AGATHA
CHRISTIE

Hercule Poirot
Omnibus

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By Agatha Christie

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The Mysterious Affair At Styles (1920)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

GO TO STYLES

The intense interest aroused in the public by what was known at the time as "The Styles Case" has now somewhat subsided. Nevertheless, in view of the world-wide notoriety which attended it, I have been asked, both by my friend Poirot and the family themselves, to write an account of the whole story. This, we trust, will effectually silence the sensational rumours which still persist.

I will therefore briefly set down the circumstances which led to my being connected with the affair.

I had been invalided home from the Front; and, after spending some months in a rather depressing Convalescent Home, was given a month's sick leave. Having no near relations or friends, I was trying to make up my mind what to do, when I ran across John Cavendish. I had seen very little of him for some years. Indeed, I had never known him particularly well. He was a good fifteen years my senior, for one thing, though he hardly looked his forty-five years. As a boy, though, I had often stayed at

Styles, his mother's place in Essex.

We had a good yarn about old times, and it ended in his inviting me down to Styles to spend my leave there.

"The mater will be delighted to see you again—after all those years," he added.

"Your mother keeps well?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. I suppose you know that she has married again?"

I am afraid I showed my surprise rather plainly. Mrs. Cavendish, who had married John's father when he was a widower with two sons, had been a handsome woman of middle-age as I remembered her. She certainly could not be a day less than seventy now. I recalled her as an energetic, autocratic personality, somewhat inclined to charitable and social notoriety, with a fondness for opening bazaars and playing the Lady Bountiful. She was a most generous woman, and possessed a considerable fortune of her own.

Their country-place, Styles Court, had been purchased by Mr. Cavendish early in their married life. He had been completely under his wife's ascendancy, so much so that, on dying, he left the place to her for her lifetime, as well as the larger part of his income; an arrangement that was distinctly unfair to his two sons. Their step-mother, however, had always been most generous to them; indeed, they were so young at the time of their father's remarriage that they always thought of her as their own mother.

Lawrence, the younger, had been a delicate youth. He had qualified as a doctor but early relinquished the profession of medicine, and lived at home while pursuing literary ambitions; though his verses never had any marked success.

John practiced for some time as a barrister, but had finally settled down to the more congenial life of a country squire. He had married two years ago, and had taken his wife to live at Styles, though I entertained a shrewd suspicion that he would have preferred his mother to increase his allowance, which would have enabled him to have a home of his own. Mrs. Cavendish, however, was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them, and in this case she certainly had the whip hand, namely: the purse strings.

John noticed my surprise at the news of his mother's remarriage and smiled rather ruefully.

"Rotten little bounder too!" he said savagely. "I can tell you, Hastings, it's making life jolly difficult for us. As for Evie—you remember Evie?"

"No."

"Oh, I suppose she was after your time. She's the mater's factotum, companion, Jack of all trades! A great sport—old Evie! Not precisely young and beautiful, but as game as they make them."

"You were going to say——?"

"Oh, this fellow! He turned up from nowhere, on the pretext of being a second cousin or something of Evie's, though she didn't seem particularly keen to acknowledge the relationship. The fellow is an absolute outsider, anyone can see that. He's got a great black beard, and wears patent leather boots in all weathers! But the mater cottoned to him at once, took him on as secretary—you know how she's always running a hundred societies?"

I nodded.

"Well, of course the war has turned the hundreds into thousands. No doubt the fellow was very useful to her. But you could have knocked us all down with a feather when, three months ago, she suddenly announced that she and Alfred were engaged! The fellow must be at least twenty years younger than she is! It's simply bare-faced fortune hunting; but there you are—she is her own mistress, and she's married him."

"It must be a difficult situation for you all."

"Difficult! It's damnable!"

Thus it came about that, three days later, I descended from the train at Styles St. Mary, an absurd little station, with no apparent reason for existence, perched up in the midst of green fields and country lanes. John Cavendish was waiting on the platform, and piloted me out to the car.

"Got a drop or two of petrol still, you see," he remarked. "Mainly owing to the mater's activities."

The village of Styles St. Mary was situated about two miles from the little station, and Styles Court lay a mile the other side of it. It was a still, warm day in early July. As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world. As we turned in at the lodge gates, John said:

"I'm afraid you'll find it very quiet down here, Hastings."

"My dear fellow, that's just what I want."

"Oh, it's pleasant enough if you want to lead the idle life. I drill with the volunteers twice a week, and lend a hand at the farms. My wife works regularly 'on the land'. She is up at five every morning to milk, and keeps at it steadily until lunchtime. It's a jolly good life taking it all round—if it weren't for that fellow Alfred Inglethorp!" He checked the car suddenly, and glanced at his watch. "I wonder if we've time to pick

up Cynthia. No, she'll have started from the hospital by now."

"Cynthia! That's not your wife?"

"No, Cynthia is a protegee of my mother's, the daughter of an old schoolfellow of hers, who married a rascally solicitor. He came a cropper, and the girl was left an orphan and penniless. My mother came to the rescue, and Cynthia has been with us nearly two years now. She

works in the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster, seven miles away."

As he spoke the last words, we drew up in front of the fine old house. A lady in a stout tweed skirt, who was bending over a flower bed, straightened herself at our approach.

"Hullo, Evie, here's our wounded hero! Mr. Hastings—Miss Howard."

Miss Howard shook hands with a hearty, almost painful, grip. I had an impression of very blue eyes in a sunburnt face. She was a pleasantlooking woman of about forty, with a deep voice, almost manly in its stentorian tones, and had a large sensible square body, with feet to match—these last encased in good thick boots. Her conversation, I soon found, was couched in the telegraphic style.

"Weeds grow like house afire. Can't keep even with 'em. Shall press you in. Better be careful."

"I'm sure I shall be only too delighted to make myself useful," I responded.

"Don't say it. Never does. Wish you hadn't later."

"You're a cynic, Evie," said John, laughing. "Where's tea to-day—inside or out?"

"Out. Too fine a day to be cooped up in the house."

"Come on then, you've done enough gardening for to-day. 'The labourer is worthy of his hire', you know. Come and be refreshed."

"Well," said Miss Howard, drawing off her gardening gloves, "I'm inclined to agree with you."

She led the way round the house to where tea was spread under the shade of a large sycamore.

A figure rose from one of the basket chairs, and came a few steps to meet us.

"My wife, Hastings," said John.

I shall never forget my first sight of Mary Cavendish. Her tall, slender form, outlined against the bright light; the vivid sense of slumbering fire that seemed to find expression only in those wonderful tawny eyes of hers, remarkable eyes, different from any other woman's that I have ever known; the intense power of stillness she possessed, which nevertheless conveyed the impression of a wild untamed spirit in an exquisitely civilised body—all these things are burnt into my memory. I shall never forget them.

She greeted me with a few words of pleasant welcome in a low clear voice, and I sank into a basket chair feeling distinctly glad that I had accepted John's invitation. Mrs. Cavendish gave me some tea, and her few quiet remarks heightened my first impression of her as a thoroughly fascinating woman. An appreciative listener is always stimulating, and I described, in a humorous manner, certain incidents of my Convalescent Home, in a way which, I flatter myself, greatly amused my hostess. John, of course, good fellow though he is, could hardly be called a brilliant conversationalist.

At that moment a well remembered voice floated through the open French window near at hand:

"Then you'll write to the Princess after tea, Alfred? I'll write to Lady Tadminster for the second day, myself. Or shall we wait until we hear from the Princess? In case of a refusal, Lady Tadminster might open it the first day, and Mrs. Crosbie the second. Then there's the

Duchess—about the school fete."

There was the murmur of a man's voice, and then Mrs. Inglethorp's rose in reply:

"Yes, certainly. After tea will do quite well. You are so thoughtful, Alfred dear."

The French window swung open a little wider, and a handsome whitehaired old lady, with a somewhat masterful cast of features, stepped out of it on to the lawn. A man followed her, a suggestion of deference in his manner.

Mrs. Inglethorp greeted me with effusion.

"Why, if it isn't too delightful to see you again, Mr. Hastings, after all these years. Alfred, darling, Mr. Hastings—my husband."

I looked with some curiosity at "Alfred darling". He certainly struck a rather alien note. I did not wonder at John objecting to his beard. It was one of the longest and blackest I have ever seen. He wore gold-rimmed pince-nez, and had a curious impassivity of feature. It struck me that he might look natural on a stage, but was strangely out of place in real life. His voice was rather deep and unctuous. He placed a wooden hand in mine and said:

"This is a pleasure, Mr. Hastings." Then, turning to his wife: "Emily

dearest, I think that cushion is a little damp."

She beamed fondly on him, as he substituted another with every demonstration of the tenderest care. Strange infatuation of an otherwise sensible woman!

With the presence of Mr. Inglethorp, a sense of constraint and veiled hostility seemed to settle down upon the company. Miss Howard, in particular, took no pains to conceal her feelings. Mrs. Inglethorp, however, seemed to notice nothing unusual. Her volubility, which I remembered of old, had lost nothing in the intervening years, and she poured out a steady flood of conversation, mainly on the subject of the forthcoming bazaar which she was organizing and which was to take place shortly. Occasionally she referred to her husband over a question of days or dates. His watchful and attentive manner never varied. From the very first I took a firm and rooted dislike to him, and I flatter myself that my first judgments are usually fairly shrewd.

Presently Mrs. Inglethorp turned to give some instructions about letters to Evelyn Howard, and her husband addressed me in his painstaking voice:

"Is soldiering your regular profession, Mr. Hastings?"

"No, before the war I was in Lloyd's."

"And you will return there after it is over?" "Perhaps. Either that or a fresh start altogether." Mary Cavendish leant forward.

"What would you really choose as a profession, if you could just consult your inclination?"

"Well, that depends."

"No secret hobby?" she asked. "Tell me—you're drawn to something?

Every one is—usually something absurd." "You'll laugh at me." She smiled.

"Perhaps."

"Well, I've always had a secret hankering to be a detective!"

"The real thing—Scotland Yard? Or Sherlock Holmes?"

"Oh, Sherlock Holmes by all means. But really, seriously, I am awfully drawn to it. I came across a man in Belgium once, a very famous detective, and he quite inflamed me. He was a marvellous little fellow. He used to say that all good detective work was a mere matter of method. My system is based on his—though of course I have progressed rather further. He was a funny little man, a great dandy, but wonderfully clever."

"Like a good detective story myself," remarked Miss Howard. "Lots of nonsense written, though. Criminal discovered in last chapter. Every one dumbfounded. Real crime—you'd know at once."

"There have been a great number of undiscovered crimes," I argued.

"Don't mean the police, but the people that are right in it. The family. You couldn't really hoodwink them. They'd know."

"Then," I said, much amused, "you think that if you were mixed up in a crime, say a murder, you'd be able to spot the murderer right off?"

"Of course I should. Mightn't be able to prove it to a pack of lawyers. But I'm certain I'd know. I'd feel it in my fingertips if he came near me." "It might be a 'she,' " I suggested.

"Might. But murder's a violent crime. Associate it more with a man."

"Not in a case of poisoning." Mrs. Cavendish's clear voice startled me. "Dr. Bauerstein was saying yesterday that, owing to the general ignorance of the more uncommon poisons among the medical profession, there were probably countless cases of poisoning quite unsuspected."

"Why, Mary, what a gruesome conversation!" cried Mrs. Inglethorp. "It makes me feel as if a goose were walking over my grave. Oh, there's Cynthia!"

A young girl in V. A. D. uniform ran lightly across the lawn.

"Why, Cynthia, you are late to-day. This is Mr. Hastings—Miss

Murdoch."

Cynthia Murdoch was a fresh-looking young creature, full of life and vigour. She tossed off her little V. A. D. cap, and I admired the great loose waves of her auburn hair, and the smallness and whiteness of the hand she held out to claim her tea. With dark eyes and eyelashes she would have been a beauty.

She flung herself down on the ground beside John, and as I handed her a plate of sandwiches she smiled up at me.

"Sit down here on the grass, do. It's ever so much nicer." I dropped down obediently.

"You work at Tadminster, don't you, Miss Murdoch?" She nodded.

"For my sins."

"Do they bully you, then?" I asked, smiling.

"I should like to see them!" cried Cynthia with dignity.

"I have got a cousin who is nursing," I remarked. "And she is terrified of 'Sisters'."

"I don't wonder. Sisters are, you know, Mr. Hastings. They simp—ly are! You've no idea! But I'm not a nurse, thank heaven, I work in the dispensary."

"How many people do you poison?" I asked, smiling.

Cynthia smiled too.

"Oh, hundreds!" she said.

"Cynthia," called Mrs. Inglethorp, "do you think you could write a few notes for me?"

"Certainly, Aunt Emily."

She jumped up promptly, and something in her manner reminded me that her position was a dependent one, and that Mrs. Inglethorp, kind as she might be in the main, did not allow her to forget it.

My hostess turned to me.

"John will show you your room. Supper is at half-past seven. We have given up late dinner for some time now. Lady Tadminster, our Member's wife—she was the late Lord Abbotsbury's daughter—does the same. She agrees with me that one must set an example of economy. We are quite a war household; nothing is wasted here—every scrap of waste paper, even, is saved and sent away in sacks."

I expressed my appreciation, and John took me into the house and up the broad staircase, which forked right and left half-way to different wings of the building. My room was in the left wing, and looked out over the park.

John left me, and a few minutes later I saw him from my window walking slowly across the grass arm in arm with Cynthia Murdoch. I heard Mrs. Inglethorp call "Cynthia" impatiently, and the girl started and ran back to the house. At the same moment, a man stepped out from the shadow of a tree and walked slowly in the same direction. He looked about forty, very dark with a melancholy clean-shaven face. Some violent emotion seemed to be mastering him. He looked up at my window as he passed, and I recognized him, though he had changed much in the fifteen years that had elapsed since we last met. It was John's younger brother, Lawrence Cavendish. I wondered what it was that had brought that singular expression to his face.

Then I dismissed him from my mind, and returned to the contemplation of my own affairs.

The evening passed pleasantly enough; and I dreamed that night of that enigmatical woman, Mary Cavendish.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, and I was full of the anticipation of a delightful visit.

I did not see Mrs. Cavendish until lunch-time, when she volunteered to take me for a walk, and we spent a charming afternoon roaming in the woods, returning to the house about five.

As we entered the large hall, John beckoned us both into the smokingroom. I saw at once by his face that something disturbing had occurred. We followed him in, and he shut the door after us.

"Look here, Mary, there's the deuce of a mess. Evie's had a row with

Alfred Inglethorp, and she's off."

"Evie? Off?"

John nodded gloomily.

"Yes; you see she went to the mater, and—Oh, here's Evie herself."

Miss Howard entered. Her lips were set grimly together, and she carried a small suit-case. She looked excited and determined, and slightly on the defensive.

"At any rate," she burst out, "I've spoken my mind!"

"My dear Evelyn," cried Mrs. Cavendish, "this can't be true!" Miss Howard nodded grimly.

"True enough! Afraid I said some things to Emily she won't forget or forgive in a hurry. Don't mind if they've only sunk in a bit. Probably water off a duck's back, though. I said right out: 'You're an old woman, Emily, and there's no fool like an old fool. The man's twenty years younger than you, and don't you fool yourself as to what he married you for. Money! Well, don't let him have too much of it. Farmer Raikes has got a very pretty young wife. Just ask your Alfred how much time he spends over there.' She was very angry. Natural! I went on, 'I'm going to warn you, whether you like it or not. That man would as soon murder you in your bed as look at you. He's a bad lot. You can say what you like

to me, but remember what I've told you. He's a bad lot!' "

"What did she say?"

Miss Howard made an extremely expressive grimace.

" 'Darling Alfred'—'dearest Alfred'—'wicked calumnies' —'wicked lies'—'wicked woman'—to accuse her 'dear husband'! The sooner I left her house the better. So I'm off."

"But not now?"

"This minute!"

For a moment we sat and stared at her. Finally John Cavendish, finding his persuasions of no avail, went off to look up the trains. His wife followed him, murmuring something about persuading Mrs. Inglethorp to think better of it.

As she left the room, Miss Howard's face changed. She leant towards me eagerly.

"Mr. Hastings, you're honest. I can trust you?"

I was a little startled. She laid her hand on my arm, and sank her voice to a whisper.

"Look after her, Mr. Hastings. My poor Emily. They're a lot of sharks—all of them. Oh, I know what I'm talking about. There isn't one of them that's not hard up and trying to get money out of her. I've protected her as much as I could. Now I'm out of the way, they'll impose upon her."

"Of course, Miss Howard," I said, "I'll do everything I can, but I'm sure you're excited and overwrought."

She interrupted me by slowly shaking her forefinger.

"Young man, trust me. I've lived in the world rather longer than you have. All I ask you is to keep your eyes open. You'll see what I mean." The throb of the motor came through the open window, and Miss Howard rose and moved to the door. John's voice sounded outside. With her hand on the handle, she turned her head over her shoulder, and beckoned to me.

"Above all, Mr. Hastings, watch that devil—her husband!"

There was no time for more. Miss Howard was swallowed up in an eager chorus of protests and good-byes. The Inglethorps did not appear.

As the motor drove away, Mrs. Cavendish suddenly detached herself from the group, and moved across the drive to the lawn to meet a tall bearded man who had been evidently making for the house. The colour rose in her cheeks as she held out her hand to him.

"Who is that?" I asked sharply, for instinctively I distrusted the man.

"That's Dr. Bauerstein," said John shortly.

"And who is Dr. Bauerstein?"

"He's staying in the village doing a rest cure, after a bad nervous breakdown. He's a London specialist; a very clever man—one of the greatest living experts on poisons, I believe."

"And he's a great friend of Mary's," put in Cynthia, the irrepressible.

John Cavendish frowned and changed the subject.

"Come for a stroll, Hastings. This has been a most rotten business. She always had a rough tongue, but there is no stauncher friend in England than Evelyn Howard."

He took the path through the plantation, and we walked down to the village through the woods which bordered one side of the estate.

As we passed through one of the gates on our way home again, a pretty young woman of gipsy type coming in the opposite direction bowed and smiled.

"That's a pretty girl," I remarked appreciatively. John's face hardened.

"That is Mrs. Raikes."

"The one that Miss Howard——"

"Exactly," said John, with rather unnecessary abruptness.

I thought of the white-haired old lady in the big house, and that vivid wicked little face that had just smiled into ours, and a vague chill of foreboding crept over me. I brushed it aside.

"Styles is really a glorious old place," I said to John.

He nodded rather gloomily.

"Yes, it's a fine property. It'll be mine some day—should be mine now by rights, if my father had only made a decent will. And then I shouldn't be so damned hard up as I am now."

"Hard up, are you?"

"My dear Hastings, I don't mind telling you that I'm at my wit's end for money."

"Couldn't your brother help you?"

"Lawrence? He's gone through every penny he ever had, publishing rotten verses in fancy bindings. No, we're an impecunious lot. My mother's always been awfully good to us, I must say. That is, up to now. Since her marriage, of course——" he broke off, frowning.

For the first time I felt that, with Evelyn Howard, something indefinable had gone from the atmosphere. Her presence had spelt security. Now that security was removed—and the air seemed rife with suspicion. The sinister face of Dr. Bauerstein recurred to me unpleasantly. A vague suspicion of every one and everything filled my mind. Just for a moment I had a premonition of approaching evil.

THE 16TH AND 17TH OF JULY

I had arrived at Styles on the 5th of July. I come now to the events of the 16th and 17th of that month. For the convenience of the reader I will recapitulate the incidents of those days in as exact a manner as possible. They were elicited subsequently at the trial by a process of long and tedious cross-examinations.

I received a letter from Evelyn Howard a couple of days after her departure, telling me she was working as a nurse at the big hospital in Middlingham, a manufacturing town some fifteen miles away, and begging me to let her know if Mrs. Inglethorp should show any wish to be reconciled.

The only fly in the ointment of my peaceful days was Mrs. Cavendish's extraordinary, and, for my part, unaccountable preference for the society of Dr. Bauerstein. What she saw in the man I cannot imagine, but she was always asking him up to the house, and often went off for long expeditions with him. I must confess that I was quite unable to see his attraction.

The 16th of July fell on a Monday. It was a day of turmoil. The famous bazaar had taken place on Saturday, and an entertainment, in connection with the same charity, at which Mrs. Inglethorp was to recite a War poem, was to be held that night. We were all busy during the morning arranging and decorating the Hall in the village where it was to take place. We had a late luncheon and spent the afternoon resting in the garden. I noticed that John's manner was somewhat unusual. He seemed very excited and restless.

After tea, Mrs. Inglethorp went to lie down to rest before her efforts in the evening and I challenged Mary Cavendish to a single at tennis.

About a quarter to seven, Mrs. Inglethorp called us that we should be late as supper was early that night. We had rather a scramble to get ready in time; and before the meal was over the motor was waiting at the door.

The entertainment was a great success, Mrs. Inglethorp's recitation receiving tremendous applause. There were also some tableaux in which Cynthia took part. She did not return with us, having been asked to a supper party, and to remain the night with some friends who had been acting with her in the tableaux.

The following morning, Mrs. Inglethorp stayed in bed to breakfast, as she was rather overtired; but she appeared in her briskest mood about 12.30, and swept Lawrence and myself off to a luncheon party.

"Such a charming invitation from Mrs. Rolleston. Lady Tadminster's sister, you know. The Rollestons came over with the Conqueror—one of our oldest families."

Mary had excused herself on the plea of an engagement with Dr.

Bauerstein.

We had a pleasant luncheon, and as we drove away Lawrence suggested that we should return by Tadminster, which was barely a mile out of our way, and pay a visit to Cynthia in her dispensary. Mrs. Inglethorp replied that this was an excellent idea, but as she had several letters to write she would drop us there, and we could come back with Cynthia in the pony-trap.

We were detained under suspicion by the hospital porter, until Cynthia appeared to vouch for us, looking very cool and sweet in her long white overall. She took us up to her sanctum, and introduced us to her fellow dispenser, a rather awe-inspiring individual, whom Cynthia cheerily addressed as "Nibs."

"What a lot of bottles!" I exclaimed, as my eye travelled round the small room. "Do you really know what's in them all?"

"Say something original," groaned Cynthia. "Every single person who comes up here says that. We are really thinking of bestowing a prize on the first individual who does not say: 'What a lot of bottles!' And I know the next thing you're going to say is: 'How many people have you poisoned?' "

I pleaded guilty with a laugh.

"If you people only knew how fatally easy it is to poison some one by mistake, you wouldn't joke about it. Come on, let's have tea. We've got all sorts of secret stories in that cupboard. No, Lawrence—that's the poison cupboard. The big cupboard—that's right."

We had a very cheery tea, and assisted Cynthia to wash up afterwards. We had just put away the last tea-spoon when a knock came at the door. The countenances of Cynthia and Nibs were suddenly petrified into a stern and forbidding expression.

"Come in," said Cynthia, in a sharp professional tone.

A young and rather scared looking nurse appeared with a bottle which she proffered to Nibs, who waved her towards Cynthia with the somewhat enigmatical remark:

"I'm not really here to-day."

Cynthia took the bottle and examined it with the severity of a judge.

"This should have been sent up this morning."

"Sister is very sorry. She forgot."

"Sister should read the rules outside the door."

I gathered from the little nurse's expression that there was not the least likelihood of her having the hardihood to retail this message to the dreaded "Sister".

"So now it can't be done until to-morrow," finished Cynthia.

"Don't you think you could possibly let us have it to-night?"

"Well," said Cynthia graciously, "we are very busy, but if we have time it shall be done."

The little nurse withdrew, and Cynthia promptly took a jar from the shelf, refilled the bottle, and placed it on the table outside the door.

I laughed.

"Discipline must be maintained?"

"Exactly. Come out on our little balcony. You can see all the outside wards there."

I followed Cynthia and her friend and they pointed out the different wards to me. Lawrence remained behind, but after a few moments Cynthia called to him over her shoulder to come and join us. Then she looked at her watch.

"Nothing more to do, Nibs?"

"No."

"All right. Then we can lock up and go."

I had seen Lawrence in quite a different light that afternoon. Compared to John, he was an astoundingly difficult person to get to know. He was the opposite of his brother in almost every respect, being unusually shy and reserved. Yet he had a certain charm of manner, and I fancied that, if one really knew him well, one could have a deep affection for him. I had always fancied that his manner to Cynthia was rather constrained, and that she on her side was inclined to be shy of him. But they were both gay enough this afternoon, and chatted together like a couple of children.

As we drove through the village, I remembered that I wanted some stamps, so accordingly we pulled up at the post office.

As I came out again, I cannoned into a little man who was just entering. I drew aside and apologised, when suddenly, with a loud exclamation, he clasped me in his arms and kissed me warmly.

"Mon ami Hastings!" he cried. "It is indeed mon ami Hastings!"
"Poirot!" I exclaimed.

I turned to the pony-trap.

"This is a very pleasant meeting for me, Miss Cynthia. This is my old friend, Monsieur Poirot, whom I have not seen for years."

"Oh, we know Monsieur Poirot," said Cynthia gaily. "But I had no idea he was a friend of yours."

"Yes, indeed," said Poirot seriously. "I know Mademoiselle Cynthia. It is by the charity of that good Mrs. Inglethorp that I am here." Then, as I looked at him inquiringly: "Yes, my friend, she had kindly extended hospitality to seven of my countrypeople who, alas, are refugees from their native land. We Belgians will always remember her with gratitude."

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandyfied little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a detective, his flair had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by unravelling some of the most baffling cases of the day.

He pointed out to me the little house inhabited by him and his fellow Belgians, and I promised to go and see him at an early date. Then he raised his hat with a flourish to Cynthia, and we drove away. "He's a dear little man," said Cynthia. "I'd no idea you knew him." "You've been entertaining a celebrity unawares," I replied.

And, for the rest of the way home, I recited to them the various exploits and triumphs of Hercule Poirot.

We arrived back in a very cheerful mood. As we entered the hall, Mrs.

Inglethorp came out of her boudoir. She looked flushed and upset.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

"Is there anything the matter, Aunt Emily?" asked Cynthia.

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Inglethorp sharply. "What should there be?" Then catching sight of Dorcas, the parlourmaid, going into the diningroom, she called to her to bring some stamps into the boudoir.

"Yes, m'm." The old servant hesitated, then added diffidently: "Don't you think, m'm, you'd better get to bed? You're looking very tired."

"Perhaps you're right, Dorcas—yes—no—not now. I've some letters I must finish by post-time. Have you lighted the fire in my room as I told you?"

"Yes, m'm."

"Then I'll go to bed directly after supper."

She went into the boudoir again, and Cynthia stared after her.

"Goodness gracious! I wonder what's up?" she said to Lawrence.

He did not seem to have heard her, for without a word he turned on his heel and went out of the house.

I suggested a quick game of tennis before supper and, Cynthia agreeing, I ran upstairs to fetch my racquet.

Mrs. Cavendish was coming down the stairs. It may have been my fancy, but she, too, was looking odd and disturbed.

"Had a good walk with Dr. Bauerstein?" I asked, trying to appear as indifferent as I could.

"I didn't go," she replied abruptly. "Where is Mrs. Inglethorp?"

"In the boudoir."

Her hand clenched itself on the banisters, then she seemed to nerve herself for some encounter, and went rapidly past me down the stairs across the hall to the boudoir, the door of which she shut behind her.

As I ran out to the tennis court a few moments later, I had to pass the open boudoir window, and was unable to help overhearing the following scrap of dialogue. Mary Cavendish was saying in the voice of a woman desperately controlling herself: "Then you won't show it to me?" To which Mrs. Inglethorp replied:

"My dear Mary, it has nothing to do with that matter."

"Then show it to me."

"I tell you it is not what you imagine. It does not concern you in the least."

To which Mary Cavendish replied, with a rising bitterness: "Of course, I might have known you would shield him." Cynthia was waiting for me, and greeted me eagerly with:

"I say! There's been the most awful row! I've got it all out of Dorcas."

"What kind of a row?"

"Between Aunt Emily and him. I do hope she's found him out at last!" "Was Dorcas there, then?"

"Of course not. She 'happened to be near the door'. It was a real old bust-up. I do wish I knew what it was all about."

I thought of Mrs. Raikes's gipsy face, and Evelyn Howard's warnings, but wisely decided to hold my peace, whilst Cynthia exhausted every possible hypothesis, and cheerfully hoped, "Aunt Emily will send him away, and will never speak to him again."

I was anxious to get hold of John, but he was nowhere to be seen. Evidently something very momentous had occurred that afternoon. I tried to forget the few words I had overheard; but, do what I would, I could not dismiss them altogether from my mind. What was Mary Cavendish's concern in the matter?

Mr. Inglethorp was in the drawing-room when I came down to supper. His face was impassive as ever, and the strange unreality of the man struck me afresh.

Mrs. Inglethorp came down last. She still looked agitated, and during the meal there was a somewhat constrained silence. Inglethorp was unusually quiet. As a rule, he surrounded his wife with little attentions, placing a cushion at her back, and altogether playing the part of the devoted husband. Immediately after supper, Mrs. Inglethorp retired to her boudoir again.

"Send my coffee in here, Mary," she called. "I've just five minutes to catch the post."

Cynthia and I went and sat by the open window in the drawing-room.

Mary Cavendish brought our coffee to us. She seemed excited.

"Do you young people want lights, or do you enjoy the twilight?" she asked. "Will you take Mrs. Inglethorp her coffee, Cynthia? I will pour it out."

"Do not trouble, Mary," said Inglethorp. "I will take it to Emily." He poured it out, and went out of the room carrying it carefully.

Lawrence followed him, and Mrs. Cavendish sat down by us.

We three sat for some time in silence. It was a glorious night, hot and still. Mrs. Cavendish fanned herself gently with a palm leaf.

"It's almost too hot," she murmured. "We shall have a thunderstorm."

Alas, that these harmonious moments can never endure! My paradise was rudely shattered by the sound of a well known, and heartily disliked, voice in the hall.

"Dr. Bauerstein!" exclaimed Cynthia. "What a funny time to come."

I glanced jealously at Mary Cavendish, but she seemed quite undisturbed, the delicate pallor of her cheeks did not vary.

In a few moments, Alfred Inglethorp had ushered the doctor in, the latter laughing, and protesting that he was in no fit state for a drawingroom. In truth, he presented a sorry spectacle, being literally plastered with mud.

"What have you been doing, doctor?" cried Mrs. Cavendish.

"I must make my apologies," said the doctor. "I did not really mean to come in, but Mr. Inglethorp insisted."

"Well, Bauerstein, you are in a plight," said John, strolling in from the hall. "Have some coffee, and tell us what you have been up to."

"Thank you, I will." He laughed rather ruefully, as he described how he had discovered a very rare species of fern in an inaccessible place, and in his efforts to obtain it had lost his footing, and slipped ignominiously into a neighbouring pond.

"The sun soon dried me off," he added, "but I'm afraid my appearance is very disreputable."

At this juncture, Mrs. Inglethorp called to Cynthia from the hall, and the girl ran out.

"Just carry up my despatch-case, will you, dear? I'm going to bed."

The door into the hall was a wide one. I had risen when Cynthia did, John was close by me. There were therefore three witnesses who could swear that Mrs. Inglethorp was carrying her coffee, as yet untasted, in her hand.

My evening was utterly and entirely spoilt by the presence of Dr. Bauerstein. It seemed to me the man would never go. He rose at last, however, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'll walk down to the village with you," said Mr. Inglethorp. "I must see our agent over those estate accounts." He turned to John. "No one need sit up. I will take the latch-key."

THE NIGHT OF THE TRAGEDY

To make this part of my story clear, I append the following plan of the first floor of Styles. The servants' rooms are reached through the door B. They have no communication with the right wing, where the Inglethorps' rooms were situated.

It seemed to be the middle of the night when I was awakened by Lawrence Cavendish. He had a candle in his hand, and the agitation of his face told me at once that something was seriously wrong.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sitting up in bed, and trying to collect my scattered thoughts.

"We are afraid my mother is very ill. She seems to be having some

kind of fit. Unfortunately she has locked herself in."

"I'll come at once."

I sprang out of bed; and, pulling on a dressing-gown, followed Lawrence along the passage and the gallery to the right wing of the house.

John Cavendish joined us, and one or two of the servants were standing round in a state of awe-stricken excitement. Lawrence turned to his brother.

"What do you think we had better do?"

Never, I thought, had his indecision of character been more apparent.

John rattled the handle of Mrs. Inglethorp's door violently, but with no effect. It was obviously locked or bolted on the inside. The whole household was aroused by now. The most alarming sounds were audible from the interior of the room. Clearly something must be done.

"Try going through Mr. Inglethorp's room, sir," cried Dorcas. "Oh, the poor mistress!"

Suddenly I realized that Alfred Inglethorp was not with us—that he alone had given no sign of his presence. John opened the door of his room. It was pitch dark, but Lawrence was following with the candle, and by its feeble light we saw that the bed had not been slept in, and that there was no sign of the room having been occupied.

We went straight to the connecting door. That, too, was locked or bolted on the inside. What was to be done?

"Oh, dear, sir," cried Dorcas, wringing her hands, "what ever shall we do?"

"We must try and break the door in, I suppose. It'll be a tough job, though. Here, let one of the maids go down and wake Baily and tell him to go for Dr. Wilkins at once. Now then, we'll have a try at the door. Half a moment, though, isn't there a door into Miss Cynthia's rooms?"

"Yes, sir, but that's always bolted. It's never been undone."

"Well, we might just see."

He ran rapidly down the corridor to Cynthia's room. Mary Cavendish was there, shaking the girl—who must have been an unusually sound sleeper—and trying to wake her.

In a moment or two he was back.

"No good. That's bolted too. We must break in the door. I think this

one is a shade less solid than the one in the passage."

We strained and heaved together. The framework of the door was solid, and for a long time it resisted our efforts, but at last we felt it give beneath our weight, and finally, with a resounding crash, it was burst open.

We stumbled in together, Lawrence still holding his candle. Mrs. Inglethorp was lying on the bed, her whole form agitated by violent convulsions, in one of which she must have overturned the table beside her. As we entered, however, her limbs relaxed, and she fell back upon the pillows.

John strode across the room, and lit the gas. Turning to Annie, one of the housemaids, he sent her downstairs to the dining-room for brandy. Then he went across to his mother whilst I unbolted the door that gave on the corridor.

I turned to Lawrence, to suggest that I had better leave them now that there was no further need of my services, but the words were frozen on my lips. Never have I seen such a ghastly look on any man's face. He was white as chalk, the candle he held in his shaking hand was sputtering onto the carpet, and his eyes, petrified with terror, or some such kindred emotion, stared fixedly over my head at a point on the further wall. It was as though he had seen something that turned him to stone. I instinctively followed the direction of his eyes, but I could see nothing unusual. The still feebly flickering ashes in the grate, and the row of prim ornaments on the mantelpiece, were surely harmless enough.

The violence of Mrs. Inglethorp's attack seemed to be passing. She was able to speak in short gasps.

"Better now—very sudden—stupid of me—to lock myself in."

A shadow fell on the bed and, looking up, I saw Mary Cavendish standing near the door with her arm around Cynthia. She seemed to be supporting the girl, who looked utterly dazed and unlike herself. Her face was heavily flushed, and she yawned repeatedly.

"Poor Cynthia is quite frightened," said Mrs. Cavendish in a low clear voice. She herself, I noticed, was dressed in her white land smock. Then it must be later than I thought. I saw that a faint streak of daylight was showing through the curtains of the windows, and that the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to close upon five o'clock.

A strangled cry from the bed startled me. A fresh access of pain seized the unfortunate old lady. The convulsions were of a violence terrible to behold. Everything was confusion. We thronged round her, powerless to help or alleviate. A final convulsion lifted her from the bed, until she appeared to rest upon her head and her heels, with her body arched in an extraordinary manner. In vain Mary and John tried to administer more brandy. The moments flew. Again the body arched itself in that peculiar fashion.

At that moment, Dr. Bauerstein pushed his way authoritatively into the room. For one instant he stopped dead, staring at the figure on the bed, and, at the same instant, Mrs. Inglethorp cried out in a strangled voice, her eyes fixed on the doctor:

"Alfred—Alfred——" Then she fell back motionless on the pillows.

With a stride, the doctor reached the bed, and seizing her arms worked them energetically, applying what I knew to be artificial respiration. He issued a few short sharp orders to the servants. An imperious wave of his hand drove us all to the door. We watched him, fascinated, though I think we all knew in our hearts that it was too late, and that nothing could be done now. I could see by the expression on his face that he himself had little hope.

Finally he abandoned his task, shaking his head gravely. At that moment, we heard footsteps outside, and Dr. Wilkins, Mrs. Inglethorp's own doctor, a portly, fussy little man, came bustling in.

In a few words Dr. Bauerstein explained how he had happened to be passing the lodge gates as the car came out, and had run up to the house as fast as he could, whilst the car went on to fetch Dr. Wilkins. With a faint gesture of the hand, he indicated the figure on the bed.

"Ve—ry sad. Ve—ry sad," murmured Dr. Wilkins. "Poor dear lady. Always did far too much—far too much—against my advice. I warned her. Her heart was far from strong. 'Take it easy,' I said to her, 'Take—it—easy'. But no—her zeal for good works was too great. Nature rebelled. Na—ture—re—belled."

Dr. Bauerstein, I noticed, was watching the local doctor narrowly. He still kept his eyes fixed on him as he spoke.

"The convulsions were of a peculiar violence, Dr. Wilkins. I am sorry you were not here in time to witness them. They were quite—tetanic in character."

"Ah!" said Dr. Wilkins wisely.

"I should like to speak to you in private," said Dr. Bauerstein. He turned to John. "You do not object?"

"Certainly not."

We all trooped out into the corridor, leaving the two doctors alone, and I heard the key turned in the lock behind us.

We went slowly down the stairs. I was violently excited. I have a certain talent for deduction, and Dr. Bauerstein's manner had started a flock of wild surmises in my mind. Mary Cavendish laid her hand upon my arm.

"What is it? Why did Dr. Bauerstein seem so—peculiar?" I looked at her.

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"Listen!" I looked round, the others were out of earshot. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "I believe she has been poisoned! I'm certain Dr.

Bauerstein suspects it."

"What?" She shrank against the wall, the pupils of her eyes dilating wildly. Then, with a sudden cry that startled me, she cried out: "No, no—not that—not that!" And breaking from me, fled up the stairs. I followed her, afraid that she was going to faint. I found her leaning against the bannisters, deadly pale. She waved me away impatiently.

"No, no—leave me. I'd rather be alone. Let me just be quiet for a

minute or two. Go down to the others."

I obeyed her reluctantly. John and Lawrence were in the dining-room. I joined them. We were all silent, but I suppose I voiced the thoughts of us all when I at last broke it by saying: "Where is Mr. Inglethorp?"

John shook his head.

"He's not in the house."

Our eyes met. Where was Alfred Inglethorp? His absence was strange and inexplicable. I remembered Mrs. Inglethorp's dying words. What lay beneath them? What more could she have told us, if she had had time?

At last we heard the doctors descending the stairs. Dr. Wilkins was looking important and excited, and trying to conceal an inward exultation under a manner of decorous calm. Dr. Bauerstein remained in the background, his grave bearded face unchanged. Dr. Wilkins was the spokesman for the two. He addressed himself to John:

"Mr. Cavendish, I should like your consent to a postmortem."

"Is that necessary?" asked John gravely. A spasm of pain crossed his face.

"Absolutely," said Dr. Bauerstein.

"You mean by that——?"

"That neither Dr. Wilkins nor myself could give a death certificate under the circumstances." John bent his head.

"In that case, I have no alternative but to agree."

"Thank you," said Dr. Wilkins briskly. "We propose that it should take place to-morrow night—or rather to-night." And he glanced at the daylight. "Under the circumstances, I am afraid an inquest can hardly be avoided—these formalities are necessary, but I beg that you won't distress yourselves."

There was a pause, and then Dr. Bauerstein drew two keys from his pocket, and handed them to John.

"These are the keys of the two rooms. I have locked them and, in my opinion, they would be better kept locked for the present." The doctors then departed.

I had been turning over an idea in my head, and I felt that the moment had now come to broach it. Yet I was a little chary of doing so. John, I knew, had a horror of any kind of publicity, and was an easygoing optimist, who preferred never to meet trouble half-way. It might be difficult to convince him of the soundness of my plan. Lawrence, on the other hand, being less conventional, and having more imagination, I felt I might count upon as an ally. There was no doubt that the moment had come for me to take the lead.

"John," I said, "I am going to ask you something." "Well?"

"You remember my speaking of my friend Poirot? The Belgian who is

here? He has been a most famous detective."

"Yes."

"I want you to let me call him in—to investigate this matter."

"What—now? Before the post-mortem?"

"Yes, time is an advantage if—if—there has been foul play."

"Rubbish!" cried Lawrence angrily. "In my opinion the whole thing is a mare's nest of Bauerstein's! Wilkins hadn't an idea of such a thing, until Bauerstein put it into his head. But, like all specialists, Bauerstein's got a bee in his bonnet. Poisons are his hobby, so of course he sees them everywhere."

I confess that I was surprised by Lawrence's attitude. He was so seldom vehement about anything.

John hesitated.

"I can't feel as you do, Lawrence," he said at last. "I'm inclined to give Hastings a free hand, though I should prefer to wait a bit. We don't want any unnecessary scandal."

"No, no," I cried eagerly, "you need have no fear of that. Poirot is discretion itself."

"Very well, then, have it your own way. I leave it in your hands. Though, if it is as we suspect, it seems a clear enough case. God forgive me if I am wronging him!"

I looked at my watch. It was six o'clock. I determined to lose no time.

Five minutes' delay, however, I allowed myself. I spent it in ransacking the library until I discovered a medical book which gave a description of strychnine poisoning.

POIROT INVESTIGATES

The house which the Belgians occupied in the village was quite close to the park gates. One could save time by taking a narrow path through the long grass, which cut off the detours of the winding drive. So I, accordingly, went that way. I had nearly reached the lodge, when my attention was arrested by the running figure of a man approaching me. It was Mr. Inglethorp. Where had he been? How did he intend to explain his absence?

He accosted me eagerly.

"My God! This is terrible! My poor wife! I have only just heard."
"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Denby kept me late last night. It was one o'clock before we'd finished. Then I found that I'd forgotten the latch-key after all. I didn't want to

arouse the household, so Denby gave me a bed." "How did you hear the news?" I asked.

"Wilkins knocked Denby up to tell him. My poor Emily! She was so

self-sacrificing—such a noble character. She over-taxed her strength."

A wave of revulsion swept over me. What a consummate hypocrite the man was!

"I must hurry on," I said, thankful that he did not ask me whither I was bound.

In a few minutes I was knocking at the door of Leastways Cottage.

Getting no answer, I repeated my summons impatiently. A window above me was cautiously opened, and Poirot himself looked out.

He gave an exclamation of surprise at seeing me. In a few brief words,

I explained the tragedy that had occurred, and that I wanted his help.

"Wait, my friend, I will let you in, and you shall recount to me the affair whilst I dress."

In a few moments he had unbarred the door, and I followed him up to his room. There he installed me in a chair, and I related the whole story, keeping back nothing, and omitting no circumstance, however insignificant, whilst he himself made a careful and deliberate toilet.

I told him of my awakening, of Mrs. Inglethorp's dying words, of her husband's absence, of the quarrel the day before, of the scrap of conversation between Mary and her mother-in-law that I had overheard, of the former quarrel between Mrs. Inglethorp and Evelyn Howard, and of the latter's innuendoes.

I was hardly as clear as I could wish. I repeated myself several times, and occasionally had to go back to some detail that I had forgotten.

Poirot smiled kindly on me.

"The mind is confused? Is it not so? Take time, mon ami. You are agitated; you are excited—it is but natural. Presently, when we are calmer, we will arrange the facts, neatly, each in his proper place. We will examine—and reject. Those of importance we will put on one side; those of no importance, pouf!"—he screwed up his cherub-like face, and puffed comically enough—"blow them away!"

"That's all very well," I objected, "but how are you going to decide what is important, and what isn't? That always seems the difficulty to me."

Poirot shook his head energetically. He was now arranging his moustache with exquisite care.

"Not so. Voyons! One fact leads to another—so we continue. Does the next fit in with that? A merveille! Good! We can proceed. This next little fact—no! Ah, that is curious! There is something missing—a link in the chain that is not there. We examine. We search. And that little curious fact, that possibly paltry little detail that will not tally, we put it here!" He made an extravagant gesture with his hand. "It is significant! It is tremendous!"

"Y—es—"

"Ah!" Poirot shook his forefinger so fiercely at me that I quailed before it. "Beware! Peril to the detective who says: 'It is so small—it does not matter. It will not agree. I will forget it.' That way lies confusion!

Everything matters."

"I know. You always told me that. That's why I have gone into all the

details of this thing whether they seemed to me relevant or not."

"And I am pleased with you. You have a good memory, and you have given me the facts faithfully. Of the order in which you present them, I say nothing—truly, it is deplorable! But I make allowances—you are upset. To that I attribute the circumstance that you have omitted one fact of paramount importance."

"What is that?" I asked.

"You have not told me if Mrs. Inglethorp ate well last night."

I stared at him. Surely the war had affected the little man's brain. He was carefully engaged in brushing his coat before putting it on, and seemed wholly engrossed in the task.

"I don't remember," I said. "And, anyway, I don't see——"

"You do not see? But it is of the first importance."

"I can't see why," I said, rather nettled. "As far as I can remember, she didn't eat much. She was obviously upset, and it had taken her appetite away. That was only natural."

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully, "it was only natural."

He opened a drawer, and took out a small despatch-case, then turned to me.

"Now I am ready. We will proceed to the chateau, and study matters on the spot. Excuse me, mon ami, you dressed in haste, and your tie is on one side. Permit me." With a deft gesture, he rearranged it.

"Ca y est! Now, shall we start?"

We hurried up the village, and turned in at the lodge gates. Poirot stopped for a moment, and gazed sorrowfully over the beautiful expanse of park, still glittering with morning dew.

"So beautiful, so beautiful, and yet, the poor family, plunged in sorrow, prostrated with grief."

He looked at me keenly as he spoke, and I was aware that I reddened under his prolonged gaze.

Was the family prostrated by grief? Was the sorrow at Mrs. Inglethorp's death so great? I realized that there was an emotional lack in the atmosphere. The dead woman had not the gift of commanding love. Her death was a shock and a distress, but she would not be passionately regretted.

Poirot seemed to follow my thoughts. He nodded his head gravely.

"No, you are right," he said, "it is not as though there was a blood tie. She has been kind and generous to these Cavendishes, but she was not their own mother. Blood tells—always remember that—blood tells."

"Poirot," I said, "I wish you would tell me why you wanted to know if Mrs. Inglethorp ate well last night? I have been turning it over in my mind, but I can't see how it has anything to do with the matter?"

He was silent for a minute or two as we walked along, but finally he said:

"I do not mind telling you—though, as you know, it is not my habit to explain until the end is reached. The present contention is that Mrs.

Inglethorp died of strychnine poisoning, presumably administered in her coffee."

"Yes?"

"Well, what time was the coffee served?"

"About eight o'clock."

"Therefore she drank it between then and half-past eight— certainly not much later. Well, strychnine is a fairly rapid poison. Its effects would be felt very soon, probably in about an hour. Yet, in Mrs. Inglethorp's case, the symptoms do not manifest themselves until five o'clock the next morning: nine hours! But a heavy meal, taken at about the same time as the poison, might retard its effects, though hardly to that extent. Still, it is a possibility to be taken into account. But, according to you, she ate very little for supper, and yet the symptoms do not develop until early the next morning! Now that is a curious circumstance, my friend. Something may arise at the autopsy to explain it. In the meantime, remember it."

As we neared the house, John came out and met us. His face looked weary and haggard.

"This is a very dreadful business, Monsieur Poirot," he said. "Hastings has explained to you that we are anxious for no publicity?"

"I comprehend perfectly."

"You see, it is only suspicion so far. We have nothing to go upon."

"Precisely. It is a matter of precaution only."

John turned to me, taking out his cigarette-case, and lighting a cigarette as he did so.

"You know that fellow Inglethorp is back?"

"Yes. I met him."

John flung the match into an adjacent flower bed, a proceeding which was too much for Poirot's feelings. He retrieved it, and buried it neatly.

"It's jolly difficult to know how to treat him."

"That difficulty will not exist long," pronounced Poirot quietly.

John looked puzzled, not quite understanding the portent of this cryptic saying. He handed the two keys which Dr. Bauerstein had given him to me.

"Show Monsieur Poirot everything he wants to see." "The rooms are locked?" asked Poirot. "Dr. Bauerstein considered it advisable." Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Then he is very sure. Well, that simplifies matters for us."

We went up together to the room of the tragedy. For convenience I append a plan of the room and the principal articles of furniture in it.

Poirot locked the door on the inside, and proceeded to a minute inspection of the room. He darted from one object to the other with the agility of a grasshopper. I remained by the door, fearing to obliterate any clues. Poirot, however, did not seem grateful to me for my forbearance.

"What have you, my friend," he cried, "that you remain there

like—how do you say it?—ah, yes, the stuck pig?"

I explained that I was afraid of obliterating any foot-marks.

"Foot-marks? But what an idea! There has already been practically an army in the room! What foot-marks are we likely to find? No, come here

and aid me in my search. I will put down my little case until I need it."

He did so, on the round table by the window, but it was an ill-advised proceeding; for, the top of it being loose, it tilted up, and precipitated the despatch-case on the floor.

"Eh voila une table!" cried Poirot. "Ah, my friend, one may live in a big house and yet have no comfort."

After which piece of moralizing, he resumed his search.

A small purple despatch-case, with a key in the lock, on the writingtable, engaged his attention for some time. He took out the key from the lock, and passed it to me to inspect. I saw nothing peculiar, however. It was an ordinary key of the Yale type, with a bit of twisted wire through the handle.

Next, he examined the framework of the door we had broken in, assuring himself that the bolt had really been shot. Then he went to the door opposite leading into Cynthia's room. That door was also bolted, as I had stated. However, he went to the length of unbolting it, and opening and shutting it several times; this he did with the utmost precaution against making any noise. Suddenly something in the bolt itself seemed to rivet his attention. He examined it carefully, and then, nimbly whipping out a pair of small forceps from his case, he drew out some minute particle which he carefully sealed up in a tiny envelope.

On the chest of drawers there was a tray with a spirit lamp and a small saucepan on it. A small quantity of a dark fluid remained in the saucepan, and an empty cup and saucer that had been drunk out of stood near it.

I wondered how I could have been so unobservant as to overlook this. Here was a clue worth having. Poirot delicately dipped his finger into liquid, and tasted it gingerly. He made a grimace. "Coco—with—I think—rum in it."

He passed on to the debris on the floor, where the table by the bed had been overturned. A reading-lamp, some books, matches, a bunch of keys, and the crushed fragments of a coffee-cup lay scattered about.

"Ah, this is curious," said Poirot.

"I must confess that I see nothing particularly curious about it."

"You do not? Observe the lamp—the chimney is broken in two places; they lie there as they fell. But see, the coffee-cup is absolutely smashed to powder."

"Well," I said wearily, "I suppose some one must have stepped on it."

"Exactly," said Poirot, in an odd voice. "Some one stepped on it."

He rose from his knees, and walked slowly across to the mantelpiece, where he stood abstractedly fingering the ornaments, and straightening them—a trick of his when he was agitated.

"Mon ami," he said, turning to me, "somebody stepped on that cup, grinding it to powder, and the reason they did so was either because it contained strychnine or—which is far more serious—because it did not contain strychnine!"

I made no reply. I was bewildered, but I knew that it was no good asking him to explain. In a moment or two he roused himself, and went on with his investigations. He picked up the bunch of keys from the floor, and twirling them round in his fingers finally selected one, very bright and shining, which he tried in the lock of the purple despatch-case. It fitted, and he opened the box, but after a moment's hesitation, closed and relocked it, and slipped the bunch of keys, as well as the key that had originally stood in the lock, into his own pocket.

"I have no authority to go through these papers. But it should be done—at once!"

He then made a very careful examination of the drawers of the washstand. Crossing the room to the left-hand window, a round stain, hardly visible on the dark brown carpet, seemed to interest him particularly. He went down on his knees, examining it minutely—even going so far as to smell it.

Finally, he poured a few drops of the coco into a test tube, sealing it up carefully. His next proceeding was to take out a little notebook.

"We have found in this room," he said, writing busily, "six points of interest. Shall I enumerate them, or will you?" "Oh, you," I replied hastily.

"Very well, then. One, a coffee-cup that has been ground into powder; two, a despatch-case with a key in the lock; three, a stain on the floor." "That may have been done some time ago," I interrupted.

"No, for it is still perceptibly damp and smells of coffee. Four, a fragment of some dark green fabric—only a thread or two, but recognizable."

"Ah!" I cried. "That was what you sealed up in the envelope."

"Yes. It may turn out to be a piece of one of Mrs. Inglethorp's own dresses, and quite unimportant. We shall see. Five, this!" With a dramatic gesture, he pointed to a large splash of candle grease on the floor by the writing-table. "It must have been done since yesterday, otherwise a good housemaid would have at once removed it with blotting-paper and a hot

iron. One of my best hats once—but that is not to the point."

"It was very likely done last night. We were very agitated. Or perhaps

Mrs. Inglethorp herself dropped her candle."

"You brought only one candle into the room?"

"Yes. Lawrence Cavendish was carrying it. But he was very upset. He seemed to see something over here"—I indicated the mantelpiece—"that absolutely paralysed him."

"That is interesting," said Poirot quickly. "Yes, it is suggestive"—his eye sweeping the whole length of the wall—"but it was not his candle that made this great patch, for you perceive that this is white grease; whereas Monsieur Lawrence's candle, which is still on the dressingtable, is pink. On the other hand, Mrs. Inglethorp had no candlestick in the room, only a reading-lamp."

"Then," I said, "what do you deduce?"

To which my friend only made a rather irritating reply, urging me to use my own natural faculties.

"And the sixth point?" I asked. "I suppose it is the sample of coco."

"No," said Poirot thoughtfully. "I might have included that in the six, but I did not. No, the sixth point I will keep to myself for the present."

He looked quickly round the room. "There is nothing more to be done here, I think, unless"—he stared earnestly and long at the dead ashes in the grate. "The fire burns—and it destroys. But by chance—there might be—let us see!"

Deftly, on hands and knees, he began to sort the ashes from the grate into the fender, handling them with the greatest caution. Suddenly, he gave a faint exclamation.

"The forceps, Hastings!"

I quickly handed them to him, and with skill he extracted a small piece of half charred paper.

"There, mon ami!" he cried. "What do you think of that?"

I scrutinized the fragment. This is an exact reproduction of it:—

I was puzzled. It was unusually thick, quite unlike ordinary notepaper. Suddenly an idea struck me.

"Poirot!" I cried. "This is a fragment of a will!"

"Exactly."

I looked up at him sharply.

"You are not surprised?"

"No," he said gravely, "I expected it."

I relinquished the piece of paper, and watched him put it away in his case, with the same methodical care that he bestowed on everything. My brain was in a whirl. What was this complication of a will? Who had destroyed it? The person who had left the candle grease on the floor? Obviously. But how had anyone gained admission? All the doors had been bolted on the inside.

"Now, my friend," said Poirot briskly, "we will go. I should like to ask a few questions of the parlourmaid—Dorcas, her name is, is it not?"

We passed through Alfred Inglethorp's room, and Poirot delayed long enough to make a brief but fairly comprehensive examination of it. We went out through that door, locking both it and that of Mrs. Inglethorp's room as before.

I took him down to the boudoir which he had expressed a wish to see, and went myself in search of Dorcas.

When I returned with her, however, the boudoir was empty.

"Poirot," I cried, "where are you?"

"I am here, my friend."

He had stepped outside the French window, and was standing, apparently lost in admiration, before the various shaped flower beds.

"Admirable!" he murmured. "Admirable! What symmetry! Observe that crescent; and those diamonds—their neatness rejoices the eye. The spacing of the plants, also, is perfect. It has been recently done; is it not so?"

"Yes, I believe they were at it yesterday afternoon. But come in—Dorcas is here."

"Eh bien, eh bien! Do not grudge me a moment's satisfaction of the eye."

"Yes, but this affair is more important."

"And how do you know that these fine begonias are not of equal importance?"

I shrugged my shoulders. There was really no arguing with him if he chose to take that line.

"You do not agree? But such things have been. Well, we will come in and interview the brave Dorcas."

Dorcas was standing in the boudoir, her hands folded in front of her, and her grey hair rose in stiff waves under her white cap. She was the very model and picture of a good old-fashioned servant.

In her attitude towards Poirot, she was inclined to be suspicious, but he soon broke down her defences. He drew forward a chair.

"Pray be seated, mademoiselle."

"Thank you, sir."

"You have been with your mistress many years, is it not so?"

"Ten years, sir."

"That is a long time, and very faithful service. You were much attached to her, were you not?"

"She was a very good mistress to me, sir."

"Then you will not object to answering a few questions. I put them to you with Mr. Cavendish's full approval."

"Oh, certainly, sir."

"Then I will begin by asking you about the events of yesterday afternoon. Your mistress had a quarrel?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't know that I ought——" Dorcas hesitated. Poirot looked at her keenly.

"My good Dorcas, it is necessary that I should know every detail of that quarrel as fully as possible. Do not think that you are betraying your mistress's secrets. Your mistress lies dead, and it is necessary that we should know all—if we are to avenge her. Nothing can bring her back to life, but we do hope, if there has been foul play, to bring the murderer to justice."

"Amen to that," said Dorcas fiercely. "And, naming no names, there's one in this house that none of us could ever abide! And an ill day it was when first he darkened the threshold."

Poirot waited for her indignation to subside, and then, resuming his business-like tone, he asked:

"Now, as to this quarrel? What is the first you heard of it?"

"Well, sir, I happened to be going along the hall outside yesterday——"

"What time was that?"

"I couldn't say exactly, sir, but it wasn't tea-time by a long way. Perhaps four o'clock—or it may have been a bit later. Well, sir, as I said, I happened to be passing along, when I heard voices very loud and angry in here. I didn't exactly mean to listen, but—well, there it is. I stopped.

The door was shut, but the mistress was speaking very sharp and clear, and I heard what she said quite plainly. 'You have lied to me, and deceived me,' she said. I didn't hear what Mr. Inglethorp replied. He spoke a good bit lower than she did—but she answered: 'How dare you? I have kept you and clothed you and fed you! You owe everything to me! And this is how you repay me! By bringing disgrace upon our name!' Again I didn't hear what he said, but she went on: 'Nothing that you can say will make any difference. I see my duty clearly. My mind is made up. You need not think that any fear of publicity, or scandal between husband and wife will deter me.' Then I thought I heard them coming out, so I went off quickly."

"You are sure it was Mr. Inglethorp's voice you heard?"

"Oh, yes, sir, whose else's could it be?"

"Well, what happened next?"

"Later, I came back to the hall; but it was all quiet. At five o'clock, Mrs. Inglethorp rang the bell and told me to bring her a cup of tea—nothing to eat—to the boudoir. She was looking dreadful—so white and upset. 'Dorcas,' she says, 'I've had a great shock.' 'I'm sorry for that, m'm,' I says. 'You'll feel better after a nice hot cup of tea, m'm.' She had something in her hand. I don't know if it was a letter, or just a piece of paper, but it had writing on it, and she kept staring at it, almost as if she couldn't believe what was written there. She whispered to herself, as though she had forgotten I was there: 'These few words—and everything's changed.' And then she says to me: 'Never trust a man, Dorcas, they're not worth it!' I hurried off, and got her a good strong cup of tea, and she thanked me, and said she'd feel better when she'd drunk it. 'I don't know what to do,' she says. 'Scandal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing, Dorcas. I'd rather hush it up if I could.' Mrs. Cavendish came in just then, so she didn't say any more."

"She still had the letter, or whatever it was, in her hand?" "Yes, sir."

"What would she be likely to do with it afterwards?"

"Well, I don't know, sir, I expect she would lock it up in that purple case of hers."

"Is that where she usually kept important papers?"

"Yes, sir. She brought it down with her every morning, and took it up every night."

"When did she lose the key of it?"

"She missed it yesterday at lunch-time, sir, and told me to look carefully for it. She was very much put out about it."

"But she had a duplicate key?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

Dorcas was looking very curiously at him and, to tell the truth, so was

I. What was all this about a lost key? Poirot smiled.

"Never mind, Dorcas, it is my business to know things. Is this the key that was lost?" He drew from his pocket the key that he had found in the lock of the despatch-case upstairs.

Dorcas's eyes looked as though they would pop out of her head.

"That's it, sir, right enough. But where did you find it? I looked everywhere for it."

"Ah, but you see it was not in the same place yesterday as it was today. Now, to pass to another subject, had your mistress a dark green dress in her wardrobe?"

Dorcas was rather startled by the unexpected question.

"No, sir."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Has anyone else in the house got a green dress?" Dorcas reflected.

"Miss Cynthia has a green evening dress."

"Light or dark green?"

"A light green, sir; a sort of chiffon, they call it."

"Ah, that is not what I want. And nobody else has anything green?"

"No, sir—not that I know of."

Poirot's face did not betray a trace of whether he was disappointed or otherwise. He merely remarked:

"Good, we will leave that and pass on. Have you any reason to believe that your mistress was likely to take a sleeping powder last night?"

"Not last night, sir, I know she didn't."

"Why do you know so positively?"

"Because the box was empty. She took the last one two days ago, and she didn't have any more made up."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Positive, sir."

"Then that is cleared up! By the way, your mistress didn't ask you to sign any paper yesterday?"

"To sign a paper? No, sir."

"When Mr. Hastings and Mr. Lawrence came in yesterday evening, they found your mistress busy writing letters. I suppose you can give me no idea to whom these letters were addressed?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't, sir. I was out in the evening. Perhaps Annie could tell you, though she's a careless girl. Never cleared the coffee-cups away last night. That's what happens when I'm not here to look after things."

Poirot lifted his hand.

"Since they have been left, Dorcas, leave them a little longer, I pray you. I should like to examine them."

"Very well, sir."

"What time did you go out last evening?"

"About six o'clock, sir."

"Thank you, Dorcas, that is all I have to ask you." He rose and strolled to the window. "I have been admiring these flower beds. How many

gardeners are employed here, by the way?"

"Only three now, sir. Five, we had, before the war, when it was kept as a gentleman's place should be. I wish you could have seen it then, sir. A fair sight it was. But now there's only old Manning, and young William, and a new-fashioned woman gardener in breeches and such-like. Ah, these are dreadful times!"

"The good times will come again, Dorcas. At least, we hope so. Now, will you send Annie to me here?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"How did you know that Mrs. Inglethorp took sleeping powders?" I asked, in lively curiosity, as Dorcas left the room. "And about the lost key and the duplicate?"

"One thing at a time. As to the sleeping powders, I knew by this." He suddenly produced a small cardboard box, such as chemists use for powders.

"Where did you find it?"

"In the wash-stand drawer in Mrs. Inglethorp's bedroom. It was Number Six of my catalogue."

"But I suppose, as the last powder was taken two days ago, it is not of much importance?"

"Probably not, but do you notice anything that strikes you as peculiar about this box?"

I examined it closely.

"No, I can't say that I do."

"Look at the label."

I read the label carefully: " 'One powder to be taken at bedtime, if required. Mrs. Inglethorp.' No, I see nothing unusual."

"Not the fact that there is no chemist's name?"

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "To be sure, that is odd!"

"Have you ever known a chemist to send out a box like that, without his printed name?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

I was becoming quite excited, but Poirot damped my ardour by remarking:

"Yet the explanation is quite simple. So do not intrigue yourself, my friend."

An audible creaking proclaimed the approach of Annie, so I had no time to reply.

Annie was a fine, strapping girl, and was evidently labouring under intense excitement, mingled with a certain ghoulish enjoyment of the tragedy.

Poirot came to the point at once, with a business-like briskness.

"I sent for you, Annie, because I thought you might be able to tell me something about the letters Mrs. Inglethorp wrote last night. How many were there? And can you tell me any of the names and addresses?" Annie considered.

"There were four letters, sir. One was to Miss Howard, and one was to Mr. Wells, the lawyer, and the other two I don't think I remember, sir—oh, yes, one was to Ross's, the caterers in Tadminster. The other one,

I don't remember."

"Think," urged Poirot.

Annie racked her brains in vain.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's clean gone. I don't think I can have noticed it."

"It does not matter," said Poirot, not betraying any sign of disappointment. "Now I want to ask you about something else. There is a saucepan in Mrs. Inglethorp's room with some coco in it. Did she have that every night?"

"Yes, sir, it was put in her room every evening, and she warmed it up in the night—whenever she fancied it."

"What was it? Plain coco?"

"Yes, sir, made with milk, with a teaspoonful of sugar, and two teaspoonfuls of rum in it."

"Who took it to her room?"

"I did, sir."

"Always?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time?"

"When I went to draw the curtains, as a rule, sir."

"Did you bring it straight up from the kitchen then?"

"No, sir, you see there's not much room on the gas stove, so Cook used to make it early, before putting the vegetables on for supper. Then I used to bring it up, and put it on the table by the swing door, and take it into her room later."

"The swing door is in the left wing, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the table, is it on this side of the door, or on the farther—servants' side?"

"It's this side, sir."

"What time did you bring it up last night?"

"About quarter-past seven, I should say, sir."

"And when did you take it into Mrs. Inglethorp's room?"

"When I went to shut up, sir. About eight o'clock. Mrs. Inglethorp came up to bed before I'd finished."

"Then, between 7.15 and 8 o'clock, the coco was standing on the table in the left wing?"

"Yes, sir." Annie had been growing redder and redder in the face, and now she blurted out unexpectedly:

"And if there was salt in it, sir, it wasn't me. I never took the salt near it."

"What makes you think there was salt in it?" asked Poirot.

"Seeing it on the tray, sir."

"You saw some salt on the tray?"

"Yes. Coarse kitchen salt, it looked. I never noticed it when I took the tray up, but when I came to take it into the mistress's room I saw it at once, and I suppose I ought to have taken it down again, and asked Cook to make some fresh. But I was in a hurry, because Dorcas was out, and I thought maybe the coco itself was all right, and the salt had only gone on the tray. So I dusted it off with my apron, and took it in."

I had the utmost difficulty in controlling my excitement. Unknown to herself, Annie had provided us with an important piece of evidence. How she would have gaped if she had realized that her "coarse kitchen salt" was strychnine, one of the most deadly poisons known to mankind. I marvelled at Poirot's calm. His self-control was astonishing. I awaited his next question with impatience, but it disappointed me.

"When you went into Mrs. Inglethorp's room, was the door leading into Miss Cynthia's room bolted?"

"Oh! Yes, sir; it always was. It had never been opened."

"And the door into Mr. Inglethorp's room? Did you notice if that was bolted too?"

Annie hesitated.

"I couldn't rightly say, sir; it was shut but I couldn't say whether it was bolted or not."

"When you finally left the room, did Mrs. Inglethorp bolt the door after you?"

"No, sir, not then, but I expect she did later. She usually did lock it at night. The door into the passage, that is."

"Did you notice any candle grease on the floor when you did the room yesterday?"

"Candle grease? Oh, no, sir. Mrs. Inglethorp didn't have a candle, only a reading-lamp."

"Then, if there had been a large patch of candle grease on the floor, you think you would have been sure to have seen it?"

"Yes, sir, and I would have taken it out with a piece of blotting-paper and a hot iron."

Then Poirot repeated the question he had put to Dorcas:

"Did your mistress ever have a green dress?"

"No, sir."

"Nor a mantle, nor a cape, nor a—how do you call it?—a sports coat?"

"Not green, sir."

"Nor anyone else in the house?" Annie reflected.

"No, sir."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Bien! That is all I want to know. Thank you very much."

With a nervous giggle, Annie took herself creakingly out of the room.

My pent-up excitement burst forth.

"Poirot," I cried, "I congratulate you! This is a great discovery."

"What is a great discovery?"

"Why, that it was the coco and not the coffee that was poisoned. That explains everything! Of course it did not take effect until the early morning, since the coco was only drunk in the middle of the night."

"So you think that the coco—mark well what I say, Hastings, the coco—contained strychnine?"

"Of course! That salt on the tray, what else could it have been?" "It might have been salt," replied Poirot placidly.

I shrugged my shoulders. If he was going to take the matter that way, it was no good arguing with him. The idea crossed my mind, not for the first time, that poor old Poirot was growing old. Privately I thought it lucky that he had associated with him some one of a more receptive type of mind.

Poirot was surveying me with quietly twinkling eyes.

"You are not pleased with me, mon ami?"

"My dear Poirot," I said coldly, "it is not for me to dictate to you. You have a right to your own opinion, just as I have to mine."

"A most admirable sentiment," remarked Poirot, rising briskly to his feet. "Now I have finished with this room. By the way, whose is the smaller desk in the corner?"

"Mr. Inglethorp's."

"Ah!" He tried the roll top tentatively. "Locked. But perhaps one of Mrs. Inglethorp's keys would open it." He tried several, twisting and turning them with a practiced hand, and finally uttering an ejaculation of satisfaction. "Voila! It is not the key, but it will open it at a pinch." He slid back the roll top, and ran a rapid eye over the neatly filed papers. To my surprise, he did not examine them, merely remarking approvingly as he relocked the desk: "Decidedly, he is a man of method, this Mr.

Inglethorp!"

A "man of method" was, in Poirot's estimation, the highest praise that could be bestowed on any individual.

I felt that my friend was not what he had been as he rambled on disconnectedly:

"There were no stamps in his desk, but there might have been, eh, mon ami? There might have been? Yes"—his eyes wandered round the room—"this boudoir has nothing more to tell us. It did not yield much.

Only this."

He pulled a crumpled envelope out of his pocket, and tossed it over to me. It was rather a curious document. A plain, dirty looking old envelope with a few words scrawled across it, apparently at random. The following is a facsimile of it.

"IT ISN'T STRYCHNINE, IS IT?"

"Where did you find this?" I asked Poirot, in lively curiosity.

"In the waste-paper basket. You recognise the handwriting?" "Yes, it is Mrs. Inglethorp's. But what does it mean?" Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot say—but it is suggestive."

A wild idea flashed across me. Was it possible that Mrs. Inglethorp's mind was deranged? Had she some fantastic idea of demoniacal possession? And, if that were so, was it not also possible that she might have taken her own life?

I was about to expound these theories to Poirot, when his own words distracted me.

"Come," he said, "now to examine the coffee-cups!"

"My dear Poirot! What on earth is the good of that, now that we know about the coco?"

"Oh, la la! That miserable coco!" cried Poirot flippantly.

He laughed with apparent enjoyment, raising his arms to heaven in mock despair, in what I could not but consider the worst possible taste.

"And, anyway," I said, with increasing coldness, "as Mrs. Inglethorp took her coffee upstairs with her, I do not see what you expect to find, unless you consider it likely that we shall discover a packet of strychnine on the coffee tray!"

Poirot was sobered at once.

"Come, come, my friend," he said, slipping his arms through mine. "Ne vous fachez pas! Allow me to interest myself in my coffee-cups, and I will respect your coco. There! Is it a bargain?"

He was so quaintly humorous that I was forced to laugh; and we went together to the drawing-room, where the coffee-cups and tray remained undisturbed as we had left them.

Poirot made me recapitulate the scene of the night before, listening very carefully, and verifying the position of the various cups.

"So Mrs. Cavendish stood by the tray—and poured out. Yes. Then she came across to the window where you sat with Mademoiselle Cynthia. Yes. Here are the three cups. And the cup on the mantel-piece, half drunk, that would be Mr. Lawrence Cavendish's. And the one on the tray?"

"John Cavendish's. I saw him put it down there."

"Good. One, two, three, four, five—but where, then, is the cup of Mr. Inglethorp?"

"He does not take coffee."

"Then all are accounted for. One moment, my friend."

With infinite care, he took a drop or two from the grounds in each cup, sealing them up in separate test tubes, tasting each in turn as he did so. His physiognomy underwent a curious change. An expression gathered there that I can only describe as half puzzled, and half relieved.

"Bien!" he said at last. "It is evident! I had an idea—but clearly I was mistaken. Yes, altogether I was mistaken. Yet it is strange. But no matter!"

And, with a characteristic shrug, he dismissed whatever it was that was worrying him from his mind. I could have told him from the beginning that this obsession of his over the coffee was bound to end in a blind alley, but I restrained my tongue. After all, though he was old, Poirot had been a great man in his day.

"Breakfast is ready," said John Cavendish, coming in from the hall.

"You will breakfast with us, Monsieur Poirot?"

Poirot acquiesced. I observed John. Already he was almost restored to his normal self. The shock of the events of the last night had upset him temporarily, but his equable poise soon swung back to the normal. He was a man of very little imagination, in sharp contrast with his brother, who had, perhaps, too much.

Ever since the early hours of the morning, John had been hard at work, sending telegrams—one of the first had gone to Evelyn Howard—writing notices for the papers, and generally occupying himself with the melancholy duties that a death entails.

"May I ask how things are proceeding?" he said. "Do your investigations point to my mother having died a natural death— or—or must we prepare ourselves for the worst?"

"I think, Mr. Cavendish," said Poirot gravely, "that you would do well not to buoy yourself up with any false hopes. Can you tell me the views of the other members of the family?"

"My brother Lawrence is convinced that we are making a fuss over nothing. He says that everything points to its being a simple case of heart failure."

"He does, does he? That is very interesting—very interesting," murmured Poirot softly. "And Mrs. Cavendish?" A faint cloud passed over John's face.

"I have not the least idea what my wife's views on the subject are."

The answer brought a momentary stiffness in its train. John broke the rather awkward silence by saying with a slight effort: "I told you, didn't I, that Mr. Inglethorp has returned?" Poirot bent his head.

"It's an awkward position for all of us. Of course one has to treat him as usual—but, hang it all, one's gorge does rise at sitting down to eat with a possible murderer!"

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

"I quite understand. It is a very difficult situation for you, Mr. Cavendish. I would like to ask you one question. Mr. Inglethorp's reason for not returning last night was, I believe, that he had forgotten the latchkey. Is not that so?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you are quite sure that the latch-key was forgotten—that he did not take it after all?"

"I have no idea. I never thought of looking. We always keep it in the

hall drawer. I'll go and see if it's there now."

Poirot held up his hand with a faint smile.

"No, no, Mr. Cavendish, it is too late now. I am certain that you would find it. If Mr. Inglethorp did take it, he has had ample time to replace it by now."

"But do you think——"

"I think nothing. If anyone had chanced to look this morning before his return, and seen it there, it would have been a valuable point in his favour. That is all."

John looked perplexed.

"Do not worry," said Poirot smoothly. "I assure you that you need not let it trouble you. Since you are so kind, let us go and have some breakfast."

Every one was assembled in the dining-room. Under the circumstances, we were naturally not a cheerful party. The reaction after a shock is always trying, and I think we were all suffering from it. Decorum and good breeding naturally enjoined that our demeanour should be much as usual, yet I could not help wondering if this self-control were really a matter of great difficulty. There were no red eyes, no signs of secretly indulged grief.

I felt that I was right in my opinion that Dorcas was the person most affected by the personal side of the tragedy.

I pass over Alfred Inglethorp, who acted the bereaved widower in a manner that I felt to be disgusting in its hypocrisy. Did he know that we suspected him, I wondered. Surely he could not be unaware of the fact, conceal it as we would. Did he feel some secret stirring of fear, or was he confident that his crime would go unpunished? Surely the suspicion in the atmosphere must warn him that he was already a marked man.

But did every one suspect him? What about Mrs. Cavendish? I watched her as she sat at the head of the table, graceful, composed, enigmatic. In her soft grey frock, with white ruffles at the wrists falling over her slender hands, she looked very beautiful. When she chose, however, her face could be sphinx-like in its inscrutability. She was very silent, hardly opening her lips, and yet in some queer way I felt that the great strength of her personality was dominating us all.

And little Cynthia? Did she suspect? She looked very tired and ill, I thought. The heaviness and languor of her manner were very marked. I asked her if she were feeling ill, and she answered frankly: "Yes, I've got the most beastly headache."

"Have another cup of coffee, mademoiselle?" said Poirot solicitously. "It will revive you. It is unparalleled for the mal de tete." He jumped up and took her cup.

"No sugar," said Cynthia, watching him, as he picked up the sugartongs.

"No sugar? You abandon it in the war-time, eh?"

"No, I never take it in coffee."

"Sacre!" murmured Poirot to himself, as he brought back the replenished cup.

Only I heard him, and glancing up curiously at the little man I saw that his face was working with suppressed excitement, and his eyes were as green as a cat's. He had heard or seen something that had affected him strongly—but what was it? I do not usually label myself as dense, but I must confess that nothing out of the ordinary had attracted my attention.

In another moment, the door opened and Dorcas appeared.

"Mr. Wells to see you, sir," she said to John.

I remembered the name as being that of the lawyer to whom Mrs. Inglethorp had written the night before.

John rose immediately.

"Show him into my study." Then he turned to us. "My mother's lawyer," he explained. And in a lower voice: "He is also Coroner—you understand. Perhaps you would like to come with me?"

We acquiesced and followed him out of the room. John strode on ahead and I took the opportunity of whispering to Poirot:

"There will be an inquest then?"

Poirot nodded absently. He seemed absorbed in thought; so much so that my curiosity was aroused.

"What is it? You are not attending to what I say."

"It is true, my friend. I am much worried."

"Why?"

"Because Mademoiselle Cynthia does not take sugar in her coffee."

"What? You cannot be serious?"

"But I am most serious. Ah, there is something there that I do not understand. My instinct was right." "What instinct?"

"The instinct that led me to insist on examining those coffee-cups.

Chut! no more now!"

We followed John into his study, and he closed the door behind us.

Mr. Wells was a pleasant man of middle-age, with keen eyes, and the typical lawyer's mouth. John introduced us both, and explained the reason of our presence.

"You will understand, Wells," he added, "that this is all strictly private. We are still hoping that there will turn out to be no need for investigation of any kind."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr. Wells soothingly. "I wish we could have spared you the pain and publicity of an inquest, but of course it's quite unavoidable in the absence of a doctor's certificate."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Clever man, Bauerstein. Great authority on toxicology, I believe."

"Indeed," said John with a certain stiffness in his manner. Then he added rather hesitatingly: "Shall we have to appear as witnesses—all of us, I mean?"

"You, of course—and ah—er—Mr.—er—Inglethorp."

A slight pause ensued before the lawyer went on in his soothing manner:

"Any other evidence will be simply confirmatory, a mere matter of form."

"I see."

A faint expression of relief swept over John's face. It puzzled me, for I saw no occasion for it.

"If you know of nothing to the contrary," pursued Mr. Wells, "I had thought of Friday. That will give us plenty of time for the doctor's report.

The post-mortem is to take place to-night, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Then that arrangement will suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"I need not tell you, my dear Cavendish, how distressed I am at this most tragic affair."

"Can you give us no help in solving it, monsieur?" interposed Poirot, speaking for the first time since we had entered the room.

"I?"

"Yes, we heard that Mrs. Inglethorp wrote to you last night. You

should have received the letter this morning."

"I did, but it contains no information. It is merely a note asking me to call upon her this morning, as she wanted my advice on a matter of great importance."

"She gave you no hint as to what that matter might be?"
"Unfortunately, no."

"That is a pity," said John.

"A great pity," agreed Poirot gravely.

There was silence. Poirot remained lost in thought for a few minutes. Finally he turned to the lawyer again.

"Mr. Wells, there is one thing I should like to ask you—that is, if it is not against professional etiquette. In the event of Mrs. Inglethorp's death, who would inherit her money?"

The lawyer hesitated a moment, and then replied:

"The knowledge will be public property very soon, so if Mr. Cavendish does not object——"

"Not at all," interpolated John.

"I do not see any reason why I should not answer your question. By her last will, dated August of last year, after various unimportant legacies to servants, etc., she gave her entire fortune to her stepson, Mr.

John Cavendish."

"Was not that—pardon the question, Mr. Cavendish—rather unfair to her other stepson, Mr. Lawrence Cavendish?"

"No, I do not think so. You see, under the terms of their father's will, while John inherited the property, Lawrence, at his stepmother's death, would come into a considerable sum of money. Mrs. Inglethorp left her money to her elder stepson, knowing that he would have to keep up

Styles. It was, to my mind, a very fair and equitable distribution." Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"I see. But I am right in saying, am I not, that by your English law that will was automatically revoked when Mrs. Inglethorp remarried?" Mr. Wells bowed his head.

"As I was about to proceed, Monsieur Poirot, that document is now null and void."

"Hein!" said Poirot. He reflected for a moment, and then asked: "Was

Mrs. Inglethorp herself aware of that fact?"

"I do not know. She may have been."

"She was," said John unexpectedly. "We were discussing the matter of wills being revoked by marriage only yesterday."

"Ah! One more question, Mr. Wells. You say 'her last will.' Had Mrs.

Inglethorp, then, made several former wills?"

"On an average, she made a new will at least once a year," said Mr. Wells imperturbably. "She was given to changing her mind as to her testamentary dispositions, now benefiting one, now another member of her family."

"Suppose," suggested Poirot, "that, unknown to you, she had made a new will in favour of some one who was not, in any sense of the word, a member of the family—we will say Miss Howard, for instance—would you be surprised?"

"Not in the least."

"Ah!" Poirot seemed to have exhausted his questions.

I drew close to him, while John and the lawyer were debating the question of going through Mrs. Inglethorp's papers.

"Do you think Mrs. Inglethorp made a will leaving all her money to

Miss Howard?" I asked in a low voice, with some curiosity.

Poirot smiled.

"No."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Hush!"

John Cavendish had turned to Poirot.

"Will you come with us, Monsieur Poirot? We are going through my mother's papers. Mr. Inglethorp is quite willing to leave it entirely to Mr.

Wells and myself."

"Which simplifies matters very much," murmured the lawyer. "As technically, of course, he was entitled——" He did not finish the sentence.

"We will look through the desk in the boudoir first," explained John, "and go up to her bedroom afterwards. She kept her most important papers in a purple despatch-case, which we must look through carefully."

"Yes," said the lawyer, "it is quite possible that there may be a later will than the one in my possession."

"There is a later will." It was Poirot who spoke.

"What?" John and the lawyer looked at him startled.

"Or, rather," pursued my friend imperturbably, "there was one."

"What do you mean—there was one? Where is it now?"

"Burnt!"

"Burnt?"

"Yes. See here." He took out the charred fragment we had found in the grate in Mrs. Inglethorp's room, and handed it to the lawyer with a brief explanation of when and where he had found it.

"But possibly this is an old will?"

"I do not think so. In fact I am almost certain that it was made no earlier than yesterday afternoon."

"What?" "Impossible!" broke simultaneously from both men.

Poirot turned to John.

"If you will allow me to send for your gardener, I will prove it to you."
"Oh, of course—but I don't see——" Poirot raised his hand.

"Do as I ask you. Afterwards you shall question as much as you please."

"Very well." He rang the bell.

Dorcas answered it in due course.

"Dorcas, will you tell Manning to come round and speak to me here."
"Yes, sir."

Dorcas withdrew.

We waited in a tense silence. Poirot alone seemed perfectly at his ease, and dusted a forgotten corner of the bookcase.

The clumping of hobnailed boots on the gravel outside proclaimed the approach of Manning. John looked questioningly at Poirot. The latter nodded.

"Come inside, Manning," said John, "I want to speak to you."

Manning came slowly and hesitatingly through the French window, and stood as near it as he could. He held his cap in his hands, twisting it very carefully round and round. His back was much bent, though he was probably not as old as he looked, but his eyes were sharp and intelligent, and belied his slow and rather cautious speech.

"Manning," said John, "this gentleman will put some questions to you which I want you to answer."

"Yes sir," mumbled Manning.

Poirot stepped forward briskly. Manning's eye swept over him with a faint contempt.

"You were planting a bed of begonias round by the south side of the house yesterday afternoon, were you not, Manning?"

"Yes, sir, me and Willum."

"And Mrs. Inglethorp came to the window and called you, did she not?"

"Yes, sir, she did."

"Tell me in your own words exactly what happened after that."

"Well, sir, nothing much. She just told Willum to go on his bicycle down to the village, and bring back a form of will, or such-like—I don't know what exactly—she wrote it down for him."

"Well?"

"Well, he did, sir."

"And what happened next?"

"We went on with the begonias, sir."

"Did not Mrs. Inglethorp call you again?"

"Yes, sir, both me and Willum, she called."

"And then?"

"She made us come right in, and sign our names at the bottom of a long paper—under where she'd signed."

"Did you see anything of what was written above her signature?" asked Poirot sharply.

"No, sir, there was a bit of blotting paper over that part."

"And you signed where she told you?"

"Yes, sir, first me and then Willum."

"What did she do with it afterwards?"

"Well, sir, she slipped it into a long envelope, and put it inside a sort of purple box that was standing on the desk."

"What time was it when she first called you?"

"About four, I should say, sir."

"Not earlier? Couldn't it have been about half-past three?"

"No, I shouldn't say so, sir. It would be more likely to be a bit after four—not before it."

"Thank you, Manning, that will do," said Poirot pleasantly.

The gardener glanced at his master, who nodded, whereupon Manning lifted a finger to his forehead with a low mumble, and backed cautiously out of the window.

We all looked at each other.

"Good heavens!" murmured John. "What an extraordinary coincidence."

"How—a coincidence?"

"That my mother should have made a will on the very day of her death!"

Mr. Wells cleared his throat and remarked drily:

"Are you so sure it is a coincidence, Cavendish?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother, you tell me, had a violent quarrel with—some one yesterday afternoon——"

"What do you mean?" cried John again. There was a tremor in his voice, and he had gone very pale.

"In consequence of that quarrel, your mother very suddenly and hurriedly makes a new will. The contents of that will we shall never know. She told no one of its provisions. This morning, no doubt, she would have consulted me on the subject—but she had no chance. The will disappears, and she takes its secret with her to her grave. Cavendish, I much fear there is no coincidence there. Monsieur Poirot, I am sure you agree with me that the facts are very suggestive."

"Suggestive, or not," interrupted John, "we are most grateful to Monsieur Poirot for elucidating the matter. But for him, we should never have known of this will. I suppose, I may not ask you, monsieur, what first led you to suspect the fact?" Poirot smiled and answered:

"A scribbled over old envelope, and a freshly planted bed of begonias."

John, I think, would have pressed his questions further, but at that moment the loud purr of a motor was audible, and we all turned to the window as it swept past.

"Evie!" cried John. "Excuse me, Wells." He went hurriedly out into the hall.

Poirot looked inquiringly at me.

"Miss Howard," I explained.

"Ah, I am glad she has come. There is a woman with a head and a heart too, Hastings. Though the good God gave her no beauty!"

I followed John's example, and went out into the hall, where Miss Howard was endeavouring to extricate herself from the voluminous mass of veils that enveloped her head. As her eyes fell on me, a sudden pang of guilt shot through me. This was the woman who had warned me so earnestly, and to whose warning I had, alas, paid no heed! How soon, and how contemptuously, I had dismissed it from my mind. Now that she had been proved justified in so tragic a manner, I felt ashamed. She had known Alfred Inglethorp only too well. I wondered whether, if she had remained at Styles, the tragedy would have taken place, or would the man have feared her watchful eyes?

I was relieved when she shook me by the hand, with her well remembered painful grip. The eyes that met mine were sad, but not reproachful; that she had been crying bitterly, I could tell by the redness of her eyelids, but her manner was unchanged from its old gruffness.

"Started the moment I got the wire. Just come off night duty. Hired car. Quickest way to get here."

"Have you had anything to eat this morning, Evie?" asked John.

"No."

"I thought not. Come along, breakfast's not cleared away yet, and they'll make you some fresh tea." He turned to me. "Look after her, Hastings, will you? Wells is waiting for me. Oh, here's Monsieur Poirot. He's helping us, you know, Evie."

Miss Howard shook hands with Poirot, but glanced suspiciously over her shoulder at John.

"What do you mean—helping us?"

"Helping us to investigate."

"Nothing to investigate. Have they taken him to prison yet?"

"Taken who to prison?"

"Who? Alfred Inglethorp, of course!"

"My dear Evie, do be careful. Lawrence is of the opinion that my mother died from heart seizure."

"More fool, Lawrence!" retorted Miss Howard. "Of course Alfred Inglethorp murdered poor Emily—as I always told you he would."

"My dear Evie, don't shout so. Whatever we may think or suspect, it is better to say as little as possible for the present. The inquest isn't until

Friday."

"Not until fiddlesticks!" The snort Miss Howard gave was truly magnificent. "You're all off your heads. The man will be out of the country by then. If he's any sense, he won't stay here tamely and wait to be hanged." John Cavendish looked at her helplessly.

"I know what it is," she accused him, "you've been listening to the doctors. Never should. What do they know? Nothing at all—or just enough to make them dangerous. I ought to know—my own father was a doctor. That little Wilkins is about the greatest fool that even I have ever seen. Heart seizure! Sort of thing he would say. Anyone with any sense could see at once that her husband had poisoned her. I always said he'd murder her in her bed, poor soul. Now he's done it. And all you can do is to murmur silly things about 'heart seizure' and 'inquest on Friday.' You ought to be ashamed of yourself, John Cavendish."

"What do you want me to do?" asked John, unable to help a faint smile. "Dash it all, Evie, I can't haul him down to the local police station by the scruff of his neck."

"Well, you might do something. Find out how he did it. He's a crafty

beggar. Dare say he soaked fly papers. Ask Cook if she's missed any."

It occurred to me very forcibly at that moment that to harbour Miss Howard and Alfred Inglethorp under the same roof, and keep the peace between them, was likely to prove a Herculean task, and I did not envy John. I could see by the expression of his face that he fully appreciated the difficulty of the position. For the moment, he sought refuge in retreat, and left the room precipitately.

Dorcas brought in fresh tea. As she left the room, Poirot came over from the window where he had been standing, and sat down facing Miss Howard.

"Mademoiselle," he said gravely, "I want to ask you something." "Ask away," said the lady, eyeing him with some disfavour.

"I want to be able to count upon your help."

"I'll help you to hang Alfred with pleasure," she replied gruffly. "Hanging's too good for him. Ought to be drawn and quartered, like in good old times."

"We are at one then," said Poirot, "for I, too, want to hang the criminal."

"Alfred Inglethorp?"

"Him, or another."

"No question of another. Poor Emily was never murdered until he came along. I don't say she wasn't surrounded by sharks—she was. But it was only her purse they were after. Her life was safe enough. But along comes Mr. Alfred Inglethorp—and within two months—hey presto!"

"Believe me, Miss Howard," said Poirot very earnestly, "if Mr. Inglethorp is the man, he shall not escape me. On my honour, I will hang him as high as Haman!"

"That's better," said Miss Howard more enthusiastically.

"But I must ask you to trust me. Now your help may be very valuable to me. I will tell you why. Because, in all this house of mourning, yours are the only eyes that have wept."

Miss Howard blinked, and a new note crept into the gruffness of her voice.

"If you mean that I was fond of her—yes, I was. You know, Emily was a selfish old woman in her way. She was very generous, but she always wanted a return. She never let people forget what she had done for them—and, that way she missed love. Don't think she ever realized it, though, or felt the lack of it. Hope not, anyway. I was on a different footing. I took my stand from the first. 'So many pounds a year I'm worth to you. Well and good. But not a penny piece besides—not a pair of gloves, nor a theatre ticket.' She didn't understand—was very offended sometimes. Said I was foolishly proud. It wasn't that—but I couldn't explain. Anyway, I kept my self-respect. And so, out of the whole bunch, I was the only one who could allow myself to be fond of her. I watched over her. I guarded her from the lot of them, and then a glib-tongued scoundrel comes along, and pooh! all my years of devotion go for nothing." Poirot nodded sympathetically.

"I understand, mademoiselle, I understand all you feel. It is most natural. You think that we are lukewarm—that we lack fire and energy—but trust me, it is not so."

John stuck his head in at this juncture, and invited us both to come up to Mrs. Inglethorp's room, as he and Mr. Wells had finished looking through the desk in the boudoir.

As we went up the stairs, John looked back to the dining-room door, and lowered his voice confidentially:

"Look here, what's going to happen when these two meet?" I shook my head helplessly.

"I've told Mary to keep them apart if she can."

"Will she be able to do so?"

"The Lord only knows. There's one thing, Inglethorp himself won't be too keen on meeting her."

"You've got the keys still, haven't you, Poirot?" I asked, as we reached the door of the locked room.

Taking the keys from Poirot, John unlocked it, and we all passed in. The lawyer went straight to the desk, and John followed him.

"My mother kept most of her important papers in this despatch-case, I believe," he said.

Poirot drew out the small bunch of keys.

"Permit me. I locked it, out of precaution, this morning."

"But it's not locked now."

"Impossible!"

"See." And John lifted the lid as he spoke.

"Milles tonnerres!" cried Poirot, dumfounded. "And I—who have both the keys in my pocket!" He flung himself upon the case. Suddenly he

stiffened. "En voila une affaire! This lock has been forced." "What?"

Poirot laid down the case again.

"But who forced it? Why should they? When? But the door was locked?" These exclamations burst from us disjointedly.

Poirot answered them categorically—almost mechanically.

"Who? That is the question. Why? Ah, if I only knew. When? Since I was here an hour ago. As to the door being locked, it is a very ordinary

lock. Probably any other of the doorkeys in this passage would fit it."

We stared at one another blankly. Poirot had walked over to the mantelpiece. He was outwardly calm, but I noticed his hands, which from long force of habit were mechanically straightening the spill vases on the mantelpiece, were shaking violently.

"See here, it was like this," he said at last. "There was something in that case—some piece of evidence, slight in itself perhaps, but still enough of a clue to connect the murderer with the crime. It was vital to him that it should be destroyed before it was discovered and its significance appreciated. Therefore, he took the risk, the great risk, of coming in here. Finding the case locked, he was obliged to force it, thus betraying his presence. For him to take that risk, it must have been something of great importance."

"But what was it?"

"Ah!" cried Poirot, with a gesture of anger. "That, I do not know! A document of some kind, without doubt, possibly the scrap of paper Dorcas saw in her hand yesterday afternoon. And I—" his anger burst forth freely —"miserable animal that I am! I guessed nothing! I have behaved like an imbecile! I should never have left that case here. I should have carried it away with me. Ah, triple pig! And now it is gone. It is destroyed—but is it destroyed? Is there not yet a chance—we must leave no stone unturned—"

He rushed like a madman from the room, and I followed him as soon as I had sufficiently recovered my wits. But, by the time I had reached the top of the stairs, he was out of sight.

Mary Cavendish was standing where the staircase branched, staring down into the hall in the direction in which he had disappeared.

"What has happened to your extraordinary little friend, Mr. Hastings?

He has just rushed past me like a mad bull."

"He's rather upset about something," I remarked feebly. I really did not know how much Poirot would wish me to disclose. As I saw a faint smile gather on Mrs. Cavendish's expressive mouth, I endeavoured to try and turn the conversation by saying: "They haven't met yet, have they?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Inglethorp and Miss Howard."

She looked at me in rather a disconcerting manner. "Do you think it would be such a disaster if they did meet?" "Well, don't you?" I said, rather taken aback.

"No." She was smiling in her quiet way. "I should like to see a good flare up. It would clear the air. At present we are all thinking so much, and saying so little."

"John doesn't think so," I remarked. "He's anxious to keep them apart."

"Oh, John!"

Something in her tone fired me, and I blurted out:

"Old John's an awfully good sort."

She studied me curiously for a minute or two, and then said, to my great surprise:

"You are loyal to your friend. I like you for that."

"Aren't you my friend too?"

"I am a very bad friend."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is true. I am charming to my friends one day, and forget all about them the next."

I don't know what impelled me, but I was nettled, and I said foolishly and not in the best of taste:

"Yet you seem to be invariably charming to Dr. Bauerstein!"

Instantly I regretted my words. Her face stiffened. I had the impression of a steel curtain coming down and blotting out the real woman. Without a word, she turned and went swiftly up the stairs, whilst I stood like an idiot gaping after her.

I was recalled to other matters by a frightful row going on below. I could hear Poirot shouting and expounding. I was vexed to think that my diplomacy had been in vain. The little man appeared to be taking the whole house into his confidence, a proceeding of which I, for one, doubted the wisdom. Once again I could not help regretting that my friend was so prone to lose his head in moments of excitement. I stepped briskly down the stairs. The sight of me calmed Poirot almost immediately. I drew him aside.

"My dear fellow," I said, "is this wise? Surely you don't want the whole house to know of this occurrence? You are actually playing into the criminal's hands."

"You think so, Hastings?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, well, my friend, I will be guided by you."

"Good. Although, unfortunately, it is a little too late now."

"Sure."

He looked so crestfallen and abashed that I felt quite sorry, though I still thought my rebuke a just and wise one.

"Well," he said at last, "let us go, mon ami."

"You have finished here?"

"For the moment, yes. You will walk back with me to the village?"

"Willingly."

He picked up his little suit-case, and we went out through the open window in the drawing-room. Cynthia Murdoch was just coming in, and

Poirot stood aside to let her pass. "Excuse me, mademoiselle, one minute." "Yes?" she turned inquiringly.

"Did you ever make up Mrs. Inglethorp's medicines?"

A slight flush rose in her face, as she answered rather constrainedly:

"No."

"Only her powders?"

The flush deepened as Cynthia replied:

"Oh, yes, I did make up some sleeping powders for her once."

"These?"

Poirot produced the empty box which had contained powders.

She nodded.

"Can you tell me what they were? Sulphonal? Veronal?"

"No, they were bromide powders."

"Ah! Thank you, mademoiselle; good morning."

As we walked briskly away from the house, I glanced at him more than once. I had often before noticed that, if anything excited him, his eyes turned green like a cat's. They were shining like emeralds now.

"My friend," he broke out at last, "I have a little idea, a very strange, and probably utterly impossible idea. And yet—it fits in."

I shrugged my shoulders. I privately thought that Poirot was rather too much given to these fantastic ideas. In this case, surely, the truth was only too plain and apparent.

"So that is the explanation of the blank label on the box," I remarked. "Very simple, as you said. I really wonder that I did not think of it myself."

Poirot did not appear to be listening to me.

"They have made one more discovery, la-bas," he observed, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Styles. "Mr. Wells told me as we were going upstairs." "What was it?"

"Locked up in the desk in the boudoir, they found a will of Mrs. Inglethorp's, dated before her marriage, leaving her fortune to Alfred Inglethorp. It must have been made just at the time they were engaged. It came quite as a surprise to Wells—and to John Cavendish also. It was written on one of those printed will forms, and witnessed by two of the servants—not Dorcas."

"Did Mr. Inglethorp know of it?"

"He says not."

"One might take that with a grain of salt," I remarked sceptically. "All these wills are very confusing. Tell me, how did those scribbled words on the envelope help you to discover that a will was made yesterday afternoon?"

Poirot smiled.

"Mon ami, have you ever, when writing a letter, been arrested by the fact that you did not know how to spell a certain word?"

"Yes, often. I suppose every one has."

"Exactly. And have you not, in such a case, tried the word once or twice on the edge of the blotting-paper, or a spare scrap of paper, to see if it looked right? Well, that is what Mrs. Inglethorp did. You will notice that the word 'possessed' is spelt first with one 's' and subsequently with two—correctly. To make sure, she had further tried it in a sentence, thus: 'I am possessed.' Now, what did that tell me? It told me that Mrs. Inglethorp had been writing the word 'possessed' that afternoon, and, having the fragment of paper found in the grate fresh in my mind, the possibility of a will—(a document almost certain to contain that word)—occurred to me at once. This possibility was confirmed by a further circumstance. In the general confusion, the boudoir had not been swept that morning, and near the desk were several traces of brown mould and earth. The weather had been perfectly fine for some days, and no ordinary boots would have left such a heavy deposit.

"I strolled to the window, and saw at once that the begonia beds had been newly planted. The mould in the beds was exactly similar to that on the floor of the boudoir, and also I learnt from you that they had been planted yesterday afternoon. I was now sure that one, or possibly both of the gardeners—for there were two sets of footprints in the bed—had entered the boudoir, for if Mrs. Inglethorp had merely wished to speak to them she would in all probability have stood at the window, and they would not have come into the room at all. I was now quite convinced that she had made a fresh will, and had called the two gardeners in to witness her signature. Events proved that I was right in my supposition."

"That was very ingenious," I could not help admitting. "I must confess that the conclusions I drew from those few scribbled words were quite erroneous."

He smiled.

"You gave too much rein to your imagination. Imagination is a good servant, and a bad master. The simplest explanation is always the most likely."

"Another point—how did you know that the key of the despatch-case had been lost?"

"I did not know it. It was a guess that turned out to be correct. You observed that it had a piece of twisted wire through the handle. That suggested to me at once that it had possibly been wrenched off a flimsy keyring. Now, if it had been lost and recovered, Mrs. Inglethorp would at once have replaced it on her bunch; but on her bunch I found what was obviously the duplicate key, very new and bright, which led me to the hypothesis that somebody else had inserted the original key in the lock of the despatch-case."

"Yes," I said, "Alfred Inglethorp, without doubt." Poirot looked at me curiously.

"You are very sure of his guilt?"

"Well, naturally. Every fresh circumstance seems to establish it more clearly."

"On the contrary," said Poirot quietly, "there are several points in his favour."

"Oh, come now!"

"Yes."

"I see only one."

"And that?"

"That he was not in the house last night."

" 'Bad shot!' as you English say! You have chosen the one point that to my mind tells against him."

"How is that?"

"Because if Mr. Inglethorp knew that his wife would be poisoned last night, he would certainly have arranged to be away from the house. His excuse was an obviously trumped up one. That leaves us two possibilities: either he knew what was going to happen or he had a reason of his own for his absence."

"And that reason?" I asked sceptically.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"How should I know? Discreditable, without doubt. This Mr. Inglethorp, I should say, is somewhat of a scoundrel—but that does not of necessity make him a murderer."

I shook my head, unconvinced.

"We do not agree, eh?" said Poirot. "Well, let us leave it. Time will show which of us is right. Now let us turn to other aspects of the case. What do you make of the fact that all the doors of the bedroom were bolted on the inside?"

"Well——" I considered. "One must look at it logically."

"True."

"I should put it this way. The doors were bolted—our own eyes have told us that—yet the presence of the candle grease on the floor, and the destruction of the will, prove that during the night some one entered the room. You agree so far?"

"Perfectly. Put with admirable clearness. Proceed."

"Well," I said, encouraged, "as the person who entered did not do so by the window, nor by miraculous means, it follows that the door must have been opened from inside by Mrs. Inglethorp herself. That strengthens the conviction that the person in question was her husband.

She would naturally open the door to her own husband." Poirot shook his head.

"Why should she? She had bolted the door leading into his room—a most unusual proceeding on her part—she had had a most violent quarrel with him that very afternoon. No, he was the last person she would admit."

"But you agree with me that the door must have been opened by Mrs.

Inglethorp herself?"

"There is another possibility. She may have forgotten to bolt the door into the passage when she went to bed, and have got up later, towards morning, and bolted it then."

"Poirot, is that seriously your opinion?"

"No, I do not say it is so, but it might be. Now, to turn to another feature, what do you make of the scrap of conversation you overheard between Mrs. Cavendish and her mother-in-law?"

"I had forgotten that," I said thoughtfully. "That is as enigmatical as ever. It seems incredible that a woman like Mrs. Cavendish, proud and reticent to the last degree, should interfere so violently in what was certainly not her affair."

"Precisely. It was an astonishing thing for a woman of her breeding to do."

"It is certainly curious," I agreed. "Still, it is unimportant, and need not be taken into account."

A groan burst from Poirot.

"What have I always told you? Everything must be taken into account.

If the fact will not fit the theory—let the theory go." "Well, we shall see," I said, nettled.

"Yes, we shall see."

We had reached Leastways Cottage, and Poirot ushered me upstairs to his own room. He offered me one of the tiny Russian cigarettes he himself occasionally smoked. I was amused to notice that he stowed away the used matches most carefully in a little china pot. My momentary annoyance vanished.

Poirot had placed our two chairs in front of the open window which commanded a view of the village street. The fresh air blew in warm and pleasant. It was going to be a hot day.

Suddenly my attention was arrested by a weedy looking young man rushing down the street at a great pace. It was the expression on his face that was extraordinary—a curious mingling of terror and agitation.

"Look, Poirot!" I said.

He leant forward.

"Tiens!" he said. "It is Mr. Mace, from the chemist's shop. He is coming here."

The young man came to a halt before Leastways Cottage, and, after hesitating a moment, pounded vigorously at the door.

"A little minute," cried Poirot from the window. "I come."

Motioning to me to follow him, he ran swiftly down the stairs and opened the door. Mr. Mace began at once.

"Oh, Mr. Poirot, I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I heard that you'd just come back from the Hall?"

"Yes, we have."

The young man moistened his dry lips. His face was working curiously.

"It's all over the village about old Mrs. Inglethorp dying so suddenly.

They do say—" he lowered his voice cautiously—"that it's poison?" Poirot's face remained quite impassive.

"Only the doctors can tell us that, Mr. Mace."

"Yes, exactly—of course——" The young man hesitated, and then his agitation was too much for him. He clutched Poirot by the arm, and sank his voice to a whisper: "Just tell me this, Mr. Poirot, it isn't—it isn't strychnine, is it?"

I hardly heard what Poirot replied. Something evidently of a non-committal nature. The young man departed, and as he closed the door

Poirot's eyes met mine.

"Yes," he said, nodding gravely. "He will have evidence to give at the inquest."

We went slowly upstairs again. I was opening my lips, when Poirot stopped me with a gesture of his hand.

"Not now, not now, mon ami. I have need of reflection. My mind is in some disorder—which is not well."

For about ten minutes he sat in dead silence, perfectly still, except for several expressive motions of his eyebrows, and all the time his eyes grew steadily greener. At last he heaved a deep sigh.

"It is well. The bad moment has passed. Now all is arranged and classified. One must never permit confusion. The case is not clear yet—no. For it is of the most complicated! It puzzles me. Me, Hercule Poirot! There are two facts of significance."

"And what are they?"

"The first is the state of the weather yesterday. That is very important."

"But it was a glorious day!" I interrupted. "Poirot, you're pulling my leg!"

"Not at all. The thermometer registered 80 degrees in the shade. Do

not forget that, my friend. It is the key to the whole riddle!" "And the second point?" I asked.

"The important fact that Monsieur Inglethorp wears very peculiar clothes, has a black beard, and uses glasses."

"Poirot, I cannot believe you are serious."

"I am absolutely serious, my friend."

"But this is childish!"

"No, it is very momentous."

"And supposing the Coroner's jury returns a verdict of Wilful Murder against Alfred Inglethorp. What becomes of your theories, then?"

"They would not be shaken because twelve stupid men had happened to make a mistake! But that will not occur. For one thing, a country jury is not anxious to take responsibility upon itself, and Mr. Inglethorp stands practically in the position of local squire. Also," he added placidly, "I should not allow it!"

"You would not allow it?"

"No."

I looked at the extraordinary little man, divided between annoyance and amusement. He was so tremendously sure of himself. As though he read my thoughts, he nodded gently.

"Oh, yes, mon ami, I would do what I say." He got up and laid his hand on my shoulder. His physiognomy underwent a complete change. Tears came into his eyes. "In all this, you see, I think of that poor Mrs. Inglethorp who is dead. She was not extravagantly loved—no. But she was very good to us Belgians—I owe her a debt."

I endeavoured to interrupt, but Poirot swept on.

"Let me tell you this, Hastings. She would never forgive me if I let Alfred Inglethorp, her husband, be arrested now—when a word from me could save him!"

THE INQUEST

In the interval before the inquest, Poirot was unfailing in his activity. Twice he was closeted with Mr. Wells. He also took long walks into the country. I rather resented his not taking me into his confidence, the more so as I could not in the least guess what he was driving at.

It occurred to me that he might have been making inquiries at Raikes's farm; so, finding him out when I called at Leastways Cottage on Wednesday evening, I walked over there by the fields, hoping to meet him. But there was no sign of him, and I hesitated to go right up to the farm itself. As I walked away, I met an aged rustic, who leered at me cunningly. "You'm from the Hall, bain't you?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm looking for a friend of mine whom I thought might have walked this way."

"A little chap? As waves his hands when he talks? One of them Belgies from the village?"

"Yes," I said eagerly. "He has been here, then?"

"Oh, ay, he's been here, right enough. More'n once too. Friend of yours, is he? Ah, you gentlemen from the Hall—you'n a pretty lot!" And he leered more jocosely than ever.

"Why, do the gentlemen from the Hall come here often?" I asked, as carelessly as I could.

He winked at me knowingly.

"One does, mister. Naming no names, mind. And a very liberal gentleman too! Oh, thank you, sir, I'm sure."

I walked on sharply. Evelyn Howard had been right then, and I experienced a sharp twinge of disgust, as I thought of Alfred Inglethorp's liberality with another woman's money. Had that piquant gipsy face been at the bottom of the crime, or was it the baser mainspring of money?

Probably a judicious mixture of both.

On one point, Poirot seemed to have a curious obsession. He once or twice observed to me that he thought Dorcas must have made an error in fixing the time of the quarrel. He suggested to her repeatedly that it was 4.30, and not 4 o'clock when she had heard the voices.

But Dorcas was unshaken. Quite an hour, or even more, had elapsed between the time when she had heard the voices and 5 o'clock, when she had taken tea to her mistress.

The inquest was held on Friday at the Stylites Arms in the village.

Poirot and I sat together, not being required to give evidence.

The preliminaries were gone through. The jury viewed the body, and

John Cavendish gave evidence of identification.

Further questioned, he described his awakening in the early hours of the morning, and the circumstances of his mother's death.

The medical evidence was next taken. There was a breathless hush, and every eye was fixed on the famous London specialist, who was known to be one of the greatest authorities of the day on the subject of toxicology.

In a few brief words, he summed up the result of the post-mortem. Shorn of its medical phraseology and technicalities, it amounted to the fact that Mrs. Inglethorp had met her death as the result of strychnine poisoning. Judging from the quantity recovered, she must have taken not less than three-quarters of a grain of strychnine, but probably one grain or slightly over.

"Is it possible that she could have swallowed the poison by accident?" asked the Coroner.

"I should consider it very unlikely. Strychnine is not used for domestic purposes, as some poisons are, and there are restrictions placed on its sale."

"Does anything in your examination lead you to determine how the poison was administered?"

"No."

"You arrived at Styles before Dr. Wilkins, I believe?"

"That is so. The motor met me just outside the lodge gates, and I hurried there as fast as I could."

"Will you relate to us exactly what happened next?"

"I entered Mrs. Inglethorp's room. She was at that moment in a typical tetanic convulsion. She turned towards me, and gasped out:

'Alfred—Alfred——' "

"Could the strychnine have been administered in Mrs. Inglethorp's after-dinner coffee which was taken to her by her husband?"

"Possibly, but strychnine is a fairly rapid drug in its action. The symptoms appear from one to two hours after it has been swallowed. It is retarded under certain conditions, none of which, however, appear to have been present in this case. I presume Mrs. Inglethorp took the coffee after dinner about eight o'clock, whereas the symptoms did not manifest themselves until the early hours of the morning, which, on the face of it, points to the drug having been taken much later in the evening."

"Mrs. Inglethorp was in the habit of drinking a cup of coco in the middle of the night. Could the strychnine have been administered in that?"

"No, I myself took a sample of the coco remaining in the saucepan and had it analysed. There was no strychnine present." I heard Poirot chuckle softly beside me.

"How did you know?" I whispered.

"Listen."

"I should say"—the doctor was continuing—"that I would have been considerably surprised at any other result."

"Why?"

"Simply because strychnine has an unusually bitter taste. It can be detected in a solution of 1 in 70,000, and can only be disguised by some strongly flavoured substance. Coco would be quite powerless to mask it."

One of the jury wanted to know if the same objection applied to coffee.

"No. Coffee has a bitter taste of its own which would probably cover the taste of strychnine."

"Then you consider it more likely that the drug was administered in the coffee, but that for some unknown reason its action was delayed."

"Yes, but, the cup being completely smashed, there is no possibility of analyzing its contents."

This concluded Dr. Bauerstein's evidence. Dr. Wilkins corroborated it on all points. Sounded as to the possibility of suicide, he repudiated it utterly. The deceased, he said, suffered from a weak heart, but otherwise enjoyed perfect health, and was of a cheerful and well-balanced disposition. She would be one of the last people to take her own life.

Lawrence Cavendish was next called. His evidence was quite unimportant, being a mere repetition of that of his brother. Just as he was about to step down, he paused, and said rather hesitatingly:

"I should like to make a suggestion if I may?"

He glanced deprecatingly at the Coroner, who replied briskly:

"Certainly, Mr. Cavendish, we are here to arrive at the truth of this matter, and welcome anything that may lead to further elucidation."

"It is just an idea of mine," explained Lawrence. "Of course I may be quite wrong, but it still seems to me that my mother's death might be accounted for by natural means."

"How do you make that out, Mr. Cavendish?"

"My mother, at the time of her death, and for some time before it, was taking a tonic containing strychnine." "Ah!" said the Coroner.

The jury looked up, interested.

"I believe," continued Lawrence, "that there have been cases where the cumulative effect of a drug, administered for some time, has ended by causing death. Also, is it not possible that she may have taken an overdose of her medicine by accident?"

"This is the first we have heard of the deceased taking strychnine at the time of her death. We are much obliged to you, Mr. Cavendish." Dr. Wilkins was recalled and ridiculed the idea.

"What Mr. Cavendish suggests is quite impossible. Any doctor would tell you the same. Strychnine is, in a certain sense, a cumulative poison, but it would be quite impossible for it to result in sudden death in this way. There would have to be a long period of chronic symptoms which would at once have attracted my attention. The whole thing is absurd."

"And the second suggestion? That Mrs. Inglethorp may have inadvertently taken an overdose?"

"Three, or even four doses, would not have resulted in death. Mrs. Inglethorp always had an extra large amount of medicine made up at a time, as she dealt with Coot's, the Cash Chemists in Tadminster. She would have had to take very nearly the whole bottle to account for the amount of strychnine found at the post-mortem."

"Then you consider that we may dismiss the tonic as not being in any way instrumental in causing her death?"

"Certainly. The supposition is ridiculous."

The same juryman who had interrupted before here suggested that the chemist who made up the medicine might have committed an error.

"That, of course, is always possible," replied the doctor.

But Dorcas, who was the next witness called, dispelled even that possibility. The medicine had not been newly made up. On the contrary,

Mrs. Inglethorp had taken the last dose on the day of her death.

So the question of the tonic was finally abandoned, and the Coroner proceeded with his task. Having elicited from Dorcas how she had been awakened by the violent ringing of her mistress's bell, and had subsequently roused the household, he passed to the subject of the quarrel on the preceding afternoon.

Dorcas's evidence on this point was substantially what Poirot and I had already heard, so I will not repeat it here.

The next witness was Mary Cavendish. She stood very upright, and spoke in a low, clear, and perfectly composed voice. In answer to the Coroner's question, she told how, her alarm clock having aroused her at 4.30 as usual, she was dressing, when she was startled by the sound of something heavy falling.

"That would have been the table by the bed?" commented the Coroner.

"I opened my door," continued Mary, "and listened. In a few minutes a bell rang violently. Dorcas came running down and woke my husband, and we all went to my mother-in-law's room, but it was locked——" The Coroner interrupted her.

"I really do not think we need trouble you further on that point. We know all that can be known of the subsequent happenings. But I should be obliged if you would tell us all you overheard of the quarrel the day before." "I?"

There was a faint insolence in her voice. She raised her hand and adjusted the ruffle of lace at her neck, turning her head a little as she did so. And quite spontaneously the thought flashed across my mind: "She is gaining time!"

"Yes. I understand," continued the Coroner deliberately, "that you were sitting reading on the bench just outside the long window of the boudoir. That is so, is it not?"

This was news to me and glancing sideways at Poirot, I fancied that it was news to him as well.

There was the faintest pause, the mere hesitation of a moment, before she answered:

"Yes, that is so."

"And the boudoir window was open, was it not?" Surely her face grew a little paler as she answered:

"Yes."

"Then you cannot have failed to hear the voices inside, especially as they were raised in anger. In fact, they would be more audible where you were than in the hall."

"Possibly."

"Will you repeat to us what you overheard of the quarrel?"

"I really do not remember hearing anything."

"Do you mean to say you did not hear voices?"

"Oh, yes, I heard the voices, but I did not hear what they said." A faint spot of colour came into her cheek. "I am not in the habit of listening to private conversations."

The Coroner persisted.

"And you remember nothing at all? Nothing, Mrs. Cavendish? Not one stray word or phrase to make you realize that it was a private conversation?"

She paused, and seemed to reflect, still outwardly as calm as ever.

"Yes; I remember. Mrs. Inglethorp said something—I do not remember exactly what—about causing scandal between husband and wife."

"Ah!" the Coroner leant back satisfied. "That corresponds with what Dorcas heard. But excuse me, Mrs. Cavendish, although you realized it was a private conversation, you did not move away? You remained where you were?"

I caught the momentary gleam of her tawny eyes as she raised them. I felt certain that at that moment she would willingly have torn the little lawyer, with his insinuations, into pieces, but she replied quietly enough:

"No. I was very comfortable where I was. I fixed my mind on my book."

"And that is all you can tell us?"

"That is all."

The examination was over, though I doubted if the Coroner was entirely satisfied with it. I think he suspected that Mary Cavendish could tell more if she chose.

Amy Hill, shop assistant, was next called, and deposed to having sold a will form on the afternoon of the 17th to William Earl, under-gardener at Styles.

William Earl and Manning succeeded her, and testified to witnessing a document. Manning fixed the time at about 4.30, William was of the opinion that it was rather earlier.

Cynthia Murdoch came next. She had, however, little to tell. She had known nothing of the tragedy, until awakened by Mrs. Cavendish.

"You did not hear the table fall?" "No. I was fast asleep." The Coroner smiled.

"A good conscience makes a sound sleeper," he observed. "Thank you,

Miss Murdoch, that is all." "Miss Howard."

Miss Howard produced the letter written to her by Mrs. Inglethorp on the evening of the 17th. Poirot and I had, of course already seen it. It added nothing to our knowledge of the tragedy. The following is a facsimile:

STYLES COURT ESSEX hand written note: July 17th My dear Evelyn

Can we not bury the hachet? I have found it hard to forgive the things you said

against my dear husband but I am an old woman & very fond of you

Yours affectionately,

Emily Inglethorpe

It was handed to the jury who scrutinized it attentively.

"I fear it does not help us much," said the Coroner, with a sigh. "There is no mention of any of the events of that afternoon."

"Plain as a pikestaff to me," said Miss Howard shortly. "It shows clearly enough that my poor old friend had just found out she'd been made a fool of!"

"It says nothing of the kind in the letter," the Coroner pointed out.

"No, because Emily never could bear to put herself in the wrong. But I know her. She wanted me back. But she wasn't going to own that I'd been right. She went round about. Most people do. Don't believe in it myself."

Mr. Wells smiled faintly. So, I noticed, did several of the jury. Miss Howard was obviously quite a public character.

"Anyway, all this tomfoolery is a great waste of time," continued the lady, glancing up and down the jury disparagingly. "Talk—talk—talk!

When all the time we know perfectly well——"

The Coroner interrupted her in an agony of apprehension:

"Thank you, Miss Howard, that is all."

I fancy he breathed a sigh of relief when she complied.

Then came the sensation of the day. The Coroner called Albert Mace, chemist's assistant.

It was our agitated young man of the pale face. In answer to the Coroner's questions, he explained that he was a qualified pharmacist, but had only recently come to this particular shop, as the assistant formerly there had just been called up for the army.

These preliminaries completed, the Coroner proceeded to business.

"Mr. Mace, have you lately sold strychnine to any unauthorized person?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was this?"

"Last Monday night."

"Monday? Not Tuesday?"

"No, sir, Monday, the 16th."

"Will you tell us to whom you sold it?" You could have heard a pin drop.

"Yes, sir. It was to Mr. Inglethorp."

Every eye turned simultaneously to where Alfred Inglethorp was sitting, impassive and wooden. He started slightly, as the damning words fell from the young man's lips. I half thought he was going to rise from his chair, but he remained seated, although a remarkably well acted expression of astonishment rose on his face.

"You are sure of what you say?" asked the Coroner sternly.

"Quite sure, sir."

"Are you in the habit of selling strychnine indiscriminately over the counter?"

The wretched young man wilted visibly under the Coroner's frown.

"Oh, no, sir—of course not. But, seeing it was Mr. Inglethorp of the

Hall, I thought there was no harm in it. He said it was to poison a dog."

Inwardly I sympathized. It was only human nature to endeavour to please "The Hall"—especially when it might result in custom being transferred from Coot's to the local establishment.

"Is it not customary for anyone purchasing poison to sign a book?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Inglethorp did so."

"Have you got the book here?"

"Yes, sir."

It was produced; and, with a few words of stern censure, the Coroner dismissed the wretched Mr. Mace.

Then, amidst a breathless silence, Alfred Inglethorp was called. Did he realize, I wondered, how closely the halter was being drawn around his neck?

The Coroner went straight to the point.

"On Monday evening last, did you purchase strychnine for the purpose of poisoning a dog?"

Inglethorp replied with perfect calmness:

"No, I did not. There is no dog at Styles, except an outdoor sheepdog, which is in perfect health."

"You deny absolutely having purchased strychnine from Albert Mace on Monday last?"

"I do."

"Do you also deny this?"

The Coroner handed him the register in which his signature was inscribed.

"Certainly I do. The hand-writing is quite different from mine. I will show you."

He took an old envelope out of his pocket, and wrote his name on it, handing it to the jury. It was certainly utterly dissimilar. "Then what is your explanation of Mr. Mace's statement?" Alfred Inglethorp replied imperturbably:

"Mr. Mace must have been mistaken."

The Coroner hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Mr. Inglethorp, as a mere matter of form, would you mind telling us where you were on the evening of Monday, July 16th?"

"Really—I can't remember."

"That is absurd, Mr. Inglethorp," said the Coroner sharply. "Think again."

Inglethorp shook his head.

"I cannot tell you. I have an idea that I was out walking."

"In what direction?"

"I really can't remember." The Coroner's face grew graver.

"Were you in company with anyone?"

"No."

"Did you meet anyone on your walk?"

"No."

"That is a pity," said the Coroner dryly. "I am to take it then that you decline to say where you were at the time that Mr. Mace positively recognized you as entering the shop to purchase strychnine?"

"If you like to take it that way, yes." "Be careful, Mr. Inglethorp." Poirot was fidgeting nervously.

"Sacre!" he murmured. "Does this imbecile of a man want to be arrested?"

Inglethorp was indeed creating a bad impression. His futile denials would not have convinced a child. The Coroner, however, passed briskly to the next point, and Poirot drew a deep breath of relief.

"You had a discussion with your wife on Tuesday afternoon?"

"Pardon me," interrupted Alfred Inglethorp, "you have been misinformed. I had no quarrel with my dear wife. The whole story is absolutely untrue. I was absent from the house the entire afternoon."

"Have you anyone who can testify to that?"

"You have my word," said Inglethorp haughtily.

The Coroner did not trouble to reply.

"There are two witnesses who will swear to having heard your disagreement with Mrs. Inglethorp."

"Those witnesses were mistaken."

I was puzzled. The man spoke with such quiet assurance that I was staggered. I looked at Poirot. There was an expression of exultation on his face which I could not understand. Was he at last convinced of Alfred

Inglethorp's guilt?

"Mr. Inglethorp," said the Coroner, "you have heard your wife's dying words repeated here. Can you explain them in any way?"

"Certainly I can."

"You can?"

"It seems to me very simple. The room was dimly lighted. Dr. Bauerstein is much of my height and build, and, like me, wears a beard. In the dim light, and suffering as she was, my poor wife mistook him for me." "Ah!" murmured Poirot to himself. "But it is an idea, that!" "You think it is true?" I whispered.

"I do not say that. But it is truly an ingenious supposition."

"You read my wife's last words as an accusation"—Inglethorp was

continuing—"they were, on the contrary, an appeal to me." The Coroner reflected a moment, then he said:

"I believe, Mr. Inglethorp, that you yourself poured out the coffee, and took it to your wife that evening?"

"I poured it out, yes. But I did not take it to her. I meant to do so, but I was told that a friend was at the hall door, so I laid down the coffee on the hall table. When I came through the hall again a few minutes later, it was gone."

This statement might, or might not, be true, but it did not seem to me to improve matters much for Inglethorp. In any case, he had had ample time to introduce the poison.

At that point, Poirot nudged me gently, indicating two men who were sitting together near the door. One was a little, sharp, dark, ferret-faced man, the other was tall and fair.

I questioned Poirot mutely. He put his lips to my ear. "Do you know who that little man is?" I shook my head.

"That is Detective Inspector James Japp of Scotland Yard—Jimmy Japp. The other man is from Scotland Yard too. Things are moving quickly, my friend."

I stared at the two men intently. There was certainly nothing of the policeman about them. I should never have suspected them of being official personages.

I was still staring, when I was startled and recalled by the verdict being given:

"Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown."

POIROT PAYS HIS DEBTS

As we came out of the Stylites Arms, Poirot drew me aside by a gentle pressure of the arm. I understood his object. He was waiting for the Scotland Yard men.

In a few moments, they emerged, and Poirot at once stepped forward, and accosted the shorter of the two.

"I fear you do not remember me, Inspector Japp."

"Why, if it isn't Mr. Poirot!" cried the Inspector. He turned to the other man. "You've heard me speak of Mr. Poirot? It was in 1904 he and I worked together—the Abercrombie forgery case—you remember, he was run down in Brussels. Ah, those were great days, moosier. Then, do you remember 'Baron' Altara? There was a pretty rogue for you! He eluded the clutches of half the police in Europe. But we nailed him in Antwerp—thanks to Mr. Poirot here."

As these friendly reminiscences were being indulged in, I drew nearer, and was introduced to Detective-Inspector Japp, who, in his turn, introduced us both to his companion, Superintendent Summerhaye.

"I need hardly ask what you are doing here, gentlemen," remarked Poirot.

Japp closed one eye knowingly.

"No, indeed. Pretty clear case I should say." But Poirot answered gravely:

"There I differ from you."

"Oh, come!" said Summerhaye, opening his lips for the first time. "Surely the whole thing is clear as daylight. The man's caught redhanded. How he could be such a fool beats me!" But Japp was looking attentively at Poirot.

"Hold your fire, Summerhaye," he remarked jocularly. "Me and Moosier here have met before—and there's no man's judgment I'd sooner take than his. If I'm not greatly mistaken, he's got something up his sleeve.

Isn't that so, moosier?"

Poirot smiled.

"I have drawn certain conclusions—yes."

Summerhaye was still looking rather sceptical, but Japp continued his scrutiny of Poirot.

"It's this way," he said, "so far, we've only seen the case from the outside. That's where the Yard's at a disadvantage in a case of this kind, where the murder's only out, so to speak, after the inquest. A lot depends on being on the spot first thing, and that's where Mr. Poirot's had the start of us. We shouldn't have been here as soon as this even, if it hadn't been for the fact that there was a smart doctor on the spot, who gave us the tip through the Coroner. But you've been on the spot from the first, and you may have picked up some little hints. From the evidence at the inquest, Mr. Inglethorp murdered his wife as sure as I stand here, and if anyone but you hinted the contrary I'd laugh in his face. I must say I was surprised the jury didn't bring it in Wilful Murder against him right off. I think they would have, if it hadn't been for the Coroner—he seemed to be holding them back."

"Perhaps, though, you have a warrant for his arrest in your pocket now," suggested Poirot.

A kind of wooden shutter of officialdom came down from Japp's expressive countenance.

"Perhaps I have, and perhaps I haven't," he remarked dryly.

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

"I am very anxious, Messieurs, that he should not be arrested." "I dare say," observed Summerhaye sarcastically.

Japp was regarding Poirot with comical perplexity.

"Can't you go a little further, Mr. Poirot? A wink's as good as a nod—from you. You've been on the spot—and the Yard doesn't want to make any mistakes, you know." Poirot nodded gravely.

"That is exactly what I thought. Well, I will tell you this. Use your warrant: Arrest Mr. Inglethorp. But it will bring you no kudos—the case against him will be dismissed at once! Comme ca!" And he snapped his fingers expressively.

Japp's face grew grave, though Summerhaye gave an incredulous snort.

As for me, I was literally dumb with astonishment. I could only conclude that Poirot was mad.

Japp had taken out a handkerchief, and was gently dabbing his brow.

"I daren't do it, Mr. Poirot. I'd take your word, but there's others over me who'll be asking what the devil I mean by it. Can't you give me a little more to go on?"

Poirot reflected a moment.

"It can be done," he said at last. "I admit I do not wish it. It forces my hand. I would have preferred to work in the dark just for the present, but what you say is very just—the word of a Belgian policeman, whose day is past, is not enough! And Alfred Inglethorp must not be arrested. That I have sworn, as my friend Hastings here knows. See, then, my good Japp, you go at once to Styles?"

"Well, in about half an hour. We're seeing the Coroner and the doctor first."

"Good. Call for me in passing—the last house in the village. I will go with you. At Styles, Mr. Inglethorp will give you, or if he refuses—as is probable—I will give you such proofs that shall satisfy you that the case against him could not possibly be sustained. Is that a bargain?"

"That's a bargain," said Japp heartily. "And, on behalf of the Yard, I'm much obliged to you, though I'm bound to confess I can't at present see the faintest possible loop-hole in the evidence, but you always were a marvel! So long, then, moosier."

The two detectives strode away, Summerhaye with an incredulous grin on his face.

"Well, my friend," cried Poirot, before I could get in a word, "what do you think? Mon Dieu! I had some warm moments in that court; I did not figure to myself that the man would be so pig-headed as to refuse to say anything at all. Decidedly, it was the policy of an imbecile."

"H'm! There are other explanations besides that of imbecility," I remarked. "For, if the case against him is true, how could he defend himself except by silence?"

"Why, in a thousand ingenious ways," cried Poirot. "See; say that it is I who have committed this murder, I can think of seven most plausible stories! Far more convincing than Mr. Inglethorp's stony denials!" I could not help laughing.

"My dear Poirot, I am sure you are capable of thinking of seventy! But, seriously, in spite of what I heard you say to the detectives, you surely cannot still believe in the possibility of Alfred Inglethorp's innocence?"

"Why not now as much as before? Nothing has changed."

"But the evidence is so conclusive."

"Yes, too conclusive."

We turned in at the gate of Leastways Cottage, and proceeded up the now familiar stairs.

"Yes, yes, too conclusive," continued Poirot, almost to himself. "Real evidence is usually vague and unsatisfactory. It has to be examined—sifted. But here the whole thing is cut and dried. No, my friend, this evidence has been very cleverly manufactured—so cleverly that it has defeated its own ends."

"How do you make that out?"

"Because, so long as the evidence against him was vague and intangible, it was very hard to disprove. But, in his anxiety, the criminal has drawn the net so closely that one cut will set Inglethorp free." I was silent. And in a minute or two, Poirot continued:

"Let us look at the matter like this. Here is a man, let us say, who sets out to poison his wife. He has lived by his wits as the saying goes. Presumably, therefore, he has some wits. He is not altogether a fool. Well, how does he set about it? He goes boldly to the village chemist's and purchases strychnine under his own name, with a trumped up story about a dog which is bound to be proved absurd. He does not employ the poison that night. No, he waits until he has had a violent quarrel with her, of which the whole household is cognisant, and which naturally directs their suspicions upon him. He prepares no defence—no shadow of an alibi, yet he knows the chemist's assistant must necessarily come forward with the facts. Bah! do not ask me to believe that any man could be so idiotic! Only a lunatic, who wished to commit suicide by

causing himself to be hanged, would act so!" "Still—I do not see—" I began.

"Neither do I see. I tell you, mon ami, it puzzles me. Me —Hercule

Poirot!"

"But if you believe him innocent, how do you explain his buying the strychnine?"

"Very simply. He did not buy it."

"But Mace recognized him!"

"I beg your pardon, he saw a man with a black beard like Mr. Inglethorp's, and wearing glasses like Mr. Inglethorp, and dressed in Mr. Inglethorp's rather noticeable clothes. He could not recognize a man whom he had probably only seen in the distance, since, you remember, he himself had only been in the village a fortnight, and Mrs. Inglethorp dealt principally with Coot's in Tadminster."

"Then you think——"

"Mon ami, do you remember the two points I laid stress upon? Leave the first one for the moment, what was the second?"

"The important fact that Alfred Inglethorp wears peculiar clothes, has a black beard, and uses glasses," I quoted.

"Exactly. Now suppose anyone wished to pass himself off as John or Lawrence Cavendish. Would it be easy?"

"No," I said thoughtfully. "Of course an actor——" But Poirot cut me short ruthlessly.

"And why would it not be easy? I will tell you, my friend: Because they are both clean-shaven men. To make up successfully as one of these two in broad daylight, it would need an actor of genius, and a certain initial facial resemblance. But in the case of Alfred Inglethorp, all that is changed. His clothes, his beard, the glasses which hide his eyes—those are the salient points about his personal appearance. Now, what is the first instinct of the criminal? To divert suspicion from himself, is it not so? And how can he best do that? By throwing it on some one else. In this instance, there was a man ready to his hand. Everybody was predisposed to believe in Mr. Inglethorp's guilt. It was a foregone conclusion that he would be suspected; but, to make it a sure thing there must be tangible proof—such as the actual buying of the poison, and that, with a man of the peculiar appearance of Mr.

Inglethorp, was not difficult. Remember, this young Mace had never actually spoken to Mr. Inglethorp. How should he doubt that the man in his clothes, with his beard and his glasses, was not Alfred Inglethorp?"

"It may be so," I said, fascinated by Poirot's eloquence. "But, if that was the case, why does he not say where he was at six o'clock on Monday evening?"

"Ah, why indeed?" said Poirot, calming down. "If he were arrested, he probably would speak, but I do not want it to come to that. I must make him see the gravity of his position. There is, of course, something discreditable behind his silence. If he did not murder his wife, he is, nevertheless, a scoundrel, and has something of his own to conceal, quite apart from the murder."

"What can it be?" I mused, won over to Poirot's views for the moment, although still retaining a faint conviction that the obvious deduction was the correct one.

"Can you not guess?" asked Poirot, smiling.

"No, can you?"

"Oh, yes, I had a little idea sometime ago—and it has turned out to be correct."

"You never told me," I said reproachfully.

Poirot spread out his hands apologetically.

"Pardon me, mon ami, you were not precisely sympathique." He turned to me earnestly. "Tell me—you see now that he must not be arrested?"

"Perhaps," I said doubtfully, for I was really quite indifferent to the fate of Alfred Inglethorp, and thought that a good fright would do him no harm.

Poirot, who was watching me intently, gave a sigh.

"Come, my friend," he said, changing the subject, "apart from Mr. Inglethorp, how did the evidence at the inquest strike you?"

"Oh, pretty much what I expected."

"Did nothing strike you as peculiar about it?"

My thoughts flew to Mary Cavendish, and I hedged:

"In what way?"

"Well, Mr. Lawrence Cavendish's evidence for instance?" I was relieved.

"Oh, Lawrence! No, I don't think so. He's always a nervous chap."

"His suggestion that his mother might have been poisoned accidentally by means of the tonic she was taking, that did not strike you as strange—hein?"

"No, I can't say it did. The doctors ridiculed it of course. But it was quite a natural suggestion for a layman to make."

"But Monsieur Lawrence is not a layman. You told me yourself that he had started by studying medicine, and that he had taken his degree."

"Yes, that's true. I never thought of that." I was rather startled. "It is odd."

Poirot nodded.

"From the first, his behaviour has been peculiar. Of all the household, he alone would be likely to recognize the symptoms of strychnine poisoning, and yet we find him the only member of the family to uphold strenuously the theory of death from natural causes. If it had been Monsieur John, I could have understood it. He has no technical knowledge, and is by nature unimaginative. But Monsieur Lawrence—no! And now, to-day, he puts forward a suggestion that he himself must have known was ridiculous. There is food for thought in this, mon ami!" "It's very confusing," I agreed.

"Then there is Mrs. Cavendish," continued Poirot. "That's another who is not telling all she knows! What do you make of her attitude?"

"I don't know what to make of it. It seems inconceivable that she

should be shielding Alfred Inglethorp. Yet that is what it looks like." Poirot nodded reflectively.

"Yes, it is queer. One thing is certain, she overheard a good deal more

of that 'private conversation' than she was willing to admit."

"And yet she is the last person one would accuse of stooping to eavesdrop!"

"Exactly. One thing her evidence has shown me. I made a mistake. Dorcas was quite right. The quarrel did take place earlier in the afternoon, about four o'clock, as she said."

I looked at him curiously. I had never understood his insistence on that point.

"Yes, a good deal that was peculiar came out to-day," continued Poirot. "Dr. Bauerstein, now, what was he doing up and dressed at that hour in

the morning? It is astonishing to me that no one commented on the fact." "He has insomnia, I believe," I said doubtfully.

"Which is a very good, or a very bad explanation," remarked Poirot. "It covers everything, and explains nothing. I shall keep my eye on our clever Dr. Bauerstein."

"Any more faults to find with the evidence?" I inquired satirically.

"Mon ami," replied Poirot gravely, "when you find that people are not telling you the truth—look out! Now, unless I am much mistaken, at the inquest to-day only one—at most, two persons were speaking the truth without reservation or subterfuge."

"Oh, come now, Poirot! I won't cite Lawrence, or Mrs. Cavendish. But there's John—and Miss Howard, surely they were speaking the truth?"

"Both of them, my friend? One, I grant you, but both——!"

His words gave me an unpleasant shock. Miss Howard's evidence, unimportant as it was, had been given in such a downright straightforward manner that it had never occurred to me to doubt her sincerity. Still, I had a great respect for Poirot's sagacity—except on the occasions when he was what I described to myself as "foolishly pig-headed."

"Do you really think so?" I asked. "Miss Howard had always seemed to me so essentially honest—almost uncomfortably so."

Poirot gave me a curious look, which I could not quite fathom. He seemed to speak, and then checked himself.

"Miss Murdoch too," I continued, "there's nothing untruthful about her."

"No. But it was strange that she never heard a sound, sleeping next door; whereas Mrs. Cavendish, in the other wing of the building, distinctly heard the table fall."

"Well, she's young. And she sleeps soundly."

"Ah, yes, indeed! She must be a famous sleeper, that one!"

I did not quite like the tone of his voice, but at that moment a smart knock reached our ears, and looking out of the window we perceived the two detectives waiting for us below.

Poirot seized his hat, gave a ferocious twist to his moustache, and, carefully brushing an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve, motioned me to precede him down the stairs; there we joined the detectives and set out for Styles.

I think the appearance of the two Scotland Yard men was rather a shock—especially to John, though of course after the verdict, he had realized that it was only a matter of time. Still, the presence of the detectives brought the truth home to him more than anything else could have done.

Poirot had conferred with Japp in a low tone on the way up, and it was the latter functionary who requested that the household, with the exception of the servants, should be assembled together in the drawing-room. I realized the significance of this. It was up to Poirot to make his boast good.

Personally, I was not sanguine. Poirot might have excellent reasons for his belief in Inglethorp's innocence, but a man of the type of Summerhaye would require tangible proofs, and these I doubted if Poirot could supply.

Before very long we had all trooped into the drawing-room, the door of which Japp closed. Poirot politely set chairs for every one. The Scotland Yard men were the cynosure of all eyes. I think that for the first time we realized that the thing was not a bad dream, but a tangible reality. We had read of such things—now we ourselves were actors in the drama. To-morrow the daily papers, all over England, would blazon out the news in staring headlines:

"MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY IN ESSEX"

"WEALTHY LADY POISONED"

There would be pictures of Styles, snap-shots of "The family leaving the Inquest"—the village photographer had not been idle! All the things that one had read a hundred times—things that happen to other people, not to oneself. And now, in this house, a murder had been committed. In front of us were "the detectives in charge of the case." The well-known glib phraseology passed rapidly through my mind in the interval before Poirot opened the proceedings.

I think every one was a little surprised that it should be he and not one of the official detectives who took the initiative.

"Mesdames and messieurs," said Poirot, bowing as though he were a celebrity about to deliver a lecture, "I have asked you to come here all together, for a certain object. That object, it concerns Mr. Alfred

Inglethorp."

Inglethorp was sitting a little by himself—I think, unconsciously, every one had drawn his chair slightly away from him—and he gave a faint start as Poirot pronounced his name.

"Mr. Inglethorp," said Poirot, addressing him directly, "a very dark shadow is resting on this house—the shadow of murder." Inglethorp shook his head sadly.

"My poor wife," he murmured. "Poor Emily! It is terrible."

"I do not think, monsieur," said Poirot pointedly, "that you quite realize how terrible it may be—for you." And as Inglethorp did not appear to understand, he added: "Mr. Inglethorp, you are standing in very grave danger."

The two detectives fidgeted. I saw the official caution "Anything you say will be used in evidence against you," actually hovering on

Summerhaye's lips. Poirot went on.

"Do you understand now, monsieur?"

"No; What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Poirot deliberately, "that you are suspected of poisoning your wife."

A little gasp ran round the circle at this plain speaking.

"Good heavens!" cried Inglethorp, starting up. "What a monstrous idea! I—poison my dearest Emily!"

"I do not think"—Poirot watched him narrowly—"that you quite realize the unfavourable nature of your evidence at the inquest. Mr. Inglethorp, knowing what I have now told you, do you still refuse to say where you were at six o'clock on Monday afternoon?"

With a groan, Alfred Inglethorp sank down again and buried his face in his hands. Poirot approached and stood over him.

"Speak!" he cried menacingly.

With an effort, Inglethorp raised his face from his hands. Then, slowly and deliberately, he shook his head. "You will not speak?"

"No. I do not believe that anyone could be so monstrous as to accuse me of what you say."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully, like a man whose mind is made up. "Soit!" he said. "Then I must speak for you." Alfred Inglethorp sprang up again.

"You? How can you speak? You do not know——" he broke off abruptly.

Poirot turned to face us. "Mesdames and messieurs! I speak! Listen! I, Hercule Poirot, affirm that the man who entered the chemist's shop, and purchased strychnine at six o'clock on Monday last was not Mr. Inglethorp, for at six o'clock on that day Mr. Inglethorp was escorting Mrs. Raikes back to her home from a neighbouring farm. I can produce no less than five witnesses to swear to having seen them together, either at six or just after and, as you may know, the Abbey Farm, Mrs. Raikes's home, is at least two and a half miles distant from the village. There is absolutely no question as to the alibi!"

FRESH SUSPICIONS

There was a moment's stupefied silence. Japp, who was the least surprised of any of us, was the first to speak.

"My word," he cried, "you're the goods! And no mistake, Mr. Poirot!

These witnesses of yours are all right, I suppose?"

"Voila! I have prepared a list of them—names and addresses. You

must see them, of course. But you will find it all right."

"I'm sure of that." Japp lowered his voice. "I'm much obliged to you. A pretty mare's nest arresting him would have been." He turned to Inglethorp. "But, if you'll excuse me, sir, why couldn't you say all this at the inquest?"

"I will tell you why," interrupted Poirot. "There was a certain rumour——"

"A most malicious and utterly untrue one," interrupted Alfred Inglethorp in an agitated voice.

"And Mr. Inglethorp was anxious to have no scandal revived just at present. Am I right?"

"Quite right." Inglethorp nodded. "With my poor Emily not yet buried, can you wonder I was anxious that no more lying rumours should be started."

"Between you and me, sir," remarked Japp, "I'd sooner have any amount of rumours than be arrested for murder. And I venture to think your poor lady would have felt the same. And, if it hadn't been for Mr.

Poirot here, arrested you would have been, as sure as eggs is eggs!"

"I was foolish, no doubt," murmured Inglethorp. "But you do not know, inspector, how I have been persecuted and maligned." And he shot a baleful glance at Evelyn Howard.

"Now, sir," said Japp, turning briskly to John, "I should like to see the lady's bedroom, please, and after that I'll have a little chat with the servants. Don't you bother about anything. Mr. Poirot, here, will show me the way."

As they all went out of the room, Poirot turned and made me a sign to follow him upstairs. There he caught me by the arm, and drew me aside.

"Quick, go to the other wing. Stand there—just this side of the baize door. Do not move till I come." Then, turning rapidly, he rejoined the two detectives.

I followed his instructions, taking up my position by the baize door, and wondering what on earth lay behind the request. Why was I to stand in this particular spot on guard? I looked thoughtfully down the corridor in front of me. An idea struck me. With the exception of Cynthia Murdoch's, every one's room was in this left wing. Had that anything to do with it? Was I to report who came or went? I stood faithfully at my post. The minutes passed. Nobody came. Nothing happened.

It must have been quite twenty minutes before Poirot rejoined me.

"You have not stirred?"

"No, I've stuck here like a rock. Nothing's happened."

"Ah!" Was he pleased, or disappointed? "You've seen nothing at all?"
"No."

"But you have probably heard something? A big bump—eh, mon ami?"

"No."

"Is it possible? Ah, but I am vexed with myself! I am not usually clumsy. I made but a slight gesture"—I know Poirot's gestures—"with the left hand, and over went the table by the bed!"

He looked so childishly vexed and crest-fallen that I hastened to console him.

"Never mind, old chap. What does it matter? Your triumph downstairs excited you. I can tell you, that was a surprise to us all. There must be more in this affair of Inglethorp's with Mrs. Raikes than we thought, to make him hold his tongue so persistently. What are you going to do

now? Where are the Scotland Yard fellows?"

"Gone down to interview the servants. I showed them all our exhibits.

I am disappointed in Japp. He has no method!"

"Hullo!" I said, looking out of the window. "Here's Dr. Bauerstein. I believe you're right about that man, Poirot. I don't like him." "He is clever," observed Poirot meditatively.

"Oh, clever as the devil! I must say I was overjoyed to see him in the plight he was in on Tuesday. You never saw such a spectacle!" And I described the doctor's adventure. "He looked a regular scarecrow!

Plastered with mud from head to foot." "You saw him, then?"

"Yes. Of course, he didn't want to come in—it was just after dinner—but Mr. Inglethorp insisted."

"What?" Poirot caught me violently by the shoulders. "Was Dr. Bauerstein here on Tuesday evening? Here? And you never told me? Why did you not tell me? Why? Why?"

He appeared to be in an absolute frenzy.

"My dear Poirot," I expostulated, "I never thought it would interest you. I didn't know it was of any importance."

"Importance? It is of the first importance! So Dr. Bauerstein was here on Tuesday night—the night of the murder. Hastings, do you not see?

That alters everything—everything!"

I had never seen him so upset. Loosening his hold of me, he mechanically straightened a pair of candlesticks, still murmuring to himself: "Yes, that alters everything—everything."

Suddenly he seemed to come to a decision.

"Allons!" he said. "We must act at once. Where is Mr. Cavendish?" John was in the smoking-room. Poirot went straight to him.

"Mr. Cavendish, I have some important business in Tadminster. A new clue. May I take your motor?"

"Why, of course. Do you mean at once?"

"If you please."

John rang the bell, and ordered round the car. In another ten minutes, we were racing down the park and along the high road to Tadminster.

"Now, Poirot," I remarked resignedly, "perhaps you will tell me what all this is about?"

"Well, mon ami, a good deal you can guess for yourself. Of course you realize that, now Mr. Inglethorp is out of it, the whole position is greatly changed. We are face to face with an entirely new problem. We know now that there is one person who did not buy the poison. We have cleared away the manufactured clues. Now for the real ones. I have ascertained that anyone in the household, with the exception of Mrs. Cavendish, who was playing tennis with you, could have personated Mr. Inglethorp on Monday evening. In the same way, we have his statement that he put the coffee down in the hall. No one took much notice of that at the inquest—but now it has a very different significance. We must find out who did take that coffee to Mrs. Inglethorp eventually, or who passed through the hall whilst it was standing there. From your account, there are only two people whom we can positively say did not go near the coffee—Mrs. Cavendish, and Mademoiselle Cynthia."

"Yes, that is so." I felt an inexpressible lightening of the heart. Mary Cavendish could certainly not rest under suspicion.

"In clearing Alfred Inglethorp," continued Poirot, "I have been obliged to show my hand sooner than I intended. As long as I might be thought to be pursuing him, the criminal would be off his guard. Now, he will be doubly careful. Yes—doubly careful." He turned to me abruptly. "Tell me, Hastings, you yourself—have you no suspicions of anybody?"

I hesitated. To tell the truth, an idea, wild and extravagant in itself, had once or twice that morning flashed through my brain. I had rejected it as absurd, nevertheless it persisted.

"You couldn't call it a suspicion," I murmured. "It's so utterly foolish."

"Come now," urged Poirot encouragingly. "Do not fear. Speak your

mind. You should always pay attention to your instincts."

"Well then," I blurted out, "it's absurd—but I suspect Miss Howard of not telling all she knows!"

"Miss Howard?"

"Yes—you'll laugh at me——"

"Not at all. Why should I?"

"I can't help feeling," I continued blunderingly; "that we've rather left her out of the possible suspects, simply on the strength of her having been away from the place. But, after all, she was only fifteen miles away. A car would do it in half an hour. Can we say positively that she was

away from Styles on the night of the murder?"

"Yes, my friend," said Poirot unexpectedly, "we can. One of my first actions was to ring up the hospital where she was working."

"Well?"

"Well, I learnt that Miss Howard had been on afternoon duty on Tuesday, and that—a convoy coming in unexpectedly—she had kindly offered to remain on night duty, which offer was gratefully accepted.

That disposes of that."

"Oh!" I said, rather nonplussed. "Really," I continued, "it's her extraordinary vehemence against Inglethorp that started me off suspecting her. I can't help feeling she'd do anything against him. And I had an idea she might know something about the destroying of the will. She might have burnt the new one, mistaking it for the earlier one in his favour. She is so terribly bitter against him."

"You consider her vehemence unnatural?"

"Y—es. She is so very violent. I wondered really whether she is quite sane on that point."

Poirot shook his head energetically.

"No, no, you are on a wrong tack there. There is nothing weak-minded or degenerate about Miss Howard. She is an excellent specimen of well-balanced English beef and brawn. She is sanity itself."

"Yet her hatred of Inglethorp seems almost a mania. My idea was—a very ridiculous one, no doubt—that she had intended to poison him—and that, in some way, Mrs. Inglethorp got hold of it by mistake. But I don't at all see how it could have been done. The whole thing is absurd and ridiculous to the last degree."

"Still you are right in one thing. It is always wise to suspect everybody until you can prove logically, and to your own satisfaction, that they are innocent. Now, what reasons are there against Miss Howard's having deliberately poisoned Mrs. Inglethorp?"

"Why, she was devoted to her!" I exclaimed.

"Tcha! Tcha!" cried Poirot irritably. "You argue like a child. If Miss Howard were capable of poisoning the old lady, she would be quite equally capable of simulating devotion. No, we must look elsewhere. You are perfectly correct in your assumption that her vehemence against

Alfred Inglethorp is too violent to be natural; but you are quite wrong in the deduction you draw from it. I have drawn my own deductions, which I believe to be correct, but I will not speak of them at present." He paused a minute, then went on. "Now, to my way of thinking, there is

one insuperable objection to Miss Howard's being the murderess."

"And that is?"

"That in no possible way could Mrs. Inglethorp's death benefit Miss

Howard. Now there is no murder without a motive." I reflected.

"Could not Mrs. Inglethorp have made a will in her favour?" Poirot shook his head.

"But you yourself suggested that possibility to Mr. Wells?" Poirot smiled.

"That was for a reason. I did not want to mention the name of the person who was actually in my mind. Miss Howard occupied very much

the same position, so I used her name instead."

"Still, Mrs. Inglethorp might have done so. Why, that will, made on the afternoon of her death may——"

But Poirot's shake of the head was so energetic that I stopped.

"No, my friend. I have certain little ideas of my own about that will.

But I can tell you this much—it was not in Miss Howard's favour."

I accepted his assurance, though I did not really see how he could be so positive about the matter.

"Well," I said, with a sigh, "we will acquit Miss Howard, then. It is partly your fault that I ever came to suspect her. It was what you said

about her evidence at the inquest that set me off." Poirot looked puzzled.

"What did I say about her evidence at the inquest?"

"Don't you remember? When I cited her and John Cavendish as being above suspicion?"

"Oh—ah—yes." He seemed a little confused, but recovered himself.

"By the way, Hastings, there is something I want you to do for me."

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Next time you happen to be alone with Lawrence Cavendish, I want you to say this to him. 'I have a message for you, from Poirot. He says: "Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace!" ' Nothing more.

Nothing less."

" 'Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace.' Is that right?" I asked, much mystified.

"Excellent."

"But what does it mean?"

"Ah, that I will leave you to find out. You have access to the facts. Just say that to him, and see what he says."

"Very well—but it's all extremely mysterious."

We were running into Tadminster now, and Poirot directed the car to the "Analytical Chemist."

Poirot hopped down briskly, and went inside. In a few minutes he was back again.

"There," he said. "That is all my business."

"What were you doing there?" I asked, in lively curiosity.

"I left something to be analysed."

"Yes, but what?"

"The sample of coco I took from the saucepan in the bedroom."

"But that has already been tested!" I cried, stupefied. "Dr. Bauerstein had it tested, and you yourself laughed at the possibility of there being strychnine in it."

"I know Dr. Bauerstein had it tested," replied Poirot quietly.

"Well, then?"

"Well, I have a fancy for having it analysed again, that is all." And not another word on the subject could I drag out of him.

This proceeding of Poirot's, in respect of the coco, puzzled me intensely. I could see neither rhyme nor reason in it. However, my confidence in him, which at one time had rather waned, was fully restored since his belief in Alfred Inglethorp's innocence had been so triumphantly vindicated.

The funeral of Mrs. Inglethorp took place the following day, and on Monday, as I came down to a late breakfast, John drew me aside, and informed me that Mr. Inglethorp was leaving that morning, to take up his quarters at the Stylites Arms until he should have completed his plans.

"And really it's a great relief to think he's going, Hastings," continued my honest friend. "It was bad enough before, when we thought he'd done it, but I'm hanged if it isn't worse now, when we all feel guilty for having been so down on the fellow. The fact is, we've treated him abominably. Of course, things did look black against him. I don't see how anyone could blame us for jumping to the conclusions we did. Still, there it is, we were in the wrong, and now there's a beastly feeling that one ought to make amends; which is difficult, when one doesn't like the fellow a bit better than one did before. The whole thing's damned awkward! And I'm thankful he's had the tact to take himself off. It's a good thing Styles wasn't the mater's to leave to him. Couldn't bear to think of

the fellow lording it here. He's welcome to her money."

"You'll be able to keep up the place all right?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. There are the death duties, of course, but half my father's money goes with the place, and Lawrence will stay with us for the present, so there is his share as well. We shall be pinched at first, of course, because, as I once told you, I am in a bit of a hole financially myself. Still, the Johnnies will wait now."

In the general relief at Inglethorp's approaching departure, we had the most genial breakfast we had experienced since the tragedy. Cynthia, whose young spirits were naturally buoyant, was looking quite her pretty self again, and we all, with the exception of Lawrence, who seemed unalterably gloomy and nervous, were quietly cheerful, at the opening of a new and hopeful future.

The papers, of course, had been full of the tragedy. Glaring headlines, sandwiched biographies of every member of the household, subtle innuendoes, the usual familiar tag about the police having a clue. Nothing was spared us. It was a slack time. The war was momentarily inactive, and the newspapers seized with avidity on this crime in fashionable life: "The Mysterious Affair at Styles" was the topic of the moment.

Naturally it was very annoying for the Cavendishes. The house was constantly besieged by reporters, who were consistently denied admission, but who continued to haunt the village and the grounds, where they lay in wait with cameras, for any unwary members of the household. We all lived in a blast of publicity. The Scotland Yard men came and went, examining, questioning, lynx-eyed and reserved of tongue. Towards what end they were working, we did not know. Had they any clue, or would the whole thing remain in the category of undiscovered crimes?

After breakfast, Dorcas came up to me rather mysteriously, and asked if she might have a few words with me.

"Certainly. What is it, Dorcas?"

"Well, it's just this, sir. You'll be seeing the Belgian gentleman to-day perhaps?" I nodded. "Well, sir, you know how he asked me so particular

if the mistress, or anyone else, had a green dress?"

"Yes, yes. You have found one?" My interest was aroused.

"No, not that, sir. But since then I've remembered what the young gentlemen"—John and Lawrence were still the "young gentlemen" to Dorcas—"call the 'dressing-up box.' It's up in the front attic, sir. A great chest, full of old clothes and fancy dresses, and what not. And it came to me sudden like that there might be a green dress amongst them. So, if you'd tell the Belgian gentleman——"

"I will tell him, Dorcas," I promised.

"Thank you very much, sir. A very nice gentleman he is, sir. And quite a different class from them two detectives from London, what goes prying about, and asking questions. I don't hold with foreigners as a rule, but from what the newspapers say I make out as how these brave Belges isn't the ordinary run of foreigners, and certainly he's a most polite spoken gentleman."

Dear old Dorcas! As she stood there, with her honest face upturned to mine, I thought what a fine specimen she was of the old-fashioned servant that is so fast dying out.

I thought I might as well go down to the village at once, and look up Poirot; but I met him half-way, coming up to the house, and at once gave him Dorcas's message.

"Ah, the brave Dorcas! We will look at the chest, although—but no matter—we will examine it all the same."

We entered the house by one of the windows. There was no one in the hall, and we went straight up to the attic.

Sure enough, there was the chest, a fine old piece, all studded with brass nails, and full to overflowing with every imaginable type of garment.

Poirot bundled everything out on the floor with scant ceremony. There were one or two green fabrics of varying shades; but Poirot shook his head over them all. He seemed somewhat apathetic in the search, as though he expected no great results from it. Suddenly he gave an exclamation.

"What is it?"

"Look!"

The chest was nearly empty, and there, reposing right at the bottom, was a magnificent black beard.

"Oho!" said Poirot. "Oho!" He turned it over in his hands, examining it closely. "New," he remarked. "Yes, quite new."

After a moment's hesitation, he replaced it in the chest, heaped all the other things on top of it as before, and made his way briskly downstairs. He went straight to the pantry, where we found Dorcas busily polishing her silver.

Poirot wished her good morning with Gallic politeness, and went on:

"We have been looking through that chest, Dorcas. I am much obliged to you for mentioning it. There is, indeed, a fine collection there. Are they often used, may I ask?"

"Well, sir, not very often nowadays, though from time to time we do have what the young gentlemen call 'a dress-up night.' And very funny it is sometimes, sir. Mr. Lawrence, he's wonderful. Most comic! I shall never forget the night he came down as the Char of Persia, I think he called it—a sort of Eastern King it was. He had the big paper knife in his hand, and 'Mind, Dorcas,' he says, 'you'll have to be very respectful. This is my specially sharpened scimitar, and it's off with your head if I'm at all displeased with you!' Miss Cynthia, she was what they call an Apache, or some such name—a Frenchified sort of cut-throat, I take it to be. A real sight she looked. You'd never have believed a pretty young lady like that could have made herself into such a ruffian. Nobody would have known her."

"These evenings must have been great fun," said Poirot genially. "I suppose Mr. Lawrence wore that fine black beard in the chest upstairs, when he was Shah of Persia?"

"He did have a beard, sir," replied Dorcas, smiling. "And well I know it, for he borrowed two skeins of my black wool to make it with! And I'm sure it looked wonderfully natural at a distance. I didn't know as there was a beard up there at all. It must have been got quite lately, I think. There was a red wig, I know, but nothing else in the way of hair. Burnt corks they use mostly—though 'tis messy getting it off again. Miss Cynthia was a nigger once, and, oh, the trouble she had."

"So Dorcas knows nothing about that black beard," said Poirot thoughtfully, as we walked out into the hall again.

"Do you think it is the one?" I whispered eagerly.

Poirot nodded.

"I do. You notice it had been trimmed?"

"No."

"Yes. It was cut exactly the shape of Mr. Inglethorp's, and I found one

or two snipped hairs. Hastings, this affair is very deep." "Who put it in the chest, I wonder?"

"Some one with a good deal of intelligence," remarked Poirot dryly. "You realize that he chose the one place in the house to hide it where its presence would not be remarked? Yes, he is intelligent. But we must be more intelligent. We must be so intelligent that he does not suspect us of being intelligent at all." I acquiesced.

"There, mon ami, you will be of great assistance to me."

I was pleased with the compliment. There had been times when I hardly thought that Poirot appreciated me at my true worth.

"Yes," he continued, staring at me thoughtfully, "you will be invaluable."

This was naturally gratifying, but Poirot's next words were not so welcome.

"I must have an ally in the house," he observed reflectively.

"You have me," I protested.

"True, but you are not sufficient."

I was hurt, and showed it. Poirot hurried to explain himself.

"You do not quite take my meaning. You are known to be working

with me. I want somebody who is not associated with us in any way."

"Oh, I see. How about John?"

"No, I think not."

"The dear fellow isn't perhaps very bright," I said thoughtfully.

"Here comes Miss Howard," said Poirot suddenly. "She is the very person. But I am in her black books, since I cleared Mr. Inglethorp. Still, we can but try."

With a nod that was barely civil, Miss Howard assented to Poirot's request for a few minutes' conversation.

We went into the little morning-room, and Poirot closed the door.

"Well, Monsieur Poirot," said Miss Howard impatiently, "what is it? Out with it. I'm busy."

"Do you remember, mademoiselle, that I once asked you to help me?"

"Yes, I do." The lady nodded. "And I told you I'd help you with pleasure—to hang Alfred Inglethorp."

"Ah!" Poirot studied her seriously. "Miss Howard, I will ask you one question. I beg of you to reply to it truthfully." "Never tell lies," replied Miss Howard.

"It is this. Do you still believe that Mrs. Inglethorp was poisoned by her husband?"

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply. "You needn't think your pretty explanations influence me in the slightest. I'll admit that it wasn't he who bought strychnine at the chemist's shop. What of that? I dare say he soaked fly paper, as I told you at the beginning."

"That is arsenic—not strychnine," said Poirot mildly.

"What does that matter? Arsenic would put poor Emily out of the way just as well as strychnine. If I'm convinced he did it, it doesn't matter a jot to me how he did it."

"Exactly. If you are convinced he did it," said Poirot quietly. "I will put my question in another form. Did you ever in your heart of hearts believe that Mrs. Inglethorp was poisoned by her husband?"

"Good heavens!" cried Miss Howard. "Haven't I always told you the man is a villain? Haven't I always told you he would murder her in her bed? Haven't I always hated him like poison?"

"Exactly," said Poirot. "That bears out my little idea entirely."

"What little idea?"

"Miss Howard, do you remember a conversation that took place on the day of my friend's arrival here? He repeated it to me, and there is a sentence of yours that has impressed me very much. Do you remember affirming that if a crime had been committed, and anyone you loved had been murdered, you felt certain that you would know by instinct who the criminal was, even if you were quite unable to prove it?"

"Yes, I remember saying that. I believe it too. I suppose you think it nonsense?"

"Not at all."

"And yet you will pay no attention to my instinct against Alfred Inglethorp."

"No," said Poirot curtly. "Because your instinct is not against Mr. Inglethorp."

"What?"

"No. You wish to believe he committed the crime. You believe him capable of committing it. But your instinct tells you he did not commit it. It tells you more—shall I go on?"

She was staring at him, fascinated, and made a slight affirmative movement of the hand.

"Shall I tell you why you have been so vehement against Mr. Inglethorp? It is because you have been trying to believe what you wish to believe. It is because you are trying to drown and stifle your instinct, which tells you another name——"

"No, no, no!" cried Miss Howard wildly, flinging up her hands. "Don't say it! Oh, don't say it! It isn't true! It can't be true. I don't know what put

such a wild—such a dreadful—idea into my head!" "I am right, am I not?" asked Poirot.

"Yes, yes; you must be a wizard to have guessed. But it can't be so—it's too monstrous, too impossible. It must be Alfred Inglethorp." Poirot shook his head gravely.

"Don't ask me about it," continued Miss Howard, "because I shan't tell you. I won't admit it, even to myself. I must be mad to think of such a thing."

Poirot nodded, as if satisfied.

"I will ask you nothing. It is enough for me that it is as I thought. And I—I, too, have an instinct. We are working together towards a common end."

"Don't ask me to help you, because I won't. I wouldn't lift a finger to—to——" She faltered.

"You will help me in spite of yourself. I ask you nothing—but you will be my ally. You will not be able to help yourself. You will do the only thing that I want of you."

"And that is?"

"You will watch!"

Evelyn Howard bowed her head.

"Yes, I can't help doing that. I am always watching—always hoping I shall be proved wrong."

"If we are wrong, well and good," said Poirot. "No one will be more pleased than I shall. But, if we are right? If we are right, Miss Howard, on whose side are you then?"

"I don't know, I don't know——"

"Come now."

"It could be hushed up."

"There must be no hushing up." "But Emily herself——" She broke off.

"Miss Howard," said Poirot gravely, "this is unworthy of you." Suddenly she took her face from her hands.

"Yes," she said quietly, "that was not Evelyn Howard who spoke!" She flung her head up proudly. "This is Evelyn Howard! And she is on the side of Justice! Let the cost be what it may." And with these words, she walked firmly out of the room.

"There," said Poirot, looking after her, "goes a very valuable ally. That woman, Hastings, has got brains as well as a heart." I did not reply.

"Instinct is a marvellous thing," mused Poirot. "It can neither be explained nor ignored."

"You and Miss Howard seem to know what you are talking about," I

observed coldly. "Perhaps you don't realize that I am still in the dark."

"Really? Is that so, mon ami?"

"Yes. Enlighten me, will you?"

Poirot studied me attentively for a moment or two. Then, to my intense surprise, he shook his head decidedly.

"No, my friend."

"Oh, look here, why not?"

"Two is enough for a secret."

"Well, I think it is very unfair to keep back facts from me."

"I am not keeping back facts. Every fact that I know is in your possession. You can draw your own deductions from them. This time it is a question of ideas."

"Still, it would be interesting to know."

Poirot looked at me very earnestly, and again shook his head.

"You see," he said sadly, "you have no instincts."

"It was intelligence you were requiring just now," I pointed out.

"The two often go together," said Poirot enigmatically.

The remark seemed so utterly irrelevant that I did not even take the trouble to answer it. But I decided that if I made any interesting and important discoveries—as no doubt I should—I would keep them to myself, and surprise Poirot with the ultimate result.

There are times when it is one's duty to assert oneself.

DR. BAUERSTEIN

I HAD had no opportunity as yet of passing on Poirot's message to Lawrence. But now, as I strolled out on the lawn, still nursing a grudge against my friend's high-handedness, I saw Lawrence on the croquet lawn, aimlessly knocking a couple of very ancient balls about, with a still more ancient mallet.

It struck me that it would be a good opportunity to deliver my message. Otherwise, Poirot himself might relieve me of it. It was true that I did not quite gather its purport, but I flattered myself that by Lawrence's reply, and perhaps a little skillful cross-examination on my part, I should soon perceive its significance. Accordingly I accosted him.

"I've been looking for you," I remarked untruthfully.

"Have you?"

"Yes. The truth is, I've got a message for you—from Poirot."

"Yes?"

"He told me to wait until I was alone with you," I said, dropping my voice significantly, and watching him intently out of the corner of my eye. I have always been rather good at what is called, I believe, creating an atmosphere.

"Well?"

There was no change of expression in the dark melancholic face. Had he any idea of what I was about to say?

"This is the message." I dropped my voice still lower. " 'Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace.' "

"What on earth does he mean?" Lawrence stared at me in quite unaffected astonishment.

"Don't you know?"

"Not in the least. Do you?"

I was compelled to shake my head.

"What extra coffee-cup?"

"I don't know."

"He'd better ask Dorcas, or one of the maids, if he wants to know about coffee-cups. It's their business, not mine. I don't know anything about the coffee-cups, except that we've got some that are never used, which are a perfect dream! Old Worcester. You're not a connoisseur, are you, Hastings?"

I shook my head.

"You miss a lot. A really perfect bit of old china—it's pure delight to handle it, or even to look at it."

"Well, what am I to tell Poirot?"

"Tell him I don't know what he's talking about. It's double Dutch to me."

"All right."

I was moving off towards the house again when he suddenly called me back.

"I say, what was the end of that message? Say it over again, will you?"

" 'Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace.' Are you sure you don't know what it means?" I asked him earnestly.

He shook his head.

"No," he said musingly, "I don't. I—I wish I did."

The boom of the gong sounded from the house, and we went in together. Poirot had been asked by John to remain to lunch, and was already seated at the table.

By tacit consent, all mention of the tragedy was barred. We conversed on the war, and other outside topics. But after the cheese and biscuits had been handed round, and Dorcas had left the room, Poirot suddenly leant forward to Mrs. Cavendish.

"Pardon me, madame, for recalling unpleasant memories, but I have a little idea"—Poirot's "little ideas" were becoming a perfect byword—"and would like to ask one or two questions."

"Of me? Certainly."

"You are too amiable, madame. What I want to ask is this: the door leading into Mrs. Inglethorp's room from that of Mademoiselle Cynthia, it was bolted, you say?"

"Certainly it was bolted," replied Mary Cavendish, rather surprised. "I said so at the inquest."

"Bolted?"

"Yes." She looked perplexed.

"I mean," explained Poirot, "you are sure it was bolted, and not merely locked?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. No, I don't know. I said bolted, meaning that it was fastened, and I could not open it, but I believe all the doors were found bolted on the inside."

"Still, as far as you are concerned, the door might equally well have been locked?"

"Oh, yes."

"You yourself did not happen to notice, madame, when you entered

Mrs. Inglethorp's room, whether that door was bolted or not?"

"I—I believe it was."

"But you did not see it?"

"No. I—never looked."

"But I did," interrupted Lawrence suddenly. "I happened to notice that it was bolted."

"Ah, that settles it." And Poirot looked crestfallen.

I could not help rejoicing that, for once, one of his "little ideas" had come to naught.

After lunch Poirot begged me to accompany him home. I consented rather stiffly.

"You are annoyed, is it not so?" he asked anxiously, as we walked through the park.

"Not at all," I said coldly.

"That is well. That lifts a great load from my mind."

This was not quite what I had intended. I had hoped that he would have observed the stiffness of my manner. Still, the fervour of his words went towards the appeasing of my just displeasure. I thawed.

"I gave Lawrence your message," I said.

"And what did he say? He was entirely puzzled?"

"Yes. I am quite sure he had no idea of what you meant."

I had expected Poirot to be disappointed; but, to my surprise, he replied that that was as he had thought, and that he was very glad. My pride forbade me to ask any questions.

Poirot switched off on another tack.

"Mademoiselle Cynthia was not at lunch to-day? How was that?"

"She is at the hospital again. She resumed work to-day."

"Ah, she is an industrious little demoiselle. And pretty too. She is like pictures I have seen in Italy. I would rather like to see that dispensary of hers. Do you think she would show it to me?"

"I am sure she would be delighted. It's an interesting little place."
"Does she go there every day?"

"She has all Wednesdays off, and comes back to lunch on Saturdays. Those are her only times off."

"I will remember. Women are doing great work nowadays, and Mademoiselle Cynthia is clever—oh, yes, she has brains, that little one."

"Yes. I believe she has passed quite a stiff exam."

"Without doubt. After all, it is very responsible work. I suppose they have very strong poisons there?"

"Yes, she showed them to us. They are kept locked up in a little cupboard. I believe they have to be very careful. They always take out the key before leaving the room."

"Indeed. It is near the window, this cupboard?" "No, right the other side of the room. Why?" Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I wondered. That is all. Will you come in?" We had reached the cottage.

"No. I think I'll be getting back. I shall go round the long way through the woods."

The woods round Styles were very beautiful. After the walk across the open park, it was pleasant to saunter lazily through the cool glades. There was hardly a breath of wind, the very chirp of the birds was faint and subdued. I strolled on a little way, and finally flung myself down at the foot of a grand old beech-tree. My thoughts of mankind were kindly and charitable. I even forgave Poirot for his absurd secrecy. In fact, I was at peace with the world. Then I yawned.

I thought about the crime, and it struck me as being very unreal and far off.

I yawned again.

Probably, I thought, it really never happened. Of course, it was all a bad dream. The truth of the matter was that it was Lawrence who had murdered Alfred Inglethorp with a croquet mallet. But it was absurd of John to make such a fuss about it, and to go shouting out: "I tell you I won't have it!"

I woke up with a start.

At once I realized that I was in a very awkward predicament. For, about twelve feet away from me, John and Mary Cavendish were standing facing each other, and they were evidently quarrelling. And, quite as evidently, they were unaware of my vicinity, for before I could move or speak John repeated the words which had aroused me from my dream.

"I tell you, Mary, I won't have it."

Mary's voice came, cool and liquid:

"Have you any right to criticize my actions?"

"It will be the talk of the village! My mother was only buried on

Saturday, and here you are gadding about with the fellow."

"Oh," she shrugged her shoulders, "if it is only village gossip that you mind!"

"But it isn't. I've had enough of the fellow hanging about. He's a Polish

Jew, anyway."

"A tinge of Jewish blood is not a bad thing. It leavens the"—she looked at him—"stolid stupidity of the ordinary Englishman."

Fire in her eyes, ice in her voice. I did not wonder that the blood rose to John's face in a crimson tide.

"Mary!"

"Well?" Her tone did not change.

The pleading died out of his voice.

"Am I to understand that you will continue to see Bauerstein against my express wishes?"

"If I choose."

"You defy me?"

"No, but I deny your right to criticize my actions. Have you no friends of whom I should disapprove?"

John fell back a pace. The colour ebbed slowly from his face.

"What do you mean?" he said, in an unsteady voice.

"You see!" said Mary quietly. "You do see, don't you, that you have no right to dictate to me as to the choice of my friends?"

John glanced at her pleadingly, a stricken look on his face.

"No right? Have I no right, Mary?" he said unsteadily. He stretched out his hands. "Mary——"

For a moment, I thought she wavered. A softer expression came over her face, then suddenly she turned almost fiercely away.

"None!"

She was walking away when John sprang after her, and caught her by the arm.

"Mary"—his voice was very quiet now—"are you in love with this fellow Bauerstein?"

She hesitated, and suddenly there swept across her face a strange expression, old as the hills, yet with something eternally young about it. So might some Egyptian sphinx have smiled.

She freed herself quietly from his arm, and spoke over her shoulder.

"Perhaps," she said; and then swiftly passed out of the little glade, leaving John standing there as though he had been turned to stone.

Rather ostentatiously, I stepped forward, crackling some dead branches with my feet as I did so. John turned. Luckily, he took it for granted that I had only just come upon the scene.

"Hullo, Hastings. Have you seen the little fellow safely back to his cottage? Quaint little chap! Is he any good, though, really?"

"He was considered one of the finest detectives of his day."

"Oh, well, I suppose there must be something in it, then. What a rotten world it is, though!"

"You find it so?" I asked.

"Good Lord, yes! There's this terrible business to start with. Scotland Yard men in and out of the house like a jack-in-the-box! Never know where they won't turn up next. Screaming headlines in every paper in the country—damn all journalists, I say! Do you know there was a whole crowd staring in at the lodge gates this morning. Sort of Madame Tussaud's chamber of horrors business that can be seen for nothing.

Pretty thick, isn't it?"

"Cheer up, John!" I said soothingly. "It can't last for ever."

"Can't it, though? It can last long enough for us never to be able to hold up our heads again."

"No, no, you're getting morbid on the subject."

"Enough to make a man morbid, to be stalked by beastly journalists and stared at by gaping moon-faced idiots, wherever he goes! But there's worse than that."

"What?"

John lowered his voice:

"Have you ever thought, Hastings—it's a nightmare to me—who did it? I can't help feeling sometimes it must have been an accident. Because—because—who could have done it? Now Inglethorp's out of the

way, there's no one else; no one, I mean, except—one of us."

Yes, indeed, that was nightmare enough for any man! One of us? Yes, surely it must be so, unless——

A new idea suggested itself to my mind. Rapidly, I considered it. The light increased. Poirot's mysterious doings, his hints—they all fitted in. Fool that I was not to have thought of this possibility before, and what a relief for us all.

"No, John," I said, "it isn't one of us. How could it be?"

"I know, but, still, who else is there?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

I looked cautiously round, and lowered my voice.

"Dr. Bauerstein!" I whispered.

"Impossible!"

"Not at all."

"But what earthly interest could he have in my mother's death?"

"That I don't see," I confessed, "but I'll tell you this: Poirot thinks so."

"Poirot? Does he? How do you know?"

I told him of Poirot's intense excitement on hearing that Dr. Bauerstein had been at Styles on the fatal night, and added:

"He said twice: 'That alters everything.' And I've been thinking. You know Inglethorp said he had put down the coffee in the hall? Well, it was just then that Bauerstein arrived. Isn't it possible that, as Inglethorp brought him through the hall, the doctor dropped something into the coffee in passing?"

"H'm," said John. "It would have been very risky."

"Yes, but it was possible."

"And then, how could he know it was her coffee? No, old fellow, I don't think that will wash."

But I had remembered something else.

"You're quite right. That wasn't how it was done. Listen." And I then told him of the coco sample which Poirot had taken to be analysed.

John interrupted just as I had done.

"But, look here, Bauerstein had had it analysed already?"

"Yes, yes, that's the point. I didn't see it either until now. Don't you understand? Bauerstein had it analysed—that's just it! If Bauerstein's the murderer, nothing could be simpler than for him to substitute some ordinary coco for his sample, and send that to be tested. And of course they would find no strychnine! But no one would dream of suspecting Bauerstein, or think of taking another sample—except Poirot," I added, with belated recognition.

"Yes, but what about the bitter taste that coco won't disguise?"

"Well, we've only his word for that. And there are other possibilities.

He's admittedly one of the world's greatest toxicologists——" "One of the world's greatest what? Say it again."

"He knows more about poisons than almost anybody," I explained. "Well, my idea is, that perhaps he's found some way of making strychnine tasteless. Or it may not have been strychnine at all, but some obscure drug no one has ever heard of, which produces much the same symptoms."

"H'm, yes, that might be," said John. "But look here, how could he have got at the coco? That wasn't downstairs?"

"No, it wasn't," I admitted reluctantly.

And then, suddenly, a dreadful possibility flashed through my mind. I hoped and prayed it would not occur to John also. I glanced sideways at him. He was frowning perplexedly, and I drew a deep breath of relief, for the terrible thought that had flashed across my mind was this: that Dr. Bauerstein might have had an accomplice.

Yet surely it could not be! Surely no woman as beautiful as Mary Cavendish could be a murderess. Yet beautiful women had been known to poison.

And suddenly I remembered that first conversation at tea on the day of my arrival, and the gleam in her eyes as she had said that poison was a woman's weapon. How agitated she had been on that fatal Tuesday evening! Had Mrs. Inglethorp discovered something between her and Bauerstein, and threatened to tell her husband? Was it to stop that denunciation that the crime had been committed?

Then I remembered that enigmatical conversation between Poirot and Evelyn Howard. Was this what they had meant? Was this the monstrous possibility that Evelyn had tried not to believe?

Yes, it all fitted in.

No wonder Miss Howard had suggested "hushing it up." Now I understood that unfinished sentence of hers: "Emily herself——" And in my heart I agreed with her. Would not Mrs. Inglethorp have preferred to go unavenged rather than have such terrible dishonour fall upon the name of Cavendish.

"There's another thing," said John suddenly, and the unexpected sound of his voice made me start guiltily. "Something which makes me doubt if what you say can be true."

"What's that?" I asked, thankful that he had gone away from the subject of how the poison could have been introduced into the coco.

"Why, the fact that Bauerstein demanded a post-mortem. He needn't have done so. Little Wilkins would have been quite content to let it go at heart disease."

"Yes," I said doubtfully. "But we don't know. Perhaps he thought it safer in the long run. Some one might have talked afterwards. Then the Home Office might have ordered exhumation. The whole thing would have come out, then, and he would have been in an awkward position, for no one would have believed that a man of his reputation could have been deceived into calling it heart disease."

"Yes, that's possible," admitted John. "Still," he added, "I'm blest if I can see what his motive could have been."

I trembled.

"Look here," I said, "I may be altogether wrong. And, remember, all this is in confidence."

"Oh, of course—that goes without saying."

We had walked, as we talked, and now we passed through the little gate into the garden. Voices rose near at hand, for tea was spread out under the sycamore-tree, as it had been on the day of my arrival.

Cynthia was back from the hospital, and I placed my chair beside her, and told her of Poirot's wish to visit the dispensary.

"Of course! I'd love him to see it. He'd better come to tea there one day. I must fix it up with him. He's such a dear little man! But he is funny. He made me take the brooch out of my tie the other day, and put it in again, because he said it wasn't straight." I laughed.

"It's quite a mania with him."

"Yes, isn't it?"

We were silent for a minute or two, and then, glancing in the direction of Mary Cavendish, and dropping her voice, Cynthia said:

"Mr. Hastings."

"Yes?"

"After tea, I want to talk to you."

Her glance at Mary had set me thinking. I fancied that between these two there existed very little sympathy. For the first time, it occurred to me to wonder about the girl's future. Mrs. Inglethorp had made no provisions of any kind for her, but I imagined that John and Mary would probably insist on her making her home with them—at any rate until the end of the war. John, I knew, was very fond of her, and would be sorry to let her go.

John, who had gone into the house, now reappeared. His goodnatured face wore an unaccustomed frown of anger.

"Confound those detectives! I can't think what they're after! They've been in every room in the house—turning things inside out, and upside down. It really is too bad! I suppose they took advantage of our all being out. I shall go for that fellow Japp, when I next see him!" "Lot of Paul Prys," grunted Miss Howard.

Lawrence opined that they had to make a show of doing something.

Mary Cavendish said nothing.

After tea, I invited Cynthia to come for a walk, and we sauntered off into the woods together.

"Well?" I inquired, as soon as we were protected from prying eyes by the leafy screen.

With a sigh, Cynthia flung herself down, and tossed off her hat. The sunlight, piercing through the branches, turned the auburn of her hair to quivering gold.

"Mr. Hastings—you are always so kind, and you know such a lot."

It struck me at this moment that Cynthia was really a very charming girl! Much more charming than Mary, who never said things of that kind.

"Well?" I asked benignantly, as she hesitated.

"I want to ask your advice. What shall I do?"

"Do?"

"Yes. You see, Aunt Emily always told me I should be provided for. I suppose she forgot, or didn't think she was likely to die—anyway, I am not provided for! And I don't know what to do. Do you think I ought to go away from here at once?"

"Good heavens, no! They don't want to part with you, I'm sure."

Cynthia hesitated a moment, plucking up the grass with her tiny hands. Then she said: "Mrs. Cavendish does. She hates me." "Hates you?" I cried, astonished.

Cynthia nodded.

"Yes. I don't know why, but she can't bear me; and he can't, either."

"There I know you're wrong," I said warmly. "On the contrary, John is very fond of you."

"Oh, yes—John. I meant Lawrence. Not, of course, that I care whether Lawrence hates me or not. Still, it's rather horrid when no one loves you, isn't it?"

"But they do, Cynthia dear," I said earnestly. "I'm sure you are mistaken. Look, there is John—and Miss Howard—"

Cynthia nodded rather gloomily. "Yes, John likes me, I think, and of course Evie, for all her gruff ways, wouldn't be unkind to a fly. But Lawrence never speaks to me if he can help it, and Mary can hardly bring herself to be civil to me. She wants Evie to stay on, is begging her to, but she doesn't want me, and—and—I don't know what to do." Suddenly the poor child burst out crying.

I don't know what possessed me. Her beauty, perhaps, as she sat there, with the sunlight glinting down on her head; perhaps the sense of relief at encountering someone who so obviously could have no connection with the tragedy; perhaps honest pity for her youth and loneliness. Anyway, I leant forward, and taking her little hand, I said awkwardly: "Marry me, Cynthia."

Unwittingly, I had hit upon a sovereign remedy for her tears. She sat up at once, drew her hand away, and said, with some asperity:

"Don't be silly!"

I was a little annoyed.

"I'm not being silly. I am asking you to do me the honour of becoming my wife."

To my intense surprise, Cynthia burst out laughing, and called me a "funny dear."

"It's perfectly sweet of you," she said, "but you know you don't want to!"

"Yes, I do. I've got—"

"Never mind what you've got. You don't really want to—and I don't either."

"Well, of course, that settles it," I said stiffly. "But I don't see anything to laugh at. There's nothing funny about a proposal."

"No, indeed," said Cynthia. "Somebody might accept you next time.

Good-bye, you've cheered me up very much."

And, with a final uncontrollable burst of merriment, she vanished through the trees.

Thinking over the interview, it struck me as being profoundly unsatisfactory.

It occurred to me suddenly that I would go down to the village, and look up Bauerstein. Somebody ought to be keeping an eye on the fellow. At the same time, it would be wise to allay any suspicions he might have as to his being suspected. I remembered how Poirot had relied on my diplomacy. Accordingly, I went to the little house with the "Apartments" card inserted in the window, where I knew he lodged, and tapped on the door.

An old woman came and opened it.

"Good afternoon," I said pleasantly. "Is Dr. Bauerstein in?" She stared at me.

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"About him."

"What about him?"

"He's took."

"Took? Dead?"

"No, took by the perlice."

"By the police!" I gasped. "Do you mean they've arrested him?"

"Yes, that's it, and—"

I waited to hear no more, but tore up the village to find Poirot.

THE ARREST

To my extreme annoyance, Poirot was not in, and the old Belgian who answered my knock informed me that he believed he had gone to London.

I was dumbfounded. What on earth could Poirot be doing in London! Was it a sudden decision on his part, or had he already made up his mind when he parted from me a few hours earlier?

I retraced my steps to Styles in some annoyance. With Poirot away, I was uncertain how to act. Had he foreseen this arrest? Had he not, in all probability, been the cause of it? Those questions I could not resolve. But in the meantime what was I to do? Should I announce the arrest openly at Styles, or not? Though I did not acknowledge it to myself, the thought of Mary Cavendish was weighing on me. Would it not be a terrible shock to her? For the moment, I set aside utterly any suspicions of her. She could not be implicated—otherwise I should have heard some hint of it.

Of course, there was no possibility of being able permanently to conceal Dr. Bauerstein's arrest from her. It would be announced in every newspaper on the morrow. Still, I shrank from blurting it out. If only Poirot had been accessible, I could have asked his advice. What possessed him to go posting off to London in this unaccountable way?

In spite of myself, my opinion of his sagacity was immeasurably heightened. I would never have dreamt of suspecting the doctor, had not

Poirot put it into my head. Yes, decidedly, the little man was clever.

After some reflecting, I decided to take John into my confidence, and leave him to make the matter public or not, as he thought fit.

He gave vent to a prodigious whistle, as I imparted the news.

"Great Scot! You were right, then. I couldn't believe it at the time."

"No, it is astonishing until you get used to the idea, and see how it makes everything fit in. Now, what are we to do? Of course, it will be generally known to-morrow." John reflected.

"Never mind," he said at last, "we won't say anything at present. There is no need. As you say, it will be known soon enough."

But to my intense surprise, on getting down early the next morning, and eagerly opening the newspapers, there was not a word about the arrest! There was a column of mere padding about "The Styles Poisoning Case," but nothing further. It was rather inexplicable, but I supposed that, for some reason or other, Japp wished to keep it out of the papers. It worried me just a little, for it suggested the possibility that there might be further arrests to come.

After breakfast, I decided to go down to the village, and see if Poirot had returned yet; but, before I could start, a well-known face blocked one of the windows, and the well-known voice said:

"Bon jour, mon ami!"

"Poirot," I exclaimed, with relief, and seizing him by both hands, I dragged him into the room. "I was never so glad to see anyone. Listen, I

have said nothing to anybody but John. Is that right?"

"My friend," replied Poirot, "I do not know what you are talking about."

"Dr. Bauerstein's arrest, of course," I answered impatiently.

"Is Bauerstein arrested, then?"

"Did you not know it?"

"Not the least in the world." But, pausing a moment, he added: "Still, it does not surprise me. After all, we are only four miles from the coast." "The coast?" I asked, puzzled. "What has that got to do with it?" Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Surely, it is obvious!"

"Not to me. No doubt I am very dense, but I cannot see what the proximity of the coast has got to do with the murder of Mrs. Inglethorp."

"Nothing at all, of course," replied Poirot, smiling. "But we were speaking of the arrest of Dr. Bauerstein."

"Well, he is arrested for the murder of Mrs. Inglethorp——"

"What?" cried Poirot, in apparently lively astonishment. "Dr. Bauerstein arrested for the murder of Mrs. Inglethorp?"

"Yes."

"Impossible! That would be too good a farce! Who told you that, my friend?"

"Well, no one exactly told me," I confessed. "But he is arrested." "Oh, yes, very likely. But for espionage, mon ami." "Espionage?" I gasped. "Precisely."

"Not for poisoning Mrs. Inglethorp?"

"Not unless our friend Japp has taken leave of his senses," replied Poirot placidly.

"But—but I thought you thought so too?"

Poirot gave me one look, which conveyed a wondering pity, and his full sense of the utter absurdity of such an idea.

"Do you mean to say," I asked, slowly adapting myself to the new idea, "that Dr. Bauerstein is a spy?" Poirot nodded.

"Have you never suspected it?"

"It never entered my head."

"It did not strike you as peculiar that a famous London doctor should bury himself in a little village like this, and should be in the habit of

walking about at all hours of the night, fully dressed?"

"No," I confessed, "I never thought of such a thing."

"He is, of course, a German by birth," said Poirot thoughtfully, "though he has practiced so long in this country that nobody thinks of him as anything but an Englishman. He was naturalized about fifteen years ago.

A very clever man—a Jew, of course." "The blackguard!" I cried indignantly.

"Not at all. He is, on the contrary, a patriot. Think what he stands to lose. I admire the man myself."

But I could not look at it in Poirot's philosophical way.

"And this is the man with whom Mrs. Cavendish has been wandering about all over the country!" I cried indignantly.

"Yes. I should fancy he had found her very useful," remarked Poirot. "So long as gossip busied itself in coupling their names together, any other vagaries of the doctor's passed unobserved."

"Then you think he never really cared for her?" I asked eagerly—rather too eagerly, perhaps, under the circumstances.

"That, of course, I cannot say, but—shall I tell you my own private opinion, Hastings?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is this: that Mrs. Cavendish does not care, and never has cared one little jot about Dr. Bauerstein!"

"Do you really think so?" I could not disguise my pleasure.

"I am quite sure of it. And I will tell you why."

"Yes?"

"Because she cares for some one else, mon ami."

"Oh!" What did he mean? In spite of myself, an agreeable warmth spread over me. I am not a vain man where women are concerned, but I remembered certain evidences, too lightly thought of at the time, perhaps, but which certainly seemed to indicate——

My pleasing thoughts were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Miss Howard. She glanced round hastily to make sure there was no one else in the room, and quickly produced an old sheet of brown paper.

This she handed to Poirot, murmuring as she did so the cryptic words:

"On top of the wardrobe." Then she hurriedly left the room.

Poirot unfolded the sheet of paper eagerly, and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. He spread it out on the table.

"Come here, Hastings. Now tell me, what is that initial—J. or L.?"

It was a medium sized sheet of paper, rather dusty, as though it had lain by for some time. But it was the label that was attracting Poirot's attention. At the top, it bore the printed stamp of Messrs. Parkson's, the well-known theatrical costumiers, and it was addressed to "—(the debatable initial) Cavendish, Esq., Styles Court, Styles St. Mary, Essex."

"It might be T., or it might be L.," I said, after studying the thing for a minute or two. "It certainly isn't a J."

"Good," replied Poirot, folding up the paper again. "I, also, am of your way of thinking. It is an L., depend upon it!"

"Where did it come from?" I asked curiously. "Is it important?"

"Moderately so. It confirms a surmise of mine. Having deduced its existence, I set Miss Howard to search for it, and, as you see, she has been successful."

"What did she mean by 'On the top of the wardrobe'?"

"She meant," replied Poirot promptly, "that she found it on top of a wardrobe."

"A funny place for a piece of brown paper," I mused.

"Not at all. The top of a wardrobe is an excellent place for brown paper and cardboard boxes. I have kept them there myself. Neatly arranged, there is nothing to offend the eye."

"Poirot," I asked earnestly, "have you made up your mind about this crime?"

"Yes—that is to say, I believe I know how it was committed."

"Ah!"

"Unfortunately, I have no proof beyond my surmise, unless——" With sudden energy, he caught me by the arm, and whirled me down the hall, calling out in French in his excitement: "Mademoiselle Dorcas, Mademoiselle Dorcas, un moment, s'il vous plait!"

Dorcas, quite flurried by the noise, came hurrying out of the pantry.

"My good Dorcas, I have an idea—a little idea—if it should prove justified, what magnificent chance! Tell me, on Monday, not Tuesday, Dorcas, but Monday, the day before the tragedy, did anything go wrong with Mrs. Inglethorp's bell?"

Dorcas looked very surprised.

"Yes, sir, now you mention it, it did; though I don't know how you came to hear of it. A mouse, or some such, must have nibbled the wire through. The man came and put it right on Tuesday morning."

With a long drawn exclamation of ecstasy, Poirot led the way back to the morning-room.

"See you, one should not ask for outside proof—no, reason should be enough. But the flesh is weak, it is consolation to find that one is on the right track. Ah, my friend, I am like a giant refreshed. I run! I leap!"

And, in very truth, run and leap he did, gambolling wildly down the stretch of lawn outside the long window.

"What is your remarkable little friend doing?" asked a voice behind me, and I turned to find Mary Cavendish at my elbow. She smiled, and so did I. "What is it all about?"

"Really, I can't tell you. He asked Dorcas some question about a bell, and appeared so delighted with her answer that he is capering about as you see!"

Mary laughed.

"How ridiculous! He's going out of the gate. Isn't he coming back today?"

"I don't know. I've given up trying to guess what he'll do next."

"Is he quite mad, Mr. Hastings?"

"I honestly don't know. Sometimes, I feel sure he is as mad as a hatter; and then, just as he is at his maddest, I find there is method in his madness."

"I see."

In spite of her laugh, Mary was looking thoughtful this morning. She seemed grave, almost sad.

It occurred to me that it would be a good opportunity to tackle her on the subject of Cynthia. I began rather tactfully, I thought, but I had not gone far before she stopped me authoritatively.

"You are an excellent advocate, I have no doubt, Mr. Hastings, but in this case your talents are quite thrown away. Cynthia will run no risk of encountering any unkindness from me."

I began to stammer feebly that I hoped she hadn't thought—But again she stopped me, and her words were so unexpected that they quite drove Cynthia, and her troubles, out of my mind.

"Mr. Hastings," she said, "do you think I and my husband are happy together?"

I was considerably taken aback, and murmured something about it's not being my business to think anything of the sort.

"Well," she said quietly, "whether it is your business or not, I will tell you that we are not happy."

I said nothing, for I saw that she had not finished.

She began slowly, walking up and down the room, her head a little bent, and that slim, supple figure of hers swaying gently as she walked. She stopped suddenly, and looked up at me.

"You don't know anything about me, do you?" she asked. "Where I come from, who I was before I married John—anything, in fact? Well, I will tell you. I will make a father confessor of you. You are kind, I think—yes, I am sure you are kind."

Somehow, I was not quite as elated as I might have been. I remembered that Cynthia had begun her confidences in much the same way. Besides, a father confessor should be elderly, it is not at all the role for a young man.

"My father was English," said Mrs. Cavendish, "but my mother was a

Russian."

"Ah," I said, "now I understand—"

"Understand what?"

"A hint of something foreign—different—that there has always been about you."

"My mother was very beautiful, I believe. I don't know, because I never saw her. She died when I was quite a little child. I believe there was some tragedy connected with her death—she took an overdose of some sleeping draught by mistake. However that may be, my father was broken-hearted. Shortly afterwards, he went into the Consular Service. Everywhere he went, I went with him. When I was twenty-three, I had

been nearly all over the world. It was a splendid life—I loved it."

There was a smile on her face, and her head was thrown back. She seemed living in the memory of those old glad days.

"Then my father died. He left me very badly off. I had to go and live with some old aunts in Yorkshire." She shuddered. "You will understand me when I say that it was a deadly life for a girl brought up as I had been. The narrowness, the deadly monotony of it, almost drove me mad." She paused a minute, and added in a different tone: "And then I met John Cavendish."

"Yes?"

"You can imagine that, from my aunts' point of view, it was a very good match for me. But I can honestly say it was not this fact which weighed with me. No, he was simply a way of escape from the insufferable monotony of my life."

I said nothing, and after a moment, she went on:

"Don't misunderstand me. I was quite honest with him. I told him, what was true, that I liked him very much, that I hoped to come to like him more, but that I was not in any way what the world calls 'in love' with him. He declared that that satisfied him, and so—we were married."

She waited a long time, a little frown had gathered on her forehead.

She seemed to be looking back earnestly into those past days.

"I think—I am sure—he cared for me at first. But I suppose we were not well matched. Almost at once, we drifted apart. He—it is not a pleasing thing for my pride, but it is the truth—tired of me very soon." I must have made some murmur of dissent, for she went on quickly: "Oh, yes, he did! Not that it matters now—now that we've come to the parting of the ways."

"What do you mean?" She answered quietly:

"I mean that I am not going to remain at Styles."

"You and John are not going to live here?"

"John may live here, but I shall not."

"You are going to leave him?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

She paused a long time, and said at last:

"Perhaps—because I want to be—free!"

And, as she spoke, I had a sudden vision of broad spaces, virgin tracts of forests, untrodden lands—and a realization of what freedom would mean to such a nature as Mary Cavendish. I seemed to see her for a moment as she was, a proud wild creature, as untamed by civilization as some shy bird of the hills. A little cry broke from her lips:

"You don't know, you don't know, how this hateful place has been prison to me!"

"I understand," I said, "but—but don't do anything rash." "Oh, rash!" Her voice mocked at my prudence.

Then suddenly I said a thing I could have bitten out my tongue for:

"You know that Dr. Bauerstein has been arrested?"

An instant coldness passed like a mask over her face, blotting out all expression.

"John was so kind as to break that to me this morning." "Well, what do you think?" I asked feebly.

"Of what?"

"Of the arrest?"

"What should I think? Apparently he is a German spy; so the gardener had told John."

Her face and voice were absolutely cold and expressionless. Did she care, or did she not?

She moved away a step or two, and fingered one of the flower vases.

"These are quite dead. I must do them again. Would you mind moving—thank you, Mr. Hastings." And she walked quietly past me out of the window, with a cool little nod of dismissal.

No, surely she could not care for Bauerstein. No woman could act her part with that icy unconcern.

Poirot did not make his appearance the following morning, and there was no sign of the Scotland Yard men.

But, at lunch-time, there arrived a new piece of evidence—or rather lack of evidence. We had vainly tried to trace the fourth letter, which Mrs. Inglethorp had written on the evening preceding her death. Our efforts having been in vain, we had abandoned the matter, hoping that it might turn up of itself one day. And this is just what did happen, in the shape of a communication, which arrived by the second post from a firm of French music publishers, acknowledging Mrs. Inglethorp's cheque, and regretting they had been unable to trace a certain series of Russian folksongs. So the last hope of solving the mystery, by means of Mrs.

Inglethorp's correspondence on the fatal evening, had to be abandoned.

Just before tea, I strolled down to tell Poirot of the new disappointment, but found, to my annoyance, that he was once more out.

"Gone to London again?"

"Oh, no, monsieur, he has but taken the train to Tadminster. 'To see a young lady's dispensary,' he said."

"Silly ass!" I ejaculated. "I told him Wednesday was the one day she wasn't there! Well, tell him to look us up to-morrow morning, will you?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

But, on the following day, no sign of Poirot. I was getting angry. He was really treating us in the most cavalier fashion.

After lunch, Lawrence drew me aside, and asked if I was going down to see him.

"No, I don't think I shall. He can come up here if he wants to see us."

"Oh!" Lawrence looked indeterminate. Something unusually nervous and excited in his manner roused my curiosity.

"What is it?" I asked. "I could go if there's anything special."

"It's nothing much, but—well, if you are going, will you tell him—" he dropped his voice to a whisper—"I think I've found the extra coffee-cup!"

I had almost forgotten that enigmatical message of Poirot's, but now my curiosity was aroused afresh.

Lawrence would say no more, so I decided that I would descend from my high horse, and once more seek out Poirot at Leastways Cottage.

This time I was received with a smile. Monsieur Poirot was within. Would I mount? I mounted accordingly.

Poirot was sitting by the table, his head buried in his hands. He sprang up at my entrance.

"What is it?" I asked solicitously. "You are not ill, I trust?" "No, no, not ill. But I decide an affair of great moment." "Whether to catch the criminal or not?" I asked facetiously.

But, to my great surprise, Poirot nodded gravely.

" 'To speak or not to speak,' as your so great Shakespeare says, 'that is the question.' "

I did not trouble to correct the quotation.

"You are not serious, Poirot?"

"I am of the most serious. For the most serious of all things hangs in the balance."

"And that is?"

"A woman's happiness, mon ami," he said gravely.

I did not quite know what to say.

"The moment has come," said Poirot thoughtfully, "and I do not know what to do. For, see you, it is a big stake for which I play. No one but I, Hercule Poirot, would attempt it!" And he tapped himself proudly on the breast.

After pausing a few minutes respectfully, so as not to spoil his effect, I gave him Lawrence's message.

"Aha!" he cried. "So he has found the extra coffee-cup. That is good. He has more intelligence than would appear, this long-faced Monsieur Lawrence of yours!"

I did not myself think very highly of Lawrence's intelligence; but I forebore to contradict Poirot, and gently took him to task for forgetting my instructions as to which were Cynthia's days off.

"It is true. I have the head of a sieve. However, the other young lady was most kind. She was sorry for my disappointment, and showed me everything in the kindest way."

"Oh, well, that's all right, then, and you must go to tea with Cynthia another day."

I told him about the letter.

"I am sorry for that," he said. "I always had hopes of that letter. But no, it was not to be. This affair must all be unravelled from within." He tapped his forehead. "These little grey cells. It is 'up to them'—as you say over here." Then, suddenly, he asked: "Are you a judge of finger-marks, my friend?"

"No," I said, rather surprised, "I know that there are no two finger-marks alike, but that's as far as my science goes."

"Exactly."

He unlocked a little drawer, and took out some photographs which he laid on the table.

"I have numbered them, 1, 2, 3. Will you describe them to me?" I studied the proofs attentively.

"All greatly magnified, I see. No. 1, I should say, are a man's fingerprints; thumb and first finger. No. 2 are a lady's; they are much smaller, and quite different in every way. No. 3"—I paused for some time—"there seem to be a lot of confused finger-marks, but here, very distinctly, are No. 1's."

"Overlapping the others?"

"Yes."

"You recognize them beyond fail?"

"Oh, yes; they are identical."

Poirot nodded, and gently taking the photographs from me locked them up again.

"I suppose," I said, "that as usual, you are not going to explain?"

"On the contrary. No. 1 were the finger-prints of Monsieur Lawrence. No. 2 were those of Mademoiselle Cynthia. They are not important. I merely obtained them for comparison. No. 3 is a little more complicated."

"Yes?"

"It is, as you see, highly magnified. You may have noticed a sort of blur extending all across the picture. I will not describe to you the special apparatus, dusting powder, etc., which I used. It is a well-known process to the police, and by means of it you can obtain a photograph of the finger-prints of any object in a very short space of time. Well, my friend, you have seen the finger-marks—it remains to tell you the particular object on which they had been left."

"Go on—I am really excited."

"Eh bien! Photo No. 3 represents the highly magnified surface of a tiny bottle in the top poison cupboard of the dispensary in the Red Cross

Hospital at Tadminster—which sounds like the house that Jack built!"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "But what were Lawrence Cavendish's finger-marks doing on it? He never went near the poison cupboard the day we were there!"

"Oh, yes, he did!"

"Impossible! We were all together the whole time." Poirot shook his head.

"No, my friend, there was a moment when you were not all together. There was a moment when you could not have been all together, or it would not have been necessary to call to Monsieur Lawrence to come and join you on the balcony."

"I'd forgotten that," I admitted. "But it was only for a moment."

"Long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

Poirot's smile became rather enigmatical.

"Long enough for a gentleman who had once studied medicine to gratify a very natural interest and curiosity."

Our eyes met. Poirot's were pleasantly vague. He got up and hummed a little tune. I watched him suspiciously.

"Poirot," I said, "what was in this particular little bottle?" Poirot looked out of the window.

"Hydro-chloride of strychnine," he said, over his shoulder, continuing to hum.

"Good heavens!" I said it quite quietly. I was not surprised. I had expected that answer.

"They use the pure hydro-chloride of strychnine very little— only occasionally for pills. It is the official solution, Liq. Strychnine Hydro-clor. that is used in most medicines. That is why the finger-marks have remained undisturbed since then."

"How did you manage to take this photograph?"

"I dropped my hat from the balcony," explained Poirot simply. "Visitors were not permitted below at that hour, so, in spite of my many apologies, Mademoiselle Cynthia's colleague had to go down and fetch it for me."

"Then you knew what you were going to find?"

"No, not at all. I merely realized that it was possible, from your story, for Monsieur Lawrence to go to the poison cupboard. The possibility had to be confirmed, or eliminated."

"Poirot," I said, "your gaiety does not deceive me. This is a very important discovery."

"I do not know," said Poirot. "But one thing does strike me. No doubt it has struck you too." "What is that?"

"Why, that there is altogether too much strychnine about this case. This is the third time we run up against it. There was strychnine in Mrs.

Inglethorp's tonic. There is the strychnine sold across the counter at Styles St. Mary by Mace. Now we have more strychnine, handled by one of the household. It is confusing; and, as you know, I do not like confusion."

Before I could reply, one of the other Belgians opened the door and stuck his head in.

"There is a lady below, asking for Mr Hastings."

"A lady?"

I jumped up. Poirot followed me down the narrow stairs. Mary Cavendish was standing in the doorway.

"I have been visiting an old woman in the village," she explained, "and as Lawrence told me you were with Monsieur Poirot I thought I would call for you."

"Alas, madame," said Poirot, "I thought you had come to honour me with a visit!"

"I will some day, if you ask me," she promised him, smiling.

"That is well. If you should need a father confessor, madame" —she started ever so slightly—"remember, Papa Poirot is always at your service."

She stared at him for a few minutes, as though seeking to read some deeper meaning into his words. Then she turned abruptly away. "Come, will you not walk back with us too, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Enchanted, madame."

All the way to Styles, Mary talked fast and feverishly. It struck me that in some way she was nervous of Poirot's eyes.

The weather had broken, and the sharp wind was almost autumnal in its shrewishness. Mary shivered a little, and buttoned her black sports coat closer. The wind through the trees made a mournful noise, like some great giant sighing.

We walked up to the great door of Styles, and at once the knowledge came to us that something was wrong.

Dorcas came running out to meet us. She was crying and wringing her hands. I was aware of other servants huddled together in the background, all eyes and ears.

"Oh, m'am! Oh, m'am! I don't know how to tell you—"

"What is it, Dorcas?" I asked impatiently. "Tell us at once."

"It's those wicked detectives. They've arrested him—they've arrested

Mr. Cavendish!"

"Arrested Lawrence?" I gasped.

I saw a strange look come into Dorcas's eyes.

"No, sir. Not Mr. Lawrence—Mr. John."

Behind me, with a wild cry, Mary Cavendish fell heavily against me, and as I turned to catch her I met the quiet triumph in Poirot's eyes.

THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION

The trial of John Cavendish for the murder of his stepmother took place two months later.

Of the intervening weeks I will say little, but my admiration and sympathy went out unfeignedly to Mary Cavendish. She ranged herself passionately on her husband's side, scorning the mere idea of his guilt, and fought for him tooth and nail.

I expressed my admiration to Poirot, and he nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, she is of those women who show at their best in adversity. It brings out all that is sweetest and truest in them. Her pride and her jealousy have —"

"Jealousy?" I queried.

"Yes. Have you not realized that she is an unusually jealous woman? As I was saying, her pride and jealousy have been laid aside. She thinks of nothing but her husband, and the terrible fate that is hanging over him."

He spoke very feelingly, and I looked at him earnestly, remembering that last afternoon, when he had been deliberating whether or not to speak. With his tenderness for "a woman's happiness," I felt glad that the decision had been taken out of his hands.

"Even now," I said, "I can hardly believe it. You see, up to the very last minute, I thought it was Lawrence!" Poirot grinned.

"I know you did."

"But John! My old friend John!"

"Every murderer is probably somebody's old friend," observed Poirot philosophically. "You cannot mix up sentiment and reason."

"I must say I think you might have given me a hint."

"Perhaps, mon ami, I did not do so, just because he was your old friend."

I was rather disconcerted by this, remembering how I had busily passed on to John what I believed to be Poirot's views concerning Bauerstein. He, by the way, had been acquitted of the charge brought against him. Nevertheless, although he had been too clever for them this time, and the charge of espionage could not be brought home to him, his wings were pretty well clipped for the future.

I asked Poirot whether he thought John would be condemned. To my intense surprise, he replied that, on the contrary, he was extremely likely to be acquitted.

"But, Poirot—" I protested.

"Oh, my friend, have I not said to you all along that I have no proofs. It is one thing to know that a man is guilty, it is quite another matter to prove him so. And, in this case, there is terribly little evidence. That is the whole trouble. I, Hercule Poirot, know, but I lack the last link in my chain. And unless I can find that missing link—" He shook his head gravely.

"When did you first suspect John Cavendish?" I asked, after a minute or two.

"Did you not suspect him at all?"

"No, indeed."

"Not after that fragment of conversation you overheard between Mrs. Cavendish and her mother-in-law, and her subsequent lack of frankness at the inquest?"

"No."

"Did you not put two and two together, and reflect that if it was not Alfred Inglethorp who was quarrelling with his wife—and you remember, he strenuously denied it at the inquest—it must be either Lawrence or John. Now, if it was Lawrence, Mary Cavendish's conduct was just as inexplicable. But if, on the other hand, it was John, the whole thing was explained quite naturally."

"So," I cried, a light breaking in upon me, "it was John who quarrelled with his mother that afternoon?"

"Exactly."

"And you have known this all along?"

"Certainly. Mrs. Cavendish's behaviour could only be explained that way."

"And yet you say he may be acquitted?" Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Certainly I do. At the police court proceedings, we shall hear the case for the prosecution, but in all probability his solicitors will advise him to reserve his defence. That will be sprung upon us at the trial. And—ah, by the way, I have a word of caution to give you, my friend. I must not appear in the case."

"What?"

"No. Officially, I have nothing to do with it. Until I have found that last link in my chain, I must remain behind the scenes. Mrs. Cavendish must think I am working for her husband, not against him." "I say, that's playing it a bit low down," I protested.

"Not at all. We have to deal with a most clever and unscrupulous man, and we must use any means in our power—otherwise he will slip through our fingers. That is why I have been careful to remain in the background. All the discoveries have been made by Japp, and Japp will take all the credit. If I am called upon to give evidence at all"—he smiled broadly—"it will probably be as a witness for the defence." I could hardly believe my ears.

"It is quite en regle," continued Poirot. "Strangely enough, I can give evidence that will demolish one contention of the prosecution."

"Which one?"

"The one that relates to the destruction of the will. John Cavendish did not destroy that will."

Poirot was a true prophet. I will not go into the details of the police court proceedings, as it involves many tiresome repetitions. I will merely state baldly that John Cavendish reserved his defence, and was duly committed for trial.

September found us all in London. Mary took a house in Kensington,

Poirot being included in the family party.

I myself had been given a job at the War Office, so was able to see them continually.

As the weeks went by, the state of Poirot's nerves grew worse and worse. That "last link" he talked about was still lacking. Privately, I hoped it might remain so, for what happiness could there be for Mary, if John were not acquitted?

On September 15th John Cavendish appeared in the dock at the Old Bailey, charged with "The Wilful Murder of Emily Agnes Inglethorp," and pleaded "Not Guilty."

Sir Ernest Heavywether, the famous K. C., had been engaged to defend him.

Mr. Philips, K. C., opened the case for the Crown.

The murder, he said, was a most premeditated and cold-blooded one. It was neither more nor less than the deliberate poisoning of a fond and trusting woman by the stepson to whom she had been more than a mother. Ever since his boyhood, she had supported him. He and his wife had lived at Styles Court in every luxury, surrounded by her care and attention. She had been their kind and generous benefactress.

He proposed to call witnesses to show how the prisoner, a profligate and spendthrift, had been at the end of his financial tether, and had also been carrying on an intrigue with a certain Mrs. Raikes, a neighbouring farmer's wife. This having come to his stepmother's ears, she taxed him with it on the afternoon before her death, and a quarrel ensued, part of which was overheard. On the previous day, the prisoner had purchased strychnine at the village chemist's shop, wearing a disguise by means of which he hoped to throw the onus of the crime upon another man—to wit, Mrs. Inglethorp's husband, of whom he had been bitterly jealous. Luckily for Mr. Inglethorp, he had been able to produce an unimpeachable alibi.

On the afternoon of July 17th, continued Counsel, immediately after the quarrel with her son, Mrs. Inglethorp made a new will. This will was found destroyed in the grate of her bedroom the following morning, but evidence had come to light which showed that it had been drawn up in favour of her husband. Deceased had already made a will in his favour before her marriage, but—and Mr. Philips wagged an expressive forefinger—the prisoner was not aware of that. What had induced the deceased to make a fresh will, with the old one still extant, he could not say. She was an old lady, and might possibly have forgotten the former one; or—this seemed to him more likely—she may have had an idea that it was revoked by her marriage, as there had been some conversation on the subject. Ladies were not always very well versed in legal knowledge. She had, about a year before, executed a will in favour of the prisoner. He would call evidence to show that it was the prisoner who ultimately handed his stepmother her coffee on the fatal night. Later in the evening, he had sought admission to her room, on which occasion, no doubt, he found an opportunity of destroying the will which, as far as he knew, would render the one in his favour valid.

The prisoner had been arrested in consequence of the discovery, in his room, by Detective Inspector Japp—a most brilliant officer—of the identical phial of strychnine which had been sold at the village chemist's to the supposed Mr. Inglethorp on the day before the murder. It would be for the jury to decide whether or not these damning facts constituted an overwhelming proof of the prisoner's guilt.

And, subtly implying that a jury which did not so decide, was quite unthinkable, Mr. Philips sat down and wiped his forehead.

The first witnesses for the prosecution were mostly those who had been called at the inquest, the medical evidence being again taken first.

Sir Ernest Heavywether, who was famous all over England for the unscrupulous manner in which he bullied witnesses, only asked two questions.

"I take it, Dr. Bauerstein, that strychnine, as a drug, acts quickly?"
"Yes."

"And that you are unable to account for the delay in this case?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

Mr. Mace identified the phial handed him by Counsel as that sold by him to "Mr. Inglethorp." Pressed, he admitted that he only knew Mr. Inglethorp by sight. He had never spoken to him. The witness was not crossexamined.

Alfred Inglethorp was called, and denied having purchased the poison. He also denied having quarrelled with his wife. Various witnesses testified to the accuracy of these statements.

The gardeners' evidence, as to the witnessing of the will was taken, and then Dorcas was called.

Dorcas, faithful to her "young gentlemen," denied strenuously that it could have been John's voice she heard, and resolutely declared, in the teeth of everything, that it was Mr. Inglethorp who had been in the boudoir with her mistress. A rather wistful smile passed across the face of the prisoner in the dock. He knew only too well how useless her gallant defiance was, since it was not the object of the defence to deny this point. Mrs. Cavendish, of course, could not be called upon to give evidence against her husband.

After various questions on other matters, Mr. Philips asked:

"In the month of June last, do you remember a parcel arriving for Mr.

Lawrence Cavendish from Parkson's?" Dorcas shook her head.

"I don't remember, sir. It may have done, but Mr. Lawrence was away from home part of June."

"In the event of a parcel arriving for him whilst he was away, what would be done with it?"

"It would either be put in his room or sent on after him." "By you?"

"No, sir, I should leave it on the hall table. It would be Miss Howard who would attend to anything like that."

Evelyn Howard was called and, after being examined on other points, was questioned as to the parcel.

"Don't remember. Lots of parcels come. Can't remember one special one."

"You do not know if it was sent after Mr. Lawrence Cavendish to

Wales, or whether it was put in his room?"

"Don't think it was sent after him. Should have remembered it if it was."

"Supposing a parcel arrived addressed to Mr. Lawrence Cavendish, and afterwards it disappeared, should you remark its absence?"

"No, don't think so. I should think some one had taken charge of it."

"I believe, Miss Howard, that it was you who found this sheet of brown paper?" He held up the same dusty piece which Poirot and I had examined in the morning-room at Styles.

"Yes, I did."

"How did you come to look for it?"

"The Belgian detective who was employed on the case asked me to search for it."

"Where did you eventually discover it?"

"On the top of—of—a wardrobe."

"On top of the prisoner's wardrobe?"

"I—I believe so."

"Did you not find it yourself?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know where you found it?"

"Yes, it was on the prisoner's wardrobe."

"That is better."

An assistant from Parkson's, Theatrical Costumiers, testified that on June 29th, they had supplied a black beard to Mr. L. Cavendish, as requested. It was ordered by letter, and a postal order was enclosed. No, they had not kept the letter. All transactions were entered in their books. They had sent the beard, as directed, to "L. Cavendish, Esq., Styles

Court."

Sir Ernest Heavywether rose ponderously.

"Where was the letter written from?"

"From Styles Court."

"The same address to which you sent the parcel?" "Yes."

"And the letter came from there?"

"Yes."

Like a beast of prey, Heavywether fell upon him:

"How do you know?"

"I—I don't understand."

"How do you know that letter came from Styles? Did you notice the postmark?"

"No—but—"

"Ah, you did not notice the postmark! And yet you affirm so confidently that it came from Styles. It might, in fact, have been any postmark?"

"Y—es."

"In fact, the letter, though written on stamped notepaper, might have been posted from anywhere? From Wales, for instance?"

The witness admitted that such might be the case, and Sir Ernest signified that he was satisfied.

Elizabeth Wells, second housemaid at Styles, stated that after she had gone to bed she remembered that she had bolted the front door, instead of leaving it on the latch as Mr. Inglethorp had requested. She had accordingly gone downstairs again to rectify her error. Hearing a slight noise in the West wing, she had peeped along the passage, and had seen Mr. John Cavendish knocking at Mrs. Inglethorp's door.

Sir Ernest Heavywether made short work of her, and under his unmerciful bullying she contradicted herself hopelessly, and Sir Ernest sat down again with a satisfied smile on his face.

With the evidence of Annie, as to the candle grease on the floor, and as to seeing the prisoner take the coffee into the boudoir, the proceedings were adjourned until the following day.

As we went home, Mary Cavendish spoke bitterly against the prosecuting counsel.

"That hateful man! What a net he has drawn around my poor John!

How he twisted every little fact until he made it seem what it wasn't!"

"Well," I said consolingly, "it will be the other way about to-morrow."

"Yes," she said meditatively; then suddenly dropped her voice. "Mr.

Hastings, you do not think—surely it could not have been

Lawrence—Oh, no, that could not be!"

But I myself was puzzled, and as soon as I was alone with Poirot I asked him what he thought Sir Ernest was driving at.

"Ah!" said Poirot appreciatively. "He is a clever man, that Sir Ernest."

"Do you think he believes Lawrence guilty?"

"I do not think he believes or cares anything! No, what he is trying for is to create such confusion in the minds of the jury that they are divided in their opinion as to which brother did it. He is endeavouring to make out that there is quite as much evidence against Lawrence as against

John—and I am not at all sure that he will not succeed."

Detective-inspector Japp was the first witness called when the trial was reopened, and gave his evidence succinctly and briefly. After relating the earlier events, he proceeded:

"Acting on information received, Superintendent Summerhaye and myself searched the prisoner's room, during his temporary absence from the house. In his chest of drawers, hidden beneath some underclothing, we found: first, a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez similar to those worn by

Mr. Inglethorp"—these were exhibited—"secondly, this phial."

The phial was that already recognized by the chemist's assistant, a tiny bottle of blue glass, containing a few grains of a white crystalline powder, and labelled: "Strychnine Hydrochloride. POISON."

A fresh piece of evidence discovered by the detectives since the police court proceedings was a long, almost new piece of blotting-paper. It had been found in Mrs. Inglethorp's cheque book, and on being reversed at a mirror, showed clearly the words: "… erything of which I die possessed I leave to my beloved husband Alfred Ing … " This placed beyond question the fact that the destroyed will had been in favour of the deceased lady's husband. Japp then produced the charred fragment of paper recovered from the grate, and this, with the discovery of the beard in the attic, completed his evidence.

But Sir Ernest's cross-examination was yet to come.

"What day was it when you searched the prisoner's room?"

"Tuesday, the 24th of July."

"Exactly a week after the tragedy?"

"Yes."

"You found these two objects, you say, in the chest of drawers. Was the drawer unlocked?"

"Yes."

"Does it not strike you as unlikely that a man who had committed a crime should keep the evidence of it in an unlocked drawer for anyone to find?"

"He might have stowed them there in a hurry."

"But you have just said it was a whole week since the crime. He would have had ample time to remove them and destroy them." "Perhaps."

"There is no perhaps about it. Would he, or would he not have had

plenty of time to remove and destroy them?"

"Yes."

"Was the pile of underclothes under which the things were hidden heavy or light?"

"Heavyish."

"In other words, it was winter underclothing. Obviously, the prisoner would not be likely to go to that drawer?"

"Perhaps not."

"Kindly answer my question. Would the prisoner, in the hottest week of a hot summer, be likely to go to a drawer containing winter underclothing. Yes, or no?"

"No."

"In that case, is it not possible that the articles in question might have been put there by a third person, and that the prisoner was quite unaware of their presence?"

"I should not think it likely."

"But it is possible?"

"Yes."

"That is all."

More evidence followed. Evidence as to the financial difficulties in which the prisoner had found himself at the end of July. Evidence as to his intrigue with Mrs. Raikes—poor Mary, that must have been bitter hearing for a woman of her pride. Evelyn Howard had been right in her facts, though her animosity against Alfred Inglethorp had caused her to jump to the conclusion that he was the person concerned.

Lawrence Cavendish was then put into the box. In a low voice, in answer to Mr. Philips' questions, he denied having ordered anything from Parkson's in

June. In fact, on June 29th, he had been staying away, in Wales.

Instantly, Sir Ernest's chin was shooting pugnaciously forward.

"You deny having ordered a black beard from Parkson's on June 29th?"
"I do."

"Ah! In the event of anything happening to your brother, who will inherit Styles Court?"

The brutality of the question called a flush to Lawrence's pale face. The judge gave vent to a faint murmur of disapprobation, and the prisoner in the dock leant forward angrily.

Heavywether cared nothing for his client's anger. "Answer my question, if you please."

"I suppose," said Lawrence quietly, "that I should."

"What do you mean by you 'suppose'? Your brother has no children.

You would inherit it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that's better," said Heavywether, with ferocious geniality. "And you'd inherit a good slice of money too, wouldn't you?"

"Really, Sir Ernest," protested the judge, "these questions are not relevant."

Sir Ernest bowed, and having shot his arrow proceeded.

"On Tuesday, the 17th July, you went, I believe, with another guest, to visit the dispensary at the Red Cross Hospital in Tadminster?"

"Yes."

"Did you—while you happened to be alone for a few seconds—unlock the poison cupboard, and examine some of the bottles?"

"I—I—may have done so."

"I put it to you that you did do so?"

"Yes."

Sir Ernest fairly shot the next question at him.

"Did you examine one bottle in particular?"

"No, I do not think so."

"Be careful, Mr. Cavendish. I am referring to a little bottle of Hydrochloride of Strychnine."

Lawrence was turning a sickly greenish colour.

"N—o—I am sure I didn't."

"Then how do you account for the fact that you left the unmistakable impress of your finger-prints on it?"

The bullying manner was highly efficacious with a nervous disposition.

"I—I suppose I must have taken up the bottle."

"I suppose so too! Did you abstract any of the contents of the bottle?"

"Certainly not."

"Then why did you take it up?"

"I once studied to be a doctor. Such things naturally interest me."

"Ah! So poisons 'naturally interest' you, do they? Still, you waited to be alone before gratifying that 'interest' of yours?"

"That was pure chance. If the others had been there, I should have done just the same."

"Still, as it happens, the others were not there?"

"No, but——"

"In fact, during the whole afternoon, you were only alone for a couple of minutes, and it happened—I say, it happened—to be during those two minutes that you displayed your 'natural interest' in Hydro-chloride of

Strychnine?"

Lawrence stammered pitiably.

"I—I—mdash;"

With a satisfied and expressive countenance, Sir Ernest observed:

"I have nothing more to ask you, Mr. Cavendish."

This bit of cross-examination had caused great excitement in court. The heads of the many fashionably attired women present were busily laid together, and their whispers became so loud that the judge angrily threatened to have the court cleared if there was not immediate silence.

There was little more evidence. The hand-writing experts were called upon for their opinion of the signature of "Alfred Inglethorp" in the chemist's poison register. They all declared unanimously that it was certainly not his hand-writing, and gave it as their view that it might be that of the prisoner disguised. Cross-examined, they admitted that it might be the prisoner's hand-writing cleverly counterfeited.

Sir Ernest Heavywether's speech in opening the case for the defence was not a long one, but it was backed by the full force of his emphatic manner. Never, he said, in the course of his long experience, had he known a charge of murder rest on slighter evidence. Not only was it entirely circumstantial, but the greater part of it was practically unproved. Let them take the testimony they had heard and sift it impartially. The strychnine had been found in a drawer in the prisoner's room. That drawer was an unlocked one, as he had pointed out, and he submitted that there was no evidence to prove that it was the prisoner who had concealed the poison there. It was, in fact, a wicked and malicious attempt on the part of some third person to fix the crime on the prisoner. The prosecution had been unable to produce a shred of evidence in support of their contention that it was the prisoner who ordered the black beard from Parkson's. The quarrel which had taken place between prisoner and his stepmother was freely admitted, but both it and his financial embarrassments had been grossly exaggerated.

His learned friend—Sir Ernest nodded carelessly at Mr. Philips—had stated that if the prisoner were an innocent man, he would have come forward at the inquest to explain that it was he, and not Mr. Inglethorp, who had been the participator in the quarrel. He thought the facts had been misrepresented. What had actually occurred was this. The prisoner, returning to the house on Tuesday evening, had been authoritatively told that there had been a violent quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Inglethorp. No suspicion had entered the prisoner's head that anyone could possibly have mistaken his voice for that of Mr. Inglethorp. He naturally concluded that his stepmother had had two quarrels.

The prosecution averred that on Monday, July 16th, the prisoner had entered the chemist's shop in the village, disguised as Mr. Inglethorp. The prisoner, on the contrary, was at that time at a lonely spot called Marston's Spinney, where he had been summoned by an anonymous note, couched in blackmailing terms, and threatening to reveal certain matters to his wife unless he complied with its demands. The prisoner had, accordingly, gone to the appointed spot, and after waiting there vainly for half an hour had returned home. Unfortunately, he had met with no one on the way there or back who could vouch for the truth of his story, but luckily he had kept the note, and it would be produced as evidence.

As for the statement relating to the destruction of the will, the prisoner had formerly practiced at the Bar, and was perfectly well aware that the will made in his favour a year before was automatically revoked by his stepmother's remarriage. He would call evidence to show who did destroy the will, and it was possible that that might open up quite a new view of the case.

Finally, he would point out to the jury that there was evidence against other people besides John Cavendish. He would direct their attention to the fact that the evidence against Mr. Lawrence Cavendish was quite as strong, if not stronger than that against his brother.

He would now call the prisoner.

John acquitted himself well in the witness-box. Under Sir Ernest's skilful handling, he told his tale credibly and well. The anonymous note received by him was produced, and handed to the jury to examine. The readiness with which he admitted his financial difficulties, and the disagreement with his stepmother, lent value to his denials.

At the close of his examination, he paused, and said:

"I should like to make one thing clear. I utterly reject and disapprove of Sir Ernest Heavywether's insinuations against my brother. My brother, I am convinced, had no more to do with the crime than I have."

Sir Ernest merely smiled, and noted with a sharp eye that John's protest had produced a very favourable impression on the jury.

Then the cross-examination began.

"I understand you to say that it never entered your head that the witnesses at the inquest could possibly have mistaken your voice for that of

Mr. Inglethorp. Is not that very surprising?"

"No, I don't think so. I was told there had been a quarrel between my mother and Mr. Inglethorp, and it never occurred to me that such was not really the case."

"Not when the servant Dorcas repeated certain fragments of the conversation—fragments which you must have recognized?"

"I did not recognize them."

"Your memory must be unusually short!"

"No, but we were both angry, and, I think, said more than we meant. I paid very little attention to my mother's actual words."

Mr. Philips' incredulous sniff was a triumph of forensic skill. He passed on to the subject of the note.

"You have produced this note very opportunely. Tell me, is there nothing familiar about the hand-writing of it?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you not think that it bears a marked resemblance to your own hand-writing—carelessly disguised?"

"No, I do not think so."

"I put it to you that it is your own hand-writing!"

"No."

"I put it to you that, anxious to prove an alibi, you conceived the idea of a fictitious and rather incredible appointment, and wrote this note yourself in order to bear out your statement!"

"No."

"Is it not a fact that, at the time you claim to have been waiting about at a solitary and unfrequented spot, you were really in the chemist's shop in Styles St. Mary, where you purchased strychnine in the name of Alfred Inglethorp?"

"No, that is a lie."

"I put it to you that, wearing a suit of Mr. Inglethorp's clothes, with a black beard trimmed to resemble his, you were there—and signed the register in his name!"

"That is absolutely untrue."

"Then I will leave the remarkable similarity of hand-writing between the note, the register, and your own, to the consideration of the jury," said Mr. Philips, and sat down with the air of a man who has done his duty, but who was nevertheless horrified by such deliberate perjury.

After this, as it was growing late, the case was adjourned till Monday.

Poirot, I noticed, was looking profoundly discouraged. He had that little frown between the eyes that I knew so well.

"What is it, Poirot?" I inquired.

"Ah, mon ami, things are going badly, badly."

In spite of myself, my heart gave a leap of relief. Evidently there was a likelihood of John Cavendish being acquitted.

When we reached the house, my little friend waved aside Mary's offer of tea.

"No, I thank you, madame. I will mount to my room."

I followed him. Still frowning, he went across to the desk and took out a small pack of patience cards. Then he drew up a chair to the table, and, to my utter amazement, began solemnly to build card houses!

My jaw dropped involuntarily, and he said at once:

"No, mon ami, I am not in my second childhood! I steady my nerves, that is all. This employment requires precision of the fingers. With precision of the fingers goes precision of the brain. And never have I needed that more than now!"

"What is the trouble?" I asked.

With a great thump on the table, Poirot demolished his carefully built up edifice.

"It is this, mon ami! That I can build card houses seven stories high, but I cannot"—thump—"find"—thump—"that last link of which I spoke to you."

I could not quite tell what to say, so I held my peace, and he began slowly building up the cards again, speaking in jerks as he did so.

"It is done—so! By placing—one card—on another—with mathematical—precision!"

I watched the card house rising under his hands, story by story. He never hesitated or faltered. It was really almost like a conjuring trick.

"What a steady hand you've got," I remarked. "I believe I've only seen your hand shake once."

"On an occasion when I was enraged, without doubt," observed Poirot, with great placidity.

"Yes indeed! You were in a towering rage. Do you remember? It was when you discovered that the lock of the despatch-case in Mrs. Inglethorp's bedroom had been forced. You stood by the mantel-piece, twiddling the things on it in your usual fashion, and your hand shook like a leaf! I must say——"

But I stopped suddenly. For Poirot, uttering a hoarse and inarticulate cry, again annihilated his masterpiece of cards, and putting his hands over his eyes swayed backwards and forwards, apparently suffering the keenest agony.

"Good heavens, Poirot!" I cried. "What is the matter? Are you taken ill?"

"No, no," he gasped. "It is—it is—that I have an idea!"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, much relieved. "One of your 'little ideas'?"

"Ah, ma foi, no!" replied Poirot frankly. "This time it is an idea gigantic! Stupendous! And you—you, my friend, have given it to me!"

Suddenly clasping me in his arms, he kissed me warmly on both cheeks, and before I had recovered from my surprise ran headlong from the room.

Mary Cavendish entered at that moment.

"What is the matter with Monsieur Poirot? He rushed past me crying out: 'A garage! For the love of Heaven, direct me to a garage, madame!'

And, before I could answer, he had dashed out into the street."

I hurried to the window. True enough, there he was, tearing down the street, hatless, and gesticulating as he went. I turned to Mary with a gesture of despair.

"He'll be stopped by a policeman in another minute. There he goes, round the corner!"

Our eyes met, and we stared helplessly at one another. "What can be the matter?" I shook my head.

"I don't know. He was building card houses, when suddenly he said

he had an idea, and rushed off as you saw."

"Well," said Mary, "I expect he will be back before dinner." But night fell, and Poirot had not returned.

THE LAST LINK

POIROT'S abrupt departure had intrigued us all greatly. Sunday morning wore away, and still he did not reappear. But about three o'clock a ferocious and prolonged hooting outside drove us to the window, to see Poirot alighting from a car, accompanied by Japp and Summerhaye. The little man was transformed. He radiated an absurd complacency. He bowed with exaggerated respect to Mary Cavendish.

"Madame, I have your permission to hold a little reunion in the salon?

It is necessary for every one to attend." Mary smiled sadly.

"You know, Monsieur Poirot, that you have carte blanche in every way."

"You are too amiable, madame."

Still beaming, Poirot marshalled us all into the drawing-room, bringing forward chairs as he did so.

"Miss Howard—here. Mademoiselle Cynthia. Monsieur Lawrence. The good Dorcas. And Annie. Bien! We must delay our proceedings a few

minutes until Mr. Inglethorp arrives. I have sent him a note." Miss Howard rose immediately from her seat.

"If that man comes into the house, I leave it!"

"No, no!" Poirot went up to her and pleaded in a low voice.

Finally Miss Howard consented to return to her chair. A few minutes later Alfred Inglethorp entered the room.

The company once assembled, Poirot rose from his seat with the air of a popular lecturer, and bowed politely to his audience.

"Messieurs, mesdames, as you all know, I was called in by Monsieur John Cavendish to investigate this case. I at once examined the bedroom of the deceased which, by the advice of the doctors, had been kept locked, and was consequently exactly as it had been when the tragedy occurred. I found: first, a fragment of green material; second, a stain on the carpet near the window, still damp; thirdly, an empty box of bromide powders.

"To take the fragment of green material first, I found it caught in the bolt of the communicating door between that room and the adjoining one occupied by Mademoiselle Cynthia. I handed the fragment over to the police who did not consider it of much importance. Nor did they recognize it for what it was—a piece torn from a green land armlet." There was a little stir of excitement.

"Now there was only one person at Styles who worked on the land—Mrs. Cavendish. Therefore it must have been Mrs. Cavendish who entered the deceased's room through the door communicating with Mademoiselle Cynthia's room."

"But that door was bolted on the inside!" I cried.

"When I examined the room, yes. But in the first place we have only her word for it, since it was she who tried that particular door and reported it fastened. In the ensuing confusion she would have had ample opportunity to shoot the bolt across. I took an early opportunity of verifying my conjectures. To begin with, the fragment corresponds exactly with a tear in Mrs. Cavendish's armlet. Also, at the inquest, Mrs. Cavendish declared that she had heard, from her own room, the fall of the table by the bed. I took an early opportunity of testing that statement by stationing my friend Monsieur Hastings in the left wing of the building, just outside Mrs. Cavendish's door. I myself, in company with the police, went to the deceased's room, and whilst there I, apparently accidentally, knocked over the table in question, but found that, as I had expected, Monsieur Hastings had heard no sound at all. This confirmed my belief that Mrs. Cavendish was not speaking the truth when she declared that she had been dressing in her room at the time of the tragedy. In fact, I was convinced that, far from having been in her own room, Mrs. Cavendish was actually in the deceased's room when the alarm was given." I shot a quick glance at Mary. She was very pale, but smiling.

"I proceeded to reason on that assumption. Mrs. Cavendish is in her mother-in-law's room. We will say that she is seeking for something and has not yet found it. Suddenly Mrs. Inglethorp awakens and is seized with an alarming paroxysm. She flings out her arm, overturning the bed table, and then pulls desperately at the bell. Mrs. Cavendish, startled, drops her candle, scattering the grease on the carpet. She picks it up, and retreats quickly to Mademoiselle Cynthia's room, closing the door behind her. She hurries out into the passage, for the servants must not find her where she is. But it is too late! Already footsteps are echoing along the gallery which connects the two wings. What can she do? Quick as thought, she hurries back to the young girl's room, and starts shaking her awake. The hastily aroused household come trooping down the passage. They are all busily battering at Mrs. Inglethorp's door. It occurs to nobody that Mrs. Cavendish has not arrived with the rest, but—and this is significant—I can find no one who saw her come from the other wing."

He looked at Mary Cavendish. "Am I right, madame?" She bowed her head.

"Quite right, monsieur. You understand that, if I had thought I would do my husband any good by revealing these facts, I would have done so. But it did not seem to me to bear upon the question of his guilt or innocence."

"In a sense, that is correct, madame. But it cleared my mind of many misconceptions, and left me free to see other facts in their true significance."

"The will!" cried Lawrence. "Then it was you, Mary, who destroyed the will?"

She shook her head, and Poirot shook his also.

"No," he said quietly. "There is only one person who could possibly have destroyed that will—Mrs. Inglethorp herself!"

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "She had only made it out that very afternoon!"

"Nevertheless, mon ami, it was Mrs. Inglethorp. Because, in no other way can you account for the fact that, on one of the hottest days of the year, Mrs. Inglethorp ordered a fire to be lighted in her room."

I gave a gasp. What idiots we had been never to think of that fire as being incongruous! Poirot was continuing:

"The temperature on that day, messieurs, was 80 degrees in the shade. Yet Mrs. Inglethorp ordered a fire! Why? Because she wished to destroy something, and could think of no other way. You will remember that, in consequence of the War economics practiced at Styles, no waste paper was thrown away. There was therefore no means of destroying a thick document such as a will. The moment I heard of a fire being lighted in Mrs. Inglethorp's room, I leaped to the conclusion that it was to destroy some important document—possibly a will. So the discovery of the charred fragment in the grate was no surprise to me. I did not, of course, know at the time that the will in question had only been made this afternoon, and I will admit that, when I learnt that fact, I fell into a grievous error. I came to the conclusion that Mrs. Inglethorp's determination to destroy her will arose as a direct consequence of the quarrel she had that afternoon, and that therefore the quarrel took place after, and not before the making of the will.

"Here, as we know, I was wrong, and I was forced to abandon that idea. I faced the problem from a new standpoint. Now, at 4 o'clock, Dorcas overheard her mistress saying angrily: 'You need not think that any fear of publicity, or scandal between husband and wife will deter me." I conjectured, and conjectured rightly, that these words were addressed, not to her husband, but to Mr. John Cavendish. At 5 o'clock, an hour later, she uses almost the same words, but the standpoint is different. She admits to Dorcas, 'I don't know what to do; scandal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing.' At 4 o'clock she has been angry, but completely mistress of herself. At 5 o'clock she is in violent distress, and speaks of having had a great shock.

"Looking at the matter psychologically, I drew one deduction which I was convinced was correct. The second 'scandal' she spoke of was not the same as the first—and it concerned herself!

"Let us reconstruct. At 4 o'clock, Mrs. Inglethorp quarrels with her son, and threatens to denounce him to his wife—who, by the way, overheard the greater part of the conversation. At 4.30, Mrs. Inglethorp, in consequence of a conversation on the validity of wills, makes a will in favour of her husband, which the two gardeners witness. At 5 o'clock, Dorcas finds her mistress in a state of considerable agitation, with a slip of paper—'a letter,' Dorcas thinks—in her hand, and it is then that she orders the fire in her room to be lighted. Presumably, then, between 4.30 and 5 o'clock, something has occurred to occasion a complete revolution of feeling, since she is now as anxious to destroy the will, as she was before to make it. What was that something?

"As far as we know, she was quite alone during that half-hour. Nobody entered or left that boudoir. What then occasioned this sudden change of sentiment?

"One can only guess, but I believe my guess to be correct. Mrs. Inglethorp had no stamps in her desk. We know this, because later she asked Dorcas to bring her some. Now in the opposite corner of the room stood her husband's desk—locked. She was anxious to find some stamps, and, according to my theory, she tried her own keys in the desk. That one of them fitted I know. She therefore opened the desk, and in searching for the stamps she came across something else—that slip of paper which Dorcas saw in her hand, and which assuredly was never meant for Mrs. Inglethorp's eyes. On the other hand, Mrs. Cavendish believed that the slip of paper to which her mother-in-law clung so tenaciously was a written proof of her own husband's infidelity. She demanded it from Mrs. Inglethorp who assured her, quite truly, that it had nothing to do with that matter. Mrs. Cavendish did not believe her. She thought that Mrs. Inglethorp was shielding her stepson. Now Mrs. Cavendish is a very resolute woman, and, behind her mask of reserve, she was madly jealous of her husband. She determined to get hold of that paper at all costs, and in this resolution chance came to her aid. She happened to pick up the key of Mrs. Inglethorp's despatch-case, which had been lost that morning. She knew that her mother-in-law invariably kept all important papers in this particular case.

"Mrs. Cavendish, therefore, made her plans as only a woman driven desperate through jealousy could have done. Some time in the evening she unbolted the door leading into Mademoiselle Cynthia's room. Possibly she applied oil to the hinges, for I found that it opened quite noiselessly when I tried it. She put off her project until the early hours of the morning as being safer, since the servants were accustomed to hearing her move about her room at that time. She dressed completely in her land kit, and made her way quietly through Mademoiselle Cynthia's room into that of Mrs. Inglethorp."

He paused a moment, and Cynthia interrupted:

"But I should have woken up if anyone had come through my room?"

"Not if you were drugged, mademoiselle."

"Drugged?"

"Mais, oui!"

"You remember"—he addressed us collectively again—"that through all the tumult and noise next door Mademoiselle Cynthia slept. That admitted of two possibilities. Either her sleep was feigned—which I did not believe—or her unconsciousness was indeed by artificial means.

"With this latter idea in my mind, I examined all the coffee-cups most carefully, remembering that it was Mrs. Cavendish who had brought Mademoiselle Cynthia her coffee the night before. I took a sample from each cup, and had them analysed—with no result. I had counted the cups carefully, in the event of one having been removed. Six persons had taken coffee, and six cups were duly found. I had to confess myself mistaken.

"Then I discovered that I had been guilty of a very grave oversight. Coffee had been brought in for seven persons, not six, for Dr. Bauerstein had been there that evening. This changed the face of the whole affair, for there was now one cup missing. The servants noticed nothing, since Annie, the housemaid, who took in the coffee, brought in seven cups, not knowing that Mr. Inglethorp never drank it, whereas Dorcas, who cleared them away the following morning, found six as usual—or strictly speaking she found five, the sixth being the one found broken in Mrs.

Inglethorp's room.

"I was confident that the missing cup was that of Mademoiselle Cynthia. I had an additional reason for that belief in the fact that all the cups found contained sugar, which Mademoiselle Cynthia never took in her coffee. My attention was attracted by the story of Annie about some 'salt' on the tray of coco which she took every night to Mrs. Inglethorp's room.

I accordingly secured a sample of that coco, and sent it to be analysed."

"But that had already been done by Dr. Bauerstein," said Lawrence quickly.

"Not exactly. The analyst was asked by him to report whether strychnine was, or was not, present. He did not have it tested, as I did, for a narcotic."

"For a narcotic?"

"Yes. Here is the analyst's report. Mrs. Cavendish administered a safe, but effectual, narcotic to both Mrs. Inglethorp and Mademoiselle Cynthia. And it is possible that she had a mauvais quart d'heure in consequence! Imagine her feelings when her mother-in-law is suddenly taken ill and dies, and immediately after she hears the word 'Poison'! She has believed that the sleeping draught she administered was perfectly harmless, but there is no doubt that for one terrible moment she must have feared that Mrs. Inglethorp's death lay at her door. She is seized with panic, and under its influence she hurries downstairs, and quickly drops the coffee-cup and saucer used by Mademoiselle Cynthia into a large brass vase, where it is discovered later by Monsieur Lawrence. The remains of the coco she dare not touch. Too many eyes are upon her. Guess at her relief when strychnine is mentioned, and she discovers that after all the tragedy is not her doing.

"We are now able to account for the symptoms of strychnine poisoning being so long in making their appearance. A narcotic taken with strychnine will delay the action of the poison for some hours."

Poirot paused. Mary looked up at him, the colour slowly rising in her face.

"All you have said is quite true, Monsieur Poirot. It was the most awful hour of my life. I shall never forget it. But you are wonderful. I understand now——"

"What I meant when I told you that you could safely confess to Papa Poirot, eh? But you would not trust me."

"I see everything now," said Lawrence. "The drugged coco, taken on top of the poisoned coffee, amply accounts for the delay."

"Exactly. But was the coffee poisoned, or was it not? We come to a little difficulty here, since Mrs. Inglethorp never drank it." "What?" The cry of surprise was universal.

"No. You will remember my speaking of a stain on the carpet in Mrs. Inglethorp's room? There were some peculiar points about that stain. It was still damp, it exhaled a strong odour of coffee, and imbedded in the nap of the carpet I found some little splinters of china. What had happened was plain to me, for not two minutes before I had placed my little case on the table near the window, and the table, tilting up, had deposited it upon the floor on precisely the identical spot. In exactly the same way, Mrs. Inglethorp had laid down her cup of coffee on reaching her room the night before, and the treacherous table had played her the same trick.

"What happened next is mere guess work on my part, but I should say that Mrs. Inglethorp picked up the broken cup and placed it on the table by the bed. Feeling in need of a stimulant of some kind, she heated up her coco, and drank it off then and there. Now we are faced with a new problem. We know the coco contained no strychnine. The coffee was never drunk. Yet the strychnine must have been administered between seven and nine o'clock that evening. What third medium was there—a medium so suitable for disguising the taste of strychnine that it is extraordinary no one has thought of it?" Poirot looked round the room, and then answered himself impressively. "Her medicine!"

"Do you mean that the murderer introduced the strychnine into her tonic?" I cried.

"There was no need to introduce it. It was already there—in the mixture. The strychnine that killed Mrs. Inglethorp was the identical strychnine prescribed by Dr. Wilkins. To make that clear to you, I will read you an extract from a book on dispensing which I found in the Dispensary of the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster:

"'The following prescription has become famous in text books: Strychninae Sulph … … gr.I Potass Bromide … … . 3vi Aqua ad … … … . .

3viii Fiat Mistura

This solution deposits in a few hours the greater part of the strychnine salt as an insoluble bromide in transparent crystals. A lady in England lost her life by taking a similar mixture: the precipitated strychnine collected at the bottom, and in taking the last dose she swallowed nearly all of it!"

"Now there was, of course, no bromide in Dr. Wilkins' prescription, but you will remember that I mentioned an empty box of bromide powders. One or two of those powders introduced into the full bottle of medicine would effectually precipitate the strychnine, as the book describes, and cause it to be taken in the last dose. You will learn later that the person who usually poured out Mrs. Inglethorp's medicine was always extremely careful not to shake the bottle, but to leave the sediment at the bottom of it undisturbed.

"Throughout the case, there have been evidences that the tragedy was intended to take place on Monday evening. On that day, Mrs. Inglethorp's bell wire was neatly cut, and on Monday evening Mademoiselle Cynthia was spending the night with friends, so that Mrs. Inglethorp would have been quite alone in the right wing, completely shut off from help of any kind, and would have died, in all probability, before medical aid could have been summoned. But in her hurry to be in time for the village entertainment Mrs. Inglethorp forgot to take her medicine, and the next day she lunched away from home, so that the last—and fatal—dose was actually taken twenty-four hours later than had been anticipated by the murderer; and it is owing to that delay that the final proof—the last link of the chain—is now in my hands."

Amid breathless excitement, he held out three thin strips of paper.

"A letter in the murderer's own hand-writing, mes amis! Had it been a little clearer in its terms, it is possible that Mrs. Inglethorp, warned in time, would have escaped. As it was, she realized her danger, but not the manner of it."

In the deathly silence, Poirot pieced together the slips of paper and, clearing his throat, read:

"'Dearest Evelyn:

'You will be anxious at hearing nothing. It is all right—only it will be to-night instead of last night. You understand. There's a good time coming once the old woman is dead and out of the way. No one can possibly bring home the crime to me. That idea of yours about the bromides was a stroke of genius! But we must be very circumspect. A false step——'

"Here, my friends, the letter breaks off. Doubtless the writer was interrupted; but there can be no question as to his identity. We all know this hand-writing and——"

A howl that was almost a scream broke the silence.

"You devil! How did you get it?"

A chair was overturned. Poirot skipped nimbly aside. A quick movement on his part, and his assailant fell with a crash.

"Messieurs, mesdames," said Poirot, with a flourish, "let me introduce you to the murderer, Mr. Alfred Inglethorp!"

POIROT EXPLAINS

"Poirot, you old villain," I said, "I've half a mind to strangle you! What do you mean by deceiving me as you have done?"

We were sitting in the library. Several hectic days lay behind us. In the room below, John and Mary were together once more, while Alfred Inglethorp and Miss Howard were in custody. Now at last, I had Poirot to myself, and could relieve my still burning curiosity.

Poirot did not answer me for a moment, but at last he said:

"I did not deceive you, mon ami. At most, I permitted you to deceive yourself."

"Yes, but why?"

"Well, it is difficult to explain. You see, my friend, you have a nature so honest, and a countenance so transparent, that—enfin, to conceal your feelings is impossible! If I had told you my ideas, the very first time you saw Mr. Alfred Inglethorp that astute gentleman would have—in your so expressive idiom—'smelt a rat'! And then, bon jour to our chances of catching him!"

"I think that I have more diplomacy than you give me credit for."

"My friend," besought Poirot, "I implore you, do not enrage yourself! Your help has been of the most invaluable. It is but the extremely beautiful nature that you have, which made me pause."

"Well," I grumbled, a little mollified. "I still think you might have given me a hint."

"But I did, my friend. Several hints. You would not take them. Think now, did I ever say to you that I believed John Cavendish guilty? Did I not, on the contrary, tell you that he would almost certainly be acquitted?"

"Yes, but——"

"And did I not immediately afterwards speak of the difficulty of bringing the murderer to justice? Was it not plain to you that I was speaking of two entirely different persons?"

"No," I said, "it was not plain to me!"

"Then again," continued Poirot, "at the beginning, did I not repeat to you several times that I didn't want Mr. Inglethorp arrested now? That should have conveyed something to you."

"Do you mean to say you suspected him as long ago as that?"

"Yes. To begin with, whoever else might benefit by Mrs. Inglethorp's death, her husband would benefit the most. There was no getting away from that. When I went up to Styles with you that first day, I had no idea as to how the crime had been committed, but from what I knew of Mr. Inglethorp I fancied that it would be very hard to find anything to connect him with it. When I arrived at the chateau, I realized at once that it was Mrs. Inglethorp who had burnt the will; and there, by the way, you cannot complain, my friend, for I tried my best to force on you the significance of that bedroom fire in midsummer."

"Yes, yes," I said impatiently. "Go on."

"Well, my friend, as I say, my views as to Mr. Inglethorp's guilt were very much shaken. There was, in fact, so much evidence against him that I was inclined to believe that he had not done it."

"When did you change your mind?"

"When I found that the more efforts I made to clear him, the more efforts he made to get himself arrested. Then, when I discovered that Inglethorp had nothing to do with Mrs. Raikes and that in fact it was John Cavendish who was interested in that quarter, I was quite sure."

"But why?"

"Simply this. If it had been Inglethorp who was carrying on an intrigue with Mrs. Raikes, his silence was perfectly comprehensible. But, when I discovered that it was known all over the village that it was John who was attracted by the farmer's pretty wife, his silence bore quite a different interpretation. It was nonsense to pretend that he was afraid of the scandal, as no possible scandal could attach to him. This attitude of his gave me furiously to think, and I was slowly forced to the conclusion that Alfred Inglethorp wanted to be arrested. Eh bien! from that moment,

I was equally determined that he should not be arrested."

"Wait a minute. I don't see why he wished to be arrested?"

"Because, mon ami, it is the law of your country that a man once acquitted can never be tried again for the same offence. Aha! but it was clever—his idea! Assuredly, he is a man of method. See here, he knew that in his position he was bound to be suspected, so he conceived the exceedingly clever idea of preparing a lot of manufactured evidence against himself. He wished to be arrested. He would then produce his irreproachable alibi—and, hey presto, he was safe for life!"

"But I still don't see how he managed to prove his alibi, and yet go to the chemist's shop?"

Poirot stared at me in surprise.

"Is it possible? My poor friend! You have not yet realized that it was

Miss Howard who went to the chemist's shop?"

"Miss Howard?"

"But, certainly. Who else? It was most easy for her. She is of a good height, her voice is deep and manly; moreover, remember, she and Inglethorp are cousins, and there is a distinct resemblance between them, especially in their gait and bearing. It was simplicity itself. They are a clever pair!"

"I am still a little fogged as to how exactly the bromide business was done," I remarked.

"Bon! I will reconstruct for you as far as possible. I am inclined to think that Miss Howard was the master mind in that affair. You remember her once mentioning that her father was a doctor? Possibly she dispensed his medicines for him, or she may have taken the idea from one of the many books lying about when Mademoiselle Cynthia was studying for her exam. Anyway, she was familiar with the fact that the addition of a bromide to a mixture containing strychnine would cause the precipitation of the latter. Probably the idea came to her quite suddenly. Mrs. Inglethorp had a box of bromide powders, which she occasionally took at night. What could be easier than quietly to dissolve one or more of those powders in Mrs. Inglethorp's large sized bottle of medicine when it came from Coot's? The risk is practically nil. The tragedy will not take place until nearly a fortnight later. If anyone has seen either of them touching the medicine, they will have forgotten it by that time. Miss Howard will have engineered her quarrel, and departed from the house. The lapse of time, and her absence, will defeat all suspicion. Yes, it was a clever idea! If they had left it alone, it is possible the crime might never have been brought home to them. But they were not satisfied. They tried to be too clever—and that was their undoing."

Poirot puffed at his tiny cigarette, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"They arranged a plan to throw suspicion on John Cavendish, by buying strychnine at the village chemist's, and signing the register in his handwriting.

"On Monday Mrs. Inglethorp will take the last dose of her medicine. On Monday, therefore, at six o'clock, Alfred Inglethorp arranges to be seen by a number of people at a spot far removed from the village. Miss Howard has previously made up a cock and bull story about him and Mrs. Raikes to account for his holding his tongue afterwards. At six o'clock, Miss Howard, disguised as Alfred Inglethorp, enters the chemist's shop, with her story about a dog, obtains the strychnine, and writes the name of Alfred Inglethorp in John's handwriting, which she had previously studied carefully.

"But, as it will never do if John, too, can prove an alibi, she writes him an anonymous note—still copying his hand-writing —which takes him to a remote spot where it is exceedingly unlikely that anyone will see him.

"So far, all goes well. Miss Howard goes back to Middlingham. Alfred Inglethorp returns to Styles. There is nothing that can compromise him in any way, since it is Miss Howard who has the strychnine, which, after all, is only wanted as a blind to throw suspicion on John Cavendish.

"But now a hitch occurs. Mrs. Inglethorp does not take her medicine that night. The broken bell, Cynthia's absence— arranged by Inglethorp through his wife—all these are wasted. And then—he makes his slip.

"Mrs. Inglethorp is out, and he sits down to write to his accomplice, who, he fears, may be in a panic at the nonsuccess of their plan. It is probable that Mrs. Inglethorp returned earlier than he expected. Caught in the act, and somewhat flurried he hastily shuts and locks his desk. He fears that if he remains in the room he may have to open it again, and that Mrs. Inglethorp might catch sight of the letter before he could snatch it up. So he goes out and walks in the woods, little dreaming that Mrs.

Inglethorp will open his desk, and discover the incriminating document.

"But this, as we know, is what happened. Mrs. Inglethorp reads it, and becomes aware of the perfidy of her husband and Evelyn Howard, though, unfortunately, the sentence about the bromides conveys no warning to her mind. She knows that she is in danger—but is ignorant of where the danger lies. She decides to say nothing to her husband, but sits down and writes to her solicitor, asking him to come on the morrow, and she also determines to destroy immediately the will which she has just made. She keeps the fatal letter."

"It was to discover that letter, then, that her husband forced the lock of the despatch-case?"

"Yes, and from the enormous risk he ran we can see how fully he realized its importance. That letter excepted, there was absolutely nothing to connect him with the crime."

"There's only one thing I can't make out, why didn't he destroy it at once when he got hold of it?"

"Because he did not dare take the biggest risk of all—that of keeping it on his own person."

"I don't understand."

"Look at it from his point of view. I have discovered that there were only five short minutes in which he could have taken it—the five minutes immediately before our own arrival on the scene, for before that time Annie was brushing the stairs, and would have seen anyone who passed going to the right wing. Figure to yourself the scene! He enters the room, unlocking the door by means of one of the other doorkeys—they were all much alike. He hurries to the despatch-case—it is locked, and the keys are nowhere to be seen. That is a terrible blow to him, for it means that his presence in the room cannot be concealed as he had hoped. But he sees clearly that everything must be risked for the sake of that damning piece of evidence. Quickly, he forces the lock with a penknife, and turns over the papers until he finds what he is looking for.

"But now a fresh dilemma arises: he dare not keep that piece of paper on him. He may be seen leaving the room—he may be searched. If the paper is found on him, it is certain doom. Probably, at this minute, too, he hears the sounds below of Mr. Wells and John leaving the boudoir. He must act quickly. Where can he hide this terrible slip of paper? The contents of the waste-paper-basket are kept and in any case, are sure to be examined. There are no means of destroying it; and he dare not keep it. He looks round, and he sees—what do you think, mon ami?" I shook my head.

"In a moment, he has torn the letter into long thin strips, and rolling them up into spills he thrusts them hurriedly in amongst the other spills in the vase on the mantle-piece." I uttered an exclamation.

"No one would think of looking there," Poirot continued. "And he will be able, at his leisure, to come back and destroy this solitary piece of evidence against him."

"Then, all the time, it was in the spill vase in Mrs. Inglethorp's bedroom, under our very noses?" I cried.

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, my friend. That is where I discovered my 'last link,' and I owe that very fortunate discovery to you."

"To me?"

"Yes. Do you remember telling me that my hand shook as I was

straightening the ornaments on the mantel-piece?"

"Yes, but I don't see——"

"No, but I saw. Do you know, my friend, I remembered that earlier in the morning, when we had been there together, I had straightened all the objects on the mantel-piece. And, if they were already straightened, there would be no need to straighten them again, unless, in the meantime, some one else had touched them."

"Dear me," I murmured, "so that is the explanation of your extraordinary behaviour. You rushed down to Styles, and found it still there?"

"Yes, and it was a race for time."

"But I still can't understand why Inglethorp was such a fool as to leave it there when he had plenty of opportunity to destroy it." "Ah, but he had no opportunity. I saw to that."

"You?"

"Yes. Do you remember reproving me for taking the household into my confidence on the subject?"

"Yes."

"Well, my friend, I saw there was just one chance. I was not sure then if Inglethorp was the criminal or not, but if he was I reasoned that he would not have the paper on him, but would have hidden it somewhere, and by enlisting the sympathy of the household I could effectually prevent his destroying it. He was already under suspicion, and by making the matter public I secured the services of about ten amateur detectives, who would be watching him unceasingly, and being himself aware of their watchfulness he would not dare seek further to destroy the document. He was therefore forced to depart from the house, leaving it in the spill vase."

"But surely Miss Howard had ample opportunities of aiding him."

"Yes, but Miss Howard did not know of the paper's existence. In accordance with their prearranged plan, she never spoke to Alfred Inglethorp. They were supposed to be deadly enemies, and until John Cavendish was safely convicted they neither of them dared risk a meeting. Of course I had a watch kept on Mr. Inglethorp, hoping that sooner or later he would lead me to the hiding-place. But he was too clever to take any chances. The paper was safe where it was; since no one had thought of looking there in the first week, it was not likely they would do so afterwards. But for your lucky remark, we might never have been able to bring him to justice."

"I understand that now; but when did you first begin to suspect Miss

Howard?"

"When I discovered that she had told a lie at the inquest about the letter she had received from Mrs. Inglethorp."

"Why, what was there to lie about?"

"You saw that letter? Do you recall its general appearance?"

"Yes—more or less."

"You will recollect, then, that Mrs. Inglethorp wrote a very distinctive hand, and left large clear spaces between her words. But if you look at the date at the top of the letter you will notice that 'July 17th' is quite different in this respect. Do you see what I mean?"

"No," I confessed, "I don't."

"You do not see that that letter was not written on the 17th, but on the 7th—the day after Miss Howard's departure? The '1' was written in before the '7' to turn it into the '17th'."

"But why?"

"That is exactly what I asked myself. Why does Miss Howard suppress the letter written on the 17th, and produce this faked one instead? Because she did not wish to show the letter of the 17th. Why, again? And at once a suspicion dawned in my mind. You will remember my saying

that it was wise to beware of people who were not telling you the truth."

"And yet," I cried indignantly, "after that, you gave me two reasons why Miss Howard could not have committed the crime!"

"And very good reasons too," replied Poirot. "For a long time they were a stumbling-block to me until I remembered a very significant fact: that she and Alfred Inglethorp were cousins. She could not have committed the crime single-handed, but the reasons against that did not debar her from being an accomplice. And, then, there was that rather overvehement hatred of hers! It concealed a very opposite emotion. There was, undoubtedly, a tie of passion between them long before he came to Styles. They had already arranged their infamous plot—that he should marry this rich, but rather foolish old lady, induce her to make a will leaving her money to him, and then gain their ends by a very cleverly conceived crime. If all had gone as they planned, they would probably have left England, and lived together on their poor victim's money.

"They are a very astute and unscrupulous pair. While suspicion was to be directed against him, she would be making quiet preparations for a very different denouement. She arrives from Middlingham with all the compromising items in her possession. No suspicion attaches to her. No notice is paid to her coming and going in the house. She hides the strychnine and glasses in John's room. She puts the beard in the attic. She will see to it that sooner or later they are duly discovered."

"I don't quite see why they tried to fix the blame on John," I remarked.

"It would have been much easier for them to bring the crime home to

Lawrence."

"Yes, but that was mere chance. All the evidence against him arose out of pure accident. It must, in fact, have been distinctly annoying to the pair of schemers."

"His manner was unfortunate," I observed thoughtfully.

"Yes. You realize, of course, what was at the back of that?"

"No."

"You did not understand that he believed Mademoiselle Cynthia guilty of the crime?"

"No," I exclaimed, astonished. "Impossible!"

"Not at all. I myself nearly had the same idea. It was in my mind when I asked Mr. Wells that first question about the will. Then there were the bromide powders which she had made up, and her clever male impersonations, as Dorcas recounted them to us. There was really more evidence against her than anyone else."

"You are joking, Poirot!"

"No. Shall I tell you what made Monsieur Lawrence turn so pale when he first entered his mother's room on the fatal night? It was because, whilst his mother lay there, obviously poisoned, he saw, over your shoulder, that the door into Mademoiselle Cynthia's room was unbolted."

"But he declared that he saw it bolted!" I cried.

"Exactly," said Poirot dryly. "And that was just what confirmed my suspicion that it was not. He was shielding Mademoiselle Cynthia."

"But why should he shield her?" "Because he is in love with her." I laughed.

"There, Poirot, you are quite wrong! I happen to know for a fact that,

far from being in love with her, he positively dislikes her."

"Who told you that, mon ami?"

"Cynthia herself."

"La pauvre petite! And she was concerned?"

"She said that she did not mind at all."

"Then she certainly did mind very much," remarked Poirot. "They are like that—les femmes!"

"What you say about Lawrence is a great surprise to me," I said.

"But why? It was most obvious. Did not Monsieur Lawrence make the sour face every time Mademoiselle Cynthia spoke and laughed with his brother? He had taken it into his long head that Mademoiselle Cynthia was in love with Monsieur John. When he entered his mother's room, and saw her obviously poisoned, he jumped to the conclusion that Mademoiselle Cynthia knew something about the matter. He was nearly driven desperate. First he crushed the coffee-cup to powder under his feet, remembering that she had gone up with his mother the night before, and he determined that there should be no chance of testing its contents. Thenceforward, he strenuously, and quite uselessly, upheld the theory of

'Death from natural causes'."

"And what about the 'extra coffee-cup'?"

"I was fairly certain that it was Mrs. Cavendish who had hidden it, but I had to make sure. Monsieur Lawrence did not know at all what I meant; but, on reflection, he came to the conclusion that if he could find an extra coffee-cup anywhere his lady love would be cleared of suspicion. And he was perfectly right."

"One thing more. What did Mrs. Inglethorp mean by her dying words?"

"They were, of course, an accusation against her husband."

"Dear me, Poirot," I said with a sigh, "I think you have explained everything. I am glad it has all ended so happily. Even John and his wife are reconciled."

"Thanks to me."

"How do you mean—thanks to you?"

"My dear friend, do you not realize that it was simply and solely the trial which has brought them together again? That John Cavendish still loved his wife, I was convinced. Also, that she was equally in love with him. But they had drifted very far apart. It all arose from a misunderstanding. She married him without love. He knew it. He is a sensitive man in his way, he would not force himself upon her if she did not want him. And, as he withdrew, her love awoke. But they are both unusually proud, and their pride held them inexorably apart. He drifted into an entanglement with Mrs. Raikes, and she deliberately cultivated the friendship of Dr. Bauerstein. Do you remember the day of John Cavendish's arrest, when you found me deliberating over a big decision?"

"Yes, I quite understood your distress."

"Pardon me, mon ami, but you did not understand it in the least. I was trying to decide whether or not I would clear John Cavendish at once. I could have cleared him—though it might have meant a failure to convict the real criminals. They were entirely in the dark as to my real attitude up to the very last moment—which partly accounts for my success."

"Do you mean that you could have saved John Cavendish from being brought to trial?"

"Yes, my friend. But I eventually decided in favour of 'a woman's happiness'. Nothing but the great danger through which they have passed could have brought these two proud souls together again."

I looked at Poirot in silent amazement. The colossal cheek of the little man! Who on earth but Poirot would have thought of a trial for murder as a restorer of conjugal happiness!

"I perceive your thoughts, mon ami," said Poirot, smiling at me. "No one but Hercule Poirot would have attempted such a thing! And you are wrong in condemning it. The happiness of one man and one woman is the greatest thing in all the world."

His words took me back to earlier events. I remembered Mary as she lay white and exhausted on the sofa, listening, listening. There had come the sound of the bell below. She had started up. Poirot had opened the door, and meeting her agonized eyes had nodded gently. "Yes, madame," he said. "I have brought him back to you." He had stood aside, and as I went out I had seen the look in Mary's eyes, as John Cavendish had caught his wife in his arms.

"Perhaps you are right, Poirot," I said gently. "Yes, it is the greatest thing in the world."

Suddenly, there was a tap at the door, and Cynthia peeped in.

"I—I only——"

"Come in," I said, springing up.

She came in, but did not sit down.

"I—only wanted to tell you something——"

"Yes?"

Cynthia fidgeted with a little tassel for some moments, then, suddenly exclaiming: "You dears!" kissed first me and then Poirot, and rushed out of the room again.

"What on earth does this mean?" I asked, surprised.

It was very nice to be kissed by Cynthia, but the publicity of the salute rather impaired the pleasure.

"It means that she has discovered Monsieur Lawrence does not dislike her as much as she thought," replied Poirot philosophically.

"But——"

"Here he is."

Lawrence at that moment passed the door.

"Eh! Monsieur Lawrence," called Poirot. "We must congratulate you, is it not so?"

Lawrence blushed, and then smiled awkwardly. A man in love is a sorry spectacle. Now Cynthia had looked charming.

I sighed.

"What is it, mon ami?"

"Nothing," I said sadly. "They are two delightful women!"

"And neither of them is for you?" finished Poirot. "Never mind. Console yourself, my friend. We may hunt together again, who knows? And then ——"

The Murder On The Links (1923)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

A FELLOW TRAVELLER

I believe that a well-known anecdote exists to the effect that a young writer, determined to make the commencement of his story forcible and original enough to catch and rivet the attention of the most blasé of editors, penned the following sentence:

"'Hell!' said the Duchess."

Strangely enough, this tale of mine opens in much the same fashion. Only the lady who gave utterance to the exclamation was not a duchess.

It was a day in early June. I had been transacting some business in Paris and was returning by the morning service to London, where I was still sharing rooms with my old friend, the Belgian ex-detective, Hercule Poirot.

The Calais express was singularly empty—in fact, my own compartment held only one other traveller. I had made a somewhat hurried departure from the hotel and was busy assuring myself that I had duly collected all my traps, when the train started. Up till then I had hardly noticed my companion, but I was now violently recalled to the fact of her existence. Jumping up from her seat, she let down the window and stuck her head out, withdrawing it a moment later with the brief and forcible ejaculation "Hell!"

Now I am old-fashioned. A woman, I consider, should be womanly. I have no patience with the modern neurotic girl who jazzes from morning to night, smokes like a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush!

I looked up, frowning slightly, into a pretty, impudent face, surmounted by a rakish little red hat. A thick cluster of black curls hid each ear. I judged that she was little more than seventeen, but her face was covered with powder, and her lips were quite impossibly scarlet.

Nothing abashed, she returned my glance, and executed an expressive grimace.

“Dear me, we’ve shocked the kind gentleman!” she observed to an imaginary audience. “I apologize for my language! Most unladylike, and all that, but, oh, Lord, there’s reason enough for it! Do you know I’ve lost my only sister?”

“Really?” I said politely. “How unfortunate.”

“He disapproves!” remarked the lady. “He disapproves utterly—of me, and my sister—which last is unfair, because he hasn’t seen her!”

I opened my mouth, but she forestalled me.

“Say no more! Nobody loves me! I shall go into the garden and eat worms! Boohoo. I am crushed!”

She buried herself behind a large comic French paper. In a minute or two I saw her eyes stealthily peeping at me over the top. In spite of myself I could not help smiling, and in a minute she had tossed the paper aside, and had burst into a merry peal of laughter.

“I knew you weren’t such a mutt as you looked,” she cried.

Her laughter was so infectious that I could not help joining in, though I hardly cared for the word “mutt.”

“There! Now we’re friends!” declared the minx. “Say you’re sorry about my sister—”

“I am desolated!”

“That’s a good boy!”

“Let me finish. I was going to add that, although I am desolated, I can manage to put up with her absence very well.” I made a little bow.

But this most unaccountable of damsels frowned and shook her head.

“Cut it out. I prefer the ‘dignified disapproval’ stunt. Oh, your face! ‘Not one of us,’ it said. And you were right there—though, mind you, it’s pretty hard to tell nowadays. It’s not everyone who can distinguish between a demi and a duchess. There now, I believe I’ve shocked you again! You’ve been dug out of the backwoods, you have. Not that I mind that. We could do with a few more of your sort. I just hate a fellow who gets fresh. It makes me mad.”

She shook her head vigorously.

“What are you like when you’re mad?” I inquired with a smile.

“A regular little devil! Don’t care what I say, or what I do, either! I nearly did a chap in once. Yes, really. He’d have deserved it too.”

“Well,” I begged, “don’t get mad with me.”

“I shan’t. I like you—did the first moment I set eyes on you. But you looked so disapproving that I never thought we should make friends.”

“Well, we have. Tell me something about yourself.”

“I’m an actress. No—not the kind you’re thinking of. I’ve been on the boards since I was a kid of six—tumbling.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said, puzzled.

“Haven’t you ever seen child acrobats?”

“Oh, I understand!”

“I’m American born, but I’ve spent most of my life in England. We’ve got a new show now—”

“We?”

“My sister and I. Sort of song and dance, and a bit of patter, and a dash of the old business thrown in. It’s quite a new idea, and it hits them every time. There’s going to be money in it—”

My new acquaintance leaned forward, and discoursed volubly, a great many of her terms being quite unintelligible to me. Yet I found myself evincing an increasing interest in her. She seemed such a curious mixture of child and woman. Though perfectly worldly-wise, and able, as she expressed it, to take care of herself, there was yet something curiously ingenuous in her single-minded attitude towards life, and her wholehearted determination to “make good.”

We passed through Amiens. The name awakened many memories. My companion seemed to have an intuitive knowledge of what was in my mind.

“Thinking of the War?”

I nodded.

“You were through it, I suppose?”

“Pretty well. I was wounded once, and after the Somme they invalided me out altogether. I’m a sort of private secretary now to an MP.”

“My! That’s brainy!”

“No, it isn’t. There’s really awfully little to do. Usually a couple of hours every day sees me through. It’s dull work too. In fact, I don’t know what I should do if I hadn’t got something to fall back upon.”

“Don’t say you collect bugs!”

“No. I share rooms with a very interesting man. He’s a Belgian—an ex-detective. He’s set up as a private detective in London, and he’s doing extraordinarily well. He’s really a very marvellous little man. Time and again he has proved to be right where the official police have failed.”

My companion listened with widening eyes.

“Isn’t that interesting now? I just adore crime. I go to all the mysteries on the movies. And when there’s a murder on I just devour the papers.”

“Do you remember the Styles Case?” I asked.

“Let me see, was that the old lady who was poisoned? Somewhere down in Essex?”

I nodded.

“That was Poirot’s first big case. Undoubtedly, but for him the murderer would have escaped scot-free. It was a most wonderful bit of detective work.”

Warming to my subject, I ran over the heads of the affair, working up to the triumphant and unexpected dénouement.

The girl listened spellbound. In fact, we were so absorbed that the train drew into Calais station before we realized it.

I secured a couple of porters, and we alighted on the platform. My companion held out her hand.

“Goodbye, and I’ll mind my language better in future.”

“Oh, but surely you’ll let me look after you on the boat?”

“Mayn’t be on the boat. I’ve got to see whether that sister of mine got aboard after all anywhere. But thanks, all the same.”

“Oh, but we’re going to meet again, surely? Aren’t you even going to tell me your name?” I cried, as she turned away.

She looked over her shoulder.

“Cinderella,” she said, and laughed.

But little did I think when and how I should see Cinderella again.

Two

AN APPEAL FOR HELP

It was five minutes past nine when I entered our joint sitting room for breakfast on the following morning. My friend Poirot, exact to the minute as usual, was just tapping the shell of his second egg.

He beamed upon me as I entered.

“You have slept well, yes? You have recovered from the crossing so terrible? It is a marvel, almost you are exact this morning. Pardon, but your tie is not symmetrical. Permit that I rearrange him.”

Elsewhere, I have described Hercule Poirot. An extraordinary little man! Height, five feet four inches, egg-shaped head carried a little to one side, eyes that shone green when he was excited, stiff military moustache, air of dignity immense! He was neat and dandified in appearance. For neatness of any kind he had an absolute passion. To see an ornament set crookedly, or a speck of dust, or a slight disarray in one’s attire, was torture to the little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the matter. “Order” and “Method” were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: “The true work, it is done from within. The little grey cells—remember always the little grey cells, mon ami.”

I slipped into my seat, and remarked idly, in answer to Poirot’s greeting, that an hour’s sea passage from Calais to Dover could hardly be dignified by the epithet “terrible.”

“Anything interesting come by the post?” I asked.

Poirot shook his head with a dissatisfied air.

“I have not yet examined my letters, but nothing of interest arrives nowadays. The great criminals, the criminals of method, they do not exist.”

He shook his head despondently, and I roared with laughter.

“Cheer up, Poirot, the luck will change. Open your letters. For all you know, there may be a great case looming on the horizon.”

Poirot smiled, and taking up the neat little letter opener with which he opened his correspondence he slit the tops of the several envelopes that lay by his plate.

“A bill. Another bill. It is that I grow extravagant in my old age. Aha! a note from Japp.”

“Yes?” I pricked up my ears. The Scotland Yard Inspector had more than once introduced us to an interesting case.

“He merely thanks me (in his fashion) for a little point in the Aberystwyth Case on which I was able to set him right. I am delighted to have been of service to him.”

Poirot continued to read his correspondence placidly.

“A suggestion that I should give a lecture to our local Boy Scouts. The Countess of Forfanock will be obliged if I will call and see her. Another lapdog without doubt! And now for the last. Ah—”

I looked up, quick to notice the change of tone. Poirot was reading attentively. In a minute he tossed the sheet over to me.

“This is out of the ordinary, mon ami. Read for yourself.”

The letter was written on a foreign type of paper, in a bold characteristic hand:

Villa Geneviève,

Merlinville-sur-Mer,

France.

Dear Sir,—I am in need of the services of a detective and, for reasons which I will give you later, do not wish to call in the official police. I have heard of you from several quarters, and all reports go to show that you are not only a man of decided ability, but one who also knows how to be discreet. I do not wish to trust details to the post, but, on account of a secret I possess, I go in daily fear of my life. I am convinced that the danger is imminent, and therefore I beg that you will lose no time in crossing to France, I will send a car to meet you at Calais, if you will wire me when you are arriving. I shall be obliged if you will drop all cases you have on hand, and devote yourself solely to my interests. I am prepared to pay any compensation necessary. I shall probably need your services for a considerable period of time, as it may be necessary for you to go out to Santiago, where I spent several years of my life. I shall be content for you to name your own fee.

Assuring you once more that the matter is urgent.

Yours faithfully,

P. T. Renauld.

Below the signature was a hastily scrawled line, almost illegible:

“For God’s sake, come!”

I handed the letter back with quickened pulses.

“At last!” I said. “Here is something distinctly out of the ordinary.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Poirot meditatively.

“You will go of course,” I continued.

Poirot nodded. He was thinking deeply. Finally he seemed to make up his mind, and glanced up at the clock. His face was very grave.

“See you, my friend, there is no time to lose. The Continental express leaves Victoria at 11 o’clock. Do not agitate yourself. There is plenty of time. We can allow ten minutes for discussion. You accompany me, n’est-ce pas?”

“Well—”

“You told me yourself that your employer needed you not for the next few weeks.”

“Oh, that’s all right. But this Mr. Renauld hints strongly that his business is private.”

“Ta-ta-ta! I will manage M. Renauld. By the way, I seem to know the name?”

“There’s a well-known South American millionaire fellow. His name’s Renauld. I don’t know whether it could be the same.”

“But without doubt. That explains the mention of Santiago. Santiago is in Chile, and Chile it is in South America! Ah; but we progress finely! You remarked the postscript? How did it strike you?”

I considered.

“Clearly he wrote the letter keeping himself well in hand, but at the end his self-control snapped and, on the impulse of the moment, he scrawled those four desperate words.”

But my friend shook his head energetically.

“You are in error. See you not that while the ink of the signature is nearly black, that of the postscript is quite pale?”

“Well?” I said, puzzled.

“Mon Dieu, mon ami, but use your little grey cells. Is it not obvious? Mr. Renault wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he reread it carefully. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet.”

"But why?"

"Parbleu! so that it should produce the effect upon me that it has upon you."

"What?"

"Mais oui—to make sure of my coming! He reread the letter and was dissatisfied. It was not strong enough!"

He paused, and then added softly, his eyes shining with that green light that always betokened inward excitement:

"And so, mon ami, since that postscript was added, not on impulse, but soberly, in cold blood, the urgency is very great, and we must reach him as soon as possible."

"Merlinville," I murmured thoughtfully. "I've heard of it, I think."

Poirot nodded.

"It is a quiet little place—but chic! It lies about midway between Boulogne and Calais. Mr. Renauld has a house in England, I suppose?"

"Yes, in Rutland Gate, as far as I remember. Also a big place in the country, somewhere in Hertfordshire. But I really know very little about him, he doesn't do much in a social way. I believe he has large South American interests in the City, and has spent most of his life out in Chile and the Argentine."

"Well, we shall hear all the details from the man himself. Come, let us pack. A small suitcase each, and then a taxi to Victoria."

Eleven o'clock saw our departure from Victoria on our way to Dover. Before starting Poirot had dispatched a telegram to Mr. Renauld giving the time of our arrival at Calais.

"I'm surprised you haven't invested in a few bottles of some sea sick remedy, Poirot," I observed maliciously, as I recalled our conversation at breakfast.

My friend, who was anxiously scanning the weather, turned a reproachful face upon me.

“Is it that you have forgotten the method most excellent of Laverguier? His system, I practise it always. One balances oneself, if you remember, turning the head from left to right, breathing in and out, counting six between each breath.”

“H’m,” I demurred. “You’ll be rather tired of balancing yourself and counting six by the time you get to Santiago, or Buenos Aires, or wherever it is you land.”

“Quelle idée! You do not figure to yourself that I shall go to Santiago?”

“Mr. Renauld suggests it in his letter.”

“He did not know the methods of Hercule Poirot. I do not run to and fro, making journeys, and agitating myself. My work is done from within—here—” he tapped his forehead significantly.

As usual, this remark roused my argumentative faculty.

“It’s all very well, Poirot, but I think you are falling into the habit of despising certain things too much. A fingerprint has led sometimes to the arrest and conviction of a murderer.”

“And has, without doubt, hanged more than one innocent man,” remarked Poirot dryly.

“But surely the study of fingerprints and footprints, cigarette ash, different kinds of mud, and other clues that comprise the minute observation of details—all these are of vital importance?”

“But certainly. I have never said otherwise. The trained observer, the expert, without doubt he is useful! But the others, the Hercules Poirots, they are above the experts! To them the experts bring the facts, their business is the method of the crime, its logical deduction, the proper sequence and order of the facts; above all, the true psychology of the case. You have hunted the fox, yes?”

“I have hunted a bit, now and again,” I said, rather bewildered by this abrupt change of subject. “Why?”

“Eh bien, this hunting of the fox, you need the dogs, no?”

“Hounds,” I corrected gently. “Yes, of course.”

“But yet,” Poirot wagged his finger at me. “You did not descend from your horse and run along the ground smelling with your nose and uttering loud Ow Ows?”

In spite of myself I laughed immoderately. Poirot nodded in a satisfied manner.

“So. You leave the work of the d—hounds to the hounds. Yet you demand that I, Hercule Poirot, should make myself ridiculous by lying down (possibly on damp grass) to study hypothetical footprints, and should scoop up cigarette ash when I do not know one kind from the other. Remember the Plymouth Express mystery. The good Japp departed to make a survey of the railway line. When he returned, I, without having moved from my apartments, was able to tell him exactly what he had found.”

“So you are of the opinion that Japp wasted his time.”

“Not at all, since his evidence confirmed my theory. But I should have wasted my time if I had gone. It is the same with so called ‘experts.’ Remember the handwriting testimony in the Cavendish Case. One counsel’s questioning brings out testimony as to the resemblances, the defence brings evidence to show dissimilarity. All the language is very technical. And the result? What we all knew in the first place. The writing was very like that of John Cavendish. And the psychological mind is faced with the question ‘Why?’ Because it was actually his? Or because some one wished us to think it was his? I answered that question, mon ami, and answered it correctly.”

And Poirot, having effectually silenced, if not convinced me, leaned back with a satisfied air.

On the boat, I knew better than to disturb my friend’s solitude. The weather was gorgeous, and the sea as smooth as the proverbial millpond, so I was hardly surprised when a smiling Poirot joined me on disembarking at Calais. A disappointment was in store for us, as no car had been sent to meet us, but Poirot put this down to his telegram having been delayed in transit.

“We will hire a car,” he said cheerfully. And a few minutes later saw us creaking and jolting along, in the most ramshackle of automobiles that ever plied for hire, in the direction of Merlinville.

My spirits were at their highest, but my little friend was observing me gravely.

“You are what the Scotch people call ‘fey,’ Hastings. It presages disaster.”

“Nonsense. At any rate, you do not share my feelings.”

“No, but I am afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“I do not know. But I have a premonition—a je ne sais quoi!”

He spoke so gravely that I was impressed in spite of myself.

“I have a feeling,” he said slowly, “that this is going to be a big affair—a long, troublesome problem that will not be easy to work out.”

I would have questioned him further, but we were just coming into the little town of Merlinville, and we slowed up to inquire the way to the Villa Geneviève.

“Straight on, monsieur, through the town. The Villa Geneviève is about half a mile the other side. You cannot miss it. A big villa, overlooking the sea.”

We thanked our informant, and drove on, leaving the town behind. A fork in the road brought us to a second halt. A peasant was trudging towards us, and we waited for him to come up to us in order to ask the way again. There was a tiny villa standing right by the road, but it was too small and dilapidated to be the one we wanted. As we waited, the gate of it swung open and a girl came out.

The peasant was passing us now, and the driver leaned forward from his seat and asked for direction.

“The Villa Geneviève? Just a few steps up this road to the right, monsieur. You could see it if it were not for the curve.”

The chauffeur thanked him, and started the car again. My eyes were fascinated by the girl who still stood, with one hand on the gate, watching us. I am an admirer of beauty, and here was one whom nobody could have passed without remark. Very tall, with the proportions of a young goddess, her uncovered golden head gleaming in the sunlight, I swore to myself that she was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen. As we swung up the rough road, I turned my head to look after her.

“By Jove, Poirot,” I exclaimed, “did you see that young goddess?”

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

“Ça commence!” he murmured. “Already you have seen a goddess!”

“But, hang it all, wasn’t she?”

“Possibly, I did not remark the fact.”

“Surely you noticed her?”

“Mon ami, two people rarely see the same thing. You, for instance, saw a goddess. I—” He hesitated.

“Yes?”

“I saw only a girl with anxious eyes,” said Poirot gravely.

But at that moment we drew up at a big green gate, and, simultaneously, we both uttered an exclamation. Before it stood an imposing sergent de ville. He held up his hand to bar our way.

“You cannot pass, messieurs.”

“But we wish to see Mr. Renauld,” I cried. “We have an appointment. This is his villa, isn’t it?”

“Yes, monsieur, but—”

Poirot leaned forward.

“But what?”

“Monsieur Renauld was murdered this morning.”

Three

AT THE VILLA GENEVIÈVE

In a moment Poirot had leapt from the car, his eyes blazing with excitement.

“What is that you say? Murdered? When? How?”

The sergent de ville drew himself up.

“I cannot answer any questions, monsieur.”

“True. I comprehend.” Poirot reflected for a minute. “The Commissary of Police, he is without doubt within?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

Poirot took out a card, and scribbled a few words on it.

“Voilà! Will you have the goodness to see that this card is sent in to the commissary at once?”

The man took it and, turning his head over his shoulder, whistled. In a few seconds a comrade joined him, and was handed Poirot’s message. There was a wait of some minutes, and then a short, stout man with a huge moustache came bustling down to the gate. The sergent de ville saluted and stood aside.

“My dear Monsieur Poirot,” cried the newcomer, “I am delighted to see you. Your arrival is most opportune.”

Poirot’s face had lighted up.

“Monsieur Bex! This is indeed a pleasure.” He turned to me. “This is an English friend of mine, Captain Hastings—Monsieur Lucien Bex.”

The commissary and I bowed to each other ceremoniously, and M. Bex turned once more to Poirot.

“Mon vieux, I have not seen you since 1909, that time in Ostend. You have information to give which may assist us?”

“Possibly you know it already. You were aware that I had been sent for?”

“No. By whom?”

“The dead man. It seems that he knew an attempt was going to be made on his life. Unfortunately he sent for me too late.”

“Sacré tonnerre!” ejaculated the Frenchman. “So he foresaw his own murder. That upsets our theories considerably! But come inside.”

He held the gate open, and we commenced walking towards the house. M. Bex continued to talk:

“The examining magistrate, Monsieur Hautet, must hear of this at once. He has just finished examining the scene of the crime and is about to begin his interrogations.”

“When was the crime committed?” asked Poirot.

“The body was discovered this morning about nine o’clock. Madame Renauld’s evidence and that of the doctors goes to show that death must have occurred about 2 a.m. But enter, I pray of you.”

We had arrived at the steps which led up to the front door of the villa. In the hall another sergent de ville was sitting. He rose at sight of the commissary.

“Where is Monsieur Hautet now?” inquired the latter.

“In the salon, monsieur.”

M. Bex opened a door to the left of the hall, and we passed in. M. Hautet and his clerk were sitting at a big round table. They looked up as we entered. The commissary introduced us, and explained our presence.

M. Hautet, the Juge d’Instruction, was a tall gaunt man, with piercing dark eyes, and a neatly cut grey beard, which he had a habit of caressing as he talked. Standing by the mantelpiece was an elderly man, with slightly stooping shoulders, who was introduced to us as Dr. Durand.

“Most extraordinary,” remarked M. Hautet as the commissary finished speaking. “You have the letter here, monsieur?”

Poirot handed it to him, and the magistrate read it.

“H’m! He speaks of a secret. What a pity he was not more explicit. We are much indebted to you, Monsieur Poirot. I hope you will do us the honour of assisting us in our investigations. Or are you obliged to return to London?”

“Monsieur le juge, I propose to remain. I did not arrive in time to prevent my client’s death, but I feel myself bound in honour to discover the assassin.”

The magistrate bowed.

“These sentiments do you honour. Also, without doubt, Madame Renauld will wish to retain your services. We are expecting M. Giraud from the Sûreté in Paris any moment, and I am sure that you and he will be able to give each other mutual assistance in your investigations. In the meantime, I hope that you will do me the honour to be present at my interrogations, and I need hardly say that if there is any assistance you require it is at your disposal.”

“I thank you, monsieur. You will comprehend that at present I am completely in the dark. I know nothing whatever.”

M. Hautet nodded to the commissary, and the latter took up the tale:

“This morning, the old servant Françoise, on descending to start her work, found the front door ajar. Feeling a momentary alarm as to burglars, she looked into the dining room, but seeing the silver was safe she thought no more about it, concluding that her master had, without doubt, risen early, and gone for a stroll.”

"Pardon, monsieur, for interrupting, but was that a common practice of his?"

"No, it was not, but old Françoise has the common idea as regards the English—that they are mad, and liable to do the most unaccountable things at any moment! Going to call her mistress as usual, a young maid, Léonie, was horrified to discover her gagged and bound, and almost at the same moment news was brought that Monsieur Renauld's body had been discovered, stone dead, stabbed in the back."

"Where?"

"That is one of the most extraordinary features of the case. Monsieur Poirot, the body was lying face downwards, in an open grave."

"What?"

"Yes. The pit was freshly dug—just a few yards outside the boundary of the villa grounds."

"And it had been dead—how long?"

Dr. Durand answered this.

"I examined the body this morning at ten o'clock. Death must have taken place at least seven, and possibly ten hours previously."

"H'm! that fixes it at between midnight and 3 a.m."

"Exactly, and Mrs. Renauld's evidence places it at after 2 a.m., which narrows the field still farther. Death must have been instantaneous, and naturally could not have been self-inflicted."

Poirot nodded, and the commissary resumed:

"Madame Renauld was hastily freed from the cords that bound her by the horrified servants. She was in a terrible condition of weakness, almost unconscious from the pain of her bonds. It appears that two masked men entered the bedroom, gagged and bound her, while forcibly abducting her husband. This we know at second hand from the servants. On hearing the tragic news, she fell at once into an alarming state of agitation. On arrival, Dr. Durand immediately prescribed a sedative, and we have not yet been able to question her. But without doubt she will awake more calm, and be equal to bearing the strain of the interrogation.”

The commissary paused.

“And the inmates of the house, monsieur?”

“There is old Françoise, the housekeeper, she lived for many years with the former owners of the Villa Geneviève. Then there are two young girls, sisters, Denise and Léonie Oulard. Their home is in Merlinville, and they come of most respectable parents. Then there is the chauffeur whom Monsieur Renauld brought over from England with him, but he is away on a holiday. Finally there are Madame Renauld and her son, Monsieur Jack Renauld. He, too, is away from home at present.”

Poirot bowed his head. M. Hautet spoke:

“Marchaud!”

The sergent de ville appeared.

“Bring in the woman Françoise.”

The man saluted, and disappeared. In a moment or two he returned, escorting the frightened Françoise.

“Your name is Françoise Arrichet?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“You have been a long time in service at the Villa Geneviève?”

“Eleven years with Madame la Vicomtesse. Then when she sold the Villa this spring, I consented to remain on with the English milor’. Never did I imagine—”

The magistrate cut her short.

“Without doubt, without doubt. Now, Françoise, in this matter of the front door, whose business was it to fasten it at night?”

“Mine, monsieur. Always I saw to it myself.”

“And last night?”

“I fastened it as usual.”

“You are sure of that?”

“I swear it by the blessed saints, monsieur.”

“What time would that be?”

“The same time as usual, half past ten, monsieur.”

“What about the rest of the household, had they gone up to bed?”

“Madame had retired some time before. Denise and Léonie went up with me. Monsieur was still in his study.”

“Then, if anyone unfastened the door afterwards, it must have been Monsieur Renauld himself?”

Françoise shrugged her broad shoulders.

“What should he do that for? With robbers and assassins passing every minute! A nice idea! Monsieur was not an imbecile. It is not as though he had had to let the lady out—”

The magistrate interrupted sharply:

“The lady? What lady do you mean?”

“Why, the lady who came to see him.”

“Had a lady been to see him that evening?”

“But yes, monsieur—and many other evenings as well.”

“Who was she? Did you know her?”

A rather cunning look spread over the woman’s face.

“How should I know who it was?” she grumbled. “I did not let her in last night.”

“Aha!” roared the examining magistrate, bringing his hand down with a bang on the table. “You would trifle with the police, would you? I demand that you tell me at once the name of this woman who came to visit Monsieur Renauld in the evenings.”

“The police—the police,” grumbled Françoise. “Never did I think that I should be mixed-up with the police. But I know well enough who she was. It was Madame Daubreuil.”

The commissary uttered an exclamation, and leaned forward as though in utter astonishment.

“Madame Daubreuil—from the Villa Marguerite just down the road?”

“That is what I said, monsieur. Oh, she is a pretty one.”

The old woman tossed her head scornfully.

“Madame Daubreuil,” murmured the commissary. “Impossible.”

“Voilà,” grumbled Françoise. “That is all you get for telling the truth.”

“Not at all,” said the examining magistrate soothingly. “We were surprised, that is all. Madame Daubreuil then, and Monsieur Renauld, they were—?” He paused delicately. “Eh? It was that without doubt?”

“How should I know? But what will you? Monsieur, he was milord anglais—très riche—and Madame Daubreuil, she was poor, that one—and très chic, for all that she lives so quietly with her daughter. Not a doubt of it, she has had her history! She is no longer young, but ma foi! I who speak to you have seen the men's heads turn after her as she goes down the street. Besides lately, she had had more money to spend—all the town knows it. The little economies, they are at an end." And Françoise shook her head with an air of unalterable certainty.

M. Hautet stroked his beard reflectively.

"And Madame Renauld?" he asked at length. "How did she take this—friendship?"

Françoise shrugged her shoulders.

"She was always most amiable—most polite. One would say that she suspected nothing. But all the same, is it not so, the heart suffers, monsieur? Day by day, I have watched Madame grow paler and thinner. She was not the same woman who arrived here a month ago. Monsieur, too, has changed. He also has had his worries. One could see that he was on the brink of a crisis of the nerves. And who could wonder, with an affair conducted in such a fashion? No reticence, no discretion. Style anglais, without doubt!"

I bounded indignantly in my seat, but the examining magistrate was continuing his questions, undistracted by side issues.

"You say that Monsieur Renauld had not to let Madame Daubreuil out? Had she left, then?"

"Yes, monsieur. I heard them come out of the study and go to the door. Monsieur said goodnight, and shut the door after her."

"What time was that?"

"About twenty-five minutes after ten, monsieur."

"Do you know when Monsieur Renauld went to bed?"

"I heard him come up about ten minutes after we did. The stair creaks so that one hears everyone who goes up and down."

"And that is all? You heard no sound of disturbance during the night?"

"Nothing whatever, monsieur."

"Which of the servants came down the first in the morning?"

"I did, monsieur. At once I saw the door swinging open."

"What about the other downstairs windows, were they all fastened?"

"Every one of them. There was nothing suspicious or out of place anywhere."

"Good. Françoise, you can go."

The old woman shuffled towards the door. On the threshold she looked back.

"I will tell you one thing, monsieur. That Madame Daubreuil she is a bad one! Oh, yes, one woman knows about another. She is a bad one, remember that." And, shaking her head sagely, Françoise left the room.

"Léonie Oulard," called the magistrate.

Léonie appeared dissolved in tears, and inclined to be hysterical. M. Hautet dealt with her adroitly. Her evidence was mainly concerned with the discovery of her mistress gagged and bound, of which she gave rather an exaggerated account. She, like Françoise, had heard nothing during the night.

Her sister, Denise, succeeded her. She agreed that her master had changed greatly of late.

"Every day he became more and more morose. He ate less. He was always depressed." But Denise had her own theory. "Without doubt it was the

Mafia he had on his track! Two masked men—who else could it be? A terrible society that!”

“It is, of course, possible,” said the magistrate smoothly. “Now, my girl, was it you who admitted Madame Daubreuil to the house last night?”

“Not last night, monsieur, the night before.”

“But Françoise has just told us that Madame Daubreuil was here last night?”

“No, monsieur. A lady did come to see Monsieur Renauld last night, but it was not Madame Daubreuil.”

Surprised, the magistrate insisted, but the girl held firm. She knew Madame Daubreuil perfectly by sight. This lady was dark also, but shorter, and much younger. Nothing could shake her statement.

“Had you ever seen this lady before?”

“Never, monsieur.” And then the girl added diffidently: “But I think she was English.”

“English?”

“Yes, monsieur. She asked for Monsieur Renauld in quite good French, but the accent—however slight one can always tell it. Besides, when they came out of the study they were speaking in English.”

“Did you hear what they said? Could you understand it, I mean?”

“Me, I speak the English very well,” said Denise with pride. “The lady was speaking too fast for me to catch what she said, but I heard Monsieur’s last words as he opened the door for her.” She paused, and then repeated carefully and laboriously: “‘Yeas—yeas—but for Gaud’s saike go nauw!’”

“Yes, yes, but for God’s sake go now!” repeated the magistrate.

He dismissed Denise and, after a moment or two for consideration, recalled Françoise. To her he propounded the question as to whether she had not made a mistake in fixing the night of Madame Daubreuil’s visit. Françoise, however, proved unexpectedly obstinate. It was last night that Madame Daubreuil had come. Without doubt it was she. Denise wished to make herself interesting, voilà tout! So she had cooked up this fine tale about a strange lady. Airing her knowledge of English, too! Probably Monsieur had never spoken that sentence in English at all, and, even if he had, it proved nothing, for Madame Daubreuil spoke English perfectly, and generally used that language when talking to Monsieur and Madame Renauld. “You see, Monsieur Jack, the son of Monsieur, was usually here, and he spoke the French very badly.”

The magistrate did not insist. Instead, he inquired about the chauffeur, and learned that only yesterday Monsieur Renauld had declared that he was not likely to use the car, and that Masters might just as well take a holiday.

A perplexed frown was beginning to gather between Poirot’s eyes.

“What is it?” I whispered.

He shook his head impatiently, and asked a question:

“Pardon, Monsieur Bex, but without doubt Monsieur Renauld could drive the car himself?”

The commissary looked over at Françoise, and the old woman replied promptly:

“No, Monsieur did not drive himself.”

Poirot’s frown deepened.

“I wish you would tell me what is worrying you,” I said impatiently.

“See you not? In his letter Monsieur Renauld speaks of sending the car for me to Calais.”

“Perhaps he meant a hired car,” I suggested.

“Doubtless, that is so. But why hire a car when you have one of your own? Why choose yesterday to send away the chauffeur on a holiday—suddenly, at a moment’s notice? Was it that for some reason he wanted him out of the way before we arrived?”

Four

THE LETTER SIGNED “BELLA”

Françoise had left the room. The magistrate was drumming thoughtfully on the table.

“Monsieur Bex,” he said at length, “here we have directly conflicting testimony. Which are we to believe, Françoise or Denise?”

“Denise,” said the commissary decidedly. “It was she who let the visitor in. Françoise is old and obstinate, and has evidently taken a dislike to Madame Daubreuil. Besides, our own knowledge tends to show that Renauld was entangled with another woman.”

“Tiens!” cried M. Hautet. “We have forgotten to inform Monsieur Poirot of that.” He searched among the papers on the table, and finally handed the one he was in search of to my friend. “This letter, Monsieur Poirot, we found in the pocket of the dead man’s overcoat.”

Poirot took it and unfolded it. It was somewhat worn and crumpled, and was written in English in a rather unformed hand:

My Dearest One,—Why have you not written for so long? You do love me still, don’t you? Your letters lately have been so different, cold, and strange, and now this long silence. It makes me afraid. If you were to stop loving me! But that’s impossible—what a silly kid I am—always imagining things! But if you did stop loving me, I don’t know what I should do—kill myself perhaps! I couldn’t live without you. Sometimes I fancy another woman is coming between us. Let her look out, that’s all—and you too! I’d as soon kill you as let her have you! I mean it.

But there, I’m writing high-flown nonsense. You love me, and I love you—yes, love you, love you, love you!

Your own adoring

Bella.

There was no address or date. Poirot handed it back with a grave face.

“And the assumption is—?”

The examining magistrate shrugged his shoulders.

“Obviously Monsieur Renauld was entangled with this Englishwoman—Bella! He comes over here, meets Madame Daubreuil, and starts an intrigue with her. He cools off to the other, and she instantly suspects something. This letter contains a distinct threat. Monsieur Poirot, at first sight the case seemed simplicity itself. Jealousy! The fact that Monsieur Renauld was stabbed in the back seemed to point distinctly to its being a woman’s crime.”

Poirot nodded.

“The stab in the back, yes—but not the grave! That was laborious work, hard work—no woman dug that grave, Monsieur. That was a man’s doing.”

The commissary exclaimed excitedly:

“Yes, yes, you are right. We did not think of that.”

“As I said,” continued M. Hautet, “at first sight the case seemed simple, but the masked men, and the letter you received from Monsieur Renauld, complicate matters. Here we seem to have an entirely different set of circumstances, with no relationship between the two. As regards the letter written to yourself, do you think it is possible that it referred in any way to this ‘Bella’ and her threats?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Hardly. A man like Monsieur Renauld, who had led an adventurous life in out-of-the-way places, would not be likely to ask for protection against a woman.”

The examining magistrate nodded his head emphatically.

"My view exactly. Then we must look for the explanation of the letter—"

"In Santiago," finished the commissary. "I shall cable without delay to the police in that city, requesting full details of the murdered man's life out there, his love affairs, his business transactions, his friendships, and any enmities he may have incurred. It will be strange if, after that, we do not hold a clue to his mysterious murder."

The commissary looked around for approval.

"Excellent!" said Poirot appreciatively.

"You have found no other letters from this Bella among Monsieur Renauld's effects?" asked Poirot.

"No. Of course one of our first proceedings was to search through his private papers in the study. We found nothing of interest, however. All seemed square and aboveboard. The only thing at all out of the ordinary was his will. Here it is."

Poirot ran through the document.

"So. A legacy of a thousand pounds to Mr. Stonor—who is he, by the way?"

"Monsieur Renauld's secretary. He remained in England, but was over here once or twice for a weekend."

"And everything else left unconditionally to his beloved wife, Eloise. Simply drawn up, but perfectly legal. Witnessed by the two servants, Denise and Françoise. Nothing so very unusual about that." He handed it back.

"Perhaps," began Bex, "you did not notice—"

"The date?" twinkled Poirot. "But, yes, I noticed it. A fortnight ago. Possibly it marks his first intimation of danger. Many rich men die intestate through never considering the likelihood of their demise. But it is dangerous to draw conclusions prematurely. It points, however, to his having a real liking and fondness for his wife, in spite of his amorous intrigues.”

“Yes,” said M. Hautet doubtfully. “But it is possibly a little unfair on his son, since it leaves him entirely dependent on his mother. If she were to marry again, and her second husband obtained an ascendancy over her, this boy might never touch a penny of his father’s money.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Man is a vain animal. Monsieur Renauld figured to himself, without doubt, that his widow would never marry again. As to the son, it may have been a wise precaution to leave the money in his mother’s hands. The sons of rich men are proverbially wild.”

“It may be as you say. Now, Monsieur Poirot, you would without doubt like to visit the scene of the crime. I am sorry that the body has been removed, but of course photographs have been taken from every conceivable angle, and will be at your disposal as soon as they are available.”

“I thank you, monsieur, for all your courtesy.”

The commissary rose.

“Come with me, messieurs.”

He opened the door, and bowed ceremoniously to Poirot to precede him. Poirot, with equal politeness, drew back and bowed to the commissary.

“Monsieur.”

“Monsieur.”

At last they got out into the hall.

“That room there, it is the study, hein?” asked Poirot suddenly, nodding towards the door opposite.

“Yes. You would like to see it?” He threw open the door as he spoke, and we entered.

The room which M. Renauld had chosen for his own particular use was small, but furnished with great taste and comfort. A businesslike writing desk, with many pigeonholes, stood in the window. Two large leather-covered armchairs faced the fireplace, and between them was a round table covered with the latest books and magazines.

Poirot stood a moment taking in the room, then he stepped forward, passed his hand lightly over the backs of the leather chairs, picked up a magazine from the table, and drew a finger gingerly over the surface of the oak sideboard. His face expressed complete approval.

“No dust?” I asked, with a smile.

He beamed on me, appreciative of my knowledge of his peculiarities.

“Not a particle, mon ami! And for once, perhaps, it is a pity.”

His sharp, birdlike eyes darted here and there.

“Ah!” he remarked suddenly, with an intonation of relief. “The hearthrug is crooked,” and he bent down to straighten it.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation and rose. In his hand he held a small fragment of pink paper.

“In France, as in England,” he remarked, “the domestics omit to sweep under the mats?”

Bex took the fragment from him, and I came close to examine it.

“You recognize it—eh, Hastings?”

I shook my head, puzzled—and yet that particular shade of pink paper was very familiar.

The commissary’s mental processes were quicker than mine.

“A fragment of a cheque,” he exclaimed.

The piece of paper was roughly about two inches square. On it was written in ink the word “Duveen.”

“Bien!” said Bex. “This cheque was payable to, or drawn by, someone named Duveen.”

“The former, I fancy,” said Poirot. “For, if I am not mistaken, the handwriting is that of Monsieur Renauld.”

That was soon established, by comparing it with a memorandum from the desk.

“Dear me,” murmured the commissary, with a crestfallen air, “I really cannot imagine how I came to overlook this.”

Poirot laughed.

“The moral of that is, always look under the mats! My friend Hastings here will tell you that anything in the least crooked is a torment to me. As soon as I saw that the hearthrug was out of the straight, I said to myself: ‘Tiens! The legs of the chair caught it in being pushed back. Possibly there may be something beneath it which the good Françoise overlooked.’”

“Françoise?”

“Or Denise, or Léonie. Whoever did this room. Since there is no dust, the room must have been done this morning. I reconstruct the incident like this. Yesterday, possibly last night, Monsieur Renauld drew a cheque to the order of some one named Duveen. Afterwards it was torn up, and scattered on the floor. This morning—”

But M. Bex was already pulling impatiently at the bell.

Françoise answered it. Yes, there had been a lot of pieces of paper on the floor. What had she done with them? Put them in the kitchen stove of course! What else?

With a gesture of despair, Bex dismissed her. Then, his face lightening, he ran to the desk. In a minute he was hunting through the dead man's cheque book. Then he repeated his former gesture. The last counterfoil was blank.

"Courage!" cried Poirot, clapping him on the back. "Without doubt, Madame Renauld will be able to tell us all about this mysterious person named Duveen."

The commissary's face cleared. "That is true. Let us proceed."

As we turned to leave the room, Poirot remarked casually: "It was here that Monsieur Renauld received his guest last night, eh?"

"It was—but how did you know?"

"By this. I found it on the back of the leather chair." And he held up between his finger and thumb a long black hair—a woman's hair!

M. Bex took us out by the back of the house to where there was a small shed leaning against the house. He produced a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

"The body is here. We moved it from the scene of the crime just before you arrived, as the photographers had done with it."

He opened the door and we passed in. The murdered man lay on the ground, with a sheet over him. M. Bex dexterously whipped off the covering. Renauld was a man of medium height, slender, and lithe in figure. He looked about fifty years of age, and his dark hair was plentifully streaked with grey. He was clean-shaven with a long, thin nose, and eyes set rather close together, and his skin was deeply bronzed, as that of a man who had spent most of his life beneath tropical skies. His lips were drawn back from his teeth and an expression of absolute amazement and terror was stamped on the livid features.

"One can see by his face that he was stabbed in the back," remarked Poirot.

Very gently, he turned the dead man over. There, between the shoulder blades, staining the light fawn overcoat, was a round dark patch. In the middle of it there was a slit in the cloth. Poirot examined it narrowly.

“Have you any idea with what weapon the crime was committed?”

“It was left in the wound.” The commissary reached down a large glass jar. In it was a small object that looked to me more like a paper knife than anything else. It had a black handle and a narrow shining blade. The whole thing was not more than ten inches long. Poirot tested the discoloured point gingerly with his fingertip.

“Ma foi! but it is sharp! A nice easy little tool for murder!”

“Unfortunately, we could find no trace of fingerprints on it,” remarked Bex regretfully. “The murderer must have worn gloves.”

“Of course he did,” said Poirot contemptuously. “Even in Santiago they know enough for that. The veriest amateur of an English Mees knows it—thanks to the publicity the Bertillon system has been given in the Press. All the same, it interests me very much that there were no fingerprints. It is so amazingly simple to leave the fingerprints of someone else! And then the police are happy.” He shook his head. “I very much fear our criminal is not a man of method—either that or he was pressed for time. But we shall see.”

He let the body fall back into its original position.

“He wore only underclothes under his overcoat, I see,” he remarked.

“Yes, the examining magistrate thinks that is rather a curious point.”

At this minute there was a tap on the door which Bex had closed after him. He strode forward and opened it. Françoise was there. She endeavoured to peep in with ghoulish curiosity.

“Well, what is it?” demanded Bex impatiently.

“Madame. She sends a message that she is much recovered and is quite ready to receive the examining magistrate.”

“Good,” said M. Bex briskly. “Tell Monsieur Hautet and say that we will come at once.”

Poirot lingered a moment, looking back towards the body. I thought for a moment that he was going to apostrophize it, to declare aloud his determination never to rest till he had discovered the murderer. But when he spoke, it was tamely and awkwardly, and his comment was ludicrously inappropriate to the solemnity of the moment.

“He wore his overcoat very long,” he said constrainedly.

Five

MRS. RENAULD’S STORY

We found M. Hautet awaiting us in the hall, and we all proceeded upstairs together, Françoise marching ahead to show us the way. Poirot went up in a zigzag fashion which puzzled me, until he whispered with a grimace:

“No wonder the servants heard M. Renauld mounting the stairs, not a board of them but creaks fit to awake the dead!”

At the head of the staircase, a small passage branched off.

“The servants’ quarters,” explained Bex.

We continued along a corridor, and Françoise tapped on the last door to the right of it.

A faint voice bade us enter, and we passed into a large, sunny apartment looking out towards the sea, which showed blue and sparkling about a quarter of a mile distant.

On a couch, propped up with cushions, and attended by Dr. Durand, lay a tall, striking-looking woman. She was middle-aged, and her once dark hair was now almost entirely silvered, but the intense vitality, and strength of her personality would have made itself felt anywhere. You knew at once that you were in the presence of what the French call une maîtresse femme.

She greeted us with a dignified inclination of the head.

“Pray be seated, messieurs.”

We took chairs, and the magistrate’s clerk established himself at a round table.

“I hope, madame,” began M. Hautet, “that it will not distress you unduly to relate to us what occurred last night?”

“Not at all, monsieur. I know the value of time, if these scoundrelly assassins are to be caught and punished.”

“Very well, madame. It will fatigue you less, I think, if I ask you questions and you confine yourself to answering them. At what time did you go to bed last night?”

“At half past nine, monsieur. I was tired.”

“And your husband?”

“About an hour later, I fancy.”

“Did he seem disturbed—upset in any way?”

“No, not more than usual.”

“What happened then?”

“We slept. I was awakened by a hand pressed over my mouth. I tried to scream out, but the hand prevented me. There were two men in the room. They were both masked.”

“Can you describe them at all, madame?”

“One was very tall, and had a long black beard, the other was short and stout. His beard was reddish. They both wore hats pulled down over their eyes.”

“H’m!” said the magistrate thoughtfully. “Too much beard, I fear.”

“You mean they were false?”

“Yes, madame. But continue your story.”

“It was the short man who was holding me. He forced a gag into my mouth, and then bound me with rope hand and foot. The other man was standing over my husband. He had caught up my little dagger paper knife from the dressing table and was holding it with the point just over his heart. When the short man had finished with me, he joined the other, and they forced my husband to get up and accompany them into the dressing room next door. I was nearly fainting with terror, nevertheless I listened desperately.

“They were speaking in too low a tone for me to hear what they said. But I recognized the language, a bastard Spanish such as is spoken in some parts of South America. They seemed to be demanding something from my husband, and presently they grew angry, and their voices rose a little. I think the tall man was speaking. ‘You know what we want?’ he said. ‘The secret! Where is it?’ I do not know what my husband answered, but the other replied fiercely: ‘You lie! We know you have it. Where are your keys?’

“Then I heard sounds of drawers being pulled out. There is a safe on the wall of my husband’s dressing room in which he always keeps a fairly large amount of ready money. Léonie tells me this has been rifled and the money taken, but evidently what they were looking for was not there, for presently I heard the tall man, with an oath, command my husband to dress himself. Soon after that, I think some noise in the house must have disturbed them, for they hustled my husband out into my room only half-dressed.”

“Pardon,” interrupted Poirot, “but is there then no other egress from the dressing room?”

“No, monsieur, there is only the communicating door into my room. They hurried my husband through, the short man in front, and the tall man behind him with the dagger still in his hand. Paul tried to break away to come to me. I saw his agonized eyes. He turned to his captors. ‘I must speak to her,’ he said. Then, coming to the side of the bed, ‘It is all right, Eloise,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid. I shall return before morning.’ But, although he tried to make his voice confident, I could see the terror in his eyes. Then they hustled him out of the door, the tall man saying: ‘One sound—and you are a dead man, remember.’

“After that,” continued Mrs. Renauld, “I must have fainted. The next thing I recollect is Léonie rubbing my wrists and giving me brandy.”

“Madame Renauld,” said the magistrate, “had you any idea what it was for which the assassins were searching?”

“None whatever, monsieur.”

“Had you any knowledge that your husband feared something?”

“Yes. I had seen the change in him.”

“How long ago was that?”

Mrs. Renauld reflected.

“Ten days, perhaps.”

“Not longer?”

“Possibly. I only noticed it then.”

“Did you question your husband at all as to the cause?”

“Once. He put me off evasively. Nevertheless, I was convinced that he was suffering some terrible anxiety. However, since he evidently wished to conceal the fact from me, I tried to pretend that I had noticed nothing.”

“Were you aware that he had called in the services of a detective?”

“A detective?” exclaimed Mrs. Renauld, very much surprised.

“Yes, this gentleman—Monsieur Hercule Poirot.” Poirot bowed. “He arrived today in response to a summons from your husband.” And taking the letter written by M. Renauld from his pocket he handed it to the lady.

She read it with apparently genuine astonishment.

“I had no idea of this. Evidently he was fully cognizant of the danger.”

“Now, madame, I will beg of you to be frank with me. Is there any incident in your husband’s past life in South America which might throw light on his murder?”

Mrs. Renauld reflected deeply, but at last shook her head.

“I can think of none. Certainly my husband had many enemies, people he had got the better of in some way or another, but I can think of no one distinctive case. I do not say there is no such incident—only that I am not aware of it.”

The examining magistrate stroked his beard disconsolately.

“And you can fix the time of this outrage?”

“Yes, I distinctly remember hearing the clock on the mantelpiece strike two.” She nodded towards an eight-day travelling clock in a leather case which stood in the centre of the chimneypiece.

Poirot rose from his seat, scrutinized the clock carefully, and nodded, satisfied.

“And here too,” exclaimed M. Bex, “is a wristwatch, knocked off the dressing table by the assassins, without doubt, and smashed to atoms. Little did they know it would testify against them.”

Gently he picked away the fragments of broken glass. Suddenly his face changed to one of utter stupefaction.

“Mon Dieu!” he ejaculated.

“What is it?”

“The hands of the watch point to seven o’clock!”

“What?” cried the examining magistrate, astonished.

But Poirot, deft as ever, took the broken trinket from the startled commissary, and held it to his ear. Then he smiled.

"The glass is broken, yes, but the watch itself is still going."

The explanation of the mystery was greeted with a relieved smile. But the magistrate bethought him of another point.

"But surely it is not seven o'clock now?"

"No," said Poirot gently, "it is a few minutes after five. Possibly the watch gains, is that so, madame?"

Mrs. Renauld was frowning perplexedly.

"It does gain," she admitted. "But I've never known it gain quite so much as that."

With a gesture of impatience the magistrate left the matter of the watch and proceeded with his interrogatory.

"Madame, the front door was found ajar. It seems almost certain that the murderers entered that way, yet it has not been forced at all. Can you suggest any explanation?"

"Possibly my husband went out for a stroll the last thing, and forgot to latch it when he came in."

"Is that a likely thing to happen?"

"Very. My husband was the most absentminded of men."

There was a slight frown on her brow as she spoke, as though this trait in the dead man's character had at times vexed her.

"There is one inference I think we might draw," remarked the commissary suddenly. "Since the men insisted on Monsieur Renauld dressing himself, it looks as though the place they were taking him to, the place where 'the secret' was concealed, lay some distance away."

The magistrate nodded.

“Yes, far, and yet not too far, since he spoke of being back by morning.”

“What time does the last train leave the station of Merlinville?” asked Poirot.

“11:50 one way, and 12:17 the other, but it is more probable that they had a motor waiting.”

“Of course,” agreed Poirot, looking somewhat crestfallen.

“Indeed, that might be one way of tracing them,” continued the magistrate, brightening. “A motor containing two foreigners is quite likely to have been noticed. That is an excellent point, Monsieur Bex.”

He smiled to himself, and then, becoming grave once more, he said to Mrs. Renauld:

“There is another question. Do you know anyone of the name of ‘Duveen?’”

“Duveen?” Mrs. Renauld repeated thoughtfully. “No, for the moment, I cannot say I do.”

“You have never heard your husband mention anyone of that name.”

“Never.”

“Do you know anyone whose Christian name is Bella?”

He watched Mrs. Renauld narrowly as he spoke, seeking to surprise any signs of anger or consciousness, but she merely shook her head in quite a natural manner. He continued his questions.

“Are you aware that your husband had a visitor last night?”

Now he saw the red mount slightly in her cheeks, but she replied composedly:

“No, who was that?”

“A lady.”

“Indeed?”

But for the moment the magistrate was content to say no more. It seemed unlikely that Madame Daubreuil had any connexion with the crime, and he was anxious not to upset Mrs. Renauld more than necessary.

He made a sign to the commissary, and the latter replied with a nod. Then rising, he went across the room, and returned with the glass jar we had seen in the outhouse in his hand. From this he took the dagger.

“Madame,” he said gently, “do you recognize this?”

She gave a little cry.

“Yes, that is my little dagger.” Then she saw the stained point, and she drew back, her eyes widening with horror. “Is that—blood?”

“Yes, madame. Your husband was killed with this weapon.” He removed it hastily from sight. “You are quite sure about its being the one that was on your dressing table last night?”

“Oh, yes. It was a present from my son. He was in the Air Force during the War. He gave his age as older than it was.” There was a touch of the proud mother in her voice. “This was made from a streamline aeroplane wire, and was given to me by my son as a souvenir of the War.”

“I see, madame. That brings us to another matter. Your son, where is he now? It is necessary that he should be telegraphed to without delay.”

“Jack? He is on his way to Buenos Aires.”

“What?”

“Yes. My husband telegraphed to him yesterday. He had sent him on business to Paris, but yesterday he discovered that it would be necessary for him to proceed without delay to South America. There was a boat leaving Cherbourg for Buenos Aires last night, and he wired him to catch it.”

“Have you any knowledge of what the business in Buenos Aires was?”

“No, monsieur, I know nothing of its nature, but Buenos Aires is not my son’s final destination. He was going overland from there to Santiago.”

And, in unison, the magistrate and the commissary exclaimed:

“Santiago! Again Santiago!”

It was at this moment, when we were all stunned by the mention of that word, that Poirot approached Mrs. Renauld. He had been standing by the window like a man lost in a dream, and I doubt if he had fully taken in what had passed. He paused by the lady’s side with a bow.

“Pardon, madame, but may I examine your wrists?”

Though slightly surprised at the request, Mrs. Renauld held them out to him. Round each of them was a cruel red mark where the cords had bitten into the flesh. As he examined them, I fancied that a momentary flicker of excitement I had seen in his eyes disappeared.

“They must cause you great pain,” he said, and once more he looked puzzled.

But the magistrate was speaking excitedly.

“Young Monsieur Renauld must be communicated with at once by wireless. It is vital that we should know anything he can tell us about this trip to Santiago.” He hesitated. “I hoped he might have been near at hand, so that we could have saved you pain, madame.” He paused.

“You mean,” she said in a low voice, “the identification of my husband’s body?”

The magistrate bowed his head.

“I am a strong woman, monsieur. I can bear all that is required of me. I am ready—now.”

“Oh, tomorrow will be quite soon enough, I assure you—”

“I prefer to get it over,” she said in a low tone, a spasm of pain crossing her face. “If you will be so good as to give me your arm, doctor?”

The doctor hastened forward, a cloak was thrown over Mrs. Renauld’s shoulders, and a slow procession went down the stairs. M. Bex hurried on ahead to open the door of the shed. In a minute or two Mrs. Renauld appeared in the doorway. She was very pale, but resolute. She raised her hand to her face.

“A moment, messieurs, while I steel myself.”

She took her hand away and looked down at the dead man. Then the marvellous self-control which had upheld her so far deserted her.

“Paul!” she cried. “Husband! Oh, God!” And pitching forward she fell unconscious to the ground.

Instantly Poirot was beside her, he raised the lid of her eye, felt her pulse. When he had satisfied himself that she had really fainted, he drew aside. He caught me by the arm.

“I am an imbecile, my friend! If ever there was love and grief in a woman’s voice, I heard it then. My little idea was all wrong. Eh bien! I must start again!”

Six

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

Between them, the doctor and M. Hautet carried the unconscious woman into the house. The commissary looked after them, shaking his head.

“Pauvre femme,” he murmured to himself. “The shock was too much for her. Well, well, we can do nothing. Now, Monsieur Poirot, shall we visit the place where the crime was committed?”

“If you please, Monsieur Bex.”

We passed through the house, and out by the front door. Poirot had looked up at the staircase in passing, and shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“It is to me incredible that the servants heard nothing. The creaking of that staircase, with three people descending it, would awaken the dead!”

“It was the middle of the night, remember. They were sound asleep by then.”

But Poirot continued to shake his head as though not fully accepting the explanation. On the sweep of the drive he paused, looking up at the house.

“What moved them in the first place to try if the front door were open? It was a most unlikely thing that it should be. It was far more probable that they should at once try to force a window.”

“But all the windows on the ground floor are barred with iron shutters,” objected the commissary.

Poirot pointed to a window on the first floor.

“That is the window of the bedroom we have just come from, is it not? And see—there is a tree by which it would be the easiest thing in the world to mount.”

“Possibly,” admitted the other. “But they could not have done so without leaving footprints in the flower bed.”

I saw the justice of his words. There were two large oval flower beds planted with scarlet geraniums, one each side of the steps leading up to the front door. The tree in question had its roots actually at the back of the bed itself, and it would have been impossible to reach it without stepping on the bed.

“You see,” continued the commissary, “owing to the dry weather no prints would show on the drive or paths; but, on the soft mould of the flower bed, it would have been a very different affair.”

Poirot went close to the bed and studied it attentively. As Bex had said, the mould was perfectly smooth. There was not an indentation on it anywhere.

Poirot nodded, as though convinced, and we turned away, but he suddenly darted off and began examining the other flower bed.

“Monsieur Bex!” he called. “See here. Here are plenty of traces for you.”

The commissary joined him—and smiled.

“My dear Monsieur Poirot, those are without doubt the footprints of the gardener’s large hobnailed boots. In any case, it would have no importance, since this side we have no tree, and consequently no means of gaining access to the upper storey.”

“True,” said Poirot, evidently crestfallen. “So you think these footprints are of no importance?”

“Not the least in the world.”

Then, to my utter astonishment, Poirot pronounced these words:

“I do not agree with you. I have a little idea that these footprints are the most important things we have seen yet.”

M. Bex said nothing, merely shrugged his shoulders. He was far too courteous to utter his real opinion.

“Shall we proceed?” he asked, instead.

“Certainly. I can investigate this matter of the footprints later,” said Poirot cheerfully.

Instead of following the drive down to the gate, M. Bex turned up a path that branched off at right angles. It led, up a slight incline, round to the right of the house, and was bordered on either side by a kind of shrubbery. Suddenly it emerged into a little clearing from which one obtained a view of the sea. A seat had been placed here, and not far from it was a rather ramshackle shed. A few steps farther on, a neat line of small bushes marked the boundary of the Villa grounds. M. Bex pushed his way through these, and we found ourselves on a wide stretch of open downs. I looked round, and saw something that filled me with astonishment.

“Why, this is a Golf Course,” I cried.

Bex nodded.

“The links are not completed yet,” he explained. “It is hoped to be able to open them some time next month. It was some of the men working on them who discovered the body early this morning.”

I gave a gasp. A little to my left, where for the moment I had overlooked it, was a long narrow pit and by it, face downwards, was the body of a man! For a moment my heart gave a terrible leap, and I had a wild fancy that the tragedy had been duplicated. But the commissary dispelled my illusion by moving forward with a sharp exclamation of annoyance:

“What have my police been about? They had strict orders to allow no one near the place without proper credentials!”

The man on the ground turned his head over his shoulder.

“But I have proper credentials,” he remarked, and rose slowly to his feet.

“My dear Monsieur Giraud,” cried the commissary. “I had no idea that you had arrived, even. The examining magistrate has been awaiting you with the utmost impatience.”

As he spoke, I was scanning the newcomer with the keenest curiosity. The famous detective from the Paris Sûreté was familiar to me by name, and I was extremely interested to see him in the flesh. He was very tall, perhaps about thirty years of age, with auburn hair and moustache, and a military carriage. There was a trace of arrogance in his manner which showed that he was fully alive to his own importance. Bex introduced us, presenting Poirot as a colleague. A flicker of interest came into the detective’s eye.

“I know you by name, Monsieur Poirot,” he said. “You cut quite a figure in the old days, didn’t you? But methods are very different now.”

“Crimes, though, are very much the same,” remarked Poirot gently.

I saw at once that Giraud was prepared to be hostile. He resented the other being associated with him, and I felt that if he came across any clue of importance he would be more than likely to keep it to himself.

“The examining magistrate—” began Bex again.

But Giraud interrupted rudely:

“A fig for the examining magistrate! The light is the important thing. For all practical purposes it will be gone in another half hour or so. I know all about the case, and the people at the house will do very well until tomorrow; but, if we’re going to find a clue to the murderers, here is the spot we shall find it. Is it your police who have been trampling all over the place? I thought they knew better nowadays.”

“Assuredly they do. The marks you complain of were made by the workmen who discovered the body.”

The other grunted disgustedly.

“I can see the tracks where the three of them came through the hedge—but they were cunning. You can just recognize the centre footmarks as those of Monsieur Renauld, but those on either side have been carefully obliterated. Not that there would really be much to see anyway on this hard ground, but they weren’t taking any chances.”

“The external sign,” said Poirot. “That is what you seek, eh?”

The other detective stared.

“Of course.”

A very faint smile came to Poirot’s lips. He seemed about to speak, but checked himself. He bent down to where a spade was lying.

“That’s what the grave was dug with, right enough,” said Giraud. “But you’ll get nothing from it. It was Renauld’s own spade, and the man who used it wore gloves. Here they are.” He gesticulated with his foot to where two soil-stained gloves were lying. “And they’re Renauld’s too—or at least his gardener’s. I tell you, the men who carried out this crime were taking no chances. The man was stabbed with his own dagger, and would have been buried with his own spade. They counted on leaving no traces! But I’ll beat them. There’s always something! And I mean to find it.”

But Poirot was now apparently interested in something else, a short, discoloured piece of lead-piping which lay beside the spade. He touched it delicately with his finger.

“And does this, too, belong to the murdered man?” he asked, and I thought I detected a subtle flavour of irony in the question.

Giraud shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he neither knew nor cared.

“May have been lying around here for weeks. Anyway, it doesn’t interest me.”

“I, on the contrary, find it very interesting,” said Poirot sweetly.

I guessed that he was merely bent on annoying the Paris detective and, if so, he succeeded. The other turned away rudely, remarking that he had no time to waste, and bending down he resumed his minute search of the ground.

Meanwhile, Poirot, as though struck by a sudden idea, stepped back over the boundary, and tried the door of the little shed.

“That’s locked,” said Giraud over his shoulder. “But it’s only a place where the gardener keeps his rubbish. The spade didn’t come from there, but from the toolshed up by the house.”

“Marvellous,” murmured M. Bex ecstatically to me. “He has been here but half an hour, and he already knows everything! What a man! Undoubtedly Giraud is the greatest detective alive today.”

Although I disliked the detective heartily, I nevertheless was secretly impressed. Efficiency seemed to radiate from the man. I could not help feeling that, so far, Poirot had not greatly distinguished himself, and it vexed me. He seemed to be directing his attention to all sorts of silly puerile points that had nothing to do with the case. Indeed, at this juncture, he suddenly asked:

“Monsieur Bex, tell me, I pray you, the meaning of this whitewashed line that extends all round the grave. Is it a device of the police?”

“No, Monsieur Poirot, it is an affair of the golf course. It shows that there is here to be a ‘bunkair,’ as you call it.”

“A bunkair?” Poirot turned to me. “That is the irregular hole filled with sand and a bank at one side, is it not?”

I concurred.

“Monsieur Renauld, without doubt he played the golf?”

“Yes, he was a keen golfer. It’s mainly owing to him, and to his large subscriptions, that this work is being carried forward. He even had a say in the designing of it.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he remarked:

“It was not a very good choice they made—of a spot to bury the body? When the men began to dig up the ground, all would have been discovered.”

“Exactly,” cried Giraud triumphantly. “And that proves that they were strangers to the place. It’s an excellent piece of indirect evidence.”

“Yes,” said Poirot doubtfully. “No one who knew would bury a body there—unless they wanted it to be discovered. And that is clearly absurd, is it not?”

Giraud did not even trouble to reply.

“Yes,” said Poirot, in a somewhat dissatisfied voice. “Yes—undoubtedly—absurd!”

Seven

THE MYSTERIOUS MADAME DAUBREUIL

As we retraced our steps to the house, M. Bex excused himself for leaving us, explaining that he must immediately acquaint the examining magistrate with the fact of Giraud's arrival. Giraud himself had been obviously delighted when Poirot declared that he had seen all he wanted. The last thing we observed, as we left the spot, was Giraud, crawling about on all fours, with a thoroughness in his search that I could not but admire. Poirot guessed my thoughts, for as soon as we were alone he remarked ironically:

"At last you have seen the detective you admire—the human foxhound! Is it not so, my friend?"

"At any rate, he's doing something," I said, with asperity. "If there's anything to find he'll find it. Now you—"

"Eh bien! I also have found something! A piece of lead-piping."

"Nonsense, Poirot. You know very well that's got nothing to do with it. I meant little things—traces that may lead us infallibly to the murderers."

"Mon ami, a clue of two feet long is every bit as valuable as one measuring two millimetres! But it is the romantic idea that all important clues must be infinitesimal. As to the piece of lead-piping having nothing to do with the crime, you say that because Giraud told you so. No"—as I was about to interpose a question—"we will say no more. Leave Giraud to his search, and me to my ideas. The case seems straightforward enough—and yet—and yet, mon ami, I am not satisfied! And do you know why? Because of the wristwatch that is two hours fast. And then there are several curious little points that do not seem to fit in. For instance, if the object of the murderers was revenge, why did they not stab Renauld in his sleep and have done with it?"

"They wanted the 'secret,'" I reminded him.

Poirot brushed a speck of dust from his sleeve with a dissatisfied air.

“Well, where is this ‘secret?’ Presumably some distance away, since they wish him to dress himself. Yet he is found murdered close at hand, almost within earshot of the house. Then again, it is pure chance that a weapon such as the dagger should be lying about casually, ready to hand.”

He paused, frowning, and then went on:

“Why did the servants hear nothing? Were they drugged? Was there an accomplice, and did that accomplice see to it that the front door should remain open? I wonder if—”

He stopped abruptly. We had reached the drive in front of the house. Suddenly he turned to me.

“My friend, I am about to surprise you—to please you! I have taken your reproaches to heart! We will examine some footprints!”

“Where?”

“In that right-hand bed yonder. Monsieur Bex says that they are the footmarks of the gardener. Let us see if this is so. See, he approaches with his wheelbarrow.”

Indeed an elderly man was just crossing the drive with a barrowful of seedlings. Poirot called to him, and he set down the barrow and came hobbling towards us.

“You are going to ask him for one of his boots to compare with the footmarks?” I asked breathlessly. My faith in Poirot revived a little. Since he said the footprints in this right-hand bed were important, presumably they were.

“Exactly,” said Poirot.

“But won’t he think it very odd?”

“He will not think about it at all.”

We could say no more, for the old man had joined us.

“You want me for something, monsieur?”

“Yes. You have been gardener here a long time, haven’t you?”

“Twenty-four years, monsieur.”

“And your name is—?”

“Auguste, monsieur.”

“I was admiring these magnificent geraniums. They are truly superb. They have been planted long?”

“Some time, monsieur. But of course, to keep the beds looking smart, one must keep bedding out a few new plants, and remove those that are over, besides keeping the old blooms well picked off.”

“You put in some new plants yesterday, didn’t you? Those in the middle there, and in the other bed also.”

“Monsieur has a sharp eye. It takes always a day or so for them to ‘pick up.’ Yes, I put ten new plants in each bed last night. As monsieur doubtless knows, one should not put in plants when the sun is hot.” Auguste was charmed with Poirot’s interest, and was quite inclined to be garrulous.

“That is a splendid specimen there,” said Poirot, pointing. “Might I perhaps have a cutting of it?”

“But certainly, monsieur.” The old fellow stepped into the bed, and carefully took a slip from the plant Poirot had admired.

Poirot was profuse in his thanks, and Auguste departed to his barrow.

“You see?” said Poirot with a smile, as he bent over the bed to examine the indentation of the gardener’s hobnailed boot. “It is quite simple.”

“I did not realize—”

"That the foot would be inside the boot? You do not use your excellent mental capacities sufficiently. Well, what of the footmark?"

I examined the bed carefully.

"All the footmarks in the bed were made by the same boot," I said at length after a careful study.

"You think so? Eh bien! I agree with you," said Poirot.

He seemed quite uninterested, and as though he were thinking of something else.

"At any rate," I remarked, "you will have one bee less in your bonnet now."

"Mon Dieu! But what an idiom! What does it mean?"

"What I meant was that now you will give up your interest in these footmarks."

But to my surprise Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, mon ami. At last I am on the right track. I am still in the dark, but, as I hinted just now to Monsieur Bex, these footmarks are the most important and interesting things in the case! That poor Giraud—I should not be surprised if he took no notice of them whatever."

At that moment the front door opened, and M. Hautet and the commissary came down the steps.

"Ah, Monsieur Poirot, we were coming to look for you," said the magistrate. "It is getting late, but I wish to pay a visit to Madame Daubreuil. Without doubt she will be very much upset by Monsieur Renauld's death, and we may be fortunate enough to get a clue from her. The secret that he did not confide to his wife, it is possible that he may have told it to the woman whose love held him enslaved. We know where our Samsons are weak, don't we?"

We said no more, but fell into line. Poirot walked with the examining magistrate, and the commissary and I followed a few paces behind.

“There is no doubt that Françoise’s story is substantially correct,” he remarked to me in a confidential tone. “I have been telephoning headquarters. It seems that three times in the last six weeks—that is to say since the arrival of Monsieur Renauld at Merlinville—Madame Daubreuil has paid a large sum in notes into her banking account. Altogether the sum totals two hundred thousand francs!”

“Dear me,” I said, considering, “that must be something like four thousand pounds!”

“Precisely. Yes, there can be no doubt that he was absolutely infatuated. But it remains to be seen whether he confided his secret to her. The examining magistrate is hopeful, but I hardly share his views.”

During this conversation we were walking down the lane towards the fork in the road where our car had halted earlier in the afternoon, and in another moment I realized that the Villa Marguerite, the home of the mysterious Madame Daubreuil, was the small house from which the beautiful girl had emerged.

“She has lived here for many years,” said the commissary nodding his head towards the house. “Very quietly, very unobtrusively. She seems to have no friends or relations other than the acquaintances she has made in Merlinville. She never refers to the past, nor to her husband. One does not even know if he is alive or dead. There is a mystery about her, you comprehend.”

I nodded, my interest growing.

“And—the daughter?” I ventured.

“A truly beautiful young girl—modest, devout, all that she should be. One pities her, for, though she may know nothing of the past, a man who wants to ask her hand in marriage must necessarily inform himself, and then—” The commissary shrugged his shoulders cynically.

“But it would not be her fault!” I cried, with rising indignation.

“No. But what will you? A man is particular about his wife’s antecedents.”

I was prevented from further argument by our arrival at the door. M. Hautet rang the bell. A few minutes elapsed, and then we heard a footfall within, and the door was opened. On the threshold stood my young goddess of that afternoon. When she saw us, the colour left her cheeks, leaving her deathly white, and her eyes widened with apprehension. There was no doubt about it, she was afraid!

“Mademoiselle Daubreuil,” said M. Hautet, sweeping off his hat, “we regret infinitely to disturb you, but the exigencies of the Law, you comprehend? My compliments to madame your mother, and will she have the goodness to grant me a few moments’ interview?”

For a moment the girl stood motionless. Her left hand was pressed to her side, as though to still the sudden unconquerable agitation of her heart. But she mastered herself, and said in a low voice:

“I will go and see. Please come inside.”

She entered a room on the left of the hall, and we heard the low murmur of her voice. And then another voice, much the same in timbre, but with a slightly harder inflection behind its mellow roundness, said:

“But certainly. Ask them to enter.”

In another minute we were face to face with the mysterious Madame Daubreuil.

She was not nearly so tall as her daughter, and the rounded curves of her figure had all the grace of full maturity. Her hair, again unlike her daughter’s, was dark, and parted in the middle in the Madonna style. Her eyes, half hidden by the drooping lids, were blue. Though very well-preserved, she was certainly no longer young, but her charm was of the quality which is independent of age.

“You wished to see me, monsieur?” she asked.

“Yes, madame.” M. Hautet cleared his throat. “I am investigating the death of Monsieur Renauld. You have heard of it, no doubt?”

She bowed her head without speaking. Her expression did not change.

“We came to ask you whether you can—er—throw any light upon the circumstances surrounding it?”

“I?” The surprise of her tone was excellent.

“Yes, madame. We have reason to believe that you were in the habit of visiting the dead man at his villa in the evenings. Is that so?”

The colour rose in the lady’s pale cheeks, but she replied quietly:

“I deny your right to ask me such a question!”

“Madame, we are investigating a murder.”

“Well, what of it? I had nothing to do with the murder.”

“Madame, we do not say that for a moment. But you knew the dead man well. Did he ever confide in you as to any danger that threatened him?”

“Never.”

“Did he ever mention his life in Santiago, and any enemies he may have made there?”

“No.”

“Then you can give us no help at all?”

“I fear not. I really do not see why you should come to me. Cannot his wife tell you what you want to know?” Her voice held a slender inflection of irony.

“Mrs. Renauld has told us all she can.”

“Ah!” said Madame Daubreuil. “I wonder—”

“You wonder what, madame?”

“Nothing.”

The examining magistrate looked at her. He was aware that he was fighting a duel, and that he had no mean antagonist.

“You persist in your statement that Monsieur Renauld confided nothing to you?”

“Why should you think it likely that he should confide in me?”

“Because, madame,” said M. Hautet, with calculated brutality, “a man tells to his mistress what he does not always tell to his wife.”

“Ah!” She sprang forward. Her eyes flashed fire. “Monsieur, you insult me! And before my daughter! I can tell you nothing. Have the goodness to leave my house!”

The honours undoubtedly rested with the lady. We left the Villa Marguerite like a shamefaced pack of schoolboys. The magistrate muttered angry ejaculations to himself. Poirot seemed lost in thought. Suddenly he came out of his reverie with a start, and inquired of M. Hautet if there was a good hotel near at hand.

“There is a small place, the Hôtel des Bains, on this side of the town. A few hundred yards down the road. It will be handy for your investigations. We shall see you in the morning, then, I presume?”

“Yes, I thank you, Monsieur Hautet.”

With mutual civilities we parted company, Poirot and I going towards Merlinville, and the others returning to the Villa Geneviève.

“The French police system is very marvellous,” said Poirot, looking after them. “The information they possess about everyone’s life, down to the most commonplace detail, is extraordinary. Though he has only been here a little over six weeks, they are perfectly well acquainted with Monsieur Renauld’s tastes and pursuits, and at a moment’s notice they can produce information as to Madame Daubreuil’s banking account, and the sums that have lately been paid in! Undoubtedly the dossier is a great institution. But what is that?” He turned sharply.

A figure was running hatless down the road after us. It was Marthe Daubreuil.

“I beg your pardon,” she cried breathlessly, as she reached us. “I—I should not do this, I know. You must not tell my mother. But is it true, what the people say, that Monsieur Renauld called in a detective before he died, and—and that you are he?”

“Yes, mademoiselle,” said Poirot gently. “It is quite true. But how did you learn it?”

“Françoise told our Amélie,” explained Marthe with a blush.

Poirot made a grimace.

“The secrecy, it is impossible in an affair of this kind! Not that it matters. Well, mademoiselle, what is it you want to know?”

The girl hesitated. She seemed longing, yet fearing, to speak. At last, almost in a whisper, she asked:

“Is—anyone suspected?”

Poirot eyed her keenly.

Then he replied evasively:

“Suspicion is in the air at present, mademoiselle.”

“Yes, I know—but—anyone in particular?”

“Why do you want to know?”

The girl seemed frightened by the question. All at once Poirot’s words about her earlier in the day occurred to me. The “girl with the anxious eyes.”

“Monsieur Renauld was always very kind to me,” she replied at last. “It is natural that I should be interested.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “Well, mademoiselle, suspicion at present is hovering round two persons.”

“Two?”

I could have sworn there was a note of surprise and relief in her voice.

“Their names are unknown, but they are presumed to be Chileans from Santiago. And now, mademoiselle, you see what comes of being young and beautiful! I have betrayed professional secrets for you!”

The girl laughed merrily, and then, rather shyly, she thanked him.”

“I must run back now. Maman will miss me.”

And she turned and ran back up the road, looking like a modern Atalanta. I stared after her.

“Mon ami,” said Poirot, in his gentle ironical voice, “is it that we are to remain planted here all night—just because you have seen a beautiful young woman, and your head is in a whirl.”

I laughed and apologized.

“But she is beautiful, Poirot. Anyone might be excused for being bowled over by her.”

But to my surprise Poirot shook his head very earnestly.

“Ah, mon ami, do not set your heart on Marthe Daubreuil. She is not for you, that one! Take it from Papa Poirot!”

“Why,” I cried, “the commissary assured me that she was as good as she is beautiful! A perfect angel!”

“Some of the greatest criminals I have known had the faces of angels,” remarked Poirot cheerfully. “A malformation of the grey cells may coincide quite easily with the face of a Madonna.”

“Poirot,” I cried, horrified, “you cannot mean that you suspect an innocent child like this!”

“Ta-ta-ta! Do not excite yourself! I have not said that I suspected her. But you must admit that her anxiety to know about the case is somewhat unusual.”

“For once I see farther than you do,” I said. “Her anxiety is not for herself—but for her mother.”

“My friend,” said Poirot, “as usual, you see nothing at all. Madame Daubreuil is very well able to look after herself without her daughter worrying about her. I admit I was teasing you just now, but all the same I repeat what I said before. Do not set your heart on that girl. She is not for you! I, Hercule Poirot, know it. Sacré! if only I could remember where I had seen that face?”

“What face?” I asked, surprised. “The daughter’s?”

“No. The mother’s.”

Noting my surprise, he nodded emphatically.

“But yes—it is as I tell you. It was a long time ago, when I was still with the police in Belgium. I have never actually seen the woman before, but I have seen her picture—and in connexion with some case. I rather fancy—”

“Yes?”

“I may be mistaken, but I rather fancy that it was a murder case!”

Eight

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

We were up at the villa betimes next morning. The man on guard at the gate did not bar our way this time. Instead, he respectfully saluted us, and we passed on to the house. The maid Léonie was just coming down the stairs, and seemed not averse to the prospect of a little conversation.

Poirot inquired after the health of Mrs. Renauld.

Léonie shook her head.

“She is terribly upset, the poor lady! She will eat nothing—but nothing! And she is as pale as a ghost. It is heartrending to see her. Ah, it is not I who would grieve like that for a man who had deceived me with another woman!”

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

“What you say is very just, but what will you? The heart of a woman who loves will forgive many blows. Still undoubtedly there must have been many scenes of recrimination between them in the last few months?”

Again Léonie shook her head.

“Never, monsieur. Never have I heard madame utter a word of protest—of reproach, even! She had the temper and disposition of an angel—quite different to monsieur.”

“Monsieur Renauld had not the temper of an angel?”

“Far from it. When he enraged himself, the whole house knew of it. The day that he quarrelled with Monsieur Jack—ma foi! they might have been heard in the marketplace, they shouted so loud!”

“Indeed,” said Poirot. “And when did this quarrel take place?”

“Oh, it was just before Monsieur Jack went to Paris. Almost he missed his train. He came out of the library, and caught up his bag which he had left in the hall. The automobile, it was being repaired, and he had to run for the station. I was dusting the salon, and I saw him pass, and his face was white—white—with two burning spots of red. Ah, but he was angry!”

Léonie was enjoying her narrative thoroughly.

“And the dispute, what was it about?”

“Ah, that I do not know,” confessed Léonie. “It is true that they shouted, but their voices were so loud and high, and they spoke so fast, that only one well acquainted with English could have comprehended. But monsieur, he was like a thundercloud all day! Impossible to please him!”

The sound of a door shutting upstairs cut short Léonie’s loquacity.

“And Françoise who awaits me!” she exclaimed, awakening to a tardy remembrance of her duties. “That old one, she always scolds.”

“One moment, mademoiselle. The examining magistrate, where is he?”

“They have gone out to look at the automobile in the garage. Monsieur the commissary had some idea that it might have been used on the night of the murder.”

“Quelle idée,” murmured Poirot, as the girl disappeared.

“You will go out and join them?”

“No, I shall await their return in the salon. It is cool there on this hot morning.”

This placid way of taking things did not quite commend itself to me.

“If you don’t mind—” I said, and hesitated.

“Not in the least. You wish to investigate on your own account, eh?”

“Well, I’d rather like to have a look at Giraud, if he’s anywhere about, and see what he’s up to.”

“The human foxhound,” murmured Poirot, as he leaned back in a comfortable chair, and closed his eyes. “By all means, my friend. Au revoir.”

I strolled out of the front door. It was certainly hot. I turned up the path we had taken the day before. I had a mind to study the scene of the crime myself. I did not go directly to the spot, however, but turned aside into the bushes, so as to come out on the links some hundred yards or so farther to the right. The shrubbery here was much denser, and I had quite a struggle to force my way through. When I emerged at last on the course, it was quite unexpectedly and with such vigour that I cannoned heavily into a young lady who had been standing with her back to the plantation.

She not unnaturally gave a suppressed shriek, but I, too, uttered an exclamation of surprise. For it was my friend of the train, Cinderella!

The surprise was mutual.

“You!” we both exclaimed simultaneously.

The young lady recovered herself first.

“My only aunt!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“For the matter of that, what are you?” I retorted.

“When last I saw you, the day before yesterday, you were trotting home to England like a good little boy.”

“When last I saw you,” I said, “you were trotting home with your sister, like a good little girl. By the way, how is your sister?”

A flash of white teeth rewarded me.

“How kind of you to ask! My sister is well, I thank you.”

“She is here with you?”

“She remained in town,” said the minx with dignity.

“I don’t believe you’ve got a sister,” I laughed. “If you have, her name is Harris!”

“Do you remember mine?” she asked with a smile.

“Cinderella. But you’re going to tell me the real one now aren’t you?”

She shook her head with a wicked look.

“Not even why you’re here?”

“Oh, that! I suppose you’ve heard of members of my profession ‘resting.’”

“At expensive French watering places?”

“Dirt cheap if you know where to go.”

I eyed her keenly.

“Still, you’d no intention of coming here when I met you two days ago?”

“We all have our disappointments,” said Miss Cinderella sententiously. “There now, I’ve told you quite as much as is good for you. Little boys should not be inquisitive. You’ve not yet told me what you’re doing here?”

“You remember my telling you that my great friend was a detective?”

“Yes?”

“And perhaps you’ve heard about this crime—at the Villa Geneviève—?”

She stared at me. Her breast heaved, and her eyes grew wide and round.

“You don’t mean—that you’re in on that?”

I nodded. There was no doubt that I had scored heavily. Her emotion, as she regarded me, was only too evident. For some few seconds she remained silent, staring at me. Then she nodded her head emphatically.

“Well, if that doesn’t beat the band! Tote me round. I want to see all the horrors.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I say. Bless the boy, didn’t I tell you I doted on crimes? I’ve been nosing round for hours. It’s a real piece of luck happening on you this way. Come on, show me all the sights.”

“But look here—wait a minute—I can’t. Nobody’s allowed in. They’re awfully strict.”

“Aren’t you and your friends the big bugs?”

I was loath to relinquish my position of importance.

“Why are you so keen?” I asked weakly. “And what is it you want to see?”

“Oh, everything! The place where it happened, and the weapon, and the body, and any fingerprints or interesting things like that. I’ve never had a chance before of being right in on a murder like this. It’ll last me all my life.”

I turned away, sickened. What were women coming to nowadays? The girl’s ghoulish excitement nauseated me.

“Come off your high horse,” said the lady suddenly. “And don’t give yourself airs. When you got called to this job, did you put your nose in the air and say it was a nasty business, and you wouldn’t be mixed-up in it?”

“No, but—”

"If you'd been here on a holiday, wouldn't you be nosing round just the same as I am? Of course you would."

"I'm a man. You're a woman."

"Your idea of a woman is someone who gets on a chair and shrieks if she sees a mouse. That's all prehistoric. But you will show me round, won't you? You see, it might make a big difference to me."

"In what way?"

"They're keeping all the reporters out. I might make a big scoop with one of the papers. You don't know how much they pay for a bit of inside stuff."

I hesitated. She slipped a small soft hand into mine.

"Please—there's a dear."

I capitulated. Secretly, I knew that I should rather enjoy the part of showman.

We repaired first to the spot where the body had been discovered. A man was on guard there, who saluted respectfully, knowing me by sight, and raised no questions as to my companion. Presumably he regarded her as vouched for by me. I explained to Cinderella just how the discovery had been made, and she listened attentively, sometimes putting an intelligent question. Then we turned our steps in the direction of the villa. I proceeded rather cautiously, for, truth to tell, I was not at all anxious to meet anyone. I took the girl through the shrubbery round to the back of the house where the small shed was. I recollected that yesterday evening, after re-locking the door, M. Bex had left the key with the sergent de ville, Marchaud, "In case Monsieur Giraud should require it while we are upstairs." I thought it quite likely that the Sûreté detective, after using it, had returned it to Marchaud again. Leaving the girl out of sight in the shrubbery, I entered the house. Marchaud was on duty outside the door of the salon. From within came the murmur of voices.

"Monsieur desires Monsieur Hautet? He is within. He is again interrogating Françoise."

"No," I said hastily, "I don't want him. But I should very much like the key of the shed outside if it is not against regulations."

"But certainly, monsieur." He produced it. "Here it is. Monsieur Hautet gave orders that all facilities were to be placed at your disposal. You will return it to me when you have finished out there, that is all."

"Of course."

I felt a thrill of satisfaction as I realized that in Marchaud's eyes, at least, I ranked equally in importance with Poirot. The girl was waiting for me. She gave an exclamation of delight as she saw the key in my hand.

"You've got it then?"

"Of course," I said coolly. "All the same, you know, what I'm doing is highly irregular."

"You've been a perfect duck, and I shan't forget it. Come along. They can't see us from the house, can they?"

"Wait a minute." I arrested her eager advance. "I won't stop you if you really wish to go in. But do you? You've seen the grave, and the grounds, and you've heard all the details of the affair. Isn't that enough for you? This is going to be gruesome, you know, and—unpleasant."

She looked at me for a moment with an expression that I could not quite fathom. Then she laughed.

"Me for the horrors," she said. "Come along."

In silence we arrived at the door of the shed. I opened it and we passed in. I walked over to the body, and gently pulled down the sheet as Bex had done the preceding afternoon. A little gasping sound escaped from the girl's lips, and I turned and looked at her. There was horror on her face now, and those debonair high spirits of hers were quenched utterly. She had not chosen to listen to my advice, and she was punished now for her disregard of it. I felt singularly merciless towards her. She should go through with it now. I turned the corpse over gently.

“You see,” I said. “He was stabbed in the back.”

Her voice was almost soundless.

“With what?”

I nodded towards the glass jar.

“That dagger.”

Suddenly the girl reeled, and then sank down in a heap. I sprang to her assistance.

“You are faint. Come out of here. It has been too much for you.”

“Water,” she murmured. “Quick. Water.”

I left her, and rushed into the house. Fortunately none of the servants were about, and I was able to secure a glass of water unobserved and add a few drops of brandy from a pocket flask. In a few minutes I was back again. The girl was lying as I had left her, but a few sips of the brandy and water revived her in a marvellous manner.

“Take me out of here—oh, quickly, quickly!” she cried, shuddering.

Supporting her with my arm, I led her out into the air, and she pulled the door to behind her. Then she drew a deep breath.

“That’s better. Oh, it was horrible! Why did you ever let me go in?”

I felt this to be so feminine that I could not forbear a smile. Secretly, I was not dissatisfied with her collapse. It proved that she was not quite so callous as I had thought her. After all she was little more than a child, and her curiosity had probably been of the unthinking order.

“I did my best to stop you, you know,” I said gently.

“I suppose you did. Well, good-bye.”

“Look here, you can’t start off like that—all alone. You’re not fit for it. I insist on accompanying you back to Merlinville.”

“Nonsense. I’m quite all right now.”

“Supposing you felt faint again? No, I shall come with you.”

But this she combated with a good deal of energy. In the end, however, I prevailed so far as to be allowed to accompany her to the outskirts of the town. We retraced our steps over our former route, passing the grave again, and making a detour on to the road. Where the first straggling line of shops began, she stopped and held out her hand.

“Good-bye, and thank you ever so much for coming with me.”

“Are you sure you’re all right now?”

“Quite, thanks. I hope you don’t get into any trouble over showing me things.”

I disclaimed the idea lightly.

“Well, good-bye.”

“Au revoir,” I corrected. “If you’re staying here, we shall meet again.”

She flashed a smile at me.

“That’s so. Au revoir, then.”

“Wait a second, you haven’t told me your address.”

“Oh, I’m staying at the Hôtel du Phare. It’s a little place, but quite good. Come and look me up tomorrow.”

“I will,” I said, with perhaps rather unnecessary empressement.

I watched her out of sight, then turned and retraced my steps to the villa. I remembered that I had not relocked the door of the shed. Fortunately no one had noticed the oversight, and turning the key I removed it and returned it to the sergent de ville. And, as I did so, it came upon me suddenly that though Cinderella had given me her address I still did not know her name.

Nine

M. GIRAUD FINDS SOME CLUES

In the salon I found the examining magistrate busily interrogating the old gardener, Auguste. Poirot and the commissary, who were both present, greeted me respectively with a smile and a polite bow. I slipped quietly into a seat. M. Hautet was painstaking and meticulous in the extreme, but did not succeed in eliciting anything of importance.

The gardening gloves Auguste admitted to be his. He wore them when handling a certain species of primula plant which was poisonous to some people. He could not say when he had worn them last. Certainly he had not missed them. Where were they kept? Sometimes in one place, sometimes in another. The spade was usually to be found in the small toolshed. Was it locked? Of course it was locked. Where was the key kept? Parbleu, it was in the door of course. There was nothing of value to steal. Who would have expected a party of bandits, or assassins? Such things did not happen in Madame la Vicomtesse's time.

M. Hautet signifying that he had finished with him, the old man withdrew, grumbling to the last. Remembering Poirot's unaccountable insistence on the footprints in the flower-beds, I scrutinized him narrowly as he gave his evidence. Either he had nothing to do with the crime or he was a consummate actor. Suddenly, just as he was going out of the door, an idea struck me.

"Pardon, Monsieur Hautet," I cried, "but will you permit me to ask him one question?"

"But certainly, monsieur."

Thus encouraged, I turned to Auguste.

"Where do you keep your boots?"

“On my feet,” growled the old man. “Where else?”

“But when you go to bed at night?”

“Under my bed.”

“But who cleans them?”

“Nobody. Why should they be cleaned? Is it that I promenade myself on the front like a young man? On Sunday I wear the Sunday boots, but otherwise—” He shrugged his shoulders.

I shook my head, discouraged.

“Well, well,” said the magistrate, “we do not advance very much. Undoubtedly we are held up until we get the return cable from Santiago. Has anyone seen Giraud? In verity that one lacks politeness! I have a very good mind to send for him and—”

“You will not have to send far.”

The quiet voice startled us. Giraud was standing outside looking in through the open window.

He leapt lightly into the room and advanced to the table.

“Here I am, at your service. Accept my excuses for not presenting myself sooner.”

“Not at all—not at all!” said the magistrate, rather confused.

“Of course I am only a detective,” continued the other. “I know nothing of interrogatories. Were I conducting one, I should be inclined to do so without an open window. Anyone standing outside can so easily hear all that passes. But no matter.”

M. Hautet flushed angrily. There was evidently going to be no love lost between the examining magistrate and the detective in charge of the case. They had fallen foul of each other at the start. Perhaps in any event it would have been much the same. To Giraud, all examining magistrates were fools, and to M. Hautet, who took himself seriously, the casual manner of the Paris detective could not fail to give offence.

“Eh bien, Monsieur Giraud,” said the magistrate rather sharply. “Without doubt you have been employing your time to a marvel! You have the names of the assassins for us, have you not? And also the precise spot where they find themselves now?”

Unmoved by this irony, M. Giraud replied:

“I know at least where they have come from.”

Giraud took two small objects from his pocket and laid them down on the table. We crowded round. The objects were very simple ones: the stub of a cigarette and an unlighted match. The detective wheeled round on Poirot.

“What do you see there?” he asked.

There was something almost brutal in his tone. It made my cheeks flush. But Poirot remained unmoved. He shrugged his shoulders.

“A cigarette end and a match.”

“And what does that tell you?”

Poirot spread out his hands.

“It tells me—nothing.”

“Ah!” said Giraud, in a satisfied voice. “You haven’t made a study of these things. That’s not an ordinary match—not in this country at least. It’s common enough in South America. Luckily it’s unlighted. I mightn’t have recognized it otherwise. Evidently one of the men threw away his cigarette and lit another, spilling one match out of the box as he did so.”

“And the other match?” asked Poirot.

“Which match?”

“The one he did light his cigarette with. You have found that also?”

“No.”

“Perhaps you didn’t search very thoroughly.”

“Not search thoroughly—” For a moment it seemed as though the detective was going to break out angrily, but with an effort he controlled himself. “I see you love a joke, Monsieur Poirot. But in any case, match or no match, the cigarette end would be sufficient. It is a South American cigarette with liquorice pectoral paper.”

Poirot bowed. The commissary spoke:

“The cigarette end and match might have belonged to Monsieur Renauld. Remember, it is only two years since he returned from South America.”

“No,” replied the other confidently. “I have already searched among the effects of Monsieur Renauld. The cigarettes he smoked and the matches he used are quite different.”

“You do not think it odd,” asked Poirot, “that these strangers should come unprovided with a weapon, with gloves, with a spade, and that they should so conveniently find all these things?”

Giraud smiled in a rather superior manner.

“Undoubtedly it is strange. Indeed, without the theory that I hold, it would be inexplicable.”

“Aha!” said M. Hautet. “An accomplice within the house!”

“Or outside it,” said Giraud, with a peculiar smile.

“But someone must have admitted them. We cannot allow that, by an unparalleled piece of good fortune, they found the door ajar for them to walk in?”

“The door was opened for them; but it could just as easily be opened from outside—by someone who possessed a key.”

“But who did possess a key?”

Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

“As for that, no one who possesses one is going to admit the fact if he can help it. But several people might have had one. Monsieur Jack Renauld, the son, for instance. It is true that he is on his way to South America, but he might have lost the key or had it stolen from him. Then there is the gardener—he has been here many years. One of the younger servants may have a lover. It is easy to take an impression of a key and have one cut. There are many possibilities. Then there is another person who, I should judge, is exceedingly likely to have such a thing.”

“Who is that?”

“Madame Daubreuil,” said the detective.

“Eh, eh!” said the magistrate. “So you have heard about that, have you?”

“I hear everything,” said Giraud imperturbably.

“There is one thing I could swear you have not heard,” said M. Hautet, delighted to be able to show superior knowledge, and without more ado he retailed the story of the mysterious visitor the night before. He also touched on the cheque made out to “Duveen,” and finally handed Giraud the letter signed “Bella.”

“All very interesting. But my theory remains unaffected.”

“And your theory is?”

“For the moment I prefer not to say. Remember, I am only just beginning my investigations.”

“Tell me one thing, Monsieur Giraud,” said Poirot suddenly. “Your theory allows for the door being opened. It does not explain why it was left open.

When they departed, would it not have been natural for them to close it behind them? If a sergent de ville had chanced to come up to the house, as is sometimes done to see that all is well, they might have been discovered and overtaken almost at once."

"Bah! They forgot it. A mistake, I grant you."

Then, to my surprise, Poirot uttered almost the same words as he had uttered to Bex the previous evening:

"I do not agree with you. The door being left open was the result of either design or necessity, and any theory that does not admit that fact is bound to prove vain."

We all regarded the little man with a good deal of astonishment. The confession of ignorance drawn from him over the match end had, I thought, been bound to humiliate him, but here he was self-satisfied as ever, laying down the law to Giraud without a tremor.

The detective twisted his moustache, eyeing my friend in a somewhat bantering fashion.

"You don't agree with me, eh? Well, what strikes you particularly about the case? Let's hear your views."

"One thing presents itself to me as being significant. Tell me, Monsieur Giraud, does nothing strike you as familiar about this case? Is there nothing it reminds you of?"

"Familiar? Reminds me of? I can't say offhand. I don't think so, though."

"You are wrong," said Poirot quietly. "A crime almost precisely similar has been committed before."

"When? And where?"

"Ah, that, unfortunately, I cannot for the moment remember, but I shall do so. I had hoped you might be able to assist me."

Giraud snorted incredulously.

“There have been many affairs of masked men. I cannot remember the details of them all. The crimes all resemble each other more or less.”

“There is such a thing as the individual touch.” Poirot suddenly assumed his lecturing manner, and addressed us collectively. “I am speaking to you now of the psychology of crime. Monsieur Giraud knows quite well that each criminal has his particular method, and that the police, when called in to investigate, say, a case of burglary, can often make a shrewd guess at the offender, simply by the peculiar methods he has employed. (Japp would tell you the same, Hastings.) Man is an unoriginal animal. Unoriginal within the law in his daily respectable life, equally unoriginal outside the law. If a man commits a crime, any other crime he commits will resemble it closely. The English murderer who disposed of his wives in succession by drowning them in their baths was a case in point. Had he varied his methods, he might have escaped detection to this day. But he obeyed the common dictates of human nature, arguing that what had once succeeded would succeed again, and he paid the penalty of his lack of originality.”

“And the point of all this?” sneered Giraud.

“That, when you have two crimes precisely similar in design and execution, you find the same brain behind them both. I am looking for that brain, Monsieur Giraud, and I shall find it. Here we have a true clue—a psychological clue. You may know all about cigarettes and match ends, Monsieur Giraud, but I, Hercule Poirot, know the mind of man.”

Giraud remained singularly unimpressed.

“For your guidance,” continued Poirot, “I will also advise you of one fact which might fail to be brought to your notice. The wristwatch of Madame Renauld, on the day following the tragedy, had gained two hours.”

Giraud stared.

“Perhaps it was in the habit of gaining?”

“As a matter of fact, I am told it did.”

“Very well, then.”

“All the same, two hours is a good deal,” said Poirot softly. “Then there is the matter of the footprints in the flower bed.”

He nodded his head towards the open window. Giraud took two eager strides, and looked out.

“But I see no footprints?”

“No,” said Poirot, straightening a little pile of books on a table. “There are none.”

For a moment an almost murderous rage obscured Giraud’s face. He took two strides towards his tormentor, but at that moment the salon door was opened, and Marchaud announced:

“Monsieur Stonor, the secretary, has just arrived from England. May he enter?”

Ten

GABRIEL STONOR

The man who now entered the room was a striking figure. Very tall, with a well-knit, athletic frame, and a deeply bronzed face and neck, he dominated the assembly. Even Giraud seemed anaemic beside him. When I knew him better I realized that Gabriel Stonor was quite an unusual personality. English by birth, he had knocked about all over the world. He had shot big game in Africa, travelled in Korea, ranched in California, and traded in the South Sea islands.

His unerring eye picked out M. Hautet.

“The examining magistrate in charge of the case? Pleased to meet you, sir. This is a terrible business. How’s Mrs. Renauld? Is she bearing up fairly well? It must have been an awful shock to her.”

“Terrible, terrible,” said M. Hautet. “Permit me to introduce Monsieur Bex, our commissary of police, Monsieur Giraud of the Sûreté. This gentleman is Monsieur Hercule Poirot. Mr. Renauld sent for him, but he arrived too late to do anything to avert the tragedy. A friend of Monsieur Poirot’s, Captain Hastings.”

Stonor looked at Poirot with some interest.

“Sent for you, did he?”

“You did not know, then, that Monsieur Renauld contemplated calling a detective?” interposed M. Bex.

“No, I didn’t. But it doesn’t surprise me a bit.”

“Why?”

“Because the old man was rattled. I don’t know what it was all about. He didn’t confide in me. We weren’t on those terms. But rattled he was—and badly.”

“H’m!” said M. Hautet. “But you have no notion of the cause?”

“That’s what I said, sir.”

“You will pardon me, Monsieur Stonor, but we must begin with a few formalities. Your name?”

“Gabriel Stonor.”

“How long ago was it that you became secretary to Monsieur Renauld?”

“About two years ago, when he first arrived from South America. I met him through a mutual friend, and he offered me the post. A thundering good boss he was too.”

“Did he talk to you much about his life in South America?”

“Yes, a good bit.”

“Do you know if he was ever in Santiago?”

“Several times, I believe.”

“He never mentioned any special incident that occurred there—anything that might have provoked some vendetta against him?”

“Never.”

“Did he speak of any secret that he had acquired while sojourning there?”

“Not that I can remember. But, for all that, there was a mystery about him. I’ve never heard him speak of his boyhood, for instance, or of any incident prior to his arrival in South America. He was a French-Canadian by birth, I believe, but I’ve never heard him speak of his life in Canada. He could shut up like a clam if he liked.”

“So, as far as you know, he had no enemies, and you can give us no clue as to any secret to obtain possession of which he might have been murdered?”

“That’s so.”

“Monsieur Stonor, have you ever heard the name of Duveen in connexion with Monsieur Renauld?”

“Duveen. Duveen.” He tried the name over thoughtfully. “I don’t think I have. And yet it seems familiar.”

“Do you know a lady, a friend of Monsieur Renauld’s, whose Christian name is Bella?”

Again Mr. Stonor shook his head.

“Bella Duveen? Is that the full name? It’s curious. I’m sure I know it. But for the moment I can’t remember in what connexion.”

The magistrate coughed.

“You understand, Monsieur Stonor—the case is like this. There must be no reservations. You might, perhaps, through a feeling of consideration for Madame Renauld—for whom, I gather, you have a great esteem and affection—you might—in fact!” said M. Hautet, getting rather tied up in his sentence, “there must absolutely be no reservations.”

Stonor stared at him, a dawning light of comprehension in his eyes.

“I don’t quite get you,” he said gently. “Where does Mrs. Renauld come in? I’ve an immense respect and affection for that lady; she’s a very wonderful and unusual type, but I don’t quite see how my reservations, or otherwise, could affect her.”

“Not if this Bella Duveen should prove to have been something more than a friend to her husband?”

“Ah!” said Stonor. “I get you now. But I’ll bet my bottom dollar that you’re wrong. The old man never so much as looked at a petticoat. He just adored his own wife. They were the most devoted couple I know.”

M. Hautet shook his head gently.

“Monsieur Stonor, we hold absolute proof—a love letter written by this Bella to Monsieur Renauld, accusing him of having tired of her. Moreover, we have further proof that, at the time of his death, he was carrying on an intrigue with a Frenchwoman, a Madame Daubreuil, who rents the adjoining villa.”

The secretary’s eyes narrowed.

“Hold on, sir. You’re barking up the wrong tree. I knew Paul Renauld. What you’ve just been saying is plumb impossible. There’s some other explanation.”

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders.

“What other explanation could there be?”

“What leads you to think it was a love affair?”

“Madame Daubreuil was in the habit of visiting him here in the evenings. Also, since Monsieur Renauld came to the Villa Geneviève, Madame Daubreuil has paid large sums of money into the bank in notes. In all, the amount totals four thousand pounds of your English money.”

“I guess that’s right,” said Stonor quietly. “I transmitted him those sums in notes at his request. But it wasn’t an intrigue.”

“What else could it be?”

“Blackmail,” said Stonor sharply, bringing down his hand with a slam on the table. “That’s what it was.”

“Ah!” cried the magistrate, shaken in spite of himself.

“Blackmail,” repeated Stonor. “The old man was being bled—and at a good rate too. Four thousand in a couple of months. Whew! I told you just now there was a mystery about Renauld. Evidently this Madame Daubreuil knew enough of it to put the screw on.”

“It is possible,” the commissary cried excitedly. “Decidedly it is possible.”

“Possible?” roared Stonor. “It’s certain. Tell me, have you asked Mrs. Renauld about this love affair stunt of yours?”

“No, monsieur. We did not wish to occasion her any distress if it could reasonably be avoided.”

“Distress? Why, she’d laugh in your face. I tell you, she and Renauld were a couple in a hundred.”

“Ah, that reminds me of another point,” said M. Hautet. “Did Monsieur Renauld take you into his confidence at all as to the dispositions of his will?”

“I know all about it—took it to the lawyers for him after he’d drawn it out. I can give you the name of his solicitors if you want to see it. They’ve got it there. Quite simple. Half in trust to his wife for her lifetime, the other half to his son. A few legacies. I rather think he left me a thousand.”

“When was this will drawn up?”

“Oh, about a year and a half ago.”

“Would it surprise you very much, Monsieur Stonor, to hear that Monsieur Renauld had made another will, less than a fortnight ago?”

Stonor was obviously very much surprised.

“I’d no idea of it. What’s it like?”

“The whole of his vast fortune is left unreservedly to his wife. There is no mention of his son.”

Mr. Stonor gave vent to a prolonged whistle.

“I call that rather rough on the lad. His mother adores him of course, but to the world at large it looks rather like a want of confidence on his father’s part. It will be rather galling to his pride. Still, it all goes to prove what I told you, that Renauld and his wife were on first-rate terms.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said M. Hautet. “It is possible we shall have to revise our ideas on several points. We have, of course, cabled to Santiago, and are expecting a reply from there any minute. In all probability, everything will then be perfectly clear and straightforward. On the other hand, if your suggestion of blackmail is true, Madame Daubreuil ought to be able to give us valuable information.”

Poirot interjected a remark:

“Monsieur Stonor, the English chauffeur, Masters, had he been long with Monsieur Renauld?”

“Over a year.”

“Have you any idea whether he has ever been in South America?”

“I’m quite sure he hasn’t. Before coming to M. Renauld he had been for many years with some people in Gloucestershire whom I know well.”

“In fact, you can answer for him as being above suspicion?”

“Absolutely.”

Poirot seemed somewhat crestfallen.

Meanwhile the magistrate had summoned Marchaud.

“My compliments to Madame Renauld, and I should be glad to speak to her for a few minutes. Beg her not to disturb herself. I will wait upon her upstairs.”

Marchaud saluted and disappeared.

We waited some minutes, and then, to our surprise, the door opened, and Mrs. Renauld, deathly pale in her heavy mourning, entered the room.

M. Hautet brought forward a chair, uttering vigorous protestations, and she thanked him with a smile. Stonor was holding one hand of hers in his with an eloquent sympathy. Words evidently failed him. Mrs. Renauld turned to M. Hautet.

“You wish to ask me something?”

“With your permission, madame. I understand your husband was a French-Canadian by birth. Can you tell me anything of his youth or upbringing?”

She shook her head.

“My husband was always very reticent about himself, monsieur. He came from the North-West, I know, but I fancy that he had an unhappy childhood, for he never cared to speak of that time. Our life was lived entirely in the present and the future.”

“Was there any mystery in his past life?”

Mrs. Renauld smiled a little and shook her head.

“Nothing so romantic, I am sure, monsieur.”

M. Hautet also smiled.

“True, we must not permit ourselves to get melodramatic. There is one thing more—” He hesitated.

Stonor broke in impetuously:

“They’ve got an extraordinary idea into their heads, Mrs. Renauld. They actually fancy that Mr. Renauld was carrying on an intrigue with a Madame Daubreuil who, it seems, lives next door.”

The scarlet colour flamed into Mrs. Renauld’s cheeks. She flung her head up, then bit her lip, her face quivering. Stonor stood looking at her in astonishment, but M. Bex leaned forward and said gently:

“We regret to cause you pain, madame, but have you any reason to believe that Madame Daubreuil was your husband’s mistress?”

With a sob of anguish, Mrs. Renauld buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved convulsively. At last she lifted her head and said brokenly:

“She may have been.”

Never, in all my life, have I seen anything to equal the blank amazement on Stonor’s face. He was thoroughly taken aback.

Eleven

JACK RENAULD

What the next development of the conversation would have been I cannot say, for at that moment the door was thrown open violently and a tall young man strode into the room.

Just for a moment I had the uncanny sensation that the dead man had come to life again. Then I realized that this dark head was untouched with grey, and that, in point of fact, it was a mere boy who now burst in among us with so little ceremony. He went straight to Mrs. Renauld with an impetuosity that took no heed of the presence of others.

“Mother!”

“Jack!” With a cry she folded him in her arms. “My dearest! But what brings you here? You were to sail on the Anzora from Cherbourg two days ago?” Then, suddenly recalling to herself the presence of others, she turned with a certain dignity: “My son, messieurs.”

“Aha!” said M. Hautet, acknowledging the young man’s bow. “So you did not sail on the Anzora?”

“No, monsieur. As I was about to explain, the Anzora was detained twenty-four hours through engine trouble. I should have sailed last night instead of the night before, but, happening to buy an evening paper, I saw in it an account of the—the awful tragedy that had befallen us—” His voice broke and the tears came into his eyes. “My poor father—my poor, poor father.”

Staring at him like one in a dream, Mrs. Renauld repeated:

“So you did not sail?” And then, with a gesture of infinite weariness, she murmured as though to herself: “After all, it does not matter—now.”

"Sit down, Monsieur Renauld, I beg of you," said M. Hautet, indicating a chair. "My sympathy for you is profound. It must have been a terrible shock to you to learn the news as you did. However, it is most fortunate that you were prevented from sailing. I am in hopes that you may be able to give us just the information we need to clear up this mystery."

"I am at your disposal, monsieur. Ask me any questions you please."

"To begin with, I understand that this journey was being undertaken at your father's request?"

"Quite so, monsieur. I received a telegram bidding me to proceed without delay to Buenos Aires, and from thence via the Andes to Valparaiso, and on to Santiago."

"Ah! And the object of this journey?"

"I have no idea."

"What?"

"No. See, here in the telegram."

The magistrate took it and read it aloud:

"'Proceed immediately Cherbourg embark Anzora sailing tonight Buenos Aires. Ultimate destination Santiago. Further instructions will await you Buenos Aires. Do not fail. Matter is of utmost importance. Renauld.' And there had been no previous correspondence on the matter?"

Jack Renauld shook his head.

"That is the only intimation of any kind. I knew, of course, that my father, having lived so long out there, had necessarily many interests in South America. But he had never mooted any suggestion of sending me out."

"You have, of course, been a good deal in South America, M. Renauld?"

“I was there as a child. But I was educated in England, and spent most of my holidays in that country, so I really know far less of South America than might be supposed. You see, the War broke out when I was seventeen.”

“You served in the English Flying Corps, did you not?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

M. Hautet nodded his head and proceeded with his inquiries along the, by now, well-known lines. In response, Jack Renauld declared definitely that he knew nothing of any enmity his father might have incurred in the city of Santiago or elsewhere in the South American continent, that he had noticed no change in his father’s manner of late, and that he had never heard him refer to a secret. He had regarded the mission to South America as connected with business interests.

As M. Hautet paused for a minute, the quiet voice of Giraud broke in:

“I should like to put a few questions of my own, Monsieur le juge.”

“By all means, Monsieur Giraud, if you wish,” said the magistrate coldly.

Giraud edged his chair a little nearer to the table.

“Were you on good terms with your father, Monsieur Renauld?”

“Certainly I was,” returned the lad haughtily.

“You assert that positively?”

“Yes.”

“No little disputes, eh?”

Jack shrugged his shoulders. “Everyone may have a difference of opinion now and then.”

“Quite so, quite so. But, if anyone were to assert that you had a violent quarrel with your father on the eve of your departure for Paris, that person, without doubt, would be lying?”

I could not but admire the ingenuity of Giraud. His boast, “I know everything,” had been no idle one. Jack Renauld was clearly disconcerted by the question.

“We—we did have an argument,” he admitted.

“Ah, an argument! In the course of that argument, did you use this phrase: ‘When you are dead I can do as I please?’”

“I may have done,” muttered the other. “I don’t know.”

“In response to that, did your father say: ‘But I am not dead yet!?’ To which you responded: ‘I wish you were!’”

The boy made no answer. His hands fiddled nervously with the things on the table in front of him.

“I must request an answer, please, Monsieur Renauld,” said Giraud sharply.

With an angry exclamation, the boy swept a heavy paper knife to the floor.

“What does it matter? You might as well know. Yes, I did quarrel with my father. I dare say I said all those things—I was so angry I cannot even remember what I said! I was furious—I could almost have killed him at that moment—there, make the most of that!” He leant back in his chair, flushed and defiant.

Giraud smiled, then, moving his chair back a little, said:

“That is all. You would, without doubt, prefer to continue the interrogatory, Monsieur Hautet.”

“Ah, yes, exactly,” said M. Hautet. “And what was the subject of your quarrel?”

“That I decline to state.” M. Hautet sat up in his chair.

“Monsieur Renauld, it is not permitted to trifle with the law!” he thundered. “What was the subject of the quarrel?”

Young Renauld remained silent, his boyish face sullen and overcast. But another voice spoke, imperturbable and calm, the voice of Hercule Poirot:

“I will inform you, if you like, monsieur.”

“You know?”

“Certainly I know. The subject of the quarrel was Mademoiselle Marthe Daubreuil.”

Renauld sprang round, startled. The magistrate leaned forward.

“Is that so, monsieur?”

Jack Renauld bowed his head.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I love Mademoiselle Daubreuil, and I wish to marry her. When I informed my father of the fact he flew at once into a violent rage. Naturally, I could not stand hearing the girl I loved insulted, and I, too, lost my temper.”

M. Hautet looked across at Mrs. Renauld.

“You were aware of this—attachment, madame?”

“I feared it,” she replied simply.

“Mother,” cried the boy. “You too! Marthe is as good as she is beautiful. What can you have against her?”

“I have nothing against Mademoiselle Daubreuil in any way. But I should prefer you to marry an Englishwoman, or if a Frenchwoman, not one who has a mother of doubtful antecedents!”

Her rancour against the older woman showed plainly in her voice, and I could well understand that it must have been a bitter blow to her when her only son showed signs of falling in love with the daughter of her rival.

Mrs. Renauld continued, addressing the magistrate:

“I ought, perhaps, to have spoken to my husband on the subject, but I hoped that it was only a boy and girl flirtation which would blow over all the quicker if no notice was taken of it. I blame myself now for my silence, but my husband, as I told you, had seemed so anxious and careworn, different altogether from his normal self, that I was chiefly concerned not to give him any additional worry.”

M. Hautet nodded.

“When you informed your father of your intentions towards Mademoiselle Daubreuil,” he resumed, “he was surprised?”

“He seemed completely taken aback. Then he ordered me peremptorily to dismiss any such idea from my mind. He would never give his consent to such a marriage. Nettled, I demanded what he had against Mademoiselle Daubreuil. To that he could give no satisfactory reply, but spoke in slighting terms of the mystery surrounding the lives of the mother and daughter. I answered that I was marrying Marthe and not her antecedents, but he shouted me down with a peremptory refusal to discuss the matter in any way. The whole thing must be given up. The injustice and high-handedness of it all maddened me—especially since he himself always seemed to go out of his way to be attentive to the Daubreuils and was always suggesting that they should be asked to the house. I lost my head, and we quarrelled in earnest. My father reminded me that I was entirely dependent on him, and it must have been in answer to that that I made the remark about doing as I pleased after his death—”

Poirot interrupted with a quick question:

“You were aware, then, of the terms of your father’s will?”

“I knew that he had left half his fortune to me, the other half in trust for my mother, to come to me at her death,” replied the lad.

“Proceed with your story,” said the magistrate.

“After that we shouted at each other in sheer rage, until I suddenly realized that I was in danger of missing my train to Paris. I had to run for the station, still in a white heat of fury. However, once well away, I calmed down. I wrote to Marthe, telling her what had happened, and her reply soothed me still further. She pointed out to me that we had only to be steadfast, and any opposition was bound to give way at last. Our affection for each other must be tried and proved, and when my parents realized that it was no light infatuation on my part they would doubtless relent towards us. Of course, to her, I had not dwelt on my father’s principal objection to the match. I soon saw that I should do my cause no good by violence.”

“To pass to another matter, are you acquainted with the name of Duveen, Monsieur Renauld?”

“Duveen?” said Jack. “Duveen?” He leant forward and slowly picked up the paper knife he had swept from the table. As he lifted his head his eyes met the watching ones of Giraud. “Duveen? No, I can’t say I do.”

“Will you read this letter, Monsieur Renauld? And tell me if you have any idea as to who the person was who addressed it to your father.”

Jack Renauld took the letter and read it through, the colour mounting in his face as he did so.

“Addressed to my father?” The emotion and indignation in his tones were evident.

“Yes. We found it in the pocket of his coat.”

“Does—” He hesitated, throwing the merest fraction of a glance towards his mother.

The magistrate understood.

“As yet—no. Can you give us any clue as to the writer?”

“I have no idea whatsoever.”

M. Hautet sighed.

“A most mysterious case. Ah, well, I suppose we can now rule out the letter altogether. Let me see, where were we? Oh, the weapon. I fear this may give you pain, Monsieur Renauld. I understand it was a present from you to your mother. Very sad—very distressing—”

Jack Renauld leaned forward. His face, which had flushed during the perusal of the letter, was now deadly white.

“Do you mean—that it was with an aeroplane wire paper-cutter that my father was—was killed? But it’s impossible! A little thing like that!”

“Alas, Monsieur Renauld, it is only too true! An ideal little tool, I fear. Sharp and easy to handle.”

“Where is it? Can I see it? Is it still in the—the body?”

“Oh no, it has been removed. You would like to see it? To make sure? It would be as well, perhaps, though madame has already identified it. Still—Monsieur Bex, might I trouble you?”

“Certainly. I will fetch it immediately.”

“Would it not be better to take Monsieur Renauld to the shed?” suggested Giraud smoothly. “Without doubt he would wish to see his father’s body.”

The boy made a shivering gesture of negation, and the magistrate, always disposed to cross Giraud whenever possible, replied:

“But no—not at present. Monsieur Bex will be so kind as to bring it to us here.”

The commissary left the room. Stonor crossed to Jack and wrung him by the hand. Poirot had risen, and was adjusting a pair of candlesticks that struck his trained eye as being a shade askew. The magistrate was reading the mysterious love letter through a last time, clinging desperately to his first theory of jealousy and a stab in the back.

Suddenly the door burst open and the commissary rushed in.

“Monsieur le juge! Monsieur le juge!”

“But yes. What is it?”

“The dagger! It is gone!”

“What—gone?”

“Vanished. Disappeared. The glass jar that contained it is empty!”

“What?” I cried. “Impossible. Why, only this morning I saw—” The words died on my tongue.

But the attention of the entire room was diverted to me.

“What is that you say?” cried the commissary. “This morning?”

“I saw it there this morning,” I said slowly. “About an hour and a half ago, to be accurate.”

“You went to the shed, then? How did you get the key?”

“I asked the sergent de ville for it.”

“And you went there? Why?”

I hesitated, but in the end I decided that the only thing to do was to make a clean breast of it.

“Monsieur Hautet,” I said, “I have committed a grave fault, for which I must crave your indulgence.”

“Proceed, monsieur.”

“The fact of the matter is,” I said, wishing myself anywhere else but where I was, “that I met a young lady, an acquaintance of mine. She displayed a great desire to see everything that was to be seen, and I—well, in short, I took the key to show her the body.”

“Ah!” cried the magistrate indignantly. “But it is a grave fault you have committed there, Captain Hastings. It is altogether most irregular. You should not have permitted yourself this folly.”

“I know,” I said meekly. “Nothing that you can say could be too severe, monsieur.”

“You did not invite this lady to come here?”

“Certainly not. I met her quite by accident. She is an English lady who happens to be staying in Merlinville, though I was not aware of that until my unexpected meeting with her.”

“Well, well,” said the magistrate, softening. “It was most irregular, but the lady is without doubt young and beautiful. What it is to be young!” And he sighed sentimentally.

But the commissary, less romantic and more practical, took up the tale:

“But did you not reclose and lock the door when you departed?”

“That’s just it,” I said slowly. “That’s what I blame myself for so terribly. My friend was upset at the sight. She nearly fainted. I got her some brandy and water, and afterwards insisted on accompanying her back to the town. In the excitement I forgot to relock the door. I only did so when I got back to the villa.”

“Then for twenty minutes at least—” said the commissary slowly. He stopped.

“Exactly,” I said.

“Twenty minutes,” mused the commissary.

“It is deplorable,” said M. Hautet, his sternness of manner returning. “Without precedent.”

Suddenly another voice spoke.

“You find it deplorable?” asked Giraud.

“Certainly I do.”

“I find it admirable!” said the other imperturbably.

This unexpected ally quite bewildered me.

“Admirable, Monsieur Giraud?” asked the magistrate, studying him cautiously out of the corner of his eye.

“Precisely.”

“And why?”

“Because we know now that the assassin, or an accomplice of the assassin, has been near the villa only an hour ago. It will be strange if, with that knowledge, we do not shortly lay hands upon him.” There was a note of menace in his voice. He continued: “He risked a good deal to gain possession of that dagger. Perhaps he feared that fingerprints might be discovered on it.”

Poirot turned to Bex.

“You said there were none?”

Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps he could not be sure.”

Poirot looked at him.

“You are wrong, Monsieur Giraud. The assassin wore gloves. So he must have been sure.”

“I do not say it was the assassin himself. It may have been an accomplice who was not aware of that fact.”

The magistrate’s clerk was gathering up the papers on the table. M. Hautet addressed us:

“Our work here is finished. Perhaps, Monsieur Renauld, you will listen while your evidence is read over to you. I have purposely kept all the proceedings as informal as possible. I have been called original in my methods, but I maintain that there is much to be said for originality. The case is now in the clever hands of the renowned Monsieur Giraud. He will without doubt distinguish himself. Indeed, I wonder that he has not already laid his hands upon the murderers! Madame, again let me assure you of my heartfelt sympathy. Messieurs, I wish you all good day.” And, accompanied by his clerk and the commissary, he took his departure.

Poirot tugged out that large turnip of a watch of his and observed the time.

“Let us return to the hotel for lunch, my friend,” he said. “And you shall recount to me in full the indiscretions of this morning. No one is observing us. We need make no adieux.”

We went quietly out of the room. The examining magistrate had just driven off in his car. I was going down the steps when Poirot’s voice arrested me:

“One little moment, my friend.” Dexterously he whipped out his yard measure and proceeded, quite solemnly, to measure an overcoat hanging in the hall, from the collar to the hem. I had not seen it hanging there before, and guessed that it belonged to either Mr. Stonor or Jack Renauld.

Then, with a little satisfied grunt, Poirot returned the measure to his pocket and followed me out into the open air.

Twelve

POIROT ELUCIDATES CERTAIN POINTS

“Why did you measure that overcoat?” I asked, with some curiosity, as we walked down the hot white road at a leisurely pace.

“Parbleu! to see how long it was,” replied my friend imperturbably.

I was vexed. Poirot’s incurable habit of making a mystery out of nothing never failed to irritate me. I relapsed into silence, and followed a train of thought of my own. Although I had not noticed them specially at the time, certain words Mrs. Renauld had addressed to her son now recurred to me, fraught with a new significance. “So you did not sail?” she had said, and then had added: “After all, it does not matter—now.”

What had she meant by that? The words were enigmatical—significant. Was it possible that she knew more than we supposed? She had denied all knowledge of the mysterious mission with which her husband was to have entrusted his son. But was she really less ignorant than she pretended? Could she enlighten us if she chose, and was her silence part of a carefully thought out and preconceived plan?

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that I was right. Mrs. Renauld knew more than she chose to tell. In her surprise at seeing her son, she had momentarily betrayed herself. I felt convinced that she knew, if not the assassins, at least the motive for the assassination. But some very powerful considerations must keep her silent.

“You think profoundly, my friend,” remarked Poirot, breaking in upon my reflections. “What is it that intrigues you so?”

I told him, sure of my ground, though feeling expectant that he would ridicule my suspicions. But to my surprise he nodded thoughtfully.

“You are quite right, Hastings. From the beginning I have been sure that she was keeping something back. At first I suspected her, if not of inspiring, at least of conniving at the crime.”

“You suspected her?” I cried.

“But certainly. She benefits enormously—in fact, by this new will, she is the only person to benefit. So, from the start, she was singled out for attention. You may have noticed that I took an early opportunity of examining her wrists. I wished to see whether there was any possibility that she had gagged and bound herself. Eh bien, I saw at once that there was no fake, the cords had actually been drawn so tight as to cut into the flesh. That ruled out the possibility of her having committed the crime single-handed. But it was still possible for her to have connived at it, or to have been the instigator with an accomplice. Moreover, the story, as she told it, was singularly familiar to me—the masked men that she could not recognize, the mention of ‘the secret’—I had heard, or read, all these things before. Another little detail confirmed my belief that she was not speaking the truth. The wristwatch, Hastings, the wristwatch!”

Again that wristwatch! Poirot was eyeing me curiously.

“You see, mon ami? You comprehend?”

“No,” I replied with some ill humour. “I neither see nor comprehend. You make all these confounded mysteries, and it’s useless asking you to explain. You always like keeping something up your sleeve to the last minute.”

“Do not enrage yourself, my friend,” said Poirot, with a smile. “I will explain if you wish. But not a word to Giraud, c’est entendu? He treats me as an old one of no importance! We shall see! In common fairness I gave him a hint. If he does not choose to act upon it, that is his own lookout.”

I assured Poirot that he could rely upon my discretion.

“C’est bien! Let us then employ our little grey cells. Tell me, my friend, at what time, according to you, did the tragedy take place?”

“Why, at two o’clock or thereabouts,” I said, astonished. “You remember, Mrs. Renauld told us that she heard the clock strike while the men were in the room.”

“Exactly, and on the strength of that, you, the examining magistrate, Bex, and everyone else, accept the time without further question. But I, Hercule Poirot, say that Madame Renauld lied. The crime took place at least two hours earlier.”

“But the doctors—”

“They declared, after examination of the body, that death had taken place between ten and seven hours previously. Mon ami, for some reason it was imperative that the crime should seem to have taken place later than it actually did. You have read of a smashed watch or clock recording the exact hour of a crime? So that the time should not rest on Madame Renauld’s testimony alone, someone moved on the hands of that wristwatch to two o’clock, and then dashed it violently to the ground. But, as is often the case, they defeated their own object. The glass was smashed, but the mechanism of the watch was uninjured. It was a most disastrous manoeuvre on their part, for it at once drew my attention to two points—first, that Madame Renauld was lying; secondly, that there must be some vital reason for the postponement of the time.”

“But what reason could there be?”

“Ah, that is the question! There we have the whole mystery. As yet, I cannot explain it. There is only one idea that presents itself to me as having a possible connexion.”

“And that is?”

“The last train left Merlinville at seventeen minutes past twelve.”

I followed it out slowly.

“So that, the crime apparently taking place some two hours later, anyone leaving by that train would have an unimpeachable alibi!”

“Perfect, Hastings! You have it!”

I sprang up.

“But we must inquire at the station! Surely they cannot have failed to notice two foreigners who left by that train! We must go there at once!”

“You think so, Hastings?”

“Of course. Let us go there now.”

Poirot restrained my ardour with a light touch upon the arm.

“Go by all means if you wish, mon ami—but if you go, I should not ask for particulars of two foreigners.”

I stared and he said rather impatiently:

“Là, là, you do not believe all that rigmarole, do you? The masked men and all the rest of cette histoire-là!”

His words took me so much aback, that I hardly knew how to respond. He went on serenely:

“You heard me say to Giraud, did you not, that all the details of this crime were familiar to me? Eh bien, that presupposes one of two things, either the brain that planned the first crime also planned this one, or else an account read of a cause célèbre unconsciously remained in our assassin’s memory and prompted the details. I shall be able to pronounce definitely on that after—” He broke off.

I was revolving sundry matters in my mind.

“But Mr. Renauld’s letter? It distinctly mentions a secret and Santiago!”

“Undoubtedly there was a secret in Monsieur Renauld’s life—there can be no doubt of that. On the other hand, the word Santiago, to my mind, is a red herring, dragged continually across the track to put us off the scent. It is possible that it was used in the same way on Monsieur Renauld, to keep him from directing his suspicions to a quarter nearer at hand. Oh, be assured, Hastings, the danger that threatened him was not in Santiago, it was near at hand, in France.”

He spoke so gravely, and with such assurance, that I could not fail to be convinced. But I essayed one final objection:

“And the match and cigarette end found near the body? What of them?”

A light of pure enjoyment lit up Poirot’s face.

“Planted! Deliberately planted there for Giraud or one of his tribe to find! Ah, he is smart, Giraud, he can do his tricks! So can a good retriever dog. He comes in so pleased with himself. For hours he has crawled on his stomach. ‘See what I have found,’ he says. And then again to me: ‘What do you see here?’ Me, I answer, with profound and deep truth, ‘Nothing.’ And Giraud, the great Giraud, he laughs, he thinks to himself, ‘Oh, he is imbecile, this old one!’ But we shall see….”

But my mind had reverted to the main facts.

“Then all this story of the masked men—?”

“Is false.”

“What really happened?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“One person could tell us—Madame Renauld. But she will not speak. Threats and entreaties would not move her. A remarkable woman that, Hastings. I recognized as soon as I saw her that I had to deal with a woman of unusual character. At first, as I told you, I was inclined to suspect her of being concerned in the crime. Afterwards I altered my opinion.”

“What made you do that?”

“Her spontaneous and genuine grief at the sight of her husband’s body. I could swear that the agony in that cry of hers was genuine.”

“Yes,” I said thoughtfully, “one cannot mistake these things.”

“I beg your pardon, my friend—one can always be mistaken. Regard a great actress, does not her acting of grief carry you away and impress you with its reality? No, however strong my own impression and belief, I needed other evidence before I allowed myself to be satisfied. The great criminal can be a great actor. I base my certainty in this case not upon my own impression, but upon the undeniable fact that Madame Renauld actually fainted. I turned up her eyelids and felt her pulse. There was no deception—the swoon was genuine. Therefore I was satisfied that her anguish was real and not assumed. Besides, a small additional point without interest, it was unnecessary for Madame Renauld to exhibit unrestrained grief. She had had one paroxysm on learning of her husband’s death, and there would be no need for her to simulate another such a violent one on beholding his body. No, Madame Renauld was not her husband’s murderess. But why has she lied? She lied about the wristwatch, she lied about the masked men—she lied about a third thing. Tell me, Hastings, what is your explanation of the open door?”

“Well,” I said, rather embarrassed, “I suppose it was an oversight. They forgot to shut it.”

Poirot shook his head, and sighed.

“That is the explanation of Giraud. It does not satisfy me. There is a meaning behind that open door which for the moment I cannot fathom. One thing I am fairly sure of—they did not leave through the door. They left by the window.”

“What?”

“Precisely.”

“But there were no footmarks in the flower bed underneath.”

“No—and there ought to have been. Listen, Hastings. The gardener, Auguste, as you heard him say, planted both those beds the preceding afternoon. In the one there are plentiful impressions of his big hobnailed boots—in the other, none! You see? Someone had passed that way, someone who, to obliterate their footprints, smoothed over the surface of the bed with a rake."

"Where did they get a rake?"

"Where they got the spade and the gardening gloves," said Poirot impatiently. "There is no difficulty about that."

"What makes you think that they left that way, though? Surely it is more probable that they entered by the window, and left by the door?"

"That is possible, of course. Yet I have a strong idea that they left by the window."

"I think you are wrong."

"Perhaps, mon ami."

I mused, thinking over the new field of conjecture that Poirot's deductions had opened up to me. I recalled my wonder at his cryptic allusion to the flower bed and the wristwatch. His remarks had seemed so meaningless at the moment, and now, for the first time, I realized how remarkably, from a few slight incidents, he had unravelled much of the mystery that surrounded the case. I paid a belated homage to my friend.

"In the meantime," I said, considering, "although we know a great deal more than we did, we are no nearer to solving the mystery of who killed Mr. Renauld."

"No," said Poirot cheerfully. "In fact we are a great deal farther off."

The fact seemed to afford him such peculiar satisfaction that I gazed at him in wonder. He met my eye and smiled.

Suddenly a light burst upon me.

"Poirot! Mrs. Renauld! I see it now. She must be shielding somebody."

From the quietness with which Poirot received my remark, I could see that the idea had already occurred to him.

“Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “Shielding someone—or screening someone. One of the two.”

Then, as we entered our hotel, he enjoined silence on me with a gesture.

Thirteen

THE GIRL WITH THE ANXIOUS EYES

We lunched with an excellent appetite. For a while we ate in silence, and then Poirot observed maliciously: “Eh bien! And your indiscretions! You recount them not?”

I felt myself blushing.

“Oh, you mean this morning?” I endeavoured to adopt a tone of absolute nonchalance.

But I was no match for Poirot. In a very few minutes he had extracted the whole story from me, his eyes twinkling as he did so.

“Tiens! A story of the most romantic. What is her name, this charming young lady?”

I had to confess that I did not know.

“Still more romantic! The first rencontre in the train from Paris, the second here. Journeys end in lovers’ meetings, is not that the saying?”

“Don’t be an ass, Poirot.”

“Yesterday it was Mademoiselle Daubreuil, today it is Mademoiselle—Cinderella! Decidedly you have the heart of a Turk, Hastings! You should establish a harem!”

“It’s all very well to rag me. Mademoiselle Daubreuil is a very beautiful girl, and I do admire her immensely—I don’t mind admitting it. The other’s nothing—I don’t suppose I shall ever see her again.”

“You do not propose to see the lady again?”

His last words were almost a question, and I was aware of the sharpness with which he darted a glance at me. And before my eyes, writ large in letters of fire, I saw the words “Hôtel du Phare,” and I heard again her voice saying, “Come and look me up,” and my own answering with empressement “I will.”

I answered Poirot lightly enough:

“She asked me to look her up, but, of course, I shan’t.”

“Why ‘of course?’”

“Well, I don’t want to.”

“Mademoiselle Cinderella is staying at the Hôtel d’Angleterre you told me, did you not?”

“No. Hôtel du Phare.”

“True, I forgot.”

A moment’s misgiving shot across my mind. Surely I had never mentioned any hotel to Poirot. I looked across at him and felt reassured. He was cutting his bread into neat little squares, completely absorbed in his task. He must have fancied I had told him where the girl was staying.

We had coffee outside facing the sea. Poirot smoked one of his tiny cigarettes, and then drew his watch from his pocket.

“The train to Paris leaves at 2:25,” he observed. “I should be starting.”

“Paris?” I cried.

“That is what I said, mon ami.”

“You are going to Paris? But why?”

He replied very seriously:

"To look for the murderer of Monsieur Renauld."

"You think he is in Paris?"

"I am quite certain that he is not. Nevertheless, it is there that I must look for him. You do not understand, but I will explain it all to you in good time. Believe me, this journey to Paris is necessary. I shall not be away long. In all probability I shall return tomorrow. I do not propose that you should accompany me. Remain here and keep an eye on Giraud. Also cultivate the society of Monsieur Renauld fils."

"That reminds me," I said. "I meant to ask you how you knew about those two?"

"Mon ami—I know human nature. Throw together a boy like young Renauld and a beautiful girl like Mademoiselle Marthe and the result is almost inevitable. Then, the quarrel! It was money, or a woman, and, remembering Léonie's description of the lad's anger, I decided on the latter. So I made my guess—and I was right."

"You already suspected that she loved young Renauld?" Poirot smiled.

"At any rate, I saw that she had anxious eyes. That is how I always think of Mademoiselle Daubreuil—as the girl with the anxious eyes."

His voice was so grave that it impressed me uncomfortably.

"What do you mean by that, Poirot?"

"I fancy, my friend, that we shall see before very long. But I must start."

"I will come and see you off," I said, rising.

"You will do nothing of the sort. I forbid it."

He was so peremptory that I stared at him in surprise. He nodded emphatically.

"I mean it, mon ami. Au revoir."

I felt rather at a loose end after Poirot had left me. I strolled down to the beach and watched the bathers, without feeling energetic enough to join them. I rather fancied that Cinderella might be disporting herself among them in some wonderful costume, but I saw no signs of her. I strolled aimlessly along the sands towards the farther end of the town. It occurred to me that, after all, it would only be decent feeling on my part to inquire after the girl. And it would save trouble in the end. The matter would then be finished with. There would be no need for me to trouble about her any further. But if I did not go at all, she might quite possibly come and look me up at the villa.

Accordingly, I left the beach, and walked inland. I soon found the Hôtel du Phare, a very unpretentious building. It was annoying in the extreme not to know the lady’s name and, to save my dignity, I decided to stroll inside and look around. Probably I should find her in the lounge. I went in, but there was no sign of her. I waited for some time, till my impatience got the better of me. I took the concierge aside and slipped five francs into his hand.

“I wish to see a lady who is staying here. A young English lady, small and dark. I am not sure of her name.”

The man shook his head and seemed to be suppressing a grin.

“There is no such lady as you describe staying here.”

“But the lady told me she was staying here.”

“Monsieur must have made a mistake—or it is more likely the lady did, since there has been another gentleman here inquiring for her.”

“What is that you say?” I cried, surprised.

“But yes, monsieur. A gentleman who described her just as you have done.”

“What was he like?”

“He was a small gentleman, well dressed, very neat, very spotless, the moustache very stiff, the head of a peculiar shape, and the eyes green.”

Poirot! So that was why he refused to let me accompany him to the station. The impertinence of it! I would thank him not to meddle in my concerns. Did he fancy I needed a nurse to look after me?

Thanking the man, I departed, somewhat at a loss, and still much incensed with my meddlesome friend.

But where was the lady? I set aside my wrath and tried to puzzle it out. Evidently, through inadvertence, she had named the wrong hotel. Then another thought struck me. Was it inadvertence? Or had she deliberately withheld her name and given me the wrong address?

The more I thought about it, the more I felt convinced that this last surmise of mine was right. For some reason or other she did not wish to let the acquaintance ripen into friendship. And, though half an hour earlier this had been precisely my own view, I did not enjoy having the tables turned upon me. The whole affair was profoundly unsatisfactory, and I went up to the Villa Geneviève in a condition of distinct ill humour. I did not go to the house, but went up the path to the little bench by the shed, and sat there moodily enough.

I was distracted from my thoughts by the sound of voices close at hand. In a second or two I realized that they came, not from the garden I was in, but from the adjoining garden of the Villa Marguerite, and that they were approaching rapidly. A girl's voice was speaking, a voice that I recognized as that of the beautiful Marthe.

“Chéri,” she was saying, “is it really true? Are all our troubles over?”

“You know it, Marthe,” Jack Renauld replied. “Nothing can part us now, beloved. The last obstacle to our union is removed. Nothing can take you from me.”

“Nothing?” the girl murmured. “Oh Jack, Jack—I am afraid.”

I had moved to depart, realizing that I was quite unintentionally eavesdropping. As I rose to my feet, I caught sight of them through a gap in the hedge. They stood together facing me, the man's arm round the girl, his eyes looking into hers. They were a splendid-looking couple, the dark, well-knit boy, and the fair young goddess. They seemed made for each other as they stood there, happy in spite of the terrible tragedy that overshadowed their young lives.

But the girl's face was troubled, and Jack Renauld seemed to recognize it, as he held her closer to him and asked:

"But what are you afraid of, darling? What is there to fear—now?"

And then I saw the look in her eyes, the look Poirot had spoken of, as she murmured, so that I almost guessed at the words:

"I am afraid—for you."

I did not hear young Renauld's answer, for my attention was distracted by an unusual appearance a little farther down the hedge. There appeared to be a brown bush there, which seemed odd, to say the least of it, so early in the summer. I stepped along to investigate, but, at my advance, the brown bush withdrew itself precipitately, and faced me with a finger to its lips. It was Giraud.

Enjoining caution, he led the way round the shed until we were out of ear-shot.

"What were you doing there?" I asked.

"Exactly what you were doing—listening."

"But I was not there on purpose!"

"Ah!" said Giraud. "I was."

As always, I admired the man while disliking him. He looked me up and down with a sort of contemptuous disfavour.

"You didn't help matters by butting in. I might have heard something useful in a minute. What have you done with your old fossil?"

“Monsieur Poirot has gone to Paris,” I replied coldly.

Giraud snapped his fingers disdainfully. “So he has gone to Paris, has he? Well, a good thing. The longer he stays there the better. But what does he think he will find there?”

I thought I read in the question a tinge of uneasiness. I drew myself up.

“That I am not at liberty to say,” I said quietly.

Giraud subjected me to a piercing stare.

“He has probably enough sense not to tell you,” he remarked rudely. “Good afternoon. I’m busy.” And with that he turned on his heel, and left me without ceremony.

Matters seemed at a standstill at the Villa Geneviève. Giraud evidently did not desire my company and, from what I had seen, it seemed fairly certain that Jack Renauld did not either.

I went back to the town, had an enjoyable bathe, and returned to the hotel. I turned in early, wondering whether the following day would bring forth anything of interest.

I was wholly unprepared for what it did bring forth. I was eating my petit déjeuner in the dining room, when the waiter, who had been talking to someone outside, came back in obvious excitement. He hesitated for a minute, fidgeting with his napkin, and then burst out:

“Monsieur will pardon me, but he is connected, is he not, with the affair at the Villa Geneviève?”

“Yes,” I said eagerly. “Why?”

“Monsieur has not heard the news, though?”

“What news?”

“That there has been another murder there last night!”

“What?”

Leaving my breakfast, I caught up my hat and ran as fast as I could. Another murder—and Poirot away! What fatality. But who had been murdered?

I dashed in at the gate. A group of servants were in the drive, talking and gesticulating. I caught hold of Françoise.

“What has happened?”

“Oh, monsieur! monsieur! Another death! It is terrible. There is a curse upon the house. But yes, I say it, a curse! They should send for Monsieur le Curé to bring some holy water. Never will I sleep another night under that roof. It might be my turn, who knows?”

She crossed herself.

“Yes,” I cried, “but who has been killed?”

“Do I know—me? A man—a stranger. They found him up there—in the shed—not a hundred yards from where they found poor Monsieur. And that is not all. He is stabbed—stabbed to the heart with the same dagger!”

Fourteen

THE SECOND BODY

Waiting for no more, I turned and ran up the path to the shed. The two men on guard there stood aside to let me pass and, filled with excitement, I entered.

The light was dim, the place was a mere rough wooden erection to keep old pots and tools in. I had entered impetuously, but on the threshold I checked myself, fascinated by the spectacle before me.

Giraud was on his hands and knees, a pocket torch in his hand with which he was examining every inch of the ground. He looked up with a frown at my entrance, then his face relaxed a little in a sort of good-humoured contempt.

“There he is,” said Giraud, flashing his torch to the far corner.

I stepped across.

The dead man lay straight upon his back. He was of medium height, swarthy of complexion, and possibly about fifty years of age. He was neatly dressed in a dark blue suit, well cut, and probably made by an expensive tailor, but not new. His face was terribly convulsed, and on his left side, just over the heart, the hilt of a dagger stood up, black and shining. I recognized it. It was the same dagger I had seen reposing in the glass jar the preceding morning!

“I’m expecting the doctor any minute,” explained Giraud. “Although we hardly need him. There’s no doubt what the man died of. He was stabbed to the heart, and death must have been pretty well instantaneous.”

“When was it done? Last night?”

Giraud shook his head.

“Hardly. I don’t lay down the law on medical evidence, but the man’s been dead well over twelve hours. When do you say you last saw that dagger?”

“About ten o’clock yesterday morning.”

“Then I should be inclined to fix the crime as being done not long after that.”

“But people were passing and repassing this shed continually.”

Giraud laughed disagreeably.

“You progress to a marvel! Who told you he was killed in this shed?”

“Well—” I felt flustered. “I—I assumed it.”

“Oh, what a fine detective! Look at him. Does a man stabbed to the heart fall like that—neatly with his feet together, and his arms to his sides? No. Again, does a man lie down on his back and permit himself to be stabbed without raising a hand to defend himself? It is absurd, is it not? But see here—and here—” He flashed the torch along the ground. I saw curious irregular marks in the soft dirt. “He was dragged here after he was dead. Half dragged, half carried by two people. Their tracks do not show on the hard ground outside, and here they have been careful to obliterate them; but one of the two was a woman, my young friend.”

“A woman?”

“Yes.”

“But if the tracks are obliterated, how do you know?”

“Because, blurred as they are, the prints of the woman’s shoe are unmistakable. Also, by this.” And, leaning forward, he drew something from the handle of the dagger and held it up for me to see. It was a woman’s long black hair, similar to the one Poirot had taken from the armchair in the library.

With a slightly ironic smile he wound it round the dagger again.

"We will leave things as they are as much as possible," he explained. "It pleases the examining magistrate. Well, do you notice anything else?"

I was forced to shake my head.

"Look at his hands."

I did. The nails were broken and discoloured and the skin was hard. It hardly enlightened me as much as I should have liked it to have done. I looked up at Giraud.

"They are not the hands of a gentleman," he said, answering my look. "On the contrary, his clothes are those of a well-to-do man. That is curious, is it not?"

"Very curious," I agreed.

"And none of his clothing is marked. What do we learn from that? This man was trying to pass himself off as other than he was. He was masquerading. Why? Did he fear something? Was he trying to escape by disguising himself? As yet we do not know, but one thing we do know—he was as anxious to conceal his identity as we are to discover it."

He looked down at the body again.

"As before, there are no fingerprints on the handle of the dagger. The murderer again wore gloves."

"You think, then, that the murderer was the same in both cases?" I asked eagerly.

Giraud became inscrutable.

"Never mind what I think. We shall see. Marchaud!"

The sergent de ville appeared at the door.

"Monsieur?"

“Why is Madame Renauld not here? I sent for her a quarter of an hour ago.”

“She is coming up the path now, monsieur, and her son with her.”

“Good. I only want one at a time, though.”

Marchaud saluted and disappeared again. A moment later he reappeared with Mrs. Renauld.

“Here is Madame.”

Giraud came forward with a curt bow.

“This way, madame.” He led her across, and then, standing suddenly aside, “Here is the man. Do you know him?”

And as he spoke, his eyes, gimlet-like, bored into her face, seeking to read her mind, noting every indication of her manner.

But Mrs. Renauld remained perfectly calm—too calm, I felt. She looked down at the corpse almost without interest, certainly without any sign of agitation or recognition.

“No,” she said. “I have never seen him in my life. He is quite a stranger to me.”

“You are sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“You do not recognize in him one of your assailants, for instance?”

“No.” She seemed to hesitate, as though struck by the idea. “No, I do not think so. Of course they wore beards—false ones the examining magistrate thought—but still, no.” Now she seemed to make her mind up definitely. “I am sure neither of the two was this man.”

“Very well, madame. That is all, then.”

She stepped out with head erect, the sun flashing on the silver threads in her hair. Jack Renauld succeeded her. He, too, failed to identify the man in a completely natural manner.

Giraud merely grunted. Whether he was pleased or chagrined I could not tell. He called to Marchaud.

“You have got the other there?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Bring her in, then.”

“The other” was Madame Daubreuil. She came indignantly, protesting with vehemence.

“I object, monsieur! This is an outrage! What have I to do with all this?”

“Madame,” said Giraud brutally, “I am investigating not one murder, but two murders! For all I know you may have committed them both.”

“How dare you?” she cried. “How dare you insult me by such a wild accusation! It is infamous!”

“Infamous, is it? What about this?” Stooping, he again detached the hair, and held it up. “Do you see this, madame?” He advanced towards her. “You permit that I see whether it matches?”

With a cry she started backwards, white to the lips.

“It is false, I swear it. I know nothing of the crime—of either crime. Anyone who says I do lies! Ah, mon Dieu, what shall I do?”

“Calm yourself, madame,” said Giraud coldly. “No one has accused you as yet. But you will do well to answer my questions without more ado.”

“Anything you wish, monsieur.”

“Look at the dead man. Have you ever seen him before?”

Drawing nearer, a little of the colour creeping back to her face, Madame Daubreuil looked down at the victim with a certain amount of interest and curiosity. Then she shook her head.

“I do not know him.”

It seemed impossible to doubt her, the words came so naturally. Giraud dismissed her with a nod of the head.

“You are letting her go?” I asked in a low voice. “Is that wise? Surely that black hair is from her head.”

“I do not need teaching my business,” said Giraud dryly. “She is under surveillance. I have no wish to arrest her as yet.”

Then, frowning, he gazed down at the body.

“Should you say that was a Spanish type at all?” he asked suddenly.

I considered the face carefully.

“No,” I said at last. “I should put him down as a Frenchman most decidedly.”

Giraud gave a grunt of dissatisfaction.

“Same here.”

He stood there for a moment, then with an imperative gesture he waved me aside, and once more, on hands and knees, he continued his search of the floor of the shed. He was marvellous. Nothing escaped him. Inch by inch he went over the floor, turning over pots, examining old sacks. He pounced on a bundle by the door, but it proved to be only a ragged coat and trousers, and he flung it down again with a snarl. Two pairs of old gloves interested him, but in the end he shook his head and laid them aside. Then he went back to the pots, methodically turning them over one by one. In the end he rose to his feet, and shook his head thoughtfully. He seemed baffled and perplexed. I think he had forgotten my presence.

But at that moment a stir and bustle was heard outside, and our old friend, the examining magistrate, accompanied by his clerk and M. Bex, with the doctor behind them, came bustling in.

“But this is extraordinary, Monsieur Giraud,” cried M. Hautet. “Another crime! Ah, we have not got to the bottom of this case. There is some deep mystery here. But who is the victim this time?”

“That is just what nobody can tell us, monsieur. He has not been identified.”

“Where is the body?” asked the doctor.

Giraud moved aside a little.

“There in the corner. He has been stabbed to the heart, as you see. And with the dagger that was stolen yesterday morning. I fancy that the murder followed hard upon the theft—but that is for you to say. You can handle the dagger freely—there are no fingerprints on it.”

The doctor knelt down by the dead man, and Giraud turned to the examining magistrate.

“A pretty little problem, is it not? But I shall solve it.”

“And so no one can identify him,” mused the magistrate. “Could it possibly be one of the assassins? They may have fallen out among themselves.”

Giraud shook his head.

“The man is a Frenchman—I would take my oath on that—”

But at that moment they were interrupted by the doctor, who was sitting back on his heels with a perplexed expression.

“You say he was killed yesterday morning?”

“I fix it by the theft of the dagger,” explained Giraud. “He may, of course, have been killed later in the day.”

“Later in the day? Fiddlesticks! This man has been dead at least forty-eight hours, and probably longer.”

We stared at each other in blank amazement.

Fifteen

A PHOTOGRAPH

The doctor’s words were so surprising that we were all momentarily taken aback. Here was a man stabbed with a dagger which we knew to have been stolen only twenty-four hours previously, and yet Dr. Durand asserted positively that he had been dead at least forty-eight hours! The whole thing was fantastic to the last extreme.

We were still recovering from the surprise of the doctor’s announcement, when a telegram was brought to me. It had been sent up from the hotel to the villa. I tore it open. It was from Poirot, and announced his return by the train arriving at Merlinville at 12:28.

I looked at my watch and saw that I had just time to get comfortably to the station and meet him there. I felt that it was of the utmost importance that he should know at once of the new and startling developments in the case.

Evidently, I reflected, Poirot had had no difficulty in finding what he wanted in Paris. The quickness of his return proved that. Very few hours had sufficed. I wondered how he would take the exciting news I had to impart.

The train was some minutes late, and I strolled aimlessly up and down the platform, until it occurred to me that I might pass the time by asking a few questions as to who had left Merlinville by the last train on the evening of the tragedy.

I approached the chief porter, an intelligent-looking man, and had little difficulty in persuading him to enter upon the subject. It was a disgrace to the police, he hotly affirmed, that such brigands or assassins should be allowed to go about unpunished. I hinted that there was some possibility they might have left by the midnight train, but he negatived the idea decidedly. He would have noticed two foreigners—he was sure of it. Only about twenty people had left by the train, and he could not have failed to observe them.

I do not know what put the idea into my head—possibly it was the deep anxiety underlying Marthe Daubreuil’s tones—but I asked suddenly:

“Young Monsieur Renauld—he did not leave by that train, did he?”

“Ah, no, monsieur. To arrive and start off again within half an hour, it would not be amusing, that!”

I stared at the man, the significance of his words almost escaping me. Then I saw.

“You mean,” I said, my heart beating a little, “that Monsieur Jack Renauld arrived at Merlinville that evening?”

“But yes, monsieur. By the last train arriving the other way, the 11:40.”

My brain whirled. That, then, was the reason of Marthe’s poignant anxiety. Jack Renauld had been in Merlinville on the night of the crime. But why had he not said so? Why, on the contrary, had he led us to believe that he had remained in Cherbourg? Remembering his frank boyish countenance, I could hardly bring myself to believe that he had any connexion with the crime. Yet why this silence on his part about so vital a matter? One thing was certain, Marthe had known all along. Hence her anxiety, and her eager questioning of Poirot as to whether anyone was suspected.

My cogitations were interrupted by the arrival of the train, and in another moment I was greeting Poirot. The little man was radiant. He beamed and vociferated and, forgetting my English reluctance, embraced me warmly on the platform.

“Mon cher ami, I have succeeded—but succeeded to a marvel!”

“Indeed? I’m delighted to hear it. Have you heard the latest here?”

“How would you that I should hear anything? There have been some developments, eh? The brave Giraud, he has made an arrest? Or even arrests, perhaps? Ah, but I will make him look foolish, that one! But where are you taking me, my friend? Do we not go to the hotel? It is necessary that I attend to my moustaches—they are deplorably limp from the heat of travelling. Also, without doubt, there is dust on my coat. And my tie, that I must rearrange."

I cut short his remonstrances.

"My dear Poirot—never mind all that. We must go to the villa at once. There has been another murder!"

Never have I seen a man so flabbergasted. His jaw dropped. All the jauntiness went out of his bearing. He stared at me openmouthed.

"What is that you say? Another murder? Ah, then, but I am all wrong. I have failed. Giraud may mock himself at me—he will have reason!"

"You did not expect it, then?"

"I? Not the least in the world. It demolishes my theory—it ruins everything—it—Ah, no!" He stopped dead, thumping himself on the chest. "It is impossible. I cannot be wrong! The facts, taken methodically, and in their proper order, admit of only one explanation. I must be right! I am right!"

"But then—"

He interrupted me.

"Wait, my friend. I must be right, therefore this new murder is impossible unless—unless—Oh, wait, I implore you. Say no word."

He was silent for a moment or two, then resuming his normal manner, he said in a quiet assured voice:

"The victim is a man of middle age. His body was found in the locked shed near the scene of the crime and had been dead at least forty-eight hours. And it is most probable that he was stabbed in a similar manner to Mr. Renauld, though not necessarily in the back."

It was my turn to gape—and gape I did. In all my knowledge of Poirot he had never done anything so amazing as this. And, almost inevitably, a doubt crossed my mind.

“Poirot,” I cried, “you’re pulling my leg. You’ve heard all about it already.”

He turned his earnest gaze upon me reproachfully.

“Would I do such a thing? I assure you that I have heard nothing whatsoever. Did you not observe the shock your news was to me?”

“But how on earth could you know all that?”

“I was right, then? But I knew it. The little grey cells, my friend, the little grey cells! They told me. Thus, and in no other way, could there have been a second death. Now tell me all. If we go round to the left here, we can take a short cut across the golf links which will bring us to the back of the Villa Geneviève much more quickly.”

As we walked, taking the way he had indicated, I recounted all I knew. Poirot listened attentively.

“The dagger was in the wound, you say? That is curious. You are sure it was the same one?”

“Absolutely certain. That’s what makes it so impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible. There may have been two daggers.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Surely that is in the highest degree unlikely? It would be a most extraordinary coincidence.”

“You speak as usual, without reflection, Hastings. In some cases two identical weapons would be highly improbable. But not here. This particular weapon was a war souvenir which was made to Jack Renauld’s orders. It is really highly unlikely, when you come to think of it, that he should have had only one made. Very probably he would have another for his own use.”

“But nobody has mentioned such a thing,” I objected.

A hint of the lecturer crept into Poirot’s tone.

“My friend, in working upon a case, one does not take into account only the things that are ‘mentioned.’ There is no reason to mention many things which may be important. Equally, there is often an excellent reason for not mentioning them. You can take your choice of the two motives.”

I was silent, impressed in spite of myself. Another few minutes brought us to the famous shed. We found all our friends there, and after an interchange of polite amenities, Poirot began his task.

Having watched Giraud at work, I was keenly interested. Poirot bestowed but a cursory glance on the surroundings. The only thing he examined was the ragged coat and trousers by the door. A disdainful smile rose to Giraud’s lips, and, as though noting it, Poirot flung the bundle down again.

“Old clothes of the gardener’s?” he queried.

“Exactly,” said Giraud.

Poirot knelt down by the body. His fingers were rapid but methodical. He examined the texture of the clothes, and satisfied himself that there were no marks on them. The boots he subjected to special care, also the dirty and broken fingernails. While examining the latter he threw a quick question at Giraud.

“You saw them?”

“Yes, I saw them,” replied the other. His face remained inscrutable.

Suddenly Poirot stiffened.

“Dr. Durand!”

“Yes?” The doctor came forward.

“There is foam on the lips. You observed it?”

“I didn’t notice it, I must admit.”

“But you observe it now?”

“Oh, certainly.”

Poirot again shot a question at Giraud.

“You noticed it without doubt?”

The other did not reply. Poirot proceeded. The dagger had been withdrawn from the wound. It reposed in a glass jar by the side of the body. Poirot examined it, then he studied the wound closely. When he looked up, his eyes were excited and shone with the green light I knew so well.

“It is a strange wound, this! It has not bled. There is no stain on the clothes. The blade of the dagger is slightly discoloured, that is all. What do you think, monsieur le docteur?”

“I can only say that it is most abnormal.”

“It is not abnormal at all. It is most simple. The man was stabbed after he was dead.” And, stilling the clamour of voices that arose with a wave of his hand, Poirot turned to Giraud and added: “M. Giraud agrees with me, do you not, monsieur?”

Whatever Giraud’s real belief, he accepted the position without moving a muscle. Calmly and almost scornfully he replied:

“Certainly I agree.”

The murmur of surprise and interest broke out again.

“But what an idea!” cried M. Hautet. “To stab a man after he is dead! Barbaric! Unheard of! Some unappeasable hate perhaps.”

“No,” said Poirot. “I should fancy it was done quite cold-bloodedly—to create an impression.”

“What impression?”

“The impression it nearly did create,” returned Poirot oracularly.

M. Bex had been thinking.

“How, then, was the man killed?”

“He was not killed. He died. He died, if I am not much mistaken, of an epileptic fit!”

This statement of Poirot’s again aroused considerable excitement. Dr. Durand knelt down again, and made a searching examination. At last he rose to his feet.

“Monsieur Poirot, I am inclined to believe that you are correct in your assertion. I was misled to begin with. The incontrovertible fact that the man had been stabbed distracted my attention from any other indications.”

Poirot was the hero of the hour. The examining magistrate was profuse in compliments. Poirot responded gracefully, and then excused himself on the pretext that neither he nor I had yet lunched, and that he wished to repair the ravages of the journey. As we were about to leave the shed, Giraud approached us.

“One other thing, Monsieur Poirot,” he said, in his suave mocking voice. “We found this coiled round the handle of the dagger—a woman’s hair.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “A woman’s hair? What woman’s, I wonder?”

“I wonder also,” said Giraud. Then, with a bow, he left us.

“He was insistent, the good Giraud,” said Poirot thoughtfully, as we walked towards the hotel. “I wonder in what direction he hopes to mislead me? A woman’s hair—h’m!”

We lunched heartily, but I found Poirot somewhat distrait and inattentive. Afterwards we went up to our sitting room, and there I begged him to tell me something of his mysterious journey to Paris.

“Willingly, my friend. I went to Paris to find this.”

He took from his pocket a small faded newspaper cutting. It was the reproduction of a woman’s photograph. He handed it to me. I uttered an exclamation.

“You recognize it, my friend?”

I nodded. Although the photo obviously dated from very many years back, and the hair was dressed in a different style, the likeness was unmistakable.

“Madame Daubreuil!” I exclaimed.

Poirot shook his head with a smile.

“Not quite correct, my friend. She did not call herself by that name in those days. That is a picture of the notorious Madame Beroldy!”

Madame Beroldy! In a flash the whole thing came back to me. The murder trial that had evoked such worldwide interest.

The Beroldy Case.

Sixteen

THE BEROLDY CASE

Some twenty years or so before the opening of the present story, Monsieur Arnold Beroldy, a native of Lyons, arrived in Paris accompanied by his pretty wife and their little daughter, a mere babe. Monsieur Beroldy was a junior partner in a firm of wine merchants, a stout middle-aged man, fond of the good things of life, devoted to his charming wife, and altogether unremarkable in every way. The firm in which Monsieur Beroldy was a partner was a small one and, although doing well, it did not yield a large income to the junior partner. The Beroldys had a small apartment and lived in a very modest fashion to begin with.

But, unremarkable though Monsieur Beroldy might be, his wife was plentifully gilded with the brush of Romance. Young and good-looking, and gifted withal with a singular charm of manner, Madame Beroldy at once created a stir in the quarter, especially when it began to be whispered that some interesting mystery surrounded her birth. It was rumoured that she was the illegitimate daughter of a Russian Grand Duke. Others asserted that it was an Austrian Archduke, and that the union was legal, though morganatic. But all stories agreed upon one point, that Jeanne Beroldy was the centre of an interesting mystery.

Among the friends and acquaintances of the Beroldys was a young lawyer, Georges Conneau. It was soon evident that the fascinating Jeanne had completely enslaved his heart. Madame Beroldy encouraged the young man in a discreet fashion, but always being careful to affirm her complete devotion to her middle-aged husband. Nevertheless, many spiteful persons did not hesitate to declare that young Conneau was her lover—and not the only one!

When the Beroldys had been in Paris about three months, another personage came upon the scene. This was Mr. Hiram P. Trapp, a native of the United States, and extremely wealthy. Introduced to the charming and mysterious Madame Beroldy, he fell a prompt victim to her fascinations. His admiration was obvious, though strictly respectful.

About this time, Madame Beroldy became more outspoken in her confidences. To several friends, she declared herself greatly worried on her husband's behalf. She explained that he had been drawn into several schemes of a political nature, and also referred to some important papers that had been entrusted to him for safekeeping and which concerned a "secret" of far-reaching European importance. They had been entrusted to his custody to throw pursuers off the track, but Madame Beroldy was nervous, having recognized several important members of the Revolutionary Circle in Paris.

On the 28th day of November the blow fell. The woman who came daily to clean and cook for the Beroldys was surprised to find the door of the apartment standing wide open. Hearing faint moans issuing from the bedroom, she went in. A terrible sight met her eyes. Madame Beroldy lay on the floor bound hand and foot, uttering feeble moans, having managed to free her mouth from a gag. On the bed was Monsieur Beroldy, lying in a pool of blood, with a knife driven through his heart.

Madame Beroldy's story was clear enough. Suddenly awakened from sleep, she had discerned two masked men bending over her. Stifling her cries, they had bound and gagged her. They had then demanded of Monsieur Beroldy the famous "secret."

But the intrepid wine merchant refused point-blank to accede to their request. Angered by his refusal, one of the men incontinently stabbed him through the heart. With the dead man's keys, they had opened the safe in the corner, and had carried away with them a mass of papers. Both men were heavily bearded, and had worn masks, but Madame Beroldy declared positively that they were Russians.

The affair created an immense sensation. Time went on, and the mysterious bearded men were never traced. And then, just as public interest was beginning to die down, a startling development occurred: Madame Beroldy was arrested and charged with the murder of her husband.

The trial, when it came on, aroused widespread interest. The youth and beauty of the accused, and her mysterious history, were sufficient to make of it a cause célèbre.

It was proved beyond doubt that Jeanne Beroldy's parents were a highly respectable and prosaic couple, fruit merchants, who lived on the outskirts of Lyons. The Russian Grand Duke, the court intrigues, and the political schemes—all the stories current were traced back to the lady herself! Remorselessly, the whole story of her life was laid bare. The motive for the murder was found in Mr. Hiram P. Trapp. Mr. Trapp did his best, but, relentlessly and agilely cross-questioned, he was forced to admit that he loved the lady, and that, had she been free, he would have asked her to be his wife. The fact that the relations between them were admittedly platonic strengthened the case against the accused. Debarred from becoming his mistress by the simple honourable nature of the man, Jeanne Beroldy had conceived the monstrous project of ridding herself of her elderly, undistinguished husband and becoming the wife of the rich American.

Throughout, Madame Beroldy confronted her accusers with complete sangfroid and self-possession. Her story never varied. She continued to declare strenuously that she was of royal birth and that she had been substituted for the daughter of the fruit seller at an early age. Absurd and completely unsubstantiated as these statements were, a great number of people believed implicitly in their truth.

But the prosecution was implacable. It denounced the masked "Russians" as a myth, and asserted that the crime had been committed by Madame Beroldy and her lover, Georges Conneau. A warrant was issued for the arrest of the latter, but he had wisely disappeared. Evidence showed that the bonds which secured Madame Beroldy were so loose that she could easily have freed herself.

And then, towards the close of the trial, a letter, posted in Paris, was sent to the Public Prosecutor. It was from Georges Conneau and, without revealing his whereabouts, it contained a full confession of the crime. He declared that he had indeed struck the fatal blow at Madame Beroldy's instigation. The crime had been planned between them. Believing that her husband ill-treated her, and maddened by his own passion for her, a passion which he believed her to return, he had planned the crime and struck the fatal blow that should free the woman he loved from a hateful bondage. Now, for the first time, he learnt of Mr. Hiram P. Trapp, and realized that the woman he loved had betrayed him! Not for his sake did she wish to be free, but in order to marry the wealthy American. She had used him as a cat’s paw, and now, in his jealous rage, he turned and denounced her, declaring that throughout he had acted at her instigation.

And then Madame Beroldy proved herself the remarkable woman she undoubtedly was. Without hesitation, she dropped her previous defence, and admitted that the “Russians” were a pure invention on her part. The real murderer was Georges Conneau. Maddened by passion, he had committed the crime, vowing that if she did not keep silence he would exact a terrible vengeance from her. Terrified by his threats, she had consented—also fearing it likely that if she told the truth she might be accused of conniving at the crime. But she had steadfastly refused to have anything more to do with her husband’s murderer, and it was in revenge for this attitude on her part that he had written this letter accusing her. She swore solemnly that she had had nothing to do with the planning of the crime, that she had awoke on that memorable night to find Georges Conneau standing over her, the bloodstained knife in his hand.

It was a touch-and-go affair. Madame Beroldy’s story was hardly credible. But her address to the jury was a masterpiece. The tears streaming down her face, she spoke of her child, of her woman’s honour—of her desire to keep her reputation untarnished for the child’s sake. She admitted that, Georges Conneau having been her lover, she might perhaps be held morally responsible for the crime—but, before God, nothing more! She knew that she had committed a grave fault in not denouncing Conneau to the law, but she declared in a broken voice that that was a thing no woman could have done. She had loved him! Could she let her hand be the one to send him to the guillotine? She had been guilty of much, but she was innocent of the terrible crime imputed to her.

However that may have been, her eloquence and personality won the day. Madame Beroldy, amidst a scene of unparalleled excitement, was acquitted.

Despite the utmost endeavours of the police, Georges Conneau was never traced. As for Madame Beroldy, nothing more was heard of her. Taking the child with her, she left Paris to begin a new life.

Seventeen

WE MAKE FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

I have set down the Beroldy case in full. Of course all the details did not present themselves to my memory as I have recounted them here. Nevertheless, I recalled the case fairly accurately. It had attracted a great deal of interest at the time, and had been fully reported by the English papers, so that it did not need much effort of memory on my part to recollect the salient details.

Just for the moment, in my excitement, it seemed to clear up the whole matter. I admit that I am impulsive, and Poirot deplores my custom of jumping to conclusions, but I think I had some excuse in this instance. The remarkable way in which this discovery justified Poirot’s point of view struck me at once.

“Poirot,” I said, “I congratulate you. I see everything now.”

Poirot lit one of his little cigarettes with his usual precision. Then he looked up.

“And since you see everything now, mon ami, what exactly is it that you see?”

“Why, that it was Madame Daubreuil—Beroldy—who murdered Mr. Renauld. The similarity of the two cases proves that beyond a doubt.”

“Then you consider that Madame Beroldy was wrongly acquitted? That in actual fact she was guilty of connivance in her husband’s murder?”

I opened my eyes wide.

“Of course! Don’t you?”

Poirot walked to the end of the room, absentmindedly straightened a chair, and then said thoughtfully:

“Yes, that is my opinion. But there is no ‘of course’ about it, my friend. Technically speaking, Madame Beroldy is innocent.”

“Of that crime, perhaps. But not of this.”

Poirot sat down again, and regarded me, his thoughtful air more marked than ever.

“So it is definitely your opinion, Hastings, that Madame Daubreuil murdered Monsieur Renauld?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He shot the question at me with such suddenness that I was taken aback.

“Why?” I stammered. “Why? Oh, because—” I came to a stop.

Poirot nodded his head at me.

“You see, you come to a stumbling block at once. Why should Madame Daubreuil (I shall call her that for clearness’ sake) murder Monsieur Renauld? We can find no shadow of a motive. She does not benefit by his death; considered as either mistress or blackmailer she stands to lose. You cannot have a murder without motive. The first crime was different—there we had a rich lover waiting to step into her husband’s shoes.”

“Money is not the only motive for murder,” I objected.

“True,” agreed Poirot placidly. “There are two others, the crime passionnel is one. And there is the third rare motive, murder for an idea, which implies some form of mental derangement on the part of the murderer. Homicidal mania and religious fanaticism belong to that class. We can rule it out here.”

“But what about the crime passionnel? Can you rule that out? If Madame Daubreuil was Renauld’s mistress, if she found that his affection was cooling, or if her jealousy was aroused in any way, might she not have struck him down in a moment of anger?”

Poirot shook his head.

“If—I say if, you note—Madame Daubreuil was Renauld’s mistress, he had not had time to tire of her. And in any case you mistake her character. She is a woman who can simulate great emotional stress. She is a magnificent actress. But, looked at dispassionately, her life disproves her appearance. Throughout, if we examine it, she has been cold-blooded and calculating in her motives and actions. It was not to link her life with that of her young lover that she connived at her husband’s murder. The rich American, for whom she probably did not care a button, was her objective. If she committed a crime, she would always do so for gain. Here there was no gain. Besides, how do you account for the digging of the grave? That was a man’s work.”

“She might have had an accomplice,” I suggested, unwilling to relinquish my belief.

“I pass to another objection. You have spoken of the similarity between the two crimes. Wherein does that lie, my friend?”

I stared at him in astonishment.

“Why, Poirot, it was you who remarked on that! The story of the masked men, the ‘secret,’ the papers!”

Poirot smiled a little.

“Do not be so indignant, I beg of you. I repudiate nothing. The similarity of the two stories links the two cases together inevitably. But reflect now on something very curious. It is not Madame Daubreuil who tells us this tale—if it were, all would indeed be plain sailing—it is Madame Renauld. Is she then in league with the other?”

"I can't believe that," I said slowly. "If she is, she must be the most consummate actress the world has ever known."

"Ta-ta-ta!" said Poirot impatiently. "Again you have the sentiment and not the logic! If it is necessary for a criminal to be a consummate actress, then by all means assume her to be one. But is it necessary? I do not believe Mrs. Renauld to be in league with Madame Daubreuil for several reasons, some of which I have already enumerated to you. The others are self-evident. Therefore, that possibility eliminated, we draw very near to the truth, which is, as always, very curious and interesting."

"Poirot," I cried, "what more do you know?"

"Mon ami, you must make your own deductions. You have 'access to the facts.' Concentrate your grey cells. Reason—not like Giraud—but like Hercule Poirot!"

"But are you sure?"

"My friend, in many ways I have been an imbecile. But at last I see clearly."

"You know everything?"

"I have discovered what Monsieur Renauld sent for me to discover."

"And you know the murderer?"

"I know one murderer."

"What do you mean?"

"We talk a little at cross-purposes. There are here not one crime, but two. The first I have solved, the second—eh bien, I will confess, I am not sure!"

"But, Poirot, I thought you said the man in the shed had died a natural death?"

"Ta-ta-ta!" Poirot made his favourite ejaculation of impatience. "Still you do not understand. One may have a crime without a murderer, but for two crimes it is essential to have two bodies.”

His remark struck me as so peculiarly lacking in lucidity that I looked at him in some anxiety. But he appeared perfectly normal. Suddenly he rose and strolled to the window.

“Here he is,” he observed.

“Who?”

“Monsieur Jack Renauld. I sent a note up to the Villa to ask him to come here.”

That changed the course of my ideas, and I asked Poirot if he knew that Jack Renauld had been in Merlinville on the night of the crime. I had hoped to catch my astute little friend napping, but as usual he was omniscient. He, too, had inquired at the station.

“And without doubt we are not original in the idea, Hastings. The excellent Giraud, he also has probably made his inquiries.”

“You don’t think—” I said, and then stopped. “Ah, no, it would be too horrible!”

Poirot looked inquiringly at me, but I said no more. It had just occurred to me that though there were seven women, directly and indirectly connected with the case—Mrs. Renauld, Madame Daubreuil and her daughter, the mysterious visitor, and the three servants—there was, with the exception of old Auguste, who could hardly count, only one man—Jack Renauld. And a man must have dug the grave.

I had no time to develop farther the appalling idea that had occurred to me, for Jack Renauld was ushered into the room.

Poirot greeted him in businesslike manner.

“Take a seat, monsieur. I regret infinitely to derange you, but you will perhaps understand that the atmosphere of the villa is not too congenial to me. Monsieur Giraud and I do not see eye to eye about everything. His politeness to me has not been striking, and you will comprehend that I do not intend any little discoveries I may make to benefit him in any way."

"Exactly, Monsieur Poirot," said the lad. "That fellow Giraud is an ill-conditioned brute, and I'd be delighted to see someone score at his expense."

"Then I may ask a little favour of you?"

"Certainly."

"I will ask you to go to the railway station and take a train to the next station along the line, Abbalac. Ask at the cloakroom whether two foreigners deposited a valise there on the night of the murder. It is a small station, and they are almost certain to remember. Will you do this?"

"Of course I will," said the boy, mystified, though ready for the task.

"I and my friend, you comprehend, have business elsewhere," explained Poirot. "There is a train in a quarter of an hour, and I will ask you not to return to the villa, as I have no wish for Giraud to get an inkling of your errand."

"Very well, I will go straight to the station."

He rose to his feet. Poirot's voice stopped him:

"One moment, Monsieur Renauld, there is one little matter that puzzles me. Why did you not mention to Monsieur Hautet this morning that you were in Merlinville on the night of the crime?"

Jack Renauld's face went crimson. With an effort he controlled himself.

"You have made a mistake. I was in Cherbourg as I told the examining magistrate this morning."

Poirot looked at him, his eyes narrowed, catlike, until they only showed a gleam of green.

“Then it is a singular mistake that I have made there—for it is shared by the station staff. They say you arrived by the 11:40 train.”

For a moment Jack Renauld hesitated, then he made up his mind.

“And if I did? I suppose you do not mean to accuse me of participating in my father’s murder?” He asked the question haughtily, his head thrown back.

“I should like an explanation of the reason that brought you here.”

“That is simple enough. I came to see my fiancée, Mademoiselle Daubreuil. I was on the eve of a long voyage, uncertain as to when I should return. I wished to see her before I went, to assure her of my unchanging devotion.”

“And did you see her?” Poirot’s eyes never left the other’s face.

There was an appreciable pause before Renauld replied. Then he said:

“Yes.”

“And afterwards?”

“I found I had missed the last train. I walked to St. Beauvais, where I knocked up a garage and got a car to take me back to Cherbourg.”

“St. Beauvais? That is fifteen kilometres. A long walk, M. Renauld.”

“I—I felt like walking.”

Poirot bowed his head as a sign that he accepted the explanation. Jack Renauld took up his hat and cane and departed. In a trice Poirot jumped to his feet.

“Quick, Hastings. We will go after him.”

Keeping a discreet distance behind our quarry, we followed him through the streets of Merlinville. But when Poirot saw that he took the turning to the station he checked himself.

“All is well. He has taken the bait. He will go to Abbalac, and will inquire for the mythical valise left by the mythical foreigners. Yes, mon ami, all that was a little invention of my own.”

“You wanted him out of the way!” I exclaimed.

“Your penetration is amazing, Hastings! Now, if you please, we will go up to the Villa Geneviève.”

Eighteen

GIRAUD ACTS

Arrived at the villa, Poirot led the way up to the shed where the second body had been discovered. He did not, however, go in, but paused by the bench which I have mentioned before as being set some few yards away from it. After contemplating it for a moment or two, he paced carefully from it to the hedge which marked the boundary between the Villa Geneviève and the Villa Marguerite. Then he paced back again, nodding his head as he did so. Returning again to the hedge, he parted the bushes with his hands.

“With good fortune,” he remarked to me over his shoulder, “Mademoiselle Marthe may find herself in the garden. I desire to speak to her and would prefer not to call formally at the Villa Marguerite. Ah, all is well, there she is. Pst, Mademoiselle! Pst! Un moment, s’il vous plaît.”

I joined him at the moment that Marthe Daubreuil, looking slightly startled, came running up to the hedge at his call.

“A little word with you, mademoiselle, if it is permitted?”

“Certainly, Monsieur Poirot.”

Despite her acquiescence, her eyes looked troubled and afraid.

“Mademoiselle, do you remember running after me on the road the day that I came to your house with the examining magistrate? You asked me if anyone were suspected of the crime.”

“And you told me two Chileans.” Her voice sounded rather breathless, and her left hand stole to her breast.

“Will you ask me the same question again, mademoiselle?”

“What do you mean?”

“This. If you were to ask me that question again, I should give you a different answer. Someone is suspected—but not a Chilean.”

“Who?” The word came faintly between her parted lips.

“Monsieur Jack Renauld.”

“What?” It was a cry. “Jack? Impossible. Who dares to suspect him?”

“Giraud.”

“Giraud!” The girl’s face was ashy. “I am afraid of that man. He is cruel. He will—he will—” She broke off. There was courage gathering in her face, and determination. I realized in that moment that she was a fighter. Poirot, too, watched her intently.

“You know, of course, that he was here on the night of the murder?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied mechanically. “He told me.”

“It was unwise to have tried to conceal the fact,” ventured Poirot.

“Yes, yes,” she replied impatiently. “But we cannot waste time on regrets. We must find something to save him. He is innocent, of course; but that will not help him with a man like Giraud, who has his reputation to think of. He must arrest someone, and that someone will be Jack.”

“The facts will tell against him,” said Poirot. “You realize that?”

She faced him squarely.

“I am not a child, monsieur. I can be brave and look facts in the face. He is innocent, and we must save him.”

She spoke with a kind of desperate energy, then was silent, frowning as she thought.

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, observing her keenly, "is there not something that you are keeping back that you could tell us?"

She nodded perplexedly.

"Yes, there is something, but I hardly know whether you will believe it—it seems so absurd."

"At any rate, tell us, mademoiselle."

"It is this. M. Giraud sent for me, as an afterthought, to see if I could identify the man in there." She signed with her head towards the shed. "I could not. At least I could not at the moment. But since I have been thinking—"

"Well?"

"It seems so queer, and yet I am almost sure. I will tell you. On the morning of the day Monsieur Renauld was murdered, I was walking in the garden here, when I heard a sound of men's voices quarrelling. I pushed aside the bushes and looked through. One of the men was Monsieur Renauld and the other was a tramp, a dreadful-looking creature in filthy rags. He was alternately whining and threatening. I gathered he was asking for money, but at that moment maman called me from the house, and I had to go. That is all, only—I am almost sure that the tramp and the dead man in the shed are one and the same."

Poirot uttered an exclamation.

"But why did you not say at the time, mademoiselle?"

"Because at first it only struck me that the face was vaguely familiar in some way. The man was differently dressed, and apparently belonged to a superior station in life."

A voice called from the house.

"Maman," whispered Marthe: "I must go." And she slipped away through the trees.

“Come,” said Poirot and, taking my arm, turned in the direction of the villa.

“What do you really think?” I asked in some curiosity. “Was that story true, or did the girl make it up in order to divert suspicion from her lover?”

“It is a curious tale,” said Poirot, “but I believe it to be the absolute truth. Unwittingly, Mademoiselle Marthe told us the truth on another point—and incidentally gave Jack Renauld the lie. Did you notice his hesitation when I asked him if he saw Marthe Daubreuil on the night of the crime? He paused and then said ‘Yes.’ I suspected that he was lying. It was necessary for me to see Mademoiselle Marthe before he could put her on her guard. Three little words gave me the information I wanted. When I asked her if she knew that Jack Renauld was here that night, she answered, ‘He told me.’ Now, Hastings, what was Jack Renauld doing here on that eventful evening, and if he did not see Mademoiselle Marthe whom did he see?”

“Surely, Poirot,” I cried, aghast, “you cannot believe that a boy like that would murder his own father!”

“Mon ami,” said Poirot. “You continue to be of a sentimentality unbelievable! I have seen mothers who murdered their little children for the sake of the insurance money! After that, one can believe anything.”

“And the motive?”

“Money of course. Remember that Jack Renauld thought that he would come into half his father’s fortune at the latter’s death.”

“But the tramp. Where does he come in?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Giraud would say that he was an accomplice—an apache who helped young Renauld to commit the crime, and who was conveniently put out of the way afterwards.”

“But the hair round the dagger? The woman’s hair?”

“Ah!” said Poirot, smiling broadly. “That is the cream of Giraud’s little jest. According to him, it is not a woman’s hair at all. Remember that the youths of today wear their hair brushed straight back from the forehead with pomade or hair wash to make it lie flat. Consequently some of the hairs are of considerable length.”

“And you believe that too?”

“No,” said Poirot, with a curious smile. “For I know it to be the hair of a woman—and more, which woman!”

“Madame Daubreuil,” I announced positively.

“Perhaps,” said Poirot, regarding me quizzically. But I refused to allow myself to get annoyed.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked, as we entered the hall of the Villa Geneviève.

“I wish to make a search among the effects of M. Jack Renauld. That is why I had to get him out of the way for a few hours.”

Neatly and methodically, Poirot opened each drawer in turn, examined the contents, and returned them exactly to their places. It was a singularly dull and uninteresting proceeding. Poirot waded on through collars, pyjamas, and socks. A purring noise outside drew me to the window. Instantly I became galvanized into life.

“Poirot!” I cried. “A car has just driven up. Giraud is in it, and Jack Renauld, and two gendarmes.”

“Sacré tonnerre!” growled Poirot. “That animal of a Giraud, could he not wait? I shall not be able to replace the things in this last drawer with the proper method. Let us be quick.”

Unceremoniously he tumbled out the things on the floor, mostly ties and handkerchiefs. Suddenly with a cry of triumph Poirot pounced on something, a small square of cardboard, evidently a photograph. Thrusting it into his pocket, he returned the things pell-mell to the drawer, and seizing me by the arm dragged me out of the room and down the stairs. In the hall stood Giraud, contemplating his prisoner.

“Good afternoon, Monsieur Giraud,” said Poirot. “What have we here?”

Giraud nodded his head towards Jack.

“He was trying to make a getaway, but I was too sharp for him. He’s under arrest for the murder of his father, Monsieur Paul Renauld.”

Poirot wheeled round to confront the boy, who was leaning limply against the door, his face ashy pale.

“What do you say to that, jeune homme?”

Jack Renauld stared at him stonily.

“Nothing,” he said.

Nineteen

I USE MY GREY CELLS

I was dumbfounded. Up to the last, I had not been able to bring myself to believe Jack Renauld guilty. I had expected a ringing proclamation of his innocence when Poirot challenged him. But now, watching him as he stood, white and limp against the wall, and hearing the damning admission fall from his lips, I doubted no longer.

But Poirot had turned to Giraud.

“What are your grounds for arresting him?”

“Do you expect me to give them to you?”

“As a matter of courtesy, yes.”

Giraud looked at him doubtfully. He was torn between a desire to refuse rudely and the pleasure of triumphing over his adversary.

“You think I have made a mistake, I suppose?” he sneered.

“It would not surprise me,” replied Poirot, with a soupçon of malice.

Giraud’s face took on a deeper tinge of red.

“Eh bien, come in here. You shall judge for yourself.”

He flung open the door of the salon, and we passed in, leaving Jack Renauld in the care of the two other men.

“Now, Monsieur Poirot,” said Giraud, laying his hat on the table, and speaking with the utmost sarcasm, “I will treat you to a little lecture on detective work. I will show how we moderns work.”

“Bien!” said Poirot, composing himself to listen. “I will show you how admirably the Old Guard can listen.” And he leaned back and closed his eyes, opening them for a moment to remark: “Do not fear that I shall sleep. I will attend most carefully.”

“Of course,” began Giraud, “I soon saw through all that Chilean tomfoolery. Two men were in it—but they were not mysterious foreigners! All that was a blind.”

“Very creditable so far, my dear Giraud,” murmured Poirot. “Especially after that clever trick of theirs with the match and cigarette end.”

Giraud glared, but continued.

“A man must have been connected with the case, in order to dig the grave. There is no man who actually benefits by the crime, but there was a man who thought he would benefit. I heard of Jack Renauld’s quarrel with his father, and of the threats that he had used. The motive was established. Now as to means. Jack Renauld was in Merlinville that night. He concealed the fact—which turned suspicion into certainty. Then we found a second victim—stabbed with the same dagger. We know when that dagger was stolen. Captain Hastings here can fix the time. Jack Renauld, arriving from Cherbourg, was the only person who could have taken it. I have accounted for all the other members of the household.”

Poirot interrupted.

“You are wrong. There is one other person who could have taken the dagger.”

“You refer to Monsieur Stonor? He arrived at the front door, in an automobile which had brought him straight from Calais. Ah! believe me, I have looked into everything. Monsieur Jack Renauld arrived by train. An hour elapsed between his arrival and the moment when he presented himself at the house. Without doubt, he saw Captain Hastings and his companion leave the shed, slipped in himself and took the dagger, stabbed his accomplice in the shed—”

“Who was already dead!”

Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

“Possibly he did not observe that. He may have judged him to be sleeping. Without doubt they had a rendezvous. In any case he knew this apparent second murder would greatly complicate the case. It did.”

“But it could not deceive Monsieur Giraud,” murmured Poirot.

“You mock at me! But I will give you one last irrefutable proof. Madame Renauld’s story was false—a fabrication from beginning to end. We believe Madame Renauld to have loved her husband—yet she lied to shield his murderer. For whom will a woman lie? Sometimes for herself, usually for the man she loves, always for her children. That is the last—the irrefutable proof. You cannot get round it.”

Giraud paused, flushed and triumphant. Poirot regarded him steadily.

“That is my case,” said Giraud. “What have you to say to it?”

“Only that there is one thing you have failed to take into account.”

“What is that?”

“Jack Renauld was presumably acquainted with the planning out of the golf course. He knew that the body would be discovered almost at once, when they started to dig the bunker.”

Giraud laughed out loud.

“But it is idiotic what you say there! He wanted the body to be found! Until it was found, he could not presume death, and would have been unable to enter into his inheritance.”

I saw a quick flash of green in Poirot’s eyes as he rose to his feet.

“Then why bury it?” he asked very softly. “Reflect, Giraud. Since it was to Jack Renauld’s advantage that the body should be found without delay, why dig a grave at all?”

Giraud did not reply. The question found him unprepared. He shrugged his shoulders as though to intimate that it was of no importance.

Poirot moved towards the door. I followed him.

“There is one more thing that you have failed to take into account,” he said over his shoulder.

“What is that?”

“The piece of lead piping,” said Poirot, and left the room.

Jack Renauld still stood in the hall, with a white dumb face, but as we came out of the salon he looked up sharply. At the same moment there was the sound of a footfall on the staircase. Mrs. Renauld was descending it. At the sight of her son, standing between the two myrmidons of the law, she stopped as though petrified.

“Jack,” she faltered. “Jack, what is this?”

He looked up at her, his face set.

“They have arrested me, mother.”

“What?”

She uttered a piercing cry, and before anyone could get to her, swayed, and fell heavily. We both ran to her and lifted her up. In a minute Poirot stood up again.

“She has cut her head badly, on the corner of the stairs. I fancy there is slight concussion also. If Giraud wants a statement from her, he will have to wait. She will probably be unconscious for at least a week.”

Denise and Françoise had run to their mistress, and leaving her in their charge Poirot left the house. He walked with his head down, frowning thoughtfully. For some time I did not speak, but at last I ventured to put a question to him:

“Do you believe then, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, that Jack Renauld may not be guilty?”

Poirot did not answer at once, but after a long wait he said gravely:

“I do not know, Hastings. There is just a chance of it. Of course Giraud is all wrong—wrong from beginning to end. If Jack Renauld is guilty, it is in spite of Giraud’s arguments, not because of them. And the gravest indictment against him is known only to me.”

“What is that?” I asked, impressed.

“If you would use your grey cells, and see the whole case clearly as I do, you too would perceive it, my friend.”

This was what I called one of Poirot’s irritating answers. He went on, without waiting for me to speak:

“Let us walk this way to the sea. We will sit on that little mound there, overlooking the beach, and review the case. You shall know all that I know, but I would prefer that you should come at the truth by your own efforts—not by my leading you by the hand.”

We established ourselves on the grassy knoll as Poirot had suggested, looking out to sea.

“Think, my friend,” said Poirot’s voice encouragingly. “Arrange your ideas. Be methodical. Be orderly. There is the secret of success.”

I endeavoured to obey him, casting my mind back over all the details of the case. And suddenly I started as an idea of bewildering luminosity shot into my brain. Tremblingly I built up my hypothesis.

“You have a little idea, I see, mon ami! Capital. We progress.”

I sat up, and lit a pipe.

“Poirot,” I said, “it seems to me we have been strangely remiss. I say we—although I dare say I would be nearer the mark. But you must pay the penalty of your determined secrecy. So I say again we have been strangely remiss. There is someone we have forgotten.”

“And who is that?” inquired Poirot, with twinkling eyes.

“Georges Conneau!”

Twenty

AN AMAZING STATEMENT

The next moment Poirot embraced me warmly on the cheek.

“Enfin! You have arrived! And all by yourself. It is superb! Continue your reasoning. You are right. Decidedly we have done wrong to forget Georges Conneau.”

I was so flattered by the little man’s approval that I could hardly continue. But at last I collected my thoughts and went on.

“Georges Conneau disappeared twenty years ago, but we have no reason to believe that he is dead.”

“Aucunement,” agreed Poirot. “Proceed.”

“Therefore we will assume that he is alive.”

“Exactly.”

“Or that he was alive until recently.”

“De mieux en mieux!”

“We will presume,” I continued, my enthusiasm rising, “that he has fallen on evil days. He has become a criminal, an apache, a tramp—a what you will. He chances to come to Merlinville. There he finds the woman he has never ceased to love.”

“Eh eh! The sentimentality,” warned Poirot.

“Where one hates one also loves,” I quoted or misquoted. “At any rate he finds her there, living under an assumed name. But she has a new lover, the Englishman, Renauld. Georges Conneau, the memory of old wrongs rising in him, quarrels with this Renauld. He lies in wait for him as he comes to visit his mistress, and stabs him in the back. Then, terrified at what he has done, he starts to dig a grave. I imagine it likely that Madame Daubreuil comes out to look for her lover. She and Conneau have a terrible scene. He drags her into the shed, and there suddenly falls down in an epileptic fit. Now supposing Jack Renauld to appear. Madame Daubreuil tells him all, points out to him the dreadful consequences to her daughter if this scandal of the past is revived. His father's murderer is dead—let them do their best to hush it up. Jack Renauld consents—goes to the house and has an interview with his mother, winning her over to his point of view. Primed with the story that Madame Daubreuil has suggested to him, she permits herself to be gagged and bound. There, Poirot, what do you think of that?" I leaned back, flushed with the pride of successful reconstruction.

Poirot looked at me thoughtfully.

"I think that you should write for the Kinema, mon ami," he remarked at last.

"You mean—"

"It would mean a good film, the story that you have recounted to me there—but it bears no sort of resemblance to everyday life."

"I admit that I haven't gone into all the details, but—"

"You have gone farther—you have ignored them magnificently. What about the way the two men were dressed? Do you suggest that after stabbing his victim, Conneau removed his suit of clothes, donned it himself, and replaced the dagger?"

"I don't see that that matters," I objected rather huffily. "He may have obtained clothes and money from Madame Daubreuil by threats earlier in the day."

"By threats—eh? You seriously advance that supposition?"

"Certainly. He could have threatened to reveal her identity to the Renaulds, which would probably have put an end to all hopes of her daughter's marriage.”

“You are wrong, Hastings. He could not blackmail her, for she had the whip hand. Georges Conneau, remember, is still wanted for murder. A word from her and he is in danger of the guillotine.”

I was forced, rather reluctantly, to admit the truth of this.

“Your theory,” I remarked acidly, “is doubtless correct as to all the details?”

“My theory is the truth,” said Poirot quietly. “And the truth is necessarily correct. In your theory you made a fundamental error. You permitted your imagination to lead you astray with midnight assignations and passionate love scenes. But in investigating crime we must take our stand upon the commonplace. Shall I demonstrate my methods to you?”

“Oh, by all means let us have a demonstration!”

Poirot sat very upright and began, wagging his forefinger emphatically to emphasize his points:

“I will start as you started from the basic fact of Georges Conneau. Now the story told by Madame Beroldy in court as to the ‘Russians’ was admittedly a fabrication. If she was innocent of connivance in the crime, it was concocted by her, and by her only as she stated. If, on the other hand, she was not innocent, it might have been invented by either her or Georges Conneau.

“Now, in this case we are investigating, we meet the same tale. As I pointed out to you, the facts render it very unlikely that Madame Daubreuil inspired it. So we turn to the hypothesis that the story had its origin in the brain of Georges Conneau. Very good. Georges Conneau, therefore, planned the crime, with Mrs. Renauld as his accomplice. She is in the limelight, and behind her is a shadowy figure whose present alias is unknown to us.

“Now let us go carefully over the Renauld Case from the beginning, setting down each significant point in its chronological order. You have a notebook and pencil? Good. Now what is the earliest point to note down?”

“The letter to you?”

“That was the first we knew of it, but it is not the proper beginning of the case. The first point of any significance, I should say, is the change that came over Monsieur Renauld shortly after arriving in Merlinville, and which is attested to by several witnesses. We have also to consider his friendship with Madame Daubreuil, and the large sums of money paid over to her. From thence we can come directly to the 23rd May.”

Poirot paused, cleared his throat, and signed to me to write:

“23rd May. M. Renauld quarrels with his son over latter’s wish to marry Marthe Daubreuil. Son leaves for Paris.

“24th May. M. Renauld alters his will, leaving entire control of his fortune in his wife’s hands.

“7th June. Quarrel with tramp in garden, witnessed by Marthe Daubreuil.

“Letter written to M. Hercule Poirot, imploring assistance.

“Telegram sent to M. Jack Renauld, bidding him proceed by the Anzora to Buenos Aires.

“Chauffeur, Masters, sent off on a holiday.

“Visit of a lady that evening. As he is seeing her out, his words are ‘Yes, yes—but for God’s sake go now….’”

Poirot paused.

“There, Hastings, take each of those facts one by one, consider them carefully by themselves and in relation to the whole, and see if you do not get new light on the matter.”

I endeavoured conscientiously to do as he had said. After a moment or two, I said rather doubtfully:

“As to the first points, the question seems to be whether we adopt the theory of blackmail, or of an infatuation for this woman.”

“Blackmail, decidedly. You heard what Stonor said as to his character and habits.”

“Mrs. Renauld did not confirm his view,” I argued.

“We have already seen that Madame Renauld’s testimony cannot be relied upon in any way. We must trust to Stonor on that point.”

“Still, if Renauld had an affair with a woman called Bella, there seems no inherent improbability in his having another with Madame Daubreuil.”

“None whatever, I grant you, Hastings. But did he?”

“The letter, Poirot. You forget the letter.”

“No, I do not forget. But what makes you think that letter was written to Monsieur Renauld?”

“Why, it was found in his pocket, and—and—”

“And that is all!” cut in Poirot. “There was no mention of any name to show to whom the letter was addressed. We assumed it was to the dead man because it was in the pocket of his overcoat. Now, mon ami, something about that overcoat struck me as unusual. I measured it, and made the remark that he wore his overcoat very long. That remark should have given you to think.”

“I thought you were just saying it for the sake of saying something,” I confessed.

“Ah, quelle idée! Later you observed me measuring the overcoat of Monsieur Jack Renauld. Eh bien, Monsieur Jack Renauld wears his overcoat very short. Put those two facts together with a third, namely, that Monsieur Jack Renauld flung out of the house in a hurry on his departure for Paris, and tell me what you make of it!”

"I see," I said slowly, as the meaning of Poirot's remarks bore in upon me. "That letter was written to Jack Renauld—not to his father. He caught up the wrong overcoat in his haste and agitation."

Poirot nodded.

"Précisément! We can return to this point later. For the moment let us content ourselves with accepting the letter as having nothing to do with Monsieur Renauld père, and pass to the next chronological event."

"'23rd May.'" I read: "'M. Renauld quarrels with his son over latter's wish to marry Marthe Daubreuil. Son leaves for Paris.' I don't see anything much to remark upon there, and the altering of the will the following day seems straightforward enough. It was the direct result of the quarrel."

"We agree, mon ami—at least as to the cause. But what exact motive underlay this procedure of Monsieur Renauld's?"

I opened my eyes in surprise.

"Anger against his son of course."

"Yet he wrote him affectionate letters to Paris?"

"So Jack Renauld says, but he cannot produce them."

"Well, let us pass from that."

"Now we come to the day of the tragedy. You have placed the events of the morning in a certain order. Have you any justification for that?"

"I have ascertained that the letter to me was posted at the same time as the telegram was dispatched. Masters was informed he could take a holiday shortly afterwards. In my opinion the quarrel with the tramp took place anterior to these happenings."

"I do not see that you can fix that definitely unless you question Madame Daubreuil again."

“There is no need. I am sure of it. And if you do not see that, you see nothing, Hastings!”

I looked at him for a moment.

“Of course! I am an idiot. If the tramp was Georges Conneau, it was after the stormy interview with him that Mr. Renauld apprehended danger. He sent away the chauffeur, Masters, whom he suspected of being in the other’s pay, he wired to his son, and sent for you.”

A faint smile crossed Poirot’s lips.

“You do not think it strange that he should use exactly the same expressions in his letter as Madame Renauld used, later in her story? If the mention of Santiago was a blind, why should Renauld speak of it, and—what is more—send his son there?”

“It is puzzling, I admit, but perhaps we shall find some explanation later. We come now to the evening, and the visit of the mysterious lady. I confess that that fairly baffles me, unless it was indeed Madame Daubreuil, as Françoise all along maintained.”

Poirot shook his head.

“My friend, my friend, where are your wits wandering? Remember the fragment of cheque, and the fact that the name Bella Duveen was faintly familiar to Stonor, and I think we may take it for granted that Bella Duveen is the full name of Jack’s unknown correspondent, and that it was she who came to the Villa Geneviève that night. Whether she intended to see Jack, or whether she meant all along to appeal to his father, we cannot be certain, but I think we may assume that this is what occurred. She produced her claim upon Jack, probably showed letters that he had written her, and the older man tried to buy her off by writing a cheque. This she indignantly tore up. The terms of her letter are those of a woman genuinely in love, and she would probably deeply resent being offered money. In the end he got rid of her, and here the words that he used are significant.”

"'Yes, yes, but for God's sake go now,'" I repeated. "They seem to me a little vehement, perhaps, that is all."

"That is enough. He was desperately anxious for the girl to go. Why? Not because the interview was unpleasant. No, it was the time that was slipping by, and for some reason time was precious."

"Why should it be?" I asked bewildered.

"That is what we ask ourselves. Why should it be? But later we have the incident of the wristwatch—which again shows us that time plays a very important part in the crime. We are now fast approaching the actual drama. It is half past ten when Bella Duveen leaves, and by the evidence of the wristwatch we know that the crime was committed, or at any rate that it was staged, before twelve o'clock. We have reviewed all the events anterior to the murder, there remains only one unplaced. By the doctor's evidence, the tramp, when found, had been dead at least forty-eight hours—with a possible margin of twenty-four hours more. Now, with no other facts to help me than those we have discussed, I place the death as having occurred on the morning of 7th June."

I stared at him, stupefied.

"But how? Why? How can you possibly know?"

"Because only in that way can the sequence of events be logically explained. Mon ami, I have taken you step by step along the way. Do you not now see what is so glaringly plain?"

"My dear Poirot, I can't see anything glaring about it. I did think I was beginning to see my way before, but I'm now hopelessly fogged. For goodness' sake, get on, and tell me who killed Mr. Renauld."

"That is just what I am not sure of as yet."

"But you said it was glaringly clear!"

“We talk at cross-purposes, my friend. Remember, it is two crimes we are investigating—for which, as I pointed out to you, we have the necessary two bodies. There, there, ne vous impatientez pas! I explain all. To begin with, we apply our psychology. We find three points at which Monsieur Renauld displays a distinct change of view and action—three psychological points therefore. The first occurs immediately after arriving in Merlinville, the second after quarrelling with his son on a certain subject, the third on the morning of 7th June. Now for the three causes. We can attribute No 1 to meeting Madame Daubreuil. No 2 is indirectly connected with her, since it concerns a marriage between Monsieur Renauld’s son and her daughter. But the cause of No 3 is hidden from us. We had to deduce it. Now, mon ami, let me ask you a question: whom do we believe to have planned this crime?”

“Georges Conneau,” I said doubtfully, eyeing Poirot warily.

“Exactly. Now Giraud laid it down as an axiom that a woman lies to save herself, the man she loves, and her child. Since we are satisfied that it was Georges Conneau who dictated the lie to her, and as Georges Conneau is not Jack Renauld, it follows that the third case is put out of court. And, still attributing the crime to Georges Conneau, the first is equally so. So we are forced to the second—that Madame Renauld lied for the sake of the man she loved—or in other words, for the sake of Georges Conneau. You agree to that?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “It seems logical enough.”

“Bien! Madame Renauld loves Georges Conneau. Who, then, is Georges Conneau?”

“The tramp.”

“Have we any evidence to show that Madame Renauld loved the tramp?”

“No, but—”

“Very well then. Do not cling to theories where facts no longer support them. Ask yourself instead whom Madame Renauld did love.”

I shook my head perplexed.

“Mais oui, you know perfectly. Whom did Madame Renauld love so dearly that when she saw his dead body she fell down in a swoon?”

I stared dumbfounded.

“Her husband?” I gasped.

Poirot nodded.

“Her husband—or Georges Conneau, whichever you like to call him.”

I rallied myself.

“But it’s impossible.”

“How ‘impossible?’ Did we not agree just now that Madame Daubreuil was in a position to blackmail Georges Conneau?”

“Yes, but—”

“And did she not very effectively blackmail Monsieur Renauld?”

“That may be true enough, but—”

“And is it not a fact that we know nothing of Monsieur Renauld’s youth and upbringing? That he springs suddenly into existence as a French-Canadian exactly twenty-two years ago?”

“All that is so,” I said more firmly, “but you seem to me to be overlooking one salient point.”

“What is that, my friend?”

“Why, we have admitted that Georges planned the crime. That brings us to the ridiculous statement that he planned his own murder!”

“Eh bien, mon ami,” said Poirot placidly, “that is just what he did do!”

Twenty-one

HERCULE POIROT ON THE CASE

In a measured voice Poirot began his exposition.

“It seems strange to you, mon ami, that a man should plan his own death? So strange, that you prefer to reject the truth as fantastic, and to revert to a story that is in reality ten times more impossible. Yes, Monsieur Renauld planned his own death, but there is one detail that perhaps escapes you—he did not intend to die.”

I shook my head, bewildered.

“But no, it is all most simple really,” said Poirot kindly. “For the crime that Monsieur Renauld proposed a murderer was not necessary, as I told you, but a body was. Let us reconstruct, seeing events this time from a different angle.

“Georges Conneau flies from justice—to Canada. There, under an assumed name, he marries, and finally acquires a vast fortune in South America. But there is a nostalgia upon him for his own country. Twenty years have elapsed, he is considerably changed in appearance, besides being a man of such eminence that no one is likely to connect him with a fugitive from justice many years ago. He deems it quite safe to return. He takes up his headquarters in England, but intends to spend the summers in France. And ill fortune, or that obscure justice which shapes men’s ends and will not allow them to evade the consequences of their acts, takes him to Merlinville. There, in the whole of France, is the one person who is capable of recognizing him. It is, of course, a gold mine to Madame Daubreuil, and a gold mine of which she is not slow to take advantage. He is helpless, absolutely in her power. And she bleeds him heavily.

“And then the inevitable happens. Jack Renauld falls in love with the beautiful girl he sees almost daily, and wishes to marry her. That rouses his father. At all costs, he will prevent his son marrying the daughter of this evil woman. Jack Renauld knows nothing of his father’s past, but Madame Renauld knows everything. She is a woman of great force of character and passionately devoted to her husband. They take counsel together. Renauld sees only one way of escape—death. He must appear to die, in reality escaping to another country where he will start again under an assumed name and where Madame Renauld, having played the widow’s part for a while, can join him. It is essential that she should have control of the money, so he alters his will. How they meant to manage the body business originally, I do not know—possibly an art student’s skeleton and a fire—or something of the kind, but long before their plans have matured an event occurs which plays into their hands. A rough tramp, violent and abusive, finds his way into the garden. There is a struggle, Renauld seeks to eject him, and suddenly the tramp, an epileptic, falls down in a fit. He is dead. Renauld calls his wife. Together they drag him into the shed—as we know the event had occurred just outside—and they realize the marvellous opportunity that has been vouchsafed them. The man bears no resemblance to Renauld but he is middle-aged, of a usual French type. That is sufficient.

“I rather fancy that they sat on the bench up there, out of earshot from the house, discussing matters. Their plan was quickly made. The identification must rest solely on Madame Renauld’s evidence. Jack Renauld and the chauffeur (who had been with his master two years) must be got out of the way. It was unlikely that the French women servants would go near the body, and in any case Renauld intended to take measures to deceive anyone not likely to appreciate details. Masters was sent off, a telegram dispatched to Jack, Buenos Aires being selected to give credence to the story that Renauld had decided upon. Having heard of me as a rather obscure elderly detective, he wrote his appeal for help, knowing that when I arrived, the production of the letter would have a profound effect upon the examining magistrate—which, of course, it did.

“They dressed the body of the tramp in a suit of Renauld’s and left his ragged coat and trousers by the door of the shed, not daring to take them into the house. And then, to give credence to the tale Madame Renauld was to tell, they drove the aeroplane dagger through his heart. That night Renauld will first bind and gag his wife, and then, taking a spade, will dig a grave in that particular plot of ground where he knows a—how do you call it?—bunkair? is to be made. It is essential that the body should be found—Madame Daubreuil must have no suspicions. On the other hand, if a little time elapses, any dangers as to identity will be greatly lessened. Then, Renauld will don the tramp's rags, and shuffle off to the station, where he will leave, unnoticed, by the 12:10 train. Since the crime will be supposed to have taken place two hours later, no suspicion can possibly attach to him.

"You see now his annoyance at the inopportune visit of the girl, Bella. Every moment of delay is fatal to his plans. He gets rid of her as soon as he can, however. Then, to work! He leaves the front door slightly ajar to create the impression that assassins left that way. He binds and gags Madame Renauld, correcting his mistake of twenty-two years ago, when the looseness of the bonds caused suspicion to fall upon his accomplice, but leaving her primed with essentially the same story as he had invented before, proving the unconscious recoil of the mind against originality. The night is chilly, and he slips on an overcoat over his underclothing, intending to cast it into the grave with the dead man. He goes out by the window, smoothing over the flower bed carefully, and thereby furnishing the most positive evidence against himself. He goes out on to the lonely golf links, and he digs—And then—"

"Yes?"

"And then," said Poirot gravely, "the justice that he has so long eluded overtakes him. An unknown hand stabs him in the back … Now, Hastings, you understand what I mean when I talk of two crimes. The first crime, the crime that Monsieur Renauld, in his arrogance, asked us to investigate, is solved. But behind it lies a deeper riddle. And to solve that will be difficult—since the criminal, in his wisdom, has been content to avail himself of the devices prepared by Renauld. It has been a particularly perplexing and baffling mystery to solve."

"You're marvellous, Poirot," I said, with admiration. "Absolutely marvellous. No one on earth but you would have done it!"

I think my praise pleased him. For once in his life he looked almost embarrassed.

“That poor Giraud,” said Poirot, trying unsuccessfully to look modest. “Without doubt it is not all stupidity. He has had la mauvaise chance once or twice. That dark hair coiled round the dagger, for instance. To say the least, it was misleading.”

“To tell you the truth, Poirot,” I said slowly, “even now I don’t quite see—whose hair was it?”

“Madame Renauld’s, of course. That is where la mauvaise chance came in. Her hair, dark originally, is almost completely silvered. It might just as easily have been a grey hair—and then, by no conceivable effort could Giraud have persuaded himself it came from the head of Jack Renauld! But it is all of a piece. Always the facts must be twisted to fit the theory!

“Without doubt, when Madame Renauld recovers, she will speak. The possibility of her son being accused of the murder never occurred to her. How should it, when she believed him safely at sea on board the Anzora? Ah! voilà une femme, Hastings! What force, what self-command! She only made one slip. On his unexpected return: ‘It does not matter—now.’ And no one noticed—no one realized the significance of those words. What a terrible part she has had to play, poor woman. Imagine the shock when she goes to identify the body and, instead of what she expects, sees the actual lifeless form of the husband she has believed miles away by now. No wonder she fainted! But since then, despite her grief and her despair, how resolutely she has played her part and how the anguish of it must wring her. She cannot say a word to set us on the track of the real murderers. For her son’s sake, no one must know that Paul Renauld was Georges Conneau, the criminal. Final and most bitter blow, she has admitted publicly that Madame Daubreuil was her husband’s mistress—for a hint of blackmail might be fatal to her secret. How cleverly she dealt with the examining magistrate when he asked her if there was any mystery in her husband’s past life. ‘Nothing so romantic, I am sure, monsieur.’ It was perfect, the indulgent tone, the soupçon of sad mockery. At once Monsieur Hautet felt himself foolish and melodramatic. Yes, she is a great woman! If she loved a criminal, she loved him royally!”

Poirot lost himself in contemplation.

"One thing more, Poirot, what about the piece of lead-piping?"

"You do not see? To disfigure the victim's face so that it would be unrecognizable. It was that which first set me on the right track. And that imbecile of a Giraud, swarming all over it to look for match ends! Did I not tell you that a clue of two foot long was quite as good as a clue of two inches? You see, Hastings, we must now start again. Who killed Monsieur Renauld? Someone who was near the villa just before twelve o'clock that night, someone who would benefit by his death—the description fits Jack Renauld only too well. The crime need not have been premeditated. And then the dagger!"

I started, I had not realized that point.

"Of course," I said, "Mrs. Renauld's dagger was the second one we found in the tramp. There were two, then?"

"Certainly, and since they were duplicates, it stands to reason that Jack Renauld was the owner. But that would not trouble me so much. In fact, I had a little idea as to that. No, the worst indictment against him is again psychological—heredity, mon ami, heredity! Like father, like son—Jack Renauld, when all is said or done, is the son of Georges Conneau."

His tone was grave and earnest, and I was impressed in spite of myself.

"What is your little idea that you mentioned just now?" I asked.

For answer, Poirot consulted his turnip-faced watch, and then asked:

"What time is the afternoon boat from Calais?"

"About five, I believe."

"That will do very well. We shall just have time."

"You are going to England?"

"Yes, my friend."

“Why?”

“To find a possible—witness.”

“Who?”

With a rather peculiar smile upon his face, Poirot replied:

“Miss Bella Duveen.”

“But how will you find her—what do you know about her?”

“I know nothing about her—but I can guess a good deal. We may take it for granted that her name is Bella Duveen, and since that name was faintly familiar to Monsieur Stonor, though evidently not in connexion with the Renauld family, it is probable that she is on the stage. Jack Renauld was a young man with plenty of money, and twenty years of age. The stage is sure to have been the home of his first love. It tallies, too, with Monsieur Renauld’s attempt to placate her with a cheque. I think I shall find her all right—especially with the help of this.”

And he brought out the photograph I had seen him take from Jack Renauld’s drawer. “With love from Bella” was scrawled across the corner, but it was not that which held my eyes fascinated. The likeness was not first rate—but for all that it was unmistakable to me. I felt a cold sinking, as though some unutterable calamity had befallen me.

It was the face of Cinderella.

Twenty-two

I FIND LOVE

For a moment or two I sat as though frozen, the photograph still in my hand. Then summoning all my courage to appear unmoved, I handed it back. At the same time I stole a quick glance at Poirot. Had he noticed anything? But to my relief he did not seem to be observing me. Anything unusual in my manner had certainly escaped him.

He rose briskly to his feet.

“We have no time to lose. We must make our departure with all dispatch. All is well—the sea it will be calm!”

In the bustle of departure, I had no time for thinking, but once on board the boat, secure from Poirot’s observation, I pulled myself together, and attacked the facts dispassionately. How much did Poirot know, and why was he bent on finding this girl? Did he suspect her of having seen Jack Renauld commit the crime? Or did he suspect—But that was impossible! The girl had no grudge against the elder Renauld, no possible motive for wishing his death. What had brought her back to the scene of the murder? I went over the facts carefully. She must have left the train at Calais where I parted from her that day. No wonder I had been unable to find her on the boat. If she had dined in Calais, and then taken a train out to Merlinville, she would have arrived at the Villa Geneviève just about the time that Françoise said. What had she done when she left the house just after ten? Presumably either gone to an hotel, or returned to Calais. And then? The crime had been committed on Tuesday night. On Thursday morning she was once more in Merlinville. Had she ever left France at all? I doubted it very much. What kept her there—the hope of seeing Jack Renauld? I had told her (as at the time we believed) that he was on the high seas en route to Buenos Aires. Possibly she was aware that the Anzora had not sailed. But to know that she must have seen Jack. Was that what Poirot was after? Had Jack Renauld, returning to see Marthe Daubreuil, come face to face instead with Bella Duveen, the girl he had heartlessly thrown over?

I began to see daylight. If that were indeed the case, it might furnish Jack with the alibi he needed. Yet under those circumstances his silence seemed difficult to explain. Why could he not have spoken out boldly? Did he fear for this former entanglement of his to come to the ears of Marthe Daubreuil? I shook my head, dissatisfied. The thing had been harmless enough, a foolish boy-and-girl affair, and I reflected cynically that the son of a millionaire was not likely to be thrown over by a penniless French girl, who moreover loved him devotedly, without a much graver cause.

Poirot reappeared brisk and smiling at Dover, and our journey to London was uneventful. It was past nine o’clock when we arrived, and I supposed that we should return straight away to our rooms and do nothing till the morning.

But Poirot had other plans.

“We must lose no time, mon ami. The news of the arrest will not be in the English papers until the day after tomorrow, but still we must lose no time.”

I did not quite follow his reasoning, but I merely asked how he proposed to find the girl.

“You remember Joseph Aarons, the theatrical agent? No? I assisted him in a little matter of a Japanese wrestler. A pretty little problem, I must recount it to you one day. He, without doubt, will be able to put us in the way of finding out what we want to know.”

It took us some time to run Mr. Aarons to earth, and it was after midnight when we finally managed it. He greeted Poirot with every evidence of warmth, and professed himself ready to be of service to us in any way.

“There’s not much about the profession I don’t know,” he said, beaming genially.

“Eh bien, Monsieur Aarons, I desire to find a young girl called Bella Duveen.”

“Bella Duveen. I know the name, but for a moment I can’t place it. What’s her line?”

“That I do not know—but here is her photograph.”

Mr. Aarons studied it for a moment, then his face lighted.

“Got it!” He slapped his thigh. “The Dulcibella Kids, by the Lord!”

“The Dulcibella Kids?”

“That’s it. They’re sisters. Acrobats, dancers, and singers. Give quite a good little turn. They’re in the provinces, somewhere, I believe—if they’re not resting. They’ve been on in Paris for the last two or three weeks.”

“Can you find out for me exactly where they are?”

“Easy as a bird. You go home, and I’ll send you round the dope in the morning.”

With this promise we took leave of him. He was as good as his word. About eleven o’clock the following day, a scribbled note reached us.

“The Dulcibella Sisters are on at the Palace in Coventry. Good luck to you.”

Without more ado, we started for Coventry. Poirot made no inquiries at the theatre, but contented himself with booking stalls for the variety performance that evening.

The show was wearisome beyond words—or perhaps it was only my mood that made it seem so. Japanese families balanced themselves precariously, would-be fashionable men, in greenish evening dress and exquisitely slicked hair, reeled off society patter and danced marvellously. Stout prima donnas sang at the top of the human register, a comic comedian endeavoured to be Mr. George Robey and failed signally.

At last the number went up which announced the Dulcibella Kids. My heart beat sickeningly. There she was—there they both were, the pair of them, one flaxen-haired, one dark, matching as to size, with short fluffy skirts and immense “Buster Brown” bows. They looked a pair of extremely piquant children. They began to sing. Their voices were fresh and true, rather thin and music-hally, but attractive.

It was quite a pretty little turn. They danced neatly, and did some clever little acrobatic feats. The words of their songs were crisp and catchy. When the curtain fell, there was a full meed of applause. Evidently the Dulcibella Kids were a success.

Suddenly I felt that I could remain no longer. I must get out into the air. I suggested leaving to Poirot.

“Go by all means, mon ami. I amuse myself, and will stay to the end. I will rejoin you later.”

It was only a few steps from the theatre to the hotel. I went up to the sitting room, ordered a whisky and soda, and sat drinking it, staring meditatively into the empty grate. I heard the door open, and turned my head, thinking it was Poirot. Then I jumped to my feet. It was Cinderella who stood in the doorway. She spoke haltingly, her breath coming in little gasps.

“I saw you in front. You and your friend. When you got up to go, I was waiting outside and followed you. Why are you here—in Coventry? What were you doing there tonight? Is the man who was with you the—the detective?”

She stood there, the cloak she had wrapped round her stage dress slipping from her shoulders. I saw the whiteness of her cheeks under the rouge, and heard the terror in her voice. And in that moment I understood everything—understood why Poirot was seeking her, and what she feared, and understood at last my own heart….

“Yes,” I said gently.

“Is he looking for—me?” she half whispered.

Then, as I did not answer for a moment, she slipped down by the big chair, and burst into violent bitter weeping.

I knelt down by her, holding her in my arms, and smoothing the hair back from her face.

“Don’t cry, child, don’t cry, for God’s sake. You’re safe here. I’ll take care of you. Don’t cry, darling. Don’t cry. I know—I know everything.”

“Oh, but you don’t!”

“I think I do.” And after a moment, as her sobs grew quieter, I asked: “It was you who took the dagger, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“That was why you wanted me to show you round? And why you pretended to faint?”

Again she nodded.

“Why did you take the dagger?” I asked presently.

She replied as simply as a child:

“I was afraid there might be fingermarks on it.”

“But didn’t you remember that you had worn gloves?”

She shook her head as though bewildered, and then said slowly:

“Are you going to give me up to—to the police?”

“Good God! no.”

Her eyes sought mine long and earnestly, and then she asked in a little quiet voice that sounded afraid of itself:

“Why not?”

It seemed a strange place and a strange time for a declaration of love—and God knows, in all my imagining, I had never pictured love coming to me in such a guise. But I answered simply and naturally enough:

“Because I love you, Cinderella.”

She bent her head down, as though ashamed, and muttered in a broken voice:

“You can’t—you can’t—not if you knew—” And then, as though rallying herself, she faced me squarely, and asked, “What do you know, then?”

“I know that you came to see Mr. Renauld that night. He offered you a cheque and you tore it up indignantly. Then you left the house—” I paused.

“Go on—what next?”

“I don’t know whether you knew Jack Renauld would be coming that night, or whether you just waited about on the chance of seeing him, but you did wait about. Perhaps you were just miserable and walked aimlessly—but at any rate just before twelve you were still near there, and you saw a man on the golf links—”

Again I paused. I had leapt to the truth in a flash as she entered the room, but now the picture rose before me even more convincingly. I saw vividly the peculiar pattern of the overcoat on the dead body of Mr. Renauld, and I remembered the amazing likeness that had startled me into believing for one instant that the dead man had risen from the dead when his son burst into our conclave in the salon.

“Go on,” repeated the girl steadily.

“I fancy his back was to you—but you recognized him, or thought you recognized him. The gait and the carriage were familiar to you, and the pattern of his overcoat.” I paused. “You used a threat in one of your letters to Jack Renauld. When you saw him there, your anger and jealousy drove you mad—and you struck! I don’t believe for a minute that you meant to kill him. But you did kill him, Cinderella.”

She had flung up her hands to cover her face, and in a choked voice she said:

"You're right … you're right … I can see it all as you tell it." Then she turned on me almost savagely. "And you love me? Knowing what you do, how can you love me?"

"I don't know," I said a little wearily. "I think love is like that—a thing one cannot help. I have tried, I know—ever since the first day I met you. And love has been too strong for me."

And then suddenly, when I least expected it, she broke down again, casting herself down on the floor and sobbing wildly.

"Oh, I can't!" she cried. "I don't know what to do. I don't know which way to turn. Oh, pity me, pity me, someone, and tell me what to do!"

Again I knelt by her, soothing her as best I could.

"Don't be afraid of me, Bella. For God's sake don't be afraid of me. I love you, that's true—but I don't want anything in return. Only let me help you. Love him still if you have to, but let me help you, as he can't."

It was as though she had been turned to stone by my words. She raised her head from her hands and stared at me.

"You think that?" she whispered. "You think that I love Jack Renauld?"

Then, half laughing, half crying, she flung her arms passionately round my neck, and pressed her sweet wet face to mine.

"Not as I love you," she whispered. "Never as I love you!"

Her lips brushed my cheek, and then, seeking my mouth, kissed me again and again with a sweetness and fire beyond belief. The wildness of it—and the wonder, I shall not forget—no, not as long as I live!

It was a sound in the doorway that made us look up. Poirot was standing there looking at us.

I did not hesitate. With a bound I reached him and pinioned his arms to his sides.

“Quick,” I said to the girl. “Get out of here. As fast as you can. I’ll hold him.”

With one look at me, she fled out of the room past us. I held Poirot in a grip of iron.

“Mon ami,” observed the latter mildly, “you do this sort of thing very well. The strong man holds me in his grasp and I am helpless as a child. But all this is uncomfortable and slightly ridiculous. Let us sit down and be calm.”

“You won’t pursue her?”

“Mon Dieu! no. Am I Giraud? Release me, my friend.”

Keeping a suspicious eye upon him, for I paid Poirot the compliment of knowing that I was no match for him in astuteness, I relaxed my grip, and he sank into an armchair, feeling his arms tenderly.

“It is that you have the strength of a bull when you are roused, Hastings! Eh bien, and do you think you have behaved well to your old friend? I show you the girl’s photograph and you recognize it, but you never say a word.”

“There was no need if you knew that I recognized it,” I said rather bitterly. So Poirot had known all along! I had not deceived him for an instant.

“Ta-ta! You did not know that I knew that. And tonight you help the girl to escape when we have found her with so much trouble. Eh bien! it comes to this—are you going to work with me or against me, Hastings?”

For a moment or two I did not answer. To break with my old friend gave me great pain. Yet I must definitely range myself against him. Would he ever forgive me, I wondered? He had been strangely calm so far, but I knew him to possess marvellous self-command.

“Poirot,” I said, “I’m sorry. I admit I’ve behaved badly to you over this. But sometimes one has no choice. And in future I must take my own line.”

Poirot nodded his head several times.

“I understand,” he said. The mocking light had quite died out of his eyes, and he spoke with a sincerity and kindness that surprised me. “It is that, my friend, is it not? It is love that has come—not as you imagined it, all cock-a-hoop with fine feathers, but sadly, with bleeding feet. Well, well—I warned you. When I realized that this girl must have taken the dagger, I warned you. Perhaps you remember. But already it was too late. But, tell me, how much do you know?”

I met his eyes squarely.

“Nothing that you could tell me would be any surprise to me, Poirot. Understand that. But in case you think of resuming your search for Miss Duveen, I should like you to know one thing clearly. If you have any idea that she was concerned in the crime, or was the mysterious lady who called upon Mr. Renauld that night, you are wrong. I travelled home from France with her that day, and parted from her at Victoria that evening, so that it is clearly impossible for her to have been in Merlinville.”

“Ah!” Poirot looked at me thoughtfully. “And you would swear to that in a court of law?”

“Most certainly I would.”

Poirot rose and bowed.

“Mon ami! Vive l’amour! It can perform miracles. It is decidedly ingenious what you have thought of there. It defeats even Hercule Poirot!”

Twenty-three

DIFFICULTIES AHEAD

After a moment of stress, such as I have just described, reaction is bound to set in. I retired to rest that night on a note of triumph, but I awoke to realize that I was by no means out of the wood. True, I could see no flaw in the alibi I had so suddenly conceived. I had but to stick to my story, and I failed to see how Bella could be convicted in face of it.

But I felt the need of treading warily. Poirot would not take defeat lying down. Somehow or other, he would endeavour to turn the tables on me, and that in the way, and at the moment, when I least expected it.

We met at breakfast the following morning as though nothing had happened. Poirot's good temper was imperturbable, yet I thought I detected a film of reserve in his manner which was new. After breakfast, I announced my intention of going out for a stroll. A malicious gleam shot through Poirot's eyes.

"If it is information you seek, you need not be at the pains of deranging yourself. I can tell you all you wish to know. The Dulcibella Sisters have cancelled their contract, and have left Coventry for an unknown destination."

"Is that really so, Poirot?"

"You can take it from me, Hastings. I made inquiries the first thing this morning. After all, what else did you expect?"

True enough, nothing else could be expected under the circumstances. Cinderella had profited by the slight start I had been able to secure her, and would certainly not lose a moment in removing herself from the reach of the pursuer. It was what I had intended and planned. Nevertheless, I was aware of being plunged into a network of fresh difficulties.

I had absolutely no means of communicating with the girl, and it was vital that she should know the line of defence that had occurred to me, and which I was prepared to carry out. Of course it was possible that she might try to send word to me in some way or another, but I hardly thought it likely. She would know the risk she ran of a message being intercepted by Poirot, thus setting him on her track once more. Clearly her only course was to disappear utterly for the time being.

But, in the meantime, what was Poirot doing? I studied him attentively. He was wearing his most innocent air, and staring meditatively into the far distance. He looked altogether too placid and supine to give me reassurance. I had learned, with Poirot, that the less dangerous he looked, the more dangerous he was. His quiescence alarmed me. Observing a troubled quality in my glance, he smiled benignantly.

“You are puzzled, Hastings? You ask yourself why I do not launch myself in pursuit?”

“Well—something of the kind.”

“It is what you would do, were you in my place. I understand that. But I am not of those who enjoy rushing up and down a country seeking a needle in a haystack, as you English say. No—let Mademoiselle Bella Duveen go. Without doubt, I shall be able to find her when the time comes. Until then, I am content to wait.”

I stared at him doubtfully. Was he seeking to mislead me? I had an irritating feeling that, even now, he was master of the situation. My sense of superiority was gradually waning. I had contrived the girl’s escape, and evolved a brilliant scheme for saving her from the consequences of her rash act—but I could not rest easy in my mind. Poirot’s perfect calm awakened a thousand apprehensions.

“I suppose, Poirot,” I said rather diffidently, “I mustn’t ask what your plans are? I’ve forfeited the right.”

“But not at all. There is no secret about them. We return to France without delay.”

“We?”

“Precisely—‘we!’ You know very well that you cannot afford to let Papa Poirot out of your sight. Eh? is it not so, my friend? But remain in England by all means if you wish—”

I shook my head. He had hit the nail on the head. I could not afford to let him out of my sight. Although I could not expect his confidence after what had happened, I could still check his actions. The only danger to Bella lay with him. Giraud and the French police were indifferent to her existence. At all costs I must keep near Poirot.

Poirot observed me attentively as these reflections passed through my mind, and gave me a nod of satisfaction.

“I am right, am I not? And as you are quite capable of trying to follow me, disguised with some absurdity such as a false beard—which everyone would perceive, bien entendu—I much prefer that we should voyage together. It would annoy me greatly that anyone should mock themselves at you.”

“Very well, then. But it’s only fair to warn you—”

“I know—I know all. You are my enemy! Be my enemy, then. It does not worry me at all.”

“So long as it’s all fair and aboveboard, I don’t mind.”

“You have to the full the English passion for ‘fair play!’ Now your scruples are satisfied, let us depart immediately. There is no time to be lost. Our stay in England has been short but sufficient. I know—what I wanted to know.”

The tone was light, but I read a veiled menace into the words.

“Still—” I began, and stopped.

“Still—as you say! Without doubt you are satisfied with the part you are playing. Me, I preoccupy myself with Jack Renauld.”

Jack Renauld! The words gave me a start. I had completely forgotten that aspect of the case. Jack Renauld, in prison, with the shadow of the guillotine looming over him. I saw the part I was playing in a more sinister light. I could save Bella—yes, but in doing so I ran the risk of sending an innocent man to his death.

I pushed the thought from me with horror. It could not be. He would be acquitted. Certainly he would be acquitted. But the cold fear came back. Suppose he were not? What then? Could I have it on my conscience—horrible thought! Would it come to that in the end? A decision. Bella or Jack Renauld? The promptings of my heart were to save the girl I loved at any cost to myself. But, if the cost were to another, the problem was altered.

What would the girl herself say? I remembered that no word of Jack Renauld's arrest had passed my lips. As yet she was in total ignorance of the fact that her former lover was in prison charged with a hideous crime which he had not committed. When she knew, how would she act? Would she permit her life to be saved at the expense of his? Certainly she must do nothing rash. Jack Renauld might, and probably would, be acquitted without any intervention on her part. If so, good. But if he was not! That was the terrible, the unanswerable problem. I fancied that she ran no risk of the extreme penalty. The circumstances of the crime were quite different in her case. She could plead jealousy and extreme provocation, and her youth and beauty would go for much. The fact that by a tragic mistake it was Mr. Renauld, and not his son, who paid the penalty would not alter the motive of the crime. But in any case, however lenient the sentence of the Court, it must mean a long term of imprisonment.

No, Bella must be protected. And, at the same time, Jack Renauld must be saved. How this was to be accomplished I did not see clearly. But I pinned my faith to Poirot. He knew. Come what might, he would manage to save an innocent man. He must find some pretext other than the real one. It might be difficult, but he would manage it somehow. And with Bella unsuspected, and Jack Renauld acquitted, all would end satisfactorily.

So I told myself repeatedly, but at the bottom of my heart there still remained a cold fear.

Twenty-four

“SAVE HIM!”

We crossed from England by the evening boat, and the following morning saw us in St. Omer, whither Jack Renauld had been taken. Poirot lost no time in visiting M. Hautet. As he did not seem disposed to make any objections to my accompanying him, I bore him company.

After various formalities and preliminaries, we were conducted to the examining magistrate’s room. He greeted us cordially.

“I was told that you had returned to England, Monsieur Poirot. I am glad to find that such is not the case.”

“It is true I went there, monsieur, but it was only for a flying visit. A side issue, but one that I fancied might repay investigation.”

“And it did—eh?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. M. Hautet nodded, sighing.

“We must resign ourselves, I fear. That animal Giraud, his manners are abominable, but he is undoubtedly clever! Not much chance of that one making a mistake.”

“You think not?”

It was the examining magistrate’s turn to shrug his shoulders.

“Oh, well, speaking frankly—in confidence, of course—can you come to any other conclusion?”

“Frankly, there seem to me to be many points that are obscure.”

“Such as—?”

But Poirot was not to be drawn.

“I have not yet tabulated them,” he remarked. “It was a general reflection that I was making. I liked the young man, and should be sorry to believe him guilty of such a hideous crime. By the way, what has he to say for himself on the matter?”

The magistrate frowned.

“I cannot understand him. He seems incapable of putting up any sort of defence. It has been most difficult to get him to answer questions. He contents himself with a general denial, and beyond that takes refuge in a most obstinate silence. I am interrogating him again tomorrow, perhaps you would like to be present?”

We accepted the invitation with empressement.

“A distressing case,” said the magistrate with a sigh. “My sympathy for Madame Renauld is profound.”

“How is Madame Renauld?”

“She has not yet recovered consciousness. It is merciful in a way, poor woman, she is being spared much. The doctors say that there is no danger, but that when she comes to herself she must be kept as quiet as possible. It was, I understand, quite as much the shock as the fall which caused her present state. It would be terrible if her brain became unhinged; but I should not wonder at all—no, really, not at all.”

M. Hautet leaned back, shaking his head, with a sort of mournful enjoyment, as he envisaged the gloomy prospect.

He roused himself at length, and observed with a start:

“That reminds me. I have here a letter for you, Monsieur Poirot. Let me see, where did I put it?”

He proceeded to rummage among his papers. At last he found the missive, and handed it to Poirot.

“It was sent under cover to me in order that I might forward it to you,” he explained. “But as you left no address I could not do so.”

Poirot studied the letter curiously. It was addressed in a long, sloping, foreign hand, and the writing was decidedly a woman’s. Poirot did not open it. Instead he put it in his pocket and rose to his feet.

“Till tomorrow then. Many thanks for your courtesy and amiability.”

“But not at all. I am always at your service.”

We were just leaving the building when we came face to face with Giraud, looking more dandified than ever, and thoroughly pleased with himself.

“Aha! Monsieur Poirot,” he cried airily. “You have returned from England then?”

“As you see,” said Poirot.

“The end of the case is not far off now, I fancy.”

“I agree with you, Monsieur Giraud.”

Poirot spoke in a subdued tone. His crestfallen manner seemed to delight the other.

“Of all the milk-and-water criminals! Not an idea of defending himself. It is extraordinary!”

“So extraordinary that it gives one to think, does it not?” suggested Poirot mildly.

But Giraud was not even listening. He twirled his cane amicably.

“Well, good day, Monsieur Poirot. I am glad you’re satisfied of young Renauld’s guilt at last.”

“Pardon! But I am not in the least satisfied. Jack Renauld is innocent.”

Giraud stared for a moment—then burst out laughing, tapping his head significantly with the brief remark: “Toqué!”

Poirot drew himself up. A dangerous light showed in his eyes.

“Monsieur Giraud, throughout the case your manner to me has been deliberately insulting. You need teaching a lesson. I am prepared to wager you five hundred francs that I find the murderer of Monsieur Renauld before you do. Is it agreed?”

Giraud stared helplessly at him, and murmured again: “Toqué!”

“Come now,” urged Poirot, “is it agreed?”

“I have no wish to take your money from you.”

“Make your mind easy—you will not!”

“Oh, well then, I agree! You speak of my manner to you being insulting. Well, once or twice, your manner has annoyed me.”

“I am enchanted to hear it,” said Poirot. “Good morning, Monsieur Giraud. Come, Hastings.”

I said no word as we walked along the street. My heart was heavy. Poirot had displayed his intentions only too plainly. I doubted more than ever my powers of saving Bella from the consequences of her act. This unlucky encounter with Giraud had roused Poirot and put him on his mettle.

Suddenly I felt a hand laid on my shoulder, and turned to face Gabriel Stonor. We stopped and greeted him, and he proposed strolling with us back to our hotel.

“And what are you doing here, Monsieur Stonor?” inquired Poirot.

“One must stand by one’s friends,” replied the other dryly. “Especially when they are unjustly accused.”

“Then you do not believe that Jack Renauld committed the crime?” I asked eagerly.

“Certainly I don’t. I know the lad. I admit that there have been one or two things in this business that have staggered me completely, but none the less, in spite of his fool way of taking it, I’ll never believe that Jack Renauld is a murderer.”

My heart warmed to the secretary. His words seemed to lift a secret weight from my heart.

“I have no doubt that many people feel as you do,” I exclaimed. “There is really absurdly little evidence against him. I should say that there was no doubt of his acquittal—no doubt whatever.”

But Stonor hardly responded as I could have wished.

“I’d give a lot to think as you do,” he said gravely. He turned to Poirot. “What’s your opinion, monsieur?”

“I think that things look very black against him,” said Poirot quietly.

“You believe him guilty?” said Stonor sharply.

“No. But I think he will find it hard to prove his innocence.”

“He’s behaving so damned queerly,” muttered Stonor. “Of course, I realize that there’s a lot more in this affair than meets the eye. Giraud’s not wise to that because he’s an outsider, but the whole thing has been damned odd. As to that, least said soonest mended. If Mrs. Renauld wants to hush anything up, I’ll take my cue from her. It’s her show, and I’ve too much respect for her judgement to shove my oar in, but I can’t get behind this attitude of Jack’s. Anyone would think he wanted to be thought guilty.”

“But it’s absurd,” I cried, bursting in. “For one thing, the dagger—” I paused, uncertain as to how much Poirot would wish me to reveal. I continued, choosing my words carefully, “We know that the dagger could not have been in Jack Renauld’s possession that evening. Mrs. Renauld knows that.”

“True,” said Stonor. “When she recovers, she will doubtless say all this and more. Well, I must be leaving you.”

“One moment.” Poirot’s hand arrested his departure. “Can you arrange for word to be sent to me at once should Mrs. Renauld recover consciousness?”

“Certainly. That’s easily done.”

“That point about the dagger is good, Poirot,” I urged as we went upstairs. “I couldn’t speak very plainly before Stonor.”

“That was quite right of you. We might as well keep the knowledge to ourselves as long as we can. As to the dagger, your point hardly helps Jack Renauld. You remember that I was absent for an hour this morning, before we started from London?”

“Yes?”

“Well, I was employed in trying to find the firm Jack Renauld employed to convert his souvenirs. It was not very difficult. Eh bien, Hastings, they made to his order not two paper knives, but three.”

“So that—”

“So that, after giving one to his mother and one to Bella Duveen, there was a third which he doubtless retained for his own use. No, Hastings, I fear the dagger question will not help us to save him from the guillotine.”

“It won’t come to that,” I cried, stung.

Poirot shook his head uncertainly.

“You will save him,” I cried positively.

Poirot glanced at me dryly.

“Have you not rendered it impossible, mon ami?”

“Some other way,” I muttered.

“Ah! Sapristi! But it is miracles you ask from me. No—say no more. Let us instead see what is in this letter.”

And he drew out the envelope from his breast pocket.

His face contracted as he read, then he handed the one flimsy sheet to me.

“There are other women in the world who suffer, Hastings.”

The writing was blurred and the note had evidently been written in great agitation.

Dear M. Poirot—If you get this, I beg of you to come to my aid. I have no one to turn to, and at all costs Jack must be saved. I implore of you on my knees to help us.

Marthe Daubreuil

I handed it back, moved.

“You will go?”

“At once. We will command an auto.”

Half an hour later saw us at the Villa Marguerite. Marthe was at the door to meet us, and let Poirot in, clinging with both hands to one of his.

“Ah, you have come—it is good of you. I have been in despair, not knowing what to do. They will not let me go to see him in prison even. I suffer horribly. I am nearly mad.

“Is it true what they say, that he does not deny the crime? But that is madness. It is impossible that he should have done it! Never for one minute will I believe it.”

“Neither do I believe it, mademoiselle,” said Poirot gently.

“But then why does he not speak? I do not understand.”

“Perhaps because he is screening someone,” suggested Poirot, watching her.

Marthe frowned.

“Screening someone? Do you mean his mother? Ah, from the beginning I have suspected her. Who inherits all that vast fortune? She does. It is easy to wear widow’s weeds and play the hypocrite. And they say that when he was arrested she fell down like that!” She made a dramatic gesture. “And without doubt, Monsieur Stonor, the secretary, he helped her. They are thick as thieves, those two. It is true she is older than he—but what do men care—if a woman is rich!”

There was a hint of bitterness in her tone.

“Stonor was in England,” I put in.

“He says so—but who knows?”

“Mademoiselle,” said Poirot quietly, “if we are to work together, you and I, we must have things clear. First, I will ask you a question.”

“Yes, monsieur?”

“Are you aware of your mother’s real name?”

Marthe looked at him for a minute, then, letting her head fall forward on her arms, she burst into tears.

“There, there,” said Poirot, patting her on the shoulder. “Calm yourself, petite, I see that you know. Now a second question—did you know who Monsieur Renauld was?”

“Monsieur Renauld,” she raised her head from her hands and gazed at him wonderingly.

“Ah, I see you do not know that. Now listen to me carefully.”

Step by step, he went over the case, much as he had done to me on the day of our departure for England. Marthe listened spellbound. When he had finished, she drew a long breath.

“But you are wonderful—magnificent! You are the greatest detective in the world.”

With a swift gesture she slipped off her chair and knelt before him with an abandonment that was wholly French.

“Save him, monsieur,” she cried. “I love him so. Oh, save him, save him—save him!”

Twenty-five

AN UNEXPECTED DÉNOUEMENT

We were present the following morning at the examination of Jack Renauld. Short as the time had been, I was shocked at the change that had taken place in the young prisoner. His cheeks had fallen in, there were deep black circles round his eyes, and he looked haggard and distraught, as one who had wooed sleep in vain for several nights. He betrayed no emotion at seeing us.

“Renauld,” began the magistrate, “do you deny that you were in Merlinville on the night of the crime?”

Jack did not reply at once, then he said with a hesitancy of manner which was piteous:

“I—I—told you that I was in Cherbourg.”

The magistrate turned sharply.

“Send in the station witnesses.”

In a moment or two the door opened to admit a man whom I recognized as being a porter at Merlinville station.

“You were on duty on the night of 7th June?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“You witnessed the arrival of the 11:40 train?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Look at the prisoner. Do you recognize him as having been one of the passengers to alight?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“There is no possibility of your being mistaken?”

“No, monsieur. I know Monsieur Jack Renauld well.”

“Nor of your being mistaken as to the date?”

“No, monsieur. Because it was the following morning, 8th June, that we heard of the murder.”

Another railway official was brought in, and confirmed the first one’s evidence. The magistrate looked at Jack Renauld.

“These men have identified you positively. What have you to say?”

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

“Nothing.”

“Renauld,” continued the magistrate, “do you recognize this?”

He took something from the table by his side and held it out to the prisoner. I shuddered as I recognized the aeroplane dagger.

“Pardon,” cried Jack’s counsel, Maître Grosier. “I demand to speak to my client before he answers that question.”

But Jack Renauld had no consideration for the feelings of the wretched Grosier. He waved him aside, and replied quietly:

“Certainly I recognize it. It was a present given by me to my mother, as a souvenir of the war.”

“Is there, as far as you know, any duplicate of that dagger in existence?”

Again Maître Grosier burst out, and again Jack overrode him.

“Not that I know of. The setting was my own design.”

Even the magistrate almost gasped at the boldness of the reply. It did, in very truth, seem as though Jack was rushing on his fate. I realized, of course, the vital necessity he was under of concealing, for Bella's sake, the fact that there was a duplicate dagger in the case. So long as there was supposed to be only one weapon, no suspicion was likely to attach to the girl who had had the second paper knife in her possession. He was valiantly shielding the woman he had once loved—but at what cost to himself! I began to realize the magnitude of the task I had so lightly set Poirot. It would not be easy to secure the acquittal of Jack Renauld by anything short of the truth.

M. Hautet spoke again, with a peculiarly biting inflection:

"Madame Renauld told us that this dagger was on her dressing table on the night of the crime. But Madame Renauld is a mother! It will doubtless astonish you, Renauld, but I consider it highly likely that Madame Renauld was mistaken, and that, by inadvertence perhaps, you had taken it with you to Paris. Doubtless you will contradict me—"

I saw the lad's handcuffed hands clench themselves. The perspiration stood out in beads upon his brow, as with a supreme effort he interrupted M. Hautet in a hoarse voice:

"I shall not contradict you. It is possible."

It was a stupefying moment. Maître Grosier rose to his feet, protesting:

"My client has undergone a considerable nervous strain. I should wish it put on record that I do not consider him answerable for what he says."

The magistrate quelled him angrily. For a moment a doubt seemed to arise in his own mind. Jack Renauld had almost overdone his part. He leaned forward, and gazed at the prisoner searchingly.

"Do you fully understand, Renauld, that on the answers you have given me I shall have no alternative but to commit you for trial?"

Jack's pale face flushed. He looked steadily back.

“Monsieur Hautet, I swear that I did not kill my father.”

But the magistrate’s brief moment of doubt was over. He laughed a short unpleasant laugh.

“Without doubt, without doubt—they are always innocent, our prisoners! By your own mouth you are condemned. You can offer no defence, no alibi—only a mere assertion which would not deceive a babe!—that you are not guilty. You killed your father, Renauld—a cruel and cowardly murder—for the sake of the money which you believed would come to you at his death. Your mother was an accessory after the fact. Doubtless, in view of the fact that she acted as a mother, the courts will extend an indulgence to her that they will not accord to you. And rightly so! Your crime was a horrible one—to be held in abhorrence by gods and men!”

M. Hautet was interrupted—to his intense annoyance. The door was pushed open.

“Monsieur le juge, Monsieur le juge,” stammered the attendant, “there is a lady who says—who says—”

“Who says what?” cried the justly incensed magistrate. “This is highly irregular. I forbid it—I absolutely forbid it.”

But a slender figure pushed the stammering gendarme aside. Dressed all in black, with a long veil that hid her face, she advanced into the room.

My heart gave a sickening throb. She had come then! All my efforts were in vain. Yet I could not but admire the courage that had led her to take this step so unfalteringly.

She raised her veil—and I gasped. For, though as like her as two peas, this girl was not Cinderella! On the other hand, now that I saw her without the fair wig she had worn on the stage, I recognized her as the girl of the photograph in Jack Renauld’s room.

“You are the Juge d’Instruction, Monsieur Hautet?” she queried.

“Yes, but I forbid—”

“My name is Bella Duveen. I wish to give myself up for the murder of Mr. Renauld.”

Twenty-six

I RECEIVE A LETTER

“My friend,—You will know all when you get this. Nothing that I can say will move Bella. She has gone out to give herself up. I am tired out with struggling.

“You will know now that I deceived you, that where you gave me trust I repaid you with lies. It will seem, perhaps, indefensible to you, but I should like, before I go out of your life for ever, to show you just how it all came about. If I knew that you forgave me, it would make life easier for me. It wasn’t for myself I did it—that’s the only thing I can put forward to say for myself.

“I’ll begin from the day I met you in the boat train from Paris. I was uneasy then about Bella. She was just desperate about Jack Renauld, she’d have lain down on the ground for him to walk on, and when he began to change, and to stop writing so often, she began getting in a state. She got it into her head that he was keen on another girl—and of course, as it turned out afterwards, she was quite right there. She’d made up her mind to go to their villa at Merlinville, and try and see Jack. She knew I was against it, and tried to give me the slip. I found she was not on the train at Calais, and determined I would not go on to England without her. I’d an uneasy feeling that something awful was going to happen if I couldn’t prevent it.

“I met the next train from Paris. She was on it, and set upon going out then and there to Merlinville. I argued with her for all I was worth, but it wasn’t any good. She was all strung up and set upon having her own way. Well, I washed my hands of it. I’d done all I could. It was getting late. I went to an hotel, and Bella started for Merlinville. I still couldn’t shake off my feeling of what the books call ‘impending disaster.’

“The next day came—but no Bella. She’d made a date with me to meet at the hotel, but she didn’t keep it. No sign of her all day. I got more and more anxious. Then came an evening paper with the news.

"It was awful! I couldn't be sure, of course—but I was terribly afraid. I figured it out that Bella had met Papa Renauld and told him about her and Jack, and that he'd insulted her or something like that. We've both got terribly quick tempers.

"Then all the masked foreigner business came out, and I began to feel more at ease. But it still worried me that Bella hadn't kept her date with me.

"By the next morning I was so rattled that I'd just got to go and see what I could. First thing, I ran up against you. You know all that … When I saw the dead man, looking so like Jack, and wearing Jack's fancy overcoat, I knew! And there was the identical paper knife—wicked little thing!—that Jack had given Bella! Ten to one it had her fingermarks on it. I can't hope to explain to you the sort of helpless horror of that moment. I only saw one thing clearly—I must get hold of that dagger, and get right away with it before they found out it was gone. I pretended to faint, and while you were away getting water I took the thing and hid it away in my dress.

"I told you that I was staying at the Hôtel du Phare, but of course really I made a beeline back to Calais, and then on to England by the first boat. When we were in mid-Channel I dropped that little devil of a dagger into the sea. Then I felt I could breathe again.

"Bella was in our digs in London. She looked like nothing on God's earth. I told her what I'd done, and that she was pretty safe for the time being. She stared at me, and then began laughing … laughing … laughing … it was horrible to hear her! I felt that the best thing to do was to keep busy. She'd go mad if she had time to brood on what she'd done. Luckily we got an engagement at once.

"And then, I saw you and your friend watching us that night … I was frantic. You must suspect, or you wouldn't have tracked us down. I had to know the worst, so I followed you. I was desperate. And then, before I'd had time to say anything, I tumbled to it that it was me you suspected, not Bella! Or at least that you thought I was Bella, since I'd stolen the dagger.

"I wish, honey, that you could see back into my mind at that moment … you'd forgive me, perhaps … I was so frightened, and muddled, and desperate … All I could get clearly was that you would try and save me—I didn’t know whether you’d be willing to save her … I thought very likely not—It wasn’t the same thing! And I couldn’t risk it! Bella’s my twin—I’d got to do the best for her. So I went on lying. I felt mean—I feel mean still … That’s all—enough too, you’ll say, I expect. I ought to have trusted you … If I had—

“As soon as the news was in the paper that Jack Renauld had been arrested, it was all up. Bella wouldn’t even wait to see how things went….

“I’m very tired. I can’t write any more.”

She had begun to sign herself Cinderella, but had crossed that out and written instead “Dulcie Duveen.”

It was an ill-written, blurred epistle—but I have kept it to this day.

Poirot was with me when I read it. The sheets fell from my hand, and I looked across at him.

“Did you know all the time that it was—the other?”

“Yes, my friend.”

“Why did you not tell me?”

“To begin with, I could hardly believe it conceivable that you could make such a mistake. You had seen the photograph. The sisters are very alike, but by no means incapable of distinguishment.”

“But the fair hair?”

“A wig, worn for the sake of a piquant contrast on the stage. Is it conceivable that with twins one should be fair and one dark?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that night at the hotel in Coventry?”

“You were rather high-handed in your methods, mon ami,” said Poirot dryly. “You did not give me a chance.”

“But afterwards?”

“Ah, afterwards! Well, to begin with, I was hurt at your want of faith in me. And then, I wanted to see whether your—feelings would stand the test of time. In fact, whether it was love, or a flash in the pan, with you. I should not have left you long in your error.”

I nodded. His tone was too affectionate for me to bear resentment. I looked down on the sheets of the letter. Suddenly I picked them up from the floor, and pushed them across to him.

“Read that,” I said. “I’d like you to.”

He read it through in silence, then he looked up at me.

“What is it that worries you, Hastings?”

This was quite a new mood in Poirot. His mocking manner seemed laid quite aside. I was able to say what I wanted without too much difficulty.

“She doesn’t say—she doesn’t say—well, not whether she cares for me or not?”

Poirot turned back the pages.

“I think you are mistaken, Hastings.”

“Where?” I cried, leaning forward eagerly.

Poirot smiled.

“She tells you that in every line of the letter, mon ami.”

“But where am I to find her? There’s no address on the letter. There’s a French stamp, that’s all.”

“Excite yourself not! Leave it to Papa Poirot. I can find her for you as soon as I have five little minutes!”

Twenty-seven

JACK RENAULD’S STORY

“Congratulations, Monsieur Jack,” said Poirot, wringing the lad warmly by the hand.

Young Renauld had come to us as soon as he was liberated—before starting for Merlinville to rejoin Marthe and his mother. Stonor accompanied him. His heartiness was in strong contrast to the lad’s wan looks. It was plain that the boy was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He smiled mournfully at Poirot, and said in a low voice:

“I went through it to protect her, and now it’s all no use.”

“You could hardly expect the girl to accept the price of your life,” remarked Stonor dryly. “She was bound to come forward when she saw you heading straight for the guillotine.”

“Eh ma foi! and you were heading for it too!” added Poirot, with a slight twinkle. “You would have had Maître Grosier’s death from rage on your conscience if you had gone on.”

“He was a well-meaning ass, I suppose,” said Jack. “But he worried me horribly. You see, I couldn’t very well take him into my confidence. But, my God! what’s going to happen about Bella?”

“If I were you,” said Poirot frankly, “I should not distress myself unduly. The French Courts are very lenient to youth and beauty, and the crime passionnel! A clever lawyer will make out a great case of extenuating circumstances. It will not be pleasant for you—”

“I don’t care about that. You see, Monsieur Poirot, in a way I do feel guilty of my father’s murder. But for me, and my entanglement with this girl, he would be alive and well today. And then my cursed carelessness in taking away the wrong overcoat. I can’t help feeling responsible for his death. It will haunt me for ever!”

“No, no,” I said soothingly.

“Of course it’s horrible to me to think that Bella killed my father,” resumed Jack. “But I’d treated her shamefully. After I met Marthe, and realized I’d made a mistake, I ought to have written and told her so honestly. But I was so terrified of a row, and of its coming to Marthe’s ears, and her thinking there was more in it than there ever had been, that—well, I was a coward, and went on hoping the thing would die down of itself. I just drifted, in fact—not realizing that I was driving the poor kid desperate. If she’d really knifed me, as she meant to, I should have got no more than my deserts. And the way she’s come forward now is downright plucky. I’d have stood the racket, you know—up to the end.”

He was silent for a moment or two, and then burst out on another tack:

“What gets me is why the Governor should be wandering about in underclothes and my overcoat at that time of night. I suppose he’d just given the foreign johnnies the slip, and my mother must have made a mistake about its being two o’clock when they came. Or—or, it wasn’t all a frame-up, was it? I mean, my mother didn’t think—couldn’t think—that—that it was me?”

Poirot reassured him quickly.

“No, no, Monsieur Jack. Have no fears on that score. As for the rest, I will explain it to you one of these days. It is rather curious. But will you recount to us exactly what did occur on that terrible evening?”

“There’s very little to tell. I came from Cherbourg, as I told you, in order to see Marthe before going to the other end of the world. The train was late, and I decided to take the short cut across the golf links. I could easily get into the grounds of the Villa Marguerite from there. I had nearly reached the place when—”

He paused and swallowed.

“Yes?”

“I heard a terrible cry. It wasn’t loud—a sort of choke and gasp—but it frightened me. For a moment I stood rooted to the spot. Then I came round the corner of a bush. There was moonlight. I saw the grave, and a figure lying face downwards with a dagger sticking in the back. And then—and then—I looked up and saw her. She was looking at me as though she saw a ghost—it’s what she must have thought me at first—all expression seemed frozen out of her face by horror. And then she gave a cry, and turned and ran.”

He stopped, trying to master his emotion.

“And afterwards?” asked Poirot gently.

“I really don’t know. I stayed there for a time, dazed. And then I realized I’d better get away as fast as I could. It didn’t occur to me that they would suspect me, but I was afraid of being called upon to give evidence against her. I walked to St. Beauvais as I told you, and got a car from there back to Cherbourg.”

A knock came at the door, and a page entered with a telegram which he delivered to Stonor. He tore it open. Then he got up from his seat.

“Mrs. Renauld has regained consciousness,” he said.

“Ah!” Poirot sprang to his feet. “Let us all go to Merlinville at once!”

A hurried departure was made forthwith. Stonor, at Jack’s insistence, agreed to stay behind and do all that could be done for Bella Duveen. Poirot, Jack Renauld, and I set off in the Renauld car.

The run took just over forty minutes. As we approached the doorway of the Villa Marguerite Jack Renauld shot a questioning glance at Poirot.

“How would it be if you went on first—to break the news to my mother that I am free—”

“While you break it in person to Mademoiselle Marthe, eh?” finished Poirot, with a twinkle. “But yes, by all means, I was about to propose such an arrangement myself.”

Jack Renauld did not wait for more. Stopping the car, he swung himself out, and ran up the path to the front door. We went on in the car to the Villa Geneviève.

“Poirot,” I said, “do you remember how we arrived here that first day? And were met by the news of Mr. Renauld’s murder?”

“Ah, yes, truly. Not so long ago either. But what a lot of things have happened since then—especially for you, mon ami!”

“Yes, indeed,” I sighed.

“You are regarding it from the sentimental standpoint, Hastings. That was not my meaning. We will hope that Mademoiselle Bella will be dealt with leniently, and after all Jack Renauld cannot marry both the girls! I spoke from a professional standpoint. This is not a crime well-ordered and regular, such as a detective delights in. The mise en scène designed by Georges Conneau, that indeed is perfect, but the dénouement—ah, no! A man killed by accident in a girl’s fit of anger—ah, indeed, what order or method is there in that?”

And in the midst of a fit of laughter on my part at Poirot’s peculiarities, the door was opened by Françoise.

Poirot explained that he must see Mrs. Renauld at once, and the old woman conducted him upstairs. I remained in the salon. It was some time before Poirot reappeared. He was looking unusually grave.

“Vous voilà, Hastings! Sacré tonnerre! but there are squalls ahead!”

“What do you mean?” I cried.

“I would hardly have credited it,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “but women are very unexpected.”

“Here are Jack and Marthe Daubreuil,” I exclaimed, looking out of the window.

Poirot bounded out of the room, and met the young couple on the steps outside.

“Do not enter. It is better not. Your mother is very upset.”

“I know, I know,” said Jack Renauld. “I must go up to her at once.”

“But no, I tell you. It is better not.”

“But Marthe and I—”

“In any case, do not take Mademoiselle with you. Mount, if you must, but you would be wise to be guided by me.”

A voice on the stairs behind made us all start.

“I thank you for your good offices, Monsieur Poirot, but I will make my own wishes clear.”

We stared in astonishment. Descending the stairs, leaning on Léonie’s arm, was Mrs. Renauld, her head still bandaged. The French girl was weeping, and imploring her mistress to return to bed.

“Madame will kill herself. It is contrary to all the doctor’s orders!”

But Mrs. Renauld came on.

“Mother,” cried Jack, starting forward.

But with a gesture she drove him back.

“I am no mother of yours! You are no son of mine! From this day and hour I renounce you.”

“Mother!” cried the lad, stupefied.

For a moment she seemed to waver, to falter before the anguish in his voice. Poirot made a mediating gesture. But instantly she regained command of herself.

“Your father’s blood is on your head. You are morally guilty of his death. You thwarted and defied him over this girl, and by your heartless treatment of another girl, you brought about his death. Go out from my house. Tomorrow I intend to take such steps as shall make it certain that you shall never touch a penny of his money. Make your way in the world as best you can with the help of the girl who is the daughter of your father’s bitterest enemy!”

And slowly, painfully, she retraced her way upstairs.

We were all dumbfounded—totally unprepared for such a demonstration. Jack Renauld, worn out with all he had already gone through, swayed and nearly fell. Poirot and I went quickly to his assistance.

“He is overdone,” murmured Poirot to Marthe. “Where can we take him?”

“But home! To the Villa Marguerite. We will nurse him, my mother and I. My poor Jack!”

We got the lad to the villa, where he dropped limply on to a chair in a semi-dazed condition. Poirot felt his head and hands.

“He has fever. The long strain begins to tell. And now this shock on top of it. Get him to bed, and Hastings and I will summon a doctor.”

A doctor was soon procured. After examining the patient, he gave it as his opinion that it was simply a case of nerve strain. With perfect rest and quiet, the lad might be almost restored by the next day, but, if excited, there was a chance of brain fever. It would be advisable for someone to sit up all night with him.

Finally, having done all we could, we left him in the charge of Marthe and her mother, and set out for the town. It was past our usual hour of dining, and we were both famished. The first restaurant we came to assuaged the pangs of hunger with an excellent omelette, and an equally excellent entrecôte to follow.

“And now for quarters for the night,” said Poirot, when at length café noir had completed the meal. “Shall we try our old friend, the Hôtel de Bains?”

We traced our steps there without more ado. Yes, Messieurs could be accommodated with two good rooms overlooking the sea. Then Poirot asked a question which surprised me:

“Has an English lady, Miss Robinson, arrived?”

“Yes, Monsieur. She is in the little salon.”

“Ah!”

“Poirot,” I cried, keeping pace with him, as he walked along the corridor, “who on earth is Miss Robinson?”

Poirot beamed kindly on me.

“It is that I have arranged you a marriage, Hastings.”

“But I say—”

“Bah!” said Poirot, giving me a friendly push over the threshold of the door. “Do you think I wish to trumpet aloud in Merlinville the name of Duveen?”

It was indeed Cinderella who rose to greet us. I took her hand in both of mine. My eyes said the rest.

Poirot cleared his throat.

“Mes enfants,” he said, “for the moment we have no time for sentiment. There is work ahead of us. Mademoiselle, were you able to do what I asked you?”

In response, Cinderella took from her bag an object wrapped up in paper, and handed it silently to Poirot. The latter unwrapped it. I gave a start—for it was the aeroplane dagger which I understood she had cast into the sea. Strange, how reluctant women always are to destroy the most compromising of objects and documents!

“Très bien, mon enfant,” said Poirot. “I am pleased with you. Go now and rest yourself. Hastings here and I have work to do. You shall see him tomorrow.”

“Where are you going?” asked the girl, her eyes widening.

“You shall hear all about it tomorrow.”

“Because wherever you’re going, I’m coming too.”

“But, mademoiselle—”

“I’m coming too, I tell you.”

Poirot realized that it was futile to argue. He gave in.

“Come then, mademoiselle. But it will not be amusing. In all probability nothing will happen.”

The girl made no reply.

Twenty minutes later we set forth. It was quite dark now, a close oppressive evening. Poirot led the way out of the town in the direction of the Villa Geneviève. But when he reached the Villa Marguerite he paused.

“I should like to assure myself that all goes well with Jack Renauld. Come with me, Hastings. Mademoiselle will perhaps remain outside. Madame Daubreuil might say something which would wound her.”

We unlatched the gate, and walked up the path. As we went round to the side of the house, I drew Poirot’s attention to a window on the first floor. Thrown sharply on the blind was the profile of Marthe Daubreuil.

“Ah!” said Poirot. “I figure to myself that that is the room where we shall find Jack Renauld.”

Madame Daubreuil opened the door to us. She explained that Jack was much the same, but perhaps we would like to see for ourselves. She led us upstairs and into the bedroom. Marthe Daubreuil was sitting by a table with a lamp on it, working. She put her finger to her lips as we entered.

Jack Renauld was sleeping an uneasy, fitful sleep, his head turning from side to side, and his face still unduly flushed.

“Is the doctor coming again?” asked Poirot in a whisper.

“Not unless we send. He is sleeping—that is the great thing. Maman made him a tisane.”

She sat down again with her embroidery as we left the room. Madame Daubreuil accompanied us down the stairs. Since I had learned of her past history, I viewed this woman with increased interest. She stood there with her eyes cast down, the same very faint enigmatical smile that I remembered on her lips. And suddenly I felt afraid of her, as one might feel afraid of a beautiful poisonous snake.

“I hope we have not deranged you, madame,” said Poirot politely, as she opened the door for us to pass out.

“Not at all, monsieur.”

“By the way,” said Poirot, as though struck by an afterthought, “Monsieur Stonor has not been in Merlinville today, has he?”

I could not at all fathom the point of this question, which I well knew to be meaningless as far as Poirot was concerned.

Madame Daubreuil replied quite composedly:

“Not that I know of.”

“He has not had an interview with Madame Renauld?”

“How should I know that, monsieur?”

“True,” said Poirot. “I thought you might have seen him coming or going, that is all. Goodnight, madame.”

“Why—” I began.

“No whys, Hastings. There will be time for that later.”

We rejoined Cinderella and made our way rapidly in the direction of the Villa Geneviève. Poirot looked over his shoulder once at the lighted window and the profile of Marthe as she bent over her work.

“He is being guarded at all events,” he muttered.

Arrived at the Villa Geneviève, Poirot took up his stand behind some bushes to the left of the drive, where, while enjoying a good view ourselves, we were completely hidden from sight. The villa itself was in total darkness, everybody was without doubt in bed and asleep. We were almost immediately under the window of Mrs. Renauld’s bedroom, which window, I noticed, was open. It seemed to me that it was upon this spot that Poirot’s eyes were fixed.

“What are we going to do?” I whispered.

“Watch.”

“But—”

“I do not expect anything to happen for at least an hour, probably two hours, but the—”

His words were interrupted by a long, thin drawn cry:

“Help!”

A light flashed up in the first-floor room on the right-hand side of the front door. The cry came from there. And even as we watched there came a shadow on the blind as of two people struggling.

“Mille tonnerres!” cried Poirot. “She must have changed her room.”

Dashing forward, he battered wildly on the front door. Then rushing to the tree in the flower bed, he swarmed up it with the agility of a cat. I followed him, as with a bound he sprang in through the open window. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Dulcie reaching the branch behind me.

“Take care,” I exclaimed.

“Take care of your grandmother!” retorted the girl. “This is child’s play to me.”

Poirot had rushed through the empty room and was pounding on the door.

“Locked and bolted on the outside,” he growled. “And it will take time to burst it open.”

The cries for help were getting noticeably fainter. I saw despair in Poirot’s eyes. He and I together put our shoulders to the door.

Cinderella’s voice, calm and dispassionate, came from the window:

“You’ll be too late. I guess I’m the only one who can do anything.”

Before I could move a hand to stop her, she appeared to leap from the window into space. I rushed and looked out. To my horror, I saw her hanging by her hands from the roof, propelling herself along by jerks in the direction of the lighted window.

“Good heavens! She’ll be killed,” I cried.

“You forget. She’s a professional acrobat, Hastings. It was the providence of the good God that made her insist on coming with us tonight. I only pray that she may be in time. Ah!”

A cry of absolute terror floated out on to the night, as the girl disappeared through the window, and then in Cinderella’s clear tones came the words:

“No, you don’t! I’ve got you—and my wrists are just like steel.”

At the same moment the door of our prison was opened cautiously by Françoise. Poirot brushed her aside unceremoniously and rushed down the passage to where the other maids were grouped round the farther door.

“It’s locked on the inside, monsieur.”

There was the sound of a heavy fall within. After a moment or two the key turned and the door swung slowly open. Cinderella, very pale, beckoned us in.

“She is safe?” demanded Poirot.

“Yes, I was just in time. She was exhausted.”

Mrs. Renauld was half sitting, half lying on the bed. She was gasping for breath.

“Nearly strangled me,” she murmured painfully.

The girl picked up something from the floor and handed it to Poirot. It was a rolled-up ladder of silk rope, very fine but quite strong.

“A getaway,” said Poirot. “By the window, while we were battering at the door. Where is—the other?”

The girl stood aside a little and pointed. On the ground lay a figure wrapped in some dark material, a fold of which hid the face.

“Dead?”

She nodded.

“I think so. Head must have struck the marble fender.”

“But who is it?” I cried.

“The murderer of Renauld, Hastings. And the would-be murderer of Madame Renauld.”

Puzzled and uncomprehending, I knelt down, and lifting the fold of cloth, looked into the dead beautiful face of Marthe Daubreuil!

Twenty-eight

JOURNEY’S END

I have confused memories of the further events of that night. Poirot seemed deaf to my repeated questions. He was engaged in overwhelming Françoise with reproaches for not having told him of Mrs. Renauld’s change of sleeping quarters.

I caught him by the shoulder, determined to attract his attention, and make myself heard.

“But you must have known,” I expostulated. “You were taken up to see her this afternoon.”

Poirot deigned to attend to me for a brief moment.

“She had been wheeled on a sofa into the middle room—her boudoir,” he explained.

“But, monsieur,” cried Françoise, “Madame changed her room almost immediately after the crimes. The associations—they were too distressing!”

“Then why was I not told?” vociferated Poirot, striking the table, and working himself into a first-class passion. “I demand of you—why—was—I—not—told? You are an old woman completely imbecile! And Léonie and Denise are no better. All of you are triple idiots! Your stupidity has nearly caused the death of your mistress. But for this courageous child—”

He broke off, and, darting across the room to where the girl was bending over ministering to Mrs. Renauld, he embraced her with Gallic fervour—slightly to my annoyance.

I was aroused from my condition of mental fog by a sharp command from Poirot to fetch the doctor immediately on Mrs. Renauld’s behalf. After that, I might summon the police. And he added, to complete my dudgeon:

“It will hardly be worth your while to return here. I shall be too busy to attend to you, and of Mademoiselle here I make a garde-malade.”

I retired with what dignity I could command. Having done my errands, I returned to the hotel. I understood next to nothing of what had occurred. The events of the night seemed fantastic and impossible. Nobody would answer my questions. Nobody had seemed to hear them. Angrily, I flung myself into bed, and slept the sleep of the bewildered and utterly exhausted.

I awoke to find the sun pouring in through the open windows and Poirot, neat and smiling, sitting beside the bed.

“Enfin, you wake! But it is that you are a famous sleeper, Hastings! Do you know that it is nearly eleven o’clock?”

I groaned and put a hand to my head.

“I must have been dreaming,” I said. “Do you know, I actually dreamt that we found Marthe Daubreuil’s body in Mrs. Renauld’s room, and that you declared her to have murdered Mr. Renauld?”

“You were not dreaming. All that is quite true.”

“But Bella Duveen killed Mr. Renauld?”

“Oh no, Hastings, she did not! She said she did—yes—but that was to save the man she loved from the guillotine.”

“What?”

“Remember Jack Renauld’s story. They both arrived on the scene on the same instant, and each took the other to be the perpetrator of the crime. The girl stares at him in horror, and then with a cry rushes away. But, when she hears that the crime has been brought home to him, she cannot bear it, and comes forward to accuse herself and save him from certain death.”

Poirot leaned back in his chair, and brought the tips of his fingers together in familiar style.

“The case was not quite satisfactory to me,” he observed judicially. “All along I was strongly under the impression that we were dealing with a cold-blooded and premeditated crime committed by someone who had contented themselves (very cleverly) with using Monsieur Renauld’s own plans for throwing the police off the track. The great criminal (as you may remember my remarking to you once) is always supremely simple.”

I nodded.

“Now, to support this theory, the criminal must have been fully cognizant of Monsieur Renauld’s plans. That leads us to Mrs. Renauld. But facts fail to support any theory of her guilt. Is there anyone else who might have known of them? Yes. From Marthe Daubreuil’s own lips we have the admission that she overheard Mr. Renauld’s quarrel with the tramp. If she could overhear that, there is no reason why she should not have heard everything else, especially if Mr. and Madame Renauld were imprudent enough to discuss their plans sitting on the bench. Remember how easily you overheard Marthe’s conversation with Jack Renauld from that spot.”

“But what possible motive could Marthe have for murdering Mr. Renauld?” I argued.

“What motive! Money! Renauld was a millionaire several times over, and at his death (or so she and Jack believed) half that vast fortune would pass to his son. Let us reconstruct the scene from the standpoint of Marthe Daubreuil.

“Marthe Daubreuil overhears what passes between Renauld and his wife. So far he has been a nice little source of income to the Daubreuil mother and daughter, but now he proposes to escape from their toils. At first, possibly, her idea is to prevent that escape. But a bolder idea takes its place, and one that fails to horrify the daughter of Jeanne Beroldy! At present Renauld stands inexorably in the way of her marriage with Jack. If the latter defies his father, he will be a pauper—which is not at all to the mind of Mademoiselle Marthe. In fact, I doubt if she has ever cared a straw for Jack Renauld. She can simulate emotion but in reality she is of the same cold, calculating type as her mother. I doubt, too, whether she was really very sure of her hold over the boy’s affections. She had dazzled and captivated him, but separated from her, as his father could so easily manage to separate him, she might lose him. But with Renauld dead, and Jack the heir to half his millions, the marriage can take place at once, and at a stroke she will attain wealth—not the beggarly thousands that have been extracted from him so far. And her clever brain takes in the simplicity of the thing. It is all so easy. Renauld is planning all the circumstances of his death—she has only to step in at the right moment and turn the farce into a grim reality. And here comes in the second point which led me infallibly to Marthe Daubreuil—the dagger! Jack Renauld had three souvenirs made. One he gave to his mother, one to Bella Duveen—was it not highly probable that he had given the third one to Marthe Daubreuil?

“So, then, to sum up, there were four points of note against Marthe Daubreuil:

1. Marthe Daubreuil could have overheard Renauld’s plans.
2. Marthe Daubreuil had a direct interest in causing Renauld’s death.
3. Marthe Daubreuil was the daughter of the notorious Madame Beroldy who in my opinion was morally and virtually the murderess of her husband, although it may have been Georges Conneau’s hand which struck the actual blow.
4. Marthe Daubreuil was the only person, besides Jack Renauld, likely to have the third dagger in her possession.”

Poirot paused and cleared his throat.

“Of course, when I learned of the existence of the other girl, Bella Duveen, I realized that it was quite possible that she might have killed Renauld. The solution did not commend itself to me, because, as I pointed out to you, Hastings, an expert, such as I am, likes to meet a foeman worthy of his steel. Still, one must take crimes as one finds them, not as one would like them to be. It did not seem very likely that Bella Duveen would be wandering about carrying a souvenir paper knife in her hand, but of course she might have had some idea all the time of revenging herself on Jack Renauld. When she actually came forward and confessed to the murder, it seemed that all was over. And yet—I was not satisfied, mon ami. I was not satisfied….

“I went over the case again minutely, and I came to the same conclusion as before. If it was not Bella Duveen, the only other person who could have committed the crime was Marthe Daubreuil. But I had not one single proof against her!

“And then you showed me that letter from Mademoiselle Dulcie, and I saw a chance of settling the matter once for all. The original dagger was stolen by Dulcie Duveen and thrown into the sea—since, as she thought, it belonged to her sister. But if, by any chance, it was not her sister’s, but the one given by Jack to Marthe Daubreuil—why then, Bella Duveen’s dagger would be still intact! I said no word to you, Hastings (it was no time for romance), but I sought out Mademoiselle Dulcie, told her as much as I deemed needful, and set her to search among the effects of her sister. Imagine my elation, when she sought me out (according to my instructions) as Miss Robinson, with the precious souvenir in her possession!

“In the meantime I had taken steps to force Mademoiselle Marthe into the open. By my orders, Madame Renauld repulsed her son, and declared her intention of making a will on the morrow which should cut him off from ever enjoying even a portion of his father’s fortune. It was a desperate step, but a necessary one, and Madame Renauld was fully prepared to take the risk—though unfortunately she also never thought of mentioning her change of room. I suppose she took it for granted that I knew. All happened as I thought. Marthe Daubreuil made a last bold bid for the Renauld millions—and failed!”

“What absolutely bewilders me,” I said, “is how she ever got into the house without our seeing her. It seems an absolute miracle. We left her behind at the Villa Marguerite, we go straight to the Villa Geneviève—and yet she is there before us!”

“Ah, but we did not leave her behind. She was out of the Villa Marguerite by the back way while we were talking to her mother in the hall. That is where, as the Americans say, she ‘put it over’ on Hercule Poirot!”

“But the shadow on the blind? We saw it from the road.”

“Eh bien, when we looked up, Madame Daubreuil had just had time to run upstairs and take her place.”

“Madame Daubreuil?”

“Yes. One is old, and one is young, one dark, and one fair, but, for the purpose of a silhouette on a blind, their profiles are singularly alike. Even I did not suspect—triple imbecile that I was! I thought I had plenty of time before me—that she would not try to gain admission to the villa until much later. She had brains, that beautiful Mademoiselle Marthe.”

“And her object was to murder Mrs. Renauld?”

“Yes. The whole fortune would then pass to her son. But it would have been suicide, mon ami! On the floor by Marthe Daubreuil’s body, I found a pad and a little bottle of chloroform and a hypodermic syringe containing a fatal dose of morphine. You understand? The chloroform first—then when the victim is unconscious the prick of the needle. By the morning the smell of the chloroform has quite disappeared, and the syringe lies where it has fallen from Madame Renauld’s hand. What would he say, the excellent Monsieur Hautet? ‘Poor woman! What did I tell you? The shock of joy, it was too much on top of the rest! Did I not say that I should not be surprised if her brain became unhinged. Altogether a most tragic case, the Renauld Case!’

“However, Hastings, things did not go quite as Mademoiselle Marthe had planned. To begin with, Madame Renauld was awake and waiting for her. There is a struggle. But Madame Renauld is terribly weak still. There is a last chance for Marthe Daubreuil. The idea of suicide is at an end, but if she can silence Madame Renauld with her strong hands, make a getaway with her little silk ladder while we are still battering on the inside of the farther door, and be back at the Villa Marguerite before we return there, it will be hard to prove anything against her. But she was checkmated, not by Hercule Poirot, but by la petite acrobate with her wrists of steel.”

I mused over the whole story.

“When did you first begin to suspect Marthe Daubreuil, Poirot? When she told us she had overheard the quarrel in the garden?”

Poirot smiled.

“My friend, do you remember when we drove into Merlinville that first day? And the beautiful girl we saw standing at the gate? You asked me if I had noticed a young goddess, and I replied to you that I had seen only a girl with anxious eyes. That is how I have thought of Marthe Daubreuil from the beginning. The girl with the anxious eyes! Why was she anxious? Not on Jack Renauld’s behalf, for she did not know then that he had been in Merlinville the previous evening.”

“By the way,” I exclaimed, “how is Jack Renauld?”

“Much better. He is still at the Villa Marguerite. But Madame Daubreuil has disappeared. The police are looking for her.”

“Was she in with her daughter, do you think?”

“We shall never know. Madame is a lady who can keep her secrets. And I doubt very much if the police will ever find her.”

“Has Jack Renauld been—told?”

“Not yet.”

“It will be a terrible shock to him.”

“Naturally. And yet, do you know, Hastings, I doubt if his heart was ever seriously engaged? So far we have looked upon Bella Duveen as a siren, and Marthe Daubreuil as the girl he really loved. But I think that if we reversed the terms we should come nearer to the truth. Marthe Daubreuil was very beautiful. She set herself to fascinate Jack, and she succeeded, but remember his curious reluctance to break with the other girl. And see how he was willing to go to the guillotine rather than implicate her. I have a little idea that when he learns the truth, he will be horrified—revolted, and his false love will wither away.”

“What about Giraud?”

“He has a crise of the nerves, that one! He has been obliged to return to Paris.”

We both smiled.

Poirot proved a fairly true prophet. When at length the doctor pronounced Jack Renauld strong enough to hear the truth, it was Poirot who broke it to him. The shock was indeed terrific. Yet Jack rallied better than I could have supposed possible. His mother’s devotion helped him to live through those difficult days. The mother and son were inseparable now.

There was a further revelation to come. Poirot had acquainted Mrs. Renauld with the fact that he knew her secret, and had represented to her that Jack should not be left in ignorance of his father’s past.

“To hide the truth, never does it avail, madame! Be brave and tell him everything.”

With a heavy heart Mrs. Renauld consented, and her son learned that the father he had loved had been in actual fact a fugitive from justice. A halting question was promptly answered by Poirot.

“Reassure yourself, Monsieur Jack. The world knows nothing. As far as I can see, there is no obligation for me to take the police into my confidence. Throughout the case I have acted, not for them, but for your father. Justice overtook him at last, but no one need ever know that he and Georges Conneau were one and the same.”

There were, of course, various points in the case that remained puzzling to the police, but Poirot explained things in so plausible a fashion that all query about them was gradually stilled.

Shortly after we got back to London, I noticed a magnificent model of a foxhound adorning Poirot’s mantelpiece. In answer to my inquiring glance, Poirot nodded.

“Mais oui! I got my five hundred francs! Is he not a splendid fellow? I call him Giraud!”

A few days later Jack Renauld came to see us with a resolute expression on his face.

“Monsieur Poirot, I’ve come to say good-bye. I’m sailing for South America almost immediately. My father had large interests over the continent, and I mean to start a new life out there.”

“You go alone, Monsieur Jack?”

“My mother comes with me—and I shall keep Stonor on as my secretary. He likes out-of-the-way parts of the world.”

“No one else goes with you?”

Jack flushed.

“You mean—?”

“A girl who loves you very dearly—who has been willing to lay down her life for you.”

“How could I ask her?” muttered the boy. “After all that has happened, could I go to her and—Oh, what sort of a lame story could I tell?”

“Les femmes—they have a wonderful genius for manufacturing crutches for stories like that.”

“Yes, but—I’ve been such a damned fool.”

“So have all of us, one time and another,” observed Poirot philosophically.

But Jack’s face had hardened.

“There’s something else. I’m my father’s son. Would anyone marry me, knowing that?”

“You are your father’s son, you say. Hastings here will tell you that I believe in heredity—”

“Well, then—”

“Wait. I know a woman, a woman of courage and endurance, capable of great love, of supreme self-sacrifice—”

The boy looked up. His eyes softened.

“My mother!”

“Yes. You are your mother’s son as well as your father’s. Then go to Mademoiselle Bella. Tell her everything. Keep nothing back—and see what she will say!”

Jack looked irresolute.

“Go to her as a boy no longer, but a man—a man bowed by the fate of the Past, and the fate of Today, but looking forward to a new and wonderful life. Ask her to share it with you. You may not realize it, but your love for each other has been tested in the fire and not found wanting. You have both been willing to lay down your lives for each other.”

And what of Captain Arthur Hastings, humble chronicler of these pages?

There is some talk of his joining the Renaulds on a ranch across the seas, but for the end of this story I prefer to go back to a morning in the garden of the Villa Geneviève.

“I can’t call you Bella,” I said, “since it isn’t your name. And Dulcie seems so unfamiliar. So it’s got to be Cinderella. Cinderella married the Prince, you remember. I’m not a Prince, but—”

She interrupted me.

“Cinderella warned him, I’m sure. You see, she couldn’t promise to turn into a princess. She was only a little scullion after all—”

“It’s the Prince’s turn to interrupt,” I interpolated. “Do you know what he said?”

“No?”

“‘Hell!’ said the Prince—and kissed her!”

And I suited the action to the word.

Poirot Investigates (1924)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE ADVENTURE OF “THE WESTERN STAR”

I was standing at the window of Poirot’s rooms looking out idly on the street below.

“That’s queer,” I ejaculated suddenly beneath my breath.

“What is, mon ami?” asked Poirot placidly, from the depths of his comfortable chair.

“Deduce, Poirot, from the following facts! Here is a young lady, richly dressed—fashionable hat, magnificent furs. She is coming along slowly, looking up at the houses as she goes. Unknown to her, she is being shadowed by three men and a middle-aged woman. They have just been joined by an errand boy who points after the girl, gesticulating as he does so. What drama is this being played? Is the girl a crook, and are the shadows detectives preparing to arrest her? Or are they the scoundrels, and are they plotting to attack an innocent victim? What does the great detective say?”

“The great detective, mon ami, chooses, as ever, the simplest course. He rises to see for himself.” And my friend joined me at the window.

In a minute he gave vent to an amused chuckle.

“As usual, your facts are tinged with your incurable romanticism. This is Miss Mary Marvell, the film star. She is being followed by a bevy of admirers who have recognized her. And, en passant, my dear Hastings, she is quite aware of the fact!”

I laughed.

“So all is explained! But you get no marks for that, Poirot. It was a mere matter of recognition.”

“En vérité! And how many times have you seen Mary Marvell on the screen, mon cher?”

I thought.

“About a dozen times perhaps.”

“And I—once! Yet I recognize her, and you do not.”

“She looks so different,” I replied rather feebly.

“Ah! Sacré! ” cried Poirot. “Is it that you expect her to promenade herself in the streets of London in a cowboy hat, or with bare feet, and a bunch of curls, as an Irish colleen? Always with you it is the nonessentials! Remember the case of the dancer, Valerie Saintclair.”

I shrugged my shoulders, slightly annoyed.

“But console yourself, mon ami,” said Poirot, calming down. “All cannot be as Hercule Poirot! I know it well.”

“You really have the best opinion of yourself of anyone I ever knew!” I cried, divided between amusement and annoyance.

“What will you? When one is unique, one knows it! And others share that opinion—even, if I mistake it not, Miss Mary Marvell.”

“What?”

“Without doubt. She is coming here.”

“How do you make that out?”

“Very simply. This street, it is not aristocratic, mon ami! In it there is no fashionable doctor, no fashionable dentist—still less is there a fashionable milliner! But there is a fashionable detective. Oui, my friend, it is true—I am become the mode, the dernier cri! One says to another: ‘Comment? You have lost your gold pencil case? You must go to the little Belgian. He is too marvellous! Everyone goes! Courez!’ And they arrive! In flocks, mon ami! With problems of the most foolish!” A bell rang below. “What did I tell you? That is Miss Marvell.”

As usual, Poirot was right. After a short interval, the American film star was ushered in, and we rose to our feet.

Mary Marvell was undoubtedly one of the most popular actresses on the screen. She had only lately arrived in England in company with her husband, Gregory B. Rolf, also a film actor. Their marriage had taken place about a year ago in the States and this was their first visit to England. They had been given a great reception. Everyone was prepared to go mad over Mary Marvell, her wonderful clothes, her furs, her jewels, above all one jewel, the great diamond which had been nicknamed, to match its owner, “The Western Star.” Much, true and untrue, had been written about this famous stone which was reported to be insured for the enormous sum of fifty thousand pounds.

All these details passed rapidly through my mind as I joined with Poirot in greeting our fair client.

Miss Marvell was small and slender, very fair and girlish looking, with the wide innocent blue eyes of a child.

Poirot drew forward a chair for her, and she commenced talking at once.

“You will probably think me very foolish, Monsieur Poirot, but Lord Cronshaw was telling me last night how wonderfully you cleared up the mystery of his nephew’s death, and I felt that I just must have your advice. I dare say it’s only a silly hoax—Gregory says so—but it’s just worrying me to death.”

She paused for breath. Poirot beamed encouragement.

“Proceed, madame. You comprehend, I am still in the dark.”

“It’s these letters.” Miss Marvell unclasped her handbag, and drew out three envelopes which she handed to Poirot.

The latter scrutinized them closely.

“Cheap paper—the name and address carefully printed. Let us see the inside.” He drew out the enclosure.

I had joined him, and was leaning over his shoulder. The writing consisted of a single sentence, carefully printed like the envelope. It ran as follows:

“The great diamond which is the left eye of the god must return whence it came.”

The second letter was couched in precisely the same terms, but the third was more explicit:

“You have been warned. You have not obeyed. Now the diamond will be taken from you. At the full of the moon, the two diamonds which are the left and right eye of the god shall return. So it is written.”

“The first letter I treated as a joke,” explained Miss Marvell. “When I got the second, I began to wonder. The third one came yesterday, and it seemed to me that, after all, the matter might be more serious than I had imagined.”

“I see they did not come by post, these letters.”

“No; they were left by hand—by a Chinaman. That is what frightens me.”

“Why?”

“Because it was from a Chink in San Francisco that Gregory bought the stone three years ago.”

“I see, madame, that you believe the diamond referred to to be—”

“ ‘The Western Star,’ ” finished Miss Marvell. “That’s so. At the time, Gregory remembers that there was some story attached to the stone, but the Chink wasn’t handing out any information. Gregory says he seemed just scared to death, and in a mortal hurry to get rid of the thing. He only asked about a tenth of its value. It was Greg’s wedding present to me.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“The story seems of an almost unbelievable romanticism. And yet—who knows? I pray of you, Hastings, hand me my little almanac.”

I complied.

“Voyons!” said Poirot, turning the leaves. “When is the date of the full moon? Ah, Friday next. That is in three days’ time. Eh bien, madame, you seek my advice—I give it to you. This belle histoire may be a hoax—but it may not! Therefore I counsel you to place the diamond in my keeping until after Friday next. Then we can take what steps we please.”

A slight cloud passed over the actress’s face, and she replied constrainedly:

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“You have it with you—hein?” Poirot was watching her narrowly.

The girl hesitated a moment, then slipped her hand into the bosom of her gown, drawing out a long thin chain. She leaned forward, unclosing her hand. In the palm, a stone of white fire, exquisitely set in platinum, lay and winked at us solemnly.

Poirot drew in his breath with a long hiss.

“Épatant!” he murmured. “You permit, madame?” He took the jewel in his own hand and scrutinized it keenly, then restored it to her with a little bow. “A magnificent stone—without a flaw. Ah, cent tonnerres! and you carry it about with you, comme ça! ”

“No, no, I’m very careful really, Monsieur Poirot. As a rule it’s locked up in my jewel case, and left in the hotel safe deposit. We’re staying at the Magnificent, you know. I just brought it along today for you to see.”

“And you will leave it with me, n’est-ce pas? You will be advised by Papa Poirot?”

“Well, you see, it’s this way, Monsieur Poirot. On Friday we’re going down to Yardly Chase to spend a few days with Lord and Lady Yardly.”

Her words awoke a vague echo of remembrance in my mind. Some gossip—what was it now? A few years ago Lord and Lady Yardly had paid a visit to the States, rumour had it that his lordship had rather gone the pace out there with the assistance of some lady friends—but surely there was something more, more gossip which coupled Lady Yardly’s name with that of a “movie” star in California—why! it came to me in a flash—of course it was none other than Gregory B. Rolf.

“I’ll let you into a little secret, Monsieur Poirot,” Miss Marvell was continuing. “We’ve got a deal on with Lord Yardly. There’s some chance of our arranging to film a play down there in his ancestral pile.”

“At Yardly Chase?” I cried, interested. “Why, it’s one of the showplaces of England.”

Miss Marvell nodded.

“I guess it’s the real old feudal stuff all right. But he wants a pretty stiff price, and of course I don’t know yet whether the deal will go through, but Greg and I always like to combine business with pleasure.”

“But—I demand pardon if I am dense, madame—surely it is possible to visit Yardly Chase without taking the diamond with you?”

A shrewd, hard look came into Miss Marvell’s eyes which belied their childlike appearance. She looked suddenly a good deal older.

“I want to wear it down there.”

“Surely,” I said suddenly, “there are some very famous jewels in the Yardly collection, a large diamond amongst them?”

“That’s so,” said Miss Marvell briefly.

I heard Poirot murmur beneath his breath: “Ah, c’est comme ça! ” Then he said aloud, with his usual uncanny luck in hitting the bull’s-eye (he dignifies it by the name of psychology): “Then you are without doubt already acquainted with Lady Yardly, or perhaps your husband is?”

“Gregory knew her when she was out West three years ago,” said Miss Marvell. She hesitated a moment, and then added abruptly: “Do either of you ever see Society Gossip?”

We both pleaded guilty rather shamefacedly.

“I ask because in this week’s number there is an article on famous jewels, and it’s really very curious—” She broke off.

I rose, went to the table at the other side of the room and returned with the paper in question in my hand. She took it from me, found the article, and began to read aloud:

“. . . Amongst other famous stones may be included The Star of the East, a diamond in the possession of the Yardly family. An ancestor of the present Lord Yardly brought it back with him from China, and a romantic story is said to attach to it. According to this, the stone was once the right eye of a temple god. Another diamond, exactly similar in form and size, formed the left eye, and the story goes that this jewel, too, would in course of time be stolen. ‘One eye shall go West, the other East, till they shall meet once more. Then, in triumph shall they return to the god.’ It is a curious coincidence that there is at the present time a stone corresponding closely in description with this one, and known as ‘The Star of the West,’ or ‘The Western Star.’ It is the property of the celebrated film star, Miss Mary Marvell. A comparison of the two stones would be interesting.”

She stopped.

“Épatant!” murmured Poirot. “Without doubt a romance of the first water.” He turned to Mary Marvell. “And you are not afraid, madame? You have no superstitious terrors? You do not fear to introduce these two Siamese twins to each other lest a Chinaman should appear and, hey presto! whisk them both back to China?”

His tone was mocking, but I fancied that an undercurrent of seriousness lay beneath it.

“I don’t believe that Lady Yardly’s diamond is anything like as good as mine,” said Miss Marvell. “Anyway, I’m going to see.”

What more Poirot would have said I do not know, for at that moment the door flew open, and a splendid-looking man strode into the room. From his crisply curling black head, to the tips of his patent leather boots, he was a hero fit for romance.

“I said I’d call round for you, Mary,” said Gregory Rolf, “and here I am. Well, what does Monsieur Poirot say to our little problem? Just one big hoax, same as I do?”

Poirot smiled up at the big actor. They made a ridiculous contrast.

“Hoax or no hoax, Mr. Rolf,” he said dryly, “I have advised Madame your wife not to take the jewel with her to Yardly Chase on Friday.”

“I’m with you there, sir. I’ve already said so to Mary. But there! She’s a woman through and through, and I guess she can’t bear to think of another woman outshining her in the jewel line.”

“What nonsense, Gregory!” said Mary Marvell sharply. But she flushed angrily.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Madame, I have advised. I can do no more. C’est fini.”

He bowed them both to the door.

“Ah! la la,” he observed, returning. “Histoire des femmes! The good husband, he hit the nail—tout de même, but he was not tactful! Assuredly not.”

I imparted to him my vague remembrances, and he nodded vigorously.

“So I thought. All the same, there is something curious underneath all this. With your permission, mon ami, I will take the air. Await my return, I beg of you, I shall not be long.”

I was half asleep in my chair when the landlady tapped on the door, and put her head in.

“It’s another lady to see Mr. Poirot, sir. I’ve told her he was out, but she says as how she’ll wait, seeing as she’s come up from the country.”

“Oh, show her in here, Mrs. Murchinson. Perhaps I can do something for her.”

In another moment the lady had been ushered in. My heart gave a leap as I recognized her. Lady Yardly’s portrait had figured too often in the Society papers to allow her to remain unknown.

“Do sit down, Lady Yardly,” I said, drawing forward a chair. “My friend, Poirot, is out, but I know for a fact that he’ll be back very shortly.”

She thanked me and sat down. A very different type, this, from Miss Mary Marvell. Tall, dark, with flashing eyes, and a pale proud face—yet something wistful in the curves of the mouth.

I felt a desire to rise to the occasion. Why not? In Poirot’s presence I have frequently felt a difficulty—I do not appear at my best. And yet there is no doubt that I, too, possess the deductive sense in a marked degree. I leant forward on a sudden impulse.

“Lady Yardly,” I said, “I know why you have come here. You have received blackmailing letters about the diamond.”

There was no doubt as to my bolt having shot home. She stared at me openmouthed, all colour banished from her cheeks.

“You know?” she gasped. “How?”

I smiled.

“By a perfectly logical process. If Miss Marvell has had warning letters—”

“Miss Marvell? She has been here?”

“She has just left. As I was saying, if she, as the holder of one of the twin diamonds, has received a mysterious series of warnings, you, as the holder of the other stone, must necessarily have done the same. You see how simple it is? I am right, then, you have received these strange communications also?”

For a moment she hesitated, as though in doubt whether to trust me or not, then she bowed her head in assent with a little smile.

“That is so,” she acknowledged.

“Were yours, too, left by hand—by a Chinaman?”

“No, they came by post; but tell me, has Miss Marvell undergone the same experience, then?”

I recounted to her the events of the morning. She listened attentively.

“It all fits in. My letters are the duplicate of hers. It is true that they came by post, but there is a curious perfume impregnating them—something in the nature of joss stick—that at once suggested the East to me. What does it all mean?”

I shook my head.

“That is what we must find out. You have the letters with you? We might learn something from the postmarks.”

“Unfortunately I destroyed them. You understand, at the time I regarded it as some foolish joke. Can it be true that some Chinese gang are really trying to recover the diamonds? It seems too incredible.”

We went over the facts again and again, but could get no further towards the elucidation of the mystery. At last Lady Yardly rose.

“I really don’t think I need wait for Monsieur Poirot. You can tell him all this, can’t you? Thank you so much Mr.—”

She hesitated, her hand outstretched.

“Captain Hastings.”

“Of course! How stupid of me. You’re a friend of the Cavendishes, aren’t you? It was Mary Cavendish who sent me to Monsieur Poirot.”

When my friend returned, I enjoyed telling him the tale of what had occurred during his absence. He cross-questioned me rather sharply over the details of our conversation and I could read between the lines that he was not best pleased to have been absent. I also fancied that the dear old fellow was just the least inclined to be jealous. It had become rather a pose with him to consistently belittle my abilities, and I think he was chagrined at finding no loophole for criticism. I was secretly rather pleased with myself, though I tried to conceal the fact for fear of irritating him. In spite of his idiosyncrasies, I was deeply attached to my quaint little friend.

“Bien! ” he said at length, with a curious look on his face. “The plot develops. Pass me, I pray you, that Peerage on the top shelf there.” He turned the leaves. “Ah, here we are! ‘Yardly . . . 10th viscount, served South African War . . .’ tout ça n’a pas d’importance . . . ‘mar. 1907 Hon. Maude Stopperton, fourth daughter of 3rd Baron Cotteril . . .’ um, um, um . . . ‘has iss. two daughters, born 1908, 1910 . . . Clubs, residences . . .’ Voilà, that does not tell us much. But tomorrow morning we see this milord! ”

“What?”

“Yes. I telephoned to him.”

“I thought you had washed your hands of the case?”

“I am not acting for Miss Marvell since she refuses to be guided by my advice. What I do now is for my own satisfaction—the satisfaction of Hercule Poirot! Decidedly, I must have a finger in this pie.”

"And you calmly wire Lord Yardly to dash up to town just to suit your convenience. He won't be pleased."

"Au contraire, if I preserve for him his family diamond, he ought to be very grateful."

"Then you really think there is any chance of it being stolen?" I asked eagerly.

"Almost a certainty," replied Poirot placidly. "Everything points that way."

"But how—"

Poirot stopped my eager questions with an airy gesture of the hand.

"Not now, I pray you. Let us not confuse the mind. And observe that Peerage—how you have replaced him! See you not that the tallest books go in the top shelf, the next tallest in the row beneath, and so on. Thus we have order, method, which, as I have often told you, Hastings—"

"Exactly," I said hastily, and put the offending volume in its proper place.

II

Lord Yardly turned out to be a cheery, loud-voiced sportsman with a rather red face, but with a good-humoured bonhomie about him that was distinctly attractive and made up for any lack of mentality.

"Extraordinary business this, Monsieur Poirot. Can't make head or tail of it. Seems my wife's been getting odd kind of letters, and that Miss Marvell's had 'em too. What does it all mean?"

Poirot handed him the copy of Society Gossip.

"First, milord, I would ask you if these facts are substantially correct?"

The peer took it. His face darkened with anger as he read.

“Damned nonsense!” he spluttered. “There’s never been any romantic story attaching to the diamond. It came from India originally, I believe. I never heard of all this Chinese god stuff.”

“Still, the stone is known as ‘The Star of the East.’ ”

“Well, what if it is?” he demanded wrathfully.

Poirot smiled a little, but made no direct reply.

“What I would ask you to do, milord, is to place yourself in my hands. If you do so unreservedly, I have great hopes of averting the catastrophe.”

“Then you think there’s actually something in these wildcat tales?”

“Will you do as I ask you?”

“Of course I will, but—”

“Bien! Then permit that I ask you a few questions. This affair of Yardly Chase, is it, as you say, all fixed up between you and Mr. Rolf?”

“Oh, he told you about it, did he? No, there’s nothing settled.” He hesitated, the brick-red colour of his face deepening. “Might as well get the thing straight. I’ve made rather an ass of myself in many ways, Monsieur Poirot—and I’m head over ears in debt—but I want to pull up. I’m fond of the kids, and I want to straighten things up, and be able to live on at the old place. Gregory Rolf is offering me big money—enough to set me on my feet again. I don’t want to do it—I hate the thought of all that crowd playacting round the Chase—but I may have to, unless—” He broke off.

Poirot eyed him keenly. “You have, then, another string to your bow? Permit that I make a guess? It is to sell The Star of the East?”

Lord Yardly nodded. “That’s it. It’s been in the family for some generations, but it’s not essential. Still, it’s not the easiest thing in the world to find a purchaser. Hoffberg, the Hatton Garden man, is on the lookout for a likely customer, but he’ll have to find one soon, or it’s a washout.”

"One more question, permettez—Lady Yardly, which plan does she approve?"

"Oh, she's bitterly opposed to my selling the jewel. You know what women are. She's all for this film stunt."

"I comprehend," said Poirot. He remained a moment or so in thought, then rose briskly to his feet. "You return to Yardly Chase at once? Bien! Say no word to anyone—to anyone, mind—but expect us there this evening. We will arrive shortly after five.

"All right, but I don't see—"

"Ça n'a pas d'importance," said Poirot kindly. "You will that I preserve for you your diamond, n'est-ce pas?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then do as I say."

A sadly bewildered nobleman left the room.

III

It was half past five when we arrived at Yardly Chase, and followed the dignified butler to the old panelled hall with its fire of blazing logs. A pretty picture met our eyes: Lady Yardly and her two children, the mother's proud dark head bent down over the two fair ones. Lord Yardly stood near, smiling down on them.

"Monsieur Poirot and Captain Hastings," announced the butler.

Lady Yardly looked up with a start, for her husband came forward uncertainly, his eyes seeking instruction from Poirot. The little man was equal to the occasion.

"All my excuses! It is that I investigate still this affair of Miss Marvell's. She comes to you on Friday, does she not? I make a little tour first to make sure that all is secure. Also I wanted to ask Lady Yardly if she recollected at all the postmarks on the letters she received?”

Lady Yardly shook her head regretfully. “I’m afraid I don’t. It’s stupid of me. But, you see, I never dreamt of taking them seriously.”

“You’ll stay the night?” said Lord Yardly.

“Oh, milord, I fear to incommode you. We have left our bags at the inn.”

“That’s all right.” Lord Yardly had his cue. “We’ll send down for them. No, no—no trouble, I assure you.”

Poirot permitted himself to be persuaded, and sitting down by Lady Yardly, began to make friends with the children. In a short time they were all romping together, and had dragged me into the game.

“Vous êtes bonne mère,” said Poirot, with a gallant little bow, as the children were removed reluctantly by a stern nurse.

Lady Yardly smoothed her ruffled hair.

“I adore them,” she said with a little catch in her voice.

“And they you—with reason!” Poirot bowed again.

A dressing gong sounded, and we rose to go up to our rooms. At that moment the butler emerged with a telegram on a salver which he handed to Lord Yardly. The latter tore it open with a brief word of apology. As he read it he stiffened visibly.

With an ejaculation he handed it to his wife. Then he glanced at my friend.

“Just a minute, Monsieur Poirot, I feel you ought to know about this. It’s from Hoffberg. He thinks he’s found a customer for the diamond—an American, sailing for the States tomorrow. They’re sending down a chap tonight to vet the stone. By Jove, though, if this goes through—” Words failed him.

Lady Yardly had turned away. She still held the telegram in her hand.

“I wish you wouldn’t sell it, George,” she said, in a low voice. “It’s been in the family so long.” She waited, as though for a reply, but when none came her face hardened. She shrugged her shoulders. “I must go and dress. I suppose I had better display ‘the goods.’ ” She turned to Poirot with a slight grimace. “It’s one of the most hideous necklaces that was ever designed! George has always promised to have the stones reset for me, but it’s never been done.” She left the room.

Half an hour later, we three were assembled in the great drawing room awaiting the lady. It was already a few minutes past the dinner hour.

Suddenly there was a low rustle, and Lady Yardly appeared framed in the doorway, a radiant figure in a long white shimmering dress. Round the column of her neck was a rivulet of fire. She stood there with one hand just touching the necklace.

“Behold the sacrifice,” she said gaily. Her ill-humour seemed to have vanished. “Wait while I turn the big light on and you shall feast your eyes on the ugliest necklace in England.”

The switches were just outside the door. As she stretched out her hand to them, the incredible thing happened. Suddenly, without any warning, every light was extinguished, the door banged, and from the other side of it came a long-drawn piercing woman’s scream.

“My God!” cried Lord Yardly. “That was Maude’s voice! What has happened?”

We rushed blindly for the door, cannoning into each other in the darkness. It was some minutes before we could find it. What a sight met our eyes! Lady Yardly lay senseless on the marble floor, a crimson mark on her white throat where the necklace had been wrenched from her neck.

As we bent over her, uncertain for the moment whether she was dead or alive, her eyelids opened.

“The Chinaman,” she whispered painfully. “The Chinaman—the side door.”

Lord Yardly sprang up with an oath. I accompanied him, my heart beating wildly. The Chinaman again! The side door in question was a small one in the angle of the wall, not more than a dozen yards from the scene of the tragedy. As we reached it, I gave a cry. There, just short of the threshold, lay the glittering necklace, evidently dropped by the thief in the panic of his flight. I swooped joyously down on it. Then I uttered another cry which Lord Yardly echoed. For in the middle of the necklace was a great gap. The Star of the East was missing!

“That settles it,” I breathed. “These were no ordinary thieves. This one stone was all they wanted.”

“But how did the fellow get in?”

“Through this door.”

“But it’s always locked.”

I shook my head. “It’s not locked now. See.” I pulled it open as I spoke.

As I did so something fluttered to the ground. I picked it up. It was a piece of silk, and the embroidery was unmistakable. It had been torn from a Chinaman’s robe.

“In his haste it caught in the door,” I explained. “Come, hurry. He cannot have gone far as yet.”

But in vain we hunted and searched. In the pitch darkness of the night, the thief had found it easy to make his getaway. We returned reluctantly, and Lord Yardly sent off one of the footmen posthaste to fetch the police.

Lady Yardly, aptly ministered to by Poirot, who is as good as a woman in these matters, was sufficiently recovered to be able to tell her story.

“I was just going to turn on the other light,” she said, “when a man sprang on me from behind. He tore my necklace from my neck with such force that I fell headlong to the floor. As I fell I saw him disappearing through the side door. Then I realized by the pigtail and the embroidered robe that he was a Chinaman.” She stopped with a shudder.

The butler reappeared. He spoke in a low voice to Lord Yardly.

“A gentleman from Mr. Hoffberg’s, m’lord. He says you expect him.”

“Good heavens!” cried the distracted nobleman. “I must see him, I suppose. No, not here, Mullings, in the library.”

I drew Poirot aside.

“Look here, my dear fellow, hadn’t we better get back to London?”

“You think so, Hastings? Why?”

“Well”—I coughed delicately—“things haven’t gone very well, have they? I mean, you tell Lord Yardly to place himself in your hands and all will be well—and then the diamond vanishes from under your very nose!”

“True,” said Poirot, rather crestfallen. “It was not one of my most striking triumphs.”

This way of describing events almost caused me to smile, but I stuck to my guns.

“So, having—pardon the expression—rather made a mess of things, don’t you think it would be more graceful to leave immediately?”

“And the dinner, the without doubt excellent dinner, that the chef of Lord Yardly has prepared?”

“Oh, what’s dinner!” I said impatiently.

Poirot held up his hands in horror.

“Mon Dieu! It is that in this country you treat the affairs gastronomic with a criminal indifference.”

"There's another reason why we should get back to London as soon as possible," I continued.

"What is that, my friend?"

"The other diamond," I said, lowering my voice. "Miss Marvell's."

"Eh bien, what of it?"

"Don't you see?" His unusual obtuseness annoyed me. What had happened to his usually keen wits? "They've got one, now they'll go for the other."

"Tiens!" cried Poirot, stepping back a pace and regarding me with admiration. "But your brain marches to a marvel, my friend! Figure to yourself that for the moment I had not thought of that! But there is plenty of time. The full of the moon, it is not until Friday."

I shook my head dubiously. The full of the moon theory left me entirely cold. I had my way with Poirot, however, and we departed immediately, leaving behind us a note of explanation and apology for Lord Yardly.

My idea was to go at once to the Magnificent, and relate to Miss Marvell what had occurred, but Poirot vetoed the plan, and insisted that the morning would be time enough. I gave in rather grudgingly.

In the morning Poirot seemed strangely disinclined to stir out. I began to suspect that, having made a mistake to start with, he was singularly loath to proceed with the case. In answer to my persuasions, he pointed out, with admirable common sense, that as the details of the affair at Yardly Chase were already in the morning papers the Rolfs would know quite as much as we could tell them. I gave way unwillingly.

Events proved my forebodings to be justified. About two o'clock, the telephone rang. Poirot answered it. He listened for some moments, then with a brief "Bien, j'y serai" he rang off, and turned to me.

"What do you think, mon ami?" He looked half ashamed, half excited. "The diamond of Miss Marvell, it has been stolen."

“What?” I cried, springing up. “And what about the ‘full of the moon’ now?” Poirot hung his head. “When did this happen?”

“This morning, I understand.”

I shook my head sadly. “If only you had listened to me. You see I was right.”

“It appears so, mon ami,” said Poirot cautiously. “Appearances are deceptive, they say, but it certainly appears so.”

As we hurried in a taxi to the Magnificent, I puzzled out the true inwardness of the scheme.

“That ‘full of the moon’ idea was clever. The whole point of it was to get us to concentrate on the Friday, and so be off our guard beforehand. It is a pity you did not realize that.”

“Ma foi!” said Poirot airily, his nonchalance quite restored after its brief eclipse. “One cannot think of everything!”

I felt sorry for him. He did so hate failure of any kind.

“Cheer up,” I said consolingly. “Better luck next time.”

At the Magnificent, we were ushered at once into the manager’s office. Gregory Rolf was there with two men from Scotland Yard. A pale-faced clerk sat opposite them.

Rolf nodded to us as we entered.

“We’re getting to the bottom of it,” he said. “But it’s almost unbelievable. How the guy had the nerve I can’t think.”

A very few minutes sufficed to give us the facts. Mr. Rolf had gone out of the hotel at 11:15. At 11:30, a gentleman, so like him in appearance as to pass muster, entered the hotel and demanded the jewel case from the safe deposit. He duly signed the receipt, remarking carelessly as he did so: “Looks a bit different from my ordinary one, but I hurt my hand getting out of the taxi.” The clerk merely smiled and remarked that he saw very little difference. Rolf laughed and said: “Well, don’t run me in as a crook this time, anyway. I’ve been getting threatening letters from a Chinaman, and the worst of it is I look rather like a Chink myself—it’s something about the eyes.”

“I looked at him,” said the clerk who was telling us this, “and I saw at once what he meant. The eyes slanted up at the corners like an Oriental’s. I’d never noticed it before.”

“Darn it all, man,” roared Gregory Rolf, leaning forward, “do you notice it now?”

The man looked up at him and started.

“No, sir,” he said. “I can’t say I do.” And indeed there was nothing even remotely Oriental about the frank brown eyes that looked into ours.

The Scotland Yard man grunted. “Bold customer. Thought the eyes might be noticed, and took the bull by the horns to disarm suspicion. He must have watched you out of the hotel, sir, and nipped in as soon as you were well away.”

“What about the jewel case?” I asked.

“It was found in the corridor of the hotel. Only one thing had been taken—‘The Western Star.’ ”

We stared at each other—the whole thing was so bizarre, so unreal.

Poirot hopped briskly to his feet. “I have not been of much use, I fear,” he said regretfully. “Is it permitted to see Madame?”

“I guess she’s prostrated with the shock,” exclaimed Rolf.

“Then perhaps I might have a few words alone with you, monsieur?”

“Certainly.”

In about five minutes Poirot reappeared.

“Now, my friend,” he said gaily. “To a post office. I have to send a telegram.”

“Who to?”

“Lord Yardly.” He discounted further inquiries by slipping his arm through mine. “Come, come, mon ami. I know all that you feel about this terrible business. I have not distinguished myself! You, in my place, might have distinguished yourself. Bien! All is admitted. Let us forget it and have lunch.”

It was about four o’clock when we entered Poirot’s rooms. A figure rose from a chair by the window. It was Lord Yardly. He looked haggard and distraught.

“I got your wire and came up at once. Look here, I’ve been round to Hoffberg, and they know nothing about that man of theirs last night, or the wire either. Do you think that—”

Poirot held up his hand.

“My excuses! I sent that wire, and hired the gentleman in question.”

“You—but why? What?” The nobleman spluttered impotently.

“My little idea was to bring things to a head,” explained Poirot placidly.

“Bring things to a head! Oh, my God!” cried Lord Yardly.

“And the ruse succeeded,” said Poirot cheerfully. “Therefore, milord, I have much pleasure in returning you—this!” With a dramatic gesture he produced a glittering object. It was a great diamond.

“The Star of the East,” gasped Lord Yardly. “But I don’t understand—”

“No?” said Poirot. “It makes no matter. Believe me, it was necessary for the diamond to be stolen. I promised you that it would be preserved to you, and

I have kept my word. You must permit me to keep my little secret. Convey, I beg of you, the assurance of my deepest respect to Lady Yardly, and tell her how pleased I am to be able to restore her jewel to her. What beau temps, is it not? Good day, milord.”

And smiling and talking, the amazing little man conducted the bewildered nobleman to the door. He returned gently rubbing his hands.

“Poirot,” I said. “Am I quite demented?”

“No, mon ami, but you are, as always, in a mental fog.”

“How did you get the diamond?”

“From Mr. Rolf.”

“Rolf?”

“Mais oui! The warning letters, the Chinaman, the article in Society Gossip, all sprang from the ingenious brain of Mr. Rolf! The two diamonds, supposed to be so miraculously alike—bah! they did not exist. There was only one diamond, my friend! Originally in the Yardly collection, for three years it has been in the possession of Mr. Rolf. He stole it this morning with the assistance of a touch of grease paint at the corner of each eye! Ah, I must see him on the film, he is indeed an artist, celui-là! ”

“But why should he steal his own diamond?” I asked, puzzled.

“For many reasons. To begin with, Lady Yardly was getting restive.”

“Lady Yardly?”

“You comprehend she was left much alone in California. Her husband was amusing himself elsewhere. Mr. Rolf was handsome, he had an air about him of romance. But au fond, he is very businesslike, ce monsieur! He made love to Lady Yardly, and then he blackmailed her. I taxed the lady with the truth the other night, and she admitted it. She swore that she had only been indiscreet, and I believe her. But, undoubtedly, Rolf had letters of hers that could be twisted to bear a different interpretation. Terrified by the threat of a divorce, and the prospect of being separated from her children, she agreed to all he wished. She had no money of her own, and she was forced to permit him to substitute a paste replica for the real stone. The coincidence of the date of the appearance of ‘The Western Star’ struck me at once. All goes well. Lord Yardly prepares to range himself—to settle down. And then comes the menace of the possible sale of the diamond. The substitution will be discovered. Without doubt she writes off frantically to Gregory Rolf who has just arrived in England. He soothes her by promising to arrange all—and prepares for a double robbery. In this way he will quiet the lady, who might conceivably tell all to her husband, an affair which would not suit our blackmailer at all, he will have £50,000 insurance money (aha, you had forgotten that!), and he will still have the diamond! At this point I put my fingers in the pie. The arrival of a diamond expert is announced. Lady Yardly, as I felt sure she would, immediately arranges a robbery—and does it very well too! But Hercule Poirot, he sees nothing but facts. What happens in actuality? The lady switches off the light, bangs the door, throws the necklace down the passage, and screams. She has already wrenched out the diamond with pliers upstairs—”

“But we saw the necklace round her neck!” I objected.

“I demand pardon, my friend. Her hand concealed the part of it where the gap would have shown. To place a piece of silk in the door beforehand is child’s play! Of course, as soon as Rolf read of the robbery, he arranged his own little comedy. And very well he played it!”

“What did you say to him?” I asked with lively curiosity.

“I said to him that Lady Yardly had told her husband all, that I was empowered to recover the jewel, and that if it were not immediately handed over proceedings would be taken. Also a few more little lies which occurred to me. He was as wax in my hands!”

I pondered the matter.

“It seems a little unfair on Mary Marvell. She has lost her diamond through no fault of her own.”

“Bah!” said Poirot brutally. “She has a magnificent advertisement. That is all she cares for, that one! Now the other, she is different. Bonne mère, très femme! ”

“Yes,” I said doubtfully, hardly sharing Poirot’s views on femininity. “I suppose it was Rolf who sent her the duplicate letters.”

“Pas du tout,” said Poirot briskly. “She came by the advice of Mary Cavendish to seek my aid in her dilemma. Then she heard that Mary Marvell, whom she knew to be her enemy, had been here, and she changed her mind jumping at a pretext that you, my friend, offered her. A very few questions sufficed to show me that you told her of the letters, not she you! She jumped at the chance your words offered.”

“I don’t believe it,” I cried, stung.

“Si, si, mon ami, it is a pity that you study not the psychology. She told you that the letters were destroyed? Oh, la la, never does a woman destroy a letter if she can avoid it! Not even if it would be more prudent to do so!”

“It’s all very well,” I said, my anger rising, “but you’ve made a perfect fool of me! From beginning to end! No, it’s all very well to try and explain it away afterwards. There really is a limit!”

“But you were so enjoying yourself, my friend, I had not the heart to shatter your illusions.”

“It’s no good. You’ve gone a bit too far this time.”

“Mon Dieu! but how you enrage yourself for nothing, mon ami! ”

“I’m fed up!” I went out, banging the door. Poirot had made an absolute laughingstock of me. I decided that he needed a sharp lesson. I would let some time elapse before I forgave him. He had encouraged me to make a perfect fool of myself.

Two

THE TRAGEDY AT MARSDON MANOR

I had been called away from town for a few days, and on my return found Poirot in the act of strapping up his small valise.

“A la bonne heure, Hastings, I feared you would not have returned in time to accompany me.”

“You are called away on a case, then?”

“Yes, though I am bound to admit that, on the face of it, the affair does not seem promising. The Northern Union Insurance Company have asked me to investigate the death of a Mr. Maltravers who a few weeks ago insured his life with them for the large sum of fifty thousand pounds.”

“Yes?” I said, much interested.

“There was, of course, the usual suicide clause in the policy. In the event of his committing suicide within a year the premiums would be forfeited. Mr. Maltravers was duly examined by the Company’s own doctor, and although he was a man slightly past the prime of life was passed as being in quite sound health. However, on Wednesday last—the day before yesterday—the body of Mr. Maltravers was found in the grounds of his house in Essex, Marsdon Manor, and the cause of his death is described as some kind of internal haemorrhage. That in itself would be nothing remarkable, but sinister rumours as to Mr. Maltravers’ financial position have been in the air of late, and the Northern Union have ascertained beyond any possible doubt that the deceased gentleman stood upon the verge of bankruptcy. Now that alters matters considerably. Maltravers had a beautiful young wife, and it is suggested that he got together all the ready money he could for the purpose of paying the premiums on a life insurance for his wife’s benefit, and then committed suicide. Such a thing is not uncommon. In any case, my friend Alfred Wright, who is a director of the Northern Union, has asked me to investigate the facts of the case, but, as I told him, I am not very hopeful of success. If the cause of the death had been heart failure, I should have been more sanguine. Heart failure may always be translated as the inability of the local GP to discover what his patient really did die of, but a haemorrhage seems fairly definite. Still, we can but make some necessary inquiries. Five minutes to pack your bag, Hastings, and we will take a taxi to Liverpool Street."

About an hour later, we alighted from a Great Eastern train at the little station of Marsdon Leigh. Inquiries at the station yielded the information that Marsdon Manor was about a mile distant. Poirot decided to walk, and we betook ourselves along the main street.

"What is our plan of campaign?" I asked.

"First I will call upon the doctor. I have ascertained that there is only one doctor in Marsdon Leigh, Dr. Ralph Bernard. Ah, here we are at his house."

The house in question was a kind of superior cottage, standing back a little from the road. A brass plate on the gate bore the doctor's name. We passed up the path and rang the bell.

We proved to be fortunate in our call. It was the doctor's consulting hour, and for the moment there were no patients waiting for him. Dr. Bernard was an elderly man, high-shouldered and stooping, with a pleasant vagueness of manner.

Poirot introduced himself and explained the purpose of our visit, adding that Insurance Companies were bound to investigate fully in a case of this kind.

"Of course, of course," said Dr. Bernard vaguely. "I suppose, as he was such a rich man, his life was insured for a big sum?"

"You consider him a rich man, doctor?"

The doctor looked rather surprised.

"Was he not? He kept two cars, you know, and Marsdon Manor is a pretty big place to keep up, although I believe he bought it very cheap."

“I understand that he had had considerable losses of late,” said Poirot, watching the doctor narrowly.

The latter, however, merely shook his head sadly.

“Is that so? Indeed. It is fortunate for his wife, then, that there is this life insurance. A very beautiful and charming young creature, but terribly unstrung by this sad catastrophe. A mass of nerves, poor thing. I have tried to spare her all I can, but of course the shock was bound to be considerable.”

“You had been attending Mr. Maltravers recently?”

“My dear sir, I never attended him.”

“What?”

“I understand Mr. Maltravers was a Christian Scientist—or something of that kind.”

“But you examined the body?”

“Certainly. I was fetched by one of the undergardeners.”

“And the cause of death was clear?”

“Absolutely. There was blood on the lips, but most of the bleeding must have been internal.”

“Was he still lying where he had been found?”

“Yes, the body had not been touched. He was lying at the edge of a small plantation. He had evidently been out shooting rooks, a small rook rifle lay beside him. The haemorrhage must have occurred quite suddenly. Gastric ulcer, without a doubt.”

“No question of his having been shot, eh?”

“My dear sir!”

"I demand pardon," said Poirot humbly. "But, if my memory is not at fault, in the case of a recent murder, the doctor first gave a verdict of heart failure—altering it when the local constable pointed out that there was a bullet wound through the head!"

"You will not find any bullet wounds on the body of Mr. Maltravers," said Dr. Bernard dryly. "Now gentlemen, if there is nothing further—"

We took the hint.

"Good morning, and many thanks to you, doctor, for so kindly answering our questions. By the way, you saw no need for an autopsy?"

"Certainly not." The doctor became quite apoplectic. "The cause of death was clear, and in my profession we see no need to distress unduly the relatives of a dead patient."

And, turning, the doctor slammed the door sharply in our faces.

"And what do you think of Dr. Bernard, Hastings?" inquired Poirot, as we proceeded on our way to the Manor.

"Rather an old ass."

"Exactly. Your judgements of character are always profound, my friend."

I glanced at him uneasily, but he seemed perfectly serious. A twinkle, however, came into his eye, and he added slyly:

"That is to say, where there is no question of a beautiful woman!"

I looked at him coldly.

On our arrival at the manor house, the door was opened to us by a middle-aged parlourmaid. Poirot handed her his card, and a letter from the Insurance Company for Mrs. Maltravers. She showed us into a small morning room, and retired to tell her mistress. About ten minutes elapsed, and then the door opened, and a slender figure in widow's weeds stood upon the threshold.

“Monsieur Poirot?” she faltered.

“Madame!” Poirot sprang gallantly to his feet and hastened towards her. “I cannot tell you how I regret to derange you in this way. But what will you? Les affaires—they know no mercy.”

Mrs. Maltravers permitted him to lead her to a chair. Her eyes were red with weeping, but the temporary disfigurement could not conceal her extraordinary beauty. She was about twenty-seven or -eight, and very fair, with large blue eyes and a pretty pouting mouth.

“It is something about my husband’s insurance, is it? But must I be bothered now—so soon?”

“Courage, my dear madame. Courage! You see, your late husband insured his life for rather a large sum, and in such a case the Company always has to satisfy itself as to a few details. They have empowered me to act for them. You can rest assured that I will do all in my power to render the matter not too unpleasant for you. Will you recount to me briefly the sad events of Wednesday?”

“I was changing for tea when my maid came up—one of the gardeners had just run to the house. He had found—”

Her voice trailed away. Poirot pressed her hand sympathetically.

“I comprehend. Enough! You had seen your husband earlier in the afternoon?”

“Not since lunch. I had walked down to the village for some stamps, and I believe he was out pottering round the grounds.”

“Shooting rooks, eh?”

“Yes, he usually took his little rook rifle with him, and I heard one or two shots in the distance.”

“Where is this little rook rifle now?”

“In the hall, I think.”

She led the way out of the room and found and handed the little weapon to Poirot, who examined it cursorily.

“Two shots fired, I see,” he observed, as he handed it back. “And now, madame, if I might see—”

He paused delicately.

“The servant shall take you,” she murmured, averting her head.

The parlourmaid, summoned, led Poirot upstairs. I remained with the lovely and unfortunate woman. It was hard to know whether to speak or remain silent. I essayed one or two general reflections to which she responded absently, and in a very few minutes Poirot rejoined us.

“I thank you for all your courtesy, madame. I do not think you need be troubled any further with this matter. By the way, do you know anything of your husband’s financial position?”

She shook her head.

“Nothing whatever. I am very stupid over business things.”

“I see. Then you can give us no clue as to why he suddenly decided to insure his life? He had not done so previously, I understand.”

“Well, we had only been married a little over a year. But, as to why he insured his life, it was because he had absolutely made up his mind that he would not live long. He had a strong premonition of his own death. I gather that he had had one haemorrhage already, and that he knew that another one would prove fatal. I tried to dispel these gloomy fears of his, but without avail. Alas, he was only too right!”

Tears in her eyes, she bade us a dignified farewell. Poirot made a characteristic gesture as we walked down the drive together.

“Eh bien, that is that! Back to London, my friend, there appears to be no mouse in this mouse hole. And yet—”

“Yet what?”

“A slight discrepancy, that is all! You noticed it? You did not? Still, life is full of discrepancies, and assuredly the man cannot have taken his life—there is no poison that would fill his mouth with blood. No, no, I must resign myself to the fact that all here is clear and aboveboard—but who is this?”

A tall young man was striding up the drive towards us. He passed us without making any sign, but I noted that he was not ill-looking, with a lean, deeply-bronzed face that spoke of life in a tropic clime. A gardener who was sweeping up leaves had paused for a minute in his task, and Poirot ran quickly up to him.

“Tell me, I pray you, who is that gentleman? Do you know him?”

“I don’t remember his name, sir, though I did hear it. He was staying down here last week for a night. Tuesday, it was.”

“Quick, mon ami, let us follow him.”

We hastened up the drive after the retreating figure. A glimpse of a black-robed figure on the terrace at the side of the house, and our quarry swerved and we after him, so that we were witnesses of the meeting.

Mrs. Maltravers almost staggered where she stood, and her face blanched noticeably.

“You,” she gasped. “I thought you were on the sea—on your way to East Africa?”

“I got some news from my lawyers that detained me,” explained the young man. “My old uncle in Scotland died unexpectedly and left me some money. Under the circumstances I thought it better to cancel my passage. Then I saw this bad news in the paper and I came down to see if there was anything I could do. You’ll want someone to look after things for you a bit perhaps.”

At that moment they became aware of our presence. Poirot stepped forward, and with many apologies explained that he had left his stick in the hall. Rather reluctantly, it seemed to me, Mrs. Maltravers made the necessary introduction.

“Monsieur Poirot, Captain Black.”

A few minutes’ chat ensued, in the course of which Poirot elicited the fact that Captain Black was putting up at the Anchor Inn. The missing stick not having been discovered (which was not surprising), Poirot uttered more apologies and we withdrew.

We returned to the village at a great pace, and Poirot made a beeline for the Anchor Inn.

“Here we establish ourselves until our friend the Captain returns,” he explained. “You noticed that I emphasized the point that we were returning to London by the first train? Possibly you thought I meant it. But no—you observed Mrs. Maltravers’ face when she caught sight of this young Black? She was clearly taken aback, and he—eh bien, he was very devoted, did you not think so? And he was here on Tuesday night—the day before Mr. Maltravers died. We must investigate the doings of Captain Black, Hastings.”

In about half an hour we espied our quarry approaching the inn. Poirot went out and accosted him and presently brought him up to the room we had engaged.

“I have been telling Captain Black of the mission which brings us here,” he explained. “You can understand, monsieur le capitaine, that I am anxious to arrive at Mr. Maltravers’ state of mind immediately before his death, and that at the same time I do not wish to distress Mrs. Maltravers unduly by asking her painful questions. Now, you were here just before the occurrence, and can give us equally valuable information.”

"I'll do anything I can to help you, I'm sure," replied the young soldier; "but I'm afraid I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. You see, although Maltravers was an old friend of my people's, I didn't know him very well myself."

"You came down—when?"

"Tuesday afternoon. I went up to town early Wednesday morning, as my boat sailed from Tilbury about twelve o'clock. But some news I got made me alter my plans, as I dare say you heard me explain to Mrs. Maltravers."

"You were returning to East Africa, I understand?"

"Yes. I've been out there ever since the War—a great country."

"Exactly. Now what was the talk about at dinner on Tuesday night?"

"Oh, I don't know. The usual odd topics. Maltravers asked after my people, and then we discussed the question of German reparations, and then Mr. Maltravers asked a lot of questions about East Africa, and I told them one or two yarns, that's about all, I think."

"Thank you."

Poirot was silent for a moment, then he said gently: "With your permission, I should like to try a little experiment. You have told us all that your conscious self knows, I want now to question your subconscious self."

"Psychoanalysis, what?" said Black, with visible alarm.

"Oh, no," said Poirot reassuringly. "You see, it is like this, I give you a word, you answer with another, and so on. Any word, the first you think of. Shall we begin?"

"All right," said Black slowly, but he looked uneasy.

"Note down the words, please, Hastings," said Poirot. Then he took from his pocket his big turnip-faced watch and laid it on the table beside him. "We will commence. Day."

There was a moment’s pause, and then Black replied:

“Night.”

As Poirot proceeded, his answers came quicker.

“Name,” said Poirot.

“Place.”

“Bernard.”

“Shaw.”

“Tuesday.”

“Dinner.”

“Journey.”

“Ship.”

“Country.”

“Uganda.”

“Story.”

“Lions.”

“Rook Rifle.”

“Farm.”

“Shot.”

“Suicide.”

“Elephant.”

“Tusks.”

“Money.”

“Lawyers.”

“Thank you, Captain Black. Perhaps you could spare me a few minutes in about half an hour’s time?”

“Certainly.” The young soldier looked at him curiously and wiped his brow as he got up.

“And now, Hastings,” said Poirot, smiling at me as the door closed behind him. “You see it all, do you not?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Does that list of words tell you nothing?”

I scrutinized it, but was forced to shake my head.

“I will assist you. To begin with, Black answered well within the normal time limit, with no pauses, so we can take it that he himself has no guilty knowledge to conceal. ‘Day’ to ‘Night’ and ‘Place’ to ‘Name’ are normal associations. I began work with ‘Bernard,’ which might have suggested the local doctor had he come across him at all. Evidently he had not. After our recent conversation, he gave ‘Dinner’ to my ‘Tuesday,’ but ‘Journey’ and ‘Country’ were answered by ‘Ship’ and ‘Uganda,’ showing clearly that it was his journey abroad that was important to him and not the one which brought him down here. ‘Story’ recalls to him one of the ‘Lion’ stories he told at dinner. I proceeded to ‘Rook Rifle’ and he answered with the totally unexpected word ‘Farm.’ When I say ‘Shot,’ he answers at once ‘Suicide.’ The association seems clear. A man he knows committed suicide with a rook rifle on a farm somewhere. Remember, too, that his mind is still on the stories he told at dinner, and I think you will agree that I shall not be far from the truth if I recall Captain Black and ask him to repeat the particular suicide story which he told at the dinner table on Tuesday evening.”

Black was straightforward enough over the matter.

“Yes, I did tell them that story now that I come to think of it. Chap shot himself on a farm out there. Did it with a rook rifle through the roof of the mouth, bullet lodged in the brain. Doctors were no end puzzled over it—there was nothing to show except a little blood on the lips. But what—?”

“What has it got to do with Mr. Maltravers? You did not know, I see, that he was found with a rook rifle by his side.”

“You mean my story suggested to him—oh, but that is awful!”

“Do not distress yourself—it would have been one way or another. Well, I must get on the telephone to London.”

Poirot had a lengthy conversation over the wire, and came back thoughtful. He went off by himself in the afternoon, and it was not till seven o’clock that he announced that he could put it off no longer, but must break the news to the young widow. My sympathy had already gone out to her unreservedly. To be left penniless, and with the knowledge that her husband had killed himself to assure her future, was a hard burden for any woman to bear. I cherished a secret hope, however, that young Black might prove capable of consoling her after her first grief had passed. He evidently admired her enormously.

Our interview with the lady was painful. She refused vehemently to believe the facts that Poirot advanced, and when she was at last convinced broke down into bitter weeping. An examination of the body turned our suspicions into certainty. Poirot was very sorry for the poor lady, but, after all, he was employed by the Insurance Company, and what could he do? As he was preparing to leave he said gently to Mrs. Maltravers:

“Madame, you of all people should know that there are no dead!”

“What do you mean?” she faltered, her eyes growing wide.

“Have you never taken part in any spiritualistic séances? You are mediumistic, you know.”

“I have been told so. But you do not believe in Spiritualism, surely?”

“Madame, I have seen some strange things. You know that they say in the village that this house is haunted?”

She nodded, and at that moment the parlourmaid announced that dinner was ready.

“Won’t you just stay and have something to eat?”

We accepted gracefully, and I felt that our presence could not but help distract her a little from her own griefs.

We had just finished our soup, when there was a scream outside the door, and the sound of breaking crockery. We jumped up. The parlourmaid appeared, her hand to her heart.

“It was a man—standing in the passage.”

Poirot rushed out, returning quickly.

“There is no one there.”

“Isn’t there, sir?” said the parlourmaid weakly. “Oh it did give me a start!”

“But why?”

She dropped her voice to a whisper.

“I thought—I thought it was the master—it looked like ’im.”

I saw Mrs. Maltravers give a terrified start, and my mind flew to the old superstition that a suicide cannot rest. She thought of it too, I am sure, for a minute later, she caught Poirot’s arm with a scream.

“Didn’t you hear that? Those three taps on the window? That’s how he always used to tap when he passed round the house.”

“The ivy,” I cried. “It was the ivy against the pane.”

But a sort of terror was gaining on us all. The parlourmaid was obviously unstrung, and when the meal was over Mrs. Maltravers besought Poirot not to go at once. She was clearly terrified to be left alone. We sat in the little morning room. The wind was getting up, and moaning round the house in an eerie fashion. Twice the door of the room came unlatched and the door slowly opened, and each time she clung to me with a terrified gasp.

“Ah, but this door, it is bewitched!” cried Poirot angrily at last. He got up and shut it once more, then turned the key in the lock. “I shall lock it, so!”

“Don’t do that,” she gasped. “If it should come open now—”

And even as she spoke the impossible happened. The locked door slowly swung open. I could not see into the passage from where I sat, but she and Poirot were facing it. She gave one long shriek as she turned to him.

“You saw him—there in the passage?” she cried.

He was staring down at her with a puzzled face, then shook his head.

“I saw him—my husband—you must have seen him too?”

“Madame, I saw nothing. You are not well—unstrung—”

“I am perfectly well, I—Oh, God!”

Suddenly, without warning, the lights quivered and went out. Out of the darkness came three loud raps. I could hear Mrs. Maltravers moaning.

And then—I saw!

The man I had seen on the bed upstairs stood there facing us, gleaming with a faint ghostly light. There was blood on his lips, and he held his right hand out, pointing. Suddenly a brilliant light seemed to proceed from it. It passed over Poirot and me, and fell on Mrs. Maltravers. I saw her white terrified face, and something else!

“My God, Poirot!” I cried. “Look at her hand, her right hand. It’s all red!”

Her own eyes fell on it, and she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“Blood,” she cried hysterically. “Yes, it’s blood. I killed him. I did it. He was showing me, and then I put my hand on the trigger and pressed. Save me from him—save me! He’s come back!”

Her voice died away in a gurgle.

“Lights,” said Poirot briskly.

The lights went on as if by magic.

“That’s it,” he continued. “You heard, Hastings? And you, Everett? Oh, by the way, this is Mr. Everett, rather a fine member of the theatrical profession. I phoned to him this afternoon. His makeup is good, isn’t it? Quite like the dead man, and with a pocket torch and the necessary phosphorescence he made the proper impression. I shouldn’t touch her right hand if I were you, Hastings. Red paint marks so. When the lights went out I clasped her hand, you see. By the way, we mustn’t miss our train. Inspector Japp is outside the window. A bad night—but he has been able to while away the time by tapping on the window every now and then.”

“You see,” continued Poirot, as we walked briskly through the wind and rain, “there was a little discrepancy. The doctor seemed to think the deceased was a Christian Scientist, and who could have given him that impression but Mrs. Maltravers? But to us she represented him as being in a great state of apprehension about his own health. Again, why was she so taken aback by the reappearance of young Black? And lastly although I know that convention decrees that a woman must make a decent pretence of mourning for her husband, I do not care for such heavily-rouged eyelids! You did not observe them, Hastings? No? As I always tell you, you see nothing!

“Well, there it was. There were the two possibilities. Did Black’s story suggest an ingenious method of committing suicide to Mr. Maltravers, or did his other listener, the wife, see an equally ingenious method of committing murder? I inclined to the latter view. To shoot himself in the way indicated, he would probably have had to pull the trigger with his toe

—or at least so I imagine. Now if Maltravers had been found with one boot off, we should almost certainly have heard of it from someone. An odd detail like that would have been remembered.

“No, as I say, I inclined to the view that it was the case of murder, not suicide, but I realized that I had not a shadow of proof in support of my theory. Hence the elaborate little comedy you saw played tonight.”

“Even now I don’t quite see all the details of the crime,” I said.

“Let us start from the beginning. Here is a shrewd and scheming woman who, knowing of her husband’s financial débâcle and tired of the elderly mate she had only married for his money, induces him to insure his life for a large sum, and then seeks for the means to accomplish her purpose. An accident gives her that—the young soldier’s strange story. The next afternoon when monsieur le capitaine, as she thinks, is on the high seas, she and her husband are strolling round the grounds. ‘What a curious story that was last night!’ she observes. ‘Could a man shoot himself in such a way? Do show me if it is possible!’ The poor fool—he shows her. He places the end of his rifle in his mouth. She stoops down, and puts her finger on the trigger, laughing up at him. ‘And now, sir,’ she says saucily, ‘supposing I pull the trigger?’

“And then—and then, Hastings—she pulls it!”

Three

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CHEAP FLAT

So far, in the cases which I have recorded, Poirot’s investigations have started from the central fact, whether murder or robbery, and have proceeded from thence by a process of logical deduction to the final triumphant unravelling. In the events I am now about to chronicle a remarkable chain of circumstances led from the apparently trivial incidents which first attracted Poirot’s attention to the sinister happenings which completed a most unusual case.

I had been spending the evening with an old friend of mine, Gerald Parker. There had been, perhaps, about half a dozen people there besides my host and myself, and the talk fell, as it was bound to do sooner or later wherever Parker found himself, on the subject of house-hunting in London. Houses and flats were Parker’s special hobby. Since the end of the War, he had occupied at least half a dozen different flats and maisonettes. No sooner was he settled anywhere than he would light unexpectedly upon a new find, and would forthwith depart bag and baggage. His moves were nearly always accomplished at a slight pecuniary gain, for he had a shrewd business head, but it was sheer love of the sport that actuated him, and not a desire to make money at it. We listened to Parker for some time with the respect of the novice for the expert. Then it was our turn, and a perfect babel of tongues was let loose. Finally the floor was left to Mrs. Robinson, a charming little bride who was there with her husband. I had never met them before, as Robinson was only a recent acquaintance of Parker’s.

“Talking of flats,” she said, “have you heard of our piece of luck, Mr. Parker? We’ve got a flat—at last! In Montagu Mansions.”

“Well,” said Parker, “I’ve always said there are plenty of flats—at a price!”

“Yes, but this isn’t at a price. It’s dirt cheap. Eighty pounds a year!”

“But—but Montagu Mansions is just off Knightsbridge, isn’t it? Big handsome building. Or are you talking of a poor relation of the same name stuck in the slums somewhere?”

“No, it’s the Knightsbridge one. That’s what makes it so wonderful.”

“Wonderful is the word! It’s a blinking miracle. But there must be a catch somewhere. Big premium, I suppose?”

“No premium!”

“No prem—oh, hold my head, somebody!” groaned Parker.

“But we’ve got to buy the furniture,” continued Mrs. Robinson.

“Ah!” Parker bristled up. “I knew there was a catch!”

“For fifty pounds. And it’s beautifully furnished!”

“I give it up,” said Parker. “The present occupants must be lunatics with a taste for philanthropy.”

Mrs. Robinson was looking a little troubled. A little pucker appeared between her dainty brows.

“It is queer, isn’t it? You don’t think that—that—the place is haunted?”

“Never heard of a haunted flat,” declared Parker decisively.

“No-o.” Mrs. Robinson appeared far from convinced. “But there were several things about it all that struck me as—well, queer.”

“For instance—” I suggested.

“Ah,” said Parker, “our criminal expert’s attention is aroused! Unburden yourself to him, Mrs. Robinson. Hastings is a great unraveller of mysteries.”

I laughed, embarrassed, but not wholly displeased with the rôle thrust upon me.

“Oh, not really queer, Captain Hastings, but when we went to the agents, Stosser and Paul—we hadn’t tried them before because they only have the expensive Mayfair flats, but we thought at any rate it would do no harm—everything they offered us was four and five hundred a year, or else huge premiums, and then, just as we were going, they mentioned that they had a flat at eighty, but that they doubted if it would be any good our going there, because it had been on their books some time and they had sent so many people to see it that it was almost sure to be taken—‘snapped up’ as the clerk put it—only people were so tiresome in not letting them know, and then they went on sending, and people get annoyed at being sent to a place that had, perhaps, been let some time.”

Mrs. Robinson paused for some much needed breath, and then continued:

“We thanked him, and said that we quite understood it would probably be no good, but that we should like an order all the same—just in case. And we went there straight away in a taxi, for, after all, you never know. No 4 was on the second floor, and just as we were waiting for the lift, Elsie Ferguson—she’s a friend of mine, Captain Hastings, and they are looking for a flat too—came hurrying down the stairs. ‘Ahead of you for once, my dear,’ she said. ‘But it’s no good. It’s already let.’ That seemed to finish it, but—well, as John said, the place was very cheap, we could afford to give more, and perhaps if we offered a premium. A horrid thing to do, of course, and I feel quite ashamed of telling you, but you know what flat-hunting is.”

I assured her that I was well aware that in the struggle for houseroom the baser side of human nature frequently triumphed over the higher, and that the well-known rule of dog eat dog always applied.

“So we went up and, would you believe it, the flat wasn’t let at all. We were shown over it by the maid, and then we saw the mistress, and the thing was settled then and there. Immediate possession and fifty pounds for the furniture. We signed the agreement next day, and we are to move in tomorrow!” Mrs. Robinson paused triumphantly.

“And what about Mrs. Ferguson?” asked Parker. “Let’s have your deductions, Hastings.”

“ ‘Obvious, my dear Watson,’ ” I quoted lightly. “She went to the wrong flat.”

“Oh, Captain Hastings, how clever of you!” cried Mrs. Robinson admiringly.

I rather wished Poirot had been there. Sometimes I have the feeling that he rather underestimates my capabilities.

II

The whole thing was rather amusing, and I propounded the thing as a mock problem to Poirot on the following morning. He seemed interested, and questioned me rather narrowly as to the rents of flats in various localities.

“A curious story,” he said thoughtfully. “Excuse me, Hastings, I must take a short stroll.”

When he returned, about an hour later, his eyes were gleaming with a peculiar excitement. He laid his stick on the table, and brushed the nap of his hat with his usual tender care before he spoke.

“It is as well, mon ami, that we have no affairs of moment on hand. We can devote ourselves wholly to the present investigation.”

“What investigation are you talking about?”

“The remarkable cheapness of your friend, Mrs. Robinson’s, new flat.”

“Poirot, you are not serious!”

“I am most serious. Figure to yourself, my friend, that the real rent of those flats is £350. I have just ascertained that from the landlord’s agents. And yet this particular flat is being sublet at eighty pounds! Why?”

“There must be something wrong with it. Perhaps it is haunted, as Mrs. Robinson suggested.”

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“Then again how curious it is that her friend tells her the flat is let, and, when she goes up, behold, it is not so at all!”

“But surely you agree with me that the other woman must have gone to the wrong flat. That is the only possible solution.”

“You may or may not be right on that point, Hastings. The fact still remains that numerous other applicants were sent to see it, and yet, in spite of its remarkable cheapness, it was still in the market when Mrs. Robinson arrived.”

“That shows that there must be something wrong about it.”

“Mrs. Robinson did not seem to notice anything amiss. Very curious, is it not? Did she impress you as being a truthful woman, Hastings?”

“She was a delightful creature!”

“Evidemment! since she renders you incapable of replying to my question. Describe her to me, then.”

“Well, she’s tall and fair; her hair’s really a beautiful shade of auburn—”

“Always you have had a penchant for auburn hair!” murmured Poirot. “But continue.”

“Blue eyes and a very nice complexion and—well, that’s all, I think,” I concluded lamely.

“And her husband?”

“Oh, he’s quite a nice fellow—nothing startling.”

“Dark or fair?”

“I don’t know—betwixt and between, and just an ordinary sort of face.”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, there are hundreds of these average men—and anyway, you bring more sympathy and appreciation to your description of women. Do you know anything about these people? Does Parker know them well?”

“They are just recent acquaintances, I believe. But surely, Poirot, you don’t think for an instant—”

Poirot raised his hand.

“Tout doucement, mon ami. Have I said that I think anything? All I say is—it is a curious story. And there is nothing to throw light upon it; except perhaps the lady’s name, eh, Hastings?”

“Her name is Stella,” I said stiffly, “but I don’t see—”

Poirot interrupted me with a tremendous chuckle. Something seemed to be amusing him vastly.

“And Stella means a star, does it not? Famous!”

“What on earth—?”

“And stars give light! Voilà! Calm yourself, Hastings. Do not put on that air of injured dignity. Come, we will go to Montagu Mansions and make a few inquiries.”

I accompanied him, nothing loath. The Mansions were a handsome block of buildings in excellent repair. A uniformed porter was sunning himself on the threshold, and it was to him that Poirot addressed himself.

“Pardon, but would you tell me if a Mr. and Mrs. Robinson reside here?”

The porter was a man of few words and apparently of a sour or suspicious disposition. He hardly looked at us and grunted out:

“No 4. Second floor.”

“I thank you. Can you tell me how long they have been here?”

“Six months.”

I started forward in amazement, conscious as I did so of Poirot’s malicious grin.

“Impossible,” I cried. “You must be making a mistake.”

“Six months.”

“Are you sure? The lady I mean is tall and fair with reddish gold hair and —”

“That’s ’er,” said the porter. “Come in the Michaelmas quarter, they did. Just six months ago.”

He appeared to lose interest in us and retreated slowly up the hall. I followed Poirot outside.

“Eh bien, Hastings?” my friend demanded slyly. “Are you so sure now that delightful women always speak the truth?”

I did not reply.

Poirot had steered his way into Brompton Road before I asked him what he was going to do and where we were going.

“To the house agents, Hastings. I have a great desire to have a flat in Montagu Mansions. If I am not mistaken, several interesting things will take place there before long.”

We were fortunate in our quest. No 8, on the fourth floor, was to be let furnished at ten guineas a week, Poirot promptly took it for a month. Outside in the street again, he silenced my protests:

“But I make money nowadays! Why should I not indulge a whim? By the way, Hastings, have you a revolver?”

“Yes—somewhere,” I answered, slightly thrilled. “Do you think—”

“That you will need it? It is quite possible. The idea pleases you, I see. Always the spectacular and romantic appeals to you.”

The following day saw us installed in our temporary home. The flat was pleasantly furnished. It occupied the same position in the building as that of the Robinsons, but was two floors higher.

The day after our installation was a Sunday. In the afternoon, Poirot left the front door ajar, and summoned me hastily as a bang reverberated from somewhere below.

“Look over the banisters. Are those your friends? Do not let them see you.”

I craned my neck over the staircase.

“That’s them,” I declared in an ungrammatical whisper.

“Good. Wait awhile.”

About half an hour later, a young woman emerged in brilliant and varied clothing. With a sigh of satisfaction, Poirot tiptoed back into the flat.

“C’est ça. After the master and mistress, the maid. The flat should now be empty.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked uneasily.

Poirot had trotted briskly into the scullery and was hauling at the rope of the coal lift.

“We are about to descend after the method of the dustbins,” he explained cheerfully. “No one will observe us. The Sunday concert, the Sunday ‘afternoon out,’ and finally the Sunday nap after the Sunday dinner of England—le rosbif—all these will distract attention from the doings of Hercule Poirot. Come, my friend.”

He stepped into the rough wooden contrivance and I followed him gingerly.

“Are we going to break into the flat?” I asked dubiously.

Poirot’s answer was not too reassuring:

“Not precisely today,” he replied.

Pulling on the rope, we descended slowly till we reached the second floor. Poirot uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he perceived that the wooden door into the scullery was open.

“You observe? Never do they bolt these doors in the daytime. And yet anyone could mount or descend as we have done. At night, yes—though not always then—and it is against that that we are going to make provision.”

He had drawn some tools from his pocket as he spoke, and at once set deftly to work, his object being to arrange the bolt so that it could be pulled back from the lift. The operation only occupied about three minutes. Then Poirot returned the tools to his pocket, and we reascended once more to our own domain.

III

On Monday Poirot was out all day, but when he returned in the evening he flung himself into his chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Hastings, shall I recount to you a little history? A story after your own heart and which will remind you of your favourite cinema?”

“Go ahead,” I laughed. “I presume that it is a true story, not one of your efforts of fancy.”

“It is true enough. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard will vouch for its accuracy, since it was through his kind offices that it came to my ears. Listen, Hastings. A little over six months ago some important Naval plans were stolen from an American Government department. They showed the position of some of the most important Harbour defences, and would be worth a considerable sum to any foreign Government—that of Japan, for example. Suspicion fell upon a young man named Luigi Valdarno, an Italian by birth, who was employed in a minor capacity in the Department and who was missing at the same time as the papers. Whether Luigi Valdarno was the thief or not, he was found two days later on the East Side in New York, shot dead. The papers were not on him. Now for some time past Luigi Valdarno had been going about with a Miss Elsa Hardt, a young concert singer who had recently appeared and who lived with a brother in an apartment in Washington. Nothing was known of the antecedents of Miss Elsa Hardt, and she disappeared suddenly about the time of Valdarno's death. There are reasons for believing that she was in reality an accomplished international spy who has done much nefarious work under various aliases. The American Secret Service, while doing their best to trace her, also kept an eye upon certain insignificant Japanese gentlemen living in Washington. They felt pretty certain that, when Elsa Hardt had covered her tracks sufficiently, she would approach the gentlemen in question. One of them left suddenly for England a fortnight ago. On the face of it, therefore, it would seem that Elsa Hardt is in England." Poirot paused, and then added softly: "The official description of Elsa Hardt is: Height 5 ft 7, eyes blue, hair auburn, fair complexion, nose straight, no special distinguishing marks."

"Mrs. Robinson!" I gasped.

"Well, there is a chance of it, anyhow," amended Poirot. "Also I learn that a swarthy man, a foreigner of some kind, was inquiring about the occupants of No 4 only this morning. Therefore, mon ami, I fear that you must forswear your beauty sleep tonight, and join me in my all-night vigil in that flat below—armed with that excellent revolver of yours, bien entendu! "

"Rather," I cried with enthusiasm. "When shall we start?"

"The hour of midnight is both solemn and suitable, I fancy. Nothing is likely to occur before then."

At twelve o'clock precisely, we crept cautiously into the coal lift and lowered ourselves to the second floor. Under Poirot's manipulation, the wooden door quickly swung inwards, and we climbed into the flat. From the scullery we passed into the kitchen where we established ourselves comfortably in two chairs with the door into the hall ajar.

"Now we have but to wait," said Poirot contentedly, closing his eyes.

To me, the waiting appeared endless. I was terrified of going to sleep. Just when it seemed to me that I had been there about eight hours—and had, as I found out afterwards, in reality been exactly one hour and twenty minutes—a faint scratching sound came to my ears. Poirot's hand touched mine. I rose, and together we moved carefully in the direction of the hall. The noise came from there. Poirot placed his lips to my ear.

"Outside the front door. They are cutting out the lock. When I give the word, not before, fall upon him from behind and hold him fast. Be careful, he will have a knife."

Presently there was a rending sound, and a little circle of light appeared through the door. It was extinguished immediately and then the door was slowly opened. Poirot and I flattened ourselves against the wall. I heard a man's breathing as he passed us. Then he flashed on his torch, and as he did so, Poirot hissed in my ear:

"Allez."

We sprang together, Poirot with a quick movement enveloped the intruder's head with a light woollen scarf whilst I pinioned his arms. The whole affair was quick and noiseless. I twisted a dagger from his hand, and as Poirot brought down the scarf from his eyes, whilst keeping it wound tightly round his mouth, I jerked up my revolver where he could see it and understand that resistance was useless. As he ceased to struggle Poirot put his mouth close to his ear and began to whisper rapidly. After a minute the man nodded. Then enjoining silence with a movement of the hand, Poirot led the way out of the flat and down the stairs. Our captive followed, and I brought up the rear with the revolver. When we were out in the street, Poirot turned to me.

"There is a taxi waiting just round the corner. Give me the revolver. We shall not need it now."

"But if this fellow tries to escape?"

Poirot smiled.

“He will not.”

I returned in a minute with the waiting taxi. The scarf had been unwound from the stranger’s face, and I gave a start of surprise.

“He’s not a Jap,” I ejaculated in a whisper to Poirot.

“Observation was always your strong point, Hastings! Nothing escapes you. No, the man is not a Jap. He is an Italian.”

We got into the taxi, and Poirot gave the driver an address in St. John’s Wood. I was by now completely fogged. I did not like to ask Poirot where we were going in front of our captive, and strove in vain to obtain some light upon the proceedings.

We alighted at the door of a small house standing back from the road. A returning wayfarer, slightly drunk, was lurching along the pavement and almost collided with Poirot, who said something sharply to him which I did not catch. All three of us went up the steps of the house. Poirot rang the bell and motioned us to stand a little aside. There was no answer and he rang again and then seized the knocker which he plied for some minutes vigorously.

A light appeared suddenly above the fanlight, and the door opened cautiously a little way.

“What the devil do you want?” a man’s voice demanded harshly.

“I want the doctor. My wife is taken ill.”

“There’s no doctor here.”

The man prepared to shut the door, but Poirot thrust his foot in adroitly. He became suddenly a perfect caricature of an infuriated Frenchman.

“What you say, there is no doctor? I will have the law of you. You must come! I will stay here and ring and knock all night.”

“My dear sir—” The door was opened again, the man, clad in a dressing gown and slippers, stepped forward to pacify Poirot with an uneasy glance round.

“I will call the police.”

Poirot prepared to descend the steps.

“No, don’t do that for Heaven’s sake!” The man dashed after him.

With a neat push Poirot sent him staggering down the steps. In another minute all three of us were inside the door and it was pushed to and bolted.

“Quick—in here.” Poirot led the way into the nearest room, switching on the light as he did so. “And you—behind the curtain.”

“Si, Signor,” said the Italian and slid rapidly behind the full folds of rose-coloured velvet which draped the embrasure of the window.

Not a minute too soon. Just as he disappeared from view a woman rushed into the room. She was tall with reddish hair and held a scarlet kimono round her slender form.

“Where is my husband?” she cried, with a quick frightened glance. “Who are you?”

Poirot stepped forward with a bow.

“It is to be hoped your husband will not suffer from a chill. I observed that he had slippers on his feet, and that his dressing gown was a warm one.”

“Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”

“It is true that none of us have the pleasure of your acquaintance, madame. It is especially to be regretted as one of our number has come specially from New York in order to meet you.”

The curtains parted and the Italian stepped out. To my horror I observed that he was brandishing my revolver, which Poirot must doubtless have put down through inadvertence in the cab.

The woman gave a piercing scream and turned to fly, but Poirot was standing in front of the closed door.

“Let me by,” she shrieked. “He will murder me.”

“Who was it dat croaked Luigi Valdarno?” asked the Italian hoarsely, brandishing the weapon, and sweeping each one of us with it. We dared not move.

“My God, Poirot, this is awful. What shall we do?” I cried.

“You will oblige me by refraining from talking so much, Hastings. I can assure you that our friend will not shoot until I give the word.”

“Youse sure o’ dat, eh?” said the Italian, leering unpleasantly.

It was more than I was, but the woman turned to Poirot like a flash.

“What is it you want?”

Poirot bowed.

“I do not think it is necessary to insult Miss Elsa Hardt’s intelligence by telling her.”

With a swift movement, the woman snatched up a big black velvet cat which served as a cover for the telephone.

“They are stitched in the lining of that.”

“Clever,” murmured Poirot appreciatively. He stood aside from the door. “Good evening, madame. I will detain your friend from New York whilst you make your getaway.”

“Whatta fool!” roared the big Italian, and raising the revolver he fired point-blank at the woman’s retreating figure just as I flung myself upon him.

But the weapon merely clicked harmlessly and Poirot's voice rose in mild reproof.

"Never will you trust your old friend, Hastings. I do not care for my friends to carry loaded pistols about with them and never would I permit a mere acquaintance to do so. No, no, mon ami." This to the Italian who was swearing hoarsely. Poirot continued to address him in a tone of mild reproof: "See now, what I have done for you. I have saved you from being hanged. And do not think that our beautiful lady will escape. No, no, the house is watched, back and front. Straight into the arms of the police they will go. Is not that a beautiful and consoling thought? Yes, you may leave the room now. But be careful—be very careful. I—Ah, he is gone! And my friend Hastings looks at me with eyes of reproach. But it's all so simple! It was clear, from the first, that out of several hundred, probably, applicants for No 4 Montagu Mansions, only the Robinsons were considered suitable. Why? What was there that singled them out from the rest—at practically a glance. Their appearance? Possibly, but it was not so unusual. Their name, then!"

"But there's nothing unusual about the name of Robinson," I cried. "It's quite a common name."

"Ah! Sapristi, but exactly! That was the point. Elsa Hardt and her husband, or brother or whatever he really is, come from New York, and take a flat in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. Suddenly they learn that one of these secret societies, the Mafia, or the Camorra, to which doubtless Luigi Valdarno belonged, is on their track. What do they do? They hit on a scheme of transparent simplicity. Evidently they knew that their pursuers were not personally acquainted with either of them. What, then, can be simpler? They offer the flat at an absurdly low rental. Of the thousands of young couples in London looking for flats, there cannot fail to be several Robinsons. It is only a matter of waiting. If you will look at the name of Robinson in the telephone directory, you will realize that a fair-haired Mrs. Robinson was pretty sure to come along sooner or later. Then what will happen? The avenger arrives. He knows the name, he knows the address. He strikes! All is over, vengeance is satisfied, and Miss Elsa Hardt has escaped by the skin of her teeth once more. By the way, Hastings, you must present me to the real Mrs. Robinson—that delightful and truthful creature! What will they think when they find their flat has been broken into! We must hurry back. Ah, that sounds like Japp and his friends arriving.”

A mighty tattoo sounded on the knocker.

“How do you know this address?” I asked as I followed Poirot out into the hall. “Oh, of course, you had the first Mrs. Robinson followed when she left the other flat.”

“A la bonne heure, Hastings. You use your grey cells at last. Now for a little surprise for Japp.”

Softly unbolting the door, he stuck the cat’s head round the edge and ejaculated a piercing “Miaow.”

The Scotland Yard inspector, who was standing outside with another man, jumped in spite of himself.

“Oh, it’s only Monsieur Poirot at one of his little jokes!” he exclaimed, as Poirot’s head followed that of the cat. “Let us in, moosior.”

“You have our friends safe and sound?”

“Yes, we’ve got the birds all right. But they hadn’t got the goods with them.”

“I see. So you come to search. Well, I am about to depart with Hastings, but I should like to give you a little lecture upon the history and habits of the domestic cat.”

“For the Lord’s sake, have you gone completely balmy?”

“The cat,” declaimed Poirot, “was worshipped by the ancient Egyptians. It is still regarded as a symbol of good luck if a black cat crosses your path. This cat crossed your path tonight, Japp. To speak of the interior of any animal or any person is not. I know, considered polite in England. But the interior of this cat is perfectly delicate. I refer to the lining.”

With a sudden grunt, the second man seized the cat from Poirot’s hand.

“Oh, I forgot to introduce you,” said Japp. “Mr. Poirot, this is Mr. Burt of the United States Secret Service.”

The American’s trained fingers had felt what he was looking for. He held out his hand, and for a moment speech failed him. Then he rose to the occasion.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Mr. Burt.

Four

THE MYSTERY OF HUNTER’S LODGE

“After all,” murmured Poirot, “it is possible that I shall not die this time.”

Coming from a convalescent influenza patient, I hailed the remark as showing a beneficial optimism. I myself had been the first sufferer from the disease. Poirot in his turn had gone down. He was now sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows, his head muffled in a woollen shawl, and was slowly sipping a particularly noxious tisane which I had prepared according to his directions. His eye rested with pleasure upon a neatly graduated row of medicine bottles which adorned the mantelpiece.

“Yes, yes,” my little friend continued. “Once more shall I be myself again, the great Hercule Poirot, the terror of evildoers! Figure to yourself, mon ami, that I have a little paragraph to myself in Society Gossip. But yes! Here it is: ‘Go it—criminals—all out! Hercule Poirot—and believe me, girls, he’s some Hercules!—our own pet society detective can’t get a grip on you. ’Cause why? ’Cause he’s got la grippe himself!’ ”

I laughed.

“Good for you, Poirot. You are becoming quite a public character. And fortunately you haven’t missed anything of particular interest during this time.”

“That is true. The few cases I have had to decline did not fill me with any regret.”

Our landlady stuck her head in at the door.

“There’s a gentleman downstairs. Says he must see Monsieur Poirot or you, Captain. Seeing as he was in a great to-do—and with all that quite the gentleman—I brought up ’is card.”

She handed me a bit of pasteboard. “Mr. Roger Havering,” I read.

Poirot motioned with his head towards the bookcase, and I obediently pulled forth Who's Who. Poirot took it from me and scanned the pages rapidly.

"Second son of fifth Baron Windsor. Married 1913 Zoe, fourth daughter of William Crabb."

"H'm!" I said. "I rather fancy that's the girl who used to act at the Frivolity—only she called herself Zoe Carrisbrook. I remember she married some young man about town just before the War."

"Would it interest you, Hastings, to go down and hear what our visitor's particular little trouble is? Make him all my excuses."

Roger Havering was a man of about forty, well set up and of smart appearance. His face, however, was haggard, and he was evidently labouring under great agitation.

"Captain Hastings? You are Monsieur Poirot's partner, I understand. It is imperative that he should come with me to Derbyshire today."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," I replied. "Poirot is ill in bed—influenza."

His face fell.

"Dear me, that is a great blow to me."

"The matter on which you want to consult him is serious?"

"My God, yes! My uncle, the best friend I have in the world, was foully murdered last night."

"Here in London?"

"No, in Derbyshire. I was in town and received a telegram from my wife this morning. Immediately upon its receipt I determined to come round and beg Monsieur Poirot to undertake the case."

"If you will excuse me a minute," I said, struck by a sudden idea.

I rushed upstairs, and in a few brief words acquainted Poirot with the situation. He took any further words out of my mouth.

"I see. I see. You want to go yourself, is it not so? Well, why not? You should know my methods by now. All I ask is that you should report to me fully every day, and follow implicitly any instructions I may wire you."

To this I willingly agreed.

II

An hour later I was sitting opposite Mr. Havering in a first-class carriage on the Midland Railway, speeding rapidly away from London.

"To begin with, Captain Hastings, you must understand that Hunter's Lodge, where we are going, and where the tragedy took place, is only a small shooting box in the heart of the Derbyshire moors. Our real home is near Newmarket, and we usually rent a flat in town for the season. Hunter's Lodge is looked after by a housekeeper who is quite capable of doing all we need when we run down for an occasional weekend. Of course, during the shooting season, we take down some of our own servants from Newmarket. My uncle, Mr. Harrington Pace (as you may know, my mother was a Miss Pace of New York), has, for the last three years, made his home with us. He never got on well with my father, or my elder brother, and I suspect that my being somewhat of a prodigal son myself rather increased than diminished his affection towards me. Of course I am a poor man, and my uncle was a rich one—in other words, he paid the piper! But, though exacting in many ways, he was not really hard to get on with, and we all three lived very harmoniously together. Two days ago, my uncle, rather wearied with some recent gaieties of ours in town, suggested that we should run down to Derbyshire for a day or two. My wife telegraphed to Mrs. Middleton, the housekeeper, and we went down that same afternoon. Yesterday evening I was forced to return to town, but my wife and my uncle remained on. This morning I received this telegram." He handed it over to me:

“Come at once uncle Harrington murdered last night bring good detective if you can but do come—Zoe.”

“Then, as yet you know no details?”

“No, I suppose it will be in the evening papers. Without doubt the police are in charge.”

It was about three o’clock when we arrived at the little station of Elmer’s Dale. From there a five-mile drive brought us to a small grey stone building in the midst of the rugged moors.

“A lonely place,” I observed with a shiver.

Havering nodded.

“I shall try and get rid of it. I could never live here again.”

We unlatched the gate and were walking up the narrow path to the oak door when a familiar figure emerged and came to meet us.

“Japp!” I ejaculated.

The Scotland Yard inspector grinned at me in a friendly fashion before addressing my companion.

“Mr. Havering, I think? I’ve been sent down from London to take charge of this case, and I’d like a word with you, if I may, sir.”

“My wife—”

“I’ve seen your good lady, sir—and the housekeeper. I won’t keep you a moment, but I am anxious to get back to the village now that I’ve seen all there is to see here.”

“I know nothing as yet as to what—”

“Ex-actly,” said Japp soothingly. “But there are just one or two little points I’d like your opinion about all the same. Captain Hastings here, he knows me, and he'll go on up to the house and tell them you're coming. What have you done with the little man, by the way, Captain Hastings?"

"He's ill in bed with influenza."

"Is he now? I'm sorry to hear that. Rather the case of the cart without the horse, you being here without him, isn't it?"

And on his rather ill-timed jest I went on to the house. I rang the bell, as Japp had closed the door behind him. After some moments it was opened to me by a middle-aged woman in black.

"Mr. Havering will be here in a moment," I explained. "He has been detained by the inspector. I have come down with him from London to look into the case. Perhaps you can tell me briefly what occurred last night."

"Come inside, sir." She closed the door behind me, and we stood in the dimly-lighted hall. "It was after dinner last night, sir, that the man came. He asked to see Mr. Pace, sir, and, seeing that he spoke the same way, I thought it was an American gentleman friend of Mr. Pace's and I showed him into the gun room, and then went to tell Mr. Pace. He wouldn't give any name, which, of course, was a bit odd, now I come to think of it. I told Mr. Pace, and he seemed puzzled like, but he said to the mistress: 'Excuse me, Zoe, while I see what this fellow wants.' He went off to the gun room, and I went back to the kitchen, but after a while I heard loud voices, as if they were quarrelling, and I came out into the hall. At the same time, the mistress she comes out too, and just then there was a shot and then a dreadful silence. We both ran to the gun room door, but it was locked and we had to go round to the window. It was open, and there inside was Mr. Pace, all shot and bleeding."

"What became of the man?"

"He must have got away through the window, sir, before we got to it."

"And then?"

“Mrs. Havering sent me to fetch the police. Five miles to walk it was. They came back with me, and the constable he stayed all night, and this morning the police gentleman from London arrived.”

“What was this man like who called to see Mr. Pace?”

The housekeeper reflected.

“He had a black beard, sir, and was about middle-aged, and had on a light overcoat. Beyond the fact that he spoke like an American I didn’t notice much about him.”

“I see. Now I wonder if I can see Mrs. Havering?”

“She’s upstairs, sir. Shall I tell her?”

“If you please. Tell her that Mr. Havering is outside with Inspector Japp, and that the gentleman he has brought back with him from London is anxious to speak to her as soon as possible.”

“Very good, sir.”

I was in a fever of impatience to get all the facts. Japp had two or three hours’ start on me, and his anxiety to be gone made me keen to be close at his heels.

Mrs. Havering did not keep me waiting long. In a few minutes I heard a light step descending the stairs, and looked up to see a very handsome young woman coming towards me. She wore a flame-coloured jumper, that set off the slender boyishness of her figure. On her dark head was a little hat of flame-coloured leather. Even the present tragedy could not dim the vitality of her personality.

I introduced myself, and she nodded in quick comprehension.

“Of course I have often heard of you and your colleague, Monsieur Poirot. You have done some wonderful things together, haven’t you? It was very clever of my husband to get you so promptly. Now will you ask me questions? That is the easiest way, isn’t it, of getting to know all you want to about this dreadful affair?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Havering. Now what time was it that this man arrived?”

“It must have been just before nine o’clock. We had finished dinner, and were sitting over our coffee and cigarettes.”

“Your husband had already left for London?”

“Yes, he went up by the 6:15.”

“Did he go by car to the station, or did he walk?”

“Our own car isn’t down here. One came out from the garage in Elmer’s Dale to fetch him in time for the train.”

“Was Mr. Pace quite his usual self?”

“Absolutely. Most normal in every way.”

“Now, can you describe this visitor at all?”

“I’m afraid not. I didn’t see him. Mrs. Middleton showed him straight into the gun room and then came to tell my uncle.”

“What did your uncle say?”

“He seemed rather annoyed, but went off at once. It was about five minutes later that I heard the sound of raised voices. I ran out into the hall and almost collided with Mrs. Middleton. Then we heard the shot. The gun room door was locked on the inside, and we had to go right round the house to the window. Of course that took some time, and the murderer had been able to get well away. My poor uncle”—her voice faltered—“had been shot through the head. I saw at once that he was dead. I sent Mrs. Middleton for the police, I was careful to touch nothing in the room but to leave it exactly as I found it.”

I nodded approval.

“Now, as to the weapon?”

“Well, I can make a guess at it, Captain Hastings. A pair of revolvers of my husband’s were mounted upon the wall. One of them is missing. I pointed this out to the police, and they took the other one away with them. When they have extracted the bullet, I suppose they will know for certain.”

“May I go to the gun room?”

“Certainly. The police have finished with it. But the body has been removed.”

She accompanied me to the scene of the crime. At that moment Havering entered the hall, and with a quick apology his wife ran to him. I was left to undertake my investigations alone.

I may as well confess at once that they were rather disappointing. In detective novels clues abound, but here I could find nothing that struck me as out of the ordinary except a large bloodstain on the carpet where I judged the dead man had fallen. I examined everything with painstaking care and took a couple of pictures of the room with my little camera which I had brought with me. I also examined the ground outside the window, but it appeared to have been so heavily trampled underfoot that I judged it was useless to waste time over it. No, I had seen all that Hunter’s Lodge had to show me. I must go back to Elmer’s Dale and get into touch with Japp. Accordingly I took leave of the Haverings, and was driven off in the car that had brought us from the station.

I found Japp at the Matlock Arms and he took me forthwith to see the body. Harrington Pace was a small, spare, clean-shaven man, typically American in appearance. He had been shot through the back of the head, and the revolver had been discharged at close quarters.

“Turned away for a moment,” remarked Japp, “and the other fellow snatched up a revolver and shot him. The one Mrs. Havering handed over to us was fully loaded and I suppose the other one was also. Curious what darn fool things people do. Fancy keeping two loaded revolvers hanging up on your wall.”

“What do you think of the case?” I asked, as we left the gruesome chamber behind us.

“Well, I’d got my eye on Havering to begin with. Oh, yes!”—noting my exclamation of astonishment. “Havering has one or two shady incidents in his past. When he was a boy at Oxford there was some funny business about the signature on one of his father’s cheques. All hushed up of course. Then, he’s pretty heavily in debt now, and they’re the kind of debts he wouldn’t like to go to his uncle about, whereas you may be sure the uncle’s will would be in his favour. Yes, I’d got my eye on him, and that’s why I wanted to speak to him before he saw his wife, but their statements dovetail all right, and I’ve been to the station and there’s no doubt whatever that he left by the 6:15. That gets up to London about 10:30. He went straight to his club, he says, and if that’s confirmed all right—why, he couldn’t have been shooting his uncle here at nine o’clock in a black beard!”

“Ah, yes, I was going to ask you what you thought about that beard?”

Japp winked.

“I think it grew pretty fast—grew in the five miles from Elmer’s Dale to Hunter’s Lodge. Americans that I’ve met are mostly clean-shaven. Yes, it’s amongst Mr. Pace’s American associates that we’ll have to look for the murderer. I questioned the housekeeper first, and then her mistress, and their stories agree all right, but I’m sorry Mrs. Havering didn’t get a look at the fellow. She’s a smart woman, and she might have noticed something that would set us on the track.”

I sat down and wrote a minute and lengthy account to Poirot. I was able to add various further items of information before I posted the letter.

The bullet had been extracted and was proved to have been fired from a revolver identical with the one held by the police. Furthermore, Mr. Havering’s movements on the night in question had been checked and verified, and it was proved beyond doubt that he had actually arrived in London by the train in question. And, thirdly, a sensational development had occurred. A city gentleman, living at Ealing, on crossing Haven Green to get to the District Railway Station that morning, had observed a brown-paper parcel stuck between the railings. Opening it, he found that it contained a revolver. He handed the parcel over to the local police station, and before night it was proved to be the one we were in search of, the fellow to that given us by Mrs. Havering. One bullet had been fired from it.

All this I added to my report. A wire from Poirot arrived whilst I was at breakfast the following morning:

“Of course black-bearded man was not Havering only you or Japp would have such an idea wire me description of housekeeper and what clothes she wore this morning same of Mrs. Havering do not waste time taking photographs of interiors they are underexposed and not in the least artistic.”

It seemed to me that Poirot’s style was unnecessarily facetious. I also fancied he was a shade jealous of my position on the spot with full facilities for handling the case. His request for a description of the clothes worn by the two women appeared to me to be simply ridiculous, but I complied as well as I, a mere man, was able to.

At eleven a reply wire came from Poirot:

“Advise Japp arrest housekeeper before it is too late.”

Dumbfounded, I took the wire to Japp. He swore softly under his breath.

“He’s the goods, Monsieur Poirot: if he says so, there’s something in it. And I hardly noticed the woman. I don’t know that I can go so far as arresting her, but I’ll have her watched. We’ll go up right away, and take another look at her.”

But it was too late, Mrs. Middleton, that quiet middle-aged woman, who had appeared so normal and respectable, had vanished into thin air. Her box had been left behind. It contained only ordinary wearing apparel. There was no clue to her identity, or as to her whereabouts.

From Mrs. Havering we elicited all the facts we could:

"I engaged her about three weeks ago when Mrs. Emery, our former housekeeper, left. She came to me from Mrs. Selbourne's Agency in Mount Street—a very well-known place. I get all my servants from there. They sent several women to see me, but this Mrs. Middleton seemed much the nicest, and had splendid references. I engaged her on the spot, and notified the Agency of the fact. I can't believe that there was anything wrong with her. She was such a nice quiet woman."

The thing was certainly a mystery. Whilst it was clear that the woman herself could not have committed the crime, since at the moment the shot was fired Mrs. Havering was with her in the hall, nevertheless she must have some connection with the murder, or why should she suddenly take to her heels and bolt?

I wired the latest development to Poirot and suggested returning to London and making inquiries at Selbourne's Agency.

Poirot's reply was prompt:

"Useless to inquire at agency they will never have heard of her find out what vehicle took her up to hunters lodge when she first arrived there."

Though mystified, I was obedient. The means of transport in Elmer's Dale were limited. The local garage had two battered Ford cars, and there were two station flies. None of these had been requisitioned on the date in question. Questioned, Mrs. Havering explained that she had given the woman the money for her fare down to Derbyshire and sufficient to hire a car or fly to take her up to Hunter's Lodge. There was usually one of the Fords at the station on the chance of its being required. Taking into consideration the further fact that nobody at the station had noticed the arrival of a stranger, black-bearded or otherwise, on the fatal evening, everything seemed to point to the conclusion that the murderer had come to the spot in a car, which had been waiting near at hand to aid his escape, and that the same car had brought the mysterious housekeeper to her new post. I may mention that inquiries at the Agency in London bore out Poirot's prognostication. No such woman as "Mrs. Middleton" had ever been on their books. They had received the Hon. Mrs. Havering's application for a housekeeper, and had sent her various applicants for the post. When she sent them the engagement fee, she omitted to mention which woman she had selected.

Somewhat crestfallen, I returned to London. I found Poirot established in an armchair by the fire in a garish, silk dressing gown. He greeted me with much affection.

“Mon ami Hastings! But how glad I am to see you. Veritably I have for you a great affection! And you have enjoyed yourself? You have run to and fro with the good Japp? You have interrogated and investigated to your heart’s content?”

“Poirot,” I cried, “the thing’s a dark mystery! It will never be solved.”

“It is true that we are not likely to cover ourselves with glory over it.”

“No, indeed. It’s a hard nut to crack.”

“Oh, as far as that goes, I am very good at cracking the nuts! A veritable squirrel! It is not that which embarrasses me. I know well enough who killed Mr. Harrington Pace.”

“You know? How did you find out?”

“Your illuminating answers to my wires supplied me with the truth. See here, Hastings, let us examine the facts methodically and in order. Mr. Harrington Pace is a man with a considerable fortune which at his death will doubtless pass to his nephew. Point No 1. His nephew is known to be desperately hard up. Point No 2. His nephew is also known to be—shall we say a man of rather loose moral fibre? Point No 3.”

“But Roger Havering is proved to have journeyed straight up to London.”

“Précisément—and therefore, as Mr. Havering left Elmer’s Dale at 6:15, and since Mr. Pace cannot have been killed before he left, or the doctor would have spotted the time of the crime as being given wrongly when he examined the body, we conclude quite rightly, that Mr. Havering did not shoot his uncle. But there is a Mrs. Havering, Hastings.”

“Impossible! The housekeeper was with her when the shot was fired.”

“Ah, yes, the housekeeper. But she has disappeared.”

“She will be found.”

“I think not. There is something peculiarly elusive about that housekeeper, don’t you think so, Hastings? It struck me at once.”

“She played her part, I suppose, and then got out in the nick of time.”

“And what was her part?”

“Well, presumably to admit her confederate, the black-bearded man.”

“Oh, no, that was not her part! Her part was what you have just mentioned, to provide an alibi for Mrs. Havering at the moment the shot was fired. And no one will ever find her, mon ami, because she does not exist! ‘There’s no such person,’ as your so great Shakespeare says.”

“It was Dickens,” I murmured, unable to suppress a smile. “But what do you mean, Poirot?”

“I mean that Zoe Havering was an actress before her marriage, that you and Japp only saw the housekeeper in a dark hall, a dim middle-aged figure in black with a faint subdued voice, and finally that neither you nor Japp, nor the local police whom the housekeeper fetched, ever saw Mrs. Middleton and her mistress at one and the same time. It was child’s play for that clever and daring woman. On the pretext of summoning her mistress, she runs upstairs, slips on a bright jumper and a hat with black curls attached which she jams down over the grey transformation. A few deft touches, and the makeup is removed, a slight dusting of rouge, and the brilliant Zoe Havering comes down with her clear ringing voice. Nobody looks particularly at the housekeeper. Why should they? There is nothing to connect her with the crime. She, too, has an alibi.”

“But the revolver that was found at Ealing? Mrs. Havering could not have placed it there?”

“No, that was Roger Havering’s job—but it was a mistake on their part. It put me on the right track. A man who has committed murder with a revolver which he found on the spot would fling it away at once, he would not carry it up to London with him. No, the motive was clear, the criminals wished to focus the interest of the police on a spot far removed from Derbyshire, they were anxious to get the police away as soon as possible from the vicinity of Hunter’s Lodge. Of course the revolver found at Ealing was not the one with which Mr. Pace was shot. Roger Havering discharged one shot from it, brought it up to London, went straight to his club to establish his alibi, then went quickly out to Ealing by the District, a matter of about twenty minutes only, placed the parcel where it was found and so back to town. That charming creature, his wife, quietly shoots Mr. Pace after dinner—you remember he was shot from behind? Another significant point, that!—reloads the revolver and puts it back in its place, and then starts off with her desperate little comedy.”

“It’s incredible,” I muttered, fascinated, “and yet—”

“And yet it is true. Bien sur, my friend, it is true. But to bring that precious pair to justice, that is another matter. Well, Japp must do what he can—I have written him fully—but I very much fear, Hastings, that we shall be obliged to leave them to Fate, or le bon Dieu, whichever you prefer.”

“The wicked flourish like a green bay tree,” I reminded him.

“But at a price, Hastings, always at a price, croyez-moi! ”

Poirot’s forebodings were confirmed, Japp, though convinced of the truth of his theory, was unable to get together the necessary evidence to ensure a conviction.

Mr. Pace’s huge fortune passed into the hands of his murderers. Nevertheless, Nemesis did overtake them, and when I read in the paper that the Hon. Roger and Mrs. Havering were amongst those killed in the crashing of the Air Mail to Paris I knew that Justice was satisfied.

Five

THE MILLION DOLLAR BOND ROBBERY

“What a number of bond robberies there have been lately!” I observed one morning, laying aside the newspaper. “Poirot, let us forsake the science of detection, and take to crime instead!”

“You are on the—how do you say it?—get-rich-quick tack, eh, mon ami?”

“Well, look at this last coup, the million dollars’ worth of Liberty Bonds which the London and Scottish Bank were sending to New York, and which disappeared in such a remarkable manner on board the Olympia.”

“If it were not for mal de mer, and the difficulty of practising the so excellent method of Laverguier for a longer time than the few hours of crossing the Channel, I should delight to voyage myself on one of these big liners,” murmured Poirot dreamily.

“Yes, indeed,” I said enthusiastically. “Some of them must be perfect palaces; the swimming baths, the lounges, the restaurant, the palm courts—really, it must be hard to believe that one is on the sea.”

“Me, I always know when I am on the sea,” said Poirot sadly. “And all those bagatelles that you enumerate, they say nothing to me; but, my friend, consider for a moment the genuises that travel as it were incognito! On board these floating palaces, as you so justly call them, one would meet the élite, the haute noblesse of the criminal world!”

I laughed.

“So that’s the way your enthusiasm runs! You would have liked to cross swords with the man who sneaked the Liberty Bonds?”

The landlady interrupted us.

“A young lady as wants to see you, Mr. Poirot. Here’s her card.”

The card bore the inscription: Miss Esmée Farquhar, and Poirot, after diving under the table to retrieve a stray crumb, and putting it carefully in the wastepaper basket, nodded to the landlady to admit her.

In another minute one of the most charming girls I have ever seen was ushered into the room. She was perhaps about five-and-twenty, with big brown eyes and a perfect figure. She was well-dressed and perfectly composed in manner.

“Sit down, I beg of you, mademoiselle. This is my friend, Captain Hastings, who aids me in my little problems.”

“I am afraid it is a big problem I have brought you today, Monsieur Poirot,” said the girl, giving me a pleasant bow as she seated herself. “I dare say you have read about it in the papers. I am referring to the theft of Liberty Bonds on the Olympia.” Some astonishment must have shown itself on Poirot’s face, for she continued quickly: “You are doubtless asking yourself what have I to do with a grave institution like the London and Scottish Bank. In one sense nothing, in another sense everything. You see, Monsieur Poirot, I am engaged to Mr. Philip Ridgeway.”

“Aha! and Mr. Philip Ridgeway—”

“Was in charge of the bonds when they were stolen. Of course no actual blame can attach to him, it was not his fault in any way. Nevertheless, he is half distraught over the matter, and his uncle, I know, insists that he must carelessly have mentioned having them in his possession. It is a terrible setback to his career.”

“Who is his uncle?”

“Mr. Vavasour, joint general manager of the London and Scottish Bank.”

“Suppose, Miss Farquhar, that you recount to me the whole story?”

“Very well. As you know, the Bank wished to extend their credits in America, and for this purpose decided to send over a million dollars in Liberty Bonds. Mr. Vavasour selected his nephew, who had occupied a position of trust in the Bank for many years and who was conversant with all the details of the Bank's dealings in New York, to make the trip. The Olympia sailed from Liverpool on the 23rd, and the bonds were handed over to Philip on the morning of that day by Mr. Vavasour and Mr. Shaw, the two joint general managers of the London and Scottish Bank. They were counted, enclosed in a package, and sealed in his presence, and he then locked the package at once in his portmanteau."

"A portmanteau with an ordinary lock?"

"No, Mr. Shaw insisted on a special lock being fitted to it by Hubbs. Philip, as I say, placed the package at the bottom of the trunk. It was stolen just a few hours before reaching New York. A rigorous search of the whole ship was made, but without result. The bonds seemed literally to have vanished into thin air."

Poirot made a grimace.

"But they did not vanish absolutely, since I gather that they were sold in small parcels within half an hour of the docking of the Olympia! Well, undoubtedly the next thing is for me to see Mr. Ridgeway."

"I was about to suggest that you should lunch with me at the 'Cheshire Cheese.' Philip will be there. He is meeting me, but does not yet know that I have been consulting you on his behalf."

We agreed to this suggestion readily enough, and drove there in a taxi.

Mr. Philip Ridgeway was there before us, and looked somewhat surprised to see his fiancée arriving with two complete strangers. He was a nice looking young fellow, tall and spruce, with a touch of greying hair at the temples, though he could not have been much over thirty.

Miss Farquhar went up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

"You must forgive me acting without consulting you, Philip," she said. "Let me introduce you to Monsieur Hercule Poirot, of whom you must often have heard, and his friend, Captain Hastings."

Ridgeway looked very astonished.

“Of course I have heard of you, Monsieur Poirot,” he said, as he shook hands. “But I had no idea that Esmée was thinking of consulting you about my—our trouble.”

“I was afraid you would not let me do it, Philip,” said Miss Farquhar meekly.

“So you took care to be on the safe side,” he observed, with a smile. “I hope Monsieur Poirot will be able to throw some light on this extraordinary puzzle, for I confess frankly that I am nearly out of my mind with worry and anxiety about it.”

Indeed, his face looked drawn and haggard and showed only too clearly the strain under which he was labouring.

“Well, well,” said Poirot. “Let us lunch, and over lunch we will put our heads together and see what can be done. I want to hear Mr. Ridgeway’s story from his own lips.”

Whilst we discussed the excellent steak and kidney pudding of the establishment, Philip Ridgeway narrated the circumstances leading to the disappearance of the bonds. His story agreed with that of Miss Farquhar in every particular. When he had finished, Poirot took up the thread with a question.

“What exactly led you to discover that the bonds had been stolen, Mr. Ridgeway?”

He laughed rather bitterly.

“The thing stared me in the face, Monsieur Poirot. I couldn’t have missed it. My cabin trunk was half out from under the bunk and all scratched and cut about where they’d tried to force the lock.”

“But I understood that it had been opened with a key?”

“That’s so. They tried to force it, but couldn’t. And in the end, they must have got it unlocked somehow or other.”

“Curious,” said Poirot, his eyes beginning to flicker with the green light I knew so well. “Very curious! They waste much, much time trying to prise it open, and then—sapristi! they find they have the key all the time—for each of Hubbs’s locks are unique.”

“That’s just why they couldn’t have had the key. It never left me day or night.”

“You are sure of that?”

“I can swear to it, and besides, if they had had the key or a duplicate, why should they waste time trying to force an obviously unforceable lock?”

“Ah! there is exactly the question we are asking ourselves! I venture to prophesy that the solution, if we ever find it, will hinge on that curious fact. I beg of you not to assault me if I ask you one more question: Are you perfectly certain that you did not leave the trunk unlocked?”

Philip Ridgeway merely looked at him, and Poirot gesticulated apologetically.

“Ah, but these things can happen, I assure you! Very well, the bonds were stolen from the trunk. What did the thief do with them? How did he manage to get ashore with them?”

“Ah!” cried Ridgeway. “That’s just it. How? Word was passed to the Customs authorities, and every soul that left the ship was gone over with a toothcomb!”

“And the bonds, I gather, made a bulky package?”

“Certainly they did. They could hardly have been hidden on board—and anyway we know they weren’t, because they were offered for sale within half an hour of the Olympia’s arrival, long before I got the cables going and the numbers sent out. One broker swears he bought some of them even before the Olympia got in. But you can't send bonds by wireless."

"Not by wireless, but did any tug come alongside?"

"Only the official ones, and that was after the alarm was given when everyone was on the lookout. I was watching out myself for their being passed over to someone that way. My God, Monsieur Poirot, this thing will drive me mad! People are beginning to say I stole them myself."

"But you also were searched on landing, weren't you?" asked Poirot gently.

"Yes."

The young man stared at him in a puzzled manner.

"You do not catch my meaning, I see," said Poirot, smiling enigmatically. "Now I should like to make a few inquiries at the Bank."

Ridgeway produced a card and scribbled a few words on it.

"Send this in and my uncle will see you at once."

Poirot thanked him, bade farewell to Miss Farquhar, and together we started out for Threadneedle Street and the head office of the London and Scottish Bank. On production of Ridgeway's card, we were led through the labyrinth of counters and desks, skirting paying-in clerks and paying-out clerks and up to a small office on the first floor where the joint general managers received us. They were two grave gentlemen, who had grown grey in the service of the Bank. Mr. Vavasour had a short white beard, Mr. Shaw was clean shaven.

"I understand you are strictly a private inquiry agent?" said Mr. Vavasour. "Quite so, quite so. We have, of course, placed ourselves in the hands of Scotland Yard. Inspector McNeil has charge of the case. A very able officer, I believe."

"I am sure of it," said Poirot politely. "You will permit a few questions, on your nephew's behalf? About this lock, who ordered it from Hubbs's?"

“I ordered it myself,” said Mr. Shaw. “I would not trust to any clerk in the matter. As to the keys, Mr. Ridgeway had one, and the other two are held by my colleague and myself.”

“And no clerk has had access to them?”

Mr. Shaw turned inquiringly to Mr. Vavasour.

“I think I am correct in saying that they have remained in the safe where we placed them on the 23rd,” said Mr. Vavasour. “My colleague was unfortunately taken ill a fortnight ago—in fact on the very day that Philip left us. He has only just recovered.”

“Severe bronchitis is no joke to a man of my age,” said Mr. Shaw ruefully. “But I’m afraid Mr. Vavasour has suffered from the hard work entailed by my absence, especially with this unexpected worry coming on top of everything.”

Poirot asked a few more questions. I judged that he was endeavouring to gauge the exact amount of intimacy between uncle and nephew. Mr. Vavasour’s answers were brief and punctilious. His nephew was a trusted official of the Bank, and had no debts or money difficulties that he knew of. He had been entrusted with similar missions in the past. Finally we were politely bowed out.

“I am disappointed,” said Poirot, as we emerged into the street.

“You hoped to discover more? They are such stodgy old men.”

“It is not their stodginess which disappoints me, mon ami. I do not expect to find in a Bank manager, a ‘keen financier with an eagle glance,’ as your favourite works of fiction put it. No, I am disappointed in the case—it is too easy!”

“Easy?”

“Yes, do you not find it almost childishly simple?”

“You know who stole the bonds?”

“I do.”

“But then—we must—why—”

“Do not confuse and fluster yourself, Hastings. We are not going to do anything at present.”

“But why? What are you waiting for?”

“For the Olympia. She is due on her return trip from New York on Tuesday.”

“But if you know who stole the bonds, why wait? He may escape.”

“To a South Sea island where there is no extradition? No, mon ami, he would find life very uncongenial there. As to why I wait—eh bien, to the intelligence of Hercule Poirot the case is perfectly clear, but for the benefit of others, not so greatly gifted by the good God—the Inspector, McNeil, for instance—it would be as well to make a few inquiries to establish the facts. One must have consideration for those less gifted than oneself.”

“Good Lord, Poirot! Do you know, I’d give a considerable sum of money to see you make a thorough ass of yourself—just for once. You’re so confoundedly conceited!”

“Do not enrage yourself, Hastings. In verity, I observe that there are times when you almost detest me! Alas, I suffer the penalties of greatness!”

The little man puffed out his chest, and sighed so comically that I was forced to laugh.

Tuesday saw us speeding to Liverpool in a first-class carriage of the L and NWR. Poirot had obstinately refused to enlighten me as to his suspicions—or certainties. He contented himself with expressing surprise that I, too, was not equally au fait with the situation. I disdained to argue, and entrenched my curiosity behind a rampart of pretended indifference.

Once arrived at the quay alongside which lay the big transatlantic liner, Poirot became brisk and alert. Our proceedings consisted in interviewing

four successive stewards and inquiring after a friend of Poirot's who had crossed to New York on
the 23rd.

"An elderly gentleman, wearing glasses. A great invalid, hardly moved out of his cabin."

The description appeared to tally with one Mr. Ventnor who had occupied the cabin C24 which was next to that of Philip Ridgeway. Although unable to see how Poirot had deduced Mr. Ventnor's existence and personal appearance, I was keenly excited.

"Tell me," I cried, "was this gentleman one of the first to land when you got to New York?"

The steward shook his head.

"No, indeed, sir, he was one of the last off the boat."

I retired crestfallen, and observed Poirot grinning at me. He thanked the steward, a note changed hands, and we took our departure.

"It's all very well," I remarked heatedly, "but that last answer must have damned your precious theory, grin as you please!"

"As usual, you see nothing, Hastings. That last answer is, on the contrary, the copingstone of my theory."

I flung up my hands in despair.

"I give it up."

II

When we were in the train, speeding towards London, Poirot wrote busily for a few minutes, sealing up the result in an envelope.

"This is for the good Inspector McNeil. We will leave it at Scotland Yard in passing, and then to the Rendezvous Restaurant, where I have asked Miss

Esmée Farquhar to do us the honour of dining with us.”

“What about Ridgeway?”

“What about him?” asked Poirot with a twinkle.

“Why, you surely don’t think—you can’t—”

“The habit of incoherence is growing upon you, Hastings. As a matter of fact I did think. If Ridgeway had been the thief—which was perfectly possible—the case would have been charming; a piece of neat methodical work.”

“But not so charming for Miss Farquhar.”

“Possibly you are right. Therefore all is for the best. Now, Hastings, let us review the case. I can see that you are dying to do so. The sealed package is removed from the trunk and vanishes, as Miss Farquhar puts it, into thin air. We will dismiss the thin air theory, which is not practicable at the present stage of science, and consider what is likely to have become of it. Everyone asserts the incredulity of its being smuggled ashore—”

“Yes, but we know—”

“You may know, Hastings, I do not. I take the view that, since it seemed incredible, it was incredible. Two possibilities remain: it was hidden on board—also rather difficult—or it was thrown overboard.”

“With a cork on it, do you mean?”

“Without a cork.”

I stared.

“But if the bonds were thrown overboard, they couldn’t have been sold in New York.”

“I admire your logical mind, Hastings. The bonds were sold in New York, therefore they were not thrown overboard. You see where that leads us?”

"Where we were when we started."

"Jamais de la vie! If the package was thrown overboard and the bonds were sold in New York, the package could not have contained the bonds. Is there any evidence that the package did contain the bonds? Remember, Mr. Ridgeway never opened it from the time it was placed in his hands in London."

"Yes, but then—"

Poirot waved an impatient hand.

"Permit me to continue. The last moment that the bonds are seen as bonds is in the office of the London and Scottish Bank on the morning of the 23rd. They reappear in New York half an hour after the Olympia gets in, and according to one man, whom nobody listens to, actually before she gets in. Supposing then, that they have never been on the Olympia at all? Is there any other way they could get to New York? Yes. The Gigantic leaves Southampton on the same day as the Olympia, and she holds the record for the Atlantic. Mailed by the Gigantic, the bonds would be in New York the day before the Olympia arrived. All is clear, the case begins to explain itself. The sealed packet is only a dummy, and the moment of its substitution must be in the office in the bank. It would be an easy matter for any of the three men present to have prepared a duplicate package which could be substituted for the genuine one. Très bien, the bonds are mailed to a confederate in New York, with instructions to sell as soon as the Olympia is in, but someone must travel on the Olympia to engineer the supposed moment of robbery."

"But why?"

"Because if Ridgeway merely opens the packet and finds it a dummy, suspicion flies at once to London. No, the man on board in the cabin next door does his work, pretends to force the lock in an obvious manner so as to draw immediate attention to the theft, really unlocks the trunk with a duplicate key, throws the package overboard and waits until the last to leave the boat. Naturally he wears glasses to conceal his eyes, and is an invalid since he does not want to run the risk of meeting Ridgeway. He steps ashore in New York and returns by the first boat available.”

“But who—which was he?”

“The man who had a duplicate key, the man who ordered the lock, the man who has not been severely ill with bronchitis at his home in the country—enfin, the ‘stodgy’ old man, Mr. Shaw! There are criminals in high places sometimes, my friend. Ah, here we are, Mademoiselle, I have succeeded! You permit?”

And, beaming, Poirot kissed the astonished girl lightly on either cheek!

Six

THE ADVENTURE OF THE EGYPTIAN TOMB

I have always considered that one of the most thrilling and dramatic of the many adventures I have shared with Poirot was that of our investigation into the strange series of deaths which followed upon the discovery and opening of the Tomb of King Men-her-Ra.

Hard upon the discovery of the Tomb of Tutankh-Amen by Lord Carnarvon, Sir John Willard and Mr. Bleibner of New York, pursuing their excavations not far from Cairo, in the vicinity of the Pyramids of Gizeh, came unexpectedly on a series of funeral chambers. The greatest interest was aroused by their discovery. The Tomb appeared to be that of King Men-her-Ra, one of those shadowy kings of the Eighth Dynasty, when the Old Kingdom was falling to decay. Little was known about this period, and the discoveries were fully reported in the newspapers.

An event soon occurred which took a profound hold on the public mind. Sir John Willard died quite suddenly of heart failure.

The more sensational newspapers immediately took the opportunity of reviving all the old superstitious stories connected with the ill luck of certain Egyptian treasures. The unlucky Mummy at the British Museum, that hoary old chestnut, was dragged out with fresh zest, was quietly denied by the Museum, but nevertheless enjoyed all its usual vogue.

A fortnight later Mr. Bleibner died of acute blood poisoning, and a few days afterwards a nephew of his shot himself in New York. The “Curse of Men-her-Ra” was the talk of the day, and the magic power of dead-and-gone Egypt was exalted to a fetish point.

It was then that Poirot received a brief note from Lady Willard, widow of the dead archaeologist, asking him to go and see her at her house in Kensington Square. I accompanied him.

Lady Willard was a tall, thin woman, dressed in deep mourning. Her haggard face bore eloquent testimony to her recent grief.

"It is kind of you to have come so promptly, Monsieur Poirot."

"I am at your service, Lady Willard. You wished to consult me?"

"You are, I am aware, a detective, but it is not only as a detective that I wish to consult you. You are a man of original views, I know, you have imagination, experience of the world; tell me, Monsieur Poirot, what are your views on the supernatural?"

Poirot hesitated for a moment before he replied. He seemed to be considering. Finally he said:

"Let us not misunderstand each other, Lady Willard. It is not a general question that you are asking me there. It has a personal application, has it not? You are referring obliquely to the death of your late husband?"

"That is so," she admitted.

"You want me to investigate the circumstances of his death?"

"I want you to ascertain for me exactly how much is newspaper chatter, and how much may be said to be founded on fact? Three deaths, Monsieur Poirot—each one explicable taken by itself, but taken together surely an almost unbelievable coincidence, and all within a month of the opening of the tomb! It may be mere superstition, it may be some potent curse from the past that operates in ways undreamed of by modern science. The fact remains—three deaths! And I am afraid, Monsieur Poirot, horribly afraid. It may not yet be the end."

"For whom do you fear?"

"For my son. When the news of my husband's death came I was ill. My son, who has just come down from Oxford, went out there. He brought the—the body home, but now he has gone out again, in spite of my prayers and entreaties. He is so fascinated by the work that he intends to take his father’s place and carry on the system of excavations. You may think me a foolish, credulous woman, but, Monsieur Poirot, I am afraid. Supposing that the spirit of the dead King is not yet appeased? Perhaps to you I seem to be talking nonsense—”

“No, indeed, Lady Willard,” said Poirot quickly. “I, too, believe in the force of superstition, one of the greatest forces the world has ever known.”

I looked at him in surprise. I should never have credited Poirot with being superstitious. But the little man was obviously in earnest.

“What you really demand is that I shall protect your son? I will do my utmost to keep him from harm.”

“Yes, in the ordinary way, but against an occult influence?”

“In volumes of the Middle Ages, Lady Willard, you will find many ways of counteracting black magic. Perhaps they knew more than we moderns with all our boasted science. Now let us come to facts, that I may have guidance. Your husband had always been a devoted Egyptologist, hadn’t he?”

“Yes, from his youth upwards. He was one of the greatest living authorities upon the subject.”

“But Mr. Bleibner, I understand, was more or less of an amateur?”

“Oh, quite. He was a very wealthy man who dabbled freely in any subject that happened to take his fancy. My husband managed to interest him in Egyptology, and it was his money that was so useful in financing the expedition.”

“And the nephew? What do you know of his tastes? Was he with the party at all?”

“I do not think so. In fact I never knew of his existence till I read of his death in the paper. I do not think he and Mr. Bleibner can have been at all intimate. He never spoke of having any relations.”

“Who are the other members of the party?”

“Well, there’s Dr. Tosswill, a minor official connected with the British Museum; Mr. Schneider of the Metropolitan Museum in New York; a young American secretary; Dr. Ames, who accompanies the expedition in his professional capacity; and Hassan, my husband’s devoted native servant.”

“Do you remember the name of the American secretary?”

“Harper, I think, but I cannot be sure. He had not been with Mr. Bleibner very long, I know. He was a very pleasant young fellow.”

“Thank you, Lady Willard.”

“If there is anything else—”

“For the moment, nothing. Leave it now in my hands, and be assured that I will do all that is humanly possible to protect your son.”

They were not exactly reassuring words, and I observed Lady Willard wince as he uttered them. Yet, at the same time, the fact that he had not pooh-poohed her fears seemed in itself to be a relief to her.

For my part I had never before suspected that Poirot had so deep a vein of superstition in his nature. I tackled him on the subject as we went homewards. His manner was grave and earnest.

“But yes, Hastings. I believe in these things. You must not underrate the force of superstition.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Toujours pratique, the good Hastings! Eh bien, to begin with we are going to cable to New York for fuller details of young Mr. Bleibner’s death.”

He duly sent off his cable. The reply was full and precise. Young Rupert Bleibner had been in low water for several years. He had been a beachcomber and a remittance man in several South Sea islands, but had returned to New York two years ago, where he had rapidly sunk lower and lower. The most significant thing, to my mind, was that he had recently managed to borrow enough money to take him to Egypt. “I’ve a good friend there I can borrow from,” he had declared. Here, however, his plans had gone awry. He had returned to New York cursing his skinflint of an uncle who cared more for the bones of dead and gone kings than his own flesh and blood. It was during his sojourn in Egypt that the death of Sir John Willard had occurred. Rupert had plunged once more into his life of dissipation in New York, and then, without warning, he had committed suicide, leaving behind him a letter which contained some curious phrases. It seemed written in a sudden fit of remorse. He referred to himself as a leper and an outcast, and the letter ended by declaring that such as he were better dead.

A shadowy theory leapt into my brain. I had never really believed in the vengeance of a long dead Egyptian king. I saw here a more modern crime. Supposing this young man had decided to do away with his uncle—preferably by poison. By mistake, Sir John Willard receives the fatal dose. The young man returns to New York, haunted by his crime. The news of his uncle’s death reaches him. He realizes how unnecessary his crime has been, and stricken with remorse takes his own life.

I outlined my solution to Poirot. He was interested.

“It is ingenious what you have thought of there—decidedly it is ingenious. It may even be true. But you leave out of count the fatal influence of the Tomb.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“You still think that has something to do with it?”

“So much so, mon ami, that we start for Egypt tomorrow.”

“What?” I cried, astonished.

“I have said it.” An expression of conscious heroism spread over Poirot’s face. Then he groaned. “But oh,” he lamented, “the sea! The hateful sea!”

II

It was a week later. Beneath our feet was the golden sand of the desert. The hot sun poured down overhead. Poirot, the picture of misery, wilted by my side. The little man was not a good traveller. Our four days' voyage from Marseilles had been one long agony to him. He had landed at Alexandria the wraith of his former self, even his usual neatness had deserted him. We had arrived in Cairo and had driven out at once to the Mena House Hotel, right in the shadow of the Pyramids.

The charm of Egypt had laid hold of me. Not so Poirot. Dressed precisely the same as in London, he carried a small clothes brush in his pocket and waged an unceasing war on the dust which accumulated on his dark apparel.

"And my boots," he wailed. "Regard them, Hastings. My boots, of the neat patent leather, usually so smart and shining. See, the sand is inside them, which is painful, and outside them, which outrages the eyesight. Also the heat, it causes my moustaches to become limp—but limp!"

"Look at the Sphinx," I urged. "Even I can feel the mystery and the charm it exhales."

Poirot looked at it discontentedly.

"It has not the air happy," he declared. "How could it, half-buried in sand in that untidy fashion. Ah, this cursed sand!"

"Come, now, there's a lot of sand in Belgium," I reminded him, mindful of a holiday spent at Knocke-sur-mer in the midst of "Les dunes impeccables" as the guidebook had phrased it.

"Not in Brussels," declared Poirot. He gazed at the Pyramids thoughtfully. "It is true that they, at least, are of a shape solid and geometrical, but their surface is of an unevenness most unpleasing. And the palm trees I like them not. Not even do they plant them in rows!"

I cut short his lamentations, by suggesting that we should start for the camp. We were to ride there on camels, and the beasts were patiently kneeling, waiting for us to mount, in charge of several picturesque boys headed by a voluble dragoman.

I pass over the spectacle of Poirot on a camel. He started by groans and lamentations and ended by shrieks, gesticulations and invocations to the Virgin Mary and every Saint in the calendar. In the end, he descended ignominiously and finished the journey on a diminutive donkey. I must admit that a trotting camel is no joke for the amateur. I was stiff for several days.

At last we neared the scene of the excavations. A sunburnt man with a grey beard, in white clothes and wearing a helmet, came to meet us.

“Monsieur Poirot and Captain Hastings? We received your cable. I’m sorry that there was no one to meet you in Cairo. An unforeseen event occurred which completely disorganized our plans.”

Poirot paled. His hand, which had stolen to his clothes brush, stayed its course.

“Not another death?” he breathed.

“Yes.”

“Sir Guy Willard?” I cried.

“No, Captain Hastings. My American colleague, Mr. Schneider.”

“And the cause?” demanded Poirot.

“Tetanus.”

I blanched. All around me I seemed to feel an atmosphere of evil, subtle and menacing. A horrible thought flashed across me. Supposing I were next?

“Mon Dieu,” said Poirot, in a very low voice, “I do not understand this. It is horrible. Tell me, monsieur, there is no doubt that it was tetanus?”

“I believe not. But Dr. Ames will tell you more than I can do.”

“Ah, of course, you are not the doctor.”

“My name is Tosswill.”

This, then, was the British expert described by Lady Willard as being a minor official at the British Museum. There was something at once grave and steadfast about him that took my fancy.

“If you will come with me,” continued Dr. Tosswill. “I will take you to Sir Guy Willard. He was most anxious to be informed as soon as you should arrive.”

We were taken across the camp to a large tent. Dr. Tosswill lifted up the flap and we entered. Three men were sitting inside.

“Monsieur Poirot and Captain Hastings have arrived, Sir Guy,” said Tosswill.

The youngest of the three men jumped up and came forward to greet us. There was a certain impulsiveness in his manner which reminded me of his mother. He was not nearly so sunburnt as the others, and that fact, coupled with a certain haggardness round the eyes, made him look older than his twenty-two years. He was clearly endeavouring to bear up under a severe mental strain.

He introduced his two companions, Dr. Ames, a capable-looking man of thirty-odd, with a touch of greying hair at the temples, and Mr. Harper, the secretary, a pleasant lean young man wearing the national insignia of horn-rimmed spectacles.

After a few minutes’ desultory conversation the latter went out, and Dr. Tosswill followed him. We were left alone with Sir Guy and Dr. Ames.

“Please ask any questions you want to ask, Monsieur Poirot,” said Willard. “We are utterly dumbfounded at this strange series of disasters, but it isn’t—it can’t be, anything but coincidence.”

There was a nervousness about his manner which rather belied the words. I saw that Poirot was studying him keenly.

“Your heart is really in this work, Sir Guy?”

“Rather. No matter what happens, or what comes of it, the work is going on. Make up your mind to that.”

Poirot wheeled round on the other.

“What have you to say to that, monsieur le docteur?”

“Well,” drawled the doctor, “I’m not for quitting myself.”

Poirot made one of those expressive grimaces of his.

“Then, évidemment, we must find out just how we stand. When did Mr. Schneider’s death take place?”

“Three days ago.”

“You are sure it was tetanus?”

“Dead sure.”

“It couldn’t have been a case of strychnine poisoning, for instance?”

“No, Monsieur Poirot, I see what you are getting at. But it was a clear case of tetanus.”

“Did you not inject antiserum?”

“Certainly we did,” said the doctor dryly. “Every conceivable thing that could be done was tried.”

“Had you the antiserum with you?”

“No. We procured it from Cairo.”

"Have there been any other cases of tetanus in the camp?"

"No, not one."

"Are you certain that the death of Mr. Bleibner was not due to tetanus?"

"Absolutely plumb certain. He had a scratch upon his thumb which became poisoned, and septicaemia set in. It sounds pretty much the same to a layman, I dare say, but the two things are entirely different."

"Then we have four deaths—all totally dissimilar, one heart failure, one blood poisoning, one suicide and one tetanus."

"Exactly, Monsieur Poirot."

"Are you certain that there is nothing which might link the four together?"

"I don't quite understand you?"

"I will put it plainly. Was any act committed by those four men which might seem to denote disrespect to the spirit of Men-her-Ra?"

The doctor gazed at Poirot in astonishment.

"You're talking through your hat, Monsieur Poirot. Surely you've not been guyed into believing all that fool talk?"

"Absolute nonsense," muttered Willard angrily.

Poirot remained placidly immovable, blinking a little out of his green cat's eyes.

"So you do not believe it, monsieur le docteur?"

"No, sir, I do not," declared the doctor emphatically. "I am a scientific man, and I believe only what science teaches."

"Was there no science then in Ancient Egypt?" asked Poirot softly. He did not wait for a reply, and indeed Dr. Ames seemed rather at a loss for the moment. “No, no, do not answer me, but tell me this. What do the native workmen think?”

“I guess,” said Dr. Ames, “that, where white folk lose their heads, natives aren’t going to be far behind. I’ll admit that they’re getting what you might call scared—but they’ve no cause to be.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot noncommittally.

Sir Guy leant forward.

“Surely,” he cried incredulously, “you cannot believe in—oh, but the thing’s absurd! You can know nothing of Ancient Egypt if you think that.”

For answer Poirot produced a little book from his pocket—an ancient tattered volume. As he held it out I saw its title, The Magic of the Egyptians and Chaldeans. Then, wheeling round, he strode out of the tent. The doctor stared at me.

“What is his little idea?”

The phrase, so familiar on Poirot’s lips, made me smile as it came from another.

“I don’t know exactly,” I confessed. “He’s got some plan of exorcizing the evil spirits, I believe.”

I went in search of Poirot, and found him talking to the lean-faced young man who had been the late Mr. Bleibner’s secretary.

“No,” Mr. Harper was saying, “I’ve only been six months with the expedition. Yes, I knew Mr. Bleibner’s affairs pretty well.”

“Can you recount to me anything concerning his nephew?”

“He turned up here one day, not a bad-looking fellow. I’d never met him before, but some of the others had—Ames, I think, and Schneider. The old man wasn’t at all pleased to see him. They were at it in no time, hammer and tongs. ‘Not a cent,’ the old man shouted. ‘Not one cent now or when

I’m dead. I intend to leave my money to the furtherance of my life’s work. I’ve been talking it over with Mr. Schneider today.’ And a bit more of the same. Young Bleibner lit out for Cairo right away.”

“Was he in perfectly good health at the time?”

“The old man?”

“No, the young one.”

“I believe he did mention there was something wrong with him. But it couldn’t have been anything serious, or I should have remembered.”

“One thing more, has Mr. Bleibner left a will?”

“So far as we know, he has not.”

“Are you remaining with the expedition, Mr. Harper?”

“No, sir, I am not. I’m for New York as soon as I can square up things here. You may laugh if you like, but I’m not going to be this blasted Men-her-Ra’s next victim. He’ll get me if I stop here.”

The young man wiped the perspiration from his brow.

Poirot turned away. Over his shoulder he said with a peculiar smile:

“Remember, he got one of his victims in New York.”

“Oh, hell!” said Mr. Harper forcibly.

“That young man is nervous,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “He is on the edge, but absolutely on the edge.”

I glanced at Poirot curiously, but his enigmatical smile told me nothing. In company with Sir Guy Willard and Dr. Tosswill we were taken round the excavations. The principal finds had been removed to Cairo, but some of the tomb furniture was extremely interesting. The enthusiasm of the young baronet was obvious, but I fancied that I detected a shade of nervousness in his manner as though he could not quite escape from the feeling of menace in the air. As we entered the tent which had been assigned to us, for a wash before joining the evening meal, a tall dark figure in white robes stood aside to let us pass with a graceful gesture and a murmured greeting in Arabic. Poirot stopped.

“You are Hassan, the late Sir John Willard’s servant?”

“I served my Lord Sir John, now I serve his son.” He took a step nearer to us and lowered his voice. “You are a wise one, they say, learned in dealing with evil spirits. Let the young master depart from here. There is evil in the air around us.”

And with an abrupt gesture, not waiting for a reply, he strode away.

“Evil in the air,” muttered Poirot. “Yes, I feel it.”

Our meal was hardly a cheerful one. The floor was left to Dr. Tosswill, who discoursed at length upon Egyptian antiquities. Just as we were preparing to retire to rest, Sir Guy caught Poirot by the arm and pointed. A shadowy figure was moving amidst the tents. It was no human one: I recognized distinctly the dog-headed figure I had seen carved on the walls of the tomb.

My blood froze at the sight.

“Mon Dieu! ” murmured Poirot, crossing himself vigorously. “Anubis, the jackal-headed, the god of departing souls.”

“Someone is hoaxing us,” cried Dr. Tosswill, rising indignantly to his feet.

“It went into your tent, Harper,” muttered Sir Guy, his face dreadfully pale.

“No,” said Poirot, shaking his head, “into that of Dr. Ames.”

The doctor stared at him incredulously; then, repeating Dr. Tosswill’s words, he cried:

“Someone is hoaxing us. Come, we’ll soon catch the fellow.”

He dashed energetically in pursuit of the shadowy apparition. I followed him, but, search as we would, we could find no trace of any living soul having passed that way. We returned, somewhat disturbed in mind, to find Poirot taking energetic measures, in his own way, to ensure his personal safety. He was busily surrounding our tent with various diagrams and inscriptions which he was drawing in the sand. I recognized the five-pointed star or Pentagon many times repeated. As was his wont, Poirot was at the same time delivering an impromptu lecture on witchcraft and magic in general, White magic as opposed to Black, with various references to the Ka and the Book of the Dead thrown in.

It appeared to excite the liveliest contempt in Dr. Tosswill, who drew me aside, literally snorting with rage.

“Balderdash, sir,” he exclaimed angrily. “Pure balderdash. The man’s an imposter. He doesn’t know the difference between the superstitions of the Middle Ages and the beliefs of Ancient Egypt. Never have I heard such a hotchpotch of ignorance and credulity.”

I calmed the excited expert, and joined Poirot in the tent. My little friend was beaming cheerfully.

“We can now sleep in peace,” he declared happily. “And I can do with some sleep. My head, it aches abominably. Ah, for a good tisane! ”

As though in answer to prayer, the flap of the tent was lifted and Hassan appeared, bearing a steaming cup which he offered to Poirot. It proved to be camomile tea, a beverage of which he is inordinately fond. Having thanked Hassan and refused his offer of another cup for myself, we were left alone once more. I stood at the door of the tent some time after undressing, looking out over the desert.

“A wonderful place,” I said aloud, “and a wonderful work. I can feel the fascination. This desert life, this probing into the heart of a vanished civilization. Surely, Poirot, you, too, must feel the charm?”

I got no answer, and I turned, a little annoyed. My annoyance was quickly changed to concern. Poirot was lying back across the rude couch, his face horribly convulsed. Beside him was the empty cup. I rushed to his side, then dashed out and across the camp to Dr. Ames's tent.

"Dr. Ames!" I cried. "Come at once."

"What's the matter?" said the doctor, appearing in pyjamas.

"My friend. He's ill. Dying. The camomile tea. Don't let Hassan leave the camp."

Like a flash the doctor ran to our tent. Poirot was lying as I left him.

"Extraordinary," cried Ames. "Looks like a seizure—or—what did you say about something he drank?" He picked up the empty cup.

"Only I did not drink it!" said a placid voice.

We turned in amazement. Poirot was sitting up on the bed. He was smiling.

"No," he said gently. "I did not drink it. While my good friend Hastings was apostrophizing the night, I took the opportunity of pouring it, not down my throat, but into a little bottle. That little bottle will go to the analytical chemist. No"—as the doctor made a sudden movement—"as a sensible man, you will understand that violence will be of no avail. During Hastings' absence to fetch you, I have had time to put the bottle in safe keeping. Ah, quick, Hastings, hold him!"

I misunderstood Poirot's anxiety. Eager to save my friend, I flung myself in front of him. But the doctor's swift movement had another meaning. His hand went to his mouth, a smell of bitter almonds filled the air, and he swayed forward and fell.

"Another victim," said Poirot gravely, "but the last. Perhaps it is the best way. He has three deaths on his head."

"Dr. Ames?" I cried, stupefied. "But I thought you believed in some occult influence?"

"You misunderstood me, Hastings. What I meant was that I believe in the terrific force of superstition. Once get it firmly established that a series of deaths are supernatural, and you might almost stab a man in broad daylight, and it would still be put down to the curse, so strongly is the instinct of the supernatural implanted in the human race. I suspected from the first that a man was taking advantage of that instinct. The idea came to him, I imagine, with the death of Sir John Willard. A fury of superstition arose at once. As far as I could see, nobody could derive any particular profit from Sir John's death. Mr. Bleibner was a different case. He was a man of great wealth. The information I received from New York contained several suggestive points. To begin with, young Bleibner was reported to have said he had a good friend in Egypt from whom he could borrow. It was tacitly understood that he meant his uncle, but it seemed to me that in that case he would have said so outright. The words suggest some boon companion of his own. Another thing, he scraped up enough money to take him to Egypt, his uncle refused outright to advance him a penny, yet he was able to pay the return passage to New York. Someone must have lent him the money."

"All that was very thin," I objected.

"But there was more. Hastings, there occur often enough words spoken metaphorically which are taken literally. The opposite can happen too. In this case, words which were meant literally were taken metaphorically. Young Bleibner wrote plainly enough: 'I am a leper,' but nobody realized that he shot himself because he believed that he contracted the dread disease of leprosy."

"What?" I ejaculated.

"It was the clever invention of a diabolical mind. Young Bleibner was suffering from some minor skin trouble; he had lived in the South Sea Islands, where the disease is common enough. Ames was a former friend of his, and a well-known medical man, he would never dream of doubting his word. When I arrived here, my suspicions were divided between Harper and Dr. Ames, but I soon realized that only the doctor could have perpetrated and concealed the crimes, and I learn from Harper that he was previously acquainted with young Bleibner. Doubtless the latter at some time or another had made a will or had insured his life in favour of the doctor. The latter saw his chance of acquiring wealth. It was easy for him to inoculate Mr. Bleibner with the deadly germs. Then the nephew, overcome with despair at the dread news his friend had conveyed to him, shot himself. Mr. Bleibner, whatever his intentions, had made no will. His fortune would pass to his nephew and from him to the doctor."

"And Mr. Schneider?"

"We cannot be sure. He knew young Bleibner too, remember, and may have suspected something, or, again, the doctor may have thought that a further death motiveless and purposeless would strengthen the coils of superstition. Furthermore, I will tell you an interesting psychological fact, Hastings. A murderer has always a strong desire to repeat his successful crime, the performance of it grows upon him. Hence my fears for young Willard. The figure of Anubis you saw tonight was Hassan dressed up by my orders. I wanted to see if I could frighten the doctor. But it would take more than the supernatural to frighten him. I could see that he was not entirely taken in by my pretences of belief in the occult. The little comedy I played for him did not deceive him. I suspected that he would endeavour to make me the next victim. Ah, but in spite of la mer maudite, the heat abominable, and the annoyances of the sand, the little grey cells still functioned!"

Poirot proved to be perfectly right in his premises. Young Bleibner, some years ago, in a fit of drunken merriment, had made a jocular will, leaving "my cigarette case you admire so much and everything else of which I die possessed which will be principally debts to my good friend Robert Ames who once saved my life from drowning."

The case was hushed up as far as possible, and, to this day, people talk of the remarkable series of deaths in connection with the Tomb of Men-her-Ra as a triumphal proof of the vengeance of a bygone king upon the desecrators of his tomb—a belief which, as Poirot pointed out to me, is contrary to all Egyptian belief and thought.

Seven

THE JEWEL ROBBERY AT THE GRAND METROPOLITAN

"Poirot," I said, "a change of air would do you good."

"You think so, mon ami?"

"I am sure of it."

"Eh—eh?" said my friend, smiling. "It is all arranged, then?"

"You will come?"

"Where do you propose to take me?"

"Brighton. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine in the City put me on to a very good thing, and—well, I have money to burn, as the saying goes. I think a weekend at the Grand Metropolitan would do us all the good in the world."

"Thank you, I accept most gratefully. You have the good heart to think of an old man. And the good heart, it is in the end worth all the little grey cells. Yes, yes, I who speak to you am in danger of forgetting that sometimes."

I did not relish the implication. I fancy that Poirot is sometimes a little inclined to underestimate my mental capacities. But his pleasure was so evident that I put my slight annoyance aside.

"Then, that's all right," I said hastily.

Saturday evening saw us dining at the Grand Metropolitan in the midst of a gay throng. All the world and his wife seemed to be at Brighton. The dresses were marvellous, and the jewels—worn sometimes with more love of display than good taste—were something magnificent.

“Hein, it is a good sight, this!” murmured Poirot. “This is the home of the Profiteer, is it not so, Hastings?”

“Supposed to be,” I replied. “But we’ll hope they aren’t all tarred with the Profiteering brush.”

Poirot gazed round him placidly.

“The sight of so many jewels makes me wish I had turned my brains to crime, instead of to its detection. What a magnificent opportunity for some thief of distinction! Regard, Hastings, that stout woman by the pillar. She is, as you would say, plastered with gems.”

I followed his eyes.

“Why,” I exclaimed, “it’s Mrs. Opalsen.”

“You know her?”

“Slightly. Her husband is a rich stockbroker who made a fortune in the recent oil boom.”

After dinner we ran across the Opalsens in the lounge, and I introduced Poirot to them. We chatted for a few minutes, and ended by having our coffee together.

Poirot said a few words in praise of some of the costlier gems displayed on the lady’s ample bosom, and she brightened up at once.

“It’s a perfect hobby of mine, Mr. Poirot. I just love jewellery. Ed knows my weakness, and every time things go well he brings me something new. You are interested in precious stones?”

“I have had a good deal to do with them one time and another, madame. My profession has brought me into contact with some of the most famous jewels in the world.”

He went on to narrate, with discreet pseudonyms, the story of the historic jewels of a reigning house, and Mrs. Opalsen listened with bated breath.

"There now," she exclaimed, as he ended. "If it isn't just like a play! You know, I've got some pearls of my own that have a history attached to them. I believe it's supposed to be one of the finest necklaces in the world—the pearls are so beautifully matched and so perfect in colour. I declare I really must run up and get it!"

"Oh, madame," protested Poirot, "you are too amiable. Pray do not derange yourself!"

"Oh, but I'd like to show it to you."

The buxom dame waddled across to the lift briskly enough. Her husband, who had been talking to me, looked at Poirot inquiringly.

"Madame your wife is so amiable as to insist on showing me her pearl necklace," explained the latter.

"Oh, the pearls!" Opalsen smiled in a satisfied fashion. "Well, they are worth seeing. Cost a pretty penny too! Still, the money's there all right; I could get what I paid for them any day—perhaps more. May have to, too, if things go on as they are now. Money's confoundedly tight in the City. All this infernal EPD." He rambled on, launching into technicalities where I could not follow him.

He was interrupted by a small page boy who approached him and murmured something in his ear.

"Eh—what? I'll come at once. Not taken ill, is she? Excuse me, gentlemen."

He left us abruptly. Poirot leaned back and lit one of his tiny Russian cigarettes. Then, carefully and meticulously, he arranged the empty coffee cups in a neat row, and beamed happily on the result.

The minutes passed. The Opalsens did not return.

"Curious," I remarked, at length. "I wonder when they will come back."

Poirot watched the ascending spirals of smoke, and then said thoughtfully:

“They will not come back.”

“Why?”

“Because, my friend, something has happened.”

“What sort of thing? How do you know?” I asked curiously.

Poirot smiled.

“A few minutes ago the manager came hurriedly out of his office and ran upstairs. He was much agitated. The liftboy is deep in talk with one of the pages. The lift-bell has rung three times, but he heeds it not. Thirdly, even the waiters are distrait; and to make a waiter distrait—” Poirot shook his head with an air of finality. “The affair must indeed be of the first magnitude. Ah, it is as I thought! Here come the police.”

Two men had just entered the hotel—one in uniform, the other in plain clothes. They spoke to a page, and were immediately ushered upstairs. A few minutes later, the same boy descended and came up to where we were sitting.

“Mr. Opalsen’s compliments, and would you step upstairs?”

Poirot sprang nimbly to his feet. One would have said that he awaited the summons. I followed with no less alacrity.

The Opalsens’ apartments were situated on the first floor. After knocking on the door, the page boy retired, and we answered the summons. “Come in!” A strange scene met our eyes. The room was Mrs. Opalsen’s bedroom, and in the centre of it, lying back in an armchair, was the lady herself, weeping violently. She presented an extraordinary spectacle, with the tears making great furrows in the powder with which her complexion was liberally coated. Mr. Opalsen was striding up and down angrily. The two police officials stood in the middle of the room, one with a notebook in hand. An hotel chambermaid, looking frightened to death, stood by the fireplace; and on the other side of the room a Frenchwoman, obviously Mrs.

Opalsen’s maid, was weeping and wringing her hands, with an intensity of grief that rivalled that of her mistress.

Into this pandemonium stepped Poirot, neat and smiling. Immediately, with an energy surprising in one of her bulk Mrs. Opalsen sprang from her chair towards him.

“There now; Ed may say what he likes, but I believe in luck, I do. It was fated I should meet you the way I did this evening, and I’ve a feeling that if you can’t get my pearls back for me nobody can.”

“Calm yourself, I pray of you, madame.” Poirot patted her hand soothingly. “Reassure yourself. All will be well. Hercule Poirot will aid you!”

Mr. Opalsen turned to the police inspector.

“There will be no objection to my—er—calling in this gentleman, I suppose?”

“None at all, sir,” replied the man civilly, but with complete indifference. “Perhaps now your lady’s feeling better she’ll just let us have the facts?”

Mrs. Opalsen looked helplessly at Poirot. He led her back to her chair.

“Seat yourself, madame, and recount to us the whole history without agitating yourself.”

Thus abjured, Mrs. Opalsen dried her eyes gingerly, and began.

“I came upstairs after dinner to fetch my pearls for Mr. Poirot here to see. The chambermaid and Célestine were both in the room as usual—”

“Excuse me, madame, but what do you mean by ‘as usual?’ ”

Mr. Opalsen explained.

“I make it a rule that no one is to come into this room unless Célestine, the maid, is there also. The chambermaid does the room in the morning while

Célestine is present, and comes in after dinner to turn down the beds under the same conditions; otherwise she never enters the room.”

“Well, as I was saying,” continued Mrs. Opalsen, “I came up. I went to the drawer here”—she indicated the bottom right-hand drawer of the kneehole dressing table—“took out my jewel case and unlocked it. It seemed quite as usual—but the pearls were not there!”

The inspector had been busy with his notebook. When had you last seen them?” he asked.

“They were there when I went down to dinner.”

“You are sure?”

“Quite sure. I was uncertain whether to wear them or not, but in the end I decided on the emeralds, and put them back in the jewel case.”

“Who locked up the jewel case?”

“I did. I wear the key on a chain round my neck.” She held it up as she spoke.

The inspector examined it, and shrugged his shoulders.

“The thief must have had a duplicate key. No difficult matter. The lock is quite a simple one. What did you do after you’d locked the jewel case?”

“I put it back in the bottom drawer where I always keep it.”

“You didn’t lock the drawer?”

“No, I never do. My maid remains in the room till I come up, so there’s no need.”

The inspector’s face grew greyer.

“Am I to understand that the jewels were there when you went down to dinner, and that since then the maid has not left the room?”

Suddenly, as though the horror of her own situation for the first time burst upon her, Célestine uttered a piercing shriek, and, flinging herself upon Poirot, poured out a torrent of incoherent French.

The suggestion was infamous! That she should be suspected of robbing Madame! The police were well known to be of a stupidity incredible! But Monsieur, who was a Frenchman—"

"A Belgian," interjected Poirot, but Célestine paid no attention to the correction.

Monsieur would not stand by and see her falsely accused, while that infamous chambermaid was allowed to go scot-free. She had never liked her—a bold, red-faced thing—a born thief. She had said from the first that she was not honest. And had kept a sharp watch over her too, when she was doing Madame's room! Let those idiots of policemen search her, and if they did not find Madame's pearls on her it would be very surprising!

Although this harangue was uttered in rapid and virulent French, Célestine had interlarded it with a wealth of gesture, and the chambermaid realized at least a part of her meaning. She reddened angrily.

"If that foreign woman's saying I took the pearls, it's a lie!" she declared heatedly. "I never so much as saw them."

"Search her!" screamed the other. "You will find it is as I say."

"You're a lair—do you hear?" said the chambermaid, advancing upon her. "Stole 'em yourself, and want to put it on me. Why, I was only in the room about three minutes before the lady came up, and then you were sitting here the whole time, as you always do, like a cat watching a mouse."

The inspector looked across inquiringly at Célestine. "Is that true? Didn't you leave the room at all?"

"I did not actually leave her alone," admitted Célestine reluctantly, "but I went into my own room through the door here twice—once to fetch a reel of cotton, and once for my scissors. She must have done it then.”

“You wasn’t gone a minute,” retorted the chambermaid angrily. “Just popped out and in again. I’d be glad if the police would search me. I’ve nothing to be afraid of.”

At this moment there was a tap at the door. The inspector went to it. His face brightened when he saw who it was.

“Ah!” he said. “That’s rather fortunate. I sent for one of our female searchers, and she’s just arrived. Perhaps if you wouldn’t mind going into the room next door.”

He looked at the chambermaid, who stepped across the threshold with a toss of her head, the searcher following her closely.

The French girl had sunk sobbing into a chair. Poirot was looking round the room, the main features of which I have made clear by a sketch.

“Where does that door lead?” he inquired, nodding his head towards the one by the window.

“Into the next apartment, I believe,” said the inspector. “It’s bolted, anyway, on this side.”

Poirot walked across to it, tried it, then drew back the bolt and tried it again.

“And on the other side as well,” he remarked. “Well, that seems to rule out that.”

He walked over to the windows, examining each of them in turn.

“And again—nothing. Not even a balcony outside.”

“Even if there were,” said the inspector impatiently, “I don’t see how that would help us, if the maid never left the room.”

“Évidemment,” said Poirot, not disconcerted. “As Mademoiselle is positive she did not leave the room—”

He was interrupted by the reappearance of the chambermaid and the police searcher.

“Nothing,” said the latter laconically.

“I should hope not, indeed,” said the chambermaid virtuously. “And that French hussy ought to be ashamed of herself taking away an honest girl’s character.”

“There, there, my girl; that’s all right,” said the inspector, opening the door. “Nobody suspects you. You go along and get on with your work.”

The chambermaid went unwillingly.

“Going to search her?” she demanded, pointing at Célestine.

“Yes, yes!” He shut the door on her and turned the key.

Célestine accompanied the searcher into the small room in her turn. A few minutes later she also returned. Nothing had been found on her.

The inspector’s face grew graver.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to come along with me all the same, miss.” He turned to Mrs. Opalsen. “I’m sorry, madam, but all the evidence points that way. If she’s not got them on her, they’re hidden somewhere about the room.”

Célestine uttered a piercing shriek, and clung to Poirot’s arm. The latter bent and whispered something in the girl’s ear. She looked up at him doubtfully.

“Si, si, mon enfant—I assure you it is better not to resist.” Then he turned to the inspector. “You permit, monsieur? A little experiment—purely for my own satisfaction.”

“Depends on what it is,” replied the police officer noncommittally.

Poirot addressed Célestine once more.

“You have told us that you went into your room to fetch a reel of cotton. Whereabouts was it?”

“On top of the chest of drawers, monsieur.”

“And the scissors?”

“They also.”

“Would it be troubling you too much, mademoiselle, to ask you to repeat those two actions? You were sitting here with your work, you say?”

Célestine sat down, and then, at a sign from Poirot, rose, passed into the adjoining room, took up an object from the chest of drawers, and returned.

Poirot divided his attention between her movements and a large turnip of a watch which he held in the palm of his hand.

“Again, if you please, mademoiselle.”

At the conclusion of the second performance, he made a note in his pocketbook, and returned the watch to his pocket.

“Thank you, mademoiselle. And you, monsieur”—he bowed to the inspector—“for your courtesy.”

The inspector seemed somewhat entertained by this excessive politeness. Célestine departed in a flood of tears, accompanied by the woman and the plainclothes official.

Then, with a brief apology to Mrs. Opalsen, the inspector set to work to ransack the room. He pulled out drawers, opened cupboards, completely unmade the bed, and tapped the floor. Mr. Opalsen looked on sceptically.

“You really think you will find them?”

“Yes, sir. It stands to reason. She hadn’t time to take them out of the room. The lady’s discovering the robbery so soon upset her plans. No, they’re here right enough. One of the two must have hidden them—and it’s very unlikely for the chambermaid to have done so.”

“More than unlikely—impossible!” said Poirot quietly.

“Eh?” The inspector stared.

Poirot smiled modestly.

“I will demonstrate. Hastings, my good friend, take my watch in your hand—with care. It is a family heirloom! Just now I timed Mademoiselle’s movements—her first absence from the room was of twelve seconds, her second of fifteen. Now observe my actions. Madame will have the kindness to give me the key of the jewel case. I thank you. My friend Hastings will have the kindness to say ‘Go!’ ”

“Go!” I said.

With almost incredible swiftness, Poirot wrenched open the drawer of the dressing table, extracted the jewel case, fitted the key in the lock, opened the case, selected a piece of jewellery, shut and locked the case, and returned it to the drawer, which he pushed to again. His movements were like lightning.

“Well, mon ami?” he demanded of me breathlessly.

“Forty-six seconds,” I replied.

“You see?” He looked round. “There would have not been time for the chambermaid even to take the necklace out, far less hide it.”

“Then that settles it on the maid,” said the inspector with satisfaction, and returned to his search. He passed into the maid’s bedroom next door.

Poirot was frowning thoughtfully. Suddenly he shot a question at Mr. Opalsen.

“This necklace—it was, without doubt, insured?”

Mr. Opalsen looked a trifle surprised at the question.

“Yes,” he said hesitatingly, “that is so.”

“But what does that matter?” broke in Mrs. Opalsen tearfully. “It’s my necklace I want. It was unique. No money could be the same.”

“I comprehend, madame,” said Poirot soothingly. “I comprehend perfectly. To la femme sentiment is everything—is it not so? But, monsieur, who has not the so fine susceptibility, will doubtless find some slight consolation in the fact.”

“Of course, of course,” said Mr. Opalsen rather uncertainly. “Still—”

He was interrupted by a shout of triumph from the inspector. He came in dangling something from his fingers.

With a cry, Mrs. Opalsen heaved herself up from her chair. She was a changed woman.

“Oh, oh, my necklace!”

She clasped it to her breast with both hands. We crowded round.

“Where was it?” demanded Opalsen.

“Maid’s bed. In among the springs of the wire mattress. She must have stolen it and hidden it there before the chambermaid arrived on the scene.”

“You permit, madame?” said Poirot gently. He took the necklace from her and examined it closely; then handed it back with a bow.

“I’m afraid, madame, you’ll have to hand it over to us for the time being,” said the inspector. “We shall want it for the charge. But it shall be returned to you as soon as possible.”

Mr. Opalsen frowned.

"Is that necessary?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. Just a formality."

"Oh, let him take it, Ed!" cired his wife. "I'd feel safer if he did. I shouldn't sleep a wink thinking someone else might try to get hold of it. That wretched girl! And I would never have believed it of her."

"There, there, my dear, don't take on so."

I felt a gentle pressure on my arm. It was Poirot.

"Shall we slip away, my friend? I think our services are no longer needed."

Once outside, however, he hesitated, and then, much to my surprise, he remarked:

"I should rather like to see the room next door."

The door was not locked, and we entered. The room, which was a large double one, was unoccupied. Dust lay about rather noticeably, and my sensitive friend gave a characteristic grimace as he ran his finger round a rectangular mark on a table near the window.

"The service leaves to be desired," he observed dryly.

He was staring thoughtfully out of the window, and seemed to have fallen into a brown study.

"Well?" I demanded impatiently. "What did we come in here for?"

He started.

"Je vous demande pardon, mon ami. I wished to see if the door was really bolted on this side also."

"Well," I said, glancing at the door which communicated with the room we had just left, "it is bolted."

Poirot nodded. He still seemed to be thinking.

“And anyway,” I continued, “what does it matter? The case is over. I wish you’d had more chance of distinguishing yourself. But it was the kind of case that even a stiff-backed idiot like that inspector couldn’t go wrong over.”

Poirot shook his head.

“The case is not over, my friend. It will not be over until we find out who stole the pearls.”

“But the maid did!”

“Why do you say that?”

“Why,” I stammered, “they were found—actually in her mattress.”

“Ta, ta, ta!” said Poirot impatiently. “Those were not the pearls.”

“What?”

“Imitation, mon ami.”

The statement took my breath away. Poirot was smiling placidly.

“The good inspector obviously knows nothing of jewels. But presently there will be a fine hullabaloo!”

“Come!” I cried, dragging at his arm.

“Where?”

“We must tell the Opalsens at once.”

“I think not.”

“But that poor woman—”

“Eh bien; that poor woman, as you call her, will have a much better night believing the jewels to be safe.”

“But the thief may escape with them!”

“As usual, my friend, you speak without reflection. How do you know that the pearls Mrs. Opalsen locked up so carefully tonight were not the false ones, and that the real robbery did not take place at a much earlier date?”

“Oh!” I said, bewildered.

“Exactly,” said Poirot, beaming. “We start again.”

He led the way out of the room, paused a moment as though considering, and then walked down to the end of the corridor, stopping outside the small den where the chambermaids and valets of the respective floors congregated. Our particular chambermaid appeared to be holding a small court there, and to be retailing her late experiences to an appreciative audience. She stopped in the middle of a sentence. Poirot bowed with his usual politeness.

“Excuse that I derange you, but I shall be obliged if you will unlock for me the door of Mr. Opalsen’s room.”

The woman rose willingly, and we accompanied her down the passage again. Mr. Opalsen’s room was on the other side of the corridor, its door facing that of his wife’s room. The chambermaid unlocked it with her passkey, and we entered.

As she was about to depart Poirot detained her.

“One moment; have you ever seen among the effects of Mr.Opalsen a card like this?”

He held out a plain white card, rather highly glazed and uncommon in appearance. The maid took it and scrutinized it carefully.

“No, sir, I can’t say I have. But, anyway, the valet has most to do with the gentlemen’s rooms.”

"I see. Thank you."

Poirot took back the card. The woman departed. Poirot appeared to reflect a little. Then he gave a short, sharp nod of the head.

"Ring the bell, I pray you, Hastings. Three times for the valet."

I obeyed, devoured with curiosity. Meanwhile Poirot had emptied the wastepaper basket on the floor, and was swiftly going through its contents.

In a few moments the valet answered the bell. To him Poirot put the same question, and handed him the card to examine. But the response was the same. The valet had never seen a card of that particular quality among Mr. Opalsen's belongings. Poirot thanked him, and he withdrew, somewhat unwillingly, with an inquisitive glance at the overturned wastepaper basket and the litter on the floor. He could hardly have helped overhearing Poirot's thoughtful remark as he bundled the torn papers back again:

"And the necklace was heavily insured. . . ."

"Poirot," I cried, "I see—"

"You see nothing, my friend," he replied quickly. "As usual, nothing at all! It is incredible—but there it is. Let us return to our own apartments."

We did so in silence. Once there, to my intense surprise, Poirot effected a rapid change of clothing.

"I go to London tonight," he explained. "It is imperative."

"What?"

"Absolutely. The real work, that of the brain (ah, those brave little grey cells), it is done. I go to seek the confirmation. I shall find it! Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot!"

"You'll come a cropper one of these days," I observed, rather disgusted by his vanity.

“Do not be enraged, I beg of you, mon ami. I count on you to do me a service—of your friendship.”

“Of course,” I said eagerly, rather ashamed of my moroseness. “What is it?”

“The sleeve of my coat that I have taken off—will you brush it? See you, a little white powder has clung to it. You without doubt observed me run my finger round the drawer of the dressing table?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You should observe my actions, my friend. Thus I obtained the powder on my finger, and, being a little overexcited, I rubbed it on my sleeve; an action without method which I deplore—false to all my principles.”

“But what was the powder?” I asked, not particularly interested in Poirot’s principles.

“Not the poison of the Borgias,” replied Poirot with a twinkle. “I see your imagination mounting. I should say it was French chalk.”

“French chalk?”

“Yes, cabinetmakers use it to make drawers run smoothly.”

I laughed.

“You old sinner! I thought you were working up to something exciting.”

“Au revoir, my friend. I save myself. I fly!”

The door shut behind him. With a smile, half of derision, half of affection, I picked up the coat and stretched out my hand for the clothes brush.

II

The next morning, hearing nothing from Poirot, I went out for a stroll, met some old friends, and lunched with them at their hotel. In the afternoon we went for a spin. A punctured tyre delayed us, and it was past eight when I got back to the Grand Metropolitan.

The first sight that met my eyes was Poirot, looking even more diminutive than usual, sandwiched between the Opalsens, beaming in a state of placid satisfaction.

“Mon ami Hastings!” he cried, and sprang to meet me. “Embrace me, my friend; all has marched to a marvel!”

Luckily, the embrace was merely figurative—not a thing one is always sure of with Poirot.

“Do you mean—” I began.

“Just wonderful, I call it!” said Mrs. Opalsen, smiling all over her fat face. “Didn’t I tell you, Ed, that if he couldn’t get back my pearls nobody would?”

“You did, my dear, you did. And you were right.”

I looked helplessly at Poirot, and he answered the glance.

“My friend Hastings is, as you say in England, all at the seaside. Seat yourself, and I will recount to you all the affair that has so happily ended.”

“Ended?”

“But yes. They are arrested.”

“Who are arrested?”

“The chambermaid and the valet, parbleu! You did not suspect? Not with my parting hint about the French chalk?”

“You said cabinetmakers used it.”

“Certainly they do—to make drawers slide easily. Somebody wanted the drawer to slide in and out without any noise. Who could that be? Obviously, only the chambermaid. The plan was so ingenious that it did not at once leap to the eye—not even to the eye of Hercule Poirot.

"Listen, this was how it was done. The valet was in the empty room next door, waiting. The French maid leaves the room. Quick as a flash the chambermaid whips open the drawer, takes out the jewel case and, slipping back the bolt, passes it through the door. The valet opens it at his leisure with the duplicate key with which he has provided himself, extracts the necklace, and waits his time. Célestine leaves the room again, and—pst!—in a flash the case is passed back again and replaced in the drawer.

"Madame arrives, the theft is discovered. The chambermaid demands to be searched, with a good deal of righteous indignation, and leaves the room without a stain on her character. The imitation necklace with which they have provided themselves has been concealed in the French girl's bed that morning by the chambermaid—a master stroke, ça! "

"But what did you go to London for?"

"You remember the card?"

"Certainly. It puzzled me—and puzzles me still. I thought—"

I hesitated delicately, glancing at Mr. Opalsen.

Poirot laughed heartily.

"Une blague! For the benefit of the valet. The card was one with a specially prepared surface—for fingerprints. I went straight to Scotland Yard, asked for our old friend Inspector Japp, and laid the facts before him. As I had suspected, the fingerprints proved to be those of two well-known jewel thieves who have been 'wanted' for some time. Japp came down with me, the thieves were arrested, and the necklace was discovered in the valet's possession. A clever pair, but they failed in method. Have I not told you, Hastings, at least thirty-six times, that without method—"

"At least thirty-six thousand times!" I interrupted. "But where did their 'method' break down?"

“Mon ami, it is a good plan to take a place as chambermaid or valet—but you must not shirk your work. They left an empty room undusted; and therefore, when the man put down the jewel case on the little table near the communicating door, it left a square mark—”

“I remember,” I cried.

“Before, I was undecided. Then—I knew! ”

There was a moment’s silence.

“And I’ve got my pearls,” said Mrs. Opalsen as a sort of Greek chorus.

“Well,” I said, “I’d better have some dinner.”

Poirot accompanied me.

“This ought to mean kudos for you,” I observed.

“Pas du tout,” replied Poirot tranquilly. “Japp and the local inspector will divide the credit between them. But”—he tapped his pocket—“I have a cheque here, from Mr. Opalsen, and, how you say, my friend? This weekend has not gone according to plan. Shall we return here next weekend—at my expense this time?”

Eight

THE KIDNAPPED PRIME MINISTER

Now that war and the problems of war are things of the past, I think I may safely venture to reveal to the world the part which my friend Poirot played in a moment of national crisis. The secret has been well-guarded. Not a whisper of it reached the Press. But, now that the need for secrecy has gone by, I feel it is only just that England should know the debt it owes to my quaint little friend, whose marvellous brain so ably averted a great catastrophe.

One evening after dinner—I will not particularize the date; it suffices to say that it was at the time when "Peace by negotiation" was the parrot cry of England's enemies—my friend and I were sitting in his rooms. After being invalided out of the Army I had been given a recruiting job, and it had become my custom to drop in on Poirot in the evenings after dinner and talk with him of any cases of interest that he might have had on hand.

I was attempting to discuss with him the sensational news of the day—no less than an attempted assassination of Mr. David MacAdam, England's Prime Minister. The account in the papers had evidently been carefully censored. No details were given, save that the Prime Minister had had a marvellous escape, the bullet just grazing his cheek.

I considered that our police must have been shamefully careless for such an outrage to be possible. I could well understand that the German agents in England would be willing to risk much for such an achievement. "Fighting Mac," as his own party had nicknamed him, had strenuously and unequivocally combated the Pacifist influence which was becoming so prevalent.

He was more than England's Prime Minister—he was England; and to have removed him from his sphere of influence would have been a crushing and paralysing blow to Britain.

Poirot was busy mopping a grey suit with a minute sponge. Never was there a dandy such as Hercule Poirot. Neatness and order were his passion. Now, with the odour of benzene filling the air, he was quite unable to give me his full attention.

"In a little minute I am with you, my friend. I have all but finished. The spot of grease—he is not good—I remove him—so!" He waved his sponge.

I smiled as I lit another cigarette.

"Anything interesting on?" I inquired, after a minute or two.

"I assist a—how do you call it?—'charlady' to find her husband. A difficult affair, needing the tact. For I have a little idea that when he is found he will not be pleased. What would you? For my part, I sympathize with him. He was a man of discrimination to lose himself."

I laughed.

"At last! The spot of grease, he is gone! I am at your disposal."

"I was asking you what you thought of this attempt to assassinate MacAdam?"

"Enfantillage!" replied Poirot promptly. "One can hardly take it seriously. To fire with the rifle—never does it succeed. It is a device of the past."

"It was very near succeeding this time," I reminded him.

Poirot shook his head impatiently. He was about to reply when the landlady thrust her head round the door and informed him that there were two gentlemen below who wanted to see him.

"They won't give their names, sir, but they says as it's very important."

"Let them mount," said Poirot, carefully folding his grey trousers.

In a few minutes the two visitors were ushered in, and my heart gave a leap as in the foremost I recognized no less a personage than Lord Estair, Leader

of the House of Commons; whilst his companion, Mr. Bernard Dodge, was also a member of the War Cabinet, and, as I knew, a close personal friend of the Prime
Minister.

“Monsieur Poirot?” said Lord Estair interrogatively. My friend bowed. The great man looked at me and hesitated. “My business is private.”

“You may speak freely before Captain Hastings,” said my friend, nodding to me to remain. “He has not all the gifts, no! But I answer for his discretion.”

Lord Estair still hesitated, but Mr. Dodge broke in abruptly:

“Oh, come on—don’t let’s beat about the bush! As far as I can see, the whole of England will know the hole we’re in soon enough. Time’s everything.”

“Pray be seated, messieurs,” said Poirot politely. “Will you take the big chair, milord?”

Lord Estair started slightly. “You know me?”

Poirot smiled. “Certainly. I read the little papers with the pictures. How should I not know you?”

“Monsieur Poirot, I have come to consult you upon a matter of the most vital urgency. I must ask for absolute secrecy.”

“You have the word of Hercule Poirot—I can say no more!” said my friend grandiloquently.

“It concerns the Prime Minister. We are in grave trouble.”

“We’re up a tree!” interposed Mr. Dodge.

“The injury is serious then?” I asked.

“What injury?”

“The bullet wound.”

“Oh, that!” cried Mr. Dodge contemptuously. “That’s old history.”

“As my colleague says,” continued Lord Estair, “that affair is over and done with. Luckily, it failed. I wish I could say as much for the second attempt.”

“There has been a second attempt, then?”

“Yes, though not of the same nature, Monsieur Poirot, the Prime Minister has disappeared.”

“What?”

“He has been kidnapped!”

“Impossible!” I cried, stupefied.

Poirot threw a withering glance at me, which I knew enjoined me to keep my mouth shut.

“Unfortunately, impossible as it seems, it is only too true,” continued his lordship.

Poirot looked at Mr. Dodge. “You said just now, monsieur, that time was everything. What did you mean by that?”

The two men exchanged glances, and then Lord Estair said:

“You have heard, Monsieur Poirot, of the approaching Allied Conference?”

“My friend nodded.

“For obvious reasons, no details have been given of when and where it is to take place. But, although it has been kept out of the newspapers, the date is, of course, widely known in diplomatic circles. The Conference is to be held tomorrow—Thursday—evening at Versailles. Now you perceive the terrible gravity of the situation. I will not conceal from you that the Prime Minister’s presence at the Conference is a vital necessity. The Pacifist propaganda, started and maintained by the German agents in our midst, has been very active. It is the universal opinion that the turning point of the Conference will be the strong personality of the Prime Minister. His absence may have the most serious results—possibly a premature and disastrous peace. And we have no one who can be sent in his place. He alone can represent England."

Poirot's face had grown very grave. "Then you regard the kidnapping of the Prime Minister as a direct attempt to prevent his being present at the Conference?"

"Most certainly I do. He was actually on his way to France at the time."

"And the Conference is to be held?"

"At nine o'clock tomorrow night."

Poirot drew an enormous watch from his pocket.

"It is now a quarter to nine."

"Twenty-four hours," said Mr. Dodge thoughtfully.

"And a quarter," amended Poirot. "Do not forget the quarter, monsieur—it may come in useful. Now for the details—the abduction, did it take place in England or in France?"

"In France. Mr. MacAdam crossed to France this morning. He was to stay tonight as the guest of the Commander-in-Chief, proceeding tomorrow to Paris. He was conveyed across the Channel by destroyer. At Boulogne he was met by a car from General Headquarters and one of the Commander-in-Chief's ADCs."

"Eh bien?"

"Well, they started from Boulogne—but they never arrived."

"What?"

"Monsieur Poirot, it was a bogus car and a bogus ADC. The real car was found in a side road, with the chauffeur and the ADC neatly gagged and bound."

"And the bogus car?"

"Is still at large."

Poirot made a gesture of impatience. "Incredible! Surely it cannot escape attention for long?"

"So we thought. It seemed merely a question of searching thoroughly. That part of France is under Military Law. We were convinced that the car could not go long unnoticed. The French police and our own Scotland Yard men and the military are straining every nerve. It is, as you say, incredible—but nothing has been discovered!"

At that moment a tap came at the door, and a young officer entered with a heavily sealed envelope which he handed to Lord Estair.

"Just through from France, sir. I brought it on here, as you directed."

The Minister tore it open eagerly, and uttered an exclamation. The officer withdrew.

"Here is news at last! This telegram has just been decoded. They have found the second car, also the secretary, Daniels, chloroformed, gagged, and bound, in an abandoned farm near C—. He remembers nothing, except something being pressed against his mouth and nose from behind, and struggling to free himself. The police are satisfied as to the genuineness of his statement."

"And they have found nothing else?"

"No."

"Not the Prime Minister's dead body? Then, there is hope. But it is strange. Why, after trying to shoot him this morning, are they now taking so much trouble to keep him alive?"

Dodge shook his head. “One thing’s quite certain. They’re determined at all costs to prevent his attending the Conference.”

“If it is humanly possible, the Prime Minister shall be there. God grant it is not too late. Now, messieurs, recount to me everything—from the beginning. I must know about this shooting affair as well.”

“Last night, the Prime Minister, accompanied by one of his secretaries, Captain Daniels—”

“The same who accompanied him to France?”

“Yes. As I was saying, they motored down to Windsor, where the Prime Minister was granted an Audience. Early this morning he returned to town, and it was on the way that the attempted assassination took place.”

“One moment, if you please. Who is this Captain Daniels? You have his dossier?”

Lord Estair smiled. “I thought you would ask me that. We do not know very much of him. He is of no particular family. He has served in the English Army, and is an extremely able secretary, being an exceptionally fine linguist. I believe he speaks seven languages. It is for that reason that the Prime Minister chose him to accompany him to France.”

“Has he any relatives in England?”

“Two aunts. A Mrs. Everard, who lives at Hampstead, and a Miss Daniels, who lives near Ascot.”

“Ascot? That is near to Windsor, is it not?”

“That point has not been overlooked. But it has led to nothing.”

“You regard the Capitaine Daniels, then, as above suspicion?”

A shade of bitterness crept into Lord Estair’s voice, as he replied:

“No, Monsieur Poirot. In these days, I should hesitate before I pronounced anyone above suspicion.”

“Très bien. Now I understand, milord, that the Prime Minister would, as a matter of course, be under vigilant police protection, which ought to render any assault upon him an impossibility?”

Lord Estair bowed his head. “That is so. The Prime Minister’s car was closely followed by another car containing detectives in plain clothes. Mr. MacAdam knew nothing of these precautions. He is personally a most fearless man, and would be inclined to sweep them away arbitrarily. But, naturally, the police make their own arrangements. In fact, the Premier’s chauffeur, O’Murphy, is a CID man.”

“O’Murphy? That is a name of Ireland, is it not so?”

“Yes, he is an Irishman.”

“From what part of Ireland?”

“County Clare, I believe.”

“Tiens! But proceed, milord.”

“The Premier started for London. The car was a closed one. He and Captain Daniels sat inside. The second car followed as usual. But, unluckily, for some unknown reason, the Prime Minister’s car deviated from the main road—”

“At a point where the road curves?” interrupted Poirot.

“Yes—but how did you know?”

“Oh, c’est évident! Continue!”

“For some unknown reason,” continued Lord Estair, “the Premier’s car left the main road. The police car, unaware of the deviation, continued to keep to the high road. At a short distance down the unfrequented lane, the Prime

Minister’s car was suddenly held up by a band of masked men. The chauffeur—”

“That brave O’Murphy!” murmured Poirot thoughtfully.

“The chauffeur, momentarily taken aback, jammed on the brakes. The Prime Minister put his head out of the window. Instantly a shot rang out—then another. The first one grazed his cheek, the second, fortunately, went wide. The chauffeur, now realizing the danger, instantly forged straight ahead, scattering the band of men.”

“A near escape,” I ejaculated, with a shiver.

“Mr. MacAdam refused to make any fuss over the slight wound he had received. He declared it was only a scratch. He stopped at a local cottage hospital, where it was dressed and bound up—he did not, of course, reveal his identity. He then drove, as per schedule, straight to Charing Cross, where a special train for Dover was awaiting him, and, after a brief account of what had happened had been given to the anxious police by Captain Daniels, he duly departed for France. At Dover, he went on board the waiting destroyer. At Boulogne, as you know, the bogus car was waiting for him, carrying the Union Jack, and correct in every detail.”

“That is all you have to tell me?”

“Yes.”

“There is no other circumstance that you have omitted, milord?”

“Well, there is one rather peculiar thing.”

“Yes?”

“The Prime Minister’s car did not return home after leaving the Prime Minister at Charing Cross. The police were anxious to interview O’Murphy, so a search was instituted at once. The car was discovered standing outside a certain unsavoury little restaurant in Soho, which is well known as a meeting place of German agents.”

“And the chauffeur?”

“The chauffeur was nowhere to be found. He, too, had disappeared.”

“So,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “there are two disappearances: the Prime Minister in France, and O’Murphy in London.”

He looked keenly at Lord Estair, who made a gesture of despair.

“I can only tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that, if anyone had suggested to me yesterday that O’Murphy was a traitor, I should have laughed in his face.”

“And today?”

“Today I do not know what to think.”

Poirot nodded gravely. He looked at his turnip of a watch again.

“I understand that I have carte blanche, messieurs—in every way, I mean? I must be able to go where I choose, and how I choose.”

“Perfectly. There is a special train leaving for Dover in an hour’s time, with a further contingent from Scotland Yard. You shall be accompanied by a Military officer and a CID man, who will hold themselves at your disposal in every way. Is that satisfactory?”

“Quite. One more question before you leave, messieurs. What made you come to me? I am unknown, obscure in this great London of yours.”

“We sought you out on the express recommendation and wish of a very great man of your own country.”

“Comment? My old friend the Préfet—?”

Lord Estair shook his head.

“One higher than the Préfet. One whose word was once law in Belgium—and shall be again! That England has sworn!”

Poirot's hand flew swiftly to a dramatic salute. "Amen to that! Ah, but my Master does not forget . . . Messieurs, I, Hercule Poirot, will serve you faithfully. Heaven only send that it will be in time. But this is dark—dark . . . I cannot see."

"Well, Poirot," I cried impatiently, as the door closed behind the Ministers, "what do you think?"

My friend was busy packing a minute suitcase, with quick, deft movements. He shook his head thoughtfully.

"I don't know what to think. My brains desert me."

"Why, as you said, kidnap him, when a knock on the head would do as well?" I mused.

"Pardon me, mon ami, but I did not quite say that. It is undoubtedly far more their affair to kidnap him."

"But why?"

"Because uncertainty creates panic. That is one reason. Were the Prime Minister dead, it would be a terrible calamity, but the situation would have to be faced. But now you have paralysis. Will the Prime Minister reappear, or will he not? Is he dead or alive? Nobody knows, and until they know nothing definite can be done. And, as I tell you, uncertainty breeds panic, which is what les Boches are playing for. Then, again, if the kidnappers are holding him secretly somewhere, they have the advantage of being able to make terms with both sides. The German Government is not a liberal paymaster, as a rule, but no doubt they can be made to disgorge substantial remittances in such a case as this. Thirdly, they run no risk of the hangman's rope. Oh, decidedly, kidnapping is their affair."

"Then, if that is so, why should they first try to shoot him?"

Poirot made a gesture of anger. "Ah, that is just what I do not understand! It is inexplicable—stupid! They have all their arrangements made (and very good arrangements too!) for the abduction, and yet they imperil the whole affair by a melodramatic attack, worthy of a cinema, and quite as unreal. It is almost impossible to believe in it, with its band of masked men, not twenty miles from London!"

"Perhaps they were two quite separate attempts which happened irrespective of each other," I suggested.

"Ah, no, that would be too much of a coincidence! Then, further—who is the traitor? There must have been a traitor—in the first affair, anyway. But who was it—Daniels or O'Murphy? It must have been one of the two, or why did the car leave the main road? We cannot suppose that the Prime Minister connived at his own assassination! Did O'Murphy take that turning of his own accord, or was it Daniels who told him to do so?"

"Surely it must have been O'Murphy's doing."

"Yes, because if it was Daniels' the Prime Minister would have heard the order, and would have asked the reason. But there are altogether too many 'whys' in this affair, and they contradict each other. If O'Murphy is an honest man, why did he leave the main road? But if he was a dishonest man, why did he start the car again when only two shots had been fired—thereby, in all probability, saving the Prime Minister's life? And, again, if he was honest, why did he, immediately on leaving Charing Cross, drive to a well-known rendezvous of German spies?"

"It looks bad," I said.

"Let us look at the case with method. What have we for and against these two men? Take O'Murphy first. Against: that his conduct in leaving the main road was suspicious; that he is an Irishman from County Clare; that he has disappeared in a highly suggestive manner. For: that his promptness in restarting the car saved the Premier's life; that he is a Scotland Yard man, and, obviously, from the post allotted to him, a trusted detective. Now for Daniels. There is not much against him, except the fact that nothing is known of his antecedents, and that he speaks too many languages for a good Englishman! (Pardon me, mon ami, but, as linguists, you are deplorable!) Now for him, we have the fact that he was found gagged, bound, and chloroformed—which does not look as though he had anything to do with the matter."

"He might have gagged and bound himself, to divert suspicion."

Poirot shook his head. "The French police would make no mistake of that kind. Besides, once he had attained his object, and the Prime Minister was safely abducted, there would not be much point in his remaining behind. His accomplices could have gagged and chloroformed him, of course, but I fail to see what object they hoped to accomplish by it. He can be of little use to them now, for, until the circumstances concerning the Prime Minister have been cleared up, he is bound to be closely watched."

"Perhaps he hoped to start the police on a false scent?"

"Then why did he not do so? He merely says that something was pressed over his nose and mouth, and that he remembers nothing more. There is no false scent there. It sounds remarkably like the truth."

"Well," I said, glancing at the clock, "I suppose we'd better start for the station. You may find more clues in France."

"Possibly, mon ami, but I doubt it. It is still incredible to me that the Prime Minister has not been discovered in that limited area, where the difficulty of concealing him must be tremendous. If the military and the police of two countries have not found him, how shall I?"

At Charing Cross we were met by Mr. Dodge.

"This is Detective Barnes, of Scotland Yard, and Major Norman. They will hold themselves entirely at your disposal. Good luck to you. It's a bad business, but I've not given up hope. Must be off now." And the Minister strode rapidly away.

We chatted in a desultory fashion with Major Norman. In the centre of the little group of men on the platform I recognized a little ferret-faced fellow talking to a tall, fair man. He was an old acquaintance of Poirot's—

Detective-Inspector Japp, supposed to be one of the smartest of Scotland Yard's officers. He came over and greeted my friend cheerfully.

"I heard you were on this job too. Smart bit of work. So far they've got away with the goods all right. But I can't believe they can keep him hidden long. Our people are going through France with a toothcomb. So are the French. I can't help feeling it's only a matter of hours now."

"That is, if he's still alive," remarked the tall detective gloomily.

Japp's face fell. "Yes . . . but somehow I've got the feeling he's still alive all right."

Poirot nodded. "Yes, yes; he's alive. But can he be found in time? I, like you, did not believe he could be hidden so long."

The whistle blew, and we all trooped up into the Pullman car. Then, with a slow, unwilling jerk, the train drew out of the station.

It was a curious journey. The Scotland Yard men crowded together. Maps of Northern France were spread out, and eager forefingers traced the lines of roads and villages. Each man had his own pet theory. Poirot showed none of his usual loquacity, but sat staring in front of him, with an expression on his face that reminded me of a puzzled child. I talked to Norman, whom I found quite an amusing fellow. On arriving at Dover Poirot's behaviour moved me to intense amusement. The little man, as he went on board the boat, clutched desperately at my arm. The wind was blowing lustily.

"Mon Dieu!" he murmured. "This is terrible!"

"Have courage, Poirot," I cried. "You will succeed. You will find him. I am sure of it."

"Ah, mon ami, you mistake my emotion. It is this villainous sea that troubles me! The mal de mer—it is horrible suffering!"

"Oh!" I said, rather taken aback.

The first throb of the engines was felt, and Poirot groaned and closed his eyes.

“Major Norman has a map of Northern France if you would like to study it?”

Poirot shook his head impatiently.

“But no, but no! Leave me, my friend. See you, to think, the stomach and the brain must be in harmony. Laverguier has a method most excellent for averting the mal de mer. You breathe in—and out—slowly, so—turning the head from left to right and counting six between each breath.”

I left him to his gymnastic endeavours, and went on deck.

As we came slowly into Boulogne Harbour Poirot appeared, neat and smiling, and announced to me in a whisper that Laverguier’s system had succeeded “to a marvel!”

Japp’s forefinger was still tracing imaginary routes on his map. “Nonsense! The car started from Boulogne—here they branched off. Now, my idea is that they transferred the Prime Minister to another car. See?”

“Well,” said the tall detective, “I shall make for the seaports. Ten to one, they’ve smuggled him on board a ship.”

Japp shook his head. “Too obvious. The order went out at once to close all the ports.”

The day was just breaking as we landed. Major Norman touched Poirot on the arm. “There’s a military car here waiting for you, sir.”

“Thank you, monsieur. But, for the moment, I do not propose to leave Boulogne.”

“What?”

“No, we will enter this hotel here, by the quay.”

He suited the action to the word, demanded and was accorded a private room. We three followed him, puzzled and uncomprehending.

He shot a quick glance at us. “It is not so that the good detective should act, eh? I perceive your thought. He must be full of energy. He must rush to and fro. He should prostrate himself on the dusty road and seek the marks of tyres through a little glass. He must gather up the cigarette end, the fallen match? That is your idea, is it not?”

His eyes challenged us. “But I—Hercule Poirot—tell you that it is not so! The true clues are within—here! ” He tapped his forehead. “See you, I need not have left London. It would have been sufficient for me to sit quietly in my rooms there. All that matters is the little grey cells within. Secretly and silently they do their part, until suddenly I call for a map, and I lay my finger on a spot—so—and I say: the Prime Minister is there! And it is so! With method and logic one can accomplish anything! This frantic rushing to France was a mistake—it is playing a child’s game of hide-and-seek. But now, though it may be too late, I will set to work the right way, from within. Silence, my friends, I beg of you.”

And for five long hours the little man sat motionless, blinking his eyelids like a cat, his green eyes flickering and becoming steadily greener and greener. The Scotland Yard man was obviously contemptuous, Major Norman was bored and impatient, and I myself found the time passed with wearisome slowness.

Finally, I got up, and strolled as noiselessly as I could to the window. The matter was becoming a farce. I was secretly concerned for my friend. If he failed, I would have preferred him to fail in a less ridiculous manner. Out of the window I idly watched the daily leave boat, belching forth columns of smoke, as she lay alongside the quay.

Suddenly I was aroused by Poirot’s voice close to my elbow.

“Mes amis, let us start!”

I turned. An extraordinary transformation had come over my friend. His eyes were flickering with excitement, his chest was swelled to the uttermost.

“I have been an imbecile, my friends! But I see daylight at last.”

Major Norman moved hastily to the door. “I’ll order the car.”

“There is no need. I shall not use it. Thank Heaven the wind has fallen.”

“Do you mean you are going to walk, sir?”

“No, my young friend. I am no St. Peter. I prefer to cross the sea by boat.”

“To cross the sea?”

“Yes. To work with method, one must begin from the beginning. And the beginning of this affair was in England. Therefore, we return to England.”

II

At three o’clock, we stood once more upon Charing Cross platform. To all our expostulations, Poirot turned a deaf ear, and reiterated again and again that to start at the beginning was not a waste of time, but the only way. On the way over, he had conferred with Norman in a low voice, and the latter had despatched a sheaf of telegrams from Dover.

Owing to the special passes held by Norman, we got through everywhere in record time. In London, a large police car was waiting for us, with some plainclothesmen, one of whom handed a typewritten sheet of paper to my friend. He answered my inquiring glance.

“A list of the cottage hospitals within a certain radius west of London. I wired for it from Dover.”

We were whirled rapidly through the London streets. We were on the Bath Road. On we went, through Hammersmith, Chiswick and Brentford. I began to see our objective. Through Windsor and so on to Ascot. My heart gave a leap. Ascot was where Daniels had an aunt living. We were after him, then, not O’Murphy.

We duly stopped at the gate of a trim villa. Poirot jumped out and rang the bell. I saw a perplexed frown dimming the radiance of his face. Plainly, he was not satisfied. The bell was answered. He was ushered inside. In a few moments he reappeared, and climbed into the car with a short, sharp shake of his head. My hopes began to die down. It was past four now. Even if he found certain evidence incriminating Daniels, what would be the good of it, unless he could wring from someone the exact spot in France where they were holding the Prime Minister?

Our return progress towards London was an interrupted one. We deviated from the main road more than once, and occasionally stopped at a small building, which I had no difficulty in recognizing as a cottage hospital. Poirot only spent a few minutes at each, but at every halt his radiant assurance was more and more restored.

He whispered something to Norman, to which the latter replied:

“Yes, if you turn off to the left, you will find them waiting by the bridge.”

We turned up a side road, and in the failing light I discerned a second car, waiting by the side of the road. It contained two men in plainclothes. Poirot got down and spoke to them, and then we started off in a northerly direction, the other car following close behind.

We drove for some time, our objective being obviously one of the northern suburbs of London. Finally, we drove up to the front door of a tall house, standing a little back from the road in its own grounds.

Norman and I were left in the car. Poirot and one of the detectives went up to the door and rang. A neat parlourmaid opened it. The detective spoke.

“I am a police officer, and I have a warrant to search this house.”

The girl gave a little scream, and a tall, handsome woman of middle age appeared behind her in the hall.

“Shut the door, Edith. They are burglars, I expect.”

But Poirot swiftly inserted his foot in the door, and at the same moment blew a whistle. Instantly the other detectives ran up, and poured into the house, shutting the door behind them.

Norman and I spent about five minutes cursing our forced inactivity. Finally the door reopened, and the men emerged, escorting three prisoners—a woman and two men. The woman, and one of the men, were taken to the second car. The other man was placed in our car by Poirot himself.

“I must go with the others, my friend. But have great care of this gentleman. You do not know him, no? Eh bien, let me present to you, Monsieur O’Murphy!”

O’Murphy! I gaped at him open-mouthed as we started again. He was not handcuffed, but I did not fancy he would try to escape. He sat there staring in front of him as though dazed. Anyway, Norman and I would be more than a match for him.

To my surprise, we still kept a northerly route. We were not returning to London, then! I was much puzzled. Suddenly, as the car slowed down, I recognized that we were close to Hendon Aerodrome. Immediately I grasped Poirot’s idea. He proposed to reach France by aeroplane.

It was a sporting idea, but, on the face of it, impracticable. A telegram would be far quicker. Time was everything. He must leave the personal glory of rescuing the Prime Minister to others.

As we drew up, Major Norman jumped out, and a plainclothesman took his place. He conferred with Poirot for a few minutes, and then went off briskly.

I, too, jumped out, and caught Poirot by the arm.

“I congratulate you, old fellow! They have told you the hiding place? But, look here, you must wire to France at once. You’ll be too late if you go yourself.”

Poirot looked at me curiously for a minute or two.

"Unfortunately, my friend, there are some things that cannot be sent by telegram."

III

At that moment Major Norman returned, accompanied by a young officer in the uniform of the Flying Corps.

"This is Captain Lyall, who will fly you over to France. He can start at once."

"Wrap up warmly, sir," said the young pilot. "I can lend you a coat, if you like."

Poirot was consulting his enormous watch. He murmured to himself: "Yes, there is time—just time." Then he looked up and bowed politely to the young officer. "I thank you, monsieur. But it is not I who am your passenger. It is this gentleman here."

He moved a little aside as he spoke, and a figure came forward out of the darkness. It was the second male prisoner who had gone in the other car, and as the light fell on his face, I gave a start of surprise.

It was the Prime Minister!

IV

"For Heaven's sake, tell me all about it," I cried impatiently, as Poirot, Norman and I motored back to London. "How in the world did they manage to smuggle him back to England?"

"There was no need to smuggle him back," replied Poirot dryly. "The Prime Minister has never left England. He was kidnapped on his way from Windsor to London."

"What?"

"I will make all clear. The Prime Minister was in his car, his secretary beside him. Suddenly a pad of chloroform is clapped on his face—"

“But by whom?”

“By the clever linguistic Captain Daniels. As soon as the Prime Minister is unconscious, Daniels picks up the speaking tube, and directs O’Murphy to turn to the right, which the chauffeur, quite unsuspicious, does. A few yards down that unfrequented road a large car is standing, apparently broken down. Its driver signals to O’Murphy to stop. O’Murphy slows up. The stranger approaches. Daniels leans out of the window, and, probably with the aid of an instantaneous anaesthetic, such as ethylchloride, the chloroform trick is repeated. In a few seconds, the two helpless men are dragged out and transferred to the other car, and a pair of substitutes take their places.”

“Impossible!”

“Pas du tout! Have you not seen music hall turns imitating celebrities with marvellous accuracy? Nothing is easier than to personate a public character. The Prime Minister of England is far easier to understudy than Mr. John Smith of Clapham, say. As for O’Murphy’s ‘double,’ no one was going to take much notice of him until after the departure of the Prime Minister, and by then he would have made himself scarce. He drives straight from Charing Cross to the meeting place of his friends. He goes in as O’Murphy, he emerges as someone quite different. O’Murphy has disappeared, leaving a conveniently suspicious trail behind him.”

“But the man who personated the Prime Minister was seen by everyone!”

“He was not seen by anyone who knew him privately or intimately. And Daniels shielded him from contact with anyone as much as possible. Moreover, his face was bandaged up, and anything unusual in his manner would be put down to the fact that he was suffering from shock as a result of the attempt upon his life. Mr. MacAdam has a weak throat, and always spares his voice as much as possible before any great speech. The deception was perfectly easy to keep up as far as France. There it would be impracticable and impossible—so the Prime Minister disappears. The police of this country hurry across the Channel, and no one bothers to go into the details of the first attack. To sustain the illusion that the abduction has taken place in France, Daniels is gagged and chloroformed in a convincing manner."

"And the man who has enacted the part of the Prime Minister?"

"Rids himself of his disguise. He and the bogus chauffeur may be arrested as suspicious characters, but no one will dream of suspecting their real part in the drama, and they will eventually be released for lack of evidence."

"And the real Prime Minister?"

"He and O'Murphy were driven straight to the house of 'Mrs. Everard,' at Hampstead, Daniels' so-called 'aunt.' In reality, she is Frau Bertha Ebenthal, and the police have been looking for her for some time. It is a valuable little present that I have made them—to say nothing of Daniels! Ah, it was a clever plan, but he did not reckon on the cleverness of Hercule Poirot!"

I think my friend might well be excused his moment of vanity.

"When did you first begin to suspect the truth of the matter?"

"When I began to work the right way—from within! I could not make that shooting affair fit in—but when I saw that the net result of it was that the Prime Minister went to France with his face bound up I began to comprehend! And when I visited all the cottage hospitals between Windsor and London, and found that no one answering to my description had had his face bound up and dressed that morning, I was sure! After that, it was child's play for a mind like mine!"

The following morning, Poirot showed me a telegram he had just received. It had no place of origin, and was unsigned. It ran:

"In time."

Later in the day the evening papers published an account of the Allied Conference. They laid particular stress on the magnificent ovation accorded to Mr. David MacAdam, whose inspiring speech had produced a deep and lasting impression.

Nine

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MR. DAVENHEIM

Poirot and I were expecting our old friend Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard to tea. We were sitting round the tea-table awaiting his arrival. Poirot had just finished carefully straightening the cups and saucers which our landlady was in the habit of throwing, rather than placing, on the table. He had also breathed heavily on the metal teapot, and polished it with a silk handkerchief. The kettle was on the boil, and a small enamel saucepan beside it contained some thick, sweet chocolate which was more to Poirot's palate than what he described as "your English poison."

A sharp "rat-tat" sounded below, and a few minutes afterwards Japp entered briskly.

"Hope I'm not late," he said as he greeted us. "To tell the truth, I was yarning with Miller, the man who's in charge of the Davenheim case."

I pricked up my ears. For the last three days the papers had been full of the strange disappearance of Mr. Davenheim, senior partner of Davenheim and Salmon, the well-known bankers and financiers. On Saturday last he had walked out of his house, and had never been seen since. I looked forward to extracting some interesting details from Japp.

"I should have thought," I remarked, "that it would be almost impossible for anyone to 'disappear' nowadays."

Poirot moved a plate of bread and butter the eighth of an inch, and said sharply:

"Be exact, my friend. What do you mean by 'disappear?' To which class of disappearance are you referring?"

"Are disappearances classified and labelled, then?" I laughed.

Japp smiled also. Poirot frowned at both of us.

“But certainly they are! They fall into three categories: First, and most common, the voluntary disappearance. Second, the much abused ‘loss of memory’ case—rare, but occasionally genuine. Third, murder, and a more or less successful disposal of the body. Do you refer to all three as impossible of execution?”

“Very nearly so, I should think. You might lose your own memory, but someone would be sure to recognize you—especially in the case of a well-known man like Davenheim. Then ‘bodies’ can’t be made to vanish into thin air. Sooner or later they turn up, concealed in lonely places, or in trunks. Murder will out. In the same way, the absconding clerk, or the domestic defaulter, is bound to be run down in these days of wireless telegraphy. He can be headed off from foreign countries; ports and railway stations are watched; and as for concealment in this country, his features and appearance will be known to everyone who reads a daily newspaper. He’s up against civilization.”

“Mon ami,” said Poirot, “you make one error. You do not allow for the fact that a man who had decided to make away with another man—or with himself in a figurative sense—might be that rare machine, a man of method. He might bring intelligence, talent, a careful calculation of detail to the task; and then I do not see why he should not be successful in baffling the police force.”

“But not you, I suppose?” said Japp good-humouredly, winking at me. “He couldn’t baffle you, eh, Monsieur Poirot?”

Poirot endeavoured, with a marked lack of success, to look modest. “Me also! Why not? It is true that I approach such problems with an exact science, a mathematical precision, which seems, alas, only too rare in the new generation of detectives!”

Japp grinned more widely.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Miller, the man who’s on this case, is a smart chap. You may be very sure he won’t overlook a footprint, or a cigar ash, or a crumb even. He’s got eyes that see everything.”

“So, mon ami,” said Poirot, “has the London sparrow. But all the same, I should not ask the little brown bird to solve the problem of Mr. Davenheim.”

“Come now, monsieur, you’re not going to run down the value of details as clues?”

“By no means. These things are all good in their way. The danger is they may assume undue importance. Most details are insignificant; one or two are vital. It is the brain, the little grey cells”—he tapped his forehead—“on which one must rely. The senses mislead. One must seek the truth within—not without.”

“You don’t mean to say, Monsieur Poirot, that you would undertake to solve a case without moving from your chair, do you?”

“That is exactly what I do mean—granted the facts were placed before me. I regard myself as a consulting specialist.”

Japp slapped his knee. “Hanged if I don’t take you at your word. Bet you a fiver that you can’t lay your hand—or rather tell me where to lay my hand—on Mr. Davenheim, dead or alive, before a week is out.”

Poirot considered. “Eh bien, mon ami, I accept. Le sport, it is the passion of you English. Now—the facts.”

“On Saturday last, as is his usual custom, Mr. Davenheim took the 12:40 train from Victoria to Chingside, where his palatial country seat, The Cedars, is situated. After lunch, he strolled round the grounds, and gave various directions to the gardeners. Everybody agrees that his manner was absolutely normal and as usual. After tea he put his head into his wife’s boudoir, saying that he was going to stroll down to the village and post some letters. He added that he was expecting a Mr. Lowen, on business. If he should come before he himself returned, he was to be shown into the study and asked to wait. Mr. Davenheim then left the house by the front door, passed leisurely down the drive, and out at the gate, and—was never seen again. From that hour, he vanished completely.”

“Pretty—very pretty—altogether a charming little problem,” murmured Poirot. “Proceed, my good friend.”

“About a quarter of an hour later a tall, dark man with a thick black moustache rang the front doorbell, and explained that he had an appointment with Mr. Davenheim. He gave the name of Lowen, and in accordance with the banker’s instructions was shown into the study. Nearly an hour passed. Mr. Davenheim did not return. Finally Mr. Lowen rang the bell, and explained that he was unable to wait any longer, as he must catch his train back to town.

Mrs. Davenheim apologized for her husband’s absence, which seemed unaccountable, as she knew him to have been expecting the visitor. Mr. Lowen reiterated his regrets and took his departure.

“Well, as everyone knows, Mr. Davenheim did not return. Early on Sunday morning the police were communicated with, but could make neither head nor tail of the matter. Mr. Davenheim seemed literally to have vanished into thin air. He had not been to the post office; nor had he been seen passing through the village. At the station they were positive he had not departed by any train. His own motor had not left the garage. If he had hired a car to meet him in some lonely spot, it seems almost certain that by this time, in view of the large reward offered for information, the driver of it would have come forward to tell what he knew. True, there was a small race meeting at Entfield, five miles away, and if he had walked to that station he might have passed unnoticed in the crowd. But since then his photograph and a full description of him have been circulated in every newspaper, and nobody has been able to give any news of him. We have, of course, received many letters from all over England, but each clue, so far, has ended in disappointment.

“On Monday morning a further sensational discovery came to light. Behind a portière in Mr. Davenheim’s study stands a safe, and that safe had been broken into and rifled. The windows were fastened securely on the inside, which seems to put an ordinary burglary out of court, unless, of course, an accomplice within the house fastened them again afterwards. On the other hand, Sunday having intervened, and the household being in a state of chaos, it is likely that the burglary was committed on the Saturday, and remained undetected until Monday."

"Précisément," said Poirot dryly. "Well, is he arrested, ce pauvre M. Lowen?"

Japp grinned. "Not yet. But he's under pretty close supervision."

Poirot nodded. "What was taken from the safe? Have you any idea?"

"We've been going into that with the junior partner of the firm and Mrs. Davenheim. Apparently there was a considerable amount in bearer bonds, and a very large sum in notes, owing to some large transaction having been just carried through. There was also a small fortune in jewellery. All Mrs. Davenheim's jewels were kept in the safe. The purchasing of them had become a passion with her husband of late years, and hardly a month passed that he did not make her a present of some rare and costly gem."

"Altogether a good haul," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Now, what about Lowen? Is it known what his business was with Davenheim that evening?"

"Well, the two men were apparently not on very good terms. Lowen is a speculator in quite a small way. Nevertheless, he has been able once or twice to score a coup off Davenheim in the market, though it seems they seldom or never actually met. It was a matter concerning some South American shares which led the banker to make his appointment."

"Had Davenheim interests in South America, then?"

"I believe so. Mrs. Davenheim happened to mention that he spent all last autumn in Buenos Aires."

"Any trouble in his home life? Were the husband and wife on good terms?"

"I should say his domestic life was quite peaceful and uneventful. Mrs. Davenheim is a pleasant, rather unintelligent woman. Quite a nonentity, I think."

“Then we must not look for the solution of the mystery there. Had he any enemies?”

“He had plenty of financial rivals, and no doubt there are many people whom he has got the better of who bear him no particular goodwill. But there was no one likely to make away with him—and, if they had, where is the body?”

“Exactly. As Hastings says, bodies have a habit of coming to light with fatal persistency.”

“By the way, one of the gardeners says he saw a figure going round to the side of the house towards the rose garden. The long french window of the study opens on to the rose garden, and Mr. Davenheim frequently entered and left the house that way. But the man was a good way off, at work on some cucumber frames, and cannot even say whether it was the figure of his master or not. Also, he cannot fix the time with any accuracy. It must have been before six, as the gardeners cease work at that time.”

“And Mr. Davenheim left the house?”

“About half past five or thereabouts.”

“What lies beyond the rose garden?”

“A lake.”

“With a boathouse?”

“Yes, a couple of punts are kept there. I suppose you’re thinking of suicide, Monsieur Poirot? Well, I don’t mind telling you that Miller’s going down tomorrow expressly to see that piece of water dragged. That’s the kind of man he is!”

Poirot smiled faintly, and turned to me. “Hastings, I pray you, hand me that copy of Daily Megaphone. If I remember rightly, there is an unusually clear photograph there of the missing man.”

I rose, and found the sheet required. Poirot studied the features attentively.

"H'm!" he murmured. "Wears his hair rather long and wavy, full moustache and pointed beard, bushy eyebrows. Eyes dark?"

"Yes."

"Hair and beard turning grey?"

The detective nodded. "Well, Monsieur Poirot, what have you got to say to it all? Clear as daylight, eh?"

"On the contrary, most obscure."

The Scotland Yard man looked pleased.

"Which gives me great hopes of solving it," finished Poirot placidly.

"Eh?"

"I find it a good sign when a case is obscure. If a thing is clear as daylight—eh bien, mistrust it! Someone has made it so."

Japp shook his head almost pityingly. "Well, each to their fancy. But it's not a bad thing to see your way clear ahead."

"I do not see," murmured Poirot. "I shut my eyes—and think."

Japp sighed. "Well, you've got a clear week to think in."

"And you will bring me any fresh developments that arise—the result of the labours of the hardworking and lynx-eyed Inspector Miller, for instance?"

"Certainly. That's in the bargain."

"Seems a shame, doesn't it?" said Japp to me as I accompanied him to the door. "Like robbing a child!"

I could not help agreeing with a smile. I was still smiling as I reentered the room.

“Eh bien!” said Poirot immediately. “You make fun of Papa Poirot, is it not so?” He shook his finger at me. “You do not trust his grey cells? Ah, do not be confused! Let us discuss this little problem—incomplete as yet, I admit, but already showing one or two points of interest.”

“The lake!” I said significantly.

“And even more than the lake, the boathouse!”

I looked sidewise at Poirot. He was smiling in his most inscrutable fashion. I felt that, for the moment, it would be quite useless to question him further.

We heard nothing of Japp until the following evening, when he walked in about nine o’clock. I saw at once by his expression that he was bursting with news of some kind.

“Eh bien, my friend,” remarked Poirot. “All goes well? But do not tell me that you have discovered the body of Mr. Davenheim in your lake, because I shall not believe you.”

“We haven’t found the body, but we did find his clothes—the identical clothes he was wearing that day. What do you say to that?”

“Any other clothes missing from the house?”

“No, his valet was quite positive on that point. The rest of his wardrobe is intact. There’s more. We’ve arrested Lowen. One of the maids, whose business it is to fasten the bedroom windows, declares that she saw Lowen coming towards the study through the rose garden about a quarter past six. That would be about ten minutes before he left the house.”

“What does he himself say to that?”

“Denied first of all that he had ever left the study. But the maid was positive, and he pretended afterwards that he had forgotten just stepping out of the window to examine an unusual species of rose. Rather a weak story! And there’s fresh evidence against him come to light. Mr. Davenheim always wore a thick gold ring set with a solitaire diamond on the little finger of his right hand. Well, that ring was pawned in London on Saturday night by a man called Billy Kellett! He's already known to the police—did three months last autumn for lifting an old gentleman's watch. It seems he tried to pawn the ring at no less than five different places, succeeded at the last one, got gloriously drunk on the proceeds, assaulted a policeman, and was run in in consequence. I went to Bow Street with Miller and saw him. He's sober enough now, and I don't mind admitting we pretty well frightened the life out of him, hinting he might be charged with murder. This is his yarn, and a very queer one it is.

"He was at Entfield races on Saturday, though I dare say scarfpins was his line of business, rather than betting. Anyway, he had a bad day, and was down on his luck. He was tramping along the road to Chingside, and sat down in a ditch to rest just before he got into the village. A few minutes later he noticed a man coming along the road to the village, 'dark-complexioned gent, with a big moustache, one of them city toffs,' is his description of the man.

"Kellett was half concealed from the road by a heap of stones. Just before he got abreast of him, the man looked quickly up and down the road, and seeing it apparently deserted he took a small object from his pocket and threw it over the hedge. Then he went on towards the station. Now, the object he had thrown over the hedge had fallen with a slight 'chink' which aroused the curiosity of the human derelict in the ditch. He investigated and, after a short search, discovered the ring! That is Kellett's story. It's only fair to say that Lowen denies it utterly, and of course the word of a man like Kellett can't be relied upon in the slightest. It's within the bounds of possibility that he met Davenheim in the lane and robbed and murdered him."

Poirot shook his head.

"Very improbable, mon ami. He had no means of disposing of the body. It would have been found by now. Secondly, the open way in which he pawned the ring makes it unlikely that he did murder to get it. Thirdly, your sneak thief is rarely a murderer. Fourthly, as he has been in prison since Saturday, it would be too much of a coincidence that he is able to give so accurate a description of Lowen."

Japp nodded. “I don’t say you’re not right. But all the same, you won’t get a jury to take much note of a jailbird’s evidence. What seems odd to me is that Lowen couldn’t find a cleverer way of disposing of the ring.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “Well, after all, if it were found in the neighbourhood, it might be argued that Davenheim himself had dropped it.”

“But why remove it from the body at all?” I cried.

“There might be a reason for that,” said Japp. “Do you know that just beyond the lake, a little gate leads out on to the hill, and not three minutes’ walk brings you to—what do you think?—a lime kiln.”

“Good heavens!” I cried. “You mean that the lime which destroyed the body would be powerless to affect the metal of the ring?”

“Exactly.”

“It seems to me,” I said, “that that explains everything. What a horrible crime!”

By common consent we both turned and looked at Poirot. He seemed lost in reflection, his brow knitted, as though with some supreme mental effort. I felt at last his keen intellect was asserting itself. What would his first words be? We were not long left in doubt. With a sigh, the tension of his attitude relaxed and turning to Japp, he asked:

“Have you any idea, my friend, whether Mr. and Mrs. Davenheim occupied the same bedroom?”

The question seemed so ludicrously inappropriate that for a moment we both stared in silence. Then Japp burst into a laugh. “Good Lord, Monsieur Poirot, I thought you were coming out with something startling. As to your question, I’m sure I don’t know.”

“You could find out?” asked Poirot with curious persistence.

“Oh, certainly—if you really want to know.”

"Merci, mon ami. I should be obliged if you would make a point of it."

Japp stared at him a few minutes longer, but Poirot seemed to have forgotten us both. The detective shook his head sadly at me, and murmuring, "Poor old fellow! War's been too much for him!" gently withdrew from the room.

As Poirot seemed sunk in a daydream, I took a sheet of paper, and amused myself by scribbling notes upon it. My friend's voice aroused me. He had come out of his reverie, and was looking brisk and alert.

"Que faites-vous là, mon ami? "

"I was jotting down what occurred to me as the main points of interest in this affair."

"You become methodical—at last!" said Poirot approvingly.

I concealed my pleasure. "Shall I read them to you?"

"By all means."

I cleared my throat.

" 'One: All the evidence points to Lowen having been the man who forced the safe.

" 'Two: He had a grudge against Davenheim.

" 'Three: He lied in his first statement that he had never left the study.

" 'Four: If you accept Billy Kellett's story as true, Lowen is unmistakably implicated.' "

I paused. "Well?" I asked, for I felt that I had put my finger on all the vital facts.

Poirot looked at me pityingly, shaking his head very gently. "Mon pauvre ami! But it is that you have not the gift! The important detail, you appreciate him never! Also, your reasoning is false.”

“How?”

“Let me take your four points.”

“One: Mr. Lowen could not possibly know that he would have the chance to open the safe. He came for a business interview. He could not know beforehand that Mr. Davenheim would be absent posting a letter, and that he would consequently be alone in the study!”

“He might have seized the opportunity,” I suggested.

“And the tools? City gentlemen do not carry round housebreaker’s tools on the off chance! And one could not cut into that safe with penknife, bien entendu! ”

“Well, what about Number Two?”

“You say Lowen had a grudge against Mr. Davenheim. What you mean is that he had once or twice got the better of him. And presumably those transactions were entered into with the view of benefiting himself. In any case you do not as a rule bear a grudge against a man you have got the better of—it is more likely to be the other way about. Whatever grudge there might have been would have been on Mr. Davenheim’s side.”

“Well, you can’t deny that he lied about never having left the study?”

“No. But he may have been frightened. Remember, the missing man’s clothes had just been discovered in the lake. Of course, as usual, he would have done better to speak the truth.”

“And the fourth point?”

“I grant you that. If Kellett’s story is true, Lowen is undeniably implicated. That is what makes the affair so very interesting.”

“Then I did appreciate one vital fact?”

“Perhaps—but you have entirely overlooked the two most important points, the ones which undoubtedly hold the clue to the whole matter.”

“And pray, what are they?”

“One, the passion which has grown upon Mr. Davenheim in the last few years for buying jewellery. Two, his trip to Buenos Aires last autumn.”

“Poirot, you are joking?”

“I am serious. Ah, sacred thunder, but I hope Japp will not forget my little commission.”

But the detective, entering into the spirit of the joke, had remembered it so well that a telegram was handed to Poirot about eleven o’clock the next day. At his request I opened it and read it out:

“ ‘Husband and wife have occupied separate rooms since last winter.’ ”

“Aha!” cried Poirot. “And now we are in mid June! All is solved!”

I stared at him.

“You have no moneys in the bank of Davenheim and Salmon, mon ami?”

“No,” I said wondering. “Why?”

“Because I should advise you to withdraw it—before it is too late.”

“Why, what do you expect?”

“I expect a big smash in a few days—perhaps sooner. Which reminds me, we will return the compliment of a dépêche to Japp. A pencil, I pray you, and a form. Voilà! “Advise you to withdraw any money deposited with firm in question.” That will intrigue him, the good Japp! His eyes will open wide—wide! He will not comprehend in the slightest—until tomorrow, or the next day!”

I remained sceptical, but the morrow forced me to render tribute to my friend’s remarkable powers. In every paper was a huge headline telling of the sensational failure of the Davenheim bank. The disappearance of the famous financier took on a totally different aspect in the light of the revelation of the financial affairs of the bank.

Before we were halfway through breakfast, the door flew open and Japp rushed in. In his left hand was a paper; in his right was Poirot’s telegram, which he banged down on the table in front of my friend.

“How did you know, Monsieur Poirot? How the blazes could you know?”

Poirot smiled placidly at him. “Ah, mon ami, after your wire, it was a certainty! From the commencement, see you, it struck me that the safe burglary was somewhat remarkable. Jewels, ready money, bearer bonds—all so conveniently arranged for—whom? Well, the good Monsieur Davenheim was of those who ‘look after Number One’ as your saying goes! It seemed almost certain that it was arranged for—himself! Then his passion of late years for buying jewellery! How simple! The funds he embezzled, he converted into jewels, very likely replacing them in turn with paste duplicates, and so he put away in a safe place, under another name, a considerable fortune to be enjoyed all in good time when everyone has been thrown off the track. His arrangements completed, he makes an appointment with Mr. Lowen (who has been imprudent enough in the past to cross the great man once or twice), drills a hole in the safe, leaves orders that the guest is to be shown into the study, and walks out of the house—where?” Poirot stopped, and stretched out his hand for another boiled egg. He frowned. “It is really insupportable,” he murmured, “that every hen lays an egg of a different size! What symmetry can there be on the breakfast table? At least they should sort them in dozens at the shop!”

“Never mind the eggs,” said Japp impatiently. “Let ’em lay ’em square if they like. Tell us where our customer went to when he left The Cedars—that is, if you know!”

“Eh bien, he went to his hiding place. Ah, this Monsieur Davenheim, there may be some malformation in his grey cells, but they are of the first quality!”

“Do you know where he is hiding?”

“Certainly! It is most ingenious.”

“For the Lord’s sake, tell us, then!”

Poirot gently collected every fragment of shell from his plate, placed them in the egg-cup, and reversed the empty eggshell on top of them. This little operation concluded, he smiled on the neat effect, and then beamed affectionately on us both.

“Come, my friends, you are men of intelligence. Ask yourself the question I asked myself. ‘If I were this man, where should I hide?’ Hastings, what do you say?”

“Well,” I said, “I’m rather inclined to think I’d not do a bolt at all. I’d stay in London—in the heart of things, travel by tubes and buses; ten to one I’d never be recognized. There’s safety in a crowd.”

Poirot turned inquiringly to Japp.

“I don’t agree. Get clear away at once—that’s the only chance. I would have had plenty of time to prepare things beforehand. I’d have a yacht waiting, with steam up, and I’d be off to one of the most out-of-the-way corners of the world before the hue and cry began!”

We both looked at Poirot. “What do you say, monsieur?”

For a moment he remained silent. Then a very curious smile flitted across his face.

“My friends, if I were hiding from the police, do you know where I should hide? In a prison! ”

“What?”

“You are seeking Monsieur Davenheim in order to put him in prison, so you never dream of looking to see if he may not be already there!”

“What do you mean?”

“You tell me Madame Davenheim is not a very intelligent woman. Nevertheless I think if you took her up to Bow Street and confronted her with the man Billy Kellett she would recognize him! In spite of the fact that he has shaved his beard and moustache and those bushy eyebrows, and has cropped his hair close. A woman nearly always knows her husband, though the rest of the world may be deceived.”

“Billy Kellett? But he’s known to the police!”

“Did I not tell you Davenheim was a clever man? He prepared his alibi long beforehand. He was not in Buenos Aires last autumn—he was creating the character of Billy Kellett, ‘doing three months,’ so that the police should have no suspicions when the time came. He was playing, remember, for a large fortune, as well as liberty. It was worth while doing the thing thoroughly. Only—”

“Yes?”

“Eh bien, afterwards he had to wear a false beard and wig, had to make up as himself again, and to sleep with a false beard is not easy—it invites detection! He cannot risk continuing to share the chamber of madame his wife. You found out for me that for the last six months, or ever since his supposed return from Buenos Aires, he and Mrs. Davenheim occupied separate rooms. Then I was sure! Everything fitted in. The gardener who fancied he saw his master going round to the side of the house was quite right. He went to the boathouse, donned his ‘tramp’ clothes, which you may be sure had been safely hidden from the eyes of his valet, dropped the others in the lake, and proceeded to carry out his plan by pawning the ring in an obvious manner, and then assaulting a policeman, getting himself safely into the haven of Bow Street, where nobody would ever dream of looking for him!”

“It’s impossible,” murmured Japp.

“Ask Madame,” said my friend, smiling.

The next day a registered letter lay beside Poirot’s plate. He opened it and a five-pound note fluttered out. My friend’s brow puckered.

“Ah, sacré! But what shall I do with it? I have much remorse! Ce pauvre Japp? Ah, an idea! We will have a little dinner, we three! That consoles me. It was really too easy. I am ashamed. I, who would not rob a child—mille tonnerres! Mon ami, what have you, that you laugh so heartily?”

Ten

THE ADVENTURE OF THE ITALIAN NOBLEMAN

Poirot and I had many friends and acquaintances of an informal nature. Amongst these was to be numbered Dr. Hawker, a near neighbour of ours, and a member of the medical profession. It was the genial doctor's habit to drop in sometimes of an evening and have a chat with Poirot, of whose genius he was an ardent admirer. The doctor himself, frank and unsuspicious to the last degree, admired the talents so far removed from his own.

On one particular evening in early June, he arrived about half past eight and settled down to a comfortable discussion on the cheery topic of the prevalence of arsenical poisoning in crimes. It must have been about a quarter of an hour later when the door of our sitting room flew open, and a distracted female precipitated herself into the room.

"Oh, doctor, you're wanted! Such a terrible voice. It gave me a turn, it did indeed."

I recognized in our new visitor Dr. Hawker's housekeeper, Miss Rider. The doctor was a bachelor, and lived in a gloomy old house a few streets away. The usually placid Miss Rider was now in a state bordering on incoherence.

"What terrible voice? Who is it, and what's the trouble?"

"It was the telephone, doctor. I answered it—and a voice spoke. 'Help,' it said. 'Doctor—help. They've killed me!' Then it sort of tailed away. 'Who's speaking?' I said. 'Who's speaking?' Then I got a reply, just a whisper, it seemed, 'Foscatine'—something like that—'Regent's Court.' "

The doctor uttered an exclamation.

"Count Foscatini. He has a flat in Regent's Court. I must go at once. What can have happened?"

“A patient of yours?” asked Poirot.

“I attended him for some slight ailment a few weeks ago. An Italian, but he speaks English perfectly. Well, I must wish you good night, Monsieur Poirot, unless—” He hesitated.

“I perceive the thought in your mind,” said Poirot, smiling. “I shall be delighted to accompany you. Hastings, run down and get hold of a taxi.”

Taxis always make themselves sought for when one is particularly pressed for time, but I captured one at last, and we were soon bowling along in the direction of Regent’s Park. Regent’s Court was a new block of flats, situated just off St. John’s Wood Road. They had only recently been built, and contained the latest service devices.

There was no one in the hall. The doctor pressed the lift bell impatiently, and when the lift arrived questioned the uniformed attendant sharply.

“Flat 11. Count Foscatini. There’s been an accident there, I understand.”

The man stared at him.

“First I’ve heard of it. Mr. Graves—that’s Count Foscatini’s man—went out about half an hour ago, and he said nothing.”

“Is the Count alone in the flat?”

“No, sir, he’s got two gentlemen dining with him.”

“What are they like?” I asked eagerly.

We were in the lift now, ascending rapidly to the second floor, on which Flat 11 was situated.

“I didn’t see them myself, sir, but I understand that they were foreign gentlemen.”

He pulled back the iron door, and we stepped out on the landing. No 11 was opposite to us. The doctor rang the bell. There was no reply, and we could hear no sound from within. The doctor rang again and again; we could hear the bell trilling within, but no sign of life rewarded us.

“This is getting serious,” muttered the doctor. He turned to the lift attendant.

“Is there any passkey to this door?”

“There is one in the porter’s office downstairs.”

“Get it, then, and, look here, I think you’d better send for the police.”

Poirot approved with a nod of the head.

The man returned shortly; with him came the manager.

“Will you tell me, gentlemen, what is the meaning of all this?”

“Certainly. I received a telephone message from Count Foscatini stating that he had been attacked and was dying. You can understand that we must lose no time—if we are not already too late.”

The manager produced the key without more ado, and we all entered the flat.

We passed first into the small square lounge hall. A door on the right of it was half open. The manager indicated it with a nod.

“The dining room.”

Dr. Hawker led the way. We followed close on his heels. As we entered the room I gave a gasp. The round table in the centre bore the remains of a meal; three chairs were pushed back, as though their occupants had just risen. In the corner, to the right of the fireplace, was a big writing table, and sitting at it was a man—or what had been a man. His right hand still grasped the base of the telephone, but he had fallen forward, struck down by a terrific blow on the head from behind. The weapon was not far to seek. A marble statue stood where it had been hurriedly put down, the base of it stained with blood.

The doctor's examination did not take a minute. "Stone dead. Must have been almost instantaneous. I wonder he even managed to telephone. It will be better not to move him until the police arrive."

On the manager's suggestion we searched the flat, but the result was a foregone conclusion. It was not likely that the murderers would be concealed there when all they had to do was to walk out.

We came back to the dining room. Poirot had not accompanied us in our tour. I found him studying the centre table with close attention. I joined him. It was a well-polished round mahogany table. A bowl of roses decorated the centre, and white lace mats reposed on the gleaming surface. There was a dish of fruit, but the three dessert plates were untouched. There were three coffee cups with remains of coffee in them—two black, one with milk. All three men had taken port, and the decanter, half full, stood before the centre plate. One of the men had smoked a cigar, the other two cigarettes. A tortoiseshell-and-silver box, holding cigars and cigarettes, stood open upon the table.

I enumerated all these facts to myself, but I was forced to admit that they did not shed any brilliant light on the situation. I wondered what Poirot saw in them to make him so intent. I asked him.

"Mon ami," he replied, "you miss the point. I am looking for something that I do not see."

"What is that?"

"A mistake—even a little mistake—on the part of the murderer."

He stepped swiftly to the small adjoining kitchen, looked in, and shook his head.

"Monsieur," he said to the manager, "explain to me, I pray, your system of serving meals here."

The manager stepped to a small hatch in the wall.

"This is the service lift," he explained. "It runs to the kitchens at the top of the building. You order through this telephone, and the dishes are sent down in the lift, one course at a time. The dirty plates and dishes are sent up in the same manner. No domestic worries, you understand, and at the same time you avoid the wearying publicity of always dining in a restaurant."

Poirot nodded.

"Then the plates and dishes that were used tonight are on high in the kitchen. You permit that I mount there?"

"Oh, certainly, if you like! Roberts, the lift man, will take you up and introduce you; but I'm afraid you won't find anything that's of any use. They're handling hundreds of plates and dishes, and they'll be all lumped together."

Poirot remained firm, however, and together we visited the kitchens and questioned the man who had taken the order from Flat 11.

"The order was given from the à la carte menu—for three," he explained. "Soup julienne, filet de sole normande, tournedos of beef, and a rice soufflé. What time? Just about eight o'clock, I should say. No, I'm afraid the plates and dishes have been all washed up by now. Unfortunate. You were thinking of fingerprints, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," said Poirot, with an enigmatical smile. "I am more interested in Count Foscatini's appetite. Did he partake of every dish?"

"Yes; but of course I can't say how much of each he ate. The plates were all soiled, and the dishes empty—that is to say, with the exception of the rice soufflé. There was a fair amount of that left."

"Ah!" said Poirot, and seemed satisfied with the fact.

As we descended to the flat again he remarked in a low tone:

"We have decidedly to do with a man of method."

"Do you mean the murderer, or Count Foscatini?"

“The latter was undoubtedly an orderly gentleman. After imploring help and announcing his approaching demise, he carefully hung up the telephone receiver.”

I stared at Poirot. His words now and his recent inquiries gave me the glimmering of an idea.

“You suspect poison?” I breathed. “The blow on the head was a blind.”

Poirot merely smiled.

We reentered the flat to find the local inspector of police had arrived with two constables. He was inclined to resent our appearance, but Poirot calmed him with the mention of our Scotland Yard friend, Inspector Japp, and we were accorded a grudging permission to remain. It was a lucky thing we were, for we had not been back five minutes before an agitated middle-aged man came rushing into the room with every appearance of grief and agitation.

This was Graves, valet-butler to the late Count Foscatini. The story he had to tell was a sensational one.

On the previous morning, two gentlemen had called to see his master. They were Italians, and the elder of the two, a man of about forty, gave his name as Signor Ascanio. The younger was a well-dressed lad of about twenty-four.

Count Foscatini was evidently prepared for their visit and immediately sent Graves out upon some trivial errand. Here the man paused and hesitated in his story. In the end, however, he admitted that, curious as to the purport of the interview, he had not obeyed immediately, but had lingered about endeavouring to hear something of what was going on.

The conversation was carried on in so low a tone that he was not as successful as he had hoped; but he gathered enough to make it clear that some kind of monetary proposition was being discussed, and that the basis of it was a threat. The discussion was anything but amicable. In the end, Count Foscatini raised his voice slightly, and the listener heard these words clearly:

“I have no time to argue further now, gentlemen. If you will dine with me tomorrow night at eight o’clock, we will resume the discussion.”

Afraid of being discovered listening, Graves had then hurried out to do his master’s errand. This evening the two men had arrived punctually at eight. During dinner they had talked of indifferent matters—politics, the weather, and the theatrical world. When Graves had placed the port upon the table and brought in the coffee his master told him that he might have the evening off.

“Was that a usual proceeding of his when he had guests?” asked the inspector.

“No, sir; it wasn’t. That’s what made me think it must be some business of a very unusual kind that he was going to discuss with these gentlemen.”

That finished Graves’s story. He had gone out about 8:30, and meeting a friend, had accompanied him to the Metropolitan Music Hall in Edgware Road.

Nobody had seen the two men leave, but the time of the murder was fixed clearly enough at 8:47. A small clock on the writing-table had been swept off by Foscatini’s arm, and had stopped at that hour, which agreed with Miss Rider’s telephone summons.

The police surgeon had made his examination of the body, and it was now lying on the couch. I saw the face for the first time—the olive complexion, the long nose, the luxuriant black moustache, and the full red lips drawn back from the dazzlingly white teeth. Not altogether a pleasant face.

“Well,” said the inspector, refastening his notebook. “The case seems clear enough. The only difficulty will be to lay our hands on this Signor Ascanio. I suppose his address is not in the dead man’s pocketbook by any chance?”

As Poirot had said, the late Foscatini was an orderly man. Neatly written in small, precise handwriting was the inscription, “Signor Paolo Ascanio, Grosvenor Hotel.”

The inspector busied himself with the telephone, then turned to us with a grin.

“Just in time. Our fine gentleman was off to catch the boat train to the Continent. Well, gentlemen, that’s about all we can do here. It’s a bad business, but straightforward enough. One of these Italian vendetta things, as likely as not.”

Thus airily dismissed, we found our way downstairs. Dr. Hawker was full of excitement.

“Like the beginning of a novel, eh? Real exciting stuff. Wouldn’t believe it if you read about it.”

Poirot did not speak. He was very thoughtful. All the evening he had hardly opened his lips.

“What says the master detective, eh?” asked Hawker, clapping him on the back. “Nothing to work your grey cells over this time.”

“You think not?”

“What could there be?”

“Well, for example, there is the window.”

“The window? But it was fastened. Nobody could have got out or in that way. I noticed it specially.”

“And why were you able to notice it?”

The doctor looked puzzled. Poirot hastened to explain.

“It is to the curtains that I refer. They were not drawn. A little odd, that. And then there was the coffee. It was very black coffee.”

“Well, what of it?”

“Very black,” repeated Poirot. “In conjunction with that let us remember that very little of the rice soufflé was eaten, and we get—what?”

“Moonshine,” laughed the doctor. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“Never do I pull the leg. Hastings here knows that I am perfectly serious.”

“I don’t know what you are getting at, all the same,” I confessed. “You don’t suspect the manservant, do you? He might have been in with the gang, and put some dope in the coffee. I suppose they’ll test his alibi?”

“Without doubt, my friend; but it is the alibi of Signor Ascanio that interests me.”

“You think he has an alibi?”

“That is just what worries me. I have no doubt that we shall soon be enlightened on that point.”

The Daily Newsmonger enabled us to become conversant with succeeding events.

Signor Ascanio was arrested and charged with the murder of Count Foscatini. When arrested, he denied knowing the Count, and declared he had never been near Regent’s Court either on the evening of the crime or on the previous morning. The younger man had disappeared entirely. Signor Ascanio had arrived alone at the Grosvenor Hotel from the Continent two days before the murder. All efforts to trace the second man failed.

Ascanio, however, was not sent for trial. No less a personage than the Italian Ambassador himself came forward and testified at the police court proceedings that Ascanio had been with him at the Embassy from eight till nine that evening. The prisoner was discharged. Naturally, a lot of people thought that the crime was a political one, and was being deliberately hushed up.

Poirot had taken a keen interest in all these points. Nevertheless, I was somewhat surprised when he suddenly informed me one morning that he was expecting a visitor at eleven o'clock, and that the visitor was none other than Ascanio himself.

"He wishes to consult you?"

"Du tout, Hastings, I wish to consult him."

"What about?"

"The Regent's Court murder."

"You are going to prove that he did it?"

"A man cannot be tried twice for murder, Hastings. Endeavour to have the common sense. Ah, that is our friend's ring."

A few minutes later Signor Ascanio was ushered in—a small, thin man with a secretive and furtive glance in his eyes. He remained standing, darting suspicious glances from one to the other of us.

"Monsieur Poirot?"

My little friend tapped himself gently on the chest.

"Be seated, signor. You received my note. I am determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. In some small measure you can aid me. Let us commence. You—in company with a friend—visited the late Count Foscatini on the morning of Tuesday the 9th—"

The Italian made an angry gesture.

"I did nothing of the sort. I have sworn in court—"

"Précisément—and I have a little idea that you have sworn falsely."

"You threaten me? Bah! I have nothing to fear from you. I have been acquitted."

"Exactly; and as I am not an imbecile, it is not with the gallows I threaten you—but with publicity. Publicity! I see that you do not like the word. I had an idea that you would not. My little ideas, you know, they are very valuable to me. Come, signor, your only chance is to be frank with me. I do not ask to know whose indiscretions brought you to England. I know this much, you came for the special purpose of seeing Count Foscatini."

"He was not a count," growled the Italian.

"I have already noted the fact that his name does not appear in the Almanach de Gotha. Never mind, the title of count is often useful in the profession of blackmailing."

"I suppose I might as well be frank. You seem to know a good deal."

"I have employed my grey cells to some advantage. Come, Signor Ascanio, you visited the dead man on the Tuesday morning—that is so, is it not?"

"Yes; but I never went there on the following evening. There was no need. I will tell you all. Certain information concerning a man of great position in Italy had come into this scoundrel's possession. He demanded a big sum of money in return for the papers. I came over to England to arrange the matter. I called upon him by appointment that morning. One of the young secretaries of the Embassy was with me. The Count was more reasonable than I had hoped, although even then the sum of money I paid him was a huge one."

"Pardon, how was it paid?"

"In Italian notes of comparatively small denomination. I paid over the money then and there. He handed me the incriminating papers. I never saw him again."

"Why did you not say all this when you were arrested?"

"In my delicate position I was forced to deny any association with the man."

“And how do you account for the events of the evening then?”

“I can only think that someone must have deliberately impersonated me. I understand that no money was found in the flat.”

Poirot looked at him and shook his head.

“Strange,” he murmured. “We all have the little grey cells. And so few of us know how to use them. Good morning, Signor Ascanio. I believe your story. It is very much as I had imagined. But I had to make sure.”

After bowing his guest out, Poirot returned to his armchair and smiled at me.

“Let us hear M. le Capitaine Hastings on the case.”

“Well, I suppose Ascanio is right—somebody impersonated him.”

“Never, never will you use the brains the good God has given you. Recall to yourself some words I uttered after leaving the flat that night. I referred to the window curtains not being drawn. We are in the month of June. It is still light at eight o’clock. The light is failing by half past. Ça vous dit quelque chose? I perceive a struggling impression that you will arrive some day. Now let us continue. The coffee was, as I said, very black. Count Foscatini’s teeth were magnificently white. Coffee stains the teeth. We reason from that that Count Foscatini did not drink any coffee. Yet there was coffee in all three cups. Why should anyone pretend Count Foscatini had drunk coffee when he had not done so?”

I shook my head, utterly bewildered.

“Come, I will help you. What evidence have we that Ascanio and his friend, or two men posing as them, ever came to the flat that night? Nobody saw them go in; nobody saw them go out. We have the evidence of one man and of a host of inanimate objects.”

“You mean?”

“I mean knives and forks and plates and empty dishes. Ah, but it was a clever idea! Graves is a thief and a scoundrel, but what a man of method! He overhears a portion of the conversation in the morning, enough to realize that Ascanio will be in an awkward position to defend himself. The following evening, about eight o’clock, he tells his master he is wanted at the telephone. Foscatini sits down, stretches out his hand to the telephone, and from behind Graves strikes him down with the marble figure. Then quickly to the service telephone—dinner for three! It comes, he lays the table, dirties the plates, knives, and forks, etc. But he has to get rid of the food too. Not only is he a man of brain; he has a resolute and capacious stomach! But after eating three tournedos, the rice soufflé is too much for him! He even smokes a cigar and two cigarettes to carry out the illusion. Ah, but it was magnificently thorough! Then, having moved on the hands of the clock to 8:47, he smashes it and stops it. The one thing he does not do is to draw the curtains. But if there had been a real dinner party the curtains would have been drawn as soon as the light began to fail. Then he hurries out, mentioning the guests to the lift man in passing. He hurries to a telephone box, and as near as possible to 8:47 rings up the doctor with his master’s dying cry. So successful is his idea that no one ever inquires if a call was put through from Flat 11 at that time.”

“Except Hercule Poirot, I suppose?” I said sarcastically.

“Not even Hercule Poirot,” said my friend, with a smile. “I am about to inquire now. I had to prove my point to you first. But you will see, I shall be right; and then Japp, to whom I have already given a hint, will be able to arrest the respectable Graves. I wonder how much of the money he has spent.”

Poirot was right. He always is, confound him!

Eleven

THE CASE OF THE MISSING WILL

The problem presented to us by Miss Violet Marsh made rather a pleasant change from our usual routine work. Poirot had received a brisk and businesslike note from the lady asking for an appointment, and had replied asking her to call upon him at eleven o'clock the following day.

She arrived punctually—a tall, handsome young woman, plainly but neatly dressed, with an assured and businesslike manner. Clearly a young woman who meant to get on in the world. I am not a great admirer of the so-called New Woman myself, and, in spite of her good looks, I was not particularly prepossessed in her favour.

"My business is of a somewhat unusual nature, Monsieur Poirot," she began, after she had accepted a chair. "I had better begin at the beginning and tell you the whole story."

"If you please, mademoiselle."

"I am an orphan. My father was one of two brothers, sons of a small yeoman farmer in Devonshire. The farm was a poor one, and the elder brother, Andrew, emigrated to Australia, where he did very well indeed, and by means of successful speculation in land became a very rich man. The younger brother, Roger (my father), had no leanings towards the agricultural life. He managed to educate himself a little, and obtained a post as clerk with a small firm. He married slightly above him; my mother was the daughter of a poor artist. My father died when I was six years old. When I was fourteen, my mother followed him to the grave. My only living relation then was my uncle Andrew, who had recently returned from Australia and bought a small place, Crabtree Manor, in his native county. He was exceedingly kind to his brother's orphan child, took me to live with him, and treated me in every way as though I was his own daughter.

"Crabtree Manor, in spite of its name, is really only an old farmhouse. Farming was in my uncle's blood, and he was intensely interested in various modern farming experiments. Although kindness itself to me, he had certain peculiar and deeply-rooted ideas as to the upbringing of women. Himself a man of little or no education, though possessing remarkable shrewdness, he placed little value on what he called ‘book knowledge.’ He was especially opposed to the education of women. In his opinion, girls should learn practical housework and dairy work, be useful about the home, and have as little to do with book learning as possible. He proposed to bring me up on these lines, to my bitter disappointment and annoyance. I rebelled frankly. I knew that I possessed a good brain, and had absolutely no talent for domestic duties. My uncle and I had many bitter arguments on the subject, for, though much attached to each other, we were both self-willed. I was lucky enough to win a scholarship, and up to a certain point was successful in getting my own way. The crisis arose when I resolved to go to Girton. I had a little money of my own, left me by my mother, and I was quite determined to make the best use of the gifts God had given me. I had one long, final argument with my uncle. He put the facts plainly before me. He had no other relations, and he had intended me to be his sole heiress. As I have told you, he was a very rich man. If I persisted in these ‘newfangled notions’ of mine, however, I need look for nothing from him. I remained polite, but firm. I should always be deeply attached to him, I told him, but I must lead my own life. We parted on that note. ‘You fancy your brains, my girl,’ were his last words. ‘I’ve no book learning, but, for all that, I’ll pit mine against yours any day. We’ll see what we shall see.’ ”

“That was nine years ago. I have stayed with him for a weekend occasionally, and our relations were perfectly amicable, though his views remained unaltered. He never referred to my having matriculated, nor to my BSc. For the last three years his health had been failing, and a month ago he died.

“I am now coming to the point of my visit. My uncle left a most extraordinary will. By its terms, Crabtree Manor and its contents are to be at my disposal for a year from his death—‘during which time my clever niece may prove her wits,’ the actual words run. At the end of that period, ‘my wits having been proved better than hers,’ the house and all my uncle’s large fortune pass to various charitable institutions.”

“That is a little hard on you, mademoiselle, seeing that you were Mr. Marsh’s only blood relation.”

“I do not look on it in that way. Uncle Andrew warned me fairly, and I chose my own path. Since I would not fall in with his wishes, he was at perfect liberty to leave his money to whom he pleased.”

“Was the will drawn up by a lawyer?”

“No; it was written on a printed will-form and witnessed by the man and his wife who live at the house and do for my uncle.”

“There might be a possibility of upsetting such a will?”

“I would not even attempt to do such a thing.”

“You regard it then as a sporting challenge on the part of your uncle?”

“That is exactly how I look upon it.”

“It bears that interpretation, certainly,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Somewhere in this rambling old manor house your uncle has concealed either a sum of money in notes or possibly a second will, and has given you a year in which to exercise your ingenuity to find it.”

“Exactly, Monsieur Poirot; and I am paying you the compliment of assuming that your ingenuity will be greater than mine.”

“Eh, eh! but that is very charming of you. My grey cells are at your disposal. You have made no search yourself?”

“Only a cursory one; but I have too much respect for my uncle’s undoubted abilities to fancy that the task will be an easy one.”

“Have you the will or a copy of it with you?”

Miss March handed a document across the table. Poirot ran through it, nodding to himself.

"Made three years ago. Dated March 25; and the time is given also—11 A.M.—that is very suggestive. It narrows the field of search. Assuredly it is another will we have to seek for. A will made even half an hour later would upset this. Eh bien, mademoiselle, it is a problem charming and ingenious that you have presented to me here. I shall have all the pleasure in the world in solving it for you. Granted that your uncle was a man of ability, his grey cells cannot have been of the quality of Hercule Poirot's!"

(Really, Poirot's vanity is blatant!)

"Fortunately, I have nothing of moment on hand at the minute. Hastings and I will go down to Crabtree Manor tonight. The man and wife who attended on your uncle are still there, I presume?"

"Yes, their name is Baker."

II

The following morning saw us started on the hunt proper. We had arrived late the night before. Mr. and Mrs. Baker, having received a telegram from Miss Marsh, were expecting us. They were a pleasant couple, the man gnarled and pink-cheeked, like a shrivelled pippin, and his wife a woman of vast proportion and true Devonshire calm.

Tired with our journey and the eight-mile drive from the station, we had retired at once to bed after a supper of roast chicken, apple pie, and Devonshire cream. We had now disposed of an excellent breakfast, and were sitting in a small panelled room which had been the late Mr. Marsh's study and living room. A rolltop desk stuffed with papers, all neatly docketed, stood against the wall, and a big leather armchair showed plainly that it had been its owner's constant resting-place. A big chintz-covered settee ran along the opposite wall, and the deep low window seats were covered with the same faded chintz of an old-fashioned pattern.

"Eh bien, mon ami," said Poirot, lighting one of his tiny cigarettes, "we must map out our plan of campaign. Already I have made a rough survey of the house, but I am of the opinion that any clue will be found in this room. We shall have to go through the documents in the desk with meticulous care. Naturally, I do not expect to find the will amongst them, but it is likely that some apparently innocent paper may conceal the clue to its hiding place. But first we must have a little information. Ring the bell, I pray of you.”

I did so. While we were waiting for it to be answered, Poirot walked up and down, looking about him approvingly.

“A man of method, this Mr. Marsh. See how neatly the packets of papers are docketed; then the key to each drawer has its ivory label—so has the key of the china cabinet on the wall; and see with what precision the china within is arranged. It rejoices the heart. Nothing here offends the eye—”

He came to an abrupt pause, as his eye was caught by the key of the desk itself, to which a dirty envelope was affixed. Poirot frowned at it and withdrew it from the lock. On it were scrawled the words: “Key of Roll Top Desk,” in a crabbed handwriting, quite unlike the neat superscriptions on the other keys.

“An alien note,” said Poirot, frowning. “I could swear that here we have no longer the personality of Mr. Marsh. But who else has been in the house? Only Miss Marsh, and she, if I mistake not, is also a young lady of method and order.”

Baker came in answer to the bell.

“Will you fetch madame your wife, and answer a few questions?”

Baker departed, and in a few moments returned with Mrs. Baker, wiping her hands on her apron and beaming all over her face.

In a few clear words Poirot set forth the object of his mission. The Bakers were immediately sympathetic.

“Us don’t want to see Miss Violet done out of what’s hers,” declared the woman. “Cruel hard ’twould be for hospitals to get it all.”

Poirot proceeded with his questions. Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Baker remembered perfectly witnessing the will. Baker had previously been sent into the neighbouring town to get two printed will forms.

“Two?” said Poirot sharply.

“Yes, sir, for safety like, I suppose, in case he should spoil one—and sure enough, so he did do. Us had signed one—”

“What time of day was that?”

Baker scratched his head, but his wife was quicker.

“Why, to be sure, I’d just put the milk on for the cocoa at eleven. Don’t ee remember? It had all boiled over on the stove when us got back to kitchen.”

“And afterwards?”

“ ’Twould be about an hour later. Us had to go in again. ‘I’ve made a mistake,’ said old master, ‘had to tear the whole thing up. I’ll trouble you to sign again,’ and us did. And afterwards master gave us a tidy sum of money each. ‘I’ve left you nothing in my will,’ says he, ‘but each year I live you’ll have this to be a nest egg when I’m gone’: and sure enough, so he did.”

Poirot reflected.

“After you had signed the second time, what did Mr. Marsh do? Do you know?”

“Went out to the village to pay tradesmen’s books.”

That did not seem very promising. Poirot tried another tack. He held out the key of the desk.

“Is that your master’s writing?”

I may have imagined it, but I fancied that a moment or two elapsed before Baker replied: “Yes, sir, it is.”

“He’s lying,” I thought. “But why?”

“Has your master let the house?—have there been any strangers in it during the last three years?”

“No, sir.”

“No visitors?”

“Only Miss Violet.”

“No strangers of any kind been inside this room?”

“No, sir.”

“You forget the workmen, Jim,” his wife reminded him.

“Workmen?” Poirot wheeled round on her. “What workmen?”

The woman explained that about two years and a half ago workmen had been in the house to do certain repairs. She was quite vague as to what the repairs were. Her view seemed to be that the whole thing was a fad of her master’s and quite unnecessary. Part of the time the workmen had been in the study; but what they had done there she could not say, as her master had not let either of them into the room whilst the work was in progress. Unfortunately, they could not remember the name of the firm employed, beyond the fact that it was a Plymouth one.

“We progress, Hastings,” said Poirot, rubbing his hands as the Bakers left the room. “Clearly he made a second will and then had workmen from Plymouth in to make a suitable hiding place. Instead of wasting time taking up the floor and tapping the walls, we will go to Plymouth.”

With a little trouble, we were able to get the information we wanted. After one or two essays we found the firm employed by Mr. Marsh.

Their employees had all been with them many years, and it was easy to find the two men who had worked under Mr. Marsh’s orders. They remembered the job perfectly. Amongst various other minor jobs, they had taken up one of the bricks of the old-fashioned fireplace, made a cavity beneath, and so cut the brick that it was impossible to see the join. By pressing on the second brick from the end, the whole thing was raised. It had been quite a complicated piece of work, and the old gentleman had been very fussy about it. Our informant was a man called Coghan, a big, gaunt man with a grizzled moustache. He seemed an intelligent fellow.

We returned to Crabtree Manor in high spirits, and, locking the study door, proceeded to put our newly acquired knowledge into effect. It was impossible to see any sign on the bricks, but when we pressed in the manner indicated, a deep cavity was at once disclosed.

Eagerly Poirot plunged in his hand. Suddenly his face fell from complacent elation to consternation. All he held was a charred fragment of stiff paper. But for it, the cavity was empty.

“Sacre!” cried Poirot angrily. “Someone has been before us.”

We examined the scrap of paper anxiously. Clearly it was a fragment of what we sought. A portion of Baker’s signature remained, but no indication of what the terms of the will had been.

Poirot sat back on his heels. His expression would have been comical if we had not been so overcome. “I understand it not,” he growled. “Who destroyed this? And what was their object?”

“The Bakers?” I suggested.

“Pourquoi? Neither will makes any provision for them, and they are more likely to be kept on with Miss Marsh than if the place became the property of a hospital. How could it be to anyone’s advantage to destroy the will? The hospitals benefit—yes; but one cannot suspect institutions.”

“Perhaps the old man changed his mind and destroyed it himself,” I suggested.

Poirot rose to his feet, dusting his knees with his usual care.

“That may be,” he admitted, “one of your more sensible observations, Hastings. Well, we can do no more here. We have done all that mortal man can do. We have successfully pitted our wits against the late Andrew Marsh’s; but, unfortunately, his niece is not better off for our success.”

By driving to the station at once, we were just able to catch a train to London, though not the principal express. Poirot was sad and dissatisfied. For my part, I was tired and dozed in a corner. Suddenly, as we were just moving out of Taunton, Poirot uttered a piercing squeal.

“Vite, Hastings! Awake and jump! But jump I say!”

Before I knew where I was we were standing on the platform, bareheaded and minus our valises, whilst the train disappeared into the night. I was furious. But Poirot paid no attention.

“Imbecile that I have been!” he cried. “Triple imbecile! Not again will I vaunt my little grey cells!”

“That’s a good job at any rate,” I said grumpily. “But what is this all about?”

As usual, when following out his own ideas, Poirot paid absolutely no attention to me.

“The tradesmen’s books—I have left them entirely out of account? Yes, but where? Where? Never mind, I cannot be mistaken. We must return at once.”

Easier said than done. We managed to get a slow train to Exeter, and there Poirot hired a car. We arrived back at Crabtree Manor in the small hours of the morning. I pass over the bewilderment of the Bakers when we had at last aroused them. Paying no attention to anybody, Poirot strode at once to the study.

“I have been, not a triple imbecile, but thirty-six times one, my friend,” he deigned to remark. “Now, behold!”

Going straight to the desk he drew out the key, and detached the envelope from it. I stared at him stupidly. How could he possibly hope to find a big will form in that tiny envelope? With great care he cut open the envelope, laying it out flat. Then he lighted the fire and held the plain inside surface of the envelope to the flame. In a few minutes faint characters began to appear.

“Look, mon ami! ” cried Poirot in triumph.

I looked. There were just a few lines of faint writing stating briefly that he left everything to his niece, Violet Marsh. It was dated March 25 12:30 p.m., and witnessed by Albert Pike, confectioner, and Jessie Pike, married woman.

“But is it legal?” I gasped.

“As far as I know, there is no law against writing your will in a blend of disappearing and sympathetic ink. The intention of the testator is clear, and the beneficiary is his only living relation. But the cleverness of him! He foresaw every step that a searcher would take—that I, miserable imbecile, took. He gets two will forms, makes the servants sign twice, then sallies out with his will written on the inside of a dirty envelope and a fountain pen containing his little ink mixture. On some excuse he gets the confectioner and his wife to sign their names under his own signature, then he ties it to the key of his desk and chuckles to himself. If his niece sees through his little ruse, she will have justified her choice of life and elaborate education and be thoroughly welcome to his money.”

“She didn’t see through it, did she?” I said slowly. “It seems rather unfair. The old man really won.”

“But no, Hastings. It is your wits that go astray. Miss Marsh proved the astuteness of her wits and the value of the higher education for women by at once putting the matter in my hands. Always employ the expert. She has amply proved her right to the money.”

I wonder—I very much wonder—what old Andrew Marsh would have thought!

Twelve

THE VEILED LADY

I had noticed that for some time Poirot had been growing increasingly dissatisfied and restless. We had had no interesting cases of late, nothing on which my little friend could exercise his keen wits and remarkable powers of deduction. This morning he flung down the newspaper with an impatient "Tchah! "—a favourite exclamation of his which sounded exactly like a cat sneezing.

"They fear me, Hastings; the criminals of your England they fear me! When the cat is there, the little mice, they come no more to the cheese!"

"I don't suppose the greater part of them even know of your existence," I said, laughing.

Poirot looked at me reproachfully. He always imagines that the whole world is thinking and talking of Hercule Poirot. He had certainly made a name for himself in London, but I could hardly believe that his existence struck terror into the criminal world.

"What about that daylight robbery of jewels in Bond Street the other day?" I asked.

"A neat coup," said Poirot approvingly, "though not in my line. Pas de finesse, seulement de l'audace! A man with a loaded cane smashes the plate-glass window of a jeweller's shop and grabs a number of precious stones. Worthy citizens immediately seize him; a policeman arrives. He is caught red-handed with the jewels on him. He is marched off to the police, and then it is discovered that the stones are paste. He has passed the real ones to a confederate—one of the aforementioned worthy citizens. He will go to prison—true; but when he comes out, there will be a nice little fortune awaiting him. Yes, not badly imagined. But I could do better than that. Sometimes, Hastings, I regret that I am of such a moral disposition. To work against the law, it would be pleasing, for a change."

"Cheer up, Poirot; you know you are unique in your own line."

"But what is there on hand in my own line?"

I picked up the paper.

"Here's an Englishman mysteriously done to death in Holland," I said.

"They always say that—and later they find that he ate the tinned fish and that his death is perfectly natural."

"Well, if you're determined to grouse!"

"Tiens! " said Poirot, who had strolled across to the window. "Here in the street is what they call in novels a 'heavily veiled lady.' She mounts the steps; she rings the bell—she comes to consult us. Here is a possibility of something interesting. When one is as young and pretty as that one, one does not veil the face except for a big affair."

A minute later our visitor was ushered in. As Poirot had said, she was indeed heavily veiled. It was impossible to distinguish her features until she raised her veil of black Spanish lace. Then I saw that Poirot's intuition had been right; the lady was extremely pretty, with fair hair and blue eyes. From the costly simplicity of her attire, I deduced at once that she belonged to the upper strata of society.

"Monsieur Poirot," said the lady in a soft, musical voice, "I am in great trouble. I can hardly believe that you can help me, but I have heard such wonderful things of you that I come literally as the last hope to beg you to do the impossible."

"The impossible, it pleases me always," said Poirot. "Continue, I beg of you, mademoiselle."

Our fair guest hesitated.

"But you must be frank," added Poirot. "You must not leave me in the dark on any point."

“I will trust you,” said the girl suddenly. “You have heard of Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan?”

I looked up with keen interest. The announcement of Lady Millicent’s engagement to the young Duke of Southshire had appeared a few days previously. She was, I knew, the fifth daughter of an impecunious Irish peer, and the Duke of Southshire was one of the best matches in England.

“I am Lady Millicent,” continued the girl. “You may have read of my engagement. I should be one of the happiest girls alive; but oh, M. Poirot, I am in terrible trouble! There is a man, a horrible man—his name is Lavington; and he—I hardly know how to tell you. There was a letter I wrote—I was only sixteen at the time; and he—he—”

“A letter that you wrote to this Mr. Lavington?”

“Oh no—not to him! To a young soldier—I was very fond of him—he was killed in the war.”

I understand,” said Poirot kindly.

“It was a foolish letter, an indiscreet letter, but indeed, M. Poirot, nothing more. But there are phrases in it which—which might bear a different interpretation.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “And this letter has come into the possession of Mr. Lavington?”

“Yes, and he threatens, unless I pay him an enormous sum of money, a sum that is quite impossible for me to raise, to send it to the Duke.”

“The dirty swine!” I ejaculated. “I beg your pardon, Lady Millicent.”

“Would it not be wiser to confess all to your future husband?”

“I dare not, M. Poirot. The Duke is a rather peculiar character, jealous and suspicious and prone to believe the worst. I might as well break off my engagement at once.”

"Dear, dear," said Poirot with an expressive grimace. "And what do you want me to do, milady?"

"I thought perhaps that I might ask Mr. Lavington to call upon you. I would tell him that you were empowered by me to discuss the matter. Perhaps you could reduce his demands."

"What sum does he mention?"

"Twenty thousand pounds—an impossibility. I doubt if I could raise a thousand, even."

"You might perhaps borrow the money on the prospect of your approaching marriage—but I doubt if you could get hold of half that sum. Besides—eh bien, it is repungnant to me that you should pay! No, the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot shall defeat your enemies! Send me this Mr. Lavington. Is he likely to bring the letter with him?"

The girl shook her head.

"I do not think so. He is very cautious."

"I suppose there is no doubt that he really has it?"

"He showed it to me when I went to his house."

"You went to his house? That was very imprudent, milady."

"Was it? I was so desperate. I hoped my entreaties might move him."

"Oh, là là! The Lavingtons of this world are not moved by entreaties! He would welcome them as showing how much importance you attached to the document. Where does he live, this fine gentleman?"

"At Buona Vista, Wimbledon. I went there after dark—" Poirot groaned. "I declared that I would inform the police in the end, but he only laughed in a horrid, sneering manner. 'By all means, my dear Lady Millicent, do so if you wish,' he said."

“Yes, it is hardly an affair for the police,” murmured Poirot.

“ ‘But I think you will be wiser than that,’ he continued. ‘See, here is your letter—in this little Chinese puzzle box!’ He held it so that I could see. I tried to snatch at it, but he was too quick for me. With a horrid smile he folded it up and replaced it in the little wooden box. ‘It will be quite safe here, I assure you,’ he said, ‘and the box itself lives in such a clever place that you would never find it.’ My eyes turned to the small wall safe, and he shook his head and laughed. ‘I have a better safe than that,’ he said. Oh, he was odious! M. Poirot, do you think that you can help me?”

“Have faith in Papa Poirot. I will find a way.”

These reassurances were all very well, I thought, as Poirot gallantly ushered his fair client down the stairs, but it seemed to me that we had a tough nut to crack. I said as much to Poirot when he returned. He nodded ruefully.

“Yes—the solution does not leap to the eye. He has the whip hand, this M. Lavington. For the moment I do not see how we are to circumvent him.”

II

Mr. Lavington duly called upon us that afternoon. Lady Millicent had spoken truly when she described him as an odious man. I felt a positive tingling in the end of my boot, so keen was I to kick him down the stairs. He was blustering and overbearing in manner, laughed Poirot’s gentle suggestions to scorn, and generally showed himself as master of the situation. I could not help feeling that Poirot was hardly appearing at his best. He looked discouraged and crestfallen.

“Well, gentlemen,” said Lavington, as he took up his hat, “we don’t seem to be getting much further. The case stands like this: I’ll let the Lady Millicent off cheap, as she is such a charming young lady.” He leered odiously. “We’ll say eighteen thousand. I’m off to Paris today—a little piece of business to attend to over there. I shall be back on Tuesday. Unless the money is paid by Tuesday evening, the letter goes to the Duke. Don’t tell me Lady Millicent can’t raise the money. Some of her gentlemen friends would be only too willing to oblige such a pretty woman with a loan—if she goes the right way about it.”

My face flushed, and I took a step forward, but Lavington had wheeled out of the room as he finished his sentence.

“My God!” I cried. “Something has got to be done. You seem to be taking this lying down, Poirot.”

“You have an excellent heart, my friend—but your grey cells are in a deplorable condition. I have no wish to impress Mr. Lavington with my capabilities. The more pusillanimous he thinks me, the better.”

“Why?”

“It is curious,” murmured Poirot reminiscently, “that I should have uttered a wish to work against the law just before Lady Millicent arrived!”

“You are going to burgle his house while he is away?” I gasped.

“Sometimes, Hastings, your mental processes are amazingly quick.”

“Suppose he takes the letter with him?”

Poirot shook his head.

“That is very unlikely. He has evidently a hiding place in his house that he fancies to be pretty impregnable.”

“When do we—er—do the deed?”

“Tomorrow night. We will start from here about eleven o’clock.”

III

At the time appointed I was ready to set off. I had donned a dark suit, and a soft dark hat. Poirot beamed kindly on me.

“You have dressed the part, I see,” he observed. “Come let us take the underground to Wimbledon.”

“Aren’t we going to take anything with us? Tools to break in with?”

“My dear Hastings, Hercule Poirot does not adopt such crude methods.”

I retired, snubbed, but my curiosity was alert.

It was just on midnight that we entered the small suburban garden of Buona Vista. The house was dark and silent. Poirot went straight to a window at the back of the house, raised the sash noiselessly and bade me enter.

“How did you know this window would be open?” I whispered, for really it seemed uncanny.

“Because I sawed through the catch this morning.”

“What?”

“But yes, it was most simple. I called, presented a fictitious card and one of Inspector Japp’s official ones. I said I had been sent, recommended by Scotland Yard, to attend to some burglar-proof fastenings that Mr. Lavington wanted fixed while he was away. The housekeeper welcomed me with enthusiasm. It seems they have had two attempted burglaries here lately—evidently our little idea has occurred to other clients of Mr. Lavington’s—with nothing of value taken. I examined all the windows, made my little arrangement, forbade the servants to touch the windows until tomorrow, as they were electrically connected up, and withdrew gracefully.”

“Really, Poirot, you are wonderful.”

“Mon ami, it was of the simplest. Now, to work! The servants sleep at the top of the house, so we will run little risk of disturbing them.”

“I presume the safe is built into the wall somewhere?”

“Safe? Fiddlesticks! There is no safe. Mr. Lavington is an intelligent man. You will see, he will have devised a hiding place much more intelligent than a safe. A safe is the first thing everyone looks for.”

Whereupon we began a systematic search of the entire place. But after several hours” ransacking of the house, our search had been unavailing. I saw symptoms of anger gathering on Poirot’s face.

“Ah, sapristi, is Hercule Poirot to be beaten? Never! Let us be calm. Let us reflect. Let us reason. Let us—enfin!—employ our little grey cells!”

He paused for some moments, bending his brows in concentration; then the green light I knew so well stole into his eyes.

“I have been an imbecile! The kitchen!”

“The kitchen,” I cried. “But that’s impossible. The servants!”

“Exactly. Just what ninety-nine people out of a hundred would say! And for that very reason the kitchen is the ideal place to choose. It is full of various homely objects. En avant, to the kitchen!”

I followed him, completely sceptical, and watched whilst he dived into bread bins, tapped saucepans, and put his head into the gas-oven. In the end, tired of watching him, I strolled back to the study. I was convinced that there, and there only, would we find the cache. I made a further minute search, noted that it was now a quarter past four and that therefore it would soon be growing light, and then went back to the kitchen regions.

To my utter amazement, Poirot was now standing right inside the coal bin, to the utter ruin of his neat light suit. He made a grimace.

“But yes, my friend, it is against all my instincts so to ruin my appearance, but what will you?”

“But Lavington can’t have buried it under the coal?”

“If you would use your eyes, you would see that it is not the coal that I examine.”

I then saw on a shelf behind the coal bunker some logs of wood were piled. Poirot was dexterously taking them down one by one. Suddenly he uttered a low exclamation.

“Your knife, Hastings!”

I handed it to him. He appeared to inset it in the wood, and suddenly the log split in two. It had been neatly sawn in half and a cavity hollowed out in the centre. From this cavity Poirot took a little wooden box of Chinese make.

“Well done!” I cried, carried out of myself.

“Gently, Hastings! Do not raise your voice too much. Come, let us be off, before the daylight is upon us.”

Slipping the box into his pocket, he leaped lightly out of the coal-bunker, brushed himself down as well as he could, and leaving the house by the same way as we had come, we walked rapidly in the direction of London.

“But what an extraordinary place!” I expostulated. “Anyone might have used the log.”

“In July, Hastings? And it was at the bottom of the pile—a very ingenious hiding place. Ah, here is a taxi! Now for home, a wash, and a refreshing sleep.”

IV

After the excitement of the night, I slept late. When I finally strolled into our sitting room just before one o’clock, I was surprised to see Poirot, leaning back in an armchair, the Chinese box open beside him, calmly reading the letter he had taken from it.

He smiled at me affectionately, and tapped the sheet he held.

“She was right, the Lady Millicent; never would the Duke have pardoned this letter! It contains some of the most extravagant terms of affection I have ever come across.”

“Really, Poirot,” I said, rather disgustedly, “I don’t think you should have read the letter. “That’s the sort of thing that isn’t done.”

“It is done by Hercule Poirot,” replied my friend imperturbably.

“And another thing,” I said. “I don’t think using Japp’s official card yesterday was quite playing the game.”

“But I was not playing a game, Hastings. I was conducting a case.”

I shrugged my shoulders. One can’t argue with a point of view.

“A step on the stairs,” said Poirot. “That will be Lady Millicent.”

Our fair client came in with an anxious expression on her face which changed to one of delight on seeing the letter and box which Poirot held up.

“Oh, M. Poirot. How wonderful of you! How did you do it?”

“By rather reprehensible methods, milady. But Mr. Lavington will not prosecute. This is your letter, is it not?”

She glanced through it.

“Yes. Oh, how can I ever thank you! You are a wonderful, wonderful man. Where was it hidden?”

Poirot told her.

“How very clever of you!” She took up the small box from the table. “I shall keep this as a souvenir.”

“I had hoped, milady, that you would permit me to keep it—also as a souvenir.”

“I hope to send you a better souvenir than that—on my wedding day. You shall not find me ungrateful, M. Poirot.”

"The pleasure of doing you a service will be more to me than a cheque—so you permit that I retain the box."

"Oh no, M. Poirot, I simply must have that," she cried laughingly.

She stretched out her hand, but Poirot was before her. His hand closed over it.

"I think not." His voice had changed.

"What do you mean?" Her voice seemed to have grown sharper.

"At any rate, permit me to abstract its further contents. You observed that the original cavity has been reduced by half. In the top half, the compromising letter; in the bottom—"

He made a nimble gesture, then held out his hand. On the palm were four large glittering stones, and two big milky white pearls.

"The jewels stolen in Bond Street the other day, I rather fancy," murmured Poirot. "Japp will tell us."

To my utter amazement, Japp himself stepped out from Poirot's bedroom.

"An old friend of yours, I believe," said Poirot politely to Lady Millicent.

"Nabbed, by the Lord!" said Lady Millicent, with a complete change of manner. "You nippy old devil!" She looked at Poirot with almost affectionate awe.

"Well, Gertie, my dear," said Japp, "the game's up this time, I fancy. Fancy seeing you again so soon! We've got your pal, too, the gentleman who called here the other day calling himself Lavington. As for Lavington himself, alias Croker, alias Reed, I wonder which of the gang it was who stuck a knife into him the other day in Holland? Thought he'd got the goods with him, didn't you? And he hadn't. He double-crossed you properly—hid 'em in his own house. You had two fellows looking for them, and then you tackled M. Poirot here, and by a piece of amazing luck he found them."

“You do like talking, don’t you?” said the late Lady Millicent. “Easy there, now. I’ll go quietly. You can’t say that I’m not the perfect lady. Ta-ta, all!”

“The shoes were wrong,” said Poirot dreamily, while I was still too stupefied to speak. “I have made my little observations of your English nation, and a lady, a born lady, is always particular about her shoes. She may have shabby clothes, but she will be well shod. Now, this Lady Millicent had smart, expensive clothes, and cheap shoes. It was not likely that either you or I should have seen the real Lady Millicent; she has been very little in London, and this girl had a certain superficial resemblance which would pass well enough. As I say, the shoes first awakened my suspicions, and then her story—and her veil—were a little melodramatic, eh? The Chinese box with a bogus compromising letter in the top must have been known to all the gang, but the log of wood was the late Mr. Lavington’s idea. Eh, par example, Hastings, I hope you will not again wound my feelings as you did yesterday by saying that I am unknown to the criminal classes. Ma foi, they even employ me when they themselves fail!”

Thirteen

THE LOST MINE

I laid down my bank book with a sigh.

“It is a curious thing,” I observed, “but my overdraft never seems to grow any less.”

“And it perturbs you not? Me, if I had an overdraft, never should I close my eyes all night,” declared Poirot.

“You deal in comfortable balances, I suppose!” I retorted.

“Four hundred and forty-four pounds, four and fourpence,” said Poirot with some complacency. “A neat figure, is it not?”

“It must be tact on the part of your bank manager. He is evidently acquainted with your passion for symmetrical details. What about investing, say, three hundred of it in the Porcupine oil fields? Their prospectus, which is advertised in the papers today, says that they will pay one hundred per cent dividends next year.”

“Not for me,” said Poirot, shaking his head. “I like not the sensational. For me the safe, the prudent investment—les rentes, the consols, the—how do you call it?—the conversion.”

“Have you never made a speculative investment?”

“No, mon ami,” replied Poirot severely. “I have not. And the only shares I own which have not what you call the gilded edge are fourteen thousand shares in the Burma Mines Ltd.”

Poirot paused with an air of waiting to be encouraged to go on.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“And for them I paid no cash—no, they were the reward of the exercise of my little grey cells. You would like to hear the story? Yes?”

“Of course I would.”

“These mines are situated in the interior of Burma about two hundred miles inland from Rangoon. They were discovered by the Chinese in the fifteenth century and worked down to the time of the Mohammedan Rebellion, being finally abandoned in the year 1868. The Chinese extracted the rich lead-silver ore from the upper part of the ore body, smelting it for the silver alone, and leaving large quantities of rich lead-bearing slag. This, of course, was soon discovered when prospecting work was carried out in Burma, but owing to the fact that the old workings had become full of loose filling and water, all attempts to find the source of the ore proved fruitless. Many parties were sent out by syndicates, and they dug over a large area, but this rich prize still eluded them. But a representative of one of the syndicates got on the track of a Chinese family who were supposed to have still kept a record of the situation of the mine. The present head of the family was one Wu Ling.”

“What a fascinating page of commercial romance!” I exclaimed.

“Is it not? Ah, mon ami, one can have romance without golden-haired girls of matchless beauty—no, I am wrong; it is auburn hair that so excites you always. You remember—”

“Go on with the story,” I said hastily.

“Eh bien, my friend, this Wu Ling was approached. He was an estimable merchant, much respected in the province where he lived. He admitted at once that he owned the documents in question, and was perfectly prepared to negotiate for this sale, but he objected to dealing with anyone other than principals. Finally it was arranged that he should journey to England and meet the directors of an important company.

“Wu Ling made the journey to England in the SS Assunta, and the Assunta docked at Southampton on a cold, foggy morning in November. One of the directors, Mr. Pearson, went down to Southampton to meet the boat, but owing to the fog, the train down was very much delayed, and by the time he arrived, Wu Ling had disembarked and left by special train for London. Mr. Pearson returned to town somewhat annoyed, as he had no idea where the Chinaman proposed to stay. Later in the day, however, the offices of the company were rung up on the telephone. Wu Ling was staying at the Russell Square Hotel. He was feeling somewhat unwell after the voyage, but declared himself perfectly able to attend the board meeting on the following day.

"The meeting of the board took place at eleven o'clock. When half past eleven came, and Wu Ling had not put in an appearance, the secretary rang up the Russell Hotel. In answer to his inquiries, he was told that the Chinaman had gone out with a friend about half past ten. It seemed clear that he had started out with the intention of coming to the meeting, but the morning wore away, and he did not appear. It was, of course, possible that he had lost his way, being unacquainted with London, but at a late hour that night he had not returned to the hotel. Thoroughly alarmed now, Mr. Pearson put matters in the hands of the police. On the following day, there was still no trace of the missing man, but towards evening of the day after that again, a body was found in the Thames which proved to be that of the ill-fated Chinaman. Neither on the body, nor in the luggage at the hotel, was there any trace of the papers relating to the mine.

"At this juncture, mon ami, I was brought into the affair. Mr. Pearson called upon me. While profoundly shocked by the death of Wu Ling, his chief anxiety was to recover the papers which were the object of the Chinaman's visit to England. The main anxiety of the police, of course, would be to track down the murderer—the recovery of the papers would be a secondary consideration. What he wanted me to do was to cooperate with the police while acting in the interests of the company.

"I consented readily enough. It was clear that there were two fields of search open to me. On the one hand, I might look among the employees of the company who knew of the Chinaman's coming; on the other, among the passengers on the boat who might have been acquainted with his mission. I started with the second, as being a narrower field of search. In this I coincided with Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the case—a man altogether different from our friend Japp, conceited, ill-mannered and quite insufferable. Together we interviewed the officers of the ship. They had little to tell us. Wu Ling had kept much to himself on the voyage. He had been intimate with but two of the other passengers—one a broken-down European named Dyer who appeared to bear a somewhat unsavoury reputation, the other a young bank clerk named Charles Lester, who was returning from Hong Kong. We were lucky enough to obtain snapshots of both these men. At the moment there seemed little doubt that if either of the two was implicated, Dyer was the man. He was known to be mixed up with a gang of Chinese crooks, and was altogether a most likely suspect.

“Our next step was to visit the Russell Square Hotel. Shown a snapshot of Wu Ling, they recognized him at once. We then showed them the snapshot of Dyer, but to our disappointment, the hall porter declared positively that that was not the man who had come to the hotel on the fatal morning. Almost as an afterthought, I produced the photograph of Lester, and to my surprise the man at once recognized it.

“ ‘Yes, sir,’ he asserted, ‘that’s the gentleman who came in at half past ten and asked for Mr. Wu Ling, and afterwards went out with him.’

“The affair was progressing. Our next move was to interview Mr. Charles Lester. He met us with the utmost frankness, was desolated to hear of the Chinaman’s untimely death, and put himself at our disposal in every way. His story was as follows: By arrangement with Wu Ling, he called for him at the hotel at ten-thirty. Wu Ling, however, did not appear. Instead, his servant came, explained that his master had had to go out, and offered to conduct the young man to where his master now was. Suspecting nothing, Lester agreed, and the Chinaman procured a taxi. They drove for some time in the direction of the docks. Suddenly becoming mistrustful, Lester stopped the taxi and got out, disregarding the servant’s protests. That, he assured us, was all he knew.

“Apparently satisfied, we thanked him and took our leave. His story was soon proved to be a somewhat inaccurate one. To begin with, Wu Ling had had no servant with him, either on the boat or at the hotel. In the second place, the taxi driver who had driven the two men on that morning came forward. Far from Lester’s having left the taxi en route, he and the Chinese gentleman had driven to a certain unsavoury dwelling place in Limehouse, right in the heart of Chinatown. The place in question was more or less well known as an opium-den of the lowest description. The two gentlemen had gone in—about an hour later the English gentleman, whom he identified from the photograph, came out alone. He looked very pale and ill, and directed the taxi man to take him to the nearest underground station.

“Inquiries were made about Charles Lester’s standing, and it was found that, though bearing an excellent character, he was heavily in debt, and had a secret passion for gambling. Dyer, of course, was not lost sight of. It seemed just faintly possible that he might have impersonated the other man, but that idea was proved utterly groundless. His alibi for the whole of the day in question was absolutely unimpeachable. Of course, the proprietor of the opium den denied everything with Oriental stolidity. He had never seen Charles Lester. No two gentlemen had been to the place that morning. In any case, the police were wrong: no opium was ever smoked there.

“His denials, however well meant, did little to help Charles Lester. He was arrested for the murder of Wu Ling. A search of his effects was made, but no papers relating to the mine were discovered. The proprietor of the opium den was also taken into custody, but a cursory raid of his premises yielded nothing. Not even a stick of opium rewarded the zeal of the police.

“In the meantime my friend Mr. Pearson was in a great state of agitation. He strode up and down my room, uttering great lamentations.

“ ‘But you must have some ideas, M. Poirot!’ he kept urging. ‘Surely you must have some ideas!’

“ ‘Certainly I have ideas,’ I replied cautiously. ‘That is the trouble—one has too many; therefore they all lead in different directions.’

“ ‘For instance?’ he suggested.

“ ‘For instance—the taxi-driver. We have only his word for it that he drove the two men to that house. That is one idea. Then—was it really that house they went to? Supposing that they left the taxi there, passed through the house and out by another entrance and went elsewhere?’

"Mr. Pearson seemed struck by that.

" 'But you do nothing but sit and think? Can't we do something?'

"He was of an impatient temperament, you comprehend.

" 'Monsieur,' I said with dignity, 'It is not for Hercule Poirot to run up and down the evil-smelling streets of Limehouse like a little dog of no breeding. Be calm. My agents are at work.'

"On the following day I had news for him. The two men had indeed passed through the house in question, but their real objective was a small eating house close to the river. They were seen to pass in there, and Lester came out alone.

"And then, figure to yourself, Hastings, an idea of the most unreasonable seized this Mr. Pearson! Nothing would suit him but that we should go ourselves to this eating house and make investigations. I argued and prayed, but he would not listen. He talked of disguising himself—he even suggested that I—I should—I hesitate to say it—should shave off my moustache! Yes, rien que ça! I pointed out to him that that was an idea ridiculous and absurd. One destroys not a thing of beauty wantonly. Besides, shall not a Belgian gentleman with a moustache desire to see life and smoke opium just as readily as one without a moustache?

"Eh bien, he gave in on that, but he still insisted on his project. He turned up that evening—Mon dieu, what a figure! He wore what he called the 'pea jacket,' his chin, it was dirty and unshaved; he had a scarf of the vilest that offended the nose. And figure to yourself, he was enjoying himself! Truly, the English are mad! He made some changes in my own appearance. I permitted it. Can one argue with a maniac? We started out—after all, could I let him go alone, a child dressed up to act the charades?"

"Of course you couldn't," I replied.

"To continue—we arrived. Mr. Pearson talked English of the strangest. He represented himself to be a man of the sea. He talked of 'lubbers' and 'focselles' and I know not what. It was a low little room with many Chinese in it. We ate of peculiar dishes. Ah, Dieu, mon estomac! ” Poirot clasped that portion of his anatomy before continuing. “Then there came to us the proprietor, a Chinaman with a face of evil smiles.

“ ‘You gentlemen no likee food here,’ he said. ‘You come for what you likee better. Piecee pipe, eh?’

“Mr. Pearson, he gave me the great kick under the table. (He had on the boots of the sea too!) And he said: ‘I don’t mind if I do, John. Lead ahead.’

“The Chinaman smiled, and he took us through a door and to a cellar and through a trapdoor, and down some steps and up again into a room all full of divans and cushions of the most comfortable. We lay down and a Chinese boy took off our boots. It was the best moment of the evening. Then they brought us the opium pipes and cooked the opium pills, and we pretended to smoke and then to sleep and dream. But when we were alone, Mr. Pearson called softly to me, and immediately he began crawling along the floor. We went into another room where other people were asleep, and so on, until we heard two men talking. We stayed behind a curtain and listened. They were speaking of Wu Ling.

“ ‘What about the papers?’ said one.

“ ‘Mr. Lester, he takee those,’ answered the other, who was a Chinaman. ‘He say, puttee them allee in safee place—where pleeceman no lookee.’

“ ‘Ah, but he’s nabbed,’ said the first one.

“ ‘He gettee free. Pleeceman not sure he done it.’

“There was more of the same kind of thing, then apparently the two men were coming our way, and we scuttled back to our beds.

“ ‘We’d better get out of here,’ said Pearson, after a few minutes had elapsed. ‘This place isn’t healthy.’

“ ‘You are right, monsieur,’ I agreed. ‘We have played the farce long enough.’

"We succeeded in getting away, all right, paying handsomely for our smoke. Once clear of Limehouse, Pearson drew a long breath.

" 'I'm glad to get out of that,' he said. 'But it's something to be sure.'

" 'It is indeed,' I agreed. 'And I fancy that we shall not have much difficulty in finding what we want—after this evening's masquerade.'

"And there was no difficulty whatsoever," finished Poirot suddenly.

This abrupt ending seemed so extraordinary that I stared at him.

"But—but where were they?" I asked.

"In his pocket—tout simplement."

"But in whose pocket?"

"Mr. Pearson's, parbleu! " Then, observing my look of bewilderment, he continued gently: "You do not yet see it? Mr. Pearson, like Charles Lester, was in debt. Mr. Pearson, like Charles Lester, was fond of gambling. And he conceived the idea of stealing the papers from the Chinaman. He met him all right at Southampton, came up to London with him, and took him straight to Limehouse. It was foggy that day; the Chinaman would not notice where he was going. I fancy Mr. Pearson smoked the opium fairly often down there and had some peculiar friends in consequence. I do not think he meant murder. His idea was that one of the Chinamen should impersonate Wu Ling and receive the money for the sale of the document. So far, so good! But, to the Oriental mind, it was infinitely simpler to kill Wu Ling and throw his body into the river, and Pearson's Chinese accomplices followed their own methods without consulting him. Imagine, then, what you would call the 'funk bleu' of M. Pearson. Someone may have seen him in the train with Wu Ling—murder is a very different thing from simple abduction.

"His salvation lies with the Chinaman who is personating Wu Ling at the Russell Square Hotel. If only the body is not discovered too soon! Probably Wu Ling had told him of the arrangement between him and Charles Lester whereby the latter was to call for him at the hotel. Pearson sees there an excellent way of diverting suspicion from himself. Charles Lester shall be the last person to be seen in company with Wu Ling. The impersonator has orders to represent himself to Lester as the servant of Wu Ling, and to bring him as speedily as possible to Limehouse. There, very likely, he was offered a drink. The drink would be suitably drugged, and when Lester emerged an hour later, he would have a very hazy impression of what had happened. So much was this the case, that as soon as Lester learned of Wu Ling's death, he loses his nerve, and denies that he ever reached Limehouse.

"By that, of course, he plays right into Pearson's hands. But is Pearson content? No—my manner disquiets him, and he determines to complete the case against Lester. So he arranges an elaborate masquerade. Me, I am to be gulled completely. Did I not say just now that he was as a child acting the charades? Eh bien, I play my part. He goes home rejoicing. But in the morning, Inspector Miller arrives on his doorstep. The papers are found on him; the game is up. Bitterly he regrets permitting himself to play the farce with Hercule Poirot! There was only one real difficulty in the affair."

"What was that?" I demanded curiously.

"Convincing Inspector Miller! What an animal, that! Both obstinate and imbecile. And in the end he took all the credit!"

"Too bad," I cried.

"Ah, well, I had my compensations. The other directors of the Burma Mines Ltd awarded me fourteen thousand shares as a small recompense for my services. Not so bad, eh? But when investing money, keep, I beg of you, Hastings, strictly to the conservative. The things you read in the paper, they may not be true. The directors of the Porcupine—they may be so many Mr. Pearsons!"

Fourteen

THE CHOCOLATE BOX

It was a wild night. Outside, the wind howled malevolently, and the rain beat against the windows in great gusts.

Poirot and I sat facing the hearth, our legs stretched out to the cheerful blaze. Between us was a small table. On my side of it stood some carefully brewed hot toddy; on Poirot’s was a cup of thick, rich chocolate which I would not have drunk for a hundred pounds! Poirot sipped the thick brown mess in the pink china cup, and sighed with contentment.

“Quelle belle vie!” he murmured.

“Yes, it’s a good old world,” I agreed. “Here am I with a job, and a good job too! And here are you, famous—”

“Oh, mon ami! ” protested Poirot.

“But you are. And rightly so! When I think back on your long line of successes, I am positively amazed. I don’t believe you know what failure is!”

“He would be a droll kind of original who could say that!”

“No, but seriously, have you ever failed?”

“Innumerable times, my friend. What would you? La bonne chance, it cannot always be on your side. I have been called in too late. Very often another, working towards the same goal, has arrived there first. Twice have I been stricken down with illness just as I was on the point of success. One must take the downs with the ups, my friend.”

“I didn’t quite mean that,” I said. “I meant, had you ever been completely down and out over a case through your own fault?”

"Ah, I comprehend! You ask if I have ever made the complete prize ass of myself, as you say over here? Once, my friend—" A slow, reflective smile hovered over his face. "Yes, once I made a fool of myself."

He sat up suddenly in his chair.

"See here, my friend, you have, I know, kept a record of my little successes. You shall add one more story to the collection, the story of a failure!"

He leaned forward and placed a log on the fire. Then, after carefully wiping his hands on a little duster that hung on a nail by the fireplace, he leaned back and commenced his story.

That of which I tell you (said M. Poirot) took place in Belgium many years ago. It was at the time of the terrible struggle in France between church and state. M. Paul Déroulard was a French deputy of note. It was an open secret that the portfolio of a Minister awaited him. He was among the bitterest of the anti-Catholic party, and it was certain that on his accession to power, he would have to face violent enmity. He was in many ways a peculiar man. Though he neither drank nor smoked, he was nevertheless not so scrupulous in other ways. You comprehend, Hastings, c'était des femmes—toujours des femmes!

He had married some years earlier a young lady from Brussels who had brought him a substantial dot. Undoubtedly the money was useful to him in his career, as his family was not rich, though on the other hand he was entitled to call himself M. le Baron if he chose. There were no children of the marriage, and his wife died after two years—the result of a fall downstairs. Among the property which she bequeathed to him was a house on the Avenue Louise in Brussels.

It was in this house that his sudden death took place, the event coinciding with the resignation of the Minister whose portfolio he was to inherit. All the papers printed long notices of his career. His death, which had taken place quite suddenly in the evening after dinner, was attributed to heart failure.

At that time, mon ami, I was, as you know, a member of the Belgian detective force. The death of M. Paul Déroulard was not particularly interesting to me. I am, as you also know, bon catholique, and his demise seemed to me fortunate.

It was some three days afterwards, when my vacation had just begun, that I received a visitor at my own apartments—a lady, heavily veiled, but evidently quite young; and I perceived at once that she was a jeune fille tout à fait comme il faut.

“You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot?” she asked in a low sweet voice.

I bowed.

“Of the detective service?”

Again I bowed. “Be seated, I pray of you, mademoiselle,” I said.

She accepted a chair and drew aside her veil. Her face was charming, though marred with tears, and haunted as though with some poignant anxiety.

“Monsieur,” she said, “I understand that you are now taking a vacation. Therefore you will be free to take up a private case. You understand that I do not wish to call in the police.”

I shook my head. “I fear what you ask is impossible, mademoiselle. Even though on vacation, I am still of the police.”

She leaned forward. “Ecoutez, monsieur. All that I ask of you is to investigate. The result of your investigations you are at perfect liberty to report to the police. If what I believe to be true is true, we shall need all the machinery of the law.”

That placed a somewhat different complexion on the matter, and I placed myself at her service without more ado.

A slight colour rose in her cheeks. “I thank you, monsieur. It is the death of M. Paul Déroulard that I ask you to investigate.”

“Comment?” I exclaimed, surprised.

“Monsieur, I have nothing to go upon—nothing but my woman’s instinct, but I am convinced—convinced, I tell you—that M. Déroulard did not die a natural death!”

“But surely the doctors—”

“Doctors may be mistaken. He was so robust, so strong. Ah, Monsieur Poirot, I beseech of you to help me—”

The poor child was almost beside herself. She would have knelt to me. I soothed her as best I could.

“I will help you, mademoiselle. I feel almost sure that your fears are unfounded, but we will see. First, I will ask you to describe to me the inmates of the house.”

“There are the domestics, of course, Jeannette, Félice, and Denise the cook. She has been there many years; the others are simple country girls. Also there is François, but he too is an old servant. Then there is Monsieur Déroulard’s mother who lived with him, and myself. My name is Virginie Mesnard. I am a poor cousin of the late Madame Déroulard, M. Paul’s wife, and I have been a member of their ménage for over three years. I have now described to you the household. There were also two guests staying in the house.”

“And they were?”

“M. de Saint Alard, a neighbour of M. Déroulard’s in France. Also an English friend, Mr. John Wilson.”

“Are they still with you?”

“Mr. Wilson, yes, but M. de Saint Alard departed yesterday.”

“And what is your plan, Mademoiselle Mesnard?”

"If you will present yourself at the house in half an hour's time, I will have arranged some story to account for your presence. I had better represent you to be connected with journalism in some way. I shall say you have come from Paris, and that you have brought a card of introduction from M. de Saint Alard. Madame Déroulard is very feeble in health, and will pay little attention to details."

On mademoiselle's ingenious pretext I was admitted to the house, and after a brief interview with the dead deputy's mother, who was a wonderfully imposing and aristocratic figure though obviously in failing health, I was made free of the premises.

I wonder, my friend (continued Poirot), whether you can possibly figure to yourself the difficulties of my task? Here was a man whose death had taken place three days previously. If there had been foul play, only one possibility was admittable—poison! And I had no chance of seeing the body, and there was no possibility of examining, or analysing, any medium in which the poison could have been administered. There were no clues, false or otherwise, to consider. Had the man been poisoned? Had he died a natural death? I, Hercule Poirot, with nothing to help me, had to decide.

First, I interviewed the domestics, and with their aid, I recapitulated the evening. I paid especial notice to the food at dinner, and the method of serving it. The soup had been served by M. Déroulard himself from a tureen. Next a dish of cutlets, then a chicken. Finally, a compote of fruits. And all placed on the table, and served by Monsieur himself. The coffee was brought in a big pot to the dinner-table. Nothing there, mon ami—impossible to poison one without poisoning all!

After dinner Madame Déroulard had retired to her own apartments and Mademoiselle Virginie had accompanied her. The three men had adjourned to M. Déroulard's study. Here they had chatted amicably for some time, when suddenly, without any warning, the deputy had fallen heavily to the ground. M. de Saint Alard had rushed out and told François to fetch the doctor immediately. He said it was without doubt an apoplexy, explained the man. But when the doctor arrived, the patient was past help.

Mr. John Wilson, to whom I was presented by Mademoiselle Virginie, was what was known in those days as a regular John Bull Englishman, middle-aged and burly. His account, delivered in very British French, was substantially the same.

“Déroulard went very red in the face, and down he fell.”

There was nothing further to be found out there. Next I went to the scene of the tragedy, the study, and was left alone there at my own request. So far there was nothing to support Mademoiselle Mesnard’s theory. I could not but believe that it was a delusion on her part. Evidently she had entertained a romantic passion for the dead man which had not permitted her to take a normal view of the case. Nevertheless, I searched the study with meticulous care. It was just possible that a hypodermic needle might have been introduced into the dead man’s chair in such a way as to allow of a fatal injection. The minute puncture it would cause was likely to remain unnoticed. But I could discover no sign to support the theory. I flung myself down in the chair with a gesture of despair.

“Enfin, I abandon it!” I said aloud. “There is not a clue anywhere! Everything is perfectly normal.”

As I said the words, my eyes fell on a large box of chocolates standing on a table near by, and my heart gave a leap. It might not be a clue to M. Déroulard’s death, but here at least was something that was not normal. I lifted the lid. The box was full, untouched; not a chocolate was missing—but that only made the peculiarity that had caught my eye more striking. For, see you, Hastings, while the box itself was pink, the lid was blue. Now, one often sees a blue ribbon on a pink box, and vice versa, but a box of one colour, and a lid of another—no, decidedly—ça ne se voit jamais!

I did not as yet see that this little incident was of any use to me, yet I determined to investigate it as being out of the ordinary. I rang the bell for François, and asked him if his late master had been fond of sweets. A faint melancholy smile came to his lips.

“Passionately fond of them, monsieur. He would always have a box of chocolates in the house. He did not drink wine of any kind, you see.”

“Yet this box has not been touched?” I lifted the lid to show him.

“Pardon, monsieur, but that was a new box purchased on the day of his death, the other being nearly finished.”

“Then the other box was finished on the day of his death,” I said slowly.

“Yes, monsieur, I found it empty in the morning and threw it away.”

“Did M. Déroulard eat sweets at all hours of the day?”

“Usually after dinner, monsieur.”

I began to see light.

“François,” I said, “you can be discreet?”

“If there is need, monsieur.”

“Bon! Know, then, that I am of the police. Can you find me that other box?”

“Without doubt, monsieur. It will be in the dustbin.”

He departed, and returned in a few minutes with a dust-covered object. It was the duplicate of the box I held, save for the fact that this time the box was blue and the lid was pink. I thanked François, recommended him once more to be discreet, and left the house in the Avenue Louise without more ado.

Next I called upon the doctor who had attended M. Déroulard. With him I had a difficult task. He entrenched himself prettily behind a wall of learned phraseology, but I fancied that he was not quite as sure about the case as he would like to be.

“There have been many curious occurrences of the kind,” he observed, when I had managed to disarm him somewhat. “A sudden fit of anger, a violent emotion—after a heavy dinner, c’est entendu—then, with an access of rage, the blood flies to the head, and pst!—there you are!”

“But M. Déroulard had had no violent emotion.”

“No? I made sure that he had been having a stormy altercation with M. de Saint Alard.”

“Why should he?”

“C’est évident! ” The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “Was not M. de Saint Alard a Catholic of the most fanatical? Their friendship was being ruined by this question of church and state. Not a day passed without discussions. To M. de Saint Alard, Déroulard appeared almost as Antichrist.”

This was unexpected, and gave me food for thought.

“One more question, Doctor: would it be possible to introduce a fatal dose of poison into a chocolate?”

“It would be possible, I suppose,” said the doctor slowly. “Pure prussic acid would meet the case if there were no chance of evaporation, and a tiny globule of anything might be swallowed unnoticed—but it does not seem a very likely supposition. A chocolate full of morphine or strychnine—” He made a wry face. “You comprehend, M. Poirot—one bite would be enough! The unwary one would not stand upon ceremony.”

“Thank you, M. le Docteur.”

I withdrew. Next I made inquiries of the chemists, especially those in the neighbourhood of the Avenue Louise. It is good to be of the police. I got the information I wanted without any trouble. Only in one case could I hear of any poison having been supplied to the house in question. This was some eye drops of atropine sulphate for Madame Déroulard. Atropine is a potent poison, and for the moment I was elated, but the symptoms of atropine poisoning are closely allied to those of ptomaine, and bear no resemblance to those I was studying. Besides, the prescription was an old one. Madame Déroulard had suffered from cataracts in both eyes for many years.

I was turning away discouraged when the chemist’s voice called me back.

“Un moment, M. Poirot. I remember, the girl who brought that prescription, she said something about having to go on to the English chemist. You might try there.”

I did. Once more enforcing my official status, I got the information I wanted. On the day before M. Déroulard’s death they had made up a prescription for Mr. John Wilson. Not that there was any making up about it. They were simply little tablets of trinitrine. I asked if I might see some. He showed me them, and my heart beat faster—for the tiny tablets were of chocolate.

“Is it a poison?” I asked.

“No, monsieur.”

“Can you describe to me its effect?”

“It lowers the blood pressure. It is given for some forms of heart trouble—angina pectoris for instance. It relieves the arterial tension. In arteriosclerosis—”

I interrupted him. “Ma foi! This rigmarole says nothing to me. Does it cause the face to flush?”

“Certainly it does.”

“And supposing I ate ten—twenty of your little tablets, what then?”

“I should not advise you to attempt it,” he replied drily.

“And yet you say it is not poison?”

“There are many things not called poison which can kill a man,” he replied as before.

I left the shop elated. At last, things had begun to march!

I now knew that John Wilson had the means for the crime—but what about the motive? He had come to Belgium on business, and had asked M. Déroulard, whom he knew slightly, to put him up. There was apparently no way in which Déroulard's death could benefit him. Moreover, I discovered by inquiries in England that he had suffered for some years from that painful form of heart disease known as angina. Therefore he had a genuine right to have those tablets in his possession. Nevertheless, I was convinced that someone had gone to the chocolate box, opening the full one first by mistake, and had abstracted the contents of the last chocolate, cramming in instead as many little trinitrine tablets as it would hold. The chocolates were large ones. Between twenty or thirty tablets, I felt sure, could have been inserted. But who had done this?

There were two guests in the house. John Wilson had the means. Saint Alard had the motive. Remember, he was a fanatic, and there is no fanatic like a religious fanatic. Could he, by any means, have got hold of John Wilson's trinitrine?

Another little idea came to me. Ah, you smile at my little ideas! Why had Wilson run out of trinitrine? Surely he would bring an adequate supply from England. I called once more at the house in the Avenue Louise. Wilson was out, but I saw the girl who did his room, Félice. I demanded of her immediately whether it was not true that M. Wilson had lost a bottle from his washstand some little time ago. The girl responded eagerly. It was quite true. She, Félice, had been blamed for it. The English gentleman had evidently thought that she had broken it, and did not like to say so. Whereas she had never even touched it. Without doubt it was Jeannette—always nosing round where she had no business to be—

I calmed the flow of words, and took my leave. I knew now all that I wanted to know. It remained for me to prove my case. That, I felt, would not be easy. I might be sure that Saint Alard had removed the bottle of trinitrine from John Wilson's washstand, but to convince others, I would have to produce evidence. And I had none to produce!

Never mind. I knew—that was the great thing. You remember our difficulty in the Styles case, Hastings? There again, I knew—but it took me a long time to find the last link which made my chain of evidence against the murderer complete.

I asked for an interview with Mademoiselle Mesnard. She came at once. I demanded of her the address of M. de Saint Alard. A look of trouble came over her face.

“Why do you want it, monsieur?”

“Mademoiselle, it is necessary.”

She seemed doubtful—troubled.

“He can tell you nothing. He is a man whose thoughts are not in this world. He hardly notices what goes on around him.”

“Possibly, mademoiselle. Nevertheless, he was an old friend of M. Déroulard’s. There may be things he can tell me—things of the past—old grudges—old love-affairs.”

The girl flushed and bit her lip. “As you please—but—but I feel sure now that I have been mistaken. It was good of you to accede to my demand, but I was upset—almost distraught at the time. I see now that there is no mystery to solve. Leave it, I beg of you, monsieur.”

I eyed her closely.

“Mademoiselle,” I said, “it is sometimes difficult for a dog to find a scent, but once he has found it, nothing on earth will make him leave it! That is if he is a good dog! And I, mademoiselle, I, Hercule Poirot, am a very good dog.”

Without a word she turned away. A few minutes later she returned with the address written on a sheet of paper. I left the house. François was waiting for me outside. He looked at me anxiously.

“There is no news, monsieur?”

“None as yet, my friend.”

"Ah! Pauvre Monsieur Déroulard!" he sighed. "I too was of his way of thinking. I do not care for priests. Not that I would say so in the house. The women are all devout—a good thing perhaps. Madame est très pieuse—et Mademoiselle Virginie aussi."

Mademoiselle Virginie? Was she "très pieuse?" Thinking of the tear-stained passionate face I had seen that first day, I wondered.

Having obtained the address of M. de Saint Alard, I wasted no time. I arrived in the neighbourhood of his château in the Ardennes but it was some days before I could find a pretext for gaining admission to the house. In the end I did—how do you think—as a plumber, mon ami! It was the affair of a moment to arrange a neat little gas leak in his bedroom. I departed for my tools, and took care to return with them at an hour when I knew I should have the field pretty well to myself. What I was searching for, I hardly knew. The one thing needful, I could not believe there was any chance of finding. He would never have run the risk of keeping it.

Still when I found the little cupboard above the washstand locked, I could not resist the temptation of seeing what was inside it. The lock was quite a simple one to pick. The door swung open. It was full of old bottles. I took them up one by one with a trembling hand. Suddenly, I uttered a cry. Figure to yourself, my friend, I held in my hand a little phial with an English chemist's label. On it were the words: "Trinitrine Tablets. One to be taken when required. Mr. John Wilson."

I controlled my emotion, closed the cupboard, slipped the bottle into my pocket, and continued to repair the gas leak! One must be methodical. Then I left the château, and took train for my own country as soon as possible. I arrived in Brussels late that night. I was writing out a report for the préfet in the morning, when a note was brought to me. It was from old Madame Déroulard, and it summoned me to the house in the Avenue Louise without delay.

François opened the door to me.

"Madame la Baronne is awaiting you."

He conducted me to her apartments. She sat in state in a large armchair. There was no sign of Mademoiselle Virginie.

“M. Poirot,” said the old lady, “I have just learned that you are not what you pretend to be. You are a police officer.”

“That is so, madame.”

“You came here to inquire into the circumstances of my son’s death?”

Again I replied: “That is so, madame.”

“I should be glad if you would tell me what progress you have made.”

I hesitated.

“First I would like to know how you have learned all this, madame.”

“From one who is no longer of this world.”

Her words, and the brooding way she uttered them, sent a chill to my heart. I was incapable of speech.

“Therefore, monsieur, I would beg of you most urgently to tell me exactly what progress you have made in your investigation.”

“Madame, my investigation is finished.”

“My son?”

“Was killed deliberately.”

“You know by whom?”

“Yes, madame.”

“Who, then?”

“M. de Saint Alard.”

“You are wrong. M. de Saint Alard is incapable of such a crime.”

“The proofs are in my hands.”

“I beg of you once more to tell me all.”

This time I obeyed, going over each step that had led me to the discovery of the truth. She listened attentively. At the end she nodded her head.

“Yes, yes, it is all as you say, all but one thing. It was not M. de Saint Alard who killed my son. It was I, his mother.”

I stared at her. She continued to nod her head gently.

“It is well that I sent for you. It is the providence of the good God that Virginie told me before she departed for the convent, what she had done. Listen, M. Poirot! My son was an evil man. He persecuted the church. He led a life of mortal sin. He dragged down the other souls beside his own. But there was worse than that. As I came out of my room in this house one morning, I saw my daughter-in-law standing at the head of the stairs. She was reading a letter. I saw my son steal up behind her. One swift push, and she fell, striking her head on the marble steps. When they picked her up she was dead. My son was a murderer, and only I, his mother, knew it.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. “You cannot conceive, monsieur, of my agony, my despair. What was I to do? Denounce him to the police? I could not bring myself to do it. It was my duty, but my flesh was weak. Besides, would they believe me? My eyesight had been failing for some time—they would say I was mistaken. I kept silence. But my conscience gave me no peace. By keeping silence I too was a murderer. My son inherited his wife’s money. He flourished as the green bay tree. And now he was to have a Minister’s portfolio. His persecution of the church would be redoubled. And there was Virginie. She, poor child, beautiful, naturally pious, was fascinated by him. He had a strange and terrible power over women. I saw it coming. I was powerless to prevent it. He had no intention of marrying her. The time came when she was ready to yield everything to him.

“Then I saw my path clear. He was my son. I had given him life. I was responsible for him. He had killed one woman’s body, now he would kill another’s soul! I went to Mr. Wilson’s room, and took the bottle of tablets. He had once said laughingly that there were enough in it to kill a man! I went into the study and opened the big box of chocolates that always stood on the table. I opened a new box by mistake. The other was on the table also. There was just one chocolate left in it. That simplified things. No one ate chocolates except my son and Virginie. I would keep her with me that night. All went as I had planned—”

She paused, closing her eyes a minute then opened them again.

“M. Poirot, I am in your hands. They tell me I have not many days to live. I am willing to answer for my action before the good God. Must I answer for it on earth also?”

I hesitated. “But the empty bottle, madame,” I said to gain time. “How came that into M. de Saint Alard’s possession?”

“When he came to say goodbye to me, monsieur, I slipped it into his pocket. I did not know how to get rid of it. I am so infirm that I cannot move about much without help, and finding it empty in my rooms might have caused suspicion. You understand, monsieur—” she drew herself up to her full height—“it was with no idea of casting suspicion on M. de Saint Alard! I never dreamed of such a thing. I thought his valet would find an empty bottle and throw it away without question.”

I bowed my head. “I comprehend, madame,” I said.

“And your decision, monsieur?”

Her voice was firm and unfaltering, her head held as high as ever.

I rose to my feet.

“Madame,” I said, “I have the honour to wish you good day. I have made my investigations—and failed! The matter is closed.”

He was silent for a moment, then said quietly: “She died just a week later. Mademoiselle Virginie passed through her novitiate, and duly took the veil. That, my friend, is the story. I must admit that I do not make a fine figure in it.”

“But that was hardly a failure,” I expostulated. “What else could you have thought under the circumstances?”

“Ah, sacré, mon ami,” cried Poirot, becoming suddenly animated. “Is it that you do not see? But I was thirty-six times an idiot! My grey cells, they functioned not at all. The whole time I had the clue in my hands.”

“What clue?”

“The chocolate box! Do you not see? Would anyone in possession of their full eyesight make such a mistake? I knew Madame Déroulard had cataracts—the atropine drops told me that. There was only one person in the household whose eyesight was such that she could not see which lid to replace. It was the chocolate box that started me on the track, and yet up to the end I failed consistently to perceive its real significance!

“Also my psychology was at fault. Had M. de Saint Alard been the criminal, he would never have kept an incriminating bottle. Finding it was a proof of his innocence. I had learned already from Mademoiselle Virginie that he was absent-minded. Altogether it was a miserable affair that I have recounted to you there! Only to you have I told the story. You comprehend, I do not figure well in it! An old lady commits a crime in such a simple and clever fashion that I, Hercule Poirot, am completely deceived. Sapristi! It does not bear thinking of! Forget it. Or no—remember it, and if you think at any time that I am growing conceited—it is not likely, but it might arise.”

I concealed a smile.

“Eh bien, my friend, you shall say to me, ‘Chocolate box.’ Is it agreed?”

“It’s a bargain!”

“After all,” said Poirot reflectively, “it was an experience! I, who have undoubtedly the finest brain in Europe at present, can afford to be magnanimous!”

“Chocolate box,” I murmured gently.

“Pardon, mon ami? ”

I looked at Poirot’s innocent face, as he bent forward inquiringly, and my heart smote me. I had suffered often at his hands, but I, too, though not possessing the finest brain in Europe, could afford to be magnanimous!

“Nothing,” I lied, and lit another pipe, smiling to myself.

The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd (1926)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

DR. SHEPPARD AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

Mrs. Ferrars died on the night of the 16th–17th September—a Thursday. I was sent for at eight o'clock on the morning of Friday the 17th. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours.

It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more. I opened the front door with my latchkey, and purposely delayed a few moments in the hall, hanging up my hat and the light overcoat that I had deemed a wise precaution against the chill of an early autumn morning. To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead.

From the dining room on my left there came the rattle of teacups and the short, dry cough of my sister Caroline.

"Is that you, James?" she called.

An unnecessary question, since who else could it be? To tell the truth, it was precisely my sister Caroline who was the cause of my few minutes' delay. The motto of the mongoose family, so Mr. Kipling tells us, is: "Go and find out." If Caroline ever adopts a crest, I should certainly suggest a mongoose rampant. One might omit the first part of the motto. Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don't know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and the tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather in information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert.

It was really this last named trait of hers which was causing me these pangs of indecision. Whatever I told Caroline now concerning the demise of Mrs. Ferrars would be common knowledge all over the village within the space of an hour and a half. As a professional man, I naturally aim at discretion.

Therefore I have got into the habit of continually withholding all information possible from my sister. She usually finds out just the same, but I have the moral satisfaction of knowing that I am in no way to blame.

Mrs. Ferrars’ husband died just over a year ago, and Caroline has constantly asserted, without the least foundation for the assertion, that his wife poisoned him.

She scorns my invariable rejoinder that Mr. Ferrars died of acute gastritis, helped on by habitual overindulgence in alcoholic beverages. The symptoms of gastritis and arsenical poisoning are not, I agree, unlike, but Caroline bases her accusation on quite different lines.

“You’ve only got to look at her,” I have heard her say.

Mrs. Ferrars, though not in her first youth, was a very attractive woman, and her clothes, though simple, always seemed to fit her very well, but all the same, lots of women buy their clothes in Paris, and have not, on that account, necessarily poisoned their husbands.

As I stood hesitating in the hall, with all this passing through my mind, Caroline’s voice came again, with a sharper note in it.

“What on earth are you doing out there, James? Why don’t you come and get your breakfast?”

“Just coming, my dear,” I said hastily. “I’ve been hanging up my overcoat.”

“You could have hung up half a dozen overcoats in this time.”

She was quite right. I could have.

I walked into the dining room, gave Caroline the accustomed peck on the cheek, and sat down to eggs and bacon. The bacon was rather cold.

“You’ve had an early call,” remarked Caroline.

“Yes,” I said. “King’s Paddock. Mrs. Ferrars.”

"I know," said my sister.

"How did you know?"

"Annie told me."

Annie is the house parlourmaid. A nice girl, but an inveterate talker.

There was a pause. I continued to eat eggs and bacon. My sister's nose, which is long and thin, quivered a little at the tip, as it always does when she is interested or excited over anything.

"Well?" she demanded.

"A sad business. Nothing to be done. Must have died in her sleep."

"I know," said my sister again.

This time I was annoyed.

"You can't know," I snapped. "I didn't know myself until I got there, and haven't mentioned it to a soul yet. If that girl Annie knows, she must be a clairvoyant."

"It wasn't Annie who told me. It was the milkman. He had it from the Ferrarses' cook."

As I say, there is no need for Caroline to go out to get information. She sits at home and it comes to her.

My sister continued:

"What did she die of? Heart failure?"

"Didn't the milkman tell you that?" I inquired sarcastically.

Sarcasm is wasted on Caroline. She takes it seriously and answers accordingly.

"He didn't know," she explained.

After all, Caroline was bound to hear sooner or later. She might as well hear from me.

"She died of an overdose of Veronal. She's been taking it lately for sleeplessness. Must have taken too much."

"Nonsense," said Caroline immediately. "She took it on purpose. Don't tell me!"

It is odd, when you have a secret belief of your own which you do not wish to acknowledge, the voicing of it by someone else will rouse you to a fury of denial. I burst immediately into indignant speech.

"There you go again," I said. "Rushing along without rhyme or reason. Why on earth should Mrs. Ferrars wish to commit suicide? A widow, fairly young still, very well off, good health, and nothing to do but enjoy life. It's absurd."

"Not at all. Even you must have noticed how different she has been looking lately. It's been coming on for the last six months. She's looked positively hag-ridden. And you have just admitted that she hasn't been able to sleep."

"What is your diagnosis?" I demanded coldly. "An unfortunate love affair, I suppose?"

My sister shook her head.

"Remorse," she said, with great gusto.

"Remorse?"

"Yes. You never would believe me when I told you she poisoned her husband. I'm more than ever convinced of it now."

"I don't think you're very logical," I objected. "Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she'd be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance."

Caroline shook her head.

“There probably are women like that—but Mrs. Ferrars wasn’t one of them. She was a mass of nerves. An overmastering impulse drove her on to get rid of her husband because she was the sort of person who simply can’t endure suffering of any kind, and there’s no doubt that the wife of a man like Ashley Ferrars must have had to suffer a good deal—”

I nodded.

“And ever since she’s been haunted by what she did. I can’t help feeling sorry for her.”

I don’t think Caroline ever felt sorry for Mrs. Ferrars whilst she was alive. Now that she has gone where (presumably) Paris frocks can no longer be worn, Caroline is prepared to indulge in the softer emotions of pity and comprehension.

I told her firmly that her whole idea was nonsense. I was all the more firm because I secretly agreed with some part, at least, of what she had said. But it is all wrong that Caroline should arrive at the truth simply by a kind of inspired guesswork. I wasn’t going to encourage that sort of thing. She will go round the village airing her views, and everyone will think that she is doing so on medical data supplied by me. Life is very trying.

“Nonsense,” said Caroline, in reply to my strictures. “You’ll see. Ten to one she’s left a letter confessing everything.”

“She didn’t leave a letter of any kind,” I said sharply, and not seeing where the admission was going to land me.

“Oh!” said Caroline. “So you did inquire about that, did you? I believe, James, that in your heart of hearts, you think very much as I do. You’re a precious old humbug.”

“One always has to take the possibility of suicide into consideration,” I said impressively.

“Will there be an inquest?”

“There may be. It all depends. If I am able to declare myself absolutely satisfied that the overdose was taken accidentally, an inquest might be dispensed with.”

“And are you absolutely satisfied?” asked my sister shrewdly.

I did not answer, but got up from the table.

Two

WHO’S WHO IN KING’S ABBOT

Before I proceed further with what I said to Caroline and what Caroline said to me, it might be as well to give some idea of what I should describe as our local geography. Our village, King’s Abbot, is, I imagine, very much like any other village. Our big town is Cranchester, nine miles away. We have a large railway station, a small post office, and two rival “General Stores.” Able-bodied men are apt to leave the place early in life, but we are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers. Our hobbies and recreations can be summed up in the one word, “gossip.”

There are only two houses of any importance in King’s Abbot. One is King’s Paddock, left to Mrs. Ferrars by her late husband. The other, Fernly Park, is owned by Roger Ackroyd. Ackroyd has always interested me by being a man more impossibly like a country squire than any country squire could really be. He reminds one of the red-faced sportsmen who always appeared early in the first act of an old-fashioned musical comedy, the setting being the village green. They usually sang a song about going up to London. Nowadays we have revues, and the country squire has died out of musical fashion.

Of course, Ackroyd is not really a country squire. He is an immensely successful manufacturer of (I think) wagon wheels. He is a man of nearly fifty years of age, rubicund of face and genial of manner. He is hand and glove with the vicar, subscribes liberally to parish funds (though rumour has it that he is extremely mean in personal expenditure), encourages cricket matches, Lads’ Clubs, and Disabled Soldiers’ Institutes. He is, in fact, the life and soul of our peaceful village of King’s Abbot.

Now when Roger Ackroyd was a lad of twenty-one, he fell in love with, and married, a beautiful woman some five or six years his senior. Her name was Paton, and she was a widow with one child. The history of the marriage was short and painful. To put it bluntly, Mrs. Ackroyd was a dipsomaniac.

She succeeded in drinking herself into her grave four years after her marriage.

In the years that followed, Ackroyd showed no disposition to make a second matrimonial adventure. His wife’s child by her first marriage was only seven years old when his mother died. He is now twenty-five. Ackroyd has always regarded him as his own son, and has brought him up accordingly, but he has been a wild lad and a continual source of worry and trouble to his stepfather. Nevertheless we are all very fond of Ralph Paton in King’s Abbot. He is such a good-looking youngster for one thing.

As I said before, we are ready enough to gossip in our village. Everybody noticed from the first that Ackroyd and Mrs. Ferrars got on very well together. After her husband’s death, the intimacy became more marked. They were always seen about together, and it was freely conjectured that at the end of her period of mourning, Mrs. Ferrars would become Mrs. Roger Ackroyd. It was felt, indeed, that there was a certain fitness in the thing. Roger Ackroyd’s wife had admittedly died of drink. Ashley Ferrars had been a drunkard for many years before his death. It was only fitting that these two victims of alcoholic excess should make up to each other for all that they had previously endured at the hands of their former spouses.

The Ferrars only came to live here just over a year ago, but a halo of gossip has surrounded Ackroyd for many years past. All the time that Ralph Paton was growing up to manhood a series of lady housekeepers presided over Ackroyd’s establishment, and each in turn was regarded with lively suspicion by Caroline and her cronies. It is not too much to say that for at least fifteen years the whole village has confidently expected Ackroyd to marry one of his housekeepers. The last of them, a redoubtable lady called Miss Russell, has reigned undisputed for five years, twice as long as any of her predecessors. It is felt that but for the advent of Mrs. Ferrars, Ackroyd could hardly have escaped. That—and one other factor—the unexpected arrival of a widowed sister-in-law with her daughter from Canada. Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, widow of Ackroyd’s ne’er-do-well younger brother, has taken up her residence at Fernley Park, and has succeeded, according to Caroline, in putting Miss Russell in her proper place.

I don’t know exactly what a “proper place” constitutes—it sounds chilly and unpleasant—but I know that Miss Russell goes about with pinched lips, and what I can only describe as an acid smile, and that she professes the utmost sympathy for “poor Mrs. Ackroyd—dependent on the charity of her husband’s brother. The bread of charity is so bitter, is it not? I should be quite miserable if I did not work for my living.”

I don’t know what Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd thought of the Ferrars affair when it came on the tapis. It was clearly to her advantage that Ackroyd should remain unmarried. She was always very charming—not to say gushing—to Mrs. Ferrars when they met. Caroline says that proves less than nothing.

Such have been our preoccupations in King’s Abbot for the last few years. We have discussed Ackroyd and his affairs from every standpoint. Mrs. Ferrars has fitted into her place in the scheme.

Now there has been a rearrangement of the kaleidoscope. From a mild discussion of probable wedding presents, we had been jerked into the midst of tragedy.

Revolving these and sundry other matters in my mind, I went mechanically on my round. I had no cases of special interest to attend, which was, perhaps, as well, for my thoughts returned again and again to the mystery of Mrs. Ferrars’s death. Had she taken her own life? Surely, if she had done so, she would have left some word behind to say what she contemplated doing? Women, in my experience, if they once reach the determination to commit suicide, usually wish to reveal the state of mind that led to the fatal action. They covet the limelight.

When had I last seen her? Not for over a week. Her manner then had been normal enough considering—well—considering everything.

Then I suddenly remembered that I had seen her, though not to speak to, only yesterday. She had been walking with Ralph Paton, and I had been surprised because I had had no idea that he was likely to be in King’s Abbot. I thought, indeed, that he had quarrelled finally with his stepfather. Nothing had been seen of him down here for nearly six months. They had been walking along, side by side, their heads close together, and she had been talking very earnestly.

I think I can safely say that it was at this moment that a foreboding of the future first swept over me. Nothing tangible as yet—but a vague premonition of the way things were setting. That earnest tête-à-tête between Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars the day before struck me disagreeably.

I was still thinking of it when I came face to face with Roger Ackroyd.

"Sheppard!" he exclaimed. "Just the man I wanted to get hold of. This is a terrible business."

"You've heard then?"

He nodded. He had felt the blow keenly, I could see. His big red cheeks seemed to have fallen in, and he looked a positive wreck of his usual jolly, healthy self.

"It's worse than you know," he said quietly. "Look here, Sheppard, I've got to talk to you. Can you come back with me now?"

"Hardly. I've got three patients to see still, and I must be back by twelve to see my surgery patients."

"Then this afternoon—no, better still, dine tonight. At 7:30. Will that suit you?"

"Yes, I can manage that all right. What's wrong? Is it Ralph?"

I hardly knew why I said that—except, perhaps, that it had so often been Ralph.

Ackroyd stared blankly at me as though he hardly understood. I began to realize that there must be something very wrong indeed somewhere. I had never seen Ackroyd so upset before.

"Ralph?" he said vaguely. "Oh! no, it's not Ralph. Ralph's in London—Damn! Here's old Miss Gannett coming. I don't want to have to talk to her about this ghastly business. See you tonight, Sheppard. Seven-thirty.”

I nodded, and he hurried away, leaving me wondering. Ralph in London? But he had certainly been in King’s Abbot the preceding afternoon. He must have gone back to town last night or early this morning, and yet Ackroyd’s manner had conveyed quite a different impression. He had spoken as though Ralph had not been near the place for months.

I had no time to puzzle the matter out further. Miss Gannett was upon me, thirsting for information. Miss Gannett has all the characteristics of my sister Caroline, but she lacks that unerring aim in jumping to conclusions which lends a touch of greatness to Caroline’s manoeuvres. Miss Gannett was breathless and interrogatory.

Wasn’t it sad about poor dear Mrs. Ferrars? A lot of people were saying she had been a confirmed drug-taker for years. So wicked the way people went about saying things. And yet, the worst of it was, there was usually a grain of truth somewhere in these wild statements. No smoke without fire! They were saying too that Mr. Ackroyd had found out about it, and had broken off the engagement—because there was an engagement. She, Miss Gannett, had proof positive of that. Of course I must know all about it—doctors always did—but they never tell?

And all this with a sharp beady eye on me to see how I reacted to these suggestions. Fortunately, long association with Caroline has led me to preserve an impassive countenance, and to be ready with small noncommittal remarks.

On this occasion I congratulated Miss Gannett on not joining in ill-natured gossip. Rather a neat counterattack, I thought. It left her in difficulties, and before she could pull herself together, I had passed on.

I went home thoughtful, to find several patients waiting for me in the surgery.

I had dismissed the last of them, as I thought, and was just contemplating a few minutes in the garden before lunch when I perceived one more patient waiting for me. She rose and came towards me as I stood somewhat surprised.

I don’t know why I should have been, except that there is a suggestion of cast iron about Miss Russell, a something that is above the ills of the flesh.

Ackroyd’s housekeeper is a tall woman, handsome but forbidding in appearance. She has a stern eye, and lips that shut tightly, and I feel that if I were an under housemaid or a kitchenmaid I should run for my life whenever I heard her coming.

“Good morning, Dr. Sheppard,” said Miss Russell. “I should be much obliged if you would take a look at my knee.”

I took a look, but, truth to tell, I was very little wiser when I had done so. Miss Russell’s account of vague pains was so unconvincing that with a woman of less integrity of character I should have suspected a trumped-up tale. It did cross my mind for one moment that Miss Russell might have deliberately invented this affection of the knee in order to pump me on the subject of Mrs. Ferrars’s death, but I soon saw that there, at least, I had misjudged her. She made a brief reference to the tragedy, nothing more. Yet she certainly seemed disposed to linger and chat.

“Well, thank you very much for this bottle of liniment, doctor,” she said at last. “Not that I believe it will do the least good.”

I didn’t think it would either, but I protested in duty bound. After all, it couldn’t do any harm, and one must stick up for the tools of one’s trade.

“I don’t believe in all these drugs,” said Miss Russell, her eyes sweeping over my array of bottles disparagingly. “Drugs do a lot of harm. Look at the cocaine habit.”

“Well, as far as that goes—”

“It’s very prevalent in high society.”

I’m sure Miss Russell knows far more about high society than I do. I didn’t attempt to argue with her.

“Just tell me this, doctor,” said Miss Russell. “Suppose you are really a slave of the drug habit, is there any cure?”

One cannot answer a question like that off-hand. I gave her a short lecture on the subject, and she listened with close attention. I still suspected her of seeking information about Mrs. Ferrars.

“Now, Veronal, for instance—” I proceeded.

But, strangely enough, she didn’t seem interested in Veronal. Instead she changed the subject, and asked me if it was true that there were certain poisons so rare as to baffle detection.

“Ah!” I said. “You’ve been reading detective stories.”

She admitted that she had.

“The essence of a detective story,” I said, “is to have a rare poison—if possible something from South America, that nobody has ever heard of—something that one obscure tribe of savages use to poison their arrows with. Death is instantaneous, and Western science is powerless to detect it. Is that the kind of thing you mean?”

“Yes. Is there really such a thing?”

I shook my head regretfully.

“I’m afraid there isn’t. There’s curare, of course.”

I told her a good deal about curare, but she seemed to have lost interest once more. She asked me if I had any in my poison cupboard, and when I replied in the negative I fancy I fell in her estimation.

She said she must be getting back, and I saw her out at the surgery door just as the luncheon gong went.

I should never have suspected Miss Russell of a fondness for detective stories. It pleases me very much to think of her stepping out of the housekeeper’s room to rebuke a delinquent housemaid, and then returning to a comfortable perusal of The Mystery of the Seventh Death, or something of the kind.

Three

THE MAN WHO GREW VEGETABLE MARROWS

I told Caroline at lunch that I should be dining at Fernly. She expressed no objection—on the contrary.

“Excellent,” she said. “You’ll hear all about it. By the way, what is the trouble with Ralph?”

“With Ralph?” I said, surprised; “there isn’t any.”

“Then why is he staying at the Three Boars instead of at Fernly Park?”

I did not for a minute question Caroline’s statement that Ralph Paton was staying at the local inn. That Caroline said so was enough for me.

“Ackroyd told me he was in London,” I said. In the surprise of the moment I departed from my valuable rule of never parting with information.

“Oh!” said Caroline. I could see her nose twitching as she worked on this.

“He arrived at the Three Boars yesterday morning,” she said. “And he’s still there. Last night he was out with a girl.”

That did not surprise me in the least. Ralph, I should say, is out with a girl most nights of his life. But I did rather wonder that he chose to indulge in the pastime in King’s Abbot instead of in the gay Metropolis.

“One of the barmaids?” I asked.

“No. That’s just it. He went out to meet her. I don’t know who she is.”

(Bitter for Caroline to have to admit such a thing.)

“But I can guess,” continued my indefatigable sister.

I waited patiently.

“His cousin.”

“Flora Ackroyd?” I exclaimed in surprise.

Flora Ackroyd is, of course, no relation whatever really to Ralph Paton but Ralph has been looked upon for so long as practically Ackroyd’s own son, that cousinship is taken for granted.

“Flora Ackroyd,” said my sister.

“But why not go to Fernly if he wanted to see her?”

“Secretly engaged,” said Caroline, with immense enjoyment. “Old Ackroyd won’t hear of it, and they have to meet this way.”

I saw a good many flaws in Caroline’s theory, but I forebore to point them out to her. An innocent remark about our new neighbour created a diversion.

The house next door, The Larches, has recently been taken by a stranger. To Caroline’s extreme annoyance, she has not been able to find out anything about him, except that he is a foreigner. The Intelligence Corps has proved a broken reed. Presumably the man has milk and vegetables and joints of meat and occasional whitings just like everybody else, but none of the people who make it their business to supply these things seem to have acquired any information. His name, apparently, is Mr. Porrott—a name which conveys an odd feeling of unreality. The one thing we do know about him is that he is interested in the growing of vegetable marrows.

But that is certainly not the sort of information that Caroline is after. She wants to know where he comes from, what he does, whether he is married, what his wife was, or is, like, whether he has children, what his mother’s maiden name was—and so on. Somebody very like Caroline must have invented the questions on passports, I think.

"My dear Caroline," I said. "There's no doubt at all about what the man's profession has been. He's a retired hairdresser. Look at that moustache of his."

Caroline dissented. She said that if the man was a hairdresser, he would have wavy hair—not straight. All hairdressers did.

I cited several hairdressers personally known to me who had straight hair, but Caroline refused to be convinced.

"I can't make him out at all," she said in an aggrieved voice. "I borrowed some garden tools the other day, and he was most polite, but I couldn't get anything out of him. I asked him point blank at last whether he was a Frenchman, and he said he wasn't—and, somehow, I didn't like to ask him any more."

I began to be more interested in our mysterious neighbour. A man who is capable of shutting up Caroline and sending her, like the Queen of Sheba, empty away, must be something of a personality.

"I believe," said Caroline, "that he's got one of those new vacuum cleaners —"

I saw a meditated loan and the opportunity of further questioning gleaming from her eye. I saw the chance to escape into the garden. I am rather fond of gardening. I was busily exterminating dandelion roots when a shout of warning sounded from close by and a heavy body whizzed by my ears and fell at my feet with a repellent squelch. It was a vegetable marrow!

I looked up angrily. Over the wall, to my left, there appeared a face. An egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense moustaches, and a pair of watchful eyes. It was our mysterious neighbour, Mr. Porrott.

He broke at once into fluent apologies.

"I demand of you a thousand pardons, monsieur. I am without defence. For some months now I cultivate the marrows. This morning suddenly I enrage myself with these marrows. I send them to promenade themselves—alas! not only mentally but physically. I seize the biggest. I hurl him over the wall. Monsieur, I am ashamed. I prostrate myself.”

Before such profuse apologies, my anger was forced to melt. After all, the wretched vegetable hadn’t hit me. But I sincerely hoped that throwing large vegetables over walls was not our new friend’s hobby. Such a habit could hardly endear him to us as a neighbour.

The strange little man seemed to read my thoughts.

“Ah! no,” he exclaimed. “Do not disquiet yourself. It is not with me a habit. But you can figure to yourself, monsieur, that a man may work towards a certain object, may labour and toil to attain a certain kind of leisure and occupation, and then find that, after all, he yearns for the old busy days, and the old occupations that he thought himself so glad to leave?”

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I fancy that that is a common enough occurrence. I myself am perhaps an instance. A year ago I came into a legacy—enough to enable me to realize a dream. I have always wanted to travel, to see the world. Well, that was a year ago, as I said, and—I am still here.”

My little neighbour nodded.

“The chains of habit. We work to attain an object, and the object gained, we find that what we miss is the daily toil. And mark you, monsieur, my work was interesting work. The most interesting work there is in the world.”

“Yes?” I said encouragingly. For the moment the spirit of Caroline was strong within me.

“The study of human nature, monsieur!”

“Just so,” I said kindly.

Clearly a retired hairdresser. Who knows the secrets of human nature better than a hairdresser?

“Also, I had a friend—a friend who for many years never left my side. Occasionally of an imbecility to make one afraid, nevertheless he was very dear to me. Figure to yourself that I miss even his stupidity. His naïveté, his honest outlook, the pleasure of delighting and surprising him by my superior gifts—all these I miss more than I can tell you.”

“He died?” I asked sympathetically.

“Not so. He lives and flourishes—but on the other side of the world. He is now in the Argentine.”

“In the Argentine,” I said enviously.

I have always wanted to go to South America. I sighed, and then looked up to find Mr. Porrott eyeing me sympathetically. He seemed an understanding little man.

“Will you go there, yes?” he asked.

I shook my head with a sigh.

“I could have gone,” I said. “A year ago. But I was foolish—and worse than foolish—greedy. I risked the substance for the shadow.”

“I comprehend,” said Mr. Porrott. “You speculated?”

I nodded mournfully, but in spite of myself I felt secretly entertained. This ridiculous little man was so portentously solemn.

“Not the Porcupine Oilfields?” he asked suddenly.

I stared.

“I thought of them, as a matter of fact, but in the end I plumped for a gold mine in Western Australia.”

My neighbour was regarding me with a strange expression which I could not fathom.

“It is Fate,” he said at last.

“What is Fate?” I asked irritably.

“That I should live next to a man who seriously considers Porcupine Oilfields, and also West Australian Gold Mines. Tell me, have you also a penchant for auburn hair?”

I stared at him openmouthed, and he burst out laughing.

“No, no, it is not the insanity that I suffer from. Make your mind easy. It was a foolish question that I put to you there, for, you see, my friend of whom I spoke was a young man, a man who thought all women good, and most of them beautiful. But you are a man of middle age, a doctor, a man who knows the folly and the vanity of most things in this life of ours. Well, well, we are neighbours. I beg of you to accept and present to your excellent sister my best marrow.”

He stooped, and with a flourish produced an immense specimen of the tribe, which I duly accepted in the spirit in which it was offered.

“Indeed,” said the little man cheerfully, “this has not been a wasted morning. I have made the acquaintance of a man who in some ways resembles my far-off friend. By the way, I should like to ask you a question. You doubtless know everyone in this tiny village. Who is the young man with the very dark hair and eyes, and the handsome face. He walks with his head flung back, and an easy smile on his lips?”

The description left me in no doubt.

“That must be Captain Ralph Paton,” I said slowly.

“I have not seen him about here before?”

“No, he has not been here for some time. But he is the son—adopted son, rather—of Mr. Ackroyd of Fernly Park.”

My neighbour made a slight gesture of impatience.

"Of course, I should have guessed. Mr. Ackroyd spoke of him many times."

"You know Mr. Ackroyd?" I said, slightly surprised.

"Mr. Ackroyd knew me in London—when I was at work there. I have asked him to say nothing of my profession down here."

"I see," I said, rather amused by this patent snobbery, as I thought it.

But the little man went on with an almost grandiloquent smirk.

"One prefers to remain incognito. I am not anxious for notoriety. I have not even troubled to correct the local version of my name."

"Indeed," I said, not knowing quite what to say.

"Captain Ralph Paton," mused Mr. Porrott. "And so he is engaged to Mr. Ackroyd's niece, the charming Miss Flora."

"Who told you so?" I asked, very much surprised.

"Mr. Ackroyd. About a week ago. He is very pleased about it—has long desired that such a thing should come to pass, or so I understood from him. I even believe that he brought some pressure to bear upon the young man. That is never wise. A young man should marry to please himself—not to please a stepfather from whom he has expectations."

My ideas were completely upset. I could not see Ackroyd taking a hairdresser into his confidence, and discussing the marriage of his niece and stepson with him. Ackroyd extends a genial patronage to the lower orders, but he has a very great sense of his own dignity. I began to think that Porrott couldn't be a hairdresser after all.

To hide my confusion, I said the first thing that came into my head.

"What made you notice Ralph Paton? His good looks?"

"No, not that alone—though he is unusually good-looking for an Englishman—what your lady novelists would call a Greek God. No, there was something about that young man that I did not understand.”

He said the last sentence in a musing tone of voice which made an indefinable impression upon me. It was as though he was summing up the boy by the light of some inner knowledge that I did not share. It was that impression that was left with me, for at that moment my sister’s voice called me from the house.

I went in. Caroline had her hat on, and had evidently just come in from the village. She began without preamble.

“I met Mr. Ackroyd.”

“Yes?” I said.

“I stopped him, of course, but he seemed in a great hurry, and anxious to get away.”

I have no doubt but that that was the case. He would feel towards Caroline much as he had felt towards Miss Gannett earlier in the day—perhaps more so. Caroline is less easy to shake off.

“I asked him at once about Ralph. He was absolutely astonished. Had no idea the boy was down here. He actually said he thought I must have made a mistake. I! A mistake!”

“Ridiculous,” I said. “He ought to have known you better.”

“Then he went on to tell me that Ralph and Flora are engaged.”

“I knew that, too,” I interrupted, with modest pride.

“Who told you?”

“Our new neighbour.”

Caroline visibly wavered for a second or two, much as if a roulette ball might coyly hover between two numbers. Then she declined the tempting red herring.

“I told Mr. Ackroyd that Ralph was staying at the Three Boars.”

“Caroline,” I said, “do you never reflect that you might do a lot of harm with this habit of yours of repeating everything indiscriminately?”

“Nonsense,” said my sister. “People ought to know things. I consider it my duty to tell them. Mr. Ackroyd was very grateful to me.”

“Well,” I said, for there was clearly more to come.

“I think he went straight off to the Three Boars, but if so he didn’t find Ralph there.”

“No?”

“No. Because as I was coming back through the wood—”

“Coming back through the wood?” I interrupted.

Caroline had the grace to blush.

“It was such a lovely day,” she exclaimed. “I thought I would make a little round. The woods with their autumnal tints are so perfect at this time of year.”

Caroline does not care a hang for woods at any time of year. Normally she regards them as places where you get your feet damp, and where all kinds of unpleasant things may drop on your head. No, it was good sound mongoose instinct which took her to our local wood. It is the only place adjacent to the village of King’s Abbot where you can talk with a young woman unseen by the whole of the village. It adjoins the Park of Fernly.

“Well,” I said, “go on.”

“As I say, I was just coming back through the wood when I heard voices.”

Caroline paused.

“Yes?”

“One was Ralph Paton’s—I knew it at once. The other was a girl’s. Of course I didn’t mean to listen—”

“Of course not,” I interjected, with patent sarcasm—which was, however, wasted on Caroline.

“But I simply couldn’t help overhearing. The girl said something—I didn’t quite catch what it was, and Ralph answered. He sounded very angry. ‘My dear girl,’ he said. ‘Don’t you realize that it is quite on the cards the old man will cut me off with a shilling? He’s been pretty fed up with me for the last few years. A little more would do it. And we need the dibs, my dear. I shall be a very rich man when the old fellow pops off. He’s mean as they make ’em, but he’s rolling in money really. I don’t want him to go altering his will. You leave it to me, and don’t worry.’ Those were his exact words. I remember them perfectly. Unfortunately, just then I stepped on a dry twig or something, and they lowered their voices and moved away. I couldn’t, of course, go rushing after them, so wasn’t able to see who the girl was.”

“That must have been most vexing,” I said. “I suppose, though, you hurried on to the Three Boars, felt faint, and went into the bar for a glass of brandy, and so were able to see if both the barmaids were on duty?”

“It wasn’t a barmaid,” said Caroline unhesitatingly. “In fact, I’m almost sure that it was Flora Ackroyd, only—”

“Only it doesn’t seem to make sense,” I agreed.

“But if it wasn’t Flora, who could it have been?”

Rapidly my sister ran over a list of maidens living in the neighbourhood, with profuse reasons for and against.

When she paused for breath, I murmured something about a patient, and slipped out.

I proposed to make my way to the Three Boars. It seemed likely that Ralph Paton would have returned there by now.

I knew Ralph very well—better, perhaps, than anyone else in King’s Abbot, for I had known his mother before him, and therefore I understood much in him that puzzled others. He was, to a certain extent, the victim of heredity. He had not inherited his mother’s fatal propensity for drink, but nevertheless he had in him a strain of weakness. As my new friend of this morning had declared, he was extraordinarily handsome. Just on six feet, perfectly proportioned, with the easy grace of an athlete, he was dark, like his mother, with a handsome, sunburnt face always ready to break into a smile. Ralph Paton was of those born to charm easily and without effort. He was self-indulgent and extravagant, with no veneration for anything on earth, but he was lovable nevertheless, and his friends were all devoted to him.

Could I do anything with the boy? I thought I could.

On inquiry at the Three Boars I found that Captain Paton had just come in. I went up to his room and entered unannounced.

For a moment, remembering what I had heard and seen, I was doubtful of my reception, but I need have had no misgivings.

“Why, it’s Sheppard! Glad to see you.”

He came forward to meet me, hand outstretched, a sunny smile lighting up his face.

“The one person I am glad to see in this infernal place.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“What’s the place been doing?”

He gave a vexed laugh.

“It’s a long story. Things haven’t been going well with me, doctor. But have a drink, won’t you?”

“Thanks,” I said, “I will.”

He pressed the bell, then coming back threw himself into a chair.

“Not to mince matters,” he said gloomily, “I’m in the devil of a mess. In fact, I haven’t the least idea what to do next.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked sympathetically.

“It’s my confounded stepfather.”

“What has he done?”

“It isn’t what he’s done yet, but what he’s likely to do.”

The bell was answered, and Ralph ordered the drinks. When the man had gone again, he sat hunched in the armchair, frowning to himself.

“Is it really—serious?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I’m fairly up against it this time,” he said soberly.

The unusual ring of gravity in his voice told me that he spoke the truth. It took a good deal to make Ralph grave.

“In fact,” he continued, “I can’t see my way ahead…I’m damned if I can.”

“If I could help—” I suggested diffidently.

But he shook his head very decidedly.

“Good of you, doctor. But I can’t let you in on this. I’ve got to play a lone hand.”

He was silent a minute and then repeated in a slightly different tone of voice:

“Yes—I’ve got to play a lone hand….”

Four

DINNER AT FERNLY

I

It was just a few minutes before half past seven when I rang the frontdoor bell of Fernly Park. The door was opened with admirable promptitude by Parker, the butler.

The night was such a fine one that I had preferred to come on foot. I stepped into the big square hall and Parker relieved me of my overcoat. Just then Ackroyd's secretary, a pleasant young fellow by the name of Raymond, passed through the hall on his way to Ackroyd's study, his hands full of papers.

"Good evening, doctor. Coming to dine? Or is this a professional call?"

The last was in allusion to my black bag which I had laid down on the oak chest.

I explained that I expected a summons to a confinement case at any moment, and so had come out prepared for an emergency call. Raymond nodded, and went on his way, calling over his shoulder:

"Go into the drawing room. You know the way. ladies will be down in a minute. I must just take these papers to Mr. Ackroyd, and I'll tell him you're here."

On Raymond's appearance Parker had withdrawn, so I was alone in the hall. I settled my tie, glanced in a large mirror which hung there, and crossed to the door directly facing me, which was, as I knew, the door of the drawing room.

I noticed, just as I was turning the handle, a sound from within—the shutting down of a window, I took it to be. I noticed it, I may say, quite mechanically, without attaching any importance to it at the time.

I opened the door and walked in. As I did so I almost collided with Miss Russell who was just coming out. We both apologized.

For the first time I found myself appraising the housekeeper and thinking what a handsome woman she must once have been—indeed, as far as that goes, still was. Her dark hair was unstreaked with grey, and when she had a colour, as she had at this minute, the stern quality of her looks was not so apparent.

Quite subconsciously I wondered whether she had been out, for she was breathing hard, as though she had been running.

“I’m afraid I’m a few minutes early,” I said.

“Oh! I don’t think so. It’s gone half past seven, Dr. Sheppard.” She paused a minute before saying, “I—didn’t know you were expected to dinner tonight. Mr. Ackroyd didn’t mention it.”

I received a vague impression that my dining there displeased her in some way, but I couldn’t imagine why.

“How’s the knee?” I inquired.

“Much the same, thank you, doctor. I must be going now. Mrs. Ackroyd will be down in a moment. I—I only came in here to see if the flowers were all right.”

She passed quickly out of the room. I strolled to the window, wondering at her evident desire to justify her presence in the room. As I did so, I saw what, of course, I might have known all the time had I troubled to give my mind to it, namely, that the windows were long french ones opening on the terrace. The sound I had heard, therefore, could not have been that of a window being shut down.

Quite idly, and more to distract my mind from painful thoughts than for any other reason, I amused myself by trying to guess what could have caused the sound in question.

Coals on the fire? No, that was not the kind of noise at all. A drawer of a bureau pushed in? No, not that.

Then my eye was caught by what, I believe, is called a silver table, the lid of which lifts, and through the glass of which you can see the contents. I crossed over to it, studying the contents. There were one or two pieces of old silver, a baby shoe belonging to King Charles the First, some Chinese jade figures, and quite a number of African implements and curios. Wanting to examine one of the jade figures more closely, I lifted the lid. It slipped through my fingers and fell.

At once I recognized the sound I had heard. It was this same table lid being shut down gently and carefully. I repeated the action once or twice for my own satisfaction. Then I lifted the lid to scrutinize the contents more closely.

I was still bending over the open silver table when Flora Ackroyd came into the room.

Quite a lot of people do not like Flora Ackroyd, but nobody can help admiring her. And to her friends she can be very charming. The first thing that strikes you about her is her extraordinary fairness. She has the real Scandinavian pale gold hair. Her eyes are blue—blue as the waters of a Norwegian fiord, and her skin is cream and roses. She has square, boyish shoulders and slight hips. And to a jaded medical man it is very refreshing to come across such perfect health.

A simple straightforward English girl—I may be old-fashioned, but I think the genuine article takes a lot of beating.

Flora joined me by the silver table, and expressed heretical doubts as to King Charles I ever having worn the baby shoe.

“And anyway,” continued Miss Flora, “all this making a fuss about things because someone wore or used them seems to me all nonsense. They’re not wearing or using them now. That pen that George Eliot wrote The Mill on the Floss with—that sort of thing—well, it's only just a pen after all. If you're really keen on George Eliot, why not get The Mill on the Floss in a cheap edition and read it."

"I suppose you never read such old out-of-date stuff, Miss Flora?"

"You're wrong, Dr. Sheppard. I love The Mill on the Floss."

I was rather pleased to hear it. The things young women read nowadays and profess to enjoy positively frighten me.

"You haven't congratulated me yet, Dr. Sheppard," said Flora. "Haven't you heard?"

She held out her left hand. On the third finger of it was an exquisitely set single pearl.

"I'm going to marry Ralph, you know," she went on. "Uncle is very pleased. It keeps me in the family, you see."

I took both her hands in mine.

My dear," I said, "I hope you'll be very happy."

"We've been engaged for about a month," continued Flora in her cool voice, "but it was only announced yesterday. Uncle is going to do up Cross-stones, and give it to us to live in, and we're going to pretend to farm. Really, we shall hunt all the winter, town for the season, and then go yachting. I love the sea. And, of course, I shall take a great interest in the parish affairs, and attend all the Mothers' Meetings."

Just then Mrs. Ackroyd rustled in, full of apologies for being late.

I am sorry to say I detest Mrs. Ackroyd. She is all chains and teeth and bones. A most unpleasant woman. She has small pale flinty blue eyes, and how ever gushing her words may be, those eyes of hers always remain coldly speculative.

I went across to her, leaving Flora by the window. She gave me a handful of assorted knuckles and rings to squeeze, and began talking volubly.

Had I heard about Flora’s engagement? So suitable in every way. The dear young things had fallen in love at first sight. Such a perfect pair, he so dark and she so fair.

“I can’t tell you, my dear Dr. Sheppard, the relief to a mother’s heart.”

Mrs. Ackroyd sighed—a tribute to her mother’s heart, whilst her eyes remained shrewdly observant of me.

“I was wondering. You are such an old friend of dear Roger’s. We know how much he trusts to your judgment. So difficult for me—in my position as poor Cecil’s widow. But there are so many tiresome things—settlements, you know—all that. I fully believe that Roger intends to make settlements upon dear Flora, but, as you know, he is just a leetle peculiar about money. Very usual, I’ve heard, amongst men who are captains of industry. I wondered, you know, if you could just sound him on the subject? Flora is so fond of you. We feel you are quite an old friend, although we have only really known you just over two years.”

Mrs. Ackroyd’s eloquence was cut short as the drawing room door opened once more. I was pleased at the interruption. I hate interfering in other people’s affairs, and I had not the least intention of tackling Ackroyd on the subject of Flora’s settlements. In another moment I should have been forced to tell Mrs. Ackroyd as much.

“You know Major Blunt, don’t you, doctor?”

“Yes, indeed,” I said.

A lot of people know Hector Blunt—at least by repute. He has shot more wild animals in unlikely places than any man living, I suppose. When you mention him, people say: “Blunt—you don’t mean the big game man, do you?”

His friendship with Ackroyd has always puzzled me a little. The two men are so totally dissimilar. Hector Blunt is perhaps five years Ackroyd's junior. They made friends early in life, and though their ways have diverged, the friendship still holds. About once in two years Blunt spends a fortnight at Fernly, and an immense animal's head, with an amazing number of horns which fixes you with a glazed stare as soon as you come inside the front door, is a permanent reminder of the friendship.

Blunt had entered the room now with his own peculiar, deliberate, yet soft-footed tread. He is a man of medium height, sturdily and rather stockily built. His face is almost mahogany coloured, and is peculiarly expressionless. He has grey eyes that give the impression of always watching something that is happening very far away. He talks little, and what he does say is said jerkily, as though the words were forced out of him unwillingly.

He said now: "How are you, Sheppard?" in his usual abrupt fashion, and then stood squarely in front of the fireplace looking over our heads as though he saw something very interesting happening in Timbuctoo.

"Major Blunt," said Flora, "I wish you'd tell me about these African things. I'm sure you know what they all are."

I have heard Hector Blunt described as a woman hater, but I noticed that he joined Flora at the silver table with what might be described as alacrity. They bent over it together.

I was afraid Mrs. Ackroyd would begin talking about settlements again, so I made a few hurried remarks about the new sweet pea. I knew there was a newsweet pea because the Daily Mail had told me so that morning. Mrs. Ackroyd knows nothing about horticulture, but she is the kind of woman who likes to appear well-informed about the topics of the day, and she, too, reads the Daily Mail. We were able to converse quite intelligently until Ackroyd and his secretary joined us, and immediately afterwards Parker announced dinner.

My place at table was between Mrs. Ackroyd and Flora. Blunt was on Mrs. Ackroyd's other side, and Geoffrey Raymond next to him.

Dinner was not a cheerful affair. Ackroyd was visibly preoccupied. He looked wretched, and ate next to nothing. Mrs. Ackroyd, Raymond, and I kept the conversation going. Flora seemed affected by her uncle’s depression, and Blunt relapsed into his usual taciturnity.

II

Immediately after dinner Ackroyd slipped his arm through mine and led me off to his study.

“Once we’ve had coffee, we shan’t be disturbed again,” he explained. “I told Raymond to see to it that we shouldn’t be interrupted.”

I studied him quietly without appearing to do so. He was clearly under the influence of some strong excitement. For a minute or two he paced up and down the room, then, as Parker entered with the coffee tray, he sank into an armchair in front of the fire.

The study was a comfortable apartment. Bookshelves lined one wall of it. The chairs were big and covered in dark blue leather. A large desk stood by the window and was covered with papers neatly docketed and filed. On a round table were various magazines and sporting papers.

“I’ve had a return of that pain after food lately,” remarked Ackroyd calmly, as he helped himself to coffee. “You must give me some more of those tablets of yours.”

It struck me that he was anxious to convey the impression that our conference was a medical one. I played up accordingly.

“I thought as much. I brought some up with me.”

“Good man. Hand them over now.”

“They’re in my bag in the hall. I’ll get them.”

Ackroyd arrested me.

“Don’t you trouble. Parker will get them. Bring in the doctor’s bag, will you, Parker?”

“Very good, sir.”

Parker withdrew. As I was about to speak, Ackroyd threw up his hand.

“Not yet. Wait. Don’t you see I’m in such a state of nerves that I can hardly contain myself?”

I saw that plainly enough. And I was very uneasy. All sorts of forebodings assailed me.

Ackroyd spoke again almost immediately.

“Make certain that window’s closed, will you,” he asked.

Somewhat surprised, I got up and went to it. It was not a french window, but one of the ordinary sash type. The heavy blue velvet curtains were drawn in front of it, but the window itself was open at the top.

Parker reentered the room with my bag while I was still at the window.

“That’s all right,” I said, emerging again into the room.

“You’ve put the latch across?”

“Yes, yes. What’s the matter with you, Ackroyd?”

The door had just closed behind Parker, or I would not have put the question.

Ackroyd waited just a minute before replying.

“I’m in hell,” he said slowly, after a minute. “No, don’t bother with those damn tablets. I only said that for Parker. Servants are so curious. Come here and sit down. The door’s closed too, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Nobody can overhear; don’t be uneasy.”

“Sheppard, nobody knows what I’ve gone through in the last twenty-four hours. If a man’s house ever fell in ruin about him, mine has about me. This business of Ralph’s is the last straw. But we won’t talk about that now. It’s the other—the other—! I don’t know what to do about it. And I’ve got to make up my mind soon.”

“What’s the trouble?”

Ackroyd remained silent for a minute or two. He seemed curiously averse to begin. When he did speak, the question he asked came as a complete surprise. It was the last thing I expected.

“Sheppard, you attended Ashley Ferrars in his last illness, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

He seemed to find even greater difficulty in framing his next question.

“Did you ever suspect—did it ever enter your head—that—well, that he might have been poisoned?”

I was silent for a minute or two. Then I made up my mind what to say. Roger Ackroyd was not Caroline.

“I’ll tell you the truth,” I said. “At the time I had no suspicion whatever, but since—well, it was mere idle talk on my sister’s part that first put the idea into my head. Since then I haven’t been able to get it out again. But, mind you, I’ve no foundation whatever for that suspicion.”

“He was poisoned,” said Ackroyd.

He spoke in a dull heavy voice.

“Who by?” I asked sharply.

“His wife.”

“How do you know that?”

“She told me so herself.”

“When?”

“Yesterday! My God! yesterday! It seems ten years ago.”

I waited a minute, then he went on.

“You understand, Sheppard, I’m telling you this in confidence. It’s to go no further. I want your advice—I can’t carry the whole weight by myself. As I said just now, I don’t know what to do.”

“Can you tell me the whole story?” I said. “I’m still in the dark. How did Mrs. Ferrars come to make this confession to you?”

“It’s like this. Three months ago I asked Mrs. Ferrars to marry me. She refused. I asked her again and she consented, but she refused to allow me to make the engagement public until her year of mourning was up. Yesterday I called upon her, pointed out that a year and three weeks had now elapsed since her husband’s death, and that there could be no further objection to making the engagement public property. I had noticed that she had been very strange in her manner for some days. Now, suddenly, without the least warning, she broke down completely. She—she told me everything. Her hatred of her brute of a husband, her growing love for me, and the—the dreadful means she had taken. Poison! My God! It was murder in cold blood.”

I saw the repulsion, the horror, in Ackroyd’s face. So Mrs. Ferrars must have seen it. Ackroyd’s is not the type of the great lover who can forgive all for love’s sake. He is fundamentally a good citizen. All that was sound and wholesome and law-abiding in him must have turned from her utterly in that moment of revelation.

“Yes,” he went on, in a low, monotonous voice, “she confessed everything. It seems that there is one person who has known all along—who has been blackmailing her for huge sums. It was the strain of that that drove her nearly mad.”

“Who was the man?”

Suddenly before my eyes there arose the picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars side by side. Their heads so close together. I felt a momentary throb of anxiety. Supposing—oh! but surely that was impossible. I remembered the frankness of Ralph’s greeting that very afternoon. Absurd!

“She wouldn’t tell me his name,” said Ackroyd slowly. “As a matter of fact, she didn’t actually say that it was a man. But of course—”

“Of course,” I agreed. “It must have been a man. And you’ve no suspicion at all?”

For answer Ackroyd groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

“It can’t be,” he said. “I’m mad even to think of such a thing. No, I won’t even admit to you the wild suspicion that crossed my mind. I’ll tell you this much, though. Something she said made me think that the person in question might be actually among my household—but that can’t be so. I must have misunderstood her.”

“What did you say to her?” I asked.

“What could I say? She saw, of course, the awful shock it had been to me. And then there was the question, what was my duty in the matter? She had made me, you see, an accessory after the fact. She saw all that, I think, quicker than I did. I was stunned, you know. She asked me for twenty-four hours—made me promise to do nothing till the end of that time. And she steadfastly refused to give me the name of the scoundrel who had been blackmailing her. I suppose she was afraid that I might go straight off and hammer him, and then the fat would have been in the fire as far as she was concerned. She told me that I should hear from her before twenty-four hours had passed. My God! I swear to you, Sheppard, that it never entered my head what she meant to do. Suicide! And I drove her to it.”

“No, no,” I said. “Don’t take an exaggerated view of things. The responsibility for her death doesn’t lie at your door.”

“The question is, what am I to do now? The poor lady is dead. Why rake up past trouble?”

“I rather agree with you,” I said.

“But there’s another point. How am I to get hold of that scoundrel who drove her to death as surely as if he’d killed her? He knew of the first crime, and he fastened on to it like some obscene vulture. She’s paid the penalty. Is he to go scot free?”

“I see,” I said slowly. “You want to hunt him down? It will mean a lot of publicity, you know.”

“Yes, I’ve thought of that. I’ve zigzagged to and fro in my mind.”

“I agree with you that the villain ought to be punished, but the cost has got to be reckoned.”

Ackroyd rose and walked up and down. Presently he sank into the chair again.

“Look here, Sheppard, suppose we leave it like this. If no word comes from her, we’ll let the dead things lie.”

“What do you mean by word coming from her?” I asked curiously.

“I have the strongest impression that somewhere or somehow she must have left a message for me—before she went. I can’t argue about it, but there it is.”

I shook my head.

“She left no letter or word of any kind?” I asked.

“Sheppard, I’m convinced that she did. And more, I’ve a feeling that by deliberately choosing death, she wanted the whole thing to come out, if only to be revenged on the man who drove her to desperation. I believe that if I could have seen her then, she would have told me his name and bid me go for him for all I was worth.”

He looked at me.

“You don’t believe in impressions?”

“Oh, yes, I do, in a sense. If, as you put it, word should come from her—”

I broke off. The door opened noiselessly and Parker entered with a salver on which were some letters.

“The evening post, sir,” he said, handing the salver to Ackroyd.

Then he collected the coffee cups and withdrew.

My attention, diverted for a moment, came back to Ackroyd. He was staring like a man turned to stone at a long blue envelope. The other letters he had let drop to the ground.

“Her writing,” he said in a whisper. “She must have gone out and posted it last night, just before—before—”

He ripped open the envelope and drew out a thick enclosure. Then he looked up sharply.

“You’re sure you shut the window?” he said.

“Quite sure,” I said, surprised. “Why?”

“All this evening I’ve had a queer feeling of being watched, spied upon. What’s that—”

He turned sharply. So did I. We both had the impression of hearing the latch of the door give ever so slightly. I went across to it and opened it. There was no one there.

“Nerves,” murmured Ackroyd to himself.

He unfolded the thick sheets of paper, and read aloud in a low voice.

“My dear, my very dear Roger,—A life calls for a life. I see that—I saw it in your face this afternoon. So I am taking the only road open to me. I leave to you the punishment of the person who has made my life a hell upon earth for the last year. I would not tell you the name, this afternoon, but I propose to write it to you now. I have no children or near relations to be spared, so do not fear publicity. If you can, Roger, my very dear Roger, forgive me the wrong I meant to do you, since when the time came, I could not do it after all….”

Ackroyd, his finger on the sheet to turn it over, paused.

“Sheppard, forgive me, but I must read this alone,” he said unsteadily. “It was meant for my eyes, and my eyes only.”

He put the letter in the envelope and laid it on the table.

“Later, when I am alone.”

“No,” I cried impulsively, “read it now.”

Ackroyd stared at me in some surprise.

“I beg your pardon,” I said, reddening. “I do not mean read it aloud to me. But read it through whilst I am still here.”

Ackroyd shook his head.

“No, I’d rather wait.”

But for some reason, obscure to myself, I continued to urge him.

“At least, read the name of the man,” I said.

Now Ackroyd is essentially pigheaded. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it. All my arguments were in vain.

The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. With a shake of the head I passed out and closed the door behind me.

I was startled by seeing the figure of Parker close at hand. He looked embarrassed, and it occurred to me that he might have been listening at the door.

What a fat, smug, oily face the man had, and surely there was something decidedly shifty in his eye.

“Mr. Ackroyd particularly does not want to be disturbed,” I said coldly. “He told me to tell you so.”

“Quite so, sir. I—I fancied I heard the bell ring.”

This was such a palpable untruth that I did not trouble to reply. Preceding me to the hall, Parker helped me on with my overcoat, and I stepped out into the night. The moon was overcast, and every thing seemed very dark and still.

The village church clock chimed nine o’clock as I passed through the lodge gates. I turned to the left towards the village, and almost cannoned into a man coming in the opposite direction.

“This the way to Fernly Park, mister?” asked the stranger in a hoarse voice.

I looked at him. He was wearing a hat pulled down over his eyes, and his coat collar turned up. I could see little or nothing of his face, but he seemed a young fellow. The voice was rough and uneducated.

“These are the lodge gates here,” I said.

“Thank you, mister.” He paused, and then added, quite unnecessarily, “I’m a stranger in these parts, you see.”

He went on, passing through the gates as I turned to look after him.

The odd thing was that his voice reminded me of someone’s voice that I knew, but whose it was I could not think.

Ten minutes later I was at home once more. Caroline was full of curiosity to know why I had returned so early. I had to make up a slightly fictitious account of the evening in order to satisfy her, and I had an uneasy feeling that she saw through the transparent device.

At ten o’clock I rose, yawned, and suggested bed. Caroline acquiesced.

It was Friday night, and on Friday night I wind the clocks. I did it as usual, whilst Caroline satisfied herself that the servants had locked up the kitchen properly.

It was a quarter past ten as we went up the stairs. I had just reached the top when the telephone rang in the hall below.

“Mrs. Bates,” said Caroline immediately.

“I’m afraid so,” I said ruefully.

I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.

“What?” I said. “What? Certainly, I’ll come at once.”

I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.

“Parker telephoning,” I shouted to Caroline, “from Fernly. They’ve just found Roger Ackroyd murdered.”

Five

MURDER

I got out the car in next to no time, and drove rapidly to Fernly. Jumping out, I pulled the bell impatiently. There was some delay in answering, and I rang again.

Then I heard the rattle of the chain and Parker, his impassivity of countenance quite unmoved, stood in the open doorway.

I pushed past him into the hall.

“Where is he?” I demanded sharply.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Your master. Mr. Ackroyd. Don’t stand there staring at me, man. Have you notified the police?”

“The police, sir? Did you say the police?” Parker stared at me as though I were a ghost.

“What’s the matter with you, Parker? If, as you say, your master has been murdered—”

A gasp broke from Parker.

“The master? Murdered? Impossible, sir!”

It was my turn to stare.

“Didn’t you telephone to me, not five minutes ago, and tell me that Mr. Ackroyd had been found murdered?”

“Me, sir? Oh! no indeed, sir. I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing.”

“Do you mean to say it’s all a hoax? That there’s nothing the matter with Mr. Ackroyd?”

“Excuse me, sir, did the person telephoning use my name?”

“I’ll give you the exact words I heard. ‘Is that Dr. Sheppard? Parker, the butler at Fernly, speaking. Will you please come at once, sir. Mr. Ackroyd has been murdered.’”

Parker and I stared at each other blankly.

“A very wicked joke to play, sir,” he said at last, in a shocked tone. “Fancy saying a thing like that.”

“Where is Mr. Ackroyd?” I asked suddenly.

“Still in the study, I fancy, sir. The ladies have gone to bed, and Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond are in the billiard room.”

“I think I’ll just look in and see him for a minute,” I said. “I know he didn’t want to be disturbed again, but this odd practical joke has made me uneasy. I’d just like to satisfy myself that he’s all right.”

“Quite so, sir. It makes me feel quite uneasy myself. If you don’t object to my accompanying you as far as the door, sir—?”

“Not at all,” I said. “Come along.”

I passed through the door on the right, Parker on my heels, traversed the little lobby where a small flight of stairs led upstairs to Ackroyd’s bedroom, and tapped on the study door.

There was no answer. I turned the handle, but the door was locked.

“Allow me, sir,” said Parker.

Very nimbly, for a man of his build, he dropped on one knee and applied his eye to the keyhole.

“Key is in the lock all right, sir,” he said, rising. “On the inside. Mr. Ackroyd must have locked himself in and possibly just dropped off to sleep.”

I bent down and verified Parker’s statement.

“It seems all right,” I said, “but, all the same, Parker, I’m going to wake your master up. I shouldn’t be satisfied to go home without hearing from his own lips that he’s quite all right.”

So saying, I rattled the handle and called out, “Ackroyd, Ackroyd, just a minute.”

But still there was no answer. I glanced over my shoulder.

“I don’t want to alarm the household,” I said hesitatingly.

Parker went across and shut the door from the big hall through which we had come.

“I think that will be all right now, sir. The billiard room is at the other side of the house, and so are the kitchen quarters and the ladies’ bedrooms.”

I nodded comprehendingly. Then I banged once more frantically on the door, and stooping down, fairly bawled through the keyhole:

“Ackroyd, Ackroyd! It’s Sheppard. Let me in.”

And still—silence. Not a sign of life from within the locked room. Parker and I glanced at each other.

“Look here, Parker,” I said, “I’m going to break this door in—or rather, we are. I’ll take the responsibility.”

“If you say so, sir,” said Parker, rather doubtfully.

“I do say so. I’m seriously alarmed about Mr. Ackroyd.”

I looked round the small lobby and picked up a heavy oak chair. Parker and I held it between us and advanced to the assault. Once, twice, and three times we hurled it against the lock. At the third blow it gave, and we staggered into the room.

Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the armchair before the fire. His head had fallen sideways, and clearly visible, just below the collar of his coat, was a shining piece of twisted metalwork.

Parker and I advanced till we stood over the recumbent figure. I heard the butler draw in his breath with a sharp hiss.

“Stabbed from be’ind,” he murmured. “‘Orrible!”

He wiped his moist brow with his handkerchief, then stretched out a gingerly hand towards the hilt of the dagger.

“You mustn’t touch that,” I said sharply. “Go at once to the telephone and ring up the police station. Inform them of what has happened. Then tell Mr. Raymond and Major Blunt.”

“Very good, sir.”

Parker hurried away, still wiping his perspiring brow.

I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time.

Then I heard young Raymond’s voice, horror-stricken and incredulous, outside.

“What do you say? Oh! impossible! Where’s the doctor?”

He appeared impetuously in the doorway, then stopped dead, his face very white. A hand put him aside, and Hector Blunt came past him into the room.

“My God!” said Raymond from behind him; “it’s true, then.”

Blunt came straight on till he reached the chair. He bent over the body, and I thought that, like Parker, he was going to lay hold of the dagger hilt. I drew him back with one hand.

“Nothing must be moved,” I explained. “The police must see him exactly as he is now.”

Blunt nodded in instant comprehension. His face was expressionless as ever, but I thought I detected signs of emotion beneath the stolid mask. Geoffrey Raymond had joined us now, and stood peering over Blunt’s shoulder at the body.

“This is terrible,” he said in a low voice.

He had regained his composure, but as he took off the pince-nez he habitually wore and polished them I observed that his hand was shaking.

“Robbery, I suppose,” he said. “How did the fellow get in? Through the window? Has anything been taken?”

He went towards the desk.

“You think it’s burglary?” I said slowly.

“What else could it be? There’s no question of suicide, I suppose?”

“No man could stab himself in such a way,” I said confidently. “It’s murder right enough. But with what motive?”

“Roger hadn’t an enemy in the world,” said Blunt quietly. “Must have been burglars. But what was the thief after? Nothing seems to be disarranged?”

He looked round the room. Raymond was still sorting the papers on the desk.

“There seems nothing missing, and none of the drawers show signs of having been tampered with,” the secretary observed at last. “It’s very mysterious.”

Blunt made a slight motion with his head.

“There are some letters on the floor here,” he said.

I looked down. Three or four letters still lay where Ackroyd had dropped them earlier in the evening.

But the blue envelope containing Mrs. Ferrar’s letter had disappeared. I half opened my mouth to speak, but at that moment the sound of a bell pealed through the house. There was a confused murmur of voices in the hall, and then Parker appeared with our local inspector and a police constable.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” said the inspector. “I’m terribly sorry for this! A good kind gentleman like Mr. Ackroyd. The butler says it’s murder. No possibility of accident or suicide, doctor?”

“None whatever,” I said.

“Ah! A bad business.”

He came and stood over the body.

“Been moved at all?” he asked sharply.

“Beyond making certain that life was extinct—an easy matter—I have not disturbed the body in any way.”

“Ah! And everything points to the murderer having got clear away—for the moment, that is. Now then, let me hear all about it. Who found the body?”

I explained the circumstances carefully.

“A telephone message, you say? From the butler?”

“A message that I never sent,” declared Parker earnestly. “I’ve not been near the telephone the whole evening. The others can bear me out that I haven’t.”

“Very odd, that. Did it sound like Parker’s voice, doctor?”

“Well—I can’t say I noticed. I took it for granted, you see.”

image

“Naturally. Well, you got up here, broke in the door, and found poor Mr. Ackroyd like this. How long should you say he had been dead, doctor?”

“Half an hour at least—perhaps longer,” I said.

“The door was locked on the inside, you say? What about the window?”

“I myself closed and bolted it earlier in the evening at Mr. Ackroyd’s request.”

The inspector strode across to it and threw back the curtains.

“Well, it’s open now, anyway,” he remarked.

True enough, the window was open, the lower sash being raised to its fullest extent.

The inspector produced a pocket torch and flashed it along the sill outside.

“This is the way he went all right,” he remarked, “and got in. See here.”

In the light of the powerful torch, several clearly defined footmarks could be seen. They seemed to be those of shoes with rubber studs in the soles. One particularly clear one pointed inwards, another, slightly overlapping it, pointed outwards.

“Plain as a pikestaff,” said the inspector. “Any valuables missing?”

Geoffrey Raymond shook his head.

“Not so far that we can discover. Mr. Ackroyd never kept anything of particular value in this room.”

“H’m,” said the inspector. “Man found an open window. Climbed in, saw Mr. Ackroyd sitting there—maybe he’d fallen asleep. Man stabbed him from behind, then lost his nerve and made off. But he’s left his tracks pretty clearly. We ought to get hold of him without much difficulty. No suspicious strangers been hanging about anywhere?”

“Oh!” I said suddenly.

“What is it, doctor?”

“I met a man this evening—just as I was turning out of the gate. He asked me the way to Fernly Park.”

“What time would that be?”

“Just nine o’clock. I heard it chime the hour as I was turning out of the gate.”

“Can you describe him?”

I did so to the best of my ability.

The inspector turned to the butler.

“Anyone answering that description come to the front door?”

“No, sir. No one has been to the house at all this evening.”

“What about the back?”

“I don’t think so, sir, but I’ll make inquiries.”

He moved towards the door, but the inspector held up a large hand.

“No, thanks. I’ll do my own inquiring. But first of all I want to fix the times a little more clearly. When was Mr. Ackroyd last seen alive?”

“Probably by me,” I said, “when I left at—let me see—about ten minutes to nine. He told me that he didn’t wish to be disturbed, and I repeated the order to Parker.”

“Just so, sir,” said Parker respectfully.

“Mr. Ackroyd was certainly alive at half past nine,” put in Raymond, “for I heard his voice in here talking.”

“Who was he talking to?”

“That I don’t know. Of course, at the time I took it for granted that it was Dr. Sheppard who was with him. I wanted to ask him a question about some papers I was engaged upon, but when I heard the voices I remembered that he had said he wanted to talk to Dr. Sheppard without being disturbed, and I went away again. But now it seems that the doctor had already left?”

I nodded.

“I was at home by a quarter past nine,” I said. “I didn’t go out again until I received the telephone call.”

“Who could have been with him at half past nine?” queried the inspector. “It wasn’t you, Mr—er—”

“Major Blunt,” I said.

“Major Hector Blunt?” asked the inspector, a respectful tone creeping into his voice.

Blunt merely jerked his head affirmatively.

“I think we’ve seen you down here before, sir,” said the inspector. “I didn’t recognize you for the moment, but you were staying with Mr. Ackroyd a year ago last May.”

“June,” corrected Blunt.

“Just so, June it was. Now, as I was saying, it wasn’t you with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty this evening?”

Blunt shook his head.

“Never saw him after dinner,” he volunteered.

The inspector turned once more to Raymond.

“You didn’t overhear any of the conversation going on, did you, sir?”

“I did catch just a fragment of it,” said the secretary, “and, supposing as I did that it was Dr. Sheppard who was with Mr. Ackroyd, that fragment struck me as distinctly odd. As far as I can remember, the exact words were these. Mr. Ackroyd was speaking. ‘The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late’—that is what he was saying—‘of late, that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request…’ I went away again at once, of course, so I did not hear any more. But I rather wondered because Dr. Sheppard—”

“—Does not ask for loans for himself or subscriptions for others,” I finished.

“A demand for money,” said the inspector musingly. “It may be that here we have a very important clue.” He turned to the butler. “You say, Parker, that nobody was admitted by the front door this evening?”

“That’s what I say, sir.”

“Then it seems almost certain that Mr. Ackroyd himself must have admitted this stranger. But I don’t quite see—”

The inspector went into a kind of daydream for some minutes.

“One thing’s clear,” he said at length, rousing himself from his absorption. “Mr. Ackroyd was alive and well at nine-thirty. That is the last moment at which he is known to have been alive.”

Parker gave vent to an apologetic cough which brought the inspector’s eyes on him at once.

“Well?” he said sharply.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir, Miss Flora saw him after that.”

“Miss Flora?”

“Yes, sir. About a quarter to ten that would be. It was after that that she told me Mr. Ackroyd wasn’t to be disturbed again tonight.”

“Did he send her to you with that message?”

“Not exactly, sir. I was bringing a tray with soda and whisky when Miss Flora, who was just coming out of this room, stopped me and said her uncle didn’t want to be disturbed.”

The inspector looked at the butler with rather closer attention than he had bestowed on him up to now.

“You’d already been told that Mr. Ackroyd didn’t want to be disturbed, hadn’t you?”

Parker began to stammer. His hands shook.

“Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Quite so, sir.”

“And yet you were proposing to do so?”

“I’d forgotten, sir. At least I mean, I always bring the whisky and soda about that time, sir, and ask if there’s anything more, and I thought—well, I was doing as usual without thinking.”

It was at this moment that it began to dawn upon me that Parker was most suspiciously flustered. The man was shaking and twitching all over.

“H’m,” said the inspector. “I must see Miss Ackroyd at once. For the moment we’ll leave this room exactly as it is. I can return here after I’ve heard what Miss Ackroyd has to tell me. I shall just take the precaution of shutting and bolting the window.”

This precaution accomplished, he led the way into the hall and we followed him. He paused a moment, as he glanced up at the little staircase, then spoke over his shoulder to the constable.

“Jones, you’d better stay here. Don’t let anyone go into that room.”

Parker interposed deferentially.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir. If you were to lock the door into the main hall, nobody could gain access to this part. That staircase leads only to Mr. Ackroyd’s bedroom and bathroom. There is no communication with the other part of the house. There once was a door through, but Mr. Ackroyd had it blocked up. He liked to feel that his suite was entirely private.”

To make things clear and explain the position, I have appended a rough sketch of the right-hand wing of the house. The small staircase leads, as Parker explained, to a big bedroom made by two being knocked into one, and an adjoining bathroom and lavatory.

The inspector took in the position at a glance. We went through into the large hall and he locked the door behind him, slipping the key into his pocket. Then he gave the constable some low-voiced instructions, and the latter prepared to depart.

“We must get busy on those shoe tracks,” explained the inspector. “But first of all, I must have a word with Miss Ackroyd. She was the last person to see her uncle alive. Does she know yet?”

Raymond shook his head.

“Well, no need to tell her for another five minutes. She can answer my questions better without being upset by knowing the truth about her uncle. Tell her there’s been a burglary, and ask her if she would mind dressing and coming down to answer a few questions.”

It was Raymond who went upstairs on this errand.

“Miss Ackroyd will be down in a minute,” he said, when he returned. “I told her just what you suggested.”

In less than five minutes Flora descended the staircase. She was wrapped in a pale pink silk kimono. She looked anxious and excited.

The inspector stepped forward.

“Good evening, Miss Ackroyd,” he said civilly. “We’re afraid there’s been an attempt at robbery, and we want you to help us. What’s this room—the billiard room? Come in here and sit down.”

Flora sat down composedly on the wide divan which ran the length of the wall, and looked up at the inspector.

“I don’t quite understand. What has been stolen? What do you want me to tell you?”

“It’s just this, Miss Ackroyd. Parker here says you came out of your uncle’s study at about a quarter to ten. Is that right?”

“Quite right. I had been to say goodnight to him.”

“And the time is correct?”

“Well, it must have been about then. I can’t say exactly. It might have been later.”

“Was your uncle alone, or was there anyone with him?”

“He was alone. Dr. Sheppard had gone.”

“Did you happen to notice whether the window was open or shut?”

Flora shook her head.

“I can’t say. The curtains were drawn.”

“Exactly. And your uncle seemed quite as usual?”

“I think so.”

“Do you mind telling us exactly what passed between you?”

Flora paused a minute, as though to collect her recollections.

"I went in and said, 'Goodnight, Uncle, I'm going to bed now. I'm tired tonight.' He gave a sort of grunt, and—I went over and kissed him, and he said something about my looking nice in the frock I had on, and then he told me to run away as he was busy. So I went."

"Did he ask specially not to be disturbed?"

"Oh! yes, I forgot. He said: 'Tell Parker I don't want anything more tonight, and that he's not to disturb me.' I met Parker just outside the door and gave him Uncle's message."

"Just so," said the inspector.

"Won't you tell me what it is that has been stolen?"

"We're not quite—certain," said the inspector hesitatingly.

A wide look of alarm came into the girl's eyes. She started up.

"What is it? You're hiding something from me?"

Moving in his usual unobtrusive manner, Hector Blunt came between her and the inspector. She half stretched out her hand, and he took it in both of his, patting it as though she were a very small child, and she turned to him as though something in his stolid, rocklike demeanour promised comfort and safety.

"It's bad news, Flora," he said quietly. "Bad news for all of us. Your Uncle Roger—"

"Yes?"

"It will be a shock to you. Bound to be. Poor Roger's dead."

Flora drew away from him, her eyes dilating with horror.

"When?" she whispered. "When?"

"Very soon after you left him, I'm afraid," said Blunt gravely.

Flora raised her hand to her throat, gave a little cry, and I hurried to catch her as she fell. She had fainted, and Blunt and I carried her upstairs and laid her on her bed. Then I got him to wake Mrs. Ackroyd and tell her the news. Flora soon revived, and I brought her mother to her, telling her what to do for the girl. Then I hurried downstairs again.

Six

THE TUNISIAN DAGGER

I met the inspector just coming from the door which led into the kitchen quarters.

“How’s the young lady, doctor?”

“Coming round nicely. Her mother’s with her.”

“That’s good. I’ve been questioning the servants. They all declare that no one has been to the back door tonight. Your description of that stranger was rather vague. Can’t you give us something more definite to go upon?”

“I’m afraid not,” I said regretfully. “It was a dark night, you see, and the fellow had his coat collar well pulled up and his hat squashed down over his eyes.”

“H’m,” said the inspector. “Looked as though he wanted to conceal his face. Sure it was no one you know?”

I replied in the negative, but not as decidedly as I might have done. I remembered my impression that the stranger’s voice was not unfamiliar to me. I explained this rather haltingly to the inspector.

“It was a rough, uneducated voice, you say?”

I agreed, but it occurred to me that the roughness had been of an almost exaggerated quality. If, as the inspector thought, the man had wished to hide his face, he might equally well have tried to disguise his voice.

“Do you mind coming into the study with me again, doctor? There are one or two things I want to ask you.”

I acquiesced. Inspector Davis unlocked the door of the lobby, we passed through, and he locked the door again behind him.

“We don’t want to be disturbed,” he said grimly. “And we don’t want any eavesdropping either. What’s all this about blackmail?”

“Blackmail!” I exclaimed, very much startled.

“Is it an effort of Parker’s imagination? Or is there something in it?”

“If Parker heard anything about blackmail,” I said slowly, “he must have been listening outside this door with his ear glued against the keyhole.”

Davis nodded.

“Nothing more likely. You see, I’ve been instituting a few inquiries as to what Parker has been doing with himself this evening. To tell the truth, I didn’t like his manner. The man knows something. When I began to question him, he got the wind up, and plumped out some garbled story of blackmail.”

I took an instant decision.

“I’m rather glad you’ve brought the matter up,” I said. “I’ve been trying to decide whether to make a clean breast of things or not. I’d already practically decided to tell you everything, but I was going to wait for a favourable opportunity. You might as well have it now.”

And then and there I narrated the whole events of the evening as I have set them down here. The inspector listened keenly, occasionally interjecting a question.

“Most extraordinary story I ever heard,” he said, when I had finished. “And you say that letter has completely disappeared? It looks bad—it looks very bad indeed. It gives us what we’ve been looking for—a motive for the murder.”

I nodded.

"I realize that."

"You say that Mr. Ackroyd hinted at a suspicion he had that some member of his household was involved? Household's rather an elastic term."

"You don't think that Parker himself might be the man we're after?" I suggested.

"It looks very like it. He was obviously listening at the door when you came out. Then Miss Ackroyd came across him later bent on entering the study. Say he tried again when she was safely out of the way. He stabbed Ackroyd, locked the door on the inside, opened the window, and got out that way, and went round to a side door which he had previously left open. How's that?"

"There's only one thing against it," I said slowly. "If Ackroyd went on reading that letter as soon as I left, as he intended to do, I don't see him continuing to sit on here and turn things over in his mind for another hour. He'd have had Parker in at once, accused him then and there, and there would have been a fine old uproar. Remember, Ackroyd was a man of choleric temper."

"Mightn't have had time to go on with the letter just then," suggested the inspector. "We know someone was with him at half past nine. If that visitor turned up as soon as you left, and after he went, Miss Ackroyd came in to say goodnight—well, he wouldn't be able to go on with the letter until close upon ten o'clock."

"And the telephone call?"

"Parker sent that all right—perhaps before he thought of the locked door and open window. Then he changed his mind—or got in a panic—and decided to deny all knowledge of it. That was it, depend upon it."

"Ye—es," I said rather doubtfully.

"Anyway, we can find out the truth about the telephone call from the exchange. If it was put through from here, I don't see how anyone else but

Parker could have sent it. Depend upon it, he's our man. But keep it dark—we don't want to alarm him just yet, till we've got all the evidence. I'll see to it he doesn't give us the slip. To all appearances we'll be concentrating on your mysterious stranger."

He rose from where he had been sitting astride the chair belonging to the desk, and crossed over to the still form in the armchair.

"The weapon ought to give us a clue," he remarked, looking up. "It's something quite unique—a curio, I should think, by the look of it."

He bent down, surveying the handle attentively, and I heard him give a grunt of satisfaction. Then, very gingerly, he pressed his hands down below the hilt and drew the blade out from the wound. Still carrying it so as not to touch the handle, he placed it in a wide china mug which adorned the mantelpiece.

"Yes," he said, nodding at it. "Quite a work of art. There can't be many of them about."

It was indeed a beautiful object. A narrow, tapering blade, and a hilt of elaborately intertwined metals of curious and careful workmanship. He touched the blade gingerly with his finger, testing its sharpness, and made an appreciative grimace.

"Lord, what an edge," he exclaimed. "A child could drive that into a man—as easy as cutting butter. A dangerous sort of toy to have about."

"May I examine the body properly now?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Go ahead."

I made a thorough examination.

"Well?" said the inspector, when I had finished.

“I’ll spare you the technical language,” I said. “We’ll keep that for the inquest. The blow was delivered by a right-handed man standing behind him, and death must have been instantaneous. By the expression on the dead man’s face, I should say that the blow was quite unexpected. He may have died without knowing who his assailant was.”

“Butlers can creep about as soft-footed as cats,” said Inspector Davis. “There’s not going to be much mystery about this crime. Take a look at the hilt of that dagger.”

I took the look.

“I dare say they’re not apparent to you, but I can see them clearly enough.” He lowered his voice. “Fingerprints!”

He stood off a few steps to judge of his effect.

“Yes,” I said mildly. “I guessed that.”

I do not see why I should be supposed to be totally devoid of intelligence. After all, I read detective stories, and the newspapers, and am a man of quite average ability. If there had been toe marks on the dagger handle, now, that would have been quite a different thing. I would then have registered any amount of surprise and awe.

I think the inspector was annoyed with me for declining to get thrilled. He picked up the china mug and invited me to accompany him to the billiard room.

“I want to see if Mr. Raymond can tell us anything about this dagger,” he explained.

Locking the outer door behind us again, we made our way to the billiard room, where we found Geoffrey Raymond. The inspector held up his exhibit.

“Ever seen this before, Mr. Raymond?”

“Why—I believe—I’m almost sure that is a curio given to Mr. Ackroyd by Major Blunt. It comes from Morocco—no, Tunis. So the crime was committed with that? What an extraordinary thing. It seems almost impossible, and yet there could hardly be two daggers the same. May I fetch Major Blunt?”

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried off.

“Nice young fellow that,” said the inspector. “Something honest and ingenuous about him.”

I agreed. In the two years that Geoffrey Raymond has been secretary to Ackroyd, I have never seen him ruffled or out of temper. And he has been, I know, a most efficient secretary.

In a minute or two Raymond returned, accompanied by Blunt.

“I was right,” said Raymond excitedly. “It is the Tunisian dagger.”

“Major Blunt hasn’t looked at it yet,” objected the inspector.

“Saw it the moment I came into the study,” said the quiet man.

“You recognized it, then?”

Blunt nodded.

“You said nothing about it,” said the inspector suspiciously.

“Wrong moment,” said Blunt. “Lot of harm done by blurting out things at the wrong time.”

He returned the inspector’s stare placidly enough.

The latter grunted at last and turned away. He brought the dagger over to Blunt.

“You’re quite sure about it, sir. You identify it positively?”

“Absolutely. No doubt whatever.”

“Where was this—er—curio usually kept? Can you tell me that, sir?”

It was the secretary who answered.

“In the silver table in the drawing room.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

The others looked at me.

“Yes, doctor?” said the inspector encouragingly.

“It’s nothing,” said the inspector again, still encouragingly.

“It’s so trivial,” I explained apologetically. “Only that when I arrived last night for dinner I heard the lid of the silver table being shut down in the drawing room.”

I saw profound scepticism and a trace of suspicion on the inspector’s countenance.

“How did you know it was the silver table lid?”

I was forced to explain in detail—a long, tedious explanation which I would infinitely rather not have had to make.

The inspector heard me to the end.

“Was the dagger in its place when you were looking over the contents?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I can’t say I remember noticing it—but, of course, it may have been there all the time.”

“We’d better get hold of the housekeeper,” remarked the inspector, and pulled the bell.

A few minutes later Miss Russell, summoned by Parker, entered the room.

“I don’t think I went near the silver table,” she said, when the inspector had posed his question. “I was looking to see that all the flowers were fresh. Oh! yes, I remember now. The silver table was open—which it had no business to be, and I shut the lid down as I passed.”

She looked at him aggressively.

“I see,” said the inspector. “Can you tell me if this dagger was in its place then?”

Miss Russell looked at the weapon composedly.

“I can’t say I’m sure,” she replied. “I didn’t stop to look. I knew the family would be down any minute, and I wanted to get away.”

“Thank you,” said the inspector.

There was just a trace of hesitation in his manner, as though he would have liked to question her further, but Miss Russell clearly accepted the words as a dismissal, and glided from the room.

“Rather a Tartar, I should fancy, eh?” said the inspector, looking after her. “Let me see. This silver table is in front of one of the windows, I think you said, doctor?”

Raymond answered for me.

“Yes, the left-hand window.”

“And the window was open?”

“They were both ajar.”

“Well, I don’t think we need go into the question much further. Somebody—I’ll just say somebody—could get that dagger any time he liked, and exactly when he got it doesn’t matter in the least. I’ll be coming up in the morning with the chief constable, Mr. Raymond. Until then, I’ll keep the key of that door. I want Colonel Melrose to see everything exactly as it is. I happen to know that he’s dining out the other side of the county, and, I believe, staying the night….”

We watched the inspector take up the jar.

“I shall have to pack this carefully,” he observed. “It’s going to be an important piece of evidence in more ways than one.”

A few minutes later as I came out of the billiard room with Raymond, the latter gave a low chuckle of amusement.

I felt the pressure of his hand on my arm, and followed the direction of his eyes. Inspector Davis seemed to be inviting Parker’s opinion of a small pocket diary.

“A little obvious,” murmured my companion. “So Parker is the suspect, is he? Shall we oblige Inspector Davis with a set of our fingerprints also?”

He took two cards from the card tray, wiped them with his silk handkerchief, then handed one to me and took the other himself. Then, with a grin, he handed them to the police inspector.

“Souvenirs,” he said. “No. 1. Dr. Sheppard; No. 2, my humble self. One from Major Blunt will be forthcoming in the morning.”

Youth is very buoyant. Even the brutal murder of his friend and employer could not dim Geoffrey Raymond’s spirits for long. Perhaps that is as it should be. I do not know. I have lost the quality of resilience long since myself.

It was very late when I got back, and I hoped that Caroline would have gone to bed. I might have known better.

She had hot cocoa waiting for me, and whilst I drank it, she extracted the whole history of the evening from me. I said nothing of the blackmailing business, but contented myself with giving her the facts of the murder.

“The police suspect Parker,” I said, as I rose to my feet and prepared to ascend to bed. “There seems a fairly clear case against him.”

“Parker!” said my sister. “Fiddlesticks! That inspector must be a perfect fool. Parker indeed! Don’t tell me.” With which obscure pronouncement we went up to bed.

Seven

I LEARN MY NEIGHBOUR’S PROFESSION

On the following morning I hurried unforgivably over my round. My excuse can be that I had no very serious cases to attend. On my return Caroline came into the hall to greet me.

“Flora Ackroyd is here,” she announced in an excited whisper.

“What?”

I concealed my surprise as best as I could.

“She’s very anxious to see you. She’s been here half an hour.”

Caroline led the way into our small sitting room, and I followed.

Flora was sitting on the sofa by the window. She was in black and she sat nervously twisting her hands together. I was shocked by the sight of her face. All the colour had faded away from it. But when she spoke her manner was as composed and resolute as possible.

“Dr. Sheppard, I have come to ask you to help me?”

“Of course he’ll help you, my dear,” said Caroline.

I don’t think Flora really wished Caroline to be present at the interview. She would, I am sure, have infinitely preferred to speak to me privately. But she also wanted to waste no time, so she made the best of it.

“I want you to come to The Larches with me.”

“The Larches?” I queried, surprised.

“To see that funny little man?” exclaimed Caroline.

"Yes. You know who he is, don't you?"

"We fancied," I said, "that he might be a retired hairdresser."

Flora's blue eyes opened very wide.

"Why, he's Hercule Poirot! You know who I mean—the private detective. They say he's done the most wonderful things—just like detectives do in books. A year ago he retired and came to live down here. Uncle knew who he was, but he promised not to tell anyone, because M. Poirot wanted to live quietly without being bothered by people."

"So that's who he is," I said slowly.

"You've heard of him, of course?"

"I'm rather an old fogey, as Caroline tells me," I said, "but I have just heard of him."

"Extraordinary!" commented Caroline.

I don't know what she was referring to—possibly her own failure to discover the truth.

"You want to go and see him?" I asked slowly. "Now why?"

"To get him to investigate this murder, of course," said Caroline sharply. "Don't be so stupid, James."

I was not really being stupid. Caroline does not always understand what I am driving at.

"You haven't got confidence in Inspector Davis?" I went on.

"Of course she hasn't," said Caroline. "I haven't either."

Anyone would have thought it was Caroline's uncle who had been murdered.

“And how do you know he would take up the case?” I asked. “Remember he has retired from active work.”

“That’s just it,” said Flora simply. “I’ve got to persuade him.”

“You are sure you are doing wisely?” I asked gravely.

“Of course she is,” said Caroline. “I’ll go with her myself if she likes.”

“I’d rather the doctor came with me, if you don’t mind, Miss Sheppard,” said Flora.

She knows the value of being direct on certain occasions. Any hints would certainly have been wasted on Caroline.

“You see,” she explained, following directness with tact, “Dr. Sheppard being the doctor, and having found the body, he would be able to give all the details to M. Poirot.”

“Yes,” said Caroline grudgingly, “I see that.”

I took a turn or two up and down the room.

“Flora,” I said gravely, “be guided by me. I advise you not to drag this detective into the case.”

Flora sprang to her feet. The colour rushed into her cheeks.

“I know why you say that,” she cried. “But it’s exactly for that reason I’m so anxious to go. You’re afraid! But I’m not. I know Ralph better than you do.”

“Ralph!” said Caroline. “What has Ralph got to do with it?”

Neither of us heeded her.

“Ralph may be weak,” continued Flora. “He may have done foolish things in the past—wicked things even—but he wouldn’t murder anyone.”

“No, no,” I exclaimed. “I never thought it of him.”

“Then why did you go to the Three Boars last night?” demanded Flora. “On your way home—after Uncle’s body was found?”

I was momentarily silenced. I had hoped that that visit of mine would remain unnoticed.

“How did you know about that?” I countered.

“I went there this morning,” said Flora. “I heard from the servants that Ralph was staying there—”

I interrupted her.

“You had no idea that he was in King’s Abbot?”

“No. I was astounded. I couldn’t understand it. I went there and asked for him. They told me, what I suppose they told you last night, that he went out at about nine o’clock yesterday evening—and—and never came back.”

Her eyes met mine defiantly, and as though answering something in my look, she burst out:

“Well, why shouldn’t he? He might have gone—anywhere. He may even have gone back to London.”

“Leaving his luggage behind?” I asked gently.

Flora stamped her foot.

“I don’t care. There must be a simple explanation.”

“And that’s why you want to go to Hercule Poirot? Isn’t it better to leave things as they are? The police don’t suspect Ralph in the least, remember. They’re working on quite another tack.”

“But that’s just it,” cried the girl. “They do suspect him. A man from Cranchester turned up this morning—Inspector Raglan, a horrid, weaselly little man. I found he had been to the Three Boars this morning before me. They told me all about his having been there, and the questions he had asked. He must think Ralph did it."

"That's a change of mind from last night, if so," I said slowly. "He doesn't believe in Davis's theory that it was Parker then?"

"Parker indeed," said my sister, and snorted.

Flora came forward and laid her hand on my arm.

"Oh! Dr. Sheppard, let us go at once to this M. Poirot. He will find out the truth."

"My dear Flora," I said gently, laying my hand on hers. "Are you quite sure it is the truth we want?"

She looked at me, nodding her head gravely.

"You're not sure," she said. "I am. I know Ralph better than you do."

"Of course he didn't do it," said Caroline, who had been keeping silent with great difficulty. "Ralph may be extravagant, but he's a dear boy, and has the nicest manners."

I wanted to tell Caroline that large numbers of murderers have had nice manners, but the presence of Flora restrained me. Since the girl was determined, I was forced to give in to her and we started at once, getting away before my sister was able to fire off any more pronouncements beginning with her favourite words, "Of course."

An old woman with an immense Breton cap opened the door of The Larches to us. M. Poirot was at home, it seemed.

We were ushered into a little sitting room arranged with formal precision, and there, after a lapse of a minute or so, my friend of yesterday came to us.

"Monsieur le docteur," he said, smiling. "Mademoiselle."

He bowed to Flora.

“Perhaps,” I began, “you have heard of the tragedy which occurred last night.”

His face grew grave.

“But certainly I have heard. It is horrible. I offer mademoiselle all my sympathy. In what way can I serve you?”

“Miss Ackroyd,” I said, “wants you to—to—”

“To find the murderer,” said Flora in a clear voice.

“I see,” said the little man. “But the police will do that, will they not?”

“They might make a mistake,” said Flora. “They are on their way to make a mistake now, I think. Please, M. Poirot, won’t you help us? If—if it is a question of money—”

Poirot held up his hand.

“Not that, I beg of you, mademoiselle. Not that I do not care for money.” His eyes showed a momentary twinkle. “Money, it means much to me and always has done. No, if I go into this, you must understand one thing clearly. I shall go through with it to the end. The good dog, he does not leave the scent, remember! You may wish that, after all, you had left it to the local police.”

“I want the truth,” said Flora, looking him straight in the eyes.

“All the truth?”

“All the truth.”

“Then I accept,” said the little man quietly. “And I hope you will not regret those words. Now, tell me all the circumstances.”

“Dr. Sheppard had better tell you,” said Flora. “He knows more than I do.”

Thus enjoined, I plunged into a careful narrative, embodying all the facts I have previously set down. Poirot listened carefully, inserting a question here and there, but for the most part sitting in silence, his eyes on the ceiling.

I brought my story to a close with the departure of the inspector and myself from Fernly Park the previous night.

“And now,” said Flora, as I finished, “tell him all about Ralph.”

I hesitated, but her imperious glance drove me on.

“You went to this inn—this Three Boars—last night on your way home?” asked Poirot, as I brought my tale to a close. “Now exactly why was that?”

I paused a moment to choose my words carefully.

“I thought someone ought to inform the young man of his uncle’s death. It occurred to me after I had left Fernly that possibly no one but myself and Mr. Ackroyd were aware that he was staying in the village.”

Poirot nodded.

“Quite so. That was your only motive in going there, eh?”

“That was my only motive,” I said stiffly.

“It was not to—shall we say—reassure yourself about ce jeune homme?”

“Reassure myself?”

“I think, M. le docteur, that you know very well what I mean, though you pretend not to do so. I suggest that it would have been a relief to you if you had found that Captain Paton had been at home all the evening.”

“Not at all,” I said sharply.

The little detective shook his head at me gravely.

“You have not the trust in me of Miss Flora,” he said. “But no matter. What we have to look at is this—Captain Paton is missing, under circumstances which call for an explanation. I will not hide from you that the matter looks grave. Still, it may admit of a perfectly simple explanation.”

“That’s just what I keep saying,” cried Flora eagerly.

Poirot touched no more upon that theme. Instead he suggested an immediate visit to the local police. He thought it better for Flora to return home, and for me to be the one to accompany him there and introduce him to the officer in charge of the case.

We carried out this plan forthwith. We found Inspector Davis outside the police station looking very glum indeed. With him was Colonel Melrose, the Chief Constable, and another man whom, from Flora’s description of “weaselly,” I had no difficulty in recognizing as Inspector Raglan from Cranchester.

I know Melrose fairly well, and I introduced Poirot to him and explained the situation. The chief constable was clearly vexed, and Inspector Raglan looked as black as thunder. Davis, however, seemed slightly exhilarated by the sight of his superior officer’s annoyance.

“The case is going to be plain as a pikestaff,” said Raglan. “Not the least need for amateurs to come butting in. You’d think any fool would have seen the way things were last night, and then we shouldn’t have lost twelve hours.”

He directed a vengeful glance at poor Davis, who received it with perfect stolidity.

“Mr. Ackroyd’s family must, of course, do what they see fit,” said Colonel Melrose. “But we cannot have the official investigation hampered in any way. I know M. Poirot’s great reputation, of course,” he added courteously.

“The police can’t advertise themselves, worse luck,” said Raglan.

It was Poirot who saved the situation.

"It is true that I have retired from the world," he said. "I never intended to take up a case again. Above all things, I have a horror of publicity. I must beg, that in the case of my being able to contribute something to the solution of the mystery, my name may not be mentioned."

Inspector Raglan's face lightened a little.

"I've heard of some very remarkable successes of yours," observed the colonel, thawing.

"I have had much experience," said Poirot quietly. "But most of my successes have been obtained by the aid of the police. I admire enormously your English police. If Inspector Raglan permits me to assist him, I shall be both honoured and flattered."

The inspector's countenance became still more gracious.

Colonel Melrose drew me aside.

"From all I hear, this little fellow's done some really remarkable things," he murmured. "We're naturally anxious not to have to call in Scotland Yard. Raglan seems very sure of himself, but I'm not quite certain that I agree with him. You see, I—er—know the parties concerned better than he does. This fellow doesn't seem out after kudos, does he? Would work in with us unobtrusively, eh?"

"To the greater glory of Inspector Raglan," I said solemnly.

"Well, well," said Colonel Melrose breezily in a louder voice, "we must put you wise to the latest developments, M. Poirot."

"I thank you," said Poirot. "My friend, Doctor Sheppard, said something of the butler being suspected?"

"That's all bunkum," said Raglan instantly. "These high-class servants get in such a funk that they act suspiciously for nothing at all."

"The fingerprints?" I hinted.

“Nothing like Parker’s.” He gave a faint smile, and added: “And yours and Mr. Raymond’s don’t fit either, doctor.”

“What about those of Captain Ralph Paton?” asked Poirot quietly.

I felt a secret admiration of the way he took the bull by the horns. I saw a look of respect creep into the inspector’s eye.

“I see you don’t let the grass grow under your feet, Mr. Poirot. It will be a pleasure to work with you, I’m sure. We’re going to take that young gentleman’s fingerprints as soon as we can lay hands upon him.”

“I can’t help thinking you’re mistaken, Inspector,” said Colonel Melrose warmly. “I’ve known Ralph Paton from a boy upward. He’d never stoop to murder.”

“Maybe not,” said the inspector tonelessly.

“What have you got against him?” I asked.

“Went out just on nine o’clock last night. Was seen in the neighbourhood of Fernly Park somewhere about nine-thirty. Not been seen since. Believed to be in serious money difficulties. I’ve got a pair of his shoes here—shoes with rubber studs in them. He had two pairs, almost exactly alike. I’m going up now to compare them with those footmarks. The constable is up there seeing that no one tampers with them.”

“We’ll go at once,” said Colonel Melrose. “You and M. Poirot will accompany us, will you not?”

We assented, and all drove up in the colonel’s car. The inspector was anxious to get at once to the footmarks, and asked to be put down at the lodge. About halfway up the drive, on the right, a path branched off which led round to the terrace and the window of Ackroyd’s study.

“Would you like to go with the inspector, M. Poirot,” asked the chief constable, “or would you prefer to examine the study?”

Poirot chose the latter alternative. Parker opened the door to us. His manner was smug and deferential, and he seemed to have recovered from his panic of the night before.

Colonel Melrose took a key from his pocket, and unlocking the door which let into the lobby, he ushered us through into the study.

“Except for the removal of the body, M. Poirot, this room is exactly as it was last night.”

image

“And the body was found—where?”

As precisely as possible, I described Ackroyd’s position. The armchair still stood in front of the fire.

Poirot went and sat down in it.

“The blue letter you speak of, where was it when you left the room?”

“Mr. Ackroyd had laid it down on this little table at his right hand.”

Poirot nodded.

“Except for that, everything was in its place?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Colonel Melrose, would you be so extremely obliging as to sit down in this chair a minute. I thank you. Now M. le docteur, will you kindly indicate to me the exact position of the dagger?”

I did so, whilst the little man stood in the doorway.

“The hilt of the dagger was plainly visible from the door then. Both you and Parker could see it at once?”

“Yes.”

Poirot went next to the window.

“The electric light was on, of course, when you discovered the body?” he asked over his shoulder.

I assented, and joined him where he was studying the marks on the windowsill.

“The rubber studs are the same pattern as those in Captain Paton’s shoes,” he said quietly.

Then he came back once more to the middle of the room. His eye travelled round, searching everything in the room with a quick, trained glance.

“Are you a man of good observation, Doctor Sheppard?” he asked at last.

“I think so,” I said, surprised.

“There was a fire in the grate, I see. When you broke the door down and found Mr. Ackroyd dead, how was the fire? Was it low?”

I gave a vexed laugh.

“I—I really can’t say. I didn’t notice. Perhaps Mr. Raymond or Major Blunt—”

The little man opposite me shook his head with a faint smile.

“One must always proceed with method. I made an error of judgment in asking you that question. To each man his own knowledge. You could tell me the details of the patient’s appearance—nothing there would escape you. If I wanted information about the papers on that desk, Mr. Raymond would have noticed anything there was to see. To find out about the fire, I must ask the man whose business it is to observe such things. You permit—”

He moved swiftly to the fireplace and rang the bell.

After a lapse of a minute or two Parker appeared.

"The bell rang, sir," he said hesitatingly.

"Come in, Parker," said Colonel Melrose. "This gentleman wants to ask you something."

Parker transferred a respectful attention to Poirot.

"Parker," said the little man, "when you broke down the door with Dr. Sheppard last night, and found your master dead, what was the state of the fire?"

Parker replied without a pause.

"It had burned very low, sir. It was almost out."

"Ah!" said Poirot. The exclamation sounded almost triumphant. He went on:

"Look round you, my good Parker. Is this room exactly as it was then?"

The butler's eye swept round. It came to rest on the windows.

"The curtains were drawn, sir, and the electric light was on."

Poirot nodded approval.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, sir, this chair was drawn out a little more."

He indicated a big grandfather chair to the left of the door between it and the window. I append a plan of the room with the chair in question marked with an X.

"Just show me," said Poirot.

The butler drew the chair in question out a good two feet from the wall, turning it so that the seat faced the door.

“Voilà ce qui est curieux,” murmured Poirot. “No one would want to sit in a chair in such a position, I fancy. Now who pushed it back into place again, I wonder? Did you, my friend?”

“No, sir,” said Parker. “I was too upset with seeing the master and all.”

Poirot looked across at me.

“Did you, doctor?”

I shook my head.

“It was back in position when I arrived with the police, sir,” put in Parker. “I’m sure of that.”

“Curious,” said Poirot again.

“Raymond or Blunt must have pushed it back,” I suggested. “Surely it isn’t important?”

“It is completely unimportant,” said Poirot. “That is why it is so interesting,” he added softly.

“Excuse me a minute,” said Colonel Melrose. He left the room with Parker.

“Do you think Parker is speaking the truth?” I asked.

“About the chair, yes. Otherwise I do not know. You will find, M. le docteur, if you have much to do with cases of this kind, that they all resemble each other in one thing.”

“What is that?” I asked curiously.

“Everyone concerned in them has something to hide.”

“Have I?” I asked, smiling.

Poirot looked at me attentively.

“I think you have,” he said quietly.

“But—”

“Have you told me everything known to you about this young man Paton?” He smiled as I grew red. “Oh! do not fear. I will not press you. I shall learn it in good time.”

“I wish you’d tell me something of your methods,” I said hastily, to cover my confusion. “The point about the fire, for instance?”

“Oh! that was very simple. You leave Mr. Ackroyd at—ten minutes to nine, was it not?”

“Yes, exactly, I should say.”

“The window is then closed and bolted and the door unlocked. At a quarter past ten when the body is discovered, the door is locked and the window is open. Who opened it? Clearly only Mr. Ackroyd himself could have done so, and for one of two reasons. Either because the room became unbearably hot, but since the fire was nearly out and there was a sharp drop in temperature last night, that cannot be the reason, or because he admitted someone that way. And if he admitted someone that way, it must have been someone well known to him, since he had previously shown himself uneasy on the subject of that same window.”

“It sounds very simple,” I said.

“Everything is simple, if you arrange the facts methodically. We are concerned now with the personality of the person who was with him at nine-thirty last night. Everything goes to show that that was the individual admitted by the window, and though Mr. Ackroyd was seen alive later by Miss Flora, we cannot approach a solution of the mystery until we know who that visitor was. The window may have been left open after his departure and so afforded entrance to the murderer, or the same person may have returned a second time. Ah! here is the colonel who returns.”

Colonel Melrose entered with an animated manner.

“That telephone call has been traced at last,” he said. “It did not come from here. It was put through to Dr. Sheppard at 10:15 last night from a public call office at King’s Abbot station. And at 10:23 the night mail leaves for Liverpool.”

Eight

INSPECTOR RAGLAN IS CONFIDENT

We looked at each other.

“You’ll have inquiries made at the station, of course?” I said.

“Naturally, but I’m not over sanguine as to the result. You know what that station is like.”

I did. King’s Abbot is a mere village, but its station happens to be an important junction. Most of the big expresses stop there, and trains are shunted, re-sorted, and made up. It has two or three public telephone boxes. At that time of night, three local trains come in close upon each other, to catch the connection with the express for the north which comes in at 10:19 and leaves at 10:23. The whole place is in a bustle, and the chances of one particular person being noticed telephoning or getting into the express are very small indeed.

“But why telephone at all?” demanded Melrose. “That is what I find so extraordinary. There seems no rhyme or reason in the thing.”

Poirot carefully straightened a china ornament on one of the bookcases.

“Be sure there was a reason,” he said over his shoulder.

“But what reason could it be?”

“When we know that, we shall know everything. This case is very curious and very interesting.”

There was something almost indescribable in the way he said those last words. I felt that he was looking at the case from some peculiar angle of his own, and what he saw I could not tell.

He went to the window and stood there, looking out.

“You say it was nine o’clock, Dr. Sheppard, when you met this stranger outside the gate?”

He asked the question without turning round.

“Yes,” I replied. “I heard the church clock chime the hour.”

“How long would it take him to reach the house—to reach this window, for instance?”

“Five minutes at the outside. Two or three minutes only if he took the path at the right of the drive and came straight here.”

“But to do that he would have to know the way. How can I explain myself?—it would mean that he had been here before—that he knew his surroundings.”

“That is true,” replied Colonel Melrose.

“We could find out, doubtless, if Mr. Ackroyd had received any strangers during the past week?”

“Young Raymond could tell us that,” I said.

“Or Parker,” suggested Colonel Melrose.

“Ou tous les deux,” suggested Poirot, smiling.

Colonel Melrose went in search of Raymond, and I rang the bell once more for Parker.

Colonel Melrose returned almost immediately, accompanied by the young secretary, whom he introduced to Poirot. Geoffrey Raymond was fresh and debonair as ever. He seemed surprised and delighted to make Poirot’s acquaintance.

“No idea you’d been living among us incognito, M. Poirot,” he said. “It will be a great privilege to watch you at work—Hallo, what’s this?”

Poirot had been standing just to the left of the door. Now he moved aside suddenly, and I saw that while my back was turned he must have swiftly drawn out the armchair till it stood in the position Parker had indicated.

“Want me to sit in the chair whilst you take a blood test?” asked Raymond good-humouredly. “What’s the idea?”

“M. Raymond, this chair was pulled out—so—last night when Mr. Ackroyd was found killed. Someone moved it back again into place. Did you do so?”

The secretary’s reply came without a second’s hesitation.

“No, indeed I didn’t. I don’t even remember that it was in that position, but it must have been if you say so. Anyway, somebody else must have moved it back to its proper place. Have they destroyed a clue in doing so? Too bad!”

“It is of no consequence,” said the detective. “Of no consequence whatever. What I really want to ask you is this, M. Raymond: Did any stranger come to see Mr. Ackroyd during this past week?”

The secretary reflected for a minute or two, knitting his brows, and during the pause Parker appeared in answer to the bell.

“No,” said Raymond at last. “I can’t remember anyone. Can you, Parker?”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Any stranger coming to see Mr. Ackroyd this week?”

The butler reflected for a minute or two.

“There was the young man who came on Wednesday, sir,” he said at last. “From Curtis and Troute, I understood he was.”

Raymond moved this aside with an impatient hand.

"Oh! yes, I remember, but that is not the kind of stranger this gentleman means." He turned to Poirot. "Mr. Ackroyd had some idea of purchasing a dictaphone," he explained. "It would have enabled us to get through a lot more work in a limited time. The firm in question sent down their representative, but nothing came of it. Mr. Ackroyd did not make up his mind to purchase."

Poirot turned to the butler.

"Can you describe this young man to me, my good Parker?"

"He was fair-haired, sir, and short. Very neatly dressed in a blue serge suit. A very presentable young man, sir, for his station in life."

Poirot turned to me.

"The man you met outside the gate, doctor, was tall, was he not?"

"Yes," I said. "Somewhere about six feet, I should say."

"There is nothing in that, then," declared the Belgian. "I thank you, Parker."

The butler spoke to Raymond.

"Mr. Hammond has just arrived, sir," he said. "He is anxious to know if he can be of any service, and he would be glad to have a word with you."

"I'll come at once," said the young man. He hurried out. Poirot looked inquiringly at the chief constable.

"The family solicitor, M. Poirot," said the latter.

"It is a busy time for this young M. Raymond," murmured M. Poirot. "He has the air efficient, that one."

"I believe Mr. Ackroyd considered him a most able secretary."

"He has been here—how long?"

“Just on two years, I fancy.”

“His duties he fulfils punctiliously. Of that I am sure. In what manner does he amuse himself? Does he go in for le sport?”

“Private secretaries haven’t much time for that sort of thing,” said Colonel Melrose, smiling. “Raymond plays golf, I believe. And tennis in the summer time.”

“He does not attend the courses—I should say the running of the horses?”

“Race meetings? No, I don’t think he’s interested in racing.”

Poirot nodded and seemed to lose interest. He glanced slowly round the study.

“I have seen, I think, all that there is to be seen here.”

I, too, looked round.

“If those walls could speak,” I murmured.

Poirot shook his head.

“A tongue is not enough,” he said. “They would have to have also eyes and ears. But do not be too sure that these dead things”—he touched the top of the bookcase as he spoke—“are always dumb. To me they speak sometimes—chairs, tables—they have their message!”

He turned away towards the door.

“What message?” I cried. “What have they said to you today?”

He looked over his shoulder and raised one eyebrow quizzically.

“An opened window,” he said. “A locked door. A chair that apparently moved itself. To all three I say ‘Why?’ and I find no answer.”

He shook his head, puffed out his chest, and stood blinking at us. He looked ridiculously full of his own importance. It crossed my mind to wonder whether he was really any good as a detective. Had his big reputation been built up on a series of lucky chances?

I think the same thought must have occurred to Colonel Melrose, for he frowned.

“Anything more you want to see, M. Poirot?” he inquired brusquely.

“You would perhaps be so kind as to show me the silver table from which the weapon was taken? After that, I will trespass on your kindness no longer.”

We went to the drawing room, but on the way the constable waylaid the colonel, and after a muttered conversation the latter excused himself and left us together. I showed Poirot the silver table, and after raising the lid once or twice and letting it fall, he pushed open the window and stepped out on the terrace. I followed him.

Inspector Raglan had just turned the corner of the house, and was coming towards us. His face looked grim and satisfied.

“So there you are, M. Poirot,” he said. “Well, this isn’t going to be much of a case. I’m sorry, too. A nice enough young fellow gone wrong.”

Poirot’s face fell, and he spoke very mildly.

“I’m afraid I shall not be able to be of much aid to you, then?”

“Next time, perhaps,” said the inspector soothingly. “Though we don’t have murders every day in this quiet little corner of the world.”

Poirot’s gaze took on an admiring quality.

“You have been of a marvellous promptness,” he observed. “How exactly did you go to work, if I may ask?”

“Certainly,” said the inspector. “To begin with—method. That’s what I always say—method!”

“Ah!” cried the other. “That, too, is my watchword. Method, order, and the little grey cells.”

“The cells?” said the inspector, staring.

“The little grey cells of the brain,” explained the Belgian.

“Oh, of course; well, we all use them, I suppose.”

“In a greater or lesser degree,” murmured Poirot. “And there are, too, differences in quality. Then there is the psychology of a crime. One must study that.”

“Ah!” said the inspector, “you’ve been bitten with all this psycho-analysis stuff? Now, I’m a plain man—”

“Mrs. Raglan would not agree, I am sure, to that,” said Poirot, making him a little bow.

Inspector Raglan, a little taken aback, bowed.

“You don’t understand,” he said, grinning broadly. “Lord, what a lot of difference language makes. I’m telling you how I set to work. First of all, method. Mr. Ackroyd was last seen alive at a quarter to ten by his niece, Miss Flora Ackroyd. That’s fact number one, isn’t it?”

“If you say so.”

“Well, it is. At half past ten, the doctor here says that Mr. Ackroyd had been dead at least half an hour. You stick to that, doctor?”

“Certainly,” I said. “Half an hour or longer.”

“Very good. That gives us exactly a quarter of an hour in which the crime must have been committed. I make a list of everyone in the house, and work through it, setting down opposite their names where they were and what they were doing between the hour of 9:45 and 10 p.m.”

He handed a sheet of paper to Poirot. I read it over his shoulder. It ran as follows, written in a neat script:

Major Blunt In billiard room with Mr. Raymond. (Latter confirms.)

Mr. Raymond Billiard room. (See above.)

Mrs. Ackroyd 9:45 watching billiard match. Went up to bed 9:55. (Raymond and Blunt watched her up staircase.)

Miss Ackroyd Went straight from her uncle’s room upstairs. (Confirmed by Parker, also housemaid, Elsie Dale.)

Servants:

Parker Went straight to butler’s pantry. (Confirmed by housekeeper, Miss Russell, who came down to speak to him about something at 9:47, and remained at least ten minutes.)

Miss Russell As above. Spoke to housemaid, Elsie Dale, upstairs at 9:45.

Ursula Bourne (parlourmaid) In her own room until 9:55. Then in Servants’ Hall.

Mrs. Cooper (cook) In Servants’ Hall.

Gladys Jones (second housemaid) In Servants’ Hall.

Elsie Dale Upstairs in bedroom. Seen there by Miss Russell and Miss Flora Ackroyd.

Mary Thripp (kitchenmaid) Servants’ Hall.

"The cook has been here seven years, the parlourmaid eighteen months, and Parker just over a year. The others are new. Except for something fishy about Parker, they all seem quite all right."

"A very complete list," said Poirot, handing it back to him. "I am quite sure that Parker did not do the murder," he added gravely.

"So is my sister," I struck in. "And she's usually right." Nobody paid any attention to my interpolation.

"That disposes pretty effectually of the household," continued the inspector. "Now we come to a very grave point. The woman at the lodge—Mary Black—was pulling the curtains last night when she saw Ralph Paton turn in at the gate and go up towards the house."

"She is sure of that?" I asked sharply.

"Quite sure. She knows him well by sight. He went past very quickly and turned off by the path to the right, which is a short cut to the terrace."

"And what time was that?" asked Poirot, who had sat with an immovable face.

"Exactly twenty-five minutes past nine," said the inspector gravely.

There was a silence. Then the inspector spoke again.

"It's all clear enough. It fits in without a flaw. At twenty-five minutes past nine, Captain Paton is seen passing the lodge; at nine-thirty or thereabouts, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond hears someone in here asking for money and Mr. Ackroyd refusing. What happens next? Captain Paton leaves the same way—through the window. He walks along the terrace, angry and baffled. He comes to the open drawing room window. Say it's now a quarter to ten. Miss Flora Ackroyd is saying goodnight to her uncle. Major Blunt, Mr. Raymond, and Mrs. Ackroyd are in the billiard room. The drawing room is empty. He steals in, takes the dagger from the silver table, and returns to the study window. He slips off his shoes, climbs in, and—well, I don't need to go into details. Then he slips out again and goes off. Hadn’t the nerve to go back to the inn. He makes for the station, rings up from there—”

“Why?” said Poirot softly.

I jumped at the interruption. The little man was leaning forward. His eyes shone with a queer green light.

For a moment Inspector Raglan was taken aback by the question.

“It’s difficult to say exactly why he did that,” he said at last. “But murderers do funny things. You’d know that if you were in the police force. The cleverest of them make stupid mistakes sometimes. But come along and I’ll show you those footprints.”

We followed him round the corner of the terrace to the study window. At a word from Raglan a police constable produced the shoes which had been obtained from the local inn.

The inspector laid them over the marks.

“They’re the same,” he said confidently. “That is to say, they’re not the same pair that actually made these prints. He went away in those. This is a pair just like them, but older—see how the studs are worn down?”

“Surely a great many people wear shoes with rubber studs in them?” asked Poirot.

“That’s so, of course,” said the inspector. “I shouldn’t put so much stress on the footmarks if it wasn’t for everything else.”

“A very foolish young man, Captain Ralph Paton,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “To leave so much evidence of his presence.”

“Ah! well,” said the inspector, “it was a dry, fine night, you know. He left no prints on the terrace or on the gravelled path. But, unluckily for him, a spring must have welled up just lately at the end of the path from the drive. See here.”

A small gravelled path joined the terrace a few feet away. In one spot, a few yards from its termination, the ground was wet and boggy. Crossing this wet place there were again the marks of footsteps, and amongst them the shoes with rubber studs.

Poirot followed the path on a little way, the inspector by his side.

“You noticed the women’s footprints?” he said suddenly.

The inspector laughed.

“Naturally. But several different women have walked this way—and men as well. It’s a regular short cut to the house, you see. It would be impossible to sort out all the footsteps. After all, it’s the ones on the windowsill that are really important.”

Poirot nodded.

“It’s no good going farther,” said the inspector, as we came in view of the drive. “It’s all gravelled again here, and hard as it can be.”

Again Poirot nodded, but his eyes were fixed on a small garden house—a kind of superior summerhouse. It was a little to the left of the path ahead of us, and a gravelled walk ran up to it.

Poirot lingered about until the inspector had gone back towards the house. Then he looked at me.

“You must have indeed been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings,” he said, with a twinkle. “I observe that you do not quit my side. How say you, Doctor Sheppard, shall we investigate that summerhouse? It interests me.”

He went up to the door and opened it. Inside, the place was almost dark. There were one or two rustic seats, a croquet set, and some folded deck chairs.

I was startled to observe my new friend. He had dropped to his hands and knees and was crawling about the floor. Every now and then he shook his head as though not satisfied. Finally, he sat back on his heels.

“Nothing,” he murmured. “Well, perhaps it was not to be expected. But it would have meant so much—”

He broke off, stiffening all over. Then he stretched out his hand to one of the rustic chairs. He detached something from one side of it.

“What is it?” I cried. “What have you found?”

He smiled, unclosing his hand so that I should see what lay in the palm of it. A scrap of stiff white cambric.

I took it from him, looked at it curiously, and then handed it back.

“What do you make of it, eh, my friend?” he asked, eyeing me keenly.

“A scrap torn from a handkerchief,” I suggested, shrugging my shoulders.

He made another dart and picked up a small quill—a goose quill by the look of it.

“And that?” he cried triumphantly. “What do you make of that?”

I only stared.

He slipped the quill into his pocket, and looked again at the scrap of white stuff.

“A fragment of a handkerchief?” he mused. “Perhaps you are right. But remember this—a good laundry does not starch a handkerchief.”

He nodded at me triumphantly, then he put away the scrap carefully in his pocketbook.

Nine

THE GOLDFISH POND

We walked back to the house together. There was no sign of the inspector. Poirot paused on the terrace and stood with his back to the house, slowly turning his head from side to side.

“Une belle propriété,” he said at last appreciatively. “Who inherits it?”

His words gave me almost a shock. It is an odd thing, but until that moment the question of inheritance had never come into my head. Poirot watched me keenly.

“It is a new idea to you, that,” he said at last. “You had not thought of it before—eh?”

“No,” I said truthfully. “I wish I had.”

He looked at me again curiously.

“I wonder just what you mean by that,” he said thoughtfully. “Oh! no,” as I was about to speak. “Inutile! You would not tell me your real thought.”

“Everyone has something to hide,” I quoted, smiling.

“Exactly.”

“You still believe that?”

“More than ever, my friend. But it is not easy to hide things from Hercule Poirot. He has a knack of finding out.”

He descended the steps of the Dutch garden as he spoke.

“Let us walk a little,” he said over his shoulder. “The air is pleasant today.”

I followed him. He led me down a path to the left enclosed in yew hedges. A walk led down the middle, bordered each side with formal flower beds, and at the end was a round paved recess with a seat and a pond of goldfish. Instead of pursuing the path to the end, Poirot took another which wound up the side of a wooded slope. In one spot the trees had been cleared away, and a seat had been put. Sitting there one had a splendid view over the countryside, and one looked right down on the paved recess and the goldfish pond.

“England is very beautiful,” said Poirot, his eyes straying over the prospect. Then he smiled. “And so are English girls,” he said in a lower voice. “Hush, my friend, and look at the pretty picture below us.”

It was then that I saw Flora. She was moving along the path we had just left and she was humming a little snatch of song. Her step was more dancing than walking, and, in spite of her black dress, there was nothing but joy in her whole attitude. She gave a sudden pirouette on her toes, and her black draperies swung out. At the same time she flung her head back and laughed outright.

As she did so a man stepped out from the trees. It was Hector Blunt.

The girl started. Her expression changed a little.

“How you startled me—I didn’t see you.”

Blunt said nothing, but stood looking at her for a minute or two in silence.

“What I like about you,” said Flora, with a touch of malice, “is your cheery conversation.”

I fancy that at that Blunt reddened under his tan. His voice, when he spoke, sounded different—it had a curious sort of humility in it.

“Never was much of a fellow for talking. Not even when I was young.”

“That was a very long time ago, I suppose,” said Flora gravely.

I caught the undercurrent of laughter in her voice, but I don’t think Blunt did.

“Yes,” he said simply, “it was.”

“How does it feel to be Methuselah?” asked Flora.

This time the laughter was more apparent, but Blunt was following out an idea of his own.

“Remember the johnny who sold his soul to the devil? In return for being made young again? There’s an opera about it.”

“Faust, you mean?”

“That’s the beggar. Rum story. Some of us would do it if we could.”

“Anyone would think you were creaking at the joints to hear you talk,” cried Flora, half vexed, half amused.

Blunt said nothing for a minute or two. Then he looked away from Flora into the middle distance and observed to an adjacent tree trunk that it was about time he got back to Africa.

“Are you going on another expedition—shooting things?”

“Expect so. Usually do, you know—shoot things, I mean.”

“You shot that head in the hall, didn’t you?”

Blunt nodded. Then he jerked out, going rather red as he did so:

“Care for some decent skins any time? If so, I could get ’em for you.”

“Oh! please do,” cried Flora. “Will you really? You won’t forget?”

“I shan’t forget,” said Hector Blunt.

He added, in a sudden burst of communicativeness:

“Time I went. I’m no good in this sort of life. Haven’t got the manners for it. I’m a rough fellow, no use in society. Never remember the things one’s expected to say. Yes, time I went.”

“But you’re not going at once,” cried Flora. “No—not while we’re in all this trouble. Oh! please. If you go—”

She turned away a little.

“You want me to stay?” asked Blunt.

He spoke deliberately but quite simply.

“We all—”

“I meant you personally,” said Blunt, with directness.

Flora turned slowly back again and met his eyes.

“I want you to stay,” she said, “if—if that makes any difference.”

“It makes all the difference,” said Blunt.

There was a moment’s silence. They sat down on the stone seat by the goldfish pond. It seemed as though neither of them knew quite what to say next.

“It—it’s such a lovely morning,” said Flora at last. “You know, I can’t help feeling happy, in spite—in spite of everything. That’s awful, I suppose?”

“Quite natural,” said Blunt. “Never saw your uncle until two years ago, did you? Can’t be expected to grieve very much. Much better to have no humbug about it.”

“There’s something awfully consoling about you,” said Flora. “You make things seem so simple.”

“Things are simple as a rule,” said the big-game hunter.

“Not always,” said Flora.

Her voice had lowered itself, and I saw Blunt turn and look at her, bringing his eyes back from (apparently) the coast of Africa to do so. He evidently put his own construction on her change of tone, for he said, after a minute or two, in rather an abrupt manner:

“I say, you know, you mustn’t worry. About that young chap, I mean. Inspector’s an ass. Everybody knows—utterly absurd to think he could have done it. Man from outside. Burglar chap. That’s the only possible solution.”

Flora turned to look at him.

“You really think so?”

“Don’t you?” said Blunt quickly.

“I—oh, yes, of course.”

Another silence, and then Flora burst out:

“I’m—I’ll tell you why I felt so happy this morning. However heartless you think me, I’d rather tell you. It’s because the lawyer has been—Mr. Hammond. He told us about the will. Uncle Roger has left me twenty thousand pounds. Think of it—twenty thousand beautiful pounds.”

Blunt looked surprised.

“Does it mean so much to you?”

“Mean much to me? Why, it’s everything. Freedom—life—no more scheming and scraping and lying—”

“Lying?” said Blunt, sharply interrupting.

Flora seemed taken aback for a minute.

“You know what I mean,” she said uncertainly. “Pretending to be thankful for all the nasty cast-off things rich relations give you. Last year’s coat and skirts and hats.”

“Don’t know much about ladies’ clothes; should have said you were always very well turned out.”

“It cost me something, though,” said Flora in a low voice. “Don’t let’s talk of horrid things. I’m so happy. I’m free. Free to do what I like. Free not to —”

She stopped suddenly.

“Not to what?” asked Blunt quickly.

“I forget now. Nothing important.”

Blunt had a stick in his hand, and he thrust it into the pond, poking at something.

“What are you doing, Major Blunt?”

“There’s something bright down there. Wondered what it was—looks like a gold brooch. Now I’ve stirred up the mud and it’s gone.”

“Perhaps it’s a crown,” suggested Flora. “Like the one Melisande saw in the water.”

“Melisande,” said Blunt reflectively—“she’s in an opera, isn’t she?”

“Yes, you seem to know a lot about operas.”

“People take me sometimes,” said Blunt sadly. “Funny idea of pleasure—worse racket than the natives make with their tom-toms.”

Flora laughed.

“I remember Melisande,” continued Blunt, “married an old chap old enough to be her father.”

He threw a small piece of flint into the goldfish pond. Then, with a change of manner, he turned to Flora.

“Miss Ackroyd, can I do anything? About Paton, I mean. I know how dreadfully anxious you must be.”

“Thank you,” said Flora in a cold voice. “There is really nothing to be done. Ralph will be all right. I’ve got hold of the most wonderful detective in the world, and he’s going to find out all about it.”

For some time I had felt uneasy as to our position. We were not exactly eavesdropping, since the two in the garden below had only to lift their heads to see us. Nevertheless, I should have drawn attention to our presence before now, had not my companion put a warning pressure on my arm. Clearly he wished me to remain silent. Now, however, he acted briskly.

He rose quickly to his feet, clearing his throat.

“I demand pardon,” he cried. “I cannot allow mademoiselle thus extravagantly to compliment me, and not draw attention to my presence. They say the listener hears no good of himself, but that is not the case this time. To spare my blushes, I must join you and apologize.”

He hurried down the path with me close behind him, and joined the others by the pond.

“This is M. Hercule Poirot,” said Flora. “I expect you’ve heard of him.”

Poirot bowed.

“I know Major Blunt by reputation,” he said politely. “I am glad to have encountered you, monsieur. I am in need of some information that you can give me.”

Blunt looked at him inquiringly.

“When did you last see M. Ackroyd alive?”

“At dinner.”

“And you neither saw nor heard anything of him after that?”

“Didn’t see him. Heard his voice.”

“How was that?”

“I strolled out on the terrace—”

“Pardon me, what time was that?”

“About half past nine. I was walking up and down smoking in front of the drawing room window. I heard Ackroyd talking in his study—”

Poirot stopped and removed a microscopic weed.

“Surely you couldn’t hear voices in the study from that part of the terrace,” he murmured.

He was not looking at Blunt, but I was, and to my intense surprise, I saw the latter flush.

“Went as far as the corner,” he explained unwillingly.

“Ah! indeed?” said Poirot.

In the mildest manner he conveyed an impression that more was wanted.

“Thought I saw—a woman disappearing into the bushes. Just a gleam of white, you know. Must have been mistaken. It was while I was standing at the corner of the terrace that I heard Ackroyd’s voice speaking to that secretary of his.”

“Speaking to Mr. Geoffrey Raymond?”

“Yes—that’s what I supposed at the time. Seems I was wrong.”

“Mr. Ackroyd didn’t address him by name?”

“Oh, no.”

“Then, if I may ask, why did you think—?”

Blunt explained laboriously.

“Took it for granted that it would be Raymond, because he had said just before I came out that he was taking some papers to Ackroyd. Never thought of it being anybody else.”

“Can you remember what the words you heard were?”

“Afraid I can’t. Something quite ordinary and unimportant. Only caught a scrap of it. I was thinking of something else at the time.”

“It is of no importance,” murmured Poirot. “Did you move a chair back against the wall when you went into the study after the body was discovered?”

“Chair? No, why should I?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders but did not answer. He turned to Flora.

“There is one thing I should like to know from you, mademoiselle. When you were examining the things in the silver table with Dr. Sheppard, was the dagger in its place, or was it not?”

Flora’s chin shot up.

“Inspector Raglan has been asking me that,” she said resentfully. “I’ve told him, and I’ll tell you. I’m perfectly certain the dagger was not there. He thinks it was and that Ralph sneaked it later in the evening. And—and he doesn’t believe me. He thinks I’m saying it so—to shield Ralph.”

“And aren’t you?” I asked gravely.

Flora stamped her foot.

“You, too, Dr. Sheppard! Oh! it’s too bad.”

Poirot tactfully made a diversion.

“It is true what I heard you say, Major Blunt. There is something that glitters in this pond. Let us see if I can reach it.”

He knelt down by the pond, baring his arm to the elbow, and lowered it in very slowly, so as not to disturb the bottom of the pond. But in spite of all his precautions the mud eddied and swirled, and he was forced to draw his arm out again empty-handed.

He gazed ruefully at the mud upon his arm. I offered him my handkerchief, which he accepted with fervent protestations of thanks. Blunt looked at his watch.

“Nearly lunch time,” he said. “We’d better be getting back to the house.”

“You will lunch with us, M. Poirot?” asked Flora. “I should like you to meet my mother. She is—very fond of Ralph.”

The little man bowed.

“I shall be delighted, mademoiselle.”

“And you will stay, too, won’t you, Dr. Sheppard?”

I hesitated.

“Oh, do!”

I wanted to, so I accepted the invitation without further ceremony.

We set out towards the house, Flora and Blunt walking ahead.

“What hair,” said Poirot to me in a low tone, nodding towards Flora. “The real gold! They will make a pretty couple. She and the dark, handsome Captain Paton. Will they not?”

I looked at him inquiringly, but he began to fuss about a few microscopic drops of water on his coat sleeve. The man reminded me in some ways of a cat. His green eyes and his finicking habits.

"And all for nothing, too," I said sympathetically. "I wonder what it was in the pond?"

"Would you like to see?" asked Poirot.

I stared at him. He nodded.

"My good friend," he said gently and reproachfully, "Hercule Poirot does not run the risk of disarranging his costume without being sure of attaining his object. To do so would be ridiculous and absurd. I am never ridiculous."

"But you brought your hand out empty," I objected.

"There are times when it is necessary to have discretion. Do you tell your patients everything—but everything, doctor? I think not. Nor do you tell your excellent sister everything either, is it not so? Before showing my empty hand, I dropped what it contained into my other hand. You shall see what that was."

He held out his left hand, palm open. On it lay a little circlet of gold. A woman's wedding ring.

I took it from him.

"Look inside," commanded Poirot.

I did so. Inside was an inscription in fine writing:

From R., March 13th.

I looked at Poirot, but he was busy inspecting his appearance in a tiny pocket glass. He paid particular attention to his moustaches, and none at all to me. I saw that he did not intend to be communicative.

Ten

THE PARLOURMAID

We found Mrs. Ackroyd in the hall. With her was a small dried-up little man, with an aggressive chin and sharp grey eyes, and "lawyer" written all over him.

"Mr. Hammond is staying to lunch with us," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "You know Major Blunt, Mr. Hammond? And dear Doctor Sheppard—also a close friend of poor Roger's. And, let me see—"

She paused, surveying Hercule Poirot in some perplexity.

"This is M. Poirot, Mother," said Flora. "I told you about him this morning."

"Oh! yes," said Mrs. Ackroyd vaguely. "Of course, my dear, of course. He is to find Ralph, is he not?"

"He is to find out who killed Uncle," said Flora.

"Oh! my dear," cried her mother. "Please! My poor nerves. I am a wreck this morning, a positive wreck. Such a dreadful thing to happen. I can't help feeling that it must have been an accident of some kind. Roger was so fond of handling queer curios. His hand must have slipped, or something."

This theory was received in polite silence. I saw Poirot edge up to the lawyer, and speak to him in a confidential undertone. They moved aside into the embrasure of the window. I joined them—then hesitated.

"Perhaps I'm intruding," I said.

"Not at all," cried Poirot heartily. "You and I, M. le docteur, we investigate this affair side by side. Without you I should be lost. I desire a little information from the good Mr. Hammond."

“You are acting on behalf of Captain Ralph Paton, I understand,” said the lawyer cautiously.

Poirot shook his head.

“Not so. I am acting in the interests of justice. Miss Ackroyd has asked me to investigate the death of her uncle.”

Mr. Hammond seemed slightly taken aback.

“I cannot seriously believe that Captain Paton can be concerned in this crime,” he said, “however strong the circumstantial evidence against him may be. The mere fact that he was hard pressed for money—”

“Was he hard pressed for money?” interpolated Poirot quickly.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

“It was a chronic condition with Ralph Paton,” he said drily. “Money went through his hands like water. He was always applying to his stepfather.”

“Had he done so of late? During the last year, for instance?”

“I cannot say. Mr. Ackroyd did not mention the fact to me.”

“I comprehend. Mr. Hammond, I take it that you are acquainted with the provisions of Mr. Ackroyd’s will?”

“Certainly. That is my principal business here today.”

“Then, seeing that I am acting for Miss Ackroyd, you will not object to telling me the terms of that will?”

“They are quite simple. Shorn of legal phraseology, and after paying certain legacies and bequests—”

“Such as—?” interrupted Poirot.

Mr. Hammond seemed a little surprised.

“A thousand pounds to his housekeeper, Miss Russell; fifty pounds to the cook, Emma Cooper; five hundred pounds to his secretary, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond. Then to various hospitals—”

Poirot held up his hand.

“Ah! the charitable bequests, they interest me not.”

“Quite so. The income on ten thousand pounds” worth of shares to be paid to Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd during her lifetime. Miss Flora Ackroyd inherits twenty thousand pounds outright. The residue—including this property, and the shares in Ackroyd and Son—to his adopted son, Ralph Paton.”

“Mr. Ackroyd possessed a large fortune?”

“A very large fortune. Captain Paton will be an exceedingly wealthy young man.”

There was a silence. Poirot and the lawyer looked at each other.

“Mr. Hammond,” came Mrs. Ackroyd’s voice plaintively from the fireplace.

The lawyer answered the summons. Poirot took my arm and drew me right into the window.

“Regard the irises,” he remarked in a rather loud voice. “Magnificent, are they not? A straight and pleasing effect.”

At the same time I felt the pressure of his hand on my arm, and he added in a low tone:

“Do you really wish to aid me? To take part in this investigation?”

“Yes, indeed,” I said eagerly. “There’s nothing I should like better. You don’t know what a dull old fogey’s life I lead. Never anything out of the ordinary.”

“Good, we will be colleagues then. In a minute or two I fancy Major Blunt will join us. He is not happy with the good mamma. Now there are some things I want to know—but I do not wish to seem to want to know them. You comprehend? So it will be your part to ask the questions.”

“What questions do you want me to ask?” I asked apprehensively.

“I want you to introduce the name of Mrs. Ferrars.”

“Yes?”

“Speak of her in a natural fashion. Ask him if he was down here when her husband died. You understand the kind of thing I mean. And while he replies, watch his face without seeming to watch it. C’est compris?”

There was no time for more, for at that minute, as Poirot had prophesied, Blunt left the others in his abrupt fashion and came over to us.

I suggested strolling on the terrace, and he acquiesced. Poirot stayed behind.

I stopped to examine a late rose.

“How things change in the course of a day or two,” I observed. “I was up here last Wednesday, I remember, walking up and down this same terrace. Ackroyd was with me—full of spirits. And now—three days later—Ackroyd’s dead, poor fellow. Mrs. Ferrars dead—you knew her, didn’t you? But of course you did.”

Blunt nodded his head.

“Had you seen her since you’d been down this time?”

“Went with Ackroyd to call. Last Tuesday, think it was. Fascinating woman—but something queer about her. Deep—one would never know what she was up to.”

I looked into his steady grey eyes. Nothing there surely. I went on:

“I suppose you’d met her before?”

"Last time I was here—she and her husband had just come here to live." He paused a minute and then added: "Rum thing, she had changed a lot between then and now."

"How—changed?" I asked.

"Looked ten years older."

"Were you down here when her husband died?" I asked, trying to make the question sound as casual as possible.

"No. From all I heard it would be good riddance. Uncharitable, perhaps, but the truth."

I agreed.

"Ashley Ferrars was by no means a pattern husband," I said cautiously.

"Blackguard, I thought," said Blunt.

"No," I said, "only a man with more money than was good for him."

"Oh! money! All the troubles in the world can be put down to money—or the lack of it."

"Which has been your particular trouble?" I asked.

"Enough for what I want. I'm one of the lucky ones."

"Indeed."

"I'm not too flush just now, as a matter of fact. Came into a legacy a year ago, and like a fool let myself be persuaded into putting it into some wild-cat scheme."

I sympathized, and narrated my own similar trouble.

Then the gong pealed out, and we all went in to lunch. Poirot drew me back a little.

"Eh bien?"

"He's all right," I said. "I'm sure of it."

"Nothing—disturbing?"

"He had a legacy just a year ago," I said. "But why not? Why shouldn't he? I'll swear the man is perfectly square and above board."

"Without doubt, without doubt," said Poirot soothingly. "Do not upset yourself."

He spoke as though to a fractious child.

We all trooped into the dining room. It seemed incredible that less than twenty-four hours had passed since I last sat at that table.

Afterwards, Mrs. Ackroyd took me aside and sat down with me on a sofa.

"I can't help feeling a little hurt," she murmured, producing a handkerchief of the kind obviously not meant to be cried into. "Hurt, I mean, by Roger's lack of confidence in me. That twenty thousand pounds ought to have been left to me—not to Flora. A mother could be trusted to safeguard the interests of her child. A lack of trust, I call it."

"You forget, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said, "Flora was Ackroyd's own niece, a blood relation. It would have been different had you been his sister instead of his sister-in-law."

"As poor Cecil's widow, I think my feelings ought to have been considered," said the lady, touching her eyelashes gingerly with the handkerchief. "But Roger was always most peculiar—not to say mean—about money matters. It has been a most difficult position for both Flora and myself. He did not even give the poor child an allowance. He would pay her bills, you know, and even that with a good deal of reluctance and asking what she wanted all those fal-lals for—so like a man—but—now I've forgotten what it was I was going to say! Oh, yes, not a penny we could call our own, you know. Flora resented it—yes, I must say she resented it—very strongly. Though devoted to her uncle, of course. But any girl would have resented it. Yes, I must say Roger had very strange ideas about money. He wouldn't even buy new face towels, though I told him the old ones were in holes. And then," proceeded Mrs. Ackroyd, with a sudden leap highly characteristic of her conversation, "to leave all that money—a thousand pounds, fancy, a thousand pounds!—to that woman."

"What woman?"

"That Russell woman. Something very queer about her, and so I've always said. But Roger wouldn't hear a word against her. Said she was a woman of great force of character, and that he admired and respected her. He was always going on about her rectitude and independence and moral worth. I think there's something fishy about her. She was certainly doing her best to marry Roger. But I soon put a stop to that. She always hated me. Naturally. I saw through her."

I began to wonder if there was any chance of stemming Mrs. Ackroyd's eloquence, and getting away.

Mr. Hammond provided the necessary diversion by coming up to say goodbye. I seized my chance and rose also.

"About the inquest," I said. "Where would you prefer it to be held? Here, or at the Three Boars?"

Mrs. Ackroyd stared at me with a dropped jaw.

"The inquest?" she asked, the picture of consternation. "But surely there won't have to be an inquest?"

Mr. Hammond gave a dry little cough and murmured, "Inevitable. Under the circumstances," in two short little barks.

"But surely Dr. Sheppard can arrange—"

"There are limits to my powers of arrangement," I said drily.

"If his death was an accident—"

“He was murdered, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said brutally.

She gave a little cry.

“No theory of accident will hold water for a minute.”

Mrs. Ackroyd looked at me in distress. I had no patience with what I thought was her silly fear of unpleasantness.

“If there’s an inquest, I—I shan’t have to answer questions and all that, shall I?” she asked.

“I don’t know what will be necessary,” I answered. “I imagine Mr. Raymond will take the brunt of it off you. He knows all the circumstances, and can give formal evidence of identification.”

The lawyer assented with a little bow.

“I really don’t think there is anything to dread, Mrs. Ackroyd,” he said. “You will be spared all the unpleasantness. Now, as to the question of money, have you all you need for the present? I mean,” he added, as she looked at him inquiringly, “ready money. Cash, you know. If not, I can arrange to let you have whatever you require.”

“That ought to be all right,” said Raymond, who was standing by. “Mr. Ackroyd cashed a cheque for a hundred pounds yesterday.”

“A hundred pounds?”

“Yes. For wages and other expenses due today. At the moment it is still intact.”

“Where is this money? In his desk?”

“No, he always kept his cash in his bedroom. In an old collar box, to be accurate. Funny idea, wasn’t it?”

“I think,” said the lawyer, “we ought to make sure the money is there before I leave.”

“Certainly,” agreed the secretary. “I’ll take you up now…Oh! I forgot. The door’s locked.”

Inquiry from Parker elicited the information that Inspector Raglan was in the housekeeper’s room asking a few supplementary questions. A few minutes later the inspector joined the party in the hall, bringing the key with him. He unlocked the door and we passed into the lobby and up the small staircase. At the top of the stairs the door into Ackroyd’s bedroom stood open. Inside the room it was dark, the curtains were drawn, and the bed was turned down just as it had been last night. The inspector drew the curtains, letting in the sunlight, and Geoffrey Raymond went to the top drawer of a rosewood bureau.

“He kept his money like that, in an unlocked drawer. Just fancy,” commented the inspector.

The secretary flushed a little.

“Mr. Ackroyd had perfect faith in the honesty of all the servants,” he said hotly.

“Oh! quite so,” said the inspector hastily.

Raymond opened the drawer, took out a round leather collar box from the back of it, and opening it, drew out a thick wallet.

“Here is the money,” he said, taking out a fat roll of notes. “You will find the hundred intact, I know, for Mr. Ackroyd put it in the collar box in my presence last night when he was dressing for dinner, and of course it has not been touched since.”

Mr. Hammond took the roll from him and counted it. He looked up sharply.

“A hundred pounds, you said. But there is only sixty here.”

Raymond stared at him.

“Impossible,” he cried, springing forward. Taking the notes from the other’s hand, he counted them aloud.

Mr. Hammond had been right. The total amounted to sixty pounds.

"But—I can't understand it," cried the secretary, bewildered.

Poirot asked a question.

"You saw Mr. Ackroyd put this money away last night when he was dressing for dinner? You are sure he had not paid away any of it already?"

"I'm sure he hadn't. He even said, 'I don't want to take a hundred pounds down to dinner with me. Too bulgy.'"

"Then the affair is very simple," remarked Poirot. "Either he paid out that forty pounds some time last evening, or else it has been stolen."

"That's the matter in a nutshell," agreed the inspector. He turned to Mrs. Ackroyd. "Which of the servants would come in here yesterday evening?"

"I suppose the housemaid would turn down the bed."

"Who is she? What do you know about her?"

"She's not been here very long," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "But she's a nice ordinary country girl."

"I think we ought to clear this matter up," said the inspector. "If Mr. Ackroyd paid that money away himself, it may have a bearing on the mystery of the crime. The other servants all right, as far as you know?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Not missed anything before?"

"No."

"None of them leaving, or anything like that?"

"The parlourmaid is leaving."

"When?"

"She gave notice yesterday, I believe."

"To you?"

"Oh, no. I have nothing to do with the servants. Miss Russell attends to the household matters."

The inspector remained lost in thought for a minute or two. Then he nodded his head and remarked, "I think I'd better have a word with Miss Russell, and I'll see the girl Dale as well."

Poirot and I accompanied him to the housekeeper's room. Miss Russell received us with her usual sangfroid.

Elsie Dale had been at Fernly five months. A nice girl, quick at her duties, and most respectable. Good references. The last girl in the world to take anything not belonging to her.

What about the parlourmaid?

"She, too, was a most superior girl. Very quiet and ladylike. An excellent worker."

"Then why is she leaving?" asked the inspector.

Miss Russell pursed up her lips.

"It was none of my doing. I understand Mr. Ackroyd found fault with her yesterday afternoon. It was her duty to do the study, and she disarranged some of the papers on his desk, I believe. He was very annoyed about it, and she gave notice. At least, that is what I understood from her, but perhaps you'd like to see her yourselves?"

The inspector assented. I had already noticed the girl when she was waiting on us at lunch. A tall girl, with a lot of brown hair rolled tightly away at the back of her neck, and very steady grey eyes. She came in answer to the housekeeper’s summons, and stood very straight with those same grey eyes fixed on us.

“You are Ursula Bourne?” asked the inspector.

“Yes, sir.”

“I understand you are leaving?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why is that?”

“I disarranged some papers on Mr. Ackroyd’s desk. He was very angry about it, and I said I had better leave. He told me to go as soon as possible.”

“Were you in Mr. Ackroyd’s bedroom at all last night? Tidying up or anything?”

“No, sir. That is Elsie’s work. I never went near that part of the house.”

“I must tell you, my girl, that a large sum of money is missing from Mr. Ackroyd’s room.”

At last I saw her roused. A wave of colour swept over her face.

“I know nothing about any money. If you think I took it, and that that is why Mr. Ackroyd dismissed me, you are wrong.”

“I’m not accusing you of taking it, my girl,” said the inspector. “Don’t flare up so.”

The girl looked at him coldly.

“You can search my things if you like,” she said disdainfully. “But you won’t find anything.”

Poirot suddenly interposed.

“It was yesterday afternoon that Mr. Ackroyd dismissed you—or you dismissed yourself, was it not?” he asked.

The girl nodded.

“How long did the interview last?”

“The interview?”

“Yes, the interview between you and Mr. Ackroyd in the study?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Twenty minutes? Half an hour?”

“Something like that.”

“Not longer?”

“Not longer than half an hour, certainly.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle.”

I looked curiously at him. He was rearranging a few objects on the table, setting them straight with precise fingers. His eyes were shining.

“That’ll do,” said the inspector.

Ursula Bourne disappeared. The inspector turned to Miss Russell.

“How long has she been here? Have you got a copy of the reference you had with her?”

Without answering the first question, Miss Russell moved to an adjacent bureau, opened one of the drawers, and took out a handful of letters clipped together with a patent fastener. She selected one and handed it to the inspector.

“H’m,” said he. “Reads all right. Mrs. Richard Folliott, Marby Grange, Marby. Who’s this woman?”

“Quite good country people,” said Miss Russell.

“Well,” said the inspector, handing it back, “let’s have a look at the other one, Elsie Dale.”

Elsie Dale was a big fair girl, with a pleasant but slightly stupid face. She answered our questions readily enough, and showed much distress and concern at the loss of the money.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with her,” observed the inspector, after he had dismissed her. “What about Parker?”

Miss Russell pursed her lips together and made no reply.

“I’ve a feeling there’s something wrong about that man,” the inspector continued thoughtfully. “The trouble is that I don’t quite see when he got his opportunity. He’d be busy with his duties immediately after dinner, and he’d got a pretty good alibi all through the evening. I know, for I’ve been devoting particular attention to it. Well, thank you very much, Miss Russell. We’ll leave things as they are for the present. It’s highly probable Mr. Ackroyd paid that money away himself.”

The housekeeper bade us a dry good afternoon, and we took our leave.

I left the house with Poirot.

“I wonder,” I said, breaking the silence, “what the papers the girl disarranged could have been for Ackroyd to have got into such a state about them? I wonder if there is any clue there to the mystery.”

“The secretary said there were no papers of particular importance on the desk,” said Poirot quietly.

“Yes, but—” I paused.

"It strikes you as odd that Ackroyd should have flown into a rage about so trivial a matter?"

"Yes, it does rather."

"But was it a trivial matter?"

"Of course," I admitted, "we don't know what those papers may have been. But Raymond certainly said—"

"Leave M. Raymond out of it for a minute. What did you think of that girl?"

"Which girl? The parlourmaid?"

"Yes, the parlourmaid. Ursula Bourne."

"She seemed a nice girl," I said hesitatingly.

Poirot repeated my words, but whereas I had laid a slight stress on the fourth word, he put it on the second.

"She seemed a nice girl—yes."

Then, after a minute's silence, he took something from his pocket and handed it to me.

"See, my friend, I will show you something. Look there."

The paper he had handed me was that compiled by the inspector and given by him to Poirot that morning. Following the pointing finger, I saw a small cross marked in pencil opposite the name Ursula Bourne.

"You may not have noticed it at the time, my good friend, but there was one person on this list whose alibi had no kind of confirmation. Ursula Bourne."

"You don't think—?"

“Dr. Sheppard, I dare to think anything. Ursula Bourne may have killed Mr. Ackroyd, but I confess I can see no motive for her doing so. Can you?”

He looked at me very hard—so hard that I felt uncomfortable.

“Can you?” he repeated.

“No motive whatsoever,” I said firmly.

His gaze relaxed. He frowned and murmured to himself:

“Since the blackmailer was a man, it follows that she cannot be the blackmailer, then—”

I coughed.

“As far as that goes—” I began doubtfully.

He spun round on me.

“What? What are you going to say?”

“Nothing, Nothing. Only that, strictly speaking, Mrs. Ferrars in her letter mentioned a person—she didn’t actually specify a man. But we took it for granted, Ackroyd and I, that it was a man.”

Poirot did not seem to be listening to me. He was muttering to himself again.

“But then it is possible after all—yes, certainly it is possible—but then—ah! I must rearrange my ideas. Method, order, never have I needed them more. Everything must fit in—in its appointed place—otherwise I am on the wrong track.”

He broke off, and whirled round upon me again.

“Where is Marby?”

“It’s on the other side of Cranchester.”

“How far away?”

“Oh!—fourteen miles, perhaps.”

“Would it be possible for you to go there? Tomorrow, say?”

“Tomorrow? Let me see, that’s Sunday. Yes, I could arrange it. What do you want me to do there?”

“See this Mrs. Folliott. Find out all you can about Ursula Bourne.”

“Very well. But—I don’t much care for the job.”

“It is not the time to make difficulties. A man’s life may hang on this.”

“Poor Ralph,” I said with a sigh. “You believe him to be innocent, though?”

Poirot looked at me very gravely.

“Do you want to know the truth?”

“Of course.”

“Then you shall have it. My friend, everything points to the assumption that he is guilty.”

“What!” I exclaimed.

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, that stupid inspector—for he is stupid—has everything pointing his way. I seek for the truth—and the truth leads me every time to Ralph Paton. Motive, opportunity, means. But I will leave no stone unturned. I promised Mademoiselle Flora. And she was very sure, that little one. But very sure indeed.”

Eleven

POIROT PAYS A CALL

I was slightly nervous when I rang the bell at Marby Grange the following afternoon. I wondered very much what Poirot expected to find out. He had entrusted the job to me. Why? Was it because, as in the case of questioning Major Blunt, he wished to remain in the background? The wish, intelligible in the first case, seemed to me quite meaningless here.

My meditations were interrupted by the advent of a smart parlourmaid.

Yes, Mrs. Folliott was at home. I was ushered into a big drawing room, and looked round me curiously as I waited for the mistress of the house. A large bare room, some good bits of old china, and some beautiful etchings, shabby covers and curtains. A lady's room in every sense of the term.

I turned from the inspection of a Bartolozzi on the wall as Mrs. Folliott came into the room. She was a tall woman, with untidy brown hair, and a very winning smile.

"Dr. Sheppard," she said hesitatingly.

"That is my name," I replied. "I must apologize for calling upon you like this, but I wanted some information about a parlourmaid previously employed by you, Ursula Bourne."

With the utterance of the name the smile vanished from her face, and all the cordiality froze out of her manner. She looked uncomfortable and ill at ease.

"Ursula Bourne?" she said hesitatingly.

"Yes," I said. "Perhaps you don't remember the name?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I—I remember perfectly."

“She left you just over a year ago, I understand?”

“Yes. Yes, she did. That is quite right.”

“And you were satisfied with her whilst she was with you? How long was she with you, by the way?”

“Oh! a year or two—I can’t remember exactly how long. She—she is very capable. I’m sure you will find her quite satisfactory. I didn’t know she was leaving Fernly. I hadn’t the least idea of it.”

“Can you tell me anything about her?” I asked.

“Anything about her?”

“Yes, where she comes from, who her people are—that sort of thing?”

Mrs. Folliott’s face wore more than ever its frozen look.

“I don’t know at all.”

“Who was she with before she came to you?”

“I’m afraid I don’t remember.”

There was a spark of anger now underlying her nervousness. She flung up her head in a gesture that was vaguely familiar.

“Is it really necessary to ask all these questions?”

“Not at all,” I said, with an air of surprise and a tinge of apology in my manner. “I had no idea you would mind answering them. I am very sorry.”

Her anger left her and she became confused again.

“Oh! I don’t mind answering them. I assure you I don’t. Why should I? It—it just seemed a little odd, you know. That’s all. A little odd.”

One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you. I should have known from Mrs. Folliott’s manner, if from nothing else, that she did mind answering my questions—minded intensely. She was thoroughly uncomfortable and upset, and there was plainly some mystery in the background. I judged her to be a woman quite unused to deception of any kind, and consequently rendered acutely uneasy when forced to practise it. A child could have seen through her.

But it was also clear the she had no intention of telling me anything further. Whatever the mystery centring round Ursula Bourne might be, I was not going to learn it through Mrs. Folliott.

Defeated, I apologized once more for disturbing her, took my hat and departed.

I went to see a couple of patients and arrived home about six o’clock. Caroline was sitting beside the wreck of tea things. She had that look of suppressed exultation on her face which I know only too well. It is a sure sign with her of either the getting or the giving of information. I wondered which it had been.

“I’ve had a very interesting afternoon,” began Caroline, as I dropped into my own particular easy chair and stretched out my feet to the inviting blaze in the fireplace.

“Have you?” I said. “Miss Gannett drop in to tea?”

Miss Gannett is one of the chief of our newsmongers.

“Guess again,” said Caroline, with intense complacency.

I guessed several times, working slowly through all the members of Caroline’s Intelligence Corps. My sister received each guess with a triumphant shake of the head. In the end she volunteered the information herself.

“M. Poirot!” she said. “Now, what do you think of that?”

I thought a good many things of it, but I was careful not to say them to Caroline.

“Why did he come?” I asked.

“To see me, of course. He said that, knowing my brother so well, he hoped he might be permitted to make the acquaintance of his charming sister—your charming sister, I’ve got mixed up—but you know what I mean.”

“What did he talk about?” I asked.

“He told me a lot about himself and his cases. You know that Prince Paul of Mauretania—the one who’s just married a dancer?”

“Yes?”

“I saw a most intriguing paragraph about her in Society Snippets the other day, hinting that she was really a Russian Grand Duchess—one of the Czar’s daughters who managed to escape from the Bolsheviks. Well, it seems that M. Poirot solved a baffling murder mystery that threatened to involve them both. Prince Paul was beside himself with gratitude.”

“Did he give him an emerald tie pin the size of a plover’s egg?” I inquired sarcastically.

“He didn’t mention it. Why?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I thought it was always done. It is in detective fiction anyway. The super-detective always has his rooms littered with rubies and pearls and emeralds from grateful Royal clients.”

“It’s very interesting to hear about these things from the inside,” said my sister complacently.

It would be—to Caroline. I could not but admire the ingenuity of M. Hercule Poirot, who had selected unerringly the case of all others that would most appeal to an elderly lady living in a small village.

“Did he tell you if the dancer was really a Grand Duchess?” I inquired.

“He was not at liberty to speak,” said Caroline importantly.

I wondered how far Poirot had strained the truth in talking to Caroline—probably not at all. He had conveyed his innuendoes by means of his eyebrows and his shoulders.

“And after all this,” I remarked, “I suppose you were ready to eat out of his hand?”

“Don’t be coarse, James. I don’t know where you get these vulgar expressions from.”

“Probably from my only link with the outside world—my patients. Unfortunately, my practice does not lie amongst Royal princes and interesting Russian émigrés.”

Caroline pushed her spectacles up and looked at me.

“You seem very grumpy, James. It must be your liver. A blue pill, I think, tonight.”

To see me in my own home, you would never imagine that I was a doctor of medicine. Caroline does the home prescribing both for herself and me.

“Damn my liver,” I said irritably. “Did you talk about the murder at all?”

“Well, naturally, James. What else is there to talk about locally? I was able to set M. Poirot straight upon several points. He was very grateful to me. He said I had the makings of a born detective in me—and a wonderful psychological insight into human nature.”

Caroline was exactly like a cat that is full to overflowing with rich cream. She was positively purring.

“He talked a lot about the little grey cells of the brain, and of their functions. His own, he says, are of the first quality.”

“He would say so,” I remarked bitterly. “Modesty is certainly not his middle name.”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so horribly American, James. He thought it very important that Ralph should be found as soon as possible, and induced to come forward and give an account of himself. He says that his disappearance will produce a very unfortunate impression at the inquest.”

“And what did you say to that?”

“I agreed with him,” said Caroline importantly. “And I was able to tell him the way people were talking already about it.”

“Caroline,” I said sharply, “did you tell M. Poirot what you overheard in the wood that day?”

“I did,” said Caroline complacently.

I got up and began to walk about.

“You realize what you’re doing, I hope,” I jerked out. “You’re putting a halter round Ralph Paton’s neck as surely as you’re sitting in that chair.”

“Not at all,” said Caroline, quite unruffled. “I was surprised you hadn’t told him.”

“I took very good care not to,” I said. “I’m fond of that boy.”

“So am I. That’s why I say you’re talking nonsense. I don’t believe Ralph did it, and so the truth can’t hurt him, and we ought to give M. Poirot all the help we can. Why, think, very likely Ralph was out with that identical girl on the night of the murder, and if so, he’s got a perfect alibi.”

“If he’s got a perfect alibi,” I retorted, “why doesn’t he come forward and say so?”

“Might get the girl into trouble,” said Caroline sapiently. “But if M. Poirot gets hold of her, and puts it to her as her duty, she’ll come forward of her own accord and clear Ralph.”

“You seem to have invented a romantic fairy story of your own,” I said. “You read too many trashy novels, Caroline. I’ve always told you so.”

I dropped into my chair again.

“Did Poirot ask you any more questions?” I inquired.

“Only about the patients you had that morning.”

“The patients?” I demanded, unbelievingly.

“Yes, your surgery patients. How many and who they were.”

“Do you mean to say you were able to tell him that?” I demanded.

Caroline is really amazing.

“Why not?” asked my sister triumphantly. “I can see the path up to the surgery door perfectly from this window. And I’ve got an excellent memory, James. Much better than yours, let me tell you.”

“I’m sure you have,” I murmured mechanically.

My sister went on, checking the names on her fingers.

“There was old Mrs. Bennett, and that boy from the farm with the bad finger, Dolly Grice to have a needle out of her finger; that American steward off the liner. Let me see—that’s four. Yes, and old George Evans with his ulcer. And lastly—”

She paused significantly.

“Well?”

Caroline brought out her climax triumphantly. She hissed it in the most approved style—aided by the fortunate number of s’s at her disposal.

“Miss Russell!”

She sat back in her chair and looked at me meaningly, and when Caroline looks at you meaningly, it is impossible to miss it.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, quite untruthfully. “Why shouldn’t Miss Russell consult me about her bad knee?”

“Bad knee,” said Caroline. “Fiddlesticks! No more bad knee than you and I. She was after something else.”

“What?” I asked.

Caroline had to admit that she didn’t know.

“But depend upon it, that was what he was trying to get at—M. Poirot, I mean. There’s something fishy about that woman, and he knows it.”

“Precisely the remark Mrs. Ackroyd made to me yesterday,” I said. “That there was something fishy about Miss Russell.”

“Ah!” said Caroline darkly, “Mrs. Ackroyd! There’s another!”

“Another what?”

Caroline refused to explain her remarks. She merely nodded her head several times, rolling up her knitting, and went upstairs to don the high mauve silk blouse and the gold locket which she calls dressing for dinner.

I stayed there staring into the fire and thinking over Caroline’s words. Had Poirot really come to gain information about Miss Russell, or was it only Caroline’s tortuous mind that interpreted everything according to her own ideas?

There had certainly been nothing in Miss Russell’s manner that morning to arouse suspicion. At least—

I remembered her persistent conversation on the subject of drug-taking—and from that she had led the conversation to poisons and poisoning. But there was nothing in that. Ackroyd had not been poisoned. Still, it was odd….

I heard Caroline’s voice, rather acid in tone, calling from the top of the stairs.

“James, you will be late for dinner.”

I put some coal on the fire and went upstairs obediently.

It is well at any price to have peace in the home.

Twelve

ROUND THE TABLE

A joint inquest was held on Monday.

I do not propose to give the proceedings in detail. To do so would only be to go over the same ground again and again. By arrangement with the police, very little was allowed to come out. I gave evidence as to the cause of Ackroyd's death and the probable time. The absence of Ralph Paton was commented on by the coroner, but not unduly stressed.

Afterwards, Poirot and I had a few words with Inspector Raglan. The inspector was very grave.

"It looks bad, M. Poirot," he said. "I'm trying to judge the thing fair and square. I'm a local man, and I've seen Captain Paton many times in Cranchester. I'm not wanting him to be the guilty one—but it's bad whichever way you look at it. If he's innocent, why doesn't he come forward? We've got evidence against him, but it's just possible that the evidence could be explained away. Then why doesn't he give an explanation?"

A lot more lay behind the inspector's words than I knew at the time. Ralph's description had been wired to every port and railway station in England. The police everywhere were on the alert. His rooms in town were watched, and any houses he had been known to be in the habit of frequenting. With such a cordon it seemed impossible that Ralph should be able to evade detection. He had no luggage, and, as far as anyone knew, no money.

"I can't find anyone who saw him at the station that night," continued the inspector. "And yet he's well known down here, and you'd think somebody would have noticed him. There's no news from Liverpool either."

"You think he went to Liverpool?" queried Poirot.

"Well, it's on the cards. That telephone message from the station, just three minutes before the Liverpool express left—there ought to be something in that."

"Unless it was deliberately intended to throw you off the scent. That might just possibly be the point of the telephone message."

"That's an idea," said the inspector eagerly. "Do you really think that's the explanation of the telephone call?"

"My friend," said Poirot gravely, "I do not know. But I will tell you this: I believe that when we find the explanation of that telephone call we shall find the explanation of the murder."

"You said something like that before, I remember," I observed, looking at him curiously.

Poirot nodded.

"I always come back to it," he said seriously.

"It seems to me utterly irrelevant," I declared.

"I wouldn't say that," demurred the inspector. "But I must confess I think Mr. Poirot here harps on it a little too much. We've better clues than that. The fingerprints on the dagger, for instance."

Poirot became suddenly very foreign in manner, as he often did when excited over anything.

"M. l'Inspecteur," he said, "beware of the blind—the blind—comment dire?—the little street that has no end to it."

Inspector Raglan stared, but I was quicker.

"You mean a blind alley?" I said.

"That is it—the blind street that leads nowhere. So it may be with those fingerprints—they may lead you nowhere."

“I don’t see how that can well be,” said the police officer. “I suppose you’re hinting that they’re faked? I’ve read of such things being done, though I can’t say I’ve ever come across it in my experience. But fake or true—they’re bound to lead somewhere.”

Poirot merely shrugged his shoulders, flinging out his arms wide.

The inspector then showed us various enlarged photographs of the fingerprints, and proceeded to become technical on the subject of loops and whorls.

“Come now,” he said at last, annoyed by Poirot’s detached manner, “you’ve got to admit that those prints were made by someone who was in the house that night?”

“Bien entendu,” said Poirot, nodding his head.

“Well, I’ve taken the prints of every member of the household, everyone, mind you, from the old lady down to the kitchen maid.”

I don’t think Mrs. Ackroyd would enjoy being referred to as the old lady. She must spend a considerable amount on cosmetics.

“Everyone’s,” repeated the inspector fussily.

“Including mine,” I said drily.

“Very well. None of them correspond. That leaves us two alternatives. Ralph Paton, or the mysterious stranger the doctor here tells us about. When we get hold of those two—”

“Much valuable time may have been lost,” broke in Poirot.

“I don’t quite get you, Mr. Poirot.”

“You have taken the prints of everyone in the house, you say,” murmured Poirot. “Is that the exact truth you are telling me there, M. l’Inspecteur?”

“Certainly.”

“Without overlooking anyone?”

“Without overlooking anyone.”

“The quick or the dead?”

For a moment the inspector looked bewildered at what he took to be a religious observation. Then he reacted slowly.

“You mean—?”

“The dead, M. l’Inspecteur.”

The inspector still took a minute or two to understand.

“I am suggesting,” said Poirot placidly, “that the fingerprints on the dagger handle are those of Mr. Ackroyd himself. It is an easy matter to verify. His body is still available.”

“But why? What would be the point of it? You’re surely not suggesting suicide, Mr. Poirot?”

“Ah! no. My theory is that the murderer wore gloves or wrapped something round his hand. After the blow was struck, he picked up the victim’s hand and closed it round the dagger handle.”

“But why?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders again.

“To make a confusing case even more confusing.”

“Well,” said the inspector. “I’ll look into it. What gave you the idea in the first place?”

“When you were so kind as to show me the dagger and draw attention to the fingerprints. I know very little of loops and whorls—see, I confess my ignorance frankly. But it did occur to me that the position of the prints was somewhat awkward. Not so would I have held a dagger in order to strike.

Naturally, with the right hand brought up over the shoulder backwards, it would have been difficult to put it in exactly the right position.”

Inspector Raglan stared at the little man. Poirot, with an air of great unconcern, flecked a speck of dust from his coat sleeve.

“Well,” said the inspector. “It’s an idea. I’ll look into it all right, but don’t you be disappointed if nothing comes of it.”

He endeavoured to make his tone kindly and patronising. Poirot watched him go off. Then he turned to me with twinkling eyes.

“Another time,” he observed, “I must be more careful of his amour propre. And now that we are left to our own devices, what do you think, my good friend, of a little reunion of the family?”

The “little reunion,” as Poirot called it, took place about half an hour later. We sat round the table in the dining room at Fernly. Poirot at the head of the table, like the chairman of some ghastly board meeting. The servants were not present, so we were six in all. Mrs. Ackroyd, Flora, Major Blunt, young Raymond, Poirot and myself.

When everyone was assembled, Poirot rose and bowed.

“Messieurs, mesdames, I have called you together for a certain purpose.” He paused. “To begin with, I want to make a very special plea to mademoiselle.”

“To me?” said Flora.

“Mademoiselle, you are engaged to Captain Ralph Paton. If anyone is in his confidence, you are. I beg you, most earnestly, if you know of his whereabouts, to persuade him to come forward. One little minute”—as Flora raised her head to speak—“say nothing till you have well reflected. Mademoiselle, his position grows daily more dangerous. If he had come forward at once, no matter how damning the facts, he might have had a chance of explaining them away. But this silence—this flight—what can it mean? Surely only one thing, knowledge of guilt. Mademoiselle, if you really believe in his innocence, persuade him to come forward before it is too late.”

Flora’s face had gone very white.

“Too late!” she repeated, very low.

Poirot leant forward, looking at her.

“See now, mademoiselle,” he said very gently, “it is Papa Poirot who asks you this. The old Papa Poirot who has much knowledge and much experience. I would not seek to entrap you, mademoiselle. Will you not trust me—and tell me where Ralph Paton is hiding?”

The girl rose and stood facing him.

“M. Poirot,” she said in a clear voice, “I swear to you—swear solemnly—that I have no idea where Ralph is, and that I have neither seen him nor heard from him either on the day of—of the murder, or since.”

She sat down again. Poirot gazed at her in silence for a minute or two, then he brought his hand down on the table with a sharp rap.

“Bien! That is that,” he said. His face hardened. “Now I appeal to these others who sit round this table, Mrs. Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Dr. Sheppard, Mr. Raymond. You are all friends and intimates of the missing man. If you know where Ralph Paton is hiding, speak out.”

There was a long silence. Poirot looked to each in turn.

“I beg of you,” he said in a low voice, “speak out.”

But still there was silence, broken at last by Mrs. Ackroyd.

“I must say,” she observed in a plaintive voice, “that Ralph’s absence is most peculiar—most peculiar indeed. Not to come forward at such a time. It looks, you know, as though there were something behind it. I can’t help thinking, Flora dear, that it was a very fortunate thing your engagement was never formally announced.”

“Mother!” cried Flora angrily.

“Providence,” declared Mrs. Ackroyd. “I have a devout belief in Providence—a divinity that shapes our ends, as Shakespeare’s beautiful line runs.”

“Surely you don’t make the Almighty directly responsible for thick ankles, Mrs. Ackroyd, do you?” asked Geoffrey Raymond, his irresponsible laugh ringing out.

His idea was, I think, to loosen the tension, but Mrs. Ackroyd threw him a glance of reproach and took out her handkerchief.

“Flora has been saved a terrible amount of notoriety and unpleasantness. Not for a moment that I think dear Ralph had anything to do with poor Roger’s death. I don’t think so. But then I have a trusting heart—I always have had, ever since a child. I am loath to believe the worst of anyone. But, of course, one must remember that Ralph was in several air raids as a young boy. The results are apparent long after, sometimes, they say. People are not responsible for their actions in the least. They lose control, you know, without being able to help it.”

“Mother,” cried Flora, “you don’t think Ralph did it?”

“Come, Mrs. Ackroyd,” said Blunt.

“I don’t know what to think,” said Mrs. Ackroyd tearfully. “It’s all very upsetting. What would happen to the estate, I wonder, if Ralph were found guilty?”

Raymond pushed his chair away from the table violently. Major Blunt remained very quiet, looking thoughtfully at her.

“Like shell shock, you know,” said Mrs. Ackroyd obstinately, “and I dare say Roger kept him very short of money—with the best intentions, of course. I can see you are all against me, but I do think it is very odd that Ralph has not come forward, and I must say I am thankful Flora’s engagement was never announced formally.”

“It will be tomorrow,” said Flora in a clear voice.

“Flora!” cried her mother, aghast.

Flora had turned to the secretary.

“Will you send the announcement to the Morning Post. And The Times, please, Mr. Raymond.”

“If you are sure that it is wise, Miss Ackroyd,” he replied gravely.

She turned impulsively to Blunt.

“You understand,” she said. “What else can I do? As things are, I must stand by Ralph. Don’t you see that I must?”

She looked very searchingly at him, and after a long pause he nodded abruptly.

Mrs. Ackroyd burst out into shrill protests. Flora remained unmoved. Then Raymond spoke.

“I appreciate your motives, Miss Ackroyd. But don’t you think you’re being rather precipitate? Wait a day or two.”

“Tomorrow,” said Flora in a clear voice. “It’s no good, Mother, going on like this. Whatever else I am, I’m not disloyal to my friends.”

“M. Poirot,” Mrs. Ackroyd appealed tearfully. “Can’t you say anything at all?”

“Nothing to be said,” interpolated Blunt. “She’s doing the right thing. I’ll stand by her through thick and thin.”

Flora held out her hand to him.

“Thank you, Major Blunt,” she said.

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "will you let an old man congratulate you on your courage and your loyalty? And will you not misunderstand me if I ask you—ask you most solemnly—to postpone the announcement you speak of for at least two days more?"

Flora hesitated.

"I ask it in Ralph Paton's interests as much as in yours, mademoiselle. You frown. You do not see how that can be. But I assure you that it is so. Pas de blagues. You put the case into my hands—you must not hamper me now."

Flora paused a few minutes before replying.

"I do not like it," she said at last, "but I will do what you say."

She sat down again at the table.

"And now, messieurs et mesdames," said Poirot rapidly, "I will continue with what I was about to say. Understand this, I mean to arrive at the truth. The truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to the seeker after it. I am much aged, my powers may not be what they were." Here he clearly expected a contradiction. "In all probability this is the last case I shall ever investigate. But Hercule Poirot does not end with a failure. Messieurs et mesdames, I tell you, I mean to know. And I shall know—in spite of you all."

He brought out the last words provocatively, hurling them in our face as it were. I think we all flinched back a little, excepting Geoffrey Raymond, who remained good-humoured and imperturbable as usual.

"How do you mean—in spite of us all?" he asked, with slightly raised eyebrows.

"But—just that, monsieur. Every one of you in this room is concealing something from me." He raised his hand as a faint murmur of protest arose. "Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. It may be something unimportant—trivial—which is supposed to have no bearing on the case, but there it is. Each one of you has something to hide. Come now, am I right?"

His glance, challenging and accusing, swept round the table. And every pair of eyes dropped before his. Yes, mine as well.

“I am answered,” said Poirot, with a curious laugh. He got up from his seat. “I appeal to you all. Tell me the truth—the whole truth.” There was a silence. “Will no one speak?”

He gave the same short laugh again.

“C’est dommage,” he said, and went out.

Thirteen

THE GOOSE QUILL

That evening, at Poirot's request, I went over to his house after dinner. Caroline saw me depart with visible reluctance. I think she would have liked to have accompanied me.

Poirot greeted me hospitably. He had placed a bottle of Irish whiskey (which I detest) on a small table, with a soda water siphon and a glass. He himself was engaged in brewing hot chocolate. It was a favourite beverage of his, I discovered later.

He inquired politely after my sister, whom he declared to be a most interesting woman.

"I'm afraid you've been giving her a swelled head," I said drily. "What about Sunday afternoon?"

He laughed and twinkled.

"I always like to employ the expert," he remarked obscurely, but he refused to explain the remark.

"You got all the local gossip anyway," I remarked. "True, and untrue."

"And a great deal of valuable information," he added quietly.

"Such as—"

He shook his head.

"Why not have told me the truth?" he countered. "In a place like this, all Ralph Paton's doings were bound to be known. If your sister had not happened to pass through the wood that day somebody else would have done so."

“I suppose they would,” I said grumpily. “What about this interest of yours in my patients?”

Again he twinkled.

“Only one of them, doctor. Only one of them.”

“The last?” I hazarded.

“I find Miss Russell a study of the most interesting,” he said evasively.

“Do you agree with my sister and Mrs. Ackroyd that there is something fishy about her?” I asked.

“Eh? What do you say—fishy?”

I explained to the best of my ability.

“And they say that, do they?”

“Didn’t my sister convey as much to you yesterday afternoon?”

“C’est possible.”

“For no reason whatever,” I declared.

“Les femmes,” generalized Poirot. “They are marvellous! They invent haphazard—and by miracle they are right. Not that it is that, really. Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together—and they call the result intuition. Me, I am very skilled in psychology. I know these things.”

He swelled his chest out importantly, looking so ridiculous that I found it difficult not to burst out laughing. Then he took a small sip of his chocolate, and carefully wiped his moustache.

“I wish you’d tell me,” I burst out, “what you really think of it all?”

He put down his cup.

“You wish that?”

“I do.”

“You have seen what I have seen. Should not our ideas be the same?”

“I’m afraid you’re laughing at me,” I said stiffly. “Of course, I’ve no experience of matters of this kind.”

Poirot smiled at me indulgently.

“You are like the little child who wants to know the way the engine works. You wish to see the affair, not as the family doctor sees it, but with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one—to whom they are all strangers and all equally liable to suspicion.”

“You put it very well,” I said.

“So I give you, then, a little lecture. The first thing is to get a clear history of what happened that evening—always bearing in mind that the person who speaks may be lying.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Rather a suspicious attitude.”

“But necessary—I assure you, necessary. Now first—Dr. Sheppard leaves the house at ten minutes to nine. How do I know that?”

“Because I told you so.”

“But you might not be speaking the truth—or the watch you went by might be wrong. But Parker also says that you left the house at ten minutes to nine. So we accept that statement and pass on. At nine o’clock you run into a man—and here we come to what we will call the Romance of the Mysterious Stranger—just outside the Park gates. How do I know that that is so?”

“I told you so,” I began again, but Poirot interrupted me with a gesture of impatience.

“Ah! but it is that you are a little stupid tonight, my friend. You know that it is so—but how am I to know? Eh bien, I am able to tell you that the Mysterious Stranger was not a hallucination on your part, because the maid of a Miss Gannett met him a few minutes before you did, and of her too he inquired the way to Fernly Park. We accept his presence, therefore, and we can be fairly sure of two things about him—that he was a stranger to the neighbourhood, and that whatever his object in going to Fernly, there was no great secrecy about it, since he twice asked the way there.”

“Yes,” I said, “I see that.”

“Now I have made it my business to find out more about this man. He had a drink at the Three Boars, I learn, and the barmaid there says that he spoke with an American accent and mentioned having just come over from the States. Did it strike you that he had an American accent?”

“Yes, I think he had,” I said, after a minute or two, during which I cast my mind back; “but a very slight one.”

“Précisément. There is also this, which, you will remember, I picked up in the summerhouse.”

He held out to me the little quill. I looked at it curiously. Then a memory of something I had read stirred in me.

Poirot, who had been watching my face, nodded.

“Yes, heroin, ‘snow’. Drug-takers carry it like this, and sniff it up the nose.”

“Diamorphine hydrochloride,” I murmured mechanically.

“This method of taking the drug is very common on the other side. Another proof, if we wanted one, that the man came from Canada or the States.”

“What first attracted your attention to that summerhouse?” I asked curiously.

"My friend the inspector took it for granted that anyone using that path did so as a short cut to the house, but as soon as I saw the summerhouse, I realized that the same path would be taken by anyone using the summerhouse as a rendezvous. Now it seems fairly certain that the stranger came neither to the front nor to the back door. Then did someone from the house go out and meet him? If so, what could be a more convenient place than that little summerhouse? I searched it with the hope that I might find some clue inside. I found two, the scrap of cambric and the quill."

"And the scrap of cambric?" I asked curiously. "What about that?"

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"You do not use your little grey cells," he remarked drily. "The scrap of starched cambric should be obvious."

"Not very obvious to me." I changed the subject. "Anyway," I said, "this man went to the summerhouse to meet somebody. Who was that somebody?"

"Exactly the question," said Poirot. "You will remember that Mrs. Ackroyd and her daughter came over from Canada to live here?"

"Is that what you meant today when you accused them of hiding the truth?"

"Perhaps. Now another point. What did you think of the parlourmaid's story?"

"What story?"

"The story of her dismissal. Does it take half an hour to dismiss a servant? Was the story of those important papers a likely one? And remember, though she says she was in her bedroom from nine-thirty until ten o'clock, there is no one to confirm her statement."

"You bewilder me," I said.

"To me it grows clearer. But tell me now your own ideas and theories."

I drew a piece of paper from my pocket.

“I just scribbled down a few suggestions,” I said apologetically.

“But excellent—you have method. Let us hear them.”

I read out in a somewhat embarrassed voice.

“To begin with, one must look at the thing logically—”

“Just what my poor Hastings used to say,” interrupted Poirot, “but alas! he never did so.”

“Point No. 1.—Mr. Ackroyd was heard talking to someone at half past nine.

“Point No. 2.—At some time during the evening Ralph Paton must have come in through the window, as evidenced by the prints of his shoes.

“Point No. 3.—Mr. Ackroyd was nervous that evening, and would only have admitted someone he knew.

“Point No. 4.—The person with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty was asking for money. We know Ralph Paton was in a scrape.

“These four points go to show that the person with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty was Ralph Paton. But we know that Mr. Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten, therefore it was not Ralph who killed him. Ralph left the window open. Afterwards the murderer came in that way.”

“And who was the murderer?” inquired Poirot.

“The American stranger. He may have been in league with Parker, and possibly in Parker we have the man who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. If so, Parker may have heard enough to realize the game was up, have told his accomplice so, and the latter did the crime with the dagger which Parker gave him.”

“It is a theory that,” admitted Poirot. “Decidedly you have cells of a kind. But it leaves a good deal unaccounted for.”

“Such as—”

“The telephone call, the pushed-out chair—”

“Do you really think that latter important?” I interrupted.

“Perhaps not,” admitted my friend. “It may have been pulled out by accident, and Raymond or Blunt may have shoved it into place unconsciously under the stress of emotion. Then there is the missing forty pounds.”

“Given by Ackroyd to Ralph,” I suggested. “He may have reconsidered his first refusal.”

“That still leaves one thing unexplained.”

“What?”

“Why was Blunt so certain in his own mind that it was Raymond with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty?”

“He explained that,” I said.

“You think so? I will not press the point. Tell me, instead, what were Ralph Paton’s reasons for disappearing?”

“That’s rather more difficult,” I said slowly. “I shall have to speak as a medical man. Ralph’s nerves must have gone phut! If he suddenly found out that his uncle had been murdered within a few minutes of his leaving him—after, perhaps, a rather stormy interview—well, he might get the wind up and clear right out. Men have been known to do that—act guiltily when they’re perfectly innocent.”

“Yes, that is true,” said Poirot. “But we must not lose sight of one thing.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” I remarked: “motive. Ralph Paton inherits a great fortune by his uncle’s death.”

“That is one motive,” agreed Poirot.

“One?”

“Mais oui. Do you realize that there are three separate motives staring us in the face. Somebody certainly stole the blue envelope and its contents. That is one motive. Blackmail! Ralph Paton may have been the man who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. Remember, as far as Hammond knew, Ralph Paton had not applied to his uncle for help of late. That looks as though he were being supplied with money elsewhere. Then there is the fact that he was in some—how do you say—scrape?—which he feared might get to his uncle’s ears. And finally there is the one you have just mentioned.”

“Dear me,” I said, rather taken aback. “The case does seem black against him.”

“Does it?” said Poirot. “That is where we disagree, you and I. Three motives—it is almost too much. I am inclined to believe that, after all, Ralph Paton is innocent.”

Fourteen

MRS. ACKROYD

After the evening talk I have just chronicled, the affair seemed to me to enter on a different phase. The whole thing can be divided into two parts, each clear and distinct from the other. Part I ranges from Ackroyd's death on the Friday evening to the following Monday night. It is the straightforward narrative of what occurred, as presented to Hercule Poirot. I was at Poirot's elbow the whole time. I saw what he saw. I tried my best to read his mind. As I know now, I failed in this latter task. Though Poirot showed me all his discoveries—as, for instance, the gold wedding-ring—he held back the vital and yet logical impressions that he formed. As I came to know later, this secrecy was characteristic of him. He would throw out hints and suggestions, but beyond that he would not go.

As I say, up till the Monday evening, my narrative might have been that of Poirot himself. I played Watson to his Sherlock. But after Monday our ways diverged. Poirot was busy on his own account. I got to hear of what he was doing, because in King's Abbot you get to hear of everything, but he did not take me into his confidence beforehand. And I, too, had my own preoccupations.

On looking back, the thing that strikes me most is the piecemeal character of this period. Everyone had a hand in the elucidation of the mystery. It was rather like a jig-saw puzzle to which everyone contributed their own little piece of knowledge or discovery. But their task ended there. To Poirot alone belongs the renown of fitting those pieces into their correct place.

Some of the incidents seemed at the time irrelevant and unmeaning. There was, for instance, the question of the black boots. But that comes later…. To take things strictly in chronological order, I must begin with the summons from Mrs. Ackroyd.

She sent for me early on Tuesday morning, and since the summons sounded an urgent one, I hastened there, expecting to find her in extremis.

The lady was in bed. So much did she concede to the etiquette of the situation. She gave me her bony hand, and indicated a chair drawn up to the bedside.

“Well, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said, “and what’s the matter with you?”

I spoke with that kind of spurious geniality which seems to be expected of general practitioners.

“I’m prostrated,” said Mrs. Ackroyd in a faint voice. “Absolutely prostrated. It’s the shock of poor Roger’s death. They say these things often aren’t felt at the time, you know. It’s the reaction afterwards.”

It is a pity that a doctor is precluded by his profession from being able sometimes to say what he really thinks.

I would have given anything to be able to answer “Bunkum!”

Instead, I suggested a tonic. Mrs. Ackroyd accepted the tonic. One move in the game seemed now to be concluded. Not for a moment did I imagine that I had been sent for because of the shock occasioned by Ackroyd’s death. But Mrs. Ackroyd is totally incapable of pursuing a straightforward course on any subject. She always approaches her object by tortuous means. I wondered very much why it was she had sent for me.

“And then that scene—yesterday,” continued my patient.

She paused as though expecting me to take up a cue.

“What scene?”

“Doctor, how can you? Have you forgotten? That dreadful little Frenchman—or Belgian—or whatever he is. Bullying us all like he did. It has quite upset me. Coming on the top of Roger’s death.”

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said.

“I don’t know what he meant—shouting at us like he did. I should hope I know my duty too well to dream of concealing anything. I have given the police every assistance in my power.”

Mrs. Ackroyd paused, and I said, “Quite so.” I was beginning to have a glimmering of what all the trouble was about.

“No one can say that I have failed in my duty,” continued Mrs. Ackroyd. “I am sure Inspector Raglan is perfectly satisfied. Why should this little upstart of a foreigner make a fuss? A most ridiculous-looking creature he is too—just like a comic Frenchman in a revue. I can’t think why Flora insisted on bringing him into the case. She never said a word to me about it. Just went off and did it on her own. Flora is too independent. I am a woman of the world and her mother. She should have come to me for advice first.”

I listened to all this in silence.

“What does he think? That’s what I want to know. Does he actually imagine I’m hiding something? He—he—positively accused me yesterday.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“It is surely of no consequence, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said. “Since you are not concealing anything, any remarks he may have made do not apply to you.”

Mrs. Ackroyd went off at a tangent, after her usual fashion.

“Servants are so tiresome,” she said. “They gossip, and talk amongst themselves. And then it gets round—and all the time there’s probably nothing in it at all.”

“Have the servants been talking?” I asked. “What about?”

Mrs. Ackroyd cast a very shrewd glance at me. It quite threw me off my balance.

“I was sure you’d know, doctor, if anyone did. You were with M. Poirot all the time, weren’t you?”

“I was.”

"Then of course you know. It was that girl, Ursula Bourne, wasn't it? Naturally—she's leaving. She would want to make all the trouble she could. Spiteful, that's what they are. They're all alike. Now, you being there, doctor, you must know exactly what she did say? I'm most anxious that no wrong impression should get about. After all, you don't repeat every little detail to the police, do you? There are family matters sometimes—nothing to do with the question of the murder. But if the girl was spiteful, she may have made out all sorts of things."

I was shrewd enough to see that a very real anxiety lay behind these outpourings. Poirot had been justified in his premises. Of the six people round the table yesterday, Mrs. Ackroyd at least had had something to hide. It was for me to discover what that something might be.

"If I were you, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said brusquely, "I should make a clean breast of things."

She gave a little scream.

"Oh! doctor, how can you be so abrupt. It sounds as though—as though—And I can explain everything so simply."

"Then why not do so?" I suggested.

Mrs. Ackroyd took out a frilled handkerchief, and became tearful.

"I thought, doctor, that you might put it to M. Poirot—explain it, you know—because it's so difficult for a foreigner to see our point of view. And you don't know—nobody could know—what I've had to contend with. A martyrdom—a long martyrdom. That's what my life has been. I don't like to speak ill of the dead—but there it is. Not the smallest bill but it had all to be gone over—just as though Roger had had a few miserly hundreds a year instead of being (as Mr. Hammond told me yesterday) one of the wealthiest men in these parts."

Mrs. Ackroyd paused to dab her eyes with the frilled handkerchief.

"Yes," I said encouragingly. "You were talking about bills?"

“Those dreadful bills. And some I didn’t like to show Roger at all. They were things a man wouldn’t understand. He would have said the things weren’t necessary. And of course they mounted up, you know, and they kept coming in—”

She looked at me appealingly, as though asking me to condole with her on this striking peculiarity.

“It’s a habit they have,” I agreed.

And the tone altered—became quite abusive. “I assure you, doctor, I was becoming a nervous wreck. I couldn’t sleep at nights. And a dreadful fluttering round the heart. And then I got a letter from a Scotch gentleman—as a matter of fact there were two letters—both Scotch gentlemen. Mr. Bruce MacPherson was one, and the other was Colin MacDonald. Quite a coincidence.”

“Hardly that,” I said drily. “They are usually Scotch gentlemen, but I suspect a Semitic strain in their ancestry.”

“Ten pounds to ten thousand on note of hand alone,” murmured Mrs. Ackroyd reminiscently. “I wrote to one of them, but it seemed there were difficulties.”

She paused.

I gathered that we were just coming to delicate ground. I have never known anyone more difficult to bring to the point.

“You see,” murmured Mrs. Ackroyd, “it’s all a question of expectations, isn’t it? Testamentary expectations. And though, of course, I expected that Roger would provide for me, I didn’t know. I thought that if only I could glance over a copy of his will—not in any sense of vulgar prying—but just so that I could make my own arrangements.”

She glanced sideways at me. The position was now very delicate indeed. Fortunately words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of naked facts.

"I could only tell this to you, dear Doctor Sheppard," said Mrs. Ackroyd rapidly. "I can trust you not to misjudge me, and to represent the matter in the right light to M. Poirot. It was on Friday afternoon—"

She came to a stop and swallowed uncertainly.

"Yes," I repeated encouragingly. "On Friday afternoon. Well?"

"Everyone was out, or so I thought. And I went into Roger's study—I had some real reason for going there—I mean, there was nothing underhand about it. And as I saw all the papers heaped on the desk, it just came to me, like a flash: 'I wonder if Roger keeps his will in one of the drawers of the desk.' I'm so impulsive, always was, from a child. I do things on the spur of the moment. He'd left his keys—very careless of him—in the lock of the top drawer."

"I see," I said helpfully. "So you searched the desk. Did you find the will?"

Mrs. Ackroyd gave a little scream, and I realized that I had not been sufficiently diplomatic.

"How dreadful it sounds. But it wasn't at all like that really."

"Of course it wasn't," I said hastily. "You must forgive my unfortunate way of putting things."

"Of course, men are so peculiar. In dear Roger's place, I should have not objected to revealing the provisions of my will. But men are so secretive. One is forced to adopt little subterfuges in self-defence."

"And the result of the little subterfuge?" I asked.

"That's just what I'm telling you. As I got to the bottom drawer, Bourne came in. Most awkward. Of course I shut the drawer and stood up, and I called her attention to a few specks of dust on the surface. But I didn't like the way she looked—quite respectful in manner, but a very nasty light in her eyes. Almost contemptuous, if you know what I mean. I never have liked that girl very much. She's a good servant, and she says Ma'am, and doesn’t object to wearing caps and aprons (which I declare to you a lot of them do nowadays), and she can say ‘Not at home’ without scruples if she has to answer the door instead of Parker, and she doesn’t have those peculiar gurgling noises inside which so many parlourmaids seem to have when they wait at table—Let me see, where was I?”

“You were saying, that in spite of several valuable qualities, you never liked Bourne.”

“No more I do. She’s—odd. There’s something different about her from the others. Too well educated, that’s my opinion. You can’t tell who are ladies and who aren’t nowadays.”

“And what happened next?” I asked.

“Nothing. At last, Roger came in. And I thought he was out for a walk. And he said: ‘What’s all this?’ and I said, ‘Nothing. I just came in to fetch Punch.’ And I took Punch and went out with it. Bourne stayed behind. I heard her asking Roger if she could speak to him for a minute. I went straight up to my room, to lie down. I was very upset.”

There was a pause.

“You will explain to M. Poirot, won’t you? You can see for yourself what a trivial matter the whole thing was. But, of course, when he was so stern about concealing things, I thought of this at once. Bourne may have made some extraordinary story out of it, but you can explain, can’t you?”

“That is all?” I said. “You have told me everything?”

“Ye-es,” said Mrs. Ackroyd. “Oh! yes,” she added firmly.

But I had noted the momentary hesitation, and I knew that there was still something she was keeping back. It was nothing less than a flash of sheer genius that prompted me to ask the question I did.

“Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said, “was it you who left the silver table open?”

I had my answer in the blush of guilt that even rouge and powder could not conceal.

“How did you know?” she whispered.

“It was you, then?”

“Yes—I—you see—there were one or two pieces of old silver—very interesting. I had been reading up the subject and there was an illustration of quite a small piece which had fetched an immense sum at Christy’s. It looked to be just the same as the one in the silver table. I thought I would take it up to London with me when I went—and—and have it valued. Then if it really was a valuable piece, just think what a charming surprise it would have been for Roger.”

I refrained from comments, accepting Mrs. Ackroyd’s story on its merits. I even forbore to ask her why it was necessary to abstract what she wanted in such a surreptitious manner.

“Why did you leave the lid open?” I asked. “Did you forget?”

“I was startled,” said Mrs. Ackroyd. “I heard footsteps coming along the terrace outside. I hastened out of the room and just got up the stairs before Parker opened the front door to you.”

“That must have been Miss Russell,” I said thoughtfully. Mrs. Ackroyd had revealed to me one fact that was extremely interesting. Whether her designs upon Ackroyd’s silver had been strictly honourable I neither knew nor cared. What did interest me was the fact that Miss Russell must have entered the drawing room by the window, and that I had not been wrong when I judged her to be out of breath with running. Where had she been? I thought of the summerhouse and the scrap of cambric.

“I wonder if Miss Russell has had her handkerchiefs starched!” I exclaimed on the spur of the moment.

Mrs. Ackroyd’s start recalled me to myself, and I rose.

“You think you can explain to M. Poirot?” she asked anxiously.

“Oh, certainly. Absolutely.”

I got away at last, after being forced to listen to more justifications of her conduct.

The parlourmaid was in the hall, and it was she who helped me on with my overcoat. I observed her more closely than I had done heretofore. It was clear that she had been crying.

“How is it,” I asked, “that you told us that Mr. Ackroyd sent for you on Friday to his study? I hear now that it was you who asked to speak to him.”

For a minute the girl’s eyes dropped before mine.

Then she spoke.

“I meant to leave in any case,” she said uncertainly.

I said no more. She opened the front door for me. Just as I was passing out, she said suddenly in a low voice:

“Excuse me, sir, is there any news of Captain Paton?”

I shook my head, looking at her inquiringly.

“He ought to come back,” she said. “Indeed—indeed he ought to come back.”

She was looking at me with appealing eyes.

“Does no one know where he is?” she asked.

“Do you?” I said sharply.

She shook her head.

“No, indeed. I know nothing. But anyone who was a friend to him would tell him this: he ought to come back.”

I lingered, thinking that perhaps the girl would say more. Her next question surprised me.

“When do they think the murder was done? Just before ten o’clock?”

“That is the idea,” I said. “Between a quarter to ten and the hour.”

“Not earlier? Not before a quarter to ten?”

I looked at her attentively. She was so clearly eager for a reply in the affirmative.

“That’s out of the question,” I said. “Miss Ackroyd saw her uncle alive at a quarter to ten.”

She turned away, and her whole figure seemed to droop.

“A handsome girl,” I said to myself as I drove off. “An exceedingly handsome girl.”

Caroline was at home. She had had a visit from Poirot and was very pleased and important about it.

“I am helping him with the case,” she explained.

I felt rather uneasy. Caroline is bad enough as it is. What will she be like with her detective instincts encouraged?

“Are you going round the neighbourhood looking for Ralph Paton’s mysterious girl?” I inquired.

“I might do that on my own account,” said Caroline. “No, this is a special thing M. Poirot wants me to find out for him.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“He wants to know whether Ralph Paton’s boots were black or brown,” said Caroline with tremendous solemnity.

I stared at her. I see now that I was unbelievably stupid about these boots. I failed altogether to grasp the point.

“They were brown shoes,” I said. “I saw them.”

“Not shoes, James, boots. M. Poirot wants to know whether a pair of boots Ralph had with him at the hotel were brown or black. A lot hangs on it.”

Call me dense if you like. I didn’t see.

“And how are you going to find out?” I asked.

Caroline said there would be no difficulty about that. Our Annie’s dearest friend was Miss Gannett’s maid, Clara. And Clara was walking out with the Boots at the Three Boars. The whole thing was simplicity itself, and by the aid of Miss Gannett, who cooperated loyally, at once giving Clara leave of absence, the matter was rushed through at express speed.

It was when we were sitting down to lunch that Caroline remarked, with would-be unconcern:

“About those boots of Ralph Paton’s.”

“Well,” I said, “what about them?”

“M. Poirot thought they were probably brown. He was wrong. They’re black.”

And Caroline nodded her head several times. She evidently felt that she had scored a point over Poirot.

I did not answer. I was puzzling over what the colour of a pair of Ralph Paton’s boots had to do with the case.

Fifteen

GEOFFREY RAYMOND

I was to have a further proof that day of the success of Poirot’s tactics. That challenge of his had been a subtle touch born of his knowledge of human nature. A mixture of fear and guilt had wrung the truth from Mrs. Ackroyd. She was the first to react.

That afternoon when I returned from seeing my patients, Caroline told me that Geoffrey Raymond had just left.

“Did he want to see me?” I asked, as I hung up my coat in the hall.

Caroline was hovering by my elbow.

“It was M. Poirot he wanted to see,” she said. “He’d just come from The Larches. M. Poirot was out. Mr. Raymond thought that he might be here, or that you might know where he was.”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

“I tried to make him wait,” said Caroline, “but he said he would call back at The Larches in half an hour, and went away down the village. A great pity, because M. Poirot came in practically the minute after he left.”

“Came in here?”

“No, to his own house.”

“How do you know?”

“The side window,” said Caroline briefly.

It seemed to me that we had now exhausted the topic. Caroline thought otherwise.

“Aren’t you going across?”

“Across where?”

“To The Larches, of course.”

“My dear Caroline,” I said, “what for?”

“Mr. Raymond wanted to see him very particularly,” said Caroline. “You might hear what it’s all about.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Curiosity is not my besetting sin,” I remarked coldly. “I can exist comfortably without knowing exactly what my neighbours are doing and thinking.”

“Stuff and nonsense, James,” said my sister. “You want to know just as much as I do. You’re not so honest, that’s all. You always have to pretend.”

“Really, Caroline,” I said, and retired into my surgery.

Ten minutes later Caroline tapped at the door and entered. In her hand she held what seemed to be a pot of jam.

“I wonder, James,” she said, “if you would mind taking this pot of medlar jelly across to M. Poirot? I promised it to him. He has never tasted any home-made medlar jelly.”

“Why can’t Annie go?” I asked coldly.

“She’s doing some mending. I can’t spare her.”

Caroline and I looked at each other.

“Very well,” I said, rising. “But if I take the beastly thing, I shall just leave it at the door. You understand that?”

My sister raised her eyebrows.

“Naturally,” she said. “Who suggested you should do anything else?”

The honours were with Caroline.

“If you do happen to see M. Poirot,” she said, as I opened the front door, “you might tell him about the boots.”

It was a most subtle parting shot. I wanted dreadfully to understand the enigma of the boots. When the old lady with the Breton cap opened the door to me, I found myself asking if M. Poirot was in, quite automatically.

Poirot sprang up to meet me, with every appearance of pleasure.

“Sit down, my good friend,” he said. “The big chair? This small one? The room is not too hot, no?”

I thought it was stifling, but refrained from saying so. The windows were closed, and a large fire burned in the grate.

“The English people, they have a mania for the fresh air,” declared Poirot. “The big air, it is all very well outside, where it belongs. Why admit it to the house? But let us not discuss such banalities. You have something for me, yes?”

“Two things,” I said. “First—this—from my sister.”

I handed over the pot of medlar jelly.

“How kind of Mademoiselle Caroline. She has remembered her promise. And the second thing?”

“Information—of a kind.”

And I told him of my interview with Mrs. Ackroyd. He listened with interest, but not much excitement.

“It clears the ground,” he said thoughtfully. “And it has a certain value as confirming the evidence of the housekeeper. She said, you remember, that she found the silver table lid open and closed it down in passing.”

“What about her statement that she went into the drawing room to see if the flowers were fresh?”

“Ah! we never took that very seriously, did we, my friend? It was patently an excuse, trumped up in a hurry, by a woman who felt it urgent to explain her presence—which, by the way, you would probably never have thought of questioning. I considered it possible that her agitation might arise from the fact that she had been tampering with the silver table, but I think now that we must look for another cause.”

“Yes,” I said. “Whom did she go out to meet? And why?”

“You think she went to meet someone?”

“I do.”

Poirot nodded.

“So do I,” he said thoughtfully.

There was a pause.

“By the way,” I said, “I’ve got a message for you from my sister. Ralph Paton’s boots were black, not brown.”

I was watching him closely as I gave the message, and I fancied that I saw a momentary flicker of discomposure. If so, it passed almost immediately.

“She is absolutely positive they are not brown?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ah!” said Poirot regretfully. “That is a pity.”

And he seemed quite crestfallen.

He entered into no explanations, but at once started a new subject of conversation.

“The housekeeper, Miss Russell, who came to consult you on that Friday morning—is it indiscreet to ask what passed at the interview—apart from the medical details, I mean?”

“Not at all,” I said. “When the professional part of the conversation was over, we talked for a few minutes about poisons, and the ease or difficulty of detecting them, and about drug-taking and drug-takers.”

“With special reference to cocaine?” asked Poirot.

“How did you know?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

For answer, the little man rose and crossed the room to where newspapers were filed. He brought me a copy of the Daily Budget, dated Friday, 16th September, and showed me an article dealing with the smuggling of cocaine. It was a somewhat lurid article, written with an eye to picturesque effect.

“That is what put cocaine into her head, my friend,” he said.

I would have catechized him further, for I did not quite understand his meaning, but at that moment the door opened and Geoffrey Raymond was announced.

He came in fresh and debonair as ever, and greeted us both.

“How are you, doctor? M. Poirot, this is the second time I’ve been here this morning. I was anxious to catch you.”

“Perhaps I’d better be off,” I suggested rather awkwardly.

“Not on my account, doctor. No, it’s just this,” he went on, seating himself at a wave of invitation from Poirot, “I’ve got a confession to make.”

“En verité?” said Poirot, with an air of polite interest.

“Oh, it’s of no consequence, really. But, as a matter of fact, my conscience has been pricking me ever since yesterday afternoon. You accused us all of keeping back something, M. Poirot. I plead guilty. I’ve had something up my sleeve.”

“And what is that, M. Raymond?”

“As I say, it’s nothing of consequence—just this. I was in debt—badly, and that legacy came in the nick of time. Five hundred pounds puts me on my feet again with a little to spare.”

He smiled at us both with that engaging frankness that made him such a likeable youngster.

“You know how it is. Suspicious-looking policemen—don’t like to admit you were hard up for money—think it will look bad to them. But I was a fool, really, because Blunt and I were in the billiard room from a quarter to ten onwards, so I’ve got a watertight alibi and nothing to fear. Still, when you thundered out that stuff about concealing things, I felt a nasty prick of conscience, and I thought I’d like to get it off my mind.”

He got up again and stood smiling at us.

“You are a very wise young man,” said Poirot, nodding at him with approval. “See you, when I know that anyone is hiding things from me, I suspect that the thing hidden may be something very bad indeed. You have done well.”

“I’m glad I’m cleared from suspicion,” laughed Raymond. “I’ll be off now.”

“So that is that,” I remarked, as the door closed behind the young secretary.

“Yes,” agreed Poirot. “A mere bagatelle—but if he had not been in the billiard room—who knows? After all, many crimes have been committed for the sake of less than five hundred pounds. It all depends on what sum is sufficient to break a man. A question of relativity, is it not so? Have you reflected, my friend, that many people in that house stood to benefit by Mr. Ackroyd’s death? Mrs. Ackroyd, Miss Flora, young Mr. Raymond, the housekeeper, Miss Russell. Only one, in fact, does not, Major Blunt.”

His tone in uttering that name was so peculiar that I looked up, puzzled.

“I don’t understand you,” I said.

“Two of the people I accused have given me the truth.”

“You think Major Blunt has something to conceal also?”

“As for that,” remarked Poirot nonchalantly, “there is a saying, is there not, that Englishmen conceal only one thing—their love? And Major Blunt, I should say, is not good at concealments.”

“Sometimes,” I said, “I wonder if we haven’t rather jumped to conclusions on one point.”

“What is that?”

“We’ve assumed that the blackmailer of Mrs. Ferrars is necessarily the murderer of Mr. Ackroyd. Mightn’t we be mistaken?”

Poirot nodded energetically.

“Very good. Very good indeed. I wondered if that idea would come to you. Of course it is possible. But we must remember one point. The letter disappeared. Still, that, as you say, may not necessarily mean that the murderer took it. When you first found the body, Parker may have abstracted the letter unnoticed by you.”

“Parker?”

“Yes, Parker. I always come back to Parker—not as the murderer—no, he did not commit the murder; but who is more suitable than he as the mysterious scoundrel who terrorized Mrs. Ferrars? He may have got his information about Mr. Ferrars’s death from one of the King’s Paddock servants. At any rate, he is more likely to have come upon it than a casual guest such as Blunt, for instance.”

“Parker might have taken the letter,” I admitted. “It wasn’t till later that I noticed it was gone.”

“How much later? After Blunt and Raymond were in the room, or before?”

“I can’t remember,” I said slowly. “I think it was before—no, afterwards. Yes, I’m almost sure it was afterwards.”

“That widens the field to three,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “But Parker is the most likely. It is in my mind to try a little experiment with Parker. How say you, my friend, will you accompany me to Fernly?”

I acquiesced, and we set out at once. Poirot asked to see Miss Ackroyd, and presently Flora came to us.

“Mademoiselle Flora,” said Poirot, “I have to confide in you a little secret. I am not yet satisfied of the innocence of Parker. I propose to make a little experiment with your assistance. I want to reconstruct some of his actions on that night. But we must think of something to tell him—ah! I have it. I wish to satisfy myself as to whether voices in the little lobby could have been heard outside on the terrace. Now, ring for Parker, if you will be so good.”

I did so, and presently the butler appeared, suave as ever.

“You rang, sir?”

“Yes, my good Parker. I have in mind a little experiment. I have placed Major Blunt on the terrace outside the study window. I want to see if anyone there could have heard the voices of Miss Ackroyd and yourself in the lobby that night. I want to enact that little scene over again. Perhaps you would fetch the tray or whatever it was you were carrying?”

Parker vanished, and we repaired to the lobby outside the study door. Presently we heard a chink in the outer hall, and Parker appeared in the doorway carrying a tray with a siphon, a decanter of whisky, and two glasses on it.

“One moment,” cried Poirot, raising his hand and seemingly very excited. “We must have everything in order. Just as it occurred. It is a little method of mine.”

“A foreign custom, sir,” said Parker. “Reconstruction of the crime they call it, do they not?”

He was quite imperturbable as he stood there politely waiting on Poirot’s orders.

“Ah! he knows something, the good Parker,” cried Poirot. “He has read of these things. Now, I beg you, let us have everything of the most exact. You came from the outer hall—so. Mademoiselle was—where?”

“Here,” said Flora, taking up her stand just outside the study door.

“Quite right, sir,” said Parker.

“I had just closed the door,” continued Flora.

“Yes, miss,” agreed Parker. “Your hand was still on the handle as it is now.”

“Then allez,” said Poirot. “Play me the little comedy.”

Flora stood with her hand on the door handle, and Parker came stepping through the door from the hall, bearing the tray.

He stopped just inside the door. Flora spoke.

“Oh! Parker. Mr. Ackroyd doesn’t want to be disturbed again tonight.”

“Is that right?” she added in an undertone.

“To the best of my recollection, Miss Flora,” said Parker, “but I fancy you used the word evening instead of night.” Then, raising his voice in a somewhat theatrical fashion: “Very good, miss. Shall I lock up as usual?”

“Yes, please.”

Parker retired through the door, Flora followed him, and started to ascend the main staircase.

“Is that enough?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Admirable,” declared the little man, rubbing his hands. “By the way, Parker, are you sure there were two glasses on the tray that evening? Who was the second one for?”

“I always bring two glasses, sir,” said Parker. “Is there anything further?”

“Nothing. I thank you.”

Parker withdrew, dignified to the last.

Poirot stood in the middle of the hall frowning. Flora came down and joined us.

“Has your experiment been successful?” she asked. “I don’t quite understand, you know—”

Poirot smiled admiringly at her.

“It is not necessary that you should,” he said. “But tell me, were there indeed two glasses on Parker’s tray that night?”

Flora wrinkled her brows a minute.

“I really can’t remember,” she said. “I think there were. Is—is that the object of your experiment?”

Poirot took her hand and patted it.

“Put it this way,” he said. “I am always interested to see if people will speak the truth.”

“And did Parker speak the truth?”

“I rather think he did,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

A few minutes later saw us retracing our steps to the village.

“What was the point of that question about the glasses?” I asked curiously.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“One must say something,” he remarked. “That particular question did as well as any other.”

I stared at him.

“At any rate, my friend,” he said seriously, “I know now something I wanted to know. Let us leave it at that.”

Sixteen

AN EVENING AT MAH JONG

That night we had a little Mah Jong party. This kind of simple entertainment is very popular in King's Abbot. The guests arrive in galoshes and waterproofs after dinner. They partake of coffee and later of cake, sandwiches and tea.

On this particular night our guests were Miss Gannett and Colonel Carter, who lives near the church. A good deal of gossip is handed round at these evenings, sometimes seriously interfering with the game in progress. We used to play bridge—chatty bridge of the worst description. We find Mah Jong much more peaceful. The irritated demand as to why on earth your partner did not lead a certain card is entirely done away with, and though we still express criticisms frankly, there is not the same acrimonious spirit.

"Very cold evening, eh, Sheppard?" said Colonel Carter, standing with his back to the fire. Caroline had taken Miss Gannett to her own room, and was there assisting her to disentangle herself from her many wraps. "Reminds me of the Afghan passes."

"Indeed?" I said politely.

"Very mysterious business this about poor Ackroyd," continued the colonel, accepting a cup of coffee. "A deuce of a lot behind it—that's what I say. Between you and me, Sheppard, I've heard the word blackmail mentioned!"

The colonel gave me the look which might be tabulated "one man of the world to another."

"A woman in it, no doubt," he said. "Depend upon it, a woman in it."

Caroline and Miss Gannett joined us at this minute. Miss Gannett drank coffee whilst Caroline got out the Mah Jong box and poured out the tiles upon the table.

“Washing the tiles,” said the colonel facetiously. “That’s right—washing the tiles, as we used to say in the Shanghai Club.”

It is the private opinion of both Caroline and myself that Colonel Carter has never been in the Shanghai Club in his life. More, that he has never been farther east than India, where he juggled with tins of bully beef and plum and apple jam during the Great War. But the colonel is determinedly military, and in King’s Abbot we permit people to indulge their little idiosyncrasies freely.

“Shall we begin?” said Caroline.

We sat round the table. For some five minutes there was complete silence, owing to the fact that there is tremendous secret competition amongst us as to who can build their wall quickest.

“Go on, James,” said Caroline at last. “You’re East Wind.”

I discarded a tile. A round or two proceeded, broken by the monotonous remarks of “Three Bamboos,” “Two Circles,” “Pung,” and frequently from Miss Gannett “Unpung,” owing to that lady’s habit of too hastily claiming tiles to which she had no right.

“I saw Flora Ackroyd this morning,” said Miss Gannett. “Pung—no—Unpung. I made a mistake.”

“Four Circles,” said Caroline. “Where did you see her?”

“She didn’t see me,” said Miss Gannett, with that tremendous significance only to be met with in small villages.

“Ah!” said Caroline interestedly. “Chow.”

“I believe,” said Miss Gannett, temporarily diverted, “that it’s the right thing nowadays to say ‘Chee’ not ‘Chow.’”

“Nonsense,” said Caroline. “I have always said ‘Chow.’”

“In the Shanghai Club,” said Colonel Carter, “they say ‘Chow.’”

Miss Gannett retired, crushed.

“What were you saying about Flora Ackroyd?” asked Caroline, after a moment or two devoted to the game. “Was she with anyone?”

“Very much so,” said Miss Gannett.

The eyes of the two ladies met, and seemed to exchange information.

“Really,” said Caroline interestedly. “Is that it? Well, it doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

“We’re waiting for you to discard, Miss Caroline,” said the colonel. He sometimes affects the pose of the bluff male, intent on the game and indifferent to gossip. But nobody is deceived.

“If you ask me,” said Miss Gannett. (“Was that a Bamboo you discarded, dear? Oh! no, I see now—it was a Circle.) As I was saying, if you ask me, Flora’s been exceedingly lucky. Exceedingly lucky she’s been.”

“How’s that, Miss Gannett?” asked the colonel. “I’ll Pung that Green Dragon. How do you make out that Miss Flora’s been lucky? Very charming girl and all that, I know.”

“I mayn’t know very much about crime,” said Miss Gannett, with the air of one who knows everything there is to know, “but I can tell you one thing. The first question that’s always asked is ‘Who last saw the deceased alive?’ And the person who did is regarded with suspicion. Now, Flora Ackroyd last saw her uncle alive. It might have looked very nasty for her—very nasty indeed. It’s my opinion—and I give it for what it’s worth, that Ralph Paton is staying away on her account, to draw suspicion away from her.”

“Come, now,” I protested mildly, “you surely can’t suggest that a young girl like Flora Ackroyd is capable of stabbing her uncle in cold blood?”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Miss Gannett. “I’ve just been reading a book from the library about the underworld of Paris, and it says that some of the worst women criminals are young girls with the faces of angels.”

“That’s in France,” said Caroline instantly.

“Just so,” said the colonel. “Now, I’ll tell you a very curious thing—a story that was going round the Bazaars in India….”

The colonel’s story was one of interminable length, and of curiously little interest. A thing that happened in India many years ago cannot compare for a moment with an event that took place in King’s Abbot the day before yesterday.

It was Caroline who brought the colonel’s story to a close by fortunately going Mah Jong. After the slight unpleasantness always caused by my corrections of Caroline’s somewhat faulty arithmetic, we started a new hand.

“East Wind passes,” said Caroline. “I’ve got an idea of my own about Ralph Paton. Three Characters. But I’m keeping it to myself for the present.”

“Are you, dear?” said Miss Gannett. “Chow—I mean Pung.”

“Yes,” said Caroline firmly.

“Was it all right about the boots?” asked Miss Gannett. “Their being black, I mean?”

“Quite all right,” said Caroline.

“What was the point, do you think?” asked Miss Gannett.

Caroline pursed up her lips, and shook her head with an air of knowing all about it.

“Pung,” said Miss Gannett. “No—Unpung. I suppose that now the doctor’s in with M. Poirot he knows all the secrets?”

“Far from it,” I said.

“James is so modest,” said Caroline. “Ah! A concealed Kong.”

The colonel gave vent to a whistle. For the moment gossip was forgotten.

"Your own wind, too," he said. "And you've got two Pungs of Dragons. We must be careful. Miss Caroline's out for a big hand."

We played for some minutes with no irrelevant conversation.

"This M. Poirot now," said Colonel Carter, "is he really such a great detective?"

"The greatest the world has ever known," said Caroline solemnly. "He has to come here incognito to avoid publicity."

"Chow," said Miss Gannett. "Quite wonderful for our little village, I'm sure. By the way, Clara—my maid, you know—is great friends with Elsie, the housemaid at Fernly, and what do you think Elsie told her? That there's been a lot of money stolen, and it's her opinion—Elsie's, I mean—that the parlourmaid had something to do with it. She's leaving at the month, and she's crying a good deal at night. If you ask me, the girl is very likely in league with a gang. She's always been a queer girl—she's not friends with any of the girls round here. She goes off by herself on her days out—very unnatural, I call it, and most suspicious. I asked her once to come to our Friendly Girls' Evenings, but she refused, and then I asked her a few questions about her home and her family—all that sort of thing, and I'm bound to say I considered her manner most impertinent. Outwardly very respectful—but she shut me up in the most barefaced way."

Miss Gannett stopped for breath, and the colonel, who was totally uninterested in the servant question, remarked that in the Shanghai Club brisk play was the invariable rule.

We had a round of brisk play.

"That Miss Russell," said Caroline. "She came here pretending to consult James on Friday morning. It's my opinion she wanted to see where the poisons were kept. Five Characters."

“Chow,” said Miss Gannett. “What an extraordinary idea! I wonder if you can be right.”

“Talking of poisons,” said the colonel. “Eh—what? Haven’t I discarded? Oh! Eight Bamboos.”

“Mah Jong!” said Miss Gannett.

Caroline was very much annoyed.

“One Red Dragon,” she said regretfully, “and I should have had a hand of three doubles.”

“I’ve had two Red Dragons all the time,” I mentioned.

“So exactly like you, James,” said Caroline reproachfully. “You’ve no conception of the spirit of the game.”

I myself thought I had played rather cleverly. I should have had to pay Caroline an enormous amount if she had gone Mah Jong. Miss Gannett’s Mah Jong was of the poorest variety possible, as Caroline did not fail to point out to her.

East Wind passed, and we started a new hand in silence.

“What I was going to tell you just now was this,” said Caroline.

“Yes?” said Miss Gannett encouragingly.

“My idea about Ralph Paton, I mean.”

“Yes, dear,” said Miss Gannett, still more encouragingly. “Chow!”

“It’s a sign of weakness to Chow so early,” said Caroline severely. “You should go for a big hand.”

“I know,” said Miss Gannett. “You were saying—about Ralph Paton, you know?”

“Yes. Well, I’ve a pretty shrewd idea where he is.”

We all stopped to stare at her.

“This is very interesting, Miss Caroline,” said Colonel Carter. “All your own idea, eh?”

“Well, not exactly. I’ll tell you about it. You know that big map of the county we have in the hall?”

We all said Yes.

“As M. Poirot was going out the other day, he stopped and looked at it, and he made some remark—I can’t remember exactly what it was. Something about Cranchester being the only big town anywhere near us—which is true, of course. But after he had gone—it came to me suddenly.”

“What came to you?”

“His meaning. Of course Ralph is in Cranchester.”

It was at that moment that I knocked down the rack that held my pieces. My sister immediately reproved me for clumsiness, but half-heartedly. She was intent on her theory.

“Cranchester, Miss Caroline?” said Colonel Carter. “Surely not Cranchester! It’s so near.”

“That’s exactly it,” cried Caroline triumphantly. “It seems quite clear by now that he didn’t get away from here by train. He must simply have walked into Cranchester. And I believe he’s there still. No one would dream of his being so near at hand.”

I pointed out several objections to the theory, but when once Caroline has got something firmly into her head, nothing dislodges it.

“And you think M. Poirot has the same idea,” said Miss Gannett thoughtfully. “It’s a curious coincidence, but I was out for a walk this afternoon on the Cranchester road, and he passed me in a car coming from that direction."

We all looked at each other.

"Why, dear me," said Miss Gannett suddenly, "I'm Mah Jong all the time, and I never noticed it."

Caroline's attention was distracted from her own inventive exercises. She pointed out to Miss Gannett that a hand consisting of mixed suits and too many Chows was hardly worth going Mah Jong on. Miss Gannett listened imperturbably and collected her counters.

"Yes, dear, I know what you mean," she said. "But it rather depends on what kind of a hand you have to start with, doesn't it?"

"You'll never get the big hands if you don't go for them," urged Caroline.

"Well, we must all play our own way, mustn't we?" said Miss Gannett. She looked down at her counters. "After all, I'm up, so far."

Caroline, who was considerably down, said nothing.

East Wind passed, and we set to once more. Annie brought in the tea things. Caroline and Miss Gannett were both slightly ruffled as is often the case during one of these festive evenings.

"If you would only play a leetle quicker, dear," said Caroline, as Miss Gannett hesitated over her discard. "The Chinese put down the tiles so quickly it sounds like little birds pattering."

For some minutes we played like the Chinese.

"You haven't contributed much to the sum of information, Sheppard," said Colonel Carter genially. "You're a sly dog. Hand in glove with the great detective, and not a hint as to the way things are going."

"James is an extraordinary creature," said Caroline. "He can not bring himself to part with information."

She looked at me with some disfavour.

“I assure you,” I said, “that I don’t know anything. Poirot keeps his own counsel.”

“Wise man,” said the colonel with a chuckle. “He doesn’t give himself away. But they’re wonderful fellows, these foreign detectives. Up to all sorts of dodges, I believe.”

“Pung,” said Miss Gannett, in a tone of quiet triumph. “And Mah Jong.”

The situation became more strained. It was annoyance at Miss Gannett’s going Mah Jong for the third time running which prompted Caroline to say to me as we built a fresh wall:

“You are too tiresome, James. You sit there like a deadhead, and say nothing at all!”

“But, my dear,” I protested, “I have really nothing to say—that is, of the kind you mean.”

“Nonsense,” said Caroline, as she sorted her hand. “You must know something interesting.”

I did not answer for a moment. I was overwhelmed and intoxicated. I had read of there being such a thing as The Perfect Winning—going Mah Jong on one’s original hand. I had never hoped to hold the hand myself.

With suppressed triumph I laid my hand face upwards on the table.

“As they say in the Shanghai Club,” I remarked—“Tin-ho—the Perfect Winning!”

The colonel’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

“Upon my soul,” he said. “what an extraordinary thing. I never saw that happen before!”

It was then that I went on, goaded by Caroline's gibes, and rendered reckless by my triumph.

"And as to anything interesting," I said. "What about a gold wedding ring with a date and 'From R.' inside."

I pass over the scene that followed. I was made to say exactly where this treasure was found. I was made to reveal the date.

"March 13th," said Caroline. "Just six months ago. Ah!"

Out of a babel of excited suggestions and suppositions three theories were evolved:

1. That of Colonel Carter: that Ralph was secretly married to Flora. The first or most simple solution.

2. That of Miss Gannett: that Roger Ackroyd had been secretly married to Mrs. Ferrars.

3. That of my sister: that Roger Ackroyd had married his housekeeper, Miss Russell.

A fourth or super theory was propounded by Caroline later as we went up to bed.

"Mark my words," she said suddenly, "I shouldn't be at all surprised if Geoffrey Raymond and Flora weren't married."

"Surely it would be 'From G.,' not 'From R.' then," I suggested.

"You never know. Some girls call men by their surnames. And you heard what Miss Gannett said this evening—about Flora's carryings on."

Strictly speaking, I had not heard Miss Gannett say anything of the kind, but I respected Caroline's knowledge of innuendoes.

"How about Hector Blunt?" I hinted. "If it's anybody—"

“Nonsense,” said Caroline. “I dare say he admires her—may even be in love with her. But depend upon it a girl isn’t going to fall in love with a man old enough to be her father when there’s a good-looking secretary about. She may encourage Major Blunt just as a blind. Girls are very artful. But there’s one thing I do tell you, James Sheppard. Flora Ackroyd does not care a penny piece for Ralph Paton, and never has. You can take it from me.”

I took it from her meekly.

Seventeen

PARKER

It occurred to me the next morning that under the exhilaration produced by Tin-ho or the Perfect Winning, I might have been slightly indiscreet. True, Poirot had not asked me to keep the discovery of the ring to myself. On the other hand, he had said nothing about it whilst at Fernly, and as far as I knew, I was the only person aware that it had been found. I felt distinctly guilty. The fact was by now spreading through King's Abbot like wildfire. I was expecting wholesale reproaches from Poirot any minute.

The joint funeral of Mrs. Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd was fixed for eleven o'clock. It was a melancholy and impressive ceremony. All the party from Fernly were there.

After it was over, Poirot, who had also been present, took me by the arm, and invited me to accompany him back to The Larches. He was looking very grave, and I feared that my indiscretion of the night before had got round to his ears. But it soon transpired that his thoughts were occupied by something of a totally different nature.

“See you,” he said. “We must act. With your help I propose to examine a witness. We will question him, we will put such fear into him that the truth is bound to come out.”

“What witness are you talking about?” I asked, very much surprised.

“Parker!” said Poirot. “I asked him to be at my house this morning at twelve o'clock. He should await us there at this very minute.”

“What do you think?” I ventured, glancing sideways at his face.

“I know this—that I am not satisfied.”

“You think that it was he who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars?”

“Either that, or—”

“Well?” I said, after waiting a minute or two.

“My friend, I will say this to you—I hope it was he.”

The gravity of his manner, and something indefinable that tinged it, reduced me to silence.

On arrival at The Larches, we were informed that Parker was already there awaiting our return. As we entered the room, the butler rose respectfully.

“Good morning, Parker,” said Poirot pleasantly. “One instant, I pray of you.”

He removed his overcoat and gloves.

“Allow me, sir,” said Parker, and sprang forward to assist him. He deposited the articles neatly on a chair by the door. Poirot watched him with approval.

“Thank you, my good Parker,” he said. “Take a seat, will you not? What I have to say may take some time.”

Parker seated himself with an apologetic bend of the head.

“Now what do you think I asked you to come here for this morning—eh?”

Parker coughed.

“I understood, sir, that you wished to ask me a few questions about my late master—private like.”

“Précisément,” said Poirot, beaming. “Have you made many experiments in blackmail?”

“Sir!”

The butler sprang to his feet.

“Do not excite yourself,” said Poirot placidly. “Do not play the farce of the honest, injured man. You know all there is to know about the blackmail, is it not so?”

“Sir, I—I’ve never—never been—”

“Insulted,” suggested Poirot, “in such a way before. Then why, my excellent Parker, were you so anxious to overhear the conversation in Mr. Ackroyd’s study the other evening, after you had caught the word blackmail?”

“I wasn’t—I—”

“Who was your last master?” rapped out Poirot suddenly.

“My last master?”

“Yes, the master you were with before you came to Mr. Ackroyd.”

“A Major Ellerby, sir—”

Poirot took the words out of his mouth.

“Just so, Major Ellerby. Major Ellerby was addicted to drugs, was he not? You travelled about with him. When he was in Bermuda there was some trouble—a man was killed. Major Ellerby was partly responsible. It was hushed up. But you knew about it. How much did Major Ellerby pay you to keep your mouth shut?”

Parker was staring at him openmouthed. The man had gone to pieces, his cheeks shook flabbily.

“You see, me, I have made inquiries,” said Poirot pleasantly. “It is as I say. You got a good sum then as blackmail, and Major Ellerby went on paying you until he died. Now I want to hear about your latest experiment.”

Parker still stared.

“It is useless to deny. Hercule Poirot knows. It is so, what I have said about Major Ellerby, is it not?”

As though against his will, Parker nodded reluctantly once. His face was ashen pale.

“But I never hurt a hair of Mr. Ackroyd’s head,” he moaned. “Honest to God, sir, I didn’t. I’ve been afraid of this coming all the time. And I tell you I didn’t—I didn’t kill him.”

His voice rose almost to a scream.

“I am inclined to believe you, my friend,” said Poirot. “You have not the nerve—the courage. But I must have the truth.”

“I’ll tell you anything, sir, anything you want to know. It’s true that I tried to listen that night. A word or two I heard made me curious. And Mr. Ackroyd’s wanting not to be disturbed, and shutting himself up with the doctor the way he did. It’s God’s own truth what I told the police. I heard the word blackmail, sir, and well—”

He paused.

“You thought there might be something in it for you?” suggested Poirot smoothly.

“Well—well, yes, I did, sir. I thought that if Mr. Ackroyd was being blackmailed, why shouldn’t I have a share of the pickings?”

A very curious expression passed over Poirot’s face. He leaned forward.

“Had you any reason to suppose before that night that Mr. Ackroyd was being blackmailed?”

“No, indeed, sir. It was a great surprise to me. Such a regular gentleman in all his habits.”

“How much did you overhear?”

"Not very much, sir. There seemed what I might call a spite against me. Of course I had to attend to my duties in the pantry. And when I did creep along once or twice to the study it was no use. The first time Dr. Sheppard came out and almost caught me in the act, and another time Mr. Raymond passed me in the big hall and went that way, so I knew it was no use; and when I went with the tray, Miss Flora headed me off."

Poirot stared for a long time at the man, as if to test his sincerity. Parker returned his gaze earnestly.

"I hope you believe me, sir. I've been afraid all along the police would rake up that old business with Major Ellerby and be suspicious of me in consequence."

"Eh bien," said Poirot at last. "I am disposed to believe you. But there is one thing I must request of you—to show me your bankbook. You have a bankbook, I presume?"

"Yes, sir, as a matter of fact, I have it with me now."

With no sign of confusion, he produced it from his pocket. Poirot took the slim, green-covered book and perused the entries.

"Ah! I perceive you have purchased £500 worth of National Savings Certificates this year?"

"Yes, sir. I have already over a thousand pounds saved—the result of my connection with—er—my late master, Major Ellerby. And I have had quite a little flutter on some horses this year—very successful. If you remember, sir, a rank outsider won the Jubilee. I was fortunate enough to back it—£20."

Poirot handed him back the book.

"I will wish you good morning. I believe that you have told me the truth. If you have not—so much the worse for you, my friend."

When Parker had departed, Poirot picked up his overcoat once more.

“Going out again?” I asked.

“Yes, we will pay a little visit to the good M. Hammond.”

“You believe Parker’s story?”

“It is credible enough on the face of it. It seems clear that—unless he is a very good actor indeed—he genuinely believes it was Ackroyd himself who was the victim of blackmail. If so, he knows nothing at all about the Mrs. Ferrars business.”

“Then in that case—who—?”

“Précisément! Who? But our visit to M. Hammond will accomplish one purpose. It will either clear Parker completely or else—”

“Well?”

“I fall into the bad habit of leaving my sentences unfinished this morning,” said Poirot apologetically. “You must bear with me.”

“By the way,” I said, rather sheepishly, “I’ve got a confession to make. I’m afraid I have inadvertently let out something about that ring.”

“What ring?”

“The ring you found in the goldfish pond.”

“Ah! yes,” said Poirot, smiling broadly.

“I hope you’re not annoyed? It was very careless of me.”

“But not at all, my good friend, not at all. I laid no commands upon you. You were at liberty to speak of it if you so wished. She was interested, your sister?”

“She was indeed. It created a sensation. All sorts of theories are flying about.”

“Ah! And yet it is so simple. The true explanation leapt to the eye, did it not?”

“Did it?” I said drily.

Poirot laughed.

“The wise man does not commit himself,” he observed. “Is not that so? But here we are at Mr. Hammond’s.”

The lawyer was in his office, and we were ushered in without any delay. He rose and greeted us in his dry, precise manner.

Poirot came at once to the point.

“Monsieur, I desire from you certain information, that is, if you will be so good as to give it to me. You acted, I understand, for the late Mrs. Ferrars of King’s Paddock?”

I noticed the swift gleam of surprise which showed in the lawyer’s eyes, before his professional reserve came down once more like a mask over his face.

“Certainly. All her affairs passed through our hands.”

“Very good. Now, before I ask you to tell me anything, I should like you to listen to the story Dr. Sheppard will relate to you. You have no objection, have you, my friend, to repeating the conversation you had with Mr. Ackroyd last Friday night?”

“Not in the least,” I said, and straightway began the recital of that strange evening.

Hammond listened with close attention.

“That is all,” I said, when I had finished.

“Blackmail,” said the lawyer thoughtfully.

"You are surprised?" asked Poirot.

The lawyer took off his pince-nez and polished them with his handkerchief.

"No," he replied, "I can hardly say that I am surprised. I have suspected something of the kind for some time."

"That brings us," said Poirot, "to the information for which I am asking. If anyone can give us an idea of the actual sums paid, you are the man, monsieur."

"I see no object in withholding the information," said Hammond, after a moment or two. "During the past year, Mrs. Ferrars has sold out certain securities, and the money for them was paid into her account and not reinvested. As her income was a large one, and she lived very quietly after her husband's death, it seems certain that these sums of money were paid away for some special purpose. I once sounded her on the subject, and she said that she was obliged to support several of her husband's poor relations. I let the matter drop, of course. Until now, I have always imagined that the money was paid to some woman who had had a claim on Ashley Ferrars. I never dreamed that Mrs. Ferrars herself was involved."

"And the amount?" asked Poirot.

"In all, I should say the various sums totalled at least twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand pounds!" I exclaimed. "In one year!"

"Mrs. Ferrars was a very wealthy woman," said Poirot drily. "And the penalty for murder is not a pleasant one."

"Is there anything else that I can tell you?" inquired Mr. Hammond.

"I thank you, no," said Poirot, rising. "All my excuses for having deranged you."

"Not at all, not at all."

“The word derange,” I remarked, when we were outside again, “is applicable to mental disorder only.”

“Ah!” cried Poirot. “Never will my English be quite perfect. A curious language. I should then have said disarranged, n’est-ce pas?”

“Disturbed is the word you had in mind.”

“I thank you, my friend. The word exact, you are zealous for it. Eh bien, what about our friend Parker now? With twenty thousand pounds in hand, would he have continued being a butler? Je ne pense pas. It is, of course, possible that he banked the money under another name, but I am disposed to believe he spoke the truth to us. If he is a scoundrel, he is a scoundrel on a mean scale. He has not the big ideas. That leaves us as a possibility, Raymond, or—well—Major Blunt.”

“Surely not Raymond,” I objected. “Since we know that he was desperately hard up for a matter of five hundred pounds.”

“That is what he says, yes.”

“And as to Hector Blunt—”

“I will tell you something as to the good Major Blunt,” interrupted Poirot. “It is my business to make inquiries. I make them. Eh bien—that legacy of which he speaks, I have discovered that the amount of it was close upon twenty thousand pounds. What do you think of that?”

I was so taken aback that I could hardly speak.

“It’s impossible,” I said at last. “A well-known man like Hector Blunt.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Who knows? At least he is a man with big ideas. I confess that I hardly see him as a blackmailer, but there is another possibility that you have not even considered.”

“What is that?”

“The fire, my friend. Ackroyd himself may have destroyed that letter, blue envelope and all, after you left him.”

“I hardly think that likely,” I said slowly. “And yet—of course, it may be so. He might have changed his mind.”

We had just arrived at my house, and on the spur of the moment I invited Poirot to come in and take pot luck.

I thought Caroline would be pleased with me, but it is hard to satisfy one’s womenfolk. It appears that we were eating chops for lunch—the kitchen staff being regaled on tripe and onions. And two chops set before three people are productive of embarrassment.

But Caroline is seldom daunted for long. With magnificent mendacity, she explained to Poirot that although James laughed at her for doing so, she adhered strictly to a vegetarian diet. She descanted ecstatically on the delights of nut cutlets (which I am quite sure she has never tasted) and ate a Welsh rarebit with gusto and frequent cutting remarks as to the dangers of “flesh” foods.

Afterwards, when we were sitting in front of the fire and smoking, Caroline attacked Poirot directly.

“Not found Ralph Paton yet?” she asked.

“Where should I find him, mademoiselle?”

“I thought, perhaps, you’d found him in Cranchester,” said Caroline, with intense meaning in her tone.

Poirot looked merely bewildered.

“In Cranchester? But why in Cranchester?”

I enlightened him with a touch of malice.

“One of our ample staff of private detectives happened to see you in a car on the Cranchester road yesterday,” I explained.

Poirot’s bewilderment vanished. He laughed heartily.

“Ah, that! A simple visit to the dentist, c’est tout. My tooth, it aches. I go there. My tooth, it is at once better. I think to return quickly. The dentist, he says No. Better to have it out. I argue. He insists. He has his way! That particular tooth, it will never ache again.”

Caroline collapsed rather like a pricked balloon.

We fell to discussing Ralph Paton.

“A weak nature,” I insisted. “But not a vicious one.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “But weakness, where does it end?”

“Exactly,” said Caroline. “Take James here—weak as water, if I weren’t about to look after him.”

“My dear Caroline,” I said irritably, “can’t you talk without dragging in personalities?”

“You are weak, James,” said Caroline, quite unmoved. “I’m eight years older than you are—oh! I don’t mind M. Poirot knowing that—”

“I should never have guessed it, mademoiselle,” said Poirot, with a gallant little bow.

“Eight years older. And I’ve always considered it my duty to look after you. With a bad bringing up, Heaven knows what mischief you might have got into by now.”

“I might have married a beautiful adventuress,” I murmured, gazing at the ceiling, and blowing smoke rings.

“Adventuress!” said Caroline, with a snort. “If we’re talking of adventuresses—”

She left the sentence unfinished.

“Well?” I said, with some curiosity.

“Nothing. But I can think of someone not a hundred miles away.”

Then she turned to Poirot suddenly.

“James sticks to it that you believe someone in the house committed the murder. All I can say is, you’re wrong.”

“I should not like to be wrong,” said Poirot. “It is not—how do you say—my métier?”

“I’ve got the facts pretty clearly,” continued Caroline, taking no notice of Poirot’s remark, “from James and others. As far as I can see, of the people in the house, only two could have had the chance of doing it. Ralph Paton and Flora Ackroyd.”

“My dear Caroline—”

“Now, James, don’t interrupt me. I know what I’m talking about. Parker met her outside the door, didn’t he? He didn’t hear her uncle saying goodnight to her. She could have killed him then and there.”

“Caroline!”

“I’m not saying she did, James. I’m saying she could have done. As a matter of fact, though, Flora is like all these young girls nowadays, with no veneration for their betters and thinking they know best on every subject under the sun, I don’t for a minute believe she’d kill even a chicken. But there it is. Mr. Raymond and Major Blunt have alibis. Mrs. Ackroyd’s got an alibi. Even that Russell woman seems to have one—and a good job for her it is she has. Who is left? Only Ralph and Flora! And say what you will, I don’t believe Ralph Paton is a murderer. A boy we’ve known all our lives.”

Poirot was silent for a minute, watching the curling smoke rise from his cigarette. When at last he spoke, it was in a gentle far-away voice that produced a curious impression. It was totally unlike his usual manner.

“Let us take a man—a very ordinary man. A man with no idea of murder in his heart. There is in him somewhere a strain of weakness—deep down. It has so far never been called into play. Perhaps it never will be—and if so he will go to his grave honoured and respected by everyone. But let us suppose that something occurs. He is in difficulties—or perhaps not that even. He may stumble by accident on a secret—a secret involving life or death to someone. And his first impulse will be to speak out—to do his duty as an honest citizen. And then the strain of weakness tells. Here is a chance of money—a great amount of money. He wants money—he desires it—and it is so easy. He has to do nothing for it—just keep silence. That is the beginning. The desire for money grows. He must have more—and more! He is intoxicated by the gold mine which has opened at his feet. He becomes greedy. And in his greed he overreaches himself. One can press a man as far as one likes—but with a woman one must not press too far. For a woman has at heart a great desire to speak the truth. How many husbands who have deceived their wives go comfortably to their graves, carrying their secret with them! How many wives who have deceived their husbands wreck their lives by throwing the fact in those same husbands’ teeth! They have been pressed too far. In a reckless moment (which they will afterwards regret, bien entendu) they fling safety to the winds and turn at bay, proclaiming the truth with great momentary satisfaction to themselves. So it was, I think, in this case. The strain was too great. And so there came your proverb, the death of the goose that laid the golden eggs. But that is not the end. Exposure faced the man of whom we are speaking. And he is not the same man he was—say, a year ago. His moral fibre is blunted. He is desperate. He is fighting a losing battle, and he is prepared to take any means that come to his hand, for exposure means ruin to him. And so—the dagger strikes!”

He was silent for a moment. It was as though he had laid a spell upon the room. I cannot try to describe the impression his words produced. There was something in the merciless analysis, and the ruthless power of vision which struck fear into both of us.

“Afterwards,” he went on softly, “the dagger removed, he will be himself again, normal, kindly. But if the need again arises, then once more he will strike.”

Caroline roused herself at last.

“You are speaking of Ralph Paton,” she said. “You may be right, you may not, but you have no business to condemn a man unheard.”

The telephone bell rang sharply. I went out into the hall, and took off the receiver.

“What?” I said. “Yes. Dr. Sheppard speaking.”

I listened for a minute or two, then replied briefly. Replacing the receiver, I went back into the drawing room.

“Poirot,” I said, “they have detained a man at Liverpool. His name is Charles Kent, and he is believed to be the stranger who visited Fernly that night. They want me to go to Liverpool at once and identify him.”

Eighteen

CHARLES KENT

Half an hour later saw Poirot, myself, and Inspector Raglan in the train on the way to Liverpool. The inspector was clearly very excited.

“We may get a line on the blackmailing part of the business, if on nothing else,” he declared jubilantly. “He’s a rough customer, this fellow, by what I heard over the phone. Takes dope, too. We ought to find it easy to get what we want out of him. If there was the shadow of a motive, nothing’s more likely than that he killed Mr. Ackroyd. But in that case, why is young Paton keeping out of the way. The whole thing’s a muddle—that’s what it is. By the way, M. Poirot, you were quite right about those fingerprints. They were Mr. Ackroyd’s own. I had rather the same idea myself, but I dismissed it as hardly feasible.”

I smiled to myself. Inspector Raglan was so very plainly saving his face.

“As regard this man,” said Poirot, “he is not yet arrested, eh?”

“No, detained under suspicion.”

“And what account does he give of himself?”

“Precious little,” said the inspector, with a grin. “He’s a wary bird, I gather. A lot of abuse, but very little more.”

On arrival at Liverpool I was surprised to find that Poirot was welcomed with acclamation. Superintendent Hayes, who met us, had worked with Poirot over some case long ago, and had evidently an exaggerated opinion of his powers.

“Now we’ve got M. Poirot here we shan’t be long,” he said cheerfully. “I thought you’d retired, moosior?”

“So I had, my good Hayes, so I had. But how tedious is retirement! You cannot imagine to yourself the monotony with which day comes after day.”

“Very likely. So you’ve come to have a look at our own particular find? Is this Dr. Sheppard? Think you’ll be able to identify him, sir?”

“I’m not very sure,” I said doubtfully.

“How did you get hold of him?” inquired Poirot.

“Description was circulated, as you know. In the press and privately. Not much to go on, I admit. This fellow has an American accent all right, and he doesn’t deny that he was near King’s Abbot that night. Just asks what the hell it is to do with us, and that he’ll see us in—before he answers any questions.”

“Is it permitted that I, too, see him?” asked Poirot.

The superintendent closed one eye knowingly.

“Very glad to have you, sir. You’ve got permission to do anything you please. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard was asking after you the other day. Said he’d heard you were connected unofficially with this case. Where’s Captain Paton hiding, sir, can you tell me that?”

“I doubt if it would be wise at the present juncture,” said Poirot primly, and I bit my lips to prevent a smile.

The little man really did it very well.

After some further parley, we were taken to interview the prisoner.

He was a young fellow, I should say not more than twenty-two or three. Tall, thin, with slightly shaking hands, and the evidences of considerable physical strength somewhat run to seed. His hair was dark, but his eyes were blue and shifty, seldom meeting a glance squarely. I had all along cherished the illusion that there was something familiar about the figure I had met that night, but if this were indeed he, I was completely mistaken. He did not remind me in the least of anyone I knew.

“Now then, Kent,” said the superintendent. “Stand up. Here are some visitors come to see you. Recognize any of them?”

Kent glared at us sullenly, but did not reply. I saw his glance waver over the three of us, and come back to rest on me.

“Well, sir,” said the superintendent to me, “what do you say?”

“The height’s the same,” I said, “and as far as general appearance goes it might well be the man in question. Beyond that, I couldn’t go.”

“What the hell’s the meaning of all this?” asked Kent. “What have you got against me? Come on, out with it! What am I supposed to have done?”

I nodded my head.

“It’s the man,” I said. “I recognize the voice.”

“Recognize my voice, do you? Where do you think you heard it before?”

“On Friday evening last, outside the gates of Fernly Park. You asked me the way there.”

“I did, did I?”

“Do you admit it?” asked the inspector.

“I don’t admit anything. Not till I know what you’ve got on me.”

“Have you not read the papers in the last few days?” asked Poirot, speaking for the first time.

The man’s eyes narrowed.

“So that’s it, is it? I saw an old gent had been croaked at Fernly. Trying to make out I did the job, are you?”

“You were there that night,” said Poirot quietly.

"How do you know, mister?"

"By this." Poirot took something from his pocket and held it out.

It was the goose quill we had found in the summer house.

At the sight of it the man's face changed. He half held out his hand.

"Snow," said Poirot thoughtfully. "No, my friend, it is empty. It lay where you dropped it in the summer house that night."

Charles Kent looked at him uncertainly.

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about everything, you little foreign cock duck. Perhaps you remember this: the papers say that the old gent was croaked between a quarter to ten and ten o'clock?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

"Yes, but is it really so? That's what I'm getting at."

"This gentleman will tell you," said Poirot.

He indicated Inspector Raglan. The latter hesitated, glanced at Superintendent Hayes, then at Poirot, and finally, as though receiving sanction, he said:

"That's right. Between a quarter to ten and ten o'clock."

"Then you've nothing to keep me here for," said Kent. "I was away from Fernly Park by twenty-five minutes past nine. You can ask at the Dog and Whistle. That's a saloon about a mile out of Fernly on the road to Cranchester. I kicked up a bit of a row there, I remember. As near as nothing to quarter to ten, it was. How about that?"

Inspector Raglan wrote down something in his notebook.

"Well?" demanded Kent.

“Inquiries will be made,” said the inspector. “If you’ve spoken the truth, you won’t have anything to complain about. What were you doing at Fernly Park anyway?”

“Went there to meet someone.”

“Who?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You’d better keep a civil tongue in your head, my man,” the superintendent warned him.

“To hell with a civil tongue. I went there on my own business, and that’s all there is to it. If I was clear away before the murder was done, that’s all that concerns the cops.”

“Your name, it is Charles Kent,” said Poirot. “Where were you born?”

The man stared at him, then he grinned.

“I’m a full-blown Britisher all right,” he said.

“Yes,” said Poirot meditatively. “I think you are. I fancy you were born in Kent.”

The man stared.

“Why’s that? Because of my name? What’s that to do with it? Is a man whose name is Kent bound to be born in that particular county?”

“Under certain circumstances, I can imagine he might be,” said Poirot very deliberately. “Under certain circumstances, you comprehend.”

There was so much meaning in his voice as to surprise the two police officers. As for Charles Kent, he flushed a brick red, and for a moment I thought he was going to spring at Poirot. He thought better of it, however, and turned away with a kind of laugh.

Poirot nodded as though satisfied, and made his way out through the door. He was joined presently by the two officers.

“We’ll verify that statement,” remarked Raglan. “I don’t think he’s lying, though. But he’s got to come clean with a statement as to what he was doing at Fernly. It looks to me as though we’d got our blackmailer all right. On the other hand, granted his story’s correct, he couldn’t have had anything to do with the actual murder. He’d got ten pounds on him when he was arrested—rather a large sum. I fancy that forty pounds went to him—the numbers of the notes didn’t correspond, but of course he’d have changed them first thing. Mr. Ackroyd must have given him the money, and he made off with it as fast as possible. What was that about Kent being his birthplace? What’s that got to do with it?”

“Nothing whatever,” said Poirot mildly. “A little idea of mine, that was all. Me, I am famous for my little ideas.”

“Are you really?” said Raglan, studying him with a puzzled expression.

The superintendent went into a roar of laughter.

“Many’s the time I’ve heard Inspector Japp say that. M. Poirot and his little ideas! Too fanciful for me, he’d say, but always something in them.”

“You mock yourself at me,” said Poirot, smiling; “but never mind. The old ones they laugh last sometimes, when the young, clever ones do not laugh at all.”

And nodding his head at them in a sage manner he walked out into the street.

He and I lunched together at an hotel. I know now that the whole thing lay clearly unravelled before him. He had got the last thread he needed to lead him to the truth.

But at the time I had no suspicion of the fact. I overestimated his general self-confidence, and I took it for granted that the things which puzzled me must be equally puzzling to him.

My chief puzzle was what the man Charles Kent could have been doing at Fernly. Again and again I put the question to myself and could get no satisfactory reply. At last I ventured a tentative query to Poirot. His reply was immediate.

“Mon ami, I do not think, I know.”

“Really?” I said incredulously.

“Yes, indeed. I suppose now that to you it would not make sense if I said that he went to Fernly that night because he was born in Kent?”

I stared at him.

“It certainly doesn’t seem to make sense to me,” I said drily.

“Ah!” said Poirot pityingly. “Well, no matter. I have still my little idea.”

Nineteen

FLORA ACKROYD

As I was returning from my round the following morning, I was hailed by Inspector Raglan. I pulled up, and the inspector mounted on the step.

“Good morning, Dr. Sheppard,” he said. “Well, that alibi is all right enough.”

“Charles Kent’s?”

“Charles Kent’s. The barmaid at the Dog and Whistle, Sally Jones, she remembers him perfectly. Picked out his photograph from among five others. It was just a quarter to ten when he came into the bar, and the Dog and Whistle is well over a mile from Fernly Park. The girl mentions that he had a lot of money on him—she saw him take a handful of notes out of his pocket. Rather surprised her, it did, seeing the class of fellow he was, with a pair of boots clean dropping off him. That’s where that forty pounds went right enough.”

“The man still refuses to give an account of his visit to Fernly?”

“Obstinate as a mule he is. I had a chat with Hayes at Liverpool over the wire this morning.”

“Hercule Poirot says he knows the reason the man went there that night,” I observed.

“Does he?” cried the inspector eagerly.

“Yes,” I said maliciously. “He says he went there because he was born in Kent.”

I felt a distinct pleasure in passing on my own discomfiture.

Raglan stared at me for a moment or two uncomprehendingly. Then a grin overspread his weaselly countenance and he tapped his forehead significantly.

“But gone here,” he said. “I’ve thought so for some time. Poor old chap, so that’s why he had to give up and come down here. In the family, very likely. He’s got a nephew who’s quite off his crumpet.”

“Poirot has?” I said, very surprised.

“Yes. Hasn’t he ever mentioned him to you? Quite docile, I believe, and all that, but mad as a hatter, poor lad.”

“Who told you that?”

Again a grin showed itself on Inspector Raglan’s face.

“Your sister, Miss Sheppard, she told me all about it.”

Really, Caroline is amazing. She never rests until she knows the last details of everybody’s family secrets. Unfortunately, I have never been able to instil into her the decency of keeping them to herself.

“Jump in, Inspector,” I said, opening the door of the car. “We’ll go up to The Larches together, and acquaint our Belgian friend with the latest news.”

“Might as well, I suppose. After all, even if he is a bit barmy, it was a useful tip he gave me about those fingerprints. He’s got a bee in his bonnet about the man Kent, but who knows—there may be something useful behind it.”

Poirot received us with his usual smiling courtesy.

He listened to the information we had brought him, nodding his head now and then.

“Seems quite O.K., doesn’t it?” said the inspector rather gloomily. “A chap can’t be murdering someone in one place when he’s drinking in the bar in another place a mile away.”

“Are you going to release him?”

“Don’t see what else we can do. We can’t very well hold him for obtaining money on false pretences. Can’t prove a ruddy thing.”

The inspector tossed a match into the grate in a disgruntled fashion. Poirot retrieved it and put it neatly in a little receptacle designed for the purpose. His action was purely mechanical. I could see that his thoughts were on something very different.

“If I were you,” he said at last, “I should not release the man Charles Kent yet.”

“What do you mean?”

Raglan stared at him.

“What I say. I should not release him yet.”

“You don’t think he can have had anything to do with the murder, do you?”

“I think probably not—but one cannot be certain yet.”

“But haven’t I just told you—?”

Poirot raised a hand protestingly.

“Mais oui, mais oui. I heard. I am not deaf—or stupid, thank the good God! But you see, you approach the matter from the wrong—the wrong—premises, is not that the word?”

The inspector stared at him heavily.

“I don’t see how you make that out. Look here, we know Mr. Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten. You admit that, don’t you?”

Poirot looked at him for a moment, then shook his head with a quick smile.

“I admit nothing that is not—proved!”

“Well, we’ve got proof enough of that. We’ve got Miss Flora Ackroyd’s evidence.”

“That she said goodnight to her uncle? But me—I do not always believe what a young lady tells me—no, not even when she is charming and beautiful.”

“But hang it all, man, Parker saw her coming out of the door.”

“No.” Poirot’s voice rang out with sudden sharpness. “That is just what he did not see. I satisfied myself of that by a little experiment the other day—you remember, doctor? Parker saw her outside the door, with her hand on the handle. He did not see her come out of the room.”

“But—where else could she have been?”

“Perhaps on the stairs.”

“The stairs?”

“That is my little idea—yes.”

“But those stairs only lead to Mr. Ackroyd’s bedroom.”

“Precisely.”

And still the inspector stared.

“You think she’d been up to her uncle’s bedroom? Well, why not? Why should she lie about it?”

“Ah! that is just the question. It depends on what she was doing there, does it not?”

“You mean—the money? Hang it all, you don’t suggest that it was Miss Ackroyd who took that forty pounds?”

“I suggest nothing,” said Poirot. “But I will remind you of this. Life was not very easy for that mother and daughter. There were bills—there was constant trouble over small sums of money. Roger Ackroyd was a peculiar man over money matters. The girl might be at her wits' end for a comparatively small sum. Figure to yourself then what happens. She has taken the money, she descends the little staircase. When she is halfway down she hears the chink of glass from the hall. She has not a doubt of what it is—Parker coming to the study. At all costs she must not be found on the stairs—Parker will not forget it, he will think it odd. If the money is missed, Parker is sure to remember having seen her come down those stairs. She has just time to rush down to the study door—with her hand on the handle to show that she has just come out, when Parker appears in the doorway. She says the first thing that comes into her head, a repetition of Roger Ackroyd's orders earlier in the evening, and then goes upstairs to her own room."

"Yes, but later," persisted the inspector, "she must have realized the vital importance of speaking the truth? Why, the whole case hinges on it!"

"Afterwards," said Poirot drily, "it was a little difficult for Mademoiselle Flora. She is told simply that the police are here and that there has been a robbery. Naturally she jumps to the conclusion that the theft of the money has been discovered. Her one idea is to stick to her story. When she learns that her uncle is dead she is panic-stricken. Young women do not faint nowadays, monsieur, without considerable provocation. Eh bien! There it is. She is bound to stick to her story, or else confess everything. And a young and pretty girl does not like to admit that she is a thief—especially before those whose esteem she is anxious to retain."

Raglan brought his fist down with a thump on the table.

"I'll not believe it," he said. "It's—it's not credible. And you—you've known this all along?"

"The possibility has been in my mind from the first," admitted Poirot. "I was always convinced that Mademoiselle Flora was hiding something from us. To satisfy myself, I made the little experiment I told you of. Dr. Sheppard accompanied me."

"A test for Parker, you said it was," I remarked bitterly.

“Mon ami,” said Poirot apologetically, “as I told you at the time, one must say something.”

The inspector rose.

“There’s only one thing for it,” he declared. “We must tackle the young lady right away. You’ll come up to Fernly with me, M. Poirot?”

“Certainly. Dr. Sheppard will drive us up in his car.”

I acquiesced willingly.

On inquiry for Miss Ackroyd, we were shown into the billiard room. Flora and Major Hector Blunt were sitting on the long window seat.

“Good morning, Miss Ackroyd,” said the inspector. “Can we have a word or two alone with you?”

Blunt got up at once and moved to the door.

“What is it?” asked Flora nervously. “Don’t go, Major Blunt. He can stay, can’t he?” she asked, turning to the inspector.

“That’s as you like,” said the inspector drily. “There’s a question or two it’s my duty to put to you, miss, but I’d prefer to do so privately, and I dare say you’d prefer it also.”

Flora looked keenly at him. I saw her face grow whiter. Then she turned and spoke to Blunt.

“I want you to stay—please—yes, I mean it. Whatever the inspector has to say to me, I’d rather you heard it.”

Raglan shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, if you will have it so, that’s all there is to it. Now, Miss Ackroyd, M. Poirot here has made a certain suggestion to me. He suggests that you weren’t in the study at all last Friday night, that you never saw Mr. Ackroyd to say goodnight to him, that instead of being in the study you were on the stairs leading down from your uncle’s bedroom when you heard Parker coming across the hall.”

Flora’s gaze shifted to Poirot. He nodded back at her.

“Mademoiselle, the other day, when we sat round the table, I implored you to be frank with me. What one does not tell to Papa Poirot he finds out. It was that, was it not? See, I will make it easy for you. You took the money, did you not?”

“The money?” said Blunt sharply.

There was a silence which lasted for at least a minute.

Then Flora drew herself up and spoke.

“M. Poirot is right. I took that money. I stole. I am a thief—yes, a common, vulgar little thief. Now you know! I am glad it has come out. It’s been a nightmare, these last few days!” She sat down suddenly and buried her face in her hands. She spoke huskily through her fingers. “You don’t know what my life has been since I came here. Wanting things, scheming for them, lying, cheating, running up bills, promising to pay—oh! I hate myself when I think of it all! That’s what brought us together, Ralph and I. We were both weak! I understood him, and I was sorry—because I’m the same underneath. We’re not strong enough to stand alone, either of us. We’re weak, miserable, despicable things.”

She looked at Blunt and suddenly stamped her foot.

“Why do you look at me like that—as though you couldn’t believe? I may be a thief—but at any rate I’m real now. I’m not lying any more. I’m not pretending to be the kind of girl you like, young and innocent and simple. I don’t care if you never want to see me again. I hate myself, despise myself—but you’ve got to believe one thing, if speaking the truth would have made things better for Ralph, I would have spoken out. But I’ve seen all along that it wouldn’t be better for Ralph—it makes the case against him blacker than ever. I was not doing him any harm by sticking to my lie.”

“Ralph,” said Blunt. “I see—always Ralph.”

“You don’t understand,” said Flora hopelessly. “You never will.”

She turned to the inspector.

“I admit everything; I was at my wits’ end for money. I never saw my uncle that evening after he left the dinner table. As to the money, you can take what steps you please. Nothing could be worse than it is now!”

Suddenly she broke down again, hid her face in her hands, and rushed from the room.

“Well,” said the inspector in a flat tone, “so that’s that.”

He seemed rather at a loss what to do next.

Blunt came forward.

“Inspector Raglan,” he said quietly, “that money was given to me by Mr. Ackroyd for a special purpose. Miss Ackroyd never touched it. When she says she did, she is lying with the idea of shielding Captain Paton. The truth is as I said, and I am prepared to go into the witness-box and swear to it.”

He made a kind of jerky bow, then turning abruptly he left the room.

Poirot was after him in a flash. He caught the other up in the hall.

“Monsieur—a moment, I beg of you, if you will be so good.”

“Well, sir?”

Blunt was obviously impatient. He stood frowning down on Poirot.

“It is this,” said Poirot rapidly: “I am not deceived by your little fantasy. No, indeed. It was truly Miss Flora who took the money. All the same it is well imagined what you say—it pleases me. It is very good what you have done there. You are a man quick to think and to act.”

“I’m not in the least anxious for your opinion, thank you,” said Blunt coldly.

He made once more as though to pass on, but Poirot, not at all offended, laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“Ah! but you are to listen to me. I have more to say. The other day I spoke of concealments. Very well, all along I have seen what you are concealing. Mademoiselle Flora, you love her with all your heart. From the first moment you saw her, is it not so? Oh! let us not mind saying these things—why must one in England think it necessary to mention love as though it were some disgraceful secret? You love Mademoiselle Flora. You seek to conceal that fact from all the world. That is very good—that is as it should be. But take the advice of Hercule Poirot—do not conceal it from mademoiselle herself.”

Blunt had shown several signs of restlessness whilst Poirot was speaking, but the closing words seemed to rivet his attention.

“What d’you mean by that?” he said sharply.

“You think that she loves the Capitaine Ralph Paton—but I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that that is not so. Mademoiselle Flora accepted Captain Paton to please her uncle, and because she saw in the marriage a way of escape from her life here which was becoming frankly insupportable to her. She liked him, and there was much sympathy and understanding between them. But love—no! It is not Captain Paton Mademoiselle Flora loves.”

“What the devil do you mean?” asked Blunt.

I saw the dark flush under his tan.

“You have been blind, monsieur. Blind! She is loyal, the little one. Ralph Paton is under a cloud, she is bound in honour to stick by him.”

I felt it was time I put in a word to help on the good work.

“My sister told me the other night,” I said encouragingly, “that Flora had never cared a penny piece for Ralph Paton, and never would. My sister is always right about these things.”

Blunt ignored my well-meant offers. He spoke to Poirot.

“D’you really think—” he began, and stopped.

He is one of those inarticulate men who find it hard to put things into words.

Poirot knows no such disability.

“If you doubt me, ask her yourself, monsieur. But perhaps you no longer care to—the affair of the money—”

Blunt gave a sound like an angry laugh.

“Think I’d hold that against her? Roger was always a queer chap about money. She got in a mess and didn’t dare tell him. Poor kid. Poor lonely kid.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at the side door.

“Mademoiselle Flora went into the garden, I think,” he murmured.

“I’ve been every kind of a fool,” said Blunt abruptly. “Rum conversation we’ve been having. Like one of those Danish plays. But you’re a sound fellow, M. Poirot. Thank you.”

He took Poirot’s hand and gave it a grip which caused the other to wince in anguish. Then he strode to the side door and passed out into the garden.

“Not every kind of a fool,” murmured Poirot, tenderly nursing the injured member. “Only one kind—the fool in love.”

Twenty

MISS RUSSELL

Inspector Raglan had received a bad jolt. He was not deceived by Blunt's valiant lie any more than we had been. Our way back to the village was punctuated by his complaints.

"This alters everything, this does. I don't know whether you've realized it, Monsieur Poirot?"

"I think so, yes, I think so," said Poirot. "You see, me, I have been familiar with the idea for some time."

Inspector Raglan, who had only had the idea presented to him a short half hour ago, looked at Poirot unhappily, and went on with his discoveries.

"Those alibis now. Worthless! Absolutely worthless. Got to start again. Find out what everyone was doing from nine-thirty onwards. Nine-thirty—that's the time we've got to hang on to. You were quite right about the man Kent—we don't release him yet awhile. Let me see now—nine-forty-five at the Dog and Whistle. He might have got there in a quarter of an hour if he ran. It's just possible that it was his voice Mr. Raymond heard talking to Mr. Ackroyd—asking for money which Mr. Ackroyd refused. But one thing's clear—it wasn't he who sent the telephone message. The station is half a mile in the other direction—over a mile and a half from the Dog and Whistle, and he was at the Dog and Whistle until about ten minutes past ten. Dang that telephone call! We always come up against it."

"We do indeed," agreed Poirot. "It is curious."

"It's just possible that if Captain Paton climbed into his uncle's room and found him there murdered, he may have sent it. Got the wind up, thought he'd be accused, and cleared out. That's possible, isn't it?"

"Why should he have telephoned?"

"May have had doubts if the old man was really dead. Thought he'd get the doctor up there as soon as possible, but didn't want to give himself away. Yes, I say now, how's that for a theory? Something in that, I should say."

The inspector swelled his chest out importantly. He was so plainly delighted with himself that any words of ours would have been quite superfluous.

We arrived back at my house at this minute, and I hurried in to my surgery patients, who had all been waiting a considerable time, leaving Poirot to walk to the police station with the inspector.

Having dismissed the last patient, I strolled into the little room at the back of the house which I call my workshop—I am rather proud of the home-made wireless set I turned out. Caroline hates my workroom. I have kept my tools there, and Annie is not allowed to wreak havoc with a dustpan and brush. I was just adjusting the interior of an alarm clock which had been denounced as wholly unreliable by the household, when the door opened and Caroline put her head in.

"Oh! there you are, James," she said, with deep disapproval. "M. Poirot wants to see you."

"Well," I said, rather irritably, for her sudden entrance had startled me and I had let go of a piece of delicate mechanism. "If he wants to see me, he can come in here."

"In here?" said Caroline.

"That's what I said—in here."

Caroline gave a sniff of disapproval and retired. She returned in a moment or two, ushering in Poirot, and then retired again, shutting the door with a bang.

"Aha! my friend," said Poirot, coming forward and rubbing his hands. "You have not got rid of me so easily, you see!"

"Finished with the inspector?" I asked.

“For the moment, yes. And you, you have seen all the patients?”

“Yes.”

Poirot sat down and looked at me, tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, with the air of one who savours a very delicious joke.

“You are in error,” he said at last. “You have still one patient to see.”

“Not you?” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Ah, not me, bien entendu. Me, I have the health magnificent. No, to tell you the truth, it is a little complot of mine. There is someone I wish to see, you understand—and at the same time it is not necessary that the whole village should intrigue itself about the matter—which is what would happen if the lady were seen to come to my house—for it is a lady. But to you she has already come as a patient before.”

“Miss Russell!” I exclaimed.

“Précisément. I wish much to speak with her, so I send her the little note and make the appointment in your surgery. You are not annoyed with me?”

“On the contrary,” I said. “That is, presuming I am allowed to be present at the interview?”

“But naturally! In your own surgery!”

“You know,” I said, throwing down the pincers I was holding, “it’s extraordinarily intriguing, the whole thing. Every new development that arises is like the shake you give to a kaleidoscope—the thing changes entirely in aspect. Now, why are you so anxious to see Miss Russell?”

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

“Surely it is obvious?” he murmured.

“There you go again,” I grumbled. “According to you everything is obvious. But you leave me walking about in a fog.”

Poirot shook his head genially to me.

“You mock yourself at me. Take the matter of Mademoiselle Flora. The inspector was surprised—but you—you were not.”

“I never dreamed of her being the thief,” I expostulated.

“That—perhaps no. But I was watching your face and you were not—like Inspector Raglan—startled and incredulous.”

I thought for a minute or two.

“Perhpas you are right,” I said at last. “All along I’ve felt that Flora was keeping back something—so the truth, when it came, was subconsciously expected. It upset Inspector Raglan very much indeed, poor man.”

“Ah! pour ça oui! The poor man must rearrange all his ideas. I profited by his state of mental chaos to induce him to grant me a little favour.”

“What was that?”

Poirot took a sheet of notepaper from his pocket. Some words were written on it, and he read them aloud.

“The police have, for some days, been seeking for Captain Ralph Paton, the nephew of Mr. Ackroyd of Fernly Park, whose death occurred under such tragic circumstances last Friday. Captain Paton has been found at Liverpool, where he was on the point of embarking for America.”

He folded up the piece of paper again.

“That, my friend, will be in the newspapers tomorrow morning.”

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

“But—but it isn’t true! He’s not at Liverpool!”

Poirot beamed on me.

"You have the intelligence so quick! No, he has not been found at Liverpool. Inspector Raglan was very loath to let me send this paragraph to the press, especially as I could not take him into my confidence. But I assured him most solemnly that very interesting results would follow its appearance in print, so he gave in, after stipulating that he was, on no account, to bear the responsibility."

I stared at Poirot. He smiled back at me.

"It beats me," I said at last, "what you expect to get out of that."

"You should employ your little grey cells," said Poirot gravely.

He rose and came across to the bench.

"It is that you have really the love of the machinery," he said, after inspecting the débris of my labours.

Every man has his hobby. I immediately drew Poirot's attention to my home-made wireless. Finding him sympathetic, I showed him one or two little inventions of my own—trifling things, but useful in the house.

"Decidedly," said Poirot, "you should be an inventor by trade, not a doctor. But I hear the bell—that is your patient. Let us go into the surgery."

Once before I had been struck by the remnants of beauty in the housekeeper's face. This morning I was struck anew. Very simply dressed in black, tall, upright and independent as ever, with her big dark eyes and an unwonted flush of colour in her usually pale cheeks, I realized that as a girl she must have been startlingly handsome.

"Good morning, mademoiselle," said Poirot. "Will you be seated? Dr. Sheppard is so kind as to permit me the use of his surgery for a little conversation I am anxious to have with you."

Miss Russell sat down with her usual composure. If she felt any inward agitation, it did not display itself in any outward manifestation.

“It seems a queer way of doing things, if you’ll allow me to say so,” she remarked.

“Miss Russell—I have news to give you.”

“Indeed!”

“Charles Kent has been arrested at Liverpool.”

Not a muscle of her face moved. She merely opened her eyes a trifle wider, and asked, with a tinge of defiance:

“Well, what of it?”

But at that moment it came to me—the resemblance that had haunted me all along, something familiar in the defiance of Charles Kent’s manner. The two voices, one rough and coarse, the other painfully ladylike—were strangely the same in timbre. It was of Miss Russell that I had been reminded that night outside the gates of Fernly Park.

I looked at Poirot, full of my discovery, and he gave me an imperceptible nod.

In answer to Miss Russell’s question, he threw out his hands in a thoroughly French gesture.

“I thought you might be interested, that is all,” he said mildly.

“Well, I’m not particularly,” said Miss Russell. “Who is this Charles Kent anyway?”

“He is a man, mademoiselle, who was at Fernly on the night of the murder.”

“Really?”

“Fortunately for him, he has an alibi. At a quarter to ten he was at a public-house a mile from here.”

“Lucky for him,” commented Miss Russell.

“But we still do not know what he was doing at Fernly—who it was he went to meet, for instance.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you at all,” said the housekeeper politely. “Nothing came to my ears. If that is all—”

She made a tentative movement as though to rise. Poirot stopped her.

“It is not quite all,” he said smoothly. “This morning fresh developments have arisen. It seems now that Mr. Ackroyd was murdered, not at a quarter to ten, but before. Between ten minutes to nine, when Dr. Sheppard left, and a quarter to ten.”

I saw the colour drain from the housekeeper’s face, leaving it dead white. She leaned forward, her figure swaying.

“But Miss Ackroyd said—Miss Ackroyd said—”

“Miss Ackroyd has admitted that she was lying. She was never in the study at all that evening.”

“Then—”

“Then it would seem that in this Charles Kent we have the man we are looking for. He came to Fernly, can give no account of what he was doing there—”

“I can tell you what he was doing there. He never touched a hair of old Ackroyd’s head—he never went near the study. He didn’t do it, I tell you.”

She was leaning forward. That iron self-control was broken through at last. Terror and desperation was in her face.

“M. Poirot! M. Poirot! Oh, do believe me.”

Poirot got up and came to her. He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

“But yes—but yes, I will believe. I had to make you speak, you know.”

For an instant suspicion flared up in her.

“Is what you said true?”

“That Charles Kent is suspected of the crime? Yes, that is true. You alone can save him, by telling the reason for his being at Fernly.”

“He came to see me.” She spoke in a low, hurried voice. “I went out to meet him—”

“In the summerhouse, yes, I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Mademoiselle, it is the business of Hercule Poirot to know things. I know that you went out earlier in the evening, that you left a message in the summerhouse to say what time you would be there.”

“Yes, I did. I had heard from him—saying he was coming. I dared not let him come to the house. I wrote to the address he gave me and said I would meet him in the summerhouse, and described it to him so that he would be able to find it. Then I was afraid he might not wait there patiently, and I ran out and left a piece of paper to say I would be there about ten minutes past nine. I didn’t want the servants to see me, so I slipped out through the drawing room window. As I came back, I met Dr. Sheppard, and I fancied that he would think it queer. I was out of breath, for I had been running. I had no idea that he was expected to dinner that night.”

She paused.

“Go on,” said Poirot. “You went out to meet him at ten minutes past nine. What did you say to each other?”

“It’s difficult. You see—”

“Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, interrupting her, “in this matter I must have the whole truth. What you tell us need never go beyond these four walls. Dr. Sheppard will be discreet, and so shall I. See, I will help you. This Charles Kent, he is your son, is he not?”

She nodded. The colour had flamed into her cheeks.

“No one has ever known. It was long ago—long ago—down in Kent. I was not married….”

“So you took the name of the county as a surname for him. I understand.”

“I got work. I managed to pay for his board and lodging. I never told him that I was his mother. But he turned out badly, he drank, then took to drugs. I managed to pay his passage out to Canada. I didn’t hear of him for a year or two. Then, somehow or other, he found out that I was his mother. He wrote asking me for money. Finally, I heard from him back in this country again. He was coming to see me at Fernly, he said. I dared not let him come to the house. I have always been considered so—so very respectable. If anyone got an inkling—it would have been all up with my post as housekeeper. So I wrote to him in the way I have just told you.”

“And in the morning you came to see Dr. Sheppard?”

“Yes. I wondered if something could be done. He was not a bad boy—before he took to drugs.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “Now let us go on with the story. He came that night to the summerhouse?”

“Yes, he was waiting for me when I got there. He was very rough and abusive. I had brought with me all the money I had, and I gave it to him. We talked a little, and then he went away.”

“What time was that?”

“It must have been between twenty and twenty-five minutes past nine. It was not yet half past when I got back to the house.”

“Which way did he go?”

“Straight out the same way he came, by the path that joined the drive just inside the lodge gates.”

Poirot nodded.

“And you, what did you do?”

“I went back to the house. Major Blunt was walking up and down the terrace smoking, so I made a detour to get round to the side door. It was just then on half past nine, as I tell you.”

Poirot nodded again. He made a note or two in a microscopic pocketbook.

“I think that is all,” he said thoughtfully.

“Ought I—?” she hesitated. “Ought I to tell all this to Inspector Raglan?”

“It may come to that. But let us not be in a hurry. Let us proceed slowly, with due order and method. Charles Kent is not yet formally charged with murder. Circumstances may arise which will render your story unnecessary.”

Miss Russell rose.

“Thank you very much, M. Poirot,” she said. “You have been very kind—very kind indeed. You—you do believe me, don’t you? That Charles had nothing to do with this wicked murder!”

“There seems no doubt that the man who was talking to Mr. Ackroyd in the library at nine-thirty could not possibly have been your son. Be of good courage, mademoiselle. All will yet be well.”

Miss Russell departed. Poirot and I were left together.

“So that’s that,” I said. “Every time we come back to Ralph Paton. How did you manage to spot Miss Russell as the person Charles Kent came to meet? Did you notice the resemblance?”

“I had connected her with the unknown man long before we actually came face to face with him. As soon as we found that quill. The quill suggested dope, and I remembered your account of Miss Russell’s visit to you. Then I found the article on cocaine in that morning’s paper. It all seemed very clear. She had heard from someone that morning—someone addicted to drugs, she read the article in the paper, and she came to ask you a few tentative questions. She mentioned cocaine, since the article in question was on cocaine. Then, when you seemed too interested, she switched hurriedly to the subject of detective stories and untraceable poisons. I suspected a son or a brother, or some other undesirable male relation. Ah! but I must go. It is the time of the lunch."

"Stay and lunch with us," I suggested.

Poirot shook his head. A faint twinkle came into his eye.

"Not again today. I should not like to force Mademoiselle Caroline to adopt a vegetarian diet two days in succession."

It occurred to me that there was not much which escaped Hercule Poirot.

Twenty-one

THE PARAGRAPH IN THE PAPER

Caroline, of course, had not failed to see Miss Russell come to the surgery door. I had anticipated this, and had ready an elaborate account of the lady's bad knee. But Caroline was not in a cross-questioning mood. Her point of view was that she knew what Miss Russell had really come for and that I didn't.

"Pumping you, James," said Caroline. "Pumping you in the most shameless manner, I've no doubt. It's no good interrupting. I dare say you hadn't the least idea she was doing it even. Men are so simple. She knows that you are in M. Poirot's confidence, and she wants to find out things. Do you know what I think, James?"

"I couldn't begin to imagine. You think so many extraordinary things."

"It's no good being sarcastic. I think Miss Russell knows more about Mr. Ackroyd's death than she is prepared to admit."

Caroline leaned back triumphantly in her chair.

"Do you really think so?" I said absently.

"You are very dull today, James. No animation about you. It's that liver of yours."

Our conversation then dealt with purely personal matters.

The paragraph inspired by Poirot duly appeared in our daily paper the next morning. I was in the dark as to its purpose, but its effect on Caroline was immense.

She began by stating, most untruly, that she had said as much all along. I raised my eyebrows, but did not argue. Caroline, however, must have felt a prick of conscience, for she went on:

“I mayn’t have actually mentioned Liverpool, but I knew he’d try to get away to America. That’s what Crippen did.”

“Without much success,” I reminded her.

“Poor boy, and so they’ve caught him. I consider, James, that it’s your duty to see that he isn’t hung.”

“What do you expect me to do?”

“Why, you’re a medical man, aren’t you? You’ve known him from a boy upwards. Not mentally responsible. That’s the line to take, clearly. I read only the other day that they’re very happy in Broadmoor—it’s quite like a high-class club.”

But Caroline’s words had reminded me of something.

“I never knew that Poirot had an imbecile nephew?” I said curiously.

“Didn’t you? Oh, he told me all about it. Poor lad. It’s a great grief to all the family. They’ve kept him at home so far, but it’s getting to such a pitch that they’re afraid he’ll have to go into some kind of institution.”

“I suppose you know pretty well everything there is to know about Poirot’s family by this time,” I said, exasperated.

“Pretty well,” said Caroline complacently. “It’s a great relief to people to be able to tell all their troubles to someone.”

“It might be,” I said, “if they were ever allowed to do so spontaneously. Whether they enjoy having confidences screwed out of them by force is another matter.”

Caroline merely looked at me with an air of a Christian martyr enjoying martyrdom.

“You are so self-contained, James,” she said. “You hate speaking out, or parting with any information yourself, and you think everybody else must be just like you. I should hope that I never screw confidences out of anybody. For instance, if M. Poirot comes in this afternoon, as he said he might do, I shall not dream of asking him who it was arrived at his house early this morning.”

“Early this morning?” I queried.

“Very early,” said Caroline. “Before the milk came. I just happened to be looking out of the window—the blind was flapping. It was a man. He came in a closed car, and he was all muffled up. I couldn’t get a glimpse of his face. But I will tell you my idea, and you’ll see that I’m right.”

“What’s your idea?”

Caroline dropped her voice mysteriously.

“A Home Office expert,” she breathed.

“A Home Office expert,” I said, amazed. “My dear Caroline!”

“Mark my words, James, you’ll see that I’m right. That Russell woman was here that morning after your poisons. Roger Ackroyd might easily have been poisoned in his food that night.”

I laughed out loud.

“Nonsense,” I cried. “He was stabbed in the neck. You know that as well as I do.”

“After death, James,” said Caroline; “to make a false clue.”

“My good woman,” I said, “I examined the body, and I know what I’m talking about. That wound wasn’t inflicted after death—it was the cause of death, and you need make no mistake about it.”

Caroline merely continued to look omniscient, which so annoyed me that I went on:

"Perhaps you will tell me, Caroline, if I have a medical degree or if I have not?"

"You have the medical degree, I dare say, James—at least, I mean I know you have. But you've no imagination whatever."

"Having endowed you with a treble portion, there was none left over for me," I said drily.

I was amused to see Caroline's manoeuvres that afternoon when Poirot duly arrived. My sister, without asking a direct question, skirted the subject of the mysterious guest in every way imaginable. By the twinkle in Poirot's eyes, I saw that he realized her object. He remained blandly impervious, and blocked her bowling so successfully that she herself was at a loss how to proceed.

Having, I suspect, enjoyed the little game, he rose to his feet and suggested a walk.

"It is that I need to reduce the figure a little," he explained. "You will come with me, doctor? And perhaps later, Miss Caroline will give us some tea."

"Delighted," said Caroline. "Won't your—er—guest come in also?"

"You are too kind," said Poirot. "But no, my friend reposes himself. Soon you must make his acquaintance."

"Quite an old friend of yours, so somebody told me," said Caroline, making one last valiant effort.

"Did they?" murmured Poirot. "Well, we must start."

Our tramp took us in the direction of Fernly. I had guessed beforehand that it might do so. I was beginning to understand Poirot's methods. Every little irrelevancy had a bearing upon the whole.

"I have a commission for you, my friend," he said at last. "Tonight, at my house. I desire to have a little conference. You will attend, will you not?"

"Certainly," I said.

"Good. I need also those in the house—that is to say: Mrs. Ackroyd, Mademoiselle Flora, Major Blunt, Mr. Raymond. I want you to be my ambassador. This little reunion is fixed for nine o'clock. You will ask them—yes?"

"With pleasure; but why not ask them yourself?"

"Because they will then put the questions: Why? What for? They will demand what my idea is. And, as you know, my friend, I much dislike to have to explain my little ideas until the time comes."

I smiled a little.

"My friend Hastings, he of whom I told you, used to say of me that I was the human oyster. But he was unjust. Of facts, I keep nothing to myself. But to everyone his own interpretation of them."

"When do you want me to do this?"

"Now, if you will. We are close to the house."

"Aren't you coming in?"

"No, me, I will promenade myself in the grounds. I will rejoin you by the lodge gates in a quarter of an hour's time."

I nodded, and set off on my task. The only member of the family at home proved to be Mrs. Ackroyd, who was sipping an early cup of tea. She received me very graciously.

"So grateful to you, doctor," she murmured, "for clearing up that little matter with M. Poirot. But life is one trouble after another. You have heard about Flora, of course?"

"What exactly?" I asked cautiously.

“This new engagement. Flora and Hector Blunt. Of course not such a good match as Ralph would have been. But after all, happiness comes first. What dear Flora needs is an older man—someone steady and reliable, and then Hector is really a very distinguished man in his way. You saw the news of Ralph’s arrest in the paper this morning?”

“Yes,” I said, “I did.”

“Horrible.” Mrs. Ackroyd closed her eyes and shuddered. “Geoffrey Raymond was in a terrible way. Rang up Liverpool. But they wouldn’t tell him anything at the police station there. In fact, they said they hadn’t arrested Ralph at all. Mr. Raymond insists that it’s all a mistake—a—what do they call it?—canard of the newspaper’s. I’ve forbidden it to be mentioned before the servants. Such a terrible disgrace. Fancy if Flora had actually been married to him.”

Mrs. Ackroyd shut her eyes in anguish. I began to wonder how soon I should be able to deliver Poirot’s invitation.

Before I had time to speak, Mrs. Ackroyd was off again.

“You were here yesterday, weren’t you, with that dreadful Inspector Raglan? Brute of a man—he terrified Flora into saying she took that money from poor Roger’s room. And the matter was so simple, really. The dear child wanted to borrow a few pounds, didn’t like to disturb her uncle since he’d given strict orders against it. But knowing where he kept his notes she went there and took what she needed.”

“Is that Flora’s account of the matter?” I asked.

“My dear doctor, you know what girls are nowadays. So easily acted on by suggestion. You, of course, know all about hypnosis and that sort of thing. The inspector shouts at her, says the word ‘steal’ over and over again, until the poor child gets an inhibition—or is it a complex?—I always mix up those two words—and actually thinks herself that she has stolen the money. I saw at once how it was. But I can’t be too thankful for the whole misunderstanding in one way—it seems to have brought those two together—Hector and Flora, I mean. And I assure you that I have been very much worried about Flora in the past: why, at one time I actually thought there was going to be some kind of understanding between her and young Raymond. Just think of it!” Mrs. Ackroyd’s voice rose in shrill horror. “A private secretary—with practically no means of his own.”

“It would have been a severe blow to you,” I said. “Now, Mrs. Ackroyd, I’ve got a message for you from M. Hercule Poirot.”

“For me?”

Mrs. Ackroyd looked quite alarmed.

I hastened to reassure her, and I explained what Poirot wanted.

“Certainly,” said Mrs. Ackroyd rather doubtfully. “I suppose we must come if M. Poirot says so. But what is it all about? I like to know beforehand.”

I assured the lady truthfully that I myself did not know any more than she did.

“Very well,” said Mrs. Ackroyd at last, rather grudgingly, “I will tell the others, and we will be there at nine o’clock.”

Thereupon I took my leave, and joined Poirot at the agreed meeting-place.

“I’ve been longer than a quarter of an hour, I’m afraid,” I remarked. “But once that good lady starts talking it’s a matter of the utmost difficulty to get a word in edgeways.”

“It is of no matter,” said Poirot. “Me, I have been well amused. This park is magnificent.”

We set off homewards. When we arrived, to our great surprise Caroline, who had evidently been watching for us, herself opened the door.

She put her finger to her lips. Her face was full of importance and excitement.

"Ursula Bourne," she said, "the parlourmaid from Fernly. She's here! I've put her in the dining room. She's in a terrible way, poor thing. Says she must see M. Poirot at once. I've done all I could. Taken her a cup of hot tea. It really goes to one's heart to see anyone in such a state."

"In the dining room?" asked Poirot.

"This way," I said, and flung open the door.

Ursula Bourne was sitting by the table. Her arms were spread out in front of her, and she had evidently just lifted her head from where it had been buried. Her eyes were red with weeping.

"Ursula Bourne," I murmured.

But Poirot went past me with outstretched hands.

"No," he said, "that is not quite right, I think. It is not Ursula Bourne, is it, my child—but Ursula Paton? Mrs. Ralph Paton."

Twenty-two

URSULA’S STORY

For a moment or two the girl looked mutely at Poirot. Then, her reserve breaking down completely, she nodded her head once, and burst into an outburst of sobs.

Caroline pushed past me, and putting her arm round the girl, patted her on the shoulder.

“There, there, my dear,” she said soothingly, “it will be all right. You’ll see—everything will be all right.”

Buried under curiosity and scandal-mongering there is a lot of kindness in Caroline. For the moment, even the interest of Poirot’s revelation was lost in the sight of the girl’s distress.

Presently Ursula sat up and wiped her eyes.

“This is very weak and silly of me,” she said.

“No, no, my child,” said Poirot kindly. “We can all realize the strain of this last week.”

“It must have been a terrible ordeal,” I said.

“And then to find that you knew,” continued Ursula. “How did you know? Was it Ralph who told you?”

Poirot shook his head.

“You know what brought me to you tonight,” went on the girl. “This—”

She held out a crumpled piece of newspaper, and I recognized the paragraph that Poirot had had inserted.

"It says that Ralph has been arrested. So everything is useless. I need not pretend any longer."

"Newspaper paragraphs are not always true, mademoiselle," murmured Poirot, having the grace to look ashamed of himself. "All the same, I think you will do well to make a clean breast of things. The truth is what we need now."

The girl hesitated, looking at him doubtfully.

"You do not trust me," said Poirot gently. "Yet all the same you came here to find me, did you not? Why was that?"

"Because I don't believe that Ralph did it," said the girl in a very low voice. "And I think that you are clever, and will find out the truth. And also—"

"Yes?"

"I think you are kind."

Poirot nodded his head several times.

"It is very good that—yes, it is very good. Listen, I do in verity believe that this husband of yours is innocent—but the affair marches badly. If I am to save him, I must know all there is to know—even if it should seem to make the case against him blacker than before."

"How well you understand," said Ursula.

"So you will tell me the whole story, will you not? From the beginning."

"You're not going to send me away, I hope," said Caroline, settling herself comfortably in an armchair. "What I want to know," she continued, "is why this child was masquerading as a parlourmaid?"

"Masquerading?" I queried.

"That's what I said. Why did you do it, child? For a wager?"

“For a living,” said Ursula drily.

And encouraged, she began the story which I reproduce here in my own words.

Ursula Bourne, it seemed, was one of a family of seven—impoverished Irish gentlefolk. On the death of her father, most of the girls were cast out into the world to earn their own living. Ursula’s eldest sister was married to Captain Folliott. It was she whom I had seen that Sunday, and the cause of her embarrassment was clear enough now. Determined to earn her living and not attracted to the idea of being a nursery governess—the one profession open to an untrained girl—Ursula preferred the job of parlourmaid. She scorned to label herself a “lady parlourmaid.” She would be the real thing, her reference being supplied by her sister. At Fernly, despite an aloofness which, as has been seen, caused some comment, she was a success at her job—quick, competent and thorough.

“I enjoyed the work,” she explained. “And I had plenty of time to myself.”

And then came her meeting with Ralph Paton, and the love affair which culminated in a secret marriage. Ralph had persuaded her into that, somewhat against her will. He had declared that his stepfather would not hear of his marrying a penniless girl. Better to be married secretly, and break the news to him at some later and more favourable minute.

And so the deed was done, and Ursula Bourne became Ursula Paton. Ralph had declared that he meant to pay off his debts, find a job, and then, when he was in a position to support her, and independent of his adopted father, they would break the news to him.

But to people like Ralph Paton, turning over a new leaf is easier in theory than in practice. He hoped that his stepfather, whilst still in ignorance of the marriage, might be persuaded to pay his debts and put him on his feet again. But the revelation of the amount of Ralph’s liabilities merely enraged Roger Ackroyd, and he refused to do anything at all. Some months passed, and then Ralph was bidden once more to Fernly. Roger Ackroyd did not beat about the bush. It was the desire of his heart that Ralph should marry Flora, and he put the matter plainly before the young man.

And here it was that the innate weakness of Ralph Paton showed itself. As always, he grasped at the easy, the immediate solution. As far as I could make out, neither Flora nor Ralph made any pretence of love. It was, on both sides, a business arrangement. Roger Ackroyd dictated his wishes—they agreed to them. Flora accepted a chance of liberty, money and an enlarged horizon, Ralph, of course, was playing a different game. But he was in a very awkward hole financially. He seized at the chance. His debts would be paid. He could start again with a clean sheet. His was not a nature to envisage the future, but I gather that he saw vaguely the engagement with Flora being broken off after a decent interval had elapsed. Both Flora and he stipulated that it should be kept a secret for the present. He was anxious to conceal it from Ursula. He felt instinctively that her nature, strong and resolute, with an inherent distaste for duplicity, was not one to welcome such a course.

Then came the crucial moment when Roger Ackroyd, always high-handed, decided to announce the engagement. He said no word of his intention to Ralph—only to Flora, and Flora, apathetic, raised no objection. On Ursula, the news fell like a bombshell. Summoned by her, Ralph came hurriedly down from town. They met in the wood, where part of their conversation was overheard by my sister. Ralph implored her to keep silent for a little while longer, Ursula was equally determined to have done with concealments. She would tell Mr. Ackroyd the truth without any further delay. Husband and wife parted acrimoniously.

Ursula, steadfast in her purpose, sought an interview with Roger Ackroyd that very afternoon, and revealed the truth to him. Their interview was a stormy one—it might have been even more stormy had not Roger Ackroyd been already obsessed with his own troubles. It was bad enough, however. Ackroyd was not the kind of man to forgive the deceit that had been practised upon him. His rancour was mainly directed to Ralph, but Ursula came in for her share, since he regarded her as a girl who had deliberately tried to “entrap” the adopted son of a very wealthy man. Unforgivable things were said on both sides.

That same evening Ursula met Ralph by appointment in the small summerhouse, stealing out from the house by the side door in order to do so. Their interview was made up of reproaches on both sides. Ralph charged Ursula with having irretrievably ruined his prospects by her ill-timed revelation. Ursula reproached Ralph with his duplicity.

They parted at last. A little over half an hour later came the discovery of Roger Ackroyd's body. Since that night Ursula had neither seen nor heard from Ralph.

As the story unfolded itself, I realized more and more what a damning series of facts it was. Alive, Ackroyd could hardly have failed to alter his will—I knew him well enough to realize that to do so would be his first thought. His death came in the nick of time for Ralph and Ursula Paton. Small wonder the girl had held her tongue, and played her part so consistently.

My meditations were interrupted. It was Poirot's voice speaking, and I knew from the gravity of his tone that he, too, was fully alive to the implications of the position.

"Mademoiselle, I must ask you one question, and you must answer it truthfully, for on it everything may hang: What time was it when you parted from Captain Ralph Paton in the summerhouse? Now, take a little minute so that your answer may be very exact."

The girl gave a half laugh, bitter enough in all conscience.

"Do you think I haven't gone over that again and again in my own mind? It was just half past nine when I went out to meet him. Major Blunt was walking up and down the terrace, so I had to go round through the bushes to avoid him. It must have been about twenty-seven minutes to ten when I reached the summerhouse. Ralph was waiting for me. I was with him ten minutes—not longer, for it was just a quarter to ten when I got back to the house."

I saw now the insistence of her question the other day. If only Ackroyd could have been proved to have been killed before a quarter to ten, and not after.

I saw the reflection of that thought in Poirot’s next question.

“Who left the summerhouse first?”

“I did.”

“Leaving Ralph Paton in the summerhouse?”

“Yes—but you don’t think—”

“Mademoiselle, it is of no importance what I think. What did you do when you got back to the house?”

“I went up to my room.”

“And stayed there until when?”

“Until about ten o’clock.”

“Is there anyone who can prove that?”

“Prove? That I was in my room, you mean? Oh! no. But surely—oh! I see, they might think—they might think—”

I saw the dawning horror in her eyes.

Poirot finished the sentence for her.

“That it was you who entered by the window and stabbed Mr. Ackroyd as he sat in his chair? Yes, they might think just that.”

“Nobody but a fool would think any such thing,” said Caroline indignantly.

She patted Ursula on the shoulder.

The girl had her face hidden in her hands.

“Horrible,” she was murmuring. “Horrible.”

Caroline gave her a friendly shake.

“Don’t worry, my dear,” she said. “M. Poirot doesn’t think that really. As for that husband of yours, I don’t think much of him, and I tell you so candidly. Running away and leaving you to face the music.”

But Ursula shook her head energetically.

“Oh, no,” she cried. “It wasn’t like that at all. Ralph would not run away on his own account. I see now. If he heard of his stepfather’s murder, he might think himself that I had done it.”

“He wouldn’t think any such thing,” said Caroline.

“I was so cruel to him that night—so hard and bitter. I wouldn’t listen to what he was trying to say—wouldn’t believe that he really cared. I just stood there telling him what I thought of him, and saying the coldest, cruellest things that came into my mind—trying my best to hurt him.”

“Do him no harm,” said Caroline. “Never worry about what you say to a man. They’re so conceited that they never believe you mean it if it’s unflattering.”

Ursula went on nervously twisting and untwisting her hands.

“When the murder was discovered and he didn’t come forward, I was terribly upset. Just for a moment I wondered—but then I knew he couldn’t—he couldn’t…But I wished he would come forward and say openly that he’d had nothing to do with it. I knew that he was fond of Dr. Sheppard, and I fancied that perhaps Dr. Sheppard might know where he was hiding.”

She turned to me.

“That’s why I said what I did to you that day. I thought, if you knew where he was, you might pass on the message to him.”

“I?” I exclaimed.

“Why should James know where he was?” demanded Caroline sharply.

“It was very unlikely, I know,” admitted Ursula, “but Ralph had often spoken of Dr. Sheppard, and I knew that he would be likely to consider him as his best friend in King’s Abbot.”

“My dear child,” I said, “I have not the least idea where Ralph Paton is at the present moment.”

“That is true enough,” said Poirot.

“But—” Ursula held out the newspaper cutting in a puzzled fashion.

“Ah! that,” said Poirot, slightly embarrassed; “a bagatelle, mademoiselle. A rien du tout. Not for a moment do I believe that Ralph Paton has been arrested.”

“But then—” began the girl slowly.

Poirot went on quickly:

“There is one thing I should like to know—did Captain Paton wear shoes or boots that night?”

Ursula shook her head.

“I can’t remember.”

“A pity! But how should you? Now, madame,” he smiled at her, his head on one side, his forefinger wagging eloquently, “no questions. And do not torment yourself. Be of good courage, and place your faith in Hercule Poirot.”

Twenty-three

POIROT’S LITTLE REUNION

“And now,” said Caroline, rising, “that child is coming upstairs to lie down. Don’t you worry, my dear. M. Poirot will do everything he can for you—be sure of that.”

“I ought to go back to Fernly,” said Ursula uncertainly.

But Caroline silenced her protests with a firm hand.

“Nonsense. You’re in my hands for the time being. You’ll stay here for the present, anyway—eh, M. Poirot?”

“It will be the best plan,” agreed the little Belgian. “This evening I shall want mademoiselle—I beg her pardon, madame—to attend my little reunion. Nine o’clock at my house. It is most necessary that she should be there.”

Caroline nodded, and went with Ursula out of the room. The door shut behind them. Poirot dropped down into a chair again.

“So far, so good,” he said. “Things are straightening themselves out.”

“They’re getting to look blacker and blacker against Ralph Paton,” I observed gloomily.

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, that is so. But it was to be expected, was it not?”

I looked at him, slightly puzzled by the remark. He was leaning back in the chair, his eyes half closed, the tips of his fingers just touching each other. Suddenly he sighed and shook his head.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It is that there are moments when a great longing for my friend Hastings comes over me. That is the friend of whom I spoke to you—the one who resides now in the Argentine. Always, when I have had a big case, he has been by my side. And he has helped me—yes, often he has helped me. For he had a knack, that one, of stumbling over the truth unawares—without noticing it himself, bien entendu. At times, he has said something particularly foolish, and behold that foolish remark has revealed the truth to me! And then, too, it was his practice to keep a written record of the cases that proved interesting.”

I gave a slightly embarrassed cough.

“As far as that goes,” I began, and then stopped.

Poirot sat upright in his chair. His eyes sparkled.

“But yes? What is it that you would say?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve read some of Captain Hasting’s narratives, and I thought, why not try my hand at something of the same kind. Seemed a pity not to—unique opportunity—probably the only time I’ll be mixed up with anything of this kind.”

I felt myself getting hotter and hotter, and more and more incoherent, as I floundered through the above speech.

Poirot sprang from his chair. I had a moment’s terror that he was going to embrace me French fashion, but mercifully he refrained.

“But this is magnificent—you have then written down your impressions of the case as you went along?”

I nodded.

“Epatant!” cried Poirot. “Let me see them—this instant.”

I was not quite prepared for such a sudden demand. I racked my brains to remember certain details.

"I hope you won't mind," I stammered. "I may have been a little—er—personal now and then."

"Oh! I comprehend perfectly; you have referred to me as comic—as, perhaps, ridiculous now and then? It matters not at all. Hastings, he also was not always polite. Me, I have the mind above such trivialities."

Still somewhat doubtful, I rummaged in the drawers of my desk and produced an untidy pile of manuscript which I handed over to him. With an eye on possible publication in the future, I had divided the work into chapters, and the night before I had brought it up to date with an account of Miss Russell's visit. Poirot had therefore twenty chapters.

I left him with them.

I was obliged to go out to a case at some distance away, and it was past eight o'clock when I got back, to be greeted with a plate of hot dinner on a tray, and the announcement that Poirot and my sister had supped together at half past seven, and that the former had then gone to my workshop to finish his reading of the manuscript.

"I hope, James," said my sister, "that you've been careful in what you say about me in it?"

My jaw dropped. I had not been careful at all.

"Not that it matters very much," said Caroline, reading my expression correctly. "M. Poirot will know what to think. He understands me much better than you do."

I went into the workshop. Poirot was sitting by the window. The manuscript lay neatly piled on a chair beside him. He laid his hand on it and spoke.

"Eh bien," he said, "I congratulate you—on your modesty!"

"Oh!" I said, rather taken aback.

"And on your reticence," he added.

I said “Oh!” again.

“Not so did Hastings write,” continued my friend. “On every page, many, many times was the word ‘I’. What he thought—what he did. But you—you have kept your personality in the background; only once or twice does it obtrude—in scenes of home life, shall we say?”

I blushed a little before the twinkle of his eye.

“What do you really think of the stuff?” I asked nervously.

“You want my candid opinion?”

“Yes.”

Poirot laid his jesting manner aside.

“A very meticulous and accurate account,” he said kindly. “You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly—though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.”

“And it has helped you?”

“Yes. I may say that it has helped me considerably. Come, we must go over to my house and set the stage for my little performance.”

Caroline was in the hall. I think she hoped that she might be invited to accompany us. Poirot dealt with the situation tactfully.

“I should much like to have had you present, mademoiselle,” he said regretfully, “but at this juncture it would not be wise. See you, all these people tonight are suspects. Amongst them, I shall find the person who killed Mr. Ackroyd.”

“You really believe that?” I said incredulously.

“I see that you do not,” said Poirot drily. “Not yet do you appreciate Hercule Poirot at his true worth.”

At that minute Ursula came down the staircase.

“You are ready, my child?” said Poirot. “That is good. We will go to my house together. Mademoiselle Caroline, believe me, I do everything possible to render you service. Good evening.”

We went off, leaving Caroline rather like a dog who has been refused a walk, standing on the front door step gazing after us.

The sitting room at The Larches had been got ready. On the table were various siropes and glasses. Also a plate of biscuits. Several chairs had been brought in from the other room.

Poirot ran to and fro rearranging things. Pulling out a chair here, altering the position of a lamp there, occasionally stooping to straighten one of the mats that covered the floor. He was specially fussing over the lighting. The lamps were arranged in such a way as to throw a clear light on the side of the room where the chairs were grouped, at the same time leaving the other end of the room, where I presumed Poirot himself would sit, in a dim twilight.

Ursula and I watched him. Presently a bell was heard.

“They arrive,” said Poirot. “Good, all is in readiness.”

The door opened and the party from Fernly filed in. Poirot went forward and greeted Mrs. Ackroyd and Flora.

“It is most good of you to come,” he said. “And Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond.”

The secretary was debonair as ever.

“What’s the great idea?” he said, laughing. “Some scientific machine? Do we have bands round our wrists which register guilty heart-beats? There is such an invention, isn’t there?”

“I have read of it, yes,” admitted Poirot. “But me, I am old-fashioned. I use the old methods. I work only with the little grey cells. Now let us begin—but first I have an announcement to make to you all.”

He took Ursula’s hand and drew her forward.

“This lady is Mrs. Ralph Paton. She was married to Captain Paton last March.”

A little shriek burst from Mrs. Ackroyd.

“Ralph! Married! Last March! Oh! but it’s absurd. How could he be?”

She stared at Ursula as though she had never seen her before.

“Married to Bourne?” she said. “Really, M. Poirot, I don’t believe you.”

Ursula flushed and began to speak, but Flora forestalled her.

Going quickly to the other girl’s side, she passed her hand through her arm.

“You must not mind our being surprised,” she said. “You see, we had no idea of such a thing. You and Ralph have kept your secret very well. I am—very glad about it.”

“You are very kind, Miss Ackroyd,” said Ursula in a low voice, “and you have every right to be exceedingly angry. Ralph behaved very badly—especially to you.”

“You needn’t worry about that,” said Flora, giving her arm a consoling little pat. “Ralph was in a corner and took the only way out. I should probably have done the same in his place. I do think he might have trusted me with the secret, though. I wouldn’t have let him down.”

Poirot rapped gently on a table and cleared his throat significantly.

“The board meeting’s going to begin,” said Flora. “M. Poirot hints that we mustn’t talk. But just tell me one thing. Where is Ralph? You must know if anyone does.”

“But I don’t,” cried Ursula, almost in a wail. “That’s just it, I don’t.”

“Isn’t he detained at Liverpool?” asked Raymond. “It said so in the paper.”

“He is not at Liverpool,” said Poirot shortly.

“In fact,” I remarked, “no one knows where he is.”

“Except Hercule Poirot, eh?” said Raymond.

Poirot replied seriously to the other’s banter.

“Me, I know everything. Remember that.”

Geoffrey Raymond lifted his eyebrows.

“Everything?” He whistled. “Whew! that’s a tall order.”

“Do you mean to say you can really guess where Ralph Paton is hiding?” I asked incredulously.

“You call it guessing. I call it knowing, my friend.”

“In Cranchester?” I hazarded.

“No,” replied Poirot gravely, “not in Cranchester.”

He said no more, but at a gesture from him the assembled party took their seats. As they did so, the door opened once more and two other people came in and sat down near the door. They were Parker and the housekeeper.

“The number is complete,” said Poirot. “Everyone is here.”

There was a ring of satisfaction in his tone. And with the sound of it I saw a ripple of something like uneasiness pass over all those faces grouped at the other end of the room. There was a suggestion in all this as of a trap—a trap that had closed.

Poirot read from a list in an important manner.

“Mrs. Ackroyd, Miss Flora Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond, Mrs. Ralph Paton, John Parker, Elizabeth Russell.”

He laid the paper down on the table.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” began Raymond.

“The list I have just read,” said Poirot, “is a list of suspected persons. Every one of you present had the opportunity to kill Mr. Ackroyd—”

With a cry Mrs. Ackroyd sprang up, her throat working.

“I don’t like it,” she wailed. “I don’t like it. I would much prefer to go home.”

“You cannot go home, madame,” said Poirot sternly, “until you have heard what I have to say.”

He paused a moment, then cleared his throat.

“I will start at the beginning. When Miss Ackroyd asked me to investigate the case, I went up to Fernly Park with the good Doctor Sheppard. I walked with him along the terrace, where I was shown the footprints on the windowsill. From there Inspector Raglan took me along the path which leads to the drive. My eye was caught by a little summerhouse, and I searched it thoroughly. I found two things—a scrap of starched cambric and an empty goose quill. The scrap of cambric immediately suggested to me a maid’s apron. When Inspector Raglan showed me his list of the people in the house, I noticed at once that one of the maids—Ursula Bourne, the parlourmaid—had no real alibi. According to her own story, she was in her bedroom from nine-thirty until ten. But supposing that instead she was in the summerhouse? If so, she must have gone there to meet someone. Now we know from Dr. Sheppard that someone from outside did come to the house that night—the stranger whom he met just by the gate. At first glance it would seem that our problem was solved, and that the stranger went to the summerhouse to meet Ursula Bourne. It was fairly certain that he did go to the summerhouse because of the goose quill. That suggested at once to my mind a taker of drugs—and one who had acquired the habit on the other side of the Atlantic where sniffing ‘snow’ is more common than in this country. The man whom Dr. Sheppard met had an American accent, which fitted in with that supposition.

“But I was held up by one point. The times did not fit. Ursula Bourne could certainly not have gone to the summerhouse before nine-thirty, whereas the man must have got there by a few minutes past nine. I could, of course, assume that he waited there for half an hour. The only alternative supposition was that there had been two separate meetings in the summerhouse that night. Eh bien, as soon as I went into that alternative I found several significant facts. I discovered that Miss Russell, the housekeeper, had visited Dr. Sheppard that morning, and had displayed a good deal of interest in cures for victims of the drug habit. Taking that in conjunction with the goose quill, I assumed that the man in question came to Fernly to meet the housekeeper, and not Ursula Bourne. Who, then, did Ursula Bourne come to the rendezvous to meet? I was not long in doubt. First I found a ring—a wedding ring—with ‘From R.’ and a date inside it. Then I learnt that Ralph Paton had been seen coming up the path which led to the summerhouse at twenty-five minutes past nine, and I also heard of a certain conversation which had taken place in the wood near the village that very afternoon—a conversation between Ralph Paton and some unknown girl. So I had my facts succeeding each other in a neat and orderly manner. A secret marriage, an engagement announced on the day of the tragedy, the stormy interview in the wood, and the meeting arranged for the summerhouse that night.

“Incidentally this proved to me one thing, that both Ralph Paton and Ursula Bourne (or Paton) had the strongest motives for wishing Mr. Ackroyd out of the way. And it also made one other point unexpectedly clear. It could not have been Ralph Paton who was with Mr. Ackroyd in the study at nine-thirty.

“So we come to another and most interesting aspect of the crime. Who was it in the room with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty? Not Ralph Paton, who was in the summerhouse with his wife. Not Charles Kent, who had already left. Who, then? I posed my cleverest—my most audacious question: Was anyone with him?”

Poirot leaned forward and shot the last words triumphantly at us, drawing back afterwards with the air of one who has made a decided hit.

Raymond, however, did not seem impressed, and lodged a mild protest.

"I don't know if you're trying to make me out a liar, M. Poirot, but the matter does not rest on my evidence alone—except perhaps as to the exact words used. Remember, Major Blunt also heard Mr. Ackroyd talking to someone. He was on the terrace outside, and couldn't catch the words clearly, but he distinctly heard the voices."

Poirot nodded.

"I have not forgotten," he said quietly. "But Major Blunt was under the impression that it was you to whom Mr. Ackroyd was speaking."

For a moment Raymond seemed taken aback. Then he recovered himself.

"Blunt knows now that he was mistaken," he said.

"Exactly," agreed the other man.

"Yet there must have been some reason for his thinking so," mused Poirot. "Oh! no," he held up his hand in protest, "I know the reason you will give—but it is not enough. We must seek elsewhere. I will put it this way. From the beginning of the case I have been struck by one thing—the nature of those words which Mr. Raymond overheard. It has been amazing to me that no one has commented on them—has seen anything odd about them."

He paused a minute, and then quoted softly:

"…the calls on my purse have been so frequent of late that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request. Does nothing strike you as odd about that?"

"I don't think so," said Raymond. "He has frequently dictated letters to me, using almost exactly those same words."

"Exactly," cried Poirot. "That is what I seek to arrive at. Would any man use such a phrase in talking to another? Impossible that that should be part of a real conversation. Now, if he had been dictating a letter—"

"You mean he was reading a letter aloud," said Raymond slowly. "Even so, he must have been reading to someone."

“But why? We have no evidence that there was anyone else in the room. No other voice but Mr. Ackroyd’s was heard, remember.”

“Surely a man wouldn’t read letters of that type aloud to himself—not unless he was—well—going barmy.”

“You have all forgotten one thing,” said Poirot softly: “the stranger who called at the house the preceding Wednesday.”

They all stared at him.

“But yes,” said Poirot, nodding encouragingly, “on Wednesday. The young man was not of himself important. But the firm he represented interested me very much.”

“The Dictaphone Company,” gasped Raymond. “I see it now. A dictaphone. That’s what you think?”

Poirot nodded.

“Mr. Ackroyd had promised to invest in a dictaphone, you remember. Me, I had the curiosity to inquire of the company in question. Their reply is that Mr. Ackroyd did purchase a dictaphone from their representative. Why he concealed the matter from you, I do not know.”

“He must have meant to surprise me with it,” murmured Raymond. “He had quite a childish love of surprising people. Meant to keep it up his sleeve for a day or so. Probably was playing with it like a new toy. Yes, it fits in. You’re quite right—no one would use quite those words in casual conversation.”

“It explains, too,” said Poirot, “why Major Blunt thought it was you who were in the study. Such scraps as came to him were fragments of dictation, and so his subconscious mind deduced that you were with him. His conscious mind was occupied with something quite different—the white figure he had caught a glimpse of. He fancied it was Miss Ackroyd. Really, of course, it was Ursula Bourne’s white apron he saw as she was stealing down to the summerhouse.”

Raymond had recovered from his first surprise.

“All the same,” he remarked, “this discovery of yours, brilliant though it is (I’m quite sure I should never have thought of it), leaves the essential position unchanged. Mr. Ackroyd was alive at nine-thirty, since he was speaking into the dictaphone. It seems clear that the man Charles Kent was really off the premises by then. As to Ralph Paton—?”

He hesitated, glancing at Ursula.

Her colour flared up, but she answered steadily enough.

“Ralph and I parted just before a quarter to ten. He never went near the house, I am sure of that. He had no intention of doing so. The last thing on earth he wanted was to face his stepfather. He would have funked it badly.”

“It isn’t that I doubt your story for a moment,” explained Raymond. “I’ve always been quite sure Captain Paton was innocent. But one has to think of a court of law—and the questions that would be asked. He is in a most unfortunate position, but if he were to come forward—”

Poirot interrupted.

“That is your advice, yes? That he should come forward?”

“Certainly. If you know where he is—”

“I perceive that you do not believe that I do know. And yet I have told you just now that I know everything. The truth of the telephone call, of the footprints on the windowsill, of the hiding-place of Ralph Paton—”

“Where is he?” said Blunt sharply.

“Not very far away,” said Poirot, smiling.

“In Cranchester?” I asked.

Poirot turned towards me.

“Always you ask me that. The idea of Cranchester, it is with you an idée fixe. No, he is not in Cranchester. He is—there!”

He pointed a dramatic forefinger. Everyone’s head turned.

Ralph Paton was standing in the doorway.

Twenty-four

RALPH PATON’S STORY

It was a very uncomfortable minute for me. I hardly took in what happened next, but there were exclamations and cries of surprise! When I was sufficiently master of myself to be able to realize what was going on, Ralph Paton was standing by his wife, her hand in his, and he was smiling across the room at me.

Poirot, too, was smiling, and at the same time shaking an eloquent finger at me.

“Have I not told you at least thirty-six times that it is useless to conceal things from Hercule Poirot?” he demanded. “That in such a case he finds out?”

He turned to the others.

“One day, you remember, we held a little séance about a table—just the six of us. I accused the other five persons present of concealing something from me. Four of them gave up their secret. Dr. Sheppard did not give up his. But all along I have had my suspicions. Dr. Sheppard went to the Three Boars that night hoping to find Ralph. He did not find him there; but supposing, I said to myself, that he met him in the street on his way home? Dr. Sheppard was a friend of Captain Paton’s, and he had come straight from the scene of the crime. He must know that things looked very black against him. Perhaps he knew more than the general public did—”

“I did,” I said ruefully. “I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of things now. I went to see Ralph that afternoon. At first he refused to take me into his confidence, but later he told me about his marriage, and the hole he was in. As soon as the murder was discovered, I realized that once the facts were known, suspicion could not fail to attach to Ralph—or, if not to him, to the girl he loved. That night I put the facts plainly before him. The thought of having possibly to give evidence which might incriminate his wife made him resolve at all costs to—to—”

I hesitated, and Ralph filled up the gap.

“To do a bunk,” he said graphically. “You see, Ursula left me to go back to the house. I thought it possible that she might have attempted to have another interview with my stepfather. He had already been very rude to her that afternoon. It occurred to me that he might have so insulted her—in such an unforgivable manner—that without knowing what she was doing—”

He stopped. Ursula released her hand from his, and stepped back.

“You thought that, Ralph! You actually thought that I might have done it?”

“Let us get back to the culpable conduct of Dr. Sheppard,” said Poirot drily. “Dr. Sheppard consented to do what he could to help him. He was successful in hiding Captain Paton from the police.”

“Where?” asked Raymond. “In his own house?”

“Ah, no, indeed,” said Poirot. “You should ask yourself the question that I did. If the good doctor is concealing the young man, what place would he choose? It must necessarily be somewhere near at hand. I think of Cranchester. A hotel? No. Lodgings? Even more emphatically, no. Where, then? Ah! I have it. A nursing home. A home for the mentally unfit. I test my theory. I invent a nephew with mental trouble. I consult Mademoiselle Sheppard as to suitable homes. She gives me the names of two near Cranchester to which her brother has sent patients. I make inquiries. Yes, at one of them a patient was brought there by the doctor himself early on Saturday morning. That patient, though known by another name, I had no difficulty in identifying as Captain Paton. After certain necessary formalities, I was allowed to bring him away. He arrived at my house in the early hours of yesterday morning.”

I looked at him ruefully.

“Caroline’s Home Office expert,” I murmured. “And to think I never guessed!”

“You see now why I drew attention to the reticence of your manuscript,” murmured Poirot. “It was strictly truthful as far as it went—but it did not go very far, eh, my friend?”

I was too abashed to argue.

“Dr. Sheppard has been very loyal,” said Ralph. “He has stood by me through thick and thin. He did what he thought was best. I see now, from what M. Poirot has told me, that it was not really the best. I should have come forward and faced the music. You see, in the home, we never saw a newspaper. I knew nothing of what was going on.”

“Dr. Sheppard has been a model of discretion,” said Poirot drily. “But me, I discover all the little secrets. It is my business.”

“Now we can have your story of what happened that night,” said Raymond impatiently.

“You know it already,” said Ralph. “There’s very little for me to tell. I left the summerhouse about nine forty-five, and tramped about the lanes, trying to make up my mind as to what to do next—what line to take. I’m bound to admit that I’ve not the shadow of an alibi, but I give you my solemn word that I never went to the study, that I never saw my stepfather alive—or dead. Whatever the world thinks, I’d like all of you to believe me.”

“No alibi,” murmured Raymond. “That’s bad. I believe you, of course, but—it’s a bad business.”

“It makes things very simple, though,” said Poirot, in a cheerful voice. “Very simple indeed.”

We all stared at him.

“You see what I mean? No? Just this—to save Captain Paton the real criminal must confess.”

He beamed round at us all.

“But yes—I mean what I say. See now, I did not invite Inspector Raglan to be present. That was for a reason. I did not want to tell him all that I knew—at least I did not want to tell him tonight.”

He leaned forward, and suddenly his voice and his whole personality changed. He suddenly became dangerous.

“I who speak to you—I know the murderer of Mr. Ackroyd is in this room now. It is to the murderer I speak. Tomorrow the truth goes to Inspector Raglan. You understand?”

There was a tense silence. Into the midst of it came the old Breton woman with a telegram on a salver. Poirot tore it open.

Blunt’s voice rose abrupt and resonant.

“The murderer is amongst us, you say? You know—which?”

Poirot had read the message. He crumpled it up in his hand.

“I know—now.”

He tapped the crumpled ball of paper.

“What is that?” said Raymond sharply.

“A wireless message—from a steamer now on her way to the United States.”

There was a dead silence. Poirot rose to his feet bowing.

“Messieurs et Mesdames, this reunion of mine is at an end. Remember—the truth goes to Inspector Raglan in the morning.”

Twenty-five

THE WHOLE TRUTH

A slight gesture from Poirot enjoined me to stay behind the rest. I obeyed, going over to the fire and thoughtfully stirring the big logs on it with the toe of my boot.

I was puzzled. For the first time I was absolutely at sea as to Poirot's meaning. For a moment I was inclined to think that the scene I had just witnessed was a gigantic piece of bombast—that he had been what he called "playing the comedy" with a view to making himself interesting and important. But, in spite of myself, I was forced to believe in an underlying reality. There had been real menace in his words—a certain indisputable sincerity. But I still believed him to be on entirely the wrong tack.

When the door shut behind the last of the party he came over to the fire.

"Well, my friend," he said quietly, "and what do you think of it all?"

"I don't know what to think," I said frankly. "What was the point? Why not go straight to Inspector Raglan with the truth instead of giving the guilty person this elaborate warning?"

Poirot sat down and drew out his case of tiny Russian cigarettes. He smoked for a minute or two in silence. Then:

"Use your little grey cells," he said. "There is always a reason behind my actions."

I hesitated for a moment, and then I said slowly:

"The first one that occurs to me is that you yourself do not know who the guilty person is, but that you are sure that he is to be found amongst the people here tonight. Therefore your words were intended to force a confession from the unknown murderer?"

Poirot nodded approvingly.

“A clever idea, but not the truth.”

“I thought, perhaps, that by making him believe you knew, you might force him out into the open—not necessarily by confession. He might try to silence you as he formerly silenced Mr. Ackroyd—before you could act tomorrow morning.”

“A trap with myself as the bait! Merci, mon ami, but I am not sufficiently heroic for that.”

“Then I fail to understand you. Surely you are running the risk of letting the murderer escape by thus putting him on his guard?”

Poirot shook his head.

“He cannot escape,” he said gravely. “There is only one way out—and that way does not lead to freedom.”

“You really believe that one of those people here tonight committed the murder?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes, my friend.”

“Which one?”

There was a silence for some minutes. Then Poirot tossed the stump of his cigarette into the grate and began to speak in a quiet, reflective tone.

“I will take you the way that I have travelled myself. Step by step you shall accompany me, and see for yourself that all the facts point indisputably to one person. Now, to begin with, there were two facts and a little discrepancy in time which especially attracted my attention. The first fact was the telephone call. If Ralph Paton were indeed the murderer, the telephone call became meaningless and absurd. Therefore, I said to myself, Ralph Paton is not the murderer.

“I satisfied myself that the call could not have been sent by anyone in the house, yet I was convinced that it was amongst those present on the fatal evening that I had to look for my criminal. Therefore I concluded that the telephone call must have been sent by an accomplice. I was not quite pleased with that deduction, but I let it stand for the minute.

“I next examined the motive for the call. That was difficult. I could only get at it by judging its result. Which was—that the murder was discovered that night instead of—in all probability—the following morning. You agree with that?”

“Ye-es,” I admitted. “Yes. As you say, Mr. Ackroyd, having given orders that he was not to be disturbed, nobody would have been likely to go to the study that night.”

“Très bien. The affair marches, does it not? But matters were still obscure. What was the advantage of having the crime discovered that night in preference to the following morning? The only idea I could get hold of was that the murderer, knowing the crime was to be discovered at a certain time, could make sure of being present when the door was broken in—or at any rate immediately afterwards. And now we come to the second fact—the chair pulled out from the wall. Inspector Raglan dismissed that as of no importance. I, on the contrary, have always regarded it as of supreme importance.

“In your manuscript you have drawn a neat little plan of the study. If you had it with you this minute you would see that—the chair being drawn out in the position indicated by Parker—it would stand in a direct line between the door and the window.”

“The window!” I said quickly.

“You, too, have my first idea. I imagined that the chair was drawn out so that something connected with the window should not be seen by anyone entering through the door. But I soon abandoned that supposition, for though the chair was a grandfather with a high back, it obscured very little of the window—only the part between the sash and the ground. No, mon ami—but remember that just in front of the window there stood a table with books and magazines upon it. Now that table was completely hidden by the drawn-out chair—and immediately I had my first shadowy suspicion of the truth.

“Supposing that there had been something on that table not intended to be seen? Something placed there by the murderer? As yet I had no inkling of what that something might be. But I knew certain very interesting facts about it. For instance, it was something that the murderer had not been able to take away with him at the time that he committed the crime. At the same time it was vital that it should be removed as soon as possible after the crime had been discovered. And so—the telephone message, and the opportunity for the murderer to be on the spot when the body was discovered.

“Now four people were on the scene before the police arrived. Yourself, Parker, Major Blunt, and Mr. Raymond. Parker I eliminated at once, since at whatever time the crime was discovered, he was the one person certain to be on the spot. Also it was he who told me of the pulled-out chair. Parker, then, was cleared (of the murder, that is. I still thought it possible that he had been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars). Raymond and Blunt, however, remained under suspicion since, if the crime had been discovered in the early hours of the morning, it was quite possible that they might have arrived on the scene too late to prevent the object on the round table being discovered.

“Now what was that object? You heard my arguments tonight in reference to the scrap of conversation overheard? As soon as I learned that a representative of a dictaphone company had called, the idea of a dictaphone took root in my mind. You heard what I said in this room not half an hour ago? They all agreed with my theory—but one vital fact seems to have escaped them. Granted that a dictaphone was being used by Mr. Ackroyd that night—why was no dictaphone found?”

“I never thought of that,” I said.

“We know that a dictaphone was supplied to Mr. Ackroyd. But no dictaphone has been found amongst his effects. So, if something was taken from the table—why should not that something be the dictaphone? But there were certain difficulties in the way. The attention of everyone was, of course, focused on the murdered man. I think anyone could have gone to the table unnoticed by the other people in the room. But a dictaphone has a certain bulk—it cannot be slipped casually into a pocket. There must have been a receptacle of some kind capable of holding it.

“You see where I am arriving? The figure of the murderer is taking shape. A person who was on the scene straightaway, but who might not have been if the crime had been discovered the following morning. A person carrying a receptacle into which the dictaphone might be fitted—”

I interrupted.

“But why remove the dictaphone? What was the point?”

“You are like Mr. Raymond. You take it for granted that what was heard at nine-thirty was Mr. Ackroyd’s voice speaking into a dictaphone. But consider this useful invention for a little minute. You dictate into it, do you not? And at some later time a secretary or a typist turns it on, and the voice speaks again.”

“You mean—?” I gasped.

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, I meant that. At nine-thirty Mr. Ackroyd was already dead. It was the dictaphone speaking—not the man.”

“And the murderer switched it on. Then he must have been in the room at that minute?”

“Possibly. But we must not exclude the likelihood of some mechanical device having been applied—something after the nature of a time lock, or even of a simple alarm clock. But in that case we must add two qualifications to our imaginary portrait of the murderer. It must be someone who knew of Mr. Ackroyd’s purchase of the dictaphone and also someone with the necessary mechanical knowledge.

“I had got thus far in my own mind when we came to the footprints on the window ledge. Here there were three conclusions open to me. (1) They might really have been made by Ralph Paton. He had been at Fernly that night, and might have climbed into the study and found his uncle dead there. That was one hypothesis. (2) There was the possibility that the footmarks might have been made by somebody else who happened to have the same kind of studs in his shoes. But the inmates of the house had shoes soled with crêpe rubber, and I declined to believe in the coincidence of someone from outside having the same kind of shoes as Ralph Paton wore. Charles Kent, as we know from the barmaid of the Dog and Whistle, had on a pair of boots ‘clean dropping off him.’ (3) Those prints were made by someone deliberately trying to throw suspicion on Ralph Paton. To test this last conclusion, it was necessary to ascertain certain facts. One pair of Ralph’s shoes had been obtained from the Three Boars by the police. Neither Ralph nor anyone else could have worn them that evening, since they were downstairs being cleaned. According to the police theory, Ralph was wearing another pair of the same kind, and I found out that it was true that he had two pairs. Now for my theory to be proved correct it was necessary for the murderer to have worn Ralph’s shoes that evening—in which case Ralph must have been wearing yet a third pair of footwear of some kind. I could hardly suppose that he would bring three pairs of shoes all alike—the third pair of footwear were more likely to be boots. I got your sister to make inquiries on this point—laying some stress on the colour, in order—I admit it frankly—to obscure the real reason for my asking.

“You know the result of her investigations. Ralph Paton had had a pair of boots with him. The first question I asked him when he came to my house yesterday morning was what he was wearing on his feet on the fatal night. He replied at once that he had worn boots—he was still wearing them, in fact—having nothing else to put on.

“So we get a step further in our description of the murderer—a person who had the opportunity to take these shoes of Ralph Paton’s from the Three Boars that day.”

He paused, and then said, with a slightly raised voice:

“There is one further point. The murderer must have been a person who had the opportunity to purloin that dagger from the silver table. You might argue that anyone in the house might have done so, but I will recall to you that Flora Ackroyd was very positive that the dagger was not there when she examined the silver table.”

He paused again.

“Let us recapitulate—now that all is clear. A person who was at the Three Boars earlier that day, a person who knew Ackroyd well enough to know that he had purchased a dictaphone, a person who was of a mechanical turn of mind, who had the opportunity to take the dagger from the silver table before Miss Flora arrived, who had with him a receptacle suitable for hiding the dictaphone—such as a black bag—and who had the study to himself for a few minutes after the crime was discovered while Parker was telephoning for the police. In fact—Dr. Sheppard!”

Twenty-six

AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

There was a dead silence for a minute and a half.

Then I laughed.

“You’re mad,” I said.

“No,” said Poirot placidly. “I am not mad. It was the little discrepancy in time that first drew my attention to you—right at the beginning.”

“Discrepancy in time?” I queried, puzzled.

“But yes. You will remember that everyone agreed—you yourself included—that it took five minutes to walk from the lodge to the house—less if you took the short cut to the terrace. But you left the house at ten minutes to nine—both by your own statement and that of Parker, and yet it was nine o’clock when you passed through the lodge gates. It was a chilly night—not an evening a man would be inclined to dawdle; why had you taken ten minutes to do a five minutes’ walk? All along I realized that we had only your statement for it that the study window was ever fastened. Ackroyd asked you if you had done so—he never looked to see. Supposing, then, that the study window was unfastened? Would there be time in that ten minutes for you to run round the outside of the house, change your shoes, climb in through the window, kill Ackroyd, and get to the gate by nine o’clock? I decided against that theory since in all probability a man as nervous as Ackroyd was that night would hear you climbing in, and then there would have been a struggle. But supposing that you killed Ackroyd before you left—as you were standing beside his chair? Then you go out of the front door, run round to the summerhouse, take Ralph Paton’s shoes out of the bag you brought up with you that night, slip them on, walk through the mud in them, and leave prints on the window ledge, you climb in, lock the study door on the inside, run back to the summerhouse, change back into your own shoes, and race down to the gate. (I went through similar actions the other day, when you were with Mrs. Ackroyd—it took ten minutes exactly.) Then home—and an alibi—since you had timed the dictaphone for half past nine."

"My dear Poirot," I said in a voice that sounded strange and forced to my own ears, "you've been brooding over this case too long. What on earth had I to gain by murdering Ackroyd?"

"Safety. It was you who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. Who could have had a better knowledge of what killed Mr. Ferrars than the doctor who was attending him? When you spoke to me that first day in the garden, you mentioned a legacy received about a year ago. I have been unable to discover any trace of a legacy. You had to invent some way of accounting for Mrs. Ferrars's twenty thousand pounds. It has not done you much good. You lost most of it in speculation—then you put the screw on too hard, and Mrs. Ferrars took a way out that you had not expected. If Ackroyd had learnt the truth he would have had no mercy on you—you were ruined for ever."

"And the telephone call?" I asked, trying to rally. "You have a plausible explanation of that also, I suppose?"

"I will confess to you that it was my greatest stumbling block when I found that a call had actually been put through to you from King's Abbot station. I at first believed that you had simply invented the story. It was a very clever touch, that. You must have some excuse for arriving at Fernly, finding the body, and so getting the chance to remove the dictaphone on which your alibi depended. I had a very vague notion of how it was worked when I came to see your sister that first day and inquired as to what patients you had seen on Friday morning. I had no thought of Miss Russell in my mind at that time. Her visit was a lucky coincidence, since it distracted your mind from the real object of my questions. I found what I was looking for. Among your patients that morning was the steward of an American liner. Who more suitable than he to be leaving for Liverpool by the train that evening? And afterwards he would be on the high seas, well out of the way. I noted that the Orion sailed on Saturday, and having obtained the name of the steward I sent him a wireless message asking a certain question. This is his reply you saw me receive just now."

He held out the message to me. It ran as follows:

“Quite correct. Dr. Sheppard asked me to leave a note at a patient’s house. I was to ring him up from the station with the reply. Reply was ‘No answer.’”

“It was a clever idea,” said Poirot. “The call was genuine. Your sister saw you take it. But there was only one man’s word as to what was actually said—your own!”

I yawned.

“All this,” I said, “is very interesting—but hardly in the sphere of practical politics.”

“You think not? Remember what I said—the truth goes to Inspector Raglan in the morning. But, for the sake of your good sister, I am willing to give you the chance of another way out. There might be, for instance, an overdose of a sleeping draught. You comprehend me? But Captain Ralph Paton must be cleared—ça va sans dire. I should suggest that you finish that very interesting manuscript of yours—but abandoning your former reticence.”

“You seem to be very prolific of suggestions,” I remarked. “Are you sure you’ve quite finished?”

“Now that you remind me of the fact, it is true that there is one thing more. It would be most unwise on your part to attempt to silence me as you silenced M. Ackroyd. That kind of business does not succeed against Hercule Poirot, you understand.”

“My dear Poirot,” I said, smiling a little, “whatever else I may be, I am not a fool.”

I rose to my feet.

“Well, well,” I said, with a slight yawn, “I must be off home. Thank you for a most interesting and instructive evening.”

Poirot also rose and bowed with his accustomed politeness as I passed out of the room.

Twenty-seven

APOLOGIA

Five a.m. I am very tired—but I have finished my task. My arm aches from writing.

A strange end to my manuscript. I meant it to be published some day as the history of one of Poirot's failures! Odd, how things pan out.

All along I've had a premonition of disaster, from the moment I saw Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars with their heads together. I thought then that she was confiding in him; as it happened I was quite wrong there, but the idea persisted even after I went into the study with Ackroyd that night, until he told me the truth.

Poor old Ackroyd. I'm always glad that I gave him a chance. I urged him to read that letter before it was too late. Or let me be honest—didn't I subconsciously realize that with a pigheaded chap like him, it was my best chance of getting him not to read it? His nervousness that night was interesting psychologically. He knew danger was close at hand. And yet he never suspected me.

The dagger was an afterthought. I'd brought up a very handy little weapon of my own, but when I saw the dagger lying in the silver table, it occurred to me at once how much better it would be to use a weapon that couldn't be traced to me.

I suppose I must have meant to murder him all along. As soon as I heard of Mrs. Ferrars's death, I felt convinced that she would have told him everything before she died. When I met him and he seemed so agitated, I thought that perhaps he knew the truth, but that he couldn't bring himself to believe it, and was going to give me the chance of refuting it.

So I went home and took my precautions. If the trouble were after all only something to do with Ralph—well, no harm would have been done. The dictaphone he had given me two days ago to adjust. Something had gone a little wrong with it, and I persuaded him to let me have a go at it, instead of sending it back. I did what I wanted to, and took it up with me in my bag that evening.

I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:

“The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.”

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?

When I looked round the room from the door, I was quite satisfied. Nothing had been left undone. The dictaphone was on the table by the window, timed to go off at nine-thirty (the mechanism of that little device was rather clever—based on the principle of an alarm clock), and the armchair was pulled out so as to hide it from the door.

I must admit that it gave me rather a shock to run into Parker just outside the door. I have faithfully recorded that fact.

Then later, when the body was discovered, and I sent Parker to telephone for the police, what a judicious use of words: “I did what little had to be done!” It was quite little—just to shove the dictaphone into my bag and push back the chair against the wall in its proper place. I never dreamed that Parker would have noticed that chair. Logically, he ought to have been so agog over the body as to be blind to everything else. But I hadn’t reckoned with the trained servant complex.

I wish I could have known beforehand that Flora was going to say she’d seen her uncle alive at a quarter to ten. That puzzled me more than I can say. In fact, all through the case there have been things that puzzled me hopelessly. Everyone seems to have taken a hand.

My greatest fear all through has been Caroline. I have fancied she might guess. Curious the way she spoke that day of my “strain of weakness.”

Well, she will never know the truth. There is, as Poirot said, one way out….

I can trust him. He and Inspector Raglan will manage it between them. I should not like Caroline to know. She is fond of me, and then, too, she is proud…My death will be a grief to her, but grief passes….

When I have finished writing, I shall enclose this whole manuscript in an envelope and address it to Poirot.

And then—what shall it be? Veronal? There would be a kind of poetic justice. Not that I take any responsibility for Mrs. Ferrars’s death. It was the direct consequence of her own actions. I feel no pity for her.

I have no pity for myself either.

So let it be Veronal.

But I wish Hercule Poirot had never retired from work and come here to grow vegetable marrows.

The Big Four (1927)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

I have met people who enjoy a channel crossing; men who can sit calmly in their deck chairs and, on arrival, wait until the boat is moored, then gather their belongings together without fuss and disembark. Personally, I can never manage this. From the moment I get on board I feel that the time is too short to settle down to anything. I move my suitcases from one spot to another, and if I go down to the saloon for a meal, I bolt my food with an uneasy feeling that the boat may arrive unexpectedly whilst I am below. Perhaps all this is merely a legacy from one's short leaves in the war, when it seemed a matter of such importance to secure a place near the gangway, and to be amongst the first to disembark lest one should waste precious minutes of one's three or five days' leave.

On this particular July morning, as I stood by the rail and watched the white cliffs of Dover drawing nearer, I marvelled at the passengers who could sit calmly in their chairs and never even raise their eyes for the first sight of their native land. Yet perhaps their case was different from mine. Doubtless many of them had only crossed to Paris for the weekend, whereas I had spent the last year and a half on a ranch in the Argentine. I had prospered there, and my wife and I had both enjoyed the free and easy life of the South American continent, nevertheless it was with a lump in my throat that I watched the familiar shore draw nearer and nearer.

I had landed in France two days before, transacted some necessary business, and was now en route for London. I should be there some months—time enough to look up old friends, and one old friend in particular. A little man with an egg-shaped head and green eyes—Hercule Poirot! I proposed to take him completely by surprise. My last letter from the Argentine had given no hint of my intended voyage—indeed, that had been decided upon hurriedly as a result of certain business complications—and I spent many amused moments picturing to myself his delight and stupefaction on beholding me.

He, I knew, was not likely to be far from his headquarters. The time when his cases had drawn him from one end of England to the other was past. His fame had spread, and no longer would he allow one case to absorb all his time. He aimed more and more, as time went on, at being considered a “consulting detective”—as much a specialist as a Harley Street physician. He had always scoffed at the popular idea of the human bloodhound who assumed wonderful disguises to track criminals, and who paused at every footprint to measure it.

“No, my friend Hastings,” he would say, “we leave that to Giraud and his friends. Hercule Poirot’s methods are his own. Order and method, and ‘the little grey cells.’ Sitting at ease in our own armchairs we see the things that these others overlook, and we do not jump to the conclusion like the worthy Japp.”

No; there was little fear of finding Hercule Poirot far afield. On arrival in London, I deposited my luggage at a hotel and drove straight on to the old address. What poignant memories it brought back to me! I hardly waited to greet my old landlady, but hurried up the stairs two at a time and rapped on Poirot’s door.

“Enter, then,” cried a familiar voice from within.

I strode in. Poirot stood facing me. In his arms he carried a small valise, which he dropped with a crash on beholding me.

“Mon ami, Hastings!” he cried. “Mon ami, Hastings!”

And, rushing forward, he enveloped me in a capacious embrace. Our conversation was incoherent and inconsequent. Ejaculations, eager questions, incomplete answers, messages from my wife, explanations as to my journey, were all jumbled up together.

“I suppose there’s someone in my old rooms?” I asked at last, when we had calmed down somewhat. “I’d love to put up here again with you.”

Poirot’s face changed with startling suddenness.

“Mon Dieu! but what a chance épouvantable. Regard around you, my friend.”

For the first time I took note of my surroundings. Against the wall stood a vast ark of a trunk of prehistoric design. Near to it were placed a number of suitcases, ranged neatly in order of size from large to small. The inference was unmistakable.

“You are going away?”

“Yes.”

“Where to?”

“South America.”

“What?”

“Yes, it is a droll farce, is it not? It is to Rio I go, and every day I say to myself, I will write nothing in my letters—but oh! the surprise of the good Hastings when he beholds me!”

“But when are you going?”

Poirot looked at his watch.

“In an hour’s time.”

“I thought you always said nothing would induce you to make a long sea voyage?”

Poirot closed his eyes and shuddered.

“Speak not of it to me, my friend. My doctor, he assures me that one dies not of it—and it is for the one time only; you understand, that never—never shall I return.”

He pushed me into a chair.

“Come, I will tell you how it all came about. Do you know who is the richest man in the world? Richer even than Rockefeller? Abe Ryland.”

“The American Soap King?”

“Precisely. One of his secretaries approached me. There is some very considerable, as you would call it, hocus-pocus going on in connection with a big company in Rio. He wished me to investigate matters on the spot. I refused. I told him that if the facts were laid before me, I would give him my expert opinion. But that he professed himself unable to do. I was to be put in possession of the facts only on my arrival out there. Normally, that would have closed the matter. To dictate to Hercule Poirot is sheer impertinence. But the sum offered was so stupendous that for the first time in my life I was tempted by mere money. It was a competence—a fortune! And there was a second attraction—you, my friend. For this last year and a half I have been a very lonely old man. I thought to myself, Why not? I am beginning to weary of this unending solving of foolish problems. I have achieved sufficient fame. Let me take this money and settle down somewhere near my old friend.”

I was quite affected by this token of Poirot’s regard.

“So I accepted,” he continued, “and in an hour’s time I must leave to catch the boat train. One of life’s little ironies, is it not? But I will admit to you, Hastings, that had not the money offered been so big, I might have hesitated, for just lately I have begun a little investigation of my own. Tell me, what is commonly meant by the phrase, ‘The Big Four?’”

“I suppose it had its origin at the Versailles Conference, and then there’s the famous ‘Big Four’ in the film world, and the term is used by hosts of smaller fry.”

“I see,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “I have come across the phrase, you understand, under certain circumstances where none of those explanations would apply. It seems to refer to a gang of international criminals or something of that kind; only—”

“Only what?” I asked, as he hesitated.

"Only that I fancy that it is something on a large scale. Just a little idea of mine, nothing more. Ah, but I must complete my packing. The time advances."

"Don't go," I urged. "Cancel your package and come out on the same boat with me."

Poirot drew himself up and glanced at me reproachfully.

"Ah, is it that you don't understand! I have passed my word, you comprehend—the word of Hercule Poirot. Nothing but a matter of life or death could detain me now."

"And that's not likely to occur," I murmured ruefully. "Unless at the eleventh hour 'the door opens and the unexpected guest comes in.'"

I quoted the old saw with a slight laugh, and then, in the pause that succeeded it, we both started as a sound came from the inner room.

"What's that?" I cried.

"Ma foi!" retorted Poirot. "It sounds very like your 'unexpected guest' in my bedroom."

"But how can anyone be in there? There's no door except into this room."

"Your memory is excellent, Hastings. Now for the deductions."

"The window! But it's a burglar, then? He must have had a stiff climb of it—I should say it was almost impossible."

I had risen to my feet and was striding in the direction of the door when the sound of fumbling at the handle from the other side arrested me.

The door swung slowly open. Framed in the doorway stood a man. He was coated from head to foot with dust and mud; his face was thin and emaciated. He stared at us for a moment, and then swayed and fell. Poirot hurried to his side, then he looked up and spoke to me.

“Brandy—quickly.”

I dashed some brandy into a glass and brought it. Poirot managed to administer a little, and together we raised him and carried him to the couch. In a few minutes he opened his eyes and looked round him with an almost vacant stare.

“What is it you want, monsieur?” asked Poirot.

The man opened his lips and spoke in a queer mechanical voice.

“M. Hercule Poirot, 14 Farraway Street.”

“Yes, yes; I am he.”

The man did not seem to understand, and merely repeated in exactly the same tone:

“M. Hercule Poirot, 14 Farraway Street.”

Poirot tried him with several questions. Sometimes the man did not answer at all; sometimes he repeated the same phrase. Poirot made a sign to me to ring up on the telephone.

“Get Dr. Ridgeway to come round.”

The doctor was in, luckily; and as his house was only just round the corner, few minutes elapsed before he came bustling in.

“What’s all this, eh?”

Poirot gave him a brief explanation, and the doctor started examining our strange visitor, who seemed quite unconscious of his presence or ours.

“H’m!” said Dr. Ridgeway, when he had finished. “Curious case.”

“Brain fever?” I suggested.

The doctor immediately snorted with contempt.

“Brain fever! Brain fever! No such thing as brain fever. An invention of novelists. No; the man’s had a shock of some kind. He’s come here under the force of a persistent idea—to find M. Hercule Poirot, 14 Farraway Street—and he repeats those words mechanically without in the least knowing what they mean.”

“Aphasia?” I said eagerly.

This suggestion did not cause the doctor to snort quite as violently as my last one had done. He made no answer, but handed the man a sheet of paper and a pencil.

“Let’s see what he’ll do with that,” he remarked.

The man did nothing with it for some moments, then he suddenly began to write feverishly. With equal suddenness he stopped and let both paper and pencil fall to the ground. The doctor picked it up, and shook his head.

“Nothing here. Only the figure 4 scrawled a dozen times, each one bigger than the last. Wants to write 14 Farraway Street, I expect. It’s an interesting case—very interesting. Can you possibly keep him here until this afternoon? I’m due at the hospital now, but I’ll come back this afternoon and make all arrangements about him. It’s too interesting a case to be lost sight of.”

I explained Poirot’s departure and the fact that I proposed to accompany him to Southampton.

“That’s all right. Leave the man here. He won’t get into mischief. He’s suffering from complete exhaustion. Will probably sleep for eight hours on end. I’ll have a word with that excellent Mrs. Funnyface of yours, and tell her to keep an eye on him.”

And Dr. Ridgeway bustled out with his usual celerity. Poirot himself completed his packing, with one eye on the clock.

“The time, it marches with a rapidity unbelievable. Come now, Hastings, you cannot say that I have left you with nothing to do. A most sensational problem. The man from the unknown. Who is he? What is he? Ah, sapristi, but I would give two years of my life to have this boat go tomorrow instead of today. There is something here very curious—very interesting. But one must have time—time. It may be days—or even months—before he will be able to tell us what he came to tell.”

“I’ll do my best, Poirot,” I assured him. “I’ll try to be an efficient substitute.”

“Ye-es.”

His rejoinder struck me as being a shade doubtful. I picked up the sheet of paper.

“If I were writing a story,” I said lightly, “I should weave this in with your latest idiosyncrasy and call it The Mystery of the Big Four.” I tapped the pencilled figures as I spoke.

And then I started, for our invalid, roused suddenly from his stupor, sat up in his chair and said clearly and distinctly:

“Li Chang Yen.”

He had the look of a man suddenly awakened from sleep. Poirot made a sign to me not to speak. The man went on. He spoke in a clear, high voice, and something in his enunciation made me feel that he was quoting from some written report or lecture.

“Li Chang Yen may be regarded as representing the brains of the Big Four. He is the controlling and motive force. I have designated him, therefore, as Number One. Number Two is seldom mentioned by name. He is represented by an ‘S’ with two lines through it—the sign for a dollar; also by two stripes and a star. It may be conjectured, therefore, that he is an American subject, and that he represents the power of wealth. There seems no doubt that Number Three is a woman, and her nationality French. It is possible that she may be one of the sirens of the demimonde, but nothing is known definitely. Number Four—”

His voice faltered and broke. Poirot leant forward.

“Yes,” he prompted eagerly, “Number Four?”

His eyes were fastened on the man’s face. Some overmastering terror seemed to be gaining the day; the features were distorted and twisted.

“The destroyer,” gasped the man. Then, with a final convulsed movement, he fell back in a dead faint.

“Mon Dieu!” whispered Poirot, “I was right then. I was right.”

“You think—?”

He interrupted me.

“Carry him on to the bed in my room. I have not a minute to lose if I would catch my train. Not that I want to catch it. Oh, that I could miss it with a clear conscience! But I gave my word. Come, Hastings!”

Leaving our mysterious visitor in the charge of Mrs. Pearson, we drove away, and duly caught the train by the skin of our teeth. Poirot was alternately silent and loquacious. He would sit staring out of the window like a man lost in a dream, apparently not hearing a word that I said to him. Then, reverting to animation suddenly, he would shower injunctions and commands upon me, and urge the necessity of constant marconigrams.

We had a long fit of silence just after we passed Woking. The train, of course, did not stop anywhere until Southampton; but just here it happened to be held up by a signal.

“Ah! Sacré mille tonnerres!” cried Poirot suddenly. “But I have been an imbecile. I see clearly at last. It is undoubtedly the blessed saints who stopped the train. Jump, Hastings, but jump, I tell you.”

In an instant he had unfastened the carriage door, and jumped out on the line.

“Throw out the suitcases and jump yourself.”

I obeyed him. Just in time. As I alighted beside him, the train moved on.

“And now, Poirot,” I said, in some exasperation, “perhaps you will tell me what all this is about.”

“It is, my friend, that I have seen the light.”

“That,” I said, “is very illuminating to me.”

“It should be,” said Poirot, “but I fear—I very much fear that it is not. If you can carry two of these valises, I think I can manage the rest.”

Two

THE MAN FROM THE ASYLUM

Fortunately the train had stopped near a station. A short walk brought us to a garage where we were able to obtain a car, and half an hour later we were spinning rapidly back to London. Then, and not till then, did Poirot deign to satisfy my curiosity.

“You do not see? No more did I. But I see now. Hastings, I was being got out of the way.”

“What!”

“Yes. Very cleverly. Both the place and the method were chosen with great knowledge and acumen. They were afraid of me.”

“Who were?”

“Those four geniuses who have banded themselves together to work outside the law. A Chinaman, an American, a Frenchwoman, and—another. Pray the good God we arrive back in time, Hastings.”

“You think there is danger to our visitor?”

“I am sure of it.”

Mrs. Pearson greeted us on arrival. Brushing aside her ecstasies of astonishment on beholding Poirot, we asked for information. It was reassuring. No one had called, and our guest had not made any sign.

With a sigh of relief we went up to the rooms. Poirot crossed the outer one and went through to the inner one. Then he called me, his voice strangely agitated.

“Hastings, he’s dead.”

I came running to join him. The man was lying as we had left him, but he was dead, and had been dead some time. I rushed out for a doctor. Ridgeway, I knew, would not have returned yet. I found one almost immediately, and brought him back with me.

"He's dead right enough, poor chap. Tramp you've been befriending, eh?"

"Something of the kind," said Poirot evasively. "What was the cause of death, doctor?"

"Hard to say. Might have been some kind of fit. There are signs of asphyxiation. No gas laid on, is there?"

"No, electric light—nothing else."

"And both windows wide open, too. Been dead about two hours, I should say. You'll notify the proper people, won't you?"

He took his departure. Poirot did some necessary telephoning. Finally, somewhat to my surprise, he rang up our old friend Inspector Japp, and asked him if he could possibly come round.

No sooner were these proceedings completed than Mrs. Pearson appeared, her eyes as round as saucers.

"There's a man here from 'Anwell—from the 'Sylum. Did you ever? Shall I show him up?"

We signified assent, and a big burly man in uniform was ushered in.

"'Morning, gentlemen," he said cheerfully. "I've got reason to believe you've got one of my birds here. Escaped last night, he did."

"He was here," said Poirot quietly.

"Not got away again, has he?" asked the keeper, with some concern.

"He is dead."

The man looked more relieved than otherwise.

“You don’t say so. Well, I dare say it’s best for all parties.”

“Was he—dangerous?”

“’Omicidal, d’you mean? Oh, no. ’Armless enough. Persecution mania very acute. Full of secret societies from China that had got him shut up. They’re all the same.”

I shuddered.

“How long has he been shut up?” asked Poirot.

“A matter of two years now.”

“I see,” said Poirot quietly. “It never occurred to anybody that he might—be sane?”

The keeper permitted himself to laugh.

“If he was sane, what would he be doing in a lunatic asylum? They all say they’re sane, you know.”

Poirot said no more. He took the man in to see the body. The identification came immediately.

“That’s him—right enough,” said the keeper callously: “funny sort of bloke, ain’t he? Well, gentlemen, I had best go off now and make arrangements under the circumstances. We won’t trouble you with the corpse much longer. If there’s a hinquest, you will have to appear at it, I dare say. Good morning, sir.”

With a rather uncouth bow he shambled out of the room.

A few minutes later Japp arrived. The Scotland Yard inspector was jaunty and dapper as usual.

“Here I am, Moosior Poirot. What can I do for you? Thought you were off to the coral strands of somewhere or other today?”

“My good Japp, I want to know if you have ever seen this man before.”

He led Japp into the bedroom. The inspector stared down at the figure on the bed with a puzzled face.

“Let me see now—he seems sort of familiar—and I pride myself on my memory, too. Why, God bless my soul, it’s Mayerling!”

“Secret Service chap—not one of our people. Went to Russia five years ago. Never heard of again. Always thought the Bolshies had done him in.”

“It all fits in,” said Poirot, when Japp had taken his leave, “except for the fact that he seems to have died a natural death.”

He stood looking down on the motionless figure with a dissatisfied frown. A puff of wind set the window curtains flying out, and he looked up sharply.

“I suppose you opened the windows when you laid him down on the bed, Hastings?”

“No, I didn’t,” I replied. “As far as I remember, they were shut.”

Poirot lifted his head suddenly.

“Shut—and now they are open. What can that mean?”

“Somebody came in that way,” I suggested.

“Possibly,” agreed Poirot, but he spoke absently and without conviction. After a minute or two he said:

“That is not exactly the point I had in mind, Hastings. If only one window was open it would not intrigue me so much. It is both windows being open that strikes me as curious.”

He hurried into the other room.

“The sitting-room window is open, too. That also we left shut. Ah!”

He bent over the dead man, examining the corners of the mouth minutely. Then he looked up suddenly.

“He has been gagged, Hastings. Gagged and then poisoned.”

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, shocked. “I suppose we shall find out all about it from the postmortem.”

“We shall find out nothing. He was killed by inhaling strong prussic acid. It was jammed right under his nose. Then the murderer went away again, first opening all the windows. Hydrocyanic acid is exceedingly volatile, but it has a pronounced smell of bitter almonds. With no trace of the smell to guide them, and no suspicion of foul play, death would be put down to some natural cause by the doctors. So this man was in the Secret Service, Hastings. And five years ago he disappeared in Russia.”

“The last two years he’s been in the asylum,” I said. “But what of the three years before that?”

Poirot shook his head, and then caught my arm.

“The clock, Hastings, look at the clock.”

I followed his gaze to the mantelpiece. The clock had stopped at four o’clock.

“Mon ami, someone has tampered with it. It had still three days to run. It is an eight-day clock, you comprehend?”

“But what should they want to do that for? Some idea of a false scent by making the crime appear to have taken place at four o’clock?”

“No, no; rearrange your ideas, mon ami. Exercise your little grey cells. You are Mayerling. You hear something perhaps—and you know well enough that your doom is sealed. You have just time to leave a sign. Four o'clock, Hastings. Number Four, the destroyer. Ah! an idea!"

He rushed into the other room and seized the telephone. He asked for Hanwell.

"You are the asylum, yes? I understand there has been an escape today? What is that you say? A little moment, if you please. Will you repeat that? Ah! parfaitement."

He hung up the receiver, and turned to me.

"You heard, Hastings? There has been no escape."

"But the man who came—the keeper?" I said.

"I wonder—I very much wonder."

"You mean—?"

"Number Four—the destroyer."

I gazed at Poirot dumbfounded. A minute or two after, on recovering my voice, I said:

"We shall know him again, anywhere, that's one thing. He was a man of very pronounced personality."

"Was he, mon ami? I think not. He was burly and bluff and red-faced, with a thick moustache and a hoarse voice. He will be none of those things by this time, and for the rest, he has nondescript eyes, nondescript ears, and a perfect set of false teeth. Identification is not such an easy matter as you seem to think. Next time—"

"You think there will be a next time?" I interrupted.

Poirot's face grew very grave.

“It is a duel to the death, mon ami. You and I on the one side, the Big Four on the other. They have won the first trick; but they have failed in their plan to get me out of the way, and in the future they have to reckon with Hercule Poirot!”

Three

WE HEAR MORE ABOUT LI CHANG YEN

For a day or two after our visit from the fake asylum attendant I was in some hopes that he might return, and I refused to leave the flat even for a moment. As far as I could see, he had no reason to suspect that we had penetrated his disguise. He might, I thought, return and try to remove the body, but Poirot scoffed at my reasoning.

“Mon ami,” he said, “if you wish you may wait in to put salt on the little bird’s tail, but for me I do not waste my time so.”

“Well, then, Poirot,” I argued, “why did he run the risk of coming at all? If he intended to return later for the body, I can see some point in his visit. He would at least be removing the evidence against himself; as it is, he does not seem to have gained anything.”

Poirot shrugged his most Gallic shrug. “But you do not see with the eyes of Number Four, Hastings,” he said. “You talk of evidence, but what evidence have we against him? True, we have a body, but we have no proof even that the man was murdered—prussic acid, when inhaled, leaves no trace. Again, we can find no one who saw anyone enter the flat during our absence, and we have found out nothing about the movements of our late friend, Mayerling …

“No, Hastings, Number Four has left no trace, and he knows it. His visit we may call a reconnaissance. Perhaps he wanted to make quite sure that Mayerling was dead, but more likely, I think, he came to see Hercule Poirot, and to have speech with the adversary whom alone he must fear.”

Poirot’s reasoning appeared to be typically egotistical, but I forebore to argue.

“And what about the inquest?” I asked. “I suppose you will explain things clearly there, and let the police have a full description of Number Four.”

"And to what end? Can we produce anything to impress a coroner's jury of your solid Britishers? Is our description of Number Four of any value? No; we shall allow them to call it 'Accidental Death,' and maybe, although I have not much hope, our clever murderer will pat himself on the back that he deceived Hercule Poirot in the first round."

Poirot was right as usual. We saw no more of the man from the asylum, and the inquest, at which I gave evidence, but which Poirot did not even attend, aroused no public interest.

As, in view of his intended trip to South America, Poirot had wound up his affairs before my arrival, he had at this time no cases in hand, but although he spent most of his time in the flat I could get little out of him. He remained buried in an armchair, and discouraged my attempts at conversation.

And then one morning, about a week after the murder, he asked me if I would care to accompany him on a visit he wished to make. I was pleased, for I felt he was making a mistake in trying to work things out so entirely on his own, and I wished to discuss the case with him. But I found he was not communicative. Even when I asked where we were going, he would not answer.

Poirot loves being mysterious. He will never part with a piece of information until the last possible moment. In this instance, having taken successively a bus and two trains, and arrived in the neighbourhood of one of London's most depressing southern suburbs, he consented at last to explain matters.

"We go, Hastings, to see the one man in England who knows most of the underground life of China."

"Indeed! Who is he?"

"A man you have never heard of—a Mr. John Ingles. To all intents and purposes, he is a retired Civil Servant of mediocre intellect, with a house full of Chinese curios with which he bores his friends and acquaintances.

Nevertheless, I am assured by those who should know that the only man capable of giving me the information I seek is this same John Ingles.”

A few moments more saw us ascending the steps of The Laurels, as Mr. Ingles’s residence was called. Personally, I did not notice a laurel bush of any kind, so deduced that it had been named according to the usual obscure nomenclature of the suburbs.

We were admitted by an impassive-faced Chinese servant and ushered into the presence of his master. Mr. Ingles was a squarely built man, somewhat yellow of countenance, with deep-set eyes that were oddly reflective in character. He rose to greet us, setting aside an open letter which he had held in his hand. He referred to it after his greeting.

“Sit down, won’t you? Hasley tells me that you want some information and that I may be useful to you in the matter.”

“That is so, monsieur. I ask of you if you have any knowledge of a man named Li Chang Yen?”

“That’s rum—very rum indeed. How did you come to hear about the man?”

“You know him, then?”

“I’ve met him once. And I know something of him—not quite as much as I should like to. But it surprises me that anyone else in England should even have heard of him. He’s a great man in his way—mandarin class and all that, you know—but that’s not the crux of the matter. There’s good reason to suppose that he’s the man behind it all.”

“Behind what?”

“Everything. The worldwide unrest, the labour troubles that beset every nation, and the revolutions that break out in some. There are people, not scaremongers, who know what they are talking about, and they say that there is a force behind the scenes which aims at nothing less than the disintegration of civilization. In Russia, you know, there were many signs that Lenin and Trotsky were mere puppets whose every action was dictated by another's brain. I have no definite proof that would count with you, but I am quite convinced that this brain was Li Chang Yen's."

"Oh, come," I protested, "isn't that a bit far-fetched? How would a Chinaman cut any ice in Russia?"

Poirot frowned at me irritably.

"For you, Hastings," he said, "everything is far-fetched that comes not from your own imagination; for me, I agree with this gentleman. But continue, I pray, monsieur."

"What exactly he hopes to get out of it all I cannot pretend to say for certain," went on Mr. Ingles; "but I assume his disease is one that has attacked great brains from the time of Akbar and Alexander to Napoleon—a lust for power and personal supremacy. Up to modern times armed force was necessary for conquest, but in this century of unrest a man like Li Chang Yen can use other means. I have evidence that he has unlimited money behind him for bribery and propaganda, and there are signs that he controls some scientific force more powerful than the world has dreamed of."

Poirot was following Mr. Ingles's words with the closest attention.

"And in China?" he asked. "He moves there too?"

The other nodded in emphatic assent.

"There," he said, "although I can produce no proof that would count in a court of law, I speak from my own knowledge. I know personally every man who counts for anything in China today, and this I can tell you: the men who loom most largely in the public eye are men of little or no personality. They are marionettes who dance to the wires pulled by a master hand, and that hand is Li Chang Yen's. His is the controlling brain of the East today. We don't understand the East—we never shall; but Li Chang Yen is its moving spirit. Not that he comes out into the limelight—oh, not at all; he never moves from his palace in Peking. But he pulls strings—that's it, pulls strings—and things happen far away."

“And there is no one to oppose him?” asked Poirot.

Mr. Ingles leant forward in his chair.

“Four men have tried in the last four years,” he said slowly; “men of character, and honesty, and brain power. Any one of them might in time have interfered with his plans.” He paused.

“Well?” I queried.

“Well, they are dead. One wrote an article, and mentioned Li Chang Yen’s name in connection with the riots in Peking, and within two days he was stabbed in the street. His murderer was never caught. The offences of the other two were similar. In a speech or an article, or in conversation, each linked Li Chang Yen’s name with rioting or revolution, and within a week of his indiscretion each was dead. One was poisoned; one died of cholera, an isolated case—not part of an epidemic; and one was found dead in his bed. The cause of the last death was never determined, but I was told by a doctor who saw the corpse that it was burnt and shrivelled as though a wave of electrical energy of incredible power had passed through it.”

“And Li Chang Yen?” inquired Poirot. “Naturally nothing is traced to him, but there are signs, eh?”

Mr. Ingles shrugged.

“Oh, signs—yes, certainly. And once I found a man who would talk, a brilliant young Chinese chemist who was a protégé of Li Chang Yen’s. He came to me one day, this chemist, and I could see that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He hinted to me of experiments on which he’d been engaged in Li Chang Yen’s palace under the mandarin’s direction—experiments on coolies in which the most revolting disregard for human life and suffering had been shown. His nerve had completely broken, and he was in the most pitiable state of terror. I put him to bed in a top room of my own house, intending to question him the next day—and that, of course, was stupid of me.”

“How did they get him?” demanded Poirot.

“That I shall never know. I woke that night to find my house in flames, and was lucky to escape with my life. Investigation showed that a fire of amazing intensity had broken out on the top floor, and the remains of my young chemist friend were charred to a cinder.”

I could see from the earnestness with which he had been speaking that Mr. Ingles was a man mounted on his hobby horse, and evidently he, too, realized that he had been carried away, for he laughed apologetically.

“But, of course,” he said, “I have no proofs, and you, like the others, will merely tell me that I have a bee in my bonnet.”

“On the contrary,” said Poirot quietly, “we have every reason to believe your story. We ourselves are more than a little interested in Li Chang Yen.”

“Very odd your knowing about him. Didn’t fancy a soul in England had ever heard of him. I’d rather like to know how you did come to hear of him—if it’s not indiscreet.”

“Not in the least, monsieur. A man took refuge in my rooms. He was suffering badly from shock, but he managed to tell us enough to interest us in this Li Chang Yen. He described four people—the Big Four—an organisation hitherto undreamed of. Number One is Li Chang Yen, Number Two is an unknown American, Number Three an equally unknown Frenchwoman, Number Four may be called the executive of the organization—the destroyer. My informant died. Tell me, monsieur, is that phrase known to you at all? The Big Four.”

“Not in connection with Li Chang Yen. No, I can’t say it is. But I’ve heard it, or read it, just lately—and in some unusual connection too. Ah, I’ve got it.”

He rose and went across to an inlaid lacquer cabinet—an exquisite thing, as even I could see. He returned with a letter in his hand.

“Here you are. Note from an old sea-faring man I ran against once in Shanghai. Hoary old reprobate—maudlin with drink by now, I should say. I took this to be the ravings of alcoholism.”

He read it aloud:

Dear Sir—You may not remember me, but you did me a good turn once in Shanghai. Do me another now. I must have money to get out of the country. I'm well hid here, I hope, but any day they may get me. The Big Four, I mean. It's life or death. I've plenty of money, but I daren't get at it, for fear of putting them wise. Send me a couple of hundred in notes. I'll repay it faithful—I swear to that.—

Your servant, sir,
Jonathan Whalley

"Dated from Granite Bungalow, Hoppaton, Dartmoor. I'm afraid I regarded it as rather a crude method of relieving me of a couple of hundred which I can ill spare. If it's any use to you—" He held it out.

"Je vous remercie, monsieur. I start for Hoppaton à l'heure même."

"Dear me, this is very interesting. Supposing I came along too? Any objection?"

"I should be charmed to have your company, but we must start at once. We shall not reach Dartmoor until close on nightfall, as it is."

John Ingles did not delay us more than a couple of minutes, and soon we were in the train moving out of Paddington bound for the West Country. Hoppaton was a small village clustering in a hollow right on the fringe of the moorland. It was reached by a nine-mile drive from Moretonhampstead. It was about eight o'clock when we arrived; but as the month was July, the daylight was still abundant.

We drove into the narrow street of the village and then stopped to ask our way of an old rustic.

"Granite Bungalow," said the old man reflectively, "it be Granite Bungalow you do want? Eh?"

We assured him that this was what we did want.

The old man pointed to a small grey cottage at the end of the street.

“There be t’Bungalow. Do yee want to see t’Inspector?”

“What Inspector?” asked Poirot sharply; “what do you mean?”

“Haven’t yee heard about t’murder, then? A shocking business t’was seemingly. Pools of blood, they do say.”

“Mon Dieu!” murmured Poirot. “This Inspector of yours, I must see him at once.”

Five minutes later we were closeted with Inspector Meadows. The Inspector was inclined to be stiff at first, but at the magic name of Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard he unbent.

“Yes, sir; murdered this morning. A shocking business. They phoned to Moreton, and I came out at once. Looked a mysterious thing to begin with. The old man—he was about seventy, you know, and fond of his glass, from all I hear—was lying on the floor of the living room. There was a bruise on his head and his throat was cut from ear to ear. Blood all over the place, as you can understand. The woman who cooks for him, Betsy Andrews, she told us that her master had several little Chinese jade figures, that he’d told her were very valuable, and these had disappeared. That, of course, looked like assault and robbery; but there were all sorts of difficulties in the way of that solution. The old fellow had two people in the house; Betsy Andrews, who is a Hoppaton woman, and a rough kind of manservant, Robert Grant. Grant had gone to the farm to fetch the milk, which he does every day, and Betsy had stepped out to have a chat with a neighbour. She was only away twenty minutes—between ten and half past—and the crime must have been done then. Grant returned to the house first. He went in by the back door, which was open—no one locks up doors round here—not in broad daylight, at all events—put the milk in the larder, and went into his own room to read the paper and have a smoke. He had no idea anything unusual had occurred—at least, that’s what he says. Then Betsy comes in, goes into the living room, sees what’s happened, and lets out a screech to wake the dead. That’s all fair and square. Someone got in whilst those two were out, and did the poor old man in. But it struck me at once that he must be a pretty cool customer. He’d have to come right up the village street, or creep through someone’s back yard. Granite Bungalow has got houses all round it, as you can see. How was it that no one had seen him?”

The Inspector paused with a flourish.

“Aha, I perceive your point,” said Poirot. “To continue?”

“Well, sir, fishy, I said to myself—fishy. And I began to look about me. Those jade figures, now. Would a common tramp ever suspect that they were valuable? Anyway, it was madness to try such a thing in broad daylight. Suppose the old man had yelled for help?”

“I suppose, Inspector,” said Mr. Ingles, “that the bruise on the head was inflicted before death?”

“Quite right, sir. First knocked him silly, the murderer did, and then cut his throat. That’s clear enough. But how the dickens did he come or go? They notice strangers quick enough in a little place like this. It came to me all at once—nobody did come. I took a good look round. It had rained the night before, and there were footprints clear enough going in and out of the kitchen. In the living room there were two sets of footprints only (Betsy Andrews’s stopped at the door)—Mr. Whalley’s (he was wearing carpet slippers) and another man’s. The other man had stepped in the bloodstains, and I traced his bloody footprints—I beg your pardon, sir.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Ingles, with a faint smile; “the adjective is perfectly understood.”

“I traced them to the kitchen—but not beyond. Point Number One. On the lintel of Robert Grant’s door was a faint smear—a smear of blood. That’s point Number Two. Point Number Three was when I got hold of Grant’s boots—which he had taken off—and fitted them to the marks. That settled it. It was an inside job. I warned Grant and took him into custody; and what do you think I found packed away in his portmanteau? The little jade figures and a ticket-of-leave. Robert Grant was also Abraham Biggs, convicted for felony and housebreaking five years ago.”

The Inspector paused triumphantly.

“What do you think of that, gentlemen?”

“I think,” said Poirot, “that it appears a very clear case—of a surprising clearness, in fact. This Biggs, or Grant, he must be a man very foolish and uneducated, eh?”

“Oh, he is that—a rough, common sort of fellow. No idea of what a footprint may mean.”

“Clearly he reads not the detective fiction! Well, Inspector, I congratulate you. We may look at the scene of the crime. Yes?”

“I’ll take you there myself this minute. I’d like you to see those footprints.”

“I, too, should like to see them. Yes, yes, very interesting, very ingenious.”

We set out forthwith. Mr. Ingles and the Inspector forged ahead. I drew Poirot back a little so as to be able to speak to him out of the Inspector’s hearing.

“What do you really think, Poirot? Is there more in this than meets the eye?”

“That is just the question, mon ami. Whalley says plainly enough in his letter that the Big Four are on his track, and we know, you and I, that the Big Four is no bogey for the children. Yet everything seems to say that this man Grant committed the crime. Why did he do so? For the sake of the little jade figures? Or is he an agent of the Big Four? I confess that this last seems more likely. However valuable the jade, a man of that class was not likely to realize the fact—at any rate, not to the point of committing murder for them. (That, par example, ought to have struck the Inspector.) He could have stolen the jade and made off with it instead of committing a brutal murder. Ah, yes; I fear our Devonshire friend has not used his little grey cells. He has measured footprints, and has omitted to reflect and arrange his ideas with the necessary order and method.”

Five

DISAPPEARANCE OF A SCIENTIST

Personally, I don’t think that, even when a jury had acquitted Robert Grant, alias Biggs, of the murder of Jonathan Whalley, Inspector Meadows was entirely convinced of his innocence. The case which he had built up against Grant—the man’s record, the jade which he had stolen, the boots which fitted the footprints so exactly—was to his matter-of-fact mind too complete to be easily upset; but Poirot, compelled much against his inclination to give evidence, convinced the jury. Two witnesses were produced who had seen a butcher’s cart drive up to the bungalow on that Monday morning, and the local butcher testifed that his cart only called there on Wednesdays and Fridays.

A woman was actually found who, when questioned, remembered seeing the butcher’s man leaving the bungalow, but she could furnish no useful description of him. The only impression he seemed to have left on her mind was that he was clean shaven, of medium height, and looked exactly like a butcher’s man. At this description Poirot shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

“It is as I tell you, Hastings,” he said to me, after the trial. “He is an artist, this one. He disguises himself not with the false beard and the blue spectacles. He alters his features, yes; but that is the least part. For the time being he is the man he would be. He lives in his part.”

Certainly I was compelled to admit that the man who had visited us from Hanwell had fitted in exactly with my idea of what an asylum attendant should look like. I should never for a moment have dreamt of doubting that he was genuine.

It was all a little discouraging, and our experience on Dartmoor did not seem to have helped us at all. I said as much to Poirot, but he would not admit that we had gained nothing.

“We progress,” he said; “we progress. At every contact with this man we learn a little of his mind and his methods. Of us and our plans he knows nothing.”

“And there, Poirot,” I protested, “he and I seem to be in the same boat. You don’t seem to me to have any plans, you seem to sit and wait for him to do something.”

Poirot smiled.

“Mon ami, you do not change. Always the same Hastings, who would be up and at their throats. Perhaps,” he added, as a knock sounded on the door, “you have here your chance; it may be our friend who enters.” And he laughed at my disappointment when Inspector Japp and another man entered the room.

“Good evening, moosior,” said the Inspector. “Allow me to introduce Captain Kent of the United States Secret Service.”

Captain Kent was a tall, lean American, with a singularly impassive face which looked as though it had been carved out of wood.

“Pleased to meet you, gentlemen,” he murmured, as he shook hands jerkily.

Poirot threw an extra log on the fire, and brought forward more easy chairs. I brought out glasses and the whisky and soda. The captain took a deep draught, and expressed appreciation.

“Legislation in your country is still sound,” he observed.

“And now to business,” said Japp. “Moosior Poirot here made a certain request to me. He was interested in some concern that went by the name of the Big Four, and he asked me to let him know at any time if I came across a mention of it in my official line of business. I didn’t take much stock in the matter, but I remembered what he said, and when the captain here came over with rather a curious story, I said at once, ‘We’ll go round to Moosior Poirot’s.’”

Poirot looked across at Captain Kent, and the American took up the tale.

“You may remember reading, M. Poirot, that a number of torpedo boats and destroyers were sunk by being dashed upon the rocks off the American coast. It was just after the Japanese earthquake, and the explanation given was that the disaster was the result of a tidal wave. Now, a short time ago, a roundup was made of certain crooks and gunmen, and with them were captured some papers which put an entirely new face upon the matter. They appeared to refer to some organization called the ‘Big Four,’ and gave an incomplete description of some powerful wireless installation—a concentration of wireless energy far beyond anything so far attempted, and capable of focusing a beam of great intensity upon some given spot. The claims made for this invention seemed manifestly absurd, but I turned them in to headquarters for what they were worth, and one of our highbrow professors got busy on them. Now it appears that one of your British scientists read a paper upon the subject before the British Association. His colleagues didn’t think great shakes of it, by all accounts, thought it far-fetched and fanciful, but your scientist stuck to his guns, and declared that he himself was on the eve of success in his experiments.”

“Eh bien?” demanded Poirot, with interest.

“It was suggested that I should come over here and get an interview with this gentleman. Quite a young fellow, he is, Halliday by name. He is the leading authority on the subject, and I was to get from him whether the thing suggested was anyway possible.”

“And was it?” I asked eagerly.

“That’s just what I don’t know. I haven’t seen Mr. Halliday—and I’m not likely to, by all accounts.”

“The truth of the matter is,” said Japp shortly, “Halliday’s disappeared.”

“When?”

“Two months ago.”

“Was his disappearance reported?”

“Of course it was. His wife came to us in a great state. We did what we could, but I knew all along it would be no good.”

“Why not?”

“Never is—when a man disappears that way.” Japp winked.

“What way?”

“Paris.”

“So Halliday disappeared in Paris?”

“Yes. Went over there on scientific work—so he said. Of course, he’d have to say something like that. But you know what it means when a man disappears over there. Either it’s Apache work, and that’s the end of it—or else it’s voluntary disappearance—and that’s a great deal the commoner of the two, I can tell you. Gay Paree and all that, you know. Sick of home life. Halliday and his wife had had a tiff before he started, which all helps to make it a pretty clear case.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

The American was looking at him curiously.

“Say, mister,” he drawled, “what’s this Big Four idea?”

“The Big Four,” said Poirot, “is an international organization which has at its head a Chinaman. He is known as Number One. Number Two is an American. Number Three is a Frenchwoman. Number Four, ‘the Destroyer,’ is an Englishman.”

“A Frenchwoman, eh?” The American whistled. “And Halliday disappeared in France. Maybe there’s something in this. What’s her name?”

“I don’t know. I know nothing about her.”

"But it's a mighty big proposition, eh?" suggested the other.

Poirot nodded, as he arranged the glasses in a neat row on the tray. His love of order was as great as ever.

"What was the idea in sinking those boats? Are the Big Four a German stunt?"

"The Big Four are for themselves—and for themselves only, M. le Capitaine. Their aim is world domination."

The American burst out laughing, but broke off at the sight of Poirot's serious face.

"You laugh, monsieur," said Poirot, shaking a finger at him. "You reflect not—you use not the little grey cells of the brain. Who are these men who send a portion of your navy to destruction simply as a trial of their power? For that was all it was, Monsieur, a test of this new force of magnetical attraction which they hold."

"Go on with you, moosior," said Japp good-humouredly. I've read of supercriminals many a time, but I've never come across them. Well, you've heard Captain Kent's story. Anything further I can do for you?"

"Yes, my good friend. You can give me the address of Mrs. Halliday—and also a few words of introduction to her if you will be so kind."

Thus it was that the following day saw us bound for Chetwynd Lodge, near the village of Chobham in Surrey.

Mrs. Halliday received us at once, a tall, fair woman, nervous and eager in manner. With her was her little girl, a beautiful child of five.

Poirot explained the purpose of our visit.

"Oh! M. Poirot, I am so glad, so thankful. I have heard of you, of course. You will not be like these Scotland Yard people, who will not listen or try to understand. And the French police are just as bad—worse, I think. They are all convinced that my husband has gone off with some other woman. But he wasn’t like that! All he thought of in life was his work. Half our quarrels came from that. He cared for it more than he did for me.”

“Englishmen, they are like that,” said Poirot soothingly. “And if it is not work, it is the games, the sport. All those things they take au grand sérieux. Now, madame, recount to me exactly, in detail, and as methodically as you can, the exact circumstances of your husband’s disappearance.”

“My husband went to Paris on Thursday, the 20th of July. He was to meet and visit various people there connected with his work, amongst them Madame Olivier.”

Poirot nodded at the mention of the famous French woman chemist, who had eclipsed even Madame Curie in the brilliance of her achievements. She had been decorated by the French Government, and was one of the most prominent personalities of the day.

“He arrived there in the evening and went at once to the Hotel Castiglione in the rue de Castiglione. On the following morning he had an appointment with Professor Bourgoneau, which he kept. His manner was normal and pleasant. The two men had a most interesting conversation, and it was arranged that he should witness some experiments in the professor’s laboratory on the following day. He lunched alone at the Café Royal, went for a walk in the Bois, and then visited Madame Olivier at her house at Passy. There, also, his manner was perfectly normal. He left about six. Where he dined is not known, probably alone at some restaurant. He returned to the hotel about eleven o’clock and went straight up to his room, after inquiring if any letters had come for him. On the following morning, he walked out of the hotel, and has not been seen again.”

“At what time did he leave the hotel? At the hour when he would normally leave it to keep his appointment at Professor Bourgoneau’s laboratory?”

“We do not know. He was not remarked leaving the hotel. But no petit déjeuner was served to him, which seems to indicate that he went out early.”

“Or he might, in fact, have gone out again after he came in the night before?”

“I do not think so. His bed had been slept in, and the night porter would have remembered anyone going out at that hour.”

“A very just observation, madame. We may take it, then, that he left early on the following morning—and that is reassuring from one point of view. He is not likely to have fallen a victim to any Apache assault at that hour. His baggage, now, was it all left behind?”

Mrs. Halliday seemed rather reluctant to answer, but at last she said:

“No—he must have taken one small suitcase with him.”

“H’m,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “I wonder where he was that evening. If we knew that, we should know a great deal. Whom did he meet?—there lies the mystery. Madame, myself, I do not of necessity accept the view of the police; with them is it always ‘Cherchez la femme.’ Yet it is clear that something occurred that night to alter your husband’s plans. You say he asked for letters on returning to the hotel. Did he receive any?”

“One only, and that must have been the one I wrote him on the day he left England.”

Poirot remained sunk in thought for a full minute, then he rose briskly to his feet.

“Well, madame, the solution of the mystery lies in Paris, and to find it I myself journey to Paris on the instant.”

“It is all a long time ago, monsieur.”

“Yes, yes. Nevertheless, it is there that we must seek.”

He turned to leave the room, but paused with his hand on the door.

“Tell me, madame, do you ever remember your husband mentioning the phrase, ‘The Big Four?’”

“The Big Four,” she repeated thoughtfully. “No, I can’t say Ido.”

Four

THE IMPORTANCE OF A LEG OF MUTTON

The Inspector drew a key from his pocket and unlocked the door of Granite Bungalow. The day had been fine and dry, so our feet were not likely to leave any prints; nevertheless, we wiped them carefully on the mat before entering.

A woman came up out of the gloom and spoke to the Inspector, and he turned aside. Then he spoke over his shoulder.

"Have a good look round, Mr. Poirot, and see all there is to be seen. I'll be back in about ten minutes. By the way, here's Grant's boot. I brought it along with me for you to compare the impressions."

We went into the living room, and the sound of the Inspector's footsteps died away outside. Ingles was attracted immediately by some Chinese curios on a table in the corner, and went over to examine them. He seemed to take no interest in Poirot's doings. I, on the other hand, watched him with breathless interest. The floor was covered with a dark-green linoleum which was ideal for showing up footprints. A door at the farther end led into the small kitchen. From there another door led into the scullery (where the back door was situated), and another into the bedroom which had been occupied by Robert Grant. Having explored the ground, Poirot commented upon it in a low running monologue.

"Here is where the body lay; that big dark stain and the splashes all around mark the spot. Traces of carpet slippers and 'number nine' boots, you observe, but all very confused. Then two sets of tracks leading to and from the kitchen; whoever the murderer was, he came in that way. You have the boot, Hastings? Give it to me." He compared it carefully with the prints. "Yes, both made by the same man, Robert Grant. He came in that way, killed the old man, and went back to the kitchen. He had stepped in the blood; see the stains he left as he went out? Nothing to be seen in the kitchen—all the village has been walking about in it. He went into his own room—no, first he went back again to the scene of the crime—was that to get the little jade figures? Or had he forgotten something that might incriminate him?"

"Perhaps he killed the old man the second time he went in?" I suggested.

"Mais non, you do not observe. On one of the outgoing footmarks stained with blood there is superimposed an ingoing one. I wonder what he went back for—the little jade figures as an afterthought? It is all ridiculous—stupid."

"Well, he's given himself away pretty hopelessly."

"N'est-ce pas? I tell you, Hastings, it goes against reason. It offends my little grey cells. Let us go into his bedroom—ah, yes; there is the smear of blood on the lintel and just a trace of footmarks—bloodstained. Robert Grant's footmarks, and his only, near the body—Robert Grant the only man who went near the house. Yes, it must be so."

"What about the old woman?" I said suddenly. "She was in the house alone after Grant had gone for the milk. She might have killed him and then gone out. Her feet would leave no prints if she hadn't been outside."

"Very good, Hastings. I wondered whether that hypothesis would occur to you. I had already thought of it and rejected it. Betsy Andrews is a local woman, well-known hereabouts. She can have no connection with the Big Four; and, besides, old Whalley was a powerful fellow, by all accounts. This is a man's work—not a woman's."

"I suppose the Big Four couldn't have had some diabolical contrivance concealed in the ceiling—something which descended automatically and cut the old man's throat and was afterwards drawn up again?"

"Like Jacob's ladder? I know, Hastings, that you have an imagination of the most fertile—but I implore of you to keep it within bounds."

I subsided, abashed. Poirot continued to wander about, poking into rooms and cupboards with a profoundly dissatisfied expression on his face.

Suddenly he uttered an excited yelp, reminiscent of a Pomeranian dog. I rushed to join him. He was standing in the larder in a dramatic attitude. In his hand he was brandishing a leg of mutton!

“My dear Poirot!” I cried. “What is the matter? Have you suddenly gone mad?”

“Regard, I pray you, this mutton. But regard it closely!”

I regarded it as closely as I could, but could see nothing unusual about it. It seemed to me a very ordinary leg of mutton. I said as much. Poirot threw me a withering glance.

“But do you not see this—and this—and this—”

He illustrated each “this” with a jab at the unoffending joint, dislodging small icicles as he did so.

Poirot had just accused me of being imaginative, but I now felt that he was far more wildly so than I had ever been. Did he seriously think these slivers of ice were crystals of a deadly poison? That was the only construction I could put upon his extraordinary agitation.

“It’s frozen meat,” I explained gently. “Imported, you know. New Zealand.”

He stared at me for a moment or two and then broke into a strange laugh.

“How marvellous is my friend Hastings! He knows everything—but everything! How do they say—Inquire Within Upon Everything. That is my friend Hastings.”

He flung down the leg of mutton on to its dish again and left the larder. Then he looked through the window.

“Here comes our friend the Inspector. It is well. I have seen all I want to see here.” He drummed on the table absentmindedly, as though absorbed in calculation, and then asked suddenly, “What is the day of the week, mon ami?”

“Monday,” I said, rather astonished. “What—?”

“Ah! Monday, is it? A bad day of the week. To commit a murder on a Monday is a mistake.”

Passing back to the living room, he tapped the glass on the wall and glanced at the thermometer.

“Set fair, and seventy degrees Fahrenheit. An orthodox English summer’s day.”

Ingles was still examining various pieces of Chinese pottery.

“You do not take much interest in this inquiry, monsieur?” said Poirot.

The other gave a slow smile.

“It’s not my job, you see. I’m a connoisseur of some things, but not of this. So I just stand back and keep out of the way. I’ve learnt patience in the East.”

The Inspector came bustling in, apologizing for having been so long away. He insisted on taking us over most of the ground again, but finally we got away.

“I must appreciate your thousand politenesses, Inspector,” said Poirot, as we were walking down the village street again.

“There is just one more request I should like to put to you.”

“You want to see the body, perhaps, sir?”

“Oh, dear me, no! I have not the least interest in the body. I want to see Robert Grant.”

“You’ll have to drive back with me to Moreton to see him, sir.”

“Very well, I will do so. But I must see him and be able to speak to him alone.”

The Inspector caressed his upper lip.

“Well, I don’t know about that, sir.”

“I assure you that if you can get through to Scotland Yard you will receive full authority.”

“I’ve heard of you, of course, sir, and I know you’ve done us a good turn now and again. But it’s very irregular.”

“Nevertheless, it is necessary,” said Poirot calmly. “It is necessary for this reason—Grant is not the murderer.”

“What? Who, is, then?”

“The murderer was, I should fancy, a youngish man. He drove up to Granite Bungalow in a trap, which he left outside. He went in, committed the murder, came out, and drove away again. He was bareheaded, and his clothing was slightly bloodstained.”

“But—but the whole village would have seen him!”

“Not under certain circumstances.”

“Not if it was dark, perhaps; but the crime was committed in broad daylight.”

Poirot merely smiled.

“And the horse and trap, sir—how could you tell that? Any amount of wheeled vehicles have passed along outside. There’s no mark of one in particular to be seen.”

“Not with the eyes of the body, perhaps; but with the eyes of the mind, yes.”

The Inspector touched his forehead significantly with a grin at me. I was utterly bewildered, but I had faith in Poirot. Further discussion ended in our all driving back to Moreton with the Inspector. Poirot and I were taken to

Grant, but a constable was to be present during the interview. Poirot went straight to the point.

“Grant, I know you to be innocent of this crime. Relate to me in your own words exactly what happened.”

The prisoner was a man of medium height, with a somewhat unpleasing cast of features. He looked a jailbird if ever a man did.

“Honest to God, I never did it,” he whined. “Someone put those little glass figures amongst my traps. It was a frame-up, that’s what it was. I went straight to my rooms when I came in, like I said. I never knew a thing till Betsy screeched out. S’welp me, God, I didn’t.”

Poirot rose.

“If you can’t tell me the truth, that is the end of it.”

“But, guv’nor—”

“You did go into the room—you did know your master was dead; and you were just preparing to make a bolt of it when the good Betsy made her terrible discovery.”

The man stared at Poirot with a dropped jaw.

“Come now, is it not so? I tell you solemnly—on my word of honour—that to be frank now is your only chance.”

“I’ll risk it,” said the man suddenly. “It was just as you say. I came in, and went straight to the master—and there he was, dead on the floor and blood all round. Then I got the wind up proper. They’d ferret out my record, and for a certainty they’d say it was me as had done him in. My only thought was to get away—at once—before he was found—”

“And the jade figures?”

The man hesitated.

"You see—"

"You took them by a kind of reversion to instinct, as it were? You had heard your master say that they were valuable, and you felt you might as well go the whole hog. That, I understand. Now, answer me this. Was it the second time that you went into the room that you took the figures?"

"I didn't go in a second time. Once was enough for me."

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Good. Now, when did you come out of prison?"

"Two months ago."

"How did you obtain this job?"

"Through one of them Prisoners' Help Societies. Bloke met me when I came out."

"What was he like?"

"Not exactly a parson, but looked like one. Soft black hat and mincing way of walking. Got a broken front tooth. Spectacled chap. Saunders his name was. Said he hoped I was repentant, and that he'd find me a good post. I went to old Whalley on his recommendation."

Poirot rose once more.

"I thank you. I know all now. Have patience." He paused in the doorway and added: "Saunders gave you a pair of boots, didn't he?"

Grant looked very astonished.

"Why, yes, he did. But how did you know?"

"It is my business to know things," said Poirot gravely.

After a word or two to the Inspector, the three of us went to the White Hart and discussed eggs and bacon and Devonshire cider.

“Any elucidations yet?” asked Ingles, with a smile.

“Yes, the case is clear enough now; but, see you, I shall have a good deal of difficulty in proving it. Whalley was killed by order of the Big Four—but not by Grant. A very clever man got Grant the post and deliberately planned to make him the scapegoat—an easy matter with Grant’s prison record. He gave him a pair of boots, one of two duplicate pairs. The other he kept himself. It was all so simple. When Grant is out of the house, and Betsy is chatting in the village (which she probably did every day of her life), he drives up wearing the duplicate boots, enters the kitchen, goes through into the living room, fells the old man with a blow, and then cuts his throat. Then he returns to the kitchen, removes the boots, puts on another pair, and, carrying the first pair, goes out to his trap and drives off again.”

Ingles looks steadily at Poirot.

“There’s a catch in it still. Why did nobody see him?”

“Ah! That is where the cleverness of Number Four, I am convinced, comes in. Everybody saw him—and yet nobody saw him. You see, he drove up in a butcher’s cart!”

I uttered an exclamation.

“The leg of mutton?”

“Exactly, Hastings, the leg of mutton. Everybody swore that no one had been to Granite Bungalow that morning, but, nevertheless, I found in the larder a leg of mutton, still frozen. It was Monday, so the meat must have been delivered that morning; for if on Saturday, in this hot weather, it would not have remained frozen over Sunday. So someone had been to the Bungalow, and a man on whom a trace of blood here and there would attract no attention.”

“Damned ingenious!” cried Ingles approvingly.

"Yes, he is clever, Number Four."

"As clever as Hercule Poirot?" I murmured.

My friend threw me a glance of dignified reproach.

"There are some jests that you should not permit yourself, Hastings," he said sententiously. "Have I not saved an innocent man from being sent to the gallows? That is enough for one day."

Six

THE WOMAN ON THE STAIRS

That was all that could be elicited from Mrs. Halliday. We hurried back to London, and the following day saw us en route for the Continent. With rather a rueful smile, Poirot observed:

“This Big Four, they make me to bestir myself, mon ami. I run up and down, all over the ground, like our old friend ‘the human foxhound.’”

“Perhaps you’ll meet him in Paris,” I said, knowing that he referred to a certain Giraud, one of the most trusted detectives of the Sûreté, whom he had met on a previous occasion.

Poirot made a grimace. “I devoutly hope not. He loved me not, that one.”

“Won’t it be a very difficult task?” I asked. “To find out what an unknown Englishman did on an evening two months ago?”

“Very difficult, mon ami. But as you know well, difficulties rejoice the heart of Hercule Poirot.”

“You think the Big Four kidnapped him?”

Poirot nodded.

Our inquiries necessarily went over old ground, and we learnt little to add to what Mrs. Halliday had already told us. Poirot had a lengthy interview with Professor Bourgoneau, during which he sought to elicit whether Halliday had mentioned any plan of his own for the evening, but we drew a complete blank.

Our next source of information was the famous Madame Olivier. I was quite excited as we mounted the steps of her villa at Passy. It has always seemed to me extraordinary that a woman should go so far in the scientific world. I should have thought a purely masculine brain was needed for such work.

The door was opened by a young lad of seventeen or thereabouts, who reminded me vaguely of an acolyte, so ritualistic was his manner. Poirot had taken the trouble to arrange our interview beforehand, as he knew Madame Olivier never received anyone without an appointment, being immersed in research work most of the day.

We were shown into a small salon, and presently the mistress of the house came to us there. Madame Olivier was a very tall woman, her tallness accentuated by the long white overall she wore, and a coif like a nun's that shrouded her head. She had a long pale face, and wonderful dark eyes that burnt with a light almost fanatical. She looked more like a priestess of old than a modern Frenchwoman. One cheek was disfigured by a scar, and I remembered that her husband and coworker had been killed in an explosion in the laboratory three years before, and that she herself had been terribly burned. Ever since then she had shut herself away from the world, and plunged with fiery energy into the work of scientific research. She received us with cold politeness.

“I have been interviewed by the police many times, messieurs. I think it hardly likely that I can help you, since I have not been able to help them.”

“Madame, it is possible that I shall not ask you quite the same questions. To begin with, of what did you talk together, you and M. Halliday?”

She looked a trifle surprised.

“But of his work! His work—and also mine.”

“Did he mention to you the theories he had embodied recently in his paper read before the British Association?”

“Certainly he did. It was chiefly of those we spoke.”

“His ideas were somewhat fantastic, were they not?” asked Poirot carelessly.

“Some people have thought so. I do not agree.”

“You consider them practicable?”

“Perfectly practicable. My own line of research has been somewhat similar, though not undertaken with the same end in view. I have been investigating the gamma rays emitted by the substance usually known as Radium C, a product of Radium emanation, and in doing so I have come across some very interesting magnetical phenomena. Indeed, I have a theory as to the actual nature of the force we call magnetism, but it is not yet time for my discoveries to be given to the world. Mr. Halliday’s experiments and views were exceedingly interesting to me.”

Poirot nodded. Then he asked a question which surprised me.

“Madame, where did you converse on these topics? In here?”

“No, monsieur. In the laboratory.”

“May I see it?”

“Certainly.”

She led the way to the door from which she had entered. It opened on a small passage. We passed through two doors and found ourselves in the big laboratory, with its array of beakers and crucibles and a hundred appliances of which I did not even know the names. There were two occupants, both busy with some experiment. Madame Olivier introduced them.

“Mademoiselle Claude, one of my assistants.” A tall, serious-faced young girl bowed to us. “Monsieur Henri, an old and trusted friend.”

The young man, short and dark, bowed jerkily.

Poirot looked round him. There were two other doors besides the one by which we had entered. One, madame explained, led into the garden, the other into a smaller chamber also devoted to research. Poirot took all this in, then declared himself ready to return to the salon.

“Madame, were you alone with M. Halliday during your interview?”

“Yes, monsieur. My two assistants were in the smaller room next door.”

“Could your conversation be overheard—by them or anyone else?”

Madame reflected, then shook her head.

“I do not think so. I am almost sure it could not. The doors were all shut.”

“Could anyone have been concealed in the room?”

“There is the big cupboard in the corner—but the idea is absurd.”

“Pas tout à fait, madame. One thing more: did M. Halliday make any mention of his plans for the evening?”

“He said nothing whatever, monsieur.”

“I thank you, madame, and I apologize for disturbing you. Pray do not trouble—we can find our way out.”

We stepped out into the hall. A lady was just entering the front door as we did so. She ran quickly up the stairs, and I was left with an impression of the heavy mourning that denotes a French widow.

“A most unusual type of woman, that,” remarked Poirot, as we walked away.

“Madame Olivier? Yes, she—”

“Mais non, not Madame Olivier. Cela va sans dire! There are not many geniuses of her stamp in the world. No, I referred to the other lady—the lady on the stairs.”

“I didn’t see her face,” I said, staring. “And I hardly see how you could have done. She never looked at us.”

“That is why I said she was an unusual type,” said Poirot placidly. “A woman who enters her home—for I presume that it is her home since she enters with a key—and runs straight upstairs without even looking at two strange visitors in the hall to see who they are, is a very unusual type of woman—quite unnatural, in fact. Mille tonnerres! what is that?”

He dragged me back—just in time. A tree had crashed down on to the sidewalk, just missing us. Poirot stared at it, pale and upset.

“It was a near thing that! But clumsy, all the same—for I had no suspicion—at least hardly any suspicion. Yes, but for my quick eyes, the eyes of a cat, Hercule Poirot might now be crushed out of existence—a terrible calamity for the world. And you, too, mon ami—though that would not be such a national catastrophe.”

“Thank you,” I said coldly. “And what are we going to do now?”

“Do?” cried Poirot. “We are going to think. Yes, here and now, we are going to exercise our little grey cells. This M. Halliday now, was he really in Paris? Yes, for Professor Bourgoneau, who knows him, saw and spoke to him.”

“What on earth are you driving at?” I cried.

“That was Friday morning. He was last seen at eleven Friday night—but was he seen then?”

“The porter—”

“A night porter—who had not previously seen Halliday. A man comes in, sufficiently like Halliday—we may trust Number Four for that—asks for letters, goes upstairs, packs a small suitcase, and slips out the next morning. Nobody saw Halliday all that evening—no, because he was already in the hands of his enemies. Was it Halliday whom Madame Olivier received? Yes, for though she did not know him by sight, an imposter could hardly deceive her on her own special subject. He came here, he had his interview, he left. What happened next?”

Seizing me by the arm, Poirot was fairly dragging me back to the villa.

“Now, mon ami, imagine that it is the day after the disappearance, and that we are tracking footprints. You love footprints, do you not? See—here they go, a man’s, M. Halliday’s … He turns to the right as we did, he walks briskly—ah! other footsteps following behind—very quickly—small footsteps, a woman’s. See, she catches him up—a slim young woman, in a widow’s veil. ‘Pardon, monsieur, Madame Olivier desires that I recall you.’ He stops, he turns. Now where would the young woman take him? Is it coincidence that she catches up with him just where a narrow alleyway opens, dividing two gardens? She leads him down it. ‘It is shorter this way, monsieur.’ On the right is the garden of Madame Olivier’s villa, on the left the garden of another villa—and from that garden, mark you, the tree fell—so nearly on us. Garden doors from both open on the alley. The ambush is there. Men pour out, overpower him, and carry him into the strange villa.”

“Good gracious, Poirot,” I cried, “are you pretending to see all this?”

“I see it with the eyes of the mind, mon ami. So, and only so, could it have happened. Come, let us go back to the house.”

“You want to see Madame Olivier again?”

Poirot gave a curious smile.

“No, Hastings, I want to see the face of the lady on the stairs.”

“Who do you think she is, a relation of Madame Olivier’s?”

“More probably a secretary—and a secretary engaged not very long ago.”

The same gentle acolyte opened the door to us.

“Can you tell me,” said Poirot, “the name of the lady, the widow lady, who came in just now?”

“Madame Veroneau? Madame’s secretary?”

“That is the lady. Would you be so kind as to ask her to speak to us for a moment.”

The youth disappeared. He soon reappeared.

“I am sorry. Madame Veroneau must have gone out again.”

“I think not,” said Poirot quietly. “Will you give her my name, M. Hercule Poirot, and say that it is important I should see her at once, as I am just going to the Préfecture.”

Again our messenger departed. This time the lady descended. She walked into the salon. We followed her. She turned and raised her veil. To my astonishment I recognized our old antagonist, the Countess Rossakoff, a Russian countess, who had engineered a particularly smart jewel robbery in London.

“As soon as I caught sight of you in the hall, I feared the worst,” she observed plaintively.

“My dear Countess Rossakoff—”

She shook her head.

“Inez Veroneau now,” she murmured. “A Spaniard, married to a Frenchman. What do you want of me, M. Poirot? You are a terrible man. You hunted me from London. Now, I suppose, you will tell our wonderful Madame Olivier about me, and hunt me from Paris? We poor Russians, we must live, you know.”

“It is more serious than that, madame,” said Poirot, watching her. “I propose to enter the villa next door, and release M. Halliday, if he is still alive. I know everything, you see.”

I saw her sudden pallor. She bit her lip. Then she spoke with her usual decision.

“He is still alive—but he is not at the villa. Come, monsieur, I will make a bargain with you. Freedom for me—and M. Halliday, alive and well, for you.”

“I accept,” said Poirot. “I was about to propose the same bargain myself. By the way, are the Big Four your employers, madame?”

Again I saw that deathly pallor creep over her face, but she left his question unanswered.

Instead, “You permit me to telephone?” she asked, and crossing to the instrument she rang up a number. “The number of the villa,” she explained, “where our friend is now imprisoned. You may give it to the police—the nest will be empty when they arrive. Ah! I am through. Is that you, André? It is I, Inez. The little Belgian knows all. Send Halliday to the hotel, and clear out.”

She replaced the receiver, and came towards us, smiling.

“You will accompany us to the hotel, madame.”

“Naturally. I expected that.”

I got a taxi, and we drove off together. I could see by Poirot’s face that he was perplexed. The thing was almost too easy. We arrived at the hotel. The porter came up to us.

“A gentleman has arrived. He is in your rooms. He seems very ill. A nurse came with him, but she has left.”

“That is all right,” said Poirot, “he is a friend of mine.”

We went upstairs together. Sitting in a chair by the window was a haggard young fellow who looked in the last stages of exhaustion. Poirot went over to him.

“Are you John Halliday?” The man nodded. “Show me your left arm. John Halliday has a mole just below the left elbow.”

The man stretched out his arm. The mole was there. Poirot bowed to the countess. She turned and left the room.

A glass of brandy revived Halliday somewhat.

“My God!” he muttered. “I have been through hell—hell … Those fiends are devils incarnate. My wife, where is she? What does she think? They told me that she would believe—would believe—”

“She does not,” said Poirot firmly. “Her faith in you has never wavered. She is waiting for you—she and the child.”

“Thank God for that. I can hardly believe that I am free once more.”

“Now that you are a little recovered, monsieur, I should like to hear the whole story from the beginning.”

Halliday looked at him with an indescribable expression.

“I remember—nothing,” he said.

“What?”

“Have you ever heard of the Big Four?”

“Something of them,” said Poirot dryly.

“You do not know what I know. They have unlimited power. If I remain silent, I shall be safe—if I say one word—not only I, but my nearest and dearest will suffer unspeakable things. It is no good arguing with me. I know… I remember—nothing.”

And, getting up, he walked from the room.

Poirot’s face wore a baffled expression.

“So it is like that, is it?” he muttered. “The Big Four win again. What is that you are holding in your hand, Hastings?”

I handed it to him.

“The countess scribbled it before she left,” I explained.

He read it.

“Au revoir.—I.V.”

“Signed with her initials—I.V. Just a coincidence, perhaps, that they also stand for Four. I wonder, Hastings, I wonder.”

Seven

THE RADIUM THIEVES

On the night of his release, Halliday slept in the room next to ours at the hotel, and all night long I heard him moaning and protesting in his sleep. Undoubtedly his experience in the villa had broken his nerve, and in the morning we failed completely to extract any information from him. He would only repeat his statement about the unlimited power at the disposal of the Big Four, and his assurance of the vengeance which would follow if he talked.

After lunch he departed to rejoin his wife in England, but Poirot and I remained behind in Paris. I was all for energetic proceedings of some kind or other, and Poirot's quiescence annoyed me.

"For Heaven's sake, Poirot," I urged, "let us be up and at them."

"Admirable, mon ami, admirable! Up where, and at whom? Be precise, I beg of you."

"At the Big Four, of course."

"Cela va sans dire. But how would you set about it?"

"The police," I hazarded doubtfully.

Poirot smiled.

"They would accuse us of romancing. We have nothing to go upon—nothing whatever. We must wait."

"Wait for what?"

"Wait for them to make a move. See now, in England you all comprehend and adore la boxe. If one man does not make a move, the other must, and by permitting the adversary to make the attack one learns something about him. That is our part—to let the other side make the attack."

"You think they will?" I said doubtfully.

"I have no doubt whatever of it. To begin with, see, they try to get me out of England. That fails. Then, in the Dartmoor affair, we step in and save their victim from the gallows. And yesterday, once again, we interfere with their plans. Assuredly, they will not leave the matter there."

As I reflected on this, there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for a reply, a man stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He was a tall, thin man, with a slightly hooked nose and a sallow complexion. He wore an overcoat buttoned up to his chin, and a soft hat well pulled down over his eyes.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, for my somewhat unceremonious entry," he said in a soft voice, "but my business is of a rather unorthodox nature."

Smiling, he advanced to the table and sat down by it. I was about to spring up, but Poirot restrained me with a gesture.

"As you say, monsieur, your entry is somewhat unceremonious. Will you kindly state your business?"

"My dear M. Poirot, it is very simple. You have been annoying my friends."

"In what way?"

"Come, come, M. Poirot. You do not seriously ask me that? You know as well as I do."

"It depends, monsieur, upon who these friends of yours are."

Without a word, the man drew from his pocket a cigarette case, and, opening it, took out four cigarettes and tossed them on the table. Then he picked them up and returned them to his case, which he replaced in his pocket.

"Aha!" said Poirot, "so it is like that, is it? And what do your friends suggest?"

"They suggest, monsieur, that you should employ your talents—your very considerable talents—in the detection of legitimate crime—return to your former avocations, and solve the problems of London society ladies."

"A peaceful programme," said Poirot. "And supposing I do not agree?"

The man made an eloquent gesture.

"We should regret it, of course, exceedingly," he said. "So would all the friends and admirers of the great M. Hercule Poirot. But regrets, however poignant, do not bring a man to life again."

"Put very delicately," said Poirot, nodding his head. "And supposing I—accept?"

"In that case I am empowered to offer you—compensation."

He drew out a pocketbook, and threw ten notes on the table. They were for ten thousand francs each.

"That is merely a guarantee of our good faith," he said. "Ten times that amount will be paid you."

"Good God," I cried, springing up, "you dare to think—"

"Sit down, Hastings," said Poirot autocratically. "Subdue your so beautiful and honest nature and sit down. To you, monsieur, I will say this. What is to prevent me ringing up the police and giving you into their custody, whilst my friend here prevents you from escaping?"

"By all means do so if you think it advisable," said our visitor calmly.

"Oh! look here, Poirot," I cried. "I can't stand this. Ring up the police and have done with it."

Rising swiftly, I strode to the door and stood with my back against it.

“It seems the obvious course,” murmured Poirot, as though debating with himself.

“But you distrust the obvious, eh?” said our visitor, smiling.

“Go on, Poirot,” I urged.

“It will be your responsibility, mon ami.”

As he lifted the receiver, the man made a sudden, catlike jump at me. I was ready for him. In another minute we were locked together, staggering round the room. Suddenly I felt him slip and falter. I pressed my advantage. He went down before me. And then, in the very flush of victory, an extraordinary thing happened. I felt myself flying forwards. Head first, I crashed into the wall in a complicated heap. I was up in a minute, but the door was already closing behind my late adversary. I rushed to it and shook it, it was locked on the outside. I seized the telephone from Poirot.

“Is that the bureau? Stop a man who is coming out. A tall man, with a buttoned-up overcoat and a soft hat. He is wanted by the police.”

Very few minutes elapsed before we heard a noise in the corridor outside. The key was turned and the door flung open. The manager himself stood in the doorway.

“The man—you have got him?” I cried.

“No, monsieur. No one has descended.”

“You must have passed him.”

“We have passed no one, monsieur. It is incredible that he can have escaped.”

“You have passed someone, I think,” said Poirot, in his gentle voice. “One of the hotel staff, perhaps?”

“Only a waiter carrying a tray, monsieur.”

“Ah!” said Poirot, in a tone that spoke infinities.

“So that was why he wore his overcoat buttoned up to his chin,” mused Poirot, when we had finally got rid of the excited hotel officials.

“I’m awfully sorry, Poirot,” I murmured, rather crestfallen. “I thought I’d downed him all right.”

“Yes, that was a Japanese trick, I fancy. Do not distress yourself, mon ami. All went according to plan—his plan. That is what I wanted.”

“What’s this?” I cried, pouncing on a brown object that lay on the floor.

It was a slim pocketbook of brown leather, and had evidently fallen from our visitor’s pocket during his struggle with me. It contained two receipted bills in the name of M. Felix Laon, and a folded-up piece of paper which made my heart beat faster. It was a half sheet of notepaper on which a few words were scrawled in pencil, but they were words of supreme importance.

“The next meeting of the council will be on Friday at 34 rue des Echelles at 11 a.m.”

It was signed with a big figure 4.

And today was Friday, and the clock on the mantelpiece showed the hour to be 10:30.

“My God, what a chance!” I cried. “Fate is playing into our hands. We must start at once, though. What stupendous luck.”

“So that was why he came,” murmured Poirot. “I see it all now.”

“See what? Come on, Poirot, don’t stay daydreaming there.”

Poirot looked at me, and slowly shook his head, smiling as he did so.

“‘Will you walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly?’ That is your little English nursery rhyme, is it not? No, no—they are subtle—but not so subtle as Hercule Poirot.”

“What on earth are you driving at, Poirot?”

“My friend, I have been asking myself the reason of this morning’s visit. Did our visitor really hope to succeed in bribing me? Or, alternatively, in frightening me into abandoning my task? It seemed hardly credible. Why, then, did he come? And now I see the whole plan—very neat—very pretty—the ostensible reason to bribe or frighten me—the necessary struggle which he took no pains to avoid, and which should make the dropped pocketbook natural and reasonable—and finally—the pitfall! Rue des Echelles, 11 a.m.? I think not, mon ami! One does not catch Hercule Poirot as easily as that.”

“Good heavens,” I gasped.

Poirot was frowning to himself.

“There is still one thing I do not understand.”

“What is that?”

“The time, Hastings—the time. If they wanted to decoy me away, surely nighttime would be better? Why this early hour? Is it possible that something is about to happen this morning? Something which they are anxious Hercule Poirot should not know about?”

He shook his head.

“We shall see. Here I sit, mon ami. We do not stir out this morning. We await events here.”

It was at half past eleven exactly that the summons came. A petit bleu. Poirot tore it open, then handed it to me. It was from Madame Olivier, the world-famous scientist, whom we had visited yesterday in connection with the Halliday case. It asked us to come out to Passy at once.

We obeyed the summons without an instant’s delay. Madame Olivier received us in the same small salon. I was struck anew with the wonderful power of this woman, with her long nun’s face and burning eyes—this brilliant successor of Becquerel and the Curies. She came to the point at once.

“Messieurs, you interviewed me yesterday about the disappearance of M. Halliday. I now learn that you returned to the house a second time, and asked to see my secretary, Inez Veroneau. She left the house with you, and has not returned here since.”

“Is that all, madame?”

“No, monsieur, it is not. Last night the laboratory was broken into, and several valuable papers and memoranda were stolen. The thieves had a try for something more precious still, but luckily they failed to open the big safe.”

“Madame, these are the facts of the case. Your late secretary, Madame Veroneau, was really the Countess Rossakoff, an expert thief, and it was she who was responsible for the disappearance of M. Halliday. How long had she been with you?”

“Five months, Monsieur. What you say amazes me.”

“It is true, nevertheless. These papers, were they easy to find? Or do you think an inside knowledge was shown?”

“It is rather curious that the thieves knew exactly where to look. You think Inez—”

“Yes, I have no doubt that it was upon her information that they acted. But what is this precious thing that the thieves failed to find? Jewels?”

Madame Olivier shook her head with a faint smile.

“Something much more precious than that, monsieur.” She looked round her, then bent forward, lowering her voice. “Radium, monsieur.”

“Radium?”

“Yes, monsieur. I am now at the crux of my experiments. I possess a small portion of radium myself—more has been lent to me for the process I am at work upon. Small though the actual quantity is, it comprises a large amount of the world’s stock and represents a value of millions of francs.”

“And where is it?”

“In its leaden case in the big safe—the safe purposely appears to be of an old and worn-out pattern, but it is really a triumph of the safe-maker’s art. That is probably why the thieves were unable to open it.”

“How long are you keeping this radium in your possession?”

“Only for two days more, monsieur. Then my experiments will be concluded.”

Poirot’s eyes brightened.

“And Inez Veroneau is aware of the fact? Good—then our friends will come back. Not a word of me to anyone, madame. But rest assured, I will save your radium for you. You have a key of the door leading from the laboratory to the garden?”

“Yes, monsieur. Here it is. I have a duplicate for myself. And here is the key of the garden door leading out into the alleyway between this villa and the next one.”

“I thank you, madame. Tonight, go to bed as usual, have no fears, and leave all to me. But not a word to anyone—not to your two assistants—Mademoiselle Claude and Monsieur Henri, is it not?—particularly not a word to them.”

Poirot left the villa rubbing his hands in great satisfaction.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked.

“Now, Hastings, we are about to leave Paris—for England.”

“What?”

“We will pack our effects, have lunch, and drive to the Gare du Nord.”

“But the radium?”

“I said we were going to leave for England—I did not say we were going to arrive there. Reflect a moment, Hastings. It is quite certain that we are being watched and followed. Our enemies must believe that we are going back to England, and they certainly will not believe that unless they see us get on board the train and start.”

“Do you mean we are to slip off again at the last minute?”

“No, Hastings. Our enemies will be satisfied with nothing less than a bona fide departure.”

“But the train doesn’t stop until Calais?”

“It will stop if it is paid to do so.”

“Oh, come now, Poirot—surely you can’t pay an express to stop—they’d refuse.”

“My dear friend, have you never remarked the little handle—the signal d’arrêt—penalty for improper use, 100 francs, I think?”

“Oh! you are going to pull that?”

“Or rather a friend of mine, Pierre Combeau, will do so. Then, while he is arguing with the guard, and making a big scene, and all the train is agog with interest, you and I will fade quietly away.”

We duly carried out Poirot’s plan. Pierre Combeau, an old crony of Poirot’s, and who evidently knew my little friend’s methods pretty well, fell in with the arrangements. The communication cord was pulled just as we got to the outskirts of Paris. Combeau “made a scene” in the most approved French fashion, and Poirot and I were able to leave the train without anyone being interested in our departure. Our first proceeding was to make a considerable change in our appearance. Poirot had brought the materials for this with him in a small case. Two loafers in dirty blue blouses were the result. We had dinner in an obscure hostelry, and started back to Paris afterwards.

It was close on eleven o’clock when we found ourselves once more in the neighbourhood of Madame Olivier’s villa. We looked up and down the road before slipping into the alleyway. The whole place appeared to be perfectly deserted. One thing we could be quite certain of, no one was following us.

“I do not expect them to be here yet,” whispered Poirot to me. “Possibly they may not come until tomorrow night, but they know perfectly well that there are only two nights on which the radium will be there.”

Very cautiously we turned the key in the garden door. It opened noiselessly and we stepped into the garden.

And then, with complete unexpectedness, the blow fell. In a minute we were surrounded, gagged, and bound. At least ten men must have been waiting for us. Resistance was useless. Like two helpless bundles we were lifted up and carried along. To my intense astonishment, they took us towards the house and not away from it. With a key they opened the door into the laboratory and carried us into it. One of the men stooped down before a big safe. The door of it swung open. I felt an unpleasant sensation down my spine. Were they going to bundle us into it, and leave us there to asphyxiate slowly?

However, to my amazement, I saw that from the inside of the safe steps led down beneath the floor. We were thrust down this narrow way and eventually came out into a big subterranean chamber. A woman stood there, tall and imposing, with a black velvet mask covering her face. She was clearly in command of the situation by her gestures of authority. The men slung us down on the floor and left us—alone with the mysterious creature in the mask. I had no doubt who she was. This was the unknown Frenchwoman—Number Three of the Big Four.

She knelt down beside us and removed the gags, but left us bound, then rising and facing us, with a sudden swift gesture she removed her mask.

It was Madame Olivier!

“M. Poirot,” she said, in a low mocking tone. “The great, the wonderful, the unique, M. Poirot. I sent a warning to you yesterday morning. You chose to disregard it—you thought you could pit your wits against US. And now, you are here!”

There was a cold malignity about her that froze me to the marrow. It was so at variance with the burning fire of her eyes. She was mad—mad—with the madness of genius!

Poirot said nothing. His jaw had dropped, and he was staring at her.

“Well,” she said softly, “this is the end. We cannot permit our plans to be interfered with. Have you any last request to make?”

Never before, or since, have I felt so near death. Poirot was magnificent. He neither flinched nor paled, just stared at her with unabated interest.

“Your psychology interests me enormously, madame,” he said quietly. “It is a pity that I have so short a time to devote to studying it. Yes, I have a request to make. A condemned man is always allowed a last smoke, I believe. I have my cigarette case on me. If you would permit—” He looked down at his bonds.

“Oh, yes!” she laughed. “You would like me to untie your hands, would you not? You are clever, M. Hercule Poirot, I know that. I shall not untie your hands—but I will find you a cigarette.”

She knelt down by him, extracted his cigarette case, took out a cigarette, and placed it between his lips.

“And now a match,” she said, rising.

“It is not necessary, madame.” Something in his voice startled me. She, too, was arrested.

“Do not move, I pray of you, madame. You will regret it if you do. Are you acquainted at all with the properties of curare? The South American Indians use it as an arrow poison. A scratch with it means death. Some tribes use a little blowpipe—I, too, have a little blowpipe constructed so as to look exactly like a cigarette. I have only to blow … Ah! you start. Do not move, madame. The mechanism of this cigarette is most ingenious. One blows—and a tiny dart resembling a fishbone flies through the air—to find its mark. You do not wish to die, madame. Therefore, I beg of you to release my friend Hastings from his bonds. I cannot use my hands, but I can turn my head—so—you are still covered, madame. Make no mistake, I beg of you."

Slowly, with shaking hands, and rage and hate convulsing her face, she bent down and did his bidding. I was free. Poirot's voice gave me instructions.

"Your bonds will now do for the lady, Hastings. That is right. Is she securely fastened? Then release me, I pray of you. It is a fortunate circumstance she sent away her henchmen. With a little luck we may hope to find the way out unobstructed."

In another minute, Poirot stood by my side. He bowed to the lady.

"Hercule Poirot is not killed so easily, madame. I wish you good night."

The gag prevented her from replying, but the murderous gleam in her eyes frightened me. I hoped devoutly that we should never fall into her power again.

Three minutes later we were outside the villa, and hurriedly traversing the garden. The road outside was deserted, and we were soon clear of the neighbourhood.

Then Poirot broke out.

"I deserve all that that woman said to me. I am a triple imbecile, a miserable animal, thirty-six times an idiot. I was proud of myself for not falling into their trap. And it was not even meant as a trap—except exactly in the way in which I fell into it. They knew I would see through it—they counted on my seeing through it. This explains all—the ease with which they surrendered. Halliday—everything. Madame Olivier was the ruling spirit—Vera Rossakoff only her lieutenant. Madame needs Halliday's ideas—she herself had the necessary genius to supply the gaps that perplexed him. Yes, Hastings, we know now who Number Three is—the woman who is probably the greatest scientist in the world! Think of it. The brain of the East, the science of the West—and two others whose identities we do not yet know. But we must find out. Tomorrow we will return to London and set about it.”

“You are not going to denounce Madame Olivier to the police?”

“I should not be believed. The woman is one of the idols of France. And we can prove nothing. We are lucky if she does not denounce us.”

“What?”

“Think of it. We are found at night upon the premises with keys in our possession which she will swear she never gave us. She surprises us at the safe, and we gag and bind her and make away. Have no illusions, Hastings. The boot is not upon the right leg—is that how you say it?”

Eight

IN THE HOUSE OF THE ENEMY

After our adventure in the villa at Passy, we returned posthaste to London. Several letters were awaiting Poirot. He read one of them with a curious smile, and then handed it to me.

“Read this, mon ami.”

I turned first to the signature, “Abe Ryland,” and recalled Poirot’s words: “the richest man in the world.” Mr. Ryland’s letter was curt and incisive. He expressed himself as profoundly dissatisfied with the reason Poirot had given for withdrawing from the South American proposition at the last moment.

“This gives one furiously to think, does it not?” said Poirot.

“I suppose it’s only natural he should be a bit ratty.”

“No, no, you comprehend not. Remember the words of Mayerling, the man who took refuge here—only to die by the hands of his enemies. ‘Number Two is represented by an “S” with two lines through it—the sign of a dollar; also by two stripes and a star. It may be conjectured therefore that he is an American subject, and that he represents the power of wealth.’ Add to those words the fact that Ryland offered me a huge sum to tempt me out of England—and—and what about it, Hastings?”

“You mean,” I said, staring, “that you suspect Abe Ryland, the multimillionaire, of being Number Two of the Big Four.”

“Your bright intellect has grasped the idea, Hastings. Yes, I do. The tone in which you said multimillionaire was eloquent but let me impress upon you one fact—this thing is being run by men at the top—and Mr. Ryland has the reputation of being no beauty in his business dealings. An able, unscrupulous man, a man who has all the wealth that he needs, and is out for unlimited power."

There was undoubtedly something to be said for Poirot's view. I asked him when he had made up his mind definitely upon the point.

"That is just it. I am not sure. I cannot be sure. Mon ami, I would give anything to know. Let me but place Number Two definitely as Abe Ryland, and we draw nearer to our goal."

"He has just arrived in London, I see by this," I said, tapping the letter. "Shall you call upon him, and make your apologies in person?"

"I might do so."

Two days later, Poirot returned to our rooms in a state of boundless excitement. He grasped me by both hands in his most impulsive manner.

"My friend, an occasion stupendous, unprecedented, never to be repeated, has presented itself! But there is danger, grave danger. I should not even ask you to attempt it."

If Poirot was trying to frighten me, he was going the wrong way to work, and so I told him. Becoming less incoherent, he unfolded his plan.

It seemed that Ryland was looking for an English secretary, one with a good social manner and presence. It was Poirot's suggestion that I should apply for the post.

"I would do it, myself, mon ami," he explained apologetically. "But, see you, it is almost impossible for me to disguise myself in the needful manner. I speak the English very well—except when I am excited—but hardly so as to deceive the ear; and even though I were to sacrifice my moustaches, I doubt not but that I should still be recognizable as Hercule Poirot."

I doubted it also, and declared myself ready and willing to take up the part and penetrate into Ryland's household.

“Ten to one he won’t engage me anyway,” I remarked.

“Oh, yes, he will. I will arrange for you such testimonials as shall make him lick his lips. The Home Secretary himself shall recommend you.”

This seemed to be carrying things a bit far, but Poirot waved aside my remonstrances.

“Oh, yes, he will do it. I investigated for him a little matter which might have caused a grave scandal. All was solved with discretion and delicacy, and now, as you would say, he perches upon my hand like the little bird and pecks the crumbs.”

Our first step was to engage the services of an artist in “makeup.” He was a little man, with a quaint birdlike turn of the head, not unlike Poirot’s own. He considered me some time in silence, and then fell to work. When I looked at myself in the glass half an hour afterwards, I was amazed. Special shoes caused me to stand at least two inches taller, and the coat I wore was arranged so as to give me a long, lank, weedy look. My eyebrows had been cunningly altered, giving a totally different expression to my face, I wore pads in my cheeks, and the deep tan of my face was a thing of the past. My moustache had gone, and a gold tooth was prominent on one side of my mouth.

“Your name,” said Poirot, “is Arthur Neville. God guard you, my friend—for I fear that you go into perilous places.”

It was with a beating heart that I presented myself at the Savoy, at an hour named by Mr. Ryland, and asked to see the great man.

After being kept waiting a minute or two, I was shown upstairs to his suite.

Ryland was sitting at a table. Spread out in front of him was a letter which I could see out of the tail of my eye was in the Home Secretary’s handwriting. It was my first sight of the American millionaire, and, in spite of myself, I was impressed. He was tall and lean, with a jutting out chin and slightly hooked nose. His eyes glittered cold and grey behind penthouse brows. He had thick grizzled hair, and a long black cigar (without which, I learned later, he was never seen) protruded rakishly from the corner of his mouth.

“Siddown,” he grunted.

I sat. He tapped the letter in front of him.

“According to this piece here, you’re the goods all right, and I don’t need to look further. Say, are you well up in the social matters?”

I said that I thought I could satisfy him in that respect.

“I mean to say, if I have a lot of dooks and earls and viscounts and suchlike down to the country place I’ve gotten, you’ll be able to sort them out all right and put them where they should be round the dining table?”

“Oh! quite easily,” I replied, smiling.

We exchanged a few more preliminaries, and then I found myself engaged. What Mr. Ryland wanted was a secretary conversant with English society, as he already had an American secretary and a stenographer with him.

Two days later I went down to Hatton Chase, the seat of the Duke of Loamshire, which the American millionaire had rented for a period of six months.

My duties gave me no difficulty whatever. At one period of my life I had been private secretary to a busy member of Parliament, so I was not called upon to assume a role unfamiliar to me. Mr. Ryland usually entertained a large party over the weekend, but the middle of the week was comparatively quiet. I saw very little of Mr. Appleby, the American secretary, but he seemed a pleasant, normal young American, very efficient in his work. Of Miss Martin, the stenographer, I saw rather more. She was a pretty girl of about twenty-three or four, with auburn hair and brown eyes that could look mischievous enough upon occasion, though they were usually cast demurely down. I had an idea that she both disliked and distrusted her employer, though, of course, she was careful never to hint at anything of the kind, but the time came when I was unexpectedly taken into her confidence.

I had, of course, carefully scrutinized all the members of the household. One or two of the servants had been newly engaged, one of the footmen, I think, and some of the housemaids. The butler, the house keeper, and the chef were the duke's own staff, who had consented to remain on in the establishment. The housemaids I dismissed as unimportant; I scrutinized James, the second footman, very carefully; but it was clear that he was an underfootman and an underfootman only. He had, indeed, been engaged by the butler. A person of whom I was far more suspicious was Deaves, Ryland's valet, whom he had brought over from New York with him. An Englishman by birth, with an irreproachable manner, I yet harboured vague suspicions about him.

I had been at Hatton Chase three weeks and not an incident of any kind had arisen which I could lay my finger on in support of our theory. There was no trace of the activities of the Big Four. Mr. Ryland was a man of overpowering force and personality, but I was coming to believe that Poirot had made a mistake when he associated him with that dread organization. I even heard him mention Poirot in a casual way at dinner one night.

"Wonderful little man, they say. But he's a quitter. How do I know? I put him on a deal, and he turned me down the last minute. I'm not taking any more of your Monsieur Hercule Poirot."

It was at moments such as these that I felt my cheek pads most wearisome!

And then Miss Martin told me a rather curious story. Ryland had gone to London for the day, taking Appleby with him. Miss Martin and I were strolling together in the garden after tea. I liked the girl very much, she was so unaffected and so natural. I could see that there was something on her mind, and at last out it came.

"Do you know, Major Neville," she said, "I am really thinking of resigning my post here."

I looked somewhat astonished, and she went on hurriedly.

“Oh! I know it’s a wonderful job to have got, in a way. I suppose most people would think me a fool to throw it up. But I can’t stand abuse, Major Neville. To be sworn at like a trooper is more than I can bear. No gentleman would do such a thing.”

“Has Ryland been swearing at you?”

She nodded.

“Of course, he’s always rather irritable and short-tempered. That one expects. It’s all in the day’s work. But to fly into such an absolute fury—over nothing at all. He really looked as though he could have murdered me! And, as I say, over nothing at all!”

“Tell me about it?” I said, keenly interested.

“As you know, I open all Mr. Ryland’s letters. Some I hand on to Mr. Appleby, others I deal with myself, but I do all the preliminary sorting. Now there are certain letters that come, written on blue paper, and with a tiny 4 marked on the corner—I beg your pardon, did you speak?”

I had been unable to repress a stifled exclamation, but I hurriedly shook my head, and begged her to continue.

“Well, as I was saying, these letters come, and there are strict orders that they are never to be opened, but to be handed over to Mr. Ryland intact. And, of course, I always do so. But there was an unusually heavy mail yesterday morning, and I was opening these letters in a terrific hurry. By mistake I opened one of these letters. As soon as I saw what I had done, I took it to Mr. Ryland and explained. To my utter amazement he flew into the most awful rage. As I tell you, I was quite frightened.”

“What was there in the letter, I wonder, to upset him so?”

“Absolutely nothing—that’s just the curious part of it. I had read it before I discovered my mistake. It was quite short. I can still remember it word for word, and there was nothing in it that could possibly upset anyone.

“You can repeat it, you say?” I encouraged her.

“Yes.” She paused a minute and then repeated slowly, whilst I noted down the words unobtrusively, the following:

Dear Sir—The essential thing now, I should say, is to see the property. If you insist on the quarry being included, then seventeen thousand seems reasonable. 11 per cent commission too much, 4 percent is ample.

Yours truly,
Arthur Leversham

Miss Martin went on:

“Evidently about some property Mr. Ryland was thinking of buying. But really, I do feel that a man who can get into a rage over such a trifle is, well, dangerous. What do you think I ought to do, Major Neville? You’ve more experience of the world than I have.”

I soothed the girl down, pointed out to her that Mr. Ryland had probably been suffering from the enemy of his race—dyspepsia. In the end I sent her away quite comforted. But I was not so easily satisfied myself. When the girl had gone, and I was alone, I took out my notebook, and ran over the letter which I had jotted down. What did it mean—this apparently innocent-sounding missive? Did it concern some business deal which Ryland was undertaking, and was he anxious that no details about it should leak out until it was carried through? That was a possible explanation. But I remembered the small figure 4 with which the envelopes were marked, and I felt that, at last, I was on the track of the thing we were seeking.

I puzzled over the letter all that evening, and most of the next day—and then suddenly the solution came to me. It was so simple, too. The figure 4 was the clue. Read every fourth word in the letter, and an entirely different message appeared. “Essential should see you quarry seventeen eleven four.”

The solution of the figures was easy. Seventeen stood for the seventeenth of October—which was tomorrow, eleven was the time, and four was the signature—either referring to the mysterious Number Four himself—or else it was the “trademark,” so to speak, of the Big Four. The quarry was also intelligible. There was a big disused quarry on the estate about half a mile from the house—a lonely spot, ideal for a secret meeting.

For a moment or two I was tempted to run the show myself. It would be such a feather in my cap, for once, to have the pleasure of crowing over Poirot.

But in the end I overcame the temptation. This was a big business—I had no right to play a lone hand, and perhaps jeopardize our chances of success. For the first time, we had stolen a march upon our enemies. We must make good this time—and, disguise the fact as I might, Poirot had the better brain of the two.

I wrote off posthaste to him, laying the facts before him, and explaining how urgent it was that we should overhear what went on at the interview. If he liked to leave it to me, well and good, but I gave him detailed instructions how to reach the quarry from the station in case he should deem it wise to be present himself.

I took the letter down to the village and posted it myself. I had been able to communicate with Poirot throughout my stay, but we agreed that he should not attempt to communicate with me in case my letters should be tampered with.

I was in a glow of excitement the following evening. No guests were staying in the house, and I was busy with Mr. Ryland in his study all the evening. I had foreseen that this would be the case, which was why I had no hope of being able to meet Poirot at the station. I was, however, confident that I would be dismissed well before eleven o’clock.

Sure enough, just after ten-thirty, Mr. Ryland glanced at the clock, and announced that he was “through.” I took the hint and retired discreetly. I went upstairs as though going to bed, but slipped quietly down a side staircase and let myself out into the garden, having taken the precaution to don a dark overcoat to hide my white shirtfront.

I had gone some way down the garden when I chanced to look over my shoulder. Mr. Ryland was just stepping out from his study window into the garden. He was starting to keep the appointment. I redoubled my pace, so as to get a clear start. I arrived at the quarry somewhat out of breath. There seemed no one about, and I crawled into a thick tangle of bushes and awaited developments.

Ten minutes later, just on the stroke of eleven, Ryland stalked up, his hat over his eyes and the inevitable cigar in his mouth. He gave a quick look round, and then plunged into the hollows of the quarry below. Presently I heard a low murmur of voices come up to me. Evidently the other man—or men—whoever they were, had arrived first at the rendezvous. I crawled cautiously out of the bushes, and inch by inch, using the utmost precaution against noise, I wormed myself down the steep path. Only a boulder now separated me from the talking men. Secure in the blackness, I peeped round the edge of it and found myself facing the muzzle of a black, murderous-looking automatic!

“Hands up!” said Mr. Ryland succinctly. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

He was seated in the shadow of the rock, so that I could not see his face, but the menace in his voice was unpleasant. Then I felt a ring of cold steel on the back of my neck, and Ryland lowered his own automatic.

“That’s right, George,” he drawled. “March him around here.”

Raging inwardly, I was conducted to a spot in the shadows, where the unseen George (whom I suspected of being the impeccable Deaves) gagged and bound me securely.

Ryland spoke again in a tone which I had difficulty in recognizing, so cold and menacing was it.

“This is going to be the end of you two. You’ve got in the way of the Big Four once too often. Ever heard of landslides? There was one about here two years ago. There’s going to be another tonight. I’ve fixed that good and square. Say, that friend of yours doesn’t keep his dates very punctually.”

A wave of horror swept over me. Poirot! In another minute he would walk straight into the trap. And I was powerless to warn him. I could only pray that he had elected to leave the matter in my hands, and had remained in London. Surely, if he had been coming, he would have been here by now.

With every minute that passed, my hopes rose.

Suddenly they were dashed to pieces. I heard footsteps—cautious footsteps, but footsteps nevertheless. I writhed in impotent agony. They came down the path, paused and then Poirot himself appeared, his head a little on one side, peering into the shadows.

I heard the growl of satisfaction Ryland gave as he raised the big automatic and shouted, "Hands up." Deaves sprang forward as he did so, and took Poirot in the rear. The ambush was complete.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hercule Poirot," said the American grimly.

Poirot's self-possession was marvellous. He did not turn a hair. But I saw his eyes searching in the shadows.

"My friend? He is here?"

"Yes, you are both in the trap—the trap of the Big Four."

He laughed.

"A trap?" queried Poirot.

"Say, haven't you tumbled to it yet?"

"I comprehend that there is a trap—yes," said Poirot gently. "But you are in error, monsieur. It is you who are in it—not I and my friend."

"What?" Ryland raised the big automatic, but I saw his gaze falter.

"If you fire, you commit murder watched by ten pairs of eyes, and you will be hanged for it. This place is surrounded—has been for the last hour—by Scotland Yard men. It is checkmate, Mr. Abe Ryland."

He uttered a curious whistle, and, as though by magic, the place was alive with men. They seized Ryland and the valet and disarmed them. After speaking a few words to the officer in charge, Poirot took me by the arm, and led me away.

Once clear of the quarry he embraced me with vigour.

“You are alive—you are unhurt. It is magnificent. Often have I blamed myself for letting you go.”

“I’m perfectly all right,” I said, disengaging myself. “But I’m just a bit fogged. You tumbled to their little scheme, did you?”

“But I was waiting for it! For what else did I permit you to go there? Your false name, your disguise, not for a moment was it intended to deceive!”

“What?” I cried. “You never told me.”

“As I have frequently told you, Hastings, you have a nature so beautiful and so honest that unless you are yourself deceived, it is impossible for you to deceive others. Good, then, you are spotted from the first, and they do what I had counted on their doing—a mathematical certainty to anyone who uses his grey cells properly—use you as a decoy. They set the girl on—By the way, mon ami, as an interesting fact psychologically, had she got red hair?”

“If you mean Miss Martin,” I said coldly. “Her hair is a delicate shade of auburn, but—”

“They are épatants—these people! They have even studied your psychology. Oh! yes, my friend, Miss Martin was in the plot—very much so. She repeats the letter to you, together with her tale of Mr. Ryland’s wrath, you write it down, you puzzle your brains—the cipher is nicely arranged, difficult, but not too difficult—you solve it, and you send for me.”

“But what they do not know is that I am waiting for just this very thing to happen. I go posthaste to Japp and arrange things. And so, as you see, all is triumph!”

I was not particularly pleased with Poirot, and I told him so. We went back to London on a milk train in the early hours of the morning, and a most uncomfortable journey it was.

I was just out of my bath and indulging in pleasurable thoughts of breakfast when I heard Japp's voice in the sitting room. I threw on a bathrobe and hurried in.

"A pretty mare's nest you've got us into this time," Japp was saying. "It's too bad of you, M. Poirot. First time I've ever known you take a toss."

Poirot's face was a study. Japp went on:

"There were we, taking all this Black Hand stuff seriously—and all the time it was the footman."

"The footman?" I gasped.

"Yes, James, or whatever his name is. Seems he laid 'em a wager in the servants" hall that he could get taken for the old man by his nibs—that's you, Captain Hastings—and would hand him out a lot of spy stuff about a Big Four gang."

"Impossible!" I cried.

"Don't you believe it. I marched our gentleman straight to Hatton Chase, and there was the real Ryland in bed and asleep, and the butler and the cook and God knows how many of them to swear to the wager. Just a silly hoax—that's all it was—and the valet is with him."

"So that was why he kept in the shadow," murmured Poirot.

After Japp had gone we looked at each other.

"We know, Hastings," said Poirot at last. "Number Two of the Big Four is Abe Ryland. The masquerading on the part of the footman was to ensure a way of retreat in case of emergencies. And the footman—"

"Yes," I breathed.

“Number Four,” said Poirot gravely.

Nine

THE YELLOW JASMINE MYSTERY

It was all very well for Poirot to say that we were acquiring information all the time and gaining an insight into our adversaries' minds—I felt myself that I required some more tangible success than this.

Since we had come into contact with the Big Four, they had committed two murders, abducted Halliday, and had been within an ace of killing Poirot and myself; whereas so far we had hardly scored a point in the game.

Poirot treated my complaints lightly.

"So far, Hastings," he said, "they laugh. That is true, but you have a proverb, have you not: 'He laughs best who laughs at the end?' And at the end, mon ami, you shall see."

"You must remember, too," he added, "that we deal with no ordinary criminal, but with the second-greatest brain in the world."

I forebore to pander to his conceit by asking the obvious question. I knew the answer, at least I knew what Poirot's answer would be, and instead I tried without success to elicit some information as to what steps he was taking to track down the enemy. As usual he had kept me completely in the dark as to his movements, but I gathered that he was in touch with secret service agents in India, China, and Russia, and, from his occasional bursts of self-glorification, that he was at least progressing in his favourite game of gauging his enemy's mind.

He had abandoned his private practice almost entirely, and I know that at this time he refused some remarkably handsome fees. True, he would sometimes investigate cases which intrigued him, but he usually dropped them the moment he was convinced that they had no connection with the activities of the Big Four.

This attitude of his was remarkably profitable to our friend, Inspector Japp. Undeniably he gained much kudos for solving several problems in which his success was really due to a half-contemptuous hint from Poirot.

In return for such service Japp supplied full details of any case which he thought might interest the little Belgian, and when he was put in charge of what the newspapers called “The Yellow Jasmine Mystery,” he wired Poirot, asking him whether he would care to come down and look into the case.

It was in response to this wire that, about a month after my adventure in Abe Ryland’s house, we found ourselves alone in a railway compartment whirling away from the smoke and dust of London, bound for the little town of Market Handford in Worcestershire, the seat of the mystery.

Poirot leant back in his corner.

“And what exactly is your opinion of the affair, Hastings?”

I did not at once reply to his question; I felt the need of going warily.

“It all seems so complicated,” I said cautiously.

“Does it not?” said Poirot delightedly.

“I suppose our rushing off like this is a pretty clear signal that you consider Mr. Paynter’s death to be murder—not suicide or the result of an accident?”

“No, no; you misunderstand me, Hastings. Granting that Mr. Paynter died as a result of a particularly terrible accident, there are still a number of mysterious circumstances to be explained.”

“That was what I meant when I said it was all so complicated.”

“Let us go over all the main facts quietly and methodically. Recount them to me, Hastings, in an orderly and lucid fashion.”

I started forthwith, endeavouring to be as orderly and lucid as I could.

“We start,” I said, “with Mr. Paynter. A man of fifty-five, rich, cultured, and somewhat of a globe-trotter. For the last twelve years he has been little in England, but, suddenly tiring of incessant travelling, he bought a small place in Worcestershire, near Market Handford, and prepared to settle down. His first action was to write to his only relative, a nephew, Gerald Paynter, the son of his youngest brother, and to suggest to him that he should come and make his home at Croftlands (as the place is called) with his uncle. Gerald Paynter, who is an impecunious young artist, was glad enough to fall in with the arrangement, and had been living with his uncle for about seven months when the tragedy occurred.”

“Your narrative style is masterly,” murmured Poirot. “I say to myself, it is a book that talks, not my friend Hastings.”

Paying no attention to Poirot, I went on, warming to the story.

“Mr. Paynter kept up a fair staff at Croftlands—six servants as well as his own Chinese body servant—Ah Ling.”

“His Chinese servant, Ah Ling,” murmured Poirot.

“On Tuesday last, Mr. Paynter complained of feeling unwell after dinner, and one of the servants was despatched to fetch the doctor. Mr. Paynter received the doctor in his study, having refused to go to bed. What passed between them was not then known, but before Doctor Quentin left, he asked to see the housekeeper, and mentioned that he had given Mr. Paynter a hypodermic injection as his heart was in a very weak state, recommended that he should not be disturbed, and then proceeded to ask some rather curious questions about the servants, how long they had been there, from whom they had come, etc.

“The housekeeper answered these questions as best she could, but was rather puzzled as to their purport. A terrible discovery was made on the following morning. One of the housemaids, on descending, was met by a sickening odour of burned flesh which seemed to come from her master’s study. She tried the door, but it was locked on the inside. With the assistance of Gerald Paynter and the Chinaman, that was soon broken in, but a terrible sight greeted them. Mr. Paynter had fallen forward into the gas fire, and his face and head were charred beyond recognition.

“Of course, at the moment, no suspicion was aroused as to its being anything but a ghastly accident. If blame attached to anyone, it was to Doctor Quentin for giving his patient a narcotic and leaving him in such a dangerous position. And then a rather curious discovery was made.

“There was a newspaper on the floor, lying where it had slipped from the old man’s knees. On turning it over, words were found to be scrawled across it, feebly traced in ink. A writing table stood close to the chair in which Mr. Paynter had been sitting, and the forefinger of the victim’s right hand was ink-stained up to the second joint. It was clear that, too weak to hold a pen, Mr. Paynter had dipped his finger in the inkpot and managed to scrawl these two words across the surface of the newspaper he held—but the words themselves seemed utterly fantastic: Yellow Jasmine—just that and nothing more.

“Croftlands has a large quantity of yellow jasmine growing up its walls, and it was thought that this dying message had some reference to them, showing that the poor old man’s mind was wandering. Of course the newspapers, agog for anything out of the common, took up the story hotly, calling it the Mystery of the Yellow Jasmine—though in all probability the words are completely unimportant.”

“They are unimportant, you say?” said Poirot. “Well, doubtless, since you say so, it must be so.”

I regarded him dubiously, but I could detect no mockery in his eye.

“And then,” I continued, “there came the excitements of the inquest.”

“This is where you lick your lips, I perceive.”

“There was a certain amount of feeling evidenced against Dr. Quentin. To begin with, he was not the regular doctor, only a locum, putting in a month’s work, whilst Dr. Bolitho was away on a well-earned holiday. Then it was felt that his carelessness was the direct cause of the accident. But his evidence was little short of sensational. Mr. Paynter had been ailing in health since his arrival at Croftlands. Dr. Bolitho had attended him for some time, but when Dr. Quentin first saw his patient, he was mystified by some of the symptoms. He had only attended him once before the night when he was sent for after dinner. As soon as he was alone with Mr. Paynter, the latter had unfolded a surprising tale. To begin with, he was not feeling ill at all, he explained, but the taste of some curry that he had been eating at dinner had struck him as peculiar. Making an excuse to get rid of Ah Ling for a few minutes, he had turned the contents of his plate into a bowl, and he now handed it over to the doctor with injunctions to find out if there were really anything wrong with it.

“In spite of his statement that he was not feeling ill, the doctor noted that the shock of his suspicions had evidently affected him, and that his heart was feeling it. Accordingly he administered an injection—not of a narcotic, but of strychnine.

“That, I think, completes the case—except for the crux of the whole thing—the fact that the uneaten curry, duly analysed, was found to contain enough powdered opium to have killed two men!”

I paused.

“And your conclusions, Hastings?” asked Poirot quietly.

“It’s difficult to say. It might be an accident—the fact that someone attempted to poison him the same night might be merely a coincidence.”

“But you don’t think so? You prefer to believe it—murder!”

“Don’t you?”

“Mon ami, you and I do not reason in the same way. I am not trying to make up my mind between two opposite solutions—murder or accident—that will come when we have solved the other problem—the mystery of the ‘Yellow Jasmine.’ By the way, you have left out something there.”

“You mean the two lines at right angles to each other faintly indicated under the words? I did not think they could be of any possible importance.”

“What you think is always so important to yourself, Hastings. But let us pass from the Mystery of the Yellow Jasmine to the Mystery of the Curry.”

“I know. Who poisoned it? Why? There are a hundred questions one can ask. Ah Ling, of course, prepared it. But why should he wish to kill his master? Is he a member of a tong, or something like that? One reads of such things. The tong of the Yellow Jasmine, perhaps. Then there is Gerald Paynter.”

I came to an abrupt pause.

“Yes,” said Poirot, nodding his head. “There is Gerald Paynter, as you say. He is his uncle’s heir. He was dining out that night, though.”

“He might have got at some of the ingredients of the curry,” I suggested. “And he would take care to be out, so as not to have to partake of the dish.”

I think my reasoning rather impressed Poirot. He looked at me with a more respectful attention than he had given me so far.

“He returns late,” I mused, pursuing a hypothetical case. “Sees the light in his uncle’s study, enters, and, finding his plan has failed, thrusts the old man down into the fire.”

“Mr. Paynter, who was a fairly hearty man of fifty-five, would not permit himself to be burnt to death without a struggle, Hastings. Such a reconstruction is not feasible.”

“Well, Poirot,” I cried, “we’re nearly there, I fancy. Let us hear what you think?”

Poirot threw me a smile, swelled out his chest, and began in a pompous manner.

“Assuming murder, the question at once arises, why choose that particular method? I can think of only one reason—to confuse identity, the face being charred beyond recognition.”

“What?” I cried. “You think—”

“A moment’s patience, Hastings. I was going on to say that I examine that theory. Is there any ground for believing that the body is not that of Mr. Paynter? Is there anyone else whose body it possibly could be? I examine these two questions and finally I answer them both in the negative.”

“Oh!” I said, rather disappointed. “And then?”

Poirot’s eyes twinkled a little.

“And then I say to myself, ‘since there is here something that I do not understand, it would be well that I should investigate the matter. I must not permit myself to be wholly engrossed by the Big Four.’ Ah! We are just arriving. My little clothes brush, where does it hide itself? Here it is—brush me down, I pray you, my friend, and then I will perform the same service for you.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully, as he put away the brush, “one must not permit oneself to be obsessed by one idea. I have been in danger of that. Figure to yourself, my friend, that even here, in this case, I am in danger of it. Those two lines you mentioned, a downstroke and a line at right angles to it, what are they but the beginning of a 4?”

“Good gracious, Poirot,” I cried, laughing.

“Is it not absurd? I see the hand of the Big Four everywhere, it is well to employ one’s wits in a totally different milieu. Ah! There is Japp come to meet us.”

Ten

WE INVESTIGATE AT CROFTLANDS

The Scotland Yard Inspector was, indeed, waiting on the platform, and greeted us warmly.

“Well, Moosior Poirot, this is good. Thought you’d like to be let in on this. Tip-top mystery, isn’t it?”

I read this aright as showing Japp to be completely puzzled and hoping to pick up a pointer from Poirot.

Japp had a car waiting, and we drove up in it to Croftlands. It was a square, white house, quite unpretentious, and covered with creepers, including the starry yellow jasmine. Japp looked up at it as we did.

“Must have been balmy to go writing that, poor old cove,” he remarked. “Hallucinations, perhaps, and thought he was outside.”

Poirot was smiling at him.

“Which was it, my good Japp?” he asked, “accident or murder?”

The Inspector seemed a little embarrassed by the question.

“Well, if it weren’t for that curry business, I’d be for accident every time. There’s no sense in holding a live man’s head in the fire—why, he’d scream the house down.”

“Ah!” said Poirot in a low voice. “Fool that I have been. Triple imbecile! You are a cleverer man than I am, Japp.”

Japp was rather taken aback by the compliment—Poirot being usually given to exclusive self-praise. He reddened and muttered something about there being a lot of doubt about that.

He led the way through the house to the room where the tragedy had occurred—Mr. Paynter’s study. It was a wide, low room, with book-lined walls and big leather armchairs.

Poirot looked across at once to the window which gave upon a gravelled terrace.

“The window, was it unlatched?” he asked.

“That’s the whole point, of course. When the doctor left this room, he merely closed the door behind him. The next morning it was found locked. Who locked it? Mr. Paynter? Ah Ling declares that the window was closed and bolted. Dr. Quentin, on the other hand, has an impression that it was closed, but not fastened, but he won’t swear either way. If he could, it would make a great difference. If the man was murdered, someone entered the room either through the door or the window—if through the door, it was an inside job; if through the window, it might have been anyone. First thing when they had broken the door down, they flung the window open, and the housemaid who did it thinks that it wasn’t fastened, but she’s a precious bad witness—will remember anything you ask her to!”

“What about the key?”

“There you are again. It was on the floor among the wreckage of the door. Might have fallen from the keyhole, might have been dropped there by one of the people who entered, might have been slipped underneath the door from the outside.”

“In fact everything is ‘might have been?’”

“You’ve hit it, Moosior Poirot. That’s just what it is.”

Poirot was looking around him, frowning unhappily.

“I cannot see light,” he murmured. “Just now—yes, I got a gleam, but now all is darkness once more. I have not the clue—the motive.”

"Young Gerald Paynter had a pretty good motive," remarked Japp grimly. "He's been wild enough in his time, I can tell you. And extravagant. You know what artists are, too—no morals at all."

Poirot did not pay much attention to Japp's sweeping strictures on the artistic temperament. Instead he smiled knowingly.

"My good Japp, is it possible that you throw me the mud in my eyes? I know well enough that it is the Chinaman you suspect. But you are so artful. You want me to help you—and yet you drag the red kipper across the trail."

Japp burst out laughing.

"That's you all over, Mr. Poirot. Yes, I'd bet on the Chink, I'll admit it now. It stands to reason that it was he who doctored the curry, and if he'd try once in an evening to get his master out of the way, he'd try twice."

"I wonder if he would," said Poirot softly.

"But it's the motive that beats me. Some heathen revenge or other, I suppose."

"I wonder," said Poirot again. "There has been no robbery? Nothing has disappeared? No jewellery, or money, or papers?"

"No—that is, not exactly."

I pricked up my ears; so did Poirot.

"There's been no robbery, I mean," explained Japp. "But the old boy was writing a book of some sort. We only knew about it this morning when there was a letter from the publishers asking about the manuscript. It was just completed, it seems. Young Paynter and I have searched high and low, but can't find a trace of it—he must have hidden it away somewhere."

Poirot's eyes were shining with the green light I knew so well.

"How was it called, this book?" he asked.

"The Hidden Hand in China, I think it was called."

"Aha!" said Poirot, with almost a gasp. Then he said quickly, "Let me see the Chinaman, Ah Ling."

The Chinaman was sent for and appeared, shuffling along, with his eyes cast down, and his pigtail swinging. His impassive face showed no trace of any kind of emotion.

"Ah Ling," said Poirot, "are you sorry your master is dead?"

"I welly sorry. He good master."

"You know who kill him?"

"I not know. I tell pleeceman if I know."

The questions and answers went on. With the same impassive face, Ah Ling described how he had made the curry. The cook had had nothing to do with it, he declared, no hand had touched it but his own. I wondered if he saw where his admission was leading him. He stuck to it too, that the window to the garden was bolted that evening. If it was open in the morning, his master must have opened it himself. At last Poirot dismissed him.

"That will do, Ah Ling." Just as the Chinaman had got to the door, Poirot recalled him. "And you know nothing, you say, of the Yellow Jasmine?"

"No, what should I know?"

"Nor yet of the sign that was written underneath it?"

Poirot leaned forward as he spoke, and quickly traced something on the dust of a little table. I was near enough to see it before he rubbed it out. A down stroke, a line at right angles, and then a second line down which completed a big 4. The effect on the Chinaman was electrical. For one moment his face was a mask of terror. Then, as suddenly, it was impassive again, and repeating his grave disclaimer, he withdrew.

Japp departed in search of young Paynter, and Poirot and I were left alone together.

“The Big Four, Hastings,” cried Poirot. “Once again, the Big Four. Paynter was a great traveller. In his book there was doubtless some vital information concerning the doings of Number One, Li Chang Yen, the head and brains of the Big Four.”

“But who—how—”

“Hush, here they come.”

Gerald Paynter was an amiable, rather weak-looking young man. He had a soft brown beard, and a peculiar flowing tie. He answered Poirot’s questions readily enough.

“I dined out with some neighbours of ours, the Wycherleys,” he explained. “What time did I get home? Oh, about eleven. I had a latchkey, you know. All the servants had gone to bed, and I naturally thought my uncle had done the same. As a matter of fact, I did think I caught sight of that soft-footed Chinese beggar, Ah Ling, just whisking round the corner of the hall, but I fancy I was mistaken.”

“When did you last see your uncle, Mr. Paynter? I mean before you came to live with him?”

“Oh! not since I was a kid of ten. He and his brother (my father) quarrelled, you know.”

“But he found you again with very little trouble, did he not? In spite of all the years that had passed?”

“Yes, it was quite a bit of luck my seeing the lawyer’s advertisement.”

Poirot asked no more questions.

Our next move was to visit Dr. Quentin. His story was substantially the same as he had told at the inquest, and he had little to add to it. He received us in his surgery, having just come to the end of his consulting patients. He seemed an intelligent man. A certain primness of manner went well with his pince-nez, but I fancied that he would be thoroughly modern in his methods.

“I wish I could remember about the window,” he said frankly. “But it’s dangerous to think back, one becomes quite positive about something that never existed. That’s psychology, isn’t it, M. Poirot? You see, I’ve read all about your methods, and I may say I’m an enormous admirer of yours. No, I suppose it’s pretty certain that the Chinaman put the powdered opium in the curry, but he’ll never admit it, and we shall never know why. But holding a man down in a fire—that’s not in keeping with our Chinese friend’s character, it seems to me.”

I commented on this last point to Poirot as we walked down the main street of Market Handford.

“Do you think he let a confederate in?” I asked. “By the way, I suppose Japp can be trusted to keep an eye on him?” (The Inspector had passed into the police station on some business or other.) “The emissaries of the Big Four are pretty spry.”

“Japp is keeping an eye on both of them,” said Poirot grimly. “They have been closely shadowed ever since the body was discovered.”

“Well, at any rate we know that Gerald Paynter had nothing to do with it.”

“You always know so much more than I do, Hastings, that it becomes quite fatiguing.”

“You old fox,” I laughed. “You never will commit yourself.”

“To be honest, Hastings, the case is now quite clear to me—all but the words, Yellow Jasmine—and I am coming to agree with you that they have no bearing on the crime. In a case of this kind, you have got to make up your mind who is lying. I have done that. And yet—”

He suddenly darted from my side and entered an adjacent bookshop. He emerged a few minutes later, hugging a parcel. Then Japp rejoined us, and we all sought quarters at the inn.

I slept late the next morning. When I descended to the sitting room reserved for us, I found Poirot already there, pacing up and down, his face contorted with agony.

“Do not converse with me,” he cried, waving an agitated hand. “Not until I know that all is well—that the arrest is made. Ah! but my psychology has been weak. Hastings, if a man writes a dying message, it is because it is important. Everyone has said—‘Yellow Jasmine? There is yellow jasmine growing up the house—it means nothing.’”

“Well, what does it mean? Just what it says. Listen.” He held up a little book he was holding.

“My friend, it struck me that it would be well to inquire into the subject. What exactly is yellow jasmine? This little book has told me. Listen.”

He read.

“Gelsemini Radix. Yellow Jasmine. Composition: Alkaloids gelseminine $C_{22}H_{26}N_2O_3$, a potent poison acting like coniine; gelsemine $C_{12}H_{14}NO_2$, acting like strychnine; gelsemic acid, etc. Gelsemium is a powerful depressant to the central nervous system. At a late stage in its action it paralyses the motor nerve endings, and in large doses causes giddiness and loss of muscular power. Death is due to paralysis of the respiratory centre.”

“You see, Hastings? At the beginning I had an inkling of the truth when Japp made his remark about a live man being forced into the fire. I realized then that it was a dead man who was burned.”

“But why? What was the point?”

“My friend, if you were to shoot a man, or stab a man after he were dead, or even knock him on the head, it would be apparent that the injuries were inflicted after death. But with his head charred to a cinder, no one is going to hunt about for obscure causes of death, and a man who has apparently just escaped being poisoned at dinner is not likely to be poisoned just afterwards. Who is lying, that is always the question? I decided to believe Ah Ling—”

“What!” I exclaimed.

“You are surprised, Hastings? Ah Ling knew of the existence of the Big Four, that was evident—so evident that it was clear he knew nothing of their association with the crime until that moment. Had he been the murderer, he would have been able to retain his impassive face perfectly. So I decided, then, to believe Ah Ling, and I fixed my suspicions on Gerald Paynter. It seemed to me that Number Four would have found an impersonation of a long-lost nephew very easy.”

“What!” I cried. “Number Four?”

“No, Hastings, not Number Four. As soon as I had read up the subject of yellow jasmine, I saw the truth. In fact, it leapt to the eye.”

“As always,” I said coldly, “it doesn’t leap to mine.”

“Because you will not use your little grey cells. Who had a chance to tamper with the curry?”

“Ah Ling. No one else.”

“No one else? What about the doctor?”

“But that was afterwards.”

“Of course it was afterwards. There was no trace of powdered opium in the curry served to Mr. Paynter, but acting in obedience to the suspicions Dr. Quentin had aroused, the old man eats none of it, and preserves it to give to his medical attendant, whom he summons according to plan. Dr. Quentin arrives, takes charge of the curry, and gives Mr. Paynter an injection—of strychnine, he says, but really of yellow jasmine—a poisonous dose. When the drug begins to take effect, he departs, after unlatching the window. Then, in the night, he returns by the window, finds the manuscript, and shoves Mr. Paynter into the fire. He does not heed the newspaper that drops to the floor and is covered by the old man's body. Paynter knew what drug he had been given, and strove to accuse the Big Four of his murder. It is easy for Quentin to mix powdered opium with the curry before handing it over to be analysed. He gives his version of the conversation with the old man, and mentions the strychnine injection casually, in case the mark of the hypodermic needle is noticed. Suspicion at once is divided between accident and the guilt of Ah Ling owing to the poison of the curry."

"But Dr. Quentin cannot be Number Four?"

"I fancy he can. There is undoubtedly a real Dr. Quentin who is probably abroad somewhere. Number Four has simply masqueraded as him for a short time. The arrangements with Dr. Bolitho were all carried out by correspondence, the man who was to do locum orginally having been taken ill at the last minute."

At that minute, Japp burst in, very red in the face.

"Have you got him?" cried Poirot anxiously.

Japp shook his head, very out of breath.

"Bolitho came back from his holiday this morning—recalled by telegram. No one knows who sent it. The other man left last night. We'll catch him yet, though."

Poirot shook his head quietly.

"I think not," he said, and absentmindedly he drew a big 4 on the table with a fork.

Eleven

A CHESS PROBLEM

Poirot and I often dined at a small restaurant in Soho. We were there one evening, when we observed a friend at an adjacent table. It was Inspector Japp, and as there was room at our table, he came and joined us. It was some time since either of us had seen him.

“Never do you drop in to see us nowadays,” declared Poirot reproachfully. “Not since the affair of the Yellow Jasmine have we met, and that is nearly a month ago.”

“I’ve been up north—that’s why. How are things with you? Big Four still going strong—eh?”

Poirot shook a finger at him reproachfully.

“Ah! You mock yourself at me—but the Big Four—they exist.”

“Oh! I don’t doubt that—but they’re not the hub of the universe, as you make out.”

“My friend, you are very much mistaken. The greatest power for evil in the world today is this ‘Big Four.’ To what end they are tending, no one knows, but there has never been another such criminal organization. The finest brain in China at the head of it, an American millionaire, and a French woman scientist as members, and for the fourth—”

Japp interrupted.

“I know—I know. Regular bee in your bonnet over it all. It’s becoming your little mania, Moosior Poirot. Let’s talk of something else for a change. Take any interest in chess?”

“I have played it, yes.”

"Did you see that curious business yesterday? Match between two players of worldwide reputation, and one died during the game?"

"I saw mention of it. Dr. Savaronoff, the Russian champion, was one of the players, and the other, who succumbed to heart failure, was the brilliant young American, Gilmour Wilson."

"Quite right. Savaronoff beat Rubinstein and became Russian champion some years ago. Wilson was said to be a second Capablanca."

"A very curious occurrence," mused Poirot. "If I mistake not, you have a particular interest in the matter?"

Japp gave a rather embarrassed laugh.

"You've hit it, Moosior Poirot. I'm puzzled. Wilson was sound as a bell—no trace of heart trouble. His death is quite inexplicable."

"You suspect Dr. Savaronoff of putting him out of the way?" I cried.

"Hardly that," said Japp dryly. "I don't think even a Russian would murder another man in order not to be beaten at chess—and anyway, from all I can make out, the boot was likely to be on the other leg. The doctor is supposed to be very hot stuff—second to Lasker they say he is."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Then what exactly is your little idea?" he asked. "Why should Wilson be poisoned? For, I assume, of course, that it is poison you suspect."

"Naturally. Heart failure means your heart stops beating—that's all there is to that. That's what a doctor says officially at the moment, but privately he tips us the wink that he's not satisfied."

"When is the autopsy to take place?"

"Tonight. Wilson's death was extraordinarily sudden. He seemed quite as usual and was actually moving one of the pieces when he suddenly fell forward—dead!"

“There are very few poisons would act in such a fashion,” objected Poirot.

“I know. The autopsy will help us, I expect. But why should anyone want Gilmour Wilson out of the way—that’s what I’d like to know? Harmless, unassuming young fellow. Just come over here from the States, and apparently hadn’t an enemy in the world.”

“It seems incredible,” I mused.

“Not at all,” said Poirot, smiling. “Japp has his theory, I can see.”

“I have, Moosior Poirot. I don’t believe the poison was meant for Wilson—it was meant for the other man.”

“Savaronoff?”

“Yes. Savaronoff fell foul of the Bolsheviks at the outbreak of the Revolution. He was even reported killed. In reality he escaped, and for three years endured incredible hardships in the wilds of Siberia. His sufferings were so great that he is now a changed man. His friends and acquaintances declare they would hardly have recognized him. His hair is white, and his whole aspect that of a man terribly aged. He is a semi-invalid, and seldom goes out, living alone with a niece, Sonia Daviloff, and a Russian manservant in a flat down Westminster way. It is possible that he still considers himself a marked man. Certainly he was very unwilling to agree to this chess contest. He refused several times point blank, and it was only when the newspapers took it up and began making a fuss about the ‘unsportsmanlike refusal’ that he gave in. Gilmour Wilson had gone on challenging him with real Yankee pertinacity, and in the end he got his way. Now I ask you, Moosior Poirot, why wasn’t he willing? Because he didn’t want attention drawn to him. Didn’t want somebody or other to get on his track. That’s my solution—Gilmour Wilson got pipped by mistake.”

“There is no one who has any private reason to gain by Savaronoff’s death?”

“Well, his niece, I suppose. He’s recently come into an immense fortune. Left him by Madame Gospoja whose husband was a sugar profiteer under the old regime. They had an affair together once, I believe, and she refused steadfastly to credit the reports of his death.”

“Where did the match take place?”

“In Savaronoff’s own flat. He’s an invalid, as I told you.”

“Many people there to watch it?”

“At least a dozen—probably more.”

Poirot made an expressive grimace.

“My poor Japp, your task is not an easy one.”

“Once I know definitely that Wilson was poisoned, I can get on.”

“Has it occurred to you that, in the meantime, supposing your assumption that Savaronoff was the intended victim to be correct, the murderer may try again?”

“Of course it has. Two men are watching Savaronoff’s flat.”

“That will be very useful if anyone should call with a bomb under his arm,” said Poirot dryly.

“You’re getting interested, Moosior Poirot,” said Japp, with a twinkle. “Care to come round to the mortuary and see Wilson’s body before the doctors start on it? Who knows, his tie pin may be askew, and that may give you a valuable clue that will solve the mystery.”

“My dear Japp, all through dinner my fingers have been itching to rearrange your own tie pin. You permit, yes? Ah! that is much more pleasing to the eye. Yes, by all means, let us go to the mortuary.”

I could see that Poirot’s attention was completely captivated by this new problem. It was so long since he had shown any interest over any outside case that I was quite rejoiced to see him back in his old form.

For my own part, I felt a deep pity as I looked down upon the motionless form and convulsed face of the hapless young American who had come by his death in such a strange way. Poirot examined the body attentively. There was no mark on it anywhere, except a small scar on the left hand.

“And the doctor says that’s a burn, not a cut,” explained Japp.

Poirot’s attention shifted to the contents of the dead man’s pockets which a constable spread out for our inspection. There was nothing much—a handkerchief, keys, notecase filled with notes, and some unimportant letters. But one object standing by itself filled Poirot with interest.

“A chessman!” he exclaimed. “A white bishop. Was that in his pocket?”

“No, clasped in his hand. We had quite a difficulty to get it out of his fingers. It must be returned to Dr. Savaronoff sometime. It’s part of a very beautiful set of carved ivory chessmen.”

“Permit me to return it to him. It will make an excuse for my going there.”

“Aha!” cried Japp. “So you want to come in on this case?”

“I admit it. So skilfully have you aroused my interest.”

“That’s fine. Got you away from your brooding. Captain Hastings is pleased, too, I can see.”

“Quite right,” I said, laughing.

Poirot turned back towards the body.

“No other little detail you can tell me about—him?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Not even—that he was left-handed?”

“You’re a wizard, Moosior Poirot. How did you know that? He was left-handed. Not that it’s anything to do with the case.”

“Nothing whatever,” agreed Poirot hastily, seeing that Japp was slightly ruffled. “My little joke—that was all. I like to play you the trick, see you.”

We went out upon an amicable understanding.

The following morning saw us wending our way to Dr. Savaronoff’s flat in Westminster.

“Sonia Daviloff,” I mused. “It’s a pretty name.”

Poirot stopped, and threw me a look of despair.

“Always looking for romance! You are incorrigible. It would serve you right if Sonia Daviloff turned out to be our friend and enemy the Countess Vera Rossakoff.”

At the mention of the countess, my face clouded over.

“Surely, Poirot, you don’t suspect—”

“But, no, no. It was a joke! I have not the Big Four on the brain to that extent, whatever Japp may say.”

The door of the flat was opened to us by a manservant with a peculiarly wooden face. It seemed impossible to believe that that impassive countenance could ever display emotion.

Poirot presented a card on which Japp had scribbled a few words of introduction, and we were shown into a low, long room furnished with rich hangings and curios. One or two wonderful ikons hung upon the walls, and exquisite Persian rugs lay upon the floor. A samovar stood upon a table.

I was examining one of the ikons which I judged to be of considerable value, and turned to see Poirot prone upon the floor. Beautiful as the rug was, it hardly seemed to me to necessitate such close attention.

“Is it such a very wonderful specimen?” I asked.

“Eh? Oh! the rug? But no, it was not the rug I was remarking. But it is a beautiful specimen, far too beautiful to have a large nail wantonly driven through the middle of it. No, Hastings,” as I came forward, “the nail is not there now. But the hole remains.”

A sudden sound behind us made me spin round, and Poirot sprang nimbly to his feet. A girl was standing in the doorway. Her eyes, full upon us, were dark with suspicion. She was of medium height, with a beautiful, rather sullen face, dark blue eyes, and very black hair which was cut short. Her voice, when she spoke, was rich and sonorous, and completely un-English.

“I fear my uncle will be unable to see you. He is a great invalid.”

“That is a pity, but perhaps you will kindly help me instead. You are Mademoiselle Daviloff, are you not?”

“Yes, I am Sonia Daviloff. What is it you want to know?”

“I am making some inquiries about that sad affair the night before last—the death of M. Gilmour Wilson. What can you tell me about it?”

The girl’s eyes opened wide.

“He died of heart failure—as he was playing chess.”

“The police are not so sure that it was—heart failure, mademoiselle.”

The girl gave a terrified gesture.

“It was true then,” she cried. “Ivan was right.”

“Who is Ivan, and why do you say he was right?”

“It was Ivan who opened the door to you—and he has already said to me that in his opinion Gilmour Wilson did not die a natural death—that he was poisoned by mistake.”

“By mistake.”

“Yes, the poison was meant for my uncle.”

She had quite forgotten her first distrust now, and was speaking eagerly.

“Why do you say that, mademoiselle? Who should wish to poison Dr. Savaronoff?”

She shook her head.

“I do not know. I am in the dark. And my uncle, he will not trust me. It is natural, perhaps. You see, he hardly knows me. He saw me as a child, and not since till I came to live with him here in London. But this much I do know, he is in fear of something. We have many secret societies in Russia, and one day I overheard something which made me think it was of just such a society he went in fear. Tell me, monsieur”—she came a step nearer, and dropped her voice—“have you ever heard of a society called the ‘Big Four?’”

Poirot jumped nearly out of his skin. His eyes positively bulged with astonishment.

“Why do you—what do you know of the Big Four, mademoiselle?”

“There is such an association, then! I overheard a reference to them, and asked my uncle about it afterwards. Never have I seen a man so afraid. He turned all white and shaking. He was in fear of them, monsieur, in great fear, I am sure of it. And, by mistake, they killed the American, Wilson.”

“The Big Four,” murmured Poirot. “Always the Big Four! An astonishing coincidence, mademoiselle, your uncle is still in danger. I must save him. Now recount to me exactly the events of that fatal evening. Show me the chessboard, the table, how the two men sat—everything.”

She went to the side of the room and brought out a small table. The top of it was exquisite, inlaid with squares of silver and black to represent a chessboard.

“This was sent to my uncle a few weeks ago as a present, with the request that he would use it in the next match he played. It was in the middle of the room—so.”

Poirot examined the table with what seemed to me quite unnecessary attention. He was not conducting the inquiry at all as I would have done. Many of the questions seemed to me pointless, and upon really vital matters he seemed to have no questions to ask. I concluded that the unexpected mention of the Big Four had thrown him completely off his balance.

After a minute examination of the table and the exact position it had occupied, he asked to see the chessmen. Sonia Daviloff brought them to him in a box. He examined one or two of them in a perfunctory manner.

“An exquisite set,” he murmured absentmindedly.

Still not a question as to what refreshments there had been, or what people had been present.

I cleared my throat significantly.

“Don’t you think, Poirot, that—”

He interrupted me peremptorily.

“Do not think, my friend. Leave all to me. Mademoiselle, is it quite impossible that I should see your uncle?”

A faint smile showed itself on her face.

“He will see you, yes. You understand, it is my part to interview all strangers first.”

She disappeared. I heard a murmur of voices in the next room, and a minute later she came back and motioned us to pass into the adjoining room.

The man who lay there on a couch was an imposing figure. Tall, gaunt, with huge bushy eyebrows and white beard, and a face haggard as the result of starvation and hardships, Dr. Savaronoff was a distinct personality. I noted the peculiar formation of his head, its unusual height. A great chess player must have a great brain, I knew. I could easily understand Dr. Savaronoff being the second greatest player in the world.

Poirot bowed.

“M. le Docteur, may I speak to you alone?”

Savaronoff turned to his niece.

“Leave us, Sonia.”

She disappeared obediently.

“Now, sir, what is it?”

“Dr. Savaronoff, you have recently come into an enormous fortune. If you should—die unexpectedly, who inherits it?”

“I have made a will leaving everything to my niece, Sonia Daviloff. You do not suggest—”

“I suggest nothing, but you have not seen your niece since she was a child. It would have been easy for anyone to impersonate her.”

Savaronoff seemed thunderstruck by the suggestion. Poirot went on easily.

“Enough as to that: I give you the word of warning, that is all. What I want you to do now is to describe to me the game of chess the other evening.”

“How do you mean—describe it?”

“Well, I do not play the chess myself, but I understand that there are various regular ways of beginning—the gambit, do they not call it?”

Dr. Savaronoff smiled a little.

“Ah! I comprehend you now. Wilson opened Ruy Lopez—one of the soundest openings there is, and one frequently adopted in tournaments and matches.”

“And how long had you been playing when the tragedy happened?”

“It must have been about the third or fourth move when Wilson suddenly fell forward over the table, stone dead.”

Poirot rose to depart. He flung out his last question as though it was of absolutely no importance, but I knew better.

“Had he anything to eat or drink?”

“A whisky and soda, I think.”

“Thank you, Dr. Savaronoff. I will disturb you no longer.”

Ivan was in the hall to show us out. Poirot lingered on the threshold.

“The flat below this, do you know who lives there?”

“Sir Charles Kingwell, a member of Parliament, sir. It has been let furnished lately, though.”

“Thank you.”

We went out into the bright winter sunlight.

“Well, really, Poirot,” I burst out. “I don’t think you’ve distinguished yourself this time. Surely your questions were very inadequate.”

“You think so, Hastings?” Poirot looked at me appealingly. “I was bouleversé, yes. What would you have asked?”

I considered the question carefully, and then outlined my scheme to Poirot. He listened with what seemed to be close interest. My monologue lasted until we had nearly reached home.

“Very excellent, very searching, Hastings,” said Poirot, as he inserted his key in the door and preceded me up the stairs. “But quite unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary!” I cried, amazed. “If the man was poisoned—”

“Aha,” cried Poirot, pouncing upon a note which lay on the table. “From Japp. Just as I thought.” He flung it over to me. It was brief and to the point. No traces of poison had been found, and there was nothing to show how the man came by his death.

“You see,” said Poirot, “our questions would have been quite unnecessary.”

“You guessed this beforehand?”

“‘Forecast the probable result of the deal,’” quoted Poirot from a recent bridge problem on which I had spent much time. “Mon ami, when you do that successfully, you do not call it guessing.”

“Don’t let’s split hairs,” I said impatiently. “You foresaw this?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

Poirot put his hand into his pocket and pulled out—a white bishop.

“Why,” I cried, “you forgot to give it back to Dr. Savaronoff.”

“You are in error, my friend. That bishop still reposes in my left-hand pocket. I took its fellow from the box of chessmen Mademoiselle Daviloff kindly permitted me to examine. The plural of one bishop is two bishops.”

He sounded the final “s” with a great hiss. I was completely mystified.

“But why did you take it?”

“Parbleu, I wanted to see if they were exactly alike.”

Poirot looked at them with his head on one side.

“They seem so, I admit. But one should take no fact for granted until it is proved. Bring me, I pray you, my little scales.”

With infinite care he weighed the two chessmen, then turned to me with a face alight with triumph.

“I was right. See you, I was right. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot!”

He rushed to the telephone—waited impatiently.

“Is that Japp? Ah! Japp, it is you. Hercule Poirot speaks. Watch the manservant. Ivan. On no account let him slip through your fingers. Yes, yes, it is as I say.”

He dashed down the receiver and turned to me.

“You see it not, Hastings? I will explain. Wilson was not poisoned, he was electrocuted. A thin metal rod passes up the middle of one of those chessmen. The table was prepared beforehand and set upon a certain spot on the floor. When the bishop was placed upon one of the silver squares, the current passed through Wilson’s body, killing him instantly. The only mark was the electric burn upon his hand—his left hand, because he was left-handed. The ‘special table’ was an extremely cunning piece of mechanism. The table I examined was a duplicate, perfectly innocent. It was substituted for the other immediately after the murder. The thing was worked from the flat below, which, if you remember, was let furnished. But one accomplice at least was in Savaronoff’s flat. The girl is an agent of the Big Four, working to inherit Savaronoff’s money.”

“And Ivan?”

“I strongly suspect that Ivan is none other than the famous Number Four.”

“What?”

“Yes. The man is a marvellous character actor. He can assume any part he pleases.”

I thought back over past adventures, the lunatic asylum keeper, the butcher’s young man, the suave doctor, all the same man, and all totally unlike each other.

“It’s amazing,” I said at last. “Everything fits in. Savaronoff had an inkling of the plot, and that’s why he was so averse to playing the match.”

Poirot looked at me without speaking. Then he turned abruptly away, and began pacing up and down.

“Have you a book on chess by any chance, mon ami?” he asked suddenly.

“I believe I have somewhere.”

It took me some time to ferret it out, but I found it at last, and brought it to Poirot, who sank down in a chair and started reading it with the greatest attention.

In about a quarter of an hour the telephone rang. I answered it. It was Japp. Ivan had left the flat, carrying a large bundle. He had sprung into a waiting taxi, and the chase had begun. He was evidently trying to lose his pursuers. In the end he seemed to fancy that he had done so, and had then driven to a big empty house at Hampstead. The house was surrounded.

I recounted all this to Poirot. He merely stared at me as though he scarcely took in what I was saying. He held out the chess book.

“Listen to this, my friend. This is the Ruy Lopez opening. 1 P-K4, P-K4; 2 Kt-KB3, K-QB3; 3 B-Kt5. Then there comes a question as to Black’s best third move. He has the choice of various defences. It was White’s third move that killed Gilmour Wilson, 3 B-Kt5. Only the third move—does that say nothing to you?”

I hadn’t the least idea what he meant, and told him so.

“Suppose, Hastings, that, while you were sitting in this chair, you heard the front door being opened and shut, what would you think?”

“I should think someone had gone out, I suppose.”

“Yes—but there are always two ways of looking at things. Someone gone out—someone come in—two totally different things, Hastings. But if you assumed the wrong one, presently some little discrepancy would creep in and show you that you were on the wrong track."

"What does all this mean, Poirot?"

Poirot sprang to his feet with sudden energy.

"It means that I have been a triple imbecile. Quick, quick, to the flat in Westminster. We may yet be in time."

We tore off in a taxi. Poirot returned no answer to my excited questions. We raced up the stairs. Repeated rings and knocks brought no reply, but listening closely I could distinguish a hollow groan coming from within.

The hall porter proved to have a master key, and after a few difficulties he consented to use it.

Poirot went straight to the inner room. A whiff of chloroform met us. On the floor was Sonia Daviloff, gagged and bound, with a great wad of saturated cotton wool over her nose and mouth. Poirot tore it off and began to take measures to restore her. Presently a doctor arrived, and Poirot handed her over to his charge and drew aside with me. There was no sign of Dr. Savaronoff.

"What does it all mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"It means that before two equal deductions I chose the wrong one. You heard me say that it would be easy for anyone to impersonate Sonia Daviloff because her uncle had not seen her for so many years?"

"Yes?"

"Well, precisely the opposite held good also. It was equally easy for anyone to impersonate the uncle."

"What?"

"Savaronoff did die at the outbreak of the Revolution. The man who pretended to have escaped with such terrible hardships, the man so changed ‘that his own friends could hardly recognize him,’ the man who successfully laid claim to an enormous fortune—”

“Yes. Who was he?”

“Number Four. No wonder he was frightened when Sonia let him know she had overheard one of his private conversations about the ‘Big Four.’ Again he has slipped through my fingers. He guessed I should get on the right track in the end, so he sent off the honest Ivan on a tortuous wild goose chase, chloroformed the girl, and got out, having by now doubtless realized most of the securities left by Madame Gospoja.”

“But—but who tried to kill him then?”

“Nobody tried to kill him. Wilson was the intended victim all along.”

“But why?”

“My friend, Savaronoff was the second-greatest chess player in the world. In all probability Number Four did not even know the rudiments of the game. Certainly he could not sustain the fiction of a match. He tried all he knew to avoid the contest. When that failed, Wilson’s doom was sealed. At all costs he must be prevented from discovering that the great Savaronoff did not even know how to play chess. Wilson was fond of the Ruy Lopez opening, and was certain to use it. Number Four arranged for death to come with the third move, before any complications of defence set in.”

“But, my dear Poirot,” I persisted, “are we dealing with a lunatic? I quite follow your reasoning, and admit that you must be right, but to kill a man just to sustain his role! Surely there were simpler ways out of the difficulty than that? He could have said that his doctor forbade the strain of a match.”

Poirot wrinkled his forehead.

“Certainement, Hastings,” he said, “there were other ways, but none so convincing. Besides, you are assuming that to kill a man is a thing to avoid, are you not? Number Four’s mind, it does not act that way. I put myself in his place, a thing impossible for you. I picture his thoughts. He enjoys himself as the professor at that match, I doubt not he has visited the chess tourneys to study his part. He sits and frowns in thought; he gives the impression that he is thinking great plans, and all the time he laughs in himself. He is aware that two moves are all that he knows—and all that he need know. Again, it would appeal to his mind to foresee the time that suits Number Four … Oh, yes, Hastings, I begin to understand our friend and his psychology."

I shrugged.

"Well, I suppose you're right, but I can't understand anyone running a risk he could so easily avoid."

"Risk!" Poirot snorted. "Where then lay the risk? Would Japp have solved the problem? No; if Number Four had not made one small mistake he would have run no risk."

"And his mistake?" I asked, although I suspected the answer.

"Mon ami, he overlooked the little grey cells of Hercule Poirot."

Poirot has his virtues, but modesty is not one of them.

Twelve

THE BAITED TRAP

It was mid-January—a typical English winter day in London, damp and dirty. Poirot and I were sitting in two chairs well drawn up to the fire. I was aware of my friend looking at me with a quizzical smile, the meaning of which I could not fathom.

“A penny for your thoughts,” I said lightly.

“I was thinking, my friend, that at midsummer, when you first arrived, you told me that you proposed to be in this country for a couple of months only.”

“Did I say that?” I asked, rather awkwardly. “I don’t remember.”

Poirot’s smile broadened.

“You did, mon ami. Since then, you have changed your plan, is it not so?”

“Er—yes, I have.”

“And why is that?”

“Dash it all, Poirot, you don’t think I’m going to leave you all alone when you’re up against a thing like the ‘Big Four,’ do you?”

Poirot nodded gently.

“Just as I thought. You are a staunch friend, Hastings. It is to serve me that you remain on here. And your wife—little Cinderella as you call her, what does she say?”

“I haven’t gone into details, of course, but she understands. She’d be the last one to wish me to turn my back on a pal.”

"Yes, yes, she, too, is a loyal friend. But it is going to be a long business, perhaps."

I nodded, rather discouraged.

"Six months already," I mused, "and where are we? You know, Poirot, I can't help thinking that we ought to—well, to do something."

"Always so energetic, Hastings! And what precisely would you have me do?"

This was somewhat of a poser, but I was not going to withdraw from my position.

"We ought to take the offensive," I urged. "What have we done all this time?"

"More than you think, my friend. After all, we have established the identity of Number Two and Number Three, and we have learnt more than a little about the ways and methods of Number Four."

I brightened up a little. As Poirot put it, things didn't sound so bad.

"Oh! Yes, Hastings, we have done a great deal. It is true that I am not in a position to accuse either Ryland or Madame Olivier—who would believe me? You remember I thought once I had Ryland successfully cornered? Nevertheless I have made my suspicions known in certain quarters—the highest—Lord Aldington, who enlisted my help in the matter of the stolen submarine plans, is fully cognizant of all my information respecting the Big Four—and while others may doubt, he believes. Ryland and Madame Olivier, and Li Chang Yen himself may go their ways, but there is a searchlight turned on all their movements."

"And Number Four?" I asked.

"As I said just now—I am beginning to know and understand his methods. You may smile, Hastings—but to penetrate a man's personality, to know exactly what he will do under any given circumstances—that is the beginning of success. It is a duel between us, and whilst he is constantly giving away his mentality to me, I endeavour to let him know little or nothing of mine. He is in the light, I in the shade. I tell you, Hastings, that every day they fear me the more for my chosen inactivity.”

“They’ve let us alone, anyway,” I observed. “There have been no more attempts on your life, and no ambushes of any kind.”

“No,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “On the whole, that rather surprises me. Especially as there are one or two fairly obvious ways of getting at us which I should have thought certain to have occurred to them. You catch my meaning, perhaps?”

“An infernal machine of some kind?” I hazarded.

Poirot made a sharp click with his tongue expressive of impatience.

“But no! I appeal to your imagination, and you can suggest nothing more subtle than bombs in the fireplace. Well, well, I have need of some matches, I will promenade myself despite the weather. Pardon, my friend, but it is possible that you read The Future of the Argentine, Mirror of Society, Cattle Breeding, The Clue of Crimson, and Sport in the Rockies at one and the same time?”

I laughed, and admitted that The Clue of Crimson was at present engaging my sole attention. Poirot shook his head sadly.

“But replace then the others on the bookshelf! Never, never shall I see you embrace the order and the method. Mon Dieu, what then is a bookshelf for?”

I apologized humbly, and Poirot, after replacing the offending volumes, each in its appointed place, went out and left me to uninterrupted enjoyment of my selected book.

I must admit, however, that I was half asleep when Mrs. Pearson’s knock at the door aroused me.

“A telegram for you, captain.”

I tore the orange envelope open without much interest.

Then I sat as though turned to stone.

It was a cable from Bronsen, my manager out at the South American ranch, and it ran as follows:

Mrs. Hastings disappeared yesterday, feared been kidnapped by some gang calling itself big four cable instructions have notified police but no clue as yet Bronsen.

I waved Mrs. Pearson out of the room, and sat as though stunned, reading the words over and over again. Cinderella—kidnapped! In the hands of the imfamous Big Four! God, what could I do?

Poirot! I must have Poirot. He would advise me. He would checkmate them somehow. In a few minutes now, he would be back. I must wait patiently until then. But Cinderella—in the hands of the Big Four!

Another knock. Mrs. Pearson put her head in once more.

“A note for you, captain—brought by a heathen Chinaman. He’s a-waiting downstairs.”

I seized it from her. It was brief and to the point.

“If you ever wish to see your wife again, go with the bearer of this note immediately. Leave no message for your friend or she will suffer.”

It was signed with a big 4.

What ought I to have done? What would you who read have done in my place?

I had no time to think. I saw only one thing—Cinderella in the power of those devils. I must obey—I dare not risk a hair of her head. I must go with this Chinaman and follow whither he led. It was a trap, yes, and it meant certain capture and possible death, but it was baited with the person dearest to me in the whole world, and I dared not hesitate.

What irked me most was to leave no word for Poirot. Once set him on my track, and all might yet be well! Dare I risk it? Apparently I was under no supervision, but yet I hesitated. It would have been so easy for the Chinaman to come up and assure himself that I was keeping to the letter of the command. Why didn’t he? His very abstention made me more suspicious. I had seen so much of the omnipotence of the Big Four that I credited them with almost superhuman powers. For all I know, even the little bedraggled servant girl might be one of their agents.

No, I dared not risk it. But one thing I could do, leave the telegram. He would know then that Cinderella had disappeared, and who was responsible for her disappearance.

All this passed through my head in less time than it takes to tell, and I had clapped my hat on my head and was descending the stairs to where my guide waited, in a little over a minute.

The bearer of the message was a tall impassive Chinaman, neatly but rather shabbily dressed. He bowed and spoke to me. His English was perfect, but he spoke with a slight sing-song intonation.

“You Captain Hastings?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You give me note, please.”

I had foreseen the request, and handed him over the scrap of paper without a word. But that was not all.

“You have a telegram today, yes? Come along just now? From South America, yes?”

I realized anew the excellence of their espionage system—or it might have been a shrewd guess. Bronsen was bound to cable me. They would wait until the cable was delivered and would strike hard upon it.

No good could come of denying what was palpably true.

“Yes,” I said. “I did get a telegram.”

“You fetch him, yes? Fetch him now.”

I ground my teeth, but what could I do? I ran upstairs again. As I did so, I thought of confiding in Mrs. Pearson, at any rate as far as Cinderella’s disappearance went. She was on the landing, but close behind her was the little maidservant, and I hesitated. If she was a spy—the words of the note danced before my eyes: “…she will suffer …” I passed into the sitting room without speaking.

I took up the telegram and was about to pass out again when an idea struck me. Could I not leave some sign which would mean nothing to my enemies but which Poirot himself would find significant. I hurried across to the bookcase and tumbled out four books on to the floor. No fear of Poirot’s not seeing them. They would outrage his eyes immediately—and coming on top of his little lecture, surely he would find them unusual. Next I put a shovelful of coal on the fire and managed to spill four knobs into the grate. I had done all I could—pray Heaven Poirot would read the sign aright.

I hurried down again. The Chinaman took the telegram from me, read it, then placed it in his pocket and with a nod beckoned me to follow him.

It was a long weary march that he led me. Once we took a bus and once we went for some considerable way in a tram, and always our route led us steadily eastward. We went through strange districts, whose existence I had never dreamed of. We were down by the docks now, I knew, and I realized that I was being taken into the heart of Chinatown.

In spite of myself I shivered. Still my guide plodded on, turning and twisting through mean streets and byways, until at last he stopped at a dilapidated house and rapped four times upon the door.

It was opened immediately by another Chinaman who stood aside to let us pass in. The clanging to of the door behind me was the knell of my last hopes. I was indeed in the hands of the enemy.

I was now handed over to the second Chinaman. He led me down some rickety stairs and into a cellar which was filled with bales and casks and which exhaled a pungent odour, as of eastern spices. I felt wrapped all round with the atmosphere of the East, tortuous, cunning, sinister—

Suddenly my guide rolled aside two of the casks, and I saw a low tunnellike opening in the wall. He motioned me to go ahead. The tunnel was of some length, and it was too low for me to stand upright. At last, however, it broadened out into a passage, and a few minutes later we stood in another cellar.

My Chinaman went forward, and rapped four times on one of the walls. A whole section of the wall swung out, leaving a narrow doorway. I passed through, and to my utter astonishment found myself in a kind of Arabian Nights' palace. A low long subterranean chamber hung with rich oriental silks, brilliantly lighted and fragrant with perfumes and spices. There were five or six silk-covered divans, and exquisite carpets of Chinese workmanship covered the ground. At the end of the room was a curtained recess. From behind these curtains came a voice.

"You have brought our honoured guest?"

"Excellency, he is here," replied my guide.

"Let our guest enter," was the answer.

At the same moment, the curtains were drawn aside by an unseen hand, and I was facing an immense cushioned divan on which sat a tall thin Oriental dressed in wonderfully embroidered robes, and clearly, by the length of his finger nails, a great man.

"Be seated, I pray you, Captain Hastings," he said, with a wave of his hand. "You acceded to my request to come immediately, I am glad to see."

"Who are you?" I asked. "Li Chang Yen?"

"Indeed no, I am but the humblest of the master's servants. I carry out his behests, that is all—as do other of his servants in other countries—in South America, for instance."

I advanced a step.

"Where is she? What have you done with her out there?"

"She is in a place of safety—where none will find her. As yet, she is unharmed. You observe that I say—as yet!"

Cold shivers ran down my spine as I confronted this smiling devil.

"What do you want?" I cried. "Money?"

"My dear Captain Hastings. We have no designs on your small savings, I can assure you. Not—pardon me—a very intelligent suggestion on your part. Your colleague would not have made it, I fancy."

"I suppose," I said heavily, "you wanted to get me into your toils. Well, you have succeeded. I have come here with my eyes open. Do what you like with me, and let her go. She knows nothing, and she can be no possible use to you. You've used her to get hold of me—you've got me all right, and that settles it."

The smiling Oriental caressed his smooth cheek, watching me obliquely out of his narrow eyes.

"You go too fast," he said purringly. "That does not quite—settle it. In fact, to 'get hold of you' as you express it, is not really our objective. But through you, we hope to get hold of your friend, M. Hercule Poirot."

"I'm afraid you won't do that," I said, with a short laugh.

"What I suggest is this," continued the other, his words running on as though he had not heard me. "You will write M. Hercule Poirot a letter, such a letter as will induce him to hasten thither and join you."

"I shall do no such thing," I said angrily.

"The consequences of refusal will be disagreeable."

"Damn your consequences."

"The alternative might be death!"

A nasty shiver ran down my spine, but I endeavoured to put a bold face upon it.

"It's no good threatening me, and bullying me. Keep your threats for Chinese cowards."

"My threats are very real ones, Captain Hastings. I ask you again, will you write this letter?"

"I will not, and what's more, you daren't kill me. You'd have the police on your tracks in no time."

My interlocutor clapped his hands swiftly. Two Chinese attendants appeared as it were out of the blue, and pinioned me by both arms. Their master said something rapidly to them in Chinese, and they dragged me across the floor to a spot in one corner of the big chamber. One of them stooped, and suddenly, without the least warning, the flooring gave beneath my feet. But for the restraining hand of the other man I should have gone down the yawning gap beneath me. It was inky black, and I could hear the rushing of water.

"The river," said my questioner from his place on the divan. "Think well, Captain Hastings. If you refuse again, you go headlong to eternity, to meet your death in the dark waters below. For the last time, will you write that letter?"

I'm not braver than most men. I admit frankly that I was scared to death, and in a blue funk. That Chinese devil meant business, I was sure of that. It was goodbye to the good old world. In spite of myself, my voice wobbled a little as I answered.

“For the last time, no! To hell with your letter!”

Then involuntarily I closed my eyes and breathed a short prayer.

Thirteen

THE MOUSE WALKS IN

Not often in a lifetime does a man stand on the edge of eternity, but when I spoke those words in that East End cellar I was perfectly certain that they were my last words on earth. I braced myself for the shock of those black, rushing waters beneath, and experienced in advance the horror of that breath-choking fall.

But to my surprise a low laugh fell on my ears. I opened my eyes. Obeying a sign from the man on the divan, my two jailers brought me back to my old seat facing him.

“You are a brave man, Captain Hastings,” he said. “We of the East appreciate bravery. I may say that I expected you to act as you have done. That brings us to the appointed second act of your little drama. Death for yourself you have faced—will you face death for another?”

“What do you mean?” I asked hoarsely, a horrible fear creeping over me.

“Surely you have not forgotten the lady who is in our power—the Rose of the Garden.”

I stared at him in dumb agony.

“I think, Captain Hastings, that you will write that letter. See, I have a cable form here. The message I shall write on it depends on you, and means life or death for your wife.”

The sweat broke out on my brow. My tormentor continued, smiling amiably, and speaking with perfect sangfroid:

“There, captain, the pen is ready to your hand. You have only to write. If not—”

“If not?” I echoed.

“If not, that lady that you love dies—and dies slowly. My master, Li Chang Yen, amuses himself in his spare hours by devising new and ingenious methods of torture—”

“My God!” I cried. “You fiend! Not that—you wouldn’t do that—”

“Shall I recount to you some of his devices?”

Without heeding my cry of protest, his speech flowed on—evenly, serenely—till with a cry of horror I clapped my hands to my ears.

“It is enough, I see. Take up the pen and write.”

“You would not dare—”

“Your speech is foolishness, and you know it. Take up the pen and write.”

“If I do?”

“Your wife goes free. The cable shall be despatched immediately.”

“How do I know that you will keep faith with me?”

“I swear it to you on the sacred tombs of my ancestors. Moreover, judge for yourself—why should I wish to do her harm? Her detention will have answered its purpose.”

“And—and Poirot?”

“We will keep him in safe custody until we have concluded our operations. Then we will let him go.”

“Will you swear that also on the tombs of your ancestors?”

“I have sworn one oath to you. That should be sufficient.”

My heart sank. I was betraying my friend—to what? For a moment I hesitated—then the terrible alternative rose like a nightmare before my eyes. Cinderella—in the hands of these Chinese devils, dying by slow torture—

A groan rose to my lips. I seized the pen. Perhaps by careful wording of the letter I could convey a warning, and Poirot would be enabled to avoid the trap. It was the only hope.

But even that hope was not to remain. The Chinaman's voice rose, suave and courteous.

"Permit me to dictate to you."

He paused, consulted a sheaf of notes that lay by his side, and then dictated as follows:

Dear Poirot, I think I'm on the track of Number Four. A Chinaman came this afternoon and lured me down here with a bogus message. Luckily I saw through his little game in time, and gave him the slip. Then I turned the tables on him, and managed to do a bit of shadowing on my own account—rather neatly too, I flatter myself. I'm getting a bright young lad to carry this to you. Give him half a crown, will you? That's what I promised him if it was delivered safely. I'm watching the house, and daren't leave. I shall wait for you until six o'clock, and if you haven't come then, I'll have a try at getting into the house on my own. It's too good a chance to miss, and, of course, the boy mightn't find you. But if he does, get him to bring you down here right away. And cover up those precious moustaches of yours in case anyone's watching out from the house and might recognize you.

Yours in haste,
A.H.

Every word that I wrote plunged me deeper in despair. The thing was diabolically clever. I realized how closely every detail of our life must be known. It was just such an epistle as I might have penned myself. The acknowledgement that the Chinaman who had called that afternoon had endeavoured to "lure me away" discounted any good I might have done by leaving my “sign” of four books. It had been a trap, and I had seen through it, that was what Poirot would think. The time, too, was cleverly planned. Poirot, on receiving the note, would have just time to rush off with his innocent-looking guide, and that he would do so I knew. My determination to make my way into the house would bring him posthaste. He always displayed a ridiculous distrust of my capacities. He would be convinced that I was running into danger without being equal to the situation, and would rush down to take command of the situation.

But there was nothing to be done. I wrote as bidden. My captor took the note from me, read it, then nodded his head approvingly and handed it to one of the silent attendants who disappeared with it behind one of the silken hangings on the wall which masked a doorway.

With a smile the man opposite me picked up a cable form and wrote. He handed it to me.

It read: “Release the white bird with all despatch.”

I gave a sigh of relief.

“You will send it at once?” I urged.

He smiled, and shook his head.

“When M. Hercule Poirot is in my hands it shall be sent. Not until then.”

“But you promised—”

“If this device fails, I may have need of our white bird—to persuade you to further efforts.”

I grew white with anger.

“My God! If you—”

He waved a long, slim yellow hand.

“Be reassured, I do not think it will fail. And the moment M. Poirot is in our hands, I will keep my oath.”

“If you play me false—”

“I have sworn it by my honoured ancestors. Have no fear. Rest here awhile. My servants will see to your needs whilst I am absent.”

I was left alone in this strange underground nest of luxury. The second Chinese attendant had reappeared. One of them brought food and drink and offered it to me, but I waved them aside. I was sick—sick—at heart—

And then suddenly the master reappeared, tall and stately in his silken robes. He directed operations. By his orders I was hustled back through the cellar and tunnel into the original house I had entered. There they took me into a ground-floor room. The windows were shuttered, but one could see through the cracks into the street. An old ragged man was shuffling along the opposite side of the road, and when I saw him make a sign to the window, I understood that he was one of the gang on watch.

“It is well,” said my Chinese friend. “Hercule Poirot has fallen into the trap. He approaches now—and alone except for the boy who guides him. Now, Captain Hastings, you have still one more part to play. Unless you show yourself he will not enter the house. When he arrives opposite, you must go out on the step and beckon him in.”

“What?” I cried, revolted.

“You play that part alone. Remember the price of failure. If Hercule Poirot suspects anything is amiss and does not enter the house, your wife dies by the Seventy Lingering Deaths! Ah! Here he is.”

With a beating heart, and a feeling of deathly sickness, I looked through the crack in the shutters. In the figure walking along the opposite side of the street I recognized my friend at once, though his coat collar was turned up and an immense yellow muffler hid the bottom part of his face. But there was no mistaking that walk, and the pose of that egg-shaped head.

It was Poirot coming to my aid in all good faith, suspecting nothing amiss. By his side ran a typical London urchin, grimy of face and ragged of apparel.

Poirot paused, looking across at the house, whilst the boy spoke to him eagerly and pointed. It was the time for me to act. I went out into the hall. At a sign from the tall Chinaman, one of the servants unlatched the door.

“Remember the price of failure,” said my enemy in a low voice.

I was outside on the steps. I beckoned to Poirot. He hastened across.

“Aha! So all is well with you, my friend. I was beginning to be anxious. You managed to get inside? Is the house empty, then?”

“Yes,” I said, in a low voice I strove to make natural. “There must be a secret way out of it somewhere. Come in and let us look for it.”

I stepped back across the threshold. In all innocence Poirot prepared to follow me.

And then something seemed to snap in my head. I saw only too clearly the part I was playing—the part of Judas.

“Back, Poirot!” I cried. “Back for your life. It’s a trap. Never mind me. Get away at once.”

Even as I spoke—or rather shouted my warning, hands gripped me like a vice. One of the Chinese servants sprang past me to grab Poirot.

I saw the latter spring back, his arm raised, then suddenly a dense volume of smoke was rising round me, choking me—killing me—

I felt myself falling—suffocating—this was death—

I came to myself slowly and painfully—all my senses dazed. The first thing I saw was Poirot’s face. He was sitting opposite me watching me with an anxious face. He gave a cry of joy when he saw me looking at him.

“Ah, you revive—you return to yourself. All is well! My friend—my poor friend!”

“Where am I?” I said painfully.

“Where? But chez vous!”

I looked round me. True enough, I was in the old familiar surroundings. And in the grate were the identical four knobs of coal I had carefully spilt there.

Poirot had followed my glance.

“But yes, that was a famous idea of yours—that and the books. See you, if they should say to me any time, ‘That friend of yours, that Hastings, he has not the great brain, is it not so?’ I shall reply to them: ‘You are in error.’ It was an idea magnificent and superb that occurred to you there.”

“You understood their meaning then?”

“Am I an imbecile? Of course I understood. It gave me just the warning I needed, and the time to mature my plans. Somehow or other the Big Four had carried you off. With what object? Clearly not for your beaux yeux—equally clearly not because they feared you and wanted to get you out of the way. No, their object was plain. You would be used as a decoy to get the great Hercule Poirot into their clutches. I have long been prepared for something of the kind. I make my little preparations, and presently, sure enough, the messenger arrives—such an innocent little street urchin. Me, I swallow everything, and hasten away with him, and, very fortunately, they permit you to come out on the doorstep. That was my one fear, that I should have to dispose of them before I had reached the place where you were concealed, and that I should have to search for you—perhaps in vain—afterwards.”

“Dispose of them, did you say?” I asked feebly. “Singlehanded.”

“Oh, there is nothing very clever about that. If one is prepared in advance, all is simple—the motto of the Boy Scout, is it not? And a very fine one.

Me, I was prepared. Not so long ago, I rendered a service to a very famous chemist, who did a lot of work in connection with poison gas during the war. He devised for me a little bomb—simple and easy to carry about—one has but to throw it and poof, the smoke—and then the unconsciousness. Immediately I blow a little whistle and straightway some of Japp's clever fellows who were watching the house here long before the boy arrived, and who managed to follow us all the way to Limehouse, came flying up and took charge of the situation."

"But how was it you weren't unconscious too?"

"Another piece of luck. Our friend Number Four (who certainly composed that ingenious letter) permitted himself a little jest at my moustaches, which rendered it extremely easy for me to adjust my respirator under the guise of a yellow muffler."

"I remember," I cried eagerly, and then with the word "remember" all the ghastly horror that I had temporarily forgotten came back to me. Cinderella—

I fell back with a groan.

I must have lost consciousness again for a minute or two. I awoke to find Poirot forcing some brandy between my lips.

"What is it, mon ami? But what is it—then? Tell me." Word by word, I got the thing told, shuddering as I did so. Poirot uttered a cry.

"My friend! My friend! But what you must have suffered! And I who knew nothing of all this! But reassure yourself! All is well!"

"You will find her, you mean? But she is in South America. And by the time we get there—long before, she will be dead—and God knows how and in what horrible way she will have died."

"No, no, you do not understand. She is safe and well. She has never been in their hands for one instant."

“But I got a cable from Bronsen?”

“No, no, you did not. You may have got a cable from South America signed Bronsen—that is a very different matter. Tell me, has it never occurred to you that an organization of this kind, with ramifications all over the world, might easily strike at us through the little girl, Cinderella, whom you love so well?”

“No, never,” I replied.

“Well, it did to me. I said nothing to you because I did not want to upset you unnecessarily—but I took measures of my own. Your wife’s letters all seem to have been written from the ranch, but in reality she has been in a place of safety devised by me for over three months.”

I looked at him for a long time.

“You are sure of that?”

“Parbleu! I know it. They tortured you with a lie!”

I turned my head aside. Poirot put his hand on my shoulder. There was something in his voice that I had never heard there before.

“You like not that I should embrace you or display the emotion, I know well. I will be very British. I will say nothing—but nothing at all. Only this—that in this last adventure of ours, the honours are all with you, and happy is the man who has such a friend as I have!”

Fourteen

THE PEROXIDE BLONDE

I was very disappointed with the results of Poirot’s bomb attack on the premises in Chinatown. To begin with, the leader of the gang had escaped. When Japp’s men rushed up in response to Poirot’s whistle they found four Chinamen unconscious in the hall, but the man who had threatened me with death was not among them. I remembered afterwards that when I was forced out on to the doorstep, to decoy Poirot into the house, this man had kept well in the background. Presumably he was out of the danger zone of the gas bomb, and made good his escape by one of the many exits which we afterwards discovered.

From the four who remained in our hands we learnt nothing. The fullest investigation by the police failed to bring to light anything to connect them with the Big Four. They were ordinary low-class residents of the district, and they professed bland ignorance of the name Li Chang Yen. A Chinese gentleman had hired them for service in the house by the waterside, and they knew nothing whatever of his private affairs.

By the next day I had, except for a slight headache, completely recovered from the effects of Poirot’s gas bomb. We went down together to Chinatown and searched the house from which I had been rescued. The premises consisted of two ramshackle houses joined together by an underground passage. The ground floors and the upper stories of each were unfurnished and deserted, the broken windows covered by decaying shutters. Japp had already been prying about in the cellars, and had discovered the secret of the entrance to the subterranean chamber where I had spent such an unpleasant half hour. Closer investigation confirmed the impression that it had made on me the night before. The silks on the walls and divan and the carpets on the floor were of exquisite workmanship. Although I know very little about Chinese art, I could appreciate that every article in the room was perfect of its kind.

With the aid of Japp and some of his men we conducted a most thorough search of the apartment. I had cherished high hopes that we would find documents of importance. A list, perhaps, of some of the more important agents of the Big Four, or cipher notes of some of their plans, but we discovered nothing of the kind. The only papers we found in the whole place were the notes which the Chinaman had consulted whilst he was dictating the letter to Poirot. These consisted of a very complete record of each of our careers, an estimate of our characters, and suggestions about the weaknesses through which we might best be attacked.

Poirot was most childishly delighted with this discovery. Personally I could not see that it was of any value whatever, especially as whoever compiled the notes was ludicrously mistaken in some of his opinions. I pointed this out to my friend when we were back in our rooms.

“My dear Poirot,” I said, “you know now what the enemy thinks of us. He appears to have a grossly exaggerated idea of your brain power, and to have absurdly underrated mine, but I do not see how we are better off for knowing this.”

Poirot chuckled in rather an offensive way.

“You do not see, Hastings, no? But surely now we can prepare ourselves for some of their methods of attack now that we are warned of some of our faults. For instance, my friend, we know that you should think before you act. Again, if you meet a red-haired young woman in trouble you should eye her—what you say—askance, is it not?”

Their notes had contained some absurd references to my supposed impulsiveness, and had suggested that I was susceptible to the charms of young women with hair of a certain shade. I thought Poirot’s reference to be in the worst of taste, but fortunately I was able to counter him.

“And what about you?” I demanded. “Are you going to try to cure your ‘overweening vanity?’ Your ‘finicky tidiness?’”

I was quoting, and I could see that he was not pleased with my retort.

“Oh, without doubt, Hastings, in some things they deceive themselves—tant mieux! They will learn in due time. Meanwhile we have learnt something, and to know is to be prepared.”

This last was a favourite axiom of his lately; so much so that I had begun to hate the sound of it.

“We know something, Hastings,” he continued. “Yes, we know something—and that is to the good—but we do not know nearly enough. We must know more.”

“In what way?”

Poirot settled himself back in his chair, straightened a box of matches which I had thrown carelessly down on the table, and assumed an attitude that I knew only too well. I saw that he was prepared to hold forth at some length.

“See you, Hastings, we have to contend against four adversaries, that is against four different personalities. With Number One we have never come into personal contact—we know him, as it were, only by the impress of his mind—and in passing, Hastings, I will tell you that I begin to understand that mind very well—a mind most subtle and Oriental—every scheme and plot that we have encountered has emanated from the brain of Li Chang Yen. Number Two and Number Three are so powerful, so high up, that they are for the present immune from our attacks. Nevertheless what is their safeguard is, by a perverse chance, our safeguard also. They are so much in the limelight that their movements must be carefully ordered. And so we come to the last member of the gang—we come to the man known as Number Four.”

Poirot’s voice altered a little, as it always did when speaking of this particular individual.

“Number Two and Number Three are able to succeed, to go on their way unscathed, owing to their notoriety and their assured position. Number Four succeeds for the opposite reason—he succeeds by the way of obscurity. Who is he? Nobody knows. What does he look like? Again nobody knows. How many times have we seen him, you and I? Five times, is it not? And could either of us say truthfully that we could be sure of recognizing him again?"

I was forced to shake my head, as I ran back in my mind over those five different people who, incredible as it seemed, were one and the same man. The burly lunatic asylum keeper, the man in the buttoned-up overcoat in Paris, James, the footman, the quiet young medical man in the Yellow Jasmine case, and the Russian professor. In no way did any two of these people resemble each other.

"No," I said hopelessly. "We've nothing to go by whatsoever."

Poirot smiled.

"Do not, I pray of you, give way to such enthusiastic despair. We know one or two things."

"What kind of things?" I asked sceptically.

"We know that he is a man of medium height, and of medium or fair colouring. If he were a tall man of swarthy complexion he could never have passed himself off as the fair, stocky doctor. It is child's play, of course, to put on an additional inch or so for the part of James, or the Professor. In the same way he must have a short, straight nose. Additions can be built on to a nose by skilful makeup, but a large nose cannot be successfully reduced at a moment's notice. Then again, he must be a fairly young man, certainly not over thirty-five. You see, we are getting somewhere. A man between thirty and thirty-five, of medium height and colouring, an adept in the art of makeup, and with very few or any teeth of his own."

"What?"

"Surely, Hastings. As the keeper, his teeth were broken and discoloured, in Paris they were even and white, as a doctor they protruded slightly, and as Savaranoff they had unusually long canines. Nothing alters the face so completely as a different set of teeth. You see where all this is leading us?"

"Not exactly," I said cautiously.

“A man carries his profession written in his face, they say.”

“He’s a criminal,” I cried.

“He is an adept in the art of making-up.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Rather a sweeping statement, Hastings, and one which would hardly be appreciated by the theatrical world. Do you not see that the man is, or has been, at one time or another, an actor?”

“An actor?”

“But certainly. He has the whole technique at his fingertips. Now there are two classes of actors, the one who sinks himself in his part, and the one who manages to impress his personality upon it. It is from the latter class that actor-managers usually spring. They seize a part and mould it to their own personality. The former class is quite likely to spend its days doing Mr. Lloyd George at different music halls, or impersonating old men with beards in repertory plays. It is among that former class that we must look for our Number Four. He is a supreme artist in the way he sinks himself in each part he plays.”

I was growing interested.

“So you fancy you may be able to trace his identity through his connection with the stage?”

“Your reasoning is always brilliant, Hastings.”

“It might have been better,” I said coldly, “if the idea had come to you sooner. We have wasted a lot of time.”

“You are in error, mon ami. No more time has been wasted than was unavoidable. For some months now my agents have been engaged on the task. Joseph Aarons is one of them. You remember him? They have compiled a list for me of men fulfilling the necessary qualifications—young men round about the age of thirty, of more or less nondescript appearance, and with a gift for playing character parts—men, moreover, who have definitely left the stage within the last three years."

"Well?" I said, deeply interested.

"The list was, necessarily, rather a long one. For some time now, we have been engaged on the task of elimination. And finally we have boiled the whole thing down to four names. Here they are, my friend."

He tossed me over a sheet of paper. I read its contents aloud.

"Ernest Luttrell. Son of a North Country parson. Always had a kink of some kind in his moral makeup. Was expelled from his public school. Went on the stage at the age of twenty-three. (Then followed a list of parts he had played, with dates and places.) Addicted to drugs. Supposed to have gone to Australia four years ago. Cannot be traced after leaving England. Age 32, height 5ft. 10½in., clean-shaven, hair brown, nose straight, complexion fair, eyes grey.

"John St. Maur. Assumed name. Real name not known. Believed to be of cockney extraction. On stage since quite a child. Did music hall impersonations. Not been heard of for three years. Age, about 33, height 5ft. 10in., slim build, blue eyes, fair colouring.

"Austen Lee. Assumed name. Real name Austen Foly. Good family. Always had taste for acting and distinguished himself in that way at Oxford. Brilliant war record. Acted in—(The usual list followed. It included many repertory plays.) An enthusiast on criminology. Had bad nervous breakdown as the result of a motor accident three and a half years ago, and has not appeared on the stage since. No clue to his present whereabouts. Age 35, height 5ft. 9½in., complexion fair, eyes blue, hair brown.

"Claud Darrell. Supposed to be real name. Some mystery about his origin. Played at music halls, and also in repertory plays. Seems to have had no intimate friends. Was in China in 1919. Returned by way of America. Played a few parts in New York. Did not appear on stage one night, and has never been heard of since. New York police say most mysterious disappearance. Age about 33, hair brown, fair complexion, grey eyes. Height 5ft. 10½in.”

“Most interesting,” I said, as I laid down the paper. “And so this is the result of the investigation of months? These four names. Which of them are you inclined to suspect?”

Poirot made an eloquent gesture.

“Mon ami, for the moment it is an open question. I would just point out to you that Claud Darrell has been in China and America—a fact not without significance, perhaps, but we must not allow ourselves to be unduly biased by that point. It may be a mere coincidence.”

“And the next step?” I asked eagerly.

“Affairs are already in train. Every day cautiously worded advertisements will appear. Friends and relatives of one or the other will be asked to communicate with my solicitor at his office. Even today we might—Aha, the telephone! Probably it is, as usual, the wrong number, and they will regret to have troubled us, but it may be—yes, it may be—that something has arisen.”

I crossed the room and picked up the receiver.

“Yes, yes. M. Poirot’s rooms. Yes, Captain Hastings speaking. Oh, it’s you, Mr. McNeil! (McNeil and Hodgson were Poirot’s solicitors.) I’ll tell him. Yes, we’ll come round at once.”

I replaced the receiver and turned to Poirot, my eyes dancing with excitement.

“I say, Poirot, there’s a woman there. Friend of Claud Darrell’s. Miss Flossie Monro. McNeil wants you to come round.”

“At the instant!” cried Poirot, disappearing into his bedroom, and reappearing with a hat.

A taxi soon took us to our destination, and we were ushered into Mr. McNeil's private office. Sitting in the armchair facing the solicitor was a somewhat lurid-looking lady no longer in her first youth. Her hair was of an impossible yellow, and was prolific in curls over each ear, her eyelids were heavily blackened, and she had by no means forgotten the rouge and the lip salve.

"Ah, here is M. Poirot!" said Mr. McNeil. "M. Poirot, this is Miss—er—Monro, who has very kindly called to give us some information."

"Ah, but that is most kind!" cried Poirot.

He came forward with great empressement, and shook the lady warmly by the hand.

"Mademoiselle blooms like a flower in this dry-as-dust old office," he added, careless of the feelings of Mr. McNeil.

This outrageous flattery was not without effect. Miss Monro blushed and simpered.

"Oh, go on now, Mr. Poirot!" she exclaimed. "I know what you Frenchmen are like."

"Mademoiselle, we are not mute like Englishmen before beauty. Not that I am a Frenchman—I am a Belgian, you see."

"I've been to Ostend myself," said Miss Monro.

The whole affair, as Poirot would have said, was marching splendidly.

"And so you can tell us something about Mr. Claud Darrell?" continued Poirot.

"I knew Mr. Darrell very well at one time," explained the lady. "And I saw your advertisement, being out of a shop for the moment, and, my time being my own, I said to myself: There, they want to know about poor old Claudie—lawyers, too—maybe it's a fortune looking for the rightful heir. I'd better go round at once."

Mr. McNeil rose.

“Well, Monsieur Poirot, shall I leave you for a little conversation with Miss Monro?”

“You are too amiable. But stay—a little idea presents itself to me. The hour of the déjeuner approaches. Mademoiselle will perhaps honour me by coming out to luncheon with me?”

Miss Monro’s eyes glistened. It struck me that she was in exceedingly low water, and that the chance of a square meal was not to be despised.

A few minutes later saw us all in a taxi, bound for one of London’s most expensive restaurants. Once arrived there, Poirot ordered a most delectable lunch, and then turned to his guest.

“And for wine, mademoiselle? What do you say to champagne?”

Miss Monro said nothing—or everything.

The meal started pleasantly. Poirot replenished the lady’s glass with thoughtful assiduity, and gradually slid on to the topic nearest his heart.

“The poor Mr. Darrell. What a pity he is not with us.”

“Yes, indeed,” sighed Miss Monro. “Poor boy, I do wonder what’s become of him.”

“Is it a long time since you have seen him, yes?”

“Oh, simply ages—not since the war. He was a funny boy, Claudie, very close about things, never told you a word about himself. But, of course, that all fits in if he’s a missing heir. Is it a title, Mr. Poirot?”

“Alas, a mere heritage,” said Poirot unblushingly. “But you see, it may be a question of identification. That is why it is necessary for us to find someone who knew him very well indeed. You knew him very well, did you not, mademoiselle?”

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Poirot. You're a gentleman. You know how to order a lunch for a lady—which is more than some of these young whippersnappers do nowadays. Downright mean, I call it. As I was saying, you being a Frenchman won't be shocked. Ah, you Frenchmen! Naughty, naughty!" She wagged her finger at him in an excess of archness. "Well, there it was, me and Claudie, two young things—what else could you expect? And I've still a kindly feeling for him. Though, mind you, he didn't treat me well—no, he didn't—he didn't treat me well at all. Not as a lady should be treated. They're all the same when it comes to a question of money."

"No, no, mademoiselle, do not say that," protested Poirot, filling up her glass once more. "Could you now describe this Mr. Darrell to me?"

"He wasn't anything so very much to look at," said Flossie Monro dreamily. "Neither tall nor short, you know, but quite well set up. Spruce looking. Eyes a sort of blue-grey. And more or less fair-haired, I suppose. But oh, what an artist! I never saw anyone to touch him in the profession! He'd have made his name before now if it hadn't been for jealousy. Ah, Mr. Poirot, jealousy—you wouldn't believe it, you really wouldn't, what we artists have to suffer through jealousy. Why, I remember once at Manchester —"

We displayed what patience we could in listening to a long complicated story about a pantomime, and the infamous conduct of the principal boy. Then Poirot led her gently back to the subject of Claud Darrell.

"It is very interesting, all this that you are able to tell us, mademoiselle, about Mr. Darrell. Women are such wonderful observers—they see everything, they notice the little detail that escapes the mere man. I have seen a woman identify one man out of a dozen others—and why, do you think? She had observed that he had a trick of stroking his nose when he was agitated. Now would a man ever have thought of noticing a thing like that?"

"Did you ever!" cried Miss Monro. "I suppose we do notice things. I remember Claudie, now I come to think of it, always fiddling with his bread at table. He'd get a little piece between his fingers and then dab it round to pick up crumbs. I’ve seen him do it a hundred times. Why, I’d know him anywhere by that one trick of his.”

“Is not that just what I say? The marvellous observation of a woman. And did you ever speak to him about this little habit of his, mademoiselle?”

“No, I didn’t, Mr. Poirot. You know what men are! They don’t like you to notice things—especially if it should seem you were telling them off about it. I never said a word—but many’s the time I smiled to myself. Bless you, he never knew he was doing it even.”

Poirot nodded gently. I noticed that his own hand was shaking a little as he stretched it out to his glass.

“Then there is always handwriting as a means of establishing identity,” he remarked. “Without doubt you have preserved a letter written by Mr. Darrell?”

Flossie Monro shook her head regretfully.

“He was never one for writing. Never wrote me a line in his life.”

“That is a pity,” said Poirot.

“I tell you what, though,” said Miss Monro suddenly. “I’ve got a photograph if that would be any good?”

“You have a photograph?”

Poirot almost sprang from his seat with excitement.

“It’s quite an old one—eight years old at least.”

“Ça ne fait rien! No matter how old and faded! Ah, ma foi, but what stupendous luck! You will permit me to inspect that photograph, mademoiselle?”

“Why, of course.”

"Perhaps you will even permit me to have a copy made? It would not take long."

"Certainly if you like."

Miss Monro rose.

"Well, I must run away," she declared archly. "Very glad to have met you and your friend, Mr. Poirot."

"And the photograph? When may I have it?"

"I'll look it out tonight. I think I know where to lay my hands upon it. And I'll send it to you right away."

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. You are all that is of the most amiable. I hope that we shall soon be able to arrange another little lunch together."

"As soon as you like," said Miss Monro. "I'm willing."

"Let me see, I do not think that I have your address?"

With a grand air, Miss Monro drew a card from her handbag, and handed it to him. It was a somewhat dirty card, and the original address had been scratched out and another substituted in pencil.

Then, with a good many bows and gesticulations on Poirot's part, we bade farewell to the lady and got away.

"Do you really think this photograph so important?" I asked Poirot.

"Yes, mon ami. The camera does not lie. One can magnify a photograph, seize salient points that otherwise would remain unnoticed. And then there are a thousand details—such as the structure of the ears, which no one could ever describe to you in words. Oh, yes, it is a great chance, this, which has come our way! That is why I propose to take precautions."

He went across to the telephone as he finished speaking, and gave a number which I knew to be that of a private detective agency which he sometimes employed. His instructions were clear and definite. Two men were to go to the address he gave, and, in general terms, were to watch over the safety of Miss Monro. They were to follow her wherever she went.

Poirot hung up the receiver and came back to me.

“Do you really think that necessary, Poirot?” I asked.

“It may be. There is no doubt that we are watched, you and I, and since that is so, they will soon know with whom we were lunching today. And it is possible that Number Four will scent danger.”

About twenty minutes later the telephone bell rang. I answered it. A curt voice spoke into the phone.

“Is that Mr. Poirot? St. James’s Hospital speaking. A young woman was brought in ten minutes ago. Street accident. Miss Flossie Monro. She is asking very urgently for Mr. Poirot. But he must come at once. She can’t possibly last long.”

I repeated the words to Poirot. His face went white.

“Quick, Hastings. We must go like the wind.”

A taxi took us to the hospital in less than ten minutes. We asked for Miss Monro, and were taken immediately to the Accident Ward. But a white-capped sister met us in the doorway.

Poirot read the news in her face.

“It is over, eh?”

“She died six minutes ago.”

Poirot stood as though stunned.

The nurse, mistaking his emotion, began speaking gently.

“She did not suffer, and she was unconscious towards the last. She was run over by a motor, you know—and the driver of the car did not even stop. Wicked, isn’t it? I hope someone took the number.”

“The stars fight against us,” said Poirot, in a low voice.

“You would like to see her?”

The nurse led the way, and we followed.

Poor Flossie Monro, with her rouge and her dyed hair. She lay there very peacefully, with a little smile on her lips.

“Yes,” murmured Poirot. “The stars fight against us—but is it the stars?” He lifted his head as though struck by a sudden idea. “Is it the stars, Hastings? If it is not—if it is not … Oh, I swear to you, my friend, standing here by this poor woman’s body, that I will have no mercy when the time comes!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

But Poirot had turned to the nurse and was eagerly demanding information. A list of the articles found in her handbag was finally obtained. Poirot gave a suppressed cry as he read it over.

“You see, Hastings, you see?”

“See what?”

“There is no mention of a latchkey. But she must have had a latchkey with her. No, she was run down in cold blood, and the first person who bent over her took the key from her bag. But we may yet be in time. He may not have been able to find at once what he sought.”

Another taxi took us to the address Flossie Monro had given us, a squalid block of Mansions in an unsavoury neighbourhood. It was some time before we could gain admission to Miss Monro’s flat, but we had at least the satisfaction of knowing that no one could leave it whilst we were on guard outside.

Eventually we got in. It was plain that someone had been before us. The contents of drawers and cupboards were strewn all over the floor. Locks had been forced, and small tables had even been overthrown, so violent had been the searcher’s haste.

Poirot began to hunt through the débris. Suddenly he stood erect with a cry, holding out something. It was an old-fashioned photograph frame—empty.

He turned it slowly over. Affixed to the back was a small round label—a price label.

“It cost four shillings,” I commented.

“Mon Dieu! Hastings, use your eyes. That is a new clean label. It was stuck there by the man who took out the photograph, the man who was here before us, but knew that we should come, and so left this for us—Claud Darrell—alias Number Four.”

Fifteen

THE TERRIBLE CATASTROPHE

It was after the tragic death of Miss Flossie Monro that I began to be aware of a change in Poirot. Up to now, his invincible confidence in himself had stood the test. But it seemed as though, at last, the long strain was beginning to tell. His manner was grave and brooding, and his nerves were on edge. In these days he was as jumpy as a cat. He avoided all discussion of the Big Four as far as possible, and seemed to throw himself into his ordinary work with almost his old ardour. Nevertheless, I knew that he was secretly active in the big matter. Extraordinary-looking Slavs were constantly calling to see him, and though he vouchsafed no explanation as to these mysterious activities, I realized that he was building some new defence or weapon of opposition with the help of these somewhat repulsive-looking foreigners. Once, purely by chance, I happened to see the entries in his passbook—he had asked me to verify some small item—and I noticed the paying out of a huge sum—a huge sum even for Poirot who was coining money nowadays—to some Russian with apparently every letter of the alphabet in his name.

But he gave no clue as to the line on which he proposed to operate. Only over and over again he gave utterance to one phrase. “It is a mistake to underestimate your adversary. Remember that, mon ami.” And I realized that that was the pitfall he was striving at all costs to avoid.

So matters went on until the end of March, and then one morning Poirot made a remark which startled me considerably.

“This morning, my friend, I should recommend the best suit. We go to call upon the Home Secretary.”

“Indeed? That is very exciting. He has called you in to take up a case?”

“Not exactly. The interview is of my seeking. You may remember my saying that I once did him some small service? He is inclined to be foolishly enthusiastic over my capabilities in consequence, and I am about to trade on this attitude of his. As you know, the French Premier, M. Desjardeaux, is over in London, and at my request the Home Secretary has arranged for him to be present at our little conference this morning.”

The Right Honourable Sydney Crowther, His Majesty’s Secretary of State for Home Affairs, was a well-known and popular figure. A man of some fifty years of age, with a quizzical expression and shrewd grey eyes, he received us with that delightful bonhomie of manner which was well-known to be one of his principal assets.

Standing with his back to the fireplace was a tall thin man with a pointed black beard and a sensitive face.

“M. Desjardeaux,” said Crowther. “Allow me to introduce to you M. Hercule Poirot of whom you may, perhaps, already have heard.”

The Frenchman bowed and shook hands.

“I have indeed heard of M. Hercule Poirot,” he said pleasantly. “Who has not?”

“You are too amiable, monsieur,” said Poirot, bowing, but his face flushed with pleasure.

“Any word for an old friend?” asked a quiet voice, and a man came forward from a corner by a tall bookcase.

It was our old acquaintance, Mr. Ingles.

Poirot shook him warmly by the hand.

“And now, M. Poirot,” said Crowther. “We are at your service. I understand you to say that you had a communication of the utmost importance to make to us.”

“That is so, monsieur. There is in the world today a vast organization—an organization of crime. It is controlled by four individuals, who are known and spoken of as the Big Four. Number One is a Chinaman, Li Chang Yen; Number Two is the American multimillionaire, Abe Ryland; Number Three is a Frenchwoman; Number Four I have every reason to believe is an obscure English actor called Claud Darrell. These four are banded together to destroy the existing social order, and to replace it with an anarchy in which they would reign as dictators."

"Incredible," muttered the Frenchman. "Ryland, mixed up with a thing of that kind? Surely the idea is too fantastic."

"Listen, monsieur, whilst I recount to you some of the doings of this Big Four."

It was an enthralling narrative which Poirot unfolded. Familiar as I was with all the details, they thrilled me anew as I heard the bald recital of our adventures and escapes.

M. Desjardeaux looked mutely at Mr. Crowther as Poirot finished. The other answered the look.

"Yes, M. Desjardeaux, I think we must admit the existence of a 'Big Four.' Scotland Yard was inclined to jeer at first, but they have been forced to admit that M. Poirot was right in many of his claims. I cannot but feel that M. Poirot—er—exaggerates a little."

For answer Poirot set forth ten salient points. I have been asked not to give them to the public even now, and so I refrain from doing so, but they included the extraordinary disasters to submarines which occurred in a certain month, and also a series of aeroplane accidents and forced landings. According to Poirot, these were all the work of the Big Four, and bore witness to the fact that they were in possession of various scientific secrets unknown to the world at large.

This brought us straight to the question which I had been waiting for the French premier to ask.

"You say that the third member of this organization is a Frenchwoman. Have you any idea of her name?"

“It is a well-known name, monsieur. An honoured name. Number Three is no less than the famous Madame Olivier.”

At the mention of the world-famous scientist, successor to the Curies, M. Desjardeaux positively bounded from his chair, his face purple with emotion.

“Madame Olivier! Impossible! Absurd! It is an insult what you say there!”

Poirot shook his head gently, but made no answer.

Desjardeaux looked at him in stupefaction for some moments. Then his face cleared, and he glanced at the Home Secretary and tapped his forehead significantly.

“M. Poirot is a great man,” he observed. “But even the great man—sometimes he has his little mania, does he not? And seeks in high places for fancied conspiracies. It is well-known. You agree with me, do you not, Mr. Crowther?”

The Home Secretary did not answer for some minutes. Then he spoke slowly and heavily.

“Upon my soul, I don’t know,” he said at last. “I have always had and still have the utmost belief in M. Poirot, but—well, this takes a bit of believing.”

“This Li Chang Yen, too,” continued M. Desjardeaux. “Who has ever heard of him?”

“I have,” said the unexpected voice of Mr. Ingles.

The Frenchman stared at him, and he stared placidly back again, looking more like a Chinese idol than ever. “Mr. Ingles,” explained the Home Secretary, “is the greatest authority we have on the interior of China.”

“And you have heard of this Li Chang Yen?”

“Until M. Poirot here came to me, I imagined that I was the only man in England who had. Make no mistake, M. Desjardeaux, there is only one man in China who counts today—Li Chang Yen. He has, perhaps, I only say perhaps, the finest brain in the world at the present time.”

M. Desjardeaux sat as though stunned. Presently, however, he rallied.

“There may be something in what you say, M. Poirot,” he said coldly. “But as regards Madame Olivier, you are most certainly mistaken. She is a true daughter of France, and devoted solely to the cause of science.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders and did not answer.

There was a minute or two’s pause, and then my little friend rose to his feet, with an air of dignity that sat rather oddly upon his quaint personality.

“That is all I have to say, messieurs—to warn you. I thought it likely that I should not be believed. But at least you will be on your guard. My words will sink in, and each fresh event that comes along will confirm your wavering faith. It was necessary for me to speak now—later I might not have been able to do so.”

“You mean—?” asked Crowther, impressed in spite of himself by the gravity of Poirot’s tone.

“I mean, monsieur, that since I have penetrated the identity of Number Four, my life is not worth an hour’s purchase. He will seek to destroy me at all costs—and not for nothing is he named ‘The Destroyer.’ Messieurs, I salute you. To you, M. Crowther, I deliver this key, and this sealed envelope. I have got together all my notes on the case, and my ideas as to how best to meet the menace that any day may break upon the world, and have placed them in a certain safe deposit. In the event of my death, M. Crowther, I authorize you to take charge of those papers and make what use you can of them. And now, messieurs, I wish you good day.”

Desjardeaux merely bowed coldly, but Crowther sprang up and held out his hand.

“You have converted me, M. Poirot. Fantastic as the whole thing seems, I believe utterly in the truth of what you have told us.”

Ingles left at the same time as we did.

“I am not disappointed with the interview,” said Poirot, as we walked along. “I did not expect to convince Desjardeaux, but I have at least ensured that, if I die, my knowledge does not die with me. And I have made one or two converts. Pas si mal!”

“I’m with you, as you know,” said Ingles. “By the way, I’m going out to China as soon as I can get off.”

“Is that wise?”

“No,” said Ingles drily. “But it’s necessary. One must do what one can.”

“Ah, you are a brave man!” cried Poirot with emotion. “If we were not in the street, I would embrace you.”

I fancied that Ingles looked rather relieved.

“I don’t suppose that I shall be in any more danger in China than you are in London,” he growled.

“That is possibly true enough,” admitted Poirot. “I hope that they will not succeed in massacring Hastings also, that is all. That would annoy me greatly.”

I interrupted this cheerful conversation to remark that I had no intention of letting myself be massacred, and shortly afterwards Ingles parted from us.

For some time we went along in silence, which Poirot at length broke by uttering a totally unexpected remark.

“I think—I really think—that I shall have to bring my brother into this.”

“Your brother,” I cried, astonished. “I never knew you had a brother?”

“You surprise me, Hastings. Do you not know that all celebrated detectives have brothers who would be even more celebrated than they are were it not for constitutional indolence?”

Poirot employs a peculiar manner sometimes which makes it wellnigh impossible to know whether he is jesting or in earnest. That manner was very evident at the moment.

“What is your brother’s name?” I asked, trying to adjust myself to this new idea.

“Achille Poirot,” replied Poirot gravely. “He lives near Spa in Belgium.”

“What does he do?” I asked with some curiosity, putting aside a half-formed wonder as to the character and disposition of the late Madame Poirot, and her classical taste in Christian names.

“He does nothing. He is, as I tell, of a singularly indolent disposition. But his abilities are hardly less than my own—which is saying a great deal.”

“Is he like you to look at?”

“Not unlike. But not nearly so handsome. And he wears no moustaches.”

“Is he older than you, or younger?”

“He happens to have been born on the same day.”

“A twin,” I cried.

“Exactly, Hastings. You jump to the right conclusion with unfailing accuracy. But here we are at home again. Let us at once get to work on that little affair of the Duchess’s necklace.”

But the Duchess’s necklace was doomed to wait awhile. A case of quite another description was waiting for us.

Our landlady, Mrs. Pearson, at once informed us that a hospital nurse had called and was waiting to see Poirot.

We found her sitting in the big armchair facing the window, a pleasant-faced woman of middle age, in a dark blue uniform. She was a little reluctant to come to the point, but Poirot soon put her at her ease, and she embarked upon her story.

“You see, M. Poirot, I’ve never come across anything of the kind before. I was sent for, from the Lark Sisterhood, to go down to a case in Hertfordshire. An old gentleman, it is, Mr. Templeton. Quite a pleasant house, and quite pleasant people. The wife, Mrs. Templeton, is much younger than the husband, and he has a son by his first marriage who lives there. I don’t know that the young man and the stepmother always get on together. He’s not quite what you’d call normal—not ‘wanting’ exactly, but decidedly dull in the intellect. Well, this illness of Mr. Templeton’s seemed to me from the first to be mysterious. At times there seemed really nothing the matter with him, and then he suddenly has one of these gastric attacks with pain and vomiting. But the doctor seemed quite satisfied, and it wasn’t for me to say anything. But I couldn’t help thinking about it. And then—” She paused, and became rather red.

“Something happened which aroused your suspicions?” suggested Poirot.

“Yes.”

But she still seemed to find it difficult to go on.

“I found the servants were passing remarks too.”

“About Mr. Templeton’s illness?”

“Oh, no! About—about this other thing—”

“Mrs. Templeton?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Templeton and the doctor, perhaps?”

Poirot had an uncanny flair in these things. The nurse threw him a grateful glance and went on.

“They were passing remarks. And then one day I happened to see them together myself—in the garden—”

It was left at that. Our client was in such an agony of outraged propriety that no one could feel it necessary to ask exactly what she had seen in the garden. She had evidently seen quite enough to make up her own mind on the situation.

“The attacks got worse and worse. Dr. Treves said it was all perfectly natural and to be expected, and that Mr. Templeton could not possibly live long, but I’ve never seen anything like it before myself—not in all my long experience of nursing. It seemed to me much more like some form of—”

She paused, hesitating.

“Arsenical poisoning?” said Poirot helpfully.

She nodded.

“And then, too, he, the patient, I mean, said something queer. ‘They’ll do for me, the four of them. They’ll do for me yet.’”

“Eh?” said Poirot quickly.

“Those were his very words, M. Poirot. He was in great pain at the time, of course, and hardly knew what he was saying.”

“‘They’ll do for me, the four of them,’” repeated Poirot thoughtfully. “What did he mean by ‘the four of them,’ do you think?”

“That I can’t say, M. Poirot. I thought perhaps he meant his wife and son, and the doctor, and perhaps Miss Clark, Mrs. Templeton’s companion. That would make four, wouldn’t it? He might think they were all in league against him.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said Poirot, in a preoccupied voice. “What about food? Could you take no precautions about that?”

"I'm always doing what I can. But, of course, sometimes Mrs. Templeton insists on bringing him his food herself, and then there are the times when I am off duty."

"Exactly. And you are not sure enough of your ground to go to the police?"

The nurse's face showed her horror at the mere idea.

"What I have done, M. Poirot, is this. Mr. Templeton had a very bad attack after partaking of a bowl of soup. I took a little from the bottom of the bowl afterwards, and have brought it up with me. I have been spared for the day to visit a sick mother, as Mr. Templeton was well enough to be left."

She drew out a little bottle of dark fluid and handed it to Poirot.

"Excellent, mademoiselle. We will have this analysed immediately. If you will return here in, say, an hour's time I think that we shall be able to dispose of your suspicions one way or another."

First extracting from our visitor her name and qualifications, he ushered her out. Then he wrote a note and sent it off together with the bottle of soup. Whilst we waited to hear the result, Poirot amused himself by verifying the nurse's credentials, somewhat to my surprise.

"No, no, my friend," he declared. "I do well to be careful. Do not forget the Big Four are on our track."

However, he soon elicited the information that a nurse of the name of Mabel Palmer was a member of the Lark Institute and had been sent to the case in question.

"So far, so good," he said, with a twinkle. "And now here comes Nurse Palmer back again, and here also is our analyst's report.

"Is there arsenic in it?" she asked breathlessly.

Poirot shook his head, refolding the paper.

"No."

We were both immeasurably surprised.

“There is no arsenic in it,” continued Poirot. “But there is antimony, and that being the case, we will start immediately for Hertfordshire. Pray Heaven that we are not too late.”

It was decided that the simplest plan was for Poirot to represent himself truly as a detective, but that the ostensible reason of his visit should be to question Mrs. Templeton about a servant formerly in her employment whose name he obtained from Nurse Palmer, and whom he could represent as being concerned in a jewel robbery.

It was late when we arrived at Elmstead, as the house was called. We had allowed Nurse Palmer to precede us by about twenty minutes, so that there should be no question of our all arriving together.

Mrs. Templeton, a tall dark woman, with sinuous movements and uneasy eyes, received us. I noticed that as Poirot announced his profession, she drew in her breath with a sudden hiss, as though badly startled, but she answered his question about the maidservant readily enough. And then, to test her, Poirot embarked upon a long history of a poisoning case in which a guilty wife had figured. His eyes never left her face as he talked, and try as she would, she could hardly conceal her rising agitation. Suddenly, with an incoherent word of excuse, she hurried from the room.

We were not long left alone. A squarely built man with a small red moustache and pince-nez came in.

“Dr. Treves,” he introduced himself. “Mrs. Templeton asked me to make her excuses to you. She’s in a very bad state, you know. Nervous strain. Worry over her husband and all that. I’ve prescribed bed and bromide. But she hopes you’ll stay and take pot luck, and I’m to do host. We’ve heard of you down here, M. Poirot, and we mean to make the most of you. Ah, here’s Micky!”

A shambling young man entered the room. He had a very round face, and foolish-looking eyebrows raised as though in perpetual surprise. He grinned awkwardly as he shook hands. This was clearly the “wanting” son.

Presently we all went in to dinner. Dr. Treves left the room—to open some wine, I think—and suddenly the boy's physiognomy underwent a startling change. He leant forward, staring at Poirot.

"You've come about Father," he said, nodding his head. "I know. I know lots of things—but nobody thinks I do. Mother will be glad when Father's dead and she can marry Dr. Treves. She isn't my own mother, you know. I don't like her. She wants Father to die."

It was all rather horrible. Luckily, before Poirot had time to reply, the doctor came back, and we had to carry on a forced conversation.

And then suddenly Poirot lay back in his chair with a hollow groan. His face was contorted with pain.

"My dear sir, what's the matter?" cried the doctor.

"A sudden spasm. I am used to them. No, no, I require no assistance from you, doctor. If I might lie down upstairs."

His request was instantly acceded to, and I accompanied him upstairs, where he collapsed on the bed, groaning heavily.

For the first minute or two I had been taken in, but I had quickly realized that Poirot was—as he would have put it—playing the comedy, and that his object was to be left alone upstairs near the patient's room.

Hence I was quite prepared when, the instant we were alone, he sprang up.

"Quick, Hastings, the window. There is ivy outside. We can climb down before they begin to suspect."

"Climb down?"

"Yes, we must get out of this house at once. You saw him at dinner?"

"The doctor?"

“No, young Templeton. His trick with his bread. Do you remember what Flossie Monro told us before she died? That Claud Darrell had a habit of dabbing his bread on the table to pick up crumbs. Hastings, this is a vast plot, and that vacant-looking young man is our archenemy—Number Four! Hurry.”

I did not wait to argue. Incredible as the whole thing seemed it was wiser not to delay. We scrambled down the ivy as quietly as we could and made a beeline for the small town and the railway station. We were just able to catch the last train, the 8:34 which would land us in town about eleven o’clock.

“A plot,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “How many of them were in it, I wonder? I suspect that the whole Templeton family are just so many agents of the Big Four. Did they simply want to decoy us down there? Or was it more subtle than that? Did they intend to play the comedy down there and keep me interested until they had had time to do—what? I wonder now.”

He remained very thoughtful.

Arrived at our lodgings, he restrained me at the door of the sitting room.

“Attention, Hastings. I have my suspicions. Let me enter first.”

He did so, and, to my slight amusement, took the precaution to press on the electric switch with an old galosh. Then he went round the room like a strange cat, cautiously, delicately, on the alert for danger. I watched him for some time, remaining obediently where I had been put by the wall.

“It seems all right, Poirot,” I said impatiently.

“It seems so, mon ami, it seems so. But let us make sure.”

“Rot,” I said. “I shall light the fire, anyway, and have a pipe. I’ve caught you out for once. You had the matches last and you didn’t put them back in the holder as usual—the very thing you’re always cursing me for doing.”

I stretched out my hand. I heard Poirot’s warning cry—saw him leaping towards me—my hand touched the matchbox.

Then—a flash of blue flame—an ear-rending crash—and darkness—

I came to myself to find the familiar face of our old friend Dr. Ridgeway bending over me. An expression of relief passed over his features.

“Keep still,” he said soothingly. “You’re all right. There’s been an accident, you know.”

“Poirot?” I murmured.

“You’re in my digs. Everything’s quite all right.”

A cold fear clutched at my heart. His evasion woke a horrible fear.

“Poirot?” I reiterated. “What of Poirot?”

He saw that I had to know and that further evasions were useless.

“By a miracle you escaped—Poirot—did not!”

A cry burst from my lips.

“Not dead? Not dead?”

Ridgeway bowed his head, his features working with emotion.

With desperate energy I pulled myself to a sitting position.

“Poirot may be dead,” I said weakly. “But his spirit lives on. I will carry on his work! Death to the Big Four!”

Then I fell back, fainting.

Sixteen

THE DYING CHINAMAN

Even now I can hardly bear to write of those days in March.

Poirot—the unique, the inimitable Hercule Poirot—dead! There was a particularly diabolical touch in the disarranged matchbox, which was certain to catch his eye, and which he would hasten to rearrange—and thereby touch off the explosion. That, as a matter of fact, it was I who actually precipitated the catastrophe never ceased to fill me with unavailing remorse. It was, Dr. Ridgeway said, a perfect miracle that I had not been killed, but had escaped with a slight concussion.

Although it had seemed to me as though I regained consciousness almost immediately, it was in reality over twenty-four hours before I came back to life. It was not until the evening of the day following that I was able to stagger feebly into an adjoining room, and view with deep emotion the plain elm coffin which held the remains of one of the most marvellous men this world has ever known.

From the very first moment of regaining consciousness I had had only one purpose in mind—to avenge Poirot's death, and to hunt down the Big Four remorselessly.

I had thought that Ridgeway would have been of one mind with me about this, but to my surprise the good doctor seemed unaccountably lukewarm.

"Get back to South America," was his advice, tendered on every occasion. Why attempt the impossible? Put as delicately as possible, his opinion amounted to this: If Poirot, the unique Poirot, had failed, was it likely that I should succeed?

But I was obstinate. Putting aside any question as to whether I had the necessary qualifications for the task (and I may say in passing that I did not entirely agree with his views on this point) I had worked so long with Poirot that I knew his methods by heart, and felt fully capable of taking up the work where he had laid it down; it was, with me, a question of feeling. My friend had been foully murdered. Was I to go tamely back to South America without an effort to bring his murderers to justice?

I said all this and more to Ridgeway, who listened attentively enough.

“All the same,” he said when I had finished, “my advice does not vary. I am earnestly convinced that Poirot himself, if he were here, would urge you to return. In his name, I beg of you, Hastings, abandon these wild ideas and go back to your ranch.”

To that only one answer was possible, and, shaking his head sadly, he said no more.

It was a month before I was fully restored to health. Towards the end of April, I sought, and obtained, an interview with the Home Secretary.

Mr. Crowther’s manner was reminiscent of that of Dr. Ridgeway. It was soothing and negative. Whilst appreciating the offer of my services, he gently and considerately declined them. The papers referred to by Poirot had passed into his keeping, and he assured me that all possible steps were being taken to deal with the approaching menace.

With that cold comfort I was forced to be satisfied. Mr. Crowther ended the interview by urging me to return to South America. I found the whole thing profoundly unsatisfactory.

I should, I suppose, in its proper place, have described Poirot’s funeral. It was a solemn and moving ceremony, and the extraordinary number of floral tributes passed belief. They came from high and low alike, and bore striking testimony to the place my friend had made for himself in the country of his adoption. For myself, I was frankly overcome by emotion as I stood by the graveside and thought of all our varied experiences and the happy days we had passed together.

By the beginning of May I had mapped out a plan of campaign. I felt that I could not do better than keep to Poirot’s scheme of advertising for any information respecting Claud Darrell. I had an advertisement to this effect inserted in a number of morning newspapers, and I was sitting in a small restaurant in Soho, and judging of the effect of the advertisement, when a small paragraph in another part of the paper gave me a nasty shock.

Very briefly, it reported the mysterious disappearance of Mr. John Ingles from the S.S. Shanghai, shortly after the latter had left Marseilles. Although the weather was perfectly smooth, it was feared that the unfortunate gentleman must have fallen overboard. The paragraph ended with a brief reference to Mr. Ingles's long and distinguished service in China.

The news was unpleasant. I read into Ingles's death a sinister motive. Not for one moment did I believe the theory of an accident. Ingles had been murdered, and his death was only too clearly the handiwork of that accursed Big Four.

As I sat there, stunned by the blow, and turning the whole matter over in my mind, I was startled by the remarkable behaviour of the man sitting opposite me. So far I had not paid much attention to him. He was a thin, dark man of middle age, sallow of complexion, with a small pointed beard. He had sat down opposite me so quietly that I had hardly noticed his arrival.

But his actions now were decidedly peculiar, to say the least of them. Leaning forward, he deliberately helped me to salt, putting it in four little heaps round the edge of my plate.

“You will excuse me,” he said, in a melancholy voice. “To help a stranger to salt is to help them to sorrow, they say. That may be an unavoidable necessity. I hope not, though. I hope that you will be reasonable.”

Then, with a certain significance, he repeated his operations with the salt on his own plate. The symbol 4 was too plain to be missed. I looked at him searchingly. In no way that I could see did he resemble the young Templeton, or James the footman, or any other of the various personalities we had come across. Nevertheless, I was convinced that I had to do with no less than the redoubtable Number Four himself. In his voice there was certainly a faint resemblance to the buttoned-up stranger who had called upon us in Paris.

I looked round, undecided as to my course of action. Reading my thoughts, he smiled and gently shook his head.

“I should not advise it,” he remarked. “Remember what came of your hasty action in Paris. Let me assure you that my way of retreat is well assured. Your ideas are inclined to be a little crude, Captain Hastings, if I may say so.”

“You devil,” I said, choking with rage, “you incarnate devil!”

“Heated—just a trifle heated. Your late lamented friend would have told you that a man who keeps calm has always a great advantage.”

“You dare to speak of him,” I cried. “The man you murdered so foully. And you come here—”

He interrupted me.

“I came here for an excellent and peaceful purpose. To advise you to return at once to South America. If you do so, that is the end of the matter as far as the Big Four are concerned. You and yours will not be molested in any way. I give you my word as to that.”

I laughed scornfully.

“And if I refuse to obey your autocratic command?”

“It is hardly a command. Shall we say that it is—a warning?”

There was a cold menace in his tone.

“The first warning,” he said softly. “You will be well advised not to disregard it.”

Then, before I had any hint of his intention, he rose and slipped quickly away towards the door. I sprang to my feet and was after him in a second, but by bad luck I cannoned straight into an enormously fat man who blocked the way between me and the next table. By the time I had disentangled myself, my quarry was just passing through the doorway, and the next delay was from a waiter carrying a huge pile of plates who crashed into me without the least warning. By the time I got to the door there was no sign of the thin man with the dark beard.

The waiter was fulsome in apologies, the fat man was sitting placidly at a table ordering his lunch. There was nothing to show that both occurrences had not been a pure accident. Nevertheless, I had my own opinion as to that. I knew well enough that the agents of the Big Four were everywhere.

Needless to say, I paid no heed to the warning given me. I would do or die in the good cause. I received in all only two answers to the advertisements. Neither of them gave me any information of value. They were both from actors who had played with Claud Darrell at one time or another. Neither of them knew him at all intimately, and no new light was thrown upon the problem of his identity and present whereabouts.

No further sign came from the Big Four until about ten days later. I was crossing Hyde Park, lost in thought, when a voice, rich with a persuasive foreign inflection, hailed me.

“Captain Hastings, is it not?”

A big limousine had just drawn up by the pavement. A woman was leaning out. Exquisitely dressed in black, with wonderful pearls, I recognized the lady first known to us as Countess Vera Rossakoff, and afterwards under a different alias as an agent of the Big Four. Poirot, for some reason or other, had always had a sneaking fondness for the countess. Something in her very flamboyance attracted the little man. She was, he was wont to declare in moments of enthusiasm, a woman in a thousand. That she was arrayed against us, on the side of our bitterest enemies, never seemed to weigh in his judgement.

“Ah, do not pass on!” said the countess. “I have something most important to say to you. And do not try to have me arrested either, for that would be stupid. You were always a little stupid—yes, yes, it is so. You are stupid now, when you persist in disregarding the warning we sent you. It is the second warning I bring you. Leave England at once. You can do no good here—I tell you that frankly. You will never accomplish anything.”

"In that case," I said stiffly, "it seems rather extraordinary that you are all so anxious to get me out of the country."

The countess shrugged her shoulders—magnificent shoulders, and a magnificent gesture.

"For my part, I think that, too, stupid. I would leave you here to play about happily. But the chiefs, you see, are fearful that some word of yours may give great help to those more intelligent than yourself. Hence—you are to be banished."

The countess appeared to have a flattering idea of my abilities. I concealed my annoyance. Doubtless this attitude of hers was assumed expressly to annoy me and to give me the idea that I was unimportant.

"It would, of course, be quite easy to—remove you," she continued, "but I am quite sentimental sometimes. I pleaded for you. You have a nice little wife somewhere, have you not? And it would please the poor little man who is dead to know that you were not to be killed. I always liked him, you know. He was clever—but clever! Had it not been a case of four against one I honestly believe he might have been too much for us. I confess it frankly—he was my master! I sent a wreath to the funeral as a token of my admiration—an enormous one of crimson roses. Crimson roses express my temperament."

I listened in silence and a growing distaste.

"You have the look of a mule when it puts its ears back and kicks. Well, I have delivered my warning. Remember this, the third warning will come by the hand of the Destroyer—"

She made a sign, and the car whirled away rapidly. I noted the number mechanically, but without the hope that it would lead to anything. The Big Four were not apt to be careless in details.

I went home a little sobered. One fact had emerged from the countess's flood of volubility. I was in real danger of my life. Though I had no intention of abandoning the struggle, I saw that it behoved me to walk warily and adopt every possible precaution.

Whilst I was reviewing all these facts and seeking for the best line of action, the telephone bell rang. I crossed the room and picked up the receiver.

“Yes. Hallo. Who’s speaking?”

A crisp voice answered me.

“This is St. Giles’s Hospital. We have a Chinaman here, knifed in the street and brought in. He can’t last long. We rang you up because we found in his pockets a piece of paper with your name and address on it.”

I was very much astonished. Nevertheless, after a moment’s reflection I said that I would come down at once. St. Giles’s Hospital, was, I knew, down by the docks, and it occurred to me that the Chinaman might have just come off some ship.

It was on my way down there that a sudden suspicion shot into my mind. Was the whole thing a trap? Wherever a Chinaman was, there might be the hand of Li Chang Yen. I remembered the adventure of the Baited Trap. Was the whole thing a ruse on the part of my enemies?

A little reflection convinced me that at any rate a visit to the hospital would do no harm. It was probable that the thing was not so much a plot as what is vulgarly known as a “plant.” The dying Chinaman would make some revelation to me upon which I should act, and which would have the result of leading me into the hands of the Big Four. The thing to do was to preserve an open mind, and whilst feigning credulity be secretly on my guard.

On arriving at St. Giles’s Hospital, and making my business known, I was taken at once to the accident ward, to the bedside of the man in question. He lay absolutely still, his eyelids closed, and only a very faint movement of the chest showed that he still breathed. A doctor stood by the bed, his fingers on the Chinaman’s pulse.

"He's almost gone," he whispered to me. "You know him, eh?"

I shook my head.

"I've never seen him before."

"Then what was he doing with your name and address in his pocket? You are Captain Hastings, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I can't explain it any more than you can."

"Curious thing. From his papers he seems to have been the servant of a man called Ingles—a retired Civil Servant. Ah, you know him, do you?" he added quickly, as I started at the name.

Ingles's servant! Then I had seen him before. Not that I had ever succeeded in being able to distinguish one Chinaman from another. He must have been with Ingles on his way to China, and after the catastrophe he had returned to England with a message, possibly, for me. It was vital, imperative that I should hear the message.

"Is he conscious?" I asked. "Can he speak? Mr. Ingles was an old friend of mine, and I think it possible that this poor fellow has brought me a message from him. Mr. Ingles is believed to have gone overboard about ten days ago."

"He's just conscious, but I doubt if he has the force to speak. He lost a terrible lot of blood, you know. I can administer a stimulant, of course, but we've already done all that is possible in that direction."

Nevertheless, he administered a hypodermic injection, and I stayed by the bed, hoping against hope for a word—a sign—that might be of the utmost value to me in my work. But the minutes sped on and no sign came.

And suddenly a baleful idea shot across my mind. Was I not already falling into the trap? Suppose that this Chinaman had merely assumed the part of Ingles's servant, that he was in reality an agent of the Big Four? Had I not once read that certain Chinese priests were capable of simulating death? Or, to go further still, Li Chang Yen might command a little band of fanatics who would welcome death itself if it came at the command of their master. I must be on my guard.

Even as these thoughts flashed across my mind, the man in the bed stirred. His eyes opened. He murmured something incoherently. Then I saw his glance fasten upon me. He made no sign of recognition, but I was at once aware that he was trying to speak to me. Be he friend or foe, I must hear what he had to say.

I leaned over the bed, but the broken sounds conveyed no sort of meaning to me. I thought I caught the word "hand," but in what connection it was used I could not tell. Then it came again, and this time I heard another word, the word "Largo." I stared in amazement, as the possible juxtaposition of the two suggested itself to me.

"Handel's Largo?" I queried.

The Chinaman's eyelids flickered rapidly, as though in assent, and he added another Italian word, the word "carrozza." Two or three more words of murmured Italian came to my ears, and then he fell back abruptly.

The doctor pushed me aside. It was all over. The man was dead.

I went out into the air again thoroughly bewildered.

"Handel's Largo," and a "carrozza." If I remembered rightly, a carrozza was a carriage. What possible meaning could lie behind those simple words? The man was a Chinaman, not an Italian, why should he speak in Italian? Surely, if he were indeed Ingles's servant, he must know English? The whole thing was profoundly mystifying. I puzzled over it all the way home. Oh, if only Poirot had been there to solve the problem with his lightning ingenuity!

I let myself in with my latchkey and went slowly up to my room. A letter was lying on the table, and I tore it open carelessly enough. But in a minute I stood rooted to the ground whilst I read.

It was a communication from a firm of solicitors.

Dear Sir (it ran)—As instructed by our late client, M. Hercule

Poirot, we forward you the enclosed letter. This letter was placed in our hands a week before his death, with instructions that in the event of his demise, it should be sent to you at a certain date after his death.

Yours faithfully, etc.

I turned the enclosed missive over and over. It was undoubtably from Poirot. I knew that familiar writing only too well. With a heavy heart, yet a certain eagerness, I tore it open.

Mon Cher Ami (it began)—When you receive this I shall be no more. Do not shed tears about me, but follow my orders. Immediately upon receipt of this, return to South America. Do not be pigheaded about this. It is not for sentimental reasons that I bid you undertake the journey. It is necessary. It is part of the plan of Hercule Poirot! To say more is unnecessary, to anyone who has the acute intelligence of my friend Hastings.

A bas the Big Four! I salute you, my friend, from beyond the grave.

Ever thine,
Hercule Poirot

I read and reread this astonishing communication. One thing was evident. The amazing man had so provided for every eventuality that even his own death did not upset the sequence of his plans! Mine was to be the active part—his the directing genius. Doubtless I should find full instructions awaiting me beyond the seas. In the meantime my enemies, convinced that I was obeying their warning, would cease to trouble their heads about me. I could return, unsuspected, and work havoc in their midst.

There was now nothing to hinder my immediate departure. I sent off cables, booked my passage, and one week later found me embarking in the Ansonia, en route for Buenos Aires.

Just as the boat left the quay, a steward brought me a note. It had been given him, so he explained, by a big gentleman in a fur coat who had left the boat last thing before the gangway planks were lifted.

I opened it. It was terse and to the point.

“You are wise,” it ran. It was signed with a big figure 4.

I could afford to smile to myself!

The sea was not too choppy. I enjoyed a passable dinner, made up my mind as to the majority of my fellow passengers, and had a rubber or two of bridge. Then I turned in and slept like a log as I always do on board ship.

I was awakened by feeling myself persistently shaken. Dazed and bewildered, I saw that one of the ship’s officers was standing over me. He gave a sigh of relief as I sat up.

“Thank the Lord I’ve got you awake at last. I’ve had no end of a job. Do you always sleep like that?”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, still bewildered and not fully awake. “Is there anything wrong with the ship?”

“I expect you know what’s the matter better than I do,” he replied drily. “Special instructions from the Admiralty. There’s a destroyer waiting to take you off.”

“What?” I cried. “In midocean?”

“It seems a most mysterious affair, but that’s not my business. They’ve sent a young fellow aboard who is to take your place, and we are all sworn to secrecy. Will you get up and dress?”

Utterly unable to conceal my amazement I did as I was told. A boat was lowered, and I was conveyed aboard the destroyer. There I was received courteously, but got no further information. The commander’s instructions were to land me at a certain spot on the Belgian coast. There his knowledge and responsibility ended.

The whole thing was like a dream. The one idea I held to firmly was that all this must be part of Poirot's plan. I must simply go forward blindly, trusting in my dead friend.

I was duly landed at the spot indicated. There a motor was waiting, and soon I was rapidly whirling across the flat Flemish plains. I slept that night at a small hotel in Brussels. The next day we went on again. The country became wooded and hilly. I realized that we were penetrating into the Ardennes, and I suddenly remembered Poirot's saying that he had a brother who lived at Spa.

But we did not go to Spa itself. We left the main road and wound into the leafy fastnesses of the hills, till we reached a little hamlet, and an isolated white villa high on the hillside. Here the car stopped in front of the green door of the villa.

The door opened as I alighted. An elderly manservant stood in the doorway bowing.

"M. le Capitaine Hastings?" he said in French. "M. le Capitaine is expected. If he will follow me."

He led the way across the hall, and flung open a door at the back, standing aside to let me pass in.

I blinked a little, for the room faced west and the afternoon sun was pouring in. Then my vision cleared and I saw a figure waiting to welcome me with outstretched hands.

It was—oh, impossible, it couldn't be—but yes!

"Poirot!" I cried, and for once did not attempt to evade the embrace with which he overwhelmed me.

"But yes, but yes, it is indeed I! Not so easy to kill Hercule Poirot!"

"But Poirot—why?"

“A ruse de guerre, my friend, a ruse de guerre. All is now ready for our grand coup.”

“But you might have told me!”

“No, Hastings, I could not. Never, never, in a thousand years, could you have acted the part at the funeral. As it was, it was perfect. It could not fail to carry conviction to the Big Four.”

“But what I’ve been through—”

“Do not think me too unfeeling. I carried out the deception partly for your sake. I was willing to risk my own life, but I had qualms about continually risking yours. So, after the explosion, I have an idea of great brilliancy. The good Ridgeway, he enables me to carry it out. I am dead, you will return to South America. But, mon ami, that is just what you would not do. In the end I have to arrange a solicitor’s letter, and a long rigmarole. But, at all events, here you are—that is the great thing. And now we lie here—perdus—till the moment comes for the last grand coup—the final overthrowing of the Big Four.”

Seventeen

NUMBER FOUR WINS A TRICK

From our quiet retreat in the Ardennes we watched the progress of affairs in the great world. We were plentifully supplied with newspapers, and every day Poirot received a bulky envelope, evidently containing some kind of report. He never showed these reports to me, but I could usually tell from his manner whether their contents had been satisfactory or otherwise. He never wavered in his belief that our present plan was the only one likely to be crowned by success.

“As a minor point, Hastings,” he remarked one day, “I was in continual fear of your death lying at my door. And that rendered me nervous—like a cat upon the jumps, as you say. But now I am well satisfied. Even if they discover that the Captain Hastings who landed in South America is an impostor (and I do not think they will discover it, they are not likely to send an agent out there who knows you personally), they will only believe that you are trying to circumvent them in some clever manner of your own, and will pay no serious attention to discovering your whereabouts. Of the one vital fact, my supposed death, they are thoroughly convinced. They will go ahead and mature their plans.”

“And then?” I asked eagerly.

“And then, mon ami, grand resurrection of Hercule Poirot! At the eleventh hour I reappear, throw all into confusion, and achieve the supreme victory in my own unique manner!”

I realized that Poirot’s vanity was of the case-hardened variety which could withstand all attacks. I reminded him that once or twice the honours of the game had lain with our adversaries. But I might have known that it was impossible to diminish Hercule Poirot’s enthusiasm for his own methods.

“See you, Hastings, it is like the little trick that you play with the cards. You have seen it without doubt? You take the four knaves, you divide them, one on top of the pack, one underneath, and so on—you cut and you shuffle, and there they are all together again. That is my object. So far I have been contending, now against one of the Big Four, now against another. But let me get them all together, like the four knaves in the pack of cards, and then, with one coup, I destroy them all!"

"And how do you propose to get them all together?" I asked.

"By awaiting the supreme moment. By lying perdus until they are ready to strike."

"That may mean a long wait," I grumbled.

"Always impatient, the good Hastings! But no, it will not be so long. The one man they were afraid of—myself—is out of the way. I give them two or three months at most."

His speaking of someone being got out of the way reminded me of Ingles and his tragic death, and I remembered that I had never told Poirot about the dying Chinaman in St. Giles's Hospital.

He listened with keen attention to my story.

"Ingles's servant, eh? And the few words he uttered were in Italian? Curious."

"That's why I suspected it might have been a plant on the part of the Big Four."

"Your reasoning is at fault, Hastings. Employ the little grey cells. If your enemies wished to deceive you they would assuredly have seen to it that the Chinaman spoke in intelligible pidgin English. No, the message was genuine. Tell me again all that you heard?"

"First of all he made a reference to Handel's Largo, and then he said something that sounded like 'carrozza'—that's a carriage, isn't it?"

"Nothing else?"

“Well, just at the end he murmured something like ‘Cara’ somebody or other—some woman’s name. Zia, I think. But I don’t suppose that that had any bearing on the rest of it.”

“You would not suppose so, Hastings. Cara Zia is very important, very important indeed.”

“I don’t see—”

“My dear friend, you never see—and anyway the English know no geography.”

“Geography?” I cried. “What has geography got to do with it?”

“I dare say M. Thomas Cook would be more to the point.”

As usual, Poirot refused to say anything more—a most irritating trick of his. But I noticed that his manner became extremely cheerful, as though he had scored some point or other.

The days went on, pleasant if a trifle monotonous. There were plenty of books in the villa, and delightful rambles all around, but I chafed sometimes at the forced inactivity of our life, and marvelled at Poirot’s state of placid content. Nothing occurred to ruffle our quiet existence, and it was not until the end of June, well within the limit that Poirot had given them, that we had our news of the Big Four.

A car drove up to the villa early one morning, such an unusual event in our peaceful life that I hurried down to satisfy my curiosity. I found Poirot talking to a pleasant-faced young fellow of about my own age.

He introduced me.

“This is Captain Harvey, Hastings, one of the most famous members of your Intelligence Service.”

“Not famous at all, I’m afraid,” said the young man, laughing pleasantly.

“Not famous except to those in the know, I should have said. Most of Captain Harvey’s friends and acquaintances consider him an amiable but brainless young man—devoted only to the trot of the fox or whatever the dance is called.”

We both laughed.

“Well, well, to business,” said Poirot. “You are of opinion the time has come, then?”

“We are sure of it, sir. China was isolated politically yesterday. What is going on out there, nobody knows. No news of any kind, wireless or otherwise, has come through—just a complete break—and silence!”

“Li Chang Yen has shown his hand. And the others?”

“Abe Ryland arrived in England a week ago, and left for the Continent yesterday.”

“And Madame Olivier?”

“Madame Olivier left Paris last night.”

“For Italy?”

“For Italy, sir. As far as we can judge, they are both making for the resort you indicated—though how you knew that—”

“Ah, that is not the cap with the feather for me! That was the work of Hastings here. He conceals his intelligence, you comprehend, but it is profound for all that.”

Harvey looked at me with due appreciation, and I felt rather uncomfortable.

“All is in train, then,” said Poirot. He was pale now, and completely serious. “The time has come. The arrangements are all made?”

“Everything you ordered has been carried out. The governments of Italy, France, and England are behind you, and are all working harmoniously together.”

“It is, in fact, a new Entente,” observed Poirot drily. “I am glad that Desjardeaux is convinced at last. Eh bien, then, we will start—or rather, I will start. You, Hastings, will remain here—yes, I pray of you. In verity, my friend, I am serious.”

I believe him, but it was not likely that I should consent to being left behind in that fashion. Our argument was short but decisive.

It was not until we were in the train, speeding towards Paris, that he admitted that he was secretly glad of my decision.

“For you have a part to play, Hastings. An important part! Without you, I might well fail. Nevertheless, I felt that it was my duty to urge you to remain behind—”

“There is danger, then?”

“Mon ami, where there is the Big Four there is always danger.”

On arrival in Paris, we drove across to the Gare de l’Est, and Poirot at last announced our destination. We were bound for Bolzano and the Italian Tyrol.

During Harvey’s absence from our carriage I took the opportunity of asking Poirot why he had said that the discovery of the rendezvous was my work.

“Because it was, my friend. How Ingles managed to get hold of the information I do not know, but he did, and he sent it to us by his servant. We are bound, mon ami, for Karersee, the new Italian name for which is Lago di Carrezza. You see now where your ‘Cara Zia’ comes in and also your ‘Carrozza’ and ‘Largo’—the Handel was supplied by your own imagination. Possibly some reference to the information coming from the ‘hand’ of Mr. Ingles started the train of association.”

“Karersee?” I queried. “I never heard of it.”

"I always tell you that the English know no geography. But as a matter of fact it is a well known and very beautiful summer resort, four thousand feet up, in the heart of the Dolomites."

"And it is in this out of the way spot that the Big Four have their rendezvous?"

"Say rather their headquarters. The signal has been given, and it is their intention to disappear from the world and issue orders from their mountain fastness. I have made the enquiries—a lot of quarrying of stone and mineral deposits is done there, and the company, apparently a small Italian firm, is in reality controlled by Abe Ryland. I am prepared to swear that a vast subterranean dwelling has been hollowed out in the very heart of the mountain, secret and inaccessible. From there the leaders of the organization will issue by wireless their orders to their followers who are numbered by thousands in every country. And from that crag in the Dolomites the dictators of the world will emerge. That is to say—they would emerge were it not for Hercule Poirot."

"Do you seriously believe all this, Poirot?—What about the armies and general machinery of civilization?"

"What about it in Russia, Hastings? This will be Russia on an infinitely larger scale—and with this additional menace—that Madame Olivier's experiments have proceeded further than she has ever given out. I believe that she has, to a certain extent, succeeded in liberating atomic energy and harnessing it to her purpose. Her experiments with the nitrogen of the air have been very remarkable, and she has also experimented in the concentration of wireless energy, so that a beam of great intensity can be focused upon some given spot. Exactly how far she has progressed, nobody knows, but it is certain that it is much farther than has ever been given out. She is a genius, that woman—the Curies were as nothing to her. Add to her genius the powers of Ryland's almost unlimited wealth, and, with the brain of Li Chang Yen, the finest criminal brain ever known, to direct and plan—eh bien, it will not be, as you say, all jam for civilization."

His words made me very thoughtful. Although Poirot was given at times to exaggeration of language, he was not really an alarmist. For the first time I realized what a desperate struggle it was upon which we were engaged.

Harvey soon rejoined us and the journey went on.

We arrived at Bolzano about midday. From there the journey on was by motor. Several big blue motor cars were waiting in the central square of the town, and we three got into one of them. Poirot, notwithstanding the heat of the day, was muffled to the eyes in greatcoat and scarf. His eyes and the tips of his ears were all that could be seen of him.

I did not know whether this was due to precaution at merely his exaggerated fear of catching a chill. The motor journey took a couple of hours. It was a really wonderful drive. For the first part of the way we wound in and out of huge cliffs, with a trickling waterfall on one hand. Then we emerged into a fertile valley, which continued for some miles, and then, still winding steadily upwards, the bare rock peaks began to show with dense clustering pinewoods at their base. The whole place was wild and lovely. Finally a series of abrupt curves, with the road running through the pinewoods on either side, and we came suddenly upon a big hotel and found we had arrived.

Our rooms had been reserved for us, and under Harvey's guidance we went straight up to them. They looked straight out over the rocky peaks and the long slopes of pinewoods leading up to them. Poirot made a gesture towards them.

"It is there?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," replied Harvey. "There is a place called the Felsenlabyrinth—all big boulders piled about in a most fantastic way—a path winds through them. The quarrying is to the right of that, but we think that the entrance is probably in the Felsenlabyrinth."

Poirot nodded.

"Come, mon ami," he said to me. "Let us go down and sit upon the terrace and enjoy the sunlight."

“You think that wise?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

The sunlight was marvellous—in fact the glare was almost too great for me. We had some creamy coffee instead of tea, then went upstairs and unpacked our few belongings. Poirot was in his most unapproachable mood, lost in a kind of reverie. Once or twice he shook his head and sighed.

I had been rather intrigued by a man who had got out of our train at Bolzano, and had been met by a private car. He was a small man, and one thing about him that attracted my attention was that he was almost as much muffled up as Poirot had been. More so, indeed, for in addition to greatcoat and muffler, he was wearing huge blue spectacles. I was convinced that here we had an emissary of the Big Four. Poirot did not seem very impressed by my idea. But when, leaning out of my bedroom window, I reported that the man in question was strolling about in the vicinity of the hotel, he admitted that there might be something in it.

I urged my friend not to go down to dinner, but he insisted on doing so. We entered the dining room rather late, and were shown to a table by the window. As we sat down, our attention was attracted by an exclamation and a crash of falling china. A dish of haricots verts had been upset over a man who was sitting at the table next to ours.

The head waiter came up and was vociferous in apologies.

Presently, when the offending waiter was serving us with soup, Poirot spoke to him.

“An unfortunate accident, that. But it was not your fault.”

“Monsieur saw that? No, indeed it was not my fault. The gentleman half sprang up from his chair—I thought he was going to have an attack of some kind. I could not save the catastrophe.”

I saw Poirot’s eyes shining with the green light I knew so well, and as the waiter departed he said to me in a low voice:

“You see, Hastings, the effect of Hercule Poirot—alive and in the flesh?”

“You think—”

I had not time to continue. I felt Poirot’s hand on my knee, as he whispered excitedly:

“Look, Hastings, look. His trick with the bread! Number Four!”

Sure enough, the man at the next table to ours, his face unusually pale, was dabbing a small piece of bread mechanically about the table.

I studied him carefully. His face, clean-shaven and puffily fat, was of a pasty, unhealthy sallowness, with heavy pouches under the eyes and deep lines running from his nose to the corners of his mouth. His age might have been anything from thirty-five to forty-five. In no particular did he resemble any one of the characters which Number Four had previously assumed. Indeed, had it not been for his little trick with the bread, of which he was evidently quite unaware, I would have sworn readily enough that the man sitting there was someone whom I had never seen before.

“He has recognized you,” I murmured. “You should not have come down.”

“My excellent Hastings, I have feigned death for three months for this one purpose.”

“To startle Number Four?”

“To startle him at a moment when he must act quickly or not at all. And we have this great advantage—he does not know that we recognize him. He thinks that he is safe in his new disguise. How I bless Flossie Monro for telling us of that little habit of his.”

“What will happen now?” I asked.

“What can happen? He recognizes the only man he fears, miraculously resurrected from the dead, at the very minute when the plans of the Big Four are in the balance. Madame Olivier and Abe Ryland lunched here today, and it is thought that they went to Cortina. Only we know that they have retired to their hiding place. How much do we know? That is what Number Four is asking himself at this minute. He dare take no risks. I must be suppressed at all costs. Eh bien, let him try to suppress Hercule Poirot! I shall be ready for him."

As he finished speaking, the man at the next table got up and went out.

"He has gone to make his little arrangements," said Poirot placidly. "Shall we have our coffee on the terrace, my friend? It would be pleasanter, I think. I will just go up and get a coat."

I went out on to the terrace, a little disturbed in mind. Poirot's assurance did not quite content me. However, so long as we were on guard, nothing could happen to us. I resolved to keep thoroughly on the alert.

It was quite five minutes before Poirot joined me. With his usual precautions against cold, he was muffled up to the ears. He sat down beside me and sipped his coffee appreciatively.

"Only in England is the coffee so atrocious," he remarked. "On the Continent they understand how important it is for the digestion that it should be properly made."

As he finished speaking, the man from the next table suddenly appeared on the terrace. Without any hesitation, he came over and drew up a third chair to our table.

"You do not mind my joining you, I hope," he said in English.

"Not at all, monsieur," said Poirot.

I felt very uneasy. It is true that we were on the terrace of the hotel, with people all around us, but nevertheless I was not satisfied. I sensed the presence of danger.

Meanwhile Number Four chatted away in a perfectly natural manner. It seemed impossible to believe that he was anything but a bona fide tourist.

He described excursions and motor trips, and posed as quite an authority on the neighbourhood.

He took a pipe from his pocket and began to light it. Poirot drew out his case of tiny cigarettes. As he placed one between his lips, the stranger leant forward with a match.

“Let me give you a light.”

As he spoke, without the least warning, all the lights went out. There was a chink of glass, and something pungent under my nose, suffocating me—

Eighteen

IN THE FELSENLABYRINTH

I could not have been unconscious more than a minute. I came to myself being hustled along between two men. They had me under each arm, supporting my weight, and there was a gag in my mouth. It was pitch dark, but I gathered that we were not outside, but passing through the hotel. All round I could hear people shouting and demanding in every known language what had happened to the lights. My captors swung me down some stairs. We passed along a basement passage, then through a door and out into the open again through a glass door at the back of the hotel. In another moment we had gained the shelter of the pine trees.

I had caught a glimpse of another figure in a similar plight to myself, and realized that Poirot, too, was a victim of this bold coup.

By sheer audacity, Number Four had won the day. He had employed, I gathered, an instant anaesthetic, probably ethyl chloride—breaking a small bulb of it under our noses. Then, in the confusion of the darkness, his accomplices, who had probably been guests sitting at the next table, had thrust gags in our mouths and hurried us away, taking us through the hotel to baffle pursuit.

I cannot describe the hour that followed. We were hurried through the woods at a breakneck pace, going uphill the whole time. At last we emerged in the open, on the mountainside, and I saw just in front of us an extraordinary conglomeration of fantastic rocks and boulders.

This must be the Felsenlabyrinth of which Harvey had spoken. Soon we were winding in and out of its recesses. The place was like a maze devised by some evil genie.

Suddenly we stopped. An enormous rock barred our path. One of the men stopped and seemed to push on something when, without a sound, the huge mass of rock turned on itself and disclosed a small tunnellike opening leading into the mountainside.

Into this we were hurried. For some time the tunnel was narrow, but presently it widened, and before very long we came out into a wide rocky chamber lighted by electricity. Then the gags were removed. At a sign from Number Four, who stood facing us with mocking triumph in his face, we were searched and every article was removed from our pockets, including Poirot's little automatic pistol.

A pang smote me as it was tossed down on the table. We were defeated—hopelessly defeated and outnumbered. It was the end.

"Welcome to the headquarters of the Big Four, M. Hercule Poirot," said Number Four in a mocking tone. "To meet you again is an unexpected pleasure. But was it worthwhile returning from the grave only for this?"

Poirot did not reply. I dared not look at him.

"Come this way," continued Number Four. "Your arrival will be somewhat of a surprise to my colleagues."

He indicated a narrow doorway in the wall. We passed through and found ourselves in another chamber. At the very end of it was a table behind which four chairs were placed. The end chair was empty, but it was draped with a mandarin's cape. On the second, smoking a cigar, sat Mr. Abe Ryland. Leaning back on the third chair, with her burning eyes and her nun's face, was Madame Olivier. Number Four took his seat on the fourth chair.

We were in the presence of the Big Four.

Never before had I felt so fully the reality and the presence of Li Chang Yen as I did now when confronting his empty seat. Far away in China, he yet controlled and directed this malign organization.

Madame Olivier gave a faint cry on seeing us. Ryland, more self-controlled, only shifted his cigar, and raised his grizzled eyebrows.

“M. Hercule Poirot,” said Ryland slowly. “This is a pleasant surprise. You put it over on us all right. We thought you were good and buried. No matter, the game is up now.”

There was a ring as of steel in his voice. Madame Olivier said nothing, but her eyes burned, and I disliked the slow way she smiled.

“Madame and messieurs, I wish you good evening,” said Poirot quietly.

Something unexpected, something I had not been prepared to hear in his voice made me look at him. He seemed quite composed. Yet there was something about his whole appearance that was different.

Then there was a stir of draperies behind us, and the Countess Vera Rossakoff came in.

“Ah!” said Number Four. “Our valued and trusted lieutenant. An old friend of yours is here, my dear lady.”

The countess whirled round with her usual vehemence of movement.

“God in Heaven!” she cried. “It is the little man! Ah! but he has the nine lives of a cat! Oh, little man, little man! Why did you mix yourself up in this?”

“Madame,” said Poirot with a bow. “Me, like the great Napoleon, I am on the side of the big battalions.”

As he spoke I saw a sudden suspicion flash into her eyes, and at the same moment I knew the truth which subconsciously I already sensed.

The man beside me was not Hercule Poirot.

He was very like him, extraordinarily like him. There was the same egg-shaped head, the same strutting figure, delicately plump. But the voice was different, and the eyes instead of being green were dark, and surely the moustaches—those famous moustaches—?

My reflections were cut short by the countess's voice. She stepped forward, her voice ringing with excitement.

"You have been deceived. This man is not Hercule Poirot!"

Number Four uttered an incredulous exclamation, but the countess leant forward and snatched at Poirot's moustaches. They came off in her hand, and then, indeed, the truth was plain. For this man's upper lip was disfigured by a small scar which completely altered the expression of the face.

"Not Hercule Poirot," muttered Number Four. "But who can he be then?"

"I know," I cried suddenly, and then stopped dead, afraid I had ruined everything.

But the man I will still refer to as Poirot had turned to me encouragingly.

"Say it if you will. It makes no matter now. The trick has succeeded."

"This is Achille Poirot," I said slowly. "Hercule Poirot's twin brother."

"Impossible," said Ryland sharply, but he was shaken.

"Hercule's plan has succeeded to a marvel," said Achille placidly.

Number Four leapt forward, his voice harsh and menacing.

"Succeeded, has it?" he snarled. "Do you realize that before many minutes have passed you will be dead—dead?"

"Yes," said Achille Poirot gravely. "I realize that. It is you who do not realize that a man may be willing to purchase success by his life. There were men who laid down their lives for their country in the war. I am prepared to lay down mine in the same way for the world."

It struck me just then that although perfectly willing to lay down my life I might have been consulted in the matter. Then I remembered how Poirot had urged me to stay behind and I felt appeased.

“And in what way will your laying down your life benefit the world?” asked Ryland sardonically.

“I see that you do not perceive the true inwardness of Hercule’s plan. To begin with, your place of retreat was known some months ago, and practically all the visitors, hotel assistants, and others are detectives or Secret Service men. A cordon has been drawn round the mountain. You may have more than one means of egress, but even so you cannot escape. Poirot himself is directing the operations outside. My boots were smeared with a preparation of aniseed tonight, before I came down to the terrace in my brother’s place. Hounds are following the trail. It will lead them infallibly to the rock in the Felsenlabyrinth where the entrance is situated. You see, do what you will to us, the net is drawn tightly round you. You cannot escape.”

Madame Olivier laughed suddenly.

“You are wrong. There is one way we can escape, and, like Samson, of old, destroy our enemies at the same time. What do you say, my friends?”

Ryland was staring at Achille Poirot.

“Suppose he’s lying,” he said hoarsely.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“In an hour it will be dawn. Then you can see for yourself the truth of my words. Already they should have traced me to the entrance in the Felsenlabyrinth.”

Even as he spoke, there was a far-off reverberation, and a man ran in shouting incoherently. Ryland sprang up and went out. Madame Olivier moved to the end of the room and opened a door that I had not noticed. Inside I caught a glimpse of a perfectly equipped laboratory which reminded me of the one in Paris. Number Four also sprang up and went out. He returned with Poirot’s revolver which he gave to the countess.

"There is no danger of their escaping," he said grimly. "But still you had better have this."

Then he went out again.

The countess came over to us and surveyed my companion attentively for some time. Suddenly she laughed.

"You are very clever, M. Achille Poirot," she said mockingly.

"Madame, let us talk business. It is fortunate that they have left us alone together. What is your price?"

"I do not understand. What price?"

"Madame, you can aid us to escape. You know the secret way out of this retreat. I ask you, what is your price?"

She laughed again.

"More than you could pay, little man! Why, all the money in the world would not buy me!"

"Madame, I did not speak of money. I am a man of intelligence. Nevertheless, this is a true fact—everyone has his price! In exchange for life and liberty, I offer you your heart's desire."

"So you are a magician!"

"You can call me so if you like."

The countess suddenly dropped her jesting manner. She spoke with passionate bitterness.

"Fool! My heart's desire! Can you give me revenge upon my enemies? Can you give me back youth and beauty and a gay heart? Can you bring the dead to life again?"

Achille Poirot was watching her very curiously.

“Which of the three, Madame? Make your choice.”

She laughed sardonically.

“You will send me the Elixir of Life, perhaps? Come, I will make a bargain with you. Once, I had a child. Find my child for me—and you shall go free.”

“Madame, I agree. It is a bargain. Your child shall be restored to you. On the faith of—on the faith of Hercule Poirot himself.”

Again that strange woman laughed—this time long and unrestrainedly.

“My dear M. Poirot, I am afraid I laid a little trap for you. It is very kind of you to promise to find my child for me, but, you see, I happen to know that you would not succeed, and so that would be a very one-sided bargain, would it not?”

“Madame, I swear to you by the Holy Angels that I will restore your child to you.”

“I asked you before, M. Poirot, could you restore the dead to life?”

“Then the child is—”

“Dead? Yes.”

He stepped forward and took her wrist.

“Madame, I—I who speak to you, swear once more. I will bring the dead back to life.”

She stared at him as though fascinated.

“You do not believe me. I will prove my words. Get my pocketbook which they took from me.”

She went out of the room, and returned with it in her hand. Throughout all she retained her grip on the revolver. I felt that Achille Poirot’s chances of bluffing her were very slight. The Countess Vera Rossakoff was no fool.

“Open it, madame. The flap on the left-hand side. That is right. Now take out that photograph and look at it.”

Wonderingly, she took out what seemed to be a small snapshot. No sooner had she looked at it than she uttered a cry and swayed as though about to fall. Then she almost flew at my companion.

“Where? Where? You shall tell me. Where?”

“Remember your bargain, madame.”

“Yes, yes, I will trust you. Quick, before they come back.”

Catching him by the hand, she drew him quickly and silently out of the room. I followed. From the outer room she led us into the tunnel by which we had first entered, but a short way along this forked, and she turned off to the right. Again and again the passage divided, but she led us on, never faltering or seeming to doubt her way, and with increasing speed.

“If only we are in time,” she panted. “We must be out in the open before the explosion occurs.”

Still we went on. I understood that this tunnel led right through the mountain and that we should finally emerge on the other side, facing a different valley. The sweat streamed down my face, but I raced on.

And then, far away, I saw a gleam of daylight. Nearer and nearer. I saw green bushes growing. We forced them aside, pushed our way through. We were in the open again, with the faint light of dawn making everything rosy.

Poirot’s cordon was a reality. Even as we emerged, three men fell upon us, but released us again with a cry of astonishment.

“Quick,” cried my companion. “Quick—there is no time to lose—”

But he was not destined to finish. The earth shook and trembled under our feet, there was a terrific roar and the whole mountain seemed to dissolve.

We were flung headlong through the air.

I came to myself at last. I was in a strange bed and a strange room. Someone was sitting by the window. He turned and came and stood by me.

It was Achille Poirot—or, stay, was it—

The well-known ironical voice dispelled any doubts I might have had.

“But yes, my friend, it is. Brother Achille has gone home again—to the land of myths. It was I all the time. It is not only Number Four who can act a part. Belladonna in the eyes, the sacrifice of the moustaches, and a real scar the inflicting of which caused me much pain two months ago—but I could not risk a fake beneath the eagle eyes of Number Four. And the final touch, your own knowledge and belief that there was such a person as Achille Poirot! It was invaluable, the assistance you rendered me, half the success of the coup is due to you! The whole crux of the affair was to make them believe that Hercule Poirot was still at large directing operations. Otherwise, everything was true, the aniseed, the cordon, etc.”

“But why not really send a substitute?”

“And let you go into danger without me by your side? You have a pretty idea of me there! Besides, I always had a hope of finding a way out through the countess.”

“How on earth did you manage to convince her? It was a pretty thin story to make her swallow—all that about a dead child.”

“The countess has a great deal more perspicacity than you have, my dear Hastings. She was taken in at first by my disguise; but she soon saw through it. When she said, ‘You are very clever, M. Achille Poirot,’ I knew that she had guessed the truth. It was then or never to play my trump card.”

“All that rigmarole about bringing the dead to life?”

“Exactly—but then, you see, I had the child all along.”

“What?”

"But yes! You know my motto—Be prepared. As soon as I found that the Countess Rossakoff was mixed up with the Big Four, I had every possible inquiry made as to her antecedents. I learnt that she had had a child who was reported to have been killed, and I also found that there were discrepancies in the story which led me to wonder whether it might not, after all, be alive. In the end, I succeeded in tracing the boy, and by paying out a big sum I obtained possession of the child's person. The poor little fellow was nearly dead of starvation. I placed him in a safe place, with kindly people, and took a snapshot of him in his new surroundings. And so, when the time came, I had my little coup de théâtre all ready!"

"You are wonderful, Poirot; absolutely wonderful!"

"I was glad to do it, too. For I had admired the countess. I should have been sorry if she had perished in the explosion."

"I've been half afraid to ask you—what of the Big Four?"

"All the bodies have now been recovered. That of Number Four was quite unrecognizable, the head blown to pieces. I wish—I rather wish it had not been so. I should have liked to be sure—but no more of that. Look at this."

He handed me a newspaper in which a paragraph was marked. It reported the death, by suicide, of Li Chang Yen, who had engineered the recent revolution which had failed so disastrously.

"My great opponent," said Poirot gravely. "It was fated that he and I should never meet in the flesh. When he received the news of the disaster here, he took the simplest way out. A great brain, my friend, a great brain. But I wish I had seen the face of the man who was Number Four …Supposing that, after all—but I romance. He is dead. Yes, mon ami, together we have faced and routed the Big Four; and now you will return to your charming wife, and I—I shall retire. The great case of my life is over. Anything else will seem tame after this. No, I shall retire. Possibly I shall grow vegetable marrows! I might even marry and arrange myself!"

He laughed heartily at the idea, but with a touch of embarrassment. I hope … small men always admire big, flamboyant women—

“Marry and arrange myself,” he said again. “Who knows?”

The Mystery Of The Blue Train (1928)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE MAN WITH THE WHITE HAIR

It was close on midnight when a man crossed the Place de la Concorde. In spite of the handsome fur coat which garbed his meagre form, there was something essentially weak and paltry about him.

A little man with a face like a rat. A man, one would say, who could never play a conspicuous part, or rise to prominence in any sphere. And yet, in leaping to such a conclusion, an onlooker would have been wrong. For this man, negligible and inconspicuous as he seemed, played a prominent part in the destiny of the world. In an Empire where rats ruled, he was the king of the rats.

Even now, an Embassy awaited his return. But he had business to do first—business of which the Embassy was not officially cognizant. His face gleamed white and sharp in the moonlight. There was the least hint of a curve in the thin nose. His father had been a Polish Jew, a journeyman tailor. It was business such as his father would have loved that took him abroad tonight.

He came to the Seine, crossed it, and entered one of the less reputable quarters of Paris. Here he stopped before a tall, dilapidated house and made his way up to an apartment on the fourth floor. He had barely time to knock before the door was opened by a woman who had evidently been awaiting his arrival. She gave him no greeting, but helped him off with his overcoat and then led the way into the tawdrily furnished sitting room. The electric light was shaded with dirty pink festoons, and it softened, but could not disguise, the girl's face with its mask of crude paint. Could not disguise, either, the broad Mongolian cast of her countenance. There was no doubt of Olga Demiroff's profession, nor of her nationality.

“All is well, little one?”

“All is well, Boris Ivanovitch.”

He nodded, murmuring: “I do not think I have been followed.”

But there was anxiety in his tone. He went to the window, drawing the curtains aside slightly, and peering carefully out. He started away violently.

“There are two men—on the opposite pavement. It looks to me—” He broke off and began gnawing at his nails—a habit he had when anxious.

The Russian girl was shaking her head with a slow, reassuring action.

“They were here before you came.”

“All the same, it looks to me as though they were watching this house.”

“Possibly,” she admitted indifferently.

“But then—”

“What of it? Even if they know—it will not be you they will follow from here.”

A thin, cruel smile came to his lips.

“No,” he admitted, “that is true.”

He mused for a minute or two, and then observed,

“This damned American—he can look after himself as well as anybody.”

“I suppose so.”

He went again to the window.

“Tough customers,” he muttered, with a chuckle. “Known to the police, I fear. Well, well, I wish Brother Apache good hunting.”

Olga Demiroff shook her head.

“If the American is the kind of man they say he is, it will take more than a couple of cowardly apaches to get the better of him.” She paused. “I wonder —”

“Well?”

“Nothing. Only twice this evening a man has passed along this street—a man with white hair.”

“What of it?”

“This. As he passed those two men, he dropped his glove. One of them picked it up and returned it to him. A threadbare device.”

“You mean—that the white-haired man is—their employer?”

“Something of the kind.”

The Russian looked alarmed and uneasy.

“You are sure—the parcel is safe? It has not been tampered with? There has been too much talk . . . much too much talk.”

He gnawed his nails again.

“Judge for yourself.”

She bent to the fireplace, deftly removing the coals. Underneath, from amongst the crumpled balls of newspaper, she selected from the very middle an oblong package wrapped round with grimy newspaper, and handed it to the man.

“Ingenious,” he said, with a nod of approval.

“The apartment has been searched twice. The mattress on my bed was ripped open.”

“It is as I said,” he muttered. “There has been too much talk. This haggling over the price—it was a mistake.”

He had unwrapped the newspaper. Inside was a small brown paper parcel. This in turn he unwrapped, verified the contents, and quickly wrapped it up once more. As he did so, an electric bell rang sharply.

“The American is punctual,” said Olga, with a glance at the clock.

She left the room. In a minute she returned ushering in a stranger, a big, broad-shouldered man whose transatlantic origin was evident. His keen glance went from one to the other.

“M. Krassnine?” he inquired politely.

“I am he,” said Boris. “I must apologize for—for the unconventionality of this meeting place. But secrecy is urgent. I—I cannot afford to be connected with this business in any way.”

“Is that so?” said the American politely.

“I have your word, have I not, that no details of this transaction will be made public? That is one of the conditions of—sale.”

The American nodded.

“That has already been agreed upon,” he said indifferently. “Now, perhaps, you will produce the goods.”

“You have the money—in notes?”

“Yes,” replied the other.

He did not, however, make any attempt to produce it. After a moment’s hesitation, Krassnine gestured towards the small parcel on the table.

The American took it up and unrolled the wrapping paper. The contents he took over to a small electric lamp and submitted them to a very thorough examination. Satisfied, he drew from his pocket a thick leather wallet and extracted from it a wad of notes. These he handed to the Russian, who counted them carefully.

“All right?”

“I thank you, Monsieur. Everything is correct.”

“Ah!” said the other. He slipped the brown paper parcel negligently into his pocket. He bowed to Olga. “Good evening, Mademoiselle. Good evening, M. Krassnine.”

He went out, shutting the door behind him. The eyes of the two in the room met. The man passed his tongue over his dry lips.

“I wonder—will he ever get back to his hotel?” he muttered.

By common accord, they both turned to the window. They were just in time to see the American emerge into the street below. He turned to the left and marched along at a good pace without once turning his head. Two shadows stole from a doorway and followed noiselessly. Pursuers and pursued vanished into the night. Olga Demiroff spoke.

“He will get back safely,” she said. “You need not fear—or hope—whichever it is.”

“Why do you think he will be safe?” asked Krassnine curiously.

“A man who has made as much money as he has could not possibly be a fool,” said Olga. “And talking of money—”

She looked significantly at Krassnine.

“Eh?”

“My share, Boris Ivanovitch.”

With some reluctance, Krassnine handed over two of the notes. She nodded her thanks, with a complete lack of emotion, and tucked them away in her stocking.

“That is good,” she remarked, with satisfaction.

He looked at her curiously.

“You have no regrets, Olga Vassilovna?”

“Regrets? For what?”

“For what has been in your keeping. There are women—most women, I believe, who go mad over such things.”

She nodded reflectively.

“Yes, you speak truth there. Most women have that madness. I—have not. I wonder now—” She broke off.

“Well?” asked the other curiously.

“The American will be safe with them—yes, I am sure of that. But afterwards—”

“Eh? What are you thinking of?”

“He will give them, of course, to some woman,” said Olga thoughtfully. “I wonder what will happen then. . . .”

She shook herself impatiently and went over to the window. Suddenly she uttered an exclamation and called to her companion.

“See, he is going down the street now—the man I mean.”

They both gazed down together. A slim, elegant figure was progressing along at a leisurely pace. He wore an opera hat and a cloak. As he passed a street lamp, the light illuminated a thatch of thick white hair.

Two

M. LE MARQUIS

The man with the white hair continued on his course, unhurried, and seemingly indifferent to his surroundings. He took a side turning to the right and another one to the left. Now and then he hummed a little air to himself.

Suddenly he stopped dead and listened intently. He had heard a certain sound. It might have been the bursting of a tyre or it might have been—a shot. A curious smile played round his lips for a minute. Then he resumed his leisurely walk.

On turning a corner he came upon a scene of some activity. A representative of the law was making notes in a pocketbook, and one or two late passersby had collected on the spot. To one of these the man with the white hair made a polite request for information.

“Something has been happening, yes?”

“Mais oui, Monsieur. Two apaches set upon an elderly American gentleman.”

“They did him no injury?”

“No, indeed.” The man laughed. “The American, he had a revolver in his pocket, and before they could attack him, he fired shots so closely round them that they took alarm and fled. The police, as usual, arrived too late.”

“Ah!” said the inquirer.

He displayed no emotion of any kind.

Placidly and unconcernedly he resumed his nocturnal strolling. Presently he crossed the Seine and came into the richer areas of the city. It was some twenty minutes later that he came to a stop before a certain house in a quiet but aristocratic thoroughfare.

The shop, for shop it was, was a restrained and unpretentious one. D. Papopolous, dealer in antiques, was so known to fame that he needed no advertisement, and indeed most of his business was not done over a counter. M. Papopolous had a very handsome apartment of his own overlooking the Champs Elysées, and it might reasonably be supposed that he would have been found there and not at his place of business at such an hour, but the man with the white hair seemed confident of success as he pressed the obscurely placed bell, having first given a quick glance up and down the deserted street.

His confidence was not misplaced. The door opened and a man stood in the aperture. He wore gold rings in his ears and was of a swarthy cast of countenance.

“Good evening,” said the stranger. “Your master is within?”

“The master is here, but he does not see chance visitors at this time of night,” growled the other.

“I think he will see me. Tell him that his friend M. le Marquis is here.”

The man opened the door a little wider and allowed the visitor to enter.

The man who gave his name as M. le Marquis had shielded his face with his hand as he spoke. When the manservant returned with the information that M. Papopolous would be pleased to receive the visitor a further change had taken place in the stranger’s appearance. The manservant must have been very unobservant or very well-trained, for he betrayed no surprise at the small black satin mask which hid the other’s features. Leading the way to a door at the end of the hall, he opened it and announced in a respectful murmur: “M. le Marquis.”

The figure which rose to receive this strange guest was an imposing one. There was something venerable and patriarchal about M. Papopolous. He had a high-domed forehead and a beautiful white beard. His manner had in it something ecclesiastical and benign.

“My dear friend,” said M. Papopolous.

He spoke in French and his tones were rich and unctuous.

“I must apologise,” said the visitor, “for the lateness of the hour.”

“Not at all. Not at all,” said M. Papopolous—“an interesting time of night. You have had, perhaps, an interesting evening?”

“Not personally,” said M. le Marquis.

“Not personally,” repeated M. Papopolous, “no, no, of course not. And there is news, eh?”

He cast a sharp glance sideways at the other, a glance that was not ecclesiastical or benign in the least.

“There is no news. The attempt failed. I hardly expected anything else.”

“Quite so,” said M. Papopolous: “anything crude—”

He waved his hand to express his intense distaste for crudity in any form. There was indeed nothing crude about M. Papopolous nor about the goods he handled. He was well-known in most European courts, and kings called him Demetrius in a friendly manner. He had the reputation for the most exquisite discretion. That, together with the nobility of his aspect, had carried him through several very questionable transactions.

“The direct attack—” said M. Papopolous. He shook his head. “It answers sometimes—but very seldom.”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"It saves time," he remarked, "and to fail costs nothing—or next to nothing. The other plan—will not fail."

"Ah," said M. Papopolous, looking at him keenly.

The other nodded slowly.

"I have great confidence in your—er—reputation," said the antique dealer.

M. le Marquis smiled gently.

"I think I may say," he murmured, "that your confidence will not be misplaced."

"You have unique opportunities," said the other, with a note of envy in his voice.

"I make them," said M. le Marquis.

He rose and took up the cloak which he had thrown carelessly on the back of a chair.

"I will keep you informed, M. Papopolous, through the usual channels, but there must be no hitch in your arrangements."

M. Papopolous was pained.

"There is never a hitch in my arrangements," he complained.

The other smiled, and without any further word of adieu he left the room, closing the door behind him.

M. Papopolous remained in thought for a moment, stroking his venerable white beard, and then moved across to a second door which opened inwards. As he turned the handle, a young woman, who only too clearly had been leaning against it with her ear to the keyhole, stumbled headlong into the room. M. Papopolous displayed neither surprise nor concern. It was evidently all quite natural to him.

“Well, Zia?” he asked.

“I did not hear him go,” explained Zia.

She was a handsome young woman, built on Junoesque lines, with dark flashing eyes and such a general air of resemblance to M. Papopolous that it was easy to see they were father and daughter.

“It is annoying,” she continued vexedly, “that one cannot see through a keyhole and hear through it at the same time.”

“It has often annoyed me,” said M. Papopolous, with great simplicity.

“So that is M. le Marquis,” said Zia slowly. “Does he always wear a mask, Father?”

“Always.”

There was a pause.

“It is the rubies, I suppose?” asked Zia.

Her father nodded.

“What do you think, my little one?” he inquired, with a hint of amusement in his beady black eyes.

“Of M. le Marquis?”

“Yes.”

“I think,” said Zia slowly, “that it is a very rare thing to find a well-bred Englishman who speaks French as well as that.”

“Ah!” said M. Papopolous, “so that is what you think.”

As usual, he did not commit himself, but he regarded Zia with benign approval.

“I thought, too,” said Zia, “that his head was an odd shape.”

“Massive,” said her father—“a trifle massive. But then that effect is always created by a wig.”

They both looked at each other and smiled.

Three

HEART OF FIRE

Rufus Van Aldin passed through the revolving doors of the Savoy, and walked to the reception desk. The desk clerk smiled a respectful greeting.

“Pleased to see you back again, Mr. Van Aldin,” he said.

The American millionaire nodded his head in a casual greeting.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Major Knighton is upstairs in the suite now.”

Van Aldin nodded again.

“Any mail?” he vouchsafed.

“They have all been sent up, Mr. Van Aldin. Oh! wait a minute.”

He dived into a pigeonhole, and produced a letter.

“Just come this minute,” he explained.

Rufus Van Aldin took the letter from him, and as he saw the handwriting, a woman’s flowing hand, his face was suddenly transformed. The harsh contours of it softened, and the hard line of his mouth relaxed. He looked a different man. He walked across to the lift with the letter in his hand and the smile still on his lips.

In the drawing room of his suite, a young man was sitting at a desk nimbly sorting correspondence with the ease born of long practice. He sprang up as Van Aldin entered.

"Hallo, Knighton!"

"Glad to see you back, sir. Had a good time?"

"So so!" said the millionaire unemotionally. "Paris is rather a one-horse city nowadays. Still—I got what I went over for."

He smiled to himself rather grimly.

"You usually do, I believe," said the secretary, laughing.

"That's so," agreed the other.

He spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, as one stating a well-known fact. Throwing off his heavy overcoat, he advanced to the desk.

"Anything urgent?"

"I don't think so, sir. Mostly the usual stuff. I have not quite finished sorting it out."

Van Aldin nodded briefly. He was a man who seldom expressed either blame or praise. His methods with those he employed were simple; he gave them a fair trial and dismissed promptly those who were inefficient. His selections of people were unconventional. Knighton, for instance, he had met casually at a Swiss resort two months previously. He had approved of the fellow, looked up his war record, and found in it the explanation of the limp with which he walked. Knighton had made no secret of the fact that he was looking for a job, and indeed diffidently asked the millionaire if he knew of any available post. Van Aldin remembered, with a grim smile of amusement, the young man's complete astonishment when he had been offered the post of secretary to the great man himself.

"But—but I have no experience of business," he had stammered.

"That doesn't matter a cuss," Van Aldin had replied. "I have got three secretaries already to attend to that kind of thing. But I am likely to be in England for the next six months, and I want an Englishman who—well, knows the ropes—and can attend to the social side of things for me."

So far, Van Aldin had found his judgement confirmed. Knighton had proved quick, intelligent, and resourceful, and he had a distinct charm of manner.

The secretary indicated three or four letters placed by themselves on the top of the desk.

“It might perhaps be as well, sir, if you glanced at these,” he suggested. “The top one is about the Colton agreement—”

But Rufus Van Aldin held up a protesting hand.

“I am not going to look at a durned thing tonight,” he declared. “They can all wait till the morning. Except this one,” he added, looking down at the letter he held in his hand. And again that strange transforming smile stole over his face.

Richard Knighton smiled sympathetically.

“Mrs. Kettering?” he murmured. “She rang up yesterday and today. She seems very anxious to see you at once, sir.”

“Does she, now!”

The smile faded from the millionaire’s face. He ripped open the envelope which he held in his hand and took out the enclosed sheet. As he read it his face darkened, his mouth set grimly in the line which Wall Street knew so well, and his brows knit themselves ominously. Knighton turned tactfully away, and went on opening letters and sorting them. A muttered oath escaped the millionaire, and his clenched fist hit the table sharply.

“I’ll not stand for this,” he muttered to himself. “Poor little girl, it’s a good thing she has her old father behind her.”

He walked up and down the room for some minutes, his brows drawn together in a scowl. Knighton still bent assiduously over the desk. Suddenly Van Aldin came to an abrupt halt. He took up his overcoat from the chair where he had thrown it.

“Are you going out again, sir?”

"Yes, I'm going round to see my daughter."

"If Colton's people ring up—?"

"Tell them to go to the devil," said Van Aldin.

"Very well," said the secretary unemotionally.

Van Aldin had his overcoat on by now. Cramming his hat upon his head, he went towards the door. He paused with his hand upon the handle.

"You are a good fellow, Knighton," he said. "You don't worry me when I am rattled."

Knighton smiled a little, but made no reply.

"Ruth is my only child," said Van Aldin, "and there is no one on this earth who knows quite what she means to me."

A faint smile irradiated his face. He slipped his hand into his pocket.

"Care to see something, Knighton?"

He came back towards the secretary.

From his pocket he drew out a parcel carelessly wrapped in brown paper. He tossed off the wrapping and disclosed a big, shabby, red velvet case. In the centre of it were some twisted initials surmounted by a crown. He snapped the case open, and the secretary drew in his breath sharply. Against the slightly dingy white of the interior, the stones glowed like blood.

"My God! sir," said Knighton. "Are they—are they real?"

Van Aldin laughed a quiet little cackle of amusement.

"I don't wonder at your asking that. Amongst these rubies are the three largest in the world. Catherine of Russia wore them, Knighton. That centre one there is known as 'Heart of Fire.' It's perfect—not a flaw in it."

“But,” the secretary murmured, “they must be worth a fortune.”

“Four or five hundred thousand dollars,” said Van Aldin nonchalantly, “and that is apart from the historical interest.”

“And you carry them about—like that, loose in your pocket?”

Van Aldin laughed amusedly.

“I guess so. You see, they are my little present for Ruthie.”

The secretary smiled discreetly.

“I can understand now Mrs. Kettering’s anxiety over the telephone,” he murmured.

But Van Aldin shook his head. The hard look returned to his face.

“You are wrong there,” he said. “She doesn’t know about these; they are my little surprise for her.”

He shut the case, and began slowly to wrap it up again.

“It’s a hard thing, Knighton,” he said, “how little one can do for those one loves. I can buy a good portion of the earth for Ruth, if it would be any use to her, but it isn’t. I can hang these things round her neck and give her a moment or two’s pleasure, maybe, but—”

He shook his head.

“When a woman is not happy in her home—”

He left the sentence unfinished. The secretary nodded discreetly. He knew, none better, the reputation of the Hon. Derek Kettering. Van Aldin sighed. Slipping the parcel back in his coat pocket, he nodded to Knighton and left the room.

Four

ON CURZON STREET

The Hon. Mrs. Derek Kettering lived in Curzon Street. The butler who opened the door recognized Rufus Van Aldin at once and permitted himself a discreet smile of greeting. He led the way upstairs to the big double drawing room on the first floor.

A woman who was sitting by the window started up with a cry.

“Why, Dad, if that isn’t too good for anything! I’ve been telephoning Major Knighton all day to try and get hold of you, but he couldn’t say for sure when you were expected back.”

Ruth Kettering was twenty-eight years of age. Without being beautiful, or in the real sense of the word even pretty, she was striking-looking because of her colouring. Van Aldin had been called Carrots and Ginger in his time, and Ruth’s hair was almost pure auburn. With it went dark eyes and very black lashes—the effect somewhat enhanced by art. She was tall and slender, and moved well. At a careless glance it was the face of a Raphael Madonna. Only if one looked closely did one perceive the same line of jaw and chin as in Van Aldin’s face, bespeaking the same hardness and determination. It suited the man, but suited the woman less well. From her childhood upward Ruth Van Aldin had been accustomed to having her own way, and anyone who had ever stood up against her soon realized that Rufus Van Aldin’s daughter never gave in.

“Knighton told me you’d ’phoned him,” said Van Aldin. “I only got back from Paris half an hour ago. What’s all this about Derek?”

Ruth Kettering flushed angrily.

“It’s unspeakable. It’s beyond all limits,” she cried. “He—he doesn’t seem to listen to anything I say.”

There was bewilderment as well as anger in her voice.

“He’ll listen to me,” said the millionaire grimly.

Ruth went on.

“I’ve hardly seen him for the last month. He goes about everywhere with that woman.”

“With what woman?”

“Mirelle. She dances at the Parthenon, you know.”

Van Aldin nodded.

“I was down at Leconbury last week. I—I spoke to Lord Leconbury. He was awfully sweet to me, sympathized entirely. He said he’d give Derek a good talking to.”

“Ah!” said Van Aldin.

“What do you mean by ‘Ah!’ Dad?”

“Just what you think I mean, Ruthie. Poor old Leconbury is a washout. Of course he sympathized with you, of course he tried to soothe you down. Having got his son and heir married to the daughter of one of the richest men in the States, he naturally doesn’t want to mess the thing up. But he’s got one foot in the grave already, everyone knows that, and anything he may say will cut darned little ice with Derek.”

“Can’t you do anything, Dad?” urged Ruth, after a minute or two.

“I might,” said the millionaire. He waited a second reflectively, and then went on. “There are several things I might do, but there’s only one that will be any real good. How much pluck have you got, Ruthie?”

She stared at him. He nodded back at her.

"I mean just what I say. Have you got the grit to admit to all the world that you've made a mistake? There's only one way out of this mess, Ruthie. Cut your losses and start afresh."

"You mean—?"

"Divorce."

"Divorce!"

Van Aldin smiled drily.

"You say that word, Ruth, as though you'd never heard it before. And yet your friends are doing it all round you every day."

"Oh! I know that. But—"

She stopped, biting her lip. Her father nodded comprehendingly.

"I know, Ruth. You're like me, you can't bear to let go. But I've learnt, and you've got to learn, that there are times when it's the only way. I might find ways of whistling Derek back to you, but it would all come to the same in the end. He's no good, Ruth; he's rotten through and through. And mind you, I blame myself for ever letting you marry him. But you were kind of set on having him, and he seemed in earnest about turning over a new leaf—and well, I'd crossed you once, honey. . . ."

He did not look at her as he said the last words. Had he done so, he might have seen the swift colour that came up in her face.

"You did," she said in a hard voice.

"I was too durned softhearted to do it a second time. I can't tell you how I wish I had, though. You've led a poor kind of life for the last few years, Ruth."

"It has not been very—agreeable," agreed Mrs. Kettering.

“That’s why I say to you that this thing has got to stop!” He brought his hand down with a bang on the table. “You may have a hankering after the fellow still. Cut it out. Face facts. Derek Kettering married you for your money. That’s all there is to it. Get rid of him, Ruth.”

Ruth Kettering looked down at the ground for some moments, then she said, without raising her head:

“Supposing he doesn’t consent?”

Van Aldin looked at her in astonishment.

“He won’t have a say in the matter.”

She flushed and bit her lip.

“No—no—of course not. I only meant—”

She stopped. Her father eyed her keenly.

“What did you mean?”

“I meant—” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “He mayn’t take it lying down.”

The millionaire’s chin shot out grimly.

“You mean he’ll fight the case? Let him! But, as a matter of fact, you’re wrong. He won’t fight. Any solicitor he consults will tell him he hasn’t a leg to stand upon.”

“You don’t think”—she hesitated—“I mean—out of sheer spite against me—he might, well, try to make it awkward?”

Her father looked at her in some astonishment.

“Fight the case, you mean?”

He shook his head.

"Very unlikely. You see, he would have to have something to go upon."

Mrs. Kettering did not answer. Van Aldin looked at her sharply.

"Come, Ruth, out with it. There's something troubling you—what is it?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

But her voice was unconvincing.

"You are dreading the publicity, eh? Is that it? You leave it to me. I'll put the whole thing through so smoothly that there will be no fuss at all."

"Very well, Dad, if you really think it's the best thing to be done."

"Got a fancy for the fellow still, Ruth? Is that it?"

"No."

The word came with no uncertain emphasis. Van Aldin seemed satisfied. He patted his daughter on the shoulder.

"It will be all right, little girl. Don't you worry any. Now let's forget about all this. I have brought you a present from Paris."

"For me? Something very nice?"

"I hope you'll think so," said Van Aldin, smiling.

He took the parcel from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She unwrapped it eagerly, and snapped open the case. A long-drawn "Oh!" came from her lips. Ruth Kettering loved jewels—always had done so.

"Dad, how—how wonderful!"

"Rather in a class by themselves, aren't they?" said the millionaire with satisfaction. "You like them, eh."

"Like them? Dad, they're unique. How did you get hold of them?"

Van Aldin smiled.

“Ah! that’s my secret. They had to be bought privately, of course. They are rather well-known. See that big stone in the middle? You have heard of it, maybe; that’s the historic ‘Heart of Fire.’ ”

“ ‘Heart of Fire!’ ” repeated Mrs. Kettering.

She had taken the stones from the case and was holding them against her breast. The millionaire watched her. He was thinking of the series of women who had worn the jewels. The heartaches, the despairs, the jealousies. “Heart of Fire,” like all famous stones, had left behind it a trail of tragedy and violence. Held in Ruth Kettering’s assured hand, it seemed to lose its potency of evil. With her cool, equable poise, this woman of the western world seemed a negation to tragedy or heart burnings. Ruth returned the stones to their case; then, jumping up, she flung her arms round her father’s neck.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Dad. They are wonderful! You do give me the most marvellous presents always.”

“That’s all right,” said Van Aldin, patting her shoulder. “You are all I have, you know, Ruthie.”

“You will stay to dinner, won’t you, Father?”

“I don’t think so. You were going out, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but I can easily put that off. Nothing very exciting.”

“No,” said Van Aldin. “Keep your engagement. I have got a good deal to attend to. See you tomorrow, my dear. Perhaps if I ’phone you, we can meet at Galbraiths?”

Messrs. Galbraith, Galbraith, Cuthbertson & Galbraith were Van Aldin’s London solicitors.

“Very well, Dad.” She hesitated. “I suppose it—this—won’t keep me from going to the Riviera?”

“When are you off?”

“On the fourteenth.”

“Oh, that will be all right. These things take a long time to mature. By the way, Ruth, I shouldn’t take those rubies abroad if I were you. Leave them at the bank.”

Mrs. Kettering nodded.

“We don’t want to have you robbed and murdered for the sake of ‘Heart of Fire,’ ” said the millionaire jocosely.

“And yet you carried it about in your pocket loose,” retorted his daughter, smiling.

“Yes—”

Something, some hesitation, caught her attention.

“What is it, Dad?”

“Nothing.” He smiled. “Thinking of a little adventure of mine in Paris.”

“An adventure?”

“Yes, the night I bought these things.”

He made a gesture towards the jewel case.

“Oh, do tell me.”

“Nothing to tell, Ruthie. Some apache fellows got a bit fresh and I shot at them and they got off. That’s all.”

She looked at him with some pride.

“You’re a tough proposition, Dad.”

“You bet I am, Ruthie.”

He kissed her affectionately and departed. On arriving back at the Savoy, he gave a curt order to Knighton.

“Get hold of a man called Goby; you’ll find his address in my private book. He’s to be here tomorrow morning at half past nine.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I also want to see Mr. Kettering. Run him to earth for me if you can. Try his Club—at any rate, get hold of him somehow, and arrange for me to see him here tomorrow morning. Better make it latish, about twelve. His sort aren’t early risers.”

The secretary nodded in comprehension of these instructions. Van Aldin gave himself into the hands of this valet. His bath was prepared, and as he lay luxuriating in the hot water, his mind went back over the conversation with his daughter. On the whole he was well-satisfied. His keen mind had long since accepted the fact that divorce was the only possible way out. Ruth had agreed to the proposed solution with more readiness than he had hoped for. Yet, in spite of her acquiescence, he was left with a vague sense of uneasiness. Something about her manner, he felt, had not been quite natural. He frowned to himself.

“Maybe I’m fanciful,” he muttered, “and yet—I bet there’s something she has not told me.”

Five

A USEFUL GENTLEMAN

Rufus Van Aldin had just finished the sparse breakfast of coffee and dry toast, which was all he ever allowed himself, when Knighton entered the room.

"Mr. Goby is below, sir, waiting to see you."

The millionaire glanced at the clock. It was just half past nine.

"All right," he said curtly. "He can come up."

A minute or two later, Mr. Goby entered the room. He was a small, elderly man, shabbily dressed, with eyes that looked carefully all round the room, and never at the person he was addressing.

"Good morning, Goby," said the millionaire. "Take a chair."

"Thank you, Mr. Van Aldin."

Mr. Goby sat down with his hands on his knees, and gazed earnestly at the radiator.

"I have got a job for you."

"Yes, Mr. Van Aldin?"

"My daughter is married to the Hon. Derek Kettering, as you may perhaps know."

Mr. Goby transferred his gaze from the radiator to the left-hand drawer of the desk, and permitted a deprecating smile to pass over his face. Mr. Goby knew a great many things, but he always hated to admit the fact.

“By my advice, she is about to file a petition for divorce. That, of course, is a solicitor’s business. But, for private reasons, I want the fullest and most complete information.”

Mr. Goby looked at the cornice and murmured:

“About Mr. Kettering?”

“About Mr. Kettering.”

“Very good, sir.”

Mr. Goby rose to his feet.

“When will you have it ready for me?”

“Are you in a hurry, sir?”

“I’m always in a hurry,” said the millionaire.

Mr. Goby smiled understandingly at the fender.

“Shall we say two o’clock this afternoon, sir?” he asked.

“Excellent,” approved the other. “Good morning, Goby.”

“Good morning, Mr. Van Aldin.”

“That’s a very useful man,” said the millionaire as Goby went out and his secretary came in. “In his own line he’s a specialist.”

“What is his line?”

“Information. Give him twenty-four hours and he would lay the private life of the Archbishop of Canterbury bare for you.”

“A useful sort of chap,” said Knighton, with a smile.

“He has been useful to me once or twice,” said Van Aldin. “Now then, Knighton, I’m ready for work.”

The next few hours saw a vast quantity of business rapidly transacted. It was half past twelve when the telephone bell rang, and Mr. Van Aldin was informed that Mr. Kettering had called. Knighton looked at Van Aldin, and interpreted his brief nod.

“Ask Mr. Kettering to come up, please.”

The secretary gathered up his papers and departed. He and the visitor passed each other in the doorway, and Derek Kettering stood aside to let the other go out. Then he came in, shutting the door behind him.

“Good morning, sir. You are very anxious to see me, I hear.”

The lazy voice with its slightly ironic inflection roused memories in Van Aldin. There was charm in it—there had always been charm in it. He looked piercingly at his son-in-law. Derek Kettering was thirty-four, lean of build, with a dark, narrow face, which had even now something indescribably boyish in it.

“Come in,” said Van Aldin curtly. “Sit down.”

Kettering flung himself lightly into an armchair. He looked at his father-in-law with a kind of tolerant amusement.

“Not seen you for a long time, sir,” he remarked pleasantly. “About two years, I should say. Seen Ruth yet?”

“I saw her last night,” said Van Aldin.

“Looking very fit, isn’t she?” said the other lightly.

“I didn’t know you had had much opportunity of judging,” said Van Aldin drily.

Derek Kettering raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, we sometimes meet at the same nightclub, you know,” he said airily.

“I am not going to beat about the bush,” Van Aldin said curtly. “I have advised Ruth to file a petition for divorce.”

Derek Kettering seemed unmoved.

“How drastic!” he murmured. “Do you mind if I smoke, sir?”

He lit a cigarette, and puffed out a cloud of smoke as he added nonchalantly:

“And what did Ruth say?”

“Ruth proposes to take my advice,” said her father.

“Does she really?”

“Is that all you have got to say?” demanded Van Aldin sharply.

Kettering flicked his ash into the grate.

“I think, you know,” he said, with a detached air, “that she’s making a great mistake.”

“From your point of view she doubtless is,” said Van Aldin grimly.

“Oh, come now,” said the other; “don’t let’s be personal. I really wasn’t thinking of myself at the moment. I was thinking of Ruth. You know my poor old Governor really can’t last much longer; all the doctors say so. Ruth had better give it a couple more years, then I shall be Lord Leconbury, and she can be châtelaine of Leconbury, which is what she married me for.”

“I won’t have any of your darned impudence,” roared Van Aldin.

Derek Kettering smiled at him unmoved.

“I agree with you. It’s an obsolete idea,” he said. “There’s nothing in a title nowadays. Still, Leconbury is a very fine old place, and, after all, we are one of the oldest families in England. It will be very annoying for Ruth if she divorces me to find me marrying again, and some other woman queening it at Leconbury instead of her."

"I am serious, young man," said Van Aldin.

"Oh, so am I," said Kettering. "I am in very low water financially; it will put me in a nasty hole if Ruth divorces me, and, after all, if she has stood it for ten years, why not stand it a little longer? I give you my word of honour that the old man can't possibly last out another eighteen months, and, as I said before, it's a pity Ruth shouldn't get what she married me for."

"You suggest that my daughter married you for your title and position?"

Derek Kettering laughed a laugh that was not all amusement.

"You don't think it was a question of a love match?" he asked.

"I know," said Van Aldin slowly, "that you spoke very differently in Paris ten years ago."

"Did I? Perhaps I did. Ruth was very beautiful, you know—rather like an angel or a saint, or something that had stepped down from a niche in a church. I had fine ideas, I remember, of turning over a new leaf, of settling down and living up to the highest traditions of English home life with a beautiful wife who loved me."

He laughed again, rather more discordantly.

"But you don't believe that, I suppose?" he said.

"I have no doubt at all that you married Ruth for her money," said Van Aldin unemotionally.

"And that she married me for love?" asked the other ironically.

"Certainly," said Van Aldin.

Derek Kettering stared at him for a minute or two, then he nodded reflectively.

“I see you believe that,” he said. “So did I at the time. I can assure you, my dear father-in-law, I was very soon undeceived.”

“I don’t know what you are getting at,” said Van Aldin, “and I don’t care. You have treated Ruth darned badly.”

“Oh, I have,” agreed Kettering lightly, “but she’s tough, you know. She’s your daughter. Underneath the pink-and-white softness of her she’s as hard as granite. You have always been known as a hard man, so I have been told, but Ruth is harder than you are. You, at any rate, love one person better than yourself. Ruth never has and never will.”

“That is enough,” said Van Aldin. “I asked you here so that I could tell you fair and square what I meant to do. My girl has got to have some happiness, and remember this, I am behind her.”

Derek Kettering got up and stood by the mantelpiece. He tossed away his cigarette. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet.

“What exactly do you mean by that, I wonder?” he said.

“I mean,” said Van Aldin, “that you had better not try to defend the case.”

“Oh,” said Kettering, “is that a threat?”

“You can take it any way you please,” said Van Aldin.

Kettering drew a chair up to the table. He sat down fronting the millionaire.

“And supposing,” he said softly, “that, just for argument’s sake, I did defend the case?”

Van Aldin shrugged his shoulders.

“You have not got a leg to stand upon, you young fool. Ask your solicitors, they will soon tell you. Your conduct has been notorious, the talk of

London.”

“Ruth has been kicking up a row about Mirelle, I suppose. Very foolish of her. I don’t interfere with her friends.”

“What do you mean?” said Van Aldin sharply.

Derek Kettering laughed.

“I see you don’t know everything, sir,” he said. “You are, perhaps naturally, prejudiced.”

He took up his hat and stick and moved towards the door.

“Giving advice is not much in my line.” He delivered his final thrust. “But, in this case, I should advise most strongly perfect frankness between father and daughter.”

He passed quickly out of the room and shut the door behind him just as the millionaire sprang up.

“Now, what the hell did he mean by that?” said Van Aldin as he sank back into his chair again.

All his uneasiness returned in full force. There was something here that he had not yet got to the bottom of. The telephone was by his elbow; he seized it, and asked for the number of his daughter’s house.

“Hallo! Hallo! Is that Mayfair 81907? Mrs. Kettering in? Oh, she’s out, is she? Yes, out to lunch. What time will she be in? You don’t know? Oh, very good; no, there’s no message.”

He slammed the receiver down again angrily. At two o’clock he was pacing the floor of his room waiting expectantly for Goby. The latter was ushered in at ten minutes past two.

“Well?” barked the millionaire sharply.

But little Mr. Goby was not to be hurried. He sat down at the table, produced a very shabby pocketbook, and proceeded to read from it in a monotonous voice. The millionaire listened attentively, with an increasing satisfaction. Goby came to a full stop, and looked attentively at the wastepaper basket.

“Um!” said Van Aldin. “That seems pretty definite. The case will go through like winking. The hotel evidence is all right, I suppose?”

“Cast iron,” said Mr. Goby, and looked malevolently at a gilt armchair.

“And financially he’s in very low water. He’s trying to raise a loan now, you say? Has already raised practically all he can upon his expectations from his father. Once the news of the divorce gets about, he won’t be able to raise another cent, and not only that, his obligations can be bought up and pressure can be put upon him from that quarter. We have got him, Goby; we have got him in a cleft stick.”

He hit the table a bang with his fist. His face was grim and triumphant.

“The information,” said Mr. Goby in a thin voice, “seems satisfactory.”

“I have got to go round to Curzon Street now,” said the millionaire. “I am much obliged to you, Goby. You are the goods all right.”

A pale smile of gratification showed itself on the little man’s face.

“Thank you, Mr. Van Aldin,” he said; “I try to do my best.”

Van Aldin did not go direct to Curzon Street. He went first to the City, where he had two interviews which added to his satisfaction. From there he took the tube to Down Street. As he was walking along Curzon Street, a figure came out of No. 160, and turned up the street towards him, so that they passed each other on the pavement. For a moment, the millionaire had fancied it might be Derek Kettering himself; the height and build were not unlike. But as they came face to face, he saw that the man was a stranger to him. At least—no, not a stranger; his face awoke some call of recognition in the millionaire’s mind, and it was associated definitely with something unpleasant. He cudgelled his brains in vain, but the thing eluded him. He went on, shaking his head irritably. He hated to be baffled.

Ruth Kettering was clearly expecting him. She ran to him and kissed him when he entered.

“Well, Dad, how are things going?”

“Very well,” said Van Aldin; “but I have got a word or two to say to you, Ruth.”

Almost insensibly he felt the change in her; something shrewd and watchful replaced the impulsiveness of her greeting. She sat down in a big armchair.

“Well, Dad?” she asked. “What is it?”

“I saw your husband this morning,” said Van Aldin.

“You saw Derek?”

“I did. He said a lot of things, most of which were darned cheek. Just as he was leaving, he said something that I didn’t understand. He advised me to be sure that there was perfect frankness between father and daughter. What did he mean by that, Ruthie?”

Mrs. Kettering moved a little in her chair.

“I—I don’t know, Dad. How should I?”

“Of course you know,” said Van Aldin. “He said something else, about his having his friends and not interfering with yours. What did he mean by that?”

“I don’t know,” said Ruth Kettering again.

Van Aldin sat down. His mouth set itself in a grim line.

“See here, Ruth. I am not going into this with my eyes closed. I am not at all sure that that husband of yours doesn’t mean to make trouble. Now, he can’t do it, I am sure of that. I have got the means to silence him, to shut his mouth for good and all, but I have got to know if there’s any need to use those means. What did he mean by your having your own friends?”

Mrs. Kettering shrugged her shoulders.

“I have got lots of friends,” she said uncertainly. “I don’t know what he meant, I am sure.”

“You do,” said Van Aldin.

He was speaking now as he might have spoken to a business adversary.

“I will put it plainer. Who is the man?”

“What man?”

“The man. That’s what Derek was driving at. Some special man who is a friend of yours. You needn’t worry, honey, I know there is nothing in it, but we have got to look at everything as it might appear to the Court. They can twist these things about a good deal, you know. I want to know who the man is, and just how friendly you have been with him.”

Ruth didn’t answer. Her hands were kneading themselves together in intense nervous absorption.

“Come, honey,” said Van Aldin in a softer voice. “Don’t be afraid of your old Dad. I was not too harsh, was I, even that time in Paris?—By gosh!”

He stopped, thunderstruck.

“That’s who it was,” he murmured to himself. “I thought I knew his face.”

“What are you talking about, Dad? I don’t understand.”

The millionaire strode across to her and took her firmly by the wrist.

“See here, Ruth, have you been seeing that fellow again?”

"What fellow?"

"The one we had all that fuss about years ago. You know who I mean well enough."

"You mean"—she hesitated—"you mean the Comte de la Roche?"

"Comte de la Roche!" snorted Van Aldin. "I told you at the time that the man was no better than a swindler. You had entangled yourself with him then very deeply, but I got you out of his clutches."

"Yes, you did," said Ruth bitterly. "And I married Derek Kettering."

"You wanted to," said the millionaire sharply.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"And now," said Van Aldin slowly, "you have been seeing him again—after all I told you. He has been in the house today. I met him outside, and couldn't place him for the moment."

Ruth Kettering had recovered her composure.

"I want to tell you one thing, Dad; you are wrong about Armand—the Comte de la Roche, I mean. Oh, I know there were several regrettable incidents in his youth—he has told me about them; but—well, he has cared for me always. It broke his heart when you parted us in Paris, and now—"

She was interrupted by the snort of indignation her father gave.

"So you fell for that stuff, did you? You, a daughter of mine! My God!"

He threw up his hands.

"That women can be such darned fools!"

Six

MIRELLE

Derek Kettering emerged from Van Aldin’s suite so precipitantly that he collided with a lady passing across the corridor. He apologized, and she accepted his apologies with a smiling reassurance and passed on, leaving with him a pleasant impression of a soothing personality and rather fine grey eyes.

For all his nonchalance, his interview with his father-in-law had shaken him more than he cared to show. He had a solitary lunch, and after it, frowning to himself a little, he went round to the sumptuous flat that housed the lady known as Mirelle. A trim Frenchwoman received him with smiles.

“But enter then, Monsieur. Madame reposes herself.”

He was ushered into the long room with its Eastern setting which he knew so well. Mirelle was lying on the divan, supported by an incredible number of cushions, all in varying shades of amber, to harmonize with the yellow ochre of her complexion. The dancer was a beautifully made woman, and if her face, beneath its mask of yellow, was in truth somewhat haggard, it had a bizarre charm of its own, and her orange lips smiled invitingly at Derek Kettering.

He kissed her, and flung himself into a chair.

“What have you been doing with yourself? Just got up, I suppose?”

The orange mouth widened into a long smile.

“No,” said the dancer. “I have been at work.”

She flung out a long, pale hand towards the piano, which was littered with untidy music scores.

“Ambrose has been here. He has been playing me the new Opera.”

Kettering nodded without paying much attention. He was profoundly uninterested in Claud Ambrose and the latter’s operatic setting of Ibsen’s Peer Gynt. So was Mirelle, for that matter, regarding it merely as a unique opportunity for her own presentation as Anitra.

“It is a marvellous dance,” she murmured. “I shall put all the passion of the desert into it. I shall dance hung over with jewels—ah! and, by the way, mon ami, there is a pearl that I saw yesterday in Bond Street—a black pearl.”

She paused, looking at him invitingly.

“My dear girl,” said Kettering, “it’s no use talking of black pearls to me. At the present minute, as far as I am concerned, the fat is in the fire.”

She was quick to respond to his tone. She sat up, her big black eyes widening.

“What is that you say, Dereek? What has happened?”

“My esteemed father-in-law,” said Kettering, “is preparing to go off the deep end.”

“Eh?”

“In other words, he wants Ruth to divorce me.”

“How stupid!” said Mirelle. “Why should she want to divorce you?”

Derek Kettering grinned.

“Mainly because of you, chérie!” he said.

Mirelle shrugged her shoulders.

“That is foolish,” she observed in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Very foolish,” agreed Derek.

“What are you going to do about it?” demanded Mirelle.

“My dear girl, what can I do? On the one side, the man with unlimited money; on the other side, the man with unlimited debts. There is no question as to who will come out on top.”

“They are extraordinary, these Americans,” commented Mirelle. “It is not as though your wife were fond of you.”

“Well,” said Derek, “what are we going to do about it?”

She looked at him inquiringly. He came over and took both her hands in his.

“Are you going to stick to me?”

“What do you mean? After—?”

“Yes,” said Kettering. “After, when the creditors come down like wolves on the fold. I am damned fond of you, Mirelle; are you going to let me down?”

She pulled her hands away from him.

“You know I adore you, Dereek.”

He caught the note of evasion in her voice.

“So that’s that, is it? The rats will leave the sinking ship.”

“Ah, Dereek!”

“Out with it,” he said violently. “You will fling me over; is that it?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I am very fond of you, mon ami—indeed I am fond of you. You are very charming—un beau garçon, but ce n’est pas practique.”

“You are a rich man’s luxury, eh? Is that it?”

“If you like to put it that way.”

She leaned back on the cushions, her head flung back.

“All the same, I am fond of you, Dereek.”

He went over to the window and stood there some time looking out, with his back to her. Presently the dancer raised herself on her elbow and stared at him curiously.

“What are you thinking of, mon ami?”

He grinned at her over his shoulder, a curious grin, that made her vaguely uneasy.

“As it happened, I was thinking of a woman, my dear.”

“A woman, eh?”

Mirelle pounced on something that she could understand.

“You are thinking of some other woman, is that it?”

“Oh, you needn’t worry; it is purely a fancy portrait. ‘Portrait of a lady with grey eyes.’ ”

Mirelle said sharply, “When did you meet her?”

Derek Kettering laughed, and his laughter had a mocking, ironical sound.

“I ran into the lady in the corridor of the Savoy Hotel.”

“Well! What did she say?”

"As far as I can remember, I said 'I beg your pardon,' and she said, 'It doesn't matter,' or words to that effect."

"And then?" persisted the dancer.

Kettering shrugged his shoulders.

"And then—nothing. That was the end of the incident."

"I don't understand a word of what you are talking about," declared the dancer.

"Portrait of a lady with grey eyes," murmured Derek reflectively. "Just as well I am never likely to meet her again."

"Why?"

"She might bring me bad luck. Women do."

Mirelle slipped quietly from her couch, and came across to him, laying one long, snakelike arm round his neck.

"You are foolish, Dereek," she murmured. "You are very foolish. You are beau garçon, and I adore you, but I am not made to be poor—no, decidedly I am not made to be poor. Now listen to me; everything is very simple. You must make it up with your wife."

"I am afraid that's not going to be actually in the sphere of practical politics," said Derek drily.

"How do you say? I do not understand."

"Van Aldin, my dear, is not taking any. He is the kind of man who makes up his mind and sticks to it."

"I have heard of him," nodded the dancer. "He is very rich, is he not? Almost the richest man in America. A few days ago, in Paris, he bought the most wonderful ruby in the world—'Heart of Fire' it is called."

Kettering did not answer. The dancer went on musingly:

“It is a wonderful stone—a stone that should belong to a woman like me. I love jewels, Dereek; they say something to me. Ah! to wear a ruby like ‘Heart of Fire.’ ”

She gave a little sigh, and then became practical once more.

“You don’t understand these things. Dereek; you are only a man. Van Aldin will give these rubies to his daughter, I suppose. Is she his only child?”

“Yes.”

“Then when he dies, she will inherit all his money. She will be a rich woman.”

“She is a rich woman already,” said Kettering drily. “He settled a couple of millions on her at her marriage.”

“A couple of million! But that is immense. And if she died suddenly, eh? That would all come to you?”

“As things stand at present,” said Kettering slowly, “it would. As far as I know she has not made a will.”

“Mon Dieu!” said the dancer. “If she were to die, what a solution that would be.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then Derek Kettering laughed outright.

“I like your simple, practical mind, Mirelle, but I am afraid what you desire won’t come to pass. My wife is an extremely healthy person.”

“Eh bien!” said Mirelle; “there are accidents.”

He looked at her sharply but did not answer.

She went on.

“But you are right, mon ami, we must not dwell on possibilities. See now, my little Dereek, there must be no more talk of this divorce. Your wife must give up the idea.”

“And if she won’t?”

The dancer’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“I think she will, my friend. She is one of those who would not like the publicity. There are one or two pretty stories that she would not like her friends to read in the newspapers.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kettering sharply.

Mirelle laughed, her head thrown back.

“Parbleu! I mean the gentleman who calls himself the Comte de la Roche. I know all about him. I am Parisienne, you remember. He was her lover before she married you, was he not?”

Kettering took her sharply by the shoulders.

“That is a damned lie,” he said, “and please remember that, after all, you are speaking of my wife.”

Mirelle was a little sobered.

“You are extraordinary, you English,” she complained. “All the same, I daresay that you may be right. The Americans are so cold, are they not? But you will permit me to say, mon ami, that she was in love with him before she married you, and her father stepped in and sent the Comte about his business. And the little Mademoiselle, she wept many tears! But she obeyed. Still, you must know as well as I do, Dereek, that it is a very different story now. She sees him nearly every day, and on the 14th she goes to Paris to meet him.”

“How do you know all this?” demanded Kettering.

“Me? I have friends in Paris, my dear Dereek, who know the Comte intimately. It is all arranged. She is going to the Riviera, so she says, but in reality the Comte meets her in Paris and—who knows! Yes, yes, you can take my word for it, it is all arranged.”

Derek Kettering stood motionless.

“You see,” purred the dancer, “if you are clever, you have her in the hollow of your hand. You can make things very awkward for her.”

“Oh, for God’s sake be quiet,” cried Kettering. “Shut your cursed mouth!”

Mirelle flung herself down on the divan with a laugh. Kettering caught up his hat and coat and left the flat, banging the door violently. And still the dancer sat on the divan and laughed softly to herself. She was not displeased with her work.

Seven

LETTERS

"Mrs. Samuel Harfield presents her compliments to Miss Katherine Grey and wishes to point out that under the circumstances Miss Grey may not be aware—"

Mrs. Harfield, having written so far fluently, came to a dead stop, held up by what has proved an insuperable difficulty to many other people—namely, the difficulty of expressing oneself fluently in the third person.

After a minute or two of hesitation, Mrs. Harfield tore up the sheet of notepaper and started afresh.

Dear Miss Grey,—Whilst fully appreciating the adequate way you discharged your duties to my Cousin Emma (whose recent death has indeed been a severe blow to us all), I cannot but feel—

Again Mrs. Harfield came to a stop. Once more the letter was consigned to the wastepaper basket. It was not until four false starts had been made that Mrs. Harfield at last produced an epistle that satisfied her. It was duly sealed and stamped and addressed to Miss Katherine Grey, Little Crampton, St. Mary Mead, Kent, and it lay beside the lady's plate on the following morning at breakfast time in company with a more important-looking communication in a long blue envelope.

Katherine Grey opened Mrs. Harfield's letter first. The finished production ran as follows:

Dear Miss Grey,—My husband and I wish to express our thanks to you for your services to my poor cousin, Emma. Her death has been a great blow to us, though we were, of course, aware that her mind has been failing for some time past. I understand that her latter testamentary dispositions have been of a most peculiar character, and they would not hold good, of course, in any court of law. I have no doubt that, with your usual good sense, you have already realized this fact. If these matters can be arranged privately it is always so much better, my husband says. We shall be pleased to recommend you most highly for a similar post, and hope that you will also accept a small present. Believe me, dear Miss Grey, yours cordially.

Mary Anne Harfield.

Katherine Grey read the letter through, smiled a little, and read it a second time. Her face as she laid the letter down after the second reading was distinctly amused. Then she took up the second letter. After one brief perusal she laid it down and stared very straight in front of her. This time she did not smile. Indeed, it would have been hard for anyone watching her to guess what emotions lay behind that quiet, reflective gaze.

Katherine Grey was thirty-three. She came of good family, but her father had lost all his money, and Katherine had had to work for her living from an early age. She had been just twenty-three when she had come to old Mrs. Harfield as companion.

It was generally recognized that old Mrs. Harfield was “difficult.” Companions came and went with startling rapidity. They arrived full of hope and they usually left in tears. But from the moment Katherine Grey set foot in Little Crampton, ten years ago, perfect peace had reigned. No one knows how these things come about. Snake charmers, they say, are born, not made. Katherine Grey was born with the power of managing old ladies, dogs, and small boys, and she did it without any apparent sense of strain.

At twenty-three she had been a quiet girl with beautiful eyes. At thirty-three she was a quiet woman, with those same grey eyes, shining steadily out on the world with a kind of happy serenity that nothing could shake. Moreover, she had been born with, and still possessed, a sense of humour.

As she sat at the breakfast table, staring in front of her, there was a ring at the bell, accompanied by a very energetic rat-a-tat-tat at the knocker. In another minute the little maidservant opened the door and announced rather breathlessly:

“Dr. Harrison.”

The big, middle-aged doctor came bustling in with the energy and breeziness that had been foreshadowed by his onslaught on the knocker.

“Good morning, Miss Grey.”

“Good morning, Dr. Harrison.”

“I dropped in early,” began the doctor, “in case you should have heard from one of those Harfield cousins. Mrs. Samuel, she calls herself—a perfectly poisonous person.”

Without a word, Katherine picked up Mrs. Harfield’s letter from the table and gave it to him. With a good deal of amusement she watched his perusal of it, the drawing together of the bushy eyebrows, the snorts and grunts of violent disapproval. He dashed it down again on the table.

“Perfectly monstrous,” he fumed. “Don’t you let it worry you, my dear. They’re talking through their hat. Mrs. Harfield’s intellect was as good as yours or mine, and you won’t get anyone to say the contrary. They wouldn’t have a leg to stand upon, and they know it. All that talk of taking it into court is pure bluff. Hence this attempt to get round you in a hole-and-corner way. And look here, my dear, don’t let them get round you with soft soap either. Don’t get fancying it’s your duty to hand over the cash, or any tomfoolery of conscientious scruples.”

“I’m afraid it hasn’t occurred to me to have scruples,” said Katherine. “All these people are distant relatives of Mrs. Harfield’s husband, and they never came near her or took any notice of her in her lifetime.”

“You’re a sensible woman,” said the doctor. “I know, none better, that you’ve had a hard life of it for the last ten years. You’re fully entitled to enjoy the old lady’s savings, such as they were.”

Katherine smiled thoughtfully.

“Such as they were,” she repeated. “You’ve no idea of the amount, doctor?”

“Well—enough to bring in five hundred a year or so, I suppose.”

Katherine nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” she said. “Now read this.”

She handed him the letter she had taken from the long blue envelope. The doctor read and uttered an exclamation of utter astonishment.

“Impossible,” he muttered. “Impossible.”

“She was one of the original shareholders in Mortaulds. Forty years ago she must have had an income of eight or ten thousand a year. She has never, I am sure, spent more than four hundred a year. She was always terribly careful about money. I always believed that she was obliged to be careful about every penny.”

“And all the time the income has accumulated at compound interest. My dear, you’re going to be a very rich woman.”

Katherine Grey nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “I am.”

She spoke in a detached, impersonal tone, as though she were looking at the situation from outside.

“Well,” said the doctor, preparing to depart, “you have all my congratulations.” He flicked Mrs. Samuel Harfield’s letter with his thumb. “Don’t worry about that woman and her odious letter.”

“It really isn’t an odious letter,” said Miss Grey tolerantly. “Under the circumstances, I think it’s really quite a natural thing to do.”

“I have the gravest suspicions of you sometimes,” said the doctor.

"Why?"

"The things that you find perfectly natural."

Katherine Grey laughed.

Doctor Harrison retailed the great news to his wife at lunch-time. She was very excited about it.

"Fancy old Mrs. Harfield—with all that money. I'm glad she left it to Katherine Grey. That girl's a saint."

The doctor made a wry face.

"Saints I always imagined must have been difficult people. Katherine Grey is too human for a saint."

"She's a saint with a sense of humour," said the doctor's wife, twinkling. "And, though I don't suppose you've ever noticed the fact, she's extremely good looking."

"Katherine Grey?" The doctor was honestly surprised. "She's got very nice eyes, I know."

"Oh, you men!" cried his wife. "Blind as bats. Katherine's got all the makings of a beauty in her. All she wants is clothes!"

"Clothes? What's wrong with her clothes? She always looks very nice."

Mrs. Harrison gave an exasperated sigh, and the doctor rose preparatory to starting on his rounds.

"You might look in on her, Polly," he suggested.

"I'm going to," said Mrs. Harrison, promptly.

She made her call about three o'clock.

“My dear, I’m so glad,” she said warmly, as she squeezed Katherine’s hand. “And everyone in the village will be glad too.”

“It’s very nice of you to come and tell me,” said Katherine. “I hoped you would come in because I wanted to ask about Johnnie.”

“Oh! Johnnie. Well—”

Johnnie was Mrs. Harrison’s youngest son. In another minute she was off, retailing a long history in which Johnnie’s adenoids and tonsils bulked largely. Katherine listened sympathetically. Habits die hard. Listening had been her portion for ten years now. “My dear, I wonder if I ever told you about the naval ball at Portsmouth? When Lord Charles admired my gown?” And composedly, kindly, Katherine would reply: “I rather think you have, Mrs. Harfield, but I’ve forgotten about it. Won’t you tell it me again?” And then the old lady would start off full swing, with numerous corrections, and stops, and remembered details. And half of Katherine’s mind would be listening, saying the right things mechanically when the old lady paused. . . .

Now, with the same curious feeling of duality to which she was accustomed, she listened to Mrs. Harrison.

At the end of half an hour, the latter recalled herself suddenly.

“I’ve been talking about myself all this time,” she exclaimed. “And I came here to talk about you and your plans.”

“I don’t know that I’ve got any yet.”

“My dear—you’re not going to stay on here.”

Katherine smiled at the horror in the other’s tone.

“No; I think I want to travel. I’ve never seen much of the world, you know.”

“I should think not. It must have been an awful life for you cooped up here all these years.”

“I don’t know,” said Katherine. “It gave me a lot of freedom.”

She caught the other’s gasp, and reddened a little.

“It must sound foolish—saying that. Of course, I hadn’t much freedom in the downright physical sense—”

“I should think not,” breathed Mrs. Harrison, remembering that Katherine had seldom had that useful thing, a “day off.”

“But in a way, being tied physically gives you lots of scope mentally. You’re always free to think. I’ve had a lovely feeling always of mental freedom.”

Mrs. Harrison shook her head.

“I can’t understand that.”

“Oh! you would if you’d been in my place. But, all the same, I feel I want a change. I want—well, I want things to happen. Oh! not to me—I don’t mean that. But to be in the midst of things—exciting things—even if I’m only the looker-on. You know, things don’t happen in St. Mary Mead.”

“They don’t indeed,” said Mrs. Harrison, with fervour.

“I shall go to London first,” said Katherine. “I have to see the solicitors, anyway. After that, I shall go abroad, I think.”

“Very nice.”

“But of course, first of all—”

“Yes?”

“I must get some clothes.”

“Exactly what I said to Arthur this morning,” cried the doctor’s wife. “You know, Katherine, you could look possibly positively beautiful if you tried.”

Miss Grey laughed unaffectedly.

“Oh! I don’t think you could ever make a beauty out of me,” she said sincerely. “But I shall enjoy having some really good clothes. I’m afraid I’m talking about myself an awful lot.”

Mrs. Harrison looked at her shrewdly.

“It must be quite a novel experience for you,” she said drily.

Katherine went to say good-bye to old Miss Viner before leaving the village. Miss Viner was two years older than Mrs. Harfield, and her mind was mainly taken up with her own success in out-living her dead friend.

“You wouldn’t have thought I’d have outlasted Jane Harfield, would you?” she demanded triumphantly of Katherine. “We were at school together, she and I. And here we are, she taken, and I left. Who would have thought it?”

“You’ve always eaten brown bread for supper, haven’t you?” murmured Katherine mechanically.

“Fancy your remembering that, my dear. Yes; if Jane Harfield had had a slice of brown bread every evening and taken a little stimulant with her meals she might be here today.”

The old lady paused, nodding her head triumphantly; then added in sudden remembrance:

“And so you’ve come into a lot of money, I hear? Well, well. Take care of it. And you’re going up to London to have a good time? Don’t think you’ll get married, though, my dear, because you won’t. You’re not the kind to attract the men. And, besides, you’re getting on. How old are you now?”

“Thirty-three,” Katherine told her.

“Well,” remarked Miss Viner doubtfully, “that’s not so very bad. You’ve lost your first freshness, of course.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Katherine, much entertained.

“But you’re a very nice girl,” said Miss Viner kindly. “And I’m sure there’s many a man might do worse than take you for a wife instead of one of these flibbertigibbets running about nowadays showing more of their legs than the Creator ever intended them to. Good-bye, my dear, and I hope you’ll enjoy yourself, but things are seldom what they seem in this life.”

Heartened by these prophecies, Katherine took her departure. Half the village came to see her off at the station, including the little maid of all work, Alice, who brought a stiff wired nosegay and cried openly.

“There ain’t a many like her,” sobbed Alice when the train had finally departed. “I’m sure when Charlie went back on me with that girl from the dairy, nobody could have been kinder than Miss Grey was, and though particular about the brasses and the dust, she was always one to notice when you’d give a thing an extra rub. Cut myself in little pieces for her, I would, any day. A real lady, that’s what I call her.”

Such was Katherine’s departure from St. Mary Mead.

Eight

LADY TAMPLIN WRITES A LETTER

"Well," said Lady Tamplin, "well."

She laid down the continental Daily Mail and stared out across the blue waters of the Mediterranean. A branch of golden mimosa, hanging just above her head, made an effective frame for a very charming picture. A golden-haired, blue-eyed lady in a very becoming négligé. That the golden hair owed something to art, as did the pink-and-white complexion, was undeniable, but the blue of the eyes was Nature's gift, and at forty-four Lady Tamplin could still rank as a beauty.

Charming as she looked, Lady Tamplin was, for once, not thinking of herself. That is to say, she was not thinking of her appearance. She was intent on graver matters.

Lady Tamplin was a well-known figure on the Riviera, and her parties at the Villa Marguerite were justly celebrated. She was a woman of considerable experience, and had had four husbands. The first had been merely an indiscretion, and so was seldom referred to by the lady. He had had the good sense to die with commendable promptitude, and his widow thereupon espoused a rich manufacturer of buttons. He too had departed for another sphere after three years of married life—it was said after a congenial evening with some boon companions. After him came Viscount Tamplin, who had placed Rosalie securely on those heights where she wished to tread. She retained her title when she married for a fourth time. This fourth venture had been undertaken for pure pleasure. Mr. Charles Evans, an extremely good-looking young man of twenty-seven, with delightful manners, a keen love of sport, and an appreciation of this world's goods, had no money of his own whatsoever.

Lady Tamplin was very pleased and satisfied with life generally, but she had occasional faint preoccupations about money. The button manufacturer had left his widow a considerable fortune, but, as Lady Tamplin was wont to say, “what with one thing and another—” (one thing being the depreciation of stocks owing to the War, and the other the extravagances of the late Lord Tamplin). She was still comfortably off. But to be merely comfortably off was hardly satisfactory to one of Rosalie Tamplin’s temperament.

So, on this particular January morning, she opened her blue eyes extremely wide as she read a certain item of news and uttered that noncommittal monosyllable “Well.” The only other occupant of the balcony was her daughter, the Hon. Lenox Tamplin. A daughter such as Lenox was a sad thorn in Lady Tamplin’s side, a girl with no kind of tact, who actually looked older than her age, and whose peculiar sardonic form of humour was, to say the least of it, uncomfortable.

“Darling,” said Lady Tamplin, “just fancy.”

“What is it?”

Lady Tamplin picked up the Daily Mail, handed it to her daughter, and indicated with an agitated forefinger the paragraph of interest.

Lenox read it without any of the signs of agitation shown by her mother. She handed back the paper.

“What about it?” she asked. “It is the sort of thing that is always happening. Cheese-paring old women are always dying in villages and leaving fortunes of millions to their humble companions.”

“Yes, dear, I know,” said her mother, “and I daresay the fortune is not anything like as large as they say it is; newspapers are so inaccurate. But even if you cut it down by half—”

“Well,” said Lenox, “it has not been left to us.”

“Not exactly, dear,” said Lady Tamplin; “but this girl, this Katherine Grey, is actually a cousin of mine. One of the Worcestershire Greys, the Edgeworth lot. My very own cousin! Fancy!”

“Ah-ha,” said Lenox.

“And I was wondering—” said her mother.

“What there is in it for us,” finished Lenox, with that sideways smile that her mother always found difficult to understand.

“Oh, darling,” said Lady Tamplin, on a faint note of reproach.

It was very faint, because Rosalie Tamplin was used to her daughter’s outspokenness and to what she called Lenox’s uncomfortable way of putting things.

“I was wondering,” said Lady Tamplin, again drawing her artistically pencilled brows together, “whether—oh, good morning, Chubby darling: are you going to play tennis? How nice!”

Chubby, thus addressed, smiled kindly at her, remarked perfunctorily, “How topping you look in that peach-coloured thing,” and drifted past them and down the steps.

“The dear thing,” said Lady Tamplin, looking affectionately after her husband. “Let me see, what was I saying? Ah!” She switched her mind back to business once more. “I was wondering—”

“Oh, for God’s sake get on with it. That is the third time you have said that.”

“Well, dear,” said Lady Tamplin, “I was thinking that it would be very nice if I wrote to dear Katherine and suggested that she should pay us a little visit out here. Naturally, she is quite out of touch with Society. It would be nicer for her to be launched by one of her own people. An advantage for her and an advantage for us.”

“How much do you think you would get her to cough up?” asked Lenox.

Her mother looked at her reproachfully and murmured:

“We should have to come to some financial arrangement, of course. What with one thing and another—the War—your poor father—”

“And Chubby now,” said Lenox. “He is an expensive luxury if you like.”

“She was a nice girl as I remember her,” murmured Lady Tamplin, pursuing her own line of thought—“quiet, never wanted to shove herself forward, not a beauty, and never a manhunter.”

“She will leave Chubby alone, then?” said Lenox.

Lady Tamplin looked at her in protest. “Chubby would never—” she began.

“No,” said Lenox, “I don’t believe he would; he knows a jolly sight too well which way his bread is buttered.”

“Darling,” said Lady Tamplin, “you have such a coarse way of putting things.”

“Sorry,” said Lenox.

Lady Tamplin gathered up the Daily Mail and her négligé, a vanity bag, and various odd letters.

“I shall write to dear Katherine at once,” she said, “and remind her of the dear old days at Edgeworth.”

She went into the house, a light of purpose shining in her eyes.

Unlike Mrs. Samuel Harfield, correspondence flowed easily from her pen. She covered four sheets without pause or effort, and on rereading it found no occasion to alter a word.

Katherine received it on the morning of her arrival in London. Whether she read between the lines of it or not is another matter. She put it in her handbag and started out to keep the appointment she had made with Mrs. Harfield’s lawyers.

The firm was an old established one in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and after a few minutes’ delay Katherine was shown into the presence of the senior partner, a kindly, elderly man with shrewd blue eyes and a fatherly manner.

They discussed Mrs. Harfield’s will and various legal matters for some twenty minutes, then Katherine handed the lawyer Mrs. Samuel’s letter.

“I had better show you this, I suppose,” she said, “though it is really rather ridiculous.”

He read it with a slight smile.

“Rather a crude attempt, Miss Grey. I need hardly tell you, I suppose, that these people have no claim of any kind upon the estate, and if they endeavour to contest the will no court will uphold them.”

“I thought as much.”

“Human nature is not always very wise. In Mrs. Samuel Harfield’s place, I should have been more inclined to make an appeal to your generosity.”

“That is one of the things I want to speak to you about. I should like a certain sum to go to these people.”

“There is no obligation.”

“I know that.”

“And they will not take it in the spirit it is meant. They will probably regard it as an attempt to pay them off, though they will not refuse it on that account.”

“I can see that, and it can’t be helped.”

“I should advise you, Miss Grey, to put that idea out of your mind.”

Katherine shook her head. “You are quite right, I know, but I should like it done all the same.”

“They will grab at the money and abuse you all the more afterwards.”

“Well,” said Katherine, “let them if they like. We all have our own ways of enjoying ourselves. They were, after all, Mrs. Harfield’s only relatives, and though they despised her as a poor relation and paid no attention to her when she was alive, it seems to me unfair that they should be cut off with nothing.”

She carried her point, though the lawyer was still unwilling, and she presently went out into the streets of London with a comfortable assurance that she could spend money freely and make what plans she liked for the future. Her first action was to visit the establishment of a famous dressmaker.

A slim, elderly Frenchwoman, rather like a dreaming duchess, received her, and Katherine spoke with a certain näveté.

“I want, if I may, to put myself in your hands. I have been very poor all my life and know nothing about clothes, but now I have come into some money and want to look really well-dressed.”

The Frenchwoman was charmed. She had an artist’s temperament, which had been soured earlier in the morning by a visit from an Argentine meat queen, who had insisted on having those models least suited to her flamboyant type of beauty. She scrutinized Katherine with keen, clever eyes. “Yes—yes, it will be a pleasure. Mademoiselle has a very good figure; for her the simple lines will be best. She is also très anglaise. Some people it would offend them if I said that, but Mademoiselle no. Une belle Anglaise, there is no style more delightful.”

The demeanour of a dreaming duchess was suddenly put off. She screamed out directions to various mannequins. “Clothilde, Virginie, quickly, my little ones, the little tailleur gris clair and the robe de soirée ‘soupir d’automne.’ Marcelle, my child, the little mimosa suit of crêpe de chine.”

It was a charming morning. Marcelle, Clothilde, Virginie, bored and scornful, passed slowly round, squirming and wriggling in the time-honoured fashion of mannequins. The Duchess stood by Katherine and made entries in a small notebook.

“An excellent choice, Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle has great goût. Yes, indeed. Mademoiselle cannot do better than those little suits if she is going to the Riviera, as I suppose, this winter.”

“Let me see that evening dress once more,” said Katherine—“the pinky mauve one.”

Virginie appeared, circling slowly.

“That is the prettiest of all,” said Katherine, as she surveyed the exquisite draperies of mauve and grey and blue. “What do you call it?”

“Soupir d’automne; yes, yes, that is truly the dress of Mademoiselle.”

What was there in these words that came back to Katherine with a faint feeling of sadness after she had left the dressmaking establishment?

“ ‘Soupir d’automne; that is truly the dress of Mademoiselle.’ ” Autumn, yes, it was autumn for her. She who had never known spring or summer, and would never know them now. Something she had lost never could be given to her again. These years of servitude in St. Mary Mead—and all the while life passing by.

“I am an idiot,” said Katherine. “I am an idiot. What do I want? Why, I was more contented a month ago than I am now.”

She drew out from her handbag the letter she had received that morning from Lady Tamplin. Katherine was no fool. She understood the nuances of that letter as well as anybody and the reason of Lady Tamplin’s sudden show of affection towards a long-forgotten cousin was not lost upon her. It was for profit and not for pleasure that Lady Tamplin was so anxious for the company of her dear cousin. Well, why not? There would be profit on both sides.

“I will go,” said Katherine.

She was walking down Piccadilly at the moment, and turned into Cook’s to clinch the matter then and there. She had to wait for a few minutes. The man with whom the clerk was engaged was also going to the Riviera. Everyone, she felt, was going. Well, for the first time in her life, she, too, would be doing what “everybody” did.

The man in front of her turned abruptly, and she stepped into his place. She made her demand to the clerk, but at the same time half of her mind was busy with something else. That man’s face—in some vague way it was familiar to her. Where had she seen him before? Suddenly she remembered. It was in the Savoy outside her room that morning. She had collided with him in the passage. Rather an odd coincidence that she should run into him twice in a day. She glanced over her shoulder, rendered uneasy by something, she knew not what. The man was standing in the doorway looking back at her. A cold shiver passed over Katherine; she had a haunting sense of tragedy, of doom impending. . . .

Then she shook the impression from her with her usual good sense and turned her whole attention to what the clerk was saying.

Nine

AN OFFER REFUSED

It was rarely that Derek Kettering allowed his temper to get the better of him. An easygoing insouciance was his chief characteristic, and it had stood him in good stead in more than one tight corner. Even now, by the time he had left Mirelle's flat, he had cooled down. He had need of coolness. The corner he was in now was a tighter one than he had ever been in before, and unforeseen factors had arisen with which, for the moment, he did not know how to deal.

He strolled along deep in thought. His brow was furrowed, and there was none of the easy, jaunty manner which sat so well upon him. Various possibilities floated through his mind. It might have been said of Derek Kettering that he was less of a fool than he looked. He saw several roads that he might take—one in particular. If he shrank from it, it was for the moment only. Desperate ills need desperate remedies. He had gauged his father-in-law correctly. A war between Derek Kettering and Rufus Van Aldin could end only one way. Derek damned money and the power of money vehemently to himself. He walked up St. James's Street, across Piccadilly, and strolled along it in the direction of Piccadilly Circus. As he passed the offices of Messrs. Thomas Cook & Sons his footsteps slackened. He walked on, however, still turning the matter over in his mind. Finally, he gave a brief nod of his head, turned sharply—so sharply as to collide with a couple of pedestrians who were following in his footsteps, and went back the way he had come. This time he did not pass Cook's, but went in. The office was comparatively empty, and he got attended to at once.

"I want to go to Nice next week. Will you give me particulars?"

"What date, sir?"

“The fourteenth. What is the best train?”

“Well, of course, the best train is what they call ‘The Blue Train.’ You avoid the tiresome Customs business at Calais.”

Derek nodded. He knew all this, none better.

“The fourteenth,” murmured the clerk; “that is rather soon. The Blue Train is nearly always all booked up.”

“See if there is a berth left,” said Derek. “If there is not—” He left the sentence unfinished, with a curious smile on his face.

The clerk disappeared for a few minutes, and presently returned. “That is all right, sir; still three berths left. I will book you one of them. What name?”

“Pavett,” said Derek. He gave the address of his rooms in Jermyn Street.

The clerk nodded, finished writing it down, wished Derek good morning politely, and turned his attention to the next client.

“I want to go to Nice—on the fourteenth. Isn’t there a train called the Blue Train?”

Derek looked round sharply.

Coincidence—a strange coincidence. He remembered his own half-whimsical words to Mirelle. “Portrait of a lady with grey eyes. I don’t suppose I shall ever see her again.” But he had seen her again, and, what was more, she proposed to travel to the Riviera on the same day as he did.

Just for a moment a shiver passed over him; in some ways he was superstitious. He had said, half-laughingly, that this woman might bring him bad luck. Suppose—suppose that should prove to be true. From the doorway he looked back at her as she stood talking to the clerk. For once his memory had not played him false. A lady—a lady in every sense of the word. Not very young, not singularly beautiful. But with something—grey eyes that might perhaps see too much. He knew as he went out of the door that in some way he was afraid of this woman. He had a sense of fatality.

He went back to his rooms in Jermyn Street and summoned his man.

“Take this cheque, Pavett, and go round to Cook’s in Piccadilly. They will have some tickets there booked in your name, pay for them, and bring them back.”

“Very good, sir.”

Pavett withdrew.

Derek strolled over to a side table and picked up a handful of letters. They were of a type only too familiar. Bills, small bills and large bills, one and all pressing for payment. The tone of the demands was still polite. Derek knew how soon that polite tone would change if—if certain news became public property.

He flung himself moodily into a large, leather-covered chair. A damned hole—that was what he was in. Yes, a damned hole! And ways of getting out of that damned hole were not too promising.

Pavett appeared with a discreet cough.

“A gentleman to see you—sir—Major Knighton.”

“Knighton, eh?”

Derek sat up, frowned, became suddenly alert. He said in a softer tone, almost to himself: “Knighton—I wonder what is in the wind now?”

“Shall I—er—show him in, sir?”

His master nodded. When Knighton entered the room he found a charming and genial host awaiting him.

“Very good of you to look me up,” said Derek.

Knighton was nervous.

The other's keen eyes noticed that at once. The errand on which the secretary had come was clearly distasteful to him. He replied almost mechanically to Derek's easy flow of conversation. He declined a drink, and, if anything, his manner became stiffer than before. Derek appeared at last to notice it.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "what does my esteemed father-in-law want with me? You have come on his business, I take it?"

Knighton did not smile in reply.

"I have, yes," he said carefully. "I—I wish Mr. Van Aldin had chosen someone else."

Derek raised his eyebrows in mock dismay.

"Is it as bad as all that? I am not very thin-skinned, I can assure you, Knighton."

"No," said Knighton; "but this—"

He paused.

Derek eyed him keenly.

"Go on, out with it," he said kindly. "I can imagine my dear father-in-law's errands might not always be pleasant ones."

Knighton cleared his throat. He spoke formally in tones that he strove to render free of embarrassment.

"I am directed by Mr. Van Aldin to make you a definite offer."

"An offer?" For a moment Derek showed his surprise. Knighton's opening words were clearly not what he had expected. He offered a cigarette to Knighton, lit one himself, and sank back in his chair, murmuring in a slightly sardonic voice:

"An offer? That sounds rather interesting."

"Shall I go on?"

"Please. You must forgive my surprise, but it seems to me that my dear father-in-law has rather climbed down since our chat this morning. And climbing down is not what one associates with strong men, Napoleons of finance, etc. It shows—I think it shows that he finds his position weaker than he thought it."

Knighton listened politely to the easy, mocking voice, but no sign of any kind showed itself on his rather stolid countenance. He waited until Derek had finished, and then he said quietly:

"I will state the proposition in the fewest possible words."

"Go on."

Knighton did not look at the other. His voice was curt and matter-of-fact.

"The matter is simply this. Mrs. Kettering, as you know, is about to file a petition for divorce. If the case goes undefended you will receive one hundred thousand on the day that the decree is made absolute."

Derek, in the act of lighting his cigarette, suddenly stopped dead. "A hundred thousand!" he said sharply. "Dollars?"

"Pounds."

There was dead silence for at least two minutes. Kettering had his brows together thinking. A hundred thousand pounds. It meant Mirelle and a continuance of his pleasant, careless life. It meant that Van Aldin knew something. Van Aldin did not pay for nothing. He got up and stood by the chimneypiece.

"And in the event of my refusing his handsome offer?" he asked, with a cold, ironical politeness.

Knighton made a deprecating gesture.

“I can assure you, Mr. Kettering,” he said earnestly, “that it is with the utmost unwillingness that I came here with this message.”

“That’s all right,” said Kettering. “Don’t distress yourself; it’s not your fault. Now then—I asked you a question, will you answer it?”

Knighton also rose. He spoke more reluctantly than before.

“In the event of your refusing this proposition,” he said, “Mr. Van Aldin wished me to tell you in plain words that he proposes to break you. Just that.”

Kettering raised his eyebrows, but he retained his light, amused manner.

“Well, well!” he said, “I suppose he can do it. I certainly should not be able to put up much of a fight against America’s man of many millions. A hundred thousand! If you are going to bribe a man there is nothing like doing it thoroughly. Supposing I were to tell you that for two hundred thousand I’d do what he wanted, what then?”

“I would take your message back to Mr. Van Aldin,” said Knighton unemotionally. “Is that your answer?”

“No,” said Derek; “funnily enough it is not. You can go back to my father-in-law and tell him to take himself and his bribes to hell. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly,” said Knighton. He got up, hesitated, and then flushed. “I—you will allow me to say, Mr. Kettering, that I am glad you have answered as you have.”

Derek did not reply. When the other had left the room he remained for a minute or two lost in thought. A curious smile came to his lips.

“And that is that,” he said softly.

Ten

ON THE BLUE TRAIN

“Dad!”

Mrs. Kettering started violently. Her nerves were not completely under control this morning. Very perfectly dressed in a long mink coat and a little hat of Chinese lacquer red, she had been walking along the crowded platform of Victoria deep in thought, and her father’s sudden appearance and hearty greeting had an unlooked-for effect upon her.

“Why, Ruth, how you jumped!”

“I didn’t expect to see you, I suppose, Dad. You said good-bye to me last night and said you had a conference this morning.”

“So I have,” said Van Aldin, “but you are more to me than any number of darned conferences. I came to take a last look at you, since I am not going to see you for some time.”

“That is very sweet of you, Dad. I wish you were coming too.”

“What would you say if I did?”

The remark was merely a joking one. He was surprised to see the quick colour of flame in Ruth’s cheeks. For a moment he almost thought he saw dismay flash out of her eyes. She laughed uncertainly and nervously.

“Just for a moment I really thought you meant it,” she said.

“Would you have been pleased?”

“Of course.” She spoke with exaggerated emphasis.

“Well,” said Van Aldin, “that’s good.”

“It isn’t really for very long, Dad,” continued Ruth; “you know, you are coming out next month.”

“Ah!” said Van Aldin unemotionally, “sometimes I guess I will go to one of these big guys in Harley Street and have him tell me that I need sunshine and change of air right away.”

“Don’t be so lazy,” cried Ruth; “next month is ever so much nicer than this month out there. You have got all sorts of things you can’t possibly leave just now.”

“Well, that’s so, I suppose,” said Van Aldin, with a sigh. “You had better be getting on board this train of yours, Ruth. Where is your seat?”

Ruth Kettering looked vaguely up at the train. At the door of one of the Pullman cars a thin, tall woman dressed in black was standing—Ruth Kettering’s maid. She drew aside as her mistress came up to her.

“I have put your dressing case under your seat, Madam, in case you should need it. Shall I take the rugs, or will you require one?”

“No, no, I shan’t want one. Better go and find your own seat now, Mason.”

“Yes, Madam.”

The maid departed.

Van Aldin entered the Pullman car with Ruth. She found her seat, and Van Aldin deposited various papers and magazines on the table in front of her. The seat opposite to her was already taken, and the American gave a cursory glance at its occupant. He had a fleeting impression of attractive grey eyes and a neat travelling costume. He indulged in a little more desultory conversation with Ruth, the kind of talk peculiar to those seeing other people off by train.

Presently, as whistles blew, he glanced at his watch.

“I had best be clearing out of here. Good-bye, my dear. Don’t worry. I will attend to things.”

“Oh, Father!”

He turned back sharply. There had been something in Ruth’s voice, something so entirely foreign to her usual manner, that he was startled. It was almost a cry of despair. She had made an impulsive movement towards him, but in another minute she was mistress of herself once more.

“Till next month,” she said carefully.

Two minutes later the train started.

Ruth sat very still, biting her under lip and trying hard to keep the unaccustomed tears from her eyes. She felt a sudden sense of horrible desolation. There was a wild longing upon her to jump out of the train and to go back before it was too late. She, so calm, so self-assured, for the first time in her life felt like a leaf swept by the wind. If her father knew—what would he say?

Madness! Yes, just that, madness! For the first time in her life she was swept away by emotion, swept away to the point of doing a thing which even she knew to be incredibly foolish and reckless. She was enough Van Aldin’s daughter to realize her own folly, and levelheaded enough to condemn her own action. But she was his daughter in another sense also. She had that same iron determination that would have what it wanted, and once it had made up its mind would not be balked. From her cradle she had been self-willed; the very circumstances of her life had developed that self-will in her. It drove her now remorselessly. Well, the die was cast. She must go through with it now.

She looked up, and her eyes met those of the woman sitting opposite. She had a sudden fancy that in some way this other woman had read her mind. She saw in those grey eyes understanding and—yes—compassion.

It was only a fleeting impression. The faces of both women hardened to well-bred impassiveness. Mrs. Kettering took up a magazine, and Katherine

Grey looked out of the window and watched a seemingly endless vista of depressing streets and suburban homes.

Ruth found an increasing difficulty in fixing her mind on the printed page in front of her. In spite of herself, a thousand apprehensions preyed on her mind. What a fool she had been! What a fool she was! Like all cool and self-sufficient people, when she did lose her self-control she lost it thoroughly. It was too late . . . Was it too late? Oh, for someone to speak to, for someone to advise her. She had never before had such a wish; she would have scorned the idea of relying on any judgment other than her own, but now—what was the matter with her? Panic. Yes, that would describe it best—panic. She, Ruth Kettering, was completely and utterly panic stricken.

She stole a covert glance at the figure opposite. If only she knew someone like that, some nice, cool, calm sympathetic creature. That was the sort of person one could talk to. But you can’t, of course, confide in a stranger. And Ruth smiled to herself a little at the idea. She picked up the magazine again. Really she must control herself. After all she had thought all this out. She had decided of her own free will. What happiness had she ever had in her life up to now? She said to herself restlessly: “Why shouldn’t I be happy? No one will ever know.”

It seemed no time before Dover was reached. Ruth was a good sailor. She disliked the cold, and was glad to reach the shelter of the private cabin she had telegraphed for. Although she would not have admitted the fact, Ruth was in some ways superstitious. She was of the order of people to whom coincidence appeals. After disembarking at Calais and settling herself down with her maid in her double compartment in the Blue Train, she went along to the luncheon car. It was with a little shock of surprise that she found herself set down to a small table with, opposite her, the same woman who had been her vis-à-vis in the Pullman. A faint smile came to the lips of both women.

“This is quite a coincidence,” said Mrs. Kettering.

“I know,” said Katherine; “it is odd the way things happen.”

A flying attendant shot up to them with the wonderful velocity always displayed by the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits and deposited two cups of soup. By the time the omelette succeeded the soup they were chatting together in friendly fashion.

“It will be heavenly to get into the sunshine,” sighed Ruth.

“I am sure it will be a wonderful feeling.”

“You know the Riviera well?”

“No; this is my first visit.”

“Fancy that.”

“You go every year, I expect?”

“Practically. January and February in London are horrible.”

“I have always lived in the country. They are not very inspiring months there either. Mostly mud.”

“What made you suddenly decide to travel?”

“Money,” said Katherine. “For ten years I have been a paid companion with just enough money of my own to buy myself strong country shoes; now I have been left what seems to me a fortune, though I daresay it would not seem so much to you.”

“Now I wonder why you said that—that it would not seem so to me.”

Katherine laughed. “I don’t really know. I suppose one forms impressions without thinking of it. I put you down in my own mind as one of the very rich of the earth. It was just an impression. I daresay I am wrong.”

“No,” said Ruth, “you are not wrong.” She had suddenly become very grave. “I wish you would tell me what other impressions you formed about me.”

“I—”

Ruth swept on, disregarding the other’s embarrassment. “Oh, please, don’t be conventional. I want to know. As we left Victoria I looked across at you, and I had the sort of feeling that you—well, understood what was going on in my mind.”

“I can assure you I am not a mind reader,” said Katherine smiling.

“No, but will you tell me, please, just what you thought.” Ruth’s eagerness was so intense and so sincere that she carried her point.

“I will tell you if you like, but you must not think me impertinent. I thought that for some reason you were in great distress of mind, and I was sorry for you.”

“You are right. You are quite right. I am in terrible trouble. I—I should like to tell you something about it, if I may.”

“Oh, dear,” Katherine thought to herself, “how extraordinarily alike the world seems to be everywhere! People were always telling me things in St. Mary Mead, and it is just the same thing here, and I don’t really want to hear anybody’s troubles!”

She replied politely:

“Do tell me.”

They were just finishing their lunch. Ruth gulped down her coffee, rose from her seat, and quite oblivious of the fact that Katherine had not begun to sip her coffee, said: “Come to my compartment with me.”

They were two single compartments with a communicating door between them. In the second of them a thin maid, whom Katherine had noticed at Victoria, was sitting very upright on the seat, clutching a big scarlet morocco case with the initials R. V. K. on it. Mrs. Kettering pulled the communicating door to and sank down on the seat. Katherine sat down beside her.

“I am in trouble and I don’t know what to do. There is a man whom I am fond of—very fond of indeed. We cared for each other when we were young, and we were thrust apart most brutally and unjustly. Now we have come together again.”

“Yes?”

“I—I am going to meet him now. Oh! I daresay you think it is all wrong, but you don’t know the circumstances. My husband is impossible. He has treated me disgracefully.”

“Yes,” said Katherine again.

“What I feel so badly about is this. I have deceived my father—it was he who came to see me off at Victoria today. He wishes me to divorce my husband, and, of course, he has no idea—that I am going to meet this other man. He would think it extraordinarily foolish.”

“Well, don’t you think it is?”

“I—I suppose it is.”

Ruth Kettering looked down at her hands; they were shaking violently.

“But I can’t draw back now.”

“Why not?”

“I—it is all arranged, and it would break his heart.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said Katherine robustly; “hearts are pretty tough.”

“He will think I have no courage, no strength of purpose.”

“It seems to me an awfully silly thing that you are going to do,” said Katherine. “I think you realize that yourself.”

Ruth Kettering buried her face in her hands. “I don’t know—I don’t know. Ever since I left Victoria I have had a horrible feeling of something—

something that is coming to me very soon—that I can’t escape.”

She clutched convulsively at Katherine’s hand.

“You must think I am mad talking to you like this, but I tell you I know something horrible is going to happen.”

“Don’t think it,” said Katherine; “try to pull yourself together. You could send your father a wire from Paris, if you like, and he would come to you at once.”

The other brightened.

“Yes, I could do that. Dear old Dad. It is queer—but I never knew until today how terribly fond of him I am.” She sat up and dried her eyes with a handkerchief. “I have been very foolish. Thank you so much for letting me talk to you. I don’t know why I got into such a queer, hysterical state.”

She got up. “I am quite all right now. I suppose, really, I just needed someone to talk to. I can’t think now why I have been making such an absolute fool of myself.”

Katherine got up too.

“I am glad you feel better,” she said, trying to make her voice sound as conventional as possible. She was only too well aware that the aftermath of confidences is embarrassment. She added tactfully:

“I must be going back to my own compartment.”

She emerged into the corridor at the same time as the maid was also coming out from the next door. The latter looked towards Katherine, over her shoulder, and an expression of intense surprise showed itself on her face. Katherine turned also, but by that time whoever it was who had aroused the maid’s interest had retreated into his or her compartment, and the corridor was empty. Katherine walked down it to regain her own place, which was in the next coach. As she passed the end compartment the door opened and a woman’s face looked out for a moment and then pulled the door to sharply.

It was a face not easily forgotten, as Katherine was to know when she saw it again. A beautiful face, oval and dark, very heavily made-up in a bizarre fashion. Katherine had a feeling that she had seen it before somewhere.

She regained her own compartment without other adventure and sat for some time thinking of the confidence which had just been made to her. She wondered idly who the woman in the mink coat might be, wondered also how the end of her story would turn out.

“If I had stopped anyone from making an idiot of themselves, I suppose I have done good work,” she thought to herself. “But who knows? That is the kind of woman who is hardheaded and egotistical all her life, and it might be good for her to do the other sort of thing for a change. Oh, well—I don’t suppose I shall ever see her again. She certainly won’t want to see me again. That is the worst of letting people tell you things. They never do.”

She hoped that she would not be given the same place at dinner. She reflected, not without humour, that it might be awkward for both of them. Leaning back with her head against a cushion she felt tired and vaguely depressed. They had reached Paris, and the slow journey round the ceinture, with its interminable stops and waits, was very wearisome. When they arrived at the Gare de Lyon she was glad to get out and walk up and down the platform. The keen cold air was refreshing after the steam-heated train. She observed with a smile that her friend of the mink coat was solving the possible awkwardness of the dinner problem in her own way. A dinner basket was being handed up and received through the window by the maid.

When the train started once more, and dinner was announced by a violent ringing of bells, Katherine went along to it much relieved in mind. Her vis-à-vis tonight was of an entirely different kind—a small man, distinctly foreign in appearance, with a rigidly waxed moustache and an egg-shaped head which he carried rather on one side. Katherine had taken in a book to dinner with her. She found the little man’s eyes fixed upon it with a kind of twinkling amusement.

“I see, Madame, that you have a roman policier. You are fond of such things?”

“They amuse me,” Katherine admitted.

The little man nodded with the air of complete understanding.

“They have a good sale always, so I am told. Now why is that, eh, Mademoiselle? I ask you as a student of human nature—why should that be?”

Katherine felt more and more amused.

“Perhaps they give one the illusion of living an exciting life,” she suggested.

He nodded gravely.

“Yes; there is something in that.”

“Of course, one knows that such things don’t really happen,” Katherine was continuing, but he interrupted her sharply.

“Sometimes, Mademoiselle! Sometimes! I who speak to you—they have happened to me.”

She threw him a quick, interested glance.

“Some day, who knows, you might be in the thick of things,” he went on. “It is all chance.”

“I don’t think it is likely,” said Katherine. “Nothing of that kind ever happens to me.”

He leaned forward.

“Would you like it to?”

The question startled her, and she drew in her breath sharply.

“It is my fancy, perhaps,” said the little man, as he dexterously polished one of the forks, “but I think that you have a yearning in you for interesting happenings. Eh bien, Mademoiselle, all through my life I have observed one thing—‘All one wants one gets!’ Who knows?” His face screwed itself up comically. “You may get more than you bargain for.”

“Is that a prophecy?” asked Katherine, smiling as she rose from the table.

The little man shook his head.

“I never prophesy,” he declared pompously. “It is true that I have the habit of being always right—but I do not boast of it. Goodnight, Mademoiselle and may you sleep well.”

Katherine went back along the train amused and entertained by her little neighbour. She passed the open door of her friend’s compartment and saw the conductor making up the bed. The lady in the mink coat was standing looking out of the window. The second compartment, as Katherine saw through the communicating door, was empty, with rugs and bags heaped up on the seat. The maid was not there.

Katherine found her own bed prepared, and since she was tired, she went to bed and switched off her light about half past nine.

She woke with a sudden start; how much time had passed she did not know. Glancing at her watch, she found that it had stopped. A feeling of intense uneasiness pervaded her and grew stronger moment by moment. At last she got up, threw her dressing-gown round her shoulders, and stepped out into the corridor. The whole train seemed wrapped in slumber. Katherine let the window down and sat by it for some minutes, drinking in the cool night air and trying vainly to calm her uneasy fears. She presently decided that she would go along to the end and ask the conductor for the right time so that she could set her watch. She found, however, that his little chair was vacant. She hesitated for a moment and then walked through into the next coach. She looked down the long, dim line of the corridor and saw, to her surprise, that a man was standing with his hand on the door of the compartment occupied by the lady in the mink coat. That is to say, she thought it was the compartment. Probably, however, she was mistaken. He stood there for a moment or two with his back to her, seeming uncertain and hesitating in his attitude. Then he slowly turned, and with an odd feeling of fatality, Katherine recognized him as the same man whom she had noticed twice before—once in the corridor of the Savoy Hotel and once in Cook's offices. Then he opened the door of the compartment and passed in, drawing it to behind him.

An idea flashed across Katherine's mind. Could this be the man of whom the other woman had spoken—the man she was journeying to meet?

Then Katherine told herself that she was romancing. In all probability she had mistaken the compartment.

She went back to her own carriage. Five minutes later the train slackened speed. There was the long plaintive hiss of the Westinghouse brake, and a few minutes later the train came to a stop at Lyons.

Eleven

MURDER

Katherine wakened the next morning to brilliant sunshine. She went along to breakfast early, but met none of her acquaintances of the day before. When she returned to her compartment it had just been restored to its daytime appearance by the conductor, a dark man with a drooping moustache and melancholy face.

“Madame is fortunate,” he said; “the sun shines. It is always a great disappointment to passengers when they arrive on a grey morning.”

“I should have been disappointed, certainly,” said Katherine.

The man prepared to depart.

“We are rather late, Madame,” he said. “I will let you know just before we get to Nice.”

Katherine nodded. She sat by the window, entranced by the sunlit panorama. The palm trees, the deep blue of the sea, the bright yellow mimosa came with all the charm of novelty to the woman who for fourteen years had known only the drab winters of England.

When they arrived at Cannes, Katherine got out and walked up and down the platform. She was curious about the lady in the mink coat, and looked up at the windows of her compartment. The blinds were still drawn down—the only ones to be so on the whole train. Katherine wondered a little, and when she reentered the train she passed along the corridor and noticed that these two compartments were still shuttered and closed. The lady of the mink coat was clearly no early riser.

Presently the conductor came to her and told her that in a few minutes the train would arrive at Nice. Katherine handed him a tip; the man thanked her, but still lingered. There was something odd about him. Katherine, who had at first wondered whether the tip had not been big enough, was now convinced that something far more serious was amiss. His face was of a sickly pallor, he was shaking all over, and looked as if he had been frightened out of his life. He was eyeing her in a curious manner. Presently he said abruptly: “Madame will excuse me, but is she expecting friends to meet her at Nice?”

“Probably,” said Katherine. “Why?”

But the man merely shook his head and murmured something that Katherine could not catch and moved away, not reappearing until the train came to rest at the station, when he started handing her belongings down from the window.

Katherine stood for a moment or two on the platform rather at a loss, but a fair young man with an ingenuous face came up to her and said rather hesitatingly:

“Miss Grey, is it not?”

Katherine said that it was, and the young man beamed upon her seraphically and murmured: “I am Chubby, you know—Lady Tamplin’s husband. I expect she mentioned me, but perhaps she forgot. Have you got your billet de bagages? I lost mine when I came out this year, and you would not believe the fuss they made about it. Regular French red tape!”

Katherine produced it, and was just about to move off beside him when a very gentle and insidious voice murmured in her ear:

“A little moment, Madame, if you please.”

Katherine turned to behold an individual who made up for insignificance of stature by a large quantity of gold lace and uniform. The individual explained. “There were certain formalities. Madame would perhaps be so kind as to accompany him. The regulations of the police—” he threw up his arms. “Absurd, doubtless, but there it was.”

Mr. Chubby Evans listened with a very imperfect comprehension, his French being of a limited order.

“So like the French,” murmured Mr. Evans. He was one of those staunch patriotic Britons who, having made a portion of a foreign country their own, strongly resent the original inhabitants of it. “Always up to some silly dodge or other. They’ve never tackled people on the station before, though. This is something quite new. I suppose you’ll have to go.”

Katherine departed with her guide. Somewhat to her surprise, he led her towards a siding where a coach of the departed train had been shunted. He invited her to mount into this, and, preceding her down the corridor, held aside the door of one of the compartments. In it was a pompous-looking official personage, and with him a nondescript being who appeared to be a clerk. The pompous-looking personage rose politely, bowed to Katherine, and said:

“You will excuse me, Madame, but there are certain formalities to be complied with. Madame speaks French, I trust?”

“Sufficiently, I think, Monsieur,” replied Katherine in that language.

“That is good. Pray be seated, Madame. I am M. Caux, the Commissary of Police.” He blew out his chest importantly, and Katherine tried to look sufficiently impressed.

“You wish to see my passport?” she inquired. “Here it is.”

The Commissary eyed her keenly and gave a little grunt.

“Thank you, Madame,” he said, taking the passport from her. He cleared his throat. “But what I really desire is a little information.”

“Information?”

The Commissary nodded his head slowly.

"About a lady who has been a fellow-passenger of yours. You lunched with her yesterday."

"I am afraid I can't tell you anything about her. We fell into conversation over our meal, but she is a complete stranger to me. I have never seen her before."

"And yet," said the Commissary sharply, "you returned to her compartment with her after lunch and sat talking for some time?"

"Yes," said Katherine; "that is true."

The Commissary seemed to expect her to say something more. He looked at her encouragingly.

"Yes, Madame?"

"Well, Monsieur?" said Katherine.

"You can, perhaps, give me some kind of idea of that conversation?"

"I could," said Katherine, "but at the moment I see no reason to do so."

In a somewhat British fashion she felt annoyed. This foreign official seemed to her impertinent.

"No reason?" cried the Commissary. "Oh yes, Madame, I can assure you that there is a reason."

"Then perhaps you will give it to me."

The Commissary rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a minute or two without speaking.

"Madame," he said at last, "the reason is very simple. The lady in question was found dead in her compartment this morning."

"Dead!" gasped Katherine. "What was it—heart failure?"

"No," said the Commissary in a reflective, dreamy voice. "No—she was murdered."

"Murdered!" cried Katherine.

"So you see, Madame, why we are anxious for any information we can possibly get."

"But surely her maid—"

"The maid has disappeared."

"Oh!" Katherine paused to assemble her thoughts.

"Since the conductor had seen you talking with her in her compartment, he quite naturally reported the fact to the police, and that is why, Madame, we have detained you, in the hope of gaining some information."

"I am very sorry," said Katherine; "I don't even know her name."

"Her name is Kettering. That we know from her passport and from the labels on her luggage. If we—"

There was a knock on the compartment door. M. Caux frowned. He opened it about six inches.

"What is the matter?" he said peremptorily. "I cannot be disturbed."

The egg-shaped head of Katherine's dinner acquaintance showed itself in the aperture. On his face was a beaming smile.

"My name," he said, "is Hercule Poirot."

"Not," the Commissary stammered, "not the Hercule Poirot?"

"The same," said M. Poirot. "I remember meeting you once, M. Caux, at the Sûreté in Paris, though doubtless you have forgotten me?"

“Not at all, Monsieur, not at all,” declared the Commissary heartily. “But enter, I pray you. You know of this—?”

“Yes, I know,” said Hercule Poirot. “I came to see if I might be of any assistance?”

“We should be flattered,” replied the Commissary promptly. “Let me present you, M. Poirot, to”—he consulted the passport he still held in his hand—“to Madame—er—Mademoiselle Grey.”

Poirot smiled across at Katherine.

“It is strange, is it not,” he murmured, “that my words should have come true so quickly?”

“Mademoiselle, alas! can tell us very little,” said the Commissary.

“I have been explaining,” said Katherine, “that this poor lady was a complete stranger to me.”

Poirot nodded.

“But she talked to you, did she not?” he said gently. “You formed an impression—is it not so?”

“Yes,” said Katherine thoughtfully. “I suppose I did.”

“And that impression was—?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle”—the Commissary jerked himself forward—“let us by all means have your impressions.”

Katherine sat turning the whole thing over in her mind. She felt in a way as if she were betraying a confidence, but with that ugly word “Murder” ringing in her ears she dared not keep anything back. Too much might hang upon it. So, as nearly as she could, she repeated word for word the conversation she had had with the dead woman.

"That is interesting," said the Commissary, glancing at the other. "Eh, M. Poirot, that is interesting? Whether it has anything to do with the crime—" He left the sentence unfinished.

"I suppose it could not be suicide," said Katherine, rather doubtfully.

"No," said the Commissary, "it could not be suicide. She was strangled with a length of black cord."

"Oh!" Katherine shivered. M. Caux spread out his hands apologetically. "It is not nice—no. I think that our train robbers are more brutal than they are in your country."

"It is horrible."

"Yes, yes"—he was soothing and apologetic—"but you have great courage, Mademoiselle. At once, as soon as I saw you, I said to myself, 'Mademoiselle has great courage.' That is why I am going to ask you to do something more—something distressing, but I assure you very necessary."

Katherine looked at him apprehensively.

He spread out his hands apologetically.

"I am going to ask you, Mademoiselle, to be so good as to accompany me to the next compartment."

"Must I?" asked Katherine in a low voice.

"Someone must identify her," said the Commissary, "and since the maid has disappeared"—he coughed significantly—"you appear to be the person who has seen most of her since she joined the train."

"Very well," said Katherine quietly; "if it is necessary—"

She rose. Poirot gave her a little nod of approval.

"Mademoiselle is sensible," he said. "May I accompany you, M. Caux?"

“Enchanted, my dear M. Poirot.”

They went out into the corridor, and M. Caux unlocked the door of the dead woman’s compartment. The blinds on the far side had been drawn halfway up to admit light. The dead woman lay on the berth to their left, in so natural a posture that one could have thought her asleep. The bedclothes were drawn up over her, and her head was turned to the wall, so that only the red auburn curls showed. Very gently M. Caux laid a hand on her shoulder and turned the body back so that the face came into view. Katherine flinched a little and dug her nails into her palms. A heavy blow had disfigured the features almost beyond recognition. Poirot gave a sharp exclamation.

“When was that done, I wonder?” he demanded. “Before death or after?”

“The doctor says after,” said M. Caux.

“Strange,” said Poirot, drawing his brows together. He turned to Katherine. “Be brave, Mademoiselle; look at her well. Are you sure that this is the woman you talked to in the train yesterday?”

Katherine had good nerves. She steeled herself to look long and earnestly at the recumbent figure. Then she leaned forward and took up the dead woman’s hand.

“I am quite sure,” she replied at length. “The face is too disfigured to recognize, but the build and carriage and hair are exact, and besides I noticed this”—she pointed to a tiny mole on the dead woman’s wrist—“while I was talking to her.”

“Bon,” approved Poirot. “You are an excellent witness, Mademoiselle. There is, then, no question as to the identity, but it is strange, all the same.” He frowned down on the dead woman in perplexity.

M. Caux shrugged his shoulders.

“The murderer was carried away by rage, doubtless,” he suggested.

“If she had been struck down, it would have been comprehensible,” mused Poirot, “but the man who strangled her slipped up behind and caught her unawares. A little choke—a little gurgle—that is all that would be heard, and then afterwards—that smashing blow on her face. Now why? Did he hope that if the face were unrecognizable she might not be identified? Or did he hate her so much that he could not resist striking that blow even after she was dead?”

Katherine shuddered, and he turned at once to her kindly.

“You must not let me distress you, Mademoiselle,” he said. “To you this is all very new and terrible. To me, alas! it is an old story. One moment, I pray of you both.”

They stood against the door watching him as he went quickly round the compartment. He noted the dead woman’s clothes neatly folded on the end of the berth, the big fur coat that hung from a hook, and the little red lacquer hat tossed on the rack. Then he passed through into the adjoining compartment, that in which Katherine had seen the maid sitting. Here the berth had not been made up. Three or four rugs were piled loosely on the seat; there was a hatbox and a couple of suitcases. He turned suddenly to Katherine.

“You were in here yesterday,” he said. “Do you see anything changed, anything missing?”

Katherine looked carefully round both compartments.

“Yes,” she said, “there is something missing—a scarlet morocco case. It had the initials ‘R.V.K.’ on it. It might have been a small dressing case or a big jewel case. When I saw it, the maid was holding it.”

“Ah!” said Poirot.

“But, surely,” said Katherine, “I—of course, I don’t know anything about such things, but surely it is plain enough, if the maid and the jewel-case are missing?”

“You mean that it was the maid who was the thief? No, Mademoiselle, there is a very good reason against that.”

“What?”

“The maid was left behind in Paris.”

He turned to Poirot. “I should like you to hear the conductor’s story yourself,” he murmured confidentially. “It is very suggestive.”

“Mademoiselle would doubtless like to hear it also,” said Poirot. “You do not object, Monsieur le Commissaire?”

“No,” said the Commissary, who clearly did object very much. “No, certainly, M. Poirot, if you say so. You have finished here?”

“I think so. One little minute.”

He had been turning over the rugs, and now he took one to the window and looked at it, picking something off it with his fingers.

“What is it?” demanded M. Caux sharply.

“Four auburn hairs.” He bent over the dead woman. “Yes, they are from the head of Madame.”

“And what of it? Do you attach importance to them?”

Poirot let the rug drop back on the seat.

“What is important? What is not? One cannot say at this stage. But we must note each little fact carefully.”

They went back again into the first compartment, and in a minute or two the conductor of the carriage arrived to be questioned.

“Your name is Pierre Michel?” said the Commissary.

“Yes, Monsieur le Commissaire.”

“I should like you to repeat to this gentleman”—he indicated Poirot—“the story that you told me as to what happened in Paris.”

“Very good, Monsieur le Commissaire. It was after we had left the Gare de Lyon I came along to make the beds, thinking that Madame would be at dinner, but she had a dinner basket in her compartment. She said to me that she had been obliged to leave her maid behind in Paris, so that I only need make up one berth. She took her dinner basket into the adjoining compartment, and sat there while I made up the bed; then she told me that she did not wish to be wakened early in the morning, that she liked to sleep on. I told her I quite understood, and she wished me ‘goodnight.’ ”

“You yourself did not go into the adjoining compartment?”

“No, Monsieur.”

“Then you did not happen to notice if a scarlet morocco case was amongst the luggage there?”

“No, Monsieur, I did not.”

“Would it have been possible for a man to have been concealed in the adjoining compartment?”

The conductor reflected.

“The door was half open,” he said. “If a man had stood behind the door I should not have been able to see him, but he would, of course, have been perfectly visible to Madame when she went in there.”

“Quite so,” said Poirot. “Is there anything more you have to tell us?”

“I think that is all, Monsieur. I can remember nothing else.”

“And now this morning?” prompted Poirot.

“As Madame had ordered, I did not disturb her. It was not until just before Cannes that I ventured to knock at the door. Getting no reply, I opened it.

The lady appeared to be in her bed asleep. I took her by the shoulder to rouse her, and then—"

"And then you saw what had happened," volunteered Poirot. "Très bien. I think I know all I want to know."

"I hope, Monsieur le Commissaire, it is not that I have been guilty of any negligence," said the man piteously. "Such an affair to happen on the Blue Train! It is horrible."

"Console yourself," said the Commissary. "Everything will be done to keep the affair as quiet as possible, if only in the interests of justice. I cannot think you have been guilty of any negligence."

"And Monsieur le Commissaire will report as much to the company?"

"But certainly, but certainly," said M. Caux, impatiently. "That will do now."

The conductor withdrew.

"According to the medical evidence," said the Commissary, "the lady was probably dead before the train reached Lyons. Who then was the murderer? From Mademoiselle's story, it seems clear that somewhere on her journey she was to meet this man of whom she spoke. Her action in getting rid of the maid seems significant. Did the man join the train at Paris, and did she conceal him in the adjoining compartment? If so, they may have quarrelled, and he may have killed her in a fit of rage. That is one possibility. The other, and the more likely to my mind, is that her assailant was a train robber travelling on the train; that he stole along the corridor unseen by the conductor, killed her, and went off with the red morocco case, which doubtless contained jewels of some value. In all probability he left the train at Lyons, and we have already telegraphed to the station there for full particulars of anyone seen leaving the train."

"Or he might have come on to Nice," suggested Poirot.

“He might,” agreed the Commissary, “but that would be a very bold course.”

Poirot let a minute or two go by before speaking, and then he said:

“In the latter case you think the man was an ordinary train robber?”

The Commissary shrugged his shoulders.

“It depends. We must get hold of the maid. It is possible that she has the red morocco case with her. If so, then the man of whom she spoke to Mademoiselle may be concerned in the case, and the affair is a crime of passion. I myself think the solution of a train robber is the more plausible. These bandits have become very bold of late.”

Poirot looked suddenly across at Katherine.

“And you, Mademoiselle,” he said, “you heard and saw nothing during the night?”

“Nothing,” said Katherine.

Poirot turned to the Commissary.

“We need detain Mademoiselle no longer, I think,” he suggested.

The latter nodded.

“She will leave us her address?” he said.

Katherine gave him the name of Lady Tamplin’s villa. Poirot made her a little bow.

“You permit that I see you again, Mademoiselle?” he said. “Or have you so many friends that your time will be all taken up?”

“On the contrary,” said Katherine, “I shall have plenty of leisure, and I shall be very pleased to see you again.”

“Excellent,” said Poirot, and gave her a little friendly nod. “This shall be a ‘roman policier’ à nous. We will investigate this affair together.”

Twelve

AT THE VILLA MARGUERITE

“Then you were really in the thick of it all!” said Lady Tamplin enviously. “My dear, how thrilling!” She opened her china-blue eyes very wide and gave a little sigh.

“A real murder,” said Mr. Evans gloatingly.

“Of course Chubby had no idea of anything of the kind,” went on Lady Tamplin; “he simply could not imagine why the police wanted you. My dear, what an opportunity! I think, you know—yes, I certainly think something might be made out of this.”

A calculating look rather marred the ingenuousness of the blue eyes.

Katherine felt slightly uncomfortable. They were just finishing lunch, and she looked in turn at the three people sitting round the table. Lady Tamplin, full of practical schemes; Mr. Evans, beaming with naïve appreciation, and Lenox with a queer crooked smile on her dark face.

“Marvellous luck,” murmured Chubby; “I wish I could have gone along with you—and seen—all the exhibits.” His tone was wistful and childlike.

Katherine said nothing. The police had laid no injunctions of secrecy upon her, and it was clearly impossible to suppress the bare facts or try to keep them from her hostess. But she did rather wish it had been possible to do so.

“Yes,” said Lady Tamplin, coming suddenly out of her reverie, “I do think something might be done. A little account, you know, cleverly written up. An eyewitness, a feminine touch: ‘How I chatted with the dead woman, little thinking—’ that sort of thing, you know.”

“Rot!” said Lenox.

“You have no idea,” said Lady Tamplin in a soft, wistful voice, “what newspapers will pay for a little titbit! Written, of course, by someone of really unimpeachable social position. You would not like to do it yourself, I daresay, Katherine dear, but just give me the bare bones of it, and I will manage the whole thing for you. Mr. de Haviland is a special friend of mine. We have a little understanding together. A most delightful man—not at all reporterish. How does the idea strike you, Katherine?”

“I would much prefer to do nothing of the kind,” said Katherine bluntly.

Lady Tamplin was rather disconcerted at this uncompromising refusal. She sighed and turned to the elucidation of further details.

“A very striking-looking woman, you said? I wonder now who she could have been. You didn’t hear her name?”

“It was mentioned,” Katherine admitted, “but I can’t remember it. You see, I was rather upset.”

“I should think so,” said Mr. Evans; “it must have been a beastly shock.”

It is to be doubted whether, even if Katherine had remembered the name, she would have admitted the fact. Lady Tamplin’s remorseless cross-examination was making her restive. Lenox, who was observant in her own way, noticed this, and offered to take Katherine upstairs to see her room. She left her there, remarking kindly before she went: “You mustn’t mind Mother; she would make a few pennies’ profit out of her dying grandmother if she could.”

Lenox went down again to find her mother and stepfather discussing the newcomer.

“Presentable,” said Lady Tamplin, “quite presentable. Her clothes are all right. That grey thing is the same model that Gladys Cooper wore in Palm Trees in Egypt.”

“Have you noticed her eyes—what?” interposed Mr. Evans.

“Never mind her eyes, Chubby,” said Lady Tamplin tartly; “we are discussing things that really matter.”

“Oh, quite,” said Mr. Evans, and retired into his shell.

“She doesn’t seem to me very—malleable,” said Lady Tamplin, rather hesitating to choose the right word.

“She has all the instincts of a lady, as they say in books,” said Lenox, with a grin.

“Narrow-minded,” murmured Lady Tamplin. “Inevitable under the circumstances, I suppose.”

“I expect you will do your best to broaden her,” said Lenox, with a grin, “but you will have your work cut out. Just now, you noticed, she stuck down her forefeet and laid back her ears and refused to budge.”

“Anyway,” said Lady Tamplin hopefully, “she doesn’t look to me at all mean. Some people, when they come into money, seem to attach undue importance to it.”

“Oh, you’ll easily touch her for what you want,” said Lenox; “and, after all, that is all that matters, isn’t it? That is what she is here for.”

“She is my own cousin,” said Lady Tamplin, with dignity.

“Cousin, eh?” said Mr. Evans, waking up again. “I suppose I call her Katherine, don’t I?”

“It is of no importance at all what you call her, Chubby,” said Lady Tamplin.

“Good,” said Mr. Evans; “then I will. Do you suppose she plays tennis?” he added hopefully.

"Of course not," said Lady Tamplin. "She has been a companion, I tell you. Companions don't play tennis—or golf. They might possibly play golf-croquet, but I have always understood that they wind wool and wash dogs most of the day."

"O God!" said Mr. Evans; "do they really?"

Lenox drifted upstairs again to Katherine's room. "Can I help you?" she asked rather perfunctorily.

On Katherine's disclaimer, Lenox sat on the edge of the bed and stared thoughtfully at her guest.

"Why did you come?" she said at last. "To us, I mean. We're not your sort."

"Oh, I am anxious to get into Society."

"Don't be an ass," said Lenox promptly, detecting the flicker of a smile. "You know what I mean well enough. You are not a bit what I thought you would be. I say, you have got some decent clothes." She sighed. "Clothes are no good to me. I was born awkward. It's a pity, because I love them."

"I love them too," said Katherine, "but it has not been much use my loving them up to now. Do you think this is nice?"

She and Lenox discussed several models with artistic fervour.

"I like you," said Lenox suddenly. "I came up to warn you not to be taken in by Mother, but I think now that there is no need to do that. You are frightfully sincere and upright and all those queer things, but you are not a fool. Oh hell! what is it now?"

Lady Tamplin's voice was calling plaintively from the hall:

"Lenox, Derek has just rung up. He wants to come to dinner tonight. Will it be all right? I mean, we haven't got anything awkward, like quails, have we?"

Lenox reassured her and came back into Katherine’s room. Her face looked brighter and less sullen.

“I’m glad old Derek is coming,” she said; “you’ll like him.”

“Who is Derek?”

“He is Lord Leconbury’s son, married a rich American woman. Women are simply potty about him.”

“Why?”

“Oh, the usual reason—very good-looking and a regular bad lot. Everyone goes off their head about him.”

“Do you?”

“Sometimes I do,” said Lenox, “and sometimes I think I would like to marry a nice curate and live in the country and grow things in frames.” She paused a minute, and then added, “An Irish curate would be best, and then I should hunt.”

After a minute or two she reverted to her former theme. “There is something queer about Derek. All that family are a bit potty—mad gamblers, you know. In the old days they used to gamble away their wives and their estates, and did most reckless things just for the love of it. Derek would have made a perfect highwayman—debonair and gay, just the right manner.” She moved to the door. “Well, come down when you feel like it.”

Left alone, Katherine gave herself up to thought. Just at present she felt thoroughly ill at ease and jarred by her surroundings. The shock of the discovery in the train and the reception of the news by her new friends jarred upon her susceptibilities. She thought long and earnestly about the murdered woman. She had been sorry for Ruth, but she could not honestly say that she had liked her. She had divined only too well the ruthless egoism that was the keynote of her personality, and it repelled her.

She had been amused and a trifle hurt by the other's cool dismissal of her when she had served her turn. That she had come to some decision, Katherine was quite certain, but she wondered now what that decision had been. Whatever it was, death had stepped in and made all decisions meaningless. Strange that it should have been so, and that a brutal crime should have been the ending of that fateful journey. But suddenly Katherine remembered a small fact that she ought, perhaps, to have told the police—a fact that had for the moment escaped her memory. Was it of any real importance? She had certainly thought that she had seen a man going into that particular compartment, but she realized that she might easily have been mistaken. It might have been the compartment next door, and certainly the man in question could be no train robber. She recalled him very clearly as she had seen him on those two previous occasions—once at the Savoy and once at Cook's office. No, doubtless she had been mistaken. He had not gone into the dead woman's compartment, and it was perhaps as well that she had said nothing to the police. She might have done incalculable harm by doing so.

She went down to join the others on the terrace outside. Through the branches of mimosa, she looked out over the blue of the Mediterranean, and, whilst listening with half an ear to Lady Tamplin's chatter, she was glad that she had come. This was better than St. Mary Mead.

That evening she put on the mauvy pink dress that went by the name of soupir d'automne, and after smiling at her reflection in the mirror, went downstairs with, for the first time in her life, a faint feeling of shyness.

Most of Lady Tamplin's guests had arrived, and since noise was the essential of Lady Tamplin's parties, the din was already terrific. Chubby rushed up to Katherine, pressed a cocktail upon her, and took her under his wing.

"Oh, here you are, Derek," cried Lady Tamplin, as the door opened to admit the last corner. "Now at last we can have something to eat. I am starving."

Katherine looked across the room. She was startled. So this—was Derek, and she realized that she was not surprised. She had always known that she would some day meet the man whom she had seen three times by such a curious chain of coincidences. She thought, too, that he recognized her. He paused abruptly in what he was saying to Lady Tamplin, and went on again as though with an effort. They all went in to dinner, and Katherine found that he was placed beside her. He turned to her at once with a vivid smile.

“I knew I was going to meet you soon,” he remarked, “but I never dreamt that it would be here. It had to be, you know. Once at the Savoy and once at Cook’s—never twice without three times. Don’t say you can’t remember me or never noticed me. I insist upon your pretending that you noticed me, anyway.”

“Oh, I did,” said Katherine; “but this is not the third time. It is the fourth time. I saw you on the Blue Train.”

“On the Blue Train!” Something undefinable came over his manner; she could not have said just what it was. It was as though he had received a check, a setback. Then he said carelessly:

“What was the rumpus this morning? Somebody had died, hadn’t they?”

“Yes,” said Katherine slowly; “somebody had died.”

“You shouldn’t die on a train,” remarked Derek flippantly. “I believe it causes all sorts of legal and international complications, and it gives the train an excuse for being even later than usual.”

“Mr. Kettering?” A stout American lady, who was sitting opposite, leaned forward and spoke to him with the deliberate intonation of her race. “Mr. Kettering, I do believe you have forgotten me, and I thought you such a perfectly lovely man.”

Derek leaned forward, answering her, and Katherine sat almost dazed.

Kettering! That was the name, of course! She remembered it now—but what a strange, ironical situation! Here was this man whom she had seen go into his wife’s compartment last night, who had left her alive and well, and now he was sitting at dinner, quite unconscious of the fate that had befallen her. Of that there was no doubt. He did not know.

A servant was leaning over Derek, handing him a note and murmuring in his ear. With a word of excuse to Lady Tamplin, he broke it open, and an expression of utter astonishment came over his face as he read; then he looked at his hostess.

“This is most extraordinary. I say, Rosalie, I am afraid I will have to leave you. The Prefect of Police wants to see me at once. I can’t think what about.”

“Your sins have found you out,” remarked Lenox.

“They must have,” said Derek; “probably some idiotic nonsense, but I suppose I shall have to push off to the Prefecture. How dare the old boy rout me out from dinner? It ought to be something deadly serious to justify that,” and he laughed as he pushed back his chair and rose to leave the room.

Thirteen

VAN ALDIN GETS A TELEGRAM

On the afternoon of the 15th February a thick yellow fog had settled down on London. Rufus Van Aldin was in his suite at the Savoy and was making the most of the atmospheric conditions by working double time. Knighton was overjoyed. He had found it difficult of late to get his employer to concentrate on the matters in hand. When he had ventured to urge certain courses, Van Aldin had put him off with a curt word. But now Van Aldin seemed to be throwing himself into work with redoubled energy, and the secretary made the most of his opportunities. Always tactful, he plied the spur so unobtrusively that Van Aldin never suspected it.

Yet in the middle of this absorption in business matters, one little fact lay at the back of Van Aldin's mind. A chance remark of Knighton's, uttered by the secretary in all unconsciousness, had given rise to it. It now festered unseen, gradually reaching further and further forward into Van Aldin's consciousness, until at last, in spite of himself, he had to yield to its insistence.

He listened to what Knighton was saying with his usual air of keen attention, but in reality not one word of it penetrated his mind. He nodded automatically, however, and the secretary turned to some other paper. As he was sorting them out, his employer spoke:

“Do you mind telling me that over again, Knighton?”

For a moment Knighton was at a loss.

“You mean about this, sir?” He held up a closely written Company report.

“No, no,” said Van Aldin; “what you told me about seeing Ruth’s maid in Paris last night. I can’t make it out. You must have been mistaken.”

“I can’t have been mistaken, sir; I actually spoke to her.”

“Well, tell me the whole thing again.”

Knighton complied.

“I had fixed up the deal with Bartheimers,” he explained, “and had gone back to the Ritz to pick up my traps preparatory to having dinner and catching the nine o’clock train from the Gare du Nord. At the reception desk I saw a woman whom I was quite sure was Mrs. Kettering’s maid. I went up to her and asked if Mrs. Kettering was staying there.”

“Yes, yes,” said Van Aldin. “Of course. Naturally. And she told you that Ruth had gone on to the Riviera and had sent her to the Ritz to await further orders there?”

“Exactly that, sir.”

“It is very odd,” said Van Aldin. “Very odd, indeed, unless the woman had been impertinent or something of that kind.”

“In that case,” objected Knighton, “surely Mrs. Kettering would have paid her down a sum of money, and told her to go back to England? She would hardly have sent her to the Ritz.”

“No,” muttered the millionaire; “that’s true.”

He was about to say something further, but checked himself. He was fond of Knighton and liked and trusted him, but he could hardly discuss his daughter’s private affairs with his secretary. He had already felt hurt by Ruth’s lack of frankness, and this chance information which had come to him did nothing to allay his misgivings.

Why had Ruth got rid of her maid in Paris? What possible object or motive could she have had in so doing?

He reflected for a moment or two on the curious combination of chance. How should it have occurred to Ruth, except as the wildest coincidence, that the first person that the maid should run across in Paris should be her father's secretary? Ah, but that was the way things happened. That was the way things got found out.

He winced at the last phrase; it had arisen with complete naturalness to his mind. Was there then "something to be found out?" He hated to put this question to himself; he had no doubt of the answer. The answer was—he was sure of it—Armand de la Roche.

It was bitter to Van Aldin that a daughter of his should be gulled by such a man, yet he was forced to admit that she was in good company—that other well-bred and intelligent women had succumbed just as easily to the Count's fascination. Men saw through him, women did not.

He sought now for a phrase that would allay any suspicion that his secretary might have felt.

"Ruth is always changing her mind about things at a moment's notice," he remarked, and then he added in a would-be careless tone: "The maid didn't give any—er—reason for this change of plan?"

Knighton was careful to make his voice as natural as possible as he replied:

"She said, sir, that Mrs. Kettering had met a friend unexpectedly."

"Is that so?"

The secretary's practised ears caught the note of strain underlying the seemingly casual tone.

"Oh, I see. Man or woman?"

"I think she said a man, sir."

Van Aldin nodded. His worst fears were being realized. He rose from his chair, and began pacing up and down the room, a habit of his when agitated. Unable to contain his feelings any longer, he burst forth:

“There is one thing no man can do, and that is to get a woman to listen to reason. Somehow or other, they don’t seem to have any kind of sense. Talk of woman’s instinct—why, it is well known all the world over that a woman is the surest mark for any rascally swindler. Not one in ten of them knows a scoundrel when she meets one; they can be preyed on by any good-looking fellow with a soft side to his tongue. If I had my way—”

He was interrupted. A page boy entered with a telegram. Van Aldin tore it open, and his face went a sudden chalky white. He caught hold of the back of a chair to steady himself, and waved the page boy from the room.

“What’s the matter, sir?”

Knighton had risen in concern.

“Ruth!” said Van Aldin hoarsely.

“Mrs. Kettering?”

“Killed!”

“An accident to the train?”

Van Aldin shook his head.

“No. From this it seems she has been robbed as well. They don’t use the word, Knighton, but my poor girl has been murdered.”

“Oh, my God, sir!”

Van Aldin tapped the telegram with his forefinger.

“This is from the police at Nice. I must go out there by the first train.”

Knighton was efficient as ever. He glanced at the clock.

“Five o’clock from Victoria, sir.”

"That's right. You will come with me, Knighton. Tell my man, Archer, and pack your own things. See to everything here. I want to go round to Curzon Street."

The telephone rang sharply, and the secretary lifted the receiver.

"Yes; who is it?"

Then to Van Aldin:

"Mr. Goby, sir."

"Goby? I can't see him now. No—wait, we have plenty of time. Tell them to send him up."

Van Aldin was a strong man. Already he had recovered that iron calm of his. Few people would have noticed anything amiss in his greeting to Mr. Goby.

"I am pressed for time, Goby. Got anything important to tell me?"

Mr. Goby coughed.

"The movements of Mr. Kettering, sir. You wished them reported to you."

"Yes—well?"

"Mr. Kettering, sir, left London for the Riviera yesterday morning."

"What?"

Something in his voice must have startled Mr. Goby. That worthy gentleman departed from his usual practice of never looking at the person to whom he was talking, and stole a fleeting glance at the millionaire.

"What train did he go on?" demanded Van Aldin.

"The Blue Train, sir."

Mr. Goby coughed again and spoke to the clock on the mantelpiece.

“Mademoiselle Mirelle, the dancer from the Parthenon, went by the same train.”

Fourteen

ADA MASON’S STORY

“I cannot repeat to you often enough, Monsieur, our horror, our consternation, and the deep sympathy we feel for you.”

Thus M. Carrège, the Juge d’Instruction, addressed Van Aldin. M. Caux, the Commissary, made sympathetic noises in his throat. Van Aldin brushed away horror, consternation, and sympathy with an abrupt gesture. The scene was the Examining Magistrate’s room at Nice. Besides M. Carrège, the Commissary, and Van Aldin, there was a further person in the room. It was that person who now spoke.

“M. Van Aldin,” he said, “desires action—swift action.”

“Ah!” cried the Commissary, “I have not yet presented you. M. Van Aldin, this is M. Hercule Poirot; you have doubtless heard of him. Although he has retired from his profession for some years now, his name is still a household word as one of the greatest living detectives.”

“Pleased to meet you, M. Poirot,” said Van Aldin, falling back mechanically on a formula that he had discarded some years ago. “You have retired from your profession?”

“That is so, Monsieur. Now I enjoy the world.”

The little man made a grandiloquent gesture.

“M. Poirot happened to be travelling on the Blue Train,” explained the Commissary, “and he has been so kind as to assist us out of his vast experience.”

The millionaire looked at Poirot keenly. Then he said unexpectedly:

"I am a very rich man, M. Poirot. It is usually said that a rich man labours under the belief that he can buy everything and everyone. That is not true. I am a big man in my way, and one big man can ask a favour from another big man."

Poirot nodded a quick appreciation.

"That is very well said, M. Van Aldin. I place myself entirely at your service."

"Thank you," said Van Aldin. "I can only say call upon me at any time, and you will not find me ungrateful. And now, gentlemen, to business."

"I propose," said M. Carrège, "to interrogate the maid, Ada Mason. You have her here, I understand?"

"Yes," said Van Aldin. "We picked her up in Paris in passing through. She was very upset to hear of her mistress's death, but she tells her story coherently enough."

"We will have her in, then," said M. Carrège.

He rang the bell on his desk, and in a few minutes Ada Mason entered the room.

She was very neatly dressed in black, and the tip of her nose was red. She had exchanged her grey travelling gloves for a pair of black suède ones. She cast a look round the Examining Magistrate's office in some trepidation, and seemed relieved at the presence of her mistress's father. The Examining Magistrate prided himself on his geniality of manner, and did his best to put her at her ease. He was helped in this by Poirot, who acted as interpreter, and whose friendly manner was reassuring to the Englishwoman.

"Your name is Ada Mason; is that right?"

"Ada Beatrice I was christened, sir," said Mason primly.

"Just so. And we can understand, Mason, that this has all been very distressing."

“Oh, indeed it has, sir. I have been with many ladies and always given satisfaction, I hope, and I never dreamt of anything of this kind happening in any situation where I was.”

“No, no,” said M. Carrège.

“Naturally, I have read of such things, of course, in the Sunday papers. And then I always have understood that those foreign trains—” She suddenly checked her flow, remembering that the gentlemen who were speaking to her were of the same nationality as the trains.

“Now let us talk this affair over,” said M. Carrège. “There was, I understand, no question of your staying in Paris when you started from London?”

“Oh no, sir. We were to go straight through to Nice.”

“Have you ever been abroad with your mistress before?”

“No, sir. I had only been with her two months, you see.”

“Did she seem quite as usual when starting on this journey?”

“She was worried like and a bit upset, and she was rather irritable and difficult to please.”

M. Carrège nodded.

“Now then, Mason, what was the first you heard of your stopping in Paris?”

“It was at the place they call the Gare de Lyon, sir. My mistress was thinking of getting out and walking up and down the platform. She was just going out into the corridor when she gave a sudden exclamation, and came back into her compartment with a gentleman. She shut the door between her carriage and mine, so that I didn’t see or hear anything, till she suddenly opened it again and told me that she had changed her plans. She gave me some money and told me to get out and go to the Ritz. They knew her well there, she said, and would give me a room. I was to wait there until I heard from her; she would wire me what she wanted me to do. I had just time to get my things together and jump out of the train before it started off. It was a rush.”

“While Mrs. Kettering was telling you this, where was the gentleman?”

“He was standing in the other compartment, sir, looking out of the window.”

“Can you describe him to us?”

“Well, you see, sir, I hardly saw him. He had his back to me most of the time. He was a tall gentleman and dark; that’s all I can say. He was dressed very like another gentleman in a dark blue overcoat and a grey hat.”

“Was he one of the passengers on the train?”

“I don’t think so, sir; I took it that he had come to the station to see Mrs. Kettering in passing through. Of course he might have been one of the passengers; I never thought of that.”

Mason seemed a little flurried by the suggestion.

“Ah!” M. Carrège passed lightly to another subject. “Your mistress later requested the conductor not to rouse her early in the morning. Was that a likely thing for her to do, do you think?”

“Oh yes, sir. The mistress never ate any breakfast and she didn’t sleep well at nights, so that she liked sleeping on in the morning.”

Again M. Carrège passed to another subject.

“Amongst the luggage there was a scarlet morocco case, was there not?” he asked. “Your mistress’s jewel case?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you take that case to the Ritz?”

“Me take the mistress’s jewel case to the Ritz! Oh no, indeed, sir.” Mason’s tones were horrified.

“You left it behind you in the carriage?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Had your mistress many jewels with her, do you know?”

“A fair amount, sir; made me a bit uneasy sometimes, I can tell you, with those nasty tales you hear of being robbed in foreign countries. They were insured, I know, but all the same it seemed a frightful risk. Why, the rubies alone, the mistress told me, were worth several hundred thousand pounds.”

“The rubies! What rubies?” barked Van Aldin suddenly.

Mason turned to him. “I think it was you who gave them to her, sir, not very long ago.”

“My God!” cried Van Aldin. “You don’t say she had those rubies with her? I told her to leave them at the bank.”

Mason gave once more the discreet cough which was apparently part of her stock-in-trade as a lady’s maid. This time it expressed a good deal. It expressed far more clearly than words could have done, that Mason’s mistress had been a lady who took her own way.

“Ruth must have been mad,” muttered Van Aldin. “What on earth could have possessed her?”

M. Carrège in turn gave vent to a cough, again a cough of significance. It riveted Van Aldin’s attention on him.

“For the moment,” said M. Carrège, addressing Mason, “I think that is all. If you will go into the next room, Mademoiselle, they will read over to you the questions and answers, and you will sign accordingly.”

Mason went out escorted by the clerk, and Van Aldin said immediately to the Magistrate:

“Well?”

M. Carrège opened a drawer in his desk, took out a letter, and handed it across to Van Aldin.

“This was found in Madame’s handbag.”

Chere Amie, (the letter ran)—I will obey you; I will be prudent, discreet—all those things that a lover most hates. Paris would perhaps have been unwise, but the Isles d’Or are far away from the world, and you may be assured that nothing will leak out. It is like you and your divine sympathy to be so interested in the work on famous jewels that I am writing. It will, indeed, be an extraordinary privilege to actually see and handle these historic rubies. I am devoting a special passage to “Heart of Fire.” My wonderful one! Soon I will make up to you for all those sad years of separation and emptiness.

Your ever-adoring,

Armand.

Fifteen

THE COMTE DE LA ROCHE

Van Aldin read the letter through in silence. His face turned a dull angry crimson. The men watching him saw the veins start out on his forehead, and his big hands clench themselves unconsciously. He handed back the letter without a word. M. Carrège was looking with close attention at his desk, M. Caux's eyes were fixed upon the ceiling, and M. Hercule Poirot was tenderly brushing a speck of dust from his coat sleeve. With the greatest tact they none of them looked at Van Aldin.

It was M. Carrège, mindful of his status and his duties, who tackled the unpleasant subject.

"Perhaps, Monsieur," he murmured, "you are aware by whom—er—this letter was written?"

"Yes, I know," said Van Aldin heavily.

"Ah?" said the magistrate inquiringly.

"A scoundrel who calls himself the Comte de la Roche."

There was a pause; then M. Poirot leaned forward, straightened a ruler on the judge's desk, and addressed the millionaire directly.

"M. Van Aldin, we are all sensible, deeply sensible, of the pain it must give you to speak of these matters, but believe me, Monsieur, it is not the time for concealments. If justice is to be done, we must know everything. If you will reflect a little minute you will realize the truth of that clearly for yourself."

Van Aldin was silent for a moment or two, then almost reluctantly he nodded his head in agreement.

“You are quite right, M. Poirot,” he said. “Painful as it is, I have no right to keep anything back.”

The Commissary gave a sigh of relief, and the Examining Magistrate leaned back in his chair and adjusted a pince-nez on his long thin nose.

“Perhaps you will tell us in your own words, M. Van Aldin,” he said, “all that you know of this gentleman.”

“It began eleven or twelve years ago—in Paris. My daughter was a young girl then, full of foolish, romantic notions, like all young girls are. Unknown to me, she made the acquaintance of this Comte de la Roche. You have heard of him, perhaps?”

The Commissary and Poirot nodded in assent.

“He calls himself the Comte de la Roche,” continued Van Aldin, “but I doubt if he has any right to the title.”

“You would not have found his name in the Almanac de Gotha,” agreed the Commissary.

“I discovered as much,” said Van Aldin. “The man was a good-looking, plausible scoundrel, with a fatal fascination for women. Ruth was infatuated with him, but I soon put a stop to the whole affair. The man was no better than a common swindler.”

“You are quite right,” said the Commissary. “The Comte de la Roche is well known to us. If it were possible, we should have laid him by the heels before now, but ma foi! it is not easy; the fellow is cunning, his affairs are always conducted with ladies of high social position. If he obtains money from them under false pretences or as the fruit of blackmail, eh bien! naturally they will not prosecute. To look foolish in the eyes of the world, oh no, that would never do, and he has an extraordinary power over women.”

“That is so,” said the millionaire heavily. “Well, as I told you, I broke the affair up pretty sharply. I told Ruth exactly what he was, and she had, perforce, to believe me. About a year afterwards, she met her present husband and married him. As far as I knew, that was the end of the matter; but only a week ago, I discovered, to my amazement, that my daughter had resumed her acquaintance with the Comte de la Roche. She had been meeting him frequently in London and Paris. I remonstrated with her on her imprudence, for I may tell you gentlemen that, on my insistence, she was preparing to bring a suit for divorce against her husband.”

“That is interesting,” murmured Poirot softly, his eyes on the ceiling.

Van Aldin looked at him sharply, and then went on.

“I pointed out to her the folly of continuing to see the Comte under the circumstances. I thought she agreed with me.”

The Examining Magistrate coughed delicately.

“But according to this letter—” he began, and then stopped.

Van Aldin’s jaw set itself squarely.

“I know. It’s no good mincing matters. However unpleasant, we have got to face facts. It seems clear that Ruth had arranged to go to Paris and meet de la Roche there. After my warnings to her, however, she must have written to the Count suggesting a change of rendezvous.”

“The Isles d’Or,” said the Commissary thoughtfully, “are situated just opposite Hyères, a remote and idyllic spot.”

Van Aldin nodded.

“My God! How could Ruth be such a fool?” he exclaimed bitterly. “All this talk about writing a book on jewels! Why, he must have been after the rubies from the first.”

“There are some very famous rubies,” said Poirot, “originally part of the Crown jewels of Russia; they are unique in character, and their value is almost fabulous. There has been a rumour that they have lately passed into the possession of an American. Are we right in concluding, Monsieur, that you were the purchaser?"

"Yes," said Van Aldin. "They came into my possession in Paris about ten days ago."

"Pardon me, Monsieur, but you have been negotiating for their purchase for some time?"

"A little over two months. Why?"

"These things became known," said Poirot. "There is always a pretty formidable crowd on the track of jewels such as these."

A spasm distorted the other's face.

"I remember," he said brokenly, "a joke I made to Ruth when I gave them to her. I told her not to take them to the Riviera with her, as I could not afford to have her robbed and murdered for the sake of the jewels. My God! the things one says—never dreaming or knowing they will come true."

There was a sympathetic silence, and then Poirot spoke in a detached manner.

"Let us arrange our facts with order and precision. According to our present theory, this is how they run. The Comte de la Roche knows of your purchase of these jewels. By an easy stratagem he induces Madame Kettering to bring the stones with her. He, then, is the man Mason saw in the train at Paris."

The other three nodded in agreement.

"Madame is surprised to see him, but he deals with the situation promptly. Mason is got out of the way; a dinner basket is ordered. We know from the conductor that he made up the berth for the first compartment, but he did not go into the second compartment, and that a man could quite well have been concealed from him. So far the Comte could have been hidden to a marvel. No one knows of his presence on the train except Madame; he has been careful that the maid did not see his face. All that she could say is that he was tall and dark. It is all most conveniently vague. They are alone—and the train rushes through the night. There would be no outcry, no struggle, for the man is, so she thinks, her lover.”

He turned gently to Van Aldin.

“Death, Monsieur, must have been almost instantaneous. We will pass over that quickly. The Comte takes the jewel case which lies ready to his hand. Shortly afterwards the train draws into Lyons.”

M. Carrège nodded his approval.

“Precisely. The conductor without descends. It would be easy for our man to leave the train unseen; it would be easy to catch a train back to Paris or anywhere he pleases. And the crime would be put down as an ordinary train robbery. But for the letter found in Madame’s bag, the Comte would not have been mentioned.”

“It was an oversight on his part not to search that bag,” declared the Commissary.

“Without doubt he thought she had destroyed that letter. It was—pardon me, Monsieur—it was an indiscretion of the first water to keep it.”

“And yet,” murmured Poirot, “it was an indiscretion the Comte might have foreseen.”

“You mean?”

“I mean we are all agreed on one point, and that is that the Comte de la Roche knows one subject à fond: Women. How was it that, knowing women as he does, he did not foresee that Madame would have kept that letter?”

“Yes—yes,” said the Examining Magistrate doubtfully, “there is something in what you say. But at such times, you understand, a man is not master of himself. He does not reason calmly. Mon Dieu!” he added, with feeling, “if our criminals kept their heads and acted with intelligence, how should we capture them?”

Poirot smiled to himself.

“It seems to me a clear case,” said the other, “but a difficult one to prove. The Comte is a slippery customer, and unless the maid can identify him—”

“Which is most unlikely,” said Poirot.

“True, true.” The Examining Magistrate rubbed his chin. “It is going to be difficult.”

“If he did indeed commit the crime—” began Poirot. M. Caux interrupted.

“If—you say if?”

“Yes, Monsieur le Commissaire, I say if.”

The other looked at him sharply. “You are right,” he said at last, “we go too fast. It is possible that the Comte may have an alibi. Then we should look foolish.”

“Ah, ça par exemple,” replied Poirot, “that is of no importance whatever. Naturally, if he committed the crime he will have an alibi. A man with the Comte’s experience does not neglect to take precautions. No, I said if for a very definite reason.”

“And what was that?”

Poirot wagged an emphatic forefinger. “The psychology.”

“Eh?” said the Commissary.

“The psychology is at fault. The Comte is a scoundrel—yes. The Comte is a swindler—yes. The Comte preys upon women—yes. He proposes to steal Madame’s jewels—again yes. Is he the kind of man to commit murder? I say no! A man of the type of the Comte is always a coward; he takes no risks. He plays the safe, the mean, what the English call the lowdown game; but murder, a hundred times no!” He shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

The Examining Magistrate, however, did not seem disposed to agree with him.

“The day always comes when such gentry lose their heads and go too far,” he observed sagely. “Doubtless that is the case here. Without wishing to disagree with you, M. Poirot—”

“It was only an opinion,” Poirot hastened to explain. “The case is, of course, in your hands, and you will do what seems fit to you.”

“I am satisfied in my own mind the Comte de la Roche is the man we need to get hold of,” said M. Carrège. “You agree with me, Monsieur le Commissaire?”

“Perfectly.”

“And you, M. Van Aldin?”

“Yes,” said the millionaire. “Yes; the man is a thorough-paced villain, no doubt about it.”

“It will be difficult to lay hands on him, I am afraid,” said the Magistrate, “but we will do our best. Telegraphed instructions shall go out at once.”

“Permit me to assist you,” said Poirot. “There need be no difficulty.”

“Eh?”

The others stared at him. The little man smiled beamingly back at them.

“It is my business to know things,” he explained. “The Comte is a man of intelligence. He is at present at a villa he has leased, the Villa Marina at Antibes.”

Sixteen

POIROT DISCUSSES THE CASE

Everybody looked respectfully at Poirot. Undoubtedly the little man had scored heavily. The Commissary laughed—on a rather hollow note.

“You teach us all our business,” he cried. “M. Poirot knows more than the police.”

Poirot gazed complacently at the ceiling, adopting a mock-modest air.

“What will you; it is my little hobby,” he murmured, “to know things. Naturally I have the time to indulge it. I am not overburdened with affairs.”

“Ah!” said the Commissary shaking his head portentously. “As for me—”

He made an exaggerated gesture to represent the cares that lay on his shoulders.

Poirot turned suddenly to Van Aldin.

“You agree, Monsieur, with this view? You feel certain that the Comte de la Roche is the murderer?”

“Why, it would seem so—yes, certainly.”

Something guarded in the answer made the Examining Magistrate look at the American curiously. Van Aldin seemed aware of his scrutiny and made an effort as though to shake off some preoccupation.

“What about my son-in-law?” he asked. “You have acquainted him with the news? He is in Nice, I understand.”

“Certainly, Monsieur.” The Commissary hesitated, and then murmured very discreetly: “You are doubtless aware, M. Van Aldin, that M. Kettering was also one of the passengers on the Blue Train that night?”

The millionaire nodded.

“Heard it just before I left London,” he vouchsafed laconically.

“He tells us,” continued the Commissary, “that he had no idea his wife was travelling on the train.”

“I bet he hadn’t,” said Van Aldin grimly. “It would have been rather a nasty shock to him if he’d come across her on it.”

The three men looked at him questioningly.

“I’m not going to mince matters,” said Van Aldin savagely. “No one knows what my poor girl has had to put up with. Derek Kettering wasn’t alone. He had a lady with him.”

“Ah?”

“Mirelle—the dancer.”

M. Carrège and the Commissary looked at each other and nodded as though confirming some previous conversation. M. Carrège leaned back in his chair, joined his hands, and fixed his eyes on the ceiling.

“Ah!” he murmured again. “One wondered.” He coughed. “One has heard rumours.”

“The lady,” said M. Caux, “is very notorious.”

“And also,” murmured Poirot softly, “very expensive.”

Van Aldin had gone very red in the face. He leant forward and hit the table a bang with his fist.

“See here,” he cried, “my son-in-law is a damned scoundrel!”

He glared at them, looking from one face to another.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he went on. “Good looks and a charming, easy manner. It took me in once upon a time. I suppose he pretended to be brokenhearted when you broke the news to him—that is, if he didn’t know it already.”

“Oh, it came as a surprise to him. He was overwhelmed.”

“Darned young hypocrite,” said Van Aldin. “Simulated great grief, I suppose?”

“N—no,” said the Commissary cautiously. “I would not quite say that—eh, M. Carrège?”

The Magistrate brought the tips of his fingers together, and half-closed his eyes.

“Shock, bewilderment, horror—these things, yes,” he declared judicially. “Great sorrow—no—I should not say that.”

Hercule Poirot spoke once more.

“Permit me to ask, M. Van Aldin, does M. Kettering benefit by the death of his wife?”

“He benefits to the tune of a couple of millions,” said Van Aldin.

“Dollars?”

“Pounds. I settled that sum on Ruth absolutely on her marriage. She made no will and leaves no children, so the money will go to her husband.”

“Whom she was on the point of divorcing,” murmured Poirot. “Ah, yes—précisément.”

The Commissary turned and looked sharply at him.

“Do you mean—?” he began.

"I mean nothing," said Poirot. "I arrange the facts, that is all."

Van Aldin stared at him with awakening interest.

The little man rose to his feet.

"I do not think I can be of any further service to you, M. le Juge," he said politely, bowing to M. Carrège. "You will keep me informed of the course of events? It will be a kindness."

"But certainly—most certainly."

Van Aldin rose also.

"You don't want me any more at present?"

"No, Monsieur; we have all the information we need for the moment."

"Then I will walk a little way with M. Poirot. That is, if he does not object?"

"Enchanted, Monsieur," said the little man, with a bow.

Van Aldin lighted a large cigar, having first offered one to Poirot, who declined it and lit one of his own tiny cigarettes. A man of great strength of character, Van Aldin already appeared to be his everyday, normal self once more. After strolling along for a minute or two in silence, the millionaire spoke:

"I take it, M. Poirot, that you no longer exercise your profession?"

"That is so, Monsieur. I enjoy the world."

"Yet you are assisting the police in this affair?"

"Monsieur, if a doctor walks along the street and an accident happens, does he say, 'I have retired from my profession, I will continue my walk,' when there is someone bleeding to death at his feet? If I had been already in Nice, and the police had sent to me and asked me to assist them, I should have refused. But this affair, the good God thrust it upon me.”

“You were on the spot,” said Van Aldin thoughtfully. “You examined the compartment, did you not?”

Poirot nodded.

“Doubtless you found things that were, shall we say, suggestive to you?”

“Perhaps,” said Poirot.

“I hope you see what I am leading up to?” said Van Aldin. “It seems to me that the case against this Comte de la Roche is perfectly clear, but I am not a fool. I have been watching you for this last hour or so, and I realize that for some reason of your own you don’t agree with that theory?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“I may be wrong.”

“So we come to the favour I want to ask you. Will you act in this matter for me?”

“For you, personally?”

“That was my meaning.”

Poirot was silent for a moment or two. Then he said:

“You realize what you are asking?”

“I guess so,” said Van Aldin.

“Very well,” said Poirot. “I accept. But in that case, I must have frank answers to my questions.”

“Why, certainly. That is understood.”

Poirot’s manner changed. He became suddenly brusque and businesslike.

“This question of a divorce,” he said. “It was you who advised your daughter to bring the suit?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“About ten days ago. I had had a letter from her complaining of her husband’s behaviour, and I put it to her very strongly that divorce was the only remedy.”

“In what way did she complain of his behaviour?”

“He was being seen about with a very notorious lady—the one we have been speaking of—Mirelle.”

“The dancer. Ah-ha! And Madame Kettering objected? Was she very devoted to her husband?”

“I would not say that,” said Van Aldin, hesitating a little.

“It was not her heart that suffered, it was her pride—is that what you would say?”

“Yes, I suppose you might put it like that.”

“I gather that the marriage has not been a happy one from the beginning?”

“Derek Kettering is rotten to the core,” said Van Aldin. “He is incapable of making any woman happy.”

“He is, as you say in England, a bad lot. That is right, is it not?”

Van Aldin nodded.

“Très bien! You advise Madame to seek a divorce, she agrees; you consult your solicitors. When does M. Kettering get news of what is in the wind?”

“I sent for him myself, and explained the course of action I proposed to take.”

“And what did he say?” murmured Poirot softly.

Van Aldin’s face darkened at the remembrance.

“He was infernally impudent.”

“Excuse the question, Monsieur, but did he refer to the Comte de la Roche?”

“Not by name,” growled the other unwillingly, “but he showed himself cognizant of the affair.”

“What, if I may ask, was Mr. Kettering’s financial position at the time?”

“How do you suppose I should know that?” asked Van Aldin, after a very brief hesitation.

“It seemed likely to me that you would inform yourself on that point.”

“Well—you are quite right, I did. I discovered that Kettering was on the rocks.”

“And now he has inherited two million pounds! La vie—it is a strange thing, is it not?”

Van Aldin looked at him sharply.

“What do you mean?”

“I moralize,” said Poirot, “I reflect, I speak the philosophy. But to return to where we were. Surely M. Kettering did not propose to allow himself to be divorced without making a fight for it?”

Van Aldin did not answer for a minute or two, then he said:

“I don’t exactly know what his intentions were.”

“Did you hold any further communications with him?”

Again a slight pause, then Van Aldin said:

“No.”

Poirot stopped dead, took off his hat, and held out his hand.

“I must wish you good-day, Monsieur. I can do nothing for you.”

“What are you getting at?” demanded Van Aldin angrily.

“If you do not tell me the truth, I can do nothing.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. You may rest assured, M. Van Aldin, that I know how to be discreet.”

“Very well, then,” said the millionaire. “I’ll admit that I was not speaking the truth just now. I did have further communication with my son-in-law.”

“Yes?”

“To be exact, I sent my secretary, Major Knighton, to see him, with instructions to offer him the sum of one hundred thousand pounds in cash if the divorce went through undefended.”

“A pretty sum of money,” said Poirot appreciatively: “and the answer of Monsieur your son-in-law?”

“He sent back word that I could go to hell,” replied the millionaire succinctly.

“Ah!” said Poirot.

He betrayed no emotion of any kind. At the moment he was engaged in methodically recording facts.

“Monsieur Kettering has told the police that he neither saw nor spoke to his wife on the journey from England. Are you inclined to believe that statement, Monsieur?”

“Yes, I am,” said Van Aldin. “He would take particular pains to keep out of her way, I should say.”

“Why?”

“Because he had got that woman with him.”

“Mirelle?”

“Yes.”

“How did you come to know that fact?”

“A man of mine, whom I had put on to watch him, reported to me that they both left by that train.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “In that case, as you said before, he would not be likely to attempt to hold any communication with Madame Kettering.”

The little man fell silent for some time. Van Aldin did not interrupt his meditation.

Seventeen

AN ARISTOCRATIC GENTLEMAN

“You have been to the Riviera before, Georges?” said Poirot to his valet the following morning.

George was an intensely English, rather wooden-faced individual.

“Yes, sir. I was here two years ago when I was in the service of Lord Edward Frampton.”

“And today,” murmured his master, “you are here with Hercule Poirot. How one mounts in the world!”

The valet made no reply to this observation. After a suitable pause he asked:

“The brown lounge suit, sir? The wind is somewhat chilly today.”

“There is a grease spot on the waistcoat,” objected Poirot. “A morceau of filet de sole à la Jeanette alighted there when I was lunching at the Ritz last Tuesday.”

“There is no spot there now, sir,” said George reproachfully. “I have removed it.”

“Très bien!” said Poirot. “I am pleased with you, Georges.”

“Thank you, sir.”

There was a pause, and then Poirot murmured dreamily:

“Supposing, my good Georges, that you had been born in the same social sphere as your late master, Lord Edward Frampton—that, penniless yourself, you had married an extremely wealthy wife, but that wife proposed to divorce you, with excellent reasons, what would you do about it?”

“I should endeavour, sir,” replied George, “to make her change her mind.”

“By peaceful or by forcible methods?”

George looked shocked.

“You will excuse me, sir,” he said, “but a gentleman of the aristocracy would not behave like a Whitechapel coster. He would not do anything low.”

“Would he not, Georges? I wonder now. Well, perhaps you are right.”

There was a knock on the door. George went to it and opened it a discreet inch or two. A low murmured colloquy went on, and then the valet returned to Poirot.

“A note, sir.”

Poirot took it. It was from M. Caux, the Commissary of Police.

“We are about to interrogate the Comte de la Roche. The Juge d’Instruction begs that you will be present.”

“Quickly, my suit, Georges! I must hasten myself.”

A quarter of an hour later, spick and span in his brown suit, Poirot entered the Examining Magistrate’s room. M. Caux was already there, and both he and M. Carrège greeted Poirot with polite empressement.

“The affair is somewhat discouraging,” murmured M. Caux.

“It appears that the Comte arrived in Nice the day before the murder.”

“If that is true, it will settle your affair nicely for you,” responded Poirot.

M. Carrège cleared his throat.

“We must not accept this alibi without very cautious inquiry,” he declared. He struck the bell upon the table with his hand.

In another minute a tall dark man, exquisitely dressed, with a somewhat haughty cast of countenance, entered the room. So very aristocratic-looking was the Count, that it would have seemed sheer heresy even to whisper that his father had been an obscure corn chandler in Nantes—which, as a matter of fact, was the case. Looking at him, one would have been prepared to swear that innumerable ancestors of his must have perished by the guillotine in the French Revolution.

“I am here, gentlemen,” said the Count haughtily. “May I ask why you wish to see me?”

“Pray be seated, Monsieur le Comte,” said the Examining Magistrate politely. “It is the affair of the death of Madame Kettering that we are investigating.”

“The death of Madame Kettering? I do not understand.”

“You were—ahem!—acquainted with the lady, I believe, Monsieur le Comte?”

“Certainly I was acquainted with her. What has that to do with the matter?”

Sticking an eyeglass in his eye, he looked coldly round the room, his glance resting longest on Poirot, who was gazing at him with a kind of simple, innocent admiration which was most pleasing to the Count’s vanity. M. Carrège leaned back in his chair and cleared his throat.

“You do not perhaps know, Monsieur le Comte”—he paused—“that Madame Kettering was murdered?”

“Murdered? Mon Dieu, how terrible!”

The surprise and the sorrow were excellently done—so well done, indeed, as to seem wholly natural.

“Madame Kettering was strangled between Paris and Lyons,” continued M. Carrège, “and her jewels were stolen.”

“It is iniquitous!” cried the Count warmly; “the police should do something about these train bandits. Nowadays no one is safe.”

“In Madame’s handbag,” continued the Judge, “we found a letter to her from you. She had, it seemed, arranged to meet you?”

The Count shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

“Of what use are concealments,” he said frankly. “We are all men of the world. Privately and between ourselves, I admit the affair.”

“You met her in Paris and travelled down with her, I believe?” said M. Carrège.

“That was the original arrangement, but by Madame’s wish it was changed. I was to meet her at Hyères.”

“You did not meet her on the train at Gare de Lyon on the evening of the 14th?”

“On the contrary, I arrived in Nice on the morning of that day, so what you suggest is impossible.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said M. Carrège. “As a matter of form, you would perhaps give me an account of your movements during the evening and night of the 14th.”

The Count reflected for a minute.

“I dined in Monte Carlo at the Café de Paris. Afterwards I went to the Le Sporting. I won a few thousand francs,” he shrugged his shoulders. “I returned home at perhaps one o’clock.”

“Pardon me, Monsieur, but how did you return home?”

“In my own two-seater car.”

“No one was with you?”

“No one.”

“You could produce witnesses in support of this statement?”

“Doubtless many of my friends saw me there that evening. I dined alone.”

“Your servant admitted you on your return to your villa?”

“I let myself in with my own latchkey.”

“Ah!” murmured the Magistrate.

Again he struck the bell on the table with his hand. The door opened, and a messenger appeared.

“Bring in the maid, Mason,” said M. Carrège.

“Very good, Monsieur le Juge.”

Ada Mason was brought in.

“Will you be so good, Mademoiselle, as to look at this gentleman. To the best of your ability was it he who entered your mistress’s compartment in Paris?”

The woman looked long and searchingly at the Count, who was, Poirot fancied, rather uneasy under this scrutiny.

“I could not say, sir, I am sure,” said Mason at last. “It might be and again it might not. Seeing as how I only saw his back, it’s hard to say. I rather think it was the gentleman.”

“But you are not sure?”

“No-o,” said Mason unwillingly; “n-no, I am not sure.”

“You have seen this gentleman before in Curzon Street?”

Mason shook her head.

“I should not be likely to see any visitors that come to Curzon Street,” she explained, “unless they were staying in the house.”

“Very well, that will do,” said the Examining Magistrate sharply.

Evidently he was disappointed.

“One moment,” said Poirot. “There is a question I would like to put to Mademoiselle, if I may?”

“Certainly, M. Poirot—certainly, by all means.”

Poirot addressed himself to the maid.

“What happened to the tickets?”

“The tickets, sir?”

“Yes; the tickets from London to Nice. Did you or your mistress have them?”

“The mistress had her own Pullman ticket, sir; the others were in my charge.”

“What happened to them?”

“I gave them to the conductor on the French train, sir; he said it was usual. I hope I did right, sir?”

“Oh, quite right, quite right. A mere matter of detail.”

Both M. Caux and the Examining Magistrate looked at him curiously. Mason stood uncertainly for a minute or two, and then the magistrate gave her a brief nod of dismissal, and she went out. Poirot scribbled something on a scrap of paper and handed it across to M. Carrège. The latter read it and his brow cleared.

“Well, gentlemen,” demanded the Count haughtily, “am I to be detained further?”

“Assuredly not, assuredly not,” M. Carrège hastened to say, with a great deal of amiability. “Everything is now cleared up as regards your own position in this affair. Naturally, in view of Madame’s letter, we were bound to question you.”

The Count rose, picked up his handsome stick from the corner, and, with rather a curt bow, left the room.

“And that is that,” said M. Carrège. “You were quite right, M. Poirot—much better to let him feel he is not suspected. Two of my men will shadow him night and day, and at the same time we will go into the question of the alibi. It seems to me rather—er—a fluid one.”

“Possibly,” agreed Poirot thoughtfully.

“I asked M. Kettering to come here this morning,” continued the Magistrate, “though really I doubt if we have much to ask him, but there are one or two suspicious circumstances—” He paused, rubbing his nose.

“Such as?” asked Poirot.

“Well”—the Magistrate coughed—“this lady with whom he is said to be travelling—Mademoiselle Mirelle. She is staying at one hotel and he at another. That strikes me—er—as rather odd.”

“It looks,” said M. Caux, “as though they were being careful.”

“Exactly,” said M. Carrège triumphantly; “and what should they have to be careful about?”

“An excess of caution is suspicious, eh?” said Poirot.

“Précisément.”

“We might, I think,” murmured Poirot, “ask M. Kettering one or two questions.”

The Magistrate gave instructions. A moment or two later, Derek Kettering, debonair as ever, entered the room.

“Good morning, Monsieur,” said the Judge politely.

“Good morning,” said Derek Kettering curtly. “You sent for me. Has anything fresh turned up?”

“Pray sit down, Monsieur.”

Derek took a seat and flung his hat and stick on the table.

“Well?” he asked impatiently.

“We have, so far, no fresh data,” said M. Carrège cautiously.

“That’s very interesting,” said Derek drily. “Did you send for me here in order to tell me that?”

“We naturally thought, Monsieur, that you would like to be informed of the progress of the case,” said the Magistrate severely.

“Even if the progress is nonexistent.”

“We also wished to ask you a few questions.”

“Ask away.”

“You are quite sure that you neither saw nor spoke with your wife on the train.”

“I’ve answered that already. I did not.”

“You had, no doubt, your reasons.”

Derek stared at him suspiciously.

“I—did—not—know—she—was—on—the—train,” he explained, spacing his words elaborately, as though to someone dull of intellect.

“That is what you say, yes,” murmured M. Carrège.

A quick frown suffused Derek’s face.

“I should like to know what you are driving at. Do you know what I think, M. Carrège?”

“What do you think, Monsieur?”

“I think the French police are vastly overrated. Surely you must have some data as to these gangs of train robbers. It’s outrageous that such a thing could happen on a train de luxe like that, and that the French police should be helpless to deal with the matter.”

“We are dealing with it, Monsieur, never fear.”

“Madame Kettering, I understand, did not leave a will,” interposed Poirot suddenly. His fingertips were joined together, and he was looking intently at the ceiling.

“I don’t think she ever made one,” said Kettering. “Why?”

“It is a very pretty little fortune that you inherit there,” said Poirot—“a very pretty little fortune.”

Although his eyes were still on the ceiling, he managed to see the dark flush that rose to Derek Kettering’s face.

“What do you mean, and who are you?”

Poirot gently uncrossed his knees, withdrew his gaze from the ceiling, and looked the young man full in the face.

“My name is Hercule Poirot,” he said quietly, “and I am probably the greatest detective in the world. You are quite sure that you did not see or speak to your wife on that train?”

“What are you getting at? Do you—do you mean to insinuate that I—I killed her?”

He laughed suddenly.

“I mustn’t lose my temper; it’s too palpably absurd. Why, if I killed her I should have had no need to steal her jewels, would I?”

“That is true,” murmured Poirot, with a rather crestfallen air. “I did not think of that.”

“If ever there were a clear case of murder and robbery this is it,” said Derek Kettering. “Poor Ruth, it was those damned rubies did for her. It must have got about she had them with her. There has been murder done for those same stones before now, I believe.”

Poirot sat up suddenly in his chair. A very faint green light glowed in his eyes. He looked extraordinarily like a sleek, well-fed cat.

“One more question, M. Kettering,” he said. “Will you give me the date when you last saw your wife?”

“Let me see,” Kettering reflected. “It must have been—yes, over three weeks ago. I am afraid I can’t give you the date exactly.”

“No matter,” said Poirot drily; “that is all I wanted to know.”

“Well,” said Derek Kettering impatiently, “anything further?”

He looked towards M. Carrège. The latter sought inspiration from Poirot, and received it in a very faint shake of the head.

“No, M. Kettering,” he said politely; “no, I do not think we need trouble you any further. I wish you good morning.”

“Good morning,” said Kettering. He went out, banging the door behind him.

Poirot leaned forward and spoke sharply, as soon as the young man was out of the room.

“Tell me,” he said peremptorily, “when did you speak of these rubies to M. Kettering?”

“I have not spoken of them,” said M. Carrège. “It was only yesterday afternoon that we learnt about them from M. Van Aldin.”

“Yes; but there was a mention of them in the Comte’s letter.”

M. Carrège looked pained.

“Naturally I did not speak of that letter to M. Kettering,” he said in a shocked voice. “It would have been most indiscreet at the present juncture of affairs.”

Poirot leaned forward and tapped the table.

“Then how did he know about them?” he demanded softly. “Madame could not have told him, for he has not seen her for three weeks. It seems unlikely that either M. Van Aldin or his secretary would have mentioned them; their interviews with him have been on entirely different lines, and there has not been any hint or reference to them in the newspapers.”

He got up and took his hat and stick.

“And yet,” he murmured to himself, “our gentleman knows all about them. I wonder now, yes, I wonder!”

Eighteen

DEREK LUNCHES

Derek Kettering went straight to the Negresco, where he ordered a couple of cocktails and disposed of them rapidly; then he stared moodily out over the dazzling blue sea. He noted the passersby mechanically—a damned dull crowd, badly dressed, and painfully uninteresting; one hardly ever saw anything worthwhile nowadays. Then he corrected this last impression rapidly, as a woman placed herself at a table a little distance away from him. She was wearing a marvellous confection of orange and black, with a little hat that shaded her face. He ordered a third cocktail; again he stared out to sea, and then suddenly he started. A well-known perfume assailed his nostrils, and he looked up to see the orange-and-black lady standing beside him. He saw her face now, and recognized her. It was Mirelle. She was smiling that insolent, seductive smile he knew so well.

“Dereek!” she murmured. “You are pleased to see me, no?”

She dropped into a seat the other side of the table.

“But welcome me, then, stupid one,” she mocked.

“This is an unexpected pleasure,” said Derek. “When did you leave London?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“A day or two ago?”

“And the Parthenon?”

“I have, how do you say it?—given them the chuck!”

"Really?"

"You are not very amiable, Dereek."

"Do you expect me to be?"

Mirelle lit a cigarette and puffed at it for a few minutes before saying:

"You think, perhaps, that it is not prudent so soon?"

Derek stared at her, then he shrugged his shoulders, and remarked formally:

"You are lunching here?"

"Mais oui. I am lunching with you."

"I am exceedingly sorry," said Derek. "I have a very important engagement."

"Mon Dieu! But you men are like children," exclaimed the dancer. "But yes, it is the spoilt child that you act to me, ever since that day in London when you flung yourself out of my flat, you sulk. Ah! mais c'est inouï!"

"My dear girl," said Derek, "I really don't know what you are talking about. We agreed in London that rats desert a sinking ship, that is all that there is to be said."

In spite of his careless words, his face looked haggard and strained. Mirelle leaned forward suddenly.

"You cannot decieve me," she murmured. "I know—I know what you have done for me."

He looked up at her sharply. Some undercurrent in her voice arrested his attention. She nodded her head at him.

"Ah! have no fear; I am discreet. You are magnificent! You have a superb courage, but, all the same, it was I who gave you the idea that day, when I said to you in London that accidents sometimes happened. And you are not in danger? The police do not suspect you?”

“What the devil—?”

“Hush!”

She held up a slim olive hand with one big emerald on the little finger.

“You are right, I should not have spoken so in a public place. We will not speak of the matter again, but our troubles are ended; our life together will be wonderful—wonderful!”

Derek laughed suddenly—a harsh, disagreeable laugh.

“So the rats come back, do they? Two million makes a difference—of course it does. I ought to have known that.” He laughed again. “You will help me to spend that two million, won’t you, Mirelle? You know how, no woman better.” He laughed again.

“Hush!” cried the dancer. “What is the matter with you, Dereek? See—people are turning to stare at you.”

“Me? I will tell you what is the matter. I have finished with you, Mirelle. Do you hear? Finished!”

Mirelle did not take it as he expected her to do. She looked at him for a minute or two, and then she smiled softly.

“But what a child! You are angry—you are sore, and all because I am practical. Did I not always tell you that I adored you?”

She leaned forward.

“But I know you, Dereek. Look at me—see, it is Mirelle who speaks to you. You cannot live without her, you know it. I loved you before, I will love you a hundred times more now. I will make life wonderful for you—but wonderful. There is no one like Mirelle.”

Her eyes burned into his. She saw him grow pale and draw in his breath, and she smiled to herself contentedly. She knew her own magic and power over men.

“That is settled,” she said softly, and gave a little laugh. “And now, Dereek, will you give me lunch?”

“No.”

He drew in his breath sharply and rose to his feet.

“I am sorry, but I told you—I have got an engagement.”

“You are lunching with someone else? Bah! I don’t believe it.”

“I am lunching with that lady over there.”

He crossed abruptly to where a lady in white had just come up the steps. He addressed her a little breathlessly.

“Miss Grey, will you—will you have lunch with me? You met me at Lady Tamplin’s, if you remember.”

Katherine looked at him for a minute or two with those thoughtful grey eyes that said so much.

“Thank you,” she said, after a moment’s pause; “I should like to very much.”

Nineteen

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

The Comte de la Roche had just finished déjeuner, consisting of an omelette fines herbes, an entrecôte Bearnaise, and a savarin au rhum. Wiping his fine black moustache delicately with his table napkin, the Comte rose from the table. He passed through the salon of the villa, noting with appreciation the few objets d'art which were carelessly scattered about. The Louis XV snuff-box, the satin shoe worn by Marie Antoinette, and the other historic trifles that were part of the Comte's mise en scène. They were, he would explain to his fair visitors, heirlooms in his family. Passing through on to the terrace the Comte looked out on to the Mediterranean with an unseeing eye. He was in no mood for appreciating the beauties of scenery. A fully matured scheme had been rudely brought to naught, and his plans had to be cast afresh. Stretching himself out in a basket chair, a cigarette held between his white fingers, the Comte pondered deeply.

Presently Hipolyte, his manservant, brought out coffee and a choice of liqueurs. The Comte selected some very fine old brandy.

As the manservant was preparing to depart, the Comte arrested him with a slight gesture. Hipolyte stood respectfully to attention. His countenance was hardly a prepossessing one, but the correctitude of his demeanour went far to obliterate the fact. He was now the picture of respectful attention.

“It is possible,” said the Comte, “that in the course of the next few days various strangers may come to the house. They will endeavour to scrape acquaintance with you and with Marie. They will probably ask you various questions concerning me.”

“Yes, Monsieur le Comte.”

“Perhaps this has already happened?”

“No, Monsieur le Comte.”

“There have been no strangers about the place? You are certain?”

“There has been no one, Monsieur le Comte.”

“That is well,” said the Comte drily; “nevertheless they will come—I am sure of it. They will ask questions.”

Hipolyte looked at his master in intelligent anticipation.

The Comte spoke slowly, without looking at Hipolyte.

“As you know, I arrived here last Tuesday morning. If the police or any other inquirer should question you, do not forget that fact. I arrived on Tuesday, the 14th—not Wednesday, the 15th. You understand?”

“Perfectly, Monsieur le Comte.”

“In an affair where a lady is concerned, it is always necessary to be discreet. I feel certain, Hipolyte, that you can be discreet.”

“I can be discreet, Monsieur.”

“And Marie?”

“Marie also. I will answer for her.”

“That is well then,” murmured the Comte.

When Hipolyte had withdrawn, the Comte sipped his black coffee with a reflective air. Occasionally he frowned, once he shook his head slightly, twice he nodded it. Into the midst of these cogitations came Hipolyte once more.

“A lady, Monsieur.”

"A lady?"

The Comte was surprised. Not that a visit from a lady was an unusual thing at the Villa Marina, but at this particular moment the Comte could not think who the lady was likely to be.

"She is, I think, a lady not known to Monsieur," murmured the valet helpfully.

The Comte was more and more intrigued.

"Show her out here, Hipolyte," he commanded.

A moment later a marvellous vision in orange and black stepped out in the terrace, accompanied by a strong perfume of exotic blossoms.

"Monsieur le Comte de la Roche?"

"At your service, Mademoiselle," said the Comte, bowing.

"My name is Mirelle. You may have heard of me."

"Ah, indeed, Mademoiselle, but who has not been enchanted by the dancing of Mademoiselle Mirelle? Exquisite!"

The dancer acknowledged this compliment with a brief mechanical smile.

"My descent upon you is unceremonious," she began.

"But seat yourself, I beg of you, Mademoiselle," cried the Comte, bringing forward a chair.

Behind the gallantry of his manner he was observing her narrowly. There were very few things that the Comte did not know about women. True, his experience had not lain much in ladies of Mirelle's class, who were themselves predatory. He and the dancer were, in a sense, birds of a feather. His arts, the Comte knew, would be thrown away on Mirelle. She was a Parisienne, and a shrewd one. Nevertheless, there was one thing that the Comte could recognize infallibly when he saw it. He knew at once that he was in the presence of a very angry woman, and an angry woman, as the Comte was well aware, always says more than is prudent, and is occasionally a source of profit to a levelheaded gentleman who keeps cool.

“It is most amiable of you, Mademoiselle, to honour my poor abode thus.”

“We have mutual friends in Paris,” said Mirelle. “I have heard of you from them, but I come to see you today for another reason. I have heard of you since I came to Nice—in a different way, you understand.”

“Ah?” said the Comte softly.

“I will be brutal,” continued the dancer; “nevertheless, believe that I have your welfare at heart. They are saying in Nice, Monsieur le Comte, that you are the murderer of the English lady, Madame Kettering.”

“I!—the murderer of Madame Kettering? Bah! But how absurd!”

He spoke more languidly than indignantly, knowing that he would thus provoke her further.

“But yes,” she insisted, “it is as I tell you.”

“It amuses people to talk,” murmured the Comte indifferently. “It would be beneath me to take such wild accusations seriously.”

“You do not understand.” Mirelle bent forward, her dark eyes flashing. “It is not the idle talk of those in the street. It is the police.”

“The police—ah?”

The Comte sat up, alert once more.

Mirelle nodded her head vigorously several times.

“Yes, yes. You comprehend me—I have friends everywhere. The Prefect himself—” She left the sentence unfinished, with an eloquent shrug of the shoulders.

“Who is not indiscreet where a beautiful woman is concerned?” murmured the Count politely.

“The police believe that you killed Madame Kettering. But they are wrong.”

“Certainly they are wrong,” agreed the Comte easily.

“You say that, but you do not know the truth. I do.”

The Comte looked at her curiously.

“You know who killed Madame Kettering? Is that what you would say, Mademoiselle?”

Mirelle nodded vehemently.

“Yes.”

“Who was it?” asked the Comte sharply.

“Her husband.” She leant across to the Comte, speaking in a low voice that vibrated with anger and excitement. “It was her husband who killed her.”

The Comte leaned back in his chair. His face was a mask.

“Let me ask you, Mademoiselle—how do you know this?”

“How do I know it?” Mirelle sprang to her feet, with a laugh. “He boasted of it beforehand. He was ruined, bankrupt, dishonoured. Only the death of his wife could save him. He told me so. He travelled on the same train—but she was not to know it. Why was that, I ask you? So that he might creep upon her in the night—Ah!”—she shut her eyes—“I can see it happening. . . .”

The Count coughed.

“Perhaps—perhaps,” he murmured. “But surely, Mademoiselle, in that case he would not steal the jewels?”

“The jewels!” breathed Mirelle. “The jewels. Ah! Those rubies. . . .”

Her eyes grew misty, a faraway light in them. The Comte looked at her curiously, wondering for the hundredth time at the magical influence of precious stones on the female sex. He recalled her to practical matters.

“What do you want me to do, Mademoiselle?”

Mirelle became alert and businesslike once more.

“Surely it is simple. You will go to the police. You will say to them that M. Kettering committed this crime.”

“And if they do not believe me? If they ask for proof?” He was eyeing her closely.

Mirelle laughed softly, and drew her orange-and-black wrap closer round her.

“Send them to me, Monsieur le Comte,” she said softly; “I will give them the proof they want.”

Upon that she was gone, an impetuous whirlwind, her errand accomplished.

The Comte looked after her, his eyebrows delicately raised.

“She is in a fury,” he murmured. “What has happened now to upset her? But she shows her hand too plainly. Does she really believe that Mr. Kettering killed his wife? She would like me to believe it. She would even like the police to believe it.”

He smiled to himself. He had no intention whatsoever of going to the police. He saw various other possibilities; to judge by his smile, an agreeable vista of them.

Presently, however, his brow clouded. According to Mirelle, he was suspected by the police. That might be true or it might not. An angry woman of the type of the dancer was not likely to bother about the strict veracity of her statements. On the other hand, she might easily have obtained—inside information. In that case—his mouth set grimly—in that case he must take certain precautions.

He went into the house and questioned Hipolyte closely once more as to whether any strangers had been to the house. The valet was positive in his assurances that this was not the case. The Comte went up to his bedroom and crossed over to an old bureau that stood against the wall. He let down the lid of this, and his delicate fingers sought for a spring at the back of one of the pigeonholes. A secret drawer flew out; in it was a small brown paper package. The Comte took this out and weighed it in his hand carefully for a minute or two. Raising his hand to his head, with a slight grimace he pulled out a single hair. This he placed on the lip of the drawer and shut it carefully. Still carrying the small parcel in his hand, he went downstairs and out of the house to the garage, where stood a scarlet two-seater car. Ten minutes later he had taken the road for Monte Carlo.

He spent a few hours at the Casino, then sauntered out into the town. Presently he reentered the car and drove off in the direction of Mentone. Earlier in the afternoon he had noticed an inconspicuous grey car some little distance behind him. He noticed it again now. He smiled to himself. The road was climbing steadily upwards. The Comte's foot pressed hard on the accelerator. The little red car had been specially built to the Comte's design, and had a far more powerful engine than would have been suspected from its appearance. It shot ahead.

Presently he looked back and smiled; the grey car was following behind. Smothered in dust, the little red car leaped along the road. It was travelling now at a dangerous pace, but the Comte was a first-class driver. Now they were going down hill, twisting and curving unceasingly. Presently the car slackened speed, and finally came to a standstill before a Bureau de Poste. The Comte jumped out, lifted the lid of the tool chest, extracted the small brown paper parcel and hurried into the post office. Two minutes later he was driving once more in the direction of Mentone. When the grey car arrived there, the Comte was drinking English five o'clock tea on the terrace of one of the hotels.

Later, he drove back to Monte Carlo, dined there, and reached home once more at eleven o'clock. Hipolyte came out to meet him with a disturbed face.

“Ah! Monsieur le Comte has arrived. Monsieur le Comte did not telephone me, by any chance?”

The Comte shook his head.

“And yet at three o’clock I received a summons from Monsieur le Comte, to present myself to him at Nice, at the Negresco.”

“Really,” said the Comte; “and you went?”

“Certainly, Monsieur, but at the Negresco they knew nothing of Monsieur le Comte. He had not been there.”

“Ah,” said the Comte, “doubtless at that hour Marie was out doing her afternoon marketing?”

“That is so, Monsieur le Comte.”

“Ah, well,” said the Comte, “it is of no importance. A mistake.”

He went upstairs, smiling to himself.

Once within his own room, he bolted his door and looked sharply round. Everything seemed as usual. He opened various drawers and cupboards. Then he nodded to himself. Things had been replaced almost exactly as he had left them, but not quite. It was evident that a very thorough search had been made.

He went over to the bureau and pressed the hidden spring. The drawer flew open, but the hair was no longer where he had placed it. He nodded his head several times.

“They are excellent, our French police,” he murmured to himself —“excellent. Nothing escapes them.”

Twenty

KATHERINE MAKES A FRIEND

On the following morning Katherine and Lenox were sitting on the terrace of the Villa Marguerite. Something in the nature of a friendship was springing up between them, despite the difference in age. But for Lenox, Katherine would have found life at the Villa Marguerite quite intolerable. The Kettering case was the topic of the moment. Lady Tamplin frankly exploited her guest's connection with the affair for all it was worth. The most persistent rebuffs that Katherine could administer quite failed to pierce Lady Tamplin's self-esteem. Lenox adopted a detached attitude, seemingly amused at her mother's manoeuvres, and yet with a sympathetic understanding of Katherine's feelings. The situation was not helped by Chubby, whose naïve delight was unquenchable, and who introduced Katherine to all and sundry as:

"This is Miss Grey. You know that Blue Train business? She was in it up to the ears! Had a long talk with Ruth Kettering a few hours before the murder! Bit of luck for her, eh?"

A few remarks of this kind had provoked Katherine that morning to an unusually tart rejoinder, and when they were alone together Lenox observed in her slow drawl:

"Not used to exploitation, are you? You have a lot to learn, Katherine."

"I am sorry I lost my temper. I don't, as a rule."

"It is about time you learnt to blow off steam. Chubby is only an ass; there is no harm in him. Mother, of course, is trying, but you can lose your temper with her until Kingdom come, and it won't make any impression. She will open large, sad blue eyes at you and not care a bit."

Katherine made no reply to this filial observation, and Lenox presently went on:

“I am rather like Chubby. I delight in a good murder, and besides—well, knowing Derek makes a difference.”

Katherine nodded.

“So you lunched with him yesterday,” pursued Lenox reflectively. “Do you like him, Katherine?”

Katherine considered for a minute or two.

“I don’t know,” she said very slowly.

“He is very attractive.”

“Yes, he is attractive.”

“What don’t you like about him?”

Katherine did not reply to the question, or at any rate not directly. “He spoke of his wife’s death,” she said. “He said he would not pretend that it had been anything but a bit of most marvellous luck for him.”

“And that shocked you, I suppose,” said Lenox. She paused, and then added in rather a queer tone of voice: “He likes you, Katherine.”

“He gave me a very good lunch,” said Katherine, smiling.

Lenox refused to be sidetracked.

“I saw it the night he came here,” she said thoughtfully. “The way he looked at you; and you are not his usual type—just the opposite. Well, I suppose it is like religion—you get it at a certain age.”

“Mademoiselle is wanted at the telephone,” said Marie, appearing at the window of the salon. “M. Hercule Poirot desires to speak with her.”

“More blood and thunder. Go on, Katherine; go and dally with your detective.”

M. Hercule Poirot’s voice came neat and precise in its intonation to Katherine’s ear.

“That is Mademoiselle Grey who speaks? Bon. Mademoiselle, I have a word for you from M. Van Aldin, the father of Madame Kettering. He wishes very much to speak with you, either at the Villa Marguerite or at his hotel, whichever you prefer.”

Katherine reflected for a moment, but she decided that for Van Aldin to come to the Villa Marguerite would be both painful and unnecessary. Lady Tamplin would have hailed his advent with far too much delight. She never lost a chance to cultivate millionaires. She told Poirot that she would much rather come to Nice.

“Excellent, Mademoiselle. I will call for you myself in an auto. Shall we say in about three-quarters of an hour?”

Punctually to the moment Poirot appeared. Katherine was waiting for him, and they drove off at once.

“Well, Mademoiselle, how goes it?”

She looked at his twinkling eyes, and was confirmed in her first impression that there was something very attractive about M. Hercule Poirot.

“This is our own roman policier, is it not?” said Poirot. “I made you the promise that we should study it together. And me, I always keep my promises.”

“You are too kind,” murmured Katherine.

“Ah, you mock yourself at me; but do you want to hear the developments of the case, or do you not?”

Katherine admitted that she did, and Poirot proceeded to sketch for her a thumbnail portrait of the Comte de la Roche.

“You think he killed her,” said Katherine thoughtfully.

“That is the theory,” said Poirot guardedly.

“Do you yourself believe that?”

“I did not say so. And you, Mademoiselle, what do you think?”

Katherine shook her head.

“How should I know? I don’t know anything about those things, but I should say that—”

“Yes,” said Poirot encouragingly.

“Well—from what you say the Count does not sound the kind of man who would actually kill anybody.”

“Ah! Very good,” cried Poirot. “You agree with me; that is just what I have said.” He looked at her sharply. “But tell me, you have met Mr. Derek Kettering?”

“I met him at Lady Tamplin’s, and I lunched with him yesterday.”

“A mauvais sujet,” said Poirot, shaking his head; “but les femmes—they like that, eh?”

He twinkled at Katherine and she laughed.

“He is the kind of man one would notice anywhere,” continued Poirot. “Doubtless you observed him on the Blue Train?”

“Yes, I noticed him.”

“In the restaurant car?”

“No. I didn’t notice him at meals at all. I only saw him once—going into his wife’s compartment.”

Poirot nodded. “A strange business,” he murmured. “I believe you said you were awake, Mademoiselle, and looked out of your window at Lyons? You saw no tall dark man such as the Comte de la Roche leave the train?”

Katherine shook her head. “I don’t think I saw anyone at all,” she said. “There was a youngish lad in a cap and overcoat who got out, but I don’t think he was leaving the train, only walking up and down the platform. There was a fat Frenchman with a beard, in pyjamas and an overcoat, who wanted a cup of coffee. Otherwise, I think there were only the train attendants.”

Poirot nodded his head several times. “It is like this, you see,” he confided, “the Comte de la Roche has an alibi. An alibi, it is a very pestilential thing, and always open to the gravest suspicion. But here we are!”

They went straight up to Van Aldin’s suite, where they found Knighton. Poirot introduced him to Katherine. After a few commonplaces had been exchanged, Knighton said: “I will tell Mr. Van Aldin that Miss Grey is here.”

He went through a second door into an adjoining room. There was a low murmur of voices, and then Van Aldin came into the room and advanced towards Katherine with outstretched hand, giving her at the same time a shrewd and penetrating glance.

“I am pleased to meet you, Miss Grey,” he said simply. “I have been wanting very badly to hear what you can tell me about Ruth.”

The quiet simplicity of the millionaire’s manner appealed to Katherine strongly. She felt herself in the presence of a very genuine grief, the more real for its absence of outward sign.

He drew forward a chair.

“Sit here, will you, and just tell me all about it.”

Poirot and Knighton retired discreetly into the other room, and Katherine and Van Aldin were left alone together. She found no difficulty in her task.

Quite simply and naturally she related her conversation with Ruth Kettering, word for word as nearly as she could. He listened in silence, leaning back in his chair, with one hand shading his eyes. When she had finished he said quietly:

“Thank you, my dear.”

They both sat silent for a minute or two. Katherine felt that words of sympathy would be out of place. When the millionaire spoke, it was in a different tone:

“I am very grateful to you, Miss Grey. I think you did something to ease my poor Ruth’s mind in the last hours of her life. Now I want to ask you something. You know—M. Poirot will have told you—about the scoundrel that my poor girl had got herself mixed up with. He was the man of whom she spoke to you—the man she was going to meet. In your judgment, do you think she might have changed her mind after her conversation with you? Do you think she meant to go back on her word?”

“I can’t honestly tell you. She had certainly come to some decision, and seemed more cheerful in consequence of it.”

“She gave you no idea where she intended to meet the skunk—whether in Paris or at Hyères?”

Katherine shook her head.

“She said nothing as to that.”

“Ah!” said Van Aldin thoughtfully, “and that is the important point. Well, time will show.”

He got up and opened the door of the adjoining room. Poirot and Knighton came back.

Katherine declined the millionaire’s invitation to lunch, and Knighton went down with her and saw her into the waiting car. He returned to find Poirot and Van Aldin deep in conversation.

“If we only knew,” said the millionaire thoughtfully, “what decision Ruth came to. It might have been any of half a dozen. She might have meant to leave the train at Paris and cable to me. She may have meant to have gone on to the south of France and have an explanation with the Count there. We are in the dark—absolutely in the dark. But we have the maid’s word for it that she was both startled and dismayed at the Count’s appearance at the station in Paris. That was clearly not part of the preconceived plan. You agree with me, Knighton?”

The secretary started. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Van Aldin. I was not listening.”

“Daydreaming, eh?” said Van Aldin. “That’s not like you. I believe that girl has bowled you over.”

Knighton blushed.

“She is a remarkably nice girl,” said Van Aldin thoughtfully, “very nice. Did you happen to notice her eyes?”

“Any man,” said Knighton, “would be bound to notice her eyes.”

Twenty-one

AT THE TENNIS

Several days had elapsed. Katherine had been for a walk by herself one morning, and came back to find Lenox grinning at her expectantly.

“Your young man has been ringing you up, Katherine!”

“Who do you call my young man?”

“A new one—Rufus Van Aldin’s secretary. You seem to have made rather an impression there. You are becoming a serious breaker of hearts, Katherine. First Derek Kettering, and now this young Knighton. The funny thing is that I remember him quite well. He was in Mother’s War Hospital that she ran out here. I was only a kid of about eight at the time.”

“Was he badly wounded?”

“Shot in the leg, if I remember rightly—rather a nasty business. I think the doctors messed it up a bit. They said he wouldn’t limp or anything, but when he left here he was still completely dot and go one.”

Lady Tamplin came out and joined them.

“Have you been telling Katherine about Major Knighton?” she asked. “Such a dear fellow! Just at first I didn’t remember him—one had so many—but now it all comes back.”

“He was a bit too unimportant to be remembered before,” said Lenox. “Now that he is a secretary to an American millionaire, it is a very different matter.”

“Darling!” said Lady Tamplin in her vague reproachful voice.

“What did Major Knighton ring up about?” inquired Katherine.

“He asked if you would like to go to the tennis this afternoon. If so, he would call for you in a car. Mother and I accepted for you with empressement. Whilst you dally with a millionaire’s secretary, you might give me a chance with the millionaire, Katherine. He is about sixty, I suppose, so that he will be looking about for a nice sweet young thing like me.”

“I should like to meet Mr. Van Aldin,” said Lady Tamplin earnestly; “one has heard so much of him. Those fine rugged figures of the Western world”—she broke off—“so fascinating,” she murmured.

“Major Knighton was very particular to say it was Mr. Van Aldin’s invitation,” said Lenox. “He said it so often that I began to smell a rat. You and Knighton would make a very nice pair, Katherine. Bless you, my children.”

Katherine laughed, and went upstairs to change her clothes.

Knighton arrived soon after lunch and endured manfully Lady Tamplin’s transports of recognition.

When they were driving together towards Cannes he remarked to Katherine: “Lady Tamplin has changed wonderfully little.”

“In manner or appearance?”

“Both. She must be, I suppose, well over forty, but she is a remarkably beautiful woman still.”

“She is,” agreed Katherine.

“I am very glad that you could come today,” went on Knighton. “M. Poirot is going to be there also. What an extraordinary little man he is. Do you know him well, Miss Grey?”

Katherine shook her head. “I met him on the train on the way here. I was reading a detective novel, and I happened to say something about such things not happening in real life. Of course, I had no idea of who he was.”

“He is a very remarkable person,” said Knighton slowly, “and has done some very remarkable things. He has a kind of genius for going to the root of the matter, and right up to the end no one has any idea of what he is really thinking. I remember I was staying at a house in Yorkshire, and Lady Clanravon’s jewels were stolen. It seemed at first to be a simple robbery, but it completely baffled the local police. I wanted them to call in Hercule Poirot, and said he was the only man who could help them, but they pinned their faith to Scotland Yard.”

“And what happened?” said Katherine curiously.

“The jewels were never recovered,” said Knighton drily.

“You really do believe in him?”

“I do indeed. The Comte de la Roche is a pretty wily customer. He has wriggled out of most things. But I think he has met his match in Hercule Poirot.”

“The Comte de la Roche,” said Katherine thoughtfully; “so you really think he did it?”

“Of course.” Knighton looked at her in astonishment. “Don’t you?”

“Oh yes,” said Katherine hastily; “that is, I mean, if it was not just an ordinary train robbery.”

“It might be, of course,” agreed the other, “but it seems to me that the Comte de la Roche fits into this business particularly well.”

“And yet he has an alibi.”

“Oh, alibis!” Knighton laughed, his face broke into his attractive boyish smile.

“You confess that you read detective stories, Miss Grey. You must know that anyone who has a perfect alibi is always open to grave suspicion.”

“Do you think that real life is like that?” asked Katherine, smiling.

“Why not? Fiction is founded on fact.”

“But is rather superior to it,” suggested Katherine.

“Perhaps. Anyway, if I was a criminal I should not like to have Hercule Poirot on my track.”

“No more should I,” said Katherine, and laughed.

They were met on arrival by Poirot. As the day was warm he was attired in a white duck suit, with a white camellia in his buttonhole.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot. “I look very English, do I not?”

“You look wonderful,” said Katherine tactfully.

“You mock yourself at me,” said Poirot genially. “But no matter. Papa Poirot, he always laughs the last.”

“Where is Mr. Van Aldin?” asked Knighton.

“He will meet us at our seats. To tell you the truth, my friend, he is not too well-pleased with me. Oh, those Americans—the repose, the calm, they know it not! Mr. Van Aldin, he would that I fly myself in the pursuit of criminals through all the byways of Nice.”

“I should have thought myself that it would not have been a bad plan,” observed Knighton.

“You are wrong,” said Poirot; “in these matters one needs not energy but finesse. At the tennis one meets everyone. That is so important. Ah, there is Mr. Kettering.”

Derek came abruptly up to them. He looked reckless and angry, as though something had arisen to upset him. He and Knighton greeted each other with some frigidity. Poirot alone seemed unconscious of any sense of strain, and chatted pleasantly in a laudable attempt to put everyone at their ease. He paid little compliments.

“It is amazing, M. Kettering, how well you speak the French,” he observed —“so well that you could be taken for a Frenchman if you chose. That is a very rare accomplishment among Englishmen.”

“I wish I did,” said Katherine. “I am only too well aware that my French is of a painfully British order.”

They reached their seats and sat down, and almost immediately Knighton perceived his employer signalling to him from the other end of the court, and went off to speak to him.

“Me, I approve of that young man,” said Poirot, sending a beaming smile after the departing secretary; “and you, Mademoiselle?”

“I like him very much.”

“And you, M. Kettering?”

Some quick rejoinder was springing to Derek’s lips, but he checked it as though something in the little Belgian’s twinkling eyes had made him suddenly alert. He spoke carefully, choosing his words.

“Knighton is a very good fellow,” he said.

Just for a moment Katherine fancied that Poirot looked disappointed.

“He is a great admirer of yours, M. Poirot,” she said, and she related some of the things that Knighton had said. It amused her to see the little man plume himself like a bird, thrusting out his chest, and assuming an air of mock modesty that would have deceived no one.

“That reminds me, Mademoiselle,” he said suddenly, “I have a little matter of business I have to speak to you about. When you were sitting talking to that poor lady in the train, I think you must have dropped a cigarette case.”

Katherine looked rather astonished. “I don’t think so,” she said. Poirot drew from his pocket a cigarette case of soft blue leather, with the initial “K” on it in gold.

“No, that is not mine,” Katherine said.

“Ah, a thousand apologies. It was doubtless Madame’s own. ‘K,’ of course, stands for Kettering. We were doubtful, because she had another cigarette case in her bag, and it seemed odd that she should have two.” He turned to Derek suddenly. “You do not know, I suppose, whether this was your wife’s case or not?”

Derek seemed momentarily taken aback. He stammered a little in his reply: “I—I don’t know. I suppose so.”

“It is not yours by any chance?”

“Certainly not. If it were mine it would hardly have been in my wife’s possession.”

Poirot looked more ingenuous and childlike than ever.

“I thought perhaps you might have dropped it when you were in your wife’s compartment,” he explained guilelessly.

“I never was there. I have already told the police that a dozen times.”

“A thousand pardons,” said Poirot, with his most apologetic air. “It was Mademoiselle here who mentioned having seen you going in.”

He stopped with an air of embarrassment.

Katherine looked at Derek. His face had gone rather white, but perhaps that was her fancy. His laugh, when it came, was natural enough.

“You made a mistake, Miss Grey,” he said easily. “From what the police have told me, I gather that my own compartment was only a door or two away from that of my wife’s—though I never suspected the fact at the time.

You must have seen me going into my own compartment.” He got up quickly as he saw Van Aldin and Knighton approaching.

“I’m going to leave you now,” he announced. “I can’t stand my father-in-law at any price.”

Van Aldin greeted Katherine very courteously, but was clearly in a bad humour.

“You seem fond of watching tennis, M. Poirot,” he growled.

“It is a pleasure to me, yes,” replied Poirot placidly.

“It is as well you are in France,” said Van Aldin. “We are made of sterner stuff in the States. Business comes before pleasure there.”

Poirot did not take offence; indeed, he smiled gently and confidingly at the irate millionaire.

“Do not enrage yourself, I beg of you. Everyone his own methods. Me, I have always found it a delightful and pleasing idea to combine business and pleasure together.”

He glanced at the other two. They were deep in conversation, absorbed in each other. Poirot nodded his head in satisfaction, and then leant towards the millionaire, lowering his voice as he did so.

“It is not only for pleasure that I am here, M. Van Aldin. Observe just opposite us that tall old man—the one with the yellow face and the venerable beard.”

“Well, what of him?”

“That,” Poirot said, “is M. Papopolous.”

“A Greek, eh?”

“As you say—a Greek. He is a dealer in antiques of worldwide reputation. He has a small shop in Paris, and he is suspected by the police of being something more.”

“What?”

“A receiver of stolen goods, especially jewels. There is nothing as to the recutting and resetting of gems that he does not know. He deals with the highest in Europe and with the lowest of the riff-raff of the underworld.”

Van Aldin was looking at Poirot with suddenly awakened attention.

“Well?” he demanded, a new note in his voice.

“I ask myself,” said Poirot, “I, Hercule Poirot”—he thumped himself dramatically on the chest—“ask myself why is M. Papopolous suddenly come to Nice?”

Van Aldin was impressed. For a moment he had doubted Poirot and suspected the little man of being past his job, a poseur only. Now, in a moment, he switched back to his original opinion. He looked straight at the little detective.

“I must apologize to you, M. Poirot.”

Poirot waved the apology aside with an extravagant gesture.

“Bah!” he cried, “all that is of no importance. Now listen, M. Van Aldin; I have news for you.”

The millionaire looked sharply at him, all his interest aroused.

Poirot nodded.

“It is as I say. You will be interested. As you know, M. Van Aldin, the Comte de la Roche has been under surveillance ever since his interview with the Juge d’Instruction. The day after that, during his absence, the Villa Marina was searched by the police.”

“Well,” said Van Aldin, “did they find anything? I bet they didn’t.”

Poirot made him a little bow.

“Your acumen is not at fault. M. Van Aldin. They found nothing of an incriminating nature. It was not to be expected that they would. The Comte de la Roche, as your expressive idiom has it, was not born on the preceding day. He is an astute gentleman with great experience.”

“Well, go on,” growled Van Aldin.

“It may be, of course, that the Comte had nothing of a compromising nature to conceal. But we must not neglect the possibility. If, then, he has something to conceal, where is it? Not in his house—the police searched thoroughly. Not on his person, for he knows that he is liable to arrest at any minute. There remains—his car. As I say, he was under surveillance. He was followed on that day to Monte Carlo. From there he went by road to Mentone, driving himself. His car is a very powerful one, it outdistanced his pursuers, and for about a quarter of an hour they completely lost sight of him.”

“And during that time you think he concealed something by the roadside?” asked Van Aldin, keenly interested.

“By the roadside, no. Ca n’est pas pratique. But listen now—me, I have made a little suggestion to M. Carrège. He is graciously pleased to approve of it. In each Bureau de Poste in the neighbourhood it has been seen to that there is someone who knows the Comte de la Roche by sight. Because, you see, Monsieur, the best way of hiding a thing is by sending it away by the post.”

“Well?” demanded Van Aldin; his face was keenly alight with interest and expectation.

“Well—voilà!” With a dramatic flourish Poirot drew out from his pocket a loosely wrapped brown paper package from which the string had been removed.

“During that quarter of an hour’s interval, our good gentleman mailed this.”

“The address?” asked the other sharply.

Poirot nodded his head.

“Might have told us something, but unfortunately it does not. The package was addressed to one of these little newspaper shops in Paris where letters and parcels are kept until called for on payment of a small commission.”

“Yes, but what is inside?” demanded Van Aldin impatiently.

Poirot unwrapped the brown paper and disclosed a square cardboard box. He looked round him.

“It is a good moment,” he said quietly. “All eyes are on the tennis. Look, Monsieur!”

He lifted the lid of the box for a fraction of a second. An exclamation of utter astonishment came from the millionaire. His face turned as white as chalk.

“My God!” he breathed, “the rubies.”

He sat for a minute as though dazed. Poirot restored the box to his pocket and beamed placidly. Then suddenly the millionaire seemed to come out of his trance; he leaned across to Poirot and wrung his hand so heartily that the little man winced with pain.

“This is great,” said Van Aldin. “Great! You are the goods, M. Poirot. Once and for all, you are the goods.”

“It is nothing,” said Poirot modestly. “Order, method, being prepared for eventualities beforehand—that is all there is to it.”

“And now, I suppose, the Comte de la Roche has been arrested?” continued Van Aldin eagerly.

“No,” said Poirot.

A look of utter astonishment came over Van Aldin’s face.

“But why? What more do you want?”

“The Comte’s alibi is still unshaken.”

“But that is nonsense.”

“Yes,” said Poirot; “I rather think it is nonsense, but unfortunately we have to prove it so.”

“In the meantime he will slip through your fingers.”

Poirot shook his head very energetically.

“No,” he said, “he will not do that. The one thing the Comte cannot afford to sacrifice is his social position. At all costs he must stop and brazen it out.”

Van Aldin was still dissatisfied.

“But I don’t see—”

Poirot raised a hand. “Grant me a little moment, Monsieur. Me, I have a little idea. Many people have mocked themselves at the little ideas of Hercule Poirot—and they have been wrong.”

“Well,” said Van Aldin, “go ahead. What is this little idea?”

Poirot paused for a moment and then he said:

“I will call upon you at your hotel at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning. Until then, say nothing to anyone.”

Twenty-two

M. PAPOPOLOUS BREAKFASTS

M. Papopolous was at breakfast. Opposite him sat his daughter, Zia.

There was a knock at the sitting room door, and a chasseur entered with a card which he brought to M. Papopolous. The latter scrutinized it, raised his eyebrows, and passed it over to his daughter.

“Ah!” said M. Papopolous, scratching his left ear thoughtfully, “Hercule Poirot. I wonder now.”

Father and daughter looked at each other.

“I saw him yesterday at the tennis,” said M. Papopolous. “Zia, I hardly like this.”

“He was very useful to you once,” his daughter reminded him.

“That is true,” acknowledged M. Papopolous; “also he has retired from active work, so I hear.”

These interchanges between father and daughter had passed in their own language. Now M. Papopolous turned to the chasseur and said in French:

“Faîtes monter ce monsieur.”

A few minutes later Hercule Poirot, exquisitely attired, and swinging a cane with a jaunty air, entered the room.

“My dear M. Papopolous.”

“My dear M. Poirot.”

“And Mademoiselle Zia.” Poirot swept her a low bow.

“You will excuse us going on with our breakfast,” said M. Papopolous, pouring himself out another cup of coffee. “Your call is—ahem!—a little early.”

“It is scandalous,” said Poirot, “but you see, I am pressed.”

“Ah!” murmured M. Papopolous, “you are on an affair then?”

“A very serious affair,” said Poirot; “the death of Madame Kettering.”

“Let me see,” M. Papopolous looked innocently up at the ceiling, “that was the lady who died on the Blue Train, was it not? I saw a mention of it in the papers, but there was no suggestion of foul play.”

“In the interests of justice,” said Poirot, “it was thought best to suppress that fact.”

There was a pause.

“And in what way can I assist you, M. Poirot?” asked the dealer politely.

“Voilà,” said Poirot, “I shall come to the point.” He took from his pocket the same box that he had displayed at Cannes, and, opening it, he took out the rubies and pushed them across the table to Papopolous.

Although Poirot was watching him narrowly, not a muscle of the old man’s face moved. He took up the jewels and examined them with a kind of detached interest, then he looked across at the detective inquiringly:

“Superb, are they not?” asked Poirot.

“Quite excellent,” said M. Papopolous.

“How much should you say they are worth?”

The Greek’s face quivered a little.

“Is it really necessary to tell you, M. Poirot?” he asked.

“You are shrewd, M. Papopolous. No, it is not. They are not, for instance, worth five hundred thousand dollars.”

Papopolous laughed, and Poirot joined with him.

“As an imitation,” said Papopolous, handing them back to Poirot, “they are, as I said, quite excellent. Would it be indiscreet to ask, M. Poirot, where you came across them?”

“Not at all,” said Poirot; “I have no objection to telling an old friend like yourself. They were in the possession of the Comte de la Roche.”

M. Papopolous’ eyebrows lifted themselves eloquently.

“Indeed,” he murmured.

Poirot leaned forward and assumed his most innocent and beguiling air.

“M. Papopolous,” he said, “I am going to lay my cards upon the table. The original of these jewels was stolen from Madame Kettering on the Blue Train. Now I will say to you first this: I am not concerned with the recovery of these jewels. That is the affair of the police. I am working not for the police but for M. Van Aldin. I want to lay hands on the man who killed Madame Kettering. I am interested in the jewels only in so far as they may lead me to the man. You understand?”

The last two words were uttered with great significance. M. Papopolous, his face quite unmoved, said quietly:

“Go on.”

“It seems to me probable, Monsieur, that the jewels will change hands in Nice—may already have done so.”

“Ah!” said M. Papopolous.

He sipped his coffee reflectively, and looked a shade more noble and patriarchal than usual.

“I say to myself,” continued Poirot, with animation, “what good fortune! My old friend, M. Papopolous, is in Nice. He will aid me.”

“And how do you think I can aid you?” inquired M. Papopolous coldly.

“I said to myself, without doubt M. Papopolous is in Nice on business.

“Not at all,” said M. Papopolous, “I am here for my health—by the doctor’s orders.”

He coughed hollowly.

“I am desolated to hear it,” replied Poirot, with somewhat insincere sympathy. “But to continue. When a Russian Grand Duke, an Austrian Archduchess, or an Italian Prince wish to dispose of their family jewels—to whom do they go? To M. Papopolous, is it not? He who is famous all over the world for the discretion with which he arranges these things.”

The other bowed.

“You flatter me.”

“It is a great thing, discretion,” mused Poirot, and was rewarded by the fleeting smile which passed across the Greek’s face. “I, too, can be discreet.”

The eyes of the two men met.

Then Poirot went on speaking very slowly, and obviously picking his words with care.

“I say to myself, this: if these jewels have changed hands in Nice, M. Papopolous would have heard of it. He has knowledge of all that passes in the jewel world.”

“Ah!” said M. Papopolous, and helped himself to a croissant.

“The police, you understand,” said M. Poirot, “do not enter into the matter. It is a personal affair.”

“One hears rumours,” admitted M. Papopolous cautiously.

“Such as?” prompted Poirot.

“Is there any reason why I should pass them on?”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I think there is. You may remember, M. Papopolous, that seventeen years ago there was a certain article in your hands, left there as security by a very—er—Prominent Person. It was in your keeping and it unaccountably disappeared. You were, if I may use the English expression, in the soup.”

His eyes came gently round to the girl. She had pushed her cup and plate aside, and with both elbows on the table and her chin resting on her hands, was listening eagerly. Still keeping an eye on her he went on:

“I am in Paris at the time. You send for me. You place yourself in my hands. If I restore to you that—article, you say I shall earn your undying gratitude. Eh bien! I did restore it to you.”

A long sigh came from M. Papopolous.

“It was the most unpleasant moment of my career,” he murmured.

“Seventeen years is a long time,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “but I believe that I am right in saying, Monsieur, that your race does not forget.”

“A Greek?” murmured Papopolous, with an ironical smile.

“It was not as a Greek I meant,” said Poirot.

There was a silence, and then the old man drew himself up proudly.

“You are right, M. Poirot,” he said quietly. “I am a Jew. And, as you say, our race does not forget.”

“You will aid me then?”

“As regards the jewels, Monsieur, I can do nothing.”

The old man, as Poirot had done just now, picked his words carefully.

“I know nothing. I have heard nothing. But I can perhaps do you a good turn—that is, if you are interested in racing.”

“Under certain circumstances I might be,” said Poirot, eyeing him steadily.

“There is a horse running at Longchamps that would, I think, repay attention. I cannot say for certain, you understand; this news passed through so many hands.”

He stopped, fixing Poirot with his eyes, as though to make sure that the latter was comprehending him.

“Perfectly, perfectly,” said Poirot, nodding.

“The name of the horse,” said M. Papopolous, leaning back and joining the tips of his fingers together, “is the Marquis. I think, but I am not sure, that it is an English horse, eh, Zia?”

“I think so too,” said the girl.

Poirot got up briskly.

“I thank you, Monsieur,” he said. “It is a great thing to have what the English call a tip from the stable. Au revoir, Monsieur, and many thanks.”

He turned to the girl.

“Au revoir, Mademoiselle Zia. It seems to me but yesterday that I saw you in Paris. One would say that two years had passed at most.”

“There is a difference between sixteen and thirty-three,” said Zia ruefully.

“Not in your case,” declared Poirot gallantly. “You and your father will perhaps dine with me one night.”

“We shall be delighted,” replied Zia.

“Then we will arrange it,” declared Poirot, “and now—je me sauve.”

Poirot walked along the street humming a little tune to himself. He twirled his stick with a jaunty air, once or twice he smiled to himself quietly. He turned into the first Bureau de Poste he came to and sent off a telegram. He took some time in wording it, but it was in code and he had to call upon his memory. It purported to deal with a missing scarfpin, and was addressed to Inspector Japp, Scotland Yard.

Decoded, it was short and to the point. “Wire me everything known about man whose soubriquet is the Marquis.”

Twenty-three

A NEW THEORY

It was exactly eleven o’clock when Poirot presented himself at Van Aldin’s hotel. He found the millionaire alone.

“You are punctual, M. Poirot,” he said, with a smile, as he rose to greet the detective.

“I am always punctual,” said Poirot. “The exactitude—always do I observe it. Without order and method—”

He broke off. “Ah, but it is possible that I have said these things to you before. Let us come at once to the object of my visit.”

“Your little idea?”

“Yes, my little idea.” Poirot smiled.

“First of all, Monsieur, I should like to interview once more the maid, Ada Mason. She is here?”

“Yes, she’s here.”

“Ah!”

Van Aldin looked at him curiously. He rang the bell, and a messenger was despatched to find Mason.

Poirot greeted her with his usual politeness, which was never without effect on that particular class.

“Good afternoon, Mademoiselle,” he said cheerfully. “Be seated, will you not, if Monsieur permits.”

“Yes, yes, sit down, my girl,” said Van Aldin.

“Thank you, sir,” said Mason primly, and she sat down on the extreme edge of a chair. She looked bonier and more acid than ever.

“I have come to ask you yet more questions,” said Poirot. “We must get to the bottom of this affair. Always I return to the question of the man in the train. You have been shown the Comte de la Roche. You say that it is possible he was the man, but you are not sure.”

“As I told you, sir, I never saw the gentleman’s face. That is what makes it so difficult.”

Poirot beamed and nodded.

“Precisely, exactly. I comprehend well the difficulty. Now, Mademoiselle, you have been in the service of Madame Kettering two months, you say. During that time, how often did you see your master?”

Mason reflected a minute or two, and then said:

“Only twice, sir.”

“And was that near to, or far away?”

“Well once, sir, he came to Curzon Street. I was upstairs, and I looked over the banisters and saw him in the hall below. I was a bit curious like, you understand, knowing the way things—er—were.” Mason finished up with her discreet cough.

“And the other time?”

“I was in the Park, sir, with Annie—one of the housemaids, sir, and she pointed out the master to me walking with a foreign lady.”

Again Poirot nodded.

"Now listen, Mason, this man whom you saw in the carriage talking to your mistress at the Gare de Lyon, how do you know it was not your master?"

"The master, sir? Oh, I don't think it could have been."

"But you are not sure," Poirot persisted.

"Well—I never thought of it, sir."

Mason was clearly upset at the idea.

"You have heard that your master was also on the train. What more natural than that it should be he who came along the corridor?"

"But the gentleman who was talking to the mistress must have come from outside, sir. He was dressed for the street. In an overcoat and soft hat."

"Just so, Mademoiselle, but reflect a minute. The train has just arrived at the Gare de Lyon. Many of the passengers promenade themselves upon the quay. Your mistress was about to do so, and for that purpose had doubtless put on her fur coat, eh?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Mason.

"Your master, then, does the same. The train is heated, but outside in the station it is cold. He puts on his overcoat and his hat and he walks along beside the train, and looking up at the lighted windows he suddenly sees Madame Kettering. Until then he has had no idea that she was on the train. Naturally, he mounts the carriage and goes to her compartment. She gives an exclamation of surprise at seeing him and quickly shuts the door between the two compartments since it is possible that their conversation may be of a private nature."

He leaned back in his chair and watched the suggestion slowly take effect. No one knew better than Hercule Poirot that the class to which Mason belongs cannot be hurried. He must give her time to get rid of her own preconceived ideas. At the end of three minutes she spoke:

"Well, of course, sir, it might be so. I never thought of it that way. The master is tall and dark, and just about that build. It was seeing the hat and coat that made me say it was a gentleman from outside. Yes, it might have been the master. I would not like to say either way I'm sure."

"Thank you very much, Mademoiselle. I shall not require you any further. Ah, just one thing more." He took from his pocket the cigarette case he had already shown to Katherine. "Is that your mistress's case?" he said to Mason.

"No, sir, it is not the mistress's—at least—"

She looked suddenly startled. An idea was clearly working its way to the forefront of her mind.

"Yes?" said Poirot encouragingly.

"I think, sir—I can't be sure, but I think—it is a case that the mistress bought to give to the master."

"Ah," said Poirot in a noncommittal manner.

"But whether she ever did give it to him or not, I can't say, of course."

"Precisely," said Poirot, "precisely. That is all, I think, Mademoiselle. I wish you good afternoon."

Ada Mason retired discreetly, closing the door noiselessly behind her.

Poirot looked across at Van Aldin, a faint smile upon his face. The millionaire looked thunderstruck.

"You think—you think it was Derek?" he queried, "but—everything points the other way. Why, the Count has actually been caught red-handed with the jewels on him."

"No."

"But you told me—"

“What did I tell you?”

“That story about the jewels. You showed them to me.”

“No.”

Van Aldin stared at him.

“You mean to say you didn’t show them to me?”

“No.”

“Yesterday—at the tennis?”

“No.”

“Are you crazy, M. Poirot, or am I?”

“Neither of us is crazy,” said the detective. “You ask me a question; I answer it. You say have I not shown you the jewels yesterday? I reply—no. What I showed you, M. Van Aldin, was a first-class imitation, hardly to be distinguished except by an expert from the real ones.”

Twenty-four

POIROT GIVES ADVICE

It took the millionaire some few minutes to take the thing in. He stared at Poirot as though dumbfounded. The little Belgian nodded at him gently.

“Yes,” he said, “it alters the position, does it not?”

“Imitation!”

He leaned forward.

“All along, M. Poirot, you have had this idea? All along this is what you have been driving at? You never believed that the Comte de la Roche was the murderer?”

“I have had doubts,” said Poirot quietly. “I said as much to you. Robbery with violence and murder”—he shook his head energetically—“no, it is difficult to picture. It does not harmonize with the personality of the Comte de la Roche.”

“But you believe that he meant to steal the rubies?”

“Certainly. There is no doubt as to that. See, I will recount to you the affair as I see it. The Comte knew of the rubies and he laid his plans accordingly. He made up a romantic story of a book he was writing, so as to induce your daughter to bring them with her. He provided himself with an exact duplicate. It is clear, is it not, that substitution is what he was after. Madame, your daughter, was not an expert on jewels. It would probably be a long time before she discovered what had occurred. When she did so—well—I do not think she would prosecute the Comte. Too much would come out. He would have in his possession various letters of hers. Oh yes, a very safe scheme from the Comte’s point of view—one that he has probably carried out before.”

“It seems clear enough, yes,” said Van Aldin musingly.

“It accords with the personality of the Comte de la Roche,” said Poirot.

“Yes, but now—” Van Aldin looked searchingly at the other. “What actually happened? Tell me that, M. Poirot.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“It is quite simple,” he said; “someone stepped in ahead of the Comte.”

There was a long pause.

Van Aldin seemed to be turning things over in his mind. When he spoke it was without beating about the bush.

“How long have you suspected my son-in-law, M. Poirot?”

“From the very first. He had the motive and the opportunity. Everyone took for granted that the man in Madame’s compartment in Paris was the Comte de la Roche. I thought so, too. Then you happened to mention that you had once mistaken the Comte for your son-in-law. That told me that they were of the same height and build, and alike in colouring. It put some curious ideas in my head. The maid had only been with your daughter a short time. It was unlikely that she would know Mr. Kettering well by sight, since he had not been living in Curzon Street; also the man was careful to keep his face turned away.”

“You believe he—murdered her?” said Van Aldin hoarsely.

Poirot raised a hand quickly.

“No, no, I did not say that—but it is a possibility—a very strong possibility. He was in a tight corner, a very tight corner, threatened with ruin. This was the one way out.”

"But why take the jewels?"

"To make the crime appear an ordinary one committed by train robbers. Otherwise suspicion might have fallen on him straight away."

"If that is so, what has he done with the rubies?"

"That remains to be seen. There are several possibilities. There is a man in Nice who may be able to help, the man I pointed out at the tennis."

He rose to his feet and Van Aldin rose also and laid his hand on the little man's shoulder. His voice when he spoke was harsh with emotion.

"Find Ruth's murderer for me," he said, "that is all I ask."

Poirot drew himself up.

"Leave it in the hands of Hercule Poirot," he said superbly; "have no fears. I will discover the truth."

He brushed a speck of fluff from his hat, smiled reassuringly at the millionaire, and left the room. Nevertheless, as he went down the stairs some of the confidence faded from his face.

"It is all very well," he murmured to himself, "but there are difficulties. Yes, there are great difficulties." As he was passing out of the hotel he came to a sudden halt. A car had drawn up in front of the door. In it was Katherine Grey, and Derek Kettering was standing beside it talking to her earnestly. A minute or two later the car drove off and Derek remained standing on the pavement looking after it. The expression on his face was an odd one. He gave a sudden impatient gesture of the shoulders, sighed deeply, and turned to find Hercule Poirot standing at his elbow. In spite of himself he started. The two men looked at each other. Poirot steadily and unwaveringly and Derek with a kind of lighthearted defiance. There was a sneer behind the easy mockery of his tone when he spoke, raising his eyebrows slightly as he did so.

"Rather a dear, isn't she?" he asked easily.

His manner was perfectly natural.

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “that describes Mademoiselle Katherine very well. It is very English, that phrase there, and Mademoiselle Katherine, she also is very English.”

Derek remained perfectly still without answering.

“And yet she is sympathique, is it not so?”

“Yes,” said Derek; “there are not many like her.”

He spoke softly, almost as though to himself. Poirot nodded significantly. Then he leant towards the other and spoke in a different tone, a quiet, grave tone that was new to Derek Kettering.

“You will pardon an old man, Monsieur, if he says to you something that you may consider impertinent. There is one of your English proverbs that I would quote to you. It says that ‘It is well to be off with the old love, before being on with the new.’ ”

Kettering turned on him angrily.

“What the devil do you mean?”

“You enrage yourself at me,” said Poirot placidly. “I expected as much. As to what I mean—I mean, Monsieur, that there is a second car with a lady in it. If you turn your head you will see her.”

Derek spun round. His face darkened with anger.

“Mirelle, damn her!” he muttered. “I will soon—”

Poirot arrested the movement he was about to make.

“Is it wise what you are about to do there?” he asked warningly. His eyes shone softly with a green light in them. But Derek was past noticing the warning signs. In his anger he was completely off his guard.

“I have broken with her utterly, and she knows it,” cried Derek angrily.

“You have broken with her, yes, but has she broken with you?”

Derek gave a sudden harsh laugh.

“She won’t break with two million pounds if she can help it,” he murmured brutally; “trust Mirelle for that.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

“You have the outlook cynical,” he murmured.

“Have I?” There was no mirth in his sudden wide smile. “I have lived in the world long enough, M. Poirot, to know that all women are pretty much alike.” His face softened suddenly. “All save one.”

He met Poirot’s gaze defiantly. A look of alertness crept into his eyes, then faded again. “That one,” he said, and jerked his head in the direction of Cap Martin.

“Ah!” said Poirot.

This quiescence was well calculated to provoke the impetuous temperament of the other.

“I know what you are going to say,” said Derek rapidly, “the kind of life I have led, the fact that I am not worthy of her. You will say that I have no right to think even of such a thing. You will say that it is not a case of giving a dog a bad name—I know that it is not decent to be speaking like this with my wife dead only a few days, and murdered at that.”

He paused for breath, and Poirot took advantage of the pause to remark in his plaintive tone:

“But, indeed, I have not said anything at all.”

“But you will.”

“Eh?” said Poirot.

“You will say that I have no earthly chance of marrying Katherine.”

“No,” said Poirot, “I would not say that. Your reputation is bad, yes, but with women—never does that deter them. If you were a man of excellent character, of strict morality who had done nothing that he should not do, and—possibly everything that he should do—eh bien! then I should have grave doubts of your success. Moral worth, you understand, it is not romantic. It is appreciated, however, by widows.”

Derek Kettering stared at him, then he swung round on his heel and went up to the waiting car.

Poirot looked after him with some interest. He saw the lovely vision lean out of the car and speak.

Derek Kettering did not stop. He lifted his hat and passed straight on.

“Ca y est,” said M. Hercule Poirot, “it is time, I think, that I return chez moi.”

He found an imperturbable George pressing trousers.

“A pleasant day, Georges, somewhat fatiguing, but not without interest,” he said.

George received these remarks in his usual wooden fashion.

“Indeed, sir.”

“The personality of a criminal, Georges, is an interesting matter. Many murderers are men of great personal charm.”

“I always heard, sir, that Dr. Crippen was a pleasant-spoken gentleman. And yet he cut up his wife like so much mincemeat.”

“Your instances are always apt, Georges.”

The valet did not reply, and at that moment the telephone rang. Poirot took up the receiver.

“ ’Allo—’allo—yes, yes, it is Hercule Poirot who speaks.”

“This is Knighton. Will you hold the line a minute, M. Poirot. Mr. Van Aldin would like to speak to you.”

There was a moment’s pause, then the millionaire’s voice came through.

“Is that you, M. Poirot? I just wanted to tell you that Mason came to me now of her own accord. She has been thinking it over, and she says that she is almost certain that the man at Paris was Derek Kettering. There was something familiar about him at the time, she says, but at the minute she could not place it. She seems pretty certain now.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “thank you, M. Van Aldin. That advances us.”

He replaced the receiver, and stood for a minute or two with a very curious smile on his face. George had to speak to him twice before obtaining an answer.

“Eh?” said Poirot. “What is that that you say to me?”

“Are you lunching here, sir, or are you going out?”

“Neither,” said Poirot. “I shall go to bed and take a tisane. The expected has happened, and when the expected happens, it always causes me emotion.”

Twenty-five

DEFIANCE

As Derek Kettering passed the car, Mirelle leant out.

“Dereek—I must speak to you for a moment—”

But, lifting his hat, Derek passed straight on without stopping.

When he got back to his hotel, the concierge detached himself from his wooden pen and accosted him.

“A gentleman is waiting to see you, Monsieur.”

“Who is it?” asked Derek.

“He did not give his name, Monsieur, but he said his business with you was important, and that he would wait.”

“Where is he?”

“In the little salon, Monsieur. He preferred it to the lounge, he said, as being more private.”

Derek nodded, and turned his steps in that direction.

The small salon was empty except for the visitor, who rose and bowed with easy foreign grace as Derek entered. As it chanced, Derek had only seen the Comte de la Roche once, but found no difficulty in recognizing that aristocratic nobleman, and he frowned angrily. Of all the consummate impertinence!

“The Comte de la Roche, is it not?” he said. “I am afraid you have wasted your time in coming here.”

“I hope not,” said the Comte agreeably. His white teeth glittered.

The Comte’s charm of manner was usually wasted on his own sex. All men, without exception, disliked him heartily. Derek Kettering was already conscious of a distinct longing to kick the Count bodily out of the room. It was only the realization that scandal would be unfortunate just at present that restrained him. He marvelled anew that Ruth could have cared, as she certainly had, for this fellow. A bounder, and worse than a bounder. He looked with distaste at the Count’s exquisitely manicured hands.

“I called,” said the Comte, “on a little matter of business. It would be advisable, I think, for you to listen to me.”

Again Derek felt strongly tempted to kick him out, but again he refrained. The hint of a threat was not lost upon him, but he interpreted it in his own way. There were various reasons why it would be better to hear what the Comte had to say.

He sat down and drummed impatiently with his fingers on the table.

“Well,” he said sharply, “what is it?”

It was not the Comte’s way to come out into the open at once.

“Allow me, Monsieur, to offer you my condolences on your recent bereavement.”

“If I have any impertinence from you,” said Derek quietly, “you go out by that window.”

He nodded his head towards the window beside the Comte, and the latter moved uneasily.

“I will send my friends to you, Monsieur, if that is what you desire,” he said haughtily.

Derek laughed.

“A duel, eh? My dear Count, I don’t take you seriously enough for that. But I should take a good deal of pleasure in kicking you down the Promenade des Anglais.”

The Comte was not at all anxious to take offence. He merely raised his eyebrows and murmured:

“The English are barbarians.”

“Well,” said Derek, “what is it you have to say to me?”

“I will be frank,” said the Comte, “I will come immediately to the point. That will suit us both, will it not?”

Again he smiled in his agreeable fashion.

“Go on,” said Derek curtly.

The Comte looked at the ceiling, joined the tips of his fingers together, and murmured softly:

“You have come into a lot of money, Monsieur.”

“What the devil has that got to do with you?”

The Comte drew himself up.

“Monsieur, my name is tarnished! I am suspected—accused—of foul crime.”

“The accusation does not come from me,” said Derek coldly; “as an interested party I have not expressed any opinion.”

“I am innocent,” said the Comte. “I swear before heaven”—he raised his hand to heaven—“that I am innocent.”

“M. Carrège is, I believe, the Juge d’Instruction in charge of the case,” hinted Derek politely.

The Comte took no notice.

“Not only am I unjustly suspected of a crime that I did not commit, but I am also in serious need of money.”

He coughed softly and suggestively.

Derek rose to his feet.

“I was waiting for that,” he said softly; “you blackmailing brute! I will not give you a penny. My wife is dead, and no scandal that you can make can touch her now. She wrote you foolish letters, I daresay. If I were to buy them from you for a round sum at this minute, I am pretty certain that you would manage to keep one or two back; and I will tell you this, M. de la Roche, blackmailing is an ugly word both in England and France. That is my answer to you. Good afternoon.”

“One moment”—the Comte stretched out a hand as Derek was turning to leave the room. “You are mistaken, Monsieur. You are completely mistaken. I am, I hope, a ‘gentleman.’ ” Derek laughed. “Any letters that a lady might write to me I should hold sacred.” He flung back his head with a beautiful air of nobility. “The proposition that I was putting before you was of quite a different nature. I am, as I said, extremely short of money, and my conscience might impel me to go to the police with certain information.”

Derek came slowly back into the room.

“What do you mean?”

The Comte’s agreeable smile flashed forth once more.

“Surely it is not necessary to go into details,” he purred. “Seek whom the crime benefits, they say, don’t they? As I said just now, you have come into a lot of money lately.”

Derek laughed.

“If that is all—” he said contemptuously.

But the Comte was shaking his head.

“But it is not all, my dear sir. I should not come to you unless I had much more precise and detailed information than that. It is not agreeable, Monsieur, to be arrested and tried for murder.”

Derek came close up to him. His face expressed such furious anger that involuntarily the Comte drew back a pace or two.

“Are you threatening me?” the young man demanded angrily.

“You shall hear nothing more of the matter,” the Comte assured him.

“Of all the colossal bluffs that I have ever struck—”

The Comte raised a white hand.

“You are wrong. It is not a bluff. To convince you I will tell you this. My information was obtained from a certain lady. It is she who holds the irrefutable proof that you committed the murder.”

“She? Who?”

“Mademoiselle Mirelle.”

Derek drew back as though struck.

“Mirelle,” he muttered.

The Comte was quick to press what he took to be his advantage.

“A bagatelle of one hundred thousand francs,” he said. “I ask no more.”

“Eh?” said Derek absently.

“I was saying, Monsieur, that a bagatelle of one hundred thousand francs would satisfy my—conscience.”

Derek seemed to recollect himself. He looked earnestly at the Comte.

“You would like my answer now?”

“If you please, Monsieur.”

“Then here it is. You can go to the devil. See?”

Leaving the Comte too astonished to speak, Derek turned on his heel and swung out of the room.

Once out of the hotel he hailed a taxi and drove to Mirelle’s hotel. On inquiring, he learned that the dancer had just come in. Derek gave the concierge his card.

“Take this up to Mademoiselle and ask if she will see me.”

A very brief interval elapsed, and then Derek was bidden to follow a chasseur.

A wave of exotic perfume assailed Derek’s nostrils as he stepped over the threshold of the dancer’s apartments. The room was filled with carnations, orchids, and mimosa. Mirelle was standing by the window in a peignoir of foamy lace.

She came towards him, her hands outstretched.

“Dereek—you have come to me. I knew you would.”

He put aside the clinging arms and looked down on her sternly.

“Why did you send the Comte de la Roche to me?”

She looked at him in astonishment, which he took to be genuine.

“I? Send the Comte de la Roche to you? But for what?”

“Apparently—for blackmail,” said Derek grimly.

Again she stared. Then suddenly she smiled and nodded her head.

“Of course. It was to be expected. It is what he would do, ce type là. I might have known it. No, indeed, Dereek, I did not send him.”

He looked at her piercingly, as though seeking to read her mind.

“I will tell you,” said Mirelle. “I am ashamed, but I will tell you. The other day, you comprehend, I was mad with rage, quite mad”—she made an eloquent gesture. “My temperament, it is not a patient one. I want to be revenged on you, and so I go to the Comte de la Roche, and I tell him to go to the police and say so and so, and so and so. But have no fear, Dereek. Not completely did I lose my head; the proof rests with me alone. The police can do nothing without my word, you understand? And now—now?”

She nestled up close to him, looking at him with melting eyes.

He thrust her roughly away from him. She stood there, her breast heaving, her eyes narrowing to a catlike slit.

“Be careful, Dereek, be very careful. You have come back to me, have you not?”

“I shall never come back to you,” said Derek steadily.

“Ah!”

More than ever the dancer looked like a cat. Her eyelids flickered.

“So there is another woman? The one with whom you lunched that day. Eh! am I right?”

“I intend to ask that lady to marry me. You might as well know.”

“That prim Englishwoman! Do you think that I will support that for one moment? Ah, no.” Her beautiful lithe body quivered. “Listen, Dereek, do you remember that conversation we had in London? You said the only thing that could save you was the death of your wife. You regretted that she was so healthy. Then the idea of an accident came to your brain. And more than an accident.”

“I suppose,” said Derek contemptuously, “that it was this conversation that you repeated to the Comte de la Roche.”

Mirelle laughed.

“Am I a fool? Could the police do anything with a vague story like that? See—I will give you a last chance. You shall give up this Englishwoman. You shall return to me. And then, chéri, never, never will I breathe—”

“Breathe what?”

She laughed softly. “You thought no one saw you—”

“What do you mean?”

“As I say, you thought no one saw you—but I saw you, Dereek, mon ami; I saw you coming out of the compartment of Madame your wife just before the train got into Lyons that night. And I know more than that. I know that when you came out of her compartment she was dead.”

He stared at her. Then, like a man in a dream, he turned very slowly and went out of the room, swaying slightly as he walked.

Twenty-six

A WARNING

"And so it is," said Poirot, "that we are the good friends and have no secrets from each other."

Katherine turned her head to look at him. There was something in his voice, some undercurrent of seriousness, which she had not heard before.

They were sitting in the gardens of Monte Carlo. Katherine had come over with her friends, and they had run into Knighton and Poirot almost immediately on arrival. Lady Tamplin had seized upon Knighton and had overwhelmed him with reminiscences, most of which Katherine had a faint suspicion were invented. They had moved away together, Lady Tamplin with her hand on the young man's arm. Knighton had thrown a couple of glances back over his shoulder, and Poirot's eyes twinkled a little as he saw them.

"Of course we are friends," said Katherine.

"From the beginning we have been sympathetic to each other," mused Poirot.

"When you told me that a 'roman policier' occurs in real life."

"And I was right, was I not?" he challenged her, with an emphatic forefinger. "Here we are, plunged in the middle of one. That is natural for me—it is my métier—but for you it is different. Yes," he added in a reflective tone, "for you it is different."

She looked sharply at him. It was as though he were warning her, pointing out to her some menace that she had not seen.

“Why do you say that I am in the middle of it? It is true that I had that conversation with Mrs. Kettering just before she died, but now—now all that is over. I am not connected with the case any more.”

“Ah, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle, can we ever say, ‘I have finished with this or that?’ ”

Katherine turned defiantly round to face him.

“What is it?” she asked. “You are trying to tell me something—to convey it to me rather. But I am not clever at taking hints. I would much rather that you said anything you have to say straight out.”

Poirot looked at her sadly. “Ah, mais c’est anglais ça,” he murmured, “everything in black and white, everything clear-cut and well defined. But life, it is not like that, Mademoiselle. There are the things that are not yet, but which cast their shadow before.”

He dabbed his brow with a very large silk pocket handkerchief and murmured:

“Ah, but it is that I become poetical. Let us, as you say, speak only of facts. And, speaking of facts, tell me what you think of Major Knighton.”

“I like him very much indeed,” said Katherine warmly; “he is quite delightful.”

Poirot sighed.

“What is the matter?” asked Katherine.

“You reply so heartily,” said Poirot. “If you had said in an indifferent voice, ‘Oh, quite nice,’ eh bien, do you know I should have been better pleased.”

Katherine did not answer. She felt slightly uncomfortable. Poirot went on dreamily:

“And yet, who knows? With les femmes, they have so many ways of concealing what they feel—and heartiness is perhaps as good a way as any other.”

He sighed.

“I don’t see—” began Katherine.

He interrupted her.

“You do not see why I am being so impertinent, Mademoiselle? I am an old man, and now and then—not very often—I come across someone whose welfare is dear to me. We are friends, Mademoiselle. You have said so yourself. And it is just this—I should like to see you happy.”

Katherine stared very straight in front of her. She had a cretonne sunshade with her, and with its point she traced little designs in the gravel at her feet.

“I have asked you a question about Major Knighton, now I will ask you another. Do you like Mr. Derek Kettering?”

“I hardly know him,” said Katherine.

“That is not an answer, that.”

“I think it is.”

He looked at her, struck by something in her tone. Then he nodded his head gravely and slowly.

“Perhaps you are right, Mademoiselle. See you, I who speak to you have seen much of the world, and I know that there are two things which are true. A good man may be ruined by his love for a bad woman—but the other way holds good also. A bad man may equally be ruined by his love for a good woman.”

Katherine looked up sharply.

“When you say ruined—”

“I mean from his point of view. One must be wholehearted in crime as in everything else.”

“You are trying to warn me,” said Katherine in a low voice. “Against whom?”

“I cannot look into your heart, Mademoiselle; I do not think you would let me if I could. I will just say this. There are men who have a strange fascination for women.”

“The Comte de la Roche,” said Katherine, with a smile.

“There are others—more dangerous than the Comte de la Roche. They have qualities that appeal—recklessness, daring, audacity. You are fascinated, Mademoiselle; I see that, but I think that it is no more than that. I hope so. This man of whom I speak, the emotion he feels is genuine enough, but all the same—”

“Yes?”

He got up and stood looking down at her. Then he spoke in a low, distinct voice:

“You could, perhaps, love a thief, Mademoiselle, but not a murderer.”

He wheeled sharply away on that and left her sitting there.

He heard the little gasp she gave and paid no attention. He had said what he meant to say. He left her there to digest that last unmistakable phrase.

Derek Kettering, coming out of the Casino into the sunshine, saw her sitting alone on the bench and joined her.

“I have been gambling,” he said, with a light laugh, “gambling unsuccessfully. I have lost everything—everything, that is, that I have with me.”

Katherine looked at him with a troubled face. She was aware at once of something new in his manner, some hidden excitement that betrayed itself in a hundred different infinitesimal signs.

“I should think you were always a gambler. The spirit of gambling appeals to you.”

“Every day and in every way a gambler? You are about right. Don’t you find something stimulating in it? To risk all on one throw—there is nothing like it.”

Calm and stolid as she believed herself to be, Katherine felt a faint answering thrill.

“I want to talk to you,” went on Derek, “and who knows when I may have another opportunity? There is an idea going about that I murdered my wife—no, please don’t interrupt. It is absurd, of course.” He paused for a minute or two, then went on, speaking more deliberately. “In dealing with the police and Local Authorities here I have had to pretend to—well—a certain decency. I prefer not to pretend with you. I meant to marry money. I was on the lookout for money when I first met Ruth Van Aldin. She had the look of a slim Madonna about her, and—I—well—I made all sorts of good resolutions—and was bitterly disillusioned. My wife was in love with another man when she married me. She never cared for me in the least. Oh, I am not complaining; the thing was a perfectly respectable bargain. She wanted Leconbury and I wanted money. The trouble arose simply through Ruth’s American blood. Without caring a pin for me, she would have liked me to be continually dancing attendance. Time and again she as good as told me that she had bought me and that I belonged to her. The result was that I behaved abominably to her. My father-in-law will tell you that, and he is quite right. At the time of Ruth’s death, I was faced with absolute disaster.” He laughed suddenly. “One is faced with absolute disaster when one is up against a man like Rufus Van Aldin.”

“And then?” asked Katherine in a low voice.

“And then,” Derek shrugged his shoulders, “Ruth was murdered—very providentially.”

He laughed, and the sound of his laugh hurt Katherine. She winced.

“Yes,” said Derek, “that wasn’t in very good taste. But it is quite true. Now I am going to tell you something more. From the very first moment I saw you I knew you were the only woman in the world for me. I was—afraid of you. I thought you might bring me bad luck.”

“Bad luck?” said Katherine sharply.

He stared at her. “Why do you repeat it like that? What have you got in your mind?”

“I was thinking of things that people have said to me.”

Derek grinned suddenly. “They will say a lot to you about me, my dear, and most of it will be true. Yes, and worse things too—things that I shall never tell you. I have been a gambler always—and I have taken some long odds. I shan’t confess to you now or at any other time. The past is done with. There is one thing I do wish you to believe. I swear to you solemnly that I did not kill my wife.”

He said the words earnestly enough, yet there was somehow a theatrical touch about them. He met her troubled gaze and went on:

“I know. I lied the other day. It was my wife’s compartment I went into.”

“Ah,” said Katherine.

“It’s difficult to explain just why I went in, but I’ll try. I did it on an impulse. You see, I was more or less spying on my wife. I kept out of sight on the train. Mirelle had told me that my wife was meeting the Comte de la Roche in Paris. Well, as far as I had seen, that was not so. I felt ashamed, and I thought suddenly that it would be a good thing to have it out with her once and for all, so I pushed open the door and went in.”

He paused.

“Yes,” said Katherine gently.

“Ruth was lying on the bunk asleep—her face was turned away from me—I could only see the back of her head. I could have woken her up, of course.

But suddenly I felt a reaction. What, after all, was there to say that we hadn't both of us said a hundred times before? She looked so peaceful lying there. I left the compartment as quietly as I could."

"Why lie about it to the police?" asked Katherine.

"Because I'm not a complete fool. I've realized from the beginning that, from the point of view of motive, I'm the ideal murderer. If I once admitted that I had been in her compartment just before she was murdered, I'd do for myself once and for all."

"I see."

Did she see? She could not have told herself. She was feeling the magnetic attraction of Derek's personality, but there was something in her that resisted, that held back. . . .

"Katherine—"

"I—"

"You know that I care for you. Do—do you care for me?"

"I—I don't know."

Weakness there. Either she knew or she did not know. If—if only—

She cast a look round desperately as though seeking something that would help her. A soft colour rose in her cheeks as a tall fair man with a limp came hurrying along the path towards them—Major Knighton.

There was relief and an unexpected warmth in her voice as she greeted him.

Derek stood up, scowling, his face black as a thundercloud.

"Lady Tamplin having a flutter?" he said easily. "I must join her and give her the benefit of my system."

He swung round on his heel and left them together. Katherine sat down again. Her heart was beating rapidly and unevenly, but as she sat there, talking commonplaces to the quiet, rather shy man beside her, her self-command came back.

Then she realized with a shock that Knighton also was laying bare his heart, much as Derek had done, but in a very different manner.

He was shy and stammering. The words came haltingly with no eloquence to back them.

“From the first moment I saw you—I—I ought not to have spoken so soon—but Mr. Van Aldin may leave here any day, and I might not have another chance. I know you can’t care for me so soon—that is impossible. I daresay it is presumption anyway on my part. I have private means, but not very much—no, please don’t answer now. I know what your answer would be. But in case I went away suddenly I just wanted you to know—that I care.”

She was shaken—touched. His manner was so gentle and appealing.

“There’s one thing more. I just wanted to say that if—if you are ever in trouble, anything that I can do—”

He took her hand in his, held it tightly for a minute, then dropped it and walked rapidly away towards the Casino without looking back.

Katherine sat perfectly still, looking after him. Derek Kettering—Richard Knighton—two men so different—so very different. There was something kind about Knighton, kind and trustworthy. As to Derek—

Then suddenly Katherine had a very curious sensation. She felt that she was no longer sitting alone on the seat in the Casino gardens, but that someone was standing beside her, and that that someone was the dead woman, Ruth Kettering. She had a further impression that Ruth wanted—badly—to tell her something. The impression was so curious, so vivid, that it could not be driven away. She felt absolutely certain that the spirit of Ruth Kettering was trying to convey something of vital importance to her. The impression faded. Katherine got up, trembling a little. What was it that Ruth Kettering had wanted so badly to say?

Twenty-seven

INTERVIEW WITH MIRELLE

When Knighton left Katherine he went in search of Hercule Poirot, whom he found in the Rooms, jauntily placing the minimum stake on the even numbers. As Knighton joined him, the number thirty-three turned up, and Poirot's stake was swept away.

"Bad luck!" said Knighton; "are you going to stake again?"

Poirot shook his head.

"Not at present."

"Do you feel the fascination of gambling?" asked Knighton curiously.

"Not at roulette."

Knighton shot a swift glance at him. His own face became troubled. He spoke haltingly, with a touch of deference.

"I wonder, are you busy, M. Poirot? There is something I would like to ask you about."

"I am at your disposal. Shall we go outside? It is pleasant in the sunshine."

They strolled out together, and Knighton drew a deep breath.

"I love the Riviera," he said. "I came here first twelve years ago, during the War, when I was sent to Lady Tamplin's Hospital. It was like Paradise, coming from Flanders to this."

"It must have been," said Poirot.

“How long ago the War seems now!” mused Knighton.

They walked on in silence for some little way.

“You have something on your mind?” said Poirot.

Knighton looked at him in some surprise.

“You are quite right,” he confessed. “I don’t know how you knew it, though.”

“It showed itself only too plainly,” said Poirot drily.

“I did not know that I was so transparent.”

“It is my business to observe the physiognomy,” the little man explained, with dignity.

“I will tell you, M. Poirot. You have heard of this dancer woman—Mirelle?”

“She who is the chère amie of M. Derek Kettering?”

“Yes, that is the one; and, knowing this, you will understand that Mr. Van Aldin is naturally prejudiced against her. She wrote to him, asking for an interview. He told me to dictate a curt refusal, which of course I did. This morning she came to the hotel and sent up her card, saying that it was urgent and vital that she should see Mr. Van Aldin at once.”

“You interest me,” said Poirot.

“Mr. Van Aldin was furious. He told me what message to send down to her. I ventured to disagree with him. It seemed to me both likely and probable that this woman Mirelle might give us valuable information. We know that she was on the Blue Train, and she may have seen or heard something that it might be vital for us to know. Don’t you agree with me, M. Poirot?”

“I do,” said Poirot drily. “M. Van Aldin, if I may say so, behaved exceedingly foolishly.”

"I am glad you take that view of the matter," said the secretary. "Now I am going to tell you something, M. Poirot. So strongly did I feel the unwisdom of Mr. Van Aldin's attitude that I went down privately and had an interview with the lady."

"Eh bien?"

"The difficulty was that she insisted on seeing Mr. Van Aldin himself. I softened his message as much as I possibly could. In fact—to be candid—I gave it in a very different form. I said that Mr. Van Aldin was too busy to see her at present, but that she might make any communication she wished to me. That, however, she could not bring herself to do, and she left without saying anything further. But I have a strong impression, M. Poirot, that that woman knows something."

"This is serious," said Poirot quietly. "You know where she is staying?"

"Yes." Knighton mentioned the name of the hotel.

"Good," said Poirot; "we will go there immediately."

The secretary looked doubtful.

"And Mr. Van Aldin?" he queried doubtfully.

"M. Van Aldin is an obstinate man," said Poirot drily. "I do not argue with obstinate men. I act in spite of them. We will go and see the lady immediately. I will tell her that you are empowered by M. Van Aldin to act for him, and you will guard yourself well from contradicting me."

Knighton still looked doubtful, but Poirot took no notice of his hesitation.

At the hotel, they were told that Mademoiselle was in, and Poirot sent up both his and Knighton's cards, with "From Mr. Van Aldin" pencilled upon them.

Word came down that Mademoiselle Mirelle would receive them.

When they were ushered into the dancer’s apartments, Poirot immediately took the lead.

“Mademoiselle,” he murmured, bowing very low, “we are here on behalf of M. Van Aldin.”

“Ah! And why did he not come himself?”

“He is indisposed,” said Poirot mendaciously; “the Riviera throat, it has him in its grip, but me I am empowered to act for him, as is Major Knighton, his secretary. Unless, of course, Mademoiselle would prefer to wait a fortnight or so.”

If there was one thing of which Poirot was tolerably certain, it was that to a temperament such as Mirelle’s the mere word “wait” was anathema.

“Eh bien, I will speak, Messieurs,” she cried. “I have been patient. I have held my hand. And for what? That I should be insulted! Yes, insulted! Ah! Does he think to treat Mirelle like that? To throw her off like an old glove. I tell you never has a man tired of me. Always it is I who tire of them.”

She paced up and down the room, her slender body trembling with rage. A small table impeded her free passage, and she flung it from her into a corner, where it splintered against the wall.

“That is what I will do to him,” she cried, “and that!”

Picking up a glass bowl filled with lilies she flung it into the grate, where it smashed into a hundred pieces.

Knighton was looking at her with cold British disapproval. He felt embarrassed and ill at ease. Poirot, on the other hand, with twinkling eyes was thoroughly enjoying the scene.

“Ah, it is magnificent!” he cried. “It can be seen—Madame has a temperament.”

“I am an artist,” said Mirelle; “every artist has a temperament. I told Dereek to beware, and he would not listen.” She whirled round on Poirot suddenly.

“It is true, is it not, that he wants to marry that English miss?”

Poirot coughed.

“On m’a dit,” he murmured, “that he adores her passionately.”

Mirelle came towards them.

“He murdered his wife,” she screamed. “There—now you have it! He told me beforehand that he meant to do it. He had got to an impasse—zut! he took the easiest way out.”

“You say that M. Kettering murdered his wife.”

“Yes, yes, yes. Have I not told you so?”

“The police,” murmured Poirot, “will need proof of that—er—statement.”

“I tell you I saw him come out of her compartment that night on the train.”

“When?” asked Poirot sharply.

“Just before the train reached Lyons.”

“You will swear to that, Mademoiselle?”

It was a different Poirot who spoke now, sharp and decisive.

“Yes.”

There was a moment’s silence. Mirelle was panting, and her eyes, half defiant, half frightened, went from the face of one man to the other.

“This is a serious matter, Mademoiselle,” said the detective. “You realize how serious?”

“Certainly I do.”

“That is well,” said Poirot. “Then you understand, Mademoiselle, that no time must be lost. You will, perhaps, accompany us immediately to the office of the Examining Magistrate.”

Mirelle was taken aback. She hesitated, but, as Poirot had foreseen, she had no loophole for escape.

“Ver well,” she muttered, “I will fetch a coat.”

Left alone together, Poirot and Knighton exchanged glances.

“It is necessary to act while—how do you say it?—the iron is hot,” murmured Poirot. “She is temperamental; in an hour’s time, maybe, she will repent, and she will wish to draw back. We must prevent that at all costs.”

Mirelle reappeared, wrapped in a sand-coloured velvet wrap trimmed with leopard skin. She looked not altogether unlike a leopardess, tawny and dangerous. Her eyes still flashed with anger and determination.

They found M. Caux and the Examining Magistrate together. A few brief introductory words from Poirot, and Mademoiselle Mirelle was courteously entreated to tell her tale. This she did in much the same words as she had done to Knighton and Poirot, though with far more soberness of manner.

“This is an extraordinary story, Mademoiselle,” said M. Carrège slowly. He leant back in his chair, adjusted his pince-nez, and looked keenly and searchingly at the dancer through them.

“You wish us to believe M. Kettering actually boasted of the crime to you beforehand?”

“Yes, yes. She was too healthy, he said. If she were to die it must be an accident—he would arrange it all.”

“You are aware, Mademoiselle,” said M. Carrège sternly, “that you are making yourself out to be an accessory before the fact?”

“Me? But not the least in the world, Monsieur. Not for a moment did I take that statement seriously. Ah no indeed! I know men, Monsieur; they say many wild things. It would be an odd state of affairs if one were to take all they said au pied de la lettre.”

The Examining Magistrate raised his eyebrows.

“We are to take it, then, that you regarded M. Kettering’s threats as mere idle words? May I ask, Mademoiselle, what made you throw up your engagements in London and come out to the Riviera?”

Mirelle looked at him with melting black eyes.

“I wished to be with the man I loved,” she said simply. “Was it so unnatural?”

Poirot interpolated a question gently.

“Was it, then, at M. Kettering’s wish that you accompanied him to Nice?”

Mirelle seemed to find a little difficulty in answering this. She hesitated perceptibly before she spoke. When she did, it was with a haughty indifference of manner.

“In such matters I please myself, Monsieur,” she said.

That the answer was not an answer at all was noted by all three men. They said nothing.

“When were you first convinced that M. Kettering had murdered his wife?”

“As I tell you, Monsieur, I saw M. Kettering come out of his wife’s compartment just before the train drew in to Lyons. There was a look on his face—ah! at the moment I could not understand it—a look haunted and terrible. I shall never forget it.”

Her voice rose shrilly, and she flung out her arms in an extravagant gesture.

“Quite so,” said M. Carrège.

“Afterwards, when I found that Madame Kettering was dead when the train left Lyons, then—then I knew!”

“And still—you did not go to the police, Mademoiselle,” said the Commissary mildly.

Mirelle glanced at him superbly; she was clearly enjoying herself in the rôle she was playing.

“Shall I betray my lover?” she asked. “Ah no; do not ask a woman to do that.”

“Yet now—” hinted M. Caux.

“Now it is different. He has betrayed me! Shall I suffer that in silence? . . .”

The Examining Magistrate checked her.

“Quite so, quite so,” he murmured soothingly. “And now, Mademoiselle, perhaps you will read over the statement of what you have told us, see that it is correct, and sign it.”

Mirelle wasted no time on the document.

“Yes, yes,” she said, “it is correct.” She rose to her feet. “You require me no longer, Messieurs?”

“At present, no, Mademoiselle.”

“And Dereek will be arrested?”

“At once, Mademoiselle.”

Mirelle laughed cruelly and drew her fur draperies closer about her.

“He should have thought of this before he insulted me,” she cried.

“There is one little matter”—Poirot coughed apologetically—“just a matter of detail.”

“Yes?”

“What makes you think that Madame Kettering was dead when the train left Lyons?”

Mirelle stared.

“But she was dead.”

“Was she?”

“Yes, of course. I—”

She came to an abrupt stop. Poirot was regarding her intently, and he saw the wary look that came into her eyes.

“I have been told so. Everybody says so.”

“Oh,” said Poirot, “I was not aware that the fact had been mentioned outside the Examining Magistrate’s office.”

Mirelle appeared somewhat discomposed.

“One hears those things,” she said vaguely; “they get about. Somebody told me. I can’t remember who it was.”

She moved to the door. M. Caux sprang forward to open it for her, and as he did so, Poirot’s voice rose gently once more.

“And the jewels? Pardon, Mademoiselle. Can you tell me anything about those?”

“The jewels? What jewels?”

“The rubies of Catherine the Great. Since you hear so much, you must have heard of them.”

“I know nothing about any jewels,” said Mirelle sharply.

She went out, closing the door behind her. M. Caux came back to his chair; the Examining Magistrate sighed.

“What a fury!” he said, “but diablement chic. I wonder if she is telling the truth? I think so.”

“There is some truth in her story, certainly,” said Poirot. “We have confirmation of it from Miss Grey. She was looking down the corridor a short time before the train reached Lyons, and she saw M. Kettering go into his wife’s compartment.”

“The case against him seems quite clear,” said the Commissary, sighing: “it is a thousand pities,” he murmured.

“How do you mean?” asked Poirot.

“It has been the ambition of my life to lay the Comte de la Roche by the heels. This time, ma foi, I thought we had got him. This other—it is not nearly so satisfactory.”

M. Carrège rubbed his nose.

“If anything goes wrong,” he observed cautiously, “it will be most awkward. M. Kettering is of the aristocracy. It will get into the newspapers. If we have made a mistake—” He shrugged his shoulders forebodingly.

“The jewels now,” said the Commissary, “what do you think he has done with them?”

“He took them for a plant, of course,” said M. Carrège; “they must have been a great inconvenience to him and very awkward to dispose of.”

Poirot smiled.

“I have an idea of my own about the jewels. Tell me, Messieurs, what do you know of a man called the Marquis?”

The Commissary leant forward excitedly.

“The Marquis,” he said, “the Marquis? Do you think he is mixed up in this affair, M. Poirot?”

“I ask you what you know of him.”

The Commissary made an expressive grimace.

“Not as much as we should like to,” he observed ruefully. “He works behind the scenes, you understand. He has underlings who do his dirty work for him. But he is someone high up. That we are sure of. He does not come from the criminal classes.”

“A Frenchman?”

“Y-es. At least we believe so. But we are not sure. He has worked in France, in England, in America. There was a series of robberies in Switzerland last autumn which were laid at his door. By all accounts he is a grand seigneur, speaking French and English with equal perfection, and his origin is a mystery.”

Poirot nodded and rose to take his departure.

“Can you tell us nothing more, M. Poirot?” urged the Commissary.

“At present, no,” said Poirot, “but I may have news awaiting me at my hotel.”

M. Carrège looked uncomfortable. “If the Marquis is concerned in this—” he began, and then stopped.

“It upsets our ideas,” complained M. Caux.

“It does not upset mine,” said Poirot. “On the contrary, I think it agrees with them very well. Au revoir, Messieurs; if news of any importance comes to me I will communicate it to you immediately.”

He walked back to his hotel with a grave face. In his absence, a telegram had come for him. Taking a paper cutter from his pocket, he slit it open. It was a long telegram, and he read it over twice before slowly putting it in his pocket. Upstairs, George was awaiting his master.

“I am fatigued, Georges, much fatigued. Will you order for me a small pot of chocolate?”

The chocolate was duly ordered and brought, and George set it at the little table at his master’s elbow. As he was preparing to retire, Poirot spoke:

“I believe, Georges, that you have a good knowledge of the English aristocracy?” murmured Poirot.

George smiled apologetically.

“I think that I might say that I have, sir,” he replied.

“I suppose that it is your opinion, Georges, that criminals are invariably drawn from the lower orders?”

“Not always, sir. There was great trouble with one of the Duke of Devize’s younger sons. He left Eton under a cloud, and after that he caused great anxiety on several occasions. The police would not accept the view that it was kleptomania. A very clever young gentleman, sir, but vicious through and through, if you take my meaning. His Grace shipped him to Australia, and I hear he was convicted out there under another name. Very odd, sir, but there it is. The young gentleman, I need hardly say, was not in want financially.”

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

“Love of excitement,” he murmured, “and a little kink in the brain somewhere. I wonder now—”

He drew out the telegram from his pocket and read it again.

“Then there was Lady Mary Fox’s daughter,” continued the valet in a mood of reminiscence. “Swindled tradespeople something shocking, she did. Very worrying to the best families, if I may say so, and there are many other queer cases I could mention."

"You have a wide experience, Georges," murmured Poirot. "I often wonder having lived so exclusively with titled families that you demean yourself by coming as a valet to me. I put it down to love of excitement on your part."

"Not exactly, sir," said George. "I happened to see in Society Snippets that you had been received at Buckingham Palace. That was just when I was looking for a new situation. His Majesty, so it said, had been most gracious and friendly and thought very highly of your abilities."

"Ah," said Poirot, "one always likes to know the reason for things."

He remained in thought for a few moments and then said:

"You rang up Mademoiselle Papopolous?"

"Yes, sir; she and her father will be pleased to dine with you tonight."

"Ah," said Poirot thoughtfully. He drank off his chocolate, set the cup and saucer neatly in the middle of the tray, and spoke gently, more to himself than to the valet.

"The squirrel, my good Georges, collects nuts. He stores them up in the autumn so that they may be of advantage to him later. To make a success of humanity, Georges, we must profit by the lessons of those below us in the animal kingdom. I have always done so. I have been the cat, watching the mouse hole. I have been the good dog following up the scent, and not taking my nose from the trail. And also, my good Georges, I have been the squirrel. I have stored away the little fact here, the little fact there. I go now to my store and I take out one particular nut, a nut that I stored away—let me see, seventeen years ago. You follow me, Georges?"

"I should hardly have thought, sir," said George, "that nuts would have kept so long as that, though I know one can do wonders with preserving bottles."

Poirot looked at him and smiled.

Twenty-eight

POIROT PLAYS THE SQUIRREL

Poirot started to keep his dinner appointment with a margin of three-quarters of an hour to spare. He had an object in this. The car took him, not straight to Monte Carlo, but to Lady Tamplin's house at Cap Martin, where he asked for Miss Grey. The ladies were dressing and Poirot was shown into a small salon to wait, and here, after a lapse of three or four minutes, Lenox Tamplin came to him.

"Katherine is not quite ready yet," she said. "Can I give her a message, or would you rather wait until she comes down?"

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully. He was a minute or two in replying, as though something of great weight hung upon his decision. Apparently the answer to such a simple question mattered.

"No," he said at last, "No, I do not think it is necessary that I should wait to see Mademoiselle Katherine. I think perhaps, that it is better that I should not. These things are sometimes difficult."

Lenox waited politely, her eyebrows slightly raised.

"I have a piece of news," continued Poirot. "You will, perhaps, tell your friend. M. Kettering was arrested tonight for the murder of his wife."

"You want me to tell Katherine that?" asked Lenox. She breathed rather hard, as though she had been running; her face, Poirot thought, looked white and strained—rather noticeably so.

"If you please, Mademoiselle."

“Why?” said Lenox. “Do you think Katherine will be upset? Do you think she cares?”

“I don’t know, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot. “See, I admit it frankly. As a rule I know everything, but in this case, I—well, I do not. You, perhaps, know better than I do.”

“Yes,” said Lenox, “I know—but I am not going to tell you all the same.”

She paused for a minute or two, her dark brows drawn together in a frown.

“You believe he did it?” she said abruptly.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“The police say so.”

“Ah,” said Lenox, “hedging, are you? So there is something to hedge about.”

Again she was silent, frowning. Poirot said gently:

“You have known Derek Kettering a long time, have you not?”

“Off and on ever since I was a kid,” said Lenox gruffly. Poirot nodded his head several times without speaking.

With one of her brusque movements Lenox drew forward a chair and sat down on it, her elbows on the table and her face supported by her hands. Sitting thus, she looked directly across the table at Poirot.

“What have they got to go on?” she demanded. “Motive, I suppose. Probably came into money at her death.”

“He came into two million.”

“And if she had not died he would have been ruined?”

“Yes.”

“But there must have been more than that,” persisted Lenox. “He travelled by the same train, I know, but—that would not be enough to go on by itself.”

“A cigarette case with the letter ‘K’ on it which did not belong to Mrs. Kettering was found in her carriage, and he was seen by two people entering and leaving the compartment just before the train got into Lyons.”

“What two people?”

“Your friend Miss Grey was one of them. The other was Mademoiselle Mirelle, the dancer.”

“And he, Derek, what has he got to say about it?” demanded Lenox sharply.

“He denies having entered his wife’s compartment at all,” said Poirot.

“Fool!” said Lenox crisply, frowning. “Just before Lyons, you say? Does nobody know when—when she died?”

“The doctors’ evidence necessarily cannot be very definite,” said Poirot; “they are inclined to think that death was unlikely to have occurred after leaving Lyons. And we know this much, that a few moments after leaving Lyons Mrs. Kettering was dead.”

“How do you know that?”

Poirot was smiling rather oddly to himself.

“Someone else went into her compartment and found her dead.”

“And they did not rouse the train?”

“No.”

“Why was that?”

“Doubtless they had their reasons.”

Lenox looked at him sharply.

“Do you know the reason?”

“I think so—yes.”

Lenox sat still turning things over in her mind. Poirot watched her in silence. At last she looked up. A soft colour had come into her cheeks and her eyes were shining.

“You think someone on the train must have killed her, but that need not be so at all. What is to stop anyone swinging themselves on to the train when it stopped at Lyons? They could go straight to her compartment, strangle her, and take the rubies and drop off the train again without anyone being the wiser. She may have been actually killed while the train was in Lyons station. Then she would have been alive when Derek went in, and dead when the other person found her.”

Poirot leant back in his chair. He drew a deep breath. He looked across at the girl and nodded his head three times, then he heaved a sigh.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “what you have said there is very just—very true. I was struggling in the darkness, and you have shown me a light. There was a point that puzzled me and you have made it plain.”

He got up.

“And Derek?” said Lenox.

“Who knows?” said Poirot, with a shrug of his shoulders. “But I will tell you this, Mademoiselle. I am not satisfied; no, I, Hercule Poirot, am not yet satisfied. It may be that this very night I shall learn something more. At least, I go to try.”

“You are meeting someone?”

“Yes.”

“Someone who knows something?”

“Someone who might know something. In these matters one must leave no stone unturned. Au revoir, Mademoiselle.”

Lenox accompanied him to the door.

“Have I—helped?” she asked.

Poirot’s face softened as he looked up at her standing on the doorstep above him.

“Yes, Mademoiselle, you have helped. If things are very dark, always remember that.”

When the car had driven off he relapsed into a frowning absorption, but in his eyes was that faint green light which was always the precursor of the triumph to be.

He was a few minutes late at the rendezvous, and found that M. Papopolous and his daughter had arrived before him. His apologies were abject, and he outdid himself in politeness and small attentions. The Greek was looking particularly benign and noble this evening, a sorrowful patriarch of blameless life. Zia was looking handsome and good humoured. The dinner was a pleasant one. Poirot was his best and most sparkling self. He told anecdotes, he made jokes, he paid graceful compliments to Zia Papopolous, and he told many interesting incidents of his career. The menu was a carefully selected one, and the wine was excellent.

At the close of dinner M. Papopolous inquired politely:

“And the tip I gave you? You have had your little flutter on the horse?”

“I am in communication with—er—my bookmaker,” replied Poirot.

The eyes of the two men met.

“A well-known horse, eh?”

“No,” said Poirot; “it is what our friends, the English, call a dark horse.”

“Ah!” said M. Papopolous thoughtfully.

“Now we must step across to the Casino and have our little flutter at the roulette table,” cried Poirot gaily.

At the Casino the party separated, Poirot devoting himself solely to Zia, whilst Papopolous himself drifted away.

Poirot was not fortunate, but Zia had a run of good luck, and had soon won a few thousand francs.

“It would be as well,” she observed drily to Poirot, “if I stopped now.”

Poirot’s eyes twinkled.

“Superb!” he exclaimed. “You are the daughter of your father, Mademoiselle Zia. To know when to stop. Ah! that is the art.”

He looked round the rooms.

“I cannot see your father anywhere about,” he remarked carelessly. “I will fetch your cloak for you, Mademoiselle, and we will go out in the gardens.”

He did not, however, go straight to the cloakroom. His sharp eyes had seen but a little while before the departure of M. Papopolous. He was anxious to know what had become of the wily Greek. He ran him to earth unexpectedly in the big entrance hall. He was standing by one of the pillars, talking to a lady who had just arrived. The lady was Mirelle.

Poirot sidled unostentatiously round the room. He arrived at the other side of the pillar, and unnoticed by the two who were talking together in an animated fashion—or rather, that is to say, the dancer was talking, Papopolous contributing an occasional monosyllable and a good many expressive gestures.

“I tell you I must have time,” the dancer was saying. “If you give me time I will get the money.”

“To wait”—the Greek shrugged his shoulders—“it is awkward.”

“Only a very little while,” pleaded the other. “Ah! but you must! A week—ten days—that is all I ask. You can be sure of your affair. The money will be forthcoming.”

Papopolous shifted a little and looked round him uneasily—to find Poirot almost at his elbow with a beaming innocent face.

“Ah! vous voilà, M. Papopolous. I have been looking for you. It is permitted that I take Mademoiselle Zia for a little turn in the gardens? Good evening, Mademoiselle.” He bowed very low to Mirelle. “A thousand pardons that I did not see you immediately.”

The dancer accepted his greetings rather impatiently. She was clearly annoyed at the interruption of her tête-à-tête. Poirot was quick to take the hint. Papopolous had already murmured: “Certainly—but certainly,” and Poirot withdrew forthwith.

He fetched Zia’s cloak, and together they strolled out into the gardens.

“This is where the suicides take place,” said Zia.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “So it is said. Men are foolish, are they not, Mademoiselle? To eat, to drink, to breathe the good air, it is a very pleasant thing, Mademoiselle. One is foolish to leave all that simply because one has no money—or because the heart aches. L’amour, it causes many fatalities, does it not?”

Zia laughed.

“You should not laugh at love, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, shaking an energetic forefinger at her. “You who are young and beautiful.”

“Hardly that,” said Zia; “you forget that I am thirty-three, M. Poirot. I am frank with you, because it is no good being otherwise. As you told my father it is exactly seventeen years since you aided us in Paris that time.”

“When I look at you, it seems much less,” said Poirot gallantly. “You were then very much as you are now, Mademoiselle, a little thinner, a little paler, a little more serious. Sixteen years old and fresh from your pension. Not quite the petite pensionnaire, not quite a woman. You were very delicious, very charming, Mademoiselle Zia; others thought so too, without doubt.”

“At sixteen,” said Zia, “one is simple and a little fool.”

“That may be,” said Poirot; “yes, that well may be. At sixteen one is credulous, is one not? One believes what one is told.”

If he saw the quick sideways glance that the girl shot at him, he pretended not to have done so. He continued dreamily: “It was a curious affair that, altogether. Your father, Mademoiselle, has never understood the true inwardness of it.”

“No?”

“When he asked me for details, for explanations, I said to him thus: ‘Without scandal, I have got back for you that which was lost. You must ask no questions.’ Do you know, Mademoiselle, why I said these things?”

“I have no idea,” said the girl coldly.

“It was because I had a soft spot in my heart for a little pensionnaire, so pale, so thin, so serious.”

“I don’t understand what you are talking about,” cried Zia angrily.

“Do you not, Mademoiselle? Have you forgotten Antonio Pirezzio?” He heard the quick intake of her breath—almost a gasp.

“He came to work as an assistant in the shop, but not thus could he have got hold of what he wanted. An assistant can lift his eyes to his master’s daughter, can he not? If he is young and handsome with a glib tongue. And since they cannot make love all the time, they must occasionally talk of things that interest them both—such as that very interesting thing which was temporarily in M. Papopolous’ possession. And since, as you say, Mademoiselle, the young are foolish and credulous, it was easy to believe him and to give him a sight of that particular thing, to show him where it was kept. And afterwards when it is gone—when the unbelievable catastrophe has happened. Alas! the poor little pensionnaire. What a terrible position she is in. She is frightened, the poor little one. To speak or not to speak? And then there comes along that excellent fellow, Hercule Poirot. Almost a miracle it must have been, the way things arranged themselves. The priceless heirlooms are restored and there are no awkward questions.”

Zia turned on him fiercely.

“You have known all the time? Who told you? Was it—was it Antonio?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No one told me,” he said quietly. “I guessed. It was a good guess, was it not, Mademoiselle? You see, unless you are good at guessing, it is not much use being a detective.”

The girl walked along beside him for some minutes in silence. Then she said in a hard voice:

“Well, what are you going to do about it; are you going to tell my father?”

“No,” said Poirot sharply. “Certainly not.”

She looked at him curiously.

“You want something from me?”

“I want your help, Mademoiselle.”

“What makes you think that I can help you?”

“I do not think so. I only hope so.”

“And if I do not help you, then—you will tell my father?”

“But no, but no! Debarrass yourself of that idea, Mademoiselle. I am not a blackmailer. I do not hold your secret over your head and threaten you with it.”

"If I refuse to help you—?" began the girl slowly.

"Then you refuse, and that is that."

"Then why—?" she stopped.

"Listen, and I will tell you why. Women, Mademoiselle, are generous. If they can render a service to one who has rendered a service to them, they will do it. I was generous once to you, Mademoiselle. When I might have spoken, I held my tongue."

There was another silence; then the girl said, "My father gave you a hint the other day."

"It was very kind of him."

"I do not think," said Zia slowly, "that there is anything that I can add to that."

If Poirot was disappointed he did not show it. Not a muscle of his face changed.

"Eh bien!" he said cheerfully, "then we must talk of other things."

And he proceeded to chat gaily. The girl was distraite, however, and her answers were mechanical and not always to the point. It was when they were approaching the Casino once more that she seemed to come to a decision.

"M. Poirot?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle?"

"I—I should like to help you if I could."

"You are very amiable, Mademoiselle—very amiable."

Again there was a pause. Poirot did not press her. He was quite content to wait and let her take her own time.

“Ah bah,” said Zia, “after all, why should I not tell you? My father is cautious—always cautious in everything he says. But I know that with you it is not necessary. You have told us it is only the murderer you seek, and that you are not concerned over the jewels. I believe you. You were quite right when you guessed that we were in Nice because of the rubies. They have been handed over here according to plan. My father has them now. He gave you a hint the other day as to who our mysterious client was.”

“The Marquis?” murmured Poirot softly.

“Yes, the Marquis.”

“Have you ever seen the Marquis, Mademoiselle Zia?”

“Once,” said the girl. “But not very well,” she added. “It was through a keyhole.”

“That always presents difficulties,” said Poirot sympathetically, “but all the same you saw him. You would know him again?”

Zia shook her head.

“He wore a mask,” she explained.

“Young or old?”

“He had white hair. It may have been a wig, it may not. It fitted very well. But I do not think he was old. His walk was young, and so was his voice.”

“His voice?” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Ah, his voice! Would you know it again, Mademoiselle Zia?”

“I might,” said the girl.

“You were interested in him, eh? It was that that took you to the keyhole?”

Zia nodded.

“Yes, yes. I was curious. One had heard so much—he is not the ordinary thief—he is more like a figure of history or romance.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully; “yes, perhaps so.”

“But it is not this that I meant to tell you,” said Zia. “It was just one other little fact that I thought might be—well—useful to you.”

“Yes?” said Poirot encouragingly.

“The rubies, as I say, were handed over to my father here at Nice. I did not see the person who handed them over, but—”

“Yes?”

“I know one thing. It was a woman.”

Twenty-nine

A LETTER FROM HOME

Dear Katherine,—Living among grand friends as you are doing now, I don't suppose you will care to hear any of our news; but as I always thought you were a sensible girl, perhaps you are a trifle less swollen-headed than I suppose. Everything goes on much the same here. There was great trouble about the new curate, who is scandalously high. In my view, he is neither more nor less than a Roman. Everybody has spoken to the Vicar about it, but you know what the Vicar is—all Christian charity and no proper spirit. I have had a lot of trouble with maids lately. That girl Annie was no good—skirts up to her knees and wouldn't wear sensible woollen stockings. Not one of them can bear being spoken to. I have had a lot of pain with my rheumatism one way and another, and Dr. Harris persuaded me to go and see a London specialist—a waste of three guineas and a railway fare, as I told him; but by waiting until Wednesday I managed to get a cheap return. The London doctor pulled a long face and talked all round about and never straight out, until I said to him, "I'm a plain woman, Doctor, and I like things to be plainly stated. Is it cancer, or is it not?" And then, of course, he had to say it was. They say a year with care, and not too much pain, though I'm sure I can bear pain as well as any other Christian woman. Life seems rather lonely at times, with most of my friends dead or gone before. I wish you were in St. Mary Mead, my dear, and that is a fact. If you hadn't come into this money and gone off into grand society, I would have offered you double the salary poor Jane gave you to come and look after me; but there—there's no good wanting what we can't get. However, if things should go ill with you—and that is always possible. I have heard no end of tales of bogus noblemen marrying girls and getting hold of their money and then leaving them at the church door. I daresay you are too sensible for anything of the kind to happen to you, but one never knows; and never having had much attention of any kind it might easily go to your head now. So just in case, my dear, remember there is always a home for you here; and though a plain-spoken woman I am a warm-hearted one too.

Your affectionate old friend,

Amelia Viner.

PS. I saw a mention of you in the paper with your cousin, Viscountess Tamplin, and I cut it out and put it with my cuttings. I prayed for you on Sunday that you might be kept from pride and vainglory.

Katherine read this characteristic epistle through twice, then she laid it down and stared out of her bedroom window across the blue waters of the Mediterranean. She felt a curious lump in her throat. A sudden wave of longing for St. Mary Mead swept over her. So full of familiar, everyday, stupid little things—and yet—home. She felt very inclined to lay her head down on her arms and indulge in a real good cry.

Lenox, coming in at the moment, saved her.

“Hello, Katherine,” said Lenox. “I say—what is the matter?”

“Nothing,” said Katherine, grabbing up Miss Viner’s letter and thrusting it into her handbag.

“You looked rather queer,” said Lenox. “I say—I hope you don’t mind—I rang up your detective friend, M. Poirot, and asked him to lunch with us in Nice. I said you wanted to see him, as I thought he might not come for me.”

“Did you want to see him then?” asked Katherine.

“Yes,” said Lenox. “I have rather lost my heart to him. I never met a man before whose eyes were really green like a cat’s.”

“All right,” said Katherine. She spoke listlessly. The last few days had been trying. Derek Kettering’s arrest had been the topic of the hour, and the Blue Train Mystery had been thrashed out from every conceivable standpoint.

"I have ordered the car," said Lenox, "and I have told Mother some lie or other—unfortunately I can't remember exactly what; but it won't matter, as she never remembers. If she knew where we were going, she would want to come too, to pump M. Poirot."

The two girls arrived at the Negresco to find Poirot waiting.

He was full of Gallic politeness, and showered so many compliments upon the two girls that they were soon helpless with laughter; yet for all that the meal was not a gay one. Katherine was dreamy and distracted, and Lenox made bursts of conversation, interspersed by silences. As they were sitting on the terrace sipping their coffee she suddenly attacked Poirot bluntly.

"How are things going? You know what I mean?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. "They take their course," he said.

"And you are just letting them take their course?"

He looked at Lenox a little sadly.

"You are young, Mademoiselle, but there are three things that cannot be hurried—le bon Dieu, Nature, and old people."

"Nonsense!" said Lenox. "You are not old."

"Ah, it is pretty, what you say there."

"Here is Major Knighton," said Lenox.

Katherine looked round quickly and then turned back again.

"He is with Mr. Van Aldin," continued Lenox. "There is something I want to ask Major Knighton about. I won't be a minute."

Left alone together, Poirot bent forward and murmured to Katherine:

"You are distraite, Mademoiselle; your thoughts, they are far away, are they not?"

“Just as far as England, no farther.”

Guided by a sudden impulse, she took the letter she had received that morning and handed it across to him to read.

“That is the first word that has come to me from my old life; somehow or other—it hurts.”

He read it through and then handed it back to her.

“So you are going back to St. Mary Mead?” he said.

“No, I am not,” said Katherine; “why should I?”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “it is my mistake. You will excuse me one little minute.”

He strolled across to where Lenox Tamplin was talking to Van Aldin and Knighton. The American looked old and haggard. He greeted Poirot with a curt nod but without any other sign of animation.

As he turned to reply to some observation made by Lenox, Poirot drew Knighton aside.

“M. Van Aldin looks ill,” he said.

“Do you wonder?” asked Knighton. “The scandal of Derek Kettering’s arrest has about put the lid on things, as far as he is concerned. He is even regretting that he asked you to find out the truth.”

“He should go back to England,” said Poirot.

“We are going the day after tomorrow.”

“That is good news,” said Poirot.

He hesitated, and looked across the terrace to where Katherine was sitting.

“I wish,” he murmured, “that you could tell Miss Grey that.”

“Tell her what?”

“That you—I mean that M. Van Aldin is returning to England.”

Knighton looked a little puzzled, but he readily crossed the terrace and joined Katherine.

Poirot saw him go with a satisfied nod of the head, and then joined Lenox and the American. After a minute or two they joined the others. Conversation was general for a few minutes, then the millionaire and his secretary departed. Poirot also prepared to take his departure.

“A thousand thanks for your hospitality, Mesdemoiselles,” he cried; “it has been a most charming luncheon. Ma foi, I needed it!” He swelled out his chest and thumped it. “I am now a lion—a giant. Ah, Mademoiselle Katherine, you have not seen me as I can be. You have seen the gentle, the calm Hercule Poirot; but there is another Hercule Poirot. I go now to bully, to threaten, to strike terror into the hearts of those who listen to me.”

He looked at them in a self-satisfied way, and they both appeared to be duly impressed, though Lenox was biting her underlip, and the corners of Katherine’s mouth had a suspicious twitch.

“And I shall do it,” he said gravely. “Oh yes, I shall succeed.”

He had gone but a few steps when Katherine’s voice made him turn.

“M. Poirot, I—I want to tell you. I think you were quite right in what you said. I am going back to England almost immediately.”

Poirot stared at her very hard, and under the directness of his scrutiny she blushed.

“I see,” he said gravely.

“I don’t believe you do,” said Katherine.

“I know more than you think, Mademoiselle,” he said quietly.

He left her, with an odd little smile upon his lips. Entering a waiting car, he drove to Antibes.

Hipolyte, the Comte de la Roche’s wooden-faced manservant, was busy at the Villa Marina polishing his master’s beautiful cut table glass. The Comte de la Roche himself had gone to Monte Carlo for the day. Chancing to look out of the window, Hipolyte espied a visitor walking briskly up to the hall door, a visitor of so uncommon a type that Hipolyte, experienced as he was, had some difficulty in placing him. Calling to his wife, Marie, who was busy in the kitchen, he drew her attention to what he called ce type là.

“It is not the police again?” said Marie anxiously.

“Look for yourself,” said Hipolyte.

Marie looked.

“Certainly not the police,” she declared. “I am glad.”

“They have not really worried us much,” said Hipolyte. “In fact, but for Monsieur le Comte’s warning, I should never have guessed that stranger at the wineshop to be what he was.”

The hall bell pealed and Hipolyte, in a grave and decorous manner, went to open the door.

“M. le Comte, I regret to say, is not at home.”

The little man with the large moustaches beamed placidly.

“I know that,” he replied. “You are Hipolyte Flavelle, are you not?”

“Yes, Monsieur, that is my name.”

“And you have a wife, Marie Flavelle?”

“Yes, Monsieur, but—”

“I desire to see you both,” said the stranger, and he stepped nimbly past Hipolyte into the hall.

“Your wife is doubtless in the kitchen,” he said. “I will go there.”

Before Hipolyte could recover his breath, the other had selected the right door at the back of the hall and passed along the passage and into the kitchen, where Marie paused openmouthed to stare at him.

“Voilà,” said the stranger, and sank into a wooden armchair; “I am Hercule Poirot.”

“Yes, Monsieur?”

“You do not know the name?”

“I have never heard it,” said Hipolyte.

“Permit me to say that you have been badly educated. It is the name of one of the great ones of this world.”

He sighed and folded his hands across his chest.

Hipolyte and Marie were staring at him uneasily. They were at a loss what to make of this unexpected and extremely strange visitor. “Monsieur desires—?” murmured Hipolyte mechanically.

“I desire to know why you have lied to the police.”

“Monsieur!” cried Hipolyte; “I—lied to the police? Never have I done such a thing.”

M. Poirot shook his head.

“You are wrong,” he said; “you have done it on several occasions. Let me see.” He took a small notebook from his pocket and consulted it. “Ah, yes; on seven occasions at least. I will recite them to you.”

In a gentle unemotional voice he proceeded to outline the seven occasions.

Hipolyte was taken aback.

“But it is not of these past lapses that I wish to speak,” continued Poirot, “only, my dear friend, do not get into the habit of thinking yourself too clever. I come now to the particular lie in which I am concerned—your statement that the Comte de la Roche arrived at this villa on the morning of 14th January.”

“But that was no lie, Monsieur; that was the truth. Monsieur le Comte arrived here on the morning of Tuesday, the 14th. That is so, Marie, is it not?”

Marie assented eagerly.

“Ah, yes, that is quite right. I remember it perfectly.”

“Oh,” said Poirot, “and what did you give your good master for déjeuner that day?”

“I—” Marie paused, trying to collect herself.

“Odd,” said Poirot, “how one remembers some things—and forgets others.”

He leant forward and struck the table a blow with his fist; his eyes flashed with anger.

“Yes, yes, it is as I say. You tell your lies and you think nobody knows. But there are two people who know. Yes—two people. One is le bon Dieu—”

He raised a hand to heaven, and then settling himself back in his chair and shutting his eyelids, he murmured comfortably:

“And the other is Hercule Poirot.”

“I assure you, Monsieur, you are completely mistaken. Monsieur le Comte left Paris on Monday night—”

“True,” said Poirot—“by the Rapide. I do not know where he broke his journey. Perhaps you do not know that. What I do know is that he arrived here on Wednesday morning, and not on Tuesday morning.”

“Monsieur is mistaken,” said Marie stolidly.

Poirot rose to his feet.

“Then the law must take its course,” he murmured, “A pity.”

“What do you mean, Monsieur?” asked Marie, with a shade of uneasiness.

“You will be arrested and held as accomplices concerned in the murder of Mrs. Kettering, the English lady who was killed.”

“Murder!”

The man’s face had gone chalk white, his knees knocked together. Marie dropped the rolling pin and began to weep.

“But it is impossible—impossible. I thought—”

“Since you stick to your story, there is nothing to be said. I think you are both foolish.”

He was turning towards the door when an agitated voice arrested him.

“Monsieur, Monsieur, just a little moment. I—I had no idea that it was anything of this kind. I—I thought it was just a matter concerning a lady. There have been little awkwardnesses with the police over ladies before. But murder—that is very different.”

“I have no patience with you,” cried Poirot. He turned round on them and angrily shook his fist in Hipolyte’s face. “Am I to stop here all day, arguing with a couple of imbeciles thus? It is the truth I want. If you will not give it to me, that is your lookout. For the last time, when did Monsieur le Comte arrive at the Villa Marina—Tuesday morning or Wednesday morning?”

“Wednesday,” gasped the man, and behind him Marie nodded confirmation.

Poirot regarded them for a minute or two, then inclined his head gravely.

“You are wise, my children,” he said quietly. “Very nearly you were in serious trouble.”

He left the Villa Marina, smiling to himself.

“One guess confirmed,” he murmured to himself. “Shall I take a chance on the other?”

It was six o’clock when the card of Monsieur Hercule Poirot was brought up to Mirelle. She stared at it for a moment or two, and then nodded. When Poirot entered, he found her walking up and down the room feverishly. She turned on him furiously.

“Well?” she cried. “Well? What is it now? Have you not tortured me enough, all of you? Have you not made me betray my poor Dereek? What more do you want?”

“Just one little question, Mademoiselle. After the train left Lyons, when you entered Mrs. Kettering’s compartment—”

“What is that?”

Poirot looked at her with an air of mild reproach and began again.

“I say when you entered Mrs. Kettering’s compartment—”

“I never did.”

“And found her—”

“I never did.”

“Ah, sacré!”

He turned on her in a rage and shouted at her, so that she cowered back before him.

“Will you lie to me? I tell you I know what happened as well as though I had been there. You went into her compartment and you found her dead. I tell you I know it. To lie to me is dangerous. Be careful, Mademoiselle Mirelle.”

Her eyes wavered beneath his gaze and fell.

“I—I didn’t—” she began uncertainly, and stopped.

“There is only one thing about which I wonder,” said Poirot—“I wonder, Mademoiselle, if you found what you were looking for or whether—”

“Whether what?”

“Or whether someone else had been before you.”

“I will answer no more questions,” screamed the dancer. She tore herself away from Poirot’s restraining hand, and flinging herself down on the floor in a frenzy, she screamed and sobbed. A frightened maid came rushing in.

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows, and quietly left the room.

But he seemed satisfied.

Thirty

MISS VINER GIVES JUDGMENT

Katherine looked out of Miss Viner's bedroom window. It was raining, not violently, but with a quiet, well-bred persistence. The window looked out on a strip of front garden with a path down to the gate and neat little flower beds on either side, where later roses and pinks and blue hyacinths would bloom.

Miss Viner was lying in a large Victorian bedstead. A tray with the remains of breakfast had been pushed to one side and she was busy opening her correspondence and making various caustic comments upon it.

Katherine had an open letter in her hand and was reading it through for the second time. It was dated from the Ritz Hotel, Paris.

Chère Mademoiselle Katherine, (It began)—I trust that you are in good health and that the return to the English winter has not proved too depressing. Me, I prosecute my inquiries with the utmost diligence. Do not think that it is the holiday that I take here. Very shortly I shall be in England, and I hope then to have the pleasure of meeting you once more. It shall be so, shall it not? On arrival in London I shall write to you. You remember that we are the colleagues in this affair? But indeed I think you know that very well. Be assured, Mademoiselle, of my most respectful and devoted sentiments.

Hercule Poirot.

Katherine frowned slightly. It was as though something in the letter puzzled and intrigued her.

“A choirboys’ picnic indeed,” came from Miss Viner, “Tommy Saunders and Albert Dykes ought to be left behind, and I shan’t subscribe to it unless they are. What those two boys think they are doing in church on Sundays I don’t know. Tommy sang, ‘O God, make speed to save us,’ and never opened his lips again, and if Albert Dykes wasn’t sucking a mint humbug, my nose is not what it is and always has been.”

“I know, they are awful,” agreed Katherine.

She opened her second letter, and a sudden flush came to her cheeks. Miss Viner’s voice in the room seemed to recede into the far distance.

When she came back to a sense of her surroundings Miss Viner was bringing a long speech to a triumphant termination.

“And I said to her, ‘Not at all. As it happens, Miss Grey is Lady Tamplin’s own cousin.’ What do you think of that?”

“Were you fighting my battles for me? That was very sweet of you.”

“You can put it that way if you like. There is nothing to me in a title. Vicar’s wife or no vicar’s wife, that woman is a cat. Hinting you had bought your way into Society.”

“Perhaps she was not so very far wrong.”

“And look at you,” continued Miss Viner. “Have you come back a stuck-up fine lady, as well you might have done? No, there you are, as sensible as ever you were, with a pair of good Balbriggan stockings on and your sensible shoes. I spoke to Ellen about it only yesterday. ‘Ellen,’ I said, ‘you look at Miss Grey. She has been hobnobbing with some of the greatest in the land, and does she go about as you do with skirts up to her knees and silk stockings that ladder when you look at them, and the most ridiculous shoes that ever I set eyes on?’ ”

Katherine smiled a little to herself. It had apparently been worthwhile to conform to Miss Viner’s prejudices. The old lady went on with increasing gusto.

“It has been a great relief to me that you have not had your head turned. Only the other day I was looking for my cuttings. I have several about Lady Tamplin and her War Hospital and whatnot, but I cannot lay my hand upon them. I wish you would look, my dear; your eyesight is better than mine. They are all in a box in the bureau drawer.”

Katherine glanced down at the letter in her hand and was about to speak, but checked herself, and going over to the bureau found the box of cuttings and began to look over them. Since her return to St. Mary Mead, her heart had gone out to Miss Viner in admiration of the old woman’s stoicism and pluck. She felt that there was little she could do for her old friend, but she knew from experience how much those seemingly small trifles meant to old people.

“Here is one,” she said presently. “ ‘Viscountess Tamplin, who is running her villa at Nice as an Officers’ Hospital, has just been the victim of a sensational robbery, her jewels having been stolen. Amongst them were some very famous emeralds, heirlooms of the Tamplin family.’ ”

“Probably paste,” said Miss Viner; “a lot of these Society women’s jewels are.”

“Here is another,” said Katherine. “A picture of her. ‘A charming camera study of Viscountess Tamplin with her little daughter Lenox.’ ”

“Let me look,” said Miss Viner. “You can’t see much of the child’s face, can you? But I dare say that is just as well. Things go by contraries in this world and beautiful mothers have hideous children. I daresay the photographer realized that to take the back of the child’s head was the best thing he could do for her.”

Katherine laughed.

“ ‘One of the smartest hostesses on the Riviera this season is Viscountess Tamplin, who has a villa at Cap Martin. Her cousin, Miss Grey, who recently inherited a vast fortune in a most romantic manner, is staying with her there.’ ”

“That is the one I wanted,” said Miss Viner. “I expect there has been a picture of you in one of the papers that I have missed; you know the kind of thing. Mrs. Somebody or other Jones-Williams, at the something or other Point-to-Point, usually carrying a shooting stick and having one foot lifted up in the air. It must be a trial to some of them to see what they look like.”

Katherine did not answer. She was smoothing out the cutting with her finger, and her face had a puzzled, worried look. Then she drew the second letter out of its envelope and mastered its contents once more. She turned to her friend.

“Miss Viner? I wonder—there is a friend of mine, someone I met on the Riviera, who wants very much to come down and see me here.”

“A man?” said Miss Viner.

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“He is secretary to Mr. Van Aldin, the American millionaire.”

“What is his name?”

“Knighton. Major Knighton.”

“H’m—secretary to a millionaire. And wants to come down here. Now, Katherine, I am going to say something to you for your own good. You are a nice girl and a sensible girl, and though you have your head screwed on the right way about most things, every woman makes a fool of herself once in her life. Ten to one what this man is after is your money.”

With a gesture she arrested Katherine’s reply. “I have been waiting for something of this kind. What is a secretary to a millionaire? Nine times out of ten it is a young man who likes living soft. A young man with nice manners and a taste for luxury and no brains and no enterprise, and if there is anything that is a softer job than being secretary to a millionaire it is marrying a rich woman for her money. I am not saying that you might not be some man’s fancy. But you are not young, and though you have a very good complexion you are not a beauty, and what I say to you is, don’t make a fool of yourself; but if you are determined to do so, do see that your money is properly tied up on yourself. There, now I have finished. What have you got to say?”

“Nothing,” said Katherine; “but would you mind if he did come down to see me?”

“I wash my hands of it,” said Miss Viner. “I have done my duty, and whatever happens now is on your own head. Would you like him to lunch or to dinner? I daresay Ellen could manage dinner—that is, if she didn’t lose her head.”

“Lunch would be very nice,” said Katherine. “It is awfully kind of you, Miss Viner. He asked me to ring him up, so I will do so and say that we shall be pleased if he will lunch with us. He will motor down from town.”

“Ellen does a steak with grilled tomatoes pretty fairly,” said Miss Viner. “She doesn’t do it well, but she does it better than anything else. It is no good having a tart because she is heavy-handed with pastry; but her little castle puddings are not bad, and I daresay you could find a nice piece of Stilton at Abbot’s. I have always heard that gentlemen like a nice piece of Stilton, and there is a good deal of Father’s wine left, a bottle of sparkling Moselle, perhaps.”

“Oh no, Miss Viner; that is really not necessary.”

“Nonsense, my child. No gentleman is happy unless he drinks something with his meal. There is some good prewar whisky if you think he would prefer that. Now do as I say and don’t argue. The key of the wine cellar is in the third drawer down in the dressing table, in the second pair of stockings on the left-hand side.”

Katherine went obediently to the spot indicated.

“The second pair, now mind,” said Miss Viner. “The first pair has my diamond earrings and my filigree brooch in it.”

“Oh,” said Katherine, rather taken aback, “wouldn’t you like them put in your jewel case?”

Miss Viner gave vent to a terrific and prolonged snort.

“No, indeed! I have much too much sense for that sort of thing, thank you. Dear, dear, I well remember how my poor father had a safe built in downstairs. Pleased as Punch he was with it, and he said to my mother, ‘Now, Mary, you bring me your jewels in their case every night and I will lock them away for you.’ My mother was a very tactful woman, and she knew that gentlemen like having their own way, and she brought him the jewel case to be locked up just as he said.

“And one night burglars broke in, and of course—naturally—the first thing they went for was the safe! It would be, with my father talking up and down the village and bragging about it until you might have thought he kept all King Solomon’s diamonds there. They made a clean sweep, got the tankards, the silver cups, and the presentation gold plate that my father had had presented to him, and the jewel case.”

She sighed reminiscently. “My father was in a great state over my mother’s jewels. There was the Venetian set and some very fine cameos, and some pale pink corals, and two diamond rings with quite large stones in them. And then, of course, she had to tell him that, being a sensible woman, she had kept her jewellery rolled up in a pair of corsets, and there it was still as safe as anything.”

“And the jewel case had been quite empty?”

“Oh no, dear,” said Miss Viner, “it would have been too light a weight then. My mother was a very intelligent woman; she saw to that. She kept her buttons in the jewel case, and a very handy place it was. Boot buttons in the top tray, trouser buttons in the second tray, and assorted buttons below. Curiously enough, my father was quite annoyed with her. He said he didn’t like deceit. But I mustn’t go chattering on; you want to go and ring up your friend, and mind you choose a nice piece of steak, and tell Ellen she is not to have holes in her stockings when she waits at lunch.”

"Is her name Ellen or Helen, Miss Viner? I thought—"

Miss Viner closed her eyes.

"I can sound my h's, dear, as well as anyone, but Helen is not a suitable name for a servant. I don't know what the mothers in the lower classes are coming to nowadays."

The rain had cleared away when Knighton arrived at the cottage. The pale fitful sunshine shone down on it and burnished Katherine's head as she stood in the doorway to welcome him. He came up to her quickly, almost boyishly.

"I say, I hope you don't mind. I simply had to see you again soon. I hope the friend you are staying with does not mind."

"Come in and make friends with her," said Katherine. "She can be most alarming, but you will soon find that she has the softest heart in the world."

Miss Viner was enthroned majestically in the drawing room, wearing a complete set of the cameos which had been so providentially preserved in the family. She greeted Knighton with dignity and an austere politeness which would have damped many men. Knighton, however, had a charm of manner which was not easily set aside, and after about ten minutes Miss Viner thawed perceptibly. Luncheon was a merry meal, and Ellen, or Helen, in a new pair of silk stockings devoid of ladders, performed prodigies of waiting. Afterwards, Katherine and Knighton went for a walk, and they came back to have tea tête-à-tête, since Miss Viner had gone to lie down.

When the car had finally driven off Katherine went slowly upstairs. A voice called her and she went in to Miss Viner's bedroom.

"Friend gone?"

"Yes. Thank you so much for letting me ask him down."

"No need to thank me. Do you think I am the sort of old curmudgeon who never will do anything for anybody?"

"I think you are a dear," said Katherine affectionately.

"Humph," said Miss Viner, mollified.

As Katherine was leaving the room she called her back.

"Katherine?"

"Yes."

"I was wrong about that young man of yours. A man when he is making up to anybody can be cordial and gallant and full of little attentions and altogether charming. But when a man is really in love he can't help looking like a sheep. Now, whenever that young man looked at you he looked like a sheep. I take back all I said this morning. It is genuine."

Thirty-one

MR. AARONS LUNCHES

"Ah!" said Mr. Joseph Aarons appreciatively.

He took a long draught from his tankard, set it down with a sigh, wiped the froth from his lips, and beamed across the table at his host, Monsieur Hercule Poirot.

"Give me," said Mr. Aarons, "a good Porterhouse steak and a tankard of something worth drinking, and anyone can have your French fallals and whatnots, your ordoovres and your omelettes and your little bits of quail. Give me," he reiterated, "a Porterhouse steak."

Poirot, who had just complied with this request, smiled sympathetically.

"Not that there is much wrong with a steak and kidney pudding," continued Mr. Aarons. "Apple tart? Yes, I will take apple tart, thank you, Miss, and a jug of cream."

The meal proceeded. Finally, with a long sigh, Mr. Aarons laid down his spoon and fork preparatory to toying with some cheese before turning his mind to other matters.

"There was a little matter of business I think you said, Monsieur Poirot," he remarked. "Anything I can do to help you I am sure I shall be most happy."

"That is very kind of you," said Poirot. "I said to myself, 'If you want to know anything about the dramatic profession there is one person who knows all that is to be known and that is my old friend, Mr. Joseph Aarons.' "

"And you don't say far wrong," said Mr. Aarons complacently; "whether it is past, present, or future, Joe Aarons is the man to come to."

"Précisément. Now I want to ask you, Monsieur Aarons, what you know about a young woman called Kidd."

"Kidd? Kitty Kidd?"

"Kitty Kidd."

"Pretty smart, she was. Male impersonator, song and a dance—That one?"

"That is the one."

"Very smart, she was. Made a good income. Never out of an engagement. Male impersonation mostly, but, as a matter of fact, you could not touch her as a character actress."

"So I have heard," said Poirot; "but she has not been appearing lately, has she?"

"No. Dropped right out of things. Went over to France and took up with some swell nobleman there. She quitted the stage then for good and all, I guess."

"How long ago was that?"

"Let me see. Three years ago. And she has been a loss—let me tell you that."

"She was clever?"

"Clever as a cartload of monkeys."

"You don't know the name of the man she became friends with in Paris?"

"He was a swell, I know that. A Count—or was it a Marquis? Now I come to think of it, I believe it was a Marquis."

“And you know nothing about her since?”

“Nothing. Never even run across her accidentally like. I bet she is tooling it round some of these foreign resorts. Being a Marquise to the life. You couldn’t put one over on Kitty. She would give as good as she got any day.”

“I see,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“I am sorry I can’t tell you more, Monsieur Poirot,” said the other. “I would like to be of use to you if I could. You did me a good turn once.”

“Ah, but we are quits on that; you, too, did me a good turn.”

“One good turn deserves another. Ha, ha!” said Mr. Aarons.

“Your profession must be a very interesting one,” said Poirot.

“So-so,” said Mr. Aarons noncommittally. “Taking the rough with the smooth, it is all right. I don’t do so badly at it, all things considered, but you have to keep your eyes skinned. Never know what the public will jump for next.”

“Dancing has come very much to the fore in the last few years,” murmured Poirot reflectively.

“I never saw anything in this Russian ballet, but people like it. Too highbrow for me.”

“I met one dancer out on the Riviera—Mademoiselle Mirelle.”

“Mirelle? She is hot stuff, by all accounts. There is always money going to back her—though, so far as that goes, the girl can dance; I have seen her, and I know what I am talking about. I never had much to do with her myself, but I hear she is a terror to deal with. Tempers and tantrums all the time.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully; “yes, so I should imagine.”

“Temperament!” said Mr. Aarons, “temperament! That is what they call it themselves. My missus was a dancer before she married me, but I am thankful to say she never had any temperament. You don’t want temperament in the home, Monsieur Poirot.”

“I agree with you, my friend; it is out of place there.”

“A woman should be calm and sympathetic, and a good cook,” said Mr. Aarons.

“Mirelle has not been long before the public, has she?” asked Poirot.

“About two and a half years, that is all,” said Mr. Aarons. “Some French duke started her. I hear now that she has taken up with the ex-Prime Minister of Greece. These are the chaps who manage to put money away quietly.”

“That is news to me,” said Poirot.

“Oh, she’s not one to let the grass grow under her feet. They say that young Kettering murdered his wife on her account. I don’t know, I am sure. Anyway, he is in prison, and she had to look round for herself, and pretty smart she has been about it. They say she is wearing a ruby the size of a pigeon’s egg—not that I have ever seen a pigeon’s egg myself, but that is what they always call it in works of fiction.”

“A ruby the size of a pigeon’s egg!” said Poirot. His eyes were green and catlike. “How interesting!”

“I had it from a friend of mine,” said Mr. Aarons. “But for all I know, it may be coloured glass. They are all the same, these women—they never stop telling tall stories about their jewels. Mirelle goes about bragging that it has got a curse on it. ‘Heart of Fire,’ I think she calls it.”

“But if I remember rightly,” said Poirot, “the ruby that is named ‘Heart of Fire’ is the centre stone in a necklace.”

“There you are! Didn’t I tell you there is no end to the lies women will tell about their jewellery? This is a single stone, hung on a platinum chain round her neck; but, as I said before, ten to one it is a bit of coloured glass.”

“No,” said Poirot gently; “no—somehow I do not think it is coloured glass.”

Thirty-two

KATHERINE AND POIROT COMPARE NOTES

“You have changed, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot suddenly. He and Katherine were seated opposite each other at a small table at the Savoy.

“Yes, you have changed,” he continued.

“In what way?”

“Mademoiselle, these nuances are difficult to express.”

“I am older.”

“Yes, you are older. And by that I do not mean that the wrinkles and the crows’ feet are coming. When I first saw you, Mademoiselle, you were a looker-on at life. You had the quiet, amused look of one who sits back in the stalls and watches the play.”

“And now?”

“Now you no longer watch. It is an absurd thing, perhaps, that I say here, but you have the wary look of a fighter who is playing a difficult game.”

“My old lady is difficult sometimes,” said Katherine, with a smile; “but I can assure you that I don’t engage in deadly contests with her. You must go down and see her some day, Monsieur Poirot. I think you are one of the people who would appreciate her pluck and her spirit.”

There was a silence while the waiter deftly served them with chicken en casserole. When he had departed, Poirot said: “You have heard me speak of my friend Hastings?—he who said that I was a human oyster. Eh bien, Mademoiselle, I have met my match in you. You, far more than I, play a lone hand.”

“Nonsense,” said Katherine lightly.

“Never does Hercule Poirot talk nonsense. It is as I say.”

Again there was a silence. Poirot broke it by inquiring:

“Have you seen any of our Riviera friends since you have been back, Mademoiselle?”

“I have seen something of Major Knighton.”

“A-ha. Is that so?”

Something in Poirot’s twinkling eyes made Katherine lower hers.

“So Mr. Van Aldin remains in London?”

“Yes.”

“I must try to see him tomorrow or the next day.”

“You have news for him?”

“What makes you think that?”

“I—wondered, that is all.”

Poirot looked across at her with twinkling eyes.

“And now, Mademoiselle, there is much that you wish to ask me, I can see that. And why not? Is not the affair of the Blue Train our own ‘roman policier?’ ”

“Yes, there are things I should like to ask you.”

“Eh bien?”

Katherine looked up with a sudden air of resolution.

“What were you doing in Paris, Monsieur Poirot?”

Poirot smiled slightly.

“I made a call at the Russian Embassy.”

“Oh.”

“I see that that tells you nothing. But I will not be a human oyster. No, I will lay my cards on the table, which is assuredly a thing that oysters never do. You suspect, do you not, that I am not satisfied with the case against Derek Kettering?”

“That is what I have been wondering. I thought, in Nice, that you had finished with the case.”

“You do not say all that you mean, Mademoiselle. But I admit everything. It was I—my researches—which placed Derek Kettering where he now is. But for me the Examining Magistrate would still be vainly trying to fasten the crime on the Comte de la Roche. Eh bien, Mademoiselle, what I have done I do not regret. I have only one duty—to discover the truth, and that way led straight to Mr. Kettering. But did it end there? The police say yes, but I, Hercule Poirot, am not satisfied.”

He broke off suddenly. “Tell me, Mademoiselle, have you heard from Mademoiselle Lenox lately?”

“One very short, scrappy letter. She is, I think, annoyed with me for coming back to England.”

Poirot nodded.

“I had an interview with her the night that Monsieur Kettering was arrested. It was an interesting interview in more ways than one.”

Again he fell silent, and Katherine did not interrupt his train of thought. “Mademoiselle,” he said at last, “I am now on delicate ground, yet I will say this to you. There is, I think, someone who loves Monsieur Kettering—correct me if I am wrong—and for her sake—well—for her sake I hope that I am right and the police are wrong. You know who that someone is?"

There was a pause, then Katherine said:

"Yes—I think I know."

Poirot leant across the table towards her.

"I am not satisfied, Mademoiselle; no, I am not satisfied. The facts, the main facts, led straight to Monsieur Kettering. But there is one thing that has been left out of account."

"And what is that?"

"The disfigured face of the victim. I have asked myself, Mademoiselle, a hundred times, 'Was Derek Kettering the kind of man who would deal that smashing blow after having committed the murder?' What end would it serve? What purpose would it accomplish? Was it a likely action for one of Monsieur Kettering's temperament? And, Mademoiselle, the answer to these questions is profoundly unsatisfactory. Again and again I go back to that one point—'why?' And the only things I have to help me to a solution of the problem are these."

He whipped out his pocketbook and extracted something from it which he held between his finger and thumb.

"Do you remember, Mademoiselle? You saw me take these hairs from the rug in the railway carriage."

Katherine leant forward, scrutinizing the hairs keenly.

Poirot nodded his head slowly several times.

"They suggest nothing to you, I see that, Mademoiselle. And yet—I think somehow that you see a good deal."

“I have had ideas,” said Katherine slowly, “curious ideas. That is why I ask you what you were doing in Paris, Monsieur Poirot.”

“When I wrote to you—”

“From the Ritz?”

A curious smile came over Poirot’s face.

“Yes, as you say, from the Ritz. I am a luxurious person sometimes—when a millionaire pays.”

“The Russian Embassy,” said Katherine, frowning. “No, I don’t see where that comes in.”

“It does not come in directly, Mademoiselle. I went there to get certain information. I saw a particular personage and I threatened him—yes, Mademoiselle, I, Hercule Poirot, threatened him.”

“With the police?”

“No,” said Poirot drily, “with the Press—a much more deadly weapon.”

He looked at Katherine and she smiled at him, just shaking her head.

“Are you not just turning back into an oyster again, Monsieur Poirot?”

“No, no; I do not wish to make mysteries. See, I will tell you everything. I suspect this man of being the active party in the sale of the jewels of Monsieur Van Aldin. I tax him with it, and in the end I get the whole story out of him. I learn where the jewels were handed over, and I learn, too, of the man who paced up and down outside in the street—a man with a venerable head of white hair, but who walked with the light, springy step of a young man—and I give that man a name in my own mind—the name of ‘Monsieur le Marquis.’ ”

“And now you have come to London to see Mr. Van Aldin?”

“Not entirely for that reason. I had other work to do. Since I have been in London I have seen two more people—a theatrical agent and a Harley Street doctor. From each of them I have got certain information. Put these things together, Mademoiselle, and see if you can make of them the same as I do.”

“I?”

“Yes, you. I will tell you one thing, Mademoiselle. There has been a doubt all along in my mind as to whether the robbery and the murder were done by the same person. For a long time I was not sure—”

“And now?”

“And now I know.”

There was a silence. Then Katherine lifted her head. Her eyes were shining.

“I am not clever like you, Monsieur Poirot. Half the things that you have been telling me don’t seem to me to point anywhere at all. The ideas that came to me came from such an entirely different angle—”

“Ah, but that is always so,” said Poirot quietly. “A mirror shows the truth, but everyone stands in a different place for looking into the mirror.”

“My ideas may be absurd—they may be entirely different from yours, but —”

“Yes?”

“Tell me, does this help you at all?”

He took a newspaper cutting from her outstretched hand. He read it and, looking up, he nodded gravely.

“As I told you, Mademoiselle, one stands at a different angle for looking into the mirror, but it is the same mirror and the same things are reflected there.”

Katherine got up. “I must rush,” she said. “I have only just time to catch my train. Monsieur Poirot—”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“It—it mustn’t be much longer, you understand. I—I can’t go on much longer.”

There was a break in her voice.

He patted her hand reassuringly.

“Courage, Mademoiselle, you must not fail now; the end is very near.”

Thirty-three

A NEW THEORY

“Monsieur Poirot wants to see you, sir.”

“Damn the fellow!” said Van Aldin.

Knighton remained sympathetically silent.

Van Aldin got up from his chair and paced up and down.

“I suppose you have seen the cursed newspapers this morning?”

“I have glanced at them, sir.”

“Still at it hammer and tongs?”

“I am afraid so, sir.”

The millionaire sat down again and pressed his hand to his forehead.

“If I had had an idea of this,” he groaned. “I wish to God I had never got that little Belgian to ferret out the truth. Find Ruth’s murderer—that was all I thought about.”

“You wouldn’t have liked your son-in-law to go scot free?”

Van Aldin sighed.

“I would have preferred to take the law into my own hands.”

“I don’t think that would have been a very wise proceeding, sir.”

“All the same—are you sure the fellow wants to see me?”

“Yes, Mr. Van Aldin. He is very urgent about it.”

“Then I suppose he will have to. He can come along this morning if he likes.”

It was a very fresh and debonair Poirot who was ushered in. He did not seem to see any lack of cordiality in the millionaire’s manner, and chatted pleasantly about various trifles. He was in London, he explained, to see his doctor. He mentioned the name of an eminent surgeon.

“No, no, pas la guerre—a memory of my days in the police force, a bullet of a rascally apache.”

He touched his left shoulder and winced realistically.

“I always consider you a lucky man, Monsieur Van Aldin; you are not like our popular idea of American millionaires, martyrs to dyspepsia.”

“I am pretty tough,” said Van Aldin. “I lead a very simple life, you know; plain fare and not too much of it.”

“You have seen something of Miss Grey, have you not?” inquired Poirot, innocently turning to the secretary.

“I—yes; once or twice,” said Knighton.

He blushed slightly and Van Aldin exclaimed in surprise:

“Funny you never mentioned to me that you had seen her, Knighton.”

“I didn’t think you would be interested, sir.”

“I like that girl very much,” said Van Aldin.

“It is a thousand pities that she should have buried herself once more in St. Mary Mead,” said Poirot.

“It is very fine of her,” said Knighton hotly. “There are very few people who would bury themselves down there to look after a cantankerous old woman who has no earthly claim on her.”

“I am silent,” said Poirot, his eyes twinkling a little; “but all the same I say it is a pity. And now, Messieurs, let us come to business.”

Both the other men looked at him in some surprise.

“You must not be shocked or alarmed at what I am about to say. Supposing, Monsieur Van Aldin, that, after all, Monsieur Derek Kettering did not murder his wife?”

“What?”

Both men stared at him in blank surprise.

“Supposing, I say, that Monsieur Kettering did not murder his wife?”

“Are you mad, Monsieur Poirot?”

It was Van Aldin who spoke.

“No,” said Poirot, “I am not mad. I am eccentric, perhaps—at least certain people say so; but as regards my profession, I am very much, as one says, ‘all there.’ I ask you, Monsieur Van Aldin, whether you would be glad or sorry if what I tell you should be the case?”

Van Aldin stared at him.

“Naturally I should be glad,” he said at last. “Is this an exercise in suppositions, Monsieur Poirot, or are there any facts behind it?”

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

“There is an off chance,” he said quietly, “that it might be the Comte de la Roche after all. At least I have succeeded in upsetting his alibi.”

“How did you manage that?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders modestly.

“I have my own methods. The exercise of a little tact, a little cleverness—and the thing is done.”

“But the rubies,” said Van Aldin, “these rubies that the Count had in his possession were false.”

“And clearly he would not have committed the crime except for the rubies. But you are overlooking one point, Monsieur Van Aldin. Where the rubies were concerned, someone might have been before him.”

“But this is an entirely new theory,” cried Knighton.

“Do you really believe all this rigmarole, Monsieur Poirot?” demanded the millionaire.

“The thing is not proved,” said Poirot quietly. “It is as yet only a theory, but I tell you this, Monsieur Van Aldin, the facts are worth investigating. You must come out with me to the south of France and go into the case on the spot.”

“You really think this is necessary—that I should go, I mean?”

“I thought it would be what you yourself would wish,” said Poirot.

There was a hint of reproach in his tone which was not lost upon the other.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he said. “When do you wish to start, Monsieur Poirot?”

“You are very busy at present, sir,” murmured Knighton.

But the millionaire had now made up his mind, and he waved the other’s objections aside.

“I guess this business comes first,” he said. “All right, Monsieur Poirot, tomorrow. What train?”

“We will go, I think, by the Blue Train,” said Poirot, and he smiled.

Thirty-four

THE BLUE TRAIN AGAIN

“The Millionaires’ Train,” as it is sometimes called, swung round a curve of line at what seemed a dangerous speed. Van Aldin, Knighton, and Poirot sat together in silence. Knighton and Van Aldin had two compartments connecting with each other, as Ruth Kettering and her maid had had on the fateful journey. Poirot’s own compartment was farther along the coach.

The journey was a painful one for Van Aldin, recalling as it did the most agonizing memories. Poirot and Knighton conversed occasionally in low tones without disturbing him.

When, however, the train had completed its slow journey round the ceinture and reached the Gare de Lyon, Poirot became suddenly galvanized into activity. Van Aldin realized that part of his object in travelling by the train had been to attempt to reconstruct the crime. Poirot himself acted every part. He was in turn the maid, hurriedly shut into her own compartment, Mrs. Kettering, recognizing her husband with surprise and a trace of anxiety, and Derek Kettering discovering that his wife was travelling on the train. He tested various possibilities, such as the best way for a person to conceal himself in the second compartment.

Then suddenly an idea seemed to strike him. He clutched at Van Aldin’s arm.

“Mon Dieu, but that is something I have not thought of! We must break our journey in Paris. Quick, quick, let us alight at once.”

Seizing suitcases he hurried from the train. Van Aldin and Knighton, bewildered but obedient, followed him. Van Aldin having once more formed his opinion of Poirot’s ability was slow to depart from it. At the barrier they were held up. Their tickets were in the charge of the conductor of the train, a fact which all three of them had forgotten.

Poirot’s explanations were rapid, fluent, and impassioned, but they produced no effect upon the stolid-faced official.

“Let us get quit of this,” said Van Aldin abruptly. “I gather you are in a hurry, Monsieur Poirot. For God’s sake pay the fares from Calais and let us get right on with whatever you have got on your mind.”

But Poirot’s flood of language had suddenly stopped dead, and he had the appearance of a man turned to stone. His arm, still outflung in an impassioned gesture, remained there as though stricken with paralysis.

“I have been an imbecile,” he said simply. “Ma foi, I lose my head nowadays. Let us return and continue our journey quietly. With reasonable luck the train will not have have gone.”

They were only just in time, the train moving off as Knighton, the last of the three, swung himself and his suitcase on board.

The conductor remonstrated with them feelingly and assisted them to carry their luggage back to their compartments. Van Aldin said nothing, but he was clearly disgusted at Poirot’s extraordinary conduct. Alone with Knighton for a moment, or two, he remarked:

“This is a wild-goose chase. The man has lost his grip on things. He has got brains up to a point, but any man who loses his head and scuttles round like a frightened rabbit is no earthly darned good.”

Poirot came to them in a moment or two, full of abject apologies and clearly so crestfallen that harsh words would have been superfluous. Van Aldin received his apologies gravely, but managed to restrain himself from making acid comments.

They had dinner on the train, and afterwards, somewhat to the surprise of the other two, Poirot suggested that they should all three sit up in Van Aldin’s compartment.

The millionaire looked at him curiously.

“Is there anything that you are keeping back from us, Monsieur Poirot?”

“I?” Poirot opened his eyes in innocent surprise. “But what an idea.”

Van Aldin did not answer, but he was not satisfied. The conductor was told that he need not make up the beds. Any surprise he might have felt was obliterated by the largeness of the tip which Van Aldin handed to him. The three men sat in silence. Poirot fidgeted and seemed restless. Presently he turned to the secretary.

“Major Knighton, is the door of your compartment bolted? The door into the corridor, I mean.”

“Yes; I bolted it myself just now.”

“Are you sure?” said Poirot.

“I will go and make sure, if you like,” said Knighton, smiling.

“No, no, do not derange yourself. I will see for myself.”

He passed through the connecting door and returned in a second or two, nodding his head.

“Yes, yes, it is as you said. You pardon an old man’s fussy ways.” He closed the connecting door and resumed his place in the right-hand corner.

The hours passed. The three men dozed fitfully, waking with uncomfortable starts. Probably never before had three people booked berths on the most luxurious train available, then declined to avail themselves of the accommodation they had paid for. Every now and then Poirot glanced at his watch, and then nodded his head and composed himself to slumber once more. On one occasion he rose from his seat and opened the connecting door, peered sharply into the adjoining compartment, and then returned to his seat, shaking his head.

"What is the matter?" whispered Knighton. "You are expecting something to happen, aren't you?"

"I have the nerves," confessed Poirot. "I am like the cat upon the hot tiles. Every little noise it makes me jump."

Knighton yawned.

"Of all the darned uncomfortable journeys," he murmured. "I suppose you know what you are playing at, Monsieur Poirot."

He composed himself to sleep as best he could. Both he and Van Aldin had succumbed to slumber, when Poirot, glancing for the fourteenth time at his watch, leant across and tapped the millionaire on the shoulder.

"Eh? What is it?"

"In five or ten minutes, Monsieur, we shall arrive at Lyons."

"My God!" Van Aldin's face looked white and haggard in the dim light. "Then it must have been about this time that poor Ruth was killed."

He sat staring straight in front of him. His lips twitched a little, his mind reverting back to the terrible tragedy that had saddened his life.

There was the usual long screaming sigh of the brake, and the train slackened speed and drew into Lyons. Van Aldin let down the window and leant out.

"If it wasn't Derek—if your new theory is correct, it is here that the man left the train?" he asked over his shoulder.

Rather to his surprise Poirot shook his head.

"No," he said thoughtfully, "no man left the train, but I think—yes, I think, a woman may have done so."

Knighton gave a gasp.

“A woman?” demanded Van Aldin sharply.

“Yes, a woman,” said Poirot, nodding his head. “You may not remember, Monsieur Van Aldin, but Miss Grey in her evidence mentioned that a youth in a cap and overcoat descended on to the platform ostensibly to stretch his legs. Me, I think that that youth was most probably a woman.”

“But who was she?”

Van Aldin’s face expressed incredulity, but Poirot replied seriously and categorically:

“Her name—or the name under which she was known, for many years—is Kitty Kidd, but you, Monsieur Van Aldin, knew her by another name—that of Ada Mason.”

Knighton sprang to his feet.

“What?” he cried.

Poirot swung round to him.

“Ah!—before I forget it.” He whipped something from a pocket and held it out.

“Permit me to offer you a cigarette—out of your own cigarette case. It was careless of you to drop it when you boarded the train on the ceinture at Paris.”

Knighton stood staring at him as though stupefied. Then he made a movement, but Poirot flung up his hand in a warning gesture.

“No, don’t move,” he said in a silky voice; “the door into the next compartment is open, and you are being covered from there this minute. I unbolted the door into the corridor when we left Paris, and our friends the police were told to take their places there. As I expect you know, the French police want you rather urgently, Major Knighton—or shall we say—Monsieur le Marquis?”

Thirty-five

EXPLANATIONS

"Explanations?"

Poirot smiled. He was sitting opposite the millionaire at a luncheon table in the latter's private suite at the Negresco. Facing him was a relieved but very puzzled man. Poirot leant back in his chair, lit one of his tiny cigarettes, and stared reflectively at the ceiling.

"Yes, I will give you explanations. It began with the one point that puzzled me. You know what that point was? The disfigured face. It is not an uncommon thing to find when investigating a crime and it rouses an immediate question, the question of identity. That naturally was the first thing that occurred to me. Was the dead woman really Mrs. Kettering? But that line led me nowhere, for Miss Grey's evidence was positive and very reliable, so I put that idea aside. The dead woman was Ruth Kettering."

"When did you first begin to suspect the maid?"

"Not for some time, but one peculiar little point drew my attention to her. The cigarette case found in the railway carriage and which she told us was one which Mrs. Kettering had given to her husband. Now that was, on the face of it, most improbable, seeing the terms they were on. It awakened a doubt in my mind as to the general veracity of Ada Mason's statements. There was the rather suspicious fact to be taken into consideration, that she had only been with her mistress for two months. Certainly it did not seem as if she could have had anything to do with the crime since she had been left behind in Paris and Mrs. Kettering had been seen alive by several people afterwards, but—"

Poirot leant forward. He raised an emphatic forefinger and wagged it with intense emphasis at Van Aldin.

"But I am a good detective. I suspect. There is nobody and nothing that I do not suspect. I believe nothing that I am told. I say to myself: how do we know that Ada Mason was left behind in Paris? And at first the answer to that question seemed completely satisfactory. There was the evidence of your secretary, Major Knighton, a complete outsider, whose testimony might be supposed to be entirely impartial, and there were the dead woman's own words to the conductor of the train. But I put the latter point aside for the moment, because a very curious idea—an idea perhaps fantastic and impossible—was growing up in my mind. If by any outside chance it happened to be true, that particular piece of testimony was worthless.

"I concentrated on the chief stumbling block to my theory, Major Knighton's statement that he saw Ada Mason at the Ritz after the Blue Train had left Paris. That seemed conclusive enough, but yet, on examining the facts carefully, I noted two things. First, that by a curious coincidence he, too, had been exactly two months in your service. Secondly, his initial letter was the same—K. Supposing—just supposing—that it was his cigarette case which had been found in the carriage. Then, if Ada Mason and he were working together, and she recognized it when we showed it to her, would she not act precisely as she had done? At first, taken aback, she quickly evolved a plausible theory that would agree with Mr. Kettering's guilt. Bien entendu, that was not the original idea. The Comte de la Roche was to be the scapegoat, though Ada Mason would not make her recognition of him too certain, in case he should be able to prove an alibi. Now, if you will cast your mind back to that time, you will remember a significant thing that happened. I suggested to Ada Mason that the man she had seen was not the Comte de la Roche, but Derek Kettering. She seemed uncertain at the time, but after I had got back to my hotel you rang me up and told me that she had come to you and said that, on thinking it over, she was now quite convinced that the man in question was Mr. Kettering. I had been expecting something of the kind. There could be but one explanation of this sudden certainty on her part. After leaving your hotel, she had had time to consult with somebody, and had received instructions which she acted upon. Who had given her these instructions? Major Knighton. And there was another very small point, which might mean nothing or might mean a great deal. In casual conversation Knighton had talked of a jewel robbery in Yorkshire in a house where he was staying. Perhaps a mere coincidence—perhaps another small link in the chain."

"But there is one thing I do not understand, Monsieur Poirot. I guess I must be dense or I would have seen it before now. Who was the man in the train at Paris? Derek Kettering or the Comte de la Roche?"

"That is the simplicity of the whole thing. There was no man. Ah—mille tonnerres!—do you not see the cleverness of it all? Whose word have we for it that there ever was a man there? Only Ada Mason's. And we believe in Ada Mason because of Knighton's evidence that she was left behind in Paris."

"But Ruth herself told the conductor that she had left her maid behind there," demurred Van Aldin.

"Ah! I am coming to that. We have Mrs. Kettering's own evidence there, but, on the other hand, we have not really got her evidence, because, Monsieur Van Aldin, a dead woman cannot give evidence. It is not her evidence, but the evidence of the conductor of the train—a very different affair altogether."

"So you think the man was lying?"

"No, no, not at all. He spoke what he thought to be the truth. But the woman who told him that she had left her maid in Paris was not Mrs. Kettering."

Van Aldin stared at him.

"Monsieur Van Aldin, Ruth Kettering was dead before the train arrived at the Gare de Lyon. It was Ada Mason, dressed in her mistress's very distinctive clothing, who purchased a dinner basket and who made that very necessary statement to the conductor."

“Impossible!”

“No, no, Monsieur Van Aldin; not impossible. Les femmes, they look so much alike nowadays that one identifies them more by their clothing than by their faces. Ada Mason was the same height as your daughter. Dressed in that very sumptuous fur coat and the little red lacquer hat jammed down over her eyes, with just a bunch of auburn curls showing over each ear, it was no wonder that the conductor was deceived. He had not previously spoken to Mrs. Kettering, you remember. True, he had seen the maid just for a moment when she handed him the tickets, but his impression had been merely that of a gaunt, black-clad female. If he had been an unusually intelligent man, he might have gone so far as to say that mistress and maid were not unlike, but it is extremely unlikely that he would even think that. And remember, Ada Mason, or Kitty Kidd, was an actress, able to change her appearance and tone of voice at a moment’s notice. No, no; there was no danger of his recognizing the maid in the mistress’s clothing, but there was the danger that when he came to discover the body he might realize it was not the woman he had talked to the night before. And now we see the reason for the disfigured face. The chief danger that Ada Mason ran was that Katherine Grey might visit her compartment after the train left Paris, and she provided against that difficulty by ordering a dinner basket and by locking herself in her compartment.”

“But who killed Ruth—and when?”

“First, bear it in mind that the crime was planned and undertaken by the two of them—Knighton and Ada Mason, working together. Knighton was in Paris that day on your business. He boarded the train somewhere on its way round the ceinture. Mrs. Kettering would be surprised, but she would be quite unsuspicious. Perhaps he draws her attention to something out of the window, and as she turns to look he slips the cord round her neck—and the whole thing is over in a second or two. The door of the compartment is locked, and he and Ada Mason set to work. They strip off the dead woman’s outer clothes. Mason and Knighton roll the body up in a rug and put it on the seat in the adjoining compartment amongst the bags and suitcases. Knighton drops off the train, taking the jewel case containing the rubies with him. Since the crime is not supposed to have been committed until nearly twelve hours later he is perfectly safe, and his evidence and the supposed Mrs. Kettering’s words to the conductor will provide a perfect alibi for his accomplice.

“At the Gare de Lyon Ada Mason gets a dinner basket and, shutting herself into the toilet compartment, she quickly changes into her mistress’s clothes, adjusts two false bunches of auburn curls, and generally makes up to resemble her as closely as possible. When the conductor comes to make up the bed, she tells him the prepared story about having left her maid behind in Paris; and whilst he is making up the berth, she stands looking out of the window, so that her back is towards the corridor and people passing along there. That was a wise precaution, because, as we know, Miss Grey was one of those passing, and she, among others, was willing to swear that Mrs. Kettering was still alive at that hour.”

“Go on,” said Van Aldin.

“Before getting to Lyons, Ada Mason arranged her mistress’s body in the bunk, folded up the dead woman’s clothes neatly on the end of it, and herself changed into a man’s clothes and prepared to leave the train. When Derek Kettering entered his wife’s compartment, and, as he thought, saw her asleep in her berth, the scene had been set, and Ada Mason was hidden in the next compartment waiting for the moment to leave the train unobserved. As soon as the conductor had swung himself down on to the platform at Lyons, she follows, slouching along as though just taking a breath of air. At a moment when she is unobserved, she hurriedly crosses to the other platform, and takes the first train back to Paris and the Ritz Hotel. Her name has been registered there as taking a room the night before by one of Knighton’s female accomplices. She has nothing to do but wait there placidly for your arrival. The jewels are not, and never have been, in her possession. No suspicion attaches to him, and, as your secretary, he brings them to Nice without the least fear of discovery. Their delivery there to Monsieur Papopolous is already arranged for, and they are entrusted to Mason at the last moment to hand over to the Greek. Altogether a very neatly planned coup, as one would expect from a master of the game such as the Marquis.”

“And you honestly mean that Richard Knighton is a well-known criminal, who has been at this business for years?”

Poirot nodded.

“One of the chief assets of the gentleman called the Marquis was his plausible, ingratiating manner. You fell a victim of his charm, Monsieur Van Aldin, when you engaged him as a secretary on such a slight acquaintanceship.”

“I could have sworn that he never angled for the post,” cried the millionaire.

“It was very astutely done—so astutely done that it deceived a man whose knowledge of other men is as great as yours is.”

“I looked up his antecedents too. The fellow’s record was excellent.”

“Yes, yes; that was part of the game. As Richard Knighton his life was quite free from reproach. He was well-born, well-connected, did honourable service in the War, and seemed altogether above suspicion; but when I came to glean information about the mysterious Marquis, I found many points of similarity. Knighton spoke French like a Frenchman, he had been in America, France, and England at much the same time as the Marquis was operating. The Marquis was last heard of as engineering various jewel robberies in Switzerland, and it was in Switzerland that you had come across Major Knighton; and it was at precisely that time that the first rumours were going round of your being in treaty for the famous rubies.”

“But why murder?” murmured Van Aldin brokenly. “Surely a clever thief could have stolen the jewels without running his head into a noose.”

Poirot shook his head. “This is not the first murder that lies to the Marquis’s charge. He is a killer by instinct; he believes, too, in leaving no evidence behind him. Dead men and women tell no tales.

“The Marquis had an intense passion for famous and historical jewels. He laid his plans far beforehand by installing himself as your secretary and getting his accomplice to obtain the situation of maid with your daughter, for whom he guessed the jewels were destined. And, though this was his matured and carefully thought-out plan, he did not scruple to attempt a short-cut by hiring a couple of apaches to waylay you in Paris on the night you bought the jewels. The plan failed, which hardly surprised him, I think. This plan was, so he thought, completely safe. No possible suspicion could attach to Richard Knighton. But like all great men—and the Marquis was a great man—he had his weaknesses. He fell genuinely in love with Miss Grey, and, suspecting her liking for Derek Kettering, he could not resist the temptation to saddle him with the crime when the opportunity presented itself. And now, Monsieur Van Aldin, I am going to tell you something very curious. Miss Grey is not a fanciful woman by any means, yet she firmly believes that she felt your daughter's presence beside her one day in the Casino Gardens at Monte Carlo, just after she had been having a long talk with Knighton. She was convinced, she says, that the dead woman was urgently trying to tell her something, and it suddenly came to her that what the dead woman was trying to say was that Knighton was her murderer! The idea seemed so fantastic at the time that Miss Grey spoke of it to no one. But she was so convinced of its truth that she acted on it—wild as it seemed. She did not discourage Knighton's advances, and she pretended to him that she was convinced of Derek Kettering's guilt."

"Extraordinary," said Van Aldin.

"Yes, it is very strange. One cannot explain these things. Oh, by the way, there is one little point that baffled me considerably. Your secretary has a decided limp—the result of a wound that he received in the War. Now the Marquis most decidedly did not limp. That was a stumbling block. But Miss Lenox Tamplin happened to mention one day that Knighton's limp had been a surprise to the surgeon who had been in charge of the case in her mother's hospital. That suggested camouflage. When I was in London I went to the surgeon in question, and I got several technical details from him which confirmed me in that belief. I mentioned the name of that surgeon in Knighton's hearing the day before yesterday. The natural thing would have been for Knighton to mention that he had been attended by him during the War, but he said nothing—and that little point, if nothing else, gave me the last final assurance that my theory of the crime was correct. Miss Grey, too, provided me with a cutting, showing that there had been a robbery at Lady

Tamplin's hospital during the time that Knighton had been there. She realized that I was on the same track as herself when I wrote to her from the Ritz in Paris.

"I had some trouble in my inquiries there, but I got what I wanted—evidence that Ada Mason arrived on the morning after the crime and not on the evening of the day before."

There was a long silence, then the millionaire stretched out a hand to Poirot across the table.

"I guess you know what this means to me, Monsieur Poirot," he said huskily. "I am sending you round a cheque in the morning, but no cheque in the world will express what I feel about what you have done for me. You are the goods, Monsieur Poirot. Every time, you are the goods."

Poirot rose to his feet; his chest swelled.

"I am only Hercule Poirot," he said modestly, "yet, as you say, in my own way I am a big man, even as you also are a big man. I am glad and happy to have been of service to you. Now I go to repair the damages caused by travel. Alas! My excellent Georges is not with me."

In the lounge of the hotel he encountered a friend—the venerable Monsieur Papopolous, his daughter Zia beside him.

"I thought you had left Nice, Monsieur Poirot," murmured the Greek as he took the detective's affectionately proferred hand.

"Business compelled me to return, my dear Monsieur Papopolous."

"Business?"

"Yes, business. And talking of business, I hope your health is better, my dear friend?"

"Much better. In fact, we are returning to Paris tomorrow."

“I am enchanted to hear such good news. You have not completely ruined the Greek ex-Minister, I hope.”

“I?”

“I understand you sold him a very wonderful ruby which—strictly entre nous—is being worn by Mademoiselle Mirelle, the dancer?”

“Yes,” murmured Monsieur Papopolous; “yes, that is so.”

“A ruby not unlike the famous ‘Heart of Fire.’ ”

“It has points of resemblance, certainly,” said the Greek casually.

“You have a wonderful hand with jewels, Monsieur Papopolous. I congratulate you. Mademoiselle Zia, I am desolate that you are returning to Paris so speedily. I had hoped to see some more of you now that my business is accomplished.”

“Would one be indiscreet if one asked what that business was?” asked Monsieur Papopolous.

“Not at all, not at all. I have just succeeded in laying the Marquis by the heels.”

A far-away look came over Monsieur Papopolous’ noble countenance.

“The Marquis?” he murmured; “now why does that seem familiar to me? No—I cannot recall it.”

“You would not, I am sure,” said Poirot. “I refer to a very notable criminal and jewel robber. He has just been arrested for the murder of the English lady, Madame Kettering.”

“Indeed? How interesting these things are!”

A polite exchange of farewells followed, and when Poirot was out of earshot, Monsieur Papopolous turned to his daughter.

“Zia,” he said, with feeling, “that man is the devil!”

“I like him.”

“I like him myself,” admitted Monsieur Papopolous. “But he is the devil, all the same.”

Thirty-six

BY THE SEA

The mimosa was nearly over. The scent of it in the air was faintly unpleasant. There were pink geraniums twining along the balustrade of Lady Tamplin's villa, and masses of carnations below sent up a sweet, heavy perfume. The Mediterranean was at its bluest. Poirot sat on the terrace with Lenox Tamplin. He had just finished telling her the same story that he had told to Van Aldin two days before. Lenox had listened to him with absorbed attention, her brows knitted and her eyes sombre.

When he had finished she said simply:

"And Derek?"

"He was released yesterday."

"And he has gone—where?"

"He left Nice last night."

"For St. Mary Mead?"

"Yes, for St. Mary Mead."

There was a pause.

"I was wrong about Katherine," said Lenox. "I thought she did not care."

"She is very reserved. She trusts no one."

"She might have trusted me," said Lenox, with a shade of bitterness.

“Yes,” said Poirot gravely, “she might have trusted you. But Mademoiselle Katherine has spent a great deal of her life listening, and those who have listened do not find it easy to talk; they keep their sorrows and joys to themselves and tell no one.”

“I was a fool,” said Lenox; “I thought she really cared for Knighton. I ought to have known better. I suppose I thought so because—well, I hoped so.”

Poirot took her hand and gave it a little friendly squeeze. “Courage, Mademoiselle,” he said gently.

Lenox looked very straight out across the sea, and her face, in its ugly rigidity, had for the moment a tragic beauty.

“Oh, well,” she said at last, “it would not have done. I am too young for Derek; he is like a kid that has never grown up. He wants the Madonna touch.”

There was a long silence, then Lenox turned to him quickly and impulsively. “But I did help, Monsieur Poirot—at any rate I did help.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle. It was you who gave me the first inkling of the truth when you said that the person who committed the crime need not have been on the train at all. Before that, I could not see how the thing had been done.”

Lenox drew a deep breath.

“I am glad,” she said; “at any rate—that is something.”

From far behind them there came a long-drawn-out scream of an engine’s whistle.

“That is that damned Blue Train,” said Lenox. “Trains are relentless things, aren’t they, Monsieur Poirot? People are murdered and die, but they go on just the same. I am talking nonsense, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Life is like a train, Mademoiselle. It goes on. And it is a good thing that that is so.”

“Why?”

“Because the train gets to its journey’s end at last, and there is a proverb about that in your language, Mademoiselle.”

“ ‘Journeys end in lovers meeting.’ ” Lenox laughed. “That is not going to be true for me.”

“Yes—yes, it is true. You are young, younger than you yourself know. Trust the train, Mademoiselle, for it is le bon Dieu who drives it.”

The whistle of the engine came again.

“Trust the train, Mademoiselle,” murmured Poirot again. “And trust Hercule Poirot—He knows.”

Black Coffee (1930)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Chapter 1

Hercule Poirot sat at breakfast in his small but agreeably cosy flat in Whitehall Mansions. He had enjoyed his brioche and his cup of hot chocolate. Unusually, for he was a creature of habit and rarely varied his breakfast routine, he had asked his valet, George, to make him a second cup of chocolate. While he was awaiting it, he glanced again at the morning's post which lay on his breakfast table.

Meticulously tidy as always, he had placed the discarded envelopes in one neat pile. They had been opened very carefully, with the paper-knife in the form of a miniature sword which his old friend Hastings had given him for a birthday many years ago. A second pile contained those communications he found of no interest - circulars, mostly - which in a moment he would ask George to dispose of. The third pile consisted of those letters which would require an answer of some kind, or at least an acknowledgement.

These would be dealt with after breakfast, and in any case not before ten o'clock. Poirot thought it not quite professional to begin a routine working day before ten. When he was on a case - ah, well, of course that was different. He remembered that once he and Hastings had set out well before dawn in order to... But, no, Poirot did not want his thoughts to dwell on the past. The happy past. Their last case, involving an international crime organization known as The Big Four, had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and Hastings had returned to the Argentine, his wife and his ranch. Though his old friend was temporarily back in London on business connected with the ranch, it was highly unlikely that Poirot and he would find themselves working together again to solve a crime. Was that why Hercule Poirot was feeling restless on this fine spring morning in May 1934?

Ostensibly retired, he had been lured out of that retirement more than once when an especially interesting problem had been presented to him. He had enjoyed being on the scent again, with Hastings by his side to act as a kind of sounding board for his ideas and theories. But nothing of professional interest had presented itself to Poirot for several months. Were there no imaginative crimes and criminals any more? Was it all violence and brutality, the kind of sordid murder or robbery which was beneath his, Poirot's, dignity to investigate?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival, silently at his elbow, of George - with that second and welcome cup of chocolate. Welcome not only because Poirot would enjoy the rich, sweet taste, but also because it would enable him to postpone, for a few more minutes, the realization that the day, a fine sunny morning, stretched before him with nothing more exciting in prospect than a constitutional in the park and a walk through Mayfair to his favourite restaurant in Soho, where he would lunch alone on - what, now? - perhaps a little pâté to begin, and then the sole bonne femme, followed by...

He became aware that George, having placed the chocolate on the table, was addressing him. The impeccable and imperturbable George, an intensely English, rather wooden-faced individual, had been with Poirot for some time now, and was all that he wished in the way of a valet.

Completely incurious, and extraordinarily reluctant to express a personal opinion on any subject, George was a mine of information about the English aristocracy, and as fanatically neat as the great detective himself. Poirot had more than once said to him, “You press admirably the trousers, George, but the imagination, you possess it not.”

Imagination, however, Hercule Poirot possessed in abundance. The ability to press a pair of trousers properly was, in his opinion, a rare accomplishment. Yes, he was indeed fortunate in having George to look after him.

“- and so I took the liberty, sir, of promising that you would return the call this morning,” George was saying.

“I do beg your pardon, my dear George,” replied Poirot. “My attention was wandering. Someone has telephoned, you say?”

“Yes, sir. It was last night, sir, while you were out at the theatre with Mrs Oliver. I had retired to bed before you arrived home, and thought it unnecessary to leave a message for you at that late hour.”

“Who was it who called?”

“The gentleman said he was Sir Claud Amory, sir. He left his telephone number, which would appear to be somewhere in Surrey. The matter, he said, was a somewhat delicate one, and when you rang you were not to give your name to anyone else, but were to insist on speaking to Sir Claud himself.”

“Thank you, George. Leave the telephone number on my desk,” said Poirot. “I shall ring Sir Claud after I have perused this morning's Times. It is still a trifle early in the morning for telephoning, even on somewhat delicate matters.”

George bowed and departed, while Poirot slowly finished his cup of chocolate and then repaired to the balcony with that morning's newspaper.

A few minutes later The Times had been laid aside. The international news was, as usual, depressing. That terrible Hitler had turned the German courts into branches of the Nazi party, the Fascists had seized power in Bulgaria and, worst of all, in Poirot's own country, Belgium, forty-two miners were feared dead after an explosion at a mine near Mons. The home news was little better. Despite the misgivings of officials, women competitors at Wimbledon were to be allowed to wear shorts this summer. Nor was there much comfort in the obituaries, for people Poirot's age and younger seemed intent on dying.

His newspaper abandoned, Poirot lay back in his comfortable wicker chair, his feet on a small stool. Sir Claud Amory, he thought to himself. The name struck a chord, surely? He had heard it somewhere. Yes, this Sir Claud was well-known in some sphere or other. But what was it? Was he a politician? A barrister? A retired civil servant? Sir Claud Amory. Amory.

The balcony faced the morning sun, and Poirot found it warm enough to bask in for a moment or two. Soon it would become too warm for him, for he was no sunworshipper.

“When the sun drives me inside,” he mused, “then I will exert myself and consult the Who's Who. If this Sir Claud is a person of some distinction, he will surely be included in that so admirable volume. If he is not -”

The little detective gave an expressive shrug of his shoulders. An inveterate snob, he was already predisposed in Sir Claud's favour by virtue of his title. If he were to be found in Who's Who, a volume in which the details of Poirot's own career could also be discovered, then perhaps this Sir Claud was someone with a valid claim on his, Hercule Poirot's, time and attention.

A quickening of curiosity and a sudden cool breeze combined to send Poirot indoors. Entering his library, he went to a shelf of reference books and took down the thick red volume whose title, Who's Who, was embossed in gold on its spine. Turning the pages, he came to the entry he sought, and read aloud.

AMORY, Sir Claud (Herbert); Kt. 1927;

b. 24 Nov. 1878. m. 1907, Helen Graham (d. 1929);

one s.

Educ: Weymouth Gram. Sch.; King's Coll., London.

Research Physicist GEC Laboratories, 1905;

RAE Famborough (Radio Dept.), 1916;

Air Min. Research Establishment, Swanage, 1921;

demonstrated a new Principle for accelerating particles: the travelling wave linear accelerator, 1924.

Awarded Monroe Medal of Physical Soc. Publications; papers in learned journals.

Address: Abbot's Cleve, nr. Market Cleve, Surrey. T; Market Cleve 304.

Club: Athenaeum.

“Ah, yes,” Poirot mused. “The famous scientist.”

He remembered a conversation he had had some months previously with a member of His Majesty's government, after Poirot had retrieved some missing documents whose contents could have proved embarrassing. They had talked of security, and the politician had admitted that security measures in general were not sufficiently stringent.

“For instance,” he had said, “what Sir Claud Amory is working on now is of such fantastic importance in any future war - but he refuses to work under laboratory conditions where he and his invention can be properly guarded. Insists on working alone at his house in the country. No security at all. Frightening.”

I wonder, Poirot thought to himself as he replaced Who's Who on the bookshelf, I wonder - can Sir Claud want to engage Hercule Poirot to be a tired old watchdog? The inventions of war, the secret weapons, they are not for me. If Sir Claud -

The telephone in the next room rang, and Poirot could hear George answering it. A moment later, the valet appeared.

“It's Sir Claud Amory again, sir,” he said.

Poirot went to the phone.

“Hallo. It is Hercule Poirot who speaks,” he announced into the mouthpiece.

“Poirot? We've not met, though we have acquaintances in common. My name is Amory, Claud Amory -”

“I have heard of you, of course, Sir Claud,” Poirot responded.

“Look here, Poirot. I've got a devilishly tricky problem on my hands. Or rather, I might have. I can't be certain. I've been working on a formula to bombard the atom - I won't go into details, but the Ministry of Defence regards it as of the utmost importance. My work is now complete, and I've produced a formula from which a new and deadly explosive can be made. I have reason to suspect that a member of my household is attempting to steal the formula. I can't say any more now, but I should be greatly obliged if you would come down to Abbot's Cleve for the weekend, as my house-guest. I want you to take the formula back with you to London, and hand it over to a certain person at the Ministry. There are good reasons why a Ministry courier can't do the job. I need someone who is ostensibly an unobtrusive, unscientific member of the public but who is also astute enough -”

Sir Claud talked on. Hercule Poirot, glancing across at the reflection in the mirror of his bald, egg-shaped head and his elaborately waxed moustache, told himself that he had never before, in a long career, been considered unobtrusive, nor did he so consider himself. But a weekend in the country and a chance to meet the distinguished scientist could be agreeable, plus, no doubt, the suitably expressed thanks of a grateful government - and merely for carrying in his pocket from Surrey to Whitehall an obscure, if deadly, scientific formula.

“I shall be delighted to oblige you, my dear Sir Claud,” he interrupted. “I shall arrange to arrive on Saturday afternoon, if that is convenient to you, and return to London, with whatever you wish me to take with me, on Monday morning. I look forward greatly to making your acquaintance.”

Curious, he thought, as he replaced the receiver. Foreign agents might well be interested in Sir Claud's formula, but could it really be the case that someone in the scientist's own household -? Ah well, doubtless more would be revealed during the course of the weekend.

“George,” he called, “please take my heavy tweed suit and my dinner jacket and trousers to the cleaner's. I must have them back by Friday, as I am going to the Country for the Weekend.” He made it sound like the Steppes of Central Asia and for a lifetime.

Then, turning to the phone, he dialled a number and waited for a few moments before speaking.

“My dear Hastings,” he began, “would you not like to have a few days away from your business concerns in London? Surrey is very pleasant at this time of the year...”

Chapter 2

Sir Claud Amory's house, Abbot's Cleve, stood just on the outskirts of the small town - or rather, overgrown village - of Market Cleve, about twenty-five miles southeast of London. The house itself, a large but architecturally nondescript Victorian mansion, was set amid an attractive few acres of gently undulating countryside, here and there heavily wooded. The gravel drive, from the gatehouse up to the front door of Abbot's Cleve, twisted its way through trees and dense shrubbery. A terrace ran along the back of the house, with a lawn sloping down to a somewhat neglected formal garden.

On the Friday evening two days after his telephone conversation with Hercule Poirot, Sir Claud sat in his study, a small but comfortably furnished room on the ground floor of the house, on the east side. Outside, the light was beginning to fade. Sir Claud's butler, Tredwell, a tall, lugubrious-looking individual with an impeccably correct manner, had sounded the gong for dinner two or three minutes earlier, and no doubt the family was now assembling in the dining-room on the other side of the hall.

Sir Claud drummed on the desk with his fingers, his habit when forcing himself to a quick decision. A man of medium height and build in his fifties, with greying hair brushed straight back from a high forehead and eyes of a piercingly cold blue, he now wore an expression in which anxiety was mixed with puzzlement.

There was a discreet knock on the study door, and Tredwell appeared in the doorway.

“Excuse me, Sir Claud. I wondered if perhaps you had not heard the gong -”

“Yes, yes, Tredwell, that's all right. Would you tell them I shall be in very shortly? Say I'm caught on the phone. In fact, I am about to make a quick phone call. You may as well begin serving.”

Tredwell withdrew silently, and Sir Claud, taking a deep breath, pulled the telephone towards himself. Extracting a small address-book from a drawer of his desk, he consulted it briefly and then picked up the receiver. He listened for a moment and then spoke.

“This is Market Cleve three-oh-four. I want you to get me a London number.” He gave the number, then sat back, waiting. The fingers of his right hand began to drum nervously on the desk.

Several minutes later, Sir Claud Amory joined the dinner party, taking his place at the head of the table, around which the six others were already seated. On Sir Claud's right sat his niece, Barbara Amory, with Richard, her cousin and the only son of Sir Claud, next to her. On Richard Amory's right was a house-guest, Dr Carelli, an Italian. Continuing round, at the opposite end of the table to Sir Claud, sat Caroline Amory, his sister. A middle-aged spinster, she had run Sir Claud's house for him ever since his wife died some years earlier. Edward Raynor, Sir Claud's secretary, sat on Miss Amory's right, with Lucia, Richard Amory's wife, between him and the head of the household.

Dinner, on this occasion, was not at all festive. Caroline Amory made several attempts at small-talk with Dr Carelli, who answered her politely enough without offering much in the way of conversation himself. When she turned to address a remark to Edward Raynor, that normally polite and socially suave young man gave a nervous start, mumbled an apology and looked embarrassed. Sir Claud was as taciturn as he normally was at meal-times, or perhaps even more so. Richard Amory cast an occasional anxious glance across the table at his wife, Lucia. Barbara Amory alone seemed in good spirits, and made spasmodic light conversation with her Aunt Caroline.

It was while Tredwell was serving the dessert course that Sir Claud suddenly addressed the butler, speaking loudly enough for all at the dinner-table to hear his words.

“Tredwell,” he said, “would you ring Jackson's garage in Market Cleve, and ask them to send a car and driver to the station to meet the eight-fifty from

London? A gentleman who is visiting us after dinner will be coming by that train.”

“Very well, Sir Claud,” replied Tredwell as he left. He was barely out of the room when Lucia, with a murmured apology, got up abruptly from the table and hurried out, almost colliding with the butler as he was about to close the door behind him.

Crossing the hall, she hurried along the corridor and proceeded to the large room at the back of the house. The library - as it was generally called - served normally as a drawing-room as well. It was a comfortable room rather than an elegant one. French windows opened from it onto the terrace, and another door led to Sir Claud's study. On the mantelpiece, above a large open fireplace, stood an old-fashioned clock and some ornaments, as well as a vase of spills for use in lighting the fire.

The library furniture consisted of a tall bookcase with a tin box on the top of it, a desk with a telephone on it, a stool, a small table with gramophone and records, a settee, a coffee-table, an occasional table with book-ends and books on it, two upright chairs, an arm-chair and another table on which stood a plant in a brass pot. The furniture in general was old-fashioned, but not sufficiently old or distinguished to be admired as antique.

Lucia, a beautiful young woman of twenty-five, had luxuriant dark hair which flowed to her shoulders, and brown eyes which could flash excitingly but were now smouldering with a suppressed emotion not easy to define.

She hesitated in the middle of the room, then crossed to the French windows and, parting the curtains slightly, looked out at the night. Uttering a barely audible sigh, she pressed her brow to the cool glass of the window and stood lost in thought.

Miss Amory's voice could be heard outside in the hall, calling, “Lucia - Lucia - where are you?” A moment later, Miss Amory, a somewhat fussy elderly lady a few years older than her brother, entered the room. Going across to Lucia, she took the younger woman by the arm and propelled her towards the settee.

“There, my dear. You sit down here,” she said, pointing to a corner of the settee. “You'll be all right in a minute or two.”

As she sat, Lucia gave a wan smile of gratitude to Caroline Amory.

“Yes, of course,” she agreed. “It's passing already, in fact.”

Though she spoke English impeccably, perhaps too impeccably, an occasional inflection betrayed that English was not her native tongue.

“I just felt faint, that's all,” she continued. “How ridiculous of me. I've never done such a thing before. I can't imagine why it should have happened. Please go back, Aunt Caroline. I shall be quite all right here.”

She took a handkerchief from her handbag, as Caroline Amory looked on solicitously. Dabbing at her eyes with it, she then returned the handkerchief to her bag, and smiled again.

“I shall be quite all right,” she repeated. “Really, I shall.”

Miss Amory looked unconvinced. “You've really not looked well, dear, all the evening, you know,” she remarked, anxiously studying Lucia.

“Haven't I?”

“No, indeed,” replied Miss Amory. She sat on the settee, close to Lucia.

“Perhaps you've caught a little chill, dear,” she twittered anxiously. “Our English summers can be rather treacherous, you know. Not at all like the hot sun in Italy, which is what you're more used to. So delightful, Italy, I always think.”

“Italy,” murmured Lucia with a faraway look in her eyes, as she placed her handbag beside her on the settee. “Italy -”

“I know, my child. You must miss your own country sadly. It must seem such a dreadful contrast - the weather for one thing, and the different customs. And we must seem such a cold lot. Now, Italians -”

“No, never. I never miss Italy,” cried Lucia, with a vehemence that surprised Miss Amory. “Never.”

“Oh, come now, child, there's no disgrace in feeling a little homesick for -”

“Never!” Lucia repeated. “I hate Italy. I always hated it. It is like heaven for me to be here in England with all you kind people. Absolute heaven!”

“It's really very sweet of you to say that, my dear,” said Caroline Amory, “though I'm sure you're only being polite. It's true we've all tried to make you feel happy and at home here, but it would be only natural for you to yearn for Italy sometimes. And then, not having any mother -”

“Please - please -” Lucia interrupted her, “do not speak of my mother.”

“No, of course not, dear, if you'd rather I didn't. I didn't mean to upset you. Shall I get you some smelling-salts? I've got some in my room.”

“No, thank you,” Lucia replied. “Really, I'm perfectly all right now.”

“It's no trouble at all, you know,” Caroline Amory persisted. “I've got some very nice smelling-salts, a lovely pink colour, and in the most charming little bottle. And very pungent. Sal ammoniac, you know. Or is it spirits of salts? I can never remember. But anyway, it's not the one you clean the bath with.”

Lucia smiled gently, but made no reply. Miss Amory had risen, and apparently could not decide whether to go in search of smelling-salts or not. She moved indecisively to the back of the settee and re-arranged the cushions.

“Yes, I think it must be a sudden chill,” she continued. “You were looking the absolute picture of health this morning. Perhaps it was the excitement of seeing this Italian friend of yours, Dr Carelli? He turned up so suddenly and unexpectedly, didn't he? It must have given you quite a shock.”

Lucia's husband, Richard, had entered the library while Caroline Amory was speaking. Miss Amory did not notice him, for she could not understand why her words appeared to have upset Lucia, who leaned back, closed her eyes and shivered.

“Oh, my dear, what is it?” asked Miss Amory. “Are you coming over faint again?”

Richard Amory closed the door and approached the two women. A conventionally handsome young Englishman of about thirty, with sandy hair, he was of medium height, with a somewhat thick-set, muscular figure.

“Do go and finish your dinner, Aunt Caroline,” he said to Miss Amory. “Lucia will be all right with me. I'll look after her.”

Miss Amory still appeared irresolute.

“Oh, it's you, Richard. Well, perhaps I'd better go back,” she said, taking a reluctant step or two in the direction of the door leading to the hall. “You know how your father does hate a disturbance of any kind. And particularly with a guest here. It's not as though it was someone who was a close friend of the family.”

She turned back to Lucia.

“I was just saying, dear, wasn't I, what a very strange thing it was that Dr Carelli should turn up in the way he did, with no idea that you were living in this part of the world. You simply ran into him in the village, and invited him here. It must have been a great surprise for you, my dear, mustn't it?”

“It was,” replied Lucia.

“The world really is such a very small place, I've always said so,” Miss Amory continued. “Your friend is a very good-looking man, Lucia.”

“Do you think so?”

“Foreign-looking, of course,” Miss Amory conceded, “but distinctly handsome. And he speaks English very well.”

“Yes, I suppose he does.”

Miss Amory seemed disinclined to let the topic go.

“Did you really have no idea,” she asked, “that he was in this part of the world?”

“None whatsoever,” replied Lucia emphatically.

Richard Amory had been watching his wife intently. Now he spoke again.

“What a delightful surprise it must have been for you, Lucia,” he said.

His wife looked up at him quickly, but made no reply. Miss Amory beamed.

“Yes, indeed,” she continued. “Did you know him well in Italy, my dear? Was he a great friend of yours? I suppose he must have been.”

There was a sudden bitterness in Lucia's voice.

“He was never a friend,” she said.

“Oh, I see. Merely an acquaintance. But he accepted your generous invitation to stay. I often think foreigners are inclined to be a little pushing. Oh, I don't mean you, of course, dear -” Miss Amory had the grace to pause and blush. “I mean, well, you're half English in any case.”

She looked archly at her nephew, and continued, “In fact, she's quite English now, isn't she, Richard?”

Richard Amory did not respond to his aunt's archness, but moved towards the door and opened it, as though in invitation to Miss Amory to return to the others.

“Well,” said that lady as she moved reluctantly to the door, “if you're sure I can't do anything more -”

“No, no.” Richard's tone was as abrupt as his words as he held the door open for her. With an uncertain gesture and a last nervous smile at Lucia, Miss Amory left.

Emitting a sigh of relief, Richard shut the door after her and came back to his wife.

“Natter, natter, natter,” he complained. “I thought she'd never go.”

“She was only trying to be kind, Richard.”

“Oh, I dare say she was. But she tries a damn sight too hard.”

“I think she's fond of me,” murmured Lucia.

“What? Oh, of course.” Richard Amory's tone was abstracted. He stood observing his wife closely. For a few moments there was a constrained silence. Then, moving nearer to her, Richard looked down at Lucia.

“You're sure there's nothing I can get you?”

Lucia looked up at him, forcing a smile.

“Nothing, really, thank you, Richard. Do go back to the dining-room. I really am perfectly all right now.”

“No,” replied her husband. “I'll stay with you.”

“But I'd rather be alone.”

There was a pause. Then Richard spoke again, as he moved behind the settee. “Cushions all right? Would you like another one under your head?”

“I am quite comfortable as I am,” Lucia protested. “It would be nice to have some air, though. Could you open the window?”

Richard moved to the French windows and fumbled with the catch.

“Damn!” he exclaimed. “The old boy's locked it with one of those patent catches of his. You can't open it without the key.”

Lucia shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, well,” she murmured, “it really doesn't matter.”

Richard came back from the French windows and sat in one of the chairs by the table. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs.

“Wonderful fellow, the old man. Always inventing something or other.”

“Yes,” replied Lucia. “He must have made a lot of money out of his inventions.”

“Pots of it,” said Richard gloomily. “But it isn't the money that appeals to him. They're all the same, these scientists. Always on the track of something utterly impracticable that can be of no earthly interest to anyone other than themselves. Bombarding the atom, for heaven's sake!”

“But all the same, he is a great man, your father.”

“I suppose he's one of the leading scientists of the day,” said Richard grudgingly. “But he can't see any point of view except his own.” He spoke with increasing irritation. “He's treated me damned badly.”

“I know,” Lucia agreed. “He keeps you here, chained to this house, almost as though you were a prisoner. Why did he make you give up the army and come to live here?”

“I suppose,” said Richard, “that he thought I could help him in his work. But he ought to have known that I should be of no earthly use to him in that way. I simply haven't got the brains for it.”

He moved his chair a little closer to Lucia and leaned forward again.

“My God, Lucia, it makes me feel pretty desperate, sometimes. There he is, rolling in money, and he spends every penny on those damned experiments of his. You'd think he'd let me have something of what will be mine someday, in any case, and allow me to get free of this place.”

Lucia sat upright.

“Money!” she exclaimed bitterly. “Everything comes round to that. Money!”

“I'm like a fly caught in a spider's web,” Richard continued. “Helpless. Absolutely helpless.”

Lucia looked at him with an imploring eagerness.

“Oh, Richard,” she exclaimed. “So am I.”

Her husband looked at her with alarm. He was about to speak when Lucia continued, “So am I. Helpless. And I want to get out.”

She rose suddenly and moved towards him, speaking excitedly. “Richard, for God's sake, before it's too late, take me away!”

“Away?” Richard's voice was empty and despairing. “Away where?”

“Anywhere,” replied Lucia with growing excitement. “Anywhere in the world! But away from this house. That's the important thing, away from this house! I am afraid, Richard, I tell you I'm afraid. There are shadows -” she looked over her shoulder as though she could see them “- shadows everywhere.”

Richard remained seated. “How can we go away without money?” he asked. He looked up at Lucia and continued, bitterly, “A man's not much good to a woman without money, is he, Lucia? Is he?”

She backed away from him. “Why do you say that?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

Richard continued to look at her in silence, his face tense yet curiously expressionless.

“What's the matter with you tonight, Richard?” Lucia asked him. “You're different, somehow -”

Richard rose from his chair. “Am I?”

“Yes - what is it?”

“Well -” Richard began, and then stopped. “Nothing. It's nothing.”

He started to turn away from her, but Lucia pulled him back and placed her hands on his shoulders. “Richard, my dear -” she began. He took her hands from his shoulders.

“Richard,” she said again.

Putting his hands behind his back, Richard looked down at her.

“Do you think I'm a complete fool?” he asked. “Do you think I didn't see this old friend of yours slip a note into your hand tonight?”

“Do you mean you thought that -”

He interrupted her fiercely. “Why did you come out from dinner? You weren't feeling faint. That was all a pretense. You wanted to be alone to read your precious note. You couldn't wait. You were nearly mad with impatience because you couldn't get rid of us. First Aunt Caroline - then me.” His eyes were cold with hurt and anger as he looked at her.

“Richard,” said Lucia, “you're mad. Oh, it's absurd. You can't think I care for Carelli! Can you? Can you, really? My dear, Richard, my dear - it's you. It's nobody but you. You must know that.”

Richard kept his eyes fixed on her. “What is in that note?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing - nothing at all.”

“Then show it to me.”

“I - I can't,” said Lucia. “I've destroyed it.”

A frigid smile appeared and disappeared on Richard's face.

“No, you haven't,” he said. “Show it to me.”

Lucia was silent for a moment. She looked at him imploringly.

Then, “Richard,” she asked, “can't you trust me?”

“I could take it from you by force,” he muttered through clenched teeth, as he advanced a step towards her. “I've half a mind -”

Lucia backed away with a faint cry, her eyes still on Richard's face as though willing him to believe her. Suddenly he turned away.

“No,” he said, as though to himself. “I suppose there are some things one can't do.”

He turned back to face his wife. “But, by God, I'll have it out with Carelli.”

Lucia caught his arm with a cry of alarm. “No, Richard, you mustn't. You mustn't. Don't do that, I beg you. Don't do that.”

“You're afraid for your lover, are you?” sneered Richard.

“He's not my lover,” Lucia retorted fiercely.

Richard took her by the shoulders. “Perhaps he isn't - yet,” he said. “Perhaps he -”

Hearing voices outside in the hall, he stopped speaking. Making an effort to control himself, he moved to the fireplace, took out a cigarette-case and lighter, and lit a cigarette.

As the door from the hall opened and the voices grew louder, Lucia moved to the chair Richard had recently vacated, and sat. Her face was white, her hands clasped together in tension.

Miss Amory entered, accompanied by her niece Barbara, an extremely modern young woman of twenty-one.

Swinging her handbag, Barbara crossed the room towards her.

“Hello, Lucia, are you all right now?” she asked.

Chapter 3

Lucia forced a smile as Barbara Amory approached her. “Yes, thank you, darling,” she replied. “I'm perfectly all right. Really.”

Barbara looked down at the beautiful black-haired wife of her cousin. “Not broken any glad tidings to Richard, have you?” she asked. “Is that what it's all about?”

“Glad tidings? What glad tidings? I don't know what you mean,” protested Lucia.

Barbara clasped her arms together and made a rocking motion as though cradling a baby. Lucia's reaction to this pantomime was a sad smile and a shake of the head. Miss Amory, however, collapsed in horror onto a chair. “Really, Barbara!” she admonished.

“Well,” said Barbara, “accidents will happen, you know.”

Her aunt shook her head vigorously. “I cannot think what young girls are coming to, nowadays,” she announced to no one in particular. “In my young days we did not speak flippantly of motherhood, and I would never have allowed -” She broke off at the sound of the door opening, and looked around in time to see Richard leave the room.

“You've embarrassed Richard,” she continued, addressing Barbara, “and I can't say I'm at all surprised.”

“Well, Aunt Caroline,” Barbara replied, “you are a Victorian, you know, born when the old Queen still had a good twenty years of life ahead of her. You're thoroughly representative of your generation, and I dare say I am of mine.”

“I'm in no doubt as to which I prefer -” her aunt began, only to be interrupted by Barbara, who chuckled and said, “I think the Victorians were too marvellous. Fancy telling children that babies were found under gooseberry bushes! I think it's sweet.”

She fumbled in her handbag, found a cigarette and a lighter, and lit the cigarette. She was about to begin speaking again when Miss Amory silenced her with a gesture.

“Oh, do stop being silly, Barbara. I'm really very worried about this poor child here, and I wish you wouldn't make fun of me.”

Lucia suddenly broke down and began to weep. Trying to wipe the tears from her eyes, she said between sobs, “You are all so good to me. No one was ever kind to me until I came here, until I married Richard. It's been wonderful to be here with you. I can't help it, I -”

“There, there,” murmured Miss Amory, rising and going to Lucia. She patted her on the shoulder. “There, there, my dear. I know what you mean - living abroad all your life - most unsuitable for a young girl. Not a proper kind of upbringing at all, and of course the continentals have some very peculiar ideas about education. There, there.”

Lucia stood up and looked about her uncertainly. She allowed Miss Amory to lead her to the settee, and sat at one end while Miss Amory patted cushions around her and then sat next to her. “Of course you're upset, my dear. But you must try to forget about Italy. Although, of course, the dear Italian lakes are quite delightful in the spring, I always think. Very suitable for holidays, but one wouldn't want to live there, naturally. Now, now, don't cry, my dear.”

“I think she needs a good stiff drink,” suggested Barbara, sitting on the coffee-table and peering critically but not unsympathetically into Lucia's face. “This is an awful house, Aunt Caroline. It's years behind the times. You never see the ghost of a cocktail in it. Nothing but sherry or whisky before dinner, and brandy afterwards. Richard can't make a decent Manhattan, and just try asking Edward Raynor for a Whisky Sour. Now what would really pull Lucia around in no time would be a Satan's Whisker.”

Miss Amory turned a shocked countenance upon her niece. “What,” she inquired in horrified tones, “might a Satan's Whisker be?”

“It's quite simple to make, if you have the ingredients,” replied Barbara. “It's merely equal parts of brandy and créme de menthe, but you mustn't forget a shake of red pepper. That's most important. It's absolutely super, and guaranteed to put some pep into you.”

“Barbara, you know I disapprove of these alcoholic stimulants,” Miss Amory exclaimed with a shudder. “My dear father always said -”

“I don't know what he said,” replied Barbara, “but absolutely everyone in the family knows that dear old Great-Uncle Algernon had the reputation of being a three-bottle man.”

At first Miss Amory looked as if she might explode, but then the slight twitch of a smile appeared on her lips, and all she said was, “Gentlemen are different.”

Barbara was having none of this. “They're not in the least different,” she said. “Or at any rate I can't imagine why they should be allowed to be different. They simply got away with it in those days.” She produced from her handbag a small mirror, a powder-puff and lipstick. “Well, how do we look?” she asked herself. “Oh, my God!” And she began vigorously to apply lipstick.

“Really, Barbara,” said her aunt, “I do wish you wouldn't put quite so much of that red stuff on your lips. It's such a very bright colour.”

“I hope so,” replied Barbara, still completing her makeup. “After all, it cost seven and sixpence.”

“Seven shillings and sixpence! What a disgraceful waste of money, just for - for -”

“For 'Kissproof,' Aunt Caroline.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The lipstick. It's called 'Kissproof.'”

Her aunt sniffed disapprovingly. “I know, of course,” she said, “that one's lips are inclined to chap if one has been out in a high wind, and that a little grease is advisable. Lanoline, for instance. I always use -”

Barbara interrupted her. “My dear Aunt Caroline, take it from me, a girl simply can't have too much lipstick on. After all, she never knows how much of it she's going to lose in the taxi coming home.” As she spoke, she replaced the mirror, powder-puff and lipstick in her handbag.

Miss Amory looked puzzled. “What do you mean, 'in the taxi coming home?'” she asked. “I don't understand.”

Barbara rose and, moving behind the settee, leaned over to Lucia. “Never mind. Lucia understands, don't you, my love?” she asked, giving Lucia's chin a little tickle.

Lucia Amory looked around blankly. “I'm so sorry,” she said to Barbara, “I haven't been listening. What did you say?”

Focusing her attention on Lucia again, Caroline Amory returned to the subject of that young lady's health. “You know, my dear,” she said, “I really am worried about you.”

She looked from Lucia to Barbara. “She ought to have something, Barbara. What have we got now? Sal volatile, of course, that would be the very thing. Unfortunately, that careless Ellen broke my bottle this morning when she was dusting in my room.”

Pursing her lips, Barbara considered for a moment. “I know,” she exclaimed. “The hospital stores!”

“Hospital stores? What do you mean? What hospital stores?” Miss Amory asked.

Barbara came and sat in a chair close to her aunt. “You remember,” she reminded her. “All of Edna's things.”

Miss Amory's face brightened. “Ah, yes, of course!”

Turning to Lucia, she said, “I wish you had met Edna, my elder niece, Barbara's sister. She went to India with her husband - oh, it must have been about three months before you came here with Richard. Such a capable girl, Edna was.”

“Most capable,” Barbara confirmed. “She's just had twins. As there are no gooseberry bushes in India, I think she must have found them under a double mango tree.”

Miss Amory allowed herself a smile. “Hush, Barbara,” she said. Then, turning back to Lucia, she continued, “As I was saying, dear, Edna trained as a dispenser during the war. She worked at our hospital here. We turned the Town Hall into a hospital, you know, during the war. And then for some years after the war, until she was married, Edna continued to work in the dispensary at the County Hospital. She was very knowledgeable about drugs and pills and that sort of thing. I dare say she still is. That knowledge must be invaluable to her in India. But what was I saying? Oh, yes - when she left. Now what did we do with all those bottles of hers?”

“I remember perfectly well,” said Barbara. “A lot of old things of Edna's from the dispensary were bundled into a box. They were supposed to be sorted out and sent to hospitals, but everyone forgot, or at least no one did anything about it. They were put away in the attic, and they only came to light again when Edna was packing to go to India. They're up there -” she gestured towards the bookcase - “and they still haven't been looked through and sorted out.”

She rose and, taking her chair across to the bookcase, stood on it and, reaching up, lifted the black tin box down from the top.

Ignoring Lucia's murmured “Please don't bother, darling, I really don't need anything,” Barbara carried the box over to the table in the center of the room and put it down.

“Well,” she said, “at least we might as well have a look at the things now that I've got them down.” She opened the box. “Oh dear, it's a motley collection,” she said, taking out various bottles as she spoke. “Iodine, Friar's Balsam, something called Tinct. Card. Co, Castor oil.” She grimaced.

“Ah, now we're coming to the hot stuff,” she exclaimed, as she took out of the box some small brown glass tubes.

“Atropine, morphine, strychnine,” she read from the labels. “Be careful, Aunt Caroline. If you arouse my furious temper, I'll poison your coffee with strychnine, and you'll die in the most awful agony.” Barbara made a mock-menacing gesture at her aunt, who waved her away with a snort.

“Well, there's nothing here we could possibly try out on Lucia as a tonic, that's for certain,” she laughed, as she began to pack the bottles and phials back into the tin box. She was holding a tube of morphine aloft in her right hand as the door to the hall opened and Tredwell ushered in Edward Raynor, Dr Carelli and Sir Claud Amory.

Sir Claud's secretary, Edward Raynor, entered first, an unremarkable-looking young man in his late twenties. He moved across to Barbara and stood looking at the box.

“Hello, Mr Raynor. Interested in poisons?” she asked him as she continued to pack up the bottles.

Dr Carelli, too, approached the table. A very dark, swarthy individual of about forty, Carelli wore perfectly fitting evening clothes. His manner was suave, and when he spoke, it was with the slightest Italian accent. “What have we here, my dear Miss Amory?” he queried.

Sir Claud paused at the door to speak to Tredwell.

“You understand my instructions?” he asked, and was satisfied by the reply: “Perfectly, Sir Claud.” Tredwell left the room, and Sir Claud moved across to his guest.

“I hope you will excuse me, Dr Carelli,” he said, “if I go straight to my study? I have several important letters which must go off tonight. Raynor, will you come with me?” The secretary joined his employer, and they went into Sir Claud's study by the connecting door. As the door closed behind them, Barbara suddenly dropped the tube she had been holding.

Chapter 4

Dr Carelli stepped forward quickly, and picked up the tube Barbara had dropped. Glancing at it before handing it back to her with a polite bow, he exclaimed “Hello what's this? Morphine!” He picked up another one from the table. “And Strychnine! May I ask, my dear young lady, where you got hold of these lethal little tubes?” He began to examine the contents of the tin box.

Barbara looked at the suave Italian with distaste “The spoils of war,” she replied shortly, with a tight little smile. Rising anxiously, Caroline Amory approached Dr Carelli.

“They're not really poison, are they, Doctor? I mean they couldn't harm anyone, could they?” she asked. “That box has been in the house for years. Surely it's harmless, isn't it?”

“I should say,” replied Carelli drily, “that, with the little you have here, you could kill, roughly, twelve strong men. I don't know what you regard as harmful.”

“Oh, good gracious,” Miss Amory gasped with horror as she moved back to her chair and sat heavily.

“Here, for instance,” continued Carelli, addressing the assembled company. He picked up a tube and read slowly from the label. “'Strychnine hydrochloride; one sixteenth of a grain.' Seven or eight of these little tablets, and you would die a very unpleasant death indeed. An extremely painful way out of the world.” He picked up another tube.

“'Atropine sulphate.' Now, atropine poisoning is sometimes very hard to tell from ptomaine poisoning. It is also a very painful death.”

Replacing the two tubes he had handled, he picked up another. “Now here -” he continued, speaking now very slowly and deliberately, “here we have hyoscine hydrobromide, one hundredth of a grain. That doesn't sound very potent, does it? Yet I assure you, you would only have to swallow half of the little white tablets in this tube, and -” he made a graphic gesture. “There would be no pain - no pain at all. Just a swift and completely dreamless sleep, but a sleep from which there would be no awakening.”

He moved towards Lucia and held out the tube to her, as though inviting her to examine it. There was a smile on his face, but not in his eyes.

Lucia stared at the tube as though she were fascinated by it. Stretching out a hand, she spoke in a voice that sounded almost as though it were hypnotized. “A swift and completely dreamless sleep -” she murmured, reaching for the tube.

Instead of giving it to her, Dr Carelli glanced at Caroline Amory with an almost questioning look. That lady shuddered and looked distressed, but said nothing. With a shrug of the shoulders, Carelli turned away from Lucia, still holding the tube of hyoscine hydrobromide.

The door to the hall-way opened, and Richard Amory entered. Without speaking he strolled across to the stool by the desk and sat down. He was followed into the room by Tredwell, who carried a tray containing a jug of coffee and cups and saucers. Placing the tray on the coffee-table, Tredwell left the room as Lucia moved to sit on the settee and pour out the coffee.

Barbara went across to Lucia, took two cups of coffee from the tray, and then moved over to Richard to give him one of them, keeping the other for herself. Dr Carelli, meanwhile, was busy replacing the tubes in the tin box on the center table.

“You know,” said Miss Amory to Carelli, “you make my flesh creep, Doctor, with your talk of swift, dreamless sleep and unpleasant deaths. I suppose that, being Italian as you are, you know a lot about poisons?”

“My dear lady,” laughed Carelli, “is that not an extremely unjust - what do you say - non sequitur? Why should an Italian know any more about poisons than an Englishman? I have heard it said,” he continued playfully, “that poison is a woman's weapon, rather than a man's. Perhaps I should ask you -? Ah, but perhaps, dear lady, it is an Italian woman you were thinking of? Perhaps you were about to mention a certain Borgia. Is that it, eh?” He took a cup of coffee from Lucia at the coffee-table and handed it to Miss Amory, returning to take another cup for himself.

“Lucrezia Borgia - that dreadful creature! Yes, I suppose that's what I was thinking of,” admitted Miss Amory. “I used to have nightmares about her when I was a child, you know. I imagined her as very pale, but tall, and with jet-black hair just like our own dear Lucia.”

Dr Carelli approached Miss Amory with the sugarbowl. She shook her head in refusal, and he took the bowl back to the coffee tray. Richard Amory put his coffee down, took a magazine from the desk and began to browse through it, as his aunt developed her Borgia theme.

“Yes, dreadful nightmares I used to have,” Miss Amory was saying. “I would be the only child in a room full of adults, all of them drinking out of very elaborate goblets. Then this glamorous woman - now I come to think of it, she did look remarkably like you, Lucia dear - would approach me and force a goblet upon me. I could tell by the way she smiled, somehow, that I ought not to drink, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to refuse. Somehow, she hypnotized me into drinking, and then I would begin to feel a dreadful burning sensation in my throat, and I would find myself fighting for breath. And then, of course, I woke up.”

Dr Carelli had moved close to Lucia. Standing in front of her, he gave an ironic bow. “My dear Lucrezia Borgia,” he implored, “have mercy on us all.”

Lucia did not react to Carelli's joke. She appeared not to have heard him. There was a pause. Smiling to himself, Dr Carelli turned away from Lucia, drank his coffee and placed his cup on the center table. Finishing her coffee rapidly, Barbara seemed to realize that a change of mood was called for.

“What about a little tune?” she suggested, moving across to the gramophone. “Now, what shall we have? There's a marvellous record here that I bought up in town the other day.” She began to sing, accompanying her words with a jazzy little dance. “'Ikey - oh, crikey - what have you got on?' Or what else is there?”

“Oh, Barbara dear, not that vulgar song,” implored Miss Amory, moving across to her and helping to look through the gramophone records. “There are some much nicer records here. If we must have popular music, there are some lovely songs by John McCormack here somewhere. Or what about 'The Holy City'? - I can't remember the soprano's name. Or why not that nice Melba record? Oh - ah, yes - here's Händel's Largo.”

“Oh, come on, Aunt Caroline. We're not likely to be cheered up by Händel's Largo,” Barbara protested. “There's some Italian opera here, if we must have classical music. Come on, Dr Carelli, this ought to be your province. Come and help us choose.”

Carelli joined Barbara and Miss Amory around the gramophone, and all three of them began to sort through the pile of records. Richard now seemed engrossed in his magazine.

Lucia rose, moved slowly and apparently aimlessly across to the center table and glanced at the tin box. Then, taking care to establish that the others were not observing her, she took a tube from the box and read the label. “'Hyoscine hydrobromide.'” Opening the tube, Lucia poured nearly all of the tablets into the palm of her hand. As she did so, the door to Sir Claud's study opened, and Sir Claud's secretary, Edward Raynor, appeared in the doorway.

Unknown to Lucia, Raynor watched her as she put the tube back into the tin box before moving over to the coffee-table.

At that moment Sir Claud's voice was heard to call from the study. His words were indistinct, but Raynor, turning to answer him, said, “Yes, of course, Sir Claud. I'll bring you your coffee now.”

The secretary was about to enter the library when Sir Claud's voice arrested him. “And what about that letter to Marshall's?”

“It went off by the afternoon post, Sir Claud,” replied the secretary.

“But Raynor, I told you - oh, come back here, man,” Sir Claud boomed from his study.

“I'm sorry, sir,” Raynor was heard to say as he retreated from the doorway to rejoin Sir Claud Amory in his study. Lucia, who had turned to watch him at the sound of his voice, seemed not to realize that the secretary had been observing her movements. Turning, so that her back was to Richard, she dropped the tablets she had been holding into one of the coffee-cups on the coffee-table, and moved to the center of the settee.

The gramophone suddenly burst into life with a quick foxtrot. Richard Amory put down the magazine he had been reading, finished his coffee quickly, placed the cup on the center table, and moved across to his wife. “I'll take you at your word. I've decided. We'll go away together.”

Lucia looked up at him in surprise. “Richard,” she said faintly, “do you really mean it? We can get away from here? But I thought you said - what about? - where will the money come from?”

“There are always ways of acquiring money,” said Richard grimly.

There was alarm in Lucia's voice as she asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said her husband, “that when a man cares about a woman as I care about you, he'll do anything. Anything!”

“It does not flatter me to hear you say that,” Lucia responded. “It only tells me that you still do not trust me - that you think you must buy my love with -”

She broke off and looked around as the door to the study opened and Edward Raynor returned. Raynor walked over to the coffee-table and picked up a cup of coffee, as Lucia changed her position on the settee, moving down to one end of it. Richard had wandered moodily across to the fireplace and was staring into the unlit grate.

Barbara, beginning a tentative foxtrot alone, looked at her cousin Richard as though considering whether to invite him to dance. But, apparently put off by his stony countenance, she turned to Raynor. “Care to dance, Mr Raynor?” she asked.

“I'd love to, Miss Amory,” the secretary replied. “Just a moment, while I take Sir Claud his coffee.”

Lucia suddenly rose from the settee. “Mr Raynor,” she said hurriedly, “that isn't Sir Claud's coffee. You've taken the wrong cup.”

“Have I?” said Raynor. “I'm so sorry.” Lucia picked up another cup from the coffee-table and held it out to Raynor. They exchanged cups. “That,” said Lucia, as she handed the cup to Raynor, “is Sir Claud's coffee.” She smiled enigmatically to herself, placed the cup Raynor had given her on the coffee-table and returned to the settee.

Turning his back to Lucia, the secretary took some tablets from his pocket and dropped them into the cup he was holding. As he was walking with it towards the study door, Barbara intercepted him. “Do come and dance with me, Mr Raynor,” she pleaded, with one of her most engaging smiles. “I'd force Dr Carelli to, except that I can tell he's simply dying to dance with Lucia.”

As Raynor hovered indecisively, Richard Amory approached.

“You may as well give in to her, Raynor,” he advised. “Everyone does, eventually. Here, give the coffee to me. I'll take it to my father.”

Reluctantly Raynor allowed the coffee-cup to be taken from him. Turning away, Richard paused momentarily and then went through into Sir Claud's study. Barbara and Edward Raynor, having first turned over the gramophone record on the machine, were now slowly waltzing in each other's arms. Dr Carelli watched them for a moment or two with an indulgent smile, before approaching Lucia who, wearing a look of utter dejection, was still seated on the settee.

Carelli addressed her. “It was most kind of Miss Amory to allow me to join you for the weekend,” he said.

Lucia looked up at him. For a few seconds she did not speak, but then said, finally, “She is the kindest of people.”

“And this is such a charming house,” continued Carelli, moving behind the settee. “You must show me over it sometime. I am extremely interested in the domestic architecture of this period.”

While he was speaking, Richard Amory had returned from the study. Ignoring his wife and Carelli, he went across to the box of drugs on the center table, and began to tidy its contents.

“Miss Amory can tell you much more about this house than I can,” Lucia told Dr Carelli. “I know very little of these things.”

Looking around first, to confirm that Richard Amory was busying himself with the drugs, that Edward Raynor and Barbara Amory were still waltzing at the far end of the room, and that Caroline Amory appeared to be dozing, Carelli moved to the front of the settee and sat next to Lucia. In low, urgent tones, he muttered, “Have you done what I asked?”

Her voice even lower, almost a whisper, Lucia said desperately, “Have you no pity?”

“Have you done what I told you to?” Carelli asked more insistently.

“I - I -” Lucia began, but then, faltering, rose, turned abruptly and walked swiftly to the door which led into the hall. Turning the handle, she discovered that the door would not open.

“There's something wrong with this door,” she exclaimed, turning to face the others. “I can't get it open.”

“What's that?” called Barbara, still waltzing with Raynor.

“I can't get this door open,” Lucia repeated.

Barbara and Raynor stopped dancing and went across to Lucia at the door. Richard Amory moved to the gramophone to switch it off before joining them. They took it in turns to attempt to get the door open, but without success, observed by Miss Amory, who was awake but still seated, and by Dr Carelli, who stood by the bookcase.

Unnoticed by any of the company, Sir Claud emerged from his study, coffee-cup in hand, and stood for a moment or two observing the group clustered around the door to the hall.

“What an extraordinary thing,” Raynor exclaimed, abandoning his attempt to open the door, and turning to face the others. “It seems to have got stuck somehow.”

Sir Claud's voice rang across the room, startling them all. “Oh, no, it's not stuck. It's locked. Locked from the outside.”

His sister rose and approached Sir Claud. She was about to speak, but he forestalled her. “It was locked by my orders, Caroline,” he told her.

With all eyes upon him, Sir Claud walked across to the coffee-table, took a lump of sugar from the bowl, and dropped it into his cup. “I have something to say to you all,” he announced to the assembled company. “Richard, would you be so kind as to ring for Tredwell?”

His son looked as though he were about to make some reply. However, after a pause he went to the fireplace and pressed a bell in the wall nearby.

“I suggest that you all sit down,” Sir Claud continued, with a gesture towards the chairs.

Dr Carelli, with raised eyebrows, crossed the room to sit on the stool. Edward Raynor and Lucia Amory found chairs for themselves, while Richard Amory chose to stand in front of the fireplace, looking puzzled. Caroline Amory and her niece Barbara occupied the settee.

When all were comfortably seated, Sir Claud moved the arm-chair to a position where he could most easily observe all the others. He sat.

The door on the left opened, and Tredwell entered. “You rang, Sir Claud?”

“Yes, Tredwell. Did you call the number I gave you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was the answer satisfactory?”

“Perfectly satisfactory, sir.”

“And a car has gone to the station?”

“Yes, sir. A car has been ordered to meet the train.”

“Very well, Tredwell,” said Sir Claud. “You may lock up now.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Tredwell, as he withdrew.

After the butler had closed the door behind him, the sound of a key turning in the lock could be heard.

“Claud,” Miss Amory exclaimed, “what on earth does Tredwell think -?”

“Tredwell is acting on my instructions, Caroline,” Sir Claud interrupted sharply.

Richard Amory addressed his father. “May we ask the meaning of all this?” he inquired coldly.

“I am about to explain,” replied Sir Claud. “Please listen to me calmly, all of you. To begin with, as you now realize, those two doors -” he gestured towards the two doors on the hall side of the library - “are locked on the outside. From my study next door, there is no way out except through this room. The French windows in this room are locked.” Swivelling around in his seat to Carelli, he explained, as though in parenthesis, “Locked, in fact, by a patent device of my own, which my family knows of, but which they do not know how to immobilize.” Again addressing everyone, Sir Claud continued, “This place is a rat-trap.” He looked at his watch. “It is now ten minutes to nine. At a few minutes past nine, the rat-catcher will arrive.”

“The rat-catcher?” Richard Amory's face was a study in perplexity. “What rat-catcher?”

“A detective,” explained the famous scientist drily as he sipped his coffee.

Chapter 5

Consternation greeted Sir Claud's announcement.

Lucia uttered a low cry, and her husband stared at her intently. Miss Amory gave a shriek, Barbara exclaimed “Crikey!” and Edward Raynor contributed an ineffectual “Oh, I say, Sir Claud!” Only Dr Carelli seemed unaffected.

Sir Claud settled in his arm-chair, holding his coffee-cup in his right hand and the saucer in his left. “I seem to have made my little effect,” he observed with satisfaction.

Finishing his coffee, he set the cup and saucer down on the table with a grimace. “The coffee is unusually bitter this evening,” he complained.

His sister's countenance registered a certain annoyance at the aspersion cast on the coffee, which she took as a direct criticism of her housekeeping. She was about to say something, when Richard Amory spoke. “What detective?” he asked his father.

“His name is Hercule Poirot,” replied Sir Claud. “He is a Belgian.”

“But why?” Richard persisted. “Why did you send for him?”

“A leading question,” said his father, with an unpleasantly grim smile. “Now we come to the point. For some time past, as most of you know, I have been engaged in atomic research. I have made a discovery of a new explosive. Its force is such that everything hitherto attempted in that line will be mere child's play beside it. Most of this you know already -”

Carelli got to his feet quickly. “I did not know,” he exclaimed eagerly. “I am much interested to hear of this.”

“Indeed, Dr Carelli?” Sir Claud invested the conventionally meaningless phrase with a curious significance, and Carelli, in some embarrassment, resumed his seat.

“As I was saying,” Sir Claud continued, “the force of Amorite, as I call it, is such that where we have hitherto killed by thousands, we can now kill by hundreds of thousands.”

“How horrible,” exclaimed Lucia, with a shudder.

“My dear Lucia -” her father-in-law smiled thinly at her as he spoke - “the truth is never horrible, only interesting.”

“But why -” asked Richard, “are you telling us all this?”

“Because I have had occasion for some time to believe that a member of this household was attempting to steal the Amorite formula. I had asked Monsieur Poirot to join us tomorrow for the weekend, so that he could take the formula back to London with him on Monday, and deliver it personally to an official at the Ministry of Defence.”

“But, Claud, that's absurd. Indeed, it's highly offensive to all of us,” Caroline Amory expostulated. “You can't seriously suspect -”

“I have not finished, Caroline,” her brother interrupted. “And I assure you there is nothing absurd about what I am saying. I repeat, I had invited Hercule Poirot to join us tomorrow, but I have had to change my plans and ask Monsieur Poirot to hurry down here from London this evening. I have taken this step because -”

Sir Claud paused. When he resumed speaking, it was more slowly, and with a much more deliberate emphasis.

“Because,” he repeated, as his glance swept around the assembled company, “the formula, written on an ordinary sheet of notepaper and enclosed in a long envelope, was stolen from the safe in my study sometime before dinner this evening. It was stolen by someone in this room!”

A chorus of shocked exclamations greeted the eminent scientist's announcement. Then everyone began to speak at once.

“Stolen formula?” Caroline Amory began.

“What? From the safe? Impossible!” Edward Raynor exclaimed.

The babble of voices did not include that of Dr Carelli, who remained seated, with a thoughtful expression on his face. The others, however, were silenced only when Sir Claud raised his voice and continued.

“I am in the habit of being certain of my facts,” he assured his hearers. “At twenty minutes past seven exactly, I placed the formula in the safe. As I left the study, Raynor here entered it.”

Blushing either from embarrassment or from anger, the secretary began, “Sir Claud, really, I must protest -”

Sir Claud raised a hand to silence him. “Raynor remained in the study,” he went on, “and was still there, working, when Dr Carelli appeared at the door. After greeting him, Raynor left Carelli alone in the study while he went to let Lucia know -”

“I protest - I -” Carelli began, but again Sir Claud raised his hand for silence, and continued his narrative. “Raynor, however,” he said, “did not get further than the door of this room, where he met my sister Caroline, with Barbara. The three of them remained in this room, and Dr Carelli joined them. Caroline and Barbara were the only two members of the party who did not enter the study.”

Barbara glanced at her aunt, and then addressed Sir Claud. “I'm afraid your information about our movements isn't quite correct, Uncle Claud,” she said. “I can't be excluded from your list of suspects. Do you remember, Aunt Caroline? You sent me into the study to look for a knitting needle you said you'd mislaid. You wondered if it might be in there.”

Ignoring his niece's interruption, the scientist continued. “Richard came down next. He strolled into the study by himself and remained there for some minutes.”

“My God!” Richard exclaimed. “Really, Father, you surely don't suspect that I'd steal your wretched formula, do you?”

Looking directly at his son, Sir Claud replied meaningfully, “That piece of paper was worth a great deal of money.”

“I see.” His son regarded him steadily. “And I'm in debt. That's what you mean, isn't it?”

Sir Claud made no reply to him. His gaze sweeping over the others, he continued. “As I was saying, Richard remained in the study for some minutes. He reappeared in this room just as Lucia came in. When dinner was announced, a few minutes later, Lucia was no longer with us. I found her in the study, standing by the safe.”

“Father!” exclaimed Richard, moving to his wife and putting an arm protectively about her.

“I repeat, standing by the safe,” Sir Claud insisted. “She seemed very much agitated, and when I asked what was the matter she told me she felt unwell. I suggested that a glass of wine might be good for her. She assured me, however, that she was quite all right again, and then left me to join the others. Instead of following Lucia immediately to the dining-room, I remained behind in my study. I don't know why, but some instinct urged me to look in the safe. The envelope with the formula in it had disappeared.”

Chapter 6

There was a pause. No one spoke. The immense seriousness of the situation appeared to be dawning on everyone. Then Richard asked, “How have you assembled this information about our movements, Father?”

“By taking thought, of course,” Sir Claud replied. “By observation and deduction. By the evidence of my own eyes, and by what I learned from questioning Tredwell.”

“I notice you don't include Tredwell or any of the other servants among your suspects, Claud,” Caroline Amory observed tartly. “Only your family.”

“My family - and our guest,” her brother corrected her.

“That is so, Caroline. I have established to my own satisfaction that neither Tredwell nor any of the domestics were in the study between the time I placed the formula in the safe and the time I opened the safe again to find it missing.”

He looked at each of them in turn, before adding, “I hope the position is clear to you all. Whoever took the formula must still have it. Since we returned here from dinner, the dining-room has been thoroughly searched. Tredwell would have informed me if the piece of paper had been found hidden there. And, as you now realize, I have seen to it that no one has had the opportunity to leave this room.”

For some moments there was a tense silence, broken only when Dr Carelli asked politely, “Is it your suggestion, then, Sir Claud, that we should all be searched?”

“That is not my suggestion,” replied Sir Claud, consulting his watch. “It is now two minutes to nine. Hercule Poirot will have arrived at Market Cleve, where he is being met. At nine o'clock precisely. Tredwell has orders to switch off the lights from the main switch in the basement. We shall be in complete darkness in this room for one minute, and one minute only. When the lights go on again, matters will be out of my hands. Hercule Poirot will be here shortly, and he will be in charge of the case. But if, under cover of darkness, the formula is placed here -" and Sir Claud slapped his hand down on the table - "then I shall inform Monsieur Poirot that I had made a mistake and that I have no need of his services."

"That's an outrageous suggestion," Richard declared heatedly. He looked around at the others. "I say we should all be searched. I'm certainly willing."

"So am I, of course," Edward Raynor made haste to announce.

Richard Amory looked pointedly at Dr Carelli. The Italian smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "And I."

Richard's glance moved to his aunt. "Very well, if we must, we must," Miss Amory grumbled.

"Lucia?" Richard asked, turning to his wife.

"No, no, Richard," Lucia replied breathily. "Your father's plan is best."

Richard looked at her in silence for a moment.

"Well, Richard?" queried Sir Claud.

A heavy sigh was at first his only reply, and then, "Very well, I agree." He looked at his cousin Barbara, who gave a gesture of assent.

Sir Claud leaned back in his chair wearily, and spoke in a slow, dragging voice. "The taste of that coffee is still in my mouth," he said, and then yawned.

The clock on the mantelpiece began to strike, and there was complete silence as all turned to listen. Sir Claud turned slowly in his chair and looked steadily at his son, Richard. On the last stroke of nine, the lights suddenly went out and the room was plunged into darkness.

There were a few gasps, and some stifled exclamations from the women, and then Miss Amory's voice rang out clearly. “I don't care for this at all.”

“Do be quiet, Aunt Caroline,” Barbara ordered her. “I'm trying to listen.”

For a few seconds there was absolute silence, followed by the sounds of heavy breathing, and then a rustling of paper. Silence again, before they all heard a kind of metallic clink, the sound of something tearing, and a loud bang, which might have been a chair being knocked over.

Suddenly, Lucia screamed. “Sir Claud! Sir Claud! I can't bear it. I must have light. Somebody, please!”

The room remained in darkness. There was a sharp intake of breath, and then a loud knock at the door leading to the hall. Lucia screamed again. As though in response, the lights suddenly came on again.

Richard was now standing by the door, apparently unable to decide whether or not to attempt to open it. Edward Raynor was on his feet by his chair, which had overturned. Lucia lay back in her chair, as though about to faint.

Sir Claud sat absolutely still in his arm-chair, with his eyes closed. His secretary suddenly pointed to the table beside his employer. “Look,” he exclaimed. “The formula.”

On the table beside Sir Claud was a long envelope of the type he had earlier described.

“Thank God!” cried Lucia. “Thank God!”

There was another knock at the door, which now opened slowly. Everyone's attention was fixed on the doorway as Tredwell ushered in a stranger and then withdrew.

The assembled company stared at the stranger.

What they saw was an extraordinary-looking little man, hardly more than five feet four inches in height, who carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he carried it at a slight angle, like an inquiring terrier. His moustache was distinctly stiff and military. He was very neatly dressed.

“Hercule Poirot, at your service,” said the stranger, and bowed.

Richard Amory held out a hand. “Monsieur Poirot,” he said as they shook hands.

“Sir Claud?” asked Poirot. “Ah, no, you are too young, of course. You are his son, perhaps?” He moved past Richard into the center of the room. Behind him, another man, tall, middle-aged and of military bearing, had unobtrusively entered. As he moved to Poirot's side, the detective announced, “My colleague, Captain Hastings.”

“What a delightful room,” Hastings observed as he shook hands with Richard Amory.

Richard turned back to Poirot. “I'm sorry, Monsieur Poirot,” he said, “but I fear we have brought you down here under a misapprehension. The need for your services has passed.”

“Indeed?” replied Poirot.

“Yes, I'm sorry,” Richard continued. “It's too bad, dragging you all the way down here from London. Of course, your fee - and expenses - I mean - er, that'll be all right, of course -”

“I comprehend perfectly,” said Poirot, “but for the moment it is neither my fee nor my expenses which interests me.”

“No? Then what - er -?”

“What does interest me, Mr Amory? I will tell you. It is just a little point, of no consequence, of course. But it was your father who sent for me to come. Why is it not he who tells me to go?”

“Oh, of course. I'm sorry,” said Richard, turning towards Sir Claud. “Father, would you please tell Monsieur Poirot that we no longer have any need of his services?”

Sir Claud did not answer.

“Father!” Richard exclaimed, moving quickly to Sir Claud's arm-chair. He bent over his father, and then turned around wildly. “Dr Carelli,” he called.

Miss Amory rose, white-faced. Carelli swiftly crossed to Sir Claud and felt his pulse. Frowning, he placed his hand over Sir Claud's heart, and then shook his head.

Poirot moved slowly to the arm-chair and stood looking down at the motionless body of the scientist. “Yes - I fear -” he murmured, as though to himself, “I very much fear -”

“What do you fear?” asked Barbara, moving towards him.

Poirot looked at her. “I fear that Sir Claud has sent for me too late, mademoiselle.”

Consternation followed Hercule Poirot's statement. Dr Carelli continued his examination of Sir Claud for a few moments before straightening himself and turning to the others. Addressing Richard Amory, “I am afraid your father is dead,” he confirmed.

Richard stared at him in disbelief, as though he were unable to take the Italian doctor's words in. Then, “My God - what was it? Heart failure?” he asked.

“I - I suppose so,” replied Carelli somewhat doubtfully.

Barbara moved to her aunt to comfort her, for Miss Amory seemed about to faint. Edward Raynor joined them, helping to support Miss Amory, and whispering to Barbara as he did so, “I suppose that fellow is a real doctor?”

“Yes, but only an Italian one,” Barbara murmured in reply, as between them they settled Miss Amory into a chair. Overhearing Barbara's remark, Poirot shook his head energetically. Then, stroking his luxuriant moustache with exquisite care, he smiled as he commented softly, “Me, I am a detective -

but only a Belgian one. Nevertheless, madame, we foreigners do arrive at the correct answer occasionally.”

Barbara had the grace to look at least a trifle embarrassed. She and Raynor remained in conversation for a few moments, but then Lucia approached Poirot, taking his arm and drawing him aside from the others.

“Monsieur Poirot,” she urged him breathlessly, “you must stay! You must not let them send you away.”

Poirot regarded her steadily. His face remained quite impassive as he asked her, “Is it that you wish me to stay, madame?”

“Yes, yes,” replied Lucia, glancing anxiously towards the body of Sir Claud, still seated in its upright position in the arm-chair. “There's something wrong about all this. My father-in-law's heart was perfectly all right. Perfectly, I tell you. Please, Monsieur Poirot, you must find out what has happened.”

Dr Carelli and Richard Amory continued to hover near the body of Sir Claud. Richard, in an agony of indecision, appeared to be almost petrified into immobility. “I would suggest, Mr Amory,” Dr Carelli urged him, “that you send for your father's own physician. I assume he had one?”

Richard roused himself with an effort. “What? Oh, yes,” he responded. “Dr Graham. Young Kenneth Graham. He has a practice in the village. In fact, he's rather keen on my cousin Barbara. I mean - sorry, that's irrelevant, isn't it?” Glancing across the room at Barbara, he called to her.

“What's Kenneth Graham's phone number?”

“Market Cleve five,” Barbara told him. Richard moved to the phone, lifted the receiver and asked for the number.

While he was waiting to be connected, Edward Raynor, recalling his secretarial duties, asked Richard, “Do you think I should order the car for Monsieur Poirot?”

Poirot spread out his hands apologetically. He was about to speak when Lucia forestalled him. “Monsieur Poirot is remaining - at my request,” she announced to the company in general.

Still holding the telephone receiver to his ear, Richard turned, startled. “What do you mean?” he asked his wife tersely.

“Yes, yes, Richard, he must stay,” Lucia insisted. Her voice sounded almost hysterical.

Miss Amory looked up in consternation, Barbara and Edward Raynor exchanged worried glances, Dr Carelli stood looking down thoughtfully at the lifeless body of the great scientist, while Hastings, who had been absentmindedly examining the books on the library shelves, turned to survey the gathering.

Richard was about to respond to Lucia's outburst when his attention was claimed by the telephone he was holding.

“Oh, what... Is that Dr Graham?” he asked. “Kenneth, it's Richard Amory speaking. My father has had a heart attack. Can you come up at once? ... Well, actually, I'm afraid there's nothing to be done... Yes, he's dead... No... I'm afraid so... Thank you.” Replacing the receiver, he crossed the room to his wife and, in a low, agitated voice, muttered, “Lucia, are you mad? What have you done? Don't you realize we must get rid of this detective?”

Astonished, Lucia rose from her chair. “What do you mean?” she asked Richard.

Their exchange continued quietly but urgently. “Didn't you hear what Father said?” His tone fraught with meaning, he murmured, “The coffee is very bitter.”

At first, Lucia seemed not to understand. “'The coffee is very bitter?'” she repeated. She looked at Richard uncomprehendingly for a moment, and then suddenly uttered a cry of horror which she quickly stifled.

“You see? Do you understand now?” Richard asked.

Lowering his voice to a whisper, he added, “He's been poisoned. And obviously by a member of the family. You don't want a ghastly scandal, do you?”

“Oh, my God,” murmured Lucia, staring straight in front of her. “Oh, merciful God.”

Turning away from her, Richard approached Poirot.

“Monsieur Poirot -” he began, and then hesitated.

“M'sieu?” Poirot queried politely.

Summoning up his determination, Richard continued, “Monsieur Poirot, I'm afraid I do not quite understand what it is that my wife has asked you to investigate.”

Poirot considered for a moment before replying. Then, smiling pleasantly, he answered, “Shall we say, the theft of a document? That, mademoiselle tells me,” he continued, gesturing towards Barbara, “is what I was called down for.”

Casting a glance of reproach at Barbara, Richard told Poirot, “The document in question has been returned.”

“Has it?” asked Poirot, his smile becoming rather enigmatic.

The little detective suddenly had the attention of everyone present, as he moved to the table in the center of the room and looked at the envelope still lying on it, which had been generally forgotten in the excitement and commotion caused by the discovery of Sir Claud's death.

“What do you mean?” Richard Amory asked Hercule Poirot.

Poirot gave a flamboyant twist to his moustache and carefully brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve. Then, “It is just a - no doubt foolish - idea of mine,” the little detective finally replied. “You see, someone told me the other day a most amusing story. The story of the empty bottle - there was nothing in it.”

“I'm sorry, I don't understand you,” Richard Amory declared.

Picking up the envelope from the table, Poirot murmured, “I just wondered...” He glanced at Richard, who took the envelope from him, and looked inside.

“It's empty!” Richard exclaimed. Screwing up the envelope, he threw it on the table and looked searchingly at Lucia, who moved away from him.

“Then,” he continued uncertainly, “I suppose we must be searched - we...” Richard's voice trailed away, and he looked around the room as though seeking guidance. He was met with looks of confusion from Barbara and her aunt, indignation from Edward Raynor and blandness from Dr Carelli. Lucia continued to avoid his eye.

“Why do you not take my advice, monsieur?” Poirot suggested. “Do nothing until the doctor comes. Tell me,” he asked, pointing towards the study, “that doorway, where does he go?”

“That's my father's study in there,” Richard told him. Poirot crossed the room to the door, put his head around it to look into the study, and then turned back into the library, nodding as though satisfied.

“I see,” he murmured. Then, addressing Richard, he added, “Eh bien, monsieur. I see no need why any of you should remain in this room if you would prefer not to.”

There was a general stir of relief. Dr Carelli was the first to move.

“It is understood, of course,” Poirot announced, looking at the Italian doctor, “that no one should leave the house.”

“I will hold myself responsible for that,” Richard declared as Barbara and Raynor left together, followed by Carelli. Caroline Amory lingered by her brother's chair.

“Poor dear Claud,” she murmured to herself. “Poor dear Claud.”

Poirot approached her. “You must have courage, mademoiselle,” he told her. “The shock to you has been great, I know.”

Miss Amory looked at him with tears in her eyes. “I'm so glad that I ordered the cook to prepare fried sole tonight,” she said. “It was one of my brother's favorite dishes.”

With a brave attempt to look serious and to match the solemnity of her delivery, Poirot answered, “Yes, yes, that must be a real comfort to you, I am sure.” He shepherded Miss Amory out of the room. Richard followed his aunt out and, after a moment's hesitation, Lucia made a brisk exit. Poirot and Hastings were left alone in the room with the body of Sir Claud.

Chapter 7

As soon as the room was empty, Hastings addressed Poirot eagerly. “Well, what do you think?” he asked.

“Shut the door, please, Hastings,” was the only reply he received. As his friend complied, Poirot shook his head slowly and looked around the room. He moved about, casting an eye over the furniture and occasionally looking down at the floor. Suddenly, he stooped down to examine the overturned chair, the chair in which the secretary Edward Raynor had been sitting when the lights had gone out. From beneath the chair Poirot picked up a small object.

“What have you found?” Hastings asked him.

“A key,” Poirot replied. “It looks to me as though it might be the key of a safe. I observed a safe in Sir Claud's study. Will you have the goodness, Hastings, to try this key and tell me if it fits?”

Hastings took the key from Poirot and went into the study with it. Meanwhile, Poirot approached the body of the scientist and, feeling in the trouser pocket, removed from it a bunch of keys, each of which he examined closely.

Hastings returned, informing Poirot that, indeed, the key fitted the safe in the study. “I think I can guess what happened,” Hastings continued. “I imagine Sir Claud must have dropped it, and - er -”

He broke off, and Poirot slowly shook his head doubtfully.

“No, no, mon ami, give me the key, please,” he requested, frowning to himself as though perplexed. He took the key from Hastings and compared it with one of the keys on the bunch. Then, putting them back in the dead scientist's pocket, he held up the single key. “This,” he told Hastings, “is a duplicate. It is, indeed, clumsily made, but no doubt it served its purpose.”

In great excitement, Hastings exclaimed, “Then that means -”

He was stopped by a warning gesture from Poirot. The sound of a key being turned in the lock of the other door which led to the front hall and the staircase to the upper floors of the house was heard. As the two men turned, it opened slowly, and Tredwell, the butler, stood in the doorway.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said Tredwell as he came into the room and shut the door behind him. “The master told me to lock this door, as well as the other one leading from this room, until you arrived. The master...” He stopped on seeing the motionless figure of Sir Claud in the chair.

“I am afraid your master is dead,” Poirot told him. “May I ask your name?”

“Tredwell, sir.” The servant moved to the front of the desk, looking at the body of his master. “Oh dear. Poor Sir Claud!” he murmured. Turning to Poirot, he added, “Do please forgive me, sir, but it's such a shock. May I ask what happened? Is it - murder?”

“Why should you ask that?” said Poirot.

Lowering his voice, the butler replied, “There have been strange things happening this evening, sir.”

“Oh?” exclaimed Poirot, as he exchanged glances with Hastings. “Tell me about these strange things.”

“Well, I hardly know where to begin, sir,” Tredwell replied. “I - I think I first felt that something was wrong when the Italian gentleman came to tea.”

“The Italian gentleman?”

“Dr Carelli, sir.”

“He came to tea unexpectedly?” asked Poirot.

“Yes, sir, and Miss Amory asked him to stay for the weekend, seeing as how he was a friend of Mrs Richard's. But if you ask me, sir -”

He stopped, and Poirot gently prompted him. “Yes?”

“I hope you will understand, sir,” said Tredwell. “that it is not my custom to gossip about the family. But seeing that the master is dead...”

He paused again, and Poirot murmured sympathetically, “Yes, yes, I understand. I am sure you were very attached to your master.” Tredwell nodded, and Poirot continued, “Sir Claud sent for me in order to tell me something. You must tell me all you can.”

“Well, then,” Tredwell responded, “in my opinion, sir, Mrs Richard Amory did not want the Italian gentleman asked to dinner. I observed her face when Miss Amory gave the invitation.”

“What is your own impression of Dr Carelli?” asked Poirot.

“Dr Carelli, sir,” replied the butler rather haughtily, “is not one of us.”

Not quite understanding Tredwell's remark, Poirot looked inquiringly at Hastings, who turned away to hide a smile. Throwing his colleague a glance of mild reproof, Poirot turned again to Tredwell. The butler's countenance remained perfectly serious.

“Did you feel,” Poirot queried, “that there was something odd about Dr Carelli's coming to the house in the way that he did?”

“Precisely, sir. It wasn't natural, somehow. And it was after he arrived that the trouble began, with the master telling me earlier this evening to send for you, and giving orders about the doors being locked. Mrs Richard, too, hasn't been herself all the evening. She had to leave the dinner-table. Mr Richard, he was very upset about it.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “she had to leave the table? Did she come into this room?”

“Yes, sir,” Tredwell replied.

Poirot looked around the room. His eye alighted on the handbag which Lucia had left on the table. “One of the ladies has left her bag, I see,” he observed, as he picked it up.

Moving closer to him to look at the handbag, Tredwell told Poirot, “That is Mrs Richard's, sir.”

“Yes,” Hastings confirmed. “I noticed her laying it down there just before she left the room.”

“Just before she left the room, eh?” said Poirot. “How curious.” He put the bag down on the settee, frowned perplexedly, and stood there, apparently lost in thought.

“About locking the doors, sir,” Tredwell continued after a brief pause. “The master told me -”

Suddenly starting out of his reverie, Poirot interrupted the butler. “Yes, yes, I must hear all about that. Let us go through here,” he suggested, indicating the door nearer to the front of the house.

Tredwell went to the door, followed by Poirot. Hastings, however, declared rather importantly, “I think I'll stay here.”

Poirot turned, and regarded Hastings quizzically. “No, no, please come with us,” he requested his colleague.

“But don't you think it better -” Hastings began, when Poirot interrupted him, now speaking solemnly and meaningfully.

“I need your co-operation, my friend,” he said.

“Oh, well, of course, in that case -”

The three men left the room together, closing the door behind them. No more than a few seconds later, the other door leading to the hallway was opened cautiously and Lucia entered surreptitiously. After a hurried glance around the room, as though to assure herself that there was no one there, she approached the round table in the center of the room and picked up Sir Claud's coffee-cup. A shrewd, hard look came into her eyes which belied their customary innocent appearance, and she looked suddenly a good deal older.

Lucia was still standing with the cup in her hand, as though undecided what to do, when the other door leading to the front of the house opened and Poirot entered the library alone.

“Permit me, madame,” said Poirot, causing Lucia to start violently. He moved across to her and took the cup from her hand with the air of one indulging in a gesture of simple politeness.

“I - I - came back for my bag,” Lucia gasped.

“Ah, yes,” said Poirot. “Now, let me see, where did I observe a lady's handbag? Ah yes, over here.” He went to the settee, picked up the bag, and handed it to Lucia.

“Thank you so much,” she said, glancing around distractedly as she spoke.

“Not at all, madame.”

After a brief nervous smile at Poirot, Lucia quickly left the room. When she had gone, Poirot stood quite still for a moment or two, and then picked up the coffee-cup. After smelling it cautiously, he took from his pocket a test-tube, poured some of the dregs from Sir Claud's cup into it, and sealed the tube. Replacing it in his pocket, he then proceeded to look around the room, counting the cups aloud. “One, two, three, four, five, six. Yes, six coffee-cups.”

A perplexed frown was beginning to gather between Poirot's brows, when suddenly his eyes shone with that green light that always betokened inward excitement. Moving swiftly to the door through which he had recently entered, he opened it and slammed it noisily shut again, and then darted to the French windows, concealing himself behind the curtains. After a few moments the other door to the hallway opened once more, and Lucia entered again, this time even more cautiously than before, appearing to be very much on her guard. Looking about her in an attempt to keep both doors in her sight, she snatched up the coffee-cup from which Sir Claud had drunk and surveyed the entire room.

Her eye alighted on the small table near the door to the hall, on which there stood a large bowl containing a house plant. Moving to the table, Lucia thrust the coffee-cup upside down into the bowl. Then, still watching the door, she took one of the other coffee-cups and placed it near Sir Claud's body. She then moved quickly to the door, but as she reached it, the door opened and her husband Richard entered with a very tall, sandy-haired man in his early thirties, whose countenance, though amiable, had an air of authority about it. The newcomer was carrying a Gladstone bag.

“Lucia!” Richard exclaimed, startled. “What are you doing here?”

“I - I - came to get my handbag,” Lucia explained. “Hello, Dr Graham. Excuse me, please,” she added, hurrying past them.

As Richard watched her go, Poirot emerged from behind the curtains, approaching the two men as though he had just entered the room by the other door.

“Ah, here is Monsieur Poirot. Let me introduce you. Poirot, this is Dr Graham. Kenneth Graham.” Poirot and the doctor bowed to each other, and Dr Graham went immediately to the body of the dead scientist to examine it, watched by Richard. Hercule Poirot, to whom they paid no further attention, moved about the room, counting the coffee-cups again with a smile.

“One, two, three, four, five,” he murmured. “Five, indeed.”

A light of pure enjoyment lit up Poirot's face, and he smiled in his most inscrutable fashion. Taking the test-tube out of his pocket, he looked at it and slowly shook his head.

Meanwhile, Dr Graham had concluded a cursory examination of Sir Claud Amory's body.

“I'm afraid,” he said to Richard, “that I shan't be able to sign a death certificate. Sir Claud was in perfectly healthy condition, and it seems extremely unlikely to me that he could have suffered a sudden heart attack.

I fear we shall have to find out what he had eaten or drunk in his last hours.”

“Good heavens, man, is that really necessary?” asked Richard, with a note of alarm in his voice. “He hadn't eaten or drunk anything that the rest of us didn't. It's absurd to suggest -”

“I'm not suggesting anything,” Dr Graham interrupted, speaking firmly and with authority. “I'm telling you that there will have to be an inquest, by law, and that the coroner will certainly want to know the cause of death. At present I simply do not know what caused Sir Claud's death. I'll have his body removed, and I'll arrange for an autopsy to be done first thing tomorrow morning as a matter of urgency. I should be able to get back to you later tomorrow with some hard facts.”

He left the room swiftly, followed by a still expostulating Richard. Poirot looked after them, and then assumed a puzzled expression as he turned to look again at the body of the man who had called him away from London with such urgency in his voice.

“What was it you wanted to tell me, my friend? I wonder. What did you fear?” he thought to himself. “Was it simply the theft of your formula, or did you fear for your life as well? You relied on Hercule Poirot for help. You called for help too late, but I shall try to discover the truth.”

Shaking his head thoughtfully, Poirot was about to leave the room when Tredwell entered.

“I've shown the other gentleman to his room, sir,” he told Poirot. “May I take you to yours, which is the adjoining one at the top of the stairs? I've also taken the liberty of providing a little cold supper for you both, after your journey. On the way upstairs I'll show you where the dining-room is.”

Poirot inclined his head in polite acceptance.

“Thank you very much, Tredwell,” he said. “Incidentally, I am going to advise Mr Amory most strongly that this room should be kept locked until tomorrow, when we should have further information about this evening's distressing occurrence. Would you be so kind as to make it secure after we leave it now?”

“Most certainly sir, if that is your wish,” replied Tredwell as Poirot preceded him out of the library.

Chapter 8

When Hastings came down to breakfast late the following morning, after having slept long and well, he found himself eating alone. From Tredwell he learned that Edward Raynor had breakfasted much earlier, and had gone back to his room to put some of Sir Claud's papers in order, that Mr and Mrs Amory had had breakfast in their suite of rooms and had not yet appeared, and that Barbara Amory had taken a cup of coffee out into the garden, where she was presumably still sunning herself. Miss Caroline Amory had ordered breakfast in her room, pleading a slight headache, and Tredwell had not seen her subsequently.

“Have you caught sight of Monsieur Poirot at all this morning, Tredwell?” Hastings asked, and was told that his friend had risen early and had decided to take a walk to the village.

“I understood Monsieur Poirot to say that he had some business to conduct there,” Tredwell added.

After finishing a lavish breakfast of bacon, sausage and eggs, toast and coffee, Hastings returned to his comfortable room on the first floor, which offered a splendid view of part of the garden and, for a few minutes which Hastings found rewarding, of the sun-bathing Barbara Amory as well. It was not until Barbara had come indoors that Hastings settled down in an arm-chair with that morning's Times, which had of course gone to press too early to contain any mention of Sir Claud Amory's death the previous evening.

Hastings turned to the editorial page and began to read. A good half-hour later, he awakened from a light slumber to find Hercule Poirot standing over him.

“Ah, mon cher, you are hard at work on the case, I see,” Poirot chuckled.

“As a matter of fact, Poirot, I was thinking about last night's events for quite some time,” Hastings asserted. “I must have dozed off.”

“And why not, my friend?” Poirot assured him. “Me, I have been thinking about the death of Sir Claud as well, and, of course, the theft of his so important formula. I have, in fact, already taken some action, and I am expecting at any minute a telephone message to tell me if a certain suspicion of mine is correct or not.”

“What or whom do you suspect, Poirot?” Hastings asked eagerly.

Poirot looked out of the window before replying. “No, I do not think I can reveal that to you at this stage of the game, my friend,” he replied mischievously. “Let us just say that, as the magicians on the stage like to assure us, the quickness of the hand deceives the eye.”

“Really, Poirot,” Hastings exclaimed, “you can be extremely irritating at times. I do think you ought to at least let me know whom you suspect of having stolen the formula. After all, I might be able to help you by -”

Poirot stopped his colleague with an airy gesture of his hand. The little detective was now wearing his most innocent expression and gazing out of the window, meditatively, into the far distance.

“You are puzzled, Hastings?” he asked. “You are wondering to yourself why I do not launch myself in pursuit of a suspect?”

“Well - something of the kind,” Hastings admitted.

“It is no doubt what you would do, if you were in my place,” observed Poirot complacently. “I understand that. But I am not of those who enjoy rushing about, seeking a needle in a hay-stack, as you English say. For the moment, I am content to wait. As to why I wait - eh bien, to the intelligence of Hercule Poirot things are sometimes perfectly clear which are not at all clear to those who are not so greatly gifted.”

“Good Lord, Poirot!” Hastings exclaimed. “Do you know, I'd give a considerable sum of money to see you make a thorough ass of yourself - just for once. You're so confoundedly conceited!”

“Do not enrage yourself, my dear Hastings,” Poirot replied soothingly. “In verity, I observe that there are times when you seem almost to detest me! Alas, I suffer the penalties of greatness!”

The little man puffed out his chest and sighed so comically that Hastings was forced to laugh. “Poirot, you really have the best opinion of yourself of anyone I've ever known,” he declared.

“What will you? When one is unique, one knows it. But now to serious matters, my dear Hastings. Let me tell you that I have asked Sir Claud's son, Mr Richard Amory, to meet us in the library at noon. I say 'us,' Hastings, for I need you to be there, my friend, to observe closely.”

“As always, I shall be delighted to assist you, Poirot,” his friend assured him.

At noon Poirot, Hastings and Richard Amory met in the library, from which the body of Sir Claud had been removed late the previous evening. While Hastings listened and observed from a comfortable position on the settee, the detective asked Richard Amory to recount in detail the events of the evening prior to his, Poirot's, arrival. When he had concluded his recital of events, Richard, sitting in the chair which his father had occupied the previous evening, added, “Well, that's about everything, I think. I hope I've made myself clear?”

“But perfectly, Monsieur Amory, perfectly,” Poirot replied, leaning against an arm of the only arm-chair in the room. “I now have a clear tableau.” Shutting his eyes, he attempted to conjure up the scene. “There is Sir Claud in his chair, dominating the situation. Then the darkness, the knocking on the door. Yes, indeed, a dramatic little scene.”

“Well,” said Richard, making as if to rise, “if that is all -”

“Just one little minute,” said Poirot, with a gesture as though to detain him.

Lowering himself to his chair again with an air of reluctance, Richard asked, “Yes?”

“What about earlier in the evening, Monsieur Amory?”

“Earlier in the evening?”

“Yes,” Poirot reminded him. “After dinner.”

“Oh, that!” said Richard. “There's really nothing more to tell. My father and his secretary, Raynor - Edward Raynor - went straight into my father's study. The rest of us were in here.”

Poirot beamed at Richard encouragingly. “And you did - what?”

“Oh, we just talked. We had the gramophone on for most of the time.”

Poirot thought for a moment. Then, “Nothing took place that strikes you as worth recalling?” he asked.

“Nothing whatever,” Richard affirmed very quickly.

Watching him closely, Poirot pressed on. “When was the coffee served?”

“Immediately after dinner,” was Richard's reply. Poirot made a circular motion with his hand. “Did the butler hand it around, or did he leave it here to be poured out?”

“I really can't remember,” said Richard.

Poirot gave a slight sigh. He thought for a moment, and then asked, “Did you all take coffee?”

“Yes, I think so. All except Raynor, that is. He doesn't drink coffee.”

“And Sir Claud's coffee was taken to him in the study?”

“I suppose so,” replied Richard, with some irritation beginning to show in his voice. “Are all these details really necessary?”

Poirot lifted his arms in a gesture of apology. “I am so sorry,” he said. “It is just that I am very anxious to get the whole picture straight in my mind's eye. And, after all, we do want to get this precious formula back, do we not?”

“I suppose so,” was again Richard's rather sullen rejoinder, at which Poirot's eyebrows shot up exaggeratedly and he uttered an exclamation of surprise. “No, of course, of course, we do,” Richard hastened to add.

Poirot, looking away from Richard Amory, asked, “Now, when did Sir Claud come from the study into this room?”

“Just as they were trying to get that door open,” Amory told him.

“They?” queried Poirot, rounding on him.

“Yes. Raynor and the others.”

“May I ask who wanted it opened?”

“My wife, Lucia,” said Richard. “She hadn't been feeling well all the evening.”

Poirot's tone was sympathetic as he replied, “La pauvre dame! I hope she finds herself better this morning? There are one or two things I urgently desire to ask her.”

“I'm afraid that's quite impossible,” said Richard. “She's not up to seeing anyone, or answering any questions. In any case, there's nothing she could tell you that I couldn't.”

“Quite so, quite so,” Poirot assured him. “But women, Monsieur Amory, have a great capacity for observing things in detail. Still, doubtless your aunt, Miss Amory, will do as well.”

“She's in bed,” said Richard hastily. “My father's death was a great shock to her.”

“Yes, I see,” murmured Poirot thoughtfully. There was a pause. Richard, looking distinctly uncomfortable, rose and turned to the French windows. “Let's have some air,” he announced. “It's very hot in here.”

“Ah, you are like all the English,” Poirot declared, smiling. “The good open air, you will not leave it in the open. No! It must be brought inside the house.”

“You don't mind, I hope?” Richard asked.

“Me?” said Poirot. “No, of course not. I have adopted all the English habits. Everywhere, I am taken for an Englishman.”

On the settee, Hastings could not help but smile to himself. “But, pardon me, Monsieur Amory, is not that window locked by some ingenious device?”

Richard said, “But the key to it is on my father's bunch of keys, which I have here.” Taking the keys from his pocket, he moved to the French windows and undid the catch, flinging the windows open wide; moving away from him, Poirot sat on the stool, well away from the French windows and the fresh air, and shivered, while Richard took a deep breath of air and then stood for a moment looking out at the garden, before coming back to Poirot with the air of someone who has arrived at a decision.

“Monsieur Poirot,” Richard Amory declared, “I won't beat about the bush. I know my wife begged you last night to remain, but she was upset and hysterical, and hardly knew what she was doing. I'm the person concerned, and I tell you frankly that I don't care a damn about the formula. My father was a rich man. This discovery of his was worth a great deal of money, but I don't need more than I've got, and I can't pretend to share his enthusiasm in the matter. There are explosives enough in the world already.”

“I see,” murmured Poirot thoughtfully.

“What I say,” continued Richard, “is that we should let the whole thing drop.”

Poirot's eyebrows shot up, as he made his familiar gesture of surprise. “You prefer that I should depart?” he asked. “That I should make no further investigations?”

“Yes, that's it.” Richard Amory sounded uncomfortable as he half turned away from Poirot.

“But,” the detective persisted, “whoever stole the formula would not do so in order to make no use of it.”

“No,” Richard admitted. He turned back to Poirot. “But still -”

Slowly and meaningfully, Poirot continued, “Then you do not object to the - how shall I put it - the stigma?”

“Stigma?” exclaimed Richard sharply.

“Five people -” Poirot explained to him, “five people had the opportunity of stealing the formula. Until one is proved guilty, the other four cannot be proved innocent.”

Tredwell had entered the room while Poirot was speaking. As Richard began to stammer irresolutely, “I - that is -” the butler interrupted him.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said to his employer, “but Dr Graham is here, and would like to see you.”

Clearly glad of the opportunity to escape further questioning from Poirot, Richard replied, “I'll come at once,” moving to the door as he spoke. Turning to Poirot, he asked formally, “Would you excuse me, please?” as he left with Tredwell.

When the two men had departed, Hastings rose from the settee and approached Poirot, bursting with suppressed excitement.

“I say!” he exclaimed. “Poison, eh?”

“What, my dear Hastings?” asked Poirot.

“Poison, surely!” Hastings repeated, nodding his head vigorously.

Poirot surveyed his friend with an amused twinkle in his eye. “How dramatic you are, my dear Hastings!” he exclaimed. “With what swiftness and brilliance you leap to conclusions!”

“Now then, Poirot,” Hastings protested, “you can't put me off that way. You're not going to pretend that you think the old fellow died of heart disease. What happened last night positively leaps to the eye. But I must say Richard Amory can't be a very bright sort of chap. The possibility of poison doesn't seem to have occurred to him.”

“You think not, my friend?” asked Poirot.

“I spotted it last night, when Dr Graham announced that he couldn't issue a death certificate and said that there would have to be an autopsy.”

Poirot gave a slight sigh. “Yes, yes,” he murmured placatingly. “It is the result of the autopsy that Dr Graham comes to announce this morning. We shall know whether you are right or not in a very few minutes.” Poirot seemed to be about to say something further, but then checked himself. He moved to the mantelpiece and began to adjust the vase containing the spills used for lighting the fire.

Hastings watched him affectionately. “I say, Poirot,” he laughed, “what a fellow you are for neatness.”

“Is not the effect more pleasing now?” asked Poirot, as he surveyed the mantelpiece with his head on one side.

Hastings snorted. “I can't say it worried me greatly before.”

“Beware!” said Poirot, shaking an admonishing finger at him. “The symmetry, it is everything. Everywhere there should be neatness and order, especially in the little grey cells of the brain.” He tapped his head as he spoke.

“Oh, come on, don't leap onto your hobby-horse,” Hastings begged him. “Just tell me what your precious little grey cells make of this business.”

Poirot moved to the settee and sat before replying. He regarded Hastings steadily, his eyes narrowing like a cat's until they showed only a gleam of green. “If you would use your grey cells, and attempt to see the whole case clearly - as I attempt to do - you would perhaps perceive the truth, my friend,” he announced smugly. “However,” he continued, in a tone which suggested that he considered he was behaving with great magnanimity, “before Dr Graham arrives, let us first hear the ideas of my friend Hastings.”

“Well,” Hastings began eagerly, “the key being found under the secretary's chair is suspicious.”

“You think so, do you, Hastings?”

“Of course,” his friend replied. “Highly suspicious. But, on the whole, I plump for the Italian.”

“Ah!” Poirot murmured. “The mysterious Dr Carelli.”

“Mysterious, exactly,” Hastings continued. “That's precisely the right word for him. What is he doing down here in the country? I'll tell you. He was after Sir Claud Amory's formula. He's almost certainly the emissary of a foreign government. You know the kind of thing I mean.”

“I do, indeed, Hastings,” Poirot responded with a smile. “After all, I do occasionally go to the cinema, you know.”

“And if it turns out that Sir Claud was indeed poisoned -” Hastings was now well into his stride - “it makes Dr Carelli more than ever the prime suspect. Remember the Borgias? Poison is a very Italian sort of crime. But what I'm afraid of is that Carelli will get away with the formula in his possession.”

“He will not do that, my friend,” said Poirot, shaking his head.

“How on earth can you be so sure?” Hastings inquired.

Poirot leaned back in his chair and brought the tips of his fingers together in his familiar manner. “I do not exactly know, Hastings,” he admitted. “I cannot be sure, of course. But I have a little idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“Where do you think that formula is now, my clever collaborator?” Poirot asked.

“How should I know?”

Poirot looked at Hastings for a moment, as though giving his friend a chance to consider the question. Then, “Think, my friend,” he said encouragingly. “Arrange your ideas. Be methodical. Be orderly. That is the secret of success.”

When Hastings merely shook his head with a perplexed air, the detective attempted to give his colleague a clue. “There is only one place where it can be,” Poirot told him.

“And where is that, for heaven's sake?” Hastings asked, with a distinct note of irritation in his voice.

“In this room, of course,” Poirot announced, a triumphant Cheshire cat-like grin appearing on his face.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“But yes, Hastings. Just consider the facts. We know from the good Tredwell that Sir Claud took certain precautions to prevent the formula from being removed from this room. When he sprang his little surprise and announced our imminent arrival, it is quite certain, therefore, that the thief still had the formula on his person. What must he do? He dare not risk having it found on him when I arrived. He can do only two things. He can return it, in the manner suggested by Sir Claud, or else he can hide it somewhere, under cover of that one minute of total darkness. Since he did not do the first, he must have done the second. Voilà! It is obvious to me that the formula is hidden in this room.”

“By God, Poirot,” Hastings exclaimed in great excitement, “I believe you're right! Let's look for it.” He rose quickly, and moved to the desk.

“By all means, if it amuses you,” Poirot responded. “But there is someone who will be able to find it more easily than you can.”

“Oh, and who is that?” asked Hastings.

Poirot twirled his moustache with enormous energy.

“Why, the person who hid it, parbleu!” he exclaimed, accompanying his words with the kind of gesture more suitably employed by a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

“You mean that -”

“I mean,” Poirot explained patiently to his colleague, “that sooner or later the thief will try to recapture his booty. One or the other of us, therefore, must constantly remain on guard -” Hearing the door being opened slowly and cautiously, he broke off and beckoned Hastings to join him by the gramophone, out of the immediate sight of anyone entering the room.

Chapter 10

The door opened, and Barbara Amory entered the room cautiously. Taking a chair from near the wall, she placed it in front of the bookcase, climbed on it, and reached for the tin case containing the drugs. At that moment, Hastings suddenly sneezed, and Barbara, with a start, dropped the box.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in some confusion. “I didn't know there was anyone here.”

Hastings rushed forward and retrieved the box, which Poirot then took from him.

“Permit me, mademoiselle,” said the detective. “I am sure that is too heavy for you.”

He moved to the center table and placed the tin case upon it. “It is a little collection of yours?” he asked. “The birds' eggs? The sea shells, perhaps?”

“I'm afraid it's much more prosaic, Monsieur Poirot,” replied Barbara, with a nervous laugh. “Nothing but pills and powders!”

“But surely,” said Poirot, “one so young, so full of health and vigour, has no need of these bagatelles?”

“Oh, it's not for me,” Barbara assured him. “It's for Lucia. She's got such an awful headache this morning.”

“La pauvre dame,” murmured Poirot, his voice dripping with sympathy. “She sent you for these pills, then?”

“Yes,” replied Barbara. “I gave her a couple of aspirin, but she wanted some real dope. I said I'd bring up the whole outfit - that is, if no one were here.”

Poirot, leaning his hands on the box, spoke thoughtfully.

“If no one were here. Why would that matter, mademoiselle?”

“Well, you know what it is in a place like this,” Barbara explained. “Fuss, fuss, fuss! I mean, Aunt Caroline, for instance, is like a ducky old hen! And Richard's a damned nuisance and completely useless into the bargain, as men always are when you're ill.”

Poirot nodded in comprehension. “I understand, I understand,” he told Barbara, bowing his head as a sign that he accepted her explanation. He rubbed his fingers along the lid of the case containing the drugs, and then looked quickly at his hands. Pausing for a moment, he cleared his throat with a slightly affected sound, and then went on, “Do you know, mademoiselle, that you are very fortunate in your domestic servants?”

“What do you mean?” asked Barbara.

Poirot showed her the tin case.

“See -” he pointed out, “on this box there is no speck of dust. To mount on a chair and bother to dust so high up there - not all domestics would be so conscientious.”

“Yes,” Barbara agreed. “I thought it odd last night that it wasn't dusty.”

“You had this case of drugs down last night?” Poirot asked her.

“Yes, after dinner. It's full of old hospital stuff, you know.”

“Let us have a look at these hospital drugs,” suggested Poirot as he opened the box. Taking out some phials and holding them up, he raised his eyebrows exaggeratedly.

“Strychnine - atropine - a very pretty little collection! Ah! Here is a tube of hyoscine, nearly empty!”

“What?” exclaimed Barbara. “Why, they were all full last night. I'm sure they were.”

“Voilà!” Poirot held out a tube to her, and then replaced it in the box. “This is very curious. You say that all these little - what do you call them - phials - were full? Where exactly was this case of drugs last night, mademoiselle?”

“Well, when we took it down, we placed it on this table,” Barbara informed him. “And Dr Carelli was looking through the drugs, commenting on them and -”

She broke off as Lucia entered the room. Richard Amory's wife looked surprised to see the two men. Her pale, proud face seemed careworn in the daylight, and there was something wistful in the curve of her mouth.

Barbara hastened to her. “Oh, darling, you shouldn't have got up,” she told Lucia. “I was just coming up to you.”

“My headache is much better, Barbara dear,” Lucia replied, her eyes fixed on Poirot. “I came down because I want to speak to Monsieur Poirot.”

“But, my pet, don't you think you should -”

“Please, Barbara.”

“Oh, very well, you know best,” said Barbara as she moved to the door, which Hastings rushed to open for her. When she had gone, Lucia moved to a chair and sat down.

“Monsieur Poirot -” she began.

“I am at your service, madame,” Poirot responded politely.

Lucia spoke hesitantly, and her voice trembled a little.

“Monsieur Poirot,” she began again, “last night I made a request to you. I asked you to stay on here. I - I begged you to do so. This morning I see that I made a mistake.”

“Are you sure, madame?” Poirot asked her quietly.

“Quite sure. I was nervous last night, and overwrought. I am most grateful to you for doing what I asked, but now it is better that you should go.”

“Ah, c'est comme ça,” Poirot murmured beneath his breath. Aloud, his response was merely a noncommittal “I see, madame.”

Rising, Lucia glanced at him nervously as she asked, “That is settled, then?”

“Not quite, madame,” replied Poirot, taking a step towards her. “If you remember, you expressed a doubt that your father-in-law had died a natural death.”

“I was hysterical last night,” Lucia insisted. “I did not know what I was saying.”

“Then you are now convinced,” Poirot persisted, “that his death was, after all, natural?”

“Absolutely,” Lucia declared.

Poirot's eyebrows rose a trifle. He looked at her in silence.

“Why do you look at me like that?” Lucia asked with alarm in her voice.

“Because, madame, it is sometimes difficult to set a dog on the scent. But once he has found it, nothing on earth will make him leave it. Not if he is a good dog. And I, madame, I, Hercule Poirot, am a very good dog!”

In great agitation, Lucia declared, “Oh! But you must, you really must go. I beg you, I implore you. You don't know what harm you may do by remaining!”

“Harm?” asked Poirot. “To you, madame?”

“To all of us, Monsieur Poirot. I can't explain further, but I beg you to accept my word that it is so. From the first moment I saw you, I trusted you. Please -”

She broke off as the door opened, and Richard, looking shocked, entered with Dr Graham. “Lucia!” her husband exclaimed as he caught sight of her.

“Richard, what is it?” asked Lucia anxiously as she rushed to his side. “What has happened? Something new has happened, I can see it in your face. What is it?”

“Nothing, my dear,” replied Richard with an attempt at reassurance in his tone. “Do you mind leaving us for a moment?”

Lucia's eyes searched his face. “Can't I -” she began, but hesitated as Richard moved to the door and opened it.

“Please,” he repeated.

With a final backward glance in which there was a distinct element of fear, Lucia left the room.

Chapter 11

Putting his Gladstone bag on the coffee-table, Dr Graham crossed to the settee and sat. “I'm afraid this is a bad business, Monsieur Poirot,” he announced to the detective.

“A bad business, you say? Yes? You have discovered what caused the death of Sir Claud?” asked Poirot.

“His death was due to poisoning by a powerful vegetable alkaloid,” Graham declared.

“Such as hyoscine, perhaps?” Poirot suggested, picking up the tin case of drugs from the table.

“Why, yes, exactly.” Dr Graham sounded surprised at the detective's accurate surmise. Poirot took the case to the other side of the room, placing it on the gramophone table, and Hastings followed him there. Meanwhile, Richard Amory joined the doctor on the settee.

“What does this mean, actually?” Richard asked Dr Graham.

“For one thing, it means the involvement of the police,” was Graham's prompt reply.

“My God!” exclaimed Richard. “This is terrible. Can't you possibly hush it up?”

Dr Graham looked at Richard Amory steadily before he spoke, slowly and deliberately. “My dear Richard,” he said. “Believe me, nobody could be more pained and grieved at this horrible calamity than I am. Especially since, under the circumstances, it does not seem likely that the poison could have been self-administered.”

Richard paused for several seconds before he spoke. “Are you saying it was murder?” he asked in an unsteady voice.

Dr Graham did not speak, but nodded solemnly.

“Murder!” exclaimed Richard. “What on earth are we going to do?”

Adopting a brisker, more business-like manner, Graham explained the procedure to be followed. “I have notified the coroner. The inquest will be held tomorrow at the King's Arms.”

“And - you mean - the police will have to be involved? There's no way out of it?”

“There is not. Surely you must realize that, Richard?” said Dr Graham.

Richard's tone was frantic as he began to exclaim, “But why didn't you warn me that -”

“Come on, Richard. Take a hold of yourself. I'm sure you understand that I have only taken such steps as I thought absolutely necessary,” Graham interrupted him. “After all, no time should be lost in matters of this kind.”

“My God!” exclaimed Richard.

Dr Graham addressed Amory in a kindlier tone. “Richard, I know. I do understand. This has been a terrible shock to you. But there are things I must ask you about. Do you feel equal to answering a few questions?”

Richard made a visible effort to pull himself together. “What do you want to know?” he asked.

“First of all,” said Graham, “what food and drink did your father have at dinner last night?”

“Let's see, we all had the same. Soup, fried sole, cutlets, and we finished off with a fruit salad.”

“Now, what about drink?” continued Dr Graham. Richard considered for a moment before replying. “My father and my aunt drank burgundy. So did Raynor, I think. I stuck with whisky and soda, and Dr Carelli - yes, Dr Carelli drank white wine throughout the meal.”

“Ah, yes, the mysterious Dr Carelli,” Graham murmured. “You'll excuse me, Richard, but how much precisely do you know about this man?”

Interested to hear Richard Amory's reply to this, Hastings moved closer to the two men. In answer to Dr Graham, Richard declared, “I know nothing about him. I'd never met him, or even heard of him, until yesterday.”

“But he is a friend of your wife?” asked the doctor.

“Apparently he is.”

“Does she know him intimately?”

“Oh, no, he is a mere acquaintance, I gather.”

Graham made a little clicking sound with his tongue, and shook his head. “You've not allowed him to leave the house, I hope?” he asked.

“No, no,” Richard assured him. “I pointed out to him last night that, until this matter was cleared up - the business of the formula being stolen, I mean - it would be best for him to remain here at the house. In fact, I sent down to the inn where he had a room, and had his things brought up here.”

“Didn't he make any protest at all?” Graham asked in some surprise.

“Oh, no, in fact he agreed quite eagerly.”

“H'm,” was Graham's only response to this. Then, looking about him, he asked, “Well now, what about this room?”

Poirot approached the two men. “The doors were locked last night by Tredwell, the butler,” he assured Dr Graham, “and the keys were given to me. Everything is exactly as it was, except that we have moved the chairs, as you see.”

Dr Graham looked at the coffee-cup on the table.

Pointing to it, he asked, “Is that the cup?” He went across to the table, picked up the cup and sniffed at it. “Richard,” he asked, “is this the cup your father drank from? I'd better take it. It will have to be analysed." Carrying the cup over to the coffee-table, he opened his bag.

Richard sprang to his feet. "Surely you don't think -" he began, but then broke off.

"It seems highly unlikely," Graham told him, "that the poison could have been administered at dinner. The most likely explanation is that the hyoscine was added to Sir Claud's coffee."

"I - I -" Richard tried to utter as he rose and took a step towards the doctor, but then broke off with a despairing gesture and left the room abruptly through the French windows into the garden.

Dr Graham took a small cardboard box of cotton wool from his bag and carefully packed the cup in it, talking to Poirot as he did so. "A nasty business," he confided. "I'm not at all surprised that Richard Amory is upset. The newspapers will make the most of this Italian doctor's friendship with his wife. And mud tends to stick, Monsieur Poirot. Mud tends to stick. Poor lady! She was probably wholly innocent. The man obviously made her acquaintance in some plausible way. They're astonishingly clever, these foreigners. Of course, I suppose I shouldn't be talking this way, as though the thing were a foregone conclusion, but what else is one to imagine?"

"You think it leaps to the eye, yes?" Poirot asked him, exchanging glances with Hastings.

"Well, after all," Dr Graham explained, "Sir Claud's invention was valuable. This foreigner comes along, of whom nobody knows anything. An Italian. Sir Claud is mysteriously poisoned -"

"Ah, yes! The Borgias," exclaimed Poirot.

"I beg your pardon?" asked the doctor.

"Nothing, nothing."

Dr Graham picked up his bag and prepared to leave, holding out his hand to Poirot. “Well, I'd best be off.”

“Goodbye - for the present, Monsieur le Docteur,” said Poirot as they shook hands.

At the door, Graham paused and looked back. “Goodbye, Monsieur Poirot. You will see that nobody disturbs anything in this room until the police arrive, won't you? That's extremely important.”

“Most certainly, I shall make myself responsible for it,” Poirot assured him.

As Graham left, closing the door behind him, Hastings observed drily, “You know, Poirot, I shouldn't like to be ill in this house. For one thing, there appears to be a poisoner at loose in the place - and, for another, I'm not at all sure I trust that young doctor.”

Poirot gave Hastings a quizzical look. “Let us hope that we will not be in this house long enough to become ill,” he said, moving to the fireplace and pressing the bell. “And now, my dear Hastings, to work,” he announced as he rejoined his colleague, who was contemplating the coffee-table with a puzzled expression.

“What are you going to do?” Hastings asked.

“You and I, my friend,” replied Poirot with a twinkle in his eye, “are going to interview Cesare Borgia.”

Tredwell entered in response to Poirot's call. “You rang, sir?” the butler asked.

“Yes, Tredwell. Will you please ask the Italian gentleman, Dr Carelli, if he would be kind enough to come here?”

“Certainly, sir,” Tredwell replied. He left the room, and Poirot went to the table to pick up the case of drugs.

“It would be well, I think,” he confided to Hastings, “if we were to put this box of so very dangerous drugs back in its proper place. Let us, above all things, be neat and orderly."

Handing the tin case to Hastings, Poirot took a chair to the bookcase and climbed onto it.

"The old cry for neatness and symmetry, eh?" Hastings exclaimed. "But there's more to it than that, I imagine."

"What do you mean, my friend?" asked Poirot.

"I know what it is. You don't want to scare Carelli. After all, who handled those drugs last night? Amongst others, he did. If he saw them down on the table, it might put him on his guard, eh, Poirot?"

Poirot tapped Hastings on the head. "How astute is my friend Hastings," he declared, taking the case from him.

"I know you too well," Hastings insisted. "You can't throw dust in my eyes."

As Hastings spoke, Poirot drew a finger along the top of the bookshelf, sweeping dust down into his friend's upturned face. "It seems to me, my dear Hastings, that that is precisely what I have done," Poirot exclaimed as he gingerly drew a finger along the shelf again, making a grimace as he did so. "It appears that I have praised the domestics too soon. This shelf is thick with dust. I wish I had a good wet duster in my hand to clean it up!"

"My dear Poirot," Hastings laughed, "you're not a housemaid."

"Alas, no," observed Poirot sadly. "I am only a detective!"

"Well, there's nothing to detect up there," Hastings declared, "so get down."

"As you say, there is nothing -" Poirot began, and then stopped dead, standing quite still on the chair as though turned to stone.

"What is it?" Hastings asked him impatiently, adding, "Do get down, Poirot. Dr Carelli will be here at any minute. You don't want him to find you up there, do you?"

“You are right, my friend,” Poirot agreed as he got down slowly from the chair. His face wore a solemn expression.

“What on earth is the matter?” asked Hastings.

“It is that I am thinking of something,” Poirot replied with a faraway look in his eyes.

“What are you thinking of?”

“Dust, Hastings. Dust,” said Poirot in an odd voice.

The door opened, and Dr Carelli entered the room. He and Poirot greeted each other with the greatest of ceremony, each politely speaking the other's native tongue.

“Ah, Monsieur Poirot,” Carelli began. “Vous voulez me questionner?”

“Si, Signer Dottore, se lei permette,” Poirot replied.

“Ah, lei parla italiano?”

“Si, ma preferisco parlare in francese.”

“Alors,” said Carelli, “qu'est'ce que vous voulez me demander?”

“I say,” Hastings interjected with a certain irritation in his voice. “What the devil is all this?”

“Ah, the poor Hastings is not a linguist. I had forgotten.” Poirot smiled. “We had better speak English.”

“I beg your pardon. Of course,” Carelli agreed. He addressed Poirot with an air of great frankness. “I am glad that you have sent for me, Monsieur Poirot,” he declared. “Had you not done so, I should myself have requested an interview.”

“Indeed?” remarked Poirot, indicating a chair by the table.

Carelli sat, while Poirot seated himself in the armchair, and Hastings made himself comfortable on the settee.

“Yes,” the Italian doctor continued. “As it happens, I have business in London of an urgent nature.”

“Pray, continue,” Poirot encouraged him.

“Yes. Of course, I quite appreciated the position last night. A valuable document had been stolen. I was the only stranger present. Naturally, I was only too willing to remain, to permit myself to be searched, in fact to insist on being searched. As a man of honour, I could do nothing else.”

“Quite so,” Poirot agreed. “But today?”

“Today is different,” replied Carelli. “I have, as I say, urgent business in London.”

“And you wish to take your departure?”

“Exactly.”

“It seems most reasonable,” Poirot declared. “Do you not think so, Hastings?”

Hastings made no reply, but looked as though he did not think it at all reasonable.

“Perhaps a word from you, Monsieur Poirot, to Mr Amory, would be in order,” Carelli suggested. “I should like to avoid any unpleasantness.”

“My good offices are at your disposal, Monsieur le docteur,” Poirot assured him. “And now, perhaps you can assist me with one or two details.”

“I should be only too happy to do so,” Carelli replied.

Poirot considered for a moment, before asking, “Is Madame Richard Amory an old friend of yours?”

“A very old friend,” said Carelli. He sighed. “It was a delightful surprise, running across her so unexpectedly in this out-of-the-way spot.”

“Unexpectedly, you say?” Poirot asked.

“Quite unexpectedly,” Carelli replied, with a quick glance at the detective.

“Quite unexpectedly,” Poirot repeated. “Fancy that!”

A certain tension had crept into the atmosphere. Carelli looked at Poirot sharply, but said nothing.

“You are interested in the latest discoveries of science?” Poirot asked him.

“Certainly. I am a doctor.”

“Ah! But that does not quite follow, surely,” Poirot observed. “A new vaccine, a new ray, a new germ - all this, yes. But a new explosive, surely that is not quite the province of a doctor of medicine?”

“Science should be of interest to all of us,” Carelli insisted. “It represents the triumph of man over nature. Man wrings secrets from nature in spite of her bitter opposition.”

Poirot nodded his head in agreement. “It is indeed admirable, what you say there. It is poetic! But, as my friend Hastings reminded me just now, I am only a detective. I appreciate things from a more practical standpoint. This discovery of Sir Claud's - it was worth a great amount of money, eh?”

“Possibly.” Carelli's tone was dismissive. “I have not given that side of the matter much thought.”

“You are evidently a man of lofty principles,” observed Poirot, “and also, no doubt, a man of means. Travelling, for instance, is an expensive hobby.”

“One should see the world one lives in,” said Carelli drily.

“Indeed,” Poirot agreed. “And the people who live in it. Curious people, some of them. The thief, for instance - what a curious mentality he must have!”

“As you say,” Carelli agreed, “most curious.”

“And the blackmailer,” Poirot continued.

“What do you mean?” Carelli asked sharply.

“I said, the blackmailer,” Poirot repeated. There was an awkward pause, before he continued, “But we are wandering from our subject - the death of Sir Claud Amory.”

“The death of Sir Claud Amory? Why is that our subject?”

“Ah, of course,” Poirot recalled. “You do not yet know. I am afraid that Sir Claud did not die as the result of a heart attack. He was poisoned.” He watched the Italian closely for his reaction.

“Ah!” murmured Carelli, with a nod of the head.

“That does not surprise you?” asked Poirot.

“Frankly, no,” Carelli replied. “I suspected as much last night.”

“You see, then,” Poirot continued, “that the matter has become much more serious.” His tone changed. “You will not be able to leave the house today, Dr Carelli.”

Leaning forward to Poirot, Carelli asked, “Do you connect Sir Claud's death with the stealing of the formula?”

“Certainly,” Poirot replied. “Do not you?”

Carelli spoke quickly and urgently. “Is there no one in this house, no member of this family, who desired the death of Sir Claud, quite apart from any question of the formula? What does his death mean to most of the people in this house? I will tell you. It means freedom, Monsieur Poirot. Freedom, and what you mentioned just now - money. That old man was a tyrant, and apart from his beloved work he was a miser.”

“Did you observe all this last night, Monsieur le Docteur?” asked Poirot innocently.

“What if I did?” replied Carelli. “I have eyes. I can see. At least three of the people in this house wanted Sir Claud out of the way.” He rose, and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. “But that does not concern me now.”

Hastings leaned forward, looking very interested, as Carelli continued, “I am vexed that I cannot keep my appointment in London.”

“I am desolated, Monsieur le Docteur,” said Poirot. “But what can I do?”

“Well, then, you have no further need of me?” asked Carelli.

“For the moment, no,” Poirot told him.

Dr Carelli moved to the door. “I will tell you one thing more, Monsieur Poirot,” he announced, opening the door and turning back to face the detective. “There are some women whom it is dangerous to drive too far.”

Poirot bowed to him politely, and Carelli returned his bow somewhat more ironically before making his exit.

Chapter 12

When Carelli had left the room, Hastings stared after him for a few moments.

“I say, Poirot,” he asked finally, “what do you think he meant by that?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “It was a remark of no consequence,” he declared.

“But Poirot,” Hastings persisted, “I'm sure Carelli was trying to tell you something.”

“Ring the bell once more, Hastings,” was the little detective's only response. Hastings did as he was bidden, but could not refrain from a further inquiry. “What are you going to do now?”

Poirot's reply was in his most enigmatic vein. “You will see, my dear Hastings. Patience is a great virtue.”

Tredwell entered the room again with his usual respectful inquiry of “Yes, sir?” Poirot beamed at him genially.

“Ah, Tredwell. Will you present my compliments to Miss Caroline Amory, and ask her if she will be good enough to allow me a few minutes of her time?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“I thank you, Tredwell.”

When the butler had left, Hastings exclaimed, “But the old soul's in bed. Surely you're not going to make her get up if she isn't feeling well.”

“My friend Hastings knows everything! So she is in bed, yes?”

“Well, isn't she?”

Poirot patted his friend's shoulder affectionately. “That is just what I want to find out.”

“But, surely -” Hastings elaborated. “Don't you remember? Richard Amory said so.”

The detective regarded his friend steadily. “Hastings,” he declared, “here is a man killed. And how does his family react? With lies, lies, lies everywhere! Why does Madame Amory want me to go? Why does Monsieur Amory want me to go? Why does he wish to prevent me from seeing his aunt? What can she tell me that he does not want me to hear? I tell you, Hastings, what we have here is drama! Not a simple, sordid crime, but drama. Poignant, human drama!”

He looked as though he would have expanded on this theme had not Miss Amory entered at that moment.

“Monsieur Poirot,” she addressed him as she closed the door, “Tredwell tells me you wanted to see me.”

“Ah yes, mademoiselle,” Poirot declared as he went to her. “It is just that I would like to ask you a few questions. Will you not sit down?” He led her to a chair by the table, and she sat, looking at him nervously. “But I understood that you were prostrated, ill?” Poirot continued as he sat on the other side of the table and regarded her with an expression of anxious solicitude.

“It's all been a terrible shock, of course.” Caroline Amory sighed. “Really terrible! But what I always say is, somebody must keep their head. The servants, you know, are in a turmoil. Well,” she continued, speaking more quickly, “you know what servants are, Monsieur Poirot. They positively delight in funerals! They prefer a death to a wedding, I do believe. Now, dear Dr Graham! He is so kind - such a comfort. A really clever doctor, and of course he's so fond of Barbara. I think it's a pity that Richard doesn't seem to care for him, but - what was I saying? Oh yes, Dr Graham. So young. And he quite cured my neuritis last year. Not that I am often ill. Now, this rising generation doesn't seem to me to be at all strong. There was poor Lucia last night, having to come out from dinner feeling faint. Of course, poor child, she's a mass of nerves, and what else can you expect, with Italian blood in her veins? Though she was not so bad, I remember, when her diamond necklace was stolen -"

Miss Amory paused for breath. Poirot, while she was speaking, had taken out his cigarette-case and was about to light a cigarette, but he paused and took the opportunity to ask her, "Madame Amory's diamond necklace was stolen? When was this, mademoiselle?"

Miss Amory assumed a thoughtful expression. "Let me see, it must have been - yes, it was two months ago - just about the same time that Richard had such a quarrel with his father."

Poirot looked at the cigarette in his hand. "You permit that I smoke, madame?" he asked, and on receiving a smile and a gracious nod of assent, he took a box of matches from his pocket, lit his cigarette, and looked at Miss Amory encouragingly.

When that lady made no effort to resume speaking, Poirot prompted her. "I think you were saying that Monsieur Amory quarrelled with his father," he suggested.

"Oh, it was nothing serious," Miss Amory told him. "It was only over Richard's debts. Of course, all young men have debts! Although, indeed, Claud himself was never like that. He was always so studious, even when he was a lad. Later, of course, his experiments always used up a lot of money. I used to tell him he was keeping Richard too short of money, you know. But, yes, about two months ago they had quite a scene, and what with that, and Lucia's necklace missing, and her refusing to call in the police, it was a very upsetting time. And so absurd, too! Nerves, all nerves!"

"You are sure that my smoke is not deranging you, mademoiselle?" asked Poirot, holding up his cigarette.

"Oh, no, not at all," Miss Amory assured him. "I think gentlemen ought to smoke."

Only now noticing that his cigarette had failed to light properly, Poirot retrieved his box of matches from the table in front of him. “Surely, it is a very unusual thing for a young and beautiful woman to take the loss of her jewels so calmly?” he asked, as he lit his cigarette again, carefully replacing two dead matches in the box, which he then returned to his pocket.

“Yes, it is odd. That's what I call it,” Miss Amory agreed. “Distinctly odd! But there, she didn't seem to care a bit. Oh dear, here I am gossiping on about things which can't possibly interest you, Monsieur Poirot.”

“But you interest me enormously, mademoiselle,” Poirot assured her. “Tell me, when Madame Amory came out from dinner last night, feeling faint, did she go upstairs?”

“Oh, no,” replied Caroline Amory. “She came into this room. I settled her here on the sofa, and then I went back to the dining-room, leaving Richard with her. Young husbands and wives, you know, Monsieur Poirot! Not that young men are nearly so romantic as they used to be when I was a girl! Oh dear! I remember a young fellow called Aloysius Jones. We used to play croquet together. Foolish fellow - foolish fellow! But there, I'm wandering from the point again. We were talking about Richard and Lucia. A very handsome couple they make, don't you think so, Monsieur Poirot? He met her in Italy, you know - on the Italian lakes - last November. It was love at first sight. They were married within a week. She was an orphan, alone in the world. Very sad, although I sometimes wonder whether it wasn't a blessing in disguise. If she'd had a lot of foreign relations - that would be a bit trying, don't you think? After all, you know what foreigners are! They - oh!” She suddenly broke off, turning in her chair to look at Poirot in embarrassed dismay. “Oh, I do beg your pardon!”

“Not at all, not at all,” murmured Poirot, with an amused glance at Hastings.

“So stupid of me,” Miss Amory apologized, highly flustered. “I didn't mean - of course, it's so different in your case. 'Les braves Beiges,' as we used to say during the war.”

“Please, do not concern yourself,” Poirot assured her.

After a pause, he continued, as though her mention of the war had reminded him, “I believe - that is - I understand that the box of drugs above the bookcase is a relic of the war. You were all examining it last night, were you not?”

“Yes, that's right. So we were.”

“Now, how did that come about?” inquired Poirot.

Miss Amory considered for a moment before replying.

“Now, how did it happen? Ah, yes, I remember. I said I wished I had some sal volatile, and Barbara got the box down to look through it, and then the gentlemen came in, and Dr Carelli frightened me to death with the things he said.”

Hastings began to show great interest in the turn being taken by the discussion, and Poirot prompted Miss Amory to continue. “You mean the things Dr Carelli said about the drugs? He looked through them and examined them thoroughly, I suppose?”

“Yes,” Miss Amory confirmed, “and he held one glass tube up, something with a most innocent name - bromide, I think - which I have often taken for sea-sickness - and he said it would kill twelve strong men!”

“Hyoscine hydrobromide?” asked Poirot.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Was it hyoscine hydrobromide that Dr Carelli was referring to?”

“Yes, yes, that was it,” Miss Amory exclaimed. “How clever of you! And then Lucia took it from him, and repeated something he had said - about a dreamless sleep. I detest this modern neurotic poetry. I always say that, ever since dear Lord Tennyson died, no one has written poetry of any -”

“Oh dear,” muttered Poirot.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Miss Amory.

“Ah, I was just thinking of the dear Lord Tennyson. But please go on. What happened next?”

“Next?”

“You were telling us about last night. Here, in this room -”

“Ah, yes. Well, Barbara wanted to put on an extremely vulgar song. On the gramophone, I mean. Fortunately, I stopped her.”

“I see,” murmured Poirot. “And this little tube that the doctor held up - was it full?”

“Oh, yes,” Miss Amory replied without hesitation. “Because, when the doctor made his quotation about dreamless sleep, he said that half the tablets in the tube would be sufficient.”

Miss Amory got up from her chair and moved away from the table. “You know, Monsieur Poirot,” she continued as Poirot rose to join her, “I've said all along that I didn't like that man. That Dr Carelli. There's something about him - not sincere - and so oily in manner. Of course, I couldn't say anything in front of Lucia, since he is supposed to be a friend of hers, but I did not like him. You see, Lucia is so trusting! I'm certain that the man must have wormed his way into her confidence with a view to getting asked to the house and stealing the formula.”

Poirot regarded Miss Amory quizzically before he asked, “You have no doubt, then, that it was Dr Carelli who stole Sir Claud's formula?”

Miss Amory looked at the detective in surprise. “Dear Monsieur Poirot!” she exclaimed. “Who else could have done so? He was the only stranger present. Naturally, my brother would not have liked to accuse a guest, so he made an opportunity for the document to be returned. I thought it was very delicately done. Very delicately indeed!”

“Quite so,” Poirot agreed tactfully, putting a friendly arm around Miss Amory's shoulder, to that lady's evident displeasure. “Now, mademoiselle, I am going to try a little experiment in which I would like your cooperation.” He removed his arm from her. “Where were you sitting last night when the lights went out?”

“There!” Miss Amory declared, indicating the settee.

“Then would you be so good as to sit there once again?”

Miss Amory moved to the settee and sat. “Now, mademoiselle,” announced Poirot, “I want you to make a strong effort of the imagination! Shut your eyes, if you please.”

Miss Amory did as she was asked. “That is right,” Poirot continued. “Now, imagine that you are back again where you were last night. It is dark. You can see nothing. But you can hear. Throw yourself back.”

Interpreting his words literally, Miss Amory flung herself backwards on the settee.

“No, no,” said Poirot. “I mean, your mind back. What can you hear? That is right, cast your mind back. Now, tell me what you hear in the darkness.”

Impressed by the detective's evident earnestness, Miss Amory made an effort to do as he requested. Pausing for a moment, she then began to speak, slowly and in jerks.

“Gasps,” she said. “A lot of little gasps - and then the noise of a chair falling - and a metallic kind of clink -”

“Was it like this?” asked Poirot, taking a key from his pocket and throwing it down on the floor. It made no sound, and Miss Amory, after waiting for a few seconds, declared that she could hear nothing. “Well, like this, perhaps?” Poirot tried again, retrieving the key from the floor and hitting it sharply against the coffee-table.

“Why, that's exactly the sound I heard last night!” Miss Amory exclaimed. “How curious!”

“Continue. I pray you, mademoiselle,” Poirot encouraged her.

“Well, I heard Lucia scream and call out to Sir Claud. And then the knocking came on the door.”

“That was all? You are sure?”

“Yes, I think so - oh, wait a minute! Right at the beginning, there was a curious noise, like the tearing of silk. Somebody's dress, I suppose.”

“Whose dress, do you think?” asked Poirot.

“It must have been Lucia's. It wouldn't have been Barbara's, because she was sitting right next to me, here.”

“That is curious,” murmured Poirot thoughtfully.

“And that really is all,” Miss Amory concluded. “May I open my eyes now?”

“Oh yes, certainly, mademoiselle.” As she did so, Poirot asked her, “Who poured out Sir Claud's coffee? Was it you?”

“No,” Miss Amory told him. “Lucia poured out the coffee.”

“When was that, exactly?”

“It must have been just after we were talking about those dreadful drugs.”

“Did Mrs Amory take the coffee to Sir Claud herself?”

Caroline Amory paused for thought. “No -” she finally decided.

“No?” asked Poirot. “Then who did?”

“I don't know - I'm not sure - let me see, now. Oh yes, I remember! Sir Claud's coffee-cup was on the table beside Lucia's own cup. I remember that, because Mr Raynor was carrying the cup to Sir Claud in the study, and Lucia called him back and said he had taken the wrong cup - which really was very silly, because they were both exactly the same - black, without sugar.”

“So,” Poirot observed, “Monsieur Raynor took the coffee to Sir Claud?”

“Yes - or, at least - no, that's right, Richard took it from him, because Barbara wanted to dance with Mr Raynor.”

“Oh! So Monsieur Amory took the coffee to his father.”

“Yes, that's correct,” Miss Amory confirmed.

“Ah!” exclaimed Poirot. “Tell me, what had Monsieur Amory been doing just before that? Dancing?”

“Oh, no,” Miss Amory replied. “He had been packing away the drugs. Putting them all back in the box tidily, you know.”

“I see, I see. Sir Claud, then, drank his coffee in his study?”

“I suppose he began to do so,” Miss Amory remembered. “But he came back in here with the cup in his hand. I remember his complaining about the taste, saying that it was bitter. And I assure you, Monsieur Poirot, it was the very best coffee. A special mixture that I had ordered myself from the Army and Navy Stores in London. You know, that wonderful department store in Victoria Street. It's so convenient, not far from the railway station. And I -”

She broke off as the door opened and Edward Raynor entered.

“Am I interrupting?” the secretary asked. “I am so sorry. I wanted to speak to Monsieur Poirot, but I can come back later.”

“No, no,” declared Poirot. “I have finished putting this poor lady upon the rack!”

Miss Amory rose. “I'm afraid I haven't been able to tell you anything useful,” she apologized, as she went to the door.

Poirot rose and walked ahead of her. “You have told me a great deal, mademoiselle. More than you realize, perhaps,” he assured Miss Amory as he opened the door for her.

Chapter 13

After seeing Miss Amory out, Poirot turned his attention to Edward Raynor. “Now, Monsieur Raynor,” he said as he gestured the secretary to a chair, “let me hear what you have to tell me.”

Raynor sat down and regarded Poirot earnestly. “Mr Amory has just told me the news about Sir Claud. The cause of his death, I mean. This is a most extraordinary business, monsieur.”

“It has come as a shock to you?” asked Poirot.

“Certainly. I never suspected such a thing.”

Approaching him, Poirot handed Raynor the key that he had found, watching the secretary keenly as he did so.

“Have you ever seen this key before, Monsieur Raynor?” he asked.

Raynor took the key and turned it about in his hands with a puzzled air. “It looks rather like the key of Sir Claud's safe,” he observed. “But I understand from Mr Amory that Sir Claud's key was in its proper place on his chain.” He handed the key back to Poirot.

“Yes, this is a key to the safe in Sir Claud's study, but it is a duplicate key,” Poirot told him, adding slowly and with emphasis, “a duplicate which was lying on the floor beside the chair you occupied last night.”

Raynor looked at the detective unflinchingly. “If you think it was I who dropped it, you are mistaken,” he declared.

Poirot regarded him searchingly for a moment, and then nodded his head as if satisfied. “I believe you,” he said.

Moving briskly to the settee, he sat and rubbed his hands together. “Now, let us get to work, Monsieur Raynor. You were Sir Claud's confidential secretary, were you not?”

“That is correct.”

“Then you knew a lot about his work?”

“Yes. I have a certain amount of scientific training, and I occasionally helped him with his experiments.”

“Do you know anything,” asked Poirot, “that can throw light upon this unfortunate affair?”

Raynor took a letter from his pocket. “Only this,” he replied as he rose, moved across to Poirot and handed him the letter. “One of my tasks was to open and sort out all of Sir Claud's correspondence. This came two days ago.”

Poirot took the letter and read it aloud. “'You are nourishing a viper in your bosom.' Bosom?” he queried, turning to Hastings before continuing, “'Beware of Selma Goetz and her brood. Your secret is known. Be on your guard.' It is signed 'Watcher.' H'm, very picturesque and dramatic. Hastings, you will enjoy this,” Poirot remarked, passing the letter to his friend.

“What I would like to know,” declared Edward Raynor, “is this. Who is Selma Goetz?”

Leaning back and putting his fingertips together, Poirot announced, “I think I can satisfy your curiosity, monsieur. Selma Goetz was the most successful international spy ever known. She was also a very beautiful woman. She worked for Italy, for France, for Germany, and eventually, I believe, for Russia. Yes, she was an extraordinary woman, Selma Goetz.”

Raynor stepped back a pace, and spoke sharply. “Was?”

“She is dead,” Poirot declared. “She died in Genoa, last November.” He retrieved the letter from Hastings, who had been shaking his head over it with a perplexed expression.

“Then this letter must be a hoax,” Raynor exclaimed.

“I wonder,” Poirot murmured. “'Selma Goetz and her brood,' it says. Selma Goetz left a daughter, Monsieur Raynor, a very beautiful girl. Since her mother's death she has disappeared completely.” He put the letter in his pocket.

“Could it be possible that - ?” Raynor began, then paused.

“Yes? You were going to say something, monsieur?” Poirot prompted him.

Moving to the detective, Raynor spoke eagerly. “Mrs Amory's Italian maid. She brought her from Italy with her, a very pretty girl. Vittoria Muzio, her name is. Could she possibly be this daughter of Selma Goetz?”

“Ah, it is an idea, that.” Poirot sounded impressed.

“Let me send her to you,” Raynor suggested, turning to go.

Poirot rose. “No, no, a little minute. Above all, we must not alarm her. Let me speak to Madame Amory first. She will be able to tell me something about this girl.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Raynor agreed. “I'll tell Mrs Amory at once.”

The secretary left the room with the air of a determined man, and Hastings approached Poirot in great excitement.

“That's it, Poirot! Carelli and the Italian maid in collusion, working for a foreign government. Don't you agree?”

Deep in thought, Poirot paid his colleague no heed.

“Poirot? Don't you think so? I said, it must be Carelli and the maid working together.”

“Ah, yes, that is exactly what you would say, my friend.”

Hastings looked affronted. “Well, what is your idea?” he asked Poirot in an injured tone.

“There are several questions to be answered, my dear Hastings. Why was Madame Amory's necklace stolen two months ago? Why did she refuse to call in the police on that occasion? Why - ?”

He broke off as Lucia Amory entered the room, carrying her handbag. “I understand you wanted to see me, Monsieur Poirot. Is that correct?” she asked.

“Yes, madame. I would like simply to ask you a few questions.” He indicated a chair by the table. “Won't you sit down?”

Lucia moved to the chair and sat, as Poirot turned to Hastings. “My friend, the garden outside that window is very fine,” Poirot observed, taking Hastings by the arm and propelling him gently towards the French windows. Hastings looked distinctly reluctant to leave, but Poirot's insistence, though gentle, was firm. “Yes, my friend. Observe the beauties of nature. Do not ever lose a chance of observing the beauties of nature.”

Somewhat unwillingly, Hastings allowed himself to be bundled out of doors. Then, the day being warm and sunny, he decided to make the best of his present situation and explore the Amorys' garden. Ambling across the lawn, he made his way towards a hedge beyond which a formal garden looked extremely inviting.

As he walked along the length of the hedge, Hastings became aware of voices quite close by, voices which, as he approached, he recognized as those of Barbara Amory and Dr Graham, who were, it seemed, enjoying a tête-a-tête on a bench, just the other side of the hedge. In the hope that he might overhear something relevant to Sir Claud Amory's death or the disappearance of the formula that would be useful for Poirot to know, Hastings stopped to listen.

“- perfectly clear that he thinks his beautiful young cousin can do better for herself than a country doctor. That seems to be the basis of his lack of enthusiasm for our seeing each other,” Kenneth Graham was saying.

“Oh, I know Richard can be an old stick-in-the-mud at times, and carry on like someone twice his age,” Barbara's voice replied. “But I don't think you ought to allow yourself to be affected by it, Kenny. I certainly don't take any notice of him.”

“Well, I shan't either,” said Dr Graham. “But look here, Barbara, I asked you to meet me out here because I wanted to talk to you privately, without being seen or heard by the family. First of all, I ought to tell you that there can be no doubt about it, your uncle was poisoned last night.”

“Oh, yes?” Barbara sounded bored.

“You don't seem at all surprised to hear that.”

“Oh, I suppose I'm surprised. After all, members of one's family don't get poisoned every day, do they? But I have to admit that I'm not particularly upset that he's dead. In fact, I think I'm glad.”

“Barbara!”

“Now, don't you start pretending you're surprised to hear that, Kenny. You've listened to me going on about the mean old so-and-so on countless occasions. He didn't really care for any of us, he was only interested in his mouldy old experiments. He treated Richard very badly, and he wasn't particularly welcoming to Lucia when Richard brought her back from Italy as his bride. And Lucia is so sweet, and so absolutely right for Richard.”

“Barbara, darling, I have to ask you this. Now, I promise that anything you say to me will go no further. I'll protect you if necessary. But tell me, do you know something - anything at all - about your uncle's death? Have you any reason to suspect that Richard, for example, might have felt so desperate about his financial situation that he would think of killing his father in order to get his hands now on what would eventually be his inheritance?”

“I don't want to continue this conversation, Kenny. I thought you asked me out here to whisper sweet nothings to me, not to accuse my cousin of murder.”

“Darling, I'm not accusing Richard of anything. But you must admit there's something wrong here. Richard doesn't seem to want a police investigation into his father's death. It's almost as though he were afraid of what it might reveal. There's no way he can stop the police from taking over, of course, but he's made it perfectly clear that he's furious with me for having instigated an official investigation. I was only doing my duty as a doctor, after all. How could I possibly have signed a death certificate stating that Sir Claud had died of a heart attack? For heaven's sake, there was absolutely nothing wrong with his heart when I last gave him a regular check-up only a few weeks ago."

"Kenny, I don't want to hear any more. I'm going indoors. You'll make your own way out through the garden, won't you? I'll see you around."

"Barbara, I only want -" But she had already gone, and Dr Graham emitted a deep sigh that was almost a groan.

At that moment, Hastings thought it expedient to retrace his steps quickly back to the house without being seen by either of them.

Chapter 14

Back in the library, it was only after Hastings, propelled by Hercule Poirot, had made his unwilling exit into the garden that the little detective turned his attention again to Lucia Amory, first taking care to close the French windows.

Lucia looked at Poirot anxiously. “You want to ask me about my maid, I understand, Monsieur Poirot. That is what Mr Raynor told me. But she is a very good girl. I am sure there is nothing wrong with her.”

“Madame,” Poirot replied, “it is not about your maid that I wish to speak to you.”

Lucia sounded startled as she began, “But Mr Raynor said -”

Poirot interrupted her. “I am afraid I allowed Mr Raynor to think so for reasons of my own.”

“Well, what is it then?” Lucia's voice was guarded now.

“Madame,” Poirot observed, “you paid me a very pretty compliment yesterday. You said that, ”when you first saw me - you said - that you trusted me."

“Well?”

“Well, madame, I ask you to trust me now!”

“What do you mean?”

Poirot observed her solemnly. “You have youth, beauty, admiration, love - all the things a woman wants and craves. But there is one thing, madame, that you lack - a father confessor! Let Papa Poirot offer himself for the post.”

Lucia was about to speak when Poirot interrupted her.

“Now, think well before you refuse, madame. It was at your request that I remained here. I stayed to serve you. I still wish to serve you.”

With a sudden flash of temperament, Lucia replied, “You can serve me best now by going, monsieur.”

“Madame,” Poirot continued imperturbably, “do you know that the police have been called in?”

“The police?”

“Yes.”

“But by whom? And why?”

“Dr Graham and the other doctors, his colleagues,” Poirot told her, “have discovered that Sir Claud Amory was poisoned.”

“Ah, no! No! Not that!” Lucia sounded more horrified than surprised.

“Yes. So you see, madame, there is very little time for you to decide on the most prudent course of action. At present, I serve you. Later, I may have to serve justice.”

Lucia's eyes searched Poirot's face as though trying to decide whether to confide in him. At last, “What do you want me to do?” she asked falteringly.

Poirot sat and faced her. “What will you?” he murmured to himself, and then, addressing Lucia, he suggested gently, “Why not simply tell me the truth, madame?”

Lucia paused. Stretching out her hand towards him, she began, “I - I -” She paused again, irresolutely, and then her expression hardened. “Really, Monsieur Poirot, I am at a loss to understand you.”

Poirot eyed her keenly. “Ah! It is to be like that, is it? I am very sorry.”

Her composure somewhat regained, Lucia spoke coldly. “If you will tell me what you want with me, I will answer any questions you wish to ask.”

“So!” the little detective exclaimed. “You pit your wits against Hercule Poirot, do you? Very well, then. Be assured, however, madame, that we shall get at the truth just the same.” He tapped the table. “But by a less pleasant process.”

“I have nothing to conceal,” Lucia told him defiantly.

Taking from his pocket the letter Edward Raynor had given him, Poirot handed it to Lucia. “A few days ago, Sir Claud received this anonymous letter,” he informed her.

Lucia glanced through the letter, apparently unmoved.

“Well, what of it?” she commented as she handed it back to Poirot.

“Have you ever heard the name Selma Goetz, before?”

“Never! Who is she?” asked Lucia.

“She died - in Genoa - last November,” said Poirot.

“Indeed?”

“Perhaps you met her there,” Poirot remarked, replacing the letter in his pocket. “In fact, I think you did.”

“I was never in Genoa in my life,” Lucia insisted sharply.

“Then, if anyone were to say that they had seen you there?”

“They would - they would be mistaken.”

Poirot persisted. “But I understand, madame, that you first met your husband in Genoa?”

“Did Richard say that? How stupid of him! We met first in Milan.”

“Then the woman you were with in Genoa -”

Lucia interrupted him angrily. “I tell you, I was never in Genoa!”

“Ah, pardon!” exclaimed Poirot. “Of course, you said so just now. Yet it is odd!”

“What is odd?”

Poirot closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. His voice came purringly from between his lips. “I will tell you a little story, madame,” he announced, taking out a pocketbook.

“I have a friend who does the photography for certain London journals. He takes - how do you say? - the snapshots of contessas and other fashionable ladies who bathe themselves on fashionable beaches. That sort of thing.” Poirot searched in the pocket-book before continuing, “Last November, this friend of mine, he finds himself in Genoa, and he recognizes a very notorious lady. The Baronne de Giers, she calls herself at this time, and she is the chère amie of a very noted French diplomat. The world talks, but that does not matter to the lady, because the diplomat, he talks also, and that is what she wants. He is more amorous than discreet, you understand -” Poirot broke off with an innocent air. “I do not bore you, I hope, madame?”

“Not at all, but I hardly see the point of this story.”

Looking through the contents of his pocketbook, Poirot continued. “I am arriving at the point, I assure you, madame. My friend, he shows me a snapshot he has taken. We agree with each other that the Baronne de Giers is une très belle femme, and we are not at all surprised at the behavior of the diplomat.”

“Is that all?”

“No, madame. You see, the lady was not alone. She was photographed walking with her daughter, and that daughter, madame, had a very beautiful face, and one, moreover, that it would not be at all easy to forget.” Poirot rose, made his most gallant bow, and closed his pocket-book. “Of course, I recognized that face as soon as I arrived here.”

Lucia looked at Poirot and drew her breath in sharply.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. After a moment, she pulled herself together, and laughed. “My dear Monsieur Poirot, what a curious mistake. Of course, I see the point of all your questions now. I remember the Baronne de Giers perfectly, and her daughter as well. The daughter was rather a dull girl, but the mother fascinated me. I was quite romantic about her, and went out walking with her on several occasions. I think my devotion amused her. That was doubtless how the mistake arose. That is how someone thought that I must be the woman's daughter.” Lucia sank back in her chair.

Poirot nodded slow appreciation, at which Lucia appeared visibly to relax. Then suddenly, leaning over the table towards her, the detective remarked, “But I thought you had never been to Genoa.”

Taken unawares, Lucia gasped. She stared at Poirot as he put his pocket-book back in an inner pocket of his jacket. “You have no photograph,” she said. It was half question, half statement.

“No,” Poirot confessed. “I have no photograph, madame. I knew the name that Selma Goetz passed under in Genoa. The rest - my friend and his photography - all of that was a harmless little invention of mine!”

Lucia leaped to her feet, her eyes blazing with anger.

“You set a trap for me!” she exclaimed furiously.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, madame,” he affirmed. “I fear I had no alternative.”

“What has all this to do with Sir Claud's death?” Lucia muttered as though to herself, looking wildly about the room.

Poirot affected a tone of indifference as, instead of answering, he posed another question. “Madame,” he asked, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from his jacket as he spoke, “is it true that you lost a valuable diamond necklace a little time ago?”

Lucia glared at him. “Again I ask,” her words emerging as though through clenched teeth, “what has that to do with Sir Claud's death?”

Poirot spoke slowly and deliberately. “First a stolen necklace - then a stolen formula. Both would bring in a very large sum of money.”

“What do you mean?” Lucia gasped.

“I mean, madame, that I would like you to answer this question. How much did Dr Carelli want - this time?” Lucia turned away from Poirot. “I - I - I will not answer any more questions,” she whispered.

“Because you are afraid?” asked Poirot, moving to her.

Lucia turned to face him again, flinging her head back in a gesture of defiance.

“No,” she asserted, “I'm not afraid. I simply don't know what you are talking about! Why should Dr Carelli ask me for money?”

“To buy his silence,” Poirot replied. “The Amorys are a proud family, and you would not have wanted them to know that you are - the daughter of Selma Goetz!”

Lucia glared at Poirot for a moment without replying, and then, her shoulders sagging, she collapsed onto a chair, resting her head in her hands. At least a minute elapsed before she looked up with a sigh. “Does Richard know?” she murmured.

“He does not know yet, madame,” Poirot replied slowly.

Lucia sounded desperate as she pleaded, “Don't tell him, Monsieur Poirot! Please don't tell him! He is so proud of his family name, so proud of his honour! I was wicked to have married him! But I was so miserable. I hated that life, that awful life I was forced to live with my mother. I felt degraded by it. But what could I do? And then, when Mama died, I was at last free!

Free to be honest! Free to get away from that life of lies and intrigue. I met Richard. That was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me. Richard came into my life. I loved him, and he wanted to marry me. How could I tell him who I was? Why should I tell him?"

"And then," Poirot prompted her gently, "Carelli recognized you somewhere with Monsieur Amory, and began to blackmail you?"

"Yes, but I had no money of my own," Lucia gasped. "I sold the necklace and paid him. I thought that was the end of it all. But yesterday he turned up here. He had heard of this formula that Sir Claud had invented."

"He wanted you to steal it for him?"

Lucia sighed. "Yes."

"And did you?" asked Poirot, moving closer to her.

"You won't believe me - now," murmured Lucia, shaking her head sorrowfully.

Poirot contemplated the beautiful young woman with a look of sympathy.

"Yes, yes, my child," he assured her. "I will still believe you. Have courage, and trust Papa Poirot, yes? Just tell me the truth. Did you take Sir Claud's secret formula?"

"No, no, I didn't, I didn't!" Lucia declared vehemently. "But it's true that I meant to. Carelli made a key of Sir Claud's safe from an impression I took."

Taking a key from his pocket and showing it to her, Poirot asked, "Is this it?"

Lucia looked at the key. "Yes, it was all quite easy. Carelli gave me that key. I was in the study, just steeling myself to open the safe when Sir Claud came in and found me. That's the truth, I swear it!"

"I believe you, madame," said Poirot. He returned the key to his pocket, moved to the arm-chair and sat, placing the tips of his fingers together, and pondering for a moment.

“And yet you acquiesced eagerly in Sir Claud's scheme of plunging the room into darkness?”

“I didn't want to be searched,” Lucia explained. “Carelli had passed me a note at the same time as the key, and they were both in my dress.”

“What did you do with them?” Poirot asked her.

“When the lights went out, I threw the key as far from me as I could. Over there.” She pointed in the direction of the chair in which Edward Raynor had sat on the previous evening.

“And the note that Carelli had passed to you?” Poirot continued.

“I didn't know what to do with the note.” Lucia rose and went to the table. “So I slipped it between the leaves of a book.” Taking a book from the table, she searched in it. “Yes, it is still here,” she declared as she removed a piece of paper from the book. “Do you wish to see it?”

“No, madame, it is yours,” Poirot assured her.

Sitting in a chair by the table, Lucia tore the note into small pieces which she put in her handbag. Poirot watched her but paused before asking, “One little thing more, madame. Did you, by any chance, tear your dress last night?”

“I? No!” Lucia sounded surprised.

“During those moments of darkness,” asked Poirot, “did you hear the sound of a dress tearing?”

Lucia considered for a few seconds. Then, “Yes, now that you mention it,” she said, “I believe I did. But it was not mine. It must have been Miss Amory's or Barbara's.”

“Well, we will not worry about that,” remarked Poirot dismissively. “Now, let us pass on to something else. Who poured out Sir Claud's coffee last night?”

“I did.”

“And you put it down on that table, beside your own cup?”

“Yes.”

Poirot rose, leaned forward over the table towards Lucia, and suddenly shot his next question at her. “Into which cup did you put the hyoscine?”

Lucia looked at him wildly. “How did you know?” she gasped.

“It is my business to know things. Into which cup, madame?”

Lucia sighed. “My own.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted - I wanted to die. Richard suspected that there was something between Carelli and me - that we were having an affair. He could not have been further from the truth. I hated Carelli! I hate him now. But, as I had failed to obtain the formula for him, I was sure he would expose me to Richard. To kill myself was a way out - the only way. A swift, dreamless sleep - and no awakening - that's what he said.”

“Who said that to you?”

“Dr Carelli.”

“I begin to see - I begin to see,” said Poirot slowly. He pointed to the cup on the table. “This is your cup, then? A full cup, untasted?”

“Yes.”

“What made you change your mind about drinking it?”

“Richard came over to me. He said that he would take me away - abroad - that he would get the money to do so, somehow. He gave me back - hope.”

“Now, listen to me carefully, madame,” said Poirot gravely. “This morning, Dr Graham took away the cup that was beside Sir Claud's chair.”

"Yes?

“His fellow-doctors will have found nothing but the dregs of coffee in it -” He paused.

Without looking at him, Lucia answered, “Of - of course.”

“That is correct, yes?” Poirot persisted.

Lucia looked straight ahead of her without replying.

Then, looking up at Poirot, she exclaimed, “Why are you staring at me like that? You frighten me!”

“I said,” Poirot repeated, “that they took away the cup that was beside Sir Claud's chair this morning. Let us suppose instead that they had taken away the cup that was by his chair last night?” He moved to the table on which the plant bowl stood and took a coffee-cup from the bowl. “Let us suppose that they had taken this cup!”

Lucia rose quickly, putting her hands up to her face.

“You know!” she gasped.

Poirot moved to her. “Madame!” His voice now was stern. “They will test their cup, if they have not already done so, and they will find - nothing. But last night I took some of the dregs from the original cup. What would you say if I were to tell you that there was hyoscine in Sir Claud's cup?”

Lucia looked stricken. She swayed, but then recovered herself. For a moment she said nothing. Then, “You are right,” she whispered. “You are quite right. I killed him.” Her voice rang out suddenly. “I killed him! I put the hyoscine in his cup.” Going to the table, she grasped the full cup of coffee. “This one - is only coffee!”

She raised the full cup to her lips, but Poirot sprang orward, interposing his hand between the cup and her lips. They looked at each other intently for a time, then Lucia burst into sobs. Poirot took the cup from her and placed it on the table. “Madame!” he exclaimed.

“Why did you stop me?” Lucia murmured.

“Madame,” Poirot told her, “the world is very beautiful. Why should you wish to leave it?”

“I - Oh!” Lucia collapsed onto the settee, sobbing bitterly.

When Poirot spoke, his voice was warm and gentle.

“You told me the truth. You put the hyoscine in your own cup. I believe you. But there was hyoscine in the other cup as well. Now, speak the truth to me again. Who put the hyoscine in Sir Claud's cup?”

Lucia stared at Poirot in terror. “No, no, you're wrong. He didn't. I killed him,” she cried hysterically.

“Who didn't? Whom are you shielding, madame? Tell me,” Poirot demanded.

“He didn't, I tell you,” Lucia sobbed.

There was a knock at the door. “That will be the police!” declared Poirot. “We have very little time. I will make you two promises, madame. Promise number one is that I will save you -”

“But I killed him, I tell you.” Lucia's voice was almost at screaming pitch.

“Promise number two,” Poirot continued imperturbabiy, “is that I will save your husband!”

“Oh!” Lucia gasped, gazing at him in bewilderment.

The butler, Tredwell, entered the room. Addressing Poirot, he announced, “Inspector Japp, from Scotland Yard.”

Chapter 15

Fifteen minutes later Inspector Japp, accompanied by Johnson, a young constable, had finished his initial inspection of the library. Japp, a bluff, hearty, middle-aged man with a thick-set figure and a ruddy complexion, was reminiscing with Poirot and Hastings, who had returned from his exile in the garden.

“Yes,” Japp told his constable, “Mr Poirot and I go back a long way. You've heard me speak often of him. He was still a member of the Belgian police force when we first worked together. It was the Abercrombie forgery case, wasn't it, Poirot? We ran him down in Brussels. Ah, those were great days. And do you remember 'Baron' Altara? There was a pretty rogue for you! He eluded the clutches of half the police in Europe. But we nailed him in Antwerp - thanks to Mr Poirot here.”

Japp turned from Johnson to Poirot. “And then we met again in this country, didn't we, Poirot?” he exclaimed. “You'd retired by then, of course. You solved that mysterious affair at Styles, remember? The last time we collaborated on a case was about two years ago, wasn't it? That affair of the Italian nobleman in London. Well, it's really good to see you again, Poirot. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I came in a few minutes ago and saw your funny old mug.”

“My mug?” asked Poirot, looking puzzled. English slang never failed to mystify him.

“Your face, I mean, old chap,” Japp explained with a grin. “Well, shall we work together on this?”

Poirot smiled. “My good Japp, you know my little weaknesses!”

“Secretive old beggar, aren't you?” remarked Japp, smacking Poirot on the shoulder. “I say, that Mrs Amory you were talking to when I came in, she's a good-looker. Richard Amory's wife, I suppose? I'll bet you were enjoying yourself, you old dog!”

The inspector gave a rather coarse laugh and seated himself on a chair by the table. “Anyway,” he continued, “this is just the sort of case that suits you down to the ground. It pleases your tortuous mind. Now, I loathe a poisoning case. Nothing to go on. You have to find out what they ate and drank, and who handled it, and who so much as breathed on it! I admit Dr Graham seems pretty clear on the case. He says the dope must have been in the coffee. According to him, such a large dose would have been almost instantaneous in effect. Of course, we shall know for certain when we get the analyst's report, but we've got enough to go on.”

Japp rose to his feet. “Well, I've finished with this room,” he declared. “I'd better have a few words with Mr Richard Amory, I suppose, and then I'll see this Dr Carelli. It looks as though he's our man. But keep an open mind, that's what I always say, keep an open mind.” He moved to the door. “Coming, Poirot?”

“But certainly, I will accompany you,” said Poirot, joining him.

“Captain Hastings too, I've no doubt.” Japp laughed. “Sticks as close to you as your shadow, doesn't he, Poirot?”

Poirot threw a meaningful glance at his friend. “Perhaps Hastings would prefer to remain here,” he remarked.

Taking his cue in a somewhat obvious manner, Hastings replied, “Yes, yes, I think I'll stay here.”

“Well, as you please.” Japp sounded surprised. He and Poirot left, followed by the young constable, and a moment later Barbara Amory entered from the garden through the French windows, wearing a pink blouse and light-coloured slacks. “Ah! There you are, my pet. I say, what's this that's just blown in upon us?” she asked Hastings, as she moved across to the settee and sat down. “Is it the police?”

“Yes,” Hastings told her. He joined her on the settee. “It's Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. He's gone to see your cousin now, to ask him a few questions.”

“Will he want to ask me questions, do you think?”

“I don't imagine so. But even if he does,” Hastings assured her, “there's nothing to be alarmed about.”

“Oh, I'm not alarmed,” Barbara declared. “In fact, I think it would be absolutely wizard! But it would be so tempting to embroider a bit, just to make a sensation. I adore sensation, don't you?”

Hastings looked puzzled. “I - I really don't know. No, I don't think I adore sensation.”

Barbara Amory regarded him quizzically. “You know, you intrigue me,” she declared. “Where have you been all your life?”

“Well, I've spent several years in South America.”

“I knew it!” Barbara exclaimed. She gestured, with her hand over her eyes. “The wide-open spaces. That's why you're so deliciously old-fashioned.”

Hastings now looked offended. “I'm sorry,” he said stiffly.

“Oh, but I adore it,” Barbara hastened to explain. “I think you're a pet, an absolute pet.”

“What exactly do you mean by old-fashioned?”

“Well,” Barbara continued, “I'm sure you believe in all sorts of stuffy old things, like decency, and not telling lies except for a very good reason, and putting a good face on things.”

“Quite,” agreed Hastings in some surprise. “Don't you?”

“Me? Well, for example, do you expect me to keep up the fiction that Uncle Claud's death is a regrettable incident?”

“Isn't it?” Hastings sounded shocked.

“My dear!” exclaimed Barbara. She rose and perched herself on the edge of the coffee-table. “As far as I'm concerned, it's the most marvellous thing that ever happened. You don't know what an old skinflint he was. You don't know how he ground us all down!” She stopped, overcome by the strength of her feelings.

Embarrassed, Hastings began, “I - I - wish you wouldn't -” but was interrupted by Barbara.

“You don't like honesty?” she asked. “That's just what I thought you'd be like. You'd prefer me to be wearing black instead of this, and to be talking in a hushed voice about 'Poor Uncle Claud! So good to us all.'”

“Really!” Hastings exclaimed.

“Oh, you needn't pretend,” Barbara went on, “I knew that's what you'd turn out to be like, if I got to know you properly. But what I say is that life isn't long enough for all that lying and pretence. Uncle Claud wasn't good to us at all. I'm certain we're all glad he's dead, really, in our heart of hearts. Yes, even Aunt Caroline. Poor dear, she's stood him longer than any of us.”

Barbara suddenly calmed down. When she spoke again, it was in a milder tone. “You know, I've been thinking. Scientifically speaking, Aunt Caroline might have poisoned Uncle Claud. That heart attack last night was really very queer. I don't believe it was a heart attack at all. Just suppose that suppressing her feelings all these years had led to Aunt Caroline developing some powerful complex -”

“I suppose it's theoretically possible,” Hastings murmured guardedly.

“I wonder who pinched the formula, though,” Barbara continued. “Everyone says it was the Italian, but personally I suspect Tredwell.”

“Your butler? Good heavens! Why?”

“Because he never went near the study!”

Hastings looked perplexed. “But then -”

“I'm very orthodox in some ways,” Barbara remarked. “I've been brought up to suspect the least likely person. That's who it is in all the best murder mysteries. And Tredwell is certainly the least likely person.”

“Except you, perhaps,” Hastings suggested with a laugh.

“Oh, me!” Barbara smiled uncertainly as she rose and moved away from him. “How curious -” she murmured to herself.

“What's curious?” Hastings asked, rising to his feet.

“Something I've just thought of. Let's go out in the garden. I hate it in here.” She moved towards the French windows.

“I'm afraid I have to stay here,” Hastings told her.

“Why?”

“I mustn't leave this room.”

“You know,” Barbara observed, “you've got a complex about this room. Do you remember last night? There we all were, completely shattered by the disappearance of the formula, and in you strode, and produced the most marvellous anti-climax by saying in your best conversational manner, 'What a delightful room, Mr Amory.' It was so funny when the two of you walked in. There was this extraordinary little man with you, no more than five feet four, but with an air of immense dignity. And you, being oh, so polite.”

“Poirot is rather odd at first sight, I admit,” Hastings agreed. “And he has all kinds of little foibles. For instance, he has an absolute passion for neatness of any kind. If he sees an ornament set crookedly, or a speck of dust, or even a slight disarray in someone's attire, it's absolute torture to him.”

“You make such a wonderful contrast to each other,” Barbara said, laughing.

“Poirot's methods of detection are very much his own, you know,” Hastings continued. “Order and method are his gods. He has a great disdain for tangible evidence, things like footprints and cigarette ash, you know what I mean. In fact he maintains that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. The true work, he says, is done from within. And then he taps that egg-shaped head of his, and remarks with great satisfaction, 'The little grey cells of the brain - always remember the little grey cells, mon ami.'”

“Oh, I think he's a poppet,” Barbara declared. “But not as sweet as you, with your 'What a delightful room!'”

“But it is a delightful room,” Hastings insisted, sounding rather nettled.

“Personally, I don't agree with you,” said Barbara. She took his hand and tried to pull him towards the open French windows. “Anyway, you've had quite enough of it for now. Come along.”

“You don't understand,” Hastings declared, taking his hand away from her. “I promised Poirot.”

Barbara spoke slowly. “You promised Monsieur Poirot that you would not leave this room? But why?”

“I can't tell you that.”

“Oh!” Barbara was silent for a moment or two, and then her manner changed. She moved behind Hastings and began to recite, in an exaggerated dramatic voice, 'The boy stood on the burning deck -'"

“I beg your pardon?”

“'Whence all but he had fled.' Well, my pet?”

“I simply cannot understand you,” Hastings declared in exasperation.

“Why should you understand me? Oh, you really are a delight,” declared Barbara, slipping her arm through his. “Come and be vamped. Really, you know, I think you're adorable.”

“You're pulling my leg.”

“Not at all,” Barbara insisted. “I'm crazy about you. You're positively pre-war.”

She pulled him to the French windows, and this time Hastings allowed himself to yield to the pressure of her arm.

“You really are an extraordinary person,” he told her. “You're quite different from any girl I've ever met.”

“I'm delighted to hear it. That's a very good sign,” said Barbara, as they now stood, face to face, framed in the open windows.

“A good sign?”

“Yes, it makes a girl feel hopeful.”

Hastings blushed, and Barbara laughed light-heartedly as she dragged him out into the garden.

Chapter 16

After Barbara's exit with Hastings into the garden, the library remained unoccupied for no longer than a moment or two. Then the door to the hall opened, and Miss Amory entered, carrying a small work-bag. She went over to the settee, put the bag down, knelt, and began to feel at the back of the seat. As she did so, Dr Carelli entered by the other door, carrying a hat and a small suitcase. Seeing Miss Amory, Carelli stopped and murmured a word of apology at having intruded upon her.

Miss Amory rose from the settee, looking a trifle flustered. “I was searching for a knitting needle,” she explained unnecessarily, brandishing her discovery as she spoke. “It had slipped down behind the seat.” Then, taking in the significance of his suitcase, she asked, “Are you leaving us, Dr Carelli?”

Carelli put his hat and suitcase on a chair. “I feel I can no longer trespass on your hospitality,” he announced.

Obviously delighted, Miss Amory was polite enough to murmur, “Well, of course, if you feel like that -” Then, remembering the situation in which the occupants of the house currently found themselves, she added, “But I thought there were some tiresome formalities -” Her voice trailed off indecisively.

“Oh, that is all arranged,” Carelli assured her.

“Well, if you feel you must go -”

“I do, indeed.”

“Then I will order the car,” Miss Amory declared briskly, moving to the bell above the fireplace.

“No, no,” Carelli insisted. “That, too, is all arranged.”

“But you've even had to carry your suitcase down yourself. Really, the servants! They're all demoralized, completely demoralized!” She returned to the settee and took her knitting from her bag. “They can't concentrate, Dr Carelli. They cannot keep their heads. So curious, is it not?”

Looking distinctly on edge, Carelli replied offhandedly, “Very curious.” He glanced at the telephone.

Miss Amory began to knit, keeping up a flow of aimless conversation as she did so. “I suppose you are catching the twelve-fifteen. You mustn't run it too fine. Not that I want to fuss, of course. I always say that fussing over -”

“Yes, indeed,” Dr Carelli interrupted peremptorily, “but there is plenty of time, I think. I - I wondered if I might use the telephone?”

Miss Amory looked up momentarily. “Oh, yes, of course,” she said, as she continued to knit. It seemed not to have occurred to her that Dr Carelli might have wanted to make his telephone call in private.

“Thank you,” murmured Carelli, moving to the desk and making a pretence of looking up a number in the telephone directory. He glanced across impatiently at Miss Amory. “I think your niece was looking for you,” he remarked.

Miss Amory's only reaction to this information was to talk about her niece while continuing with her knitting undisturbed.

“Dear Barbara!” she exclaimed. “Such a sweet creature. You know, she leads rather a sad life here, far too dull for a young girl. Well, well, things will be different now, I dare say.” She dwelt pleasurably on this thought for a moment, before continuing, “Not that I haven't done all I could. But what a girl needs is a little gaiety. All the Beeswax in the world won't make up for that.”

Dr Carelli's face was a study in incomprehension, mixed with more than a little irritation. “Beeswax?” he felt obliged to ask.

“Yes, Beeswax - or is it Beemax? Vitamins, you know, or at least that's what it says on the tin. A and B and C and D. All of them, except the one that keeps you from having beriberi. And I really think there's no need for that, if one is living in England. It's not a disease one encounters here. It comes, I believe, from polishing the rice in native countries. So interesting. I made Mr Raynor take it - Beeswax, I mean - after breakfast every day. He was looking pale, poor young fellow. I tried to make Lucia take it, too, but she wouldn't.” Miss Amory shook her head disapprovingly.

“And to think, when I was a girl, I was strictly forbidden to eat caramels because of the Beeswax - I mean Beemax. Times change, you know. Times do change.”

Though he attempted to disguise the fact, by now Dr Carelli was positively fuming. “Yes, yes, Miss Amory,” he replied as politely as he could manage. Moving towards her, he tried a somewhat more direct approach. “I think your niece is calling you.”

“Calling me?”

“Yes. Do you not hear?”

Miss Amory listened. “No - no,” she confessed. “How curious.” She rolled up her knitting. “You must have keen ears, Dr Carelli. Not that my hearing is bad. Indeed, I've been told that -”

She dropped her ball of wool, and Carelli picked it up for her. “Thank you so much,” she said. “All the Amorys have keen hearing, you know.” She rose from the settee. “My father kept his faculties in the most remarkable way. He could read without glasses when he was eighty.” She dropped the ball of wool again, and again Carelli stooped to retrieve it for her.

“Oh, thank you so much,” Miss Amory continued. “A remarkable man, Dr Carelli. My father, I mean. Such a remarkable man. He always slept in a four-poster featherbed; and the windows of his bedroom were never opened. The night air, he used to say, was most injurious. Unfortunately, when he had an attack of gout he was nursed by a young woman who insisted on the window being opened at the top, and my poor father died of it.”

She dropped the ball of wool yet again. This time, after picking it up, Carelli planted it firmly in her hand and led her to the door. Miss Amory moved slowly, talking all the time. “I do not care at all for hospital nurses, Dr Carelli,” she informed him. “They gossip about their cases, they drink far too much tea, and they always upset the servants.”

“Very true, dear lady, very true,” Carelli agreed hastily, opening the door for her.

“Thank you so much,” Miss Amory said as he propelled her out of the room. Shutting the door after her, Carelli moved quickly to the desk and lifted the telephone receiver. After a pause, he spoke into it softly but urgently. “This is Market Cleve three-oh-four. I want London... Soho double-eight-five-three... no, five-three, that's right... Eh? ... Will you call me? ... Right.”

He replaced the receiver and then stood biting his nails impatiently. After a moment he crossed to the door of the study, opened it, and entered the room. Hardly had he done so, when Edward Raynor came into the library from the hall. Glancing around the room, Raynor strolled casually to the fireplace. He touched the vase of spills on the mantelpiece, and as he did so, Carelli strolled into the room again from the study. As Carelli closed the study door, Raynor turned and saw him.

“I didn't know you were in here,” said the secretary.

“I'm waiting for a phone call,” Carelli explained.

“Oh!”

After a pause, Carelli spoke again. “When did the police inspector come?”

“About twenty minutes ago, I believe. Have you seen him?”

“Only in the distance,” replied Carelli.

“He's a Scotland Yard man,” Raynor informed him. “Apparently, he happened to be down in the neighbourhood clearing up some other case, so he was called in by the local police.”

“That was a piece of luck, eh?” observed Carelli.

“Wasn't it?” The telephone rang, and Raynor moved towards it. Walking quickly ahead of him to the phone, Carelli said, “I think that will be my call.” He looked at Raynor. “I wonder if you'd mind -”

“Certainly, my dear fellow,” the secretary assured him. “I'll clear out.”

Raynor left the room, and Carelli lifted the receiver. He spoke quietly. “Hello? ... Is that Miguel? ... Yes? ... No, damn it, I haven't. It's been impossible... No, you don't understand, the old gentleman died last night... I'm leaving at once... Japp's here... Japp. You know, the Scotland Yard man... No, I've not met him yet... I hope so, too... At the usual place, nine-thirty tonight... Right.”

Replacing the receiver, Carelli moved to the recess, picked up his suitcase, put on his hat, and went towards the French windows. At that moment, Hercule Poirot entered from the garden, and he and Carelli collided. “I beg your pardon,” said the Italian.

“Not at all,” replied Poirot politely, continuing to block the way out.

“If you would allow me to pass -”

“Impossible,” said Poirot mildly. “Quite impossible.”

“I insist.”

“I shouldn't,” murmured Poirot with a friendly smile.

Suddenly, Carelli charged at Poirot. The little detective stepped briskly aside, tripping Carelli up neatly with an unexpected movement, and taking the Italian doctor's suitcase from him at the same time. At that moment, Japp slid into the room behind Poirot, and Carelli fell into the Inspector's arms.

“Hello, what's all this?” exclaimed Inspector Japp, “Why, bless me if it isn't Tonio!”

“Ah!” Poirot gave a little laugh as he moved away from them both. “I thought, my dear Japp, that you would probably be able to give a name to this gentleman.”

“Oh, I know all about him,” Japp affirmed. “Tonio's quite a public character. Aren't you, Tonio? I'll bet you were surprised at Monsieur Poirot's move just then. What do you call that stuff, Poirot? Ju-jitsu or such-like, isn't it? Poor old Tonio!”

As Poirot placed the Italian's suitcase on the table and opened it, Carelli growled at Japp, “You've got nothing against me. You can't hold me.”

“I wonder,” said the Inspector. “I'll bet we won't have far to look for the man who stole that formula, and did in the old gentleman.” Turning to Poirot, he added, “That formula is absolutely bang in Tonio's line, and since we've found him trying to make a getaway, I shouldn't be surprised if he's got the goods on him this minute.”

“I agree with you,” declared Poirot.

Japp ran his hands over Carelli, while Poirot went through the suitcase.

“Well?” Japp asked Poirot.

“Nothing,” the detective replied, closing the suitcase. “Nothing. I am disappointed.”

“You think yourselves very clever, do you not?” snarled Carelli. “But I could tell you -”

Poirot interrupted him, speaking quietly and significantly. “You could, perhaps, but it would be very unwise.”

Startled, Carelli exclaimed, “What do you mean?”

“Monsieur Poirot's quite right,” Japp declared. “You'd better keep your mouth shut.” Moving to the hall door, he opened it and called, “Johnson!” The young constable put his head around the door. “Get the whole family together for me, will you?” Japp asked him. “I want them all here.”

“Yes, sir,” said Johnson as he left the room.

“I protest! I -” Carelli gasped. Suddenly, he grabbed his suitcase and made a dash towards the French windows.

Japp rushed after him, grabbed him, and threw him onto the settee, taking the suitcase from him as he did so. “No one's hurt you yet, so don't squeal,” Japp barked at the now thoroughly cowed Italian.

Poirot strolled towards the French windows. “Please don't go away now, Poirot,” Japp called after him, putting Carelli's suitcase down by the coffee-table. “This should be very interesting.”

“No, no, my dear Japp, I am not leaving,” Poirot assured him. “I shall be right here. This family gathering, as you say, will be most interesting indeed.”

Chapter 17

A few minutes later, when the Amory family began to assemble in the library, Carelli was still seated on the settee, looking rather sullen, while Poirot continued to hover by the French windows. Barbara Amory, with Hastings in tow, returned from the garden through the French windows, and Barbara moved to share the settee with Carelli, while Hastings went to stand by Poirot's side. Poirot whispered to his colleague, “It would be helpful, Hastings, if you would make a note - a mental note, you understand - of where they all choose to sit.”

“Helpful? How?” asked Hastings.

“Psychologically, my friend,” was Poirot's only reply.

When Lucia entered the room, Hastings watched her as she sat on a chair near the center table. Richard arrived with his aunt, Miss Amory, who sat on the stool as Richard moved close to the table to keep a protective eye on his wife. Edward Raynor was the last to arrive, taking up a position behind the arm-chair. He was followed into the room by the constable, Johnson, who shut the door and stood close to it.

Richard Amory introduced Inspector Japp to those two members of the family whom Japp had not already met.

“My aunt, Miss Amory,” he announced, “and my cousin, Miss Barbara Amory.”

Acknowledging the introduction, Barbara asked, “What's all the excitement, Inspector?”

Japp avoided her question. “Now, I think we're all here, are we not?” he remarked, moving to the fireplace.

Miss Amory looked bewildered and a little apprehensive.

“I don't quite understand,” she said to Richard. “What is this - this gentleman doing here?”

“I think perhaps I ought to tell you something,” Richard answered her. “You see, Aunt Caroline - and all of you,” he added, glancing around the room, “Dr Graham has discovered that my father was - poisoned.”

“What?” exclaimed Raynor sharply. Miss Amory gave a cry of horror.

“He was poisoned with hyoscine,” Richard continued.

Raynor gave a start. “With hyoscine? Why, I saw -”

He stopped dead, looking at Lucia.

Taking a step towards him, Inspector Japp asked, “What did you see, Mr Raynor?”

The secretary looked embarrassed. “Nothing - at least -” he began uncertainly. His voice trailed off into silence.

“I'm sorry, Mr Raynor,” Japp insisted, “but I've got to have the truth. Come now, everyone realizes you're keeping something back.”

“It's nothing, really,” said the secretary. “I mean, there's obviously some quite reasonable explanation.”

“Explanation for what, Mr Raynor?” asked Japp.

Raynor still hesitated.

“Well?” Japp prompted him.

“It was only that -” Raynor paused again, and then made up his mind to continue. “It was only that I saw Mrs Amory emptying out some of those little tablets into her hand.”

“When was this?” Japp asked him.

“Last night. I was coming out of Sir Claud's study. The others were busy with the gramophone. They were all clustered around it. I noticed her pick up a tube of tablets - I thought it was the hyoscine - and pour most of them out into the palm of her hand. Then Sir Claud called me back into the study for something.”

“Why didn't you mention this before?” asked Japp.

Lucia began to speak, but the Inspector silenced her.

“One minute, please, Mrs Amory,” he insisted. “I'd like to hear from Mr Raynor first.”

“I never thought of it again,” Raynor told him. “It was only when Mr Amory said just now that Sir Claud had been poisoned with hyoscine that it came back to me. Of course, I realize it's perfectly all right. It was just the coincidence that startled me. The tablets might not have been hyoscine at all. It could have been one of the other tubes that she was handling.”

Japp now turned to Lucia. “Well, ma'am,” he asked, “what have you got to say about it?”

Lucia seemed quite composed as she answered, “I wanted something to make me sleep.”

Addressing Raynor again, Japp asked, “You say she pretty well emptied the tube?”

“It seemed so to me,” said Raynor.

Japp turned again to Lucia. “You wouldn't have needed so many tablets to make you sleep. One or two would have been sufficient. What did you do with the rest?”

Lucia thought for a moment before replying, “I can't remember.”

She was about to continue, when Carelli rose to his feet and burst out venomously, “You see, Inspector? There's your murderess.”

Barbara rose quickly from the settee and moved away from Carelli, while Hastings hurried to her side. The Italian continued, “You shall have the truth, Inspector. I came down here especially to see that woman. She had sent for me. She said she would get Sir Claud's formula, and she offered to sell it to me. I'll admit that I've dealt with such things in the past.”

“That's not much of an admission,” Japp advised him, moving between Carelli and Lucia. “We know as much already.” He turned to Lucia. “What have you to say to all this, ma'am?”

Lucia rose, her face drained of colour, and Richard went to her. “I'm not going to allow -” he began, when Japp stopped him.

“If you please, sir.”

Carelli spoke again. “Just look at that woman! None of you know who she is. But I do! She's the daughter of Selma Goetz. The daughter of one of the most infamous women the world has ever known.”

“It's not true, Richard,” Lucia cried. “It's not true! Don't listen to him -”

“I'll break every bone in your body!” Richard Amory growled at Carelli.

Japp took a pace towards Richard. “Keep calm, sir, do keep calm, please,” he admonished. “We've got to get to the bottom of this.” Japp turned to Lucia. “Now then, Mrs Amory.”

There was a pause. Lucia tried to speak. “I - I -” she began. She looked at her husband and then at Poirot, holding out her hand helplessly to the detective.

“Have courage, madame,” Poirot advised her. “Trust in me. Tell them. Tell them the truth. We have come to the point where lies will serve no longer. The truth will have to come out.”

Lucia looked pleadingly at Poirot, but he merely repeated, “Have courage, madame. Si, si. Be brave and speak.”

He returned to his position by the French windows.

After a long pause, Lucia began to speak, her voice low and stifled. “It is true that I am Selma Goetz's daughter. It is not true that I asked that man to come here, or that I offered to sell him Sir Claud's formula. He came here to blackmail me!”

“Blackmail!” gasped Richard, moving to her.

Lucia turned to Richard. There was an urgency in her tone as she spoke. “He threatened to tell you about my mother unless I got the formula for him, but I didn't do it. I think he must have stolen it. He had the chance. He was alone in there - in the study. And I see now that he wanted me to take the hyoscine and kill myself, so that everyone would think that it was I who had stolen the formula. He almost hypnotized me into -” She broke down and sobbed on Richard's shoulder.

With a cry of “Lucia, my darling!” Richard embraced her. Then, passing his wife over to Miss Amory, who had risen and who now embraced the distressed young woman consolingly, Richard addressed Japp. “Inspector, I want to speak to you alone.”

Japp looked at Richard Amory for a moment and then gave a brief nod to Johnson. “Very well,” he agreed, as the constable opened the door for Miss Amory and Lucia. Barbara and Hastings took the opportunity of returning to the garden through the French windows, while Edward Raynor, as he left, murmured to Richard, “I'm sorry, Mr Amory, very sorry.”

As Carelli picked up his suitcase and followed Raynor out, Japp instructed his constable, “Keep your eye on Mrs Amory - and also on Dr Carelli.” Carelli turned at the door, and Japp continued, to the constable, “There's to be no funny business from anyone, you understand?”

“I understand, sir,” replied Johnson as he followed Carelli out of the room.

“I'm sorry, Mr Amory,” said Japp to Richard Amory, “but after what Mr Raynor has told us, I'm bound to take every precaution. And I want Monsieur Poirot to remain here, as a witness to whatever you tell me.”

Richard approached Japp with the air of a man who has come to a momentous decision. Taking a deep breath, he spoke with determination. “Inspector!”

“Well, sir, what is it?” asked Japp.

Very deliberately and slowly, Richard replied, “I think it's time I confessed. I killed my father.”

Japp smiled. “I'm afraid that won't wash, sir.”

Richard looked astonished. “What do you mean?”

“No, sir,” Japp continued. “Or, to put it differently, that cat won't jump. You're very set on your good lady, I realize. Newly married and all that. But, to speak plainly to you, it's no manner of use putting your neck in a halter for the sake of a bad woman. Though she's a good-looker, and no mistake, I'll admit.”

“Inspector Japp!” exclaimed Richard angrily.

“There's no point in getting upset with me, sir,” Japp continued imperturbably. “I've told you the plain truth without beating about the bush, and I've no doubt that Monsieur Poirot here will tell you the same. I'm sorry, sir, but duty is duty, and murder is murder. That's all there is to it.” Japp nodded decisively and left the room.

Turning to Poirot, who had been observing the scene from the settee, Richard asked coldly, “Well, are you going to tell me the same, Monsieur Poirot?”

Rising, Poirot took a cigarette-case from his pocket and extracted a cigarette. Instead of answering Richard's question, he posed one of his own. “Monsieur Amory, when did you first suspect your wife?” he asked.

“I never -” Richard began, but Poirot interrupted him, picking up a box of matches from the table as he spoke.

“Please, I beg of you, Monsieur Amory, nothing but the truth! You did suspect her, I know it. You suspected her before I arrived. That is why you were so anxious to get me away from this house. Do not deny it. It is impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot.” He lit his cigarette, replaced the box of matches on the table, and smiled up at the much taller man, who towered over him. They made a ridiculous contrast.

“You are mistaken,” Richard told Poirot stiffly. “Utterly mistaken. How could I suspect Lucia?”

“And yet, of course, there is an equally good case to be made against you,” Poirot continued reflectively, as he resumed his seat. “You handled the drugs, you handled the coffee, you were short of money and desperate to acquire some. Oh, yes, anyone might be excused for suspecting you.”

“Inspector Japp doesn't seem to agree with you,” Richard observed.

“Ah, Japp! He has the common sense,” Poirot smiled. “He is not a woman in love.”

“A woman in love?” Richard sounded puzzled.

“Let me give you a lesson in psychology, monsieur,” Poirot offered. “When I first arrived, your wife came up to me and begged me to stay here and discover the murderer. Would a guilty woman have done that?”

“You mean -” Richard began quickly.

“I mean,” Poirot interrupted him, “that before the sun sets tonight, you will be asking her pardon upon your knees.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying too much, perhaps,” Poirot admitted, rising. “Now, monsieur, place yourself in my hands. In the hands of Hercule Poirot.”

“You can save her?” Richard asked with desperation in his voice.

Poirot regarded him solemnly. “I have pledged my word - although, when I did so, I did not realize how difficult it was going to be. You see, the time it is very short, and something must be done quickly. You must promise me that you will do exactly as I tell you, without asking questions or making difficulties. Do you promise me that?”

“Very well,” replied Richard rather unwillingly.

“That is good. And now, listen to me. What I suggest is neither difficult nor impossible. It is, in fact, the common sense. This house will shortly be given over to the police. They will swarm all over it. They will make their investigations everywhere. For yourself and your family it could be very unpleasant. I suggest that you leave.”

“Give the house over to the police?” Richard asked, incredulous.

“That is my suggestion,” Poirot repeated. “Of course, you will have to remain in the neighbourhood. But they say the local hotel is fairly comfortable. Engage rooms there. Then you will be close at hand when the police wish to question you all.”

“But when do you suggest that this should take place?”

Poirot beamed at him. “My idea was - immediately.”

“Surely it will all look very odd?”

“Not at all, not at all,” the little detective assured Richard, smiling again. “It will appear to be a move of the utmost - how do you say? - the utmost sensitivity. The associations here are hateful to you - you cannot bear to remain another hour. I assure you, it will sound very well.”

“But how about the Inspector?”

“I myself will fix it up with Inspector Japp.”

“I still can't see what good this is going to achieve,” Richard persisted.

“No, of course you do not see.” Poirot sounded more than a trifle smug. He shrugged his shoulders. “It is not necessary that you should see. But I see. I, Hercule Poirot. That is enough.” He took Richard by the shoulders. “Go, and make the arrangements. Or, if you cannot give your mind to it, let Raynor make them for you. Go! Go!” He almost pushed Richard to the door.

With a final anxious look back at Poirot, Richard left the room.

“Oh, these English! How obstinate,” muttered Poirot. He moved to the French windows and called, “Mademoiselle Barbara!”

Chapter 18

In answer to Poirot's call, Barbara Amory appeared outside the French windows. “What is it? Has something else happened?” she asked.

Poirot gave her his most winning smile. “Ah, mademoiselle,” he said. “I wonder if you might be able to spare my colleague Hastings for just a little minute or two, perhaps?”

Barbara's reply was accompanied by a skittish glance. “So! You want to take my little pet away from me, do you?”

“Just for a very short time, mademoiselle, I promise you.”

“Then you shall, Monsieur Poirot.” Turning back into the garden, Barbara called, “My pet, you're wanted.”

“I thank you,” Poirot smiled again with a polite bow.

Barbara returned to the garden, and a few moments later Hastings entered the library through the French windows, looking somewhat ashamed.

“And what have you to say for yourself?” Poirot asked in a tone of mock annoyance.

Hastings attempted an apologetic smile. “It is all well to put on the grin of the sheep,” Poirot admonished him. “I leave you here on guard, and the next thing I know you are promenading yourself with that very charming young lady in the garden. You are generally the most reliable of men, mon cher, but as soon as a pretty young woman appears upon the scene, your judgement flies out of the window. Alors!”

Hastings's sheepish grin faded, to be replaced by a blush of embarrassment. “I say, I'm awfully sorry, Poirot,” he exclaimed. “I just stepped outside for a second, and then I saw you through the window, coming into the room, so. I thought it didn't matter.”

“You mean you thought it better not to return to face me,” declared Poirot. “Well, my dear Hastings, you may have done the most irreparable damage. I found Carelli in here. The good Lord alone knows what he was doing, or what evidence he was tampering with.”

“I say, Poirot, I really am sorry,” Hastings apologized again. “I'm most awfully sorry.”

“If you have not done the damage irreparable, it is more by good luck than for any other reason. But now, mon ami, the moment has come when we must employ our little grey cells.” Pretending to smack Hastings on the cheek, Poirot in fact gave his colleague an affectionate pat.

“Ah, good! Let's get to work,” Hastings exclaimed.

“No, it is not good, my friend,” Poirot told him. “It is bad. It is obscure.” His face wore a troubled look as he continued, “It is dark, as dark as it was last night.” He thought for a moment, and then added, “But - yes - I think there is perhaps an idea. The germ of an idea. Yes, we will start there!”

Looking completely mystified, Hastings asked, “What on earth are you talking about?”

The tone of Poirot's voice changed. He spoke gravely and thoughtfully. “Why did Sir Claud die, Hastings? Answer me that. Why did Sir Claud die?”

Hastings stared at him. “But we know that,” he exclaimed.

“Do we?” asked Poirot. “Are you so very sure?”

“Er - yes,” Hastings responded, though somewhat uncertainly. “He died - he died because he was poisoned.”

Poirot made an impatient gesture. “Yes, but why was he poisoned?”

Hastings thought carefully before replying. Then, “Surely it must have been because the thief suspected -” he began.

Poirot slowly shook his head as Hastings continued, “because the thief suspected - that he had been discovered -” he broke off again as he observed Poirot continuing to shake his head.

“Suppose, Hastings -” Poirot murmured, “just suppose that the thief did not suspect?”

“I don't quite see,” Hastings confessed.

Poirot moved away, and then turned back with his arm raised in a gesture that seemed intended to hold his friend's attention. He paused and cleared his throat.

“Let me recount to you, Hastings,” he declared, “the sequence of events as they might have gone, or rather as I think they were meant to go.”

Hastings sat in a chair by the table as Poirot continued.

“Sir Claud dies in his chair one night.” Poirot moved to the arm-chair, sat, and paused for a moment before repeating thoughtfully, “Yes, Sir Claud dies in his chair. There are no suspicious circumstances attending that death. In all probability it will be put down to heart failure. It will be some days before his private papers are examined. His will is the only document that will be searched for. After the funeral, in due course, it will be discovered that his notes on the new explosive are incomplete. It may never be known that the exact formula existed. You see what that gives to our thief, Hastings?”

“Yes.”

“What?” asked Poirot.

Hastings looked puzzled. “What?” he repeated.

“Security. That is what it gives the thief. He can dispose of his booty quite safely, whenever he wishes to. There is no pressure upon him. Even if the existence of the formula is known, he will have had plenty of time to cover his tracks.”

“Well, it's an idea - yes, I suppose so,” Hastings commented in a dubious tone.

“But naturally it is an idea!” Poirot cried. “Am I not Hercule Poirot? But see now where this idea leads us. It tells us that the murder of Sir Claud was not a chance manoeuvre executed on the spur of the moment. It was planned beforehand. Beforehand. You see now where we are?”

“No,” Hastings admitted with an engaging candour. “You know very well I never see these things. I know that we're in the library of Sir Claud's house, and that's all.”

“Yes, my friend, you are right,” Poirot told him. “We are in the library of Sir Claud Amory's house. It is not morning but evening. The lights have just gone out. The thief's plans have gone awry.”

Poirot sat very upright and wagged his forefinger emphatically to emphasize his points. “Sir Claud, who, in the normal course of things, would not have gone to that safe until the following day, has discovered his loss by a mere chance. And, as the old gentleman himself said, the thief is caught like a rat in a trap. Yes, but the thief, who is also the murderer, knows something, too, that Sir Claud does not. The thief knows that in a very few minutes Sir Claud will be silenced for ever. He - or she - has one problem that has to be solved, and one only - to hide the paper safely during those few moments of darkness. Shut your eyes, Hastings, as I shut mine. The lights have gone out, and we can see nothing. But we can hear. Repeat to me, Hastings, as accurately as you can, the words of Miss Amory when she described this scene for us.”

Hastings shut his eyes. Then he began to speak, slowly, with an effort of memory and several pauses. “Gasps,” he uttered.

Poirot nodded. “A lot of little gasps,” Hastings went on, and Poirot nodded again.

Hastings concentrated for a time, and then continued, “The noise of a chair falling - a metallic clink - that must have been the key, I imagine.”

“Quite right,” said Poirot. “The key. Continue.”

“A scream. That was Lucia screaming. She called out to Sir Claud - Then the knocking came at the door - Oh! Wait a moment - right at the beginning, the noise of tearing silk.” Hastings opened his eyes.

“Yes, tearing silk,” Poirot exclaimed. He rose, moved to the desk, and then crossed to the fireplace. “It is all there, Hastings, in those few moments of darkness. All there. And yet our ears tell us - nothing.” He stopped at the mantelpiece and mechanically straightened the vase of spills.

“Oh, do stop straightening those damned things, Poirot,” Hastings complained. “You're always at it.”

His attention arrested, Poirot removed his hand from the vase.

“What is that you say?” he asked. “Yes, it is true.”

He stared at the vase of spills. “I remember straightening them but a little hour ago. And now - it is necessary that I straighten them again.” He spoke excitedly. “Why, Hastings - why is that?”

“Because they're crooked, I suppose,” Hastings replied in a bored tone. “It's just your little mania for neatness.”

“Tearing silk!” exclaimed Poirot. “No, Hastings! The sound is the same.” He stared at the paper spills, and snatched up the vase that contained them. “Tearing paper,” he continued as he moved away from the mantelpiece.

His excitement communicated itself to his friend. “What is it?” Hastings asked, springing up and moving to him.

Poirot stood, tumbling out the spills onto the settee, and examining them. Every now and then he handed one to Hastings, muttering, “Here is one. Ah, another, and yet another.”

Hastings unfolded the spills and scrutinized them.

“Cig-23” he began to read aloud from one of them.

“Yes, yes!” exclaimed Poirot. “It is the formula!”

“I say, that's wonderful!”

“Quick! Fold them up again!” Poirot ordered, and Hastings began to do so. “Oh, you are so slow!” Poirot admonished him. “Quick! Quick!” Snatching the spills from Hastings, he put them back into the vase and hastened to return it to the mantelpiece.

Looking dumbfounded, Hastings joined him there. Poirot beamed. “It intrigues you what I do there, yes? Tell me, Hastings, what is it that I have here in this vase?”

“Why, spills, of course,” Hastings replied in a tone of tremendous irony.

“No, mon ami, it is cheese.”

“Cheese?”

“Precisely, my friend, cheese.”

“I say, Poirot,” Hastings inquired sarcastically, “you're all right, aren't you? I mean, you haven't got a headache or anything?”

Poirot's reply ignored his friend's frivolous question.

“For what do you use cheese, Hastings? I will tell you, mon ami. You use it to bait a mousetrap. We wait now for one thing only - the mouse.”

“And the mouse -”

“The mouse will come, my friend,” Poirot assured Hastings. “Rest assured of that. I have sent him a message. He will not fail to respond.”

Before Hastings had time to react to Poirot's cryptic announcement, the door opened and Edward Raynor entered the room. “Oh, you're here, Monsieur Poirot,” the secretary observed. “And Captain Hastings also. Inspector Japp would like to speak to you both upstairs.”

Chapter 19

“We will come at once,” Poirot replied. Followed by Hastings, he walked to the door, as Raynor entered the library and crossed to the fireplace. At the door, Poirot suddenly wheeled round to look at the secretary. “By the way, Mr Raynor,” the detective asked, as he moved back to the center of the room, “do you by any chance know whether Dr Carelli was here in the library at all this morning?”

“Yes, he was,” Raynor told the detective. “I found him here.”

“Ah!” Poirot seemed pleased at this. “And what was he doing?”

“He was telephoning, I believe.”

“Was he telephoning when you came in?”

“No, he was just coming back into the room. He had been in Sir Claud's study.”

Poirot considered this for a moment, and then asked Raynor, “Where exactly were you then? Can you remember?”

Still standing by the fireplace, Raynor replied, “Oh, somewhere about here, I think.”

“Did you hear any of Dr Carelli's conversation on the phone?”

“No,” said the secretary. “He made it perfectly clear that he wanted to be alone, so I cleared out.”

“I see.” Poirot hesitated, and then took a notebook and pencil from his pocket. Writing a few words on a page, he tore it out. “Hastings!” he called.

Hastings, who had been hovering by the door, came to him, and Poirot gave his friend the folded page. “Would you be so kind as to take that up to Inspector Japp?”

Raynor watched Hastings leave the room on his errand, and then asked, “What was that all about?”

Putting the notebook and pencil back in his pocket, Poirot replied, “I told Japp that I would be with him in a few minutes, and that I might be able to tell him the name of the murderer.”

“Really? You know who it is?” asked Raynor in a state of some excitement.

There was a momentary pause. Hercule Poirot seemed to hold the secretary under the spell of his personality.

Raynor watched the detective, fascinated, as he began slowly to speak. “Yes, I think I know who the murderer is - at last,” Poirot announced. “I am reminded of another case, not so long ago. Never shall I forget the killing of Lord Edgware. I was nearly defeated - yes, I, Hercule Poirot! - by the extremely simple cunning of a vacant brain. You see, Monsieur Raynor, the very simple-minded have often the genius to commit an uncomplicated crime and then leave it alone. Let us hope that the murderer of Sir Claud, on the other hand, is intelligent and superior and thoroughly pleased with himself and unable to resist - how do you say? - painting the lily.” Poirot's eyes lit up in vivid animation.

“I'm not sure that I understand you,” said Raynor. “Do you mean that it's not Mrs Amory?”

“No, it is not Mrs Amory,” Poirot told him. “That is why I wrote my little note. That poor lady has suffered enough. She must be spared any further questioning.”

Raynor looked thoughtful, and then exclaimed, “Then I'll bet it's Carelli. Yes?”

Poirot wagged a finger at him playfully. “Monsieur Raynor, you must permit me to keep my little secrets until the last moment.” Taking out a handkerchief, he mopped his brow. “Mon Dieu, how hot it is today!” he complained.

“Would you like a drink?” asked Raynor. “I'm forgetting my manners. I should have offered you one earlier.”

Poirot beamed. “You are very kind. I will have a whisky, please, if I may.”

“Certainly. Just a moment.” Raynor left the room, while Poirot wandered across to the French windows and looked out into the garden for a moment. Then, moving to the settee, he shook the cushions, before drifting across to the mantelpiece to examine the ornaments. In a few moments Raynor returned with two whiskies and sodas on a tray. He watched as Poirot lifted a hand to an ornament on the mantelpiece.

“This is a valuable antique, I fancy,” Poirot remarked, picking up a jug.

“Is it?” was Raynor's uninterested comment. “I don't know much about that kind of thing. Come and have a drink,” he suggested as he set his tray down on the coffee-table.

“Thank you,” murmured Poirot, joining him there.

“Well, here's luck,” said Raynor, taking a glass and drinking.

With a bow, Poirot raised the other glass to his lips.

“To you, my friend. And now let me tell you of my suspicions. I first realized that -”

He broke off suddenly, jerking his head over his shoulder as though some sound had caught his ear. Looking first at the door and then at Raynor, he put his finger to his lips, indicating that he thought someone might be eavesdropping.

Raynor nodded in comprehension. The two men crept stealthily up to the door, and Poirot gestured to the secretary to remain in the room. Poirot opened the door sharply and bounced outside, but returned immediately looking extremely crestfallen.

“Surprising,” he admitted to Raynor. “I could have sworn I heard something. Ah well, I made a mistake. It does not happen very often. A votre santé, my friend.” He drained the contents of his glass.

“Ah!” exclaimed Raynor, as he also drank.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Poirot.

“Nothing. A load off my mind, that is all.”

Poirot moved to the table and put his glass down. “Do you know, Monsieur Raynor,” he confided, “to be absolutely honest with you, I have never become quite used to your English national drink, the whisky. The taste, it pleases me not. It is bitter.” He moved to the armchair and sat.

“Really? I'm so sorry. Mine didn't taste at all bitter.”

Raynor put his glass down on the coffee-table, and continued, “I think you were about to tell me something just now, were you not?”

Poirot looked surprised. “Was I? What can it have been? Can I have forgotten already? I think that perhaps I wanted to explain to you how I proceed in an investigation. Voyons! One fact leads to another, so we continue. Does the next one fit in with that? A merveille! Good! We can proceed. This next little fact - no! Ah, that is curious! There is something missing - a link in the chain that is not there. We examine. We search. And that little curious fact, that perhaps paltry little detail that will not tally, we put it here!” Poirot made an extravagant gesture with his hand. “It is significant! It is tremendous!”

“Y-es, I see,” Raynor murmured dubiously.

Poirot shook his forefinger so fiercely in Raynor's face that the secretary almost quailed before it. “Ah, beware! Peril to the detective who says, 'It is so small, it does not matter. It will not agree. I will forget it.' That way lies confusion! Everything matters.” Poirot suddenly stopped and tapped his head. “Ah! Now I remember what I wanted to talk to you about. It was one of those small, unimportant little facts. I wanted to talk to you, Monsieur Raynor, about dust.”

Raynor smiled politely. “Dust?”

“Precisely. Dust,” Poirot repeated. “My friend Hastings, he reminded me just now that I am a detective and not a housemaid. He thought himself very clever to make such a remark, but I am not so sure. The housemaid and the detective, after all, have something in common. The housemaid, what does she do? She explores all the dark corners with her broom. She brings into the light of day all the hidden things that have rolled conveniently out of sight. Does not the detective do much the same?”

Raynor looked bored, but murmured, “Very interesting, Monsieur Poirot.” He moved to the chair by the table and sat, before asking, “But - is that all you were intending to say?”

“No, not quite,” replied Poirot. He leaned forward.

“You did not throw dust in my eyes, Monsieur Raynor, because there was no dust. Do you understand?”

The secretary stared at him intently. “No, I'm afraid I didn't.”

“There was no dust on that box of drugs. Mademoiselle Barbara commented on the fact. But there should have been dust. That shelf on which it stands -” and Poirot gestured towards it as he spoke - “is thick with dust. It was then that I knew -”

“Knew what?”

“I knew,” Poirot continued, “that someone had taken that box down recently. That the person who poisoned Sir Claud Amory would not need to go near the box last night, since he had on some earlier occasion helped himself to all the poison he needed, choosing a time when he knew he would not be disturbed. You did not go near the box of drugs last night, because you had already taken from it the hyoscine you needed. But you did handle the coffee, Monsieur Raynor.”

Raynor smiled patiently. “Dear me! Do you accuse me of murdering Sir Claud?”

“Do you deny it?” asked Poirot.

Raynor paused before replying. When he spoke again, a harsher tone had entered his voice. “Oh, no,” he declared, “I don't deny it. Why should I? I'm really rather proud of the whole thing. It ought to have gone off without a hitch. It was sheer bad luck that made Sir Claud open the safe again last night. He's never done such a thing before.”

Poirot sounded rather drowsy as he asked, “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Why not? You're so sympathetic. It's a pleasure to talk to you.” Raynor laughed, and continued. “Yes, things very nearly went wrong. But that's what I really pride myself on, turning a failure into a success.” A triumphant expression appeared on his face. “To devise a hiding place on the spur of the moment was really rather creditable. Would you like me to tell you where the formula is now?”

His drowsiness now accentuated, Poirot seemed to find difficulty in speaking clearly. “I - I do not understand you,” he whispered.

“You made one little mistake, Monsieur Poirot,” Raynor told him with a sneer. “You underestimated my intelligence. I wasn't really taken in just now by your ingenious red herring about poor old Carelli. A man with your brains couldn't seriously have believed that Carelli - why, it won't bear thinking about. You see, I'm playing for big stakes. That piece of paper, delivered in the right quarters, means fifty thousand pounds to me.” He leaned back. “Just think what a man of my ability can do with fifty thousand pounds.”

In a voice of increasing drowsiness, Poirot managed to reply, “I - I do not - like to think of it.”

“Well, perhaps not. I appreciate that,” Raynor conceded. “One has to allow for a different point of view.”

Poirot leaned forward, and appeared to be making an effort to pull himself together. “And it will not be so,” he exclaimed. “I will denounce you. I, Hercule Poirot -” He broke off suddenly.

“Hercule Poirot will do nothing,” declared Raynor, as the detective sank back in his seat. With a laugh which was close to a sneer, the secretary continued, “You never guessed, did you, even when you said that the whisky was bitter? You see, my dear Monsieur Poirot, I took not just one but several tubes of hyoscine from that box. If anything, you have had slightly more than I gave Sir Claud.”

“Ah, mon Dieu,” Poirot gasped, struggling to rise. In a weak voice he tried to call, “Hastings! Has-” His voice faded away, and he sank back into his chair. His eyelids closed.

Raynor got to his feet, pushed his chair aside, and moved to stand over Poirot. “Try to keep awake, Monsieur Poirot,” he said. “Surely you'd like to see where the formula was hidden, wouldn't you?”

He waited for a moment, but Poirot's eyes remained closed. “A swift, dreamless sleep, and no awakening, as our dear friend Carelli puts it,” Raynor commented drily as he went to the mantelpiece, took the spills, folded them, and put them in his pocket. He moved towards the French windows, pausing only to call over his shoulder, “Goodbye, my dear Monsieur Poirot.”

He was about to step out into the garden when he was halted by the sound of Poirot's voice, speaking cheerfully and naturally. “Would you not like the envelope as well?”

Raynor spun around, and at the same moment Inspector Japp entered the library from the garden. Moving back a few steps, Raynor paused irresolutely, and then decided to bolt. He rushed to the French windows, only to be seized by Japp and by Constable Johnson, who also suddenly appeared from the garden.

Poirot rose from his chair, stretching himself. “Well, my dear Japp,” he asked. “Did you get it all?”

Dragging Raynor back to the center of the room with the aid of his constable, Japp replied, “Every word, thanks to your note, Poirot. You can hear everything perfectly from the terrace there, just outside the window. Now, let's go over him and see what we can find.” He pulled the spills from Raynor's pocket and threw them onto the coffee-table.

He next pulled out a small tube. “Aha! Hyoscine! Empty.”

“Ah, Hastings,” Poirot greeted his friend, as he entered from the hall carrying a glass of whisky and soda, which he handed to the detective.

“You see?” Poirot addressed Raynor in his kindliest manner. “I refused to play in your comedy. Instead, I made you play in mine. In my note, I gave instructions to Japp and also to Hastings. Then I make things easy for you by complaining of the heat. I know you will suggest a drink. It is, after all, the opening that you need. After that, it is all so straightforward. When I go to the door, the good Hastings, he is ready outside with another whisky and soda. I change glasses and I am back again. And so - on with the comedy.”

Poirot gave the glass back to Hastings. “Myself, I think I play my part rather well,” he declared.

There was a pause while Poirot and Raynor surveyed each other. Then Raynor spoke. “I've been afraid of you ever since you came into this house. My scheme could have worked. I could have set myself up for life with the fifty thousand pounds - perhaps even more - that I would have got for that wretched formula. But, from the moment you arrived, I stopped feeling absolutely confident that I'd get away with killing that pompous old fool and stealing his precious scrap of paper.”

“I have observed already that you are intelligent,” Poirot replied. He sat again in the arm-chair, looking distinctly pleased with himself, as Japp began to speak rapidly.

“Edward Raynor, I arrest you for the wilful murder of Sir Claud Amory, and I warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence.” Japp made a gesture to the constable to take Raynor away.

Chapter 20

As Raynor made his exit in the custody of Constable Johnson, the two men passed Miss Amory, who was entering the library at the same moment. She looked back at them anxiously, and then hastened to Poirot. “Monsieur Poirot,” she gasped as Poirot rose to greet her, “is this true? Was it Mr Raynor who murdered my poor brother?”

“I am afraid so, mademoiselle,” said Poirot.

Miss Amory looked dumbfounded. “Oh! Oh!” she exclaimed. “I can't believe it! What wickedness! We've always treated him like one of the family. And the Beeswax and everything -” She turned abruptly, and was about to leave when Richard entered and held the door open for her. As she almost ran from the room, her niece Barbara entered from the garden.

“This is simply too shattering for words,” Barbara exclaimed. “Edward Raynor, of all people. Who would have believed it? Somebody has been frightfully clever to have found out. I wonder who!”

She looked meaningfully at Poirot who, however, gave a bow in the direction of the police inspector as he murmured, “It was Inspector Japp who solved the case, mademoiselle.”

Japp beamed. “I will say for you, Monsieur Poirot, you're the goods. And a gentleman as well.” With a nod to the assembled company, Japp made a brisk exit, snatching the whisky glass from a bemused Hastings, with the words, “I'll take charge of the evidence, if you please, Captain Hastings!”

“Yes, but was it really Inspector Japp who found out who killed Uncle Claud? Or,” Barbara asked Poirot coyly as she approached him, “was it you, Monsieur Hercule Poirot?”

Poirot moved to Hastings, putting an arm around his old friend.

“Mademoiselle,” he informed Barbara, “the real credit belongs to Hastings here. He made a remark of surpassing brilliance which put me on the right track. Take him into the garden and make him tell you about it.”

He pushed Hastings towards Barbara and shepherded them both towards the French windows.

“Ah, my pet,” Barbara sighed comically to Hastings as they went out into the garden.

Richard Amory was about to address Poirot, when the door to the hall opened and Lucia entered. Giving a start when she saw her husband, Lucia murmured uncertainly, “Richard.”

Richard turned to look at her. “Lucia!”

Lucia moved a few steps into the room. “I -” she began, and then broke off.

Richard approached her, and then stopped. “You -”

They both looked extremely nervous and ill at ease with each other. Then Lucia suddenly caught sight of Poirot and went to him with outstretched hands. “Monsieur Poirot! How can we ever thank you?”

Poirot took both her hands in his. “So, madame, your troubles are over!” he announced.

“A murderer has been caught. But my troubles, are they really over?” Lucia asked wistfully.

“It is true that you do not look quite happy yet, my child,” Poirot observed.

“Shall I ever be happy again, I wonder?”

“I think so,” said Poirot with a twinkle in his eye. “Trust in your old Poirot.”

Guiding Lucia to the chair by the table in the center of the room, he picked up the spills from the coffee-table, went across to Richard, and handed them to him.

“Monsieur,” he declared, “I have pleasure in restoring to you Sir Claud's formula! It can be pieced together - what is the expression you use? - it will be as good as new.”

“My God, the formula!” Richard exclaimed. “I'd almost forgotten it. I can hardly bear to look at it again. Think what it has done to us all. It's cost my father his life, and it's all but ruined the lives of all of us as well.”

“What are you going to do with it, Richard?” Lucia asked him.

“I don't know. What would you do with it?”

Rising and moving to him, Lucia whispered, “Would you let me?”

“It's yours,” her husband told her, handing her the spills. “Do as you like with the wretched thing.”

“Thank you, Richard,” murmured Lucia. She went to the fireplace, took a match from the box on the mantelpiece, and set fire to the spills, dropping the pieces one by one into the fireplace. “There is so much suffering already in the world. I cannot bear to think of any more.”

“Madame,” said Poirot, “I admire the manner in which you burn many thousands of pounds with as little emotion as though they were just a few pence.”

“They are nothing but ashes,” Lucia sighed. “Like my life.”

Poirot gave a snort. “Oh! Let us all order our coffins,” he remarked in a tone of mock gloom. “No! Me, I like to be happy, to rejoice, to dance, to sing. See you, my children,” he continued, turning to address Richard as well, “I am about to take a liberty with you both. Madame looks down her nose and thinks, 'I have deceived my husband.' Monsieur looks down his nose and thinks, 'I have suspected my wife.' And yet what you really want, both of you, is to be in each other's arms, is it not?”

Lucia took a step towards her husband. “Richard -” she began in a low voice.

“Madame,” Poirot interrupted her, “I fear that Sir Claud may have suspected you of planning to steal his formula because, a few weeks ago, someone - no doubt an ex-colleague of Carelli, for people of that kind are continually falling out with one another - someone, I say, sent Sir Claud an anonymous letter about your mother. But, do you know, my foolish child, that your husband tried to accuse himself to Inspector Japp - that he actually confessed to the murder of Sir Claud - in order to save you?”

Lucia gave a little cry, and looked adoringly at Richard.

“And you, monsieur,” Poirot continued. “Figure to yourself that, not more than half an hour ago, your wife was shouting in my ear that she had killed your father, all because she feared that you might have done so.”

“Lucia,” Richard murmured tenderly, going to her.

“Being English,” Poirot remarked as he moved away from them, “you will not embrace in my presence, I suppose?”

Lucia went to him and took his hand. “Monsieur Poirot, I do not think I shall ever forget you - ever.”

“Neither shall I forget you, madame,” Poirot declared gallantly as he kissed her hand.

“Poirot,” Richard Amory declared, “I don't know what to say, except that you've saved my life and my marriage: I can't express what I feel -”

“Do not derange yourself, my friend,” replied Poirot. “I am happy to have been of service to you.”

Lucia and Richard went out into the garden together, looking into each other's eyes, his arm around her shoulders.

Following them to the window, Poirot called after them, “Bless you, mes enfants! Oh, and if you encounter Miss Barbara in the garden, please ask her to return Captain Hastings to me. We must shortly begin our journey to London.” Turning back into the room, his glance fell on the fireplace.

“Ah!” he exclaimed as he went to the mantelpiece over the fireplace and straightened the spill vase. “Voilà! Now, order and neatness are restored.” With that, Poirot walked towards the door with an air of immense satisfaction.

Peril At End House (1932)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE MAJESTIC HOTEL

No seaside town in the south of England is, I think, as attractive as St. Loo. It is well-named the Queen of Watering Places and reminds one forcibly of the Riviera. The Cornish coast is to my mind every bit as fascinating as that of the south of France.

I remarked as much to my friend, Hercule Poirot. “So it said on our menu in the restaurant car yesterday, mon ami. Your remark is not original.”

“But don’t you agree?”

He was smiling to himself and did not at once answer my question. I repeated it.

“A thousand pardons, Hastings. My thoughts were wandering. Wandering indeed to that part of the world you mentioned just now.”

“The south of France?”

“Yes. I was thinking of that last winter that I spent there and of the events which occurred.”

I remembered. A murder had been committed on the Blue Train, and the mystery—a complicated and baffling one—had been solved by Poirot with his usual unerring acumen.

“How I wish I had been with you,” I said with deep regret.

“I too,” said Poirot. “Your experience would have been invaluable to me.”

I looked at him sideways. As a result of long habit, I distrust his compliments, but he appeared perfectly serious. And after all, why not? I have a very long experience of the methods he employs.

"What I particularly missed was your vivid imagination, Hastings," he went on dreamily. "One needs a certain amount of light relief. My valet, Georges, an admirable man with whom I sometimes permitted myself to discuss a point, has no imagination whatever." This remark seemed to me quite irrelevant.

"Tell me, Poirot," I said. "Are you never tempted to renew your activities? This passive life—"

"Suits me admirably, my friend. To sit in the sun—what could be more charming? To step from your pedestal at the zenith of your fame—what could be a grander gesture? They say of me: 'That is Hercule Poirot!—The great—the unique!—There was never anyone like him, there never will be!' Eh bien—I am satisfied. I ask no more. I am modest."

I should not myself have used the word modest. It seemed to me that my little friend's egotism had certainly not declined with his years. He leaned back in his chair, caressing his moustache and almost purring with self-satisfaction.

We were sitting on one of the terraces of the Majestic Hotel. It is the biggest hotel in St. Loo and stands in its own grounds on a headland overlooking the sea. The gardens of the hotel lay below us freely interspersed with palm trees. The sea was of a deep and lovely blue, the sky clear and the sun shining with all the single-hearted fervour an August sun should (but in England so often does not) have. There was a vigorous humming of bees, a pleasant sound—and altogether nothing could have been more ideal.

We had only arrived last night, and this was the first morning of what we proposed should be a week's stay. If only these weather conditions continued, we should indeed have a perfect holiday.

I picked up the morning paper which had fallen from my hand and resumed my perusal of the morning's news. The political situation seemed unsatisfactory, but uninteresting, there was trouble in China, there was a long account of a rumoured City swindle, but on the whole there was no news of a very thrilling order.

“Curious thing this parrot disease,” I remarked, as I turned the sheet.

“Very curious.”

“Two more deaths at Leeds, I see.”

“Most regrettable.”

I turned a page.

“Still no news of that flying fellow, Seton, in his round-the-world flight. Pretty plucky, these fellows. That amphibian machine of his, the Albatross, must be a great invention. Too bad if he’s gone west. Not that they’ve given up hope yet. He may have made one of the Pacific islands.”

“The Solomon islanders are still cannibals, are they not?” inquired Poirot pleasantly.

“Must be a fine fellow. That sort of thing makes one feel it’s a good thing to be an Englishman after all.”

“It consoles for the defeats at Wimbledon,” said Poirot.

“I—I didn’t mean,” I began.

My friend waved my attempted apology aside gracefully.

“Me,” he announced. “I am not amphibian, like the machine of the poor Captain Seton, but I am cosmopolitan. And for the English I have always had, as you know, a great admiration. The thorough way, for instance, in which they read the daily paper.”

My attention had strayed to political news.

"They seem to be giving the Home Secretary a pretty bad time of it," I remarked with a chuckle.

"The poor man. He has his troubles, that one. Ah! yes. So much so that he seeks for help in the most improbable quarters."

I stared at him.

With a slight smile, Poirot drew from his pocket his morning's correspondence, neatly secured by a rubber band. From this he selected one letter which he tossed across to me.

"It must have missed us yesterday," he said.

I read the letter with a pleasurable feeling of excitement.

"But, Poirot," I cried. "This is most flattering!"

"You think so, my friend?"

"He speaks in the warmest terms of your ability."

"He is right," said Poirot, modestly averting his eyes.

"He begs you to investigate this matter for him—puts it as a personal favour."

"Quite so. It is unneccessary to repeat all this to me. You understand, my dear Hastings. I have read the letter myself."

"It is too bad," I cried. "This will put an end to our holiday."

"No, no, calmez vous—there is no question of that."

"But the Home Secretary says the matter is urgent."

"He may be right—or again he may not. These politicians, they are easily excited. I have seen myself, in the Chambre des Députés in Paris—"

"Yes, yes, but Poirot, surely we ought to be making arrangements? The express to London has gone—it leaves at twelve o'clock. The next—"

"Calm yourself, Hastings, calm yourself, I pray of you! Always the excitement, the agitation. We are not going to London today—nor yet tomorrow."

"But this summons—"

"Does not concern me. I do not belong to your police force, Hastings. I am asked to undertake a case as a private investigator. I refuse."

"You refuse?"

"Certainly. I write with perfect politeness, tender my regrets, my apologies, explain that I am completely desolated—but what will you? I have retired—I am finished."

"You are not finished," I exlaimed warmly.

Poirot patted my knee.

"There speaks the good friend—the faithful dog. And you have reason, too. The grey cells, they still function—the order, the method—it is still there. But when I have retired, my friend, I have retired! It is finished! I am not a stage favourite who gives the world a dozen farewells. In all generosity I say: let the young men have a chance. They may possibly do something creditable. I doubt it, but they may. Anyway they will do well enough for this doubtless tiresome affair of the Home Secretary's."

"But, Poirot, the compliment!"

"Me, I am above compliments. The Home Secretary, being a man of sense, realizes that if he can only obtain my services all will be successful. What will you? He is unlucky. Hercule Poirot has solved his last case."

I looked at him. In my heart of hearts I deplored his obstinacy. The solving of such a case as was indicated might add still further lustre to his already worldwide reputation. Nevertheless I could not but admire his unyielding attitude.

Suddenly a thought struck me and I smiled.

“I wonder,” I said, “that you are not afraid. Such an emphatic pronouncement will surely tempt the gods.”

“Impossible,” he replied, “that anyone should shake the decision of Hercule Poirot.”

“Impossible, Poirot?”

“You are right, mon ami, one should not use such a word. Eh, ma foi, I do not say that if a bullet should strike the wall by my head, I would not investigate the matter! One is human after all!”

I smiled. A little pebble had just struck the terrace beside us, and Poirot’s fanciful analogy from it tickled my fancy. He stooped now and picked up the pebble as he went on.

“Yes—one is human. One is the sleeping dog—well and good, but the sleeping dog can be roused. There is a proverb in your language that says so.”

“In fact,” I said, “if you find a dagger planted by your pillow tomorrow morning—let the criminal who put it there beware!”

He nodded, but rather absently.

Suddenly, to my surprise, he rose and descended the couple of steps that led from the terrace to the garden. As he did so, a girl came into sight hurrying up towards us.

I had just registered the impression that she was a decidedly pretty girl when my attention was drawn to Poirot who, not looking where he was going, had stumbled over a root and fallen heavily. He was just abreast of the girl at the time and she and I between us helped him to his feet. My attention was naturally on my friend, but I was conscious of an impression of dark hair, an impish face and big dark-blue eyes.

“A thousand pardons,” stammered Poirot. “Mademoiselle, you are most kind. I regret exceedingly—ouch!—my foot he pains me considerably. No, no, it is nothing really—the turned ankle, that is all. In a few minutes all will be well. But if you could help me, Hastings—you and Mademoiselle between you, if she will be so very kind. I am ashamed to ask it of her.”

With me on the one side and the girl on the other we soon got Poirot onto a chair on the terrace. I then suggested fetching a doctor, but this my friend negatived sharply.

“It is nothing, I tell you. The ankle turned, that is all. Painful for the moment, but soon over.” He made a grimace. “See, in a little minute I shall have forgotten. Mademoiselle, I thank you a thousand times. You were most kind. Sit down, I beg of you.”

The girl took a chair.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “But I wish you would let it be seen to.”

“Mademoiselle, I assure you, it is a bagatelle! In the pleasure of your society the pain passes already.”

The girl laughed.

“That’s good.”

“What about a cocktail?” I suggested. “It’s just about the time.”

“Well—” She hesitated. “Thanks very much.”

“Martini?”

“Yes, please—dry Martini.”

I went off. On my return, after having ordered the drinks, I found Poirot and the girl engaged in animated conversation.

"Imagine, Hastings," he said, "that house there—the one on the point—that we have admired so much, it belongs to Mademoiselle here."

"Indeed?" I said, though I was unable to recall having expressed any admiration. In fact I had hardly noticed the house. "It looks rather eerie and imposing standing there by itself far from anything."

"It's called End House," said the girl. "I love it—but it's a tumbledown old place. Going to rack and ruin."

"You are the last of an old family, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh! we're nothing important. But there have been Buckleys here for two or three hundred years. My brother died three years ago, so I'm the last of the family."

"That is sad. You live there alone, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh! I'm away a good deal and when I'm at home there's usually a cheery crowd coming and going."

"That is so modern. Me, I was picturing you in a dark mysterious mansion, haunted by a family curse."

"How marvellous! What a picturesque imagination you must have. No, it's not haunted. Or if so, the ghost is a beneficent one. I've had three escapes from sudden death in as many days, so I must bear a charmed life."

Poirot sat up alertly.

"Escapes from death? That sounds interesting, Mademoiselle."

"Oh! they weren't very thrilling. Just accidents you know." She jerked her head sharply as a wasp flew past. "Curse these wasps. There must be a nest of them round here."

"The bees and the wasps—you do not like them, Mademoiselle? You have been stung—yes?"

“No—but I hate the way they come right past your face.”

“The bee in the bonnet,” said Poirot. “Your English phrase.”

At that moment the cocktails arrived. We all held up our glasses and made the usual inane observations.

“I’m due in the hotel for cocktails, really,” said Miss Buckley. “I expect they’re wondering what has become of me.”

Poirot cleared his throat and set down his glass.

“Ah! for a cup of good rich chocolate,” he murmured. “But in England they make it not. Still, in England you have some very pleasing customs. The young girls, their hats come on and off—so prettily—so easily—”

The girl stared at him.

“What do you mean? Why shouldn’t they?”

“You ask that because you are young—so young, Mademoiselle. But to me the natural thing seems to have a coiffure high and rigid—so—and the hat attached with many hat pins—là—là—là—et là.”

He executed four vicious jabs in the air.

“But how frightfully uncomfortable!”

“Ah! I should think so,” said Poirot. No martyred lady could have spoken with more feeling. “When the wind blew it was the agony—it gave you the migraine.”

Miss Buckley dragged off the simple wide-brimmed felt she was wearing and cast it down beside her.

“And now we do this,” she laughed.

“Which is sensible and charming,” said Poirot, with a little bow.

I looked at her with interest. Her dark hair was ruffled and gave her an elfin look. There was something elfin about her altogether. The small, vivid face, pansy shaped, the enormous dark-blue eyes, and something else—something haunting and arresting. Was it a hint of recklessness? There were dark shadows under the eyes.

The terrace on which we were sitting was a little-used one. The main terrace where most people sat was just round the corner at a point where the cliff shelved directly down to the sea.

From round this corner now there appeared a man, a red-faced man with a rolling carriage who carried his hands half clenched by his side. There was something breezy and carefree about him—a typical sailor.

“I can’t think where the girl’s got to,” he was saying in tones that easily carried to where we sat. “Nick—Nick.”

Miss Buckley rose.

“I knew they’d be getting in a state. Attaboy—George—here I am.”

“Freddie’s frantic for a drink. Come on, girl.”

He cast a glance of frank curiosity at Poirot, who must have differed considerably from most of Nick’s friends.

The girl performed a wave of introduction.

“This is Commander Challenger—er—”

But to my surprise Poirot did not supply the name for which she was waiting. Instead he rose, bowed very ceremoniously and murmured:

“Of the English Navy. I have a great regard for the English Navy.”

This type of remark is not one that an Englishman acclaims most readily. Commander Challenger flushed and Nick Buckley took command of the situation.

“Come on, George. Don’t gape. Let’s find Freddie and Jim.”

She smiled at Poirot.

“Thanks for the cocktail. I hope the ankle will be all right.”

With a nod to me she slipped her hand through the sailor’s arm and they disappeared round the corner together.

“So that is one of Mademoiselle’s friends,” murmured Poirot thoughtfully. “One of her cheery crowd. What about him? Give me your expert judgement, Hastings. Is he what you call a good fellow—yes?”

Pausing for a moment to try and decide exactly what Poirot thought I should mean by a “good fellow,” I gave a doubtful assent.

“He seems all right—yes,” I said. “So far as one can tell by a cursory glance.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot.

The girl had left her hat behind. Poirot stooped to pick it up and twirled it round absentmindedly on his finger.

“Has he a tendresse for her? What do you think, Hastings?”

“My dear Poirot! How can I tell? Here—give me that hat. The lady will want it. I’ll take it to her.”

Poirot paid no attention to my request. He continued to revolve the hat slowly on his finger.

“Pas encore. Ça m’amuse.”

“Really, Poirot!”

“Yes, my friend, I grow old and childish, do I not?”

This was so exactly what I was feeling that I was somewhat disconcerted to have it put into words. Poirot gave a little chuckle, then leaning forward he laid a finger against the side of his nose.

“But no—I am not so completely imbecile as you think! We will return the hat—but assuredly—but later! We will return it to End House and thus we shall have the opportunity of seeing the charming Miss Nick again.”

“Poirot,” I said. “I believe you have fallen in love.”

“She is a pretty girl—eh?”

“Well—you saw for yourself. Why ask me?”

“Because, alas! I cannot judge. To me, nowadays, anything young is beautiful. Jeunesse—jeunesse . . . It is the tragedy of my years. But you—I appeal to you! Your judgement is not upto-date, naturally, having lived in the Argentine so long. You admire the figure of five years ago, but you are at any rate more modern than I am. She is pretty—yes? She has the appeal to the sexes?”

“One sex is sufficient, Poirot. The answer, I should say, is very much in the affirmative. Why are you so interested in the lady?”

“Am I interested?”

“Well—look at what you’ve just being saying.”

“You are under a misapprehension, mon ami. I may be interested in the lady—yes—but I am much more interested in her hat.”

I stared at him, but he appeared perfectly serious.

He nodded his head at me.

“Yes, Hastings, this very hat.” He held it towards me. “You see the reason for my interest?”

“It’s a nice hat,” I said, bewildered. “But quite an ordinary hat. Lots of girls have hats like it.”

“Not like this one.”

I looked at it more closely.

“You see, Hastings?”

“A perfectly plain fawn felt. Good style—”

“I did not ask you to describe the hat. It is plain that you do not see. Almost incredible, my poor Hastings, how you hardly ever do see! It amazes me every time anew! But regard, my dear old imbecile—it is not necessary to employ the grey cells—the eyes will do. Regard—regard—”

And then at last I saw to what he had been trying to draw my attention. The slowly turning hat was revolving on his finger, and that finger was stuck neatly through a hole in the brim of the hat. When he saw that I had realized his meaning, he drew his finger out and held the hat towards me. It was a small neat hole, quite round, and I could not imagine its purpose, if purpose it had.

“Did you observe the way Mademoiselle Nick flinched when a bee flew past? The bee in the bonnet—the hole in the hat.”

“But a bee couldn’t make a hole like that.”

“Exactly, Hastings! What acumen! It could not. But a bullet could, mon cher!”

“A bullet?”

“Mais oui! A bullet like this.”

He held out his hand with a small object in the palm of it.

“A spent bullet, mon ami. It was that which hit the terrace just now when we were talking. A spent bullet!”

"You mean—"

"I mean that one inch of a difference and that hole would not be through the hat but through the head. Now do you see why I am interested, Hastings? You were right, my friend, when you told me not to use the word 'impossible.' Yes—one is human! Ah! but he made a grave mistake, that would-be murderer, when he shot at his victim within a dozen yards of Hercule Poirot! For him, it is indeed la mauvaise chance. But you see now why we must make our entry into End House and get into touch with Mademoiselle? Three near escapes from death in three days. That is what she said. We must act quickly, Hastings. The peril is very close at hand."

Two

END HOUSE

“Poirot,” I said. “I have been thinking.”

“An admirable exercise, my friend. Continue it.”

We were sitting facing each other at lunch at a small table in the window.

“This shot must have been fired quite close to us. And yet we did not hear it.”

“And you think that in the peaceful stillness, with the rippling waves the only sound, we should have done so?”

“Well, it’s odd.”

“No, it is not odd. Some sounds—you get used to them so soon that you hardly notice they are there. All this morning, my friend, speedboats have been making trips in the bay. You complained at first—soon, you did not even notice. But, ma foi, you could fire a machine gun almost and not notice it when one of those boats is on the sea.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Ah! voilà,” murmured Poirot. “Mademoiselle and her friends. They are to lunch here, it seems. And therefore I must return the hat. But no matter. The affair is sufficiently serious to warrant a visit all on its own.”

He leaped up nimbly from his seat, hurried across the room, and presented the hat with a bow just as Miss Buckley and her companions were seating themselves at table.

They were a party of four, Nick Buckley, Commander Challenger, another man and another girl. From where we sat we had a very imperfect view of them. From time to time the naval man's laugh boomed out. He seemed a simple, likeable soul, and I had already taken a fancy to him.

My friend was silent and distrait during our meal. He crumbled his bread, made strange little ejaculations to himself and straightened everything on the table. I tried to talk, but meeting with no encouragement soon gave up.

He continued to sit on at the table long after he had finished his cheese. As soon as the other party had left the room, however, he too rose to his feet. They were just settling themselves at a table in the lounge when Poirot marched up to them in his most military fashion, and addressed Nick directly.

"Mademoiselle, may I crave one little word with you."

The girl frowned. I realized her feelings clearly enough. She was afraid that this queer little foreigner was going to be a nuisance. I could not but sympathize with her, knowing how it must appear in her eyes. Rather unwillingly, she moved a few steps aside.

Almost immediately I saw an expression of surprise pass over her face at the low hurried words Poirot was uttering.

In the meantime, I was feeling rather awkward and ill at ease. Challenger with ready tact came to my rescue, offering me a cigarette and making some commonplace observation. We had taken each other's measure and were inclined to be sympathetic to each other. I fancied that I was more his own kind than the man with whom he had been lunching. I now had the opportunity of observing the latter. A tall, fair, rather exquisite young man, with a rather fleshy nose and overemphasized good looks. He had a supercilious manner and a tired drawl. There was a sleekness about him that I especially disliked.

Then I looked at the woman. She was sitting straight opposite me in a big chair and had just thrown off her hat. She was an unusual type—a weary Madonna describes it best. She had fair, almost colourless hair, parted in the middle and drawn straight down over her ears to a knot in the neck. Her face was dead white and emaciated—yet curiously attractive. Her eyes were very light grey with large pupils. She had a curious look of detachment. She was staring at me. Suddenly she spoke.

“Sit down—till your friend has finished with Nick.”

She had an affected voice, languid and artificial—yet which had a curious attraction—a kind of resonant lingering beauty. She impressed me, I think, as the most tired person I had ever met. Tired in mind, not in body, as though she had found everything in the world to be empty and valueless.

“Miss Buckley very kindly helped my friend when he twisted his ankle this morning,” I explained as I accepted her offer.

“So Nick said.” Her eyes considered me, still detachedly. “Nothing wrong with his ankle now, is there?”

I felt myself blushing.

“Just a momentary sprain,” I explained.

“Oh! well—I’m glad to hear Nick didn’t invent the whole thing. She’s the most heaven-sent little liar that ever existed, you know. Amazing—it’s quite a gift.”

I hardly knew what to say. My discomfiture seemed to amuse her.

“She’s one of my oldest friends,” she said, “and I always think loyalty’s such a tiresome virtue, don’t you? Principally practised by the Scots—like thrift and keeping the Sabbath. But Nick is a liar, isn’t she, Jim? That marvellous story about the brakes of the car—and Jim says there was nothing in it at all.”

The fair man said in a soft rich voice:

“I know something about cars.”

He half-turned his head. Outside amongst other cars was a long, red car. It seemed longer and redder than any car could be. It had a long gleaming bonnet of polished metal. A super car!

“Is that your car?” I asked on a sudden impulse.

He nodded.

“Yes.”

I had an insane desire to say, “It would be!”

Poirot rejoined us at that moment. I rose, he took me by the arm, gave a quick bow to the party, and drew me rapidly away.

“It is arranged, my friend. We are to call on Mademoiselle at End House at half past six. She will be returned from the motoring by then. Yes, yes, surely she will have returned—in safety.”

His face was anxious and his tone was worried.

“What did you say to her?”

“I asked her to accord me an interview—as soon as possible. She was a little unwilling—naturally. She thinks—I can see the thoughts passing through her mind: “Who is he—this little man? Is he the bounder, the upstart, the Moving Picture director?” If she could have refused she would—but it is difficult—asked like that on the spur of the moment it is easier to consent. She admits that she will be back by six thirty. Ça y est!”

I remarked that that seemed to be all right then, but my remark met with little favour. Indeed Poirot was as jumpy as the proverbial cat. He walked about our sitting room all the afternoon, murmuring to himself and ceaselessly rearranging and straightening the ornaments. When I spoke to him, he waved his hands and shook his head.

In the end we started out from the hotel at barely six o’clock.

“It seems incredible,” I remarked, as we descended the steps of the terrace. “To attempt to shoot anyone in a hotel garden. Only a madman would do such a thing.”

“I disagree with you. Given one condition, it would be quite a reasonably safe affair. To begin with the garden is deserted. The people who come to hotels are like a flock of sheep. It is customary to sit on the terrace overlooking the bay—eh bien, so everyone sits on the terrace. Only, I who am an original, sit overlooking the garden. And even then, I saw nothing. There is plenty of cover, you observe—trees, groups of palms, flowering shrubs. Anyone could hide himself comfortably and be unobserved whilst he waited for Mademoiselle to pass this way. And she would come this way. To come round by the road from End House would be much longer. Mademoiselle Nick Buckley, she would be of those who are always late and taking the short cut!”

“All the same, the risk was enormous. He might have been seen—and you can’t make shooting look like an accident.”

“Not like an accident—no.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing—a little idea. I may or may not be justified. Leaving it aside for a moment, there is what I mentioned just now—an essential condition.”

“Which is?”

“Surely you can tell me, Hastings.”

“I wouldn’t like to deprive you of the pleasure of being clever at my expense!”

“Oh! the sarcasm! The irony! Well, what leaps to the eye is this: the motive cannot be obvious. If it were—why, then, truly the risk would indeed be too great to be taken! People would say: ‘I wonder if it were Soand-So. Where was Soand-So when the shot was fired?’ No, the murderer—the would-be murderer, I should say—cannot be obvious. And that, Hastings is why I am afraid! Yes, at this minute I am afraid. I reassure myself. I say: ‘There are four of them.’ I say: ‘Nothing can happen when they are all together.’ I say: ‘It would be madness!’ And all the time I am afraid. These ‘accidents’—I want to hear about them!”

He turned back abruptly.

“It is still early. We will go the other way by the road. The garden has nothing to tell us. Let us inspect the orthodox approach to End House.”

Our way led out of the front gate of the hotel and up a sharp hill to the right. At the top of it was a small lane with a notice on the wall: “TO END HOUSE ONLY.”

We followed it and after a few hundred yards the lane gave an abrupt turn and ended in a pair of dilapidated entrance gates, which would have been the better for a coat of paint.

Inside the gates, to the right, was a small lodge. This lodge presented a piquant contrast to the gates and to the condition of the grass-grown drive. The small garden round it was spick and span, the window frames and sashes had been lately painted and there were clean bright curtains at the windows.

Bending over a flower bed was a man in a faded Norfolk jacket. He straightened up as the gate creaked and turned to look at us. He was a man of about sixty, six foot at least, with a powerful frame and a weather-beaten face. His head was almost completely bald. His eyes were a vivid blue and twinkled. He seemed a genial soul.

“Good afternoon,” he observed as we passed.

I responded in kind and as we went on up the drive I was conscious of those blue eyes raking our backs inquisitively.

“I wonder,” said Poirot, thoughtfully.

He left it at that without vouchsafing any explanation of what it was that he wondered.

The house itself was large and rather dreary-looking. It was shut in by trees, the branches of which actually touched the roof. It was clearly in bad repair. Poirot swept it with an appraising glance before ringing the bell—an old-fashioned bell that needed a Herculean pull to produce any effect and which once started, echoed mournfully on and on.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman—“a decent woman in black”—so I felt she should be described. Very respectable, rather mournful, completely uninterested.

Miss Buckley, she said, had not yet returned. Poirot explained that we had an appointment. He had some little difficulty in gaining his point, she was the type that is apt to be suspicious of foreigners. Indeed I flatter myself that it was my appearance which turned the scale. We were admitted and ushered into the drawing room to await Miss Buckley’s return.

There was no mournful note here. The room gave on the sea and was full of sunshine. It was shabby and betrayed conflicting styles—ultra modern of a cheap variety superimposed on solid Victorian. The curtains were of faded brocade, but the covers were new and gay and the cushions were positively hectic. On the walls were hung family portraits. Some of them, I thought, looked remarkably good. There was a gramophone and there were some records lying idly about. There were a portable wireless, practically no books, and one newspaper flung open on the end of the sofa. Poirot picked it up—then laid it down with a grimace. It was the St. Loo Weekly Herald and Directory. Something impelled him to pick it up a second time, and he was glancing at a column when the door opened and Nick Buckley came into the room.

“Bring the ice, Ellen,” she called over her shoulder, then addressed herself to us.

“Well, here I am—and I’ve shaken off the others. I’m devoured with curiosity. Am I the long-lost heroine that is badly wanted for the Talkies?

You were so very solemn"—she addressed herself to Poirot—"that I feel it can't be anything else. Do make me a handsome offer."

"Alas! Mademoiselle—" began Poirot.

"Don't say it's the opposite," she begged him. "Don't say you paint miniatures and want me to buy one. But no—with that moustache and staying at the Majestic, which has the nastiest food and the highest prices in England—no, it simply can't be."

The woman who had opened the door to us came into the room with ice and a tray of bottles. Nick mixed cocktails expertly, continuing to talk. I think at last Poirot's silence (so unlike him) impressed itself upon her. She stopped in the very act of filling the glasses and said sharply:

"Well?"

"That is what I wish it to be—well, Mademoiselle." He took the cocktail from her hand. "To your good health, Mademoiselle—to your continued good health."

The girl was no fool. The significance of his tone was not lost on her.

"Is—anything the matter?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle. This . . ."

He held out his hand to her with the bullet on the palm of it. She picked it up with a puzzled frown.

"You know what that is?"

"Yes, of course I know. It's a bullet."

"Exactly. Mademoiselle—it was not a wasp that flew past your face this morning—it was this bullet."

"Do you mean—was some criminal idiot shooting bullets in a hotel garden?"

"It would seem so."

"Well, I'm damned," said Nick frankly. "I do seem to bear a charmed life. That's number four."

"Yes," said Poirot. "That is number four. I want, Mademoiselle, to hear about the other three—accidents."

She stared at him.

"I want to be very sure, Mademoiselle, that they were—accidents."

"Why, of course! What else could they be?"

"Mademoiselle, prepare yourself, I beg, for a great shock. What if someone is attempting your life?"

All Nick's response to this was a burst of laughter. The idea seemed to amuse her hugely.

"What a marvellous idea! My dear man, who on earth do you think would attempt my life? I'm not the beautiful young heiress whose death releases millions. I wish somebody was trying to kill me—that would be a thrill, if you like—but I'm afraid there's not a hope!"

"Will you tell me, Mademoiselle, about those accidents?"

"Of course—but there's nothing in it. They were just stupid things. There's a heavy picture hangs over my bed. It fell in the night. Just by pure chance I had happened to hear a door banging somewhere in the house and went down to find it and shut it—and so I escaped. It would probably have bashed my head in. That's No. 1."

Poirot did not smile.

"Continue, Mademoiselle. Let us pass to No. 2."

"Oh, that's weaker still. There's a scrambly cliff path down to the sea. I go down that way to bathe. There's a rock you can dive off. A boulder got dislodged somehow and came roaring down just missing me. The third thing was quite different. Something went wrong with the brakes of the car—I don’t know quite what—the garage man explained, but I didn’t follow it. Anyway if I’d gone through the gate and down the hill, they wouldn’t have held and I suppose I’d have gone slap into the Town Hall and there would have been the devil of a smash. Slight defacement of the Town Hall, complete obliteration of me. But owing to my always leaving something behind, I turned back and merely ran into the laurel hedge.”

“And you cannot tell me what the trouble was?”

“You can go and ask them at Mott’s Garage. They’ll know. It was something quite simple and mechanical that had been unscrewed, I think. I wondered if Ellen’s boy (my standby who opened the door to you, has got a small boy) had tinkered with it. Boys do like messing about with cars. Of course Ellen swore he’d never been near the car. I think something must just have worked loose in spite of what Mott said.”

“Where is your garage, Mademoiselle?”

“Round the other side of the house.”

“Is it kept locked?”

Nick’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Oh! no. Of course not.”

“Anyone could tamper with the car unobserved?”

“Well—yes—I suppose so. But it’s so silly.”

“No, Mademoiselle. It is not silly. You do not understand. You are in danger—grave danger. I tell it to you. I! And you do not know who I am?”

“No.” said Nick, breathlessly.

“I am Hercule Poirot.”

“Oh!” said Nick, in rather a flat tone. “Oh, yes.”

“You know my name, eh?”

“Oh, yes.”

She wriggled uncomfortably. A hunted look came into her eyes. Poirot observed her keenly.

“You are not at ease. That means, I suppose, that you have not read my books.”

“Well—no—not all of them. But I know the name, of course.”

“Mademoiselle, you are a polite little liar.” (I started, remembering the words spoken at the Majestic Hotel that day after lunch.) “I forget—you are only a child—you would not have heard. So quickly does fame pass. My friend there—he will tell you.”

Nick looked at me. I cleared my throat, somewhat embarrassed.

“Monsieur Poirot is—er—was—a great detective,” I explained.

“Ah! my friend,” cried Poirot. “Is that all you can find to say? Mais dis donc! Say then to Mademoiselle that I am a detective unique, unsurpassed, the greatest that ever lived!”

“That is now unnecessary,” I said coldly. “You have told her yourself.”

“Ah, yes, but it is more agreeable to have been able to preserve the modesty. One should not sing one’s own praises.”

“One should not keep a dog and have to bark oneself,” agreed Nick, with mock sympathy. “Who is the dog, by the way? Dr. Watson, I presume.”

“My name is Hastings,” I said coldly.

“Battle of—1066,” said Nick. “Who said I wasn’t educated? Well, this is all too, too marvellous! Do you think someone really wants to do away with me? It would be thrilling. But, of course, that sort of thing doesn’t really happen. Only in books. I expect Monsieur Poirot is like a surgeon who’s invented an operation or a doctor who’s found an obscure disease and wants everyone to have it.”

“Sacré tonnerre!” thundered Poirot. “Will you be serious? You young people of today, will nothing make you serious? It would not have been a joke, Mademoiselle, if you had been lying in the hotel garden a pretty little corpse with a nice little hole through your head instead of your hat. You would not have laughed then—eh?”

“Unearthly laughter heard at a séance,” said Nick. “But seriously, M. Poirot—it’s very kind of you and all that—but the whole thing must be an accident.”

“You are as obstinate as the devil!”

“That’s where I got my name from. My grandfather was popularly supposed to have sold his soul to the devil. Everyone round here called him Old Nick. He was a wicked old man—but great fun. I adored him. I went everywhere with him and so they called us Old Nick and Young Nick. My real name is Magdala.”

“That is an uncommon name.”

“Yes, it’s a kind of family one. There have been lots of Magdalas in the Buckley family. There’s one up there.”

She nodded at a picture on the wall.

“Ah!” said Poirot. Then looking at a portrait hanging over the mantelpiece, he said:

“Is that your grandfather, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, rather an arresting portait, isn’t it? Jim Lazarus offered to buy it, I wouldn’t sell. I’ve got an affection for Old Nick.”

“Ah!” Poirot was silent for a minute, then he said very earnestly:

“Revenons à nos moutons. Listen, Mademoiselle. I implore you to be serious. You are in danger. Today, somebody shot at you with a Mauser pistol—”

“A Mauser pistol?—”

For a moment she was startled.

“Yes, why? Do you know of anyone who has a Mauser pistol?”

She smiled.

“I’ve got one myself.”

“You have?”

“Yes—it was Dad’s. He brought it back from the War. It’s been knocking round here ever since. I saw it only the other day in that drawer.”

She indicated an old-fashioned bureau. Now, as though suddenly struck by an idea, she crossed to it and pulled the drawer open. She turned rather blankly. Her voice held a new note.

“Oh!” she said. “It’s—it’s gone.”

Three

ACCIDENTS?

It was from that moment that the conversation took on a different tone. Up to now, Poirot and the girl had been at cross-purposes. They were separated by a gulf of years. His fame and reputation meant nothing to her—she was of the generation that knows only the great names of the immediate moment. She was, therefore, unimpressed by his warnings. He was to her only a rather comic elderly foreigner with an amusingly melodramatic mind.

And this attitude baffled Poirot. To begin with, his vanity suffered. It was his constant dictum that all the world knew Hercule Poirot. Here was someone who did not. Very good for him, I could not but feel—but not precisely helpful to the object in view!

With the discovery of the missing pistol, however, the affair took on a new phase. Nick ceased to treat it as a mildly amusing joke. She still treated the matter lightly, because it was her habit and her creed to treat all occurrences lightly, but there was a distinct difference in her manner.

She came back and sat down on the arm of a chair, frowning thoughtfully.

“That’s odd,” she said.

Poirot whirled round on me.

“You remember, Hastings, the little idea I mentioned? Well, it was correct, my little idea! Supposing Mademoiselle had been found shot lying in the hotel garden? She might not have been found for some hours—few people pass that way. And beside her hand—just fallen from it—is her own pistol.

Doubtless the good Madame Ellen would identify it. There would be suggestions, no doubt, of worry or of sleeplessness—”

Nick moved uneasily.

“That’s true. I have been worried to death. Everybody’s been telling me I’m nervy. Yes—they’d say all that. . . .”

“And bring in a verdict of suicide. Mademoiselle’s fingerprints conveniently on the pistol and nobody else’s—but yes, it would be very simple and convincing.”

“How terribly amusing!” said Nick, but not, I was glad to note, as though she were terribly amused.

Poirot accepted her words in the conventional sense in which they were uttered.

“N’est-ce pas? But you understand, Mademoiselle, there must be no more of this. Four failures—yes—but the fifth time there may be a success.”

“Bring out your rubber-tyred hearses,” murmured Nick.

“But we are here, my friend and I, to obviate all that!” I felt grateful for the “we.” Poirot has a habit of sometimes ignoring my existence.

“Yes,” I put in. “You mustn’t be alarmed, Miss Buckley. We will protect you.”

“How frightfully nice of you,” said Nick. “I think the whole thing is perfectly marvellous. Too, too thrilling.”

She still preserved her airy detached manner, but her eyes, I thought, looked troubled.

“And the first thing to do,” said Poirot, “is to have the consultation.”

He sat down and beamed upon her in a friendly manner.

“To begin with, Mademoiselle, a conventional question—but—have you any enemies?”

Nick shook her head rather regretfully.

“I’m afraid not,” she said apologetically.

“Bon. We will dismiss that possibility then. And now we ask the question of the cinema, of the detective novel—Who profits by your death, Mademoiselle?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Nick. “That’s why it all seems such nonsense. There’s this beastly old barn, of course, but it’s mortgaged up to the hilt, the roof leaks and there can’t be a coal mine or anything exciting like that hidden in the cliff.”

“It is mortgaged—hein?”

“Yes. I had to mortgage it. You see there were two lots of death duties—quite soon after each other. First my grandfather died—just six years ago, and then my brother. That just about put the lid on the financial position.”

“And your father?”

“He was invalided home from the War, then got pneumonia and died in 1919. My mother died when I was a baby. I lived here with grandfather. He and Dad didn’t get on (I don’t wonder), so Dad found it convenient to park me and go roaming the world on his own account. Gerald—that was my brother—didn’t get on with grandfather either. I dare say I shouldn’t have got on with him if I’d been a boy. Being a girl saved me. Grandfather used to say I was a chip off the old block and had inherited his spirit.” She laughed. “He was an awful old rip, I believe. But frightfully lucky. There was a saying round here that everything he touched turned to gold. He was a gambler, though, and gambled it away again. When he died he left hardly anything beside the house and land. I was sixteen when he died and Gerald was twenty-two. Gerald was killed in a motor accident just three years ago and the place came to me.”

“And after you, Mademoiselle? Who is your nearest relation?”

“My cousin, Charles. Charles Vyse. He’s a lawyer down here. Quite good and worthy but very dull. He gives me good advice and tries to restrain my extravagant tastes.”

“He manages your affairs for you—eh?”

“Well—yes, if you like to put it that way. I haven’t many affairs to manage. He arranged the mortgage for me and made me let the lodge.”

“Ah!—the lodge. I was going to ask you about that. It is let?”

“Yes—to some Australians. Croft their name is. Very hearty, you know—and all that sort of thing. Simply oppressively kind. Always bringing up sticks of celery and early peas and things like that. They’re shocked at the way I let the garden go. They’re rather a nuisance, really—at least he is. Too terribly friendly for words. She’s a cripple, poor thing, and lies on a sofa all day. Anyway they pay the rent and that’s the great thing.”

“How long have they been here?”

“Oh! about six months.”

“I see. Now, beyond this cousin of yours—on your father’s side or your mother’s, by the way?”

“Mother’s. My mother was Amy Vyse.”

“Bien! Now, beyond this cousin, as I was saying, have you any other relatives?”

“Some very distant cousins in Yorkshire—Buckleys.”

“No one else?”

“No.”

“That is lonely.”

Nick stared at him.

“Lonely? What a funny idea. I’m not down here much, you know. I’m usually in London. Relations are too devastating as a rule. They fuss and interfere. It’s much more fun to be on one’s own.”

“I will not waste the sympathy. You are a modern, I see, Mademoiselle. Now—your household.”

“How grand that sounds! Ellen’s the household. And her husband, who’s a sort of gardener—not a very good one. I pay them frightfully little because I let them have the child here. Ellen does for me when I’m down here and if I have a party we get in who and what we can to help. I’m giving a party on Monday. It’s Regatta week, you know.”

“Monday—and today is Saturday. Yes. Yes. And now, Mademoiselle, your friends—the ones with whom you were lunching today, for instance?”

“Well, Freddie Rice—the fair girl—is practically my greatest friend. She’s had a rotten life. Married to a beast—a man who drank and drugged and was altogether a queer of the worst description. She had to leave him a year or two ago. Since then she’s drifted round. I wish to goodness she’d get a divorce and marry Jim Lazarus.”

“Lazarus? The art dealer in Bond Street?”

“Yes. Jim’s the only son. Rolling in money, of course. Did you see that car of his? He’s a Jew, of course, but a frightfully decent one. And he’s devoted to Freddie. They go about everywhere together. They are staying at the Majestic over the weekend and are coming to me on Monday.”

“And Mrs. Rice’s husband?”

“The mess? Oh! he’s dropped out of everything. Nobody knows where he is. It makes it horribly awkward for Freddie. You can’t divorce a man when you don’t know where he is.”

“Évidemment!”

"Poor Freddie," said Nick, pensively. "She's had rotten luck. The thing was all fixed once. She got hold of him and put it to him, and he said he was perfectly willing, but he simply hadn't got the cash to take a woman to a hotel. So the end of it all was she forked out—and he took it and off he went and has never been heard of from that day to this. Pretty mean, I call it."

"Good heavens," I exclaimed.

"My friend Hastings is shocked," remarked Poirot. "You must be more careful, Mademoiselle. He is out of date, you comprehend. He has just returned from those great clear open spaces, etc., and he has yet to learn the language of nowadays."

"Well, there's nothing to get shocked about," said Nick, opening her eyes very wide. "I mean, everybody knows, don't they, that there are such people. But I call it a low-down trick all the same. Poor old Freddie was so damned hard up at the time that she didn't know where to turn."

"Yes, yes, not a very pretty affair. And your other friend, Mademoiselle. The good Commander Challenger?"

"George? I've known George all my life—well, for the last five years anyway. He's a good scout, George."

"He wishes you to marry him—eh?"

"He does mention it now and again. In the small hours of the morning or after the second glass of port."

"But you remain hard-hearted."

"What would be the use of George and me marrying one another? We've neither of us got a bean. And one would get terribly bored with George. That 'playing for one's side,' 'good old school' manner. After all, he's forty if he's a day."

The remark made me wince slightly.

“In fact he has one foot in the grave,” said Poirot. “Oh! do not mind me, Mademoiselle. I am a grandpapa—a nobody. And now tell me more about these accidents. The picture, for instance?”

“It’s been hung up again—on a new cord. You can come and see it if you like.”

She led the way out of the room and we followed her. The picture in question was an oil painting in a heavy frame. It hung directly over the bed head.

With a murmured, “You permit, Mademoiselle,” Poirot removed his shoes and mounted upon the bed. He examined the picture and the cord, and gingerly tested the weight of the painting. With an elegant grimace he descended.

“To have that descend on one’s head—no, it would not be pretty. The cord by which it was hung, Mademoiselle, was it, like this one, a wire cable?”

“Yes, but not so thick. I got a thicker one this time.”

“That is comprehensible. And you examined the break—the edges were frayed?”

“I think so—but I didn’t notice particularly. Why should I?”

“Exactly. As you say, why should you? All the same, I should much like to look at that piece of wire. Is it about the house anywhere?”

“It was still on the picture. I expect the man who put the new wire on just threw the old one away.”

“A pity. I should like to have seen it.”

“You don’t think it was just an accident after all? Surely it couldn’t have been anything else.”

“It may have been an accident. It is impossible to say. But the damage to the brakes of your car—that was not an accident. And the stone that rolled down the cliff—I should like to see the spot where that accident occurred."

Nick took us out in the garden and led us to the cliff edge. The sea glittered blue below us. A rough path led down the face of the rock. Nick described just where the accident occurred and Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he asked:

"How many ways are there into your garden, Mademoiselle?"

"There's the front way—past the lodge. And a tradesman's entrance—a door in the wall halfway up that lane. Then there's a gate just along here on the cliff edge. It leads out on to a zigzag path that leads up from that beach to the Majestic Hotel. And then, of course, you can go straight through a gap in the hedge into the Majestic garden—that's the way I went this morning. To go through the Majestic garden is a short cut to the town anyway."

"And your gardener—where does he usually work?"

"Well, he usually potters round the kitchen garden, or else he sits in the potting shed and pretends to be sharpening the shears."

"Round the other side of the house, that is to say?"

"So that if anyone were to come in here and dislodge a boulder he would be very unlikely to be noticed."

Nick gave a sudden little shiver.

"Do you—do you really think that is what happened?" she asked, "I can't believe it somehow. It seems so perfectly futile."

Poirot drew the bullet from his pocket again and looked at it.

"That was not futile, Mademoiselle," he said gently.

"It must have been some madman."

“Possibly. It is an interesting subject of after-dinner conversation—are all criminals really madmen? There may be a malformation in their little grey cells—yes, it is very likely. That, it is the affair of the doctor. For me—I have different work to perform. I have the innocent to think of, not the guilty—the victim, not the criminal. It is you I am considering now, Mademoiselle, not your unknown assailant. You are young and beautiful, and the sun shines and the world is pleasant, and there is life and love ahead of you. It is all that of which I think, Mademoiselle. Tell me, these friends of yours, Mrs. Rice and Mr. Lazarus—they have been down here, how long?”

“Freddie came down on Wednesday to this part of the world. She stopped with some people near Tavistock for a couple of nights. She came on here yesterday. Jim has been touring round about, I believe.”

“And Commander Challenger?”

“He’s at Devonport. He comes over in his car whenever he can—weekends mostly.”

Poirot nodded. We were walking back to the house. There was a silence, and then he said suddenly:

“Have you a friend whom you can trust, Mademoiselle?”

“There’s Freddie.”

“Other than Mrs. Rice.”

“Well, I don’t know. I suppose I have. Why?”

“Because I want you to have a friend to stay with you—immediately.”

“Oh!”

Nick seemed rather taken aback. She was silent a moment or two, thinking. Then she said doubtfully:

“There’s Maggie. I could get hold of her, I expect.”

“Who is Maggie?”

“One of my Yorkshire cousins. There’s a large family of them. He’s a clergyman, you know. Maggie’s about my age, and I usually have her to stay sometime or other in the summer. She’s no fun, though—one of those painfully pure girls, with the kind of hair that has just become fashionable by accident. I was hoping to get out of having her this year.”

“Not at all. Your cousin, Mademoiselle, will do admirably. Just the type of person I had in mind.”

“All right,” said Nick, with a sigh. “I’ll wire her. I certainly don’t know who else I could get hold of just now. Everyone’s fixed up. But if it isn’t the Choirboys’ Outing or the Mothers’ Beanfeast she’ll come all right. Though what you expect her to do. . . .”

“Could you arrange for her to sleep in your room?”

“I suppose so.”

“She would not think that an odd request?”

“Oh, no, Maggie never thinks. She just does—earnestly, you know. Christian works—with faith and perseverance. All right, I’ll wire her to come on Monday.”

“Why not tomorrow?”

“With Sunday trains? She’ll think I’m dying if I suggest that. No, I’ll say Monday. Are you going to tell her about the awful fate hanging over me?”

“Nous verrons. You still make a jest of it? You have courage, I am glad to see.”

“It makes a diversion anyway,” said Nick.

Something in her tone struck me and I glanced at her curiously. I had a feeling that there was something she had left untold. We had reentered the drawing room. Poirot was fingering the newspaper on the sofa.

"You read this, Mademoiselle?" he asked, suddenly.

"The St. Loo Herald? Not seriously. I opened it to see the tides. It gives them every week."

"I see. By the way, Mademoiselle, have you ever made a will?"

"Yes, I did. About six months ago. Just before my op."

"Qu'est-ce que vous dites? Your op?"

"Operation. For appendicitis. Someone said I ought to make a will, so I did. It made me feel quite important."

"And the terms of that will?"

"I left End House to Charles. I hadn't much else to leave, but what there was I left to Freddie. I should think probably the—what do you call them—liabilities would have exceeded the assets, really."

Poirot nodded absently.

"I will take my leave now. Au revoir, Mademoiselle. Be careful."

"What of?" asked Nick.

"You are intelligent. Yes, that is the weak point—in which direction are you to be careful? Who can say? But have confidence, Mademoiselle. In a few days I shall have discovered the truth."

"Until then beware of poison, bombs, revolver shots, motor accidents and arrows dipped in the secret poison of the South American Indians," finished Nick glibly.

"Do not mock yourself, Mademoiselle," said Poirot gravely.

He paused as he reached the door.

“By the way,” he said. “What price did M. Lazarus offer you for the portrait of your grandfather?”

“Fifty pounds.”

“Ah!” said Poirot.

He looked earnestly back at the dark saturnine face above the mantelpiece.

“But, as I told you, I don’t want to sell the old boy.”

“No,” said Poirot, thoughtfully. “No, I understand.”

Four

THERE MUST BE SOMETHING!

“Poirot,” I said, as soon as we were out upon the road. “There is one thing I think you ought to know.”

“And what is that, mon ami?”

I told him of Mrs. Rice’s version of the trouble with the motor.

“Tiens! C’est intéressant, ça. There is, of course, a type, vain, hysterical, that seeks to make itself interesting by having marvellous escapes from death and which will recount to you surprising histories that never happened! Yes, it is well-known, that type there. Such people will even do themselves grave bodily injury to sustain the fiction.”

“You don’t think that—”

“That Mademoiselle Nick is of that type? No, indeed. You observed, Hastings, that we had great difficulty in convincing her of her danger. And right to the end she kept up the farce of a half-mocking disbelief. She is of her generation, that little one. All the same, it is interesting—what Madame Rice said. Why should she say it? Why say it even if it were true? It was unnecessary—almost gauche.”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s true. She dragged it into the conversation neck and crop—for no earthly reason that I could see.”

“That is curious. Yes, that is curious. The little facts that are curious, I like to see them appear. They are significant. They point the way.”

“The way—where?”

“You put your finger on the weak spot, my excellent Hastings. Where? Where indeed! Alas, we shall not know till we get there.”

“Tell me, Poirot,” I said. “Why did you insist on her getting this cousin to stay?”

Poirot stopped and waved an excited forefinger at me.

“Consider,” he cried. “Consider for one little moment, Hastings. How we are handicapped! How are our hands tied! To hunt down a murderer after a crime has been committed—c’est tout simple! Or at least it is simple to one of my ability. The murderer has, so to speak, signed his name by committing the crime. But here there is no crime—and what is more we do not want a crime. To detect a crime before it has been committed—that is indeed of a rare difficulty.

“What is our first aim? The safety of Mademoiselle. And that is not easy. No, it is not easy, Hastings. We cannot watch over her day and night—we cannot even send a policeman in big boots to watch over her. We cannot pass the night in a young lady’s sleeping chamber. The affair bristles with difficulties.

“But we can do one thing. We can make it more difficult for our assassin. We can put Mademoiselle upon her guard and we can introduce a perfectly impartial witness. It will take a very clever man to get round those two circumstances.”

He paused, and then said in an entirely different tone of voice:

“But what I am afraid of, Hastings—”

“Yes?”

“What I am afraid of is—that he is a very clever man. And I am not easy in my mind. No, I am not easy at all.”

“Poirot,” I said. “You’re making me feel quite nervous.”

"So am I nervous. Listen, my friend, that paper, the St. Loo Weekly Herald. It was open and folded back at—where do you think? A little paragraph which said, 'Among the guests staying at the Majestic Hotel are M. Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings.' Supposing—just supposing that someone had read that paragraph. They know my name—everyone knows my name—"

"Miss Buckley didn't," I said, with a grin.

"She is a scatterbrain—she does not count. A serious man—a criminal—would know my name. And he would be afraid! He would wonder! He would ask himself questions. Three times he has attempted the life of Mademoiselle and now Hercule Poirot arrives in the neighbourhood. "Is that coincidence?' he would ask himself. And he would fear that it might not be coincidence. What would he do then?"

"Lie low and hide his tracks," I suggested.

"Yes—yes—or else—if he had real audacity, he would strike quickly—without loss of time. Before I had time to make inquiries—pouf, Mademoiselle is dead. That is what a man of audacity would do."

"But why do you think that somebody read that paragraph other than Miss Buckley?"

"It was not Miss Buckley who read that paragraph. When I mentioned my name it meant nothing to her. It was not even familiar. Her face did not change. Besides she told us—she opened the paper to look at the tides—nothing else. Well, there was no tide table on that page."

"You think someone in the house—"

"Someone in the house or who has access to it. And that last is easy—the window stands open. Without doubt Miss Buckley's friends pass in and out."

"Have you any idea? Any suspicion?"

Poirot flung out his hands.

“Nothing. Whatever the motive, it is, as I predicted, not an obvious one. That is the would-be murderer’s security—that is why he could act so daringly this morning. On the face of it, no one seems to have any reason for desiring the little Nick’s death. The property? End House? That passes to the cousin—but does he particularly want a heavily mortgaged and very dilapidated old house? It is not even a family place so far as he is concerned. He is not a Buckley, remember. We must see this Charles Vyse, certainly, but the idea seems fantastic.

“Then there is Madame—the bosom friend—with her strange eyes and her air of a lost Madonna—”

“You felt that too? I asked, startled.

“What is her concern in the business? She tells you that her friend is a liar. C’est gentil, ça! Why does she tell you? Is she afraid of something that Nick may say? Is that something connected with the car? Or did she use that as an instance, and was her real fear of something else? Did anyone tamper with the car, and if so, who? And does she know about it?

“Then the handsome blond, M. Lazarus. Where does he fit in? With his marvellous automobile and his money. Can he possibly be concerned in any way? Commander Challenger—”

“He’s all right,” I put in quickly. “I’m sure of that. A real pukka sahib.”

“Doubtless he has been to what you consider the right school. Happily, being a foreigner, I am free from these prejudices, and can make investigations unhampered by them. But I will admit that I find it hard to connect Commander Challenger with the case. In fact, I do not see that he can be connected.”

“Of course he can’t,” I said warmly.

Poirot looked at me meditatively.

“You have an extraordinary effect on me, Hastings. You have so strongly the flair in the wrong direction that I am almost tempted to go by it! You are that wholly admirable type of man, honest, credulous, honourable, who is invariably taken in by any scoundrel. You are the type of man who invests in doubtful oil fields, and non-existent gold mines. From hundreds like you, the swindler makes his daily bread. Ah, well—I shall study this Commander Challenger. You have awakened my doubts."

"My dear Poirot," I cried, angrily. "You are perfectly absurd. A man who has knocked about the world like I have—"

"Never learns," said Poirot, sadly. "It is amazing—but there it is."

"Do you suppose I'd have made a success of my ranch out in the Argentine if I were the kind of credulous fool you make out?"

"Do not enrage yourself, mon ami. You have made a great success of it—you and your wife."

"Bella," I said, "always goes by my judgement."

"She is as wise as she is charming," said Poirot. "Let us not quarrel my friend. See, there ahead of us, it says Mott's Garage. That, I think, is the garage mentioned by Mademoiselle Buckley. A few inquiries will soon give us the truth of that little matter."

We duly entered the place and Poirot introduced himself by explaining that he had been recommended there by Miss Buckley. He made some inquiries about hiring a car for some afternoon drives and from there slid easily into the topic of the damage sustained by Miss Buckley's car not long ago.

Immediately the garage proprietor waxed voluble. Most extraordinary thing he'd ever seen. He proceeded to be technical. I, alas, am not mechanically minded. Poirot, I should imagine, is even less so. But certain facts did emerge unmistakably. The car had been tampered with. And the damage had been something quite easily done, occupying very little time.

"So that is that," said Poirot, as we strolled away. "The little Nick was right, and the rich M. Lazarus was wrong. Hastings, my friend, all this is very interesting."

“What do we do now?”

“We visit the post office and send off a telegram if it is not too late.”

“A telegram?” I said hopefully.

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “A telegram.”

The post office was still open. Poirot wrote out his telegram and despatched it. He vouchsafed me no information as to its contents. Feeling that he wanted me to ask him, I carefully refrained from doing so.

“It is annoying that tomorrow is Sunday,” he remarked, as we strolled back to the hotel. “We cannot now call upon M. Vyse till Monday morning.”

“You could get hold of him at his private address.”

“Naturally. But that is just what I am anxious not to do. I would prefer, in the first place, to consult him professionally and to form my judgement of him from that aspect.”

“Yes,” I said thoughtfully. “I suppose that would be best.”

“The answer to one simple little question, for instance, might make a great difference. If M. Charles Vyse was in his office at twelve-thirty this morning, then it was not he who fired that shot in the garden of the Majestic Hotel.”

“Ought we not to examine the alibis of the three at the hotel?”

“That is much more difficult. It would be easy enough for one of them to leave the others for a few minutes, a hasty egress from one of the innumerable windows—lounge, smoking room, drawing room, writing room, quickly under cover to the spot where the girl must pass—the shot fired and a rapid retreat. But as yet, mon ami, we are not even sure that we have arrived at all the dramatis personae in the drama. There is the respectable Ellen—and her so far unseen husband. Both inmates of the house and possibly, for all we know, with a grudge against our little Mademoiselle. There are even the unknown Australians at the lodge. And there may be others, friends and intimates of Miss Buckley's whom she has no reason for suspecting and consequently has not mentioned. I cannot help feeling, Hastings, that there is something behind this—something that has not yet come to light. I have a little idea that Miss Buckley knows more than she told us."

"You think she is keeping something back?"

"Yes."

"Possibly with an idea of shielding whoever it is?"

Poirot shook his head with the utmost energy.

"No, no. As far as that goes, she gave me the impression of being utterly frank. I am convinced that as regards these attempts on her life, she was telling all she knew. But there is something else—something that she believes has nothing to do with that at all. And I should like to know what that something is. For I—I say it in all modesty—am a great deal more intelligent than une petite comme ça. I, Hercule Poirot, might see a connection where she sees none. It might give me the clue I am seeking. For I announce to you, Hastings, quite frankly and humbly, that I am as you express it, all on the sea. Until I can get some glimmering of the reason behind all this, I am in the dark. There must be something—some factor in the case that I do not grasp. What is it? Je me demande ça sans cesse. Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

"You will find out," I said, soothingly.

"So long," he said sombrely, "as I do not find out too late."

Five

MR. AND MRS. CROFT

There was dancing that evening at the hotel. Nick Buckley dined there with her friends and waved a gay greeting to us.

She was dressed that evening in floating scarlet chiffon that dragged on the floor. Out of it rose her white neck and shoulders and her small impudent dark head.

“An engaging young devil,” I remarked.

“A contrast to her friend—eh?”

Frederica Rice was in white. She danced with a languorous weary grace that was as far removed from Nick’s animation as anything could be.

“She is very beautiful,” said Poirot suddenly.

“Who? Our Nick?”

“No—the other. Is she evil? Is she good? Is she merely unhappy? One cannot tell. She is a mystery. She is, perhaps, nothing at all. But I tell you, my friend, she is an allumeuse.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

He shook his head, smiling.

“You will feel it sooner or later. Remember my words.”

Presently to my surprise, he rose. Nick was dancing with George Challenger. Frederica and Lazarus had just stopped and had sat down at their table. Then Lazarus got up and went away. Mrs. Rice was alone. Poirot went straight to her table. I followed him.

His methods were direct and to the point.

“You permit?” He laid a hand on the back of a chair, then slid into it. “I am anxious to have a word with you while your friend is dancing.”

“Yes?” Her voice sounded cool, uninterested.

“Madame, I do not know whether your friend has told you. If not, I will. Today her life has been attempted.”

Her great grey eyes widened in horror and surprise. The pupils, dilated black pupils, widened too.

“What do you mean?”

“Mademoiselle Buckley was shot at in the garden of this hotel.”

She smiled suddenly—a gentle, pitying, incredulous smile.

“Did Nick tell you so?”

“No, Madame, I happened to see it with my own eyes. Here is the bullet.”

He held it out to her and she drew back a little.

“But, then—but, then—”

“It is no fantasy of Mademoiselle’s imagination, you understand. I vouch for that. And there is more. Several very curious accidents have happened in the last few days. You will have heard—no, perhaps you will not. You only arrived yesterday, did you not?”

“Yes—yesterday.”

“Before that you were staying with friends, I understand. At Tavistock.”

"Yes."

"I wonder, Madame, what were the names of the friends with whom you were staying."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Is there any reason why I should tell you that?" she asked coldly.

Poirot was immediately all innocent surprise.

"A thousand pardons, Madame. I was most maladroit. But I myself, having friends at Tavistock, fancied that you might have met them there . . . Buchanan—that is the name of my friends."

Mrs. Rice shook her head.

"I don't remember them. I don't think I can have met them." Her tone now was quite cordial. "Don't let us talk about boring people. Go on about Nick. Who shot at her? Why?"

"I do not know who—as yet, said Poirot. "But I shall find out. Oh! yes, I shall find out. I am, you know, a detective. Hercule Poirot is my name."

"A very famous name."

"Madame is too kind."

She said slowly:

"What do you want me to do?"

I think she surprised us both there. We had not expected just that.

"I will ask you, Madame, to watch over your friend."

"I will."

"That is all."

He got up, made a quick bow, and we returned to our own table.

“Poirot,” I said, “aren’t you showing your hand very plainly?”

“Mon ami, what else can I do? It lacks subtlety, perhaps, but it makes for safety. I can take no chances. At any rate one thing emerges plain to see.”

“What is that?”

“Mrs. Rice was not at Tavistock. Where was she? Ah! but I will find out. Impossible to keep information from Hercule Poirot. See—the handsome Lazarus has returned. She is telling him. He looks over at us. He is clever, that one. Note the shape of his head. Ah! I wish I knew—”

“What?” I asked, as he came to a stop.

“What I shall know on Monday,” he returned, ambiguously.

I looked at him but said nothing. He sighed.

“You have no longer the curiosity, my friend. In the old days—”

“There are some pleasures,” I said, coldly, “that it is good for you to do without.”

“You mean—?”

“The pleasure of refusing to answer questions.”

“Ah c’est malin.”

“Quite so.”

“Ah, well, well,” murmured Poirot. “The strong silent man beloved of novelists in the Edwardian age.”

His eyes twinkled with their old glint.

Nick passed our table shortly afterwards. She detached herself from her partner and swooped down on us like a gaily-coloured bird.

“Dancing on the edge of death,” she said lightly.

“It is a new sensation, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes. Rather fun.”

She was off again, with a wave of her hand.

“I wish she hadn’t said that,” I said, slowly.

“Dancing on the edge of death. I don’t like it.”

“I know. It is too near the truth. She has courage, that little one. Yes, she has courage. But unfortunately it is not courage that is needed at this moment. Caution, not courage—voilà ce qu’il nous faut!”

The following day was Sunday. We were sitting on the terrace in front of the hotel, and it was about half past eleven when Poirot suddenly rose to his feet.

“Come, my friend. We will try a little experiment. I have ascertained that M. Lazarus and Madame have gone out in the car and Mademoiselle with them. The coast is clear.”

“Clear for what?”

“You shall see.”

We walked down the steps and across a short stretch of grass to the sea. A couple of bathers were coming up it. They passed us laughing and talking.

When they had gone, Poirot walked to the point where an inconspicuous small gate, rather rusty on its hinges, bore the words in half obliterated letters, “End House. Private.” There was no one in sight. We passed quietly through.

In another minute we came out on the stretch of lawn in front of the house. There was no one about. Poirot strolled to the edge of the cliff and looked over. Then he walked towards the house itself. The French windows onto the verandah were open and we passed straight into the drawing room. Poirot wasted no time there. He opened the door and went out into the hall. From there he mounted the stairs, I at his heels. He went straight to Nick's bedroom—sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded to me with a twinkle.

"You see, my friend, how easy it is. No one has seen us come. No one will see us go. We could do any little affair we had to do in perfect safety. We could, for instance, fray through a picture wire so that it would be bound to snap before many hours had passed. And supposing that by chance anyone did happen to be in front of the house and see us coming. Then we would have a perfectly natural excuse—providing that we were known as friends of the house."

"You mean that we can rule out a stranger?"

"That is what I mean, Hastings. It is no stray lunatic who is at the bottom of this. We must look nearer home than that."

He turned to leave the room and I followed him. We neither of us spoke. We were both, I think, troubled in mind.

And then, at the bend of the staircase, we both stopped abruptly. A man was coming up.

He too stopped. His face was in shadow but his attitude was one of one completely taken aback. He was the first to speak, in a loud, rather bullying voice.

"What the hell are you doing here, I'd like to know?"

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Monsieur—Croft, I think?"

"That's my name, but what—"

“Shall we go into the drawing room to converse? It would be better, I think.”

The other gave way, turned abruptly and descended, we following close on his heels. In the drawing room, with the door shut, Poirot made a little bow.

“I will introduce myself. Hercule Poirot at your service.”

The other’s face cleared a little.

“Oh!” he said slowly. “You’re the detective chap. I’ve read about you.”

“In the St. Loo Herald?”

“Eh? I’ve read about you way back in Australia. French, aren’t you?”

“Belgian. It makes no matter. This is my friend, Captain Hastings.”

“Glad to meet you. But look, what’s the big idea? What are you doing here? Anything—wrong?”

“It depends what you call—wrong.”

The Australian nodded. He was a fine-looking man in spite of his bald head and advancing years. His physique was magnificent. He had a heavy, rather underhung face—a crude face, I called it to myself. The piercing blue of his eyes was the most noticeable thing about him.

“See here,” he said. “I came round to bring little Miss Buckley a handful of tomatoes and a cucumber. That man of hers is no good—bone idle—doesn’t grow a thing. Lazy hound. Mother and I—why, it makes us mad, and we feel it’s only neighbourly to do what we can! We’ve got a lot more tomatoes than we can eat. Neighbours should be matey, don’t you think? I came in, as usual, through the window and dumped the basket down. I was just going off again when I heard footsteps and men’s voices overhead. That struck me as odd. We don’t deal much in burglars round here—but after all it was possible. I thought I’d just make sure everything was all right. Then I met you two on the stairs coming down. It gave me a bit of a surprise. And now you tell me you’re a bonza detective. What’s it all about?”

"It is very simple," said Poirot, smiling. "Mademoiselle had a rather alarming experience the other night. A picture fell above her bed. She may have told you of it?"

"She did. A mighty fine escape."

"To make all secure I promised to bring her some special chain—it will not do to repeat the occurrence, eh? She tells me she is going out this morning, but I may come and measure what amount of chain will be needed. Voilà—it is simple."

He flung out his hands with a childlike simplicity and his most engaging smile.

Croft drew a deep breath.

"So that's all it is?"

"Yes—you have had the scare for nothing. We are very law-abiding citizens, my friend and I."

"Didn't I see you yesterday?" said Croft, slowly. "Yesterday evening it was. You passed our little place."

"Ah! yes, you were working in the garden and were so polite as to say good afternoon when we passed."

"That's right. Well—well. And you're the Monsieur Hercule Poirot I've heard so much about. Tell me, are you busy, Mr. Poirot? Because if not, I wish you'd come back with me now—have a cup of morning tea, Australian fashion, and meet my old lady. She's read all about you in the newspapers."

"You are too kind, M. Croft. We have nothing to do and shall be delighted."

"That's fine."

"You have the measurements correctly, Hastings?" asked Poirot, turning to me.

I assured him that I had the measurements correctly and we accompanied our new friend.

Croft was a talker; we soon realized that. He told us of his home near Melbourne, of his early struggles, of his meeting with his wife, of their combined efforts and of his final good fortune and success.

“Right away we made up our minds to travel,” he said. “We’d always wanted to come to the old country. Well, we did. We came down to this part of the world—tried to look up some of my wife’s people—they came from round about here. But we couldn’t trace any of them. Then we took a trip on the Continent—Paris, Rome, the Italian Lakes, Florence—all those places. It was while we were in Italy that we had the train accident. My poor wife was badly smashed up. Cruel, wasn’t it? I’ve taken her to the best doctors and they all say the same—there’s nothing for it but time—time and lying up. It’s an injury to the spine.”

“What a misfortune!”

“Hard luck, isn’t it? Well, there it was. And she’d only got one kind of fancy—to come down here. She kind of felt if we had a little place of our own—something small—it would make all the difference. We saw a lot of messy-looking shacks, and then by good luck we found this. Nice and quiet and tucked away—no cars passing, or gramophones next door. I took it right away.”

With the last words we had come to the lodge itself. He sent his voice echoing forth in a loud “Cooee,” to which came an answering “Cooee.”

“Come in,” said Mr. Croft. He passed through the open door and up the short flight of stairs to a pleasant bedroom. There, on a sofa, was a stout middle-aged woman with pretty grey hair and a very sweet smile.

“Who do you think this is, mother?” said Mr. Croft. “The extra-special, world-celebrated detective, Mr. Hercule Poirot. I brought him right along to have a chat with you.”

“If that isn’t too exciting for words,” cried Mrs. Croft, shaking Poirot warmly by the hand. “Read about that Blue Train business, I did, and you just happening to be on it, and a lot about your other cases. Since this trouble with my back, I’ve read all the detective stories that ever were, I should think. Nothing else seems to pass the time away so quick. Bert, dear, call out to Edith to bring the tea along.”

“Right you are, mother.”

“She’s a kind of nurse attendant, Edith is,” Mrs. Croft explained. “She comes along each morning to fix me up. We’re not bothering with servants. Bert’s as good a cook and a house-parlourman as you’d find anywhere, and it gives him occupation—that and the garden.”

“Here we are,” cried Mr. Croft, reappearing with a tray. “Here’s the tea. This is a great day in our lives, mother.”

“I suppose you’re staying down here, Mr. Poirot?” Mrs. Croft asked, as she leaned over a little and wielded the teapot.

“Why, yes, Madame, I take the holiday.”

“But surely I read that you had retired—that you’d taken a holiday for good and all.”

“Ah! Madame, you must not believe everything you read in the papers.”

“Well, that’s true enough. So you still carry on business?”

“When I find a case that interests me.”

“Sure you’re not down here on work?” inquired Mr. Croft, shrewdly. “Calling it a holiday might be all part of the game.”

“You mustn’t ask him embarrassing questions, Bert,” said Mrs. Croft. “Or he won’t come again. We’re simple people, Mr. Poirot, and you’re giving us a great treat coming here today—you and your friend. You really don’t know the pleasure you’re giving us.”

She was so natural and so frank in her gratification that my heart quite warmed to her.

“That was a bad business about that picture,” said Mr. Croft.

“That poor little girl might have been killed,” said Mrs. Croft, with deep feeling. “She is a live wire. Livens the place up when she comes down here. Not much liked in the neighbourhood, so I’ve heard. But that’s the way in these stuck English places. They don’t like life and gaiety in a girl. I don’t wonder she doesn’t spend much time down here, and that long-nosed cousin of hers has no more chance of persuading her to settle down here for good and all than—than—well, I don’t know what.”

“Don’t gossip, Milly,” said her husband.

“Aha!” said Poirot. “The wind is in that quarter. Trust the instinct of Madame! So M. Charles Vyse is in love with our little friend?”

“He’s silly about her,” said Mrs. Croft. “But she won’t marry a country lawyer. And I don’t blame her. He’s a poor stick, anyway. I’d like her to marry that nice sailor—what’s his name, Challenger. Many a smart marriage might be worse than that. He’s older than she is, but what of that? Steadying—that’s what she needs. Flying about all over the place, the Continent even, all alone or with that queer-looking Mrs. Rice. She’s a sweet girl, Mr. Poirot—I know that well enough. But I’m worried about her. She’s looked none too happy lately. She’s had what I call a haunted kind of look. And that worries me! I’ve got my reasons for being interested in that girl, haven’t I, Bert?”

Mr. Croft got up from his chair rather suddenly.

“No need to go into that, Milly,” he said. “I wonder, Mr. Poirot, if you’d care to see some snapshots of Australia?”

The rest of our visit passed uneventfully. Ten minutes later we took our leave.

“Nice people,” I said. “So simple and unassuming. Typical Australians.”

“You liked them?”

“Didn’t you?”

“They were very pleasant—very friendly.”

“Well, what is it, then? There’s something, I can see.”

“They were, perhaps, just a shade too ‘typical,’ “ said Poirot, thoughtfully. “That cry of Cooee—that insistence on showing us snapshots—was it not playing a part just a little too thoroughly?”

“What a suspicious old devil you are!”

“You are right, mon ami. I am suspicious of everyone—of everything. I am afraid, Hastings—afraid.”

Six

A CALL UPON MR. VYSE

Poirot clung firmly to the Continental breakfast. To see me consuming eggs and bacon upset and distressed him—so he always said. Consequently he breakfasted in bed upon coffee and rolls and I was free to start the day with the traditional Englishman's breakfast of bacon and eggs and marmalade.

I looked into his room on Monday morning as I went downstairs. He was sitting up in bed arrayed in a very marvellous dressing gown.

"Bonjour, Hastings. I was just about to ring. This note that I have written, will you be so good as to get it taken over to End House and delivered to Mademoiselle at once."

I held out my hand for it. Poirot looked at me and sighed.

"If only—if only, Hastings, you would part your hair in the middle instead of at the side! What a difference it would make to the symmetry of your appearance. And your moustache. If you must have a moustache, let it be a real moustache—a thing of beauty such as mine."

Repressing a shudder at the thought, I took the note firmly from Poirot's hand and left the room.

I had rejoined him in our sitting room when word was sent up to say Miss Buckley had called. Poirot gave the order for her to be shown up.

She came in gaily enough, but I fancied that the circles under her eyes were darker than usual. In her hand she held a telegram which she handed to Poirot.

"There," she said. "I hope that will please you!"

Poirot read it aloud.

“Arrive 5:30 today. Maggie.”

“My nurse and guardian!” said Nick. “But you’re wrong, you know. Maggie’s got no kind of brains. Good works is about all she’s fit for. That and never seeing the point of jokes. Freddie would be ten times better at spotting hidden assassins. And Jim Lazarus would be better still. I never feel one has got to the bottom of Jim.”

“And the Commander Challenger?”

“Oh! George! He’d never see anything till it was under his nose. But he’d let them have it when he did see. Very useful when it came to a showdown, George would be.”

She tossed off her hat and went on:

“I gave orders for the man you wrote about to be let in. It sounds mysterious. Is he installing a dictaphone or something like that?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No, no, nothing scientific. A very simple little matter of opinion, Mademoiselle. Something I wanted to know.”

“Oh, well,” said Nick. “It’s all great fun, isn’t it?”

“Is it, Mademoiselle?” asked Poirot, gently.

She stood for a minute with her back to us, looking out of the window. Then she turned. All the brave defiance had gone out of her face. It was childishly twisted awry, as she struggled to keep back the tears.

“No,” she said. “It—it isn’t, really. I’m afraid—I’m afraid. Hideously afraid. And I always thought I was brave.”

“So you are, mon enfant, so you are. Both Hastings and I, we have both admired your courage.”

“Yes, indeed,” I put in warmly.

“No,” said Nick, shaking her head. “I’m not brave. It’s—it’s the waiting. Wondering the whole time if anything more’s going to happen. And how it’ll happen! And expecting it to happen.”

“Yes, yes—it is the strain.”

“Last night I pulled my bed out into the middle of the room. And fastened my window and bolted my door. When I came here this morning, I came round by the road. I couldn’t—I simply couldn’t come through the garden. It’s as though my nerve had gone all of a sudden. It’s this thing coming on top of everything else.”

“What do you mean exactly by that, Mademoiselle? On top of everything else?”

There was a momentary pause before she replied.

“I don’t mean anything particular. What the newspapers call ‘the strain of modern life,’ I suppose. Too many cocktails, too many cigarettes—all that sort of thing. It’s just that I’ve got into a ridiculous—sort of—of state.”

She had sunk into a chair and was sitting there, her small fingers curling and uncurling themselves nervously.

“You are not being frank with me, Mademoiselle. There is something.”

“There isn’t—there really isn’t.”

“There is something you have not told me.”

“I’ve told you every single smallest thing.”

She spoke sincerely and earnestly.

“About these accidents—about the attacks upon you, yes.”

“Well—then?”

"But you have not told me everything that is in your heart—in your life. . . ."

She said slowly:

"Can anyone do that . . . ?"

"Ah! then," said Poirot, with triumph. "You admit it!"

She shook her head. He watched her keenly.

"Perhaps," he suggested, shrewdly. "It is not your secret?"

I thought I saw a momentary flicker of her eyelids. But almost immediately she jumped up.

"Really and truly, M. Poirot, I've told you every single thing I know about this stupid business. If you think I know something about someone else, or have suspicions, you are wrong. It's having no suspicions that's driving me mad! Because I'm not a fool. I can see that if those 'accidents' weren't accidents, they must have been engineered by somebody very near at hand—somebody who—knows me. And that's what is so awful. Because I haven't the least idea—not the very least—who that somebody might be."

She went over once more to the window and stood looking out. Poirot signed to me not to speak. I think he was hoping for some further revelation, now that the girl's self-control had broken down.

When she spoke, it was in a different tone of voice, a dreamy faraway voice.

"Do you know a queer wish I've always had? I love End House. I've always wanted to produce a play there. It's got an—an atmosphere of drama about it. I've seen all sorts of plays staged there in my mind. And now it's as though a drama were being acted there. Only I'm not producing it . . . I'm in it! I'm right in it! I am, perhaps, the person who—dies in the first act."

Her voice broke.

“Now, now, Mademoiselle.” Poirot’s voice was resolutely brisk and cheerful. “This will not do. This is hysteria.”

She turned and looked at him sharply.

“Did Freddie tell you I was hysterical?” she asked. “She says I am, sometimes. But you mustn’t always believe what Freddie says. There are times, you know when—when she isn’t quite herself.”

There was a pause, then Poirot asked a totally irrelevant question:

“Tell me, Mademoiselle,” he said. “Have you ever received an offer for End House?”

“To sell it, do you mean?”

“That is what I meant.”

“No.”

“Would you consider selling it if you got a good offer?”

Nick considered for a moment.

“No, I don’t think so. Not, I mean, unless it was such a ridiculously good offer that it would be perfectly foolish not to.”

“Précisément.”

“I don’t want to sell it, you know, because I’m fond of it.”

“Quite so. I understand.”

Nick moved slowly towards the door.

“By the way, there are fireworks tonight. Will you come? Dinner at eight o’clock. The fireworks begin at nine thirty. You can see them splendidly from the garden where it overlooks the harbour.”

"I shall be enchanted."

"Both of you, of course," said Nick.

"Many thanks," I said.

"Nothing like a party for reviving the drooping spirits," remarked Nick. And with a little laugh she went out.

"Pauvre enfant," said Poirot.

He reached for his hat and carefully flicked an infinitesimal speck of dust from its surface.

"We are going out?" I asked.

"Mais oui, we have legal business to transact, mon ami."

"Of course. I understand."

"One of your brilliant mentality could not fail to do so, Hastings."

The offices of Messrs Vyse, Trevannion & Wynnard were situated in the main street of the town. We mounted the stairs to the first floor and entered a room where three clerks were busily writing. Poirot asked to see Mr. Charles Vyse.

A clerk murmured a few words down a telephone, received, apparently, an affirmative reply, and remarking that Mr. Vyse would see us now, he led us across the passage, tapped on a door and stood aside for us to pass in.

From behind a large desk covered with legal papers, Mr. Vyse rose up to greet us.

He was a tall young man, rather pale, with impassive features. He was going a little bald on either temple and wore glasses. His colouring was fair and indeterminate.

Poirot had come prepared for the encounter. Fortunately he had with him an agreement, as yet unsigned, and so on some technical points in connection with this, he wanted Mr. Vyse's advice.

Mr. Vyse, speaking carefully and correctly, was soon able to allay Poirot's alleged doubts, and to clear up some obscure points of the wording.

"I am very much obliged to you," murmured Poirot. "As a foreigner, you comprehend, these legal matters and phrasing are most difficult."

It was then that Mr. Vyse asked who had sent Poirot to him.

"Miss Buckley," said Poirot, promptly. "Your cousin, is she not? A most charming young lady. I happened to mention that I was in perplexity and she told me to come to you. I tried to see you on Saturday morning—about half past twelve—but you were out."

"Yes, I remember. I left early on Saturday."

"Mademoiselle your cousin must find that large house very lonely? She lives there alone, I understand."

"Quite so."

"Tell me, Mr. Vyse, if I may ask, is there any chance of that property being in the market?"

"Not the least, I should say."

"You understand, I do not ask idly. I have a reason! I am in search, myself, of just such a property. The climate of St. Loo enchants me. It is true that the house appears to be in bad repair, there has not been, I gather, much money to spend upon it. Under those circumstances, is it not possible that Mademoiselle would consider an offer?"

"Not the least likelihood of it." Charles Vyse shook his head with the utmost decision. "My cousin is absolutely devoted to the place. Nothing would induce her to sell, I know. It is, you understand, a family place."

"I comprehend that, but—"

"It is absolutely out of the question. I know my cousin. She has a fanatical devotion to the house."

A few minutes later we were out in the street again.

"Well, my friend," said Poirot. "And what impression did this M. Charles Vyse make upon you?"

I considered.

"A very negative one," I said at last. "He is a curiously negative person."

"Not a strong personality, you would say?"

"No, indeed. The kind of man you would never remember on meeting him again. A mediocre person."

"His appearance is certainly not striking. Did you notice any discrepancy in the course of our conversation with him?"

"Yes," I said slowly, "I did. With regard to the selling of End House."

"Exactly. Would you have described Mademoiselle Buckley's attitude towards End House as one of 'fanatical devotion?' "

"It is a very strong term."

"Yes—and Mr. Vyse is not given to using strong terms. His normal attitude—a legal attitude—is to under, rather than over, state. Yet he says that Mademoiselle has a fanatical devotion to the home of her ancestors."

"She did not convey that impression this morning," I said. "She spoke about it very sensibly, I thought. She's obviously fond of the place—just as anyone in her position would be—but certainly nothing more."

"So, in fact, one of the two is lying," said Poirot, thoughtfully.

“One would not suspect Vyse of lying.”

“Clearly a great asset if one has any lying to do,” remarked Poirot. “Yes, he has quite the air of a George Washington, that one. Did you notice another thing, Hastings?”

“What was that?”

“He was not in his office at half past twelve on Saturday.”

Seven

TRAGEDY

The first person we saw when we arrived at End House that evening was Nick. She was dancing about the hall wrapped in a marvellous kimono covered with dragons.

“Oh! it’s only you!”

“Mademoiselle—I am desolated!”

“I know. It did sound rude. But you see, I’m waiting for my dress to arrive. They promised—the brutes—promised faithfully!”

“Ah! if it is a matter of la toilette! There is a dance tonight, is there not?”

“Yes. We are all going on to it after the fireworks. That is, I suppose we are.”

There was a sudden drop in her voice. But the next minute she was laughing.

“Never give in! That’s my motto. Don’t think of trouble and trouble won’t come! I’ve got my nerve back tonight. I’m going to be gay and enjoy myself.”

There was a footfall on the stairs. Nick turned.

“Oh! here’s Maggie. Maggie, here are the sleuths that are protecting me from the secret assassin. Take them into the drawing room and let them tell you about it.”

In turn we shook hands with Maggie Buckley, and, as requested, she took us into the drawing room. I formed an immediate favourable opinion of her.

It was, I think, her appearance of calm good sense that so attracted me. A quiet girl, pretty in the old-fashioned sense—certainly not smart. Her face was innocent of makeup and she wore a simple, rather shabby, black evening dress. She had frank blue eyes, and a pleasant slow voice.

“Nick has been telling me the most amazing things,” she said. “Surely she must be exaggerating? Who ever would want to harm Nick? She can’t have an enemy in the world.”

Incredulity showed strongly in her voice. She was looking at Poirot in a somewhat unflattering fashion. I realized that to a girl like Maggie Buckley, foreigners were always suspicious.

“Nevertheless, Miss Buckley, I assure you that it is the truth,” said Poirot quietly.

She made no reply, but her face remained unbelieving.

“Nick seems quite fey tonight,” she remarked. “I don’t know what’s the matter with her. She seems in the wildest spirits.”

That word—fey! It sent a shiver through me. Also, something in the intonation of her voice had set me wondering.

“Are you Scotch, Miss Buckley?” I asked, abruptly.

“My mother was Scottish,” she explained.

She viewed me, I noticed, with more approval than she viewed Poirot. I felt that my statement of the case would carry more weight with her than Poirot’s would.

“Your cousin is behaving with great bravery,” I said. “She’s determined to carry on as usual.”

"It's the only way, isn't it?" said Maggie. "I mean—whatever one's inward feelings are—it is no good making a fuss about them. That's only uncomfortable for everyone else." She paused and then added in a soft voice: "I'm very fond of Nick. She's been good to me always."

We could say nothing more for at that moment Frederica Rice drifted into the room. She was wearing a gown of Madonna blue and looked very fragile and ethereal. Lazarus soon followed her and then Nick danced in. She was wearing a black frock, and round her was wrapped a marvellous old Chinese shawl of vivid lacquer red.

"Hello, people," she said. "Cocktails?"

We all drank, and Lazarus raised his glass to her.

"That's a marvellous shawl, Nick," he said. "It's an old one, isn't it?"

"Yes—brought back by Great-Great-Great-Uncle Timothy from his travels."

"It's a beauty—a real beauty. You wouldn't find another to match it if you tried."

"It's warm," said Nick. "It'll be nice when we're watching the fireworks. And it's gay. I—I hate black."

"Yes," said Frederica. "I don't believe I've ever seen you in a black dress before, Nick. Why did you get it?"

"Oh! I don't know." The girl flung aside with a petulant gesture, but I had caught a curious curl of her lips as though of pain. "Why does one do anything?"

We went in to dinner. A mysterious manservant had appeared—hired, I presume, for the occasion. The food was indifferent. The champagne, on the other hand, was good.

"George hasn't turned up," said Nick. "A nuisance his having to go back to Plymouth last night. He'll get over this evening sometime or other, I expect.

In time for the dance anyway. I’ve got a man for Maggie. Presentable, if not passionately interesting.”

A faint roaring sound drifted in through the window.

“Oh! curse that speedboat,” said Lazarus. “I get so tired of it.”

“That’s not the speedboat,” said Nick. “That’s a seaplane.”

“I believe you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. The sound’s quite different.”

“When are you going to get your Moth, Nick?”

“When I can raise the money,” laughed Nick.

“And then, I suppose you’ll be off to Australia like that girl—what’s her name?”

“I’d love to—”

“I admire her enormously,” said Mrs. Rice, in her tired voice. “What marvellous nerve! All by herself too.”

“I admire all these flying people,” said Lazarus. “If Michael Seton had succeeded in his flight round the world he’d have been the hero of the day—and rightly so. A thousand pities he’s come to grief. He’s the kind of man England can’t afford to lose.”

“He may still be all right,” said Nick.

“Hardly. It’s a thousand to one against by now. Poor Mad Seton.”

“They always called him Mad Seton, didn’t they?” asked Frederica.

Lazarus nodded.

“He comes of rather a mad family,” he said. “His uncle, Sir Matthew Seton, who died about a week ago—he was as mad as a hatter.”

“He was the mad millionaire who ran bird sanctuaries, wasn’t he?” asked Frederica.

“Yes. Used to buy up islands. He was a great woman-hater. Some girl chucked him once, I believe, and he took to Natural History by way of consoling himself.”

“Why do you say Michael Seton is dead?” persisted Nick. “I don’t see any reason for giving up hope—yet.”

“Of course, you knew him, didn’t you?” said Lazarus. “I forgot.”

“Freddie and I met him at Le Touquet last year,” said Nick. “He was too marvellous, wasn’t he, Freddie?”

“Don’t ask me, darling. He was your conquest, not mine. He took you up once, didn’t he?”

“Yes—at Scarborough. It was simply too wonderful.”

“Have you done any flying, Captain Hastings?” Maggie asked of me in polite conversational tones.

I had to confess that a trip to Paris and back was the extent of my acquaintance with air travel.

Suddenly, with an exclamation, Nick sprang up.

“There’s the telephone. Don’t wait for me. It’s getting late. And I’ve asked lots of people.”

She left the room. I glanced at my watch. It was just nine o’clock. Dessert was brought, and port. Poirot and Lazarus were talking Art. Pictures, Lazarus was saying, were a great drug in the market just now. They went on to discuss new ideas in furniture and decoration.

I endeavoured to do my duty by talking to Maggie Buckley, but I had to admit that the girl was heavy in hand. She answered pleasantly, but without throwing the ball back. It was uphill work.

Frederica Rice sat dreamily silent, her elbows on the table and the smoke from her cigarette curling round her fair head. She looked like a meditative angel.

It was just twenty past nine when Nick put her head round the door.

“Come out of it, all of you! The animals are coming in two by two.”

We rose obediently. Nick was busy greeting arrivals. About a dozen people had been asked. Most of them were rather uninteresting. Nick, I noticed, made a good hostess. She sank her modernisms and made everyone welcome in an old-fashioned way. Among the guests I noticed Charles Vyse.

Presently we all moved out into the garden to a place overlooking the sea and the harbour. A few chairs had been placed there for the elderly people, but most of us stood. The first rocket flamed to Heaven.

At that moment I heard a loud familiar voice, and turned my head to see Nick greeting Mr. Croft.

“It’s too bad,” she was saying, “that Mrs. Croft can’t be here too. We ought to have carried her on a stretcher or something.”

“It’s bad luck on poor mother altogether. But she never complains—that woman’s got the sweetest nature—Ha! that’s a good one.” This as a shower of golden rain showed up in the sky.

The night was a dark one—there was no moon—the new moon being due in three day’s time. It was also, like most summer evenings, cold. Maggie Buckley, who was next to me, shivered.

“I’ll just run in and get a coat,” she murmured.

“Let me.”

"No, you wouldn't know where to find it."

She turned towards the house. At that moment Frederica Rice's voice called:

"Oh, Maggie, get mine too. It's in my room."

"She didn't hear," said Nick. "I'll get it, Freddie. I want my fur one—this shawl isn't nearly hot enough. It's this wind."

There was, indeed, a sharp breeze blowing off the sea.

Some set pieces started down on the quay. I fell into conversation with an elderly lady standing next to me who put me through a rigorous catechism as to life, career, tastes and probable length of stay.

Bang! A shower of green stars filled the sky. They changed to blue, then red, then silver.

Another and yet another.

"'Oh!' and then 'Ah!' that is what one says," observed Poirot suddenly close to my ear. "At the end it becomes monotonous, do you not find? Brrr! The grass, it is damp to the feet! I shall suffer for this—a chill. And no possibility of obtaining a proper tisane!"

"A chill? On a lovely night like this?"

"A lovely night! A lovely night! You say that, because the rain it does not pour down in sheets! Always when the rain does not fall, it is a lovely night. But I tell you, my friend, if there were a little thermometer to consult you would see."

"Well," I admitted, "I wouldn't mind putting on a coat myself."

"You are very sensible. You have come from a hot climate."

"I'll bring yours."

Poirot lifted first one, then the other foot from the ground with a cat-like motion.

“It is the dampness of the feet I fear. Would it, think you, be possible to lay hands on a pair of goloshes?”

I repressed a smile.

“Not a hope,” I said. “You understand, Poirot, that it is no longer done.”

“Then I shall sit in the house,” he declared. “Just for the Guy Fawkes show, shall I want only enrhumer myself? And catch, perhaps, a fluxion de poitrine?”

Poirot still murmuring indignantly, we bent our footsteps towards the house. Loud clapping drifted up to us from the quay below where another set piece was being shown—a ship, I believe, with Welcome to Our Visitors displayed across it.

“We are all children at heart,” said Poirot, thoughtfully. “Les Feux d’Artifices, the party, the games with balls—yes, and even the conjurer, the man who deceives the eye, however carefully it watches—mais qu’est-ce que vous avez?”

I had caught him by the arm, and was clutching him with one hand, while with the other I pointed.

We were within a hundred yards of the house, and just in front of us, between us and the open French window, there lay a huddled figure wrapped in a scarlet Chinese shawl. . . .

“Mon Dieu!” whispered Poirot. “Mon Dieu. . . .”

Eight

THE FATAL SHAWL

I suppose it was not more than forty seconds that we stood there, frozen with horror, unable to move, but it seemed like an hour. Then Poirot moved forward, shaking off my hand. He moved stiffly like an automaton.

“It has happened,” he murmured, and I can hardly describe the anguished bitterness of his voice. “In spite of everything—in spite of my precautions, it has happened. Ah! miserable criminal that I am, why did I not guard her better. I should have foreseen. Not for one instant should I have left her side.”

“You mustn’t blame yourself,” I said.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I could hardly articulate.

Poirot only responded with a sorrowful shake of his head. He knelt down by the body.

And at that moment we received a second shock.

For Nick’s voice rang out, clear and gay, and a moment later Nick appeared in the square of the window silhouetted against the lighted room behind.

“Sorry I’ve been so long, Maggie,” she said. “But—”

Then she broke off—staring at the scene before her.

With a sharp exclamation, Poirot turned over the body on the lawn and I pressed forward to see.

I looked down into the dead face of Maggie Buckley.

In another minute Nick was beside us. She gave a sharp cry.

“Maggie—Oh! Maggie—it—it can’t—”

Poirot was still examining the girl’s body. At last very slowly he rose to his feet.

“Is she—is—” Nick’s voice broke off.

“Yes, Mademoiselle. She is dead.”

“But why? But why? Who could have wanted to kill her?”

Poirot’s reply came quickly and firmly.

“It was not her they meant to kill, Mademoiselle! It was you! They were misled by the shawl.”

A great cry broke from Nick.

“Why couldn’t it have been me?” she wailed. “Oh! why couldn’t it have been me? I’d so much rather. I don’t want to live—now. I’d be glad—willing—happy—to die.”

She flung up her arms wildly and then staggered slightly. I passed an arm round her quickly to support her.

“Take her into the house, Hastings,” said Poirot. “Then ring up the police.”

“The police?”

“Mais oui! Tell them someone has been shot. And afterwards stay with Mademoiselle Nick. On no account leave her.”

I nodded comprehension of these instructions, and supporting the half-fainting girl, made my way through the drawing room window. I laid the girl on the sofa there, with a cushion under her head, and then hurried out into the hall in search of the telephone.

I gave a slight start on almost running into Ellen. She was standing there with a most peculiar expression on her meek, respectable face. Her eyes were glittering and she was passing her tongue repeatedly over her dry lips. Her hands were trembling, as though with excitement. As soon as she saw me, she spoke.

“Has—has anything happened, sir?”

“Yes,” I said curtly. “Where’s the telephone?”

“Nothing—nothing wrong, sir?”

“There’s been an accident,” I said evasively. “Somebody hurt. I must telephone.”

“Who has been hurt, sir?”

There was a positive eagerness in her face.

“Miss Buckley. Miss Maggie Buckley.”

“Miss Maggie? Miss Maggie? Are you sure, sir—I mean are you sure that—that it’s Miss Maggie?”

“I’m quite sure,” I said. “Why?”

“Oh!—nothing. I—I thought it might be one of the other ladies. I thought perhaps it might be—Mrs. Rice.”

“Look here,” I said. “Where’s the telephone?”

“It’s in the little room here, sir.” She opened the door for me and indicated the instrument.

“Thanks,” I said. And, as she seemed disposed to linger, I added: “That’s all I want, thank you.”

“If you want Dr. Graham—”

"No, no," I said. "That's all. Go, please."

She withdrew reluctantly, as slowly as she dared. In all probability she would listen outside the door, but I could not help that. After all, she would soon know all there was to be known.

I got the police station and made my report. Then, on my own initiative, I rang up the Dr. Graham Ellen had mentioned. I found his number in the book. Nick, at any rate, should have medical attention, I felt—even though a doctor could do nothing for that poor girl lying out there. He promised to come at once and I hung up the receiver and came out into the hall again.

If Ellen had been listening outside the door she had managed to disappear very swiftly. There was no one in sight when I came out. I went back into the drawing room. Nick was trying to sit up.

"Do you think—could you get me—some brandy?"

"Of course."

I hurried into the dining room, found what I wanted and came back. A few sips of the spirit revived the girl. The colour began to come back into her cheeks. I rearranged the cushion for her head.

"It's all—so awful." She shivered. "Everything—everywhere."

"I know, my dear, I know."

"No, you don't! You can't. And it's all such a waste. If it were only me. It would be all over. . . ."

"You mustn't," I said, 'be morbid.' "

She only shook her head, reiterating: "You don't know! You don't know!"

Then, suddenly, she began to cry. A quiet, hopeless sobbing like a child. That, I thought, was probably the best thing for her, so I made no effort to stem her tears.

When their first violence had died down a little, I stole across to the window and looked out. I had heard an outcry of voices a few minutes before. They were all there by now, a semi-circle round the scene of the tragedy, with Poirot like a fantastical sentinel, keeping them back.

As I watched, two uniformed figures came striding across the grass. The police had arrived.

I went quietly back to my place by the sofa. Nick lifted her tear-stained face.

“Oughtn’t I to be doing something?”

“No, my dear. Poirot will see to it. Leave it to him.” Nick was silent for a minute or two, then she said:

“Poor Maggie. Poor dear old Maggie. Such a good sort who never harmed a soul in her life. That this should happen to her. I feel as though I’d killed her—bringing her down in the way that I did.”

I shook my head sadly. How little one can foresee the future. When Poirot insisted on Nick’s inviting a friend, how little did he think that he was signing an unknown girl’s death warrant.

We sat in silence. I longed to know what was going on outside, but I loyally fulfilled Poirot’s instructions and stuck to my post.

It seemed hours later when the door opened and Poirot and a police inspector entered the room. With them came a man who was evidently Dr. Graham. He came over at once to Nick.

“And how are you feeling, Miss Buckley? This must have been a terrible shock.” His fingers were on her pulse.

“Not too bad.”

He turned to me.

“Has she had anything?”

"Some brandy," I said.

"I'm all right," said Nick, bravely.

"Able to answer a few questions, eh?"

"Of course."

The police inspector moved forward with a preliminary cough. Nick greeted him with the ghost of a smile.

"Not impeding the traffic this time," she said.

I gathered they were not strangers to each other.

"This is a terrible business, Miss Buckley," said the inspector. "I'm very sorry about it. Now Mr. Poirot here, whose name I'm very familiar with (and proud we are to have him with us, I'm sure), tells me that to the best of his belief you were shot at in the grounds of the Majestic Hotel the other morning?"

Nick nodded.

"I thought it was just a wasp," she explained. "But it wasn't."

"And you'd had some rather peculiar accidents before that?"

"Yes—at least it was odd their happening so close together."

She gave a brief account of the various circumstances.

"Just so. Now how came it that your cousin was wearing your shawl tonight?"

"We came in to fetch her coat—it was rather cold watching the fireworks. I flung off the shawl on the sofa here. Then I went upstairs and put on the coat I'm wearing now—a light nutria one. I also got a wrap for my friend Mrs. Rice out of her room. There it is on the floor by the window. Then Maggie called out that she couldn't find her coat. I said it must be downstairs. She went down and called up she still couldn’t find it. I said it must have been left in the car—it was a tweed coat she was looking for—she hasn’t got an evening furry one—and I said I’d bring her down something of mine. But she said it didn’t matter—she’d take my shawl if I didn’t want it. And I said of course but would that be enough? And she said Oh, yes, because she really didn’t feel it particularly cold after Yorkshire. She just wanted something. And I said all right, I’d be out in a minute. And when I did—did come out—”

She stopped, her voice breaking. . . .

“Now, don’t distress yourself, Miss Buckley. Just tell me this. Did you hear a shot—or two shots?”

Nick shook her head.

“No—only just the fireworks popping and the squibs going off.”

“That’s just it,” said the inspector. “You’d never notice a shot with all that going on. It’s no good asking you, I suppose, if you’ve any clue to who it is making these attacks upon you?”

“I haven’t the least idea,” said Nick. “I can’t imagine.”

“And you wouldn’t be likely to,” said the inspector. “Some homicidal maniac—that’s what it looks like to me. Nasty business. Well, I won’t need to ask you any more questions tonight, miss. I’m more sorry about this than I can say.”

Dr. Graham stepped forward.

“I’m going to suggest, Miss Buckley, that you don’t stay here. I’ve been talking it over with M. Poirot. I know of an excellent nursing home. You’ve had a shock, you know. What you need is complete rest—”

Nick was not looking at him. Her eyes had gone to Poirot.

“Is it—because of the shock?” she asked.

He came forward.

“I want you to feel safe, mon enfant. And I want to feel, too, that you are safe. There will be a nurse there—a nice practical unimaginative nurse. She will be near you all night. When you wake up and cry out—she will be there, close at hand. You understand?”

“Yes,” said Nick, “I understand. But you don’t. I’m not afraid any longer. I don’t care one way or another. If anyone wants to murder me, they can.”

“Hush, hush,” I said. “You’re overstrung.”

“You don’t know. None of you know!”

“I really think M. Poirot’s plan is a good one,” the doctor broke in soothingly. “I will take you in my car. And we will give you a little something to ensure a good night’s rest. Now what do you say?”

“I don’t mind,” said Nick. “Anything you like. It doesn’t matter.”

Poirot laid his hand on hers.

“I know, Mademoiselle. I know what you must feel. I stand before you ashamed and stricken to the heart. I, who promised protection, have not been able to protect. I have failed. I am a miserable. But believe me, Mademoiselle, my heart is in agony because of that failure. If you know what I am suffering you would forgive, I am sure.”

“That’s all right,” said Nick, still in the same dull voice. “You mustn’t blame yourself. I’m sure you did the best you could. Nobody could have helped it—or done more, I’m sure. Please don’t be unhappy.”

“You are very generous, Mademoiselle.”

“No, I—”

There was an interruption. The door flew open and George Challenger rushed into the room.

"What's all this?" he cried. "I've just arrived. To find a policeman at the gate and a rumour that somebody's dead. What is it all about? For God's sake, tell me. Is it—is it—Nick?"

The anguish in his tone was dreadful to hear. I suddenly realized that Poirot and the doctor between them completely blotted out Nick from his sight.

Before anyone had time to answer, he repeated his question.

"Tell me—it can't be true—Nick isn't dead?"

"No, mon ami," said Poirot, gently. "She is alive."

And he drew back so that Challenger could see the little figure on the sofa.

For a moment or two Challenger stared at her incredulously. Then, staggering a little, like a drunken man, he muttered:

"Nick—Nick."

And suddenly dropping on his knees beside the sofa and hiding his head in his hands, he cried in a muffled voice:

"Nick—my darling—I thought that you were dead."

Nick tried to sit up.

"It's all right, George. Don't be an idiot. I'm quite safe."

He raised his head and looked round wildly.

"But somebody's dead? The policeman said so."

"Yes," said Nick. "Maggie. Poor old Maggie. Oh!—"

A spasm twisted her face. The doctor and Poirot came forward. Graham helped her to her feet. He and Poirot, one on each side, helped her from the room.

“The sooner you get to your bed the better,” remarked the doctor. “I’ll take you along at once in my car. I’ve asked Mrs. Rice to pack a few things ready for you to take.”

They disappeared through the door. Challenger caught my arm.

“I don’t understand. Where are they taking her?”

I explained.

“Oh! I see. Now, then, Hastings, for God’s sake give me the hang of this thing. What a ghastly tragedy! That poor girl.”

“Come and have a drink,” I said. “You’re all to pieces.”

“I don’t mind if I do.”

We adjourned to the dining room.

“You see,” he explained, as he put away a stiff whisky and soda, “I thought it was Nick.”

There was very little doubt as to the feelings of Commander George Challenger. A more transparent lover never lived.

Nine

A. TO J.

I doubt if I shall ever forget the night that followed. Poirot was a prey to such an agony of self-reproach that I was really alarmed. Ceaselessly he strode up and down the room heaping anathemas on his own head and deaf to my well-meant remonstrances.

“What it is to have too good an opinion of oneself. I am punished—yes, I am punished. I, Hercule Poirot. I was too sure of myself.”

“No, no,” I interpolated.

“But who would imagine—who could imagine—such unparalleled audacity? I had taken, as I thought, all possible precautions. I had warned the murderer—”

“Warned the murderer?”

“Mais oui. I had drawn attention to myself. I had let him see that I suspected—someone. I had made it, or so I thought, too dangerous for him to dare to repeat his attempts at murder. I had drawn a cordon round Mademoiselle. And he slips through it! Boldly—under our very eyes almost, he slips through it! In spite of us all—of everyone being on the alert, he achieves his object.”

“Only he doesn’t,” I reminded him.

“That is the chance only! From my point of view, it is the same. A human life has been taken, Hastings—whose life is non-essential.”

“Of course,” I said. “I didn’t mean that.”

"But on the other hand, what you say is true. And that makes it worse—ten times worse. For the murderer is still as far as ever from achieving his object. Do you understand, my friend? The position is changed—for the worse. It may mean that not one life—but two—will be sacrificed."

"Not while you're about," I said stoutly.

He stopped and wrung my hand.

"Merci, mon ami! Merci! You still have confidence in the old one—you still have the faith. You put new courage into me. Hercule Poirot will not fail again. No second life shall be taken. I will rectify my error—for, see you, there must have been an error! Somewhere there has been a lack of order and method in my usually so well arranged ideas. I will start again. Yes, I will start at the beginning. And this time—I will not fail."

"You really think then," I said, "that Nick Buckley's life is still in danger?"

"My friend, for what other reason did I send her to this nursing home?"

"Then it wasn't the shock—"

"The shock! Pah! One can recover from shock as well in one's own home as in a nursing home—better, for that matter. It is not amusing there, the floors of green linoleum, the conversation of the nurses—the meals on trays, the ceaseless washing. No, no, it is for safety and safety only. I take the doctor into my confidence. He agrees. He will make all arrangements. No one, mon ami, not even her dearest friend, will be admitted to see Miss Buckley. You and I are the only ones permitted. Pour les autres—eh bien! 'Doctor's orders,' they will be told. A phrase very convenient and one not to be gainsayed."

"Yes," I said. "Only—"

"Only what, Hastings?"

"That can't go on for ever."

“A very true observation. But it gives us a little breathing space. And you realize, do you not, that the character of our operations has changed.”

“In what way?”

“Our original task was to ensure the safety of Mademoiselle. Our task now is a much simpler one—a task with which we are well acquainted. It is neither more nor less than the hunting down of a murderer.”

“You call that simpler?”

“Certainly it is simpler. The murderer has, as I said the other day, signed his name to the crime. He has come out into the open.”

“You don’t think—” I hesitated, then went on. “You don’t think that the police are right? That this is the work of a madman, some wandering lunatic with homicidal mania?”

“I am more than ever convinced that such is not the case.”

“You really think that—”

I stopped. Poirot took up my sentence, speaking very gravely.

“That the murderer is someone in Mademoiselle’s own circle? Yes, mon ami, I do.”

“But surely last night must almost rule out that possibility. We were all together and—”

He interrupted.

“Could you swear, Hastings, that any particular person had never left our little company there on the edge of the cliff? Is there any one person there whom you could swear you had seen all the time?”

“No,” I said slowly, struck by his words. “I don’t think I could. It was dark. We all moved about, more or less. On different occasions I noticed Mrs. Rice, Lazarus, you, Croft, Vyse—but all the time—no.”

Poirot nodded his head.

“Exactly. It would be a matter of a very few minutes. The two girls go to the house. The murderer slips away unnoticed, hides behind that sycamore tree in the middle of the lawn. Nick Buckley, or so he thinks, comes out of the window, passes within a foot of him, he fires three shots in rapid succession—”

“Three?” I interjected.

“Yes. He was taking no chances this time. We found three bullets in the body.”

“That was risky, wasn’t it?”

“Less risky in all probability than one shot would have been. A Mauser pistol does not make a great deal of noise. It would resemble more or less the popping of the fireworks and blend in very well with the noise of them.”

“Did you find the pistol?” I asked.

“No. And there, Hastings, lies to my mind the indisputable proof that no stranger is responsible for this. We agree, do we not, that Miss Buckley’s own pistol was taken in the first place for one reason only—to give her death the appearance of suicide.”

“Yes.”

“That is the only possible reason, is it not? But now, you observe, there is no pretence of suicide. The murderer knows that we should not any longer be deceived by it. He knows, in fact, what we know!”

I reflected, admitting to myself the logic of Poirot’s deduction.

“What did he do with the pistol do you think?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“For that, it is difficult to say. But the sea was exceedingly handy. A good toss of the arm, and the pistol sinks, never to be recovered. We cannot, of course, be absolutely sure—but that is what I should have done.”

His matter-of-fact tone made me shiver a little.

“Do you think—do you think he realized that he’d killed the wrong person?”

“I am quite sure he did not,” said Poirot, grimly. “Yes, that must have been an unpleasant little surprise for him when he learnt the truth. To keep his face and betray nothing—it cannot have been easy.”

At that moment I bethought me of the strange attitude of the maid, Ellen. I gave Poirot an account of her peculiar demeanour. He seemed very interested.

“She betrayed surprise, did she, that it was Maggie who was dead?”

“Great surprise.”

“That is curious. And yet, the fact of a tragedy was clearly not a surprise to her. Yes, there is something there that must be looked into. Who is she, this Ellen? So quiet, so respectable in the English manner? Could it be she who—?” He broke off.

“If you’re going to include the accidents,” I said, “surely it would take a man to have rolled that heavy boulder down the cliff.”

“Not necessarily. It is very largely a question of leverage. Oh, yes, it could be done.”

He continued his slow pacing up and down the room.

“Anyone who was at End House last night comes under suspicion. But those guests—no, I do not think it was one of them. For the most part, I should say, they were mere acquaintances. There was no intimacy between them and the young mistress of the house.”

“Charles Vyse was there,” I remarked.

“Yes, we must not forget him. He is, logically, our strongest suspect.” He made a gesture of despair and threw himself into a chair opposite mine. “Voilà—it is always that we come back to! Motive! We must find the motive if we are to understand this crime. And it is there, Hastings, that I am continually baffled. Who can possibly have a motive for doing away with Mademoiselle Nick? I have let myself go to the most absurd suppositions. I, Hercule Poirot, have descended to the most ignominious flights of fancy. I have adopted the mentality of the cheap thriller. The grandfather—the ‘Old Nick’—he who is supposed to have gambled his money away. Did he really do so, I have asked myself? Did he, on the contrary, hide it away? Is it hidden somewhere in End House? Buried somewhere in the grounds? With that end in view (I am ashamed to say it) I inquired of Mademoiselle Nick whether there had ever been any offers to buy the house.”

“Do you know, Poirot,” I said, “I call that rather a bright idea. There may be something in it.”

Poirot groaned.

“You would say that! It would appeal, I knew, to your romantic but slightly mediocre mind. Buried treasure—yes, you would enjoy that idea.”

“Well—I don’t see why not—”

“Because, my friend, the more prosaic explanation is nearly always more probable. Then Mademoiselle’s father—I have played with even more degrading ideas concerning him. He was a traveller. Supposing, I say to myself, that he has stolen a jewel—the eye of a God. Jealous priests are on his tracks. Yes, I, Hercule Poirot, have descended to depths such as these.

“I have had other ideas concerning this father,” he went on. “Ideas at once more dignified and more probable. Did he, in the course of his wanderings, contract a second marriage? Is there a nearer heir than M. Charles Vyse? But again, that leads nowhere, for we are up against the same difficulty—that there is really nothing of value to inherit.

“I have neglected no possibility. Even that chance reference of Mademoiselle Nick’s to the offer made her by M. Lazarus. You remember? The offer to purchase her grandfather’s portrait. I telegraphed on Saturday for an expert to come down and examine that picture. He was the man about whom I wrote to Mademoiselle this morning. Supposing, for instance, it were worth several thousand pounds?”

“You surely don’t think a rich man like young Lazarus—?”

“Is he rich? Appearances are not everything. Even an old established firm with palatial showrooms and every appearance of prosperity may rest on a rotten basis. And what does one do then? Does one run about crying out that times are hard? No, one buys a new and luxurious car. One spends a little more money than usual. One lives a little more ostentatiously. For credit, see you, is everything! But sometimes a monumental business has crashed—for no more than a few thousand pounds—of ready money.

“Oh! I know,” he continued, forestalling my protests. “It is far-fetched—but it is not so bad as revengeful priests or buried treasure. It bears, at any rate, some relationship to things as they happen. And we can neglect nothing—nothing that might bring us nearer the truth.”

With careful fingers he straightened the objects on the table in front of him. When he spoke, his voice was grave and, for the first time, calm.

“Motive!” he said. “Let us come back to that, and regard this problem calmly and methodically. To begin with, how many kinds of motive are there for murder? What are the motives which lead one human being to take another human being’s life?

“We exclude for the moment homicidal mania. Because I am absolutely convinced that the solution of our problem does not lie there. We also exclude killing done on the spur of the moment under the impulse of an ungovernable temper. This is cold-blooded deliberate murder. What are the motives that actuate such a murder as that?”

“There is, first, Gain. Who stood to gain by Mademoiselle Buckley’s death? Directly or indirectly? Well, we can put down Charles Vyse. He inherits a property that, from the financial point of view, is probably not worth inheriting. He might, perhaps, pay off the mortgage, build small villas on the land and eventually make a small profit. It is possible. The place might be worth something to him if he had any deeply cherished love of it—if, it were, for instance, a family place. That is, undoubtedly, an instinct very deeply implanted in some human beings, and it has, in cases I have known, actually led to crime. But I cannot see any such motive in M. Vyse's case.

"The only other person who would benefit at all by Mademoiselle Buckley's death is her friend, Madame Rice. But the amount would clearly be a very small one. Nobody else, as far as I can see, gains by Mademoiselle Buckley's death.

"What is another motive? Hate—or love that has turned to hate. The crime passionnel. Well, there again we have the word of the observant Madame Croft that both Charles Vyse and Commander Challenger are in love with the young lady."

"I think we can say that we have observed the latter phenomenon for ourselves," I remarked, with a smile.

"Yes—he tends to wear his heart on his sleeve, the honest sailor. For the other, we rely on the word of Madame Croft. Now, if Charles Vyse felt that he were supplanted, would he be so powerfully affected that he would kill his cousin rather than let her become the wife of another man?"

"It sounds very melodramatic," I said, doubtfully.

"It sounds, you would say, unEnglish. I agree. But even the English have emotions. And a type such as Charles Vyse, is the most likely to have them. He is a repressed young man. One who does not show his feelings easily. Such often have the most violent feelings. I would never suspect the Commander Challenger of murder for emotional reasons. No, no, he is not the type. But with Charles Vyse—yes, it is possible. But it does not entirely satisfy me.

"Another motive for crime—Jealousy. I separate it from the last, because jealousy may not, necessarily, be a sexual emotion. There is envy—envy of possession—of supremacy. Such a jealousy as drove the Iago of your great Shakespeare to one of the cleverest crimes (speaking from the professional point of view) that has ever been committed."

"Why was it so clever?" I asked, momentarily diverted.

"Parbleu—because he got others to execute it. Imagine a criminal nowadays on whom one was unable to put the handcuffs because he had never done anything himself. But this is not the subject we were discussing. Can jealousy, of any kind, be responsible for this crime? Who has reason to envy Mademoiselle? Another woman? There is only Madame Rice, and as far as we can see, there was no rivalry between the two women. But again, that is only 'as far as we can see.' There may be something there.

"Lastly—Fear. Does Mademoiselle Nick, by any chance, hold somebody's secret in her power? Does she know something which, if it were known, might ruin another life? If so, I think we can say very definitely, that she herself is unaware of it. But that might be, you know. That might be. And if so, it makes it very difficult. Because, whilst she holds the clue in her hands, she holds it unconsciously and will be quite unable to tell us what it is."

"You really think that is possible?"

"It is a hypothesis. I am driven to it by the difficulty of finding a reasonable theory elsewhere. When you have eliminated other possibilities you turn to the one that is left and say—since the other is not—this must be so. . . ."

He was silent a long time.

At last, rousing himself from his absorption, he drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write.

"What are you writing?" I asked, curiously.

"Mon ami, I am composing a list. It is a list of people surrounding Mademoiselle Buckley. Within that list, if my theory is correct, there must be the name of the murderer."

He continued to write for perhaps twenty minutes—then shoved the sheets of paper across to me.

“Voilà, mon ami. See what you make of it.”

The following is a reproduction of the paper:

A. Ellen.

B. Her gardener husband.

C. Their child.

D. Mr. Croft.

E. Mrs. Croft.

F. Mrs. Rice.

G. Mr. Lazarus.

H. Commander Challenger.

I. Mr. Charles Vyse.

J.

Remarks:

A. Ellen.—Suspicious circumstances. Her attitude and words on hearing of the crime. Best opportunity of anyone to have staged accidents and to have known of pistol, but unlikely to have tampered with car, and general mentality of crime seems above her level. Motive.—None—unless hate arising out of some incident unknown. Note.—Further inquiries as to her antecedents and general relations with N. B.

B. Her Husband.—Same as above. More likely to have tampered with car. Note.—Should be interviewed.

C. Child.—Can be ruled out.

Note.—Should be interviewed. Might give valuable information.

D. Mr. Croft.—Only suspicious circumstance the fact that we met him mounting the stair to bedroom floor. Had ready explanation which may be true. But it may not! Nothing known of antecedents. Motive.—None.

E. Mrs. Croft.—Suspicious circumstances.—None. Motive.—None.

F. Mrs. Rice.—Suspicious circumstances. Full opportunity. Asked N. B. to fetch wrap. Has deliberately tried to create impression that N. B. is a liar and her account of “accidents” not to be relied on. Was not at Tavistock when accidents occurred. Where was she? Motive.—Gain? Very slight. Jealousy? Possible, but nothing known. Fear? Also possible, but nothing known. Note.—Converse with N. B. on subject. See if any light is thrown upon matter. Possibly something to do with F. R.’s marriage.

G. Mr. Lazarus.—Suspicious circumstances. General opportunity. Offer to buy picture. Said brakes of car were quite all right (according to F. R.). May have been in neighbourhood prior to Friday. Motive.—None—unless profit on picture. Fear?—unlikely. Note.—Find out where J. L. was before arriving at St. Loo. Find out financial position of Aaron Lazarus & Son.

H. Commander Challenger.—Suspicious circumstances. None. Was in neighbourhood all last week, so opportunity for “accidents” good. Arrived half an hour after murder. Motive.—None.

I. Mr. Vyse.—Suspicious circumstances. Was absent from office at time when shot was fired in garden of hotel. Opportunity good. Statement about selling of End House open to doubt. Of a repressed temperament. Would probably know about pistol. Motive.—Gain? (slight) Love or Hate? Possible with one of his temperament. Fear? Unlikely. Note.—Find out who held mortgage. Find out position of Vyse’s firm.

J. ?—There could be a J., e.g. an outsider. But with a link in the form of one of the foregoing. If so, probably connected with A. D. and E. or F. The existence of J. would explain (1) Ellen’s lack of surprise at crime and her pleasurable satisfaction. (But that might be due to natural pleasurable excitement of her class over deaths.) (2) The reason for Croft and his wife coming to live in lodge. (3) Might supply motive for F. R.’s fear of secret being revealed or for jealousy.

Poirot watched me as I read.

“It is very English, is it not? he remarked, with pride. “I am more English when I write than when I speak.”

“It’s an excellent piece of work,” I said, warmly. “It sets all the possibilities out most clearly.”

“Yes,” he said, thoughtfully, as he took it back from me. “And one name leaps to the eye, my friend. Charles Vyse. He has the best opportunities. We have given him the choice of two motives. Ma foi—if that was a list of racehorses, he would start favourite, n’est-ce pas?”

“He is certainly the most likely suspect.”

“You have a tendency, Hastings, to prefer the least likely. That, no doubt, is from reading too many detective stories. In real life, nine times out of ten, it is the most likely and the most obvious person who commits the crime.”

“But you don’t really think that is so this time?”

“There is only one thing that is against it. The boldness of the crime! That has stood out from the first. Because of that, as I say, the motive cannot be obvious.”

“Yes, that is what you said at first.”

“And that is what I say again.”

With a sudden brusque gesture he crumpled the sheets of paper and threw them on the floor.

“No,” he said, as I uttered an exclamation of protest. “That list has been in vain. Still, it has cleared my mind. Order and method! That is the first stage.

To arrange the facts with neatness and precision. The next stage—"

"Yes."

"The next stage is that of the psychology. The correct employment of the little grey cells! I advise you, Hastings, to go to bed."

"No," I said. "Not unless you do. I'm not going to leave you."

"Most faithful of dogs! But see you, Hastings, you cannot assist me to think. That is all I am going to do—think."

I still shook my head.

"You might want to discuss some point with me."

"Well—well—you are a loyal friend. Take at least, I beg of you, the easy-chair."

That proposal I did accept. Presently the room began to swim and dip. The last thing I remember was seeing Poirot carefully retrieving the crumpled sheets of paper from the floor and putting them away tidily in the waste-paper basket.

Then I must have fallen asleep.

Ten

NICK’S SECRET

It was daylight when I awoke.

Poirot was still sitting where he had been the night before. His attitude was the same, but in his face was a difference. His eyes were shining with that queer cat-like green light that I knew so well.

I struggled to an upright position, feeling very stiff and uncomfortable. Sleeping in a chair is a proceeding not to be recommended at my time of life. Yet one thing at least resulted from it—I awoke not in that pleasant state of lazy somnolence but with a mind and brain as active as when I fell asleep.

“Poirot,” I cried. “You have thought of something.”

He nodded. He leaned forward, tapping the table in front of him.

“Tell me, Hastings, the answer to these three questions. Why has Mademoiselle Nick been sleeping badly lately? Why did she buy a black evening dress—she never wears black? Why did she say last night, ‘I have nothing to live for—now?’ ”

I stared. The questions seemed beside the point.

“Answer those questions, Hastings, answer them.”

“Well—as to the first—she said she had been worried lately.”

“Precisely. What has she been worried about?”

“And the black dress—well, everybody wants a change sometimes.”

"For a married man, you have very little appreciation of feminine psychology. If a woman thinks she does not look well in a colour, she refuses to wear it."

"And the last—well, it was a natural thing to say after that awful shock."

"No, mon ami, it was not a natural thing to say. To be horror-struck by her cousin's death, to reproach herself for it—yes, all that is natural enough. But the other, no. She spoke of life with weariness—as of a thing no longer dear to her. Never before had she displayed that attitude. She had been defiant—yes—she had snapped the fingers, yes—and then, when that broke down, she was afraid. Afraid, mark you, because life was sweet and she did not wish to die. But weary of life—no! That never! Even before dinner that was not so. We have there, Hastings, a psychological change. And that is interesting. What was it caused her point of view to change?"

"The shock of her cousin's death."

"I wonder. It was the shock that loosed her tongue. But suppose the change was before that. Is there anything else could account for it?"

"I don't know of anything."

"Think, Hastings. Use your little grey cells."

"Really—"

"What was the last moment we had the opportunity of observing her?"

"Well, actually, I suppose, at dinner."

"Exactly. After that, we only saw her receiving guests, making them welcome—purely a formal attitude. What happened at the end of dinner, Hastings?"

"She went to telephone," I said, slowly.

"À la bonne heure. You have got there at last. She went to telephone. And she was absent a long time. Twenty minutes at least. That is a long time for a telephone call. Who spoke to her over the telephone? What did they say? Did she really telephone? We have to find out, Hastings, what happened in that twenty minutes. For there, or so I fully believe, we shall find the clue we seek.”

“You really think so?”

“Mais oui, mais oui! All along, Hastings, I have told you that Mademoiselle has been keeping something back. She doesn’t think it has any connection with the murder—but I, Hercule Poirot, know better! It must have a connection. For, all along, I have been conscious that there is a factor lacking. If there were not a factor lacking—why then, the whole thing would be plain to me! And as it is not plain to me—eh bien—then the missing factor is the keystone of the mystery! I know I am right, Hastings.

I must know the answer to those three questions. And, then—and then—I shall begin to see. . . .

“Well,” I said, stretching my stiffened limbs, “I think a bath and a shave are indicated.”

By the time I had had a bath and changed into day clothing I felt better. The stiffness and weariness of a night passed in uncomfortable conditions passed off. I arrived at the breakfast table feeling that one drink of hot coffee would restore me to my normal self.

I glanced at the paper, but there was little news in it beyond the fact that Michael Seton’s death was now definitely confirmed. The intrepid airman had perished. I wondered whether, tomorrow, new headlines would have sprung into being: “GIRL MURDERED DURING FIREWORK PARTY. MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY.” Something like that.

I had just finished breakfast when Frederica Rice came up to my table. She was wearing a plain little frock of black marocain with a little soft-pleated white collar. Her fairness was more evident than ever.

“I want to see M. Poirot, Captain Hastings. Is he up yet, do you know?”

"I will take you up with me now," I said. "We shall find him in the sitting room."

"Thank you."

"I hope," I said, as we left the dining room together, "that you didn't sleep too badly?"

"It was a shock," she said, in a meditative voice. "But, of course, I didn't know the poor girl. It's not as though it had been Nick."

"I suppose you'd never met this girl before?"

"Once—at Scarborough. She came over to lunch with Nick."

"It will be a terrible blow to her father and mother," I said.

"Dreadful."

But she said it very impersonally. She was, I fancied, an egoist. Nothing was very real to her that did not concern herself.

Poirot had finished his breakfast and was sitting reading the morning paper. He rose and greeted Frederica with all his customary Gallic politeness.

"Madame," he said. "Enchanté!"

He drew forward a chair.

She thanked him with a very faint smile and sat down. Her two hands rested on the arms of the chair. She sat there very upright, looking straight in front of her. She did not rush into speech. There was something a little frightening about her stillness and aloofness.

"M. Poirot," she said at last. "I suppose there is no doubt that this—sad business last night was all part and parcel of the same thing? I mean—that the intended victim was really Nick?"

"I should say, Madame, that there was no doubt at all."

Frederica frowned a little.

“Nick bears a charmed life,” she said.

There was some curious undercurrent in her voice that I could not understand.

“Luck, they say, goes in cycles,” remarked Poirot.

“Perhaps. It is certainly useless to fight against it.”

Now there was only weariness in her tone. After a moment or two, she went on.

“I must beg your pardon, M. Poirot. Nick’s pardon, too. Up till last night I did not believe. I never dreamed that the danger was—serious.”

“Is that so, Madame?”

“I see now that everything will have to be gone into—carefully. And I imagine that Nick’s immediate circle of friends will not be immune from suspicion. Ridiculous, of course, but there it is. Am I right, M. Poirot?”

“You are very intelligent, Madame.”

“You asked me some questions about Tavistock the other day, M. Poirot. As you will find out sooner or later, I might as well tell you the truth now. I was not at Tavistock.”

“No, Madame?”

“I motored down to this part of the world with Mr. Lazarus early last weeek. We did not wish to arouse more comment than necessary. We stayed at a little place called Shellacombe.”

“That is, I think, about seven miles from here, Madame?”

“About that—yes.”

Still that quiet faraway weariness.

“May I be impertinent, Madame?”

“Is there such a thing—in these days?”

“Perhaps you are right, Madame. How long have you and M. Lazarus been friends?”

“I met him six months ago.”

“And you—care for him, Madame?”

Frederica shrugged her shoulders.

“He is—rich.”

“Oh! là là,” cried Poirot. “That is an ugly thing to say.”

She seemed faintly amused.

“Isn’t it better to say it myself—than to have you say it for me?”

“Well—there is always that, of course. May I repeat, Madame, that you are very intelligent.”

“You will give me a diploma soon,” said Frederica, and rose.

“There is nothing more you wish to tell me, Madame?”

“I do not think so—no. I am going to take some flowers round to Nick and see how she is.”

“Ah, that is very amiable of you. Thank you, Madame, for your frankness.”

She glanced at him sharply, seemed about to speak, then thought better of it and went out of the room, smiling faintly at me as I held the door open for her.

“She is intelligent,” said Poirot. “Yes, but so is Hercule Poirot!”

“What do you mean?”

“That it is all very well and very pretty to force the richness of M. Lazarus down my throat—”

“I must say that rather disgusted me.”

“Mon cher, always you have the right reaction in the wrong place. It is not, for the moment, a question of good taste or otherwise. If Madame Rice has a devoted friend who is rich and can give her all she needs—why then obviously Madame Rice would not need to murder her dearest friend for a mere pittance.”

“Oh!” I said.

“Précisément! ‘Oh!’ ”

“Why didn’t you stop her going to the nursing home?”

“Why should I show my hand? Is it Hercule Poirot who prevents Mademoiselle Nick from seeing her friends? Quelle idée! It is the doctors and the nurses. Those tiresome nurses! So full of rules and regulations and ‘doctor’s’ orders.’ ”

“You’re not afraid that they may let her in after all? Nick may insist.”

“Nobody will be let in, my dear Hastings, but you and me. And for that matter, the sooner we make our way there, the better.”

The sitting room door flew open and George Challenger barged in. His tanned face was alive with indignation.

“Look here, M. Poirot,” he said. “What’s the meaning of this? I rang up that damned nursing home where Nick is. Asked how she was and what time I could come round and see her. And they say the doctor won’t allow any visitors. I want to know the meaning of that. To put it plainly, is this your work? Or is Nick really ill from shock?”

"I assure you, Monsieur, that I do not lay down rules for nursing homes. I would not dare. Why not ring up the good doctor—what was his name now?—Ah, yes, Graham."

"I have. He says she's going on as well as could be expected—usual stuff. But I know all the tricks—my uncle's a doctor. Harley Street. Nerve specialist. Psychoanalysis—all the rest of it. Putting relations and friends off with soothing words. I've heard about it all. I don't believe Nick isn't up to seeing any one. I believe you're at the bottom of this, M. Poirot."

Poirot smiled at him in a very kindly fashion. Indeed, I have always observed that Poirot has a kindly feeling for a lover.

"Now listen to me, mon ami," he said. "If one guest is admitted, others cannot be kept out. You comprehend? It must be all or none. We want Mademoiselle's safety, you and I, do we not? Exactly. Then, you understand—it must be none."

"I get you," said Challenger, slowly. "But then—"

"Chut! We will say no more. We will forget even what we have said. The prudence, the extreme prudence, is what is needed at present."

"I can hold my tongue," said the sailor quietly.

He turned away to the door, pausing as he went out to say:

"No embargo on flowers, is there? So long as they are not white ones."

Poirot smiled.

"And now," he said, as the door shut behind the impetuous Challenger, "whilst M. Challenger and Madame and perhaps M. Lazarus all encounter each other in the flower shop, you and I will drive quietly to our destination."

"And ask for the answer to the three questions?" I said.

"Yes. We will ask. Though, as a matter of fact, I know the answer."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Yes."

"But when did you find out?"

"Whilst I was eating my breakfast, Hastings. It stared me in the face."

"Tell me."

"No, I will leave you to hear it from Mademoiselle."

Then, as if to distract my mind, he pushed an open letter across to me.

It was a report by the expert Poirot had sent to examine the picture of old Nicholas Buckley. It stated definitely that the picture was worth at most twenty pounds.

"So that is one matter cleared up," said Poirot.

"No mouse in that mousehole," I said, remembering a metaphor of Poirot's on one past occasion.

"Ah! you remember that? No, as you say, no mouse in that mousehole. Twenty pounds and M. Lazarus offered fifty. What an error of judgement for a seemingly astute young man. But there, there, we must start on our errand."

The nursing home was set high on a hill overlooking the bay. A white-coated orderly received us. We were put into a little room downstairs and presently a brisk-looking nurse came to us.

One glance at Poirot seemed to be enough. She had clearly received her instructions from Dr. Graham together with a minute description of the little detective. She even concealed a smile.

"Miss Buckley has passed a very fair night," she said. "Come up, will you?"

In a pleasant room with the sun streaming into it, we found Nick. In the narrow iron bed, she looked like a tired child. Her face was white and her eyes were suspiciously red, and she seemed listless and weary.

“It’s good of you to come,” she said in a flat voice.

Poirot took her hand in both of his.

“Courage, Mademoiselle. There is always something to live for.”

The words startled her. She looked up in his face.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh!”

“Will you not tell me now, Mademoiselle, what it was that has been worrying you lately? Or shall I guess? And may I offer you, Mademoiselle, my very deepest sympathy.”

Her face flushed.

“So you know. Oh, well, it doesn’t matter who knows now. Now that it’s all over. Now that I shall never see him again.”

Her voice broke.

“Courage, Mademoiselle.”

“I haven’t got any courage left. I’ve used up every bit in these last weeks. Hoping and hoping and—just lately—hoping against hope.”

I stared. I could not understand one word.

“Regard the poor Hastings,” said Poirot. “He does not know what we are talking about.”

Her unhappy eyes met mine.

“Michael Seton, the airman,” she said. “I was engaged to him—and he’s dead.”

Eleven

THE MOTIVE

I was dumbfounded.

I turned on Poirot.

“Is this what you meant?”

“Yes, mon ami. This morning—I knew.”

“How did you know? How did you guess? You said it stared you in the face at breakfast.”

“So it did, my friend. From the front page of the newspaper. I remembered the conversation at dinner last night—and I saw everything.”

He turned to Nick again.

“You heard the news last night?”

“Yes. On the wireless. I made an excuse about the telephone. I wanted to hear the news alone—in case . . .” She swallowed hard. “And I heard it. . . .”

“I know, I know.” He took her hand in both of his.

“It was—pretty ghastly. And all the people arriving. I don’t know how I got through it. It all felt like a dream. I could see myself from outside—behaving just as usual. It was queer somehow.”

“Yes, yes, I understand.”

"And then, when I went to fetch Freddie's wrap—I broke down for a minute. I pulled myself together quite quickly. But Maggie kept calling up about her coat. And then at last she took my shawl and went, and I put on some powder and some rouge and followed her out. And there she was—dead. . . ."

"Yes, yes, it must have been a terrible shock."

"You don't understand. I was angry! I wished it had been me! I wanted to be dead—and there I was—alive and perhaps to live for years! And Michael dead—drowned far away in the Pacific."

"Pauvre enfant."

"I don't want to be alive. I don't want to live, I tell you!" she cried, rebelliously.

"I know—I know. To all of us, Mademoiselle, there comes a time when death is preferable to life. But it passes—sorrow passes and grief. You cannot believe that now, I know. It is useless for an old man like me to talk. Idle words—that is what you think—idle words."

"You think I'll forget—and marry someone else? Never!"

She looked rather lovely as she sat up in bed, her two hands clenched and her cheeks burning.

Poirot said gently:

"No, no. I am not thinking anything of the kind. You are very lucky, Mademoiselle. You have been loved by a brave man—a hero. How did you come to meet him?"

"It was at Le Touquet—last September. Nearly a year ago."

"And you became engaged—when?"

"Just after Christmas. But it had to be a secret."

"Why was that?"

"Michael's uncle—old Sir Matthew Seton. He loved birds and hated women."

"Ah! ce n'est pas raisonnable!"

"Well—I don't mean quite that. He was a complete crank. Thought women ruined a man's life. And Michael was absolutely dependent on him. He was frightfully proud of Michael and it was he who financed the building of the Albatross and the expenses of the round-the-world flight. It was the dearest dream of his life as well as of Michael's. If Michael had pulled it off—well, then he could have asked his uncle anything. And even if old Sir Matthew had still cut up rough, well, it wouldn't have really mattered. Michael would have been made—a kind of world hero. His uncle would have come round in the end."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"But Michael said it would be fatal if anything leaked out. We must keep it a dead secret. And I did. I never told anyone—not even Freddie."

Poirot groaned.

"If only you had told me, Mademoiselle."

Nick stared at him.

"But what difference would it have made? It couldn't have anything to do with these mysterious attacks on me? No, I'd promised Michael—and I kept my word. But it was awful—the anxiety, wondering and getting in a state the whole time. And everyone saying one was so nervy. And being unable to explain."

"Yes, I comprehend all that."

"He was missing once before, you know. Crossing the desert on the way to India. That was pretty awful, and then after all, it was all right. His machine was damaged, but it was put right, and he went on. And I kept saying to myself that it would be the same this time. Everyone said he must be dead—and I kept telling myself that he must be all right, really. And then—last night . . .”

Her voice trailed away.

“You had hoped up till then?”

“I don’t know. I think it was more that I refused to believe. It was awful never being able to talk to anyone.”

“Yes, I can imagine that. Were you never tempted to tell Madame Rice, for instance?”

“Sometimes I wanted to frightfully.”

“You do not think she—guessed?”

“I don’t think so.” Nick considered the idea carefully. “She never said anything. Of course she used to hint things sometimes. About our being great friends and all that.”

“You never considered telling her when M. Seton’s uncle died? You know that he died about a week ago?”

“I know. He had an operation or something. I suppose I might have told anybody then. But it wouldn’t have been a nice way of doing it, would it? I mean, it would have seemed rather boastful—to do it just then—when all the papers were full of Michael. And reporters would have come and interviewed me. It would all have been rather cheap. And Michael would have hated it.”

“I agree with you, Mademoiselle. You could not have announced it publicly. I only meant that you could have spoken of it privately to a friend.”

“I did sort of hint to one person,” said Nick. “I—thought it was only fair. But I don’t know how much he—the person took in.”

Poirot nodded.

“Are you on good terms with your cousin M. Vyse?” he asked, with a rather abrupt change of subject.

“Charles? What put him into your head?”

“I was just wondering—that was all.”

“Charles means well,” said Nick. “He’s a frightful stick, of course. Never moves out of this place. He disapproves of me, I think.”

“Oh! Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle. And I hear that he has laid all his devotion at your feet!”

“Disapproving of a person doesn’t keep you from having a pash for them. Charles thinks my mode of life is reprehensible and he disapproves of my cocktails, my complexion, my friends and my conversation. But he still feels my fatal fascination. He always hopes to reform me, I think.”

She paused and then said, with a ghost of a twinkle:

“Who have you been pumping to get the local information?”

“You must not give me away, Mademoiselle. I had a little conversation with the Australian lady, Madame Croft.”

“She’s rather an old dear—when one has time for her. Terribly sentimental. Love and home and children—you know the sort of thing.”

“I am old-fashioned and sentimental myself, Mademoiselle.”

“Are you? I should have said that Captain Hastings was the sentimental one of you two.”

I blushed indignantly.

“He is furious,” said Poirot, eying my discomfiture with a good deal of pleasure. “But you are right, Mademoiselle. Yes, you are right.”

“Not at all,” I said, angrily.

“Hastings has a singularly beautiful nature. It has been the greatest hindrance to me at times.”

“Don’t be absurd, Poirot.”

“He is, to begin with, reluctant to see evil anywhere, and when he does see it his righteous indignation is so great that he is incapable of dissembling. Altogether a rare and beautiful nature. No, mon ami, I will not permit you to contradict me. It is as I say.”

“You’ve both been very kind to me,” said Nick, gently.

“Là, là, Mademoiselle. That is nothing. We have much more to do. To begin with, you will remain here. You will obey orders. You will do what I tell you. At this juncture I must not be hampered.”

Nick sighed wearily.

“I’ll do anything you like. I don’t care what I do.”

“You will see no friends for the present.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to see anyone.”

“For you the passive part—for us the active one. Now, Mademoiselle, I am going to leave you. I will not intrude longer upon your sorrow.”

He moved towards the door, pausing with his hand on the handle to say over his shoulder:

“By the way, you once mentioned a will you made. Where is it, this will?”

“Oh! it’s knocking round somewhere.”

“At End House?”

“Yes.”

“In a safe? Locked up in your desk?”

“Well, I really don’t know. It’s somewhere about.” She frowned. “I’m frightfully untidy, you know. Papers and things like that would be mostly in the writing table in the library. That’s where most of the bills are. The will is probably with them. Or it might be in my bedroom.”

“You permit me to make the search—yes?”

“If you want to—yes. Look at anything you like.”

“Merci, Mademoiselle. I will avail myself of your permission.”

Twelve

ELLEN

Poirot said no word till we had emerged from the nursing home into the outer air. Then he caught me by the arm.

"You see, Hastings? You see? Ah! Sacré tonnerre! I was right! I was right! Always I knew there was something lacking—some piece of the puzzle that was not there. And without that missing piece the whole thing was meaningless."

His almost despairing triumph was double Dutch to me. I could not see that anything very epoch-making had occurred.

"It was there all the time. And I could not see it. But how should I? To know there is something—that, yes—but to know what that something is. Ah! Ça c'est bien plus difficile."

"Do you mean that this has some direct bearing on the crime?"

"Ma foi, do you not see?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't."

"Is it possible? Why, it gives us what we have been looking for—the motive—the hidden obscure motive!"

"I may be very dense, but I can't see it. Do you mean jealousy of some kind?"

"Jealousy? No, no, my friend. The usual motive—the inevitable motive. Money, my friend, money!"

“I stared. He went on, speaking more calmly.

“Listen, mon ami. Just over a week ago Sir Matthew Seton dies. And Sir Matthew Seton was a millionaire—one of the richest men in England.”

“Yes, but—”

“Attendez. One step at a time. He has a nephew whom he idolizes and to whom, we may safely assume, he has left his vast fortune.”

“But—”

“Mais oui—legacies, yes, an endowment to do with his hobby, yes, but the bulk of the money would go to Michael Seton. Last Tuesday, Michael Seton is reported missing—and on Wednesday the attacks on Mademoiselle’s life begin. Supposing, Hastings, that Michael Seton made a will before he started on his flight, and that in that will he left all he had to his fiancée.”

“That’s pure supposition.”

“It is supposition—yes. But it must be so. Because, if it is not so, there is no meaning in anything that has happened. It is no paltry inheritance that is at stake. It is an enormous fortune.”

I was silent for some minutes, turning the matter over in my mind. It seemed to me that Poirot was leaping to conclusions in a most reckless manner, and yet I was secretly convinced that he was right. It was his extraordinary flair for being right that influenced me. Yet it seemed to me that there was a good deal to be proved still.

“But if nobody knew of the engagement,” I argued.

“Pah! Somebody did know. For the matter of that, somebody always does know. If they do not know, they guess. Madame Rice suspected. Mademoiselle Nick admitted as much. She may have had means of turning those suspicions into certainties.”

“How?”

“Well, for one thing, there must have been letters from Michael Seton to Mademoiselle Nick. They had been engaged some time. And her best friend could not call that young lady anything but careless. She leaves things here and there, and everywhere. I doubt if she has ever locked up anything in her life. Oh, yes, there would be means of making sure.”

“And Frederica Rice would know about the will that her friend had made?”

“Doubtless. Oh, yes, it narrows down now. You remember my list—a list of persons numbered from A. to J. It has narrowed down to only two persons. I dismiss the servants. I dismiss the Commander Challenger—even though he did take one hour and a half to reach here from Plymouth—and the distance is only thirty miles. I dismiss the long-nosed M. Lazarus who offered fifty pounds for a picture that was only worth twenty (it is odd, that, when you come to think of it. Most uncharacteristic of his race). I dismiss the Australians—so hearty and so pleasant. I keep two people on my list still.”

“One is Frederica Rice,” I said slowly.

I had a vision of her face, the golden hair, the white fragility of the features.

“Yes. She is indicated very clearly. However carelessly worded Mademoiselle’s will may have been, she would be plainly indicated as residuary legatee. Apart from End House, everything was to go to her. If Mademoiselle Nick instead of Mademoiselle Maggie had been shot last night, Madame Rice would be a rich woman today.”

“I can hardly believe it!”

“You mean that you can hardly believe that a beautiful woman can be a murderess? One often has a little difficulty with members of a jury on that account. But you may be right. There is still another suspect.”

“Who?”

“Charles Vyse.”

“But he only inherits the house.”

"Yes—but he may not know that. Did he make Mademoiselle's will for her? I think not. If so, it would be in his keeping, not 'knocking around somewhere,' or whatever the phrase was that Mademoiselle used. So, you see, Hastings, it is quite probable that he knows nothing about that will. He may believe that she has never made a will and that, in that case, he will inherit as next of kin."

"You know," I said, "that really seems to me much more probable."

"That is your romantic mind, Hastings. The wicked solicitor. A familiar figure in fiction. If as well as being a solicitor he has an impassive face, it makes the matter almost certain. It is true that, in some ways, he is more in the picture than Madame. He would be more likely to know about the pistol and more likely to use one."

"And to send the boulder crashing down."

"Perhaps. Though, as I have told you, much can be done by leverage. And the fact that the boulder was dislodged at the wrong minute, and consequently missed Mademoiselle, is more suggestive of feminine agency. The idea of tampering with the interior of a car seems masculine in conception—though many women are as good mechanics as men nowadays. On the other hand, there are one or two gaps in the theory against M. Vyse."

"Such as—?"

"He is less likely to have known of the engagement than Madame. And there is another point. His action was rather precipitate."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, until last night there was no certitude that Seton was dead. To act rashly, without due assurance, seems very uncharacteristic of the legal mind."

"Yes," I said. "A woman would jump to conclusions."

“Exactly. Ce que femme veut, Dieu veut. That is the attitude.”

“It’s really amazing the way Nick has escaped. It seems almost incredible.”

And suddenly I remembered the tone in Frederica’s voice as she had said: “Nick bears a charmed life.”

I shivered a little.

“Yes,” said Poirot, thoughtfully. “And I can take no credit to myself. Which is humiliating.”

“Providence,” I murmured.

“Ah! mon ami, I would not put on the shoulders of the good God the burden of men’s wrongdoing. You say that in your Sunday morning voice of thankfulness—without reflecting that what you are really saying is that le bon Dieu has killed Miss Maggie Buckley.”

“Really, Poirot!”

“Really, my friend! But I will not sit back and say ‘le bon Dieu has arranged everything, I will not interfere.’ Because I am convinced that le bon Dieu created Hercule Poirot for the express purpose of interfering. It is my métier.”

We had been slowly ascending the zigzag path up the cliff. It was at this juncture that we passed through the little gate into the grounds of End House.

“Pouf!” said Poirot. “That ascent is a steep one. I am hot. My moustaches are limp. Yes, as I was saying just now, I am on the side of the innocent. I am on the side of Mademoiselle Nick because she was attacked. I am on the side of Mademoiselle Maggie because she has been killed.”

“And you are against Frederica Rice and Charles Vyse.”

“No, no, Hastings. I keep an open mind. I say only that at the moment one of those two is indicated. Chut!”

We had come out on the strip of lawn by the house, and a man was driving a mowing machine. He had a long, stupid face and lacklustre eyes. Beside him was a small boy of about ten, ugly but intelligent-looking.

It crossed my mind that we had not heard the mowing machine in action, but I presumed that the gardener was not overworking himself. He had probably been resting from his labours, and had sprung into action on hearing our voices approaching.

“Good morning,” said Poirot.

“Good morning, sir.”

“You are the gardener, I suppose. The husband of Madame who works in the house.”

“He’s my Dad,” said the small boy.

“That’s right, sir,” said the man. “You’ll be the foreign gentleman, I take it, that’s really a detective. Is there any news of the young mistress, sir?”

“I come from seeing her at the immediate moment. She has passed a satisfactory night.”

“We’ve had policemen here,” said the small boy. “That’s where the lady was killed. Here by the steps. I seen a pig killed once, haven’t I, Dad?”

“Ah!” said his father, unemotionally.

“Dad used to kill pigs when he worked on a farm. Didn’t you, Dad? I seen a pig killed. I liked it.”

“Young ’uns like to see pigs killed,” said the man, as though stating one of the unalterable facts of nature.

“Shot with a pistol, the lady was,” continued the boy. “She didn’t have her throat cut. No!”

We passed on to the house, and I felt thankful to get away from the ghoulish child.

Poirot entered the drawing room, the windows of which were open, and rang the bell. Ellen, neatly attired in black, came in answer to the bell. She showed no surprise at seeing us.

Poirot explained that we were here by permission of Miss Buckley to make a search of the house.

“Very good sir.”

“The police have finished?”

“They said they had seen everything they wanted, sir. They’ve been about the garden since very early in the morning. I don’t know whether they’ve found anything.”

She was about to leave the room when Poirot stopped her with a question.

“Were you very surprised last night when you heard Miss Buckley had been shot?”

“Yes, sir, very surprised. Miss Maggie was a nice young lady, sir. I can’t imagine anyone being so wicked as to want to harm her.”

“If it had been anyone else, you would not have been so surprised—eh?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir?”

“When I came into the hall last night,” he said, “you asked at once whether anyone had been hurt. Were you expecting anything of the kind?”

She was silent. Her fingers pleated a corner of her apron. She shook her head and murmured:

“You gentlemen wouldn’t understand.”

“Yes, yes,” said Poirot, “I would understand. However fantastic what you may say, I would understand.”

She looked at him doubtfully, then seemed to make up her mind to trust him.

“You see, sir,” she said, “this isn’t a good house.”

I was surprised and a little contemptuous. Poirot, however, seemed to find the remark not in the least unusual.

“You mean it is an old house.”

“Yes, sir, not a good house.”

“You have been here long?”

“Six years, sir. But I was here as a girl. In the kitchen as kitchen-maid. That was in the time of old Sir Nicholas. It was the same then.”

Poirot looked at her attentively.

In an old house,” she said, “there is sometimes an atmosphere of evil.”

“That’s it, sir,” said Ellen, eagerly. “Evil. Bad thoughts and bad deeds too. It’s like dry rot in a house, sir, you can’t get it out. It’s a sort of feeling in the air. I always knew something bad would happen in this house, some day.”

“Well, you have been proved right.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a very slight underlying satisfaction in her tone, the satisfaction of one whose gloomy prognostications have been shown to be correct.

“But you didn’t think it would be Miss Maggie.”

“No, indeed, I didn’t, sir. Nobody hated her—I’m sure of it.”

It seemed to me that in those words was a clue. I expected Poirot to follow it up, but to my surprise he shifted to quite a different subject.

“You didn’t hear the shots fired?”

“I couldn’t have told with the fireworks going on. Very noisy they were.”

“You weren’t out watching them?”

“No, I hadn’t finished clearing up dinner.”

“Was the waiter helping you?”

“No, sir, he’d gone out into the garden to have a look at the fireworks.”

“But you didn’t go.”

“No, sir.”

“Why was that?”

“I wanted to get finished.”

“You don’t care for fireworks?”

“Oh, yes, sir, it wasn’t that. But you see, there’s two nights of them, and William and I get the evening off tomorrow and go down into the town and see them from there.”

“I comprehend. And you heard Mademoiselle Maggie asking for her coat and unable to find it?”

“I heard Miss Nick run upstairs, sir, and Miss Buckley call up from the front hall saying she couldn’t find something and I heard her say, ‘All right—I’ll take the shawl—’ ”

“Pardon,” Poirot interrupted. “You did not endeavour to search for the coat for her—or get it from the car where it had been left?”

“I had my work to do, sir.”

“Quite so—and doubtless neither of the two young ladies asked you because they thought you were out looking at the fireworks?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So that, other years, you have been out looking at the fireworks?”

A sudden flush came into her pale cheeks.

“I don’t know what you mean, sir. We’re always allowed to go out into the garden. If I didn’t feel like it this year, and would rather get on with my work and go to bed, well, that’s my business, I imagine.”

“Mais oui. Mais oui. I did not intend to offend you. Why should you not do as you prefer. To make a change, it is pleasant.”

He paused and then added:

“Now another little matter in which I wonder whether you can help me. This is an old house. Are there, do you know, any secret chambers in it?”

“Well—there’s a kind of sliding panel—in this very room. I remember being shown it as a girl. Only I can’t remember just now where it is. Or was it in the library? I can’t say, I’m sure.”

“Big enough for a person to hide in?”

“Oh, no indeed, sir! A little cupboard place—a kind of niche. About a foot square, sir, not more than that.”

“Oh! that is not what I mean at all.”

The blush rose to her face again.

“If you think I was hiding anywhere—I wasn’t! I heard Miss Nick run down the stairs and out and I heard her cry out—and I came into the hall to see if—if anything was the matter. And that’s the gospel truth, sir. That’s the gospel truth.”

Thirteen

LETTERS

Having successfully got rid of Ellen, Poirot turned a somewhat thoughtful face towards me.

"I wonder now—did she hear those shots? I think she did. She heard them, she opened the kitchen door. She heard Nick rush down the stairs and out, and she herself came into the hall to find out what had happened. That is natural enough. But why did she not go out and watch the fireworks that evening? That is what I should like to know, Hastings."

"What was your idea in asking about a secret hiding place?"

"A mere fanciful idea that, after all, we might not have disposed of J."

"J?"

"Yes. The last person on my list. The problematical outsider. Supposing for some reason connected with Ellen, that J. had come to the house last night. He (I assume a he) conceals himself in a secret chamber in this room. A girl passes through whom he takes to be Nick. He follows her out—and shoots her. Non—c'est idiot! And anyway, we know that there is no hiding place. Ellen's decision to remain in the kitchen last night was a pure hazard. Come, let us search for the will of Mademoiselle Nick."

There were no papers in the drawing room. We adjourned to the library, a rather dark room looking out on the drive. Here there was a large old-fashioned walnut bureau writing table.

It took us some time to go through it. Everything was in complete confusion. Bills and receipts were mixed up together. Letters of invitation, letters pressing for payment of accounts, letters from friends.

“We will arrange these papers,” said Poirot, sternly, “with order and method.”

He was as good as his word. Half an hour later, he sat back with a pleased expression on his face. Everything was neatly sorted, docketed and filed.

“C’est bien, ça. One thing is at least to the good. We have had to go through everything so thoroughly that there is no possibility of our having missed anything.”

“No, indeed. Not that there’s been much to find.”

“Except possibly this.”

He tossed across a letter. It was written in large sprawling handwriting, almost indecipherable.

“Darling,—Party was too too marvellous. Feel rather a worm today. You were wise not to touch that stuff—don’t ever start, darling. It’s too damned hard to give up. I’m writing the boy friend to hurry up the supply. What Hell life is!

“Yours,

“Freddie.”

“Dated last February,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “She takes drugs, of course, I knew that as soon as I looked at her.”

“Really? I never suspected such a thing.”

“It is fairly obvious. You have only to look at her eyes. And then there are her extraordinary variations of mood. Sometimes she is all on edge, strung up—sometimes she is lifeless—inert.”

“Drug taking affects the moral sense, does it not?”

“Inevitably. But I do not think Madame Rice is a real addict. She is at the beginning—not the end.”

"And Nick?"

"There are no signs of it. She may have attended a dope party now and then for fun, but she is no taker of drugs."

"I'm glad of that."

I remembered suddenly what Nick had said about Frederica: that she was not always herself. Poirot nodded and tapped the letter he held.

"This is what she was referring to, undoubtedly. Well, we have drawn the blank, as you say, here. Let us go up to Mademoiselle's room."

There was a desk in Nick's room also, but comparatively little was kept in it. Here again, there was no sign of a will. We found the registration book of her car and a perfectly good dividend warrant of a month back. Otherwise there was nothing of importance.

Poirot sighed in an exasperated fashion.

"The young girls—they are not properly trained nowadays. The order, the method, it is left out of their bringing up. She is charming, Mademoiselle Nick, but she is a featherhead. Decidedly, she is a featherhead."

He was now going through the contents of a chest of drawers.

"Surely, Poirot," I said, with some embarrassment, "those are underclothes."

He paused in surprise.

"And why not, my friend?"

"Don't you think—I mean—we can hardly—"

He broke into a roar of laughter.

"Decidedly, my poor Hastings, you belong to the Victorian era. Mademoiselle Nick would tell you so if she were here. In all probability she would say that you had the mind like the sink! Young ladies are not ashamed of their underclothes nowadays. The camisole, the camiknicker, it is no longer a shameful secret. Every day, on the beach, all these garments will be discarded within a few feet of you. And why not?”

“I don’t see any need for what you are doing.”

“Écoutez, my friend. Clearly, she does not lock up her treasures, Mademoiselle Nick. If she wished to hide anything from sight—where would she hide it? Underneath the stockings and the petticoats. Ah! what have we here?”

He held up a packet of letters tied with a faded pink ribbon.

“The love letters of M. Michael Seton, if I mistake not.”

Quite calmly he untied the ribbon and began to open out the letters.

“Poirot,” I cried, scandalized. “You really can’t do that. It isn’t playing the game.”

“I am not playing a game, mon ami.” His voice rang out suddenly harsh and stern. “I am hunting down a murderer.”

“Yes, but private letters—”

“May have nothing to tell me—on the other hand, they may. I must take every chance, my friend. Come, you might as well read them with me. Two pairs of eyes are no worse than one pair. Console yourself with the thought that the staunch Ellen probably knows them by heart.”

I did not like it. Still I realized that in Poirot’s position he could not afford to be squeamish, and I consoled myself by the quibble that Nick’s last word had been, “Look at anything you like.”

The letters spread over several dates, beginning last winter.

New Year’s Day.

“Darling,—The New Year is in and I’m making good resolutions. It seems too wonderful to be true—that you should actually love me. You’ve made all the difference to my life. I believe we both knew—from the very first moment we met. Happy New Year, my lovely girl.

“Yours for ever,

“Michael.”

February 8th.

“Dearest Love,—How I wish I could see you more often. This is pretty rotten, isn’t it? I hate all this beastly concealment, but I explained to you how things are. I know how much you hate lies and concealment. I do too. But honestly, it might upset the whole apple cart. Uncle Matthew has got an absolute bee in his bonnet about early marriages and the way they wreck a man’s career. As though you could wreck mine, you dear angel!

“Cheer up, darling. Everything will come right.

“Yours,

“Michael.”

March 2nd.

“I oughtn’t to write to you two days running, I know. But I must. When I was up yesterday I thought of you. I flew over Scarborough. Blessed, blessed, blessed Scarborough—the most wonderful place in the world. Darling, you don’t know how I love you!

“Yours,

“Michael.”

April 18th.

“Dearest,—The whole thing is fixed up. Definitely. If I pull this off (and I shall pull it off) I shall be able to take a firm line with Uncle Matthew—and if he doesn't like it—well, what do I care? It's adorable of you to be so interested in my long technical descriptions of the Albatross. How I long to take you up in her. Some day! Don't, for goodness' sake, worry about me. The thing isn't half so risky as it sounds. I simply couldn't get killed now that I know you care for me. Everything will be all right, sweetheart. Trust your Michael."

April 20th.

"You Angel,—Every word you say is true and I shall treasure that letter always. I'm not half good enough for you. You are so different from everybody else. I adore you.

"Your

"Michael."

The last was undated.

"Dearest,—Well—I'm off tomorrow. Feeling tremendously keen and excited and absolutely certain of success. The old Albatross is all tuned up. She won't let me down.

"Cheer up, sweetheart, and don't worry. There's a risk, of course, but all life's a risk really. By the way, somebody said I ought to make a will (tactful fellow—but he meant well), so I have—on a half sheet of notepaper—and sent it to old Whitfield. I'd no time to go round there. Somebody once told me that a man made a will of three words, 'All to Mother,' and it was legal all right. My will was rather like that—I remembered your name was really Magdala, which was clever of me! A couple of the fellows witnessed it.

"Don't take all this solemn talk about wills to heart, will you? (I didn't mean that pun. An accident.) I shall be as right as rain. I'll send you telegrams from India and Australia and so on. And keep up heart. It's going to be all right. See?

"Good night and God bless you,

"Michael."

Poirot folded the letters together again.

"You see, Hastings? I had to read them—to make sure. It is as I told you."

"Surely you could have found out some other way?"

"No, mon cher, that is just what I could not do. It had to be this way. We have now some very valuable evidence."

"In what way?"

"We now know that the fact of Michael's having made a will in favour of Mademoiselle Nick is actually recorded in writing. Anyone who had read those letters would know the fact. And with letters carelessly hidden like that, anyone could read them."

"Ellen?"

"Ellen, almost certainly, I should say. We will try a little experiment on her before passing out."

"There is no sign of the will."

"No, that is curious. But in all probability it is thrown on top of a bookcase, or inside a china jar. We must try to awaken Mademoiselle's memory on that point. At any rate, there is nothing more to be found here."

Ellen was dusting the hall as we descended.

Poirot wished her good morning very pleasantly as we passed. He turned back from the front door to say:

"You knew, I suppose, that Miss Buckley was engaged to the airman, Michael Seton?"

She stared.

“What? The one there’s all the fuss in the papers about?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I never. To think of that. Engaged to Miss Nick.”

“Complete and absolute surprise registered very convincingly,” I remarked, as we got outside.

“Yes. It really seemed genuine.”

“Perhaps it was,” I suggested.

“And that packet of letters reclining for months under the lingerie? No, mon ami.”

“All very well,” I thought to myself. “But we are not all Hercule Poirots. We do not all go nosing into what does not concern us.”

But I said nothing.

“This Ellen—she is an enigma,” said Poirot. “I do not like it. There is something here that I do not understand.”

Fourteen

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING WILL

We went straight back to the nursing home.

Nick looked rather surprised to see us.

“Yes, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, answering her look. “I am like the Jack in the Case. I pop up again. To begin with I will tell you that I have put the order in your affairs. Everything is now neatly arranged.”

“Well, I expect it was about time,” said Nick, unable to help smiling. “Are you very tidy, M. Poirot?”

“Ask my friend Hastings here.”

The girl turned an inquiring gaze on me.

I detailed some of Poirot’s minor peculiarities—toast that had to be made from a square loaf—eggs matching in size—his objection to golf as a game “shapeless and haphazard,” whose only redeeming feature was the tee boxes! I ended by telling her the famous case which Poirot had solved by his habit of straightenting ornaments on the mantelpiece.

Poirot sat by smiling.

“He makes the good tale of it, yes,” he said, when I had finished. “But on the whole it is true. Figure to yourself, Mademoiselle, that I never cease trying to persuade Hastings to part his hair in the middle instead of on the side. See what an air, lopsided and unsymmetrical, it gives him.”

“Then you must disapprove of me, M. Poirot,” said Nick. “I wear a side parting. And you must approve of Freddie who parts her hair in the middle.”

“He was certainly admiring her the other evening,” I put in maliciously. “Now I know the reason.”

“C’est assez,” said Poirot. “I am here on serious business. Mademoiselle, this will of yours, I find it not.”

“Oh!” She wrinkled her brows. “But does it matter so much? After all, I’m not dead. And wills aren’t really important till you are dead, are they?”

“That is correct. All the same, I interest myself in this will of yours. I have various little ideas concerning it. Think Mademoiselle. Try to remember where you placed it—where you saw it last?”

“I don’t suppose I put it anywhere particular,” said Nick. “I never do put things in places. I probably shoved it into a drawer.”

“You did not put it in the secret panel by any chance?”

“The secret what?”

“Your maid, Ellen, says that there is a secret panel in the drawing room or the library.”

“Nonsense,” said Nick. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Ellen said so?”

“Mais oui. It seems she was in service at End House as a young girl. The cook showed it to her.”

“It’s the first I’ve ever heard of it. I suppose Grandfather must have known about it, but, if so, he didn’t tell me. And I’m sure he would have told me. M. Poirot, are you sure Ellen isn’t making it all up?”

“No, Mademoiselle, I am not at all sure! Il me semble that there is something—odd about this Ellen of yours.”

“Oh! I wouldn’t call her odd. William’s a half-wit, and the child is a nasty little brute, but Ellen’s all right. The essence of respectability.”

“Did you give her leave to go out and see the fireworks last night, Mademoiselle?”

“Of course. They always do. They clear up afterwards.”

“Yet she did not go out.”

“Oh, yes, she did.”

“How do you know, Mademoiselle?”

“Well—well—I suppose I don’t know. I told her to go and she thanked me—and so, of course, I assumed that she did go.”

“On the contrary—she remained in the house.”

“But—how very odd!”

“You think it odd?”

“Yes, I do. I’m sure she’s never done such a thing before. Did she say why?”

“She did not tell me the real reason—of that I am sure.”

Nick looked at him questioningly.

“Is it—important?”

Poirot flung out his hands.

“That is just what I cannot say, Mademoiselle. C’est curieux. I leave it like that.”

“This panel business too,” said Nick, reflectively. “I can’t help thinking that’s frightfully queer—and unconvincing. Did she show you where it was?”

“She said she couldn’t remember.”

"I don't believe there is such a thing."

"It certainly looks like it."

"She must be going batty, poor thing."

"She certainly recounts the histories! She said also that End House was not a good house to live in."

Nick gave a little shiver.

"Perhaps she's right there," she said slowly. "Sometimes I've felt that way myself. There's a queer feeling in that house. . . ."

Her eyes grew large and dark. They had a fated look. Poirot hastened to recall her to other topics.

"We have wandered from our subject, Mademoiselle. The will. The last will and testament of Magdala Buckley."

"I put that," said Nick, with some pride. "I remember putting that, and I said pay all debts and testamentary expenses. I remembered that out of a book I'd read."

"You did not use a will form, then?"

"No, there wasn't time for that. I was just going off to the nursing home, and besides Mr. Croft said will forms were very dangerous. It was better to make a simple will and not try to be too legal."

"M. Croft? He was there?"

"Yes. It was he who asked me if I'd made one. I'd never have thought of it myself. He said if you died in—in—"

"Intestate," I said.

"Yes, that's it. He said if you died intestate, the Crown pinched a lot and that would be a pity."

"Very helpful, the excellent M. Croft!"

"Oh, he was," said Nick warmly. "He got Ellen in and her husband to witness it. Oh! of course! What an idiot I've been!"

We looked at her inquiringly.

"I've been a perfect idiot. Letting you hunt round End House. Charles has got it, of course! My cousin, Charles Vyse."

"Ah! so that is the explanation."

"Mr. Croft said a lawyer was the proper person to have charge of it."

"Très correct, c'est bon M. Croft."

"Men are useful sometimes," said Nick. "A lawyer or the Bank—that's what he said. And I said Charles would be best. So we stuck it in an envelope and sent it off to him straight away."

She lay back on her pillows with a sigh.

"I'm sorry I've been so frightfully stupid. But it is all right now. Charles has got it, and if you really want to see it, of course he'll show it to you."

"Not without an authorization from you," said Poirot, smiling.

"How silly."

"No, Mademoiselle. Merely prudent."

"Well, I think it's silly." She took a piece of paper from a little stack that lay beside her bed. "What shall I say? Let the dog see the rabbit?"

"Comment?"

I laughed at his startled face.

He dictated a form of words, and Nick wrote obediently.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, as he took it.

“I’m sorry to have given you such a lot of trouble. But I really had forgotten. You know how one forgets things almost at once?”

“With order and method in the mind one does not forget.”

“I’ll have to have a course of some kind,” said Nick. “You’re giving me quite an inferiority complex.”

“That is impossible. Au revoir, Mademoiselle.” He looked round the room. “Your flowers are lovely.”

“Aren’t they? The carnations are from Freddie and the roses from George and the lilies from Jim Lazarus. And look here—”

She pulled the wrapping from a large basket of hothouse grapes by her side.

Poirot’s face changed. He stepped forward sharply.

“You have not eaten any of them?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Do not do so. You must eat nothing, Mademoiselle, that comes in from outside. Nothing. You comprehend?”

“Oh!”

She stared at him, the colour ebbing slowly from her face.

“I see. You think—you think it isn’t over yet. You think they’re still trying?” she whispered.

He took her hand.

“Do not think of it. You are safe here. But remember—nothing that comes in from outside.”

I was conscious of that white frightened face on the pillow as we left the room.

Poirot looked at his watch.

“Bon. We have just time to catch M. Vyse at his office before he leaves it for lunch.”

On arrival we were shown into Charles Vyse’s office after the briefest of delays.

The young lawyer rose to greet us. He was as formal and unemotional as ever.

“Good morning, M. Poirot. What can I do for you?”

Without more ado Poirot presented the letter Nick had written. He took it and read it, then gazed over the top of it in a perplexed manner.

“I beg your pardon. I really am at a loss to understand?”

“Has not Mademoiselle Buckley made her meaning clear?”

“In this letter,” he tapped it with his fingernail, “she asks me to hand over to you a will made by her and entrusted to my keeping in February last.”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“But, my dear sir, no will has been entrusted to my keeping!”

“Comment?”

“As far as I know my cousin never made a will. I certainly never made one for her.”

“She wrote this herself, I understand, on a sheet of notepaper and posted it to you.”

The lawyer shook his head.

“In that case all I can say is that I never received it.”

“Really, M. Vyse—”

“I never received anything of the kind, M. Poirot.”

There was a pause, then Poirot rose to his feet.

“In that case, M. Vyse, there is nothing more to be said. There must be some mistake.”

“Certainly there must be some mistake.”

He rose also.

“Good day, M. Vyse.”

“Good day, M. Poirot.”

“And that is that,” I remarked, when we were out in the street once more.

“Précisément.”

“Is he lying, do you think?”

“Impossible to tell. He has the good poker face, M. Vyse, besides looking as though he had swallowed one. One thing is clear, he will not budge from the position he has taken up. He never received the will. That is his point.”

“Surely Nick will have a written acknowledgment of its receipt.”

“Cette petite, she would never bother her head about a thing like that. She despatched it. It was off her mind. Voilà. Besides, on that very day, she went into a nursing home to have her appendix out. She had her emotions, in all probability.”

“Well, what do we do now?”

“Parbleu, we go and see M. Croft. Let us see what he can remember about this business. It seems to have been very much his doing.”

“He didn’t profit by it in any way,” I said, thoughtfully.

“No. No, I cannot see anything in it from his point of view. He is probably merely the busybody—the man who likes to arrange his neighbour’s affairs.”

Such an attitude was indeed typical of Mr. Croft, I felt. He was the kindly knowall who causes so much exasperation in this world of ours.

We found him busy in his shirt sleeves over a steaming pot in the kitchen. A most savoury smell pervaded the little lodge.

He relinquished his cookery with enthusiasm, being clearly eager to talk about the murder.

“Half a jiffy,” he said. “Walk upstairs. Mother will want to be in on this. She’d never forgive us for talking down here. Cooee—Milly. Two friends coming up.”

Mrs. Croft greeted us warmly and was eager for news of Nick. I liked her much better than her husband.

“That poor dear girl,” she said. “In a nursing home, you say? Had a complete breakdown, I shouldn’t wonder. A dreadful business, M. Poirot—perfectly dreadful. An innocent girl like that shot dead. It doesn’t bear thinking about—it doesn’t indeed. And no lawless wild part of the world either. Right here in the heart of the old country. Kept me awake all night, it did.”

“It’s made me nervous about going out and leaving you, old lady,” said her husband, who had put on his coat and joined us. “I don’t like to think of your having been left all alone here yesterday evening. It gives me the shivers.”

"You're not going to leave me again, I can tell you," said Mrs. Croft. "Not after dark, anyway. And I'm thinking I'd like to leave this part of the world as soon as possible. I shall never feel the same about it. I shouldn't think poor Nicky Buckley could ever bear to sleep in that house again."

It was a little difficult to reach the object of our visit. Both Mr. and Mrs. Croft talked so much and were so anxious to know all about everything. Were the poor dead girl's relations coming down? When was the funeral? Was there to be an inquest? What did the police think? Had they any clue yet? Was it true that a man had been arrested in Plymouth?

Then, having answered all these questions, they were insistent on offering us lunch. Only Poirot's mendacious statement that we were obliged to hurry back to lunch with the Chief Constable saved us.

At last a momentary pause occurred and Poirot got in the question he had been waiting to ask.

"Why, of course," said Mr. Croft. He pulled the blind cord up and down twice, frowning at it abstractedly. "I remember all about it. Must have been when we first came here. I remember. Appendicitis—that's what the doctor said—"

"And probably not appendicitis at all," interrupted Mrs. Croft. "These doctors—they always like cutting you up if they can. It wasn't the kind you have to operate on anyhow. She'd had indigestion and one thing and another, and they'd Xrayed her and they said out it had better come. And there she was, poor little soul, just going off to one of those nasty Homes."

"I just asked her," said Mr. Croft, "if she'd made a will. More as a joke than anything else."

"Yes?"

"And she wrote it out then and there. Talked about getting a will form at the post office—but I advised her not to. Lot of trouble they cause sometimes, so a man told me. Anyway, her cousin is a lawyer. He could draw her out a proper one afterwards if everything was all right—as, of course, I knew it would be. This was just a precautionary matter."

"Who witnessed it?"

"Oh! Ellen, the maid, and her husband."

"And afterwards? What was done with it?"

"Oh! we posted it to Vyse. The lawyer, you know."

"You know that it was posted?"

"My dear M. Poirot, I posted it myself. Right in this box here by the gate."

"So if M. Vyse says he never got it—"

Croft stared.

"Do you mean that it got lost in the post? Oh! but surely that's impossible."

"Anyway, you are certain that you posted it."

"Certain sure," said Mr. Croft, heartily. "I'll take my oath on that any day."

"Ah! well," said Poirot. "Fortunately it does not matter. Mademoiselle is not likely to die just yet awhile."

"Et voilà!" said Poirot, when we were out of earshot and walking down to the hotel. "Who is lying? M. Croft? Or M. Charles Vyse? I must confess I see no reason why M. Croft should be lying. To suppress the will would be of no advantage to him—especially when he had been instrumental in getting it made. No, his statement seems clear enough and tallies exactly with what was told us by Mademoiselle Nick. But all the same—"

"Yes?"

"All the same, I am glad that M. Croft was doing the cooking when we arrived. He left an excellent impression of a greasy thumb and first finger on a corner of the newspaper that covered the kitchen table. I managed to tear it off unseen by him. We will send it to our good friend Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. There is just a chance that he might know something about it.”

“Yes?”

“You know, Hastings, I cannot help feeling that our genial M. Croft is a little too good to be genuine.”

“And now,” he added. “Le déjeuner. I faint with hunger.”

Fifteen

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF FREDERICA

Poirot's inventions about the Chief Constable were proved not to have been so mendacious after all. Colonel Weston called upon us soon after lunch.

He was a tall man of military carriage with considerable good-looks. He had a suitable reverence for Poirot's achievements, with which he seemed to be well acquainted.

"Marvellous piece of luck for us having you down here, M. Poirot," he said again and again.

His one fear was that he should be compelled to call in the assistance of Scotland Yard. He was anxious to solve the mystery and catch the criminal without their aid. Hence his delight at Poirot's presence in the neighbourhood.

Poirot, so far as I could judge, took him completely into his confidence.

"Deuced odd business," said the Colonel. "Never heard of anything like it. Well, the girl ought to be safe enough in a nursing home. Still, you can't keep her there for ever!"

"That, M. le Colonel, is just the difficulty. There is only one way of dealing with it."

"And that is?"

"We must lay our hands on the person responsible."

"If what you suspect is true, that isn't going to be so easy."

"Ah! je le sais bien."

"Evidence! Getting evidence is going to be the devil."

He frowned abstractedly.

"Always difficult, these cases, where there's no routine work. If we could get hold of the pistol—"

"In all probability it is at the bottom of the sea. That is, if the murderer had any sense."

"Ah!" said Colonel Weston. "But often they haven't. You'd be surprised at the fool things people do. I'm not talking of murders—we don't have many murders down in these parts, I'm glad to say—but in ordinary police court cases. The sheer damn foolishness of these people would surprise you."

"They are of a different mentality, though,"

"Yes—perhaps. If Vyse is the chap, well, we'll have our work cut out. He's a cautious man and a sound lawyer. He'll not give himself away. The woman—well, there would be more hope there. Ten to one she'll try again. Women have no patience."

He rose.

"Inquest tomorrow morning. Coroner will work in with us and give away as little as possible. We want to keep things dark at present."

He was turning towards the door when he suddenly came back.

"Upon my soul, I'd forgotten the very thing that will interest you most, and that I want your opinion about."

Sitting down again, he drew from his pocket a torn scrap of paper with writing on it and handed it to Poirot.

"My police found this when they were searching the grounds. Nor far from where you were all watching the fireworks. It's the only suggestive thing they did find.”

Poirot smoothed it out. The writing was large and straggling.

“. . . must have money at once. If not you . . . what will happen. I’m warning you.”

Poirot frowned. He read and reread it.

“This is interesting,” he said. “I may keep it?”

“Certainly. There are no fingerprints on it. I’ll be glad if you can make anything of it.”

Colonel Weston got to his feet again.

“I really must be off. Inquest tomorrow, as I said. By the way, you are not being called as witness—only Captain Hastings. Don’t want the newspaper people to get wise to your being on the job.”

“I comprehend. What of the relations of the poor young lady?”

“The father and mother are coming from Yorkshire today. They’ll arrive about half past five. Poor souls. I’m heartily sorry for them. They are taking the body back with them the following day.”

He shook his head.

“Unpleasant business. I’m not enjoying this, M. Poirot.”

“Who could, M. le Colonel? It is, as you say, an unpleasant business.”

When he had gone, Poirot examined the scrap of paper once more.

“An important clue?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How can one tell? There is a hint of blackmail about it! Someone of our party that night was being pressed for money in a very unpleasant way. Of course, it is possible that it was one of the strangers."

He looked at the writing through a little magnifying glass.

"Does this writing look at all familiar to you, Hastings?"

"It reminds me a little of something—Ah! I have it—that note of Mrs. Rice's."

"Yes," said Poirot, slowly. "There are resemblances. Decidedly there are resemblances. It is curious. Yet I do not think that this is the writing of Madame Rice. Come in," he said, as a knock came at the door.

It was Commander Challenger.

"Just looked in," he explained. "Wanted to know if you were any further forward."

"Parbleu," said Poirot. "At this moment I am feeling that I am considerably further back. I seem to progress en reculant."

"That's bad. But I don't really believe it, M. Poirot. I've been hearing all about you and what a wonderful chap you are. Never had a failure, they say."

"That is not true," said Poirot. "I had a bad failure in Belgium in 1893. You recollect, Hastings? I recounted it to you. The affair of the box of chocolates."

"I remember," I said.

And I smiled, for at the time that Poirot told me that tale, he had instructed me to say "chocolate box" to him if ever I should fancy he was growing conceited! He was then bitterly offended when I used the magical words only a minute and a quarter later.

"Oh, well," said Challenger, "that is such a long time ago it hardly counts. You are going to get to the bottom of this, aren't you?"

"That I swear. On the word of Hercule Poirot. I am the dog who stays on the scent and does not leave it."

"Good. Got any ideas?"

"I have suspicions of two people."

"I suppose I mustn't ask you who they are?"

"I should not tell you! You see, I might possibly be in error."

"My alibi is satisfactory, I trust," said Challenger, with a faint twinkle.

Poirot smiled indulgently at the bronzed face in front of him. "You left Devonport at a few minutes past 8:30. You arrived here at five minutes past ten—twenty minutes after the crime had been committed. But the distance from Devonport is only just over thirty miles, and you have often done it in an hour since the road is good. So, you see, your alibi is not good at all!"

"Well, I'm—"

"You comprehend, I inquire into everything. Your alibi, as I say, is not good. But there are other things beside alibis. You would like, I think, to marry Mademoiselle Nick?"

The sailor's face flushed.

"I've always wanted to marry her," he said huskily.

"Precisely. Eh bien—Mademoiselle Nick was engaged to another man. A reason, perhaps, for killing the other man. But that is unnecessary—he dies the death of a hero."

"So it is true—that Nick was engaged to Michael Seton? There's a rumour to that effect all over the town this morning."

"Yes—it is interesting how soon news spreads. You never suspected it before?"

"I knew Nick was engaged to someone—she told me so two days ago. But she didn't give me a clue as to whom it was."

"It was Michael Seton. Entre nous, he has left her, I fancy, a very pretty fortune. Ah! assuredly, it is not a moment for killing Mademoiselle Nick—from your point of view. She weeps for her lover now, but the heart consoles itself. She is young. And I think, Monsieur, that she is very fond of you. . . ."

Challenger was silent for a moment or two.

"If it should be . . ." he murmured.

There was a tap on the door.

It was Frederica Rice.

"I've been looking for you," she said to Challenger. "They told me you were here. I wanted to know if you'd got my wristwatch back yet."

"Oh, yes, I called for it this morning."

He took it from his pocket and handed it to her. It was a watch of rather an unusual shape—round, like a globe, set on a strap of plain black moiré. I remembered that I had seen one much the same shape on Nick Buckley's wrist.

"I hope it will keep better time now."

"It's rather a bore. Something is always going wrong with it."

"It is for beauty, Madame, and not for utility," said Poirot.

"Can't one have both?" She looked from one to the other of us. "Am I interrupting a conference?"

“No, indeed, Madame. We were talking gossip—not the crime. We were saying how quickly news spreads—how that everyone now knows that Mademoiselle Nick was engaged to that brave airman who perished.”

“So Nick was engaged to Michael Seton!” exclaimed Frederica.

“It surprises you, Madame?”

“It does a little. I don’t know why. Certainly I did think he was very taken with her last autumn. They went about a lot together. And then, after Christmas, they both seemed to cool off. As far as I know, they hardly met.”

“The secret, they kept it very well.”

“That was because of old Sir Matthew, I suppose. He was really a little off his head, I think.”

“You had no suspicion, Madame? And yet Mademoiselle was such an intimate friend.”

“Nick’s a close little devil when she likes,” murmured Frederica. “But I understand now why she’s been so nervy lately. Oh! and I ought to have guessed from something she said only the other day.”

“Your little friend is very attractive, Madame.”

“Old Jim Lazarus used to think so at one time,” said Challenger, with his loud, rather tactless laugh.

“Oh! Jim—” She shrugged her shoulders, but I thought she was annoyed.

She turned to Poirot.

“Tell me, M. Poirot, did you—”

She stopped. Her tall figure swayed and her face turned whiter still. Her eyes were fixed on the centre of the table.

“You are not well, Madame.”

I pushed forward a chair, helped her to sink into it. She shook her head, murmured, “I’m all right,” and leaned forward, her face between her hands. We watched her awkwardly.

She sat up in a minute.

“How absurd! George, darling, don’t look so worried. Let’s talk about murders. Something exciting. I want to know if M. Poirot is on the track.”

“It is early to say, Madame,” said Poirot, noncommittally.

“But you have ideas—yes?”

“Perhaps. But I need a great deal more evidence.”

“Oh!” She sounded uncertain.

Suddenly she rose.

“I’ve got a head. I think I’ll go and lie down. Perhaps tomorrow they’ll let me see Nick.”

She left the room abruptly. Challenger frowned.

“You never know what that woman’s up to. Nick may have been fond of her, but I don’t believe she was fond of Nick. But there, you can’t tell with women. It’s darling—darling—darling—all the time—and ‘damn you’ would probably express it much better. Are you going out, M. Poirot?” For Poirot had risen and was carefully brushing a speck off his hat.

“Yes, I am going into the town.”

“I’ve got nothing to do. May I come with you.”

“Assuredly. It will be a pleasure.”

We left the room. Poirot, with an apology, went back.

“My stick,” he explained, as he rejoined us.

Challenger winced slightly. And indeed the stick, with its embossed gold band, was somewhat ornate.

Poirot’s first visit was to a florist.

“I must send some flowers to Mademoiselle Nick,” he explained.

He proved difficult to suit.

In the end he chose an ornate gold basket to be filled with orange carnations. The whole to be tied up with a large blue bow.

The shopwoman gave him a card and he wrote on it with a flourish: “With the Compliments of Hercule Poirot.”

“I sent her some flowers this morning,” said Challenger. “I might send her some fruit.”

“Inutile!” said Poirot.

“What?”

“I said it was useless. The eatable—it is not permitted.”

“Who says so?”

“I say so. I have made the rule. It has already been impressed on Mademoiselle Nick. She understands.”

“Good Lord!” said Challenger.

He looked thoroughly startled. He stared at Poirot curiously.

“So that’s it, is it?” he said. “You’re still—afraid.”

Sixteen

INTERVIEW WITH MR. WHITFIELD

The inquest was a dry proceeding—mere bare bones. There was evidence of identification, then I gave evidence of the finding of the body. Medical evidence followed.

The inquest was adjourned for a week.

The St. Loo murder had jumped into prominence in the daily press. It had, in fact, succeeded “Seton Still Missing. Unknown Fate of Missing Airman.”

Now that Seton was dead and due tribute had been paid to his memory, a new sensation was due. The St. Loo Mystery was a godsend to papers at their wits’ end for news in the month of August.

After the inquest, having successfully dodged reporters, I met Poirot, and we had an interview with the Rev. Giles Buckley and his wife.

Maggie’s father and mother were a charming pair, completely unworldly and unsophisticated.

Mrs. Buckley was a woman of character, tall and fair and showing very plainly her northern ancestry. Her husband was a small man, grey-haired, with a diffident appealing manner.

Poor souls, they were completely dazed by the misfortune that had overtaken them and robbed them of a well-beloved daughter. “Our Maggie,” as they called her.

“I can scarcely realize it even now,” said Mr. Buckley. “Such a dear child, M. Poirot. So quiet and unselfish—always thinking of others. Who could wish to harm her?”

“I could hardly understand the telegram,” said Mrs. Buckley. “Why it was only the morning before that we had seen her off.”

“In the midst of life we are in death,” murmured her husband.

“Colonel Weston has been very kind,” said Mrs. Buckley. “He assures us that everything is being done to find the man who did this thing. He must be a madman. No other explanation is possible.”

“Madame, I cannot tell you how I sympathize with you in your loss—and how I admire your bravery!”

“Breaking down would not bring Maggie back to us,” said Mrs. Buckley, sadly.

“My wife is wonderful,” said the clergyman. “Her faith and courage are greater than mine. It is all so—so bewildering, M. Poirot.”

“I know—I know, Monsieur.”

“You are a great detective, M. Poirot?” said Mrs. Buckley.

“It has been said, Madame.”

“Oh! I know. Even in our remote country village we have heard of you. You are going to find out the truth, M. Poirot?”

“I shall not rest until I do, Madame.”

“It will be revealed to you, M. Poirot,” quavered the clergyman. “Evil cannot go unpunished.”

“Evil never goes unpunished, Monsieur. But the punishment is sometimes secret.”

“What do you mean by that, M. Poirot?”

Poirot only shook his head.

“Poor little Nick,” said Mrs. Buckley. “I am really sorriest of all for her. I had a most pathetic letter. She says she feels she asked Maggie down here to her death.”

“That is morbid,” said Mr. Buckley.

“Yes, but I know how she feels. I wish they would let me see her. It seems so extraordinary not to let her own family visit her.”

“Doctors and nurses are very strict,” said Poirot, evasively. “They make the rules—so—and nothing will change them. And doubtless they fear for her the emotion—the natural emotion—she would experience on seeing you.”

“Perhaps,” said Mrs. Buckley, doubtfully. “But I don’t hold with nursing homes. Nick would do much better if they let her come back with me—right away from this place.”

“It is possible—but I fear they will not agree. It is long since you have seen Mademoiselle Buckley?”

“I haven’t seen her since last autumn. She was at Scarborough. Maggie went over and spent the day with her and then she came back and spent a night with us. She’s a pretty creature—though I can’t say I like her friends. And the life she leads—well, it’s hardly her fault, poor child. She’s had no upbringing of any kind.”

“It is a strange house—End House,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“I don’t like it,” said Mrs. Buckley. “I never have. There’s something all wrong about that house. I disliked old Sir Nicholas intensely. He made me shiver.”

“Not a good man, I’m afraid,” said her husband. “But he had a curious charm.”

“I never felt it,” said Mrs. Buckley. “There’s an evil feeling about that house. I wish we’d never let our Maggie go there.”

“Ah! wishing,” said Mr. Buckley, and shook his head.

“Well,” said Poirot. “I must not intrude upon you any longer. I only wished to proffer to you my deep sympathy.”

“You have been very kind, M. Poirot. And we are indeed grateful for all you are doing.”

“You return to Yorkshire—when?”

“Tomorrow. A sad journey. Goodbye, M. Poirot, and thank you again.”

“Very simple delightful people,” I said, after we had left.

Poirot nodded.

“It makes the heart ache, does it not, mon ami? A tragedy so useless—so purposeless. Cette jeune fille—Ah! but I reproach myself bitterly. I, Hercule Poirot, was on the spot and I did not prevent the crime!”

“Nobody could have prevented it.”

“You speak without reflection, Hastings. No ordinary person could have prevented it—but of what good is it to be Hercule Poirot with grey cells of a finer quality than other people’s, if you do not manage to do what ordinary people cannot?”

“Well, of course,” I said. “If you are going to put it like that—”

“Yes, indeed. I am abased, downhearted—completely abased.”

I reflected that Poirot’s abasement was strangely like other people’s conceit, but I prudently forebore from making any remark.

“And now,” he said, “en avant. To London.”

“London?”

“Mais oui. We shall catch the two o’clock train very comfortably. All is peaceful here. Mademoiselle is safe in the nursing home. No one can harm her. The watchdogs, therefore, can take leave of absence. There are one or two little pieces of information that I require.”

Our first proceeding on arriving in London was to call upon the late Captain Seton’s solicitors, Messrs Whitfield, Pargiter & Whitfield.

Poirot had arranged for an appointment beforehand, and although it was past six o’clock, we were soon closeted with Mr. Whitfield, the head of the firm.

He was a very urbane and impressive person. He had in front of him a letter from the Chief Constable and another from some high official at Scotland Yard.

“This is all very irregular and unusual, M.—ah—Poirot,” he said, as he polished his eyeglasses.

“Quite so, M. Whitfield. But then murder is also irregular—and, I am glad to say, sufficiently unusual.”

“True. True. But rather far-fetched—to make a connection between this murder and my late client’s bequest—eh?”

“I think not.”

“Ah! you think not. Well—under the circumstances—and I must admit that Sir Henry puts it very strongly in his letter—I shall be—er—happy to do anything that is in my power.”

“You acted as legal adviser to the late Captain Seton?”

“To all the Seton family, my dear sir. We have done so—our firm have done so, I mean—for the last hundred years.”

“Parfaitement. The late Sir Matthew Seton made a will?”

“We made it for him.”

“And he left his fortune—how?”

"There were several bequests—one to the Natural History Museum—but the bulk of his large—his, I may say, very large fortune—he left to Captain Michael Seton absolutely. He had no other near relations."

"A very large fortune, you say?"

"The late Sir Matthew was the second richest man in England," replied Mr. Whitfield, composedly.

"He had somewhat peculiar views, had he not?" Mr. Whitfield looked at him severely.

"A millionaire, M. Poirot, is allowed to be eccentric. It is almost expected of him."

Poirot received his correction meekly and asked another question.

"His death was unexpected, I understand?"

"Most unexpected. Sir Matthew enjoyed remarkably good health. He had an internal growth, however, which no one had suspected. It reached a vital tissue and an immediate operation was necessary. The operation was, as always on these occasions, completely successful. But Sir Matthew died."

"And his fortune passed to Captain Seton."

"That is so."

"Captain Seton had, I understand, made a will before leaving England?"

"If you can call it a will—yes," said Mr. Whitfield, with strong distaste.

"It is legal?"

"It is perfectly legal. The intention of the testator is plain and it is properly witnessed. Oh, yes, it is legal."

"But you do not approve of it?"

"My dear sir, what are we for?"

I had often wondered. Having once had occasion to make a perfectly simple will myself. I had been appalled at the length and verbiage that resulted from my solicitor's office.

"The truth of the matter was," continued Mr. Whitfield, "that at the time Captain Seton had little or nothing to leave. He was dependent on the allowance he received from his uncle. He felt, I suppose, that anything would do."

And had thought correctly, I whispered to myself.

"And the terms of this will?" asked Poirot.

"He leaves everything of which he dies possessed to his affianced wife, Miss Magdala Buckley absolutely. He names me as his executor.

"Then Miss Buckley inherits?"

"Certainly Miss Buckley inherits."

"And if Miss Buckley had happened to die last Monday?"

"Captain Seton having predeceased her, the money would go to whomever she had named in her will as residuary legatee—or failing a will to her next of kin."

"I may say," added Mr. Whitfield, with an air of enjoyment, "that death duties would have been enormous. Enormous! Three deaths, remember, in rapid succession." He shook his head. "Enormous!"

"But there would have been something left?" murmured Poirot, meekly.

"My dear sir, as I told you, Sir Matthew was the second richest man in England."

Poirot rose.

“Thank you, Mr. Whitfield, very much for the information that you have given me.”

“Not at all. Not at all. I may say that I shall be in communication with Miss Buckley—indeed, I believe the letter has already gone. I shall be happy to be of any service I can to her.”

“She is a young lady,” said Poirot, “who could do with some sound legal advice.”

“There will be fortune hunters, I am afraid,” said Mr. Whitfield, shaking his head.

“It seems indicated,” agreed Poirot. “Good day, Monsieur.”

“Goodbye, M. Poirot. Glad to have been of service to you. Your name is—ah!—familiar to me.”

He said this kindly—with an air of one making a valuable admission.

“It is all exactly as you thought, Poirot,” I said, when we were outside.

“Mon ami, it was bound to be. It could not be any other way. We will go now to the Cheshire Cheese where Japp meets us for an early dinner.”

We found Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard awaiting us at the chosen rendezvous. He greeted Poirot with every sign of warmth.

“Years since I’ve seen you, Moosior Poirot. Thought you were growing vegetable marrows in the country.”

“I tried, Japp, I tried. But even when you grow vegetable marrows you cannot get away from murder.”

He sighed. I knew of what he was thinking—that strange affair at Fernley Park. How I regretted that I had been far away at that time.

“And Captain Hastings too,” said Japp. “How are you, sir?”

"Very fit, thanks," I said.

"And now there are more murders?" continued Japp, facetiously.

"As you say—more murders."

"Well, you mustn't be depressed, old cock," said Japp. "Even if you can't see your way clear—well—you can't go about at your time of life and expect to have the success you used to do. We all of us get stale as the years go by. Got to give the young 'uns a chance, you know."

"And yet the old dog is the one who knows the tricks," murmured Poirot. "He is cunning. He does not leave the scent."

"Oh! well—we're talking about human beings, not dogs."

"Is there so much difference?"

"Well, it depends how you look at things. But you're a caution, isn't he, Captain Hastings? Always was. Looks much the same—hair a bit thinner on top but the face fungus fuller than ever."

"Eh?" said Poirot. "What is that?"

"He's congratulating you on your moustaches," I said, soothingly.

"They are luxuriant, yes," said Poirot, complacently caressing them.

Japp went off into a roar of laughter.

"Well," he said, after a minute or two, "I've done your bit of business. Those fingerprints you sent me—"

"Yes?" said Poirot, eagerly.

"Nothing doing. Whoever the gentleman may be—he hasn't passed through our hands. On the other hand, I wired to Melbourne and nobody of that description or name is known there."

“Ah!”

“So there may be something fishy after all. But he’s not one of the lads.”

“As to the other business,” went on Japp.

“Yes?”

“Lazarus and Son have a good reputation. Quite straight and honourable in their dealings. Sharp, of course—but that’s another matter. You’ve got to be sharp in business. But they’re all right. They’re in a bad way, though—financially, I mean.”

“Oh!—is that so?”

“Yes—the slump in pictures has hit them badly. And antique furniture too. All this modern continental stuff coming into fashion. They built new premises last year and—well—as I say, they’re not far from Queer Street.”

“I am much obliged to you.”

“Not at all. That sort of thing isn’t my line, as you know. But I made a point of finding out as you wanted to know. We can always get information.”

“My good Japp, what should I do without you?”

“Oh! that’s all right. Always glad to oblige an old friend. I let you in on some pretty good cases in the old days, didn’t I?”

This, I realized, was Japp’s way of acknowledging indebtedness to Poirot, who had solved many a case which had baffled the inspector.

“They were the good days—yes.”

“I wouldn’t mind having a chat with you now and again even in these days. Your methods may be old-fashioned but you’ve got your head screwed on the right way, M. Poirot.”

“What about my other question. The Dr. MacAllister?”

"Oh, him! He's a woman's doctor. I don't mean a gynaecologist. I mean one of these nerve doctors—tell you to sleep in purple walls and orange ceiling—talk to you about your libido, whatever that is—tell you to let it rip. He's a bit of a quack, if you ask me—but he gets the women all right. They flock to him. Goes abroad a good deal—does some kind of medical work in Paris, I believe."

"Why Dr. MacAllister?" I asked, bewildered. I had never heard of the name. "Where does he come in?"

"Dr. MacAllister is the uncle of Commander Challenger," explained Poirot. "You remember he referred to an uncle who was a doctor?"

"How thorough you are," I said. "Did you think he had operated on Sir Matthew?"

"He's not a surgeon," said Japp.

"Mon ami," said Poirot, "I like to inquire into everything. Hercule Poirot is a good dog. The good dog follows the scent, and if, regrettably, there is no scent to follow, he noses around—seeking always something that is not very nice. So also, does Hercule Poirot. And often—Oh! so often—does he find it!"

"It's not a nice profession, ours," said Japp. "Stilton, did you say? I don't mind if I do. No, it's not a nice profession. And yours is worse than mine—not official, you see, and therefore a lot more worming yourself into places in underhand ways."

"I do not disguise myself, Japp. Never have I disguised myself."

"You couldn't," said Japp. "You're unique. Once seen, never forgotten."

Poirot looked at him rather doubtfully.

"Only my fun," said Japp. "Don't mind me. Glass of port? Well, if you say so."

The evening became thoroughly harmonious. We were soon in the middle of reminiscences. This case, that case, and the other. I must say that I, too, enjoyed talking over the past. Those had been good days. How old and experienced I felt now!

Poor old Poirot. He was perplexed by this case—I could see that. His powers were not what they were. I had the feeling that he was going to fail—that the murderer of Maggie Buckley would never be brought to book.

“Courage, my friend,” said Poirot, slapping me on the shoulder. “All is not lost. Do not pull the long face, I beg of you.”

“That’s all right. I’m all right.”

“And so am I. And so is Japp.”

“We’re all all right,” declared Japp, hilariously.

And on this pleasant note we parted.

The following morning we journeyed back to St. Loo. On arrival at the hotel Poirot rang up the nursing home and asked to speak to Nick.

Suddenly I saw his face change—he almost dropped the instrument.

“Comment? What is that? Say it again, I beg.”

He waited for a minute or two listening. Then he said:

“Yes, yes, I will come at once.”

He turned a pale face to me.

“Why did I go away, Hastings? Mon Dieu! Why did I go away?”

“What has happened?”

“Mademoiselle Nick is dangerously ill. Cocaine poisoning. They have got at her after all. Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Why did I go away?”

Seventeen

A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

All the way to the nursing home Poirot murmured and muttered to himself. He was full of self-reproach.

“I should have known,” he groaned. “I should have known! And yet, what could I do? I took every precaution. It is impossible—impossible. No one could get to her! Who has disobeyed my orders?”

At the nursing home we were shown into a little room downstairs, and after a few minutes Dr. Graham came to us. He looked exhausted and white.

“She’ll do,” he said. “It’s going to be all right. The trouble was knowing how much she’d taken of the damned stuff.”

“What was it?”

“Cocaine.”

“She will live?”

“Yes, yes, she’ll live.”

“But how did it happen? How did they get at her? Who has been allowed in?” Poirot fairly danced with impotent excitement.

“Nobody has been allowed in.”

“Impossible.”

“It’s true.”

“But then—”

“It was a box of chocolates.”

“Ah! sacré. And I told her to eat nothing—nothing—that came from outside.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s hard work keeping a girl from a box of chocolates. She only ate one, thank goodness.”

“Was the cocaine in all the chocolates?”

“No. The girl ate one. There were two others in the top layer. The rest were all right.”

“How was it done?”

“Quite clumsily. Chocolate cut in half—the cocaine mixed with the filling and the chocolate stuck together again. Amateurishly. What you might call a homemade job.”

Poirot groaned.

“Ah! if I knew—if I knew. Can I see Mademoiselle?”

“If you come back in an hour I think you can see her,” said the doctor. “Pull yourself together, man. She isn’t going to die.”

For another hour we walked the streets of St. Loo. I did my best to distract Poirot’s mind—pointing out to him that all was well, that, after all, no mischief had been done.

But he only shook his head, and repeated at intervals:

“I am afraid, Hastings, I am afraid. . . .”

And the strange way he said it made me, too, feel afraid.

Once he caught me by the arm.

“Listen, my friend. I am all wrong. I have been all wrong from the beginning.”

“You mean it isn’t the money—”

“No, no, I am right about that. Oh, yes. But those two—it is too simple—too easy, that. There is another twist still. Yes, there is something!”

And then in an outburst of indignation:

“Ah! cette petite! Did I not forbid her? Did I not say, ‘Do not touch anything from outside?’ And she disobeys me—me, Hercule Poirot. Are not four escapes from death enough for her? Must she take a fifth chance? Ah, c’est Inoui!”

At last we made our way back. After a brief wait we were conducted upstairs.

Nick was sitting up in bed. The pupils of her eyes were widely dilated. She looked feverish and her hands kept twitching violently.

“At it again,” she murmured.

Poirot experienced real emotion at the sight of her. He cleared his throat and took her hand in his.

“Ah! Mademoiselle—Mademoiselle.”

“I shouldn’t care,” she said, defiantly, “if they had got me this time. I’m sick of it all—sick of it!”

“Pauvre petite!”

“Something in me doesn’t like to give them best!”

“That is the spirit—le sport—you must be the good sport, Mademoiselle.”

“Your old nursing home hasn’t been so safe after all,” said Nick.

"If you had obeyed orders, Mademoiselle—"

She looked faintly astonished.

"But I have."

"Did I not impress upon you that you were to eat nothing that came from outside?"

"No more I did."

"But these chocolates—"

"Well, they were all right. You sent them."

"What is that you say, Mademoiselle?"

"You sent them!"

"Me? Never. Never anything of the kind."

"But you did. Your card was in the box."

"What?"

Nick made a spasmodic gesture towards the table by the bed. The nurse came forward.

"You want the card that was in the box?"

"Yes, please, nurse."

There was a moment's pause. The nurse returned to the room with it in her hand.

"Here it is."

I gasped. So did Poirot. For on the card, in flourishing handwriting, were written the same words that I had seen Poirot inscribe on the card that accompanied the basket of flowers.

“With the Compliments of Hercule Poirot.”

“Sacré tonnerre!”

“You see,” said Nick, accusingly.

“I did not write this!” cried Poirot.

“What?”

“And yet,” murmured Poirot, “and yet it is my handwriting.”

“I know. It’s exactly the same as the card that came with the orange carnations. I never doubted that the chocolates came from you.”

Poirot shook his head.

“How should you doubt? Oh! the devil! The clever, cruel devil! To think of that! Ah! but he has genius, this man, genius! ‘With the Compliments of Hercule Poirot.’ So simple. Yes, but one had to think of it. And I—I did not think. I omitted to foresee this move.”

Nick moved restlessly.

“Do not agitate yourself, Mademoiselle. You are blameless—blameless. It is I that am to blame, miserable imbecile that I am! I should have foreseen this move. Yes, I should have foreseen it.”

His chin dropped on his breast. He looked the picture of misery.

“I really think—” said the nurse.

She had been hovering nearby, a disapproving expression on her face.

“Eh? Yes, yes, I will go. Courage, Mademoiselle. This is the last mistake I will make. I am ashamed, desolated—I have been tricked, outwitted—as though I were a little schoolboy. But it shall not happen again. No. I promise you. Come, Hastings."

Poirot's first proceeding was to interview the matron. She was, naturally, terribly upset over the whole business.

"It seems incredible to me, M. Poirot, absolutely incredible. That a thing like that should happen in my nursing home."

Poirot was sympathetic and tactful. Having soothed her sufficiently, he began to inquire into the circumstance of the arrival of the fatal packet. Here, the matron declared, he would do best to interview the orderly who had been on duty at the time of its arrival.

The man in question, whose name was Hood, was a stupid but honest-looking young fellow of about twenty-two. He looked nervous and frightened. Poirot put him at his ease, however.

"No blame can be attached to you," he said kindly. "But I want you to tell me exactly when and how this parcel arrived."

The orderly looked puzzled.

"It's difficult to say, sir," he said, slowly. "Lots of people come and inquire and leave things for the different patients."

"The nurse says this came last night," I said. "About six o'clock."

The lad's face brightened.

"I do remember, now, sir. A gentleman brought it."

"A thin-faced gentleman—fair-haired?"

"He was fair-haired—but I don't know about thin-faced."

"Would Charles Vyse bring it himself?" I murmured to Poirot.

I had forgotten that the lad would know a local name.

"It wasn't Mr. Vyse," he said. "I know him. It was a bigger gentleman—handsome-looking—came in a big car."

"Lazarus," I exclaimed.

Poirot shot me a warning glance and I regretted my precipitance.

"He came in a large car and he left this parcel. It was addressed to Miss Buckley?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did you do with it?"

"I didn't touch it, sir. Nurse took it up."

"Quite so, but you touched it when you took it from the gentleman, n'est-ce pas?"

"Oh! that, yes, of course, sir. I took it from him and put it on the table."

"Which table? Show me, if you please."

The orderly led us into the hall. The front door was open. Close to it, in the hall, was a long marble-topped table on which lay letters and parcels.

"Everything that comes is put on here, sir. Then the nurses take things up to the patients."

"Do you remember what time this parcel was left?"

"Must have been about five thirty, or a little after. I know the post had just been, and that's usually at about half-past five. It was a pretty busy afternoon, a lot of people leaving flowers and coming to see patients."

"Thank you. Now, I think, we will see the nurse who took up the parcel."

This proved to be one of the probationers, a fluffy little person all agog with excitement. She remembered taking the parcel up at six o'clock when she came on duty.

“Six o’clock,” murmured Poirot. “Then it must have been twenty minutes or so that the parcel was lying on the table downstairs.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing, Mademoiselle. Continue. You took the parcel to Miss Buckley?”

“Yes, there were several things for her. There was this box and some flowers also—sweet peas—from a Mr. and Mrs. Croft, I think. I took them up at the same time. And there was a parcel that had come by post—and curiously enough that was a box of Fuller’s chocolates also.”

“Comment? A second box?”

“Yes, rather a coincidence. Miss Buckley opened them both. She said: ‘Oh! what a shame. I’m not allowed to eat them.’ Then she opened the lids to look inside and see if they were both just the same, and your card was in one and she said, ‘Take the other impure box away, nurse. I might have got them mixed up.’ Oh! dear, whoever would have thought of such a thing? Seems like an Edgar Wallace, doesn’t it?”

Poirot cut short this flood of speech.

“Two boxes, you say? From whom was the other box?”

“There was no name inside.”

“And which was the one that came—that had the appearance of coming—from me? The one by post or the other?”

“I declare now—I can’t remember. Shall I go up and ask Miss Buckley?”

“If you would be so amiable.”

She ran up the stairs.

“Two boxes,” murmured Poirot. “There is confusion for you.”

The nurse returned breathless.

“Miss Buckley isn’t sure. She unwrapped them both before she looked inside. But she thinks it wasn’t the box that came by post.”

“Eh?” said Poirot, a little confused.

“The box from you was the one that didn’t come by post. At least she thinks so, but she isn’t quite sure.”

“Diable!” said Poirot, as we walked away. “Is no one ever quite sure? In detective books—yes. But life—real life—is always full of muddle. Am I sure, myself, about anything at all? No, no—a thousand times, no.”

“Lazarus,” I said.

“Yes, that is a surprise, is it not?”

“Shall you say anything to him about it?”

“Assuredly. I shall be interested to see how he takes it. By the way, we might as well exaggerate the serious condition of Mademoiselle. It will do no harm to let it be assumed that she is at death’s door. You comprehend? The solemn face—yes, admirable. You resemble closely an undertaker. C’est tout à fait bien.”

We were lucky in finding Lazarus. He was bending over the bonnet of his car outside the hotel.

Poirot went straight up to him.

“Yesterday evening, Monsieur Lazarus, you left a box of chocolates for Mademoiselle,” he began without preamble.

Lazarus looked rather surprised.

“Yes?”

“That was very amiable of you.”

“As a matter of fact they were from Freddie, from Mrs. Rice. She asked me to get them.”

“Oh! I see.”

“I took them round in the car.”

“I comprehend.”

He was silent for a minute or two and then said:

“Madame Rice, where is she?”

“I think she’s in the lounge.”

We found Frederica having tea. She looked up at us with an anxious face.

“What is this I hear about Nick being taken ill?”

“It is a most mysterious affair, Madame. Tell me, did you send her a box of chocolates yesterday?”

“Yes. At least she asked me to get them for her.”

“She asked you to get them for her?”

“Yes.”

“But she was not allowed to see anyone. How did you see her?”

“I didn’t. She telephoned.”

“Ah! And she said—what?”

“Would I get her a two-pound box of Fuller’s chocolates.”

“How did her voice sound—weak?”

"No—not at all. Quite strong. But different somehow. I didn't realize it was she speaking at first."

"Until she told you who she was?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure, Madame, that it was your friend?"

Frederica looked startled.

"I—I—why, of course it was. Who else could it have been?"

"That is an interesting question, Madame."

"You don't mean—"

"Could you swear, Madame, that it was your friend's voice—apart from what she said?"

"No," said Frederica, slowly, "I couldn't. Her voice was certainly different. I thought it was the phone—or perhaps being ill. . . ."

"If she had not told you who she was, you would not have recognized it?"

"No, no, I don't think I should. Who was it, M. Poirot? Who was it?"

"That is what I mean to know, Madame."

The graveness of his face seemed to awaken her suspicions.

"Is Nick—has anything happened?" she asked, breathlessly.

Poirot nodded.

"She is ill—dangerously ill. Those chocolates, Madame—were poisoned."

"The chocolates I sent her? But that's impossible—impossible!"

“Not impossible, Madame, since Mademoiselle is at death’s door.”

“Oh, my God.” She hid her face in her hands, then raised it white and quivering. “I don’t understand—I don’t understand. The other, yes, but not this. They couldn’t be poisoned. Nobody ever touched them but me and Jim. You’re making some dreadful mistake, M. Poirot.”

“It is not I that make a mistake—even though my name was in the box.”

She stared at him blankly.

“If Mademoiselle Nick dies—” he said, and made a threatening gesture with his hand.

She gave a low cry.

He turned away, and taking me by the arm, went up to the sitting-room.

He flung his hat on the table.

“I understand nothing—but nothing! I am in the dark. I am a little child. Who stands to gain by Mademoiselle’s death? Madame Rice. Who buys the chocolates and admits it and tells a story of being rung up on the telephone that cannot hold water for a minute? Madame Rice. It is too simple—too stupid. And she is not stupid—no.”

“Well, then—”

“But she takes cocaine, Hastings. I am certain she takes cocaine. There is no mistaking it. And there was cocaine in those chocolates. And what did she mean when she said, ‘The other, yes, but not this.’ It needs explaining, that! And the sleek M. Lazarus—what is he doing in all this? What does she know, Madame Rice? She knows something. But I cannot make her speak. She is not of those you can frighten into speech. But she knows something, Hastings. Is her tale of the telephone true, or did she invent it? If it is true whose voice was it?

“I tell you, Hastings. This is all very black—very black.”

"Always darkest before dawn," I said reassuringly.

He shook his head.

"Then the other box—that came by post. Can we rule that out? No, we cannot, because Mademoiselle is not sure. It is an annoyance, that!"

He groaned.

I was about to speak when he stopped me.

"No, no. Not another proverb. I cannot bear it. If you would be the good friend—the good helpful friend—"

"Yes," I said eagerly.

"Go out, I beg of you, and buy me some playing cards."

I stared.

"Very well," I said coldly.

I could not but suspect that he was making a deliberate excuse to get rid of me.

Here, however, I misjudged him. That night, when I came into the sitting room about ten o'clock, I found Poirot carefully building card houses—and I remembered!

It was an old trick of his—soothing his nerves. He smiled at me.

"Yes—you remember. One needs the precision. One card on another—so—in exactly the right place and that supports the weight of the card on top and so on, up and up. Go to bed, Hastings. Leave me here, with my house of cards. I clear the mind."

It was about five in the morning when I was shaken awake.

Poirot was standing by my bedside. He looked pleased and happy.

“It was very just what you said, mon ami. Oh! it was very just. More, it was spirituel!”

I blinked at him, being imperfectly awake.

“Always darkest before dawn—that is what you said. It has been very dark—and now it is dawn.”

I looked at the window. He was perfectly right.

“No, no, Hastings. In the head! The mind! The little grey cells!”

He paused and then said quietly:

“You see, Hastings, Mademoiselle is dead.”

“What?” I cried, suddenly wide awake.

“Hush—hush. It is as I say. Not really—bien entendu—but it can be arranged. Yes, for twenty-four hours it can be arranged. I arrange it with the doctor, with the nurses.

“You comprehend, Hastings? The murderer has been successful. Four times he has tried and failed. The fifth time he has succeeded.

“And now, we shall see what happens next. . . .

“It will be very interesting.”

Eighteen

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

The events of the next day are completely hazy in my memory. I was unfortunate enough to awake with fever on me. I have been liable to these bouts of fever at inconvenient times ever since I once contracted malaria.

In consequence, the events of that day take on in my memory the semblance of a nightmare—with Poirot coming and going as a kind of fantastic clown, making a periodic appearance in a circus.

He was, I fancy, enjoying himself to the the full. His poise of baffled despair was admirable. How he achieved the end he had in view and which he had disclosed to me in the early hours of the morning, I cannot say. But achieve it he did.

It cannot have been easy. The amount of deception and subterfuge involved must have been colossal. The English character is averse to lying on a wholesale scale and that, no less, was what Poirot's plan required. He had, first, to get Dr. Graham converted to the scheme. With Dr. Graham on his side, he had to persuade the Matron and some members of the staff of the nursing home to conform to the plan. There again, the difficulties must have been immense. It was probably Dr. Graham's influence that turned the scale.

Then there was the Chief Constable and the police. Here, Poirot would be up against officialdom. Nevertheless he wrung at last an unwilling consent out of Colonel Weston. The Colonel made it clear that it was in no way his responsibility. Poirot and Poirot alone was responsible for the spreading abroad of these lying reports. Poirot agreed. He would have agreed to anything so long as he was permitted to carry out his plan.

I spent most of the day dozing in a large armchair with a rug over my knees. Every two or three hours or so, Poirot would burst in and report progress.

“Comment ça va, mon ami? How I commiserate you. But it is as well, perhaps. The farce, you do not play it as well as I do. I come this moment from ordering a wreath—a wreath immense—stupendous. Lilies, my friend—large quantities of lilies. ‘With heartfelt regret. From Hercule Poirot.’ Ah! what a comedy.”

He departed again.

“I come from a most poignant conversation with Madame Rice,” was his next piece of information. “Very well dressed in black, that one. Her poor friend—what a tragedy! I groan sympathetically. Nick, she says, was so joyous, so full of life. Impossible to think of her as dead. I agree. ‘It is,’ I say, ‘the irony of death that it takes one like that. The old and useless are left.’ Oh! là là! I groan again.”

“How you are enjoying this,” I murmured feebly.

“Du tout. It is part of my plan, that is all. To play the comedy successfully, you must put the heart into it. Well, then, the conventional expressions of regret over, Madame comes to matters nearer home. All night she has lain awake wondering about those sweets. It is impossible—impossible. ‘Madame,’ I say, ‘it is not impossible. You can see the analyst’s report.’ Then she says, and her voice is far from steady, ‘It was—cocaine, you say?’ I assent. And she says, ‘Oh, my God. I don’t understand.’ ”

“Perhaps that’s true.”

“She understands well enough that she is in danger. She is intelligent. I told you that before. Yes, she is in danger, and she knows it.”

“And yet it seems to me that for the first time you don’t believe her guilty.”

Poirot frowned. The excitement of his manner abated.

"It is profound what you say there, Hastings. No—it seems to me that—somehow—the facts no longer fit. These crimes—so far what has marked them most—the subtlety, is it not? And here is no subtlety at all—only the crudity, pure and simple. No, it does not fit."

He sat down at the table.

"Voilà—let us examine the facts. There are three possibilities. There are the sweets bought by Madame and delivered by M. Lazarus. And in that case the guilt rests with one or the other or both. And the telephone call, supposedly from Mademoiselle Nick, that is an invention pure and simple. That is the straightforward—the obvious solution.

"Solution 2: The other box of sweets—that which came by post. Anyone may have sent those. Any of the suspects on our list from A. to J. (You remember? A very wide field.) But, if that were the guilty box, what is the point of the telephone call? Why complicate matters with a second box?"

I shook my head feebly. With a temperature of 102, any complication seemed to me quite unnecessary and absurd.

"Solution 3: A poisoned box was substituted for the innocent box bought by Madame. In that case the telephone call is ingenious and understandable. Madame is to be what you call the kitten's paw. She is to pull the roasting chestnuts out of the fire. So Solution 3 is the most logical—but, alas, it is also the most difficult. How be sure of substituting a box at the right moment? The orderly might take the box straight upstairs—a hundred and one possibilities might prevent the substitution being effected. No, it does not seem sense."

"Unless it were Lazarus," I said.

Poirot looked at me.

"You have the fever, my friend. It mounts, does it not?"

I nodded.

“Curious how a few degrees of heat should stimulate the intellect. You have uttered there an observation of profound simplicity. So simple, was it, that I had failed to consider it. But it would suppose a very curious state of affairs. M. Lazarus, the dear friend of Madame, doing his best to get her hanged. It opens up possibilities of a very curious nature. But complex—very complex.”

I closed my eyes. I was glad I had been brilliant, but I did not want to think of anything complex. I wanted to go to sleep.

Poirot, I think, went on talking, but I did not listen. His voice was vaguely soothing. . . .

It was late afternoon when I saw him next.

“My little plan, it has made the fortune of flower shops,” he announced. “Everybody orders wreaths. M. Croft, M. Vyse, Commander Challenger—”

The last name awoke a chord of compunction in my mind.

“Look here, Poirot,” I said. “You must let him in on this. Poor fellow, he will be distracted with grief. It isn’t fair.”

“You have always the tenderness for him, Hastings.”

“I like him. He’s a thoroughly decent chap. You’ve got to take him into the secret.”

Poirot shok his head.

“No, mon ami. I do not make the exceptions.”

“But you don’t suspect him to have anything to do with it?”

“I do not make the exceptions.”

“Think how he must be suffering.”

“On the contrary, I prefer to think of what a joyful surprise I prepare for him. To think the loved one dead—and find her alive! It is a sensation unique—stupendous.”

“What a pigheaded old devil you are. He’d keep the secret all right.”

“I am not so sure.”

“He’s the soul of honour. I’m certain of it.”

“That makes it all the more difficult to keep a secret. Keeping a secret is an art that requires many lies magnificently told, and a great aptitude for playing the comedy and enjoying it. Could he dissemble, the Commander Challenger? If he is what you say he is, he certainly could not.”

“Then you won’t tell him?”

“I certainly refuse to imperil my little idea for the sake of the sentiment. It is life and death we play with, mon cher. Anyway, the suffering, it is good for the character. Many of your famous clergymen have said so—even a Bishop if I am not mistaken.”

I made no further attempt to shake his decision. His mind, I could see, was made up.

“I shall not dress for dinner,” he murmured. “I am too much the broken old man. That is my part, you understand. All my self-confidence has crashed—I am broken. I have failed. I shall eat hardly any dinner—the food untasted on the plate. That is the attitude, I think. In my own apartment I will consume some brioches and some chocolate éclairs (so called) which I had the foresight to buy at a confectioners. Et vous?”

“Some more quinine, I think,” I said, sadly.

“Alas, my poor Hastings. But courage, all will be well tomorrow.”

“Very likely. These attacks often last only twenty-four hours.”

I did not hear him return to the room. I must have been asleep.

When I awoke, he was sitting at the table writing. In front of him was a crumpled sheet of paper smoothed out. I recognized it for the paper on which he had written that list of people—A. to J.—which he had afterwards crumpled up and thrown away.

He nodded in answer to my unspoken thought.

“Yes, my friend. I have resurrected it. I am at work upon it from a different angle. I compile a list of questions concerning each person. The questions may have no bearing on the crime—they are just things that I do not know—things that remain unexplained, and for which I seek to supply the answer from my own brain.”

“How far have you got?”

“I have finished. You would like to hear? You are strong enough?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am feeling a great deal better.”

“À la bonne heure! Very well, I will read them to you. Some of them, no doubt, you will consider puerile.”

He cleared his throat.

“A. Ellen.—Why did she remain in the house and not go out to see fireworks? (Unusual, as Mademoiselle’s evidence and surprise make clear.) What did she think or suspect might happen? Did she admit anyone (J. for instance) to the house? Is she speaking the truth about the secret panel? If there is such a thing why is she unable to remember where it is? (Mademoiselle seems very certain there is no such thing—and she would surely know.) If she invented it, why did she invent it? Had she read Michael Seton’s love letters or was her surprise at Mademoiselle Nick’s engagement genuine?

“B. Her Husband.—Is he as stupid as he seems? Does he share Ellen’s knowledge, whatever it is, or does he not? Is he, in any respect, a mental case?

“C. The Child.—Is his delight in blood a natural instinct common to his age and development, or is it morbid, and is that morbidity inherited from either parent? Has he ever shot with a toy pistol?

“D. Who is Mr. Croft?—Where does he really come from? Did he post the will as he swears he did? What motive could he have in not posting it?

“E. Mrs. Croft. Same as above.—Who are Mr. and Mrs. Croft? Are they in hiding for some reason—and if so, what reason? Have they any connection with the Buckley family?

“F. Mrs. Rice.—Was she really aware of the engagement between Nick and Michael Seton? Did she merely guess it, or had she actually read the letters which passed between them? (In that case she would know Mademoiselle was Seton’s heir.) Did she know that she herself was Mademoiselle’s residuary legatee? (This, I think, is likely. Mademoiselle would probably tell her so, adding perhaps that she would not get much out of it.) Is there any truth in Commander Challenger’s suggestion that Lazarus was attracted by Mademoiselle Nick? (This might explain a certain lack of cordiality between the two friends which seems to have shown itself in the last few months.) Who is the “boy friend” mentioned in her note as supplying the drug? Could this possibly be J.? Why did she turn faint one day in this room? Was it something that had been said—or was it something she saw? Is her account of the telephone message asking her to buy chocolates correct—or is it a deliberate lie? What did she mean by ‘I can understand the other—but not this?’ If she is not herself guilty, what knowledge has she got that she is keeping to herself?”

“You perceive,” said Poirot, suddenly breaking off, “that the questions concerning Madame Rice are almost innumerable. From beginning to end, she is an enigma. And that forces me to a conclusion. Either Madame Rice is guilty—or she knows—or shall we say, thinks she knows—who is guilty. But is she right? Does she know or does she merely suspect? And how is it possible to make her speak?”

He sighed.

“Well, I will go on with my list of questions.

“G. Mr. Lazarus.—Curious—there are practically no questions to ask concerning him—except the crude one, ‘Did he substitute the poisoned sweets?’ Otherwise I find only one totally irrelevant question. But I have put it down. ‘Why did M. Lazarus offer fifty pounds for a picture that was only worth twenty?’ ” “He wanted to do Nick a good turn,” I suggested.

“He would not do it that way. He is a dealer. He does not buy to sell at a loss. If he wished to be amiable he would lend her money as a private individual.”

“It can’t have any bearing on the crime, anyway.”

“No, that is true—but all the same, I should like to know. I am a student of the psychology, you understand.

“Now we come to H.”

“H. Commander Challenger.—Why did Mademoiselle Nick tell him she was engaged to someone else? What necessitated her having to tell him that? She told no one else. Had he proposed to her? What are his relations with his uncle?”

“His uncle, Poirot?”

“Yes, the doctor. That rather questionable character. Did any private news of Michael Seton’s death come through to the Admiralty before it was announced publicly?”

“I don’t quite see what you’re driving at Poirot. Even if Challenger knew beforehand about Seton’s death, it does not seem to get us anywhere. It provides no earthly motive for killing the girl he loved.”

“I quite agree. What you say is perfectly reasonable. But these are just things I should like to know. I am still the dog, you see, nosing about for the things that are not very nice!”

“I. M. Vyse.—Why did he say what he did about his cousin’s fanatical devotion to End House? What possible motive could he have in saying that?

Did he, or did he not, receive the will? Is he, in fact, an honest man—or is he not an honest man?

“And now J.—Eh bien, J. is what I put down before—a giant question mark. Is there such a person, or is there not—

“Mon Dieu! my friend, what have you?”

I had started from my chair with a sudden shriek. With a shaking hand I pointed at the window.

“A face, Poirot!” I cried. “A face pressed against the glass. A dreadful face! It’s gone now—but I saw it.”

Poirot strode to the window and pushed it open. He leant out.

“There is no one there now,” he said, thoughtfully. “You are sure you did not imagine it, Hastings?”

“Quite sure. It was a horrible face.”

“There is a balcony, of course. Anyone could reach there quite easily if they wanted to hear what we were saying. When you say a dreadful face, Hastings, just what do you mean?”

“A white, staring face, hardly human.”

“Mon ami, that is the fever. A face, yes. An unpleasant face, yes. But a face hardly human—no. What you saw was the effect of a face pressed closely against the glass—that allied to the shock of seeing it there at all.”

“It was a dreadful face,” I said, obstinately.

“It was not the face of—anyone you know?”

“No, indeed.”

“H’m—it might have been, though! I doubt if you would recognize it under these circumstances. I wonder now—yes, I very much wonder. . . .”

He gathered up his papers thoughtfully.

"One thing at least is to the good. If the owner of that face overheard our conversation we did not mention that Mademoiselle Nick was alive and well. Whatever else our visitor may have heard, that at least escaped him."

"But surely," I said, "the results of this—eh—brilliant manoeuvre of yours have been slightly disappointing up to date. Nick is dead and no startling developments have occurred!"

"I did not expect them yet awhile. Twenty-four hours, I said. Mon ami, tomorrow, if I am not mistaken, certain things will arise. Otherwise—otherwise I am wrong from start to finish. There is the post, you see. I have hopes of tomorrow's post."

I awoke in the morning feeling weak but with the fever abated. I also felt hungry. Poirot and I had breakfast served in our sitting room.

"Well?" I said, maliciously, as he sorted his letters. "Has the post done what you expected of it?"

Poirot, who had just opened two envelopes which patently contained bills, did not reply. I thought he looked rather cast down and not his usual cock-a-hoop self.

I opened my own mail. The first was a notice of a spiritualist meeting.

"If all else fails, we must go to the spiritualists," I remarked. "I often wonder that more tests of this kind aren't made. The spirit of the victim comes back and names the murderer. That would be a proof."

"It would hardly help us," said Poirot, absently. "I doubt if Maggie Buckley knew whose hand it was shot her down. Even if she could speak she would have nothing of value to tell us. Tiens! that is odd."

"What is?"

"You talk of the dead speaking, and at that moment I open this letter."

He tossed it across to me. It was from Mrs. Buckley and ran as follows:

“Langley Rectory.

“Dear Monsieur Poirot,—On my return here I found a letter written by my poor child on her arrival at St. Loo. There is nothing in it of interest to you, I’m afraid, but I thought perhaps you would care to see it.

“Thanking you for your kindness,

“Yours sincerely,

“Jean Buckley.”

The enclosure brought a lump to my throat. It was so terribly commonplace and so completely untouched by any apprehension of tragedy:

“Dear Mother,—I arrived safely. Quite a comfortable journey. Only two people in the carriage all the way to Exeter.

“It is lovely weather here. Nick seems very well and gay—a little restless, perhaps, but I cannot see why she should have telegraphed for me in the way she did. Tuesday would have done just as well.

“No more now. We are going to have tea with some neighbours. They are Australians and have rented the lodge. Nick says they are kind but rather awful. Mrs. Rice and Mr. Lazarus are coming to stay. He is the art dealer. I will post this in the box by the gate, then it will catch the post. Will write tomorrow.

“Your loving daughter,

“Maggie.”

“P.S.—Nick says there is a reason for her wire. She will tell me after tea. She is very queer and jumpy.”

“The voice of the dead,” said Poirot, quietly. “And it tells us—nothing.”

"The box by the gate," I remarked idly. "That's where Croft said he posted the will."

"Said so—yes. I wonder. How I wonder!"

"There is nothing else of interest among your letters?"

"Nothing. Hastings, I am very unhappy. I am in the dark. Still in the dark. I comprehend nothing."

At that moment the telephone rang. Poirot went to it.

Immediately I saw a change come over his face. His manner was very restrained, nevertheless he could not disguise from my eyes his intense excitement.

His own contributions to the conversation were entirely non-committal so that I could not gather what it was all about.

Presently, however, with a "Très bien. Je vous remercie," he put back the receiver and came back to where I was sitting. His eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"Mon ami," he said. "What did I tell you? Things have begun to happen."

"What was it?"

"That was M. Charles Vyse on the telephone. He informs me that this morning, throught the post, he has received a will signed by his cousin, Miss Buckley, and dated the 25th February last."

"What? The will?"

"Évidemment."

"It has turned up?"

"Just at the right moment, n'est-ce pas?"

"Do you think he is speaking the truth?"

"Or do I think he has had the will all along? Is that what you would say? Well, it is all a little curious. But one thing is certain; I told you that, if Mademoiselle Nick were supposed to be dead, we should have developments—and sure enough here they are!"

"Extraordinary," I said. "You were right. I suppose this is the will making Frederica Rice residuary legatee?"

"M. Vyse said nothing about the contents of the will. He was far too correct. But there seems very little reason to doubt that this is the same will. It is witnessed, he tells me, by Ellen Wilson and her husband."

"So we are back at the old problem," I said. "Frederica Rice."

"The enigma!"

"Frederica Rice," I murmured, inconsequently. "It's a pretty name."

"Prettier than what her friends call her. Freddie"—he made a face—"ce n'est pas joli—for a young lady."

"There aren't many abbreviations of Frederica," I said. "It's not like Margaret where you can have half a dozen—Maggie, Margot, Madge, Peggie—"

"True. Well, Hastings, are you happier now? That things have begun to happen?"

"Yes, of course. Tell me—did you expect this to happen?"

"No—not exactly. I had formulated nothing very precise to myself. All I had said was that given a certain result, the causes of that result must make themselves evident."

"Yes," I said, respectfully.

“What was it that I was going to say just as that telephone rang?” mused Poirot. “Oh, yes, that letter from Mademoiselle Maggie. I wanted to look at it once again. I have an idea in the back of my mind that something in it struck me as rather curious.”

I picked it up from where I had tossed it, and handed it to him.

He read it over to himself. I moved about the room, looking out of the window and observing the yachts racing on the bay.

Suddenly an exclamation startled me. I turned round. Poirot was holding his head in his hands and rocking himself to and fro, apparently in an agony of woe.

“Oh!” he groaned. “But I have been blind—blind.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Complex, I have said? Complicated? Mais non. Of a simplicity extreme—extreme. And miserable one that I am, I saw nothing—nothing.”

“Good gracious, Poirot, what is this light that has suddenly burst upon you?”

“Wait—wait—do not speak! I must arrange my ideas. Rearrange them in the light of this discovery so stupendous.”

Seizing his list of questions, he ran over them silently, his lips moving busily. Once or twice he nodded his head emphatically.

Then he laid them down and leaning back in his chair he shut his eyes. I thought at last that he had gone to sleep.

Suddenly he sighed and opened his eyes.

“But yes!” he said. “It all fits in! All the things that have puzzled me. All the things that have seemed to me a little unnatural. They all have their place.”

“You mean—you know everything?”

“Nearly everything. All that matters. In some respects I have been right in my deductions. In other ways ludicrously far from the truth. But now it is all clear. I shall send today a telegram asking two questions—but the answers to them I know already—I know here!” He tapped his forehead.

“And when you receive the answers?” I asked, curiously.

He sprang to his feet.

“My friend, do you remember that Mademoiselle Nick said she wanted to stage a play at End House? Tonight, we stage such a play in End House. But it will be a play produced by Hercule Poirot. Mademoiselle Nick will have a part to play in it.” He grinned suddenly. “You comprehend, Hastings, there will be a ghost in this play. Yes, a ghost. End House has never seen a ghost. It will have one tonight. No”—as I tried to ask a question—“I will say no more. Tonight, Hastings, we will produce our comedy—and reveal the truth. But now, there is much to do—much to do.”

He hurried from the room.

Nineteen

POIROT PRODUCES A PLAY

It was a curious gathering that met that night at End House.

I had hardly seen Poirot all day. He had been out for dinner but had left me a message that I was to be at End House at nine o'clock. Evening dress, he had added, was not necessary.

The whole thing was like a rather ridiculous dream.

On arrival I was ushered into the dining room and when I looked round I realized that every person on Poirot's list from A. to I. (J. was necessarily excluded, being in the Mrs. Harris-like position of "there ain't no such person") was present.

Even Mrs. Croft was there in a kind of invalid chair. She smiled and nodded at me.

"This is a surprise, isn't it?" she said, cheerfully. "It makes a change for me, I must say. I think I shall try and get out now and again. All M. Poirot's idea. Come and sit by me, Captain Hastings. Somehow I feel this is rather a gruesome business—but Mr. Vyse made a point of it."

"Mr. Vyse?" I said, rather surprised.

Charles Vyse was standing by the mantelpiece. Poirot was beside him talking earnestly to him in an undertone.

I looked round the room. Yes, they were all there. After showing me in (I had been a minute or two late) Ellen had taken her place on a chair just beside the door. On another chair, sitting painfully straight and breathing hard, was her husband. The child, Alfred, squirmed uneasily between his father and mother.

The rest sat round the dining table. Frederica in her black dress, Lazarus beside her, George Challenger and Croft on the other side of the table. I sat a little away from it near Mrs. Croft. And now Charles Vyse, a final nod of the head, took his place at the head of the table, and Poirot slipped unobtrusively into a seat next to Lazarus.

Clearly the producer, as Poirot had styled himself, did not propose to take a prominent part in the play. Charles Vyse was apparently in charge of the proceedings. I wondered what surprises Poirot had in store for him.

The young lawyer cleared his throat and stood up. He looked just the same as ever, impassive, formal and unemotional.

“This is rather an unconventional gathering we have here tonight,” he said. “But the circumstances are very peculiar. I refer, of course, to the circumstances surrounding the death of my cousin, Miss Buckley. There will have, of course, to be an autopsy—there seems to be no doubt that she met her death by poison, and that that poison was administered with the intent to kill. This is police business and I need not go into it. The police would doubtless prefer me not to do so.

“In an ordinary case, the will of a deceased person is read after the funeral, but in deference to M. Poirot’s special wish, I am proposing to read it before the funeral takes place. In fact, I am proposing to read it here and now. That is why everyone has been asked to come here. As I said just now, the circumstances are unusual and justify a departure from precedent.

“The will itself came into my possession in a somewhat unusual manner. Although dated last February, it only reached me by post this morning. However, it is undoubtedly in the handwriting of my cousin—I have no doubt on that point, and though a most informal document, it is properly attested.”

He paused and cleared his throat once more.

Every eye was upon his face.

From a long envelope in his hand, he drew out an enclosure. It was, as we could see, an ordinary piece of End House notepaper with writing on it.

“It is quite short,” said Vyse. He made a suitable pause, then began to read:

“This is the last Will and Testament of Magdala Buckley. I direct that all my funeral expenses should be paid and I appoint my cousin Charles Vyse as my executor. I leave everything of which I die possessed to Mildred Croft in grateful recognition of the services rendered by her to my father, Philip Buckley, which services nothing can ever repay.

“Signed—Magdala Buckley,

“Witnesses—Ellen Wilson, William Wilson.”

I was dumbfounded! So I think was everyone else. Only Mrs. Croft nodded her head in quiet understanding.

“It’s true,” she said, quietly. “Not that I ever meant to let on about it. Philip Buckley was out in Australia, and if it hadn’t been for me—well, I’m not going into that. A secret it’s been and a secret it had better remain. She knew about it, though. Nick did, I mean. Her father must have told her. We came down here because we wanted to have a look at the place. I’d always been curious about this End House Philip Buckley talked of. And that dear girl knew all about it, and couldn’t do enough for us. Wanted us to come and live with her, she did. But we wouldn’t do that. And so she insisted on our having the lodge—and not a penny of rent would she take. We pretended to pay it, of course, so as not to cause talk, but she handed it back to us. And now—this! Well, if anyone says there is no gratitude in the world, I’ll tell them they’re wrong! This proves it.”

There was still an amazed silence. Poirot looked at Vyse.

“Had you any idea of this?”

Vyse shook his head.

"I knew Philip Buckley had been in Australia. But I never heard any rumours of a scandal there."

He looked inquiringly at Mrs. Croft.

She shook her head.

"No, you won't get a word out of me. I never have said a word and I never shall. The secret goes to the grave with me."

Vyse said nothing. He sat quietly tapping the table with a pencil.

"I presume, M. Vyse"—Poirot leaned forward—"that as next of kin you could contest that will? There is, I understand, a vast fortune at stake which was not the case when the will was made."

Vyse looked at him coldly.

"The will is perfectly valid. I should not dream of contesting my cousin's disposal of her property."

"You're an honest fellow," said Mrs. Croft, approvingly. "And I'll see you don't lose by it."

Charles sank a little from this well-meant but slightly embarrassing remark.

"Well, Mother," said Mr. Croft, with an elation he could not quite keep out of his voice. "This is a surprise! Nick didn't tell me what she was doing."

"The dear sweet girl," murmured Mrs. Croft, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "I wish she could look down and see us now. Perhaps she does—who knows?"

"Perhaps," agreed Poirot.

Suddenly an idea seemed to strike him. He looked round.

"An idea! We are all here seated round a table. Let us hold a séance."

“A séance?” said Mrs. Croft, somewhat shocked. “But surely—”

“Yes, yes, it will be most interesting. Hastings, here, has pronounced mediumistic powers.” (Why fix on me, I thought.) “To get through a message from the other world—the opportunity is unique! I feel the conditions are propitious. You feel the same, Hastings.”

“Yes,” I said resolutely, playing up.

“Good. I knew it. Quick, the lights.”

In another minute he had risen and switched them off. The whole thing had been rushed on the company before they had had the energy to protest had they wanted to do so. As a matter of fact they were, I think, still dazed with astonishment over the will.

The room was not quite dark. The curtains were drawn back and the window was open for it was a hot night, and through those windows came a faint light. After a minute or two, as we sat in silence, I began to be able to make out the faint outlines of the furniture. I wondered very much what I was supposed to do and cursed Poirot heartily for not having given me my instructions beforehand.

However, I closed my eyes and breathed in a rather stertorous manner.

Presently Poirot rose and tiptoed to my chair. Then returning to his own, he murmured.

“Yes, he is already in a trance. Soon—things will begin to happen.”

There is something about sitting in the dark, waiting, that fills one with unbearable apprehension. I know that I myself was a prey to nerves and so, I was sure, was everyone else. And yet I had at least an idea of what was about to happen. I knew the one vital fact that no one else knew.

And yet, in spite of all that, my heart leapt into my mouth as I saw the dining room door slowly opening.

It did so quite soundlessly (it must have been oiled) and the effect was horribly grisly. It swung slowly open and for a minute or two that was all. With its opening a cold blast of air seemed to enter the room. It was, I suppose, a common or garden draught owing to the open window, but it felt like the icy chill mentioned in all the ghost stories I have ever read.

And then we all saw it! Framed in the doorway was a white shadowy figure. Nick Buckley. . . .

She advanced slowly and noiselessly—with a kind of floating ethereal motion that certainly conveyed the impression of nothing human. . . .

I realized then what an actress the world had missed. Nick had wanted to play a part at End House. Now she was playing it, and I felt convinced that she was enjoying herself to the core. She did it perfectly.

She floated forward into the room—and the silence was broken.

There was a gasping cry from the invalid chair beside me. A kind of gurgle from Mr. Croft. A startled oath from Challenger. Charles Vyse drew back his chair, I think. Lazarus leaned forward. Frederica alone made no sound or movement.

And then a scream rent the room. Ellen sprang up from her chair.

“It’s her!” she shrieked. “She’s come back. She’s walking! Them that’s murdered always walks. It’s her! It’s her!”

And then, with a click the lights went on.

I saw Poirot standing by them, the smile of the ringmaster on his face. Nick stood in the middle of the room in her white draperies.

It was Frederica who spoke first. She stretched out an unbelieving hand—touched her friend.

“Nick,” she said. “You’re—you’re real!”

It was almost a whisper.

Nick laughed. She advanced.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m real enough. Thank you so much for what you did for my father, Mrs. Croft. But I’m afraid you won’t be able to enjoy the benefit of that will just yet.”

“Oh, my God,” gasped Mrs. Croft. “Oh, my God.” She twisted to and fro in her chair. “Take me away, Bert. Take me away. It was all a joke, my dear—all a joke, that’s all it was. Honest.”

“A queer sort of joke,” said Nick.

The door had opened again and a man had entered so quietly that I had not heard him. To my surprise I saw that it was Japp. He exchanged a quick nod with Poirot as though satisfying him of something. Then his face suddenly lit up and he took a step forward towards the squirming figure in the invalid chair.

“Hello-ello-ello,” he said. “What’s this? An old friend! Milly Merton, I declare! And at your old tricks again, my dear.”

He turned round in an explanatory way to the company disregarding Mrs. Croft’s shrill protests.

“Cleverest forger we’ve ever had, Milly Merton. We knew there had been an accident to the car they made their last getaway in. But there! Even an injury to the spine wouldn’t keep Milly from her tricks. She’s an artist, she is!”

“Was that will a forgery?” said Vyse.

He spoke in tones of amazement.

“Of course it was a forgery,” said Nick scornfully. “You don’t think I’d make a silly will like that, do you? I left you End House, Charles, and everything else to Frederica.”

She crossed as she spoke and stood by her friend, and just at that moment it happened!

A spurt of flame from the window and the hiss of a bullet. Then another and the sound of a groan and a fall outside. . . .

And Frederica on her feet with a thin trickle of blood running down her arm. . . .

Twenty

J.

It was all so sudden that for a moment no one knew what had happened.

Then, with a violent exclamation, Poirot ran to the window. Challenger was with him.

A moment later they reappeared, carrying with them the limp body of a man. As they lowered him carefully into a big leather armchair and his face came into view, I uttered a cry.

“The face—the face at the window . . .”

It was the man I had seen looking in on us the previous evening. I recognized him at once. I realized that when I had said he was hardly human I had exaggerated as Poirot had accused me of doing.

Yet there was something about his face that justified my impression. It was a lost face—the face of one removed from ordinary humanity.

White, weak, depraved—it seemed a mere mask—as though the spirit within had fled long ago.

Down the side of it there trickled a stream of blood.

Frederica came slowly forward till she stood by the chair.

Poirot intercepted her.

“You are hurt, Madame?”

She shook her head.

“The bullet grazed my shoulder—that is all.”

She put him aside with a gentle hand and bent down.

The man’s eyes opened and he saw her looking down at him.

“I’ve done for you this time, I hope,” he said in a low vicious snarl, and then, his voice changing suddenly till it sounded like a child’s, “Oh! Freddie, I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it. You’ve always been so decent to me. . . .”

“It’s all right—”

She knelt down beside him.

“I didn’t mean—”

His head dropped. The sentence was never finished.

Frederica looked up at Poirot.

“Yes, Madame, he is dead,” he said, gently.

She rose slowly from her knees and stood looking down at him. With one hand she touched his forehead—pitifully, it seemed. Then she sighed and turned to the rest of us.

“He was my husband,” she said, quietly.

“J.,” I murmured.

Poirot caught my remark, and nodded a quick assent.

“Yes,” he said softly. “Always I felt that there was a J. I said so from the beginning, did I not?”

“He was my husband,” said Frederica again. Her voice was terribly tired. She sank into a chair that Lazarus brought for her. “I might as well tell you everything—now.”

“He was—completely debased. He was a drug fiend. He taught me to take drugs. I have been fighting the habit ever since I left him. I think—at last—I am nearly cured. But it has been difficult. Oh! so horribly difficult. Nobody knows how difficult!

“I could never escape from him. He used to turn up and demand money—with threats. A kind of blackmail. If I did not give him money he would shoot himself. That was always his threat. Then he took to threatening to shoot me. He was not responsible. He was mad—crazy. . . .”

“I suppose it was he who shot Maggie Buckley. He didn’t mean to shoot her, of course. He must have thought it was me.

“I ought to have said, I suppose. But, after all, I wasn’t sure. And those queer accidents Nick had—that made me feel that perhaps it wasn’t him after all. It might have been someone quite different.

“And then—one day—I saw a bit of his handwriting on a torn piece of paper on M. Poirot’s table. It was part of a letter he had sent me. I knew then that M. Poirot was on the track.

“Since then I have felt that it was only a matter of time. . . .”

“But I don’t understand about the sweets. He wouldn’t have wanted to poison Nick. And anyway, I don’t see how he could have had anything to do with that. I’ve puzzled and puzzled.”

She put both hands to her face, then took them away and said with a queer pathetic finality:

“That’s all. . . .”

Twenty-one

THE PERSON—K.

Lazarus came quickly to her side.

"My dear," he said. "My dear."

Poirot went to the sideboard, poured out a glass of wine and brought it to her, standing over her while she drank it.

She handed the glass back to him and smiled.

"I'm all right now," she said. "What—what had we better do next?"

She looked at Japp, but the Inspector shook his head. "I'm on a holiday, Mrs. Rice. Just obliging an old friend—that's all I'm doing. The St. Loo police are in charge of the case."

She looked at Poirot.

"And M. Poirot is in charge of the St. Loo Police?"

"Oh! quelle idée, Madame! I am a mere humble adviser."

"M. Poirot," said Nick. "Can't we hush it up?"

"You wish that, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes. After all—I'm the person most concerned. And there will be no more attacks on me—now."

"No, that is true. There will be no more attacks on you now."

"You're thinking of Maggie. But, M. Poirot, nothing will bring Maggie back to life again! If you make all this public, you'll only bring a terrible lot of suffering and publicity on Frederica—and she hasn't deserved it."

"You say she has not deserved it?"

"Of course she hasn't! I told you right at the beginning that she had a brute of a husband. You've seen tonight—what he was. Well, he's dead. Let that be the end of things. Let the police go on looking for the man who shot Maggie. They just won't find him, that's all."

"So that is what you say, Mademoiselle? Hush it all up."

"Yes. Please. Oh! Please. Please, dear M. Poirot."

Poirot looked slowly round.

"What do you all say?"

Each spoke in turn.

"I agree," I said, as Poirot looked at me.

"I, too," said Lazarus.

"Best thing to do," from Challenger.

"Let's forget everything that's passed in this room tonight." This very determinedly from Croft.

"You would say that!" interpolated Japp.

"Don't be hard on me, dearie," his wife sniffed to Nick, who looked at her scornfully but made no reply.

"Ellen?"

"Me and William won't say a word, sir. Least said, soonest mended."

"And you, M. Vyse?"

"A thing like this can't be hushed up," said Charles Vyse. "The facts must be made known in the proper quarter."

"Charles!" cried Nick.

"I'm sorry, dear. I look at it from the legal aspect."

Poirot gave a sudden laugh.

"So you are seven to one. The good Japp is neutral."

"I'm on holiday," said Japp, with a grin. "I don't count."

"Seven to one. Only M. Vyse holds out—on the side of law and order! You know, M. Vyse, you are a man of character!"

Vyse shrugged his shoulders.

"The position is quite clear. There is only one thing to do."

"Yes—you are an honest man. Eh bien—I, too, range myself on the side of the minority. I, too, am for the truth."

"M. Poirot!" cried Nick.

"Mademoiselle—you dragged me into the case. I came into it at your wish. You cannot silence me now."

He raised a threatening forefinger in a gesture that I knew well.

"Sit down—all of you, and I will tell you—the truth."

Silenced by his imperious attitude, we sat down meekly and turned attentive faces towards him.

"Écoutez! I have a list here—a list of persons connected with the crime. I numbered them with the letters of the alphabet including the letter J. J.

stood for a person unknown—linked to the crime by one of the others. I did not know who J. was until tonight, but I knew that there was such a person. The events of tonight have proved that I was right.

“But yesterday, I suddenly realized that I had made a grave error. I had made an omission. I added another letter to my list. The letter K.”

“Another person unknown?” asked Vyse, with a slight sneer.

“Not exactly. I adopted J. as the symbol for a person unknown. Another person unknown would be merely another J. K. has a different significance. It stands for a person who should have been included in the original list, but who was overlooked.”

He bent over Frederica.

“Reassure yourself, Madame. Your husband was not guilty of murder. It was the person K. who shot Mademoiselle Maggie.”

She stared.

“But who is K.?”

Poirot nodded to Japp. He stepped forward and spoke in tones reminiscent of the days when he had given evidence in police courts.

“Acting on information received, I took up a position here early in the evening, having been introduced secretly into the house by M. Poirot. I was concealed behind the curtains in the drawing room. When everyone was assembled in this room, a young lady entered the drawing room and switched on the light. She made her way to the fireplace and opened a small recess in the panelling that appeared to be operated with a spring. She took from the recess a pistol. With this in her hand she left the room. I followed her and opening the door a crack I was able to observe her further movements. Coats and wraps had been left in the hall by the visitors on arrival. The young lady carefully wiped the pistol with a handkerchief and then placed it in the pocket of a grey wrap, the property of Mrs. Rice—”

A cry burst from Nick.

“This is untrue—every word of it!”

Poirot pointed a hand at her.

“Voilà!” he said. “The person K.! It was Mademoiselle Nick who shot her cousin, Maggie Buckley.”

“Are you mad?” cried Nick. “Why should I kill Maggie?”

“In order to inherit the money left to her by Michael Seton! Her name too was Magdala Buckley—and it was to her he was engaged—not you.”

“You—you—”

She stood there trembling—unable to speak. Poirot turned to Japp.

“You telephoned to the police?”

“Yes, they are waiting in the hall now. They’ve got the warrant.”

“You’re all mad!” cried Nick, contemptuously. She moved swiftly to Frederica’s side. “Freddie, give me your wristwatch as—as a souvenir, will you?”

Slowly Frederica unclasped the jewelled watch from her wrist and handed it to Nick.

“Thanks. And now—I suppose we must go through with this perfectly ridiculous comedy.”

“The comedy you planned and produced in End House. Yes—but you should not have given the star part to Hercule Poirot. That, Mademoiselle, was your mistake—your very grave mistake.”

Twenty-two

THE END OF THE STORY

“You want me to explain?”

Poirot looked round with a gratified smile and the air of mock humility I knew so well.

We had moved into the drawing room and our numbers had lessened. The domestics had withdrawn tactfully, and the Crofts had been asked to accompany the police. Frederica, Lazarus, Challenger, Vyse and I remained.

“Eh bien—I confess it—I was fooled—fooled completely and absolutely. The little Nick, she had me where she wanted me, as your idiom so well expresses it. Ah! Madame, when you said that your friend was a clever little liar—how right you were! How right!”

“Nick always told lies,” said Frederica, composedly. “That’s why I didn’t really believe in these marvellous escapes of hers.”

“And I—imbecile that I was—did!”

“Didn’t they really happen?” I asked. I was, I admit, still hopelessly confused.

“They were invented—very cleverly—to give just the impression they did.”

“What was that?”

“They gave the impression that Mademoiselle Nick’s life was in danger. But I will begin earlier than that. I will tell you the story as I have pieced it out—not as it came to me imperfectly and in flashes.

"At the beginning of the business then, we have this girl, this Nick Buckley, young and beautiful, unscrupulous, and passionately and fanatically devoted to her home."

Charles Vyse nodded.

"I told you that."

"And you were right. Mademoiselle Nick loved End House. But she had no money. The house was mortgaged. She wanted money—she wanted it feverishly—and she could not get it. She meets this young Seton at Le Touquet, he is attracted by her. She knows that in all probability he is his uncle's heir and that that uncle is worth millions. Good, her star is in the ascendant, she thinks. But he is not really seriously attracted. He thinks her good fun, that is all. They meet at Scarborough, he takes her up in his machine and then—the catastrophe occurs. He meets Maggie and falls in love with her at first sight.

"Mademoiselle Nick is dumbfounded. Her cousin Maggie whom she has never considered pretty! But to young Seton she is 'different.' The one girl in the world for him. They become secretly engaged. Only one person knows—has to know. That person is Mademoiselle Nick. The poor Maggie—she is glad that there is one person she can talk to. Doubtless she reads to her cousin parts of her fiancé's letters. So it is that Mademoiselle gets to hear of the will. She pays no attention to it at the time. But it remains in her mind.

"Then comes the sudden and unexpected death of Sir Matthew Seton, and hard upon that the rumours of Michael Seton's being missing. And straightaway an outrageous plan comes into our young lady's head. Seton does not know that her name is Magdala also. He only knows her as Nick. His will is clearly quite informal—a mere mention of a name. But in the eyes of the world Seton is her friend! It is with her that his name has been coupled. If she were to claim to be engaged to him, no one would be surprised. But to do that successfully Maggie must be out of the way.

"Time is short. She arranges for Maggie to come and stay in a few days' time. Then she has her escapes from death. The picture whose cord she cuts through. The brake of the car that she tampers with. The boulder—that perhaps was natural and she merely invented the story of being underneath on the path.

“And then—she sees my name in the paper. (I told you, Hastings, everyone knew Hercule Poirot!) and she has the audacity to make me an accomplice! The bullet through the hat that falls at my feet. Oh! the pretty comedy. And I am taken in! I believe in the peril that menaces her! Bon! She has got a valuable witness on her side. I play into her hands by asking her to send for a friend.

“She seizes the chance and sends for Maggie to come a day earlier.

“How easy the crime is actually! She leaves us at the dinner table and after hearing on the wireless that Seton’s death is a fact, she starts to put her plan into action. She has plenty of time, then, to take Seton’s letters to Maggie—look through them and select the few that will answer her purpose. These she places in her own room. Then, later, she and Maggie leave the fireworks and go back to the house. She tells her cousin to put on her shawl. Then stealing out after her, she shoots her. Quick, into the house, the pistol concealed in the secret panel (of whose existence she thinks nobody knows). Then upstairs. There she waits till voices are heard. The body is discovered. It is her cue.

“Down she rushes and out through the window.

“How well she played her part! Magnificently! Oh, yes, she staged a fine drama here. The maid, Ellen, said this was an evil house. I am inclined to agree with her. It was from the house that Mademoiselle Nick took her inspiration.”

“But those poisoned sweets,” said Frederica. “I still don’t understand about that.”

“It was all part of the same scheme. Do you not see that if Nick’s life was attempted after Maggie was dead that absolutely settled the question that Maggie’s death had been a mistake.

"When she thought the time was ripe she rang up Madame Rice and asked her to get her a box of chocolates."

"Then it was her voice?"

"But, yes! How often the simple explanation is the true one! N'est ce pas? She made her voice sound a little different—that was all. So that you might be in doubt when questioned. Then, when the box arrived—again how simple. She fills three of the chocolates with cocaine (she had cocaine with her, cleverly concealed), eats one of them and is ill—but not too ill. She knows very well how much cocaine to take and just what symptoms to exaggerate.

"And the card—my card! Ah! Sapristi—she has a nerve! It was my card—the one I sent with the flowers. Simple, was it not? Yes, but it had to be thought of. . . ."

There was a pause and then Frederica asked:

"Why did she put the pistol in my coat?"

"I thought you would ask me that, Madame. It was bound to occur to you in time. Tell me—had it ever entered your head that Mademoiselle Nick no longer liked you? Did you ever feel that she might—hate you?"

"It's difficult to say," said Frederica, slowly. "We lived an insincere life. She used to be fond of me."

"Tell me, M. Lazarus—it is not a time for false modesty, you understand—was there ever anything between you and her?"

"No." Lazarus shook his head. "I was attracted to her at one time. And then—I don't know why—I went off her."

"Ah!" said Poirot, nodding his head sagely. "That was her tragedy. She attracted people—and then they 'went off her.' Instead of liking her better and better you fell in love with her friend. She began to hate Madame—

Madame who had a rich friend behind her. Last winter when she made a will, she was fond of Madame. Later it was different.

“She remembered that will. She did not know that Croft had suppressed it—that it had never reached its destination. Madame (or so the world would say) had got a motive for desiring her death. So it was to Madame she telephoned asking her to get the chocolates. Tonight, the will would have been read, naming Madame her residuary legatee—and then the pistol would be found in her coat—the pistol with which Maggie Buckley was shot. If Madame found it, she might incriminate herself by trying to get rid of it.”

“She must have hated me,” murmured Frederica.

“Yes, Madame. You had what she had not—the knack of winning love, and keeping it.”

“I’m rather dense,” said Challenger, “but I haven’t quite fathomed the will business yet.”

“No? That’s a different business altogether—a very simple one. The Crofts are lying low down here. Madmoiselle Nick has to have an operation. She has made no will. The Crofts see a chance. They persuade her to make one and take charge of it for the post. Then, if anything happens to her—if she dies—they produce a cleverly forged will—leaving the money to Mrs. Croft with a reference to Australia and Philip Buckley whom they know once visited the country.

“But Mademoiselle Nick has her appendix removed quite satisfactorily so the forged will is no good. For the moment, that is. Then the attempts on her life begin. The Crofts are hopeful once more. Finally, I announce her death. The chance is too good to be missed. The forged will is immediately posted to M. Vyse. Of course, to begin with, they naturally thought her much richer than she is. They knew nothing about the mortgage.”

“What I really want to know, M. Poirot,” said Lazarus, “is how you actually got wise to all this. When did you begin to suspect?”

"Ah! there I am ashamed. I was so long—so long. There were things that worried me—yes. Things that seemed not quite right. Discrepancies between what Mademoiselle Nick told me and what other people told me. Unfortunately, I always believed Mademoiselle Nick.

"And then, suddenly, I got a revelation. Mademoiselle Nick made one mistake. She was too clever. When I urged her to send for a friend she promised to do so—and suppressed the fact that she had already sent for Mademoiselle Maggie. It seemed to her less suspicious—but it was a mistake."

"For Maggie Buckley wrote a letter home immediately on arrival, and in it she used one innocent phrase that puzzled me: 'I don't see why Nick should have telegraphed for me the way she did. Tuesday would have done just as well.' What did that mention of Tuesday mean? It could only mean one thing. Maggie had been coming to stay on Tuesday anyway. But in that case Mademoiselle Nick had lied—or had at any rate suppressed the truth.

"And for the first time I looked at her in a different light. I criticized her statements. Instead of believing them, I said, 'Suppose this were not true.' I remembered the discrepancies. 'How would it be if every time it was Mademoiselle Nick who was lying and not the other person?'

"I said to myself: 'Let us be simple. What has really happened?'

"And I saw that what had really happened was that Maggie Buckley had been killed. Just that! But who could want Maggie Buckley dead?

"And then I thought of something else—a few foolish remarks that Hastings had made not five minutes before. He had said that there were plenty of abbreviations for Margaret—Maggie, Margot, etc. And it suddenly occurred to me to wonder what was Mademoiselle Maggie's real name?

"Then, tout d'un coup, it came to me! Supposing her name was Magdala! It was a Buckley name, Mademoiselle Nick had told me so. Two Magadala Buckleys. Supposing . . .

“In my mind I ran over the letters of Michael Seton’s that I had read. Yes—there was nothing impossible. There was a mention of Scarborough—but Maggie had been in Scarborough with Nick—her mother had told me so.

“And it explained one thing which had worried me. Why were there so few letters? If a girl keeps her love letters at all, she keeps all of them. Why these select few? Was there any peculiarity about them?

“And I remembered that there was no name mentioned in them. They all began differently—but they began with a term of endearment. Nowhere in them was there the name—Nick.

“And there was something else, something that I ought to have seen at once—that cried the truth aloud.”

“What was that?”

“Why—this. Mademoiselle Nick underwent an operation for appendicitis on February 27th last. There is a letter of Michael Seton’s dated March 2nd, and no mention of anxiety, of illness or anything unusal. That ought to have shown me that the letters were written to a different person altogether.

“Then I went through a list of questions that I had made. And I answered them in the light of my new idea.

“In all but a few isolated questions the result was simple and convincing. And I answered, too, another question which I had asked myself earlier. Why did Mademoiselle Nick buy a black dress? The answer was that she and her cousin had to be dressed alike, with the scarlet shawl as an additional touch. That was the true and convincing answer, not the other. A girl would not buy mourning before she knew her lover was dead. She would be unreal—unnatural.

“And so I, in turn, staged my little drama. And the thing I hoped for happened! Nick Buckley had been very vehement about the question of a secret panel. She had declared there was no such thing. But if there were—and I did not see why Ellen should have invented it—Nick must know of it. Why was she so vehement? Was it possible that she had hidden the pistol there? With the secret intention of using it to throw suspicion on somebody later?

“I let her see that appearances were very black against Madame. That was as she had planned. As I foresaw, she was unable to resist the crowning proof. Besides it was safer for herself. That secret panel might be found by Ellen and the pistol in it!

“We are all safely in here. She is waiting outside for her cue. It is absolutely safe, she thinks, to take the pistol from its hiding place and put it in Madame’s coat. . . .

“And so—at the last—she failed. . . .”

Frederica shivered.

“All the same,” she said. “I’m glad I gave her my watch.”

“Yes, Madame.”

She looked up at him quickly.

“You know about that too?”

“What about Ellen?” I asked, breaking in. “Did she know or suspect anything?”

“No. I asked her. She told me that she decided to stay in the house that night because in her own phrase she ‘thought something was up.’ Apparently Nick urged her to see the fireworks rather too decisively. She had fathomed Nick’s dislike of Madame. She told me that ‘she felt in her bones something was going to happen,’ but she thought it was going to happen to Madame. She knew Miss Nick’s temper, she said, and she was always a queer little girl.”

“Yes,” murmured Frederica. “Yes, let us think of her like that. A queer little girl. A queer little girl who couldn’t help herself . . . I shall—anyway.”

Poirot took her hand and raised it gently to his lips.

Charles Vyse stirred uneasily.

"It's going to be a very unpleasant business," he said, quietly. "I must see about some kind of defence for her, I suppose."

"There will be no need, I think," said Poirot, gently. "Not if I am correct in my assumptions."

He turned suddenly on Challenger.

"That's where you put the stuff, isn't it?" he said. "In those wristwatches."

"I—I—" The sailor stammered—at a loss.

"Do not try and deceive me—with your hearty good-fellow manner. It has deceived Hastings—but it does not deceive me. You make a good thing out of it, do you not—the traffic in drugs—you and your uncle in Harley Street."

"M. Poirot."

Challenger rose to his feet.

My little friend blinked up at him placidly.

"You are the useful 'boyfriend.' Deny it, if you like. But I advise you, if you do not want the facts put in the hands of the police—to go."

And to my utter amazement, Challenger did go. He went from the room like a flash. I stared after him openmouthed.

Poirot laughed.

"I told you so, mon ami. Your instincts are always wrong. C'est épatant!"

"Cocaine was in the wristwatch—" I began.

"Yes, yes. That is how Mademoiselle Nick had it with her so conveniently at the nursing home. And having finished her supply in the chocolate box she asked Madame just now for hers which was full.”

“You mean she can’t do without it?”

“Non, non. Mademoiselle Nick is not a addict. Sometimes—for fun—that is all. But tonight she needed it for a different purpose. It will be a full dose this time.”

“You mean—?” I gasped.

“It is the best way. Better than the hangman’s rope. But pst! we must not say so before M. Vyse who is all for law and order. Officially I know nothing. The contents of the wristwatch—it is the merest guess on my part.”

“Your guesses are always right, M. Poirot,” said Frederica.

“I must be going,” said Charles Vyse, cold disapproval in his attitude as he left the room.

Poirot looked from Frederica to Lazarus.

“You are going to get married—eh?”

“As soon as we can.”

“And indeed, M. Poirot,” said Frederica. “I am not the drugtaker you think. I have cut myself down to a tiny dose. I think now—with happiness in front of me—I shall not need a wristwatch any more.”

“I hope you will have happiness, Madame,” said Poirot gently. “You have suffered a great deal. And in spite of everything you have suffered, you have still the quality of mercy in your heart. . . .”

“I will look after her,” said Lazarus. “My business is in a bad way, but I believe I shall pull through. And if I don’t—well, Frederica does not mind being poor—with me.”

She shook her head, smiling.

“It is late,” said Poirot, looking at the clock.

We all rose.

“We have spent a strange night in this strange house,” Poirot went on. “It is, I think, as Ellen says, an evil house. . . .”

He looked up at the picture of old Sir Nicholas.

Then, with a sudden gesture, he drew Lazarus aside.

“I ask your pardon, but, of all my questions, there is one still unanswered. Tell me, why did you offer fifty pounds for that picture? It would give me much pleasure to know—so as, you comprehend, to leave nothing unanswered.”

Lazarus looked at him with an impassive face for a minute or two. Then he smiled.

“You see, M. Poirot,” he said. “I am a dealer.”

“Exactly.”

“That picture is not worth a penny more than twenty pounds. I knew that if I offered Nick fifty, she would immediately suspect it was worth more and would get it valued elsewhere. Then she would find that I had offered her far more than it was worth. The next time I offered to buy a picture she would not have got it valued.”

“Yes, and then?”

“The picture on the far wall is worth at least five thousand pounds,” said Lazarus drily.

“Ah!” Poirot drew a long breath.

“Now I know everything,” he said happily.

Lord Edgware Dies (1933)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

A THEATRICAL PARTY

The memory of the public is short. Already the intense interest and excitement aroused by the murder of George Alfred St. Vincent Marsh, fourth Baron Edgware, is a thing past and forgotten. Newer sensations have taken its place.

My friend, Hercule Poirot, was never openly mentioned in connection with the case. This, I may say, was entirely in accordance with his own wishes. He did not choose to appear in it. The credit went elsewhere—and that is how he wished it to be. Moreover, from Poirot's own peculiar private point of view, the case was one of his failures. He always swears that it was the chance remark of a stranger in the street that put him on the right track.

However that may be, it was his genius that discovered the truth of the affair. But for Hercule Poirot I doubt if the crime would have been brought home to its perpetrator.

I feel therefore that the time has come for me to set down all I know of the affair in black and white. I know the ins and outs of the case thoroughly and I may also mention that I shall be fulfilling the wishes of a very fascinating lady in so doing.

I have often recalled that day in Poirot's prim neat little sitting room when, striding up and down a particular strip of carpet, my little friend gave us his masterly and astounding résumé of the case. I am going to begin my narrative where he did on that occasion—at a London theatre in June of last year.

Carlotta Adams was quite the rage in London at that moment. The year before she had given a couple of matinees which had been a wild success. This year she had had a three weeks' season of which this was the last night but one.

Carlotta Adams was an American girl with the most amazing talent for single-handed sketches unhampered by makeup or scenery. She seemed to speak every language with ease. Her sketch of an evening in a foreign hotel was really wonderful. In turn, American tourists, German tourists, middle-class English families, questionable ladies, impoverished Russian aristocrats and weary discreet waiters all flitted across the scene.

Her sketches went from grave to gay and back again. Her dying Czecho-Slovakian woman in hospital brought a lump to the throat. A minute later we were rocking with laughter as a dentist plied his trade and chatted amiably with his victims.

Her programme closed with what she announced as “Some Imitations.”

Here again, she was amazingly clever. Without makeup of any kind, her features seemed to dissolve suddenly and reform themselves into those of a famous politician, or a well-known actress, or a society beauty. In each character she gave a short typical speech. These speeches, by the way, were remarkably clever. They seemed to hit off every weakness of the subject selected.

One of her last impersonations was Jane Wilkinson—a talented young American actress well-known in London. It was really very clever. Inanities slipped off her tongue charged with some powerful emotional appeal so that in spite of yourself you felt that each word was uttered with some potent and fundamental meaning. Her voice, exquisitely toned, with a deep husky note in it, was intoxicating. The restrained gestures, each strangely significant, the slightly swaying body, the impression even, of strong physical beauty—how she did it, I cannot think!

I had always been an admirer of the beautiful Jane Wilkinson. She had thrilled me in her emotional parts, and I had always maintained in face of those who admitted her beauty but declared she was no actress, that she had considerable histrionic powers.

It was a little uncanny to hear that well-known, slightly husky voice with the fatalistic drop in it that had stirred me so often, and to watch that seemingly poignant gesture of the slowly closing and unclosing hand, and the sudden throw back of the head with the hair shaken back from the face that I realized she always gave at the close of a dramatic scene.

Jane Wilkinson was one of those actresses who had left the stage on her marriage only to return to it a couple of years later.

Three years ago she had married the wealthy but slightly eccentric Lord Edgware. Rumour went that she left him shortly afterwards. At any rate eighteen months after the marriage, she was acting for the films in America, and had this season appeared in a successful play in London.

Watching Carlotta Adams' clever but perhaps slightly malicious imitation, it occurred to me to wonder how much imitations were regarded by the subject selected. Were they pleased at the notoriety—at the advertisement it afforded? Or were they annoyed at what was, after all, a deliberate exposing of the tricks of their trade? Was not Carlotta Adams in the position of the rival conjurer who says: "Oh! this is an old trick! Very simple. I'll show you how this one's done!"

I decided that if I were the subject in question, I should be very much annoyed. I should, of course, conceal my vexation, but decidedly I should not like it. One would need great broadmindedness and a distinct sense of humour to appreciate such a merciless exposé.

I had just arrived at these conclusions when the delightful husky laugh from the stage was echoed from behind me.

I turned my head sharply. In the seat immediately behind mine, leaning forward with her lips slightly parted, was the subject of the present imitation—Lady Edgware, better known as Jane Wilkinson.

I realized immediately that my deductions had been all wrong. She was leaning forward, her lips parted, with an expression of delight and excitement in her eyes.

As the "imitation" finished, she applauded loudly, laughing and turning to her companion, a tall extremely good-looking man, of the Greek god type, whose face I recognized as one better known on the screen than on the stage. It was Bryan Martin, the hero of the screen most popular at the moment. He and Jane Wilkinson had been starred together in several screen productions.

“Marvellous, isn’t she?” Lady Edgware was saying.

He laughed.

“Jane—you look all excited.”

“Well, she really is too wonderful! Heaps better than I thought she’d be.”

I did not catch Bryan Martin’s amused rejoinder. Carlotta Adams had started on a fresh improvisation.

What happened later is, I shall always think, a very curious coincidence.

After the theatre, Poirot and I went on to supper at the Savoy.

At the very next table to ours were Lady Edgware, Bryan Martin and two other people whom I did not know. I pointed them out to Poirot and, as I was doing so, another couple came and took their places at the table beyond that again. The woman’s face was familiar and yet strangely enough, for the moment I could not place it.

Then suddenly I realized that it was Carlotta Adams at whom I was staring! The man I did not know. He was well-groomed, with a cheerful, somewhat vacuous face. Not a type that I admire.

Carlotta Adams was dressed very inconspicuously in black. Hers was not a face to command instant attention or recognition. It was one of those mobile sensitive faces that preeminently lend themselves to the art of mimicry. It could take on an alien character easily, but it had no very recognizable character of its own.

I imparted these reflections of mine to Poirot. He listened attentively, his egg-shaped head cocked slightly to one side whilst he darted a sharp glance at the two tables in question.

“So that is Lady Edgware? Yes, I remember—I have seen her act. She is belle femme.”

“And a fine actress too.”

“Possibly.”

“You don’t seem convinced.”

“I think it would depend on the setting, my friend. If she is the centre of the play, if all revolves round her—yes, then she could play her part. I doubt if she could play a small part adequately or even what is called a character part. The play must be written about her and for her. She appears to me of the type of women who are interested only in themselves.” He paused and then added rather unexpectedly: “Such people go through life in great danger.”

“Danger?” I said, surprised.

“I have used a word that surprises you, I see, mon ami. Yes, danger. Because, you see, a woman like that sees only one thing—herself. Such women see nothing of the dangers and hazards that surround them—the million conflicting interests and relationships of life. No, they see only their own forward path. And so—sooner or later—disaster.”

I was interested. I confessed to myself that such a point of view would not have struck me.

“And the other?” I asked.

“Miss Adams?”

His gaze swept to her table.

“Well?” he said, smiling. “What do you want me to say about her?”

“Only how she strikes you.”

“Mon cher, am I tonight the fortune-teller who reads the palm and tells the character?”

“You could do it better than most,” I rejoined.

“It is a very pretty faith that you have in me, Hastings. It touches me. Do you not know, my friend, that each one of us is a dark mystery, a maze of conflicting passions and desires and attitudes? Mais oui, c’est vrai. One makes one’s little judgments—but nine times out of ten one is wrong.”

“Not Hercule Poirot,” I said, smiling.

“Even Hercule Poirot! Oh! I know very well that you have always a little idea that I am conceited, but, indeed, I assure you, I am really a very humble person.”

I laughed.

“You—humble!”

“It is so. Except—I confess it—that I am a little proud of my moustaches. Nowhere in London have I observed anything to compare with them.”

“You are quite safe,” I said dryly. “You won’t. So you are not going to risk judgment on Carlotta Adams?”

“Elle est artiste!” said Poirot simply. “That covers nearly all, does it not?”

“Anyway, you don’t consider that she walks through life in peril?”

“We all do that, my friend,” said Poirot gravely. “Misfortune may always be waiting to rush out upon us. But as to your question, Miss Adams, I think, will succeed. She is shrewd and she is something more. You observed without doubt that she is a Jewess?”

I had not. But now that he mentioned it, I saw the faint traces of Semitic ancestry. Poirot nodded.

"It makes for success—that. Though there is still one avenue of danger—since it is of danger we are talking."

"You mean?"

"Love of money. Love of money might lead such a one from the prudent and cautious path."

"It might do that to all of us," I said.

"That is true, but at any rate you or I would see the danger involved. We could weigh the pros and cons. If you care for money too much, it is only the money you see, everything else is in shadow."

I laughed at his serious manner.

"Esmeralda, the gipsy queen, is in good form," I remarked teasingly.

"The psychology of character is interesting," returned Poirot unmoved. "One cannot be interested in crime without being interested in psychology. It is not the mere act of killing, it is what lies behind it that appeals to the expert. You follow me, Hastings?"

I said that I followed him perfectly.

"I have noticed that when we work on a case together, you are always urging me on to physical action, Hastings. You wish me to measure footprints, to analyse cigarette ash, to prostrate myself on my stomach for the examination of detail. You never realize that by lying back in an armchair with the eyes closed one can come nearer to the solution of any problem. One sees then with the eyes of the mind."

"I don't," I said. "When I lie back in an armchair with my eyes closed one thing happens to me and one thing only!"

"I have noticed it!" said Poirot. "It is strange. At such moments the brain should be working feverishly, not sinking into sluggish repose. The mental activity, it is so interesting, so stimulating! The employment of the little grey cells is a mental pleasure. They and they only can be trusted to lead one through fog to the truth….”

I am afraid that I have got into the habit of averting my attention whenever Poirot mentions his little grey cells. I have heard it all so often before.

In this instance my attention wandered to the four people sitting at the next table. When Poirot’s monologue drew to a close I remarked with a chuckle:

“You have made a hit, Poirot. The fair Lady Edgware can hardly take her eyes off you.”

“Doubtless she has been informed of my identity,” said Poirot, trying to look modest and failing.

“I think it is the famous moustaches,” I said. “She is carried away by their beauty.”

Poirot caressed them surreptitiously.

“It is true that they are unique,” he admitted. “Oh, my friend, the ‘toothbrush’ as you call it, that you wear—it is a horror—an atrocity—a wilful stunting of the bounties of nature. Abandon it, my friend, I pray of you.”

“By Jove,” I said, disregarding Poirot’s appeal. “The lady’s getting up. I believe she’s coming to speak to us. Bryan Martin is protesting, but she won’t listen to him.”

Sure enough, Jane Wilkinson swept impetuously from her seat and came over to our table. Poirot rose to his feet bowing, and I rose also.

“M. Hercule Poirot, isn’t it?” said the soft husky voice.

“At your service.”

“M. Poirot, I want to talk to you. I must talk to you.”

“But certainly, Madame, will you not sit down?”

"No, no, not here. I want to talk to you privately. We'll go right upstairs to my suite."

Bryan Martin had joined her, he spoke now with a deprecating laugh.

"You must wait a little, Jane. We're in the middle of supper. So is M. Poirot."

But Jane Wilkinson was not so easily turned from her purpose.

"Why, Bryan, what does that matter? We'll have supper sent up to the suite. Speak to them about it, will you? And, Bryan—"

She went after him as he was turning away and appeared to urge some course upon him. He stood out about it, I gathered, shaking his head and frowning. But she spoke even more emphatically and finally with a shrug of the shoulders he gave way.

Once or twice during her speech to him she had glanced at the table where Carlotta Adams sat, and I wondered if what she were suggesting had anything to do with the American girl.

Her point gained, Jane came back, radiant.

"We'll go right up now," she said, and included me in a dazzling smile.

The question of our agreeing or not agreeing to her plan didn't seem to occur to her mind. She swept us off without a shade of apology.

"It's the greatest luck just seeing you here this evening, M. Poirot," she said as she led the way to the lift. "It's wonderful how everything seems to turn out right for me. I'd just been thinking and wondering what on earth I was going to do and I looked up and there you were at the next table, and I said to myself: 'M. Poirot will tell me what to do.'"

She broke off to say "Second Floor" to the liftboy.

"If I can be of aid to you—" began Poirot.

"I'm sure you can. I've heard you're just the most marvellous man that ever existed. Somebody's got to get me out of the tangle I'm in and I feel you're just the man to do it."

We got out at the second floor and she led the way along the corridor, paused at a door and entered one of the most opulent of the Savoy suites.

Casting her white fur wrap on one chair, and her small jewelled bag on the table, the actress sank on to a chair and exclaimed:

"M. Poirot, somehow or other I've just got to get rid of my husband!"

Two

A SUPPER PARTY

After a moment's astonishment Poirot recovered himself!

"But, Madame," he said, his eyes twinkling, "getting rid of husbands is not my speciality."

"Well, of course I know that."

"It is a lawyer you require."

"That's just where you're wrong. I'm just about sick and tired of lawyers. I've had straight lawyers and crooked lawyers, and not one of them's done me any good. Lawyers just know the law, they don't seem to have any kind of natural sense."

"And you think I have?"

She laughed.

"I've heard that you're the cat's whiskers, M. Poirot."

"Comment? The cat's whiskers? I do not understand."

"Well—that you're it."

"Madame, I may or may not have brains—as a matter of fact I have—why pretend? But your little affair, it is not my genre."

"I don't see why not. It's a problem."

"Oh! a problem!"

"And it's difficult," went on Jane Wilkinson. "I should say you weren't the man to shy at difficulties."

“Let me compliment you on your insight, Madame. But all the same, me, I do not make the investigations for divorce. It is not pretty—ce métier là.”

“My dear man. I’m not asking you to do spying work. It wouldn’t be any good. But I’ve just got to get rid of the man, and I’m sure you could tell me how to do it.”

Poirot paused awhile before replying. When he did, there was a new note in his voice.

“First tell me, Madame, why are you so anxious to ‘get rid’ of Lord Edgware?”

There was no delay or hesitation about her answer. It came swift and pat.

“Why, of course. I want to get married again. What other reason could there be?”

Her great blue eyes opened ingenuously.

“But surely a divorce should be easy to obtain?”

“You don’t know my husband, M. Poirot. He’s—he’s—” She shivered. “I don’t know how to explain it. He’s a queer man—he’s not like other people.”

She paused and then went on.

“He should never have married—anyone. I know what I’m talking about. I just can’t describe him, but he’s—queer. His first wife, you know, ran away from him. Left a baby of three months behind. He never divorced her and she died miserably abroad somewhere. Then he married me. Well—I couldn’t stick it. I was frightened. I left him and went to the States. I’ve no grounds for a divorce, and if I’ve given him grounds for one, he won’t take notice of them. He’s—he’s a kind of fanatic.”

“In certain American states you could obtain a divorce, Madame.”

“That’s no good to me—not if I’m going to live in England.”

"You want to live in England?"

"Yes."

"Who is the man you want to marry?"

"That's just it. The Duke of Merton."

I drew in my breath sharply. The Duke of Merton had so far been the despair of matchmaking mammas. A young man of monkish tendencies, a violent Anglo-Catholic, he was reported to be completely under the thumb of his mother, the redoubtable dowager duchess. His life was austere in the extreme. He collected Chinese porcelain and was reputed to be of aesthetic tastes. He was supposed to care nothing for women.

"I'm just crazy about him," said Jane sentimentally. "He's unlike anyone I ever met, and Merton Castle is too wonderful. The whole thing is the most romantic business that ever happened. He's so good-looking too—like a dreamy kind of monk."

She paused.

"I'm going to give up the stage when I marry. I just don't seem to care about it anymore."

"In the meantime," said Poirot dryly, "Lord Edgware stands in the way of these romantic dreams."

"Yes—and it's driving me to distraction." She leaned back thoughtfully. "Of course if we were only in Chicago I could get him bumped off quite easily, but you don't seem to run to gunmen over here."

"Over here," said Poirot, smiling, "we consider that every human has the right to live."

"Well, I don't know about that. I guess you'd be better off without some of your politicians, and knowing what I do of Edgware I think he'd be no loss—rather the contrary."

There was a knock at the door, and a waiter entered with supper dishes. Jane Wilkinson continued to discuss her problem with no appreciation of his presence.

“But I don’t want you to kill him for me, M. Poirot.”

“Merci, Madame.”

“I thought perhaps you might argue with him in some clever way. Get him to give in to the idea of divorce. I’m sure you could.”

“I think you overrate my persuasive powers, Madame.”

“Oh! but you can surely think of something, M. Poirot.” She leaned forward. Her blue eyes opened wide again. “You’d like me to be happy, wouldn’t you?”

Her voice was soft, low and deliciously seductive.

“I should like everybody to be happy,” said Poirot cautiously.

“Yes, but I wasn’t thinking of everybody. I was thinking of just me.”

“I should say you always do that, Madame.”

He smiled.

“You think I’m selfish?”

“Oh! I did not say so, Madame.”

“I daresay I am. But, you see, I do so hate being unhappy. It affects my acting, even. And I’m going to be ever so unhappy unless he agrees to a divorce—or dies.

“On the whole,” she continued thoughtfully, “it would be much better if he died, I mean, I’d feel more finally quit of him.”

She looked at Poirot for sympathy.

"You will help me, won't you, M. Poirot?" She rose, picking up the white wrap, and stood looking appealingly into his face. I heard the noise of voices outside in the corridor. The door was ajar. "If you don't—" she went on.

"If I don't, Madame?"

She laughed.

"I'll have to call a taxi to go round and bump him off myself."

Laughing, she disappeared through a door to an adjoining room just as Bryan Martin came in with the American girl, Carlotta Adams, and her escort, and the two people who had been supping with him and Jane Wilkinson. They were introduced to me as Mr. and Mrs. Widburn.

"Hello!" said Bryan. "Where's Jane? I want to tell her I've succeeded in the commission she gave me."

Jane appeared in the doorway of the bedroom. She held a lipstick in one hand.

"Have you got her? How marvellous. Miss Adams, I do admire your performance so. I felt I just had to know you. Come in here and talk to me while I fix my face. It's looking too perfectly frightful."

Carlotta Adams accepted the invitation. Bryan Martin flung himself down in a chair.

"Well, M. Poirot," he said. "You were duly captured. Has our Jane persuaded you to fight her battles? You might as well give in sooner as later. She doesn't understand the word 'No.'"

"She has not come across it, perhaps."

"A very interesting character, Jane," said Bryan Martin. He lay back in his hair and puffed cigarette smoke idly towards the ceiling. "Taboos have no meaning for her. No morals whatever. I don't mean she's exactly immoral—

she isn’t. Amoral is the word, I believe. Just sees one thing only in life—what Jane wants.”

He laughed.

“I believe she’d kill somebody quite cheerfully—and feel injured if they caught her and wanted to hang her for it. The trouble is that she would be caught. She hasn’t any brains. Her idea of a murder would be to drive up in a taxi, sail in under her own name and shoot.”

“Now, I wonder what makes you say that?” murmured Poirot.

“Eh?”

“You know her well, Monsieur?”

“I should say I did.”

He laughed again, and it struck me that his laugh was unusually bitter.

“You agree, don’t you?” he flung out to the others.

“Oh! Jane’s an egoist,” agreed Mrs. Widburn. “An actress has got to be, though. That is, if she wants to express her personality.”

Poirot did not speak. His eyes were resting on Bryan Martin’s face, dwelling there with a curious speculative expression that I could not quite understand.

At that moment Jane sailed in from the next room, Carlotta Adams behind her. I presume that Jane had now “fixed her face,” whatever that term denoted, to her own satisfaction. It looked to me exactly the same as before and quite incapable of improvement.

The supper party that followed was quite a merry one, yet I sometimes had the feeling that there were undercurrents which I was incapable of appreciating.

Jane Wilkinson I acquitted of any subtleties. She was obviously a young woman who saw only one thing at a time. She had desired an interview with Poirot, and had carried her point and obtained her desire without delay. Now she was obviously in high good humour. Her desire to include Carlotta Adams in the party had been, I decided, a mere whim. She had been highly amused, as a child might be amused, by the clever counterfeit of herself.

No, the undercurrents that I sensed were nothing to do with Jane Wilkinson. In what direction did they lie?

I studied the guests in turn. Bryan Martin? He was certainly not behaving quite naturally. But that, I told myself, might be merely characteristic of a film star. The exaggerated self-consciousness of a vain man too accustomed to playing a part to lay it aside easily.

Carlotta Adams, at any rate, was behaving naturally enough. She was a quiet girl with a pleasant low voice. I studied her with some attention now that I had a chance to do so at close quarters. She had, I thought, distinct charm, but charm of a somewhat negative order. It consisted in an absence of any jarring or strident note. She was a kind of personified soft agreement. Her very appearance was negative. Soft dark hair, eyes a rather colourless pale blue, pale face and a mobile sensitive mouth. A face that you liked but that you would find it hard to know again if you were to meet her, say, in different clothes.

She seemed pleased at Jane’s graciousness and complimentary sayings. Any girl would be, I thought—and then—just at that moment—something occurred that caused me to revise that rather hasty opinion.

Carlotta Adams looked across the table at her hostess who was at that moment turning her head to talk to Poirot. There was a curious scrutinizing quality in the girl’s gaze—it seemed a deliberate summing up, and at the same time it struck me that there was a very definite hostility in those pale blue eyes.

Fancy, perhaps. Or possibly professional jealousy. Jane was a successful actress who had definitely arrived. Carlotta was merely climbing the ladder.

I looked at the three other members of the party. Mr. and Mrs. Widburn, what about them? He was a tall cadaverous man, she a plump, fair, gushing soul. They appeared to be wealthy people with a passion for everything connected with the stage. They were in fact, unwilling to talk on any other subject. Owing to my recent absence from England they found me sadly ill-informed, and finally Mrs. Widburn turned a plump shoulder on me and remembered my existence no more.

The last member of the party was the dark young man with the round cheerful face who was Carlotta Adams' escort. I had had my suspicions from the first that the young man was not quite so sober as he might have been. As he drank more champagne this became even more clearly apparent.

He appeared to be suffering from a profound sense of injury. For the first half of the meal he sat in gloomy silence. Towards the latter half he unbosomed himself to me apparently under the impression that I was one of his oldest friends.

"What I mean to say," he said. "It isn't. No, dear old chap, it isn't—"

I omit the slight slurring together of the words.

"I mean to say," he went on, "I ask you? I mean if you take a girl—well, I mean—butting in. Going round upsetting things. Not as though I'd ever said a word to her I shouldn't have done. She's not the sort. You know—Puritan fathers—the Mayflower—all that. Dash it—the girl's straight. What I mean is—what was I saying?"

"That it was hard lines," I said soothingly.

"Well, dash it all, it is. Dash it, I had to borrow the money for this beano from my tailor. Very obliging chap, my tailor. I've owed him money for years. Makes a sort of bond between us. Nothing like a bond, is there, dear old fellow. You and I. You and I. Who the devil are you, by the way?"

"My name is Hastings."

“You don’t say so. Now I could have sworn you were a chap called Spencer Jones. Dear old Spencer Jones. Met him at the Eton and Harrow and borrowed a fiver from him. What I say is one face is very like another face—that’s what I say. If we were a lot of Chinks we wouldn’t know each other apart.”

He shook his head sadly, then cheered up suddenly and drank off some more champagne.

“Anyway,” he said. “I’m not a damned nigger.”

This reflection seemed to cause him such elation that he presently made several remarks of a hopeful character.

“Look on the bright side, my boy,” he adjured me. “What I say is, look on the bright side. One of these days—when I’m seventy-five or so, I’m going to be a rich man. When my uncle dies. Then I can pay my tailor.”

He sat smiling happily at the thought.

There was something strangely likeable about the young man. He had a round face and an absurdly small black moustache that gave one the impression of being marooned in the middle of a desert.

Carlotta Adams, I noticed, had an eye on him, and it was after a glance in his direction that she rose and broke up the party.

“It was just sweet of you to come up here,” said Jane. “I do so love doing things on the spur of the moment, don’t you?”

“No,” said Miss Adams. “I’m afraid I always plan a thing out very carefully before I do it. It saves—worry.”

There was something faintly disagreeable in her manner.

“Well, at any rate the results justify you,” laughed Jane. “I don’t know when I enjoyed anything so much as I did your show tonight.”

The American girl’s face relaxed.

“Well, that’s very sweet of you,” she said warmly. “And I guess I appreciate your telling me so. I need encouragement. We all do.”

“Carlotta,” said the young man with the black moustache. “Shake hands and say thank you for the party to Aunt Jane and come along.”

The way he walked straight through the door was a miracle of concentration. Carlotta followed him quickly.

“Well,” said Jane, “what was that that blew in and called me Aunt Jane? I hadn’t noticed him before.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Widburn. “You mustn’t take any notice of him. Most brilliant as a boy in the O.U.D.S. You’d hardly think so now, would you? I hate to see early promise come to nothing. But Charles and I positively must toddle.”

The Widburns duly toddled and Bryan Martin went with them.

“Well, M. Poirot?”

He smiled at her.

“Eh bien, Lady Edgware?”

“For goodness’ sake, don’t call me that. Let me forget it! If you aren’t the hardest-hearted little man in Europe!”

“But no, but no, I am not hard-hearted.”

Poirot, I thought, had had quite enough champagne, possibly a glass too much.

“Then you’ll go and see my husband? And make him do what I want?”

“I will go and see him,” Poirot promised cautiously.

“And if he turns you down—as he will—you’ll think of a clever plan. They say you’re the cleverest man in England, M. Poirot.”

“Madame, when I am hard-hearted, it is Europe you mention. But for cleverness you say only England.”

“If you put this through I’ll say the universe.”

Poirot raised a deprecating hand.

“Madame, I promise nothing. In the interests of the psychology I will endeavour to arrange a meeting with your husband.”

“Psychoanalyse him as much as you like. Maybe it would do him good. But you’ve got to pull it off—for my sake. I’ve got to have my romance, M. Poirot.”

She added dreamily: “Just think of the sensation it will make.”

Three

THE MAN WITH THE GOLD TOOTH

It was a few days later, when we were sitting at breakfast, that Poirot flung across to me a letter that he had just opened.

"Well, mon ami," he said. "What do you think of that?"

The note was from Lord Edgware and in stiff formal language it made an appointment for the following day at eleven.

I must say that I was very much surprised. I had taken Poirot's words uttered lightly in a convivial moment, and I had had no idea that he had actually taken steps to carry out his promise.

Poirot, who was very quick-witted, read my mind and his eyes twinkled a little.

"But yes, mon ami, it was not solely the champagne."

"I didn't mean that."

"But yes—but yes—you thought to yourself, the poor old one, he has the spirit of the party, he promises things that he will not perform—that he has no intention of performing. But, my friend, the promises of Hercule Poirot are sacred."

He drew himself up in a stately manner as he said the last words. "Of course. Of course. I know that," I said hastily. "But I thought that perhaps your judgment was slightly—what shall I say—influenced."

"I am not in the habit of letting my judgment be 'influenced' as you call it, Hastings. The best and driest of champagne, the most golden-haired and seductive of women—nothing influences the judgment of Hercule Poirot. No, mon ami, I am interested—that is all."

"In Jane Wilkinson's love affair?"

"Not exactly that. Her love affair, as you call it, is a very commonplace business. It is a step in the successful career of a very beautiful woman. If the Duke of Merton had neither a title nor wealth his romantic likeness to a dreamy monk would no longer interest the lady. No, Hastings, what intrigues me is the psychology of the matter. The interplay of character. I welcome the chance of studying Lord Edgware at close quarters."

"You do not expect to be successful in your mission?"

"Pourquoi pas? Every man has his weak spot. Do not imagine, Hastings, that because I am studying the case from a psychological standpoint, I shall not try my best to succeed in the commission entrusted to me. I always enjoy exercising my ingenuity."

I had feared an allusion to the little grey cells and was thankful to be spared it.

"So we go to Regent Gate at eleven tomorrow?" I said.

"We?" Poirot raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Poirot!" I cried. "You are not going to leave me behind. I always go with you."

"If it were a crime, a mysterious poisoning case, an assassination—ah! these are the things your soul delights in. But a mere matter of social adjustment?"

"Not another word," I said determinedly. "I'm coming."

Poirot laughed gently, and at that moment we were told that a gentleman had called.

To our great surprise our visitor proved to be Bryan Martin.

The actor looked older by daylight. He was still handsome, but it was a kind of ravaged handsomeness. It flashed across my mind that he might conceivably take drugs. There was a kind of nervous tension about him that suggested the possibility.

“Good morning, M. Poirot,” he said in a cheerful manner. “You and Captain Hastings breakfast at a reasonable hour, I am glad to see. By the way, I suppose you are very busy just now?”

Poirot smiled at him amiably.

“No,” he said. “At the moment I have practically no business of importance on hand.”

“Come now,” laughed Bryan. “Not called in by Scotland Yard? No delicate matters to investigate for Royalty? I can hardly believe it.”

“You confound fiction with reality, my friend,” said Poirot, smiling. “I am, I assure you, at the moment completely out of work, though not yet on the dole. Dieu merci.”

“Well, that’s luck for me,” said Bryan with another laugh. “Perhaps you’ll take on something for me.”

Poirot considered the young man thoughtfully.

“You have a problem for me—yes?” he said in a minute or two.

“Well—it’s like this. I have and I haven’t.”

This time his laugh was rather nervous. Still considering him thoughtfully, Poirot indicated a chair. The young man took it. He sat facing us, for I had taken a seat by Poirot’s side.

“And now,” said Poirot, “let us hear all about it.”

Bryan Martin still seemed to have a little difficulty in getting under way.

“The trouble is that I can’t tell you quite as much as I’d like to.” He hesitated. “It’s difficult. You see, the whole business started in America.”

“In America? Yes?”

“A mere incident first drew my attention to it. As a matter of fact, I was travelling by train and I noticed a certain fellow. Ugly little chap, clean-shaven, glasses, and a gold tooth.”

“Ah! a gold tooth.”

“Exactly. That’s really the crux of the matter.”

Poirot nodded his head several times.

“I begin to comprehend. Go on.”

“Well, as I say. I just noticed the fellow. I was travelling, by the way, to New York. Six months later I was in Los Angeles, and I noticed the fellow again. Don’t know why I should have—but I did. Still, nothing in that.”

“Continue.”

“A month afterwards I had occasion to go to Seattle, and shortly after I got there who should I see but my friend again, only this time he wore a beard.”

“Distinctly curious.”

“Wasn’t it? Of course I didn’t fancy it had anything to do with me at that time, but when I saw the man again in Los Angeles, beardless, in Chicago with a moustache and different eyebrows and in a mountain village disguised as a hobo—well, I began to wonder.”

“Naturally.”

“And at last—well, it seemed odd—but not a doubt about it. I was being what you call shadowed.”

“Most remarkable.”

“Wasn’t it? After that I made sure of it. Wherever I was, there, somewhere near at hand, was my shadow made up in different disguises. Fortunately, owing to the gold tooth, I could always spot him.”

“Ah! that gold tooth, it was a very fortunate occurrence.”

“It was.”

“Pardon me, M. Martin, but did you never speak to the man? Question him as to the reason of his persistent shadowing?”

“No, I didn’t.” The actor hesitated. “I thought of doing so once or twice, but I always decided against it. It seemed to me that I should merely put the fellow on his guard and learn nothing. Possibly once they had discovered that I had spotted him, they would have put someone else on my track—someone whom I might not recognize.”

“En effet…someone without that useful gold tooth.”

“Exactly. I may have been wrong—but that’s how I figured it out.”

“Now, M. Martin, you referred to ‘they’ just now. Whom did you mean by ‘they?’”

“It was a mere figure of speech used for convenience. I assumed—I don’t know why—a nebulous ‘they’ in the background.”

“Have you any reason for that belief?”

“None.”

“You mean you have no conception of who could want you shadowed or for what purpose?”

“Not the slightest idea. At least—”

“Continuez,” said Poirot encouragingly.

“I have an idea,” said Bryan Martin slowly. “It’s a mere guess on my part, mind.”

"A guess may be very successful sometimes, Monsieur."

"It concerns a certain incident that took place in London about two years ago. It was a slight incident, but an inexplicable and an unforgettable one. I've often wondered and puzzled over it. Just because I could find no explanation of it at the time, I am inclined to wonder if this shadowing business might not be connected in some way with it—but for the life of me I can't see why or how."

"Perhaps I can."

"Yes, but you see—" Bryan Martin's embarrassment returned. "The awkward thing is that I can't tell you about it—not now, that is. In a day or so I might be able to."

Stung into further speech by Poirot's inquiring glance he continued desperately.

"You see—a girl was concerned in it."

"Ah! parfaitement! An English girl?"

"Yes. At least—why?"

"Very simple. You cannot tell me now, but you hope to do so in a day or two. That means that you want to obtain the consent of the young lady. Therefore she is in England. Also, she must have been in England during the time you were shadowed, for if she had been in America you would have sought her out then and there. Therefore, since she has been in England for the last eighteen months she is probably, though not certainly, English. It is good reasoning that, eh?"

"Rather. Now tell me, M. Poirot, if I get her permission, will you look into the matter for me?"

There was a pause. Poirot seemed to be debating the matter in his mind. Finally he said:

"Why have you come to me before going to her?"

“Well, I thought—” he hesitated. “I wanted to persuade her to—to clear things up—I mean to let things be cleared up by you. What I mean is, if you investigate the affair, nothing need be made public, need it?”

“That depends,” said Poirot calmly.

“What do you mean?”

“If there is any question of crime—”

“Oh! there’s no crime concerned.”

“You do not know. There may be.”

“But you would do your best for her—for us?”

“That, naturally.”

He was silent for a moment and then said:

“Tell me, this follower of yours—this shadow—of what age was he?”

“Oh! quite youngish. About thirty.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “That is indeed remarkable. Yes, that makes the whole thing very much more interesting.”

I stared at him. So did Bryan Martin. This remark of his was, I am sure, equally unexplicable to us both. Bryan questioned me with a lift of the eyebrows. I shook my head.

“Yes,” murmured Poirot. “It makes the whole story very interesting.”

“He may have been older,” said Bryan doubtfully, “but I don’t think so.”

“No, no, I am sure your observation is quite accurate, M. Martin. Very interesting—extraordinarily interesting.”

Rather taken aback by Poirot’s enigmatical words, Bryan Martin seemed at a loss what to say or do next. He started making desultory conversation.

“An amusing party the other night,” he said. “Jane Wilkinson is the most high-handed woman that ever existed.”

“She has the single vision,” said Poirot, smiling. “One thing at a time.”

“She gets away with it, too,” said Martin. “How people stand it, I don’t know!”

“One will stand a good deal from a beautiful woman, my friend,” said Poirot with a twinkle. “If she had the pug nose, the sallow skin, the greasy hair, then—ah! then she would not ‘get away with it’ as you put it.”

“I suppose not,” conceded Bryan. “But it makes me mad sometimes. All the same, I’m devoted to Jane, though in some ways, mind you, I don’t think she’s quite all there.”

“On the contrary, I should say she was very much on the spot.”

“I don’t mean that, exactly. She can look after her interests all right. She’s got plenty of business shrewdness. No, I mean morally.”

“Ah! morally.”

“She’s what they call amoral. Right and wrong don’t exist for her.”

“Ah! I remember you said something of the kind the other evening.”

“We were talking of crime just now—”

“Yes, my friend?”

“Well, it would never surprise me if Jane committed a crime.”

“And you should know her well,” murmured Poirot thoughtfully. “You have acted much with her, have you not?”

"Yes. I suppose I know her through and through and up and down. I can see her killing, and quite easily."

"Ah! she has the hot temper, yes?"

"No, no, not at all. Cool as a cucumber. I mean if anyone were in her way she'd just remove them—without a thought. And one couldn't really blame her—morally, I mean. She'd just think that anyone who interfered with Jane Wilkinson had got to go."

There was a bitterness in his last words that had been lacking heretofore. I wondered what memory he was recalling.

"You think she would do—murder?"

Poirot watched him intently.

Bryan drew a deep breath.

"Upon my soul, I do. Perhaps one of these days, you'll remember my words…know her, you see. She'd kill as easily as she'd drink her morning tea. I mean it, M. Poirot."

He had risen to his feet.

"Yes," said Poirot quietly. "I can see you mean it."

"I know her," said Bryan Martin again, "through and through."

He stood frowning for a minute, then with a change of tone, he said:

"As to this business we've been talking about, I'll let you know, M. Poirot, in a few days. You will undertake it, won't you?"

Poirot looked at him for a moment or two without replying.

"Yes," he said at last. "I will undertake it. I find it—interesting."

There was something queer in the way he said the last word. I went downstairs with Bryan Martin. At the door he said to me:

“Did you get the hang of what he meant about that fellow’s age? I mean, why was it interesting that he should be about thirty? I didn’t get the hang of that at all.”

“No more did I,” I admitted.

“It doesn’t seem to make sense. Perhaps he was just having a game with me.”

“No,” I said. “Poirot is not like that. Depend upon it, the point has significance since he says so.”

“Well, blessed if I can see it. Glad you can’t either. I’d hate to feel I was a complete nut.”

He strode away. I rejoined my friend.

“Poirot,” I said. “What was the point about the age of the shadower?”

“You do not see? My poor Hastings!” He smiled and shook his head. Then he asked: “What did you think of our interview on the whole?”

“There’s so little to go upon. It seems difficult to say. If we knew more—”

“Even without knowing more, do not certain ideas suggest themselves to you, mon ami?”

The telephone ringing at that moment saved me from the ignominy of admitting that no ideas whatever suggested themselves to me. I took up the receiver.

A woman’s voice spoke, a crisp, clear efficient voice.

“This is Lord Edgware’s secretary speaking. Lord Edgware regrets that he must cancel the appointment with M. Poirot for tomorrow morning. He has to go over to Paris tomorrow unexpectedly. He could see M. Poirot for a few minutes at a quarter past twelve this morning if that would be convenient.”

I consulted Poirot.

“Certainly, my friend, we will go there this morning.”

I repeated this into the mouthpiece.

“Very good,” said the crisp businesslike voice. “A quarter past twelve this morning.”

She rang off.

Four

AN INTERVIEW

I arrived with Poirot at Lord Edgware’s house in Regent Gate in a very pleasant state of anticipation. Though I had not Poirot’s devotion to “the psychology,” yet the few words in which Lady Edgware had referred to her husband had aroused my curiosity. I was anxious to see what my own judgment would be.

The house was an imposing one—well-built, handsome and slightly gloomy. There were no window boxes or such frivolities.

The door was opened to us promptly, and by no aged white-haired butler such as would have been in keeping with the exterior of the house. On the contrary, it was opened by one of the handsomest young men I have ever seen. Tall, fair, he might have posed to a sculptor for Hermes or Apollo. Despite his good looks there was something vaguely effeminate that I disliked about the softness of his voice. Also, in a curious way, he reminded me of someone—someone, too, whom I had met quite lately—but who it was I could not for the life of me remember.

We asked for Lord Edgware.

“This way, sir.”

He led us along the hall, past the staircase, to a door at the rear of the hall.

Opening it, he announced us in that same soft voice which I instinctively distrusted.

The room into which we were shown was a kind of library. The walls were lined with books, the furnishings were dark and sombre but handsome, the chairs were formal and not too comfortable.

Lord Edgware, who rose to receive us, was a tall man of about fifty. He had dark hair streaked with grey, a thin face and a sneering mouth. He looked bad-tempered and bitter. His eyes had a queer secretive look about them. There was something, I thought, distinctly odd about those eyes.

His manner was stiff and formal.

“M. Hercule Poirot? Captain Hastings? Please be seated.”

We sat down. The room felt chilly. There was little light coming in from the one window and the dimness contributed to the cold atmosphere.

Lord Edgware had taken up a letter which I saw to be in my friend’s handwriting.

“I am familiar, of course, with your name, M. Poirot. Who is not?” Poirot bowed at the compliment. “But I cannot quite understand your position in this matter. You say that you wish to see me on behalf of”—he paused—“my wife.”

He said the last two words in a peculiar way—as though it were an effort to get them out.

“That is so,” said my friend.

“I understood that you were an investigator of—crime, M. Poirot?”

“Of problems, Lord Edgware. There are problems of crime, certainly. There are other problems.”

“Indeed. And what may this one be?”

The sneer in his words was palpable by now. Poirot took no notice of it.

“I have the honour to approach you on behalf of Lady Edgware,” he said. “Lady Edgware, as you may know, desires—a divorce.”

“I am quite aware of that,” said Lord Edgware coldly.

"Her suggestion was that you and I should discuss the matter."

"There is nothing to discuss."

"You refuse, then?"

"Refuse? Certainly not."

Whatever else Poirot had expected, he had not expected this. It is seldom that I have seen my friend utterly taken aback, but I did on this occasion. His appearance was ludicrous. His mouth fell open, his hands flew out, his eyebrows rose. He looked like a cartoon in a comic paper.

"Comment?" he cried. "What is this? You do not refuse?"

"I am at a loss to understand your astonishment, M. Poirot."

"Ecoutez, you are willing to divorce your wife?"

"Certainly I am willing. She knows that perfectly well. I wrote and told her so."

"You wrote and told her so?"

"Yes. Six months ago."

"But I do not understand. I do not understand at all."

Lord Edgware said nothing.

"I understood that you were opposed to the principle of divorce."

"I do not see that my principles are your business, M. Poirot. It is true that I did not divorce my first wife. My conscience would not allow me to do so. My second marriage, I will admit frankly, was a mistake. When my wife suggested a divorce, I refused point blank. Six months ago she wrote to me again urging the point. I have an idea she wanted to marry again—some film actor or fellow of that kind. My views had, by this time, undergone modification. I wrote to her at Hollywood telling her so. Why she has sent you to me I cannot imagine. I suppose it is a question of money."

His lips sneered again as he said the last words.

"Extremely curious," muttered Poirot. "Extremely curious. There is something here I do not understand at all."

"As regards money," went on Lord Edgware. "My wife deserted me of her own accord. If she wishes to marry another man, I can set her free to do so, but there is no reason why she should receive a penny from me and she will not do so."

"There is no question of any financial arrangement."

Lord Edgware raised his eyebrows.

"Jane must be marrying a rich man," he murmured cynically.

"There is something here that I do not understand," said Poirot. His face was perplexed and wrinkled with the effort of thought. "I understood from Lady Edgware that she had approached you repeatedly through lawyers?"

"She did," replied Lord Edgware dryly. "English lawyers, American lawyers, every kind of lawyer, down to the lowest kind of scallywag. Finally, as I say, she wrote to me herself."

"You have previously refused?"

"That is so."

"But on receiving her letter, you changed your mind. Why did you change your mind, Lord Edgware?"

"Not on account of anything in that letter," he said sharply. "My views happened to have changed, that is all."

"The change was somewhat sudden."

Lord Edgware did not reply.

“What special circumstances brought about your change of mind, Lord Edgware?”

“That, really, is my own business M. Poirot. I cannot enter into the subject. Shall we say that gradually I had perceived the advantages of severing what—you will forgive my plain speaking—I considered a degrading association. My second marriage was a mistake.”

“Your wife says the same,” said Poirot softly.

“Does she?”

There was a queer flicker for a moment in his eyes, but it was gone almost at once.

He rose with an air of finality and as we said good-bye his manner became less unbending.

“You must forgive my altering the appointment. I have to go over to Paris tomorrow.”

“Perfectly—perfectly.”

“A sale of works of art as a matter of fact. I have my eye on a little statuette—a perfect thing in its way—a macabre way, perhaps. But I enjoy the macabre. I always have. My taste is peculiar.”

Again that queer smile. I had been looking at the books in the shelves near. There were the memoirs of Casanova, also a volume on the Comte de Sade, another on mediaeval tortures.

I remembered Jane Wilkinson’s little shudder as she spoke of her husband. That had not been acting. That had been real enough. I wondered exactly what kind of a man George Alfred St. Vincent Marsh, fourth Baron Edgware, was.

Very suavely he bid us farewell, touching the bell as he did so. We went out of the door. The Greek god of a butler was waiting in the hall. As I closed the library door behind me, I glanced back into the room. I almost uttered an exclamation as I did so.

That suave smiling face was transformed. The lips were drawn back from the teeth in a snarl, the eyes were alive with fury and an almost insane rage.

I wondered no longer that two wives had left Lord Edgware. What I did marvel at was the iron self-control of the man. To have gone through that interview with such frozen self-control, such aloof politeness!

Just as we reached the front door, a door on the right opened. A girl stood at the doorway of the room, shrinking back a little as she saw us.

She was a tall slender girl, with dark hair and a white face. Her eyes, dark and startled, looked for a moment into mine. Then, like a shadow, she shrank back into the room again, closing the door.

A moment later we were out in the street. Poirot hailed a taxi. We got in and he told the man to drive to the Savoy.

"Well, Hastings," he said with a twinkle, "that interview did not go at all as I figured to myself it would."

"No, indeed. What an extraordinary man Lord Edgware is."

I related to him how I had looked back before closing the door of the study and what I had seen. He nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully.

"I fancy that he is very near the borderline of madness, Hastings. I should imagine he practises many curious vices, and that beneath his frigid exterior he hides a deep-rooted instinct of cruelty."

"It is no wonder both his wives left him."

"As you say."

“Poirot, did you notice a girl as we were coming out? A dark girl with a white face.”

“Yes, I noticed her, mon ami. A young lady who was frightened and not happy.”

His voice was grave.

“Who do you think she was?”

“Probably his daughter. He has one.”

“She did look frightened,” I said slowly. “That house must be a gloomy place for a young girl.”

“Yes, indeed. Ah! here we are, mon ami. Now to acquaint her ladyship with the good news.”

Jane was in, and after telephoning, the clerk informed us that we were to go up. A page boy took us to the door.

It was opened by a neat middle-aged woman with glasses and primly arranged grey hair. From the bedroom Jane’s voice, with its husky note, called to her.

“Is that M. Poirot, Ellis? Make him sit right down. I’ll find a rag to put on and be there in a moment.”

Jane Wilkinson’s idea of a rag was a gossamer negligee which revealed more than it hid. She came in eagerly, saying: “Well?”

Poirot rose and bowed over her hand.

“Exactly the word, Madame, it is well.”

“Why—how do you mean?”

“Lord Edgware is perfectly willing to agree to a divorce.”

"What?"

Either the stupefaction on her face was genuine, or else she was indeed a most marvellous actress.

"M. Poirot! You've managed it! At once! Like that! Why, you're a genius. How in mercy's name did you set about it?"

"Madame, I cannot take compliments where they are not earned. Six months ago your husband wrote to you withdrawing his opposition."

"What's that you say? Wrote to me? Where?"

"It was when you were at Hollywood, I understand."

"I never got it. Must have gone astray, I suppose. And to think I've been thinking and planning and fretting and going nearly crazy all these months."

"Lord Edgware seemed to be under the impression that you wished to marry an actor."

"Naturally. That's what I told him." She gave a pleased child's smile. Suddenly it changed to a look of alarm. "Why, M. Poirot, you did not go and tell him about me and the duke?"

"No, no, reassure yourself. I am discreet. That would not have done, eh?"

"Well, you see, he's got a queer mean nature. Marrying Merton, he'd feel, was perhaps a kind of leg up for me—so then naturally he'd queer the pitch. But a film actor's different. Though, all the same, I'm surprised. Yes, I am. Aren't you surprised, Ellis?"

I had noticed that the maid had come to and fro from the bedroom tidying away various outdoor garments which were lying flung over the backs of chairs. It had been my opinion that she had been listening to the conversation. Now it seemed that she was completely in Jane's confidence.

"Yes, indeed, m'lady. His lordship must have changed a good deal since we knew him," said the maid spitefully.

“Yes, he must.”

“You cannot understand his attitude. It puzzles you?” suggested Poirot.

“Oh, it does. But anyway, we needn’t worry about that. What does it matter what made him change his mind so long as he has changed it?”

“It may not interest you, but it interests me, Madame.”

Jane paid no attention to him.

“The thing is that I’m free—at last.”

“Not yet, Madame.”

She looked at him impatiently.

“Well, going to be free. It’s the same thing.”

Poirot looked as though he did not think it was.

“The duke is in Paris,” said Jane. “I must cable him right away. My—won’t his old mother be wild!”

Poirot rose.

“I am glad, Madame, that all is turning out as you wish.”

“Good-bye, M. Poirot, and thanks awfully.”

“I did nothing.”

“You brought me the good news, anyway, M. Poirot, and I’m ever so grateful. I really am.”

“And that is that,” said Poirot to me, as we left the suite. “The single idea—herself! She has no speculation, no curiosity as to why that letter never reached her. You observe, Hastings, she is shrewd beyond belief in the business sense, but she has absolutely no intellect. Well, well, the good God cannot give everything.”

“Except to Hercule Poirot,” I said dryly.

“You mock yourself at me, my friend,” he replied serenely. “But come, let me walk along the Embankment. I wish to arrange my ideas with order and method.”

I maintained a discreet silence until such time as the oracle should speak.

“That letter,” he resumed when we were pacing along by the river. “It intrigues me. There are four solutions of that problem, my friend.”

“Four?”

“Yes. First, it was lost in the post. That does happen, you know. But not very often. No, not very often. Incorrectly addressed, it would have been returned to Lord Edgware long before this. No, I am inclined to rule out that solution—though, of course, it may be the true one.

“Solution two, our beautiful lady is lying when she says she never received it. That, of course, is quite possible. That charming lady is capable of telling any lie to her advantage with the most childlike candour. But I cannot see, Hastings, how it could be to her advantage. If she knows that he will divorce her, why send me to ask him to do so? It does not make sense.

“Solution three. Lord Edgware is lying. And if anyone is lying it seems more likely that it is he than his wife. But I do not see much point in such a lie. Why invent a fictitious letter sent six months ago? Why not simply agree to my proposition? No, I am inclined to think that he did send that letter—though what the motive was for his sudden change of attitude I cannot guess.

“So we come to the fourth solution—that someone suppressed that letter. And there, Hastings, we enter on a very interesting field of speculation, because that letter could have been suppressed at either end—in America or England.

“Whoever suppressed it was someone who did not want that marriage dissolved. Hastings, I would give a great deal to know what is behind this affair. There is something—I swear there is something.”

He paused and then added slowly.

“Something of which as yet I have only been able to get a glimpse.”

Five

MURDER

The following day was the 30th June.

It was just half past nine when we were told that Inspector Japp was below and anxious to see us.

It was some years since we had seen anything of the Scotland Yard inspector.

“Ah! ce bon Japp,” said Poirot. “What does he want, I wonder?”

“Help,” I snapped. “He’s out of his depth over some case and he’s come to you.”

I had not the indulgence for Japp that Poirot had. It was not so much that I minded his picking Poirot’s brains—after all, Poirot enjoyed the process, it was a delicate flattery. What did annoy me was Japp’s hypocritical pretence that he was doing nothing of the kind. I liked people to be straightforward. I said so, and Poirot laughed.

“You are the dog of the bulldog breed, eh, Hastings? But you must remember that the poor Japp he has to save his face. So he makes his little pretence. It is very natural.”

I thought it merely foolish and said so. Poirot did not agree.

“The outward form—it is a bagatelle—but it matters to people. It enables them to keep the amour propre.”

Personally I thought a dash of inferiority complex would do Japp no harm, but there was no point in arguing the matter. Besides, I was anxious to learn what Japp had come about.

He greeted us both heartily.

“Just going to have breakfast, I see. Not got the hens to lay square eggs for you yet, M. Poirot?”

This was an allusion to a complaint from Poirot as to the varying sizes of eggs which had offended his sense of symmetry.

“As yet, no,” said Poirot smiling. “And what brings you to see us so early, my good Japp?”

“It’s not early—not for me. I’ve been up and at work for a good two hours. As to what brings me to see you—well, it’s murder.”

“Murder?”

Japp nodded.

“Lord Edgware was killed at his house in Regent Gate last night. Stabbed in the neck by his wife.”

“By his wife?” I cried.

In a flash I remembered Bryan Martin’s words on the previous morning. Had he had a prophetic knowledge of what was going to happen? I remembered, too, Jane’s easy reference to “bumping him off.” Amoral, Bryan Martin had called her. She was the type, yes. Callous, egotistical and stupid. How right he had been in his judgment.

All this passed through my mind while Japp went on:

“Yes. Actress, you know. Well-known. Jane Wilkinson. Married him three years ago. They didn’t get on. She left him.”

Poirot was looking puzzled and serious.

“What makes you believe that it was she who killed him?”

“No belief about it. She was recognized. Not much concealment about it, either. She drove up in a taxi—”

“A taxi—” I echoed involuntarily, her words at the Savoy that night coming back to me.

“—rang the bell, asked for Lord Edgware. It was ten o’clock. Butler said he’d see. ‘Oh!’ she says cool as a cucumber. ‘You needn’t. I am Lady Edgware. I suppose he’s in the library.’ And with that she walks along and opens the door and goes in and shuts it behind her.

“Well the butler thought it was queer, but all right. He went downstairs again. About ten minutes later he heard the front door shut. So, anyway, she hadn’t stayed long. He locked up for the night about eleven. He opened the library door, but it was dark, so he thought his master had gone to bed. This morning the body was discovered by a housemaid. Stabbed in the back of the neck just at the roots of the hair.”

“Was there no cry? Nothing heard?”

“They say not. That library’s got pretty well soundproof doors, you know. And there’s traffic passing, too. Stabbed in that way, death results amazing quick. Straight through the cistern into the medulla, that’s what the doctor said—or something very like it. If you hit on exactly the right spot it kills a man instantaneously.”

“That implies a knowledge of exactly where to strike. It almost implies medical knowledge.”

“Yes—that’s true. A point in her favour as far as it goes. But ten to one it was a chance. She just struck lucky. Some people do have amazing luck, you know.”

“Not so lucky if it results in her being hanged, mon ami,” observed Poirot.

“No. Of course she was a fool—sailing in like that and giving her name and all.”

“Indeed, very curious.”

“Possibly she didn’t intend mischief. They quarrelled and she whipped out a penknife and jabbed him one.”

“Was it a penknife?”

“Something of that kind, the doctor says. Whatever it was, she took it away with her. It wasn’t left in the wound.”

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“No, no, my friend, it was not like that. I know the lady. She would be quite incapable of such a hot-blooded impulsive action. Besides, she would be most unlikely to have a penknife with her. Few women have—and assuredly not Jane Wilkinson.”

“You know her, you say, M. Poirot?”

“Yes. I know her.”

He said no more for the moment. Japp was looking at him inquisitively.

“Got something up your sleeve, M. Poirot?” he ventured at last. “Ah!” said Poirot. “That reminds me. What has brought you to me? Eh? It is not merely to pass the time of day with an old comrade? Assuredly not. You have here a nice straightforward murder. You have the criminal. You have the motive—what exactly is the motive, by the way?”

“Wanted to marry another man. She was heard to say so not a week ago. Also heard to make threats. Said she meant to call round in a taxi and bump him off.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “You are very well-informed—very well-informed. Someone has been very obliging.”

I thought his eyes looked a question, but if so, Japp did not respond.

“We get to hear things, M. Poirot,” he said stolidly.

Poirot nodded. He had reached out for the daily paper. It had been opened by Japp, doubtless while he was waiting, and had been cast impatiently aside on our entry. In a mechanical manner, Poirot folded it back at the middle page, smoothed and arranged it. Though his eyes were on the paper, his mind was deep in some kind of puzzle.

“You have not answered,” he said presently. “Since all goes in the swimming fashion, why come to me?”

“Because I heard you were at Regent Gate yesterday morning.”

“I see.”

“Now, as soon as I heard that, I said to myself, ‘Something here.’ His lordship sent for M. Poirot. Why? What did he suspect? What did he fear? Before doing anything definite, I’d better go round and have a word with him.”

“What do you mean by ‘anything definite?’ Arresting the lady, I suppose?”

“Exactly.”

“You have not seen her yet?”

“Oh! yes, I have. Went round to the Savoy first thing. Wasn’t going to risk her giving us the slip.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “So you—”

He stopped. His eyes, which had been fixed thoughtfully and up to now unseeingly on the paper in front of him, now took on a different expression. He lifted his head and spoke in a changed tone of voice.

“And what did she say? Eh! my friend. What did she say?”

“I gave her the usual stuff, of course, about wanting a statement and cautioning her—you can’t say the English police aren’t fair.”

“In my opinion foolishly so. But proceed. What did mi-lady say?”

"Took hysterics—that's what she did. Rolled herself about, threw up her arms and finally flopped down on the ground. Oh! she did it well—I'll say that for her. A pretty bit of acting."

"Ah!" said Poirot blandly. "You formed, then, the impression that the hysterics were not genuine?"

Japp winked vulgarly.

"What do you think? I'm not to be taken in with those tricks. She hadn't fainted—not she! Just trying it on, she was. I'll swear she was enjoying it."

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "I should say that was perfectly possible. What next?"

"Oh! well, she came to—pretended to, I mean. And moaned—and groaned and carried on and that sour-faced maid of hers doped her with smelling salts and at last she recovered enough to ask for her solicitor. Wasn't going to say anything without her solicitor. Hysterics one moment, solicitors the next, now I ask you, is that natural behaviour, sir?"

"In this case quite natural, I should say," said Poirot calmly.

"You mean because she's guilty and knows it."

"Not at all, I mean because of her temperament. First she gives you her conception of how the part of a wife suddenly learning of her husband's death should be played. Then, having satisfied her histrionic instinct, her native shrewdness makes her send for a solicitor. That she creates an artificial scene and enjoys it is no proof of her guilt. It merely indicates that she is a born actress."

"Well, she can't be innocent. That's sure."

"You are very positive," said Poirot. "I suppose that it must be so. She made no statement, you say? No statement at all?"

Japp grinned.

"Wouldn't say a word without her solicitor. The maid telephoned for him. I left two of my men there and came along to you. I thought it just as well to get put wise to whatever there was going on before I went on with things."

"And yet you are sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. But I like as many facts as possible. You see, there's going to be a big splash made about this. No hole and corner business. All the papers will be full of it. And you know what papers are."

"Talking of papers," said Poirot. "How do you account for this, my dear friend. You have not read your morning paper very carefully."

He leant across the table, his finger on a paragraph in the society news. Japp read the item aloud.

Sir Montagu Corner gave a very successful dinner party last night at his house on the river at Chiswick. Among those present were Sir George and Lady du Fisse, Mr. James Blunt, the well-known dramatic critic, Sir Oscar Hammerfeldt of the Overton Film Studios, Miss Jane Wilkinson (Lady Edgware) and others.

For a moment Japp looked taken aback. Then he rallied.

"What's that got to do with it? This thing was sent to the Press beforehand. You'll see. You'll find that our lady wasn't there, or that she came in late—eleven o'clock or so. Bless you sir, you mustn't believe everything you see in the Press to be gospel. You of all people ought to know better than that."

"Oh! I do, I do. It only struck me as curious, that was all."

"These coincidences do happen. Now, M. Poirot, close as an oyster I know you to be by bitter experience. But you'll come across with things, won't you? You'll tell me why Lord Edgware sent for you?"

Poirot shook his head.

"Lord Edgware did not send for me. It was I who requested him to give me an appointment."

“Really? And for what reason?”

Poirot hesitated a minute.

“I will answer your question,” he said slowly. “But I should like to answer it in my own way.”

Japp groaned. I felt a sneaking sympathy with him. Poirot can be intensely irritating at times.

“I will request,” went on Poirot, “that you permit me to ring up a certain person and ask him to come here.”

“What person?”

“Mr. Bryan Martin.”

“The film star? What’s he got to do with it?”

“I think,” said Poirot, “that you may find what he has got to say interesting—and possibly helpful. Hastings, will you be so good?”

I took up the telephone book. The actor had a flat in a big block of buildings near St. James’ Park.

“Victoria 49499.”

The somewhat sleepy voice of Bryan Martin spoke after a few minutes.

“Hello—who’s speaking?”

“What am I to say?” I whispered, covering the mouthpiece with my hand.

“Tell him,” said Poirot, “that Lord Edgware has been murdered, and that I should esteem it a favour if he would come round here and see me immediately.”

I repeated this meticulously. There was a startled exclamation at the other end.

“My God,” said Martin. “So she’s done it then! I’ll come at once.”

“What did he say?” asked Poirot. I told him.

“Ah!” said Poirot. He seemed pleased. “So she’s done it then. That was what he said? Then it is as I thought, it is as I thought.”

Japp looked at him curiously.

“I can’t make you out, M. Poirot. First you sound as though you thought the woman might not have done it after all. And now you make out that you knew it all along.”

Poirot only smiled.

Six

THE WIDOW

Bryan Martin was as good as his word. In less than ten minutes he had joined us. During the time that we waited his arrival, Poirot would only talk of extraneous subjects and refused to satisfy Japp's curiosity in the smallest degree.

Evidently our news had upset the young actor terribly. His face was white and drawn.

"Good heavens, M. Poirot," he said as he shook hands. "This is a terrible business. I'm shocked to the core—and yet I can't say I'm surprised. I've always half-suspected that something of this kind might happen. You may remember I was saying so yesterday."

"Mais oui, mais oui," said Poirot. "I remember perfectly what you said to me yesterday. Let me introduce you to Inspector Japp who is in charge of the case."

Bryan Martin shot a glance of reproach at Poirot.

"I had no idea," he murmured. "You should have warned me."

He nodded coldly to the inspector.

He sat down, his lips pressed tightly together.

"I don't see," he objected, "why you asked me to come round. All this has nothing to do with me."

"I think it has," said Poirot gently. "In a case of murder one must put one's private repugnancies behind one."

“No, no. I’ve acted with Jane. I know her well. Dash it all, she’s a friend of mine.”

“And yet the moment that you hear Lord Edgware is murdered, you jump to the conclusion that it is she who has murdered him,” remarked Poirot dryly.

The actor started.

“Do you mean to say—?” His eyes seemed starting out of his head. “Do you mean to say that I’m wrong? That she had nothing to do with it?”

Japp broke in.

“No, no, Mr. Martin. She did it right enough.”

The young man sank back again in his chair.

“For a moment,” he murmured, “I thought I’d made the most ghastly mistake.”

“In a matter of this kind friendship must not be allowed to influence you,” said Poirot decisively.

“That’s all very well, but—”

“My friend, do you seriously wish to range yourself on the side of a woman who has murdered? Murder—the most repugnant of human crimes.”

Bryan Martin sighed.

“You don’t understand. Jane is not an ordinary murderess. She—she has no sense of right or wrong. Honestly she’s not responsible.”

“That’ll be a question for the jury,” said Japp.

“Come, come,” said Poirot kindly. “It is not as though you were accusing her. She is already accused. You cannot refuse to tell us what you know. You have a duty to society, young man.”

Bryan Martin sighed.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said. “What do you want me to tell you?”

Poirot looked at Japp.

“Have you ever heard Lady Edgware—or perhaps I’d better call her Miss Wilkinson—utter threats against her husband?” asked Japp.

“Yes, several times.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that if he didn’t give her her freedom she’d have to ‘bump him off.’”

“And that was not a joke, eh?”

“No. I think she meant it seriously. Once she said she’d take a taxi and go round and kill him—you heard that, M. Poirot?”

He appealed pathetically to my friend.

Poirot nodded.

Japp went on with his questions.

“Now, Mr. Martin, we’ve been informed that she wanted her freedom in order to marry another man. Do you know who that man was?”

Bryan nodded.

“Who?”

“It was—the Duke of Merton.”

“The Duke of Merton! Whew!” The detective whistled. “Flying at high game, eh? Why, he’s said to be one of the richest men in England.”

Bryan nodded more dejectedly than ever.

I could not quite understand Poirot’s attitude. He was lying back in his chair, his fingers pressed together and the rhythmic motion of his head suggested the complete approval of a man who has put a chosen record on the gramophone and is enjoying the result.

“Wouldn’t her husband divorce her?”

“No, he refused absolutely.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“Yes.”

“And now,” said Poirot, suddenly taking part once more in the proceedings, “you see where I come in, my good Japp. I was asked by Lady Edgware to see her husband and try and get him to agree to a divorce. I had an appointment for this morning.”

Bryan Martin shook his head.

“It would have been of no use,” he declared confidently. “Edgware would never have agreed.”

“You think not?” said Poirot, turning an amiable glance on him.

“Sure of it. Jane knew that in her heart of hearts. She’d no real confidence that you’d succeed. She’d given up hope. The man was a monomaniac on the subject of divorce.”

Poirot smiled. His eyes grew suddenly very green.

“You are wrong, my dear young man,” he said gently. “I saw Lord Edgware yesterday, and he agreed to a divorce.”

There was no doubt that Bryan Martin was completely dumbfounded by this piece of news. He stared at Poirot with his eyes almost starting out of his head.

"You—you saw him yesterday?" he spluttered.

"At a quarter past twelve," said Poirot in his methodical manner.

"And he agreed to a divorce?"

"He agreed to a divorce."

"You should have told Jane at once," cried the young man reproachfully.

"I did, M. Martin."

"You did?" cried Martin and Japp together.

Poirot smiled.

"It impairs the motive a little, does it not?" he murmured. "And now, M. Martin, let me call your attention to this."

He showed him the newspaper paragraph.

Bryan read it, but without much interest.

"You mean this makes an alibi?" he said. "I suppose Edgware was shot some time yesterday evening?"

"He was stabbed, not shot," said Poirot.

Martin laid the paper down slowly.

"I'm afraid this does no good," he said regretfully. "Jane didn't go to that dinner."

"How do you know?"

"I forget. Somebody told me."

"That is a pity," said Poirot thoughtfully.

Japp looked at him curiously.

“I can’t make you out, Moosior. Seems now as though you don’t want the young woman to be guilty.”

“No, no, my good Japp. I am not the partisan you think. But frankly, the case as you present it, revolts the intelligence.”

“What do you mean, revolts the intelligence? It doesn’t revolt mine.”

I could see words trembling on Poirot’s lips. He restrained them.

“Here is a young woman who wishes, you say, to get rid of her husband. That point I do not dispute. She told me so frankly. Eh bien, how does she set about it? She repeats several times in the loud clear voice before witnesses that she is thinking of killing him. She then goes out one evening. Calls at his house, has herself announced, stabs him and goes away. What do you call that, my good friend? Has it even the common sense?”

“It was a bit foolish, of course.”

“Foolish? It is the imbecility!”

“Well,” said Japp, rising. “It’s all to the advantage of the police when criminals lose their heads. I must go back to the Savoy now.”

“You permit that I accompany you?”

Japp made no demur and we set out. Bryan Martin took a reluctant leave of us. He seemed to be in a great state of nervous excitement. He begged earnestly that any further development might be reported to him.

“Nervy sort of chap,” was Japp’s comment on him.

Poirot agreed.

At the Savoy we found an extremely legal-looking gentleman who had just arrived, and we proceeded all together to Jane’s suite. Japp spoke to one of his men.

“Anything?” he inquired laconically.

“She wanted to use the telephone!”

“Who did she telephone to?” inquired Japp eagerly.

“Jay’s. For mourning.”

Japp swore under his breath. We entered the suite.

The widowed Lady Edgware was trying on hats in front of the glass. She was dressed in a filmy creation of black and white. She greeted us with a dazzling smile.

“Why, M. Poirot, how good of you to come along. Mr. Moxon,” (this was to the solicitor) “I’m so glad you’ve come. Just sit right by me and tell what questions I ought to answer. This man here seems to think that I went out and killed George this morning.”

“Last night, madam,” said Japp.

“You said this morning. Ten o’clock.”

“I said ten p.m.”

“Well. I can never tell which is which—a.m.’s and p.m.’s.”

“It’s only just about ten o’clock now,” added the inspector severely.

Jane’s eyes opened very wide.

“Mercy,” she murmured. “It’s years since I’ve been awake as early as this. Why, it must have been Early Dawn when you came along.”

“One moment, Inspector,” said Mr. Moxon in his ponderous legal voice. “When am I to understand that this—er—regrettable—most shocking—occurrence took place?”

“Round about ten o’clock last night, sir.”

"Why, that's all right," said Jane sharply. "I was at a party—Oh!" She covered her mouth up suddenly. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have said that."

Her eyes sought the solicitor's in timid appeal.

"If, at ten o'clock last night, you were—er—at a party, Lady Edgware, I—er—I can see no objection to your informing the inspector of the fact—no objection whatever."

"That's right," said Japp. "I only asked you for a statement of your movements yesterday evening."

"You didn't. You said ten something m. And anyway you gave me the most terrible shock. I fainted deadaway, Mr. Moxon."

"About this party, Lady Edgware?"

"It was at Sir Montagu Corner's—at Chiswick."

"What time did you go there?"

"The dinner was for eight thirty."

"You left here—when?"

"I started about eight o'clock. I dropped in at the Piccadilly Palace for a moment to say good-bye to an American friend who was leaving for the States—Mrs. Van Dusen. I got to Chiswick at a quarter to nine."

"What time did you leave?"

"About half past eleven."

"You came straight back here?"

"Yes."

"In a taxi?"

“No. In my own car. I hire it from the Daimler people.”

“And whilst you were at the dinner you didn’t leave it?”

“Well—I—”

“So you did leave it?”

It was like a terrier pouncing on a rat.

“I don’t know what you mean. I was called to the telephone when we were at dinner.”

“Who called you?”

“I guess it was some kind of hoax. A voice said, ‘Is that Lady Edgware?’ And I said, ‘Yes, that’s right,’ and then they just laughed and rang off.”

“Did you go outside the house to telephone?”

Jane’s eyes opened wide in amazement.

“Of course not.”

“How long were you away from the dinner table?”

“About a minute and a half.”

Japp collapsed after that. I was fully convinced that he did not believe a word she was saying, but having heard her story he could do no more until he had confirmed or disproved it.

Having thanked her coldly, he withdrew.

We also took our leave but she called Poirot back.

“M. Poirot. Will you do something for me?”

“Certainly, Madame.”

“Send a cable for me to the Duke in Paris. He’s at the Crillon. He ought to know about this. I don’t like to send it myself. I guess I’ve got to look the bereaved widow for a week or two.”

“It is quite unnecessary to cable, Madame,” said Poirot gently. “It will be in the papers over there.”

“Why, what a headpiece you’ve got! Of course it will. Much better not to cable. I feel it’s up to me to keep up my position now everything’s gone right. I want to act the way a widow should. Sort of dignified, you know. I thought of sending a wreath of orchids. They’re about the most expensive things going. I suppose I shall have to go to the funeral. What do you think?”

“You will have to go to the inquest first, Madame.”

“Why, I suppose that’s true.” She considered for a moment or two. “I don’t like that Scotland Yard inspector at all. He just scared me to death. M. Poirot?”

“Yes?”

“Seems it’s kind of lucky I changed my mind and went to that party after all.”

Poirot had been going towards the door. Suddenly, at these words, he wheeled round.

“What is that you say, Madame? You changed your mind?”

“Yes. I meant to give it a miss. I had a frightful headache yesterday afternoon.”

Poirot swallowed once or twice. He seemed to have a difficulty in speaking.

“Did you—say so to anyone?” he asked at last.

“Certainly I did. There was quite a crowd of us having tea and they wanted me to go on to a cocktail party and I said ‘No.’ I said my head was aching fit to split and that I was going right home and that I was going to cut the dinner too.”

“And what made you change your mind, Madame?”

“Ellis went on at me. Said I couldn’t afford to turn it down. Old Sir Montagu pulls a lot of strings, you know, and he’s a crotchety creature—takes offence easily. Well, I didn’t care. Once I marry Merton I’m through with all this. But Ellis is always on the cautious side. She said there’s many a slip, etc., and after all I guess she’s right. Anyway, off I went.”

“You owe Ellis a debt of gratitude, Madame,” said Poirot seriously.

“I suppose I do. That inspector had got it all taped out, hadn’t he?”

She laughed, Poirot did not. He said in a low voice:

“All the same—this gives one furiously to think. Yes, furiously to think.”

“Ellis,” called Jane.

The maid came in from the next room.

“M. Poirot says it’s very lucky you made me go to that party last night.”

Ellis barely cast a glance at Poirot. She was looking grim and disapproving.

“It doesn’t do to break engagements, m’lady. You’re much too fond of doing it. People don’t always forgive it. They turn nasty.”

Jane picked up the hat she had been trying on when we came in. She tried it again.

“I hate black,” she said disconsolately. “I never wear it. But I suppose, as a correct widow I’ve just got to. All those hats are too frightful. Ring up the other hat place, Ellis. I’ve got to be fit to be seen.”

Poirot and I slipped quietly from the room.

Seven

THE SECRETARY

We had not seen the last of Japp. He reappeared about an hour later, flung down his hat on the table and said he was eternally blasted.

"You have made the inquiries?" asked Poirot sympathetically.

Japp nodded gloomily.

"And unless fourteen people are lying, she didn't do it," he growled.

He went on:

"I don't mind telling you, M. Poirot, that I expected to find a put-up job. On the face of it, it didn't seem likely that anyone else could have killed Lord Edgware. She's the only person who's got the ghost of a motive."

"I would not say that. Mais continuez."

"Well, as I say, I expected to find a put-up job. You know what these theatrical crowds are—they'd all hang together to screen a pal. But this is rather a different proposition. The people there last night were all big guns, they were none of them close friends of hers and some of them didn't know each other. Their testimony is independent and reliable. I hoped then to find that she'd slipped away for half an hour or so. She could easily have done that—powdering her nose or some such excuse. But no, she did leave the dinner table as she told us to answer a telephone call, but the butler was with her—and, by the way, it was just as she told us. He heard what she said. 'Yes, quite right. This is Lady Edgware.' And then the other side rang off. It's curious, that, you know. Not that it's got anything to do with it."

"Perhaps not—but it is interesting. Was it a man or a woman who rang up?"

"A woman, I think she said."

“Curious,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“Never mind that,” said Japp impatiently. “Let’s get back to the important part. The whole evening went exactly as she said. She got there at a quarter to nine, left at half past eleven and got back here at a quarter to twelve. I’ve seen the chauffeur who drove her—he’s one of Daimler’s regular people. And the people at the Savoy saw her come in and confirm the time.”

“Eh bien, that seems very conclusive.”

“Then what about those two in Regent Gate? It isn’t only the butler. Lord Edgware’s secretary saw her too. They both swear by all that’s holy that it was Lady Edgware who came here at ten o’clock.”

“How long has the butler been there?”

“Six months. Handsome chap, by the way.”

“Yes, indeed. Eh bien, my friend, if he has only been there six months he cannot have recognized Lady Edgware since he had not seen her before.”

“Well, he knew her from her pictures in the papers. And anyway the secretary knew her. She’s been with Lord Edgware five or six years, and she’s the only one who’s absolutely positive.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “I should like to see the secretary.”

“Well, why not come along with me now?”

“Thank you, mon ami, I should be delighted to do so. You include Hastings in your invitation, I hope?”

Japp grinned.

“What do you think? Where the master goes, there the dog follows,” he added in what I could not think was the best of taste.

“Reminds me of the Elizabeth Canning Case,” said Japp. “You remember? How at least a score of witnesses on either side swore they had seen the gipsy, Mary Squires, in two different parts of England. Good reputable witnesses, too. And she with such a hideous face there couldn't be two like it. That mystery was never cleared up. It's very much the same here. Here's a separate lot of people prepared to swear a woman was in two different places at the same time. Which of 'em is speaking the truth?"

"That ought not to be difficult to find out."

"So you say—but this woman—Miss Carroll, really knew Lady Edgware. I mean she'd lived in the house with her day after day. She wouldn't be likely to make a mistake."

"We shall soon see."

"Who comes into the title?" I asked.

"A nephew, Captain Ronald Marsh. Bit of a waster, I understand."

"What does the doctor say as to the time of death?" asked Poirot.

"We'll have to wait for the autopsy to be exact, you know. See where the dinner had got to." Japp's way of putting things was, I am sorry to say, far from refined. "But ten o'clock fits in well enough. He was last seen alive at a few minutes past nine when he left the dinner table and the butler took whisky and soda into the library. At eleven o'clock when the butler went up to bed the light was out—so he must have been dead then. He wouldn't have been sitting in the dark."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. A moment or two later we drew up at the house, the blinds of which were now down.

The door was opened to us by the handsome butler.

Japp took the lead and went in first. Poirot and I followed. The door opened to the left, so that the butler stood against the wall on that side. Poirot was on my right and, being smaller than I was, it was only just as we stepped into the hall that the butler saw him. Being close to him, I heard the sudden intake of his breath and looked sharply at the man to find him staring at

Poirot with a kind of startled fear visible on his face. I put the fact away in my mind for what it might be worth.

Japp marched into the dining room, which lay on our right, and called the butler in after him.

“Now then, Alton, I want to go into this again very carefully. It was ten o’clock when this lady came?”

“Her ladyship? Yes, sir.”

“How did you recognize her?” asked Poirot.

“She told me her name, sir, and besides I’ve seen her portrait in the papers. I’ve seen her act, too.”

Poirot nodded.

“How was she dressed?”

“In black, sir. Black walking dress, and a small black hat. A string of pearls and grey gloves.”

Poirot looked a question at Japp.

“White taffeta evening dress and ermine wrap,” said the latter succinctly.

The butler proceeded. His tale tallied exactly with that which Japp had already passed on to us.

“Did anybody else come and see your master that evening?” asked Poirot.

“No, sir.”

“How was the front door fastened?”

“It has a Yale lock, sir. I usually draw the bolts when I go to bed, sir. At eleven, that is. But last night Miss Geraldine was at the opera so it was left unbolted.”

“How was it fastened this morning?”

“It was bolted, sir. Miss Geraldine had bolted it when she came in.”

“When did she come in? Do you know?”

“I think it was about a quarter to twelve, sir.”

“Then during the evening until a quarter to twelve, the door could not be opened from outside without a key? From the inside it could be opened by simply drawing back the handle.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How many latchkeys were there?”

“His lordship had his, sir, and there was another key in the hall drawer which Miss Geraldine took last night. I don’t know if there were any others.”

“Does nobody else in the house have a key?”

“No, sir. Miss Carroll always rings.”

Poirot intimated that that was all he wished to ask and we went in search of the secretary.

We found her busily writing at a large desk.

Miss Carroll was a pleasant efficient-looking woman of about forty-five. Her fair hair was turning grey and she wore pince-nez through which a pair of shrewd blue eyes gleamed out on us. When she spoke I recognized the clear businesslike voice that had spoken to me through the telephone.

“Ah! M. Poirot,” she said as she acknowledged Japp’s introduction. “Yes. It was with you I made that appointment for yesterday morning.”

“Precisely, Mademoiselle.”

I thought that Poirot was favourably impressed by her. Certainly she was neatness and precision personified.

“Well, Inspector Japp?” said Miss Carroll. “What more can I do for you?”

“Just this. Are you absolutely certain that it was Lady Edgware who came here last night?”

“That’s the third time you’ve asked me. Of course I’m sure. I saw her.”

“Where did you see her, Mademoiselle?”

“In the hall. She spoke to the butler for a minute then she went along the hall and in at the library door.”

“And where were you?”

“On the first floor—looking down.”

“And you were positive you were not mistaken?”

“Absolutely. I saw her face distinctly.”

“You could not have been misled by a resemblance?”

“Certainly not. Jane Wilkinson’s features are quite unique. It was her.”

Japp threw a glance at Poirot as much as to say: “You see.”

“Had Lord Edgware any enemies?” asked Poirot suddenly.

“Nonsense,” said Miss Carroll.

“How do you mean—nonsense, Mademoiselle?”

“Enemies! People in these days don’t have enemies. Not English people!”

“Yet Lord Edgware was murdered.”

"That was his wife," said Miss Carroll.

"A wife is not an enemy—no?"

"I'm sure it was a most extraordinary thing to happen. I've never heard of such a thing happening—I mean to anyone in our class of life."

It was clearly Miss Carroll's idea that murders were only committed by drunken members of the lower classes.

"How many keys are there to the front door?"

"Two," replied Miss Carroll promptly. "Lord Edgware always carried one. The other was kept in the drawer in the hall, so that anybody who was going to be late in could take it. There was a third one, but Captain Marsh lost it. Very careless."

"Did Captain Marsh come much to the house?"

"He used to live here until three years ago."

"Why did he leave?" asked Japp.

"I don't know. He couldn't get on with his uncle, I suppose."

"I think you know a little more than that, Mademoiselle," said Poirot gently.

She darted a quick glance at him.

"I am not one to gossip, M. Poirot."

"But you can tell us the truth concerning the rumours of a serious disagreement between Lord Edgware and his nephew."

"It wasn't so serious as all that. Lord Edgware was a difficult man to get on with."

"Even you found that?"

"I'm not speaking of myself. I never had any disagreement with Lord Edgware. He always found me perfectly reliable."

"But as regards Captain Marsh—"

Poirot stuck to it, gently continuing to goad her into further revelations.

Miss Carroll shrugged her shoulders.

"He was extravagant. Got into debt. There was some other trouble—I don't know exactly what. They quarrelled. Lord Edgware forbade him the house. That's all."

Her mouth closed firmly. Evidently she intended to say no more.

The room we had inteviewed her in was on the first floor. As we left it, Poirot took me by the arm.

"A little minute. Remain here if you will, Hastings. I am going down with Japp. Watch till we have gone into the library, then join us there."

I have long ago given up asking Poirot questions beginning "Why?" Like the Light Brigade "Mine not to reason why, mine but to do or die," though fortunately it has not yet come to dying! I thought that possibly he suspected the butler of spying on him and wanted to know if such were really the case.

I took up my stand looking over the banisters. Poirot and Japp went first to the front door—out of my sight. Then they reappeared walking slowly along the hall. I followed their backs with my eye until they had gone into the library. I waited a minute or two in case the butler appeared, but there was no sign of anyone, so I ran down the stairs and joined them.

The body had, of course, been removed. The curtains were drawn and the electric light was on. Poirot and Japp were standing in the middle of the room looking round them.

"Nothing here," Japp was saying.

And Poirot replied with a smile:

“Alas! not the cigarette ash—nor the footprint—nor a lady’s glove—nor even a lingering perfume! Nothing that the detective of fiction so conveniently finds.”

“The police are always made out to be as blind as bats in detective stories,” said Japp with a grin.

“I found a clue once,” said Poirot dreamily. “But since it was four feet long instead of four centimetres no one would believe in it.”

I remembered the circumstance and laughed. Then I remembered my mission.

“It’s all right, Poirot,” I said. “I watched, but no one was spying upon you as far as I could see.”

“The eyes of my friend Hastings,” said Poirot in a kind of gentle mockery. “Tell me, my friend, did you notice the rose between my lips?”

“The rose between your lips?” I asked in astonishment. Japp turned aside spluttering with laughter.

“You’ll be the death of me, M. Poirot,” he said. “The death of me. A rose. What next?”

“I had the fancy to pretend I was Carmen,” said Poirot quite undisturbed.

I wondered if they were going mad or if I was.

“You did not observe it, Hastings?” There was reproach in Poirot’s voice.

“No,” I said, staring. “But then I couldn’t see your face.”

“No matter.” He shook his head gently.

Were they making fun of me?

“Well,” said Japp. “No more to do here, I fancy. I’d like to see the daughter again if I could. She was too upset before for me to get anything out of her.”

He rang the bell for the butler.

“Ask Miss Marsh if I can see her for a few moments?”

The man departed. It was not he, however, but Miss Carroll who entered the room a few minutes later.

“Geraldine is asleep,” she said. “She’s had a terrible shock, poor child. After you left I gave her something to make her sleep and she’s fast asleep now. In an hour or two, perhaps.”

Japp agreed.

“In any case there’s nothing she can tell you that I can’t,” said Miss Carroll firmly.

“What is your opinion of the butler?” asked Poirot.

“I don’t like him much and that’s a fact,” replied Miss Carroll. “But I can’t tell you why.”

We had reached the front door.

“It was up there that you stood, was it not, last night, Mademoiselle?” said Poirot suddenly, pointing with his hands up the stairs.

“Yes. Why?”

“And you saw Lady Edgware go along the hall into the study?”

“Yes.”

“And you saw her face distinctly?”

“Certainly.”

“But you could not have seen her face, Mademoiselle. You can only have seen the back of her head from where you were standing.”

Miss Carroll flushed angrily. She seemed taken aback.

“Back of her head, her voice, her walk! It’s all the same thing. Absolutely unmistakable! I tell you I know it was Jane Wilkinson—a thoroughly bad woman if there ever was one.”

And turning away she flounced upstairs.

Eight

POSSIBILITIES

Japp had to leave us. Poirot and I turned into Regent’s Park and found a quiet seat.

“I see the point of your rose between the lips now,” I said, laughing. “At the moment I thought you had gone mad.”

He nodded without smiling.

“You observe, Hastings, that the secretary is a dangerous witness, dangerous because inaccurate. You notice that she stated positively that she saw the visitor’s face? At the time I thought that impossible. Coming from the study—yes, but not going to the study. So I made my little experiment which resulted as I thought, and then sprung my trap upon her. She immediately changed her ground.”

“Her belief was quite unaltered, though,” I argued. “And after all, a voice and a walk are just as unmistakable.”

“No, no.”

“Why, Poirot, I think a voice and the general gait are about the most characteristic things about a person.”

“I agree. And therefore they are the most easily counterfeited.”

“You think—”

“Cast your mind back a few days. Do you remember one evening as we sat in the stalls of a theatre—”

“Carlotta Adams? Ah! but then she is a genius.”

“A well-known person is not so difficult to mimic. But I agree she has unusual gifts. I believe she could carry a thing through without the aid of footlights and distance—”

A sudden thought flashed into my mind.

“Poirot,” I cried. “You don’t think that possibly—no, that would be too much of a coincidence.”

“It depends how you look at it, Hastings. Regarded from one angle it would be no coincidence at all.”

“But why should Carlotta Adams wish to kill Lord Edgware? She did not even know him.”

“How do you know she did not know him? Do not assume things, Hastings. There may have been some link between them of which we know nothing. Not that that is precisely my theory.”

“Then you have a theory?”

“Yes. The possibility of Carlotta Adams being involved struck me from the beginning.”

“But, Poirot—”

“Wait, Hastings. Let me put together a few facts for you. Lady Edgware, with a complete lack of reticence, discusses the relations between her and her husband, and even goes so far as to talk of killing him. Not only you and I hear this. A waiter hears it, her maid probably has heard it many times, Bryan Martin hears it, and I imagine Carlotta Adams herself hears it. And there are the people to whom these people repeat it. Then, in that same evening, the excellence of Carlotta Adams’ imitation of Jane is commented upon. Who had a motive for killing Lord Edgware? His wife.

“Now supposing that someone else wishes to do away with Lord Edgware. Here is a scapegoat ready to his hand. On the day when Jane Wilkinson announced that she had a headache and is going to have a quiet evening—the plan is put into operation.

“Lady Edgware must be seen to enter the house in Regent Gate. Well, she is seen. She even goes so far as to announce her identity. Ah! c’est peu trop, ça! It would awaken suspicion in an oyster.

“And another point—a small point, I admit. The woman who came to the house last night wore black. Jane Wilkinson never wears black. We heard her say so. Let us assume, then, that the woman who came to the house last night was not Jane Wilkinson—that it was a woman impersonating Jane Wilkinson. Did that woman kill Lord Edgware?

“Did a third person enter that house and kill Lord Edgware? If so, did the person enter before or after the supposed visit of Lady Edgware? If after, what did the woman say to Lord Edgware? How did she explain her presence? She might deceive the butler who did not know her, and the secretary who did not see her at close quarters. But she could not hope to deceive her husband. Or was there only a dead body in the room? Was Lord Edgware killed before she entered the house—sometime between nine and ten?”

“Stop, Poirot!” I cried. “You are making my head spin.”

“No, no, my friend. We are only considering possibilities. It is like trying on the clothes. Does this fit! No, it wrinkles on the shoulder? This one? Yes, that is better—but not quite large enough. This other one is too small. So on and so on—until we reach the perfect fit—the truth.”

“Who do you suspect of such a fiendish plot?” I asked.

“Ah! that is too early to say. One must go into the question of who has a motive for wishing Lord Edgware dead. There is, of course, the nephew who inherits. A little obvious that, perhaps. And then in spite of Miss Carroll’s dogmatic pronouncement, there is the question of enemies. Lord Edgware struck me as a man who very easily might make enemies.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “That is so.”

"Whoever it was must have fancied himself pretty safe. Remember, Hastings, but for her change of mind at the last minute, Jane Wilkinson would have had no alibi. She might have been in her room at the Savoy, and it would have been difficult to prove it. She would have been arrested, tried—probably hanged."

I shivered.

"But there is one thing that puzzles me," went on Poirot. "The desire to incriminate her is clear—but what then of the telephone call? Why did someone ring her up at Chiswick and, once satisfied of her presence there, immediately ring off. It looks, does it not, as if someone wanted to be sure of her presence there before proceeding to—what? That was at nine thirty, almost certainly before the murder. The intention then seems—there is no other word for it—beneficent. It cannot be the murderer who rings up—the murderer has laid all his plans to incriminate Jane. Who, then, was it? It looks as though we have here two entirely different sets of circumstances."

I shook my head, utterly fogged.

"It might be just a coincidence," I suggested.

"No, no, everything cannot be a coincidence. Six months ago, a letter was suppressed. Why? There are too many things here unexplained. There must be some reason linking them together."

He sighed. Presently he went on:

"That story that Bryan Martin came to tell us—"

"Surely, Poirot, that has got no connection with this business."

"You are blind, Hastings, blind and wilfully obtuse. Do you not see that the whole thing makes a pattern? A pattern confused at present but which will gradually become clear…."

I felt Poirot was being overoptimistic. I did not feel that anything would ever become clear. My brain was frankly reeling.

“It’s no good,” I said suddenly. “I can’t believe it of Carlotta Adams. She seemed such a—well, such a thoroughly nice girl.”

Yet, even as I spoke, I remembered Poirot’s words about love of money. Love of money—was that at the root of the seemingly incomprehensible? I felt that Poirot had been inspired that night. He had seen Jane in danger—the result of the strange egotistical temperament. He had seen Carlotta led astray by avarice.

“I do not think she committed the murder, Hastings. She is too cool and levelheaded for that. Possibly she was not even told that murder would be done. She may have been used innocently. But then—”

He broke off, frowning.

“Even so, she’s an accessory after the fact now. I mean, she will see the news today. She will realize—”

A hoarse sound broke from Poirot.

“Quick, Hastings. Quick! I have been blind—imbecile. A taxi. At once.”

I stared at him.

He waved his arms.

“A taxi—at once.”

One was passing. He hailed it and we jumped in.

“Do you know her address?”

“Carlotta Adams, do you mean?”

“Mais oui, mais oui. Quickly, Hastings, quickly. Every minute is of value. Do you not see?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t.”

Poirot swore under his breath.

“The telephone book? No, she would not be in it. The theatre.”

At the theatre they were not disposed to give Carlotta’s address, but Poirot managed it. It was a flat in a block of mansions near Sloane Square. We drove there, Poirot in a fever of impatience.

“If I am not too late, Hastings. If I am not too late.”

“What is all this haste? I don’t understand. What does it mean?”

“It means that I have been slow. Terribly slow to realize the obvious. Ah! mon Dieu, if only we may be in time.”

Nine

THE SECOND DEATH

Though I did not understand the reason for Poirot's agitation, I knew him well enough to be sure that he had a reason for it.

We arrived at Rosedew Mansions, Poirot sprang out, paid the driver and hurried into the building. Miss Adams' flat was on the first floor, as a visiting card stuck on a board informed us.

Poirot hurried up the stairs, not waiting to summon the lift which was at one of the upper floors.

He knocked and rang. There was a short delay, then the door was opened by a neat middle-aged woman with hair drawn tightly back from her face. Her eyelids were reddened as though with weeping.

"Miss Adams?" demanded Poirot eagerly.

The woman looked at him.

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard? Heard what?"

His face had gone deadly pale, and I realized that this, whatever it was, was what he had feared.

The woman continued slowly to shake her head.

"She's dead. Passed away in her sleep. It's terrible."

Poirot leaned against the doorpost.

"Too late," he murmured.

His agitation was so apparent that the woman looked at him with more attention.

“Excuse me, sir, but are you a friend of hers? I do not remember seeing you come here before?”

Poirot did not reply to this directly. Instead he said:

“You have had a doctor? What did he say?”

“Took an overdose of a sleeping draught. Oh! the pity of it! Such a nice young lady. Nasty dangerous things—these drugs. Veronal he said it was.”

Poirot suddenly stood upright. His manner took on a new authority.

“I must come in,” he said.

The woman was clearly doubtful and suspicious.

“I don’t think—” she began.

But Poirot meant to have his way. He took probably the only course that would have obtained the desired result.

“You must let me in,” he said. “I am a detective and I have got to inquire into the circumstances of your mistress’s death.”

The woman gasped. She stood aside and we passed into the flat.

From there on Poirot took command of the situation.

“What I have told you,” he said authoritatively, “is strictly confidential. It must not be repeated. Everyone must continue to think that Miss Adams’ death was accidental. Please give me the name and address of the doctor you summoned.”

“Dr. Heath, 17 Carlisle Street.”

“And your own name?”

“Bennett—Alice Bennett.”

“You were attached to Miss Adams, I can see, Miss Bennett.”

“Oh! yes, sir. She were a nice young lady. I worked for her last year when she were over here. It wasn’t as though she were one of those actresses. She were a real young lady. Dainty ways she had and liked everything just so.”

Poirot listened with attention and sympathy. He had now no signs of impatience. I realized that to proceed gently was the best way of extracting the information he wanted.

“It must have been a great shock to you,” he observed gently.

“Oh! it was, sir. I took her in her tea—at half past nine as usual and there she was lying—asleep I thought. And I put the tray down. And I pulled the curtains—one of the rings caught, sir, and I had to jerk it hard. Such a noise it made. I was surprised when I looked round to see she hadn’t woken. And then all of a sudden something seemed to take hold of me. Something not quite natural about the way she lay. And I went to the side of the bed, and I touched her hand. Icy cold it was, sir, and I cried out.”

She stopped, tears coming into her eyes.

“Yes, yes,” said Poirot sympathetically. “It must have been terrible for you. Did Miss Adams often take stuff to make her sleep?”

“She’d take something for a headache now and again, sir. Some little tablets in a bottle, but it was some other stuff she took last night, or so the doctor said.”

“Did anyone come to see her last night? A visitor?”

“No, sir. She was out yesterday evening, sir.”

“Did she tell you where she was going?”

“No, sir. She went out about seven o’clock.”

“Ah! How was she dressed?”

“She had on a black dress, sir. A black dress and a black hat.”

Poirot looked at me.

“Did she wear any jewellery?”

“Just the string of pearls she always wore, sir.”

“And gloves—grey gloves?”

“Yes, sir. Her gloves were grey.”

“Ah! Now describe to me, if you will, what her manner was. Was she gay? Excited? Sad? Nervous?”

“It seemed to me she was pleased about something, sir. She kept smiling to herself, as though there were some kind of joke on.”

“What time did she return?”

“A little after twelve o’clock, sir.”

“And what was her manner then? The same?”

“She was terribly tired, sir.”

“But not upset? Or distressed?”

“Oh! no, sir. I think she was pleased about something, but just done up, if you know what I mean. She started to ring someone up on the telephone, and then she said she couldn’t bother. She’d do it tomorrow morning.”

“Ah!” Poirot’s eyes gleamed with excitement. He leaned forward and spoke in a would-be indifferent voice.

“Did you hear the name of the person she rang up?”

“No, sir. She just asked for the number and waited and then the exchange must have said: ‘I’m trying to get them’ as they do, sir, and she said: ‘All right,’ and then suddenly she yawned and said: ‘Oh! I can’t bother. I’m too tired,’ and she put the receiver back and started undressing.”

“And the number she called? Do you recollect that? Think. It may be important.”

“I’m sorry I can’t say, sir. It was a Victoria number and that’s all I can remember. I wasn’t paying special heed, you see.”

“Did she have anything to eat or drink before she went to bed?”

“A glass of hot milk, sir, like she always did.”

“Who prepared it?”

“I did, sir.”

“And nobody came to the flat that evening?”

“Nobody, sir.”

“And earlier in the day?”

“Nobody came that I can remember, sir. Miss Adams was out to lunch and tea. She came in at six o’clock.”

“When did the milk come? The milk she drank last night?”

“It was the new milk she had, sir. The afternoon delivery. The boy leaves it outside the door at four o’clock. But, oh! sir, I’m sure there wasn’t nothing wrong with the milk. I had it myself for tea this morning. And the doctor he said positive as she’d taken the nasty stuff herself.”

“It is possible that I am wrong,” said Poirot. “Yes, it is possible that I am entirely wrong. I will see the doctor. But you see, Miss Adams had enemies. Things are very different in America—”

He hesitated, but the good Alice leapt at the bait.

“Oh! I know, sir. I’ve read about Chicago and them gunmen and all that. It must be a wicked country and what the police can be about, I can’t think. Not like our policemen.”

Poirot left it thankfully at that, realizing that Alice Bennett’s insular proclivities would save him the trouble of explanations.

His eye fell on a small suitcase—more of an attaché case, that was lying on a chair.

“Did Miss Adams take that with her when she went out last night?”

“In the morning she took it, sir. She didn’t have it when she came back at teatime, but she brought it back last thing.”

“Ah! You permit that I open it?”

Alice Bennett would have permitted anything. Like most canny and suspicious women, once she had overcome her distrust she was child’s play to manipulate. She would have assented to anything Poirot suggested.

The case was not locked, Poirot opened it. I came forward and looked over his shoulder.

“You see, Hastings, you see?” he murmured excitedly.

The contents were certainly suggestive.

There was a box of makeup materials, two objects which I recognized as elevators to place in shoes and raise the height an inch or so, there was a pair of grey gloves and, folded in tissue paper, an exquisitely made wig of golden hair, the exact shade of gold of Jane Wilkinson’s and dressed like hers with a centre parting and curls in the back of the neck.

“Do you doubt now, Hastings?” asked Poirot.

I believe I had up to that moment. But now I doubted no longer.

Poirot closed the case again and turned to the maid.

“You do not know with whom Miss Adams dined yesterday evening?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know with whom she had lunch or tea?”

“I know nothing about tea, sir. I believe she lunched with Miss Driver.”

“Miss Driver?”

“Yes, her great friend. She has a hat shop in Moffat Street, just off Bond Street. Genevieve it’s called.”

Poirot noted the address in his notebook just below that of the doctor.

“One thing more, Madame. Can you remember anything—anything at all—that Mademoiselle Adams said or did after she came in at six o’clock that strikes you as at all unusual or significant?”

The maid thought for a moment or two.

“I really can’t say that I do, sir,” she said at last. “I asked her if she would have tea and she said she’d had some.”

“Oh! she said she had had it,” interrupted Poirot. “Pardon. Continue.”

“And after that she was writing letters till just on the time she went out.”

“Letters, eh? You do not know to whom?”

“Yes, sir. It was just one letter—to her sister in Washington. She wrote to her sister twice a week regular. She took the letter out with her to post because of catching the mail. But she forgot it.”

“Then it is here still?”

"No, sir. I posted it. She remembered last night just as she was getting into bed. And I said I'd run out with it. By putting an extra stamp on it and putting it in the late fee box it would be all right."

"Ah!—and is that far?"

"No, sir, the post office is just around the corner."

"Did you shut the door of the flat behind you?"

Bennett stared.

"No, sir. I just left it to—as I always do when I go out to post."

Poirot seemed about to speak—then checked himself.

"Would you like to look at her, sir?" asked the maid tearfully. "Looks beautiful she does."

We followed her into the bedroom.

Carlotta Adams looked strangely peaceful and much younger than she had appeared that night at the Savoy. She looked like a tired child asleep.

There was a strange expression on Poirot's face as he stood looking down on her. I saw him make the sign of the Cross.

"J'ai fait un serment, Hastings," he said as we went down the stairs.

I did not ask him what his vow was. I could guess.

A minute or two later he said:

"There is one thing off my mind at least. I could not have saved her. By the time I heard of Lord Edgware's death she was already dead. That comforts me. Yes, that comforts me very much."

Ten

JENNY DRIVER

Our next proceeding was to call upon the doctor whose address the maid had given us.

He turned out to be a fussy elderly man somewhat vague in manner. He knew Poirot by repute and expressed a lively pleasure at meeting him in the flesh.

“And what can I do for you, M. Poirot?” he asked after this opening preamble.

“You were called this morning, M. le docteur, to the bedside of a Miss Carlotta Adams.”

“Ah! yes, poor girl. Clever actress too. I’ve been twice to her show. A thousand pities it’s ended this way. Why these girls must have drugs I can’t think.”

“You think she was addicted to drugs, then?”

“Well, professionally, I should hardly have said so. At all events she didn’t take them hypodermically. No marks of the needle. Evidently always took it by the mouth. Maid said she slept well naturally, but then maids never know. I don’t suppose she took veronal every night, but she’d evidently taken it for some time.”

“What makes you think so?”

“This, dash it—where did I put the thing?”

He was peering into a small case.

“Ah! here it is.”

He drew out a small black morocco handbag.

“There’s got to be an inquest, of course. I brought this away so that the maid shouldn’t meddle with it.”

Opening the pochette he took out a small gold box. On it were the initials C.A. in rubies. It was a valuable and expensive trinket. The doctor opened it. It was nearly full of a white powder.

“Veronal,” he explained briefly. “Now look what’s written inside.”

On the inside of the lid of the box was engraved:

C.A. from D. Paris, Nov. 10th. Sweet Dreams.

“November 10th,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“Exactly, and we’re now in June. That seems to show that she’s been in the habit of taking the stuff for at least six months, and as the year isn’t given, it might be eighteen months or two years and a half—or any time.”

“Paris. D,” said Poirot, frowning.

“Yes. Convey anything to you? By the way, I haven’t asked you what your interest is in the case. I’m assuming you’ve got good grounds. I suppose you want to know if it’s suicide? Well, I can’t tell you. Nobody can. According to the maid’s account she was perfectly cheerful yesterday. That looks like accident, and in my opinion accident it is. Veronal’s very uncertain stuff. You can take a devil of a lot and it won’t kill you, and you can take very little and off you go. It’s a dangerous drug for that reason.

“I’ve no doubt they’ll bring it in Accidental Death at the inquest. I’m afraid I can’t be of any more help to you.”

“May I examine the little bag of Mademoiselle?”

“Certainly. Certainly.”

Poirot turned out the contents of the pochette. There was a fine handkerchief with C.M.A. in the corner, a powder puff, a lipstick, a pound note and a little change, and a pair of pince-nez.

These last Poirot examined with interest. They were gold-rimmed and rather severe and academic in type.

“Curious,” said Poirot. “I did not know that Miss Adams wore glasses. But perhaps they are for reading?”

The doctor picked them up.

“No, these are outdoor glasses,” he affirmed. “Pretty powerful too. The person who wore these must have been very shortsighted.”

“You do not know if Miss Adams—”

“I never attended her before. I was called in once to see a poisoned finger of the maid’s. Otherwise I have never been in the flat. Miss Adams whom I saw for a moment on that occasion was certainly not wearing glasses then.”

Poirot thanked the doctor and we took our leave.

Poirot wore a puzzled expression.

“It can be that I am mistaken,” he admitted.

“About the impersonation?”

“No, no. That seems to me proved. No, I mean as to her death. Obviously she had veronal in her possession. It is possible that she was tired and strung up last night and determined to ensure herself a good night’s rest.”

Then he suddenly stopped dead—to the great surprise of the passersby—and beat one hand emphatically on the other.

“No, no, no, no!” he declared emphatically. “Why should that accident happen so conveniently? It was no accident. It was not suicide. No, she played her part and in doing so she signed her death warrant. Veronal may have been chosen simply because it was known that she occasionally took it and that she had that box in her possession. But, if so, the murderer must have been someone who knew her well. Who is D, Hastings? I would give a good deal to know who D was."

"Poirot," I said, as he remained rapt in thought. "Hadn't we better go on? Everyone is staring at us."

"Eh? Well, perhaps you are right. Though it does not incommode me that people should stare. It does not interfere in the least with my train of thought."

"People were beginning to laugh," I murmured.

"That has no importance."

I did not quite agree. I have a horror of doing anything conspicuous. The only thing that affects Poirot is the possibility of the damp or the heat affecting the set of his famous moustache.

"We will take a taxi," said Poirot, waving his stick.

One drew up by us, and Poirot directed it to go Genevieve in Moffat Street.

Genevieve turned out to be one of those establishments where one nondescript hat and a scarf display themselves in a glass box downstairs and where the real centre of operations is one floor up a flight of musty-smelling stairs.

Having climbed the stairs we came to a door with "Genevieve. Please Walk In" on it, and having obeyed this command we found ourselves in a small room full of hats while an imposing blonde creature came forward with a suspicious glance at Poirot.

"Miss Driver?" asked Poirot.

"I do not know if Modom can see you. What is your business, please?"

"Please tell Miss Driver that a friend of Miss Adams would like to see her."

The blonde beauty had no need to go on this errand. A black velvet curtain was violently agitated and a small vivacious creature with flaming red hair emerged.

“What’s that?” she demanded.

“Are you Miss Driver?”

“Yes. What’s that about Carlotta?”

“You have heard the sad news?”

“What sad news?”

“Miss Adams died in her sleep last night. An overdose of veronal.”

The girl’s eyes opened wide.

“How awful!” she exclaimed. “Poor Carlotta. I can hardly believe it. Why, she was full of life yesterday.”

“Nevertheless it is true, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot. “Now see—it is just on one o’clock. I want you to do me the honour of coming out to lunch with me and my friend. I want to ask you several questions.”

The girl looked him up and down. She was a pugilistic little creature. She reminded me in some ways of a fox terrier.

“Who are you?” she demanded bluntly.

“My name is Hercule Poirot. This is my friend Captain Hastings.”

I bowed.

Her glance travelled from one to the other of us.

“I’ve heard of you,” she said abruptly. “I’ll come.”

She called to the blonde:

“Dorothy?”

“Yes, Jenny.”

“Mrs. Lester’s coming in about that Rose Descartes model we’re making for her. Try the different feathers. Bye-bye, shan’t be long, I expect.”

She picked up a small black hat, affixed it to one ear, powdered her nose furiously, and then looked at Poirot.

“Ready,” she said abruptly.

Five minutes afterwards we were sitting in a small restaurant in Dover Street. Poirot had given an order to the waiter and cocktails were in front of us.

“Now,” said Jenny Driver. “I want to know the meaning of all this. What has Carlotta been getting herself mixed up in?”

“She had been getting herself mixed up in something, then, Mademoiselle?”

“Now then, who is going to ask the questions, you or me?”

“My idea was that I should,” said Poirot, smiling. “I have been given to understand that you and Miss Adams were great friends.”

“Right.”

“Eh bien, then I ask you, Mademoiselle, to accept my solemn assurance that what I do, I am doing in the interests of your dead friend. I assure you that that is so.”

There was a moment’s silence while Jenny Driver considered this question. Finally she gave a quick assenting nod of the head.

“I believe you. Carry on. What do you want to know?”

“I understand, Mademoiselle, that your friend lunched with you yesterday.”

“She did.”

“Did she tell you what her plans were for last night?”

“She didn’t exactly mention last night.”

“But she said something?”

“Well, she mentioned something that maybe is what you’re driving at. Mind you, she spoke in confidence.”

“That is understood.”

“Well, let me see now. I think I’d better explain things in my own words.”

“If you please, Mademoiselle.”

“Well, then, Carlotta was excited. She isn’t often excited. She’s not that kind. She wouldn’t tell me anything definite, said she’d promised not to, but she’d got something on. Something I gathered, in the nature of a gigantic hoax.”

“A hoax?”

“That’s what she said. She didn’t say how or when or where. Only—” She paused, frowning. “Well—you see—Carlotta’s not the kind of person who enjoys practical jokes or hoaxes or things of that kind. She’s one of those serious, nice-minded, hard-working girls. What I mean is, somebody had obviously put her up to this stunt. And I think—she didn’t say so, mind—”

“No, no, I quite understand. What was it that you thought?”

“I thought—I was sure—that in some way money was concerned. Nothing really ever excited Carlotta except money. She was made that way. She’d got one of the best heads for business I’ve ever met. She wouldn’t have been so excited and so pleased unless money—quite a lot of money—had been concerned. My impression was that she’d taken on something for a bet—and that she was pretty sure of winning. And yet that isn’t quite true. I mean, Carlotta didn't bet. I've never known her make a bet. But anyway, somehow or other, I'm sure money was concerned."

"She did not actually say so?"

"N-no-o. Just said that she'd be able to do this, that and the other in the near future. She was going to get her sister over from America to meet her in Paris. She was crazy about her little sister. Very delicate, I believe, and musical. Well that's all I know. Is that what you want?"

Poirot nodded his head.

"Yes. It confirms my theory. I had hoped, I admit, for more. I had anticipated that Miss Adams would have been bound to secrecy. But I hoped that, being a woman, she would not have counted revealing the secret to her best friend."

"I tried to make her tell me," admitted Jenny. "But she only laughed and said she'd tell me about it some day."

Poirot was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"You know the name of Lord Edgware?"

"What? The man who was murdered? On a poster half an hour ago."

"Yes. Do you know if Miss Adams was acquainted with him?"

"I don't think so. I'm sure she wasn't. Oh! wait a minute."

"Yes, Mademoiselle?" said Poirot eagerly.

"What was it now?" She frowned, knitting her brow as she tried to remember. "Yes, I've got it now. She mentioned him once. Very bitterly."

"Bitterly?"

"Yes. She said—what was it?—that men like that shouldn't be allowed to ruin other people's lives by their cruelty and lack of understanding. She said

—why, so she did—that he was the kind of man whose death would probably be a good thing for everybody.”

“When was it she said this, Mademoiselle?”

“Oh! about a month ago, I think it was.”

“How did the subject come up?”

Jenny Driver racked her brains for some minutes and finally shook her head.

“I can’t remember,” she confessed. “His name cropped up or something. It might have been in the newspaper. Anyway, I remember thinking it odd that Carlotta should be so vehement all of a sudden when she didn’t even know the man.”

“Certainly it is odd,” agreed Poirot thoughtfully. Then he asked:

“Do you know if Miss Adams was in the habit of taking veronal?”

“Not that I knew. I never saw her take it or mention taking it.”

“Did you ever see in her bag a small gold box with the initials C.A. on it in rubies?”

“A small gold box—no. I am sure I didn’t.”

“Do you happen to know where Miss Adams was last November?”

“Let me see. She went back to the States in November, I think—towards the end of the month. Before that she was in Paris.”

“Alone?”

“Alone, of course! Sorry—perhaps you didn’t mean that! I don’t know why any mention of Paris always suggests the worst. And it’s such a nice respectable place really. But Carlotta wasn’t the weekending sort, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

“Now, Mademoiselle, I am going to ask you a very important question. Was there any man Miss Adams was specially interested in?”

“The answer to that is ‘No,’” said Jenny slowly. “Carlotta, since I’ve known her, has been wrapped up in her work and in her delicate sister. She’s had the ‘head of the family all depends on me’ attitude very strongly. So the answer’s NO—strictly speaking.”

“Ah! and not speaking so strictly?”

“I shouldn’t wonder if—lately—Carlotta hadn’t been getting interested in some man.”

“Ah!”

“Mind you, that’s entirely guesswork on my part. I’ve gone simply by her manner. She’s been—different—not exactly dreamy, but abstracted. And she’s looked different, somehow. Oh! I can’t explain. It’s the sort of thing that another woman just feels—and, of course, may be quite wrong about.”

Poirot nodded.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle. One thing more. Is there any friend of Miss Adams whose initial is D?”

“D,” said Jenny Driver thoughtfully. “D? No, I’m sorry. I can’t think of anyone.”

Eleven

THE EGOIST

I do not think Poirot had expected any other answer to his question. All the same he shook his head sadly. He remained lost in thought. Jenny Driver leant forward, her elbows on the table.

“And now,” she said, “am I going to be told anything?”

“Mademoiselle,” said Poirot. “First of all let me compliment you. Your answers to my questions have been singularly intelligent. Clearly you have brains, Mademoiselle. You ask whether I am going to tell you anything. I answer—not very much. I will tell you just a few bare facts, Mademoiselle.”

He paused, and then said quietly:

“Last night Lord Edgware was murdered in his library. At ten o’clock yesterday evening a lady whom I believe to have been your friend Miss Adams came to the house, asked to see Lord Edgware, and announced herself as Lady Edgware. She wore a golden wig and was made up to resemble the real Lady Edgware who, as you probably know, is Miss Jane Wilkinson, the actress. Miss Adams (if it were she) only remained a few moments. She left the house at five minutes past ten but she did not return home till after midnight. She went to bed, having taken an overdose of veronal. Now, Mademoiselle, you see the point, perhaps, of some of the questions I have been asking you.”

Jenny drew a deep breath.

“Yes,” she said, “I see now. I believe you’re right, M. Poirot. Right about its having been Carlotta, I mean. For one thing, she bought a new hat off me yesterday.”

“A new hat?”

"Yes. She said she wanted one to shade the left side of her face."

There I must insert a few words of explanation as I do not know when these words will be read. I have seen many fashions of hats in my time—the cloche that shaded the face so completely that one gave up in despair the task of recognizing one's friends. The tilted forward hat, the hat attached airily to the back of the head, the beret, and many other styles. In this particular June the hat of the moment was shaped like an inverted soup plate and was worn attached (as if by suction) over one ear, leaving the other side of the face and hair open to inspection.

"These hats are usually worn on the right side of the head?" asked Poirot.

The little modiste nodded.

"But we keep a few to be worn on the opposite side," she explained. "Because there are people who much prefer their right profile to the left or who have a habit of parting the hair on one side only. Now, would there be any special reason for Carlotta's wanting that side of her face to be in shadow?"

I remembered that the door of the house in Regent Gate opened to the left, so that anyone entering would be in full view of the butler that side. I remembered also that Jane Wilkinson (so I had noticed the other night) had a tiny mole at the corner of the left eye.

I said as much excitedly. Poirot agreed, nodding his head vigorously.

"It is so. It is so. Vous avez parfaitement raison, Hastings. Yes, that explains the purchase of the hat."

"M. Poirot?" Jenny sat suddenly bolt upright. "You don't think—you don't for one moment think—that Carlotta did it? Kill him, I mean. You can't think that? Not just because she spoke so bitterly about him."

"I do not think so. But it is curious, all the same—that she should have spoken so, I mean. I would like to know the reason for it. What had he done—what did she know of him to make her speak in such a fashion?"

“I don’t know—but she didn’t kill him. She’s—oh! she was—well—too refined.”

Poirot nodded approvingly.

“Yes, yes. You put that very well. It is a point psychological. I agree. This was a scientific crime—but not a refined one.”

“Scientific?”

“The murderer knew exactly where to strike so as to reach the vital nerve centres at the base of the skull where it joins the cord.”

“Looks like a doctor,” said Jenny thoughtfully.

“Did Miss Adams know any doctors? I mean, was any particular doctor a friend of hers?”

Jenny shook her head.

“Never heard of one. Not over here, anyway.”

“Another question. Did Miss Adams wear pince-nez?”

“Glasses? Never.”

“Ah!” Poirot frowned.

A vision rose in my mind. A doctor, smelling of carbolic, with shortsighted eyes magnified by powerful lenses. Absurd!

“By the way, did Miss Adams know Bryan Martin, the film actor?”

“Why, yes. She used to know him as a child, she told me. I don’t think she saw much of him, though. Just once in a while. She told me she thought he’d got very swollen-headed.”

She looked at her watch and uttered an exclamation.

"Goodness, I must fly. Have I helped you at all, M. Poirot?"

"You have. I shall ask you for further help by and by."

"It's yours. Someone staged this devilry. We've got to find out who it is."

She gave us a quick shake of the hand, flashed her white teeth in a sudden smile and left us with characteristic abruptness.

"An interesting personality," said Poirot as he paid the bill.

"I like her," I said.

"It is always a pleasure to meet a quick mind."

"A little hard, perhaps," I reflected. "The shock of her friend's death did not upset her as much as I should have thought it would have done."

"She is not the sort that weeps, certainly," agreed Poirot dryly.

"Did you get what you hoped from the interview?"

He shook his head.

"No—I hoped—very much I hoped—to get a clue to the personality of D, the person who gave her the little gold box. There I have failed. Unfortunately Carlotta Adams was a reserved girl. She was not one to gossip about her friends or her possible love affairs. On the other hand, the person who suggested the hoax may not have been a friend at all. It may have been a mere acquaintance who proposed it—doubtless for some 'sporting' reason—on a money basis. This person may have seen the gold box she carried about with her and made some opportunity to discover what it contained."

"But how on earth did they get her to take it? And when?"

"Well, there was the time during which the flat door was open—when the maid was out posting a letter. Not that that satisfies me. It leaves too much to chance. But now—to work. We have still two possible clues."

"Which are?"

"The first is the telephone call to a Victoria number. It seems to me quite a probability that Carlotta Adams would ring up on her return to announce her success. On the other hand, where was she between five minutes past ten and midnight? She may have had an appointment with the instigator of the hoax. In that case the telephone call may have been merely one to a friend."

"What is the second clue?"

"Ah! that I do have hopes of. The letter, Hastings. The letter to her sister. It is possible—I only say possible—that in that she may have described the whole business. She would not regard it as a breach of faith, since the letter would not be read till a week later and in another country at that."

"Amazing, if that is so!"

"We must not build too much upon it, Hastings. It is a chance, that is all. No, we must work now from the other end."

"What do you call the other end?"

"A careful study of those who profit in any degree by Lord Edgware's death."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Apart from his nephew and his wife—"

"And the man the wife wanted to marry," added Poirot.

"The Duke? He is in Paris."

"Quite so. But you cannot deny that he is an interested party. Then there are the people in the house—the butler—the servants. Who knows what grudges they may have had? But I think myself our first point of attack should be a further interview with Mademoiselle Jane Wilkinson. She is shrewd. She may be able to suggest something."

Once more we made our way to the Savoy. We found the lady surrounded by boxes and tissue paper, whilst exquisite black draperies were strewn over the back of every chair. Jane had a rapt and serious expression and was just trying on yet another small black hat before the glass.

“Why, M. Poirot. Sit down. That is, if there’s anything to sit on. Ellis, clear something, will you?”

“Madame. You look charming.”

Jane looked serious.

“I don’t want exactly to play the hypocrite, M. Poirot. But one must observe appearances, don’t you think? I mean, I think I ought to be careful. Oh! by the way, I’ve had the sweetest telegram from the Duke.”

“From Paris?”

“Yes, from Paris. Guarded, of course, and supposed to be condolences, but put so that I can read between the lines.”

“My felicitations, Madame.”

“M. Poirot.” She clasped her hands, her husky voice dropped. She looked like an angel about to give vent to thoughts of exquisite holiness. “I’ve been thinking. It all seems so miraculous, if you know what I mean. Here I am—all my troubles over. No tiresome business of divorce. No bothers. Just my path cleared and all plain sailing. It makes me feel almost religious—if you know what I mean.”

I held my breath. Poirot looked at her, his head a little on one side. She was quite serious.

“That is how it strikes you, Madame, eh?”

“Things happen right for me,” said Jane in a sort of awed whisper. “I’ve thought and I’ve thought lately—if Edgware was to die. And there—he’s dead! It’s—it’s almost like an answer to prayer.”

Poirot cleared his throat.

“I cannot say I look at it quite like that, Madame. Somebody killed your husband.”

She nodded.

“Why, of course.”

“Has it not occurred to you to wonder who that someone was?”

She stared at him. “Does it matter? I mean—what’s that to do with it? The Duke and I can be married in about four or five months….”

With difficulty Poirot controlled himself.

“Yes, Madame, I know that. But apart from that has it not occurred to you to ask yourself who killed your husband?”

“No.” She seemed quite surprised by the idea. We could see her thinking about it.

“Does it not interest you to know?” asked Poirot.

“Not very much, I’m afraid,” she admitted. “I suppose the police will find out. They’re very clever, aren’t they?”

“So it is said. I, too, am going to make it my business to find out.”

“Are you? How funny.”

“Why funny?”

“Well, I don’t know.” Her eyes strayed back to the clothes. She slipped on a satin coat and studied herself in the glass.

“You do not object, eh?” said Poirot, his eyes twinkling.

“Why, of course not, M. Poirot. I should just love you to be clever about it all. I wish you every success.”

“Madame—I want more than your wishes. I want your opinion.”

“Opinion?” said Jane absently, as she twisted her head over her shoulder. “What on?”

“Who do you think likely to have killed Lord Edgware?”

Jane shook her head. “I haven’t any idea!”

She wriggled her shoulders experimentally and took up the hand glass.

“Madame!” said Poirot in a loud, emphatic voice. “Who DO you THINK KILLED YOUR HUSBAND?”

This time it got through. Jane threw him a startled glance. “Geraldine, I expect,” she said.

“Who is Geraldine?”

But Jane’s attention was gone again.

“Ellis, take this up a little on the right shoulder. So. What, M. Poirot? Geraldine’s his daughter. No Ellis, the right shoulder. That’s better. Oh! must you go, M. Poirot? I’m terribly grateful for everything. I mean, for the divorce, even though it isn’t necessary after all. I shall always think you were wonderful.”

I only saw Jane Wilkinson twice again. Once on the stage, once when I sat opposite her at a luncheon party. I always think of her as I saw her then, absorbed heart and soul in clothes, her lips carelessly throwing out the words that were to influence Poirot’s further actions, her mind concentrated firmly and beautifully on herself.

“Epatant,” said Poirot with reverence as we emerged into the Strand.

Twelve

THE DAUGHTER

There was a letter sent by hand lying on the table when we got back to our rooms. Poirot picked it up, slit it open with his usual neatness, and then laughed.

“What is it you say—‘Talk of the devil?’ See here, Hastings.”

I took the note from him.

The paper was stamped 17 Regent Gate and was written in very upright characteristic handwriting which looked easy to read and, curiously enough, was not.

“Dear Sir (it ran),

I hear you were at the house this morning with the inspector. I am sorry not to have had the opportunity of speaking to you. If convenient to yourself I should be much obliged if you could spare me a few minutes anytime this afternoon.

Yours truly,
Geraldine Marsh.”

“Curious,” I said. “I wonder why she wants to see you?”

“Is it curious that she should want to see me? You are not polite, my friend.”

Poirot has the most irritating habit of joking at the wrong moment.

“We will go round at once, my friend,” he said, and lovingly brushing an imagined speck of dust from his hat, he put it on his head.

Jane Wilkinson's careless suggestion that Geraldine might have killed her father seemed to me particularly absurd. Only a particularly brainless person could have suggested it. I said as much to Poirot.

"Brains. Brains. What do we really mean by the term? In your idiom you would say that Jane Wilkinson has the brains of a rabbit. That is a term of disparagement. But consider the rabbit for a moment. He exists and multiplies, does he not? That, in Nature, is a sign of mental superiority. The lovely Lady Edgware she does not know history, or geography, nor the classics sans doute. The name of Lao Tse would suggest to her a prize Pekingese dog, the name of Molière a maison de couture. But when it comes to choosing clothes, to making rich and advantageous marriages, and to getting her own way—her success is phenomenal. The opinion of a philosopher as to who murdered Lord Edgware would be no good to me—the motive for murder from a philosopher's point of view would be the greatest good of the greatest number, and as that is difficult to decide, few philosophers are murderers. But a careless opinion from Lady Edgware might be useful to me because her point of view would be materialistic and based on a knowledge of the worst side of human nature."

"Perhaps there's something in that," I conceded.

"Nous voici," said Poirot. "I am curious to know why the young lady wishes so urgently to see me."

"It is a natural desire," I said, getting my own back. "You said so a quarter of an hour ago. The natural desire to see something unique at close quarters."

"Perhaps it is you, my friend, who make an impression on her heart the other day," replied Poirot as he rang the bell.

I recalled the startled face of the girl who had stood in the doorway. I could still see those burning dark eyes in the white face. That momentary glimpse had made a great impression on me.

We were shown upstairs to a big drawing room and in a minute or two Geraldine Marsh came to us there.

The impression of intensity which I had noticed before was heightened on this occasion. This tall, thin, white-faced girl with her big haunting black eyes was a striking figure.

She was extremely composed—in view of her youth, remarkably so.

“It is very good of you to come so promptly, M. Poirot,” she said. “I am sorry to have missed you this morning.”

“You were lying down?”

“Yes. Miss Carroll—my father’s secretary, you know—insisted. She has been very kind.”

There was a queer grudging note in the girl’s voice that puzzled me.

“In what way can I be of service to you, Mademoiselle?” asked Poirot.

She hesitated a minute and then said:

“On the day before my father was killed you came to see him?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“Why? Did he—send for you?”

Poirot did not reply for a moment. He seemed to be deliberating. I believe, now, that it was a cleverly calculated move on his part. He wanted to goad her into further speech. She was, he realized, of the impatient type. She wanted things in a hurry.

“Was he afraid of something? Tell me. Tell me. I must know. Who was he afraid of? Why? What did he say to you? Oh! why can’t you speak?”

I had thought that that forced composure was not natural. It had soon broken down. She was leaning forward now, her hands twisting themselves nervously on her lap.

"What passed between Lord Edgware and myself was in confidence," said Poirot slowly.

His eyes never left her face.

"Then it was about—I mean, it must have been something to do with—the family. Oh! you sit there and torture me. Why won't you tell me? It's necessary for me to know. It's necessary. I tell you."

Again, very slowly, Poirot shook his head, apparently a prey to deep perplexity.

"M. Poirot." She drew herself up. "I'm his daughter. It is my right to know—what my father dreaded on the last day but one of his life. It isn't fair to leave me in the dark. It isn't fair to him—not to tell me."

"Were you so devoted to your father, then, Mademoiselle?" asked Poirot gently.

She drew back as though stung.

"Fond of him?" she whispered. "Fond of him. I—I—"

And suddenly her self-control snapped. Peals of laughter broke from her. She lay back in her chair and laughed and laughed.

"It's so funny," she gasped. "It's so funny—to be asked that."

That hysterical laughter had not passed unheard. The door opened and Miss Carroll came in. She was firm and efficient.

"Now, now, Geraldine, my dear, that won't do. No, no. Hush, now. I insist. No. Stop it. I mean it. Stop it at once."

Her determined manner had its effect. Geraldine's laughter grew fainter. She wiped her eyes and sat up.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "I've never done that before."

Miss Carroll was still looking at her anxiously.

“I’m all right now, Miss Carroll. It was idiotic.”

She smiled suddenly. A queer bitter smile that twisted her lips. She sat up very straight in her chair and looked at no one.

“He asked me,” she said in a cold clear voice, “if I had been very fond of my father.”

Miss Carroll made a sort of indeterminate cluck. It denoted irresolution on her part. Geraldine went on, her voice high and scornful.

“I wonder if it is better to tell lies or the truth? The truth, I think. I wasn’t fond of my father. I hated him!”

“Geraldine dear.”

“Why pretend? You didn’t hate him because he couldn’t touch you! You were one of the few people in the world that he couldn’t get at. You saw him as the employer who paid you so much a year. His rages and his queerness didn’t interest you—you ignored them. I know what you’d say, ‘Everyone has got to put up with something.’ You were cheerful and uninterested. You’re a very strong woman. You’re not really human. But then you could have walked out of the house any minute. I couldn’t. I belonged.”

“Really, Geraldine, I don’t think it’s necessary going into all this. Fathers and daughters often don’t get on. But the less said in life the better, I’ve found.”

Geraldine turned her back on her. She addressed herself to Poirot.

“M. Poirot, I hated my father! I am glad he is dead! It means freedom for me—freedom and independence. I am not in the least anxious to find his murderer. For all we know the person who killed him may have had reasons—ample reasons—justifying that action.”

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully.

“That is a dangerous principle to adopt, Mademoiselle.”

“Will hanging someone else bring father back to life?”

“No,” said Poirot dryly. “But it may save other innocent people from being murdered.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A person who has once killed, Mademoiselle, nearly always kills again—sometimes again and again.”

“I don’t believe it. Not—not a real person.”

“You mean—not a homicidal maniac? But yes, it is true. One life is removed—perhaps after a terrific struggle with the murderer’s conscience. Then—danger threatens—the second murder is morally easier. At the slightest threatening of suspicion a third follows. And little by little an artistic pride arises—it is a métier—to kill. It is done at last almost for pleasure.”

The girl had hidden her face in her hands.

“Horrible. Horrible. It isn’t true.”

“And supposing I told you that it had already happened? That already—to save himself—the murderer has killed a second time?”

“What’s that, M. Poirot?” cried Miss Carroll. “Another murder? Where? Who?”

Poirot gently shook his head.

“It was an illustration only. I ask pardon.”

“Oh! I see. For a moment I really thought—Now, Geraldine, if you’ve finished talking arrant nonsense.”

“You are on my side, I see,” said Poirot with a little bow.

"I don't believe in capital punishment," said Miss Carroll briskly. "Otherwise I am certainly on your side. Society must be protected."

Geraldine got up. She smoothed back her hair.

"I am sorry," she said. "I am afraid I have been making rather a fool of myself. You still refuse to tell me why my father called you in?"

"Called him?" said Miss Carroll in lively astonishment.

"You misunderstand, Miss Marsh. I have not refused to tell you."

Poirot was forced to come out into the open.

"I was only considering how far that interview might have been said to be confidential. Your father did not call me in. I sought an interview with him on behalf of a client. That client was Lady Edgware."

"Oh! I see."

An extraordinary expression came over the girl's face. I thought at first it was disappointment. Then I saw it was relief.

"I have been very foolish," she said slowly. "I thought my father had perhaps thought himself menaced by some danger. It was stupid."

"You know, M. Poirot, you gave me quite a turn just now," said Miss Carroll, "when you suggested that woman had done a second murder."

Poirot did not answer her. He spoke to the girl.

"Do you believe Lady Edgware committed the murder, Mademoiselle?"

She shook her head.

"No, I don't. I can't see her doing a thing like that. She's much too—well, artificial."

“I don’t see who else can have done it,” said Miss Carroll. “And I don’t think women of that kind have got any moral sense.”

“It needn’t have been her,” argued Geraldine. “She may have come here and just had an interview with him and gone away, and the real murderer may have been some lunatic who got in afterwards.”

“All murderers are mentally deficient—of that I am assured,” said Miss Carroll. “Internal gland secretion.”

At that moment the door opened and a man came in—then stopped awkwardly.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know anyone was in here.”

Geraldine made a mechanical introduction.

“My cousin, Lord Edgware. M. Poirot. It’s all right, Ronald. You’re not interrupting.”

“Sure, Dina? How do you do, M. Poirot? Are your grey cells functioning over our particular family mystery?”

I cast my mind back trying to remember. That round, pleasant, vacuous face, the eyes with slight pouches underneath them, the little moustache marooned like an island in the middle of the expanse of face.

Of course! It was Carlotta Adams’ escort on the night of the supper party in Jane Wilkinson’s suite.

Captain Ronald Marsh. Now Lord Edgware.

Thirteen

THE NEPHEW

The new Lord Edgware's eye was a quick one. He noticed the slight start I gave.

"Ah! you've got it," he said amiably. "Aunt Jane's little supper party. Just a shade bottled, wasn't I? But I fancied it passed quite unperceived."

Poirot was saying good-bye to Geraldine Marsh and Miss Carroll.

"I'll come down with you," said Ronald genially.

He led the way down the stairs, talking as he went.

"Rum thing—life. Kicked out one day, lord of the manor the next. My late unlamented uncle kicked me out, you know, three years ago. But I expect you know all about that, M. Poirot?"

"I had heard the fact mentioned—yes," replied Poirot composedly.

"Naturally. A thing of that kind is sure to be dug up. The earnest sleuth can't afford to miss it."

He grinned.

Then he threw open the dining room door.

"Have a spot before you go."

Poirot refused. So did I. But the young man mixed himself a drink and continued to talk.

"Here's to murder," he said cheerfully. "In the space of one short night I am converted from the creditor's despair to the tradesman's hope. Yesterday ruin stared me in the face, today all is affluence. God bless Aunt Jane."

He drained his glass. Then, with a slight change of manner, he spoke to Poirot.

"Seriously, though, M. Poirot, what are you doing here? Four days ago Aunt Jane was dramatically declaiming, 'Who will rid me of this insolent tyrant?' and lo and behold she is ridded! Not by your agency, I hope? The perfect crime, by Hercule Poirot, ex-sleuth hound."

Poirot smiled.

"I am here this afternoon in answer to a note from Miss Geraldine Marsh."

"A discreet answer, eh? No, M. Poirot, what are you really doing here? For some reason or other you are interesting yourself in my uncle's death."

"I am always interested in murder, Lord Edgware."

"But you don't commit it. Very cautious. You should teach Aunt Jane caution. Caution and a shade more camouflage. You'll excuse me calling her Aunt Jane. It amuses me. Did you see her blank face when I did it the other night? Hadn't the foggiest notion who I was."

"En verité?"

"No. I was kicked out of here three months before she came along."

The fatuous expression of good nature on his face failed for a moment. Then he went on lightly:

"Beautiful woman. But no subtlety. Methods are rather crude, eh?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"It is possible."

Ronald looked at him curiously.

"I believe you think she didn't do it. So she's got round you too, has she?"

"I have a great admiration for beauty," said Poirot evenly. "But also for—evidence."

He brought the last word out very quietly.

"Evidence?" said the other sharply.

"Perhaps you do not know, Lord Edgware, that Lady Edgware was at a party at Chiswick last night at the time she was supposed to have been seen here."

Ronald swore.

"So she went after all! How like a woman! At six o'clock she was throwing her weight about, declaring that nothing on earth would make her go, and I suppose about ten minutes after she'd changed her mind! When planning a murder never depend upon a woman doing what she says she'll do. That's how the best-laid plans of murder gang agley. No, M. Poirot, I'm not incriminating myself. Oh, yes, don't think I can't read what's passing through your mind. Who is the Natural Suspect? The well-known Wicked Ne'er-do-Weel Nephew."

He leaned back in his chair chuckling.

"I'm saving your little grey cells for you, M. Poirot. No need for you to hunt round for someone who saw me in the offing when Aunt Jane was declaring she never, never, never would go out that night, etc. I was there. So you ask yourself did the wicked nephew in very truth come here last night disguised in a fair wig and a Paris hat?"

Seemingly enjoying the situation, he surveyed us both. Poirot, his head a little on one side, was regarding him with close attention. I felt rather uncomfortable.

"I had a motive—oh! yes, motive admitted. And I'm going to give you a present of a very valuable and significant piece of information. I called to see my uncle yesterday morning. Why? To ask for money. Yes, lick your lips over that. To ASK FOR MONEY. And I went away without getting any. And that same evening—that very same evening—Lord Edgware dies. Good title that, by the way. Lord Edgware Dies. Look well on a bookstall."

He paused. Still Poirot said nothing.

"I'm really flattered by your attention, M. Poirot. Captain Hastings looks as though he had seen a ghost—or were going to see one any minute. Don't get so strung up, my dear fellow. Wait for the anticlimax. Well, where were we? Oh! yes, case against the Wicked Nephew. Guilt is to be thrown on the hated Aunt by Marriage. Nephew, celebrated at one time for acting female parts, does his supreme histrionic effort. In a girlish voice he announces himself as Lady Edgware and sidles past the butler with mincing steps. No suspicions are aroused. 'Jane,' cries my fond uncle. 'George,' I squeak. I fling my arms about his neck and neatly insert the penknife. The next details are purely medical and can be omitted. Exit the spurious lady. And so to bed at the end of a good day's work."

He laughed, and rising, poured himself out another whisky and soda. He returned slowly to his chair.

"Works out well, doesn't it? But you see, here comes the crux of the matter. The disappointment! The annoying sensation of having been led up the garden. For now, M. Poirot, we come to the alibi!"

He finished off his glass.

"I always find alibis very enjoyable," he remarked. "Whenever I happen to be reading a detective story I sit up and take notice when the alibi comes along. This is a remarkably good alibi. Three strong, and Jewish at that. In plainer language, Mr., Mrs. and Miss Dortheimer. Extremely rich and extremely musical. They have a box in Covent Garden. Into that box they invite young men with prospects. I, M. Poirot, am a young man with prospects—as good a one, shall we say, as they can hope to get. Do I like the opera? Frankly, no. But I enjoy the excellent dinner in Grosvenor Square first, and I also enjoy an excellent supper somewhere else afterwards, even if I do have to dance with Rachel Dortheimer and have a stiff arm for two days afterwards. So you see, M. Poirot, there you are. When uncle's lifeblood is flowing, I am whispering cheerful nothings into the diamond encrusted ears of the fair (I beg her pardon, dark) Rachel in a box at Covent Garden. Her long Jewish nose is quivering with emotion. And so you see, M. Poirot, why I can afford to be so frank."

He leaned back in his chair.

"I hope I have not bored you. Any question to ask?"

"I can assure you that I have not been bored," said Poirot. "Since you are so kind, there is one little question that I would like to ask."

"Delighted."

"How long, Lord Edgware, have you known Miss Carlotta Adams?"

Whatever the young man had expected, it certainly had not been this. He sat up sharply with an entirely new expression on his face.

"Why on earth do you want to know that? What's that got to do with what we've been talking about?"

"I was curious, that was all. For the other, you have explained so fully everything there is to explain that there is no need for me to ask questions."

Ronald shot a quick glance at him. It was almost as though he did not care for Poirot's amiable acquiescence. He would, I thought, have preferred him to be more suspicious.

"Carlotta Adams? Let me see. About a year. A little more. I got to know her last year when she gave her first show."

"You knew her well?"

"Pretty well. She's not the sort of girl you ever got to know frightfully well. Reserved and all that."

"But you liked her?"

Ronald stared at him.

“I wish I knew why you were so interested in the lady. Was it because I was with her the other night? Yes, I like her very much. She’s sympathetic—listens to a chap and makes him feel he’s something of a fellow after all.”

Poirot nodded.

“I comprehend. Then you will be sorry.”

“Sorry? What about?”

“That she is dead!”

“What?” Ronald sprang up in astonishment. “Carlotta dead?”

He looked absolutely dumbfounded by the news.

“You’re pulling my leg, M. Poirot. Carlotta was perfectly well the last time I saw her.”

“When was that?” asked Poirot quickly.

“Day before yesterday, I think. I can’t remember.”

“Tout de même, she is dead.”

“It must have been frightfully sudden. What was it? A street accident?”

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

“No. She took an overdose of veronal.”

“Oh! I say. Poor kid. How frightfully sad.”

“N’est ce pas?”

“I am sorry. And she was getting on so well. She was going to get her kid sister over and had all sorts of plans. Dash it. I’m more sorry than I can say.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It is sad to die when you are young—when you do not want to die—when all life is open before you and you have everything to live for.”

Ronald looked at him curiously.

“I don’t think I quite get you, M. Poirot.”

“No?”

Poirot rose and held out his hand.

“I express my thoughts—a little strongly, perhaps. For I do not like to see youth deprived of its right to live, Lord Edgware. I feel—very strongly about it. I wish you good day.”

“Oh—er—good-bye.”

He looked rather taken aback.

As I opened the door I almost collided with Miss Carroll.

“Ah! M. Poirot, they told me you hadn’t gone yet. I’d like a word with you if I may. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind coming up to my room?

“It’s about that child, Geraldine,” she said when we had entered her sanctum and she had closed the door.

“Yes, Mademoiselle?”

“She talked a lot of nonsense this afternoon. Now don’t protest. Nonsense! That’s what I call it and that’s what it was. She broods.”

“I could see that she was suffering from overstrain,” said Poirot gently.

“Well—to tell the truth—she hasn’t had a very happy life. No, one can’t pretend she has. Frankly, M. Poirot, Lord Edgware was a peculiar man—not the sort of man who ought to have had anything to do with the upbringing of children. Quite frankly, he terrorized Geraldine.”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, I should imagine something of the kind.”

“He was a peculiar man. He—I don’t quite know how to put it—but he enjoyed seeing anyone afraid of him. It seemed to give him a morbid kind of pleasure.”

“Quite so.”

“He was an extremely well-read man, and a man of considerable intellect. But in some ways—well, I didn’t come across that side of him myself, but it was there. I’m not really surprised his wife left him. This wife, I mean. I don’t approve of her, mind. I’ve no opinion of that young woman at all. But in marrying Lord Edgware she got all and more than she deserved. Well, she left him—and no bones broken, as they say. But Geraldine couldn’t leave him. For a long time he’d forget all about her, and then, suddenly, he’d remember. I sometimes think—though perhaps I shouldn’t say it—”

“Yes, yes. Mademoiselle, say it.”

“Well, I sometimes thought he revenged himself on the mother—his first wife—that way. She was a gentle creature, I believe, with a very sweet disposition. I’ve always been sorry for her. I shouldn’t have mentioned all this, M. Poirot, if it hadn’t been for that very foolish outburst of Geraldine’s just now. Things she said—about hating her father—they might sound peculiar to anyone who didn’t know.”

“Thank you very much, Mademoiselle. Lord Edgware, I fancy, was a man who would have done much better not to marry.”

“Much better.”

“He never thought of marrying for a third time?”

“How could he? His wife was alive.”

“By giving her her freedom he would have been free himself.”

“I should think he had had enough trouble with two wives as it was,” said Miss Carroll grimly.

“So you think there would have been no question of a third marriage. There was no one? Think, Mademoiselle. No one?”

Miss Carroll’s colour rose.

“I cannot understand the way you keep harping on the point. Of course there was no one.”

Fourteen

FIVE QUESTIONS

“Why did you ask Miss Carroll about the possibility of Lord Edgware’s wanting to marry again?” I asked with some curiosity as we were driving home.

“It just occurred to me that there was a possibility of such a thing, mon ami.”

“Why?”

“I have been searching in my mind for something to explain Lord Edgware’s sudden volte face regarding the matter of divorce. There is something curious there, my friend.”

“Yes,” I said thoughtfully. “It is rather odd.”

“You see, Hastings, Lord Edgware confirmed what Madame had told us. She had employed the lawyers of all kinds, but he refused to budge an inch. No, he would not agree to the divorce. And then, all of a sudden, he yields!”

“Or so he says,” I reminded him.

“Very true, Hastings. It is very just, the observation you make there. So he says. We have no proof, whatever, that that letter was written. Eh bien, on one part, ce Monsieur is lying. For some reason he tells us the fabrication, the embroidery. Is it not so? Why, we do not know. But, on the hypothesis that he did write that letter, there must have been a reason for so doing. Now the reason that presents itself most naturally to the imagination is that he has suddenly met someone whom he desires to marry. That explains perfectly his sudden change of face. And so, naturally, I make the inquiries.”

“Miss Carroll turned the idea down very decisively,” I said.

"Yes. Miss Carroll…" said Poirot in a meditative voice.

"Now what are you driving at?" I asked in exasperation.

Poirot is an adept at suggesting doubts by the tone of his voice.

"What reason should she have for lying about it?" I asked.

"Aucune—aucune."

"But, you see, Hastings, it is difficult to trust her evidence."

"You think she's lying? But why? She looks a most upright person."

"That is just it. Between the deliberate falsehood and the disinterested inaccuracy it is very hard to distinguish sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

"To deceive deliberately—that is one thing. But to be so sure of your facts, of your ideas and of their essential truth that the details do not matter—that, my friend, is a special characteristic of particularly honest persons. Already, mark you, she has told us one lie. She said she saw Jane Wilkinson's face when she could not possibly have done so. Now how did that come about? Look at it this way. She looks down and sees Jane Wilkinson in the hall. No doubt enters her head that it is Jane Wilkinson. She knows it is. She says she saw her face distinctly because—being so sure of her facts—exact details do not matter! It is pointed out to her that she could not have seen her face. Is that so? Well, what does it matter if she saw her face or not—it was Jane Wilkinson. And so with any other question. She knows. And so she answers questions in the light of her knowledge, not by reason of remembered facts. The positive witness should always be treated with suspicion, my friend. The uncertain witness who doesn't remember, isn't sure, will think a minute—ah! yes, that's how it was—is infinitely more to be depended upon!"

"Dear me, Poirot," I said. "You upset all my preconceived ideas about witnesses."

“In reply to my question as to Lord Edgware’s marrying again she ridicules the idea—simply because it has never occurred to her. She will not take the trouble to remember whether any infinitesimal signs may have pointed that way. Therefore we are exactly where we were before.”

“She certainly did not seem at all taken aback when you pointed out she could not have seen Jane Wilkinson’s face,” I remarked thoughtfully.

“No. That is why I decided that she was one of those honestly inaccurate persons, rather than a deliberate liar. I can see no motive for deliberate lying unless—true, that is an idea!”

“What is?” I asked eagerly.

But Poirot shook his head.

“An idea suggested itself to me. But it is too impossible—yes, much too impossible.”

And he refused to say more.

“She seems very fond of the girl,” I said.

“Yes. She certainly was determined to assist at our interview. What was your impression of the Honourable Geraldine Marsh, Hastings?”

“I was sorry for her—deeply sorry for her.”

“You have always the tender heart, Hastings. Beauty in distress upsets you every time.”

“Didn’t you feel the same?”

He nodded gravely.

“Yes—she has not had a happy life. That is written very clearly on her face.”

"At any rate," I said warmly, "you realize how preposterous Jane Wilkinson's suggestion was—that she should have had anything to do with the crime, I mean."

"Doubtless her alibi is satisfactory, but Japp has not communicated it to me as yet."

"My dear Poirot—do you mean to say that even after seeing her and talking to her, you are still not satisfied and want an alibi?"

"Eh bien, my friend, what is the result of seeing and talking to her? We perceive that she has passed through great unhappiness, she admits that she hated her father and is glad that he is dead, and she is deeply uneasy about what he may have said to us yesterday morning. And after that you say—no alibi is necessary!"

"Her mere frankness proves her innocence," I said warmly.

"Frankness is a characteristic of the family. The new Lord Edgware—with what a gesture he laid his cards on the table."

"He did indeed," I said, smiling at the remembrance. "Rather an original method."

Poirot nodded.

"He—what do you say?—cut the ground before our feet."

"From under," I corrected. "Yes—it made us look rather foolish."

"What a curious idea. You may have looked foolish. I didn't feel foolish in the least and I do not think I looked it. On the contrary, my friend, I put him out of countenance."

"Did you?" I said doubtfully, not remembering having seen signs of anything of the kind.

"Si, si. I listen—and listen. And at last I ask a question about something quite different, and that, you may have noticed, disconcerts our brave

Monsieur very much. You do not observe, Hastings.”

“I thought his horror and astonishment at hearing of Carlotta Adams’ death was genuine,” I said. “I suppose you will say it was a piece of clever acting.”

“Impossible to tell. I agree it seemed genuine.”

“Why do you think he flung all those facts at our head in that cynical way? Just for amusement?”

“That is always possible. You English, you have the most extraordinary notions of humour. But it may have been policy. Facts that are concealed acquire a suspicious importance. Facts that are frankly revealed tend to be regarded as less important than they really are.”

“The quarrel with his uncle that morning, for instance?”

“Exactly. He knows that the fact is bound to leak out. Eh bien, he will parade it.”

“He is not so foolish as he looks.”

“Oh! he is not foolish at all. He has plenty of brains when he cares to use them. He sees exactly where he stands and, as I said, he lays his cards on the table. You play the bridge, Hastings. Tell me, when does one do that?”

“You play bridge yourself,” I said, laughing. “You know well enough—when all the rest of the tricks are yours and you want to save time and get on to a new hand.”

“Yes, mon ami, that is all very true. But occasionally there is another reason. I have remarked it once or twice when playing with les dames. There is perhaps a little doubt. Eh bien, la dame, she throws down the cards, says ‘and all the rest are mine,’ and gathers up the cards and cuts the new pack. And possibly the other players agree—especially if they are a little inexperienced. The thing is not obvious, mark you. It requires to be followed out. Halfway through dealing the next hand, one of the players thinks: ‘Yes, but she would have to have taken over that fourth diamond in dummy whether she wanted it or not, and then she would have had to lead a little club and my nine would have made.’”

“So you think?”

“I think, Hastings, that too much bravado is a very interesting thing. And I also think that it is time we dined. Une petite omelette, n’est ce pas? And after that, about nine o’clock, I have one more visit I wish to make.”

“Where is that?”

“We will dine first, Hastings. And until we drink our coffee, we will not discuss the case further. When engaged in eating, the brain should be the servant of the stomach.”

Poirot was as good as his word. We went to a little restaurant in Soho where he was well-known, and there we had a delicious omelette, a sole, a chicken and a Baba au Rhum of which Poirot was inordinately fond.

Then, as we sipped our coffee, Poirot smiled affectionately across the table at me.

“My good friend,” he said. “I depend upon you more than you know.”

I was confused and delighted by these unexpected words. He had never said anything of the kind to me before. Sometimes, secretly, I had felt slightly hurt. He seemed almost to go out of his way to disparage my mental powers.

Although I did not think his own powers were flagging, I did realize suddenly that perhaps he had come to depend on my aid more than he knew.

“Yes,” he said dreamily. “You may not always comprehend just how it is so—but you do often, and often point the way.”

I could hardly believe my ears.

“Really, Poirot,” I stammered. “I’m awfully glad, I suppose I’ve learnt a good deal from you one way or another—”

He shook his head.

“Mais non, ce n’est pas ça. You have learnt nothing.”

“Oh!” I said, rather taken aback.

“That is as it should be. No human being should learn from another. Each individual should develop his own powers to the uttermost, not try to imitate those of someone else. I do not wish you to be a second and inferior Poirot. I wish you to be the supreme Hastings. And you are the supreme Hastings. In you, Hastings, I find the normal mind almost perfectly illustrated.”

“I’m not abnormal, I hope,” I said.

“No, no. You are beautifully and perfectly balanced. In you sanity is personified. Do you realize what that means to me? When the criminal sets out to do a crime his first effort is to deceive. Who does he seek to deceive? The image in his mind is that of the normal man. There is probably no such thing actually—it is a mathematical abstraction. But you come as near to realizing it as is possible. There are moments when you have flashes of brilliance when you rise above the average, moments (I hope you will pardon me) when you descend to curious depths of obtuseness, but take it all for all, you are amazingly normal. Eh bien, how does this profit me? Simply in this way. As in a mirror I see reflected in your mind exactly what the criminal wishes me to believe. That is terrifically helpful and suggestive.”

I did not quite understand. It seemed to me that what Poirot was saying was hardly complimentary. However, he quickly disabused me of that impression.

“I have expressed myself badly,” he said quickly. “You have an insight into the criminal mind, which I myself lack. You show me what the criminal wishes me to believe. It is a great gift.”

"Insight," I said thoughtfully. "Yes, perhaps I have got insight."

I looked across the table at him. He was smoking his tiny cigarettes and regarding me with great kindliness.

"Ce cher Hastings," he murmured. "I have indeed much affection for you."

I was pleased but embarrassed and hastened to change the subject.

"Come," I said in a businesslike manner. "Let us discuss the case."

"Eh bien." Poirot threw his head back, his eyes narrowed. He slowly puffed out smoke.

"Je me pose des questions," he said.

"Yes?" I said eagerly.

"You, too, doubtless?"

"Certainly," I said. And also leaning back and narrowing my own eyes I threw out:

"Who killed Lord Edgware?"

Poirot immediately sat up and shook his head vigorously.

"No, no. Not at all. Is it a question, that? You are like someone who reads the detective story and who starts guessing each of the characters in turn without rhyme or reason. Once, I agree, I had to do that myself. It was a very exceptional case. I will tell you about it one of these days. It was a feather in my cap. But of what were we speaking?"

"Of the questions you were 'posing' to yourself," I replied dryly. It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest that my real use to Poirot was to provide him with a companion to whom he could boast, but I controlled myself. If he wished to instruct then let him.

"Come on," I said. "Let's hear them."

That was all that the vanity of the man wanted. He leaned back again and resumed his former attitude.

“The first question we have already discussed. Why did Lord Edgware change his mind on the subject of divorce? One or two ideas suggest themselves to me on that subject. One of them you know.

“The second question I ask myself is What happened to that letter? To whose interest was it that Lord Edgware and his wife should continue to be tied together?

“Three, What was the meaning of the expression on his face that you saw when you looked back yesterday morning on leaving the library? Have you any answer to that, Hastings?”

I shook my head.

“I can’t understand it.”

“You are sure that you didn’t imagine it? Sometimes, Hastings, you have the imagination un peu vif.”

“No, no.” I shook my head vigorously. “I’m quite sure I wasn’t mistaken.”

“Bien. Then it is a fact to be explained. My fourth question concerns those pince-nez. Neither Jane Wilkinson nor Carlotta Adams wore glasses. What, then, are the glasses doing in Carlotta Adams’ bag?

“And for my fifth question. Why did someone telephone to find out if Jane Wilkinson were at Chiswick and who was it?

“Those, my friend, are the questions with which I am tormenting myself. If I could answer those, I should feel happier in my mind. If I could even evolve a theory that explained them satisfactorily, my amour propre would not suffer so much.”

“There are several other questions,” I said.

“Such as?”

“Who incited Carlotta Adams to this hoax? Where was she that evening before and after ten o’clock? Who is D who gave her the golden box?”

“Those questions are self-evident,” said Poirot. “There is no subtlety about them. They are simply things we do not know. They are questions of fact. We may get to know them any minute. My questions, mon ami, are psychological. The little grey cells of the brain—”

“Poirot,” I said desperately. I felt that I must stop him at all costs. I could not bear to hear it all over again. “You spoke of making a visit tonight?”

Poirot looked at his watch.

“True,” he said. “I will telephone and find out if it is convenient.”

He went away and returned a few minutes later.

“Come,” he said. “All is well.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the house of Sir Montagu Corner at Chiswick. I would like to know a little more about that telephone call.”

Fifteen

SIR MONTAGU CORNER

It was about ten o’clock when we reached Sir Montagu Corner’s house on the river at Chiswick. It was a big house standing back in its own grounds. We were admitted into a beautifully-panelled hall. On our right, through an open door, we saw the dining room with its long polished table lit with candles.

“Will you come this way, please?”

The butler led the way up a broad staircase and into a long room on the first floor overlooking the river.

“M. Hercule Poirot,” announced the butler.

It was a beautifully-proportioned room, and had an old-world air with its carefully-shaded dim lamps. In one corner of the room was a bridge table, set near the open window, and round it sat four people. As we entered the room one of the four rose and came towards us.

“It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance, M. Poirot.”

I looked with some interest at Sir Montagu Corner. He had a distinctly Jewish cast of countenance, very small intelligent black eyes and a carefully-arranged toupee. He was a short man—five foot eight at most, I should say. His manner was affected to the last degree.

“Let me introduce you. Mr. and Mrs. Widburn.”

“We’ve met before,” said Mrs. Widburn brightly.

“And Mr. Ross.”

Ross was a young fellow of about twenty-two with a pleasant face and fair hair.

“I disturb your game. A million apologies,” said Poirot.

“Not at all. We have not started. We were commencing to deal the cards only. Some coffee, M. Poirot?”

Poirot declined but accepted an offer of old brandy. It was brought us in immense goblets.

As we sipped it, Sir Montagu discoursed.

He spoke of Japanese prints, of Chinese lacquer, of Persian carpets, of the French Impressionists, of modern music and of the theories of Einstein.

Then he sat back and smiled at us beneficently. He had evidently thoroughly enjoyed his performance. In the dim light he looked like some genie of the mediaeval age. All around the room were exquisite examples of art and culture.

“And now, Sir Montagu,” said Poirot, “I will trespass on your kindness no longer but will come to the object of my visit.”

Sir Montagu waved a curious clawlike hand.

“There is no hurry. Time is infinite.”

“One always feels that in this house,” sighed Mrs. Widburn. “So wonderful.”

“I would not live in London for a million pounds,” said Sir Montagu. “Here one is in the old-world atmosphere of peace that—alas!—we have put behind us in these jarring days.”

A sudden impish fancy flashed over me that if someone were really to offer Sir Montagu a million pounds, old-world peace might go to the wall, but I trod down such heretical sentiments.

“What is money, after all?” murmured Mrs. Widburn.

“Ah!” said Mr. Widburn thoughtfully, and rattled some coins absentmindedly in his trouser pocket.

“Charles,” said Mrs. Widburn reproachfully.

“Sorry,” said Mr. Widburn and stopped.

“To speak of crime in such an atmosphere, is, I feel, unpardonable,” began Poirot apologetically.

“Not at all.” Sir Montagu waved a gracious hand. “A crime can be a work of art. A detective can be an artist. I do not refer, of course, to the police. An inspector has been here today. A curious person. He had never heard of Benvenuto Cellini, for instance.”

“He came about Jane Wilkinson, I suppose,” said Mrs. Widburn with instant curiosity.

“It was fortunate for the lady that she was at your house last night,” said Poirot.

“So it seems,” said Sir Montagu. “I asked her here knowing that she was beautiful and talented and hoping that I might be able to be of use to her. She was thinking of going into management. But it seems that I was fated to be of use to her in a very different way.”

“Jane’s got luck,” said Mrs. Widburn. “She’s been dying to get rid of Edgware and here’s somebody gone and saved her the trouble. She’ll marry the young Duke of Merton now. Everyone says so. His mother’s wild about it.”

“I was favourably impressed by her,” said Sir Montagu graciously. “She made several most intelligent remarks about Greek art.”

I smiled to myself picturing Jane saying “Yes” and “No,” “Really, how wonderful,” in her magical husky voice. Sir Montagu was the type of man to whom intelligence consisted of the faculty of listening to his own remarks with suitable attention.

“Edgware was a queer fish, by all accounts,” said Widburn. “I daresay he’s got a good few enemies.”

“Is it true, M. Poirot,” asked Mrs. Widburn, “that somebody ran a penknife into the back of his brain?”

“Perfectly true, Madame. It was very neatly and efficiently done—scientific, in fact.”

“I note your artistic pleasure, M. Poirot,” said Sir Montagu.

“And now,” said Poirot, “let me come to the object of my visit. Lady Edgware was called to the telephone when she was here at dinner. It is about that telephone call that I seek information. Perhaps you will allow me to question your domestics on the subject?”

“Certainly. Certainly. Just press that bell, will you, Ross.”

The butler answered the bell. He was a tall middle-aged man of ecclesiastical appearance.

Sir Montagu explained what was wanted. The butler turned to Poirot with polite attention.

“Who answered the telephone when it rang?” began Poirot.

“I answered it myself, sir. The telephone is in a recess leading out of the hall.”

“Did the person calling ask to speak to Lady Edgware or to Miss Jane Wilkinson?”

“To Lady Edgware, sir.”

“What did they say exactly?”

The butler reflected for a moment.

“As far as I remember, sir, I said ‘Hello.’ A voice then asked if I was Chiswick 43434. I replied that that was so. It then asked me to hold the line. Another voice then asked if that was Chiswick 43434 and on my replying ‘Yes’ it said, ‘Is Lady Edgware dining there?’ I said her ladyship was dining here. The voice said, ‘I would like to speak to her, please.’ I went and informed her ladyship who was at the dinner table. Her ladyship rose, and I showed her where the ’phone was.”

“And then?”

“Her ladyship picked up the receiver and said: ‘Hello—who’s speaking?’ Then she said: ‘Yes—that’s all right. Lady Edgware speaking.’ I was just about to leave her ladyship when she called to me and said they had been cut off. She said someone had laughed and evidently hung up the receiver. She asked me if the person ringing up had given any name. They had not done so. That was all that occurred, sir.”

Poirot frowned to himself.

“Do you really think the telephone call has something to do with the murder, M. Poirot?” asked Mrs. Widburn.

“Impossible to say, Madame. It is just a curious circumstance.”

“People do ring up for a joke sometimes. It’s been done to me.”

“C’est toujours possible, Madame.”

He spoke to the butler again.

“Was it a man’s voice or a woman’s who rang up?”

“A lady’s, I think, sir.”

“What kind of a voice, high or low?”

“Low, sir. Careful and rather distinct.” He paused. “It may be my fancy, sir, but it sounded like a foreign voice. The R’s were very noticeable.”

“As far as that goes it might have been a Scotch voice, Donald,” said Mrs. Widburn, smiling at Ross.

Ross laughed.

“Not guilty,” he said. “I was at the dinner table.”

Poirot spoke once again to the butler.

“Do you think,” he asked, “that you could recognize that voice if you were to hear it any time?”

The butler hesitated.

“I couldn’t quite say, sir. I might do so. I think it is possible that I should do so.”

“I thank you, my friend.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The butler inclined his head and withdrew, pontificial to the last.

Sir Montagu Corner continued to be very friendly and to play his role of old-world charm. He persuaded us to remain and play bridge. I excused myself—the stakes were bigger than I cared about. Young Ross seemed relieved also at the prospect of someone taking his hand. He and I sat looking on while the other four played. The evening ended in a heavy financial gain to Poirot and Sir Montagu.

Then we thanked our host and took our departure. Ross came with us.

“A strange little man,” said Poirot as we stepped out into the night.

The night was fine and we had decided to walk until we picked up a taxi instead of having one telephoned for.

“Yes, a strange little man,” said Poirot again.

“A very rich little man,” said Ross with feeling.

“I suppose so.”

“He seems to have taken a fancy to me,” said Ross. “Hope it will last. A man like that behind you means a lot.”

“You are an actor, Mr. Ross?”

Ross said that he was. He seemed sad that his name had not brought instant recognition. Apparently he had recently won marvellous notices in some gloomy play translated from the Russian.

When Poirot and I between us had soothed him down again, Poirot asked casually:

“You knew Carlotta Adams, did you not?”

“No. I saw her death announced in the paper tonight. Overdose of some drug or other. Idiotic the way all these girls dope.”

“It is sad, yes. She was clever, too.”

“I suppose so.”

He displayed a characteristic lack of interest in anyone else’s performance but his own.

“Did you see her show at all?” I asked.

“No. That sort of thing’s not much in my line. Kind of craze for it at present, but I don’t think it will last.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “Here is a taxi.”

He waved a stick.

“Think I’ll walk,” said Ross. “I get a tube straight home from Hammersmith.”

Suddenly he gave a nervous laugh.

“Odd thing,” he said. “That dinner last night.”

“Yes?”

“We were thirteen. Some fellow failed at the last minute. We never noticed till just the end of dinner.”

“And who got up first?” I asked.

He gave a queer little nervous cackle of laughter.

“I did,” he said.

Sixteen

MAINLY DISCUSSION

When we got home we found Japp waiting for us.

“Thought I’d just call round and have a chat with you before turning in, M. Poirot,” he said cheerfully.

“Eh bien, my good friend, how goes it?”

“Well, it doesn’t go any too well. And that’s a fact.”

He looked distressed.

“Got any help for me, M. Poirot?”

“I have one or two little ideas that I should like to present to you,” said Poirot.

“You and your ideas! In some ways, you know, you’re a caution. Not that I don’t want to hear them. I do. There’s some good stuff in that funny-shaped head of yours.”

Poirot acknowledged the compliment somewhat coldly.

“Have you any ideas about the double lady problem—that’s what I want to know? Eh, M. Poirot? What about it? Who was she?”

“That is exactly what I wish to talk to you about.”

He asked Japp if he had ever heard of Carlotta Adams.

“I’ve heard the name. For the moment I can’t just place it.”

Poirot explained.

“Her! Does imitations does she? Now what made you fix on her? What have you got to go on?”

Poirot related the steps we had taken and the conclusion we had drawn.

“By the Lord, it looks as though you were right. Clothes, hat, gloves, etc., and the fair wig. Yes, it must be. I will say—you’re the goods, M. Poirot. Smart work, that! Not that I think there’s anything to show she was put out of the way. That seems a bit farfetched. I don’t quite see eye to eye with you there. Your theory is a bit fantastical for me. I’ve more experience than you have. I don’t believe in this villain-behind-the-scenes motif. Carlotta Adams was the woman all right, but I should put it one of two ways. She went there for purposes of her own—blackmail, maybe, since she hinted she was going to get money. They had a bit of a dispute. He turned nasty, she turned nasty, and she finished him off. And I should say that when she got home she went all to pieces. She hadn’t meant murder. It’s my belief she took an overdose on purpose as the easiest way out.”

“You think that covers all the facts?”

“Well, naturally there are a lot of things we don’t know yet. It’s a good working hypothesis to go on with. The other explanation is that the hoax and the murder had nothing to do with each other. It’s just a damned queer coincidence.”

Poirot did not agree, I knew. But he merely said noncommittally:

“Mais oui, c’est possible.”

“Or, look here, how’s this? The hoax is innocent enough. Someone gets to hear of it and thinks it will suit their purpose jolly well. That’s not a bad idea?” He paused and went on: “But personally I prefer idea No. 1. What the link was between his lordship and the girl we’ll find out somehow or other.”

Poirot told him of the letter to America posted by the maid, and Japp agreed that that might possibly be of great assistance.

“I’ll get on to that at once,” he said, making a note of it in his little book.

“I’m the more in favour of the lady being the killer because I can’t find anyone else,” he said, as he put the book away. “Captain Marsh, now, his lordship as now is. He’s got a motive sticking out a yard. A bad record too. Hard up and none too scrupulous over money. What’s more he had a row with his uncle yesterday morning. He told me that himself as a matter of fact—which rather takes the taste out of it. Yes, he’d be a likely customer. But he’s got an alibi for yesterday evening. He was at the opera with the Dortheimers. Rich Jews. Grosvenor Square. I’ve looked into that and it’s all right. He dined with them, went to the opera and they went on to supper at Sobranis. So that’s that.”

“And Mademoiselle?”

“The daughter, you mean? She was out of the house too. Dined with some people called Carthew West. They took her to the opera and saw her home afterwards. Quarter to twelve she got in. That disposes of her. The secretary woman seems all right—very efficient decent woman. Then there’s the butler. I can’t say I take to him much. It isn’t natural for a man to have good looks like that. There’s something fishy about him—and something odd about the way he came to enter Lord Edgware’s service. Yes, I’m checking up on him all right. I can’t see any motive for murder, though.”

“No fresh facts have come to light?”

“Yes, one or two. It’s hard to say whether they mean anything or not. For one thing, Lord Edgware’s key’s missing.”

“The key to the front door?”

“Yes.”

“That is interesting, certainly.”

“As I say, it may mean a good deal or nothing at all. Depends. What is a bit more significant to my mind is this. Lord Edgware cashed a cheque yesterday—not a particularly large one—a hundred pounds as a matter of fact. He took the money in French notes—that's why he cashed the cheque, because of his journey to Paris today. Well, that money has disappeared."

"Who told you of this?"

"Miss Carroll. She cashed the cheque and obtained the money. She mentioned it to me, and then I found that it had gone."

"Where was it yesterday evening?"

"Miss Carroll doesn't know. She gave it to Lord Edgware about half past three. It was in a bank envelope. He was in the library at the time. He took it and laid it down beside him on a table."

"That certainly gives one to think. It is a complication."

"Or a simplification. By the way—the wound."

"Yes?"

"The doctor says it wasn't made by an ordinary penknife. Something of that kind but a different shaped blade. And it was amazingly sharp."

"Not a razor?"

"No, no. Much smaller."

Poirot frowned thoughtfully.

"The new Lord Edgware seems to be fond of his joke," remarked Japp. "He seems to think it amusing to be suspected of murder. He made sure we did suspect him of murder, too. Looks a bit queer, that."

"It might be merely intelligence."

"More likely guilty conscience. His uncle's death came very pat for him. He's moved into the house, by the way."

"Where was he living before?"

“Martin Street, St. George’s Road. Not a very swell neighbourhood.”

“You might make a note of that, Hastings.”

I did so, though I wondered a little. If Ronald had moved to Regent Gate, his former address was hardly likely to be needed.

“I think the Adams girl did it,” said Japp, rising. “A fine bit of work on your part, M. Poirot, to tumble to that. But there, of course, you go about to theatres and amusing yourself. Things strike you that don’t get the chance of striking me. Pity there’s no apparent motive, but a little spade work will soon bring it to light, I expect.”

“There is one person with a motive to whom you have given no attention,” remarked Poirot.

“Who’s that, sir?”

“The gentleman who is reputed to have wanted to marry Lord Edgware’s wife. I mean the Duke of Merton.”

“Yes. I suppose there is a motive.” Japp laughed. “But a gentleman in his position isn’t likely to do murder. And anyway, he’s over in Paris.”

“You do not regard him as a serious suspect, then?”

“Well, M. Poirot, do you?”

And laughing at the absurdity of the idea, Japp left us.

Seventeen

THE BUTLER

The following day was one of inactivity for us, and activity for Japp. He came round to see us about teatime.

He was red and wrathful.

“I’ve made a bloomer.”

“Impossible, my friend,” said Poirot soothingly.

“Yes, I have. I’ve let that (here he gave way to profanity)—of a butler slip through my fingers.”

“He has disappeared?”

“Yes. Hooked it. What makes me kick myself for a double-dyed idiot is that I didn’t particularly suspect him.”

“Calm yourself—but calm yourself then.”

“All very well to talk. You wouldn’t be calm if you’d been hauled over the coals at headquarters. Oh! he’s a slippery customer. It isn’t the first time he’s given anyone the slip. He’s an old hand.”

Japp wiped his forehead and looked the picture of misery. Poirot made sympathetic noises—somewhat suggestive of a hen laying an egg. With more insight into the English character, I poured out a stiff whisky and soda and placed it in front of the gloomy inspector. He brightened a little.

“Well,” he said. “I don’t mind if I do.”

Presently he began to talk more cheerfully.

"I'm not so sure even now that he's the murderer! Of course it looks bad his bolting this way, but there might be other reasons for that. I'd begun to get on to him, you see. Seems he's mixed up with a couple of disreputable night clubs. Not the usual thing. Something a great deal more recherché and nasty. In fact, he's a real bad hat."

"Tout de même, that does not necessarily mean that he is a murderer."

"Exactly! He may have been up to some funny business or other, but not necessarily murder. No, I'm more than ever convinced it was the Adams girl. I've got nothing to prove it as yet, though. I've had men going all through her flat today, but we've found nothing that's helpful. She was a canny one. Kept no letters except a few business ones about financial contracts. They're all neatly docketed and labelled. Couple of letters from her sister in Washington. Quite straight and aboveboard. One or two pieces of good old-fashioned jewellery—nothing new or expensive. She didn't keep a diary. Her passbook and chequebook don't show anything helpful. Dash it all, the girl doesn't seem to have had any private life at all!"

"She was of a reserved character," said Poirot thoughtfully. "From our point of view that is a pity."

"I've talked to the woman who did for her. Nothing there. I've been and seen that girl who keeps a hat shop and who, it seems, was a friend of hers."

"Ah! and what do you think of Miss Driver?"

"She seemed a smart wide-awake bit of goods. She couldn't help me, though. Not that that surprises me. The amount of missing girls I've had to trace and their family and their friends always say the same things. 'She was of a bright and affectionate disposition and had no men friends.' That's never true. It's unnatural. Girls ought to have men friends. If not there's something wrong with them. It's the muddle-headed loyalty of friends and relations that makes a detective's life so difficult."

He paused for want of breath, and I replenished his glass.

"Thank you, Captain Hastings, I don't mind if I do. Well, there you are. You've got to hunt and hunt about. There's about a dozen young men she went out to supper and danced with, but nothing to show that one of them meant more than another. There's the present Lord Edgware, there's Mr. Bryan Martin, the film star, there's half a dozen others—but nothing special and particular. Your man behind idea is all wrong. I think you'll find that she played a lone hand, M. Poirot. I'm looking now for the connection between her and the murdered man. That must exist. I think I'll have to go over to Paris. There was Paris written in that little gold box, and the late Lord Edgware ran over to Paris several times last Autumn, so Miss Carroll tells me, attending sales and buying curios. Yes, I think I must go over to Paris. Inquest's tomorrow. It'll be adjourned, of course. After that I'll take the afternoon boat."

"You have a furious energy, Japp. It amazes me."

"Yes, you're getting lazy. You just sit here and think! What you call employing the little grey cells. No good, you've got to go out to things. They won't come to you."

The little maidservant opened the door.

"Mr. Bryan Martin, sir. Are you busy or will you see him?"

"I'm off, M. Poirot." Japp hoisted himself up. "All the stars of the theatrical world seem to consult you."

Poirot shrugged a modest shoulder, and Japp laughed.

"You must be a millionaire by now, M. Poirot. What do you do with the money? Save it?"

"Assuredly I practise the thrift. And talking of the disposal of money, how did Lord Edgware dispose of his?"

"Such property as wasn't entailed he left to his daughter. Five hundred to Miss Carroll. No other bequests. Very simple will."

"And it was made—when?"

"After his wife left him—just over two years ago. He expressly excludes her from participation, by the way."

"A vindictive man," murmured Poirot to himself.

With a cheerful "So long," Japp departed.

Bryan Martin entered. He was faultlessly attired and looked extremely handsome. Yet I thought that he looked haggard and not too happy.

"I am afraid I have been a long time coming, M. Poirot," he said apologetically. "And, after all, I have been guilty of taking up your time for nothing."

"En verité?"

"Yes. I have seen the lady in question. I've argued with her, pleaded with her, but all to no purpose. She won't hear of my interesting you in the matter. So I'm afraid we'll have to let the thing drop. I'm very sorry—very sorry to have bothered you—"

"Du tout—du tout," said Poirot genially. "I expected this."

"Eh?" The young man seemed taken aback.

"You expected this?" he asked in a puzzled way.

"Mais oui. When you spoke of consulting your friend—I could have predicted that all would have arrived as it has done."

"You have a theory, then?"

"A detective, M. Martin, always has a theory. It is expected of him. I do not call it a theory myself. I say that I have a little idea. That is the first stage."

"And the second stage?"

"If the little idea turns out to be right—then I know! It is quite simple, you see."

"I wish you'd tell me what your theory—or your little idea—is?"

Poirot shook his head gently.

"That is another rule. The detective never tells."

"Can't you suggest it even?"

"No. I will only say that I formed my theory as soon as you mentioned a gold tooth."

Bryan Martin stared at him.

"I'm absolutely bewildered," he declared. "I can't make out what you are driving at. If you'd just give me a hint."

Poirot smiled and shook his head.

"Let us change the subject."

"Yes, but first—your fee—you must let me."

Poirot waved an imperious hand.

"Pas un sou! I have done nothing to aid you."

"I took up your time—"

"When a case interests me, I do not touch money. Your case interested me very much."

"I'm glad," said the actor uneasily.

He looked supremely unhappy.

"Come," said Poirot kindly. "Let us talk of something else."

“Wasn’t that the Scotland Yard man whom I met on the stairs?”

“Yes, Inspector Japp.”

“The light was so dim, I wasn’t sure. By the way, he came round and asked me some questions about that poor girl, Carlotta Adams, who died of an overdose of veronal.”

“You knew her well—Miss Adams?”

“Not very well. I knew her as a child in America. I came across her here once or twice but I never saw very much of her. I was very sorry to hear of her death.”

“You liked her?”

“Yes. She was extraordinarily easy to talk to.”

“A personality very sympathetic—yes, I found the same.”

“I suppose they think it might be suicide? I knew nothing that could help the inspector. Carlotta was always very reserved about herself.”

“I do not think it was suicide,” said Poirot.

“Far more likely to be an accident, I agree.”

There was a pause.

Then Poirot said with a smile:

“The affair of Lord Edgware’s death becomes intriguing, does it not?”

“Absolutely amazing. Do you know—have they any idea—who did it—now that Jane is definitely out of it?”

“Mais oui—they have a very strong suspicion.”

Bryan Martin looked excited.

"Really? Who?"

"The butler has disappeared. You comprehend—flight is as good as a confession."

"The butler! Really, you surprise me."

"A singularly good-looking man. Il vous ressemble un peu." He bowed in a complimentary fashion.

Of course! I realized now why the butler's face had struck me as being faintly familiar when I first saw it.

"You flatter me," said Bryan Martin with a laugh.

"No, no, no. Do not all the young girls, the servant girls, the flappers, the typists, the girls of society, do they not all adore M. Bryan Martin? Is there one who can resist you?"

"A lot, I should think," said Martin. He got up abruptly.

"Well, thank you very much, M. Poirot. Let me apologize again for having troubled you."

He shook hands with us both. Suddenly, I noticed he looked much older. The haggard look was more apparent.

I was devoured with curiosity, and as soon as the door closed behind him, I burst out with what I wanted to know.

"Poirot, did you really expect him to come back and relinquish all idea of investigating those queer things that happened to him in America?"

"You heard me say so, Hastings."

"But then—" I followed the thing out logically.

"Then you must know who this mysterious girl is that he had to consult?"

He smiled.

“I have a little idea, my friend. As I told you, it started from the mention of the gold tooth, and if my little idea is correct, I know who the girl is, I know why she will not let M. Martin consult me. I know the truth of the whole affair. And so could you know it if you would only use the brains the good God has given you. Sometimes I really am tempted to believe that by inadvertence He passed you by.”

Eighteen

THE OTHER MAN

I do not propose to describe either the inquest on Lord Edgware or that on Carlotta Adams. In Carlotta's case the verdict was Death by Misadventure. In the case of Lord Edgware the inquest was adjourned, after evidence of identification and the medical evidence had been given. As a result of the analysis of the stomach, the time of death was fixed as having occurred not less than an hour after the completion of dinner, with possible extension to an hour after that. This put it as between ten and eleven o'clock, with the probability in favour of the earlier time.

None of the facts concerning Carlotta's impersonation of Jane Wilkinson were allowed to leak out. A description of the wanted butler was published in the press, and the general impression seemed to be that the butler was the man wanted. His story of Jane Wilkinson's visit was looked upon as an impudent fabrication. Nothing was said of the secretary's corroborating testimony. There were columns concerning the murder in all the papers, but little real information.

Meanwhile Japp was actively at work, I knew. It vexed me a little that Poirot adopted such an inert attitude. The suspicion that approaching old age had something to do with it flashed across me—not for the first time. He made excuses to me which did not ring very convincingly.

"At my time of life one saves oneself the trouble," he explained.

"But, Poirot, my dear fellow, you mustn't think of yourself as old," I protested.

I felt that he needed bracing. Treatment by suggestion—that, I know, is the modern idea.

"You are as full of vigour as ever you were," I said earnestly. "You're in the prime of life, Poirot. At the height of your powers. You could go out and solve this case magnificently if you only would."

Poirot replied that he preferred to solve it sitting at home.

"But you can't do that, Poirot."

"Not entirely, it is true."

"What I mean is, we are doing nothing! Japp is doing everything."

"Which suits me admirably."

"It doesn't suit me at all. I want you to be doing things."

"So I am."

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Pour que mon chien de chasse me rapporte le gibier," replied Poirot with a twinkle.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the good Japp. Why keep a dog and bark yourself? Japp brings us here the result of the physical energy you admire so much. He has various means at his disposal which I have not. He will have news for us very soon, I do not doubt."

By dint of persistent inquiry, it was true that Japp was slowly getting together material. He had drawn a blank in Paris, but a couple of days later he came in looking pleased with himself.

"It's slow work," he said. "But we're getting somewhere at last."

"I congratulate you, my friend. What has happened?"

"I've discovered that a fair-haired lady deposited an attaché case in the cloakroom at Euston at nine o'clock that night. They've been shown Miss Adams' case and identify it positively. It's of American make and so just a little different."

"Ah! Euston. Yes, the nearest of the big stations to Regent Gate. She went there doubtless, made herself up in the lavatory, and then left the case. When was it taken out again?"

"At half past ten. The clerk says by the same lady."

Poirot nodded.

"And I've come on something else too. I've reason to believe that Carlotta Adams was in Lyons Corner House in the Strand at eleven o'clock."

"Ah! c'est três bien ça! How did you come across that?"

"Well, really more or less by chance. You see, there's been a mention in the papers of the little gold box with the ruby initials. Some reporter wrote it up—he was doing an article on the prevalence of dope-taking among young actresses. Sunday paper romantic stuff. The fatal little gold box with its deadly contents—pathetic figure of a young girl with all the world before her! And just a wonder expressed as to where she passed her last evening and how she felt and so on and so on.

"Well, it seems a waitress at the Corner House read this and she remembered that a lady she had served that evening had had such a box in her hand. She remembered the C. A. on it. And she got excited and began talking to all her friends—perhaps a paper would give her something?

"A young newspaper man soon got on to it and there's going to be a good sobstuff article in tonight's Evening Shriek. The last hours of the talented actress. Waiting—for the man who never came—and a good bit about the actress's sympathetic intuition that something was not well with her sister woman. You know the kind of bilge, M. Poirot?"

"And how has it come to your ears so quickly?"

“Oh! well, we’re on very good terms with the Evening Shriek. It got passed on to me while their particular bright young man tried to get some news out of me about something else. So I rushed along to the Corner House straight away—”

Yes, that was the way things ought to be done. I felt a pang of pity for Poirot. Here was Japp getting all this news at first hand—quite possibly missing valuable details, and here was Poirot placidly content with stale news.

“I saw the girl—and I don’t think there’s much doubt about it. She couldn’t pick out Carlotta Adams’ photograph, but then she said she didn’t notice the lady’s face particularly. She was young and dark and slim, and very well-dressed, the girl said. Had got on one of the new hats. I wish women looked at faces a bit more and hats a bit less.”

“The face of Miss Adams is not an easy one to observe,” said Poirot. “It had the mobility, the sensitiveness—the fluid quality.”

“I daresay you’re right. I don’t go in for analysing these things. Dressed in black the lady was, so the girl said, and she had an attaché case with her. The girl noticed that particularly, because it struck her as odd that a lady so well-dressed should be carrying a case about. She ordered some scrambled eggs and some coffee, but the girl thinks she was putting in time and waiting for someone. She’d got a wristwatch on and she kept looking at it. It was when the girl came to give her the bill that she noticed the box. The lady took it out of her handbag and had it on the table looking at it. She opened the lid and shut it down again. She was smiling in a pleased dreamy sort of way. The girl noticed the box particularly because it was such a lovely thing. ‘I’d like to have a gold box with my initials in rubies on it!’ she said.

“Apparently Miss Adams sat there some time after paying her bill. Then, finally, she looked at her watch once more, seemed to give it up and went out.”

Poirot was frowning.

“It was a rendezvous,” he murmured. “A rendezvous with someone who did not turn up. Did Carlotta Adams meet that person afterwards? Or did she fail to meet him and go home and try to ring him up? I wish I knew—oh! how I wish I knew.”

“That’s your theory, M. Poirot. Mysterious Man-in-the-Background. That Man-in-the-Background’s a myth. I don’t say she mayn’t have been waiting for someone—that’s possible. She may have made an appointment to meet someone there after her business with his lordship was settled satisfactorily. Well, we know what happened. She lost her head and stabbed him. But she’s not one to lose her head for long. She changes her appearance at the station, gets out the case, goes to the rendezvous, and then what they call the ‘reaction’ gets her. Horror of what she’d done. And when her friend doesn’t turn up, that finished her. He may be someone who knew she was going to Regent Gate that evening. She feels the game’s up. So she takes out her little box of dope. An overdose of that and it’ll be all over. At any rate she won’t be hanged. Why, it’s as plain as the nose on your face.”

Poirot’s hand strayed doubtfully to his nose, then his fingers dropped to his moustaches. He caressed them tenderly with a proud expression.

“There was no evidence at all of a mysterious Man-in-the-Background,” said Japp, pursuing his advantage doggedly. “I haven’t got evidence yet of a connection between her and his lordship, but I shall do—it’s only a question of time. I must say I’m disappointed about Paris, but nine months ago is a long time. I’ve still got someone making inquiries over there. Something may come to light yet. I know you don’t think so. You’re a pigheaded old boy, you know.”

“You insult first my nose and then my head!”

“Figure of speech, that’s all,” said Japp soothingly. “No offence meant.”

“The answer to that,” I said, “is ‘nor taken.’”

Poirot looked from one to the other of us completely puzzled.

“Any orders?” inquired Japp facetiously from the door. Poirot smiled forgivingly at him.

“An order, no. A suggestion—yes.”

“Well, what is it? Out with it.”

“A suggestion that you circularize the taxicabs. Find one that took a fare—or more probably two fares—yes, two fares—from the neighbourhood of Covent Garden to Regent Gate on the night of the murder. As to time it would probably be about twenty minutes to eleven.”

Japp cocked an eye alertly. He had the look of a smart terrier dog.

“So, that’s the idea, is it?” he said. “Well, I’ll do it. Can’t do any harm—and you sometimes know what you’re talking about.”

No sooner had he left than Poirot arose and with great energy began to brush his hat.

“Ask me no questions, my friend. Instead bring me the benzine. A morsel of omelette this morning descended on my waistcoat.”

I brought it to him.

“For once,” I said. “I do not think I need to ask questions. It seems fairly obvious. But do you think it really is so?”

“Mon ami, at the moment I concern myself solely with the toilet. If you will pardon me saying so, your tie does not please me.”

“It’s a jolly good tie,” I said.

“Possibly—once. It feels the old age as you have been kind enough to say I do. Change it, I beseech you, and also brush the right sleeve.”

“Are we proposing to call on King George?” I inquired sarcastically.

“No. But I saw in the newspaper this morning that the Duke of Merton had returned to Merton House. I understand he is a premier member of the English aristocracy. I wish to do him all honour.”

There is nothing of the Socialist about Poirot.

“Why are we going to call on the Duke of Merton?”

“I wish to see him.”

That was all I could get out of him. When my attire was at last handsome enough to please Poirot’s critical eye, we started out.

At Merton House, Poirot was asked by a footman if he had an appointment. Poirot replied in the negative. The footman bore away the card and returned shortly to say that His Grace was very sorry but he was extremely busy this morning. Poirot immediately sat down in a chair.

“Trés bien,” he said. “I wait. I will wait several hours if need be.”

This, however, was not necessary. Probably as the shortest way of getting rid of the importunate caller, Poirot was bidden to the presence of the gentleman he desired to see.

The Duke was about twenty-seven years of age. He was hardly prepossessing in appearance, being thin and weakly. He had nondescript thin hair going bald at the temples, a small bitter mouth and vague dreamy eyes. There were several crucifixes in the room and various religious works of art. A wide shelf of books seemed to contain nothing but theological works. He looked far more like a weedy young haberdasher than like a duke. He had, I knew, been educated at home, having been a terribly delicate child. This was the man who had fallen an immediate prey to Jane Wilkinson! It was really ludicrous in the extreme. His manner was priggish and his reception of us just short of courteous.

“You may, perhaps, know my name,” began Poirot.

“I have no acquaintance with it.”

“I study the psychology of crime.”

The Duke was silent. He was sitting at a writing table, an unfinished letter before him. He tapped impatiently on the desk with his pen.

“For what reason do you wish to see me?” he inquired coldly.

Poirot was sitting opposite him. His back was to the window. The Duke was facing it.

“I am at present engaged on investigating the circumstances connected with Lord Edgware’s death.”

Not a muscle of the weak but obstinate face moved.

“Indeed? I was not acquainted with him.”

“But you are, I think, acquainted with his wife—with Miss Jane Wilkinson?”

“That is so.”

“You are aware that she is supposed to have had a strong motive for desiring the death of her husband?”

“I am really not aware of anything of the kind.”

“I should like to ask you outright, Your Grace. Are you shortly going to marry Miss Jane Wilkinson?”

“When I am engaged to marry anyone the fact will be announced in the newspapers. I consider your question an impertinence.” He stood up. “Good morning.”

Poirot stood up also. He looked awkward. He hung his head. He stammered.

“I did not mean…I…Je vous demande pardon….”

“Good morning,” repeated the Duke, a little louder.

This time Poirot gave it up. He made a characteristic gesture of hopelessness, and we left. It was an ignominious dismissal.

I felt rather sorry for Poirot. His usual bombast had not gone well. To the Duke of Merton a great detective was evidently lower than a black beetle.

“That didn’t go too well,” I said sympathetically. “What a stiff-necked tartar that man is. What did you really want to see him for?”

“I wanted to know whether he and Jane Wilkinson are really going to marry.”

“She said so.”

“Ah! she said so. But, you realize, she is one of those who say anything that suits their purpose. She might have decided to marry him and he—poor man—might not yet be aware of the fact.”

“Well, he certainly sent you away with a flea in the ear.”

“He gave me the reply he would give to a reporter—yes.” Poirot chuckled. “But I know! I know exactly how the case stands.”

“How do you know? By his manner?”

“Not at all. You saw he was writing a letter?”

“Yes.”

“Eh bien, in my early days in the police force in Belgium I learned that it was very useful to read handwriting upside down. Shall I tell you what he was saying in that letter? ‘My dearest Jane, my adored, my beautiful angel, how can I tell you what you are to me? You who have suffered so much! Your beautiful nature—’”

“Poirot!” I cried, scandalized, stopping him.

“That was as far as he had got. ‘Your beautiful nature—only I know it.’”

I felt very upset. He was so naively pleased with his performance.

“Poirot,” I cried. “You can’t do a thing like that. Overlook a private letter.”

“You say the imbecilities, Hastings. Absurd to say I ‘cannot do’ a thing which I have just done!”

“It’s not—not playing the game.”

“I do not play games. You know that. Murder is not a game. It is serious. And anyway, Hastings, you should not use that phrase—playing the game. It is not said anymore. I have discovered that. It is dead. Young people laugh when they hear it. Mais oui, young beautiful girls will laugh at you if you say ‘playing the game’ and ‘not cricket.’”

I was silent. I could not bear this thing that Poirot had done so lightheartedly.

“It was so unnecessary,” I said. “If you had only told him that you had gone to Lord Edgware at Jane Wilkinson’s request, then he would have treated you very differently.”

“Ah! but I couldn’t do that. Jane Wilkinson was my client. I cannot speak of my client’s affairs to another. I undertake a mission in confidence. To speak of it would not be honourable.”

“Honourable!”

“Precisely.”

“But she’s going to marry him?”

“That does not mean that she has no secrets from him. Your ideas about marriage are very old-fashioned. No, what you suggest, I couldn’t possibly have done. I have my honour as a detective to think of. The honour, it is a very serious thing.”

“Well, I suppose it takes all kinds of honour to make a world.”

Nineteen

A GREAT LADY

The visit that we received on the following morning was to my mind one of the most surprising things about the whole affair.

I was in my sitting room when Poirot slipped in with his eyes shining.

“Mon ami, we have a visitor.”

“Who is it?”

“The Dowager Duchess of Merton.”

“How extraordinary! What does she want?”

“If you accompany me downstairs, mon ami, you will know.”

I hastened to comply. We entered the room together.

The Duchess was a small woman with a high-bridged nose and autocratic eyes. Although she was short one would not have dared to call her dumpy. Dressed though she was in unfashionable black, she was yet every inch a grande dame. She also impressed me as having an almost ruthless personality. Where her son was negative, she was positive. Her willpower was terrific. I could almost feel waves of force emanating from her. No wonder this woman had always dominated all those with whom she came in contact!

She put up a lorgnette and studied first me and then my companion. Then she spoke to him. Her voice was clear and compelling, a voice accustomed to command and to be obeyed.

“You are M. Hercule Poirot?”

My friend bowed.

“At your service, Madame la Duchesse.”

She looked at me.

“This is my friend, Captain Hastings. He assists me in my cases.”

Her eyes looked momentarily doubtful. Then she bent her head in acquiescence.

She took the chair that Poirot offered.

“I have come to consult you on a very delicate matter, M. Poirot, and I must ask that what I tell you shall be understood to be entirely confidential.”

“That goes without saying, Madame.”

“It was Lady Yardly who told me about you. From the way in which she spoke of you and the gratitude she expressed, I felt that you were the only person likely to help me.”

“Rest assured, I will do my best, Madame.”

Still she hesitated. Then, at last, with an effort, she came to the point, came to it with a simplicity that reminded me in an odd way of Jane Wilkinson on that memorable night at the Savoy.

“M. Poirot, I want you to ensure that my son does not marry the actress, Jane Wilkinson.”

If Poirot felt astonishment, he refrained from showing it. He regarded her thoughtfully and took his time about replying.

“Can you be a little more definite, Madame, as to what you want me to do?”

“That is not easy. I feel that such a marriage would be a great disaster. It would ruin my son’s life.”

“Do you think so, Madame?”

"I am sure of it. My son has very high ideals. He knows really very little of the world. He has never cared for the young girls of his own class. They have struck him as empty-headed and frivolous. But as regards this woman—well, she is very beautiful, I admit that. And she has the power of enslaving men. She has bewitched my son. I have hoped that the infatuation would run its course. Mercifully she was not free. But now that her husband is dead—"

She broke off.

"They intend to be married in a few months' time. The whole happiness of my son's life is at stake." She spoke more peremptorily. "It must be stopped, M. Poirot."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not say that you are not right, Madame. I agree that the marriage is not a suitable one. But what can one do?"

"It is for you to do something."

Poirot slowly shook his head.

"Yes, yes, you must help me."

"I doubt if anything would avail, Madame. Your son, I should say, would refuse to listen to anything against the lady! And also, I do not think there is very much against her to say! I doubt if there are any discreditable incidents to be raked up in her past. She has been—shall we say—careful?"

"I know," said the Duchess grimly.

"Ah! So you have already made the inquiries in that direction."

She flushed a little under his keen glance.

"There is nothing I would not do, M. Poirot, to save my son from this marriage." She reiterated that word emphatically, "Nothing!"

She paused, then went on:

“Money is nothing in this matter. Name any fee you like. But the marriage must be stopped. You are the man to do it.”

Poirot slowly shook his head.

“It is not a question of money. I can do nothing—for a reason which I will explain to you presently. But also, I may say, I do not see there is anything to be done. I cannot give you help, Madame la Duchesse. Will you think me impertinent if I give you advice?”

“What advice?”

“Do not antagonize your son! He is of an age to choose for himself. Because his choice is not your choice, do not assume that you must be right. If it is a misfortune—then accept misfortune. Be at hand to aid him when he needs aid. But do not turn him against you.”

“You hardly understand.”

She rose to her feet. Her lips were trembling.

“But yes, Madame la Duchesse, I understand very well. I comprehend the mother’s heart. No one comprehends it better than I, Hercule Poirot. And I say to you with authority—be patient. Be patient and calm, and disguise your feelings. There is yet a chance that the matter may break itself. Opposition will merely increase your son’s obstinacy.”

“Good-bye, M. Poirot,” she said coldly. “I am disappointed.”

“I regret infinitely, Madame, that I cannot be of service to you. I am in a difficult position. Lady Edgware, you see, has already done me the honour to consult me herself.”

“Oh! I see.” Her voice cut like a knife. “You are in the opposite camp. That explains, no doubt, why Lady Edgware has not yet been arrested for her husband’s murder.”

“Comment, Madame la Duchesse?”

“I think you heard what I said. Why is she not arrested? She was there that evening. She was seen to enter the house—to enter his study. No one else went near him and he was found dead? And yet she is not arrested! Our police force must be corrupt through and through.”

With shaking hands she arranged the scarf round her neck, then with the slightest of bows, she swept out of the room.

“Whew!” I said. “What a tartar! I admire her, though, don’t you?”

“Because she wishes to arrange the universe to her manner of thinking?”

“Well, she’s only got her son’s welfare at heart.”

Poirot nodded his head.

“That is true enough, and yet, Hastings, will it really be such a bad thing for M. le Duc to marry Jane Wilkinson?”

“Why, you don’t think she is really in love with him?”

“Probably not. Almost certainly not. But she is very much in love with his position. She will play her part carefully. She is an extremely beautiful woman and very ambitious. It is not such a catastrophe. The Duke might very easily have married a young girl of his own class who would have accepted him for the same reasons—but no one would have made the song and the dance about that.”

“That is quite true, but—”

“And suppose he marries a girl who loves him passionately, is there such a great advantage in that? Often I have observed that it is a great misfortune for a man to have a wife who loves him. She creates the scenes of jealousy, she makes him look ridiculous, she insists on having all his time and attention. Ah! non, it is not the bed of roses.”

“Poirot,” I said. “You’re an incurable old cynic.”

“Mais non, mais non, I only make the reflections. See you, really, I am on the side of the good mamma.”

I could not refrain from laughing at hearing the haughty Duchess described in this way.

Poirot remained quite serious.

“You should not laugh. It is of great importance—all this. I must reflect. I must reflect a great deal.”

“I don’t see what you can do in the matter,” I said.

Poirot paid no attention.

“You observed, Hastings, how well-informed the Duchess was? And how vindictive. She knew all the evidence there was against Jane Wilkinson.”

“The case for the prosecution, but not the case for the defence,” I said, smiling.

“How did she come to know of it?”

“Jane told the Duke. The Duke told her,” I suggested.

“Yes, that is possible. Yet I have—”

The telephone rang sharply. I answered it.

My part consisted of saying “Yes” at varying intervals. Finally I put down the receiver and turned excitedly to Poirot.

“That was Japp. Firstly, you’re ‘the goods’ as usual. Secondly, he’s had a cable from America. Thirdly, he’s got the taxi driver. Fourthly, would you like to come round and hear what the taxi driver says. Fifthly, you’re ‘the goods’ again, and all along he’s been convinced that you’d hit the nail on the head when you suggested that there was some man behind all this! I omitted to tell him that we’d just had a visitor here who says the police force is corrupt.”

“So Japp is convinced at last,” murmured Poirot. “Curious that the Man-in-the-Background theory should be proved just at the moment when I was inclining to another possible theory.”

“What theory?”

“The theory that the motive for the murder might have nothing to do with Lord Edgware himself. Imagine someone who hated Jane Wilkinson, hated her so much that they would have even had her hanged for murder. C’est une idée, ça!”

He sighed—then rousing himself:

“Come, Hastings, let us hear what Japp has to say.”

Twenty

THE TAXI DRIVER

We found Japp interrogating an old man with a ragged moustache and spectacles. He had a hoarse self-pitying voice.

“Ah! there you are,” said Japp. “Well, things are all plain sailing, I think. This man—his name’s Jobson—picked up two people in Long Acre on the night of June 29th.”

“That’s right,” assented Jobson hoarsely. “Lovely night it were. Moon and all. The young lady and gentleman were by the tube station and hailed me.”

“They were in evening dress?”

“Yes, gent in white waistcoat and the young lady all in white with birds embroidered on it. Come out of the Royal Opera, I guess.”

“What time was this?”

“Some time afore eleven.”

“Well, what next?”

“Told me to go to Regent Gate—they’d tell me which house when they got there. And told me to be quick, too. People always says that. As though you wanted to loiter. Sooner you get there and get another fare the better for you. You never think of that. And, mind you, if there’s an accident you’ll get the blame for dangerous driving!”

“Cut it out,” said Japp impatiently. “There wasn’t an accident this time, was there?”

“N-no,” agreed the man as though unwilling to abandon his claim to such an occurrence. “No, as a matter of fact there weren’t. Well, I got to Regent

Gate—not above seven minutes it didn't take me, and there the gentleman rapped on the glass, and I stopped. About at No. 8 that were. Well, the gentleman and lady got out. The gentleman stopped where he was and told me to do the same. The lady crossed the road, and began walking back along the houses the other side. The gentleman stayed by the cab—standing on the sidewalk with his back to me, looking after her. Had his hands in his pockets. It was about five minutes when I heard him say something—kind of exclamation under his breath and then off he goes too. I looks after him because I wasn't going to be bilked. It's been done afore to me, so I kept my eye on him. He went up the steps of one of the houses on the other side and went in."

"Did he push the door open?"

"No, he had a latchkey."

"What number was the house?"

"It would be 17 or 19, I fancy. Well, it seemed odd to me my being told to stay where I was. So I kept watching. About five minutes later him and the young lady came out together. They got back into the cab and told me to drive back to Covent Garden Opera House. They stopped me just before I got there and paid me. Paid me handsome, I will say. Though I expect I've got into trouble over it—seems there's nothing but trouble."

"You're all right," said Japp. "Just run your eye over these, will you, and tell me if the young lady is among them."

There were half a dozen photographs all fairly alike as to type. I looked with some interest over his shoulder.

"That were her," said Jobson. He pointed a decisive finger at one of Geraldine Marsh in evening dress.

"Sure?"

"Quite sure. Pale she was and dark."

"Now the man."

Another sheaf of photographs was handed to him.

He looked at them attentively and then shook his head.

"Well, I couldn't say—not for sure. Either of these two might be him."

The photographs included one of Ronald Marsh, but Jobson had not selected it. Instead he indicated two other men not unlike Marsh in type.

Jobson then departed and Japp flung the photographs on the table.

"Good enough. Wish I could have got a clearer identification of his lordship. Of course it's an old photograph, taken seven or eight years ago. The only one I could get hold of. Yes, I'd like a clearer identification, although the case is clear enough. Bang go a couple of alibis. Clever of you to think of it, M. Poirot."

Poirot looked modest.

"When I found that she and her cousin were both at the opera it seemed to me possible that they might have been together during one of the intervals. Naturally the parties they were with would assume that they had not left the Opera House. But a half hour interval gives plenty of time to get to Regent Gate and back. The moment the new Lord Edgware laid such stress upon his alibi, I was sure something was wrong with it."

"You're a nice suspicious sort of fellow, aren't you?" said Japp affectionately. "Well, you're about right. Can't be too suspicious in a world like this. His lordship is our man all right. Look at this."

He produced a paper.

"Cable from New York. They got in touch with Miss Lucie Adams. The letter was in the mail delivered to her this morning. She was not willing to give up the original unless absolutely necessary, but she willingly allowed the officer to take a copy of it and cable it to us. Here it is, and it's as damning as you could hope for."

Poirot took the cable with great interest. I read it over his shoulder.

Following is text to Lucie Adams, dated June 29th, 8 Rosedew Mansions, London, S.W.3. Begins, Dearest little Sister, I'm sorry I wrote such a scrappy bit last week but things were rather busy and there was a lot to see to. Well, darling, it's been ever such a success! Notices splendid, box office good, and everybody most kind. I've got some real good friends over here and next year I'm thinking of taking a theatre for two months. The Russian dancer sketch went very well and the American woman in Paris too, but the Scenes at a Foreign Hotel are still the favourites, I think. I'm so excited that I hardly know what I'm writing, and you'll see why in a minute, but first I must tell you what people have said. Mr. Hergsheimer was ever so kind and he's going to ask me to lunch to meet Sir Montagu Corner, who might do great things for me. The other night I met Jane Wilkinson and she was ever so sweet about my show and my take off of her, which brings me round to what I am going to tell you. I don't really like her very much because I've been hearing a lot about her lately from someone I know and she's behaved cruelly, I think, and in a very underhand way—but I won't go into that now. You know that she really is Lady Edgware? I've heard a lot about him too lately, and he's no beauty, I can tell you. He treated his nephew, the Captain Marsh I have mentioned to you, in the most shameful way—literally turned him out of the house and discontinued his allowance. He told me all about it and I felt awfully sorry for him. He enjoyed my show very much, he said. "I believe it would take in Lord Edgware himself. Look here, will you take something on for a bet?" I laughed and said, "How much?" Lucie darling, the answer fairly took my breath away. Ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand dollars, think of it—just to help someone win a silly bet. "Why," I said, "I'd play a joke on the King in Buckingham Palace and risk lèse majesté? for that." Well, then, we laid our heads together and got down to details.

I'll tell you all about it next week—whether I'm spotted or not. But anyway, Lucie darling, whether I succeed or fail, I'm to have the ten thousand dollars. Oh! Lucie, little sister, what that's going to mean to us. No time for more—just going off to do my "hoax." Lots and lots and lots of love, little sister mine.

Yours,
Carlotta.

Poirot laid down the letter. It had touched him, I could see.

Japp, however, reacted in quite a different way.

“We’ve got him,” said Japp exultantly.

“Yes,” said Poirot.

His voice sounded strangely flat.

Japp looked at him curiously.

“What is it, M. Poirot?”

“Nothing,” said Poirot. “It is not, somehow, just as I thought. That is all.”

He looked acutely unhappy.

“But still it must be so,” he said as though to himself. “Yes, it must be so.”

“Of course it is so. Why, you’ve said so all along!”

“No, no. You misunderstand me.”

“Didn’t you say there was someone back of all this who got the girl into doing it innocently?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Well, what more do you want?”

Poirot sighed and said nothing.

“You are an odd sort of cove. Nothing ever satisfies you. I say, it was a piece of luck the girl wrote this letter.”

Poirot agreed with more vigour than he had yet shown.

“Mais oui, that is what the murderer did not expect. When Miss Adams accepted that ten thousand dollars she signed her death warrant. The murderer thought he had taken all precautions—and yet in sheer innocence she outwitted him. The dead speak. Yes, sometimes the dead speak.”

“I never thought she’d done it off her own bat,” said Japp unblushingly.

“No, no,” said Poirot absently.

“Well, I must get on with things.”

“You are going to arrest Captain Marsh—Lord Edgware, I mean?”

“Why not? The case against him seems proved up to the hilt.”

“True.”

“You seem very despondent about it, M. Poirot. The truth is, you like things to be difficult. Here’s your own theory proved and even that does not satisfy you. Can you see any flaw in the evidence we’ve got?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Whether Miss Marsh was accessory or not, I don’t know,” said Japp. “Seems as though she must have known about it, going there with him from the opera. If she wasn’t, why did he take her? Well, we’ll hear what they’ve both got to say.”

“May I be present?”

Poirot spoke almost humbly.

“Certainly you can. I owe the idea to you!”

He picked up the telegram on the table.

I drew Poirot aside.

“What is the matter, Poirot?”

“I am very unhappy, Hastings. This seems the plain sailing and the aboveboard. But there is something wrong. Somewhere or other, Hastings, there is a fact that escapes us. It all fits together, it is as I imagined it, and yet, my friend, there is something wrong.”

He looked at me piteously.

I was at a loss what to say.

Twenty-one

RONALD’S STORY

I found it hard to understand Poirot’s attitude. Surely this was what he had predicted all along?

All the way to Regent Gate, he sat perplexed and frowning, paying no attention to Japp’s self-congratulations.

He came out of his reverie at last with a sigh.

“At all events,” he murmured, “we can see what he has to say.”

“Next to nothing if he’s wise,” said Japp. “There’s any amount of men that have hanged themselves by being too eager to make a statement. Well, no one can say as we don’t warn them! It’s all fair and aboveboard. And the more guilty they are, the more anxious they are to pipe up and tell you the lies they’ve thought out to meet the case. They don’t know that you should always submit your lies to a solicitor first.”

He sighed and said:

“Solicitors and coroners are the worst enemies of the police. Again and again I’ve had a perfectly clear case messed up by the Coroner fooling about and letting the guilty party get away with it. Lawyers you can’t object to so much, I suppose. They’re paid for their artfulness and twisting things this way and that.”

On arrival at Regent Gate we found that our quarry was at home. The family were still at the luncheon table. Japp proffered a request to speak to Lord Edgware privately. We were shown into the library.

In a minute or two the young man came to us. There was an easy smile on his face which changed a little as he cast a quick glance over us. His lips tightened.

“Hello, Inspector,” he said. “What’s all this about?”

Japp said his little piece in the classic fashion.

“So that’s it, is it?” said Ronald.

He drew a chair towards him and sat down. He pulled out a cigarette case.

“I think, Inspector, I’d like to make a statement.”

“That’s as you please, my lord.”

“Meaning that it’s damned foolish on my part. All the same, I think I will. ‘Having no reason to fear the truth,’ as the heroes in books always say.”

Japp said nothing. His face remained expressionless.

“There’s a nice handy table and chair,” went on the young man. “Your minion can sit down and take it all down in shorthand.”

I don’t think that Japp was used to having his arrangements made for him so thoughtfully. Lord Edgware’s suggestion was adopted.

“To begin with,” said the young man. “Having some grains of intelligence, I strongly suspect that my beautiful alibi has bust. Gone up in smoke. Exit the useful Dortheimers. Taxi driver, I suppose?”

“We know all about your movements on that night,” said Japp woodenly.

“I have the greatest admiration for Scotland Yard. All the same, you know, if I had really been planning a deed of violence I shouldn’t have hired a taxi and driven straight to the place and kept the fellow waiting. Have you thought of that? Ah! I see M. Poirot has.”

“It had occurred to me, yes,” said Poirot.

“Such is not the manner of premeditated crime,” said Ronald. “Put on a red moustache and horn-rimmed glasses and drive to the next street and pay the man off. Take the tube—well—well, I won’t go into it all. My Counsel, at a fee of several thousand guineas, will do it better than I can. Of course, I see the answer. Crime was a sudden impulse. There was I, waiting in the cab, etc., etc. It occurs to me, "Now, my boy, up and doing."

"Well, I'm going to tell you the truth. I was in a hole for money. That's been pretty clear, I think. It was rather a desperate business. I had to get it by the next day or drop out of things. I tried my uncle. He'd no love for me, but I thought he might care for the honour of his name. Middle-aged men sometimes do. My uncle proved to be lamentably modern in his cynical indifference.

"Well—it looked like just having to grin and bear it. I was going to try and have a shot at borrowing from Dortheimer, but I knew there wasn't a hope. And marry his daughter I couldn't. She's much too sensible a girl to take me, anyway. Then, by chance, I met my cousin at the opera. I don't often come across her, but she was always a decent kid when I lived in the house. I found myself telling her all about it. She'd heard something from her father anyway. Then she showed her mettle. She suggested I should take her pearls. They'd belonged to her mother."

He paused. There was something like real emotion, I think, in his voice. Or else he suggested it better than I could have believed possible.

"Well—I accepted the blessed child's offer. I could raise the money I wanted on them, and I swore I'd turn to and redeem them even if it meant working to manage it. But the pearls were at home in Regent Gate. We decided that the best thing to do would be to go and fetch them at once. We jumped in a taxi and off we went.

"We made the fellow stop on the opposite side of the street in case anyone should hear the taxi draw up at the door. Geraldine got out and went across the road. She had her latchkey with her. She would go in quietly, get the pearls and bring them out to me. She didn't expect to meet anyone except, possibly, a servant. Miss Carroll, my uncle's secretary, usually went to bed at half past nine. He, himself, would probably be in the library.

"So off Dina went. I stood on the pavement smoking a cigarette. Every now and then I looked over towards the house to see if she was coming. And now I come to that part of the story that you may believe or not as you like. A man passed me on the sidewalk. I turned to look after him. To my surprise he went up the steps and let himself in to No. 17. At least I thought it was No. 17, but, of course, I was some distance away. That surprised me very much for two reasons. One was that the man had let himself in with a key, and the second was that I thought I recognized in him a certain well-known actor.

“I was so surprised that I determined to look into matters. I happened to have my own key of No. 17 in my pocket. I’d lost it or thought I’d lost it three years ago, had come across it unexpectedly a day or two ago and had been meaning to give it back to my uncle this morning. However, in the heat of our discussion, it had slipped my memory. I had transferred it with the other contents of my pockets when I changed.

“Telling the taxi man to wait, I strode hurriedly along the pavement, crossed the road, went up the steps of No. 17, and opened the door with my key. The hall was empty. There was no sign of any visitor having just entered. I stood for a minute looking about me. Then I went towards the library door. Perhaps the man was in with my uncle. If so, I should hear the murmur of voices. I stood outside the library door, but I heard nothing.

“I suddenly felt I had made the most abject fool of myself. Of course the man must have gone into some other house—the house beyond, probably. Regent Gate is rather dimly lighted at night. I felt an absolute idiot. What on earth had possessed me to follow the fellow, I could not think. It had landed me here, and a pretty fool I should look if my uncle were to come suddenly out of the library and find me. I should get Geraldine into trouble and altogether the fat would be in the fire. All because something in the man’s manner had made me imagine that he was doing something that he didn’t want known. Luckily no one caught me. I must get out of it as soon as I could.

“I tiptoed back towards the front door and at the same moment Geraldine came down the stairs with the pearls in her hand.

“She was very startled at seeing me, of course. I got her out of the house, and then explained.”

He paused.

“We hurried back to the opera. Got there just as the curtain was going up. No one suspected that we’d left it. It was a hot night and several people went outside to get a breath of air.”

He paused.

“I know what you’ll say: Why didn’t I tell you this right away? And now I put it to you: Would you, with a motive for murder sticking out a yard, admit lightheartedly that you’d actually been at the place the murder was committed on the night in question?

“Frankly, I funked it! Even if we were believed, it was going to be a lot of worry for me and for Geraldine. We’d nothing to do with the murder, we’d seen nothing, we’d heard nothing. Obviously, I thought, Aunt Jane had done it. Well, why bring myself in? I told you about the quarrel and my lack of money because I knew you’d ferret it out, and if I’d tried to conceal all that you’d be much more suspicious and you’d probably examine that alibi much more closely. As it was, I thought that if I bucked enough about it it would almost hypnotize you into thinking it all right. The Dortheimers were, I know, honestly convinced that I’d been at Covent Garden all the time. That I spent one interval with my cousin wouldn’t strike them as suspicious. And she could always say she’d been with me there and that we hadn’t left the place.”

“Miss Marsh agreed to this—concealment?”

“Yes. Soon as I got the news, I got on to her and cautioned her for her life not to say anything about her excursion here last night. She’d been with me and I’d been with her during the last interval at Covent Garden. We’d talked in the street a little, that was all. She understood and she quite agreed.”

He paused.

“I know it looks bad—coming out with this afterwards. But the story’s true enough. I can give you the name and address of the man who let me have the cash on Geraldine’s pearls this morning. And if you ask her, she’ll confirm every word I’ve told you.”

He sat back in his chair and looked at Japp.

Japp continued to look expressionless.

“You say you thought Jane Wilkinson had committed the murder, Lord Edgware?” he said.

“Well, wouldn’t you have thought so? After the butler’s story?”

“What about your wager with Miss Adams?”

“Wager with Miss Adams? With Carlotta Adams, do you mean? What has she got to do with it?”

“Do you deny that you offered her the sum of ten thousand dollars to impersonate Miss Jane Wilkinson at the house that night?”

Ronald stared.

“Offered her ten thousand dollars? Nonsense. Someone’s been pulling your leg. I haven’t got ten thousand dollars to offer. You’ve got hold of a mare’s nest. Does she say so? Oh! Dash it all—I forgot, she’s dead, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” said Poirot quietly. “She is dead.”

Ronald turned his eyes from one to the other of us. He had been debonair before. Now his face had whitened. His eyes looked frightened.

“I don’t understand all this,” he said. “It’s true what I told you. I suppose you don’t believe me—any of you.”

And then, to my amazement, Poirot stepped forward.

“Yes,” he said. “I believe you.”

Twenty-two

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF HERCULE POIROT

We were in our rooms.

“What on earth—” I began.

Poirot stopped me with a gesture more extravagant than any gesture I had ever seen him make. Both arms whirled in the air.

“I implore you, Hastings! Not now. Not now.”

And upon that he seized his hat, clapped it on his head as though he had never heard of order and method, and rushed headlong from the room. He had not returned when, about an hour later, Japp appeared.

“Little man gone out?” he inquired.

I nodded.

Japp sank into a seat. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. The day was warm.

“What the devil took him?” he inquired. “I can tell you, Captain Hastings, you could have knocked me down with a feather when he stepped up to the man and said: ‘I believe you.’ For all the world as though he were acting in a romantic melodrama. It beats me.”

It beat me also, and I said so.

“And then he marches out of the house,” said Japp.

“What did he say about it to you?”

"Nothing," I replied.

"Nothing at all?"

"Absolutely nothing. When I was going to speak to him he waved me aside. I thought it best to leave him alone. When we got back here I started to question him. He waved his arms, seized his hat and rushed out again."

We looked at each other. Japp tapped his forehead significantly.

"Must be," he said.

For once I was disposed to agree. Japp had often suggested before that Poirot was what he called "touched." In those cases he had simply not understood what Poirot was driving at. Here, I was forced to confess, I could not understand Poirot's attitude. If not touched, he was, at any rate, suspiciously changeable. Here was his own private theory triumphantly confirmed and straight away he went back on it.

It was enough to dismay and distress his warmest supporters. I shook my head in a discouraged fashion.

"He's always been what I call peculiar," said Japp. "Got his own particular angle of looking at things—and a very queer one it is. He's a kind of genius, I admit that. But they always say that geniuses are very near the borderline and liable to slip over any minute. He's always been fond of having things difficult. A straightforward case is never good enough for him. No, it's got to be tortuous. He's got away from real life. He plays a game of his own. It's like an old lady playing at patience. If it doesn't come out, she cheats. Well, it's the other way round with him. If it's coming out too easily, he cheats to make it more difficult! That's the way I look at it."

I found it difficult to answer him. I, also, found Poirot's behaviour unaccountable. And since I was very attached to my strange little friend, it worried me more than I cared to express.

In the middle of a gloomy silence, Poirot walked into the room.

He was, I was thankful to see, quite calm now.

Very carefully he removed his hat, placed it with his stick on the table, and sat down in his accustomed chair.

“So you are here, my good Japp. I am glad. It was on my mind that I must see you as soon as possible.”

Japp looked at him without replying. He saw that this was only the beginning. He waited for Poirot to explain himself.

This my friend did, speaking slowly and carefully.

“Ecoutez, Japp. We are wrong. We are all wrong. It is grievous to admit it, but we have made a mistake.”

“That’s all right,” said Japp confidently.

“But it is not all right. It is deplorable. It grieves me to the heart.”

“You needn’t be grieved about that young man. He richly deserves all he gets.”

“It is not he I am grieving about—it is you.”

“Me? You needn’t worry about me.”

“But I do. See you, who was it set you on this course? It was Hercule Poirot. Mais oui, I set you on the trail. I direct your attention to Carlotta Adams, I mention to you the matter of the letter to America. Every step of the way it is I who point it!”

“I was bound to get there anyway,” said Japp coldly. “You got a bit ahead of me, that’s all.”

“Cela ce peut. But it does not console me. If harm—if loss of prestige comes to you through listening to my little ideas—I shall blame myself bitterly.”

Japp merely looked amused. I think he credited Poirot with motives that were none too pure. He fancied that Poirot grudged him the credit resulting from the successful elucidation of the affair.

“That’s all right,” he said. “I shan’t forget to let it be known that I owe something to you over this business.”

He winked at me.

“Oh! it is not that at all.” Poirot clicked his tongue with impatience. “I want no credit. And what is more, I tell you there will be no credit. It is a fiasco that you prepare for yourself, and I, Hercule Poirot, am the cause.”

Suddenly, at Poirot’s expression of extreme melancholy, Japp shouted with laughter. Poirot looked affronted.

“Sorry, M. Poirot.” He wiped his eyes. “But you did look for all the world like a dying duck in a thunderstorm. Now look here, let’s forget all this. I’m willing to shoulder the credit or the blame of this affair. It will make a big noise—you’re right there. Well, I’m going all out to get a conviction. It may be that a clever Counsel will get his lordship off—you never know with a jury. But even so, it won’t do me any harm. It will be known that we caught the right man even if we couldn’t get a conviction. And if, by any chance, the third housemaid has hysterics and owns up she did it—well, I’ll take my medicine and I won’t complain you led me up the garden. That’s fair enough.”

Poirot gazed at him mildly and sadly.

“You have the confidence—always the confidence! You never stop and say to yourself—can it be so? You never doubt—or wonder. You never think: This is too easy!”

“You bet your life I don’t. And that’s just where, if you’ll excuse me saying so, you go off the rails every time. Why shouldn’t a thing be easy? What’s the harm in a thing being easy?”

Poirot looked at him, sighed, half threw up his arms, then shook his head.

"C'est fini! I will say no more."

"Splendid," said Japp heartily. "Now let's get down to brass tacks. You'd like to hear what I've been doing?"

"Assuredly."

"Well, I saw the Honourable Geraldine, and her story tallied exactly with his lordship's. They may both be in it together, but I think not. It's my opinion he bluffed her—she's three parts sweet on him anyway. Took on terribly when she found he was arrested."

"Did she now? And the secretary—Miss Carroll?"

"Wasn't too surprised, I fancy. However, that's only my idea."

"What about the pearls?" I asked. "Was that part of the story true?"

"Absolutely. He raised the money on them early the following morning. But I don't think that touches the main argument. As I see it, the plan came into his head when he came across his cousin at the opera. It came to him in a flash. He was desperate—here was a way out. I fancy he'd been meditating something of the kind—that's why he had the key with him. I don't believe that story of suddenly coming across it. Well, as he talks to his cousin, he sees that by involving her he gains additional security for himself. He plays on her feelings, hints at the pearls, she plays up, and off they go. As soon as she's in the house he follows her in and goes along to the library. Maybe his lordship has dozed off in his chair. Anyway, in two seconds he's done the trick and he's out again. I don't fancy he meant the girl to catch him in the house. He counted on being found pacing up and down near the taxi. And I don't think the taxi man was meant to see him go in. The impression was to be that he was walking up and down smoking whilst he waited for the girl. The taxi was facing the opposite direction, remember.

"Of course, the next morning, he has to pledge the pearls. He must still seem to be in need of the money. Then, when he hears of the crime, he frightens the girl into concealing their visit to the house. They will say that they spent that interval together at the Opera House."

“Then why did they not do so?” asked Poirot sharply.

Japp shrugged his shoulders.

“Changed his mind. Or judged that she wouldn’t be able to go through with it. She’s a nervous type.”

“Yes,” said Poirot meditatively. “She is a nervous type.”

After a minute or two, he said:

“It does not strike you that it would have been easier and simpler for Captain Marsh to have left the opera during the interval by himself. To have gone in quietly with his key, killed his uncle, and returned to the opera—instead of having a taxi outside and a nervous girl coming down the stairs any minute who might lose her head and give him away.”

Japp grinned.

“That’s what you and I would have done. But then we’re a shade brighter than Captain Ronald Marsh.”

“I am not so sure. He strikes me as intelligent.”

“But not so intelligent as M. Hercule Poirot! Come now, I’m sure of that!” Japp laughed.

Poirot looked at him coldly.

“If he isn’t guilty why did he persuade the Adams girl to take on that stunt?” went on Japp. “There can be only one reason for that stunt—to protect the real criminal.”

“There I am of accord with you absolutely.”

“Well, I’m glad we agree about something.”

“It might be he who actually spoke to Miss Adams,” mused Poirot. “Whilst really—no, that is an imbecility.”

Then, looking suddenly at Japp, he rapped out a quick question.

“What is your theory as to her death?”

Japp cleared his throat.

“I’m inclined to believe—accident. A convenient accident, I admit. I can’t see that he could have had anything to do with it. His alibi is straight enough after the opera. He was at Sobranis with the Dortheimers till after one o’clock. Long before that she was in bed and asleep. No, I think that was an instance of the infernal luck criminals sometimes have. Otherwise, if that accident hadn’t happened, I think he had his plans for dealing with her. First, he’d put the fear of the Lord into her—tell her she’d be arrested for murder if she confessed the truth. And then he’d square her with a fresh lot of money.”

“Does it strike you—” Poirot stared straight in front of him. “Does it strike you that Miss Adams would let another woman be hanged when she herself held evidence that would acquit her?”

“Jane Wilkinson wouldn’t have been hanged. The Montagu Corner party evidence was too strong for that.”

“But the murderer did not know that. He would have had to count on Jane Wilkinson being hanged and Carlotta Adams keeping silence.”

“You love talking, don’t you, M. Poirot? And you’re positively convinced now that Ronald Marsh is a white-headed boy who can do no wrong. Do you believe that story of his about seeing a man sneak surreptitiously into the house?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Do you know who he says he thought it was?”

“I could guess, perhaps.”

“He says he thought it was the film star, Bryan Martin. What do you think of that? A man who’d never even met Lord Edgware.”

“Then it would certainly be curious if one saw such a man entering that house with a key.”

“Chah!” said Japp. A rich noise expressive of contempt. “And now I suppose it will surprise you to hear that Mr. Bryan Martin wasn’t in London that night. He took a young lady to dine down at Molesey. They didn’t get back to London till midnight.”

“Ah!” said Poirot mildly. “No, I am not surprised. Was the young lady also a member of the profession?”

“No. Girl who keeps a hat shop. As a matter of fact, it was Miss Adams’ friend, Miss Driver. I think you’ll agree her testimony is past suspicion.”

“I am not disputing it, my friend.”

“In fact, you’re done down and you know it, old boy,” said Japp, laughing. “Cock and bull story trumped up on the moment, that’s what it was. Nobody entered No. 17…and nobody entered either of the houses either side—so what does that show? That his lordship’s a liar.”

Poirot shook his head sadly.

Japp rose to his feet—his spirits restored.

“Come, now, we’re right, you know.”

“Who was D. Paris, November?”

Japp shrugged his shoulders.

“Ancient history, I imagine. Can’t a girl have a souvenir six months ago without its having something to do with this crime? We must have a sense of proportion.”

“Six months ago,” murmured Poirot, a sudden light in his eyes. “Dieu, que je suis bête!”

“What’s he saying?” inquired Japp of me.

“Listen.” Poirot rose and tapped Japp on the chest.

“Why does Miss Adams’ maid not recognize that box? Why does Miss Driver not recognize it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Because the box was new! It had only just been given to her. Paris, November—that is all very well—doubtless that is the date of which the box is to be a souvenir. But it was given to her now, not then. It has just been bought! Only just been bought! Investigate that, I implore you, my good Japp. It is a chance, decidedly a chance. It was bought not here, but abroad. Probably Paris. If it had been bought here, some jeweller would have come forward. It has been photographed and described in the papers. Yes, yes, Paris. Possibly some other foreign town, but I think Paris. Find out, I implore you. Make the inquiries. I want—I so badly want—to know who is this mysterious D.”

“It will do no harm,” said Japp good-naturedly. “Can’t say I’m very excited about it myself. But I’ll do what I can. The more we know the better.”

Nodding cheerfully to us he departed.

Twenty-three

THE LETTER

“And now,” said Poirot, “we will go out to lunch.”

He put his hand through my arm. He was smiling at me.

“I have hope,” he explained.

I was glad to see him restored to his old self, though I was none the less convinced myself of young Ronald’s guilt. I fancied that Poirot himself had perhaps come round to this view, convinced by Japp’s arguments. The search for the purchaser of the box was, perhaps, a last sally to save his face.

We went amicably to lunch together.

Somewhat to my amusement at a table the other side of the room, I saw Bryan Martin and Jenny Driver lunching together. Remembering what Japp had said, I suspected a possible romance.

They saw us and Jenny waved a hand.

When we were sipping coffee, Jenny left her escort and came over to our table. She looked as vivid and dynamic as ever.

“May I sit and talk to you a minute, M. Poirot?”

“Assuredly, Mademoiselle. I am charmed to see you. Will not M. Martin join us also?”

“I told him not to. You see, I wanted to talk to you about Carlotta.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle?”

“You wanted to get a line on to some man friend of hers. Isn’t that so?”

"Yes, yes."

"Well, I've been thinking and thinking. Sometimes you can't get at things straightaway. To get them clear you've got to think back—remember a lot of little words and phrases that perhaps you didn't pay attention to at the time. Well, that's what I've been doing. Thinking and thinking—and remembering just what she said. And I've come to a certain conclusion."

"Yes, Mademoiselle?"

"I think the man that she cared about—or was beginning to care about—was Ronald Marsh—you know, the one who has just succeeded to the title."

"What makes you think it was he, Mademoiselle?"

"Well, for one thing, Carlotta was speaking in a general sort of way one day. About a man having hard luck, and how it might affect character. That a man might be a decent sort really and yet go down the hill. More sinned against then sinning—you know the idea. The first thing a woman kids herself with when she's getting soft about a man. I've heard the old wheeze so often! Carlotta had plenty of sense, yet here she was coming out with this stuff just like a complete ass who knew nothing of life. 'Hello,' I said to myself. 'Something's up.' She didn't mention a name—it was all general. But almost immediately after that she began to speak of Ronald Marsh and that she thought he'd been badly treated. She was very impersonal and offhand about it. I didn't connect the two things at the time. But now—I wonder. It seems to me that it was Ronald she meant. What do you think, M. Poirot?"

Her face looked earnestly up into his.

"I think, Mademoiselle, that you have perhaps given me some very valuable information."

"Good." Jenny clapped her hands.

Poirot looked kindly at her.

"Perhaps you have not heard—the gentleman of whom you speak, Ronald Marsh—Lord Edgware—has just been arrested."

"Oh!" Her mouth flew open in surprise. "Then my bit of thinking comes rather late in the day."

"It is never too late," said Poirot. "Not with me, you understand. Thank you, Mademoiselle."

She left us to return to Bryan Martin.

"There, Poirot," I said. "Surely that shakes your belief."

"No, Hastings. On the contrary—it strengthens it."

Despite that valiant assertion I believed myself that secretly he had weakened.

During the days that followed he never once mentioned the Edgware case. If I spoke of it, he answered monosyllabically and without interest. In other words, he had washed his hands of it. Whatever he had had lingering in his fantastic brain, he had now been forced to admit that it had not materialized—that his first conception of the case had been the true one and that Ronald Marsh was only too truly accused of the crime. Only, being Poirot, he could not admit openly that such was the case! Therefore he pretended to have lost interest.

Such, as I say, was my interpretation of his attitude. It seemed borne out by the facts. He took no faintest interest in the police court proceedings, which in any case were purely formal. He busied himself with other cases and, as I say, he displayed no interest when the subject was mentioned.

It was nearly a fortnight later than the events mentioned in my last chapter when I came to realize that my interpretation of his attitude was entirely wrong.

It was breakfast time. The usual heavy pile of letters lay by Poirot's plate. He sorted through them with nimble fingers. Then he uttered a quick exclamation of pleasure and picked up a letter with an American stamp on it.

He opened it with his little letter opener. I looked on with interest since he seemed so moved to pleasure about it. There was a letter and a fairly thick enclosure.

Poirot read the former through twice, then he looked up.

“Would you like to see this, Hastings?”

I took it from him. It ran as follows:

Dear M. Poirot,—I was much touched by your kind—your very kind letter. I have been feeling so bewildered by everything. Apart from my terrible grief, I have been so affronted by the things that seem to have been hinted about Carlotta—the dearest, sweetest sister that a girl ever had. No, M. Poirot, she did not take drugs. I’m sure of it. She had a horror of that kind of thing. I’ve often heard her say so. If she played a part in that poor man’s death, it was an entirely innocent one—but of course her letter to me proves that. I am sending you the actual letter itself since you ask me to do so. I hate parting with the last letter she ever wrote, but I know you will take care of it and let me have it back, and if it helps you to clear up some of the mystery about her death, as you say it may do—why, then, of course it must go to you.

You ask whether Carlotta mentioned any friend specially in her letters. She mentioned a great many people, of course, but nobody in a very outstanding way. Bryan Martin whom we used to know years ago, a girl called Jenny Driver, and a Captain Ronald Marsh were, I think, the ones she saw most of.

I wish I could think of something to help you. You write so kindly and with such understanding, and you seem to realize what Carlotta and I were to each other.

Gratefully yours,
Lucie Adams

P.S. An officer has just been here for the letter. I told him that I had already mailed it to you. This, of course, was not true, but I felt somehow or other that it was important you should see it first. It seems Scotland Yard need it as evidence, against the murderer. You will take it to them. But, oh! please be sure they let you have it back again some day. You see, it is Carlotta's last words to me.

"So you wrote yourself to her," I remarked as I laid the letter down. "Why did you do that, Poirot? And why did you ask for the original of Carlotta Adams' letter?"

He was bending over the enclosed sheets of the letter I mentioned.

"In verity I could not say, Hastings—unless it is that I hoped against hope that the original letter might in some way explain the inexplicable."

"I don't see how you can get away from the text of that letter. Carlotta Adams gave it herself to the maid to post. There was no hocus pocus about it. And certainly it reads as a perfectly genuine ordinary epistle."

Poirot sighed.

"I know. I know. And that is what makes it so difficult. Because, Hastings, as it stands, that letter is impossible."

"Nonsense."

"Si, si, it is so. See you, as I have reasoned it out, certain things must be—they follow each other with method and order in an understandable fashion. But then comes this letter. It does not accord. Who, then, is wrong? Hercule Poirot or the letter?"

"You don't think it possible that it could be Hercule Poirot?" I suggested as delicately as I was able.

Poirot threw me a glance of reproof.

"There are times when I have been in error—but this is not one of them. Clearly then, since the letter seems impossible, it is impossible. There is some fact about the letter which escapes us. I seek to discover what that fact is.”

And thereupon he resumed his study of the letter in question, using a small pocket microscope.

As he finished perusing each page, he passed it across to me. I, certainly, could find nothing amiss. It was written in a firm fairly legible handwriting and it was word for word as it had been telegraphed across.

Poirot sighed deeply.

“There is no forgery of any kind here—no, it is all written in the same hand. And yet, since, as I say, it is impossible—”

He broke off. With an impatient gesture he demanded the sheets from me. I passed them over, and once again he went slowly through them.

Suddenly he uttered a cry.

I had left the breakfast table and was standing looking out of the window. At this sound, I turned sharply.

Poirot was literally quivering with excitement. His eyes were green like a cat’s. His pointing finger trembled.

“See you, Hastings? Look here—quickly—come and look.”

I ran to his side. Spread out before him was one of the middle sheets of the letter. I could see nothing unusual about it.

image

“See you not? All these other sheets they have the clean edge—they are single sheets. But this one—see—one side of it is ragged—it has been torn. Now do you see what I mean? This letter was a double sheet, and so, you comprehend, one page of the letter is missing.”

I stared stupidly, no doubt.

"But how can it be. It makes sense."

"Yes, yes, it makes sense. That is where the cleverness of the idea comes in. Read—and you will see."

I think I cannot do better than to apprehend a facsimile of the page in question.

"You see it now?" said Poirot. "The letter breaks off where she is talking of Captain Marsh. She is sorry for him, and then she says: 'He enjoyed my show very much.' Then on the new sheet she goes on: 'he said…' But, mon ami, a page is missing. The 'he' of the new page may not be the 'He' of the old page. In fact it is not the 'He' of the old page. It is another man altogether who proposed that hoax. Observe, nowhere after that is the name mentioned. Ah! C'est épatant! Somehow or other our murderer gets hold of this letter. It gives him away. No doubt he thinks to suppress it altogether, and then—reading it over—he sees another way of dealing with it. Remove one page, and the letter is capable of being twisted into a damning accusation of another man—a man too who has a motive for Lord Edgware's death. Ah! it was a gift! The money for the confiture as you say! He tears the sheet off and replaces the letter."

I looked at Poirot in some admiration. I was not perfectly convinced of the truth of his theory. It seemed to be highly possible that Carlotta had used an odd half sheet that was already torn. But Poirot was so transfigured with joy that I simply had not the heart to suggest this prosaic possibility. After all, he might be right.

I did, however, venture to point out one or two difficulties in the way of his theory.

"But how did the man, whoever he was, get hold of the letter? Miss Adams took it straight from her handbag and gave it herself to the maid to post. The maid told us so."

"Therefore we must assume one of two things. Either the maid was lying, or else, during that evening, Carlotta Adams met the murderer."

I nodded.

“It seems to me that that last possibility is the most likely one. We still do not know where Carlotta Adams was between the time she left the flat and nine o’clock when she left her suitcase at Euston station. During that time, I believe myself that she met the murderer in some appointed spot—they probably had some food together. He gave her some last instructions. What happened exactly in regard to the letter we do not know. One can make a guess. She may have been carrying it in her hand meaning to post it. She may have laid it down on the table in the restaurant. He sees the address and scents a possible danger. He may have picked it up adroitly, made an excuse for leaving the table, opened it, read it, torn out the sheet, and then either replaced it on the table, or perhaps given it to her as she left, telling her that she had dropped it without noticing. The exact way of it was not important—but two things do seem clear. That Carlotta Adams met the murderer that evening either before the murder of Lord Edgware, or afterwards (there was time after she left the Corner House for a brief interview). I have a fancy, though there I am perhaps wrong, that it was the murderer who gave her the gold box—it was possibly a sentimental memento of their first meeting. If so, the murderer is D.”

“I don’t see the point of the gold box.”

“Listen, Hastings, Carlotta Adams was not addicted to veronal. Lucie Adams says so, and I, too, believe it to be true. She was a clear-eyed healthy girl with no predilection for such things. None of her friends nor her maid recognized the box. Why, then, was it found in her possession after she died? To create the impression that she did take veronal and that she had taken it for a considerable time—that is to say at least six months. Let us say that she met the murderer after the murder if only for a few minutes. They had a drink together, Hastings, to celebrate the success of their plan. And in the girl’s drink he put sufficient veronal to ensure that there should be no waking for her on the following morning.”

“Horrible,” I said with a shudder.

“Yes, it was not pretty,” said Poirot dryly.

“Are you going to tell Japp all this?” I asked after a minute or two.

“Not at the moment. What have I got to tell? He would say, the excellent Japp, ‘another nest of the mare! The girl wrote on an odd sheet of paper!’ C’est tout.”

I looked guiltily at the ground.

“What can I say to that? Nothing. It is a thing that might have happened. I only know it did not happen because it is necessary that it should not have happened.”

He paused. A dreamy expression stole across his face.

“Figure to yourself, Hastings, if only that man had had the order and the method, he would have cut that sheet not torn it. And we should have noticed nothing. But nothing!”

“So we deduce that he is a man of careless habits,” I said, smiling.

“No, no. He might have been in a hurry. You observe it is very carelessly torn. Oh! assuredly he was pressed for time.”

He paused and then said:

“One thing you do remark, I hope. This man—this D—he must have had a very good alibi for that evening.”

“I can’t see how he could have had any alibi at all if he spent his time first at Regent Gate doing a murder and then with Carlotta Adams.”

“Precisely,” said Poirot. “That is what I mean. He is badly in need of an alibi, so no doubt he prepared one. Another point: Does his name really begin with D? Or does D stand for some nickname by which he was known to her?”

He paused and then said softly:

“A man whose initial or whose nickname is D. We have got to find him, Hastings. Yes, we have got to find him.”

Twenty-four

NEWS FROM PARIS

On the following day we had an unexpected visit.

Geraldine Marsh was announced.

I felt sorry for her as Poirot greeted her and set a chair for her. Her large dark eyes seemed wider and darker than ever. There were black circles round them as though she had not slept. Her face looked extraordinarily haggard and weary for one so young—little more, really, than a child.

"I have come to see you, M. Poirot, because I don't know how to go on any longer. I am so terribly worried and upset."

"Yes, Mademoiselle?"

His manner was gravely sympathetic.

"Ronald told me what you said to him that day. I mean that dreadful day when he was arrested." She shivered. "He told me that you came up to him suddenly, just when he had said that he supposed no one would believe him, and that you said to him: 'I believe you.' Is that true, M. Poirot?"

"It is true, Mademoiselle, that is what I said."

"I know, but I meant not was it true you said it, but were the words really true. I mean, did you believe his story?"

Terribly anxious she looked, leaning forward there, her hands clasped together.

"The words were true, Mademoiselle," said Poirot quietly. "I do not believe your cousin killed Lord Edgware."

"Oh!" The colour came into her face, her eyes opened big and wide. "Then you must think—that someone else did it!"

"Evidemment, Mademoiselle." He smiled.

"I'm stupid. I say things badly. What I mean is—you think you know who that somebody is?"

She leaned forward eagerly.

"I have my little ideas, naturally—my suspicions, shall we say?"

"Won't you tell me? Please—please."

Poirot shook his head.

"It would be—perhaps—unfair."

"Then you have got a definite suspicion of somebody?"

Poirot merely shook his head noncommittally.

"If only I knew a little more," pleaded the girl. "It would make it so much easier for me. And I might perhaps be able to help you. Yes, really I might be able to help you."

Her pleading was very disarming, but Poirot continued to shake his head.

"The Duchess of Merton is still convinced it was my stepmother," said the girl thoughtfully. She gave a slight questioning glance at Poirot.

He showed no reaction.

"But I hardly see how that can be."

"What is your opinion of her? Of your stepmother?"

"Well—I hardly know her. I was at school in Paris when my father married her. When I came home, she was quite kind. I mean, she just didn't notice I was there. I thought her very empty-headed and—well, mercenary."

Poirot nodded.

"You spoke of the Duchess of Merton. You have seen much of her?"

"Yes. She has been very kind to me. I have been with her a great deal during the last fortnight. It has been terrible—with all the talk, and the reporters, and Ronald in prison and everything." She shivered. "I feel I have no real friends. But the Duchess has been wonderful, and he has been nice too—her son, I mean."

"You like him?"

"He is shy, I think. Stiff and rather difficult to get on with. But his mother talks a lot about him, so that I feel I know him better than I really do."

"I see. Tell me, Mademoiselle, you are fond of your cousin?"

"Of Ronald? Of course. He—I haven't seen much of him the last two years—but before that he used to live in the house. I—I always thought he was wonderful. Always joking and thinking up mad things to do. Oh! in that gloomy house of ours it made all the difference."

Poirot nodded sympathetically, but he went on to make a remark that shocked me in its crudity.

"You do not want to see him—hanged, then?"

"No, no." The girl shivered violently. "Not that. Oh! if only it were her—my stepmother. It must be her. The Duchess says it must."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "If only Captain Marsh had stayed in the taxi—eh?"

"Yes—at least, what do you mean?" Her brow wrinkled. "I don't understand."

"If he had not followed that man into the house. Did you hear anyone come in, by the way?"

“No, I didn’t hear anything.”

“What did you do when you came into the house?”

“I ran straight upstairs—to fetch the pearls, you know.”

“Of course. It took you some time to fetch them.”

“Yes. I couldn’t find the key to my jewel case all at once.”

“So often is that the case. The more in haste, the less the speed. It was some time before you came down, and then—you found your cousin in the hall?”

“Yes, coming from the library.” She swallowed.

“I comprehend. It gave you quite a turn.”

“Yes, it did.” She looked grateful for his sympathetic tone. “It startled me, you see.”

“Quite, quite.”

“Ronnie just said: ‘Hello, Dina, got them?’ from behind me—and it made me jump.”

“Yes,” said Poirot gently. “As I said before it is a pity he did not stay outside. Then the taxi driver would have been able to swear he never entered the house.”

She nodded. Her tears began to fall, splashing unheeded on her lap. She got up. Poirot took her hand.

“You want me to save him for you—is that it?”

“Yes, yes—oh! please, yes. You don’t know….”

She stood there striving to control herself, clenching her hands.

“Life has not been easy for you, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot gently. “I appreciate that. No, it has not been easy. Hastings, will you get Mademoiselle a taxi?”

I went down with the girl and saw her into the taxi. She had composed herself by now and thanked me very prettily.

I found Poirot walking up and down the room, his brows knitted in thought. He looked unhappy.

I was glad when the telephone bell rang to distract him.

“Who is that? Oh, it is Japp. Bonjour, mon ami.”

“What’s he got to say?” I asked, drawing nearer the telephone.

Finally, after various ejaculations, Poirot spoke.

“Yes, and who called for it? Do they know?”

Whatever the answer, it was not what he expected. His face dropped ludicrously.

“Are you sure?”

“………”

“No, it is a little upsetting, that is all.”

“………”

“Yes, I must rearrange my ideas.”

“………”

“Comment?”

“………”

"All the same, I was right about it. Yes, a detail, as you say."

"………"

"No, I am still of the same opinion. I would pray of you to make still further inquiries of the restaurants in the neighbourhood of Regent Gate and Euston, Tottenham Court Road and perhaps Oxford Street."

"………"

"Yes, a woman and a man. And also in the neighbourhood of the Strand just before midnight. Comment?"

"………"

"But, yes, I know that Captain Marsh was with the Dortheimers. But there are other people in the world besides Captain Marsh."

"………"

"To say I have the head of a pig is not pretty. Tout de même, oblige me in this matter, I pray of you."

"………"

He replaced the receiver.

"Well?" I asked impatiently.

"Is it well? I wonder. Hastings, that gold box was bought in Paris. It was ordered by letter and it comes from a well-known Paris shop which specializes in such things. The letter was supposedly from a Lady Ackerley—Constance Ackerley the letter was signed. Naturally there is no such person. The letter was received two days before the murder. It ordered the initials of (presumably) the writer in rubies and the inscription inside. It was a rush order—to be called for the following day. That is, the day before the murder."

"And was it called for?"

“Yes, it was called for and paid for in notes.”

“Who called for it?” I asked excitedly. I felt we were getting near to the truth.

“A woman called for it, Hastings.”

“A woman?” I said, surprised.

“Mais oui. A woman—short, middle-aged, and wearing pince-nez.”

We looked at each other, completely baffled.

Twenty-five

A LUNCHEON PARTY

It was, I think, on the day after that that we went to the Widburns' luncheon party at Claridge's.

Neither Poirot nor I were particularly anxious to go. It was, as a matter of fact, about the sixth invitation we had received. Mrs. Widburn was a persistent woman and she liked celebrities. Undaunted by refusals, she finally offered such a choice of dates that capitulation was inevitable. Under those circumstances the sooner we went and got it over the better.

Poirot had been very uncommunicative ever since the news from Paris.

To my remarks on the subject he returned always the same answer.

"There is something here I do not comprehend."

And once or twice he murmured to himself.

"Pince-nez. Pince-nez in Paris. Pince-nez in Carlotta Adams' bag."

I really felt glad of the luncheon party as a means of distraction.

Young Donald Ross was there and came up and greeted me cheerily. There were more men than women and he was put next to me at table.

Jane Wilkinson sat almost opposite us, and next to her, between her and Mrs. Widburn, sat the young Duke of Merton.

I fancied—of course it may have been only my fancy—that he looked slightly ill at ease. The company in which he found himself was, so I should imagine, little to his liking. He was a strictly conservative and somewhat reactionary young man—the kind of character that seemed to have stepped out of the Middle Ages by some regrettable mistake. His infatuation for the extremely modern Jane Wilkinson was one of those anachronistic jokes that Nature so loves to play.

Seeing Jane's beauty and appreciating the charm that her exquisitely husky voice lent to the most trite utterances, I could hardly wonder at his capitulation. But one can get used to perfect beauty and an intoxicating voice! It crossed my mind that perhaps even now a ray of common sense was dissipating the mists of intoxicated love. It was a chance remark—a rather humiliating gaffe on Jane's part that gave me that impression.

Somebody—I forgot who—had uttered the phrase "judgement of Paris," and straight away Jane's delightful voice was uplifted.

"Paris?" she said. "Why, Paris doesn't cut any ice nowadays. It's London and New York that count."

As sometimes happens, the words fell in a momentary lull of conversation. It was an awkward moment. On my right I heard Donald Ross draw his breath sharply. Mrs. Widburn began to talk violently about Russian opera. Everyone hastily said something to somebody else. Jane alone looked serenely up and down the table without the least consciousness of having said anything amiss.

It was then I noticed the Duke. His lips were drawn tightly together, he had flushed, and it seemed to me as though he drew slightly away from Jane. He must have had a foretaste of the fact that for a man of his position to marry a Jane Wilkinson might lead to some awkward contretemps.

As so often happens, I made the first remark that came into my head to my left-hand neighbour, a stout titled lady who arranged children's matinees. I remember that the remark in question was: "Who is that extraordinary looking woman in purple at the other end of the table?" It was, of course, the lady's sister! Having stammered apologies, I turned and chatted to Ross, who answered in monosyllables.

It was then, rebuffed on both sides, that I noticed Bryan Martin. He must have been late for I had not seen him before.

He was a little way further down the table on my side and was leaning forward and chatting with great animation to a pretty blonde woman.

It was some time since I had seen him at close quarters, and I was struck at once by the great improvement in his looks. The haggard lines had almost disappeared. He looked younger and in every way more fit. He was laughing and chaffing his vis-à-vis and seemed in first-rate spirits.

I did not have time to observe him further, for at that moment my stout neighbour forgave me and graciously permitted me to listen to a long monologue on the beauties of a Children's Matinee which she was organizing for Charity.

Poirot had to leave early as he had an appointment. He was investigating the strange disappearance of an Ambassador's boots and had a rendezvous fixed for half past two. He charged me to make his adieus to Mrs. Widburn. While I was waiting to do so—not an easy matter, for she was at the moment closely surrounded by departing friends all breathing out "Darlings" at a great rate—somebody touched me on the shoulder.

It was young Ross.

"Isn't M. Poirot here? I wanted to speak to him."

I explained that Poirot had just departed.

Ross seemed taken aback. Looking more closely at him, I saw that something seemed to have upset him. He looked white and strained and he had a queer uncertain look in his eyes.

"Did you want to see him particularly?" I asked.

He answered slowly.

"I—don't know."

It was such a queer answer that I stared at him in surprise. He flushed.

“It sounds odd, I know. The truth is that something rather queer has happened. Something that I can’t make out. I—I’d like M. Poirot’s advice about it. Because, you see, I don’t know what to do—I don’t want to bother him, but—”

He looked so puzzled and unhappy that I hastened to reassure him.

“Poirot has gone to keep an appointment,” I said. “But I know he means to be back for five o’clock. Why not ring him up then, or come and see him?”

“Thanks. Do you know, I think I will. Five o’clock?”

“Better ring up first,” I said, “and make sure before coming round.”

“All right. I will. Thanks, Hastings. You see, I think it might—just might—be very important.”

I nodded and turned again to where Mrs. Widburn was dispensing honied words and limp handshakes.

My duty done, I was turning away when a hand was slipped through my arm.

“Don’t cut me,” said a merry voice.

It was Jenny Driver—looking extremely chic, by the way.

“Hello,” I said. “Where have you sprung from?”

“I was lunching at the next table to you.”

“I didn’t see you. How is business?”

“Booming, thank you.”

“The soup plates going well?”

“Soup plates, as you rudely call them, are going very well. When everybody has got thoroughly laden up with them, there’s going to be dirty work done.

Something like a blister with a feather attached is going to be worn bang in the middle of the forehead."

"Unscrupulous," I said.

"Not at all. Somebody must come to the rescue of the ostriches. They're all on the dole."

She laughed and moved away.

"Good-bye. I'm taking an afternoon off from business. Going for a spin in the country."

"And very nice too," I said approvingly. "It's stifling in London today."

I myself walked leisurely through the park. I reached home about four o'clock. Poirot had not yet come in. It was twenty minutes to five when he returned. He was twinkling and clearly in a good humour.

"I see, Holmes," I remarked, "that you have tracked the ambassadorial boots."

"It was a case of cocaine smuggling. Very ingenious. For the last hour I have been in a ladies' beauty parlour. There was a girl there with auburn hair who would have captured your susceptible heart at once."

Poirot always has the impression that I am particularly susceptible to auburn hair. I do not bother to argue about it.

The telephone rang.

"That's probably Donald Ross," I said as I went across to the instrument.

"Donald Ross?"

"Yes, the young man we met at Chiswick. He wants to see you about something."

I took down the receiver.

“Hello. Captain Hastings speaking.”

It was Ross.

“Oh! is that you, Hastings? Has M. Poirot come in?”

“Yes, he’s here now. Do you want to speak to him or are you coming round?”

“It’s nothing much. I can tell him just as well over the telephone.”

“Right. Hold on.”

Poirot came forward and took the receiver. I was so close that I could hear, faintly, Ross’s voice.

“Is that M. Poirot?” The voice sounded eager—excited.

“Yes, it is I.”

“Look here, I don’t want to bother you, but there’s something that seems to me a bit odd. It’s in connection with Lord Edgware’s death.”

I saw Poirot’s figure go taut.

“Continue, continue.”

“It may seem just nonsense to you—”

“No, no. Tell me, all the same.”

“It was Paris set me off. You see—” Very faintly I heard a bell trilling.

“Half a second,” said Ross.

There was the sound of the receiver being laid down.

We waited. Poirot at the mouthpiece. I was standing beside him.

I say—we waited….

Two minutes passed…three minutes—four minutes—five minutes.

Poirot shifted his feet uneasily. He glanced up at the clock.

Then he moved the hook up and down and spoke to the Exchange. He turned to me.

“The receiver is still off at the other end, but there is no reply. They cannot get an answer. Quick, Hastings, look up Ross’s address in the telephone book. We must go there at once.”

Twenty-six

PARIS?

A few minutes later we were jumping into a taxi.

Poirot's face was very grave.

"I am afraid, Hastings," he said. "I am afraid."

"You don't mean—" I said and stopped.

"We are up against somebody who has already struck twice—that person will not hesitate to strike again. He is twisting and turning like a rat, fighting for his life. Ross is a danger. Then Ross will be eliminated."

"Was what he had to tell so important?" I asked doubtfully. "He did not seem to think so."

"Then he was wrong. Evidently what he had to tell was of supreme importance."

"But how could anyone know?"

"He spoke to you, you say. There, at Claridge's. With people all round. Madness—utter madness. Ah! why did you not bring him back with you—guard him—let no one near him till I had heard what he had to say."

"I never thought—I never dreamt—" I stammered.

Poirot made a quick gesture.

"Do not blame yourself—how could you know? I—I would have known. The murderer, see you, Hastings, is as cunning as a tiger and as relentless. Ah! shall we never arrive?"

We were there at last. Ross lived in a maisonette on the first floor of a house in a big square in Kensington. A card stuck on a little slot by the doorbell gave us the information. The hall door was open. Inside was a big flight of stairs.

“So easy to come in. None to see,” murmured Poirot as he sprang up the stairs.

On the first floor was a kind of partition and a narrow door with a Yale lock. Ross’s card was stuck in the centre of the door.

We paused there. Everywhere there was dead silence.

I pushed the door—to my surprise it yielded.

We entered.

There was a narrow hall and an open door one side, another in front of us opening into what was evidently the sitting room.

Into this sitting room we went. It was the divided half of a big front drawing room. It was cheaply but comfortably furnished and it was empty. On a small table was the telephone, the receiver stood down beside the instrument.

Poirot took a swift step forward, looked round, then shook his head.

“Not here. Come, Hastings.”

We retraced our steps and, going into the hall, we passed through the other door. The room was a tiny dining room. At one side of the table, fallen sideways from a chair and sprawled across the table, was Ross.

Poirot bent over him.

He straightened up—his face was white.

“He’s dead. Stabbed at the base of the skull.”

For long afterwards the events of that afternoon remained like a nightmare in my mind. I could not rid myself of a dreadful feeling of responsibility.

Much later, that evening, when we were alone together, I stammered out to Poirot my bitter self-reproachings. He responded quickly.

“No, no, do not blame yourself. How could you have suspected? The good God has not given you a suspicious nature to begin with.”

“You would have suspected?”

“That is different. All my life, you see, I have tracked down murderers. I know how, each time, the impulse to kill becomes stronger, till, at last, for a trivial cause—” He broke off.

He had been very quiet ever since our ghastly discovery. All through the arrival of the police, the questioning of the other people in the house, the hundred and one details of the dreadful routine following upon a murder, Poirot had remained aloof—strangely quiet—a faraway speculative look in his eyes. Now, as he broke off his sentence, that same faraway speculative look returned.

“We have no time to waste in regrets, Hastings,” he said quietly. “No time to say ‘If’—The poor young man who is dead had something to tell us. And we know now that that something must have been of great importance—otherwise he would not have been killed. Since he can no longer tell us—we have got to guess. We have got to guess—with only one little clue to guide us.”

“Paris,” I said.

“Yes, Paris.” He got up and began to stroll up and down.

“There have been several mentions of Paris in this business, but unluckily in different connections. There is the word Paris engraved in the gold box. Paris in November last. Miss Adams was there then—perhaps Ross was there also. Was there someone else there whom Ross knew? Whom he saw with Miss Adams under somewhat peculiar circumstances?”

“We can never know,” I said.

“Yes, yes, we can know. We shall know! The power of the human brain, Hastings, is almost unlimited. What other mentions of Paris have we in connection with the case? There is the short woman with the pince-nez who called for the box at the jeweller’s there. Was she known to Ross? The Duke of Merton was in Paris when the crime was committed. Paris, Paris, Paris. Lord Edgware was going to Paris—Ah! possibly we have something there. Was he killed to prevent him going to Paris?”

He sat down again, his brows drawn together. I could almost feel the waves of his furious concentration of thought.

“What happened at that luncheon?” he murmured. “Some casual word or phrase must have shown to Donald Ross the significance of knowledge which was in his possession, but which up to then he had not known was significant. Was there some mention of France? Of Paris? Up your end of the table, I mean.”

“The word Paris was mentioned but not in that connection.”

I told him about Jane Wilkinson’s “gaffe.”

“That probably explains it,” he said thoughtfully. “The word Paris would be sufficient—taken in conjunction with something else. But what was that something else? At what was Ross looking? Or of what had he been speaking when that word was uttered?”

“He’d been talking about Scottish superstitions.”

“And his eyes were—where?”

“I’m not sure. I think he was looking up towards the head of the table where Mrs. Widburn was sitting.”

“Who sat next to her?”

“The Duke of Merton, then Jane Wilkinson, then some fellow I didn’t know.”

“M. le Duc. It is possible that he was looking at M. le Duc when the word Paris was spoken. The Duke, remember, was in Paris or was supposed to be in Paris at the time of the crime. Suppose Ross suddenly remembered something which went to show that Merton was not in Paris.”

“My dear Poirot!”

“Yes, you consider that an absurdity. So does everyone. Had M. le Duc a motive for the crime? Yes, a very strong one. But to suppose that he committed it—oh! absurd. He is so rich, of so assured a position, of such a well-known lofty character. No one will scrutinize his alibi too carefully. And yet to fake an alibi in a big hotel is not so difficult. To go across by the afternoon service—to return—it could be done. Tell me, Hastings, did Ross not say anything when the word Paris was mentioned? Did he show no emotion?”

“I do seem to remember that he drew in his breath rather sharply.”

“And his manner when he spoke to you afterwards. Was it bewildered? Confused?”

“That absolutely describes it.”

“Précisément. An idea has come to him. He thinks it preposterous! Absurd! And yet—he hesitates to voice it. First he will speak to me. But alas! when he has made up his mind, I am already departed.”

“If he had only said a little more to me,” I lamented.

“Yes. If only—Who was near you at the time?”

“Well, everybody, more or less. They were saying good-bye to Mrs. Widburn. I didn’t notice particularly.”

Poirot got up again.

“Have I been all wrong?” he murmured as he began once more to pace the floor. “All the time, have I been wrong?”

I looked at him with sympathy. Exactly what the ideas were that passed through his head I did not know. "Close as an oyster" Japp had called him, and the Scotland Yard inspector's words were truly descriptive. I only know that now, at this moment, he was at war with himself.

"At any rate," I said, "this murder cannot be put down to Ronald Marsh."

"It is a point in his favour," my friend said absentmindedly. "But that does not concern us for the moment."

Abruptly, as before, he sat down.

"I cannot be entirely wrong. Hastings, do you remember that I once posed to myself five questions?"

"I seem to remember dimly something of the sort."

"They were: Why did Lord Edgware change his mind on the subject of divorce? What is the explanation of the letter he said he wrote to his wife and which she said she never got? Why was there that expression of rage on his face when we left his house that day? What were a pair of pince-nez doing in Carlotta Adams' handbag? Why did someone telephone to Lady Edgware at Chiswick and immediately ring off?"

"Yes, these were the questions," I said. "I remember now."

"Hastings, I have had in mind all along a certain little idea. An idea as to who the man was—the man behind. Three of those questions I have answered—and the answers accord with my little idea. But two of the questions, Hastings, I cannot answer.

"You see what that means. Either I am wrong as to the person, and it cannot be that person. Or else the answer to the two questions that I cannot answer is there all the time. Which is it, Hastings? Which is it?"

Rising, he went to his desk, unlocked it and took out the letter Lucie Adams had sent him from America. He had asked Japp to let him keep it a day or two and Japp had agreed. Poirot laid it on the table in front of him and pored over it.

The minutes went by. I yawned and picked up a book. I did not think that Poirot would get much result from his study. We had already gone over and over the letter. Granted that it was not Ronald Marsh who was referred to, there was nothing whatever to show who else it might be.

I turned the pages of my book….

Possibly dozed off….

Suddenly Poirot uttered a low cry. I sat up abruptly.

He was looking at me with an indescribable expression, his eyes green and shining.

“Hastings, Hastings.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you remember I said to you that if the murderer had been a man of order and method he would have cut this page, not torn it?”

“Yes?”

“I was wrong. There is order and method throughout this crime. The page had to be torn, not cut. Look for yourself.”

I looked.

“Eh bien, you see?”

I shook my head.

“You mean he was in a hurry?”

“Hurry or no hurry it would be the same thing. Do you not see, my friend? The page had to be torn….”

I shook my head.

In a low voice Poirot said:

“I have been foolish. I have been blind. But now—now—we shall get on!”

Twenty-seven

CONCERNING PINCE-NEZ

A minute later his mood had changed. He sprang to his feet.

I also sprang to mine—completely uncomprehending but willing.

“We will take a taxi. It is only nine o’clock. Not too late to make a visit.”

I hurried after him down the stairs.

“Whom are we going to visit?”

“We are going to Regent Gate.”

I judged it wisest to hold my peace. Poirot, I saw, was not in the mood for being questioned. That he was greatly excited I could see. As we sat side by side in the taxi his fingers drummed on his knees with a nervous impatience most unlike his usual calm.

I went over in my mind every word of Carlotta Adams’ letter to her sister. By this time I almost knew it by heart. I repeated again and again to myself Poirot’s words about the torn page.

But it was no good. As far as I was concerned, Poirot’s words simply did not make sense. Why had a page got to be torn. No, I could not see it.

A new butler opened the door to us at Regent Gate. Poirot asked for Miss Carroll, and as we followed the butler up the stairs I wondered for the fiftieth time where the former “Greek god” could be. So far the police had failed utterly to run him to earth. A sudden shiver passed over me as I reflected that perhaps he, too, was dead….

The sight of Miss Carroll, brisk and neat and eminently sane, recalled me from these fantastic speculations. She was clearly very much surprised to see Poirot.

“I am glad to find you still here, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot as he bowed over her hand. “I was afraid you might be no longer in the house.”

“Geraldine would not hear of my leaving,” said Miss Carroll. “She begged me to stay on. And really, at a time like this, the poor child needs someone. If she needs nothing else, she needs a buffer. And I can assure you, when need be, I make a very efficient buffer, M. Poirot.”

Her mouth took on a grim line. I felt that she would have a short way with reporters or newshunters.

“Mademoiselle, you have always seemed to me the pattern of efficiency. The efficiency, I admire it very much. It is rare. Mademoiselle Marsh no, she has not got the practical mind.”

“She’s a dreamer,” said Miss Carroll. “Completely impractical. Always has been. Lucky she hasn’t got her living to get.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“But I don’t suppose you came here to talk about people being practical or impractical. What can I do for you, M. Poirot?”

I do not think Poirot quite liked to be recalled to the point in this fashion. He was somewhat addicted to the oblique approach. With Miss Carroll, however, such a thing was not practicable. She blinked at him suspiciously through her strong glasses.

“There are a few points on which I should like definite information. I know I can trust your memory, Miss Carroll.”

“I wouldn’t be much use as a secretary if you couldn’t,” said Miss Carroll grimly.

“Was Lord Edgware in Paris last November?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me the date of his visit?”

“I shall have to look it up.”

She rose, unlocked a drawer, took out a small bound book, turned the pages and finally announced:

“Lord Edgware went to Paris on November 3rd and returned on the 7th. He also went over on November 20th and returned on December 4th. Anything more?”

“Yes. For what purpose did he go?”

“On the first occasion he went to see some statuettes which he thought of purchasing and which were to be auctioned later. On the second occasion he had no definite purpose in view so far as I know.”

“Did Mademoiselle Marsh accompany her father on either occasion?”

“She never accompanied her father on any occasion, M. Poirot. Lord Edgware would never have dreamed of such a thing. At that time she was at a convent in Paris, but I do not think her father went to see her or took her out—at least it would surprise me very much if he had.”

“You yourself did not accompany him?”

“No.”

She looked at him curiously and then said abruptly:

“Why are you asking me these questions, M. Poirot? What is the point of them?”

Poirot did not reply to this question. Instead he said:

“Miss Marsh is very fond of her cousin, is she not?”

“Really, M. Poirot, I don’t see what that has got to do with you.”

“She came to see me the other day! You knew that?”

“No, I did not.” She seemed startled. “What did she say?”

“She told me—though not in actual words—that she was very fond of her cousin.”

“Well, then, why ask me?”

“Because I seek your opinion.”

This time Miss Carroll decided to answer.

“Much too fond of him in my opinion. Always has been.”

“You do not like the present Lord Edgware?”

“I don’t say that. I’ve no use for him, that’s all. He’s not serious. I don’t deny he’s got a pleasant way with him. He can talk you round. But I’d rather see Geraldine getting interested in someone with a little more backbone.”

“Such as the Duke of Merton?”

“I don’t know the Duke. At any rate, he seems to take the duties of his position seriously. But he’s running after that woman—that precious Jane Wilkinson.”

“His mother—”

“Oh! I daresay his mother would prefer him to marry Geraldine. But what can mothers do? Sons never want to marry the girls their mothers want them to marry.”

“Do you think that Miss Marsh’s cousin cares for her?”

“Doesn’t matter whether he does or doesn’t in the position he’s in.”

“You think, then, that he will be condemned?”

"No, I don't. I don't think he did it."

"But he might be condemned all the same?"

Miss Carroll did not reply.

"I must not detain you." Poirot rose. "By the way, did you know Carlotta Adams?"

"I saw her act. Very clever."

"Yes, she was clever." He seemed lost in meditation. "Ah! I have put down my gloves."

Reaching forward to get them from the table where he had laid them, his cuff caught the chain of Miss Carroll's pince-nez and jerked them off. Poirot retrieved them and the gloves which he had dropped, uttering confused apologies.

"I must apologize also once more for disturbing you," he ended. "But I fancied there might be some clue in a dispute Lord Edgware had with someone last year. Hence my questions about Paris. A forlorn hope, I fear, but Mademoiselle seemed so very positive it was not her cousin who committed the crime. Remarkably positive she was. Well, good night, Mademoiselle, and a thousand pardons for disturbing you."

We had reached the door when Miss Carroll's voice recalled us.

"M. Poirot, these aren't my glasses. I can't see through them."

"Comment?" Poirot stared at her in amazement. Then his face broke up into smiles.

"Imbecile that I am! My own glasses fell out of my pocket as I stooped to get the gloves and pick up yours. I have mixed the two pairs. They look very alike, you see."

An exchange was made, with smiles on both sides, and we took our departure.

“Poirot,” I said when we were outside. “You don’t wear glasses.”

He beamed at me.

“Penetrating! How quickly you see the point.”

“Those were the pince-nez I found in Carlotta Adams’ handbag?”

“Correct.”

“Why did you think they might be Miss Carroll’s?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“She is the only person connected with the case who wears glasses.”

“However, they are not hers,” I said thoughtfully.

“So she affirms.”

“You suspicious old devil.”

“Not at all, not at all. Probably she spoke the truth. I think she did speak the truth. Otherwise I doubt if she would have noticed the substitution. I did it very adroitly, my friend.”

We were strolling through the streets more or less at random. I suggested a taxi, but Poirot shook his head.

“I have need to think, my friend. Walking aids me.”

I said no more. The night was a close one and I was in no hurry to return home.

“Were your questions about Paris mere camouflage?” I asked curiously.

“Not entirely.”

"We still haven't solved the mystery of the initial D," I said thoughtfully. "It's odd that nobody to do with the case has an initial D—either surname or Christian name—except—oh! yes, that's odd—except Donald Ross himself. And he's dead."

"Yes," said Poirot in a sombre voice. "He is dead."

I remembered another evening when three of us had walked at night. Remembered something else, too, and drew my breath in sharply.

"By Jove, Poirot," I said. "Do you remember?"

"Remember what, my friend?"

"What Ross said about thirteen at table. And he was the first to get up."

Poirot did not answer. I felt a little uncomfortable as one always does when superstition is proved justified.

"It is queer," I said in a low voice. "You must admit it is queer."

"Eh?"

"I said it was queer—about Ross and thirteen. Poirot, what are you thinking about?"

To my utter amazement and, I must admit, somewhat to my disgust, Poirot began suddenly to shake with laughter. He shook and he shook. Something was evidently causing him the most exquisite mirth.

"What the devil are you laughing at?" I said sharply.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" gasped Poirot. "It is nothing. It is that I think of a riddle I heard the other day. I will tell it to you. What is it that has two legs, feathers, and barks like a dog?"

"A chicken, of course," I said wearily. "I knew that in the nursery."

“You are too well informed, Hastings. You should say, ‘I do not know.’ And then me, I say, ‘A chicken,’ and then you say, ‘But a chicken does not bark like a dog,’ and I say, ‘Ah! I put that in to make it more difficult.’ Supposing, Hastings, that there we have the explanation of the letter D?”

“What nonsense!”

“Yes, to most people, but to a certain type of mind. Oh! if I had only someone I could ask….”

We were passing a big cinema. People were streaming out of it discussing their own affairs, their servants, their friends of the opposite sex, and just occasionally, the picture they had just seen.

With a group of them we crossed the Euston Road.

“I loved it,” a girl was sighing. “I think Bryan Martin’s just wonderful. I never miss any picture he’s in. The way he rode down the cliff and got there in time with the papers.”

Her escort was less enthusiastic.

“Idiotic story. If they’d just had the sense to ask Ellis right away. Which anyone worth sense would have done—”

The rest was lost. Reaching the pavement I turned back to see Poirot standing in the middle of the road with buses bearing down on him from either side. Instinctively I put my hands over my eyes. There was a jarring of brakes, and some rich bus driver language. In a dignified manner Poirot walked to the kerb. He looked like a man walking in his sleep.

“Poirot,” I said, “were you mad?”

“No, mon ami. It was just that—something came to me. There, at that moment.”

“A damned bad moment,” I said. “And very nearly your last one.”

"No matter. Ah, mon ami—I have been blind, deaf, insensible. Now I see the answers to all those questions—yes, all five of them. Yes—I see it all… So simple, so childishly simple…."

Twenty-eight

POIROT ASKS A FEW QUESTIONS

We had a curious walk home.

Poirot was clearly following out some train of thought in his own mind. Occasionally he murmured a word under his breath. I heard one or two of them. Once he said, “Candles,” and another time he said something that sounded like “douzaine.” I suppose if I had been really bright I should have seen the line his thoughts were taking. It was really such a clear trail. However, at the time, it sounded to me mere gibberish.

No sooner were we at home than he flew to the telephone. He rang up the Savoy and asked to speak to Lady Edgware.

“Not a hope, old boy,” I said with some amusement.

Poirot, as I have often told him, is one of the worst-informed men in the world.

“Don’t you know?” I went on. “She’s in a new play. She’ll be at the theatre. It’s only half past ten.”

Poirot paid no attention to me. He was speaking to the hotel clerk, who was evidently telling him exactly what I had just told him.

“Ah! is that so? I should like then to speak to Lady Edgware’s maid.”

In a few minutes the connection was made.

“Is that Lady Edgware’s maid? This is M. Poirot speaking. M. Hercule Poirot. You remember me, do you not?”

“………”

“Três bien. Now, you understand, something of importance has arisen. I would like you to come and see me at once.”

“………”

“But yes, very important. I will give you the address. Listen carefully.”

He repeated it twice, then hung up the receiver with a thoughtful face.

“What is the idea?” I asked curiously. “Have you really got a piece of information?”

“No, Hastings, it is she who will give me the information.”

“What information?”

“Information about a certain person.”

“Jane Wilkinson?”

“Oh! as to her, I have all the information I need. I know her back side before, as you say.”

“Who, then?”

Poirot gave me one of his supremely irritating smiles and told me to wait and see.

He then busied himself in tidying up the room in a fussy manner.

Ten minutes later the maid arrived. She seemed a little nervous and uncertain. A small neat figure dressed in black, she peered about her doubtfully.

Poirot bustled forward.

“Ah! you have come. That is most kind. Sit here, will you now, Mademoiselle—Ellis, I think?”

"Yes, sir. Ellis."

She sat down on the chair Poirot had drawn forward for her.

She sat with her hands folded on her lap looking from one to the other of us. Her small bloodless face was quite composed and her thin lips were pinched together.

"To begin with, Miss Ellis, you have been with Lady Edgware how long?"

"Three years, sir."

"That is as I thought. You know her affairs well."

Ellis did not reply. She looked disapproving.

"What I mean is, you should have a good idea of who her enemies are likely to be."

Ellis compressed her lips more tightly.

"Most women have tried to do her a spiteful turn, sir. Yes, they've all been against her, nasty jealousy."

"Her own sex did not like her?"

"No, sir. She's too good-looking. And she always gets what she wants. There's a lot of nasty jealousy in the theatrical profession."

"What about men?"

Ellis allowed a sour smile to appear on her withered countenance.

"She can do what she likes with the gentlemen, sir, and that's a fact."

"I agree with you," said Poirot, smiling. "Yet, even allowing for that, I can imagine circumstances arising—" He broke off.

Then he said in a different voice:

“You know Mr. Bryan Martin, the film actor?”

“Oh! yes, sir.”

“Very well?”

“Very well, indeed.”

“I believe I am not mistaken in saying that a little less than a year ago Mr. Bryan Martin was very deeply in love with your mistress.”

“Head over ears, sir. And it’s ‘is’ not ‘was,’ if you ask me.”

“He believed at that time she would marry him—eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did she ever seriously consider marrying him?”

“She thought of it, sir. If she could have got her freedom from his lordship, I believe she would have married him.”

“And then, I suppose, the Duke of Merton appeared on the scene?”

“Yes, sir. He was doing a tour through the States. Love at first sight it was with him.”

“And so good-bye to Bryan Martin’s chances?”

Ellis nodded.

“Of course Mr. Martin made an enormous amount of money,” she explained. “But the Duke of Merton had position as well. And her ladyship is very keen on position. Married to the Duke, she’d have been one of the first ladies in the land.”

The maid’s voice held a smug complacency. It amused me.

“So Mr. Bryan Martin was—how do you say—turned down? Did he take it badly?”

“He carried on something awful, sir.”

“Ah!”

“He threatened her with a revolver once. And the scenes he made. It frightened me, it did. He was drinking a lot, too. He went all to pieces.”

“But in the end he calmed down.”

“So it seemed, sir. But he still hung about. And I didn’t like the look in his eye. I’ve warned her ladyship about it, but she only laughed. She’s one who enjoys feeling her power, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “I think I know what you mean.”

“We’ve not seen so much of him just lately, sir. A good thing in my opinion. He’s beginning to get over it, I hope.”

“Perhaps.”

Something in Poirot’s utterance of the word seem to strike her. She asked anxiously:

“You don’t think she’s in danger, sir?”

“Yes,” said Poirot gravely. “I think she is in great danger. But she has brought it on herself.”

His hand, running aimlessly along the mantelshelf, caught a vase of roses and it toppled over. The water fell on Ellis’s face and head. I had seldom known Poirot clumsy, and I could deduce from it that he was in a great state of mental perturbation. He was very upset—rushed for a towel—tenderly assisted the maid to dry her face and neck and was profuse in apologies.

Finally a treasury note changed hands and he escorted her towards the door, thanking her for her goodness in coming.

"But it is still early," he said, glancing at the clock. "You will be back before your mistress returns."

"Oh! that is quite all right, sir. She is going out to supper, I think, and anyway, she never expects me to sit up for her unless she says so special."

Suddenly Poirot flew off at a tangent.

"Mademoiselle, pardon me, but you are limping."

"That's nothing, sir. My feet are a little painful."

"The corns?" murmured Poirot in the confidential voice of one sufferer to another.

Corns, apparently, it was. Poirot expatiated upon a certain remedy which, according to him, worked wonders.

Finally Ellis departed.

I was full of curiosity.

"Well, Poirot?" I said. "Well?"

He smiled at my eagerness.

"Nothing more this evening, my friend. Tomorrow morning early, we will ring up Japp. We will ask him to come round. We will also ring up Mr. Bryan Martin. I think he will be able to tell us something interesting. Also, I wish to pay him a debt that I owe him."

"Really?"

I looked at Poirot sideways. He was smiling to himself in a curious way.

"At any rate," I said, "you can't suspect him of killing Lord Edgware. Especially after what we've heard of tonight. That would be playing Jane's game with a vengeance. To kill off the husband so as to let the lady marry someone else is a little too disinterested for any man."

“What profound judgement!”

“Now don’t be sarcastic,” I said with some annoyance. “And what on earth are you fiddling with all the time?”

Poirot held the object in question up.

“With the pince-nez of the good Ellis, my friend. She left them behind.”

“Nonsense! She had them on her nose when she went out.”

He shook his head gently.

“Wrong! Absolutely wrong! What she had on, my dear Hastings, were the pair of pince-nez we found in Carlotta Adams’ handbag.”

I gasped.

Twenty-nine

POIROT SPEAKS

It fell to me to ring up Inspector Japp the following morning.

His voice sounded rather depressed.

“Oh! it’s you, Captain Hastings. Well, what’s in the wind now?”

I gave him Poirot’s message.

“Come round at eleven? Well, I daresay I could. He’s not got anything to help us over young Ross’s death, has he? I don’t mind confessing that we could do with something. There’s not a clue of any kind. Most mysterious business.”

“I think he’s got something for you,” I said noncommittally. “He seems very pleased with himself at all events.”

“That’s more than I am, I can tell you. All right, Captain Hastings. I’ll be there.”

My next task was to ring up Bryan Martin. To him I said what I had been told to say: That Poirot had discovered something rather interesting which he thought Mr. Martin would like to hear. When asked what it was, I said that I had no idea. Poirot had not confided in me. There was a pause.

“All right,” said Bryan at last. “I’ll come.”

He rang off.

Presently, somewhat to my surprise, Poirot rang up Jenny Driver and asked her, also, to be present.

He was quiet and rather grave. I asked him no questions.

Bryan Martin was the first to arrive. He looked in good health and spirits, but—or it might have been my fancy—a shade uneasy. Jenny Driver arrived almost immediately afterwards. She seemed surprised to see Bryan and he seemed to share her surprise.

Poirot brought forward two chairs and urged them to sit down. He glanced at his watch.

“Inspector Japp will be here in one moment, I expect.”

“Inspector Japp?” Bryan seemed startled.

“Yes—I have asked him to come here—informally—as a friend.”

“I see.”

He relapsed into silence. Jenny gave a quick glance at him then glanced away. She seemed rather preoccupied about something this morning.

A moment later Japp entered the room.

He was, I think, a trifle surprised to find Bryan Martin and Jenny Driver there, but he made no sign. He greeted Poirot with his usual jocularity.

“Well, M. Poirot, what’s it all about? You’ve got some wonderful theory or other, I suppose.”

Poirot beamed at him.

“No, no—nothing wonderful. Just a little story quite simple—so simple that I am ashamed not to have seen it at once. I want, if you permit, to take you with me through the case from the beginning.”

Japp sighed and looked at his watch.

“If you won’t be more than an hour—” he said.

“Reassure yourself,” said Poirot. “It will not take as long as that. See here, you want to know, do you not, who it was killed Lord Edgware, who it was killed Miss Adams, who it was killed Donald Ross?”

“I’d like to know the last,” said Japp cautiously.

“Listen to me and you shall know everything. See, I am going to be humble.” (Not likely! I thought unbelievingly.) “I am going to show you every step of the way—I am going to reveal how I was hoodwinked, how I displayed the gross imbecility, how it needed the conversation of my friend Hastings and a chance remark by a total stranger to put me on the right track.”

He paused and then, clearing his throat, he began to speak in what I called his “lecture” voice.

“I will begin at the supper party at the Savoy. Lady Edgware accosted me and asked for a private interview. She wanted to get rid of her husband. At the close of our interview she said—somewhat unwisely, I thought—that she might have to go round in a taxi and kill him herself. Those words were heard by Mr. Bryan Martin, who came in at that moment.”

He wheeled round.

“Eh? That is so, is it not?”

“We all heard,” said the actor. “The Widburns, Marsh, Carlotta—all of us.”

“Oh! I agree. I agree perfectly. Eh bien, I did not have a chance to forget those words of Lady Edgware’s. Mr. Bryan Martin called on the following morning for the express purpose of driving those words home.”

“Not at all,” cried Bryan Martin angrily. “I came—”

Poirot held up a hand.

“You came, ostensibly, to tell me a cock-and-bull story about being shadowed. A tale that a child might have seen through. You probably took it from an out-of-date film. A girl whose consent you had to obtain—a man whom you recognized by a gold tooth. Mon ami, no young man would have a gold tooth—it is not done in these days—and especially in America. The gold tooth it is a hopelessly old-fashioned piece of dentistry. Oh! it was all of a piece—absurd! Having told your cock-and-bull story you get down to the real purpose of your visit—to poison my mind against Lady Edgware. To put it clearly, you prepare the ground for the moment when she murders her husband."

"I don't know what you're talking about," muttered Bryan Martin. His face was deathly pale.

"You ridicule the idea that he will agree to a divorce! You think I am going to see him the following day, but actually the appointment is changed. I go to see him that morning and he does agree to a divorce. Any motive for a crime on Lady Edgware's part is gone. Moreover, he tells me that he has already written to Lady Edgware to that effect.

"But Lady Edgware declares that she never got that letter. Either she lies, her husband lies, or somebody has suppressed it—who?

"Now I ask myself why does M. Bryan Martin give himself the trouble to come and tell me all these lies? What inner power drives him on. And I form the idea, Monsieur, that you have been frantically in love with that lady. Lord Edgware says that his wife told him she wanted to marry an actor. Well, supposing that is so, but that the lady changes her mind. By the time Lord Edgware's letter agreeing to the divorce arrives, it is someone else she wants to marry—not you! There would be a reason, then, for you suppressing that letter."

"I never—"

"Presently you shall say all you want to say. Now you will attend to me.

"What, then, would be your frame of mind—you, a spoilt idol who has never known a rebuff? As I see it, a kind of baffled fury, a desire to do Lady Edgware as much harm as possible. And what greater harm could you do her than to have her accused—perhaps hanged—for murder."

"Good lord!" said Japp.

Poirot turned to him.

“But yes, that was the little idea that began to shape itself in my mind. Several things came to support it. Carlotta Adams had two principal men friends—Captain Marsh and Bryan Martin. It was possible, then, that Bryan Martin, a rich man, was the one who suggested the hoax and offered her ten thousand dollars to carry it through. It has seemed to me unlikely all along that Miss Adams could ever have believed Ronald Marsh would have ten thousand dollars to give her. She knew him to be extremely hard up. Bryan Martin was a far more likely solution.”

“I didn’t—I tell you—” came hoarsely from the film actor’s lips. “When the substance of Miss Adams” letter to her sister was wired from Washington—oh! la, la! I was very upset. It seemed that my reasoning was wholly wrong. But later I made a discovery. The actual letter itself was sent to me and instead of being continuous, a sheet of the letter was missing. So, ‘he’ might refer to someone who was not Captain Marsh.

“There was one more piece of evidence. Captain Marsh, when he was arrested, distinctly stated that he thought he saw Bryan Martin enter the house. Coming from an accused man that carried no weight. Also M. Martin had an alibi. That naturally! It was to be expected. If M. Martin did the murder, to have an alibi was absolutely necessary.

“That alibi was vouched for by one person only—Miss Driver.”

“What about it?” said the girl sharply.

“Nothing, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, smiling. “Except that that same day I noticed you lunching with M. Martin and that you presently took the trouble to come over and try to make me believe that your friend Miss Adams was specially interested in Ronald Marsh—not, as I was sure was the case—in Bryan Martin.”

“Not a bit of it,” said the film star stoutly.

“You may have been unaware of it, Monsieur,” said Poirot quietly, “but I think it was true. It explains, as nothing else could, her feeling of dislike towards Lady Edgware. That dislike was on your behalf. You had told her all about your rebuff, had you not?”

“Well—yes—I felt I must talk to someone and she—”

“Was sympathetic. Yes, she was sympathetic, I noticed it myself. Eh bien, what happens next? Ronald Marsh, he is arrested. Immediately your spirits improve. Any anxiety you may have had is over. Although your plan has miscarried owing to Lady Edgware’s change of mind about going to a party at the last minute, yet somebody else has become the scapegoat and relieved you of all anxiety on your own account. And then—at a luncheon party—you hear Donald Ross, that pleasant, but rather stupid young man, say something to Hastings that seems to show that you are not so safe after all.”

“It isn’t true,” the actor bawled. The perspiration was running down his face. His eyes looked wild with horror. “I tell you I heard nothing—nothing—I did nothing.”

Then, I think, came the greatest shock of the morning.

“That is quite true,” said Poirot quietly. “And I hope you have now been sufficiently punished for coming to me—me, Hercule Poirot, with a cock-and-bull story.”

We all gasped. Poirot continued dreamily.

“You see—I am showing you all my mistakes. There were five questions I had asked myself. Hastings knows them. The answer to three of them fitted in very well. Who had suppressed that letter? Clearly Bryan Martin answered that question very well. Another question was what had induced Lord Edgware suddenly to change his mind and agree to a divorce? Well, I had an idea as to that. Either he wanted to marry again—but I could find no evidence pointing to that—or else some kind of blackmail was involved. Lord Edgware was a man of peculiar tastes. It was possible that facts about him had come to light which, while not entitling his wife to an English divorce, might yet be used by her as a lever coupled with the threat of publicity. I think that is what happened. Lord Edgware did not want an open scandal attached to his name. He gave in, though his fury at having to do so was expressed in the murderous look on his face when he thought himself unobserved. It also explains the suspicious quickness with which he said, ‘Not because of anything in the letter,’ before I had even suggested that that might be the case.

“Two questions remained. The question of an odd pair of pince-nez in Miss Adams’ bag which did not belong to her. And the question of why Lady Edgware was rung up on the telephone whilst she was at dinner at Chiswick. In no way could I fit in M. Bryan Martin with either of those questions.

“So I was forced to the conclusion that either I was wrong about Mr. Martin, or wrong about the questions. In despair I once again read that letter of Miss Adams’ through very carefully. And I found something! Yes, I found something!

“See for yourselves. Here it is. You see the sheet is torn? Unevenly, as often happens. Supposing now that before the ‘h’ at the top there was an ‘s’….

“Ah! you have it! You see. Not he—but she! It was a woman who suggested this hoax to Carlotta Adams.

“Well, I made a list of all the women who had been even remotely connected with the case. Besides Jane Wilkinson, there were four—Geraldine Marsh, Miss Carroll, Miss Driver and the Duchess of Merton.

“Of those four, the one that interested me most was Miss Carroll. She wore glasses, she was in the house that night, she had already been inaccurate in her evidence owing to her desire to incriminate Lady Edgware, and she was also a woman of great efficiency and nerve who could have carried out such a crime. The motive was more obscure—but after all, she had worked with Lord Edgware some years and some motive might exist of which we were totally unaware.

“I also felt that I could not quite dismiss Geraldine Marsh from the case. She hated her father—she had told me so. She was a neurotic, highly-strung type. Suppose when she went into the house that night she had deliberately stabbed her father and then coolly proceeded upstairs to fetch the pearls.

Imagine her agony when she found that her cousin whom she loved devotedly had not remained outside in the taxi but had entered the house.

“Her agitated manner could be well explained on these lines. It could equally well be explained by her own innocence, but by her fear that her cousin really had done the crime. There was another small point. The gold box found in Miss Adams’ bag had the initial D in it. I had heard Geraldine addressed by her cousin as ‘Dina.’ Also, she was in a pensionnat in Paris last November and might possibly have met Carlotta Adams in Paris.

“You may think it fantastic to add the Duchess of Merton to the list. But she had called upon me and I recognized in her a fanatical type. The love of her whole life was centred on her son, and she might have worked herself up to contrive a plot to destroy the woman who was about to ruin her son’s life.

“Then there was Miss Jenny Driver—”

He paused, looking at Jenny. She looked back at him, an impudent head on one side.

“And what have you got on me?” she asked.

“Nothing, Mademoiselle, except that you were a friend of Bryan Martin’s—and that your surname begins with D.”

“That’s not very much.”

“There’s one thing more. You have the brains and the nerve to commit such a crime. I doubt if anyone else had.”

The girl lit a cigarette.

“Continue,” she said cheerfully.

“Was M. Martin’s alibi genuine or was it not? That was what I had to decide. If it was, who was it Ronald Marsh had seen go into the house? And suddenly I remembered something. The good-looking butler at Regent Gate bore a very marked resemblance to M. Martin. It was he whom Captain Marsh had seen. And I formed a theory as to that. It is my idea that he discovered his master killed. Beside his master was an envelope containing French banknotes to the value of a hundred pounds. He took these notes, slipped out of the house, left them in safe keeping with some rascally friend and returned, letting himself in with Lord Edgware's key. He let the crime be discovered by the housemaid on the following morning. He felt in no danger himself, as he was quite convinced that Lady Edgware had done the murder, and the notes were out of the house and already changed before their loss was noticed. However, when Lady Edgware had an alibi and Scotland Yard began investigating his antecedents, he got the wind up and decamped."

Japp nodded approvingly.

"I still have the question of the pince-nez to settle. If Miss Carroll was the owner then the case seemed settled. She could have suppressed the letter, and in arranging details with Carlotta Adams, or in meeting her on the evening of the murder, the pince-nez might have inadvertently found their way into Carlotta Adams' bag.

"But the pince-nez were apparently nothing to do with Miss Carroll. I was walking home with Hastings here, somewhat depressed, trying to arrange things in my mind with order and method. And then the miracle happened!

"First Hastings spoke of things in a certain order. He mentioned Donald Ross having been one of thirteen at table at Sir Montagu Corner's and having been the first to get up. I was following out a train of thought of my own and did not pay much attention. It just flashed through my mind that, strictly speaking, that was not true. He may have got up first at the end of the dinner, but actually Lady Edgware had been the first to get up since she was called to the telephone. Thinking of her, a certain riddle occurred to me—a riddle that I fancied accorded well with her somewhat childish mentality. I told it to Hastings. He was, like Queen Victoria, not amused. I next fell to wondering who I could ask for details about M. Martin's feeling for Jane Wilkinson. She herself would not tell me, I knew. And then a passerby, as we were all crossing the road, uttered a simple sentence.

"He said to his girl companion that somebody or other 'should have asked Ellis.' And immediately the whole thing came to me in a flash!"

He looked round.

“Yes, yes, the pince-nez, the telephone call, the short woman who called for the gold box in Paris. Ellis, of course, Jane Wilkinson’s maid. I followed every step of it—the candles—the dim light—Mrs. Van Dusen—everything. I knew!”

Thirty

THE STORY

He looked round at us.

“Come, my friends,” he said gently. “Let me tell you the real story of what happened that night.

“Carlotta Adams leaves her flat at seven o’clock. From there she takes a taxi and goes to the Piccadilly Palace.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“To the Piccadilly Palace. Earlier in the day she has taken a room there as Mrs. Van Dusen. She wears a pair of strong glasses which, as we all know, alters the appearance very much. As I say, she books a room, saying that she is going by the night boat train to Liverpool and that her luggage has gone on. At eight thirty Lady Edgware arrives and asks for her. She is shown up to her room. There they change clothes. Dressed in a fair wig, a white taffeta dress and ermine wrap, Carlotta Adams and not Jane Wilkinson leaves the hotel and drives to Chiswick. Yes, yes, it is perfectly possible. I have been to the house in the evening. The dinner table is lit only with candles, the lamps are dim, no one there knows Jane Wilkinson very well. There is the golden hair, the well-known husky voice and manner. Oh! it was quite easy. And if it had not been successful—if someone had spotted the fake—well, that was all arranged for, too. Lady Edgware, wearing a dark wig, Carlotta’s clothes and the pince-nez, pays her bill, has her suitcase put on a taxi and drives to Euston. She removes the dark wig in the lavatory, she puts her suitcase in the cloak room. Before going to Regent Gate she rings up Chiswick and asks to speak to Lady Edgware. This has been arranged between them. If all has gone well and Carlotta has not been spotted, she is to answer simply—‘That’s right.’ I need hardly say Miss Adams was ignorant of the real reason for the telephone call. Having heard the words, Lady Edgware goes ahead. She goes to Regent Gate, asks for Lord Edgware, proclaims her individuality, and goes into the library. And commits the first murder. Of course she did not know that Miss Carroll was watching her from above. As far as she is aware it will be the butler’s word (and he has never seen her, remember—and also she wears a hat which shields her from his gaze) against the word of twelve well-known and distinguished people.

“She leaves the house, returns to Euston, changes from fair to dark again and picks up her suitcase. She has now to put in time till Carlotta Adams returns from Chiswick. They have agreed as to the approximate time. She goes to the Corner House, occasionally glancing at her watch, for the time passes slowly. Then she prepares for the second murder. She puts the small gold box she has ordered from Paris in Carlotta Adams’ bag which, of course, she is carrying. Perhaps it is then she finds the letter. Perhaps it was earlier. Anyway, as soon as she sees the address, she scents danger. She opens it—her suspicions are justified.

“Perhaps her first impulse is to destroy the letter altogether. But she soon sees a better way. By removing one page of the letter it reads like an accusation of Ronald Marsh—a man who had a powerful motive for the crime. Even if Ronald has an alibi, it will still read as an accusation of a man so long as she tears off the s of ‘she.’ So that is what she does. Then replaces it in the envelope and the envelope back in the bag.

“Then, the time having come, she walks in the direction of the Savoy Hotel. As soon as she sees the car pass, with (presumably) herself inside, she quickens her pace, enters at the same time and goes straight up the stairs. She is inconspicuously dressed in black. It is unlikely that anyone will notice her.

“Upstairs she goes to her room. Carlotta Adams has just reached it. The maid has been told to go to bed—a perfectly usual proceeding. They again change clothes and then, I fancy, Lady Edgware suggests a little drink—to celebrate. In that drink is the veronal. She congratulates her victim, says she will send her the cheque tomorrow. Carlotta Adams goes home. She is very sleepy—tries to ring up a friend—possibly M. Martin or Captain Marsh, for both have Victoria numbers—but gives it up. She is too tried. The veronal is beginning to work. She goes to bed—and she never wakes again. The second crime has been carried through successfully.

“Now for the third crime. It is at a luncheon party. Sir Montagu Corner makes a reference to a conversation he had with Lady Edgware on the night of the murder. That is easy. But Nemesis comes upon her later. There is a mention of the ‘judgement of Paris’ and she takes Paris to be the only Paris she knows—the Paris of fashion and frills!

“But opposite her is sitting a young man who was at the dinner at Chiswick—a young man who heard the Lady Edgware of that night discussing Homer and Greek civilization generally. Carlotta Adams was a cultured well-read girl. He cannot understand. He stares. And suddenly it comes to him. This is not the same woman. He is terribly upset. He is not sure of himself. He must have advice. He thinks of me. He speaks to Hastings.

“But the lady overheard him. She is quick enough and shrewd enough to realize that in some way or other she has given herself away. She heard Hastings say that I will not be in till five. At twenty to five she goes to Ross’s maisonette. He opens the door, is very surprised to see her, but it does not occur to him to be afraid. A strong able-bodied young man is not afraid of a woman. He goes with her into the dining room. She pours out some story to him. Perhaps she goes on her knees and flings her arms around his neck. And then, swift and sure, she strikes—as before. Perhaps he gives a choked cry—no more. He, too, is silenced.”

There was a silence. Then Japp spoke hoarsely.

“You mean—she did it all the time?”

Poirot bowed his head.

“But why, if he was willing to give her a divorce?”

“Because the Duke of Merton is a pillar of the Anglo-Catholics. Because he would not dream of marrying a woman whose husband was alive. He is a young man of fanatical principles. As a widow, she was pretty certain to be able to marry him. Doubtless she had tentatively suggested divorce, but he had not risen to the bait.”

“Then why send you to Lord Edgware?”

"Ah! parbleu!" Poirot, from having been very correct and English, suddenly relapsed into his natural self. "To pull the cotton-wool over my eyes! To make me a witness to the fact that there was not motive for the murder! Yes, she dared to make me, Hercule Poirot, her cat's-paw! Ma foi, she succeeded, too! Oh, that strange brain, childlike and cunning. She can act! How well she acted surprise at being told of the letter her husband had written her which she swore she had never received. Did she feel the slightest pang of remorse for any of her three crimes? I can swear she did not."

"I told you what she was like," cried Bryan Martin. "I told you. I knew she was going to kill him. I felt it. And I was afraid that somehow she'd get away with it. She's clever—devilish clever in a kind of half-wit way. And I wanted her to suffer. I wanted her to suffer. I wanted her to hang for it."

His face was scarlet. His voice came thickly.

"Now, now," said Jenny Driver.

She spoke exactly as I have heard nursemaids speak to a small child in the park.

"And the gold box with the initial D, and Paris November inside?" said Japp.

"She ordered that by letter and sent Ellis, her maid, to fetch it. Naturally Ellis just called for a parcel which she paid for. She had no idea what was inside. Also, Lady Edgware borrowed a pair of Ellis's pince-nez to help in the Van Dusen impersonation. She forgot about them and left them in Carlotta Adams' handbag—her one mistake.

"Oh! it came to me—it all came to me as I stood in the middle of the road. It was not polite what the bus driver said to me, but it was worth it. Ellis! Ellis's pince-nez. Ellis calling for the box in Paris. Ellis and therefore Jane Wilkinson. Very possibly she borrowed something else from Ellis besides des pince-nez."

"What?"

"A corn knife…."

I shivered.

There was a momentary silence.

Then Japp said with a strange reliance in the answer.

"M. Poirot. Is this true?"

"It is true, mon ami."

Then Bryan Martin spoke, and his words were, I thought, very typical of him.

"But look here," he said peevishly. "What about me? Why bring me here today? Why nearly frighten me to death?"

Poirot looked at him coldly.

"To punish you, Monsieur, for being impertinent! How dare you try and make the games with Hercule Poirot?"

And then Jenny Driver laughed. She laughed and laughed.

"Serve you right, Bryan," she said at last.

She turned to Poirot.

"I'm glad as I can be that it wasn't Ronnie Marsh," she said. "I've always liked him. And I'm glad, glad, glad that Carlotta's death won't go unpunished! As for Bryan here, well I'll tell you something, M. Poirot. I'm going to marry him. And if he thinks he can get divorced and married every two or three years in the approved Hollywood fashion, well, he never made a bigger mistake in his life. He's going to marry and stick to me."

Poirot looked at her—looked at her determined chin—and at her flaming hair.

“It is very possible, Mademoiselle,” he said, “that that may be so. I said that you had sufficient nerve for anything. Even to marry a film ‘star.’”

Thirty-one

A HUMAN DOCUMENT

A day or two after that I was suddenly recalled to the Argentine. So it happened that I never saw Jane Wilkinson again and only read in the paper of her trial and condemnation. Unexpectedly, at least unexpectedly to me, she went completely to pieces when charged with the truth. So long as she was able to be proud of her cleverness and act her part she made no mistakes, but once her self-confidence failed her, owing to someone having found her out, she was as incapable as a child would be of keeping up a deception. Cross-examined, she went completely to pieces.

So, as I said before, that luncheon party was the last time I saw Jane Wilkinson. But when I think of her, I always see her the same way—standing in her room at the Savoy trying on expensive black clothes with a serious absorbed face. I am convinced that that was no pose. She was being completely natural. Her plan had succeeded and therefore she had no further qualms and doubts. Neither do I think that she ever suffered one pang of remorse for the three crimes she had committed.

I reproduce here a document which she had directed was to be sent to Poirot after her death. It is, I think, typical of that very lovely and completely conscienceless lady.

Dear M. Poirot, I have been thinking things over and I feel that I should like to write this for you. I know that you sometimes publish reports of your cases. I don’t really think that you’ve ever published a document by the person themselves. I feel, too, that I would like everyone to know just exactly how I did it all. I still think it was all very well-planned. If it hadn’t been for you everything would have been quite all right. I’ve felt rather bitter about that, but I suppose you couldn’t help it. I’m sure, if I send you this, you’ll give it plenty of prominence. You will, won’t you? I should like to be remembered. And I do think I am really a unique person. Everybody here seems to think so.

It began in America when I got to know Merton. I saw at once that if only I were a widow he would marry me. Unfortunately, he has got a queer sort of prejudice against divorce. I tried to overcome it but it was no good, and I had to be careful, because he was a very kinky sort of person.

I soon realized that my husband simply had got to die, but I didn't know how to set about it. You can imagine things like that ever so much better in the States. I thought and I thought—but I couldn't see how to arrange it. And then, suddenly, I saw Carlotta Adams do her imitation of me and at once I began to see a way. With her help I could get an alibi. That same evening I saw you, and it suddenly struck me that it would be a good idea to send you to my husband to ask him for a divorce. At the same time I would go about talking of killing my husband, because I've always noticed that if you speak the truth in a rather silly way nobody believes you. I've often done it over contracts. And it's also a good thing to seem stupider than you are. At my second meeting with Carlotta Adams I broached the idea. I said it was a bet, and she fell for it at once. She was to pretend to be me at some party and if she got away with it she was to have ten thousand dollars. She was very enthusiastic and several of the ideas were hers—about changing clothes and all that. You see, we couldn't do it here because of Ellis and we couldn't do it at her place because of her maid. She, of course, didn't see why we couldn't. It was a little awkward. I just said "No." She thought me a little stupid about it, but she gave in and we thought of the hotel plan. I took a pair of Ellis's pince-nez.

Of course I realized quite soon that she would have to be got out of the way too. It was a pity, but after all, those imitations of hers really were very impertinent. If mine hadn't happened to suit me I'd have been angry about it. I had some veronal myself, though I hardly ever take it, so that was quite easy. And then I had quite a brainwave. You see, it would be so much better if it could seem that she was in the habit of taking it. I ordered a box—the duplicate of one I'd been given and I had her initials put on it and an inscription inside. I thought if I put some odd initial and Paris, November, inside it, it would make it all much more difficult. I wrote for the box from the Ritz when I was in there lunching one day. And I sent Ellis over to fetch it. She didn't know what it was, of course.

Everything went off quite well on the night. I took one of Ellis's corn knives, while she was over in Paris, because it was nice and sharp. She never noticed because I put it back afterwards. It was a doctor in San Francisco who showed me just where to stick it in. He'd been talking about lumbar and cistern punctures, and he said one had to be very careful, otherwise one went through the cistertia magna and into the medulla oblongata where all the vital nerve centres are, and that that would cause immediate death. I made him show me the exact place several times. I thought it might perhaps come in useful one day. I told him I wanted to use the idea in a film.

It was very dishonourable of Carlotta Adams to write to her sister. She'd promised me to tell nobody. I do think it was clever of me to see what a good thing it would be to tear off that one page and leave he instead of she. I thought of that all by myself. I think I'm more proud of that than anything else. Everyone always says I haven't got brains—but I think it needed real brains to think of that.

I'd thought things over very carefully and I did exactly what I'd planned when the Scotland Yard man came. I rather enjoyed that part of it. I had thought, perhaps, that he'd really arrest me. I felt quite safe, because they'd have to believe all those people at the dinner and I didn't see how they could find out about me and Carlotta changing clothes.

After that I felt so happy and contented. My luck had held and I really felt everything was going to go right. The old Duchess was beastly to me, but Merton was sweet. He wanted to marry me as soon as possible and hadn't the least suspicion.

I don't think I've ever been so happy as I was those few weeks. My husband's nephew being arrested made me feel just as safe as anything. And I was more proud of myself than ever for having thought of tearing that page out of Carlotta Adams' letter.

The Donald Ross business was just sheer bad luck. I'm not quite sure now just how it was he spotted me. Something about Paris being a person and not a place. Even now I don't know who Paris was—and I think it's a silly name for a man anyway.

It’s curious how, when luck starts going against you, it keeps on going. I had to do something about Donald Ross quickly, and that did go all right. It mightn’t have, because I hadn’t time to be clever or think of making an alibi. I did think I was safe after that.

Of course Ellis told me you had sent for her and questioned her, but I gathered it was all something to do with Bryan Martin. I couldn’t think what you were driving at. You didn’t ask her whether she had called for the parcel in Paris. I suppose you thought if she repeated that to me I should smell a rat. As it was, it came as a complete surprise. I couldn’t believe it. It was just uncanny the way you seemed to know everything I’d done.

I just felt it was no good. You can’t fight against luck. It was bad luck, wasn’t it? I wonder if you are ever sorry for what you did. After all, I only wanted to be happy in my own way. And if it hadn’t been for me you would never have had anything to do with the case. I never thought you’d be so horribly clever. You didn’t look clever.

It’s funny, but I haven’t lost my looks a bit. In spite of all that dreadful trial and the horrid things that man on the other side said to me, and the way he battered me with questions.

I look much paler and thinner, but it suits me somehow. They all say I’m wonderfully brave. They don’t hang you in public anymore, do they? I think that’s a pity.

I’m sure there’s never been a murderess like me before.

I suppose I must say good-bye now. It’s very queer. I don’t seem to realize things a bit. I’m going to see the chaplain tomorrow.

Yours forgivingly (because I must forgive my enemies, mustn’t I?).

Jane Wilkinson.

P.S. Do you think they will put me in Madame Tussauds?

Murder On The Orient Express (1934)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

PART ONE

THE FACTS

One

AN IMPORTANT PASSENGER ON THE TAURUS EXPRESS

It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining car, a sleeping car and two local coaches.

By the step leading up into the sleeping car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small lean man, muffled up to the ears, of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and the two points of an upward curled moustache.

It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully. Graceful phrases fell from his lips in polished French. Not that he knew what it was all about. There had been rumours, of course, as there always were in such cases. The General—his General’s—temper had grown worse and worse. And then there had come this Belgian stranger—all the way from England, it seemed. There had been a week—a week of curious tensity. And then certain things had happened. A very distinguished officer had committed suicide, another had resigned—anxious faces had suddenly lost their anxiety, certain military precautions were relaxed. And the General—Lieutenant Dubosc’s own particular General—had suddenly looked ten years younger.

Dubosc had overheard part of a conversation between him and the stranger. “You have saved us, mon cher,” said the General emotionally, his great white moustache trembling as he spoke. “You have saved the honour of the French Army—you have averted much bloodshed! How can I thank you for acceding to my request? To have come so far—”

To which the stranger (by name M. Hercule Poirot) had made a fitting reply including the phrase, “But indeed do I not remember that once you saved my life?” And then the General had made another fitting reply to that disclaiming any merit for that past service, and with more mention of France, of Belgium, of glory, of honour and of such kindred things they had embraced each other heartily and the conversation had ended.

As to what it had all been about, Lieutenant Dubosc was still in the dark, but to him had been delegated the duty of seeing off M. Poirot by the Taurus Express, and he was carrying it out with all the zeal and ardour befitting a young officer with a promising career ahead of him.

“Today is Sunday,” said Lieutenant Dubosc. “Tomorrow, Monday evening, you will be in Stamboul.”

It was not the first time he had made this observation. Conversations on the platform, before the departure of a train, are apt to be somewhat repetitive in character.

“That is so,” agreed M. Poirot.

“And you intend to remain there a few days, I think?”

“Mais oui. Stamboul, it is a city I have never visited. It would be a pity to pass through—comme ça.” He snapped his fingers descriptively. “Nothing presses—I shall remain there as a tourist for a few days.”

“La Sainte Sophie, it is very fine,” said Lieutenant Dubosc, who had never seen it.

A cold wind came whistling down the platform. Both men shivered. Lieutenant Dubosc managed to cast a surreptitious glance at his watch. Five minutes to five—only five minutes more!

Fancying that the other man had noticed his surreptitious glance, he hastened once more into speech.

“There are few people travelling this time of year,” he said, glancing up at the windows of the sleeping car above them.

“That is so,” agreed M. Poirot.

“Let us hope you will not be snowed up in the Taurus!”

“That happens?”

“It has occurred, yes. Not this year, as yet.”

“Let us hope, then,” said M. Poirot. “The weather reports from Europe, they are bad.”

“Very bad. In the Balkans there is much snow.”

“In Germany too, I have heard.”

“Eh bien,” said Lieutenant Dubosc hastily as another pause seemed to be about to occur. “Tomorrow evening at seven-forty you will be in Constantinople.”

“Yes,” said M. Poirot, and went on desperately, “La Sainte Sophie, I have heard it is very fine.”

“Magnificent, I believe.”

Above their heads the blind of one of the sleeping car compartments was pushed aside and a young woman looked out.

Mary Debenham had had little sleep since she left Baghdad on the preceding Thursday. Neither in the train to Kirkuk, nor in the Rest House at Mosul, nor last night on the train had she slept properly. Now, weary of lying wakeful in the hot stuffiness of her overheated compartment, she got up and peered out.

This must be Aleppo. Nothing to see, of course. Just a long, poor-lighted platform with loud furious altercations in Arabic going on somewhere. Two men below her window were talking French. One was a French officer, the other was a little man with enormous moustaches. She smiled faintly. She had never seen anyone quite so heavily muffled up. It must be very cold outside. That was why they heated the train so terribly. She tried to force the window down lower, but it would not go.

The Wagon Lit conductor had come up to the two men. The train was about to depart, he said. Monsieur had better mount. The little man removed his hat. What an egg-shaped head he had. In spite of her preoccupations Mary Debenham smiled. A ridiculous-looking little man. The sort of little man one could never take seriously.

Lieutenant Dubosc was saying his parting speech. He had thought it out beforehand and had kept it till the last minute. It was a very beautiful, polished speech.

Not to be outdone, M. Poirot replied in kind.

“En voiture, Monsieur,” said the Wagon Lit conductor.

With an air of infinite reluctance M. Poirot climbed aboard the train. The conductor climbed after him. M. Poirot waved his hand. Lieutenant Dubosc came to the salute. The train, with a terrific jerk, moved slowly forward.

“Enfin!” murmured M. Hercule Poirot.

“Brrrrr,” said Lieutenant Dubosc, realizing to the full how cold he was….

II

“Voilà, Monsieur.” The conductor displayed to Poirot with a dramatic gesture the beauty of his sleeping compartment and the neat arrangement of his luggage. “The little valise of Monsieur, I have placed it here.”

His outstretched hand was suggestive. Hercule Poirot placed in it a folded note.

“Merci, Monsieur.” The conductor became brisk and businesslike. “I have the tickets of Monsieur. I will also take the passport, please. Monsieur breaks his journey in Stamboul, I understand?”

M. Poirot assented.

“There are not many people travelling, I imagine?” he said.

“No, Monsieur. I have only two other passengers—both English. A Colonel from India, and a young English lady from Baghdad. Monsieur requires anything?”

Monsieur demanded a small bottle of Perrier.

Five o’clock in the morning is an awkward time to board a train. There was still two hours before dawn. Conscious of an inadequate night’s sleep, and of a delicate mission successfully accomplished, M. Poirot curled up in a corner and fell asleep.

When he awoke it was half-past nine, and he sallied forth to the restaurant car in search of hot coffee.

There was only one occupant at the moment, obviously the young English lady referred to by the conductor. She was tall, slim and dark—perhaps twenty-eight years of age. There was a kind of cool efficiency in the way she was eating her breakfast and in the way she called to the attendant to bring her more coffee, which bespoke a knowledge of the world and of travelling. She wore a dark-coloured travelling dress of some thin material eminently suitable for the heated atmosphere of the train.

M. Hercule Poirot, having nothing better to do, amused himself by studying her without appearing to do so.

She was, he judged, the kind of young woman who could take care of herself with perfect ease wherever she went. She had poise and efficiency. He rather liked the severe regularity of her features and the delicate pallor of her skin. He liked the burnished black head with its neat waves of hair, and her eyes, cool, impersonal and grey. But she was, he decided, just a little too efficient to be what he called “jolie femme.”

Presently another person entered the restaurant car. This was a tall man of between forty and fifty, lean of figure, brown of skin, with hair slightly grizzled round the temples.

“The colonel from India,” said Poirot to himself.

The newcomer gave a little bow to the girl.

“Morning, Miss Debenham.”

“Good morning, Colonel Arbuthnot.”

The Colonel was standing with a hand on the chair opposite her.

“Any objection?” he asked.

“Of course not. Sit down.”

“Well, you know, breakfast isn’t always a chatty meal.”

“I should hope not. But I don’t bite.”

The Colonel sat down.

“Boy,” he called in peremptory fashion.

He gave an order for eggs and coffee.

His eyes rested for a moment on Hercule Poirot, but they passed on indifferently. Poirot, reading the English mind correctly, knew that he had said to himself, “Only some damned foreigner.”

True to their nationality, the two English people were not chatty. They exchanged a few brief remarks, and presently the girl rose and went back to her compartment.

At lunch time the other two again shared a table and again they both completely ignored the third passenger. Their conversation was more animated than at breakfast. Colonel Arbuthnot talked of the Punjab, and occasionally asked the girl a few questions about Baghdad where it became clear that she had been in a post as governess. In the course of conversation they discovered some mutual friends which had the immediate effect of making them more friendly and less stiff. They discussed old Tommy Somebody and Jerry Someone Else. The Colonel inquired whether she was going straight through to England or whether she was stopping in Stamboul.

“No, I’m going straight on.”

“Isn’t that rather a pity?”

“I came out this way two years ago and spent three days in Stamboul then.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I may say I’m very glad you are going right through, because I am.”

He made a kind of clumsy little bow, flushing a little as he did so.

“He is susceptible, our Colonel,” thought Hercule Poirot to himself with some amusement. “The train, it is as dangerous as a sea voyage!”

Miss Debenham said evenly that that would be very nice. Her manner was slightly repressive.

The Colonel, Hercule Poirot noticed, accompanied her back to her compartment. Later they passed through the magnificent scenery of the Taurus. As they looked down towards the Cilician Gates, standing in the corridor side by side, a sigh came suddenly from the girl. Poirot was standing near them and heard her murmur:

“It’s so beautiful! I wish—I wish—”

“Yes?”

“I wish, I could enjoy it!”

Arbuthnot did not answer. The square line of his jaw seemed a little sterner and grimmer.

“I wish to Heaven you were out of all this,” he said.

“Hush, please. Hush.”

“Oh! it’s all right.” He shot a slightly annoyed glance in Poirot’s direction. Then he went on: “But I don’t like the idea of your being a governess—at the beck and call of tyrannical mothers and their tiresome brats.”

She laughed with just a hint of uncontrol in the sound.

“Oh! you mustn’t think that. The downtrodden governess is quite an exploded myth. I can assure you that it’s the parents who are afraid of being bullied by me.”

They said no more. Arbuthnot was, perhaps, ashamed of his outburst.

“Rather an odd little comedy that I watch here,” said Poirot to himself thoughtfully.

He was to remember that thought of his later.

They arrived at Konya that night about half-past eleven. The two English travellers got out to stretch their legs, pacing up and down the snowy platform.

M. Poirot was content to watch the teeming activity of the station through a window pane. After about ten minutes, however, he decided that a breath of air would not perhaps be a bad thing, after all. He made careful preparations, wrapping himself in several coats and mufflers and encasing his neat boots in goloshes. Thus attired he descended gingerly to the platform and began to pace its length. He walked out beyond the engine.

It was the voices which gave him the clue to the two indistinct figures standing in the shadow of a traffic van. Arbuthnot was speaking.

“Mary—”

The girl interrupted him.

“Not now. Not now. When it’s all over. When it’s behind us—then—”

Discreetly M. Poirot turned away. He wondered.

He would hardly have recognized the cool, efficient voice of Miss Debenham….

“Curious,” he said to himself.

The next day he wondered whether, perhaps, they had quarrelled. They spoke little to each other. The girl, he thought, looked anxious. There were dark circles under her eyes.

It was about half-past two in the afternoon when the train came to a halt. Heads were poked out of windows. A little knot of men were clustered by the side of the line looking and pointing at something under the dining car.

Poirot leaned out and spoke to the Wagon Lit conductor who was hurrying past. The man answered and Poirot drew back his head and, turning, almost collided with Mary Debenham who was standing just behind him.

“What is the matter?” she asked rather breathlessly in French. “Why are we stopping?”

“It is nothing, Mademoiselle. It is something that has caught fire under the dining car. Nothing serious. It is put out. They are now repairing the damage. There is no danger, I assure you.”

She made a little abrupt gesture, as though she were waving the idea of danger aside as something completely unimportant.

“Yes, yes, I understand that. But the time!”

“The time?”

“Yes, this will delay us.”

“It is possible—yes,” agreed Poirot.

“But we can’t afford delay! The train is due in at 6:55 and one has to cross the Bosphorus and catch the Simplon Orient Express the other side at nine o’clock. If there is an hour or two of delay we shall miss the connection.”

“It is possible, yes,” he admitted.

He looked at her curiously. The hand that held the window bar was not quite steady, her lips too were trembling.

“Does it matter to you very much, Mademoiselle?” he asked.

“Yes. Yes, it does. I—I must catch that train.”

She turned away from him and went down the corridor to join Colonel Arbuthnot.

Her anxiety, however, was needless. Ten minutes later the train started again. It arrived at Haydapassar only five minutes late, having made up time on the journey.

The Bosphorus was rough and M. Poirot did not enjoy the crossing. He was separated from his travelling companions on the boat, and did not see them again.

On arrival at the Galata Bridge he drove straight to the Tokatlian Hotel.

Two

THE TOKATLIAN HOTEL

At the Tokatlian, Hercule Poirot asked for a room with bath. Then he stepped over to the concierge’s desk and inquired for letters.

There were three waiting for him and a telegram. His eyebrows rose a little at the sight of the telegram. It was unexpected.

He opened it in his usual neat, unhurried fashion. The printed words stood out clearly.

“Development you predicted in Kassner Case has come unexpectedly please return immediately.”

“Voilà ce qui est embêtant,” murmured Poirot vexedly. He glanced up at the clock.

“I shall have to go on tonight,” he said to the concierge. “At what time does the Simplon Orient leave?”

“At nine o’clock, Monsieur.”

“Can you get me a sleeper?”

“Assuredly, Monsieur. There is no difficulty this time of year. The trains are almost empty. First-class or second?”

“First.”

“Très bien, Monsieur. How far are you going?”

“To London.”

“Bien, Monsieur. I will get you a ticket to London and reserve your sleeping car accommodation in the Stamboul-Calais coach.”

Poirot glanced at the clock again. It was ten minutes to eight.

“I have time to dine?”

“But assuredly, Monsieur.”

The little Belgian nodded. He went over and cancelled his room order and crossed the hall to the restaurant.

As he was giving his order to the waiter a hand was placed on his shoulder.

“Ah! mon vieux, but this is an unexpected pleasure,” said a voice behind him.

The speaker was a short, stout elderly man, his hair cut en brosse. He was smiling delightedly.

Poirot sprang up.

“M. Bouc.”

“M. Poirot.”

M. Bouc was a Belgian, a director of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits, and his acquaintance with the former star of the Belgian Police Force dated back many years.

“You find yourself far from home, mon cher,” said M. Bouc.

“A little affair in Syria.”

“Ah! And you return home—when?”

“Tonight.”

“Splendid! I, too. That is to say, I go as far as Lausanne, where I have affairs. You travel on the Simplon-Orient, I presume?”

“Yes. I have just asked them to get me a sleeper. It was my intention to remain here some days, but I have received a telegram recalling me to England on important business.”

“Ah!” sighed M. Bouc. “Les affaires—les affaires! But you—you are at the top of the tree nowadays, mon vieux!”

“Some little success I have had, perhaps.” Hercule Poirot tried to look modest but failed signally.

Bouc laughed.

“We will meet later,” he said.

Hercule Poirot addressed himself to the task of keeping his moustaches out of the soup.

That difficult task accomplished, he glanced round him whilst waiting for the next course. There were only about half a dozen people in the restaurant, and of those half-dozen there were only two that interested Hercule Poirot.

These two sat at a table not far away. The younger was a likeable-looking man of thirty, clearly an American. It was, however, not he but his companion who had attracted the little detective’s attention.

He was a man of between sixty and seventy. From a little distance he had the bland aspect of a philanthropist. His slightly bald head, his domed forehead, the smiling mouth that displayed a very white set of false teeth, all seemed to speak of a benevolent personality. Only the eyes belied this assumption. They were small, deep set and crafty. Not only that. As the man, making some remark to his young companion, glanced across the room, his gaze stopped on Poirot for a moment, and just for that second there was a strange malevolence, and unnatural tensity in the glance.

Then he rose.

“Pay the bill, Hector,” he said.

His voice was slightly husky in tone. It had a queer, soft, dangerous quality.

When Poirot rejoined his friend in the lounge, the other two men were just leaving the hotel. Their luggage was being brought down. The younger was supervising the process. Presently he opened the glass door and said:

“Quite ready now, Mr. Ratchett.”

The elder man grunted an assent and passed out.

“Eh bien,” said Poirot. “What do you think of those two?”

“They are Americans,” said M. Bouc.

“Assuredly they are Americans. I meant what did you think of their personalities?”

“The young man seemed quite agreeable.”

“And the other?”

“To tell you the truth, my friend, I did not care for him. He produced on me an unpleasant impression. And you?”

Hercule Poirot was a moment before replying.

“When he passed me in the restaurant,” he said at last, “I had a curious impression. It was as though a wild animal—an animal savage, but savage! you understand—had passed me by.”

“And yet he looked altogether of the most respectable.”

“Précisément! The body—the cage—is everything of the most respectable—but through the bars, the wild animal looks out.”

“You are fanciful, mon vieux,” said M. Bouc.

“It may be so. But I could not rid myself of the impression that evil had passed me by very close.”

“That respectable American gentleman?”

“That respectable American gentleman.”

“Well,” said M. Bouc cheerfully. “It may be so. There is much evil in the world.”

At that moment the door opened and the concierge came towards them. He looked concerned and apologetic.

“It is extraordinary, Monsieur,” he said to Poirot. “There is not one first-class sleeping berth to be had on the train.”

“Comment?” cried M. Bouc. “At this time of year? Ah, without doubt there is some party of journalists—of politicians—?”

“I don’t know, sir,” said the concierge, turning to him respectfully. “But that’s how it is.”

“Well, well,” M. Bouc turned to Poirot. “Have no fear, my friend. We will arrange something. There is always one compartment—the No. 16, which is not engaged. The conductor sees to that!” He smiled, then glanced up at the clock. “Come,” he said, “it is time we started.”

At the station M. Bouc was greeted with respectful empressement by the brown-uniformed Wagon Lit conductor.

“Good evening, Monsieur. Your compartment is the No. 1.”

He called to the porters and they wheeled their load half-way along the carriage on which the tin plates proclaimed its destination:

ISTANBUL TRIESTE CALAIS

“You are full up tonight, I hear?”

“It is incredible, Monsieur. All the world elects to travel tonight!”

"All the same, you must find room for this gentleman here. He is a friend of mine. He can have the No. 16."

"It is taken, Monsieur."

"What? The No. 16?"

A glance of understanding passed between them, and the conductor smiled. He was a tall, sallow man of middle age.

"But yes, Monsieur. As I told you, we are full—full—everywhere."

"But what passes itself?" demanded M. Bouc angrily. "There is a conference somewhere? It is a party?"

"No, Monsieur. It is only chance. It just happens that many people have elected to travel tonight."

M. Bouc made a clicking sound of annoyance.

"At Belgrade," he said, "there will be the slip coach from Athens. There will also be the Bucharest-Paris coach—but we do not reach Belgrade until tomorrow evening. The problem is for tonight. There is no second-class berth free?"

"There is a second-class berth, Monsieur—"

"Well, then—"

"But it is a lady's berth. There is already a German woman in the compartment—a lady's maid."

"Là, là, that is awkward," said M. Bouc.

"Do not distress yourself, my friend," said Poirot. "I must travel in an ordinary carriage."

"Not at all. Not at all." He turned once more to the conductor. "Everyone has arrived?"

“It is true,” said the man, “that there is one passenger who has not yet arrived.”

He spoke slowly with hesitation.

“But speak then?”

“No. 7 berth—a second-class. The gentleman has not yet come, and it is four minutes to nine.”

“Who is it?”

“An Englishman,” the conductor consulted his list. “A M. Harris.”

“A name of good omen,” said Poirot. “I read my Dickens. M. Harris, he will not arrive.”

“Put Monsieur’s luggage in No. 7,” said M. Bouc. “If this M. Harris arrives we will tell him that he is too late—that berths cannot be retained so long—we will arrange the matter one way or another. What do I care for a M. Harris?”

“As Monsieur pleases,” said the conductor.

He spoke to Poirot’s porter, directing him where to go.

Then he stood aside the steps to let Poirot enter the train. “Tout à fait au bout, Monsieur,” he called. “The end compartment but one.”

Poirot passed along the corridor, a somewhat slow progress, as most of the people travelling were standing outside their carriages.

His polite “Pardons” were uttered with the regularity of clockwork. At last he reached the compartment indicated. Inside it, reaching up to a suitcase, was the tall young American of the Tokatlian.

He frowned as Poirot entered.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I think you’ve made a mistake.” Then, laboriously in French, “Je crois que vous avez un erreur.”

Poirot replied in English.

“You are Mr. Harris?”

“No, my name is MacQueen. I—”

But at that moment the voice of the Wagon Lit conductor spoke from over Poirot’s shoulder. An apologetic, rather breathless voice.

“There is no other berth on the train, Monsieur. The gentleman has to come in here.”

He was hauling up the corridor window as he spoke and began to lift in Poirot’s luggage.

Poirot noticed the apology in his tone with some amusement. Doubtless the man had been promised a good tip if he could keep the compartment for the sole use of the other traveller. However, even the most munificent of tips lose their effect when a director of the company is on board and issues his orders.

The conductor emerged from the compartment, having swung the suitcases up on to the racks.

“Voilà Monsieur,” he said. “All is arranged. Yours is the upper berth, the number 7. We start in one minute.”

He hurried off down the corridor. Poirot reentered the compartment.

“A phenomenon I have seldom seen,” he said cheerfully. “A Wagon Lit conductor himself puts up the luggage! It is unheard of!”

His fellow traveller smiled. He had evidently got over his annoyance—had probably decided that it was no good to take the matter other than philosophically.

“The train’s remarkably full,” he said.

A whistle blew, there was a long, melancholy cry from the engine. Both men stepped out into the corridor.

Outside a voice shouted.

“En voiture.”

“We’re off,” said MacQueen.

But they were not quite off. The whistle blew again.

“I say, sir,” said the young man suddenly, “if you’d rather have the lower berth—easier, and all that—well, that’s all right by me.”

“No, no,” protested Poirot. “I would not deprive you—”

“That’s all right—”

“You are too amiable—”

Polite protests on both sides.

“It is for one night only,” explained Poirot. “At Belgrade—”

“Oh, I see. You’re getting out at Belgrade—”

“Not exactly. You see—”

There was a sudden jerk. Both men swung round to the window, looking out at the long, lighted platform as it slid slowly past them.

The Orient Express had started on its three-days’ journey across Europe.

Three

POIROT REFUSES A CASE

M. Hercule Poirot was a little late in entering the luncheon-car on the following day. He had risen early, breakfasted almost alone, and had spent the morning going over the notes of the case that was recalling him to London. He had seen little of his travelling companion.

M. Bouc, who was already seated, gesticulated a greeting and summoned his friend to the empty place opposite him. Poirot sat down and soon found himself in the favoured position of the table which was served first and with the choicest morsels. The food, too, was unusually good.

It was not till they were eating a delicate cream cheese that M. Bouc allowed his attention to wander to matters other than nourishment. He was at the stage of a meal when one becomes philosophic.

“Ah!” he sighed. “If I had but the pen of a Balzac! I would depict this scene.”

He waved his hand.

“It is an idea, that,” said Poirot.

“Ah, you agree? It has not been done, I think? And yet—it lends itself to romance, my friend. All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never, perhaps, to see each other again.”

“And yet,” said Poirot, “suppose an accident—”

“Ah no, my friend—”

"From your point of view it would be regrettable, I agree. But nevertheless let us just for one moment suppose it. Then, perhaps, all these here are linked together—by death."

"Some more wine," said M. Bouc, hastily pouring it out. "You are morbid, mon cher. It is, perhaps, the digestion."

"It is true," agreed Poirot, "that the food in Syria was not, perhaps, quite suited to my stomach."

He sipped his wine. Then, leaning back, he ran his eye thoughtfully round the dining car. There were thirteen people seated there and, as M. Bouc had said, of all classes and nationalities. He began to study them.

At the table opposite them were three men. They were, he guessed, single travellers graded and placed there by the unerring judgment of the restaurant attendants. A big, swarthy Italian was picking his teeth with gusto. Opposite him a spare, neat Englishman had the expressionless disapproving face of the well-trained servant. Next to the Englishman was a big American in a loud suit—possibly a commercial traveller.

"You've got to put it over big," he was saying in a loud nasal voice.

The Italian removed his toothpick to gesticulate with it freely.

"Sure," he said. "That whatta I say alla de time."

The Englishman looked out of the window and coughed.

Poirot's eye passed on.

At a small table, sitting very upright, was one of the ugliest old ladies he had ever seen. It was an ugliness of distinction—it fascinated rather than repelled. She sat very upright. Round her neck was a collar of very large pearls which, improbable though it seemed, were real. Her hands were covered with rings. Her sable coat was pushed back on her shoulders. A very small expensive black toque was hideously unbecoming to the yellow, toad-like face beneath it.

She was speaking now to the restaurant attendant in a clear, courteous but completely autocratic tone.

“You will be sufficiently amiable to place in my compartment a bottle of mineral water and a large glass of orange juice. You will arrange that I shall have chicken cooked without sauces for dinner this evening—also some boiled fish.”

The attendant replied respectfully that it should be done.

She gave a slight gracious nod of the head and rose. Her glance caught Poirot’s and swept over him with the nonchalance of the uninterested aristocrat.

“That is Princess Dragomiroff,” said M. Bouc in a low tone. “She is a Russian. Her husband realized all this money before the Revolution and invested it abroad. She is extremely rich. A cosmopolitan.”

Poirot nodded. He had heard of Princess Dragomiroff.

“She is a personality,” said M. Bouc. “Ugly as sin, but she makes herself felt. You agree?”

Poirot agreed.

At another of the large tables Mary Debenham was sitting with two other women. One of them was a tall middle-aged woman in a plaid blouse and tweed skirt. She had a mass of faded yellow hair unbecomingly arranged in a large bun, wore glasses, and had a long, mild, amiable face rather like a sheep. She was listening to the third woman, a stout, pleasant-faced, elderly woman who was talking in a slow clear monotone which showed no signs of pausing for breath or coming to a stop.

“…And so my daughter said, ‘Why,’ she said ‘you just can’t apply Amurrican methods in this country. It’s just natural to the folks here to be indolent,’ she said. ‘They just haven’t got any hustle in them.’ But all the same you’d be surprised to know what our college there is doing. They’ve gotten a fine staff of teachers. I guess there’s nothing like education. We’ve got to apply our Western ideals and teach the East to recognize them. My daughter says—"

The train plunged into a tunnel. The calm monotonous voice was drowned.

At the next table, a small one, sat Colonel Arbuthnot—alone. His gaze was fixed upon the back of Mary Debenham's head. They were not sitting together. Yet it could easily have been managed. Why?

Perhaps, Poirot thought, Mary Debenham had demurred. A governess learns to be careful. Appearances are important. A girl with her living to get has to be discreet.

His glance shifted to the other side of the carriage. At the far end, against the wall, was a middle-aged woman dressed in black with a broad expressionless face. German or Scandinavian, he thought. Probably a German lady's maid.

After her came a couple leaning forward and talking animatedly together. The man wore English clothes of loose tweed—but he was not English. Though only the back of his head was visible to Poirot, the shape of it and the set of the shoulders betrayed him. A big man, well made. He turned his head suddenly and Poirot saw his profile. A very handsome man of thirty odd with a big fair moustache.

The woman opposite him was a mere girl—twenty at a guess. A tight-fitting little black coat and skirt, white satin blouse, small chic black toque perched at the fashionable outrageous angle. She had a beautiful foreign-looking face, dead white skin, large brown eyes, jet-black hair. She was smoking a cigarette in a long holder. Her manicured hands had deep red nails. She wore one large emerald set in platinum. There was coquetry in her glance and voice.

"Elle est jolie—et chic," murmured Poirot. "Husband and wife—eh?"

M. Bouc nodded.

"Hungarian Embassy, I believe," he said. "A handsome couple."

There were only two more lunchers—Poirot's fellow traveller MacQueen and his employer Mr. Ratchett. The latter sat facing Poirot, and for the second time Poirot studied that unprepossessing face, noting the false benevolence of the brow and the small, cruel eyes.

Doubtless M. Bouc saw a change in his friend's expression.

"It is at your wild animal you look?" he asked.

Poirot nodded.

As his coffee was brought to him, M. Bouc rose to his feet. Having started before Poirot, he had finished some time ago.

"I return to my compartment," he said. "Come along presently and converse with me."

"With pleasure."

Poirot sipped his coffee and ordered a liqueur. The attendant was passing from table to table with his box of money, accepting payment for bills. The elderly American lady's voice rose shrill and plaintive.

"My daughter said, 'Take a book of food tickets and you'll have no trouble—no trouble at all.' Now, that isn't so. Seems they have to have a ten per cent tip, and then there's that bottle of mineral water—and a queer sort of water too. They hadn't got any Evian or Vichy, which seems queer to me."

"It is—they must—how you say—serve the water of the country," explained the sheep-faced lady.

"Well, it seems queer to me." She looked distastefully at the heap of small change on the table in front of her. "Look at all this peculiar stuff he's given me. Dinars or something. Just a lot of rubbish, it looks. My daughter said—"

Mary Debenham pushed back her chair and left with a slight bow to the other two. Colonel Arbuthnot got up and followed her. Gathering up her despised money, the American lady followed suit, followed by the lady like a sheep. The Hungarians had already departed. The restaurant car was empty save for Poirot and Ratchett and MacQueen.

Ratchett spoke to his companion, who got up and left the car. Then he rose himself, but instead of following MacQueen he dropped unexpectedly into the seat opposite Poirot.

“Can you oblige me with a light?” he said. His voice was soft—faintly nasal. “My name is Ratchett.”

Poirot bowed slightly. He slipped his hand into his pocket and produced a matchbox which he handed to the other man, who took it but did not strike a light.

“I think,” he went on, “that I have the pleasure of speaking to M. Hercule Poirot. Is that so?”

Poirot bowed again.

“You have been correctly informed, Monsieur.”

The detective was conscious of those strange shrewd eyes summing him up before the other spoke again.

“In my country,” he said, “we come to the point quickly. Mr. Poirot, I want you to take on a job for me.”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows went up a trifle.

“My clientèle, Monsieur, is limited nowadays. I undertake very few cases.”

“Why, naturally, I understand that. But this, Mr. Poirot, means big money.” He repeated again in his soft, persuasive voice, “Big money.”

Hercule Poirot was silent a minute or two, then he said:

“What is it you wish me to do for you, M.—er—Ratchett?”

“Mr. Poirot, I am a rich man—a very rich man. Men in that position have enemies. I have an enemy.”

“Only one enemy?”

“Just what do you mean by that question?” asked Ratchett sharply.

“Monsieur, in my experience when a man is in a position to have, as you say, enemies, then it does not usually resolve itself into one enemy only.”

Ratchett seemed relieved by Poirot’s answer. He said quickly:

“Why, yes, I appreciate that point. Enemy or enemies—it doesn’t matter. What does matter is my safety.”

“Safety?”

“My life has been threatened, Mr. Poirot. Now, I’m a man who can take pretty good care of himself.” From the pocket of his coat his hand brought a small automatic into sight for a moment. He continued grimly. “I don’t think I’m the kind of man to be caught napping. But as I look at it I might as well make assurance doubly sure. I fancy you’re the man for my money, Mr. Poirot. And remember—big money.”

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for some minutes. His face was completely expressionless. The other could have had no clue as to what thoughts were passing in that mind.

“I regret, Monsieur,” he said at length. “I cannot oblige you.”

The other looked at him shrewdly.

“Name your figure, then,” he said.

Poirot shook his head.

“You do not understand, Monsieur. I have been very fortunate in my profession. I have made enough money to satisfy both my needs and my caprices. I take now only such cases as—interest me.”

“You’ve got a pretty good nerve,” said Ratchett. “Will twenty thousand dollars tempt you?”

“It will not.”

“If you’re holding out for more, you won’t get it. I know what a thing’s worth to me.”

“I also—M. Ratchett.”

“What’s wrong with my proposition?”

Poirot rose.

“If you will forgive me for being personal—I do not like your face, M. Ratchett,” he said.

And with that he left the restaurant car.

Four

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

The Simplon Orient Express arrived at Belgrade at a quarter to nine that evening. It was not due to depart again until 9:15, so Poirot descended to the platform. He did not, however, remain there long. The cold was bitter and though the platform itself was protected, heavy snow was falling outside. He returned to his compartment. The conductor, who was on the platform stamping his feet and waving his arms to keep warm, spoke to him.

“Your valises have been moved, Monsieur, to the compartment No. 1, the compartment of M. Bouc.”

“But where is M. Bouc, then?”

“He has moved into the coach from Athens which has just been put on.”

Poirot went in search of his friend. M. Bouc waved his protestations aside.

“It is nothing. It is nothing. It is more convenient like this. You are going through to England, so it is better that you should stay in the through coach to Calais. Me, I am very well here. It is most peaceful. This coach is empty save for myself and one little Greek doctor. Ah! my friend, what a night! They say there has not been so much snow for years. Let us hope we shall not be held up. I am not too happy about it, I can tell you.”

At 9:15 punctually the train pulled out of the station, and shortly afterwards Poirot got up, said good night to his friend and made his way along the corridor back into his own coach which was in front next to the dining car.

On this, the second day of the journey, barriers were breaking down. Colonel Arbuthnot was standing at the door of his compartment talking to MacQueen.

MacQueen broke off something he was saying when he saw Poirot. He looked very surprised.

“Why,” he cried, “I thought you’d left us. You said you were getting off at Belgrade.”

“You misunderstood me,” said Poirot, smiling. “I remember now, the train started from Stamboul just as we were talking about it.”

“But, man, your baggage—it’s gone.”

“It has been moved into another compartment—that is all.”

“Oh, I see.”

He resumed his conversation with Arbuthnot and Poirot passed on down the corridor.

Two doors from his own compartment, the elderly American lady, Mrs. Hubbard, was standing talking to the sheep-like lady who was a Swede. Mrs. Hubbard was pressing a magazine on the other.

“No, do take it, my dear,” she said. “I’ve got plenty other things to read. My, isn’t the cold something frightful?” She nodded amicably to Poirot.

“You are most kind,” said the Swedish lady.

“Not at all. I hope you’ll sleep well and that your head will be better in the morning.”

“It is the cold only. I make now myself a cup of tea.”

“Have you got some aspirin? Are you sure, now? I’ve got plenty. Well, good night, my dear.”

She turned to Poirot conversationally as the other woman departed.

“Poor creature, she’s a Swede. As far as I can make out, she’s a kind of missionary—a teaching one. A nice creature, but doesn’t talk much English.

She was most interested in what I told her about my daughter.”

Poirot, by now, knew all about Mrs. Hubbard’s daughter. Everyone on the train who could understand English did! How she and her husband were on the staff of a big American college in Smyrna and how this was Mrs. Hubbard’s first journey to the East, and what she thought of the Turks and their slipshod ways and the condition of their roads.

The door next to them opened and the thin, pale manservant stepped out. Inside Poirot caught a glimpse of Mr. Ratchett sitting up in bed. He saw Poirot and his face changed, darkening with anger. Then the door was shut.

Mrs. Hubbard drew Poirot a little aside.

“You know, I’m dead scared of that man. Oh, not the valet—the other—his master. Master, indeed! There’s something wrong about that man. My daughter always says I’m very intuitive. ‘When Momma gets a hunch, she’s dead right,’ that’s what my daughter says. And I’ve got a hunch about that man. He’s next door to me, and I don’t like it. I put my grips against the communicating door last night. I thought I heard him trying the handle. Do you know, I shouldn’t be surprised if that man turns out to be a murderer—one of these train robbers you read about. I dare say I’m foolish, but there it is. I’m downright scared of the man! My daughter said I’d have an easy journey, but somehow I don’t feel happy about it. It may be foolish, but I feel anything might happen. Anything at all. And how that nice young fellow can bear to be his secretary I can’t think.”

Colonel Arbuthnot and MacQueen were coming towards them down the corridor.

“Come into my carriage,” MacQueen was saying. “It isn’t made up for the night yet. Now what I want to get right about your policy in India is this—”

The men passed and went on down the corridor to MacQueen’s carriage.

Mrs. Hubbard said good night to Poirot.

“I guess I’ll go right to bed and read,” she said. “Good night.”

“Good night, Madame.”

Poirot passed into his own compartment, which was the next one beyond Ratchett’s. He undressed and got into bed, read for about half an hour and then turned out the light.

He awoke some hours later, and awoke with a start. He knew what it was that had wakened him—a loud groan, almost a cry, somewhere close at hand. At the same moment the ting of a bell sounded sharply.

Poirot sat up and switched on the light. He noticed that the train was at a standstill—presumably at a station.

That cry had startled him. He remembered that it was Ratchett who had the next compartment. He got out of bed and opened the door just as the Wagon Lit conductor came hurrying along the corridor and knocked on Ratchett’s door. Poirot kept his door open a crack and watched. The conductor tapped a second time. A bell rang and a light showed over another door farther down. The conductor glanced over his shoulder.

At the same moment a voice from within the next-door compartment called out:

“Ce n’est rien. Je me suis trompé.”

“Bien, Monsieur.” The conductor scurried off again, to knock at the door where the light was showing.

Poirot returned to bed, his mind relieved, and switched off the light. He glanced at his watch. It was just twenty-three minutes to one.

Five

THE CRIME

He found it difficult to go to sleep again at once. For one thing, he missed the motion of the train. If it was a station outside it was curiously quiet. By contrast, the noises on the train seemed unusually loud. He could hear Ratchett moving about next door—a click as he pulled down the washbasin, the sound of the tap running, a splashing noise, then another click as the basin shut to again. Footsteps passed up the corridor outside, the shuffling footsteps of someone in bedroom slippers.

Hercule Poirot lay awake staring at the ceiling. Why was the station outside so silent? His throat felt dry. He had forgotten to ask for his usual bottle of mineral water. He looked at his watch again. Just after a quarter past one. He would ring for the conductor and ask him for some mineral water. His finger went out to the bell, but he paused as in the stillness he heard a ting. The man couldn't answer every bell at once.

Ting…ting…ting…

It sounded again and again. Where was the man? Somebody was getting impatient.

Ting…

Whoever it was was keeping their finger solidly on the push.

Suddenly with a rush, his footsteps echoing up the aisle, the man came. He knocked at a door not far from Poirot's own.

Then came voices—the conductor's, deferential, apologetic, and a woman's—insistent and voluble.

Mrs. Hubbard.

Poirot smiled to himself.

The altercation—if it was one—went on for some time. It’s proportions were ninety per cent of Mrs. Hubbard’s to a soothing ten per cent of the conductor’s. Finally the matter seemed to be adjusted. Poirot heard distinctly:

“Bonne nuit, Madame,” and a closing door.

He pressed his own finger on the bell.

The conductor arrived promptly. He looked hot and worried.

“De l’eau minerale, s’il vous plait.”

“Bien, Monsieur.” Perhaps a twinkle in Poirot’s eye led him to unburden himself.

“La Dame Americaine—”

“Yes?”

He wiped his forehead.

“Imagine to yourself the time I have had with her! She insists—but insists—that there is a man in her compartment! Figure to yourself, Monsieur. In a space of this size.” He swept a hand round. “Where would he conceal himself? I argue with her. I point out that it is impossible. She insists. She woke up and there was a man there. And how, I ask, did he get out and leave the door bolted behind him? But she will not listen to reason. As though, there were not enough to worry us already. This snow—”

“Snow?”

“But yes, Monsieur. Monsieur has not noticed? The train has stopped. We have run into a snowdrift. Heaven knows how long we shall be here. I remember once being snowed up for seven days.”

“Where are we?”

“Between Vincovi and Brod.”

“Là là,” said Poirot vexedly.

The man withdrew and returned with the water.

“Bon soir, Monsieur.”

Poirot drank a glass of water and composed himself to sleep.

He was just dropping off when something again woke him. This time it was as though something heavy had fallen with a thud against the door.

He sprang up, opened it and looked out. Nothing. But to his right some way down the corridor a woman wrapped in a scarlet kimono was retreating from him. At the other end, sitting on his little seat, the conductor was entering up figures on large sheets of paper. Everything was deathly quiet.

“Decidedly I suffer from the nerves,” said Poirot and retired to bed again. This time he slept till morning.

When he awoke the train was still at a standstill. He raised a blind and looked out. Heavy banks of snow surrounded the train.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was past nine o’clock.

At a quarter to ten, neat, spruce, and dandified as ever, he made his way to the restaurant car, where a chorus of woe was going on.

Any barriers there might have been between the passengers had now quite broken down. All were united by a common misfortune. Mrs. Hubbard was loudest in her lamentations.

“My daughter said it would be the easiest way in the world. Just sit in the train until I got to Parrus. And now we may be here for days and days,” she wailed. “And my boat sails the day after tomorrow. How am I going to catch it now? Why, I can’t even wire to cancel my passage. I feel too mad to talk about it.”

The Italian said that he had urgent business himself in Milan. The large American said that that was “too bad, Ma’am,” and soothingly expressed a hope that the train might make up time.

“My sister—her children wait me,” said the Swedish lady and wept. “I get no word to them. What they think? They will say bad things have happen to me.”

“How long shall we be here?” demanded Mary Debenham. “Doesn’t anybody know?”

Her voice sounded impatient, but Poirot noted that there were no signs of that almost feverish anxiety which she had displayed during the check to the Taurus Express.

Mrs. Hubbard was off again.

“There isn’t anybody knows a thing on this train. And nobody’s trying to do anything. Just a pack of useless foreigners. Why, if this were at home, there’d be someone at least trying to do something.”

Arbuthnot turned to Poirot and spoke in careful British French.

“Vous êtes un directeur de la ligne, je crois, Monsieur. Vous pouvez nous dire—”

Smiling Poirot corrected him.

“No, no,” he said in English. “It is not I. You confound me with my friend M. Bouc.”

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

“Not at all. It is most natural. I am now in the compartment that he had formerly.”

M. Bouc was not present in the restaurant car. Poirot looked about to notice who else was absent.

Princess Dragomiroff was missing and the Hungarian couple. Also Ratchett, his valet, and the German lady's maid.

The Swedish lady wiped her eyes.

"I am foolish," she said. "I am baby to cry. All for the best, whatever happen."

This Christian spirit, however, was far from being shared.

"That's all very well," said MacQueen restlessly. "We may be here for days."

"What is this country anyway?" demanded Mrs. Hubbard tearfully.

On being told it was Yugo-Slavia she said:

"Oh! one of these Balkan things. What can you expect?"

"You are the only patient one, Mademoiselle," said Poirot to Miss Debenham.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"What can one do?"

"You are a philosopher, Mademoiselle."

"That implies a detached attitude. I think my attitude is more selfish. I have learned to save myself useless emotion."

She was not even looking at him. Her gaze went past him, out of the window to where the snow lay in heavy masses.

"You are a strong character, Mademoiselle," said Poirot gently. "You are, I think, the strongest character amongst us."

"Oh, no. No, indeed. I know one far far stronger than I am."

“And that is—?”

She seemed suddenly to come to herself, to realize that she was talking to a stranger and a foreigner with whom, until this morning, she had only exchanged half a dozen sentences.

She laughed a polite but estranging laugh.

“Well—that old lady, for instance. You have probably noticed her. A very ugly old lady, but rather fascinating. She has only to lift a little finger and ask for something in a polite voice—and the whole train runs.”

“It runs also for my friend M. Bouc,” said Poirot. “But that is because he is a director of the line, not because he has a masterful character.”

Mary Debenham smiled.

The morning wore away. Several people, Poirot amongst them, remained in the dining car. The communal life was felt, at the moment, to pass the time better. He heard a good deal more about Mrs. Hubbard’s daughter and he heard the lifelong habits of Mr. Hubbard, deceased, from his rising in the morning and commencing breakfast with a cereal to his final rest at night in the bedsocks that Mrs. Hubbard herself had been in the habit of knitting for him.

It was when he was listening to a confused account of the missionary aims of the Swedish lady that one of the Wagon Lit conductors came into the car and stood at his elbow.

“Pardon, Monsieur.”

“Yes?”

“The compliments of M. Bouc, and he would be glad if you would be so kind as to come to him for a few minutes.”

Poirot rose, uttered excuses to the Swedish lady and followed the man out of the dining car.

It was not his own conductor, but a big fair man.

He followed his guide down the corridor of his own carriage and along the corridor of the next one. The man tapped at a door, then stood aside to let Poirot enter.

The compartment was not M. Bouc's own. It was a second-class one—chosen presumably because of its slightly larger size. It certainly gave the impression of being crowded.

M. Bouc himself was sitting on the small seat in the opposite corner. In the corner next the window facing him was a small, dark man looking out at the snow. Standing up and quite preventing Poirot from advancing any farther was a big man in blue uniform (the chef de train) and his own Wagon Lit conductor.

"Ah, my good friend," cried M. Bouc. "Come in. We have need of you."

The little man in the window shifted along the seat, Poirot squeezed past the other two men and sat down facing his friend.

The expression on M. Bouc's face gave him, as he would have expressed it, furiously to think. It was clear that something out of the common had happened.

"What has occurred?" he asked.

"You may well ask that. First this snow—this stoppage. And now—"

He paused—and a sort of strangled gasp came from the Wagon Lit conductor.

"And now what?"

"And now a passenger lies dead in his berth—stabbed."

M. Bouc spoke with a kind of calm desperation.

"A passenger? Which passenger?"

“An American. A man called—called—” he consulted some notes in front of him. “Ratchett—that is right—Ratchett?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” the Wagon Lit man gulped.

Poirot looked at him. He was as white as chalk.

“You had better let that man sit down,” he said. “He may faint otherwise.”

The chef de train moved slightly and the Wagon Lit man sank down in the corner and buried his face in his hands.

“Brr!” said Poirot. “This is serious!”

“Certainly it is serious. To begin with, a murder—that by itself is a calamity of the first water. But not only that, the circumstances are unusual. Here we are, brought to a standstill. We may be here for hours—and not only hours—days! Another circumstance. Passing through most countries we have the police of that country on the train. But in Yugoslavia—no. You comprehend?”

“It is a position of great difficulty,” said Poirot.

“There is worse to come. Dr. Constantine—I forgot, I have not introduced you—Dr. Constantine, M. Poirot.”

The little dark man bowed and Poirot returned it.

“Dr. Constantine is of the opinion that death occurred at about 1 a.m.”

“It is difficult to say exactly in these matters,” said the doctor, “but I think I can say definitely that death occurred between midnight and two in the morning.”

“When was this M. Ratchett last seen alive?” asked Poirot.

“He is known to have been alive at about twenty minutes to one, when he spoke to the conductor,” said M. Bouc.

“That is quite correct,” said Poirot. “I myself heard what passed. That is the last thing known?”

“Yes.”

Poirot turned toward the doctor, who continued:

“The window of M. Ratchett’s compartment was found wide open, leading one to suppose that the murderer escaped that way. But in my opinion that open window is a blind. Anyone departing that way would have left distinct traces in the snow. There were none.”

“The crime was discovered—when?” asked Poirot.

“Michel!”

The Wagon Lit conductor sat up. His face still looked pale and frightened.

“Tell this gentleman exactly what occurred,” ordered M. Bouc.

The man spoke somewhat jerkily.

“The valet of this M. Ratchett, he tapped several times at the door this morning. There was no answer. Then, half an hour ago, the restaurant car attendant came. He wanted to know if Monsieur was taking déjeuner. It was eleven o’clock, you comprehend.

“I open the door for him with my key. But there is a chain, too, and that is fastened. There is no answer and it is very still in there, and cold—but cold. With the window open and snow drifting in. I thought the gentleman had had a fit, perhaps. I got the chef de train. We broke the chain and went in. He was—Ah! c’était terrible!”

He buried his face in his hands again.

“The door was locked and chained on the inside,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “It was not suicide—eh?”

The Greek doctor gave a sardonic laugh.

“Does a man who commits suicide stab himself in ten—twelve—fifteen places?” he asked.

Poirot’s eyes opened.

“That is great ferocity,” he said.

“It is a woman,” said the chef de train, speaking for the first time. “Depend upon it, it was a woman. Only a woman would stab like that.”

Dr. Constantine screwed up his face thoughtfully.

“She must have been a very strong woman,” he said. “It is not my desire to speak technically—that is only confusing—but I can assure you that one or two of the blows were delivered with such force as to drive them through hard belts of bone and muscle.”

“It was not, clearly, a scientific crime,” said Poirot.

“It was most unscientific,” said Dr. Constantine. “The blows seem to have been delivered haphazard and at random. Some have glanced off, doing hardly any damage. It is as though somebody had shut their eyes and then in a frenzy struck blindly again and again.”

“C’est une femme,” said the chef de train again. “Women are like that. When they are enraged they have great strength.” He nodded so sagely that everyone suspected a personal experience of his own.

“I have, perhaps, something to contribute to your store of knowledge,” said Poirot. “M. Ratchett spoke to me yesterday. He told me, as far as I was able to understand him, that he was in danger of his life.”

“‘Bumped off’—that is the American expression, is it not?” said M. Bouc. “Then it is not a woman. It is a ‘Gangster’ or a ‘gunman.’”

The chef de train looked pained at his theory having come to naught.

“If so,” said Poirot, “it seems to have been done very amateurishly.”

His tone expressed professional disapproval.

“There is a large American on the train,” said M. Bouc, pursuing his idea—“a common-looking man with terrible clothes. He chews the gum which I believe is not done in good circles. You know whom I mean?”

The Wagon Lit conductor to whom he had appealed nodded.

“Oui, Monsieur, the No. 16. But it cannot have been he. I should have seen him enter or leave the compartment.”

“You might not. You might not. But we will go into that presently. The question is, what to do?” He looked at Poirot.

Poirot looked back at him.

“Come, my friend,” said M. Bouc. “You comprehend what I am about to ask of you. I know your powers. Take command of this investigation! No, no, do not refuse. See, to us it is serious—I speak for the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits. By the time the Yugo-Slavian police arrive, how simple if we can present them with the solution! Otherwise delays, annoyances, a million and one inconveniences. Perhaps, who knows, serious annoyance to innocent persons. Instead—you solve the mystery! We say, ‘A murder has occurred—this is the criminal!’”

“And suppose I do not solve it?”

“Ah! mon cher.” M. Bouc’s voice became positively caressing. “I know your reputation. I know something of your methods. This is the ideal case for you. To look up the antecedents of all these people, to discover their bona fides—all that takes time and endless inconvenience. But have I not heard you say often that to solve a case a man has only to lie back in his chair and think? Do that. Interview the passengers on the train, view the body, examine what clues there are and then—well, I have faith in you! I am assured that it is no idle boast of yours. Lie back and think—use (as I have heard you say so often) the little grey cells of the mind—and you will know!”

He leaned forward, looking affectionately at his friend.

“Your faith touches me, my friend,” said Poirot emotionally. “As you say, this cannot be a difficult case. I myself, last night—but we will not speak of that now. In truth, this problem intrigues me. I was reflecting, not half an hour ago, that many hours of boredom lay ahead whilst we are stuck here. And now—a problem lies ready to my hand.”

“You accept then?” said M. Bouc eagerly.

“C’est entendu. You place the matter in my hands.”

“Good—we are all at your service.”

“To begin with, I should like a plan of the Istanbul-Calais coach, with a note of the people who occupied the several compartments, and I should also like to see their passports and their tickets.”

“Michel will get you those.”

The Wagon Lit conductor left the compartment.

“What other passengers are there on the train?” asked Poirot.

“In this coach Dr. Constantine and I are the only travellers. In the coach from Bucharest is an old gentleman with a lame leg. He is well known to the conductor. Beyond that are the ordinary carriages, but these do not concern us, since they were locked after dinner had been served last night. Forward of the Istanbul-Calais coach there is only the dining car.”

“Then it seems,” said Poirot slowly, “as though we must look for our murderer in the Istanbul-Calais coach.” He turned to the doctor. “That is what you were hinting, I think?”

The Greek nodded.

“At half an hour after midnight we ran into the snowdrift. No one can have left the train since then.”

M. Bouc said solemnly.

“The murderer is with us—on the train now….”

Six

A WOMAN?

First of all," said Poirot, "I should like a word or two with young M. MacQueen. He may be able to give us valuable information."

"Certainly," said M. Bouc.

He turned to the chef de train.

"Get M. MacQueen to come here."

The chef de train left the carriage.

The conductor returned with a bundle of passports and tickets. M. Bouc took them from him.

"Thank you, Michel. It would be best now, I think, if you were to go back to your post. We will take your evidence formally later."

"Very good, Monsieur."

Michel in his turn left the carriage.

"After we have seen young MacQueen," said Poirot, "perhaps M. le docteur will come with me to the dead man's carriage."

"Certainly."

"After we have finished there—"

But at this moment the chef de train returned with Hector MacQueen.

M. Bouc rose.

“We are a little cramped here,” he said pleasantly. “Take my seat, M. MacQueen. M. Poirot will sit opposite you—so.”

He turned to the chef de train.

“Clear all the people out of the restaurant car,” he said, “and let it be left free for M. Poirot. You will conduct your interviews there, mon cher?”

“It would be the most convenient, yes,” agreed Poirot.

MacQueen had stood looking from one to the other, not quite following the rapid flow of French.

“Qu’est ce qu’il y a?” he began laboriously. “Pourquoi—?”

With a vigorous gesture Poirot motioned him to the seat in the corner. He took it and began once more.

“Pourquoi—?” then, checking himself and relapsing into his own tongue, “What’s up on the train? Has anything happened?”

He looked from one man to another.

Poirot nodded.

“Exactly. Something has happened. Prepare yourself for a shock. Your employer, M. Ratchett, is dead!”

MacQueen’s mouth pursed itself in a whistle. Except that his eyes grew a shade brighter, he showed no signs of shock or distress.

“So they got him after all,” he said.

“What exactly do you mean by that phrase, M. MacQueen?” MacQueen hesitated.

“You are assuming,” said Poirot, “that M. Ratchett was murdered?”

“Wasn’t he?” This time MacQueen did show surprise. “Why, yes,” he said slowly. “That’s just what I did think. Do you mean he just died in his sleep? Why, the old man was as tough as—as tough—”

He stopped, at a loss for a simile.

“No, no,” said Poirot. “Your assumption was quite right. Mr. Ratchett was murdered. Stabbed. But I should like to know why you were so sure it was murder, and not just—death.”

MacQueen hesitated.

“I must get this clear,” he said. “Who exactly are you? And where do you come in?”

“I represent the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits.” He paused, then added, “I am a detective. My name is Hercule Poirot.”

If he expected an effect he did not get one. MacQueen said merely, “Oh, yes?” and waited for him to go on.

“You know the name, perhaps.”

“Why, it does seem kind of familiar—only I always thought it was a woman’s dressmaker.”

Hercule Poirot looked at him with distaste.

“It is incredible!” he said.

“What’s incredible?”

“Nothing. Let us advance with the matter in hand. I want you to tell me, M. MacQueen, all that you know about the dead man. You were not related to him?”

“No. I am—was—his secretary.”

“For how long have you held that post?”

“Just over a year.”

“Please give me all the information you can.”

“Well, I met Mr. Ratchett just over a year ago when I was in Persia—”

Poirot interrupted.

“What were you doing there?”

“I had come over from New York to look into an oil concession. I don’t suppose you want to hear all about that. My friends and I had been let in rather badly over it. Mr. Ratchett was in the same hotel. He had just had a row with his secretary. He offered me the job and I took it. I was at a loose end, and glad to find a well-paid job ready made, as it were.”

“And since then?”

“We’ve travelled about. Mr. Ratchett wanted to see the world. He was hampered by knowing no languages. I acted more as a courier than as a secretary. It was a pleasant life.”

“Now tell me as much as you can about your employer.”

The young man shrugged his shoulders. A perplexed expression passed over his face.

“That’s not so easy.”

“What was his full name?”

“Samuel Edward Ratchett.”

“He was an American citizen?”

“Yes.”

“What part of America did he come from?”

"I don't know."

"Well, tell me what you do know."

"The actual truth is, Mr. Poirot, that I know nothing at all! Mr. Ratchett never spoke of himself, or of his life in America."

"Why do you think that was?"

"I don't know. I imagined that he might have been ashamed of his beginnings. Some men are."

"Does that strike you as a satisfactory solution?"

"Frankly, it doesn't."

"Has he any relations?"

"He never mentioned any."

Poirot pressed the point.

"You must have formed some theory, M. MacQueen."

"Well, yes, I did. For one thing, I don't believe Ratchett was his real name. I think he left America definitely in order to escape someone or something. I think he was successful—until a few weeks ago."

"And then?"

"He began to get letters—threatening letters."

"Did you see them?"

"Yes. It was my business to attend to his correspondence. The first letter came a fortnight ago."

"Were these letters destroyed?"

“No, I think I’ve got a couple still in my files—one I know Ratchett tore up in a rage. Shall I get them for you?”

“If you would be so good.”

MacQueen left the compartment. He returned a few minutes later and laid down two sheets of rather dirty notepaper before Poirot.

The first letter ran as follows:

“Thought you’d doublecross us and get away with it, did you? Not on your life. We’re out to GET you, Ratchett, and we WILL get you!”

There was no signature.

With no comment beyond raised eyebrows, Poirot picked up the second letter.

“We’re going to take you for a ride, Ratchett. Some time soon. We’re going to GET you, see?”

Poirot laid the letter down.

“The style is monotonous!” he said. “More so than the handwriting.”

MacQueen stared at him.

“You would not observe,” said Poirot pleasantly. “It requires the eye of one used to such things. This letter was not written by one person, M. MacQueen. Two or more persons wrote it—each writing a letter of a word at a time. Also, the letters are printed. That makes the task of identifying the handwriting much more difficult.”

He paused, then said:

“Did you know that M. Ratchett had applied for help to me?”

“To you?”

MacQueen’s astonished tone told Poirot quite certainly that the young man had not known of it. He nodded.

“Yes. He was alarmed. Tell me, how did he act when he received the first letter?”

MacQueen hesitated.

“It’s difficult to say. He—he—passed it off with a laugh in that quiet way of his. But somehow”—he gave a slight shiver—“I felt that there was a good deal going on underneath the quietness.”

Poirot nodded. Then he asked an unexpected question.

“Mr. MacQueen, will you tell me, quite honestly, exactly how you regarded your employer? Did you like him?”

Hector MacQueen took a moment or two before replying.

“No,” he said at last. “I did not.”

“Why?”

“I can’t exactly say. He was always quite pleasant in his manner.” He paused, then said, “I’ll tell you the truth, Mr. Poirot. I disliked and distrusted him. He was, I am sure, a cruel and a dangerous man. I must admit, though, that I have no reasons to advance for my opinion.”

“Thank you, M. MacQueen. One further question—when did you last see M. Ratchett alive?”

“Last evening about”—he thought for a minute—“ten o’clock, I should say. I went into his compartment to take down some memoranda from him.”

“On what subject?”

“Some tiles and antique pottery that he bought in Persia. What was delivered was not what he had purchased. There has been a long, vexatious correspondence on the subject.”

“And that was the last time M. Ratchett was seen alive?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Do you know when M. Ratchett received the last threatening letter?”

“On the morning of the day we left Constantinople.”

“There is one more question I must ask you, M. MacQueen: were you on good terms with your employer?”

The young man’s eyes twinkled suddenly.

“This is where I’m supposed to go all goosefleshy down the back. In the words of a best seller, ‘You’ve nothing on me.’ Ratchett and I were on perfectly good terms.”

“Perhaps, M. MacQueen, you will give me your full name and your address in America.”

MacQueen gave his name—Hector Willard MacQueen, and an address in New York.

Poirot leaned back against the cushions.

“That is all for the present, M. MacQueen,” he said. “I should be obliged if you would keep the matter of M. Ratchett’s death to yourself for a little time.”

“His valet, Masterman, will have to know.”

“He probably knows already,” said Poirot dryly. “If so try to get him to hold his tongue.”

“That oughtn’t to be difficult. He’s a Britisher, and does what he calls ‘Keeps himself to himself.’ He’s a low opinion of Americans and no opinion at all of any other nationality.”

“Thank you, M. MacQueen.”

The American left the carriage.

“Well?” demanded M. Bouc. “You believe what he says, this young man?”

“He seems honest and straightforward. He did not pretend to any affection for his employer as he probably would have done had he been involved in any way. It is true M. Ratchett did not tell him that he had tried to enlist my services and failed, but I do not think that is really a suspicious circumstance. I fancy M. Ratchett was a gentleman who kept his own counsel on every possible occasion.”

“So you pronounce one person at least innocent of the crime,” said M. Bouc jovially.

Poirot cast on him a look of reproach.

“Me, I suspect everybody till the last minute,” he said. “All the same, I must admit that I cannot see this sober, long-headed MacQueen losing his head and stabbing his victim twelve or fourteen times. It is not in accord with his psychology—not at all.”

“No,” said Mr. Bouc thoughtfully. “That is the act of a man driven almost crazy with a frenzied hate—it suggests more the Latin temperament. Or else it suggests, as our friend the chef de train insisted, a woman.”

Seven

THE BODY

Followed by Dr. Constantine, Poirot made his way to the next coach and the compartment occupied by the murdered man. The conductor came and unlocked the door for them with his key.

The two men passed inside. Poirot turned inquiringly to his companion.

“How much has been disarranged in this compartment?”

“Nothing has been touched. I was careful not to move the body in making my examination.”

Poirot nodded. He looked round him.

The first thing that struck the senses was the intense cold. The window was pushed down as far as it would go and the blind was drawn up.

“Brrr,” observed Poirot.

The other smiled appreciatively.

“I did not like to close it,” he said.

Poirot examined the window carefully.

“You are right,” he announced. “Nobody left the carriage this way. Possibly the open window was intended to suggest the fact, but, if so, the snow has defeated the murderer’s object.”

He examined the frame of the window carefully. Taking a small case from his pocket he blew a little powder over it.

“No fingerprints at all,” he said. “That means it has been wiped. Well, if there had been fingerprints it would have told us very little. They would have been those of M. Ratchett or his valet or the conductor. Criminals do not make mistakes of that kind nowadays.

“And that being so,” he added cheerfully, “we might as well shut the window. Positively it is the cold storage in here!”

He suited the action to the word and then turned his attention for the first time to the motionless figure lying in the bunk.

Ratchett lay on his back. His pyjama jacket, stained with rusty patches, had been unbuttoned and thrown back.

“I had to see the nature of the wounds, you see,” explained the doctor.

Poirot nodded. He bent over the body. Finally he straightened himself with a slight grimace.

“It is not pretty,” he said. “Someone must have stood there and stabbed him again and again. How many wounds are there exactly?”

“I make it twelve. One or two are so slight as to be practically scratches. On the other hand, at least three would be capable of causing death.”

Something in the doctor’s tone caught Poirot’s attention. He looked at him sharply. The little Greek was standing staring down at the body with a puzzled frown.

“Something strikes you as odd, does it not?” he asked gently. “Speak, my friend. There is something here that puzzles you?”

“You are right,” acknowledged the other.

“What is it?”

“You see, these two wounds—here and here,”—he pointed. “They are deep, each cut must have severed blood vessels—and yet—the edges do not gape. They have not bled as one would have expected.”

“Which suggests?”

“That the man was already dead—some little time dead—when they were delivered. But that is surely absurd.”

“It would seem so,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Unless our murderer figured to himself that he had not accomplished his job properly and came back to make quite sure; but that is manifestly absurd! Anything else?”

“Well, just one thing.”

“And that?”

“You see this wound here—under the right arm—near the right shoulder. Take this pencil of mine. Could you deliver such a blow?”

Poirot raised his hand.

“Précisément,” he said. “I see. With the right hand it is exceedingly difficult—almost impossible. One would have to strike backhanded, as it were. But if the blow were struck with the left hand—”

“Exactly, M. Poirot. That blow was almost certainly struck with the left hand.”

“So that our murderer is left-handed? No, it is more difficult than that, is it not?”

“As you say, M. Poirot. Some of these other blows are just as obviously right-handed.”

“Two people. We are back at two people again,” murmured the detective. He asked abruptly:

“Was the electric light on?”

“It is difficult to say. You see it is turned off by the conductor every morning about ten o’clock.”

“The switches will tell us,” said Poirot.

He examined the switch of the top light and also the roll back bed-head light. The former was turned off. The latter was closed.

“Eh bien,” he said thoughtfully. “We have here a hypothesis of the First and Second Murderer, as the great Shakespeare would put it. The First Murderer stabbed his victim and left the compartment, turning off the light. The Second Murderer came in in the dark, did not see that his or her work had been done and stabbed at least twice at a dead body. Que pensez vous de ça?”

“Magnificent,” said the little doctor with enthusiasm.

The other’s eyes twinkled.

“You think so? I am glad. It sounded to me a little like the nonsense.”

“What other explanation can there be?”

“That is just what I am asking myself. Have we here a coincidence or what? Are there any other inconsistencies, such as would point to two people being concerned?”

“I think I can say yes. Some of these blows, as I have already said, point to a weakness—a lack of strength or a lack of determination. They are feeble glancing blows. But this one here—and this one—” Again he pointed. “Great strength was needed for those blows. They have penetrated the muscle.”

“They were, in your opinion, delivered by a man?”

“Most certainly.”

“They could not have been delivered by a woman?”

“A young, vigorous, athletic woman might have struck them, especially if she were in the grip of a strong emotion, but it is in my opinion highly unlikely.”

Poirot was silent a moment or two.

The other said anxiously.

“You understand my point?”

“Perfectly,” said Poirot. “The matter begins to clear itself up wonderfully! The murderer was a man of great strength, he was feeble, it was a woman, it was a right-handed person, it was a left-handed person—Ah! c’est rigolo, tout ça!”

He spoke with sudden anger.

“And the victim—what does he do in all this? Does he cry out? Does he struggle? Does he defend himself?”

He slipped his hand under the pillow and drew out the automatic pistol which Ratchett had shown him the day before.

“Fully loaded, you see,” he said.

They looked round them. Ratchett’s day clothing was hanging from the hooks on the wall. On the small table formed by the lid of the washing basin were various objects—false teeth in a glass of water; another glass, empty; a bottle of mineral water, a large flask and an ashtray containing the butt of a cigar and some charred fragments of paper; also two burnt matches.

The doctor picked up the empty glass and sniffed it.

“Here is the explanation of the victim’s inertia,” he said quietly.

“Drugged?”

“Yes.”

Poirot nodded. He picked up the two matches and scrutinized them carefully.

“You have a clue then?” demanded the little doctor eagerly.

“Those two matches are of a different shape,” said Poirot. “One is flatter than the other. You see?”

“It is the kind you get on a train,” said the doctor, “in paper covers.”

Poirot was feeling in the pockets of Ratchett’s clothing. Presently he pulled out a box of matches. He compared them carefully.

“The rounder one is a match struck by Mr. Ratchett,” he said. “Let us see if he had also the flatter kind.”

But a further search showed no other matches.

Poirot’s eyes were darting about the compartment. They were bright and sharp like a bird’s. One felt that nothing could escape their scrutiny.

With a little exclamation he bent and picked up something from the floor.

It was a small square of cambric, very dainty. “Our friend the chef de train was right. There is a woman concerned in this.”

“And most conveniently she leaves her handkerchief behind!” said Poirot. “Exactly as it happens in the books and on the films—and to make things even easier for us it is marked with an initial.”

“What a stroke of luck for us!” exclaimed the doctor.

“Is it not?” said Poirot.

Something in his tone surprised the doctor.

But before he could ask for elucidation, Poirot had made another dive on to the floor.

This time he held out on the palm of his hand—a pipe cleaner.

“It is perhaps the property of M. Ratchett?” suggested the doctor.

“There was no pipe in any of his pockets, and no tobacco or tobacco pouch.”

“Then it is a clue.”

“Oh! decidedly. And again dropped most conveniently. A masculine clue this time, you note! One cannot complain of having no clues in this case. There are clues here in abundance. By the way, what have you done with the weapon?”

“There was no sign of any weapon. The murderer must have taken it away with him.”

“I wonder why,” mused Poirot.

“Ah!” The doctor had been delicately exploring the pyjama pockets of the dead man.

“I overlooked this,” he said. “I unbuttoned the jacket and threw it straight back.”

From the breast pocket he brought out a gold watch. The case was dented savagely, and the hands pointed to a quarter past one.

“You see?” cried Constantine eagerly. “This gives us the hour of the crime. It agrees with my calculations. Between midnight and two in the morning is what I said, and probably about one o’clock, though it is difficult to be exact in these matters. Eh bien, here is confirmation. A quarter past one. That was the hour of the crime.”

“It is possible, yes. It is certainly possible.”

The doctor looked at him curiously.

“You will pardon me, M. Poirot, but I do not quite understand you.”

“I do not understand myself,” said Poirot. “I understand nothing at all, and, as you perceive, it worries me.”

He sighed and bent over the little table, examining the charred fragment of paper. He murmured to himself.

“What I need at this moment is an old-fashioned woman’s hatbox.”

Dr. Constantine was at a loss to know what to make of this singular remark. In any case, Poirot gave him no time for questions. Opening the door into the corridor, he called for the conductor.

The man arrived at a run.

“How many women are there in this coach?”

The conductor counted on his fingers.

“One, two, three—six, Monsieur. The old American lady, a Swedish lady, the young English lady, the Countess Andrenyi and Madame la Princess Dragomiroff and her maid.”

Poirot considered.

“They all have hatboxes, yes?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Then bring me—let me see—yes, the Swedish lady’s and that of the lady’s maid. Those two are the only hope. You will tell them it is a customs regulation—something—anything that occurs to you.”

“That will be all right Monsieur. Neither lady is in her compartment at the moment.”

“Then be quick.”

The conductor departed. He returned with the two hatboxes. Poirot opened that of the lady’s maid and tossed it aside. Then he opened the Swedish lady’s and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Removing the hats carefully, he disclosed round humps of wire netting.

“Ah, here is what we need. About fifteen years ago hatboxes were made like this. You skewered through the hat with a hatpin on to this hump of wire netting.”

As he spoke he was skilfully removing two of the attachments. Then he repacked the hatbox and told the conductor to return them both where they belonged.

When the door was shut once more he turned to his companion.

“See you, my dear doctor, me, I am not one to rely upon the expert procedure. It is the psychology I seek, not the fingerprint or the cigarette ash. But in this case I would welcome a little scientific assistance. This compartment is full of clues, but can I be sure that those clues are really what they seem to be?”

“I do not quite understand you, M. Poirot.”

“Well, to give you an example—we find a woman’s handkerchief. Did a woman drop it? Or did a man, committing the crime, say to himself ‘I will make this look like a woman’s crime. I will stab my enemy an unnecessary number of times, making some of the blows feeble and ineffective, and I will drop this handkerchief where no one can miss it.’ That is one possibility. Then there is another. Did a woman kill him and did she deliberately drop a pipe cleaner to make it look like a man’s work? Or are we seriously to suppose that two people—a man and a woman—were separately concerned, and that each was so careless as to drop a clue to their identity? It is a little too much of a coincidence, that!”

“But where does the hatbox come in?” asked the doctor, still puzzled.

“Ah! I’m coming to that. As I say, these clues, the watch stopped at a quarter past one, the handkerchief, the pipe cleaner, they may be genuine, or they may be fake. As to that I cannot yet tell. But there is one clue here which I believe—though again I may be wrong—has not been faked. I mean this flat match, M. le docteur. I believe that that match was used by the murderer, not by M. Ratchett. It was used to burn an incriminating paper of some kind. Possibly a note. If so, there was something in that note, some mistake, some error, that left a possible clue to the assailant. I am going to endeavour to resurrect what that something was."

He went out of the compartment and returned a few moments later with a small spirit stove and a pair of curling tongs.

"I use them for the moustaches," he said, referring to the latter.

The doctor watched him with great interest. He flattened out the two humps of wire, and with great care wriggled the charred scrap of paper on to one of them. He clapped the other on top of it and then, holding both pieces together with the tongs, held the whole thing over the flame of the spirit lamp.

"It is a very makeshift affair, this," he said over his shoulder. "Let us hope that it will answer its purpose."

The doctor watched the proceedings attentively. The metal began to glow. Suddenly he saw faint indications of letters. Words formed themselves slowly—words of fire.

It was a very tiny scrap. Only three words and a part of another showed.

"—member little Daisy Armstrong."

"Ah!" Poirot gave a sharp exclamation.

"It tells you something?" asked the doctor.

Poirot's eyes were shining. He laid down the tongs carefully.

"Yes," he said. "I know the dead man's real name. I know why he had to leave America."

"What was his name?"

"Cassetti."

“Cassetti.” Constantine knitted his brows. “It brings back to me something. Some years ago. I cannot remember…It was a case in America, was it not?”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “A case in America.”

Further than that Poirot was not disposed to be communicative. He looked round him as he went on:

“We will go into all that presently. Let us first make sure that we have seen all there is to be seen here.”

Quickly and deftly he went once more through the pockets of the dead man’s clothes but found nothing there of interest. He tried the communicating door which led through to the next compartment, but it was bolted on the other side.

“There is one thing that I do not understand,” said Dr. Constantine. “If the murderer did not escape through the window, and if this communicating door was bolted on the other side, and if the door into the corridor was not only locked on the inside but chained, how then did the murderer leave the compartment?”

“That is what the audience says when a person bound hand and foot is shut into a cabinet—and disappears.”

“You mean—”

“I mean,” explained Poirot, “that if the murderer intended us to believe that he had escaped by way of the window he would naturally make it appear that the other two exits were impossible. Like the ‘disappearing person’ in the cabinet—it is a trick. It is our business to find out how the trick is done.”

He locked the communicating door on their side.

“In case,” he said, “the excellent Mrs. Hubbard should take it into her head to acquire first-hand details of the crime to write to her daughter.”

He looked round once more.

“There is nothing more to do here, I think. Let us rejoin M. Bouc.”

Eight

THE ARMSTRONG KIDNAPPING CASE

They found M. Bouc finishing an omelet.

“I thought it best to have lunch served immediately in the restaurant car,” he said. “Afterwards it will be cleared and M. Poirot can conduct his examination of the passengers there. In the meantime I have ordered them to bring us three some food here.”

“An excellent idea,” said Poirot.

Neither of the other two men was hungry, and the meal was soon eaten, but not till they were sipping their coffee did M. Bouc mention the subject that was occupying all their minds.

“Eh bien?” he asked.

“Eh bien, I have discovered the identity of the victim. I know why it was imperative he should leave America.”

“Who was he?”

“Do you remember reading of the Armstrong baby? This is the man who murdered little Daisy Armstrong—Cassetti.”

“I recall it now. A shocking affair—though I cannot remember the details.”

“Colonel Armstrong was an Englishman—a V.C. He was half American, as his mother was a daughter of W. K. Van der Halt, the Wall Street millionaire. He married the daughter of Linda Arden, the most famous tragic American actress of her day. They lived in America and had one child—a girl—whom they idolized. When she was three years old she was kidnapped, and an impossibly high sum demanded as the price of her return. I will not weary you with all the intricacies that followed. I will come to the moment, when, after having paid over the enormous sum of two hundred thousand dollars, the child's dead body was discovered, it having been dead at least a fortnight. Public indignation rose to fever point. And there was worse to follow. Mrs. Armstrong was expecting another child. Following the shock of the discovery, she gave birth to a dead child born prematurely, and herself died. Her broken-hearted husband shot himself."

"Mon Dieu, what a tragedy. I remember now," said M. Bouc. "There was also another death, if I remember rightly?"

"Yes—an unfortunate French or Swiss nursemaid. The police were convinced that she had some knowledge of the crime. They refused to believe her hysterical denials. Finally, in a fit of despair, the poor girl threw herself from a window and was killed. It was proved afterwards that she was absolutely innocent of any complicity in the crime."

"It is not good to think of," said M. Bouc.

"About six months later, this man Cassetti was arrested as the head of the gang who had kidnapped the child. They had used the same methods in the past. If the police seemed likely to get on their trail, they had killed their prisoner, hidden the body, and continued to extract as much money as possible before the crime was discovered.

"Now, I will make clear to you this, my friend. Cassetti was the man! But by means of the enormous wealth he had piled up and by the secret hold he had over various persons, he was acquitted on some technical inaccuracy. Notwithstanding that, he would have been lynched by the populace had he not been clever enough to give them the slip. It is now clear to me what happened. He changed his name and left America. Since then he has been a gentleman of leisure, travelling abroad and living on his rentes."

"Ah! quel animal!" M. Bouc's tone was redolent of heartfelt disgust. "I cannot regret that he is dead—not at all!"

"I agree with you."

“Tout de même, it is not necessary that he should be killed on the Orient Express. There are other places.”

Poirot smiled a little. He realized that M. Bouc was biased in the matter.

“The question we have now to ask ourselves is this,” he said. “Is this murder the work of some rival gang whom Cassetti had double-crossed in the past, or is it an act of private vengeance?”

He explained his discovery of the few words on the charred fragment of paper.

“If I am right in my assumption, then the letter was burnt by the murderer. Why? Because it mentioned the word ‘Armstrong,’ which is the clue to the mystery.”

“Are there any members of the Armstrong family living?”

“That, unfortunately, I do not know. I think I remember reading of a younger sister of Mrs. Armstrong’s.”

Poirot went on to relate the joint conclusions of himself and Dr. Constantine. M. Bouc brightened at the mention of the broken watch.

“That seems to give us the time of the crime very exactly.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It is very convenient.”

There was an indescribable something in his tone that made both the other two look at him curiously.

“You say that you yourself heard Ratchett speak to the conductor at twenty minutes to one?”

Poirot related just what had occurred.

“Well,” said M. Bouc, “that proves at least that Cassetti—or Ratchett, as I shall continue to call him—was certainly alive at twenty minutes to one.”

“Twenty-three minutes to one, to be precise.”

“Then at twelve thirty-seven, to put it formally, M. Ratchett was alive. That is one fact, at least.”

Poirot did not reply. He sat looking thoughtfully in front of him.

There was a tap on the door, and the restaurant attendant entered.

“The restaurant car is free now, Monsieur,” he said.

“We will go there,” said M. Bouc, rising.

“I may accompany you?” asked Constantine.

“Certainly, my dear doctor. Unless M. Poirot has any objection?”

“Not at all. Not at all,” said Poirot.

After a little politeness in the matter of procedure, “Après vous, Monsieur.” “Mais non, après vous,” they left the compartment.

PART TWO

THE EVIDENCE

One

THE EVIDENCE OF THE WAGON LIT CONDUCTOR

In the restaurant car all was in readiness.

Poirot and M. Bouc sat together on one side of a table. The doctor sat across the aisle.

On the table in front of Poirot was a plan of the Istanbul-Calais coach with the names of the passengers marked in in red ink.

The passports and tickets were in a pile at one side. There was writing paper, ink, pen and pencils.

“Excellent,” said Poirot. “We can open our Court of Inquiry without more ado. First, I think, we should take the evidence of the Wagon Lit conductor. You probably know something about the man. What character has he? Is he a man in whose word you would place reliance?”

“I should say so most assuredly. Pierre Michel has been employed by the company for over fifteen years. He is a Frenchman—lives near Calais. Thoroughly respectable and honest. Not, perhaps, remarkable for brains.”

Poirot nodded comprehendingly.

“Good,” he said. “Let us see him.”

Pierre Michel had recovered some of his assurance, but he was still extremely nervous.

“I hope Monsieur will not think that there has been any negligence on my part,” he said anxiously, his eyes going from Poirot to M. Bouc. “It is a terrible thing that has happened. I hope Monsieur does not think that it reflects on me in any way?”

Having soothed the man’s fears, Poirot began his questions. He first elicited Michel’s name and address, his length of service, and the length of time he had been on this particular route. These particulars he already knew, but the routine questions served to put the man at his ease.

“And now,” went on Poirot, “let us come to the events of last night. M. Ratchett retired to bed—when?”

“Almost immediately after dinner, Monsieur. Actually before we left Belgrade. So he did on the previous night. He had directed me to make up the bed while he was at dinner, and I did so.”

“Did anybody go into his compartment afterwards?”

“His valet, Monsieur, and the young American gentleman his secretary.”

“Anyone else?”

“No, Monsieur, not that I know of.”

“Good. And that is the last you saw or heard of him?”

“No, Monsieur. You forget, he rang his bell about twenty to one—soon after we had stopped.”

“What happened exactly?”

image

“I knocked at the door, but he called out and said he had made a mistake.”

“In English or in French?”

“In French.”

“What were his words exactly?”

“Ce n’est rien. Je me suis trompé.”

“Quite right,” said Poirot. “That is what I heard. And then you went away?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Did you go back to your seat?”

“No, Monsieur, I went first to answer another bell that had just rung.”

“Now, Michel, I am going to ask you an important question. Where were you at a quarter past one?”

“I, Monsieur? I was at my little seat at the end—facing up the corridor.”

“You are sure?”

“Mais oui—at least—”

“Yes?”

“I went into the next coach, the Athens coach, to speak to my colleague there. We spoke about the snow. That was at some time soon after one o’clock. I cannot say exactly.”

“And you returned—when?”

“One of my bells rang, Monsieur—I remember—I told you. It was the American lady. She had rung several times.”

“I recollect,” said Poirot. “And after that?”

“After that, Monsieur? I answered your bell and brought you some mineral water. Then, about half an hour later, I made up the bed in one of the other compartments—that of the young American gentleman, M. Ratchett’s secretary.”

“Was M. MacQueen alone in his compartment when you went to make up his bed?”

“The English Colonel from No. 15 was with him. They had been sitting talking.”

“What did the Colonel do when he left M. MacQueen?”

“He went back to his own compartment.”

“No. 15—that is quite close to your seat, is it not?”

“Yes, Monsieur, it is the second compartment from that end of the corridor.”

“His bed was already made up?”

“Yes, Monsieur. I had made it up while he was at dinner.”

“What time was all this?”

“I could not say exactly, Monsieur. Not later than two o’clock, certainly.”

“And after that?”

“After that, Monsieur, I sat in my seat till morning.”

“You did not go again into the Athens coach?”

“No, Monsieur.”

“Perhaps you slept?”

“I do not think so, Monsieur. The train being at a standstill prevented me from dozing off as I usually do.”

“Did you see any of the passengers moving up or down the corridor?”

The man reflected.

“One of the ladies went to the toilet at the far end, I think.”

“Which lady?”

“I do not know, Monsieur. It was far down the corridor, and she had her back to me. She had on a kimono of scarlet with dragons on it.”

Poirot nodded.

“And after that?”

“Nothing, Monsieur, until the morning.”

“You are sure?”

“Ah, pardon, you yourself, Monsieur, opened your door and looked out for a second.”

“Good, my friend,” said Poirot. “I wondered whether you would remember that. By the way, I was awakened by what sounded like something heavy falling against my door. Have you any idea what that could have been?”

The man stared at him.

“There was nothing, Monsieur. Nothing, I am positive of it.”

“Then I must have had the cauchemar,” said Poirot philosophically.

“Unless,” said M. Bouc, “it was something in the compartment next door that you heard.”

Poirot took no notice of the suggestion. Perhaps he did not wish to before the Wagon Lit conductor.

“Let us pass to another point,” he said. “Supposing that last night an assassin joined the train. It is quite certain that he could not have left it after committing the crime?”

Pierre Michael shook his head.

“Nor that he can be concealed on it somewhere?”

“It has been well searched,” said M. Bouc. “Abandon that idea, my friend.”

“Besides,” said Michel, “no one could get on to the sleeping car without my seeing them.”

“When was the last stop?”

“Vincovci.”

“What time was that?”

“We should have left there at 11:58. But owing to the weather we were twenty minutes late.”

“Someone might have come along from the ordinary part of the train?”

“No, Monsieur. After the service of dinner the door between the ordinary carriages and the sleeping cars is locked.”

“Did you yourself descend from the train at Vincovci?”

“Yes, Monsieur. I got down on to the platform as usual and stood by the step up into the train. The other conductors did the same.”

“What about the forward door? The one near the restaurant car?”

“It is always fastened on the inside.”

“It is not so fastened now.”

The man looked surprised, then his face cleared.

“Doubtless one of the passengers has opened it to look out on the snow.”

“Probably,” said Poirot.

He tapped thoughtfully on the table for a minute or two.

“Monsieur does not blame me?” said the man timidly.

Poirot smiled on him kindly.

“You have had the evil chance, my friend,” he said. “Ah! One other point while I remember it. You said that another bell rang just as you were knocking at M. Ratchett’s door. In fact, I heard it myself. Whose was it?”

“It was the bell of Madame la Princesse Dragomiroff. She desired me to summon her maid.”

“And you did so?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

Poirot studied the plan in front of him thoughtfully. Then he inclined his head.

“That is all,” he said, “for the moment.”

“Thank you, Monsieur.”

The man rose. He looked at M. Bouc.

“Do not distress yourself,” said the latter kindly. “I cannot see that there has been any negligence on your part.”

Gratified, Pierre Michel left the compartment.

Two

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SECRETARY

For a minute or two Poirot remained lost in thought.

“I think,” he said at last, “that it would be well to have a further word with M. MacQueen, in view of what we now know.”

The young American appeared promptly.

“Well,” he said, “how are things going?”

“Not too badly. Since our last conversation I have learnt something—the identity of M. Ratchett.”

Hector MacQueen leaned forward interestedly.

“Yes?” he said.

“Ratchett, as you suspected, was merely an alias. Ratchett was Cassetti, the man who ran the celebrated kidnapping stunts—including the famous affair of little Daisy Armstrong.”

An expression of utter astonishment appeared on MacQueen’s face; then it darkened.

“The damned skunk!” he exclaimed.

“You had no idea of this, M. MacQueen?”

“No, sir,” said the young American decidedly. “If I had I’d have cut off my right hand before it had a chance to do secretarial work for him!”

“You feel strongly about the matter, M. MacQueen?”

“I have a particular reason for doing so. My father was the district attorney who handled the case, M. Poirot. I saw Mrs. Armstrong more than once—she was a lovely woman. So gentle and heartbroken.” His face darkened. “If ever a man deserved what he got, Ratchett or Cassetti is the man. I’m rejoiced at his end. Such a man wasn’t fit to live!”

“You almost feel as though you would have been willing to do the good deed yourself?”

“I do. I—” He paused, then flushed rather guiltily. “Seems I’m kind of incriminating myself.”

“I should be more inclined to suspect you, M. MacQueen, if you displayed an inordinate sorrow at your employer’s decease.”

“I don’t think I could do that, even to save myself from the chair,” said MacQueen grimly.

Then he added:

“If I’m not being unduly curious, just how did you figure this out? Cassetti’s identity, I mean.”

“By a fragment of a letter found in his compartment.”

“But surely—I mean—that was rather careless of the old man?”

“That depends,” said Poirot, “on the point of view.”

The young man seemed to find this remark rather baffling. He stared at Poirot as though trying to make him out.

“The task before me,” said Poirot, “is to make sure of the movements of everyone on the train. No offence need be taken, you understand? It is only a matter of routine.”

“Sure. Get right on with it and let me clear my character if I can.”

"I need hardly ask you the number of your compartment," said Poirot, smiling, "since I shared it with you for a night. It is the second-class compartment Nos. 6 and 7, and after my departure you had it to yourself."

"That's right."

"Now, M. MacQueen, I want you to describe your movements last night from the time of leaving the dining car."

"That's quite easy. I went back to my compartment, read a bit, got out on the platform at Belgrade, decided it was too cold, and got in again. I talked for a while to a young English lady who is in the compartment next to mine. Then I fell into conversation with that Englishman, Colonel Arbuthnot—as a matter of fact I think you passed us as we were talking. Then I went in to Mr. Ratchett and, as I told you, took down some memoranda of letters he wanted written. I said good night to him and left him. Colonel Arbuthnot was still standing in the corridor. His compartment was already made up for the night, so I suggested that he should come along to mine. I ordered a couple of drinks and we got right down to it. Discussed world politics and the Government of India and our own troubles with the financial situation and the Wall Street crisis. I don't as a rule cotton to Britishers—they're a stiff-necked lot—but I liked this one."

"Do you know what time it was when he left you?"

"Pretty late. Getting on for two o'clock, I should say."

"You noticed that the train had stopped?"

"Oh, yes. We wondered a bit. Looked out and saw the snow lying very thick, but we didn't think it was serious."

"What happened when Colonel Arbuthnot finally said good night?"

"He went along to his compartment and I called to the conductor to make up my bed."

"Where were you whilst he was making it?"

“Standing just outside the door in the corridor smoking a cigarette.”

“And then?”

“And then I went to bed and slept till morning.”

“During the evening did you leave the train at all?”

“Arbuthnot and I thought we’d get out at—what was the name of the place?—Vincovci to stretch our legs a bit. But it was bitterly cold—a blizzard on. We soon hopped back again.”

“By which door did you leave the train?”

“By the one nearest to our compartment.”

“The one next to the dining car?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember if it was bolted?”

MacQueen considered.

“Why, yes, I seem to remember it was. At least there was a kind of bar that fitted across the handle. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes. On getting back into the train did you replace that bar?”

“Why, no—I don’t think I did. I got in last. No, I don’t seem to remember doing so.”

He added suddenly:

“Is that an important point?”

“It may be. Now, I presume, Monsieur, that while you and Colonel Arbuthnot were sitting talking the door of your compartment into the corridor was open?”

Hector MacQueen nodded.

“I want you, if you can, to tell me if anyone passed along that corridor after the train left Vincovci until the time you parted company for the night.”

MacQueen drew his brows together.

“I think the conductor passed along once,” he said, “coming from the direction of the dining car. And a woman passed the other way, going towards it.”

“Which woman?”

“I couldn’t say. I didn’t really notice. You see, I was just arguing a point with Arbuthnot. I just seem to remember a glimpse of some scarlet silk affair passing the door. I didn’t look, and anyway I wouldn’t have seen the person’s face. As you know, my carriage faces the dining car end of the train, so a woman going along the corridor in that direction would have her back to me as soon as she passed.”

Poirot nodded.

“She was going to the toilet, I presume?”

“I suppose so.”

“And you saw her return?”

“Well, no, now that you mention it, I didn’t notice her returning, but I suppose she must have done so.”

“One more question. Do you smoke a pipe, M. MacQueen?”

“No, sir, I do not.”

Poirot paused a moment.

“I think that is all at present. I should now like to see the valet of M. Ratchett. By the way, did both you and he always travel second-class?”

“He did. But I usually went first—if possible in the adjoining compartment to Mr. Ratchett. Then he had most of his baggage put in my compartment and yet could get at both it and me easily whenever he chose. But on this occasion all the first-class berths were booked except the one which he took.”

“I comprehend. Thank you, M. MacQueen.”

Three

THE EVIDENCE OF THE VALET

The American was succeeded by the pale Englishman with the inexpressive face whom Poirot had already noticed on the day before. He stood waiting very correctly. Poirot motioned to him to sit down.

“You are, I understand, the valet of M. Ratchett?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your name?”

“Edward Henry Masterman.”

“Your age?”

“Thirty-nine.”

“And your home address?”

“21 Friar Street, Clerkenwell.”

“You have heard that your master has been murdered?”

“Yes, sir. A very shocking occurrence.”

“Will you now tell me, please, at what hour you last saw M. Ratchett?”

The valet considered.

“It must have been about nine o’clock, sir, last night. That or a little after.”

“Tell me in your own words exactly what happened.”

“I went in to Mr. Ratchett as usual, sir, and attended to his wants.”

“What were your duties exactly?”

“To fold or hang up his clothes, sir. Put his dental plate in water and see that he had everything he wanted for the night.”

“Was his manner much the same as usual?”

The valet considered a moment.

“Well, sir, I think he was upset.”

“In what way—upset?”

“Over a letter he’d been reading. He asked me if it was I who had put it in his compartment. Of course I told him I hadn’t done any such thing, but he swore at me and found fault with everything I did.”

“Was that unusual?”

“Oh, no, sir, he lost his temper easily—as I say, it just depended what had happened to upset him.”

“Did your master ever take a sleeping draught?”

Dr. Constantine leaned forward a little.

“Always when travelling by train, sir. He said he couldn’t sleep otherwise.”

“Do you know what drug he was in the habit of taking?”

“I couldn’t say, I’m sure, sir. There was no name on the bottle. Just ‘The Sleeping Draught to be taken at bedtime.’”

“Did he take it last night?”

“Yes, sir. I poured it into a glass and put it on top of the toilet table ready for him.”

“You didn’t actually see him drink it?”

“No, sir.”

“What happened next?”

“I asked if there was anything further, and asked what time M. Ratchett would like to be called in the morning. He said he didn’t want to be disturbed till he rang.”

“Was that usual?”

“Quite usual, sir. He used to ring the bell for the conductor and then send him for me when he was ready to get up.”

“Was he usually an early or a late riser?”

“It depended, sir, on his mood. Sometimes he’d get up for breakfast, sometimes he wouldn’t get up till just on lunch time.”

“So that you weren’t alarmed when the morning wore on and no summons came?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you know that your master had enemies?”

“Yes, sir.”

The man spoke quite unemotionally.

“How did you know?”

“I had heard him discussing some letters, sir, with Mr. MacQueen.”

“Had you an affection for your employer, Masterman?”

Masterman’s face became, if possible, even more inexpressive than it was normally.

“I should hardly like to say that, sir. He was a generous employer.”

"But you didn't like him?"

"Shall we put it that I don't care very much for Americans, sir."

"Have you ever been in America?"

"No, sir."

"Do you remember reading in the paper of the Armstrong kidnapping case?"

A little colour came into the man's cheeks.

"Yes, indeed, sir. A little baby girl, wasn't it? A very shocking affair."

"Did you know that your employer, M. Ratchett, was the principal instigator in that affair?"

"No, indeed, sir." The valet's tone held positive warmth and feeling for the first time. "I can hardly believe it, sir."

"Nevertheless, it is true. Now, to pass to your own movements last night. A matter of routine, you understand. What did you do after leaving your master?"

"I told Mr. MacQueen, sir, that the master wanted him. Then I went to my own compartment and read."

"Your compartment was—?"

"The end second-class one, sir. Next to the dining car."

Poirot was looking at his plan.

"I see—and you had which berth?"

"The lower one, sir."

"That is No. 4?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there anyone in with you?"

"Yes, sir. A big Italian fellow."

"Does he speak English?"

"Well, a kind of English, sir." The valet's tone was deprecating. "He's been in America—Chicago—I understand."

"Do you and he talk together much?"

"No, sir. I prefer to read."

Poirot smiled. He could visualize the scene—the large voluble Italian, and the snub direct administered by the gentleman's gentleman.

"And what, may I ask, are you reading?" he inquired.

"At present, sir, I am reading Love's Captive, by Mrs. Arabella Richardson."

"A good story?"

"I find it highly enjoyable, sir."

"Well, let us continue. You returned to your compartment and read Love's Captive till—when?"

"At about ten-thirty, sir, this Italian wanted to go to bed. So the conductor came and made the beds up."

"And then you went to bed and to sleep?"

"I went to bed, sir, but I didn't sleep."

"Why didn't you sleep?"

“I had the toothache, sir.”

“Oh, là là—that is painful.”

“Most painful, sir.”

“Did you do anything for it?”

“I applied a little oil of cloves, sir, which relieved the pain a little, but I was still not able to get to sleep. I turned the light on above my head and continued to read—to take my mind off it, as it were.”

“And did you not go to sleep at all?”

“Yes, sir, I dropped off about four in the morning.”

“And your companion?”

“The Italian fellow? Oh, he just snored.”

“He did not leave the compartment at all during the night?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you hear anything during the night?”

“I don’t think so, sir. Nothing unusual, I mean. The train being at a standstill made it all very quiet.”

Poirot was silent a moment or two, then he said:

“Well, I think there is very little more to be said. You cannot throw any light upon the tragedy?”

“I’m afraid not. I’m sorry, sir.”

“As far as you know, was there any quarrel or bad blood between your master and M. MacQueen?”

“Oh, no, sir. Mr. MacQueen was a very pleasant gentleman.”

“Where were you in service before you came to M. Ratchett?”

“With Sir Henry Tomlinson, sir, in Grosvenor Square.”

“Why did you leave him?”

“He was going to East Africa, sir, and did not require my services any longer. But I am sure he will speak for me, sir. I was with him some years.”

“And you have been with M. Ratchett—how long?”

“Just over nine months, sir.”

“Thank you, Masterman. By the way, are you a pipe smoker?”

“No, sir. I only smoke cigarettes—gaspers, sir.”

“Thank you. That will do.”

The valet hesitated a moment.

“You’ll excuse me, sir, but the elderly American lady is in what I might describe as a state, sir. She’s saying she knows all about the murderer. She’s in a very excitable condition, sir.”

“In that case,” said Poirot, smiling, “we had better see her next.”

“Shall I tell her, sir? She’s been demanding to see someone in authority for a long time. The conductor’s been trying to pacify her.”

“Send her to us, my friend,” said Poirot. “We will listen to her story now.”

Four

THE EVIDENCE OF THE AMERICAN LADY

Mrs. Hubbard arrived in the dining car in such a state of breathless excitement that she was hardly able to articulate her words.

“Now just tell me this. Who’s in authority here? I’ve got some vurry important information, vurry important, indeed, and I just want to tell it to someone in authority as soon as may be. If you gentlemen—”

Her wavering glance fluctuated between the three men. Poirot leaned forward.

“Tell it to me, Madame,” he said. “But, first, pray be seated.”

Mrs. Hubbard plumped heavily down on to the seat opposite to him.

“What I’ve got to tell you is just this. There was a murder on the train last night, and the murderer was right there in my compartment!”

She paused to give dramatic emphasis to her words.

“You are sure of this, Madame?”

“Of course I’m sure! The idea! I know what I’m talking about. I’ll tell you just everything there is to tell. I’d gotten into bed and gone to sleep, and suddenly I woke up—all in the dark, it was—and I knew there was a man in my compartment. I was just so scared I couldn’t scream, if you know what I mean. I just lay there and thought, ‘Mercy, I’m going to be killed.’ I just can’t describe to you how I felt. These nasty trains, I thought, and all the outrages I’d read of. And I thought, ‘Well, anyway, he won’t get my jewellery.’ Because, you see, I’d put that in a stocking and hidden it under my pillow—which isn’t so mighty comfortable, by the way, kinder bumpy, if you know what I mean. But that’s neither here nor there. Where was I?”

“You realized, Madame, that there was a man in your compartment.”

“Yes, well, I just lay there with my eyes closed, and I thought whatever should I do, and I thought, ‘Well, I’m just thankful that my daughter doesn’t know the plight I’m in.’ And then, somehow, I got my wits about me and I felt about with my hand and I pressed the bell for the conductor. I pressed it and I pressed it, but nothing happened, and I can tell you I thought my heart was going to stop beating. ‘Mercy,’ I said to myself, ‘maybe they’ve murdered every single soul on the train.’ It was at a standstill, anyhow, and a nasty quiet feel in the air. But I just went on pressing that bell, and oh! the relief when I heard footsteps coming running down the corridor and a knock on the door. ‘Come in,’ I screamed, and I switched on the lights at the same time. And, would you believe it, there wasn’t a soul there.”

This seemed to Mrs. Hubbard to be a dramatic climax rather than an anticlimax.

“And what happened next, Madame?”

“Why, I told the man what had happened, and he didn’t seem to believe me. Seemed to imagine I’d dreamt the whole thing. I made him look under the seat, though he said there wasn’t room for a man to squeeze himself in there. It was plain enough the man had got away, but there had been a man there and it just made me mad the way the conductor tried to soothe me down! I’m not one to imagine things, Mr.—I don’t think I know your name?”

“Poirot, Madame, and this is M. Bouc, a director of the company, and Dr. Constantine.”

Mrs. Hubbard murmured:

“Please to meet you, I’m sure,” to all three of them in an abstracted manner, and then plunged once more into her recital.

“Now I’m just not going to pretend I was as bright as I might have been. I got it into my head that it was the man from next door—the poor fellow who’s been killed. I told the conductor to look at the door between the compartments, and sure enough it wasn't bolted. Well, I soon saw to that, I told him to bolt it then and there, and after he'd gone out I got up and put a suitcase against it to make sure."

"What time was this, Mrs. Hubbard?"

"Well, I'm sure I can't tell you. I never looked to see. I was so upset."

"And what is your theory now?"

"Why, I should say it was just as plain as plain could be. The man in my compartment was the murderer. Who else could he be?"

"And you think he went back into the adjoining compartment?"

"How do I know where he went? I had my eyes tight shut."

"He must have slipped out through the door into the corridor."

"Well, I couldn't say. You see, I had my eyes tight shut."

Mrs. Hubbard sighed convulsively.

"Mercy, I was scared! If my daughter only knew—"

"You do not think, Madame, that what you heard was the noise of someone moving about next door—in the murdered man's compartment?"

"No, I do not, Mr.—what is it?—Poirot. The man was right there in the same compartment with me. And, what's more, I've got proof of it."

Triumphantly she hauled a large handbag into view and proceeded to burrow in its interior.

She took out in turn two large clean handkerchiefs, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, a bottle of aspirin, a packet of Glauber's salts, a celluloid tube of bright green peppermints, a bunch of keys, a pair of scissors, a book of American Express cheques, a snapshot of an extraordinarily plain-looking child, some letters, five strings of pseudo Oriental beads and a small metal object—a button.

“You see this button? Well, it’s not one of my buttons. It’s not off anything I’ve got. I found it this morning when I got up.”

As she placed it on the table, M. Bouc leaned forward and gave an exclamation.

“But this is a button from the tunic of a Wagon Lit attendant!”

“There may be a natural explanation for that,” said Poirot.

He turned gently to the lady.

“This button, Madame, may have dropped from the conductor’s uniform, either when he searched your cabin, or when he was making the bed up last night.”

“I just don’t know what’s the matter with all you people. Seems as though you don’t do anything but make objections. Now listen here. I was reading a magazine last night before I went to sleep. Before I turned the light out I placed that magazine on a little case that was standing on the floor near the window. Have you got that?”

They assured her that they had.

“Very well, then. The conductor looked under the seat from near the door and then he came in and bolted the door between me and the next compartment, but he never went up near the window. Well, this morning that button was lying right on top of the magazine. What do you call that, I should like to know?”

“That, Madame, I call evidence,” said Poirot.

The answer seemed to appease the lady.

“It makes me madder than a hornet to be disbelieved,” she explained.

“You have given us most interesting and valuable evidence,” said Poirot soothingly. “Now, may I ask you a few questions?”

“Why, willingly.”

“How was it, since you were nervous of this man Ratchett, that you hadn’t already bolted the door between the compartments?”

“I had,” returned Mrs. Hubbard promptly.

“Oh, you had?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I asked that Swedish creature—a pleasant soul—if it was bolted, and she said it was.”

“How was it you couldn’t see for yourself?”

“Because I was in bed and my sponge bag was hanging on the door handle.”

“What time was it when you asked her to do this for you?”

“Now let me think. It must have been round about half-past ten or a quarter to eleven. She’d come along to see if I’d got an aspirin. I told her where to find it, and she got it out of my grip.”

“You yourself were in bed?”

“Yes.”

Suddenly she laughed.

“Poor soul—she was in quite a taking. You see, she’d opened the door of the next compartment by mistake.”

“M. Ratchett’s?”

“Yes. You know how difficult it is as you come along the train and all the doors are shut. She opened his by mistake. She was very distressed about it.

He’d laughed, it seemed, and I fancy he may have said something not quite nice. Poor thing, she was all in a flutter. ‘Oh! I make mistake,’ she said. ‘I ashamed make mistake. Not nice man,’ she said. ‘He say, “You too old.’”

Dr. Constantine sniggered and Mrs. Hubbard immediately froze him with a glance.

“He wasn’t a nice kind of man,” she said, “to say a thing like that to a lady. It’s not right to laugh at such things.”

Dr. Constantine hastily apologized.

“Did you hear any noise from M. Ratchett’s compartment after that?” asked Poirot.

“Well—not exactly.”

“What do you mean by that, Madame?”

“Well—” she paused. “He snored.”

“Ah! he snored, did he?”

“Terribly. The night before it quite kept me awake.”

“You didn’t hear him snore after you had had the scare about a man being in your compartment?”

“Why, Mr. Poirot, how could I? He was dead.”

“Ah, yes, truly,” said Poirot. He appeared confused.

“Do you remember the affair of the Armstrong kidnapping, Mrs. Hubbard?” he asked.

“Yes, indeed I do. And how the wretch that did it escaped scot free! My, I’d have liked to get my hands on him.”

“He has not escaped. He is dead. He died last night.”

"You don't mean—?" Mrs. Hubbard half rose from her chair in excitement.

"But yes, I do. Ratchett was the man."

"Well! Well, to think of that! I must write and tell my daughter. Now, didn't I tell you last night that that man had an evil face? I was right, you see. My daughter always says: 'When Momma's got a hunch, you can bet your bottom dollar it's O.K.'"

"Were you acquainted with any of the Armstrong family, Mrs. Hubbard?"

"No. They moved in a very exclusive circle. But I've always heard that Mrs. Armstrong was a perfectly lovely woman and that her husband worshipped her."

"Well, Mrs. Hubbard, you have helped us very much—very much indeed. Perhaps you will give me your full name?"

"Why, certainly. Caroline Martha Hubbard."

"Will you write your address down here?"

Mrs. Hubbard did so, without ceasing to speak.

"I just can't get over it. Cassetti—on this train. I had a hunch about that man, didn't I, Mr. Poirot?"

"Yes, indeed, Madame. By the way, have you a scarlet silk dressing gown?"

"Mercy, what an odd question! Why, no. I've got two dressing gowns with me—a pink flannel one that's kind of cosy for on board ship, and one my daughter gave me as a present—a kind of local affair in purple silk. But what in creation do you want to know about my dressing gowns for?"

"Well, you see, Madame, someone in a scarlet kimono entered either your or Mr. Ratchett's compartment last night. It is, as you said just now, very difficult when all the doors are shut to know which compartment is which."

"Well, no one in a scarlet dressing gown came into my compartment."

“Then she must have gone into M. Ratchett’s.”

Mrs. Hubbard pursed her lips together and said grimly:

“That wouldn’t surprise me any.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“So you heard a woman’s voice next door?”

“I don’t know how you guessed that, Mr. Poirot. I don’t really. But—well—as a matter of fact, I did.”

“But when I asked you just now if you heard anything next door, you only said you heard Mr. Ratchett snoring.”

“Well that was true enough. He did snore part of the time. As for the other—” Mrs. Hubbard got rather pink. “It isn’t a very nice thing to speak about.”

“What time was it when you heard a woman’s voice?”

“I can’t tell you. I just woke up for a minute and heard a woman talking, and it was plain enough where she was. So I just thought, ‘Well that’s the kind of man he is. Well, I’m not surprised,’ and then I went to sleep again, and I’m sure I should never have mentioned anything of the kind to three strange gentlemen if you hadn’t dragged it out of me.”

“Was it before the scare about the man in your compartment, or after?”

“Why, that’s like what you said just now! He wouldn’t have had a woman talking to him if he were dead, would he?”

“Pardon. You must think me very stupid, Madame.”

“I guess even you get kinder muddled now and then. I just can’t get over it being that monster Cassetti. What my daughter will say—”

Poirot managed adroitly to help the good lady to restore the contents of her handbag and he then shepherded her towards the door.

At the last moment he said:

“You have dropped your handkerchief, Madame.”

Mrs. Hubbard looked at the little scrap of cambric he held out to her.

“That’s not mine, Mr. Poirot. I’ve got mine right here.”

“Pardon. I thought as it had the initial H on it—”

“Well, now, that’s curious, but it’s certainly not mine. Mine are marked C.M.H., and they’re sensible things—not expensive Paris fallals. What good is a handkerchief like that to anybody’s nose?”

Neither of the three men seemed to have an answer to this question, and Mrs. Hubbard sailed out triumphantly.

Five

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SWEDISH LADY

M. Bouc was handling the button Mrs. Hubbard had left behind her.

“This button. I cannot understand it. Does it mean that, after all, Pierre Michel is involved in some way?” he said. He paused, then continued, as Poirot did not reply. “What have you to say, my friend?”

“That button, it suggests possibilities,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Let us interview next the Swedish lady before we discuss the evidence we have heard.”

He sorted through the pile of passports in front of him.

“Ah! here we are. Greta Ohlsson, age forty-nine.” M. Bouc gave directions to the restaurant attendant, and presently the lady with the yellowish-grey bun of hair and the long mild sheep-like face was ushered in. She peered shortsightedly at Poirot through her glasses, but was quite calm.

It transpired that she understood and spoke French, so that the conversation took place in that language. Poirot first asked her the questions to which he already knew the answers—her name, age, and address. He then asked her her occupation.

She was, she told him, matron in a missionary school near Stamboul. She was a trained nurse.

“You know, of course, of what took place last night, Mademoiselle?”

“Naturally. It is very dreadful. And the American lady tells me that the murderer was actually in her compartment.”

“I hear, Mademoiselle, that you were the last person to see the murdered man alive?”

“I do not know. It may be so. I opened the door of his compartment by mistake. I was much ashamed. It was a most awkward mistake.”

“You actually saw him?”

“Yes. He was reading a book. I apologized quickly and withdrew.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

A slight flush showed on the worthy lady’s cheek.

“He laughed and said a few words. I—I did not quite catch them.”

“And what did you do after that, Mademoiselle?” asked Poirot, passing from the subject tactfully.

“I went in to the American lady, Mrs. Hubbard. I asked her for some aspirin and she gave it to me.”

“Did she ask you whether the communicating door between her compartment and that of M. Ratchett was bolted?”

“Yes.”

“And was it?”

“Yes.”

“And after that?”

“After that I go back to my own compartment, I take the aspirin and lie down.”

“What time was all this?”

“When I got into bed it was five minutes to eleven, because I look at my watch before I wind it up.”

“Did you go to sleep quickly?”

"Not very quickly. My head got better, but I lay awake some time."

"Had the train come to a stop before you went to sleep?"

"I do not think so. We stopped, I think, at a station, just as I was getting drowsy."

"That would be Vincovci. Now your compartment, Mademoiselle, is this one?" he indicated it on the plan.

"That is so, yes."

"You had the upper or the lower berth?"

"The lower berth, No. 10."

"And you had a companion?"

"Yes, a young English lady. Very nice, very amiable. She had travelled from Baghdad."

"After the train left Vincovci, did she leave the compartment?"

"No, I am sure she did not."

"Why are you sure if you were asleep?"

"I sleep very lightly. I am used to waking at a sound. I am sure if she had come down from the berth above I would have awakened."

"Did you yourself leave the compartment?"

"Not until this morning."

"Have you a scarlet silk kimono, Mademoiselle?"

"No, indeed. I have a good comfortable dressing gown of Jaeger material."

"A pale mauve abba such as you buy in the East."

Poirot nodded. Then he said in a friendly tone:

“Why are you taking this journey? A holiday?”

“Yes, I am going home for a holiday. But first I go to Lausanne to stay with a sister for a week or so.”

“Perhaps you will be so amiable as to write me down the name and address of your sister?”

“With pleasure.”

She took the paper and pencil he gave her and wrote down the name and address as requested.

“Have you ever been in America, Mademoiselle?”

“No. Very nearly once. I was to go with an invalid lady, but it was cancelled at the last moment. I much regretted. They are very good, the Americans. They give much money to found schools and hospitals. They are very practical.”

“Do you remember hearing of the Armstrong kidnapping case?”

“No, what was that?”

Poirot explained.

Greta Ohlsson was indignant. Her yellow bun of hair quivered with her emotion.

“That there are in the world such evil men! It tries one’s faith. The poor mother. My heart aches for her.”

The amiable Swede departed, her kindly face flushed, her eyes suffused with tears.

Poirot was writing busily on a sheet of paper.

“What is it you write there, my friend?” asked M. Bouc.

“Mon cher, it is my habit to be neat and orderly. I make here a little table of chronological events.”

He finished writing and passed the paper to M. Bouc.

9:15 Train leaves Belgrade.

about 9:40 Valet leaves Ratchett with sleeping draught beside him.

about 10:00 MacQueen leaves Ratchett.

about 10:40 Greta Ohlsson sees Ratchett (last seen alive). N.B.—He was awake reading a book.

0:10 Train leaves Vincovci (late).

0:30 Train runs into a snowdrift.

0:37 Ratchett’s bell rings. Conductor answers it. Ratchett says, “Ce n’est rien. Je me suis trompé.”

about 1:17 Mrs. Hubbard thinks man is in her carriage. Rings for conductor.

M. Bouc nodded approval.

“That is very clear,” he said.

“There is nothing there that strikes you as at all odd?”

“No, it seems all quite clear and above board. It seems quite plain that the crime was committed at 1:15. The evidence of the watch shows us that, and Mrs. Hubbard’s story fits in. For my mind, I will make a guess at the identity of the murderer. I say, my friend, that it is the big Italian. He comes from America—from Chicago—and remember an Italian’s weapon is the knife, and he stabs not once but several times.”

“That is true.”

“Without a doubt, that is the solution of the mystery. Doubtless he and this Ratchett were in this kidnapping business together. Cassetti is an Italian name. In some way Ratchett did on him what they call the double-cross. The Italian tracks him down, sends him warning letters first, and finally revenges himself upon him in a brutal way. It is all quite simple.”

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

“It is hardly as simple as that, I fear,” he murmured.

“Me, I am convinced it is the truth,” said M. Bouc, becoming more and more enamoured of his theory.

“And what about the valet with the toothache who swears that the Italian never left the compartment?”

“That is the difficulty.”

Poirot twinkled.

“Yes, it is annoying, that. Unlucky for your theory, and extremely lucky for our Italian friend that M. Ratchett’s valet should have had the toothache.”

“It will be explained,” said M. Bouc with magnificent certainty.

Poirot shook his head again.

“No, it is hardly so simple as that,” he murmured again.

Six

THE EVIDENCE OF THE RUSSIAN PRINCESS

“Let us hear what Pierre Michel has to say about this button,” he said.

The Wagon Lit conductor was recalled. He looked at them inquiringly.

M. Bouc cleared his throat.

“Michel,” he said. “Here is a button from your tunic. It was found in the American lady’s compartment. What have you to say for yourself about it?”

The conductor’s hand went automatically to his tunic.

“I have lost no button, Monsieur,” he said. “There must be some mistake.”

“That is very odd.”

“I cannot account for it, Monsieur.”

The man seemed astonished, but not in any way guilty or confused.

M. Bouc said meaningly:

“Owing to the circumstances in which it was found, it seems fairly certain that this button was dropped by the man who was in Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment last night when she rang the bell.”

“But, Monsieur, there was no one there. The lady must have imagined it.”

“She did not imagine it, Michael. The assassin of M. Ratchett passed that way—and dropped that button.”

As the significance of M. Bouc’s word became plain to him, Pierre Michel flew into a violent state of agitation.

“It is not true, Monsieur, it is not true!” he cried. “You are accusing me of the crime. Me? I am innocent. I am absolutely innocent. Why should I want to kill a Monsieur whom I have never seen before?”

“Where were you when Mrs. Hubbard’s bell rang?”

“I told you, Monsieur, in the next coach, talking to my colleague.”

“We will send for him.”

“Do so, Monsieur, I implore you, do so.”

The conductor of the next coach was summoned. He immediately confirmed Pierre Michel’s statement. He added that the conductor from the Bucharest coach had also been there. The three of them had been discussing the situation caused by the snow. They had been talking some ten minutes when Michel fancied he heard a bell. As he opened the doors connecting the two coaches, they had all heard it plainly. A bell ringing repeatedly. Michel had run posthaste to answer it.

“So you see, Monsieur, I am not guilty,” cried Michel anxiously.

“And this button from a Wagon Lit tunic—how do you explain it?”

“I cannot, Monsieur. It is a mystery to me. All my buttons are intact.”

Both of the other conductors also declared that they had not lost a button. Also that they had not been inside Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment at any time.

“Calm yourself, Michel,” said M. Bouc, “and cast your mind back to the moment when you ran to answer Mrs. Hubbard’s bell. Did you meet anyone at all in the corridor?”

“No, Monsieur.”

“Did you see anyone going away from you down the corridor in the other direction?”

"Again, no. Monsieur."

"Odd," said M. Bouc.

"Not so very," said Poirot. "It is a question of time. Mrs. Hubbard wakes to find someone in her compartment. For a minute or two she lies paralysed, her eyes shut. Probably it was then that the man slipped out into the corridor. Then she starts ringing the bell. But the conductor does not come at once. It is only the third or fourth peal that he hears. I should say myself that there was ample time—"

"For what? For what, mon cher? Remember that there are thick drifts of snow all round the train."

"There are two courses open to our mysterious assassin," said Poirot slowly. "He could retreat into either of the toilets or he could disappear into one of the compartments."

"But they were all occupied."

"Yes."

"You mean that he could retreat into his own compartment?"

Poirot nodded.

"It fits, it fits," murmured M. Bouc. "During that ten minutes' absence of the conductor, the murderer comes from his own compartment, goes into Ratchett's, kills him, locks and chains the door on the inside, goes out through Mrs. Hubbard's compartment and is back safely in his own compartment by the time the conductor arrives."

Poirot murmured:

"It is not quite so simple as that, my friend. Our friend the doctor here will tell you so."

With a gesture M. Bouc signified that the three conductors might depart.

“We have still to see eight passengers,” said Poirot. “Five first-class passengers—Princess Dragomiroff, Count and Countess Andrenyi, Colonel Arbuthnot and Mr. Hardman. Three second-class passengers—Miss Debenham, Antonio Foscarelli and the lady’s maid, Fräulein Schmidt.”

“Who will you see first—the Italian?”

“How you harp on your Italian! No, we will start at the top of the tree. Perhaps Madame la Princesse will be so good as to spare us a few moments of her time. Convey that message to her, Michel.”

“Oui, Monsieur,” said the conductor, who was just leaving the car.

“Tell her we can wait on her in her compartment if she does not wish to put herself to the trouble of coming here,” called M. Bouc.

But Princess Dragomiroff declined to take this course. She appeared in the dining car, inclined her head slightly and sat down opposite Poirot.

Her small toad-like face looked even yellower than the day before. She was certainly ugly, and yet, like the toad, she had eyes like jewels, dark and imperious, revealing latent energy and an intellectual force that could be felt at once.

Her voice was deep, very distinct, with a slight grating quality in it.

She cut short a flowery phrase of apology from M. Bouc.

“You need not offer apologies, Messieurs. I understand a murder has taken place. Naturally, you must interview all the passengers. I shall be glad to give all the assistance in my power.”

“You are most amiable, Madame,” said Poirot.

“Not at all. It is a duty. What do you wish to know?”

“Your full Christian names and address, Madame. Perhaps you would prefer to write them yourself?”

Poirot proffered a sheet of paper and pencil, but the Princess waved them aside.

“You can write it,” she said. “There is nothing difficult—Natalia Dragomiroff, 17 Avenue Kleber, Paris.”

“You are travelling home from Constantinople, Madame?”

“Yes, I have been staying at the Austrian Embassy. My maid is with me.”

“Would you be so good as to give me a brief account of your movements last night from dinner onwards?”

“Willingly. I directed the conductor to make up my bed whilst I was in the dining car. I retired to bed immediately after dinner. I read until the hour of eleven, when I turned out my light. I was unable to sleep owing to certain rheumatic pains from which I suffer. At about a quarter to one I rang for my maid. She massaged me and then read aloud till I felt sleepy. I cannot say exactly when she left me. It may have been half an hour, it may have been later.”

“The train had stopped then?”

“The train had stopped.”

“You heard nothing—nothing unusual during the time, Madame?”

“I heard nothing unusual.”

“What is your maid’s name?”

“Hildegarde Schmidt.”

“She has been with you long?”

“Fifteen years.”

“You consider her trustworthy?”

“Absolutely. Her people come from an estate of my late husband’s in Germany.”

“You have been in America, I presume, Madame?”

The abrupt change of subject made the old lady raise her eyebrows.

“Many times.”

“Were you at any time acquainted with a family of the name of Armstrong—a family in which a tragedy occurred?”

With some emotion in her voice the old lady said:

“You speak of friends of mine, Monsieur.”

“You knew Colonel Armstrong well, then?”

“I knew him slightly; but his wife, Sonia Armstrong, was my god-daughter. I was on terms of friendship with her mother, the actress, Linda Arden. Linda Arden was a great genius, one of the greatest tragic actresses in the world. As Lady Macbeth, as Magda, there was no one to touch her. I was not only an admirer of her art, I was a personal friend.”

“She is dead?”

“No, no, she is alive, but she lives in complete retirement. Her health is very delicate, she has to lie on a sofa most of the time.”

“There was, I think, a second daughter?”

“Yes, much younger than Mrs. Armstrong.”

“And she is alive?”

“Certainly.”

“Where is she?”

The old woman bent an acute glance at him.

“I must ask you the reason of these questions. What have they to do with the matter in hand—the murder on this train?”

“They are connected in this way, Madame, the man who was murdered was the man responsible for the kidnapping and murder of Mrs. Armstrong’s child.”

“Ah!”

The straight brows drew together. Princess Dragomiroff drew herself a little more erect.

“In my view, then, this murder is an entirely admirable happening! You will pardon my slightly biased point of view.”

“It is most natural, Madame. And now to return to the question you did not answer. Where is the younger daughter of Linda Arden, the sister of Mrs. Armstrong?”

“I honestly cannot tell you, Monsieur. I have lost touch with the younger generation. I believe she married an Englishman some years ago and went to England, but at the moment I cannot recollect the name.”

She paused a minute and then said:

“Is there anything further you want to ask me, gentlemen?”

“Only one thing, Madame, a somewhat personal question. The colour of your dressing gown.”

She raised her eyebrows slightly.

“I must suppose you have a reason for such a question. My dressing gown is of blue satin.”

“There is nothing more, Madame. I am much obliged to you for answering my questions so promptly.”

She made a slight gesture with her heavily-beringed hand.

Then, as she rose, and the others rose with her, she stopped.

“You will excuse me, Monsieur,” she said, “but may I ask your name? Your face is somehow familiar to me.”

“My name, Madame, is Hercule Poirot—at your service.”

She was silent a minute, then:

“Hercule Poirot,” she said. “Yes. I remember now. This is Destiny.”

She walked away, very erect, a little stiff in her movements.

“Voilà une grande dame,” said M. Bouc. “What do you think of her, my friend?”

But Hercule Poirot merely shook his head.

“I am wondering,” he said, “what she meant by Destiny.”

Seven

THE EVIDENCE OF COUNT AND COUNTESS ANDRENYI

Count and Countess Andrenyi were next summoned. The Count, however, entered the dining car alone.

There was no doubt that he was a fine-looking man seen face to face. He was at least six feet in height, with broad shoulders and slender hips. He was dressed in very well-cut English tweeds, and might have been taken for an Englishman had it not been for the length of his moustache and something in the line of the cheekbone.

"Well, Messieurs," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"You understand, Monsieur," said Poirot, "that in view of what has occurred I am obliged to put certain questions to all the passengers."

"Perfectly, perfectly," said the Count easily. "I quite understand your position. Not, I fear, that my wife and I can do much to assist you. We were asleep and heard nothing at all."

"Are you aware of the identity of the deceased, Monsieur?"

"I understand it was the big American—a man with a decidedly unpleasant face. He sat at the table at meal times."

He indicated with a nod of his head the table at which Ratchett and MacQueen had sat.

"Yes, yes, Monsieur, you are perfectly correct. I meant did you know the name of the man?"

"No." The Count looked thoroughly puzzled by Poirot's queries.

“If you want to know his name,” he said, “surely it is on his passport?”

“The name on his passport is Ratchett,” said Poirot. “But that, Monsieur, is not his real name. He is the man Cassetti, who was responsible for a celebrated kidnapping outrage in America.”

He watched the Count closely as he spoke, but the latter seemed quite unaffected by the piece of news. He merely opened his eyes a little.

“Ah!” he said. “That certainly should throw light upon the matter. An extraordinary country America.”

“You have been there, perhaps, Monsieur le Comte?”

“I was in Washington for a year.”

“You knew, perhaps, the Armstrong family?”

“Armstrong—Armstrong—it is difficult to recall—one met so many.”

He smiled, shrugged his shoulders.

“But to come back to the matter in hand, gentlemen,” he said. “What more can I do to assist you?”

“You retired to rest—when, Monsieur le Comte?”

Hercule Poirot’s eyes stole to his plan. Count and Countess Andrenyi occupied compartments No. 12 and 13 adjoining.

“We had one compartment made up for the night whilst we were in the dining car. On returning we sat in the other for a while—”

“What number would that be?”

“No. 13. We played picquet together. About eleven o’clock my wife retired for the night. The conductor made up my compartment and I also went to bed. I slept soundly until morning.”

"Did you notice the stopping of the train?"

"I was not aware of it till this morning."

"And your wife?"

The Count smiled.

"My wife always takes a sleeping draught when travelling by train. She took her usual dose of trional."

He paused.

"I am sorry I am not able to assist you in any way."

Poirot passed him a sheet of paper and a pen.

"Thank you, Monsieur le Comte. It is a formality, but will you just let me have your name and address?"

The Count wrote slowly and carefully.

"It is just as well I should write this for you," he said pleasantly. "The spelling of my country estate is a little difficult for those unacquainted with the language."

He passed the paper across to Poirot and rose.

"It will be quite unnecessary for my wife to come here," he said. "She can tell you nothing more than I have."

A little gleam came into Poirot's eye.

"Doubtless, doubtless," he said. "But all the same I think I should like to have just one little word with Madame la Comtesse."

"I assure you it is quite unnecessary."

His voice rang out authoritatively.

Poirot blinked gently at him.

“It will be a mere formality,” he said. “But you understand, it is necessary for my report.”

“As you please.”

The Count gave way grudgingly. He made a short, foreign bow and left the dining car.

Poirot reached out a hand to a passport. It set out the Count’s name and titles. He passed on to the further information—accompanied by wife. Christian name Elena Maria; maiden name Goldenberg; age twenty. A spot of grease had been dropped some time by a careless official on it.

“A diplomatic passport,” said M. Bouc. “We must be careful, my friend, to give no offence. These people can have nothing to do with the murder.”

“Be easy, mon vieux, I will be most tactful. A mere formality.”

His voice dropped as the Countess Andrenyi entered the dining car. She looked timid and extremely charming.

“You wish to see me, Messieurs?”

“A mere formality, Madame la Comtesse.” Poirot rose gallantly, bowed her into the seat opposite him. “It is only to ask you if you saw or heard anything last night that may throw light upon this matter.”

“Nothing at all, Monsieur. I was asleep.”

“You did not hear, for instance, a commotion going on in the compartment next to yours? The American lady who occupies it had quite an attack of hysterics and rang for the conductor.”

“I heard nothing, Monsieur. You see, I had taken a sleeping draught.”

“Ah! I comprehend. Well, I need not detain you further.” Then, as she rose swiftly, “Just one little minute—these particulars, your maiden name, age and so on, they are correct?”

“Quite correct, Monsieur.”

“Perhaps you will sign this memorandum to that effect, then.”

She signed quickly, a graceful slanting handwriting.

Elena Andrenyi.

“Did you accompany your husband to America, Madame?”

“No, Monsieur.” She smiled, flushed a little. “We were not married then; we have only been married a year.”

“Ah yes, thank you, Madame. By the way, does your husband smoke?”

She stared at him as she stood poised for departure.

“Yes.”

“A pipe?”

“No. Cigarettes and cigars.”

“Ah! Thank you.”

She lingered; her eyes watched him curiously. Lovely eyes they were, dark and almond shaped, with very long black lashes that swept the exquisite pallor of her cheeks. Her lips, very scarlet, in the foreign fashion, were parted just a little. She looked exotic and beautiful.

“Why did you ask me that?”

“Madame,” Poirot waved an airy hand, “detectives have to ask all sorts of questions. For instance, perhaps you will tell me the colour of your dressing gown?”

She stared at him. Then she laughed.

“It is corn-coloured chiffon. Is that really important?”

“Very important, Madame.”

She asked curiously:

“Are you really a detective, then?”

“At your service, Madame.”

“I thought there were no detectives on the train when it passed through Yugo-Slavia—not until one got to Italy.”

“I am not a Yugo-Slavian detective, Madame. I am an international detective.”

“You belong to the League of Nations?”

“I belong to the world, Madame,” said Poirot dramatically. He went on, “I work mainly in London. You speak English?” he added in that language.

“I speak a leetle, yes.”

Her accent was charming.

Poirot bowed once more.

“We will not detain you further, Madame. You see, it was not so very terrible.”

She smiled, inclined her head and departed.

“Elle est jolie femme,” said M. Bouc appreciatively.

He sighed.

“Well, that did not advance us much.”

“No,” said Poirot. “Two people who saw nothing and heard nothing.”

“Shall we now see the Italian?”

Poirot did not reply for a moment. He was studying a grease spot on a Hungarian diplomatic passport.

Eight

THE EVIDENCE OF COLONEL ARBUTHNOT

Poirot roused himself with a slight start. His eyes twinkled a little as they met the eager ones of M. Bouc.

“Ah! my dear old friend,” he said. “You see, I have become what they call the snob! The first-class, I feel it should be attended to before the second-class. Next, I think, we will interview the good looking Colonel Arbuthnot.”

Finding the Colonel’s French to be of a severely limited description, Poirot conducted his interrogation in English.

Arbuthnot’s name, age, home address and exact military standing were all ascertained. Poirot proceeded:

“It is that you come home from India on what is called the leave—what we call en permission?”

Colonel Arbuthnot, uninterested in what a pack of foreigners called anything, replied with true British brevity:

“Yes.”

“But you do not come home on the P. & O. boat?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I chose to come by the overland route for reasons of my own.”

“And that,” his manner seemed to say, “is one for you, you interfering little jackanapes.”

“You came straight through from India?”

The Colonel replied dryly:

“I stopped for one night to see Ur of the Chaldees and for three days in Baghdad with the A.O.C., who happens to be an old friend of mine.”

“You stopped three days in Baghdad. I understand that the young English lady, Miss Debenham, also comes from Baghdad. Perhaps you met her there?”

“No, I did not. I first met Miss Debenham when she and I shared the railway convoy car from Kirkuk to Nissibin.”

Poirot leaned forward. He became persuasive and a little more foreign than he need have been.

“Monsieur, I am about to appeal to you. You and Miss Debenham are the only two English people on the train. It is necessary that I should ask you each your opinion of the other.”

“Highly irregular,” said Colonel Arbuthnot coldly.

“Not so. You see, this crime, it was most probably committed by a woman. The man was stabbed no less than twelve times. Even the chef de train said at once, ‘It is a woman.’ Well, then, what is my first task? To give all the women travelling on the Stamboul-Calais coach what Americans call the ‘once over.’ But to judge of an Englishwoman is difficult. They are very reserved, the English. So I appeal to you, Monsieur, in the interests of justice. What sort of a person is this Miss Debenham? What do you know about her?”

“Miss Debenham,” said the Colonel with some warmth, “is a lady.”

“Ah!” said Poirot with every appearance of being much gratified. “So you do not think that she is likely to be implicated in this crime?”

“The idea is absurd,” said Arbuthnot. “The man was a perfect stranger—she had never seen him before.”

“Did she tell you so?”

“She did. She commented at once upon his somewhat unpleasant appearance. If a woman is concerned, as you seem to think (to my mind without any evidence but mere assumption), I can assure you that Miss Debenham could not possibly be indicated.”

“You feel warmly in the matter,” said Poirot with a smile.

Colonel Arbuthnot gave him a cold stare.

“I really don’t know what you mean,” he said.

The stare seemed to abash Poirot. He dropped his eyes and began fiddling with the papers in front of him.

“All this is by the way,” he said. “Let us be practical and come to facts. This crime, we have reason to believe, took place at a quarter past one last night. It is part of the necessary routine to ask everyone on the train what he or she was doing at that time.”

“Quite so. At a quarter past one, to the best of my belief, I was talking to the young American fellow—secretary to the dead man.”

“Ah! Were you in his compartment, or was he in yours?”

“I was in his.”

“That is the young man of the name of MacQueen?”

“Yes.”

“He was a friend or acquaintance of yours?”

“No, I never saw him before this journey. We fell into casual conversation yesterday and both became interested. I don’t as a rule like Americans—haven’t any use for ’em—”

Poirot smiled, remembering MacQueen’s strictures on “Britishers.”

“—But I liked this young fellow. He’d got hold of some tom-fool idiotic ideas about the situation in India; that’s the worst of Americans—they’re so sentimental and idealistic. Well, he was interested in what I had to tell him. I’ve had nearly thirty years experience of the country. And I was interested in what he had to tell me about the financial situation in America. Then we got down to world politics in general. I was quite surprised to look at my watch and find it was a quarter to two.”

“That is the time you broke up this conversation?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do then?”

“Walked along to my own compartment and turned in.”

“Your bed was made up ready?”

“Yes.”

“That is the compartment—let me see—No. 15—the one next but one to the end away from the dining car?”

“Yes.”

“Where was the conductor when you went to your compartment?”

“Sitting at the end at a little table. As a matter of fact, MacQueen called him just as I went to my own compartment.”

“Why did he call him?”

“To make up his bed, I suppose. The compartment hadn’t been made up for the night.”

“Now, Colonel Arbuthnot, I want you to think carefully. During the time you were talking to Mr. MacQueen did anyone pass along the corridor outside the door?”

“A good many people, I should think. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Ah! but I am referring to—let us say the last hour and a half of your conversation. You got out at Vincovci, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but only for about a minute. There was a blizzard on. The cold was something frightful. Made one quite thankful to get back to the fug, though as a rule I think the way these trains are overheated is something scandalous.”

M. Bouc sighed.

“It is very difficult to please everybody,” he said. “The English, they open everything—then others, they come along and shut every thing. It is very difficult.”

Neither Poirot nor Colonel Arbuthnot paid any attention to him.

“Now, Monsieur, cast your mind back,” said Poirot encouragingly. “It was cold outside. You have returned to the train. You sit down again, you smoke—perhaps a cigarette, perhaps a pipe—”

He paused for the fraction of a second.

“A pipe for me. MacQueen smoked cigarettes.”

“The train starts again. You smoke your pipe. You discuss the state of Europe—of the world. It is late now. Most people have retired for the night. Does anyone pass the door—think?”

Arbuthnot frowned in the effort of remembrance.

“Difficult to say,” he said. “You see, I wasn’t paying any attention.”

“But you have the soldier’s observation for detail. You notice without noticing, so to speak.”

The Colonel thought again, but shook his head.

“I couldn’t say. I don’t remember anyone passing except the conductor. Wait a minute—and there was a woman, I think.”

“You saw her? Was she old—young?”

“Didn’t see her. Wasn’t looking that way. Just a rustle and a sort of smell of scent.”

“Scent? A good scent?”

“Well, rather fruity, if you know what I mean. I mean you’d smell it a hundred yards away. But mind you,” the Colonel went on hastily, “this may have been earlier in the evening. You see, as you said just now, it was just one of those things you notice without noticing, so to speak. Some time that evening I said to myself, ‘Woman—scent—got it on pretty thick.’ But when it was I can’t be sure, except that—why, yes, it must have been after Vincovci.”

“Why?”

“Because I remember—sniffing, you know—just when I was talking about the utter washout Stalin’s Five Year Plan was turning out. I know the idea—woman—brought the idea of the position of women in Russia into my mind. And I know we hadn’t got on to Russia until pretty near the end of our talk.”

“You can’t pin it down more definitely than that?”

“N-no. It must have been roughly within the last half hour.”

“It was after the train had stopped?”

The other nodded.

“Yes, I’m almost sure it was.”

“Well, we will pass from that. Have you ever been in America, Colonel Arbuthnot?”

"Never. Don't want to go."

"Did you ever know a Colonel Armstrong?"

"Armstrong—Armstrong—I've known two or three Armstrongs. There was Tommy Armstrong in the 60th—you don't mean him? And Selby Armstrong—he was killed on the Somme."

"I mean the Colonel Armstrong who married an American wife and whose only child was kidnapped and killed."

"Ah, yes, I remember reading about that—shocking affair. I don't think I actually ever came across the fellow, though, of course, I knew of him. Toby Armstrong. Nice fellow. Everybody liked him. He had a very distinguished career. Got the V.C."

"The man who was killed last night was the man responsible for the murder of Colonel Armstrong's child."

Arbuthnot's face grew rather grim.

"Then in my opinion the swine deserved what he got. Though I would have preferred to have seen him properly hanged—or electrocuted, I suppose, over there."

"In fact, Colonel Arbuthnot, you prefer law and order to private vengeance?"

"Well, you can't go about having blood feuds and stabbing each other like Corsicans or the Mafia," said the Colonel. "Say what you like, trial by jury is a sound system."

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or two.

"Yes," he said. "I am sure that would be your view. Well, Colonel Arbuthnot, I do not think there is anything more I have to ask you. There is nothing you yourself can recall last night that in any way struck you—or shall we say strikes you now looking back—as suspicious?"

Arbuthnot considered for a moment or two.

“No,” he said. “Nothing at all. Unless—” he hesitated.

“But yes, continue, I pray of you.”

“Well, it’s nothing really,” said the Colonel slowly. “But you said anything.”

“Yes, yes. Go on.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. A mere detail. But as I got back to my compartment I noticed that the door of the one beyond mine—the end one, you know—”

“Yes, No. 16.”

“Well, the door of it was not quite closed. And the fellow inside peered out in a furtive sort of way. Then he pulled the door to quickly. Of course, I know there’s nothing in that—but it just struck me as a bit odd. I mean, it’s quite usual to open a door and stick your head out if you want to see anything. But it was the furtive way he did it that caught my attention.”

“Ye-es,” said Poirot doubtfully.

“I told you there was nothing to it,” said Arbuthnot apologetically. “But you know what it is—early hours of the morning—everything very still—the thing had a sinister look—like a detective story. All nonsense, really.”

He rose.

“Well, if you don’t want me any more—”

“Thank you, Colonel Arbuthnot, there is nothing else.”

The soldier hesitated for a minute. His first natural distaste for being questioned by “foreigners” had evaporated.

“About Miss Debenham,” he said rather awkwardly. “You can take it from me that she’s all right. She’s a pukka sahib.”

Flushing a little, he withdrew.

“What,” asked Dr. Constantine with interest, “does a pukka sahib mean?”

“It means,” said Poirot, “that Miss Debenham’s father and brothers were at the same kind of school as Colonel Arbuthnot.”

“Oh!” said Dr. Constantine, disappointed. “Then it has nothing to do with the crime at all.”

“Exactly,” said Poirot.

He fell into a reverie, beating a light tattoo on the table. Then he looked up.

“Colonel Arbuthnot smokes a pipe,” he said. “In the compartment of Mr. Ratchett I found a pipe cleaner. M. Ratchett smoked only cigars.”

“You think—?”

“He is the only man so far who admits to smoking a pipe. And he knew of Colonel Armstrong—perhaps actually did know him though he won’t admit it.”

“So you think it possible—”

Poirot shook his head violently.

“That is just it—it is impossible—quite impossible—that an honourable, slightly stupid, upright Englishman should stab an enemy twelve times with a knife! Do you not feel, my friends, how impossible it is?”

“That is the psychology,” said M. Bouc.

“And one must respect the psychology. This crime has a signature and it is certainly not the signature of Colonel Arbuthnot. But now to our next interview.”

This time M. Bouc did not mention the Italian. But he thought of him.

Nine

THE EVIDENCE OF MR. HARDMAN

The last of the first-class passengers to be interviewed—Mr. Hardman—was the big flamboyant American who had shared a table with the Italian and the valet.

He wore a somewhat loud check suit, a pink shirt, a flashy tiepin, and was rolling something round his tongue as he entered the dining car. He had a big, fleshy, coarse-featured face, with a good humoured expression.

“Morning, gentlemen,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“You have heard of this murder, Mr.—er—Hardman?”

“Sure.”

He shifted the chewing gum deftly.

“We are of necessity interviewing all the passengers on the train.”

“That’s all right by me. Guess that’s the only way to tackle the job.”

Poirot consulted the passport lying in front of him.

“You are Cyrus Bethman Hardman, United States subject, forty-one years of age, travelling salesman for typewriting ribbons?”

“O.K., that’s me.”

“You are travelling from Stamboul to Paris?”

“That’s so.”

“Reason?”

“Business.”

“Do you always travel first-class, Mr. Hardman?”

“Yes, sir. The firm pays my travelling expenses.”

He winked.

“Now, Mr. Hardman, we come to the events of last night.”

The American nodded.

“What can you tell us about the matter?”

“Exactly nothing at all.”

“Ah, that is a pity. Perhaps, Mr. Hardman, you will tell us exactly what you did last night, from dinner onwards?”

For the first time the American did not seem ready with his reply. At last he said:

“Excuse me, gentlemen, but just who are you? Put me wise.”

“This is M. Bouc, a director of the Compagnie des Wagons Lits. This gentleman is the doctor who examined the body.”

“And you yourself?”

“I am Hercule Poirot. I am engaged by the company to investigate this matter.”

“I’ve heard of you,” said Mr. Hardman. He reflected a minute or two longer. “Guess I’d better come clean.”

“It will certainly be advisable for you to tell us all you know,” said Poirot dryly.

"You'd have said a mouthful if there was anything I did know. But I don't. I know nothing at all—just as I said. But I ought to know something. That's what makes me sore. I ought to."

"Please explain, Mr. Hardman."

Mr. Hardman sighed, removed the chewing gum, and dived into a pocket. At the same time his whole personality seemed to undergo a change. He became less of a stage character and more of a real person. The resonant nasal tones of his voice became modified.

"That passport's a bit of bluff," he said. "That's who I really am."

Poirot scrutinized the card flipped across to him. M. Bouc peered over his shoulder.

Mr. CYRUS B. HARDMAN

McNeil's Detective Agency,

NEW YORK.

Poirot knew the name. It was one of the best known and most reputable private detective agencies in New York.

"Now, Mr. Hardman," he said. "Let us hear the meaning of this."

"Sure. Things came about this way. I'd come over to Europe trailing a couple of crooks—nothing to do with this business. The chase ended in Stamboul. I wired the Chief and got his instructions to return, and I would have been making my tracks back to little old New York when I got this."

He pushed across a letter.

The heading at the top was the Tokatlian Hotel.

Dear Sir,—You have been pointed out to me as an operative of the McNeil Detective Agency. Kindly report to my suite at four o'clock this afternoon.

It was signed "S.E. Ratchett."

"Eh bien?"

"I reported at the time stated and Mr. Ratchett put me wise to the situation. He showed me a couple of letters he'd got."

"He was alarmed?"

"Pretended not to be, but he was rattled all right. He put up a proposition to me. I was to travel by the same train as he did to Parrus and see that nobody got him. Well, gentlemen, I did travel by the same train and, in spite of me, somebody did get him. I certainly feel sore about it. It doesn't look any too good for me."

"Did he give you any indication of the line you were to take?"

"Sure. He had it all taped out. It was his idea that I should travel in the compartment alongside his—well, that was blown upon straight away. The only place I could get was berth No. 16, and I had a bit of a job getting that. I guess the conductor likes to keep that compartment up his sleeve. But that's neither here nor there. When I looked all round the situation, it seemed to me that No. 16 was a pretty good strategic position. There was only the dining car in front of the Stamboul sleeping car, the door on to the platform at the front end was barred at night. The only way a thug could come was through the rear end door to the platform or along the train from the rear—in either case he'd have to pass right by my compartment."

"You had no idea, I suppose, of the identity of the possible assailant."

"Well, I knew what he looked like. Mr. Ratchett described him to me."

"What?"

All three men leaned forward eagerly.

Hardman went on:

“A small man, dark, with a womanish kind of voice—that’s what the old man said. Said, too, that he didn’t think it would be the first night out. More likely the second or third.”

“He knew something,” said M. Bouc.

“He certainly knew more than he told his secretary,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Did he tell you anything about this enemy of his? Did he, for instance, say why his life was threatened?”

“No, he was kinder reticent about that part of it. Just said the fellow was out for his blood and meant to get it.”

“A small man—dark—with a womanish voice,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

Then, fixing a sharp glance on Hardman, he said:

“You knew who he really was, of course?”

“Which, mister?”

“Ratchett. You recognized him?”

“I don’t get you.”

“Ratchett was Cassetti, the Armstrong murderer.”

Mr. Hardman gave way to a prolonged whistle.

“That certainly is some surprise!” he said. “Yes, sir! No, I didn’t recognize him. I was away out West when that case came on. I suppose I saw photos of him in the papers, but I wouldn’t recognize my own mother when a press photographer had done with her. Well, I don’t doubt that a few people had it in for Cassetti all right.”

“Do you know of anyone connected with the Armstrong case who answers to that description—small, dark, womanish voice?”

Hardman reflected a minute or two.

“It’s hard to say. Pretty nearly everyone to do with that case is dead.”

“There was the girl who threw herself out of the window, remember.”

“Sure. That’s a good point, that. She was a foreigner of some kind. Maybe she had some wop relations. But you’ve got to remember that there were other cases besides the Armstrong case. Cassetti had been running this kidnapping stunt some time. You can’t concentrate on that only.”

“Ah, but we have reason to believe that this crime is connected with the Armstrong case.”

Mr. Hardman cocked an inquiring eye. Poirot did not respond. The American shook his head.

“I can’t call to mind anybody answering that description in the Armstrong case,” he said slowly. “But of course I wasn’t in it and didn’t know much about it.”

“Well, continue your narrative, M. Hardman.”

“There’s very little to tell. I got my sleep in the daytime and stayed awake on the watch at night. Nothing suspicious happened the first night. Last night was the same, as far as I was concerned. I had my door a little ajar and watched. No stranger passed.”

“You are sure of that, M. Hardman?”

“I’m plumb certain. Nobody got on that train from outside and nobody came along the train from the rear carriages. I’ll take my oath on that.”

“Could you see the conductor from your position?”

“Sure. He sits on that little seat almost flush with my door.”

“Did he leave that seat at all after the train stopped at Vincovci?”

“That was the last station? Why, yes, he answered a couple of bells—that would be just after the train came to a halt for good. Then, after that, he went past me into the rear coach—was there about a quarter of an hour. There was a bell ringing like mad and he came back running. I stepped out into the corridor to see what it was all about—felt a mite nervous, you understand—but it was only the American dame. She was raising hell about something or other. I grinned. Then he went on to another compartment and came back and got a bottle of mineral water for someone. After that he settled down in his seat till he went up to the far end to make somebody’s bed up. I don’t think he stirred after that until about five o’clock this morning.”

“Did he doze off at all?”

“That I can’t say. He may have done.”

Poirot nodded. Automatically his hands straightened the papers on the table. He picked up the official card once more.

“Be so good as just to initial this,” he said.

The other complied.

“There is no one, I suppose, who can confirm your story of your identity, M. Hardman?”

“On this train? Well, not exactly. Unless it might be young MacQueen. I know him well enough—seen him in his father’s office in New York—but that’s not to say he’ll remember me from a crowd of other operatives. No, Mr. Poirot, you’ll have to wait and cable New York when the snow lets up. But it’s O.K. I’m not telling the tale. Well, so long, gentlemen. Pleased to have met you, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot proffered his cigarette case.

“But perhaps you prefer a pipe?”

“Not me.”

He helped himself, then strode briskly off.

The three men looked at each other.

“You think he is genuine?” asked Dr. Constantine.

“Yes, yes. I know the type. Besides, it is a story that would be very easily disproved.”

“He has given us a piece of very interesting evidence,” said M. Bouc.

“Yes, indeed.”

“A small man, dark, with a high-pitched voice,” said M. Bouc thoughtfully.

“A description which applies to no one on the train,” said Poirot.

Ten

THE EVIDENCE OF THE ITALIAN

“And now,” said Poirot with a twinkle in his eye, “we will delight the heart of M. Bouc and see the Italian.”

Antonio Foscarelli came into the dining car with a swift, catlike tread. His face beamed. It was a typical Italian face, sunny looking and swarthy.

He spoke French well and fluently, with only a slight accent.

“Your name is Antonio Foscarelli?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“You are, I see, a naturalized American subject?”

The American grinned.

“Yes, Monsieur. It is better for my business.”

“You are an agent for Ford motor cars?”

“Yes, you see—”

A voluble exposition followed. At the end of it, anything that the three men did not know about Foscarelli’s business methods, his journeys, his income, and his opinion of the United States and most European countries seemed a negligible factor. This was not a man who had to have information dragged from him. It gushed out.

His good-natured childish face beamed with satisfaction as with a last eloquent gesture, he paused and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

“So you see,” he said, “I do big business. I am up to date. I understand salesmanship!”

“You have been in the United States, then, for the last ten years on and off?”

“Yes, Monsieur. Ah! well do I remember the day I first took the boat—to go to America, so far away! My mother, my little sister—”

Poirot cut short the flood of reminiscence.

“During your sojourn in the United States did you ever come across the deceased?”

“Never. But I know the type. Oh, yes.” He snapped his fingers expressively. “It is very respectable, very well dressed, but underneath it is all wrong. Out of my experience, I should say he was the big crook. I give you my opinion for what it is worth.”

“Your opinion is quite right,” said Poirot dryly. “Ratchett was Cassetti, the kidnapper.”

“What did I tell you? I have learned to be very acute—to read the face. It is necessary. Only in America do they teach you the proper way to sell.”

“You remember the Armstrong case?

“I do not quite remember. The name, yes? It was a little girl—a baby—was it not?”

“Yes, a very tragic affair.”

The Italian seemed the first person to demur to this view.

“Ah, well, these things they happen,” he said philosophically, “in a great civilization such as America—”

Poirot cut him short.

“Did you ever come across any members of the Armstrong family?”

“No, I do not think so. It is difficult to say. I will give you some figures. Last year alone I sold—”

“Monsieur, pray confine yourself to the point.”

The Italian’s hands flung themselves out in a gesture of apology.

“A thousand pardons.”

“Tell me, if you please, your exact movements last night from dinner onwards.”

“With pleasure. I stay here as long as I can. It is more amusing. I talk to the American gentleman at my table. He sells typewriter ribbons. Then I go back to my compartment. It is empty. The miserable John Bull who shares it with me is away attending to his master. At last he comes back—very long face as usual. He will not talk—says yes and no. A miserable race, the English—not sympathetic. He sits in the corner, very stiff, reading a book. Then the conductor comes and makes our beds.”

“Nos. 4 and 5,” murmured Poirot.

“Exactly—the end compartment. Mine is the upper berth. I get up there. I smoke and read. The little Englishman has, I think, the toothache. He gets out a little bottle of stuff that smells very strong. He lies in bed and groans. Presently I sleep. Whenever I wake I hear him groaning.”

“Do you know if he left the carriage at all during the night?”

“I do not think so. That, I should hear. The light from the corridor—one wakes up automatically thinking it is the Customs examination at some frontier.”

“Did he ever speak of his master? Ever express any animus against him?”

“I tell you he did not speak. He was not sympathetic. A fish.”

“You smoke, you say—a pipe, cigarettes, cigars?”

“Cigarettes only.”

Poirot proffered him one which he accepted.

“Have you ever been in Chicago?” inquired M. Bouc.

“Oh, yes—a fine city—but I know best New York, Washington, Detroit. You have been to the States? No? You should go, it—”

Poirot pushed a sheet of paper across to him.

“If you will sign this, and put your permanent address, please.”

The Italian wrote with a flourish. Then he rose—his smile was as engaging as ever.

“That is all? You do not require me further? Good day to you, Messieurs. I wish we could get out of the snow. I have an appointment in Milan—” He shook his head sadly. “I shall lose the business.”

He departed.

Poirot looked at his friend.

“He has been a long time in America,” said M. Bouc, “and he is an Italian, and Italians use the knife! And they are great liars! I do not like Italians.”

“Ça se voit,” said Poirot with a smile. “Well, it may be that you are right, but I will point out to you, my friend, that there is absolutely no evidence against the man.”

“And what about the psychology? Do not Italians stab?”

“Assuredly,” said Poirot. “Especially in the heat of a quarrel. But this—this is a different kind of crime. I have the little idea, my friend, that this is a crime very carefully planned and staged. It is a far-sighted, long-headed crime. It is not—how shall I express it?—a Latin crime. It is a crime that shows traces of a cool, resourceful, deliberate brain—I think an Anglo-Saxon brain.”

He picked up the last two passports.

“Let us now,” he said, “see Miss Mary Debenham.”

Eleven

THE EVIDENCE OF MISS DEBENHAM

When Mary Debenham entered the dining car she confirmed Poirot’s previous estimate of her.

Very neatly dressed in a little black suit with a French grey shirt, the smooth waves of her dark head were neat and unruffled. Her manner was as calm and unruffled as her hair.

She sat down opposite Poirot and M. Bouc and looked at them inquiringly.

“Your name is Mary Hermione Debenham, and you are twenty-six years of age?” began Poirot.

“Yes.”

“English?”

“Yes.”

“Will you be so kind, Mademoiselle, as to write down your permanent address on this piece of paper?”

She complied. Her writing was clear and legible.

“And now, Mademoiselle, what have you to tell us of the affair last night?”

“I am afraid I have nothing to tell you. I went to bed and slept.”

“Does it distress you very much, Mademoiselle, that a crime has been committed on this train?”

The question was clearly unexpected. Her grey eyes widened a little.

“I don’t quite understand you.”

"It was a perfectly simple question that I asked you, Mademoiselle. I will repeat it. Are you very much distressed that a crime should have been committed on this train?"

"I have not really thought about it from that point of view. No, I cannot say that I am at all distressed."

"A crime—it is all in the day's work to you, eh?"

"It is naturally an unpleasant thing to have happen," said Mary Debenham quietly.

"You are very Anglo-Saxon. Mademoiselle. Vous n'éprouvez pas d'émotion."

She smiled a little.

"I am afraid I cannot have hysterics to prove my sensibility. After all, people die every day."

"They die, yes. But murder is a little more rare."

"Oh, certainly."

"You were not acquainted with the dead man?"

"I saw him for the first time when lunching here yesterday."

"And how did he strike you?"

"I hardly noticed him."

"He did not strike you as an evil personality."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Really, I cannot say I thought about it."

Poirot looked at her keenly.

“You are, I think, a little bit contemptuous of the way I prosecute my inquiries,” he said with a twinkle. “Not so, you think, would an English inquiry be conducted. There everything would be cut and dried—it would be all kept to the facts—a well-ordered business. But I, Mademoiselle, have my little originalities. I look first at my witness, I sum up his or her character, and I frame my questions accordingly. Just a little minute ago I am asking questions of a gentleman who wants to tell me all his ideas on every subject. Well, him I keep strictly to the point. I want him to answer yes or no, this or that. And then you come. I see at once that you will be orderly and methodical. You will confine yourself to the matter in hand. Your answers will be brief and to the point. And because, Mademoiselle, human nature is perverse, I ask of you quite different questions. I ask what you feel, what you thought. It does not please you this method?”

“If you will forgive my saying so, it seems somewhat of a waste of time. Whether or not I liked Mr. Ratchett’s face does not seem likely to be helpful in finding out who killed him.”

“Do you know who the man Ratchett really was, Mademoiselle?”

She nodded.

“Mrs. Hubbard has been telling everyone.”

“And what do you think of the Armstrong affair?”

“It was quite abominable,” said the girl crisply.

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully.

“You are travelling from Baghdad, I believe, Miss Debenham?”

“Yes.”

“To London?”

“Yes.”

“What have you been doing in Baghdad?”

“I have been acting as governess to two children.”

“Are you returning to your post after your holiday?”

“I am not sure.”

“Why is that?”

“Baghdad is rather out of things. I think I should prefer a post in London if I can hear of a suitable one.”

“I see. I thought, perhaps, you might be going to be married.”

Miss Debenham did not reply. She raised her eyes and looked Poirot full in the face. The glance said plainly, “You are impertinent.”

“What is your opinion of the lady who shares your compartment—Miss Ohlsson?”

“She seems a pleasant, simple creature.”

“What colour is her dressing gown?”

Mary Debenham stared.

“A kind of brownish colour—natural wool.”

“Ah! I may mention without indiscretion, I hope, that I noticed the colour of your dressing gown on the way from Aleppo to Stamboul. A pale mauve, I believe.”

“Yes, that is right.”

“Have you any other dressing gown, Mademoiselle? A scarlet dressing gown, for example?”

“No, that is not mine.”

Poirot leaned forward. He was like a cat pouncing on a mouse.

"Whose, then?"

The girl drew back a little, startled.

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"You do not say, 'No, I have no such thing.' You say, 'That is not mine'—meaning that such a thing does belong to someone else."

She nodded.

"Somebody else on this train?"

"Yes."

"Whose is it?"

"I told you just now. I don't know. I woke up this morning about five o'clock with the feeling that the train had been standing still for a long time. I opened the door and looked out into the corridor, thinking we might be at a station. I saw someone in a scarlet kimono some way down the corridor."

"And you don't know who it was? Was she fair or dark or grey-haired?"

"I can't say. She had on a shingle cap and I only saw the back of her head."

"And in build?"

"Tallish and slim, I should judge, but it's difficult to say. The kimono was embroidered with dragons."

"Yes, yes that is right, dragons."

He was silent a minute. He murmured to himself:

"I cannot understand. I cannot understand. None of this makes sense."

Then, looking up, he said:

"I need not keep you further, Mademoiselle."

"Oh!" she seemed rather taken aback, but rose promptly. In the doorway, however, she hesitated a minute and then came back.

"The Swedish lady—Miss Ohlsson, is it?—seems rather worried. She says you told her she was the last person to see this man alive. She thinks, I believe, that you suspect her on that account. Can't I tell her that she has made a mistake? Really, you know, she is the kind of creature who wouldn't hurt a fly."

She smiled a little as she spoke.

"What time was it that she went to fetch the aspirin from Mrs. Hubbard?"

"Just after half-past ten."

"She was away—how long?"

"About five minutes."

"Did she leave the compartment again during the night?"

"No."

Poirot turned to the doctor.

"Could Ratchett have been killed as early as that?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Then I think you can reassure your friend, Mademoiselle."

"Thank you." She smiled suddenly at him, a smile that invited sympathy. "She's like a sheep, you know. She gets anxious and bleats."

She turned and went out.

Twelve

THE EVIDENCE OF THE GERMAN LADY’S MAID

M. Bouc was looking at his friend curiously.

“I do not quite understand you, mon vieux. You were trying to do—what?”

“I was searching for a flaw, my friend.”

“A flaw?”

“Yes—in the armour of a young lady’s self-possession. I wished to shake her sangfroid. Did I succeed? I do not know. But I know this—she did not expect me to tackle the matter as I did.”

“You suspect her,” said M. Bouc slowly. “But why? She seems a very charming young lady—the last person in the world to be mixed up in a crime of this kind.”

“I agree,” said Constantine. “She is cold. She has not emotions. She would not stab a man; she would sue him in the law courts.”

Poirot sighed “You must, both of you, get rid of your obsession that this is an unpremeditated and sudden crime. As for the reason why I suspect Miss Debenham, there are two. One is because of something that I overheard, and that you do not as yet know.”

He retailed to them the curious interchange of phrases he had overheard on the journey from Aleppo.

“That is curious, certainly,” said M. Bouc when he had finished. “It needs explaining. If it means what you suspect it means, then they are both of them in it together—she and the stiff Englishman.”

Poirot nodded.

“And that is just what is not borne out by the facts,” he said. “See you, if they were both in this together, what should we expect to find—that each of them would provide an alibi for the other. Is not that so? But no—that does not happen. Miss Debenham’s alibi is provided by a Swedish woman whom she has never seen before, and Colonel Arbuthnot’s alibi is vouched for by MacQueen, the dead man’s secretary. No, that solution of the puzzle is too easy.”

“You said there was another reason for your suspicions of her,” M. Bouc reminded him.

Poirot smiled.

“Ah! but that is only psychological. I ask myself, is it possible for Miss Debenham to have planned this crime? Behind this business, I am convinced, there is a cool, intelligent, resourceful brain. Miss Debenham answers to that description.”

M. Bouc shook his head.

“I think you are wrong, my friend. I do not see that young English girl as a criminal.”

“Ah, well,” said Poirot, picking up the last passport, “to the final name on our list. Hildegarde Schmidt, lady’s maid.”

Summoned by the attendant, Hildegarde Schmidt came into the restaurant car and stood waiting respectfully.

Poirot motioned her to sit down.

She did so, folding her hands and waiting placidly till he questioned her. She seemed a placid creature altogether—eminently respectable—perhaps not over intelligent.

Poirot’s methods with Hildegarde Schmidt were a complete contrast to his handling of Mary Debenham.

He was at his kindest and most genial, setting the woman at her ease. Then, having got her to write down her name and address, he slid gently into his questions.

The interview took place in German.

“We want to know as much as possible about what happened last night,” he said. “We know that you cannot give us much information bearing on the crime itself, but you may have seen or heard something that, while conveying nothing to you, may be valuable to us. You understand?”

She did not seem to. Her broad, kindly face remained set in its expression of placid stupidity as she answered:

“I do not know anything, Monsieur.”

“Well, for instance, you know that your mistress sent for you last night?”

“That, yes.”

“Do you remember the time?”

“I do not, Monsieur. I was asleep, you see, when the attendant came and told me.”

“Yes, yes. Was it usual for you to be sent for in this way?”

“It was not unusual, Monsieur. The gracious lady often required attention at night. She did not sleep well.”

“Eh bien, then, you received the summons and you got up. Did you put on a dressing gown?”

“No, Monsieur, I put on a few clothes. I would not like to go in to her Excellency in my dressing gown.”

“And yet it is a very nice dressing gown—scarlet, is it not?”

She stared at him.

“It is a dark-blue flannel dressing gown, Monsieur.”

“Ah! continue. A little pleasantry on my part, that is all. So you went along to Madame la Princesse. And what did you do when you got there?”

“I gave her massage, Monsieur, and then I read aloud. I do not read aloud very well, but her Excellency says that is all the better. So it sends her better to sleep. When she became sleepy, Monsieur, she told me to go, so I closed the book and I returned to my own compartment.”

“Do you know what time that was?”

“No, Monsieur.”

“Well, how long had you been with Madame la Princesse?”

“About half an hour, Monsieur.”

“Good, continue.”

“First, I fetched her Excellency an extra rug from my compartment. It was very cold in spite of the heating. I arranged the rug over her and she wished me good night. I poured her out some mineral water. Then I turned out the light and left her.”

“And then?”

“There is nothing more, Monsieur. I returned to my carriage and went to sleep.”

“And you met no one in the corridor?”

“No, Monsieur.”

“You did not, for instance, see a lady in a scarlet kimono with dragons on it?”

Her mild eyes bulged at him.

“No, indeed, Monsieur. There was nobody about except the attendant. Everyone was asleep.”

“But you did see the conductor?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“What was he doing?”

“He came out of one of the compartments, Monsieur.”

“What?” M. Bouc leaned forward. “Which one?”

Hildegarde Schmidt looked frightened again and Poirot cast a reproachful glance at his friend.

“Naturally,” he said. “The conductor often has to answer bells at night. Do you remember which compartment it was?”

“It was about the middle of the coach, Monsieur. Two or three doors from Madame la Princesse.”

“Ah! tell us, if you please, exactly where this was and what happened.”

“He nearly ran into me, Monsieur. It was when I was returning from my compartment to that of the Princess with the rug.”

“And he came out of a compartment and almost collided with you? In which direction was he going?”

“Towards me, Monsieur. He apologized and passed on down the corridor towards the dining car. A bell began ringing, but I do not think he answered it.”

She paused and then said:

“I do not understand. How is it—?”

Poirot spoke reassuringly.

“It is just a question of times,” he said. “All a matter of routine. This poor conductor, he seems to have had a busy night—first waking you and then answering bells.”

“It was not the same conductor who woke me, Monsieur. It was another one.”

“Ah, another one! Had you seen him before?”

“No. Monsieur.”

“Ah! Do you think you would recognize him if you saw him?”

“I think so, Monsieur.”

Poirot murmured something in M. Bouc’s ear. The latter got up and went to the door to give an order.

Poirot was continuing his questions in an easy friendly manner.

“Have you ever been to America, Frau Schmidt?”

“Never, Monsieur. It must be a fine country.”

“You have heard, perhaps, of who this man who was killed really was—that he was responsible for the death of a little child.”

“Yes, I have heard, Monsieur. It was abominable—wicked. The good God should not allow such things. We are not so wicked as that in Germany.”

Tears had come into the woman’s eyes. Her strong motherly soul was moved.

“It was an abominable crime,” said Poirot gravely.

He drew a scrap of cambric from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Is this your handkerchief, Frau Schmidt?”

There was a moment’s silence as the woman examined it. She looked up after a minute. The colour had mounted a little in her face.

“Ah! no, indeed. It is not mine, Monsieur.”

“It has the initial H, you see. That is why I thought it was yours.”

“Ah! Monsieur, it is a lady’s handkerchief, that. A very expensive handkerchief. Embroidered by hand. It comes from Paris, I should say.”

“It is not yours and you do not know whose it is?”

“I? Oh, no, Monsieur.”

Of the three listening, only Poirot caught the nuance of hesitation in the reply.

M. Bouc whispered in his ear. Poirot nodded and said to the woman:

“The three sleeping car attendants are coming in. Will you be so kind as to tell me which is the one you met last night as you were going with the rug to the Princess?”

The three men entered. Pierre Michel, the big blond conductor of the Athens-Paris coach, and the stout burly conductor of the Bucharest one.

Hildegarde Schmidt looked at them and immediately shook her head.

“No, Monsieur,” she said. “None of these is the man I saw last night.”

“But these are the only conductors on the train. You must be mistaken.”

“I am quite sure, Monsieur. These are all tall, big men. The one I saw was small and dark. He had a little moustache. His voice when he said ‘Pardon’ was weak like a woman’s. Indeed, I remember him very well, Monsieur.”

Thirteen

SUMMARY OF THE PASSENGERS' EVIDENCE

“A small dark man with a womanish voice,” said M. Bouc.

The three conductors and Hildegarde Schmidt had been dismissed.

“But I understand nothing—but nothing of all this! The enemy that this Ratchett spoke of, he was then on the train after all? But where is he now? How can he have vanished into thin air? My head, it whirls. Say something, then, my friend, I implore you. Show me how the impossible can be possible!”

“It is a good phrase that,” said Poirot. “The impossible cannot have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances.”

“Explain to me then, quickly, what actually happened on the train last night.”

“I am not a magician, mon cher. I am, like you, a very puzzled man. This affair advances in a very strange manner.”

“It does not advance at all. It stays where it was.”

Poirot shook his head.

“No, that is not true. We are more advanced. We know certain things. We have heard the evidence of the passengers.”

“And what has that told us? Nothing at all.”

“I would not say that, my friend.”

"I exaggerate, perhaps. The American, Hardman, and the German maid—yes, they have added something to our knowledge. That is to say, they have made the whole business more unintelligible than it was."

"No, no, no," said Poirot soothingly. M. Bouc turned upon him.

"Speak, then, let us hear the wisdom of Hercule Poirot."

"Did I not tell you that I was, like you, a very puzzled man? But at least we can face our problem. We can arrange such facts as we have with order and method."

"Pray continue, Monsieur," said Dr. Constantine.

Poirot cleared his throat and straightened a piece of blotting-paper.

"Let us review the case as it stands at this moment. First, there are certain indisputable facts. This man Ratchett, or Cassetti, was stabbed in twelve places and died last night. That is fact one."

"I grant it to you—I grant it, mon vieux," said M. Bouc with a gesture of irony.

Hercule Poirot was not at all put out. He continued calmly.

"I will pass over for the moment certain rather peculiar appearances which Dr. Constantine and I have already discussed together. I will come to them presently. The next fact of importance, to my mind, is the time of the crime."

"That, again, is one of the few things we do know," said M. Bouc. "The crime was committed at a quarter past one this morning. Everything goes to show that was so."

"Not everything. You exaggerate. There is, certainly, a fair amount of evidence to support that view."

"I am glad you admit that at least."

Poirot went on calmly, unperturbed by the interruption.

“We have before us three possibilities:

“One: That the crime was committed, as you say, at a quarter past one. This is supported by the evidence of the German woman, Hildegarde Schmidt. It agrees with the evidence of Dr. Constantine.

“Possibility two: The crime was committed later and the evidence of the watch was deliberately faked.

“Possibility three: The crime was committed earlier and the evidence faked for the same reason as above.

“Now, if we accept possibility one as the most likely to have occurred and the one supported by most evidence, we must also accept certain facts arising from it. To begin with, if the crime was committed at a quarter past one, the murderer cannot have left the train, and the question arises: Where is he? And who is he?

“To begin with, let us examine the evidence carefully. We first hear of the existence of this man—the small dark man with a womanish voice—from the man Hardman. He says that Ratchett told him of this person and employed him to watch out for the man. There is no evidence to support this—we have only Hardman’s word for it. Let us next examine the question: Is Hardman the person he pretends to be—an operative of a New York Detective Agency?

“What to my mind is so interesting in this case is that we have none of the facilities afforded to the police. We cannot investigate the bona fides of any of these people. We have to rely solely on deduction. That, to me, makes the matter very much more interesting. There is no routine work. It is a matter of the intellect. I ask myself, ‘Can we accept Hardman’s account of himself?’ I make my decision and I answer, ‘Yes.’ I am of the opinion that we can accept Hardman’s account of himself.”

“You rely on the intuition—what the Americans call the hunch?” said Dr. Constantine.

“Not at all. I regard the probabilities. Hardman is travelling with a false passport—that will at once make him an object of suspicion. The first thing that the police will do when they do arrive upon the scene is to detain Hardman and cable as to whether his account of himself is true. In the case of many of the passengers, to establish their bona fides will be difficult; in most cases it will probably not be attempted, especially since there seems nothing in the way of suspicion attaching to them. But in Hardman’s case it is simple. Either he is the person he represents himself to be or he is not. Therefore I say that all will prove to be in order.”

“You acquit him of suspicion?”

“Not at all. You misunderstand me. For all I know, any American detective might have his own private reasons for wishing to murder Ratchett. No, what I am saying is that I think we can accept Hardman’s own account of himself. This story, then, that he tells of Ratchett’s seeking him out and employing him, is not unlikely and is most probably, though not of course certainly, true. If we are going to accept it as true, we must see if there is any confirmation of it. We find it in rather an unlikely place—in the evidence of Hildegarde Schmidt. Her description of the man she saw in Wagon Lit uniform tallies exactly. Is there any further confirmation of these two stories? There is. There is the button found in her compartment by Mrs. Hubbard. And there is also another corroborating statement which you may not have noticed.”

“What is that?”

“The fact that both Colonel Arbuthnot and Hector MacQueen mention that the conductor passed their carriage. They attached no importance to the fact, but Messieurs, Pierre Michel has declared that he did not leave his seat except on certain specified occasions, none of which would take him down to the far end of the coach past the compartment in which Arbuthnot and MacQueen were sitting.

“Therefore this story, the story of a small dark man with a womanish voice dressed in Wagon Lit uniform, rests on the testimony—direct or indirect—of four witnesses.”

“One small point,” said Dr. Constantine. “If Hildegarde Schmidt’s story is true, how is it that the real conductor did not mention having seen her when he came to answer Mrs. Hubbard’s bell?”

“That is explained, I think. When he arrived to answer Mrs. Hubbard, the maid was in with her mistress. When she finally returned to her own compartment, the conductor was in with Mrs. Hubbard.”

M. Bouc had been waiting with difficulty until they had finished.

“Yes, yes, my friend,” he said impatiently to Poirot. “But whilst I admire your caution, your method of advancing a step at a time, I submit that you have not yet touched the point at issue. We are all agreed that this person exists. The point is—where did he go?”

Poirot shook his head reprovingly.

“You are in error. You are inclined to put the cart before the horse. Before I ask myself, ‘Where did this man vanish to?’ I ask myself, ‘Did such a man really exist?’ Because, you see, if the man were an invention—a fabrication—how much easier to make him disappear! So I try to establish first that there really is such a flesh and blood person.”

“And having arrived at the fact that there is—eh bien—where is he now?”

“There are only two answers to that, mon cher. Either he is still hidden on the train in a place of such extraordinary ingenuity that we cannot even think of it, or else he is, as one might say, two persons. That is, he is both himself—the man feared by M. Ratchett—and a passenger on the train so well disguised that M. Ratchett did not recognize him.”

“It is an idea, that,” said M. Bouc, his face lighting up. Then it clouded over again. “But there is one objection—”

Poirot took the words out of his mouth.

“The height of the man. It is that you would say? With the exception of M. Ratchett’s valet, all the passengers are big men—the Italian, Colonel

Arbuthnot, Hector MacQueen, Count Andrenyi. Well, that leaves us the valet—not a very likely supposition. But there is another possibility. Remember the ‘womanish’ voice. That gives us a choice of alternatives. The man may be disguised as a woman, or, alternatively, he may actually be a woman. A tall woman dressed in man’s clothes would look small.”

“But surely Ratchett would have known—”

“Perhaps he did know. Perhaps, already this woman had attempted his life wearing men’s clothes the better to accomplish her purpose. Ratchett may have guessed that she would use the same trick again, so he tells Hardman to look for a man. But he mentions, however, a womanish voice.”

“It is a possibility,” said M. Bouc. “But—”

“Listen, my friend, I think that I should now tell you of certain inconsistencies noticed by Dr. Constantine.”

He retailed at length the conclusions that he and the doctor had arrived at together from the nature of the dead man’s wounds. M. Bouc groaned and held his head again.

“I know,” said Poirot sympathetically. “I know exactly how you feel. The head spins, does it not?”

“The whole thing is a fantasy,” cried M. Bouc.

“Exactly. It is absurd—improbable—it cannot be. So I myself have said. And yet, my friend, there it is! One cannot escape from the facts.”

“It is madness!”

“Is it not? It is so mad, my friend, that sometimes I am haunted by the sensation that really it must be very simple…

“But that is only one of my ‘little ideas.’…”

“Two murderers,” groaned M. Bouc. “And on the Orient Express.”

The thought almost made him weep.

“And now let us make the fantasy more fantastic,” said Poirot cheerfully. “Last night on the train there are two mysterious strangers. There is the Wagon Lit attendant answering to the description given us by M. Hardman, and seen by Hildegarde Schmidt, Colonel Arbuthnot and M. MacQueen. There is also a woman in a red kimono—a tall, slim woman—seen by Pierre Michel, by Miss Debenham, by M. MacQueen and by myself—and smelt, I may say, by Colonel Arbuthnot! Who was she? No one on the train admits to having a scarlet kimono. She, too, has vanished. Was she one and the same with the spurious Wagon Lit attendant? Or was she some quite distinct personality? Where are they, these two? And, incidentally, where is the Wagon Lit uniform and the scarlet kimono?”

“Ah! that is something definite.” M. Bouc sprang up eagerly. “We must search all the passengers’ luggage. Yes, that will be something.”

Poirot rose also.

“I will make a prophecy,” he said.

“You know where they are?”

“I have a little idea.”

“Where, then?”

“You will find the scarlet kimono in the baggage of one of the men and you will find the uniform of the Wagon Lit conductor in the baggage of Hildegarde Schmidt.”

“Hildegarde Schmidt? You think—”

“Not what you are thinking. I will put it like this. If Hildegarde Schmidt is guilty, the uniform might be found in her baggage—but if she is innocent it certainly will be.”

“But how—” began M. Bouc and stopped.

“What is this noise that approaches?” he cried. “It resembles a locomotive in motion.”

The noise drew nearer. It consisted of shrill cries and protests in a woman’s voice. The door at the end of the dining car flew open. Mrs. Hubbard burst in.

“It’s too horrible,” she cried. “It’s just too horrible. In my sponge bag. My sponge bag. A great knife—all over blood.”

And, suddenly toppling forward, she fainted heavily on M. Bouc’s shoulder.

Fourteen

THE EVIDENCE OF THE WEAPON

With more vigour than chivalry, M. Bouc deposited the fainting lady with her head on the table. Dr. Constantine yelled for one of the restaurant attendants, who came at a run.

“Keep her head so,” said the doctor. “If she revives give her a little cognac. You understand?”

Then he hurried off after the other two. His interest lay wholly in the crime—swooning middle-aged ladies did not interest him at all.

It is possible that Mrs. Hubbard revived rather quicker with these methods than she might otherwise have done. A few minutes later she was sitting up, sipping cognac from a glass proffered by the attendant, and talking once more.

“I just can’t say how terrible it was. I don’t suppose anybody on this train can understand my feelings. I’ve always been vurry, vurry sensitive ever since a child. The mere sight of blood—ugh—why even now I come over queer when I think about it.”

The attendant proffered the glass again.

“Encore un peu, Madame.”

“D’you think I’d better? I’m a lifelong teetotaller. I just never touch spirits or wine at any time. All my family are abstainers. Still perhaps as this is only medical—”

She sipped once more.

In the meantime Poirot and M. Bouc, closely followed by Dr. Constantine, had hurried out of the restaurant car and along the corridor of the Stamboul coach towards Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment.

Every traveller on the train seemed to be congregated outside the door. The conductor, a harrassed look on his face, was keeping them back.

“Mais il n’y a rien à voir,” he said, and repeated the sentiment in several other languages.

“Let me pass, if you please,” said M. Bouc.

Squeezing his rotundity past the obstructing passengers, he entered the compartment, Poirot close behind him.

“I am glad you have come Monsieur,” said the conductor with a sigh of relief. “Everyone has been trying to enter. The American lady—such screams as she gave—ma foi! I thought she too had been murdered! I came at a run and there she was screaming like a mad woman, and she cried out that she must fetch you and she departed, screeching at the top of her voice and telling everybody whose carriage she passed what had occurred.”

He added, with a gesture of the hand:

“It is in there, Monsieur. I have not touched it.”

Hanging on the handle of the door that gave access to the next compartment was a large-size checked rubber sponge bag. Below it on the floor, just where it had fallen from Mrs. Hubbard’s hand, was a straightbladed dagger—a cheap affair, sham Oriental, with an embossed hilt and a tapering blade. The blade was stained with patches of what looked like rust.

Poirot picked it up delicately.

“Yes,” he murmured. “There is no mistake. Here is our missing weapon all right—eh, docteur?”

The doctor examined it.

“You need not be so careful,” said Poirot. “There will be no fingerprints on it save those of Mrs. Hubbard.”

Constantine’s examination did not take long.

“It is the weapon all right,” he said. “It would account for any of the wounds.”

“I implore you, my friend, do not say that.”

The doctor looked astonished.

“Already we are heavily overburdened by coincidence. Two people decide to stab M. Ratchett last night. It is too much of a good thing that each of them should select an identical weapon.”

“As to that, the coincidence is not, perhaps, so great as it seems,” said the doctor. “Thousands of these sham Eastern daggers are made and shipped to the bazaars of Constantinople.”

“You console me a little, but only a little,” said Poirot. He looked thoughtfully at the door in front of him, then, lifting off the sponge bag, he tried the handle. The door did not budge. About a foot above the handle was the door bolt, Poirot drew it back and tried again, but still the door remained fast.

“We locked it from the other side, you remember,” said the doctor.

“That is true,” said Poirot absently. He seemed to be thinking about something else. His brow was furrowed as though in perplexity.

“It agrees, does it not?” said M. Bouc. “The man passes through this carriage. As he shuts the communicating door behind him he feels the sponge bag. A thought comes to him and he quickly slips the bloodstained knife inside. Then, all unwitting that he has awakened Mrs. Hubbard, he slips out through the other door into the corridor.”

“As you say,” murmured Poirot. “That is how it must have happened.”

But the puzzled look did not leave his face.

“But what is it?” demanded M. Bouc. “There is something, is there not, that does not satisfy you?”

Poirot darted a quick look at him.

“The same point does not strike you? No, evidently not. Well, it is a small matter.”

The conductor looked into the carriage.

“The American lady is coming back.”

Dr. Constantine looked rather guilty. He had, he felt, treated Mrs. Hubbard rather cavalierly. But she had no reproaches for him. Her energies were concentrated on another matter.

“I’m just going to say one thing right out,” she said breathlessly as she arrived in the doorway. “I’m not going on any longer in this compartment! Why, I wouldn’t sleep in it tonight if you paid me a million dollars.”

“But, Madame—”

“I know what you are going to say, and I’m telling you right now that I won’t do any such thing! Why, I’d rather sit up all night in the corridor.”

She began to cry.

“Oh! if my daughter could only know—if she could see me now, why—”

Poirot interrupted firmly.

“You misunderstand, Madame. Your demand is most reasonable. Your baggage shall be changed at once to another compartment.”

Mrs. Hubbard lowered her handkerchief.

“Is that so? Oh, I feel better right away. But surely it’s all full up, unless one of the gentlemen—”

M. Bouc spoke.

“Your baggage, Madame, shall be moved out of this coach altogether. You shall have a compartment in the next coach which was put on at Belgrade.”

“Why, that’s splendid. I’m not an out of the way nervous woman, but to sleep in that compartment next door to a dead man—” She shivered. “It would drive me plumb crazy.”

“Michel,” called M. Bouc. “Move this baggage into a vacant compartment in the Athens-Paris coach.”

“Yes, Monsieur—the same one as this—the No. 3?”

“No,” said Poirot before his friend could reply. “I think it would be better for Madame to have a different number altogether. The No. 12, for instance.”

“Bien, Monsieur.”

The conductor seized the luggage. Mrs. Hubbard turned gratefully to Poirot.

“That’s vurry kind and delicate of you. I appreciate it, I assure you.”

“Do not mention it, Madame. We will come with you and see you comfortably installed.”

Mrs. Hubbard was escorted by the three men to her new home. She looked round her happily.

“This is fine.”

“It suits you, Madame? It is, you see, exactly like the compartment you have left.”

“That’s so—only it faces the other way. But that doesn’t matter, for these trains go first one way and then the other. I said to my daughter, ‘I want a carriage facing the engine,’ and she said, ‘Why, Momma, that’ll be no good to you, for if you go to sleep one way, when you wake up the train’s going the other.’ And it was quite true what she said. Why, last evening we went into Belgrade one way and out the other.”

“At any rate, Madame, you are quite happy and contented now?”

“Well, no, I wouldn’t say that. Here we are stuck in a snowdrift and nobody doing anything about it, and my boat sailing the day after tomorrow.”

“Madame,” said M. Bouc, “we are all in the same case—every one of us.”

“Well, that’s true,” admitted Mrs. Hubbard. “But nobody else has had a murderer walking right through their compartment in the middle of the night.”

“What still puzzles me, Madame,” said Poirot, “is how the man got into your compartment if the communicating door was bolted as you say. You are sure that it was bolted?”

“Why, the Swedish lady tried it before my eyes.”

“Let us just reconstruct that little scene. You were lying in your bunk—so—and you could not see for yourself, you say?”

“No, because of the sponge bag. Oh, my, I shall have to get a new sponge bag. It makes me feel sick in my stomach to look at this one.”

Poirot picked up the sponge bag and hung it on the handle of the communicating door into the next carriage.

“Précisément—I see,” he said. “The bolt is just underneath the handle—the sponge bag masks it. You could not see from where you were lying whether the bolt were turned or not.”

“Why, that’s just what I’ve been telling you!”

“And the Swedish lady, Miss Ohlsson, stood so, between you and the door. She tried it and told you it was bolted.”

“That’s so.”

“All the same, Madame, she may have made an error. You see what I mean.” Poirot seemed anxious to explain. “The bolt is just a projection of metal—so. Turned to the right the door is locked, left straight, it is not. Possibly she merely tried the door, and as it was locked on the other side she may have assumed that it was locked on your side.”

“Well I guess that would be rather stupid of her.”

“Madame, the most kind, the most amiable are not always the cleverest.”

“That’s so, of course.”

“By the way, Madame, did you travel out to Smyrna this way?”

“No. I sailed right to Stamboul, and a friend of my daughter’s—Mr. Johnson (a perfectly lovely man; I’d like to have you know him)—met me and showed me all round Stamboul, which I found a very disappointing city—all tumbling down. And as for those mosques and putting on those great shuffling things over your shoes—where was I?”

“You were saying that Mr. Johnson met you.”

“That’s so, and he saw me on board a French Messagerie boat for Smyrna, and my daughter’s husband was waiting right on the quay. What he’ll say when he hears about all this! My daughter said this would be just the safest, easiest way imaginable. ‘You just sit in your carriage,’ she said, ‘and you get right to Parrus and there the American Express will meet you.’ And, oh dear, what am I to do about cancelling my steamship passage? I ought to let them know. I can’t possibly make it now. This is just too terrible—”

Mrs. Hubbard showed signs of tears once more.

Poirot, who had been fidgeting slightly, seized his opportunity.

“You have had a shock, Madame. The restaurant attendant shall be instructed to bring you along some tea and some biscuits.”

“I don’t know that I’m so set on tea,” said Mrs. Hubbard tearfully. “That’s more an English habit.”

“Coffee, then, Madame. You need some stimulant.”

“That cognac’s made my head feel mighty funny. I think I would like some coffee.”

“Excellent. You must revive your forces.”

“My, what a funny expression.”

“But first, Madame, a little matter of routine. You permit that I make a search of your baggage?”

“Whatever for?”

“We are about to commence a search of all the passengers’ luggage. I do not want to remind you of an unpleasant experience, but your sponge bag—remember.”

“Mercy! Perhaps you’d better! I just couldn’t bear to get any more surprises of that kind.”

The examination was quickly over. Mrs. Hubbard was travelling with the minimum of luggage—a hat box, a cheap suitcase, and a well-burdened travelling bag. The contents of all three were simple and straightforward, and the examination would not have taken more than a couple of minutes had not Mrs. Hubbard delayed matters by insisting on due attention being paid to photographs of “My daughter” and two rather ugly children—“My daughter’s children. Aren’t they cunning?”

Fifteen

THE EVIDENCE OF THE PASSENGERS' LUGGAGE

Having delivered himself of various polite insincerities, and having told Mrs. Hubbard that he would order coffee to be brought to her, Poirot was able to take his leave accompanied by his two friends.

"Well, we have made a start and drawn a blank," observed M. Bouc. "Whom shall we tackle next?"

"It would be simplest, I think, just to proceed along the train carriage by carriage. That means that we start with No. 16—the amiable M. Hardman."

Mr. Hardman, who was smoking a cigar, welcomed them affably.

"Come right in, gentlemen—that is, if it's humanly possible. It's just a mite cramped in here for a party."

M. Bouc explained the object of their visit, and the big detective nodded comprehendingly.

"That's O.K. To tell the truth, I've been wondering you didn't get down to it sooner. Here are my keys, gentlemen and if you like to search my pockets too, why, you're welcome. Shall I reach the grips down for you?"

"The conductor will do that. Michel!"

The contents of Mr. Hardman's two "grips" were soon examined and passed. They contained perhaps an undue proportion of spirituous liquor. Mr. Hardman winked.

"It's not often they search your grips at the frontiers—not if you fix the conductor. I handed out a wad of Turkish notes right away, and there's been no trouble so far."

“And at Paris?”

Mr. Hardman winked again.

“By the time I get to Paris,” he said, “what’s left over of this little lot will go into a bottle labelled hairwash.”

“You are not a believer in Prohibition, Monsieur Hardman,” said M. Bouc with a smile.

“Well,” said Hardman. “I can’t say Prohibition has ever worried me any.”

“Ah!” said M. Bouc. “The speakeasy.” He pronounced the word with care, savouring it.

“Your American terms are so quaint, so expressive,” he said.

“Me, I would much like to go to America,” said Poirot.

“You’d learn a few go-ahead methods over there,” said Hardman. “Europe wants waking up. She’s half asleep.”

“It is true that America is the country of progress,” agreed Poirot. “There is much that I admire about Americans. Only—I am perhaps old-fashioned—but me, I find the American woman less charming than my own countrywomen. The French or Belgian girl, coquettish, charming—I think there is no one to touch her.”

Hardman turned away to peer out at the snow for a minute.

“Perhaps you’re right, M. Poirot,” he said. “But I guess every nation likes its own girls best.”

He blinked as though the snow hurt his eyes.

“Kind of dazzling, isn’t it?” he remarked. “Say, gentlemen, this business is getting on my nerves. Murder and the snow and all, and nothing doing. Just hanging about and killing time. I’d like to get busy after someone or something.”

“The true Western spirit of hustle,” said Poirot with a smile.

The conductor replaced the bags and they moved on to the next compartment. Colonel Arbuthnot was sitting in a corner smoking a pipe and reading a magazine.

Poirot explained their errand. The Colonel made no demur. He had two heavy leather suitcases.

“The rest of my kit has gone by long sea,” he explained.

Like most Army men, the Colonel was a neat packer. The examination of his baggage took only a few minutes. Poirot noted a packet of pipe cleaners.

“You always use the same kind?” he asked.

“Usually. If I can get ’em.”

“Ah!” Poirot nodded.

These pipe cleaners were identical with the one he had found on the floor of the dead man’s compartment.

Dr. Constantine remarked as much when they were out in the corridor again.

“Tout de même,” murmured Poirot, “I can hardly believe it. It is not dans son caractère, and when you have said that you have said everything.”

The door of the next compartment was closed. It was that occupied by Princess Dragomiroff. They knocked on the door and the Princess’s deep voice called, “Entrez.”

M. Bouc was spokesman. He was very deferential and polite as he explained their errand.

The Princess listened to him in silence, her small toad-like face quite impassive.

“If it is necessary, Messieurs,” she said quietly when he had finished, “that is all there is to it. My maid has the keys. She will attend to it with you.”

“Does your maid always carry your keys, Madame?” asked Poirot.

“Certainly, Monsieur.”

“And if during the night at one of the frontiers the Customs officials should require a piece of luggage to be opened?”

The old lady shrugged her shoulders.

“It is very unlikely. But in such a case this conductor would fetch her.”

“You trust her, then, implicitly, Madame?”

“I have told you so already,” said the Princess quietly. “I do not employ people whom I do not trust.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Trust is indeed something in these days. It is, perhaps, better to have a homely woman whom one can trust than a more chic maid—for example, some smart Parisienne.”

He saw the dark intelligent eyes come slowly round and fasten themselves upon his face.

“What exactly are you implying, M. Poirot?”

“Nothing, Madame. I? Nothing.”

“But yes. You think, do you not, that I should have a smart Frenchwoman to attend to my toilet?”

“It would be, perhaps, more usual, Madame.”

She shook her head.

“Schmidt is devoted to me.” Her voice dwelt lingeringly on the words. “Devotion—c’est impayable.”

The German woman had arrived with the keys. The Princess spoke to her in her own language, telling her to open the valises and help the gentlemen in their search. She herself remained in the corridor looking out at the snow and Poirot remained with her, leaving M. Bouc to the task of searching the luggage.

She regarded him with a grim smile.

“Well, Monsieur, do you not wish to see what my valises contain?”

He shook his head.

“Madame, it is a formality, that is all.”

“Are you so sure?”

“In your case, yes.”

“And yet I knew and loved Sonia Armstrong. What do you think, then? That I would not soil my hands with killing such canaille as that man Cassetti? Well, perhaps you are right.”

She was silent a minute or two, then she said:

“With such a man as that, do you know what I should have liked to have done? I should have liked to call to my servants: “Flog this man to death and fling him out on the rubbish heap.” That is the way things were done when I was young. Monsieur.”

Still he did not speak, just listened attentively.

She looked at him with a sudden impetuosity.

“You do not say anything, M. Poirot. What is it that you are thinking, I wonder?”

He looked at her with a very direct glance.

“I think, Madame, that your strength is in your will—not in your arm.”

She glanced down at her thin, black-clad arms ending in those claw-like yellow hands with the rings on the fingers.

“It is true,” she said. “I have no strength in these—none. I do not know if I am sorry or glad.”

Then she turned abruptly back towards her carriage, where the maid was busily packing up the cases.

The Princess cut short M. Bouc’s apologies.

“There is not need for you to apologize, Monsieur,” she said. “A murder has been committed. Certain actions have to be performed. That is all there is to it.”

“Vous êtes bien amiable, Madame.”

She inclined her head slightly as they departed.

The doors of the next two carriages were shut. M. Bouc paused and scratched his head.

“Diable!” he said. “This may be awkward. These are diplomatic passports. Their baggage is exempt.”

“From Customs examination, yes. But a murder is different.”

“I know. All the same—we do not want to have complications—”

“Do not distress yourself, my friend. The Count and Countess will be reasonable. See how amiable Princess Dragomiroff was about it.”

“She is truly grande dame. These two are also of the same position, but the Count impressed me as a man of somewhat truculent disposition. He was not pleased when you insisted on questioning his wife. And this will annoy him still further. Suppose—eh—we omit them. After all, they can have nothing to do with the matter. Why should I stir up needless trouble for myself.”

"I do not agree with you," said Poirot. "I feel sure that Count Andrenyi will be reasonable. At any rate, let us make the attempt."

And, before M. Bouc could reply, he rapped sharply on the door of No. 13.

A voice from within cried, "Entrez."

The Count was sitting in the corner near the door reading a newspaper. The Countess was curled up in the opposite corner near the window. There was a pillow behind her head, and she seemed to have been asleep.

"Pardon, Monsieur le Comte," began Poirot. "Pray forgive this intrusion. It is that we are making a search of all the baggage on the train. In most cases a mere formality. But it has to be done. M. Bouc suggests that, as you have a diplomatic passport, you might reasonably claim to be exempt from such a search."

The Count considered for a moment.

"Thank you," he said. "But I do not think that I care for an exception to be made in my case. I should prefer that our baggage should be examined like that of the other passengers."

He turned to his wife.

"You do not object, I hope, Elena?"

"Not at all," said the Countess without hesitation.

A rapid and somewhat perfunctory search followed. Poirot seemed to be trying to mask an embarrassment in making various small pointless remarks, such as:

"Here is a label all wet on your suitcase, Madame," as he lifted down a blue morocco case with initials on it and a coronet.

The Countess did not reply to this observation. She seemed, indeed, rather bored by the whole proceeding, remaining curled up in her corner, staring dreamily out through the window whilst the men searched her luggage in the compartment next door.

Poirot finished his search by opening the little cupboard above the washbasin and taking a rapid glance at its contents—a sponge, face cream, powder and a small bottle labelled trional.

Then, with polite remarks on either side, the search party withdrew.

Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment, that of the dead man, and Poirot’s own came next.

They now came to the second-class carriages. The first one, Nos. 10, 11, was occupied by Mary Debenham, who was reading a book, and Greta Ohlsson, who was fast asleep but woke with a start at their entrance.

Poirot repeated his formula. The Swedish lady seemed agitated, Mary Debenham calmly indifferent.

Poirot addressed himself to the Swedish lady.

“If you permit, Mademoiselle, we will examine your baggage first, and then perhaps you would be so good as to see how the American lady is getting on. We have moved her into one of the carriages in the next coach, but she is still very upset as the result of her discovery. I have ordered coffee to be sent to her, but I think she is of those to whom someone to talk to is a necessity of the first water.”

The good lady was instantly sympathetic. She would go immediately. It must have been indeed a terrible shock to the nerves, and already the poor lady was upset by the journey and leaving her daughter. Ah, yes, certainly she would go at once—her case was not locked—and she would take with her some sal ammoniac.

She bustled off. Her possessions were soon examined. They were meagre in the extreme. She had evidently not noticed the missing wires from the hat box.

Miss Debenham had put her book down. She was watching Poirot. When he asked her, she handed over her keys. Then, as he lifted down a case and opened it, she said:

“Why did you send her away, M. Poirot?”

“I, Mademoiselle? Why, to minister to the American lady.”

“An excellent pretext—but a pretext all the same.”

“I don’t understand you, Mademoiselle.”

“I think you understand me very well.”

She smiled.

“You wanted to get me alone. Wasn’t that it?”

“You are putting words into my mouth, Mademoiselle.”

“And ideas into your head? No, I don’t think so. The ideas are already there. That is right, isn’t it?”

“Mademoiselle, we have a proverb—”

“Que s’excuse s’accuse; is that what you were going to say? You must give me the credit for a certain amount of observation and common sense. For some reason or other you have got it into your head that I know something about this sordid business—this murder of a man I never saw before.”

“You are imagining things, Mademoiselle.”

“No, I am not imagining things at all. But it seems to me that a lot of time is wasted by not speaking the truth—by beating about the bush instead of coming straight out with things.”

“And you do not like the waste of time. No, you like to come straight to the point. You like the direct method. Eh bien, I will give it to you, the direct method. I will ask you the meaning of certain words that I overheard on the journey from Syria. I had got out of the train to do what the English call ‘stretch the legs’ at the station of Konya. Your voice and the Colonel’s, Mademoiselle, they came to me out of the night. You said to him, ‘Not now. Not now. When it’s all over. When it’s behind us.’ What did you mean by those words. Mademoiselle?”

She said very quietly:

“Do you think I meant—murder?”

“It is I who am asking you, Mademoiselle.”

She sighed—was lost a minute in thought. Then, as though rousing herself, she said:

“Those words had a meaning, Monsieur, but not one that I can tell you. I can only give you my solemn word of honour that I had never set eyes on this man Ratchett in my life until I saw him on this train.”

“And—you refuse to explain those words?”

“Yes—if you like to put it that way—I refuse. They had to do with—with a task I had undertaken.”

“A task that is now ended?”

“What do you mean?”

“It is ended, is it not?”

“Why should you think so?”

“Listen, Mademoiselle, I will recall to you another incident. There was a delay to the train on the day we were to reach Stamboul. You were very agitated, Mademoiselle. You, so calm, so self-controlled. You lost that calm.”

“I did not want to miss my connection.”

“So you said. But, Mademoiselle, the Orient Express leaves Stamboul every day of the week. Even if you had missed the connection it would only have been a matter of twenty-four hours’ delay.”

Miss Debenham for the first time showed signs of losing her temper.

“You do not seem to realize that one may have friends awaiting one’s arrival in London, and that a day’s delay upsets arrangements and causes a lot of annoyance.”

“Ah, it is like that? There are friends awaiting your arrival? You do not want to cause them inconvenience?”

“Naturally.”

“And yet—it is curious—”

“What is curious?”

“On this train—again we have a delay. And this time a more serious delay, since there is no possibility of sending a telegram to your friends or of getting them on the long—the long—”

“The long distance? The telephone, you mean.”

“Ah, yes, the portmanteau call, as you say in England.”

Mary Debenham smiled a little in spite of herself.

“Trunk call,” she corrected. “Yes, as you say, it is extremely annoying not to be able to get any word through, either by telephone or telegraph.”

“And yet, mademoiselle, this time your manner is quite different. You no longer betray the impatience. You are calm and philosophical.”

Mary Debenham flushed and bit her lip. She no longer felt inclined to smile.

“You do not answer, Mademoiselle?”

“I am sorry. I did not know that there was anything to answer.”

“The explanation of your change of attitude, Mademoiselle.”

“Don’t you think that you are making rather a fuss about nothing, M. Poirot?”

Poirot spread out his hands in an apologetic gesture.

“It is perhaps a fault with us detectives. We expect the behaviour to be always consistent. We do not allow for changes of mood.”

Mary Debenham made no reply.

“You know Colonel Arbuthnot well, Mademoiselle?”

He fancied that she was relieved by the change of subject.

“I met him for the first time on this journey.”

“Have you any reason to suspect that he may have known this man Ratchett?”

She shook her head decisively.

“I am quite sure he didn’t.”

“Why are you sure?”

“By the way he spoke.”

“And yet, Mademoiselle, we found a pipe cleaner on the floor of the dead man’s compartment. And Colonel Arbuthnot is the only man on the train who smokes a pipe?”

He watched her narrowly, but she displayed neither surprise nor emotion, merely said:

“Nonsense. It’s absurd. Colonel Arbuthnot is the last man in the world to be mixed up in a crime—especially a theatrical kind of crime like this.”

It was so much what Poirot himself thought that he found himself on the point of agreeing with her. He said instead:

“I must remind you that you do not know him very well, Mademoiselle.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I know the type well enough.”

He said very gently:

“You still refuse to tell me the meaning of those words—‘When it’s behind us?’”

She said coldly:

“I have nothing more to say.”

“It does not matter,” said Hercule Poirot. “I shall find out.”

He bowed and left the compartment, closing the door after him.

“Was that wise, my friend?” asked M. Bouc. “You have put her on her guard—and through her you have put the Colonel on his guard also.”

“Mon ami, if you wish to catch a rabbit you put a ferret into the hole, and if the rabbit is there he runs. That is all I have done.”

They entered the compartment of Hildegarde Schmidt.

The woman was standing in readiness, her face respectful but unemotional.

Poirot took a quick glance through the contents of the small case on the seat. Then he motioned to the attendant to get down the bigger suitcase from the rack.

“The keys?” he said.

“It is not locked, Monsieur.”

Poirot undid the hasps and lifted the lid.

“Aha!” he said, and turning to M. Bouc, “You remember what I said? Look here a little moment!”

On the top of the suitcase was a hastily rolled up brown Wagon Lit uniform.

The stolidity of the German woman underwent a sudden change.

“Ach!” she cried. “That is not mine. I did not put it there. I have never looked in that case since we left Stamboul. Indeed, indeed, it is true.”

She looked from one to another pleadingly.

Poirot took her gently by the arm and soothed her.

“No, no all is well. We believe you. Do not be agitated. I am as sure you did not hide the uniform there as I am sure that you are a good cook. See. You are a good cook, are you not?”

Bewildered, the woman smiled in spite of herself.

“Yes, indeed, all my ladies have said so. I—”

She stopped, her mouth open, looking frightened again.

“No, no,” said Poirot. “I assure you all is well. See, I will tell you how this happened. This man, the man you saw in Wagon Lit uniform, comes out of the dead man’s compartment. He collides with you. That is bad luck for him. He has hoped that no one will see him. What to do next? He must get rid of his uniform. It is now not a safeguard, but a danger.”

His glance went to M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine, who were listening attentively.

“There is the snow, you see. The snow which confuses all his plans. Where can he hide these clothes? All the compartments are full. No, he passes one where the door is open and shows it to be unoccupied. It must be the one belonging to the woman with whom he has just collided. He slips in, removes the uniform and jams it hurriedly into a suitcase on the rack. It may be some time before it is discovered.”

“And then?” said M. Bouc.

“That we must discuss,” said Poirot with a warning glance.

He held up the tunic. A button, the third down, was missing. Poirot slipped his hand into the pocket and took out a conductor’s pass key, used to unlock the doors of the compartments.

“Here is the explanation of how our man was able to pass through locked doors,” said M. Bouc. “Your questions to Mrs. Hubbard were unnecessary. Locked or not locked, the man could easily get through the communicating door. After all, if a Wagon Lit uniform, why not a Wagon Lit key?”

“Why not, indeed,” said Poirot.

“We might have known it, really. You remember Michel said that the door into the corridor of Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment was locked when he came in answer to her bell.”

“That is so, Monsieur,” said the conductor. “That is why I thought the lady must have been dreaming.”

“But now it is easy,” continued M. Bouc. “Doubtless he meant to relock the communicating door also, but perhaps he heard some movement from the bed and it startled him.”

“We have now,” said Poirot, “only to find the scarlet kimono.”

“True. And these last two compartments are occupied by men.”

“We will search all the same.”

“Oh! assuredly. Besides, I remember what you said.”

Hector MacQueen acquiesced willingly in the search.

“I’d just as soon you did,” he said with a rueful smile. “I feel I’m just definitely the most suspicious character on the train. You’ve only got to find a will in which the old man left me all his money, and that’ll just about fix things.”

M. Bouc bent a suspicious glance upon him.

“That’s just my fun,” said MacQueen hastily. “He’d never have left me a cent, really. I was just useful to him—languages and so on. You’re apt to be done down, you know, if you don’t speak anything but good American. I’m no linguist myself, but I know what I call shopping and hotel snappy bits in French and German and Italian.”

His voice was a little louder than usual. It was as though he was slightly uneasy at the search in spite of his willingness.

Poirot emerged.

“Nothing,” he said. “Not even a compromising bequest!”

MacQueen sighed.

“Well, that’s a load off my mind,” he said humorously.

They moved on to the last compartment. The examination of the luggage of the big Italian and of the valet yielded no result.

The three men stood at the end of the coach looking at each other.

“What next?” asked M. Bouc.

“We will go back to the dining car,” said Poirot. “We know now all that we can know. We have the evidence of the passengers, the evidence of their baggage, the evidence of our eyes. We can expect no further help. It must be our part now to use our brains.”

He felt in his pocket for his cigarette case. It was empty.

“I will join you in a moment,” he said. “I shall need the cigarettes. This is a very difficult, a very curious affair. Who wore that scarlet kimono? Where is it now? I wish I knew. There is something in this case—some factor—that escapes me! It is difficult because it has been made difficult. But we will discuss it. Pardon me a moment.”

He went hurriedly along the corridor to his own compartment. He had, he knew, a further supply of cigarettes in one of his valises.

He got it down and snapped back the lock.

Then he sat back on his heels and stared.

Neatly folded on the top of the case was a thin scarlet silk kimono embroidered with dragons.

“So,” he murmured. “It is like that. A defiance. Very well. I take it up.”

PART THREE

HERCULE POIROT SITS BACK AND THINKS

One

WHICH OF THEM?

M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine were talking together when Poirot entered the dining car. M. Bouc was looking depressed.

“Le voilà,” said the latter when he saw Poirot.

Then he added as his friend sat down:

“If you solve this case, mon cher, I shall indeed believe in miracles!”

“It worries you, this case?”

“Naturally it worries me. I cannot make head or tail of it.”

“I agree,” said the doctor.

He looked at Poirot with interest.

“To be frank,” he said, “I cannot see what you are going to do next.”

“No?” said Poirot thoughtfully.

He took out his cigarette case and lit one of his tiny cigarettes. His eyes were dreamy.

“That, to me, is the interest of this case,” he said. “We are cut off from all the normal routes of procedure. Are these people whose evidence we have taken speaking the truth or lying? We have no means of finding out—except such means as we can devise ourselves. It is an exercise, this, of the brain.”

“That is all very fine,” said M. Bouc. “But what have you to go upon?”

“I told you just now. We have the evidence of the passengers and the evidence of our own eyes.”

“Pretty evidence—that of the passengers! It told us just nothing at all.”

Poirot shook his head.

“I do not agree, my friend. The evidence of the passengers gave us several points of interest.”

“Indeed,” said M. Bouc sceptically. “I did not observe it.”

“That is because you did not listen.”

“Well, tell me—what did I miss?”

“I will just take one instance—the first evidence we heard—that of the young MacQueen. He uttered, to my mind, one very significant phrase.”

“About the letters?”

“No, not about the letters. As far as I can remember, his words were: ‘We travelled about. Mr. Ratchett wanted to see the world. He was hampered by knowing no languages. I acted more as a courier than a secretary.’”

He looked from the doctor’s face to that of M. Bouc.

“What? You still do not see? That is inexcusable—for you had a second chance again just now when he said, ‘You’re apt to be done down if you speak nothing but good American.’”

“You mean—?” M. Bouc still looked puzzled.

“Ah, it is that you want it given to you in words of one syllable. Well, here it is! M. Ratchett spoke no French. Yet, when the conductor came in answer to his bell last night, it was a voice speaking in French that told him that it was a mistake and that he was not wanted. It was, moreover, a perfectly idiomatic phrase that was used, not one that a man knowing only a few words of French would have selected. ‘Ce n’est rien. Je me suis trompé.’”

“It is true,” cried Constantine excitedly. “We should have seen that! I remember your laying stress on the words when you repeated them to us.

Now I understand your reluctance to rely upon the evidence of the dented watch. Already, at twenty-three minutes to one, Ratchett was dead—"

"And it was his murderer speaking!" finished M. Bouc impressively.

Poirot raised a deprecating hand.

"Let us not go too fast. And do not let us assume more than we actually know. It is safe, I think, to say that at that time, twenty-three minutes to one, some other person was in Ratchett's compartment and that that person was either French, or could speak the French language fluently."

"You are very cautious, mon vieux."

"One should advance only a step at a time. We have no actual evidence that Ratchett was dead at that time."

"There is the cry that awakened you."

"Yes, that is true."

"In one way," said M. Bouc thoughtfully, "this discovery does not affect things very much. You heard someone moving about next door. That someone was not Ratchett, but the other man. Doubtless he is washing blood from his hands, clearing up after the crime, burning the incriminating letter. Then he waits till all is still, and when he thinks it is safe and the coast is clear he locks and chains Ratchett's door on the inside, unlocks the communicating door through into Mrs. Hubbard's compartment and slips out that way. In fact it is exactly as we thought—with the difference that Ratchett was killed about half an hour earlier, and the watch put on to a quarter past one to create an alibi."

"Not such a famous alibi," said Poirot. "The hands of the watch pointed to 1:15—the exact time when the intruder actually left the scene of the crime."

"True," said M. Bouc, a little confused. "What, then, does the watch convey to you?"

“If the hands were altered—I say if—then the time at which they were set must have a significance. The natural reaction would be to suspect anyone who had a reliable alibi for the time indicated—in this case 1:15.”

“Yes, Yes,” said the doctor. “That reasoning is good.”

“We must also pay a little attention to the time the intruder entered the compartment. When had he an opportunity of doing so? Unless we are to assume the complicity of the real conductor, there was only one time when he could have done so—during the time the train stopped at Vincovci. After the train left Vincovci the conductor was sitting facing the corridor and whereas any one of the passengers would pay little attention to a Wagon Lit attendant, the one person who would notice an imposter would be the real conductor. But during the halt at Vincovci the conductor is out on the platform. The coast is clear.”

“And, by our former reasoning, it must be one of the passengers,” said M. Bouc. “We come back to where we were. Which of them?”

Poirot smiled.

“I have made a list,” he said, “If you like to see it, it will, perhaps, refresh your memory.”

The doctor and M. Bouc pored over the list together. It was written out neatly in a methodical manner in the order in which the passengers had been interviewed.

Hector MacQueen—American subject. Berth No. 6. Second Class.

Motive: Possibly arising out of association with dead man?

Alibi: From midnight to 2 a.m. (Midnight to 1:30 vouched for by Col. Arbuthnot and 1:15 to 2 vouched for by conductor.)

Evidence Against Him: None.

Suspicious Circumstances: None.

Conductor—Pierre Michel—French subject.

Motive: None.

Alibi: From midnight to 2 a.m. (Seen by H.P. in corridor at same time as voice spoke from Ratchett's compartment at

12:37. From 1 a.m. to 1:16 vouched for by other two conductors.)

Evidence Against Him: None.

Suspicious Circumstances: The Wagon Lit uniform found is a point in his favour since it seems to have been intended to throw suspicion on him.

Edward Masterman—English subject. Berth No. 4. Second Class

Motive: Possibly arising out of connection with deceased, whose valet he was.

Alibi: From midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by Antonio Foscarelli.)

Evidence Against Him or Suspicious Circumstances: None, except that he is the only man the right height or size to have worn the Wagon Lit uniform. On the other hand, it is unlikely that he speaks French well.

Mrs. Hubbard—American subject. Berth No. 3. First Class.

Motive: None.

Alibi: From midnight to 2 a.m.—None.

Evidence Against Her or Suspicious Circumstances: Story of man in her compartment is substantiated by the evidence of Hardman and that of the woman Schmidt.

Greta Ohlsson—Swedish subject. Berth No. 10. Second Class.

Motive: None.

Alibi: From midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by Mary Debenham.) Note.—Was last to see Ratchett alive.

Princess Dragomiroff—Naturalized French subject. Berth No. 14. First Class.

Motive: Was intimately acquainted with Armstrong family, and godmother to Sonia Armstrong.

Alibi: From midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by conductor and maid.)

Evidence Against Her or Suspicious Circumstances: None.

Count Andrenyi—Hungarian subject. Diplomatic passport. Berth No. 13. First Class.

Motive: None.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by conductor—this does not cover period from 1 to 1:15.)

Countess Andrenyi—As above. Berth No. 12.

Motive: None.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. Took trional and slept. (Vouched for by husband. Trional bottle in her cupboard.)

Colonel Arbuthnot—British subject. Berth No. 15. First Class

Motive: None.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. Talked with MacQueen till 1:30. Went to own compartment and did not leave it. (Substantiated by MacQueen and conductor.)

Evidence Against Him or Suspicious Circumstances: Pipe cleaner.

Cyrus Hardman—American subject. Berth No. 16. Second Class

Motive: None known.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. Did not leave compartment. (Substantiated by MacQueen and conductor.)

Evidence Against Him or Suspicious Circumstances: None.

Antonio Foscarelli—American subject. (Italian birth.) Berth No. 5. Second Class

Motive: None known.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by Edward Masterman.)

Evidence Against Him or Suspicious Circumstances: None, except that weapon used might be said to suit his temperament. (Vide M. Bouc.)

Mary Debenham—British subject. Berth No. 11. Second Class

Motive: None.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by Greta Ohlsson.)

Evidence Against Her or Suspicious Circumstances: and her refusal to explain same.

Hildegarde Schmidt—German subject. Berth No. 8. Second Class.

Motive: None.

Alibi: Midnight to 2 a.m. (Vouched for by conductor and her mistress.) Went to bed. Was aroused by conductor at 12:38 approx. and went to mistress.

Note: The evidence of the passengers is supported by the statement of the conductor that no one entered or left Mr. Ratchett’s compartment between the hours of midnight to 1 o’clock (when he himself went into the next coach) and from 1:15 to 2 o’clock.

“That document, you understand,” said Poirot, “is a mere précis of the evidence we heard, arranged that way for convenience.”

With a grimace M. Bouc handed it back.

“It is not illuminating,” he said.

“Perhaps you may find this more to your taste,” said Poirot with a slight smile as he handed him a second sheet of paper.

Two

TEN QUESTIONS

On the paper was written:

Things needing explanation.

1. The handkerchief marked with the initial H. Whose is it?
2. The pipe cleaner. Was it dropped by Colonel Arbuthnot? Or by someone else?
3. Who wore the scarlet kimono?
4. Who was the man or woman masquerading in Wagon Lit uniform?
5. Why do the hands of the watch point to 1:15?
6. Was the murder committed at that time?
7. Was it earlier?
8. Was it later?
9. Can we be sure that Ratchett was stabbed by more than one person?
10. What other explanation of his wounds can there be?

“Well, let us see what we can do,” said M. Bouc, brightening a little at this challenge to his wits. “The handkerchief to begin with. Let us by all means be orderly and methodical.”

“Assuredly,” said Poirot, nodding his head in a satisfied fashion.

M. Bouc continued somewhat didactically.

“The initial H is connected with three people—Mrs. Hubbard, Miss Debenham, whose second name is Hermione, and the maid Hildegarde Schmidt.”

“Ah! And of those three?”

“It is difficult to say. But I think I should vote for Miss Debenham. For all one knows, she may be called by her second name and not her first. Also there is already some suspicion attaching to her. That conversation you overheard, mon cher, was certainly a little curious, and so is her refusal to explain it.”

“As for me, I plump for the American,” said Dr. Constantine. “It is a very expensive handkerchief that, and Americans, as all the world knows, do not care what they pay.”

“So you both eliminate the maid?” asked Poirot.

“Yes. As she herself said, it is the handkerchief of a member of the upper classes.”

“And the second question—the pipe cleaner. Did Colonel Arbuthnot drop it, or somebody else?”

“That is more difficult. The English, they do not stab. You are right there. I incline to the view that someone else dropped the pipe cleaner—and did so to incriminate the long-legged Englishman.”

“As you said, M. Poirot,” put in the doctor, “two clues is too much carelessness. I agree with M. Bouc. The handkerchief was a genuine oversight—hence no one will admit that it is theirs. The pipe cleaner is a faked clue. In support of that theory, you notice that Colonel Arbuthnot shows no embarrassment and admits freely to smoking a pipe and using that type of cleaner.”

“You reason well,” said Poirot.

“Question No. 3—who wore the scarlet kimono?” went on M. Bouc. “As to that I will confess I have not the slightest idea. Have you any views on the subject, Dr. Constantine?”

“None.”

“Then we confess ourselves beaten there. The next question has, at any rate, possibilities. Who was the man or woman masquerading in Wagon Lit uniform? Well, one can say with certainty a number of people whom it could not be. Hardman, Colonel Arbuthnot, Foscarelli, Count Andrenyi and Hector MacQueen are all too tall. Mrs. Hubbard, Hildegarde Schmidt and Greta Ohlsson are too broad. That leaves the valet, Miss Debenham, Princess Dragomiroff and Countess Andrenyi—and none of them sounds likely! Greta Ohlsson in one case and Antonio Foscarelli in the other both swear that Miss Debenham and the valet never left their compartments, Hildegarde Schmidt swears to the Princess being in hers, and Count Andrenyi has told us that his wife took a sleeping draught. Therefore it seems impossible that it can be anybody—which is absurd!"

"As our old friend Euclid says," murmured Poirot.

"It must be one of those four," said Dr. Constantine. "Unless it is someone from outside who has found a hiding place—and that, we agreed, was impossible."

M. Bouc had passed on to the next question on the list.

"No. 5—why do the hands of the broken watch point to 1:15? I can see two explanations of that. Either it was done by the murderer to establish an alibi and afterwards he was prevented from leaving the compartment when he meant to do so by hearing people moving about, or else—wait—I have an idea coming—"

The other two waited respectfully while M. Bouc struggled in mental agony.

"I have it," he said at last. "It was not the Wagon Lit murderer who tampered with the watch! It was the person we have called the Second Murderer—the left-handed person—in other words the woman in the scarlet kimono. She arrives later and moves back the hands of the watch in order to make an alibi for herself."

"Bravo," said Dr. Constantine. "It is well imagined, that."

"In fact," said Poirot, "she stabbed him in the dark, not realizing that he was dead already, but somehow deduced that he had a watch in his pyjama pocket, took it out, put back the hands blindly and gave it the requisite dent."

M. Bouc looked at him coldly.

"Have you anything better to suggest yourself?" he asked.

"At the moment—no," admitted Poirot.

"All the same," he went on, "I do not think you have either of you appreciated the most interesting point about that watch."

"Does question No. 6 deal with it?" asked the doctor. "To that question—was the murder committed at that time—1:15—I answer, 'No.'"

"I agree," said M. Bouc. "'Was it earlier?' is the next question. I say yes. You, too, doctor?"

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, but the question 'Was it later?' can also be answered in the affirmative. I agree with your theory, M. Bouc, and so, I think, does M. Poirot, although he does not wish to commit himself. The First Murderer came earlier than 1:15, the Second Murderer came after 1:15. And as regards the question of left-handedness, ought we not to take steps to ascertain which of the passengers is left-handed?"

"I have not completely neglected that point," said Poirot. "You may have noticed that I made each passenger write either a signature or an address. That is not conclusive, because some people do certain actions with the right hand and others with the left. Some write right-handed, but play golf left-handed. Still it is something. Every person questioned took the pen in their right hand—with the exception of Princess Dragomiroff, who refused to write."

"Princess Dragomiroff, impossible," said M. Bouc.

"I doubt if she would have had the strength to inflict that particular left-handed blow," said Dr. Constantine dubiously. "That particular wound had been inflicted with considerable force.”

“More force than a woman could use?”

“No, I would not say that. But I think more force than an elderly woman could display, and Princess Dragomiroff’s physique is particularly frail.”

“It might be a question of the influence of mind over body,” said Poirot. “Princess Dragomiroff has great personality and immense will power. But let us pass from that for the moment.”

“To questions Nos. 9 and 10. Can we be sure that Ratchett was stabbed by more than one person, and what other explanation of the wounds can there be? In my opinion, medically speaking, there can be no other explanation of those wounds. To suggest that one man struck first feebly and then with violence, first with the right hand and then with the left, and after an interval of perhaps half an hour inflicted fresh wounds on a dead body—well, it does not make sense.”

“No,” said Poirot. “It does not make sense. And you think that two murderers do make sense?”

“As you yourself have said, what other explanation can there be?”

Poirot stared straight ahead of him.

“That is what I ask myself,” he said. “That is what I never cease to ask myself.”

He leaned back in his seat.

“From now on, it is all here,” he tapped himself on the forehead. “We have thrashed it all out. The facts are all in front of us—neatly arranged with order and method. The passengers have sat here, one by one, giving their evidence. We know all that can be known—from outside.…”

He gave an affectionate smile at M. Bouc.

“It has been a little joke between us, has it not—this business of sitting back and thinking out the truth? Well, I am about to put my theory into practice—here before your eyes. You two must do the same. Let us all three close our eyes and think.…”

“One or more of those passengers killed Ratchett. Which of them?”

Three

CERTAIN SUGGESTIVE POINTS

It was quite a quarter of an hour before anyone spoke.

M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine had started by trying to obey Poirot’s instructions. They had endeavoured to see through the maze of conflicting particulars to a clear and outstanding solution.

M. Bouc’s thoughts had run something as follows:

“Assuredly I must think. But as far as that goes I have already thought…Poirot obviously thinks this English girl is mixed up in the matter. I cannot help feeling that that is most unlikely…The English are extremely cold. Probably it is because they have no figures…But that is not the point. It seems that the Italian could not have done it—a pity. I suppose the English valet is not lying when he said the other never left the compartment? But why should he? It is not easy to bribe the English, they are so unapproachable. The whole thing is most unfortunate. I wonder when we shall get out of this. There must be some rescue work in progress. They are so slow in these countries…it is hours before anyone thinks of doing anything. And the police of these countries, they will be most trying to deal with—puffed up with importance, touchy, on their dignity. They will make a grand affair of all this. It is not often that such a chance comes their way. It will be in all the newspapers….”

And from there on M. Bouc’s thoughts went along a well-worn course which they had already traversed some hundred times.

Dr. Constantine’s thoughts ran thus:

“He is queer, this little man. A genius? Or a crank? Will he solve this mystery? Impossible. I can see no way out of it. It is all too confusing…Everyone is lying, perhaps…But even then that does not help one. If they are all lying it is just as confusing as if they were speaking the truth. Odd about those wounds. I cannot understand it…It would be easier to understand if he had been shot—after all, the term gunman must mean that they shoot with a gun. A curious country, America. I should like to go there. It is so progressive. When I get home I must get hold of Demetrius Zagone—he has been to America, he has all the modern ideas…I wonder what Zia is doing at this moment. If my wife ever finds out—"

His thoughts went on to entirely private matters.

Hercule Poirot sat very still.

One might have thought he was asleep.

And then, suddenly, after a quarter of an hour's complete immobility, his eyebrows began to move slowly up his forehead. A little sigh escaped him. He murmured beneath his breath:

"But, after all, why not? And if so—why, if so, that would explain everything."

His eyes opened. They were green like a cat's. He said softly:

"Eh bien. I have thought. And you?"

Lost in their reflections, both men started violently.

"I have thought also," said M. Bouc just a shade guilty. "But I have arrived at no conclusion. The elucidation of crime is your métier, not mine, my friend."

"I, too, have reflected with great earnestness," said the doctor unblushingly, recalling his thoughts from certain pornographic details. "I have thought of many possible theories, but not one that really satisfies me."

Poirot nodded amiably. His nod seemed to say:

"Quite right. That is the proper thing to say. You have given me the cue I expected."

He sat very upright, threw out his chest, caressed his moustache and spoke in the manner of a practised speaker addressing a public meeting.

“My friends, I have reviewed the facts in my mind, and have also gone over to myself the evidence of the passengers—with this result. I see, nebulously as yet, a certain explanation that would cover the facts as we know them. It is a very curious explanation, and I cannot be sure as yet that it is the true one. To find out definitely, I shall have to make certain experiments.

“I would like first to mention certain points which appear to me suggestive. Let us start with a remark made to me by M. Bouc in this very place on the occasion of our first lunch together on the train. He commented on the fact that we were surrounded by people of all classes, of all ages, of all nationalities. That is a fact somewhat rare at this time of year. The Athens-Paris and the Bucharest-Paris coaches, for instance, are almost empty. Remember also one passenger who failed to turn up. It is, I think, significant. Then there are some minor points that strike me as suggestive—for instance, the position of Mrs. Hubbard’s sponge bag, the name of Mrs. Armstrong’s mother, the detective methods of M. Hardman, the suggestion of M. MacQueen that Ratchett himself destroyed the charred note we found, Princess Dragomiroff’s Christian name, and a grease spot on a Hungarian passport.”

The two men stared at him.

“Do they suggest anything to you, those points?” asked Poirot.

“Not a thing,” said M. Bouc frankly.

“And M. le docteur?”

“I do not understand in the least of what you are talking.” M. Bouc, meanwhile, seizing upon the one tangible thing his friend had mentioned, was sorting through the passports. With a grunt he picked up that of Count and Countess Andrenyi and opened it.

“Is this what you mean? This dirty mark?”

“Yes. It is a fairly fresh grease spot. You notice where it occurs?”

“At the beginning of the description of the Count’s wife—her Christian name, to be exact. But I confess that I still do not see the point.”

“I am going to approach it from another angle. Let us go back to the handkerchief found at the scene of the crime. As we have stated not long ago—three people are associated with the letter H. Mrs. Hubbard, Miss Debenham and the maid, Hildegarde Schmidt. Now let us regard that handkerchief from another point of view. It is, my friends, an extremely expensive handkerchief—an objet de luxe, hand made, embroidered in Paris. Which of the passengers, apart from the initial, was likely to own such a handkerchief? Not Mrs. Hubbard, a worthy woman with no pretensions to reckless extravagance in dress. Not Miss Debenham; that class of English-woman has a dainty linen handkerchief, but not an expensive wisp of cambric costing perhaps two hundred francs. And certainly not the maid. But there are two women on the train who would be likely to own such a handkerchief. Let us see if we can connect them in any way with the letter H. The two women I refer to are Princess Dragomiroff —”

“Whose Christian name is Natalia,” put in M. Bouc ironically.

“Exactly. And her Christian name, as I said just now, is decidedly suggestive. The other woman is Countess Andrenyi. And at once something strikes us—”

“You!”

“Me, then. Her Christian name on her passport is disfigured by a blob of grease. Just an accident, anyone would say. But consider that Christian name. Elena. Suppose that, instead of Elena, it were Helena. That capital H could be turned into a capital E and then run over the small e next to it quite easily—and then a spot of grease dropped to cover up the alteration.”

“Helena,” cried M. Bouc. “It is an idea, that.”

“Certainly it is an idea! I look about for any confirmation, however slight, of my idea—and I find it. One of the luggage labels on the Countess’s baggage is slightly damp. It is one that happens to run over the first initial on top of the case. That label has been soaked off and put on again in a different place.”

“You begin to convince me,” said M. Bouc, “But the Countess Andrenyi—surely—”

“Ah, now, mon vieux, you must turn yourself round and approach an entirely different angle of the case. How was this murder intended to appear to everybody? Do not forget that the snow has upset all the murderer’s original plan. Let us imagine, for a little minute, that there is no snow, that the train proceeded on its normal course. What, then, would have happened?

“The murder, let us say, would still have been discovered in all probability at the Italian frontier early this morning. Much of the same evidence would have been given to the Italian police. The threatening letters would have been produced by M. MacQueen, M. Hardman would have told his story, Mrs. Hubbard would have been eager to tell how a man passed through her compartment, the button would have been found. I imagine that two things only would have been different. The man would have passed through Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment just before one o’clock—and the Wagon Lit uniform would have been found cast off in one of the toilets.”

“You mean?”

“I mean that the murder was planned to look like an outside job. The assassin would have been presumed to have left the train at Brod, where the train is timed to arrive at 00:58. Somebody would probably have passed a strange Wagon Lit conductor in the corridor. The uniform would be left in a conspicuous place so as to show clearly just how the trick had been played. No suspicion would have been attached to the passengers. That, my friends, was how the affair was intended to appear to the outside world.

“But the accident to the train changes everything. Doubtless we have here the reason why the man remained in the compartment with his victim so long. He was waiting for the train to go on. But at last he realized that the train was not going on. Different plans would have to be made. The murderer would now be known to be still on the train."

"Yes, yes," said M. Bouc impatiently. "I see all that. But where does the handkerchief come in?"

"I am returning to it by a somewhat circuitous route. To begin with, you must realize that the threatening letters were in the nature of a blind. They might have been lifted bodily out of an indifferently written American crime novel. They are not real. They are, in fact, simply intended for the police. What we have to ask ourselves is, 'Did they deceive Ratchett?' On the face of it, the answer seems to be, 'No.' His instructions to Hardman seem to point to a definite 'private' enemy of the identity of whom he was well aware. That is if we accept Hardman's story as true. But Ratchett certainly received one letter of a very different character—the one containing a reference to the Armstrong baby, a fragment of which we found in his compartment. In case Ratchett had not realized it sooner, this was to make sure that he understood the reason of the threats against his life. That letter, as I have said all along, was not intended to be found. The murderer's first care was to destroy it. This, then, was the second hitch in his plans. The first was the snow, the second was our reconstruction of that fragment.

"That note being destroyed so carefully can only mean one thing. There must be on the train someone so intimately connected with the Armstrong family that the finding of that note would immediately direct suspicion upon that person.

"Now we come to the other two clues that we found. I pass over the pipe cleaner. We have already said a good deal about that. Let us pass on to the handkerchief. Taken at its simplest, it is a clue which directly incriminates someone whose initial is H, and it was dropped there unwittingly by that person."

"Exactly," said Dr. Constantine. "She finds out that she has dropped the handkerchief and immediately takes steps to conceal her Christian name."

"How fast you go. You arrive at a conclusion much sooner than I would permit myself to do."

"Is there any other alternative?"

"Certainly there is. Suppose, for instance, that you have committed a crime and wish to cast suspicion for it on someone else. Well, there is on the train a certain person connected intimately with the Armstrong family—a woman. Suppose, then, that you leave there a handkerchief belonging to that woman. She will be questioned, her connection with the Armstrong family will be brought out—et voilà. Motive—and an incriminating article of evidence."

"But in such a case," objected the doctor, "the person indicated being innocent, would not take steps to conceal her identity."

"Ah, really? That is what you think? That is truly the opinion of the police court. But I know human nature, my friend, and I tell you that, suddenly confronted with the possibility of being tried for murder, the most innocent person will lose their head and do the most absurd things. No, no, the grease spot and the changed label do not prove guilt—they only prove that the Countess Andrenyi is anxious for some reason to conceal her identity."

"What do you think her connection with the Armstrong family can be? She has never been in America, she says."

"Exactly, and she speaks broken English, and she has a very foreign appearance which she exaggerates. But it should not be difficult to guess who she is. I mentioned just now the name of Mrs. Armstrong's mother. It was Linda Arden, and she was a very celebrated actress—among other things a Shakespearean actress. Think of As You Like It—the Forest of Arden and Rosalind. It was there she got the inspiration for her acting name. Linda Arden, the name by which she was known all over the world, was not her real name. It may have been Goldenberg—she quite likely had central European blood in her veins—a strain of Jewish, perhaps. Many nationalities drift to America. I suggest to you, gentlemen, that that young sister of Mrs. Armstrong's, little more than a child at the time of the tragedy, was Helena Goldenberg the younger daughter of Linda Arden, and that she married Count Andrenyi when he was an attaché in Washington."

"But Princess Dragomiroff says that she married an Englishman."

"Whose name she cannot remember! I ask you, my friends—is that really likely? Princess Dragomiroff loved Linda Arden as great ladies do love great artists. She was godmother to one of her daughters. Would she forget so quickly the married name of the other daughter? It is not likely. No, I think we can safely say that Princess Dragomiroff was lying. She knew Helena was on the train, she had seen her. She realized at once, as soon as she heard who Ratchett really was, that Helena would be suspected. And so, when we question her as to the sister she promptly lies—is vague, cannot remember, but 'thinks Helena married an Englishman'—a suggestion as far away from the truth as possible."

One of the restaurant attendants came through the door at the end and approached them. He addressed M. Bouc.

"The dinner, Monsieur, shall I serve it? It is ready some little time."

M. Bouc looked at Poirot. The latter nodded.

"By all means, let dinner be served."

The attendant vanished through the doors at the other end. His bell could be heard ringing and his voice upraised:

"Premier Service. Le dîner est servi. Premier dîner—First Service."

Four

THE GREASE SPOT ON A HUNGARIAN PASSPORT

Poirot shared a table with M. Bouc and the doctor.

The company assembled in the restaurant car was a very subdued one. They spoke little. Even the loquacious Mrs. Hubbard was unnaturally quiet. She murmured as she sat:

“I don’t feel as though I’ve got the heart to eat anything,” and then partook of everything offered her, encouraged by the Swedish lady, who seemed to regard her as a special charge.

Before the meal was served Poirot had caught the chief attendant by the sleeve and murmured something to him. Constantine had a pretty good guess what the instructions had been, as he noticed that the Count and Countess Andrenyi were always served last and that at the end of the meal there was a delay in making out their bill. It therefore came about that the Count and Countess were the last left in the restaurant car.

When they rose at length and moved in the direction of the door, Poirot sprang up and followed them.

“Pardon, Madame, you have dropped your handkerchief.”

He was holding out to her the tiny monogrammed square.

She took it, glanced at it, then handed it back to him.

“You are mistaken, Monsieur, that is not my handkerchief.”

“Not your handkerchief? Are you sure?”

“Perfectly sure, Monsieur.”

“And yet, Madame, it has your initial—the initial H.”

The Count made a sudden movement. Poirot ignored him. His eyes were fixed on the Countess’s face.

Looking steadily at him she replied:

“I do not understand, Monsieur. My initials are E.A.”

“I think not. Your name is Helena—not Elena. Helena Goldenberg, the younger daughter of Linda Arden—Helena Goldenberg, the sister of Mrs. Armstrong.”

There was a dead silence for a minute or two. Both the Count and Countess had gone deadly white. Poirot said in a gentler tone:

“It is of no use denying. That is the truth, is it not?”

The Count burst out furiously:

“I demand, Monsieur, by what right you—”

She interrupted him, putting up a small hand towards his mouth.

“No, Rudolph. Let me speak. It is useless to deny what this gentleman says. We had better sit down and talk the matter out.”

Her voice had changed. It still had the southern richness of tone, but it had become suddenly more clear cut and incisive. It was, for the first time, a definitely American voice.

The Count was silenced. He obeyed the gesture of her hand they both sat down opposite Poirot.

“Your statement, Monsieur, is quite true,” said the Countess. “I am Helena Goldenberg, the younger sister of Mrs. Armstrong.”

“You did not acquaint me with that fact this morning, Madame la Comtesse.”

"No."

"In fact, all that your husband and you told me was a tissue of lies."

"Monsieur," cried the Count angrily.

"Do not be angry, Rudolph. M. Poirot puts the fact rather brutally, but what he says is undeniable."

"I am glad you admit the fact so freely, Madame. Will you now tell me your reasons for so doing and also for altering your Christian name on your passport."

"That was my doing entirely," put in the Count.

Helena said quietly:

"Surely, M. Poirot, you can guess my reason—our reason. This man who was killed is the man who murdered my baby niece, who killed my sister, who broke my brother-in-law's heart. Three of the people I loved best and who made up my home—my world!"

Her voice rang out passionately. She was a true daughter of that mother, the emotional force of whose acting had moved huge audiences to tears.

She went on more quietly.

"Of all the people on the train, I alone had probably the best motive for killing him."

"And you did not kill him, Madame?"

"I swear to you, M. Poirot, and my husband knows and will swear also—that, much as I may have been tempted to do so, I never lifted a hand against that man."

"I too, gentlemen," said the Count. "I give you my word of honour that last night Helena never left her compartment. She took a sleeping draught exactly as I said. She is utterly and entirely innocent."

Poirot looked from one to the other of them.

“On my word of honour,” repeated the Count.

Poirot shook his head slightly.

“And yet you took it upon yourself to alter the name in the passport?”

“Monsieur Poirot,” the Count spoke earnestly and passionately. “Consider my position. Do you think I could stand the thought of my wife dragged through a sordid police case. She was innocent, I knew it, but what she said was true—because of her connection with the Armstrong family she would have been immediately suspected. She would have been questioned—arrested, perhaps. Since some evil chance had taken us on the same train as this man Ratchett, there was, I felt sure, but one thing for it. I admit, Monsieur, that I lied to you—all, that is, save in one thing. My wife never left her compartment last night.”

He spoke with an earnestness that it was hard to gainsay.

“I do not say that I disbelieve you, Monsieur,” said Poirot slowly. “Your family is, I know, a proud and ancient one. It would be bitter indeed for you to have your wife dragged into an unpleasant police case. With that I can sympathize. But how, then, do you explain the presence of your wife’s handkerchief actually in the dead man’s compartment?”

“That handkerchief is not mine, Monsieur,” said the Countess.

“In spite of the initial H?”

“In spite of the initial. I have handkerchiefs not unlike that, but not one that is exactly of that pattern. I know, of course that I cannot hope to make you believe me, but I assure you that it is so. That handkerchief is not mine.”

“It may have been placed there by someone in order to incriminate you?”

She smiled a little.

"You are enticing me to admit that, after all, it is mine? But indeed, M. Poirot, it isn't."

She spoke with great earnestness.

"Then why, if the handkerchief was not yours, did you alter the name in the passport?"

The Count answered this.

"Because we heard that a handkerchief had been found with the initial H on it. We talked the matter over together before we came to be interviewed. I pointed out to Helena that if it were seen that her Christian name began with an H she would immediately be subjected to much more rigorous questioning. And the thing was so simple—to alter Helena to Elena was easily done."

"You have, M. le Comte, the makings of a very fine criminal," remarked Poirot dryly. "A great natural ingenuity, and an apparently remorseless determination to mislead justice."

"Oh, no, no," the girl leaned forward. "M. Poirot, he's explained to you how it was." She broke from French into English. "I was scared—absolutely dead scared, you understand. It had been so awful—that time—and to have it all raked up again. And to be suspected and perhaps thrown into prison. I was just scared stiff, M. Poirot. Can't you understand at all?"

Her voice was lovely—deep—rich—pleading, the voice of the daughter of Linda Arden the actress.

Poirot looked gravely at her.

"If I am to believe you, Madame—and I do not say that I will not believe you—then you must help me."

"Help you?"

"Yes. The reason for the murder lies in the past—in that tragedy which broke up your home and saddened your young life. Take me back into the past, Mademoiselle, that I may find there the link that explains the whole thing."

"What can there be to tell you? They are all dead." She repeated mournfully. "All dead—all dead—Robert, Sonia—darling, darling Daisy. She was so sweet—so happy—she had such lovely curls. We were all just crazy about her."

"There was another victim, Madame. An indirect victim, you might say."

"Poor Susanne? Yes, I had forgotten about her. The police questioned her. They were convinced she had something to do with it. Perhaps she had—but if so, only innocently. She had, I believe, chatted idly with someone, giving information as to the time of Daisy's outings. The poor thing got terribly wrought up—she thought she was being held responsible." She shuddered. "She threw herself out of the window. Oh it was horrible."

She buried her face in her hands.

"What nationality was she, Madame?"

"She was French."

"What was her last name?"

"It's absurd, but I can't remember—we all called her Susanne. A pretty laughing girl. She was devoted to Daisy."

"She was the nurserymaid, was she not?"

"Yes."

"Who was the nurse?"

"She was a trained hospital nurse. Stengelberg her name was. She, too, was devoted to Daisy—and to my sister."

"Now, Madame, I want you to think carefully before you answer this question. Have you, since you were on this train, seen anyone that you recognized?”

She stared at him.

“I? No, no one at all.”

“What about Princess Dragomiroff?”

“Oh, her? I know her, of course. I thought you meant anyone—anyone from—from that time.”

“So I did, Madame. Now think carefully. Some years have passed, remember. The person might have altered their appearance.”

Helena pondered deeply. Then she said:

“No—I am sure—there is no one.”

“You yourself—you were a young girl at the time—did you have no one to superintend your studies or to look after you?”

“Oh, yes, I had a dragon—a sort of governess to me and secretary to Sonia combined. She was English or rather Scotch—a big, red-haired woman.”

“What was her name?”

“Miss Freebody.”

“Young or old?”

“She seemed frightfully old to me. I suppose she couldn’t have been more than forty. Susanne, of course, used to look after my clothes and maid me.”

“And there were no other inmates of the house?”

“Only servants.”

“And you are certain—quite certain, Madame—that you have recognized no one on the train?”

She replied earnestly:

“No one, Monsieur. No one at all.”

Five

THE CHRISTIAN NAME OF PRINCESS DRAGOMIROFF

When the Count and Countess had departed, Poirot looked across at the other two.

“You see,” he said, “we make progress.”

“Excellent work,” said M. Bouc cordially. “For my part, I should never have dreamed of suspecting Count and Countess Andrenyi. I will admit I thought them quite hors de combat. I suppose there is no doubt that she committed the crime? It is rather sad. Still, they will not guillotine her. There are extenuating circumstances. A few years’ imprisonment—that will be all.”

“In fact you are quite certain of her guilt.”

“My dear friend, surely there is no doubt of it? I thought your reassuring manner was only to smooth things over till we are dug out of the snow and the police take charge.”

“You do not believe the Count’s positive assertion—on his word of honour—that his wife is innocent?”

“Mon cher—naturally—what else could he say? He adores his wife. He wants to save her! He tells his lie very well—quite in the grand Seigneur manner, but what else than a lie could it be?”

“Well, you know, I had the preposterous idea that it might be the truth.”

“No, no. The handkerchief, remember. The handkerchief clinches the matter.”

“Oh, I am not so sure about the handkerchief. You remember, I always told you that there were two possibilities as to the ownership of the handkerchief.”

“All the same—”

M. Bouc broke off. The door at the end had opened, and Princess Dragomiroff entered the dining car. She came straight to them and all three men rose to their feet.

She spoke to Poirot, ignoring the others.

“I believe, Monsieur,” she said, “that you have a handkerchief of mine.”

Poirot shot a glance of triumph at the other two.

“Is this it, Madame?”

He produced the little square of fine cambric.

“That is it. It has my initial in the corner.”

“But, Madame la Princesse, that is the letter H,” said M. Bouc. “Your Christian name—pardon me—is Natalia.”

She gave him a cold stare.

“That is correct, Monsieur. My handkerchiefs are always initialled in the Russian characters. H is N in Russian.”

M. Bouc was somewhat taken aback. There was something about this indomitable old lady which made him feel flustered and uncomfortable.

“You did not tell us that this handkerchief was yours at the inquiry this morning.”

“You did not ask me,” said the Princess dryly.

“Pray be seated, Madame,” said Poirot.

She sighed.

“I may as well, I suppose.”

She sat down.

“You need not make a long business of this, Messieurs. Your next question will be—how did my handkerchief come to be lying by a murdered man’s body? My reply to that is that I have no idea.”

“You have really no idea.”

“None whatever.”

“You will excuse me, Madame, but how much can we rely upon the truthfulness of your replies?”

Poirot said the words very softly. Princess Dragomiroff answered contemptuously.

“I suppose you mean because I did not tell you that Helena Andrenyi was Mrs. Armstrong’s sister?”

“In fact you deliberately lied to us in the matter.”

“Certainly. I would do the same again. Her mother was my friend. I believe, Messieurs, in loyalty—to one’s friends and one’s family and one’s caste.”

“You do not believe in doing your utmost to further the ends of justice?”

“In this case I consider that justice—strict justice—has been done.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“You see my difficulty, Madame. In this matter of the handkerchief, even, am I to believe you? Or are you shielding your friend’s daughter?”

“Oh! I see what you mean.” Her face broke into a grim smile. “Well, Messieurs, this statement of mine can be easily proved. I will give you the address of the people in Paris who make my handkerchiefs. You have only to show them the one in question and they will inform you that it was made to my order over a year ago. The handkerchief is mine, Messieurs."

She rose.

"Have you anything further you wish to ask me?"

"Your maid, Madame, did she recognize this handkerchief when we showed it to her this morning?"

"She must have done so. She saw it and said nothing? Ah, well, that shows that she too can be loyal."

With a slight inclination of her head she passed out of the dining car.

"So that was it," murmured Poirot softly. "I noticed just a trifling hesitation when I asked the maid if she knew to whom the handkerchief belonged. She was uncertain whether or not to admit that it was her mistress's. But how does that fit in with that strange central idea of mine? Yes, it might well be."

"Ah!" said M. Bouc with a characteristic gesture—"she is a terrible old lady, that!"

"Could she have murdered Ratchett?" asked Poirot of the doctor.

He shook his head.

"Those blows—the ones delivered with great force penetrating the muscle—never, never could anyone with so frail a physique inflict them."

"But the feebler ones?"

"The feebler ones, yes."

"I am thinking," said Poirot, "of the incident this morning when I said to her that the strength was in her will rather than in her arm. It was in the nature of a trap, that remark. I wanted to see if she would look down at her right or her left arm. She did neither. She looked at them both. But she made a strange reply. She said, ‘No, I have no strength in these. I do not know whether to be sorry or glad.’ A curious remark that. It confirms me in my belief about the crime.”

“It did not settle the point about the left-handedness.”

“No. By the way, did you notice that Count Andrenyi keeps his handkerchief in his right-hand breast pocket?”

M. Bouc shook his head. His mind reverted to the astonishing revelations of the last half hour. He murmured:

“Lies—and again lies—it amazes me, the amount of lies we had told to us this morning.”

“There are more still to discover,” said Poirot cheerfully.

“You think so?”

“I shall be very disappointed if it is not so.”

“Such duplicity is terrible,” said M. Bouc. “But it seems to please you,” he added reproachfully.

“It has this advantage,” said Poirot. “If you confront anyone who has lied with the truth, they usually admit it—often out of sheer surprise. It is only necessary to guess right to produce your effect.

“That is the only way to conduct this case. I select each passenger in turn, consider their evidence and say to myself, ‘If so and so is lying, on what point are they lying and what is the reason for the lie?’ And I answer if they are lying—if, you mark—it could only be for such a reason and on such a point. We have done that once very successfully with Countess Andrenyi. We shall now proceed to try the same method on several other persons.”

“And supposing, my friend, that your guess happens to be wrong?”

“Then one person, at any rate, will be completely freed from suspicion.”

“Ah! A process of elimination.”

“Exactly.”

“And who do we tackle next?”

“We are going to tackle that pukka sahib, Colonel Arbuthnot.”

Six

A SECOND INTERVIEW WITH COLONEL ARBUTHNOT

Colonel Arbuthnot was clearly annoyed at being summoned to the dining car for a second interview. His face wore a most forbidding expression as he sat down and said:

“Well?”

“All my apologies for troubling you a second time,” said Poirot. “But there is still some information that I think you might be able to give us.”

“Indeed? I hardly think so.”

“To begin with, you see this pipe cleaner?”

“Yes.”

“Is it one of yours?”

“Don’t know. I don’t put a private mark on them, you know.”

“Are you aware, Colonel Arbuthnot, that you are the only man amongst the passengers in the Stamboul-Calais carriage who smokes a pipe?”

“In that case it probably is one of mine.”

“Do you know where it was found?”

“Not the least idea.”

“It was found by the body of the murdered man.”

Colonel Arbuthnot raised his eyebrows.

"Can you tell us, Colonel Arbuthnot, how it is likely to have got there?"

"If you mean did I drop it there myself, no, I didn't."

"Did you go into Mr. Ratchett's compartment at any time?"

"I never even spoke to the man."

"You never spoke to him and you did not murder him?"

The Colonel's eyebrows went up again sardonically.

"If I had, I should hardly be likely to acquaint you with the fact. As a matter of fact I didn't murder the fellow."

"Ah, well," murmured Poirot. "It is of no consequence."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said that it was of no consequence."

"Oh!" Arbuthnot looked taken aback. He eyed Poirot uneasily.

"Because, you see," continued the little man, "the pipe cleaner, it is of no importance. I can myself think of eleven other excellent explanations of its presence."

Arbuthnot stared at him.

"What I really wished to see you about was quite another matter," went on Poirot. "Miss Debenham may have told you, perhaps, that I overheard some words spoken to you at the station of Konya?"

Arbuthnot did not reply.

"She said, 'Not now. When it's all over. When it's behind us.' Do you know to what those words referred?"

"I am sorry, M. Poirot, but I must refuse to answer that question."

“Pourquoi?”

The Colonel said stiffly:

“I suggest that you should ask Miss Debenham herself for the meaning of those words.”

“I have done so.”

“And she refused to tell you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I should think it would have been perfectly plain—even to you—that my lips are sealed.”

“You will not give away a lady’s secret?”

“You can put it that way, if you like.”

“Miss Debenham told me that they referred to a private matter of her own.”

“Then why not accept her word for it?”

“Because, Colonel Arbuthnot, Miss Debenham is what one might call a highly suspicious character.”

“Nonsense,” said the Colonel with warmth.

“It is not nonsense.”

“You have nothing whatever against her.”

“Not the fact that Miss Debenham was companion governess in the Armstrong household at the time of the kidnapping of little Daisy Armstrong?”

There was a minute’s dead silence.

Poirot nodded his head gently.

“You see,” he said, “we know more than you think. If Miss Debenham is innocent, why did she conceal that fact? Why did she tell me that she had never been in America?”

The Colonel cleared his throat.

“Aren’t you possibly making a mistake?”

“I am making no mistake. Why did Miss Debenham lie to me?”

Colonel Arbuthnot shrugged his shoulders.

“You had better ask her. I still think that you are wrong.”

Poirot raised his voice and called. One of the restaurant attendants came from the far end of the car.

“Go and ask the English lady in No. 11 if she will be good enough to come here.”

“Bien, Monsieur.”

The man departed. The four men sat in silence. Colonel Arbuthnot’s face looked as though it were carved out of wood, it was rigid and impassive.

The man returned.

“Thank you.”

A minute or two later Mary Debenham entered the dining car.

Seven

THE IDENTITY OF MARY DEBENHAM

She wore no hat. Her head was thrown back as though in defiance. The sweep of her hair back from her face, the curve of her nostril suggested the figurehead of a ship plunging gallantly into a rough sea. In that moment she was beautiful.

Her eyes went to Arbuthnot for a minute—just a minute.

She said to Poirot?

“You wished to see me?”

“I wished to ask you, Mademoiselle, why you lied to us this morning?”

“Lied to you? I don’t know what you mean.”

“You concealed the fact that at the time of the Armstrong tragedy you were actually living in the house. You told me that you had never been in America.”

He saw her flinch for a moment and then recover herself.

“Yes,” she said. “That is true.”

“No, Mademoiselle, it was false.”

“You misunderstood me. I mean that it is true that I lied to you.”

“Ah, you admit it?”

Her lips curved into a smile.

“Certainly. Since you have found me out.”

“You are at least frank, Mademoiselle.”

“There does not seem anything else for me to be.”

“Well, of course, that is true. And now, Mademoiselle, may I ask you the reason for these evasions?”

“I should have thought the reason leapt to the eye, M. Poirot?”

“It does not leap to mine, Mademoiselle.”

She said in a quiet, even voice with a trace of hardness in it:

“I have my living to get.”

“You mean—?”

She raised her eyes and looked him full in the face.

“How much do you know, M. Poirot, of the fight to get and keep decent employment? Do you think that a girl who had been detained in connection with a murder case, whose name and perhaps photographs were reproduced in the English papers—do you think that any nice ordinary middle-class Englishwoman would want to engage that girl as governess to her daughters?”

“I do not see why not—if no blame attached to you.”

“Oh, blame—it is not blame—it is publicity! So far, M. Poirot, I have succeeded in life. I have had well-paid, pleasant posts. I was not going to risk the position I had attained when no good end could have been served.”

“I will venture to suggest, Mademoiselle, that I would have been the best judge of that, not you.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“For instance, you could have helped me in the matter of identification.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it possible, Mademoiselle, that you did not recognize in the Countess Andrenyi Mrs. Armstrong’s young sister whom you taught in New York?”

“Countess Andrenyi? No.” She shook her head. “It may seem extraordinary to you, but I did not recognize her. She was not grown up, you see, when I knew her. That was over three years ago. It is true that the Countess reminded me of someone—it puzzled me. But she looks so foreign—I never connected her with the little American schoolgirl. It is true that I only glanced at her casually when coming into the restaurant car. I noticed her clothes more than her face—” she smiled faintly—“women do! And then—well, I had my own preoccupations.”

“You will not tell me your secret, Mademoiselle?”

Poirot’s voice was very gentle and persuasive.

She said in a low voice:

“I can’t—I can’t.”

And suddenly, without warning she broke down, dropping her face down upon her outstretched arms and crying as though her heart would break.

The Colonel sprang up and stood awkwardly beside her.

“I—look here—”

He stopped and, turning round, scowled fiercely at Poirot.

“I’ll break every bone in your damned body, you dirty little whippersnapper,” he said.

“Monsieur,” protested M. Bouc.

Arbuthnot had turned back to the girl.

“Mary—for God’s sake—”

She sprang up.

“It’s nothing. I’m all right. You don’t need me any more, do you, M. Poirot? If you do, you must come and find me. Oh, what an idiot—what an idiot I’m making of myself!”

She hurried out of the car. Arbuthnot, before following her, turned once more on Poirot.

“Miss Debenham’s got nothing to do with this business—nothing, do you hear? And if she’s worried and interfered with, you’ll have me to deal with.”

He strode out.

“I like to see an angry Englishman,” said Poirot. “They are very amusing. The more emotional they feel the less command they have of language.”

But M. Bouc was not interested in the emotional reactions of Englishmen. He was overcome by admiration of his friend.

“Mon cher, vous êtes épatant,” he cried. “Another miraculous guess. C’est formidable.”

“It is incredible how you think of these things,” said Dr. Constantine admiringly.

“Oh, I claim no credit this time. It was not a guess. Countess Andrenyi practically told me.”

“Comment? Surely not?”

“You remember I asked her about her governess or companion? I had already decided in my mind that if Mary Debenham were mixed up in the matter, she must have figured in the household in some such capacity.”

“Yes, but the Countess Andrenyi described a totally different person.”

“Exactly. A tall, middle-aged woman with red hair—in fact, the exact opposite in every respect of Miss Debenham, so much so as to be quite remarkable. But then she had to invent a name quickly, and there it was that the unconscious association of ideas gave her away. She said Miss Freebody, you remember.”

“Yes?”

“Eh bien, you may not know it, but there is a shop in London that was called, until recently, Debenham & Freebody. With the name Debenham running in her head, the Countess clutches at another name quickly, and the first that comes is Freebody. Naturally I understood immediately.”

“That is yet another lie. Why did she do it?”

“Possibly more loyalty. It makes things a little difficult.”

“Ma foi,” said M. Bouc with violence. “But does everybody on this train tell lies?”

“That,” said Poirot, “is what we are about to find out.”

Eight

FURTHER SURPRISING REVELATIONS

“Nothing would surprise me now,” said M. Bouc. “Nothing! Even if everybody in the train proved to have been in the Armstrong household I should not express surprise.”

“That is a very profound remark,” said Poirot. “Would you like to see what your favourite suspect, the Italian, has to say for himself?”

“You are going to make another of these famous guesses of yours?”

“Precisely.”

“It is really a most extraordinary case,” said Constantine.

“No, it is most natural.” M. Bouc flung up his arms in comic despair.

“If this is what you call natural, mom ami—”

Words failed him.

Poirot had by this time requested the dining car attendant to fetch Antonio Foscarelli.

The big Italian had a wary look in his eye as he came in. He shot nervous glances from side to side like a trapped animal.

“What do you want?” he said. “I have nothing to tell you—nothing, do you hear! Per Dio—” He struck his hand on the table.

“Yes, you have something more to tell us,” said Poirot firmly. “The truth!”

“The truth?” He shot an uneasy glance at Poirot. All the assurance and geniality had gone out of his manner.

“Mais oui. It may be that I know it already. But it will be a point in your favour if it comes from you spontaneously.”

“You talk like the American police. ‘Come clean,’ that is what they say—‘come clean.’”

“Ah! so you have had experience of the New York police?”

“No, no, never. They could not prove a thing against me—but it was not for want of trying.”

Poirot said quietly:

“That was in the Armstrong case, was it not? You were the chauffeur?”

His eyes met those of the Italian. The bluster went out of the big man. He was like a pricked balloon.

“Since you know—why ask me?”

“Why did you lie this morning?”

“Business reasons. Besides, I do not trust the Yugo-Slav police. They hate the Italians. They would not have given me justice.”

“Perhaps it is exactly justice that they would have given you!”

“No, no, I had nothing to do with this business last night. I never left my carriage. The long-faced Englishman, he can tell you so. It was not I who killed this pig—this Ratchett. You cannot prove anything against me.”

Poirot was writing something on a sheet of paper. He looked up and said quietly:

“Very good. You can go.”

Foscarelli lingered uneasily.

“You realize that it was not I—that I could have had nothing to do with it?”

“I said that you could go.”

“It is a conspiracy. You are going to frame me? All for a pig of a man who should have gone to the chair! It was an infamy that he did not. If it had been me—if I had been arrested—”

“But it was not you. You had nothing to do with the kidnapping of the child.”

“What is that you are saying? Why, that little one—she was the delight of the house. Tonio, she called me. And she would sit in the car and pretend to hold the wheel. All the household worshipped her! Even the police came to understand that. Ah, the beautiful little one.”

His voice had softened. The tears came into his eyes. Then he wheeled round abruptly on his heel and strode out of the dining car.

“Pietro,” called Poirot.

The dining car attendant came at a run.

“The No. 10—the Swedish lady.”

“Bien, Monsieur.”

“Another?” cried M. Bouc. “Ah, no—it is not possible. I tell you it is not possible.”

“Mon cher, we have to know. Even if in the end everybody on the train proves to have a motive for killing Ratchett, we have to know. Once we know, we can settle once for all where the guilt lies.”

“My head is spinning,” groaned M. Bouc.

Greta Ohlsson was ushered in sympathetically by the attendant. She was weeping bitterly.

She collapsed on the seat facing Poirot and wept steadily into a large handkerchief.

“Now do not distress yourself, Mademoiselle. Do not distress yourself.” Poirot patted her on the shoulder. “Just a few little words of truth, that is all. You were the nurse who was in charge of little Daisy Armstrong?”

“It is true—it is true,” wept the wretched woman. “Ah, she was an angel—a little sweet, trustful angel. She knew nothing but kindness and love—and she was taken away by that wicked man—cruelly treated—and her poor mother—and the other little one who never lived at all. You cannot understand—you cannot know—if you had been there as I was—if you had seen the whole terrible tragedy—I ought to have told you the truth about myself this morning. But I was afraid—afraid. I did so rejoice that that evil man was dead—that he could not any more kill or torture little children. Ah! I cannot speak—I have no words….”

She wept with more vehemence than ever.

Poirot continued to pat her gently on the shoulder.

“There—there—I comprehend—I comprehend everything—everything, I tell you. I will ask you no more questions. It is enough that you have admitted what I know to be the truth. I understand, I tell you.”

By now inarticulate with sobs, Greta Ohlsson rose and groped her way blindly towards the door. As she reached it she collided with a man coming in.

It was the valet—Masterman.

He came straight up to Poirot and spoke in his usual, quiet, unemotional voice.

“I hope I’m not intruding, sir. I thought it best to come along at once, sir, and tell you the truth. I was Colonel Armstrong’s batman in the war, sir, and afterwards I was his valet in New York. I’m afraid I concealed that fact this morning. It was very wrong of me, sir, and I thought I’d better come and make a clean breast of it. But I hope, sir, that you’re not suspecting Tonio in any way. Old Tonio, sir, wouldn’t hurt a fly. And I can swear positively that he never left the carriage all last night. So, you see, sir, he couldn’t have done it. Tonio may be a foreigner, sir, but he’s a very gentle creature—not like those nasty murdering Italians one reads about.”

He stopped.

Poirot looked steadily at him.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“That is all, sir.”

He paused, then, as Poirot did not speak, he made an apologetic little bow, and after a momentary hesitation left the dining car in the same quiet, unobtrusive fashion as he had come.

“This,” said Dr. Constantine, “is more wildly improbable than any roman policier I have ever read.”

“I agree,” said M. Bouc. “Of the twelve passengers in that coach, nine have been proved to have had a connection with the Armstrong case. What next, I ask you? Or, should I say, who next?”

“I can almost give you the answer to your question,” said Poirot. “Here comes our American sleuth, M. Hardman.”

“Is he, too, coming to confess?”

Before Poirot could reply, the American had reached their table. He cocked an alert eye at them and, sitting down, he drawled out:

“Just exactly what’s up on this train? It seems bughouse to me.”

Poirot twinkled at him:

“Are you quite sure, Mr. Hardman, that you yourself were not the gardener at the Armstrong home?”

“They didn’t have a garden,” replied Mr. Hardman literally.

“Or the butler?”

“Haven’t got the fancy manner for a place like that. No, I never had any connection with the Armstrong house—but I’m beginning to believe I’m about the only one on this train who hadn’t! Can you beat it—that’s what I say? Can you beat it?”

“It is certainly a little surprising,” said Poirot mildly.

“C’est rigolo,” burst from M. Bouc.

“Have you any ideas of your own about the crime, M. Hardman?” inquired Poirot.

“No, sir. It’s got me beat. I don’t know how to figure it out. They can’t all be in it; but which one is the guilty party is beyond me. How did you get wise to all this, that’s what I want to know?”

“I just guessed.”

“Then, believe me, you’re a pretty slick guesser. Yes, I’ll tell the world you’re a slick guesser.”

Mr. Hardman leaned back and looked at Poirot admiringly.

“You’ll excuse me,” he said, “but no one would believe it to look at you. I take off my hat to you. I do, indeed.”

“You are too kind, M. Hardman.”

“Not at all. I’ve got to hand it to you.”

“All the same,” said Poirot, “the problem is not yet quite solved. Can we say with authority that we know who killed M. Ratchett?”

“Count me out,” said Mr. Hardman. “I’m not saying anything at all. I’m just full of natural admiration. What about the other two you’ve not had a guess at yet? The old American dame and the lady’s maid? I suppose we can take it that they’re the only innocent parties on the train?”

"Unless," said Poirot, smiling, "we can fit them into our little collection as —shall we say?—housekeeper and cook in the Armstrong household."

"Well, nothing in the world would surprise me now," said Mr. Hardman with quiet resignation. "Bughouse—that's what this business is—bughouse!"

"Ah, mon cher, that would be indeed stretching coincidence a little too far," said M. Bouc. "They cannot all be in it."

Poirot looked at him.

"You do not understand," he said. "You do not understand at all. Tell me," he said, "do you know who killed Ratchett?"

"Do you?" countered M. Bouc.

Poirot nodded.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I have known for some time. It is so clear that I wonder you have not seen it also." He looked at Hardman and asked, "And you?"

The detective shook his head. He stared at Poirot curiously.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know at all. Which of them was it?"

Poirot was silent a minute. Then he said:

"If you will be so good, M. Hardman, assemble everyone here. There are two possible solutions of this case. I want to lay them both before you all."

Nine

POIROT PROPOUNDS TWO SOLUTIONS

The passengers came crowding into the restaurant car and took their seats round the tables. They all bore more or less the same expression, one of expectancy mingled with apprehension. The Swedish lady was still weeping and Mrs. Hubbard was comforting her.

“Now you must just take a hold on yourself, my dear. Everything’s going to be perfectly all right. You mustn’t lose your grip on yourself. If one of us is a nasty murderer we know quite well it isn’t you. Why, anyone would be crazy even to think of such a thing. You sit here and I’ll stay right by you; and don’t you worry any.”

Her voice died away as Poirot stood up.

The Wagon Lit conductor was hovering in the doorway.

“You permit that I stay, Monsieur?”

“Certainly, Michel.”

Poirot cleared his throat.

“Messieurs et Mesdames, I will speak in English, since I think all of you know a little of that language. We are here to investigate the death of Samuel Edward Ratchett—alias Cassetti. There are two possible solutions of the crime. I shall put them both before you, and I shall ask M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine here to judge which solution is the right one.

“Now you all know the facts of the case. Mr. Ratchett was found stabbed this morning. He was last known to be alive at 12:37 last night, when he spoke to the Wagon Lit conductor through the door. A watch in his pyjama pocket was found to be badly dented and it had stopped at a quarter past one. Dr. Constantine, who examined the body when found, puts the time of death as having occurred between midnight and two in the morning. At half an hour after midnight, as you all know, the train ran into a snowdrift. After that time it was impossible for anyone to leave the train.

“The evidence of Mr. Hardman, who is a member of a New York Detective Agency” (several heads turned to look at Mr. Hardman) “shows that no one could have passed his compartment (No. 16 at the extreme end) without being seen by him. We are therefore forced to the conclusion that the murderer is to be found among the occupants of one particular coach—the Stamboul-Calais coach.

“That, I will say, was our theory.”

“Comment?” ejaculated M. Bouc, startled.

“But I will put before you an alternative theory. It is very simple. Mr. Ratchett had a certain enemy whom he feared. He gave Mr. Hardman a description of this enemy and told him that the attempt, if made at all, would most probably be made on the second night out from Stamboul.”

“Now I put it to you, ladies and gentlemen, that Mr. Ratchett knew a good deal more than he told. The enemy as Mr. Ratchett expected, joined the train at Belgrade, or possibly at Vincouci, by the door left open by Colonel Arbuthnot and Mr. MacQueen who had just descended to the platform. He was provided with a suit of Wagon Lit uniform, which he wore over his ordinary clothes, and a pass key which enabled him to gain access to Mr. Ratchett’s compartment in spite of the door being locked. Mr. Ratchett was under the influence of a sleeping draught. This man stabbed him with great ferocity and left the compartment through the communicating door leading to Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment—”

“That’s so,” said Mrs. Hubbard, nodding her head.

“He thrust the dagger he had used into Mrs. Hubbard’s sponge bag in passing. Without knowing it, he lost a button of his uniform. Then he slipped out of the compartment and along the corridor. He hastily thrust the uniform into a suitcase in an empty compartment, and a few minutes later, dressed in ordinary clothes, he left the train just before it started off. Again using the same means of egress—the door near the dining car."

Everybody gasped.

"What about that watch?" demanded Mr. Hardman.

"There you have the explanation of the whole thing. Mr. Ratchett had ommitted to put his watch back an hour as he should have done at Tzaribrod. His watch still registered Eastern European time, which is one hour ahead of Central European time. It was a quarter past twelve when Mr. Ratchett was stabbed—not a quarter past one."

"But it is absurd, that explanation," cried M. Bouc. "What of the voice that spoke from the compartment at twenty-three minutes to one. It was either the voice of Ratchett—or else of his murderer."

"Not necessarily. It might have been—well—a third person. One who had gone in to speak to Ratchett and found him dead. He rang the bell to summon the conductor, then, as you express it, the wind rose in him—he was afraid of being accused of the crime and he spoke pretending to be Ratchett."

"C'est possible," admitted M. Bouc grudgingly.

Poirot looked at Mrs. Hubbard.

"Yes, Madame, you were going to say—?"

"Well, I don't quite know what I was going to say. Do you think I forgot to put my watch back too?"

"No, Madame. I think you heard the man pass through—but unconsciously; later you had a nightmare of a man being in your compartment and woke up with a start and rang for the conductor."

"Well, I suppose that's possible," admitted Mrs. Hubbard.

Princess Dragomiroff was looking at Poirot with a very direct glance.

“How do you explain the evidence of my maid, Monsieur?”

“Very simply, Madame. Your maid recognized the handkerchief I showed her as yours. She somewhat clumsily tried to shield you. She did encounter the man—but earlier—while the train was at Vincovci station. She pretended to have seen him at a later hour with a confused idea of giving you a watertight alibi.”

The Princess bowed her head.

“You have thought of everything, Monsieur. I—I admire you.”

There was a silence.

Then everyone jumped as Dr. Constantine suddenly hit the table a blow with his fist.

“But no,” he said. “No, no, and again no! That is an explanation that will not hold water. It is deficient in a dozen minor points. The crime was not committed so—M. Poirot must know that perfectly well.”

Poirot turned a curious glance on him.

“I see,” he said, “that I shall have to give my second solution. But do not abandon this one too abruptly. You may agree with it later.”

He turned back again to face the others.

“There is another possible solution of the crime. This is how I arrived at it.

“When I had heard all the evidence, I leaned back and shut my eyes and began to think. Certain points presented themselves to me as worthy of attention. I enumerated these points to my two colleagues. Some I have already elucidated—such as a grease spot on a passport, etc. I will run over the points that remain. The first and most important is a remark made to me by M. Bouc in the restaurant car at lunch on the first day after leaving Stamboul—to the effect that the company assembled was interesting because it was so varied—representing as it did all classes and nationalities.

“I agreed with him, but when this particular point came into my mind, I tried to imagine whether such an assembly were ever likely to be collected under any other conditions. And the answer I made to myself was—only in America. In America there might be a household composed of just such varied nationalities—an Italian chauffeur, and English governess, a Swedish nurse, a French lady’s maid and so on. That led me to my scheme of ‘guessing’—that is, casting each person for a certain part in the Armstrong drama much as a producer casts a play. Well, that gave me an extremely interesting and satisfactory result.

“I had also examined in my own mind each separate person’s evidence with some curious results. Take first the evidence of Mr. MacQueen. My first interview with him was entirely satisfactory. But in my second he made rather a curious remark. I had described to him the finding of a note mentioning the Armstrong case. He said, ‘But surely—’ and then paused and went on, ‘I mean—that was rather careless of the old man.’

“Now I could feel that that was not what he had started out to say. Supposing what he had meant to say was, ‘But surely that was burnt!’ In which case, MacQueen knew of the note and of its destruction—in other words, he was either the murderer or an accomplice of the murderer. Very good.

“Then the valet. He said his master was in the habit of taking a sleeping draught when travelling by train. That might be true, but would Ratchett have taken one last night? The automatic under his pillow gave the lie to that statement. Ratchett intended to be on the alert last night. Whatever narcotic was administered to him must have been done so without his knowledge. By whom? Obviously by MacQueen or the valet.

“Now we come to the evidence of Mr. Hardman. I believed all that he told me about his own identity, but when it came to the actual methods he had employed to guard Mr. Ratchett, his story was neither more nor less than absurd. The only way effectively to have protected Ratchett was to have passed the night actually in his compartment or in some spot where he could watch the door. The only thing that his evidence did show plainly was that no one in any other part of the train could possibly have murdered Ratchett. It drew a clear circle round the Stamboul-Calais carriage. That seemed to me a rather curious and inexplicable fact, and I put it aside to think over.

"You probably have all heard by now of the few words I overheard between Miss Debenham and Colonel Arbuthnot. The interesting thing to my mind was the fact that Colonel Arbuthnot called her Mary and was clearly on terms of intimacy with her. But the Colonel was only supposed to have met her a few days previously—and I know Englishmen of the Colonel's type. Even if he had fallen in love with the young lady at first sight, he would have advanced slowly and with decorum—not rushing things. Therefore I concluded that Colonel Arbuthnot and Miss Debenham were in reality well acquainted, and were for some reason pretending to be strangers. Another small point was Miss Debenham's easy familiarity with the term 'long distance' for a telephone call. Yet Miss Debenham had told me that she had never been in the States.

"To pass to another witness. Mrs. Hubbard had told us that lying in bed she was unable to see whether the communicating door was bolted or not, and so asked Miss Ohlsson to see for her. Now, though her statement would have been perfectly true if she had been occupying compartments Nos. 2, 4, 12, or any even number—where the bolt is directly under the handle of the door—in the uneven numbers, such as compartment No. 3, the bolt is well above the handle and could not therefore be masked by the sponge bag in the least. I was forced to the conclusion that Mrs. Hubbard was inventing an incident that had never occurred.

"And here let me say just a word or two about times. To my mind, the really interesting point about the dented watch was the place where it was found—in Ratchett's pyjama pocket, a singularly uncomfortable and unlikely place to keep one's watch, especially as there is a watch 'hook' provided just by the head of the bed. I felt sure, therefore, that the watch had been deliberately placed in the pocket and faked. The crime, then, was not committed at a quarter past one.

"Was it, then, committed earlier? To be exact, at twenty-three minutes to one? My friend M. Bouc advanced as an argument in favour of it the loud cry which awoke me from sleep. But if Ratchett were heavily drugged he could not have cried out. If he had been capable of crying out he would have been capable of making some kind of a struggle to defend himself, and there were no signs of any such struggle.

“I remembered that MacQueen had called attention, not once but twice (and the second time in a very blatant manner), to the fact that Ratchett could speak no French. I came to the conclusion that the whole business at twenty-three minutes to one was a comedy played for my benefit! Anyone might see through the watch business—it is a common enough device in detective stories. They assumed that I should see through it and that, pluming myself on my own cleverness, I would go on to assume that since Ratchett spoke no French the voice I heard at twenty-three minutes to one could not be his, and that Ratchett must be already dead. But I am convinced that at twenty-three minutes to one Ratchett was still lying in his drugged sleep.

“But the device has succeeded! I have opened my door and looked out. I have actually heard the French phrase used. If I am so unbelievably dense as not to realize the significance of that phrase, it must be brought to my attention. If necessary MacQueen can come right out in the open. He can say, ‘Excuse me, M. Poirot, that can’t have been Mr. Ratchett speaking. He can’t speak French.’

“Now when was the real time of the crime? And who killed him?

“In my opinion, and this is only an opinion, Ratchett was killed at some time very close upon two o’clock, the latest hour the doctor gives us as possible.

“As to who killed him—”

He paused, looking at his audience. He could not complain of any lack of attention. Every eye was fixed upon him. In the stillness you could have heard a pin drop.

He went on slowly:

“I was particularly struck by the extraordinary difficulty of proving a case against any one person on the train and on the rather curious coincidence that in each case the testimony giving an alibi came from what I might describe as an ‘unlikely’ person. Thus Mr. MacQueen and Colonel Arbuthnot provided alibis for each other—two persons between whom it seemed most unlikely there should be any prior acquaintanceship. The same thing happened with the English valet and the Italian, with the Swedish lady and the English girl. I said to myself, ‘This is extraordinary—they cannot all be in it!’

“And then, Messieurs, I saw light. They were all in it. For so many people connected with the Armstrong case to be travelling by the same train by a coincidence was not only unlikely, it was impossible. It must be not chance, but design. I remembered a remark of Colonel Arbuthnot’s about trial by jury. A jury is composed of twelve people—there were twelve passengers—Ratchett was stabbed twelve times. And the thing that had worried me all along—the extraordinary crowd travelling in the Stamboul—Calais coach at a slack time of year was explained.

“Ratchett had escaped justice in America. There was no question as to his guilt. I visualized a self-appointed jury of twelve people who condemned him to death and were forced by exigencies of the case to be their own executioners. And immediately, on that assumption, the whole case fell into beautiful shining order.

“I saw it as a perfect mosaic, each person playing his or her allotted part. It was so arranged that if suspicion should fall on any one person, the evidence of one or more of the others would clear the accused person and confuse the issue. Hardman’s evidence was necessary in case some outsider should be suspected of the crime and be unable to prove an alibi. The passengers in the Stamboul carriage were in no danger. Every minute detail of their evidence was worked out beforehand. The whole thing was a very cleverly-planned jig-saw puzzle, so arranged that every fresh piece of knowledge that came to light made the solution of the whole more difficult. As my friend M. Bouc remarked, the case seemed fantastically impossible! That was exactly the impression intended to be conveyed.

“Did this solution explain everything? Yes, it did. The nature of the wounds—each inflicted by a different person. The artificial threatening letters—artificial since they were unreal, written only to be produced as evidence.

(Doubtless there were real letters, warning Ratchett of his fate, which MacQueen destroyed, substituting for them these others.) Then Hardman's story of being called in by Ratchett—a lie, of course, from beginning to end—the description of the mythical 'small dark man with a womanish voice,' a convenient description, since it had the merit of not incriminating any of the actual Wagon Lit conductors and would apply equally well to a man or a woman.

"The idea of stabbing is at first sight a curious one, but on reflection nothing would fit the circumstances so well. A dagger was a weapon that could be used by everyone—strong or weak—and it made no noise. I fancy, though I may be wrong, that each person in turn entered Ratchett's darkened compartment through that of Mrs. Hubbard—and struck! They themselves would never know which blow actually killed him.

"The final letter which Ratchett had probably found on his pillow was carefully burnt. With no clue pointing to the Armstrong case, there would be absolutely no reason for suspecting any of the passengers on the train. It would be put down as an outside job, and the 'small dark man with the womanish voice' would actually have been seen by one or more of the passengers leaving the train at Brod.

"I do not know exactly what happened when the conspirators discovered that that part of their plan was impossible owing to the accident to the train. There was, I imagine, a hasty consultation, and then they decided to go through with it. It was true that now one and all of the passengers were bound to come under suspicion, but that possibility had already been foreseen and provided for. The only additional thing to be done was to confuse the issue even further. Two so-called 'clues' were dropped in the dead man's compartment—one incriminating Colonel Arbuthnot (who had the strongest alibi and whose connection with the Armstrong family was probably the hardest to prove) and the second clue, the handkerchief, incriminating Princess Dragomiroff, who by virtue of her social position, her particularly frail physique and the alibi given her by her maid and the conductor, was practically in an unassailable position. Further to confuse the issue, a 'red herring' was drawn across the trail—the mythical woman in the red kimono. Again I am to bear witness to this woman's existence.

There is a heavy bang at my door. I get up and look out—and see the scarlet kimono disappearing in the distance. A judicious selection of people—the conductor, Miss Debenham and MacQueen—will also have seen her. It was, I think, someone with a sense of humour who thoughtfully placed the scarlet kimono on the top of my suitcase whilst I was interviewing people in the dining car. Where the garment came from in the first place I do not know. I suspect it is the property of Countess Andrenyi, since her luggage contained only a chiffon negligée so elaborate as to be more a tea gown than a dressing gown.

“When MacQueen first learned that the letter which had been so carefully burnt had in part escaped destruction, and that the word Armstrong was exactly the word remaining, he must at once have communicated his news to the others. It was at this minute that the position of Countess Andrenyi became acute and her husband immediately took steps to alter the passport. It was their second piece of bad luck!

“They one and all agreed to deny utterly any connection with the Armstrong family. They knew I had no immediate means of finding out the truth, and they did not believe that I should go into the matter unless my suspicions were aroused against one particular person.

“Now there was one further point to consider. Allowing that my theory of the crime was the correct one, and I believe that it must be the correct one, then obviously the Wagon Lit conductor himself must be privy to the plot. But if so, that gave us thirteen persons, not twelve. Instead of the usual formula, ‘Of so many people one is guilty,’ I was faced with the problem that of thirteen persons one and one only was innocent. Which was that person?

“I came to a very odd conclusion. I came to the conclusion that the person who had taken no part in the crime was the person who would be considered the most likely to do so. I refer to Countess Andrenyi. I was impressed by the earnestness of her husband when he swore to me solemnly on his honour that his wife never left her compartment that night. I decided that Count Andrenyi took, so to speak, his wife’s place.

"If so, then Pierre Michel was definitely one of the twelve. But how could one explain his complicity? He was a decent man who had been many years in the employ of the Company—not the kind of man who could be bribed to assist in a crime. Then Pierre Michel must be involved in the Armstrong case. But that seemed very improbable. Then I remembered that the dead nurserymaid was French. Supposing that that unfortunate girl had been Pierre Michel's daughter. That would explain everything—it would also explain the place chosen for the staging of the crime. Were there any others whose part in the drama was not clear? Colonel Arbuthnot I put down as a friend of the Armstrongs. They had probably been through the war together. The maid, Hildegarde Schmidt, I could guess her place in the Armstrong household. I am, perhaps, overgreedy, but I sense a good cook instinctively. I laid a trap for her—she fell into it. I said I knew she was a good cook. She answered, 'Yes, indeed, all my ladies have said so.' But if you are employed as a lady's maid your employers seldom have a chance of learning whether or not you are a good cook.

"Then there was Hardman. He seemed quite definitely not to belong to the Armstrong household. I could only imagine that he had been in love with the French girl. I spoke to him of the charm of foreign women—and again I obtained the reaction I was looking for. Sudden tears came into his eyes, which he pretended were dazzled by the snow.

"There remains Mrs. Hubbard. Now Mrs. Hubbard, let me say, played the most important part in the drama. By occupying the compartment communicating with that of Ratchett she was more open to suspicion than anyone else. In the nature of things she could not have an alibi to fall back upon. To play the part she played—the perfectly natural, slightly ridiculous American fond mother—an artist was needed. But there was an artist connected with the Armstrong family—Mrs. Armstrong's mother—Linda Arden, the actress…"

He stopped.

Then, in a soft rich dreamy voice, quite unlike the one she had used all the journey, Mrs. Hubbard said:

"I always fancied myself in comedy parts."

She went on still dreamily:

“That slip about the sponge bag was silly. It shows you should always rehearse properly. We tried it on the way out—I was in an even number compartment then, I suppose. I never thought of the bolts being in different places.”

She shifted her position a little and looked straight at Poirot.

“You know all about it, M. Poirot. You’re a very wonderful man. But even you can’t quite imagine what it was like—that awful day in New York. I was just crazy with grief—so were the servants—and Colonel Arbuthnot was there, too. He was John Armstrong’s best friend.”

“He saved my life in the war,” said Arbuthnot.

“We decided then and there—perhaps we were mad—I don’t know—that the sentence of death that Cassetti had escaped had got to be carried out. There were twelve of us—or rather eleven—Susanne’s father was over in France, of course. First we thought we’d draw lots as to who should do it, but in the end we decided on this way. It was the chauffeur, Antonio, who suggested it. Mary worked out all the details later with Hector MacQueen. He’d always adored Sonia—my daughter—and it was he who explained to us exactly how Cassetti’s money had managed to get him off.

“It took a long time to perfect our plan. We had first to track Ratchett down. Hardman managed that in the end. Then we had to try to get Masterman and Hector into his employment—or at any rate one of them. Well, we managed that. Then we had a consultation with Susanne’s father. Colonel Arbuthnot was very keen on having twelve of us. He seemed to think it made it more in order. He didn’t like the stabbing idea much, but he agreed that it did solve most of our difficulties. Well, Susanne’s father was willing. Susanne was his only child. We knew from Hector that Ratchett would be coming back from the East sooner or later by the Orient Express. With Pierre Michel actually working on that train, the chance was too good to be missed. Besides, it would be a good way of not incriminating any outsiders.

“My daughter’s husband had to know, of course, and he insisted on coming on the train with her. Hector wangled it so that Ratchett selected the right day for travelling when Michel would be on duty. We meant to engage every carriage in the Stamboul-Calais coach, but unfortunately there was one carriage we couldn’t get. It was reserved long beforehand for a director of the company. Mr. Harris, of course, was a myth. But it would have been awkward to have any stranger in Hector’s compartment. And then, at the last minute, you came….”

She stopped.

“Well,” she said. “You know everything now, M. Poirot. What are you going to do about it? If it must all come out, can’t you lay the blame upon me and me only? I would have stabbed that man twelve times willingly. It wasn’t only that he was responsible for my daughter’s death and her child’s, and that of the other child who might have been alive and happy now. It was more than that. There had been other children before Daisy—there might be others in the future. Society had condemned him; we were only carrying out the sentence. But it’s unnecessary to bring all these others into it. All these good faithful souls—and poor Michel—and Mary and Colonel Arbuthnot—they love each other….”

Her voice was wonderful echoing through the crowded space—that deep, emotional, heart-stirring voice that had thrilled many a New York audience.

Poirot looked at his friend.

“You are a director of the company, M. Bouc,” he said, “What do you say?”

M. Bouc cleared his throat.

“In my opinion, M. Poirot,” he said, “the first theory you put forward was the correct one—decidedly so. I suggest that that is the solution we offer to the Yugo-Slavian police when they arrive. You agree, Doctor?”

“Certainly I agree,” said Dr. Constantine. “As regards the medical evidence, I think—er—that I made one or two fantastic suggestions.”

“Then,” said Poirot, “having placed my solution before you, I have the honour to retire from the case….”

Three Act Tragedy (1935)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

FIRST ACT

SUSPICION

One

CROW’S NEST

Mr. Satterthwaite sat on the terrace of “Crow’s Nest” and watched his host, Sir Charles Cartwright, climbing up the path from the sea.

Crow’s Nest was a modern bungalow of the better type. It had no half-timbering, no gables, no excrescences dear to a third-class builder’s heart. It was a plain white solid building—deceptive as to size, since it was a good deal bigger than it looked. It owed its name to its position, high up, overlooking the harbour of Loomouth. Indeed from one corner of the terrace, protected by a strong balustrade, there was a sheer drop to the sea below. By road Crow’s Nest was a mile from the town. The road ran inland and then zigzagged high up above the sea. On foot it was accessible in seven minutes by the steep fisherman’s path that Sir Charles Cartwright was ascending at this minute.

Sir Charles was a well-built, sunburnt man of middle age. He wore old grey flannel trousers and a white sweater. He had a slight rolling gait, and carried his hands half closed as he walked. Nine people out of ten would say, “Retired Naval man—can’t mistake the type.” The tenth, and more discerning, would have hesitated, puzzled by something indefinable that did not ring true. And then perhaps a picture would rise, unsought: the deck of a ship—but not a real ship—a ship curtailed by hanging curtains of thick rich material—a man, Charles Cartwright, standing on that deck, light that was not sunlight streaming down on him, the hands half clenched, the easy gait and a voice—the easy pleasant voice of an English sailor and gentleman, a great deal magnified in tone.

“No, sir,” Charles Cartwright was saying, “I’m afraid I can’t give you any answer to that question.”

And swish fell the heavy curtains, up sprang the lights, an orchestra plunged into the latest syncopated measure, girls with exaggerated bows in their hair said, “Chocolates? Lemonade?” The first act of The Call of the Sea, with Charles Cartwright as Commander Vanstone, was over.

From his post of vantage, looking down, Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

A dried-up little pipkin of a man, Mr. Satterthwaite, a patron of art and the drama, a determined but pleasant snob, always included in the more important house parties and social functions (the words “and Mr. Satterthwaite” appeared invariably at the tail of a list of guests). Withal a man of considerable intelligence and a very shrewd observer of people and things.

He murmured now, shaking his head, “I wouldn’t have thought it. No, really, I wouldn’t have thought it.”

A step sounded on the terrace and he turned his head. The big grey-haired man who drew a chair forward and sat down had his profession clearly stamped on his keen, kindly, middle-aged face. “Doctor” and “Harley Street.” Sir Bartholomew Strange had succeeded in his profession. He was a well-known specialist in nervous disorders, and had recently received a knighthood in the Birthday Honours list.

He drew his chair forward beside that of Mr. Satterthwaite and said:

“What wouldn’t you have thought? Eh? Let’s have it.”

With a smile Mr. Satterthwaite drew attention to the figure below rapidly ascending the path.

“I shouldn’t have thought Sir Charles would have remained contented so long in—er—exile.”

“By Jove, no more should I!” The other laughed, throwing back his head. “I’ve known Charles since he was a boy. We were at Oxford together. He’s always been the same—a better actor in private life than on the stage! Charles is always acting. He can’t help it—it’s second nature to him. Charles doesn’t go out of a room—he ‘makes an exit’—and he usually has to have a good line to make it on. All the same, he likes a change of part—

none better. Two years ago he retired from the stage—said he wanted to live a simple country life, out of the world, and indulge his old fancy for the sea. He comes down here and builds this place. His idea of a simple country cottage. Three bathrooms and all the latest gadgets! I was like you, Satterthwaite, I didn't think it would last. After all, Charles is human—he needs his audience. Two or three retired captains, a bunch of old women and a parson—that's not much of a house to play to. I thought the 'simple fellow, with his love of the sea,' would run for six months. Then, frankly, I thought he'd tire of the part. I thought the next thing to fill the bill would be the weary man of the world at Monte Carlo, or possibly a laird in the Highlands—he's versatile, Charles is."

The doctor stopped. It had been a long speech. His eyes were full of affection and amusement as he watched the unconscious man below. In a couple of minutes he would be with them.

"However," Sir Bartholomew went on, "it seems we were wrong. The attraction of the simple life holds."

"A man who dramatises himself is sometimes misjudged," pointed out Mr. Satterthwaite. "One does not take his sincerities seriously."

The doctor nodded.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "That's true."

With a cheerful halloo Charles Cartwright ran up the steps onto the terrace.

"Mirabelle surpassed herself," he said. "You ought to have come, Satterthwaite."

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head. He had suffered too often crossing the Channel to have any illusions about the strength of his stomach afloat. He had observed the Mirabelle from his bedroom window that morning. There had been a stiff sailing breeze and Mr. Satterthwaite had thanked heaven devoutly for dry land.

Sir Charles went to the drawing room window and called for drinks.

"You ought to have come, Tollie," he said to his friend. "Don't you spend half your life sitting in Harley Street telling your patients how good life on the ocean wave would be for them?"

"The great merit of being a doctor," said Sir Bartholomew, "is that you are not obliged to follow your own advice."

Sir Charles laughed. He was still unconsciously playing his part—the bluff breezy Naval man. He was an extraordinarily good-looking man, beautifully proportioned, with a lean humorous face, and the touch of grey at his temples gave him a kind of added distinction. He looked what he was—a gentleman first and an actor second.

"Did you go alone?" asked the doctor.

"No," Sir Charles turned to take his drink from a smart parlourmaid who was holding a tray. "I had a 'hand.' The girl Egg, to be exact."

There was something, some faint trace of self-consciousness in his voice which made Mr. Satterthwaite look up sharply.

"Miss Lytton Gore? She knows something about sailing, doesn't she?"

Sir Charles laughed rather ruefully.

"She succeeds in making me feel a complete landlubber; but I'm coming on—thanks to her."

Thoughts slipped quickly in and out of Mr. Satterthwaite's mind.

"I wonder—Egg Lytton Gore—perhaps that's why he hasn't tired—the age—a dangerous age—it's always a young girl at that time of life…."

Sir Charles went on: "The sea—there's nothing like it—sun and wind and sea—and a simple shanty to come home to."

And he looked with pleasure at the white building behind him, equipped with three bathrooms, hot and cold water in all the bedrooms, the latest system of central heating, the newest electrical fittings and a staff of parlourmaid, housemaid, chef, and kitchenmaid. Sir Charles’s interpretation of simple living was, perhaps, a trifle exaggerated.

A tall and exceedingly ugly woman issued from the house and bore down upon them.

“Good morning, Miss Milray.”

“Good morning, Sir Charles. Good morning” (a slight inclination of the head towards the other two). “This is the menu for dinner. I don’t know whether you would like it altered in any way?”

Sir Charles took it and murmured:

“Let’s see. Melon Cantaloupe, Borscht Soup, Fresh Mackerel, Grouse, Soufflé Surprise, Canapé Diane…No, I think that will do excellently, Miss Milray. Everyone is coming by the four thirty train.”

“I have already given Holgate his orders. By the way, Sir Charles, if you will excuse me, it would be better if I dined with you tonight.”

Sir Charles looked startled, but said courteously:

“Delighted, I am sure, Miss Milray—but—er—”

Miss Milray proceeded calmly to explain.

“Otherwise, Sir Charles, it would make thirteen at table; and so many people are superstitious.”

From her tone it could be gathered that Miss Milray would have sat down thirteen to dinner every night of her life without the slightest qualm. She went on:

“I think everything is arranged. I have told Holgate the car is to fetch Lady Mary and the Babbingtons. Is that right?”

“Absolutely. Just what I was going to ask you to do.”

With a slightly superior smile on her rugged countenance, Miss Milray withdrew.

“That,” said Sir Charles reverently, “is a very remarkable woman. I’m always afraid she’ll come and brush my teeth for me.”

“Efficiency personified,” said Strange.

“She’s been with me for six years,” said Sir Charles. “First as my secretary in London, and here, I suppose, she’s a kind of glorified housekeeper. Runs this place like clockwork. And now, if you please, she’s going to leave.”

“Why?”

“She says”—Sir Charles rubbed his nose dubiously—“she says she’s got an invalid mother. Personally I don’t believe it. That kind of woman never had a mother at all. Spontaneously generated from a dynamo. No, there’s something else.”

“Quite probably,” said Sir Bartholomew, “people have been talking.”

“Talking?” The actor stared. “Talking—what about?”

“My dear Charles. You know what talking means.”

“You mean talking about her—and me? With that face? And at her age?”

“She’s probably under fifty.”

“I suppose she is,” Sir Charles considered the matter. “But seriously, Tollie, have you noticed her face? It’s got two eyes, a nose and a mouth, but it’s not what you would call a face—not a female face. The most scandal-loving old cat in the neighbourhood couldn’t seriously connect sexual passion with a face like that.”

“You underrate the imagination of the British spinster.”

Sir Charles shook his head.

"I don't believe it. There's a kind of hideous respectability about Miss Milray that even a British spinster must recognize. She is virtue and respectability personified—and a damned useful woman. I always choose my secretaries plain as sin."

"Wise man."

Sir Charles remained deep in thought for some minutes. To distract him, Sir Bartholomew asked: "Who's coming this afternoon?"

"Angie, for one."

"Angela Sutcliffe? That's good."

Mr. Satterthwaite leaned forward interestedly, keen to know the composition of the house party. Angela Sutcliffe was a well-known actress, no longer young, but with a strong hold on the public and celebrated for her wit and charm. She was sometimes spoken of as Ellen Terry's successor.

"Then there are the Dacres."

Again Mr. Satterthwaite nodded to himself. Mrs. Dacres was Ambrosine, Ltd, that successful dressmaking establishment. You saw it on programmes—"Miss Blank's dresses in the first act by Ambrosine Ltd, Brook Street." Her husband, Captain Dacres, was a dark horse in his own racing parlance. He spent a lot of time on race courses—had ridden himself in the Grand National in years gone by. There had been some trouble—nobody knew exactly—though rumours had been spread about. There had been no inquiry—nothing overt, but somehow at mention of Freddie Dacres people's eyebrows went up a little.

"Then there's Anthony Astor, the playwright."

"Of course," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "She wrote One-Way Traffic. I saw it twice. It made a great hit."

He rather enjoyed showing that he knew that Anthony Astor was a woman.

"That's right," said Sir Charles. "I forget what her real name is—Wills, I think. I've only met her once. I asked her to please Angela. That's the lot—of the house party, I mean."

"And the locals?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, the locals! Well, there are the Babbingtons—he's the parson, quite a good fellow, not too parsonical, and his wife's a really nice woman. Lectures me on gardening. They're coming—and Lady Mary and Egg. That's all. Oh, yes, there's a young fellow called Manders, he's a journalist, or something. Good-looking young fellow. That completes the party."

Mr. Satterthwaite was a man of methodical nature. He counted heads.

"Miss Sutcliffe, one, the Dacres, three, Anthony Astor, four, Lady Mary and her daughter, six, the parson and his wife, eight, the young fellow nine, ourselves twelve. Either you or Miss Milray must have counted wrong, Sir Charles."

"It couldn't be Miss Milray," said Sir Charles with assurance. "That woman's never wrong. Let me see: Yes, by Jove, you're right. I have missed out one guest. He'd slipped my memory."

He chuckled. "Wouldn't be best pleased at that, either. The fellow is the most conceited little devil I ever met."

Mr. Satterthwaite's eyes twinkled. He had always been of the opinion that the vainest men in creation were actors. He did not exempt Sir Charles Cartwright. This instance of the pot calling the kettle black amused him.

"Who is the egoist?" he asked.

"Rum little beggar," said Sir Charles. "Rather a celebrated little beggar, though. You may have heard of him. Hercule Poirot. He's a Belgian."

"The detective," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I have met him. Rather a remarkable personage."

"He's a character," said Sir Charles.

“I’ve never met him,” said Sir Bartholomew, “but I’ve heard a good deal about him. He retired some time ago, though, didn’t he? Probably most of what I’ve heard is legend. Well, Charles, I hope we shan’t have a crime this weekend.”

“Why? Because we’ve got a detective in the house? Rather putting the cart before the horse, aren’t you, Tollie?”

“Well, it’s by way of being a theory of mine.”

“What is your theory, doctor?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“That events come to people—not people to events. Why do some people have exciting lives and other people dull ones? Because of their surroundings? Not at all. One man may travel to the ends of the earth and nothing will happen to him. There will be a massacre a week before he arrives, and an earthquake the day after he leaves, and the boat that he nearly took will be shipwrecked. And another man may live at Balham and travel to the City every day, and things will happen to him. He will be mixed up with blackmailing gangs and beautiful girls and motor bandits. There are people with a tendency to shipwrecks—even if they go on a boat on an ornamental lake something will happen to it. In the same way men like your Hercule Poirot don’t have to look for crime—it comes to them.”

“In that case,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “perhaps it is as well that Miss Milray is joining us, and that we are not sitting down thirteen to dinner.”

“Well,” said Sir Charles handsomely, “you can have your murder, Tollie, if you’re so keen on it. I make only one stipulation—that I shan’t be the corpse.”

And, laughing, the three men went into the house.

Two

INCIDENT BEFORE DINNER

The principal interest of Mr. Satterthwaite’s life was people.

He was on the whole more interested in women than men. For a manly man, Mr. Satterthwaite knew far too much about women. There was a womanish strain in his character which lent him insight into the feminine mind. Women all his life had confided in him, but they had never taken him seriously. Sometimes he felt a little bitter about this. He was, he felt, always in the stalls watching the play, never on the stage taking part in the drama. But in truth the rôle of onlooker suited him very well.

This evening, sitting in the large room giving onto the terrace, cleverly decorated by a modern firm to resemble a ship’s cabin de luxe, he was principally interested in the exact shade of hair dye attained by Cynthia Dacres. It was an entirely new tone—straight from Paris, he suspected—a curious and rather pleasing effect of greenish bronze. What Mrs. Dacres really looked like it was impossible to tell. She was a tall woman with a figure perfectly disciplined to the demands of the moment. Her neck and arms were her usual shade of summer tan for the country—whether naturally or artificially produced it was impossible to tell. The greenish bronze hair was set in a clever and novel style that only London’s best hairdresser could achieve. Her plucked eyebrows, darkened lashes, exquisitively made-up face, and mouth lipsticked to a curve that its naturally straight line did not possess, seemed all adjuncts to the perfection of her evening gown of a deep and unusual blue, cut very simply it seemed (though this was ludicrously far from the case) and of an unusual material—dull, but with hidden lights in it.

“That’s a clever woman,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, eyeing her with approval. “I wonder what she’s really like.”

But this time he meant in mind, not in body.

Her words came drawlingly, in the mode of the moment.

“My dear, it wasn’t possible. I mean, things either are possible or they’re not. This wasn’t. It was simply penetrating.”

That was the new word just now—everything was “penetrating.”

Sir Charles was vigorously shaking cocktails and talking to Angela Sutcliffe, a tall, grey-haired woman with a mischievous mouth and fine eyes.

Dacres was talking to Bartholomew Strange.

“Everyone knows what’s wrong with old Ladisbourne. The whole stable knows.”

He spoke in a high clipped voice—a little red, foxy man with a short moustache and slightly shifty eyes.

Beside Mr. Satterthwaite sat Miss Wills, whose play, One-Way Traffic, had been acclaimed as one of the most witty and daring seen in London for some years. Miss Wills was tall and thin, with a receding chin and very badly waved fair hair. She wore pince-nez, and was dressed in exceedingly limp green chiffon. Her voice was high and undistinguished.

“I went to the South of France,” she said. “But, really, I didn’t enjoy it very much. Not friendly at all. But of course it’s useful to me in my work—to see all the goings-on, you know.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought: “Poor soul. Cut off by success from her spiritual home—a boardinghouse in Bournemouth. That’s where she’d like to be.” He marvelled at the difference between written works and their authors. That cultivated “man-of-the-world” tone that Anthony Astor imparted to his plays—what faintest spark of it could be perceived in Miss Wills? Then he noticed that the pale blue eyes behind the pince-nez were singularly intelligent. They were turned on him now with an appraising look that slightly disconcerted him. It was as though Miss Wills were painstakingly learning him by heart.

Sir Charles was just pouring out the cocktails.

“Let me get you a cocktail,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, springing up.

Miss Wills giggled.

“I don’t mind if I do,” she said.

The door opened and Temple announced Lady Mary Lytton Gore and Mr. and Mrs. Babbington and Miss Lytton Gore.

Mr. Satterthwaite supplied Miss Wills with her cocktail and then sidled into the neighbourhood of Lady Mary Lytton Gore. As has been stated before, he had a weakness for titles.

Also, apart from snobbishness, he liked a gentlewoman, and that Lady Mary most undeniably was.

Left as a widow very badly off with a child of three, she had come to Loomouth and taken a small cottage where she had lived with one devoted maid ever since. She was a tall thin woman, looking older than her fifty-five years. Her expression was sweet and rather timid. She adored her daughter, but was a little alarmed by her.

Hermione Lytton Gore, usually known for some obscure reason as Egg, bore little resemblance to her mother. She was of a more energetic type. She was not, Mr. Satterthwaite decided, beautiful, but she was undeniably attractive. And the cause of that attraction, he thought, lay in her abounding vitality. She seemed twice as alive as anyone in that room. She had dark hair, and grey eyes and was of medium height. It was something in the way the hair curled crisply in her neck, in the straight glance of the grey eyes, in the curve of the cheek, in the infectious laugh that gave one that impression of riotous youth and vitality.

She stood talking to Oliver Manders, who had just arrived.

“I can’t think why sailing bores you so much. You used to like it.”

“Egg—my dear. One grows up.”

He drawled the words, raising his eyebrows.

A handsome young fellow, twenty-five at a guess. Something, perhaps, a little sleek about his good looks. Something else—something—was it foreign? Something unEnglish about him.

Somebody else was watching Oliver Manders. A little man with an egg-shaped head and very foreign-looking moustaches. Mr. Satterthwaite had recalled himself to M. Hercule Poirot's memory. The little man had been very affable. Mr. Satterthwaite suspected him of deliberately exaggerating his foreign mannerisms. His small twinkly eyes seemed to say, "You expect me to be the buffoon? To play the comedy for you? Bien—it shall be as you wish!"

But there was no twinkle now in Hercule Poirot's eyes. He looked grave and a little sad.

The Rev. Stephen Babbington, rector of Loomouth, came and joined Lady Mary and Mr. Satterthwaite. He was a man of sixty odd, with kind faded eyes and a disarming diffident manner. He said to Mr. Satterthwaite:

"We are very lucky to have Sir Charles living among us. He has been most kind—most generous. A very pleasant neighbour to have. Lady Mary agrees, I am sure."

Lady Mary smiled.

"I like him very much. His success hasn't spoilt him. In many ways he is," her smile deepened, "a child still."

The parlourmaid approached with the tray of cocktails as Mr. Satterthwaite reflected how unendingly maternal women were. Being of the Victorian generation, he approved that trait.

"You can have a cocktail, Mums," said Egg, flashing up to them, glass in hand. "Just one."

"Thank you, dear," said Lady Mary meekly.

“I think,” said Mr. Babbington, “that my wife would allow me to have one.”

And he laughed a little gentle clerical laugh.

Mr. Satterthwaite glanced over at Mrs. Babbington, who was talking earnestly to Sir Charles on the subject of manure.

“She’s got fine eyes,” he thought.

Mrs. Babbington was a big untidy woman. She looked full of energy and likely to be free from petty-mindedness. As Charles Cartwright had said—a nice woman.

“Tell me,” Lady Mary leaned forward. “Who is the young woman you were talking to when we came in—the one in green?”

“That’s the playwright—Anthony Astor.”

“What? That—that anaemic-looking young woman? Oh!” She caught herself up. “How dreadful of me. But it was a surprise. She doesn’t look—I mean she looks exactly like an inefficient nursery governess.”

It was such an apt description of Miss Wills’ appearance that Mr. Satterthwaite laughed. Mr. Babbington was peering across the room with amiable shortsighted eyes. He took a sip of his cocktail and choked a little. He was unused to cocktails, thought Mr. Satterthwaite amusedly—probably they represented modernity to his mind—but he didn’t like them. Mr. Babbington took another determined mouthful with a slightly wry face and said:

“Is it the lady over there? Oh dear—”

His hand went to his throat.

Egg Lytton Gore’s voice rang out:

“Oliver—you slippery Shylock—”

“Of course,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite, “that’s it—not foreign—Jew!”

What a handsome pair they made. Both so young and good-looking…and quarrelling, too—always a healthy sign….

He was distracted by a sound at his side. Mr. Babbington had risen to his feet and was swaying to and fro. His face was convulsed.

It was Egg’s clear voice that drew the attention of the room, though Lady Mary had risen and stretched out an anxious hand.

“Look,” said Egg’s voice. “Mr. Babbington is ill.”

Sir Bartholomew Strange came forward hurriedly, supporting the stricken man and half lifting him to a couch at one side of the room. The others crowded round, anxious to help, but impotent….

Two minutes later Strange straightened himself and shook his head. He spoke bluntly, aware that it was no use to beat about the bush.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “He’s dead….”

Three

SIR CHARLES WONDERS

“Come in here a minute, Satterthwaite, will you?”

Sir Charles poked his head out of the door.

An hour and a half had passed. To confusion had succeeded peace. Lady Mary had led the weeping Mrs. Babbington out of the room and had finally gone home with her to the vicarage. Miss Milray had been efficient with the telephone. The local doctor had arrived and taken charge. A simplified dinner had been served, and by mutual consent the house party had retired to their rooms after it. Mr. Satterthwaite had been making his own retreat when Sir Charles had called to him from the door of the Ship room where the death had taken place.

Mr. Satterthwaite passed in, repressing a slight shiver as he did so. He was old enough not to like the sight of death…For soon, perhaps, he himself…But why think of that?

“I’m good for another twenty years,” said Mr. Satterthwaite robustly to himself.

The only other occupant of the Ship room was Bartholomew Strange. He nodded approval at the sight of Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Good man,” he said. “We can do with Satterthwaite. He knows life.”

A little surprised, Mr. Satterthwaite sat down in an armchair near the doctor. Sir Charles was pacing up and down. He had forgotten the semi-clenching of his hands and looked definitely less naval.

“Charles doesn’t like it,” said Sir Bartholomew. “Poor old Babbington’s death, I mean.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought the sentiment ill expressed. Surely nobody could be expected to “like” what had occurred. He realized that Strange had quite another meaning from the bald one the words conveyed.

“It was very distressing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, cautiously feeling his way. “Very distressing indeed,” he added with a reminiscent shiver.

“H’m, yes, it was rather painful,” said the physician, the professional accent creeping for a moment into his voice.

Cartwright paused in his pacing.

“Ever see anyone die quite like that before, Tollie?”

“No,” said Sir Bartholomew thoughtfully. “I can’t say that I have.

“But,” he added in a moment or two, “I haven’t really seen as many deaths as you might suppose. A nerve specialist doesn’t kill off many of his patients. He keeps ’em alive and makes his income out of them. MacDougal has seen far more deceases than I have, I don’t doubt.”

Dr. MacDougal was the principal doctor in Loomouth, whom Miss Milray had summoned.

“MacDougal didn’t see this man die. He was dead when he arrived. There was only what we could tell him, what you could tell him. He said it was some kind of seizure, said Babbington was elderly, and his health was none too good. That doesn’t satisfy me.”

“Probably didn’t satisfy him,” grunted the other. “But a doctor has to say something. Seizure is a good word—means nothing at all, but satisfies the lay mind. And, after all, Babbington was elderly, and his health had been giving him trouble lately; his wife told us so. There may have been some unsuspected weakness somewhere.”

“Was that a typical fit or seizure, or whatever you call it?”

“Typical of what?”

“Of any known disease?”

“If you’d ever studied medicine,” said Sir Bartholomew, “you’d know that there is hardly any such thing as a typical case.”

“What, precisely, are you suggesting, Sir Charles?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

Cartwright did not answer. He made a vague gesture with his hand. Strange gave a slight chuckle.

“Charles doesn’t know himself,” he said. “It’s just his mind turning naturally to the dramatic possibilities.”

Sir Charles made a reproachful gesture. His face was absorbed—thoughtful. He shook his head slightly in an abstracted manner.

An elusive resemblance teased Mr. Satterthwaite—then he got it. Aristide Duval, the head of the Secret Service, unravelling the tangled plot of “Underground Wires.” In another minute he was sure. Sir Charles was limping unconsciously as he walked. Aristide Duval had been known as The Man With a Limp.

Sir Bartholomew continued to apply ruthless common sense to Sir Charles’s unformulated suspicions.

“Yes, what do you suspect, Charles? Suicide? Murder? Who wants to murder a harmless old clergyman? It’s fantastic. Suicide? Well, I suppose that is a point. One might perhaps imagine a reason for Babbington wanting to make away with himself—”

“What reason?”

Sir Bartholomew shook his head gently.

“How can we tell the secrets of the human mind? Just one suggestion—suppose that Babbington had been told he suffered from an incurable disease—such as cancer. Something of that kind might supply a motive. He might wish to spare his wife the pain of watching his own long-drawn-out suffering. That’s only a suggestion, of course. There’s nothing on earth to make us think that Babbington did want to put an end to himself.”

“I wasn’t thinking so much of suicide,” began Sir Charles.

Bartholomew Strange again gave his low chuckle.

“Exactly. You’re not out for probability. You want sensation—new and untraceable poison in the cocktails.”

Sir Charles made an expressive grimace.

“I’m not so sure I do want that. Damn it all, Tollie, remember I mixed those cocktails.”

“Sudden attack of homicidal mania, eh? I suppose the symptoms are delayed in our case, but we’ll all be dead before morning.”

“Damn it all, you joke, but—” Sir Charles broke off irritably.

“I’m not really joking,” said the physician.

His voice had altered. It was grave, and not unsympathetic.

“I’m not joking about poor old Babbington’s death. I’m casting fun at your suggestions, Charles, because—well—because I don’t want you, thoughtlessly, to do harm.”

“Harm?” demanded Sir Charles.

“Perhaps you understand what I’m driving at, Mr. Satterthwaite?”

“I think, perhaps, I can guess,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Don’t you see, Charles,” went on Sir Bartholomew, “that those idle suspicions of yours might be definitely harmful? These things get about. A vague suggestion of foul play, totally unfounded, might cause serious trouble and pain to Mrs. Babbington. I’ve known things of that kind happen once or twice. A sudden death—a few idle tongues wagging—rumours flying all round the place—rumours that go on growing—and that no one can stop. Damn it all, Charles, don’t you see how cruel and unnecessary it would be? You’re merely indulging your vivid imagination in a gallop over a wholly speculative course.”

A look of irresolution appeared on the actor’s face.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” he admitted.

“You’re a thundering good chap, Charles, but you do let your imagination run away with you. Come now: do you seriously believe anyone, anyone at all, would want to murder that perfectly harmless old man?”

“I suppose not,” said Sir Charles. “No, as you say, it’s ridiculous. Sorry, Tollie, but it wasn’t really a mere ‘stunt’ on my part. I did genuinely have a ‘hunch’ that something was wrong.”

Mr. Satterthwaite gave a little cough.

“May I make a suggestion? Mr. Babbington was taken ill a very few moments after entering the room and just after drinking his cocktail. Now, I did happen to notice he made a wry face when drinking. I imagined because he was unused to the taste. But supposing that Sir Bartholomew’s tentative suggestion is correct—that Mr. Babbington may for some reason have wished to commit suicide. That does strike me as just possible, whereas the suggestion of murder seems quite ridiculous.

“I feel that it is possible, though not probable, that Mr. Babbington introduced something into that glass unseen by us.

“Now I see that nothing has yet been touched in this room. The cocktail glasses are exactly where they were. This is Mr. Babbington’s. I know, because I was sitting here talking to him. I suggest that Sir Bartholomew should get the glass analysed—that can be done quite quietly and without causing any ‘talk.’”

Sir Bartholomew rose and picked up the glass.

“Right,” he said. “I’ll humour you so far, Charles, and I’ll bet you ten pounds to one that there’s nothing in it but honest-to-God gin and vermouth.”

“Done,” said Sir Charles.

Then he added with a rueful smile:

“You know, Tollie, you are partly responsible for my flights of fancy.”

“I?”

“Yes, with your talk of crime this morning. You said this man, Hercule Poirot, was a kind of stormy petrel, that where he went crimes followed. No sooner does he arrive than we have a suspiciously sudden death. Of course my thoughts fly to murder at once.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and stopped.

“Yes,” said Charles Cartwright. “I’d thought of that. What do you think, Tollie? Could we ask him what he thinks of it all? Is it etiquette, I mean?”

“A nice point,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite.

“I know medical etiquette, but I’m hanged if I know anything about the etiquette of detection.”

“You can’t ask a professional singer to sing,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite. “Can one ask a professional detective to detect? Yes, a very nice point.”

“Just an opinion,” said Sir Charles.

There was a gentle tap on the door, and Hercule Poirot’s face appeared, peering in with an apologetic expression.

“Come in, man,” cried Sir Charles, springing up. “We were just talking of you.”

“I thought perhaps I might be intruding.”

“Not at all. Have a drink.”

“I thank you, no. I seldom drink the whisky. A glass of sirop, now—”

But sirop was not included in Sir Charles’s conception of drinkable fluids. Having settled his guest in a chair, the actor went straight to the point.

“I’m not going to beat about the bush,” he said. “We were just talking of you, M. Poirot, and—and—of what happened tonight. Look here, do you think there’s anything wrong about it?”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose. He said:

“Wrong? How do you mean that—wrong?”

Bartholomew Strange said, “My friend has got an idea into his head that old Babbington was murdered.”

“And you do not think so—eh?”

“We’d like to know what you think.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“He was taken ill, of course, very suddenly—very suddenly indeed.”

“Just so.”

Mr. Satterthwaite explained the theory of suicide and his own suggestion of having a cocktail glass analysed.

Poirot nodded approval.

“That, at any rate, can do no harm. As a judge of human nature, it seems to me unlikely in the extreme that anyone could wish to do away with a charming and harmless old gentleman. Still less does the solution of suicide appeal to me. However, the cocktail glass will tell us one way or another.”

“And the result of the analysis, you think, will be—what?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Me? I can only guess. You ask me to guess what will be the result of the analysis?”

“Yes—?”

“Then I guess that they will find only the remains of a very excellent dry Martini.” (He bowed to Sir Charles.) “To poison a man in a cocktail, one of many handed round on a tray—well, it would be a technique very—very—difficult. And if that charming old clergyman wanted to commit suicide, I do not think he would do it at a party. That would show a very decided lack of consideration for others, and Mr. Babbington struck me as a very considerate person.” He paused. “That, since you ask me, is my opinion.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then Sir Charles gave a deep sigh. He opened one of the windows and looked out.

“Wind’s gone round a point,” he said.

The sailor had come back and the Secret Service detective had disappeared.

But to the observant Mr. Satterthwaite it seemed as though Sir Charles hankered slightly after the part he was not, after all, to play.

Four

A MODERN ELAINE

“Yes, but what do you think, Mr. Satterthwaite? Really think?”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked this way and that. There was no escape. Egg Lytton Gore had got him securely cornered on the fishing quay. Merciless, these modern young women—and terrifyingly alive.

“Sir Charles has put this idea into your head,” he said.

“No, he hasn’t. It was there already. It’s been there from the beginning. It was so frightfully sudden.”

“He was an old man, and his health wasn’t very good—”

Egg cut the recital short.

“That’s all tripe. He had neuritis and a touch of rheumatoid arthritis. That doesn’t make you fall down in a fit. He never had fits. He was the sort of gentle creaking gate that would have lived to be ninety. What did you think of the inquest?”

“It all seemed quite—er—normal.”

“What did you think of Dr. MacDougal’s evidence? Frightfully technical, and all that—close description of the organs—but didn’t it strike you that behind all that bombardment of words he was hedging? What he said amounted to this: that there was nothing to show death had not arisen from natural causes. He didn’t say it was the result of natural causes.”

“Aren’t you splitting hairs a little, my dear?”

“The point is that he did—he was puzzled, but he had nothing to go upon, so he had to take refuge in medical caution. What did Sir Bartholomew

Strange think?”

Mr. Satterthwaite repeated some of the physician’s dictums.

“Pooh-poohed it, did he?” said Egg thoughtfully. “Of course, he’s a cautious man—I suppose a Harley Street big bug has to be.”

“There was nothing in the cocktail glass but gin and vermouth,” Mr. Satterthwaite reminded her.

“That seems to settle it. All the same, something that happened after the inquest made me wonder—”

“Something Sir Bartholomew said to you?”

Mr. Satterthwaite began to feel a pleasant curiosity.

“Not to me—to Oliver. Oliver Manders—he was at dinner that night, but perhaps you don’t remember him.”

“Yes, I remember him very well. Is he a great friend of yours?”

“Used to be. Now we scrap most of the time. He’s gone into his uncle’s office in the city, and he’s getting—well, a bit oily, if you know what I mean. Always talks of chucking it and being a journalist—he writes rather well. But I don’t think it’s any more than talk now. He wants to get rich. I think everybody is rather disgusting about money, don’t you, Mr. Satterthwaite?”

Her youth came home to him then—the crude, arrogant childishness of her.

“My dear,” he said, “so many people are disgusting about so many things.”

“Most people are swine, of course,” agreed Egg cheerfully. “That’s why I’m really cut up about old Mr. Babbington. Because you see, he really was rather a pet. He prepared me for confirmation and all that, and though of course a lot of that business is all bunkum, he really was rather sweet about it. You see, Mr. Satterthwaite, I really believe in Christianity—not like Mother does, with little books and early service, and things—but intelligently and as a matter of history. The Church is all clotted up with the Pauline tradition—in fact the Church is a mess—but Christianity itself is all right. That’s why I can’t be a communist like Oliver. In practice our beliefs would work out much the same, things in common and ownership by all, but the difference—well, I needn’t go into that. But the Babbingtons really were Christians; they didn’t poke and pry and condemn, and they were never unkind about people or things. They were pets—and there was Robin….”

“Robin?”

“Their son…He was out in India and got killed…I—I had rather a pash on Robin….”

Egg blinked. Her gaze went out to sea….

Then her attention returned to Mr. Satterthwaite and the present.

“So, you see, I feel rather strongly about this. Supposing it wasn’t a natural death….”

“My dear child!”

“Well, it’s damned odd! You must admit it’s damned odd.”

“But surely you yourself have just practically admitted that the Babbingtons hadn’t an enemy in the world.”

“That’s what’s so queer about it. I can’t think of any conceivable motive….”

“Fantastic! There was nothing in the cocktail.”

“Perhaps someone jabbed him with a hypodermic.”

“Containing the arrow poison of the South American Indians,” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite, gently ridiculing.

Egg grinned.

"That's it. The good old untraceable stuff. Oh, well, you're all very superior about it. Someday, perhaps, you'll find out we are right."

"We?"

"Sir Charles and I." She flushed slightly.

Mr. Satterthwaite thought in the words and metre of his generation when Quotations for All Occasions was to be found in every bookcase.

"Of more than twice her years,

Seam'd with an ancient swordcut on the cheek,

And bruised and bronzed, she lifted up her eyes

And loved him, with that love which was her doom."

He felt a little ashamed of himself for thinking in quotations—Tennyson, too, was very little thought of nowadays. Besides, though Sir Charles was bronzed, he was not scarred, and Egg Lytton Gore, though doubtless capable of a healthy passion, did not look at all likely to perish of love and drift about rivers on a barge. There was nothing of the lily maid of Astolat about her.

"Except," thought Mr. Satterthwaite, "her youth…."

Girls were always attracted to middle-aged men with interesting pasts. Egg seemed to be no exception to this rule.

"Why hasn't he ever married?" she asked abruptly.

"Well…" Mr. Satterthwaite paused. His own answer, put bluntly, would have been, "Caution," but he realized that such a word would be unacceptable to Egg Lytton Gore.

Sir Charles Cartwright had had plenty of affairs with women, actresses and others, but he had always managed to steer clear of matrimony. Egg was clearly seeking for a more romantic explanation.

“That girl who died of consumption—some actress, name began with an M—wasn’t he supposed to be very fond of her?”

Mr. Satterthwaite remembered the lady in question. Rumour had coupled Charles Cartwright’s name with hers, but only very slightly, and Mr. Satterthwaite did not for a moment believe that Sir Charles had remained unmarried in order to be faithful to her memory. He conveyed as much tactfully.

“I suppose he’s had lots of affairs,” said Egg.

“Er—h’m—probably,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, feeling Victorian.

“I like men to have affairs,” said Egg. “It shows they’re not queer or anything.”

Mr. Satterthwaite’s Victorianism suffered a further pang. He was at a loss for a reply. Egg did not notice his discomfiture. She went on musingly.

“You know, Sir Charles is really cleverer than you’d think. He poses a lot, of course, dramatises himself; but behind all that he’s got brains. He’s far better sailing a boat than you’d ever think, to hear him talk. You’d think, to listen to him, that it was all pose, but it isn’t. It’s the same about this business. You think it’s all done for effect—that he wants to play the part of the great detective. All I say is: I think he’d play it rather well.”

“Possibly,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite.

The inflection of his voice showed his feelings clearly enough. Egg pounced on them and expressed them in words.

“But your view is that ‘Death of a Clergyman’ isn’t a thriller. It’s merely ‘Regrettable Incident at a Dinner Party.’ Purely a social catastrophe. What did M. Poirot think? He ought to know.”

“M. Poirot advised us to wait for the analysis of the cocktail; but in his opinion everything was quite all right.”

“Oh, well,” said Egg, “he’s getting old. He’s a back number.” Mr. Satterthwaite winced. Egg went on, unconscious of brutality: “Come home and have tea with Mother. She likes you. She said so.”

Delicately flattered, Mr. Satterthwaite accepted the invitation.

On arrival Egg volunteered to ring up Sir Charles and explain the nonappearance of his guest.

Mr. Satterthwaite sat down in the tiny sitting room with its faded chintzes and its well-polished pieces of old furniture. It was a Victorian room, what Mr. Satterthwaite called in his own mind a lady’s room, and he approved of it.

His conversation with Lady Mary was agreeable, nothing brilliant, but pleasantly chatty. They spoke of Sir Charles. Did Mr. Satterthwaite know him well? Not intimately, Mr. Satterthwaite said. He had a financial interest in one of Sir Charles’s plays some years ago. They had been friends ever since.

“He has great charm,” said Lady Mary, smiling. “I feel it as well as Egg. I suppose you’ve discovered that Egg is suffering badly from hero-worship?”

Mr. Satterthwaite wondered if, as a mother, Lady Mary was not made slightly uneasy by that hero-worship. But it did not seem so.

“Egg sees so little of the world,” she said, sighing. “We are so badly off. One of my cousins presented her and took her to a few things in town, but since then she has hardly been away from here, except for an occasional visit. Young people, I feel, should see plenty of people and places—especially people. Otherwise—well, propinquity is sometimes a dangerous thing.”

Mr. Satterthwaite agreed, thinking of Sir Charles and the sailing, but that this was not what was in Lady Mary’s mind, she showed a moment or two later.

"Sir Charles's coming has done a lot for Egg. It has widened her horizon. You see, there are very few young people down here—especially men. I've always been afraid that Egg might marry someone simply from being thrown with one person only and seeing no one else."

Mr. Satterthwaite had a quick intuition.

"Are you thinking of young Oliver Manders?"

Lady Mary blushed in ingenuous surprise.

"Oh, Mr. Satterthwaite, I don't know how you knew! I was thinking of him. He and Egg were together a lot at one time, and I know I'm old-fashioned, but I don't like some of his ideas."

"Youth must have its fling," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Lady Mary shook her head.

"I've been so afraid—it's quite suitable, of course, I know all about him, and his uncle, who has recently taken him into his firm, is a very rich man; it's not that—it's silly of me—but—"

She shook her head, unable to express herself further.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt curiously intimate. He said quietly and plainly:

"All the same, Lady Mary, you wouldn't like your girl to marry a man twice her own age."

Her answer surprised him.

"It might be safer so. If you do that, at least you know where you are. At that age a man's follies and sins are definitely behind him; they are not—still to come…."

Before Mr. Satterthwaite could say any more, Egg rejoined them.

"You've been a long time, darling," said her mother.

“I was talking to Sir Charles, my sweet. He’s all alone in his glory.” She turned reproachfully to Mr. Satterthwaite. “You didn’t tell me the house party had flitted.”

“They went back yesterday—all but Sir Bartholomew Strange. He was staying till tomorrow, but he was recalled to London by an urgent telegram this morning. One of his patients was in a critical condition.”

“It’s a pity,” said Egg. “Because I meant to study the house party. I might have got a clue.”

“A clue to what, darling?”

“Mr. Satterthwaite knows. Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. Oliver’s still here. We’ll rope him in. He’s got brains when he likes.”

When Mr. Satterthwaite arrived back at Crow’s Nest he found his host sitting on the terrace overlooking the sea.

“Hullo, Satterthwaite. Been having tea with the Lytton Gores?”

“Yes. You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. Egg telephoned…Odd sort of girl, Egg….”

“Attractive,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“H’m, yes, I suppose she is.”

He got up and walked a few aimless steps.

“I wish to God,” he said suddenly and bitterly, “that I’d never come to this cursed place.”

Five

FLIGHT FROM A LADY

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: “He’s got it badly.”

He felt a sudden pity for his host. At the age of fifty-two, Charles Cartwright, the gay debonair breaker of hearts, had fallen in love. And, as he himself realized, his case was doomed to disappointment. Youth turns to youth.

“Girls don’t wear their hearts on their sleeves,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite. “Egg makes a great parade of her feeling for Sir Charles. She wouldn’t if it really meant anything. Young Manders is the one.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was usually fairly shrewd in his assumptions.

Still, there was probably one factor that he did not take into account, because he was unaware of it himself. That was the enhanced value placed by age on youth. To Mr. Satterthwaite, an elderly man, the fact that Egg might prefer a middle-aged man to a young one was frankly incredible. Youth was to him so much the most magical of all gifts.

He felt strengthened in his beliefs when Egg rang up after dinner and demanded permission to bring Oliver along and “have a consultation.”

Certainly a handsome lad, with his dark, heavy-lidded eyes and easy grace of movement. He had, it seemed, permitted himself to be brought—a tribute to Egg’s energy; but his general attitude was lazily sceptical.

“Can’t you talk her out of it, sir?” he said to Sir Charles. “It’s this appallingly healthy bucolic life she leads that makes her so energetic. You know, Egg, you really are detestably hearty. And your tastes are childish—crime—sensation—and all that bunk.”

“You’re a sceptic, Manders?”

“Well, sir, really. That dear old bleating fellow. It’s fantastic to think of anything else but natural causes.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Sir Charles.

Mr. Satterthwaite glanced at him. What part was Charles Cartwright playing tonight. Not the ex-Naval man—not the international detective. No, some new and unfamiliar rôle.

It came as a shock to Mr. Satterthwaite when he realized what that rôle was. Sir Charles was playing second fiddle. Second fiddle to Oliver Manders.

He sat back with his head in shadow watching those two, Egg and Oliver, as they disputed—Egg hotly, Oliver languidly.

Sir Charles looked older than usual—old and tired.

More than once Egg appealed to him—hotly and confidently—but his response was lacking.

It was eleven o’clock when they left. Sir Charles went out on the terrace with them and offered the loan of an electric torch to help them down the stony path.

But there was no need of a torch. It was a beautiful moonlit night. They set off together, their voices growing fainter as they descended.

Moonlight or no moonlight, Mr. Satterthwaite was not going to risk a chill. He returned to the Ship room. Sir Charles stayed out on the terrace a little while longer.

When he came in he latched the window behind him, and striding to a side table poured himself out a whisky and soda.

“Satterthwaite,” he said, “I’m leaving here tomorrow for good.”

“What?” cried Mr. Satterthwaite, astonished.

A kind of melancholy pleasure at the effect he had produced showed for a minute on Charles Cartwright's face.

"It's the Only Thing To Do," he said, obviously speaking in capital letters. "I shall sell this place. What it has meant to me no one will ever know." His voice dropped, lingeringly…effectively.

After an evening of second fiddle, Sir Charles's egoism was taking its revenge. This was the great Renunciation Scene, so often played by him in sundry and divers dramas. Giving Up the Other Man's Wife, Renouncing the Girl he Loved.

There was a brave flippancy in his voice as he went on.

"Cut your losses—it's the only way…Youth to youth…They're made for each other, those two…I shall clear out…."

"Where to?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

The actor made a careless gesture.

"Anywhere. What does it matter?" He added with a slight change of voice, "Probably Monte Carlo." And then, retrieving what his sensitive taste could not but feel to be a slight anticlimax, "In the heart of the desert or the heart of the crowd—what does it matter? The inmost core of man is solitary—alone. I have always been—a lonely soul…."

It was clearly an exit line.

He nodded to Mr. Satterthwaite and left the room.

Mr. Satterthwaite got up and prepared to follow his host to bed.

"But it won't be the heart of a desert," he thought to himself with a slight chuckle.

On the following morning Sir Charles begged Mr. Satterthwaite to forgive him if he went up to town that day.

“Don’t cut your visit short, my dear fellow. You were staying till tomorrow, and I know you’re going on to the Harbertons at Tavistock. The car will take you there. What I feel is that, having come to my decision, I mustn’t look back. No, I mustn’t look back.”

Sir Charles squared his shoulders with manly resolution, wrung Mr. Satterthwaite’s hand with fervour and delivered him over to the capable Miss Milray.

Miss Milray seemed prepared to deal with the situation as she had dealt with any other. She expressed no surprise or emotion at Sir Charles’s overnight decision. Nor could Mr. Satterthwaite draw her out on the point. Neither sudden deaths nor sudden changes of plan could excite Miss Milray. She accepted whatever happened as a fact and proceeded to cope with it in an efficient way. She telephoned to the house agents, despatched wires abroad, and wrote busily on her typewriter. Mr. Satterthwaite escaped from the depressing spectacle of so much efficiency by strolling down to the quay. He was walking aimlessly along when he was seized by the arm from behind, and turned to confront a white-faced girl.

“What’s all this?” demanded Egg fiercely.

“All what?” parried Mr. Satterthwaite.

“It’s all over the place that Sir Charles is going away—that he’s going to sell Crow’s Nest.”

“Quite true.”

“He is going away?”

“He’s gone.”

“Oh!” Egg relinquished his arm. She looked suddenly like a very small child who has been cruelly hurt.

Mr. Satterthwaite did not know what to say.

“Where has he gone?”

“Abroad. To the South of France.”

“Oh!”

Still he did not know what to say. For clearly there was more than hero-worship here….

Pitying her, he was turning over various consolatory words in his mind when she spoke again—and startled him.

“Which of those damned bitches is it?” asked Egg fiercely.

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at her, his mouth fallen open in surprise. Egg took him by the arm again and shook him violently.

“You must know,” she cried. “Which of them? The grey-haired one or the other?”

“My dear, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You do. You must. Of course it’s some woman. He liked me—I know he liked me. One of those women the other night must have seen it, too, and determined to get him away from me. I hate women. Lousy cats. Did you see her clothes—that one with the green hair? They made me gnash my teeth with envy. A woman who has clothes like that has a pull—you can’t deny it. She’s quite old and ugly as sin, really, but what does it matter. She makes everyone else look like a dowdy curate’s wife. Is it her? Or is it the other one with the grey hair? She’s amusing—you can see that. She’s got masses of S.A. And he called her Angie. It can’t be the one like a wilted cabbage. Is it the smart one or is it Angie?”

“My dear, you’ve got the most extraordinary ideas into your head. He—er—Charles Cartwright isn’t the least interested in either of those women.”

“I don’t believe you. They’re interested in him, anyway….”

“No, no, no, you’re making a mistake. This is all imagination.”

“Bitches,” said Egg. “That’s what they are!”

"You mustn't use that word, my dear."

"I can think of a lot worse things to say than that."

"Possibly, possibly, but pray don't do so. I can assure you that you are labouring under a misapprehension."

"Then why has he gone away—like this?"

Mr. Satterthwaite cleared his throat.

"I fancy he—er—thought it best."

Egg stared at him piercingly.

"Do you mean—because of me?"

"Well—something of the kind, perhaps."

"And so he's legged it. I suppose I did show my hand a bit plainly…Men do hate being chased, don't they? Mums is right, after all…You've no idea how sweet she is when she talks about men. Always in the third person—so Victorian and polite. 'A man hates being run after; a girl should always let the man make the running.' Don't you think it's a sweet expression—make the running? Sounds the opposite of what it means. Actually that's just what Charles has done—made the running. He's running away from me. He's afraid. And the devil of it is, I can't go after him. If I did I suppose he'd take a boat to the wilds of Africa or somewhere."

"Hermione," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "are you serious about Sir Charles?"

The girl flung him an impatient glance.

"Of course I am."

"What about Oliver Manders?"

Egg dismissed Oliver Manders with an impatient whisk of the head. She was following out a train of thought of her own.

“Do you think I might write to him? Nothing alarming. Just chatty girlish stuff…you know, put him at his ease, so that he’d get over his scare?”

She frowned.

“What a fool I’ve been. Mums would have managed it much better. They knew how to do the trick, those Victorians. All blushing retreat. I’ve been all wrong about it. I actually thought he needed encouraging. He seemed—well, he seemed to need a bit of help. Tell me,” she turned abruptly on Mr. Satterthwaite, “did he see me do my kissing act with Oliver last night?”

“Not that I know of. When—?”

“All in the moonlight. As we were going down the path. I thought he was still looking from the terrace. I thought perhaps if he saw me and Oliver—well, I thought it might wake him up a bit. Because he did like me. I could swear he liked me.”

“Wasn’t that a little hard on Oliver?”

Egg shook her head decisively.

“Not in the least. Oliver thinks it’s an honour for any girl to be kissed by him. It was damned bad for his conceit, of course; but one can’t think of everything. I wanted to ginger up Charles. He’s been different lately—more standoffish.”

“My dear child,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “I don’t think you realize quite why Sir Charles went away so suddenly. He thought that you cared for Oliver. He went away to save himself further pain.”

Egg whisked round. She caught hold of Mr. Satterthwaite by the shoulders and peered into his face.

“Is that true? Is that really true? The mutt! The boob! Oh—!”

She released Mr. Satterthwaite suddenly and moved along beside him with a skipping motion.

“Then he’ll come back,” she said. “He’ll come back. If he doesn’t—”

“Well, if he doesn’t?”

Egg laughed.

“I’ll get him back somehow. You see if I don’t.”

It seemed as though allowing for difference of language Egg and the lily maid of Astolat had much in common, but Mr. Satterthwaite felt that Egg’s methods would be more practical than those of Elaine, and that dying of a broken heart would form no part of them.

SECOND ACT

CERTAINTY

One

SIR CHARLES RECEIVES A LETTER

Mr. Satterthwaite had come over for the day to Monte Carlo. His round of house parties was over, and the Riviera in September was rather a favourite haunt of his.

He was sitting in the gardens enjoying the sun and reading a two-days-old Daily Mail.

Suddenly a name caught his attention. Strange. Death of Sir Bartholomew Strange. He read the paragraph through:

We much regret having to announce the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange, the eminent nerve specialist. Sir Bartholomew was entertaining a party of friends at his house in Yorkshire. Sir Bartholomew appeared to be in perfect health and spirits, and his demise occurred quite suddenly at the end of dinner. He was chatting with his friends and drinking a glass of port when he had a sudden seizure and died before medical aid could be summoned. Sir Bartholomew will be deeply regretted. He was….

Here followed a description of Sir Bartholomew's career and work.

Mr. Satterthwaite let the paper slip from his hand. He was very disagreeably impressed. A vision of the physician as he had seen him last flashed across his mind—big, jocund, in the pink of condition. And now—dead. Certain words detached themselves from their context and floated about disagreeably in Mr. Satterthwaite's mind. "Drinking a glass of port." "Sudden seizure…Died before medical aid could be summoned…."

Port, not a cocktail, but otherwise curiously reminiscent of that death in Cornwall. Mr. Satterthwaite saw again the convulsed face of the mild old clergyman….

Supposing that after all….

He looked up to see Sir Charles Cartwright coming towards him across the grass.

“Satterthwaite, by all that’s wonderful! Just the man I’d have chosen to see. Have you seen about poor old Tollie?”

“I was just reading it now.”

Sir Charles dropped into a chair beside him. He was immaculately got up in yachting costume. No more grey flannels and old sweaters. He was the sophisticated yachtsman of the South of France.

“Listen, Satterthwaite, Tollie was as sound as a bell. Never had anything wrong with him. Am I being a complete fanciful ass, or does this business remind you of—of—?”

“Of that business at Loomouth? Yes, it does. But of course we may be mistaken. The resemblance may be only superficial. After all, sudden deaths occur the whole time from a variety of causes.”

Sir Charles nodded his head impatiently. Then he said:

“I’ve just got a letter—from Egg Lytton Gore.”

Mr. Satterthwaite concealed a smile.

“The first you’ve had from her?”

Sir Charles was unsuspecting.

“No. I had a letter soon after I got here. It followed me about a bit. Just giving me the news and all that. I didn’t answer it…Dash it all, Satterthwaite, I didn’t dare answer it…The girl had no idea, of course, but I didn’t want to make a fool of myself.”

Mr. Satterthwaite passed his hand over his mouth where the smile still lingered.

“And this one?” he asked.

“This is different. It’s an appeal for help….”

“Help?” Mr. Satterthwaite’s eyebrows went up.

“She was there—you see—in the house—when it happened.”

“You mean she was staying with Sir Bartholomew Strange at the time of his death?”

“Yes.”

“What does she say about it?”

Sir Charles had taken a letter from his pocket. He hesitated for a moment, then he handed it to Mr. Satterthwaite.

“You’d better read it for yourself.”

Mr. Satterthwaite opened out the sheet with lively curiosity.

“Dear Sir Charles,—I don’t know when this will get to you. I do hope soon. I’m so worried, I don’t know what to do. You’ll have seen, I expect, in the papers that Sir Bartholomew Strange is dead. Well, he died just the same way as Mr. Babbington. It can’t be a coincidence—it can’t—it can’t…I’m worried to death….

“Look here, can’t you come home and do something? It sounds a bit crude put like that, but you did have suspicions before, and nobody would listen to you, and now it’s your own friend who’s been killed; and perhaps if you don’t come back nobody will ever find out the truth, and I’m sure you could. I feel it in my bones….

“And there’s something else. I’m worried, definitely, about someone…He had absolutely nothing to do with it, I know that, but things might look a bit odd. Oh, I can’t explain in a letter. But won’t you come back? You could find out the truth. I know you could.

“Yours in haste,
“EGG.”

“Well?” demanded Sir Charles impatiently. “A bit incoherent of course; she wrote it in a hurry. But what about it?”

Mr. Satterthwaite folded the letter slowly to give himself a minute or two before replying.

He agreed that the letter was incoherent, but he did not think it had been written in a hurry. It was, in his view, a very careful production. It was designed to appeal to Sir Charles’s vanity, to his chivalry, and to his sporting instincts.

From what Mr. Satterthwaite knew of Sir Charles, that letter was a certain draw.

“Who do you think she means by ‘someone,’ and ‘he’?” he asked.

“Manders, I suppose.”

“Was he there, then?”

“Must have been. I don’t know why. Tollie never met him except on that one occasion at my house. Why he should ask him to stay, I can’t imagine.”

“Did he often have those big house parties?”

“Three or four times a year. Always one for the St. Leger.”

“Did he spend much time in Yorkshire?”

“Had a big sanatorium—nursing home, whatever you like to call it. He bought Melfort Abbey (it’s an old place), restored it and built a sanatorium in the grounds.”

“I see.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“I wonder who else there was in the house party?”

Sir Charles suggested that it might be in one of the other newspapers, and they went off to institute a newspaper hunt.

“Here we are,” said Sir Charles.

He read aloud:

“Sir Bartholomew Strange is having his usual house party for the St. Leger. Amongst the guests are Lord and Lady Eden, Lady Mary Lytton Gore, Sir Jocelyn and Lady Campbell, Captain and Mrs. Dacres, and Miss Angela Sutcliffe, the well-known actress.”

He and Mr. Satterthwaite looked at each other.

“The Dacres and Angela Sutcliffe,” said Sir Charles. “Nothing about Oliver Manders.”

“Let’s get today’s Continental Daily Mail,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “There might be something in that.”

Sir Charles glanced over the paper. Suddenly he stiffened.

“My God, Satterthwaite, listen to this:

“SIR BARTHOLOMEW STRANGE.

“At the inquest today on the late Sir Bartholomew Strange, a verdict of Death by Nicotine Poisoning was returned, there being no evidence to show how or by whom the poison was administered.”

He frowned.

“Nicotine poisoning. Sounds mild enough—not the sort of thing to make a man fall down in a fit. I don’t understand all this.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Do? I’m going to book a berth on the Blue Train tonight.”

“Well,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “I might as well do the same.”

“You?” Sir Charles wheeled round on him, surprised.

“This sort of thing is rather in my line,” said Mr. Satterthwaite modestly. “I’ve—er—had a little experience. Besides, I know the Chief Constable in that part of the world rather well—Colonel Johnson. That will come in useful.”

“Good man,” cried Sir Charles. “Let’s go round to the Wagon Lits offices.”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself:

“The girl’s done it. She’s got him back. She said she would. I wonder just exactly how much of her letter was genuine.”

Decidedly, Egg Lytton Gore was an opportunist.

When Sir Charles had gone off to the Wagon Lits offices, Mr. Satterthwaite strolled slowly through the gardens. His mind was still pleasantly engaged with the problem of Egg Lytton Gore. He admired her resource and her driving power, and stifled that slightly Victorian side of his nature which disapproved of a member of the fairer sex taking the initiative in affairs of the heart.

Mr. Satterthwaite was an observant man. In the midst of his cogitations on the female sex in general, and Egg Lytton Gore in particular, he was unable to resist saying to himself:

“Now where have I seen that particular shaped head before?”

The owner of the head was sitting on a seat gazing thoughtfully ahead of him. He was a little man whose moustaches were out of proportion to his size.

A discontented-looking English child was standing nearby, standing first on one foot, then the other, and occasionally meditatively kicking the lobelia edging.

“Don’t do that, darling,” said her mother, who was absorbed in a fashion paper.

“I haven’t anything to do,” said the child.

The little man turned his head to look at her, and Mr. Satterthwaite recognized him.

“M. Poirot,” he said. “This is a very pleasant surprise.” M. Poirot rose and bowed.

“Enchanté, monsieur.”

They shook hands, and Mr. Satterthwaite sat down.

“Everyone seems to be in Monte Carlo. Not half an hour ago I ran across Sir Charles Cartwright, and now you.”

“Sir Charles, he also is here?”

“He’s been yachting. You know that he gave up his house at Loomouth?”

“Ah, no, I did not know it. I am surprised.”

“I don’t know that I am. I don’t think Cartwright is really the kind of man who likes to live permanently out of the world.”

“Ah, no, I agree with you there. I was surprised for another reason. It seemed to me that Sir Charles had a particular reason for staying in Loomouth—a very charming reason, eh? Am I not right? The little demoiselle who calls herself, so amusingly, the egg?”

His eyes were twinkling gently.

“Oh, so you noticed that?”

“Assuredly I noticed. I have the heart very susceptible to lovers—you too, I think. And la jeunesse, it is always touching.”

He sighed.

“I think,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that actually you have hit on Sir Charles’s reason for leaving Loomouth. He was running away.”

“From Mademoiselle Egg? But it is obvious that he adores her. Why, then, run?”

“Ah,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “you don’t understand our Anglo-Saxon complexes.”

M. Poirot was following his own line of reasoning.

“Of course,” he said, “it is a good move to pursue. Run from a woman—immediately she follows. Doubtless Sir Charles, a man of much experience, knows that.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was rather amused.

“I don’t think it was quite that way,” he said. “Tell me, what are you doing out here? A holiday?”

“My time is all holidays nowadays. I have succeeded. I am rich. I retire. Now I travel about seeing the world.”

“Splendid,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“N’est-ce pas?”

“Mummy,” said the English child, “isn’t there anything to do?”

“Darling,” said her mother reproachfully, “isn’t it lovely to have come abroad and to be in the beautiful sunshine?”

“Yes, but there’s nothing to do.”

“Run about—amuse yourself. Go and look at the sea.”

“Maman,” said a French child, suddenly appearing. “Joue avec moi.”

A French mother looked up from her book.

“Amuse toi avec ta balle, Marcelle.”

Obediently the French child bounced her ball with a gloomy face.

“Je m’amuse,” said Hercule Poirot; and there was a very curious expression on his face.

Then, as if in answer to something he read in Mr. Satterthwaite’s face, he said:

“But yet, you have the quick perceptions. It is as you think—”

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

“See you, as a boy I was poor. There were many of us. We had to get on in the world. I entered the Police Force. I worked hard. Slowly I rose in that Force. I began to make a name for myself. I made a name for myself. I began to acquire an international reputation. At last, I was due to retire. There came the War. I was injured. I came, a sad and weary refugee, to England. A kind lady gave me hospitality. She died—not naturally; no, she was killed. Eh bien, I set my wits to work. I employed my little grey cells. I discovered her murderer. I found that I was not yet finished. No, indeed, my powers were stronger than ever. Then began my second career, that of a private inquiry agent in England. I have solved many fascinating and baffling problems. Ah, monsieur, I have lived! The psychology of human nature, it is wonderful. I grew rich. Someday, I said to myself, I will have all the money I need. I will realize all my dreams.”

He laid a hand on Mr. Satterthwaite’s knee.

“My friend, beware of the day when your dreams come true. That child near us, doubtless she too has dreamt of coming abroad—of the excitement—of how different everything would be. You understand?”

“I understand,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that you are not amusing yourself.”

Poirot nodded.

“Exactly.”

There were moments when Mr. Satterthwaite looked like Puck. This was one of them. His little wrinkled face twitched impishly. He hesitated. Should he? Should he not?

Slowly he unfolded the newspaper he was still carrying.

“Have you seen this, M. Poirot?”

With his forefinger he indicated the paragraph he meant.

The little Belgian took the paper. Mr. Satterthwaite watched him as he read. No change came over his face, but the Englishman had the impression that his body stiffened, as does that of a terrier when it sniffs a rat hole.

Hercule Poirot read the paragraph twice, then he folded the paper and returned it to Mr. Satterthwaite.

“That is interesting,” he said.

“Yes. It looks, does it not, as though Sir Charles Cartwright had been right and we had been wrong.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It seems as though we had been wrong…I will admit it, my friend, I could not believe that so harmless, so friendly an old man could have been murdered…Well, it may be that I was wrong…Although, see you, this other death may be coincidence. Coincidences do occur—the most amazing coincidences. I, Hercule Poirot, have known coincidences that would surprise you….”

He paused, and went on:

“Sir Charles Cartwright’s instinct may have been right. He is an artist—sensitive—impressionable—he feels things, rather than reasons about them…Such a method in life is often disastrous—but it is sometimes justified. I wonder where Sir Charles is now.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

“I can tell you that. He is in the office of the Wagon Lits Co. He and I are returning to England tonight.”

“Aha!” Poirot put immense meaning into the exclamation. His eyes, bright, inquiring, roguish, asked a question. “What zeal he has, our Sir Charles. He is determined, then, to play this rôle, the rôle of the amateur policeman? Or is there another reason?”

Mr. Satterthwaite did not reply, but from his silence Poirot seemed to deduce an answer.

“I see,” he said. “The bright eyes of Mademoiselle are concerned in this. It is not only crime that calls?”

“She wrote to him,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “begging him to return.”

Poirot nodded.

“I wonder now,” he said. “I do not quite understand—”

Mr. Satterthwaite interrupted.

“You do not understand the modern English girl? Well, that is not surprising. I do not always understand them myself. A girl like Miss Lytton Gore—”

In his turn Poirot interrupted.

“Pardon. You have misunderstood me. I understand Miss Lytton Gore very well. I have met such another—many such others. You call the type modern; but it is—how shall I say?—agelong.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was slightly annoyed. He felt that he—and only he—understood Egg. This preposterous foreigner knew nothing about young English womanhood.

Poirot was still speaking. His tone was dreamy—brooding.

“A knowledge of human nature—what a dangerous thing it can be.”

"A useful thing," corrected Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Perhaps. It depends upon the point of view."

"Well—" Mr. Satterthwaite hesitated—got up. He was a little disappointed. He had cast the bait and the fish had not risen. He felt that his own knowledge of human nature was at fault. "I will wish you a pleasant holiday."

"I thank you."

"I hope that when you are next in London you will come and see me." He produced a card. "This is my address."

"You are most amiable, Mr. Satterthwaite. I shall be charmed."

"Good-bye for the present, then."

"Good-bye, and bon voyage."

Mr. Satterthwaite moved away. Poirot looked after him for a moment or two, then once more he stared straight ahead of him, looking out over the blue Mediterranean.

So he sat for at least ten minutes.

The English child reappeared.

"I've looked at the sea, Mummy. What shall I do next?"

"An admirable question," said Hercule Poirot under his breath.

He rose and walked slowly away—in the direction of the Wagon Lits offices.

Two

THE MISSING BUTLER

Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite were sitting in Colonel Johnson's study. The chief constable was a big red-faced man with a barrack-room voice and a hearty manner.

He had greeted Mr. Satterthwaite with every sign of pleasure and was obviously delighted to make the acquaintance of the famous Charles Cartwright.

"My missus is a great playgoer. She's one of your—what do the Americans call it?—fans. That's it—fans. I like a good play myself—good clean stuff that is, some of the things they put on the stage nowadays—faugh!"

Sir Charles, conscious of rectitude in this respect—he had never put on "daring" plays, responded suitably with all his easy charm of manner. When they came to mention the object of their visit Colonel Johnson was only too ready to tell them all he could.

"Friend of yours, you say? Too bad—too bad. Yes, he was very popular round here. That sanatorium of his is very highly spoken of, and by all accounts Sir Bartholomew was a first-rate fellow, as well as being at the top of his profession. Kind, generous, popular all round. Last man in the world you'd expect to be murdered—and murder is what it looks like. There's nothing to indicate suicide, and anything like accident seems out of the question."

"Satterthwaite and I have just come back from abroad," said Sir Charles. "We've only seen snippets here and there in the papers."

"And naturally you want to know all about it. Well, I'll tell you exactly how the matter stands. I think there's no doubt the butler's the man we've got to look for. He was a new man—Sir Bartholomew had only had him a fortnight, and the moment after the crime he disappears—vanishes into thin air. That looks a bit fishy, doesn't it? Eh, what?"

"You've no notion where he went?"

Colonel Johnson's naturally red face got a little redder.

"Negligence on our part, you think. I admit it damn' well looks like it. Naturally the fellow was under observation—just the same as everyone else. He answered our questions quite satisfactorily—gave the London agency which obtained him the place. Last employer, Sir Horace Bird. All very civil spoken, no signs of panic. Next thing was he'd gone—and the house under observation. I've hauled my men over the coals, but they swear they didn't bat an eyelid."

"Very remarkable," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Apart from everything else," said Sir Charles thoughtfully, "it seems a damn' fool thing to do. As far as he knew, the man wasn't suspected. By bolting he draws attention to himself."

"Exactly. And not a hope of escape. His description's been circulated. It's only a matter of days before he's pulled in."

"Very odd," said Sir Charles. "I don't understand it."

"Oh, the reason's clear enough. He lost his nerve. Got the wind up suddenly."

"Wouldn't a man who had the nerve to commit murder have the nerve to sit still afterward?"

"Depends. Depends. I know criminals. Chicken-livered, most of them. He thought he was suspected, and he bolted."

"Have you verified his own account of himself?"

"Naturally, Sir Charles. That's plain routine work. London Agency confirms his story. He had a written reference from Sir Horace Bird, recommending him warmly. Sir Horace himself is in East Africa.”

“So the reference might have been forged?”

“Exactly,” said Colonel Johnson, beaming upon Sir Charles, with the air of a schoolmaster congratulating a bright pupil. “We’ve wired to Sir Horace, of course, but it may be some little time before we get a reply. He’s on safari.”

“When did the man disappear?”

“Morning after the death. There was a doctor present at the dinner—Sir Jocelyn Campbell—bit of a toxicologist, I understand; he and Davis (local man) agreed over the case, and our people were called in immediately. We interviewed everybody that night. Ellis (that’s the butler) went to his room as usual and was missing in the morning. His bed hadn’t been slept in.”

“He slipped away under cover of the darkness?”

“Seems so. One of the ladies staying there, Miss Sutcliffe, the actress—you know her, perhaps?”

“Very well, indeed.”

“Miss Sutcliffe has made a suggestion to us. She suggested that the man had left the house through a secret passage.” He blew his nose apologetically. “Sounds rather Edgar Wallace stuff, but it seems there was such a thing. Sir Bartholomew was rather proud of it. He showed it to Miss Sutcliffe. The end of it comes out among some fallen masonry about half a mile away.”

“That would be a possible explanation, certainly,” agreed Sir Charles. “Only—would the butler know of the existence of such a passage?”

“That’s the point, of course. My missus always says servants know everything. Daresay she’s right.”

“I understand the poison was nicotine,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“That’s right. Most unusual stuff to use, I believe. Comparatively rare. I understand if a man’s a heavy smoker, such as the doctor was, it would tend to complicate matters. I mean, he might have died of nicotine poisoning in a natural way. Only, of course, this business was too sudden for that.”

“How was it administered?”

“We don’t know,” admitted Colonel Johnson. “That’s going to be the weak part of the case. According to medical evidence, it could only have been swallowed a few minutes previous to death.”

“They were drinking port, I understand?”

“Exactly. Seems as though the stuff was in the port; but it wasn’t. We analysed his glass. That glass had contained port, and nothing but port. The other wine glasses had been cleared, of course, but they were all on a tray in the pantry, unwashed, and not one of them contained anything it shouldn’t. As for what he ate, it was the same as everybody else had. Soup, grilled sole, pheasant and chipped potatoes, chocolate soufflé, soft roes on toast. His cook’s been with him fifteen years. No, there doesn’t seem to be any way he could have been given the stuff, and yet there it is in the stomach. It’s a nasty problem.”

Sir Charles wheeled round on Mr. Satterthwaite.

“The same thing,” he said excitedly. “Exactly the same as before.”

He turned apologetically to the chief constable.

“I must explain. A death occurred at my house in Cornwall—”

Colonel Johnson looked interested.

“I think I’ve heard about that. From a young lady—Miss Lytton Gore.”

“Yes, she was there. She told you about it?”

“She did. She was very set on her theory. But, you know, Sir Charles, I can’t believe there’s anything in that theory. It doesn’t explain the flight of the butler. Your man didn’t disappear by any chance?”

“Haven’t got a man—only a parlourmaid.”

“She couldn’t have been a man in disguise?”

Thinking of the smart and obviously feminine Temple, Sir Charles smiled.

Colonel Johnson also smiled apologetically.

“Just an idea,” he said. “No, I can’t say I put much reliance in Miss Lytton Gore’s theory. I understand the death in question was an elderly clergyman. Who would want to put an old clergyman out of the way?”

“That’s just the puzzling part of it,” said Sir Charles.

“I think you’ll find it’s just coincidence. Depend on it, the butler’s our man. Very likely he’s a regular criminal. Unluckily we can’t find any of his fingerprints. We had a fingerprint expert go over his bedroom and the butler’s pantry, but he had no luck.”

“If it was the butler, what motive can you suggest?”

“That, of course, is one of our difficulties,” admitted Colonel Johnson. “The man might have been there with intent to steal, and Sir Bartholomew might have caught him out.”

Both Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite remained courteously silent. Colonel Johnson himself seemed to feel that the suggestion lacked plausibility.

“The fact of the matter is, one can only theorize. Once we’ve got John Ellis under lock and key and have found out who he is, and whether he’s ever been through our hands before—well, the motive may be as clear as day.”

“You’ve been through Sir Bartholomew’s papers, I suppose?”

“Naturally, Sir Charles. We’ve given that side of the case every attention. I must introduce you to Superintendent Crossfield, who has charge of the case. A most reliable man. I pointed out to him, and he was quick to agree with me, that Sir Bartholomew’s profession might have had something to do with the crime. A doctor knows many professional secrets. Sir Bartholomew’s papers were all neatly filed and docketed—his secretary, Miss Lyndon, went through them with Crossfield.”

“And there was nothing?”

“Nothing at all suggestive, Sir Charles.”

“Was anything missing from the house—silver, jewellery, anything like that?”

“Nothing whatsoever.”

“Who exactly was staying in the house?”

“I’ve got a list—now where is it? Ah, I think Crossfield has it. You must meet Crossfield; as a matter of fact, I’m expecting him any minute now to report”—as a bell went—“that’s probably the man now.”

Superintendent Crossfield was a large, solid-looking man, rather slow of speech, but with a fairly keen blue eye.

He saluted his superior officer, and was introduced to the two visitors.

It is possible that had Mr. Satterthwaite been alone he would have found it hard to make Crossfield unbend. Crossfield didn’t hold with gentlemen from London—amateurs coming down with “ideas.” Sir Charles, however, was a different matter. Superintendent Crossfield had a childish reverence for the glamour of the stage. He had twice seen Sir Charles act, and the excitement and rapture of seeing this hero of the footlights in a flesh-and-blood manner made him as friendly and loquacious as could be wished.

“I saw you in London, sir, I did. I was up with the wife. Lord Aintree’s Dilemma—that’s what the play was. In the pit, I was—and the house was crowded out—we had to stand two hours beforehand. But nothing else would do for the wife. ‘I must see Sir Charles Cartwright in Lord Aintree’s Dilemma,’ she said. At the Pall Mall Theatre, it was.”

"Well," said Sir Charles, "I've retired from the stage now, as you know. But they still know my name at the Pall Mall." He took out a card and wrote a few words on it. "You give this to the people at the box office next time you and Mrs. Crossfield are having a jaunt to town, and they'll give you a couple of the best seats going."

"I take that very kindly of you, Sir Charles—very kindly, indeed. My wife will be all worked up when I tell her about this."

After this Superintendent Crossfield was as wax in the exactor's hands.

"It's an odd case, sir. Never come across a case of nicotine poisoning before in all my experience. No more has our Doctor Davis."

"I always thought it was a kind of disease you got from oversmoking."

"To tell the truth, so did I, sir. But the doctor says that the pure alkaloid is an odourless liquid, and that a few drops of it are enough to kill a man almost instantaneously."

Sir Charles whistled.

"Potent stuff."

"As you say, sir. And yet it's in common use, as you might say. Solutions are used to spray roses with. And of course it can be extracted from ordinary tobacco."

"Roses," said Sir Charles. "Now, where have I heard—?"

He frowned, then shook his head.

"Anything fresh to report, Crossfield?" asked Colonel Johnson.

"Nothing definite, sir. We've had reports that our man Ellis has been seen at Durham, at Ipswich, at Balham, at Land's End, and a dozen other places. That's all got to be sifted out for what it's worth." He turned to the other two. "The moment a man's description is circulated as wanted, he's seen by someone all over England."

“What is the man’s description?” asked Sir Charles.

Johnson took up a paper.

“John Ellis, medium height, say five-foot seven, stoops slightly, grey hair, small side whiskers, dark eyes, husky voice, tooth missing in upper jaw, visible when he smiles, no special marks or characteristics.”

“H’m,” said Sir Charles. “Very nondescript, bar the side whiskers and the tooth, and the first will be off by now, and you can’t rely on his smiling.”

“The trouble is,” said Crossfield, “that nobody observes anything. The difficulty I had in getting anything but the vaguest description out of the maids at the Abbey. It’s always the same. I’ve had descriptions of one and the same man, and he’s been called tall, thin, short, stout, medium height, thickset, slender—not one in fifty really uses their eyes properly.”

“You’re satisfied in your own mind, Superintendent, that Ellis is the man?…”

“Why else did he bolt, sir? You can’t get away from that.”

“That’s the stumbling block,” said Sir Charles thoughtfully.

Crossfield turned to Colonel Johnson and reported the measures that were being taken. The Colonel nodded approval and then asked the Superintendent for the list of inmates of the Abbey on the night of the crime. This was handed to the two new inquirers. It ran as follows:

MARTHA LECKIE, cook.

BEATRICE CHURCH, upper-housemaid.

DORIS COKER, under-housemaid.

VICTORIA BALL, between-maid.

ALICE WEST, parlourmaid.

VIOLET BASSINGTON, kitchenmaid.

(Above have all been in service of deceased for some time and bear good character. Mrs. Leckie has been there for fifteen years.)

GLADYS LYNDON—secretary, thirty-three, has been secretary to Sir Bartholomew Strange for three years, can give no information as to likely motive.

Guests:

LORD AND LADY EDEN, 187 Cadogan Square.

SIR JOCELYN and LADY CAMPBELL, 1256 Harley Street.

MISS ANGELA SUTCLIFFE, 28 Cantrell Mansions, S.W.3.

CAPTAIN and MRS. DACRES, 3 St. John’s House, W.1.

(Mrs. Dacres carries on business as Ambrosine, Ltd, Brook Street.)

LADY MARY and MISS HERMIONE LYTTON GORE, Rose Cottage, Loomouth.

MISS MURIEL WILLS, 5 Upper Cathcart Road, Tooting.

MR. OLIVER MANDERS, Messrs Speier & Ross, Old Broad Street, E.C.2.

“H’m,” said Sir Charles. “The Tooting touch was omitted by the papers. I see young Manders was there, too.”

“That’s by way of being an accident, sir,” said Superintendent Crossfield. “The young gentleman ran his car into a wall just by the Abbey, and Sir Bartholomew, who I understood was slightly acquainted with him, asked him to stay the night.”

“Careless thing to do,” said Sir Charles cheerfully.

“It was that, sir,” said the Superintendent. “In fact, I fancy myself the young gentleman must have had one over the eight, as the saying goes. What made him ram the wall just where he did I can’t imagine, if he was sober at the time.”

“Just high spirits, I expect,” said Sir Charles.

“Spirits it was, in my opinion, sir.”

“Well, thank you very much, Superintendent. Any objection to our going and having a look at the Abbey, Colonel Johnson?”

“Of course not, my dear sir. Though I’m afraid you won’t learn much more there than I can tell you.”

“Anybody there?”

“Only the domestic staff, sir,” said Crossfield. “The house party left immediately after the inquest, and Miss Lyndon has returned to Harley Street.”

“We might, perhaps, see Dr.—er—Davis, too?” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Good idea.”

They obtained the doctor’s address, and having thanked Colonel Johnson warmly for his kindness, they left.

Three

WHICH OF THEM?

As they walked along the street, Sir Charles said:

“Any ideas, Satterthwaite?”

“What about you?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite. He liked to reserve judgment until the last possible moment.

Not so Sir Charles. He spoke emphatically:

“They’re wrong, Satterthwaite. They’re all wrong. They’ve got the butler on the brain. The butler’s done a bunk—ergo, the butler’s the murderer. It doesn’t fit. No, it doesn’t fit. You can’t leave that other death out of account—the one down at my place.”

“You’re still of the opinion that the two are connected?”

Mr. Satterthwaite asked the question, though he had already answered it in the affirmative in his own mind.

“Man, they must be connected. Everything points to it…We’ve got to find the common factor—someone who was present on both occasions—”

“Yes,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “And that’s not going to be as simple a matter as one might think, on the face of it. We’ve got too many common factors. Do you realize, Cartwright, that practically every person who was present at the dinner at your house was present here?”

Sir Charles nodded.

“Of course I’ve realized that—but do you realize what deduction one can draw from it?”

“I don’t quite follow you, Cartwright?”

“Dash it all, man, do you suppose that’s coincidence? No, it was meant. Why are all the people who were at the first death present at the second? Accident? Not on your life. It was plan—design—Tollie’s plan.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Yes, it’s possible….”

“It’s certain. You didn’t know Tollie as well as I did, Satterthwaite. He was a man who kept his own counsel, and a very patient man. In all the years I’ve known him I’ve never known Tollie give utterance to a rash opinion or judgment.

“Look at it this way: Babbington’s murdered—yes, murdered—I’m not going to hedge, or mince terms—murdered one evening in my house. Tollie ridicules me gently for my suspicions in the matter, but all the time he’s got suspicions of his own. He doesn’t talk about them—that’s not his way. But quietly, in his own mind, he’s building up a case. I don’t know what he had to build upon. It can’t, I think, be a case against any one particular person. He believed that one of those people was responsible for the crime, and he made a plan, a test of some kind to find out which person it was.”

“What about the other guests, the Edens and the Campbells?”

“Camouflage. It made the whole thing less obvious.”

“What do you think the plan was?”

Sir Charles shrugged his shoulders—an exaggerated foreign gesture. He was Aristide Duval, that mastermind of the Secret Service. His left foot limped as he walked.

“How can we know? I am not a magician. I cannot guess. But there was a plan…It went wrong, because the murderer was just one degree cleverer than Tollie thought…He struck first….”

“He?”

“Or she. Poison is as much a woman’s weapon as a man’s—more so.”

Mr. Satterthwaite was silent. Sir Charles said:

“Come now, don’t you agree? Or are you on the side of public opinion? ‘The butler’s the man. He done it.’”

“What’s your explanation of the butler?”

“I haven’t thought about him. In my view he doesn’t matter…I could suggest an explanation.”

“Such as?”

“Well, say that the police are right so far—Ellis is a professional criminal, working in, shall we say, with a gang of burglars. Ellis obtains this post with false credentials. Then Tollie is murdered. What is Ellis’s position? A man is killed, and in the house is a man whose fingerprints are at Scotland Yard, and who is known to the police. Naturally he gets the wind up and bolts.”

“By the secret passage?”

“Secret passage be damned. He dodged out of the house while one of the fatheaded constables who were watching the house was taking forty winks.”

“It certainly seems more probable.”

“Well, Satterthwaite, what’s your view?”

“Mine?” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Oh, it’s the same as yours. It has been all along. The butler seems to me a very clumsy red herring. I believe that Sir Bartholomew and poor old Babbington were killed by the same person.”

“One of the house party?”

“One of the house party.”

There was silence for a minute or two, and then Mr. Satterthwaite asked casually:

“Which of them do you think it was?”

“My God, Satterthwaite, how can I tell?”

“You can’t tell, of course,” said Mr. Satterthwaite mildly. “I just thought you might have some idea—you know, nothing scientific or reasoned. Just an ordinary guess.”

“Well, I haven’t…” He thought for a minute and then burst out: “You know, Satterthwaite, the moment you begin to think it seems impossible that any of them did it.”

“I suppose your theory is right,” mused Mr. Satterthwaite. “As to the assembling of the suspects, I mean. We’ve got to take it into account that there were certain definite exclusions. Yourself and myself and Mrs. Babbington, for instance. Young Manders, too, he was out of it.”

“Manders?”

“Yes, his arrival on the scene was an accident. He wasn’t asked or expected. That lets him out of the circle of suspects.”

“The dramatist woman, too—Anthony Astor.”

“No, no, she was there. Miss Muriel Wills of Tooting.”

“So she was—I’d forgotten the woman’s name was Wills.”

He frowned. Mr. Satterthwaite was fairly good at reading people’s thoughts. He estimated with fair accuracy what was passing through the actor’s mind. When the other spoke, Mr. Satterthwaite mentally patted himself on the back.

“You know, Satterthwaite, you’re right. I don’t think it was definitely suspected people that he asked—because, after all, Lady Mary and Egg were there…No, he wanted to stage some reproduction of the first business, perhaps…He suspected someone, but he wanted other eyewitnesses there to confirm matters. Something of that kind….”

“Something of the kind,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite. “One can only generalize at this stage. Very well, the Lytton Gores are out of it, you and I and Mrs. Babbington and Oliver Manders are out of it. Who is left? Angela Sutcliffe?”

“Angie? My dear fellow. She’s been a friend of Tollie’s for years.”

“Then it boils down to the Dacres…In fact, Cartwright, you suspect the Dacres. You might just as well have said so when I asked you.”

Sir Charles looked at him. Mr. Satterthwaite had a mildly triumphant air.

“I suppose,” said Cartwright slowly, “that I do. At least, I don’t suspect them…They just seem rather more possible than anyone else. I don’t know them very well, for one thing. But for the life of me, I can’t see why Freddie Dacres, who spends his life on the racecourse, or Cynthia, who spends her time designing fabulously expensive clothes for women, should have any desire to remove a dear, insignificant old clergyman….”

He shook his head, then his face brightened.

“There’s the Wills woman. I forgot her again. What is there about her that continually makes you forget her? She’s the most damnably nondescript creature I’ve ever seen.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

“I rather fancy she might embody Burns’s famous line—‘A chiel’s amang ye takin’ notes.’ I rather fancy that Miss Wills spends her time taking notes. There are sharp eyes behind that pair of glasses. I think you’ll find that anything worth noticing in this affair has been noticed by Miss Wills.”

“Do you?” said Sir Charles doubtfully.

“The next thing to do,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “is to have some lunch. After that, we’ll go out to the Abbey and see what we can discover on the spot.”

“You seem to be taking very kindly to this, Satterthwaite,” said Sir Charles, with a twinkle of amusement.

“The investigation of crime is not new to me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Once when my car broke down and I was staying at a lonely inn—”

He got no further.

“I remember,” said Sir Charles, in his high, clear carrying actor’s voice, “when I was touring in 1921….”

Sir Charles won.

Four

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SERVANTS

Nothing could have been more peaceful than the grounds and building of Melfort Abbey as the two men saw it that afternoon in the September sunshine. Portions of the Abbey were fifteenth century. It had been restored and a new wing added onto it. The new Sanatorium was out of sight of the house, with grounds of its own.

Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite were received by Mrs. Leckie, the cook, a portly lady, decorously gowned in black, who was tearful and voluble. Sir Charles she already knew, and it was to him she addressed most of her conversation.

“You’ll understand, I’m sure, sir, what it’s meant to me. The master’s death and all. Policemen all over the place, poking their noses here and there—would you believe it, even the dustbins they had to have their noses in, and questions!—they wouldn’t have done with asking questions. Oh, that I should have lived to see such a thing—the doctor, such a quiet gentleman as he always was, and made Sir Bartholomew, too, which a proud day it was to all of us, as Beatrice and I well remember, though she’s been here two years less than I have. And such questions as that police fellow (for gentleman I will not call him, having been accustomed to gentlemen and their ways and knowing what’s what), fellow, I say, whether or not he is a superintendent—” Mrs. Leckie paused, took breath and extricated herself from the somewhat complicated conversational morass into which she had fallen. “Questions, that’s what I say, about all the maids in the house, and good girls they are, every one of them—not that I’d say that Doris gets up when she should do in the morning. I have to speak about it at least once a week, and Vickie, she’s inclined to be impertinent, but, there, with the young ones you can’t expect the training—their mothers don’t give it to them nowadays—but good girls they are, and no police superintendent shall make me say otherwise. ‘Yes,’ I said to him, ‘you needn’t think I’m going to say anything against my girls. They're good girls, they are, and as to having anything to do with murder, why it's right down wicked to suggest such a thing.'"

Mrs. Leckie paused.

"Mr. Ellis, now—that's different. I don't know anything about Mr. Ellis, and couldn't answer for him in any way, he having been brought from London, and strange to the place, while Mr. Baker was on holiday."

"Baker?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Mr. Baker had been Sir Bartholomew's butler for the last seven years, sir. He was in London most of the time, in Harley Street. You'll remember him, sir?" She appealed to Sir Charles, who nodded. "Sir Bartholomew used to bring him up here when he had a party. But he hadn't been so well in his health, so Sir Bartholomew said, and he gave him a couple of months' holiday, paid for him, too, in a place near the sea down near Brighton—a real kind gentleman the doctor was—and he took Mr. Ellis on temporary for the time being, and so, as I said to that superintendent, I can't say anything about Mr. Ellis, though, from all he said himself, he seems to have been with the best families, and he certainly had a gentlemanly way with him."

"You didn't find anything—unusual about him?" asked Sir Charles hopefully.

"Well, it's odd your saying that, sir, because, if you know what I mean, I did and I didn't."

Sir Charles looked encouraging, and Mrs. Leckie went on:

"I couldn't exactly say what it was, sir, but there was something—"

There always is—after the event—thought Mr. Satterthwaite to himself grimly. However much Mrs. Leckie had despised the police, she was not proof against suggestion. If Ellis turned out to be the criminal, well, Mrs. Leckie would have noticed something.

“For one thing, he was standoffish. Oh, quite polite, quite the gentleman—as I said, he’d been used to good houses. But he kept himself to himself, spent a lot of time in his own room; and he was—well, I don’t know how to describe it, I’m sure—he was, well, there was something—”

“You didn’t suspect he wasn’t—not really a butler?” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Oh, he’d been in service, right enough, sir. The things he knew—and about well-known people in society, too.”

“Such as?” suggested Sir Charles gently.

But Mrs. Leckie became vague, and noncommittal. She was not going to retail servants’ hall gossip. Such a thing would have offended her sense of fitness.

To put her at her ease, Mr. Satterthwaite said:

“Perhaps you can describe his appearance.”

Mrs. Leckie brightened.

“Yes, indeed, sir. He was a very respectable-looking man—side-whiskers and grey hair, stooped a little, and he was growing stout—it worried him, that did. He had a rather shaky hand, too, but not from the cause you might imagine. He was a most abstemious man—not like many I’ve known. His eyes were a bit weak, I think, sir, the light hurt them—especially a bright light, used to make them water something cruel. Out with us he wore glasses, but not when he was on duty.”

“No special distinguishing marks?” asked Sir Charles. “No scars? Or broken fingers? Or birthmarks?”

“Oh, no, sir, nothing of that kind.”

“How superior detective stories are to life,” sighed Sir Charles. “In fiction there is always some distinguishing characteristic.”

“He had a tooth missing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“I believe so, sir; I never noticed it myself.”

“What was his manner on the night of the tragedy?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite in a slightly bookish manner.

“Well, really, sir, I couldn’t say. I was busy, you see, in my kitchen. I hadn’t time for noticing things.”

“No, no, quite so.”

“When the news came out that the master was dead we were struck all of a heap. I cried and couldn’t stop, and so did Beatrice. The young ones, of course, were excited like, though very upset. Mr. Ellis naturally wasn’t so upset as we were, he being new, but he behaved very considerate, and insisted on Beatrice and me taking a little glass of port to counteract the shock. And to think that all the time it was he—the villain—”

Words failed Mrs. Leckie, her eyes shone with indignation.

“He disappeared that night, I understand?”

“Yes, sir, went to his room like the rest of us, and in the morning he wasn’t there. That’s what set the police on him, of course.”

“Yes, yes, very foolish of him. Have you any idea how he left the house?”

“Not the slightest. It seems the police were watching the house all night, and they never saw him go—but, there, that’s what the police are, human like anyone else, in spite of the airs they give themselves, coming into a gentleman’s house and nosing round.”

“I hear there’s some question of a secret passage,” Sir Charles said.

Mrs. Leckie sniffed.

“That’s what the police say.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“I’ve heard mention of it,” Mrs. Leckie agreed cautiously.

“Do you know where it starts from?”

“No, I don’t, sir. Secret passages are all very well, but they’re not things to be encouraged in the servants’ hall. It gives the girls ideas. They might think of slipping out that way. My girls go out by the back door and in by the back door, and then we know where we are.”

“Splendid, Mrs. Leckie. I think you’re very wise.”

Mrs. Leckie bridled in the sun of Sir Charles’s approval.

“I wonder,” he went on, “if we might just ask a few questions of the other servants?”

“Of course, sir; but they can’t tell you anything more than I can.”

“Oh, I know. I didn’t mean so much about Ellis as about Sir Bartholomew himself—his manner that night, and so on. You see, he was a friend of mine.”

“I know, sir. I quite understand. There’s Beatrice, and there’s Alice. She waited at table, of course.”

“Yes, I’d like to see Alice.”

Mrs. Leckie, however, had a belief in seniority. Beatrice Church, the upper-housemaid, was the first to appear.

She was a tall thin woman, with a pinched mouth, who looked aggressively respectable.

After a few unimportant questions, Sir Charles led the talk to the behaviour of the house party on the fatal evening. Had they all been terribly upset? What had they said or done?

A little animation entered into Beatrice's manner. She had the usual ghoulish relish for tragedy.

"Miss Sutcliffe, she quite broke down. A very warmhearted lady, she's stayed here before. I suggested bringing her a little drop of brandy, or a nice cup of tea, but she wouldn't hear of it. She took some aspirin, though. Said she was sure she couldn't sleep. But she was sleeping like a little child the next morning when I brought her her early tea."

"And Mrs. Dacres?"

"I don't think anything would upset that lady much."

From Beatrice's tone, she had not liked Cynthia Dacres.

"Just anxious to get away, she was. Said her business would suffer. She's a big dressmaker in London, so Mr. Ellis told us."

A big dressmaker, to Beatrice, meant "trade," and trade she looked down upon.

"And her husband?"

Beatrice sniffed.

"Steadied his nerves with brandy, he did. Or unsteadied them, some would say."

"What about Lady Mary Lytton Gore?"

"A very nice lady," said Beatrice, her tone softening. "My great aunt was in service with her father at the Castle. A pretty young girl she was, so I've always heard. Poor she may be, but you can see she's someone—and so considerate, never giving trouble and always speaking so pleasant. Her daughter's a nice young lady, too. They didn't know Sir Bartholomew well, of course, but they were very distressed."

"Miss Wills?"

Some of Beatrice’s rigidity returned.

“I’m sure I couldn’t say, sir, what Miss Wills thought about it.”

“Or what you thought about her?” asked Sir Charles. “Come now, Beatrice, be human.”

An unexpected smile dinted Beatrice’s wooden cheeks. There was something appealingly schoolboyish in Sir Charles’s manner. She was not proof against the charm that nightly audiences had felt so strongly.

“Really, sir, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Just what you thought and felt about Miss Wills.”

“Nothing, sir, nothing at all. She wasn’t, of course—”

Beatrice hesitated.

“Go on, Beatrice.”

“Well, she wasn’t quite the ‘class’ of the others, sir. She couldn’t help it, I know,” went on Beatrice kindly. “But she did things a real lady wouldn’t have done. She pried, if you know what I mean, sir, poked and pried about.”

Sir Charles tried hard to get this statement amplified, but Beatrice remained vague. Miss Wills had poked and pried, but asked to produce a special instance of the poking, Beatrice seemed unable to do so. She merely repeated that Miss Wills pried into things that were no business of hers.

They gave it up at last, and Mr. Satterthwaite said:

“Young Mr. Manders arrived unexpectedly, didn’t he?”

“Yes, sir, he had an accident with his car—just by the lodge gates, it was. He said it was a bit of luck its happening just here. The house was full, of course, but Miss Lyndon had a bed made up for him in the little study.”

“Was everyone very surprised to see him?”

“Oh, yes, sir, naturally, sir.”

Asked her opinion of Ellis, Beatrice was noncommittal. She’d seen very little of him. Going off the way he did looked bad, though why he should want to harm the master she couldn’t imagine. Nobody could.

“What was he like, the doctor, I mean? Did he seem to be looking forward to the house party? Had he anything on his mind?”

“He seemed particularly cheerful, sir. Smiled to himself, he did, as though he had some joke on. I even heard him make a joke with Mr. Ellis, a thing he’d never done with Mr. Baker. He was usually a bit brusque with the servants, kind always, but not speaking to them much.”

“What did he say?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite eagerly.

“Well, I forget exactly now, sir. Mr. Ellis had come up with a telephone message, and Sir Bartholomew asked him if he was sure he’d got the names right, and Mr. Ellis said quite sure—speaking respectful, of course. And the doctor he laughed and said, ‘You’re a good fellow, Ellis, a first-class butler. Eh, Beatrice, what do you think?’ And I was so surprised, sir, at the master speaking like that—quite unlike his usual self—that I didn’t know what to say.”

“And Ellis?”

“He looked kind of disapproving, sir, as though it was the kind of thing he hadn’t been used to. Stiff like.”

“What was the telephone message?” asked Sir Charles.

“The message, sir? Oh, it was from the Sanatorium—about a patient who had arrived there and had stood the journey well.”

“Do you remember the name?”

“It was a queer name, sir.” Beatrice hesitated. “Mrs. de Rushbridger—something like that.”

“Ah, yes,” said Sir Charles soothingly. “Not an easy name to get right on the telephone. Well, thank you very much, Beatrice. Perhaps we could see Alice now.”

When Beatrice had left the room Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite compared notes by an interchange of glances.

“Miss Wills poked and pried, Captain Dacres got drunk, Mrs. Dacres displayed no emotion. Anything there? Precious little.”

“Very little indeed,” agreed Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Let’s pin our hopes on Alice.”

Alice was a demure, dark-eyed young woman of thirty. She was only too pleased to talk.

She herself didn’t believe Mr. Ellis had anything to do with it. He was too much the gentleman. The police had suggested he was just a common crook. Alice was sure he was nothing of the sort.

“You’re quite certain he was an ordinary honest-to-God butler?” asked Sir Charles.

“Not ordinary, sir. He wasn’t like any butler I’ve ever worked with before. He arranged the work different.”

“But you don’t think he poisoned your master.”

“Oh, sir, I don’t see how he could have done. I was waiting at table with him, and he couldn’t have put anything in the master’s food without my seeing him.”

“And the drink?”

“He went round with the wine, sir. Sherry first, with the soup, and then hock and claret. But what could he have done, sir? If there’d been anything in the wine he’d have poisoned everybody—or all those who took it. It’s not as though the master had anything that nobody else had. The same thing with the port. All the gentlemen had port, and some of the ladies.”

“The wine glasses were taken out on a tray?”

“Yes, sir, I held the tray and Mr. Ellis put the glasses on it, and I carried the tray out to the pantry, and there they were, sir, when the police came to examine them. The port glasses were still on the table. And the police didn’t find anything.”

“You’re quite sure that the doctor didn’t have anything to eat or drink at dinner that nobody else had?”

“Not that I saw, sir. In fact, I’m sure he didn’t.”

“Nothing that one of the guests gave him—”

“Oh, no, sir.”

“Do you know anything about a secret passage, Alice?”

“One of the gardeners told me something about it. Comes out in the wood where there’s some old walls and things tumbled down. But I’ve never seen any opening to it in the house.”

“Ellis never said anything about it?”

“Oh, no, sir, he wouldn’t know anything about it, I’m sure.”

“Who do you really think killed your master, Alice?”

“I don’t know, sir. I can’t believe anyone did…I feel it must have been some kind of accident.”

“H’m. Thank you, Alice.”

“If it wasn’t for the death of Babbington,” said Sir Charles as the girl left the room, “we could make her the criminal. She’s a good-looking girl…And she waited at table…No, it won’t do. Babbington was murdered; and anyway Tollie never noticed good-looking girls. He wasn’t made that way.”

“But he was fifty-five,” said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s the age a man loses his head badly about a girl—even if he hasn’t done so before.”

“Dash it all, Satterthwaite, I’m—er—getting on for fifty-five.”

“I know,” said Satterthwaite.

And before his gentle twinkling gaze Sir Charles’s eyes fell.

Unmistakably he blushed….

Five

IN THE BUTLER'S ROOM

"How about an examination of Ellis's room?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite, having enjoyed the spectacle of Sir Charles's blush to the full.

The actor seized at the diversion.

"Excellent, excellent. Just what I was about to suggest myself."

"Of course the police have already searched it thoroughly."

"The police—"

Aristide Duval waved the police away scornfully. Anxious to forget his momentary discomfiture, he flung himself with renewed vigour into his part.

"The police are blockheads," he said sweepingly. "What have they looked for in Ellis's room? Evidences of his guilt. We shall look for evidences of his innocence—an entirely different thing."

"You're completely convinced of Ellis's innocence?"

"If we're right about Babbington, he must be innocent."

"Yes, besides—"

Mr. Satterthwaite did not finish his sentence. He had been about to say that if Ellis was a professional criminal who had been detected by Sir Bartholomew and had murdered him in consequence the whole affair would become unbearably dull. Just in time he remembered that Sir Bartholomew had been a friend of Sir Charles Cartwright's and was duly appalled by the callousness of the sentiments he had nearly revealed.

At first sight Ellis's room did not seem to offer much promise of discovery. The clothes in the drawers and hanging in the cupboard were all neatly arranged. They were well cut, and bore different tailors' marks. Clearly castoffs given him in different situations. The underclothing was on the same scale. The boots were neatly polished and arranged on trees.

Mr. Satterthwaite picked up a boot and murmured, "Nines, just so, nines." But, since there were no footprints in the case, that didn't seem to lead anywhere.

It seemed clear from its absence that Ellis had departed in his butler's kit, and Mr. Satterthwaite pointed out to Sir Charles that that seemed rather a remarkable fact.

"Any man in his senses would have changed into an ordinary suit."

"Yes, it's odd that…Looks almost, though that's absurd, as if he hadn't gone at all…Nonsense, of course."

They continued their search. No letters, no papers, except a cutting from a newspaper regarding a cure for corns, and a paragraph relating to the approaching marriage of a duke's daughter.

There was a small blotting book and a penny bottle of ink on a side table—no pen. Sir Charles held up the blotting book to the mirror, but without result. One page of it was very much used—a meaningless jumble, and the ink looked to both men old.

"Either he hasn't written any letters since he was here, or he hasn't blotted them," deduced Mr. Satterthwaite. "This is an old blotter. Ah, yes—" With some gratification he pointed to a barely decipherable "L. Baker" amidst the jumble.

"I should say Ellis hadn't used this at all."

"That's rather odd, isn't it?" said Sir Charles slowly.

"What do you mean?"

“Well, a man usually writes letters….”

“Not if he’s a criminal.”

“No, perhaps you’re right…There must have been something fishy about him to make him bolt as he did…All we say is that he didn’t murder Tollie.”

They hunted round the floor, raising the carpet, looking under the bed. There was nothing anywhere, except a splash of ink beside the fireplace. The room was disappointingly bare.

They left it in a somewhat disconcerted fashion. Their zeal as detectives was momentarily damped.

Possibly the thought passed through their minds that things were arranged better in books.

They had a few words with the other members of the staff, scared-looking juniors in awe of Mrs. Leckie and Beatrice Church, but they elicited nothing further.

Finally they took their leave.

“Well, Satterthwaite,” said Sir Charles as they strolled across the park (Mr. Satterthwaite’s car had been instructed to pick them up at the lodge) “anything strike you—anything at all?”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought. He was not to be hurried into an answer—especially as he felt something ought to have struck him. To confess that the whole expedition had been a waste of time was an unwelcome idea. He passed over in his mind the evidence of one servant after another—the information was extraordinarily meagre.

As Sir Charles had summed it up just now, Miss Wills had poked and pried, Miss Sutcliffe had been very upset, Mrs. Dacres had not been upset at all, and Captain Dacres had got drunk. Very little there, unless Freddie Dacres’s indulgence showed the deadening of a guilty conscience. But Freddie Dacres, Mr. Satterthwaite knew, quite frequently got drunk.

“Well?” repeated Sir Charles impatiently.

“Nothing,” confessed Mr. Satterthwaite reluctantly. “Except—well, I think we are entitled to assume from the clipping we found that Ellis suffered from corns.”

Sir Charles gave a wry smile.

“That seems quite a reasonable deduction. Does it—er—get us anywhere?”

Mr. Satterthwaite confessed that it did not.

“The only other thing—” he said and then stopped.

“Yes? Go on, man. Anything may help.”

“It struck me as a little odd the way that Sir Bartholomew chaffed his butler—you know what the housemaid told us. It seems somehow uncharacteristic.”

“It was uncharacteristic,” said Sir Charles with emphasis. “I knew Tollie well—better than you did—and I can tell you that he wasn’t a facetious sort of man. He’d never have spoken like that unless—well, unless for some reason he wasn’t quite normal at the time. You’re right, Satterthwaite, that is a point. Now where does it get us?”

“Well,” began Mr. Satterthwaite; but it was clear that Sir Charles’s question had been merely a rhetorical one. He was anxious, not to hear Mr. Satterthwaite’s views, but to air his own.

“You remember when that incident occurred, Satterthwaite? Just after Ellis had brought him a telephone message. I think it’s a fair deduction to assume that it was that telephone message which was the cause of Tollie’s sudden unusual hilarity. You may remember I asked the housemaid woman what that message had been.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“It was to say that a woman named Mrs. de Rushbridger had arrived at the Sanatorium,” he said, to show that he, too, had paid attention to the point. “It doesn’t sound particularly thrilling.”

“It doesn’t sound so, certainly. But, if our reasoning is correct, there must be some significance in that message.”

“Ye-es,” said Mr. Satterthwaite doubtfully.

“Indubitably,” said Sir Charles. “We’ve got to find out what that significance was. It just crosses my mind that it may have been a code message of some kind—a harmless sounding natural thing, but which really meant something entirely different. If Tollie had been making inquiries into Babbington’s death, this may have had something to do with those inquiries. Say, even, that he employed a private detective to find out a certain fact. He may have told him in the event of this particular suspicion being justified to ring up and use that particular phrase which would convey no hint of the truth to anyone taking it. That would explain his jubilation, it might explain his asking Ellis if he was sure of the name—he himself knowing well there was no such person, really. In fact, the slight lack of balance a person shows when they have brought off what can be described as a long shot.”

“You think there’s no such person as Mrs. de Rushbridger?”

“Well, I think we ought to find out for certain.”

“How?”

“We might run along to the Sanatorium now and ask the Matron.”

“She may think it rather odd.”

Sir Charles laughed.

“You leave it to me,” he said.

They turned aside from the drive and walked in the direction of the Sanatorium.

Mr. Satterthwaite said:

“What about you, Cartwright? Does anything strike you at all? Arising out of our visit to the house, I mean.”

Sir Charles answered slowly.

“Yes, there is something—the devil of it is, I can’t remember what.”

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at him in surprise. The other frowned.

“How can I explain? There was something—something which at the moment struck me as wrong—as unlikely—only—I hadn’t the time to think about it then. I put it aside in my own mind.”

“And now you can’t remember what it was?”

“No—only that at some moment I said to myself, ‘That’s odd.’”

“Was it when we were questioning the servants? Which servant?”

“I tell you I can’t remember. And the more I think the less I shall remember…If I leave it alone, it may come back to me.”

They came into view of the Sanatorium, a big white modern building, divided from the park by palings. There was a gate through which they passed, and they rang the front doorbell and asked for the Matron.

The Matron, when she came, was a tall, middle-aged woman, with an intelligent face and a capable manner. Sir Charles she clearly knew by name as a friend of the late Sir Bartholomew Strange.

Sir Charles explained that he had just come back from abroad, had been horrified to hear of his friend’s death and of the terrible suspicions entertained, and had been up to the house to learn as many details as he could. The Matron spoke in moving terms of the loss Sir Bartholomew would be to them, and of his fine career as a doctor. Sir Charles professed himself anxious to know what was going to happen to the Sanatorium. The Matron explained that Sir Bartholomew had had two partners, both capable doctors, one was in residence at the Sanatorium.

“Bartholomew was very proud of this place, I know,” said Sir Charles.

“Yes, his treatments were a great success.”

“Mostly nerve cases, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“That reminds me—fellow I met out at Monte had some kind of relation coming here. I forget her name now—odd sort of name—Rushbridger—Rusbrigger—something like that.”

“Mrs. de Rushbridger, you mean?”

“That’s it. Is she here now?”

“Oh, yes. But I’m afraid she won’t be able to see you—not for some time yet. She’s having a very strict rest cure.” The Matron smiled just a trifle archly. “No letters, no exciting visitors….”

“I say, she’s not very bad, is she?”

“Rather a bad nervous breakdown—lapses of memory, and severe nervous exhaustion. Oh, we shall get her right in time.”

The Matron smiled reassuringly.

“Let me see, haven’t I heard Tollie—Sir Bartholomew—speak of her? She was a friend of his as well as a patient, wasn’t she?”

“I don’t think so, Sir Charles. At least the doctor never said so. She has recently arrived from the West Indies—really, it was very funny, I must tell you. Rather a difficult name for a servant to remember—the parlourmaid here is rather stupid. She came and said to me, ‘Mrs. West India has come,’ and of course I suppose Rushbridger does sound rather like West India—but it was rather a coincidence her having just come from the West Indies.”

“Rather—rather—most amusing. Her husband over, too?”

“He’s still out there.”

“Ah, quite—quite. I must be mixing her up with someone else. It was a case the doctor was specially interested in?”

“Cases of amnesia are fairly common, but they’re always interesting to a medical man—the variations, you know. Two cases are seldom alike.”

“Seems all very odd to me. Well, thank you, Matron, I’m glad to have had a little chat with you. I know how much Tollie thought of you. He often spoke about you,” finished Sir Charles mendaciously.

“Oh, I’m glad to hear that.” The Matron flushed and bridled. “Such a splendid man—such a loss to us all. We were absolutely shocked—well, stunned would describe it better. Murder! Who ever would murder Dr. Strange, I said. It’s incredible. That awful butler. I hope the police catch him. And no motive or anything.”

Sir Charles shook his head sadly and they took their departure, going round by the road to the spot where the car awaited them.

In revenge for his enforced quiescence during the interview with the Matron, Mr. Satterthwaite displayed a lively interest in the scene of Oliver Manders’ accident, plying the lodge keeper, a slow-witted man of middle age, with questions.

Yes, that was the place, where the wall was broken away. On a motorcycle the young gentleman was. No, he didn’t see it happen. He heard it, though, and come out to see. The young gentleman was standing there—just where the other gentleman was standing now. He didn’t seem to be hurt. Just looking rueful-like at his bike—and a proper mess that was. Just asked what the name of the place might be, and when he heard it was Sir Bartholomew Strange’s he said, “That’s a piece of luck,” and went on up to the house. A very calm young gentleman he seemed to be—tired like. How he come to have such an accident, the lodge keeper couldn't see, but he supposed them things went wrong sometimes.

"It was an odd accident," said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

He looked at the wide straight road. No bends, no dangerous crossroads, nothing to cause a motor cyclist to swerve suddenly into a ten-foot wall. Yes, an odd accident.

"What's in your mind, Satterthwaite?" asked Sir Charles curiously.

"Nothing," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "nothing."

"It's odd, certainly," said Sir Charles, and he, too, stared at the scene of the accident in a puzzled manner.

They got into the car and drove off.

Mr. Satterthwaite was busy with his thoughts. Mrs. de Rushbridger—Cartwright's theory wouldn't work—it wasn't a code message—there was such a person. But could there be something about the woman herself? Was she perhaps a witness of some kind, or was it just because she was an interesting case that Bartholomew Strange had displayed this unusual elation? Was she, perhaps, an attractive woman? To fall in love at the age of fifty-five did (Mr. Satterthwaite had observed it many a time) change a man's character completely. It might, perhaps, make him facetious, where before he had been aloof—

His thoughts were interrupted. Sir Charles leant forward.

"Satterthwaite," he said, "do you mind if we turn back?"

Without waiting for a reply, he took up the speaking tube and gave the order. The car slowed down, stopped, and the chauffeur began to reverse into a convenient lane. A minute or two later they were bowling along the road in the opposite direction.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“I’ve remembered,” said Sir Charles, “what struck me as odd. It was the ink stain on the floor in the butler’s room.”

Six

CONCERNING AN INK STAIN

Mr. Satterthwaite stared at his friend in surprise.

“The ink stain? What do you mean, Cartwright?”

“You remember it?”

“I remember there was an ink stain, yes.”

“You remember its position?”

“Well—not exactly.”

“It was close to the skirting board near the fireplace.”

“Yes, so it was. I remember now.”

“How do you think that stain was caused, Satterthwaite?”

“It wasn’t a big stain,” he said at last. “It couldn’t have been an upset ink bottle. I should say in all probability that the man dropped his fountain pen there—there was no pen in the room, you remember.” (He shall see I notice things just as much as he does, thought Mr. Satterthwaite.) “So it seems clear the man must have had a fountain pen if he ever wrote at all—and there’s no evidence that he ever did.”

“Yes, there is, Satterthwaite. There’s the ink stain.”

“He mayn’t have been writing,” snapped Satterthwaite. “He may have just dropped the pen on the floor.”

“But there wouldn’t have been a stain unless the top had been off the pen.”

"I daresay you're right," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "But I can't see what's odd about it."

"Perhaps there isn't anything odd," said Sir Charles. "I can't tell till I get back and see for myself."

They were turning in at the lodge gates. A few minutes later they had arrived at the house and Sir Charles was allaying the curiosity caused by his return by inventing a pencil left behind in the butler's room.

"And now," said Sir Charles, shutting the door of Ellis's room behind them, having with some skill shaken off the helpful Mrs. Leckie, "let's see if I'm making an infernal fool of myself, or whether there's anything in my idea."

In Mr. Satterthwaite's opinion the former alternative was by far the more probable, but he was much too polite to say so. He sat down on the bed and watched the other.

"Here's our stain," said Sir Charles, indicating the mark with his foot. "Right up against the skirting board at the opposite side of the room to the writing table. Under what circumstances would a man drop a pen just there?"

"You can drop a pen anywhere," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"You can hurl it across the room, of course," agreed Sir Charles. "But one doesn't usually treat one's pen like that. I don't know, though. Fountain pens are damned annoying things. Dry up and refuse to write just when you want them to. Perhaps that's the solution of the matter. Ellis lost his temper, said, 'Damn the thing,' and hurled it across the room."

"I think there are plenty of explanations," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "He may have simply laid the pen on the mantelpiece and it rolled off."

Sir Charles experimented with a pencil. He allowed it to roll off the corner of the mantelpiece. The pencil struck the ground at least a foot from the mark and rolled inwards towards the gas fire.

“Well,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “What’s your explanation?”

“I’m trying to find one.”

From his seat on the bed Mr. Satterthwaite now witnessed a thoroughly amusing performance.

Sir Charles tried dropping the pencil from his hand as he walked in the direction of the fireplace. He tried sitting on the edge of the bed and writing there and then dropping the pencil. To get the pencil to fall on the right spot it was necessary to stand or sit jammed up against the wall in a most unconvincing attitude.

“That’s impossible,” said Sir Charles aloud. He stood considering the wall, the stain and the prim little gas fire.

“If he were burning papers, now,” he said thoughtfully. “But one doesn’t burn papers in a gas fire—”

Suddenly he drew in his breath.

A minute later Mr. Satterthwaite was realizing Sir Charles’s profession to the full.

Charles Cartwright had become Ellis the butler. He sat writing at the writing table. He looked furtive, every now and then he raised his eyes, shooting them shiftily from side to side. Suddenly he seemed to hear something—Mr. Satterthwaite could even guess what that something was—footsteps along the passage. The man had a guilty conscience. He attached a certain meaning to those footsteps. He sprang up, the paper on which he had been writing in one hand, his pen in the other. He darted across the room to the fireplace, his head half turned, still alert—listening—afraid. He tried to shove the papers under the gas fire—in order to use both hands he cast down the pen impatiently. Sir Charles’s pencil, the “pen” of the drama, fell accurately on the ink stain….

“Bravo,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, applauding generously.

So good had the performance been that he was left with the impression that so and only so could Ellis have acted.

“You see?” said Sir Charles, resuming his own personality and speaking with modest elation. “If the fellow heard the police or what he thought was the police coming and had to hide what he was writing—well, where could he hide it? Not in a drawer or under the mattress—if the police searched the room, that would be found at once. He hadn’t time to take up a floorboard. No, behind the gas fire was the only chance.”

“The next thing to do,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “is to see whether there is anything hidden behind the gas fire.”

“Exactly. Of course, it may have been a false alarm, and he may have got the things out again later. But we’ll hope for the best.”

Removing his coat and turning up his shirt sleeves, Sir Charles lay down on the floor and applied his eye to the crack under the gas fire.

“There’s something under there,” he reported. “Something white. How can we get it out? We want something like a woman’s hatpins.”

“Women don’t have hatpins anymore,” said Mr. Satterthwaite sadly. “Perhaps a penknife.”

But a penknife proved unavailing.

In the end Mr. Satterthwaite went out and borrowed a knitting needle from Beatrice. Though extremely curious to know what he wanted it for, her sense of decorum was too great to permit her to ask.

The knitting needle did the trick. Sir Charles extracted half a dozen sheets of crumpled writing paper, hastily crushed together and pushed in.

With growing excitement he and Mr. Satterthwaite smoothed them out. They were clearly several different drafts of a letter—written in a small, neat clerkly handwriting.

This is to say (began the first) that the writer of this does not wish to cause unpleasantness, and may possibly have been mistaken in what he thought he saw tonight, but—

Here the writer had clearly been dissatisfied, and had broken off to start afresh.

John Ellis, butler, presents his compliments, and would be glad of a short interview touching the tragedy tonight before going to the police with certain information in his possession—

Still dissatisfied, the man had tried again.

John Ellis, butler, has certain facts concerning the death of the doctor in his possession. He has not yet given these facts to the police—

In the next one the use of the third person had been abandoned.

I am badly in need of money. A thousand pounds would make all the difference to me. There are certain things I could tell the police, but do not want to make trouble—

The last one was even more unreserved.

I know how the doctor died. I haven’t said anything to the police—yet. If you will meet me—

This letter broke off in a different way—after the “me” the pen had tailed off in a scrawl, and the last five words were all blurred and blotchy. Clearly it was when writing this that Ellis had heard something that alarmed him. He had crumpled up the papers and dashed to conceal them.

Mr. Satterthwaite drew a deep breath.

“I congratulate you, Cartwright,” he said. “Your instinct about that ink stain was right. Good work. Now let’s see exactly where we stand.”

He paused a minute.

“Ellis, as we thought, is a scoundrel. He wasn’t the murderer, but he knew who the murderer was, and he was preparing to blackmail him or her—”

“Him or her,” interrupted Sir Charles. “Annoying we don’t know which. Why couldn’t the fellow begin one of his effusions Sir or Madam, then we’d know where we are. Ellis seems to have been an artistic sort of fellow. He was taking a lot of trouble over his blackmailing letter. If only he’d given us one clue—as to whom that letter was addressed.”

“Never mind,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “We are getting on. You remember you said that what we wanted to find in this room was a proof of Ellis’s innocence. Well, we’ve found it. These letters show that he was innocent—of the murder, I mean. He was a thorough-paced scoundrel in other ways. But he didn’t murder Sir Bartholomew Strange. Somebody else did that. Someone who murdered Babbington also. I think even the police will have to come round to our view now.”

“You’re going to tell them about this?”

Sir Charles’s voice expressed dissatisfaction.

“I don’t see that we can do otherwise. Why?”

“Well—” Sir Charles sat down on the bed. His brow furrowed itself in thought. “How can I put it best? At the moment we know something that nobody else does. The police are looking for Ellis. They think he’s the murderer. Everyone knows that they think he’s the murderer. So the real criminal must be feeling pretty good. He (or she) will be not exactly off his or her guard, but feeling—well, comfortable. Isn’t it a pity to upset that state of things? Isn’t that just our chance? I mean our chance of finding a connection between Babbington and one of these people. They don’t know that anyone has connected this death with Babbington’s death. They’ll be unsuspicious. It’s a chance in a hundred.”

“I see what you mean,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “And I agree with you. It is a chance. But, all the same, I don’t think we can take it. It is our duty as citizens to report this discovery of ours to the police at once. We have no right to withhold it from them.”

Sir Charles looked at him quizzically.

“You’re the pattern of a good citizen, Satterthwaite. I’ve no doubt the orthodox thing must be done—but I’m not nearly such a good citizen as you are. I should have no scruples in keeping this find to myself for a day or two—only a day or two—eh? No? Well, I give in. Let us be pillars of law and order.”

“You see,” explained Mr. Satterthwaite, “Johnson is a friend of mine, and he was very decent about it all—let us into all the police were doing—gave us full information, and all that.”

“Oh, you’re right,” sighed Sir Charles. “Quite right. Only, after all, no one but me thought of looking under that gas stove. The idea never occurred to one of those thickheaded policemen…But have it your own way. I say, Satterthwaite, where do you think Ellis is now?”

“I presume,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “that he got what he wanted. He was paid to disappear, and he did disappear—most effectually.”

“Yes,” said Sir Charles. “I suppose that is the explanation.”

He gave a slight shiver.

“I don’t like this room, Satterthwaite. Come out of it.”

Seven

PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite arrived back in London the following evening.

The interview with Colonel Johnson had had to be very tactfully conducted. Superintendent Crossfield had not been too pleased that mere “gentlemen” should have found what he and his assistants had missed. He was at some pains to save his face.

“Very creditable, indeed, sir. I confess I never thought of looking under the gas fire. As a matter of fact, it beats me what set you looking there.”

The two men had not gone into a detailed account of how theorizing from an inkblot had led to the discovery. “Just nosing around,” was how Sir Charles had put it.

“Still, look you did,” continued the Superintendent, “and were justified. Not that what you’ve found is much surprise to me. You see, it stands to reason that if Ellis wasn’t the murderer, he must have disappeared for some reason or other, and it’s been in the back of my mind all along that blackmail might have been his line of business.”

One thing did arise from their discovery. Colonel Johnson was going to communicate with the Loomouth police. The death of Stephen Babbington ought certainly to be investigated.

“And if they find he died from nicotine poisoning, even Crossfield will admit the two deaths are connected,” said Sir Charles when they were speeding towards London.

He was still a little disgruntled at having had to hand over his discovery to the police.

Mr. Satterthwaite had soothed him by pointing out that the information was not to be made public or given to the press.

“The guilty person will have no misgivings. The search for Ellis will still be continued.”

Sir Charles admitted that that was true.

On arrival in London, he explained to Mr. Satterthwaite, he proposed to get in touch with Egg Lytton Gore. Her letter had been written from an address in Belgrave Square. He hoped that she might still be there.

Mr. Satterthwaite gravely approved this course. He himself was anxious to see Egg. It was arranged that Sir Charles should ring her up as soon as they reached London.

Egg proved to be still in town. She and her mother were staying with relatives and were not returning to Loomouth for about a week. Egg was easily prevailed upon to come out and dine with the two men.

“She can’t come here very well, I suppose,” said Sir Charles, looking round his luxurious flat. “Her mother mightn’t like it, eh? Of course we could have Miss Milray, too—but I’d rather not. To tell the truth, Miss Milray cramps my style a bit. She’s so efficient that she gives me an inferiority complex.”

Mr. Satterthwaite suggested his house. In the end it was arranged to dine at the Berkeley. Afterwards, if Egg liked, they could adjourn elsewhere.

Mr. Satterthwaite noticed at once that the girl was looking thinner. Her eyes seemed larger and more feverish, her chin more decided. She was pale and had circles under her eyes. But her charm was as great as ever, her childish eagerness just as intense.

She said to Sir Charles, “I knew you’d come….”

Her tone implied: “Now that you’ve come everything will be all right….”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: “But she wasn’t sure he’d come—she wasn’t sure at all. She’s been on tenterhooks. She’s been fretting herself to death.” And he thought: “Doesn’t the man realize? Actors are usually vain enough…Doesn’t he know the girl’s head over ears in love with him?”

It was, he thought, an odd situation. That Sir Charles was overwhelmingly in love with the girl, he had no doubt whatever. She was equally in love with him. And the link between them—the link to which each of them clung frenziedly—was a crime—a double crime of a revolting nature.

During dinner little was said. Sir Charles talked about his experiences abroad. Egg talked about Loomouth. Mr. Satterthwaite encouraged them both whenever the conversation seemed likely to flag. When dinner was over they went to Mr. Satterthwaite’s house.

Mr. Satterthwaite’s house was on Chelsea Embankment. It was a large house, and contained many beautiful works of art. There were pictures, sculpture, Chinese porcelain, prehistoric pottery, ivories, miniatures and much genuine Chippendale and Hepplewhite furniture. It had an atmosphere about it of mellowness and understanding.

Egg Lytton Gore saw nothing, noticed nothing. She flung off her evening coat onto a chair and said:

“At last. Now tell me all about it.”

She listened with vivid interest whilst Sir Charles narrated their adventures in Yorkshire, drawing in her breath sharply when he described the discovery of the blackmailing letters.

“What happened after that we can only conjecture,” finished Sir Charles. “Presumably Ellis was paid to hold his tongue and his escape was facilitated.”

But Egg shook her head.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Don’t you see? Ellis is dead.”

Both men were startled, but Egg reiterated her assertion.

“Of course he’s dead. That’s why he’s disappeared so successfully that no one can find a trace of him. He knew too much, and so he was killed. Ellis is the third murder.”

Although neither of the two men had considered the possibility before, they were forced to admit that it did not entirely ring false.

“But look here, my dear girl,” argued Sir Charles, “it’s all very well to say Ellis is dead. Where’s the body? There’s twelve stone or so of solid butler to be accounted for.”

“I don’t know where the body is,” said Egg. “There must be lots of places.”

“Hardly,” murmured Mr. Satterthwaite. “Hardly….”

“Lots,” reiterated Egg. “Let me see…” She paused for a moment. “Attics, there are masses of attics that no one ever goes into. He’s probably in a trunk in the attic.”

“Rather unlikely,” said Sir Charles. “But possible, of course. It might evade discovery—for—er—a time.”

It was not Egg’s way to avoid unpleasantness. She dealt immediately with the point in Sir Charles’s mind.

“Smell goes up, not down. You’d notice a decaying body in the cellar much sooner than in the attic. And, anyway, for a long time people would think it was a dead rat.”

“If your theory were correct, it would point definitely to a man as the murderer. A woman couldn’t drag a body round the house. In fact, it would be a pretty good feat for a man.”

“Well, there are other possibilities. There’s a secret passage there, you know. Miss Sutcliffe told me so, and Sir Bartholomew told me he would show it to me. The murderer might have given Ellis the money and shown him the way to get out of the house—gone down the passage with him and killed him there. A woman could do that. She could stab him, or something, from behind. Then she'd just leave the body there and go back, and no one would ever know."

Sir Charles shook his head doubtfully, but he no longer disputed Egg's theory.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt sure that the same suspicion had come to him for a moment in Ellis's room when they had found the letters. He remembered Sir Charles's little shiver. The idea that Ellis might be dead had come to him then….

Mr. Satterthwaite thought: "If Ellis is dead, then we're dealing with a very dangerous person…Yes, a very dangerous person…" And suddenly he felt a cold chill of fear down his spine….

A person who had killed three times wouldn't hesitate to kill again….

They were in danger, all three of them—Sir Charles, and Egg, and he….

If they found out too much….

He was recalled by the sound of Sir Charles's voice.

"There's one thing I didn't understand in your letter, Egg. You spoke of Oliver Manders being in danger—of the police suspecting him. I can't see that they attach the least suspicion to him."

It seemed to Mr. Satterthwaite that Egg was very slightly discomposed. He even fancied that she blushed.

"Aha," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "Let's see how you get out of this, young lady."

"It was silly of me," said Egg. "I got confused. I thought that Oliver arriving as he did, with what might have been a trumped-up excuse—well, I thought the police were sure to suspect him."

Sir Charles accepted the explanation easily enough.

“Yes,” he said. “I see.”

Mr. Satterthwaite spoke.

“Was it a trumped-up excuse?” he said.

Egg turned on him.

“What do you mean?”

“It was an odd sort of accident,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I thought if it was a trumped-up excuse you might know.”

Egg shook her head.

“I don’t know. I never thought about it. But why should Oliver pretend to have an accident if he didn’t?”

“He might have had reasons,” said Sir Charles. “Quite natural ones.”

He was smiling at her. Egg blushed crimson.

“Oh, no,” she said. “No.”

Sir Charles sighed. It occurred to Mr. Satterthwaite that his friend had interpreted that blush quite wrongly. Sir Charles seemed a sadder and older man when he spoke again.

“Well,” he said, “if our young friend is in no danger, where do I come in?”

Egg came forward quickly and caught him by the coat sleeve.

“You’re not going away again. You’re not going to give up? You’re going to find out the truth—the truth. I don’t believe anybody but you could find out the truth. You can. You will.”

She was tremendously in earnest. The waves of her vitality seemed to surge and eddy in the old-world air of the room.

"You believe in me?" said Sir Charles. He was moved.

"Yes, yes, yes. We're going to get at the truth. You and I together."

"And Satterthwaite."

"Of course, and Mr. Satterthwaite," said Egg without interest.

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled covertly. Whether Egg wanted to include him or not, he had no intention of being left out. He was fond of mysteries, and he liked observing human nature, and he had a soft spot for lovers. All three tastes seemed likely to be gratified in this affair.

Sir Charles sat down. His voice changed. He was in command, directing a production.

"First of all we've got to clarify the situation. Do we, or do we not, believe that the same person killed Babbington and Bartholomew Strange?"

"Yes," said Egg.

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Do we believe that the second murder sprang directly from the first? I mean, do we believe that Bartholomew Strange was killed in order to prevent his revealing the facts of the first murder, or his suspicion about it?"

"Yes," said Egg and Mr. Satterthwaite again, but in unison this time.

"Then it is the first murder we must investigate, not the second—"

Egg nodded.

"In my mind, until we discover the motive for the first murder, we can hardly hope to discover the murderer. The motive presents extraordinary difficulty. Babbington was a harmless, pleasant, gentle old man without, one would say, an enemy in the world. Yet he was killed—and there must have been some reason for the killing. We've got to find that reason."

He paused and then said in his ordinary everyday voice:

“Let’s get down to it. What reasons are there for killing people? First, I suppose, gain.”

“Revenge,” said Egg.

“Homicidal mania,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “The crime passionel would hardly apply in this case. But there’s fear.”

Charles Cartwright nodded. He was scribbling on a piece of paper.

“That about covers the ground,” he said. “First, Gain. Does anyone gain by Babbington’s death? Has he any money—or expectation of money?”

“I should think it very unlikely,” said Egg.

“So should I, but we’d better approach Mrs. Babbington on the point.”

“Then there’s revenge. Did Babbington do any injury to anyone—perhaps in his young days? Did he marry the girl that some other man wanted? We’ll have to look into that, too.”

“Then homicidal mania. Were both Babbington and Tollie killed by a lunatic? I don’t think that theory will hold water. Even a lunatic has some kind of reasonableness in his crimes. I mean a lunatic might think himself divinely appointed to kill doctors, or to kill clergymen, but not to kill both. I think we can wash out the theory of homicidal mania. There remains fear.

“Now, frankly, that seems to me far the most likely solution. Babbington knew something about somebody—or he recognized somebody. He was killed to prevent him telling what that something was.”

“I can’t see what someone like Mr. Babbington could know that was damaging about anybody who was there that night.”

“Perhaps,” said Sir Charles, “it was something that he didn’t know that he knew.”

He went on, trying to make his meaning clear.

“It’s difficult to say just what I mean. Suppose, for instance (this is only an instance) that Babbington saw a certain person in a certain place at a certain time. As far as he knows, there’s no reason why that person shouldn’t be there. But suppose also that that person had concocted a very clever alibi for some reason showing that at that particular time he was somewhere else a hundred miles away. Well, at any minute old Babbington, in the most innocent way in the world, might give the show away.”

“I see,” said Egg. “Say there’s a murder committed in London, and Babbington sees the man who did it at Paddington Station, but the man has proved that he didn’t do it by having an alibi showing that he was at Leeds at the time. Then Babbington might give the whole show away.”

“That’s what I mean exactly. Of course that’s only an instance. It might be anything. Someone he saw that evening whom he’d known under a different name—”

“It might be something to do with a marriage,” said Egg. “Clergymen do lots of marriages. Somebody who’d committed bigamy.”

“Or it might have to do with a birth or a death,” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite.

“It’s a very wide field,” said Egg, frowning. “We’ll have to get at it the other way. Work back from the people who were there. Let’s make a list. Who was at your house, and who was at Sir Bartholomew’s.”

She took the paper and pencil from Sir Charles.

“The Dacres, they were at both. That woman like a wilted cabbage, what’s her name—Wills. Miss Sutcliffe.”

“You can leave Angela out of it,” said Sir Charles. “I’ve known her for years.”

Egg frowned mutinously.

"We can't do that sort of thing," she said. "Leave people out because we know them. We've got to be businesslike. Besides, I don't know anything about Angela Sutcliffe. She's just as likely to have done it as anyone else, so far as I can see—more likely. All actresses have pasts. I think, on the whole, she's the most likely person."

She gazed defiantly at Sir Charles. There was an answering spark in his eyes.

"In that case we mustn't leave out Oliver Manders."

"How could it be Oliver? He'd met Mr. Babbington ever so many times before."

"He was at both places, and his arrival is a little—open to suspicion."

"Very well," said Egg. She paused, and then added: "In that case I'd better put down Mother and myself as well…That makes six suspects."

"I don't think—"

"We'll do it properly, or not at all." Her eyes flashed.

Mr. Satterthwaite made peace by offering refreshment. He rang for drinks.

Sir Charles strolled off into a far corner to admire a head of Negro sculpture. Egg came over to Mr. Satterthwaite and slipped a hand through his arm.

"Stupid of me to have lost my temper," she murmured. "I am stupid—but why should the woman be excepted? Why is he so keen she should be? Oh, dear, why the devil am I so disgustingly jealous?"

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled and patted her hand.

"Jealousy never pays, my dear," he said. "If you feel jealous, don't show it. By the way, did you really think young Manders might be suspected?"

Egg grinned—a friendly childish grin.

“Of course not. I put that in so as not to alarm the man.” She turned her head. Sir Charles was still moodily studying Negro sculpture. “You know—I didn’t want him to think I really have a pash for Oliver—because I haven’t. How difficult everything is! He’s gone back now to his ‘Bless you, my children,’ attitude. I don’t want that at all.”

“Have patience,” counselled Mr. Satterthwaite. “Everything comes right in the end, you know.”

“I’m not patient,” said Egg. “I want to have things at once, or even quicker.”

Mr. Satterthwaite laughed, and Sir Charles turned and came towards them.

As they sipped their drinks, they arranged a plan of campaign. Sir Charles should return to Crow’s Nest, for which he had not yet found a purchaser. Egg and her mother would return to Rose Cottage rather sooner than they had meant to do. Mrs. Babbington was still living in Loomouth. They would get what information they could from her and then proceed to act upon it.

“We’ll succeed,” said Egg. “I know we’ll succeed.”

She leaned forward to Sir Charles, her eyes glowing. She held out her glass to touch his.

“Drink to our success,” she commanded.

Slowly, very slowly, his eyes fixed on hers, he raised his glass to his lips.

“To success,” he said, “and to the Future….”

THIRD ACT

DISCOVERY

One

MRS. BABBINGTON

Mrs. Babbington had moved into a small fisherman’s cottage not far from the harbour. She was expecting a sister home from Japan in about six months. Until her sister arrived she was making no plans for the future. The cottage chanced to be vacant, and she took it for six months. She felt too bewildered by her sudden loss to move away from Loomouth. Stephen Babbington had held the living of St. Petroch, Loomouth, for seventeen years. They had been, on the whole, seventeen happy and peaceful years, in spite of the sorrow occasioned by the death of her son Robin. Of her remaining children, Edward was in Ceylon, Lloyd was in South Africa, and Stephen was third officer on the Angolia. They wrote frequently and affectionately, but they could offer neither a home nor companionship to their mother.

Margaret Babbington was very lonely….

Not that she allowed herself much time for thinking. She was still active in the parish—the new vicar was unmarried, and she spent a good deal of time working in the tiny plot of ground in front of the cottage. She was a woman whose flowers were part of her life.

She was working there one afternoon when she heard the latch of the gate click, and looked up to see Sir Charles Cartwright and Egg Lytton Gore.

Margaret was not surprised to see Egg. She knew that the girl and her mother were due to return shortly. But she was surprised to see Sir Charles. Rumour had insisted that he had left the neighbourhood for good. There had been paragraphs copied from other papers about his doings in the South of France. There had been a board “TO BE SOLD” stuck up in the garden of Crow’s Nest. No one had expected Sir Charles to return. Yet return he had.

Mrs. Babbington shook the untidy hair back from her hot forehead and looked ruefully at her earth-stained hands.

“I’m not fit to shake hands,” she said. “I ought to garden in gloves, I know. I do start in them sometimes; but I always tear them off sooner or later. One can feel things so much better with bare hands.”

She led the way into the house. The tiny sitting room had been made cosy with chintz. There were photographs and bowls of chrysanthemums.

“It’s a great surprise seeing you, Sir Charles. I thought you had given up Crow’s Nest for good.”

“I thought I had,” said the actor frankly. “But sometimes, Mrs. Babbington, our destiny is too strong for us.”

Mrs. Babbington did not reply. She turned towards Egg, but the girl forestalled the words on her lips.

“Look here, Mrs. Babbington. This isn’t just a call. Sir Charles and I have got something very serious to say. Only—I—I should hate to upset you.”

Mrs. Babbington looked from the girl to Sir Charles. Her face had gone rather grey and pinched.

“First of all,” said Sir Charles, “I would like to ask you if you have had any communication from the Home Office?”

Mrs. Babbington bowed her head.

“I see—well, perhaps that makes what we are about to say easier.”

“Is that what you have come about—this exhumation order?”

“Yes. Is it—I’m afraid it must be—very distressing to you.”

She softened to the sympathy in his voice.

“Perhaps I do not mind as much as you think. To some people the idea of exhumation is very dreadful—not to me. It is not the dead clay that matters. My dear husband is elsewhere—at peace—where no one can trouble his rest. No, it is not that. It is the idea that is a shock to me—the idea, a terrible one, that Stephen did not die a natural death. It seems so impossible—utterly impossible.”

“I’m afraid it must seem so to you. It did to me—to us—at first.”

“What do you mean by at first, Sir Charles?”

“Because the suspicion crossed my mind on the evening of your husband’s death, Mrs. Babbington. Like you, however, it seemed to me so impossible that I put it aside.”

“I thought so, too,” said Egg.

“You too,” Mrs. Babbington looked at her wonderingly. “You thought someone could have killed—Stephen?”

The incredulity in her voice was so great that neither of her visitors knew quite how to proceed. At last Sir Charles took up the tale.

“As you know, Mrs. Babbington, I went abroad. When I was in the South of France I read in the paper of my friend Bartholomew Strange’s death in almost exactly similar circumstances. I also got a letter from Miss Lytton Gore.”

Egg nodded.

“I was there, you know, staying with him at the time. Mrs. Babbington, it was exactly the same—exactly. He drank some port and his face changed, and—and—well, it was just the same. He died two or three minutes later.”

Mrs. Babbington shook her head slowly.

“I can’t understand it. Stephen! Sir Bartholomew—a kind and clever doctor! Who could want to harm either of them? It must be a mistake.”

“Sir Bartholomew was proved to have been poisoned, remember,” said Sir Charles.

“Then it must have been the work of a lunatic.”

Sir Charles went on:

“Mrs. Babbington, I want to get to the bottom of this. I want to find out the truth. And I feel there is no time to lose. Once the news of the exhumation gets about our criminal will be on the alert. I am assuming, for the sake of saving time, what the result of the autopsy on your husband’s body will be. I am taking it that he, too, died of nicotine poisoning. To begin with, did you or he know anything about the use of pure nicotine?”

“I always use a solution of nicotine for spraying roses. I didn’t know it was supposed to be poisonous.”

“I should imagine (I was reading up the subject last night) that in both cases the pure alkaloid must have been used. Cases of poisoning by nicotine are most unusual.”

Mrs. Babbington shook her head.

“I really don’t know anything about nicotine poisoning—except that I suppose inveterate smokers might suffer from it.”

“Did your husband smoke?”

“Yes.”

“Now tell me, Mrs. Babbington, you have expressed the utmost surprise that anyone should want to do away with your husband. Does that mean that as far as you know he had no enemies?”

“I am sure Stephen had no enemies. Everyone was fond of him. People tried to hustle him sometimes,” she smiled a little tearfully. “He was getting on, you know, and rather afraid of innovations, but everybody liked him. You couldn’t dislike Stephen, Sir Charles.”

“I suppose, Mrs. Babbington, that your husband didn’t leave very much money?”

“No. Next to nothing. Stephen was not good at saving. He gave away far too much. I used to scold him about it.”

“I suppose he had no expectations from anyone? He wasn’t the heir to any property?”

“Oh, no. Stephen hadn’t many relations. He has a sister who is married to a clergyman in Northumberland, but they are very badly off, and all his uncles and aunts are dead.”

“Then it does not seem as though there were anyone who could benefit by Mr. Babbington’s death?”

“No, indeed.”

“Let us come back to the question of enemies for a minute. Your husband had no enemies, you say; but he may have had as a young man.”

Mrs. Babbington looked sceptical.

“I should think it very unlikely. Stephen hadn’t a quarrelsome nature. He always got on well with people.”

“I don’t want to sound melodramatic,” Sir Charles coughed a little nervously. “But—er—when he got engaged to you, for instance, there wasn’t any disappointed suitor in the offing?”

A momentary twinkle came into Mrs. Babbington’s eyes.

“Stephen was my father’s curate. He was the first young man I saw when I came home from school. I fell in love with him and he with me. We were engaged for four years, and then he got a living down in Kent, and we were able to get married. Ours was a very simple love story, Sir Charles—and a very happy one.”

Sir Charles bowed his head. Mrs. Babbington’s simple dignity was very charming.

Egg took up the rôle of questioner.

“Mrs. Babbington, do you think your husband had met any of the guests at Sir Charles’s that night before?”

Mrs. Babbington looked slightly puzzled.

“Well, there were you and your mother, my dear, and young Oliver Manders.”

“Yes, but any of the others?”

“We had both seen Angela Sutcliffe in a play in London five years ago. Both Stephen and I were very excited that we were actually going to meet her.”

“You had never actually met her before?”

“No. We’ve never met any actresses—or actors, for the matter of that—until Sir Charles came to live here. And that,” added Mrs. Babbington, “was a great excitement. I don’t think Sir Charles knows what a wonderful thing it was to us. Quite a breath of romance in our lives.”

“You hadn’t met Captain and Mrs. Dacres?”

“Was he the little man, and the woman with the wonderful clothes?”

“Yes.”

“No. Nor the other woman—the one who wrote plays. Poor thing, she looked rather out of it, I thought.”

“You’re sure you’d never seen any of them before?”

“I’m quite sure I hadn’t—and so I’m fairly sure Stephen hadn’t, either. You see, we do everything together.”

“And Mr. Babbington didn’t say anything to you—anything at all,” persisted Egg, “about the people you were going to meet, or about them, when he saw them?”

“Nothing beforehand—except that he was looking forward to an interesting evening. And when we got there—well, there wasn’t much time—” Her face twisted suddenly.

Sir Charles broke in quickly.

“You must forgive us badgering you like this. But, you see, we feel that there must be something, if only we could get at it. There must be some reason for an apparently brutal and meaningless murder.”

“I see that,” said Mrs. Babbington. “If it was murder, there must be some reason…But I don’t know—I can’t imagine—what that reason could be.”

There was silence for a minute or two, then Sir Charles said:

“Can you give me a slight biographical sketch of your husband’s career?”

Mrs. Babbington had a good memory for dates. Sir Charles’s final notes ran thus:

“Stephen Babbington, born Islington, Devon, 1868. Educated St. Paul’s School and Oxford. Ordained Deacon and received a title to the Parish of Hoxton, 1891. Priested 1892. Was Curate Eslington, Surrey, to Rev. Vernon Lorrimer, 1894–1899. Married Margaret Lorrimer, 1899, and presented to the living of Gilling, Kent. Transferred to living of St. Petroch, Loomouth, 1916.”

“That gives us something to go upon,” said Sir Charles. “Our best chance seems to me the time during which Mr. Babbington was Vicar of St. Mary’s, Gilling. His earlier history seems rather far back to concern any of the people who were at my house that evening.”

Mrs. Babbington shuddered.

“Do you really think—that one of them—?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Sir Charles. “Bartholomew saw something or guessed something, and Bartholomew Strange died the same way, and five—”

“Seven,” said Egg.

“—of these people were also present. One of them must be guilty.”

“But why?” cried Mrs. Babbington. “Why? What motive could there be for anyone killing Stephen?”

“That,” said Sir Charles, “is what we are going to find out.”

Two

LADY MARY

Mr. Satterthwaite had come down to Crow’s Nest with Sir Charles. Whilst his host and Egg Lytton Gore were visiting Mrs. Babbington, Mr. Satterthwaite was having tea with Lady Mary.

Lady Mary liked Mr. Satterthwaite. For all her gentleness of manner, she was a woman who had very definite views on the subject of whom she did or did not like.

Mr. Satterthwaite sipped China tea from a Dresden cup, and ate a microscopic sandwich and chatted. On his last visit they had found many friends and acquaintances in common. Their talk today began on the same subject, but gradually drifted into more intimate channels. Mr. Satterthwaite was a sympathetic person—he listened to the troubles of other people and did not intrude his own. Even on his last visit it had seemed natural to Lady Mary to speak to him of her preoccupation with her daughter’s future. She talked now as she would have talked to a friend of many years’ standing.

“Egg is so headstrong,” she said. “She flings herself into a thing heart and soul. You know, Mr. Satterthwaite, I do not like the way she is—well, mixing herself up in this distressing business. It—Egg would laugh at me, I know—but it doesn’t seem to be ladylike.”

She flushed as she spoke. Her brown eyes, gentle and ingenuous, looked with childish appeal at Mr. Satterthwaite.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “I confess that I don’t quite like it myself. I know that it’s simply an old-fashioned prejudice, but there it is. All the same,” he twinkled at her, “we can’t expect young ladies to sit at home and sew and shudder at the idea of crimes of violence in these enlightened days.”

“I don’t like to think of murder,” said Lady Mary. “I never, never dreamed that I should be mixed up in anything of that kind. It was dreadful.” She shivered. “Poor Sir Bartholomew.”

“You didn’t know him very well?” hazarded Mr. Satterthwaite.

“I think I’d only met him twice. The first time about a year ago, when he came down to stay with Sir Charles for a weekend, and the second time was on that dreadful evening when poor Mr. Babbington died. I was really most surprised when his invitation arrived. I accepted because I thought Egg would enjoy it. She hasn’t many treats, poor child, and—well, she had seemed a little down in the mouth, as though she didn’t take any interest in anything. I thought a big house party might cheer her up.”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“Tell me something about Oliver Manders,” he said. “The young fellow rather interests me.”

“I think he’s clever,” said Lady Mary. “Of course, things have been difficult for him….”

She flushed, and then in answer to the plain inquiry of Mr. Satterthwaite’s glance she went on.

“You see, his father wasn’t married to his mother….”

“Really? I had no idea of that.”

“Everyone knows about it down here, otherwise I wouldn’t have said anything about it. Old Mrs. Manders, Oliver’s grandmother, lives at Dunboyne, that biggish house on the Plymouth road. Her husband was a lawyer down here. Her son went into a city firm and did very well. He’s quite a rich man. The daughter was a good-looking girl, and she became absolutely infatuated with a married man. I blame him very much indeed. Anyway, in the end, after a lot of scandal, they went off together. His wife wouldn’t divorce him. The girl died not long after Oliver was born. His uncle in London took charge of him. He and his wife had no children of their own. The boy divided his time between them and his grandmother. He always came down here for his summer holidays.”

She paused and then went on:

“I always felt sorry for him. I still do. I think that terribly conceited manner of his is a good deal put on.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “It’s a very common phenomenon. If I ever see anyone who appears to think a lot of themselves and boasts unceasingly, I always know that there’s a secret sense of inferiority somewhere.”

“It seems very odd.”

“An inferiority complex is a very peculiar thing. Crippen, for instance, undoubtedly suffered from it. It’s at the back of a lot of crimes. The desire to assert one’s personality.”

“It seems very strange to me,” murmured Lady Mary.

She seemed to shrink a little. Mr. Satterthwaite looked at her with an almost sentimental eye. He liked her graceful figure with the sloping shoulders, the soft brown of her eyes, her complete absence of makeup. He thought:

“She must have been a beauty when she was young….”

Not a flaunting beauty, not a rose—no, a modest, charming violet, hiding its sweetness….

His thoughts ran serenely in the idiom of his young days….

He remembered incidents in his own youth.

Presently he found himself telling Lady Mary about his own love affair—the only love affair he had ever had. Rather a poor love affair by the standards of today, but very dear to Mr. Satterthwaite.

He told her about the Girl, and how pretty she was, and of how they had gone together to see the bluebells at Kew. He had meant to propose to her that day. He had imagined (so he put it) that she reciprocated his sentiments. And then, as they were standing looking at the bluebells, she had confided in him…He had discovered that she loved another. And he had hidden the thoughts surging in his breast and had taken up the rôle of the faithful Friend.

It was not, perhaps, a very full-blooded romance, but it sounded well in the dim-faded chintz and eggshell china atmosphere of Lady Mary's drawing room.

Afterwards Lady Mary spoke of her own life, of her married life, which had not been very happy.

"I was such a foolish girl—girls are foolish, Mr. Satterthwaite. They are so sure of themselves, so convinced they know best. People write and talk a lot of a 'woman's instinct.' I don't believe, Mr. Satterthwaite, that there is any such thing. There doesn't seem to be anything that warns girls against a certain type of man. Nothing in themselves, I mean. Their parents warn them, but that's no good—one doesn't believe. It seems dreadful to say so, but there is something attractive to a girl in being told anyone is a bad man. She thinks at once that her love will reform him."

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded gently.

"One knows so little. When one knows more, it is too late."

She sighed.

"It was all my own fault. My people didn't want me to marry Ronald. He was well born, but he had a bad reputation. My father told me straight out that he was a wrong 'un. I didn't believe it. I believed that, for my sake, he would turn over a new leaf…."

She was silent a moment or two, dwelling on the past.

“Ronald was a very fascinating man. My father was quite right about him. I soon found that out. It’s an old-fashioned thing to say—but he broke my heart. Yes, he broke my heart. I was always afraid—of what might come out next.”

Mr. Satterthwaite, always intensely interested in other people’s lives, made a cautious sympathetic noise.

“It may seem a very wicked thing to say, Mr. Satterthwaite, but it was a relief when he got pneumonia and died…Not that I didn’t care for him—I loved him up to the end—but I had no illusions about him any longer. And there was Egg—”

Her voice softened.

“Such a funny little thing she was. A regular little roly-poly, trying to stand up and falling over—just like an egg; that’s how that ridiculous nickname started….”

She paused again.

“Some books that I’ve read these last few years have brought a lot of comfort to me. Books on psychology. It seems to show that in many ways people can’t help themselves. A kind of kink. Sometimes, in the most carefully brought up families you get it. As a boy Ronald stole money at school—money that he didn’t need. I can feel now that he couldn’t help himself…He was born with a kink….”

Very gently, with a small handkerchief, Lady Mary wiped her eyes.

“It wasn’t what I was brought up to believe,” she said apologetically. “I was taught that everyone knew the difference between right and wrong. But somehow—I don’t always think that is so.”

“The human mind is a great mystery,” said Mr. Satterthwaite gently. “As yet, we are going groping our way to understanding. Without acute mania it may nevertheless occur that certain natures lack what I should describe as braking power. If you or I were to say, ‘I hate someone—I wish he were dead,’ the idea would pass from our minds as soon as the words were uttered. The brakes would work automatically. But, in some people the idea, or obsession, holds. They see nothing but the immediate gratification of the idea formed.”

“I’m afraid,” said Lady Mary, “that that’s rather too clever for me.”

“I apologize. I was talking rather bookishly.”

“Did you mean that young people have too little restraint nowadays? It sometimes worries me.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that at all. Less restraint is, I think, a good thing—wholesome. I suppose you are thinking of Miss—er—Egg.”

“I think you’d better call her Egg,” said Lady Mary, smiling.

“Thank you. Miss Egg does sound rather ridiculous.”

“Egg’s very impulsive, and once she has set her mind on a thing nothing will stop her. As I said before, I hate her mixing herself up in all this, but she won’t listen to me.”

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled at the distress in Lady Mary’s tone. He thought to himself:

“I wonder if she realizes for one minute that Egg’s absorption in crime is neither more nor less than a new variant of that old, old game—the pursuit of the male by the female? No, she’d be horrified at the thought.”

“Egg says that Mr. Babbington was poisoned also. Do you think that is true, Mr. Satterthwaite? Or do you think it is just one of Egg’s sweeping statements?”

“We shall know for certain after the exhumation.”

“There is to be an exhumation, then?” Lady Mary shivered. “How terrible for poor Mrs. Babbington. I can imagine nothing more awful for any woman.”

“You knew the Babbingtons fairly intimately, I suppose, Lady Mary?”

“Yes, indeed. They are—were—very dear friends of ours.”

“Do you know of anyone who could possibly have had a grudge against the vicar?”

“No, indeed.”

“He never spoke of such a person?”

“No.”

“And they got on well together?”

“They were perfectly mated—happy in each other and in their children. They were badly off, of course, and Mr. Babbington suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. Those were their only troubles.”

“How did Oliver Manders get on with the vicar?”

“Well—” Lady Mary hesitated, “they didn’t hit it off very well. The Babbingtons were sorry for Oliver, and he used to go to the vicarage a good deal in the holidays to play with the Babbington boys—though I don’t think he got on very well with them. Oliver wasn’t exactly a popular boy. He boasted too much of the money he had and the tuck he took back to school, and all the fun he had in London. Boys are rather merciless about that sort of thing.”

“Yes, but later—since he’s been grown up?”

“I don’t think he and the vicarage people have seen much of each other. As a matter of fact Oliver was rather rude to Mr. Babbington one day here, in my house. It was about two years ago.”

“What happened?”

“Oliver made a rather ill-bred attack on Christianity. Mr. Babbington was very patient and courteous with him. That only seemed to make Oliver worse. He said, ‘All you religious people look down your noses because my father and mother weren’t married. I suppose you’d call me the child of sin. Well, I admire people who have the courage of their convictions and don’t care what a lot of hypocrites and parsons think.’ Mr. Babbington didn’t answer, but Oliver went on: ‘You won’t answer that. It’s ecclesiasticism and superstition that’s got the whole world into the mess it’s in. I’d like to sweep away the churches all over the world.’ Mr. Babbington smiled and said, ‘And the clergy, too?’ I think it was his smile that annoyed Oliver. He felt he was not being taken seriously. He said, ‘I hate everything the Church stands for. Smugness, security and hypocrisy. Get rid of the whole canting tribe, I say!’ And Mr. Babbington smiled—he had a very sweet smile—and he said, ‘My dear boy, if you were to sweep away all the churches ever built or planned, you would still have to reckon with God.’”

“What did young Manders say to that?”

“He seemed taken aback, and then he recovered his temper and went back to his usual sneering tired manner.

“He said, ‘I’m afraid the things I’ve been saying are rather bad form, padre, and not very easily assimilated by your generation.’”

“You don’t like young Manders, do you, Lady Mary?”

“I’m sorry for him,” said Lady Mary defensively.

“But you wouldn’t like him to marry Egg.”

“Oh, no.”

“I wonder why, exactly?”

“Because—because, he isn’t kind…and because—”

“Yes?”

“Because there’s something in him, somewhere, that I don’t understand. Something cold—”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at her thoughtfully for a minute or two, then he said:

“What did Sir Bartholomew Strange think of him? Did he ever mention him?”

“He said, I remember, that he found young Manders an interesting study. He said that he reminded him of a case he was treating at the moment in his nursing home. I said that I thought Oliver looked particularly strong and healthy, and he said, ‘Yes, his health’s all right, but he’s riding for a fall.’”

She paused and then said:

“I suppose Sir Bartholomew was a very clever nerve specialist.”

“I believe he was very highly thought of by his own colleagues.”

“I liked him,” said Lady Mary.

“Did he ever say anything to you about Babbington’s death?”

“No.”

“He never mentioned it at all?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you think—it’s difficult for you to tell, not knowing him well—but do you think he had anything on his mind?”

“He seemed in very good spirits—even amused by something—some private joke of his own. He told me at dinner that night that he was going to spring a surprise on me.”

“Oh, he did, did he?”

On his way home, Mr. Satterthwaite pondered that statement.

What had been the surprise Sir Bartholomew had intended to spring on his guests?

Would it, when it came, have been as amusing as he pretended?

Or did that gay manner mask a quiet but indomitable purpose? Would anyone ever know?

Three

REENTER HERCULE POIROT

“Frankly,” said Sir Charles, “are we any forrader?”

It was a council of war. Sir Charles, Mr. Satterthwaite and Egg Lytton Gore were sitting in the Ship room. A fire burned in the grate, and outside an equinoctial gale was howling.

Mr. Satterthwaite and Egg answered the question simultaneously.

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Yes,” said Egg.

Sir Charles looked from one to the other of them. Mr. Satterthwaite indicated gracefully that the lady should speak first.

Egg was silent a moment or two, collecting her ideas.

“We are further on,” she said at last. “We are further on because we haven’t found out anything. That sounds nonsense, but it isn’t. What I mean is that we had certain vague sketchy ideas; we know now that certain of those ideas are definitely washouts.”

“Progress by elimination,” said Sir Charles.

“That’s it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite cleared his throat. He liked to define things.

“The idea of gain we can now put definitely away,” he said. “There does not seem to be anybody who (in detective story parlance) could benefit by Stephen Babbington’s death. Revenge seems equally out of the question. Apart from his naturally amiable and peace-loving disposition, I doubt if he were important enough to make enemies. So we are back at our last rather sketchy idea—fear. By the death of Stephen Babbington, someone gains security.”

“That’s rather well put,” said Egg.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked modestly pleased with himself. Sir Charles looked a little annoyed. His was the star part, not Satterthwaite’s.

“The point is,” said Egg, “what are we going to do next—actually do, I mean. Are we going to sleuth people, or what? Are we going to disguise ourselves and follow them?”

“My dear child,” said Sir Charles, “I always did set my face against playing old men in beards, and I’m not going to begin now.”

“Then what—?” began Egg.

But she was interrupted. The door opened, and Temple announced:

“Mr. Hercule Poirot.” M. Poirot walked in with a beaming face and greeted three highly astonished people.

“It is permitted,” he said with a twinkle, “that I assist at this conference? I am right, am I not—it is a conference?”

“My dear fellow, we’re delighted to see you.” Sir Charles, recovering from his surprise, shook his guest warmly by the hand and pushed him into a large armchair. “Where have you sprung from so suddenly?”

“I went to call upon my good friend Mr. Satterthwaite in London. They tell me he is away—in Cornwall. Eh bien, it leaps to the eye where he has gone. I take the first train to Loomouth, and here I am.”

“Yes,” said Egg. “But why have you come?”

“I mean,” she went on, flushing a little as she realized the possible discourtesy of her words, “you have come for some particular reason?”

“I have come,” said Hercule Poirot, “to admit an error.”

With an engaging smile he turned to Sir Charles and spread out his hands in a foreign gesture.

“Monsieur, it was in this very room that you declared yourself not satisfied. And I—I thought it was your dramatic instinct—I said to myself, he is a great actor, at all costs he must have drama. It seemed, I will admit it, incredible that a harmless old gentleman should have died anything but a natural death. Even now I do not see how poison could have been administered to him, nor can I guess at any motive. It seems absurd—fantastic. And yet—since then, there has been another death, a death under similar circumstances. One cannot attribute it to coincidence. No, there must be a link between the two. And so, Sir Charles, I have come to you to apologize—to say I, Hercule Poirot, was wrong, and to ask you to admit me to your councils.”

Sir Charles cleared his throat rather nervously. He looked a little embarrassed.

“That’s extraordinarily handsome of you, M. Poirot. I don’t know—taking up a lot of your time—I—”

He stopped, somewhat at a loss. His eyes consulted Mr. Satterthwaite.

“It is very good of you—” began Mr. Satterthwaite.

“No, no, it is not good of me. It is the curiosity—and, yes, the hurt to my pride. I must repair my fault. My time—that is nothing—why voyage after all? The language may be different, but everywhere human nature is the same. But of course if I am not welcome, if you feel that I intrude—”

Both men spoke at once.

“No, indeed.”

“Rather not.”

Poirot turned his eyes to the girl.

“And Mademoiselle?”

For a minute or two Egg was silent, and on all three men the same impression was produced. Egg did not want the assistance of M. Poirot….

Mr. Satterthwaite thought he knew why. This was the private ploy of Charles Cartwright and Egg Lytton Gore. Mr. Satterthwaite had been admitted—on sufferance—on the clear understanding that he was a negligible third party. But Hercule Poirot was different. His would be the leading rôle. Perhaps, even, Sir Charles might retire in his favour. And then Egg's plans would come to naught.

He watched the girl, sympathizing with her predicament. These men did not understand, but he, with his semi-feminine sensitiveness, realized her dilemma. Egg was fighting for her happiness….

What would she say?

After all what could she say? How could she speak the thoughts in her mind? "Go away—go away—your coming may spoil everything—I don't want you here…."

Egg Lytton Gore said the only thing she could say.

"Of course," she said with a little smile. "We'd love to have you."

Four

A WATCHING BRIEF

“Good,” said Poirot. “We are colleagues. Eh bien, you will put me, if you please, au courant of the situation.”

He listened with close attention whilst Mr. Satterthwaite outlined the steps they had taken since returning to England. Mr. Satterthwaite was a good narrator. He had the faculty of creating an atmosphere, of painting a picture. His description of the Abbey, of the servants, of the Chief Constable was admirable. Poirot was warm in his appreciation of the discovery by Sir Charles of the unfinished letters under the gas fire.

“Ah, mais c’est magnifique, ça!” he exclaimed ecstatically. “The deduction, the reconstruction—perfect! You should have been a great detective, Sir Charles, instead of a great actor.”

Sir Charles received these plaudits with becoming modesty—his own particular brand of modesty. He had not received compliments on his stage performances for many years without perfecting a manner of acknowledging them.

“Your observation, too, it was very just,” said Poirot, turning to Mr. Satterthwaite. “That point of yours about his sudden familiarity with the butler.”

“Do you think there is anything in this Mrs. de Rushbridger idea?” asked Sir Charles eagerly.

“It is an idea. It suggests—well, it suggests several things, does it not?”

Nobody was quite sure about the several things, but nobody liked to say so, so there was merely an assenting murmur.

Sir Charles took up the tale next. He described his and Egg’s visit to Mrs. Babbington and its rather negative result.

“And now you’re up to date,” he said. “You know what we do. Tell us: how does it all strike you?”

He leaned forward, boyishly eager.

Poirot was silent for some minutes. The other three watched him.

He said at last:

“Can you remember at all, mademoiselle, what type of port glass Sir Bartholomew had on his table?”

Sir Charles interposed just as Egg was shaking her head vexedly.

“I can tell you that.”

He got up and went to a cupboard, where he took out some heavy cut glass sherry glasses.

“They were a slightly different shape, of course—more rounded—proper port shape. He got them at old Lammersfield’s sale—a whole set of table glass. I admired them, and as there were more than he needed, he passed some of them onto me. They’re good, aren’t they?”

Poirot took the glass and turned it about in his hand.

“Yes,” he said. “They are fine specimens. I thought something of that kind had been used.”

“Why?” cried Egg.

Poirot merely smiled at her.

“Yes,” he went on, “the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange could be explained easily enough; but the death of Stephen Babbington is more difficult. Ah, if only it had been the other way about!”

“What do you mean, the other way about?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

Poirot turned to him.

“Consider, my friend. Sir Bartholomew is a celebrated doctor. There might be many reasons for the death of a celebrated doctor. A doctor knows secrets, my friend, important secrets. A doctor has certain powers. Imagine a patient on the borderline of sanity. A word from the doctor, and he will be shut away from the world—what a temptation to an unbalanced brain! A doctor may have suspicions about the sudden death of one of his patients—oh, yes, we can find plenty of motives for the death of a doctor.

“Now, as I say, if only it had been the other way about. If Sir Bartholomew Strange had died first and then Stephen Babbington. For Stephen Babbington might have seen something—might have suspected something about the first death.”

He sighed and then resumed.

“But one cannot have a case as one would like to have it. One must take a case as it is. Just one little idea I should like to suggest. I suppose it is not possible that Stephen Babbington’s death was an accident—that the poison (if poison there was) was intended for Sir Bartholomew Strange, and that, by mistake, the wrong man was killed.”

“That’s an ingenious idea,” said Sir Charles. His face, which had brightened, fell again. “But I don’t believe it will work. Babbington came into this room about four minutes before he was taken ill. During that time the only thing that passed his lips was half a cocktail—there was nothing in that cocktail—”

Poirot interrupted him.

“That you have already told me—but suppose, for the sake of argument, that there was something in that cocktail. Could it have been intended for Sir Bartholomew Strange and did Mr. Babbington drink it by mistake?”

Sir Charles shook his head.

“Nobody who knew Tollie at all well would have tried poisoning him in a cocktail.”

“Why?”

“Because he never drank them.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

Poirot made a gesture of annoyance.

“Ah—this business—it goes all wrong. It does not make sense….”

“Besides,” went on Sir Charles, “I don’t see how any one glass could have been mistaken for another—or anything of that kind. Temple carried them round on a tray and everyone helped themselves to any glass they fancied.”

“True,” murmured Poirot. “One cannot force a cocktail like one forces a card. What is she like, this Temple of yours? She is the maid who admitted me tonight—yes?”

“That’s right. I’ve had her three or four years—nice steady girl—knows her work. I don’t know where she came from—Miss Milray would know all about that.”

“Miss Milray, that is your secretary? The tall woman—somewhat of the Grenadier?”

“Very much of the Grenadier,” agreed Sir Charles.

“I have dined with you before on various occasions, but I do not think I met her until that night.”

“No, she doesn’t usually dine with us. It was a question of thirteen, you see.”

Sir Charles explained the circumstances, to which Poirot listened very attentively.

“It was her own suggestion that she should be present? I see.”

He remained lost in thought a minute, then he said:

“Might I speak to this parlourmaid of yours, this Temple?”

“Certainly, my dear fellow.”

Sir Charles pressed a bell. It was answered promptly.

“You rang, sir?”

Temple was a tall girl of thirty-two or three. She had a certain smartness—her hair was well brushed and glossy, but she was not pretty. Her manner was calm and efficient.

“M. Poirot wants to ask you a few questions,” said Sir Charles.

Temple transferred her superior gaze to Poirot.

“We are talking of the night when Mr. Babbington died here,” said Poirot. “You remember that night?”

“Oh, yes, sir.”

“I want to know exactly how cocktails were served.”

“I beg your pardon, sir.”

“I want to know about the cocktails. Did you mix them?”

“No, sir, Sir Charles likes doing that himself. I brought in the bottles—the vermouth, the gin, and all that.”

“Where did you put them?”

"On the table there, sir."

She indicated a table by the wall.

"The tray with the glasses stood here, sir. Sir Charles, when he had finished mixing and shaking, poured out the cocktails into the glasses. Then I took the tray round and handed it to the ladies and gentlemen."

"Were all the cocktails on the tray you handed?"

"Sir Charles gave one to Miss Lytton Gore, sir; he was talking to her at the time, and he took his own. And Mr. Satterthwaite"—her eyes shifted to him for a moment—"came and fetched one for a lady—Miss Wills, I think it was."

"Quite right," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"The others I handed, sir; I think everyone took one except Sir Bartholomew."

"Will you be so very obliging, Temple, as to repeat the performance. Let us put cushions for some of the people. I stood here, I remember—Miss Sutcliffe was there."

With Mr. Satterthwaite's help, the scene was reconstructed. Mr. Satterthwaite was observant. He remembered fairly well where everyone had been in the room. Then Temple did her round. They ascertained that she had started with Mrs. Dacres, gone onto Miss Sutcliffe and Poirot, and had then come to Mr. Babbington, Lady Mary and Mr. Satterthwaite, who had been sitting together.

This agreed with Mr. Satterthwaite's recollection.

Finally Temple was dismissed.

"Pah," cried Poirot. "It does not make sense. Temple is the last person to handle those cocktails, but it was impossible for her to tamper with them in any way, and, as I say, one cannot force a cocktail on a particular person."

"It's instinctive to take the one nearest to you," said Sir Charles.

"Possibly that might work by handing the tray to the person first—but even then it would be very uncertain. The glasses are close together; one does not look particularly nearer than another. No, no, such a haphazard method could not be adopted. Tell me, Mr. Satterthwaite, did Mr. Babbington put his cocktail down, or did he retain it in his hand?"

"He put it down on this table."

"Did anyone come near that table after he had done so?"

"No. I was the nearest person to him, and I assure you I did not tamper with it in any way—even if I could have done so unobserved."

Mr. Satterthwaite spoke rather stiffly. Poirot hastened to apologize.

"No, no, I am not making an accusation—quelle idée! But I want to be very sure of my facts. According to the analysis there was nothing out of the way in that cocktail—now it seems that, apart from that analysis there could have been nothing put in it. The same results from two different tests. But Mr. Babbington ate or drank nothing else, and if he was poisoned by pure nicotine, death would have resulted very rapidly. You see where that leads us?"

"Nowhere, damn it all," said Sir Charles.

"I would not say that—no, I would not say that. It suggests a very monstrous idea—which I hope and trust cannot be true. No, of course it is not true—the death of Sir Bartholomew proves that…And yet—"

He frowned, lost in thought. The others watched him curiously. He looked up.

"You see my point, do you not? Mrs. Babbington was not at Melfort Abbey, therefore Mrs. Babbington is cleared of suspicion."

"Mrs. Babbington—but no one has even dreamed of suspecting her."

Poirot smiled beneficently.

“No? It is a curious thing that. The idea occurred to me at once—but at once. If the poor gentleman is not poisoned by the cocktail, then he must have been poisoned a very few minutes before entering the house. What way could there be? A capsule? Something, perhaps, to prevent indigestion. But who, then, could tamper with that? Only a wife. Who might, perhaps, have a motive that no one outside could possibly suspect? Again a wife.”

“But they were devoted to each other,” cried Egg indignantly. “You don’t understand a bit.”

Poirot smiled kindly at her.

“No. That is valuable. You know, but I do not. I see the facts unbiased by any preconceived notions. And let me tell you something, mademoiselle—in the course of my experience I have known five cases of wives murdered by devoted husbands, and twenty-two of husbands murdered by devoted wives. Les femmes, they obviously keep up appearances better.”

“I think you’re perfectly horrid,” said Egg. “I know the Babbingtons are not like that. It’s—it’s monstrous!”

“Murder is monstrous, mademoiselle,” said Poirot, and there was a sudden sternness in his voice.

He went on in a lighter tone.

“But I—who see only the facts—agree that Mrs. Babbington did not do this thing. You see, she was not at Melfort Abbey. No, as Sir Charles has already said, the guilt must lie on a person who was present on both occasions—one of the seven on your list.”

There was a silence.

“And how do you advise us to act?” asked Satterthwaite.

“You have doubtless already your plan?” suggested Poirot.

Sir Charles cleared his throat.

“The only feasible thing seems to be a process of elimination,” he said. “My idea was to take each person on that list and consider them guilty until they are proved innocent. I mean that we are to feel convinced ourselves that there is a connection between that person and Stephen Babbington, and we are to use all our ingenuity to find out what that connection can be. If we find no connection, then we pass onto the next person.”

“It is good psychology, that,” approved Poirot. “And your methods?”

“That we have not yet had time to discuss. We should welcome your advice on that point, M. Poirot. Perhaps you yourself—”

Poirot held up a hand.

“My friend, do not ask me to do anything of an active nature. It is my lifelong conviction that any problem is best solved by thought. Let me hold what is called, I believe, the watching brief. Continue your investigations which Sir Charles is so ably directing—”

“And what about me?” thought Mr. Satterthwaite. “These actors! Always in the limelight playing the star part!”

“You will, perhaps, from time to time require what we may describe as Counsel’s opinion. Me, I am the Counsel.”

He smiled at Egg.

“Does that strike you as the sense, mademoiselle?”

“Excellent,” said Egg. “I’m sure your experience will be very useful to us.”

Her face looked relieved. She glanced at her watch and gave an exclamation.

“I must go home. Mother will have a fit.”

“I’ll drive you home,” said Sir Charles.

They went out together.

Five

DIVISION OF LABOUR

“So you see, the fish has risen,” said Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Satterthwaite, who had been looking at the door which had just closed behind the other two, gave a start as he turned to Poirot. The latter was smiling with a hint of mockery.

“Yes, yes, do not deny it. Deliberately you showed me the bait that day in Monte Carlo. Is it not so? You showed me the paragraph in the paper. You hoped that it would arouse my interest—that I should occupy myself with the affair.”

“It is true,” confessed Mr. Satterthwaite. “But I thought that I had failed.”

“No, no, you did not fail. You are a shrewd judge of human nature, my friend. I was suffering from ennui—I had—in the words of the child who was playing near us—‘nothing to do.’ You came at the psychological moment. (And, talking of that, how much crime depends, too, on that psychological moment. The crime, the psychology, they go hand in hand.) But let us come back to our muttons. This is a crime very intriguing—it puzzles me completely.”

“Which crime—the first or the second?”

“There is only one—what you call the first and second murder are only the two halves of the same crime. The second half is simple—the motive—the means adopted—”

Mr. Satterthwaite interrupted.

“Surely the means present an equal difficulty. There was no poison found in any of the wine, and the food was eaten by everybody.”

"No, no, it is quite different. In the first case it does not seem as though anybody could have poisoned Stephen Babbington. Sir Charles, if he had wanted to, could have poisoned one of his guests, but not any particular guest. Temple might possibly have slipped something into the last glass on the tray—but Mr. Babbington's was not the last glass. No, the murder of Mr. Babbington seems so impossible that I still feel that perhaps it is impossible—that he died a natural death after all…But that we shall soon know. The second case is different. Any one of the guests present, or the butler or parlourmaid, could have poisoned Bartholomew Strange. That presents no difficulty whatever."

"I don't see—" began Mr. Satterthwaite.

Poirot swept on:

"I will prove that to you sometime by a little experiment. Let us pass onto another and most important matter. It is vital, you see (and you will see, I am sure, you have the sympathetic heart and the delicate understanding), that I must not play the part of what you call the spoilsport."

"You mean—" began Mr. Satterthwaite with the beginning of a smile.

"That Sir Charles must have the star part! He is used to it. And, moreover, it is expected of him by someone else. Am I not right? It does not please mademoiselle at all that I come to concern myself in this matter."

"You are what we call 'quick in the uptake,' M. Poirot."

"Ah, that, it leaps to the eye! I am of a very susceptible nature—I wish to assist a love affair—not to hinder it. You and I, my friend, must work together in this—to the honour and glory of Charles Cartwright; is it not so? When the case is solved—"

"If—" said Mr. Satterthwaite mildly.

"When! I do not permit myself to fail."

"Never?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite searchingly.

“There have been times,” said Poirot with dignity, “when for a short time, I have been what I suppose you would call slow in the takeup. I have not perceived the truth as soon as I might have done.”

“But you’ve never failed altogether?”

The persistence of Mr. Satterthwaite was curiosity, pure and simple. He wondered….

“Eh bien,” said Poirot. “Once. Long ago, in Belgium. We will not talk of it….”

Mr. Satterthwaite, his curiosity (and his malice) satisfied, hastened to change the subject.

“Just so. You were saying that when the case is solved—”

“Sir Charles will have solved it. That is essential. I shall have been a little cog in the wheel,” he spread out his hands. “Now and then, here and there, I shall say a little word—just one little word—a hint, no more. I desire no honour—no renown. I have all the renown I need.”

Mr. Satterthwaite studied him with interest. He was amused by the naïve conceit, the immense egoism of the little man. But he did not make the easy mistake of considering it mere empty boasting. An Englishman is usually modest about what he does well, sometimes pleased with himself over something he does badly; but a Latin has a truer appreciation of his own powers. If he is clever he sees no reason for concealing the fact.

“I should like to know,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “it would interest me very much—just what do you yourself hope to get out of this business? Is it the excitement of the chase?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No—no—it is not that. Like the chien de chasse, I follow the scent, and I get excited, and once on the scent I cannot be called off it. All that is true. But there is more…It is—how shall I put it?—a passion for getting at the truth. In all the world there is nothing so curious and so interesting and so beautiful as truth….”

There was silence for a little while after Poirot’s words.

Then he took up the paper on which Mr. Satterthwaite had carefully copied out the seven names, and read them aloud.

“Mrs. Dacres, Captain Dacres, Miss Wills, Miss Sutcliffe, Lady Mary Lytton Gore, Miss Lytton Gore, Oliver Manders.

“Yes,” he said, “suggestive, is it not?”

“What is suggestive about it?”

“The order in which the names occur.”

“I don’t think there is anything suggestive about it. We just wrote the names down without any particular order about it.”

“Exactly. The list is headed by Mrs. Dacres. I deduce from that that she is considered the most likely person to have committed the crime.”

“Not the most likely,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “The least unlikely would express it better.”

“And a third phrase would express it better still. She is perhaps the person you would all prefer to have committed the crime.”

Mr. Satterthwaite opened his lips impulsively, then met the gentle quizzical gaze of Poirot’s shining green eyes, and altered what he had been about to say.

“I wonder—perhaps, M. Poirot, you are right—unconsciously that may be true.”

“I would like to ask you something, Mr. Satterthwaite.”

“Certainly—certainly,” Mr. Satterthwaite answered complacently.

“From what you have told me, I gather that Sir Charles and Miss Lytton Gore went together to interview Mrs. Babbington.”

“Yes.”

“You did not accompany them?”

“No. Three would have been rather a crowd.”

Poirot smiled.

“And also, perhaps, your inclinations led you elsewhere. You had, as they say, different fish to fry. Where did you go, Mr. Satterthwaite?”

“I had tea with Lady Mary Lytton Gore,” said Mr. Satterthwaite stiffly.

“And what did you talk about?”

“She was so good as to confide in me some of the troubles of her early married life.”

He repeated the substance of Lady Mary’s story. Poirot nodded his head sympathetically.

“That is so true to life—the idealistic young girl who marries the bad hat and will listen to nobody. But did you talk of nothing else? Did you, for instance, not speak of Mr. Oliver Manders?”

“As a matter of fact we did.”

“And you learnt about him—what?”

Mr. Satterthwaite repeated what Lady Mary had told him. Then he said:

“What made you think we had talked of him?”

“Because you went there for that reason. Oh, yes, do not protest. You may hope that Mrs. Dacres or her husband committed the crime, but you think that young Manders did.”

He stilled Mr. Satterthwaite’s protests.

“Yes, yes, you have the secretive nature. You have your ideas, but you like keeping them to yourself. I have sympathy with you. I do the same myself….”

“I don’t suspect him—that’s absurd. But I just wanted to know more about him.”

“That is as I say. He is your instinctive choice. I, too, am interested in that young man. I was interested in him on the night of the dinner here, because I saw—”

“What did you see?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite eagerly.

“I saw that there were two people at least (perhaps more) who were playing a part. One was Sir Charles.” He smiled. “He was playing the naval officer, am I not right? That is quite natural. A great actor does not cease to act because he is not on the stage anymore. But young Manders, he too was acting. He was playing the part of the bored and blasé young man—but in reality he was neither bored nor blasé—he was very keenly alive. And therefore, my friend, I noticed him.”

“How did you know I’d been wondering about him?”

“In many little ways. You had been interested in that accident of his that brought him to Melfort Abbey that night. You had not gone with Sir Charles and Miss Lytton Gore to see Mrs. Babbington. Why? Because you wanted to follow out some line of your own unobserved. You went to Lady Mary’s to find out about someone. Who? It could only be someone local. Oliver Manders. And then, most characteristic, you put his name at the bottom of the list. Who are really the least likely suspects in your mind—Lady Mary and Mademoiselle Egg—but you put his name after theirs, because he is your dark horse, and you want to keep him to yourself.”

“Dear me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Am I really that kind of man?”

“Précisément. You have shrewd judgment and observation, and you like keeping its results to yourself. Your opinions of people are your private collection. You do not display them for all the world to see.”

“I believe,” began Mr. Satterthwaite, but he was interrupted by the return of Sir Charles.

The actor came in with a springing buoyant step.

“Brrr,” he said. “It’s a wild night.”

He poured himself out a whisky and soda.

Mr. Satterthwaite and Poirot both declined.

“Well,” said Sir Charles, “let’s map out our plan of campaign. Where’s that list, Satterthwaite? Ah, thanks. Now M. Poirot, Counsel’s opinion, if you please. How shall we divide up the spadework?”

“How would you suggest yourself, Sir Charles?”

“Well, we might divide these people up—division of labour—eh? First, there’s Mrs. Dacres. Egg seems rather keen to take her on. She seems to think that anyone so perfectly turned out won’t get impartial treatment from mere males. It seems quite a good idea to approach her through the professional side. Satterthwaite and I might work the other gambit as well if it seemed advisable. Then there’s Dacres. I know some of his racing pals. I daresay I could pick up something that way. Then there’s Angela Sutcliffe.”

“That also seems to be your work, Cartwright,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “You know her pretty well, don’t you?”

“Yes. That’s why I’d rather somebody else tackled her…Firstly,” he smiled ruefully, “I shall be accused of not putting my back into the job, and secondly—well—she’s a friend—you understand?”

“Parfaitement, parfaitement—you feel the natural delicacy. It is most understandable. This good Mr. Satterthwaite—he will replace you in the task.”

"Lady Mary and Egg—they don't count, of course. What about young Manders? His presence on the night of Tollie's death was an accident; still, I suppose we ought to include him."

"Mr. Satterthwaite will look after young Manders," said Poirot. "But I think, Sir Charles, you have missed out a name on your list. You have passed over Miss Muriel Wills."

"So I have. Well, if Satterthwaite takes on Manders, I'll take on Miss Wills. Is that settled? Any suggestions, M. Poirot?"

"No, no—I do not think so. I shall be interested to hear your results."

"Of course—that goes without saying. Another idea: If we procured photographs of these people we might use them in making inquiries in Gilling."

"Excellent," approved Poirot. "There was something—ah, yes, your friend, Sir Bartholomew, he did not drink cocktails, but he did drink the port?"

"Yes, he had a particular weakness for port."

"It seems odd to me that he did not taste anything unusual. Pure nicotine has a most pungent and unpleasant taste."

"You've got to remember," said Sir Charles, "that there probably wasn't any nicotine in the port. The contents of the glass were analysed, remember."

"Ah, yes—foolish of me. But, however it was administered—nicotine has a very disagreeable taste."

"I don't know that that would matter," said Sir Charles slowly. "Tollie had a very bad go of influenza last spring, and it left him with his sense of taste and smell a good deal impaired."

"Ah, yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "That might account for it. That simplifies things considerably."

Sir Charles went to the window and looked out.

“Still blowing a gale. I’ll send for your things, M. Poirot. The Rose and Crown is all very well for enthusiastic artists, but I think you’d prefer proper sanitation and a comfortable bed.”

“You are extremely amiable, Sir Charles.”

“Not at all. I’ll see to it now.”

He left the room.

Poirot looked at Mr. Satterthwaite.

“If I may permit myself a suggestion.”

“Yes?”

Poirot leaned forward, and said in a low voice:

“Ask young Manders why he faked an accident. Tell him the police suspect him—and see what he says.”

Six

CYNTHIA DACRES

The showrooms of Ambrosine, Ltd, were very pure in appearance. The walls were a shade just off-white—the thick pile carpet was so neutral as to be almost colourless—so was the upholstery. Chromium gleamed here and there, and on one wall was a gigantic geometric design in vivid blue and lemon yellow. The room had been designed by Mr. Sydney Sandford—the newest and youngest decorator of the moment.

Egg Lytton Gore sat in an armchair of modern design—faintly reminiscent of a dentist's chair, and watched exquisite snakelike young women with beautiful bored faces pass sinuously before her. Egg was principally concerned with endeavouring to appear as though fifty or sixty pounds was a mere bagatelle to pay for a dress.

Mrs. Dacres, looking as usual marvellously unreal, was (as Egg put it to herself) doing her stuff.

"Now, do you like this? Those shoulder knots—rather amusing, don't you think? And the waistline's rather penetrating. I shouldn't have the red lead colour, though—I should have it in the new colour—Espanol—most attractive—like mustard, with a dash of cayenne in it. How do you like Vin Ordinaire? Rather absurd, isn't it? Quite penetrating and ridiculous. Clothes simply must not be serious nowadays."

"It's very difficult to decide," said Egg. "You see"—she became confidential—"I've never been able to afford any clothes before. We were always so dreadfully poor. I remembered how simply marvellous you looked that night at Crow's Nest, and I thought, 'Now that I've got money to spend, I shall go to Mrs. Dacres and ask her to advise me.' I did admire you so much that night."

"My dear, how charming of you. I simply adore dressing a young girl. It's so important that girls shouldn't look raw—if you know what I mean."

“Nothing raw about you,” thought Egg ungratefully. “Cooked to a turn, you are.”

“You’ve got so much personality,” continued Mrs. Dacres. “You mustn’t have anything at all ordinary. Your clothes must be simple and penetrating—and just faintly visible. You understand? Do you want several things?”

“I thought about four evening frocks, and a couple of day things, and a sports suit or two—that sort of thing.”

The honey of Mrs. Dacres’s manner became sweeter. It was fortunate that she did not know that at that moment Egg’s bank balance was exactly fifteen pounds twelve shillings, and that the said balance had got to last her until December.

More girls in gowns filed past Egg. In the intervals of technical conversation, Egg interspersed other matters.

“I suppose you’ve never been to Crow’s Nest since?” she said.

“No. My dear, I couldn’t. It was so upsetting—and, anyway, I always think Cornwall is rather terribly artisty…I simply cannot bear artists. Their bodies are always such a curious shape.”

“It was a shattering business, wasn’t it?” said Egg. “Old Mr. Babbington was rather a pet, too.”

“Quite a period piece, I should imagine,” said Mrs. Dacres.

“You’d met him before somewhere, hadn’t you?”

“That dear old dug-out? Had I? I don’t remember.”

“I think I remember his saying so,” said Egg. “Not in Cornwall, though. I think it was at a place called Gilling.”

“Was it?” Mrs. Dacres’s eyes were vague. “No, Marcelle—Petite Scandale is what I want—the Jenny model—and after that blue Patou.”

“Wasn’t it extraordinary,” said Egg, “about Sir Bartholomew being poisoned?”

“My dear, it was too penetrating for words! It’s done me a world of good. All sorts of dreadful women come and order frocks from me just for the sensation. Now this Patou model would be perfect for you. Look at that perfectly useless and ridiculous frill—it makes the whole thing adorable. Young without being tiresome. Yes, poor Sir Bartholomew’s death has been rather a godsend to me. There’s just an off chance, you see, that I might have murdered him. I’ve rather played up to that. Extraordinary fat women come and positively goggle at me. Too penetrating. And then, you see—”

But she was interrupted by the advent of a monumental American, evidently a valued client.

While the American was unburdening herself of her requirements, which sounded comprehensive and expensive, Egg managed to make an unobtrusive exit, telling the young lady who had succeeded Mrs. Dacres that she would think it over before making a final choice.

As she emerged into Bruton Street, Egg glanced at her watch. It was twenty minutes to one. Before very long she might be able to put her second plan into operation.

She walked as far as Berkeley Square, and then slowly back again. At one o’clock she had her nose glued to a window displaying Chinese objets d’art.

Miss Doris Sims came rapidly out into Bruton Street and turned in the direction of Berkeley Square. Just before she got there a voice spoke at her elbow.

“Excuse me,” said Egg, “but can I speak to you a minute?”

The girl turned, surprised.

“You’re one of the mannequins at Ambrosine’s, aren’t you? I noticed you this morning. I hope you won’t be frightfully offended if I say I think you’ve got simply the most perfect figure I’ve ever seen.”

Doris Sims was not offended. She was merely slightly confused.

“It’s very kind of you, I’m sure, madam,” she said.

“You look frightfully good-natured, too,” said Egg. “That’s why I’m going to ask you a favour. Will you have lunch with me at the Berkeley or the Ritz and let me tell you about it?”

After a moment’s hesitation Doris Sims agreed. She was curious and she liked good food.

Once established at a table and lunch ordered, Egg plunged into explanations.

“I hope you’ll keep this to yourself,” she said. “You see, I’ve got a job—writing up various professions for women. I want you to tell me all about the dressmaking business.”

Doris looked slightly disappointed, but she complied amiably enough, giving bald statements as to hours, rates of pay, conveniences and inconveniences of her employment. Egg entered particulars in a little notebook.

“It’s awfully kind of you,” she said. “I’m very stupid at this. It’s quite new to me. You see I’m frightfully badly off, and this little bit of journalistic work will make all the difference.”

She went on confidentially.

“It was rather nerve on my part, walking into Ambrosine’s and pretending I could buy lots of your models. Really, I’ve got just a few pounds of my dress allowance to last me till Christmas. I expect Mrs. Dacres would be simply wild if she knew.”

Doris giggled.

“I should say she would.”

“Did I do it well?” asked Egg. “Did I look as though I had money?”

"You did it splendidly, Miss Lytton Gore. Madam thinks you're going to get quite a lot of things."

"I'm afraid she'll be disappointed," said Egg.

Doris giggled more. She was enjoying her lunch, and she felt attracted to Egg. "She may be a Society young lady," she thought to herself, "but she doesn't put on airs. She's as natural as can be."

These pleasant relations once established, Egg found no difficulty in inducing her companion to talk freely on the subject of her employer.

"I always think," said Egg, "that Mrs. Dacres looks a frightful cat. Is she?"

"None of us like her, Miss Lytton Gore, and that's a fact. But she's clever, of course, and she's got a rare head for business. Not like some Society ladies who take up the dressmaking business and go bankrupt because their friends get clothes and don't pay. She's as hard as nails, Madam is—though I will say she's fair enough—and she's got real taste—she knows what's what, and she's clever at getting people to have the style that suits them."

"I suppose she makes a lot of money?"

A queer knowing look came into Doris's eye.

"It's not for me to say anything—or to gossip."

"Of course not," said Egg. "Go on."

"But if you ask me—the firm's not far off Queer Street. There was a Jewish gentleman came to see Madam, and there have been one or two things—it's my belief she's been borrowing to keep going in the hope that trade would revive, and that she's got in deep. Really, Miss Lytton Gore, she looks terrible sometimes. Quite desperate. I don't know what she'd look like without her makeup. I don't believe she sleeps of nights."

"What's her husband like?"

"He's a queer fish. Bit of a bad lot, if you ask me. Not that we ever see much of him. None of the other girls agree with me, but I believe she's very keen on him still. Of course a lot of nasty things have been said—"

"Such as?" asked Egg.

"Well, I don't like to repeat things. I never have been one for that."

"Of course not. Go on, you were saying—?"

"Well, there's been a lot of talk among the girls. About a young fellow—very rich and very soft. Not exactly balmy, if you know what I mean—sort of betwixt and between. Madam's been running him for all she was worth. He might have put things right—he was soft enough for anything—but then he was ordered on a sea voyage—suddenly."

"Ordered by whom—a doctor?"

"Yes, someone in Harley Street. I believe now that it was the same doctor who was murdered up in Yorkshire—poisoned, so they said."

"Sir Bartholomew Strange?"

"That was the name. Madam was at the house party, and we girls said among ourselves—just laughing, you know—well, we said, supposing Madam did him in—out of revenge, you know! Of course it was just fun—"

"Naturally," said Egg. "Girlish fun. I quite understand. You know, Mrs. Dacres is quite my idea of a murderess—so hard and remorseless."

"She's ever so hard—and she's got a wicked temper! When she lets go, there's not one of us dares to come near her. They say her husband's frightened of her—and no wonder."

"Have you ever heard her speak of anyone called Babbington or of a place in Kent—Gilling?"

"Really, now, I can't call to mind that I have."

Doris looked at her watch and uttered an exclamation.

“Oh, dear, I must hurry. I shall be late.”

“Good-bye, and thanks so much for coming.”

“It’s been a pleasure, I’m sure. Good-bye, Miss Lytton Gore, and I hope the article will be a great success. I shall look out for it.”

“You’ll look in vain, my girl,” thought Egg, as she asked for her bill.

Then, drawing a line through the supposed jottings for the article, she wrote in her little notebook:

“Cynthia Dacres. Believed to be in financial difficulties. Described as having a ‘wicked temper.’ Young man (rich) with whom she was believed to be having an affair was ordered on sea voyage by Sir Bartholomew Strange. Showed no reaction at mention of Gilling or at statement that Babbington knew her.”

“There doesn’t seem much there,” said Egg to herself. “A possible motive for the murder of Sir Bartholomew, but very thin. M. Poirot may be able to make something of that. I can’t.”

Seven

CAPTAIN DACRES

Egg had not yet finished her programme for the day. Her next move was to St. John’s House, in which building the Dacres had a flat. St. John’s House was a new block of extremely expensive flats. There were sumptuous window boxes and uniformed porters of such magnificence that they looked like foreign generals.

Egg did not enter the building. She strolled up and down on the opposite side of the street. After about an hour of this she calculated that she must have walked several miles. It was half past five.

Then a taxi drew up at the Mansions, and Captain Dacres alighted from it. Egg allowed three minutes to elapse, then she crossed the road and entered the building.

Egg pressed the doorbell of No. 3. Dacres himself opened the door. He was still engaged in taking off his overcoat.

“Oh,” said Egg. “How do you do? You do remember me, don’t you? We met in Cornwall, and again in Yorkshire.”

“Of course—of course. In at the death both times, weren’t we? Come in, Miss Lytton Gore.”

“I wanted to see your wife. Is she in?”

“She’s round in Bruton Street—at her dressmaking place.”

“I know. I was there today. I thought perhaps she’d be back by now, and that she wouldn’t mind, perhaps, if I came here—only, of course, I suppose I’m being a frightful bother—”

Egg paused appealingly.

Freddie Dacres said to himself:

“Nice-looking filly. Damned pretty girl, in fact.”

Aloud he said:

“Cynthia won’t be back till well after six. I’ve just come back from Newbury. Had a rotten day and left early. Come round to the Seventy-Two Club and have a cocktail?”

Egg accepted, though she had a shrewd suspicion that Dacres had already had quite as much alcohol as was good for him.

Sitting in the underground dimness of the Seventy-Two Club, and sipping a Martini, Egg said: “This is great fun. I’ve never been here before.”

Freddie Dacres smiled indulgently. He liked a young and pretty girl. Not perhaps as much as he liked some other things—but well enough.

“Upsettin’ sort of time, wasn’t it?” he said. “Up in Yorkshire, I mean. Something rather amusin’ about a doctor being poisoned—you see what I mean—wrong way about. A doctor’s a chap who poisons other people.”

He laughed uproariously at his own remark and ordered another pink gin.

“That’s rather clever of you,” said Egg. “I never thought of it that way before.”

“Only a joke, of course,” said Freddie Dacres.

“It’s odd, isn’t it,” said Egg, “that when we meet it’s always at a death.”

“Bit odd,” admitted Captain Dacres. “You mean the old clergyman chap at what’s his name’s—the actor fellow’s place?”

“Yes. It was very queer the way he died so suddenly.”

“Damn’ disturbin’,” said Dacres. “Makes you feel a bit gruey, fellows popping off all over the place. You know, you think ‘my turn next,’ and it gives you the shivers.”

“You knew Mr. Babbington before, didn’t you, at Gilling?”

“Don’t know the place. No, I never set eyes on the old chap before. Funny thing is he popped off just the same way as old Strange did. Bit odd, that. Can’t have been bumped off, too, I suppose?”

“Well, what do you think?”

Dacres shook his head.

“Can’t have been,” he said decisively. “Nobody murders parsons. Doctors are different.”

“Yes,” said Egg. “I suppose doctors are different.”

“’Course they are. Stands to reason. Doctors are interfering devils.” He slurred the words a little. He leant forward. “Won’t let well alone. Understand?”

“No,” said Egg.

“They monkey about with fellows’ lives. They’ve got a damned sight too much power. Oughtn’t to be allowed.”

“I don’t quite see what you mean.”

“M’ dear girl, I’m telling you. Get a fellow shut up—that’s what I mean—put him in hell. God, they’re cruel. Shut him up and keep the stuff from him—and however much you beg and pray they won’t give it you. Don’t care a damn what torture you’re in. That’s doctors for you. I’m telling you—and I know.”

His face twitched painfully. His little pinpoint pupils stared past her.

“It’s hell, I tell you—hell. And they call it curing you! Pretend they’re doing a decent action. Swine!”

“Did Sir Bartholomew Strange—?” began Egg cautiously.

He took the words out of her mouth.

“Sir Bartholomew Strange. Sir Bartholomew Humbug. I’d like to know what goes on in that precious Sanatorium of his. Nerve cases. That’s what they say. You’re in there and you can’t get out. And they say you’ve gone of your own free will. Free will! Just because they get hold of you when you’ve got the horrors.”

He was shaking now. His mouth drooped suddenly.

“I’m all to pieces,” he said apologetically. “All to pieces.” He called to the waiter, pressed Egg to have another drink, and when she refused, ordered one himself.

“That’s better,” he said as he drained the glass. “Got my nerve back now. Nasty business losing your nerve. Mustn’t make Cynthia angry. She told me not to talk.” He nodded his head once or twice. “Wouldn’t do to tell the police all this,” he said. “They might think I’d bumped old Strange off. Eh? You realize, don’t you, that someone must have done it? One of us must have killed him. That’s a funny thought. Which of us? That’s the question.”

“Perhaps you know which,” said Egg.

“What d’you say that for? Why should I know?”

He looked at her angrily and suspiciously.

“I don’t know anything about it, I tell you. I wasn’t going to take that damnable ‘cure’ of his. No matter what Cynthia said—I wasn’t going to take it. He was up to something—they were both up to something. But they couldn’t fool me.”

He drew himself up.

“I’m a shtrong man, Mish Lytton Gore.”

“I’m sure you are,” said Egg. “Tell me, do you know anything of a Mrs. de Rushbridger who is at the Sanatorium?”

“Rushbridger? Rushbridger? Old Strange said something about her. Now what was it? Can’t remember anything.”

He sighed, shook his head.

“Memory’s going, that’s what it is. And I’ve got enemies—a lot of enemies. They may be spying on me now.”

He looked round uneasily. Then he leant across the table to Egg.

“What was that woman doing in my room that day?”

“What woman?”

“Rabbit-faced woman. Writes plays. It was the morning after—after he died. I’d just come up from breakfast. She came out of my room and went through the baize door at the end of the passage—went through into the servants’ quarters. Odd, eh? Why did she go into my room? What did she think she’d find there? What did she want to go nosing about for, anyway? What’s it got to do with her?” He leaned forward confidentially. “Or do you think it’s true what Cynthia says?”

“What does Mrs. Dacres say?”

“Says I imagined it. Says I was ‘seeing things.’” He laughed uncertainly. “I do see things now and again. Pink mice—snakes—all that sort of thing. But seein’ a woman’s different…I did see her. She’s a queer fish, that woman. Nasty sort of eye she’s got. Goes through you.”

He leaned back on the soft couch. He seemed to be dropping asleep.

Egg got up.

“I must be going. Thank you very much, Captain Dacres.”

“Don’t thank me. Delighted. Absolutely delighted….”

His voice tailed off.

“I’d better go before he passes out altogether,” thought Egg.

She emerged from the smoky atmosphere of the Seventy-Two Club into the cool evening air.

Beatrice, the housemaid, had said that Miss Wills poked and pried. Now came this story from Freddie Dacres. What had Miss Wills been looking for? What had she found? Was it possible that Miss Wills knew something?

Was there anything in this rather muddled story about Sir Bartholomew Strange? Had Freddie Dacres secretly feared and hated him?

It seemed possible.

But in all this no hint of any guilty knowledge in the Babbington case.

“How odd it would be,” said Egg to herself, “if he wasn’t murdered after all.”

And then she caught her breath sharply as she caught sight of the words on a newspaper placard a few feet away:

“CORNISH EXHUMATION CASE—RESULT.”

Hastily she held out a penny and snatched a paper. As she did so she collided with another woman doing the same thing. As Egg apologized she recognized Sir Charles’s secretary, the efficient Miss Milray.

Standing side by side, they both sought the stop-press news. Yes, there it was.

“RESULT OF CORNISH EXHUMATION.”

The words danced before Egg’s eyes. Analysis of the organs…Nicotine….

“So he was murdered,” said Egg.

“Oh, dear,” said Miss Milray. “This is terrible—terrible—”

Her rugged countenance was distorted with emotion. Egg looked at her in surprise. She had always regarded Miss Milray as something less than human.

“It upsets me,” said Miss Milray, in explanation. “You see, I’ve known him all my life.”

“Mr. Babbington?”

“Yes. You see, my mother lives at Gilling, where he used to be vicar. Naturally it’s upsetting.”

“Oh, of course.”

“In fact,” said Miss Milray, “I don’t know what to do.”

She flushed a little before Egg’s look of astonishment.

“I’d like to write to Mrs. Babbington,” she said quickly. “Only it doesn’t seem quite—well, quite…I don’t know what I had better do about it.”

Somehow, to Egg, the explanation was not quite satisfying.

Eight

ANGELA SUTCLIFFE

“Now, are you a friend or are you a sleuth? I simply must know.”

Miss Sutcliffe flashed a pair of mocking eyes as she spoke. She was sitting in a straight-backed chair, her grey hair becomingly arranged, her legs were crossed and Mr. Satterthwaite admired the perfection of her beautifully shod feet and her slender ankles. Miss Sutcliffe was a very fascinating woman, mainly owing to the fact that she seldom took anything seriously.

“Is that quite fair?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“My dear man, of course it’s fair. Have you come here for the sake of my beautiful eyes, as the French say so charmingly, or have you, you nasty man, come just to pump me about murders?”

“Can you doubt that your first alternative is the correct one?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite with a little bow.

“I can and I do,” said the actress with energy. “You are one of those people who look so mild, and really wallow in blood.”

“No, no.”

“Yes, yes. The only thing I can’t make up my mind about is whether it is an insult or a compliment to be considered a potential murderess. On the whole, I think it’s a compliment.”

She cocked her head a little on one side and smiled that slow bewitching smile that never failed.

Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself:

“Adorable creature.”

Aloud he said, “I will admit, dear lady, that the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange has interested me considerably. I have, as you perhaps know, dabbled in such doings before….”

He paused modestly, perhaps hoping that Miss Sutcliffe would show some knowledge of his activities. However, she merely asked:

“Tell me one thing—is there anything in what that girl said?”

“Which girl, and what did she say?”

“The Lytton Gore girl. The one who is so fascinated by Charles. (What a wretch Charles is—he will do it!) She thinks that that nice old man down in Cornwall was murdered, too.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, it certainly happened just the same way…She’s an intelligent girl, you know. Tell me—is Charles serious?”

“I expect your views on the subject are likely to be much more valuable than mine,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“What a tiresomely discreet man you are,” cried Miss Sutcliffe. “Now I”—she sighed—“am appallingly indiscreet….”

She fluttered an eyelash at him.

“I know Charles pretty well. I know men pretty well. He seems to me to display all the signs of settling down. There’s an air of virtue about him. He’ll be handing round the plate and founding a family in record time—that’s my view. How dull men are when they decide to settle down! They lose all their charm.”

“I’ve often wondered why Sir Charles has never married,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“My dear, he never showed any signs of wanting to marry. He wasn’t what they call a marrying man. But he was a very attractive man…” She sighed.

A slight twinkle showed in her eyes as she looked at Mr. Satterthwaite. “He and I were once—well, why deny what everybody knows? It was very pleasant while it lasted…and we’re still the best of friends. I suppose that’s the reason the Lytton Gore child looks at me so fiercely. She suspects I still have a tendresse for Charles. Have I? Perhaps I have. But at any rate I haven’t yet written my memoirs describing all my affairs in detail as most of my friends seem to have done. If I did, you know, the girl wouldn’t like it. She’d be shocked. Modern girls are easily shocked. Her mother wouldn’t be shocked at all. You can’t really shock a sweet mid-Victorian. They say so little, but always think the worst….”

Mr. Satterthwaite contented himself with saying:

“I think you are right in suspecting that Egg Lytton Gore mistrusts you.”

Miss Sutcliffe frowned.

“I’m not at all sure that I’m not a little jealous of her…we women are such cats, aren’t we? Scratch, scratch, miauw, miauw, purr, purr….”

She laughed.

“Why didn’t Charles come and catechize me on this business? Too much nice feeling, I suppose. The man must think me guilty…Am I guilty, Mr. Satterthwaite? What do you think now?”

She stood up and stretched out a hand.

“All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand—”

She broke off.

“No, I’m not Lady Macbeth. Comedy’s my line.”

“There seems also a certain lack of motive,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“True. I liked Bartholomew Strange. We were friends. I had no reason for wishing him out of the way. Because we were friends I’d rather like to take an active part in hunting down his murderer. Tell me if I can help in any way.”

“I suppose, Miss Sutcliffe, you didn’t see or hear anything that might have a bearing on the crime?”

“Nothing that I haven’t already told the police. The house party had only just arrived, you know. His death occurred on that first evening.”

“The butler?”

“I hardly noticed him.”

“Any peculiar behaviour on the part of the guests?”

“No. Of course that boy—what’s his name? Manders turned up rather unexpectedly.”

“Did Sir Bartholomew Strange seemed surprised?”

“Yes, I think he was. He said to me just before we went in to dinner that it was an odd business, ‘a new method of gate crashing,’ he called it. ‘Only,’ he said, ‘it’s my wall he’s crashed, not my gate.’”

“Sir Bartholomew was in good spirits?”

“Very good spirits!”

“What about this secret passage you mentioned to the police?”

“I believe it led out of the library. Sir Bartholomew promised to show it to me—but of course the poor man died.”

“How did the subject come up?”

“We were discussing a recent purchase of his—an old walnut bureau. I asked if it had a secret drawer in it. I told him I adored secret drawers. It’s a secret passion of mine. And he said, ‘No, there wasn’t a secret drawer that he knew of—but he had got a secret passage in the house.’”

“He didn’t mention a patient of his, a Mrs. de Rushbridger?”

“No.”

“Do you know a place called Gilling, in Kent?”

“Gilling? Gilling, no, I don’t think I do. Why?”

“Well, you knew Mr. Babbington before, didn’t you?”

“Who is Mr. Babbington?”

“The man who died, or who was killed, at the Crow’s Nest.”

“Oh, the clergyman. I’d forgotten his name. No, I’d never seen him before in my life. Who told you I knew him?”

“Someone who ought to know,” said Mr. Satterthwaite boldly.

Miss Sutcliffe seemed amused.

“Dear old man, did they think I’d had an affair with him? Archdeacons are sometimes very naughty, aren’t they? So why not vicars? There’s the man in the barrel, isn’t there? But I must clear the poor man’s memory. I’d never seen him before in my life.”

And with that statement Mr. Satterthwaite was forced to rest content.

Nine

MURIEL WILLS

Five Upper Cathcart Road, Tooting, seemed an incongruous home for a satiric playwright. The room into which Sir Charles was shown had walls of a rather drab oatmeal colour with a frieze of laburnum round the top. The curtains were of rose-coloured velvet, there were a lot of photographs and china dogs, the telephone was coyly hidden by a lady with ruffled skirts, there were a great many little tables and some suspicious-looking brasswork from Birmingham via the Far East.

Miss Wills entered the room so noiselessly that Sir Charles, who was at the moment examining a ridiculously elongated pierrot doll lying across the sofa, did not hear her. Her thin voice saying, “How d’you do, Sir Charles. This is really a great pleasure,” made him spin round.

Miss Wills was dressed in a limp jumper suit which hung disconsolately on her angular form. Her stockings were slightly wrinkled, and she had on very high-heeled patent leather slippers.

Sir Charles shook hands, accepted a cigarette, and sat down on the sofa by the pierrot doll. Miss Wills sat opposite him. The light from the window caught her pince-nez and made them give off little flashes.

“Fancy you finding me out here,” said Miss Wills. “My mother will be ever so excited. She just adores the theatre—especially anything romantic. That play where you were a Prince at a University—she’s often talked of it. She goes to matinées, you know, and eats chocolates—she’s one of that kind. And she does love it.”

“How delightful,” said Sir Charles. “You don’t know how charming it is to be remembered. The public memory is short!” He sighed.

“She’ll be thrilled at meeting you,” said Miss Wills. “Miss Sutcliffe came the other day, and Mother was thrilled at meeting her.”

“Angela was here?”

“Yes. She’s putting on a play of mine, you know: Little Dog Laughed.”

“Of course,” said Sir Charles. “I’ve read about it. Rather intriguing title.”

“I’m so glad you think so. Miss Sutcliffe likes it, too. It’s a kind of modern version of the nursery rhyme—a lot of froth and nonsense—Hey diddle diddle and the dish and the spoon scandal. Of course, it all revolves round Miss Sutcliffe’s part—everyone dances to her fiddling—that’s the idea.”

Sir Charles said:

“Not bad. The world nowadays is rather like a mad nursery rhyme. And the little dog laughed to see such sport, eh?” And he thought suddenly: “Of course this woman’s the Little Dog. She looks on and laughs.”

The light shifted from Miss Wills’s pince-nez, and he saw her pale-blue eyes regarding him intelligently through them.

“This woman,” thought Sir Charles, “has a fiendish sense of humour.”

Aloud he said:

“I wonder if you can guess what errand has brought me here?”

“Well,” said Miss Wills archly, “I don’t suppose it was only to see poor little me.”

Sir Charles registered for a moment the difference between the spoken and the written word. On paper Miss Wills was witty and cynical, in speech she was arch.

“It was really Satterthwaite put the idea into my head,” said Sir Charles. “He fancies himself as being a good judge of character.”

“He’s very clever about people,” said Miss Wills. “It’s rather his hobby, I should say.”

“And he is strongly of opinion that if there were anything worth noticing that night at Melfort Abbey you would have noticed it.”

“Is that what he said?”

“Yes.”

“I was very interested, I must admit,” said Miss Wills slowly. “You see, I’d never seen a murder at close hand before. A writer’s got to take everything as copy, hasn’t she?”

“I believe that’s a well-known axiom.”

“So naturally,” said Miss Wills, “I tried to notice everything I could.”

This was obviously Miss Wills’s version of Beatrice’s “poking and prying.”

“About the guests?”

“About the guests.”

“And what exactly did you notice?”

The pince-nez shifted.

“I didn’t really find out anything—if I had I’d have told the police, of course,” she added virtuously.

“But you noticed things.”

“I always do notice things. I can’t help it. I’m funny that way.” She giggled.

“And you noticed—what?”

“Oh, nothing—that is—nothing that you’d call anything, Sir Charles. Just little odds and ends about people’s characters. I find people so very interesting. So typical, if you know what I mean.”

“Typical of what?”

"Of themselves. Oh, I can't explain. I'm ever so silly at saying things."

She giggled again.

"Your pen is deadlier than your tongue," said Sir Charles, smiling.

"I don't think it's very nice of you to say deadlier, Sir Charles."

"My dear Miss Wills, admit that with a pen in your hand you're quite merciless."

"I think you're horrid, Sir Charles. It's you who are merciless to me."

"I must get out of this bog of badinage," said Sir Charles to himself. He said aloud:

"So you didn't find out anything concrete, Miss Wills?"

"No—not exactly. At least, there was one thing. Something I noticed and ought to have told the police about, only I forgot."

"What was that?"

"The butler. He had a kind of strawberry mark on his left wrist. I noticed it when he was handing me vegetables. I suppose that's the sort of thing which might come in useful."

"I should say very useful indeed. The police are trying hard to track down that man Ellis. Really, Miss Wills, you are a very remarkable woman. Not one of the servants or guests mentioned such a mark."

"Most people don't use their eyes much, do they?" said Miss Wills.

"Where exactly was the mark? And what size was it?"

"If you'll just stretch out your own wrist—" Sir Charles extended his arm. "Thank you. It was here." Miss Wills placed an unerring finger on the spot. "It was about the size, roughly, of a sixpence, and rather the shape of Australia."

“Thank you, that’s very clear,” said Sir Charles, removing his hand and pulling down his cuffs again.

“You think I ought to write to the police and tell them?”

“Certainly I do. It might be most valuable in tracing the man. Dash it all,” went on Sir Charles with feeling, “in detective stories there’s always some identifying mark on the villain. I thought it was a bit hard that real life should prove so lamentably behindhand.”

“It’s usually a scar in stories,” said Miss Wills thoughtfully.

“A birthmark’s just as good,” said Sir Charles.

He looked boyishly pleased.

“The trouble is,” he went on, “most people are so indeterminate. There’s nothing about them to take hold of.”

Miss Wills looked inquiringly at him.

“Old Babbington, for instance,” went on Sir Charles, “he had a curiously vague personality. Very difficult to lay hold of.”

“His hands were very characteristic,” said Miss Wills. “What I call a scholar’s hands. A little crippled with arthritis, but very refined fingers and beautiful nails.”

“What an observer you are. Ah, but—of course, you knew him before.”

“Knew Mr. Babbington?”

“Yes, I remember his telling me so—where was it he said he had known you?”

Miss Wills shook her head decisively.

“Not me. You must have been mixing me up with someone else—or he was. I’d never met him before.”

"It must be a mistake. I thought—at Gilling—"

He looked at her keenly. Miss Wills appeared quite composed.

"No," she said.

"Did it ever occur to you, Miss Wills, that he might have been murdered, too?"

"I know you and Miss Lytton Gore think so—or rather you think so."

"Oh—and—er—what do you think?"

"It doesn't seem likely," said Miss Wills.

A little baffled by Miss Wills's clear lack of interest in the subject Sir Charles started on another tack.

"Did Sir Bartholomew mention a Mrs. de Rushbridger at all?"

"No, I don't think so."

"She was a patient in his Home. Suffering from nervous breakdown and loss of memory."

"He mentioned a case of lost memory," said Miss Wills. "He said you could hypnotize a person and bring their memory back."

"Did he, now? I wonder—could that be significant?"

Sir Charles frowned and remained lost in thought. Miss Wills said nothing.

"There's nothing else you could tell me? Nothing about any of the guests?"

It seemed to him there was just the slightest pause before Miss Wills answered.

"No."

“About Mrs. Dacres? Or Captain Dacres? Or Miss Sutcliffe? Or Mr. Manders?”

He watched her very intently as he pronounced each name.

Once he thought he saw the pince-nez flicker, but he could not be sure.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing I can tell you, Sir Charles.”

“Oh, well!” He stood up. “Satterthwaite will be disappointed.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Miss Wills primly.

“I’m sorry, too, for disturbing you. I expect you were busy writing.”

“I was, as a matter of fact.”

“Another play?”

“Yes. To tell you the truth, I thought of using some of the characters at the house party at Melfort Abbey.”

“What about libel?”

“That’s quite all right, Sir Charles, I find people never recognize themselves.” She giggled. “Not if, as you said just now, one is really merciless.”

“You mean,” said Sir Charles, “that we all have an exaggerated idea of our own personalities and don’t recognize the truth if it’s sufficiently brutally portrayed. I was quite right, Miss Wills, you are a cruel woman.”

Miss Wills tittered.

“You needn’t be afraid, Sir Charles. Women aren’t usually cruel to men—unless it’s some particular man—they’re only cruel to other women.”

“Meaning you’ve got your analytical knife into some unfortunate female. Which one? Well, perhaps I can guess. Cynthia’s not beloved by her own sex.”

Miss Wills said nothing. She continued to smile—rather a catlike smile.

“Do you write your stuff or dictate it?”

“Oh, I write it and send it to be typed.”

“You ought to have a secretary.”

“Perhaps. Have you still got that clever Miss—Miss Milray, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, I’ve got Miss Milray. She went away for a time to look after her mother in the country, but she’s back again now. Most efficient woman.”

“So I should think. Perhaps a little impulsive.”

“Impulsive? Miss Milray?”

Sir Charles stared. Never in his wildest flights of fancy had he associated impulse with Miss Milray.

“Only on occasions, perhaps,” said Miss Wills.

Sir Charles shook his head.

“Miss Milray’s the perfect robot. Good-bye, Miss Wills. Forgive me for bothering you, and don’t forget to let the police know about that thingummybob.”

“The mark on the butler’s right wrist? No, I won’t forget.”

“Well, good-bye—half a sec.—did you say right wrist? You said left just now.”

“Did I? How stupid of me.”

“Well, which was it?”

Miss Wills frowned and half closed her eyes.

“Let me see. I was sitting so—and he—would you mind, Sir Charles, handing me that brass plate as though it was a vegetable dish. Left side.”

Sir Charles presented the beaten brass atrocity as directed.

“Cabbage, madam?”

“Thank you,” said Miss Wills, “I’m quite sure now. It was the left wrist, as I said first. Stupid of me.”

“No, no,” said Sir Charles. “Left and right are always puzzling.”

He said good-bye for the third time.

As he closed the door he looked back. Miss Wills was not looking at him. She was standing where he had left her. She was gazing at the fire, and on her lips was a smile of satisfied malice.

Sir Charles was startled.

“That woman knows something,” he said to himself. “I’ll swear she knows something. And she won’t say…But what the devil is it she knows?”

Ten

OLIVER MANDERS

At the office of Messrs Speier & Ross, Mr. Satterthwaite asked for Mr. Oliver Manders and sent in his card.

Presently he was ushered into a small room, where Oliver was sitting at a writing table.

The young man got up and shook hands.

“Good of you to look me up, sir,” he said.

His tone implied:

“I have to say that, but really it’s a damned bore.”

Mr. Satterthwaite, however, was not easily put off. He sat down, blew his nose thoughtfully, and, peering over the top of his handkerchief, said:

“Seen the news this morning?”

“You mean the new financial situation? Well, the dollar—”

“Not dollars,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Death. The result of the Loomouth exhumation. Babbington was poisoned—by nicotine.”

“Oh, that—yes, I saw that. Our energetic Egg will be pleased. She always insisted it was murder.”

“But it doesn’t interest you?”

“My tastes aren’t so crude. After all, murder—” he shrugged his shoulders. “So violent and inartistic.”

“Not always inartistic,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“No? Well, perhaps not.”

“It depends, does it not, on who commits the murder. You, for instance, would, I am sure, commit a murder in a very artistic manner.”

“Nice of you to say so,” drawled Oliver.

“But frankly, my dear boy, I don’t think much of the accident you faked. No more do the police, I understand.”

There was a moment’s silence—then a pen dropped to the floor.

Oliver said:

“Excuse me, I don’t quite understand you.”

“That rather inartistic performance of yours at Melfort Abbey. I should be interested to know—just why you did it.”

There was another silence, then Oliver said:

“You say the police—suspect?”

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded.

“It looks a little suspicious, don’t you think?” he asked pleasantly. “But perhaps you have a perfectly good explanation.”

“I’ve got an explanation,” said Oliver slowly. “Whether it’s a good one or not, I don’t know.”

“Will you let me judge?”

There was a pause, then Oliver said:

“I came there—the way I did—at Sir Bartholomew’s own suggestion.”

“What?” Mr. Satterthwaite was astonished.

“A bit odd, isn’t it? But it’s true. I got a letter from him suggesting that I should have a sham accident and claim hospitality. He said he couldn’t put his reasons in writing, but he would explain them to me at the first opportunity.”

“And did he explain?”

“No, he didn’t…I got there just before dinner. I didn’t see him alone. At the end of dinner he—he died.”

The weariness had gone out of Oliver’s manner. His dark eyes were fixed on Mr. Satterthwaite. He seemed to be studying attentively the reactions aroused by his words.

“You’ve got this letter?”

“No, I tore it up.”

“A pity,” said Mr. Satterthwaite dryly. “And you said nothing to the police?”

“No, it all seemed—well, rather fantastic.”

“It is fantastic.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head. Had Bartholomew Strange written such a letter? It seemed highly uncharacteristic. The story had a melodramatic touch most unlike the physician’s cheerful common sense.

He looked up at the young man. Oliver was still watching him. Mr. Satterthwaite thought: “He’s looking to see if I swallow this story.”

He said, “And Sir Bartholomew gave absolutely no reason for his request?”

“None whatever.”

“An extraordinary story.”

Oliver did not speak.

“Yet you obeyed the summons?”

Something of the weary manner returned.

“Yes, it seemed refreshingly out of the way to a somewhat jaded palate. I was curious, I must confess.”

“Is there anything else?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“What do you mean, sir, anything else?”

Mr. Satterthwaite did not really know what he meant. He was led by some obscure instinct.

“I mean,” he said, “is there anything else that might tell—against you?”

There was a pause. Then the young man shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of it. The woman isn’t likely to hold her tongue about it.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked a question.

“It was the morning after the murder stuff. I was talking to the Anthony Armstrong woman. I took out my pocketbook and something fell out of it. She picked it up and handed it back to me.”

“And this something?”

“Unfortunately she glanced at it before returning it to me. It was a cutting from a newspaper about nicotine—what a deadly poison it was, and so on.”

“How did you come to have such an interest in the subject?”

“I didn’t. I suppose I must have put that cutting in my wallet sometime or other, but I can’t remember doing so. Bit awkward, eh?”

Mr. Satterthwaite thought: “A thin story.”

“I suppose,” went on Oliver Manders, “she went to the police about it?”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head.

“I don’t think so. I fancy she’s a woman who likes—well, to keep things to herself. She’s a collector of knowledge.”

Oliver Manders leaned forward suddenly.

“I’m innocent, sir, absolutely innocent.”

“I haven’t suggested that you are guilty,” said Mr. Satterthwaite mildly.

“But someone has—someone must have done. Someone has put the police onto me.”

Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head.

“No, no.”

“Then why did you come here today?”

“Partly as the result of my—er—investigations on the spot.” Mr. Satterthwaite spoke a little pompously. “And partly at the suggestion of—a friend.”

“What friend?”

“Hercule Poirot.”

“That man!” The expression burst from Oliver. “Is he back in England?”

“Yes.”

“Why has he come back?”

Mr. Satterthwaite rose.

“Why does a dog go hunting?” he inquired.

And, rather pleased with his retort, he left the room.

Eleven

POIROT GIVES A SHERRY PARTY

I

Sitting in a comfortable armchair in his slightly florid suite at the Ritz, Hercule Poirot listened.

Egg was perched on the arm of a chair, Sir Charles stood in front of the fireplace, Mr. Satterthwaite sat a little farther away observing the group.

“It’s failure all along the line,” said Egg.

Poirot shook his head gently.

“No, no, you exaggerate. As regards a link with Mr. Babbington, you have drawn the blank—yes; but you have collected other suggestive information.”

“The Wills woman knows something,” said Sir Charles. “I’ll swear she knows something.”

“And Captain Dacres, he too has not the clear conscience. And Mrs. Dacres was desperately in want of money, and Sir Bartholomew spoilt her chance of laying hold of some.”

“What do you think of young Manders’s story?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“It strikes me as peculiar and as being highly uncharacteristic of the late Sir Bartholomew Strange.”

“You mean it’s a lie?” asked Sir Charles bluntly.

“There are so many kinds of lies,” said Hercule Poirot.

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

“This Miss Wills, she has written a play for Miss Sutcliffe?”

“Yes. The first night is Wednesday next.”

“Ah!”

He was silent again. Egg said:

“Tell us: What shall we do now?”

The little man smiled at her.

“There is only one thing to do—think.”

“Think?” cried Egg. Her voice was disgusted.

Poirot beamed on her.

“But yes, exactly that. Think! With thought, all problems can be solved.”

“Can’t we do something?”

“For you the action, eh, mademoiselle? But certainly, there are still things you can do. There is, for instance, this place, Gilling, where Mr. Babbington lived for so many years. You can make inquiries there. You say that this Miss Milray’s mother lives at Gilling and is an invalid. An invalid knows everything. She hears everything and forgets nothing. Make your inquiries of her, it may lead to something—who knows?”

“Aren’t you going to do anything?” demanded Egg persistently.

Poirot twinkled.

“You insist that I, too, shall be active? Eh bien. It shall be as you wish. Only me, I shall not leave this place. I am very comfortable here. But I will tell you what I will do: I will give the party—the Sherry Party—that is fashionable, is it not?”

“A Sherry Party?”

“Précisément, and to it I will ask Mrs. Dacres, Captain Dacres, Miss Sutcliffe, Miss Wills, Mr. Manders and your charming mother, mademoiselle.”

“And me?”

“Naturally, and you. The present company is included.”

“Hurrah,” said Egg. “You can’t deceive me, M. Poirot. Something will happen at that party. It will, won’t it?”

“We shall see,” said Poirot. “But do not expect too much, mademoiselle. Now leave me with Sir Charles, for there are a few things about which I want to ask his advice.”

As Egg and Mr. Satterthwaite stood waiting for the lift, Egg said ecstatically:

“It’s lovely—just like detective stories. All the people will be there, and then he’ll tell us which of them did it.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

II

The Sherry Party took place on Monday evening. The invitation had been accepted by all. The charming and indiscreet Miss Sutcliffe laughed mischievously as she glanced round.

“Quite the spider’s parlour, M. Poirot. And here all we poor little flies have walked in. I’m sure you’re going to give us the most marvellous résumé of the case and then suddenly you’ll point at me and say, ‘Thou art the woman,’ and everyone will say, ‘She done it,’ and I shall burst into tears and confess because I’m too terribly suggestible for words. Oh, M. Poirot, I’m so frightened of you.”

“Quelle histoire,” cried Poirot. He was busy with a decanter and glasses. He handed her a glass of sherry with a bow. “This is a friendly little party. Do not let us talk of murders and bloodshed and poison. Là, là! these things, they spoil the palate.”

He handed a glass to the grim Miss Milray, who had accompanied Sir Charles and was standing with a forbidding expression on her face.

“Voilà,” said Poirot as he finished dispensing hospitality. “Let us forget the occasion on which we first met. Let us have the party spirit. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Ah, malheur, I have again mentioned death. Madame,” he bowed to Mrs. Dacres, “may I be permitted to wish you good luck and congratulate you on your very charming gown.”

“Here’s to you, Egg,” said Sir Charles.

“Cheerio,” said Freddie Dacres.

Everybody murmured something. There was an air of forced gaiety about the proceedings. Everyone was determined to appear gay and unconcerned. Only Poirot himself seemed naturally so. He rambled on happily….

“The sherry, I prefer it to the cocktail—and a thousand times to the whisky. Ah, quel horreur, the whisky. By drinking the whisky, you ruin, absolutely ruin, the palate. The delicate wines of France, to appreciate them, you must never never—ah qu’est-ce qu’il y a—?”

A strange sound had interrupted him—a kind of choking cry. Every eye went to Sir Charles as he stood swaying, his face convulsed. The glass dropped from his hand onto the carpet, he took a few steps blindly, then collapsed.

There was a moment’s stupefied silence, then Angela Sutcliffe screamed and Egg started forward.

“Charles,” cried Egg. “Charles.”

She fought her way blindly forward. Mr. Satterthwaite gently held her back.

“Oh, dear God,” cried Lady Mary. “Not another!”

Angela Sutcliffe cried out:

“He’s been poisoned, too…This is awful. Oh, my God, this is too awful….”

And suddenly collapsing onto a sofa, she began to sob and laugh—a horrible sound.

Poirot had taken charge of the situation. He was kneeling by the prostrate man. The others drew back while he made his examination. He rose to his feet, mechanically dusting the knees of his trousers. He looked round at the assembly. There was complete silence, except for the smothered sobs of Angela Sutcliffe.

“My friends,” began Poirot.

He got no further, for Egg spat out at him:

“You fool. You absurd playacting little fool! Pretending to be so great and so wonderful, and to know all about everything. And now you let this happen. Another murder. Under your very nose…If you’d let the whole thing alone this wouldn’t have happened…It’s you who have murdered Charles—you—you—you….”

She stopped, unable to get out the words.

Poirot nodded his head gravely and sadly.

“It is true, mademoiselle. I confess it. It is I who have murdered Sir Charles. But I, mademoiselle, am a very special kind of murderer. I can kill—and I can restore to life.” He turned and in a different tone of voice, an apologetic everyday voice, he said:

“A magnificent performance, Sir Charles, I congratulate you. Perhaps you would now like to take your curtain.”

With a laugh the actor sprang to his feet and bowed mockingly.

Egg gave a great gasp.

"M. Poirot, you—you beast."

"Charles," cried Angela Sutcliffe. "You complete devil…."

"But why—?"

"How—?"

"What on earth—?"

By means of his upraised hand, Poirot obtained silence.

"Messieurs, mesdames. I demand pardon of you all. This little farce was necessary to prove to you all, and incidentally, to prove to myself a fact which my reason already told me is true.

"Listen. On this tray of glasses I placed in one glass a teaspoonful of plain water. That water represented pure nicotine. These glasses are of the same kind as those possessed by Sir Charles Cartwright and by Sir Bartholomew Strange. Owing to the heavy cut glass, a small quantity of a colourless liquid is quite undetectable. Imagine, then, the port glass of Sir Bartholomew Strange. After it was put on the table somebody introduced into it a sufficient quantity of pure nicotine. That might have been done by anybody. The butler, the parlourmaid, or one of the guests who slipped into the dining room on his or her way downstairs. Dessert arrived, the port is taken round, the glass is filled. Sir Bartholomew drinks—and dies.

"Tonight we have played a third tragedy—a sham tragedy—I asked Sir Charles to play the part of the victim. This he did magnificently. Now suppose for a minute that this was not a farce, but truth. Sir Charles is dead. What will be the steps taken by the police?"

Miss Sutcliffe cried:

"Why, the glass, of course." She nodded to where the glass lay on the floor as it had fallen from Sir Charles's hand. "You only put water in, but if it had been nicotine—"

“Let us suppose it was nicotine.” Poirot touched the glass gently with his toe. “You are of opinion that the police would analyse the glass, and that traces of nicotine would be found?”

“Certainly.”

Poirot shook his head gently.

“You are wrong. No nicotine would be found.”

They stared at him.

“You see,” he smiled, “that is not the glass from which Sir Charles drank.” With an apologetic grin he extended a glass from the tail pocket of his coat. “This is the glass he used.”

He went on:

“It is, you see, the simple theory of the conjuring trick. The attention cannot be in two places at once. To do my conjuring trick I need the attention focused elsewhere. Well, there is a moment, a psychological moment. When Sir Charles falls—dead—every eye in the room is on his dead body. Everyone crowds forward to get near him, and no one, no one at all, looks at Hercule Poirot, and in that moment I exchange the glasses and no one sees….

“So you see, I prove my point…There was such a moment at Crow’s Nest, there was such a moment at Melfort Abbey—and so, there was nothing in the cocktail glass and nothing in the port glass….”

Egg cried:

“Who changed them?”

Looking at her, Poirot replied:

“That, we have still to find out….”

“You don’t know?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

Rather uncertainly, the guests made signs of departure. Their manner was a little cold. They felt they had been badly fooled.

With a gesture of the hand, Poirot arrested them.

“One little moment, I pray of you. There is one thing more that I have to say. Tonight, admittedly, we have played the comedy. But the comedy may be played in earnest—it may become a tragedy. Under certain conditions the murderer may strike a third time…I speak now to all of you here present. If anyone of you knows something—something that may bear in any way on this crime, I implore that person to speak now. To keep knowledge to oneself at this juncture may be dangerous—so dangerous that death may be the result of silence. Therefore I beg again—if anyone knows anything, let that person speak now….”

It seemed to Sir Charles that Poirot’s appeal was addressed especially to Miss Wills. If so, it had no result. Nobody spoke or answered.

Poirot sighed. His hand fell.

“Be it so, then. I have given warning. I can do no more. Remember, to keep silence is dangerous….”

But still nobody spoke.

Awkwardly the guests departed.

Egg, Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite were left.

Egg had not yet forgiven Poirot. She sat very still, her cheeks flushed and her eyes angry. She wouldn’t look at Sir Charles.

“That was a damned clever bit of work, Poirot,” said Sir Charles appreciatively.

“Amazing,” said Mr. Satterthwaite with a chuckle. “I wouldn’t have believed that I wouldn’t have seen you do that exchange.”

“That is why,” said Poirot, “I could take no one into any confidence. The experiment could only be fair this way.”

“Was that the only reason you planned this—to see whether it could be done unnoticed?”

“Well, not quite, perhaps. I had one other aim.”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to watch the expression on one person’s face when Sir Charles fell dead.”

“Which person’s?” said Egg sharply.

“Ah, that is my secret.”

“And you did watch that person’s face?” asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

Poirot did not reply. He merely shook his head.

“Won’t you tell us what you saw there?”

Poirot said slowly:

“I saw an expression of the utmost surprise….”

Egg drew her breath in sharply.

“You mean,” she said, “that you know who the murderer is?”

“You can put it that way if you like, mademoiselle.”

“But then—but then—you know everything?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No; on the contrary I know nothing at all. For, you see, I do not know why Stephen Babbington was killed. Until I know that I can prove nothing, I can know nothing…It all hinges on that—the motive for Stephen Babbington’s death….”

There was a knock at the door and a page entered with a telegram on a tray.

Poirot opened it. His face changed. He handed the telegram to Sir Charles. Leaning over Sir Charles’s shoulder, Egg read it aloud:

“Please come and see me at once can give you valuable information as to Bartholomew Strange’s death—Margaret Rushbridger.”

“Mrs. de Rushbridger!” cried Sir Charles. “We were right after all. She has got something to do with the case.”

Twelve

DAY AT GILLING

I

At once an excited discussion sprang up. An A.B.C. was produced. It was decided that an early train would be better than going by car.

“At last,” said Sir Charles, “we’re going to get that particular part of the mystery cleared up.”

“What do you think the mystery is?” asked Egg.

“I can’t imagine. But it can’t fail to throw some light on the Babbington affair. If Tollie got those people together on purpose, as I feel pretty sure he did, then the ‘surprise’ he talked of springing on them had something to do with this Rushbridger woman. I think we can assume that, don’t you, M. Poirot?”

Poirot shook his head in a perplexed manner.

“This telegram complicates the affair,” he murmured. “But we must be quick—extremely quick.”

Mr. Satterthwaite did not see the need for extreme haste, but he agreed politely.

“Certainly, we will go by the first train in the morning. Er—that is to say, is it necessary for us all to go?”

“Sir Charles and I had arranged to go down to Gilling,” said Egg.

“We can postpone that,” said Sir Charles.

“I don’t think we ought to postpone anything,” said Egg. “There is no need for all four of us to go to Yorkshire. It’s absurd. Mass formation. M. Poirot and Mr. Satterthwaite go to Yorkshire and Sir Charles and I go to Gilling.”

“I’d rather like to look into this Rushbridger business,” said Sir Charles with a trace of wistfulness. “You see, I—er—talked to the Matron before—got my foot in, so to speak.”

“That’s just why you’d better keep away,” said Egg. “You involved yourself in a lot of lies, and now this Rushbridger woman has come to herself you’ll be exposed as a thorough-paced liar. It’s far far more important that you should come to Gilling. If we want to see Miss Milray’s mother she’ll open out to you much more than she would to anyone else. You’re her daughter’s employer, and she’ll have confidence in you.”

Sir Charles looked into Egg’s glowing, earnest face.

“I’ll come to Gilling,” he said. “I think you’re quite right.”

“I know I’m right,” said Egg.

“In my opinion an excellent arrangement,” said Poirot briskly. “As mademoiselle says, Sir Charles is preeminently the person to interview this Mrs. Milray. Who knows, you may learn from her facts of much more importance than those we shall learn in Yorkshire.”

Matters were arranged on this basis, and the following morning Sir Charles picked up Egg in his car at a quarter to ten. Poirot and Mr. Satterthwaite had already left London by train.

It was a lovely crisp morning, with just a touch of frost in the air. Egg felt her spirits rising as they turned and twisted through the various shortcuts which Sir Charles’s experience had discovered south of the Thames.

At last, however, they were flying smoothly along the Folkestone road. After passing through Maidstone, Sir Charles consulted a map, and they turned off from the main road and were shortly winding through country lanes. It was about a quarter to twelve when they at last reached their objective.

Gilling was a village which the world had left behind. It had an old church, a vicarage, two or three shops, a row of cottages, three or four new council houses and a very attractive village green.

Miss Milray's mother lived in a tiny house on the other side of the green to the church.

As the car drew up Egg asked:

"Does Miss Milray know you are going to see her mother?"

"Oh, yes. She wrote to prepare the old lady."

"Do you think that was a good thing?"

"My dear child, why not?"

"Oh, I don't know…You didn't bring her down with you, though."

"As a matter of fact, I thought she might cramp my style. She's so much more efficient than I am—she'd probably try to prompt me."

Egg laughed.

Mrs. Milray turned out to be almost ludicrously unlike her daughter. Where Miss Milray was hard, she was soft, where Miss Milray was angular, she was round. Mrs. Milray was an immense dumpling of a woman immovably fixed in an armchair conveniently placed so that she could, from the window, observe all that went on in the world outside.

She seemed pleasurably excited by the arrival of her visitors.

"This is very nice of you, I'm sure, Sir Charles. I've heard so much about you from my Violet." (Violet! Singularly incongruous name for Miss Milray.) "You don't know how much she admires you. It's been most interesting for her working with you all these years. Won't you sit down, Miss Lytton Gore? You'll excuse my not getting up. I've lost the use of my limbs for many years now. The Lord's will, and I don't complain, and what

I say is one can get used to anything. Perhaps you’d like a little refreshment after your drive down?”

Both Sir Charles and Egg disclaimed the need of refreshment, but Mrs. Milray paid no attention. She clapped her hands in an Oriental manner, and tea and biscuits made their appearance. As they nibbled and sipped, Sir Charles came to the object of their visit.

“I expect you’ve heard, Mrs. Milray, all about the tragic death of Mr. Babbington who used to be vicar here?”

The dumpling nodded its head in vigorous assent.

“Yes, indeed. I’ve read all about the exhumation in the paper. And whoever can have poisoned him I can’t imagine. A very nice man, he was, everyone liked him here—and her, too. And their little children and all.”

“It is indeed a great mystery,” said Sir Charles. “We’re all in despair about it. In fact, we wondered if you could possibly throw any light upon the matter.”

“Me? But I haven’t seen the Babbingtons—let me see—it must be over fifteen years.”

“I know, but some of us have the idea that there might be something in the past to account for his death.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what there could be. They led very quiet lives—very badly off, poor things, with all those children.”

Mrs. Milray was willing enough to reminisce, but her reminiscences seemed to shed little light on the problem they had set out to solve.

Sir Charles showed her the enlargement of a snapshot which included the Dacres, also an early portrait of Angela Sutcliffe and a somewhat blurred reproduction of Miss Wills cut from a newspaper. Mrs. Milray surveyed them all with great interest, but with no signs of recognition.

“I can’t say I remember any of them—of course it’s a long time ago. But this is a small place. There’s not much coming and going. The Agnew girls, the doctor’s daughters—they’re all married and out in the world, and our present doctor’s a bachelor—he’s got a new young partner. Then there were the old Miss Cayleys—sat in the big pew—they’re all dead many years back. And the Richardsons—he died and she went to Wales. And the village people, of course. But there’s not much change there. Violet, I expect, could tell you as much as I could. She was a young girl then and often over at the Vicarage.”

Sir Charles tried to envisage Miss Milray as a young girl and failed.

He asked Mrs. Milray if she remembered anyone of the name of Rushbridger, but the name failed to evoke any response.

Finally they took their leave.

Their next move was a scratch lunch in the baker’s shop. Sir Charles had hankerings for fleshpots elsewhere, but Egg pointed out that they might get hold of some local gossip.

“And boiled eggs and scones will do you no harm for once,” she said severely. “Men are so fussy about their food.”

“I always find eggs so depressing,” said Sir Charles meekly.

The woman who served them was communicative enough. She, too, had read of the exhumation in the paper and had been proportionately thrilled by its being “old vicar.” “I were a child at the time,” she explained. “But I remember him.”

She could not, however, tell them much about him.

After lunch they went to the church and looked through the register of births, marriages and deaths. Here again there seemed nothing hopeful or suggestive.

They came out into the churchyard and lingered. Egg read the names on the tombstones.

“What queer names there are,” she said. “Listen, here’s a whole family of Stavepennys and here’s a Mary Ann Sticklepath.”

“None of them so queer as mine,” murmured Sir Charles.

“Cartwright? I don’t think that’s a queer name at all.”

“I didn’t mean Cartwright. Cartwright’s my acting name, and I finally adopted it legally.”

“What’s your real name?”

“I couldn’t possibly tell you. It’s my guilty secret.”

“Is it as terrible as all that?”

“It’s not so much terrible as humorous.”

“Oh—tell it me.”

“Certainly not,” said Sir Charles firmly.

“Please.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’d laugh.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t be able to help laughing.”

“Oh, please tell me. Please, please, please.”

“What a persistent creature you are, Egg. Why do you want to know?”

“Because you won’t tell me.”

“You adorable child,” said Sir Charles a little unsteadily.

“I’m not a child.”

“Aren’t you? I wonder.”

“Tell me,” whispered Egg softly.

A humorous and rueful smile twisted Sir Charles’s mouth.

“Very well, here goes. My father’s name was Mugg.”

“Not really?”

“Really and truly.”

“H’m,” said Egg. “That is a bit catastrophic. To go through life as Mugg—”

“Wouldn’t have taken me far in my career, I agree. I remember,” went on Sir Charles dreamily, “I played with the idea (I was young then) of calling myself Ludovic Castiglione—but I eventually compromised on British alliteration as Charles Cartwright.”

“Are you really Charles?”

“Yes, my godfathers and godmothers saw to that.” He hesitated, then said, “Why don’t you say Charles—and drop the Sir?”

“I might.”

“You did yesterday. When—when—you thought I was dead.”

“Oh, then.” Egg tried to make her voice nonchalant.

Sir Charles said abruptly: “Egg, somehow or other this murder business doesn’t seem real anymore. Today especially, it seems fantastic. I meant to clear the thing up before—before anything else. I’ve been superstitious about it. I’ve associated success in solving problems with—with another kind of success. Oh, damn, why do I beat about the bush? I’ve made love on the stage so often that I’m diffident about it in real life…Is it me or is it young Manders, Egg? I must know. Yesterday I thought it was me….”

“You thought right….”

“You incredible angel,” cried Sir Charles.

“Charles, Charles, you can’t kiss me in a churchyard….”

“I shall kiss you anywhere I please….”

II

“We’ve found out nothing,” said Egg later, as they were speeding back to London.

“Nonsense, we’ve found out the only thing worth finding out…What do I care about dead clergymen or dead doctors? You’re the only thing that matters…You know, my dear, I’m thirty years older than you—are you sure it doesn’t matter?”

Egg pinched his arm gently.

“Don’t be silly…I wonder if the others have found out anything?”

“They’re welcome to it,” said Sir Charles generously.

“Charles—you used to be so keen.”

But Sir Charles was no longer playing the part of the great detective.

“Well, it was my own show. Now I’ve handed over to Moustachios. It’s his business.”

"Do you think he really knows who committed the crimes? He said he did."

"Probably hasn't the faintest idea, but he's got to keep up his professional reputation."

Egg was silent. Sir Charles said:

"What are you thinking about, darling?"

"I was thinking about Miss Milray. She was so odd in her manner that evening I told you about. She had just bought the paper about the exhumation, and she said she didn't know what to do."

"Nonsense," said Sir Charles cheerfully. "That woman always knows what to do."

"Do be serious, Charles. She sounded—worried."

"Egg, my sweet, what do I care for Miss Milray's worries? What do I care for anything but you and me?"

"You'd better pay some attention to the trams!" said Egg. "I don't want to be widowed before I'm a wife."

They arrived back at Sir Charles's flat for tea. Miss Milray came out to meet them.

"There is a telegram for you, Sir Charles."

"Thank you, Miss Milray." He laughed, a nervous boyish laugh. "Look here, I must tell you our news. Miss Lytton Gore and I are going to get married."

There was a moment's pause, and then Miss Milray said:

"Oh! I'm sure—I'm sure you'll be very happy."

There was a queer note in her voice. Egg noticed it, but before she could formulate her impression Charles Cartwright had swung round to her with a quick exclamation.

“My God, Egg, look at this. It’s from Satterthwaite.”

He shoved the telegram into her hands. Egg read it, and her eyes opened wide.

Thirteen

MRS. DE RUSHBRIDGER

Before catching their train Hercule Poirot and Mr. Satterthwaite had had a brief interview with Miss Lyndon, the late Sir Bartholomew Strange's secretary. Miss Lyndon had been very willing to help, but had had nothing of importance to tell them. Mrs. de Rushbridger was only mentioned in Sir Bartholomew's casebook in a purely professional fashion. Sir Bartholomew had never spoken of her save in medical terms.

The two men arrived at the Sanatorium about twelve o'clock. The maid who opened the door looked excited and flushed. Mr. Satterthwaite asked first for the Matron.

"I don't know whether she can see you this morning," said the girl doubtfully.

Mr. Satterthwaite extracted a card and wrote a few words on it.

"Please take her this."

They were shown into a small waiting room. In about five minutes the door opened and the Matron came in. She was looking quite unlike her usual brisk efficient self.

Mr. Satterthwaite rose.

"I hope you remember me" he said. "I came here with Sir Charles Cartwright just after the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Satterthwaite, of course I remember; and Sir Charles asked after poor Mrs. de Rushbridger then, and it seems such a coincidence."

"Let me introduce M. Hercule Poirot."

Poirot bowed and the Matron responded absently. She went on:

“I can’t understand how you can have had a telegram as you say. The whole thing seems most mysterious. Surely it can’t be connected with the poor doctor’s death in any way? There must be some madman about—that’s the only way I can account for it. Having the police here and everything. It’s really been terrible.”

“The police?” said Mr. Satterthwaite, surprised.

“Yes, since ten o’clock they’ve been here.”

“The police?” said Hercule Poirot.

“Perhaps we could see Mrs. de Rushbridger now,” suggested Mr. Satterthwaite. “Since she asked us to come—”

The Matron interrupted him.

“Oh, Mr. Satterthwaite, then you don’t know!”

“Know what?” demanded Poirot sharply.

“Poor Mrs. de Rushbridger. She’s dead.”

“Dead?” cried Poirot. “Mille Tonnerres! That explains it. Yes, that explains it. I should have seen—” He broke off. “How did she die?”

“It’s most mysterious. A box of chocolates came for her—liqueur chocolates—by post. She ate one—it must have tasted horrible, but she was taken by surprise, I suppose, and she swallowed it. One doesn’t like spitting a thing out.”

“Oui, oui, and if a liquid runs suddenly down your throat, it is difficult.”

“So she swallowed it and called out and Nurse came rushing, but we couldn’t do anything. She died in about two minutes. Then doctor sent for the police, and they came and examined the chocolates. All the top layer had been tampered with, the underneath ones were all right.”

“And the poison employed?”

“They think it’s nicotine.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “Again nicotine. What a stroke! What an audacious stroke!”

“We are too late,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “We shall never know now what she had to tell us. Unless—unless—she confided in someone?” He glanced interrogatively at the Matron.

Poirot shook his head.

“There will have been no confidences, you will find.”

“We can ask,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “One of the nurses, perhaps?”

“By all means ask,” said Poirot; but he did not sound hopeful.

Mr. Satterthwaite turned to the Matron who immediately sent for the two nurses, on day and night duty respectively, who had been in attendance on Mrs. de Rushbridger, but neither of them could add any information to that already given. Mrs. de Rushbridger had never mentioned Sir Bartholomew’s death, and they did not even know of the despatching of the telegram.

On a request from Poirot, the two men were taken to the dead woman’s room. They found Superintendent Crossfield in charge, and Mr. Satterthwaite introduced him to Poirot.

Then the two men moved over to the bed and stood looking down on the dead woman. She was about forty, dark-haired and pale. Her face was not peaceful—it still showed the agony of her death.

Mr. Satterthwaite said slowly:

“Poor soul….”

He looked across at Hercule Poirot. There was a strange expression on the little Belgian’s face. Something about it made Mr. Satterthwaite shiver….

Mr. Satterthwaite said:

“Someone knew she was going to speak, and killed her…She was killed in order to prevent her speaking….”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, that is so.”

“She was murdered to prevent her telling us what she knew.”

“Or what she did not know…But let us not waste time…There is much to be done. There must be no more deaths. We must see to that.”

Mr. Satterthwaite asked curiously:

“Does this fit in with your idea of the murderer’s identity?”

“Yes, it fits…But I realize one thing: The murderer is more dangerous than I thought…We must be careful.”

Superintendent Crossfield followed them out of the room and learnt from them of the telegram which had been received by them. The telegram had been handed in at Melfort Post Office, and on inquiry there it was elicited that it had been handed in by a small boy. The young lady in charge remembered it, because the message had excited her very much, mentioning, as it did, Sir Bartholomew Strange’s death.

After some lunch in company with the superintendent, and after despatching a telegram to Sir Charles, the quest was resumed.

At six o’clock that evening the small boy who had handed in the telegram was found. He told his story promptly. He had been given the telegram by a man dressed in shabby clothes. The man told him that the telegram had been given him by a “loony lady” in the “House in the Park.” She had dropped it out of the window wrapped round two half-crowns. The man was afraid to be mixed up in some funny business, and was tramping in the other direction, so he had given the boy two and six and told him to keep the change.

A search would be instituted for the man. In the meantime there seemed nothing more to be done, and Poirot and Mr. Satterthwaite returned to London.

It was close on midnight when the two men arrived back in town. Egg had gone back to her mother, but Sir Charles met them, and the three men discussed the situation.

“Mon ami,” said Poirot, “be guided by me. Only one thing will solve this case—the little grey cells of the brain. To rush up and down England, to hope that this person and that will tell us what we want to know—all such methods are amateurish and absurd. The truth can only be seen from within.”

Sir Charles looked slightly sceptical.

“What do you want to do, then?”

“I want to think. I ask of you twenty-four hours—in which to think.”

Sir Charles shook his head with a slight smile.

“Will thinking tell you what it was this woman could have said if she lived?”

“I believe so.”

“It hardly seems possible. However, M. Poirot, you must have it your own way. If you can see through this mystery, it’s more than I can. I’m beaten, and I confess it. In any case, I’ve other fish to fry.”

Perhaps he hoped to be questioned, but if so his expectation was disappointed. Mr. Satterthwaite did indeed look up alertly, but Poirot remained lost in thought.

“Well, I must be off,” said the actor. “Oh, just one thing. I’m rather worried about—Miss Wills.”

“What about her?”

“She’s gone.”

Poirot stared at him.

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Nobody knows…I was thinking things over after I got your telegram. As I told you at the time, I felt convinced that that woman knew something she hadn’t told us. I thought I’d have a last shot at getting it out of her. I drove out to her house—it was about half past nine when I got there—and asked for her. It appears she left home this morning—went up to London for the day—that’s what she said. Her people got a telegram in the evening saying she wasn’t returning for a day or so and not to worry.”

“And were they worrying?”

“I gather they were, rather. You see, she hadn’t taken any luggage with her.”

“Odd,” murmured Poirot.

“I know. It seems as though—I don’t know. I feel uneasy.”

“I warned her,” said Poirot. “I warned everyone. You remember I said to them, ‘Speak now.’”

“Yes, yes. Do you think that she, too—?”

“I have my ideas,” said Poirot. “For the moment I prefer not to discuss them.”

“First, the butler—Ellis—then Miss Wills. Where is Ellis? It’s incredible that the police have never been able to lay hands on him.”

“They have not looked for his body in the right place,” said Poirot.

“Then you agree with Egg. You think he is dead?”

“Ellis will never be seen alive again.”

“My God,” burst out Sir Charles. “It’s a nightmare—the whole thing is utterly incomprehensible.”

“No, no. It is sane and logical, on the contrary.”

Sir Charles stared at him.

“You say that?”

“Certainly. You see, I have the orderly mind.”

“I don’t understand you.”

Mr. Satterthwaite, too, looked curiously at the little detective.

“What kind of a mind have I?” demanded Sir Charles, slightly hurt.

“You have the actor’s mind, Sir Charles, creative, original, seeing always dramatic values. Mr. Satterthwaite here, he has the playgoer’s mind, he observes the characters, he has the sense of atmosphere. But me, I have the prosaic mind. I see only the facts without any dramatic trappings or footlights.”

“Then we’re to leave you to it?”

“That is my idea. For twenty-four hours.”

“Good luck to you, then. Goodnight.”

As they went away together Sir Charles said to Mr. Satterthwaite:

“That chap thinks a lot of himself.”

He spoke rather coldly.

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled. The star part! So that was it. He said:

“What did you mean by saying you had other fish to fry, Sir Charles?”

On Sir Charles’s face appeared the sheepish expression that Mr. Satterthwaite knew so well from attending weddings in Hanover Square.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I—er—well, Egg and I—”

“I’m delighted to hear it,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “My best congratulations.”

“Of course I’m years too old for her.”

“She doesn’t think so—and she’s the best judge.”

“That’s very nice of you, Satterthwaite. You know, I’d got it into my head she was fond of young Manders.”

“I wonder what made you think that,” said Mr. Satterthwaite innocently.

“Anyway,” said Sir Charles firmly, “she isn’t….”

Fourteen

MISS MILRAY

Poirot did not have quite the uninterrupted twenty-four hours for which he had stipulated.

At twenty minutes past eleven on the following morning Egg walked in unannounced. To her amazement she found the great detective engaged in building card houses. Her face showed such lively scorn that Poirot was impelled to defend himself.

“It is not, mademoiselle, that I have become childish in my old age. No. But the building of card houses, I have always found it most stimulating to the mind. It is an old habit of mine. This morning, first thing, I go out and buy the pack of cards. Unfortunately I make an error, they are not real cards. But they do just as well.”

Egg looked more closely at the erection on the table.

She laughed.

“Good heavens, they’ve sold you Happy Families.”

“What is that you say, the Happy Family?”

“Yes, it’s a game. Children play it in the nursery.”

“Ah, well, one can compose the houses just in the same manner.”

Egg had picked up some of the cards from the table and was looking at them affectionately.

“Master Bun, the baker’s son—I always loved him. And here’s Mrs. Mug, the milkman’s wife. Oh, dear, I suppose that’s me.”

“Why is that funny picture you, mademoiselle?”

“Because of the name.”

Egg laughed at his bewildered face and then began explaining. When she had finished he said:

“Ah, it was that that Sir Charles meant last night. I wondered…Mugg—ah, yes, one says in slang, does one not, you are a mug—a fool? Naturally you would change your name. You would not like to be the Lady Mugg, eh?”

Egg laughed. She said:

“Well, wish me happiness.”

“I do wish you happiness, mademoiselle. Not the brief happiness of youth, but the happiness that endures—the happiness that is built upon a rock.”

“I’ll tell Charles you call him a rock,” said Egg. “And now for what I came to see you about. I’ve been worrying and worrying about that cutting from the paper that Oliver dropped from his wallet. You know, the one Miss Wills picked up and handed back to him. It seems to me that either Oliver is telling a downright lie when he says he doesn’t remember its being there, or else it never was there. He dropped some odd bit of paper, and that woman pretended it was the nicotine cutting.”

“Why should she have done that, mademoiselle?”

“Because she wanted to get rid of it. She planted it on Oliver.”

“You mean she is the criminal?”

“Yes.”

“What was her motive?”

“It’s no good asking me that. I can only suggest that she’s a lunatic. Clever people often are rather mad. I can’t see any other reason—in fact I can’t see any motive anywhere.”

“Decidedly, that is the impasse. I should not ask you to guess at a motive. It is of myself that I ask that question without ceasing. What was the motive behind Mr. Babbington’s death? When I can answer that the case will be solved.”

“You don’t think just madness—?” suggested Egg.

“No, mademoiselle—not madness in the sense you mean. There is a reason. I must find that reason.”

“Well, good-bye,” said Egg. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you, but the idea just occurred to me. I must hurry. I’m going with Charles to the dress rehearsal of Little Dog Laughed—you know, the play Miss Wills has written for Angela Sutcliffe. It’s the first night tomorrow.”

“Mon dieu!” cried Poirot.

“What is it? Has anything happened?”

“Yes, indeed something has happened. An idea. A superb idea. Oh, but I have been blind—blind—”

Egg stared at him. As though realizing his eccentricity, Poirot took a hold on himself. He patted Egg on the shoulder.

“You think I am mad. Not at all. I heard what you said. You go to see The Little Dog Laughed, and Miss Sutcliffe acts in it. Go then, and pay no attention to what I have said.”

Rather doubtfully Egg departed. Left to himself, Poirot strode up and down the room muttering under his breath. His eyes shone green as any cat’s.

“Mais oui—that explains everything. A curious motive—a very curious motive—such a motive as I have never come across before, and yet it is reasonable, and, given the circumstances, natural. Altogether a very curious case.”

He passed the table where his card house still reposed. With a sweep of his hands he swept the cards from the table.

“The happy family, I need it no longer,” he said. “The problem is solved. It only remains to act.”

He caught up his hat and put on his overcoat. Then he went downstairs and the commissionaire called him a taxi. Poirot gave the address of Sir Charles’s flat.

Arrived there, he paid off the taxi, and stepped into the hall. The porter was absent taking up the lift. Poirot walked up the stairs. Just as he arrived on the second floor the door of Sir Charles’s flat opened and Miss Milray came out.

She started when she saw Poirot.

“You!”

Poirot smiled.

“Me! Or is it I? Enfin, moi!”

Miss Milray said:

“I’m afraid you won’t find Sir Charles. He’s gone to the Babylon Theatre with Miss Lytton Gore.”

“It is not Sir Charles I seek. It is my stick that I think I have left behind one day.”

“Oh, I see. Well, if you’ll ring, Temple will find it for you. I’m sorry I can’t stop. I’m on my way to catch a train. I’m going down to Kent—to my mother.”

“I comprehend. Do not let me delay you, mademoiselle.”

He stood aside and Miss Milray passed rapidly down the stairs. She was carrying a small attaché case.

But when she had gone Poirot seemed to forget the purpose for which he had come. Instead of going on up to the landing, he turned and made his way downstairs again. He arrived at the front door just in time to see Miss Milray getting into a taxi. Another taxi was coming slowly along the kerb. Poirot raised a hand and it came to rest. He got in and directed the driver to follow the other taxi.

No surprise showed on his face when the first taxi went north and finally drew up at Paddington Station, though Paddington is an odd station from which to proceed to Kent. Poirot went to the first-class booking window and demanded a return ticket to Loomouth. The train was due to depart in five minutes. Pulling up his overcoat well about his ears, for the day was cold, Poirot ensconced himself in the corner of a first-class carriage.

They arrived at Loomouth about five o'clock. It was already growing dark. Standing back a little, Poirot heard Miss Milray being greeted by the friendly porter at the little station.

"Well, now, miss, we didn't expect you. Is Sir Charles coming down?"

Miss Milray replied:

"I've come down here unexpectedly. I shall be going back tomorrow morning. I've just come to fetch some things. No, I don't want a cab, thank you. I'll walk up by the cliff path."

The dusk had deepened. Miss Milray walked briskly up the steep zigzag path. A good way behind came Hercule Poirot. He trod softly like a cat. Miss Milray, on arrival at Crow's Nest, produced a key from her bag and passed through the side door, leaving it ajar. She reappeared a minute or two later. She had a rusty door key and an electric torch in her hand. Poirot drew back a little behind a convenient bush.

Miss Milray passed round behind the house and up a scrambling overgrown path. Hercule Poirot followed. Up and up went Miss Milray until she came suddenly to an old stone tower such as is found often on that coast. This one was of humble and dilapidated appearance. There was, however, a curtain over the dirty window, and Miss Milray inserted her key in the big wooden door.

The key turned with a protesting creak. The door swung with a groan on its hinges. Miss Milray and her torch passed inside.

With an increase of pace Poirot caught up. He passed, in his turn, noiselessly through the door. The light of Miss Milray's torch gleamed fitfully on glass retorts, a bunsen burner—various apparatus.

Miss Milray had picked up a crowbar. She had raised it and was holding it over the glass apparatus when a hand caught her by the arm. She gasped and turned.

The green, catlike eyes of Poirot looked into hers.

"You cannot do that, mademoiselle," he said. "For what you seek to destroy is evidence."

Fifteen

CURTAIN

Hercule Poirot sat in a big armchair. The wall lights had been turned out. Only a rose-shaded lamp shed its glow on the figure in the armchair. There seemed something symbolic about it—he alone in the light—and the other three, Sir Charles, Mr. Satterthwaite and Egg Lytton Gore—Poirot’s audience—sitting in the outer darkness.

Hercule Poirot’s voice was dreamy. He seemed to be addressing himself to space rather than to his listeners.

“To reconstruct the crime—that is the aim of the detective. To reconstruct a crime you must place one fact upon another just as you place one card on another in building a house of cards. And if the facts will not fit—if the card will not balance—well—you must start your house again, or else it will fall….

“As I said the other day, there are three different types of mind: There is the dramatic mind—the producer’s mind, which sees the effect of reality that can be produced by mechanical appliances—there is also the mind that reacts easily to dramatic appearances—and there is the young romantic mind—and finally, my friends, there is the prosaic mind—the mind that sees not blue sea and mimosa trees, but the painted backcloth of stage scenery.

“So I come, mes amis, to the murder of Stephen Babbington in August last. On that evening Sir Charles Cartwright advanced the theory that Stephen Babbington had been murdered. I did not agree with that theory. I could not believe (a) that such a man as Stephen Babbington was likely to have been murdered, and (b) that it was possible to administer poison to a particular person under the circumstances that had obtained that evening.

“Now here I admit that Sir Charles was right and I was wrong. I was wrong because I was looking at the crime from an entirely false angle. It is only twenty-four hours ago that I suddenly perceived the proper angle of vision—and let me say that from that angle of vision the murder of Stephen Babbington is both reasonable and possible.

"But I will pass from that point for the moment and take you step by step along the path I myself have trodden. The death of Stephen Babbington I may call the first act of our drama. The curtain fell on that act when we all departed from Crow's Nest.

"What I might call the second act of the drama began in Monte Carlo when Mr. Satterthwaite showed me the newspaper account of Sir Bartholomew's death. It was at once clear that I had been wrong and Sir Charles had been right. Both Stephen Babbington and Sir Bartholomew Strange had been murdered and the two murders formed part of one and the same crime. Later a third murder completed the series—the murder of Mrs. de Rushbridger. What we need, therefore, is a reasonable commonsense theory which will link those three deaths together—in other words those three crimes were committed by one and the same person, and were to the advantage and benefit of that particular person.

"Now I may say at once that the principal thing that worried me was the fact that the murder of Sir Bartholomew Strange came after that of Stephen Babbington. Looking at those three murders without distinction of time and place the probabilities pointed to the murder of Sir Bartholomew Strange being what one might call the central or principal crime, and the other two murders as secondary in character—that is, arising from the connection of those two people with Sir Bartholomew Strange. However, as I remarked before—one cannot have one's crime as one would like to have it. Stephen Babbington had been murdered first and Sir Bartholomew Strange sometime later. It seemed, therefore, as though the second crime must necessarily arise out of the first and that accordingly it was the first crime we must examine for the clue to the whole.

"I did indeed so far incline to the theory of probability that I seriously considered the idea of a mistake having arisen. Was it possible that Sir Bartholomew Strange was intended as the first victim, and that Mr. Babbington was poisoned by mistake? I was forced, however, to abandon that idea. Anybody who knew Sir Bartholomew Strange with any degree of intimacy knew that he disliked the cocktail habit.

“Another suggestion: Had Stephen Babbington been poisoned in mistake for any other member of the original party? I could not find any evidence of such a thing. I was therefore forced back to the conclusion that the murder of Stephen Babbington had been definitely intended—and at once I came up against a complete stumbling block—the apparent impossibility of such a thing having happened.

“One should always start an investigation with the simplest and most obvious theories. Granting that Stephen Babbington had drunk a poisoned cocktail, who had had the opportunity of poisoning that cocktail? At first sight, it seemed to me that the only two people who could have done so (e.g., who handled the drinks) were Sir Charles Cartwright himself and the parlourmaid Temple. But though either of them could presumably have introduced the poison into the glass, neither of them had had any opportunity of directing that particular glass into Mr. Babbington’s hand. Temple might have done so by adroit handing of the tray so as to offer him the one remaining glass—(not easy, but it might have been done). Sir Charles could have done so by deliberately picking up the particular glass and handing it to him. But neither of these things had occurred. It looked as though chance and chance alone directed that particular glass to Stephen Babbington.

“Sir Charles Cartwright and Temple had the handling of the cocktails. Were either of those two at Melfort Abbey? They were not. Who had the best chance of tampering with Sir Bartholomew’s port glass? The absconding butler, Ellis, and his helper, the parlourmaid. But here, however, the possibility that one of the guests had done so could not be laid aside. It was risky, but it was possible, for any of the house party to have slipped into the dining room and put the nicotine into the port glass.

“When I joined you at Crow’s Nest you already had a list drawn up of the people who had been at Crow’s Nest and at Melfort Abbey. I may say now that the four names which headed the list—Captain and Mrs. Dacres, Miss Sutcliffe and Miss Wills—I discarded immediately.

"It was impossible that any of those four people should have known beforehand that they were going to meet Stephen Babbington at dinner. The employment of nicotine as a poison showed a carefully thought-out plan, not one that could be put into operation on the spur of the moment. There were three other names on that list—Lady Mary Lytton Gore, Miss Lytton Gore and Mr. Oliver Manders. Although not probable, those three were possible. They were local people, they might conceivably have motives for the removal of Stephen Babbington, and have chosen the evening of the dinner party for putting their plans into operation.

"On the other hand, I could find no evidence whatsoever that any of them had actually done such a thing.

"Mr. Satterthwaite, I think, reasoned on much the same lines as I had done, and he fixed his suspicions on Oliver Manders. I may say that young Manders was by far the most possible suspect. He displayed all the signs of high nervous tension on that evening at Crow's Nest—he had a somewhat distorted view of life owing to his private troubles—he had a strong inferiority complex, which is a frequent cause of crime, he was at an unbalanced age, he had actually had a quarrel, or shall we say had displayed animosity against Mr. Babbington. Then there were the curious circumstances of his arrival at Melfort Abbey. And later we had his somewhat incredible story of the letter from Sir Bartholomew Strange and the evidence of Miss Wills as to his having a newspaper cutting on the subject of nicotine poisoning in his possession.

"Oliver Manders, then, was clearly the person who should be placed at the head of the list of those seven suspects.

"But then, my friends, I was visited by a curious sensation. It seemed clear and logical enough that the person who had committed the crimes must have been a person who had been present on both occasions; in other words a person on that list of seven—but I had the feeling that that obviousness was an arranged obviousness. It was what any sane and logical person would be expected to think. I felt that I was, in fact, looking not at reality but at an artfully painted bit of scenery. A really clever criminal would have realized that anyone whose name was on that list would necessarily be suspect, and therefore he or she would arrange for it not to be there.

"In other words, the murderer of Stephen Babbington and Sir Bartholomew Strange was present on both occasions—but was not apparently so.

"Who had been present on the first occasion and not on the second? Sir Charles Cartwright, Mr. Satterthwaite, Miss Milray and Mr. Babbington.

"Could any of those four have been present on the second occasion in some capacity other than their own? Sir Charles and Mr. Satterthwaite had been in the South of France, Miss Milray had been in London, Mrs. Babbington had been in Loomouth. Of the four, then, Miss Milray and Mrs. Babbington seemed indicated. But could Miss Milray have been present at Melfort Abbey unrecognized by any of the company? Miss Milray has very striking features not easily disguised and not easily forgotten. I decided that it was impossible that Miss Milray could have been at Melfort Abbey unrecognized. The same applied to Mrs. Babbington.

"For the matter of that could Mr. Satterthwaite or Sir Charles Cartwright have been at Melfort Abbey and not been recognized? Mr. Satterthwaite just possibly; but when we come to Sir Charles Cartwright we come to a very different matter. Sir Charles is an actor accustomed to playing a part. But what part could he have played?

"And then I came to the consideration of the butler Ellis.

"A very mysterious person, Ellis. A person who appears from nowhere a fortnight before the crime and vanishes afterwards with complete success. Why was Ellis so successful? Because Ellis did not really exist. Ellis, again, was a thing of pasteboard and paint and stagecraft—Ellis was not real.

"But was it possible? After all, the servants at Melfort Abbey knew Sir Charles Cartwright, and Sir Bartholomew Strange was an intimate friend of his. The servants I got over easily enough. The impersonation of the butler risked nothing—if the servants recognized him—why, no harm would be done—the whole thing could be passed off as a joke. If, on the other hand, a fortnight passed without any suspicion being aroused, well, the thing was safe as houses. And I recalled what I had been told of the servants' remarks about the butler. He was 'quite the gentleman,' and had been 'in good houses,' and knew several interesting scandals. That was easy enough. But a very significant statement was made by the parlourmaid Alice. She said, ‘He arranged the work different from any butler I ever knew before.’ When that remark was repeated to me, it became a confirmation of my theory.

“But Sir Bartholomew Strange was another matter. It is hardly to be supposed that his friend could take him in. He must have known of the impersonation. Had we any evidence of that? Yes. The acute Mr. Satterthwaite pounced on one point quite early in the proceedings—the facetious remark of Sir Bartholomew (totally uncharacteristic of his manner to servants)—‘You’re a first-class butler, aren’t you, Ellis?’ A perfectly understandable remark if the butler were Sir Charles Cartwright and Sir Bartholomew was in on the joke.

“Because that is undoubtedly how Sir Bartholomew saw the matter. The impersonation of Ellis was a joke, possibly even a wager, its culmination was designed to be the successful spoofing of the house party—hence Sir Bartholomew’s remark about a surprise and his cheerful humour. Note, too, that there was still time to draw back. If any of the house party had spotted Charles Cartwright that first evening at the dinner table, nothing irrevocable had yet occurred. The whole thing could have been passed off as a joke. But nobody noticed the stooping middle-aged butler, with his belladonna darkened eyes, and his whiskers, and the painted birthmark on his wrist. A very subtle identifying touch that—which completely failed, owing to the lack of observation of most human beings! The birthmark was intended to bulk largely in the description of Ellis—and in all that fortnight no one noticed it! The only person who did was the sharp-eyed Miss Wills, to whom we shall come presently.

“What happened next? Sir Bartholomew died. This time the death was not put down to natural causes. The police came. They questioned Ellis and the others. Later that night ‘Ellis’ left by the secret passage, resumed his own personality, and two days later was strolling about the gardens at Monte Carlo ready to be shocked and surprised by the news of his friend’s death.

“This, mind you, was all theory. I had no actual proof, but everything that arose supported that theory. My house of cards was well and truly built. The blackmailing letters discovered in Ellis’s room? But it was Sir Charles himself who discovered them!

"And what of the supposed letter from Sir Bartholomew Strange asking young Manders to arrange an accident? Well, what could be easier than for Sir Charles to write that letter in Sir Bartholomew's name? If Manders had not destroyed that letter himself, Sir Charles in the rôle of Ellis can easily do so when he valets the young gentleman. In the same way the newspaper cutting is easily introduced by Ellis into Oliver Manders's wallet.

"And now we come to the third victim—Mrs. de Rushbridger. When do we first hear of Mrs. de Rushbridger? Immediately after that very awkward chaffing reference to Ellis being the perfect butler—that extremely uncharacteristic utterance of Sir Bartholomew Strange. At all costs attention must be drawn away from Sir Bartholomew's manner to his butler. Sir Charles quickly asks what was the message the butler had brought. It is about this woman—this patient of the doctor's. And immediately Sir Charles throws all his personality into directing attention to this unknown woman and away from the butler. He goes to the Sanatorium and questions the Matron. He runs Mrs. de Rushbridger for all he is worth as a red herring.

"We must now examine the part played by Miss Wills in the drama. Miss Wills has a curious personality. She is one of those people who are quite unable to impress themselves on their surroundings. She is neither good-looking nor witty nor clever, not even particularly sympathetic. She is nondescript. But she is extremely observant and extremely intelligent. She takes her revenge on the world with her pen. She has the great art of being able to reproduce character on paper. I do not know if there was anything about the butler that struck Miss Wills as unusual, but I do think that she was the only person at the table who noticed him at all. On the morning after the murder her insatiable curiosity led her to poke and pry, as the housemaid put it. She went into Dacres's room, she went through the baize door into the servants' quarters, led, I think, by the mongoose instinct for finding out.

"She was the only person who occasioned Sir Charles any uneasiness. That is why he was anxious to be the one to tackle her. He was fairly reassured by his interview and distinctly gratified that she had noticed the birthmark. But after that came catastrophe. I don't think that until that minute Miss

Wills had connected Ellis the butler with Sir Charles Cartwright. I think she had only been vaguely struck by some resemblance to someone in Ellis. But she was an observer. When dishes were handed to her she had automatically noted—not the face—but the hands that held the dishes.

"It did not occur to her that Ellis was Sir Charles. But when Sir Charles was talking to her it did suddenly occur to her that Sir Charles was Ellis! And so she asked him to pretend to hand her a dish of vegetables. But it was not whether the birthmark was on the right or left wrist that interested her. She wanted a pretext to study his hands—hands held in the same position as those of Ellis the butler.

"And so she leaped to the truth. But she was a peculiar woman. She enjoyed knowledge for its own sake. Besides, she was by no means sure that Sir Charles had murdered his friend. He had masqueraded as a butler, yes—but that did not necessarily make him a murderer. Many an innocent man has kept silence because speech would place him in an awkward position.

"So Miss Wills kept her knowledge to herself—and enjoyed it. But Sir Charles was worried. He did not like that expression of satisfied malice on her face that he saw as he left the room. She knew something. What? Did it affect him? He could not be sure. But he felt that it was something connected with Ellis the butler. First Mr. Satterthwaite—now Miss Wills. Attention must be drawn away from that vital point. It must be focused definitely elsewhere. And he thought of a plan—simple, audacious and, as he fancied, definitely mystifying.

"On the day of my Sherry Party I imagine Sir Charles rose very early, went to Yorkshire and, disguised in shabby clothes, gave the telegram to a small boy to send off. Then he returned to town in time to act the party I had indicated in my little drama. He did one more thing. He posted a box of chocolates to a woman he had never seen and of whom he knew nothing….

"You know what happened that evening. From Sir Charles's uneasiness I was fairly sure that Miss Wills had certain suspicions. When Sir Charles did his 'death scene' I watched Miss Wills's face. I saw the look of astonishment that showed on it. I knew then that Miss Wills definitely suspected Sir Charles of being the murderer. When he appeared to die poisoned like the other two she thought her deductions must be wrong.

“But if Miss Wills suspected Sir Charles, then Miss Wills was in serious danger. A man who has killed twice will kill again. I uttered a very solemn warning. Later that night I communicated with Miss Wills by telephone, and on my advice she left home suddenly the next day. Since then she has been living here in this hotel. That I was wise is proved by the fact that Sir Charles went out to Tooting on the following evening after he had returned from Gilling. He was too late. The bird had flown.

“In the meantime, from his point of view, the plan had worked well. Mrs. de Rushbridger had something of importance to tell us. Mrs. de Rushbridger was killed before she could speak. How dramatic! How like the detective stories, the plays, the films! Again the cardboard and the tinsel and the painted cloth.

“But I, Hercule Poirot, was not deceived. Mr. Satterthwaite said to me she was killed in order that she should not speak. I agreed. He went on to say she was killed before she could tell us what she knew. I said, ‘Or what she did NOT know.’ I think he was puzzled. But he should have seen then the truth. Mrs. de Rushbridger was killed because she could, in actual fact, have told us nothing at all. Because she had no connection with the crime. If she were to be Sir Charles’s successful red herring—she could only be so dead. And so Mrs. de Rushbridger, a harmless stranger, was murdered….

“Yet even in that seeming triumph Sir Charles made a colossal—a childish—error! The telegram was addressed to me, Hercule Poirot, at the Ritz Hotel. But Mrs. de Rushbridger had never heard of my connection with the case! No one up in that part of the world knew of it. It was an unbelievably childish error.

“Eh bien, then I had reached a certain stage. I knew the identity of the murderer. But I did not know the motive for the original crime.

“I reflected.

"And once again, more clearly than ever, I saw the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange as the original and purposeful murder. What reason could Sir Charles Cartwright have for the murder of his friend? Could I imagine a motive? I thought I could."

There was a deep sigh. Sir Charles Cartwright rose slowly to his feet and strolled to the fireplace. He stood there, his hand on his hip, looking down at Poirot. His attitude (Mr. Satterthwaite could have told you) was that of Lord Eaglemount as he looks scornfully at the rascally solicitor who has succeeded in fastening an accusation of fraud upon him. He radiated nobility and disgust. He was the aristocrat looking down at the ignoble canaille.

"You have an extraordinary imagination, M. Poirot," he said. "It's hardly worth while saying that there's not one single word of truth in your story. How you have the damned impertinence to dish up such an absurd fandangle of lies I don't know. But go on, I am interested. What was my motive for murdering a man whom I had known ever since boyhood?"

Hercule Poirot, the little bourgeois, looked up at the aristocrat. He spoke quickly but firmly.

"Sir Charles, we have a proverb that says, 'Cherchez la femme.' It was there that I found my motive. I had seen you with Mademoiselle Lytton Gore. It was clear that you loved her—loved her with that terrible absorbing passion that comes to a middle-aged man and which is usually inspired by an innocent young girl.

"You loved her. She, I could see, had the hero-worship for you. You had only to speak and she would fall into your arms. But you did not speak. Why?

"You pretended to your friend, Mr. Satterthwaite, that you were the dense lover who cannot recognize his mistress's answering passion. You pretended to think that Miss Lytton Gore was in love with Oliver Manders. But I say, Sir Charles, that you are a man of the world. You are a man with a great experience of women. You cannot have been deceived. You knew perfectly well that Miss Lytton Gore cared for you. Why, then, did you not marry her? You wanted to do so.

“It must be that there was some obstacle. What could that obstacle be? It could only be the fact that you already had a wife. But nobody ever spoke of you as a married man. You passed always as a bachelor. The marriage, then, had taken place when you were very young—before you became known as a rising young actor.

“What had happened to your wife? If she were still alive, why did nobody know about her? If you were living apart there was the remedy of divorce. If your wife was a Catholic, or one who disapproved of divorce, she would still be known as living apart from you.

“But there are two tragedies where the law gives no relief. The woman you married might be serving a life sentence in some prison, or she might be confined in a lunatic asylum. In neither case could you obtain a divorce, and if it had happened while you were still a boy nobody might know about it.

“If nobody knew, you might marry Miss Lytton Gore without telling her the truth. But supposing one person knew—a friend who had known you all your life? Sir Bartholomew Strange was an honourable, upright physician. He might pity you deeply, he might sympathize with a liaison or an irregular life, but he would not stand by silent and see you enter into a bigamous marriage with an unsuspecting young girl.

“Before you could marry Miss Lytton Gore, Sir Bartholomew Strange must be removed….”

Sir Charles laughed.

“And dear old Babbington? Did he know all about it, too?”

“I fancied so at first. But I soon found that there was no evidence to support that theory. Besides, my original stumbling block remained. Even if it was you who put the nicotine into the cocktail glass, you could not have ensured its reaching one particular person.

"That was my problem. And suddenly a chance word from Miss Lytton Gore showed me light.

"The poison was not intended especially for Stephen Babbington. It was intended for any one of those present, with three exceptions. These exceptions were Miss Lytton Gore, to whom you were careful to hand an innocent glass, yourself, and Sir Bartholomew Strange, who, you knew, did not drink cocktails."

Mr. Satterthwaite cried out:

"But that's nonsense! What's the point of it? There isn't any."

Poirot turned towards him. Triumph came into his voice.

"Oh, yes, there is. A queer point—a very queer point. The only time I have come across such a motive for murder. The murder of Stephen Babbington was neither more nor less than a dress rehearsal."

"What?"

"Yes, Sir Charles was an actor. He obeyed his actor's instinct. He tried out his murder before committing it. No suspicion could possibly attach to him. Not one of those people's deaths could benefit him in any way, and, moreover, as everyone has found, he could not have been proved to have poisoned any particular person. And, my friends, the dress rehearsal went well. Mr. Babbington dies, and foul play is not even suspected. It is left to Sir Charles to urge that suspicion and he is highly gratified at our refusal to take it seriously. The substitution of the glass, too, that has gone without a hitch. In fact, he can be sure that, when the real performance comes, it will be 'all right on the night.'

"As you know, events took a slightly different turn. On the second occasion a doctor was present who immediately suspected poison. It was then to Sir Charles's interests to stress the death of Babbington. Sir Bartholomew's death must be presumed to be the outcome of the earlier death. Attention must be focused on the motive for Babbington's murder, not on any motive that might exist for Sir Bartholomew's removal.

“But there was one thing that Sir Charles failed to realize—the efficient watchfulness of Miss Milray. Miss Milray knew that her employer dabbled in chemical experiments in the tower in the garden. Miss Milray paid bills for rose spraying solution, and realized that quite a lot of it had unaccountably disappeared. When she read that Mr. Babbington had died of nicotine poisoning, her clever brain leaped at once to the conclusion that Sir Charles had extracted the pure alkaloid from the rose solution.

“And Miss Milray did not know what to do, for she had known Mr. Babbington as a little girl, and she was in love, deeply and devotedly as an ugly woman can be, with her fascinating employer.

“In the end she decided to destroy Sir Charles’s apparatus. Sir Charles himself had been so cocksure of his success that he had never thought it necessary. She went down to Cornwall, and I followed.”

Again Sir Charles laughed. More than ever he looked a fine gentleman disgusted by a rat.

“Is some old chemical apparatus all your evidence?” he demanded contemptuously.

“No,” said Poirot. “There is your passport showing the dates when you returned to and left England. And there is the fact that in the Harverton County Asylum there is a woman, Gladys Mary Mugg, the wife of Charles Mugg.”

Egg had so far sat silent—a frozen figure. But now she stirred. A little cry—almost a moan—came from her.

Sir Charles turned superbly.

“Egg, you don’t believe a word of this absurd story, do you?”

He laughed. His hands were outstretched.

Egg came slowly forward as though hypnotized. Her eyes, appealing, tortured, gazed into her lover’s. And then, just before she reached him, she wavered, her glance fell, went this way and that as though seeking for reassurance.

Then with a cry she fell on her knees by Poirot.

“Is this true? Is this true?”

He put both hands on her shoulders, a firm, kindly touch.

“It is true, mademoiselle.”

There was no sound then but Egg’s sobs.

Sir Charles seemed suddenly to have aged. It was an old man’s face, a leering satyr’s face.

“God damn you,” he said.

And never, in all his acting career, had words come with such utter and compelling malignancy.

Then he turned and went out of the room.

Mr. Satterthwaite half sprang up from his chair, but Poirot shook his head, his hand still gently stroking the sobbing girl.

“He’ll escape,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Poirot shook his head.

“No, he will only choose his exit. The slow one before the eyes of the world, or the quick one off stage.”

The door opened softly and someone came in. It was Oliver Manders. His usual sneering expression was gone. He looked white and unhappy.

Poirot bent over the girl.

“See, mademoiselle,” he said gently. “Here is a friend come to take you home.”

Egg rose to her feet. She looked uncertainly towards Oliver then made a step stumblingly towards him.

“Oliver…Take me to Mother. Oh, take me to Mother.”

He put an arm round her and drew her towards the door.

“Yes, dear, I’ll take you. Come.”

Egg’s legs were trembling so that she could hardly walk. Between them Oliver and Mr. Satterthwaite guided her footsteps. At the door she took a hold upon herself and threw back her head.

“I’m all right.”

Poirot made a gesture, and Oliver Manders came back into the room.

“Be very good to her,” said Poirot.

“I will, sir. She’s all I care about in the world—you know that. Love for her made me bitter and cynical. But I shall be different now. I’m ready to stand by. And someday, perhaps—”

“I think so,” said Poirot. “I think she was beginning to care for you when he came along and dazzled her. Hero-worship is a real and terrible danger to the young. Someday Egg will fall in love with a friend, and build her happiness upon rock.”

He looked kindly after the young man as he left the room.

Presently Mr. Satterthwaite returned.

“M. Poirot,” he said. “You have been wonderful—absolutely wonderful.”

Poirot put on his modest look.

“It is nothing—nothing. A tragedy in three acts—and now the curtain has fallen.”

“You’ll excuse me—” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Yes, there is some point you want explained to you?”

“There is one thing I want to know.”

“Ask then.”

“Why do you sometimes speak perfectly good English and at other times not?”

Poirot laughed.

“Ah, I will explain. It is true that I can speak the exact, the idiomatic English. But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say—a foreigner—he can’t even speak English properly. It is not my policy to terrify people—instead I invite their gentle ridicule. Also I boast! An Englishman he says often, ‘A fellow who thinks as much of himself as that cannot be worth much.’ That is the English point of view. It is not at all true. And so, you see, I put people off their guard. Besides,” he added, “it has become a habit.”

“Dear me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “quite the cunning of the serpent.”

He was silent for a moment or two, thinking over the case.

“I’m afraid I have not shone over this matter,” he said vexedly.

“On the contrary. You appreciated that important point—Sir Bartholomew’s remark about the butler—you realized the astute observation of Miss Wills. In fact, you could have solved the whole thing but for your playgoer’s reaction to dramatic effect.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked cheerful.

Suddenly an idea struck him. His jaw fell.

“My goodness,” he cried, “I’ve only just realized it. That rascal, with his poisoned cocktail! Anyone might have drunk it. It might have been me.”

“There is an even more terrible possibility that you have not considered,” said Poirot.

“Eh?”

“It might have been ME,” said Hercule Poirot.

Death In The Clouds (1935)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Passengers

Seat

No. 2 Madame Giselle

No. 4 James Ryder

No. 5 Monsieur Armand Dupont

No. 6 Monsieur Jean Dupont

No. 8 Daniel Clancy

No. 9 Hercule Poirot

No. 10 Doctor Bryant

No. 12 Norman Gale

No. 13 The Countess of Horbury

No. 16 Jane Grey

No. 17 The Hon. Venetia Kerr

Chapter 1

Paris to Croydon

The September sun beat down hotly on Le Bourget aerodrome as the passengers crossed the ground and climbed into the air liner Prometheus, due to depart for Croydon in a few minutes' time.

Jane Grey was among the last to enter and take her seat, No. 16. Some of the passengers had already passed on through the centre door past the tiny pantry-kitchen and the two toilets to the front car. Most people were already seated. On the opposite side of the gangway there was a good deal of chatter—a rather shrill, high-pitched woman's voice dominating it. Jane's lips twisted slightly. She knew that particular type of voice so well.

'My dear—it's extraordinary—no idea—Where, do you say? Juan les Pins? Oh, yes. No—Le Pinet—Yes, just the same old crowd—But of course let's sit together. Oh, can't we? Who—? Oh, I see…'

And then a man's voice—foreign, polite:

'—With the greatest of pleasure, Madame.'

Jane stole a glance out of the corner of her eye.

A little elderly man with large moustaches and an egg-shaped head was politely moving himself and his belongings from the seat corresponding to Jane's on the opposite side of the gangway.

Jane turned her head slightly and got a view of the two women whose unexpected meeting had occasioned this polite action on the stranger's part. The mention of Le Pinet had stimulated her curiosity, for Jane also had been at Le Pinet.

She remembered one of the women perfectly—remembered how she had seen her last—at the baccarat table, her little hands clenching and unclenching themselves—her delicately made-up Dresden china face flushing and paling alternately. With a little effort, Jane thought, she could have remembered her name. A friend had mentioned it—had said: 'She's a peeress, she is, but not one of the proper ones—she was only some chorus girl or other.'

Deep scorn in the friend's voice. That had been Maisie, who had a first-class job as a masseuse 'taking off ' flesh.

The other woman, Jane thought in passing, was the 'real thing'. The 'horsey, county type', thought Jane, and forthwith forgot the two women and interested herself in the view obtainable through the window of Le Bourget aerodrome. Various other machines were standing about. One of them looked like a big metallic centipede.

The one place she was obstinately determined not to look was straight in front of her, where, on the seat opposite, sat a young man.

He was wearing a rather bright periwinkle-blue pullover. Above the pullover Jane was determined not to look. If she did, she might catch his eye, and that would never do!

Mechanics shouted in French—the engine roared—relaxed—roared again—obstructions were pulled away—the plane started.

Jane caught her breath. It was only her second flight. She was still capable of being thrilled. It looked—it looked as though they must run into that fence thing—no, they were off the ground—rising—rising—sweeping round—there was Le Bourget beneath them.

The midday service to Croydon had started. It contained twenty-one passengers—ten in the forward carriage, eleven in the rear one. It had two pilots and two stewards. The noise of the engines was very skilfully deadened. There was no need to put cotton wool in the ears. Nevertheless there was enough noise to discourage conversation and encourage thought.

As the plane roared above France on its way to the Channel the passengers in the rear compartment thought their various thoughts.

Jane Grey thought: 'I won't look at him…I won't…It's much better not. I'll go on looking out of the window and thinking. I'll choose a definite thing to think about—that’s always the best way. That will keep my mind steady. I’ll begin at the beginning and go all over it.’

Resolutely she switched her mind back to what she called the beginning, that purchase of a ticket in the Irish Sweep. It had been an extravagance, but an exciting extravagance.

A lot of laughter and teasing chatter in the hairdressing establishment in which Jane and five other young ladies were employed.

‘What’ll you do if you win it, dear?’

‘I know what I’d do.’

Plans—castles in the air—a lot of chaff.

Well, she hadn’t won ‘it’—‘it’ being the big prize; but she had won a hundred pounds.

A hundred pounds.

‘You spend half of it, dear, and keep the other half for a rainy day. You never know.’

‘I’d buy a fur coat, if I was you—a real tip-top one.’

‘What about a cruise?’

Jane had wavered at the thought of a ‘cruise’, but in the end she had remained faithful to her first idea. A week at Le Pinet. So many of her ladies had been going to Le Pinet or just come back from Le Pinet. Jane, her clever fingers patting and manipulating the waves, her tongue uttering mechanically the usual clichés, ‘Let me see, how long is it since you had your perm, Madam?’ ‘Your hair’s such an uncommon colour, Madam.’ ‘What a wonderful summer it has been, hasn’t it, Madam?’ had thought to herself, ‘Why the devil can’t I go to Le Pinet?’ Well, now she could.

Clothes presented small difficulty. Jane, like most London girls employed in smart places, could produce a miraculous effect of fashion for a ridiculously small outlay. Nails, make-up and hair were beyond reproach.

Jane went to Le Pinet.

Was it possible that now, in her thoughts, ten days at Le Pinet had dwindled down to one incident?

An incident at the roulette table. Jane allowed herself a certain amount each evening for the pleasures of gambling. That sum she was determined not to exceed. Contrary to the prevalent superstition, Jane's beginner's luck had been bad. This was her fourth evening and the last stake of that evening. So far she had staked prudently on colour or on one of the dozens. She had won a little, but lost more. Now she waited, her stake in her hand.

There were two numbers on which nobody had staked, five and six. Should she put this, her last stake, on one of those numbers? If so, which of them? Five, or six? Which did she feel?

Five—five was going to turn up. The ball was spun. Jane stretched out her hand. Six, she'd put it on six.

Just in time. She and another player opposite staked simultaneously, she on six, he on five.

'Rien ne va plus,' said the croupier.

The ball clicked, settled.

'Le numéro cinq, rouge, impair, manque.'

Jane could have cried with vexation. The croupier swept away the stakes, paid out. The man opposite said: 'Aren't you going to take up your winnings?'

'Mine?'

'Yes.'

'But I put on six.'

‘Indeed you didn’t. I put on six and you put on five.’

He smiled—a very attractive smile. White teeth in a very brown face, blue eyes, crisp short hair.

Half unbelievingly Jane picked up her gains. Was it true? She felt a little muddled herself. Perhaps she had put her counters on five. She looked doubtingly at the stranger and he smiled easily back.

‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘Leave a thing lying there and somebody else will grab it who has got no right to it. That’s an old trick.’

Then with a friendly little nod of the head he had moved away. That, too, had been nice of him. She might have suspected otherwise that he had let her take his winnings in order to scrape acquaintance with her. But he wasn’t that kind of man. He was nice…(And here he was sitting opposite to her.)

And now it was all over—the money spent—a last two days (rather disappointing days) in Paris, and now home on her return air ticket.

‘And what next?’

‘Stop,’ said Jane to her mind. ‘Don’t think of what’s going to happen next. It’ll only make you nervous.’

The two women had stopped talking.

She looked across the gangway. The Dresden china woman exclaimed petulantly, examining a broken finger-nail. She rang the bell and when the white-coated steward appeared she said:

‘Send my maid to me. She’s in the other compartment.’

‘Yes, my lady.’

The steward, very deferential, very quick and efficient, disappeared again. A dark-haired French girl dressed in black appeared. She carried a small jewel case.

Lady Horbury spoke to her in French:

‘Madeleine, I want my red morocco case.’

The maid passed along the gangway. At the extreme end of the car were some piled-up rugs and cases.

The girl returned with a small red dressing-case.

Cicely Horbury took it and dismissed the maid.

‘That’s all right, Madeleine. I’ll keep it here.’

The maid went out again. Lady Horbury opened the case and from the beautifully fitted interior she extracted a nail file. Then she looked long and earnestly at her face in a small mirror and touched it up here and there—a little powder, more lip salve.

Jane’s lips curled scornfully; her glance travelled farther down the car.

Behind the two women was the little foreigner who had yielded his seat to the ‘county’ woman. Heavily muffled up in unnecessary mufflers, he appeared to be fast asleep. Perhaps made uneasy by Jane’s scrutiny, his eyes opened, looked at her for a moment, then closed again.

Beside him sat a tall, grey-haired man with an authoritative face. He had a flute case open in front of him and was polishing the flute with loving care. Funny, Jane thought, he didn’t look like a musician—more like a lawyer or a doctor.

Behind those two were a couple of Frenchmen, one with a beard and one much younger—perhaps his son. They were talking and gesticulating in an excited manner.

On her own side of the car Jane’s view was blocked by the man in the blue pullover, the man at whom, for some absurd reason, she was determined not to look.

‘Absurd to feel—so—so excited. I might be seventeen,’ thought Jane digustedly.

Opposite her, Norman Gale was thinking:

‘She’s pretty—really pretty—She remembers me all right. She looked so disappointed when her stakes were swept away. It was worth a lot more than that to see her pleasure when she won. I did that rather well…She’s very attractive when she smiles—no pyorrhoea there—healthy gums and sound teeth…Damn it, I feel quite excited. Steady, my boy…’

He said to the steward who hovered at his side with the menu, ‘I’ll have cold tongue.’

The Countess of Horbury thought, ‘My God, what shall I do? It’s the hell of a mess—the hell of a mess. There’s only one way out that I can see. If only I had the nerve. Can I do it? Can I bluff it out? My nerves are all to pieces. That’s the coke. Why did I ever take to coke? My face looks awful, simply awful. That cat Venetia Kerr being here makes it worse. She always looks at me as though I were dirt. Wanted Stephen herself. Well, she didn’t get him! That long face of hers gets on my nerves. It’s exactly like a horse. I hate these county women. My God, what shall I do? I’ve got to make up my mind. The old bitch meant what she said…’

She fumbled in her vanity bag for her cigarette-case and fitted a cigarette into a long holder. Her hands shook slightly.

The Honourable Venetia Kerr thought: ‘Bloody little tart. That’s what she is. She may be technically virtuous, but she’s a tart through and through. Poor old Stephen…if he could only get rid of her…’

She in turn felt for her cigarette-case. She accepted Cicely Horbury’s match.

The steward said, ‘Excuse me, ladies, no smoking.’

Cicely Horbury said, ‘Hell!’

M. Hercule Poirot thought, ‘She is pretty, that little one over there. There is determination in that chin. Why is she so worried over something? Why is she so determined not to look at the handsome young man opposite her? She is very much aware of him and he of her…’ The plane dropped slightly. ‘Mon estomac,’ thought Hercule Poirot, and closed his eyes determinedly.

Beside him Dr Bryant, caressing his flute with nervous hands, thought, ‘I can’t decide. I simply cannot decide. This is the turning point of my career…’

Nervously he drew out his flute from its case, caressingly, lovingly… Music…In music there was an escape from all your cares. Half smiling he raised the flute to his lips, then put it down again. The little man with the moustaches beside him was fast asleep. There had been a moment, when the plane had bumped a little, when he had looked distinctly green. Dr Bryant was glad that he himself was neither train-sick nor sea-sick nor air-sick…

M. Dupont père turned excitedly in his seat and shouted at M. Dupont fils sitting beside him.

‘There is no doubt about it. They are all wrong—the Germans, the Americans, the English! They date the prehistoric pottery all wrong. Take the Samarra ware—’

Jean Dupont, tall, fair, with a false air of indolence, said:

‘You must take the evidences from all sources. There is Tall Halaf, and Sakje Geuze—’

They prolonged the discussion.

Armand Dupont wrenched open a battered attaché case.

‘Take these Kurdish pipes, such as they make today. The decoration on them is almost exactly similar to that on the pottery of 5000 BC.’

An eloquent gesture almost swept away the plate that a steward was placing in front of him.

Mr Clancy, writer of detective stories, rose from his seat behind Norman Gale and padded to the end of the car, extracted a continental Bradshaw from his raincoat pocket and returned with it to work out a complicated alibi for professional purposes.

Mr Ryder, in the seat behind him, thought, ‘I’ll have to keep my end up, but it’s not going to be easy. I don’t see how I’m going to raise the dibs for the next dividend…If we pass the dividend the fat’s in the fire…Oh, hell!’

Norman Gale rose and went to the toilet. As soon as he had gone Jane drew out a mirror and surveyed her face anxiously. She also applied powder and lipstick.

A steward placed coffee in front of her.

Jane looked out of the window. The Channel showed blue and shining below.

A wasp buzzed round Mr Clancy’s head just as he was dealing with 19.55 at Tzaribrod, and he struck at it absently. The wasp flew off to investigate the Duponts’ coffee cups.

Jean Dupont slew it neatly.

Peace settled down on the car. Conversation ceased, but thoughts pursued their way.

Right at the end of the car, in seat No. 2, Madame Giselle’s head lolled forward a little. One might have taken her to be asleep. But she was not asleep. She neither spoke nor thought.

Madame Giselle was dead…

Chapter 2

Discovery

Henry Mitchell, the senior of the two stewards, passed swiftly from table to table depositing bills. In half an hour's time they would be at Croydon. He gathered up notes and silver, bowed, said, 'Thank you, sir. Thank you, Madam.' At the table where the two Frenchmen sat he had to wait a minute or two, they were so busy discussing and gesticulating. And there wouldn't be much of a tip anyway from them, he thought gloomily. Two of the passengers were asleep—the little man with the moustaches, and the old woman down at the end. She was a good tipper, though—he remembered her crossing several times. He refrained therefore from awaking her.

The little man with the moustaches woke up and paid for the bottle of soda water and the thin captain biscuits, which was all he had had.

Mitchell left the other passenger as long as possible. About five minutes before they reached Croydon he stood by her side and leant over her.

'Pardon, Madam, your bill.'

He laid a deferential hand on her shoulder. She did not wake. He increased the pressure, shaking her gently, but the only result was an unexpected slumping of the body down in the seat. Mitchell bent over her, then straightened up with a white face.

II

Albert Davis, second steward, said:

'Coo! You don't mean it!'

'I tell you it's true.'

Mitchell was white and shaking.

'You sure, Henry?'

‘Dead sure. At least—well, I suppose it might be a fit.’

‘We’ll be at Croydon in a few minutes.’

‘If she’s just taken bad—’

They remained a minute or two undecided—then arranged their course of action. Mitchell returned to the rear car. He went from table to table, bending his head and murmuring confidentially:

‘Excuse me, sir, you don’t happen to be a doctor—?’

Norman Gale said, ‘I’m a dentist. But if there’s anything I can do—?’ He half rose from his seat.

‘I’m a doctor,’ said Dr Bryant. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘There’s a lady at the end there—I don’t like the look of her.’

Bryant rose to his feet and accompanied the steward. Unnoticed, the little man with the moustaches followed them.

Dr Bryant bent over the huddled figure in seat No. 2, the figure of a stoutish middle-aged woman dressed in heavy black.

The doctor’s examination was brief.

He said: ‘She’s dead.’

Mitchell said, ‘What do you think it was—kind of fit?’

‘That I can’t possibly say without a detailed examination. When did you last see her—alive, I mean?’

Mitchell reflected.

‘She was all right when I brought her coffee along.’

‘When was that?’

‘Well, it might have been three-quarters of an hour ago—about that. Then, when I brought the bill along, I thought she was asleep…’

Bryant said, ‘She’s been dead at least half an hour.’

Their consultation was beginning to cause interest—heads were craned round looking at them. Necks were stretched to listen.

‘I suppose it might have been a kind of fit, like?’ suggested Mitchell hopefully.

He clung to the theory of a fit.

His wife’s sister had fits. He felt that fits were homely things that any man might understand.

Dr Bryant had no intention of committing himself. He merely shook his head with a puzzled expression.

A voice spoke at his elbow, the voice of the muffled-up man with the moustaches.

‘There is,’ he said, ‘a mark on her neck.’

He spoke apologetically, with a due sense of speaking to superior knowledge.

‘True,’ said Dr Bryant.

The woman’s head lolled over sideways. There was a minute puncture mark on the side of her throat.

‘Pardon—’ the two Duponts joined in. They had been listening for the last few minutes. ‘The lady is dead, you say, and there is a mark on the neck?’

It was Jean, the younger Dupont, who spoke.

‘May I make a suggestion? There was a wasp flying about. I killed it.’ He exhibited the corpse in his coffee saucer. ‘Is it not possible that the poor lady has died of a wasp sting? I have heard such things happen.’

‘It is possible,’ agreed Bryant. ‘I have known of such cases. Yes, that is certainly quite a possible explanation, especially if there were any cardiac weakness—’

‘Anything I’d better do, sir?’ asked the steward. ‘We’ll be at Croydon in a minute.’

‘Quite, quite,’ said Dr Bryant as he moved away a little. ‘There’s nothing to be done. The—er—body must not be moved, steward.’

‘Yes, sir, I quite understand.’

Dr Bryant prepared to resume his seat and looked in some surprise at the small muffled-up foreigner who was standing his ground.

‘My dear sir,’ he said, ‘the best thing to do is to go back to your seat. We shall be at Croydon almost immediately.’

‘That’s right, sir,’ said the steward. He raised his voice. ‘Please resume your seats, everybody.’

‘Pardon,’ said the little man. ‘There is something—’

‘Something?’

‘Mais oui, something that has been overlooked.’

With the tip of a pointed patent-leather shoe he made his meaning clear. The steward and Dr Bryant followed the action with their eyes. They caught the glint of yellow and black on the floor half concealed by the edge of the black skirt.

‘Another wasp?’ said the doctor, surprised.

Hercule Poirot went down on his knees. He took a small pair of tweezers from his pocket and used them delicately. He stood up with his prize.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it is very like a wasp; but it is not a wasp!’

He turned the object about this way and that so that both the doctor and the steward could see it clearly, a little knot of teased fluffy silk, orange and black, attached to a long, peculiar-looking thorn with a discoloured tip.

‘Good gracious! Good gracious me!’ The exclamation came from little Mr Clancy, who had left his seat and was poking his head desperately over the steward’s shoulder. ‘Remarkable, really very remarkable, absolutely the most remarkable thing I have ever come across in my life. Well, upon my soul, I should never have believed it.’

‘Could you make yourself just a little clearer, sir?’ asked the steward. ‘Do you recognize this?’

‘Recognize it? Certainly I recognize it.’ Mr Clancy swelled with passionate pride and gratification. ‘This object, gentlemen, is the native thorn shot from a blowpipe by certain tribes—er—I cannot be exactly certain now if it is South American tribes or whether it is the inhabitants of Borneo which I have in mind; but that is undoubtedly a native dart that has been aimed by a blowpipe, and I strongly suspect that on the tip—’

‘Is the famous arrow poison of the South American Indians,’ finished Hercule Poirot. And he added, ‘Mais enfin! Est-ce que c’est possible?’

‘It is certainly very extraordinary,’ said Mr Clancy, still full of blissful excitement. ‘As I say, most extraordinary. I am myself a writer of detective fiction; but actually to meet, in real life—’

Words failed him.

The aeroplane heeled slowly over, and those people who were standing up staggered a little. The plane was circling round in its descent to Croydon aerodrome.

Chapter 3

Croydon

The steward and the doctor were no longer in charge of the situation. Their place was usurped by the rather absurd-looking little man in the mufflers. He spoke with an authority and a certainty of being obeyed that no one thought of questioning.

He whispered to Mitchell, and the latter nodded, and, pushing his way through the passengers, he took up his stand in the doorway leading past the toilets to the front car.

The plane was running along the ground now. When it finally came to a stop Mitchell raised his voice:

'I must ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to keep your seats and remain here until somebody in authority takes charge. I hope you will not be detained long.'

The reasonableness of this order was appreciated by most of the occupants of the car, but one person protested shrilly.

'Nonsense,' cried Lady Horbury angrily. 'Don't you know who I am? I insist on being allowed to leave at once.'

'Very sorry, my lady. Can't make exceptions.'

'But it's absurd, absolutely absurd,' Cicely tapped her foot angrily. 'I shall report you to the company. It's outrageous that we should be shut up here with a dead body.'

'Really, my dear,' Venetia Kerr spoke with her well-bred drawl, 'too devastating, but I fancy we'll have to put up with it.' She herself sat down and drew out a cigarette-case. 'Can I smoke now, steward?'

The harassed Mitchell said, 'I don't suppose it matters now, Miss.'

He glanced over his shoulder. Davis had disem-barked the passengers from the front car by the emergency door and had now gone in search of orders.

The wait was not a long one, but it seemed to the passengers as though half an hour at least had passed before an erect soldierly figure in plain clothes, accompanied by a uniformed policeman, came hurriedly across the aerodrome and climbed into the plane by the door that Mitchell held open.

‘Now, then, what’s all this?’ demanded the newcomer in brisk official tones.

He listened to Mitchell and then to Dr Bryant, and he flung a quick glance over the crumpled figure of the dead woman.

He gave an order to the constable and then addressed the passengers.

‘Will you please follow me, ladies and gentlemen?’

He escorted them out of the plane and across the aerodrome, but he did not enter the usual customs department; instead, he brought them to a small private room.

‘I hope not to keep you waiting any longer than is unavoidable, ladies and gentlemen.’

‘Look here, Inspector,’ said Mr James Ryder. ‘I have an important business engagement in London.’

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘I am Lady Horbury. I consider it absolutely outrageous that I should be detained in this matter!’

‘I’m sincerely sorry, Lady Horbury; but, you see, this is a very serious matter. It looks like a case of murder.’

‘The arrow poison of the South American Indians,’ murmured Mr Clancy deliriously, a happy smile on his face.

The inspector looked at him suspiciously.

The French archaeologist spoke excitedly in French, and the inspector replied to him slowly and carefully in the same language.

Venetia Kerr said, ‘All this is a most crashing bore, but I suppose you have your duty to do, Inspector,’ to which that worthy replied, ‘Thank you, Madam,’ in accents of some gratitude.

He went on:

‘If you ladies and gentlemen will remain here, I want a few words with Doctor—er—Doctor—?’

‘Bryant, my name is.’

‘Thank you. Just come this way with me, Doctor.’

‘May I assist at your interview?’

It was the little man with the moustaches who spoke.

The inspector turned on him, a sharp retort on his lips. Then his face changed suddenly.

‘Sorry, M. Poirot,’ he said. ‘You’re so muffled up, I didn’t recognize you. Come along, by all means.’

He held the door open and Bryant and Poirot passed through, followed by the suspicious glance of the rest of the company.

‘And why should he be allowed out and we made to stay here?’ cried Cicely Horbury.

Venetia Kerr sat down resignedly on a bench.

‘Probably one of the French police,’ she said, ‘or a customs spy.’

She lit a cigarette.

Norman Gale said rather diffidently to Jane:

‘I think I saw you at—er—Le Pinet.’

‘I was at Le Pinet.’

Norman Gale said, ‘It’s an awfully attractive place. I like the pine trees.’

Jane said, ‘Yes, they smell so nice.’

And then they both paused for a minute or two, uncertain what to say next.

Finally Gale said, ‘I—er—recognized you at once in the plane.’

Jane expressed great surprise. ‘Did you?’

Gale said, ‘Do you think that woman was really murdered?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Jane. ‘It’s rather thrilling in a way, but it’s rather nasty too,’ and she shuddered a little, and Norman Gale moved just a little nearer in a protective manner.

The Duponts were talking French to each other. Mr Ryder was making calculations in a little notebook and looking at his watch from time to time. Cicely Horbury sat with her foot tapping impatiently on the floor. She lit a cigarette with a shaking hand.

Against the door on the inside leaned a very large blue-clad impassive-looking policeman.

In a room nearby Inspector Japp was talking to Dr Bryant and Hercule Poirot.

‘You’ve got a knack of turning up in the most unexpected places, M. Poirot.’

‘Isn’t Croydon aerodrome a little out of your beat, my friend?’ asked Poirot.

‘Ah, I’m after rather a big bug in the smuggling line. A bit of luck my being on the spot. This is the most amazing business I’ve come across for years.

Now, then, let's get down to it. First of all, Doctor, perhaps you'll give me your full name and address.'

'Roger James Bryant. I am a specialist on diseases of the ear and throat. My address is 329 Harley Street.'

A stolid constable sitting at a table took down these particulars.

'Our own surgeon will, of course, examine the body,' said Japp, 'but we shall want you at the inquest, Doctor.'

'Quite so, quite so.'

'Can you give us any idea of the time of death?'

'The woman must have been dead at least half an hour when I examined her; that was a few minutes before we arrived at Croydon. I can't go nearer than that, but I understand from the steward that he had spoken to her about an hour before.'

'Well, that narrows it down for all practical purposes. I suppose it's no good asking you if you observed anything of a suspicious nature?'

The doctor shook his head.

'And me, I was asleep,' said Poirot with deep chagrin. 'I suffer almost as badly in the air as on the sea. Always I wrap myself up well and try to sleep.'

'Any idea as to the cause of death, Doctor?'

'I should not like to say anything definite at this stage. This is a case for post-mortem examination and analysis.'

Japp nodded comprehendingly.

'Well, Doctor,' he said, 'I don't think we need detain you now. I'm afraid you'll—er—have to go through certain formalities; all the passengers will. We can't make exceptions.'

Dr Bryant smiled.

‘I should prefer you to make sure that I have no—er—blowpipes or other lethal weapons concealed upon my person,’ he said gravely.

‘Rogers here will see to that.’ Japp nodded to his subordinate. ‘By the way, Doctor, have you any idea what would be likely to be on this—?’

He indicated the discoloured thorn which was lying in a small box on the table in front of him.

Dr Bryant shook his head.

‘Difficult to say without an analysis. Curare is the usual poison employed by the natives, I believe.’

‘Would that do the trick?’

‘It is a very swift and rapid poison.’

‘But not very easy to obtain, eh?’

‘Not at all easy for a layman.’

‘Then we’ll have to search you extra carefully,’ said Japp, who was always fond of his joke. ‘Rogers!’

The doctor and the constable left the room together.

Japp tilted back his chair and looked at Poirot.

‘Rum business, this,’ he said. ‘Bit too sensational to be true. I mean, blowpipes and poisoned darts in an aeroplane—well, it insults one’s intelligence.’

‘That, my friend, is a very profound remark,’ said Poirot.

‘A couple of my men are searching the plane,’ said Japp. ‘We’ve got a fingerprint man and a photographer coming along. I think we’d better see the stewards next.’

He strode to the door and gave an order. The two stewards were ushered in. The younger steward had recovered his balance. He looked more excited than anything else. The other steward still looked white and frightened.

‘That’s all right, my lads,’ said Japp. ‘Sit down. Got the passports there? Good.’

He sorted through them quickly.

‘Ah, here we are. Marie Morisot—French passport. Know anything about her?’

‘I’ve seen her before. She crossed to and fro from England fairly often,’ said Mitchell.

‘Ah! in business of some kind. You don’t know what her business was?’

Mitchell shook his head. The younger steward said, ‘I remember her too. I saw her on the early service—the eight o’clock from Paris.’

‘Which of you was the last to see her alive?’

‘Him.’ The younger steward indicated his companion.

‘That’s right,’ said Mitchell. ‘That’s when I took her her coffee.’

‘How was she looking then?’

‘Can’t say I noticed. I just handed her the sugar and offered her milk, which she refused.’

‘What time was that?’

‘Well, I couldn’t say exactly. We were over the Channel at the time. Might have been somewhere about two o’clock.’

‘Thereabouts,’ said Albert Davis, the other steward.

‘When did you see her next?’

‘When I took the bills round.’

‘What time was that?’

‘About a quarter of an hour later. I thought she was asleep—Crikey, she must have been dead then!’

The steward’s voice sounded awed.

‘You didn’t see any signs of this—’ Japp indicated the little wasp-like dart.

‘No, sir, I didn’t.’

‘What about you, Davis?’

‘The last time I saw her was when I was handing the biscuits to go with the cheese. She was all right then.’

‘What is your system of serving meals?’ asked Poirot. ‘Do each of you serve separate cars?’

‘No, sir, we work it together. The soup, then the meat and vegetables and salad, then the sweet, and so on. We usually serve the rear car first, and then go out with a fresh lot of dishes to the front car.’

Poirot nodded.

‘Did this Morisot woman speak to anyone on the plane, or show any signs of recognition?’ asked Japp.

‘Not that I saw, sir.’

‘You, Davis?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Did she leave her seat at all during the journey?’

‘I don’t think so, sir.’

‘There’s nothing you can think of that throws any light on this business—either of you?’

Both the men thought, then shook their heads.

‘Well, that will be all for now, then. I’ll see you again later.’

Henry Mitchell said soberly:

‘It’s a nasty thing to happen, sir. I don’t like it, me having been in charge, so to speak.’

‘Well, I can’t see that you’re to blame in any way,’ said Japp. ‘Still, I agree, it’s a nasty thing to happen.’

He made a gesture of dismissal. Poirot leaned forward.

‘Permit me one little question.’

‘Go ahead, M. Poirot.’

‘Did either of you two notice a wasp flying about the plane?’

Both men shook their heads.

‘There was no wasp that I know of,’ said Mitchell.

‘There was a wasp,’ said Poirot. ‘We have its dead body on the plate of one of the passengers.’

‘Well, I didn’t see it, sir,’ said Mitchell.

‘No more did I,’ said Davis.

‘No matter.’

The two stewards left the room. Japp was running his eye rapidly over the passports.

‘Got a countess on board,’ he said. ‘She’s the one who’s throwing her weight about, I suppose. Better see her first before she goes right off the handle and gets a question asked in the House about the brutal methods of the police.’

‘You will, I suppose, search very carefully all the baggage—the hand baggage—of the passengers in the rear car of the plane?’

Japp winked cheerfully.

‘Why, what do you think, M. Poirot? We’ve got to find that blowpipe—if there is a blowpipe and we’re not all dreaming! Seems like a kind of nightmare to me. I suppose that little writer chap hasn’t gone off his onion and decided to do one of his crimes in the flesh instead of on paper? This poisoned dart business sounds like him.’

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

‘Yes,’ continued Japp, ‘everybody’s got to be searched, whether they kick up rough or not; and every bit of truck they had with them has got to be searched too—and that’s flat.’

‘A very exact list might be made, perhaps,’ suggested Poirot, ‘a list of everything in these people’s possession.’

Japp looked at him curiously.

‘That can be done if you say so, M. Poirot. I don’t quite see what you’re driving at, though. We know what we’re looking for.’

‘You may, perhaps, mon ami, but I am not so sure. I look for something, but I know not what it is.’

‘At it again, M. Poirot! You do like making things difficult, don’t you? Now for her ladyship before she’s quite ready to scratch my eyes out.’

Lady Horbury, however, was noticeably calmer in her manner. She accepted a chair and answered Japp's questions without the least hesitation. She described herself as the wife of the Earl of Horbury, gave her address as Horbury Chase, Sussex, and 315 Grosvenor Square, London. She was returning to London from Le Pinet and Paris. The deceased woman was quite unknown to her. She had noticed nothing suspicious during the flight over. In any case, she was facing the other way—towards the front of the plane—so had had no opportunity of seeing anything that was going on behind her. She had not left her seat during the journey. As far as she remembered no one had entered the rear car from the front one with the exception of the stewards. She could not remember exactly, but she thought that two of the men passengers had left the rear car to go to the toilets, but she was not sure of this. She had not observed anyone handling anything that could be likened to a blowpipe. No—in answer to Poirot—she had not noticed a wasp in the car.

Lady Horbury was dismissed. She was succeeded by the Honourable Venetia Kerr.

Miss Kerr's evidence was much the same as that of her friend. She gave her name as Venetia Anne Kerr, and her address as Little Paddocks, Horbury, Sussex. She herself was returning from the South of France. As far as she was aware she had never seen the deceased before. She had noticed nothing suspicious during the journey. Yes, she had seen some of the passengers farther down the car striking at a wasp. One of them, she thought, had killed it. That was after luncheon had been served.

Exit Miss Kerr.

'You seem very much interested in that wasp, M. Poirot.'

'The wasp is not so much interesting as suggestive, eh?'

'If you ask me,' said Japp, changing the subject, 'those two Frenchmen are the ones in this! They were just across the gangway from the Morisot woman. They're a seedy-looking couple, and that battered old suitcase of theirs is fairly plastered with outlandish foreign labels. Shouldn't be surprised if they'd been to Borneo or South America, or wherever it is. Of course, we can’t get a line on the motive, but I dare say we can get that from Paris. We’ll have to get the Sûreté to collaborate over this. It’s their job more than ours. But, if you ask me, those two toughs are our meat.’

Poirot’s eyes twinkled a little.

‘What you say is possible, certainly, but as regards some of your points you are in error, my friend. Those two men are not toughs—or cut-throats, as you suggest. They are on the contrary two very distinguished and learned archaeologists.’

‘Go on—you’re pulling my leg!’

‘Not at all. I know them by sight perfectly. They are M. Armand Dupont and his son, M. Jean Dupont. They have returned not long ago from conducting some very interesting excavations in Persia at a site not far from Susa.’

‘Go on!’

Japp made a grab at a passport.

‘You’re right, M. Poirot,’ he said, ‘but you must admit they don’t look up to much, do they?’

‘The world’s famous men seldom do! I myself—moi, qui vous parle—I have before now been taken for a hairdresser!’

‘You don’t say so,’ said Japp with a grin. ‘Well, let’s have a look at our distinguished archaeologists.’

M. Dupont père declared that the deceased was quite unknown to him. He had noticed nothing of what had happened on the journey over as he had been discussing a very interesting point with his son. He had not left his seat at all. Yes, he had noticed a wasp towards the end of lunch. His son had killed it.

M. Jean Dupont confirmed this evidence. He had noticed nothing of what went on round about him. The wasp had annoyed him and he had killed it.

What had been the subject of the discussion? The prehistoric pottery of the Near East.

Mr Clancy, who came next, came in for rather a bad time. Mr Clancy, so felt Inspector Japp, knew altogether too much about blowpipes and poisoned darts.

‘Have you ever owned a blowpipe yourself?’

‘Well—I—er—well, yes, as a matter of fact I have.’

‘Indeed!’ Inspector Japp pounced on the statement.

Little Mr Clancy fairly squeaked with agitation.

‘You must not—er—misunderstand; my motives are quite innocent. I can explain…’

‘Yes, sir, perhaps you will explain.’

‘Well, you see, I was writing a book in which the murder was committed that way—’

‘Indeed—’

Again that threatening intonation. Mr Clancy hurried on:

‘It was all a question of fingerprints—if you understand me. It was necessary to have an illustration illustrating the point I meant—I mean—the fingerprints—the position of them—the position of them on the blowpipe, if you understand me, and having noticed such a thing—in the Charing Cross Road it was—at least two years ago now—and so I bought the blowpipe—and an artist friend of mine very kindly drew it for me—with the fingerprints—to illustrate my point. I can refer you to the book—The Clue of the Scarlet Petal—and my friend too.’

‘Did you keep the blowpipe?’

‘Why, yes—why, yes, I think so—I mean, yes, I did.’

‘And where is it now?’

‘Well, I suppose—well, it must be somewhere about.’

‘What exactly do you mean by somewhere about, Mr Clancy?’

‘I mean—well—somewhere—I can’t say where. I—I am not a very tidy man.’

‘It isn’t with you now, for instance?’

‘Certainly not. Why, I haven’t see the thing for nearly six months.’

Inspector Japp bent a glance of cold suspicion on him and continued his questions.

‘Did you leave your seat at all in the plane?’

‘No, certainly not—at least—well, yes, I did.’

‘Oh, you did. Where did you go?’

‘I went to get a continental Bradshaw out of my raincoat pocket. The raincoat was piled with some rugs and suitcases by the entrance at the end.’

‘So you passed close by the deceased’s seat?’

‘No—at least—well, yes, I must have done. But this was long before anything could have happened. I’d only just drunk my soup.’

Further questions drew negative answers. Mr Clancy had noticed nothing suspicious. He had been absorbed in the perfectioning of his cross-Europe alibi.

‘Alibi, eh?’ said the inspector darkly.

Poirot intervened with a question about wasps.

Yes, Mr Clancy had noticed a wasp. It had attacked him. He was afraid of wasps. When was this? Just after the steward had brought him his coffee. He struck at it and it went away.

Mr Clancy’s name and address were taken and he was allowed to depart, which he did with relief on his face.

‘Looks a bit fishy to me,’ said Japp. ‘He actually had a blowpipe; and look at his manner. All to pieces.’

‘That is the severity of your official demeanour, my good Japp.’

‘There’s nothing for anyone to be afraid of if they’re only telling the truth,’ said the Scotland Yard man austerely.

Poirot looked at him pityingly.

‘In verity, I believe that you yourself honestly believe that.’

‘Of course I do. It’s true. Now, then, let’s have Norman Gale.’

Norman Gale gave his address as 14 Shepherd’s Avenue, Muswell Hill. By profession he was a dentist. He was returning from a holiday spent at Le Pinet on the French coast. He had spent a day in Paris looking at various new types of dental instruments.

He had never seen the deceased, and had noticed nothing suspicious during the journey. In any case, he had been facing the other way—towards the front car. He had left his seat once during the journey to go to the toilet. He had returned straight to his seat and had never been near the rear end of the car. He had not noticed any wasp.

After him came James Ryder, somewhat on edge and brusque in manner. He was returning from a business visit to Paris. He did not know the deceased. Yes, he had occupied the seat immediately in front of hers, but he could not have seen her without rising and looking over the back of his seat. He had heard nothing—no cry or exclamation. No one had come down the car except the stewards. Yes, the two Frenchmen had occupied the seats across the gangway from his. They had talked practically the whole journey. The younger of the two had killed a wasp at the conclusion of the meal. No, he hadn't noticed the wasp previously. He didn't know what a blowpipe was like, as he'd never seen one, so he couldn't say if he'd seen one on the journey or not—

Just at this point there was a tap on the door. A police constable entered, subdued triumph in his bearing.

'The sergeant's just found this, sir,' he said. 'Thought you'd like to have it at once.'

He laid his prize on the table, unwrapping it with care from the handkerchief in which it was folded.

'No fingerprints, sir, so as the sergeant can see, but he told me to be careful.'

The object thus displayed was an undoubted blowpipe of native manufacture.

Japp drew his breath in sharply.

'Good Lord! Then it is true? Upon my soul, I didn't believe it!'

Mr Ryder leant forward interestedly.

'So that's what the South Americans use, is it? Read about such things, but never seen one. Well, I can answer your question now. I didn't see anyone handling anything of this type.'

'Where was it found?' asked Japp sharply.

'Pushed down out of sight behind one of the seats, sir.'

'Which seat?'

'No. 9.'

‘Very entertaining,’ said Poirot.

Japp turned to him.

‘What’s entertaining about it?’

‘Only that No. 9 was my seat.’

‘Well, that looks a bit odd for you, I must say,’ said Mr Ryder.

Japp frowned.

‘Thank you, Mr Ryder, that will do.’

When Ryder had gone he turned to Poirot with a grin.

‘This your work, old bird?’

‘Mon ami,’ said Poirot with dignity, ‘when I commit a murder it will not be with the arrow poison of the South American Indians.’

‘It is a bit low,’ agreed Japp. ‘But it seems to have worked.’

‘That is what gives one so furiously to think.’

‘Whoever it was must have taken the most stupendous chances. Yes, by Jove, they must. Lord, the fellow must have been an absolute lunatic. Who have we got left? Only one girl. Let’s have her in and get it over. Jane Grey—sounds like a history book.’

‘She is a pretty girl,’ said Poirot.

‘Is she, you old dog? So you weren’t asleep all the time, eh?’

‘She was pretty—and nervous,’ said Poirot.

‘Nervous, eh?’ said Japp alertly.

‘Oh, my dear friend, when a girl is nervous it usually means a young man—not crime.’

‘Oh, well, I suppose you’re right. Here she is.’

Jane answered the questions put to her clearly enough. Her name was Jane Grey and she was employed at Messrs. Antoine’s hairdressing establishment in Bruton Street. Her home address was 10 Harrogate Street, NW5. She was returning to England from Le Pinet.

‘Le Pinet—h’m!’

Further questions drew the story of the Sweep ticket.

‘Ought to be made illegal, those Irish Sweeps,’ growled Japp.

‘I think they’re marvellous,’ said Jane. ‘Haven’t you ever put half a crown on a horse?’

Japp blushed and looked confused.

The questions were resumed. Shown the blowpipe, Jane denied having seen it at any time. She did not know the deceased, but had noticed her at Le Bourget.

‘What made you notice her particularly?’

‘Because she was so frightfully ugly,’ said Jane truthfully.

Nothing else of any value was elicited from her, and she was allowed to go.

Japp fell back into contemplation of the blowpipe.

‘It beats me,’ he said. ‘The crudest detective story dodge coming out trumps! What have we got to look for now? A man who’s travelled in the part of the world this thing comes from? And where exactly does it come from? Have to get an expert on to that. It may be Malayan or South American or African.’

‘Originally, yes,’ said Poirot. ‘But if you observe closely, my friend, you will notice a microscopic piece of paper adhering to the pipe. It looks to me very much like the remains of a torn-off price ticket. I fancy that this particular specimen has journeyed from the wilds via some curio dealer’s shop. That will possibly make our search more easy. Just one little question.’

‘Ask away.’

‘You will still have that list made—the list of the passengers’ belongings?’

‘Well, it isn’t quite so vital now, but it might as well be done. You’re very set on that?’

‘Mais oui. I am puzzled, very puzzled. If I could find something to help me—’

Japp was not listening. He was examining the torn price ticket.

‘Clancy let out that he bought a blowpipe. These detective-story writers…always making the police out to be fools…and getting their procedure all wrong. Why, if I were to say the things to my super that their inspectors say to superintendents I should be thrown out of the Force tomorrow on my ear. Set of ignorant scribblers! This is just the sort of damn fool murder that a scribbler of rubbish would think he could get away with.’

Chapter 4

The Inquest

The inquest on Marie Morisot was held four days later. The sensational manner of her death had aroused great public interest, and the coroner's court was crowded.

The first witness called was a tall elderly Frenchman with a grey beard—Maître Alexandre Thibault. He spoke English slowly and precisely with a slight accent, but quite idiomatically.

After the preliminary questions the coroner asked, 'You have viewed the body of the deceased. Do you recognize it?'

'I do. It is that of my client, Marie Angélique Morisot.'

'That is the name on the deceased's passport. Was she known to the public by another name?'

'Yes, that of Madame Giselle.'

A stir of excitement went around. Reporters sat with pencils poised. The coroner said, 'Will you tell us exactly who this Madame Morisot—or Madame Giselle—was?'

'Madame Giselle—to give her her professional name, the name under which she did business—was one of the best-known moneylenders in Paris.'

'She carried on her business—where?'

'At the Rue Joliette, No. 3. That was also her private residence.'

'I understand that she journeyed to England fairly frequently. Did her business extend to this country?'

'Yes. Many of her clients were English people. She was very well known amongst a certain section of English society.'

‘How would you describe that section of society?’

‘Her clientèle was mostly among the upper and professional classes, in cases where it was important that the utmost discretion should be observed.’

‘She had the reputation of being discreet?’

‘Extremely discreet.’

‘May I ask if you have an intimate knowledge of—er—her various business transactions?’

‘No. I dealt with her legal business, but Madame Giselle was a first-class woman of business, thoroughly capable of attending to her own affairs in the most competent manner. She kept the control of her business entirely in her own hands. She was, if I may say so, a woman of very original character, and a well-known public figure.’

‘To the best of your knowledge, was she a rich woman at the time of her death?’

‘She was an extremely wealthy woman.’

‘Had she, to your knowledge, any enemies?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

Maître Thibault then stepped down and Henry Mitchell was called.

The coroner said, ‘Your name is Henry Charles Mitchell and you reside at 11 Shoeblack Lane, Wandsworth?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You are in the employment of Universal Airlines, Ltd?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You are the senior steward on the air liner Prometheus?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘On Tuesday last, the eighteenth, you were on duty on the Prometheus on the twelve o’clock service from Paris to Croydon. The deceased travelled by that service. Had you ever seen the deceased before?’

‘Yes, sir. I was on the 8.45 am service six months ago and I noticed her travelling by that once or twice.’

‘Did you know her name?’

‘Well, it must have been on my list, sir, but I didn’t notice it special, so to speak.’

‘Have you ever heard the name of Madame Giselle?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Please describe the occurrences of Tuesday last in your own way.’

‘I’d served the luncheons, sir, and was coming round with the bills. The deceased was, as I thought, asleep. I decided not to wake her until about five minutes before we got in. When I tried to do so I discovered that she was dead or seriously ill. I discovered that there was a doctor on board. He said—’

‘We shall have Dr Bryant’s evidence presently. Will you take a look at this?’

The blowpipe was handed to Mitchell, who took it gingerly.

‘Have you ever seen that before?’

‘No, sir.’

‘You are certain that you did not see it in the hands of any of the passengers?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Albert Davis.’

The younger steward took the stand.

‘You are Albert Davis of 23 Barcome Street, Croydon. You are employed by Universal Airlines, Ltd?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You were on duty on the Prometheus as second steward on Tuesday last?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What was the first that you knew of the tragedy?’

‘Mr Mitchell, sir, told me that he was afraid something had happened to one of the passengers.’

‘Have you ever seen this before?’

The blowpipe was handed to Davis.

‘No, sir.’

‘You did not observe it in the hands of any of the passengers?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Did anything at all happen on the journey that you think might throw light on this affair?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Very good. You may stand down.’

‘Dr Roger Bryant.’

Dr Bryant gave his name and address and described himself as a specialist in ear and throat diseases.

‘Will you tell us in your own words, Dr Bryant, exactly what happened on Tuesday last, the eighteenth?’

‘Just before getting into Croydon I was approached by the chief steward. He asked me if I was a doctor. On my replying in the affirmative, he told me that one of the passengers had been taken ill. I rose and went with him. The woman in question was lying slumped down in her seat. She had been dead some time.’

‘What length of time in your opinion, Dr Bryant?’

‘I should say at least half an hour. Between half an hour and an hour would be my estimate.’

‘Did you form any theory as to the cause of death?’

‘No. It would have been impossible to say without a detailed examination.’

‘But you noticed a small puncture on the side of the neck?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you…Dr James Whistler.’

Dr Whistler was a thin, scraggy little man.

‘You are the police surgeon for this district?’

‘I am.’

‘Will you give your evidence in your own words?’

‘Shortly after three o’clock on Tuesday last, the eighteenth, I received a summons to Croydon aerodrome. There I was shown the body of a middle-aged woman in one of the seats of the air liner Prometheus. She was dead, and death had occurred, I should say, about an hour previously. I noticed a circular puncture on the side of the neck—directly on the jugular vein. This mark was quite consistent with having been caused by the sting of a wasp or by the insertion of a thorn which was shown to me. The body was removed to the mortuary, where I was able to make a detailed examination.’

‘What conclusions did you come to?’

‘I came to the conclusion that death was caused by the introduction of a powerful toxin into the blood stream. Death was due to acute paralysis of the heart, and must have been practically instantaneous.’

‘Can you tell us what that toxin was?’

‘It was a toxin I had never come across before.’

The reporters, listening attentively, wrote down ‘Unknown poison.’

‘Thank you…Mr Henry Winterspoon.’

Mr Winterspoon was a large, dreamy-looking man with a benignant expression. He looked kindly but stupid. It came as something of a shock to learn that he was chief Government analyst and an authority on rare poisons.

The coroner held up the fatal thorn and asked Mr Winterspoon if he recognized it.

‘I do. It was sent to me for analysis.’

‘Will you tell us the result of that analysis?’

‘Certainly. I should say that originally the dart had been dipped in a preparation of native curare—an arrow poison used by certain tribes.’

The reporters wrote with gusto.

‘You consider, then, that death may have been due to curare.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Mr Winterspoon. ‘There was only the faintest trace of the original preparation. According to my analysis, the dart had recently been dipped in the venom of Dispholidus typus, better known as the boomslang or tree snake.’

‘A boomslang? What is a boomslang?’

‘It is a South African snake—one of the most deadly and poisonous in existence. Its effect on a human being is not known, but some idea of the intense virulence of the venom can be realized when I tell you that on injecting the venom into a hyena, the hyena died before the needle could be withdrawn. A jackal died as though shot by a gun. The poison causes acute haemorrhage under the skin and also acts on the heart, paralysing its action.’

The reporters wrote: ‘Extraordinary Story. Snake Poison in Air Drama. Deadlier than the Cobra.’

‘Have you ever known the venom to be used in a case of deliberate poisoning?’

‘Never. It is most interesting.’

Thank you, Mr Winterspoon.’

Detective-Sergeant Wilson deposed to the finding of the blowpipe behind the cushion of one of the seats. There were no fingerprints on it. Experiments had been made with the dart and the blowpipe. What you might call the range of it was fairly accurate up to about ten yards.

‘M. Hercule Poirot.’

There was a little stir of interest, but M. Poirot’s evidence was very restrained. He had noticed nothing out of the way. Yes, it was he who had found the tiny dart on the floor of the car. It was in such a position as it would naturally have occupied if it had fallen from the neck of the dead woman.

‘The Countess of Horbury.’

The reporters wrote: ‘Peer’s wife gives evidence in Air Death Mystery.’ Some of them put ‘…in Snake Poison Mystery.’

Those who wrote for women’s papers put, ‘Lady Horbury wore one of the new collegian hats and fox furs,’ or ‘Lady Horbury, who is one of the smartest women in town, wore black with one of the new collegian hats,’ or ‘Lady Horbury, who before her marriage was Miss Cicely Bland, was smartly dressed in black with one of the new hats…’

Everyone enjoyed looking at the smart and lovely young woman, though her evidence was of the briefest. She had noticed nothing; she had never seen the deceased before.

Venetia Kerr succeeded her, but was definitely less of a thrill.

The indefatigable purveyors of news for women wrote, ‘Lord Cottesmore’s daughter wore a well-cut coat and skirt with one of the new stocks,’ and noted down the phrase, ‘Society Women at Inquest.’

‘James Ryder.’

‘You are James Bell Ryder, and your address is 17 Blainberry Avenue, NW?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is your business or profession?’

‘I am managing director of the Ellis Vale Cement Co.’

‘Will you kindly examine this blowpipe.’ (A pause.) ‘Have you ever seen this before?’

‘No.’

‘You did not see any such thing in anybody’s hand on board the Prometheus?’

‘No.’

‘You were sitting in seat No. 4, immediately in front of the deceased?’

‘What if I was?’

‘Please do not take that tone with me. You were sitting in seat No. 4. From that seat you had a view of practically everyone in the compartment.’

‘No, I hadn’t. I couldn’t see any of the people on my side of the thing. The seats have got high backs.’

‘But if one of those people had stepped out into the gangway—into such a position as to be able to aim the blowpipe at the deceased—you would have seen them then?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And you saw no such thing?’

‘No.’

‘Did any of the people in front of you move from their seats?’

‘Well, the man two seats ahead of me got up and went to the toilet compartment.’

‘That was in a direction away from you and from the deceased?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did he come down the car towards you at all?’

‘No, he went straight back to his seat.’

‘Was he carrying anything in his hand?’

‘Nothing at all.’

‘You’re sure of that?’

‘Quite.’

‘Did anyone else move from his seat?’

‘The chap in front of me. He came the other way, past me to the back of the car.’

‘I protest,’ squeaked Mr Clancy, springing up from his seat in court. ‘That was earlier—much earlier—about one o’clock.’

‘Kindly sit down,’ said the coroner. ‘You will be heard presently. Proceed, Mr Ryder. Did you notice if this gentleman had anything in his hands?’

‘I think he had a fountain-pen. When he came back he had an orange book in his hand.’

‘Is he the only person who came down the car in your direction? Did you yourself leave your seat?’

‘Yes, I went to the toilet compartment—and I didn’t have any blowpipe in my hand either.’

‘You are adopting a highly improper tone. Stand down.’

Mr Norman Gale, dentist, gave evidence of a negative character. Then the indignant Mr Clancy took the stand.

Mr Clancy was news of a minor kind, several degrees inferior to a Peeress.

‘Mystery Story Writer gives Evidence. Well-known author admits purchase of deadly weapon. Sensation in court.’

But the sensation was perhaps a little premature.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Mr Clancy shrilly. ‘I did purchase a blowpipe, and what is more, I have brought it with me today. I protest strongly against the inference that the blowpipe with which the crime was committed was my blowpipe. Here is my blowpipe.’

And he produced the blowpipe with a triumphant flourish.

The reporters wrote, ‘Second blowpipe in court.’

The coroner dealt severely with Mr Clancy. He was told that he was here to assist justice, not to rebut totally imaginary charges against himself. Then he was questioned about the occurrences on the Prometheus, but with very little result. Mr Clancy, as he explained at totally unnecessary length, had been too bemused with the eccentricities of foreign train services and the difficulties of the twenty-four hour times to have noticed anything at all going on round about him. The whole car might have been shooting snake-venomed darts out of blowpipes for all Mr Clancy would have noticed of the matter.

Miss Jane Grey, hairdresser’s assistant, created no flutter among journalistic pens.

The two Frenchmen followed.

M. Armand Dupont deposed that he was on his way to London, where he was to deliver a lecture before the Royal Asiatic Society. He and his son had been very interested in a technical discussion and had noticed very little of what went on round them. He had not noticed the deceased until his attention was attracted by the stir of excitement caused by the discovery of her death.

‘Did you know this Madame Morisot or Madame Giselle by sight?’

‘No, Monsieur, I had never seen her before.’

‘But she is a well-known figure in Paris, is she not?’

Old M. Dupont shrugged his shoulders.

‘Not to me. In any case, I am not very much in Paris these days.’

‘You have lately returned from the East, I understand?’

‘That is so, Monsieur—from Persia.’

‘You and your son have travelled a good deal in out-of-the-way parts of the world?’

‘Pardon?’

‘You have journeyed in wild places?’

‘That, yes.’

‘Have you ever come across a race of people that used snake venom as an arrow poison?’

This had to be translated, and when M. Dupont understood the question he shook his head vigorously.

‘Never—never have I come across anything like that.’

His son followed him. His evidence was a repetition of his father’s. He had noticed nothing. He had thought it possible that the deceased had been stung by a wasp, because he had himself been annoyed by one and had finally killed it.

The Duponts were the last witnesses.

The coroner cleared his throat and addressed the jury.

This, he said, was without doubt the most astonishing and incredible case with which he had ever dealt in this court. A woman had been murdered—they could rule out any question of suicide or accident—in mid-air, in a small enclosed space. There was no question of any outside person having committed the crime. The murderer or murderers must be of necessity one of the witnesses they had heard this morning. There was no getting away from that fact, and a very terrible and awful one it was. One of the persons present had been lying in a desperate and abandoned manner.

The manner of the crime was one of unparalleled audacity. In the full view of ten—or twelve, counting the stewards—witnesses, the murderer had placed a blowpipe to his lips and sent the fatal dart on its murderous course through the air and no one had observed the act. It seemed frankly incredible, but there was the evidence of the blowpipe, of the dart found on the floor, of the mark on the deceased’s neck and of the medical evidence to show that, incredible or not, it had happened.

In the absence of further evidence incriminating some particular person, he could only direct the jury to return a verdict of murder against a person or persons unknown. Everyone present had denied any knowledge of the deceased woman. It would be the work of the police to find out how and where a connexion lay. In the absence of any motive for the crime he could only advise the verdict he had just mentioned. The jury would now consider the verdict.

A square-faced member of the jury with suspicious eyes leaned forward breathing heavily.

‘Can I ask a question, sir?’

‘Certainly.’

‘You say as how the blowpipe was found down a seat? Whose seat was it?’

The coroner consulted his notes. Sergeant Wilson stepped to his side and murmured:

‘Ah, yes. The seat in question was No. 9, a seat occupied by M. Hercule Poirot. M. Poirot, I may say, is a very well-known and respected private detective who has—er—collaborated several times with Scotland Yard.’

The square-faced man transferred his gaze to the face of M. Hercule Poirot. It rested with a far from satisfied expression on the little Belgian’s long moustaches.

‘Foreigners,’ said the eyes of the square-faced man, ‘you can’t trust foreigners, not even if they are hand-and-glove with the police.’

Out loud he said:

‘It was this Mr Poirot who picked up the dart, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

The jury retired. They returned after five minutes, and the foreman handed a piece of paper to the coroner.

‘What’s all this?’ The coroner frowned. ‘Nonsense, I can’t accept this verdict.’

A few minutes later the amended verdict was returned: ‘We find that the deceased came to her death by poison, there being insufficient evidence to show by whom the poison was administered.’

Chapter 5

After the Inquest

As Jane left the court after the verdict she found Norman Gale beside her.

He said, ‘I wonder what was on that paper that the coroner wouldn’t have at any price?’

‘I can tell you, I think,’ said a voice behind him.

The couple turned, to look into the twinkling eyes of M. Hercule Poirot.

‘It was a verdict,’ said the little man, ‘of wilful murder against me.’

‘Oh, surely—’ cried Jane.

Poirot nodded happily.

‘Mais oui. As I came out I heard one man say to the other, “That little foreigner—mark my words, he done it!” The jury thought the same.’

Jane was uncertain whether to condole or to laugh. She decided on the latter. Poirot laughed in sympathy.

‘But, see you,’ he said, ‘definitely I must set to work and clear my character.’

With a smile and a bow he moved away.

Jane and Norman stared after his retreating figure.

‘What an extraordinarily rum little beggar,’ said Gale. ‘Calls himself a detective. I don’t see how he could do much detecting. Any criminal could spot him a mile off. I don’t see how he could disguise himself.’

‘Haven’t you got a very old-fashioned idea of detectives?’ asked Jane. ‘All the false beard stuff is very out of date. Nowadays detectives just sit and think out a case psychologically.’

‘Rather less strenuous.’

‘Physically, perhaps; but of course you need a cool, clear brain.’

‘I see. A hot muddled one won’t do.’

They both laughed.

‘Look here,’ said Gale. A slight flush rose in his cheeks and he spoke rather fast. ‘Would you mind—I mean, it would be frightfully nice of you—it’s a bit late—but how about having some tea with me? I feel—comrades in misfortune—and—’

He stopped. To himself he said:

‘What is the matter with you, you fool? Can’t you ask a girl to have a cup of tea without stammering and blushing and making an utter ass of yourself? What will the girl think of you?’

Gale’s confusion served to accentuate Jane’s coolness and self-possession.

‘Thank you very much,’ she said. ‘I would like some tea.’

They found a tea-shop and a disdainful waitress with a gloomy manner took their order with an air of doubt as of one who might say: ‘Don’t blame me if you’re disappointed. They say we serve teas here, but I never heard of it.’

The tea-shop was nearly empty. Its emptiness served to emphasize the intimacy of tea drinking together. Jane peeled off her gloves and looked across the table at her companion. He was attractive—those blue eyes and that smile. And he was nice too.

‘It’s a queer show, this murder business,’ said Gale, plunging hastily into talk. He was still not quite free from an absurd feeling of embarrassment.

‘I know,’ said Jane. ‘I’m rather worried about it—from the point of view of my job, I mean. I don’t know how they’ll take it.’

‘Ye-es. I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘Antoine’s mayn’t like to employ a girl who’s been mixed up in a murder case and had to give evidence, and all that.’

‘People are queer,’ said Norman Gale thoughtfully. ‘Life’s so—so unfair. A thing like this that isn’t your fault at all—’ He frowned angrily. ‘It’s damnable!’

‘Well, it hasn’t happened yet,’ Jane reminded him. ‘No good getting hot and bothered about something that hasn’t happened. After all, I suppose there is some point in it—I might be the person who murdered her! And when you’ve murdered one person they say you usually murder a lot more; and it wouldn’t be very comfortable having your hair done by a person of that kind.’

‘Anyone’s only got to look at you to know you couldn’t murder anybody,’ said Norman, gazing at her earnestly.

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ said Jane. ‘I’d like to murder some of my ladies sometimes—if I could be sure I’d get away with it! There’s one in particular—she’s got a voice like a corncrake and she grumbles at everything. I really think sometimes that murdering her would be a good deed and not a crime at all. So you see I’m quite criminally minded.’

‘Well, you didn’t do this particular murder, anyway,’ said Gale. ‘I can swear to that.’

‘And I can swear you didn’t do it,’ said Jane. ‘But that won’t help you if your patients think you have.’

‘My patients, yes—’ Gale looked rather thoughtful. ‘I suppose you’re right—I hadn’t really thought of that. A dentist who might be a homicidal maniac—no, it’s not a very alluring prospect.’

He added suddenly and impulsively:

‘I say, you don’t mind my being a dentist, do you?’

Jane raised her eyebrows.

‘I? Mind?’

‘What I mean is, there’s always something rather—well, comic about a dentist. Somehow it’s not a romantic profession. Now a doctor everyone takes seriously.’

‘Cheer up,’ said Jane. ‘A dentist is decidedly a cut above a hairdresser’s assistant.’

They laughed, and Gale said, ‘I feel we’re going to be friends. Do you?’

‘Yes, I think I do.’

‘Perhaps you’ll dine with me one night and we might do a show?’

‘Thank you.’

There was a pause, and then Gale said:

‘How did you like Le Pinet?’

‘It was great fun.’

‘Had you ever been there before?’

‘No, you see—’

Jane, suddenly confidential, came out with the story of the winning Sweep ticket. They agreed together on the general romance and desirability of Sweeps and deplored the attitude of an unsympathetic English Government.

Their conversation was interrupted by a young man in a brown suit who had been hovering uncertainly nearby for some minutes before they noticed him.

Now, however, he lifted his hat and addressed Jane with a certain glib assurance.

‘Miss Jane Grey?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘I represent the Weekly Howl, Miss Grey. I wondered if you would care to do us a short article on this Air Death Murder? Point of view of one of the passengers.’

‘I think I’d rather not, thanks.’

‘Oh, come now, Miss Grey. We’d pay well for it.’

‘How much?’ asked Jane.

‘Fifty pounds—or, well—perhaps we’d make it a bit more. Say sixty.’

‘No,’ said Jane. ‘I don’t think I could. I shouldn’t know what to say.’

‘That’s all right,’ said the young man easily. ‘You needn’t actually write the article, you know. One of our fellows will just ask you for a few suggestions and work the whole thing up for you. It won’t be the least trouble to you.’

‘All the same,’ said Jane, ‘I’d rather not.’

‘What about a hundred quid? Look here, I really will make it a hundred; and give us a photograph.’

‘No,’ said Jane. ‘I don’t like the idea.’

‘So you may as well clear out,’ said Norman Gale. ‘Miss Grey doesn’t want to be worried.’

The young man turned to him hopefully.

‘Mr Gale, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘Now look here, Mr Gale, if Miss Grey feels a bit squeamish about it, what about your having a shot? Five hundred words. And we’ll pay you the same as I offered Miss Grey—and that’s a good bargain, because a woman’s account of another woman’s murder is better news value. I’m offering you a good chance.’

‘I don’t want it. I shan’t write a word for you.’

‘It’ll be good publicity apart from the pay. Rising professional man—brilliant career ahead of you—all your patients will read it.’

‘That,’ said Norman Gale, ‘is mostly what I’m afraid of.’

‘Well, you can’t get anywhere without publicity in these days.’

‘Possibly, but it depends on the kind of publicity. I’m hoping that just one or two of my patients may not read the papers and may continue in ignorance of the fact that I’ve been mixed up in a murder case. Now you’ve had your answer from both of us. Are you going quietly, or have I got to kick you out of here?’

‘Nothing to get annoyed about,’ said the young man, quite undisturbed by this threat of violence. ‘Good evening, and ring me up at the office if you change your mind. Here’s my card.’

He made his way cheerfully out of the tea-shop, thinking to himself as he did so: ‘Not too bad. Made quite a decent interview.’

And in truth the next issue of the Weekly Howl had an important column on the views of two of the witnesses in the Air Murder Mystery. Miss Jane Grey had declared herself too distressed to talk about the matter. It had been a terrible shock to her and she hated to think about it. Mr Norman Gale had expressed himself at great length on the effect upon a professional man’s career of being mixed up in a criminal case, however innocently. Mr Gale had humorously expressed the hope that some of his patients only read the fashion columns and so might not suspect the worst when they came for the ordeal of ‘the chair’.

When the young man had departed Jane said:

‘I wonder why he didn’t go for the more important people?’

‘Leaves that to his betters, probably,’ said Gale grimly. ‘He’s probably tried there and failed.’

He sat frowning for a minute or two, then he said:

‘Jane (I’m going to call you Jane. You don’t mind, do you?) Jane—who do you think really murdered this Giselle woman?’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea.’

‘Have you thought about it? Really thought about it?’

‘Well, no, I don’t suppose I have. I’ve been thinking about my own part in it, and worrying a little. I haven’t really wondered seriously which—which of the others did it. I don’t think I’d realized until today that one of them must have done it.’

‘Yes, the coroner put it very plainly. I know I didn’t do it, and I know you didn’t do it, because—well, because I was watching you most of the time.’

‘Yes,’ said Jane. ‘I know you didn’t do it—for the same reason. And of course I know I didn’t do it myself! So it must have been one of the others; but I don’t know which. I haven’t the slightest idea. Have you?’

‘No.’

Norman Gale looked very thoughtful. He seemed to be puzzling out some train of thought. Jane went on:

‘I don’t see how we can have the least idea, either. I mean we didn’t see anything—at least I didn’t. Did you?’

Gale shook his head.

‘Not a thing.’

‘That’s what seems so frightfully odd. I dare say you wouldn’t have seen anything. You weren’t facing that way. But I was. I was looking right along the middle. I mean—I could have been—’

Jane stopped and flushed. She was remembering that her eyes had been mostly fixed on a periwinkle-blue pullover, and that her mind, far from being receptive to what was going on around her, had been mainly concerned with the personality of the human being inside the periwinkle-blue pullover.

Norman Gale thought:

‘I wonder what makes her blush like that…She’s wonderful…I’m going to marry her…Yes, I am…But it’s no good looking too far ahead. I’ve got to have some good excuse for seeing her often. This murder business will do as well as anything else…Besides, I really think it would be as well to do something—that whipper-snapper of a reporter and his publicity…’

Aloud he said:

‘Let’s think about it now. Who killed her? Let’s go over all the people. The stewards?’

‘No,’ said Jane.

‘I agree. The women opposite us?’

‘I don’t suppose anyone like Lady Horbury would go killing people. And the other one, Miss Kerr, well, she’s far too county. She wouldn’t kill an old Frenchwoman, I’m sure.’

‘Only an unpopular MFH? I expect you’re not far wrong, Jane. Then there’s moustachios, but he seems, according to the coroner’s jury, to be the most likely person, so that washes him out. The doctor? That doesn’t seem very likely, either.’

‘If he’d wanted to kill her he could have used something quite untraceable and nobody would ever have known.’

‘Ye-es,’ said Norman doubtfully. ‘These untraceable, tasteless, odourless poisons are very convenient, but I’m a bit doubtful if they really exist. What about the little man who owned up to having a blowpipe?’

‘That’s rather suspicious. But he seemed a very nice little man, and he needn’t have said he had a blowpipe, so that looks as though he were all right.’

‘Then there’s Jameson—no—what’s his name—Ryder?’

‘Yes, it might be him.’

‘And the two Frenchmen?’

‘That’s the most likely of all. They’ve been to queer places. And of course they may have had some reason we know nothing about. I thought the younger one looked very unhappy and worried.’

‘You probably would be worried if you’d committed a murder,’ said Norman Gale grimly.

‘He looked nice, though,’ said Jane; ‘and the old father was rather a dear. I hope it isn’t them.’

‘We don’t seem to be getting on very fast,’ said Norman Gale.

‘I don’t see how we can get on without knowing a lot of things about the old woman who was murdered. Enemies, and who inherits her money, and all that.’

Norman Gale said thoughtfully:

‘You think this is mere idle speculation?’

Jane said coolly, ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Not quite.’ Gale hesitated, then went on slowly, ‘I have a feeling it may be useful—’

Jane looked at him inquiringly.

‘Murder,’ said Norman Gale, ‘doesn’t concern the victim and the guilty only. It affects the innocent too. You and I are innocent, but the shadow of murder has touched us. We don’t know how that shadow is going to affect our lives.’

Jane was a person of cool common sense, but she shivered suddenly.

‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘You make me feel afraid.’

‘I’m a little afraid myself,’ said Gale.

Chapter 6

Consultation

Hercule Poirot rejoined his friend Inspector Japp. The latter had a grin on his face.

‘Hullo, old boy,’ he said. ‘You’ve had a pretty near squeak of being locked up in a police cell.’

‘I fear,’ said Poirot gravely, ‘that such an occurrence might have damaged me professionally.’

‘Well,’ said Japp with a grin, ‘detectives do turn out to be criminals sometimes—in story books.’

A tall thin man with an intelligent, melancholy face joined them, and Japp introduced him.

‘This is Monsieur Fournier of the Sûreté. He has come over to collaborate with us about this business.’

‘I think I have had the pleasure of meeting you once some years ago, M. Poirot,’ said Fournier, bowing and shaking hands. ‘I have also heard of you from M. Giraud.’

A very faint smile seemed to hover on his lips. And Poirot, who could well imagine the terms in which Giraud (whom he himself had been in the habit of referring to disparagingly as the ‘human fox-hound’) had spoken of him, permitted himself a small discreet smile in reply.

‘I suggest,’ said Poirot, ‘that both you gentlemen should dine with me at my rooms. I have already invited Maître Thibault. That is, if you and my friend Japp do not object to my collaboration.’

‘That’s all right, old cock,’ said Japp, slapping him heartily on the back. ‘You’re in on this on the ground floor.’

‘We shall be indeed honoured,’ murmured the Frenchman ceremoniously.

‘You see,’ said Poirot, ‘as I said to a very charming young lady just now, I am anxious to clear my character.’

‘That jury certainly didn’t like the look of you,’ agreed Japp with a renewal of his grin. ‘Best joke I’ve heard for a long time.’

By common consent no mention of the case was made during the very excellent meal which the little Belgian provided for his friends.

‘After all, it is possible to eat well in England,’ murmured Fournier appreciatively as he made delicate use of a thoughtfully provided toothpick.

‘A delicious meal, M. Poirot,’ said Thibault.

‘Bit Frenchified, but damn good,’ pronounced Japp.

‘A meal should always lie lightly on the estomac,’ said Poirot. ‘It should not be so heavy as to paralyse thought.’

‘I can’t say my stomach ever gives me much trouble,’ said Japp. ‘But I won’t argue the point. Well, we’d better get down to business. I know that M. Thibault has got an appointment this evening, so I suggest that we should start by consulting him on any point that seems likely to be useful.’

‘I am at your service, gentlemen. Naturally I can speak more freely here than in a coroner’s court. I had a hurried conversation with Inspector Japp before the inquest, and he indicated a policy of reticence—the bare necessary facts.’

‘Quite right,’ said Japp. ‘Don’t ever spill the beans too soon. But now let’s hear all you can tell us of this Giselle woman.’

‘To speak the truth, I know very little. I know her as the world knew her—as a public character. Of her private life as an individual I know very little. Probably M. Fournier here can tell you more than I can. But I will say to you this: Madame Giselle was what you call in this country “a character”. She was unique. Of her antecedents nothing is known. I have an idea that as a young woman she was good-looking. I believe that as a result of smallpox she lost her looks. She was—I am giving you my impressions—a woman who enjoyed power; she had power. She was a keen woman of business. She was the type of hard-headed Frenchwoman who would never allow sentiment to affect her business interests; but she had the reputation of carrying on her profession with scrupulous honesty.'

He looked for assent to Fournier. That gentleman nodded his dark melancholic head.

'Yes,' he said. 'She was honest—according to her lights. Yet the law could have called her to account if only evidence had been forthcoming; but that —' He shrugged his shoulders despondently. 'It is too much to ask, with human nature what it is.'

'You mean?'

'Chantage.'

'Blackmail?' echoed Japp.

'Yes, blackmail of a peculiar and specialized kind. It was Madame Giselle's custom to lend money on what I think you call in this country "note of hand alone". She used her discretion as to the sums she lent and the methods of repayment; but I may tell you that she had her own methods of getting paid.'

Poirot leaned forward interestedly.

'As Maître Thibault said today, Madame Giselle's clientèle lay amongst the upper and professional classes. Those classes are particularly vulnerable to the force of public opinion. Madame Giselle had her own intelligence service…It was her custom before lending money (that is, in the case of a large sum) to collect as many facts as possible about the client in question; and her intelligence system, I may say, was an extraordinarily good one. I will echo what our friend has said: according to her lights Madame Giselle was scrupulously honest. She kept faith with those who kept faith with her. I honestly believe that she has never made use of her secret knowledge to obtain money from anyone unless that money was already owed to her.'

‘You mean,’ said Poirot, ‘that this secret knowledge was her form of security?’

‘Exactly; and in using it she was perfectly ruthless and deaf to any finer shades of feeling; and I will tell you this, gentlemen: her system paid! Very, very rarely did she have to write off a bad debt. A man or woman in a prominent position would go to desperate lengths to obtain the money which would obviate a public scandal. As I say, we knew of her activities; but as for prosecution—’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘That is a more difficult matter. Human nature is human nature.’

‘And supposing,’ said Poirot, ‘that she did, as you say happened occasionally, have to write off a bad debt—what then?’

‘In that case,’ said Fournier slowly, ‘the information she held was published, or was given to the person concerned in the matter.’

There was a moment’s silence. Then Poirot said:

‘Financially, that did not benefit her?’

‘No,’ said Fournier—‘not directly, that is.’

‘But indirectly?’

‘Indirectly,’ said Japp, ‘it made the others pay up, eh?’

‘Exactly,’ said Fournier. ‘It was valuable for what you call the moral effect.’

‘Immoral effect, I should call it,’ said Japp. ‘Well’—he rubbed his nose thoughtfully—‘it opens up a very pretty line in motives for murder—a very pretty line. Then there’s the question of who is going to come into her money.’ He appealed to Thibault. ‘Can you help us there at all?’

‘There was a daughter,’ said the lawyer. ‘She did not live with her mother—indeed I fancy that her mother has never seen her since she was a tiny child; but she made a will many years ago now leaving everything, with the exception of a small legacy to her maid, to her daughter Anne Morisot. As far as I know she has never made another.’

‘And her fortune is large?’ asked Poirot.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

‘At a guess eight or nine million francs.’

Poirot pursed his lips to a whistle. Japp said, ‘Lord, she didn’t look it. Let me see, what’s the exchange—that’s—why, that must be well over a hundred thousand pounds. Whew!’

‘Mademoiselle Anne Morisot will be a very wealthy young woman,’ said Poirot.

‘Just as well she wasn’t on that plane,’ said Japp drily. ‘She might have been suspected of bumping off her mother to get the dibs. How old would she be?’

‘I really cannot say. I should imagine about twenty-four or five.’

‘Well, there doesn’t seem anything to connect her with the crime. We’ll have to get down to this blackmailing business. Everyone on that plane denies knowing Madame Giselle. One of them is lying. We’ve got to find out which. An examination of her private papers might help, eh, Fournier?’

‘My friend,’ said the Frenchman, ‘immediately the news came through, after I had conversed with Scotland Yard on the telephone, I went straight to her house. There was a safe there containing papers. All those papers had been burnt.’

‘Burnt? Who by? Why?’

‘Madame Giselle had a confidential maid, Elise. Elise had instructions in the event of anything happening to her mistress to open the safe (the combination of which she knew) and burn the contents.’

‘What? But that’s amazing!’ Japp stared.

‘You see,’ said Fournier, ‘Madame Giselle had her own code. She kept faith with those who kept faith with her. She gave her promise to her clients that she would deal honestly with them. She was ruthless, but she was also a woman of her word.’

Japp shook his head dumbly. The four men were silent, ruminating on the strange character of the dead woman…

Maître Thibault rose.

‘I must leave you, Messieurs. I have to keep an appointment. If there is any further information I can give you at any time, you know my address.’

He shook hands with them ceremoniously and left the apartment.

Chapter 7

Probabilities

With the departure of Maître Thibault, the three men drew their chairs a little closer to the table.

‘Now, then,’ said Japp, ‘let’s get down to it.’ He unscrewed the cap of his fountain-pen. ‘There were eleven passengers in that plane—in the rear car, I mean; the other doesn’t come into it—eleven passengers and two stewards—that’s thirteen people we’ve got. One of the remaining twelve did the old woman in. Some of the passengers were English, some were French. The latter I shall hand over to M. Fournier. The English ones I’ll take on. Then there are inquiries to be made in Paris—that’s your job too, Fournier.’

‘And not only in Paris,’ said Fournier. ‘In the summer Giselle did a lot of business at the French watering-places—Deauville, Le Pinet, Wimereux. She went down south too, to Antibes and Nice, and all those places.’

‘A good point; one or two of the people in the Prometheus mentioned Le Pinet, I remember. Well, that’s one line. Then we’ve got to get down to the actual murder itself—prove who could possibly be in a position to use that blowpipe.’ He unrolled a large sketch plan of the car of the aeroplane and placed it in the centre of the table. ‘Now, then, we’re ready for the preliminary work. And, to begin with, let’s go through the people one by one, and decide on the probabilities and—even more important—the possibilities.

‘To begin with, we can eliminate M. Poirot here. That brings the number down to eleven.’

Poirot shook his head sadly.

‘You are of too trustful a nature, my friend. You should trust nobody—nobody at all.’

‘Well, we’ll leave you in if you like,’ said Japp good-temperedly. ‘Then there are the stewards. Seems to me very unlikely it should be either of them from the probability point of view. They’re not likely to have borrowed money on a grand scale and they’ve both got a good record—decent, sober men, both of them. It would surprise me very much if either of them had anything to do with this. On the other hand, from the possibility point of view we’ve got to include them. They were up and down the car. They could actually have taken up a position from which they could have used that blowpipe—from the right angle, I mean—though I don’t believe that a steward could shoot a poisoned dart out of a blowpipe in a car full of people without someone noticing him do it. I know by experience that most people are blind as bats; but there are limits. Of course, in a way, the same thing applies to every blessed person. It was madness, absolute madness, to commit a crime that way. Only about a chance in a hundred that it would come off without being spotted. The fellow that did it must have had the luck of the devil. Of all the damn fool ways to commit a murder—’

Poirot, who had been sitting with his eyes down, smoking quietly, interposed a question.

‘You think it was a foolish way of committing a murder, yes?’

‘Of course it was. It was absolute madness.’

‘And yet—it succeeded. We sit here, we three, we talk about it, but we have no knowledge of who committed the crime! That is success!’

‘That’s pure luck,’ argued Japp. ‘The murderer ought to have been spotted five or six times over.’

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

Fournier looked at him curiously.

‘What is it that is in your mind, M. Poirot?’

‘Mon ami,’ said Poirot, ‘my point is this: an affair must be judged by its results. This affair has succeeded. That is my point.’

‘And yet,’ said the Frenchman thoughtfully, ‘it seems almost a miracle.’

‘Miracle or no miracle, there it is,’ said Japp. ‘We’ve got the medical evidence, we’ve got the weapon; and if anyone had told me a week ago that I should be investigating a crime where a woman was killed with a poisoned dart with snake venom on it—well, I’d have laughed in his face! It’s an insult—that’s what this murder is—an insult.’

He breathed deeply. Poirot smiled.

‘It is, perhaps, a murder committed by a person with a perverted sense of humour,’ said Fournier thoughtfully. ‘It is most important in a crime to get an idea of the psychology of the murderer.’

Japp snorted slightly at the word psychology, which he disliked and mistrusted.

‘That’s the sort of stuff M. Poirot likes to hear,’ he said.

‘I am very interested, yes, in what you both say.’

‘You don’t doubt that she was killed that way, I suppose?’ Japp asked him suspiciously. ‘I know your tortuous mind.’

‘No, no, my friend. My mind is quite at ease on that point. The poisoned thorn that I picked up was the cause of death—that is quite certain. But nevertheless there are points about this case—’

He paused, shaking his head perplexedly.

Japp went on:

‘Well, to get back to our Irish stew, we can’t wash out the stewards absolutely, but I think myself it’s very unlikely that either of them had anything to do with it. Do you agree, M. Poirot?’

‘Oh, you remember what I said. Me—I would not wash out—what a term, mon Dieu!—anybody at this stage.’

‘Have it your own way. Now, the passengers. Let’s start up the end by the stewards’ pantry and the toilets. Seat No. 16.’ He jabbed a pencil on the plan. ‘That’s the hairdressing girl, Jane Grey. Got a ticket in the Irish Sweep—blued it at Le Pinet. That means the girl’s a gambler. She might have been hard up and borrowed from the old dame—doesn’t seem likely, either, that she borrowed a large sum, or that Giselle could have a “hold” over her. Seems rather too small a fish for what we’re looking for. And I don’t think a hairdresser’s assistant had the remotest chance of laying her hands on snake venom. They don’t use it as a hair dye or for face massage.

‘In a way it was rather a mistake to use snake venom; it narrows things down a lot. Only about two people in a hundred would be likely to have any knowledge of it and be able to lay hands on the stuff.’

‘Which makes one thing, at least, perfectly clear,’ said Poirot.

It was Fournier who shot a quick glance of inquiry at him.

Japp was busy with his own ideas.

‘I look at it like this,’ he said. ‘The murderer has got to fall into one of two categories: either he’s a man who’s knocked about the world in queer places—a man who knows something of snakes and of the more deadly varieties and of the habits of the native tribes who use the venom to dispose of their enemies—that’s category No. 1.’

‘And the other?’

‘The scientific line. Research. This boomslang stuff is the kind of thing they experiment with in high-class laboratories. I had a talk with Winterspoon. Apparently snake venom—cobra venom, to be exact—is sometimes used in medicine. It’s used in the treatment of epilepsy with a fair amount of success. There’s a lot being done in the way of scientific investigation into snake bite.’

‘Interesting and suggestive,’ said Fournier.

‘Yes, but let’s go on. Neither of those categories fit the Grey girl. As far as she’s concerned, motive seems unlikely, chances of getting the poison—poor. Actual possibility of doing the blowpipe act very doubtful indeed—almost impossible. See here.’

The three men bent over the plan.

‘Here’s 16,’ said Japp. ‘And here’s 2, where Giselle was sitting with a lot of people and seats intervening. If the girl didn’t move from her seat—and everybody says she didn’t—she couldn’t possibly have aimed the thorn to catch Giselle on the side of the neck. I think we can take it she’s pretty well out of it.

‘Now then, 12, opposite. That’s the dentist, Norman Gale. Very much the same applies to him. Small fry. I suppose he’d have a slightly better chance of getting hold of snake venom.’

‘It is not an injection usually favoured by dentists,’ murmured Poirot gently. ‘It would be a case of kill rather than cure.’

‘A dentist has enough fun with his patients as it is,’ said Japp, grinning. ‘Still, I suppose he might move in circles where you could get access to some funny business in drugs. He might have a scientific friend. But as regards possibility he’s pretty well out of it. He did leave his seat, but only to go to the toilet—that’s in the opposite direction. On his way back to his seat he couldn’t be farther than the gangway here, and to shoot off a thorn from a blowpipe so as to catch the old lady in the neck he’d have to have a kind of pet thorn that would do tricks and make a right-angle turn. So he’s pretty well out of it.’

‘I agree,’ said Fournier. ‘Let us proceed.’

‘We’ll cross the gangway now. 17.’

‘That was my seat originally,’ said Poirot. ‘I yielded it to one of the ladies since she desired to be near her friend.’

‘That’s the Honourable Venetia. Well, what about her? She’s a big bug. She might have borrowed from Giselle. Doesn’t look as though she had any guilty secrets in her life—but perhaps she pulled a horse in a point-to-point, or whatever they call it. We’ll have to pay a little attention to her. The position’s possible. If Giselle had got her head turned a little looking out of the window the Hon. Venetia could take a sporting shot (or do you call it a sporting puff?) diagonally across down the car. It would be a bit of a fluke, though. I rather think she’d have to stand up to do it. She’s the sort of woman who goes out with the guns in the autumn. I don’t know whether shooting with a gun is any help to you with a native blowpipe? I suppose it’s a question of eye just the same—eye and practice; and she’s probably got friends—men—who’ve been big-game hunting in odd parts of the globe. She might have got hold of some queer native stuff that way. What balderdash it all sounds, though! It doesn’t make sense.’

‘It does indeed seem unlikely,’ said Fournier. ‘Mademoiselle Kerr—I saw her at the inquest today—’ He shook his head. ‘One does not readily connect her with murder.’

‘Seat 13,’ said Japp. ‘Lady Horbury. She’s a bit of a dark horse. I know something about her I’ll tell you presently. I shouldn’t be surprised if she had a guilty secret or two.’

‘I happen to know,’ said Fournier, ‘that the lady in question has been losing very heavily at the baccarat table at Le Pinet.’

‘That’s smart of you. Yes, she’s the type of pigeon to be mixed up with Giselle.’

‘I agree absolutely.’

‘Very well, then—so far, so good. But how did she do it? She didn’t leave her seat either, you remember. She’d have had to have knelt up in her seat and leaned over the top—with ten people looking at her. Oh, hell, let’s get on.’

‘9 and 10,’ said Fournier, moving his finger on the plan.

‘M. Hercule Poirot and Dr Bryant,’ said Japp. ‘What has M. Poirot to say for himself?’

Poirot shook his head sadly.

‘Mon estomac,’ he said pathetically. ‘Alas, that the brain should be the servant of the stomach.’

‘I, too,’ said Fournier with sympathy. ‘In the air I do not feel well.’

He closed his eyes and shook his head expressively.

‘Now then, Dr Bryant. What about Dr Bryant? Big bug in Harley Street. Not very likely to go to a French woman moneylender; but you never know. And if any funny business crops up with a doctor he’s done for life! Here’s where my scientific theory comes in. A man like Bryant, at the top of the tree, is in with all the medical research people. He could pinch a test-tube of snake venom as easy as winking when he happens to be in some swell laboratory.’

‘They check these things, my friend,’ objected Poirot. ‘It would not be just like plucking a buttercup in a meadow.’

‘Even if they do check ’em, a clever man could substitute something harmless. It could be done, simply because a man like Bryant would be above suspicion.’

‘There is much in what you say,’ agreed Fournier.

‘The only thing is, why did he draw attention to the thing? Why not say the woman died from heart failure—natural death?’

Poirot coughed. The other two looked at him inquiringly.

‘I fancy,’ he said, ‘that that was the doctor’s first—well, shall we say impression? After all, it looked very like natural death, possibly as the result of a wasp sting; there was a wasp, remember—’

‘Not likely to forget that wasp,’ put in Japp. ‘You’re always harping on it.’

‘However,’ continued Poirot, ‘I happened to notice the fatal thorn on the ground and picked it up. Once we had found that, everything pointed to murder.’

‘The thorn would be bound to be found anyway.’

Poirot shook his head.

‘There is just a chance that the murderer might have been able to pick it up unobserved.’

‘Bryant?’

‘Bryant or another.’

‘H’m—rather risky.’

Fournier disagreed.

‘You think so now,’ he said, ‘because you know that it is murder. But when a lady dies suddenly of heart failure, if a man is to drop his handkerchief and stoop to pick it up, who will notice the action or think twice about it?’

‘That’s true,’ agreed Japp. ‘Well, I fancy Bryant is definitely on the list of suspects. He could lean his head round the corner of his seat and do the blowpipe act—again diagonally across the car. But why nobody saw him—! However, I won’t go into that again. Whoever did it wasn’t seen!’

‘And for that, I fancy, there must be a reason,’ said Fournier. ‘A reason that, by all I have heard,’ he smiled, ‘will appeal to M. Poirot. I mean a psychological reason.’

‘Continue, my friend,’ said Poirot. ‘It is interesting what you say there.’

‘Supposing,’ said Fournier, ‘that when travelling in a train you were to pass a house in flames. Everyone’s eyes would at once be drawn to the window. Everyone would have their attention fixed on a certain point. A man in such a moment might whip out a dagger and stab a man, and nobody would see him do it.’

‘That is true,’ said Poirot. ‘I remember a case in which I was concerned—a case of poison, where that very point arose. There was, as you call it, a psychological moment. If we discover that there was such a moment during the journey of the Prometheus—’

‘We ought to find that out by questioning the stewards and the passengers,’ said Japp.

‘True. But if there was such a psychological moment, it must follow logically that the cause of that moment must have originated with the murderer. He must have been able to produce the particular effect that caused that moment.’

‘Perfectly, perfectly,’ said the Frenchman.

‘Well, we’ll note down that as a point for questions,’ said Japp. ‘I’m coming now to seat No. 8—Daniel Michael Clancy.’

Japp spoke the name with a certain amount of relish.

‘In my opinion he’s the most likely suspect we’ve got. What’s easier than for a mystery author to fake up an interest in snake venom and get some unsuspecting scientific chemist to let him handle the stuff? Don’t forget he went down past Giselle’s seat—the only one of the passengers who did.’

‘I assure you, my friend,’ said Poirot, ‘that I have not forgotten that point.’

He spoke with emphasis.

Japp went on:

‘He could have used that blowpipe from fairly close quarters without any need of a “psychological moment”, as you call it. And he stood quite a respectable chance of getting away with it. Remember, he knows all about blowpipes—he said so.’

‘Which makes one pause, perhaps.’

‘Sheer artfulness,’ said Japp. ‘And as to this blowpipe he produced today, who is to say that it’s the one he bought two years ago? The whole thing looks very fishy to me. I don’t think it’s healthy for a man to be always brooding over crime and detective stories, reading up all sorts of cases. It puts ideas into his head.’

‘It is certainly necessary for a writer to have ideas in his head,’ agreed Poirot.

Japp returned to his plan of the plane.

‘No. 4 was Ryder—the seat slap in front of the dead woman. Don’t think he did it. But we can’t leave him out. He went to the toilet. He could have taken a pot shot on the way back from fairly close quarters; the only thing is he’d be right up against the archaeologist fellows when he did so. They’d notice it—couldn’t help it.’

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

‘You are not, perhaps, acquainted with many archaeologists? If these two were having a really absorbing discussion on some point at issue—eh bien, my friend, their concentration would be such that they would be quite blind and deaf to the outside world. They would be existing, you see, in five thousand or so BC. Nineteen hundred and thirty-five AD would have been non-existent for them.’

Japp looked a little sceptical.

‘Well, we’ll pass on to them. What can you tell us about the Duponts, Fournier?’

‘M. Armand Dupont is one of the most distinguished archaeologists in France.’

‘Then that doesn’t get us anywhere much. Their position in the car is pretty good from my point of view—across the gangway but slightly farther forward than Giselle. And I suppose that they’ve knocked about the world and dug things up in a lot of queer places; they might easily have got hold of some native snake poison.'

'It is possible, yes,' said Fournier.

'But you don't believe it's likely?'

Fournier shook his head doubtfully.

'M. Dupont lives for his profession. He is an enthusiast. He was formerly an antique dealer. He gave up a flourishing business to devote himself to excavation. Both he and his son are devoted heart and soul to their profession. It seems to me unlikely—I will not say impossible, since the ramifications of the Stavisky business I will believe anything—unlikely that they are mixed up in this business.'

'All right,' said Japp.

He picked up the sheet of paper on which he had been making notes and cleared his throat.

'This is where we stand. Jane Grey. Probability—poor. Possibility—practically nil. Gale. Probability—poor. Possibility—again practically nil. Miss Kerr. Very improbable. Possibility—doubtful. Lady Horbury. Probability—good. Possibility—practically nil. M. Poirot—almost certainly the criminal; the only man on board who could create a psychological moment.'

Japp enjoyed a good laugh over his little joke, and Poirot smiled indulgently and Fournier a trifle diffidently. Then the detective resumed:

'Bryant. Probability and possibility—both good. Clancy. Motive doubtful—probability and possibility very good indeed. Ryder. Probability uncertain—possibility quite fair. The two Duponts. Probability poor as regards motive—good as to means of obtaining poison. Possibility—good.

'That's a pretty fair summary, I think, as far as we can go. We'll have to do a lot of routine inquiry. I shall take on Clancy and Bryant first—find out what they've been up to—if they've been hard up at any time in the past—if they've seemed worried or upset lately—their movements in the last year—all that sort of stuff. I'll do the same for Ryder. Then it won't do to neglect the others entirely. I'll get Wilson to nose round there. M. Fournier here will undertake the Duponts.'

The man from the Sûreté nodded.

'Be well assured—that will be attended to. I shall return to Paris tonight. There may be something to be got out of Elise, Giselle's maid, now that we know a little more about the case. Also, I will check up Giselle's movements very carefully. It will be well to know where she has been during the summer. She was, I know, at Le Pinet once or twice. We may get information as to her contacts with some of the English people involved. Ah, yes, there is much to do.'

They both looked at Poirot, who was absorbed in thought.

'You going to take a hand at all, M. Poirot?' asked Japp.

Poirot roused himself.

'Yes, I think I should like to accompany M. Fournier to Paris.'

'Enchanté,' said the Frenchman.

'What are you up to, I wonder?' said Japp. He looked at Poirot curiously. 'You've been very quiet over all this. Got some of your little ideas, eh?'

'One or two, one or two; but it is very difficult.'

'Let's hear about it.'

'One thing that worries me,' said Poirot slowly, 'is the place where the blowpipe was found.'

'Naturally! It nearly got you locked up.'

Poirot shook his head.

‘I do not mean that. It is not because it was found pushed down beside my seat that it worries me—it was its being pushed down behind any seat.’

‘I don’t see anything in that,’ said Japp. ‘Whoever did it had got to hide the thing somewhere. He couldn’t risk its being found on him.’

‘Evidemment. But you may have noticed, my friend, when you examined the plane, that although the windows cannot be opened, there is in each of them a ventilator—a circle of small round holes in the glass which can be opened or closed by turning a fan of glass. Those holes are of a sufficient circumference to admit of the passage of our blowpipe. What could be simpler than to get rid of the blowpipe that way? It falls to the earth beneath, and it is extremely unlikely that it will ever be found.’

‘I can think of an objection to that—the murderer was afraid of being seen. If he pushed the blowpipe through the ventilator someone might have noticed.’

‘I see,’ said Poirot. ‘He was not afraid of being seen placing the blowpipe to his lips and dispatching the fatal dart, but he was afraid of being seen trying to push the blowpipe through the window!’

‘Sounds absurd, I admit,’ said Japp; ‘but there it is. He did hide the blowpipe behind the cushion of a seat. We can’t get away from that.’

Poirot did not answer, and Fournier asked curiously:

‘It gives you an idea, that?’

Poirot bowed his head assentingly.

‘It gives rise to, say, a speculation in my mind.’

With absent-minded fingers he straightened the unused inkstand that Japp’s impatient hand had set a little askew.

Then lifting his head sharply, he asked:

‘A propos, have you that detailed list of the belongings of the passengers that I asked you to get me?’

Chapter 8

The List

‘I’m a man of my word, I am,’ said Japp.

He grinned and dived his hand into his pocket, bringing out a mass of closely-typewritten paper.

‘Here you are. It’s all here—down to the minutest detail! And I’ll admit that there is one rather curious thing in it. I’ll talk to you about it when you’ve finished reading the stuff.’

Poirot spread out the sheets on the table and began to read. Fournier moved up and read them over his shoulder:

> James Ryder.
>
> Pockets.—Linen handkerchief marked J. Pigskin notecase—seven £1 notes, three business cards. Letter from partner George Ebermann hoping ‘loan has been successfully negotiated…otherwise we’re in Queer Street’. Letter signed Maudie making appointment Trocadero following evening (cheap paper, illiterate handwriting). Silver cigarette-case. Match-folder. Fountain-pen. Bunch of keys. Yale door key. Loose change in French and English money.
>
> Attaché Case.—Mass of papers concerning dealings in cement. Copy of Bootless Cup (banned in this country). A box of ‘Immediate Cold Cures’.
>
> Dr Bryant.
>
> Pockets.—Two linen handkerchiefs. Notecase containing £20 and 500 francs. Loose change in French and English money. Engagement book. Cigarette-case. Lighter. Fountain-pen. Yale door key. Bunch of keys. Flute in case. Carrying Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini and Les Maux de l’Oreille.
>
> Norman Gale.

Pockets.—Silk handkerchief. Wallet containing £1 in English and 600 francs. Loose change. Business cards of two French firms—makers of dental instruments. Bryant & May matchbox—empty. Silver lighter. Briar pipe. Rubber tobacco pouch. Yale door key.

Attaché Case.—White linen coat. Two small dental mirrors. Dental rolls of cottonwool. La Vie Parisienne. The Strand Magazine. The Autocar.

Armand Dupont.

Pockets.—Wallet containing 1000 francs and £10 in English. Spectacles in case. Loose change in French money. Cotton handkerchief. Packet of cigarettes, match-folder. Cards in case. Toothpick.

AttachéCase.—Manuscript of proposed address to Royal Asiatic Society. Two German archaeological publications. Two sheets of rough sketches of pottery. Ornamented hollow tubes (said to be Kurdish pipe stems). Small basket-work tray. Nine unmounted photographs—all of pottery.

Jean Dupont.

Pockets.—Notecase containing £5 in English and 300 francs. Cigarette-case. Cigarette-holder (ivory). Lighter. Fountain-pen. Two pencils. Small notebook full of scribbled notes. Letter in English from L. Marriner giving invitation to lunch at restaurant near Tottenham Court Road. Loose change in French.

Daniel Clancy.

Pockets.—Handkerchief (ink-stained). Fountain-pen (leaking). Notecase containing £4 and 100 francs. Three newspaper cuttings dealing with recent crimes (one poisoning by arsenic and two embezzlement). Two letters from house agents with details of country properties. Engagement book. Four pencils. Pen-knife. Three receipted and four unpaid bills. Letter from ‘Gordon’ headed S.S. Minotaur.

Half-done crossword puzzle cut from Times. Notebook containing suggestions for plots. Loose change in Italian, French, Swiss and English money. Receipted hotel bill, Naples. Large bunch of keys.

In overcoat pocket.—Manuscript notes of Murder on Vesuvius. Continental Bradshaw. Golf ball. Pair of socks. Toothbrush. Receipted hotel bill, Paris.

Miss Kerr.

Vanity bag.—Lipstick. Two cigarette-holders (one ivory and one jade). Flapjack. Cigarette-case. Match-folder. Handkerchief. £2 English. Loose change. One half letter of credit. Keys.

Dressing-case.—Shagreen fitted. Bottles, brushes, combs, etc. Manicure outfit. Washing bag containing toothbrush, sponge, toothpowder, soap. Two pairs of scissors. Five letters from family and friends in England. Two Tauchnitz novels. Photograph of two spaniels.

Carried Vogue and Good Housekeeping.

Miss Grey.

Handbag.—Lipstick, rouge, flapjack. Yale key and one trunk key. Pencil. Cigarette-case. Holder. Match-folder. Two handkerchiefs. Receipted hotel bill, Le Pinet. Small book, French Phrases. Notecase, 100 francs and 10s. Loose French and English change. One Casino counter value 5 francs.

In pocket of travelling coat.—Six postcards of Paris, two handkerchiefs and silk scarf. Letter signed ‘Gladys’. Tube of aspirin.

Lady Horbury.

Vanity bag.—Two lipsticks, rouge, flapjack. Handkerchief. Three mille notes. £6 English. Loose change (French). A diamond ring. Five French stamps. Two cigarette-holders. Lighter with case.

> Dressing-case.—Complete makeup outfit. Elaborate manicure set (gold). Small bottle labelled (in ink) Boracic Powder.

As Poirot came to the end of the list, Japp laid his finger on the last item.

‘Rather smart of our man. He thought that didn’t seem quite in keeping with the rest. Boracic powder my eye! The white powder in that bottle was cocaine.’

Poirot’s eyes opened a little. He nodded his head slowly.

‘Nothing much to do with our case, perhaps,’ said Japp. ‘But you don’t need me to tell you that a woman who’s got the cocaine habit hasn’t got much moral restraint. I’ve an idea anyway that her ladyship wouldn’t stick at much to get what she wanted, in spite of all that helpless feminine business. All the same, I doubt if she’d have the nerve to carry a thing like this through; and, frankly, I can’t see that it was possible for her to do it. The whole thing is a bit of a teaser.’

Poirot gathered up the loose typewritten sheets and read them through once again. Then he laid them down with a sigh.

‘On the face of it,’ he said, ‘it seems to point very plainly to one person as having committed the crime. And yet, I cannot see why, or even how.’

Japp stared at him.

‘Are you pretending that by reading all this stuff you’ve got an idea who did it?’

‘I think so.’

Japp seized the papers from him and read them through, handing each sheet over to Fournier as he had finished with it. Then he slapped them down on the table and stared at Poirot.

‘Are you pulling my leg, Moosior Poirot?’

‘No, no. Quelle idée!’

The Frenchman in his turn laid down the sheets.

‘What about you, Fournier?’

The Frenchman shook his head. ‘I may be stupid,’ he said, ‘but I cannot see that this list advances us much.’

‘Not by itself,’ said Poirot. ‘But taken in conjunction with certain features of the case, no? Well, it may be that I am wrong—quite wrong.’

‘Well, come out with your theory,’ said Japp. ‘I’ll be interested to hear it at all events.’

Poirot shook his head.

‘No, as you say it is a theory—a theory only. I hoped to find a certain object on that list. Eh bien, I have found it. It is there; but it seems to point in the wrong direction. The right clue on the wrong person. That means there is much work to be done, and truly there is much that is still obscure to me. I cannot see my way; only certain facts seem to stand out, to arrange themselves in a significant pattern. You do not find it so? No, I see you do not. Let us then each work to his own idea. I have no certainty, I tell you, only a certain suspicion…’

‘I believe you’re just talking through your hat,’ said Japp. He rose. ‘Well, let’s call it a day. I work the London end, you return to Paris, Fournier—and what about our M. Poirot?’

‘I still wish to accompany M. Fournier to Paris—more than ever now.’

‘More than ever—? I’d like to know just what kind of maggot you’ve got in your brain.’

‘Maggot? Ce n’est pas joli, c¸a! ’

Fournier shook hands ceremoniously.

‘I wish you good evening, with many thanks for your delightful hospitality. We will meet then at Croydon tomorrow morning?’

‘Exactly. A demain.’

‘Let us hope,’ said Fournier, ‘that nobody will murder us en route.’

The two detectives departed.

Poirot remained for a time as in a dream. Then he rose, cleared away any traces of disorder, emptied the ashtrays and straightened the chairs.

He went to a side table and picked up a copy of the Sketch. He turned the pages until he came to the one he sought.

‘Two Sun Worshippers,’ it was headed. ‘The Countess of Horbury and Mr Raymond Barraclough at Le Pinet.’ He looked at the two laughing figures in bathing-dresses, their arms entwined.

‘I wonder,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘One might do something along those lines…Yes, one might.’

Chapter 9

Elise Grandier

The weather on the following day was of so perfect a nature that even Hercule Poirot had to admit that his estomac was perfectly peaceful.

On this occasion they were travelling by the 8.45 Air Service to Paris.

There were seven or eight travellers beside Poirot and Fournier in the compartment, and the Frenchman utilized the journey to make some experiments. He took from his pocket a small piece of bamboo and three times during the journey he raised this to his lips, pointing it in a certain direction. Once he did it bending himself round the corner of his seat, once with his head slightly turned sideways, once when he was returning from the toilet compartment; and on each occasion he caught the eye of some passenger or other eyeing him with mild astonishment. On the last occasion, indeed, every eye in the car seemed to be fixed upon him.

Fournier sank in his seat discouraged, and was but little cheered by observing Poirot's open amusement.

'You are amused, my friend? But you agree one must try experiments?'

'Evidemment! In truth I admire your thoroughness. There is nothing like ocular demonstration. You play the part of the murderer with blowpipe. The result is perfectly clear. Everybody sees you!'

'Not everybody.'

'In a sense, no. On each occasion there is somebody who does not see you; but for a successful murder that is not enough. You must be reasonably sure that nobody will see you.'

'And that is impossible given ordinary conditions,' said Fournier. 'I hold then to my theory that there must have been extraordinary conditions—the psychological moment! There must have been a psychological moment when everyone's attention was mathematically centred elsewhere.'

‘Our friend Inspector Japp is going to make minute inquiries on that point.’

‘Do you not agree with me, M. Poirot?’

Poirot hesitated a minute, then he said slowly:

‘I agree that there was—that there must have been a psychological reason why nobody saw the murderer…But my ideas are running in a slightly different channel from yours. I feel that in this case mere ocular facts may be deceptive. Close your eyes, my friend, instead of opening them wide. Use the eyes of the brain, not of the body. Let the little grey cells of the mind function…Let it be their task to show you what actually happened.’

Fournier stared at him curiously.

‘I do not follow you, M. Poirot.’

‘Because you are deducing from things that you have seen. Nothing can be so misleading as observation.’

Fournier shook his head again and spread out his hands. ‘I give up. I cannot catch your meaning.’

‘Our friend Giraud would urge you to pay no attention to my vagaries. “Be up and doing,” he would say. “To sit still in an armchair and think, that is the method of an old man past his prime.” But I say that a young hound is often so eager upon the scent that he overruns it…For him is the trail of the red herring. There, it is a very good hint I have given you there…’

And, leaning back, Poirot closed his eyes, it may have been to think, but it is quite certain that five minutes later he was fast asleep.

On arrival in Paris they went straight to No. 3 Rue Joliette.

The Rue Joliette is on the south side of the Seine. There was nothing to distinguish No. 3 from the other houses. An aged concierge admitted them and greeted Fournier in a surly fashion.

‘So we have the police here again! Nothing but trouble. This will give the house a bad name.’

He retreated grumbling into his apartment.

‘We will go to Giselle’s office,’ said Fournier. ‘It is on the first floor.’

He drew a key from his pocket as he spoke and explained that the French police had taken the precaution of locking and sealing the door whilst awaiting the result of the English inquest.

‘Not, I fear,’ said Fournier, ‘that there is anything here to help us.’

He detached the seals, unlocked the door, and they entered. Madame Giselle’s office was a small, stuffy apartment. It had a somewhat old-fashioned type of safe in a corner, a writing desk of business-like appearance and several shabbily upholstered chairs. The one window was dirty and it seemed highly probable that it had never been opened.

Fournier shrugged his shoulders as he looked round.

‘You see?’ he said. ‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’

Poirot passed round behind the desk. He sat down in the chair and looked across the desk at Fournier. He passed his hand gently across the surface of the wood, then down underneath it.

‘There is a bell here,’ he said.

‘Yes, it rings down to the concierge.’

‘Ah, a wise precaution. Madame’s clients might sometimes become obstreperous.’

He opened one or two of the drawers. They contained stationery, a calendar, pens and pencils, but no papers and nothing of a personal nature.

Poirot merely glanced into them in a cursory manner.

‘I will not insult you, my friend, by a close search. If there were anything to find you would have found it, I am sure.’ He looked across at the safe. ‘Not a very efficacious pattern, that?’

‘Somewhat out of date,’ agreed Fournier.

‘It was empty?’

‘Yes. That cursed maid had destroyed everything.’

‘Ah, yes, the maid. The confidential maid. We must see her. This room, as you say, has nothing to tell us. It is significant that, do you not think so?’

‘What do you mean by significant, M. Poirot?’

‘I mean that there is in this room no personal touch…I find that interesting.’

‘She was hardly a woman of sentiment,’ said Fournier dryly.

Poirot rose.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘let us see this maid—this highly confidential maid.’

Elise Grandier was a short stout woman of middle age with a florid face and small shrewd eyes that darted quickly from Fournier’s face to that of his companion and then back again.

‘Sit down, Mademoiselle Grandier,’ said Fournier.

‘Thank you, Monsieur.’

She sat down composedly.

‘M. Poirot and I have returned today from London. The inquest—the inquiry, that is, into the death of Madame—took place yesterday. There is no doubt whatsoever. Madame was poisoned.’

The Frenchwoman shook her head gravely.

‘It is terrible what you say there, Monsieur. Madame poisoned? Who would ever have dreamt of such a thing?’

‘That is perhaps where you can help us, Mademoiselle.’

‘Certainly, Monsieur, I will naturally do all I can to aid the police. But I know nothing—nothing at all.’

‘You know that Madame had enemies?’ said Fournier sharply.

‘That is not true. Why should Madame have enemies?’

‘Come, come, Mademoiselle Grandier,’ said Fournier dryly. ‘The profession of a moneylender—it entails certain unpleasantnesses.’

‘It is true that sometimes the clients of Madame were not very reasonable,’ agreed Elise.

‘They made scenes, eh? They threatened her?’

The maid shook her head.

‘No, no, you are wrong there. It was not they who threatened. They whined—they complained—they protested they could not pay—all that, yes.’ Her voice held a very lively contempt.

‘Sometimes, perhaps, Mademoiselle,’ said Poirot, ‘they could not pay.’

Elise Grandier shrugged her shoulders.

‘Possibly. That is their affair! They usually paid in the end.’

Her tone held a certain amount of satisfaction.

‘Madame Giselle was a hard woman,’ said Fournier.

‘Madame was justified.’

‘You have no pity for the victims?’

‘Victims—victims…’ Elise spoke with impatience. ‘You do not understand. Is it necessary to run into debt, to live beyond your means, to run and borrow, and then expect to keep the money as a gift? It is not reasonable, that! Madame was always fair and just. She lent—and she expected repayment. That is only fair. She herself had no debts. Always she paid honourably what she owed. Never, never were there any bills outstanding. And when you say that Madame was a hard woman it is not the truth! Madame was kind. She gave to the Little Sisters of the Poor when they came. She gave money to charitable institutions. When the wife of Georges, the concierge, was ill, Madame paid for her to go to a hospital in the country.’

She stopped, her face flushed and angry.

She repeated, ‘You do not understand. No, you do not understand Madame at all.’

Fournier waited a moment for her indignation to subside and then said:

‘You made the observation that Madame’s clients usually managed to pay in the end. Were you aware of the means Madame used to compel them?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘I know nothing, Monsieur—nothing at all.’

‘You knew enough to burn Madame’s papers.’

‘I was following her instructions. If ever, she said, she were to meet with an accident, or if she were taken ill and died somewhere away from home, I was to destroy her business papers.’

‘The papers in the safe downstairs?’ asked Poirot.

‘That is right. Her business papers.’

‘And they were in the safe downstairs?’

His persistence brought the red up in Elise’s cheeks.

‘I obeyed Madame’s instructions,’ she said.

‘I know that,’ said Poirot, smiling. ‘But the papers were not in the safe. That is so, is it not? That safe, it is far too old-fashioned—quite an amateur might have opened it. The papers were kept elsewhere—in Madame’s bedroom, perhaps?’

Elise paused a moment and then answered:

‘Yes, that is so. Madame always pretended to clients that papers were kept in the safe, but in reality the safe was a blind. Everything was in Madame’s bedroom.’

‘Will you show us where?’

Elise rose and the two men followed her. The bedroom was a fair-sized room, but was so full of ornate heavy furniture that it was hard to move about freely in it. In one corner was a large old-fashioned trunk. Elise lifted the lid and took out an old-fashioned alpaca dress with a silk underskirt. On the inside of the dress was a deep pocket.

‘The papers were in this, Monsieur,’ she said. ‘They were kept in a large sealed envelope.’

‘You told me nothing of this,’ said Fournier sharply, ‘when I questioned you three days ago.’

‘I ask pardon, Monsieur. You asked me where were the papers that should be in the safe. I told you I had burned them. That was true. Exactly where the papers were kept seemed unimportant.’

‘True,’ said Fournier. ‘You understand, Mademoiselle Grandier, that those papers should not have been burnt.’

‘I obeyed Madame’s orders,’ said Elise sullenly.

‘You acted, I know, for the best,’ said Fournier soothingly. ‘Now I want you to listen to me very closely, Mademoiselle: Madame was murdered. It is possible that she was murdered by a person or persons about whom she held certain damaging knowledge. That knowledge was in those papers you burnt. I am going to ask you a question, Mademoiselle, and do not reply too quickly without reflection. It is possible—indeed in my view it is probable and quite understandable—that you glanced through those papers before committing them to the flames. If that is the case, no blame will be attached to you for so doing. On the contrary, any information you have acquired may be of the greatest service to the police, and may be of material service in bringing the murderer to justice. Therefore, Mademoiselle, have no fear in answering truthfully. Did you, before burning the papers, glance over them?’

Elise breathed hard. She leant forward and spoke emphatically.

‘No, Monsieur,’ she said. ‘I looked at nothing. I read nothing. I burnt the envelope without undoing the seal.’

Chapter 10

The Little Black Book

Fournier stared hard at her for a moment or two, then, satisfied that she was speaking the truth, he turned away with a gesture of discouragement.

‘It is a pity,’ he said. ‘You acted honourably, Mademoiselle, but it is a pity.’

‘I cannot help, Monsieur. I am sorry.’

Fournier sat down and drew a notebook from his pocket.

‘When I questioned you before, you told me, Mademoiselle, that you did not know the names of Madame’s clients. Yet just now you speak of them whining and asking for mercy. You did, therefore, know something about these clients of Madame Giselle’s?’

‘Let me explain, Monsieur. Madame never mentioned a name. She never discussed her business. But all the same one is human, is one not? There are ejaculations—comments. Madame spoke to me sometimes as she would to herself.’

Poirot leaned forward.

‘If you would give us an instance, Mademoiselle—’ he said.

‘Let me see—ah, yes—say a letter comes. Madame opens it. She laughs a short, dry laugh. She says, “You whine and you snivel, my fine lady. All the same, you must pay.” Or she would say to me, “What fools! What fools! To think I would lend large sums without proper security. Knowledge is security, Elise. Knowledge is power.” Something like that she would say.’

‘Madame’s clients who came to the house, did you ever see any of them?’

‘No, Monsieur—at least hardly ever. They came to the first floor only, you understand, and very often they came after dark.’

‘Had Madame Giselle been in Paris before her journey to England?’

‘She returned to Paris only the afternoon before.’

‘Where had she been?’

‘She had been away for a fortnight to Deauville, Le Pinet, Paris-Plage and Wimereux—her usual September round.’

‘Now think, Mademoiselle, did she say anything—anything at all that might be of use?’

Elise considered for some moments. Then she shook her head.

‘No, Monsieur,’ she said. ‘I cannot remember anything. Madame was in good spirits. Business was going well, she said. Her tour had been profitable. Then she directed me to ring up Universal Airlines and book a passage to England for the following day. The early morning service was booked, but she obtained a seat on the 12 o’clock service.’

‘Did she say what took her to England? Was there any urgency about it?’

‘Oh, no, Monsieur. Madame journeyed to England fairly frequently. She usually told me the day before.’

‘Did any clients come to see Madame that evening?’

‘I believe there was one client, Monsieur, but I am not sure. Georges, perhaps, would know. Madame said nothing to me.’

Fournier took from his pockets various photographs—mostly snapshots taken by reporters, of various witnesses leaving the coroner’s court.

‘Can you recognize any of these, Mademoiselle?’

Elise took them and gazed at each in turn. Then she shook her head.

‘No, Monsieur.’

‘We must try Georges then.’

‘Yes, Monsieur. Unfortunately, Georges has not very good eyesight. It is a pity.’

Fournier rose.

‘Well, Mademoiselle, we will take our leave—that is, if you are quite sure that there is nothing—nothing at all—that you have omitted to mention.’

‘I? What—what could there be?’

Elise looked distressed.

‘It is understood, then. Come, M. Poirot. I beg your pardon. You are looking for something?’

Poirot was indeed wandering round the room in a vague searching way.

‘It is true,’ said Poirot. ‘I am looking for something I do not see.’

‘What is that?’

‘Photographs. Photographs of Madame Giselle’s relations—of her family.’

Elise shook her head.

‘She had no family, Madame. She was alone in the world.’

‘She had a daughter,’ said Poirot sharply.

‘Yes, that is so. Yes, she had a daughter.’

Elise sighed.

‘But there is no picture of that daughter?’ Poirot persisted.

‘Oh, Monsieur does not understand. It is true that Madame had a daughter, but that was long ago, you comprehend. It is my belief that Madame had never seen that daughter since she was a tiny baby.’

‘How was that?’ demanded Fournier sharply.

Elise’s hands flew out in an expressive gesture.

‘I do not know. It was in the days when Madame was young. I have heard that she was pretty then—pretty and poor. She may have been married; she may not. Myself, I think not. Doubtless some arrangement was made about the child. As for Madame, she had the smallpox—she was very ill—she nearly died. When she got well her beauty was gone. There were no more follies, no more romance. Madame became a woman of business.’

‘But she left her money to this daughter?’

‘That is only right,’ said Elise. ‘Who should one leave one’s money to except one’s own flesh and blood? Blood is thicker than water; and Madame had no friends. She was always alone. Money was her passion—to make more and more money. She spent very little. She had no love for luxury.’

‘She left you a legacy. You know that?’

‘But yes, I have been informed. Madame was always generous. She gave me a good sum every year as well as my wages. I am very grateful to Madame.’

‘Well,’ said Fournier, ‘we will take our leave. On the way out I will have another word with old Georges.’

‘Permit me to follow you in a little minute, my friend,’ said Poirot.

‘As you wish.’

Fournier departed.

Poirot roamed once more round the room, then sat down and fixed his eyes on Elise.

Under his scrutiny the Frenchwoman got slightly restive.

‘Is there anything more Monsieur requires to know?’

‘Mademoiselle Grandier,’ said Poirot, ‘do you know who murdered your mistress?’

‘No, Monsieur. Before the good God I swear it.’

She spoke very earnestly. Poirot looked at her searchingly, then bent his head.

‘Bien,’ he said. ‘I accept that. But knowledge is one thing, suspicion is another. Have you any idea—an idea only—who might have done such a thing?’

‘I have no idea, Monsieur. I have already said so to the agent of police.’

‘You might say one thing to him and another thing to me.’

‘Why do you say that, Monsieur? Why should I do such a thing?’

‘Because it is one thing to give information to the police and another thing to give it to a private individual.’

‘Yes,’ admitted Elise. ‘That is true.’

A look of indecision came over her face. She seemed to be thinking. Watching her very closely, Poirot leaned forward and spoke:

‘Shall I tell you something, Mademoiselle Grandier? It is part of my business to believe nothing I am told—nothing that is, that is not proved. I do not suspect first this person and then that person. I suspect everybody. Anybody connected with a crime is regarded by me as a criminal until that person is proved innocent.’

Elise Grandier scowled at him angrily.

‘Are you saying that you suspect me—me—of having murdered Madame? It is too strong, that! Such a thought is of a wickedness unbelievable!’

Her large bosom rose and fell tumultuously.

‘No, Elise,’ said Poirot. ‘I do not suspect you of having murdered Madame. Whoever murdered Madame was a passenger in the aeroplane. Therefore it was not your hand that did the deed. But you might have been an accomplice before the act. You might have passed on to someone the details of Madame’s journey.’

‘I did not. I swear I did not.’

Poirot looked at her again for some minutes in silence. Then he nodded his head.

‘I believe you,’ he said. ‘But, nevertheless, there is something that you conceal. Oh, yes there is! Listen, I will tell you something. In every case of a criminal nature one comes across the same phenomena when questioning witnesses. Everyone keeps something back. Sometimes—often indeed—it is something quite harmless, something, perhaps, quite unconnected with the crime; but—I say it again—there is always something. That is so with you. Oh, do not deny! I am Hercule Poirot and I know. When my friend M. Fournier asked you if you were sure there was nothing you had omitted to mention, you were troubled. You answered unconsciously, with an evasion. Again just now when I suggested that you might tell me something which you would not care to tell the police you very obviously turned the suggestion over in your mind. There is, then, something. I want to know what that something is.’

‘It is nothing of importance.’

‘Possibly not. But all the same, will you not tell me what it is? Remember,’ he went on as she hesitated, ‘I am not of the police.’

‘That is true,’ said Elise Grandier. She hesitated and went on, ‘Monsieur, I am in a difficulty. I do not know what Madame herself would have wanted me to do.’

‘There is a saying that two heads are better than one. Will you not consult me? Let us examine the question together.’

The woman still looked at him doubtfully. He said with a smile:

‘You are a good watch-dog, Elise. It is a question, I see, of loyalty to your dead mistress?’

‘That is quite right, Monsieur. Madame trusted me. Ever since I entered her service I have carried out her instructions faithfully.’

‘You were grateful, were you not, for some great service she had rendered you?’

‘Monsieur is very quick. Yes, that is true. I do not mind admitting it. I had been deceived, Monsieur, my savings stolen—and there was a child. Madame was good to me. She arranged for the baby to be brought up by some good people on a farm—a good farm, Monsieur, and honest people. It was then, at that time, that she mentioned to me that she, too, was a mother.’

‘Did she tell you the age of her child, where it was, any details?’

‘No, Monsieur, she spoke of a part of her life that was over and done with. It was best so, she said. The little girl was well provided for and would be brought up to a trade or profession. She would also inherit her money when she died.’

‘She told you nothing further about this child or about its father?’

‘No, Monsieur, but I have an idea—’

‘Speak, Mademoiselle Elise.’

‘It is an idea only, you understand.’

‘Perfectly, perfectly.’

‘I have an idea that the father of the child was an Englishman.’

‘What exactly do you think gave you that impression?’

‘Nothing definite. It is just that there was a bitterness in Madame’s voice when she spoke of the English. I think, too, that in her business transactions she enjoyed having anyone English in her power. It is an impression only —’

‘Yes, but it may be a very valuable one. It opens up possibilities…Your own child, Mademoiselle Elise? Was it a girl or a boy?’

‘A girl, Monsieur. But she is dead—dead these five years now.’

‘Ah—all my sympathy.’

There was a pause.

‘And now, Mademoiselle Elise,’ said Poirot, ‘what is this something that you have hitherto refrained from mentioning?’

Elise rose and left the room. She returned a few minutes later with a small shabby black notebook in her hand.

‘This little book was Madame’s. It went with her everywhere. When she was about to depart for England she could not find it. It was mislaid. After she had gone I found it. It had dropped down behind the head of the bed. I put it in my room to keep until Madame should return. I burned the papers as soon as I heard of Madame’s death, but I did not burn the book. There were no instructions as to that.’

‘When did you hear of Madame’s death?’

Elise hesitated a minute.

‘You heard it from the police, did you not?’ said Poirot. ‘They came here and examined Madame’s rooms. They found the safe empty and you told them that you had burnt the papers, but actually you did not burn the papers until afterwards.’

‘It is true, Monsieur,’ admitted Elise. ‘Whilst they were looking in the safe I removed the papers from the trunk. I said they were burnt, yes. After all, it was very nearly the truth. I burnt them at the first opportunity. I had to carry out Madame’s orders. You see my difficulty, Monsieur? You will not inform the police? It might be a very serious matter for me.’

‘I believe, Mademoiselle Elise, that you acted with the best intentions. All the same, you understand, it is a pity…a great pity. But it does no good to regret what is done, and I see no necessity for communicating the exact hour of the destruction to the excellent M. Fournier. Now let me see if there is anything in this little book to aid us.’

‘I do not think there will be, Monsieur,’ said Elise, shaking her head. ‘It is Madame’s private memorandums, yes, but there are numbers only. Without the documents and files these entries are meaningless.’

Unwillingly she held out the book to Poirot. He took it and turned the pages. There were pencilled entries in a sloping foreign writing. They seemed to be all of the same kind. A number followed by a few descriptive details, such as:

CX 256. Colonel’s wife. Stationed Syria. Regimental funds.

GF 342. French Deputy. Stavisky connexion.

The entries seemed to be all of the same kind. There were perhaps twenty in all. At the end of the book were pencilled memoranda of dates or places, such as:

Le Pinet, Monday. Casino, 10.30. Savoy Hotel, 5 o’clock.

ABC. Fleet Street, 11 o’clock.

None of these were complete in themselves, and seemed to have been put down less as actual appointments than as aids to Giselle’s memory.

Elise was watching Poirot anxiously.

‘It means nothing, Monsieur, or so it seems to me. It was comprehensible to Madame, but not to a mere reader.’

Poirot closed the book and put it in his pocket.

‘This may be very valuable, Mademoiselle. You did wisely to give it to me. And your conscience may be quite at rest. Madame never asked you to burn this book?’

‘That is true,’ said Elise, her face brightening a little.

‘Therefore, having no instructions, it is your duty to hand this over to the police. I will arrange matters with M. Fournier so that you shall not be blamed for not having done so sooner.’

‘Monsieur is very kind.’

Poirot rose.

‘I will go now and join my colleague. Just one last question. When you reserved a seat in the aeroplane for Madame Giselle, did you ring up the aerodrome at Le Bourget or the office of the company?’

‘I rang up the office of Universal Airlines, Monsieur.’

‘And that, I think, is in the Boulevard des Capucines?’

‘That is right, Monsieur, 254 Boulevarddes Capucines.’

Poirot inscribed the number in his little book, then with a friendly nod he left the room.

Chapter 11

The American

Fournier was deep in conversation with old Georges. The detective was looking hot and annoyed.

‘Just like the police,’ the old man was grumbling in his deep hoarse voice. ‘Ask one the same question over and over again. What do they hope for? That sooner or later one will give over speaking the truth and take to lies instead? Agreeable lies, naturally, lies that suit the book of ces Messieurs.’

‘It is not lies I want, but the truth.’

‘Very well, it is the truth that I have been telling you. Yes, a woman did come to see Madame the night before she left for England. You show me those photographs, you ask me if I recognize the woman among them. I tell you what I have told you all along—my present eyesight is not good—it was growing dark—I did not look closely. I did not recognize the lady. If I saw her face to face I should probably not recognize her. There! You have it plainly for the fourth or fifth time.’

‘And you cannot even remember if she was tall or short, dark or fair, young or old? It is hardly to be believed, that.’

Fournier spoke with irritable sarcasm.

‘Then do not believe it. What do I care? A nice thing—to be mixed up with the police! I am ashamed. If Madame had not been killed high up in the air you would probably pretend that I, Georges, had poisoned her. The police are like that.’ Poirot forestalled an angry retort on Fournier’s part by slipping a tactful arm through that of his friend.

‘Come, mon vieux,’ he said. ‘The stomach calls. A simple but satisfying meal, that is what I prescribe. Let us say omelette aux champignons, sole à la Normande—a cheese of Port Salut, and with it red wine. What wine exactly?’

Fournier glanced at his watch.

‘True,’ he said. ‘It is one o’clock. Talking to this animal here—’ He glared at Georges.

Poirot smiled encouragingly at the old man.

‘It is understood,’ he said. ‘The nameless lady was neither tall nor short, fair nor dark, thin nor fat, but this at least you can tell us: Was she chic?’

‘Chic?’ said Georges, rather taken aback.

‘I am answered,’ said Poirot. ‘She was chic. And I have a little idea, my friend, that she would look well in a bathing-dress.’

Georges stared at him.

‘A bathing-dress? What is this about a bathing-dress?’

‘A little idea of mine. A charming woman looks still more charming in a bathing-dress. Do you not agree? See here.’

He passed to the old man a page torn from the Sketch.

There was a moment’s pause. The old man gave a very slight start.

‘You agree, do you not?’ asked Poirot.

‘They look well enough, those two,’ said the old man, handing the sheet back. ‘To wear nothing at all would be very nearly the same thing.’

‘Ah,’ said Poirot. ‘That is because nowadays we have discovered the beneficial action of sun on the skin. It is very convenient, that.’

Georges condescended to give a hoarse chuckle, and moved away as Poirot and Fournier stepped out into the sunlit street.

Over the meal as outlined by Poirot, the little Belgian produced the little black memorandum book.

Fournier was much excited, though distinctly irate with Elise. Poirot argued the point.

‘It is natural—very natural. The police? It is always a word frightening to that class. It embroils them in they know not what. It is the same everywhere—in every country.’

‘That is where you score,’ said Fournier. ‘The private investigator gets more out of witnesses than you ever get through official channels. However, there is the other side of the picture. We have official records—the whole system of a big organization at our command.’

‘So let us work together amicably,’ said Poirot, smiling. ‘This omelette is delicious.’

In the interval between the omelette and the sole, Fournier turned the pages of the black book. Then he made a pencilled entry in his notebook.

He looked across at Poirot.

‘You have read through this? Yes?’

‘No. I have only glanced at it. You permit?’

He took the book from Fournier.

When the cheese was placed before them Poirot laid down the book on the table, and the eyes of the two men met.

‘There are certain entries,’ began Fournier.

‘Five,’ said Poirot.

‘I agree—five.’

He read out from his pocket-book:

> ‘CL 52. English Peeress. Husband.

RT 362. Doctor. Harley Street.

MR 24. Forged Antiquities.

XVB 724. English. Embezzlement.

GF 45. Attempted Murder. English.’

‘Excellent, my friend,’ said Poirot. ‘Our minds march together to a marvel. Of all the entries in that little book, those five seem to me to be the only ones that can in any way bear a relation to the persons travelling in the aeroplane. Let us take them one by one.’

‘English Peeress. Husband,’ said Fournier. ‘That may conceivably apply to Lady Horbury. She is, I understand, a confirmed gambler. Nothing could be more likely than that she should borrow money from Giselle. Giselle’s clients are usually of that type. The word husband may have one of two meanings. Either Giselle expected the husband to pay up his wife’s debts, or she had some hold over Lady Horbury, a secret which she threatened to reveal to the lady’s husband.’

‘Precisely,’ said Poirot. ‘Either of those two alternatives might apply. I favour the second one myself, especially as I would be prepared to bet that the woman who visited Giselle the night before the aeroplane journey was Lady Horbury.’

‘Ah, you think that, do you?’

‘Yes, and I fancy you think the same. There is a touch of chivalry, I think, in our concierge’s disposition. His persistence in remembering nothing at all about the visitor seems rather significant. Lady Horbury is an extremely pretty woman. Moreover, I observed his start—oh, a very slight one—when I handed him a reproduction of her in bathing costume from the Sketch. Yes, it was Lady Horbury who went to Giselle’s that night.’

‘She followed her to Paris from Le Pinet,’ said Fournier slowly. ‘It looks as though she were pretty desperate.’

‘Yes, yes, I fancy that may be true.’

Fournier looked at him curiously.

‘But it does not square with your private ideas, eh?’

‘My friend, as I tell you, I have what I am convinced is the right clue pointing to the wrong person…I am very much in the dark. My clue cannot be wrong; and yet—’

‘You wouldn’t like to tell me what it is?’ suggested Fournier.

‘No, because I may, you see, be wrong—totally and utterly wrong. And in that case I might lead you, too, astray. No, let us each work according to our own ideas. To continue with our selected items from the little book.’

‘RT 362. Doctor. Harley Street,’ read out Fournier.

‘A possible clue to Dr Bryant. There is nothing much to go on, but we must not neglect that line of investigation.’

‘That, of course, will be the task of Inspector Japp.’

‘And mine,’ said Poirot. ‘I, too, have my finger in this pie.’

‘MR 24. Forged Antiquities,’ read Fournier. ‘Far fetched, perhaps, but it is just possible that that might apply to the Duponts. I can hardly credit it. M. Dupont is an archaeologist of world-wide reputation. He bears the highest character.’

‘Which would facilitate matters very much for him,’ said Poirot. ‘Consider, my dear Fournier, how high has been the character, how lofty the sentiments, and how worthy of admiration the life of most swindlers of note—before they are found out!’

‘True, only too true,’ agreed the Frenchman with a sigh.

‘A high reputation,’ said Poirot, ‘is the first necessity of a swindler’s stock in trade. An interesting thought. But let us return to our list.’

‘XVB 724 is very ambiguous. English. Embezzlement.’

‘Not very helpful,’ agreed Poirot. ‘Who embezzles? A solicitor? A bank clerk? Anyone in a position of trust in a commercial firm. Hardly an author, a dentist or a doctor. Mr James Ryder is the only representative of commerce. He may have embezzled money, he may have borrowed from Giselle to enable his theft to remain undetected. As to the last entry—GF 45. Attempted Murder. English—that gives us a very wide field. Author, dentist, doctor, businessman, steward, hairdresser’s assistant, lady of birth and breeding—any one of those might be GF 45. In fact only the Duponts are exempt by reason of their nationality.’

With a gesture he summoned the waiter and asked for the bill.

‘And where next, my friend?’ he inquired.

‘To the Sûreté. They may have some news for me.’

‘Good. I will accompany you. Afterwards I have a little investigation of my own to make in which, perhaps, you will assist me.’

At the Sûreté Poirot renewed acquaintance with the Chief of the Detective Force, whom he had met some years previously in the course of one of his cases. M. Gilles was very affable and polite.

‘Enchanted to learn that you are interesting yourself in this case, M. Poirot.’

‘My faith, my dear M. Gilles, it happened under my nose. It is an insult, that, you agree? Hercule Poirot to sleep while murder is committed!’

M. Gilles shook his head tactfully.

‘These machines! On a day of bad weather they are far from steady, far from steady. I myself have felt seriously incommoded once or twice.’

‘They say that an army marches on its stomach,’ said Poirot. ‘But how much are the delicate convolutions of the brain influenced by the digestive apparatus? When the mal de mer seizes me I, Hercule Poirot, am a creature with no grey cells, no order, no method—a mere member of the human race somewhat below average intelligence! It is deplorable, but there it is! And talking of these matters, how is my excellent friend Giraud?'

Prudently ignoring the significance of the words 'these matters', M. Gilles replied that Giraud continued to advance in his career.

'He is most zealous. His energy is untiring.'

'It always was,' said Poirot. 'He ran to and fro. He crawled on all fours. He was here, there and everywhere. Not for one moment did he ever pause and reflect.'

'Ah, M. Poirot, that is your little foible. A man like Fournier will be more to your mind. He is of the newest school—all for the psychology. That should please you.'

'It does. It does.'

'He has a very good knowledge of English. That is why we sent him to Croydon to assist in this case. A very interesting case, M. Poirot. Madame Giselle was one of the best-known characters in Paris. And the manner of her death—extraordinary! A poisoned dart from a blowpipe in an aeroplane. I ask you! Is it possible that such a thing could happen?'

'Exactly,' cried Poirot. 'Exactly. You hit the nail upon the head. You place a finger unerringly—Ah, here is our good Fournier. You have news, I see.'

The melancholy-faced Fournier was looking quite eager and excited.

'Yes, indeed. A Greek antique dealer, Zeropoulos, has reported the sale of a blowpipe and darts three days before the murder. I propose now, Monsieur'—he bowed respectfully to his chief—'to interview this man.'

'By all means,' said Gilles. 'Does M. Poirot accompany you?'

'If you please,' said Poirot. 'This is interesting—very interesting.'

The shop of M. Zeropoulos was in the Rue St Honoré. It was by way of being a high-class antique dealer's. There was a good deal of Rhages ware and other Persian pottery. There were one or two bronzes from Louristan, a good deal of inferior Indian jewellery, shelves of silks and embroideries from many countries, and a large proportion of perfectly worthless beads and cheap Egyptian goods. It was the kind of establishment in which you could spend a million francs on an object worth half a million, or ten francs on an object worth fifty centimes. It was patronized chiefly by American tourists and knowledgeable connoisseurs.

M. Zeropoulos himself was a short, stout little man with beady black eyes. He talked volubly and at great length.

The gentlemen were from the police? He was delighted to see them. Perhaps they would step into his private office. Yes, he had sold a blowpipe and darts—a South American curio—‘you comprehend, gentlemen, me, I sell a little of everything! I have my specialities. Persia is my speciality. M. Dupont, the esteemed M. Dupont he will answer for me. He himself comes always to see my collection—to see what new purchases I have made—to give his judgement on the genuineness of certain doubtful pieces. What a man! So learned! Such an eye! Such a feel. But I wander from the point. I have my collection—my valuable collection that all connoisseurs know—and also I have—well, frankly, Messieurs, let us call it junk! Foreign junk, that is understood, a little bit of everything—from the South Seas, from India, from Japan, from Borneo. No matter! Usually I have no fixed price for these things. If anyone takes an interest I make my estimate and I ask a price, and naturally I am beaten down, and in the end I take only half. And even then, I will admit it, the profit is good! These articles, I buy them from sailors usually at a very low price.’

M. Zeropoulos took a breath and went on happily, delighted with himself, his importance and the easy flow of his narration.

‘This blowpipe and darts I have had it for a long time—two years, perhaps. It was in that tray there, with a cowrie necklace and a Red Indian headdress, and one or two crude wooden idols and some inferior jade beads. Nobody remarks it, nobody notices it till there comes this American and asks me what it is.’

‘An American?’ said Fournier sharply.

‘Yes, yes, an American—unmistakably an American. Not the best type of American, either—the kind that knows nothing about anything and just wants a curio to take home. He is of the type that makes the fortune of bead sellers in Egypt—that buys the most preposterous scarabs ever made in Czecho-Slovakia. Well, very quickly I size him up, I tell him about the habits of certain tribes, the deadly poisons they use. I explain how very rare and unusual it is that anything of this kind comes into the market. He asks the price and I tell him. It is my American price, not quite as high as formerly (alas! they have had the depression over there). I wait for him to bargain, but straightaway he pays my price. I am stupefied. It is a pity; I might have asked more! I give him the blowpipe and the darts wrapped up in a parcel and he takes them away. It is finished. But afterwards when I read in the paper of this astounding murder I wonder—yes, I wonder very much. And I communicate with the police.’

‘We are much obliged to you, M. Zeropoulos,’ said Fournier politely. ‘This blowpipe and dart—you think you would be able to identify them? At the moment they are in London, you understand, but an opportunity will be given you of identifying them.’

‘The blowpipe was about so long,’ M. Zeropoulos measured a space on his desk, ‘and so thick—you see, like this pen of mine. It was of a light colour. There were four darts. They were long pointed thorns, slightly discoloured at the tips, with a little fluff of red silk on them.’

‘Red silk?’ asked Poirot keenly.

‘Yes, Monsieur. A cerise red—somewhat faded.’

‘That is curious,’ said Fournier. ‘You are sure that there was not one of them with a black and yellow fluff of silk?’

‘Black and yellow? No, Monsieur.’

The dealer shook his head.

Fournier glanced at Poirot. There was a curious satisfied smile on the little man’s face.

Fournier wondered why. Was it because Zeropoulos was lying, or was it for some other reason?

Fournier said doubtfully, ‘It is very possible that this blowpipe and dart has nothing whatever to do with the case. It is just one chance in fifty, perhaps. Nevertheless, I should like as full a description as possible of this American.’

Zeropoulos spread out a pair of Oriental hands.

‘He was just an American. His voice was in his nose. He could not speak French. He was chewing the gum. He had tortoise-shell glasses. He was tall and, I think, not very old.’

‘Fair or dark?’

‘I could hardly say. He had his hat on.’

‘Would you know him again if you saw him?’

Zeropoulos seemed doubtful.

‘I could not say. So many Americans come and go. He was not remarkable in any way.’

Fournier showed him the collection of snapshots, but without avail. None of them, Zeropoulos thought, was the man.

‘Probably a wild-goose chase,’ said Fournier as they left the shop.

‘It is possible, yes,’ agreed Poirot. ‘But I do not think so. The price tickets were of the same shape and there are one or two points of interest about the story and about M. Zeropoulos’s remarks. And now, my friend, having been upon one wild-goose chase, indulge me and come upon another.’

‘Where to?’

‘To the Boulevard des Capucines.’

‘Let me see, that is—?’

‘The office of Universal Airlines.’

‘Of course. But we have already made perfunctory inquiries there. They could tell us nothing of interest.’

Poirot tapped him kindly on the shoulder.

‘Ah, but, you see, an answer depends on the questions. You did not know what questions to ask.’

‘And you do?’

‘Well, I have a certain little idea.’

He would say no more, and in due course they arrived at the Boulevard des Capucines.

The office of Universal Airlines was quite small. A smart-looking dark man was behind a highly-polished wooden counter and a boy of about fifteen was sitting at a typewriter.

Fournier produced his credentials and the man, whose name was Jules Perrot, declared himself to be entirely at their service.

At Poirot’s suggestion, the typewriting boy was dispatched to the farthest corner.

‘It is very confidential what we have to say,’ he explained.

Jules Perrot looked pleasantly excited.

‘Yes, Messieurs?’

‘It is this matter of the murder of Madame Giselle.’

‘Ah, yes, I recollect. I think I have already answered some questions on the subject.’

‘Precisely, precisely. But it is necessary to have the facts very exactly. Now Madame Giselle received her place—when?’

‘I think that point has already been settled. She booked her seat by telephone on the 17th.’

‘That was for the 12 o’clock service on the following day?’

‘Yes, Monsieur.’

‘But I understand from her maid that it was on the 8.45 am service that Madame reserved a seat.’

‘No, no—at least this is what happened. Madame’s maid asked for the 8.45 service, but that service was already booked up, so we gave her a seat on the 12 o’clock instead.’

‘Ah, I see. I see.’

‘Yes, Monsieur.’

‘I see—I see—but all the same it is curious—decidedly it is curious.’

The clerk looked at him inquiringly.

‘It is only that a friend of mine decided to go to England at a moment’s notice, went to England on the 8.45 service that morning, and the plane was half empty.’

M. Perrot turned over some papers. He blew his nose.

‘Possibly your friend has mistaken the day. The day before or the day after—’

‘Not at all. It was the day of the murder, because my friend said that if he had missed the plane, as he nearly did, he would have actually been one of the passengers in the Prometheus.’

‘Ah, indeed. Yes, very curious. Of course, sometimes people do not arrive at the last minute, and then, naturally, there are vacant places…and then sometimes there are mistakes. I have to get in touch with Le Bourget; they are not always accurate—’

The mild inquiring gaze of Hercule Poirot seemed to be upsetting to Jules Perrot. He came to a stop. His eyes shifted. A little bead of perspiration came out on his forehead.

‘Two quite possible explanations,’ said Poirot, ‘but somehow, I fancy, not the true explanation. Don’t you think it might perhaps be better to make a clean breast of the matter?’

‘A clean breast of what? I don’t understand you.’

‘Come, come. You understand me very well. This is a case of murder—murder, M. Perrot. Remember that, if you please. If you withhold information it may well be very serious for you—very serious indeed. The police will take a very grave view. You are obstructing the ends of justice.’

Jules Perrot stared at him. His mouth fell open. His hands shook.

‘Come,’ said Poirot. His voice was authoritative, autocratic. ‘We want precise information, if you please. How much were you paid, and who paid you?’

‘I meant no harm—I had no idea—I never guessed…’

‘How much, and who by?’

‘F-five thousand francs. I never saw the man before. I—this will ruin me…’

‘What will ruin you is not to speak out. Come, now, we know the worst. Tell us exactly how it happened.’

The perspiration rolling down his forehead, Jules Perrot spoke rapidly in little jerks.

‘I meant no harm…Upon my honour, I meant no harm. A man came in. He said he was going to England on the following day. He wanted to negotiate a loan from—from Madame Giselle, but he wanted their meeting to be unpremeditated. He said it would give him a better chance. He said that he knew she was going to England on the following day. All I had to do was to tell her the early service was full up and to give her seat No. 2 in the Prometheus. I swear, Messieurs, that I saw nothing very wrong in that. What difference could it make?—that is what I thought. Americans are like that—they do business in unconventional ways—’

‘Americans?’ said Fournier sharply.

‘Yes, this Monsieur was an American.’

‘Describe him.’

‘He was tall, stooped, had grey hair, horn-rimmed glasses and a little goatee beard.’

‘Did he book a seat himself?’

‘Yes, Monsieur, seat No. 1—next to—to the one I was to keep for Madame Giselle.’

‘In what name?’

‘Silas—Silas Harper.’

‘There was no one of that name travelling, and no one occupied seat No. 1.’

Poirot shook his head gently.

‘I saw by the paper that there was no one of that name. That is why I thought there was no need to mention the matter. Since this man did not go by the plane—’

Fournier shot him a cold glance.

‘You have withheld valuable information from the police,’ he said. ‘This is a very serious matter.’

Together he and Poirot left the office, leaving Jules Perrot staring after them with a frightened face.

On the pavement outside, Fournier removed his hat and bowed.

‘I salute you, M. Poirot. What gave you this idea?’

‘Two separate sentences. One this morning when I heard a man in our plane say that he had crossed on the morning of the murder in a nearly empty plane. The second sentence was that uttered by Elise when she said that she rung up the office of Universal Airlines and that there was no room on the early morning service. Now those two statements did not agree. I remembered the steward on the Prometheus saying that he had seen Madame Giselle before on the early service—so it was clearly her custom to go by the 8.45 am plane.

‘But somebody wanted her to go on the 12 o’clock—somebody who was already travelling by the Prometheus. Why did the clerk say that the early service was booked up? A mistake, or a deliberate lie? I fancied the latter… I was right.’

‘Every minute this case gets more puzzling,’ cried Fournier. ‘First we seem to be on the track of a woman. Now it is a man. This American—’

He stopped and looked at Poirot.

The latter nodded gently.

‘Yes, my friend,’ he said. ‘It is so easy to be an American—here in Paris! A nasal voice—the chewing gum—the little goatee—the horn-rimmed spectacles—all the appurtenances of the stage American…’

He took from his pocket the page he had torn from the Sketch.

‘What are you looking at?’

‘At a countess in her bathing suit.’

‘You think—? But no, she is petite, charming, fragile—she could not impersonate a tall stooping American. She has been an actress, yes, but to act such a part is out of the question. No, my friend, that idea will not do.’

‘I never said it would,’ said Hercule Poirot.

And still he looked earnestly at the printed page.

Chapter 12

At Horbury Chase

Lord Horbury stood by the sideboard and helped himself absent-mindedly to kidneys.

Stephen Horbury was twenty-seven years of age. He had a narrow head and a long chin. He looked very much what he was—a sporting out-of-door kind of man without anything very spectacular in the way of brains. He was kind-hearted, slightly priggish, intensely loyal and invincibly obstinate.

He took his heaped plate back to the table and began to eat. Presently he opened a newspaper, but immediately, with a frown, he cast it aside. He thrust aside his unfinished plate, drank some coffee and rose to his feet. He paused uncertainly for a minute, then with a slight nod of the head he left the dining-room, crossed the wide hall and went upstairs. He tapped at a door and waited for a minute. From inside the room a clear high voice cried out, ‘Come in.’

Lord Horbury went in.

It was a wide beautiful bedroom facing south. Cicely Horbury was in bed, a great carved oak Elizabethan bed. Very lovely she looked, too, in her rose chiffon draperies, with the curling gold of her hair. A breakfast tray with the remains of orange juice and coffee on it was on a table beside her. She was opening her letters. Her maid was moving about the room.

Any man might be excused if his breath came a little faster confronted by so much loveliness; but the charming picture his wife presented affected Lord Horbury not at all.

There had been a time, three years ago, when the breathtaking loveliness of his Cicely had set the young man’s senses reeling. He had been madly, wildly, passionately in love. All that was over. He had been mad. He was now sane.

Lady Horbury said in some surprise:

‘Why, Stephen?’

He said abruptly, ‘I’d like to talk to you alone.’

‘Madeleine.’ Lady Horbury spoke to her maid. ‘Leave all that. Get out.’

The French girl murmured, ‘Très bien, m’lady’, shot a quick interested look out of the corner of her eye at Lord Horbury and left the room.

Lord Horbury waited till she had shut the door, then he said:

‘I’d like to know, Cicely, just exactly what is behind this idea of coming down here.’

Lady Horbury shrugged her slender, beautiful shoulders.

‘After all, why not?’

‘Why not? It seems to me there are a good many reasons.’

His wife murmured, ‘Oh, reasons…’

‘Yes, reasons. You’ll remember that we agreed that as things were between us, it would be as well to give up this farce of living together. You were to have the town house and a generous—an extremely generous—allowance. Within certain limits you were to go your own way. Why this sudden return?’

Again Cicely shrugged her shoulders.

‘I thought it—better.’

‘You mean, I suppose, that it’s money?’

Lady Horbury said, ‘My God, how I hate you. You’re the meanest man alive.’

‘Mean? Mean, you say, when it’s because of you and your senseless extravagance that there’s a mortgage on Horbury.’

‘Horbury—Horbury—that’s all you care for! Horses and hunting and shooting and crops and tiresome old farmers. God, what a life for a woman.’

‘Some women enjoy it.’

‘Yes, women like Venetia Kerr, who’s half a horse herself. You ought to have married a woman like that.’

Lord Horbury walked over to the window.

‘It’s a little late to say that. I married you.’

‘And you can’t get out of it,’ said Cicely. Her laugh was malicious, triumphant. ‘You’d like to get rid of me, but you can’t.’

He said, ‘Need we go into all this?’

‘Very much God and the Old School, aren’t you? Most of my friends fairly laugh their heads off when I tell them the kind of things you say.’

‘They are welcome to do so. Shall we get back to our original subject of discussion—your reason for coming here?’

But his wife would not follow his lead. She said:

‘You advertised in the papers that you wouldn’t be responsible for my debts. Do you call that a gentlemanly thing to do?’

‘I regret having had to take that step. I warned you, you will remember. Twice I paid up. But there are limits. Your insensate passion for gambling—well, why discuss it? But I do want to know what prompted you to come down to Horbury. You’ve always hated the place, been bored to death here.’

Cicely Horbury, her small face sullen, said, ‘I thought it better—just now.’

‘Better—just now?’ He repeated the words thoughtfully. Then he asked a question sharply: ‘Cicely, had you been borrowing from that old French moneylender?’

‘Which one? I don’t know what you mean.’

‘You know perfectly what I mean. I mean the woman who was murdered on the plane from Paris—the plane on which you travelled home. Had you borrowed money from her?’

‘No, of course not. What an idea!’

‘Now, don’t be a little fool over this, Cicely. If that woman did lend you money, you’d better tell me about it. Remember the business isn’t over and finished with. The verdict at the inquest was wilful murder by a person or persons unknown. The police of both countries are at work. It’s only a matter of time before they come on the truth. The woman’s sure to have left records of her dealings. If anything crops up to connect you with her we should be prepared beforehand. We must have ffoulkes’s advice on the matter.’ (ffoulkes, ffoulkes, Wilbraham and ffoulkes were the family solicitors who for generations had dealt with the Horbury estate.)

‘Didn’t I give evidence in that damned court and say I had never heard of the woman?’

‘I don’t think that proves very much,’ said her husband dryly. ‘If you did have dealings with this Giselle, you can be sure the police will find it out.’

Cicely sat up angrily in bed.

‘Perhaps you think I killed her—stood up there in that plane and puffed darts at her from a blowpipe. Of all the crazy businesses!’

‘The whole thing sounds mad,’ Stephen agreed thoughtfully. ‘But I do want you to realize your position.’

‘What position? There isn’t any position. You don’t believe a word I say. It’s damnable. And why be so anxious about me all of a sudden? A lot you care about what happens to me. You dislike me. You hate me. You’d be glad if I died tomorrow. Why pretend?’

‘Aren’t you exaggerating a little? In any case, old-fashioned though you think me, I do happen to care about my family name—an out-of-date sentiment which you will probably despise. But there it is.’

Turning abruptly on his heel, he left the room.

A pulse was beating in his temple. Thoughts followed each other rapidly through his head.

‘Dislike? Hate? Yes, that’s true enough. Should I be glad if she died tomorrow? My God, yes! I’d feel like a man who’s been let out of prison. What a queer beastly business life is! When I first saw her in Do It Now, what a child, what an adorable child she looked! So fair and so lovely…Damned young fool! I was mad about her—crazy…She seemed everything that was adorable and sweet, and all the time she was what she is now—vulgar, vicious, spiteful, empty-headed…I can’t even see her loveliness now.’

He whistled and a spaniel came running to him, looking up at him with adoring sentimental eyes.

He said, ‘Good old Betsy,’ and fondled the long, fringed ears.

He thought, ‘Funny term of disparagement, to call a woman a bitch. A bitch like you, Betsy, is worth nearly all the women I’ve met put together.’

Cramming an old fishing hat on his head, he left the house accompanied by the dog.

This aimless saunter of his round the estate began gradually to soothe his jangled nerves. He stroked the neck of his favourite hunter, had a word with the groom, then he went to the Home Farm and had a chat with the farmer’s wife. He was walking along a narrow lane, Betsy at his heels, when he met Venetia Kerr on her bay mare.

Venetia looked her best upon a horse. Lord Horbury looked up at her with admiration, fondness and a queer sense of homecoming.

He said, ‘Hullo, Venetia.’

‘Hullo, Stephen.’

‘Where’ve you been? Out in the five-acre?’

‘Yes, she’s coming along nicely, isn’t she?’

‘First-rate. Have you seen that two-year-old of mine I bought at Chattisley’s sale?’

They talked horses for some minutes, then he said:

‘By the way, Cicely’s here.’

‘Here, at Horbury?’

Against Venetia’s code to show surprise, but she could not quite keep the undertone of it out of her voice.

‘Yes. Turned up last night.’

There was a silence between them. Then Stephen said, ‘You were at that inquest, Venetia. How—how—er—did it go?’

She considered a moment.

‘Well, nobody was saying very much, if you know what I mean.’

‘Police weren’t giving anything away?’

‘No.’

Stephen said, ‘Must have been rather an unpleasant business for you.’

‘Well, I didn’t exactly enjoy it. But it wasn’t too devastating. The coroner was quite decent.’

Stephen slashed absent-mindedly at the hedge.

‘I say, Venetia, any idea—have you, I mean—as to who did it?’

Venetia Kerr shook her head slowly.

‘No.’ She paused a minute, seeking how best and most tactfully to put into words what she wanted to say. She achieved it at last with a little laugh. ‘Anyway, it wasn’t Cicely or me. That I do know. She’d have spotted me and I’d have spotted her.’

Stephen laughed too.

‘That’s all right, then,’ he said cheerfully.

He passed it off as a joke, but she heard the relief in his voice. So he had been thinking—

She switched her thoughts away.

‘Venetia,’ said Stephen, ‘I’ve known you a long time, haven’t I?’

‘H’m, yes. Do you remember those awful dancing classes we used to go to as children?’

‘Do I not? I feel I can say things to you—’

‘Of course you can.’ She hesitated, then went on in a calm, matter-of-fact tone: ‘It’s Cicely, I suppose?’

‘Yes. Look here, Venetia. Was Cicely mixed up with this woman Giselle in any way?’

Venetia answered slowly.

‘I don’t know. I’ve been in the South of France, remember. I haven’t heard the Le Pinet gossip yet.’

‘What do you think?’

‘Well, candidly, I shouldn’t be surprised.’

Stephen nodded thoughtfully. Venetia said gently:

‘Need it worry you? I mean you live pretty semi-detached lives, don’t you? This business is her affair, not yours.’

‘As long as she’s my wife, it’s bound to be my business too.’

‘Can’t you—er—agree to a divorce?’

‘A trumped-up business, you mean? I doubt if she’d accept it.’

‘Would you divorce her if you had the chance?’

‘If I had a cause I certainly would.’

He spoke grimly.

‘I suppose,’ said Venetia thoughtfully, ‘she knows that.’

‘Yes.’

They were both silent. Venetia thought, ‘She has the morals of a cat! I know that well enough. But she’s careful. She’s shrewd as they make ’em.’ Aloud she said, ‘So there’s nothing doing?’

He shook his head. Then he said, ‘If I were free, Venetia, would you marry me?’

Looking very straight between her horse’s ears, Venetia said in a voice carefully devoid of emotion:

‘I suppose I would.’

Stephen! She’d always loved Stephen, always since the old days of dancing classes and cubbing and birds’ nesting. And Stephen had been fond of her, but not fond enough to prevent him from falling desperately, wildly, madly in love with a clever calculating cat of a chorus girl…

Stephen said, ‘We could have a marvellous life together…’

Pictures floated before his eyes: hunting—tea and muffins—the smell of wet earth and leaves—children…All the things that Cicely could never share with him, that Cicely would never give him. A kind of mist came over his eyes. Then he heard Venetia speaking, still in that flat, emotionless voice:

‘Stephen, if you care—what about it? If we went off together Cicely would have to divorce you.’

He interrupted her fiercely. ‘My God, do you think I’d let you do a thing like that?’

‘I shouldn’t care.’

‘I should.’

He spoke with finality.

Venetia thought, ‘That’s that. It’s a pity, really. He’s hopelessly prejudiced, but rather a dear. I wouldn’t like him to be different.’

Aloud she said, ‘Well, Stephen, I’ll be getting along.’

She touched her horse gently with her heel. As she turned to wave goodbye to Stephen their eyes met, and in that glance was all the feeling that their careful words had avoided.

As she rounded the corner of the lane Venetia dropped her whip. A man walking picked it up and returned it to her with an exaggerated bow.

‘A foreigner,’ she thought as she thanked him. ‘I seem to remember his face.’ Half of her mind searched through the summer days at Juan les Pins while the other half thought of Stephen.

Only just as she reached home did memory suddenly pull her half-dreaming brain up with a jerk.

‘The little man who gave me his seat in the aeroplane. They said at the inquest he was a detective.’ And hard on that came another thought: ‘What is he doing down here?’

Chapter 13

At Antoine’s

Jane presented herself at Antoine’s on the morning after the inquest with some trepidation of spirit.

The person who was usually regarded as M. Antoine himself, and whose real name was Andrew Leech and whose claims to foreign nationality consisted of having had a Jewish mother, greeted her with an ominous frown.

It was by now second nature to him to speak in broken English once within the portals of Bruton Street.

He upbraided Jane as a complete imbécile. Why did she wish to travel by air, anyway? What an idea! Her escapade would do his establishment infinite harm. Having vented his spleen to the full, Jane was permitted to escape, receiving as she did so a large-sized wink from her friend Gladys.

Gladys was an ethereal blonde with a haughty demeanour and a faint, faraway professional voice. In private her voice was hoarse and jocular.

‘Don’t you worry, dear,’ she said to Jane. ‘The old brute’s sitting on the fence watching which way the cat will jump. And it’s my belief it isn’t going to jump the way he thinks it is. Ta ta, dearie, here’s my old devil coming in, damn her eyes. I suppose she’ll be in seventeen tantrums as usual. I hope she hasn’t brought that damned lap-dog with her.’

A moment later Gladys’s voice could be heard with its faint, faraway notes…

‘Good morning, Madam, not brought your sweet little Pekingese with you? Shall we get on with the shampoo, and then we’ll be all ready for M. Henri.’

Jane had just entered the adjoining cubicle where a henna-haired woman was sitting waiting, examining her face in the glass and saying to a friend:

‘Darling, my face is really too frightful this morning, it really is…’

The friend, who in a bored manner was turning over the pages of a three-weeks-old Sketch, replied uninterestedly:

‘Do you think so, my sweet? It seems to me much the same as usual.’

On the entrance of Jane the bored friend stopped her languid survey of the Sketch and subjected Jane to a piercing stare instead.

Then she said, ‘It is, darling. I’m sure of it.’

‘Good morning, Madam,’ said Jane with that airy brightness expected of her and which she could now produce quite mechanically and without any effort whatsoever. ‘It’s quite a long time since we’ve seen you here. I expect you’ve been abroad.’

‘Antibes,’ said the henna-haired woman, who in her turn was staring at Jane with the frankest interest.

‘How lovely,’ said Jane with false enthusiasm. ‘Let me see, is it a shampoo and set, or are you having a tint today?’

Momentarily diverted from her scrutiny, the henna-haired woman leaned forward and examined her hair attentively.

‘I think I could go another week. Heavens, what a fright I look!’

The friend said, ‘Well, darling, what can you expect at this time of the morning?’

Jane said, ‘Ah! wait until M. Georges has finished with you.’

‘Tell me,’ the woman resumed her stare, ‘are you the girl who gave evidence at the inquest yesterday—the girl who was in the aeroplane?’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘How too terribly thrilling! Tell me about it.’

Jane did her best to please.

‘Well, Madam, it was all rather dreadful, really—’ She plunged into narration, answering questions as they came. What had the old woman looked like? Was it true that there were two French detectives aboard and that the whole thing was mixed up with the French Government scandals? Was Lady Horbury on board? Was she really as good-looking as everyone said? Who did she, Jane, think had actually done the murder? They said the whole thing was being hushed up for Government reasons, and so on and so on…

This first ordeal was only a forerunner of many others all on the same lines. Everyone wanted to be done by ‘the girl who was on the plane’. Everyone was able to say to their friends, ‘My dear, positively too marvellous. The girl at my hairdresser’s is the girl…Yes, I should go there if I were you—they do your hair very well…Jeanne, her name is…rather a little thing, big eyes. She’ll tell you all about it if you ask her nicely…’

By the end of the week Jane felt her nerves giving way under the strain. Sometimes she felt that if she had to go through the recital once again she would scream or attack her questioner with the dryer.

However, in the end she hit upon a better way of relieving her feelings. She approached M. Antoine and boldly demanded a rise of salary.

‘You ask that? You have the impudence, when it is only out of kindness of heart that I keep you here, after you have been mixed up in a murder case? Many men, less kindhearted than I, would have dismissed you immediately.’

‘That’s nonsense,’ said Jane coolly. ‘I’m a draw in this place and you know it. If you want me to go, I’ll go. I’ll easily get what I want from Henri’s or the Maison Richet.’

‘And who is to know you have gone there? Of what importance are you anyway?’

‘I met one or two reporters at that inquest,’ said Jane. ‘One of them would give my change of establishment any publicity needed.’

Because he feared that this was indeed so, grumblingly M. Antoine agreed to Jane’s demands. Gladys applauded her friend heartily.

‘Good for you, dear,’ she said. ‘Ikey Andrew was no match for you that time. If a girl couldn’t fend for herself a bit I don’t know where we’d all be. Grit, dear, that’s what you’ve got, and I admire you for it.’

‘I can fight for my own hand all right,’ said Jane, her small chin lifting itself pugnaciously. ‘I’ve had to all my life.’

‘Hard lines, dear,’ said Gladys. ‘But keep your end up with Ikey Andrew. He likes you all the better for it, really. Meekness doesn’t pay in this life—but I don’t think we’re either of us troubled by too much of that.’

Thereafter Jane’s narrative, repeated daily with little variation, sank into the equivalent of a part played on the stage.

The promised dinner and theatre with Norman Gale had duly come off. It was one of those enchanting evenings when every word and confidence exchanged seemed to reveal a bond of sympathy and shared tastes.

They liked dogs and disliked cats. They both hated oysters and loved smoked salmon. They liked Greta Garbo and disliked Katharine Hepburn. They didn’t like fat women and admired really jet-black hair. They disliked very red nails. They disliked loud voices, noisy restaurants and negroes. They preferred buses to tubes.

It seemed almost miraculous that two people should have so many points of agreement.

One day at Antoine’s, opening her bag, Jane let a letter from Norman fall out. As she picked it up with a slightly heightened colour, Gladys pounced upon her.

‘Who’s your boy friend, dear?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ retorted Jane, her colour rising.

‘Don’t tell me! I know that letter isn’t from your mother’s great-uncle. I wasn’t born yesterday. Who is he, Jane?’

‘It’s someone—a man—that I met at Le Pinet. He’s a dentist.’

‘A dentist,’ said Gladys with lively distaste. ‘I suppose he’s got very white teeth and a smile.’

Jane was forced to admit that this was indeed the case.

‘He’s got a very brown face and very blue eyes.’

‘Anyone can have a brown face,’ said Gladys. ‘It may be the seaside or it may come out of a bottle, 2s. 11d. at the chemist’s. Handsome Men are Slightly Bronzed. The eyes sound all right. But a dentist! Why, if he was going to kiss you you’d feel he was going to say, “Open a little wider, please”.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, Gladys.’

‘You needn’t be so touchy, my dear. I see you’ve got it badly. Yes, Mr Henry, I’m just coming…Drat Henry! Thinks he’s God Almighty, the way he orders us girls about!’

The letter had been to suggest dinner on Saturday evening. At lunch-time on Saturday when Jane received her augmented pay she felt full of high spirits.

‘And to think,’ said Jane to herself, ‘that I was worrying so, that day coming over in the aeroplane. Everything’s turned out beautifully…Life is really too marvellous.’

So full of exuberance did she feel that she decided to be extravagant and lunch at the Corner House and enjoy the accompaniment of music to her food.

She seated herself at a table for four, where there were already a middle-aged woman and a young man sitting. The middle-aged woman was just finishing her lunch. Presently she called for her bill, picked up a large collection of parcels and departed.

Jane, as was her custom, read a book as she ate. Looking up as she turned a page, she noticed the young man opposite her staring at her very intently, and at the same moment realized that his face was vaguely familiar to her.

Just as she made these discoveries the young man caught her eye and bowed.

‘Excuse me, Mademoiselle, you do not recognize me?’

Jane looked at him more attentively. He had a fair boyish-looking face, attractive more by reason of its extreme mobility than because of any actual claim to good looks.

‘We have not been introduced, it is true,’ went on the young man, ‘unless you call murder an introduction and the fact that we both gave evidence in the coroner’s court.’

‘Of course,’ said Jane. ‘How stupid of me! I thought I knew your face. You are—?’

‘Jean Dupont,’ said the man and gave a funny, rather engaging little bow.

A remembrance flashed into Jane’s mind of a dictum of Gladys’s, expressed perhaps without undue delicacy.

‘If there’s one fellow after you, there’s sure to be another. Seems to be a law of Nature. Sometimes it’s three or four.’

Now Jane had always led an austere, hard-working life (rather like the description after the act of girls who were missing—‘She was a bright, cheerful girl with no men friends, etc.’). Jane had been ‘a bright, cheerful girl with no men friends’. Now it seemed that men friends were rolling up all round. There was no doubt about it, Jean Dupont’s face as he leaned across the table held more than mere interested politeness. He was pleased to be sitting opposite Jane. He was more than pleased—he was delighted.

Jane thought to herself with a touch of misgiving:

‘He’s French, though. You’ve got to look out with the French, they always say so.’

‘You’re still in England, then,’ said Jane, and silently cursed herself for the extreme inanity of her remark.

‘Yes. My father has been to Edinburgh to give a lecture there, and we have stayed with friends also. But now—tomorrow—we return to France.’

‘I see.’

‘The police, they have not made an arrest yet?’ said Jean Dupont.

‘No, there’s not even been anything about it in the papers lately. Perhaps they’ve given it up.’

Jean Dupont shook his head. ‘No, no, they will not have given it up. They work silently’—he made an expressive gesture—‘in the dark.’

‘Don’t,’ said Jane uneasily. ‘You give me the creeps.’

‘Yes, it is not a very nice feeling, to have been so close when a murder was committed…’ He added, ‘And I was closer than you were. I was very close indeed. Sometimes I do not like to think of that…’

‘Who do you think did it?’ asked Jane. ‘I’ve wondered and wondered.’

Jean Dupont shrugged his shoulders.

‘It was not I. She was far too ugly!’

‘Well,’ said Jane, ‘I suppose you would rather kill an ugly woman than a good-looking one?’

‘Not at all. If a woman is good-looking you are fond of her—she treats you badly—she makes you jealous, mad with jealousy. “Good,” you say, “I will kill her. It will be a satisfaction”.’

‘And is it a satisfaction?’

‘That, Mademoiselle, I do not know, because I have not yet tried.’ He laughed, then shook his head. ‘But an ugly old woman like Giselle—who would want to bother to kill her?’

‘Well, that’s one way of looking at it,’ said Jane. She frowned. ‘It seems rather terrible, somehow, to think that perhaps she was young and pretty once.’

‘I know, I know.’ He became suddenly grave. ‘It is the great tragedy of life, that women grow old.’

‘You seem to think a lot about women and their looks,’ said Jane.

‘Naturally. It is the most interesting subject possible. That seems strange to you because you are English. An Englishman thinks first of his work—his job, he calls it—and then of his sport, and last—a good way last—of his wife. Yes, yes, it is really so. Why, imagine, in a little hotel in Syria was an Englishman whose wife had been taken ill. He himself had to be somewhere in Iraq by a certain date. Eh bien, would you believe it, he left his wife and went on so as to be “on duty” in time. And both he and his wife thought that quite natural; they thought him noble, unselfish. But the doctor, who was not English, thought him a barbarian. A wife, a human being—that should come first; to do one’s job—that is something much less important.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jane. ‘One’s work has to come first, I suppose.’

‘But why? You see, you too have the same point of view. By doing one’s work one obtains money—by indulging and looking after a woman one spends it—so the last is much more noble an ideal than the first.’

Jane laughed.

‘Oh, well,’ she said. ‘I think I’d rather be regarded as a mere luxury and self-indulgence, than regarded sternly as a First Duty. I’d rather a man felt that he was enjoying himself looking after me than that he should feel I was a duty to be attended to.’

‘No one, Mademoiselle, would be likely to feel that with you.’

Jane blushed slightly at the earnestness of the young man’s tone. He went on talking quickly:

‘I have only been in England once before. It was very interesting to me the other day at the—inquest, you call it?—to study three young and charming women, all so different from one another.’

‘What did you think of us all?’ asked Jane, amused.

‘That Lady Horbury—bah, I know her type well. It is very exotic—very, very expensive. You see it sitting round the baccarat table—the soft face—the hard expression—and you know—you know so well what it will be like in, say fifteen years. She lives for sensation, that one. For high play, perhaps for drugs…Au fond, she is uninteresting!’

‘And Miss Kerr?’

‘Ah, she is very, very English. She is the kind that any shopkeeper on the Riviera will give credit to; they are very discerning, our shopkeepers. Her clothes are very well cut, but rather like a man’s. She walks about as though she owns the earth. She is not conceited about it—she is just an Englishwoman. She knows which department of England different people come from. It is true. I have heard ones like her in Egypt. “What? The Etceteras are here? The Yorkshire Etceteras? Oh, the Shropshire Etceteras”.’

His mimicry was good. Jane laughed at the drawling, well-bred tones.

‘And then—me,’ she said.

‘And then you. And I say to myself, “How nice, how very nice it would be if I were to see her again one day.” And here I am sitting opposite you. The gods arrange things very well sometimes.’

Jane said, ‘You’re an archaeologist, aren’t you? You dig up things?’

And she listened with keen attention while Jean Dupont talked of his work.

Jane gave a little sigh at last.

‘You’ve been in so many countries. You’ve seen so much. It all sounds so fascinating. And I shall never go anywhere or see anything.’

‘You would like that—to go abroad—to see wild parts of the earth? You would not be able to get your hair waved, remember.’

‘It waves by itself,’ said Jane, laughing.

She looked up at the clock and hastily summoned the waitress for her bill.

Jean Dupont said with a little embarrassment, ‘Mademoiselle, I wonder if you would permit—as I have told you, I return to France tomorrow—if you would dine with me tonight.’

‘I’m so sorry, I can’t. I’m dining with someone.’

‘Ah! I’m sorry, very sorry. You will come again to Paris, soon?’

‘I don’t expect so.’

‘And me, I do not know when I shall be in London again! It is sad!’

He stood a moment, holding Jane’s hand in his.

‘I shall hope to see you again, very much,’ he said, and sounded as though he meant it.

Chapter 14

At Muswell Hill

At about the time that Jane was leaving Antoine’s, Norman Gale was saying in a hearty professional tone, ‘Just a little tender, I’m afraid…Guide me if I hurt you—’

His expert hand guided the electric drill.

‘There, that’s all over. Miss Ross?’

Miss Ross was immediately at his elbow stirring a minute white concoction on a slab.

Norman Gale completed his filling and said, ‘Let me see, it’s next Tuesday you’re coming for those others?’

His patient, rinsing her mouth ardently, burst into a fluent explanation. She was going away—so sorry—would have to cancel the next appointment. Yes, she would let him know when she got back.

And she escaped hurriedly from the room.

‘Well,’ said Gale, ‘that’s all for today.’

Miss Ross said, ‘Lady Higginson rang up to say she must give up her appointment next week. She wouldn’t make another. Oh, and Colonel Blunt can’t come on Thursday.’

Norman Gale nodded. His face hardened.

Every day was the same. People ringing up. Cancelled appointments. All varieties of excuses—going away—going abroad—got a cold—may not be here—

It didn’t matter what reason they gave, the real reason Norman had just seen quite unmistakably in his last patient’s eye as he reached for the drill…a look of sudden panic…

He could have written down the woman's thoughts on paper.

'Oh, dear, of course he was in that aeroplane when that woman was murdered…I wonder…You do hear of people going off their heads and doing the most senseless crimes. It really isn't safe. The man might be a homicidal lunatic. They look the same as other people, I've always heard… I believe I always felt there was rather a peculiar look in his eye…'

'Well,' said Gale, 'it looks like being a quiet week next week, Miss Ross.'

'Yes, a lot of people have dropped out. Oh, well, you can do with a rest. You worked so hard earlier in the summer.'

'It doesn't look as though I were going to have a chance of working very hard in the autumn, does it?'

Miss Ross did not reply. She was saved from having to do so by the telephone ringing. She went out of the room to answer it.

Norman dropped some instruments into the sterilizer, thinking hard.

'Let's see how we stand. No beating about the bush. This business has about done for me professionally. Funny, it's done well for Jane. People come on purpose to gape at her. Come to think of it, that's what's wrong here—they have to gape at me, and they don't like it! Nasty helpless feeling you have in a dentist's chair. If the dentist were to run amuck…

'What a strange business murder is! You'd think it was a perfectly straightforward issue—and it isn't. It affects all sorts of queer things you'd never think of…Come back to facts. As a dentist I seem to be about done for…What would happen, I wonder, if they arrested the Horbury woman? Would my patients come trooping back? Hard to say. Once the rot's set in… Oh, well, what does it matter? I don't care. Yes, I do—because of Jane… Jane's adorable. I want her. And I can't have her—yet…A damnable nuisance.'

He smiled. 'I feel it's going to be all right…She cares…She'll wait…Damn it, I shall go to Canada—yes, that's it—and make money there.'

He laughed to himself.

Miss Ross came back into the room.

‘That was Mrs Lorrie. She’s sorry—’

‘—but she may be going to Timbuctoo,’ finished Norman. ‘Vive les rats! You’d better look out for another post, Miss Ross. This seems to be a sinking ship.’

‘Oh, Mr Gale, I shouldn’t think of deserting you…’

‘Good girl. You’re not a rat, anyway. But seriously I mean it. If something doesn’t happen to clear up this mess I’m done for.’

‘Something ought to be done about it!’ said Miss Ross with energy. ‘I think the police are disgraceful. They’re not trying.’

Norman laughed. ‘I expect they’re trying all right.’

‘Somebody ought to do something.’

‘Quite right. I’ve rather thought of trying to do something myself—though I don’t quite know what.’

‘Oh, Mr Gale, I should. You’re so clever.’

‘I’m a hero to that girl all right,’ thought Norman Gale. ‘She’d like to help me in my sleuth stuff; but I’ve got another partner in view.’

It was that same evening that he dined with Jane. Half-unconsciously he pretended to be in very high spirits, but Jane was too astute to be deceived. She noted his sudden moments of absent-mindedness, the little frown that showed between his brows, the sudden strained line of his mouth.

She said at last, ‘Norman, are things going badly?’

He shot a quick glance at her, then looked away.

‘Well, not too frightfully well. It’s a bad time of year.’

‘Don’t be idiotic,’ said Jane sharply.

‘Jane!’

‘I mean it. Don’t you think I can see that you’re worried to death?’

‘I’m not worried to death. I’m just annoyed.’

‘You mean people are fighting shy—’

‘Of having their teeth attended to by a possible murderer? Yes.’

‘How cruelly unfair!’

‘It is, rather. Because frankly, Jane, I’m a jolly good dentist. And I’m not a murderer.’

‘It’s wicked. Somebody ought to do something.’

‘That’s what my secretary, Miss Ross, said this morning.’

‘What’s she like?’

‘Miss Ross?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Big—lots of bones—nose rather like a rocking horse—frightfully competent.’

‘She sounds quite nice,’ said Jane graciously.

Norman rightly took this as a tribute to his diplomacy. Miss Ross’s bones were not really quite as formidable as stated, and she had an extremely attractive head of red hair, but he felt, and rightly, that it was just as well not to dwell on the latter point to Jane.

‘I’d like to do something,’ he said. ‘If I was a young man in a book I’d find a clue or I’d shadow somebody.’

Jane tugged suddenly at his sleeve.

‘Look, there’s Mr Clancy—you know, the author—sitting over there by the wall by himself. We might shadow him.’

‘But we were going to the flicks?’

‘Never mind the flicks. I feel somehow this might be meant. You said you wanted to shadow somebody, and here’s somebody to shadow. You never know. We might find out something.’

Jane’s enthusiasm was infectious. Norman fell in with the plan readily enough.

‘As you say, one never knows,’ he said. ‘Whereabouts has he got to in his dinner? I can’t see properly without turning my head, and I don’t want to stare.’

‘He’s about level with us,’ said Jane. ‘We’d better hurry a bit and get ahead and then we can pay the bill and be ready to leave when he does.’

They adopted this plan. When at last little Mr Clancy rose and passed out into Dean Street, Norman and Jane were fairly close on his heels.

‘In case he takes a taxi,’ Jane explained.

But Mr Clancy did not take a taxi. Carrying an overcoat over one arm (and, occasionally allowing it to trail on the ground), he ambled gently through the London streets. His progress was somewhat erratic. Sometimes he moved forward at a brisk trot, sometimes he slowed down till he almost came to a stop. Once, on the very brink of crossing a road, he did come to a standstill, standing there with one foot hanging over the kerb and looking exactly like a slow-motion picture.

His direction, too, was erratic. Once he actually took so many right-angle turns that he traversed the same streets twice over.

Jane felt her spirits rise.

‘You see?’ she said excitedly. ‘He’s afraid of being followed. He’s trying to put us off the scent.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Of course. Nobody would go round in circles otherwise.’

‘Oh!’

They had turned a corner rather quickly and had almost cannoned into their quarry. He was standing staring up at a butcher’s shop. The shop itself was naturally closed, but it seemed to be something about the level of the first floor that was riveting Mr Clancy’s attention.

He said aloud, ‘Perfect. The very thing. What a piece of luck!’

He took out a little book and wrote something down very carefully. Then he started off again at a brisk pace, humming a little tune.

He was now heading definitely for Bloomsbury. Sometimes, when he turned his head, the two behind could see his lips moving.

‘There is something up,’ said Jane. ‘He’s in great distress of mind. He’s talking to himself and he doesn’t know it.’

As he waited to cross by some traffic lights, Norman and Jane drew abreast.

It was quite true; Mr Clancy was talking to himself. His face looked white and strained. Norman and Jane caught a few muttered words:

‘Why doesn’t she speak? Why? There must be a reason…’

The lights went green. As they reached the opposite pavement Mr Clancy said, ‘I see now. Of course. That’s why she’s got to be silenced!’

Jane pinched Norman ferociously.

Mr Clancy set off at a great pace now. The overcoat dragged hopelessly. With great strides the little author covered the ground, apparently oblivious of the two people on his tracks.

Finally, with disconcerting abruptness, he stopped at a house, opened the door with a key and went in.

Norman and Jane looked at each other.

‘It’s his own house,’ said Norman. ‘47 Cardington Square. That’s the address he gave at the inquest.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Jane, ‘perhaps he’ll come out again by and by. And, anyway, we have heard something. Somebody—a woman—is going to be silenced, and some other woman won’t speak. Oh, dear, it sounds dreadfully like a detective story.’

A voice came out of the darkness. ‘Good evening,’ it said.

The owner of the voice stepped forward. A pair of magnificent moustaches showed in the lamplight.

‘Eh bien,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘A fine evening for the chase, is it not?’

Chapter 15

In Bloomsbury

Of the two startled young people, it was Norman Gale who recovered himself first.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘it’s Monsieur—Monsieur Poirot. Are you still trying to clear your character, M. Poirot?’

‘Ah, you remember our little conversation? And it is the poor Mr Clancy you suspect?’

‘So do you,’ said Jane acutely, ‘or you wouldn’t be here.’

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment.

‘Have you ever thought about murder, Mademoiselle? Thought about it, I mean, in the abstract—cold-bloodedly and dispassionately?’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever thought about it at all until just lately,’ said Jane.

Hercule Poirot nodded.

‘Yes, you think about it now because a murder has touched you personally. But me, I have dealt with crime for many years now. I have my own way of regarding things. What should you say the most important thing was to bear in mind when you are trying to solve a murder?’

‘Finding the murderer,’ said Jane.

Norman Gale said, ‘Justice.’

Poirot shook his head. ‘There are more important things than finding the murderer. And justice is a fine word, but it is sometimes difficult to say exactly what one means by it. In my opinion the important thing is to clear the innocent.’

‘Oh, naturally,’ said Jane. ‘That goes without saying. If anyone is falsely accused—’

‘Not even that. There may be no accusation. But until one person is proved guilty beyond any possible doubt, everyone else who is associated with the crime is liable to suffer in varying degrees.’

Norman Gale said with emphasis, ‘How true that is.’

Jane said, ‘Don’t we know it!’

Poirot looked from one to the other.

‘I see. Already you have been finding that out for yourselves.’

He became suddenly brisk.

‘Come now, I have affairs to see to. Since our aims are the same, we three, let us combine together. I am about to call upon our ingenious friend, Mr Clancy. I would suggest that Mademoiselle accompanies me—in the guise of my secretary. Here, Mademoiselle, is a notebook and a pencil for the shorthand.’

‘I can’t write shorthand,’ gasped Jane.

‘But naturally not. But you have the quick wits—the intelligence—you can make plausible signs in pencil in the book, can you not? Good. As for Mr Gale, I suggest that he meets us in, say, an hour’s time. Shall we say upstairs at Monseigneur’s? Bon! We will compare notes then.’

And forthwith he advanced to the bell and pressed it.

Slightly dazed, Jane followed him, clutching the notebook.

Gale opened his mouth as though to protest, then seemed to think better of it.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘In an hour, at Monseigneur’s.’

The door was opened by a rather forbidding-looking elderly woman attired in severe black.

Poirot said, ‘Mr Clancy?’

She drew back and Poirot and Jane entered.

‘What name, sir?’

‘Mr Hercule Poirot.’

The severe woman led them upstairs and into a room on the first floor.

‘Mr Air Kule Prott,’ she announced.

Poirot realized at once the force of Mr Clancy’s announcement at Croydon to the effect that he was not a tidy man. The room, a long one, with three windows along its length and shelves and bookcases on the other walls, was in a state of chaos. There were papers strewn about, cardboard files, bananas, bottles of beer, open books, sofa cushions, a trombone, miscellaneous china, etchings, and a bewildering assortment of fountain-pens.

In the middle of this confusion Mr Clancy was struggling with a camera and a roll of film.

‘Dear me,’ said Mr Clancy, looking up as the visitors were announced. He put the camera down and the roll of film promptly fell on the floor and unwound itself. He came forward with outstretched hand. ‘Very glad to see you, I’m sure.’

‘You remember me, I hope?’ said Poirot. ‘This is my secretary, Miss Grey.’

‘How d’you do, Miss Grey.’ He shook her by the hand and then turned back to Poirot. ‘Yes, of course I remember you—at least—now, where was it exactly? Was it at the Skull and Crossbones Club?’

‘We were fellow passengers on an aeroplane from Paris on a certain fatal occasion.’

‘Why, of course,’ said Mr Clancy. ‘And Miss Grey too! Only I hadn’t realized she was your secretary. In fact, I had some idea that she was in a beauty parlour—something of that kind.’

Jane looked anxiously at Poirot.

The latter was quite equal to the situation.

‘Perfectly correct,’ he said. ‘As an efficient secretary, Miss Grey has at times to undertake certain work of a temporary nature—you understand?’

‘Of course,’ said Mr Clancy. ‘I was forgetting. You’re a detective—the real thing. Not Scotland Yard. Private investigation. Do sit down, Miss Grey. No, not there; I think there’s orange juice on that chair. If I shift this file—Oh, dear, now everything’s tumbled out. Never mind. You sit here, M. Poirot—that’s right, isn’t it?—Poirot? The back’s not really broken. It only creaks a little as you lean against it. Well, perhaps it’s best not to lean too hard. Yes, a private investigator like my Wilbraham Rice. The public have taken very strongly to Wilbraham Rice. He bites his nails and eats a lot of bananas. I don’t know why I made him bite his nails to start with—it’s really rather disgusting—but there it is. He started by biting his nails, and now he has to do it in every single book. So monotonous. The bananas aren’t so bad; you get a bit of fun out of them—criminals slipping on the skin. I eat bananas myself—that’s what put it into my head. But I don’t bite my nails. Have some beer?’

‘I thank you, no.’

Mr Clancy sighed, sat down himself, and gazed earnestly at Poirot.

‘I can guess what you’ve come about—the murder of Giselle. I’ve thought and thought about that case. You can say what you like, it’s amazing—poisoned darts and a blowpipe in an aeroplane. An idea I have used myself, as I told you, both in book and short story form. Of course it was a very shocking occurrence, but I must confess, M. Poirot, that I was thrilled, positively thrilled.’

‘I can quite see,’ said Poirot, ‘that the crime must have appealed to you professionally, Mr Clancy.’

Mr Clancy beamed.

‘Exactly. You would think that anyone—even the official police—could have understood that! But not at all. Suspicion—that is all I got, both from the inspector and at the inquest. I go out of my way to assist the course of justice, and all I get for my pains is palpable thick-headed suspicion!’

‘All the same,’ said Poirot, smiling, ‘it does not seem to affect you very much.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Clancy. ‘But, you see, I have my methods, Watson. If you’ll excuse my calling you Watson. No offence intended. Interesting, by the way, how the technique of the idiot friend has hung on. Personally I myself think the Sherlock Holmes stories grossly overrated. The fallacies—the really amazing fallacies that there are in those stories—But what was I saying?’

‘You said that you had your methods.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Mr Clancy leaned forward. ‘I’m putting that inspector—what is his name, Japp?—yes, I’m putting him in my next book. You should see the way Wilbraham Rice deals with him.’

‘In between bananas, as one might say.’

‘In between bananas—that’s very good, that.’ Mr Clancy chuckled.

‘You have a great advantage as a writer, Monsieur,’ said Poirot. ‘You can relieve your feelings by the expedient of the printed word. You have the power of the pen over your enemies.’

Mr Clancy rocked gently back in his chair.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I begin to think this murder is going to be a really fortunate thing for me. I’m writing the whole thing exactly as it happened—only as fiction, of course, and I shall call it The Air Mail Mystery. Perfect pen portraits of all the passengers. It ought to sell like wildfire—if only I can get it out in time.'

'Won't you be had up for libel, or something?' asked Jane.

Mr Clancy turned a beaming face upon her.

'No, no, my dear lady. Of course, if I were to make one of the passengers the murderer—well, then, I might be liable for damages. But that is the strong part of it all—an entirely unexpected solution is revealed in the last chapter.'

Poirot leaned forward eagerly.

'And that solution is?'

Again Mr Clancy chuckled.

'Ingenious,' he said. 'Ingenious and sensational. Disguised as the pilot, a girl gets into the plane at Le Bourget and successfully stows herself away under Madame Giselle's seat. She has with her an ampoule of the newest gas. She releases this—everybody becomes unconscious for three minutes—she squirms out—fires the poisoned dart, and makes a parachute descent from the rear door of the car.'

Both Jane and Poirot blinked.

Jane said, 'Why doesn't she become unconscious from the gas too?'

'Respirator,' said Mr Clancy.

'And she descends into the Channel?'

'It needn't be the Channel—I shall make it the French coast.'

'And, anyway, nobody could hide under a seat; there wouldn't be room.'

'There will be room in my aeroplane,' said Mr Clancy firmly.

‘Epatant,’ said Poirot. ‘And the motive of the lady?’

‘I haven’t quite decided,’ said Mr Clancy meditatively. ‘Probably Giselle ruined the girl’s lover, who killed himself.’

‘And how did she get hold of the poison?’

‘That’s the really clever part,’ said Mr Clancy. ‘The girl’s a snake charmer. She extracts the stuff from her favourite python.’

‘Mon Dieu!’ said Hercule Poirot.

He said, ‘You don’t think, perhaps, it is just a little sensational?’

‘You can’t write anything too sensational,’ said Mr Clancy firmly. ‘Especially when you’re dealing with the arrow poison of the South American Indians. I know it was snake juice, really; but the principle is the same. After all, you don’t want a detective story to be like real life? Look at the things in the papers—dull as ditchwater.’

‘Come, now, Monsieur, would you say this little affair of ours is dull as ditchwater?’

‘No,’ admitted Mr Clancy. ‘Sometimes, you know, I can’t believe it really happened.’

Poirot drew the creaking chair a little nearer to his host. His voice lowered itself confidentially.

‘M. Clancy, you are a man of brains and imagination. The police, as you say, have regarded you with suspicion. They have not sought your advice. But I, Hercule Poirot, desire to consult you.’

Mr Clancy flushed with pleasure.

‘I’m sure that’s very nice of you.’

He looked flustered and pleased.

‘You have studied the criminology. Your ideas will be of value. It would be of great interest to me to know who, in your opinion, committed the crime.’

‘Well—’ Mr Clancy hesitated, reached automatically for a banana and began to eat it. Then, the animation dying out of his face, he shook his head. ‘You see, M. Poirot, it’s an entirely different thing. When you’re writing you can make it anyone you like; but, of course, in real life there is a real person. You haven’t any command over the facts. I’m afraid, you know, that I’d be absolutely no good as a real detective.’

He shook his head sadly and threw the banana skin into the grate.

‘It might be amusing, however, to consider the case together?’ suggested Poirot.

‘Oh, that, yes.’

‘To begin with, supposing you had to make a sporting guess, who would you choose?’

‘Oh, well, I suppose one of the two Frenchmen.’

‘Now, why?’

‘Well, she was French. It seems more likely, somehow. And they were sitting on the opposite side not too far away from her. But really I don’t know.’

‘It depends,’ said Poirot thoughtfully, ‘so much on motive.’

‘Of course—of course. I suppose you tabulate all the motives very scientifically?’

‘I am old-fashioned in my methods. I follow the old adage: seek whom the crime benefits.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Mr Clancy. ‘But I take it that’s a little difficult in a case like this. There’s a daughter who comes into money, so I’ve heard.

But a lot of the people on board might benefit, for all we know—that is if they owed her money and haven't got to pay it back.'

'True,' said Poirot. 'And I can think of other solutions. Let us suppose that Madame Giselle knew of something—attempted murder, shall we say?—on the part of one of those people.'

'Attempted murder?' said Mr Clancy. 'Now, why attempted murder? What a very curious suggestion.'

'In cases such as these,' said Poirot, 'one must think of everything.'

'Ah!' said Mr Clancy. 'But it's no good thinking. You've got to know.'

'You have reason—you have reason. A very just observation.'

Then he said, 'I ask your pardon, but this blowpipe that you bought—'

'Damn that blowpipe,' said Mr Clancy. 'I wish I'd never mentioned it.'

'You bought it, you say, at a shop in the Charing Cross Road? Do you, by any chance, remember the name of that shop?'

'Well,' said Mr Clancy, 'it might have been Absolom's—or there's Mitchell & Smith. I don't know. But I've already told all this to that pestilential inspector. He must have checked up on it by this time.'

'Ah,' said Poirot, 'but I ask for quite another reason. I desire to purchase such a thing and make a little experiment.'

'Oh, I see. But I don't know that you'll find one all the same. They don't keep sets of them, you know.'

'All the same I can try. Perhaps, Miss Grey, you would be so obliging as to take down those two names?'

Jane opened her notebook and rapidly performed a series of (she hoped) professional-looking squiggles. Then she surreptitiously wrote the names in longhand on the reverse side of the sheet in case these instructions of Poirot’s should be genuine.

‘And now,’ said Poirot, ‘I have trespassed on your time too long. I will take my departure with a thousand thanks for your amiability.’

‘Not at all. Not at all,’ said Mr Clancy. ‘I wish you would have had a banana.’

‘You are most amiable.’

‘Not at all. As a matter of fact, I’m feeling rather happy tonight. I’d been held up in a short story I was writing—the thing wouldn’t pan out properly, and I couldn’t get a good name for the criminal. I wanted something with a flavour. Well, just a bit of luck, I saw just the name I wanted over a butcher’s shop. Pargiter. Just the name I was looking for. There’s a sort of genuine sound to it; and about five minutes later I got the other thing. There’s always the same snag in stories—why won’t the girl speak? The young man tries to make her and she says her lips are sealed. There’s never any real reason, of course, why she shouldn’t blurt out the whole thing at once, but you have to try to think of something that’s not too definitely idiotic. Unfortunately it has to be a different thing every time!’

He smiled gently at Jane.

‘The trials of an author!’

He darted past her to a bookcase.

‘One thing you must allow me to give you.’

He came back with a book in his hand.

‘The Clue of the Scarlet Petal. I think I mentioned at Croydon that that book of mine dealt with arrow poison and native darts.’

‘A thousand thanks. You are too amiable.’

‘Not at all. I see,’ said Mr Clancy suddenly to Jane, ‘that you don’t use the Pitman system of shorthand.’

Jane flushed scarlet. Poirot came to her rescue.

‘Miss Grey is very up to date. She uses the most recent system invented by a Czecho-Slovakian.’

‘You don’t say so? What an amazing place Czecho-Slovakia must be. Everything seems to come from there—shoes, glass, gloves, and now a shorthand system. Quite amazing.’

He shook hands with them both.

‘I wish I could have been more helpful.’

They left him in the littered room smiling wistfully after them.

Chapter 16

Plan of Campaign

From Mr Clancy’s house they took a taxi to the Monseigneur, where they found Norman Gale awaiting them.

Poirot ordered some consommé and a chaud-froid of chicken.

‘Well?’ said Norman. ‘How did you get on?’

‘Miss Grey,’ said Poirot, ‘has proved herself the super-secretary.’

‘I don’t think I did so very well,’ said Jane. ‘He spotted my stuff when he passed behind me. You know, he must be very observant.’

‘Ah, you noticed that? This good Mr Clancy is not quite so absent-minded as one might imagine.’

‘Did you really want those addresses?’ asked Jane.

‘I think they might be useful—yes.’

‘But if the police—’

‘Ah, the police! I should not ask the same questions as the police have asked. Though, as a matter of fact, I doubt whether the police have asked any questions at all. You see, they know that the blowpipe found in the plane was purchased in Paris by an American.’

‘In Paris? An American? But there wasn’t any American in the aeroplane.’

Poirot smiled kindly on her.

‘Precisely. We have here an American just to make it more difficult. Voilà tout.’

‘But it was bought by a man?’ said Norman.

Poirot looked at him with rather an odd expression.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it was bought by a man.’

Norman looked puzzled.

‘Anyway,’ said Jane, ‘it wasn’t Mr Clancy. He’d got one blowpipe already, so he wouldn’t want to go about buying another.’

Poirot nodded his head.

‘That is how one must proceed. Suspect everyone in turn and then wipe him or her off the list.’

‘How many have you wiped off so far?’ asked Jane.

‘Not so many as you might think, Mademoiselle,’ said Poirot with a twinkle. ‘It depends, you see, on the motive.’

‘Has there been—?’ Norman Gale stopped and then added apologetically: ‘I don’t want to butt in on official secrets, but is there no record of this woman’s dealings?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘All the records are burnt.’

‘That’s unfortunate.’

‘Evidemment! But it seems that Madame Giselle combined a little blackmailing with her profession of moneylending, and that opens up a wider field. Supposing, for instance, that Madame Giselle had knowledge of a certain criminal offence—say, attempted murder on the part of someone.’

‘Is there any reason to suppose such a thing?’

‘Why, yes,’ said Poirot slowly. ‘There is—one of the few pieces of documentary evidence that we have in this case.’

He looked from one to the other of their interested faces and gave a little sigh.

‘Ah, well,’ he said, ‘that is that. Let us talk of other matters—for instance, of how this tragedy has affected the lives of you two young people.’

‘It sounds horrible to say so, but I’ve done well out of it,’ said Jane.

She related her rise of salary.

‘As you say, Mademoiselle, you have done well, but probably only for the time being. Even a nine-days’ wonder does not last longer than nine days, remember.’

Jane laughed. ‘That’s very true.’

‘I’m afraid it’s going to last more than nine days in my case,’ said Norman.

He explained the position. Poirot listened sympathetically.

‘As you say,’ he observed thoughtfully, ‘it will take more than nine days—or nine weeks—or nine months. Sensationalism dies quickly—fear is long-lived.’

‘Do you think I ought to stick it out?’

‘Have you any other plan?’

‘Yes—chuck up the whole thing. Go out to Canada or somewhere and start again.’

‘I’m sure that would be a pity,’ said Jane firmly.

Norman looked at her.

Poirot tactfully became engrossed with his chicken.

‘I don’t want to go,’ said Norman.

‘If I discover who killed Madame Giselle, you will not have to go,’ said Poirot cheerfully.

‘Do you really think you will?’ asked Jane.

Poirot looked at her reproachfully.

‘If one approaches a problem with order and method there should be no difficulty in solving it—none whatever,’ said Poirot severely.

‘Oh, I see,’ said Jane, who didn’t.

‘But I should solve this problem quicker if I had help,’ said Poirot.

‘What kind of help?’

Poirot did not speak for a moment or two. Then he said:

‘Help from Mr Gale. And perhaps, later, help from you also.’

‘What can I do?’ asked Norman.

Poirot shot a sideways glance at him.

‘You will not like it,’ he said warningly.

‘What is it?’ repeated the young man impatiently.

Very delicately, so as not to offend English susceptibilities, Poirot used a toothpick. Then he said: ‘Frankly, what I need is a blackmailer.’

‘A blackmailer?’ exclaimed Norman. He stared at Poirot as a man does who cannot believe his ears.

Poirot nodded.

‘Precisely,’ he said. ‘A blackmailer.’

‘But what for?’

‘Parbleu! To blackmail.’

‘Yes, but I mean who? Why?’

‘Why,’ said Poirot, ‘is my business. As to whom—’ He paused for a moment, then went on in a calm business-like tone:

‘Here is the plan I will outline for you. You will write a note—that is to say, I will write a note and you will copy it—to the Countess of Horbury. You will mark it “Personal”. In the note you will ask for an interview. You will recall yourself to her memory as having travelled to England by air on a certain occasion. You will also refer to certain business dealings of Madame Giselle’s having passed into your hands.’

‘And then?’

‘And then you will be accorded an interview. You will go and you will say certain things (in which I will instruct you). You will ask for—let me see—ten thousand pounds.’

‘You’re mad!’

‘Not at all,’ said Poirot. ‘I am eccentric, possibly, but mad, no.’

‘And suppose Lady Horbury sends for the police? I shall go to prison.’

‘She will not send for the police.’

‘You can’t know that.’

‘Mon cher, practically speaking, I know everything.’

‘And, anyway, I don’t like it.’

‘You will not get the ten thousand pounds—if that makes your conscience any clearer,’ said Poirot with a twinkle.

‘Yes, but look here, M. Poirot—this is the sort of wildcat scheme that might ruin me for life.’

‘Ta—ta—ta—the lady will not go to the police—that I assure you.’

‘She may tell her husband.’

‘She will not tell her husband.’

‘I don’t like it.’

‘Do you like losing your patients and ruining your career?’

‘No, but—’

Poirot smiled at him kindly.

‘You have the natural repugnance, yes? That is very natural. You have, too, the chivalrous spirit. But I can assure you that Lady Horbury is not worth all this fine feeling—to use your idiom she is a very nasty piece of goods.’

‘All the same, she can’t be a murderess.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because we should have seen her. Jane and I were sitting just opposite.’

‘You have too many preconceived ideas. Me, I desire to straighten things out; and to do that I must know.’

‘I don’t like the idea of blackmailing a woman.’

‘Ah, mon Dieu—what there is in a word! There will be no blackmail. You have only to produce a certain effect. After that, when the ground is prepared, I will step in.’

Norman said, ‘If you land me in prison—’

‘No, no, no, I am very well known at Scotland Yard. If anything should occur I will take the blame. But nothing will occur other than what I have prophesied.’

Norman surrendered with a sigh.

‘All right. I’ll do it. But I don’t half like it.’

‘Good. This is what you will write. Take a pencil.’

He dictated slowly.

‘Voilà,’ he said. ‘Later I will instruct you as to what you are to say. Tell me, Mademoiselle, do you ever go to the theatre?’

‘Yes, fairly often,’ said Jane.

‘Good. Have you seen, for instance, a play called Down Under?’

‘Yes. I saw it about a month ago. It’s rather good.’

‘An American play, is it not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you remember the part of Harry, played by Mr Raymond Barraclough?’

‘Yes. He was very good.’

‘You thought him attractive? Yes?’

‘Frightfully attractive.’

‘Ah, il a le sex appeal?’

‘Decidedly,’ said Jane, laughing.

‘Just that—or is he a good actor as well?’

‘Oh, I think he acts well too.’

‘I must go and see him,’ said Poirot.

Jane stared at him, puzzled.

What an odd little man he was—hopping from subject to subject like a bird from one branch to another!

Perhaps he read her thoughts. He smiled:

‘You do not approve of me, Mademoiselle? Of my methods?’

‘You jump about a good deal.’

‘Not really. I pursue my course logically with order and method. One must not jump wildly to a conclusion. One must eliminate.’

‘Eliminate?’ said Jane. ‘Is that what you’re doing?’ She thought a moment. ‘I see. You’ve eliminated Mr Clancy—’

‘Perhaps,’ said Poirot.

‘And you’ve eliminated us; and now you’re going, perhaps, to eliminate Lady Horbury. Oh!’

She stopped as a sudden thought struck her.

‘What is it, Mademoiselle?’

‘That talk of attempted murder? Was that a test?’

‘You are very quick, Mademoiselle. Yes, that was part of the course I pursue. I mention attempted murder and I watch Mr Clancy, I watch you, I watch Mr Gale—and in neither of you three is there any sign—not so much as the flicker of an eyelash. And let me tell you that I could not be deceived on that point. A murderer can be ready to meet any attack that he foresees. But that entry in a little notebook could not have been known to any of you. So, you see, I am satisfied.’

‘What a horrible, tricky sort of person you are, M. Poirot,’ said Jane, rising. ‘I shall never know why you are saying things.’

‘That is quite simple. I want to find out things.’

‘I suppose you’ve got very clever ways of finding out things?’

‘There is only one really simple way.’

‘What is that?’

‘To let people tell you.’

Jane laughed.

‘Suppose they don’t want to?’

‘Everyone likes talking about themselves.’

‘I suppose they do,’ admitted Jane.

‘That is how many a quack makes a fortune. He encourages patients to come and sit and tell him things. How they fell out of the perambulator when they were two, and how their mother ate a pear and the juice fell on her orange dress, and how when they were one and a half they pulled their father’s beard; and then he tells them that now they will not suffer from the insomnia any longer, and he takes two guineas; and they go away, having enjoyed themselves—oh, so much—and perhaps they do sleep.’

‘How ridiculous,’ said Jane.

‘No, it is not so ridiculous as you think. It is based on a fundamental need of human nature—the need to talk—to reveal oneself. You yourself, Mademoiselle, do you not like to dwell on your childhood memories—on your mother and your father?’

‘That doesn’t apply in my case. I was brought up in an orphanage.’

‘Ah, that is different. It is not gay, that.’

‘I don’t mean that we were the kind of charity orphans who go out in scarlet bonnets and cloaks. It was quite fun really.’

‘It was in England?’

‘No, in Ireland—near Dublin.’

‘So you are Irish. That is why you have the dark hair and the blue-grey eyes, with the look—’

‘As though they had been put in with a smutty finger—’ Norman finished with amusement.

‘Comment? What is that you say?’

‘That is a saying about Irish eyes—that they have been put in with a smutty finger.’

‘Really? It is not elegant, that. And yet—it expresses it well.’ He bowed to Jane. ‘The effect is very good, Mademoiselle.’

Jane laughed as she got up.

‘You’ll turn my head, M. Poirot. Good night, and thank you for supper. You’ll have to stand me another if Norman is sent to prison for blackmail.’

A frown came over Norman’s face at the reminder.

Poirot bade the two young people good night.

When he got home he unlocked a drawer and took out a list of eleven names.

Against four of these names he put a light tick. Then he nodded his head thoughtfully.

‘I think I know,’ he murmured to himself. ‘But I have got to be sure. Il faut continuer.’

Chapter 17

In Wandsworth

Mr Henry Mitchell was just sitting down to a supper of sausage and mash when a visitor called to see him.

Somewhat to the steward's astonishment the visitor in question was the full-moustached gentleman who had been one of the passengers on the fatal plane.

M. Poirot was very affable, very agreeable in his manner. He insisted on Mr Mitchell's getting on with his supper, paid a graceful compliment to Mrs Mitchell, who was standing staring at him open-mouthed.

He accepted a chair, remarked that it was very warm for the time of year and then gently came round to the purpose of his call.

'Scotland Yard, I fear, is not making much progress with the case,' he said.

Mitchell shook his head.

'It was an amazing business, sir—amazing. I don't see what they've got to go on. Why, if none of the people on the plane saw anything, it's going to be difficult for anyone afterwards.'

'Truly, as you say.'

'Terribly worried, Henry's been, over it,' put in his wife. 'Not able to sleep of nights.'

The steward explained:

'It's lain on my mind, sir, something terrible. The company have been very fair about it. I must say I was afraid at first I might lose my job—'

'Henry, they couldn't. It would have been cruelly unfair.'

His wife sounded highly indignant. She was a buxom, highly-complexioned woman with snapping dark eyes.

‘Things don’t always happen fairly, Ruth. Still it turned out better than I thought. They absolve me from blame. But I felt it, if you understand me. I was in charge, as it were.’

‘I understand your feelings,’ said Poirot sympathetically. ‘But I assure you that you are over-conscientious. Nothing that happened was your fault.’

‘That’s what I say, sir,’ put in Mrs Mitchell.

Mitchell shook his head.

‘I ought to have noticed that the lady was dead sooner. If I’d tried to wake her up when I first took round the bills—’

‘It would have made little difference. Death, they think, was very nearly instantaneous.’

‘He worries so,’ said Mrs Mitchell. ‘I tell him not to bother his head so. Who’s to know what reason foreigners have for murdering each other; and if you ask me, I think it’s a dirty trick to have done it in a British aeroplane.’

She finished her sentence with an indignant and patriotic snort.

Mitchell shook his head in a puzzled way.

‘It weighs on me, so to speak. Every time I go on duty I’m in a state. And then the gentleman from Scotland Yard asking me again and again if nothing unusual or sudden occurred on the way over. Makes me feel as though I must have forgotten something—and yet I know I haven’t. It was a most uneventful voyage in every way until—until it happened.’

‘Blowpipes and darts—heathen, I call it,’ said Mrs Mitchell.

‘You are right,’ said Poirot, addressing her with a flattering air of being struck by her remarks. ‘Not so is an English murder committed.’

‘You’re right, sir.’

‘You know, Mrs Mitchell, I can almost guess what part of England you come from.’

‘Dorset, sir. Not far from Bridport. That’s my home.’

‘Exactly,’ said Poirot. ‘A lovely part of the world.’

‘It is that. London isn’t a patch on Dorset. My folk have been settled in Dorset for over two hundred years—and I’ve got Dorset in the blood, as you might say.’

‘Yes, indeed.’ He turned to the steward again. ‘There’s one thing I’d like to ask you, Mitchell.’

The man’s brow contracted.

‘I’ve told you all that I know—indeed I have, sir.’

‘Yes, yes—this is a very trifling matter. I only wondered if anything on the table—Madame Giselle’s table, I mean—was disarranged?’

‘You mean when—when I found her?’

‘Yes. The spoons and forks—the salt cellar—anything like that.’

The man shook his head.

‘There wasn’t anything of that kind on the tables. Everything was cleared away bar the coffee cups. I didn’t notice anything myself. I shouldn’t, though. I was much too flustered. But the police would know that, sir, they searched the plane through and through.’

‘Ah, well,’ said Poirot. ‘It is no matter. Sometime I must have a word with your colleague—Davis.’

‘He’s on the early 8.45 am service now, sir.’

‘Has this business upset him much?’

‘Oh, well, sir, you see he’s only a young fellow. If you ask me, he’s almost enjoyed it all. The excitement, and everyone standing him drinks and wanting to hear about it.’

‘Has he perhaps a young lady?’ asked Poirot. ‘Doubtless his connexion with the crime would be very thrilling to her.’

‘He’s courting old Johnson’s daughter at the Crown and Feathers,’ said Mrs Mitchell. ‘But she’s a sensible girl—got her head screwed on the right way. She doesn’t approve of being mixed up with a murder.’

‘A very sound point of view,’ said Poirot, rising. ‘Well, thank you, Mr Mitchell—and you, Mrs Mitchell—and I beg of you, my friend, do not let this weigh upon your mind.’

When he had departed Mitchell said, ‘The thick heads in the jury at the inquest thought he’d done it. But if you ask me, he’s secret service.’

‘If you ask me,’ said Mrs Mitchell, ‘there’s Bolshies at the back of it.’

Poirot had said that he must have a word with the other steward, Davis, sometime. As a matter of fact he had it not many hours later, in the bar of the Crown and Feathers.

He asked Davis the same question he had asked Mitchell.

‘Nothing disarranged—no, sir. You mean upset? That kind of thing?’

‘I mean—well, shall we say something missing from the table—or something that would not usually be there—’

Davis said slowly:

‘There was something—I noticed it when I was clearing up, after the police had done with the place—but I don’t suppose that it’s the sort of thing you mean. It’s only that the dead lady had two coffee spoons in her saucer. It does sometimes happen when we’re serving in a hurry. I noticed it because there’s a superstition about that; they say two spoons in a saucer means a wedding.’

‘Was there a spoon missing from anyone else’s saucer?’

‘No, sir, not that I noticed. Mitchell or I must have taken the cup and saucer along that way—as I say one does sometimes what with the hurry and all. I laid two sets of fish knives and forks only a week ago. On the whole it’s better than laying the table short, for then you have to interrupt yourself and go and fetch the extra knife, or whatever it is you’ve forgotten.’

Poirot asked one more question—a somewhat jocular one:

‘What do you think of French girls, Davis?’

‘English are good enough for me, sir.’

And he grinned at a plump, fair-haired girl behind the bar.

Chapter 18

In Queen Victoria Street

Mr James Ryder was rather surprised when a card bearing the name of M. Hercule Poirot was brought to him.

He knew that the name was familiar, but for the moment he could not remember why. Then he said to himself:

‘Oh, that fellow!’ and told the clerk to show the visitor in.

M. Hercule Poirot was looking very jaunty. In one hand he carried a cane, he had a flower in his buttonhole.

‘You will forgive my troubling you, I trust,’ said Poirot. ‘It is this affair of the death of Madame Giselle.’

‘Yes?’ said Mr Ryder. ‘Well, what about it? Sit down, won’t you? Have a cigar?’

‘I thank you, no. I smoke my own cigarettes. Perhaps you will accept one?’

Ryder regarded Poirot’s tiny cigarettes with a somewhat dubious eye.

‘Think I’ll have one of my own, if it’s all the same to you. Might swallow one of those by mistake.’ He laughed heartily.

‘The inspector was round here a few days ago,’ said Mr Ryder when he had induced his lighter to work. ‘Nosey, that’s what those fellows are. Can’t mind their own business.’

‘They have, I suppose, to get information,’ said Poirot mildly.

‘They needn’t be so damned offensive about it,’ said Mr Ryder bitterly. ‘A man’s got his feelings—and his business reputation to think about.’

‘You are, perhaps, a little over-sensitive.’

‘I’m in a delicate position, I am,’ said Mr Ryder. ‘Sitting where I did, just in front of her—well, it looks fishy, I suppose. I can’t help where I sat. If I’d known that woman was going to be murdered I wouldn’t have come by that plane at all. I don’t know, though, perhaps I would.’

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

‘Has good come out of evil?’ asked Poirot, smiling.

‘It’s funny your saying that. It has, and it hasn’t, in a manner of speaking. I mean I’ve had a lot of worry. I’ve been badgered. Things have been insinuated. And why me? That’s what I say. Why don’t they go and worry that Dr Hubbard—Bryant, I mean. Doctors are the people who can get hold of high-falutin’ undetectable poisons. How’d I get hold of snake juice? I ask you!’

‘You were saying,’ said Poirot, ‘that although you had been put to a lot of inconvenience—?’

‘Ah, yes, there was a bright side to the picture. I don’t mind telling you I cleaned up a tidy little sum from the papers. Eyewitness stuff—though there was more of the reporter’s imagination than of my eyesight; but that’s neither here nor there.’

‘It is interesting,’ said Poirot, ‘how a crime affects the lives of people who are quite outside it. Take yourself, for example—you make suddenly a quite unexpected sum of money—a sum of money perhaps particularly welcome at the moment.’

‘Money’s always welcome,’ said Mr Ryder.

He eyed Poirot sharply.

‘Sometimes the need of it is imperative. For that reason men embezzle—they make fraudulent entries—’ He waved his hands. ‘All sorts of complications arise.’

‘Well, don’t let’s get gloomy about it,’ said Mr Ryder.

‘True. Why dwell on the dark side of the picture? This money was grateful to you—since you failed to raise a loan in Paris—’

‘How the devil did you know that?’ asked Mr Ryder angrily.

Hercule Poirot smiled.

‘At any rate it is true.’

‘It’s true enough, but I don’t particularly want it to get about.’

‘I will be discretion itself, I assure you.’

‘It’s odd,’ mused Mr Ryder, ‘how small a sum will sometimes put a man in Queer Street. Just a small sum of ready money to tide him over a crisis—and if he can’t get hold of that infinitesimal sum, to hell with his credit. Yes, it’s damned odd. Money’s odd. Credit’s odd. Come to that, life is odd!’

‘Very true.’

‘By the way, what was it you wanted to see me about?’

‘It is a little delicate. It has come to my ears—in the course of my profession, you understand—that in spite of your denials you did have dealings with this woman Giselle.’

‘Who says so? It’s a lie! I never saw the woman.’

‘Dear me, that is very curious!’

‘Curious! It’s damned libel.’

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I must look into the matter.’

‘What do you mean? What are you getting at?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘Do not enrage yourself; there must be—a mistake.’

‘I should think there was. Catch me getting myself mixed up with these high-toned Society moneylenders. Society woman with gambling debts—that’s their sort.’

Poirot rose.

‘I must apologize for having been misinformed.’ He paused at the door. ‘By the way, just as a matter of curiosity, what made you call Dr Bryant Dr Hubbard just now?’

‘Blessed if I know. Let me see—Oh, yes, I think it must have been the flute. The nursery rhyme, you know. Old Mother Hubbard’s dog—But when she came back he was playing the flute. Odd thing how you mix up names.’

‘Ah, yes, the flute…These things interest me, you understand, psychologically.’

Mr Ryder snorted at the word psychologically. It savoured to him of what he called that tom-fool business psychoanalysis.

He looked at Poirot with suspicion.

Chapter 19

Enter and Exit Mr Robinson

The Countess of Horbury sat in her bedroom at 315 Grosvenor Square in front of her toilet table. Gold brushes and boxes, jars of face cream, boxes of powder—dainty luxury all around her. But in the midst of the luxury Cicely Horbury sat with dry lips and a face on which the rouge showed up in unbecoming patches on her cheeks.

She read the letter for the fourth time.

> The Countess of Horbury.
>
> Dear Madam,
>
> re: Madame Giselle, deceased.
>
> I am the holder of certain documents formerly in the possession of the deceased lady. If you or Mr Raymond Barraclough are interested in the matter, I should be happy to call upon you with a view to discussing the affair.
>
> Or perhaps you would prefer me to deal with your husband in the matter?
>
> Yours truly,
>
> John Robinson.

Stupid, to read the same thing over and over again…

As though the words might alter their meaning.

She picked up the envelope—two envelopes, the first with ‘Personal’ on it, the second with ‘Private and Very Confidential.’

‘Private and Very Confidential…’

The beast…the beast…

And that lying old Frenchwoman, who had sworn that ‘all arrangements were made to protect clients in case of her own sudden demise…’

Damn her…Life was hell—hell…

‘Oh God, my nerves,’ thought Cicely. ‘It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair…’

Her shaking hand went out to a gold-topped bottle…

‘It will steady me, pull me together…’

She snuffed the stuff up her nose.

There. Now she could think! What to do? See the man, of course. Though where she could raise any money—perhaps a lucky flutter at that place in Carlos Street…

But time enough to think of that later. See the man—find out what he knows.

She went over to the writing-table, dashed off in her big, unformed handwriting:

The Countess of Horbury presents her compliments to Mr John Robinson and will see him if he calls at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning…

II

‘Will I do?’ asked Norman.

He flushed a little under Poirot’s startled gaze.

‘Name of a name,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘What kind of a comedy is it that you are playing?’

Norman Gale flushed even more deeply.

He mumbled, ‘You said a slight disguise would be as well.’

Poirot sighed, then he took the young man by the arm and marched him to the looking-glass.

‘Regard yourself,’ he said. ‘That is all I ask of you—regard yourself! What do you think you are—a Santa Claus dressed up to amuse the children? I agree that your beard is not white: no, it is black—the colour for villains. But what a beard—a beard that screams to Heaven! A cheap beard, my friend, and most imperfectly and amateurishly attached! Then there are your eyebrows. But it is that you have the mania for false hair? The spirit gum one smells it several yards away; and if you think that anyone will fail to perceive that you have a piece of sticking plaster attached to a tooth, you are mistaken. My friend, it is not your métier—decidedly not—to play the part.’

‘I acted in amateur theatricals a good deal at one time,’ said Norman Gale stiffly.

‘I can hardly believe it. At any rate, I presume they did not let you indulge in your own ideas of makeup. Even behind the footlights your appearance would be singularly unconvincing. In Grosvenor Square in broad daylight—’

Poirot gave an eloquent shrug of the shoulders by way of finishing the sentence.

‘No, mon ami,’ he said. ‘You are a blackmailer, not a comedian. I want her ladyship to fear you—not to die of laughing when she sees you. I observe that I wound you by what I am saying. I regret, but it is a moment when only the truth will serve. Take this and this—’ He pressed various jars upon him. ‘Go into the bathroom and let us have an end of what you call in this country the fooltommery.’

Crushed, Norman Gale obeyed. When he emerged a quarter of an hour later, his face a vivid shade of brick red, Poirot gave him a nod of approval.

‘Très bien. The farce is over. The serious business begins. I will permit you to have a small moustache. But I will, if you please, attach it to you myself. There—and now we will part the hair differently—so. That is quite enough. Now let me see if you at least know your lines.’

He listened with attention, then nodded.

‘That is good. En avant—and good luck to you.’

‘I devoutly hope so. I shall probably find an enraged husband and a couple of policemen.’

Poirot reassured him.

‘Have no anxiety. All will march to a marvel.’

‘So you say,’ muttered Norman rebelliously.

With his spirits at zero, he departed on his distasteful mission.

At Grosvenor Square he was shown into a small room on the first floor. There, after a minute or two, Lady Horbury came to him.

Norman braced himself. He must not—positively must not—show that he was new to this business.

‘Mr Robinson?’ said Cicely.

‘At your service,’ said Norman, and bowed.

‘Damn it all—just like a shop-walker,’ he thought disgustedly. ‘That’s fright.’

‘I had your letter,’ said Cicely.

Norman pulled himself together. ‘The old fool said I couldn’t act,’ he said to himself with a mental grin.

Aloud he said rather insolently:

‘Quite so—well, what about it, Lady Horbury?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Come, come. Must we really go into details? Everyone knows how pleasant a—well, call it a weekend at the seaside—can be; but husbands seldom agree. I think you know, Lady Horbury, just exactly what the evidence consists of. Wonderful woman, old Giselle. Always had the goods. Hotel evidence, etc., is quite first class. Now the question is who wants it most—you or Lord Horbury? That’s the question.’

She stood there quivering.

‘I’m a seller,’ said Norman, his voice growing commoner as he threw himself more whole-heartedly into the part of Mr Robinson. ‘Are you a buyer? That’s the question.’

‘How did you get hold of this—evidence?’

‘Now really, Lady Horbury, that’s rather beside the point. I’ve got it, that’s the main thing.’

‘I don’t believe you. Show it to me.’

‘Oh, no.’ Norman shook his head with a cunning leer. ‘I didn’t bring anything with me. I’m not so green as that. If we agree to do business, that’s another matter. I’ll show you the stuff before you hand the money over. All fair and above board.’

‘How—how much?’

‘Ten thousand of the best—pounds, not dollars.’

‘Impossible. I could never lay my hands on anything like that amount.’

‘It’s wonderful what you can do if you try. Jewels aren’t fetching what they did, but pearls are still pearls. Look here, to oblige a lady I’ll make it eight thousand. That’s my last word. And I’ll give you two days to think it over.’

‘I can’t get the money, I tell you.’

Norman sighed and shook his head.

‘Well, perhaps it’s only right Lord Horbury should know what’s been going on. I believe I’m correct in saying that a divorced woman gets no alimony—and Mr Barraclough’s a very promising young actor, but he’s not touching big money. Now not another word. I’ll leave you to think it over; and mind what I say—I mean it.’

He paused and then added:

‘I mean it, just as Giselle meant it…’

Then quickly, before the wretched woman could reply, he had left the room.

‘Ouch!’ said Norman as he reached the street. He wiped his brow. ‘Thank goodness that’s over.’

III

It was a bare hour later when a card was brought to Lady Horbury.

‘M. Hercule Poirot.’

She thrust it aside. ‘Who is he? I can’t see him!’

‘He said, m’lady, that he was here at the request of Mr Raymond Barraclough.’

‘Oh.’ She paused. ‘Very well, show him in.’

The butler departed, reappeared.

‘M. Hercule Poirot.’

Exquisitely dressed in the most dandiacal style, M. Poirot entered, bowed.

The butler closed the door. Cicely took a step forward.

‘Mr Barraclough sent you—?’

‘Sit down, Madame.’ His tone was kindly but authoritative.

Mechanically she sat. He took a chair near her. His manner was fatherly and reassuring.

‘Madame, I entreat you, look upon me as a friend. I come to advise you. You are, I know, in grave trouble.’

She murmured faintly, ‘I don’t—’

‘Ecoutez, Madame, I do not ask you to give away your secrets. It is unnecessary. I know them beforehand. That is the essence of being a good detective—to know.’

‘A detective?’ Her eyes widened. ‘I remember—you were on the plane. It was you—’

‘Precisely, it was me. Now, Madame, let us get to business. As I said just now, I do not press you to confide in me. You shall not start by telling me things. I will tell to you. This morning, not an hour ago, you had a visitor. That visitor—his name was Brown, perhaps?’

‘Robinson,’ said Cicely faintly.

‘It is the same thing—Brown, Smith, Robinson—he uses them in turn. He came here to blackmail you, Madame. He has in his possession certain proofs of—shall we say—indiscretion? Those proofs were once in the keeping of Madame Giselle. Now this man has them. He offers them to you for, perhaps, seven thousand pounds.’

‘Eight.’

‘Eight, then. And you, Madame, will not find it easy to get that sum very quickly?’

‘I can’t do it—I simply can’t do it…I’m in debt already. I don’t know what to do…’

‘Calm yourself, Madame. I come to assist you.’

She stared at him.

‘How do you know all this?’

‘Simply, Madame, because I am Hercule Poirot. Eh bien, have no fears—place yourself in my hands—I will deal with this Mr Robinson.’

‘Yes,’ said Cicely sharply. ‘And how much will you want?’

Hercule Poirot bowed.

‘I shall ask only a photograph, signed, of a very beautiful lady…’

She cried out, ‘Oh, dear, I don’t know what to do…My nerves…I’m going mad.’

‘No, no, all is well. Trust Hercule Poirot. Only, Madame, I must have the truth—the whole truth—do not keep anything back or my hands will be tied.’

‘And you’ll get me out of this mess?’

‘I swear to you solemnly that you will never hear of Mr Robinson again.’

She said, ‘All right. I’ll tell you everything.’

‘Good. Now then, you borrowed money from this woman Giselle?’

Lady Horbury nodded.

‘When was that? When did it begin, I mean?’

‘Eighteen months ago. I was in a hole.’

‘Gambling?’

‘Yes. I had an appalling run of luck.’

‘And she lent you as much as you wanted?’

‘Not at first. Only a small sum to begin with.’

‘Who sent you to her?’

‘Raymond—Mr Barraclough told me that he had heard she lent money to Society women.’

‘But later she lent you more?’

‘Yes—as much as I wanted. It seemed like a miracle at the time.’

‘It was Madame Giselle’s special kind of miracle,’ said Poirot drily. ‘I gather that before then you and Mr Barraclough had become—er—friends?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you were very anxious that your husband should not know about it?’

Cicely cried angrily, ‘Stephen’s a prig. He’s tired of me. He wants to marry someone else. He’d have jumped at the thought of divorcing me.’

‘And you did not want—divorce?’

‘No. I—I—’

‘You liked your position—and also you enjoyed the use of a very ample income. Quite so. Les femmes, naturally, they must look after themselves. To proceed—there arose the question of repayment?’

‘Yes, and I—I couldn’t pay back the money. And then the old devil turned nasty. She knew about me and Raymond. She’d found out places and dates and everything—I can’t think how.’

‘She had her methods,’ said Poirot drily. ‘And she threatened, I suppose, to send all this evidence to Lord Horbury?’

‘Yes, unless I paid up.’

‘And you couldn’t pay?’

‘No.’

‘So her death was quite providential?’

Cicely Horbury said earnestly, ‘It seemed too, too wonderful.’

‘Ah, precisely—too, too wonderful. But it made you a little nervous, perhaps?’

‘Nervous?’

‘Well, after all, Madame, you alone of anyone on the plane had a motive for desiring her death.’

She drew in her breath sharply.

‘I know. It was awful. I was in an absolute state about it.’

‘Especially since you had been to see her in Paris the night before, and had had something of a scene with her?’

‘The old devil! She wouldn’t budge an inch. I think she actually enjoyed it. Oh, she was a beast through and through! I came away like a rag.’

‘And yet you said at the inquest that you had never seen the woman before?’

‘Well, naturally, what else could I say?’

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully.

‘You, Madame, could say nothing else.’

‘It’s been too ghastly—nothing but lies—lies—lies. That dreadful inspector man has been here again and again badgering me with questions. But I felt pretty safe. I could see he was only trying it on. He didn’t know anything.’

‘If one does guess, one should guess with assurance.’

‘And then,’ continued Cicely, pursuing her own line of thought, ‘I couldn’t help feeling that if anything were to leak out, it would have leaked out at once. I felt safe—till that awful letter yesterday.’

‘You have not been afraid all this time?’

‘Of course I’ve been afraid!’

‘But of what? Of exposure, or of being arrested for murder?’

The colour ebbed away from her cheeks.

‘Murder—but I didn’t—Oh, you don’t believe that! I didn’t kill her. I didn’t!’

‘You wanted her dead…’

‘Yes, but I didn’t kill her…Oh, you must believe me—you must. I never moved from my seat. I—’

She broke off. Her beautiful blue eyes were fixed on him imploringly.

Hercule Poirot nodded soothingly.

‘I believe you, Madame, for two reasons—first, because of your sex, and secondly because of—a wasp.’

She stared at him.

‘A wasp?’

‘Exactly. That does not make sense to you, I see. Now, then, let us attend to the matter in hand. I will deal with this Mr Robinson. I pledge you my word that you shall never see or hear of him again. I will settle his—his—I have forgotten the word—his bacon? No, his goat. Now in return for my services I will ask you two little questions. Was Mr Barraclough in Paris the day before the murder?’

‘Yes, we dined together. But he thought it better I should go and see the woman alone.’

‘Ah, he did, did he? Now, Madame, one further question: Your stage name before you were married was Cicely Bland. Was that your real name?’

‘No, my real name is Martha Jebb. But the other—’

‘Made a better professional name. And you were born—where?’

‘Doncaster. But why—’

‘Mere curiosity. Forgive me. And now, Lady Horbury, will you permit me to give you some advice? Why not arrange with your husband a discreet divorce?’

‘And let him marry that woman?’

‘And let him marry that woman. You have a generous heart, Madame; and besides, you will be safe—oh, so safe—and your husband he will pay you an income.’

‘Not a very large one.’

‘Eh bien, once you are free you will marry a millionaire.’

‘There aren’t any nowadays.’

‘Ah, do not believe that, Madame. The man who had three millions perhaps now he has two millions—eh bien, it is still enough.’

Cicely laughed.

‘You’re very persuasive, M. Poirot. And are you really sure that dreadful man will never bother me again?’

‘On the word of Hercule Poirot,’ said that gentleman solemnly.

Chapter 20

In Harley Street

Detective-Inspector Japp walked briskly up Harley Street and stopped at a certain door.

He asked for Dr Bryant.

‘Have you an appointment, sir?’

‘No, I’ll just write a few words.’

On an official card he wrote:

‘Should be much obliged if you could spare me a few moments. I won’t keep you long.’

He sealed up the card in an envelope and gave it to the butler.

He was shown into a waiting-room. There were two women there and a man. Japp settled down with an elderly copy of Punch.

The butler reappeared and, crossing the floor, said in a discreet voice:

‘If you wouldn’t mind waiting a short time, sir, the doctor will see you, but he’s very busy this morning.’

Japp nodded. He did not in the least mind waiting—in fact he rather welcomed it. The two women had begun to talk. They had obviously a very high opinion of Dr Bryant’s abilities. More patients came in. Evidently Dr Bryant was doing well in his profession.

‘Fairly coining money,’ thought Japp to himself. ‘That doesn’t look like needing to borrow; but of course the loan may have taken place a long time ago. Anyway, he’s got a fine practice; a breath of scandal would burst it to bits. That’s the worst of being a doctor.’

Quarter of an hour later the butler reappeared and said:

‘The doctor will see you now, sir.’

Japp was shown into Dr Bryant’s consulting-room—a room at the back of the house with a big window. The doctor was sitting at his desk. He rose and shook hands with the detective.

His fine-lined face showed fatigue, but he seemed in no way disturbed by the inspector’s visit.

‘What can I do for you, Inspector?’ he said as he resumed his seat and motioned Japp to a chair opposite.

‘I must apologize first for calling in your consulting hours, but I shan’t keep you long, sir.’

‘That is all right, I suppose it is about the aeroplane death?’

‘Quite right, sir. We’re still working on it.’

‘With any result?’

‘We’re not as far on as we’d like to be. I really came to ask you some questions about the method employed. It’s this snake venom business that I can’t get the hang of.’

‘I’m not a toxicologist, you know,’ said Dr Bryant, smiling. ‘Such things aren’t in my line. Winterspoon’s your man.’

‘Ah, but you see, it’s like this, Doctor. Winterspoon’s an expert—and you know what experts are. They talk so that the ordinary man can’t understand them. But as far as I can make out there’s a medical side of this business. Is it true that snake venom is sometimes injected for epilepsy?’

‘I’m not a specialist in epilepsy, either,’ said Dr Bryant. ‘But I believe that injections of cobra venom have been used in the treatment of epilepsy with excellent results. But, as I say, that’s not really my line of country.’

‘I know—I know. What it really amounts to is this: I felt that you’d take an interest, having been on the aeroplane yourself. I thought it possible that you’d have some ideas on the subject yourself that might be useful to me. It’s not much good my going to an expert if I don’t know what to ask him.’

Dr Bryant smiled.

‘There is something in what you say, Inspector. There is probably no man living who can remain entirely unaffected by having come in close contact with murder…I am interested, I admit. I have speculated a good deal about the case in my quiet way.’

‘And what do you think, sir?’

Bryant shook his head slowly.

‘It amazes me—the whole thing seems almost—unreal—if I might put it that way. An astounding way of committing a crime. It seems a chance in a hundred that the murderer was not seen. He must be a person with a reckless disregard of risks.’

‘Very true, sir.’

‘The choice of poison is equally amazing. How could a would-be murderer possibly get hold of such a thing?’

‘I know. It seems incredible. Why, I don’t suppose one man in a thousand has ever heard of such a thing as a boomslang, much less actually handled the venom. You yourself, sir, now, you’re a doctor—but I don’t suppose you’ve ever handled the stuff.’

‘There are certainly not many opportunities of doing so. I have a friend who works at tropical research. In his laboratory there are various specimens of dried snake venoms—that of the cobra, for instance—but I cannot remember any specimen of the boomslang.’

‘Perhaps you can help me—’ Japp took out a piece of paper and handed it to the doctor. ‘Winterspoon wrote down these three names—said I might get information there. Do you know any of these men?’

‘I know Professor Kennedy slightly. Heidler I know well; mention my name and I’m sure he’ll do all he can for you. Carmichael’s an Edinburgh man—I don’t know him personally—but I believe they’ve done some good work up there.’

‘Thank you, sir, I’m much obliged. Well, I won’t keep you any longer.’

When Japp emerged into Harley Street he was smiling to himself in a pleased fashion.

‘Nothing like tact,’ he said to himself. ‘Tact does it. I’ll be bound he never saw what I was after. Well, that’s that.’

Chapter 21

The Three Clues

When Japp got back to Scotland Yard he was told that M. Hercule Poirot was waiting to see him.

Japp greeted his friend heartily.

‘Well, M. Poirot, and what brings you along. Any news?’

‘I came to ask you for news, my good Japp.’

‘If that isn’t just like you. Well, there isn’t much and that’s the truth. The dealer fellow in Paris has identified the blowpipe all right. Fournier’s been worrying the life out of me from Paris about his moment psychologique. I’ve questioned those stewards till I’m blue in the face, and they stick to it that there wasn’t a moment psychologique. Nothing startling or out of the way happened on the voyage.’

‘It might have occurred when they were both in the front car.’

‘I’ve questioned the passengers, too. Everyone can’t be lying.’

‘In one case I investigated everyone was!’

‘You and your cases! To tell the truth, M. Poirot, I’m not very happy. The more I look into things the less I get. The Chief ’s inclined to look on me rather coldly. But what can I do? Luckily it’s one of those semi-foreign cases. We can put it on the Frenchmen over here—and in Paris they say it was done by an Englishman and that it’s our business.’

‘Do you really believe the Frenchmen did it?’

‘Well, frankly, I don’t. As I look at it an archaeologist is a poor kind of fish. Always burrowing in the ground and talking through his hat about what happened thousands of years ago—and how do they know, I should like to know? Who’s to contradict them? They say some rotten string of beads is five thousand three hundred and twenty-two years old, and who’s to say it isn’t? Well, there they are—liars, perhaps—though they seem to believe it themselves—but harmless. I had an old chap in here the other day who’d had a scarab pinched—terrible state he was in—nice old boy, but helpless as a baby in arms. No, between you and me, I don’t think for a minute that pair of French archaeologists did it.’

‘Who do you think did it?’

‘Well—there’s Clancy, of course. He’s in a queer way. Goes about muttering to himself. He’s got something on his mind.’

‘The plot of a new book, perhaps.’

‘It may be that—and it may be something else; but, try as I may, I can’t get a line on motive. I still think CL 52 in the black book is Lady Horbury; but I can’t get anything out of her. She’s pretty hard-boiled, I can tell you.’

Poirot smiled to himself. Japp went on:

‘The stewards—well, I can’t find a thing to connect them with Giselle.’

‘Dr Bryant?’

‘I think I’m on to something there. Rumours about him and a patient. Pretty woman—nasty husband—takes drugs or something. If he’s not careful he’ll be struck off the medical council. That fits in with RT 362 well enough, and I don’t mind telling you that I’ve got a pretty shrewd idea where he could have got the snake venom from. I went to see him and he gave himself away rather badly over that. Still, so far it is all surmise—no facts. Facts aren’t any too easy to get at in this case. Ryder seems all square and above board—says he went to raise a loan in Paris and couldn’t get it—gave names and addresses—all checked up. I’ve found out that the firm was nearly in Queer Street about a week or two ago, but they seem to be just pulling through. There you are again—unsatisfactory. The whole thing is a muddle.’

‘There is no such thing as muddle—obscurity, yes—but muddle can exist only in a disorderly brain.’

‘Use any word you choose. The result’s the same. Fournier’s stumped, too. I suppose you’ve got it all taped out, but you’d rather not tell!’

‘You mock yourself at me. I have not got it all taped out. I proceed a step at a time, with order and method, but there is still far to go.’

‘I can’t help feeling glad to hear that. Let’s hear about these orderly steps.’

Poirot smiled.

‘I make a little table—so.’ He took a paper from his pocket. ‘My idea is this: A murder is an action performed to bring about a certain result.’

‘Say that again slowly.’

‘It is not difficult.’

‘Probably not—but you make it sound so.’

‘No, no, it is very simple. Say you want money—you get it when an aunt dies. Bien—you perform an action—this is to kill the aunt—and get the result—inherit the money.’

‘I wish I had some aunts like that,’ sighed Japp. ‘Go ahead, I see your idea. You mean there’s got to be a motive.’

‘I prefer my own way of putting it. An action is performed—the action being murder—what now are the results of that action? By studying the different results we should get the answer to our conundrum. The results of a single action may be very varied—that particular action affects a lot of different people. Eh bien, I study today—three weeks after the crime—the result in eleven different cases.’

He spread out the paper.

Japp leaned forward with some interest and read over Poirot’s shoulder:

Miss Grey. Result—temporary improvement. Increased salary.

Mr Gale. Result—bad. Loss of practice.

Lady Horbury. Result good, if she’s CL 52.

Miss Kerr. Result—bad, since Giselle’s death makes it more unlikely Lord Horbury will get the evidence to divorce his wife.

‘H’m.’ Japp interrupted his scrutiny. ‘So you think she’s keen on his lordship? You are a one for nosing out love affairs.’

Poirot smiled. Japp bent over the chart once more.

Mr Clancy. Result—good—expects to make money by book dealing with the murder.

Dr Bryant. Result—good if RT 362.

Mr Ryder. Result—good, owing to small amount of cash obtained through articles on murder which tided firm over delicate time. Also good if Ryder is XVB724.

M. Dupont. Result—unaffected.

M. Jean Dupont. Result—the same.

Mitchell. Result—unaffected.

Davis. Result—unaffected.

‘And you think that’s going to help you?’ asked Japp sceptically. ‘I can’t see that writing down “I don’t know. I don’t know. I can’t tell,” makes it any better.’

‘It gives one a clear classification,’ explained Poirot. ‘In four cases—Mr Clancy, Miss Grey, Mr Ryder, and I think I may say Lady Horbury—there is a result on the credit side. In the cases of Mr Gale and Miss Kerr there is a result on the debit side—in four cases there is no result at all—so far as we know—and in one, Dr Bryant, there is either no result or a distinct gain.’

‘And so?’ asked Japp.

‘And so,’ said Poirot, ‘we must go on seeking.’

‘With precious little to go upon,’ said Japp gloomily. ‘The truth of it is that we’re hung up until we can get what we want from Paris. It’s the Giselle side that wants going into. I bet I could have got more out of that maid than Fournier did.’

‘I doubt it, my friend. The most interesting thing about this case is the personality of the dead woman. A woman without friends—without relations—without, as one might say—any personal life. A woman who was once young, who once loved and suffered and then—with a firm hand pulled down the shutter—all that was over; not a photograph, not a souvenir, not a knick-knack. Marie Morisot became Madame Giselle—moneylender.’

‘Do you think there is a clue in her past?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Well, we could do with it! There aren’t any clues in this case.’

‘Oh, yes, my friend, there are.’

‘The blowpipe, of course—’

‘No, no, not the blowpipe.’

‘Well, let’s hear your ideas of the clues in the case.’

Poirot smiled.

‘I will give them titles—like the names of Mr Clancy’s stories: The Clue of the Wasp. The Clue in the Passenger’s Baggage. The Clue of the Extra Coffee Spoon.’

‘You’re potty,’ said Japp kindly, and added: ‘What’s this about a coffee spoon?’

‘Madame Giselle had two spoons in her saucer.’

‘That’s supposed to mean a wedding.’

‘In this case,’ said Poirot, ‘it meant a funeral.’

Chapter 22

Jane Takes a New Job

When Norman Gale, Jane and Poirot met for dinner on the night after the ‘blackmailing incident’ Norman was relieved to hear that his services as ‘Mr Robinson’ were no longer required.

‘He is dead, the good Mr Robinson,’ said Poirot. He raised his glass. ‘Let us drink to his memory.’

‘RIP,’ said Norman with a laugh.

‘What happened?’ asked Jane of Poirot.

He smiled at her.

‘I found out what I wanted to know.’

‘Was she mixed up with Giselle?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was pretty clear from my interview with her,’ said Norman.

‘Quite so,’ said Poirot. ‘But I wanted a full and detailed story.’

‘And you got it?’

‘I got it.’

They both looked at him inquiringly, but Poirot, in a provoking manner, began to discuss the relationship between a career and life.

‘There are not so many round pegs in square holes as one might think. Most people, in spite of what they tell you, choose the occupations that they secretly desire. You will hear a man say who works in an office, “I should like to explore—to rough it in far countries.” But you will find that he likes reading the fiction that deals with that subject, but that he himself prefers the safety and moderate comfort of an office stool.’

‘According to you,’ said Jane, ‘my desire for foreign travel isn’t genuine—messing about with women’s heads is my true vocation—well, that isn’t true.’

Poirot smiled at her.

‘You are young still. Naturally one tries this, that and the other, but what one eventually settles down into is the life one prefers.’

‘And suppose I prefer being rich?’

‘Ah, that, it is more difficult!’

‘I don’t agree with you,’ said Gale. ‘I’m a dentist by chance—not choice. My uncle was a dentist—he wanted me to come in with him, but I was all for adventure and seeing the world. I chucked dentistry and went off to farm in South Africa. However, that wasn’t much good—I hadn’t got enough experience. I had to accept the old man’s offer and come and set up business with him.’

‘And now you are thinking of chucking dentistry again and going off to Canada. You have a Dominion complex!’

‘This time I shall be forced to do it.’

‘Ah, but it is incredible how often things force one to do the thing one would like to do.’

‘Nothing’s forcing me to travel,’ said Jane wistfully. ‘I wish it would.’

‘Eh bien, I make you an offer here and now. I go to Paris next week. If you like you can take the job of my secretary—I will give you a good salary.’

Jane shook her head.

‘I mustn’t give up Antoine’s. It’s a good job.’

‘So is mine a good job.’

‘Yes, but it’s only temporary.’

‘I will obtain you another post of the same kind.’

‘Thanks, but I don’t think I’ll risk it.’

Poirot looked at her and smiled enigmatically.

Three days later he was rung up.

‘M. Poirot,’ said Jane, ‘is that job still open?’

‘But yes. I go to Paris on Monday.’

‘You really mean it? I can come?’

‘Yes, but what has happened to make you change your mind?’

‘I’ve had a row with Antoine. As a matter of fact I lost my temper with a customer. She was an—an absolute—well, I can’t say just what she was through the telephone. I was feeling nervy and instead of doing my soothing syrup stuff I just let rip and told her exactly what I thought of her.’

‘Ah, the thought of the great wide open spaces.’

‘What’s that you say?’

‘I say that your mind was dwelling on a certain subject.’

‘It wasn’t my mind, it was my tongue that slipped. I enjoyed it—her eyes looked just like her beastly Pekingese’s—as though they were going to drop out—but here I am—thrown out on my ear, as you might say. I must get another job sometime, I suppose—but I’d like to come to Paris first.’

‘Good, it is arranged. On the way over I will give you your instructions.’

Poirot and his new secretary did not travel by air, for which Jane was secretly thankful. The unpleasant experience of her last trip had shaken her nerve. She did not want to be reminded of that lolling figure in rusty black…

On their way from Calais to Paris they had the compartment to themselves, and Poirot gave Jane some idea of his plans.

‘There are several people in Paris that I have to see. There is the lawyer—Maître Thibault. There is also M. Fournier of the Sûreté—a melancholy man, but intelligent. And there are M. Dupont père and M. Dupont fils. Now, Mademoiselle Jane, whilst I am taking on the father I shall leave the son to you. You are very charming, very attractive—I fancy that M. Dupont will remember you from the inquest.’

‘I’ve seen him since then,’ said Jane, her colour rising slightly.

‘Indeed? And how was that?’

Jane, her colour rising a little more, described their meeting in the Corner House.

‘Excellent—better and better. Ah, it was a famous idea of mine to bring you to Paris with me. Now listen carefully, Mademoiselle Jane. As far as possible do not discuss the Giselle affair, but do not avoid the subject if Jean Dupont introduces it. It might be well if, without actually saying so, you could convey the impression that Lady Horbury is suspected of the crime. My reason for coming to Paris, you can say, is to confer with M. Fournier and to inquire particularly into any dealings Lady Horbury may have had with the dead woman.’

‘Poor Lady Horbury—you do make her a stalking horse!’

‘She is not the type I admire—eh bien, let her be useful for once.’

Jane hesitated for a minute, then said:

‘You don’t suspect young M. Dupont of the crime, do you?’

‘No, no, no—I desire information merely.’ He looked at her sharply. ‘He attracts you—eh—this young man? Il a le sex appeal?’

Jane laughed at the phrase.

‘No, that’s not how I would describe him. He’s very simple, but rather a dear.’

‘So that is how you describe him—very simple?’

‘He is simple. I think it’s because he’s led a nice unworldly life.’

‘True,’ said Poirot. ‘He has not, for instance, dealt with teeth. He has not been disillusioned by the sight of a public hero shivering with fright in the dentist’s chair.’

Jane laughed.

‘I don’t think Norman’s roped in any public heroes yet as patients.’

‘It would have been a waste, since he is going to Canada.’

‘He’s talking of New Zealand now. He thinks I’d like the climate better.’

‘At all events he is patriotic. He sticks to the British Dominions.’

‘I’m hoping,’ said Jane, ‘that it won’t be necessary.’

She fixed Poirot with an inquiring eye.

‘Meaning that you put your trust in Papa Poirot? Ah, well—I will do the best I can—that I promise you. But I have the feeling very strongly, Mademoiselle, that there is a figure who has not yet come into the limelight—a part as yet unplayed—’

He shook his head, frowning.

‘There is, Mademoiselle, an unknown factor in this case. Everything points to that…’

II

Two days after their arrival in Paris, M. Hercule Poirot and his secretary dined in a small restaurant, and the two Duponts, father and son, were Poirot's guests.

Old M. Dupont, Jane found as charming as his son, but she got little chance of talking to him. Poirot monopolized him severely from the start. Jane found Jean no less easy to get on with than she had done in London. His attractive, boyish personality pleased her now as it had then. He was such a simple friendly soul.

All the same, even while she laughed and talked with him, her ear was alert to catch snatches of the two older men's conversation. She wondered precisely what information it was that Poirot wanted. So far as she could hear, the conversation had never touched once on the murder. Poirot was skilfully drawing out his companion on the subject of the past. His interest in archaeological research in Persia seemed both deep and sincere. M. Dupont was enjoying his evening enormously. Seldom did he get such an intelligent and sympathetic listener.

Whose suggestion it was that the two young people should go to a cinema was not quite clear, but when they had gone Poirot drew his chair a little closer to the table and seemed prepared to take a still more practical interest in archaeological research.

'I comprehend,' he said. 'Naturally it is a great anxiety in these difficult financial days to raise sufficient funds. You accept private donations?'

M. Dupont laughed.

'My dear friend, we sue for them practically on bended knees! But our particular type of dig does not attract the great mass of humanity. They demand spectacular results! Above all, they like gold—large quantities of gold! It is amazing how little the average person cares for pottery. Pottery—the whole romance of humanity can be expressed in terms of pottery. Design—texture—'

M. Dupont was well away. He besought Poirot not to be led astray by the specious publications of B—, the really criminal misdating of L—, and the hopelessly unscientific stratification of G—. Poirot promised solemnly not to be led astray by any of the publications of these learned personages.

Then he said:

‘Would a donation, for instance, of five hundred pounds—?’

M. Dupont nearly fell across the table in his excitement.

‘You—you are offering that? To me? To aid our researches. But it is magnificent, stupendous! The biggest private donation we have had.’

Poirot coughed.

‘I will admit—there is a favour—’

‘Ah, yes, a souvenir—some specimens of pottery—’

‘No, no, you misunderstand me,’ said Poirot quickly before M. Dupont could get well away again. ‘It is my secretary—that charming young girl you saw tonight—if she could accompany you on your expedition?’

M. Dupont seemed slightly taken aback for a moment.

‘Well,’ he said, pulling his moustache, ‘it might possibly be arranged. I should have to consult my son. My nephew and his wife are to accompany us. It was to have been a family party. However, I will speak to Jean—’

‘Mademoiselle Grey is passionately interested in pottery. The Past has for her an immense fascination. It is the dream of her life to dig. Also she mends socks and sews on buttons in a manner truly admirable.’

‘A useful accomplishment.’

‘Is it not? And now you were telling me—about the pottery of Susa—’

M. Dupont resumed a happy monologue on his own particular theories of Susa I and Susa II.

Poirot reached his hotel, to find Jane saying good night to Jean Dupont in the hall.

As they went up in the lift Poirot said:

‘I have obtained for you a job of great interest. You are to accompany the Duponts to Persia in the spring.’

Jane stared at him.

‘Are you quite mad?’

‘When the offer is made to you, you will accept with every manifestation of delight.’

‘I am certainly not going to Persia. I shall be in Muswell Hill or New Zealand with Norman.’

Poirot twinkled at her gently.

‘My dear child,’ he said, ‘it is some months to next March. To express delight is not to buy a ticket. In the same way, I have talked about a donation—but I have not actually signed a cheque! By the way, I must obtain for you in the morning a handbook on Prehistoric Pottery of the Near East. I have said that you are passionately interested in the subject.’

Jane sighed.

‘Being secretary to you is no sinecure, is it? Anything else?’

‘Yes. I have said that you sew on buttons and darn socks to perfection.’

‘Do I have to give a demonstration of that tomorrow, too?’

‘It would be as well, perhaps,’ said Poirot, ‘if they took my word for it!’

Chapter 23

Anne Morisot

At half past ten on the following morning the melancholy M. Fournier walked into Poirot's sitting-room and shook the little Belgian warmly by the hand.

His own manner was far more animated than usual.

'Monsieur,' he said, 'there is something I want to tell you. I have, I think, at last seen the point of what you said in London about the finding of the blowpipe.'

'Ah!' Poirot's face lighted up.

'Yes,' said Fournier taking a chair. 'I pondered much over what you had said. Again and again I say to myself: Impossible that the crime should have been committed as we believe. And at last—at last—I see a connexion between that repetition of mine and what you said about the finding of the blowpipe.'

Poirot listened attentively, but said nothing.

'That day in London you said, Why was the blowpipe found, when it might so easily have been passed out through the ventilator? And I think now that I have the answer. The blowpipe was found because the murderer wanted it to be found.'

'Bravo!' said Poirot.

'That was your meaning, then? Good, I thought so. And I went on a step further. I ask myself: Why did the murderer want the blowpipe to be found? And to that I got the answer: Because the blowpipe was not used.'

'Bravo! Bravo! My reasoning exactly.'

'I say to myself: The poisoned dart, yes, but not the blowpipe. Then something else was used to send that dart through the air—something that a man or woman might put to their lips in a normal manner and which would cause no remark. And I remembered your insistence on a complete list of all that was found in the passengers' luggage and upon their persons. There were two things that especially attracted my attention—Lady Horbury had two cigarette holders, and on the table in front of the Duponts were a number of Kurdish pipes.'

M. Fournier paused. He looked at Poirot. Poirot did not speak.

'Both those things could have been put to the lips naturally without anyone remarking on it…I am right, am I not?'

Poirot hesitated, then he said:

'You are on the right track, yes, but go a little further; and do not forget the wasp.'

'The wasp?' Fournier stared. 'No, there I do not follow you. I cannot see where the wasp comes in.'

'You cannot see? But it is there that I—'

He broke off as the telephone rang.

He took up the receiver.

''Allo, 'allo. Ah, good morning. Yes, it is I myself, Hercule Poirot.' In an aside to Fournier he said, 'It is Thibault…'

'Yes—yes, indeed. Very well. And you? M. Fournier? Quite right. Yes, he has arrived. He is here at this moment.'

Lowering the receiver, he said to Fournier:

'He tried to get you at the Sûreté. They told him that you had come to see me here. You had better speak to him. He sounds excited.'

Fournier took the telephone.

‘’Allo—’allo. Yes, it is Fournier speaking…What…What…In verity, is that so…? Yes, indeed…Yes…Yes, I am sure he will. We will come round at once.’

He replaced the telephone on its hook and looked across at Poirot.

‘It is the daughter. The daughter of Madame Giselle.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, she has arrived to claim her heritage.’

‘Where has she come from?’

‘America, I understand. Thibault has asked her to return at half past eleven. He suggests we should go round and see him.’

‘Most certainly. We will go immediately…I will leave a note for Mademoiselle Grey.’

He wrote:

> Some developments have occurred which force me to go out. If M. Jean Dupont should ring up or call, be amiable to him. Talk of buttons and socks, but not as yet of prehistoric pottery. He admires you; but he is intelligent!
>
> Au revoir,
>
> Hercule Poirot.

‘And now let us come, my friend,’ he said, rising. ‘This is what I have been waiting for—the entry on the scene of the shadowy figure of whose presence I have been conscious all along. Now—soon—I ought to understand everything.’

II

Maître Thibault received Poirot and Fournier with great affability.

After an interchange of compliments and polite questions and answers, the lawyer settled down to the discussion of Madame Giselle's heiress.

'I received a letter yesterday,' he said, 'and this morning the young lady herself called upon me.'

'What age is Mademoiselle Morisot?'

'Mademoiselle Morisot—or rather Mrs Richards—for she is married, is exactly twenty-four years of age.'

'She brought documents to prove her identity?' asked Fournier.

'Certainly. Certainly.'

He opened a file at his elbow.

'To begin with, there is this.'

It was a copy of a marriage certificate between George Leman, bachelor, and Marie Morisot—both of Quebec. Its date was 1910. There was also the birth certificate of Anne Morisot Leman. There were various other documents and papers.

'This throws a certain light on the early life of Madame Giselle,' said Fournier.

Thibault nodded.

'As far as I can piece it out,' he said, 'Marie Morisot was nursery governess or sewing-maid when she met this man Leman.

'He was, I gather, a bad lot who deserted her soon after the marriage, and she resumed her maiden name.

'The child was received in the Institut de Marie at Quebec and was brought up there. Marie Morisot or Leman left Quebec shortly afterwards—I imagine with a man—and came to France. She remitted sums of money from time to time, and finally dispatched a lump sum of ready money to be given to the child on attaining the age of twenty-one. At that time Marie Morisot or Leman was, no doubt, living an irregular life, and considered it better to sunder any personal relations.'

'How did the girl realize that she was the heiress to a fortune?'

'We have inserted discreet advertisements in various journals. It seems one of these came to the notice of the Principal of the Institut de Marie, and she wrote or telegraphed to Mrs Richards, who was then in Europe, but on the point of returning to the States.'

'Who is Richards?'

'I gather he is an American or Canadian from Detroit—by profession a maker of surgical instruments.'

'He did not accompany his wife?'

'No, he is still in America.'

'Is Mrs Richards able to throw any light upon a possible reason for her mother's murder?'

The lawyer shook his head.

'She knows nothing about her. In fact, although she had once heard the Principal mention it, she did not even remember what her mother's maiden name was.'

'It looks,' said Fournier, 'as though her appearance on the scene is not going to be of any help in solving the murder problem. Not, I must admit, that I ever thought it would. I am on quite another tack at present. My inquiries have narrowed down to a choice of three persons.'

'Four,' said Poirot.

'You think four?'

‘It is not I who say four, but on the theory that you advanced to me you cannot confine yourself to three persons.’ He made a sudden rapid motion with his hands. ‘The two cigarette holders—the Kurdish pipes and a flute. Remember the flute, my friend.’

Fournier gave an exclamation, but at that moment the door opened and an aged clerk mumbled:

‘The lady has returned.’

‘Ah,’ said Thibault. ‘Now you will be able to see the heiress for yourself. Come in, Madame. Let me present to you M. Fournier of the Sûreté, who is in charge in this country of the inquiries into your mother’s death. This is M. Hercule Poirot, whose name may be familiar to you and who is kindly giving us his assistance. Madame Richards.’

Giselle’s daughter was a dark, chic-looking young woman. She was very smartly though plainly dressed.

She held out her hand to each of the men in turn, murmuring a few appreciative words.

‘Though, I fear, Messieurs, that I have hardly the feeling of a daughter in the matter. I have been to all intents and purposes an orphan all my life.’

In answer to Fournier’s questions she spoke warmly and gratefully of Mère Angélique, the head of the Institut de Marie.

‘She has always been kindness itself to me.’

‘You left the Institut—when, Madame?’

‘When I was eighteen, Monsieur. I started to earn my living. I was, for a time, a manicurist. I have also been in a dressmaker’s establishment. I met my husband in Nice. He was then just returning to the States. He came over again on business to Holland and we were married in Rotterdam a month ago. Unfortunately, he had to return to Canada. I was detained—but I am now about to rejoin him.’

Anne Richards’s French was fluent and easy. She was clearly more French than English.

‘You heard of the tragedy—how?’

‘Naturally I read of it in the papers, but I did not know—that is, I did not realize—that the victim in the case was my mother. Then I received a telegram here in Paris from Mère Angélique giving me the address of Maître Thibault and reminding me of my mother’s maiden name.’

Fournier nodded thoughtfully.

They talked a little further, but it seemed clear that Mrs Richards could be of little assistance to them in their search for the murderer. She knew nothing at all of her mother’s life or business relations.

Having elicited the name of the hotel at which she was staying, Poirot and Fournier took leave of her.

‘You are disappointed, mon vieux,’ said Fournier. ‘You had some idea in your brain about this girl? Did you suspect that she might be an impostor? Or do you, in fact, still suspect that she is an impostor?’

Poirot shook his head in a discouraged manner.

‘No—I do not think she is an impostor. Her proofs of identity sound genuine enough…It is odd, though, I feel that I have either seen her before—or that she reminds me of someone…’

‘A likeness to the dead woman?’ suggested Fournier doubtfully. ‘Surely not.’

‘No—it is not that—I wish I could remember what it was. I am sure her face reminds me of someone…’

Fournier looked at him curiously.

‘You have always, I think, been intrigued by the missing daughter.’

‘Naturally,’ said Poirot, his eyebrows rising a little. ‘Of all the people who may or may not benefit by Giselle’s death, this young woman does benefit—very definitely—in hard cash.’

‘True—but does that get us anywhere?’

Poirot did not answer for a minute or two. He was following the train of his own thoughts. He said at last:

‘My friend—a very large fortune passes to this girl. Do you wonder that from the beginning I speculated as to her being implicated. There were three women on that plane. One of them, Miss Venetia Kerr, was of well-known and authenticated family. But the other two? Ever since Elise Grandier advanced the theory that the father of Madame Giselle’s child was an Englishman I have kept it in my mind that one of the two other women might conceivably be this daughter. They were both of approximately the right age. Lady Horbury was a chorus girl whose antecedents were somewhat obscure and who acted under a stage name. Miss Jane Grey, as she once told me, had been brought up in an orphanage.’

‘Ah ha!’ said the Frenchman. ‘So that is the way your mind has been running? Our friend Japp would say that you were being over-ingenious.’

‘It is true that he always accuses me of preferring to make things difficult.’

‘You see?’

‘But as a matter of fact it is not true—I proceed always in the simplest manner imaginable! And I never refuse to accept facts.’

‘But you are disappointed? You expected more from this Anne Morisot?’

They were just entering Poirot’s hotel. An object lying on the reception desk recalled Fournier’s mind to something Poirot had said earlier in the morning.

‘I have not thanked you,’ he said, ‘for drawing my attention to the error I had committed. I noted the two cigarette holders of Lady Horbury and the

Kurdish pipes of the Duponts. It was unpardonable on my part to have forgotten the flute of Dr Bryant, though I do not seriously suspect him—'

'You do not?'

'No. He does not strike me as the kind of man to—'

He stopped. The man standing at the reception desk talking to the clerk turned, his hand on the flute case. His glance fell on Poirot and his face lit up in grave recognition.

Poirot went forward—Fournier discreetly withdrew into the background. As well that Bryant should not see him.

'Dr Bryant,' said Poirot, bowing.

'M. Poirot.'

They shook hands. A woman who had been standing near Bryant moved away towards the lift. Poirot sent just a fleeting glance after her.

He said:

'Well, M. le docteur, are your patients managing to do without you for a little?'

Dr Bryant smiled—that melancholy attractive smile that the other remembered so well. He looked tired, but strangely peaceful.

'I have no patients now,' he said.

Then, moving towards a little table, he said:

'A glass of sherry, M. Poirot, or some other apéritif?'

'I thank you.'

They sat down, and the doctor gave the order. Then he said slowly:

‘No, I have no patients now. I have retired.’

‘A sudden decision?’

‘Not so very sudden.’

He was silent as the drinks were set before them. Then, raising the glass, he said:

‘It is a necessary decision. I resign of my own free will before I am struck off the register.’ He went on speaking in a gentle, faraway voice. ‘There comes to everyone a turning-point in their lives, M. Poirot. They stand at the cross-roads and have to decide. My profession interests me enormously—it is a sorrow—a very great sorrow to abandon it. But there are other claims…There is, M. Poirot, the happiness of a human being.’

Poirot did not speak. He waited.

‘There is a lady—a patient of mine—I love her very dearly. She has a husband who causes her infinite misery. He takes drugs. If you were a doctor you would know what that meant. She has no money of her own, so she cannot leave him…

‘For some time I have been undecided—but now I have made up my mind. She and I are now on our way to Kenya to begin a new life. I hope that at last she may know a little happiness. She has suffered so long…’

Again he was silent. Then he said in a brisker tone:

‘I tell you this, M. Poirot, because it will soon be public property, and the sooner you know the better.’

‘I understand,’ said Poirot. After a minute he said, ‘You take your flute, I see?’

Dr Bryant smiled.

‘My flute, M. Poirot, is my oldest companion…When everything else fails—music remains.’

His hand ran lovingly over the flute case, then with a bow he rose.

Poirot rose also.

‘My best wishes for your future, M. le docteur—and for that of Madame,’ said Poirot.

When Fournier rejoined his friend, Poirot was at the desk making arrangements for a trunk call to Quebec.

Chapter 24

A Broken Finger-Nail

‘What now?’ cried Fournier. ‘You are still preoccupied with this girl who inherits? Decidedly it is the idée fixe you have there.’

‘Not at all, not at all,’ said Poirot. ‘But there must be in all things order and method. One must finish with one thing before proceeding to the next.’

He looked round.

‘Here is Mademoiselle Jane. Suppose that you commence déjeuner. I will join you as soon as I can.’

Fournier acquiesced and he and Jane went into the dining-room.

‘Well?’ said Jane with curiosity. ‘What is she like?’

‘She is a little over medium height, dark, with a matte complexion, a pointed chin—’

‘You’re talking exactly like a passport,’ said Jane. ‘My passport description is simply insulting, I think. It’s composed of mediums and ordinary. Nose, medium; mouth ordinary (how do they expect you to describe a mouth?); forehead, ordinary; chin, ordinary.’

‘But not ordinary eyes,’ said Fournier.

‘Even they are grey, which is not a very exciting colour.’

‘And who has told you, Mademoiselle, that it is not an exciting colour?’ said the Frenchman, leaning across the table.

Jane laughed.

‘Your command of the English language,’ she said, ‘is highly efficient. Tell me more about Anne Morisot—is she pretty?’

‘Assez bien,’ said Fournier cautiously. ‘And she is not Anne Morisot. She is Anne Richards. She is married.’

‘Was the husband there, too?’

‘No.’

‘Why not, I wonder?’

‘Because he is in Canada or America.’

He explained some of the circumstances of Anne’s life. Just as he was drawing his narrative to a close, Poirot joined them.

He looked a little dejected.

‘Well, mon cher?’ inquired Fournier.

‘I spoke to the principal—to Mère Angélique herself. It is romantic, you know, the transatlantic telephone. To speak so easily to someone nearly halfway across the globe.’

‘The telegraphed photograph—that too is romantic. Science is the greatest romance there is. But you were saying?’

‘I talked with Mère Angélique. She confirmed exactly what Mrs Richards told us of the circumstances of her having been brought up at the Institut de Marie. She spoke quite frankly about the mother who left Quebec with a Frenchman interested in the wine trade. She was relieved at the time that the child would not come under her mother’s influence. From her point of view Giselle was on the downward path. Money was sent regularly—but Giselle never suggested a meeting.’

‘In fact your conversation was a repetition of what we heard this morning.’

‘Practically—except that it was more detailed. Anne Morisot left the Institut de Marie six years ago to become a manicurist, afterwards she had a job as a lady’s maid—and finally left Quebec for Europe in that capacity. Her letters were not frequent, but Mère Angélique usually heard from her about twice a year. When she saw an account of the inquest in the paper she realized that this Marie Morisot was in all probability the Marie Morisot who had lived in Quebec.'

'What about the husband?' asked Fournier. 'Now that we know definitely that Giselle was married, the husband might become a factor?'

'I thought of that. It was one of the reasons for my telephone call. George Leman, Giselle's blackguard of a husband, was killed in the early days of the war.'

He paused and then remarked abruptly:

'What was it that I just said—not my last remark—the one before?—I have an idea that—without knowing it—I said something of significance.'

Fournier repeated as well as he could the substance of Poirot's remarks, but the little man shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

'No—no—it was not that. Well, no matter…'

He turned to Jane and engaged her in conversation.

At the close of the meal he suggested that they have coffee in the lounge.

Jane agreed and stretched out her hand for her bag and gloves, which were on the table. As she picked them up she winced slightly.

'What is it, Mademoiselle?'

'Oh, it's nothing,' laughed Jane. 'It's only a jagged nail. I must file it.'

Poirot sat down again very suddenly.

'Nom d'un nom d'un nom,' he said quietly.

The other two stared at him in surprise.

'M. Poirot?' cried Jane. 'What is it?'

‘It is,’ said Poirot, ‘that I remember now why the face of Anne Morisot is familiar to me. I have seen her before…in the aeroplane on the day of the murder. Lady Horbury sent for her to get a nail file. Anne Morisot was Lady Horbury’s maid.’

Chapter 25

‘I Am Afraid’

This sudden revelation had an almost stunning effect on the three people sitting round the luncheon table. It opened up an entirely new aspect of the case.

Instead of being a person wholly remote from the tragedy, Anne Morisot was now shown to have been actually present on the scene of the crime. It took a minute or two for everyone to readjust their ideas.

Poirot made a frantic gesture with his hands—his eyes closed—his face contorted in agony.

‘A little minute—a little minute,’ he implored them. ‘I have got to think, to see, to realize how this affects my ideas of the case. I must go back in my mind. I must remember…A thousand maledictions on my unfortunate stomach. I was preoccupied only with my internal sensations!’

‘She was actually on the plane, then,’ said Fournier. ‘I see. I begin to see.’

‘I remember,’ said Jane. ‘A tall, dark girl.’ Her eyes half closed in an effort of memory. ‘Madeleine, Lady Horbury called her.’

‘That is it, Madeleine,’ said Poirot.

‘Lady Horbury sent her along to the end of the plane to fetch a case—a scarlet dressing-case.’

‘You mean,’ said Fournier, ‘that this girl went right past the seat where her mother was sitting?’

‘That is right.’

‘The motive,’ said Fournier. He gave a great sigh.

‘And the opportunity…Yes, it is all there.’

Then with a sudden vehemence most unlike his usual melancholy manner, he brought down his hand with a bang on the table.

‘But, parbleu!’ he cried. ‘Why did no one mention this before? Why was she not included amongst the suspected persons?’

‘I have told you, my friend. I have told you,’ said Poirot wearily. ‘My unfortunate stomach.’

‘Yes, yes, that is understandable. But there were other stomachs unaffected—the stewards’, the other passengers’.’

‘I think,’ said Jane, ‘that perhaps it was because it was so very early this happened. The plane had only just left Le Bourget; and Giselle was alive and well an hour or so after that. It seemed as though she must have been killed much later.’

‘That is curious,’ said Fournier thoughtfully. ‘Can there have been a delayed action of the poison? Such things happen…’

Poirot groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

‘I must think. I must think…Can it be possible that all along my ideas have been entirely wrong?’

‘Mon vieux,’ said Fournier, ‘such things happen. They happen to me. It is possible that they have happened to you. One has occasionally to pocket one’s pride and readjust one’s ideas.’

‘That is true,’ agreed Poirot. ‘It is possible that all along I have attached too much importance to one particular thing. I expected to find a certain clue. I found it, and I built up my case from it. But if I have been wrong from the beginning—if that particular article was where it was merely as the result of an accident…why, then—yes—I will admit that I have been wrong—completely wrong.’

‘You cannot shut your eyes to the importance of this turn of events,’ said Fournier. ‘Motive and opportunity—what more can you want?’

‘Nothing. It must be as you say. The delayed action of the poison is indeed extraordinary—practically speaking—one would say impossible. But where poisons are concerned the impossible does happen. One has to reckon with idiosyncrasy…’

His voice tailed off.

‘We must discuss a plan of campaign,’ said Fournier. ‘For the moment it would, I think, be unwise to arouse Anne Morisot’s suspicions. She is completely unaware that you have recognized her. Her bona fide have been accepted. We know the hotel at which she is staying and we can keep in touch with her through Thibault. Legal formalities can always be delayed. We have two points established—opportunity and motive. We have still to prove that Anne Morisot had snake venom in her possession. There is also the question of the American who bought the blowpipe and bribed Jules Perrot. It might certainly be the husband—Richards. We have only her word for it that he is in Canada.’

‘As you say—the husband…Yes, the husband. Ah, wait—wait!’

Poirot pressed his hands upon his temples.

‘It is all wrong,’ he murmured. ‘I do not employ the little grey cells of the brain in an orderly and methodical way. No, I leap to conclusions. I think, perhaps, what I am meant to think. No, that is wrong again. If my original idea were right, I could not be meant to think—’

He broke off.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Jane.

Poirot did not answer for a moment or two; then he took his hands from his temples, sat very upright and straightened two forks and a salt-cellar which offended his sense of symmetry.

‘Let us reason,’ he said. ‘Anne Morisot is either guilty or innocent of the crime. If she is innocent why has she lied? Why has she concealed the fact that she was lady’s maid to Lady Horbury?’

‘Why, indeed?’ said Fournier.

‘So we say Anne Morisot is guilty because she has lied. But wait. Suppose my first supposition was correct. Will that supposition fit in with Anne Morisot’s guilt, or with Anne Morisot’s lie? Yes—yes—it might—given one premise. But in that case—and if that premise is correct—then Anne Morisot should not have been on the plane at all.’

The others looked at him politely, if with, perhaps, a rather perfunctory interest.

Fournier thought:

‘I see now what the Englishman, Japp, meant. He makes difficulties, this old one. He tries to make an affair which is now simple sound complicated. He cannot accept a straightforward solution without pretending that it squares with his preconceived ideas.’

Jane thought:

‘I don’t see in the least what he means…Why couldn’t the girl be on the plane? She had to go wherever Lady Horbury wanted her to go…I think he’s rather a mountebank, really…’

Suddenly Poirot drew in his breath with a hiss.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘It is a possibility; and it ought to be very simple to find out.’

He rose.

‘What now, my friend?’ asked Fournier.

‘Again the telephone,’ said Poirot.

‘The transatlantic to Quebec?’

‘This time it is merely a call to London.’

‘To Scotland Yard?’

‘No, to Lord Horbury’s house in Grosvenor Square. If only I have the good fortune to find Lady Horbury at home.’

‘Be careful, my friend. If any suspicion gets round to Anne Morisot that we have been making inquiries about her it would not suit our affairs. Above all, we must not put her upon her guard.’

‘Have no fears. I will be discreet. I ask only one little question—a question of a most harmless nature.’ He smiled. ‘You shall come with me if you like.’

‘No, no.’

‘But yes. I insist.’

The two men went off, leaving Jane in the lounge.

It took some little time to put the call through; but Poirot’s luck was in. Lady Horbury was lunching at home.

‘Good. Will you tell Lady Horbury that it is M. Hercule Poirot speaking from Paris.’ There was a pause. ‘That is you, Lady Horbury? No, no, all is well. I assure you all is well. It is not that matter at all. I want you to answer me a question. Yes…When you go from Paris to England by air does your maid usually go with you, or does she go by train? By train…And so on that particular occasion…I see…You are sure? Ah, she has left you. I see. She left you very suddenly at a moment’s notice. Mais oui, base ingratitude. It is too true. A most ungrateful class! Yes, yes, exactly. No, no, you need not worry. Au revoir. Thank you.’

He replaced the receiver and turned to Fournier, his eyes green and shining.

‘Listen, my friend, Lady Horbury’s maid usually travelled by train and boat. On the occasion of Giselle’s murder Lady Horbury decided at the last moment that Madeleine had better go by air, too.’

He took the Frenchman by the arm.

‘Quick, my friend,’ he said. ‘We must go to her hotel. If my little idea is correct—and I think it is—there is no time to be lost.’

Fournier stared at him. But before he could frame a question Poirot had turned away and was heading for the revolving doors leading out of the hotel.

Fournier hastened after him.

‘But I do not understand. What is all this?’

The commissionaire was holding open the door of a taxi. Poirot jumped in and gave the address of Anne Morisot’s hotel.

‘And drive quickly, but quickly!’

Fournier jumped in after him.

‘What fly is this that has bitten you? Why this mad rush—this haste?’

‘Because, my friend, if, as I say, my little idea is correct—Anne Morisot is in imminent danger.’

‘You think so?’

Fournier could not help a sceptical tone creeping into his voice.

‘I am afraid,’ said Poirot. ‘Afraid. Bon Dieu—how this taxi crawls!’

The taxi at the moment was doing a good forty miles an hour and cutting in and out of traffic with a miraculous immunity due to the excellent eye of the driver.

‘It crawls to such an extent that we shall have an accident in a minute,’ said Fournier drily. ‘And Mademoiselle Grey, we have left her planted there awaiting our return from the telephone, and instead we leave the hotel without a word. It is not very polite, that!’

‘Politeness or impoliteness—what does it matter in an affair of life and death?’

‘Life or death?’ Fournier shrugged his shoulders.

He thought to himself:

‘It is all very well, but this obstinate madman may endanger the whole business. Once the girl knows that we are on her track—’

He said in a persuasive voice:

‘See now, M. Poirot, be reasonable. We must go carefully.’

‘You do not understand,’ said Poirot. ‘I am afraid—afraid—’

The taxi drew up with a jerk at the quiet hotel where Anne Morisot was staying.

Poirot sprang out and nearly collided with a young man just leaving the hotel.

Poirot stopped dead for a moment, looking after him.

‘Another face that I know—but where—? Ah, I remember—it is the actor Raymond Barraclough.’

As he stepped forward to enter the hotel, Fournier placed a restraining hand on his arm.

‘M. Poirot, I have the utmost respect, the utmost admiration for your methods—but I feel very strongly that no precipitate action must be taken. I am responsible here in France for the conduct of this case…’

Poirot interrupted him:

‘I comprehend your anxiety; but do not fear any “precipitate action” on my part. Let us make inquiries at the desk. If Madame Richards is here and all is well—then no harm is done—and we can discuss together our future action. You do not object to that?'

'No, no, of course not.'

'Good.'

Poirot passed through the revolving door and went up to the reception desk. Fournier followed him.

'You have a Mrs Richards staying here, I believe,' said Poirot.

'No, Monsieur. She was staying here, but she left today.'

'She has left?' demanded Fournier.

'Yes, Monsieur.'

'When did she leave?'

The clerk glanced up at the clock.

'A little over half an hour ago.'

'Was her departure unexpected? Where has she gone?'

The clerk stiffened at the questions and was disposed to refuse to answer; but when Fournier's credentials were produced the clerk changed his tone and was eager to give any assistance in his power.

No, the lady had not left an address. He thought her departure was the result of a sudden change of plans. She had formerly said she was making a stay of about a week.

More questions. The concierge was summoned, the luggage porters, the lift boys.

According to the concierge a gentleman had called to see the lady. He had come while she was out, but had awaited her return, and they had lunched together. What kind of gentleman? An American gentleman—very American. She had seemed surprised to see him. After lunch the lady gave orders for her luggage to be brought down and put in a taxi.

Where had she driven to? She had driven to the Gare du Nord—at least that is the order she had given to the taximan. Did the American gentleman go with her? No, she had gone alone.

‘The Gare du Nord,’ said Fournier. ‘That means England on the face of it. The two o’clock service. But it may be a blind. We must telephone to Boulogne and also try and get hold of that taxi.’

It was as though Poirot’s fears had communicated themselves to Fournier.

The Frenchman’s face was anxious.

Rapidly and efficiently he set the machinery of the law in motion.

It was five o’clock when Jane, sitting in the lounge of the hotel with a book, looked up to see Poirot coming towards her.

She opened her mouth reproachfully, but the words remained unspoken. Something in his face stopped her.

‘What was it?’ she said. ‘Has anything happened?’

Poirot took both her hands in his.

‘Life is very terrible, Mademoiselle,’ he said.

Something in his tone made Jane feel frightened.

‘What is it?’ she said again.

Poirot said slowly:

‘When the boat train reached Boulogne they found a woman in a first-class carriage—dead.’

The colour ebbed from Jane’s face.

‘Anne Morisot?’

‘Anne Morisot. In her hand was a little blue glass bottle which had contained hydrocyanic acid.’

‘Oh!’ said Jane. ‘Suicide?’

Poirot did not answer for a moment or two. Then he said, with the air of one who chooses his words carefully:

‘Yes, the police think it was suicide.’

‘And you?’

Poirot slowly spread out his hands in an expressive gesture.

‘What else—is there to think?’

‘She killed herself—why? Because of remorse—or because she was afraid of being found out?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘Life can be very terrible,’ he said. ‘One needs much courage.’

‘To kill oneself? Yes, I suppose one does.’

‘Also to live,’ said Poirot, ‘one needs courage.’

Chapter 26

After Dinner Speech

The next day Poirot left Paris. Jane stayed behind with a list of duties to perform. Most of these seemed singularly meaningless to her, but she carried them out to the best of her powers. She saw Jean Dupont twice. He mentioned the expedition which she was to join, and Jane did not dare to undeceive him without orders from Poirot, so she hedged as best she could and turned the conversation to other matters.

Five days later she was recalled to England by a telegram.

Norman met her at Victoria and they discussed recent events.

Very little publicity had been given to the suicide. There had been a paragraph in the papers stating that a Canadian lady, a Mrs Richards, had committed suicide in the Paris-Boulogne express, but that was all. There had been no mention of any connexion with the aeroplane murder.

Both Norman and Jane were inclined to be jubilant. Their troubles, they hoped, were at an end. Norman was not so sanguine as Jane.

‘They may suspect her of doing her mother in, but now that she’s taken this way out they probably won’t bother to go on with the case; and unless it is proved publicly I don’t see what good it is going to be to all of us poor devils. From the point of view of the public we shall remain under suspicion just as much as ever!’

He said as much to Poirot, whom he met a few days later in Piccadilly.

Poirot smiled.

‘You are like all the rest. You think I am an old man who accomplishes nothing! Listen, you shall come tonight to dine with me. Japp is coming, and also our friend Mr Clancy. I have some things to say that may be interesting.’

The dinner passed off pleasantly. Japp was patronizing and good humoured, Norman was interested, and little Mr Clancy was nearly as thrilled as when he had recognized the fatal thorn.

It seemed clear that Poirot was not above trying to impress the little author.

After dinner, when coffee had been drunk, Poirot cleared his throat in a slightly embarrassed manner, not free from self-importance.

‘My friends,’ he said, ‘Mr Clancy here has expressed interest in what he would call “my methods, Watson”. (C’est ça, n’est-ce pas?) I propose, if it will not bore you all’—he paused significantly, and Norman and Japp said quickly, ‘No, no,’ and ‘Most interesting’—‘to give you a little résumé of my methods in dealing with this case.’

He paused and consulted some notes. Japp whispered to Norman:

‘Fancies himself, doesn’t he? Conceit’s that little man’s middle name.’

Poirot looked at him reproachfully and said, ‘Ahem!’

Three politely interested faces were turned to him, and he began:

‘I will start at the beginning, my friends. I will go back to the air liner Prometheus on its ill-fated journey from Paris to Croydon. I am going to tell you my precise ideas and impressions at the time—passing on to how I came to confirm or modify them in the light of future events.

‘When, just before we reached Croydon, Dr Bryant was approached by the steward and went with him to examine the body, I accompanied him. I had a feeling that it might—who knows?—be something in my line. I have, perhaps, too professional a point of view where deaths are concerned. They are divided, in my mind, into two classes—deaths which are my affair and deaths which are not my affair—and though the latter class is infinitely more numerous—nevertheless whenever I come in contact with death I am like the dog who lifts his head and sniffs the scent.

‘Dr Bryant confirmed the steward’s fear that the woman was dead. As to the cause of death, naturally he could not pronounce on that without a detailed examination. It was at this point that a suggestion was made—by M. Jean Dupont—that death was due to shock following on a wasp sting. In furtherance of this hypothesis, he drew attention to a wasp that he himself had slaughtered shortly before.

‘Now that was a perfectly plausible theory—and one quite likely to be accepted. There was the mark on the dead woman’s neck—closely resembling the mark of a sting—and there was the fact that a wasp had been in the plane.

‘But at that moment I was fortunate enough to look down and espy what might at first have been taken for the body of yet another wasp. In actuality it was a native thorn with a little teased yellow and black silk on it.

‘At this point Mr Clancy came forward and made the statement that it was a thorn shot from a blowpipe after the manner of some native tribe. Later, as you all know, the blowpipe itself was discovered.

‘By the time we reached Croydon several ideas were working in my mind. Once I was definitely on the firm ground, my brain began to work once more with its normal brilliance.’

‘Go it, M. Poirot,’ said Japp with a grin. ‘Don’t have any false modesty.’

Poirot threw him a look and went on.

‘One idea presented itself very strongly to me (as it did to everyone else), and that was the audacity of a crime being committed in such a manner—and the astonishing fact that nobody noticed its being done!

‘There were two other points that interested me. One was the convenient presence of the wasp. The other was the discovery of the blowpipe. As I remarked after the inquest to my friend Japp, why on earth did the murderer not get rid of it by passing it out through the ventilating hole in the window? The thorn itself might be difficult to trace or identify, but a blowpipe which still retained a portion of its price label was a very different matter.

‘What was the solution? Obviously that the murderer wanted the blowpipe to be found.

‘But why? Only one answer seemed logical. If a poisoned dart and a blowpipe were found, it would naturally be assumed that the murder had been committed by a thorn shot from a blowpipe. Therefore in reality the murder had not been committed that way.

‘On the other hand, as medical evidence was to show, the cause of death was undoubtedly the poisoned thorn. I shut my eyes and asked myself—what is the surest and most reliable way of placing a poisoned thorn in the jugular vein? And the answer came immediately: By hand.

‘And that immediately threw light on the necessity for the finding of the blowpipe. The blowpipe inevitably conveyed the suggestion of distance. If my theory was right, the person who killed Madame Giselle was a person who went right up to her table and bent over her.

‘Was there such a person? Yes, there were two people. The two stewards. Either of them could go up to Madame Giselle, lean towards her, and nobody would notice anything unusual.

‘Was there anyone else?

‘Well, there was Mr Clancy. He was the only person in the car who had passed immediately by Madame Giselle’s seat—and I remembered that it was he who had first drawn attention to the blowpipe and thorn theory.’

Mr Clancy sprang to his feet.

‘I protest,’ he cried. ‘I protest. This is an outrage.’

‘Sit down,’ said Poirot. ‘I have not finished yet. I have to show you all the steps by which I arrived at my conclusion.

‘I had now three persons as possible suspects—Mitchell, Davis, and Mr Clancy. None of them at first sight appeared likely murderers, but there was much investigation to be done.

‘I next turned my mind to the possibilities of the wasp. It was suggestive, that wasp. To begin with, no one had noticed it until about the time coffee was served. That in itself was rather curious. I constructed a certain theory of the crime. The murderer presented to the world two separate solutions of the tragedy. On the first or simplest, Madame Giselle was stung by a wasp and had succumbed to heart failure. The success of that solution depended on whether or no the murderer was in a position to retrieve the thorn. Japp and I agreed that that could be done easily enough—so long as no suspicion of foul play had arisen. There was the particular colouring of silk which I had no doubt was deliberately substituted for the original cerise so as to simulate the appearance of a wasp.

‘Our murderer, then, approaches the victim’s table, inserts the thorn and releases the wasp! The poison is so powerful that death would occur almost immediately. If Giselle cried out—it would probably not be heard owing to the noise of the plane. If it was just noticed, well, there was the wasp buzzing about to explain the cry. The poor woman had been stung.

‘That, as I say, was plan No. 1. But supposing that, as actually happened, the poisoned thorn was discovered before the murderer could retrieve it. In that case the fat is in the fire. The theory of the natural death is impossible. Instead of getting rid of the blowpipe through the window, it is put in a place where it is bound to be discovered when the plane is searched; and at once it will be assumed that the blowpipe was the instrument of the crime. The proper atmosphere of distance will be created and when the blowpipe is traced it will focus suspicion in a definite and prearranged direction.

‘I had now my theory of the crime, and I had three suspects with a barely possible fourth—M. Jean Dupont, who had outlined the “Death by a Wasp Sting theory”, and who was sitting on the gangway so near Giselle that he might just possibly have moved from it without being noticed. On the other hand, I did not really think he would have dared to take such a risk.

‘I concentrated on the problem of the wasp. If the murderer had brought the wasp on to the plane and released it at the psychological moment—he must have had something in the nature of a small box in which to keep it.

‘Hence my interest in the contents of the passengers’ pockets and hand luggage.

‘And here I came up against a totally unexpected development. I found what I was looking for—but as it seemed to me on the wrong person. There was an empty small-sized Bryant & May’s match-box in Mr Norman Gale’s pocket. But by everybody’s evidence Mr Gale had never passed down the gangway of the car. He had only visited the toilet compartment and returned to his own seat.

‘Nevertheless, although it seems impossible, there was a method by which Mr Gale could have commited the crime—as the contents of his attaché case showed.’

‘My attaché case?’ said Norman Gale. He looked amused and puzzled. ‘Why, I don’t even remember now what was in it.’

Poirot smiled at him amiably.

‘Wait a little minute. I will come to that. I am telling you my first ideas.

‘To proceed—I had four persons who could have done the crime—from the point of view of possibility: the two stewards, Clancy and Gale.

‘I now looked at the case from the opposite angle—that of motive—if a motive were to coincide with a possibility—well, I had my murderer! But alas, I could find nothing of the kind. My friend Japp has accused me of liking to make things difficult. On the contrary, I approached this question of motive with all the simplicity in the world. To whose benefit would it be if Madame Giselle were removed? Clearly to her unknown daughter’s benefit—since that unknown daughter would inherit a fortune. There were also certain persons who were in Madame Giselle’s power, or shall we say—who might be in Giselle’s power, for aught we knew. That, then, was a task of elimination. Of the passengers in the plane I could only be certain of one who was undoubtedly mixed up with Giselle. That one was Lady Horbury.

‘In Lady Horbury’s case the motive was very clear. She had visited Giselle at her house in Paris the night before. She was desperate and she had a friend, a young actor, who might easily have impersonated the American who bought the blowpipe—and might also have bribed the clerk in Universal Airlines to ensure that Giselle travelled by the 12 o’clock service.

‘I had, as it were, a problem in two halves. I did not see how it was possible for Lady Horbury to commit the crime; and I could not see for what motive the stewards, Mr Clancy, or Mr Gale should want to commit it.

‘Always, in the back of my mind, I considered the problem of Giselle’s unknown daughter and heiress. Were any of my four suspects married—and if so, could one of the wives be this Anne Morisot? If her father was English, the girl might have been brought up in England. Mitchell’s wife I soon dismissed—she was of good old Dorset stock. Davis was courting a girl whose father and mother were alive. Mr Clancy was not married. Mr Gale was obviously head over ears in love with Miss Jane Grey.

‘I may say that I investigated the antecedents of Miss Grey very carefully, having learned from her in casual conversation that she had been brought up in an orphanage near Dublin. But I soon satisfied myself that Miss Grey was not Madame Giselle’s daughter.

‘I made out a table of results—the stewards had neither gained nor lost by Madame Giselle’s death—except that Mitchell was obviously suffering from shock. Mr Clancy was planning a book on the subject by which he hoped to make money. Mr Gale was fast losing his practice. Nothing very helpful there.

‘And yet, at that time, I was convinced that Mr Gale was the murderer—there was the empty match-box—the contents of his attaché case. Apparently he lost, not gained, by the death of Giselle. But those appearances might be false appearances.

‘I determined to cultivate his acquaintance. It is my experience that no one, in the course of conversation, can fail to give themselves away sooner or later…Everyone has an irresistible urge to talk about themselves.

‘I tried to gain Mr Gale’s confidence. I pretended to confide in him, and I even enlisted his help. I persuaded him to aid me in the fake blackmailing of Lady Horbury. And it was then that he made his first mistake.

‘I had suggested a slight disguise. He arrived to play his part with a ridiculous and impossible outfit! The whole thing was a farce. No one, I felt sure, could play a part as badly as he was proposing to play one. What then was the reason for this? Because his knowledge of his own guilt made him chary of showing himself to be a good actor. When, however, I had adjusted his ridiculous makeup, his artistic skill showed itself. He played his part perfectly and Lady Horbury did not recognize him. I was convinced then that he could have disguised himself as an American in Paris and could also have played the necessary part in the Prometheus.

‘By this time I was getting seriously worried about Mademoiselle Jane. Either she was in this business with him, or else she was entirely innocent—and in the latter case she was a victim. She might wake up one day to find herself married to a murderer.

With the object of preventing a precipitate marriage, I took Mademoiselle Jane to Paris as my secretary.

‘It was whilst we were there that the missing heiress appeared to claim her fortune. I was haunted by a resemblance that I could not place. I did place it in the end—but too late…

‘At first the discovery that she had actually been in the plane and had lied about it seemed to overthrow all my theories. Here, overwhelmingly, was the guilty person.

‘But if she were guilty she had an accomplice—the man who bought the blowpipe and bribed Jules Perrot.

‘Who was that man? Was it conceivably her husband?

‘And—then—suddenly I saw the true solution. True, that is, if one point could be verified.

‘For my solution to be correct Anne Morisot ought not to have been on the plane.

‘I rang up Lady Horbury and got my answer. The maid, Madeleine, travelled in the plane by a last-minute whim of her mistress.’

He stopped.

Mr Clancy said:

‘Ahem—but—I’m afraid I’m not quite clear.’

‘When did you stop pitching on me as the murderer?’ asked Norman.

Poirot wheeled round on him.

‘I never stopped. You are the murderer…Wait—I will tell you everything. For the last week Japp and I have been busy—It is true that you became a dentist to please your uncle—John Gale. You took his name when you came into partnership with him—but you were his sister’s son—not his brother’s. Your real name is Richards. It was as Richards that you met the girl Anne Morisot at Nice last winter, when she was there with her mistress. The story she told us was true as to the facts of her childhood, but the latter part was edited carefully by you. She did know her mother’s maiden name. Giselle was at Monte Carlo—she was pointed out and her real name was mentioned. You realized that there might be a large fortune to be got. It appealed to your gambler’s nature. It was from Anne Morisot that you learnt of Lady Horbury’s connexion with Giselle. The plan of the crime formed itself in your head. Giselle was to be murdered in such a way that suspicion would fall on Lady Horbury. Your plans matured and finally fructified. You bribed the clerk in Universal Airlines so that Giselle should travel on the same plane as Lady Horbury. Anne Morisot had told you that she herself was going to England by train—you never expected her to be on the plane—and it seriously jeopardized your plans. If it was once known that Giselle’s daughter and heiress had been on the plane suspicion would naturally have fallen upon her. Your original idea was that she should claim the inheritance with a perfect alibi, since she would have been on a train or boat at the time of the crime; and then you would have married her.

‘The girl was by this time infatuated with you. But it was money you were after—not the girl herself.

‘There was another complication to your plans. At Le Pinet you saw Mademoiselle Jane Grey and fell madly in love with her. Your passion for her drove you on to play a much more dangerous game.

‘You intended to have both the money and the girl you loved. You were committing a murder for the sake of money, and you were in no mind to relinquish the fruits of the crime. You frightened Anne Morisot by telling her that if she came forward at once to proclaim her identity she would certainly be suspected of the murder. Instead you induced her to ask for a few days’ leave, and you went together to Rotterdam, where you were married.

‘In due course you primed her how to claim the money. She was to say nothing of her employment as lady’s maid, and it was very clearly to be made plain that she and her husband had been abroad at the time of the murder.

‘Unfortunately, the date planned for Anne Morisot to go to Paris and claim her inheritance coincided with my arrival in Paris, where Miss Grey had accompanied me. That did not suit your book at all. Either Mademoiselle Jane or myself might recognize in Anne Morisot the Madeleine who had been Lady Horbury’s maid.

‘You tried to get in touch with her in time, but failed. You finally arrived in Paris yourself and found she had already gone to the lawyer. When she returned she told you of her meeting with me. Things were becoming dangerous, and you made up your mind to act quickly.

‘It had been your intention that your new-made wife should not survive her accession to wealth very long. Immediately after the marriage ceremony you had both made wills leaving all you had one to the other! A very touching business.

‘You intended, I fancy, to follow a fairly leisurely course. You would have gone to Canada—ostensibly because of the failure of your practice. There you would have resumed the name of Richards and your wife would have rejoined you. All the same I do not fancy it would have been very long before Mrs Richards regrettably died, leaving a fortune to a seemingly inconsolable widower. You would then have returned to England as Norman Gale, having had the good fortune to make a lucky speculation in Canada! But now you decided that no time must be lost.’

Poirot paused and Norman Gale threw back his head and laughed.

‘You are very clever at knowing what people intend to do! You ought to adopt Mr Clancy’s profession!’ His tone deepened to one of anger. ‘I never heard such a farrago of nonsense. What you imagined, M. Poirot, is hardly evidence!’

Poirot did not seem put out. He said:

‘Perhaps not. But, then, I have some evidence.’

‘Really?’ sneered Norman. ‘Perhaps you have evidence as to how I killed old Giselle when everyone in the aeroplane knows perfectly well I never went near her?’

‘I will tell you exactly how you committed the crime,’ said Poirot. ‘What about the contents of your dispatch-case? You were on a holiday. Why take a dentist’s linen coat? That is what I asked myself. And the answer is this—because it resembled so closely a steward’s coat…

‘That is what you did. When coffee was served and the stewards had gone to the other compartment you went to the toilet, put on your linen coat, padded your cheeks with cottonwool rolls, came out, seized a coffee spoon from the box in the pantry opposite, hurried down the gangway with the steward’s quick run, spoon in hand, to Giselle’s table. You thrust the thorn into her neck, opened the match-box and let the wasp escape, hurried back into the toilet, changed your coat and emerged leisurely to return to your table. The whole thing took only a couple of minutes.

‘Nobody notices a steward particularly. The only person who might have recognized you was Mademoiselle Jane. But you know women! As soon as a woman is left alone (particularly when she is travelling with an attractive young man) she seizes the opportunity to have a good look in her hand mirror, powder her nose and adjust her makeup.’

‘Really,’ sneered Gale. ‘A most interesting theory; but it didn’t happen. Anything else?’

‘Quite a lot,’ said Poirot. ‘As I have just said, in the course of conversation a man gives himself away…You were imprudent enough to mention that for a while you were on a farm in South Africa. What you did not say, but what I have since found out, is that it was a snake farm…’

For the first time Norman Gale showed fear. He tried to speak, but the words would not come.

Poirot continued:

‘You were there under your own name of Richards; a photograph of you transmitted by telephone has been recognized. That same photograph has been identified in Rotterdam as the man Richards who married Anne Morisot.’

Again Norman Gale tried to speak and failed. His whole personality seemed to change. The handsome, vigorous young man turned into a rat-like creature with furtive eyes looking for a way of escape and finding none…

‘It was haste ruined your plan,’ said Poirot. ‘The Superior of the Institut de Marie hurried things on by wiring to Anne Morisot. It would have looked suspicious to ignore that wire. You had impressed it upon your wife that unless she suppressed certain facts either she or you might be suspected of murder, since you had both unfortunately been in the plane when Giselle was killed. When you met her afterwards and you learnt that I had been present at the interview you hurried things on. You were afraid I might get the truth out of Anne—perhaps she herself was beginning to suspect you. You hustled her away out of the hotel and into the boat train. You administered prussic acid to her by force and you left the empty bottle in her hand.'

'A lot of damned lies…'

'Oh, no. There was a bruise on her neck.'

'Damned lies, I tell you.'

'You even left your fingerprints on the bottle.'

'You lie. I wore—'

'Ah, you wore gloves…? I think, Monsieur, that little admission cooks your gander.'

'You damned interfering little mountebank!' Livid with passion, his face unrecognizable, Gale made a spring at Poirot. Japp, however, was too quick for him. Holding him in a capable unemotional grip, Japp said:

'James Richards, alias Norman Gale, I hold a warrant for your arrest on the charge of wilful murder. I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and used in evidence.'

A terrible shudder shook the man. He seemed on the point of collapse.

A couple of plain-clothes men were waiting outside. Norman Gale was taken away.

Left alone with Poirot, little Mr Clancy drew a deep breath of ecstasy.

'M. Poirot,' he said. 'That has been absolutely the most thrilling experience of my life. You have been wonderful!'

Poirot smiled modestly.

‘No, no. Japp deserves as much credit as I do. He has done wonders in identifying Gale as Richards. The Canadian police want Richards. A girl he was mixed up with there is supposed to have committed suicide, but facts have come to light which seem to point to murder.’

‘Terrible,’ Mr Clancy chirped.

‘A killer,’ said Poirot. ‘And like many killers, attractive to women.’

Mr Clancy coughed.

‘That poor girl, Jane Grey.’

Poirot shook his head sadly.

‘Yes, as I said to her, life can be very terrible. But she has courage. She will come through.’

With an absent-minded hand he arranged a pile of picture papers that Norman Gale had disarranged in his wild spring.

Something arrested his attention—a snapshot of Venetia Kerr at a race meeting, ‘talking to Lord Horbury and a friend.’

He handed it to Mr Clancy.

‘You see that? In a year’s time there will be an announcement: “A marriage is arranged and will shortly take place between Lord Horbury and the Hon. Venetia Kerr.” And do you know who will have arranged that marriage? Hercule Poirot! There is another marriage that I have arranged, too.’

‘Lady Horbury and Mr Barraclough?’

‘Ah, no, in that matter I take no interest.’ He leaned forward. ‘No—I refer to a marriage between M. Jean Dupont and Miss Jane Grey. You will see.’

II

It was a month later that Jane came to Poirot.

‘I ought to hate you, M. Poirot.’

She looked pale and fine drawn with dark circles round her eyes.

Poirot said gently:

‘Hate me a little if you will. But I think you are one of those who would rather look truth in the face than live in a fool’s paradise; and you might not have lived in it so very long. Getting rid of women is a vice that grows.’

‘He was so terribly attractive,’ said Jane.

She added:

‘I shall never fall in love again.’

‘Naturally,’ agreed Poirot. ‘That side of life is finished for you.’

Jane nodded.

‘But what I must do is to have work—something interesting that I could lose myself in.’

Poirot tilted back his chair and looked at the ceiling.

‘I should advise you to go to Persia with the Duponts. That is interesting work, if you like.’

‘But—but—I thought that was only camouflage on your part.’

Poirot shook his head.

‘On the contrary—I have become so interested in archaeology and prehistoric pottery that I sent the cheque for the donation I had promised. I heard this morning that they were expecting you to join the expedition. Can you draw at all?’

‘Yes, I was rather good at drawing at school.’

‘Excellent. I think you will enjoy your season.’

‘Do they really want me to come?’

‘They are counting on it.’

‘It would be wonderful,’ said Jane, ‘to get right away—’

A little colour rose in her face.

‘M. Poirot—’ She looked at him suspiciously. ‘You’re not—you’re not—being kind?’

‘Kind?’ said Poirot with a lively horror at the idea. ‘I can assure you, Mademoiselle—that where money is concerned I am strictly a man of business—’

He seemed so offended that Jane quickly begged his pardon.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘that I’d better go to some museums and look at some prehistoric pottery.’

‘A very good idea.’

At the doorway Jane paused and then came back.

‘You mayn’t have been kind in that particular way, but you have been kind—to me.’

She dropped a kiss on the top of his head and went out again.

‘Ça, c’est très gentil! ’ said Hercule Poirot.

The A.B.C. Murders (1936)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Foreword

by Captain Arthur Hastings, O.B.E.

In this narrative of mine I have departed from my usual practice of relating only those incidents and scenes at which I myself was present. Certain chapters, therefore, are written in the third person.

I wish to assure my readers that I can vouch for the occurrences related in these chapters. If I have taken a certain poetic licence in describing the thoughts and feelings of various persons, it is because I believe I have set them down with a reasonable amount of accuracy. I may add that they have been “vetted” by my friend Hercule Poirot himself.

In conclusion, I will say that if I have described at too great length some of the secondary personal relationships which arose as a consequence of this strange series of crimes, it is because the human and personal elements can never be ignored. Hercule Poirot once taught me in a very dramatic manner that romance can be a by-product of crime.

As to the solving of the A.B.C. mystery, I can only say that in my opinion Poirot showed real genius in the way he tackled a problem entirely unlike any which had previously come his way.

One

THE LETTER

It was in June of 1935 that I came home from my ranch in South America for a stay of about six months. It had been a difficult time for us out there. Like everyone else, we had suffered from world depression. I had various affairs to see to in England that I felt could only be successful if a personal touch was introduced. My wife remained to manage the ranch.

I need hardly say that one of my first actions on reaching England was to look up my old friend, Hercule Poirot.

I found him installed in one of the newest type of service flats in London. I accused him (and he admitted the fact) of having chosen this particular building entirely on account of its strictly geometrical appearance and proportions.

"But yes, my friend, it is of a most pleasing symmetry, do you not find it so?"

I said that I thought there could be too much squareness and, alluding to an old joke, I asked if in this super-modern hostelry they managed to induce hens to lay square eggs.

Poirot laughed heartily.

"Ah, you remember that? Alas! no—science has not yet induced the hens to conform to modern tastes, they still lay eggs of different sizes and colours!"

I examined my old friend with an affectionate eye. He was looking wonderfully well—hardly a day older than when I had last seen him.

"You're looking in fine fettle, Poirot," I said. "You've hardly aged at all. In fact, if it were possible, I should say that you had fewer grey hairs than when I saw you last."

Poirot beamed on me.

“And why is that not possible? It is quite true.”

“Do you mean your hair is turning from grey to black instead of from black to grey?”

“Precisely.”

“But surely that’s a scientific impossibility!”

“Not at all.”

“But that’s very extraordinary. It seems against nature.”

“As usual, Hastings, you have the beautiful and unsuspicious mind. Years do not change that in you! You perceive a fact and mention the solution of it in the same breath without noticing that you are doing so!”

I stared at him, puzzled.

Without a word he walked into his bedroom and returned with a bottle in his hand which he handed to me.

I took it, for the moment uncomprehending.

It bore the words:

Revivit.—To bring back the natural tone of the hair. Revivit is not a dye. In five shades, Ash, Chestnut, Titian, Brown, Black.

“Poirot,” I cried. “You have dyed your hair!”

“Ah, the comprehension comes to you!”

“So that’s why your hair looks so much blacker than it did last time I was back.”

“Exactly.”

"Dear me," I said, recovering from the shock. "I suppose next time I come home I shall find you wearing false moustaches—or are you doing so now?"

Poirot winced. His moustaches had always been his sensitive point. He was inordinately proud of them. My words touched him on the raw.

"No, no, indeed, mon ami. That day, I pray the good God, is still far off. The false moustache! Quel horreur!"

He tugged at them vigorously to assure me of their genuine character.

"Well, they are very luxuriant still," I said.

"N'est ce pas? Never, in the whole of London, have I seen a pair of moustaches to equal mine."

A good job too, I thought privately. But I would not for the world have hurt Poirot's feelings by saying so.

Instead I asked if he still practised his profession on occasion.

"I know," I said, "that you actually retired years ago—"

"C'est vrai. To grow the vegetable marrows! And immediately a murder occurs—and I send the vegetable marrows to promenade themselves to the devil. And since then—I know very well what you will say—I am like the prima donna who makes positively the farewell performance! That farewell performance, it repeats itself an indefinite number of times!"

I laughed.

"In truth, it has been very like that. Each time I say: this is the end. But no, something else arises! And I will admit it, my friend, the retirement I care for it not at all. If the little grey cells are not exercised, they grow the rust."

"I see," I said. "You exercise them in moderation."

“Precisely. I pick and choose. For Hercule Poirot nowadays only the cream of crime.”

“Has there been much cream about?”

“Pas mal. Not long ago I had a narrow escape.”

“Of failure?”

“No, no.” Poirot looked shocked. “But I—I, Hercule Poirot, was nearly exterminated.”

I whistled.

“An enterprising murderer!”

“Not so much enterprising as careless,” said Poirot. “Precisely that—careless. But let us not talk of it. You know, Hastings, in many ways I regard you as my mascot.”

“Indeed?” I said. “In what ways?”

Poirot did not answer my question directly. He went on:

“As soon as I heard you were coming over I said to myself: something will arise. As in former days we will hunt together, we two. But if so it must be no common affair. It must be something”—he waved his hands excitedly—“something recherche”—delicate—fine…” He gave the last untranslatable word its full flavour.

“Upon my word, Poirot,” I said. “Anyone would think you were ordering a dinner at the Ritz.”

“Whereas one cannot command a crime to order? Very true.” He sighed. “But I believe in luck—in destiny, if you will. It is your destiny to stand beside me and prevent me from committing the unforgivable error.”

“What do you call the unforgivable error?”

“Overlooking the obvious.”

I turned this over in my mind without quite seeing the point.

“Well,” I said presently, smiling, “has this super crime turned up yet?”

“Pas encore. At least—that is—”

He paused. A frown of perplexity creased his forehead. His hands automatically straightened an object or two that I had inadvertently pushed awry.

“I am not sure,” he said slowly.

There was something so odd about his tone that I looked at him in surprise.

The frown still lingered.

Suddenly with a brief decisive nod of the head he crossed the room to a desk near the window. Its contents, I need hardly say, were all neatly docketed and pigeonholed so that he was able at once to lay his hand upon the paper he wanted.

He came slowly across to me, an open letter in his hand. He read it through himself, then passed it to me.

“Tell me, mon ami,” he said. “What do you make of this?”

I took it from him with some interest.

It was written on thickish white notepaper in printed characters:

Mr. Hercule Poirot,—You fancy yourself, don’t you, at solving mysteries that are too difficult for our poor thick-headed British police? Let us see, Mr. Clever Poirot, just how clever you can be. Perhaps you’ll find this nut too hard to crack. Look out for Andover, on the 21st of the month.

Yours, etc.,
A B C.

I glanced at the envelope. That also was printed.

“Postmarked WC1,” said Poirot as I turned my attention to the postmark. “Well, what is your opinion?”

I shrugged my shoulders as I handed it back to him.

“Some madman or other, I suppose.”

“That is all you have to say?”

“Well—doesn’t it sound like a madman to you?”

“Yes, my friend, it does.”

His tone was grave. I looked at him curiously.

“You take this very seriously, Poirot.”

“A madman, mon ami, is to be taken seriously. A madman is a very dangerous thing.”

“Yes, of course, that is true…I hadn’t considered that point…But what I meant was, it sounds more like a rather idiotic kind of hoax. Perhaps some convivial idiot who had had one over the eight.”

“Comment? Nine? Nine what?”

“Nothing—just an expression. I meant a fellow who was tight. No, damn it, a fellow who had had a spot too much to drink.”

“Merci, Hastings—the expression ‘tight’ I am acquainted with it. As you say, there may be nothing more to it than that….”

“But you think there is?” I asked, struck by the dissatisfaction of his tone.

Poirot shook his head doubtfully, but he did not speak.

“What have you done about it?” I inquired.

“What can one do? I showed it to Japp. He was of the same opinion as you—a stupid hoax—that was the expression he used. They get these things every day at Scotland Yard. I, too, have had my share….”

“But you take this one seriously?”

Poirot replied slowly.

“There is something about that letter, Hastings, that I do not like….”

In spite of myself, his tone impressed me.

“You think—what?”

He shook his head, and picking up the letter, put it away again in the desk.

“If you really take it seriously, can’t you do something?” I asked.

“As always, the man of action! But what is there to do? The county police have seen the letter but they, too, do not take it seriously. There are no fingerprints on it. There are no local clues as to the possible writer.”

“In fact there is only your own instinct?”

“Not instinct, Hastings. Instinct is a bad word. It is my knowledge—my experience—that tells me that something about that letter is wrong—”

He gesticulated as words failed him, then shook his head again.

“I may be making the mountain out of the anthill. In any case there is nothing to be done but wait.”

“Well, the 21st is Friday. If a whacking great robbery takes place near Andover then—”

“Ah, what a comfort that would be—!”

“A comfort?” I stared. The word seemed to be a very extraordinary one to use.

“A robbery may be a thrill but it can hardly be a comfort!” I protested.

Poirot shook his head energetically.

“You are in error, my friend. You do not understand my meaning. A robbery would be a relief since it would dispossess my mind of the fear of something else.”

“Of what?”

“Murder,” said Hercule Poirot.

Two

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust rose from his seat and peered near-sightedly round the shabby bedroom. His back was stiff from sitting in a cramped position and as he stretched himself to his full height an onlooker would have realized that he was, in reality, quite a tall man. His stoop and his near-sighted peering gave a delusive impression.

Going to a well-worn overcoat hanging on the back of the door, he took from the pocket a packet of cheap cigarettes and some matches. He lit a cigarette and then returned to the table at which he had been sitting. He picked up a railway guide and consulted it, then he returned to the consideration of a typewritten list of names. With a pen, he made a tick against one of the first names on the list.

It was Thursday, June 20th.

Three

ANDOVER

I had been impressed at the time by Poirot's forebodings about the anonymous letter he had received, but I must admit that the matter had passed from my mind when the 21st actually arrived and the first reminder of it came with a visit paid to my friend by Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. The CID inspector had been known to us for many years and he gave me a hearty welcome.

"Well, I never," he exclaimed. "If it isn't Captain Hastings back from the wilds of the what do you call it! Quite like old days seeing you here with Monsieur Poirot. You're looking well, too. Just a little bit thin on top, eh? Well, that's what we're all coming to. I'm the same."

I winced slightly. I was under the impression that owing to the careful way I brushed my hair across the top of my head the thinness referred to by Japp was quite unnoticeable. However, Japp had never been remarkable for tact where I was concerned, so I put a good face upon it and agreed that we were none of us getting any younger.

"Except Monsieur Poirot here," said Japp. "Quite a good advertisement for a hair tonic, he'd be. Face fungus sprouting finer than ever. Coming out into the limelight, too, in his old age. Mixed up in all the celebrated cases of the day. Train mysteries, air mysteries, high society deaths—oh, he's here, there and everywhere. Never been so celebrated as since he retired."

"I have already told Hastings that I am like the prima donna who makes always one more appearance," said Poirot, smiling.

"I shouldn't wonder if you ended by detecting your own death," said Japp, laughing heartily. "That's an idea, that is. Ought to be put in a book."

"It will be Hastings who will have to do that," said Poirot, twinkling at me.

"Ha ha! That would be a joke, that would," laughed Japp.

I failed to see why the idea was so extremely amusing, and in any case I thought the joke was in poor taste. Poirot, poor old chap, is getting on. Jokes about his approaching demise can hardly be agreeable to him.

Perhaps my manner showed my feelings, for Japp changed the subject.

"Have you heard about Monsieur Poirot's anonymous letter?"

"I showed it to Hastings the other day," said my friend.

"Of course," I exclaimed. "It had quite slipped my memory. Let me see, what was the date mentioned?"

"The 21st," said Japp. "That's what I dropped in about. Yesterday was the 21st and just out of curiosity I rang up Andover last night. It was a hoax all right. Nothing doing. One broken shop window—kid throwing stones—and a couple of drunk and disorderlies. So just for once our Belgian friend was barking up the wrong tree."

"I am relieved, I must confess," acknowledged Poirot.

"You'd quite got the wind up about it, hadn't you?" said Japp affectionately. "Bless you, we get dozens of letters like that coming in every day! People with nothing better to do and a bit weak in the top storey sit down and write 'em. They don't mean any harm! Just a kind of excitement."

"I have indeed been foolish to take the matter so seriously," said Poirot. "It is the nest of the horse that I put my nose into there."

"You're mixing up mares and wasps," said Japp.

"Pardon?"

"Just a couple of proverbs. Well, I must be off. Got a little business in the next street to see to—receiving stolen jewellery. I thought I'd just drop in on my way and put your mind at rest. Pity to let those grey cells function unnecessarily."

With which words and a hearty laugh, Japp departed.

“He does not change much, the good Japp, eh?” asked Poirot.

“He looks much older,” I said. “Getting as grey as a badger,” I added vindictively.

Poirot coughed and said:

“You know, Hastings, there is a little device—my hairdresser is a man of great ingenuity—one attaches it to the scalp and brushes one’s own hair over it—it is not a wig, you comprehend—but—”

“Poirot,” I roared. “Once and for all I will have nothing to do with the beastly inventions of your confounded hairdresser. What’s the matter with the top of my head?”

“Nothing—nothing at all.”

“It’s not as though I were going bald.”

“Of course not! Of course not!”

“The hot summers out there naturally cause the hair to fall out a bit. I shall take back a really good hair tonic.”

“Précisément.”

“And, anyway, what business is it of Japp’s? He always was an offensive kind of devil. And no sense of humour. The kind of man who laughs when a chair is pulled away just as a man is about to sit down.”

“A great many people would laugh at that.”

“It’s utterly senseless.”

“From the point of view of the man about to sit, certainly it is.”

"Well," I said, slightly recovering my temper. (I admit that I am touchy about the thinness of my hair.) "I'm sorry that anonymous letter business came to nothing."

"I have indeed been in the wrong over that. About that letter, there was, I thought, the odour of the fish. Instead a mere stupidity. Alas, I grow old and suspicious like the blind watchdog who growls when there is nothing there."

"If I'm going to cooperate with you, we must look about for some other 'creamy' crime," I said with a laugh.

"You remember your remark of the other day? If you could order a crime as one orders a dinner, what would you choose?"

I fell in with his humour.

"Let me see now. Let's review the menu. Robbery? Forgery? No, I think not. Rather too vegetarian. It must be murder—red-blooded murder—with trimmings, of course."

"Naturally. The hors d'oeuvres."

"Who shall the victim be—man or woman? Man, I think. Some bigwig. American millionaire. Prime Minister. Newspaper proprietor. Scene of the crime—well, what's wrong with the good old library? Nothing like it for atmosphere. As for the weapon—well, it might be a curiously twisted dagger—or some blunt instrument—a carved stone idol—"

Poirot sighed.

"Or, of course," I said, "there's poison—but that's always so technical. Or a revolver shot echoing in the night. Then there must be a beautiful girl or two—"

"With auburn hair," murmured my friend.

"Your same old joke. One of the beautiful girls, of course, must be unjustly suspected—and there's some misunderstanding between her and the young man. And then, of course, there must be some other suspects—an older woman—dark, dangerous type—and some friend or rival of the dead man's—and a quiet secretary—dark horse—and a hearty man with a bluff manner—and a couple of discharged servants or gamekeepers or somethings—and a damn fool of a detective rather like Japp—and well—that's about all."

"That is your idea of the cream, eh?"

"I gather you don't agree."

Poirot looked at me sadly.

"You have made there a very pretty résumé of nearly all the detective stories that have ever been written."

"Well," I said. "What would you order?"

Poirot closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. His voice came purringly from between his lips.

"A very simple crime. A crime with no complications. A crime of quiet domestic life…very unimpassioned—very intime."

"How can a crime be intime?"

"Supposing," murmured Poirot, "that four people sit down to play bridge and one, the odd man out, sits in a chair by the fire. At the end of the evening the man by the fire is found dead. One of the four, while he is dummy, has gone over and killed him, and intent on the play of the hand, the other three have not noticed. Ah, there would be a crime for you! Which of the four was it?"

"Well," I said. "I can't see any excitement in that!"

Poirot threw me a glance of reproof.

"No, because there are no curiously twisted daggers, no blackmail, no emerald that is the stolen eye of a god, no untraceable Eastern poisons. You have the melodramatic soul, Hastings. You would like, not one murder, but a series of murders.”

“I admit,” I said, “that a second murder in a book often cheers things up. If the murder happens in the first chapter, and you have to follow up everybody’s alibi until the last page but one—well, it does get a bit tedious.”

The telephone rang and Poirot rose to answer.

“’Allo,” he said. “’Allo. Yes, it is Hercule Poirot speaking.”

He listened for a minute or two and then I saw his face change.

His own side of the conversation was short and disjointed.

“Mais oui….”

“Yes, of course….”

“But yes, we will come….”

“Naturally….”

“It may be as you say….”

“Yes, I will bring it. A tout à l’heure then.”

He replaced the receiver and came across the room to me.

“That was Japp speaking, Hastings.”

“Yes?”

“He had just got back to the Yard. There was a message from Andover….”

“Andover?” I cried excitedly.

Poirot said slowly:

"An old woman of the name of Ascher who keeps a little tobacco and newspaper shop has been found murdered."

I think I felt ever so slightly damped. My interest, quickened by the sound of Andover, suffered a faint check. I had expected something fantastic—out of the way! The murder of an old woman who kept a little tobacco shop seemed, somehow, sordid and uninteresting.

Poirot continued in the same slow, grave voice:

"The Andover police believe they can put their hand on the man who did it —"

I felt a second throb of disappointment.

"It seems the woman was on bad terms with her husband. He drinks and is by way of being rather a nasty customer. He's threatened to take her life more than once.

"Nevertheless," continued Poirot, "in view of what has happened, the police there would like to have another look at the anonymous letter I received. I have said that you and I will go down to Andover at once."

My spirits revived a little. After all, sordid as this crime seemed to be, it was a crime, and it was a long time since I had had any association with crime and criminals.

I hardly listened to the next words Poirot said. But they were to come back to me with significance later.

"This is the beginning," said Hercule Poirot.

Four

MRS. ASCHER

We were received at Andover by Inspector Glen, a tall fair-haired man with a pleasant smile.

For the sake of conciseness I think I had better give a brief résumé of the bare facts of the case.

The crime was discovered by Police Constable Dover at 1 am on the morning of the 22nd. When on his round he tried the door of the shop and found it unfastened, he entered and at first thought the place was empty. Directing his torch over the counter, however, he caught sight of the huddled-up body of the old woman. When the police surgeon arrived on the spot it was elicited that the woman had been struck down by a heavy blow on the back of the head, probably while she was reaching down a packet of cigarettes from the shelf behind the counter. Death must have occurred about nine to seven hours previously.

“But we’ve been able to get it down a bit nearer than that,” explained the inspector. “We’ve found a man who went in and bought some tobacco at 5:30. And a second man went in and found the shop empty, as he thought, at five minutes past six. That puts the time at between 5:30 and 6:5. So far I haven’t been able to find anyone who saw this man Ascher in the neighbourhood, but, of course, it’s early as yet. He was in the Three Crowns at nine o’clock pretty far gone in drink. When we get hold of him he’ll be detained on suspicion.”

“Not a very desirable character, inspector?” asked Poirot.

“Unpleasant bit of goods.”

“He didn’t live with his wife?”

“No, they separated some years ago. Ascher’s a German. He was a waiter at one time, but he took to drink and gradually became unemployable. His wife went into service for a bit. Her last place was as cook-housekeeper to an old lady, Miss Rose. She allowed her husband so much out of her wages to keep himself, but he was always getting drunk and coming round and making scenes at the places where she was employed. That’s why she took the post with Miss Rose at The Grange. It’s three miles out of Andover, dead in the country. He couldn’t get at her there so well. When Miss Rose died, she left Mrs. Ascher a small legacy, and the woman started this tobacco and newsagent business—quite a tiny place—just cheap cigarettes and a few newspapers—that sort of thing. She just about managed to keep going. Ascher used to come round and abuse her now and again and she used to give him a bit to get rid of him. She allowed him fifteen shillings a week regular.”

“Had they any children?” asked Poirot.

“No. There’s a niece. She’s in service near Overton. Very superior, steady young woman.”

“And you say this man Ascher used to threaten his wife?”

“That’s right. He was a terror when he was in drink—cursing and swearing that he’d bash her head in. She had a hard time, did Mrs. Ascher.”

“What age of woman was she?”

“Close on sixty—respectable and hard-working.”

Poirot said gravely:

“It is your opinion, inspector, that this man Ascher committed the crime?”

The inspector coughed cautiously.

“It’s a bit early to say that, Mr. Poirot, but I’d like to hear Franz Ascher’s own account of how he spent yesterday evening. If he can give a satisfactory account of himself, well and good—if not—”

His pause was a pregnant one.

“Nothing was missing from the shop?”

“Nothing. Money in the till quite undisturbed. No signs of robbery.”

“You think that this man Ascher came into the shop drunk, started abusing his wife and finally struck her down?”

“It seems the most likely solution. But I must confess, sir, I’d like to have another look at that very odd letter you received. I was wondering if it was just possible that it came from this man Ascher.”

Poirot handed over the letter and the inspector read it with a frown.

“It doesn’t read like Ascher,” he said at last. “I doubt if Ascher would use the term ‘our’ British police—not unless he was trying to be extra cunning—and I doubt if he’s got the wits for that. Then the man’s a wreck—all to pieces. His hand’s too shaky to print letters clearly like this. It’s good quality notepaper and ink, too. It’s odd that the letter should mention the 21st of the month. Of course it might be coincidence.”

“That is possible—yes.”

“But I don’t like this kind of coincidence, Mr. Poirot. It’s a bit too pat.”

He was silent for a minute or two—a frown creasing his forehead.

“A B C. Who the devil could A B C be? We’ll see if Mary Drower (that’s the niece) can give us any help. It’s an odd business. But for this letter I’d have put my money on Franz Ascher for a certainty.”

“Do you know anything of Mrs. Ascher’s past?”

“She’s a Hampshire woman. Went into service as a girl up in London—that’s where she met Ascher and married him. Things must have been difficult for them during the war. She actually left him for good in 1922. They were in London then. She came back here to get away from him, but he got wind of where she was and followed her down here, pestering her for money—" A constable came in. "Yes, Briggs, what is it?"

"It's the man Ascher, sir. We've brought him in."

"Right. Bring him in here. Where was he?"

"Hiding in a truck on the railway siding."

"He was, was he? Bring him along."

Franz Ascher was indeed a miserable and unprepossessing specimen. He was blubbering and cringing and blustering alternately. His bleary eyes moved shiftily from one face to another.

"What do you want with me? I have not done nothing. It is a shame and a scandal to bring me here! You are swine, how dare you?" His manner changed suddenly. "No, no, I do not mean that—you would not hurt a poor old man—not be hard on him. Everyone is hard on poor old Franz. Poor old Franz."

Mr. Ascher started to weep.

"That'll do, Ascher," said the inspector. "Pull yourself together. I'm not charging you with anything—yet. And you're not bound to make a statement unless you like. On the other hand, if you're not concerned in the murder of your wife—"

Ascher interrupted him—his voice rising to a scream.

"I did not kill her! I did not kill her! It is all lies! You are god-damned English pigs—all against me. I never kill her—never."

"You threatened to often enough, Ascher."

"No, no. You do not understand. That was just a joke—a good joke between me and Alice. She understood."

"Funny kind of joke! Do you care to say where you were yesterday evening, Ascher?"

"Yes, yes—I tell you everything. I did not go near Alice. I am with friends—good friends. We are at the Seven Stars—and then we are at the Red Dog—"

He hurried on, his words stumbling over each other.

"Dick Willows—he was with me—and old Curdie—and George—and Platt and lots of the boys. I tell you I do not never go near Alice. Ach Gott, it is the truth I am telling you."

His voice rose to a scream. The inspector nodded to his underling.

"Take him away. Detained on suspicion."

"I don't know what to think," he said as the unpleasant, shaking old man with the malevolent, mouthing jaw was removed. "If it wasn't for the letter, I'd say he did it."

"What about the men he mentions?"

"A bad crowd—not one of them would stick at perjury. I've no doubt he was with them the greater part of the evening. A lot depends on whether any one saw him near the shop between half past five and six."

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

"You are sure nothing was taken from the shop?"

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"That depends. A packet or two of cigarettes might have been taken—but you'd hardly commit murder for that."

"And there was nothing—how shall I put it—introduced into the shop? Nothing that was odd there—incongruous?"

“There was a railway guide,” said the inspector.

“A railway guide?”

“Yes. It was open and turned face downward on the counter. Looked as though someone had been looking up the trains from Andover. Either the old woman or a customer.”

“Did she sell that type of thing?”

The inspector shook his head.

“She sold penny timetables. This was a big one—kind of thing only Smith’s or a big stationer would keep.”

A light came into Poirot’s eyes. He leant forward.

A light came into the inspector’s eye also.

“A railway guide, you say. A Bradshaw—or an A B C?”

“By the lord,” he said. “It was an A B C.”

Five

MARY DROWER

I think that I can date my interest in the case from that first mention of the A B C railway guide. Up till then I had not been able to raise much enthusiasm. This sordid murder of an old woman in a back-street shop was so like the usual type of crime reported in the newspapers that it failed to strike a significant note. In my own mind I had put down the anonymous letter with its mention of the 21st as a mere coincidence. Mrs. Ascher, I felt reasonably sure, had been the victim of her drunken brute of a husband. But now the mention of the railway guide (so familiarly known by its abbreviation of A B C, listing as it did all railway stations in their alphabetical order) sent a quiver of excitement through me. Surely—surely this could not be a second coincidence?

The sordid crime took on a new aspect.

Who was the mysterious individual who had killed Mrs. Ascher and left an A B C railway guide behind him?

When we left the police station our first visit was to the mortuary to see the body of the dead woman. A strange feeling came over me as I gazed down on that wrinkled old face with the scanty grey hair drawn back tightly from the temples. It looked so peaceful, so incredibly remote from violence.

“Never knew who or what struck her,” observed the sergeant. “That’s what Dr. Kerr says. I’m glad it was that way, poor old soul. A decent woman she was.”

“She must have been beautiful once,” said Poirot.

“Really?” I murmured incredulously.

“But yes, look at the line of the jaw, the bones, the moulding of the head.”

He sighed as he replaced the sheet and we left the mortuary.

Our next move was a brief interview with the police surgeon.

Dr. Kerr was a competent-looking middle-aged man. He spoke briskly and with decision.

“The weapon wasn’t found,” he said. “Impossible to say what it may have been. A weighted stick, a club, a form of sandbag—any of those would fit the case.”

“Would much force be needed to strike such a blow?”

The doctor shot a keen glance at Poirot.

“Meaning, I suppose, could a shaky old man of seventy do it? Oh, yes, it’s perfectly possible—given sufficient weight in the head of the weapon, quite a feeble person could achieve the desired result.”

“Then the murderer could just as well be a woman as a man?”

The suggestion took the doctor somewhat aback.

“A woman, eh? Well, I confess it never occurred to me to connect a woman with this type of crime. But of course it’s possible—perfectly possible. Only, psychologically speaking, I shouldn’t say this was a woman’s crime.”

Poirot nodded his head in eager agreement.

“Perfectly, perfectly. On the face of it, highly improbable. But one must take all possibilities into account. The body was lying—how?”

The doctor gave us a careful description of the position of the victim. It was his opinion that she had been standing with her back to the counter (and therefore to her assailant) when the blow had been struck. She had slipped down in a heap behind the counter quite out of sight of anyone entering the shop casually.

When we had thanked Dr. Kerr and taken our leave, Poirot said:

“You perceive, Hastings, that we have already one further point in favour of Ascher’s innocence. If he had been abusing his wife and threatening her, she would have been facing him over the counter. Instead she had her back to her assailant—obviously she is reaching down tobacco or cigarettes for a customer.”

I gave a little shiver.

“Pretty gruesome.”

Poirot shook his head gravely.

“Pauvre femme,” he murmured.

Then he glanced at his watch.

“Overton is not, I think, many miles from here. Shall we run over there and have an interview with the niece of the dead woman?”

“Surely you will go first to the shop where the crime took place?”

“I prefer to do that later. I have a reason.”

He did not explain further, and a few minutes later we were driving on the London road in the direction of Overton.

The address which the inspector had given us was that of a good-sized house about a mile on the London side of the village.

Our ring at the bell was answered by a pretty dark-haired girl whose eyes were red with recent weeping.

Poirot said gently:

“Ah! I think it is you who are Miss Mary Drower, the parlour-maid here?”

“Yes, sir, that’s right. I’m Mary, sir.”

“Then perhaps I can talk to you for a few minutes if your mistress will not object. It is about your aunt, Mrs. Ascher.”

“The mistress is out, sir. She wouldn’t mind, I’m sure, if you came in here.”

She opened the door of a small morning room. We entered and Poirot, seating himself on a chair by the window, looked up keenly into the girl’s face.

“You have heard of your aunt’s death, of course?”

The girl nodded, tears coming once more into her eyes.

“This morning, sir. The police came over. Oh! it’s terrible! Poor auntie! Such a hard life as she’d had, too. And now this—it’s too awful.”

“The police did not suggest your returning to Andover?”

“They said I must come to the inquest—that’s on Monday, sir. But I’ve nowhere to go there—I couldn’t fancy being over the shop—now—and what with the housemaid being away, I didn’t want to put the mistress out more than may be.”

“You were fond of your aunt, Mary?” said Poirot gently.

“Indeed I was, sir. Very good she’s been to me always, auntie has. I went to her in London when I was eleven years old, after mother died. I started in service when I was sixteen, but I usually went along to auntie’s on my day out. A lot of trouble she went through with that German fellow. ‘My old devil,’ she used to call him. He’d never let her be in peace anywhere. Sponging, cadging old beast.”

The girl spoke with vehemence.

“Your aunt never thought of freeing herself by legal means from this persecution?”

“Well, you see, he was her husband, sir, you couldn’t get away from that.”

The girl spoke simply but with finality.

"Tell me, Mary, he threatened her, did he not?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it was awful the things he used to say. That he'd cut her throat, and such like. Cursing and swearing too—both in German and in English. And yet auntie says he was a fine handsome figure of a man when she married him. It's dreadful to think, sir, what people come to."

"Yes, indeed. And so, I suppose, Mary, having actually heard these threats, you were not so very surprised when you learnt what had happened?"

"Oh, but I was, sir. You see, sir, I never thought for one moment that he meant it. I thought it was just nasty talk and nothing more to it. And it isn't as though auntie was afraid of him. Why, I've seen him slink away like a dog with its tail between its legs when she turned on him. He was afraid of her if you like."

"And yet she gave him money?"

"Well, he was her husband, you see, sir."

"Yes, so you said before." He paused for a minute or two. Then he said: "Suppose that, after all, he did not kill her."

"Didn't kill her?"

She stared.

"That is what I said. Supposing someone else killed her…Have you any idea who that someone else could be?"

She stared at him with even more amazement.

"I've no idea, sir. It doesn't seem likely, though, does it?"

"There was no one your aunt was afraid of?"

Mary shook her head.

"Auntie wasn't afraid of people. She'd a sharp tongue and she'd stand up to anybody."

"You never heard her mention anyone who had a grudge against her?"

"No, indeed, sir."

"Did she ever get anonymous letters?"

"What kind of letters did you say, sir?"

"Letters that weren't signed—or only signed by something like A B C." He watched her narrowly, but plainly she was at a loss. She shook her head wonderingly.

"Has your aunt any relations except you?"

"Not now, sir. One of ten she was, but only three lived to grow up. My Uncle Tom was killed in the war, and my Uncle Harry went to South America and no one's heard of him since, and mother's dead, of course, so there's only me."

"Had your aunt any savings? Any money put by?"

"She'd a little in the Savings Bank, sir—enough to bury her proper, that's what she always said. Otherwise she didn't more than just make ends meet—what with her old devil and all."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He said—perhaps more to himself than to her:

"At present one is in the dark—there is no direction—if things get clearer—" He got up. "If I want you at any time, Mary, I will write to you here."

"As a matter of fact, sir, I'm giving in my notice. I don't like the country. I stayed here because I fancied it was a comfort to auntie to have me near by. But now"—again the tears rose in her eyes—"there's no reason I should stay, and so I'll go back to London. It's gayer for a girl there."

“I wish that, when you do go, you would give me your address. Here is my card.”

He handed it to her. She looked at it with a puzzled frown.

“Then you’re not—anything to do with the police, sir?”

“I am a private detective.”

She stood there looking at him for some moments in silence.

She said at last:

“Is there anything—queer going on, sir?”

“Yes, my child. There is—something queer going on. Later you may be able to help me.”

“I—I’ll do anything, sir. It—it wasn’t right, sir, auntie being killed.”

A strange way of putting it—but deeply moving.

A few seconds later we were driving back to Andover.

Six

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

The street in which the tragedy had occurred was a turning off the main street. Mrs. Ascher’s shop was situated about halfway down it on the right-hand side.

As we turned into the street Poirot glanced at his watch and I realized why he had delayed his visit to the scene of the crime until now. It was just on half past five. He had wished to reproduce yesterday’s atmosphere as closely as possible.

But if that had been his purpose it was defeated. Certainly at this moment the road bore very little likeness to its appearance on the previous evening. There were a certain number of small shops interspersed between private houses of the poorer class. I judged that ordinarily there would be a fair number of people passing up and down—mostly people of the poorer classes, with a good sprinkling of children playing on the pavements and in the road.

At this moment there was a solid mass of people standing staring at one particular house or shop and it took little perspicuity to guess which that was. What we saw was a mass of average human beings looking with intense interest at the spot where another human being had been done to death.

As we drew nearer this proved to be indeed the case. In front of a small dingy-looking shop with its shutters now closed stood a harassed-looking young policeman who was stolidly adjuring the crowd to “pass along there.” By the help of a colleague, displacements took place—a certain number of people grudgingly sighed and betook themselves to their ordinary vocations, and almost immediately other persons came along and took up their stand to gaze their fill on the spot where murder had been committed.

Poirot stopped a little distance from the main body of the crowd. From where we stood the legend painted over the door could be read plainly enough. Poirot repeated it under his breath.

“A. Ascher. Oui, c’est peut-être là—”

He broke off.

“Come, let us go inside, Hastings.”

I was only too ready.

We made our way through the crowd and accosted the young policeman. Poirot produced the credentials which the inspector had given him. The constable nodded, and unlocked the door to let us pass within. We did so and entered to the intense interest of the lookers-on.

Inside it was very dark owing to the shutters being closed. The constable found and switched on the electric light. The bulb was a low-powered one so that the interior was still dimly lit.

I looked about me.

A dingy little place. A few cheap magazines strewn about, and yesterday’s newspapers—all with a day’s dust on them. Behind the counter a row of shelves reaching to the ceiling and packed with tobacco and packets of cigarettes. There were also a couple of jars of peppermint humbugs and barley sugar. A commonplace little shop, one of many thousand such others.

The constable in his slow Hampshire voice was explaining the mise en scène.

“Down in a heap behind the counter, that’s where she was. Doctor says as how she never knew what hit her. Must have been reaching up to one of the shelves.”

“There was nothing in her hand?”

“No, sir, but there was a packet of Player’s down beside her.”

Poirot nodded. His eyes swept round the small space observing—noting.

“And the railway guide was—where?”

“Here, sir.” The constable pointed out the spot on the counter. “It was open at the right page for Andover and lying face down. Seems as though he must have been looking up the trains to London. If so, it mightn’t have been an Andover man at all. But then, of course, the railway guide might have belonged to someone else what had nothing to do with the murder at all, but just forgot it here.”

“Fingerprints?” I suggested.

The man shook his head.

“The whole place was examined straight away, sir. There weren’t none.”

“Not on the counter itself?” asked Poirot.

“A long sight too many, sir! All confused and jumbled up.”

“Any of Ascher’s among them?”

“Too soon to say, sir.”

Poirot nodded, then asked if the dead woman lived over the shop.

“Yes, sir, you go through that door at the back, sir. You’ll excuse me not coming with you, but I’ve got to stay—”

Poirot passed through the door in question and I followed him. Behind the shop was a microscopic sort of parlour and kitchen combined—it was neat and clean but very dreary looking and scantily furnished. On the mantelpiece were a few photographs. I went up and looked at them and Poirot joined me.

The photographs were three in all. One was a cheap portrait of the girl we had been with that afternoon, Mary Drower. She was obviously wearing her best clothes and had the self-conscious, wooden smile on her face that so often disfigures the expression in posed photography, and makes a snapshot preferable.

The second was a more expensive type of picture—an artistically blurred reproduction of an elderly woman with white hair. A high fur collar stood up round the neck.

I guessed that this was probably the Miss Rose who had left Mrs. Ascher the small legacy which had enabled her to start in business.

The third photograph was a very old one, now faded and yellow. It represented a young man and woman in somewhat old-fashioned clothes standing arm in arm. The man had a buttonhole and there was an air of bygone festivity about the whole pose.

“Probably a wedding picture,” said Poirot. “Regard, Hastings, did I not tell you that she had been a beautiful woman?”

He was right. Disfigured by old-fashioned hairdressing and weird clothes, there was no disguising the handsomeness of the girl in the picture with her clear-cut features and spirited bearing. I looked closely at the second figure. It was almost impossible to recognise the seedy Ascher in this smart young man with the military bearing.

I recalled the leering drunken old man, and the toil-worn face of the dead woman—and I shivered a little at the remorselessness of time….

From the parlour a stair led to two upstairs rooms. One was empty and unfurnished, the other had evidently been the dead woman’s bedroom. After being searched by the police it had been left as it was. A couple of old worn blankets on the bed—a little stock of well-darned underwear in a drawer—cookery recipes in another—a paper-backed novel entitled The Green Oasis—a pair of new stockings—pathetic in their cheap shininess—a couple of china ornaments—a Dresden shepherd much broken, and a blue and yellow spotted dog—a black raincoat and a woolly jumper hanging on pegs—such were the worldly possessions of the late Alice Ascher.

If there had been any personal papers, the police had taken them.

“Pauvre femme,” murmured Poirot. “Come, Hastings, there is nothing for us here.”

When we were once more in the street, he hesitated for a minute or two, then crossed the road. Almost exactly opposite Mrs. Ascher’s was a greengrocer’s shop—of the type that has most of its stock outside rather than inside.

In a low voice Poirot gave me certain instructions. Then he himself entered the shop. After waiting a minute or two I followed him in. He was at the moment negotiating for a lettuce. I myself bought a pound of strawberries.

Poirot was talking animatedly to the stout lady who was serving him.

“It was just opposite you, was it not, that this murder occurred? What an affair! What a sensation it must have caused you!”

The stout lady was obviously tired of talking about the murder. She must have had a long day of it. She observed:

“It would be as well if some of that gaping crowd cleared off. What is there to look at, I’d like to know?”

“It must have been very different last night,” said Poirot. “Possibly you even observed the murderer enter the shop—a tall, fair man with a beard, was he not? A Russian, so I have heard.”

“What’s that?” The woman looked up sharply. “A Russian did it, you say?”

“I understand that the police have arrested him.”

“Did you ever know?” The woman was excited, voluble. “A foreigner.”

“Mais oui. I thought perhaps you might have noticed him last night?”

“Well, I don’t get much chance of noticing, and that’s a fact. The evening’s our busy time and there’s always a fair few passing along and getting home after their work. A tall, fair man with a beard—no, I can’t say I saw anyone of that description anywhere about.”

I broke in on my cue.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said to Poirot. “I think you have been misinformed. A short dark man I was told.”

An interested discussion intervened in which the stout lady, her lank husband and a hoarse-voiced shop-boy all participated. No less than four short dark men had been observed, and the hoarse boy had seen a tall fair one, “but he hadn’t got no beard,” he added regretfully.

Finally, our purchases made, we left the establishment, leaving our falsehoods uncorrected.

“And what was the point of all that, Poirot?” I demanded somewhat reproachfully.

“Parbleu, I wanted to estimate the chances of a stranger being noticed entering the shop opposite.”

“Couldn’t you simply have asked—without all that tissue of lies?”

“No, mon ami. If I had ‘simply asked,’ as you put it, I should have got no answer at all to my questions. You yourself are English and yet you do not seem to appreciate the quality of the English reaction to a direct question. It is invariably one of suspicion and the natural result is reticence. If I had asked those people for information they would have shut up like oysters. But by making a statement (and a somewhat out of the way and preposterous one) and by your contradiction of it, tongues are immediately loosened. We know also that that particular time was a ‘busy time’—that is, that everyone would be intent on their own concerns and that there would be a fair number of people passing along the pavements. Our murderer chose his time well, Hastings.”

He paused and then added on a deep note of reproach:

“Is it that you have not in any degree the common sense, Hastings? I say to you: ‘Make a purchase quelconque’—and you deliberately choose the strawberries! Already they commence to creep through their bag and endanger your good suit.”

With some dismay, I perceived that this was indeed the case.

I hastily presented the strawberries to a small boy who seemed highly astonished and faintly suspicious.

Poirot added the lettuce, thus setting the seal on the child’s bewilderment.

He continued to drive the moral home.

“At a cheap greengrocer’s—not strawberries. A strawberry, unless fresh picked, is bound to exude juice. A banana—some apples—even a cabbage—but strawberries—”

“It was the first thing I thought of,” I explained by way of excuse.

“That is unworthy of your imagination,” returned Poirot sternly.

He paused on the sidewalk.

The house and shop on the right of Mrs. Ascher’s was empty. A “To Let’ sign appeared in the windows. On the other side was a house with somewhat grimy muslin curtains.

To this house Poirot betook himself and, there being no bell, executed a series of sharp flourishes with the knocker.

The door was opened after some delay by a very dirty child with a nose that needed attention.

“Good evening,” said Poirot. “Is your mother within?”

“Ay?” said the child.

It stared at us with disfavour and deep suspicion.

“Your mother,” said Poirot.

This took some twelve seconds to sink in, then the child turned and, bawling up the stairs “Mum, you’re wanted,” retreated to some fastness in the dim interior.

A sharp-faced woman looked over the balusters and began to descend.

“No good you wasting your time—” she began, but Poirot interrupted her.

He took off his hat and bowed magnificently.

“Good evening, madame. I am on the staff of the Evening Flicker. I want to persuade you to accept a fee of five pounds and let us have an article on your late neighbour, Mrs. Ascher.”

The irate words arrested on her lips, the woman came down the stairs smoothing her hair and hitching at her skirt.

“Come inside, please—on the left there. Won’t you sit down, sir.”

The tiny room was heavily over-crowded with a massive pseudo-Jacobean suite, but we managed to squeeze ourselves in and on to a hard-seated sofa.

“You must excuse me,” the woman was saying. “I am sure I’m sorry I spoke so sharp just now, but you’d hardly believe the worry one has to put up with—fellows coming along selling this, that and the other—vacuum cleaners, stockings, lavender bags and such-like foolery—and all so plausible and civil spoken. Got your name, too, pat they have. It’s Mrs. Fowler this, that and the other.”

Seizing adroitly on the name, Poirot said:

“Well, Mrs. Fowler, I hope you’re going to do what I ask.”

“I don’t know, I’m sure.” The five pounds hung alluringly before Mrs. Fowler’s eyes. “I knew Mrs. Ascher, of course, but as to writing anything.”

Hastily Poirot reassured her. No labour on her part was required. He would elicit the facts from her and the interview would be written up.

Thus encouraged, Mrs. Fowler plunged willingly into reminiscence, conjecture and hearsay.

Kept herself to herself, Mrs. Ascher had. Not what you'd call really friendly, but there, she'd had a lot of trouble, poor soul, everyone knew that. And by rights Franz Ascher ought to have been locked up years ago. Not that Mrs. Ascher had been afraid of him—real tartar she could be when roused! Give as good as she got any day. But there it was—the pitcher could go to the well once too often. Again and again, she, Mrs. Fowler, had said to her: "One of these days that man will do for you. Mark my words." And he had done, hadn't he? And there had she, Mrs. Fowler, been right next door and never heard a sound.

In a pause Poirot managed to insert a question.

Had Mrs. Ascher ever received any peculiar letters—letters without a proper signature—just something like A B C?

Regretfully, Mrs. Fowler returned a negative answer.

"I know the kind of thing you mean—anonymous letters they call them—mostly full of words you'd blush to say out loud. Well, I don't know, I'm sure, if Franz Ascher ever took to writing those. Mrs. Ascher never let on to me if he did. What's that? A railway guide, an A B C? No, I never saw such a thing about—and I'm sure if Mrs. Ascher had been sent one I'd have heard about it. I declare you could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard about this whole business. It was my girl Edie what came to me. 'Mum,' she says, 'there's ever so many policemen next door.' Gave me quite a turn, it did. 'Well,' I said, when I heard about it, 'it does show that she ought never to have been alone in the house—that niece of hers ought to have been with her. A man in drink can be like a ravening wolf,' I said, 'and in my opinion a wild beast is neither more nor less than what that old devil of a husband of hers is. I've warned her,' I said, 'many times and now my words have come true. He'll do for you,' I said. And he has done for her! You can’t rightly estimate what a man will do when he’s in drink and this murder’s a proof of it.”

She wound up with a deep gasp.

“Nobody saw this man Ascher go into the shop, I believe?” said Poirot.

Mrs. Fowler sniffed scornfully.

“Naturally he wasn’t going to show himself,” she said.

How Mr. Ascher had got there without showing himself she did not deign to explain.

She agreed that there was no back way into the house and that Ascher was quite well known by sight in the district.

“But he didn’t want to swing for it and he kept himself well hid.”

Poirot kept the conversational ball rolling some little time longer, but when it seemed certain that Mrs. Fowler had told all that she knew not once but many times over, he terminated the interview, first paying out the promised sum.

“Rather a dear five pounds’ worth, Poirot,” I ventured to remark when we were once more in the street.

“So far, yes.”

“You think she knows more than she has told?”

“My friend, we are in the peculiar position of not knowing what questions to ask. We are like little children playing cache-cache in the dark. We stretch out our hands and grope about. Mrs. Fowler has told us all that she thinks she knows—and has thrown in several conjectures for good measure! In the future, however, her evidence may be useful. It is for the future that I have invested that sum of five pounds.”

I did not quite understand the point, but at this moment we ran into Inspector Glen.

Seven

MR. PARTRIDGE AND MR. RIDDELL

Inspector Glen was looking rather gloomy. He had, I gathered, spent the afternoon trying to get a complete list of persons who had been noticed entering the tobacco shop.

“And nobody has seen anyone?” Poirot inquired.

“Oh, yes, they have. Three tall men with furtive expressions—four short men with black moustaches—two beards—three fat men—all strangers—and all, if I’m to believe witnesses, with sinister expressions! I wonder somebody didn’t see a gang of masked men with revolvers while they were about it!”

Poirot smiled sympathetically.

“Does anybody claim to have seen the man Ascher?”

“No, they don’t. And that’s another point in his favour. I’ve just told the Chief Constable that I think this is a job for Scotland Yard. I don’t believe it’s a local crime.”

Poirot said gravely:

“I agree with you.”

The inspector said:

“You know, Monsieur Poirot, it’s a nasty business—a nasty business…I don’t like it….”

We had two more interviews before returning to London.

The first was with Mr. James Partridge. Mr. Partridge was the last person known to have seen Mrs. Ascher alive. He had made a purchase from her at

5:30.

Mr. Partridge was a small man, a bank clerk by profession. He wore pince-nez, was very dry and spare-looking and extremely precise in all his utterances. He lived in a small house as neat and trim as himself.

“Mr—er—Poirot,” he said, glancing at the card my friend had handed to him. “From Inspector Glen? What can I do for you, Mr. Poirot?”

“I understand, Mr. Partridge, that you were the last person to see Mrs. Ascher alive.”

Mr. Partridge placed his fingertips together and looked at Poirot as though he were a doubtful cheque.

“That is a very debatable point, Mr. Poirot,” he said. “Many people may have made purchases from Mrs. Ascher after I did so.”

“If so, they have not come forward to say so.”

Mr. Partridge coughed.

“Some people, Mr. Poirot, have no sense of public duty.”

He looked at us owlishly through his spectacles.

“Exceedingly true,” murmured Poirot. “You, I understand, went to the police of your own accord?”

“Certainly I did. As soon as I heard of the shocking occurrence I perceived that my statement might be helpful and came forward accordingly.”

“A very proper spirit,” said Poirot solemnly. “Perhaps you will be so kind as to repeat your story to me.”

“By all means. I was returning to this house and at 5:30 precisely—”

“Pardon, how was it that you knew the time so accurately?”

Mr. Partridge looked a little annoyed at being interrupted.

“The church clock chimed. I looked at my watch and found I was a minute slow. That was just before I entered Mrs. Ascher’s shop.”

“Were you in the habit of making purchases there?”

“Fairly frequently. It was on my way home. About once or twice a week I was in the habit of purchasing two ounces of John Cotton mild.”

“Did you know Mrs. Ascher at all? Anything of her circumstances or her history?”

“Nothing whatever. Beyond my purchase and an occasional remark as to the state of the weather, I had never spoken to her.”

“Did you know she had a drunken husband who was in the habit of threatening her life?”

“No, I knew nothing whatever about her.”

“You knew her by sight, however. Did anything about her appearance strike you as unusual yesterday evening? Did she appear flurried or put out in any way?”

Mr. Partridge considered.

“As far as I noticed, she seemed exactly as usual,” he said.

Poirot rose.

“Thank you, Mr. Partridge, for answering these questions. Have you, by any chance, an A B C in the house? I want to look up my return train to London.”

“On the shelf just behind you,” said Mr. Partridge.

On the shelf in question were an A B C, a Bradshaw, the Stock Exchange Year Book, Kelly’s Directory, a Who’s Who and a local directory.

Poirot took down the A B C, pretended to look up a train, then thanked Mr. Partridge and took his leave.

Our next interview was with Mr. Albert Riddell and was of a highly different character. Mr. Albert Riddell was a platelayer and our conversation took place to the accompaniment of the clattering of plates and dishes by Mr. Riddell's obviously nervous wife, the growling of Mr. Riddell's dog and the undisguised hostility of Mr. Riddell himself.

He was a big clumsy giant of a man with a broad face and small suspicious eyes. He was in the act of eating meat pie, washed down by exceedingly black tea. He peered at us angrily over the rim of his cup.

"Told all I've got to tell once, haven't I?" he growled. "What's it to do with me, anyway? Told it to the blarsted police, I 'ave, and now I've got to spit it all out again to a couple of blarsted foreigners."

Poirot gave a quick, amused glance in my direction and then said:

"In truth I sympathize with you, but what will you? It is a question of murder, is it not? One has to be very, very careful."

"Best tell the gentleman what he wants, Bert," said the woman nervously.

"You shut your blarsted mouth," roared the giant.

"You did not, I think, go to the police of your own accord." Poirot slipped the remark in neatly.

"Why the hell should I? It were no business of mine."

"A matter of opinion," said Poirot indifferently. "There has been a murder—the police want to know who has been in the shop—I myself think it would have—what shall I say?—looked more natural if you had come forward."

"I've got my work to do. Don't say I shouldn't have come forward in my own time—"

“But as it was, the police were given your name as that of a person seen to go into Mrs. Ascher’s and they had to come to you. Were they satisfied with your account?”

“Why shouldn’t they be?” demanded Bert truculently.

Poirot merely shrugged his shoulders.

“What are you getting at, mister? Nobody’s got anything against me? Everyone knows who did the old girl in, that b—of a husband of hers.”

“But he was not in the street that evening and you were.”

“Trying to fasten it on me, are you? Well, you won’t succeed. What reason had I got to do a thing like that? Think I wanted to pinch a tin of her bloody tobacco? Think I’m a bloody homicidal maniac as they call it? Think I—?”

He rose threateningly from his seat. His wife bleated out:

“Bert, Bert—don’t say such things. Bert—they’ll think—”

“Calm yourself, monsieur,” said Poirot. “I demand only your account of your visit. That you refuse it seems to me—what shall we say—a little odd?”

“Who said I refused anything?” Mr. Riddell sank back again into his seat. “I don’t mind.”

“It was six o’clock when you entered the shop?”

“That’s right—a minute or two after, as a matter of fact. Wanted a packet of Gold Flake. I pushed open the door—”

“It was closed, then?”

“That’s right. I thought shop was shut, maybe. But it wasn’t. I went in, there wasn’t anyone about. I hammered on the counter and waited a bit. Nobody came, so I went out again. That’s all, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it.”

“You didn’t see the body fallen down behind the counter?”

“No, no more would you have done—unless you was looking for it, maybe.”

“Was there a railway guide lying about?”

“Yes, there was—face downwards. It crossed my mind like that the old woman might have had to go off sudden by train and forgot to lock shop up.”

“Perhaps you picked up the railway guide or moved it along the counter?”

“Didn’t touch the b—thing. I did just what I said.”

“And you did not see anyone leaving the shop before you yourself got there?”

“Didn’t see any such thing. What I say is, why pitch on me—?”

Poirot rose.

“Nobody is pitching upon you—yet. Bonsoir, monsieur.”

He left the man with his mouth open and I followed him.

In the street he consulted his watch.

“With great haste, my friend, we might manage to catch the 7:2. Let us despatch ourselves quickly.”

Eight

THE SECOND LETTER

“Well?” I demanded eagerly.

We were seated in a first-class carriage which we had to ourselves. The train, an express, had just drawn out of Andover.

“The crime,” said Poirot, “was committed by a man of medium height with red hair and a cast in the left eye. He limps slightly on the right foot and has a mole just below the shoulder blade.”

“Poirot?” I cried.

For the moment I was completely taken in. Then the twinkle in my friend’s eye undeceived me.

“Poirot!” I said again, this time in reproach.

“Mon ami, what will you? You fix upon me a look of dog-like devotion and demand of me a pronouncement à la Sherlock Holmes! Now for the truth—I do not know what the murderer looks like, nor where he lives, nor how to set hands upon him.”

“If only he had left some clue,” I murmured.

“Yes, the clue—it is always the clue that attracts you. Alas that he did not smoke the cigarette and leave the ash, and then step in it with a shoe that has nails of a curious pattern. No—he is not so obliging. But at least, my friend, you have the railway guide. The A B C, that is a clue for you!”

“Do you think he left it by mistake then?”

“Of course not. He left it on purpose. The fingerprints tell us that.”

“But there weren’t any on it.”

"That is what I mean. What was yesterday evening? A warm June night. Does a man stroll about on such an evening in gloves? Such a man would certainly have attracted attention. Therefore since there are no fingerprints on the A B C, it must have been carefully wiped. An innocent man would have left prints—a guilty man would not. So our murderer left it there for a purpose—but for all that it is none the less a clue. That A B C was bought by someone—it was carried by someone—there is a possibility there."

"You think we may learn something that way?"

"Frankly, Hastings, I am not particularly hopeful. This man, this unknown X, obviously prides himself on his abilities. He is not likely to blaze a trail that can be followed straight away."

"So that really the A B C isn't helpful at all."

"Not in the sense you mean."

"In any sense?"

Poirot did not answer at once. Then he said slowly:

"The answer to that is yes. We are confronted here by an unknown personage. He is in the dark and seeks to remain in the dark. But in the very nature of things he cannot help throwing light upon himself. In one sense we know nothing about him—in another sense we know already a good deal. I see his figure dimly taking shape—a man who prints clearly and well—who buys good-quality paper—who is at great needs to express his personality. I see him as a child possibly ignored and passed over—I see him growing up with an inward sense of inferiority—warring with a sense of injustice…I see that inner urge—to assert himself—to focus attention on himself ever becoming stronger, and events, circumstances—crushing it down—heaping, perhaps, more humiliations on him. And inwardly the match is set to the powder train…."

"That's all pure conjecture," I objected. "It doesn't give you any practical help."

"You prefer the match end, the cigarette ash, the nailed boots! You always have. But at least we can ask ourselves some practical questions. Why the A B C? Why Mrs. Ascher? Why Andover?"

"The woman's past life seems simple enough," I mused. "The interviews with those two men were disappointing. They couldn't tell us anything more than we knew already."

"To tell the truth, I did not expect much in that line. But we could not neglect two possible candidates for the murder."

"Surely you don't think—"

"There is at least a possibility that the murderer lives in or near Andover. That is a possible answer to our question: 'Why Andover?' Well, here were two men known to have been in the shop at the requisite time of day. Either of them might be the murderer. And there is nothing as yet to show that one or other of them is not the murderer."

"That great hulking brute, Riddell, perhaps," I admitted.

"Oh, I am inclined to acquit Riddell off-hand. He was nervous, blustering, obviously uneasy—"

"But surely that just shows—"

"A nature diametrically opposed to that which penned the A B C letter. Conceit and self-confidence are the characteristics that we must look for."

"Someone who throws his weight about?"

"Possibly. But some people, under a nervous and self-effacing manner, conceal a great deal of vanity and self-satisfaction."

"You don't think that little Mr. Partridge—"

"He is more le type. One cannot say more than that. He acts as the writer of the letter would act—goes at once to the police—pushes himself to the fore—enjoys his position."

"Do you really think—?"

"No, Hastings. Personally I believe that the murderer came from outside Andover, but we must neglect no avenue of research. And although I say 'he' all the time, we must not exclude the possibility of a woman being concerned."

"Surely not!"

"The method of attack is that of a man, I agree. But anonymous letters are written by women rather than by men. We must bear that in mind."

I was silent for a few minutes, then I said:

"What do we do next?"

"My energetic Hastings," Poirot said and smiled at me.

"No, but what do we do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" My disappointment rang out clearly.

"Am I the magician? The sorcerer? What would you have me do?"

Turning the matter over in my mind I found it difficult to give an answer. Nevertheless I felt convinced that something ought to be done and that we should not allow the grass to grow under our feet.

I said:

"There is the A B C—and the notepaper and envelope—"

"Naturally everything is being done in that line. The police have all the means at their disposal for that kind of inquiry. If anything is to be discovered on those lines have no fear but that they will discover it."

With that I was forced to rest content.

In the days that followed I found Poirot curiously disinclined to discuss the case. When I tried to reopen the subject he waved it aside with an impatient hand.

In my own mind I was afraid that I fathomed his motive. Over the murder of Mrs. Ascher, Poirot had sustained a defeat. A B C had challenged him—and A B C had won. My friend, accustomed to an unbroken line of successes, was sensitive to his failure—so much so that he could not even endure discussion of the subject. It was, perhaps, a sign of pettiness in so great a man, but even the most sober of us is liable to have his head turned by success. In Poirot's case the head-turning process had been going on for years. Small wonder if its effects became noticeable at long last.

Understanding, I respected my friend's weakness and I made no further reference to the case. I read in the paper the account of the inquest. It was very brief, no mention was made of the A B C letter, and a verdict was returned of murder by some person or persons unknown. The crime attracted very little attention in the press. It had no popular or spectacular features. The murder of an old woman in a side street was soon passed over in the press for more thrilling topics.

Truth to tell, the affair was fading from my mind also, partly, I think, because I disliked to think of Poirot as being in any way associated with a failure, when on July 25th it was suddenly revived.

I had not seen Poirot for a couple of days as I had been away in Yorkshire for the weekend. I arrived back on Monday afternoon and the letter came by the six o'clock post. I remember the sudden, sharp intake of breath that Poirot gave as he slit open that particular envelope.

"It has come," he said.

I stared at him—not understanding.

"What has come?"

"The second chapter of the A B C business."

For a minute I looked at him uncomprehendingly. The matter had really passed from my memory.

“Read,” said Poirot and passed me over the letter.

As before, it was printed on good-quality paper.

Dear Mr. Poirot,—Well, what about it? First game to me, I think. The Andover business went with a swing, didn’t it?

But the fun’s only just beginning. Let me draw your attention to Bexhill-on-Sea. Date, the 25th inst.

What a merry time we are having! Yours etc.

A B C

“Good God, Poirot,” I cried. “Does this mean that this fiend is going to attempt another crime?”

“Naturally, Hastings. What else did you expect? Did you think that the Andover business was an isolated case? Do you not remember my saying: ‘This is the beginning’?”

“But this is horrible!”

“Yes, it is horrible.”

“We’re up against a homicidal maniac.”

“Yes.”

His quietness was more impressive than any heroics could have been. I handed back the letter with a shudder.

The following morning saw us at a conference of powers. The Chief Constable of Sussex, the Assistant Commissioner of the CID, Inspector Glen from Andover, Superintendent Carter of the Sussex police, Japp and a younger inspector called Crome, and Dr. Thompson, the famous alienist, were all assembled together. The postmark on this letter was Hampstead, but in Poirot's opinion little importance could be attached to this fact.

The matter was discussed fully. Dr. Thompson was a pleasant middle-aged man who, in spite of his learning, contented himself with homely language, avoiding the technicalities of his profession.

"There's no doubt," said the Assistant Commissioner, "that the two letters are in the same hand. Both were written by the same person."

"And we can fairly assume that that person was responsible for the Andover murder."

"Quite. We've now got definite warning of a second crime scheduled to take place on the 25th—the day after tomorrow—at Bexhill. What steps can be taken?"

The Sussex Chief Constable looked at his superintendent.

"Well, Carter, what about it?"

The superintendent shook his head gravely.

"It's difficult, sir. There's not the least clue towards whom the victim may be. Speaking fair and square, what steps can we take?"

"A suggestion," murmured Poirot.

Their faces turned to him.

"I think it possible that the surname of the intended victim will begin with the letter B."

"That would be something," said the superintendent doubtfully.

"An alphabetical complex," said Dr. Thompson thoughtfully.

"I suggest it as a possibility—no more. It came into my mind when I saw the name Ascher clearly written over the shop door of the unfortunate woman who was murdered last month. When I got the letter naming Bexhill it occurred to me as a possibility that the victim as well as the place might be selected by an alphabetical system."

"It's possible," said the doctor. "On the other hand, it may be that the name Ascher was a coincidence—that the victim this time, no matter what her name is, will again be an old woman who keeps a shop. We're dealing, remember, with a madman. So far he hasn't given us any clue as to motive."

"Has a madman any motive, sir?" asked the superintendent sceptically.

"Of course he has, man. A deadly logic is one of the special characteristics of acute mania. A man may believe himself divinely appointed to kill clergymen—or doctors—or old women in tobacco shops—and there's always some perfectly coherent reason behind it. We mustn't let the alphabetical business run away with us. Bexhill succeeding to Andover may be a mere coincidence."

"We can at least take certain precautions, Carter, and make a special note of the B's, especially small shopkeepers, and keep a watch on all small tobacconists and newsagents looked after by a single person. I don't think there's anything more we can do than that. Naturally, keep tabs on all strangers as far as possible."

The superintendent uttered a groan.

"With the schools breaking up and the holidays beginning? People are fairly flooding into the place this week."

"We must do what we can," the Chief Constable said sharply.

Inspector Glen spoke in his turn.

"I'll have a watch kept on anyone connected with the Ascher business. Those two witnesses, Partridge and Riddell, and of course Ascher himself. If they show any sign of leaving Andover they'll be followed."

The conference broke up after a few more suggestions and a little desultory conversation.

“Poirot,” I said as we walked along by the river. “Surely this crime can be prevented?”

He turned a haggard face to me.

“The sanity of a city full of men against the insanity of one man? I fear, Hastings—I very much fear. Remember the long-continued successes of Jack the Ripper.”

“It’s horrible,” I said.

“Madness, Hastings, is a terrible thing…I am afraid…I am very much afraid….”

Nine

THE BEXHILL-ON-SEA MURDER

I still remember my awakening on the morning of the 25th of July. It must have been about seven-thirty.

Poirot was standing by my bedside gently shaking me by the shoulder. One glance at his face brought me from semiconsciousness into the full possession of my faculties.

“What is it?” I demanded, sitting up rapidly.

His answer came quite simply, but a wealth of emotion lay behind the three words he uttered.

“It has happened.”

“What?” I cried. “You mean—but today is the 25th.”

“It took place last night—or rather in the early hours of this morning.”

As I sprang from bed and made a rapid toilet, he recounted briefly what he had just learnt over the telephone.

“The body of a young girl has been found on the beach at Bexhill. She has been identified as Elizabeth Barnard, a waitress in one of the cafés, who lived with her parents in a little recently built bungalow. Medical evidence gave the time of death as between 11:30 and 1 am.”

“They’re quite sure that this is the crime?” I asked, as I hastily lathered my face.

“An A B C open at the trains to Bexhill was found actually under the body.”

I shivered.

“This is horrible!”

“Faites attention, Hastings. I do not want a second tragedy in my rooms!”

I wiped the blood from my chin rather ruefully.

“What is our plan of campaign?” I asked.

“The car will call for us in a few moments’ time. I will bring you a cup of coffee here so that there will be no delay in starting.”

Twenty minutes later we were in a fast police car crossing the Thames on our way out of London.

With us was Inspector Crome, who had been present at the conference the other day, and who was officially in charge of the case.

Crome was a very different type of officer from Japp. A much younger man, he was the silent, superior type. Well educated and well read, he was, for my taste, several shades too pleased with himself. He had lately gained kudos over a series of child murders, having patiently tracked down the criminal who was now in Broadmoor.

He was obviously a suitable person to undertake the present case, but I thought that he was just a little too aware of the fact himself. His manner to Poirot was a shade patronising. He deferred to him as a younger man to an older one—in a rather self-conscious, “public school” way.

“I’ve had a good long talk with Dr. Thompson,” he said. “He’s very interested in the ‘chain’ or ‘series’ type of murder. It’s the product of a particular distorted type of mentality. As a layman one can’t, of course, appreciate the finer points as they present themselves to a medical point of view.” He coughed. “As a matter of fact—my last case—I don’t know whether you read about it—the Mabel Homer case, the Muswell Hill schoolgirl, you know—that man Capper was extraordinary. Amazingly difficult to pin the crime on to him—it was his third, too! Looked as sane as you or I. But there are various tests—verbal traps, you know—quite modern, of course, there was nothing of that kind in your day. Once you can induce a man to give himself away, you’ve got him! He knows that you know and his nerve goes. He starts giving himself away right and left.”

“Even in my day that happened sometimes,” said Poirot.

Inspector Crome looked at him and murmured conversationally: “Oh, yes?”

There was silence between us for some time. As we passed New Cross Station, Crome said:

“If there’s anything you want to ask me about the case, pray do so.”

“You have not, I presume, a description of the dead girl?”

“She was twenty-three years of age, engaged as a waitress at the Ginger Cat café—”

“Pas ça. I wondered—if she were pretty?”

“As to that I’ve no information,” said Inspector Crome with a hint of withdrawal. His manner said: “Really—these foreigners! All the same!”

A faint look of amusement came into Poirot’s eyes.

“It does not seem to you important, that? Yet, pour une femme, it is of the first importance. Often it decides her destiny!”

Another silence fell.

It was not until we were nearing Sevenoaks that Poirot opened the conversation again.

“Were you informed, by any chance, how and with what the girl was strangled?”

Inspector Crome replied briefly.

“Strangled with her own belt—a thick, knitted affair, I gather.”

Poirot’s eyes opened very wide.

“Aha,” he said. “At last we have a piece of information that is very definite. That tells one something, does it not?”

“I haven’t seen it yet,” said Inspector Crome coldly.

I felt impatient with the man’s caution and lack of imagination.

“It gives us the hallmark of the murderer,” I said. “The girl’s own belt. It shows the particular beastliness of his mind!”

Poirot shot me a glance I could not fathom. On the face of it it conveyed humorous impatience. I thought that perhaps it was a warning not to be too outspoken in front of the inspector.

I relapsed into silence.

At Bexhill we were greeted by Superintendent Carter. He had with him a pleasant-faced, intelligent-looking young inspector called Kelsey. The latter was detailed to work in with Crome over the case.

“You’ll want to make your own inquiries, Crome,” said the superintendent. “So I’ll just give you the main heads of the matter and then you can get busy right away.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Crome.

“We’ve broken the news to her father and mother,” said the superintendent. “Terrible shock to them, of course. I left them to recover a bit before questioning them, so you can start from the beginning there.”

“There are other members of the family—yes?” asked Poirot.

“There’s a sister—a typist in London. She’s been communicated with. And there’s a young man—in fact, the girl was supposed to be out with him last night, I gather.”

“Any help from the A B C guide?” asked Crome.

“It’s there,” the superintendent nodded towards the table. “No fingerprints. Open at the page for Bexhill. A new copy, I should say—doesn’t seem to have been opened much. Not bought anywhere round here. I’ve tried all the likely stationers.”

“Who discovered the body, sir?”

“One of these fresh-air, early-morning colonels. Colonel Jerome. He was out with his dog about 6 am. Went along the front in the direction of Cooden, and down on to the beach. Dog went off and sniffed at something. Colonel called it. Dog didn’t come. Colonel had a look and thought something queer was up. Went over and looked. Behaved very properly. Didn’t touch her at all and rang us up immediately.”

“And the time of death was round about midnight last night?”

“Between midnight and 1 am—that’s pretty certain. Our homicidal joker is a man of his word. If he says the 25th, it is the 25th—though it may have been only by a few minutes.”

Crome nodded.

“Yes, that’s his mentality all right. There’s nothing else? Nobody saw anything helpful?”

“Not as far as we know. But it’s early yet. Everyone who saw a girl in white walking with a man last night will be along to tell us about it soon, and as I imagine there were about four or five hundred girls in white walking with young men last night, it ought to be a nice business.”

“Well, sir, I’d better get down to it,” said Crome. “There’s the café and there’s the girl’s home. I’d better go to both of them. Kelsey can come with me.”

“And Mr. Poirot?” asked the superintendent.

“I will accompany you,” said Poirot to Crome with a little bow.

Crome, I thought, looked slightly annoyed. Kelsey, who had not seen Poirot before, grinned broadly.

It was an unfortunate circumstance that the first time people saw my friend they were always disposed to consider him as a joke of the first water.

“What about this belt she was strangled with?” asked Crome. “Mr. Poirot is inclined to think it’s a valuable clue. I expect he’d like to see it.”

“Du tout,” said Poirot quickly. “You misunderstood me.”

“You’ll get nothing from that,” said Carter. “It wasn’t a leather belt—might have got fingerprints if it had been. Just a thick sort of knitted silk—ideal for the purpose.”

I gave a shiver.

“Well,” said Crome, “we’d better be getting along.”

We set out forthwith.

Our first visit was to the Ginger Cat. Situated on the sea front, this was the usual type of small tearoom. It had little tables covered with orange-checked cloths and basket-work chairs of exceeding discomfort with orange cushions on them. It was the kind of place that specialized in morning coffee, five different kinds of teas (Devonshire, Farmhouse, Fruit, Carlton and Plain), and a few sparing lunch dishes for females such as scrambled eggs and shrimps and macaroni au gratin.

The morning coffees were just getting under way. The manageress ushered us hastily into a very untidy back sanctum.

“Miss—eh—Merrion?” inquired Crome.

Miss Merrion bleated out in a high, distressed-gentlewoman voice:

“That is my name. This is a most distressing business. Most distressing. How it will affect our business I really cannot think!”

Miss Merrion was a very thin woman of forty with wispy orange hair (indeed she was astonishingly like a ginger cat herself). She played nervously with various fichus and frills that were part of her official costume.

“You’ll have a boom,” said Inspector Kelsey encouragingly. “You’ll see! You won’t be able to serve teas fast enough!”

“Disgusting,” said Miss Merrion. “Truly disgusting. It makes one despair of human nature.”

But her eyes brightened nevertheless.

“What can you tell me about the dead girl, Miss Merrion?”

“Nothing,” said Miss Merrion positively. “Absolutely nothing!”

“How long had she been working here?”

“This was the second summer.”

“You were satisfied with her?”

“She was a good waitress—quick and obliging.”

“She was pretty, yes?” inquired Poirot.

Miss Merrion, in her turn, gave him an “Oh, these foreigners” look.

“She was a nice, clean-looking girl,” she said distantly.

“What time did she go off duty last night?” asked Crome.

“Eight o’clock. We close at eight. We do not serve dinners. There is no demand for them. Scrambled eggs and tea (Poirot shuddered) people come in for up to seven o’clock and sometimes after, but our rush is over by 6:30.”

“Did she mention to you how she proposed to spend her evening?”

“Certainly not,” said Miss Merrion emphatically. “We were not on those terms.”

“No one came in and called for her? Anything like that?”

“No.”

“Did she seem quite her ordinary self? Not excited or depressed?”

“Really I could not say,” said Miss Merrion aloofly.

“How many waitresses do you employ?”

“Two normally, and an extra two after the 20th July until the end of August.”

“But Elizabeth Barnard was not one of the extras?”

“Miss Barnard was one of the regulars.”

“What about the other one?”

“Miss Higley? She is a very nice young lady.”

“Were she and Miss Barnard friends?”

“Really I could not say.”

“Perhaps we’d better have a word with her.”

“Now?”

“If you please.”

“I will send her to you,” said Miss Merrion, rising. “Please keep her as short a time as possible. This is the morning coffee rush hour.”

The feline and gingery Miss Merrion left the room.

“Very refined,” remarked Inspector Kelsey. He mimicked the lady’s mincing tone. “Really I could not say.”

A plump girl, slightly out of breath, with dark hair, rosy cheeks and dark eyes goggling with excitement, bounced in.

“Miss Merrion sent me,” she announced breathlessly.

“Miss Higley?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“You knew Elizabeth Barnard?”

“Oh, yes, I knew Betty. Isn’t it awful? It’s just too awful! I can’t believe it’s true. I’ve been saying to the girls all the morning I just can’t believe it! ‘You know, girls,’ I said, ‘it just doesn’t seem real. Betty! I mean, Betty Barnard, who’s been here all along, murdered! I just can’t believe it,’ I said. Five or six times I’ve pinched myself just to see if I wouldn’t wake up. Betty murdered…It’s—well, you know what I mean—it doesn’t seem real.”

“You knew the dead girl well?” asked Crome.

“Well, she’s worked here longer than I have. I only came this March. She was here last year. She was rather quiet, if you know what I mean. She wasn’t one to joke or laugh a lot. I don’t mean that she was exactly quiet—she’d plenty of fun in her and all that—but she didn’t—well, she was quiet and she wasn’t quiet, if you know what I mean.”

I will say for Inspector Crome that he was exceedingly patient. As a witness the buxom Miss Higley was persistently maddening. Every statement she made was repeated and qualified half a dozen times. The net result was meagre in the extreme.

She had not been on terms of intimacy with the dead girl. Elizabeth Barnard, it could be guessed, had considered herself a cut above Miss Higley. She had been friendly in working hours, but the girls had not seen much of her out of them. Elizabeth Barnard had had a “friend’ who worked at the estate agents near the station. Court & Brunskill. No, he wasn’t Mr. Court nor Mr. Brunskill. He was a clerk there. She didn’t know his name. But she knew him by sight well. Good-looking—oh, very good-looking, and always so nicely dressed. Clearly, there was a tinge of jealousy in Miss Higley’s heart.

In the end it boiled down to this. Elizabeth Barnard had not confided in anyone in the café as to her plans for the evening, but in Miss Higley’s opinion she had been going to meet her “friend.” She had had on a new white dress, “ever so sweet with one of the new necks.”

We had a word with each of the other two girls but with no further results. Betty Barnard had not said anything as to her plans and no one had noticed her in Bexhill during the course of the evening.

Ten

THE BARNARDS

Elizabeth Barnard’s parents lived in a minute bungalow, one of fifty or so recently run up by a speculative builder on the confines of the town. The name of it was Llandudno. Mr. Barnard, a stout, bewildered-looking man of fifty-five or so, had noticed our approach and was standing waiting in the doorway.

“Come in, gentlemen,” he said.

Inspector Kelsey took the initiative.

“This is Inspector Crome of Scotland Yard, sir,” he said. “He’s come down to help us over this business.”

“Scotland Yard?” said Mr. Barnard hopefully. “That’s good. This murdering villain’s got to be laid by the heels. My poor little girl—” His face was distorted by a spasm of grief.

“And this is Mr. Hercule Poirot, also from London, and er—”

“Captain Hastings,” said Poirot.

“Pleased to meet you, gentlemen,” said Mr. Barnard mechanically. “Come into the snuggery. I don’t know that my poor wife’s up to seeing you. All broken up, she is.”

However, by the time that we were ensconced in the living room of the bungalow, Mrs. Barnard had made her appearance. She had evidently been crying bitterly, her eyes were reddened and she walked with the uncertain gait of a person who had had a great shock.

“Why, mother, that’s fine,” said Mr. Barnard. “You’re sure you’re all right—eh?”

He patted her shoulder and drew her down into a chair.

“The superintendent was very kind,” said Mr. Barnard. “After he’d broken the news to us, he said he’d leave any questions till later when we’d got over the first shock.”

“It is too cruel. Oh, it is too cruel,” cried Mrs. Barnard tearfully. “The cruellest thing that ever was, it is.”

Her voice had a faintly sing-song intonation that I thought for a moment was foreign till I remembered the name on the gate and realized that the “effer wass” of her speech was in reality proof of her Welsh origin.

“It’s very painful, madam, I know,” said Inspector Crome. “And we’ve every sympathy for you, but we want to know all the facts we can so as to get to work as quick as possible.”

“That’s sense, that is,” said Mr. Barnard, nodding approval.

“Your daughter was twenty-three, I understand. She lived here with you and worked at the Ginger Cat café, is that right?”

“That’s it.”

“This is a new place, isn’t it? Where did you live before?”

“I was in the ironmongery business in Kennington. Retired two years ago. Always meant to live near the sea.”

“You have two daughters?”

“Yes. My elder daughter works in an office in London.”

“Weren’t you alarmed when your daughter didn’t come home last night?”

“We didn’t know she hadn’t,” said Mrs. Barnard tearfully. “Dad and I always go to bed early. Nine o’clock’s our time. We never knew Betty hadn’t come home till the police officer came and said—and said—”

She broke down.

“Was your daughter in the habit of—er—returning home late?”

“You know what girls are nowadays, inspector,” said Barnard. “Independent, that’s what they are. These summer evenings they’re not going to rush home. All the same, Betty was usually in by eleven.”

“How did she get in? Was the door open?”

“Left the key under the mat—that’s what we always did.”

“There is some rumour, I believe, that your daughter was engaged to be married?”

“They don’t put it as formally as that nowadays,” said Mr. Barnard.

“Donald Fraser his name is, and I liked him. I liked him very much,” said Mrs. Barnard. “Poor fellow, it’ll be trouble for him—this news. Does he know yet, I wonder?”

“He works in Court & Brunskill’s, I understand?”

“Yes, they’re the estate agents.”

“Was he in the habit of meeting your daughter most evenings after her work?”

“Not every evening. Once or twice a week would be nearer.”

“Do you know if she was going to meet him yesterday?”

“She didn’t say. Betty never said much about what she was doing or where she was going. But she was a good girl, Betty was. Oh, I can’t believe—”

Mrs. Barnard started sobbing again.

“Pull yourself together, old lady. Try to hold up, mother,” urged her husband. “We’ve got to get to the bottom of this.”

"I'm sure Donald would never—would never—" sobbed Mrs. Barnard.

"Now just you pull yourself together," repeated Mr Barnard.

"I wish to God I could give you some help—but the plain fact is I know nothing—nothing at all that can help you to find the dastardly scoundrel who did this. Betty was just a merry, happy girl—with a decent young fellow that she was—well, we'd have called it walking out with in my young days. Why anyone should want to murder her simply beats me—it doesn't make sense."

"You're very near the truth there, Mr. Barnard," said Crome. "I tell you what I'd like to do—have a look over Miss Barnard's room. There may be something—letters—or a diary."

"Look over it and welcome," said Mr. Barnard, rising.

He led the way. Crome followed him, then Poirot, then Kelsey, and I brought up the rear.

I stopped for a minute to retie my shoelaces, and as I did so a taxi drew up outside and a girl jumped out of it. She paid the driver and hurried up the path to the house, carrying a small suitcase. As she entered the door she saw me and stopped dead.

There was something so arresting in her pose that it intrigued me.

"Who are you?" she said.

I came down a few steps. I felt embarrassed as to how exactly to reply. Should I give my name? Or mention that I had come here with the police? The girl, however, gave me no time to make a decision.

"Oh, well," she said, "I can guess."

She pulled off the little white woollen cap she was wearing and threw it on the ground. I could see her better now as she turned a little so that the light fell on her.

My first impression was of the Dutch dolls that my sisters used to play with in my childhood. Her hair was black and cut in a straight bob and a bang across the forehead. Her cheek-bones were high and her whole figure had a queer modern angularity that was not, somehow, unattractive. She was not good-looking—plain rather—but there was an intensity about her, a forcefulness that made her a person quite impossible to overlook.

"You are Miss Barnard?" I asked.

"I am Megan Barnard. You belong to the police, I suppose?"

"Well," I said. "Not exactly—"

She interrupted me.

"I don't think I've got anything to say to you. My sister was a nice bright girl with no men friends. Good morning."

She gave me a short laugh as she spoke and regarded me challengingly.

"That's the correct phrase, I believe?" she said.

"I'm not a reporter, if that's what you're getting at."

"Well, what are you?" She looked around. "Where's mum and dad?"

"Your father is showing the police your sister's bedroom. Your mother's in there. She's very upset."

The girl seemed to make a decision.

"Come in here," she said.

She pulled open a door and passed through. I followed her and found myself in a small, neat kitchen.

I was about to shut the door behind me—but found an unexpected resistance. The next moment Poirot had slipped quietly into the room and shut the door behind him.

"Mademoiselle Barnard?" he said with a quick bow.

"This is M. Hercule Poirot," I said.

Megan Barnard gave him a quick, appraising glance.

"I've heard of you," she said. "You're the fashionable private sleuth, aren't you?"

"Not a pretty description—but it suffices," said Poirot.

The girl sat down on the edge of the kitchen table. She felt in her bag for a cigarette. She placed it between her lips, lighted it, and then said in between two puffs of smoke:

"Somehow, I don't see what M. Hercule Poirot is doing in our humble little crime."

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot. "What you do not see and what I do not see would probably fill a volume. But all that is of no practical importance. What is of practical importance is something that will not be easy to find."

"What's that?"

"Death, mademoiselle, unfortunately creates a prejudice. A prejudice in favour of the deceased. I heard what you said just now to my friend Hastings. 'A nice bright girl with no men friends.' You said that in mockery of the newspapers. And it is very true—when a young girl is dead, that is the kind of thing that is said. She was bright. She was happy. She was sweet-tempered. She had not a care in the world. She had no undesirable acquaintances. There is a great charity always to the dead. Do you know what I should like this minute? I should like to find someone who knew Elizabeth Barnard and who does not know she is dead! Then, perhaps, I should hear what is useful to me—the truth."

Megan Barnard looked at him for a few minutes in silence whilst she smoked. Then, at last, she spoke. Her words made me jump.

"Betty," she said, "was an unmitigated little ass!"

Eleven

MEGAN BARNARD

As I said, Megan Barnard's words, and still more the crisp businesslike tone in which they were uttered, made me jump.

Poirot, however, merely bowed his head gravely.

"A la bonne heure," he said. "You are intelligent, mademoiselle."

Megan Barnard said, still in the same detached tone:

"I was extremely fond of Betty. But my fondness didn't blind me from seeing exactly the kind of silly little fool she was—and even telling her so upon occasions! Sisters are like that."

"And did she pay any attention to your advice?"

"Probably not," said Megan cynically.

"Will you, mademoiselle, be precise."

The girl hesitated for a minute or two.

Poirot said with a slight smile:

"I will help you. I heard what you said to Hastings. That your sister was a bright, happy girl with no men friends. It was—un peu—the opposite that was true, was it not?"

Megan said slowly:

"There wasn't any harm in Betty. I want you to understand that. She'd always go straight. She's not the weekending kind. Nothing of that sort. But she liked being taken out and dancing and—oh, cheap flattery and compliments and all that sort of thing."

“And she was pretty—yes?”

This question, the third time I had heard it, met this time with a practical response.

Megan slipped off the table, went to her suitcase, snapped it open and extracted something which she handed to Poirot.

In a leather frame was a head and shoulders of a fair-haired, smiling girl. Her hair had evidently recently been permed, it stood out from her head in a mass of rather frizzy curls. The smile was arch and artificial. It was certainly not a face that you could call beautiful, but it had an obvious and cheap prettiness.

Poirot handed it back, saying:

“You and she do not resemble each other, mademoiselle.”

“Oh! I’m the plain one of the family. I’ve always known that.” She seemed to brush aside the fact as unimportant.

“In what way exactly do you consider your sister was behaving foolishly? Do you mean, perhaps, in relation to Mr. Donald Fraser?”

“That’s it, exactly. Don’s a very quiet sort of person—but he—well, naturally he’d resent certain things—and then—”

“And then what, mademoiselle?”

His eyes were on her very steadily.

It may have been my fancy but it seemed to me that she hesitated a second before answering.

“I was afraid that he might—chuck her altogether. And that would have been a pity. He’s a very steady and hard-working man and would have made her a good husband.”

Poirot continued to gaze at her. She did not flush under his glance but returned it with one of her own equally steady and with something else in it—something that reminded me of her first defiant, disdainful manner.

"So it is like that," he said at last. "We do not speak the truth any longer."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned towards the door.

"Well," she said. "I've done what I could to help you."

Poirot's voice arrested her.

"Wait, mademoiselle. I have something to tell you. Come back."

Rather unwillingly, I thought, she obeyed.

Somewhat to my surprise, Poirot plunged into the whole story of the A B C letters, the murder of Andover, and the railway guide found by the bodies.

He had no reason to complain of any lack of interest on her part. Her lips parted, her eyes gleaming, she hung on his words.

"Is this all true, M. Poirot?"

"Yes, it is true."

"You really mean that my sister was killed by some horrible homicidal maniac?"

"Precisely."

She drew a deep breath.

"Oh! Betty—Betty—how—how ghastly!"

"You see, mademoiselle, that the information for which I ask you can give freely without wondering whether or not it will hurt anyone."

"Yes, I see that now."

“Then let us continue our conversation. I have formed the idea that this Donald Fraser has, perhaps, a violent and jealous temper, is that right?”

Megan Barnard said quietly:

“I’m trusting you now, M. Poirot. I’m going to give you the absolute truth. Don is, as I say, a very quiet person—a bottled-up person, if you know what I mean. He can’t always express what he feels in words. But underneath it all he minds things terribly. And he’s got a jealous nature. He was always jealous of Betty. He was devoted to her—and of course she was very fond of him, but it wasn’t in Betty to be fond of one person and not notice anybody else. She wasn’t made that way. She’d got a—well, an eye for any nice-looking man who’d pass the time of day with her. And of course, working in the Ginger Cat, she was always running up against men—especially in the summer holidays. She was always very pat with her tongue and if they chaffed her she’d chaff back again. And then perhaps she’d meet them and go to the pictures or something like that. Nothing serious—never anything of that kind—but she just liked her fun. She used to say that as she’d got to settle down with Don one day she might as well have her fun now while she could.”

Megan paused and Poirot said:

“I understand. Continue.”

“It was just that attitude of mind of hers that Don couldn’t understand. If she was really keen on him he couldn’t see why she wanted to go out with other people. And once or twice they had flaming big rows about it.”

“M. Don, he was no longer quiet?”

“It’s like all those quiet people, when they do lose their tempers they lose them with a vengeance. Don was so violent that Betty was frightened.”

“When was this?”

“There was one row nearly a year ago and another—a worse one—just over a month ago. I was home for the weekend—and I got them to patch it up again, and it was then I tried to knock a little sense into Betty—told her she was a little fool. All she would say was that there hadn't been any harm in it. Well, that was true enough, but all the same she was riding for a fall. You see, after the row a year ago, she'd got into the habit of telling a few useful lies on the principle that what the mind doesn't know the heart doesn't grieve over. This last flare-up came because she'd told Don she was going to Hastings to see a girl pal—and he found out that she'd really been over to Eastbourne with some man. He was a married man, as it happened, and he'd been a bit secretive about the business anyway—and so that made it worse. They had an awful scene—Betty saying that she wasn't married to him yet and she had a right to go about with whom she pleased and Don all white and shaking and saying that one day—one day—"

"Yes?"

"He'd commit murder—" said Megan in a lowered voice.

She stopped and stared at Poirot.

He nodded his head gravely several times.

"And so, naturally, you were afraid…."

"I didn't think he'd actually done it—not for a minute! But I was afraid it might be brought up—the quarrel and all that he'd said—several people knew about it."

Again Poirot nodded his head gravely.

"Just so. And I may say, mademoiselle, that but for the egoistical vanity of a killer, that is just what would have happened. If Donald Fraser escapes suspicion, it will be thanks to A B C's maniacal boasting."

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

"Do you know if your sister met this married man, or any other man, lately?"

Megan shook her head.

“I don’t know. I’ve been away, you see.”

“But what do you think?”

“She mayn’t have met that particular man again. He’d probably sheer off if he thought there was a chance of a row, but it wouldn’t surprise me if Betty had—well, been telling Don a few lies again. You see, she did so enjoy dancing and the pictures, and of course, Don couldn’t afford to take her all the time.”

“If so, is she likely to have confided in anyone? The girl at the café, for instance?”

“I don’t think that’s likely. Betty couldn’t bear the Higley girl. She thought her common. And the others would be new. Betty wasn’t the confiding sort anyway.”

An electric bell trilled sharply above the girl’s head.

She went to the window and leaned out. She drew back her head sharply.

“It’s Don….”

“Bring him in here,” said Poirot quickly. “I would like a word with him before our good inspector takes him in hand.”

Like a flash Megan Barnard was out of the kitchen, and a couple of seconds later she was back again leading Donald Fraser by the hand.

Twelve

DONALD FRASER

I felt sorry at once for the young man. His white haggard face and bewildered eyes showed how great a shock he had had.

He was a well-made, fine-looking young fellow, standing close on six foot, not good-looking, but with a pleasant, freckled face, high cheek-bones and flaming red hair.

“What’s this, Megan?” he said. “Why in here? For God’s sake, tell me—I’ve only just heard—Betty….”

His voice trailed away.

Poirot pushed forward a chair and he sank down on it.

My friend then extracted a small flask from his pocket, poured some of its contents into a convenient cup which was hanging on the dresser and said:

“Drink some of this, Mr. Fraser. It will do you good.”

The young man obeyed. The brandy brought a little colour back into his face. He sat up straighter and turned once more to the girl. His manner was quite quiet and self-controlled.

“It’s true, I suppose?” he said. “Betty is—dead—killed?”

“It’s true, Don.”

He said as though mechanically:

“Have you just come down from London?”

“Yes. Dad phoned me.”

“By the 9:30, I suppose?” said Donald Fraser.

His mind, shrinking from reality, ran for safety along these unimportant details.

“Yes.”

There was silence for a minute or two, then Fraser said:

“The police? Are they doing anything?”

“They’re upstairs now. Looking through Betty’s things, I suppose.”

“They’ve no idea who—? They don’t know—?”

He stopped.

He had all a sensitive, shy person’s dislike of putting violent facts into words.

Poirot moved forward a little and asked a question. He spoke in a businesslike, matter-of-fact voice as though what he asked was an unimportant detail.

“Did Miss Barnard tell you where she was going last night?”

Fraser replied to the question. He seemed to be speaking mechanically:

“She told me she was going with a girl friend to St. Leonards.”

“Did you believe her?”

“I—” Suddenly the automaton came to life. “What the devil do you mean?”

His face then, menacing, convulsed by sudden passion, made me understand that a girl might well be afraid of rousing his anger.

Poirot said crisply:

“Betty Barnard was killed by a homicidal murderer. Only by speaking the exact truth can you help us to get on his track.”

His glance for a minute turned to Megan.

“That’s right, Don,” she said. “It isn’t a time for considering one’s own feelings or anyone else’s. You’ve got to come clean.”

Donald Fraser looked suspiciously at Poirot.

“Who are you? You don’t belong to the police?”

“I am better than the police,” said Poirot. He said it without conscious arrogance. It was, to him, a simple statement of fact.

“Tell him,” said Megan.

Donald Fraser capitulated.

“I—wasn’t sure,” he said. “I believed her when she said it. Never thought of doing anything else. Afterwards—perhaps it was something in her manner. I—I, well, I began to wonder.”

“Yes?” said Poirot.

He had sat down opposite Donald Fraser. His eyes, fixed on the other man’s, seemed to be exercising a mesmeric spell.

“I was ashamed of myself for being so suspicious. But—but I was suspicious…I thought of going to the front and watching her when she left the café. I actually went there. Then I felt I couldn’t do that. Betty would see me and she’d be angry. She’d realize at once that I was watching her.”

“What did you do?”

“I went over to St. Leonards. Got over there by eight o’clock. Then I watched the buses—to see if she were in them…But there was no sign of her….”

“And then?”

“I—I lost my head rather. I was convinced she was with some man. I thought it probable he had taken her in his car to Hastings. I went on there—looked in hotels and restaurants, hung round cinemas—went on the pier. All damn foolishness. Even if she was there I was unlikely to find her, and anyway, there were heaps of other places he might have taken her to instead of Hastings.”

He stopped. Precise as his tone had remained, I caught an undertone of that blind, bewildering misery and anger that had possessed him at the time he described.

“In the end I gave it up—came back.”

“At what time?”

“I don’t know. I walked. It must have been midnight or after when I got home.”

“Then—”

The kitchen door opened.

“Oh, there you are,” said Inspector Kelsey.

Inspector Crome pushed past him, shot a glance at Poirot and a glance at the two strangers.

“Miss Megan Barnard and Mr. Donald Fraser,” said Poirot, introducing them.

“This is Inspector Crome from London,” he explained.

Turning to the inspector, he said:

“While you pursued your investigations upstairs I have been conversing with Miss Barnard and Mr. Fraser, endeavouring if I could to find something that will throw light upon the matter.”

“Oh, yes?” said Inspector Crome, his thoughts not upon Poirot but upon the two newcomers.

Poirot retreated to the hall. Inspector Kelsey said kindly as he passed:

“Get anything?”

But his attention was distracted by his colleague and he did not wait for a reply.

I joined Poirot in the hall.

“Did anything strike you, Poirot?” I inquired.

“Only the amazing magnanimity of the murderer, Hastings.”

I had not the courage to say that I had not the least idea what he meant.

Thirteen

A CONFERENCE

Conferences!

Much of my memories of the A B C case seem to be of conferences.

Conferences at Scotland Yard. At Poirot’s rooms. Official conferences. Unofficial conferences.

This particular conference was to decide whether or not the facts relative to the anonymous letters should or should not be made public in the press.

The Bexhill murder had attracted much more attention than the Andover one.

It had, of course, far more elements of popularity. To begin with the victim was a young and good-looking girl. Also, it had taken place at a popular seaside resort.

All the details of the crime were reported fully and rehashed daily in thin disguises. The A B C railway guide came in for its share of attention. The favourite theory was that it had been bought locally by the murderer and that it was a valuable clue to his identity. It also seemed to show that he had come to the place by train and was intending to leave for London.

The railway guide had not figured at all in the meagre accounts of the Andover murder, so there seemed at present little likelihood of the two crimes being connected in the public eye.

“We’ve got to decide upon a policy,” said the Assistant Commissioner. “The thing is—which way will give us the best results? Shall we give the public the facts—enlist their cooperation—after all, it’ll be the cooperation of several million people, looking out for a madman—”

“He won’t look like a madman,” interjected Dr. Thompson.

“—looking out for sales of A B C’s—and so on. Against that I suppose there’s the advantage of working in the dark—not letting our man know what we’re up to, but then there’s the fact that he knows very well that we know. He’s drawn attention to himself deliberately by his letters. Eh, Crome, what’s your opinion?”

“I look at it this way, sir. If you make it public, you’re playing A B C’s game. That’s what he wants—publicity—notoriety. That’s what he’s out after. I’m right, aren’t I, doctor? He wants to make a splash.”

Thompson nodded.

The Assistant Commissioner said thoughtfully:

“So you’re for balking him. Refusing him the publicity he’s hankering after. What about you, M. Poirot?”

Poirot did not speak for a minute. When he did it was with an air of choosing his words carefully.

“It is difficult for me, Sir Lionel,” he said. “I am, as you might say, an interested party. The challenge was sent to me. If I say ‘Suppress that fact—do not make it public,’ may it not be thought that it is my vanity that speaks? That I am afraid for my reputation? It is difficult! To speak out—to tell all—that has its advantages. It is, at least, a warning…On the other hand, I am as convinced as Inspector Crome that it is what the murderer wants us to do.”

“H’m!” said the Assistant Commissioner, rubbing his chin. He looked across at Dr. Thompson. “Suppose we refuse our lunatic the satisfaction of the publicity he craves. What’s he likely to do?”

“Commit another crime,” said the doctor promptly. “Force your hand.”

“And if we splash the thing about in headlines. Then what’s his reaction?”

“Same answer. One way you feed his megalomania, the other you balk it. The result’s the same. Another crime.”

“What do you say, M. Poirot?”

“I agree with Dr. Thompson.”

“A cleft stick—eh? How many crimes do you think this—lunatic has in mind?”

Dr. Thompson looked across at Poirot.

“Looks like A to Z,” he said cheerfully.

“Of course,” he went on, “he won’t get there. Not nearly. You’ll have him by the heels long before that. Interesting to know how he’d have dealt with the letter X.” He recalled himself guiltily from this purely enjoyable speculation. “But you’ll have him long before that. G or H, let’s say.”

The Assistant Commissioner struck the table with his fist.

“My God, are you telling me we’re going to have five more murders?”

“It won’t be as much as that, sir,” said Inspector Crome. “Trust me.”

He spoke with confidence.

“Which letter of the alphabet do you place it at, inspector?” asked Poirot.

There was a slight ironic note in his voice. Crome, I thought, looked at him with a tinge of dislike adulterating the usual calm superiority.

“Might get him next time, M. Poirot. At any rate, I’d guarantee to get him by the time he gets to F.”

He turned to the Assistant Commissioner.

“I think I’ve got the psychology of the case fairly clear. Dr. Thompson will correct me if I’m wrong. I take it that every time A B C brings a crime off, his self-confidence increases about a hundred per cent. Every time he feels ‘I’m clever—they can’t catch me!’ he becomes so over-weeningly confident that he also becomes careless. He exaggerates his own cleverness and everyone else’s stupidity. Very soon he’d be hardly bothering to take any precautions at all. That’s right, isn’t it, doctor?”

Thompson nodded.

“That’s usually the case. In non-medical terms it couldn’t have been put better. You know something about such things, M. Poirot. Don’t you agree?”

I don’t think that Crome liked Thompson’s appeal to Poirot. He considered that he and he only was the expert on this subject.

“It is as Inspector Crome says,” agreed Poirot.

“Paranoia,” murmured the doctor.

Poirot turned to Crome.

“Are there any material facts of interest in the Bexhill case?”

“Nothing very definite. A waiter at the Splendide at Eastbourne recognizes the dead girl’s photograph as that of a young woman who dined there on the evening of the 24th in company with a middle-aged man in spectacles. It’s also been recognized at a roadhouse place called the Scarlet Runner halfway between Bexhill and London. They say she was there about 9 pm on the 24th with a man who looked like a naval officer. They can’t both be right, but either of them’s probable. Of course, there’s a host of other identifications, but most of them not good for much. We haven’t been able to trace the A B C.”

“Well, you seem to be doing all that can be done, Crome,” said the Assistant Commissioner. “What do you say, M. Poirot? Does any line of inquiry suggest itself to you?”

Poirot said slowly:

"It seems to me that there is one very important clue—the discovery of the motive."

"Isn't that pretty obvious? An alphabetical complex. Isn't that what you called it, doctor?"

"Ça, oui," said Poirot. "There is an alphabetical complex. But why an alphabetical complex? A madman in particular has always a very strong reason for the crimes he commits."

"Come, come, M. Poirot," said Crome. "Look at Stoneman in 1929. He ended by trying to do away with anyone who annoyed him in the slightest degree."

Poirot turned to him.

"Quite so. But if you are a sufficiently great and important person, it is necessary that you should be spared small annoyances. If a fly settles on your forehead again and again, maddening you by its tickling—what do you do? You endeavour to kill that fly. You have no qualms about it. You are important—the fly is not. You kill the fly and the annoyance ceases. Your action appears to you sane and justifiable. Another reason for killing a fly is if you have a strong passion for hygiene. The fly is a potential source of danger to the community—the fly must go. So works the mind of the mentally deranged criminal. But consider now this case—if the victims are alphabetically selected, then they are not being removed because they are a source of annoyance to the murderer personally. It would be too much of a coincidence to combine the two."

"That's a point," said Dr. Thompson. "I remember a case where a woman's husband was condemned to death. She started killing the members of the jury one by one. Quite a time before the crimes were connected up. They seemed entirely haphazard. But as M. Poirot says, there isn't such a thing as a murderer who commits crimes at random. Either he removes people who stand (however insignificantly) in his path, or else he kills by conviction. He removes clergymen, or policemen, or prostitutes because he firmly believes that they should be removed. That doesn't apply here either as far as I can see. Mrs. Ascher and Betty Barnard cannot be linked as members of the same class. Of course, it's possible that there is a sex complex. Both victims have been women. We can tell better, of course, after the next crime —"

"For God's sake, Thompson, don't speak so glibly of the next crime," said Sir Lionel irritably. "We're going to do all we can to prevent another crime."

Dr. Thompson held his peace and blew his nose with some violence.

"Have it your own way," the noise seemed to say. "If you won't face facts —"

The Assistant Commissioner turned to Poirot.

"I see what you're driving at, but I'm not quite clear yet."

"I ask myself," said Poirot, "what passes exactly in the mind of the murderer? He kills, it would seem from his letters, pour le sport—to amuse himself. Can that really be true? And even if it is true, on what principle does he select his victims apart from the merely alphabetical one? If he kills merely to amuse himself he would not advertise the fact, since, otherwise, he could kill with impunity. But no, he seeks, as we all agree, to make the splash in the public eye—to assert his personality. In what way has his personality been suppressed that one can connect with the two victims he has so far selected? A final suggestion: Is his motive direct personal hatred of me, of Hercule Poirot? Does he challenge me in public because I have (unknown to myself) vanquished him somewhere in the course of my career? Or is his animosity impersonal—directed against a foreigner? And if so, what again has led to that? What injury has he suffered at a foreigner's hand?"

"All very suggestive questions," said Dr. Thompson.

Inspector Crome cleared his throat.

"Oh, yes? A little unanswerable at present, perhaps."

“Nevertheless, my friend,” said Poirot, looking straight at him, “it is there, in those questions, that the solution lies. If we knew the exact reason—fantastic, perhaps, to us—but logical to him—of why our madman commits these crimes, we should know, perhaps, who the next victim is likely to be.”

Crome shook his head.

“He selects them haphazard—that’s my opinion.”

“The magnanimous murderer,” said Poirot.

“What’s that you say?”

“I said—the magnanimous murderer! Franz Ascher would have been arrested for the murder of his wife—Donald Fraser might have been arrested for the murder of Betty Barnard—if it had not been for the warning letters of A B C. Is he, then, so soft-hearted that he cannot bear others to suffer for something they did not do?”

“I’ve known stranger things happen,” said Dr. Thompson. “I’ve known men who’ve killed half a dozen victims all broken up because one of their victims didn’t die instantaneously and suffered pain. All the same, I don’t think that that is our fellow’s reason. He wants the credit of these crimes for his own honour and glory. That’s the explanation that fits best.”

“We’ve come to no decision about the publicity business,” said the Assistant Commissioner.

“If I may make a suggestion, sir,” said Crome. “Why not wait till the receipt of the next letter? Make it public then—special editions, etc. It will make a bit of a panic in the particular town named, but it will put everyone whose name begins with C on their guard, and it’ll put A B C on his mettle. He’ll be determined to succeed. And that’s when we’ll get him.”

How little we knew what the future held.

Fourteen

THE THIRD LETTER

I well remember the arrival of A B C’s third letter.

I may say that all precautions had been taken so that when A B C resumed his campaign there should be no unnecessary delays. A young sergeant from Scotland Yard was attached to the house and if Poirot and I were out it was his duty to open anything that came so as to be able to communicate with headquarters without loss of time.

As the days succeeded each other we had all grown more and more on edge. Inspector Crome’s aloof and superior manner grew more and more aloof and superior as one by one his more hopeful clues petered out. The vague descriptions of men said to have been seen with Betty Barnard proved useless. Various cars noticed in the vicinity of Bexhill and Cooden were either accounted for or could not be traced. The investigation of purchases of A B C railway guides caused inconvenience and trouble to heaps of innocent people.

As for ourselves, each time the postman’s familiar rat-tat sounded on the door, our hearts beat faster with apprehension. At least that was true for me, and I cannot but believe that Poirot experienced the same sensation.

He was, I knew, deeply unhappy over the case. He refused to leave London, preferring to be on the spot in case of emergency. In those hot dog days even his moustaches drooped—neglected for once by their owner.

It was on a Friday that A B C’s third letter came. The evening post arrived about ten o’clock.

When we heard the familiar step and the brisk rat-tat, I rose and went along to the box. There were four or five letters, I remember. The last one I looked at was addressed in printed characters.

“Poirot,” I cried…My voice died away.

“It has come? Open it, Hastings. Quickly. Every moment may be needed. We must make our plans.”

I tore open the letter (Poirot for once did not reproach me with untidiness) and extracted the printed sheet.

“Read it,” said Poirot.

I read aloud:

Poor Mr. Poirot,—Not so good at these little criminal matters as you thought yourself, are you? Rather past your prime, perhaps? Let us see if you can do any better this time. This time it’s an easy one. Churston on the 30th. Do try and do something about it! It’s a bit dull having it all my own way, you know!

Good hunting. Ever yours,
A B C.

“Churston,” I said, jumping to our own copy of an A B C. “Let’s see where it is.”

“Hastings,” Poirot’s voice came sharply and interrupted me. “When was that letter written? Is there a date on it?”

I glanced at the letter in my hand.

“Written on the 27th,” I announced.

“Did I hear you aright, Hastings? Did he give the date of the murder as the 30th?”

“That’s right. Let me see, that’s—”

“Bon Dieu, Hastings—do you not realise? Today is the 30th.”

His eloquent hand pointed to the calendar on the wall. I caught up the daily paper to confirm it.

“But why—how—” I stammered.

Poirot caught up the torn envelope from the floor. Something unusual about the address had registered itself vaguely in my brain, but I had been too anxious to get at the contents of the letter to pay more than fleeting attention to it.

Poirot was at the time living in Whitehaven Mansions. The address ran: M. Hercule Poirot, Whitehorse Mansions, across the corner was scrawled: “Not known at Whitehorse Mansions, EC1, nor at Whitehorse Court—try Whitehaven Mansions.”

“Mon Dieu!” murmured Poirot. “Does even chance aid this madman? Vite—vite—we must get on to Scotland Yard.”

A minute or two later we were speaking to Crome over the wire. For once the self-controlled inspector did not reply “Oh, yes?” Instead a quickly stifled curse came to his lips. He heard what we had to say, then rang off in order to get a trunk connection to Churston as rapidly as possible.

“C’est trop tard,” murmured Poirot.

“You can’t be sure of that,” I argued, though without any great hope.

He glanced at the clock.

“Twenty minutes past ten? An hour and forty minutes to go. Is it likely that A B C will have held his hand so long?”

I opened the railway guide I had previously taken from its shelf.

“Churston, Devon,” I read, “from Paddington 204¾ miles. Population 656. It sounds a fairly small place. Surely our man will be bound to be noticed there.”

“Even so, another life will have been taken,” murmured Poirot. “What are the trains? I imagine train will be quicker than car.”

“There’s a midnight train—sleeping car to Newton Abbot—gets there 6:8 am, and then Churston at 7:15.”

“That is from Paddington?”

“Paddington, yes.”

“We will take that, Hastings.”

“You’ll hardly have time to get news before we start.”

“If we receive bad news tonight or tomorrow morning does it matter which?”

“There’s something in that.”

I put a few things together in a suitcase while Poirot once more rang up Scotland Yard.

A few minutes later he came into the bedroom and demanded:

“Mais qu’est ce que vous faites là?”

“I was packing for you. I thought it would save time.”

“Vous éprouvez trop d’émotion, Hastings. It affects your hands and your wits. Is that a way to fold a coat? And regard what you have done to my pyjamas. If the hairwash breaks what will befall them?”

“Good heavens, Poirot,” I cried, “this is a matter of life and death. What does it matter what happens to our clothes?”

“You have no sense of proportion, Hastings. We cannot catch a train earlier than the time that it leaves, and to ruin one’s clothes will not be the least helpful in preventing a murder.”

Taking his suitcase from me firmly, he took the packing into his own hands.

He explained that we were to take the letter and envelope to Paddington with us. Someone from Scotland Yard would meet us there.

When we arrived on the platform the first person we saw was Inspector Crome.

He answered Poirot's look of inquiry.

"No news as yet. All men available are on the lookout. All persons whose name begins with C are being warned by phone when possible. There's just a chance. Where's the letter?"

Poirot gave it to him.

He examined it, swearing softly under his breath.

"Of all the damned luck. The stars in their courses fight for the fellow."

"You don't think," I suggested, "that it was done on purpose?"

Crome shook his head.

"No. He's got his rules—crazy rules—and abides by them. Fair warning. He makes a point of that. That's where his boastfulness comes in. I wonder now—I'd almost bet the chap drinks White Horse whisky."

"Ah, c'est ingénieux, ça!" said Poirot, driven to admiration in spite of himself. "He prints the letter and the bottle is in front of him."

"That's the way of it," said Crome. "We've all of us done much the same thing one time or another, unconsciously copied something that's just under the eye. He started off White and went on horse instead of haven…."

The inspector, we found, was also travelling by the train.

"Even if by some unbelievable luck nothing happened, Churston is the place to be. Our murderer is there, or has been there today. One of my men is on the phone here up to the last minute in case anything comes through.”

Just as the train was leaving the station we saw a man running down the platform. He reached the inspector’s window and called up something.

As the train drew out of the station Poirot and I hurried along the corridor and tapped on the door of the inspector’s sleeper.

“You have news—yes?” demanded Poirot.

Crome said quietly:

“It’s about as bad as it can be. Sir Carmichael Clarke has been found with his head bashed in.”

Sir Carmichael Clarke, although his name was not very well known to the general public, was a man of some eminence. He had been in his time a very well-known throat specialist. Retiring from his profession very comfortably off, he had been able to indulge what had been one of the chief passions of his life—a collection of Chinese pottery and porcelain. A few years later, inheriting a considerable fortune from an elderly uncle, he had been able to indulge his passion to the full, and he was now the possessor of one of the best-known collections of Chinese art. He was married but had no children and lived in a house he had built for himself near the Devon coast, only coming to London on rare occasions such as when some important sale was on.

It did not require much reflection to realize that his death, following that of the young and pretty Betty Barnard, would provide the best newspaper sensation for years. The fact that it was August and that the papers were hard up for subject matter would make matters worse.

“Eh bien,” said Poirot. “It is possible that publicity may do what private efforts have failed to do. The whole country now will be looking for A B C.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “that’s what he wants.”

"True. But it may, all the same, be his undoing. Gratified by success, he may become careless…That is what I hope—that he may be drunk with his own cleverness."

"How odd all this is, Poirot," I exclaimed, struck suddenly by an idea. "Do you know, this is the first crime of this kind that you and I have worked on together? All our murders have been—well, private murders, so to speak."

"You are quite right, my friend. Always, up to now, it has fallen to our lot to work from the inside. It has been the history of the victim that was important. The important points have been: 'Who benefited by the death? What opportunities had those round him to commit the crime?' It has always been the 'crime intime.' Here, for the first time in our association, it is cold-blooded, impersonal murder. Murder from the outside."

I shivered.

"It's rather horrible…."

"Yes. I felt from the first, when I read the original letter, that there was something wrong—misshapen…."

He made an impatient gesture.

"One must not give way to the nerves…This is no worse than any ordinary crime…."

"It is…It is…."

"Is it worse to take the life or lives of strangers than to take the life of someone near and dear to you—someone who trusts and believes in you, perhaps?"

"It's worse because it's mad…."

"No, Hastings. It is not worse. It is only more difficult."

"No, no, I do not agree with you. It's infinitely more frightening."

Hercule Poirot said thoughtfully:

“It should be easier to discover because it is mad. A crime committed by someone shrewd and sane would be far more complicated. Here, if one could but hit on the idea…This alphabetical business, it has discrepancies. If I could once see the idea—then everything would be clear and simple….”

He sighed and shook his head.

“These crimes must not go on. Soon, soon, I must see the truth…Go, Hastings. Get some sleep. There will be much to do tomorrow.”

Fifteen

SIR CARMICHAEL CLARKE

Churston, lying as it does between Brixham on the one side and Paignton and Torquay on the other, occupies a position about halfway round the curve of Torbay. Until about ten years ago it was merely a golf links and below the links a green sweep of countryside dropping down to the sea with only a farmhouse or two in the way of human occupation. But of late years there had been big building developments between Churston and Paignton and the coastline is now dotted with small houses and bungalows, new roads, etc.

Sir Carmichael Clarke had purchased a site of some two acres commanding an uninterrupted view of the sea. The house he had built was of modern design—a white rectangle that was not unpleasing to the eye. Apart from two big galleries that housed his collection it was not a large house.

Our arrival there took place about 8 am. A local police officer had met us at the station and had put us au courant of the situation.

Sir Carmichael Clarke, it seemed, had been in the habit of taking a stroll after dinner every evening. When the police rang up—at some time after eleven—it was ascertained that he had not returned. Since his stroll usually followed the same course, it was not long before a search party discovered his body. Death was due to a crashing blow with some heavy instrument on the back of the head. An open A B C had been placed face downwards on the dead body.

We arrived at Combeside (as the house was called) at about eight o’clock. The door was opened by an elderly butler whose shaking hands and disturbed face showed how much the tragedy had affected him.

“Good morning, Deveril,” said the police officer.

“Good morning, Mr. Wells.”

“These are the gentlemen from London, Deveril.”

“This way, gentlemen.” He ushered us into a long dining room where breakfast was laid. “I’ll get Mr. Franklin.”

A minute or two later a big fair-haired man with a sunburnt face entered the room.

This was Franklin Clarke, the dead man’s only brother.

He had the resolute competent manner of a man accustomed to meeting with emergencies.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

Inspector Wells made the introductions.

“This is Inspector Crome of the CID, Mr. Hercule Poirot and—er—Captain Hayter.”

“Hastings,” I corrected coldly.

Franklin Clarke shook hands with each of us in turn and in each case the handshake was accompanied by a piercing look.

“Let me offer you some breakfast,” he said. “We can discuss the position as we eat.”

There were no dissentient voices and we were soon doing justice to excellent eggs and bacon and coffee.

“Now for it,” said Franklin Clarke. “Inspector Wells gave me a rough idea of the position last night—though I may say it seemed one of the wildest tales I have ever heard. Am I really to believe, Inspector Crome, that my poor brother is the victim of a homicidal maniac, that this is the third murder that has occurred and that in each case an A B C railway guide has been deposited beside the body?”

“That is substantially the position, Mr. Clarke.”

“But why? What earthly benefit can accrue from such a crime—even in the most diseased imagination?”

Poirot nodded his head in approval.

“You go straight to the point, Mr. Franklin,” he said.

“It’s not much good looking for motives at this stage, Mr. Clarke,” said Inspector Crome. “That’s a matter for an alienist—though I may say that I’ve had a certain experience of criminal lunacy and that the motives are usually grossly inadequate. There is a desire to assert one’s personality, to make a splash in the public eye—in fact, to be a somebody instead of a nonentity.”

“Is that true, M. Poirot?”

Clarke seemed incredulous. His appeal to the older man was not too well received by Inspector Crome, who frowned.

“Absolutely true,” replied my friend.

“At any rate such a man cannot escape detection long,” said Clarke thoughtfully.

“Vous croyez? Ah, but they are cunning—ces gens là! And you must remember such a type has usually all the outer signs of insignificance—he belongs to the class of person who is usually passed over and ignored or even laughed at!”

“Will you let me have a few facts, please, Mr. Clarke,” said Crome, breaking in on the conversation.

“Certainly.”

“Your brother, I take it, was in his usual health and spirits yesterday? He received no unexpected letters? Nothing to upset him?”

“No. I should say he was quite his usual self.”

“Not upset and worried in any way.”

“Excuse me, inspector. I didn’t say that. To be upset and worried was my poor brother’s normal condition.”

“Why was that?”

“You may not know that my sister-in-law, Lady Clarke, is in very bad health. Frankly, between ourselves, she is suffering from an incurable cancer, and cannot live very much longer. Her illness has preyed terribly on my brother’s mind. I myself returned from the East not long ago and I was shocked at the change in him.”

Poirot interpolated a question.

“Supposing, Mr. Clarke, that your brother had been found shot at the foot of a cliff—or shot with a revolver beside him. What would have been your first thought?”

“Quite frankly, I should have jumped to the conclusion that it was suicide,” said Clarke.

“Encore!” said Poirot.

“What is that?”

“A fact that repeats itself. It is of no matter.”

“Anyway, it wasn’t suicide,” said Crome with a touch of curtness. “Now I believe, Mr. Clarke, that it was your brother’s habit to go for a stroll every evening?”

“Quite right. He always did.”

“Every night?”

“Well, not if it was pouring with rain, naturally.”

“And everyone in the house knew of this habit?”

"Of course."

"And outside?"

"I don't quite know what you mean by outside. The gardener may have been aware of it or not, I don't know."

"And in the village?"

"Strictly speaking, we haven't got a village. There's a post office and cottages at Churston Ferrers—but there's no village or shops."

"I suppose a stranger hanging round the place would be fairly easily noticed?"

"On the contrary. In August all this part of the world is a seething mass of strangers. They come over every day from Brixham and Torquay and Paignton in cars and buses and on foot. Broadsands, which is down there (he pointed), is a very popular beach and so is Elbury Cove—it's a well-known beauty spot and people come there and picnic. I wish they didn't! You've no idea how beautiful and peaceful this part of the world is in June and the beginning of July."

"So you don't think a stranger would be noticed?"

"Not unless he looked—well, off his head."

"This man doesn't look off his head," said Crome with certainty. "You see what I'm getting at, Mr. Clarke. This man must have been spying out the land beforehand and discovered your brother's habit of taking an evening stroll. I suppose, by the way, that no strange man came up to the house and asked to see Sir Carmichael yesterday?"

"Not that I know of—but we'll ask Deveril."

He rang the bell and put the question to the butler.

"No, sir, no one came to see Sir Carmichael. And I didn't notice anyone hanging about the house either. No more did the maids, because I've asked them.”

The butler waited a moment, then inquired: “Is that all, sir?”

“Yes, Deveril, you can go.”

The butler withdrew, drawing back in the doorway to let a young woman pass.

Franklin Clarke rose as she came in.

“This is Miss Grey, gentlemen. My brother’s secretary.”

My attention was caught at once by the girl’s extraordinary Scandinavian fairness. She had the almost colourless ash hair—light-grey eyes—and transparent glowing pallor that one finds amongst Norwegians and Swedes. She looked about twenty-seven and seemed to be as efficient as she was decorative.

“Can I help you in any way?” she asked as she sat down.

Clarke brought her a cup of coffee, but she refused any food.

“Did you deal with Sir Carmichael’s correspondence?” asked Crome.

“Yes, all of it.”

“I suppose he never received a letter or letters signed A B C?”

“A B C?” She shook her head. “No, I’m sure he didn’t.”

“He didn’t mention having seen anyone hanging about during his evening walks lately?”

“No. He never mentioned anything of the kind.”

“And you yourself have noticed no strangers?”

"Not exactly hanging about. Of course, there are a lot of people what you might call wandering about at this time of year. One often meets people strolling with an aimless look across the golf links or down the lanes to the sea. In the same way, practically everyone one sees this time of year is a stranger."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Inspector Crome asked to be taken over the ground of Sir Carmichael's nightly walk. Franklin Clarke led the way through the french window, and Miss Grey accompanied us.

She and I were a little behind the others.

"All this must have been a terrible shock to you all," I said.

"It seems quite unbelievable. I had gone to bed last night when the police rang up. I heard voices downstairs and at last I came out and asked what was the matter. Deveril and Mr. Clarke were just setting out with lanterns."

"What time did Sir Carmichael usually come back from his walk?"

"About a quarter to ten. He used to let himself in by the side door and then sometimes he went straight to bed, sometimes to the gallery where his collections were. That is why, unless the police had rung up, he would probably not have been missed till they went to call him this morning."

"It must have been a terrible shock to his wife?"

"Lady Clarke is kept under morphia a good deal. I think she is in too dazed a condition to appreciate what goes on round her."

We had come out through a garden gate on to the golf links. Crossing a corner of them, we passed over a stile into a steep, winding lane.

"This leads down to Elbury Cove," explained Franklin Clarke. "But two years ago they made a new road leading from the main road to Broadsands and on to Elbury, so that now this lane is practically deserted."

We went on down the lane. At the foot of it a path led between brambles and bracken down to the sea. Suddenly we came out on a grassy ridge overlooking the sea and a beach of glistening white stones. All round dark green trees ran down to the sea. It was an enchanting spot—white, deep green—and sapphire blue.

“How beautiful!” I exclaimed.

Clarke turned to me eagerly.

“Isn’t it? Why people want to go abroad to the Riviera when they’ve got this! I’ve wandered all over the world in my time and, honest to God, I’ve never seen anything as beautiful.”

Then, as though ashamed of his eagerness, he said in a more matter-of-fact tone:

“This was my brother’s evening walk. He came as far as here, then back up the path, and turning to the right instead of the left, went past the farm and across the fields back to the house.”

We proceeded on our way till we came to a spot near the hedge, halfway across the field where the body had been found.

Crome nodded.

“Easy enough. The man stood here in the shadow. Your brother would have noticed nothing till the blow fell.”

The girl at my side gave a quick shiver.

Franklin Clarke said:

“Hold up, Thora. It’s pretty beastly, but it’s no use shirking facts.”

Thora Grey—the name suited her.

We went back to the house where the body had been taken after being photographed.

As we mounted the wide staircase the doctor came out of a room, black bag in hand.

“Anything to tell us, doctor?” inquired Clarke.

The doctor shook his head.

“Perfectly simple case. I’ll keep the technicalities for the inquest. Anyway, he didn’t suffer. Death must have been instantaneous.”

He moved away.

“I’ll just go in and see Lady Clarke.”

A hospital nurse came out of a room farther along the corridor and the doctor joined her.

We went into the room out of which the doctor had come.

I came out again rather quickly. Thora Grey was still standing at the head of the stairs.

There was a queer scared expression on her face.

“Miss Grey—” I stopped. “Is anything the matter?”

She looked at me.

“I was thinking,” she said, “about D.”

“About D?” I stared at her stupidly.

“Yes. The next murder. Something must be done. It’s got to be stopped.”

Clarke came out of the room behind me.

He said:

“What’s got to be stopped, Thora?”

“These awful murders.”

“Yes.” His jaw thrust itself out aggressively. “I want to talk to M. Poirot some time…Is Crome any good?” He shot the words out unexpectedly.

I replied that he was supposed to be a very clever officer.

My voice was perhaps not as enthusiastic as it might have been.

“He’s got a damned offensive manner,” said Clarke. “Looks as though he knows everything—and what does he know? Nothing at all as far as I can make out.”

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“M. Poirot’s the man for my money. I’ve got a plan. But we’ll talk of that later.”

He went along the passage and tapped at the same door as the doctor had entered.

I hesitated a moment. The girl was staring in front of her.

“What are you thinking of, Miss Grey?”

She turned her eyes towards me.

“I’m wondering where he is now…the murderer, I mean. It’s not twelve hours yet since it happened…Oh! aren’t there any real clairvoyants who could see where he is now and what he is doing….”

“The police are searching—” I began.

My commonplace words broke the spell. Thora Grey pulled herself together.

“Yes,” she said. “Of course.”

In her turn she descended the staircase. I stood there a moment longer conning her words over in my mind.

A B C….

Where was he now…?

Sixteen

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust came out with the rest of the audience from the Torquay Palladium, where he had been seeing and hearing that highly emotional film, Not a Sparrow….

He blinked a little as he came out into the afternoon sunshine and peered round him in that lost-dog fashion that was characteristic of him.

He murmured to himself: "It's an idea…."

Newsboys passed along crying out:

"Latest…Homicidal Maniac at Churston…."

They carried placards on which was written:

CHURSTON MURDER. LATEST.

Mr. Cust fumbled in his pocket, found a coin, and bought a paper. He did not open it at once.

Entering the Princess Gardens, he slowly made his way to a shelter facing Torquay harbour. He sat down and opened the paper.

There were big headlines:

SIR CARMICHAEL CLARKE MURDERED.

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT CHURSTON.

WORK OF A HOMICIDAL MANIAC.

And below them:

Only a month ago England was shocked and startled by the murder of a young girl, Elizabeth Barnard, at Bexhill. It may be remembered that an A B C railway guide figured in the case. An A B C was also found by the dead body of Sir Carmichael Clarke, and the police incline to the belief that both crimes were committed by the same person. Can it be possible that a homicidal murderer is going the round of our seaside resorts?…

A young man in flannel trousers and a bright blue Aertex shirt who was sitting beside Mr. Cust remarked:

“Nasty business—eh?”

Mr. Cust jumped.

“Oh, very—very—”

His hands, the young man noticed, were trembling so that he could hardly hold the paper.

“You never know with lunatics,” said the young man chattily. “They don’t always look barmy, you know. Often they seem just the same as you or me….”

“I suppose they do,” said Mr. Cust.

“It’s a fact. Sometimes it’s the war what unhinged them—never been right since.”

“I—I expect you’re right.”

“I don’t hold with wars,” said the young man.

His companion turned on him.

“I don’t hold with plague and sleeping sickness and famine and cancer…but they happen all the same!”

“War’s preventable,” said the young man with assurance.

Mr. Cust laughed. He laughed for some time.

The young man was slightly alarmed.

“He’s a bit batty himself,” he thought.

Aloud he said:

“Sorry, sir, I expect you were in the war.”

“I was,” said Mr. Cust. “It—it—unsettled me. My head’s never been right since. It aches, you know. Aches terribly.”

“Oh! I’m sorry about that,” said the young man awkwardly.

“Sometimes I hardly know what I’m doing….”

“Really? Well, I must be getting along,” said the young man and removed himself hurriedly. He knew what people were once they began to talk about their health.

Mr. Cust remained with his paper.

He read and reread….

People passed to and fro in front of him.

Most of them were talking of the murder….

“Awful…do you think it was anything to do with the Chinese? Wasn’t the waitress in a Chinese café….”

“Actually on the golf links….”

“I heard it was on the beach….”

“—but, darling, we took our tea to Elbury only yesterday….”

“—police are sure to get him….”

“—say he may be arrested any minute now….”

“—quite likely he’s in Torquay…that other woman was who murdered the what do you call ’ems….”

Mr. Cust folded up the paper very neatly and laid it on the seat. Then he rose and walked sedately along towards the town.

Girls passed him, girls in white and pink and blue, in summery frocks and pyjamas and shorts. They laughed and giggled. Their eyes appraised the men they passed.

Not once did their eyes linger for a second on Mr. Cust….

He sat down at a little table and ordered tea and Devonshire cream….

Seventeen

MARKING TIME

With the murder of Sir Carmichael Clarke the A B C mystery leaped into the fullest prominence.

The newspapers were full of nothing else. All sorts of “clues” were reported to have been discovered. Arrests were announced to be imminent. There were photographs of every person or place remotely connected with the murder. There were interviews with anyone who would give interviews. There were questions asked in Parliament.

The Andover murder was now bracketed with the other two.

It was the belief of Scotland Yard that the fullest publicity was the best chance of laying the murderer by the heels. The population of Great Britain turned itself into an army of amateur sleuths.

The Daily Flicker had the grand inspiration of using the caption:

HE MAY BE IN YOUR TOWN!

Poirot, of course, was in the thick of things. The letters sent to him were published and facsimiled. He was abused wholesale for not having prevented the crimes and defended on the ground that he was on the point of naming the murderer.

Reporters incessantly badgered him for interviews.

What M. Poirot Says Today.

Which was usually followed by a half column of imbecilities.

M. Poirot Takes Grave View of Situation.

M. Poirot on the Eve of Success.

Captain Hastings, the great friend of M. Poirot, told our Special Representative….

“Poirot,” I would cry. “Pray believe me. I never said anything of the kind.”

My friend would reply kindly:

“I know, Hastings—I know. The spoken word and the written—there is an astonishing gulf between them. There is a way of turning sentences that completely reverses the original meaning.”

“I wouldn’t like you to think I’d said—”

“But do not worry yourself. All this is of no importance. These imbecilities, even, may help.”

“How?”

“Eh bien,” said Poirot grimly. “If our madman reads what I am supposed to have said to the Daily Blague today, he will lose all respect for me as an opponent!”

I am, perhaps, giving the impression that nothing practical was being done in the way of investigations. On the contrary, Scotland Yard and the local police of the various counties were indefatigable in following up the smallest clues.

Hotels, people who kept lodgings, boarding-houses—all those within a wide radius of the crimes were questioned minutely.

Hundreds of stories from imaginative people who had “seen a man looking very queer and rolling his eyes,” or “noticed a man with a sinister face slinking along,” were sifted to the last detail. No information, even of the vaguest character, was neglected. Trains, buses, trams, railway porters, conductors, bookstalls, stationers—there was an indefatigable round of questions and verifications.

At least a score of people were detained and questioned until they could satisfy the police as to their movements on the night in question.

The net result was not entirely a blank. Certain statements were borne in mind and noted down as of possible value, but without further evidence they led nowhere.

If Crome and his colleagues were indefatigable, Poirot seemed to me strangely supine. We argued now and again.

“But what is it that you would have me do, my friend? The routine inquiries, the police make them better than I do. Always—always you want me to run about like the dog.”

“Instead of which you sit at home like—like—”

“A sensible man! My force, Hastings, is in my brain, not in my feet! All the time, whilst I seem to you idle, I am reflecting.”

“Reflecting?” I cried. “Is this a time for reflection?”

“Yes, a thousand times yes.”

“But what can you possibly gain by reflection? You know the facts of the three cases by heart.”

“It is not the facts I reflect upon—but the mind of the murderer.”

“The mind of a madman!”

“Precisely. And therefore not to be arrived at in a minute. When I know what the murderer is like, I shall be able to find out who he is. And all the time I learn more. After the Andover crime, what did we know about the murderer? Next to nothing at all. After the Bexhill crime? A little more. After the Churston murder? More still. I begin to see—not what you would like to see—the outlines of a face and form but the outlines of a mind. A mind that moves and works in certain definite directions. After the next crime—”

“Poirot!”

My friend looked at me dispassionately.

"But, yes, Hastings, I think it is almost certain there will be another. A lot depends on la chance. So far our inconnu has been lucky. This time the luck may turn against him. But in any case, after another crime, we shall know infinitely more. Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will, your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions. There are confusing indications—sometimes it is as though there were two intelligences at work—but soon the outline will clear itself, I shall know."

"Who it is?"

"No, Hastings, I shall not know his name and address! I shall know what kind of a man he is…."

"And then?…"

"Et alors, je vais à la pêche."

As I looked rather bewildered, he went on:

"You comprehend, Hastings, an expert fisherman knows exactly what flies to offer to what fish. I shall offer the right kind of fly."

"And then?"

"And then? And then? You are as bad as the superior Crome with his eternal 'Oh, yes?' Eh bien, and then he will take the bait and the hook and we will reel in the line…."

"In the meantime people are dying right and left."

"Three people. And there are, what is it—about 120—road deaths every week?"

"That is entirely different."

"It is probably exactly the same to those who die. For the others, the relations, the friends—yes, there is a difference, but one thing at least rejoices me in this case."

“By all means let us hear anything in the nature of rejoicing.”

“Inutile to be so sarcastic. It rejoices me that there is here no shadow of guilt to distress the innocent.”

“Isn’t this worse?”

“No, no, a thousand times no! There is nothing so terrible as to live in an atmosphere of suspicion—to see eyes watching you and the love in them changing to fear—nothing so terrible as to suspect those near and dear to you—It is poisonous—a miasma. No, the poisoning of life for the innocent, that, at least, we cannot lay at A B C’s door.”

“You’ll soon be making excuses for the man!” I said bitterly.

“Why not? He may believe himself fully justified. We may, perhaps, end by having sympathy with his point of view.”

“Really, Poirot!”

“Alas! I have shocked you. First my inertia—and then my views.”

I shook my head without replying.

“All the same,” said Poirot after a minute or two. “I have one project that will please you—since it is active and not passive. Also, it will entail a lot of conversation and practically no thought.”

I did not quite like his tone.

“What is it?” I asked cautiously.

“The extraction from the friends, relations and servants of the victims of all they know.”

“Do you suspect them of keeping things back, then?”

“Not intentionally. But telling everything you know always implies selection. If I were to say to you, recount me your day yesterday, you would perhaps reply: ‘I rose at nine, I breakfasted at half past, I had eggs and bacon and coffee, I went to my club, etc.’ You would not include: ‘I tore my nail and had to cut it. I rang for shaving water. I spilt a little coffee on the tablecloth. I brushed my hat and put it on.’ One cannot tell everything. Therefore one selects. At the time of a murder people select what they think is important. But quite frequently they think wrong!”

“And how is one to get at the right things?”

“Simply, as I said just now, by conversation. By talking! By discussing a certain happening, or a certain person, or a certain day, over and over again, extra details are bound to arise.”

“What kind of details?”

“Naturally that I do not know or I should not want to find out. But enough time has passed now for ordinary things to reassume their value. It is against all mathematical laws that in three cases of murder there is no single fact nor sentence with a bearing on the case. Some trivial happening, some trivial remark there must be which would be a pointer! It is looking for the needle in the haystack, I grant—but in the haystack there is a needle—of that I am convinced!”

It seemed to me extremely vague and hazy.

“You do not see it? Your wits are not so sharp as those of a mere servant girl.”

He tossed me over a letter. It was neatly written in a sloping board-school hand.

“Dear Sir,—I hope you will forgive the liberty I take in writing to you. I have been thinking a lot since these awful two murders like poor auntie’s. It seems as though we’re all in the same boat, as it were. I saw the young lady’s picture in the paper, the young lady, I mean, that is the sister of the young lady that was killed at Bexhill. I made so bold as to write to her and tell her I was coming to London to get a place and asked if I could come to her or her mother as I said two heads might be better than one and I would not want much wages, but only to find out who this awful fiend is and perhaps we might get at it better if we could say what we knew something might come of it.

"The young lady wrote very nicely and said as how she worked in an office and lived in a hostel, but she suggested I might write to you and she said she'd been thinking something of the same kind as I had. And she said we were in the same trouble and we ought to stand together. So I am writing, sir, to say I am coming to London and this is my address.

"Hoping I am not troubling you, Yours respectfully,
"Mary Drower."

"Mary Drower," said Poirot, "is a very intelligent girl."

He picked up another letter.

"Read this."

It was a line from Franklin Clarke, saying that he was coming to London and would call upon Poirot the following day if not inconvenient.

"Do not despair, mon ami," said Poirot. "Action is about to begin."

Eighteen

POIROT MAKES A SPEECH

Franklin Clarke arrived at three o’clock on the following afternoon and came straight to the point without beating about the bush.

“M. Poirot,” he said, “I’m not satisfied.”

“No, Mr. Clarke?”

“I’ve no doubt that Crome is a very efficient officer, but, frankly, he puts my back up. That air of his of knowing best! I hinted something of what I had in mind to your friend here when he was down at Churston, but I’ve had all my brother’s affairs to settle up and I haven’t been free until now. My idea is, M. Poirot, that we oughtn’t to let the grass grow under our feet—”

“Just what Hastings is always saying!”

“—but go right ahead. We’ve got to get ready for the next crime.”

“So you think there will be a next crime?”

“Don’t you?”

“Certainly.”

“Very well, then. I want to get organized.”

“Tell me your idea exactly?”

“I propose, M. Poirot, a kind of special legion—to work under your orders—composed of the friends and relatives of the murdered people.”

“Une bonne idée.”

"I'm glad you approve. By putting our heads together I feel we might get at something. Also, when the next warning comes, by being on the spot, one of us might—I don't say it's probable—but we might recognize some person as having been near the scene of a previous crime."

"I see your idea, and I approve, but you must remember, Mr. Clarke, the relations and friends of the other victims are hardly in your sphere of life. They are employed persons and though they might be given a short vacation—"

Franklin Clarke interrupted.

"That's just it. I'm the only person in a position to foot the bill. Not that I'm particularly well off myself, but my brother died a rich man and it will eventually come to me. I propose, as I say, to enrol a special legion, the members to be paid for their services at the same rate as they get habitually, with, of course, the additional expenses."

"Who do you propose should form this legion?"

"I've been into that. As a matter of fact, I wrote to Miss Megan Barnard—indeed, this is partly her idea. I suggest myself, Miss Barnard, Mr. Donald Fraser, who was engaged to the dead girl. Then there is a niece of the Andover woman—Miss Barnard knows her address. I don't think the husband would be of any use to us—I hear he's usually drunk. I also think the Barnards—the father and mother—are a bit old for active campaigning."

"Nobody else?"

"Well—er—Miss Grey."

He flushed slightly as he spoke the name.

"Oh! Miss Grey?"

Nobody in the world could put a gentle nuance of irony into a couple of words better than Poirot. About thirty-five years fell away from Franklin

Clarke. He looked suddenly like a shy schoolboy.

“Yes. You see, Miss Grey was with my brother for over two years. She knows the countryside and the people round, and everything. I’ve been away for a year and a half.”

Poirot took pity on him and turned the conversation.

“You have been in the East? In China?”

“Yes. I had a kind of roving commission to purchase things for my brother.”

“Very interesting it must have been. Eh bien, Mr. Clarke, I approve very highly of your idea. I was saying to Hastings only yesterday that a rapprochement of the people concerned was needed. It is necessary to pool reminiscences, to compare notes—enfin to talk the thing over—to talk—to talk—and again to talk. Out of some innocent phrase may come enlightenment.”

A few days later the “Special Legion” met at Poirot’s rooms.

As they sat round looking obediently towards Poirot, who had his place, like the chairman at a board meeting, at the head of the table, I myself passed them, as it were, in review, confirming or revising my first impressions of them.

The three girls were all of them striking-looking—the extraordinary fair beauty of Thora Grey, the dark intensity of Megan Barnard, with her strange Red Indian immobility of face—Mary Drower, neatly dressed in a black coat and skirt, with her pretty, intelligent face. Of the two men, Franklin Clarke, big, bronzed and talkative, Donald Fraser, self-contained and quiet, made an interesting contrast to each other.

Poirot, unable, of course, to resist the occasion, made a little speech.

“Mesdames and Messieurs, you know what we are here for. The police are doing their utmost to track down the criminal. I, too, in my different way. But it seems to me a reunion of those who have a personal interest in the matter—and also, I may say, a personal knowledge of the victims—might have results that an outside investigation cannot pretend to attain.

“Here we have three murders—an old woman, a young girl, an elderly man. Only one thing links these three people together—the fact that the same person killed them. That means that the same person was present in three different localities and was seen necessarily by a large number of people. That he is a madman in an advanced stage of mania goes without saying. That his appearance and behaviour give no suggestion of such a fact is equally certain. This person—and though I say he, remember it may be a man or a woman—has all the devilish cunning of insanity. He has succeeded so far in covering his traces completely. The police have certain vague indications but nothing upon which they can act.

“Nevertheless, there must exist indications which are not vague but certain. To take one particular point—this assassin, he did not arrive at Bexhill at midnight and find conveniently on the beach a young lady whose name began with B—”

“Must we go into that?”

It was Donald Fraser who spoke—the words wrung from him, it seemed, by some inner anguish.

“It is necessary to go into everything, monsieur,” said Poirot, turning to him. “You are here, not to save your feelings by refusing to think of details, but if necessary to harrow them by going into the matter au fond. As I say, it was not chance that provided A B C with a victim in Betty Barnard. There must have been deliberate selection on his part—and therefore premeditation. That is to say, he must have reconnoitred the ground beforehand. There were facts of which he had informed himself—the best hour for the committing of the crime at Andover—the mise en scène at Bexhill—the habits of Sir Carmichael Clarke at Churston. Me, for one, I refuse to believe that there is no indication—no slightest hint—that might help to establish his identity.

“I make the assumption that one—or possibly all of you—knows something that they do not know they know.

"Sooner or later, by reason of your association with one another, something will come to light, will take on a significance as yet undreamed of. It is like the jig-saw puzzle—each of you may have a piece apparently without meaning, but which when reunited may show a definite portion of the picture as a whole."

"Words!" said Megan Barnard.

"Eh?" Poirot looked at her inquiringly.

"What you've been saying. It's just words. It doesn't mean anything."

She spoke with that kind of desperate intensity that I had come to associate with her personality.

"Words, mademoiselle, are only the outer clothing of ideas."

"Well, I think it's sense," said Mary Drower. "I do really, miss. It's often when you're talking over things that you seem to see your way clear. Your mind gets made up for you sometimes without your knowing how it's happened. Talking leads to a lot of things one way and another."

"If 'least said is soonest mended,' it's the converse we want here," said Franklin Clarke.

"What do you say, Mr. Fraser?"

"I rather doubt the practical applicability of what you say, M. Poirot."

"What do you think, Thora?" asked Clarke.

"I think the principle of talking things over is always sound."

"Suppose," suggested Poirot, "that you all go over your own remembrances of the time preceding the murder. Perhaps you'll start, Mr. Clarke."

"Let me see, on the morning of the day Car was killed I went off sailing. Caught eight mackerel. Lovely out there on the bay. Lunch at home. Irish stew, I remember. Slept in the hammock. Tea. Wrote some letters, missed the post, and drove into Paignton to post them. Then dinner and—I'm not ashamed to say it—reread a book of E. Nesbit's that I used to love as a kid. Then the telephone rang—"

"No further. Now reflect, Mr. Clarke, did you meet anyone on your way down to the sea in the morning?"

"Lots of people."

"Can you remember anything about them?"

"Not a damned thing now."

"Sure?"

"Well—let's see—I remember a remarkably fat woman—she wore a striped silk dress and I wondered why—had a couple of kids with her—two young men with a fox terrier on the beach throwing stones for it—Oh, yes, a girl with yellow hair squeaking as she bathed—funny how things come back—like a photograph developing."

"You are a good subject. Now later in the day—the garden—going to the post—"

"The gardener watering…Going to the post? Nearly ran down a bicyclist—silly woman wobbling and shouting to a friend. That's all, I'm afraid."

Poirot turned to Thora Grey.

"Miss Grey?"

Thora Grey replied in her clear, positive voice:

"I did correspondence with Sir Carmichael in the morning—saw the housekeeper. I wrote letters and did needlework in the afternoon, I fancy. It is difficult to remember. It was quite an ordinary day. I went to bed early."

Rather to my surprise, Poirot asked no further. He said:

“Miss Barnard—can you bring back your remembrances of the last time you saw your sister?”

“It would be about a fortnight before her death. I was down for Saturday and Sunday. It was fine weather. We went to Hastings to the swimming pool.”

“What did you talk about most of the time?”

“I gave her a piece of my mind,” said Megan.

“And what else? She conversed of what?”

The girl frowned in an effort of memory.

“She talked about being hard up—of a hat and a couple of summer frocks she’d just bought. And a little of Don…She also said she disliked Milly Higley—that’s the girl at the café—and we laughed about the Merrion woman who keeps the café…I don’t remember anything else….”

“She didn’t mention any man—forgive me, Mr. Fraser—she might be meeting?”

“She wouldn’t to me,” said Megan dryly.

Poirot turned to the red-haired young man with the square jaw.

“Mr. Fraser—I want you to cast your mind back. You went, you said, to the café on the fatal evening. Your first intention was to wait there and watch for Betty Barnard to come out. Can you remember anyone at all whom you noticed whilst you were waiting there?”

“There were a large number of people walking along the front. I can’t remember any of them.”

“Excuse me, but are you trying? However preoccupied the mind may be, the eye notices mechanically—unintelligently but accurately….”

The young man repeated doggedly:

"I don't remember anybody."

Poirot sighed and turned to Mary Drower.

"I suppose you got letters from your aunt?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"When was the last?"

Mary thought a minute.

"Two days before the murder, sir."

"What did it say?"

"She said the old devil had been round and that she'd sent him off with a flea in the ear—excuse the expression, sir—said she expected me over on the Wednesday—that's my day out, sir—and she said we'd go to the pictures. It was going to be my birthday, sir."

Something—the thought of the little festivity perhaps—suddenly brought the tears to Mary's eyes. She gulped down a sob. Then apologized for it.

"You must forgive me, sir. I don't want to be silly. Crying's no good. It was just the thought of her—and me—looking forward to our treat. It upset me somehow, sir."

"I know just what you feel like," said Franklin Clarke. "It's always the little things that get one—and especially anything like a treat or a present—something jolly and natural. I remember seeing a woman run over once. She'd just bought some new shoes. I saw her lying there—and the burst parcel with the ridiculous little high-heeled slippers peeping out—it gave me a turn—they looked so pathetic."

Megan said with a sudden eager warmth:

"That's true—that's awfully true. The same thing happened after Betty—died. Mum had bought some stockings for her as a present—bought them the very day it happened. Poor mum, she was all broken up. I found her crying over them. She kept saying: ‘I bought them for Betty—I bought them for Betty—and she never even saw them.’”

Her own voice quivered a little. She leaned forward, looking straight at Franklin Clarke. There was between them a sudden sympathy—a fraternity in trouble.

“I know,” he said. “I know exactly. Those are just the sort of things that are hell to remember.”

Donald Fraser stirred uneasily.

Thora Grey diverted the conversation.

“Aren’t we going to make any plans—for the future?” she asked.

“Of course.” Franklin Clarke resumed his ordinary manner. “I think that when the moment comes—that is, when the fourth letter arrives—we ought to join forces. Until then, perhaps we might each try our luck on our own. I don’t know whether there are any points M. Poirot thinks might repay investigation?”

“I could make some suggestions,” said Poirot.

“Good. I’ll take them down.” He produced a notebook. “Go ahead, M. Poirot. A—?”

“I consider it just possible that the waitress, Milly Higley, might know something useful.”

“A—Milly Higley,” wrote down Franklin Clarke.

“I suggest two methods of approach. You, Miss Barnard, might try what I call the offensive approach.”

“I suppose you think that suits my style?” said Megan dryly.

“Pick a quarrel with the girl—say you knew she never liked your sister—and that your sister had told you all about her. If I do not err, that will provoke a flood of recrimination. She will tell you just what she thought of your sister! Some useful fact may emerge.”

“And the second method?”

“May I suggest, Mr. Fraser, that you should show signs of interest in the girl?”

“Is that necessary.”

“No, it is not necessary. It is just a possible line of exploration.”

“Shall I try my hand?” asked Franklin. “I’ve—er—a pretty wide experience, M. Poirot. Let me see what I can do with the young lady.”

“You’ve got your own part of the world to attend to,” said Thora Grey rather sharply.

Franklin’s face fell just a little.

“Yes,” he said. “I have.”

“Tout de même, I do not think there is much you can do down there for the present,” said Poirot. “Mademoiselle Grey now, she is far more fitted—”

Thora Grey interrupted him.

“But you see, M. Poirot, I have left Devon for good.”

“Ah? I did not understand.”

“Miss Grey very kindly stayed on to help me clear up things,” said Franklin. “But naturally she prefers a post in London.”

Poirot directed a sharp glance from one to the other.

“How is Lady Clarke?” he demanded.

I was admiring the faint colour in Thora Grey's cheeks and almost missed Clarke's reply.

"Pretty bad. By the way, M. Poirot, I wonder if you could see your way to running down to Devon and paying her a visit? She expressed a desire to see you before I left. Of course, she often can't see people for a couple of days at a time, but if you would risk that—at my expense, of course."

"Certainly, Mr. Clarke. Shall we say the day after tomorrow?"

"Good. I'll let nurse know and she'll arrange the dope accordingly."

"For you, my child," said Poirot, turning to Mary, "I think you might perhaps do good work in Andover. Try the children."

"The children?"

"Yes. Children will not chat readily to outsiders. But you are known in the street where your aunt lived. There were a good many children playing about. They may have noticed who went in and out of your aunt's shop."

"What about Miss Grey and myself?" asked Clarke. "That is, if I'm not to go to Bexhill."

"M. Poirot," said Thora Grey, "what was the postmark on the third letter?"

"Putney, mademoiselle."

She said thoughtfully: "SW15, Putney, that is right, is it not?"

"For a wonder, the newspapers printed it correctly."

"That seems to point to A B C being a Londoner."

"On the face of it, yes."

"One ought to be able to draw him," said Clarke. "M. Poirot, how would it be if I inserted an advertisement—something after these lines: A B C.

Urgent, H.P. close on your track. A hundred for my silence. X.Y.Z. Nothing quite so crude as that—but you see the idea. It might draw him.”

“It is a possibility—yes.”

“Might induce him to try and have a shot at me.”

“I think it’s very dangerous and silly,” said Thora Grey sharply.

“What about it, M. Poirot?”

“It can do no harm to try. I think myself that A B C will be too cunning to reply.” Poirot smiled a little. “I see, Mr. Clarke, that you are—if I may say so without being offensive—still a boy at heart.”

Franklin Clarke looked a little abashed.

“Well,” he said, consulting his notebook. “We’re making a start.

A—Miss Barnard and Milly Higley.

B—Mr. Fraser and Miss Higley.

C—Children in Andover.

D—Advertisement.

“I don’t feel any of it is much good, but it will be something to do whilst waiting.”

He got up and a few minutes later the meeting had dispersed.

Nineteen

BY WAY OF SWEDEN

Poirot returned to his seat and sat humming a little tune to himself.

“Unfortunate that she is so intelligent,” he murmured.

“Who?”

“Megan Barnard. Mademoiselle Megan. ‘Words,’ she snaps out. At once she perceives that what I am saying means nothing at all. Everybody else was taken.”

“I thought it sounded very plausible.”

“Plausible, yes. It was just that she perceived.”

“Didn’t you mean what you said, then?”

“What I said could have been comprised into one short sentence. Instead I repeated myself ad lib without anyone but Mademoiselle Megan being aware of the fact.”

“But why?”

“Eh bien—to get things going! To imbue everyone with the impression that there was work to be done! To start—shall we say—the conversations!”

“Don’t you think any of these lines will lead to anything?”

“Oh, it is always possible.”

He chuckled.

“In the midst of tragedy we start the comedy. It is so, is it not?”

"What do you mean?"

"The human drama, Hastings! Reflect a little minute. Here are three sets of human beings brought together by a common tragedy. Immediately a second drama commences—tout à fait à part. Do you remember my first case in England? Oh, so many years ago now. I brought together two people who loved one another—by the simple method of having one of them arrested for murder! Nothing less would have done it! In the midst of death we are in life, Hastings…Murder, I have often noticed, is a great matchmaker."

"Really, Poirot," I cried scandalized. "I'm sure none of those people was thinking of anything but—"

"Oh! my dear friend. And what about yourself?"

"I?"

"Mais oui, as they departed, did you not come back from the door humming a tune?"

"One may do that without being callous."

"Certainly, but that tune told me your thoughts."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. To hum a tune is extremely dangerous. It reveals the subconscious mind. The tune you hummed dates, I think, from the days of the war. Comme ça," Poirot sang in an abominable falsetto voice:

"Some of the time I love a brunette,

Some of the time I love a blonde

(Who comes from Eden by way of Sweden).

"What could be more revealing? Mais je crois que la blonde l'emporte sur la brunette!"

“Really, Poirot,” I cried, blushing slightly.

“C’est tout naturel. Did you observe how Franklin Clarke was suddenly at one and in sympathy with Mademoiselle Megan? How he leaned forward and looked at her? And did you also notice how very much annoyed Mademoiselle Thora Grey was about it? And Mr. Donald Fraser, he—”

“Poirot,” I said. “Your mind is incurably sentimental.”

“That is the last thing my mind is. You are the sentimental one, Hastings.”

I was about to argue the point hotly, but at that moment the door opened.

To my astonishment it was Thora Grey who entered.

“Forgive me for coming back,” she said composedly. “But there was something that I think I would like to tell you, M. Poirot.”

“Certainly, mademoiselle. Sit down, will you not?”

She took a seat and hesitated for just a minute as though choosing her words.

“It is just this, M. Poirot. Mr. Clarke very generously gave you to understand just now that I had left Combeside by my own wish. He is a very kind and loyal person. But as a matter of fact, it is not quite like that. I was quite prepared to stay on—there is any amount of work to be done in connection with the collections. It was Lady Clarke who wished me to leave! I can make allowances. She is a very ill woman, and her brain is somewhat muddled with the drugs they give her. It makes her suspicious and fanciful. She took an unreasoning dislike to me and insisted that I should leave the house.”

I could not but admire the girl’s courage. She did not attempt to gloss over facts, as so many might have been tempted to do, but went straight to the point with an admirable candour. My heart went out to her in admiration and sympathy.

“I call it splendid of you to come and tell us this,” I said.

“It’s always better to have the truth,” she said with a little smile. “I don’t want to shelter behind Mr. Clarke’s chivalry. He is a very chivalrous man.”

There was a warm glow in her words. She evidently admired Franklin Clarke enormously.

“You have been very honest, mademoiselle,” said Poirot.

“It is rather a blow to me,” said Thora ruefully. “I had no idea Lady Clarke disliked me so much. In fact, I always thought she was rather fond of me.” She made a wry face. “One lives and learns.”

She rose.

“That is all I came to say. Goodbye.”

I accompanied her downstairs.

“I call that very sporting of her,” I said as I returned to the room. “She has courage, that girl.”

“And calculation.”

“What do you mean—calculation?”

“I mean that she has the power of looking ahead.”

I looked at him doubtfully.

“She really is a lovely girl,” I said.

“And wears very lovely clothes. That crêpe marocain and the silver fox collar—dernier cri.”

“You’re a man milliner, Poirot. I never notice what people have on.”

“You should join a nudist colony.”

As I was about to make an indignant rejoinder, he said, with a sudden change of subject:

“Do you know, Hastings, I cannot rid my mind of the impression that already, in our conversations this afternoon, something was said that was significant. It is odd—I cannot pin down exactly what it was…Just an impression that passed through my mind…That reminds me of something I have already heard or seen or noted….”

“Something at Churston?”

“No—not at Churston…Before that…No matter, presently it will come to me….”

He looked at me (perhaps I had not been attending very closely), laughed and began once more to hum.

“She is an angel, is she not? From Eden, by way of Sweden….”

“Poirot,” I said. “Go to the devil!”

Twenty

LADY CLARKE

There was an air of deep and settled melancholy over Combeside when we saw it again for the second time. This may, perhaps, have been partly due to the weather—it was a moist September day with a hint of autumn in the air, and partly, no doubt, it was the semi-shut-up state of the house. The downstairs rooms were closed and shuttered, and the small room into which we were shown smelt damp and airless.

A capable-looking hospital nurse came to us there pulling down her starched cuffs.

“M. Poirot?” she said briskly. “I am Nurse Capstick. I got Mr. Clarke’s letter saying you were coming.”

Poirot inquired after Lady Clarke’s health.

“Not at all bad really, all things considered.”

“All things considered,” I presumed, meant considering she was under sentence of death.

“One can’t hope for much improvement, of course, but some new treatment has made things a little easier for her. Dr. Logan is quite pleased with her condition.”

“But it is true, is it not, that she can never recover?”

“Oh, we never actually say that,” said Nurse Capstick, a little shocked by this plain speaking.

“I suppose her husband’s death was a terrible shock to her?”

"Well, M. Poirot, if you understand what I mean, it wasn't as much of a shock as it would have been to anyone in full possession of her health and faculties. Things are dimmed for Lady Clarke in her condition."

"Pardon my asking, but was she deeply attached to her husband and he to her?"

"Oh, yes, they were a very happy couple. He was very worried and upset about her, poor man. It's always worse for a doctor, you know. They can't buoy themselves up with false hopes. I'm afraid it preyed on his mind very much to begin with."

"To begin with? Not so much afterwards?"

"One gets used to everything, doesn't one? And then Sir Carmichael had his collection. A hobby is a great consolation to a man. He used to run up to sales occasionally, and then he and Miss Grey were busy recataloguing and rearranging the museum on a new system."

"Oh, yes—Miss Grey. She has left, has she not?"

"Yes—I'm very sorry about it—but ladies do take these fancies sometimes when they're not well. And there's no arguing with them. It's better to give in. Miss Grey was very sensible about it."

"Had Lady Clarke always disliked her?"

"No—that is to say, not disliked. As a matter of fact, I think she rather liked her to begin with. But there, I mustn't keep you gossiping. My patient will be wondering what has become of us."

She led us upstairs to a room on the first floor. What had at one time been a bedroom had been turned into a cheerful-looking sitting room.

Lady Clarke was sitting in a big armchair near the window. She was painfully thin, and her face had the grey, haggard look of one who suffers much pain. She had a slightly faraway, dreamy look, and I noticed that the pupils of her eyes were mere pinpoints.

“This is M. Poirot whom you wanted to see,” said Nurse Capstick in her high, cheerful voice.

“Oh, yes, M. Poirot,” said Lady Clarke vaguely.

She extended her hand.

“My friend Captain Hastings, Lady Clarke.”

“How do you do? So good of you both to come.”

We sat down as her vague gesture directed. There was a silence. Lady Clarke seemed to have lapsed into a dream.

Presently with a slight effort she roused herself.

“It was about Car, wasn’t it? About Car’s death. Oh, yes.”

She sighed, but still in a faraway manner, shaking her head.

“We never thought it would be that way round…I was so sure I should be the first to go…” She mused a minute or two. “Car was very strong—wonderful for his age. He was never ill. He was nearly sixty—but he seemed more like fifty…Yes, very strong….”

She relapsed again into her dream. Poirot, who was well acquainted with the effects of certain drugs and of how they give their taker the impression of endless time, said nothing.

Lady Clarke said suddenly:

“Yes—it was good of you to come. I told Franklin. He said he wouldn’t forget to tell you. I hope Franklin isn’t going to be foolish…he’s so easily taken in, in spite of having knocked about the world so much. Men are like that…They remain boys…Franklin, in particular.”

“He has an impulsive nature,” said Poirot.

“Yes—yes…And very chivalrous. Men are so foolish that way. Even Car—” Her voice tailed off.

She shook her head with a febrile impatience.

“Everything’s so dim…One’s body is a nuisance, M. Poirot, especially when it gets the upper hand. One is conscious of nothing else—whether the pain will hold off or not—nothing else seems to matter.”

“I know, Lady Clarke. It is one of the tragedies of this life.”

“It makes me so stupid. I cannot even remember what it was I wanted to say to you.”

“Was it something about your husband’s death?”

“Car’s death? Yes, perhaps…Mad, poor creature—the murderer, I mean. It’s all the noise and the speed nowadays—people can’t stand it. I’ve always been sorry for mad people—their heads must feel so queer. And then, being shut up—it must be so terrible. But what else can one do? If they kill people…” She shook her head—gently pained. “You haven’t caught him yet?” she asked.

“No, not yet.”

“He must have been hanging round here that day.”

“There were so many strangers about, Lady Clarke. It is the holiday season.”

“Yes—I forgot…But they keep down by the beaches, they don’t come up near the house.”

“No stranger came to the house that day.”

“Who says so?” demanded Lady Clarke, with a sudden vigour.

Poirot looked slightly taken aback.

"The servants," he said. "Miss Grey."

Lady Clarke said very distinctly:

"That girl is a liar!"

I started on my chair. Poirot threw me a glance.

Lady Clarke was going on, speaking now rather feverishly.

"I didn't like her. I never liked her. Car thought all the world of her. Used to go on about her being an orphan and alone in the world. What's wrong with being an orphan? Sometimes it's a blessing in disguise. You might have a good-for-nothing father and a mother who drank—then you would have something to complain about. Said she was so brave and such a good worker. I dare say she did her work well! I don't know where all this bravery came in!"

"Now don't excite yourself, dear," said Nurse Capstick, intervening. "We mustn't have you getting tired."

"I soon sent her packing! Franklin had the impertinence to suggest that she might be a comfort to me. Comfort to me indeed! The sooner I saw the last of her the better—that's what I said! Franklin's a fool! I didn't want him getting mixed up with her. He's a boy! No sense! 'I'll give her three months' salary, if you like,' I said. 'But out she goes. I don't want her in the house a day longer.' There's one thing about being ill—men can't argue with you. He did what I said and she went. Went like a martyr, I expect—with more sweetness and bravery!"

"Now, dear, don't get so excited. It's bad for you."

Lady Clarke waved Nurse Capstick away.

"You were as much of a fool about her as anyone else."

"Oh! Lady Clarke, you mustn't say that. I did think Miss Grey a very nice girl—so romantic-looking, like someone out of a novel."

“I’ve no patience with the lot of you,” said Lady Clarke feebly.

“Well, she’s gone now, my dear. Gone right away.”

Lady Clarke shook her head with feeble impatience but she did not answer.

Poirot said:

“Why did you say that Miss Grey was a liar?”

“Because she is. She told you no strangers came to the house, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, then. I saw her—with my own eyes—out of this window—talking to a perfectly strange man on the front doorstep.”

“When was this?”

“In the morning of the day Car died—about eleven o’clock.”

“What did this man look like?”

“An ordinary sort of man. Nothing special.”

“A gentleman—or a tradesman?”

“Not a tradesman. A shabby sort of person. I can’t remember.”

A sudden quiver of pain shot across her face.

“Please—you must go now—I’m a little tired—Nurse.”

We obeyed the cue and took our departure.

“That’s an extraordinary story,” I said to Poirot as we journeyed back to London. “About Miss Grey and a strange man.”

"You see, Hastings? It is, as I tell you: there is always something to be found out."

"Why did the girl lie about it and say she had seen no one?"

"I can think of seven separate reasons—one of them an extremely simple one."

"Is that a snub?" I asked.

"It is, perhaps, an invitation to use your ingenuity. But there is no need for us to perturb ourselves. The easiest way to answer the question is to ask her."

"And suppose she tells us another lie."

"That would indeed be interesting—and highly suggestive."

"It is monstrous to suppose that a girl like that could be in league with a madman."

"Precisely—so I do not suppose it."

I thought for some minutes longer.

"A good-looking girl has a hard time of it," I said at last with a sigh.

"Du tout. Disabuse your mind of that idea."

"It's true," I insisted, "everyone's hand is against her simply because she is good-looking."

"You speak the bêtises, my friend. Whose hand was against her at Combeside? Sir Carmichael's? Franklin's? Nurse Capstick's?"

"Lady Clarke was down on her, all right."

"Mon ami, you are full of charitable feeling towards beautiful young girls. Me, I feel charitable to sick old ladies. It may be that Lady Clarke was the clear-sighted one—and that her husband, Mr. Franklin Clarke and Nurse Capstick were all as blind as bats—and Captain Hastings.”

“You’ve got a grudge against that girl, Poirot.”

To my surprise his eyes twinkled suddenly.

“Perhaps it is that I like to mount you on your romantic high horse, Hastings. You are always the true knight—ready to come to the rescue of damsels in distress—good-looking damsels, bien entendu.”

“How ridiculous you are, Poirot,” I said, unable to keep from laughing.

“Ah, well, one cannot be tragic all the time. More and more I interest myself in the human developments that arise out of this tragedy. It is three dramas of family life that we have there. First there is Andover—the whole tragic life of Mrs. Ascher, her struggles, her support of her German husband, the devotion of her niece. That alone would make a novel. Then you have Bexhill—the happy, easy-going father and mother, the two daughters so widely differing from each other—the pretty fluffy fool, and the intense, strong-willed Megan with her clear intelligence and her ruthless passion for truth. And the other figure—the self-controlled young Scotsman with his passionate jealousy and his worship of the dead girl. Finally you have the Churston household—the dying wife, and the husband absorbed in his collections, but with a growing tenderness and sympathy for the beautiful girl who helps him so sympathetically, and then the younger brother, vigorous, attractive, interesting, with a romantic glamour about him from his long travels.

“Realize, Hastings, that in the ordinary course of events those three separate dramas would never have touched each other. They would have pursued their course uninfluenced by each other. The permutations and combinations of life, Hastings—I never cease to be fascinated by them.”

“This is Paddington,” was the only answer I made.

It was time, I felt, that someone pricked the bubble.

On our arrival at Whitehaven Mansions we were told that a gentleman was waiting to see Poirot.

I expected it to be Franklin, or perhaps Japp, but to my astonishment it turned out to be none other than Donald Fraser.

He seemed very embarrassed and his inarticulateness was more noticeable than ever.

Poirot did not press him to come to the point of his visit, but instead suggested sandwiches and a glass of wine.

Until these made their appearance he monopolized the conversation, explaining where we had been, and speaking with kindliness and feeling of the invalid woman.

Not until we had finished the sandwiches and sipped the wine did he give the conversation a personal turn.

“You have come from Bexhill, Mr. Fraser?”

“Yes.”

“Any success with Milly Higley?”

“Milly Higley? Milly Higley?” Fraser repeated the name wonderingly. “Oh, that girl! No, I haven’t done anything there yet. It’s—”

He stopped. His hands twisted themselves together nervously.

“I don’t know why I’ve come to you,” he burst out.

“I know,” said Poirot.

“You can’t. How can you?”

“You have come to me because there is something that you must tell to someone. You were quite right. I am the proper person. Speak!”

Poirot’s air of assurance had its effect. Fraser looked at him with a queer air of grateful obedience.

“You think so?”

“Parbleu, I am sure of it.”

“M. Poirot, do you know anything about dreams?”

It was the last thing I had expected him to say.

Poirot, however, seemed in no wise surprised.

“I do,” he replied. “You have been dreaming—?”

“Yes. I suppose you’ll say it’s only natural that I should—should dream about—It. But it isn’t an ordinary dream.”

“No?”

“No?”

“I’ve dreamed it now three nights running, sir…I think I’m going mad….”

“Tell me—”

The man’s face was livid. His eyes were staring out of his head. As a matter of fact, he looked mad.

“It’s always the same. I’m on the beach. Looking for Betty. She’s lost—only lost, you understand. I’ve got to find her. I’ve got to give her her belt. I’m carrying it in my hand. And then—”

“Yes?”

“The dream changes…I’m not looking any more. She’s there in front of me—sitting on the beach. She doesn’t see me coming—It’s—oh, I can’t—”

“Go on.”

Poirot’s voice was authoritative—firm.

“I come up behind her…she doesn’t hear me…I slip the belt round her neck and pull—oh—pull….”

The agony in his voice was frightful…I gripped the arms of my chair…The thing was too real.

“She’s choking…she’s dead…I’ve strangled her—and then her head falls back and I see her face…and it’s Megan—not Betty!”

He leant back white and shaking. Poirot poured out another glass of wine and passed it over to him.

“What’s the meaning of it, M. Poirot? Why does it come to me? Every night…?”

“Drink up your wine,” ordered Poirot.

The young man did so, then he asked in a calmer voice:

“What does it mean? I—I didn’t kill her, did I?”

What Poirot answered I do not know, for at that minute I heard the postman’s knock and automatically I left the room.

What I took out of the letter box banished all my interest in Donald Fraser’s extraordinary revelations.

I raced back into the sitting room.

“Poirot,” I cried. “It’s come. The fourth letter.”

He sprang up, seized it from me, caught up his paper knife and slit it open. He spread it out on the table.

The three of us read it together.

Still no success? Fie! Fie! What are you and the police doing? Well, well, isn’t this fun? And where shall we go next for honey?

Poor Mr. Poirot. I’m quite sorry for you.

If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again.

We’ve a long way to go still.

Tipperary? No—that comes farther on. Letter T.

The next little incident will take place at Doncaster on September 11th.

So long.

A B C.

Twenty-one

DESCRIPTION OF A MURDERER

It was at this moment, I think, that what Poirot called the human element began to fade out of the picture again. It was as though, the mind being unable to stand unadulterated horror, we had had an interval of normal human interests.

We had, one and all, felt the impossibility of doing anything until the fourth letter should come revealing the projected scene of the D murder. That atmosphere of waiting had brought a release of tension.

But now, with the printed words jeering from the white stiff paper, the hunt was up once more.

Inspector Crome had come round from the Yard, and while he was still there, Franklin Clarke and Megan Barnard came in.

The girl explained that she, too, had come up from Bexhill.

"I wanted to ask Mr. Clarke something."

She seemed rather anxious to excuse and explain her procedure. I just noted the fact without attaching much importance to it.

The letter naturally filled my mind to the exclusion of all else.

Crome was not, I think, any too pleased to see the various participants in the drama. He became extremely official and noncommittal.

"I'll take this with me, M. Poirot. If you care to take a copy of it—"

"No, no, it is not necessary."

"What are your plans, inspector?" asked Clarke.

“Fairly comprehensive ones, Mr. Clarke.”

“This time we’ve got to get him,” said Clarke. “I may tell you, inspector, that we’ve formed an association of our own to deal with the matter. A legion of interested parties.”

Inspector Crome said in his best manner:

“Oh, yes?”

“I gather you don’t think much of amateurs, inspector?”

“You’ve hardly the same resources at your command, have you, Mr. Clarke?”

“We’ve got a personal axe to grind—and that’s something.”

“Oh, yes?”

“I fancy your own task isn’t going to be too easy, inspector. In fact, I rather fancy old A B C has done you again.”

Crome, I noticed, could often be goaded into speech when other methods would have failed.

“I don’t fancy the public will have much to criticize in our arrangements this time,” he said. “The fool has given us ample warning. The 11th isn’t till Wednesday of next week. That gives ample time for a publicity campaign in the press. Doncaster will be thoroughly warned. Every soul whose name begins with a D will be on his or her guard—that’s so much to the good. Also, we’ll draft police into the town on a fairly large scale. That’s already been arranged for by consent of all the Chief Constables in England. The whole of Doncaster, police and civilians, will be out to catch one man—and with reasonable luck, we ought to get him!”

Clarke said quietly:

“It’s easy to see you’re not a sporting man, inspector.”

Crome stared at him.

“What do you mean, Mr. Clarke?”

“Man alive, don’t you realize that on next Wednesday the St. Leger is being run at Doncaster?”

The inspector’s jaw dropped. For the life of him he could not bring out the familiar “Oh, yes?” Instead he said:

“That’s true. Yes, that complicates matters….”

“A B C is no fool, even if he is a madman.”

We were all silent for a minute or two, taking in the situation. The crowds on the race course—the passionate, sport-loving English public—the endless complications.

Poirot murmured:

“C’est ingénieux. Tout de même c’est bien imaginé, ça.”

“It’s my belief,” said Clarke, “that the murder will take place on the race course—perhaps actually while the Leger is being run.”

For the moment his sporting instincts took a momentary pleasure in the thought….

Inspector Crome rose, taking the letter with him.

“The St. Leger is a complication,” he allowed. “It’s unfortunate.”

He went out. We heard a murmur of voices in the hallway. A minute later Thora Grey entered.

She said anxiously:

“The inspector told me there is another letter. Where this time?”

It was raining outside. Thora Grey was wearing a black coat and skirt and furs. A little black hat just perched itself on the side of her golden head.

It was to Franklin Clarke that she spoke and she came right up to him and, with a hand on his arm, waited for his answer.

“Doncaster—and on the day of the St. Leger.”

We settled down to a discussion. It went without saying that we all intended to be present, but the race-meeting undoubtedly complicated the plans we had made tentatively beforehand.

A feeling of discouragement swept over me. What could this little band of six people do, after all, however strong their personal interest in the matter might be? There would be innumerable police, keen-eyed and alert, watching all likely spots. What could six more pairs of eyes do?

As though in answer to my thought, Poirot raised his voice. He spoke rather like a schoolmaster or a priest.

“Mes enfants,” he said. “We must not disperse the strength. We must approach this matter with method and order in our thoughts. We must look within and not without for the truth. We must say to ourselves—each one of us—what do I know about the murderer? And so we must build up a composite picture of the man we are going to seek.”

“We know nothing about him,” sighed Thora Grey helplessly.

“No, no, mademoiselle. That is not true. Each one of us knows something about him—if we only knew what it is we know. I am convinced that the knowledge is there if we could only get at it.”

Clarke shook his head.

“We don’t know anything—whether he’s old or young, fair or dark! None of us has ever seen him or spoken to him! We’ve gone over everything we all know again and again.”

“Not everything! For instance, Miss Grey here told us that she did not see or speak to any stranger on the day that Sir Carmichael Clarke was murdered.”

Thora Grey nodded.

“That’s quite right.”

“Is it? Lady Clarke told us, mademoiselle, that from her window she saw you standing on the front doorstep talking to a man.”

“She saw me talking to a strange man?” The girl seemed genuinely astonished. Surely that pure, limpid look could not be anything but genuine.

She shook her head.

“Lady Clarke must have made a mistake. I never—Oh!”

The exclamation came suddenly—jerked out of her. A crimson wave flooded her cheeks.

“I remember now! How stupid! I’d forgotten all about it. But it wasn’t important. Just one of those men who come round selling stockings—you know, ex-army people. They’re very persistent. I had to get rid of him. I was just crossing the hall when he came to the door. He spoke to me instead of ringing but he was quite a harmless sort of person. I suppose that’s why I forgot about him.”

Poirot was swaying to and fro, his hands clasped to his head. He was muttering to himself with such vehemence that nobody else said anything, but stared at him instead.

“Stockings,” he was murmuring. “Stockings…stockings…stockings…ça vient…stockings…stockings…it is the motif— yes…three months ago…and the other day…and now. Bon Dieu, I have it!”

He sat upright and fixed me with an imperious eye.

“You remember, Hastings? Andover. The shop. We go upstairs. The bedroom. On a chair. A pair of new silk stockings. And now I know what it was that roused my attention two days ago. It was you, mademoiselle—” He turned on Megan. “You spoke of your mother who wept because she had bought your sister some new stockings on the very day of the murder….”

He looked round on us all.

“You see? It is the same motif three times repeated. That cannot be coincidence. When mademoiselle spoke I had the feeling that what she said linked up with something. I know now with what. The words spoken by Mrs. Ascher’s next-door neighbour, Mrs. Fowler. About people who were always trying to sell you things—and she mentioned stockings. Tell me, mademoiselle, it is true, is it not, that your mother bought those stockings, not at a shop, but from someone who came to the door?”

“Yes—yes—she did…I remember now. She said something about being sorry for these wretched men who go round and try to get orders.”

“But what’s the connection?” cried Franklin. “That a man came selling stockings proves nothing!”

“I tell you, my friends, it cannot be coincidence. Three crimes—and every time a man selling stockings and spying out the land.”

He wheeled round on Thora.

“A vous la parole! Describe this man.”

She looked at him blankly.

“I can’t…I don’t know how…He had glasses, I think—and a shabby overcoat….”

“Mieux que ça, mademoiselle.”

“He stooped…I don’t know. I hardly looked at him. He wasn’t the sort of man you’d notice….”

Poirot said gravely:

“You are quite right, mademoiselle. The whole secret of the murders lies there in your description of the murderer—for without a doubt he was the murderer! ‘He wasn’t the sort of man you’d notice.’ Yes—there is no doubt about it…You have described the murderer!”

Twenty-two

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

I

Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust sat very still. His breakfast lay cold and untasted on his plate. A newspaper was propped up against the teapot and it was this newspaper that Mr. Cust was reading with avid interest.

Suddenly he got up, paced to and fro for a minute, then sank back into a chair by the window. He buried his head in his hands with a stifled groan.

He did not hear the sound of the opening door. His landlady, Mrs. Marbury, stood in the doorway.

“I was wondering, Mr. Cust, if you'd fancy a nice—why, whatever is it? Aren't you feeling well?”

Mr. Cust raised his head from his hands.

“Nothing. It's nothing at all, Mrs. Marbury. I'm not—feeling very well this morning.”

Mrs. Marbury inspected the breakfast tray.

“So I see. You haven't touched your breakfast. Is it your head troubling you again?”

“No. At least, yes…I—I just feel a bit out of sorts.”

“Well, I'm sorry, I'm sure. You'll not be going away today, then?”

Mr. Cust sprang up abruptly.

“No, no. I have to go. It’s business. Important. Very important.”

His hands were shaking. Seeing him so agitated, Mrs. Marbury tried to soothe him.

“Well, if you must—you must. Going far this time?”

“No. I’m going to”—he hesitated for a minute or two—“Cheltenham.”

There was something so peculiar about the tentative way he said the word that Mrs. Marbury looked at him in surprise.

“Cheltenham’s a nice place,” she said conversationally. “I went there from Bristol one year. The shops are ever so nice.”

“I suppose so—yes.”

Mrs. Marbury stooped rather stiffly—for stooping did not suit her figure—to pick up the paper that was lying crumpled on the floor.

“Nothing but this murdering business in the papers nowadays,” she said as she glanced at the headlines before putting it back on the table. “Gives me the creeps, it does. I don’t read it. It’s like Jack the Ripper all over again.”

Mr. Cust’s lips moved, but no sound came from them.

“Doncaster—that’s the place he’s going to do his next murder,” said Mrs. Marbury. “And tomorrow! Fairly makes your flesh creep, doesn’t it? If I lived in Doncaster and my name began with a D, I’d take the first train away, that I would. I’d run no risks. What did you say, Mr. Cust?”

“Nothing, Mrs. Marbury—nothing.”

“It’s the races and all. No doubt he thinks he’ll get his opportunity there. Hundreds of police, they say, they’re drafting in and—Why, Mr. Cust, you do look bad. Hadn’t you better have a little drop of something? Really, now, you oughtn’t to go travelling today.”

Mr. Cust drew himself up.

"It is necessary, Mrs. Marbury. I have always been punctual in my—engagements. People must have—must have confidence in you! When I have undertaken to do a thing, I carry it through. It is the only way to get on in—in—business."

"But if you're ill?"

"I am not ill, Mrs. Marbury. Just a little worried over—various personal matters. I slept badly. I am really quite all right."

His manner was so firm that Mrs. Marbury gathered up the breakfast things and reluctantly left the room.

Mr. Cust dragged out a suitcase from under the bed and began to pack. Pyjamas, sponge bag, spare collar, leather slippers. Then unlocking a cupboard, he transferred a dozen or so flattish cardboard boxes about ten inches by seven from a shelf to the suitcase.

He just glanced at the railway guide on the table and then left the room, suitcase in hand.

Setting it down in the hall, he put on his hat and overcoat. As he did so he sighed deeply, so deeply that the girl who came out from a room at the side looked at him in concern.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Cust?"

"Nothing, Miss Lily."

"You were sighing so!"

Mr. Cust said abruptly:

"Are you at all subject to premonitions, Miss Lily? To presentiments?"

"Well, I don't know that I am, really…Of course, there are days when you just feel everything's going wrong, and days when you feel everything's going right."

“Quite,” said Mr. Cust.

He sighed again.

“Well, goodbye, Miss Lily. Goodbye. I’m sure you’ve been very kind to me always here.”

“Well, don’t say goodbye as though you were going away for ever,” laughed Lily.

“No, no, of course not.”

“See you Friday,” laughed the girl. “Where are you going this time? Seaside again.”

“No, no—er—Cheltenham.”

“Well, that’s nice, too. But not quite as nice as Torquay. That must have been lovely. I want to go there for my holiday next year. By the way, you must have been quite near where the murder was—the A B C murder. It happened while you were down there, didn’t it?”

“Er—yes. But Churston’s six or seven miles away.”

“All the same, it must have been exciting! Why, you may have passed the murderer in the street! You may have been quite near to him!”

“Yes, I may, of course,” said Mr. Cust with such a ghastly and contorted smile that Lily Marbury noticed it.

“Oh, Mr. Cust, you don’t look well.”

“I’m quite all right, quite all right. Goodbye, Miss Marbury.”

He fumbled to raise his hat, caught up his suitcase and fairly hastened out of the front door.

“Funny old thing,” said Lily Marbury indulgently. “Looks half batty to my mind.”

II

Inspector Crome said to his subordinate:

“Get me out a list of all stocking manufacturing firms and circularize them. I want a list of all their agents—you know, fellows who sell on commission and tout for orders.”

“This the A B C case, sir?”

“Yes. One of Mr. Hercule Poirot’s ideas.” The inspector’s tone was disdainful. “Probably nothing in it, but it doesn’t do to neglect any chance, however faint.”

“Right, sir. Mr. Poirot’s done some good stuff in his time, but I think he’s a bit gaga now, sir.”

“He’s a mountebank,” said Inspector Crome. “Always posing. Takes in some people. It doesn’t take in me. Now then, about the arrangement for Doncaster….”

III

Tom Hartigan said to Lily Marbury:

“Saw your old dugout this morning.”

“Who? Mr. Cust?”

“Cust it was. At Euston. Looking like a lost hen, as usual. I think the fellow’s half loony. He needs someone to look after him. First he dropped his paper and then he dropped his ticket. I picked that up—he hadn’t the faintest idea he’d lost it. Thanked me in an agitated sort of manner, but I don’t think he recognized me.”

“Oh, well,” said Lily. “He’s only seen you passing in the hall, and not very often at that.”

They danced once round the floor.

“You dance something beautiful,” said Tom.

“Go on,” said Lily and wriggled yet a little closer.

They danced round again.

“Did you say Euston or Paddington?” asked Lily abruptly. “Where you saw old Cust, I mean?”

“Euston.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. What do you think?”

“Funny. I thought you went to Cheltenham from Paddington.”

“So you do. But old Cust wasn’t going to Cheltenham. He was going to Doncaster.”

“Cheltenham.”

“Doncaster. I know, my girl! After all, I picked up his ticket, didn’t I?”

“Well, he told me he was going to Cheltenham. I’m sure he did.”

“Oh, you’ve got it wrong. He was going to Doncaster all right. Some people have all the luck. I’ve got a bit on Firefly for the Leger and I’d love to see it run.”

“I shouldn’t think Mr. Cust went to race meetings, he doesn’t look the kind. Oh, Tom, I hope he won’t get murdered. It’s Doncaster the A B C murder’s going to be.”

“Cust’ll be all right. His name doesn’t begin with a D.”

“He might have been murdered last time. He was down near Churston at Torquay when the last murder happened.”

“Was he? That’s a bit of a coincidence, isn’t it?”

He laughed.

“He wasn’t at Bexhill the time before, was he?”

Lily crinkled her brows.

“He was away…Yes, I remember he was away…because he forgot his bathing-dress. Mother was mending it for him. And she said: ‘There—Mr. Cust went away yesterday without his bathing-dress after all,’ and I said: ‘Oh, never mind the old bathing-dress—there’s been the most awful murder,’ I said, ‘a girl strangled at Bexhill.’”

“Well, if he wanted his bathing-dress, he must have been going to the seaside. I say, Lily”—his face crinkled up with amusement. “What price your old dugout being the murderer himself?”

“Poor Mr. Cust? He wouldn’t hurt a fly,” laughed Lily.

They danced on happily—in their conscious minds nothing but the pleasure of being together.

In their unconscious minds something stirred….

Twenty-three

SEPTEMBER 11TH. DONCASTER

Doncaster!

I shall, I think, remember that 11th of September all my life.

Indeed, whenever I see a mention of the St. Leger my mind flies automatically not to horse racing but to murder.

When I recall my own sensations, the thing that stands out most is a sickening sense of insufficiency. We were here—on the spot—Poirot, myself, Clarke, Fraser, Megan Barnard, Thora Grey and Mary Drower, and in the last resort what could any of us do?

We were building on a forlorn hope—on the chance of recognizing amongst a crowd of thousands of people a face or figure imperfectly seen on an occasion one, two or three months back.

The odds were in reality greater than that. Of us all, the only person likely to make such a recognition was Thora Grey.

Some of her serenity had broken down under the strain. Her calm, efficient manner was gone. She sat twisting her hands together, almost weeping, appealing incoherently to Poirot.

“I never really looked at him…Why didn’t I? What a fool I was. You’re depending on me, all of you…and I shall let you down. Because even if I did see him again I mightn’t recognize him. I’ve got a bad memory for faces.”

Poirot, whatever he might say to me, and however harshly he might seem to criticize the girl, showed nothing but kindness now. His manner was tender in the extreme. It struck me that Poirot was no more indifferent to beauty in distress than I was.

He patted her shoulder kindly.

“Now then, petite, not the hysteria. We cannot have that. If you should see this man you would recognize him.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, a great many reasons—for one, because the red succeeds the black.”

“What do you mean, Poirot?” I cried.

“I speak the language of the tables. At roulette there may be a long run on the black—but in the end red must turn up. It is the mathematical laws of chance.”

“You mean that luck turns?”

“Exactly, Hastings. And that is where the gambler (and the murderer, who is, after all, only a supreme kind of gambler since what he risks is not his money but his life) often lacks intelligent anticipation. Because he has won he thinks he will continue to win! He does not leave the tables in good time with his pocket full. So in crime the murderer who is successful cannot conceive the possibility of not being successful! He takes to himself all the credit for a successful performance—but I tell you, my friends, however carefully planned, no crime can be successful without luck!”

“Isn’t that going rather far?” demurred Franklin Clarke.

Poirot waved his hands excitedly.

“No, no. It is an even chance, if you like, but it must be in your favour. Consider! It might have happened that someone enters Mrs. Ascher’s shop just as the murderer is leaving. That person might have thought of looking behind the counter, have seen the dead woman—and either laid hands on the murderer straight away or else been able to give such an accurate description of him to the police that he would have been arrested forthwith.”

"Yes, of course, that's possible," admitted Clarke. "What it comes to is that a murderer's got to take a chance."

"Precisely. A murderer is always a gambler. And, like many gamblers, a murderer often does not know when to stop. With each crime his opinion of his own abilities is strengthened. His sense of proportion is warped. He does not say 'I have been clever and lucky!' No, he says only 'I have been clever!' And his opinion of his cleverness grows and then, mes amis, the ball spins, and the run of colour is over—it drops into a new number and the croupier calls out 'Rouge.'"

"You think that will happen in this case?" asked Megan, drawing her brows together in a frown.

"It must happen sooner or later! So far the luck has been with the criminal—sooner or later it must turn and be with us. I believe that it has turned! The clue of the stockings is the beginning. Now, instead of everything going right for him, everything will go wrong for him! And he, too, will begin to make mistakes…."

"I will say you're heartening," said Franklin Clarke. "We all need a bit of comfort. I've had a paralysing feeling of helplessness ever since I woke up."

"It seems to me highly problematical that we can accomplish anything of practical value," said Donald Fraser.

Megan rapped out:

"Don't be a defeatist, Don."

Mary Drower, flushing up a little, said:

"What I say is, you never know. That wicked fiend's in this place, and so are we—and after all, you do run up against people in the funniest way sometimes."

I fumed:

“If only we could do something more.”

“You must remember, Hastings, that the police are doing everything reasonably possible. Special constables have been enrolled. The good Inspector Crome may have the irritating manner, but he is a very able police officer, and Colonel Anderson, the Chief Constable, is a man of action. They have taken the fullest measures for watching and patrolling the town and the race course. There will be plainclothesmen everywhere. There is also the press campaign. The public is fully warned.”

Donald Fraser shook his head.

“He’ll never attempt it, I’m thinking,” he said more hopefully. “The man would just be mad!”

“Unfortunately,” said Clarke dryly, “he is mad! What do you think, M. Poirot? Will he give it up or will he try to carry it through?”

“In my opinion the strength of his obsession is such that he must attempt to carry out his promise! Not to do so would be to admit failure, and that his insane egoism would never allow. That, I may say, is also Dr. Thompson’s opinion. Our hope is that he may be caught in the attempt.”

Donald shook his head again.

“He’ll be very cunning.”

Poirot glanced at his watch. We took the hint. It had been agreed that we were to make an all-day session of it, patrolling as many streets as possible in the morning, and later, stationing ourselves at various likely points on the race course.

I say “we.” Of course, in my own case such a patrol was of little avail since I was never likely to have set eyes on A B C. However, as the idea was to separate so as to cover as wide an area as possible I had suggested that I should act as escort to one of the ladies.

Poirot had agreed—I am afraid with somewhat of a twinkle in his eye.

The girls went off to get their hats on. Donald Fraser was standing by the window looking out, apparently lost in thought.

Franklin Clarke glanced over at him, then evidently deciding that the other was too abstracted to count as a listener, he lowered his voice a little and addressed Poirot.

“Look here, M. Poirot. You went down to Churston, I know, and saw my sister-in-law. Did she say—or hint—I mean—did she suggest at all—?”

He stopped, embarrassed.

Poirot answered with a face of blank innocence that aroused my strongest suspicions.

“Comment? Did your sister-in-law say, hint, or suggest—what?”

Franklin Clarke got rather red.

“Perhaps you think this isn’t a time for butting in with personal things—”

“Du tout!”

“But I feel I’d like to get things quite straight.”

“An admirable course.”

This time I think Clarke began to suspect Poirot’s bland face of concealing some inner amusement. He ploughed on rather heavily.

“My sister-in-law’s an awfully nice woman—I’ve been very fond of her always—but of course she’s been ill some time—and in that kind of illness—being given drugs and all that—one tends to—well, to fancy things about people!”

“Ah?”

By now there was no mistaking the twinkle in Poirot’s eye.

But Franklin Clarke, absorbed in his diplomatic task, was past noticing it.

“It’s about Thora—Miss Grey,” he said.

“Oh, it is of Miss Grey you speak?” Poirot’s tone held innocent surprise.

“Yes. Lady Clarke got certain ideas in her head. You see, Thora—Miss Grey is well, rather a goodlooking girl—”

“Perhaps—yes,” conceded Poirot.

“And women, even the best of them, are a bit catty about other women. Of course, Thora was invaluable to my brother—he always said she was the best secretary he ever had—and he was very fond of her, too. But it was all perfectly straight and aboveboard. I mean, Thora isn’t the sort of girl—”

“No?” said Poirot helpfully.

“But my sister-in-law got it into her head to be—well—jealous, I suppose. Not that she ever showed anything. But after Car’s death, when there was a question of Miss Grey staying on—well, Charlotte cut up rough. Of course, it’s partly the illness and the morphia and all that—Nurse Capstick says so—she says we mustn’t blame Charlotte for getting these ideas into her head—”

He paused.

“Yes?”

“What I want you to understand, M. Poirot, is that there isn’t anything in it at all. It’s just a sick woman’s imaginings. Look here”—he fumbled in his pocket—“here’s a letter I received from my brother when I was in the Malay States. I’d like you to read it because it shows exactly what terms they were on.”

Poirot took it. Franklin came over beside him and with a pointing finger read some of the extracts out loud.

"—things go on here much as usual. Charlotte is moderately free from pain. I wish one could say more. You may remember Thora Grey? She is a dear girl and a greater comfort to me than I can tell you. I should not have known what to do through this bad time but for her. Her sympathy and interest are unfailing. She has an exquisite taste and flair for beautiful things and shares my passion for Chinese art. I was indeed lucky to find her. No daughter could be a closer or more sympathetic companion. Her life had been a difficult and not always a happy one, but I am glad to feel that here she has a home and true affection.

"You see," said Franklin, "that's how my brother felt to her. He thought of her like a daughter. What I feel so unfair is the fact that the moment my brother is dead, his wife practically turns her out of the house! Women really are devils, M. Poirot."

"Your sister-in-law is ill and in pain, remember."

"I know. That's what I keep saying to myself. One mustn't judge her. All the same, I thought I'd show you this. I don't want you to get a false impression of Thora from anything Lady Clarke may have said."

Poirot returned the letter.

"I can assure you," he said, smiling, "that I never permit myself to get false impressions from anything anyone tells me. I form my own judgments."

"Well," said Clarke, stowing away the letter. "I'm glad I showed it to you anyway. Here come the girls. We'd better be off."

As we left the room, Poirot called me back.

"You are determined to accompany the expedition, Hastings?"

"Oh, yes. I shouldn't be happy staying here inactive."

"There is activity of mind as well as body, Hastings."

"Well, you're better at it than I am," I said.

“You are incontestably right, Hastings. Am I correct in supposing that you intend to be a cavalier to one of the ladies?”

“That was the idea.”

“And which lady did you propose to honour with your company?”

“Well—I—er—hadn’t considered yet.”

“What about Miss Barnard?”

“She’s rather the independent type,” I demurred.

“Miss Grey?”

“Yes. She’s better.”

“I find you, Hastings, singularly though transparently dishonest! All along you had made up your mind to spend the day with your blonde angel!”

“Oh, really, Poirot!”

“I am sorry to upset your plans, but I must request you to give your escort elsewhere.”

“Oh, all right. I think you’ve got a weakness for that Dutch doll of a girl.”

“The person you are to escort is Mary Drower—and I must request you not to leave her.”

“But, Poirot, why?”

“Because, my dear friend, her name begins with a D. We must take no chances.”

I saw the justice of his remark. At first it seemed far-fetched, but then I realized that if A B C had a fanatical hatred of Poirot, he might very well be keeping himself informed of Poirot’s movements. And in that case the elimination of Mary Drower might strike him as a very pat fourth stroke.

I promised to be faithful to my trust.

I went out leaving Poirot sitting in a chair near the window.

In front of him was a little roulette wheel. He spun it as I went out of the door and called after me:

“Rouge—that is a good omen, Hastings. The luck, it turns!”

Twenty-four

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Below his breath Mr. Leadbetter uttered a grunt of impatience as his next-door neighbour got up and stumbled clumsily past him, dropping his hat over the seat in front, and leaning over to retrieve it.

All this at the culminating moment of Not a Sparrow, that all-star, thrilling drama of pathos and beauty that Mr. Leadbetter had been looking forward to seeing for a whole week.

The golden-haired heroine, played by Katherine Royal (in Mr. Leadbetter's opinion the leading film actress in the world), was just giving vent to a hoarse cry of indignation:

"Never. I would sooner starve. But I shan't starve. Remember those words: not a sparrow falls—"

Mr. Leadbetter moved his head irritably from right to left. People! Why on earth people couldn't wait till the end of a film…And to leave at this soul-stirring moment.

Ah, that was better. The annoying gentleman had passed on and out. Mr. Leadbetter had a full view of the screen and of Katherine Royal standing by the window in the Van Schreiner Mansion in New York.

And now she was boarding the train—the child in her arms…What curious trains they had in America—not at all like English trains.

Ah, there was Steve again in his shack in the mountains….

The film pursued its course to its emotional and semi-religious end.

Mr. Leadbetter breathed a sigh of satisfaction as the lights went up.

He rose slowly to his feet, blinking a little.

He never left the cinema very quickly. It always took him a moment or two to return to the prosaic reality of everyday life.

He glanced round. Not many people this afternoon—naturally. They were all at the races. Mr. Leadbetter did not approve of racing nor of playing cards nor of drinking nor of smoking. This left him more energy to enjoy going to the pictures.

Everyone was hurrying towards the exit. Mr. Leadbetter prepared to follow suit. The man in the seat in front of him was asleep—slumped down in his chair. Mr. Leadbetter felt indignant to think that anyone could sleep with such a drama as Not a Sparrow going on.

An irate gentleman was saying to the sleeping man whose legs were stretched out blocking the way:

“Excuse me, sir.”

Mr. Leadbetter reached the exit. He looked back.

There seemed to be some sort of commotion. A commissionaire…a little knot of people…Perhaps that man in front of him was dead drunk and not asleep….

He hesitated and then passed out—and in so doing missed the sensation of the day—a greater sensation even than Not Half winning the St. Leger at 85 to 1.

The commissionaire was saying:

“Believe you’re right, sir…He’s ill…Why—what’s the matter, sir?”

The other had drawn away his hand with an exclamation and was examining a red sticky smear.

“Blood….”

The commissionaire gave a stifled exclamation.

He had caught sight of the corner of something yellow projecting from under the seat.

“Gor blimey!” he said. “It’s a b—A B C.”

Twenty-five

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Mr. Cust came out of the Regal Cinema and looked up at the sky.

A beautiful evening…A really beautiful evening….

A quotation from Browning came into his head.

"God's in His heaven. All's right with the world."

He had always been fond of that quotation.

Only there were times, very often, when he had felt it wasn't true….

He trotted along the street smiling to himself until he came to the Black Swan where he was staying.

He climbed the stairs to his bedroom, a stuffy little room on the second floor, giving over a paved inner court and garage.

As he entered the room his smile faded suddenly. There was a stain on his sleeve near the cuff. He touched it tentatively—wet and red—blood….

His hand dipped into his pocket and brought out something—a long slender knife. The blade of that, too, was sticky and red….

Mr. Cust sat there a long time.

Once his eyes shot round the room like those of a hunted animal.

His tongue passed feverishly over his lips….

"It isn't my fault," said Mr. Cust.

He sounded as though he were arguing with somebody—a schoolboy pleading to his headmaster.

He passed his tongue over his lips again….

Again, tentatively, he felt his coat sleeve.

His eyes crossed the room to the wash-basin.

A minute later he was pouring out water from the old-fashioned jug into the basin. Removing his coat, he rinsed the sleeve, carefully squeezing it out….

Ugh! The water was red now….

A tap on the door.

He stood there frozen into immobility—staring.

The door opened. A plump young woman—jug in hand.

“Oh, excuse me, sir. Your hot water, sir.”

He managed to speak then.

“Thank you…I’ve washed in cold….”

Why had he said that? Immediately her eyes went to the basin.

He said frenziedly: “I—I’ve cut my hand….”

There was a pause—yes, surely a very long pause—before she said: “Yes, sir.”

She went out, shutting the door.

Mr. Cust stood as though turned to stone.

He listened.

It had come—at last….

Were there voices—exclamations—feet mounting the stairs?

He could hear nothing but the beating of his own heart….

Then, suddenly, from frozen immobility he leaped into activity.

He slipped on his coat, tiptoed to the door and opened it. No noises as yet except the familiar murmur arising from the bar. He crept down the stairs….

Still no one. That was luck. He paused at the foot of the stairs. Which way now?

He made up his mind, darted quickly along a passage and out by the door that gave into the yard. A couple of chauffeurs were there tinkering with cars and discussing winners and losers.

Mr. Cust hurried across the yard and out into the street.

Round the first corner to the right—then to the left—right again….

Dare he risk the station?

Yes—there would be crowds there—special trains—if luck were on his side he would do it all right….

If only luck were with him….

Twenty-six

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Inspector Crome was listening to the excited utterances of Mr. Leadbetter.

"I assure you, inspector, my heart misses a beat when I think of it. He must actually have been sitting beside me all through the programme!"

Inspector Crome, completely indifferent to the behaviour of Mr. Leadbetter's heart, said:

"Just let me have it quite clear? This man went out towards the close of the big picture—"

"Not a Sparrow—Katherine Royal," murmured Mr. Leadbetter automatically.

"He passed you and in doing so stumbled—"

"He pretended to stumble, I see it now. Then he leaned over the seat in front to pick up his hat. He must have stabbed the poor fellow then."

"You didn't hear anything? A cry? Or a groan?"

Mr. Leadbetter had heard nothing but the loud, hoarse accents of Katherine Royal, but in the vividness of his imagination he invented a groan.

Inspector Crome took the groan at its face value and bade him proceed.

"And then he went out—"

"Can you describe him?"

"He was a very big man. Six foot at least. A giant."

"Fair or dark?"

"I—well—I'm not exactly sure. I think he was bald. A sinister-looking fellow."

"He didn't limp, did he?" asked Inspector Crome.

"Yes—yes, now you come to speak of it I think he did limp. Very dark, he might have been some kind of half-caste."

"Was he in his seat the last time the lights came up?"

"No. He came in after the big picture began."

Inspector Crome nodded, handed Mr. Leadbetter a statement to sign and got rid of him.

"That's about as bad a witness as you'll find," he remarked pessimistically. "He'd say anything with a little leading. It's perfectly clear that he hasn't the faintest idea what our man looks like. Let's have the commissionaire back."

The commissionaire, very stiff and military, came in and stood to attention, his eyes fixed on Colonel Anderson.

"Now, then, Jameson, let's hear your story."

Jameson saluted.

"Yessir. Close of the performance, sir. I was told there was a gentleman taken ill, sir. Gentleman was in the two and fourpennies, slumped down in his seat like. Other gentlemen standing around. Gentleman looked bad to me, sir. One of the gentlemen standing by put his hand to the ill gentleman's coat and drew my attention. Blood, sir. It was clear the gentleman was dead—stabbed, sir. My attention was drawn to an A B C railway guide, sir, under the seat. Wishing to act correctly, I did not touch same, but reported to the police immediately that a tragedy had occurred."

"Very good. Jameson, you acted very properly."

"Thank you, sir."

"Did you notice a man leaving the two and four-pennies about five minutes earlier?"

"There were several, sir."

"Could you describe them?"

"Afraid not, sir. One was Mr. Geoffrey Parnell. And there was a young fellow, Sam Baker, with his young lady. I didn't notice anybody else particular."

"A pity. That'll do, Jameson."

"Yessir."

The commissionaire saluted and departed.

"The medical details we've got," said Colonel Anderson. "We'd better have the fellow that found him next."

A police constable came in and saluted.

"Mr. Hercule Poirot's here, sir, and another gentleman."

Inspector Crome frowned.

"Oh, well," he said. "Better have 'em in, I suppose."

Twenty-seven

THE DONCASTER MURDER

Coming in hard on Poirot's heels, I just caught the fag end of Inspector Crome's remark.

Both he and the Chief Constable were looking worried and depressed.

Colonel Anderson greeted us with a nod of the head.

"Glad you've come, M. Poirot," he said politely. I think he guessed that Crome's remark might have reached our ears. "We've got it in the neck again, you see."

"Another A B C murder?"

"Yes. Damned audacious bit of work. Man leaned over and stabbed the fellow in the back."

"Stabbed this time?"

"Yes, varies his methods a bit, doesn't he? Biff on the head, strangled, now a knife. Versatile devil—what? Here are the medical details if you care to see 'em."

He shoved a paper towards Poirot. "A B C down on the floor between the dead man's feet," he added.

"Has the dead man been identified?" asked Poirot.

"Yes. A B C's slipped up for once—if that's any satisfaction to us. Deceased's a man called Earlsfield—George Earlsfield. Barber by profession."

"Curious," commented Poirot.

“May have skipped a letter,” suggested the colonel.

My friend shook his head doubtfully.

“Shall we have in the next witness?” asked Crome. “He’s anxious to get home.”

“Yes, yes—let’s get on.”

A middle-aged gentleman strongly resembling the frog footman in Alice in Wonderland was led in. He was highly excited and his voice was shrill with emotion.

“Most shocking experience I have ever known,” he squeaked. “I have a weak heart, sir—a very weak heart, it might have been the death of me.”

“Your name, please,” said the inspector.

“Downes. Roger Emmanuel Downes.”

“Profession?”

“I am a master at Highfield School for boys.”

“Now, Mr. Downes, will you tell us in your own words what happened.”

“I can tell you that very shortly, gentlemen. At the close of the performance I rose from my seat. The seat on my left was empty but in the one beyond a man was sitting, apparently asleep. I was unable to pass him to get out as his legs were stuck out in front of him. I asked him to allow me to pass. As he did not move I repeated my request in—a—er—slightly louder tone. He still made no response. I then took him by the shoulder to waken him. His body slumped down further and I became aware that he was either unconscious or seriously ill. I called out: ‘This gentleman is taken ill. Fetch the commissionaire.’ The commissionaire came. As I took my hand from the man’s shoulder I found it was wet and red…I can assure you, gentlemen, the shock was terrific! Anything might have happened! For years I have suffered from cardiac weakness—”

Colonel Anderson was looking at Mr. Downes with a very curious expression.

“You can consider that you’re a lucky man, Mr. Downes.”

“I do, sir. Not even a palpitation!”

“You don’t quite take my meaning, Mr. Downes. You were sitting two seats away, you say?”

“Actually I was sitting at first in the next seat to the murdered man—then I moved along so as to be behind an empty seat.”

“You’re about the same height and build as the dead man, aren’t you, and you were wearing a woollen scarf round your neck just as he was?”

“I fail to see—” began Mr. Downes stiffly.

“I’m telling you, man,” said Colonel Anderson, “just where your luck came in. Somehow or other, when the murderer followed you in, he got confused. He picked on the wrong back. I’ll eat my hat, Mr. Downes, if that knife wasn’t meant for you!”

However well Mr. Downes’ heart had stood former tests, it was unable to stand up to this one. He sank on a chair, gasped, and turned purple in the face.

“Water,” he gasped. “Water….”

A glass was brought him. He sipped it whilst his complexion gradually returned to the normal.

“Me?” he said. “Why me?”

“It looks like it,” said Crome. “In fact, it’s the only explanation.”

“You mean that this man—this—this fiend incarnate—this bloodthirsty madman has been following me about waiting for an opportunity?”

“I should say that was the way of it.”

“But in heaven’s name, why me?” demanded the outraged schoolmaster.

Inspector Crome struggled with the temptation to reply: “Why not?” and said instead: “I’m afraid it’s no good expecting a lunatic to have reasons for what he does.”

“God bless my soul,” said Mr. Downes, sobered into whispering.

He got up. He looked suddenly old and shaken.

“If you don’t want me any more, gentlemen, I think I’ll go home. I—I don’t feel very well.”

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Downes. I’ll send a constable with you—just to see you’re all right.”

“Oh, no—no, thank you. That’s not necessary.”

“Might as well,” said Colonel Anderson gruffly.

His eyes slid sideways, asking an imperceptible question of the inspector. The latter gave an equally imperceptible nod.

Mr. Downes went out shakily.

“Just as well he didn’t tumble to it,” said Colonel Anderson. “There’ll be a couple of them—eh?”

“Yes, sir. Your Inspector Rice has made arrangements. The house will be watched.”

“You think,” said Poirot, “that when A B C finds out his mistake he might try again?”

Anderson nodded.

"It's a possibility," he said. "Seems a methodical sort of chap, A B C. It will upset him if things don't go according to programme."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Wish we could get a description of the fellow," said Colonel Anderson irritably. "We're as much in the dark as ever."

"It may come," said Poirot.

"Think so? Well, it's possible. Damn it all, hasn't anyone got eyes in their head?"

"Have patience," said Poirot.

"You seem very confident, M. Poirot. Got any reason for this optimism?"

"Yes, Colonel Anderson. Up to now, the murderer has not made a mistake. He is bound to make one soon."

"If that's all you've got to go on," began the Chief Constable with a snort, but he was interrupted.

"Mr. Ball of the Black Swan is here with a young woman, sir. He reckons he's got summat to say might help you."

"Bring them along. Bring them along. We can do with anything helpful."

Mr. Ball of the Black Swan was a large, slow-thinking, heavily moving man. He exhaled a strong odour of beer. With him was a plump young woman with round eyes clearly in a state of high excitement.

"Hope I'm not intruding or wasting valuable time," said Mr. Ball in a slow, thick voice. "But this wench, Mary here, reckons she's got something to tell as you ought to know."

Mary giggled in a half-hearted way.

"Well, my girl, what is it?" said Anderson. "What's your name?"

“Mary, sir, Mary Stroud.”

“Well, Mary, out with it.”

Mary turned her round eyes on her master.

“It’s her business to take up hot water to the gents’ bedrooms,” said Mr. Ball, coming to the rescue. “About half a dozen gentlemen we’d got staying. Some for the races and some just commercials.”

“Yes, yes,” said Anderson impatiently.

“Get on, lass,” said Mr. Ball. “Tell your tale. Nowt to be afraid of.”

Mary gasped, groaned and plunged in a breathless voice into her narrative.

“I knocked on door and there wasn’t no answer, otherwise I wouldn’t have gone in leastways not unless the gentleman had said ‘Come in,’ and as he didn’t say nothing I went in and he was there washing his hands.”

She paused and breathed deeply.

“Go on, my girl,” said Anderson.

Mary looked sideways at her master and as though receiving inspiration from his slow nod, plunged on again.

“‘It’s your hot water, sir,’ I said, ‘and I did knock,’ but ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I’ve washed in cold,’ he said, and so, naturally, I looks in basin, and oh! God help me, sir, it were all red!”

“Red?” said Anderson sharply.

Ball struck in.

“The lass told me that he had his coat off and that he was holding the sleeve of it, and it was all wet—that’s right, eh, lass?”

“Yes, sir, that’s right, sir.”

She plunged on:

“And his face, sir, it looked queer, mortal queer it looked. Gave me quite a turn.”

“When was this?” asked Anderson sharply.

“About a quarter after five, so near as I can reckon.”

“Over three hours ago,” snapped Anderson. “Why didn’t you come at once?”

“Didn’t hear about it at once,” said Ball. “Not till news came along as there’d been another murder done. And then the lass she screams out as it might have been blood in the basin, and I asks her what she means, and she tells me. Well, it doesn’t sound right to me and I went upstairs myself. Nobody in the room. I asks a few questions and one of the lads in courtyard says he saw a fellow sneaking out that way and by his description it was the right one. So I says to the missus as Mary here had best go to police. She doesn’t like the idea, Mary doesn’t, and I says I’ll come along with her.”

Inspector Crome drew a sheet of paper towards him.

“Describe this man,” he said. “As quick as you can. There’s no time to be lost.”

“Medium-sized he were,” said Mary. “And stooped and wore glasses.”

“His clothes?”

“A dark suit and a Homburg hat. Rather shabby-looking.”

She could add little to this description.

Inspector Crome did not insist unduly. The telephone wires were soon busy, but neither the inspector nor the Chief Constable were over-optimistic.

Crome elicited the fact that the man, when seen sneaking across the yard, had had no bag or suitcase.

“There’s a chance there,” he said.

Two men were despatched to the Black Swan.

Mr. Ball, swelling with pride and importance, and Mary, somewhat tearful, accompanied them.

The sergeant returned about ten minutes later.

“I’ve brought the register, sir,” he said. “Here’s the signature.”

We crowded round. The writing was small and cramped—not easy to read.

“A. B. Case—or is it Cash?” said the Chief Constable.

“A B C,” said Crome significantly.

“What about luggage?” asked Anderson.

“One good-sized suitcase, sir, full of small cardboard boxes.”

“Boxes? What was in ’em?”

“Stockings, sir. Silk stockings.”

Crome turned to Poirot.

“Congratulations,” he said. “Your hunch was right.”

Twenty-eight

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

I

Inspector Crome was in his office at Scotland Yard.

The telephone on his desk gave a discreet buzz and he picked it up.

"Jacobs speaking, sir. There's a young fellow come in with a story that I think you ought to hear."

Inspector Crome sighed. On an average twenty people a day turned up with so-called important information about the A B C case. Some of them were harmless lunatics, some of them were well-meaning persons who genuinely believed that their information was of value. It was the duty of Sergeant Jacobs to act as a human sieve—retaining the grosser matter and passing on the residue to his superior.

"Very well, Jacobs," said Crome. "Send him along."

A few minutes later there was a tap on the inspector's door and Sergeant Jacobs appeared, ushering in a tall, moderately good-looking young man.

"This is Mr. Tom Hartigan, sir. He's got something to tell us which may have a possible bearing on the A B C case."

The inspector rose pleasantly and shook hands.

"Good morning, Mr. Hartigan. Sit down, won't you? Smoke? Have a cigarette?"

Tom Hartigan sat down awkwardly and looked with some awe at what he called in his own mind "One of the bigwigs." The appearance of the inspector vaguely disappointed him. He looked quite an ordinary person!

“Now then,” said Crome. “You’ve got something to tell us that you think may have a bearing on the case. Fire ahead.”

Tom began nervously.

“Of course it may be nothing at all. It’s just an idea of mine. I may be wasting your time.”

Again Inspector Crome sighed imperceptibly. The amount of time he had to waste in reassuring people!

“We’re the best judge of that. Let’s have the facts, Mr. Hartigan.”

“Well, it’s like this, sir. I’ve got a young lady, you see, and her mother lets rooms. Up Camden Town way. Their second-floor back has been let for over a year to a man called Cust.”

“Cust—eh?”

“That’s right, sir. A sort of middle-aged bloke what’s rather vague and soft—and come down in the world a bit, I should say. Sort of creature who wouldn’t hurt a fly you’d say—and I’d never of dreamed of anything being wrong if it hadn’t been for something rather odd.”

In a somewhat confused manner and repeating himself once or twice, Tom described his encounter with Mr. Cust at Euston Station and the incident of the dropped ticket.

“You see, sir, look at it how you will, it’s funny like. Lily—that’s my young lady, sir—she was quite positive that it was Cheltenham he said, and her mother says the same—says she remembers distinct talking about it the morning he went off. Of course, I didn’t pay much attention to it at the time. Lily—my young lady—said as how she hoped he wouldn’t cop it from this A B C fellow going to Doncaster—and then she says it’s rather a coincidence because he was down Churston way at the time of the last crime. Laughing like, I asks her whether he was at Bexhill the time before, and she says she don't know where he was, but he was away at the seaside—that she does know. And then I said to her it would be odd if he was the A B C himself and she said poor Mr. Cust wouldn't hurt a fly—and that was all at the time. We didn't think no more about it. At least, in a sort of way I did, sir, underneath like. I began wondering about this Cust fellow and thinking that, after all, harmless as he seemed, he might be a bit batty."

Tom took a breath and then went on. Inspector Crome was listening intently now.

"And then after the Doncaster murder, sir, it was in all the papers that information was wanted as to the whereabouts of a certain A B Case or Cash, and it gave a description that fitted well enough. First evening off I had, I went round to Lily's and asked her what her Mr. Cust's initials were. She couldn't remember at first, but her mother did. Said they were A B right enough. Then we got down to it and tried to figure out if Cust had been away at the time of the first murder at Andover. Well, as you know, sir, it isn't too easy to remember things three months back. We had a job of it, but we got it fixed down in the end, because Mrs. Marbury had a brother come from Canada to see her on June 21st. He arrived unexpected like and she wanted to give him a bed, and Lily suggested that as Mr. Cust was away Bert Smith might have his bed. But Mrs. Marbury wouldn't agree, because she said it wasn't acting right by her lodger, and she always liked to act fair and square. But we fixed the date all right because of Bert Smith's ship docking at Southampton that day."

Inspector Crome had listened very attentively, jotting down an occasional note.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all, sir. I hope you don't think I'm making a lot of nothing."

Tom flushed slightly.

"Not at all. You were quite right to come here. Of course, it's very slight evidence—these dates may be mere coincidence and the likeness of the name, too. But it certainly warrants my having an interview with your Mr. Cust. Is he at home now?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did he return?"

"The evening of the Doncaster murder, sir."

"What's he been doing since?"

"He's stayed in mostly, sir. And he's been looking very queer, Mrs. Marbury says. He buys a lot of newspapers—goes out early and gets the morning ones, and then after dark he goes out and gets the evening ones. Mrs. Marbury says he talks a lot to himself, too. She thinks he's getting queerer."

"What is this Mrs. Marbury's address?"

Tom gave it to him.

"Thank you. I shall probably be calling round in the course of the day. I need hardly tell you to be careful of your manner if you come across this Cust."

He rose and shook hands.

"You may be quite satisfied you did the right thing in coming to us. Good morning, Mr. Hartigan."

"Well, sir?" asked Jacobs, reentering the room a few minutes later. "Think it's the goods?"

"It's promising," said Inspector Crome. "That is, if the facts are as the boy stated them. We've had no luck with the stocking manufacturers yet. It was time we got hold of something. By the way, give me that file of the Churston case."

He spent some minutes looking for what he wanted.

“Ah, here it is. It’s amongst the statements made to the Torquay police. Young man of the name of Hill. Deposes he was leaving the Torquay Palladium after the film Not a Sparrow and noticed a man behaving queerly. He was talking to himself. Hill heard him say ‘That’s an idea.’ Not a Sparrow—that’s the film that was on at the Regal in Doncaster?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There may be something in that. Nothing to it at the time—but it’s possible that the idea of the modus operandi for his next crime occurred to our man then. We’ve got Hill’s name and address, I see. His description of the man is vague but it links up well enough with the descriptions of Mary Stroud and this Tom Hartigan….”

He nodded thoughtfully.

“We’re getting warm,” said Inspector Crome—rather inaccurately, for he himself was always slightly chilly.

“Any instructions, sir?”

“Put on a couple of men to watch this Camden Town address, but I don’t want our bird frightened. I must have a word with the AC. Then I think it would be as well if Cust was brought along here and asked if he’d like to make a statement. It sounds as though he’s quite ready to get rattled.”

Outside Tom Hartigan had rejoined Lily Marbury who was waiting for him on the Embankment.

“All right, Tom?”

Tom nodded.

“I saw Inspector Crome himself. The one who’s in charge of the case.”

“What’s he like?”

“A bit quiet and lah-di-dah—not my idea of a detective.”

“That’s Lord Trenchard’s new kind,” said Lily with respect. “Some of them are ever so grand. Well, what did he say?”

Tom gave her a brief résumé of the interview.

“So they think as it really was him?”

“They think it might be. Anyway, they’ll come along and ask him a question or two.”

“Poor Mr. Cust.”

“It’s no good saying poor Mr. Cust, my girl. If he’s A B C, he’s committed four terrible murders.”

Lily sighed and shook her head.

“It does seem awful,” she observed.

“Well, now you’re going to come and have a bite of lunch, my girl. Just you think that if we’re right I expect my name will be in the papers!”

“Oh, Tom, will it?”

“Rather. And yours, too. And your mother’s. And I dare say you’ll have your picture in it, too.”

“Oh, Tom.” Lily squeezed his arm in an ecstasy.

“And in the meantime what do you say to a bite at the Corner House?”

Lily squeezed tighter.

“Come on then!”

“All right—half a minute. I must just telephone from the station.”

“Who to?”

“A girl I was going to meet.”

She slipped across the road, and rejoined him three minutes later, looking rather flushed.

“Now then, Tom.”

She slipped her arm in his.

“Tell me more about Scotland Yard. You didn’t see the other one there?”

“What other one?”

“The Belgian gentleman. The one that A B C writes to always.”

“No. He wasn’t there.”

“Well, tell me all about it. What happened when you got inside? Who did you speak to and what did you say?”

II

Mr. Cust put the receiver back very gently on the hook.

He turned to where Mrs. Marbury was standing in the doorway of the room, clearly devoured with curiosity.

“Not often you have a telephone call, Mr. Cust?”

“No—er—no, Mrs. Marbury. It isn’t.”

“Not bad news, I trust?”

“No—no.” How persistent the woman was. His eyes caught the legend on the newspaper he was carrying.

Births—Marriages—Deaths….

“My sister’s just had a little boy,” he blurted out.

He—who had never had a sister!

“Oh, dear! Now—well, that is nice, I am sure. (‘And never once mentioned a sister all these years,’ was her inward thought. ‘If that isn’t just like a man!’) I was surprised, I’ll tell you, when the lady asked to speak to Mr. Cust. Just at first I fancied it was my Lily’s voice—something like hers, it was—but haughtier if you know what I mean—sort of high up in the air. Well, Mr. Cust, my congratulations, I’m sure. Is it the first one, or have you other little nephews and nieces?”

“It’s the only one,” said Mr. Cust. “The only one I’ve ever had or likely to have, and—er—I think I must go off at once. They—they want me to come. I—I think I can just catch a train if I hurry.”

“Will you be away long, Mr. Cust?” called Mrs. Marbury as he ran up the stairs.

“Oh, no—two or three days—that’s all.”

He disappeared into his bedroom. Mrs. Marbury retired into the kitchen, thinking sentimentally of “the dear little mite.”

Her conscience gave her a sudden twinge.

Last night Tom and Lily and all the hunting back over dates! Trying to make out that Mr. Cust was that dreadful monster, A B C. Just because of his initials and because of a few coincidences.

“I don’t suppose they meant it seriously,” she thought comfortably. “And now I hope they’ll be ashamed of themselves.”

In some obscure way that she could not have explained, Mr. Cust’s statement that his sister had had a baby had effectually removed any doubts Mrs. Marbury might have had of her lodger’s bona fides.

“I hope she didn’t have too hard a time of it, poor dear,” thought Mrs. Marbury, testing an iron against her cheek before beginning to iron out Lily’s silk slip.

Her mind ran comfortably on a well-worn obstetric track.

Mr. Cust came quietly down the stairs, a bag in his hand. His eyes rested a minute on the telephone.

That brief conversation reechoed in his brain.

“Is that you, Mr. Cust? I thought you might like to know there’s an inspector from Scotland Yard may be coming to see you….”

What had he said? He couldn’t remember.

“Thank you—thank you, my dear…very kind of you….”

Something like that.

Why had she telephoned to him? Could she possibly have guessed? Or did she just want to make sure he would stay in for the inspector’s visit?

But how did she know the inspector was coming?

And her voice—she’d disguised her voice from her mother….

It looked—it looked—as though she knew….

But surely if she knew, she wouldn’t….

She might, though. Women were very queer. Unexpectedly cruel and unexpectedly kind. He’d seen Lily once letting a mouse out of a mousetrap.

A kind girl….

A kind, pretty girl….

He paused by the hall stand with its load of umbrellas and coats.

Should he…?

A slight noise from the kitchen decided him….

No, there wasn’t time….

Mrs. Marbury might come out….

He opened the front door, passed through and closed it behind him….

Where…?

Twenty-nine

AT SCOTLAND YARD

Conference again.

The Assistant Commissioner, Inspector Crome, Poirot and myself.

The AC was saying:

“A good tip that of yours, M. Poirot, about checking a large sale of stockings.”

Poirot spread out his hands.

“It was indicated. This man could not be a regular agent. He sold outright instead of touting for orders.”

“Got everything clear so far, inspector?”

“I think so, sir.” Crome consulted a file. “Shall I run over the position to date?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ve checked up with Churston, Paignton and Torquay. Got a list of people where he went and offered stockings. I must say he did the thing thoroughly. Stayed at the Pitt, small hotel near Torre Station. Returned to the hotel at 10:30 on the night of the murder. Could have taken a train from Churston at 9.57, getting to Torre at 10.20. No one answering to his description noticed on train or at station, but that Friday was Dartmouth Regatta and the trains back from Kingswear were pretty full.

“Bexhill much the same. Stayed at the Globe under his own name. Offered stockings to about a dozen addresses, including Mrs. Barnard and including the Ginger Cat. Left hotel early in the evening. Arrived back in London about 11.30 the following morning. As to Andover, same procedure. Stayed at the Feathers. Offered stockings to Mrs. Fowler, next door to Mrs. Ascher, and to half a dozen other people in the street. The pair Mrs. Ascher had I got from the niece (name of Drower)—they're identical with Cust's supply."

"So far, good," said the AC.

"Acting on information received," said the inspector, "I went to the address given me by Hartigan, but found that Cust had left the house about half an hour previously. He received a telephone message, I'm told. First time such a thing had happened to him, so his landlady told me."

"An accomplice?" suggested the Assistant Commissioner.

"Hardly," said Poirot. "It is odd that—unless—"

We all looked at him inquiringly as he paused.

He shook his head, however, and the inspector proceeded.

"I made a thorough search of the room he had occupied. That search puts the matter beyond doubt. I found a block of notepaper similar to that on which the letters were written, a large quantity of hosiery and—at the back of the cupboard where the hosiery was stored—a parcel much the same shape and size but which turned out to contain—not hosiery—but eight new A B C railway guides!"

"Proof positive," said the Assistant Commissioner.

"I've found something else, too," said the inspector—his voice becoming suddenly almost human with triumph. "Only found it this morning, sir. Not had time to report yet. There was no sign of the knife in his room—"

"It would be the act of an imbecile to bring that back with him," remarked Poirot.

"After all, he's not a reasonable human being," remarked the inspector. "Anway, it occurred to me that he might just possibly have brought it back to the house and then realized the danger of hiding it (as M. Poirot points out) in his room, and have looked about elsewhere. What place in the house would he be likely to select? I got it straight away. The hall stand—no one ever moves a hall stand. With a lot of trouble I got it moved out from the wall—and there it was!"

"The knife?"

"The knife. Not a doubt of it. The dried blood's still on it."

"Good work, Crome," said the AC approvingly. "We only need one thing more now."

"What's that?"

"The man himself."

"We'll get him, sir. Never fear."

The inspector's tone was confident.

"What do you say, M. Poirot?"

Poirot started out of a reverie.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We were saying that it was only a matter of time before we got our man. Do you agree?"

"Oh, that—yes. Without a doubt."

His tone was so abstracted that the others looked at him curiously.

"Is there anything worrying you, M. Poirot?"

"There is something that worries me very much. It is the why? The motive."

"But, my dear fellow, the man's crazy," said the Assistant Commissioner impatiently.

"I understand what M. Poirot means," said Crome, coming graciously to the rescue. "He's quite right. There's got to be some definite obsession. I think we'll find the root of the matter in an intensified inferiority complex. There may be a persecution mania, too, and if so he may possibly associate M. Poirot with it. He may have the delusion that M. Poirot is a detective employed on purpose to hunt him down."

"H'm," said the AC. "That's the jargon that's talked nowadays. In my day if a man was mad he was mad and we didn't look about for scientific terms to soften it down. I suppose a thoroughly up-to-date doctor would suggest putting a man like A B C in a nursing home, telling him what a fine fellow he was for forty-five days on end and then letting him out as a responsible member of society."

Poirot smiled but did not answer.

The conference broke up.

"Well," said the Assistant Commissioner. "As you say, Crome, pulling him in is only a matter of time."

"We'd have had him before now," said the inspector, "if he wasn't so ordinary-looking. We've worried enough perfectly inoffensive citizens as it is."

"I wonder where he is at this minute," said the Assistant Commissioner.

Thirty

NOT FROM CAPTAIN HASTINGS' PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Mr. Cust stood by a greengrocer's shop.

He stared across the road.

Yes, that was it.

Mrs. Ascher. Newsagent and Tobacconist…

In the empty window was a sign.

To Let.

Empty….

Lifeless….

"Excuse me, sir."

The greengrocer's wife, trying to get at some lemons.

He apologized, moved to one side.

Slowly he shuffled away—back towards the main street of the town….

It was difficult—very difficult—now that he hadn't any money left….

Not having had anything to eat all day made one feel very queer and light-headed….

He looked at a poster outside a newsagent's shop.

The A B C Case. Murderer Still at Large. Interviews with M. Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Cust said to himself:

“Hercule Poirot. I wonder if he knows….”

He walked on again.

It wouldn’t do to stand staring at that poster….

He thought:

“I can’t go on much longer….”

Foot in front of foot…what an odd thing walking was….

Foot in front of foot—ridiculous.

Highly ridiculous….

But man was a ridiculous animal anyway….

And he, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, was particularly ridiculous.

He had always been….

People had always laughed at him….

He couldn’t blame them….

Where was he going? He didn’t know. He’d come to the end. He no longer looked anywhere but at his feet.

Foot in front of foot.

He looked up. Lights in front of him. And letters….

Police Station.

“That’s funny,” said Mr. Cust. He gave a little giggle.

Then he stepped inside. Suddenly, as he did so, he swayed and fell forward.

Thirty-one

HERCULE POIROT ASKS QUESTIONS

It was a clear November day. Dr. Thompson and Chief Inspector Japp had come round to acquaint Poirot with the result of the police court proceedings in the case of Rex v. Alexander Bonaparte Cust.

Poirot himself had had a slight bronchial chill which had prevented his attending. Fortunately he had not insisted on having my company.

“Committed for trial,” said Japp. “So that’s that.”

“Isn’t it unusual?” I asked, “for a defence to be offered at this stage? I thought prisoners always reserved their defence.”

“It’s the usual course,” said Japp. “I suppose young Lucas thought he might rush it through. He’s a trier, I will say. Insanity’s the only defence possible.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“With insanity there can be no acquittal. Imprisonment during His Majesty’s pleasure is hardly preferable to death.”

“I suppose Lucas thought there was a chance,” said Japp. “With a first-class alibi for the Bexhill murder, the whole case might be weakened. I don’t think he realized how strong our case is. Anyway, Lucas goes in for originality. He’s a young man, and he wants to hit the public eye.”

Poirot turned to Thompson.

“What’s your opinion, doctor?”

“Of Cust? Upon my soul, I don’t know what to say. He’s playing the sane man remarkably well. He’s an epileptic, of course.”

“What an amazing dénouement that was,” I said.

“His falling into the Andover police station in a fit? Yes—it was a fitting dramatic curtain to the drama. A B C has always timed his effects well.”

“Is it possible to commit a crime and be unaware of it?” I asked. “His denials seem to have a ring of truth in them.”

Dr. Thompson smiled a little.

“You mustn’t be taken in by that theatrical ‘I swear by God’ pose. It’s my opinion that Cust knows perfectly well he committed the murders.”

“When they’re as fervent as that they usually do,” said Crome.

“As to your question,” went on Thompson, “it’s perfectly possible for an epileptic subject in a state of somnambulism to commit an action and be entirely unaware of having done so. But it is the general opinion that such an action must ‘not be contrary to the will of the person in the waking state.’”

He went on discussing the matter, speaking of grand mal and petit mal and, to tell the truth, confusing me hopelessly as is often the case when a learned person holds forth on his own subject.

“However, I’m against the theory that Cust committed these crimes without knowing he’d done them. You might put that theory forward if it weren’t for the letters. The letters knock the theory on the head. They show premeditation and a careful planning of the crime.”

“And of the letters we have still no explanation,” said Poirot.

“That interests you?”

“Naturally—since they were written to me. And on the subject of the letters Cust is persistently dumb. Until I get at the reason for those letters being written to me, I shall not feel that the case is solved.”

“Yes—I can understand that from your point of view. There doesn’t seem to be any reason to believe that the man ever came up against you in any way?”

"None whatever."

"I might make a suggestion. Your name!"

"My name?"

"Yes. Cust is saddled—apparently by the whim of his mother (Oedipus complex there, I shouldn't wonder!)—with two extremely bombastic Christian names: Alexander and Bonaparte. You see the implications? Alexander—the popularly supposed undefeatable who sighed for more worlds to conquer. Bonaparte—the great Emperor of the French. He wants an adversary—an adversary, one might say, in his class. Well—there you are—Hercules the strong."

"Your words are very suggestive, doctor. They foster ideas…."

"Oh, it's only a suggestion. Well, I must be off."

Dr. Thompson went out. Japp remained.

"Does this alibi worry you?" Poirot asked.

"It does a little," admitted the inspector. "Mind you, I don't believe in it, because I know it isn't true. But it is going to be the deuce to break it. This man Strange is a tough character."

"Describe him to me."

"He's a man of forty. A tough, confident, self-opinionated mining engineer. It's my opinion that it was he who insisted on his evidence being taken now. He wants to get off to Chile. He hoped the thing might be settled out of hand."

"He's one of the most positive people I've ever seen," I said.

"The type of man who would not like to admit he was mistaken," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"He sticks to his story and he's not one to be heckled. He swears by all that's blue that he picked up Cust in the Whitecross Hotel at Eastbourne on the evening of July 24th. He was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. As far as I can see, Cust made an ideal listener. He didn't interrupt! After dinner he and Cust played dominoes. It appears Strange was a whale on dominoes and to his surprise Cust was pretty hot stuff too. Queer game, dominoes. People go mad about it. They'll play for hours. That's what Strange and Cust did apparently. Cust wanted to go to bed but Strange wouldn't hear of it—swore they'd keep it up until midnight at least. And that's what they did do. They separated at ten minutes past midnight. And if Cust was in the Whitecross Hotel at Eastbourne at ten minutes past midnight on the morning of the 25th he couldn't very well be strangling Betty Barnard on the beach at Bexhill between midnight and one o'clock."

"The problem certainly seems insuperable," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Decidedly, it gives one to think."

"It's given Crome something to think about," said Japp.

"This man Strange is very positive?"

"Yes. He's an obstinate devil. And it's difficult to see just where the flaw is. Supposing Strange is making a mistake and the man wasn't Cust—why on earth should he say his name is Cust? And the writing in the hotel register is his all right. You can't say he's an accomplice—homicidal lunatics don't have accomplices! Did the girl die later? The doctor was quite firm in his evidence, and anyway it would take some time for Cust to get out of the hotel at Eastbourne without being seen and get over to Bexhill—about fourteen miles away—"

"It is a problem—yes," said Poirot.

"Of course, strictly speaking, it oughtn't to matter. We've got Cust on the Doncaster murder—the bloodstained coat, the knife—not a loophole there. You couldn't bounce any jury into acquitting him. But it spoils a pretty case. He did the Doncaster murder. He did the Churston murder. He did the Andover murder. Then, by hell, he must have done the Bexhill murder. But I don't see how!"

He shook his head and got up.

“Now’s your chance, M. Poirot,” he said. “Crome’s in a fog. Exert those cellular arrangements of yours I used to hear so much about. Show us the way he did it.”

Japp departed.

“What about it, Poirot?” I said. “Are the little grey cells equal to the task?”

Poirot answered my question by another.

“Tell me, Hastings, do you consider the case ended?”

“Well—yes, practically speaking. We’ve got the man. And we’ve got most of the evidence. It’s only the trimmings that are needed.”

Poirot shook his head.

“The case is ended! The case! The case is the man, Hastings. Until we know all about the man, the mystery is as deep as ever. It is not victory because we have put him in the dock!”

“We know a fair amount about him.”

“We know nothing at all! We know where he was born. We know he fought in the war and received a slight wound in the head and that he was discharged from the army owing to epilepsy. We know that he lodged with Mrs. Marbury for nearly two years. We know that he was quiet and retiring—the sort of man that nobody notices. We know that he invented and carried out an intensely clever scheme of systemized murder. We know that he made certain incredibly stupid blunders. We know that he killed without pity and quite ruthlessly. We know, too, that he was kindly enough not to let blame rest on any other person for the crimes he committed. If he wanted to kill unmolested—how easy to let other persons suffer for his crimes. Do you not see, Hastings, that the man is a mass of contradictions? Stupid and cunning, ruthless and magnanimous—and that there must be some dominating factor that reconciles his two natures.”

“Of course, if you treat him like a psychological study,” I began.

“What else has this case been since the beginning? All along I have been groping my way—trying to get to know the murderer. And now I realize, Hastings, that I do not know him at all! I am at sea.”

“The lust for power—” I began.

“Yes—that might explain a good deal…But it does not satisfy me. There are things I want to know. Why did he commit these murders? Why did he choose those particular people—?”

“Alphabetically—” I began.

“Was Betty Barnard the only person in Bexhill whose name began with a B? Betty Barnard—I had an idea there…It ought to be true—it must be true. But if so—”

He was silent for some time. I did not like to interrupt him.

As a matter of fact, I believe I fell asleep.

I woke to find Poirot’s hand on my shoulder.

“Mon cher Hastings,” he said affectionately. “My good genius.”

I was quite confused by this sudden mark of esteem.

“It is true,” Poirot insisted. “Always—always—you help me—you bring me luck. You inspire me.”

“How have I inspired you this time?” I asked.

“While I was asking myself certain questions I remembered a remark of yours—a remark absolutely shimmering in its clear vision. Did I not say to you once that you had a genius for stating the obvious. It is the obvious that I have neglected.”

“What is this brilliant remark of mine?” I asked.

“It makes everything as clear as crystal. I see the answers to all my questions. The reason for Mrs. Ascher (that, it is true, I glimpsed long ago), the reason for Sir Carmichael Clarke, the reason for the Doncaster murder, and finally and supremely important, the reason for Hercule Poirot.”

“Could you kindly explain?” I asked.

“Not at the moment. I require first a little more information. That I can get from our Special Legion. And then—then, when I have got the answer to a certain question, I will go and see A B C. We will be face to face at last—A B C and Hercule Poirot—the adversaries.”

“And then?” I asked.

“And then,” said Poirot. “We will talk! Je vous assure, Hastings—there is nothing so dangerous for anyone who has something to hide as conversation! Speech, so a wise old Frenchman said to me once, is an invention of man’s to prevent him from thinking. It is also an infallible means of discovering that which he wishes to hide. A human being, Hastings, cannot resist the opportunity to reveal himself and express his personality which conversation gives him. Every time he will give himself away.”

“What do you expect Cust to tell you?”

Hercule Poirot smiled.

“A lie,” he said. “And by it, I shall know the truth!”

Thirty-two

AND CATCH A FOX

During the next few days Poirot was very busy. He made mysterious absences, talked very little, frowned to himself, and consistently refused to satisfy my natural curiosity as to the brilliance I had, according to him, displayed in the past.

I was not invited to accompany him on his mysterious comings and goings—a fact which I somewhat resented.

Towards the end of the week, however, he announced his intention of paying a visit to Bexhill and neighbourhood and suggested that I should come with him. Needless to say, I accepted with alacrity.

The invitation, I discovered, was not extended to me alone. The members of our Special Legion were also invited.

They were as intrigued by Poirot as I was. Nevertheless, by the end of the day, I had at any rate an idea as to the direction in which Poirot's thoughts were tending.

He first visited Mr. and Mrs. Barnard and got an exact account from her as to the hour at which Mr. Cust had called on her and exactly what he had said. He then went to the hotel at which Cust had put up and extracted a minute description of that gentleman's departure. As far as I could judge, no new facts were elicited by his questions but he himself seemed quite satisfied.

Next he went to the beach—to the place where Betty Barnard's body had been discovered. Here he walked round in circles for some minutes studying the shingle attentively. I could see little point in this, since the tide covered the spot twice a day.

However I have learnt by this time that Poirot’s actions are usually dictated by an idea—however meaningless they may seem.

He then walked from the beach to the nearest point at which a car could have been parked. From there again he went to the place where the Eastbourne buses waited before leaving Bexhill.

Finally he took us all to the Ginger Cat café, where we had a somewhat stale tea served by the plump waitress, Milly Higley.

Her he complimented in a flowing Gallic style on the shape of her ankles.

“The legs of the English—always they are too thin! But you, mademoiselle, have the perfect leg. It has shape—it has an ankle!”

Milly Higley giggled a good deal and told him not to go on so. She knew what French gentlemen were like.

Poirot did not trouble to contradict her mistake as to his nationality. He merely ogled her in such a way that I was startled and almost shocked.

“Voilà,” said Poirot, “I have finished in Bexhill. Presently I go to Eastbourne. One little inquiry there—that is all. Unnecessary for you all to accompany me. In the meantime come back to the hotel and let us have a cocktail. That Carlton tea, it was abominable!”

As we were sipping our cocktails Franklin Clarke said curiously:

“I suppose we can guess what you are after? You’re out to break that alibi. But I can’t see what you’re so pleased about. You haven’t got a new fact of any kind.”

“No—that is true.”

“Well, then?”

“Patience. Everything arranges itself, given time.”

“You seem quite pleased with yourself anyway.”

“Nothing so far has contradicted my little idea—that is why.”

His face grew serious.

“My friend Hastings told me once that he had, as a young man, played a game called The Truth. It was a game where everyone in turn was asked three questions—two of which must be answered truthfully. The third one could be barred. The questions, naturally, were of the most indiscreet kind. But to begin with everyone had to swear that they would indeed speak the truth, and nothing but the truth.”

He paused.

“Well?” said Megan.

“Eh bien—me, I want to play that game. Only it is not necessary to have three questions. One will be enough. One question to each of you.”

“Of course,” said Clarke impatiently. “We’ll answer anything.”

“Ah, but I want it to be more serious than that. Do you all swear to speak the truth?”

He was so solemn about it that the others, puzzled, became solemn themselves. They all swore as he demanded.

“Bon,” said Poirot briskly. “Let us begin—”

“I’m ready,” said Thora Grey.

“Ah, but ladies first—this time it would not be the politeness. We will start elsewhere.”

He turned to Franklin Clarke.

“What, mon cher M. Clarke, did you think of the hats the ladies wore at Ascot this year?”

Franklin Clarke stared at him.

“Is this a joke?”

“Certainly not.”

“Is that seriously your question?”

“It is.”

Clarke began to grin.

“Well, M. Poirot, I didn’t actually go to Ascot, but from what I could see of them driving in cars, women’s hats for Ascot were an even bigger joke than the hats they wear ordinarily.”

“Fantastic?”

“Quite fantastic.”

Poirot smiled and turned to Donald Fraser.

“When did you take your holiday this year, monsieur?”

It was Fraser’s turn to stare.

“My holiday? The first two weeks in August.”

His face quivered suddenly. I guessed that the question had brought the loss of the girl he loved back to him.

Poirot, however, did not seem to pay much attention to the reply. He turned to Thora Grey and I heard the slight difference in his voice. It had tightened up. His question came sharp and clear.

“Mademoiselle, in the event of Lady Clarke’s death, would you have married Sir Carmichael if he had asked you?”

The girl sprang up.

“How dare you ask me such a question. It’s—it’s insulting!”

“Perhaps. But you have sworn to speak the truth. Eh bien—Yes or no?”

“Sir Carmichael was wonderfully kind to me. He treated me almost like a daughter. And that’s how I felt to him—just affectionate and grateful.”

“Pardon me, but that is not answering Yes or No, mademoiselle.”

She hesitated.

“The answer, of course, is no!”

He made no comment.

“Thank you, mademoiselle.”

He turned to Megan Barnard. The girl’s face was very pale. She was breathing hard as though braced up for an ordeal.

Poirot’s voice came out like the crack of a whiplash.

“Mademoiselle, what do you hope will be the result of my investigations? Do you want me to find out the truth—or not?”

Her head went back proudly. I was fairly sure of her answer. Megan, I knew, had a fanatical passion for truth.

Her answer came clearly—and it stupefied me.

“No!”

We all jumped. Poirot leant forward studying her face.

“Mademoiselle Megan,” he said, “you may not want the truth but—ma foi—you can speak it!”

He turned towards the door, then, recollecting, went to Mary Drower.

“Tell me, mon enfant, have you a young man?”

Mary, who had been looking apprehensive, looked startled and blushed.

“Oh, Mr. Poirot. I—I—well, I’m not sure.”

He smiled.

“Alors c’est bien, mon enfant.”

He looked round for me.

“Come, Hastings, we must start for Eastbourne.”

The car was waiting and soon we were driving along the coast road that leads through Pevensey to Eastbourne.

“Is it any use asking you anything, Poirot?”

“Not at this moment. Draw your own conclusions as to what I am doing.”

I relapsed into silence.

Poirot, who seemed pleased with himself, hummed a little tune. As we passed through Pevensey he suggested that we stop and have a look over the castle.

As we were returning towards the car, we paused a moment to watch a ring of children—Brownies, I guessed, by their get-up—who were singing a ditty in shrill, untuneful voices….

“What is it that they say, Hastings? I cannot catch the words.”

I listened—till I caught one refrain.

“—And catch a fox

And put him in a box

And never let him go.”

“And catch a fox and put him in a box and never let him go!” repeated Poirot.

His face had gone suddenly grave and stern.

“It is very terrible that, Hastings.” He was silent a minute. “You hunt the fox here?”

“I don’t. I’ve never been able to afford to hunt. And I don’t think there’s much hunting in this part of the world.”

“I meant in England generally. A strange sport. The waiting at the covert side—then they sound the tally-ho, do they not?—and the run begins—across the country—over the hedges and ditches—and the fox he runs—and sometimes he doubles back—but the dogs—”

“Hounds!”

“—hounds are on his trail, and at last they catch him and he dies—quickly and horribly.”

“I suppose it does sound cruel, but really—”

“The fox enjoys it? Do not say les bêtises, my friend. Tout de même—it is better that—the quick, cruel death—than what those children were singing….

“To be shut away—in a box—for ever…No, it is not good, that.”

He shook his head. Then he said, with a change of tone:

“Tomorrow, I am to visit the man Cust,” and he added to the chauffeur:

“Back to London.”

“Aren’t you going to Eastbourne?” I cried.

“What need? I know—quite enough for my purpose.”

Thirty-three

ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST

I was not present at the interview that took place between Poirot and that strange man—Alexander Bonaparte Cust. Owing to his association with the police and the peculiar circumstances of the case, Poirot had no difficulty in obtaining a Home Office order—but that order did not extend to me, and in any case it was essential, from Poirot's point of view, that that interview should be absolutely private—the two men face to face.

He has given me, however, such a detailed account of what passed between them that I set it down with as much confidence on paper as though I had actually been present.

Mr. Cust seemed to have shrunk. His stoop was more apparent. His fingers plucked vaguely at his coat.

For some time, I gather, Poirot did not speak.

He sat and looked at the man opposite him.

The atmosphere became restful—soothing—full of infinite leisure….

It must have been a dramatic moment—this meeting of the two adversaries in the long drama. In Poirot's place I should have felt the dramatic thrill.

Poirot, however, is nothing if not matter-of-fact. He was absorbed in producing a certain effect upon the man opposite him.

At last he said gently:

"Do you know who I am?"

The other shook his head.

“No—no—I can’t say I do. Unless you are Mr. Lucas’s—what do they call it?—junior. Or perhaps you come from Mr. Maynard?”

(Maynard & Cole were the defending solicitors.)

His tone was polite but not very interested. He seemed absorbed in some inner abstraction.

“I am Hercule Poirot….”

Poirot said the words very gently…and watched for the effect.

Mr. Cust raised his head a little.

“Oh, yes?”

He said it as naturally as Inspector Crome might have said it—but without the superciliousness.

Then, a minute later, he repeated his remark.

“Oh, yes?” he said, and this time his tone was different—it held an awakened interest. He raised his head and looked at Poirot.

Hercule Poirot met his gaze and nodded his own head gently once or twice.

“Yes,” he said. “I am the man to whom you wrote the letters.”

At once the contact was broken. Mr. Cust dropped his eyes and spoke irritably and fretfully.

“I never wrote to you. Those letters weren’t written by me. I’ve said so again and again.”

“I know,” said Poirot. “But if you did not write them, who did?”

“An enemy. I must have an enemy. They are all against me. The police—everyone—all against me. It’s a gigantic conspiracy.”

Poirot did not reply.

Mr. Cust said:

“Everyone’s hand has been against me—always.”

“Even when you were a child?”

Mr. Cust seemed to consider.

“No—no—not exactly then. My mother was very fond of me. But she was ambitious—terribly ambitious. That’s why she gave me those ridiculous names. She had some absurd idea that I’d cut a figure in the world. She was always urging me to assert myself—talking about will-power…saying anyone could be master of his fate…she said I could do anything!”

He was silent for a minute.

“She was quite wrong, of course. I realized that myself quite soon. I wasn’t the sort of person to get on in life. I was always doing foolish things—making myself look ridiculous. And I was timid—afraid of people. I had a bad time at school—the boys found out my Christian names—they used to tease me about them…I did very badly at school—in games and work and everything.”

He shook his head.

“Just as well poor mother died. She’d have been disappointed…Even when I was at the Commercial College I was stupid—it took me longer to learn typing and shorthand than anyone else. And yet I didn’t feel stupid—if you know what I mean.”

He cast a sudden appealing look at the other man.

“I know what you mean,” said Poirot. “Go on.”

“It was just the feeling that everybody else thought me stupid. Very paralyzing. It was the same thing later in the office.”

"And later still in the war?" prompted Poirot.

Mr. Cust's face lightened up suddenly.

"You know," he said, "I enjoyed the war. What I had of it, that was. I felt, for the first time, a man like anybody else. We were all in the same box. I was as good as anyone else."

His smile faded.

"And then I got that wound on the head. Very slight. But they found out I had fits…I'd always known, of course, that there were times when I hadn't been quite sure what I was doing. Lapses, you know. And of course, once or twice I'd fallen down. But I don't really think they ought to have discharged me for that. No, I don't think it was right."

"And afterwards?" asked Poirot.

"I got a place as a clerk. Of course there was good money to be got just then. And I didn't do so badly after the war. Of course, a smaller salary… And—I didn't seem to get on. I was always being passed over for promotion. I wasn't go-ahead enough. It grew very difficult—really very difficult…. Especially when the slump came. To tell you the truth, I'd got hardly enough to keep body and soul together (and you've got to look presentable as a clerk) when I got the offer of this stocking job. A salary and commission!"

Poirot said gently:

"But you are aware, are you not, that the firm whom you say employed you deny the fact?"

Mr. Cust got excited again.

"That's because they're in the conspiracy—they must be in the conspiracy."

He went on:

"I've got written evidence—written evidence. I've got their letters to me, giving me instructions as to what places to go to and a list of people to call on."

"Not written evidence exactly—typewritten evidence."

"It's the same thing. Naturally a big firm of wholesale manufacturers typewrite their letters."

"Don't you know, Mr. Cust, that a typewriter can be identified? All those letters were typed by one particular machine."

"What of it?"

"And that machine was your own—the one found in your room."

"It was sent me by the firm at the beginning of my job."

"Yes, but these letters were received afterwards. So it looks, does it not, as though you typed them yourself and posted them to yourself?"

"No, no! It's all part of the plot against me!"

He added suddenly:

"Besides, their letters would be written on the same kind of machine."

"The same kind, but not the same actual machine."

Mr. Cust repeated obstinately:

"It's a plot!"

"And the A B C's that were found in the cupboard?"

"I know nothing about them. I thought they were all stockings."

"Why did you tick off the name of Mrs. Ascher in that first list of people in Andover?"

“Because I decided to start with her. One must begin somewhere.”

“Yes, that is true. One must begin somewhere.”

“I don’t mean that!” said Mr. Cust. “I don’t mean what you mean!”

“But you know what I meant?”

Mr. Cust said nothing. He was trembling.

“I didn’t do it!” he said. “I’m perfectly innocent! It’s all a mistake. Why, look at that second crime—that Bexhill one. I was playing dominoes at Eastbourne. You’ve got to admit that!”

His voice was triumphant.

“Yes,” said Poirot. His voice was meditative—silky. “But it’s so easy, isn’t it, to make a mistake of one day? And if you’re an obstinate, positive man, like Mr. Strange, you’ll never consider the possibility of having been mistaken. What you’ve said you’ll stick to…He’s that kind of man. And the hotel register—it’s very easy to put down the wrong date when you’re signing it—probably no one will notice it at the time.”

“I was playing dominoes that evening!”

“You play dominoes very well, I believe.”

Mr. Cust was a little flurried by this.

“I—I—well, I believe I do.”

“It is a very absorbing game, is it not, with a lot of skill in it?”

“Oh, there’s a lot of play in it—a lot of play! We used to play a lot in the city, in the lunch hour. You’d be surprised the way total strangers come together over a game of dominoes.”

He chuckled.

“I remember one man—I’ve never forgotten him because of something he told me—we just got talking over a cup of coffee, and we started dominoes. Well, I felt after twenty minutes that I’d known that man all my life.”

“What was it that he told you?” asked Poirot.

Mr. Cust’s face clouded over.

“It gave me a turn—a nasty turn. Talking of your fate being written in your hand, he was. And he showed me his hand and the lines that showed he’d have two near escapes of being drowned—and he had had two near escapes. And then he looked at mine and he told me some amazing things. Said I was going to be one of the most celebrated men in England before I died. Said the whole country would be talking about me. But he said—he said….”

Mr. Cust broke down—faltered….

“Yes?”

Poirot’s gaze held a quiet magnetism. Mr. Cust looked at him, looked away, then back again like a fascinated rabbit.

“He said—he said—that it looked as though I might die a violent death—and he laughed and said: ‘Almost looks as though you might die on the scaffold,’ and then he laughed and said that was only his joke….”

He was silent suddenly. His eyes left Poirot’s face—they ran from side to side….

“My head—I suffer very badly with my head…the headaches are something cruel sometimes. And then there are times when I don’t know—when I don’t know….”

He broke down.

Poirot leant forward. He spoke very quietly but with great assurance.

“But you do know, don’t you,” he said, “that you committed the murders?”

Mr. Cust looked up. His glance was quite simple and direct. All resistance had left him. He looked strangely at peace.

“Yes,” he said, “I know.”

“But—I am right, am I not?—you don’t know why you did them?”

Mr. Cust shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

Thirty-four

POIROT EXPLAINS

We were sitting in a state of tense attention to listen to Poirot’s final explanation of the case.

“All along,” he said, “I have been worried over the why of this case. Hastings said to me the other day that the case was ended. I replied to him that the case was the man! The mystery was not the mystery of the murders, but the mystery of A B C. Why did he find it necessary to commit these murders? Why did he select me as his adversary?

“It is no answer to say that the man was mentally unhinged. To say a man does mad things because he is mad is merely unintelligent and stupid. A madman is as logical and reasoned in his actions as a sane man—given his peculiar biased point of view. For example, if a man insists on going out and squatting about in nothing but a loin cloth his conduct seems eccentric in the extreme. But once you know that the man himself is firmly convinced that he is Mahatma Gandhi, then his conduct becomes perfectly reasonable and logical.

“What was necessary in this case was to imagine a mind so constituted that it was logical and reasonable to commit four or more murders and to announce them beforehand by letters written to Hercule Poirot.

“My friend Hastings will tell you that from the moment I received the first letter I was upset and disturbed. It seemed to me at once that there was something very wrong about the letter.”

“You were quite right,” said Franklin Clarke dryly.

“Yes. But there, at the very start, I made a grave error. I permitted my feeling—my very strong feeling about the letter—to remain a mere impression. I treated it as though it had been an intuition. In a well-balanced, reasoning mind there is no such thing as an intuition—an inspired guess! You can guess, of course—and a guess is either right or wrong. If it is right you call it an intuition. If it is wrong you usually do not speak of it again. But what is often called an intuition is really an impression based on logical deduction or experience. When an expert feels that there is something wrong about a picture or a piece of furniture or the signature on a cheque he is really basing that feeling on a host of small signs and details. He has no need to go into them minutely—his experience obviates that—the net result is the definite impression that something is wrong. But it is not a guess, it is an impression based on experience.

“Eh bien, I admit that I did not regard that first letter in the way I should. It just made me extremely uneasy. The police regarded it as a hoax. I myself took it seriously. I was convinced that a murder would take place in Andover as stated. As you know, a murder did take place.

“There was no means at that point, as I well realized, of knowing who the person was who had done the deed. The only course open to me was to try and understand just what kind of a person had done it.

“I had certain indications. The letter—the manner of the crime—the person murdered. What I had to discover was: the motive of the crime, the motive of the letter.”

“Publicity,” suggested Clarke.

“Surely an inferiority complex covers that,” added Thora Grey.

“That was, of course, the obvious line to take. But why me? Why Hercule Poirot? Greater publicity could be ensured by sending the letters to Scotland Yard. More again by sending them to a newspaper. A newspaper might not print the first letter, but by the time the second crime took place, A B C could have been assured of all the publicity the press could give. Why, then, Hercule Poirot? Was it for some personal reason? There was, discernible in the letter, a slight anti-foreign bias—but not enough to explain the matter to my satisfaction.

“Then the second letter arrived—and was followed by the murder of Betty Barnard at Bexhill. It became clear now (what I had already suspected) that the murders were to proceed on an alphabetical plan, but the fact, which seemed final to most people, left the main question unaltered to my mind. Why did A B C need to commit these murders?”

Megan Barnard stirred in her chair.

“Isn’t there such a thing as—as a blood lust?” she said.

Poirot turned to her.

“You are quite right, mademoiselle. There is such a thing. The lust to kill. But that did not quite fit the facts of the case. A homicidal maniac who desires to kill usually desires to kill as many victims as possible. It is a recurring craving. The great idea of such a killer is to hide his tracks—not to advertise them. When we consider the four victims selected—or at any rate three of them (for I know very little of Mr. Downes or Mr. Earlsfield), we realize that if he had chosen, the murderer could have done away with them without incurring any suspicion. Franz Ascher, Donald Fraser or Megan Barnard, possibly Mr. Clarke—those are the people the police would have suspected even if they had been unable to get direct proof. An unknown homicidal murderer would not have been thought of! Why, then, did the murderer feel it necessary to call attention to himself? Was it the necessity of leaving on each body a copy of an A B C railway guide? Was that the compulsion? Was there some complex connected with the railway guide?

“I found it quite inconceivable at this point to enter into the mind of the murderer. Surely it could not be magnanimity? A horror of responsibility for the crime being fastened on an innocent person?

“Although I could not answer the main question, certain things I did feel I was learning about the murderer.”

“Such as?” asked Fraser.

“To begin with—that he had a tabular mind. His crimes were listed by alphabetical progression—that was obviously important to him. On the other hand, he had no particular taste in victims—Mrs. Ascher, Betty

Barnard, Sir Carmichael Clarke, they all differed widely from each other. There was no sex complex—no particular age complex, and that seemed to me to be a very curious fact. If a man kills indiscriminately it is usually because he removes anyone who stands in his way or annoys him. But the alphabetical progression showed that such was not the case here. The other type of killer usually selects a particular type of victim—nearly always of the opposite sex. There was something haphazard about the procedure of A B C that seemed to me to be at war with the alphabetical selection.

"One slight inference I permitted myself to make. The choice of the A B C suggested to me what I may call a railway-minded man. This is more common in men than women. Small boys love trains better than small girls do. It might be the sign, too, of an in some ways undeveloped mind. The 'boy' motif still predominated.

"The death of Betty Barnard and the manner of it gave me certain other indications. The manner of her death was particularly suggestive. (Forgive me, Mr. Fraser.) To begin with, she was strangled with her own belt—therefore she must almost certainly have been killed by someone with whom she was on friendly or affectionate terms. When I learnt something of her character a picture grew up in my mind.

"Betty Barnard was a flirt. She liked attention from a personable male. Therefore A B C, to persuade her to come out with him, must have had a certain amount of attraction—of le sex appeal! He must be able, as you English say, to 'get off.' He must be capable of the click! I visualize the scene on the beach thus: the man admires her belt. She takes it off, he passes it playfully round her neck—says, perhaps, 'I shall strangle you.' It is all very playful. She giggles—and he pulls—"

Donald Fraser sprang up. He was livid.

"M. Poirot—for God's sake."

Poirot made a gesture.

"It is finished. I say no more. It is over. We pass to the next murder, that of Sir Carmichael Clarke. Here the murderer goes back to his first method—

the blow on the head. The same alphabetical complex—but one fact worries me a little. To be consistent the murderer should have chosen his towns in some definite sequence.

“If Andover is the 155th name under A, then the B crime should be the 155th also—or it should be the 156th and the C the 157th. Here again the towns seemed to be chosen in rather too haphazard a fashion.”

“Isn’t that because you’re rather biased on that subject, Poirot?” I suggested. “You yourself are normally methodical and orderly. It’s almost a disease with you.”

“No, it is not a disease! Quelle idée! But I admit that I may be over-stressing that point. Passons!

“The Churston crime gave me very little extra help. We were unlucky over it, since the letter announcing it went astray, hence no preparations could be made.

“But by the time the D crime was announced, a very formidable system of defence had been evolved. It must have been obvious that A B C could not much longer hope to get away with his crimes.

“Moreover, it was at this point that the clue of the stockings came into my hand. It was perfectly clear that the presence of an individual selling stockings on and near the scene of each crime could not be a coincidence. Hence the stocking seller must be the murderer. I may say that his description, as given me by Miss Grey, did not quite correspond with my own picture of the man who strangled Betty Barnard.

“I will pass over the next stages quickly. A fourth murder was committed—the murder of a man named George Earlsfield—it was supposed in mistake for a man named Downes, who was something of the same build and who was sitting near him in the cinema.

“And now at last comes the turn of the tide. Events play against A B C instead of into his hands. He is marked down—hunted—and at last arrested.

“The case, as Hastings says, is ended!

“True enough as far as the public is concerned. The man is in prison and will eventually, no doubt, go to Broadmoor. There will be no more murders. Exit! Finis! R.I.P.

“But not for me! I know nothing—nothing at all! Neither the why nor the wherefore.

“And there is one small vexing fact. The man Cust has an alibi for the night of the Bexhill crime.”

“That’s been worrying me all along,” said Franklin Clarke.

“Yes. It worried me. For the alibi, it has the air of being genuine. But it cannot be genuine unless—and now we come to two very interesting speculations.

“Supposing, my friends, that while Cust committed three of the crimes—the A, C, and D crimes—he did not commit the B crime.”

“M. Poirot. It isn’t—”

Poirot silenced Megan Barnard with a look.

“Be quiet, mademoiselle. I am for the truth, I am! I have done with lies. Supposing, I say, that A B C did not commit the second crime. It took place, remember, in the early hours of the 25th—the day he had arrived for the crime. Supposing someone had forestalled him? What in those circumstances would he do? Commit a second murder, or lie low and accept the first as a kind of macabre present?”

“M. Poirot!” said Megan. “That’s a fantastic thought! All the crimes must have been committed by the same person!”

He took no notice of her and went steadily on:

“Such a hypothesis had the merit of explaining one fact—the discrepancy between the personality of Alexander Bonaparte Cust (who could never have made the click with any girl) and the personality of Betty Barnard's murderer. And it has been known, before now, that would-be murderers have taken advantage of the crimes committed by other people. Not all the crimes of Jack the Ripper were committed by Jack the Ripper, for instance. So far, so good.

"But then I came up against a definite difficulty.

"Up to the time of the Barnard murder, no facts about the A B C murders had been made public. The Andover murder had created little interest. The incident of the open railway guide had not even been mentioned in the press. It therefore followed that whoever killed Betty Barnard must have had access to facts known only to certain persons—myself, the police, and certain relations and neighbours of Mrs. Ascher.

"That line of research seemed to lead me up against a blank wall."

The faces that looked at him were blank too. Blank and puzzled.

Donald Fraser said thoughtfully:

"The police, after all, are human beings. And they're good-looking men—"

He stopped, looking at Poirot inquiringly.

Poirot shook his head gently.

"No—it is simpler than that. I told you that there was a second speculation.

"Supposing that Cust was not responsible for the killing of Betty Barnard? Supposing that someone else killed her. Could that someone else have been responsible for the other murders too?"

"But that doesn't make sense!" cried Clarke.

"Doesn't it? I did then what I ought to have done at first. I examined the letters I had received from a totally different point of view. I had felt from the beginning that there was something wrong with them—just as a picture expert knows a picture is wrong….

“I had assumed, without pausing to consider, that what was wrong with them was the fact that they were written by a madman.

“Now I examined them again—and this time I came to a totally different conclusion. What was wrong with them was the fact that they were written by a sane man!”

“What?” I cried.

“But yes—just that precisely! They were wrong as a picture is wrong—because they were a fake! They pretended to be the letters of a madman—of a homicidal lunatic, but in reality they were nothing of the kind.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Franklin Clarke repeated.

“Mais si! One must reason—reflect. What would be the object of writing such letters? To focus attention on the writer, to call attention to the murders! En vérité, it did not seem to make sense at first sight. And then I saw light. It was to focus attention on several murders—on a group of murders…Is it not your great Shakespeare who has said ‘You cannot see the trees for the wood.’”

I did not correct Poirot’s literary reminiscences. I was trying to see his point. A glimmer came to me. He went on:

“When do you notice a pin least? When it is in a pincushion! When do you notice an individual murder least? When it is one of a series of related murders.

“I had to deal with an intensely clever, resourceful murderer—reckless, daring and a thorough gambler. Not Mr. Cust! He could never have committed these murders! No, I had to deal with a very different stamp of man—a man with a boyish temperament (witness the schoolboy-like letters and the railway guide), an attractive man to women, and a man with a ruthless disregard for human life, a man who was necessarily a prominent person in one of the crimes!

“Consider when a man or woman is killed, what are the questions that the police ask? Opportunity. Where everybody was at the time of the crime? Motive. Who benefited by the deceased’s death? If the motive and the opportunity are fairly obvious, what is a would-be murderer to do? Fake an alibi—that is, manipulate time in some way? But that is always a hazardous proceeding. Our murderer thought of a more fantastic defence. Create a homicidal murderer!

“I had now only to review the various crimes and find the possible guilty person. The Andover crime? The most likely suspect for that was Franz Ascher, but I could not imagine Ascher inventing and carrying out such an elaborate scheme, nor could I see him planning a premeditated murder. The Bexhill crime? Donald Fraser was a possibility. He had brains and ability, and a methodical turn of mind. But his motive for killing his sweetheart could only be jealousy—and jealousy does not tend to premeditation. Also I learned that he had his holidays early in August, which rendered it unlikely he had anything to do with the Churston crime. We come to the Churston crime next—and at once we are on infinitely more promising ground.

“Sir Carmichael Clarke was an immensely wealthy man. Who inherits his money? His wife, who is dying, has a life interest in it, and it then goes to his brother Franklin.”

Poirot turned slowly round till his eyes met those of Franklin Clarke.

“I was quite sure then. The man I had known a long time in my secret mind was the same as the man whom I had known as a person. A B C and Franklin Clarke were one and the same! The daring adventurous character, the roving life, the partiality for England that had showed itself, very faintly, in the jeer at foreigners. The attractive free and easy manner—nothing easier for him than to pick up a girl in a café. The methodical tabular mind—he made a list here one day, ticked off over the headings A B C—and finally, the boyish mind—mentioned by Lady Clarke and even shown by his taste in fiction—I have ascertained that there is a book in the library called The Railway Children by E. Nesbit. I had no further doubt in my own mind—A B C, the man who wrote the letters and committed the crimes, was Franklin Clarke.”

Clarke suddenly burst out laughing.

“Very ingenious! And what about our friend Cust, caught red-handed? What about the blood on his coat? And the knife he hid in his lodgings? He may deny he committed the crimes—”

Poirot interrupted.

“You are quite wrong. He admits the fact.”

“What?” Clarke looked really startled.

“Oh, yes,” said Poirot gently. “I had no sooner spoken to him than I was aware that Cust believed himself to be guilty.”

“And even that didn’t satisfy M. Poirot?” said Clarke.

“No. Because as soon as I saw him I also knew that he could not be guilty! He has neither the nerve nor the daring—nor, I may add, the brains to plan! All along I have been aware of the dual personality of the murderer. Now I see wherein it consisted. Two people were involved—the real murderer, cunning, resourceful and daring—and the pseudo murderer, stupid, vacillating and suggestible.

“Suggestible—it is in that word that the mystery of Mr. Cust consists! It was not enough for you, Mr. Clarke, to devise this plan of a series to distract attention from a single crime. You had also to have a stalking horse.

“I think the idea first originated in your mind as the result of a chance encounter in a city coffee den with this odd personality with his bombastic Christian names. You were at that time turning over in your mind various plans for the murder of your brother.”

“Really? And why?”

“Because you were seriously alarmed for the future. I do not know whether you realize it, Mr. Clarke, but you played into my hands when you showed me a certain letter written to you by your brother. In it he displayed very clearly his affection and absorption in Miss Thora Grey. His regard may have been a paternal one—or he may have preferred to think it so. Nevertheless, there was a very real danger that on the death of your sister-in-law he might, in his loneliness, turn to this beautiful girl for sympathy and comfort and it might end—as so often happens with elderly men—in his marrying her. Your fear was increased by your knowledge of Miss Grey. You are, I fancy, an excellent, if somewhat cynical judge of character. You judged, whether correctly or not, that Miss Grey was a type of young woman 'on the make.' You had no doubt that she would jump at the chance of becoming Lady Clarke. Your brother was an extremely healthy and vigorous man. There might be children and your chance of inheriting your brother's wealth would vanish.

"You have been, I fancy, in essence a disappointed man all your life. You have been the rolling stone—and you have gathered very little moss. You were bitterly jealous of your brother's wealth.

"I repeat then that, turning over various schemes in your mind, your meeting with Mr. Cust gave you an idea. His bombastic Christian names, his account of his epileptic seizures and of his headaches, his whole shrinking and insignificant personality, struck you as fitting him for the tool you wanted. The whole alphabetical plan sprang into your mind—Cust's initials—the fact that your brother's name began with a C and that he lived at Churston were the nucleus of the scheme. You even went so far as to hint to Cust at his possible end—though you could hardly hope that that suggestion would bear the rich fruit that it did!

"Your arrangements were excellent. In Cust's name you wrote for a large consignment of hosiery to be sent to him. You yourself sent a number of A B C's looking like a similar parcel. You wrote to him—a typed letter purporting to be from the same firm offering him a good salary and commission. Your plans were so well laid beforehand that you typed all the letters that were sent subsequently, and then presented him with the machine on which they had been typed.

"You had now to look about for two victims whose names began with A and B respectively and who lived at places also beginning with those same letters.

"You hit on Andover as quite a likely spot and your preliminary reconnaissance there led you to select Mrs. Ascher's shop as the scene of the first crime. Her name was written clearly over the door, and you found by experiment that she was usually alone in the shop. Her murder needed nerve, daring and reasonable luck.

"For the letter B you had to vary your tactics. Lonely women in shops might conceivably have been warned. I should imagine that you frequented a few cafés and teashops, laughing and joking with the girls there and finding out whose name began with the right letter and who would be suitable for your purpose.

"In Betty Barnard you found just the type of girl you were looking for. You took her out once or twice, explaining to her that you were a married man, and that outings must therefore take place in a somewhat hole-and-corner manner.

"Then, your preliminary plans completed, you set to work! You sent the Andover list to Cust, directing him to go there on a certain date, and you sent off the first A B C letter to me.

"On the appointed day you went to Andover—and killed Mrs. Ascher—without anything occurring to damage your plans.

"Murder No. 1 was successfully accomplished.

"For the second murder, you took the precaution of committing it, in reality, the day before. I am fairly certain that Betty Barnard was killed well before midnight on the 24th July.

"We now come to murder No. 3—the important—in fact, the real murder from your point of view.

"And here a full meed of praise is due to Hastings, who made a simple and obvious remark to which no attention was paid.

"He suggested that the third letter went astray intentionally!

“And he was right!…

“In that one simple fact lies the answer to the question that has puzzled me so all along. Why were the letters addressed in the first place to Hercule Poirot, a private detective, and not to the police?

“Erroneously I imagined some personal reason.

“Not at all! The letters were sent to me because the essence of your plan was that one of them should be wrongly addressed and go astray—but you cannot arrange for a letter addressed to the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard to go astray! It is necessary to have a private address. You chose me as a fairly well-known person, and a person who was sure to take the letters to the police—and also, in your rather insular mind, you enjoyed scoring off a foreigner.

“You addressed your envelope very cleverly—Whitehaven—Whitehorse—quite a natural slip. Only Hastings was sufficiently perspicacious to disregard subtleties and go straight for the obvious!

“Of course the letter was meant to go astray! The police were to be set on the trail only when the murder was safely over. Your brother’s nightly walk provided you with the opportunity. And so successfully had the A B C terror taken hold on the public mind that the possibility of your guilt never occurred to anyone.

“After the death of your brother, of course, your object was accomplished. You had no wish to commit any more murders. On the other hand, if the murders stopped without reason, a suspicion of the truth might come to someone.

“Your stalking horse, Mr. Cust, had so successfully lived up to his role of the invisible—because insignificant—man, that so far no one had noticed that the same person had been seen in the vicinity of the three murders! To your annoyance, even his visit to Combeside had not been mentioned. The matter had passed completely out of Miss Grey’s head.

“Always daring, you decided that one more murder must take place but this time the trail must be well blazed.

“You selected Doncaster for the scene of operations.

“Your plan was very simple. You yourself would be on the scene in the nature of things. Mr. Cust would be ordered to Doncaster by his firm. Your plan was to follow him round and trust to opportunity. Everything fell out well. Mr. Cust went to a cinema. That was simplicity itself. You sat a few seats away from him. When he got up to go, you did the same. You pretended to stumble, leaned over and stabbed a dozing man in the row in front, slid the A B C on to his knees and managed to collide heavily with Mr. Cust in the darkened doorway, wiping the knife on his sleeve and slipping it into his pocket.

“You were not in the least at pains to choose a victim whose name began with D. Anyone would do! You assumed—and quite rightly—that it would be considered to be a mistake. There was sure to be someone whose name began with D not far off in the audience. It would be assumed that he had been intended to be the victim.

“And now, my friends, let us consider the matter from the point of view of the false A B C—from the point of view of Mr. Cust.

“The Andover crime means nothing to him. He is shocked and surprised by the Bexhill crime—why, he himself was there about the time! Then comes the Churston crime and the headlines in the newspapers. An A B C crime at Andover when he was there, an A B C crime at Bexhill, and now another close by…Three crimes and he has been at the scene of each of them. Persons suffering from epilepsy often have blanks when they cannot remember what they have done…Remember that Cust was a nervous, highly neurotic subject and extremely suggestible.

“Then he receives the order to go to Doncaster.

“Doncaster! And the next A B C crime is to be in Doncaster. He must have felt as though it was fate. He loses his nerve, fancies his landlady is looking at him suspiciously, and tells her he is going to Cheltenham.

“He goes to Doncaster because it is his duty. In the afternoon he goes to a cinema. Possibly he dozes off for a minute or two.

“Imagine his feelings when on his return to his inn he discovers that there is blood on his coat sleeve and a blood-stained knife in his pocket. All his vague forebodings leap into certainty.

“He—he himself—is the killer! He remembers his headaches—his lapses of memory. He is quite sure of the truth—he, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, is a homicidal lunatic.

“His conduct after that is the conduct of a hunted animal. He gets back to his lodgings in London. He is safe there—known. They think he has been in Cheltenham. He has the knife with him still—a thoroughly stupid thing to do, of course. He hides it behind the hall stand.

“Then, one day, he is warned that the police are coming. It is the end! They know!

“The hunted animal does his last run….

“I don’t know why he went to Andover—a morbid desire, I think, to go and look at the place where the crime was committed—the crime he committed though he can remember nothing about it….

“He has no money left—he is worn out…his feet lead him of his own accord to the police station.

“But even a cornered beast will fight. Mr. Cust fully believes that he did the murders but he sticks strongly to his plea of innocence. And he holds with desperation to that alibi for the second murder. At least that cannot be laid to his door.

“As I say, when I saw him, I knew at once that he was not the murderer and that my name meant nothing to him. I knew, too, that he thought himself the murderer!

“After he had confessed his guilt to me, I knew more strongly than ever that my own theory was right.”

“Your theory,” said Franklin Clarke, “is absurd!”

Poirot shook his head.

“No, Mr. Clarke. You were safe enough so long as no one suspected you. Once you were suspected proofs were easy to obtain.”

“Proofs?”

“Yes. I found the stick that you used in the Andover and Churston murders in a cupboard at Combeside. An ordinary stick with a thick knob handle. A section of wood had been removed and melted lead poured in. Your photograph was picked out from half a dozen others by two people who saw you leaving the cinema when you were supposed to be on the race course at Doncaster. You were identified at Bexhill the other day by Milly Higley and a girl from the Scarlet Runner Roadhouse, where you took Betty Barnard to dine on the fatal evening. And finally—most damning of all—you overlooked a most elementary precaution. You left a fingerprint on Cust’s typewriter—the typewriter that, if you are innocent, you could never have handled.”

Clarke sat quite still for a minute, then he said:

“Rouge, impair, manque!—you win, M. Poirot! But it was worth trying!”

With an incredibly rapid motion he whipped out a small automatic from his pocket and held it to his head.

I gave a cry and involuntarily flinched as I waited for the report.

But no report came—the hammer clicked harmlessly.

Clarke stared at it in astonishment and uttered an oath.

“No, Mr. Clarke,” said Poirot. “You may have noticed I had a new manservant today—a friend of mine—an expert sneak thief. He removed your pistol from your pocket, unloaded it, and returned it, all without you being aware of the fact.”

“You unutterable little jackanapes of a foreigner!” cried Clarke, purple with rage.

“Yes, yes, that is how you feel. No, Mr. Clarke, no easy death for you. You told Mr. Cust that you had had near escapes from drowning. You know what that means—that you were born for another fate.”

“You—”

Words failed him. His face was livid. His fists clenched menacingly.

Two detectives from Scotland Yard emerged from the next room. One of them was Crome. He advanced and uttered his time-honoured formula: “I warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence.”

“He has said quite enough,” said Poirot, and he added to Clarke: “You are very full of an insular superiority, but for myself I consider your crime not an English crime at all—not aboveboard—not sporting—”

Thirty-five

FINALE

I

I am sorry to relate that as the door closed behind Franklin Clarke I laughed hysterically.

Poirot looked at me in mild surprise.

“It’s because you told him his crime was not sporting,” I gasped.

“It was quite true. It was abominable—not so much the murder of his brother—but the cruelty that condemned an unfortunate man to a living death. To catch a fox and put him in a box and never let him go! That is not le sport!”

Megan Barnard gave a deep sigh.

“I can’t believe it—I can’t. Is it true?”

“Yes, mademoiselle. The nightmare is over.”

She looked at him and her colour deepened.

Poirot turned to Fraser.

“Mademoiselle Megan, all along, was haunted by a fear that it was you who had committed the second crime.”

Donald Fraser said quietly:

“I fancied so myself at one time.”

“Because of your dream?” He drew a little nearer to the young man and dropped his voice confidentially. “Your dream has a very natural explanation. It is that you find that already the image of one sister fades in your memory and that its place is taken by the other sister. Mademoiselle Megan replaces her sister in your heart, but since you cannot bear to think of yourself being unfaithful so soon to the dead, you strive to stifle the thought, to kill it! That is the explanation of the dream.”

Fraser’s eyes went towards Megan.

“Do not be afraid to forget,” said Poirot gently. “She was not so well worth remembering. In Mademoiselle Megan you have one in a hundred—un coeur magnifique!”

Donald Fraser’s eyes lit up.

“I believe you are right.”

We all crowded round Poirot asking questions, elucidating this point and that.

“Those questions, Poirot? That you asked of everybody. Was there any point in them?”

“Some of them were simplement une blague. But I learnt one thing that I wanted to know—that Franklin Clarke was in London when the first letter was posted—and also I wanted to see his face when I asked my question of Mademoiselle Thora. He was off his guard. I saw all the malice and anger in his eyes.”

“You hardly spared my feelings,” said Thora Grey.

“I do not fancy you returned me a truthful answer, mademoiselle,” said Poirot dryly. “And now your second expectation is disappointed. Franklin Clarke will not inherit his brother’s money.”

She flung up her head.

“Is there any need for me to stay here and be insulted?”

“None whatever,” said Poirot and held the door open politely for her.

“That fingerprint clinched things, Poirot,” I said thoughtfully. “He went all to pieces when you mentioned that.”

“Yes, they are useful—fingerprints.”

He added thoughtfully:

“I put that in to please you, my friend.”

“But, Poirot,” I cried, “wasn’t it true?”

“Not in the least, mon ami,” said Hercule Poirot.

II

I must mention a visit we had from Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust a few days later. After wringing Poirot’s hand and endeavouring very incoherently and unsuccessfully to thank him, Mr. Cust drew himself up and said:

“Do you know, a newspaper has actually offered me a hundred pounds—a hundred pounds—for a brief account of my life and history—I—I really don’t know what to do about it.”

“I should not accept a hundred,” said Poirot. “Be firm. Say five hundred is your price. And do not confine yourself to one newspaper.”

“Do you really think—that I might—”

“You must realize,” said Poirot, smiling, “that you are a very famous man. Practically the most famous man in England today.”

Mr. Cust drew himself up still further. A beam of delight irradiated his face.

“Do you know, I believe you’re right! Famous! In all the papers. I shall take your advice, M. Poirot. The money will be most agreeable—most agreeable. I shall have a little holiday…And then I want to give a nice wedding present to Lily Marbury—a dear girl—really a dear girl, M. Poirot.”

Poirot patted him encouragingly on the shoulder.

“You are quite right. Enjoy yourself. And—just a little word—what about a visit to an oculist? Those headaches, it is probably that you want new glasses.”

“You think that it may have been that all the time?”

“I do.”

Mr. Cust shook him warmly by the hand.

“You’re a very great man, M. Poirot.”

Poirot, as usual, did not disdain the compliment. He did not even succeed in looking modest.

When Mr. Cust had strutted importantly out, my old friend smiled across at me.

“So, Hastings—we went hunting once more, did we not? Vive le sport.”

Murder In Mesopotamia (1936)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Foreword

by Giles Reilly, MD

The events chronicled in this narrative took place some four years ago. Circumstances have rendered it necessary, in my opinion, that a straightforward account of them should be given to the public. There have been the wildest and most ridiculous rumours suggesting that important evidence was suppressed and other nonsense of that kind. Those misconstructions have appeared more especially in the American Press.

For obvious reasons it was desirable that the account should not come from the pen of one of the expedition staff, who might reasonably be supposed to be prejudiced.

I therefore suggested to Miss Amy Leatheran that she should undertake the task. She is obviously the person to do it. She had a professional character of the highest, she is not biased by having any previous connection with the University of Pittstown Expedition to Iraq and she was an observant and intellectual eyewitness.

It was not very easy to persuade Miss Leatheran to undertake this task—in fact, persuading her was one of the hardest jobs of my professional career—and even after it was completed she displayed a curious reluctance to let me see the manuscript. I discovered that this was partly due to some critical remarks she had made concerning my daughter Sheila. I soon disposed of that, assuring her that as children criticize their parents freely in print nowadays, parents are only too delighted when their offspring come in for their share of abuse! Her other objection was extreme modesty about her literary style. She hoped I would “put the grammar right and all that.” I have, on the contrary, refused to alter so much as a single word. Miss Leatheran’s style in my opinion is vigorous, individual and entirely apposite. If she calls Hercule Poirot “Poirot” in one paragraph and “Mr.

Poirot” in the next, such a variation is both interesting and suggestive. At one moment she is, so to speak, “remembering her manners” (and hospital nurses are great sticklers for etiquette) and at the next her interest in what she is telling is that of a pure human being—cap and cuffs forgotten!

The only thing I have done is to take the liberty of writing a first chapter—aided by a letter kindly supplied by one of Miss Leatheran’s friends. It is intended to be in the nature of a frontispiece—that is, it gives a rough sketch of the narrator.

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One

FRONTISPIECE

In the hall of the Tigris Palace Hotel in Baghdad a hospital nurse was finishing a letter. Her fountain pen drove briskly over the paper.

. . . Well, dear, I think that's really all my news. I must say it's been nice to see a bit of the world—though England for me every time, thank you. The dirt and the mess in Baghdad you wouldn't believe—and not romantic at all like you'd think from the Arabian Nights! Of course, it's pretty just on the river, but the town itself is just awful—and no proper shops at all. Major Kelsey took me through the bazaars, and of course there's no denying they're quaint—but just a lot of rubbish and hammering away at copper pans till they make your headache—and not what I'd like to use myself unless I was sure about the cleaning. You've got to be so careful of verdigris with copper pans.

I'll write and let you know if anything comes of the job that Dr. Reilly spoke about. He said this American gentleman was in Baghdad now and might come and see me this afternoon. It's for his wife—she has "fancies," so Dr. Reilly said. He didn't say any more than that, and of course, dear, one knows what that usually means (but I hope not actually D.T.s!). Of course, Dr. Reilly didn't say anything—but he had a look—if you know what I mean. This Dr. Leidner is an archaeologist and is digging up a mound out in the desert somewhere for some American museum.

Well, dear, I will close now. I thought what you told me about little Stubbins was simply killing! Whatever did Matron say?

No more now.

Yours ever,

Amy Leatheran

Enclosing the letter in an envelope, she addressed it to Sister Curshaw, St. Christopher's Hospital, London.

As she put the cap on her fountain pen, one of the native boys approached her.

"A gentleman come to see you. Dr. Leidner."

Nurse Leatheran turned. She saw a man of middle height with slightly stooping shoulders, a brown beard and gentle, tired eyes.

Dr. Leidner saw a woman of thirty-five, of erect, confident bearing. He saw a good-humoured face with slightly prominent blue eyes and glossy brown hair. She looked, he thought, just what a hospital nurse for a nervous case ought to look. Cheerful, robust, shrewd and matter-of-fact.

Nurse Leatheran, he thought, would do.

Two

INTRODUCING AMY LEATHERAN

I don’t pretend to be an author or to know anything about writing. I’m doing this simply because Dr. Reilly asked me to, and somehow when Dr. Reilly asks you to do a thing you don’t like to refuse.

“Oh, but, doctor,” I said, “I’m not literary—not literary at all.”

“Nonsense!” he said. “Treat it as case notes, if you like.”

Well, of course, you can look at it that way.

Dr. Reilly went on. He said that an unvarnished plain account of the Tell Yarimjah business was badly needed.

“If one of the interested parties writes it, it won’t carry conviction. They’ll say it’s biased one way or another.”

And of course that was true, too. I was in it all and yet an outsider, so to speak.

“Why don’t you write it yourself, doctor?” I asked.

“I wasn’t on the spot—you were. Besides,” he added with a sigh, “my daughter won’t let me.”

The way he knuckles under to that chit of a girl of his is downright disgraceful. I had half a mind to say so, when I saw that his eyes were twinkling. That was the worst of Dr. Reilly. You never knew whether he was joking or not. He always said things in the same slow melancholy way—but half the time there was a twinkle underneath it.

"Well," I said doubtfully, "I suppose I could."

"Of course you could."

"Only I don't quite know how to set about it."

"There's a good precedent for that. Begin at the beginning, go on to the end and then leave off."

"I don't even know quite where and what the beginning was," I said doubtfully.

"Believe me, nurse, the difficulty of beginning will be nothing to the difficulty of knowing how to stop. At least that's the way it is with me when I have to make a speech. Someone's got to catch hold of my coattails and pull me down by main force."

"Oh, you're joking, doctor."

"It's profoundly serious I am. Now what about it?"

Another thing was worrying me. After hesitating a moment or two I said: "You know, doctor, I'm afraid I might tend to be—well, a little personal sometimes."

"God bless my soul, woman, the more personal you are the better! This is a story of human beings—not dummies! Be personal—be prejudiced—be catty—be anything you please! Write the thing your own way. We can always prune out the bits that are libellous afterwards! You go ahead. You're a sensible woman, and you'll give a sensible commonsense account of the business."

So that was that, and I promised to do my best.

And here I am beginning, but as I said to the doctor, it's difficult to know just where to start.

I suppose I ought to say a word or two about myself. I'm thirty-two and my name is Amy Leatheran. I took my training at St. Christopher's and after that did two years maternity. I did a certain amount of private work and I was for four years at Miss Bendix's Nursing Home in Devonshire Place. I came out to Iraq with a Mrs. Kelsey. I'd attended her when her baby was born. She was coming out to Baghdad with her husband and had already got a children's nurse booked who had been for some years with friends of hers out there. Their children were coming home and going to school, and the nurse had agreed to go to Mrs. Kelsey when they left. Mrs. Kelsey was delicate and nervous about the journey out with so young a child, so Major Kelsey arranged that I should come out with her and look after her and the baby. They would pay my passage home unless we found someone needing a nurse for the return journey.

Well, there is no need to describe the Kelseys—the baby was a little love and Mrs. Kelsey quite nice, though rather the fretting kind. I enjoyed the voyage very much. I'd never been a long trip on the sea before.

Dr. Reilly was on board the boat. He was a black-haired, long-faced man who said all sorts of funny things in a low, sad voice. I think he enjoyed pulling my leg and used to make the most extraordinary statements to see if I would swallow them. He was the civil surgeon at a place called Hassanieh—a day and a half 's journey from Baghdad.

I had been about a week in Baghdad when I ran across him and he asked when I was leaving the Kelseys. I said that it was funny his asking that because as a matter of fact the Wrights (the other people I mentioned) were going home earlier than they had meant to and their nurse was free to come straightaway.

He said that he had heard about the Wrights and that that was why he had asked me.

"As a matter of fact, nurse, I've got a possible job for you."

"A case?"

He screwed his face up as though considering.

"You could hardly call it a case. It's just a lady who has—shall we say—fancies?"

"Oh!" I said.

(One usually knows what that means—drink or drugs!)

Dr. Reilly didn't explain further. He was very discreet. "Yes," he said. "A Mrs. Leidner. Husband's an American—an American Swede to be exact. He's the head of a large American dig."

And he explained how this expedition was excavating the site of a big Assyrian city something like Nineveh. The expedition house was not actually very far from Hassanieh, but it was a lonely spot and Dr. Leidner had been worried for some time about his wife's health.

"He's not been very explicit about it, but it seems she has these fits of recurring nervous terrors."

"Is she left alone all day amongst natives?" I asked.

"Oh, no, there's quite a crowd—seven or eight. I don't fancy she's ever been alone in the house. But there seems to be no doubt that she's worked herself up into a queer state. Leidner has any amount of work on his shoulders, but he's crazy about his wife and it worries him to know she's in this state. He felt he'd be happier if he knew that some responsible person with expert knowledge was keeping an eye on her."

"And what does Mrs. Leidner herself think about it?"

Dr. Reilly answered gravely:

"Mrs. Leidner is a very lovely lady. She's seldom of the same mind about anything two days on end. But on the whole she favours the idea." He added, "She's an odd woman. A mass of affection and, I should fancy, a champion liar—but Leidner seems honestly to believe that she is scared out of her life by something or other."

"What did she herself say to you, doctor?"

"Oh, she hasn't consulted me! She doesn't like me anyway—for several reasons. It was Leidner who came to me and propounded this plan. Well, nurse, what do you think of the idea? You'd see something of the country before you go home—they'll be digging for another two months. And excavation is quite interesting work."

After a moment's hesitation while I turned the matter over in my mind: "Well," I said, "I really think I might try it."

"Splendid," said Dr. Reilly, rising. "Leidner's in Baghdad now. I'll tell him to come round and see if he can fix things up with you."

Dr. Leidner came to the hotel that afternoon. He was a middle-aged man with a rather nervous, hesitating manner. There was something gentle and kindly and rather helpless about him.

He sounded very devoted to his wife, but he was very vague about what was the matter with her.

"You see," he said, tugging at his beard in a rather perplexed manner that I later came to know to be characteristic of him, "my wife is really in a very nervous state. I—I'm quite worried about her."

"She is in good physical health?" I asked.

"Yes—oh, yes, I think so. No, I should not think there was anything the matter with her physically. But she—well—imagines things, you know."

"What kind of things?" I asked.

But he shied off from the point, merely murmuring perplexedly: "She works herself up over nothing at all . . . I really can see no foundations for these fears."

"Fears of what, Dr. Leidner?"

He said vaguely, "Oh, just—nervous terrors, you know."

Ten to one, I thought to myself, it's drugs. And he doesn't realize it! Lots of men don't. Just wonder why their wives are so jumpy and have such extraordinary changes of mood.

I asked whether Mrs. Leidner herself approved of the idea of my coming.

His face lighted up.

“Yes. I was surprised. Most pleasurably surprised. She said it was a very good idea. She said she would feel very much safer.”

The word struck me oddly. Safer. A very queer word to use. I began to surmise that Mrs. Leidner might be a mental case.

He went on with a kind of boyish eagerness.

“I'm sure you'll get on very well with her. She's really a very charming woman.” He smiled disarmingly. “She feels you'll be the greatest comfort to her. I felt the same as soon as I saw you. You look, if you will allow me to say so, so splendidly healthy and full of common sense. I'm sure you're just the person for Louise.”

“Well, we can but try, Dr. Leidner,” I said cheerfully. “I'm sure I hope I can be of use to your wife. Perhaps she's nervous of natives and coloured people?”

“Oh, dear me no.” He shook his head, amused at the idea. “My wife likes Arabs very much—she appreciates their simplicity and their sense of humour. This is only her second season—we have been married less than two years—but she already speaks quite a fair amount of Arabic.”

I was silent for a moment or two, then I had one more try.

“Can't you tell me at all what it is your wife is afraid of, Dr. Leidner?” I asked.

He hesitated. Then he said slowly, “I hope—I believe—that she will tell you that herself.”

And that’s all I could get out of him.

Three

GOSSIP

It was arranged that I should go to Tell Yarimjah the following week.

Mrs. Kelsey was settling into her house at Alwiyah, and I was glad to be able to take a few things off her shoulders.

During that time I heard one or two allusions to the Leidner expedition. A friend of Mrs. Kelsey's, a young squadron leader, pursed his lips in surprise as he exclaimed: "Lovely Louise. So that's her latest!" He turned to me. "That's our nickname for her, nurse. She's always known as Lovely Louise."

"Is she so very handsome then?" I asked.

"It's taking her at her own valuation. She thinks she is!"

"Now don't be spiteful, John," said Mrs. Kelsey. "You know it's not only she who thinks so! Lots of people have been very smitten by her."

"Perhaps you're right. She's a bit long in the tooth, but she has a certain attraction."

"You were completely bowled over yourself," said Mrs. Kelsey, laughing.

The squadron leader blushed and admitted rather shamefacedly: "Well, she has a way with her. As for Leidner himself, he worships the ground she walks on—and all the rest of the expedition has to worship too! It's expected of them!"

"How many are there altogether?" I asked.

“All sorts and nationalities, nurse,” said the squadron-leader cheerfully. “An English architect, a French Father from Carthage—he does the inscriptions—tablets and things, you know. And then there’s Miss Johnson. She’s English too—sort of general bottle-washer. And a little plump man who does the photography—he’s an American. And the Mercados. Heaven knows what nationality they are—Dagos of some kind! She’s quite young—a snaky-looking creature—and oh! doesn’t she hate Lovely Louise! And there are a couple of youngsters and that’s the lot. A few odd fish, but nice on the whole—don’t you agree, Pennyman?”

He was appealing to an elderly man who was sitting thoughtfully twirling a pair of pince-nez.

The latter started and looked up.

“Yes—yes—very nice indeed. Taken individually, that is. Of course, Mercado is rather a queer fish—”

“He has such a very odd beard,” put in Mrs. Kelsey. “A queer limp kind.”

Major Pennyman went on without noticing her interruption.

“The young ’uns are both nice. The American’s rather silent, and the English boy talks a bit too much. Funny, it’s usually the other way round. Leidner himself is a delightful fellow—so modest and unassuming. Yes, individually they are all pleasant people. But somehow or other, I may have been fanciful, but the last time I went to see them I got a queer impression of something being wrong. I don’t know what it was exactly . . . Nobody seemed quite natural. There was a queer atmosphere of tension. I can explain best what I mean by saying that they all passed the butter to each other too politely.”

Blushing a little, because I don’t like airing my own opinions too much, I said: “If people are too much cooped up together it’s got a way of getting on their nerves. I know that myself from experience in hospital.”

“That’s true,” said Major Kelsey, “but it’s early in the season, hardly time for that particular irritation to have set in.”

“An expedition is probably like our life here in miniature,” said Major Pennyman. “It has its cliques and rivalries and jealousies.”

“It sounds as though they’d got a good many newcomers this year,” said Major Kelsey.

“Let me see.” The squadron leader counted them off on his fingers. “Young Coleman is new, so is Reiter. Emmott was out last year and so were the Mercados. Father Lavigny is a newcomer. He’s come in place of Dr. Byrd, who was ill this year and couldn’t come out. Carey, of course, is an old hand. He’s been out ever since the beginning, five years ago. Miss Johnson’s been out nearly as many years as Carey.”

“I always thought they got on so well together at Tell Yarimjah,” remarked Major Kelsey. “They seemed like a happy family—which is really surprising when one considers what human nature is! I’m sure Nurse Leatheran agrees with me.”

“Well,” I said, “I don’t know that you’re not right! The rows I’ve known in hospital and starting often from nothing more than a dispute about a pot of tea.”

“Yes, one tends to get petty in close communities,” said Major Pennyman. “All the same I feel there must be something more to it in this case. Leidner is such a gentle, unassuming man, with really a remarkable amount of tact. He’s always managed to keep his expedition happy and on good terms with each other. And yet I did notice that feeling of tension the other day.”

Mrs. Kelsey laughed.

“And you don’t see the explanation? Why, it leaps to the eye!”

“What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Leidner, of course.”

“Oh come, Mary,” said her husband, “she’s a charming woman—not at all the quarrelsome kind.”

“I didn’t say she was quarrelsome. She causes quarrels!”

“In what way? And why should she?”

“Why? Why? Because she’s bored. She’s not an archaeologist, only the wife of one. She’s bored shut away from any excitements and so she provides her own drama. She amuses herself by setting other people by the ears.”

“Mary, you don’t know in the least. You’re merely imagining.”

“Of course I’m imagining! But you’ll find I’m right. Lovely Louise doesn’t look like the Mona Lisa for nothing! She mayn’t mean any harm, but she likes to see what will happen.”

“She’s devoted to Leidner.”

“Oh! I dare say, I’m not suggesting vulgar intrigues. But she’s an allumeuse, that woman.”

“Women are so sweet to each other,” said Major Kelsey.

“I know. Cat, cat, cat, that’s what you men say. But we’re usually right about our own sex.”

“All the same,” said Major Pennyman thoughtfully, “assuming all Mrs. Kelsey’s uncharitable surmises to be true, I don’t think it would quite account for that curious sense of tension—rather like the feeling there is before a thunderstorm. I had the impression very strongly that the storm might break any minute.”

“Now don’t frighten nurse,” said Mrs. Kelsey. “She’s going there in three days’ time and you’ll put her right off.”

“Oh, you won’t frighten me,” I said, laughing.

All the same I thought a good deal about what had been said. Dr. Leidner’s curious use of the word “safer” recurred to me. Was it his wife’s secret fear, unacknowledged or expressed perhaps, that was reacting on the rest of the party? Or was it the actual tension (or perhaps the unknown cause of it) that was reacting on her nerves?

I looked up the word allumeuse that Mrs. Kelsey had used in a dictionary, but couldn’t get any sense out of it.

“Well,” I thought to myself, “I must wait and see.”

Four

I ARRIVE IN HASSANIEH

Three days later I left Baghdad.

I was sorry to leave Mrs. Kelsey and the baby, who was a little love and was thriving splendidly, gaining her proper number of ounces every week. Major Kelsey took me to the station and saw me off. I should arrive at Kirkuk the following morning, and there someone was to meet me.

I slept badly, I never sleep very well in a train and I was troubled by dreams. The next morning, however, when I looked out of the window it was a lovely day and I felt interested and curious about the people I was going to see.

As I stood on the platform hesitating and looking about me I saw a young man coming towards me. He had a round pink face, and really, in all my life, I have never seen anyone who seemed so exactly like a young man out of one of Mr. P. G. Wodehouse's books.

“Hallo, ’allo, ’allo,” he said. “Are you Nurse Leatheran? Well, I mean you must be—I can see that. Ha ha! My name's Coleman. Dr. Leidner sent me along. How are you feeling? Beastly journey and all that? Don't I know these trains! Well, here we are—had any breakfast? This your kit? I say, awfully modest, aren't you? Mrs. Leidner has four suitcases and a trunk—to say nothing of a hatbox and a patent pillow, and this, that and the other. Am I talking too much? Come along to the old bus.”

There was what I heard called later a station wagon waiting outside. It was a little like a wagonette, a little like a lorry and a little like a car. Mr. Coleman helped me in, explaining that I had better sit next to the driver so as to get less jolting.

Jolting! I wonder the whole contraption didn't fall to pieces! And nothing like a road—just a sort of track all ruts and holes. Glorious East indeed! When I thought of our splendid arterial roads in England it made me quite homesick.

Mr. Coleman leaned forward from his seat behind me and yelled in my ear a good deal.

"Track's in pretty good condition," he shouted just after we had been thrown up in our seats till we nearly touched the roof.

And apparently he was speaking quite seriously.

"Very good for you—jogs the liver," he said. "You ought to know that, nurse."

"A stimulated liver won't be much good to me if my head's split open," I observed tartly.

"You should come along here after it's rained! The skids are glorious. Most of the time one's going sideways."

To this I did not respond.

Presently we had to cross the river, which we did on the craziest ferryboat you can imagine. It was a mercy we ever got across, but everyone seemed to think it was quite usual.

It took us about four hours to get to Hassanieh, which, to my surprise, was quite a big place. Very pretty it looked, too, before we got there from the other side of the river—standing up quite white and fairy-like with minarets. It was a bit different, though, when one had crossed the bridge and come right into it. Such a smell and everything ramshackle and tumbledown, and mud and mess everywhere.

Mr. Coleman took me to Dr. Reilly's house, where, he said, the doctor was expecting me to lunch.

Dr. Reilly was just as nice as ever, and his house was nice too, with a bathroom and everything spick and span. I had a nice bath, and by the time I got back into my uniform and came down I was feeling fine.

Lunch was just ready and we went in, the doctor apologizing for his daughter, who he said was always late. We'd just had a very good dish of eggs in sauce when she came in and Dr. Reilly said, “Nurse, this is my daughter Sheila.”

She shook hands, hoped I'd had a good journey, tossed off her hat, gave a cool nod to Mr. Coleman and sat down.

“Well, Bill,” she said. “How's everything?”

He began to talk to her about some party or other that was to come off at the club, and I took stock of her.

I can't say I took to her much. A thought too cool for my liking. An offhand sort of girl, though good-looking. Black hair and blue eyes—a pale sort of face and the usual lipsticked mouth. She'd a cool, sarcastic way of talking that rather annoyed me. I had a probationer like her under me once—a girl who worked well, I'll admit, but whose manner always riled me.

It looked to me rather as though Mr. Coleman was gone on her. He stammered a bit, and his conversation became slightly more idiotic than it was before, if that was possible! He reminded me of a large stupid dog wagging its tail and trying to please.

After lunch Dr. Reilly went off to the hospital, and Mr. Coleman had some things to get in the town, and Miss Reilly asked me whether I'd like to see round the town a bit or whether I'd rather stop in the house. Mr. Coleman, she said, would be back to fetch me in about an hour.

“Is there anything to see?” I asked.

“There are some picturesque corners,” said Miss Reilly. “But I don't know that you'd care for them. They're extremely dirty.”

The way she said it rather nettled me. I’ve never been able to see that picturesqueness excuses dirt.

In the end she took me to the club, which was pleasant enough, overlooking the river, and there were English papers and magazines there.

When we got back to the house Mr. Coleman wasn’t there yet, so we sat down and talked a bit. It wasn’t easy somehow.

She asked me if I’d met Mrs. Leidner yet.

“No,” I said. “Only her husband.”

“Oh,” she said. “I wonder what you’ll think of her?”

I didn’t say anything to that. And she went on: “I like Dr. Leidner very much. Everybody likes him.”

That’s as good as saying, I thought, that you don’t like his wife.

I still didn’t say anything and presently she asked abruptly: “What’s the matter with her? Did Dr. Leidner tell you?”

I wasn’t going to start gossiping about a patient before I got there even, so I said evasively: “I understand she’s a bit rundown and wants looking after.”

She laughed—a nasty sort of laugh—hard and abrupt.

“Good God,” she said. “Aren’t nine people looking after her already enough?”

“I suppose they’ve all got their work to do,” I said.

“Work to do? Of course they’ve got work to do. But Louise comes first—she sees to that all right.”

“No,” I said to myself. “You don’t like her.”

“All the same,” went on Miss Reilly, “I don’t see what she wants with a professional hospital nurse. I should have thought amateur assistance was more in her line; not someone who’ll jam a thermometer in her mouth, and count her pulse and bring everything down to hard facts.”

Well, I must admit it, I was curious.

“You think there’s nothing the matter with her?” I asked.

“Of course there’s nothing the matter with her! The woman’s as strong as an ox. ‘Dear Louise hasn’t slept.’ ‘She’s got black circles under her eyes.’ Yes—put there with a blue pencil! Anything to get attention, to have everybody hovering round her, making a fuss of her!”

There was something in that, of course. I had (what nurse hasn’t?) come across many cases of hypochondriacs whose delight it is to keep a whole household dancing attendance. And if a doctor or a nurse were to say to them: “There’s nothing on earth the matter with you!” Well, to begin with they wouldn’t believe it, and their indignation would be as genuine as indignation can be.

Of course it was quite possible that Mrs. Leidner might be a case of this kind. The husband, naturally, would be the first to be deceived. Husbands, I’ve found, are a credulous lot where illness is concerned. But all the same, it didn’t quite square with what I’d heard. It didn’t, for instance, fit in with that word “safer.”

Funny how that word had got kind of stuck in my mind.

Reflecting on it, I asked: “Is Mrs. Leidner a nervous woman? Is she nervous, for instance, of living out far from anywhere?”

“What is there to be nervous of? Good heavens, there are ten of them! And they’ve got guards too—because of the antiquities. Oh, no, she’s not nervous—at least—”

She seemed struck by some thought and stopped—going on slowly after a minute or two.

“It’s odd your saying that.”

“Why?”

“Flight Lieutenant Jervis and I rode over the other day. It was in the morning. Most of them were up on the dig. She was sitting writing a letter and I suppose she didn’t hear us coming. The boy who brings you in wasn’t about for once, and we came straight up on to the verandah. Apparently she saw Flight Lieutenant Jervis’s shadow thrown on the wall—and she fairly screamed! Apologized, of course. Said she thought it was a strange man. A bit odd, that. I mean, even if it was a strange man, why get the wind up?”

I nodded thoughtfully.

Miss Reilly was silent, then burst out suddenly:

“I don’t know what’s the matter with them this year. They’ve all got the jumps. Johnson goes about so glum she can’t open her mouth. David never speaks if he can help it. Bill, of course, never stops, and somehow his chatter seems to make the others worse. Carey goes about looking as though something would snap any minute. And they all watch each other as though—as though—Oh, I don’t know, but it’s queer.”

It was odd, I thought, that two such dissimilar people as Miss Reilly and Major Pennyman should have been struck in the same manner.

Just then Mr. Coleman came bustling in. Bustling was just the word for it. If his tongue had hung out and he had suddenly produced a tail to wag you wouldn’t have been surprised.

“Hallo-allo,” he said. “Absolutely the world’s best shopper—that’s me. Have you shown nurse all the beauties of the town?”

“She wasn’t impressed,” said Miss Reilly dryly.

“I don’t blame her,” said Mr. Coleman heartily. “Of all the one-horse tumbledown places!”

“Not a lover of the picturesque or the antique, are you, Bill? I can’t think why you are an archaeologist.”

“Don’t blame me for that. Blame my guardian. He’s a learned bird—fellow of his college—browses among books in bedroom slippers—that kind of man. Bit of a shock for him to have a ward like me.”

“I think it’s frightfully stupid of you to be forced into a profession you don’t care for,” said the girl sharply.

“Not forced, Sheila, old girl, not forced. The old man asked if I had any special profession in mind, and I said I hadn’t, and so he wangled a season out here for me.”

“But haven’t you any idea really what you’d like to do? You must have!”

“Of course I have. My idea would be to give work a miss altogether. What I’d like to do is to have plenty of money and go in for motor racing.”

“You’re absurd!” said Miss Reilly.

She sounded quite angry.

“Oh, I realize that it’s quite out of the question,” said Mr. Coleman cheerfully. “So, if I’ve got to do something, I don’t much care what it is so long as it isn’t mugging in an office all day long. I was quite agreeable to seeing a bit of the world. Here goes, I said, and along I came.”

“And a fat lot of use you must be, I expect!”

“There you’re wrong. I can stand up on the dig and shout ‘Y’Allah’ with anybody! And as a matter of fact I’m not so dusty at drawing. Imitating handwriting used to be my speciality at school. I’d have made a first-class forger. Oh, well, I may come to that yet. If my Rolls-Royce splashes you with mud as you’re waiting for a bus, you’ll know that I’ve taken to crime.”

Miss Reilly said coldly: “Don’t you think it’s about time you started instead of talking so much?”

“Hospitable, aren’t we, nurse?”

“I’m sure Nurse Leatheran is anxious to get settled in.”

“You’re always sure of everything,” retorted Mr. Coleman with a grin.

That was true enough, I thought. Cocksure little minx.

I said dryly: “Perhaps we’d better start, Mr. Coleman.”

“Right you are, nurse.”

I shook hands with Miss Reilly and thanked her, and we set off.

“Damned attractive girl, Sheila,” said Mr. Coleman. “But always ticking a fellow off.”

We drove out of the town and presently took a kind of track between green crops. It was very bumpy and full of ruts.

After about half an hour Mr. Coleman pointed to a big mound by the river bank ahead of us and said: “Tell Yarimjah.”

I could see little black figures moving about it like ants.

As I was looking they suddenly began to run all together down the side of the mound.

“Fidos,” said Mr. Coleman. “Knocking-off time. We knock off an hour before sunset.”

The expedition house lay a little way back from the river.

Fig.1.eps

The driver rounded a corner, bumped through an extremely narrow arch and there we were.

The house was built round a courtyard. Originally it had occupied only the south side of the courtyard with a few unimportant outbuildings on the east. The expedition had continued the building on the other two sides. As the plan of the house was to prove of special interest later, I append a rough sketch of it here.

All the rooms opened on to the courtyard, and most of the windows—the exception being in the original south building where there were windows giving on the outside country as well. These windows, however, were barred on the outside. In the south-west corner a staircase ran up to a long flat roof with a parapet running the length of the south side of the building which was higher than the other three sides.

Mr. Coleman led me along the east side of the courtyard and round to where a big open verandah occupied the centre of the south side. He pushed open a door at one side of it and we entered a room where several people were sitting round a tea table.

“Toodle-oodle-oo!” said Mr. Coleman. “Here’s Sairey Gamp.”

The lady who was sitting at the head of the table rose and came to greet me.

I had my first glimpse of Louise Leidner.

Five

TELL YARIMJAH

I don't mind admitting that my first impression on seeing Mrs. Leidner was one of downright surprise. One gets into the way of imagining a person when one hears them talked about. I'd got it firmly into my head that Mrs. Leidner was a dark, discontented kind of woman. The nervy kind, all on edge. And then, too, I'd expected her to be—well, to put it frankly—a bit vulgar.

She wasn't a bit like what I'd imagined her! To begin with, she was very fair. She wasn't a Swede, like her husband, but she might have been as far as looks went. She had that blonde Scandinavian fairness that you don't very often see. She wasn't a young woman. Midway between thirty and forty, I should say. Her face was rather haggard, and there was some grey hair mingled with the fairness. Her eyes, though, were lovely. They were the only eyes I've ever come across that you might truly describe as violet. They were very large, and there were faint shadows underneath them. She was very thin and fragile-looking, and if I say that she had an air of intense weariness and was at the same time very much alive, it sounds like nonsense—but that's the feeling I got. I felt, too, that she was a lady through and through. And that means something—even nowadays.

She put out her hand and smiled. Her voice was low and soft with an American drawl in it.

"I'm so glad you've come, nurse. Will you have some tea? Or would you like to go to your room first?"

I said I'd have tea, and she introduced me to the people sitting round the table.

“This is Miss Johnson—and Mr. Reiter. Mrs. Mercado. Mr. Emmott. Father Lavigny. My husband will be in presently. Sit down here between Father Lavigny and Miss Johnson.”

I did as I was bid and Miss Johnson began talking to me, asking about my journey and so on.

I liked her. She reminded me of a matron I’d had in my probationer days whom we had all admired and worked hard for.

She was getting on for fifty, I should judge, and rather mannish in appearance, with iron-grey hair cropped short. She had an abrupt, pleasant voice, rather deep in tone. She had an ugly rugged face with an almost laughably turned-up nose which she was in the habit of rubbing irritably when anything troubled or perplexed her. She wore a tweed coat and skirt made rather like a man’s. She told me presently that she was a native of Yorkshire.

Father Lavigny I found just a bit alarming. He was a tall man with a great black beard and pince-nez. I had heard Mrs. Kelsey say that there was a French monk there, and I now saw that Father Lavigny was wearing a monk’s robe of some white woollen material. It surprised me rather, because I always understood that monks went into monasteries and didn’t come out again.

Mrs. Leidner talked to him mostly in French, but he spoke to me in quite fair English. I noticed that he had shrewd, observant eyes which darted about from face to face.

Opposite me were the other three. Mr. Reiter was a stout, fair young man with glasses. His hair was rather long and curly, and he had very round blue eyes. I should think he must have been a lovely baby, but he wasn’t much to look at now! In fact he was just a little like a pig. The other young man had very short hair cropped close to his head. He had a long, rather humorous face and very good teeth, and he looked very attractive when he smiled. He said very little, though, just nodded if spoken to or answered in monosyllables. He, like Mr. Reiter, was an American. The last person was Mrs. Mercado, and I couldn’t have a good look at her because whenever I glanced in her direction I always found her staring at me with a kind of hungry stare that was a bit disconcerting to say the least of it. You might have thought a hospital nurse was a strange animal the way she was looking at me. No manners at all!

She was quite young—not more than about twenty-five—and sort of dark and slinky-looking, if you know what I mean. Quite nice-looking in a kind of way, but rather as though she might have what my mother used to call “a touch of the tar-brush.” She had on a very vivid pullover and her nails matched it in colour. She had a thin bird-like eager face with big eyes and rather a tight, suspicious mouth.

The tea was very good—a nice strong blend—not like the weak China stuff that Mrs. Kelsey always had and that had been a sore trial to me.

There was toast and jam and a plate of rock buns and a cutting cake. Mr. Emmott was very polite passing me things. Quiet as he was he always seemed to notice when my plate was empty.

Presently Mr. Coleman bustled in and took the place beyond Miss Johnson. There didn’t seem to be anything the matter with his nerves. He talked away nineteen to the dozen.

Mrs. Leidner sighed once and cast a wearied look in his direction but it didn’t have any effect. Nor did the fact that Mrs. Mercado, to whom he was addressing most of his conversation, was far too busy watching me to do more than make perfunctory replies.

Just as we were finishing, Dr. Leidner and Mr. Mercado came in from the dig.

Dr. Leidner greeted me in his nice kind manner. I saw his eyes go quickly and anxiously to his wife’s face and he seemed to be relieved by what he saw there. Then he sat down at the other end of the table, and Mr. Mercado sat down in the vacant place by Mrs. Leidner. He was a tall, thin, melancholy man, a good deal older than his wife, with a sallow complexion and a queer, soft, shapeless-looking beard. I was glad when he came in, for his wife stopped staring at me and transferred her attention to him, watching him with a kind of anxious impatience that I found rather odd. He himself stirred his tea dreamily and said nothing at all. A piece of cake lay untasted on his plate.

There was still one vacant place, and presently the door opened and a man came in.

The moment I saw Richard Carey I felt he was one of the handsomest men I'd seen for a long time—and yet I doubt if that were really so. To say a man is handsome and at the same time to say he looks like a death's head sounds a rank contradiction, and yet it was true. His head gave the effect of having the skin stretched unusually tight over the bones—but they were beautiful bones. The lean line of jaw and temple and forehead was so sharply outlined that he reminded me of a bronze statue. Out of this lean brown face looked two of the brightest and most intensely blue eyes I have ever seen. He stood about six foot and was, I should imagine, a little under forty years of age.

Dr. Leidner said: "This is Mr. Carey, our architect, nurse."

He murmured something in a pleasant, inaudible English voice and sat down by Mrs. Mercado.

Mrs. Leidner said: "I'm afraid the tea is a little cold, Mr. Carey."

He said: "Oh, that's quite all right, Mrs. Leidner. My fault for being late. I wanted to finish plotting those walls."

Mrs. Mercado said, "Jam, Mr. Carey?"

Mr. Reiter pushed forward the toast.

And I remembered Major Pennyman saying: "I can explain best what I mean by saying that they all passed the butter to each other a shade too politely."

Yes, there was something a little odd about it. . . .

A shade formal. . . .

You’d have said it was a party of strangers—not people who had known each other—some of them—for quite a number of years.

Six

FIRST EVENING

After tea Mrs. Leidner took me to show me my room.

Perhaps here I had better give a short description of the arrangement of the rooms. This was very simple and can easily be understood by a reference to the plan.

On either side of the big open porch were doors leading into the two principal rooms. That on the right led into the dining room, where we had tea. The one on the other side led into an exactly similar room (I have called it the living room) which was used as a sitting room and kind of informal workroom—that is, a certain amount of drawing (other than the strictly architectural) was done there, and the more delicate pieces of pottery were brought there to be pieced together. Through the living room one passed into the antiquities room where all the finds from the dig were brought in and stored on shelves and in pigeonholes, and also laid out on big benches and tables. From the antika room there was no exit save through the living room.

Beyond the antika room, but reached through a door which gave on the courtyard, was Mrs. Leidner’s bedroom. This, like the other rooms on that side of the house, had a couple of barred windows looking out over the ploughed countryside. Round the corner next to Mrs. Leidner’s room, but with no actual communicating door, was Dr. Leidner’s room. This was the first of the rooms on the east side of the building. Next to it was the room that was to be mine. Next to me was Miss Johnson’s, with Mr. and Mrs. Mercado’s beyond. After that came two so-called bathrooms.

(When I once used that last term in the hearing of Dr. Reilly he laughed at me and said a bathroom was either a bathroom or not a bathroom! All the same, when you’ve got used to taps and proper plumbing, it seems strange to call a couple of mudrooms with a tin hip bath in each of them, and muddy water brought in kerosene tins, bathrooms!)

All this side of the building had been added by Dr. Leidner to the original Arab house. The bedrooms were all the same, each with a window and a door giving on to the courtyard. Along the north side were the drawing office, the laboratory and the photographic rooms.

To return to the verandah, the arrangement of rooms was much the same on the other side. There was the dining room leading into the office where the files were kept and the cataloguing and typing was done. Corresponding to Mrs. Leidner’s room was that of Father Lavigny, who was given the largest bedroom; he used it also for the decoding—or whatever you call it—of tablets.

In the southwest corner was the staircase running up to the roof. On the west side were first the kitchen quarters and then four small bedrooms used by the young men—Carey, Emmott, Reiter and Coleman.

At the northwest corner was the photographic room with the darkroom leading out of it. Next to that the laboratory. Then came the only entrance—the big arched doorway through which we had entered. Outside were sleeping quarters for the native servants, the guardhouse for the soldiers, and stables, etc., for the water horses. The drawing office was to the right of the archway occupying the rest of the north side.

I have gone into the arrangements of the house rather fully here because I don’t want to have to go over them again later.

As I say, Mrs. Leidner herself took me round the building and finally established me in my bedroom, hoping that I should be comfortable and have everything I wanted.

The room was nicely though plainly furnished—a bed, a chest of drawers, a washstand and a chair.

“The boys will bring you hot water before lunch and dinner—and in the morning, of course. If you want it any other time, go outside and clap your hands, and when the boy comes say, jib mai’ har. Do you think you can remember that?”

I said I thought so and repeated it a little haltingly.

“That’s right. And be sure and shout it. Arabs don’t understand anything said in an ordinary ‘English’ voice.”

“Languages are funny things,” I said. “It seems odd there should be such a lot of different ones.”

Mrs. Leidner smiled.

“There is a church in Palestine in which the Lord’s Prayer is written up in—ninety, I think it is—different languages.”

“Well!” I said. “I must write and tell my old aunt that. She will be interested.”

Mrs. Leidner fingered the jug and basin absently and shifted the soap dish an inch or two.”

“I do hope you’ll be happy here,” she said, “and not get too bored.”

“I’m not often bored,” I assured her. “Life’s not long enough for that.”

She did not answer. She continued to toy with the washstand as though abstractedly.

Suddenly she fixed her dark violet eyes on my face.

“What exactly did my husband tell you, nurse?”

Well, one usually says the same thing to a question of that kind.

“I gathered you were a bit run-down and all that, Mrs. Leidner,” I said glibly. “And that you just wanted someone to look after you and take any worries off your hands."

She bent her head slowly and thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said. "Yes—that will do very well."

That was just a little bit enigmatic, but I wasn't going to question it. Instead I said: "I hope you'll let me help you with anything there is to do in the house. You mustn't let me be idle."

She smiled a little.

"Thank you, nurse."

Then she sat down on the bed and, rather to my surprise, began to cross-question me rather closely. I say rather to my surprise because, from the moment I set eyes on her, I felt sure that Mrs. Leidner was a lady. And a lady, in my experience, very seldom displays curiosity about one's private affairs.

But Mrs. Leidner seemed anxious to know everything there was to know about me. Where I'd trained and how long ago. What had brought me out to the East. How it had come about that Dr. Reilly had recommended me. She even asked me if I had ever been in America or had any relations in America. One or two other questions she asked me that seemed quite purposeless at the time, but of which I saw the significance later.

Then, suddenly, her manner changed. She smiled—a warm sunny smile—and she said, very sweetly, that she was very glad I had come and that she was sure I was going to be a comfort to her.

She got up from the bed and said: "Would you like to come up to the roof and see the sunset? It's usually very lovely about this time."

I agreed willingly.

As we went out of the room she asked: "Were there many other people on the train from Baghdad? Any men?"

I said that I hadn't noticed anybody in particular. There had been two Frenchmen in the restaurant car the night before. And a party of three men whom I gathered from their conversation had to do with the Pipe line.

She nodded and a faint sound escaped her. It sounded like a small sigh of relief.

We went up to the roof together.

Mrs. Mercado was there, sitting on the parapet, and Dr. Leidner was bending over looking at a lot of stones and broken pottery that were laid in rows. There were big things he called querns, and pestles and celts and stone axes, and more broken bits of pottery with queer patterns on them than I've ever seen all at once.

"Come over here," called out Mrs. Mercado. "Isn't it too too beautiful?"

It certainly was a beautiful sunset. Hassanieh in the distance looked quite fairy-like with the setting sun behind it, and the River Tigris flowing between its wide banks looked like a dream river rather than a real one.

"Isn't it lovely, Eric?" said Mrs. Leidner.

The doctor looked up with abstracted eyes, murmured, "Lovely, lovely," perfunctorily and went on sorting potsherds.

Mrs. Leidner smiled and said: "Archaeologists only look at what lies beneath their feet. The sky and the heavens don't exist for them."

Mrs. Mercado giggled.

"Oh, they're very queer people—you'll soon find that out, nurse," she said.

She paused and then added: "We are all so glad you've come. We've been so very worried about dear Mrs. Leidner, haven't we, Louise?"

"Have you?"

Her voice was not encouraging.

“Oh, yes. She really has been very bad, nurse. All sorts of alarms and excursions. You know when anybody says to me of someone, ‘It’s just nerves,’ I always say: but what could be worse? Nerves are the core and centre of one’s being, aren’t they?”

“Puss, puss,” I thought to myself.

Mrs. Leidner said dryly: “Well, you needn’t be worried about me any more, Marie. Nurse is going to look after me.”

“Certainly I am,” I said cheerfully.

“I’m sure that will make all the difference,” said Mrs. Mercado. “We’ve all felt that she ought to see a doctor or do something. Her nerves have really been all to pieces, haven’t they, Louise dear?”

“So much so that I seem to have got on your nerves with them,” said Mrs. Leidner. “Shall we talk about something more interesting than my wretched ailments?”

I understood then that Mrs. Leidner was the sort of woman who could easily make enemies. There was a cool rudeness in her tone (not that I blamed her for it) which brought a flush to Mrs. Mercado’s rather sallow cheeks. She stammered out something, but Mrs. Leidner had risen and had joined her husband at the other end of the roof. I doubt if he heard her coming till she laid her hand on his shoulder, then he looked up quickly. There was affection and a kind of eager questioning in his face.

Mrs. Leidner nodded her head gently. Presently, her arm through his, they wandered to the far parapet and finally down the steps together.

“He’s devoted to her, isn’t he?” said Mrs. Mercado.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s very nice to see.”

She was looking at me with a queer, rather eager sidelong glance.

“What do you think is really the matter with her, nurse?” she asked, lowering her voice a little.

"Oh, I don't suppose it's much," I said cheerfully. "Just a bit run-down, I expect."

Her eyes still bored into me as they had done at tea. She said abruptly: "Are you a mental nurse?"

"Oh, dear, no!" I said. "What made you think that?"

She was silent for a moment, then she said: "Do you know how queer she's been? Did Dr. Leidner tell you?"

I don't hold with gossiping about my cases. On the other hand, it's my experience that it's often very hard to get the truth out of relatives, and until you know the truth you're often working in the dark and doing no good. Of course, when there's a doctor in charge, it's different. He tells you what it's necessary for you to know. But in this case there wasn't a doctor in charge. Dr. Reilly had never been called in professionally. And in my own mind I wasn't at all sure that Dr. Leidner had told me all he could have done. It's often the husband's instinct to be reticent—and more honour to him, I must say. But all the same, the more I knew the better I could tell which line to take. Mrs. Mercado (whom I put down in my own mind as a thoroughly spiteful little cat) was clearly dying to talk. And frankly, on the human side as well as the professional, I wanted to hear what she had to say. You can put it that I was just everyday curious if you like.

I said, "I gather Mrs. Leidner's not been quite her normal self lately?"

Mrs. Mercado laughed disagreeably.

"Normal? I should say not. Frightening us to death. One night it was fingers tapping on her window. And then it was a hand without an arm attached. But when it came to a yellow face pressed against the window—and when she rushed to the window there was nothing there—well, I ask you, it is a bit creepy for all of us."

"Perhaps somebody was playing a trick on her," I suggested.

“Oh, no, she fancied it all. And only three days ago at dinner they were firing shots in the village—nearly a mile away—and she jumped up and screamed out—it scared us all to death. As for Dr. Leidner, he rushed to her and behaved in the most ridiculous way. ‘It’s nothing, darling, it’s nothing at all,’ he kept saying. I think, you know, nurse, men sometimes encourage women in these hysterical fancies. It’s a pity because it’s a bad thing. Delusions shouldn’t be encouraged.”

“Not if they are delusions,” I said dryly.

“What else could they be?”

I didn’t answer because I didn’t know what to say. It was a funny business. The shots and the screaming were natural enough—for anyone in a nervous condition, that is. But this queer story of a spectral face and hand was different. It looked to me like one of two things—either Mrs. Leidner had made the story up (exactly as a child shows off by telling lies about something that never happened in order to make herself the centre of attraction) or else it was, as I had suggested, a deliberate practical joke. It was the sort of thing, I reflected, that an unimaginative hearty sort of young fellow like Mr. Coleman might think very funny. I decided to keep a close watch on him. Nervous patients can be scared nearly out of their minds by a silly joke.

Mrs. Mercado said with a sideways glance at me:

“She’s very romantic-looking, nurse, don’t you think so? The sort of woman things happen to.”

“Have many things happened to her?” I asked.

“Well, her first husband was killed in the war when she was only twenty. I think that’s very pathetic and romantic, don’t you?”

“It’s one way of calling a goose a swan,” I said dryly.

“Oh, nurse! What an extraordinary remark!”

It was really a very true one. The amount of women you hear say, “If Donald—or Arthur—or whatever his name was—had only lived.” And I sometimes think but if he had, he’d have been a stout, unromantic, short-tempered, middle-aged husband as likely as not.

It was getting dark and I suggested that we should go down. Mrs. Mercado agreed and asked if I would like to see the laboratory. “My husband will be there—working.”

I said I would like to very much and we made our way there. The place was lighted by a lamp, but it was empty. Mrs. Mercado showed me some of the apparatus and some copper ornaments that were being treated, and also some bones coated with wax.

“Where can Joseph be?” said Mrs. Mercado.

She looked into the drawing office, where Carey was at work. He hardly looked up as we entered, and I was struck by the extraordinary look of strain on his face. It came to me suddenly: “This man is at the end of his tether. Very soon, something will snap.” And I remembered somebody else had noticed that same tenseness about him.

As we went out again I turned my head for one last look at him. He was bent over his paper, his lips pressed very closely together, and that “death’s head” suggestion of his bones very strongly marked. Perhaps it was fanciful, but I thought that he looked like a knight of old who was going into battle and knew he was going to be killed.

And again I felt what an extraordinary and quite unconscious power of attraction he had.

We found Mr. Mercado in the living room. He was explaining the idea of some new process to Mrs. Leidner. She was sitting on a straight wooden chair, embroidering flowers in fine silks, and I was struck anew by her strange, fragile, unearthly appearance. She looked a fairy creature more than flesh and blood.

Mrs. Mercado said, her voice high and shrill: “Oh, there you are, Joseph. We thought we’d find you in the lab.”

He jumped up looking startled and confused, as though her entrance had broken a spell. He said stammeringly: “I—I must go now. I’m in the middle of—the middle of—”

He didn’t complete the sentence but turned towards the door.

Mrs. Leidner said in her soft, drawling voice: “You must finish telling me some other time. It was very interesting.”

She looked up at us, smiled rather sweetly but in a faraway manner, and bent over her embroidery again.

In a minute or two she said: “There are some books over there, nurse. We’ve got quite a good selection. Choose one and sit down.”

I went over to the bookshelf. Mrs. Mercado stayed for a minute or two, then, turning abruptly, she went out. As she passed me I saw her face and I didn’t like the look of it. She looked wild with fury.

In spite of myself I remembered some of the things Mrs. Kelsey had said and hinted about Mrs. Leidner. I didn’t like to think they were true because I liked Mrs. Leidner, but I wondered, nevertheless, if there mightn’t perhaps be a grain of truth behind them.

I didn’t think it was all her fault, but the fact remained that dear ugly Miss Johnson, and that common little spitfire Mrs. Mercado, couldn’t hold a candle to her in looks or in attraction. And after all, men are men all over the world. You soon see a lot of that in my profession.

Mercado was a poor fish, and I don’t suppose Mrs. Leidner really cared two hoots for his admiration—but his wife cared. If I wasn’t mistaken, she minded badly and would be quite willing to do Mrs. Leidner a bad turn if she could.

I looked at Mrs. Leidner sitting there and sewing at her pretty flowers, so remote and far away and aloof. I felt somehow I ought to warn her. I felt that perhaps she didn't know how stupid and unreasoning and violent jealousy and hate can be—and how little it takes to set them smouldering.

And then I said to myself, "Amy Leatheran, you're a fool. Mrs. Leidner's no chicken. She's close on forty if she's a day, and she must know all about life there is to know."

But I felt that all the same perhaps she didn't.

She had such a queer untouched look.

I began to wonder what her life had been. I knew she'd only married Dr. Leidner two years ago. And according to Mrs. Mercado her first husband had died about fifteen years ago.

I came and sat down near her with a book, and presently I went and washed my hands for supper. It was a good meal—some really excellent curry. They all went to bed early and I was glad, for I was tired.

Dr. Leidner came with me to my room to see I had all I wanted.

He gave me a warm handclasp and said eagerly:

"She likes you, nurse. She's taken to you at once. I'm so glad. I feel everything's going to be all right now."

His eagerness was almost boyish.

I felt, too, that Mrs. Leidner had taken a liking to me, and I was pleased it should be so.

But I didn't quite share his confidence. I felt, somehow, that there was more to it all than he himself might know.

There was something—something I couldn't get at. But I felt it in the air.

My bed was comfortable, but I didn’t sleep well for all that. I dreamt too much.

The words of a poem by Keats, that I’d had to learn as a child, kept running through my head. I kept getting them wrong and it worried me. It was a poem I’d always hated—I suppose because I’d had to learn it whether I wanted to or not. But somehow when I woke up in the dark I saw a sort of beauty in it for the first time.

“Oh say what ails thee, knight at arms, alone—and (what was it?)—palely loitering . . . ? I saw the knight’s face in my mind for the first time—it was Mr. Carey’s face—a grim, tense, bronzed face like some of those poor young men I remembered as a girl during the war . . . and I felt sorry for him—and then I fell off to sleep again and I saw that the Belle Dame sans Merci was Mrs. Leidner and she was leaning sideways on a horse with an embroidery of flowers in her hands—and then the horse stumbled and everywhere there were bones coated in wax, and I woke up all gooseflesh and shivering, and told myself that curry never had agreed with me at night.

Seven

THE MAN AT THE WINDOW

I think I'd better make it clear right away that there isn't going to be any local colour in this story. I don't know anything about archaeology and I don't know that I very much want to. Messing about with people and places that are buried and done with doesn't make sense to me. Mr. Carey used to tell me that I hadn't got the archaeological temperament and I've no doubt he was quite right.

The very first morning after my arrival Mr. Carey asked if I'd like to come and see the palace he was—planning I think he called it. Though how you can plan for a thing that's happened long ago I'm sure I don't know! Well, I said I'd like to, and to tell the truth, I was a bit excited about it. Nearly three thousand years old that palace was, it appeared. I wondered what sort of palaces they had in those days, and if it would be like the pictures I'd seen of Tutankahmen's tomb furniture. But would you believe it, there was nothing to see but mud! Dirty mud walls about two feet high—and that's all there was to it. Mr. Carey took me here and there telling me things—how this was the great court, and there were some chambers here and an upper storey and various other rooms that opened off the central court. And all I thought was, "But how does he know?" though, of course, I was too polite to say so. I can tell you it was a disappointment! The whole excavation looked like nothing but mud to me—no marble or gold or anything handsome—my aunt's house in Cricklewood would have made a much more imposing ruin! And those old Assyrians, or whatever they were, called themselves kings. When Mr. Carey had shown me his old "palaces," he handed me over to Father Lavigny, who showed me the rest of the mound. I was a little afraid of Father Lavigny, being a monk and a foreigner and having such a deep voice and all that, but he was very kind—though rather vague. Sometimes I felt it wasn't much more real to him than it was to me.

Mrs. Leidner explained that later. She said that Father Lavigny was only interested in “written documents”—as she called them. They wrote everything on clay, these people, queer, heathenish-looking marks too, but quite sensible. There were even school tablets—the teacher’s lesson on one side and the pupil’s effort on the back of it. I confess that that did interest me rather—it seemed so human, if you know what I mean.

Father Lavigny walked round the work with me and showed me what were temples or palaces and what were private houses, and also a place which he said was an early Akkadian cemetery. He spoke in a funny jerky way, just throwing in a scrap of information and then reverting to other subjects.

He said: “It is strange that you have come here. Is Mrs. Leidner really ill, then?”

“Not exactly ill,” I said cautiously.

He said: “She is an odd woman. A dangerous woman, I think.”

“Now what do you mean by that?” I said. “Dangerous? How dangerous?”

He shook his head thoughtfully.

“I think she is ruthless,” he said. “Yes, I think she could be absolutely ruthless.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, “I think you’re talking nonsense.”

He shook his head.

“You do not know women as I do,” he said.

And that was a funny thing, I thought, for a monk to say. But of course I suppose he might have heard a lot of things in confession. But that rather puzzled me, because I wasn’t sure if monks heard confessions or if it was only priests. I supposed he was a monk with that long woollen robe—all sweeping up the dirt—and the rosary and all!

“Yes, she could be ruthless,” he said musingly. “I am quite sure of that. And yet—though she is so hard—like stone, like marble—yet she is afraid. What is she afraid of?”

That, I thought, is what we should all like to know!

At least it was possible that her husband did know, but I didn’t think anyone else did.

He fixed me with a sudden bright, dark eye.

“It is odd here? You find it odd? Or quite natural?”

“Not quite natural,” I said, considering. “It’s comfortable enough as far as the arrangements go—but there isn’t quite a comfortable feeling.”

“It makes me uncomfortable. I have the idea”—he became suddenly a little more foreign—“that something prepares itself. Dr. Leidner, too, he is not quite himself. Something is worrying him also.”

“His wife’s health?”

“That perhaps. But there is more. There is—how shall I say it—an uneasiness.”

And that was just it, there was an uneasiness.

We didn’t say any more just then, for Dr. Leidner came towards us. He showed me a child’s grave that had just been uncovered. Rather pathetic it was—the little bones—and a pot or two and some little specks that Dr. Leidner told me were a bead necklace.

It was the workmen that made me laugh. You never saw such a lot of scarecrows—all in long petticoats and rags, and their heads tied up as though they had toothache. And every now and then, as they went to and fro carrying away baskets of earth, they began to sing—at least I suppose it was meant to be singing—a queer sort of monotonous chant that went on and on over and over again. I noticed that most of their eyes were terrible—all covered with discharge, and one or two looked half blind. I was just thinking what a miserable lot they were when Dr. Leidner said, “Rather a fine-looking lot of men, aren’t they?” and I thought what a queer world it was and how two different people could see the same thing each of them the other way round. I haven’t put that very well, but you can guess what I mean.

After a bit Dr. Leidner said he was going back to the house for a mid-morning cup of tea. So he and I walked back together and he told me things. When he explained, it was all quite different. I sort of saw it all—how it used to be—the streets and the houses, and he showed me ovens where they baked bread and said the Arabs used much the same kind of ovens nowadays.

We got back to the house and found Mrs. Leidner had got up. She was looking better today, not so thin and worn. Tea came in almost at once and Dr. Leidner told her what had turned up during the morning on the dig. Then he went back to work and Mrs. Leidner asked me if I would like to see some of the finds they had made up to date. Of course I said “Yes,” so she took me through into the antika room. There was a lot of stuff lying about—mostly broken pots it seemed to me—or else ones that were all mended and stuck together. The whole lot might have been thrown away, I thought.

“Dear, dear,” I said, “it’s a pity they’re all so broken, isn’t it? Are they really worth keeping?”

Mrs. Leidner smiled a little and she said: “You mustn’t let Eric hear you. Pots interest him more than anything else, and some of these are the oldest things we have—perhaps as much as seven thousand years old.” And she explained how some of them came from a very deep cut on the mound down towards the bottom, and how, thousands of years ago, they had been broken and mended with bitumen, showing people prized their things just as much then as they do nowadays.

“And now,” she said, “we’ll show you something more exciting.”

And she took down a box from the shelf and showed me a beautiful gold dagger with dark-blue stones in the handle.

I exclaimed with pleasure.

Mrs. Leidner laughed.

“Yes, everybody likes gold! Except my husband.”

“Why doesn’t Dr. Leidner like it?”

“Well, for one thing it comes expensive. You have to pay the workmen who find it the weight of the object in gold.”

“Good gracious!” I exclaimed. “But why?”

“Oh, it’s a custom. For one thing it prevents them from stealing. You see, if they did steal, it wouldn’t be for the archaeological value but for the intrinsic value. They could melt it down. So we make it easy for them to be honest.”

She took down another tray and showed me a really beautiful gold drinking cup with a design of rams’ heads on it.

Again I exclaimed.

“Yes, it is beautiful, isn’t it? These came from a prince’s grave. We found other royal graves but most of them had been plundered. This cup is our best find. It is one of the most lovely ever found anywhere. Early Akkadian. Unique.”

Suddenly, with a frown, Mrs. Leidner brought the cup up close to her eyes and scratched at it delicately with her nail.

“How extraordinary! There’s actually wax on it. Someone must have been in here with a candle.” She detached the little flake and replaced the cup in its place.

After that she showed me some queer little terracotta figurines—but most of them were just rude. Nasty minds those old people had, I say.

When we went back to the porch Mrs. Mercado was sitting polishing her nails. She was holding them out in front of her admiring the effect. I thought myself that anything more hideous than that orange red could hardly have been imagined.

Mrs. Leidner had brought with her from the antika room a very delicate little saucer broken in several pieces, and this she now proceeded to join together. I watched her for a minute or two and then asked if I could help.

“Oh, yes, there are plenty more.” She fetched quite a supply of broken pottery and we set to work. I soon got into the hang of it and she praised my ability. I suppose most nurses are handy with their fingers.

“How busy everybody is!” said Mrs. Mercado. “It makes me feel dreadfully idle. Of course I am idle.”

“Why shouldn’t you be if you like?” said Mrs. Leidner.

Her voice was quite uninterested.

At twelve we had lunch. Afterwards Dr. Leidner and Mr. Mercado cleaned some pottery, pouring a solution of hydrochloric acid over it. One pot went a lovely plum colour and a pattern of bulls’ horns came out on another one. It was really quite magical. All the dried mud that no washing would remove sort of foamed and boiled away.

Mr. Carey and Mr. Coleman went out on the dig and Mr. Reiter went off to the photographic room.

“What will you do, Louise?” Dr. Leidner asked his wife. “I suppose you’ll rest for a bit?”

I gathered that Mrs. Leidner usually lay down every afternoon.

“I’ll rest for about an hour. Then perhaps I’ll go out for a short stroll.”

“Good. Nurse will go with you, won’t you?”

“Of course,” I said.

"No, no," said Mrs. Leidner, "I like going alone. Nurse isn't to feel so much on duty that I'm not allowed out of her sight."

"Oh, but I'd like to come," I said.

"No, really, I'd rather you didn't." She was quite firm—almost peremptory. "I must be by myself every now and then. It's necessary to me."

I didn't insist, of course. But as I went off for a short sleep myself it struck me as odd that Mrs. Leidner, with her nervous terrors, should be quite content to walk by herself without any kind of protection.

When I came out of my room at half-past three the courtyard was deserted save for a little boy with a large copper bath who was washing pottery, and Mr. Emmott, who was sorting and arranging it. As I went towards them Mrs. Leidner came in through the archway. She looked more alive than I had seen her yet. Her eyes shone and she looked uplifted and almost gay.

Dr. Leidner came out from the laboratory and joined her. He was showing her a big dish with bulls' horns on it.

"The prehistoric levels are being extraordinarily productive," he said. "It's been a good season so far. Finding that tomb right at the beginning was a real piece of luck. The only person who might complain is Father Lavigny. We've had hardly any tablets so far."

"He doesn't seem to have done very much with the few we have had," said Mrs. Leidner dryly. "He may be a very fine epigraphist but he's a remarkably lazy one. He spends all his afternoons sleeping."

"We miss Byrd," said Dr. Leidner. "This man strikes me as slightly unorthodox—though, of course, I'm not competent to judge. But one or two of his translations have been surprising, to say the least of it. I can hardly believe, for instance, that he's right about that inscribed brick, and yet he must know."

After tea Mrs. Leidner asked me if I would like to stroll down to the river. I thought that perhaps she feared that her refusal to let me accompany her earlier in the afternoon might have hurt my feelings.

I wanted her to know that I wasn't the touchy kind, so I accepted at once.

It was a lovely evening. A path led between barley fields and then through some flowering fruit trees. Finally we came to the edge of the Tigris. Immediately on our left was the Tell with the workmen singing in their queer monotonous chant. A little to our right was a big waterwheel which made a queer groaning noise. It used to set my teeth on edge at first. But in the end I got fond of it and it had a queer soothing effect on me. Beyond the waterwheel was the village from which most of the workmen came.

"It's rather beautiful, isn't it?" said Mrs. Leidner.

"It's very peaceful," I said. "It seems funny to me to be so far away from everywhere."

"Far from everywhere," repeated Mrs. Leidner. "Yes. Here at least one might expect to be safe."

I glanced at her sharply, but I think she was speaking more to herself than to me, and I don't think she realized that her words had been revealing.

We began to walk back to the house.

Suddenly Mrs. Leidner clutched my arm so violently that I nearly cried out.

"Who's that, nurse? What's he doing?"

Some distance ahead of us, just where the path ran near the expedition house, a man was standing. He wore European clothes and he seemed to be standing on tiptoe and trying to look in at one of the windows.

As we watched he glanced round, caught sight of us, and immediately continued on the path towards us. I felt Mrs. Leidner's clutch tighten.

"Nurse," she whispered. "Nurse . . ."

"It's all right, my dear, it's all right," I said reassuringly.

The man came along and passed us. He was an Iraqi, and as soon as she saw him near to, Mrs. Leidner relaxed with a sigh.

“He’s only an Iraqi after all,” she said.

We went on our way. I glanced up at the windows as I passed. Not only were they barred, but they were too high from the ground to permit of anyone seeing in, for the level of the ground was lower here than on the inside of the courtyard.

“It must have been just curiosity,” I said.

Mrs. Leidner nodded.

“That’s all. But just for a minute I thought—”

She broke off.

I thought to myself. “You thought what? That’s what I’d like to know. What did you think?”

But I knew one thing now—that Mrs. Leidner was afraid of a definite flesh-and-blood person.

Eight

NIGHT ALARM

It’s a little difficult to know exactly what to note in the week that followed my arrival at Tell Yarimjah.

Looking back as I do from my present standpoint of knowledge I can see a good many little signs and indications that I was quite blind to at the time.

To tell the story properly, however, I think I ought to try to recapture the point of view that I actually held—puzzled, uneasy and increasingly conscious of something wrong.

For one thing was certain, that curious sense of strain and constraint was not imagined. It was genuine. Even Bill Coleman the insensitive commented upon it.

“This place gets under my skin,” I heard him say. “Are they always such a glum lot?”

It was David Emmott to whom he spoke, the other assistant. I had taken rather a fancy to Mr. Emmott, his taciturnity was not, I felt sure, unfriendly. There was something about him that seemed very steadfast and reassuring in an atmosphere where one was uncertain what anyone was feeling or thinking.

“No,” he said in answer to Mr. Coleman. “It wasn’t like this last year.”

But he didn’t enlarge on the theme, or say any more.

“What I can’t make out is what it’s all about,” said Mr. Coleman in an aggrieved voice.

Emmott shrugged his shoulders but didn't answer.

I had a rather enlightening conversation with Miss Johnson. I liked her very much. She was capable, practical and intelligent. She had, it was quite obvious, a distinct hero worship for Dr. Leidner.

On this occasion she told me the story of his life since his young days. She knew every site he had dug, and the results of the dig. I would almost dare swear she could quote from every lecture he had ever delivered. She considered him, she told me, quite the finest field archaeologist living.

"And he's so simple. So completely unworldly. He doesn't know the meaning of the word conceit. Only a really great man could be so simple."

"That's true enough," I said. "Big people don't need to throw their weight about."

"And he's so light-hearted too, I can't tell you what fun we used to have—he and Richard Carey and I—the first years we were out here. We were such a happy party. Richard Carey worked with him in Palestine, of course. Theirs is a friendship of ten years or so. Oh, well, I've known him for seven."

"What a handsome man Mr. Carey is," I said.

"Yes—I suppose he is."

She said it rather curtly.

"But he's just a little bit quiet, don't you think?"

"He usedn't to be like that," said Miss Johnson quickly. "It's only since—"

She stopped abruptly.

"Only since—?" I prompted.

"Oh, well." Miss Johnson gave a characteristic motion of her shoulders. "A good many things are changed nowadays."

I didn’t answer. I hoped she would go on—and she did—prefacing her remarks with a little laugh as though to detract from their importance.

“I’m afraid I’m rather a conservative old fogy. I sometimes think that if an archaeologist’s wife isn’t really interested, it would be wiser for her not to accompany the expedition. It often leads to friction.”

“Mrs. Mercado—” I suggested.

“Oh, her!” Miss Johnson brushed the suggestion aside. “I was really thinking of Mrs. Leidner. She’s a very charming woman—and one can quite understand why Dr. Leidner ‘fell for her’—to use a slang term. But I can’t help feeling she’s out of place here. She—it unsettles things.”

So Miss Johnson agreed with Mrs. Kelsey that it was Mrs. Leidner who was responsible for the strained atmosphere. But then where did Mrs. Leidner’s own nervous fears come in?

“It unsettles him,” said Miss Johnson earnestly. “Of course I’m—well, I’m like a faithful but jealous old dog. I don’t like to see him so worn out and worried. His whole mind ought to be on the work—not taken up with his wife and her silly fears! If she’s nervous of coming to out-of-the-way places, she ought to have stayed in America. I’ve no patience with people who come to a place and then do nothing but grouse about it!”

And then, a little fearful of having said more than she meant to say, she went on: “Of course I admire her very much. She’s a lovely woman and she’s got great charm of manner when she chooses.”

And there the subject dropped.

I thought to myself that it was always the same way—wherever women are cooped up together, there’s bound to be jealousy. Miss Johnson clearly didn’t like her chief ’s wife (that was perhaps natural) and unless I was much mistaken Mrs. Mercado fairly hated her.

Another person who didn’t like Mrs. Leidner was Sheila Reilly. She came out once or twice to the dig, once in a car and twice with some young man on a horse—on two horses I mean, of course. It was at the back of my mind that she had a weakness for the silent young American, Emmott. When he was on duty at the dig she used to stay talking to him, and I thought, too, that he admired her.

One day, rather injudiciously, I thought, Mrs. Leidner commented upon it at lunch.

“The Reilly girl is still hunting David down,” she said with a little laugh. “Poor David, she chases you up on the dig even! How foolish girls are!”

Mr. Emmott didn’t answer, but under his tan his face got rather red. He raised his eyes and looked right into hers with a very curious expression—a straight, steady glance with something of a challenge in it.

She smiled very faintly and looked away.

I heard Father Lavigny murmur something, but when I said “Pardon?” he merely shook his head and did not repeat his remark.

That afternoon Mr. Coleman said to me: “Matter of fact I didn’t like Mrs. L. any too much at first. She used to jump down my throat every time I opened my mouth. But I’ve begun to understand her better now. She’s one of the kindest women I’ve ever met. You find yourself telling her all the foolish scrapes you ever got into before you know where you are. She’s got her knife into Sheila Reilly, I know, but then Sheila’s been damned rude to her once or twice. That’s the worst of Sheila—she’s got no manners. And a temper like the devil!”

That I could well believe. Dr. Reilly spoilt her.

“Of course she’s bound to get a bit full of herself, being the only young woman in the place. But that doesn’t excuse her talking to Mrs. Leidner as though Mrs. Leidner were her great-aunt. Mrs. L.’s not exactly a chicken, but she’s a damned good-looking woman. Rather like those fairy women who come out of marshes with lights and lure you away.” He added bitterly, “You wouldn’t find Sheila luring anyone. All she does is to tick a fellow off.”

I only remember two other incidents of any kind of significance.

One was when I went to the laboratory to fetch some acetone to get the stickiness off my fingers from mending the pottery. Mr. Mercado was sitting in a corner, his head was laid down on his arms and I fancied he was asleep. I took the bottle I wanted and went off with it.

That evening, to my great surprise, Mrs. Mercado tackled me.

“Did you take a bottle of acetone from the lab?”

“Yes,” I said. “I did.”

“You know perfectly well that there’s a small bottle always kept in the antika room.”

She spoke quite angrily.

“Is there? I didn’t know.”

“I think you did! You just wanted to come spying round. I know what hospital nurses are.”

I stared at her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mrs. Mercado,” I said with dignity. “I’m sure I don’t want to spy on anyone.”

“Oh, no! Of course not. Do you think I don’t know what you’re here for?”

Really, for a minute or two I thought she must have been drinking. I went away without saying any more. But I thought it was very odd.

The other thing was nothing very much. I was trying to entice a pi dog pup with a piece of bread. It was very timid, however, like all Arab dogs—and was convinced I meant no good. It slunk away and I followed it—out through the archway and round the corner of the house. I came round so sharply that before I knew I had cannoned into Father Lavigny and another man who were standing together—and in a minute I realized that the second man was the same one Mrs. Leidner and I had noticed that day trying to peer through the window.

I apologized and Father Lavigny smiled, and with a word of farewell greeting to the other man he returned to the house with me.

“You know,” he said. “I am very ashamed. I am a student of Oriental languages and none of the men on the work can understand me! It is humiliating, do you not think? I was trying my Arabic on that man, who is a townsman, to see if I got on better—but it still wasn’t very successful. Leidner says my Arabic is too pure.”

That was all. But it just passed through my head that it was odd the same man should still be hanging round the house.

That night we had a scare.

It must have been about two in the morning. I’m a light sleeper, as most nurses have to be. I was awake and sitting up in bed by the time that my door opened.

“Nurse, nurse!”

It was Mrs. Leidner’s voice, low and urgent.

I struck a match and lighted the candle.

She was standing by the door in a long blue dressing gown. She was looking petrified with terror.

“There’s someone—someone—in the room next to mine . . . I heard him—scratching on the wall.”

I jumped out of bed and came to her.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’m here. Don’t be afraid, my dear.”

She whispered: “Get Eric.”

I nodded and ran out and knocked on his door. In a minute he was with us. Mrs. Leidner was sitting on my bed, her breath coming in great gasps.

“I heard him,” she said. “I heard him—scratching on the wall.”

“Someone in the antika room?” cried Dr. Leidner.

He ran out quickly—and it just flashed across my mind how differently these two had reacted. Mrs. Leidner’s fear was entirely personal, but Dr. Leidner’s mind leaped at once to his precious treasures.

“The antika room!” breathed Mrs. Leidner. “Of course! How stupid of me!”

And rising and pulling her gown round her, she bade me come with her. All traces of her panic-stricken fear had vanished.

We arrived in the antika room to find Dr. Leidner and Father Lavigny. The latter had also heard a noise, had risen to investigate, and had fancied he saw a light in the antika room. He had delayed to put on slippers and snatch up a torch and had found no one by the time he got there. The door, moreover, was duly locked, as it was supposed to be at night.

Whilst he was assuring himself that nothing had been taken, Dr. Leidner had joined him.

Nothing more was to be learned. The outside archway door was locked. The guard swore nobody could have got in from outside, but as they had probably been fast asleep this was not conclusive. There were no marks or traces of an intruder and nothing had been taken.

It was possible that what had alarmed Mrs. Leidner was the noise made by Father Lavigny taking down boxes from the shelves to assure himself that all was in order.

On the other hand, Father Lavigny himself was positive that he had (a) heard footsteps passing his window and (b) seen the flicker of a light, possibly a torch, in the antika room.

Nobody else had heard or seen anything.

The incident is of value in my narrative because it led to Mrs. Leidner's unburdening herself to me on the following day.

Nine

MRS. LEIDNER’S STORY

We had just finished lunch. Mrs. Leidner went to her room to rest as usual. I settled her on her bed with plenty of pillows and her book, and was leaving the room when she called me back.

“Don’t go, nurse, there’s something I want to say to you.”

I came back into the room.

“Shut the door.”

I obeyed.

She got up from the bed and began to walk up and down the room. I could see that she was making up her mind to something and I didn’t like to interrupt her. She was clearly in great indecision of mind.

At last she seemed to have nerved herself to the required point. She turned to me and said abruptly: “Sit down.”

I sat down by the table very quietly. She began nervously: “You must have wondered what all this is about?”

I just nodded without saying anything.

“I’ve made up my mind to tell you—everything! I must tell someone or I shall go mad.”

“Well,” I said, “I think really it would be just as well. It’s not easy to know the best thing to do when one’s kept in the dark.”

She stopped in her uneasy walk and faced me.

“Do you know what I’m frightened of?”

“Some man,” I said.

“Yes—but I didn’t say whom—I said what.”

I waited.

She said: “I’m afraid of being killed!”

Well, it was out now. I wasn’t going to show any particular concern. She was near enough to hysterics as it was.

“Dear me,” I said. “So that’s it, is it?”

Then she began to laugh. She laughed and she laughed—and the tears ran down her face.

“The way you said that!” she gasped. “The way you said it. . . .”

“Now, now,” I said. “This won’t do.” I spoke sharply. I pushed her into a chair, went over to the washstand and got a cold sponge and bathed her forehead and wrists.

“No more nonsense,” I said. “Tell me calmly and sensibly all about it.”

That stopped her. She sat up and spoke in her natural voice.

“You’re a treasure, nurse,” she said. “You make me feel as though I’m six. I’m going to tell you.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Take your time and don’t hurry.”

She began to speak, slowly and deliberately.

“When I was a girl of twenty I married. A young man in one of our State departments. It was in 1918.”

"I know," I said. "Mrs. Mercado told me. He was killed in the war."

But Mrs. Leidner shook her head.

"That's what she thinks. That's what everybody thinks. The truth is something different. I was a queer patriotic, enthusiastic girl, nurse, full of idealism. When I'd been married a few months I discovered—by a quite unforeseeable accident—that my husband was a spy in German pay. I learned that the information supplied by him had led directly to the sinking of an American transport and the loss of hundreds of lives. I don't know what most people would have done . . . But I'll tell you what I did. I went straight to my father, who was in the War Department, and told him the truth. Frederick was killed in the war—but he was killed in America—shot as a spy."

"Oh dear, dear!" I ejaculated. "How terrible!"

"Yes," she said. "It was terrible. He was so kind, too—so gentle . . . And all the time . . . But I never hesitated. Perhaps I was wrong."

"It's difficult to say," I said. "I'm sure I don't know what one would do."

"What I'm telling you was never generally known outside the State department. Ostensibly my husband had gone to the Front and had been killed. I had a lot of sympathy and kindness shown me as a war widow."

Her voice was bitter and I nodded comprehendingly.

"Lots of people wanted to marry me, but I always refused. I'd had too bad a shock. I didn't feel I could ever trust anyone again."

"Yes, I can imagine feeling like that."

"And then I became very fond of a certain young man. I wavered. An amazing thing happened! I got an anonymous letter—from Frederick—saying that if I ever married another man, he'd kill me!"

"From Frederick? From your dead husband?"

"Yes. Of course, I thought at first I was mad or dreaming . . . At last I went to my father. He told me the truth. My husband hadn't been shot after all. He'd escaped—but his escape did him no good. He was involved in a train wreck a few weeks later and his dead body was found amongst others. My father had kept the fact of his escape from me, and since the man had died anyway he had seen no reason to tell me anything until now.

"But the letter I received opened up entirely new possibilities. Was it perhaps a fact that my husband was still alive?

"My father went into the matter as carefully as possible. And he declared that as far as one could humanly be sure the body that was buried as Frederick's was Frederick's. There had been a certain amount of disfiguration, so that he could not speak with absolute cast-iron certainty, but he reiterated his solemn belief that Frederick was dead and that this letter was a cruel and malicious hoax.

"The same thing happened more than once. If I seemed to be on intimate terms with any man, I would receive a threatening letter."

"In your husband's handwriting?"

She said slowly: "That is difficult to say. I had no letters of his. I had only my memory to go by."

"There was no allusion or special form of words used that could make you sure?"

"No. There were certain terms—nicknames, for instance—private between us—if one of those had been used or quoted, then I should have been quite sure."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "That is odd. It looks as though it wasn't your husband. But is there anyone else it could be?"

"There is a possibility. Frederick had a younger brother—a boy of ten or twelve at the time of our marriage. He worshipped Frederick and Frederick was devoted to him. What happened to this boy, William his name was, I don’t know. It seems to me possible that, adoring his brother as fanatically as he did, he may have grown up regarding me as directly responsible for his death. He had always been jealous of me and may have invented this scheme by way of punishment.”

“It’s possible,” I said. “It’s amazing the way children do remember if they’ve had a shock.”

“I know. This boy may have dedicated his life to revenge.”

“Please go on.”

“There isn’t much more to tell. I met Eric three years ago. I meant never to marry. Eric made me change my mind. Right up to our wedding day I waited for another threatening letter. None came. I decided that whoever the writer might be, he was either dead, or tired of his cruel sport. Two days after our marriage I got this.”

Drawing a small attaché case which was on the table towards her, she unlocked it, took out a letter and handed it to me.

The ink was slightly faded. It was written in a rather womanish hand with a forward slant.

You have disobeyed. Now you cannot escape. You must be Frederick Bosner’s wife only! You have got to die.

“I was frightened—but not so much as I might have been to begin with. Being with Eric made me feel safe. Then, a month later, I got a second letter.”

I have not forgotten. I am making my plans. You have got to die. Why did you disobey?

“Does your husband know about this?”

Mrs. Leidner answered slowly.

“He knows that I am threatened. I showed him both letters when the second one came. He was inclined to think the whole thing a hoax. He thought also that it might be someone who wanted to blackmail me by pretending my first husband was alive.”

She paused and then went on.

“A few days after I received the second letter we had a narrow escape from death by gas poisoning. Somebody entered our apartment after we were asleep and turned on the gas. Luckily I woke and smelled the gas in time. Then I lost my nerve. I told Eric how I had been persecuted for years, and I told him that I was sure this madman, whoever he might be, did really mean to kill me. I think that for the first time I really did think it was Frederick. There was always something a little ruthless behind his gentleness.

“Eric was still, I think, less alarmed than I was. He wanted to go to the police. Naturally I wouldn’t hear of that. In the end we agreed that I should accompany him here, and that it might be wise if I didn’t return to America in the summer but stayed in London and Paris.

“We carried out our plan and all went well. I felt sure that now everything would be all right. After all, we had put half the globe between ourselves and my enemy.

“And then—a little over three weeks ago—I received a letter—with an Iraq stamp on it.”

She handed me a third letter.

You thought you could escape. You were wrong. You shall not be false to me and live. I have always told you so. Death is coming very soon.

“And a week ago—this! Just lying on the table here. It had not even gone through the post.”

I took the sheet of paper from her. There was just one phrase scrawled across it.

I have arrived.

She stared at me.

“You see? You understand? He’s going to kill me. It may be Frederick—it may be little William—but he’s going to kill me.”

Her voice rose shudderingly. I caught her wrist.

“Now—now,” I said warningly. “Don’t give way. We’ll look after you. Have you got any sal volatile?”

She nodded towards the washstand and I gave her a good dose.

“That’s better,” I said, as the colour returned to her cheeks.

“Yes, I’m better now. But oh, nurse, do you see why I’m in this state? When I saw that man looking in through my window, I thought: he’s come . . . Even when you arrived I was suspicious. I thought you might be a man in disguise—”

“The idea!”

“Oh, I know it sounds absurd. But you might have been in league with him perhaps—not a hospital nurse at all.”

“But that’s nonsense!”

“Yes, perhaps. But I’ve got beyond sense.”

Struck by a sudden idea, I said: “You’d recognize your husband, I suppose?”

She answered slowly.

“I don’t even know that. It’s over fifteen years ago. I mightn’t recognize his face.”

Then she shivered.

"I saw it one night—but it was a dead face. There was a tap, tap, tap on the window. And then I saw a face, a dead face, ghastly and grinning against the pane. I screamed and screamed . . . And they said there wasn't anything there!"

I remembered Mrs. Mercado's story.

"You don't think," I said hesitatingly, "that you dreamt that?"

"I'm sure I didn't!"

I wasn't so sure. It was the kind of nightmare that was quite likely under the circumstances and that easily might be taken for a waking occurrence. However, I never contradict a patient. I soothed Mrs. Leidner as best I could and pointed out that if any stranger arrived in the neighbourhood it was pretty sure to be known.

I left her, I think, a little comforted, and I went in search of Dr. Leidner and told him of our conversation.

"I'm glad she told you," he said simply. "It has worried me dreadfully. I feel sure that all those faces and tappings on the windowpane have been sheer imagination on her part. I haven't known what to do for the best. What do you think of the whole thing?"

I didn't quite understand the tone in his voice, but I answered promptly enough.

"It's possible," I said, "that these letters may be just a cruel and malicious hoax."

"Yes, that is quite likely. But what are we to do? They are driving her mad. I don't know what to think."

I didn't either. It had occurred to me that possibly a woman might be concerned. Those letters had a feminine note about them. Mrs. Mercado was at the back of my mind.

Supposing that by some chance she had learnt the facts of Mrs. Leidner's first marriage? She might be indulging her spite by terrorizing the other woman.

I didn't quite like to suggest such a thing to Dr. Leidner. It's so difficult to know how people are going to take things.

"Oh, well," I said cheerfully, "we must hope for the best. I think Mrs. Leidner seems happier already from just talking about it. That's always a help, you know. It's bottling things up that makes them get on your nerves."

"I'm very glad she has told you," he repeated. "It's a good sign. It shows she likes and trusts you. I've been at my wits' end to know what to do for the best."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him whether he'd thought of giving a discreet hint to the local police, but afterwards I was glad I hadn't done so.

What happened was this. On the following day Mr. Coleman was going in to Hassanieh to get the workmen's pay. He was also taking in all our letters to catch the air mail.

The letters, as written, were dropped into a wooden box on the dining room windowsill. Last thing that night Mr. Coleman took them out and was sorting them out into bundles and putting rubber bands round them.

Suddenly he gave a shout.

"What is it?" I asked.

He held out a letter with a grin.

"It's our Lovely Louise—she really is going balmy. She's addressed a letter to someone at 42nd Street, Paris, France. I don't think that can be right, do you? Do you mind taking it to her and asking what she does mean? She's just gone off to bed."

I took it from him and ran off to Mrs. Leidner with it and she amended the address.

It was the first time I had seen Mrs. Leidner’s handwriting, and I wondered idly where I had seen it before, for it was certainly quite familiar to me.

It wasn’t till the middle of the night that it suddenly came to me.

Except that it was bigger and rather more straggling, it was extraordinarily like the writing on the anonymous letters.

New ideas flashed through my head.

Had Mrs. Leidner conceivably written those letters herself?

And did Dr. Leidner half suspect the fact?

Ten

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Mrs. Leidner told me her story on a Friday.

On the Saturday morning there was a feeling of slight anticlimax in the air.

Mrs. Leidner, in particular, was inclined to be very offhand with me and rather pointedly avoided any possibility of a tête-à-tête. Well, that didn’t surprise me! I’ve had the same thing happen to me again and again. Ladies tell their nurses things in a sudden burst of confidence, and then, afterwards, they feel uncomfortable about it and wish they hadn’t! It’s only human nature.

I was very careful not to hint or remind her in any way of what she had told me. I purposely kept my conversation as matter-of-fact as possible.

Mr. Coleman had started in to Hassanieh in the morning, driving himself in the lorry with the letters in a knapsack. He also had one or two commissions to do for the members of the expedition. It was payday for the men, and he would have to go to the bank and bring out the money in coins of small denominations. All this was a long business and he did not expect to be back until the afternoon. I rather suspected he might be lunching with Sheila Reilly.

Work on the dig was usually not very busy on the afternoon of payday as at three-thirty the paying out began.

The little boy, Abdullah, whose business it was to wash pots, was established as usual in the centre of the courtyard, and again, as usual, kept up his queer nasal chant. Dr. Leidner and Mr. Emmott were going to put in some work on the pottery until Mr. Coleman returned, and Mr. Carey went up to the dig.

Mrs. Leidner went to her room to rest. I settled her as usual and then went to my own room, taking a book with me as I did not feel sleepy. It was then about a quarter to one, and a couple of hours passed quite pleasantly. I was reading Death in a Nursing Home—really a most exciting story—though I don't think the author knew much about the way nursing homes are run! At any rate I've never known a nursing home like that! I really felt inclined to write to the author and put him right about a few points.

When I put the book down at last (it was the red-haired parlourmaid and I'd never suspected her once!) and looked at my watch I was quite surprised to find it was twenty minutes to three!

I got up, straightened my uniform, and came out into the courtyard.

Abdullah was still scrubbing and still singing his depressing chant, and David Emmott was standing by him sorting the scrubbed pots, and putting the ones that were broken into boxes to await mending. I strolled over towards them just as Dr. Leidner came down the staircase from the roof.

"Not a bad afternoon," he said cheerfully. "I've made a bit of a clearance up there. Louise will be pleased. She's complained lately that there's not room to walk about. I'll go and tell her the good news."

He went over to his wife's door, tapped on it and went in.

It must, I suppose, have been about a minute and a half later that he came out again. I happened to be looking at the door when he did so. It was like a nightmare. He had gone in a brisk, cheerful man. He came out like a drunken one—reeling a little on his feet, and with a queer dazed expression on his face.

"Nurse—" he called in a queer, hoarse voice. "Nurse—"

I saw at once something was wrong and I ran across to him. He looked awful—his face was all grey and twitching, and I saw he might collapse any minute.

“My wife . . .” he said. “My wife . . . Oh, my God. . . .”

I pushed past him into the room. Then I caught my breath.

Mrs. Leidner was lying in a dreadful huddled heap by the bed.

I bent over her. She was quite dead—must have been dead an hour at least. The cause of death was perfectly plain—a terrific blow on the front of the head just over the right temple. She must have got up from the bed and been struck down where she stood.

I didn’t handle her more than I could help.

I glanced round the room to see if there was anything that might give a clue, but nothing seemed out of place or disturbed. The windows were closed and fastened, and there was no place where the murderer could have hidden. Obviously he had been and gone long ago.

I went out, closing the door behind me.

Dr. Leidner had collapsed completely now. David Emmott was with him and turned a white, inquiring face to me.

In a few low words I told him what had happened.

As I had always suspected, he was a first-class person to rely on in trouble. He was perfectly calm and self-possessed. Those blue eyes of his opened very wide, but otherwise he gave no sign at all.

He considered for a moment and then said: “I suppose we must notify the police as soon as possible. Bill ought to be back any minute. What shall we do with Leidner?”

“Help me to get him into his room.”

He nodded.

“Better lock this door first, I suppose,” he said.

He turned the key in the lock of Mrs. Leidner’s door, then drew it out and handed it to me.

“I guess you’d better keep this, nurse. Now then.”

Together we lifted Dr. Leidner and carried him into his own room and laid him on his bed. Mr. Emmott went off in search of brandy. He returned, accompanied by Miss Johnson.

Her face was drawn and anxious, but she was calm and capable, and I felt satisfied to leave Dr. Leidner in her charge.

I hurried out into the courtyard. The station wagon was just coming in through the archway. I think it gave us all a shock to see Bill’s pink, cheerful face as he jumped out with his familiar “Hallo, ’llo, ’llo! Here’s the oof!” He went on gaily, “No highway robberies—”

He came to a halt suddenly. “I say, is anything up? What’s the matter with you all? You look as though the cat had killed your canary.”

Mr. Emmott said shortly: “Mrs. Leidner’s dead—killed.”

“What?” Bill’s jolly face changed ludicrously. He stared, his eyes goggling. “Mother Leidner dead! You’re pulling my leg.”

“Dead?” It was a sharp cry. I turned to see Mrs. Mercado behind me. “Did you say Mrs. Leidner had been killed?”

“Yes,” I said. “Murdered.”

“No!” she gasped. “Oh, no! I won’t believe it. Perhaps she’s committed suicide.”

“Suicides don’t hit themselves on the head,” I said dryly. “It’s murder all right, Mrs. Mercado.”

She sat down suddenly on an upturned packing-case.

She said, “Oh, but this is horrible—horrible. . . .”

Naturally it was horrible. We didn’t need her to tell us so! I wondered if perhaps she was feeling a bit remorseful for the harsh feelings she had harboured against the dead woman, and all the spiteful things she had said.

After a minute or two she asked rather breathlessly: “What are you going to do?”

Mr. Emmott took charge in his quiet way.

“Bill, you’d better get in again to Hassanieh as quick as you can. I don’t know much about the proper procedure. Better get hold of Captain Maitland, he’s in charge of the police here, I think. Get Dr. Reilly first. He’ll know what to do.”

Mr. Coleman nodded. All the facetiousness was knocked out of him. He just looked young and frightened. Without a word he jumped into the station wagon and drove off.

Mr. Emmott said rather uncertainly, “I suppose we ought to have a hunt round.” He raised his voice and called: “Ibrahim!”

“Na’am.”

The houseboy came running. Mr. Emmott spoke to him in Arabic. A vigorous colloquy passed between them. The boy seemed to be emphatically denying something.

At last Mr. Emmott said in a perplexed voice, “He says there’s not been a soul here this afternoon. No stranger of any kind. I suppose the fellow must have slipped in without their seeing him.”

“Of course he did,” said Mrs. Mercado. “He slunk in when the boys weren’t looking.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Emmott.

The slight uncertainty in his voice made me look at him inquiringly.

He turned and spoke to the little potboy, Abdullah, asking him a question.

The boy replied vehemently at length.

The puzzled frown on Mr. Emmott’s brow increased.

“I don’t understand it,” he murmured under his breath. “I don’t understand it at all.”

But he didn’t tell me what he didn’t understand.

Eleven

AN ODD BUSINESS

I’m adhering as far as possible to telling only my personal part in the business. I pass over the events of the next two hours, the arrival of Captain Maitland and the police and Dr. Reilly. There was a good deal of general confusion, questioning, all the routine business, I suppose.

In my opinion we began to get down to brass tacks about five o’clock when Dr. Reilly asked me to come with him into the office. He shut the door, sat down in Dr. Leidner’s chair, motioned me to sit down opposite him, and said briskly: “Now, then, nurse, let’s get down to it. There’s something damned odd here.”

I settled my cuffs and looked at him inquiringly.

He drew out a notebook.

“This is for my own satisfaction. Now, what time was it exactly when Dr. Leidner found his wife’s body?”

“I should say it was almost exactly a quarter to three,” I said.

“And how do you know that?”

“Well, I looked at my watch when I got up. It was twenty to three then.”

“Let’s have a look at this watch of yours.”

I slipped it off my wrist and held it out to him.

“Right to the minute. Excellent woman. Good, that’s that fixed. Now, did you form any opinion as to how long she’d been dead?”

“Oh, really, doctor,” I said, “I shouldn’t like to say.”

“Don’t be so professional. I want to see if your estimate agrees with mine.”

“Well, I should say she’d been dead at least an hour.”

“Quite so. I examined the body at half past four and I’m inclined to put the time of death between 1:15 and 1:45. We’ll say half past one at a guess. That’s near enough.”

He stopped and drummed thoughtfully with his fingers on the table.

“Damned odd, this business,” he said. “Can you tell me about it—you were resting, you say? Did you hear anything?”

“At half-past one? No, doctor. I didn’t hear anything at half past one or at any other time. I lay on my bed from a quarter to one until twenty to three and I didn’t hear anything except that droning noise the Arab boy makes, and occasionally Mr. Emmott shouting up to Dr. Leidner on the roof.”

“The Arab boy—yes.”

He frowned.

At that moment the door opened and Dr. Leidner and Captain Maitland came in. Captain Maitland was a fussy little man with a pair of shrewd grey eyes.

Dr. Reilly rose and pushed Dr. Leidner into his chair.

“Sit down, man. I’m glad you’ve come. We shall want you. There’s something very queer about this business.”

Dr. Leidner bowed his head.

“I know.” He looked at me. “My wife confided the truth to Nurse Leatheran. We mustn’t keep anything back at this juncture, nurse, so please tell Captain Maitland and Dr. Reilly just what passed between you and my wife yesterday.”

As nearly as possible I gave our conversation verbatim.

Captain Maitland uttered an occasional ejaculation. When I had finished he turned to Dr. Leidner.

“And this is all true, Leidner—eh?”

“Every word Nurse Leatheran has told you is correct.”

“What an extraordinary story!” said Dr. Reilly. “You can produce these letters?”

“I have no doubt they will be found amongst my wife’s belongings.”

“She took them out of the attaché case on her table,” I said.

“Then they are probably still there.”

He turned to Captain Maitland and his usually gentle face grew hard and stern.

“There must be no question of hushing this story up, Captain Maitland. The one thing necessary is for this man to be caught and punished.”

“You believe it actually is Mrs. Leidner’s former husband?” I asked.

“Don’t you think so, nurse?” asked Captain Maitland.

“Well, I think it is open to doubt,” I said hesitatingly.

“In any case,” said Dr. Leidner, “the man is a murderer—and I should say a dangerous lunatic also. He must be found, Captain Maitland. He must. It should not be difficult.”

Dr. Reilly said slowly: “It may be more difficult than you think . . . eh, Maitland?”

Captain Maitland tugged at his moustache without replying.

Suddenly I gave a start.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but there’s something perhaps I ought to mention.”

I told my story of the Iraqi we had seen trying to peer through the window, and of how I had seen him hanging about the place two days ago trying to pump Father Lavigny.

“Good,” said Captain Maitland, “we’ll make a note of that. It will be something for the police to go on. The man may have some connection with the case.”

“Probably paid to act as a spy,” I suggested. “To find out when the coast was clear.”

Dr. Reilly rubbed his nose with a harassed gesture.

“That’s the devil of it,” he said. “Supposing the coast wasn’t clear—eh?”

I stared at him in a puzzled fashion.

Captain Maitland turned to Dr. Leidner.

“I want you to listen to me very carefully, Leidner. This is a review of the evidence we’ve got up to date. After lunch, which was served at twelve o’clock and was over by five and twenty to one, your wife went to her room accompanied by Nurse Leatheran, who settled her comfortably. You yourself went up to the roof, where you spent the next two hours, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come down from the roof at all during that time?”

“No.”

“Did anyone come up to you?”

“Yes, Emmott did pretty frequently. He went to and fro between me and the boy, who was washing pottery down below.”

“Did you yourself look over into the courtyard at all?”

“Once or twice—usually to call to Emmott about something.”

“On each occasion the boy was sitting in the middle of the courtyard washing pots?”

“Yes.”

“What was the longest period of time when Emmott was with you and absent from the courtyard?”

Dr. Leidner considered.

“It’s difficult to say—perhaps ten minutes. Personally I should say two or three minutes, but I know by experience that my sense of time is not very good when I am absorbed and interested in what I am doing.”

Captain Maitland looked at Dr. Reilly. The latter nodded. “We’d better get down to it,” he said.

Captain Maitland took out a small notebook and opened it.

“Look here, Leidner, I’m going to read to you exactly what every member of your expedition was doing between one and two this afternoon.”

“But surely—”

“Wait. You’ll see what I’m driving at in a minute. First Mr. and Mrs. Mercado. Mr. Mercado says he was working in his laboratory. Mrs. Mercado says she was in her bedroom shampooing her hair. Miss Johnson says she was in the living room taking impressions of cylinder seals. Mr. Reiter says he was in the dark-room developing plates. Father Lavigny says he was working in his bedroom. As to the two remaining members of the expedition, Carey and Coleman, the former was up on the dig and Coleman was in Hassanieh. So much for the members of the expedition. Now for the servants. The cook—your Indian chap—was sitting immediately outside the archway chatting to the guard and plucking a couple of fowls. Ibrahim and Mansur, the houseboys, joined him there at about 1:15. They both remained there laughing and talking until 2:30—by which time your wife was already dead.”

Dr. Leidner leaned forward.

“I don’t understand—you puzzle me. What are you hinting at?”

“Is there any means of access to your wife’s room except by the door into the courtyard?”

“No. There are two windows, but they are heavily barred—and besides, I think they were shut.”

He looked at me questioningly.

“They were closed and latched on the inside,” I said promptly.

“In any case,” said Captain Maitland, “even if they had been open, no one could have entered or left the room that way. My fellows and I have assured ourselves of that. It is the same with all the other windows giving on the open country. They all have iron bars and all the bars are in good condition. To have got into your wife’s room, a stranger must have come through the arched doorway into the courtyard. But we have the united assurance of the guard, the cook and the houseboy that nobody did so.”

Dr. Leidner sprang up.

“What do you mean? What do you mean?”

“Pull yourself together, man,” said Dr. Reilly quietly. “I know it’s a shock, but it’s got to be faced. The murderer didn’t come from outside—so he must have come from inside. It looks as though Mrs. Leidner must have been murdered by a member of your own expedition.”

Twelve

“I DIDN’T BELIEVE. . . .”

“No. No!”

Dr. Leidner sprang up and walked up and down in an agitated manner.

“It’s impossible what you say, Reilly. Absolutely impossible. One of us? Why, every single member of the expedition was devoted to Louise!”

A queer little expression pulled down the corners of Dr. Reilly’s mouth. Under the circumstances it was difficult for him to say anything, but if ever a man’s silence was eloquent his was at that minute.

“Quite impossible,” reiterated Dr. Leidner. “They were all devoted to her, Louise had such wonderful charm. Everyone felt it.”

Dr. Reilly coughed.

“Excuse me, Leidner, but after all that’s only your opinion. If any member of the expedition had disliked your wife they would naturally not advertise the fact to you.”

Dr. Leidner looked distressed.

“True—quite true. But all the same, Reilly, I think you are wrong. I’m sure everyone was fond of Louise.”

He was silent for a moment or two and then burst out:

“This idea of yours is infamous. It’s—it’s frankly incredible.”

“You can’t get away from—er—the facts,” said Captain Maitland.

“Facts? Facts? Lies told by an Indian cook and a couple of Arab houseboys. You know these fellows as well as I do, Reilly, so do you, Maitland. Truth as truth means nothing to them. They say what you want them to say as a mere matter of politeness.”

“In this case,” said Dr. Reilly dryly, “they are saying what we don’t want them to say. Besides, I know the habits of your household fairly well. Just outside the gate is a kind of social club. Whenever I’ve been over here in the afternoon I’ve always found most of your staff there. It’s the natural place for them to be.”

“All the same I think you are assuming too much. Why shouldn’t this man—this devil—have got in earlier and concealed himself somewhere?”

“I agree that that is not actually impossible,” said Dr. Reilly coolly. “Let us assume that a stranger did somehow gain admission unseen. He would have to remain concealed until the right moment (and he certainly couldn’t have done so in Mrs. Leidner’s room, there is no cover there) and take the risk of being seen entering the room and leaving it—with Emmott and the boy in the courtyard most of the time.”

“The boy. I’d forgotten the boy,” said Dr. Leidner. “A sharp little chap. But surely, Maitland, the boy must have seen the murderer go into my wife’s room?”

“We’ve elucidated that. The boy was washing pots the whole afternoon with one exception. Somehow around half past one—Emmott can’t put it closer than that—he went up to the roof and was with you for ten minutes—that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I couldn’t have told you the exact time but it must have been about that.”

“Very good. Well, during that ten minutes, the boy, seizing his chance to be idle, strolled out and joined the others outside the gate for a chat. When Emmott came down he found the boy absent and called him angrily, asking him what he meant leaving his work. As far as I can see, your wife must have been murdered during that ten minutes.”

With a groan Dr. Leidner sat down and hid his face in his hands.

Dr. Reilly took up the tale, his voice quiet and matter-of-fact.

“The time fits in with my evidence,” he said. “She’d been dead about three hours when I examined her. The only question is—who did it?”

There was a silence. Dr. Leidner sat up in his chair and passed a hand over his forehead.

“I admit the force of your reasoning, Reilly,” he said quietly. “It certainly seems as though it were what people call ‘an inside job.’ But I feel convinced that somewhere or other there is a mistake. It’s plausible but there must be a flaw in it. To begin with, you are assuming that an amazing coincidence has occurred.”

“Odd that you should use that word,” said Dr. Reilly.

Without paying any attention Dr. Leidner went on: “My wife receives threatening letters. She has reason to fear a certain person. Then she is—killed. And you ask me to believe that she is killed—not by that person—but by someone entirely different! I say that that is ridiculous.”

“It seems so—yes,” said Reilly meditatively.

He looked at Captain Maitland. “Coincidence—eh? What do you say, Maitland? Are you in favour of the idea? Shall we put it up to Leidner?”

Captain Maitland gave a nod.

“Go ahead,” he said shortly.

“Have you ever heard of a man called Hercule Poirot Leidner?”

Dr. Leidner stared at him, puzzled.

“I think I have heard the name, yes,” he said vaguely. “I once heard a Mr. Van Aldin speak of him in very high terms. He is a private detective, is he not?”

“That’s the man.”

“But surely he lives in London, so how will that help us?”

“He lives in London, true,” said Dr. Reilly, “but this is where the coincidence comes in. He is now, not in London, but in Syria, and he will actually pass through Hassanieh on his way to Baghdad tomorrow!”

“Who told you this?”

“Jean Berat, the French consul. He dined with us last night and was talking about him. It seems he has been disentangling some military scandal in Syria. He’s coming through here to visit Baghdad, and afterwards returning through Syria to London. How’s that for a coincidence?”

Dr. Leidner hesitated a moment and looked apologetically at Captain Maitland.

“What do you think, Captain Maitland?”

“Should welcome cooperation,” said Captain Maitland promptly. “My fellows are good scouts at scouring the countryside and investigating Arab blood feuds, but frankly, Leidner, this business of your wife’s seems to me rather out of my class. The whole thing looks confoundedly fishy. I’m more than willing to have the fellow take a look at the case.”

“You suggest that I should appeal to this man Poirot to help us?” said Dr. Leidner. “And suppose he refuses?”

“He won’t refuse,” said Dr. Reilly.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m a professional man myself. If a really intricate case of, say, cerebrospinal meningitis comes my way and I’m invited to take a hand, I shouldn’t be able to refuse. This isn’t an ordinary crime, Leidner.”

“No,” said Dr. Leidner. His lips twitched with sudden pain. “Will you then, Reilly, approach this Hercule Poirot on my behalf?”

“I will.”

Dr. Leidner made a gesture of thanks.

“Even now,” he said slowly, “I can’t realize it—that Louise is really dead.”

I could bear it no longer.

“Oh! Doctor Leidner,” I burst out, “I—I can’t tell you how badly I feel about this. I’ve failed so badly in my duty. It was my job to watch over Mrs. Leidner—to keep her from harm.”

Dr. Leidner shook his head gravely.

“No, no, nurse, you’ve nothing to reproach yourself with,” he said slowly. “It’s I, God forgive me, who am to blame . . . I didn’t believe—all along I didn’t believe . . . I didn’t dream for one moment that there was any real danger. . . .”

He got up. His face twitched.

“I let her go to her death . . . Yes, I let her go to her death—not believing—”

He staggered out of the room.

Dr. Reilly looked at me.

“I feel pretty culpable too,” he said. “I thought the good lady was playing on his nerves.”

“I didn’t take it really seriously either,” I confessed.

“We were all three wrong,” said Dr. Reilly gravely.

“So it seems,” said Captain Maitland.

Thirteen

HERCULE POIROT ARRIVES

I don’t think I shall ever forget my first sight of Hercule Poirot. Of course, I got used to him later on, but to begin with it was a shock, and I think everyone else must have felt the same!

I don’t know what I’d imagined—something rather like Sherlock Holmes—long and lean with a keen, clever face. Of course, I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn’t expected him to be quite as foreign as he was, if you know what I mean.

When you saw him you just wanted to laugh! He was like something on the stage or at the pictures. To begin with, he wasn’t above five-foot five, I should think—an odd, plump little man, quite old, with an enormous moustache, and a head like an egg. He looked like a hairdresser in a comic play!

And this was the man who was going to find out who killed Mrs. Leidner!

I suppose something of my disgust must have shown in my face, for almost straightaway he said to me with a queer kind of twinkle:

“You disapprove of me, ma soeur? Remember, the pudding proves itself only when you eat it.”

The proof of the pudding’s in the eating, I suppose he meant.

Well, that’s a true enough saying, but I couldn’t say I felt much confidence myself!

Dr. Reilly brought him out in his car soon after lunch on Sunday, and his first procedure was to ask us all to assemble together.

We did so in the dining room, all sitting round the table. Mr. Poirot sat at the head of it with Dr. Leidner one side and Dr. Reilly the other.

When we were all assembled, Dr. Leidner cleared his throat and spoke in his gentle, hesitating voice.

“I dare say you have all heard of M. Hercule Poirot. He was passing through Hassanieh today, and has very kindly agreed to break his journey to help us. The Iraqi police and Captain Maitland are, I am sure, doing their very best, but—but there are circumstances in the case”—he floundered and shot an appealing glance at Dr. Reilly—“there may, it seems, be difficulties. . . .”

“It is not all the square and overboard—no?” said the little man at the top of the table. Why, he couldn’t even speak English properly!

“Oho, he must be caught!” cried Mrs. Mercado. “It would be unbearable if he got away!”

I noticed the little foreigner’s eyes rest on her appraisingly.

“He? Who is he, madame?” he asked.

“Why, the murderer, of course.”

“Ah! the murderer,” said Hercule Poirot.

He spoke as though the murderer was of no consequence at all!

We all stared at him. He looked from one face to another.

“It is likely, I think,” he said, “that you have none of you been brought in contact with a case of murder before?”

There was a general murmur of assent.

Hercule Poirot smiled.

"It is clear, therefore, that you do not understand the A B C of the position. There are unpleasantnesses! Yes, there are a lot of unpleasantnesses. To begin with, there is suspicion."

"Suspicion?"

It was Miss Johnson who spoke. Mr. Poirot looked at her thoughtfully. I had an idea that he regarded her with approval. He looked as though he were thinking: "Here is a sensible, intelligent person!"

"Yes, mademoiselle," he said. "Suspicion! Let us not make the bones about it. You are all under suspicion here in this house. The cook, the house-boy, the scullion, the potboy—yes, and all the members of the expedition too."

Mrs. Mercado started up, her face working.

"How dare you? How dare you say such a thing? This is odious—unbearable! Dr. Leidner—you can't sit here and let this man—let this man—"

Dr. Leidner said wearily: "Please try and be calm, Marie."

Mr. Mercado stood up too. His hands were shaking and his eyes were bloodshot.

"I agree. It is an outrage—an insult—"

"No, no," said Mr. Poirot. "I do not insult you. I merely ask you all to face facts. In a house where murder has been committed, every inmate comes in for a certain share of suspicion. I ask you what evidence is there that the murderer came from outside at all?"

Mrs. Mercado cried: "But of course he did! It stands to reason! Why—" She stopped and said more slowly, "Anything else would be incredible!"

"You are doubtless correct, madame," said Poirot with a bow. "I explain to you only how the matter must be approached. First I assure myself of the fact that everyone in this room is innocent. After that I seek the murderer elsewhere."

“Is it not possible that that may be a little late in the day?” asked Father Lavigny suavely.

“The tortoise, mon père, overtook the hare.”

Father Lavigny shrugged his shoulders.

“We are in your hands,” he said resignedly. “Convince yourself as soon as may be of our innocence in this terrible business.”

“As rapidly as possible. It was my duty to make the position clear to you, so that you may not resent the impertinence of any questions I may have to ask. Perhaps, mon pe“re, the Church will set an example?”

“Ask any questions you please of me,” said Father Lavigny gravely.

“This is your first season out here?”

“Yes.”

“And you arrived—when?”

“Three weeks ago almost to a day. That is, on the 27th of February.”

“Coming from?”

“The Order of the Pères Blancs at Carthage.”

“Thank you, mon père. Were you at any time acquainted with Mrs. Leidner before coming here?”

“No, I had never seen the lady until I met her here.”

“Will you tell me what you were doing at the time of the tragedy?”

“I was working on some cuneiform tablets in my own room.”

I noticed that Poirot had at his elbow a rough plan of the building.

“That is the room at the southwest corner corresponding to that of Mrs. Leidner on the opposite side?”

“Yes.”

“At what time did you go to your room?”

“Immediately after lunch. I should say at about twenty minutes to one.”

“And you remained there until—when?”

“Just before three o’clock. I had heard the station wagon come back—and then I heard it drive off again. I wondered why, and came out to see.”

“During the time that you were there did you leave the room at all?”

“No, not once.”

“And you heard or saw nothing that might have any bearing on the tragedy?”

“No.”

“You have no window giving on the courtyard in your room?”

“No, both the windows give on the countryside.”

“Could you hear at all what was happening in the courtyard?”

“Not very much. I heard Mr. Emmott passing my room and going up to the roof. He did so once or twice.”

“Can you remember at what time?”

“No, I’m afraid I can’t. I was engrossed in my work, you see.”

There was a pause and then Poirot said:

“Can you say or suggest anything at all that might throw light on this business? Did you, for instance, notice anything in the days preceding the murder?”

Father Lavigny looked slightly uncomfortable.

He shot a half-questioning look at Dr. Leidner.

“That is rather a difficult question, monsieur,” he said gravely. “If you ask me I must reply frankly that in my opinion Mrs. Leidner was clearly in dread of someone or something. She was definitely nervous about strangers. I imagine she had a reason for this nervousness of hers—but I know nothing. She did not confide in me.”

Poirot cleared his throat and consulted some notes that he held in his hand. “Two nights ago I understand there was a scare of burglary.”

Father Lavigny replied in the affirmative and retailed his story of the light seen in the antika room and the subsequent futile search.

“You believe, do you not, that some unauthorized person was on the premises at that time?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Father Lavigny frankly. “Nothing was taken or disturbed in any way. It might have been one of the houseboys—”

“Or a member of the expedition?”

“Or a member of the expedition. But in that case there would be no reason for the person not admitting the fact.”

“But it might equally have been a stranger from outside?”

“I suppose so.”

“Supposing a stranger had been on the premises, could he have concealed himself successfully during the following day and until the afternoon of the day following that?”

He asked the question half of Father Lavigny and half of Dr. Leidner. Both men considered the question carefully.

“I hardly think it would be possible,” said Dr. Leidner at last with some reluctance. “I don’t see where he could possibly conceal himself, do you, Father Lavigny?”

“No—no—I don’t.”

Both men seemed reluctant to put the suggestion aside.

Poirot turned to Miss Johnson.

“And you, mademoiselle? Do you consider such a hypothesis feasible?”

After a moment’s thought Miss Johnson shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I don’t. Where could anyone hide? The bedrooms are all in use and, in any case, are sparsely furnished. The darkroom, the drawing office and the laboratory were all in use the next day—so were all these rooms. There are no cupboards or corners. Perhaps, if the servants were in collusion—”

“That is possible, but unlikely,” said Poirot.

He turned once more to Father Lavigny.

“There is another point. The other day Nurse Leatheran here noticed you talking to a man outside. She had previously noticed that same man trying to peer in at one of the windows on the outside. It rather looks as though the man were hanging round the place deliberately.”

“That is possible, of course,” said Father Lavigny thoughtfully.

“Did you speak to this man first, or did he speak to you?”

Father Lavigny considered for a moment or two.

“I believe—yes, I am sure, that he spoke to me.”

“What did he say?”

Father Lavigny made an effort of memory.

“He said, I think, something to the effect was this the American expedition house? And then something else about the Americans employing a lot of men on the work. I did not really understand him very well, but I endeavoured to keep up a conversation so as to improve my Arabic. I thought, perhaps, that being a townee he would understand me better than the men on the dig do.”

“Did you converse about anything else?”

“As far as I remember, I said Hassanieh was a big town—and we then agreed that Baghdad was bigger—and I think he asked whether I was an Armenian or a Syrian Catholic—something of that kind.”

Poirot nodded.

“Can you describe him?”

Again Father Lavigny frowned in thought.

“He was rather a short man,” he said at last, “and squarely built. He had a very noticeable squint and was of fair complexion.”

Mr. Poirot turned to me.

“Does that agree with the way you would describe him?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” I said hesitatingly. “I should have said he was tall rather than short, and very dark-complexioned. He seemed to me of a rather slender build. I didn’t notice any squint.”

Mr. Poirot gave a despairing shrug of the shoulders.

“It is always so! If you were of the police how well you would know it! The description of the same man by two different people—never does it agree. Every detail is contradicted.”

"I'm fairly sure about the squint," said Father Lavigny. "Nurse Leatheran may be right about the other points. By the way, when I said fair, I only meant fair for an Iraqi. I expect nurse would call that dark."

"Very dark," I said obstinately. "A dirty dark-yellow colour."

I saw Dr. Reilly bite his lips and smile.

Poirot threw up his hands.

"Passons!" he said. "This stranger hanging about, he may be important—he may not. At any rate he must be found. Let us continue our inquiry."

He hesitated for a minute, studying the faces turned towards him round the table, then, with a quick nod, he singled out Mr. Reiter.

"Come, my friend," he said. "Let us have your account of yesterday afternoon."

Mr. Reiter's pink, plump face flushed scarlet.

"Me?" he said.

"Yes, you. To begin with, your name and your age?"

"Carl Reiter, twenty-eight."

"American—yes?"

"Yes, I come from Chicago."

"This is your first season?"

"Yes. I'm in charge of the photography."

"Ah, yes. And yesterday afternoon, how did you employ yourself?"

"Well—I was in the darkroom most of the time."

“Most of the time—eh?”

“Yes. I developed some plates first. Afterwards I was fixing up some objects to photograph.”

“Outside?”

“Oh no, in the photographic room.”

“The darkroom opens out of the photographic room?”

“Yes.”

“And so you never came outside the photographic room?”

“No.”

“Did you notice anything that went on in the courtyard?”

The young man shook his head.

“I wasn’t noticing anything,” he explained. “I was busy. I heard the car come back, and as soon as I could leave what I was doing I came out to see if there was any mail. It was then that I—heard.”

“And you began to work in the photographic room—when?”

“At ten minutes to one.”

“Were you acquainted with Mrs. Leidner before you joined this expedition?”

The young man shook his head.

“No, sir. I never saw her till I actually got here.”

“Can you think of anything—any incident—however small—that might help us?”

Carl Reiter shook his head.

He said helplessly: “I guess I don’t know anything at all, sir.”

“Mr. Emmott?”

David Emmott spoke clearly and concisely in his pleasant soft American voice.

“I was working with the pottery from a quarter to one till a quarter to three—overseeing the boy Abdullah, sorting it, and occasionally going up to the roof to help Dr. Leidner.”

“How often did you go up to the roof?”

“Four times, I think.”

“For how long?”

“Usually a couple of minutes—not more. But on one occasion after I’d been working a little over half an hour I stayed as long as ten minutes—discussing what to keep and what to fling away.”

“And I understand that when you came down you found the boy had left his place?”

“Yes. I called him angrily and he reappeared from outside the archway. He had gone out to gossip with the others.”

“That settles the only time he left his work?”

“Well, I sent him up once or twice to the roof with pottery.”

Poirot said gravely: “It is hardly necessary to ask you, Mr. Emmott, whether you saw anyone enter or leave Mrs. Leidner’s room during that time?”

Mr. Emmott replied promptly.

“I saw no one at all. Nobody even came out into the courtyard during the two hours I was working.”

“And to the best of your belief it was half past one when both you and the boy were absent and the courtyard was empty?”

“It couldn’t have been far off that time. Of course, I can’t say exactly.”

Poirot turned to Dr. Reilly.

“That agrees with your estimate of the time of death, doctor?”

“It does,” said Dr. Reilly.

Mr. Poirot stroked his great curled moustaches.

“I think we can take it,” he said gravely, “that Mrs. Leidner met her death during that ten minutes.”

Fourteen

ONE OF US?

There was a little pause—and in it a wave of horror seemed to float round the room.

I think it was at that moment that I first believed Dr. Reilly’s theory to be right.

I felt that the murderer was in the room. Sitting with us—listening. One of us . . .

Perhaps Mrs. Mercado felt it too. For she suddenly gave a short sharp cry.

“I can’t help it,” she sobbed. “I—it’s so terrible!”

“Courage, Marie,” said her husband.

He looked at us apologetically.

“She is so sensitive. She feels things so much.”

“I—I was so fond of Louise,” sobbed Mrs. Mercado.

I don’t know whether something of what I felt showed in my face, but I suddenly found that Mr. Poirot was looking at me, and that a slight smile hovered on his lips.

I gave him a cold glance, and at once he resumed his inquiry.

“Tell me, madame,” he said, “of the way you spent yesterday afternoon?”

“I was washing my hair,” sobbed Mrs. Mercado. “It seems awful not to have known anything about it. I was quite happy and busy.”

“You were in your room?”

“Yes.”

“And you did not leave it?”

“No. Not till I heard the car. Then I came out and I heard what had happened. Oh, it was awful!”

“Did it surprise you?”

Mrs. Mercado stopped crying. Her eyes opened resentfully.

“What do you mean, M. Poirot? Are you suggesting—?”

“What should I mean, madame? You have just told us how fond you were of Mrs. Leidner. She might, perhaps, have confided in you.”

“Oh, I see . . . No—no, dear Louise never told me anything—anything definite, that is. Of course, I could see she was terribly worried and nervous. And there were those strange occurrences—hands tapping on the windows and all that.”

“Fancies, I remember you said,” I put in, unable to keep silent.

I was glad to see that she looked momentarily disconcerted.

Once again I was conscious of Mr. Poirot’s amused eye glancing in my direction.

He summed up in a businesslike way.

“It comes to this, madame, you were washing your hair—you heard nothing and you saw nothing. Is there anything at all you can think of that would be a help to us in any way?”

Mrs. Mercado took no time to think.

“No, indeed there isn’t. It’s the deepest mystery! But I should say there is no doubt—no doubt at all that the murderer came from outside. Why, it stands to reason.”

Poirot turned to her husband.

“And you, monsieur, what have you to say?”

Mr. Mercado started nervously. He pulled at his beard in an aimless fashion.

“Must have been. Must have been,” he said. “Yet how could anyone wish to harm her? She was so gentle—so kind—” He shook his head. “Whoever killed her must have been a fiend—yes, a fiend!”

“And you yourself, monsieur, how did you pass yesterday afternoon?”

“I?” he stared vaguely.

“You were in the laboratory, Joseph,” his wife prompted him.

“Ah, yes, so I was—so I was. My usual tasks.”

“At what time did you go there?”

Again he looked helplessly and inquiringly at Mrs. Mercado.

“At ten minutes to one, Joseph.”

“Ah, yes, at ten minutes to one.”

“Did you come out in the courtyard at all?”

“No—I don’t think so.” He considered. “No, I am sure I didn’t.”

“When did you hear of the tragedy?”

“My wife came and told me. It was terrible—shocking. I could hardly believe it. Even now, I can hardly believe it is true.”

Suddenly he began to tremble.

“It is horrible—horrible. . . .”

Mrs. Mercado came quickly to his side.

“Yes, yes, Joseph, we feel that. But we mustn’t give way. It makes it so much more difficult for poor Dr. Leidner.”

I saw a spasm of pain pass across Dr. Leidner’s face, and I guessed that this emotional atmosphere was not easy for him. He gave a half glance at Poirot as though in appeal. Poirot responded quickly.

“Miss Johnson?” he said.

“I’m afraid I can tell you very little,” said Miss Johnson. Her cultured well-bred voice was soothing after Mrs. Mercado’s shrill treble. She went on: “I was working in the living room—taking impressions of some cylinder seals on plasticine.”

“And you saw or noticed nothing?”

“No.”

Poirot gave her a quick glance. His ear had caught what mine had—a faint note of indecision.

“Are you quite sure, mademoiselle? Is there something that comes back to you vaguely?”

“No—not really—”

“Something you saw, shall we say, out of the corner of your eye hardly knowing you saw it.”

“No, certainly not,” she replied positively.

“Something you heard then. Ah, yes, something you are not quite sure whether you heard or not?”

Miss Johnson gave a short, vexed laugh.

“You press me very closely, M. Poirot. I’m afraid you are encouraging me to tell you what I am, perhaps, only imagining.”

“Then there was something you—shall we say—imagined?”

Miss Johnson said slowly, weighing her words in a detached way: “I have imagined—since—that at some time during the afternoon I heard a very faint cry . . . What I mean is that I daresay I did hear a cry. All the windows in the living room were open and one hears all sorts of sounds from people working in the barley fields. But you see—since—I’ve got the idea into my head that it was—that it was Mrs. Leidner I heard. And that’s made me rather unhappy. Because if I’d jumped up and run along to her room—well, who knows? I might have been in time. . . .”

Dr. Reilly interposed authoritatively.

“Now, don’t start getting that into your head,” he said. “I’ve no doubt but that Mrs. Leidner (forgive me, Leidner) was struck down almost as soon as the man entered the room, and it was that blow that killed her. No second blow was struck. Otherwise she would have had time to call for help and make a real outcry.”

“Still, I might have caught the murderer,” said Miss Johnson.

“What time was this, mademoiselle?” asked Poirot. “In the neighbourhood of half past one?”

“It must have been about that time—yes.” She reflected a minute.

“That would fit in,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “You heard nothing else—the opening or shutting of a door, for instance?”

Miss Johnson shook her head.

“No, I do not remember anything of that kind.”

“You were sitting at a table, I presume. Which way were you facing? The courtyard? The antika room? The verandah? Or the open countryside?”

“I was facing the courtyard.”

“Could you see the boy Abdullah washing pots from where you were?”

“Oh, yes, if I looked up, but of course I was very intent on what I was doing. All my attention was on that.”

“If anyone had passed the courtyard window, though, you would have noticed it?”

“Oh, yes, I am almost sure of that.”

“And nobody did so?”

“No.”

“But if anyone had walked, say, across the middle of the courtyard, would you have noticed that?”

“I think—probably not—unless, as I said before, I had happened to look up and out of the window.”

“You did not notice the boy Abdullah leave his work and go out to join the other servants?”

“No.”

“Ten minutes,” mused Poirot. “That fatal ten minutes.”

There was a momentary silence.

Miss Johnson lifted her head suddenly and said: “You know, M. Poirot, I think I have unintentionally misled you. On thinking it over, I do not believe that I could possibly have heard any cry uttered in Mrs. Leidner’s room from where I was. The antika room lay between me and her—and I understand her windows were found closed."

"In any case, do not distress yourself, mademoiselle," said Poirot kindly. "It is not really of much importance."

"No, of course not. I understand that. But you see, it is of importance to me, because I feel I might have done something."

"Don't distress yourself, dear Anne," said Dr. Leidner with affection. "You must be sensible. What you heard was probably one Arab bawling to another some distance away in the fields."

Miss Johnson flushed a little at the kindliness of his tone. I even saw tears spring to her eyes. She turned her head away and spoke even more gruffly than usual.

"Probably was. Usual thing after a tragedy—start imagining things that aren't so at all."

Poirot was once more consulting his notebook.

"I do not suppose there is much more to be said. Mr. Carey?"

Richard Carey spoke slowly—in a wooden mechanical manner.

"I'm afraid I can add nothing helpful. I was on duty at the dig. The news was brought to me there."

"And you know or can think of nothing helpful that occurred in the days immediately preceding the murder?"

"Nothing at all."

"Mr. Coleman?"

"I was right out of the whole thing," said Mr. Coleman with—was it just a shade of regret—in his tone. "I went into Hassanieh yesterday morning to get the money for the men's wages. When I came back Emmott told me what had happened and I went back in the bus to get the police and Dr. Reilly.”

“And beforehand?”

“Well, sir, things were a bit jumpy—but you know that already. There was the antika room scare and one or two before that—hands and faces at the window—you remember, sir,” he appealed to Dr. Leidner, who bent his head in assent. “I think, you know, that you’ll find some Johnny did get in from outside. Must have been an artful sort of beggar.”

Poirot considered him for a minute or two in silence.

“You are an Englishman, Mr. Coleman?” he asked at last.

“That’s right, sir. All British. See the trademark. Guaranteed genuine.”

“This is your first season?”

“Quite right.”

“And you are passionately keen on archaeology?”

This description of himself seemed to cause Mr. Coleman some embarrassment. He got rather pink and shot the side look of a guilty schoolboy at Dr. Leidner.

“Of course—it’s all very interesting,” he stammered. “I mean—I’m not exactly a brainy chap. . . .”

He broke off rather lamely. Poirot did not insist.

He tapped thoughtfully on the table with the end of his pencil and carefully straightened an inkpot that stood in front of him.

“It seems then,” he said, “that that is as near as we can get for the moment. If any one of you thinks of something that has for the time being slipped his or her memory, do not hesitate to come to me with it. It will be well now, I think, for me to have a few words alone with Dr. Leidner and Dr. Reilly.”

It was the signal for a breaking up of the party. We all rose and filed out of the door. When I was halfway out, however, a voice recalled me.

“Perhaps,” said M. Poirot, “Nurse Leatheran will be so kind as to remain. I think her assistance will be valuable to us.”

I came back and resumed my seat at the table.

Fifteen

POIROT MAKES A SUGGESTION

Dr. Reilly had risen from his seat. When everyone had gone out he carefully closed the door. Then, with an inquiring glance at Poirot, he proceeded to shut the window giving on the courtyard. The others were already shut. Then he, too, resumed his seat at the table.

“Bien!” said Poirot. “We are now private and undisturbed. We can speak freely. We have heard what the members of the expedition have to tell us and—But yes, ma soeur, what is it that you think?”

I got rather red. There was no denying that the queer little man had sharp eyes. He’d seen the thought passing through my mind—I suppose my face had shown a bit too clearly what I was thinking!

“Oh, it’s nothing—” I said hesitating.

“Come on, nurse,” said Dr. Reilly. “Don’t keep the specialist waiting.”

“It’s nothing really,” I said hurriedly. “It only just passed through my mind, so to speak, that perhaps even if anyone did know or suspect something it wouldn’t be easy to bring it out in front of everybody else—or even, perhaps, in front of Dr. Leidner.”

Rather to my astonishment, M. Poirot nodded his head in vigorous agreement.

“Precisely. Precisely. It is very just what you say there. But I will explain. That little reunion we have just had—it served a purpose. In England before the races you have a parade of the horses, do you not? They go in front of the grandstand so that everyone may have an opportunity of seeing and judging them. That is the purpose of my little assembly. In the sporting phrase, I run my eye over the possible starters.”

Dr. Leidner cried out violently, “I do not believe for one minute that any member of my expedition is implicated in this crime!”

Then, turning to me, he said authoritatively: “Nurse, I should be much obliged if you would tell M. Poirot here and now exactly what passed between my wife and you two days ago.”

Thus urged, I plunged straightaway into my own story, trying as far as possible to recall the exact words and phrases Mrs. Leidner had used.

When I had finished, M. Poirot said: “Very good. Very good. You have the mind neat and orderly. You will be of great service to me here.”

He turned to Dr. Leidner.

“You have these letters?”

“I have them here. I thought that you would want to see them first thing.”

Poirot took them from him, read them, and scrutinized them carefully as he did so. I was rather disappointed that he didn’t dust powder over them or examine them with a microscope or anything like that—but I realized that he wasn’t a very young man and that his methods were probably not very up to date. He just read them in the way that anyone might read a letter.

Having read them he put them down and cleared his throat.

“Now,” he said, “let us proceed to get our facts clear and in order. The first of these letters was received by your wife shortly after her marriage to you in America. There had been others but these she destroyed. The first letter was followed by a second. A very short time after the second arrived you both had a near escape from coal gas poisoning. You then came abroad and for nearly two years no further letters were received. They started again at the beginning of your season this year—that is to say within the last three weeks. That is correct?”

“Absolutely.”

“Your wife displayed every sign of panic and, after consulting Dr. Reilly, you engaged Nurse Leatheran here to keep your wife company and allay her fears?”

“Yes.”

“Certain incidents occurred—hands tapping at the window—a spectral face—noises in the antika room. You did not witness any of these phenomena yourself?”

“No.”

“In fact nobody did except Mrs. Leidner?”

“Father Lavigny saw a light in the antika room.”

“Yes, I have not forgotten that.”

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said: “Had your wife made a will?”

“I do not think so.”

“Why was that?”

“It did not seem worth it from her point of view.”

“Is she not a wealthy woman?”

“Yes, during her lifetime. Her father left her a considerable sum of money in trust. She could not touch the principal. At her death it was to pass to any children she might have—and failing children to the Pittstown Museum.”

Poirot drummed thoughtfully on the table.

“Then we can, I think,” he said, “eliminate one motive from the case. It is, you comprehend, what I look for first. Who benefits by the deceased’s death? In this case it is a museum. Had it been otherwise, had Mrs. Leidner died intestate but possessed of a considerable fortune, I should imagine that it would prove an interesting question as to who inherited the money—you—or a former husband. But there would have been this difficulty, the former husband would have had to resurrect himself in order to claim it, and I should imagine that he would then be in danger of arrest, though I hardly fancy that the death penalty would be exacted so long after the war. However, these speculations need not arise. As I say, I settle first the question of money. For the next step I proceed always to suspect the husband or wife of the deceased! In this case, in the first place, you are proved never to have gone near your wife's room yesterday afternoon, in the second place you lose instead of gain by your wife's death, and in the third place—"

He paused.

"Yes?" said Dr. Leidner.

"In the third place," said Poirot slowly, "I can, I think, appreciate devotion when I see it. I believe, Dr. Leidner, that your love for your wife was the ruling passion of your life. It is so, is it not?"

Dr. Leidner answered quite simply: "Yes."

Poirot nodded.

"Therefore," he said, "we can proceed."

"Hear, hear, let's get down to it," said Dr. Reilly with some impatience.

Poirot gave him a reproving glance.

"My friend, do not be impatient. In a case like this everything must be approached with order and method. In fact, that is my rule in every case. Having disposed of certain possibilities, we now approach a very important point. It is vital that, as you say—all the cards should be on the table—there must be nothing kept back."

"Quite so," said Dr. Reilly.

"That is why I demand the whole truth," went on Poirot.

Dr. Leidner looked at him in surprise.

"I assure you, M. Poirot, that I have kept nothing back. I have told you everything that I know. There have been no reserves."

"Tout de même, you have not told me everything."

"Yes, indeed. I cannot think of any detail that has escaped me."

He looked quite distressed.

Poirot shook his head gently.

"No," he said. "You have not told me, for instance, why you installed Nurse Leatheran in the house."

Dr. Leidner looked completely bewildered.

"But I have explained that. It is obvious. My wife's nervousness—her fears . . ."

Poirot leaned forward. Slowly and emphatically he wagged a finger up and down.

"No, no, no. There is something there that is not clear. Your wife is in danger, yes—she is threatened with death, yes. You send—not for the police—not for a private detective even—but for a nurse! It does not make the sense, that!"

"I—I—" Dr. Leidner stopped. The colour rose in his cheeks. "I thought—" He came to a dead stop.

"Now we are coming to it," Poirot encouraged him. "You thought—what?"

Dr. Leidner remained silent. He looked harassed and unwilling.

"See you," Poirot's tone became winning and appealing, "it all rings what you have told me, except for that. Why a nurse? There is an answer—yes. In fact, there can be only one answer. You did not believe yourself in your wife's danger."

And then with a cry Dr. Leidner broke down.

"God help me," he groaned. "I didn't. I didn't."

Poirot watched him with the kind of attention a cat gives a mouse-hole—ready to pounce when the mouse shows itself.

"What did you think then?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't know. . . ."

"But you do know. You know perfectly. Perhaps I can help you—with a guess. Did you, Dr. Leidner, suspect that these letters were all written by your wife herself?"

There wasn't any need for him to answer. The truth of Poirot's guess was only too apparent. The horrified hand he held up, as though begging for mercy, told its own tale.

I drew a deep breath. So I had been right in my half-formed guess! I recalled the curious tone in which Dr. Leidner had asked me what I thought of it all. I nodded my head slowly and thoughtfully, and suddenly awoke to the fact that M. Poirot's eyes were on me.

"Did you think the same, nurse?"

"The idea did cross my mind," I said truthfully.

"For what reason?"

I explained the similarity of the handwriting on the letter that Mr. Coleman had shown me.

Poirot turned to Dr. Leidner.

“Had you, too, noticed that similarity?”

Dr. Leidner bowed his head.

“Yes, I did. The writing was small and cramped—not big and generous like Louise’s, but several of the letters were formed the same way. I will show you.”

From an inner breast pocket he took out some letters and finally selected a sheet from one, which he handed to Poirot. It was part of a letter written to him by his wife. Poirot compared it carefully with the anonymous letters.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Yes. There are several similarities—a curious way of forming the letter s, a distinctive e. I am not a handwriting expert—I cannot pronounce definitely (and for that matter, I have never found two handwriting experts who agree on any point whatsoever)—but one can at least say this—the similarity between the two handwritings is very marked. It seems highly probable that they were all written by the same person. But it is not certain. We must take all contingencies into mind.”

He leaned back in his chair and said thoughtfully: “There are three possibilities. First, the similarity of the handwriting is pure coincidence. Second, that these threatening letters were written by Mrs. Leidner herself for some obscure reason. Third, that they were written by someone who deliberately copied her handwriting. Why? There seems no sense in it. One of these three possibilities must be the correct one.”

He reflected for a minute or two and then, turning to Dr. Leidner, he asked, with a resumal of his brisk manner: “When the possibility that Mrs. Leidner herself was the author of these letters first struck you, what theory did you form?”

Dr. Leidner shook his head.

“I put the idea out of my head as quickly as possible. I felt it was monstrous.”

“Did you search for no explanation?”

"Well," he hesitated. "I wondered if worrying and brooding over the past had perhaps affected my wife's brain slightly. I thought she might possibly have written those letters to herself without being conscious of having done so. That is possible, isn't it?" he added, turning to Dr. Reilly.

Dr. Reilly pursed up his lips.

"The human brain is capable of almost anything," he replied vaguely.

But he shot a lightning glance at Poirot, and as if in obedience to it, the latter abandoned the subject.

"The letters are an interesting point," he said. "But we must concentrate on the case as a whole. There are, as I see it, three possible solutions."

"Three?"

"Yes. Solution one: the simplest. Your wife's first husband is still alive. He first threatens her and then proceeds to carry out his threats. If we accept this solution, our problem is to discover how he got in or out without being seen.

"Solution two: Mrs. Leidner, for reasons of her own (reasons probably more easily understood by a medical man than a layman), writes herself threatening letters. The gas business is staged by her (remember, it was she who roused you by telling you she smelt gas). But, if Mrs. Leidner wrote herself the letters, she cannot be in danger from the supposed writer. We must, therefore, look elsewhere for the murderer. We must look, in fact, amongst the members of your staff. Yes," in answer to a murmur of protest from Dr. Leidner, "that is the only logical conclusion. To satisfy a private grudge one of them killed her. That person, I may say, was probably aware of the letters—or was at any rate aware that Mrs. Leidner feared or was pretending to fear someone. That fact, in the murderer's opinion, rendered the murder quite safe for him. He felt sure it would be put down to a mysterious outsider—the writer of the threatening letters.

"A variant of this solution is that the murderer actually wrote the letters himself, being aware of Mrs. Leidner's past history. But in that case it is not quite clear why the criminal should have copied Mrs. Leidner’s own handwriting since, as far as we can see, it would be more to his or her advantage that they should appear to be written by an outsider.

“The third solution is the most interesting to my mind. I suggest that the letters are genuine. They are written by Mrs. Leidner’s first husband (or his younger brother), who is actually one of the expedition staff.”

Sixteen

THE SUSPECTS

Dr. Leidner sprang to his feet.

“Impossible! Absolutely impossible! The idea is absurd!”

Mr. Poirot looked at him quite calmly but said nothing.

“You mean to suggest that my wife’s former husband is one of the expedition and that she didn’t recognize him?”

“Exactly. Reflect a little on the facts. Some fifteen years ago your wife lived with this man for a few months. Would she know him if she came across him after that lapse of time? I think not. His face will have changed, his build will have changed—his voice may not have changed so much, but that is a detail he can attend to himself. And remember, she is not looking for him amongst her own household. She visualizes him as somewhere outside—a stranger. No, I do not think she would recognize him. And there is a second possibility. The young brother—the child of those days who was so passionately devoted to his elder brother. He is now a man. Will she recognize a child of ten or twelve years old in a man nearing thirty? Yes, there is young William Bosner to be reckoned with. Remember, his brother in his eyes may not loom as a traitor but as a patriot, a martyr for his own country—Germany. In his eyes Mrs. Leidner is the traitor—the monster who sent his beloved brother to death! A susceptible child is capable of great hero worship, and a young mind can easily be obsessed by an idea which persists into adult life.”

“Quite true,” said Dr. Reilly. “The popular view that a child forgets easily is not an accurate one. Many people go right through life in the grip of an idea which has been impressed on them in very tender years.”

“Bien. You have these two possibilities. Frederick Bosner, a man by now of fifty odd, and William Bosner, whose age would be something short of thirty. Let us examine the members of your staff from these two points of view.”

“This is fantastic,” murmured Dr. Leidner. “My staff! The members of my own expedition.”

“And consequently considered above suspicion,” said Poirot dryly. “A very useful point of view. Commençons! Who could emphatically not be Frederick or William?”

“The women.”

“Naturally. Miss Johnson and Mrs. Mercado are crossed off. Who else?”

“Carey. He and I have worked together for years before I even met Louise —”

“And also he is the wrong age. He is, I should judge, thirty-eight or nine, too young for Frederick, too old for William. Now for the rest. There is Father Lavigny and Mr. Mercado. Either of them might be Frederick Bosner.”

“But, my dear sir,” cried Dr. Leidner in a voice of mingled irritation and amusement, “Father Lavigny is known all over the world as an epigraphist and Mercado has worked for years in a well-known museum in New York. It is impossible that either of them should be the man you think!”

Poirot waved an airy hand.

“Impossible—impossible—I take no account of the word! The impossible, always I examine it very closely! But we will pass on for the moment. Who else have you? Carl Reiter, a young man with a German name, David Emmott—”

“He has been with me two seasons, remember.”

“He is a young man with the gift of patience. If he committed a crime, it would not be in a hurry. All would be very well prepared.”

Dr. Leidner made a gesture of despair.

“And lastly, William Coleman,” continued Poirot.

“He is an Englishman.”

“Pourquoi pas? Did not Mrs. Leidner say that the boy left America and could not be traced? He might easily have been brought up in England.”

“You have an answer to everything,” said Dr. Leidner.

I was thinking hard. Right from the beginning I had thought Mr. Coleman’s manner rather more like a P. G. Wodehouse book than like a real live young man. Had he really been playing a part all the time?

Poirot was writing in a little book.

“Let us proceed with order and method,” he said. “On the first count we have two names. Father Lavigny and Mr. Mercado. On the second we have Coleman, Emmott and Reiter.

“Now let us pass to the opposite aspect of the matter—means and opportunity. Who amongst the expedition had the means and the opportunity of committing the crime? Carey was on the dig, Coleman was in Hassanieh, you yourself were on the roof. That leaves us Father Lavigny, Mr. Mercado, Mrs. Mercado, David Emmott, Carl Reiter, Miss Johnson and Nurse Leatheran.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, and I bounded in my chair.

Mr. Poirot looked at me with twinkling eyes.

“Yes, I’m afraid, ma soeur, that you have got to be included. It would have been quite easy for you to have gone along and killed Mrs. Leidner while the courtyard was empty. You have plenty of muscle and strength, and she would have been quite unsuspicious until the moment the blow was struck.”

I was so upset that I couldn’t get a word out. Dr. Reilly, I noticed, was looking highly amused.

“Interesting case of a nurse who murdered her patients one by one,” he murmured.

Such a look as I gave him!

Dr. Leidner’s mind had been running on a different tack.

“Not Emmott, M. Poirot,” he objected. “You can’t include him. He was on the roof with me, remember, during that ten minutes.”

“Nevertheless we cannot exclude him. He could have come down, gone straight to Mrs. Leidner’s room, killed her, and then called the boy back. Or he might have killed her on one of the occasions when he had sent the boy up to you.”

Dr. Leidner shook his head, murmuring: “What a nightmare! It’s all so—fantastic.”

To my surprise Poirot agreed.

“Yes, that’s true. This is a fantastic crime. One does not often come across them. Usually murder is very sordid—very simple. But this is unusual murder . . . I suspect, Dr. Leidner, that your wife was an unusual woman.”

He had hit the nail on the head with such accuracy that I jumped.

“Is that true, nurse?” he asked.

Dr. Leidner said quietly: “Tell him what Louise was like, nurse. You are unprejudiced.”

I spoke quite frankly.

“She was very lovely,” I said. “You couldn’t help admiring her and wanting to do things for her. I’ve never met anyone like her before.”

“Thank you,” said Dr. Leidner and smiled at me.

“That is valuable testimony coming from an outsider,” said Poirot politely. “Well, let us proceed. Under the heading of means and opportunity we have seven names. Nurse Leatheran, Miss Johnson, Mrs. Mercado, Mr. Mercado, Mr. Reiter, Mr. Emmott and Father Lavigny.”

Once more he cleared his throat. I’ve always noticed that foreigners can make the oddest noises.

“Let us for the moment assume that our third theory is correct. That is that the murderer is Frederick or William Bosner, and that Frederick or William Bosner is a member of the expedition staff. By comparing both lists we can narrow down our suspects on this count to four. Father Lavigny, Mr. Mercado, Carl Reiter and David Emmott.”

“Father Lavigny is out of the question,” said Dr. Leidner with decision. “He is one of the Pères Blancs in Carthage.”

“And his beard’s quite real,” I put in.

“Ma soeur,” said Poirot, “a murderer of the first class never wears a false beard!”

“How do you know the murderer is of the first class?” I asked rebelliously.

“Because if he were not, the whole truth would be plain to me at this instant—and it is not.”

That’s pure conceit, I thought to myself.

“Anyway,” I said, reverting to the beard, “it must have taken quite a time to grow.”

“That is a practical observation,” said Poirot.

Dr. Leidner said irritably: “But it’s ridiculous—quite ridiculous. Both he and Mercado are well-known men. They’ve been known for years.”

Poirot turned to him.

“You have not the true version. You do not appreciate an important point. If Frederick Bosner is not dead—what has he been doing all these years? He must have taken a different name. He must have built himself up a career.”

“As a Père Blanc?” asked Dr. Reilly sceptically.

“It is a little fantastic that, yes,” confessed Poirot. “But we cannot put it right out of court. Besides, these other possibilities.”

“The young ’uns?” said Reilly. “If you want my opinion, on the face of it there’s only one of your suspects that’s even plausible.”

“And that is?”

“Young Carl Reiter. There’s nothing actually against him, but come down to it and you’ve got to admit a few things—he’s the right age, he’s got a German name, he’s new this year and he had the opportunity all right. He’d only got to pop out of his photographic place, cross the courtyard to do his dirty work and hare back again while the coast was clear. If anyone were to have dropped into the photographic room while he was out of it, he can always say later that he was in the dark-room. I don’t say he’s your man but if you are going to suspect someone I say he’s by far and away the most likely.”

M. Poirot didn’t seem very receptive. He nodded gravely but doubtfully.

“Yes,” he said. “He is the most plausible, but it may not be so simple as all that.”

Then he said: “Let us say no more at present. I would like now, if I may, to examine the room where the crime took place.”

“Certainly.” Dr. Leidner fumbled in his pockets, then looked at Dr. Reilly.

“Captain Maitland took it,” he said.

“Maitland gave it to me,” said Reilly. “He had to go off on that Kurdish business.”

He produced the key.

Dr. Leidner said hesitatingly: “Do you mind—if I don’t—Perhaps, nurse—”

“Of course. Of course,” said Poirot. “I quite understand. Never do I wish to cause you unnecessary pain. If you will be good enough to accompany me, ma soeur.”

“Certainly,” I said.

Seventeen

THE STAIN BY THE WASHSTAND

Mrs. Leidner’s body had been taken to Hassanieh for the postmortem, but otherwise her room had been left exactly as it was. There was so little in it that it had not taken the police long to go over it.

To the right of the door as you entered was the bed. Opposite the door were the two barred windows giving on the countryside. Between them was a plain oak table with two drawers that served Mrs. Leidner as a dressing table. On the east wall there was a line of hooks with dresses hung up protected by cotton bags and a deal chest of drawers. Immediately to the left of the door was the washstand. In the middle of the room was a good-sized plain oak table with a blotter and inkstand and a small attaché case. It was in the latter that Mrs. Leidner had kept the anonymous letters. The curtains were short strips of native material—white striped with orange. The floor was of stone with some goatskin rugs on it, three narrow ones of brown striped with white in front of the two windows and the washstand, and a larger better quality one of white with brown stripes lying between the bed and the writing table.

There were no cupboards or alcoves or long curtains—nowhere, in fact, where anyone could have hidden. The bed was a plain iron one with a printed cotton quilt. The only trace of luxury in the room were three pillows all made of the best soft and billowy down. Nobody but Mrs. Leidner had pillows like these.

In a few brief words Dr. Reilly explained where Mrs. Leidner’s body had been found—in a heap on the rug beside the bed.

To illustrate his account, he beckoned me to come forward.

“If you don’t mind, nurse?” he said.

I’m not squeamish. I got down on the floor and arranged myself as far as possible in the attitude in which Mrs. Leidner’s body had been found.

“Leidner lifted her head when he found her,” said the doctor. “But I questioned him closely and it’s obvious that he didn’t actually change her position.”

“It seems quite straightforward,” said Poirot. “She was lying on the bed, asleep or resting—someone opens the door, she looks up, rises to her feet—”

“And he struck her down,” finished the doctor. “The blow would produce unconsciousness and death would follow very shortly. You see—”

He explained the injury in technical language.

“Not much blood, then?” said Poirot.

“No, the blood escaped internally into the brain.”

“Eh bien,” said Poirot, “that seems straightforward enough—except for one thing. If the man who entered was a stranger, why did not Mrs. Leidner cry out at once for help? If she had screamed she would have been heard. Nurse Leatheran here would have heard her, and Emmott and the boy.”

“That’s easily answered,” said Dr. Reilly dryly. “Because it wasn’t a stranger.”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes,” he said meditatively. “She may have been surprised to see the person—but she was not afraid. Then, as he struck, she may have uttered a half cry—too late.”

“The cry Miss Johnson heard?”

“Yes, if she did hear it. But on the whole I doubt it. These mud walls are thick and the windows were closed.”

He stepped up to the bed.

“You left her actually lying down?” he asked me.

I explained exactly what I had done.

“Did she mean to sleep or was she going to read?”

“I gave her two books—a light one and a volume of memoirs. She usually read for a while and then sometimes dropped off for a short sleep.”

“And she was—what shall I say—quite as usual?”

I considered.

“Yes. She seemed quite normal and in good spirits,” I said. “Just a shade off-hand, perhaps, but I put that down to her having confided in me the day before. It makes people a little uncomfortable sometimes.”

Poirot’s eyes twinkled.

“Ah, yes, indeed, me, I know that well.”

He looked round the room.

“And when you came in here after the murder, was everything as you had seen it before?”

I looked round also.

“Yes, I think so. I don’t remember anything being different.”

“There was no sign of the weapon with which she was struck?”

“No.”

Poirot looked at Dr. Reilly.

“What was it in your opinion?”

The doctor replied promptly:

“Something pretty powerful, of a fair size and without any sharp corners or edges. The rounded base of a statue, say—something like that. Mind you, I’m not suggesting that that was it. But that type of thing. The blow was delivered with great force.”

“Struck by a strong arm? A man’s arm?”

“Yes—unless—”

“Unless—what?”

Dr. Reilly said slowly: “It is just possible that Mrs. Leidner might have been on her knees—in which case, the blow being delivered from above with a heavy implement, the force needed would not have been so great.”

“On her knees,” mused Poirot. “It is an idea—that.”

“It’s only an idea, mind,” the doctor hastened to point out. “There’s absolutely nothing to indicate it.”

“But it’s possible.”

“Yes. And after all, in view of the circumstances, it’s not fantastic. Her fear might have led her to kneel in supplication rather than to scream when her instinct would tell her it was too late—that nobody could get there in time.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “It is an idea. . . .”

It was a very poor one, I thought. I couldn’t for one moment imagine Mrs. Leidner on her knees to anyone.

Poirot made his way slowly round the room. He opened the windows, tested the bars, passed his head through and satisfied himself that by no means could his shoulders be made to follow his head.

“The windows were shut when you found her,” he said. “Were they also shut when you left her at a quarter to one?”

“Yes, they were always shut in the afternoon. There is no gauze over these windows as there is in the living room and dining room. They are kept shut to keep out the flies.”

“And in any case no one could get in that way,” mused Poirot. “And the walls are of the most solid—mud-brick—and there are no trapdoors and no skylights. No, there is only one way into this room—through the door. And there is only one way to the door through the courtyard. And there is only one entrance to the courtyard—through the archway. And outside the archway there were five people and they all tell the same story, and I do not think, me, that they are lying . . . No, they are not lying. They are not bribed to silence. The murderer was here. . . .”

I didn’t say anything. Hadn’t I felt the same thing just now when we were all cooped up round the table?

Slowly Poirot prowled round the room. He took up a photograph from the chest of drawers. It was of an elderly man with a white goatee beard. He looked inquiringly at me.

“Mrs. Leidner’s father,” I said. “She told me so.”

He put it down again and glanced over the articles on the dressing-table—all of plain tortoiseshell—simple but good. He looked up at a row of books on a shelf, repeating the titles aloud.

“Who were the Greeks? Introduction to Relativity. Life of Lady Hester Stanhope. Crewe Traine. Back to Methuselah. Linda Condon. Yes, they tell us something, perhaps. She was not a fool, your Mrs. Leidner. She had a mind.”

“Oh! she was a very clever woman,” I said eagerly. “Very well read and up in everything. She wasn’t a bit ordinary.”

He smiled as he looked over at me.

“No,” he said. “I’ve already realized that.”

He passed on. He stood for some moments at the washstand, where there was a big array of bottles and toilet creams.

Then, suddenly, he dropped on his knees and examined the rug.

Dr. Reilly and I came quickly to join him. He was examining a small dark brown stain, almost invisible on the brown of the rug. In fact it was only just noticeable where it impinged on one of the white stripes.

“What do you say, doctor?” he said. “Is that blood?”

Dr. Reilly knelt down.

“Might be,” he said. “I’ll make sure if you like?”

“If you would be so amiable.”

Mr. Poirot examined the jug and basin. The jug was standing on the side of the washstand. The basin was empty, but beside the washstand there was an empty kerosene tin containing slop water.

He turned to me.

“Do you remember, nurse? Was this jug out of the basin or in it when you left Mrs. Leidner at a quarter to one?”

“I can’t be sure,” I said after a minute or two. “I rather think it was standing in the basin.”

“Ah?”

“But you see,” I said hastily, “I only think so because it usually was. The boys leave it like that after lunch. I just feel that if it hadn’t been in I should have noticed it.”

He nodded quite appreciatively.

“Yes. I understand that. It is your hospital training. If everything had not been just so in the room, you would quite unconsciously have set it to rights hardly noticing what you were doing. And after the murder? Was it like it is now?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t notice then,” I said. “All I looked for was whether there was any place anyone could be hidden or if there was anything the murderer had left behind him.”

“It’s blood all right,” said Dr. Reilly, rising from his knees. “Is it important?”

Poirot was frowning perplexedly. He flung out his hands with petulance.

“I cannot tell. How can I tell? It may mean nothing at all. I can say, if I like, that the murderer touched her—that there was blood on his hands—very little blood, but still blood—and so he came over here and washed them. Yes, it may have been like that. But I cannot jump to conclusions and say that it was so. That stain may be of no importance at all.”

“There would have been very little blood,” said Dr. Reilly dubiously. “None would have spurted out or anything like that. It would have just oozed a little from the wound. Of course, if he’d probed it at all. . . .”

I gave a shiver. A nasty sort of picture came up in my mind. The vision of somebody—perhaps that nice pig-faced photographic boy, striking down that lovely woman and then bending over her probing the wound with his finger in an awful gloating fashion and his face, perhaps, quite different . . . all fierce and mad. . . .

Dr. Reilly noticed my shiver.

“What’s the matter, nurse?” he said.

“Nothing—just gooseflesh,” I said. “A goose walking over my grave.”

Mr. Poirot turned round and looked at me.

“I know what you need,” he said. “Presently when we have finished here and I go back with the doctor to Hassanieh we will take you with us. You will give Nurse Leatheran tea, will you not, doctor?”

“Delighted.”

“Oh, no doctor,” I protested. “I couldn’t think of such a thing.”

M. Poirot gave me a little friendly tap on the shoulder. Quite an English tap, not a foreign one.

“You, ma soeur, will do as you are told,” he said. “Besides, it will be of advantage to me. There is a good deal more that I want to discuss, and I cannot do it here where one must preserve the decencies. The good Dr. Leidner he worshipped his wife and he is sure—oh, so sure—that everybody else felt the same about her! But that, in my opinion, would not be human nature! No, we want to discuss Mrs. Leidner with—how do you say?—the gloves removed. That is settled then. When we have finished here, we take you with us to Hassanieh.”

“I suppose,” I said doubtfully, “that I ought to be leaving anyway. It’s rather awkward.”

“Do nothing for a day or two,” said Dr. Reilly. “You can’t very well go until after the funeral.”

“That’s all very well,” I said. “And supposing I get murdered too, doctor?”

I said it half jokingly and Dr. Reilly took it in the same fashion and would, I think, have made some jocular response.

But M. Poirot, to my astonishment, stood stock-still in the middle of the floor and clasped his hands to his head.

“Ah! if that were possible,” he murmured. “It is a danger—yes—a great danger—and what can one do? How can one guard against it?”

“Why, M. Poirot,” I said, “I was only joking! Who’d want to murder me, I should like to know?”

“You—or another,” he said, and I didn’t like the way he said it at all. Positively creepy.

“But why?” I persisted.

He looked at me very straight then.

“I joke, mademoiselle,” he said, “and I laugh. But there are some things that are no joke. There are things that my profession has taught me. And one of these things, the most terrible thing, is this: Murder is a habit. . . .”

Eighteen

TEA AT DR. REILLY'S

Before leaving, Poirot made a round of the expedition house and the outbuildings. He also asked a few questions of the servants at second hand—that is to say, Dr. Reilly translated the questions and answers from English to Arabic and vice versa.

These questions dealt mainly with the appearance of the stranger Mrs. Leidner and I had seen looking through the window and to whom Father Lavigny had been talking on the following day.

"Do you really think that fellow had anything to do with it?" asked Dr. Reilly when we were bumping along in his car on our way to Hassanieh.

"I like all the information there is," was Poirot's reply.

And really, that described his methods very well. I found later that there wasn't anything—no small scrap of insignificant gossip—in which he wasn't interested. Men aren't usually so gossipy.

I must confess I was glad of my cup of tea when we got to Dr. Reilly's house. M. Poirot, I noticed, put five lumps of sugar in his.

Stirring it carefully with his teaspoon he said: "And now we can talk, can we not? We can make up our minds who is likely to have committed the crime."

"Lavigny, Mercado, Emmott or Reiter?" asked Dr. Reilly.

"No, no—that was theory number three. I wish to concentrate now on theory number two—leaving aside all question of a mysterious husband or brother-in-law turning up from the past. Let us discuss now quite simply which member of the expedition had the means and opportunity to kill Mrs. Leidner, and who is likely to have done so."

"I thought you didn't think much of that theory."

"Not at all. But I have some natural delicacy," said Poirot reproachfully. "Can I discuss in the presence of Dr. Leidner the motives likely to lead to the murder of his wife by a member of the expedition? That would not have been delicate at all. I had to sustain the fiction that his wife was adorable and that everyone adored her!

"But naturally it was not like that at all. Now we can be brutal and impersonal and say what we think. We have no longer to consider people's feelings. And that is where Nurse Leatheran is going to help us. She is, I am sure, a very good observer."

"Oh, I don't know about that," I said.

Dr. Reilly handed me a plate of hot scones—"To fortify yourself," he said. They were very good scones.

"Come now," said M. Poirot in a friendly, chatty way. "You shall tell me, ma soeur, exactly what each member of the expedition felt towards Mrs. Leidner."

"I was only there a week, M. Poirot," I said.

"Quite long enough for one of your intelligence. A nurse sums up quickly. She makes her judgments and abides by them. Come, let us make a beginning. Father Lavigny, for instance?"

"Well, there now, I really couldn't say. He and Mrs. Leidner seemed to like talking together. But they usually spoke French and I'm not very good at French myself though I learnt it as a girl at school. I've an idea they talked mainly about books."

"They were, as you might say, companionable together—yes?"

“Well, yes, you might put it that way. But, all the same, I think Father Lavigny was puzzled by her and—well—almost annoyed by being puzzled, if you know what I mean.”

And I told him of the conversation I had had with him out on the dig that first day when he had called Mrs. Leidner a “dangerous woman.”

“Now that is very interesting,” M. Poirot said. “And she—what do you think she thought of him?”

“That’s rather difficult to say, too. It wasn’t easy to know what Mrs. Leidner thought of people. Sometimes, I fancy, he puzzled her. I remember her saying to Dr. Leidner that he was unlike any priest she had ever known.”

“A length of hemp to be ordered for Father Lavigny,” said Dr. Reilly facetiously.

“My dear friend,” said Poirot. “Have you not, perhaps, some patients to attend? I would not for the world detain you from your professional duties.”

“I’ve got a whole hospital of them,” said Dr. Reilly.

And he got up and said a wink was as good as a nod to a blind horse, and went out laughing.

“That is better,” said Poirot. “We will have now an interesting conversation tête-à-tête. But you must not forget to eat your tea.”

He passed me a plate of sandwiches and suggested my having a second cup of tea. He really had very pleasant, attentive manners.

“And now,” he said, “let us continue with your impressions. Who was there who in your opinion did not like Mrs. Leidner?”

“Well,” I said, “it’s only my opinion and I don’t want it repeated as coming from me.”

“Naturally not.”

“But in my opinion little Mrs. Mercado fairly hated her!”

“Ah! And Mr. Mercado?”

“He was a bit soft on her,” I said. “I shouldn’t think women, apart from his wife, had ever taken much notice of him. And Mrs. Leidner had a nice kind way of being interested in people and the things they told her. It rather went to the poor man’s head, I fancy.”

“And Mrs. Mercado—she was not pleased?”

“She was just plain jealous—that’s the truth of it. You’ve got to be very careful when there’s a husband and wife about, and that’s a fact. I could tell you some surprising things. You’ve no idea the extraordinary things women get into their heads when it’s a question of their husbands.”

“I do not doubt the truth of what you say. So Mrs. Mercado was jealous? And she hated Mrs. Leidner?”

“I’ve seen her look at her as though she’d have liked to kill her—oh, gracious!” I pulled myself up. “Indeed, M. Poirot, I didn’t mean to say—I mean, that is, not for one moment—”

“No, no. I quite understand. The phrase slipped out. A very convenient one. And Mrs. Leidner, was she worried by this animosity of Mrs. Mercado’s?”

“Well,” I said, reflecting, “I don’t really think she was worried at all. In fact, I don’t even know whether she noticed it. I thought once of just giving her a hint—but I didn’t like to. Least said soonest mended. That’s what I say.”

“You are doubtless wise. Can you give me any instances of how Mrs. Mercado showed her feelings?”

I told him about our conversation on the roof.

“So she mentioned Mrs. Leidner’s first marriage,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Can you remember—in mentioning it—did she look at you as though she wondered whether you had heard a different version?”

“You think she may have known the truth about it?”

“It is a possibility. She may have written those letters—and engineered a tapping hand and all the rest of it.”

“I wondered something of the same kind myself. It seemed the kind of petty revengeful thing she might do.”

“Yes. A cruel streak, I should say. But hardly the temperament for cold-blooded, brutal murder unless, of course—”

He paused and then said: “It is odd, that curious thing she said to you. ‘I know why you are here.’ What did she mean by it?”

“I can’t imagine,” I said frankly.

“She thought you were there for some ulterior reason apart from the declared one. What reason? And why should she be so concerned in the matter. Odd, too, the way you tell me she stared at you all through tea the day you arrived.”

“Well, she’s not a lady, M. Poirot,” I said primly.

“That, ma soeur, is an excuse but not an explanation.”

I wasn’t quite sure for the minute what he meant. But he went on quickly.

“And the other members of the staff?”

I considered.

“I don’t think Miss Johnson liked Mrs. Leidner either very much. But she was quite open and aboveboard about it. She as good as admitted she was prejudiced. You see, she’s very devoted to Dr. Leidner and had worked with him for years. And of course, marriage does change things—there’s no denying it.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “And from Miss Johnson’s point of view it would be an unsuitable marriage. It would really have been much more suitable if Dr.

Leidner had married her.”

“It would really,” I agreed. “But there, that’s a man all over. Not one in a hundred considers suitability. And one can’t really blame Dr. Leidner. Miss Johnson, poor soul, isn’t so much to look at. Now Mrs. Leidner was really beautiful—not young, of course—but oh! I wish you’d known her. There was something about her . . . I remember Mr. Coleman saying she was like a thingummyjig that came to lure people into marshes. That wasn’t a very good way of putting it, but—oh, well—you’ll laugh at me, but there was something about her that was—well—unearthly.”

“She could cast a spell—yes, I understand,” said Poirot.

“Then I don’t think she and Mr. Carey got on very well either,” I went on. “I’ve an idea he was jealous just like Miss Johnson. He was always very stiff with her and so was she with him. You know—she passed him things and was very polite and called him Mr. Carey rather formally. He was an old friend of her husband’s of course, and some women can’t stand their husband’s old friends. They don’t like to think that anyone knew them before they did—at least that’s rather a muddled way of putting it—”

“I quite understand. And the three young men? Coleman, you say, was inclined to be poetic about her.”

I couldn’t help laughing.

“It was funny, M. Poirot,” I said. “He’s such a matter-of-fact young man.”

“And the other two?”

“I don’t really know about Mr. Emmott. He’s always so quiet and never says much. She was very nice to him always. You know—friendly—called him David and used to tease him about Miss Reilly and things like that.”

“Ah, really? And did he enjoy that?”

“I don’t quite know,” I said doubtfully. “He’d just look at her. Rather funnily. You couldn’t tell what he was thinking.”

"And Mr. Reiter?"

"She wasn't always very kind to him," I said slowly. "I think he got on her nerves. She used to say quite sarcastic things to him."

"And did he mind?"

"He used to get very pink, poor boy. Of course, she didn't mean to be unkind."

And then suddenly, from feeling a little sorry for the boy, it came over me that he was very likely a cold-blooded murderer and had been playing a part all the time.

"Oh, M. Poirot," I exclaimed. "What do you think really happened?"

He shook his head slowly and thoughtfully.

"Tell me," he said. "You are not afraid to go back there tonight?"

"Oh no," I said. "Of course, I remember what you said, but who would want to murder me?"

"I do not think that anyone could," he said slowly. "That is partly why I have been so anxious to hear all you could tell me. No, I think—I am sure—you are quite safe."

"If anyone had told me in Baghdad—" I began and stopped.

"Did you hear any gossip about the Leidners and the expedition before you came here?" he asked.

I told him about Mrs. Leidner's nickname and just a little of what Mrs.

Kelsey had said about her.

In the middle of it the door opened and Miss Reilly came in. She had been playing tennis and had her racquet in her hand.

I gathered Poirot had already met her when he arrived in Hassanieh.

She said how-do-you-do to me in her usual offhand manner and picked up a sandwich.

“Well, M. Poirot,” she said. “How are you getting on with our local mystery?”

“Not very fast, mademoiselle.”

“I see you’ve rescued nurse from the wreck.”

“Nurse Leatheran has been giving me valuable information about the various members of the expedition. Incidentally I have learnt a good deal—about the victim. And the victim, mademoiselle, is very often the clue to the mystery.”

Miss Reilly said: “That’s rather clever of you, M. Poirot. It’s certainly true that if ever a woman deserved to be murdered Mrs. Leidner was that woman!”

“Miss Reilly!” I cried, scandalized.

She laughed, a short, nasty laugh.

“Ah!” she said. “I thought you hadn’t been hearing quite the truth. Nurse Leatheran, I’m afraid, was quite taken in, like many other people. Do you know, M. Poirot, I rather hope that this case isn’t going to be one of your successes. I’d quite like the murderer of Louise Leidner to get away with it. In fact, I wouldn’t much have objected to putting her out of the way myself.”

I was simply disgusted with the girl. M. Poirot, I must say, didn’t turn a hair. He just bowed and said quite pleasantly:

“I hope, then, that you have an alibi for yesterday afternoon?”

There was a moment’s silence and Miss Reilly’s racquet went clattering down on to the floor. She didn’t bother to pick it up. Slack and untidy like all her sort! She said in a rather breathless voice: “Oh, yes, I was playing tennis at the club. But, seriously, M. Poirot, I wonder if you know anything at all about Mrs. Leidner and the kind of woman she was?”

Again he made a funny little bow and said: “You shall inform me, mademoiselle.”

She hesitated a minute and then spoke with a callousness and lack of decency that really sickened me.

“There’s a convention that one doesn’t speak ill of the dead. That’s stupid, I think. The truth’s always the truth. On the whole it’s better to keep your mouth shut about living people. You might conceivably injure them. The dead are past that. But the harm they’ve done lives after them sometimes. Not quite a quotation from Shakespeare but very nearly! Has nurse told you of the queer atmosphere there was at Tell Yarimjah? Has she told you how jumpy they all were? And how they all used to glare at each other like enemies? That was Louise Leidner’s doing. When I was a kid out here three years ago they were the happiest, jolliest lot imaginable. Even last year they were pretty well all right. But this year there was a blight over them—and it was her doing. She was the kind of woman who won’t let anybody else be happy! There are women like that and she was one of them! She wanted to break up things always. Just for fun—or for the sense of power—or perhaps just because she was made that way. And she was the kind of woman who had to get hold of every male creature within reach!”

“Miss Reilly,” I cried, “I don’t think that’s true. In fact I know it isn’t.”

She went on without taking the least notice of me.

“It wasn’t enough for her to have her husband adore her. She had to make a fool of that long-legged shambling idiot of a Mercado. Then she got hold of Bill. Bill’s a sensible cove, but she was getting him all mazed and bewildered. Carl Reiter she just amused herself by tormenting. It was easy. He’s a sensitive boy. And she had a jolly good go at David.

“David was better sport to her because he put up a fight. He felt her charm—but he wasn’t having any. I think because he’d got sense enough to know that she didn't really care a damn. And that's why I hate her so. She's not sensual. She doesn't want affairs. It's just cold-blooded experiment on her part and the fun of stirring people up and setting them against each other. She dabbled in that too. She's the sort of woman who's never had a row with anyone in her life—but rows always happen where she is! She makes them happen. She's a kind of female Iago. She must have drama. But she doesn't want to be involved herself. She's always outside pulling strings—looking on—enjoying it. Oh, do you see at all what I mean?"

"I see, perhaps, more than you know, mademoiselle," said Poirot.

I couldn't make his voice out. He didn't sound indignant. He sounded—oh, well, I can't explain it.

Sheila Reilly seemed to understand, for she flushed all over her face.

"You can think what you choose," she said. "But I'm right about her. She was a clever woman and she was bored and she experimented—with people—like other people experiment with chemicals. She enjoyed working on poor old Johnson's feelings and seeing her bite on the bullet and control herself like the old sport she is. She liked goading little Mercado into a white-hot frenzy. She liked flicking me on the raw—and she could do it too, every time! She liked finding out things about people and holding it over them. Oh, I don't mean crude blackmail—I mean just letting them know that she knew—and leaving them uncertain what she meant to do about it. My God, though, that woman was an artist! There was nothing crude about her methods!"

"And her husband?" asked Poirot.

"She never wanted to hurt him," said Miss Reilly slowly. "I've never known her anything but sweet to him. I suppose she was fond of him. He's a dear—wrapped up in his own world—his digging and his theories. And he worshipped her and thought her perfection. That might have annoyed some women. It didn't annoy her. In a sense he lived in a fool's paradise—and yet it wasn't a fool's paradise because to him she was what he thought her. Though it's hard to reconcile that with—"

She stopped.

“Go on, mademoiselle,” said Poirot.

She turned suddenly on me.

“What have you said about Richard Carey?”

“About Mr. Carey?” I asked, astonished.

“About her and Carey?”

“Well,” I said, “I’ve mentioned that they didn’t hit it off very well—”

To my surprise she broke into a fit of laughter.

“Didn’t hit it off very well! You fool! He’s head over ears in love with her. And it’s tearing him to pieces—because he worships Leidner too. He’s been his friend for years. That would be enough for her, of course. She’s made it her business to come between them. But all the same I’ve fancied—”

“Eh bien?”

She was frowning, absorbed in thought.

“I’ve fancied that she’d gone too far for once—that she was not only biter but bit! Carey’s attractive. He’s as attractive as hell . . . She was a cold devil—but I believe she could have lost her coldness with him. . . .”

“I think it’s just scandalous what you’re saying,” I cried. “Why, they hardly spoke to each other!”

“Oh, didn’t they?” She turned on me. “A hell of a lot you know about it. It was ‘Mr. Carey’ and ‘Mrs. Leidner’ in the house, but they used to meet outside. She’d walk down the path to the river. And he’d leave the dig for an hour at a time. They used to meet among the fruit trees.

“I saw him once just leaving her, striding back to the dig, and she was standing looking after him. I was a female cad, I suppose. I had some glasses with me and I took them out and had a good look at her face. If you ask me, I believe she cared like hell for Richard Carey. . . .”

She broke off and looked at Poirot.

“Excuse my butting in on your case,” she said with a sudden rather twisted grin, “but I thought you’d like to have the local colour correct.”

And she marched out of the room.

“M. Poirot,” I cried. “I don’t believe one word of it all!”

He looked at me and he smiled, and he said (very queerly I thought): “You can’t deny, nurse, that Miss Reilly has shed a certain—illumination on the case.”

Nineteen

A NEW SUSPICION

We couldn't say any more just then because Dr. Reilly came in, saying jokingly that he'd killed off the most tiresome of his patients.

He and M. Poirot settled down to a more or less medical discussion of the psychology and mental state of an anonymous letter-writer. The doctor cited cases that he had known professionally, and M. Poirot told various stories from his own experience.

"It is not so simple as it seems," he ended. "There is the desire for power and very often a strong inferiority complex."

Dr. Reilly nodded.

"That's why you often find that the author of anonymous letters is the last person in the place to be suspected. Some quiet inoffensive little soul who apparently can't say Bo to a goose—all sweetness and Christian meekness on the outside—and seething with all the fury of hell underneath!"

Poirot said thoughtfully: "Should you say Mrs. Leidner had any tendency to an inferiority complex?"

Dr. Reilly scraped out his pipe with a chuckle.

"Last woman on earth I'd describe that way. No repressions about her. Life, life and more life—that's what she wanted—and got, too!"

"Do you consider it a possibility, psychologically speaking, that she wrote those letters?"

"Yes, I do. But if she did, the reason arose out of her instinct to dramatize herself. Mrs. Leidner was a bit of a film star in private life! She had to be the centre of things—in the limelight. By the law of opposites she married Leidner, who's about the most retiring and modest man I know. He adored her—but adoration by the fireside wasn't enough for her. She had to be the persecuted heroine as well."

"In fact," said Poirot, smiling, "you don't subscribe to his theory that she wrote them and retained no memory of her act?"

"No, I don't. I didn't turn down the idea in front of him. You can't very well say to a man who's just lost a dearly loved wife that that same wife was a shameless exhibitionist, and that she drove him nearly crazy with anxiety to satisfy her sense of the dramatic. As a matter of fact it wouldn't be safe to tell any man the truth about his wife! Funnily enough, I'd trust most women with the truth about their husbands. Women can accept the fact that a man is a rotter, a swindler, a drugtaker, a confirmed liar, and a general swine without batting an eyelash and without its impairing their affection for the brute in the least! Women are wonderful realists."

"Frankly, Dr. Reilly, what was your exact opinion of Mrs. Leidner?"

Dr. Reilly lay back in his chair and puffed slowly at his pipe.

"Frankly—it's hard to say! I didn't know her well enough. She'd got charm—any amount of it. Brains, sympathy . . . What else? She hadn't any of the ordinary unpleasant vices. She wasn't sensual or lazy or even particularly vain. She was, I've always thought (but I've no proofs of it), a most accomplished liar. What I don't know (and what I'd like to know) is whether she lied to herself or only to other people. I'm rather partial to liars myself. A woman who doesn't lie is a woman without imagination and without sympathy. I don't think she was really a manhunter—she just liked the sport of bringing them down 'with my bow and arrow.' If you get my daughter on the subject—"

"We have had that pleasure," said Poirot with a slight smile.

"H'm," said Dr. Reilly. "She hasn't wasted much time! Shoved her knife into her pretty thoroughly, I should imagine! The younger generation has no sentiment towards the dead. It's a pity all young people are prigs! They condemn the 'old morality' and then proceed to set up a much more hard-and-fast code of their own. If Mrs. Leidner had had half a dozen affairs Sheila would probably have approved of her as 'living her life fully'—or 'obeying her blood instincts.' What she doesn't see is that Mrs. Leidner was acting true to type—her type. The cat is obeying its blood instinct when it plays with the mouse! It's made that way. Men aren't little boys to be shielded and protected. They've got to meet cat women—and faithful spaniel, yours-till-death adoring women, and hen-pecking nagging bird women—and all the rest of it! Life's a battlefield—not a picnic! I'd like to see Sheila honest enough to come off her high horse and admit that she hated Mrs. Leidner for good old thorough-going personal reasons. Sheila's about the only young girl in this place and she naturally assumes that she ought to have it all her own way with the young things in trousers. Naturally it annoys her when a woman, who in her view is middle-aged and who has already two husbands to her credit, comes along and licks her on her own ground. Sheila's a nice child, healthy and reasonably good-looking and attractive to the other sex as she should be. But Mrs. Leidner was something out of the ordinary in that line. She'd got just that sort of calamitous magic that plays the deuce with things—a kind of Belle Dame sans Merci."

I jumped in my chair. What a coincidence his saying that!

"Your daughter—I am not indiscreet—she has perhaps a tendresse for one of the young men out there?"

"Oh, I don't suppose so. She's had Emmott and Coleman dancing attendance on her as a matter of course. I don't know that she cares for one more than the other. There are a couple of young Air Force chaps too. I fancy all's fish that comes to her net at present. No, I think it's age daring to defeat youth that annoys her so much! She doesn't know as much of the world as I do. It's when you get to my age that you really appreciate a schoolgirl complexion and a clear eye and a firmly knit young body. But a woman over thirty can listen with rapt attention and throw in a word here and there to show the talker what a fine fellow he is—and few young men can resist that! Sheila's a pretty girl—but Louise Leidner was beautiful. Glorious eyes and that amazing golden fairness. Yes, she was a beautiful woman."

Yes, I thought to myself, he's right. Beauty's a wonderful thing. She had been beautiful. It wasn't the kind of looks you were jealous of—you just sat back and admired. I felt that first day I met her that I'd do anything for Mrs. Leidner!

All the same, that night as I was being driven back to Tell Yarimjah (Dr. Reilly made me stay for an early dinner) one or two things came back to my mind and made me rather uncomfortable. At the time I hadn't believed a word of all Sheila Reilly's outpouring. I'd taken it for sheer spite and malice.

But now I suddenly remembered the way Mrs. Leidner had insisted on going for a stroll by herself that afternoon and wouldn't hear of me coming with her. I couldn't help wondering if perhaps, after all, she had been going to meet Mr. Carey . . . And of course, it was a little odd, really, the way he and she spoke to each other so formally. Most of the others she called by their Christian names.

He never seemed to look at her, I remembered. That might be because he disliked her—or it might be just the opposite. . . .

I gave myself a little shake. Here I was fancying and imagining all sorts of things—all because of a girl's spiteful outburst! It just showed how unkind and dangerous it was to go about saying that kind of thing.

Mrs. Leidner hadn't been like that at all. . . .

Of course, she hadn't liked Sheila Reilly. She'd really been—almost catty about her that day at lunch to Mr. Emmott.

Funny, the way he'd looked at her. The sort of way that you couldn't possibly tell what he was thinking. You never could tell what Mr. Emmott was thinking. He was so quiet. But very nice. A nice dependable person.

Now Mr. Coleman was a foolish young man if there ever was one!

I'd got to that point in my meditations when we arrived. It was just on nine o'clock and the big door was closed and barred.

Ibrahim came running with his great key to let me in.

We all went to bed early at Tell Yarimjah. There weren't any lights showing in the living room. There was a light in the drawing office and one in Dr. Leidner's office, but nearly all the other windows were dark. Everyone must have gone to bed even earlier than usual.

As I passed the drawing office to go to my room I looked in. Mr. Carey was in his shirt sleeves working over his big plan.

Terribly ill, he looked, I thought. So strained and worn. It gave me quite a pang. I don't know what there was about Mr. Carey—it wasn't what he said because he hardly said anything—and that of the most ordinary nature, and it wasn't what he did, for that didn't amount to much either—and yet you just couldn't help noticing him, and everything about him seemed to matter more than it would have about anyone else. He just counted, if you know what I mean.

He turned his head and saw me. He removed his pipe from his mouth and said: "Well, nurse, back from Hassanieh?"

"Yes, Mr. Carey. You're up working late. Everybody else seems to have gone to bed."

"I thought I might as well get on with things," he said.

"I was a bit behind-hand. And I shall be out on the dig all tomorrow. We're starting digging again."

"Already?" I asked, shocked.

He looked at me rather queerly.

"It's the best thing, I think. I put it up to Leidner. He'll be in Hassanieh most of tomorrow seeing to things. But the rest of us will carry on here. You know it's not too easy all sitting round and looking at each other as things are."

He was right there, of course. Especially in the nervy, jumpy state everyone was in.

"Well, of course you're right in a way," I said. "It takes one's mind off if one's got something to do."

The funeral, I knew, was to be the day after tomorrow.

He had bent over his plan again. I don't know why, but my heart just ached for him. I felt certain that he wasn't going to get any sleep.

"If you'd like a sleeping draught, Mr. Carey?" I said hesitatingly.

He shook his head with a smile.

"I'll carry on, nurse. Bad habit, sleeping draughts."

"Well, good night, Mr. Carey," I said. "If there's anything I can do—"

"Don't think so, thank you, nurse. Good night."

"I'm terribly sorry," I said, rather too impulsively I suppose.

"Sorry?" He looked surprised.

"For—for everybody. It's all so dreadful. But especially for you."

"For me? Why for me?"

"Well, you're such an old friend of them both."

"I'm an old friend of Leidner's. I wasn't a friend of hers particularly."

He spoke as though he had actually disliked her. Really, I wished Miss Reilly could have heard him!

“Well, good night,” I said and hurried along to my room.

I fussed around a bit in my room before undressing. Washed out some handkerchiefs and a pair of wash-leather gloves and wrote up my diary. I just looked out of my door again before I really started to get ready for bed. The lights were still on in the drawing office and in the south building.

I suppose Dr. Leidner was still up and working in his office. I wondered whether I ought to go and say good night to him. I hesitated about it—I didn’t want to seem officious. He might be busy and not want to be disturbed. In the end, however, a sort of uneasiness drove me on. After all, it couldn’t do any harm. I’d just say goodnight, ask if there was anything I could do and come away.

But Dr. Leidner wasn’t there. The office itself was lit up but there was no one in it except Miss Johnson. She had her head down on the table and was crying as though her heart would break.

It gave me quite a turn. She was such a quiet, self-controlled woman. It was pitiful to see her.

“Whatever is it, my dear?” I cried. I put my arm round her and patted her. “Now, now, this won’t do at all . . . You mustn’t sit here crying all by yourself.”

She didn’t answer and I felt the dreadful shuddering sobs that were racking her.

“Don’t, my dear, don’t,” I said. “Take a hold on yourself. I’ll go and make you a cup of nice hot tea.”

She raised her head and said: “No, no, its all right, nurse. I’m being a fool.”

“What’s upset you, my dear?” I asked.

She didn’t answer at once, then she said: “It’s all too awful. . . .”

“Now don’t start thinking of it,” I told her. “What’s happened has happened and can’t be mended. It’s no use fretting.”

She sat up straight and began to pat her hair.

“I’m making rather a fool of myself,” she said in her gruff voice. “I’ve been clearing up and tidying the office. Thought it was best to do something. And then—it all came over me suddenly—”

“Yes, yes,” I said hastily. “I know. A nice strong cup of tea and a hot-water bottle in your bed is what you want,” I said.

And she had them too. I didn’t listen to any protests.

“Thank you, nurse,” she said when I’d settled her in bed, and she was sipping her tea and the hot-water bottle was in. “You’re a nice kind sensible woman. It’s not often I make such a fool of myself.”

“Oh, anybody’s liable to do that at a time like this,” I said. “What with one thing and another. The strain and the shock and the police here, there and everywhere. Why, I’m quite jumpy myself.”

She said slowly in rather a queer voice: “What you said in there is true. What’s happened has happened and can’t be mended. . . .”

She was silent for a minute or two and then said—rather oddly, I thought: “She was never a nice woman!”

Well, I didn’t argue the point. I’d always felt it was quite natural for Miss Johnson and Mrs. Leidner not to hit it off.

I wondered if, perhaps, Miss Johnson had secretly had a feeling that she was pleased Mrs. Leidner was dead, and had then been ashamed of herself for the thought.

I said: “Now you go to sleep and don’t worry about anything.”

I just picked up a few things and set the room to rights. Stockings over the back of the chair and coat and skirt on a hanger. There was a little ball of crumpled paper on the floor where it must have fallen out of a pocket.

I was just smoothing it out to see whether I could safely throw it away when she quite startled me.

“Give that to me!”

I did so—rather taken aback. She’d called out so peremptorily. She snatched it from me—fairly snatched it—and then held it in the candle flame till it was burnt to ashes.

As I say, I was startled—and I just stared at her.

I hadn’t had time to see what the paper was—she’d snatched it so quick. But funnily enough, as it burned it curled over towards me and I just saw that there were words written in ink on the paper.

It wasn’t till I was getting into bed that I realized why they’d looked sort of familiar to me.

It was the same handwriting as that of the anonymous letters.

Was that why Miss Johnson had given way to a fit of remorse? Had it been her all along who had written those anonymous letters?

Twenty

MISS JOHNSON, MRS. MERCADO, MR. REITER

I don’t mind confessing that the idea came as a complete shock to me. I’d never thought of associating Miss Johnson with the letters. Mrs. Mercado, perhaps. But Miss Johnson was a real lady, and so self-controlled and sensible.

But I reflected, remembering the conversation I had listened to that evening between M. Poirot and Dr. Reilly, that that might be just why.

If it were Miss Johnson who had written the letters it explained a lot, mind you. I didn’t think for a minute Miss Johnson had had anything to do with the murder. But I did see that her dislike of Mrs. Leidner might have made her succumb to the temptation of, well—putting the wind up her—to put it vulgarly.

She might have hoped to frighten away Mrs. Leidner from the dig.

But then Mrs. Leidner had been murdered and Miss Johnson had felt terrible pangs of remorse—first for her cruel trick and also, perhaps, because she realized that those letters were acting as a very good shield to the actual murderer. No wonder she had broken down so utterly. She was, I was sure, a decent soul at heart. And it explained, too, why she had caught so eagerly at my consolation of “what’s happened’s happened and can’t be mended.”

And then her cryptic remark—her vindication of herself—“she was never a nice woman!”

The question was, what was I to do about it?

I tossed and turned for a good while and in the end decided I'd let M. Poirot know about it at the first opportunity.

He came out next day, but I didn't get a chance of speaking to him what you might call privately.

We had just a minute alone together and before I could collect myself to know how to begin, he had come close to me and was whispering instructions in my ear.

"Me, I shall talk to Miss Johnson—and others, perhaps, in the living room. You have the key of Mrs. Leidner's room still?"

"Yes," I said.

"Très bien. Go there, shut the door behind you and give a cry—not a scream—a cry. You understand what I mean—it is alarm—surprise that I want you to express—not mad terror. As for the excuse if you are heard—I leave that to you—the stepped toe or what you will."

At that moment Miss Johnson came out into the courtyard and there was no time for more.

I understood well enough what M. Poirot was after. As soon as he and Miss Johnson had gone into the living room I went across to Mrs. Leidner's room and, unlocking the door, went in and pulled the door to behind me.

I can't say I didn't feel a bit of a fool standing up in an empty room and giving a yelp all for nothing at all. Besides, it wasn't so easy to know just how loud to do it. I gave a pretty loud "Oh" and then tried it a bit higher and a bit lower.

Then I came out again and prepared my excuse of a stepped (stubbed I suppose he meant!) toe.

But it soon appeared that no excuse would be needed. Poirot and Miss Johnson were talking together earnestly and there had clearly been no interruption.

"Well," I thought, "that settles that. Either Miss Johnson imagined that cry she heard or else it was something quite different."

I didn't like to go in and interrupt them. There was a deck chair on the porch so I sat down there. Their voices floated out to me.

"The position is delicate, you understand," Poirot was saying. "Dr. Leidner—obviously he adored his wife—"

"He worshipped her," said Miss Johnson.

"He tells me, naturally, how fond all his staff was of her! As for them, what can they say? Naturally they say the same thing. It is politeness. It is decency. It may also be the truth! But also it may not! And I am convinced, mademoiselle, that the key to this enigma lies in a complete understanding of Mrs. Leidner's character. If I could get the opinion—the honest opinion—of every member of the staff, I might, from the whole, build up a picture. Frankly, that is why I am here today. I knew Dr. Leidner would be in Hassanieh. That makes it easy for me to have an interview with each of you here in turn, and beg your help."

"That's all very well," began Miss Johnson and stopped.

"Do not make me the British clichés," Poirot begged. "Do not say it is not the cricket or the football, that to speak anything but well of the dead is not done—that—enfin—there is loyalty! Loyalty it is a pestilential thing in crime. Again and again it obscures the truth."

"I've no particular loyalty to Mrs. Leidner," said Miss Johnson dryly. There was indeed a sharp and acid tone in her voice. "Dr. Leidner's a different matter. And, after all, she was his wife."

"Precisely—precisely. I understand that you would not wish to speak against your chief's wife. But this is not a question of a testimonial. It is a question of sudden and mysterious death. If I am to believe that it is a martyred angel who has been killed it does not add to the easiness of my task."

“I certainly shouldn’t call her an angel,” said Miss Johnson and the acid tone was even more in evidence.

“Tell me your opinion, frankly, of Mrs. Leidner—as a woman.”

“H’m! To begin with, M. Poirot, I’ll give you this warning. I’m prejudiced. I am—we all were—devoted to Dr. Leidner. And, I suppose, when Mrs. Leidner came along, we were jealous. We resented the demands she made on his time and attention. The devotion he showed her irritated us. I’m being truthful, M. Poirot, and it isn’t very pleasant for me. I resented her presence here—yes, I did, though, of course, I tried never to show it. It made a difference to us, you see.”

“Us? You say us?”

“I mean Mr. Carey and myself. We’re the two old-timers, you see. And we didn’t much care for the new order of things. I suppose that’s natural, though perhaps it was rather petty of us. But it did make a difference.”

“What kind of a difference?”

“Oh! to everything. We used to have such a happy time. A good deal of fun, you know, and rather silly jokes, like people do who work together. Dr. Leidner was quite lighthearted—just like a boy.”

“And when Mrs. Leidner came she changed all that?”

“Well, I suppose it wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t so bad last year. And please believe, M. Poirot, that it wasn’t anything she did. She’s always been charming to me—quite charming. That’s why I’ve felt ashamed sometimes. It wasn’t her fault that little things she said and did seemed to rub me up the wrong way. Really, nobody could be nicer than she was.”

“But nevertheless things were changed this season? There was a different atmosphere.”

“Oh, entirely. Really. I don’t know what it was. Everything seemed to go wrong—not with the work—I mean with us—our tempers and our nerves.

All on edge. Almost the sort of feeling you get when there is a thunderstorm coming.”

“And you put that down to Mrs. Leidner’s influence?”

“Well, it was never like that before she came,” said Miss Johnson dryly. “Oh! I’m a cross-grained, complaining old dog. Conservative—liking things always the same. You really mustn’t take any notice of me, M. Poirot.”

“How would you describe to me Mrs. Leidner’s character and temperament?”

Miss Johnson hesitated for a moment. Then she said slowly: “Well, of course, she was temperamental. A lot of ups and downs. Nice to people one day and perhaps wouldn’t speak to them the next. She was very kind, I think. And very thoughtful for others. All the same you could see she had been thoroughly spoilt all her life. She took Dr. Leidner’s waiting on her hand and foot as perfectly natural. And I don’t think she ever really appreciated what a very remarkable—what a really great—man she had married. That used to annoy me sometimes. And of course she was terribly highly strung and nervous. The things she used to imagine and the states she used to get into! I was thankful when Dr. Leidner brought Nurse Leatheran here. It was too much for him having to cope both with his work and with his wife’s fears.”

“What is your own opinion of these anonymous letters she received?”

I had to do it. I leaned forward in my chair till I could just catch sight of Miss Johnson’s profile turned to Poirot in answer to his question.

She was looking perfectly cool and collected.

“I think someone in America had a spite against her and was trying to frighten or annoy her.”

“Pas plus sérieux que ça?”

"That's my opinion. She was a very handsome woman, you know, and might easily have had enemies. I think, those letters were written by some spiteful woman. Mrs. Leidner being of a nervous temperament took them seriously."

"She certainly did that," said Poirot. "But remember—the last of them arrived by hand."

"Well, I suppose that could have been managed if anyone had given their minds to it. Women will take a lot of trouble to gratify their spite, M. Poirot."

They will indeed, I thought to myself!

"Perhaps you are right, mademoiselle. As you say, Mrs. Leidner was handsome. By the way, you know Miss Reilly, the doctor's daughter?"

"Sheila Reilly? Yes, of course."

Poirot adopted a very confidential, gossipy tone.

"I have heard a rumour (naturally I do not like to ask the doctor) that there was a tendresse between her and one of the members of Dr. Leidner's staff. Is that so, do you know?"

Miss Johnson appeared rather amused.

"Oh, young Coleman and David Emmott were both inclined to dance attendance. I believe there was some rivalry as to who was to be her partner in some event at the club. Both the boys went in on Saturday evenings to the club as a general rule. But I don't know that there was anything in it on her side. She's the only young creature in the place, you know, and so she's by way of being the belle of it. She's got the Air Force dancing attendance on her as well."

"So you think there is nothing in it?"

"Well—I don't know." Miss Johnson became thoughtful. "It is true that she comes out this way fairly often. Up to the dig and all that. In fact, Mrs.

Leidner was chaffing David Emmott about it the other day—saying the girl was running after him. Which was rather a catty thing to say, I thought, and I don't think he liked it . . . Yes, she was here a good deal. I saw her riding towards the dig on that awful afternoon." She nodded her head towards the open window. "But neither David Emmott nor Coleman were on duty that afternoon. Richard Carey was in charge. Yes, perhaps she is attracted to one of the boys—but she's such a modern unsentimental young woman that one doesn't know quite how seriously to take her. I'm sure I don't know which of them it is. Bill's a nice boy, and not nearly such a fool as he pretends to be. David Emmott is a dear—and there's a lot to him. He is the deep, quiet kind."

Then she looked quizzically at Poirot and said: "But has this any bearing on the crime, M. Poirot?"

M. Poirot threw up his hands in a very French fashion.

"You make me blush, mademoiselle," he said. "You expose me as a mere gossip. But what will you, I am interested always in the love affairs of young people."

"Yes," said Miss Johnson with a little sigh. "It's nice when the course of true love runs smooth."

Poirot gave an answering sigh. I wondered if Miss Johnson was thinking of some love affair of her own when she was a girl. And I wondered if M. Poirot had a wife, and if he went on in the way you always hear foreigners do, with mistresses and things like that. He looked so comic I couldn't imagine it.

"Sheila Reilly has a lot of character," said Miss Johnson. "She's young and she's crude, but she's the right sort."

"I take your word for it, mademoiselle," said Poirot.

He got up and said, "Are there any other members of the staff in the house?"

“Marie Mercado is somewhere about. All the men are up on the dig today. I think they wanted to get out of the house. I don’t blame them. If you’d like to go up to the dig—”

She came out on the verandah and said, smiling to me: “Nurse Leatheran won’t mind taking you, I dare say.”

“Oh, certainly, Miss Johnson,” I said.

“And you’ll come back to lunch, won’t you, M. Poirot?”

“Enchanted, mademoiselle.”

Miss Johnson went back into the living room where she was engaged in cataloguing.

“Mrs. Mercado’s on the roof,” I said. “Do you want to see her first?”

“It would be as well, I think. Let us go up.”

As we went up the stairs I said: “I did what you told me. Did you hear anything?”

“Not a sound.”

“That will be a weight off Miss Johnson’s mind at any rate,” I said. “She’s been worrying that she might have done something about it.”

Mrs. Mercado was sitting on the parapet, her head bent down, and she was so deep in thought that she never heard us till Poirot halted opposite her and bade her good morning.

Then she looked up with a start.

She looked ill this morning, I thought, her small face pinched and wizened and great dark circles under her eyes.

“Encore moi,” said Poirot. “I come today with a special object.”

And he went on much in the same way as he had done to Miss Johnson, explaining how necessary it was that he should get a true picture of Mrs. Leidner.

Mrs. Mercado, however, wasn’t as honest as Miss Johnson had been. She burst into fulsome praise which, I was pretty sure, was quite far removed from her real feelings.

“Dear, dear Louise! It’s so hard to explain her to someone who didn’t know her. She was such an exotic creature. Quite different from anyone else. You felt that, I’m sure, nurse? A martyr to nerves, of course, and full of fancies, but one put up with things in her one wouldn’t from anyone else. And she was so sweet to us all, wasn’t she, nurse? And so humble about herself—I mean she didn’t know anything about archaeology, and she was so eager to learn. Always asking my husband about the chemical processes for treating the metal objects and helping Miss Johnson to mend pottery. Oh, we were all devoted to her.”

“Then it is not true, madame, what I have heard, that there was a certain tenseness—an uncomfortable atmosphere—here?”

Mrs. Mercado opened her opaque black eyes very wide.

“Oh! who can have been telling you that? Nurse? Dr. Leidner? I’m sure he would never notice anything, poor man.”

And she shot a thoroughly unfriendly glance at me.

Poirot smiled easily.

“I have my spies, madame,” he declared gaily. And just for a minute I saw her eyelids quiver and blink.

“Don’t you think,” asked Mrs. Mercado with an air of great sweetness, “that after an event of this kind, everyone always pretends a lot of things that never were? You know—tension, atmosphere, a ‘feeling that something was going to happen?’ I think people just make up these things afterwards.”

“There is a lot in what you say, madame,” said Poirot.

“And it really wasn’t true! We were a thoroughly happy family here.”

“That woman is one of the most utter liars I’ve ever known,” I said indignantly, when M. Poirot and I were clear of the house and walking along the path to the dig. “I’m sure she simply hated Mrs. Leidner really!”

“She is hardly the type to whom one would go for the truth,” Poirot agreed.

“Waste of time talking to her,” I snapped.

“Hardly that—hardly that. If a person tells you lies with her lips she is sometimes telling you truth with her eyes. What is she afraid of, little Madame Mercado? I saw fear in her eyes. Yes—decidedly she is afraid of something. It is very interesting.”

“I’ve got something to tell you, M. Poirot,” I said.

Then I told him all about my return the night before and my strong belief that Miss Johnson was the writer of the anonymous letters.

“So she’s a liar too!” I said. “The cool way she answered you this morning about these same letters!”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It was interesting, that. For she let out the fact she knew all about those letters. So far they have not been spoken of in the presence of the staff. Of course, it is quite possible that Dr. Leidner told her about them yesterday. They are old friends, he and she. But if he did not—well—then it is curious and interesting, is it not?”

My respect for him went up. It was clever the way he had tricked her into mentioning the letters.

“Are you going to tackle her about them?” I asked.

M. Poirot seemed quite shocked by the idea.

"No, no, indeed. Always it is unwise to parade one's knowledge. Until the last minute I keep everything here," he tapped his forehead. "At the right moment—I make the spring—like the panther—and, mon Dieu! the consternation!"

I couldn't help laughing to myself at little M. Poirot in the role of a panther.

We had just reached the dig. The first person we saw was Mr. Reiter, who was busy photographing some walling.

It's my opinion that the men who were digging just hacked out walls wherever they wanted them. That's what it looked like anyway. Mr. Carey explained to me that you could feel the difference at once with a pick, and he tried to show me—but I never saw. When the man said "Libn"—mud-brick—it was just ordinary dirt and mud as far as I could see.

Mr. Reiter finished his photographs and handed over the camera and the plate to his boy and told him to take them back to the house.

Poirot asked him one or two questions about exposures and film packs and so on which he answered very readily. He seemed pleased to be asked about his work.

He was just tendering his excuses for leaving us when Poirot plunged once more into his set speech. As a matter of fact it wasn't quite a set speech because he varied it a little each time to suit the person he was talking to. But I'm not going to write it all down every time. With sensible people like Miss Johnson he went straight to the point, and with some of the others he had to beat about the bush a bit more. But it came to the same in the end.

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean," said Mr. Reiter. "But indeed, I do not see that I can be much help to you. I am new here this season and I did not speak much with Mrs. Leidner. I regret, but indeed I can tell you nothing."

There was something a little stiff and foreign in the way he spoke, though, of course, he hadn't got any accent—except an American one, I mean.

“You can at least tell me whether you liked or disliked her?” said Poirot with a smile.

Mr. Reiter got quite red and stammered: “She was a charming person—most charming. And intellectual. She had a very fine brain—yes.”

“Bien! You liked her. And she liked you?”

Mr. Reiter got redder still.

“Oh, I—I don’t know that she noticed me much. And I was unfortunate once or twice. I was always unlucky when I tried to do anything for her. I’m afraid I annoyed her by my clumsiness. It was quite unintentional . . . I would have done anything—”

Poirot took pity on his flounderings.

“Perfectly—perfectly. Let us pass to another matter. Was it a happy atmosphere in the house?”

“Please?”

“Were you all happy together? Did you laugh and talk?”

“No—no, not exactly that. There was a little—stiffness.”

He paused, struggling with himself, and then said: “You see, I am not very good in company. I am clumsy. I am shy. Dr. Leidner always he has been most kind to me. But—it is stupid—I cannot overcome my shyness. I say always the wrong thing. I upset water jugs. I am unlucky.”

He really looked like a large awkward child.

“We all do these things when we are young,” said Poirot, smiling. “The poise, the savoir faire, it comes later.”

Then with a word of farewell we walked on.

He said: “That, ma soeur, is either an extremely simple young man or a very remarkable actor.”

I didn’t answer. I was caught up once more by the fantastic notion that one of these people was a dangerous and cold-blooded murderer. Somehow, on this beautiful still sunny morning it seemed impossible.

Twenty-one

MR. MERCADO, RICHARD CAREY

“They work in two separate places, I see,” said Poirot, halting.

Mr. Reiter had been doing his photography on an outlying portion of the main excavation. A little distance away from us a second swarm of men were coming and going with baskets.

“That’s what they call the deep cut,” I explained. “They don’t find much there, nothing but rubbishy broken pottery, but Dr. Leidner always says it’s very interesting, so I suppose it must be.”

“Let us go there.”

We walked together slowly, for the sun was hot.

Mr. Mercado was in command. We saw him below us talking to the foreman, an old man like a tortoise who wore a tweed coat over his long striped cotton gown.

It was a little difficult to get down to them as there was only a narrow path or stair and basketboys were going up and down it constantly, and they always seemed to be as blind as bats and never to think of getting out of the way.

As I followed Poirot down he said suddenly over his shoulder: “Is Mr. Mercado right-handed or left-handed?”

Now that was an extraordinary question if you like!

I thought a minute, then: “Right-handed,” I said decisively.

Poirot didn’t condescend to explain. He just went on and I followed him.

Mr. Mercado seemed rather pleased to see us.

His long melancholy face lit up.

M. Poirot pretended to an interest in archaeology that I’m sure he couldn’t have really felt, but Mr. Mercado responded at once.

He explained that they had already cut down through twelve levels of house occupation.

“We are now definitely in the fourth millennium,” he said with enthusiasm.

I always thought a millennium was in the future—the time when everything comes right.

Mr. Mercado pointed out belts of ashes (how his hand did shake! I wondered if he might possibly have malaria) and he explained how the pottery changed in character, and about burials—and how they had had one level almost entirely composed of infant burials—poor little things—and about flexed position and orientation, which seemed to mean the way the bones were lying.

And then suddenly, just as he was stooping down to pick up a kind of flint knife that was lying with some pots in a corner, he leapt into the air with a wild yell.

He spun round to find me and Poirot staring at him in astonishment.

He clapped his hand to his left arm.

“Something stung me—like a red-hot needle.”

Immediately Poirot was galvanized into energy.

“Quick, mon cher, let us see. Nurse Leatheran!”

I came forward.

He seized Mr. Mercado’s arm and deftly rolled back the sleeve of his khaki shirt to the shoulder.

“There,” said Mr. Mercado pointing.

About three inches below the shoulder there was a minute prick from which the blood was oozing.

“Curious,” said Poirot. He peered into the rolled-up sleeve. “I can see nothing. It was an ant, perhaps?”

“Better put on a little iodine,” I said.

I always carry an iodine pencil with me, and I whipped it out and applied it. But I was a little absentminded as I did so, for my attention had been caught by something quite different. Mr. Mercado’s arm, all the way up the forearm to the elbow, was marked all over by tiny punctures. I knew well enough what they were—the marks of a hypodermic needle.

Mr. Mercado rolled down his sleeve again and recommenced his explanations. Mr. Poirot listened, but didn’t try to bring the conversation round to the Leidners. In fact, he didn’t ask Mr. Mercado anything at all.

Presently we said goodbye to Mr. Mercado and climbed up the path again.

“It was neat that, did you not think so?” my companion asked.

“Neat?” I asked.

M. Poirot took something from behind the lapel of his coat and surveyed it affectionately. To my surprise I saw that it was a long sharp darning needle with a blob of sealing wax making it into a pin.

“M. Poirot,” I cried, “did you do that?”

“I was the stinging insect—yes. And very neatly I did it, too, do you not think so? You did not see me.”

That was true enough. I never saw him do it. And I'm sure Mr. Mercado hadn't suspected. He must have been quick as lightning.

"But, M. Poirot, why?" I asked.

He answered me by another question.

"Did you notice anything, sister?" he asked.

I nodded my head slowly.

"Hypodermic marks," I said.

"So now we know something about Mr. Mercado," said Poirot. "I suspected—but I did not know. It is always necessary to know."

"And you don't care how you set about it!" I thought, but didn't say.

Poirot suddenly clapped his hand to his pocket.

"Alas, I have dropped my handkerchief down there. I concealed the pin in it."

"I'll get it for you," I said and hurried back.

I'd got the feeling, you see, by this time, that M. Poirot and I were the doctor and nurse in charge of a case. At least, it was more like an operation and he was the surgeon. Perhaps I oughtn't to say so, but in a queer way I was beginning to enjoy myself.

I remember just after I'd finished my training, I went to a case in aprivate house and the need for an immediate operation arose, and the patient's husband was cranky about nursing homes. He just wouldn't hear of his wife being taken to one. Said it had to be done in the house.

Well, of course it was just splendid for me! Nobody else to have a look in! I was in charge of everything. Of course, I was terribly nervous—I thought of everything conceivable that doctor could want, but even then I was afraid I might have forgotten something. You never know with doctors. They ask for absolutely anything sometimes! But everything went splendidly! I had each thing ready as he asked for it, and he actually told me I'd done first-rate after it was over—and that's a thing most doctors wouldn't bother to do! The G.P. was very nice too. And I ran the whole thing myself!

The patient recovered, too, so everybody was happy.

Well, I felt rather the same now. In a way M. Poirot reminded me of that surgeon. He was a little man, too. Ugly little manwith a face like a monkey, but a wonderful surgeon. He knew instinctively just where to go. I've seen a lot of surgeons and I know what a lot of difference there is.

Gradually I'd been growing a kind of confidence in M. Poirot. I felt that he, too, knew exactly what he was doing. And I was getting to feel that it was my job to help him—as you might say—to have the forceps and the swabs and all handy just when he wanted them. That's why it seemed just as natural for me to run off and look for his handkerchief as it would have been to pick up a towel that a doctor had thrown on the floor.

When I'd found it and got back I couldn't see him at first. But at last I caught sight of him. He was sitting a little way from the mound talking to Mr. Carey. Mr. Carey's boy was standing near with that great big rod thing with metres marked on it, but just at that moment he said something to the boy and the boy took it away. It seemed he had finished with it for the time being.

I'd like to get this next bit quite clear. You see, I wasn't quite sure what M. Poirot did or didn't want me to do. He might, I mean, have sent me back for that handkerchief on purpose. To get me out of the way.

It was just like an operation over again. You've got to be careful to hand the doctor just what he wants and not what he doesn't want. I mean, suppose you gave him the artery forceps at the wrong moment, and were late with them at the right moment! Thank goodness I know my work in the theatre well enough. I'm not likely to make mistakes there. But in this business I was really the rawest of raw little probationers. And so I had to be particularly careful not to make any silly mistakes.

Of course, I didn’t for one moment imagine that M. Poirot didn’t want me to hear what he and Mr. Carey were saying. But he might have thought he’d get Mr. Carey to talk better if I wasn’t there.

Now I don’t want anybody to get it into their heads that I’m the kind of woman who goes about eavesdropping on private conversations. I wouldn’t do such a thing. Not for a moment. Not however much I wanted to.

And what I mean is if it had been a private conversation I wouldn’t for a moment have done what, as a matter of fact, I actually did do.

As I looked at it I was in a privileged position. After all, you hear many a thing when a patient’s coming round after an anaesthetic. The patient wouldn’t want you to hear it—and usually has no idea you have heard it—but the fact remains you do hear it. I just took it that Mr. Carey was the patient. He’d be none the worse for what he didn’t know about. And if you think that I was just curious, well, I’ll admit that I was curious. I didn’t want to miss anything I could help.

All this is just leading up to the fact that I turned aside and went by a roundabout way up behind the big dump until I was a foot from where they were, but concealed from them by the corner of the dump. And if anyone says it was dishonourable I just beg to disagree. Nothing ought to be hidden from the nurse in charge of the case, though, of course, it’s for the doctor to say what shall be done.

I don’t know, of course, what M. Poirot’s line of approach had been, but by the time I’d got there he was aiming straight for the bull’s eye, so to speak.

“Nobody appreciates Dr. Leidner’s devotion to his wife more than I do,” he was saying. “But it is often the case that one learns more about a person from their enemies than from their friends.”

“You suggest that their faults are more important than their virtues?” said Mr. Carey. His tone was dry and ironic.

“Undoubtedly—when it comes to murder. It seems odd that as far as I know nobody has yet been murdered for having too perfect a character! And yet perfection is undoubtedly an irritating thing."

"I'm afraid I'm hardly the right person to help you," said Mr. Carey. "To be perfectly honest, Mrs. Leidner and I didn't hit it off particularly well. I don't mean that we were in any sense of the word enemies, but we were not exactly friends. Mrs. Leidner was, perhaps, a shade jealous of my old friendship with her husband. I, for my part, although I admired her very much and thought she was an extremely attractive woman, was just a shade resentful of her influence over Leidner. As a result we were quite polite to each other, but not intimate."

"Admirably explained," said Poirot.

I could just see their heads, and I saw Mr. Carey's turn sharply as though something in M. Poirot's detached tone struck him disagreeably.

M. Poirot went on: "Was not Dr. Leidner distressed that you and his wife did not get on together better?"

Carey hesitated a minute before saying: "Really—I'm not sure. He never said anything. I always hoped he didn't notice it. He was very wrapped up in his work, you know."

"So the truth, according to you, is that you did not really like Mrs. Leidner?"

Carey shrugged his shoulders.

"I should probably have liked her very much if she hadn't been Leidner's wife."

He laughed as though amused by his own statement.

Poirot was arranging a little heap of broken potsherds. He said in a dreamy, faraway voice: "I talked to Miss Johnson this morning. She admitted that she was prejudiced against Mrs. Leidner and did not like her very much, although she hastened to add that Mrs. Leidner had always been charming to her."

“All quite true, I should say,” said Carey.

“So I believed. Then I had a conversation with Mrs. Mercado. She told me at great length how devoted she had been to Mrs. Leidner and how much she had admired her.”

Carey made no answer to this, and after waiting a minute or two Poirot went on: “That—I did not believe! Then I come to you and that which you tell me—well, again—I do not believe. . . .”

Carey stiffened. I could hear the anger—repressed anger—in his voice.

“I really cannot help your beliefs—or your disbeliefs, M. Poirot. You’ve heard the truth and you can take it or leave it as far as I am concerned.”

Poirot did not grow angry. Instead he sounded particularly meek and depressed.

“Is it my fault what I do—or do not believe? I have a sensitive ear, you know. And then—there are always plenty of stories going about—rumours floating in the air. One listens—and perhaps—one learns something! Yes, there are stories. . . .”

Carey sprang to his feet. I could see clearly a little pulse that beat in his temple. He looked simply splendid! So lean and so brown—and that wonderful jaw, hard and square. I don’t wonder women fell for that man.

“What stories?” he asked savagely.

Poirot looked sideways at him.

“Perhaps you can guess. The usual sort of story—about you and Mrs. Leidner.”

“What foul minds people have!”

“N’est-ce pas? They are like dogs. However deep you bury an unpleasantness a dog will always root it up again.”

“And you believe these stories?”

“I am willing to be convinced—of the truth,” said Poirot gravely.

“I doubt if you’d know the truth if you heard it,” Carey laughed rudely.

“Try me and see,” said Poirot, watching him.

“I will then! You shall have the truth! I hated Louise Leidner—there’s the truth for you! I hated her like hell!”

Twenty-two

DAVID EMMOTT, FATHER LAVIGNY AND A DISCOVERY

Turning abruptly away, Carey strode off with long, angry strides.

Poirot sat looking after him and presently he murmured: “Yes—I see. . . .”

Without turning his head he said in a slightly louder voice: “Do not come round the corner for a minute, nurse. In case he turns his head. Now it is all right. You have my handkerchief? Many thanks. You are most amiable.”

He didn’t say anything at all about my having been listening—and how he knew I was listening I can’t think. He’d never once looked in that direction. I was rather relieved he didn’t say anything. I mean, I felt all right with myself about it, but it might have been a little awkward explaining to him. So it was a good thing he didn’t seem to want explanations.

“Do you think he did hate her, M. Poirot?” I asked.

Nodding his head slowly with a curious expression on his face, Poirot answered.

“Yes—I think he did.”

Then he got up briskly and began to walk to where the men were working on the top of the mound. I followed him. We couldn’t see anyone but Arabs at first, but we finally found Mr. Emmott lying face downwards blowing dust off a skeleton that had just been uncovered.

He gave his pleasant, grave smile when he saw us.

“Have you come to see round?” he asked. “I’ll be free in a minute.”

He sat up, took his knife and began daintily cutting the earth away from round the bones, stopping every now and then to use either a bellows or his own breath. A very insanitary proceeding the latter, I thought.

“You’ll get all sorts of nasty germs in your mouth, Mr. Emmott,” I protested.

“Nasty germs are my daily diet, nurse,” he said gravely. “Germs can’t do anything to an archaeologist—they just get naturally discouraged trying.”

He scraped a little more away round the thigh bone. Then he spoke to the foreman at his side, directing him exactly what he wanted done.

“There,” he said, rising to his feet. “That’s ready for Reiter to photograph after lunch. Rather nice stuff she had in with her.”

He showed us a little verdigris copper bowl and some pins. And a lot of gold and blue things that had been her necklace of beads.

The bones and all the objects were brushed and cleaned with a knife and kept in position ready to be photographed.

“Who is she?” asked Poirot.

“First millennium. A lady of some consequence perhaps. Skull looks rather odd—I must get Mercado to look at it. It suggests death by foul play.”

“A Mrs. Leidner of two thousand odd years ago?” said Poirot.

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Emmott.

Bill Coleman was doing something with a pick to a wall face.

David Emmott called something to him which I didn’t catch and then started showing M. Poirot round.

When the short explanatory tour was over, Emmott looked at his watch.

“We knock off in ten minutes,” he said. “Shall we walk back to the house?”

“That will suit me excellently,” said Poirot.

We walked slowly along the well-worn path.

“I expect you are all glad to get back to work again,” said Poirot.

Emmott replied gravely: “Yes, it’s much the best thing. It’s not been any too easy loafing about the house and making conversation.”

“Knowing all the time that one of you was a murderer.”

Emmott did not answer. He made no gesture of dissent. I knew now that he had had a suspicion of the truth from the very first when he had questioned the houseboys.

After a few minutes he asked quietly: “Are you getting anywhere, M. Poirot?”

Poirot said gravely: “Will you help me to get somewhere?”

“Why, naturally.”

Watching him closely, Poirot said: “The hub of the case is Mrs. Leidner. I want to know about Mrs. Leidner.”

David Emmott said slowly: “What do you mean by know about her?”

“I do not mean where she came from and what her maiden name was. I do not mean the shape of her face and the colour of her eyes. I mean her—herself.”

“You think that counts in the case?”

“I am quite sure of it.”

Emmott was silent for a moment or two, then he said: “Maybe you’re right.”

“And that is where you can help me. You can tell me what sort of a woman she was.”

“Can I? I’ve often wondered about it myself.”

“Didn’t you make up your mind on the subject?”

“I think I did in the end.”

“Eh bien?”

But Mr. Emmott was silent for some minutes, then he said: “What did nurse think of her? Women are said to sum up other women quickly enough, and a nurse has a wide experience of types.”

Poirot didn’t give me any chance of speaking even if I had wanted to. He said quickly: “What I want to know is what a man thought of her?”

Emmott smiled a little.

“I expect they’d all be much the same.” He paused and said, “She wasn’t young, but I think she was about the most beautiful woman I’ve ever come across.”

“That’s hardly an answer, Mr. Emmott.”

“It’s not so far off one, M. Poirot.”

He was silent a minute or two and then he went on: “There used to be a fairy story I read when I was a kid. A Northern fairy tale about the Snow Queen and Little Kay. I guess Mrs. Leidner was rather like that—always taking Little Kay for a ride.”

“Ah yes, a tale of Hans Andersen, is it not? And there was a girl in it. Little Gerda, was that her name?”

“Maybe. I don’t remember much of it.”

“Can’t you go a little further, Mr. Emmott?”

David Emmott shook his head.

“I don’t even know if I’ve summed her up correctly. She wasn’t easy to read. She’d do a devilish thing one day, and a really fine one the next. But I think you’re about right when you say that she’s the hub of the case. That’s what she always wanted to be—at the centre of things. And she liked to get at other people—I mean, she wasn’t just satisfied with being passed the toast and the peanut butter, she wanted you to turn your mind and soul inside out for her to look at it.”

“And if one did not give her that satisfaction?” asked Poirot.

“Then she could turn ugly!”

I saw his lips close resolutely and his jaw set.

“I suppose, Mr. Emmott, you would not care to express a plain unofficial opinion as to who murdered her?”

“I don’t know,” said Emmott. “I really haven’t the slightest idea. I rather think that, if I’d been Carl—Carl Reiter, I mean—I would have had a shot at murdering her. She was a pretty fair devil to him. But, of course, he asks for it by being so darned sensitive. Just invites you to give him a kick in the pants.”

“And did Mrs. Leidner give him—a kick in the pants?” inquired Poirot.

Emmott gave a sudden grin.

“No. Pretty little jabs with an embroidery needle—that was her method. He was irritating, of course. Just like some blubbering, poor-spirited kid. But a needle’s a painful weapon.”

I stole a glance at Poirot and thought I detected a slight quiver of his lips.

“But you don’t really believe that Carl Reiter killed her?” he asked.

“No. I don’t believe you’d kill a woman because she persistently made you look a fool at every meal.”

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

Of course, Mr. Emmott made Mrs. Leidner sound quite inhuman. There was something to be said on the other side too.

There had been something terribly irritating about Mr. Reiter's attitude. He jumped when she spoke to him, and did idiotic things like passing her the marmalade again and again when he knew she never ate it. I'd have felt inclined to snap at him a bit myself.

Men don't understand how their mannerisms can get on women's nerves so that you feel you just have to snap.

I thought I'd just mention that to Mr. Poirot some time.

We had arrived back now and Mr. Emmott offered Poirot a wash and took him into his room.

I hurried across the courtyard to mine.

I came out again about the same time they did and we were all making for the dining room when Father Lavigny appeared in the doorway of his room and invited Poirot in.

Mr. Emmott came on round and he and I went into the dining room together. Miss Johnson and Mrs. Mercado were there already, and after a few minutes Mr. Mercado, Mr. Reiter and Bill Coleman joined us.

We were just sitting down and Mercado had told the Arab boy to tell Father Lavigny lunch was ready when we were all startled by a faint, muffled cry.

I suppose our nerves weren't very good yet, for we all jumped, and Miss Johnson got quite pale and said: “What was that? What's happened?”

Mrs. Mercado stared at her and said: “My dear, what is the matter with you? It's some noise outside in the fields.”

But at that minute Poirot and Father Lavigny came in.

“We thought someone was hurt,” Miss Johnson said.

“A thousand pardons, mademoiselle,” cried Poirot. “The fault is mine. Father Lavigny, he explains to me some tablets, and I take one to the window to see better—and, ma foi, not looking where I was going, I steb the toe, and the pain is sharp for the moment and I cry out.”

“We thought it was another murder,” said Mrs. Mercado, laughing.

“Marie!” said her husband.

His tone was reproachful and she flushed and bit her lip.

Miss Johnson hastily turned the conversation to the dig and what objects of interest had turned up that morning. Conversation all through lunch was sternly archaeological.

I think we all felt it was the safest thing.

After we had had coffee we adjourned to the living room. Then the men, with the exception of Father Lavigny, went off to the dig again.

Father Lavigny took Poirot through into the antika room and I went with them. I was getting to know the things pretty well by now and I felt a thrill of pride—almost as though it were my own property—when Father Lavigny took down the gold cup and I heard Poirot’s exclamation of admiration and pleasure.

“How beautiful! What a work of art!”

Father Lavigny agreed eagerly and began to point out its beauties with real enthusiasm and knowledge.

“No wax on it today,” I said.

“Wax?” Poirot stared at me.

“Wax?” So did Father Lavigny.

I explained my remark.

“Ah, je comprends,” said Father Lavigny. “Yes, yes, candle grease.”

That led direct to the subject of the midnight visitor. Forgetting my presence they both dropped into French, and I left them together and went back into the living room.

Mrs. Mercado was darning her husband’s socks and Miss Johnson was reading a book. Rather an unusual thing for her. She usually seemed to have something to work at.

After a while Father Lavigny and Poirot came out, and the former excused himself on the score of work. Poirot sat down with us.

“A most interesting man,” he said, and asked how much work there had been for Father Lavigny to do so far.

Miss Johnson explained that tablets had been scarce and that there had been very few inscribed bricks or cylinder seals. Father Lavigny, however, had done his share of work on the dig and was picking up colloquial Arabic very fast.

That led the talk to cylinder seals, and presently Miss Johnson fetched from a cupboard a sheet of impressions made by rolling them out on plasticine.

I realized as we bent over them, admiring the spirited designs, that these must be what she had been working at on that fatal afternoon.

As we talked I noticed that Poirot was rolling and kneading a little ball of plasticine between his fingers.

“You use a lot of plasticine, mademoiselle?” he asked.

“A fair amount. We seem to have got through a lot already this year—though I can’t imagine how. But half our supply seems to have gone.”

“Where is it kept, mademoiselle?”

“Here—in this cupboard.”

As she replaced the sheet of impressions she showed him the shelf with rolls of plasticine, Durofix, photographic paste and other stationery supplies.

Poirot stooped down.

“And this—what is this, mademoiselle?”

He had slipped his hand right to the back and had brought out a curious crumpled object.

As he straightened it out we could see that it was a kind of mask, with eyes and mouth crudely painted on it in Indian ink and the whole thing roughly smeared with plasticine.

“How perfectly extraordinary!” cried Miss Johnson. “I’ve never seen it before. How did it get there? And what is it?”

“As to how it got there, well, one hiding-place is as good as another, and I presume that this cupboard would not have been turned out till the end of the season. As to what it is—that, too, I think, is not difficult to say. We have here the face that Mrs. Leidner described. The ghostly face seen in the semi-dusk outside her window—without body attached.”

Mrs. Mercado gave a little shriek.

Miss Johnson was white to the lips. She murmured: “Then it was not fancy. It was a trick—a wicked trick! But who played it?”

“Yes,” cried Mrs. Mercado. “Who could have done such a wicked, wicked thing?”

Poirot did not attempt a reply. His face was very grim as he went into the next room, returned with an empty cardboard box in his hand and put the crumpled mask into it.

“The police must see this,” he explained.

"It's horrible," said Miss Johnson in a low voice. "Horrible!"

"Do you think everything's hidden here somewhere?" cried Mrs. Mercado shrilly. "Do you think perhaps the weapon—the club she was killed with—all covered with blood still, perhaps . . . Oh! I'm frightened—I'm frightened. . . ."

Miss Johnson gripped her by the shoulder.

"Be quiet," she said fiercely. "Here's Dr. Leidner. We mustn't upset him."

Indeed, at that very moment the car had driven into the courtyard. Dr. Leidner got out of it and came straight across and in at the living-room door. His face was set in lines of fatigue and he looked twice the age he had three days ago.

He said in a quiet voice: "The funeral will be at eleven o'clock tomorrow. Major Deane will read the service."

Mrs. Mercado faltered something, then slipped out of the room.

Dr. Leidner said to Miss Johnson: "You'll come, Anne?"

And she answered: "Of course, my dear, we'll all come. Naturally."

She didn't say anything else, but her face must have expressed what her tongue was powerless to do, for his face lightened up with affection and a momentary ease.

"Dear Anne," he said. "You are such a wonderful comfort and help to me. My dear old friend."

He laid his hand on her arm and I saw the red colour creep up in her face as she muttered, gruff as ever: "That's all right."

But I just caught a glimpse of her expression and knew that, for one short moment, Anne Johnson was a perfectly happy woman.

And another idea flashed across my mind. Perhaps soon, in the natural course of things, turning to his old friend for sympathy, a new and happy state of things might come about.

Not that I'm really a matchmaker, and of course it was indecent to think of such a thing before the funeral even. But after all, it would be a happy solution. He was very fond of her, and there was no doubt she was absolutely devoted to him and would be perfectly happy devoting the rest of her life to him. That is, if she could bear to hear Louise's perfections sung all the time. But women can put up with a lot when they've got what they want.

Dr. Leidner then greeted Poirot, asking him if he had made any progress.

Miss Johnson was standing behind Dr. Leidner and she looked hard at the box in Poirot's hand and shook her head, and I realized that she was pleading with Poirot not to tell him about the mask. She felt, I was sure, that he had enough to bear for one day.

Poirot fell in with her wish.

"These things march slowly, monsieur," he said.

Then, after a few desultory words, he took his leave.

I accompanied him out to his car.

There were half a dozen things I wanted to ask him, but somehow, when he turned and looked at me, I didn't ask anything after all. I'd as soon have asked a surgeon if he thought he'd made a good job of an operation. I just stood meekly waiting for instructions.

Rather to my surprise he said: "Take care of yourself, my child."

And then he added: "I wonder if it is well for you to remain here?"

"I must speak to Dr. Leidner about leaving," I said. "But I thought I'd wait until after the funeral."

He nodded in approval.

“In the meantime,” he said, “do not try to find out too much. You understand, I do not want you to be clever!” And he added with a smile, “It is for you to hold the swabs and for me to do the operation.”

Wasn’t it funny, his actually saying that?

Then he said quite irrelevantly: “An interesting man, that Father Lavigny.”

“A monk being an archaeologist seems odd to me,” I said.

“Ah, yes, you are a Protestant. Me, I am a good Catholic. I know something of priests and monks.”

He frowned, seemed to hesitate, then said: “Remember, he is quite clever enough to turn you inside out if he likes.”

If he was warning me against gossiping I felt that I didn’t need any warning!

It annoyed me, and though I didn’t like to ask him any of the things I really wanted to know, I didn’t see why I shouldn’t at any rate say one thing.

“You’ll excuse me, M. Poirot,” I said. “But it’s ‘stubbed your toe,’ not stepped or stebbed.”

“Ah! Thank you, ma soeur.”

“Don’t mention it. But it’s just as well to get a phrase right.”

“I will remember,” he said—quite meekly for him.

And he got in the car and was driven away, and I went slowly back across the courtyard wondering about a lot of things.

About the hypodermic marks on Mr. Mercado’s arm, and what drug it was he took. And about that horrid yellow smeared mask. And how odd it was that Poirot and Miss Johnson hadn’t heard my cry in the living room that morning, whereas we had all heard Poirot perfectly well in the dining room at lunch-time—and yet Father Lavigny’s room and Mrs. Leidner’s were just the same distance from the living room and the dining room respectively.

And then I felt rather pleased that I’d taught Doctor Poirot one English phrase correctly!

Even if he was a great detective he’d realize he didn’t know everything!

Twenty-three

I GO PSYCHIC

The funeral was, I thought, a very affecting affair. As well as ourselves, all the English people in Hassanieh attended it. Even Sheila Reilly was there, looking quiet and subdued in a dark coat and skirt. I hoped that she was feeling a little remorseful for all the unkind things she had said.

When we got back to the house I followed Dr. Leidner into the office and broached the subject of my departure. He was very nice about it, thanked me for what I had done (Done! I had been worse than useless) and insisted on my accepting an extra week's salary.

I protested because really I felt I'd done nothing to earn it.

"Indeed, Dr. Leidner, I'd rather not have any salary at all. If you'll just refund me my travelling expenses, that's all I want."

But he wouldn't hear of that.

"You see," I said, "I don't feel I deserve it, Dr. Leidner. I mean, I've—well, I've failed. She—my coming didn't save her."

"Now don't get that idea into your head, nurse," he said earnestly. "After all, I didn't engage you as a female detective. I never dreamt my wife's life was in danger. I was convinced it was all nerves and that she'd worked herself up into a rather curious mental state. You did all anyone could do. She liked and trusted you. And I think in her last days she felt happier and safer because of your being here. There's nothing for you to reproach yourself with."

His voice quivered a little and I knew what he was thinking. He was the one to blame for not having taken Mrs. Leidner's fears seriously.

“Dr. Leidner,” I said curiously. “Have you ever come to any conclusion about those anonymous letters?”

He said with a sigh: “I don’t know what to believe. Has M. Poirot come to any definite conclusion?”

“He hadn’t yesterday,” I said, steering rather neatly, I thought, between truth and fiction. After all, he hadn’t until I told him about Miss Johnson.

It was on my mind that I’d like to give Dr. Leidner a hint and see if he reacted. In the pleasure of seeing him and Miss Johnson together the day before, and his affection and reliance on her, I’d forgotten all about the letters. Even now I felt it was perhaps rather mean of me to bring it up. Even if she had written them, she had had a bad time after Mrs. Leidner’s death. Yet I did want to see whether that particular possibility had ever entered Dr. Leidner’s head.

“Anonymous letters are usually the work of a woman,” I said. I wanted to see how he’d take it.

“I suppose they are,” he said with a sigh. “But you seem to forget, nurse, that these may be genuine. They may actually be written by Frederick Bosner.”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” I said. “But I can’t believe somehow that that’s the real explanation.”

“I do,” he said. “It’s all nonsense, his being one of the expedition staff. That is just an ingenious theory of M. Poirot’s. I believe that the truth is much simpler. The man is a madman, of course. He’s been hanging round the place—perhaps in disguise of some kind. And somehow or other he got in on that fatal afternoon. The servants may be lying—they may have been bribed.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” I said doubtfully.

Dr. Leidner went on with a trace of irritability.

"It is all very well for M. Poirot to suspect the members of my expedition. I am perfectly certain none of them have anything to do with it! I have worked with them. I know them!"

He stopped suddenly, then he said: "Is that your experience, nurse? That anonymous letters are usually written by women?"

"It isn't always the case," I said. "But there's a certain type of feminine spitefulness that finds relief that way."

"I suppose you are thinking of Mrs. Mercado?" he said.

Then he shook his head.

"Even if she were malicious enough to wish to hurt Louise she would hardly have the necessary knowledge," he said.

I remembered the earlier letters in the attaché case.

If Mrs. Leidner had left that unlocked and Mrs. Mercado had been alone in the house one day pottering about, she might easily have found them and read them. Men never seem to think of the simplest possibilities!

"And apart from her there is only Miss Johnson," I said, watching him.

"That would be quite ridiculous!"

The little smile with which he said it was quite conclusive. The idea of Miss Johnson being the author of the letters had never entered his head! I hesitated just for a minute—but I didn't say anything. One doesn't like giving away a fellow woman, and besides, I had been a witness of Miss Johnson's genuine and moving remorse. What was done was done. Why expose Dr. Leidner to a fresh disillusion on top of all his other troubles?

It was arranged that I should leave on the following day, and I had arranged through Dr. Reilly to stay for a day or two with the matron of the hospital whilst I made arrangements for returning to England either via Baghdad or direct via Nissibin by car and train.

Dr. Leidner was kind enough to say that he would like me to choose a memento from amongst his wife’s things.

“Oh, no, really, Dr. Leidner,” I said. “I couldn’t. It’s much too kind of you.”

He insisted.

“But I should like you to have something. And Louise, I am sure, would have wished it.”

Then he went on to suggest that I should have her tortoiseshell toilet set!

“Oh, no, Dr. Leidner! Why, that’s a most expensive set. I couldn’t, really.”

“She had no sisters, you know—no one who wants these things. There is no one else to have them.”

I could quite imagine that he wouldn’t want them to fall into Mrs. Mercado’s greedy little hands. And I didn’t think he’d want to offer them to Miss Johnson.

He went on kindly: “You just think it over. By the way, here is the key of Louise’s jewel case. Perhaps you will find something there you would rather have. And I should be very grateful if you would pack up—all her clothes. I daresay Reilly can find a use for them amongst some of the poor Christian families in Hassanieh.”

I was very glad to be able to do that for him, and I expressed my willingness.

I set about it at once.

Mrs. Leidner had only had a very simple wardrobe with her and it was soon sorted and packed up into a couple of suitcases. All her papers had been in the small attaché case. The jewel case contained a few simple trinkets—a pearl ring, a diamond brooch, a small string of pearls, and one or two plain gold bar brooches of the safety pin type, and a string of large amber beads.

Naturally I wasn't going to take the pearls or the diamonds, but I hesitated a bit between the amber beads and the toilet set. In the end, however, I didn't see why I shouldn't take the latter. It was a kindly thought on Dr. Leidner's part, and I was sure there wasn't any patronage about it. I'd take it in the spirit it had been offered, without any false pride. After all, I had been fond of her.

Well, that was all done and finished with. The suitcases packed, the jewel case locked up again and put separate to give to Dr. Leidner with the photograph of Mrs. Leidner's father and one or two other personal little odds and ends.

The room looked bare and forlorn emptied of all its accoutrements, when I'd finished. There was nothing more for me to do—and yet somehow or other I shrank from leaving the room. It seemed as though there was something still to do there—something I ought to see—or something I ought to have known. I'm not superstitious, but the idea did pop into my head that perhaps Mrs. Leidner's spirit was hanging about the room and trying to get in touch with me.

I remember once at the hospital some of us girls got a planchette and really it wrote some very remarkable things.

Perhaps, although I'd never thought of such a thing, I might be mediumistic.

As I say, one gets all worked up to imagine all sorts of foolishness sometimes.

I prowled round the room uneasily, touching this and that. But, of course, there wasn't anything in the room but bare furniture. There was nothing slipped behind drawers or tucked away. I couldn't hope for anything of that kind.

In the end (it sounds rather batty, but as I say, one gets worked up) I did rather a queer thing.

I went and lay down in the bed and closed my eyes.

I deliberately tried to forget who and what I was. I tried to think myself back to that fatal afternoon. I was Mrs. Leidner lying here resting, peaceful and unsuspicious.

It’s extraordinary how you can work yourself up.

I’m a perfectly normal matter-of-fact individual—not the least bit spooky, but I tell you that after I’d lain there about five minutes I began to feel spooky.

I didn’t try to resist. I deliberately encouraged the feeling.

I said to myself: “I’m Mrs. Leidner. I’m Mrs. Leidner. I’m lying here—half asleep. Presently—very soon now—the door’s going to open.”

I kept on saying that—as though I were hypnotizing myself.

“It’s just about half past one . . . it’s just about the time . . . The door is going to open . . . the door is going to open . . . I shall see who comes in. . . .”

I kept my eyes glued on that door. Presently it was going to open. I should see it open. And I should see the person who opened it.

I must have been a little overwrought that afternoon to imagine I could solve the mystery that way.

But I did believe it. A sort of chill passed down my back and settled in my legs. They felt numb—paralysed.

“You’re going into a trance,” I said. “And in that trance you’ll see . . .”

And once again I repeated monotonously again and again:

“The door is going to open—the door is going to open. . . .”

The cold numbed feeling grew more intense.

And then, slowly, I saw the door just beginning to open.

It was horrible.

I’ve never known anything so horrible before or since.

I was paralysed—chilled through and through. I couldn’t move. For the life of me I couldn’t have moved.

And I was terrified. Sick and blind and dumb with terror.

That slowly opening door.

So noiseless.

In a minute I should see. . . .

Slowly—slowly—wider and wider.

Bill Coleman came quietly in.

He must have had the shock of his life!

I bounded off the bed with a scream of terror and hurled myself across the room.

He stood stock-still, his blunt pink face pinker and his mouth opened wide with surprise.

“Hallo-allo-allo,” he said. “What’s up, nurse?”

I came back to reality with a crash.

“Goodness, Mr. Coleman,” I said. “How you startled me!”

“Sorry,” he said with a momentary grin.

I saw then that he was holding a little bunch of scarlet ranunculus in his hand. They were pretty little flowers and they grew wild on the sides of the Tell. Mrs. Leidner had been fond of them.

He blushed and got rather red as he said: “One can’t get any flowers or things in Hassanieh. Seemed rather rotten not to have any flowers for the grave. I thought I’d just nip in here and put a little posy in that little pot thing she always had flowers in on her table. Sort of show she wasn’t forgotten—eh? A bit asinine, I know, but—well—I mean to say.”

I thought it was very nice of him. He was all pink with embarrassment like Englishmen are when they’ve done anything sentimental. I thought it was a very sweet thought.

“Why, I think that’s a very nice idea, Mr. Coleman,” I said.

And I picked up the little pot and went and got some water in it and we put the flowers in.

I really thought much more of Mr. Coleman for this idea of his. It showed he had a heart and nice feelings about things.

He didn’t ask me again what made me let out such a squeal and I’m thankful he didn’t. I should have felt a fool explaining.

“Stick to common sense in future, woman,” I said to myself as I settled my cuffs and smoothed my apron. “You’re not cut out for this psychic stuff.”

I bustled about doing my own packing and kept myself busy for the rest of the day.

Father Lavigny was kind enough to express great distress at my leaving. He said my cheerfulness and common sense had been such a help to everybody. Common sense! I’m glad he didn’t know about my idiotic behaviour in Mrs. Leidner’s room.

“We have not seen M. Poirot today,” he remarked.

I told him that Poirot had said he was going to be busy all day sending off telegrams.

Father Lavigny raised his eyebrows.

“Telegrams? To America?”

“I suppose so. He said, ‘All over the world!’ but I think that was rather a foreign exaggeration.”

And then I got rather red, remembering that Father Lavigny was a foreigner himself.

He didn’t seem offended though, just laughed quite pleasantly and asked me if there were any news of the man with the squint.

I said I didn’t know but I hadn’t heard of any.

Father Lavigny asked me again about the time Mrs. Leidner and I had noticed the man and how he had seemed to be standing on tiptoe and peering through the window.

“It seems clear the man had some overwhelming interest in Mrs. Leidner,” he said thoughtfully. “I have wondered since whether the man could possibly have been a European got up to look like an Iraqi?”

That was a new idea to me and I considered it carefully. I had taken it for granted that the man was a native, but of course when I came to think of it, I was really going by the cut of his clothes and the yellowness of his skin.

Father Lavigny declared his intention of going round outside the house to the place where Mrs. Leidner and I had seen the man standing.

“You never know, he might have dropped something. In the detective stories the criminal always does.”

“I expect in real life criminals are more careful,” I said.

I fetched some socks I had just finished darning and put them on the table in the living room for the men to sort out when they came in, and then, as there was nothing much more to do, I went up on the roof.

Miss Johnson was standing there but she didn’t hear me. I got right up to her before she noticed me.

But long before that I’d seen that there was something very wrong.

She was standing in the middle of the roof staring straight in front of her, and there was the most awful look on her face. As though she’d seen something she couldn’t possibly believe.

It gave me quite a shock.

Mind you, I’d seen her upset the other evening, but this was quite different.

“My dear,” I said, hurrying to her, “whatever’s the matter?”

She turned her head at that and stood looking at me—almost as if she didn’t see me.

“What is it?” I persisted.

She made a queer sort of grimace—as though she were trying to swallow but her throat were too dry. She said hoarsely: “I’ve just seen something.”

“What have you seen? Tell me. Whatever can it be? You look all in.”

She gave an effort to pull herself together, but she still looked pretty dreadful.

She said, still in that same dreadful choked voice: “I’ve seen how someone could come in from outside—and no one would ever guess.”

I followed the direction of her eyes but I couldn’t see anything.

Mr. Reiter was standing in the door of the photographic room and Father Lavigny was just crossing the courtyard—but there was nothing else.

I turned back puzzled and found her eyes fixed on mine with the strangest expression in them.

“Really,” I said, “I don’t see what you mean. Won’t you explain?”

But she shook her head.

“Not now. Later. We ought to have seen. Oh, we ought to have seen!”

“If you’d only tell me—”

But she shook her head.

“I’ve got to think it out first.”

And pushing past me, she went stumbling down the stairs.

I didn’t follow her as she obviously didn’t want me with her. Instead I sat down on the parapet and tried to puzzle things out. But I didn’t get anywhere. There was only the one way into the courtyard—through the big arch. Just outside it I could see the water boy and his horse and the Indian cook talking to him. Nobody could have passed them and come in without their seeing him.

I shook my head in perplexity and went downstairs again.

Twenty-four

MURDER IS A HABIT

We all went to bed early that night. Miss Johnson had appeared at dinner and had behaved more or less as usual. She had, however, a sort of dazed look, and once or twice quite failed to take in what other people said to her.

It wasn't somehow a very comfortable sort of meal. You'd say, I suppose, that that was natural enough in a house where there'd been a funeral that day. But I know what I mean.

Lately our meals had been hushed and subdued, but for all that there had been a feeling of comradeship. There had been sympathy with Dr. Leidner in his grief and a fellow feeling of being all in the same boat amongst the others.

But tonight I was reminded of my first meal there—when Mrs. Mercado had watched me and there had been that curious feeling as though something might snap any minute.

I'd felt the same thing—only very much intensified—when we'd sat round the dining room table with Poirot at the head of it.

Tonight it was particularly strong. Everyone was on edge—jumpy—on tenterhooks. If anyone had dropped something I'm sure somebody would have screamed.

As I say, we all separated early afterwards. I went to bed almost at once. The last thing I heard as I was dropping off to sleep was Mrs. Mercado's voice saying goodnight to Miss Johnson just outside my door.

I dropped off to sleep at once—tired by my exertions and even more by my silly experience in Mrs. Leidner's room. I slept heavily and dreamlessly for several hours.

I awoke when I did awake with a start and a feeling of impending catastrophe. Some sound had woken me, and as I sat up in bed listening I heard it again.

An awful sort of agonized choking groan.

I had lit my candle and was out of bed in a twinkling. I snatched up a torch, too, in case the candle should blow out. I came out of my door and stood listening. I knew the sound wasn’t far away. It came again—from the room immediately next to mine—Miss Johnson’s room.

I hurried in. Miss Johnson was lying in bed, her whole body contorted in agony. As I set down the candle and bent over her, her lips moved and she tried to speak—but only an awful hoarse whisper came. I saw that the corners of her mouth and the skin of her chin were burnt a kind of greyish white.

Her eyes went from me to a glass that lay on the floor evidently where it had dropped from her hand. The light rug was stained a bright red where it had fallen. I picked it up and ran a finger over the inside, drawing back my hand with a sharp exclamation. Then I examined the inside of the poor woman’s mouth.

There wasn’t the least doubt what was the matter. Somehow or other, intentionally or otherwise, she’d swallowed a quantity of corrosive acid—oxalic or hydrochloric, I suspected.

I ran out and called to Dr. Leidner and he woke the others, and we worked over her for all we were worth, but all the time I had an awful feeling it was no good. We tried a strong solution of carbonate of soda—and followed it with olive oil. To ease the pain I gave her a hypodermic of morphine sulphate.

David Emmott had gone off to Hassanieh to fetch Dr. Reilly, but before he came it was over.

I won’t dwell on the details. Poisoning by a strong solution of hydrochloric acid (which is what it proved to be) is one of the most painful deaths possible.

It was when I was bending over her to give her the morphia that she made one ghastly effort to speak. It was only a horrible strangled whisper when it came.

“The window . . . ” she said. “Nurse . . . the window . . . ”

But that was all—she couldn’t go on. She collapsed completely.

I shall never forget that night. The arrival of Dr. Reilly. The arrival of Captain Maitland. And finally with the dawn, Hercule Poirot.

He it was who took me gently by the arm and steered me into the dining room, where he made me sit down and have a cup of good strong tea.

“There, mon enfant,” he said, “that is better. You are worn out.”

Upon that, I burst into tears.

“It’s too awful,” I sobbed. “It’s been like a nightmare. Such awful suffering. And her eyes . . . Oh, M. Poirot—her eyes . . .”

He patted me on the shoulder. A woman couldn’t have been kinder.

“Yes, yes—do not think of it. You did all you could.”

“It was one of the corrosive acids.”

“It was a strong solution of hydrochloric acid.”

“The stuff they use on the pots?”

“Yes. Miss Johnson probably drank it off before she was fully awake. That is—unless she took it on purpose.”

“Oh, M. Poirot, what an awful idea!”

“It is a possibility, after all. What do you think?”

I considered for a moment and then shook my head decisively.

“I don’t believe it. No, I don’t believe it for a moment.” I hesitated and then said, “I think she found out something yesterday afternoon.”

“What is that you say? She found out something?”

I repeated to him the curious conversation we had had together.

Poirot gave a low soft whistle.

“La pauvre femme!” he said. “She said she wanted to think it over—eh? That is what signed her death warrant. If she had only spoken out—then—at once.”

He said: “Tell me again her exact words.”

I repeated them.

“She saw how someone could have come in from outside without any of you knowing? Come, ma soeur, let us go up to the roof and you shall show me just where she was standing.”

We went up to the roof together and I showed Poirot the exact spot where Miss Johnson had stood.

“Like this?” said Poirot. “Now what do I see? I see half the courtyard—and the archway—and the doors of the drawing office and the photographic room and the laboratory. Was there anyone in the courtyard?”

“Father Lavigny was just going towards the archway and Mr. Reiter was standing in the door of the photographic room.”

“And still I do not see in the least how anyone could come in from outside and none of you know about it . . . But she saw. . . .”

He gave it up at last, shaking his head.

“Sacré nom d’un chien—va! What did she see?”

The sun was just rising. The whole eastern sky was a riot of rose and orange and pale, pearly grey.

“What a beautiful sunrise!” said Poirot gently.

The river wound away to our left and the Tell stood up outlined in gold colour. To the south were the blossoming trees and the peaceful cultivation. The waterwheel groaned in the distance—a faint unearthly sound. In the north were the slender minarets and the clustering fairy whiteness of Hassanieh.

It was incredibly beautiful.

And then, close at my elbow, I heard Poirot give a long deep sigh.

“Fool that I have been,” he murmured. “When the truth is so clear—so clear.”

Twenty-five

SUICIDE OR MURDER?

I hadn't time to ask Poirot what he meant, for Captain Maitland was calling up to us and asking us to come down.

We hurried down the stairs.

"Look here, Poirot," he said. "Here's another complication. The monk fellow is missing."

"Father Lavigny?"

"Yes. Nobody noticed it till just now. Then it dawned on somebody that he was the only one of the party not around, and we went to his room. His bed's not been slept in and there's no sign of him."

The whole thing was like a bad dream. First Miss Johnson's death and then the disappearance of Father Lavigny.

The servants were called and questioned, but they couldn't throw any light on the mystery. He had last been seen at about eight o'clock the night before. Then he had said he was going out for a stroll before going to bed.

Nobody had seen him come back from that stroll.

The big doors had been closed and barred at nine o'clock as usual. Nobody, however, remembered unbarring them in the morning. The two houseboys each thought the other one must have done the unfastening.

Had Father Lavigny ever returned the night before? Had he, in the course of his earlier walk, discovered anything of a suspicious nature, gone out to investigate it later, and perhaps fallen a third victim?

Captain Maitland swung round as Dr. Reilly came up with Mr. Mercado behind him.

“Hallo, Reilly. Got anything?”

“Yes. The stuff came from the laboratory here. I’ve just been checking up the quantities with Mercado. It’s H.C.L. from the lab.”

“The laboratory—eh? Was it locked up?”

Mr. Mercado shook his head. His hands were shaking and his face was twitching. He looked a wreck of a man.

“It’s never been the custom,” he stammered. “You see—just now—we’re using it all the time. I—nobody ever dreamt—”

“Is the place locked up at night?”

“Yes—all the rooms are locked. The keys are hung up just inside the living room.”

“So if anyone had a key to that they could get the lot.”

“Yes.”

“And it’s a perfectly ordinary key, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Nothing to show whether she took it herself from the laboratory?” asked Captain Maitland.

“She didn’t,” I said loudly and positively.

I felt a warning touch on my arm. Poirot was standing close behind me.

And then something rather ghastly happened.

Not ghastly in itself—in fact it was just the incongruousness that made it seem worse than anything else.

A car drove into the courtyard and a little man jumped out. He was wearing a sun helmet and a short thick trench coat.

He came straight to Dr. Leidner, who was standing by Dr. Reilly, and shook him warmly by the hand.

“Vous voilà, mon cher,” he cried. “Delighted to see you. I passed this way on Saturday afternoon—en route to the Italians at Fugima. I went to the dig but there wasn’t a single European about and alas! I cannot speak Arabic. I had not time to come to the house. This morning I leave Fugima at five—two hours here with you—and then I catch the convoy on. Eh bien, and how is the season going?”

It was ghastly.

The cheery voice, the matter-of-fact manner, all the pleasant sanity of an everyday world now left far behind. He just bustled in, knowing nothing and noticing nothing—full of cheerful bonhomie.

No wonder Dr. Leidner gave an inarticulate gasp and looked in mute appeal at Dr. Reilly.

The doctor rose to the occasion.

He took the little man (he was a French archaeologist called Verrier who dug in the Greek islands, I heard later) aside and explained to him what had occurred.

Verrier was horrified. He himself had been staying at an Italian dig right away from civilization for the last few days and had heard nothing.

He was profuse in condolences and apologies, finally striding over to Dr. Leidner and clasping him warmly by both hands.

“What a tragedy! My God, what a tragedy! I have no words. Mon pauvre collègue.”

And shaking his head in one last ineffectual effort to express his feelings, the little man climbed into his car and left us.

As I say, that momentary introduction of comic relief into tragedy seemed really more gruesome than anything else that had happened.

“The next thing,” said Dr. Reilly firmly, “is breakfast. Yes, I insist. Come, Leidner, you must eat.”

Poor Dr. Leidner was almost a complete wreck. He came with us to the dining room and there a funereal meal was served. I think the hot coffee and fried eggs did us all good, though no one actually felt they wanted to eat. Dr. Leidner drank some coffee and sat twiddling his bread. His face was grey, drawn with pain and bewilderment.

After breakfast, Captain Maitland got down to things.

I explained how I had woken up, heard a queer sound and had gone into Miss Johnson’s room.

“You say there was a glass on the floor?”

“Yes. She must have dropped it after drinking.”

“Was it broken?”

“No, it had fallen on the rug. (I’m afraid the acid’s ruined the rug, by the way.) I picked the glass up and put it back on the table.”

“I’m glad you’ve told us that. There are only two sets of fingerprints on it, and one set is certainly Miss Johnson’s own. The other must be yours.”

He was silent for a moment, then he said: “Please go on.”

I described carefully what I’d done and the methods I had tried, looking rather anxiously at Dr. Reilly for approval. He gave it with a nod.

“You tried everything that could possibly have done any good,” he said. And though I was pretty sure I had done so, it was a relief to have my belief confirmed.

“Did you know exactly what she had taken?” Captain Maitland asked.

“No—but I could see, of course, that it was a corrosive acid.”

Captain Maitland asked gravely: “Is it your opinion, nurse, that Miss Johnson deliberately administered this stuff to herself?”

“Oh, no,” I exclaimed. “I never thought of such a thing!”

I don’t know why I was so sure. Partly, I think, because of M. Poirot’s hints. His “murder is a habit” had impressed itself on my mind. And then one doesn’t readily believe that anyone’s going to commit suicide in such a terribly painful way.

I said as much and Captain Maitland nodded thoughtfully. “I agree that it isn’t what one would choose,” he said. “But if anyone were in great distress of mind and this stuff were easily obtainable it might be taken for that reason.”

“Was she in great distress of mind?” I asked doubtfully.

“Mrs. Mercado says so. She says that Miss Johnson was quite unlike herself at dinner last night—that she hardly replied to anything that was said to her. Mrs. Mercado is quite sure that Miss Johnson was in terrible distress over something and that the idea of making away with herself had already occurred to her.”

“Well, I don’t believe it for a moment,” I said bluntly.

Mrs. Mercado indeed! Nasty slinking little cat!

“Then what do you think?”

“I think she was murdered,” I said bluntly.

He rapped out his next question sharply. I felt rather that I was in the orderly room.

“Any reasons?”

“It seems to me by far and away the most possible solution.”

“That’s just your private opinion. There was no reason why the lady should be murdered?”

“Excuse me,” I said, “there was. She found out something.”

“Found out something? What did she find out?”

I repeated our conversation on the roof word for word.

“She refused to tell you what her discovery was?”

“Yes. She said she must have time to think it over.”

“But she was very excited by it?”

“Yes.”

“A way of getting in from outside.” Captain Maitland puzzled over it, his brows knit. “Had you no idea at all of what she was driving at?”

“Not in the least. I puzzled and puzzled over it but I couldn’t even get a glimmering.”

Captain Maitland said: “What do you think, M. Poirot?”

Poirot said: “I think you have there a possible motive.”

“For murder?”

“For murder.”

Captain Maitland frowned.

“She wasn’t able to speak before she died?”

“Yes, she just managed to get out two words.”

“What were they?”

“The window . . . ”

“The window?” repeated Captain Maitland. “Did you understand to what she was referring?”

I shook my head.

“How many windows were there in her bedroom?”

“Just the one.”

“Giving on the courtyard?”

“Yes.”

“Was it open or shut? Open, I seem to remember. But perhaps one of you opened it?”

“No, it was open all the time. I wondered—”

I stopped.

“Go on, nurse.”

“I examined the window, of course, but I couldn’t see anything unusual about it. I wondered whether, perhaps, somebody changed the glasses that way.”

“Changed the glasses?”

“Yes. You see, Miss Johnson always takes a glass of water to bed with her. I think that glass must have been tampered with and a glass of acid put in its place.”

“What do you say, Reilly?”

“If it’s murder, that was probably the way it was done,” said Dr. Reilly promptly. “No ordinary moderately observant human being would drink a glass of acid in mistake for one of water—if they were in full possession of their waking faculties. But if anyone’s accustomed to drinking off a glass of water in the middle of the night, that person might easily stretch out an arm, find the glass in the accustomed place, and still half asleep, toss off enough of the stuff to be fatal before realizing what had happened.”

Captain Maitland reflected a minute.

“I’ll have to go back and look at that window. How far is it from the head of the bed?”

I thought.

“With a very long stretch you could just reach the little table that stands by the head of the bed.”

“The table on which the glass of water was?”

“Yes.”

“Was the door locked?”

“No.”

“So whoever it was could have come in that way and made the substitution?”

“Oh, yes.”

“There would be more risk that way,” said Dr. Reilly. “A person who is sleeping quite soundly will often wake up at the sound of a footfall. If the table could be reached from the window it would be the safer way.”

“I’m not only thinking of the glass,” said Captain Maitland absent-mindedly.

Rousing himself, he addressed me once again.

"It's your opinion that when the poor lady felt she was dying she was anxious to let you know that somebody had substituted acid for water through the open window? Surely the person's name would have been more to the point?"

"She mayn't have known the name," I pointed out.

"Or it would have been more to the point if she'd managed to hint what it was that she had discovered the day before?"

Dr. Reilly said: "When you're dying, Maitland, you haven't always got a sense of proportion. One particular fact very likely obsesses your mind. That a murderous hand had come through the window may have been the principal fact obsessing her at the minute. It may have seemed to her important that she should let people know that. In my opinion she wasn't far wrong either. It was important! She probably jumped to the fact that you'd think it was suicide. If she could have used her tongue freely, she'd probably have said 'It wasn't suicide. I didn't take it myself. Somebody else must have put it near my bed through the window.' "

Captain Maitland drummed with his fingers for a minute or two without replying. Then he said:

"There are certainly two ways of looking at it. It's either suicide or murder. Which do you think, Dr. Leidner?"

Dr. Leidner was silent for a minute or two, then he said quietly and decisively: "Murder. Anne Johnson wasn't the sort of woman to kill herself."

"No," allowed Captain Maitland. "Not in the normal run of things. But there might be circumstances in which it would be quite a natural thing to do."

"Such as?"

Captain Maitland stooped to a bundle which I had previously noticed him place by the side of his chair. He swung it on to the table with something of an effort.

“There’s something here that none of you know about,” he said. “We found it under her bed.”

He fumbled with the knot of the covering, then threw it back, revealing a heavy great quern or grinder.

That was nothing in itself—there were a dozen or so already found in the course of the excavations.

What riveted our attention on this particular specimen was a dull, dark stain and a fragment of something that looked like hair.

“That’ll be your job, Reilly,” said Captain Maitland. “But I shouldn’t say that there’s much doubt about this being the instrument with which Mrs. Leidner was killed!”

Twenty-six

NEXT IT WILL BE ME!

It was rather horrible. Dr. Leidner looked as though he were going to faint and I felt a bit sick myself.

Dr. Reilly examined it with professional gusto.

“No fingerprints, I presume?” he threw out.

“No fingerprints.”

Dr. Reilly took out a pair of forceps and investigated delicately.

“H’m—a fragment of human tissue—and hair—fair blonde hair. That’s the unofficial verdict. Of course, I’ll have to make a proper test, blood group, etc., but there’s not much doubt. Found under Miss Johnson’s bed? Well, well—so that’s the big idea. She did the murder, and then, God rest her, remorse came to her and she finished herself off. It’s a theory—a pretty theory.”

Dr. Leidner could only shake his head helplessly.

“Not Anne—not Anne,” he murmured.

“I don’t know where she hid this to begin with,” said Captain Maitland. “Every room was searched after the first crime.”

Something jumped into my mind and I thought, “In the stationery cupboard,” but I didn’t say anything.

“Wherever it was, she became dissatisfied with its hiding place and took it into her own room, which had been searched with all the rest. Or perhaps she did that after making up her mind to commit suicide.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said aloud.

And I couldn’t somehow believe that kind nice Miss Johnson had battered out Mrs. Leidner’s brains. I just couldn’t see it happening! And yet it did fit in with some things—her fit of weeping that night, for instance. After all, I’d said “remorse” myself—only I’d never thought it was remorse for anything but the smaller, more insignificant crime.

“I don’t know what to believe,” said Captain Maitland. “There’s the French Father’s disappearance to be cleared up too. My men are out hunting around in case he’s been knocked on the head and his body rolled into a convenient irrigation ditch.”

“Oh! I remember now—” I began.

Everyone looked towards me inquiringly.

“It was yesterday afternoon,” I said. “He’d been cross-questioning me about the man with a squint who was looking in at the window that day. He asked me just where he’d stood on the path and then he said he was going out to have a look round. He said in detective stories the criminal always dropped a convenient clue.”

“Damned if any of my criminals ever do,” said Captain Maitland. “So that’s what he was after, was it? By Jove, I wonder if he did find anything. A bit of a coincidence if both he and Miss Johnson discovered a clue to the identity of the murderer at practically the same time.”

He added irritably, “Man with a squint? Man with a squint? There’s more in this tale of that fellow with a squint than meets the eye. I don’t know why the devil my fellows can’t lay hold of him!”

“Probably because he hasn’t got a squint,” said Poirot quietly.

“Do you mean he faked it? Didn’t know you could fake an actual squint.”

Poirot merely said: “A squint can be a very useful thing.”

“The devil it can! I’d give a lot to know where that fellow is now, squint or no squint!”

“At a guess,” said Poirot, “he has already passed the Syrian frontier.”

“We’ve warned Tell Kotchek and Abu Kemal—all the frontier posts, in fact.”

“I should imagine that he took the route through the hills. The route lorries sometimes take when running contraband.”

Captain Maitland grunted.

“Then we’d better telegraph Deir ez Zor?”

“I did so yesterday—warning them to look out for a car with two men in it whose passports will be in the most impeccable order.”

Captain Maitland favoured him with a stare.

“You did, did you? Two men—eh?”

Poirot nodded.

“There are two men in this.”

“It strikes me, M. Poirot, that you’ve been keeping quite a lot of things up your sleeve.”

Poirot shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Not really. The truth came to me only this morning when I was watching the sunrise. A very beautiful sunrise.”

I don’t think that any of us had noticed that Mrs. Mercado was in the room. She must have crept in when we were all taken aback by the production of that horrible great bloodstained stone.

But now, without the least warning, she set up a noise like a pig having its throat cut.

“Oh, my God!” she cried. “I see it all. I see it all now. It was Father Lavigny. He’s mad—religious mania. He thinks women are sinful. He’s killing them all. First Mrs. Leidner—then Miss Johnson. And next it will be me. . . .”

With a scream of frenzy she flung herself across the room and clutched Dr. Reilly’s coat.

“I won’t stay here, I tell you! I won’t stay here a day longer. There’s danger. There’s danger all round. He’s hiding somewhere—waiting his time. He’ll spring out on me!”

Her mouth opened and she began screaming again.

I hurried over to Dr. Reilly, who had caught her by the wrists. I gave her a sharp slap on each cheek and with Dr. Reilly’s help I sat her down in a chair.

“Nobody’s going to kill you,” I said. “We’ll see to that. Sit down and behave yourself.”

She didn’t scream any more. Her mouth closed and she sat looking at me with startled, stupid eyes.

Then there was another interruption. The door opened and Sheila Reilly came in.

Her face was pale and serious. She came straight to Poirot.

“I was at the post office early, M. Poirot,” she said, “and there was a telegram there for you—so I brought it along.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle.”

He took it from her and tore it open while she watched his face.

It did not change, that face. He read the telegram, smoothed it out, folded it up neatly and put it in his pocket.

Mrs. Mercado was watching him. She said in a choked voice: “Is that—from America?”

“No, madame,” he said. “It is from Tunis.”

She stared at him for a moment as though she did not understand, then with a long sigh, she leant back in her seat.

“Father Lavigny,” she said. “I was right. I’ve always thought there was something queer about him. He said things to me once—I suppose he’s mad . . .” She paused and then said, “I’ll be quiet. But I must leave this place. Joseph and I can go in and sleep at the Rest House.”

“Patience, madame,” said Poirot. “I will explain everything.”

Captain Maitland was looking at him curiously.

“Do you consider you’ve definitely got the hang of this business?” he demanded.

Poirot bowed.

It was a most theatrical bow. I think it rather annoyed Captain Maitland.

“Well,” he barked. “Out with it, man.”

But that wasn’t the way Hercule Poirot did things. I saw perfectly well that he meant to make a song and dance of it. I wondered if he really did know the truth, or if he was just showing off.

He turned to Dr. Reilly.

“Will you be so good, Dr. Reilly, as to summon the others?”

Dr. Reilly jumped up and went off obligingly. In a minute or two the other members of the expedition began to file into the room. First Reiter and

Emmott. Then Bill Coleman. Then Richard Carey and finally Mr. Mercado.

Poor man, he really looked like death. I suppose he was mortally afraid that he’d get hauled over the coals for carelessness in leaving dangerous chemicals about.

Everyone seated themselves round the table very much as we had done on the day M. Poirot arrived. Both Bill Coleman and David Emmott hesitated before they sat down, glancing towards Sheila Reilly. She had her back to them and was standing looking out of the window.

“Chair, Sheila?” said Bill.

David Emmott said in his low pleasant drawl, “Won’t you sit down?”

She turned then and stood for a minute looking at them. Each was indicating a chair, pushing it forward. I wondered whose chair she would accept.

In the end she accepted neither.

“I’ll sit here,” she said brusquely. And she sat down on the edge of a table quite close to the window.

“That is,” she added, “if Captain Maitland doesn’t mind my staying?”

I’m not quite sure what Captain Maitland would have said. Poirot forestalled him.

“Stay by all means, mademoiselle,” he said. “It is, indeed, necessary that you should.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Necessary?”

“That is the word I used, mademoiselle. There are some questions I shall have to ask you.”

Again her eyebrows went up but she said nothing further. She turned her face to the window as though determined to ignore what went on in the room behind her.

“And now,” said Captain Maitland, “perhaps we shall get at the truth!”

He spoke rather impatiently. He was essentially a man of action. At this very moment I felt sure that he was fretting to be out and doing things—directing the search for Father Lavigny’s body, or alternatively sending out parties for his capture and arrest.

He looked at Poirot with something akin to dislike.

“If the beggar’s got anything to say, why doesn’t he say it?”

I could see the words on the tip of his tongue.

Poirot gave a slow appraising glance at us all, then rose to his feet.

I don’t know what I expected him to say—something dramatic certainly. He was that kind of person.

But I certainly didn’t expect him to start off with a phrase in Arabic.

Yet that is what happened. He said the words slowly and solemnly—and really quite religiously, if you know what I mean.

“Bismillahi ar rahman ar rahim.”

And then he gave the translation in English.

“In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”

Twenty-seven

BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY

“Bismillahi ar rahman ar rahim. That is the Arab phrase used before starting out on a journey. Eh bien, we too start on a journey. A journey into the past. A journey into the strange places of the human soul.”

I don’t think that up till that moment I’d ever felt any of the so-called “glamour of the East.” Frankly, what had struck me was the mess everywhere. But suddenly, with M. Poirot’s words, a queer sort of vision seemed to grow up before my eyes. I thought of words like Samarkand and Ispahan—and of merchants with long beards—and kneeling camels—and staggering porters carrying great bales on their backs held by a rope round the forehead—and women with henna-stained hair and tattooed faces kneeling by the Tigris and washing clothes, and I heard their queer wailing chants and the far-off groaning of the waterwheel.

They were mostly things I’d seen and heard and thought nothing much of. But now, somehow they seemed different—like a piece of fusty old stuff you take into the light and suddenly see the rich colours of an old embroidery. . . .

Then I looked round the room we were sitting in and I got a queer feeling that what M. Poirot said was true—we were all starting on a journey. We were here together now, but we were all going our different ways.

And I looked at everyone as though, in a sort of way, I were seeing them for the first time—and for the last time—which sounds stupid, but it was what I felt all the same.

Mr. Mercado was twisting his fingers nervously—his queer light eyes with their dilated pupils were staring at Poirot. Mrs. Mercado was looking at her husband. She had a strange watchful look like a tigress waiting to spring. Dr. Leidner seemed to have shrunk in some curious fashion. This last blow had just crumpled him up. You might almost say he wasn't in the room at all. He was somewhere far away in a place of his own. Mr. Coleman was looking straight at Poirot. His mouth was slightly open and his eyes protruded. He looked almost idiotic. Mr. Emmott was looking down at his feet and I couldn't see his face properly. Mr. Reiter looked bewildered. His mouth was pushed out in a pout and that made him look more like a nice clean pig than ever. Miss Reilly was looking steadily out of the window. I don't know what she was thinking or feeling. Then I looked at Mr. Carey, and somehow his face hurt me and I looked away. There we were, all of us. And somehow I felt that when M. Poirot had finished we'd all be somewhere quite different. . . .

It was a queer feeling. . . .

Poirot's voice went quietly on. It was like a river running evenly between its banks . . . running to the sea. . . .

"From the very beginning I have felt that to understand this case one must seek not for external signs or clues, but for the truer clues of the clash of personalities and the secrets of the heart.

"And I may say that though I have now arrived at what I believe to be the true solution of the case, I have no material proof of it. I know it is so, because it must be so, because in no other way can every single fact fit into its ordered and recognized place.

"And that, to my mind, is the most satisfying solution there can be."

He paused and then went on:

"I will start my journey at the moment when I myself was brought into the case—when I had it presented to me as an accomplished happening. Now, every case, in my opinion, has a definite shape and form. The pattern of this case, to my mind, all revolved round the personality of Mrs. Leidner. Until I knew exactly what kind of a woman Mrs. Leidner was I should not be able to know why she was murdered and who murdered her.

“That, then, was my starting point—the personality of Mrs. Leidner.

“There was also one other psychological point of interest—the curious state of tension described as existing amongst the members of the expedition. This was attested to by several different witnesses—some of them outsiders—and I made a note that although hardly a starting point, it should nevertheless be borne in mind during my investigations.

“The accepted idea seemed to be that it was directly the result of Mrs. Leidner’s influence on the members of the expedition, but for reasons which I will outline to you later this did not seem to me entirely acceptable.

“To start with, as I say, I concentrated solely and entirely on the personality of Mrs. Leidner. I had various means of assessing that personality. There were the reactions she produced in a number of people, all varying widely in character and temperament, and there was what I could glean by my own observation. The scope of the latter was naturally limited. But I did learn certain facts.

“Mrs. Leidner’s tastes were simple and even on the austere side. She was clearly not a luxurious woman. On the other hand, some embroidery she had been doing was of an extreme fineness and beauty. That indicated a woman of fastidious and artistic taste. From the observation of the books in her bedroom I formed a further estimate. She had brains, and I also fancied that she was, essentially, an egoist.

“It had been suggested to me that Mrs. Leidner was a woman whose main preoccupation was to attract the opposite sex—that she was, in fact, a sensual woman. This I did not believe to be the case.

“In her bedroom I noticed the following books on a shelf: Who were the Greeks?, Introduction to Relativity, Life of Lady Hester Stanhope, Back to Methuselah, Linda Condon, Crewe Train.

“She had, to begin with, an interest in culture and in modern science—that is, a distinct intellectual side. Of the novels, Linda Condon, and in a lesser degree Crewe Train, seemed to show that Mrs. Leidner had a sympathy and interest in the independent woman—unencumbered or entrapped by man.

She was also obviously interested by the personality of Lady Hester Stanhope. Linda Condon is an exquisite study of the worship of her own beauty by a woman. Crewe Train is a study of a passionate individualist, Back to Methuselah is in sympathy with the intellectual rather than the emotional attitude to life. I felt that I was beginning to understand the dead woman.

“I next studied the reactions of those who had formed Mrs. Leidner’s immediate circle—and my picture of the dead woman grew more and more complete.

“It was quite clear to me from the accounts of Dr. Reilly and others that Mrs. Leidner was one of those women who are endowed by Nature not only with beauty but with the kind of calamitous magic which sometimes accompanies beauty and can, indeed, exist independently of it. Such women usually leave a trail of violent happenings behind them. They bring disaster—sometimes on others—sometimes on themselves.

“I was convinced that Mrs. Leidner was a woman who essentially worshipped herself and who enjoyed more than anything else the sense of power. Wherever she was, she must be the centre of the universe. And everyone round her, man or woman, had got to acknowledge her sway. With some people that was easy. Nurse Leatheran, for instance, a generous-natured woman with a romantic imagination, was captured instantly and gave in ungrudging manner full appreciation. But there was a second way in which Mrs. Leidner exercised her sway—the way of fear. Where conquest was too easy she indulged a more cruel side to her nature—but I wish to reiterate emphatically that it was not what you might call conscious cruelty. It was as natural and unthinking as is the conduct of a cat with a mouse. Where consciousness came in, she was essentially kind and would often go out of her way to do kind and thoughtful actions for other people.

“Now of course the first and most important problem to solve was the problem of the anonymous letters. Who had written them and why? I asked myself: Had Mrs. Leidner written them herself?

“To answer this problem it was necessary to go back a long way—to go back, in fact, to the date of Mrs. Leidner’s first marriage. It is here we start on our journey proper. The journey of Mrs. Leidner’s life.

“First of all we must realize that the Louise Leidner of all those years ago is essentially the same Louise Leidner of the present time.

“She was young then, of remarkable beauty—that same haunting beauty that affects a man’s spirit and senses as no mere material beauty can—and she was already essentially an egoist.

“Such women naturally revolt from the idea of marriage. They may be attracted by men, but they prefer to belong to themselves. They are truly La Belle Dame sans Merci of the legend. Nevertheless Mrs. Leidner did marry—and we can assume, I think, that her husband must have been a man of a certain force of character.

“Then the revelation of his traitorous activities occurs and Mrs. Leidner acts in the way she told Nurse Leidner. She gave information to the Government.

“Now I submit that there was a psychological significance in her action. She told Nurse Leatheran that she was a very patriotic idealistic girl and that that feeling was the cause of her action. But it is a well-known fact that we all tend to deceive ourselves as to the motives for our own actions. Instinctively we select the best-sounding motive! Mrs. Leidner may have believed herself that it was patriotism that inspired her action, but I believe myself that it was really the outcome of an unacknowledged desire to get rid of her husband! She disliked domination—she disliked the feeling of belonging to someone else—in fact she disliked playing second fiddle. She took a patriotic way of regaining her freedom.

“But underneath her consciousness was a gnawing sense of guilt which was to play its part in her future destiny.

“We now come directly to the question of the letters. Mrs. Leidner was highly attractive to the male sex. On several occasions she was attracted by them—but in each case a threatening letter played its part and the affair came to nothing.

“Who wrote those letters? Frederick Bosner or his brother William or Mrs. Leidner herself?

“There is a perfectly good case for either theory. It seems clear to me that Mrs. Leidner was one of those women who do inspire devouring devotions in men, the type of devotion which can become an obsession. I find it quite possible to believe in a Frederick Bosner to whom Louise, his wife, mattered more than anything in the world! She had betrayed him once and he dared not approach her openly, but he was determined at least that she should be his or no one’s. He preferred her death to her belonging to another man.

“On the other hand, if Mrs. Leidner had, deep down, a dislike of entering into the marriage bond, it is possible that she took this way of extricating herself from difficult positions. She was a huntress who, the prey once attained, had no further use for it! Craving drama in her life, she invented a highly satisfactory drama—a resurrected husband forbidding the banns! It satisfied her deepest instincts. It made her a romantic figure, a tragic heroine, and it enabled her not to marry again.

“This state of affairs continued over a number of years. Every time there was any likelihood of marriage—a threatening letter arrived.

“But now we come to a really interesting point. Dr. Leidner came upon the scene—and no forbidding letter arrived! Nothing stood in the way of her becoming Mrs. Leidner. Not until after her marriage did a letter arrive.

“At once we ask ourselves—why?

“Let us take each theory in turn.

. . . “If Mrs. Leidner wrote the letters herself the problem is easily explained. Mrs. Leidner really wanted to marry Dr. Leidner. And so she did marry him. But in that case, why did she write herself a letter afterwards? Was her craving for drama too strong to be suppressed? And why only those two letters? After that no other letter was received until a year and a half later.

“Now take the other theory, that the letters were written by her first husband, Frederick Bosner (or his brother). Why did the threatening letter arrive after the marriage? Presumably Frederick could not have wanted her to marry Leidner. Why, then, did he not stop the marriage? He had done so successfully on former occasions. And why, having waited till the marriage had taken place, did he then resume his threats?

“The answer, an unsatisfactory one, is that he was somehow or other unable to protest sooner. He may have been in prison or he may have been abroad.

“There is next the attempted gas poisoning to consider. It seems extremely unlikely that it was brought about by an outside agency. The likely persons to have staged it were Dr. and Mrs. Leidner themselves. There seems no conceivable reason why Dr. Leidner should do such a thing, so we are brought to the conclusion that Mrs. Leidner planned and carried it out herself.

“Why? More drama?

“After that Dr. and Mrs. Leidner go abroad and for eighteen months they lead a happy, peaceful life with no threats of death to disturb it. They put that down to having successfully covered their traces, but such an explanation is quite absurd. In these days going abroad is quite inadequate for that purpose. And especially was that so in the case of the Leidners. He was the director of a museum expedition. By inquiry at the museum, Frederick Bosner could at once have obtained his correct address. Even granting that he was in too reduced circumstances to pursue the couple himself there would be no bar to his continuing his threatening letters. And it seems to me that a man with his obsession would certainly have done so.

“Instead nothing is heard of him until nearly two years later when the letters are resumed.

“Why were the letters resumed?

“A very difficult question—most easily answered by saying that Mrs. Leidner was bored and wanted more drama. But I was not quite satisfied with that. This particular form of drama seemed to me a shade too vulgar and too crude to accord well with her fastidious personality.

“The only thing to do was to keep an open mind on the question.

“There were three definite possibilities: (1) the letters were written by Mrs. Leidner herself; (2) they were written by Frederick Bosner (or young William Bosner); (3) they might have been written originally by either Mrs. Leidner or her first husband, but they were now forgeries—that is, they were being written by a third person who was aware of the earlier letters.

“I now come to direct consideration of Mrs. Leidner’s entourage.

“I examined first the actual opportunities that each member of the staff had had for committing the murder.

“Roughly, on the face of it, anyone might have committed it (as far as opportunity went), with the exception of three persons.

“Dr. Leidner, by overwhelming testimony, had never left the roof. Mr. Carey was on duty at the mound. Mr. Coleman was in Hassanieh.

“But those alibis, my friends, were not quite as good as they looked. I except Dr. Leidner’s. There is absolutely no doubt that he was on the roof all the time and did not come down until quite an hour and a quarter after the murder had happened.

“But was it quite certain that Mr. Carey was on the mound all the time?

“And had Mr. Coleman actually been in Hassanieh at the time the murder took place?”

Bill Coleman reddened, opened his mouth, shut it and looked round uneasily.

Mr. Carey’s expression did not change.

Poirot went on smoothly.

"I also considered one other person who, I satisfied myself, would be perfectly capable of committing murder if she felt strongly enough. Miss Reilly has courage and brains and a certain quality of ruthlessness. When Miss Reilly was speaking to me on the subject of the dead woman, I said to her, jokingly, that I hoped she had an alibi. I think Miss Reilly was conscious then that she had had in her heart the desire, at least, to kill. At any rate she immediately uttered a very silly and purposeless lie. She said she had been playing tennis on that afternoon. The next day I learned from a casual conversation with Miss Johnson that far from playing tennis, Miss Reilly had actually been near this house at the time of the murder. It occurred to me that Miss Reilly, if not guilty of the crime, might be able to tell me something useful."

He stopped and then said quietly: "Will you tell us, Miss Reilly, what you did see that afternoon?"

The girl did not answer at once. She still looked out of the window without turning her head, and when she spoke it was in a detached and measured voice.

"I rode out to the dig after lunch. It must have been about a quarter to two when I got there."

"Did you find any of your friends on the dig?"

"No, there seemed to be no one there but the Arab foreman."

"You did not see Mr. Carey?"

"No."

"Curious," said Poirot. "No more did M. Verrier when he went there that same afternoon."

He looked invitingly at Carey, but the latter neither moved nor spoke.

"Have you any explanation, Mr. Carey?"

“I went for a walk. There was nothing of interest turning up.”

“In which direction did you go for a walk?”

“Down by the river.”

“Not back towards the house?”

“No.”

“I suppose,” said Miss Reilly, “that you were waiting for someone who didn’t come.”

He looked at her but didn’t answer.

Poirot did not press the point. He spoke once more to the girl.

“Did you see anything else, mademoiselle?”

“Yes. I was not far from the expedition house when I noticed the expedition lorry drawn up in a wadi. I thought it was rather queer. Then I saw Mr. Coleman. He was walking along with his head down as though he were searching for something.”

“Look here,” burst out Mr. Coleman, “I—”

Poirot stopped him with an authoritative gesture.

“Wait. Did you speak to him, Miss Reilly?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Why?”

The girl said slowly: “Because, from time to time, he started and looked round with an extraordinary furtive look. It—gave me an unpleasant feeling. I turned my horse’s head and rode away. I don’t think he saw me. I was not very near and he was absorbed in what he was doing.”

“Look here,” Mr. Coleman was not to be hushed any longer. “I’ve got a perfectly good explanation for what—I admit—looks a bit fishy. As a matter of fact, the day before I had slipped a jolly fine cylinder seal into my coat pocket instead of putting it in the antika room—forgot all about it. And then I discovered I’d been and lost it out of my pocket—dropped it somewhere. I didn’t want to get into a row about it so I decided I’d have a jolly good search on the quiet. I was pretty sure I’d dropped it on the way to or from the dig. I rushed over my business in Hassanieh. Sent a walad to do some of the shopping and got back early. I stuck the bus where it wouldn’t show and had a jolly good hunt for over an hour. And didn’t find the damned thing at that! Then I got into the bus and drove on to the house. Naturally, everyone thought I’d just got back.”

“And you did not undeceive them?” asked Poirot sweetly.

“Well, that was pretty natural under the circumstances, don’t you think?”

“I hardly agree,” said Poirot.

“Oh, come now—don’t go looking for trouble—that’s my motto! But you can’t fasten anything on me. I never went into the courtyard, and you can’t find anyone who’ll say I did.”

“That, of course, has been the difficulty,” said Poirot. “The evidence of the servants that no one entered the courtyard from outside. But it occurred to me, upon reflection, that that was really not what they had said. They had sworn that no stranger had entered the premises. They had not been asked if a member of the expedition had done so.”

“Well, you ask them,” said Coleman. “I’ll eat my hat if they saw me or Carey either.”

“Ah! but that raises rather an interesting question. They would notice a stranger undoubtedly—but would they have even noticed a member of the expedition? The members of the staff are passing in and out all day. The servants would hardly notice their going and coming. It is possible, I think, that either Mr. Carey or Mr. Coleman might have entered and the servants’ minds would have no remembrance of such an event.”

“Bunkum!” said Mr. Coleman.

Poirot went on calmly: “Of the two, I think Mr. Carey was the least likely to be noticed going or coming. Mr. Coleman had started to Hassanieh in the car that morning and he would be expected to return in it. His arrival on foot would therefore be noticeable.”

“Of course it would!” said Coleman.

Richard Carey raised his head. His deep-blue eyes looked straight at Poirot.

“Are you accusing me of murder, M. Poirot?” he asked.

His manner was quite quiet but his voice had a dangerous undertone.

Poirot bowed to him.

“As yet I am only taking you all on a journey—my journey towards the truth. I had now established one fact—that all the members of the expedition staff, and also Nurse Leatheran, could in actual fact have committed the murder. That there was very little likelihood of some of them having committed it was a secondary matter.

“I had examined means and opportunity. I next passed to motive. I discovered that one and all of you could be credited with a motive!”

“Oh! M. Poirot,” I cried. “Not me! Why, I was a stranger. I’d only just come.”

“Eh bien, ma soeur, and was not that just what Mrs. Leidner had been fearing? A stranger from outside?”

“But—but—Why, Dr. Reilly knew all about me! He suggested my coming!”

“How much did he really know about you? Mostly what you yourself had told him. Imposters have passed themselves off as hospital nurses before now.”

"You can write to St. Christopher's," I began.

"For the moment will you silence yourself. Impossible to proceed while you conduct this argument. I do not say I suspect you now. All I say is that, keeping the open mind, you might quite easily be someone other than you pretended to be. There are many successful female impersonators, you know. Young William Bosner might be something of that kind."

I was about to give him a further piece of my mind. Female impersonator indeed! But he raised his voice and hurried on with such an air of determination that I thought better of it.

"I am going now to be frank—brutally so. It is necessary. I am going to lay bare the underlying structure of this place.

"I examined and considered every single soul here. To begin with Dr. Leidner, I soon convinced myself that his love for his wife was the mainspring of his existence. He was a man torn and ravaged with grief. Nurse Leatheran I have already mentioned. If she were a female impersonator she was a most amazingly successful one, and I inclined to the belief that she was exactly what she said she was—a thoroughly competent hospital nurse."

"Thank you for nothing," I interposed.

"My attention was immediately attracted towards Mr. and Mrs. Mercado, who were both of them clearly in a state of great agitation and unrest. I considered first Mrs. Mercado. Was she capable of murder, and if so for what reasons?

"Mrs. Mercado's physique was frail. At first sight it did not seem possible that she could have had the physical strength to strike down a woman like Mrs. Leidner with a heavy stone implement. If, however, Mrs. Leidner had been on her knees at the time, the thing would at least be physically possible. There are ways in which one woman can induce another to go down on her knees. Oh! not emotional ways! For instance, a woman might be turning up the hem of a skirt and ask another woman to put in the pins for her. The second woman would kneel on the ground quite unsuspectingly.

“But the motive? Nurse Leatheran had told me of the angry glances she had seen Mrs. Mercado direct at Mrs. Leidner. Mr. Mercado had evidently succumbed easily to Mrs. Leidner’s spell. But I did not think the solution was to be found in mere jealousy. I was sure Mrs. Leidner was not in the least interested really in Mr. Mercado—and doubtless Mrs. Mercado was aware of the fact. She might be furious with her for the moment, but for murder there would have to be greater provocation. But Mrs. Mercado was essentially a fiercely maternal type. From the way she looked at her husband I realized, not only that she loved him, but that she would fight for him tooth and nail—and more than that—that she envisaged the possibility of having to do so. She was constantly on her guard and uneasy. The uneasiness was for him—not for herself. And when I studied Mr. Mercado I could make a fairly easy guess at what the trouble was. I took means to assure myself of the truth of my guess. Mr. Mercado was a drug addict—in an advanced stage of the craving.

“Now I need probably not tell you all that the taking of drugs over a long period has the result of considerably blunting the moral sense.

“Under the influence of drugs a man commits actions that he would not have dreamed of committing a few years earlier before he began the practice. In some cases a man has committed murder—and it has been difficult to say whether he was wholly responsible for his actions or not. The law of different countries varies slightly on that point. The chief characteristic of the drug-fiend criminal is overweening confidence in his own cleverness.

“I thought it possible that there was some discreditable incident, perhaps a criminal incident, in Mr. Mercado’s past which his wife had somehow or other succeeded in hushing up. Nevertheless his career hung on a thread. If anything of this past incident were bruited about, Mr. Mercado would be ruined. His wife was always on the watch. But there was Mrs. Leidner to be reckoned with. She had a sharp intelligence and a love of power. She might even induce the wretched man to confide in her. It would just have suited her peculiar temperament to feel she knew a secret which she could reveal at any minute with disastrous effects.

“Here, then, was a possible motive for murder on the part of the Mercados. To protect her mate, Mrs. Mercado, I felt sure, would stick at nothing! Both she and her husband had had the opportunity—during that ten minutes when the courtyard was empty.”

Mrs. Mercado cried out, “It’s not true!”

Poirot paid no attention.

“I next considered Miss Johnson. Was she capable of murder?

“I thought she was. She was a person of strong will and iron self-control. Such people are constantly repressing themselves—and one day the dam bursts! But if Miss Johnson had committed the crime it could only be for some reason connected with Dr. Leidner. If in any way she felt convinced that Mrs. Leidner was spoiling her husband’s life, then the deep unacknowledged jealousy far down in her would leap at the chance of a plausible motive and give itself full rein.

“Yes, Miss Johnson was distinctly a possibility.

“Then there were the three young men.

“First Carl Reiter. If, by any chance, one of the expedition staff was William Bosner, then Reiter was by far the most likely person. But if he was William Bosner, then he was certainly a most accomplished actor! If he were merely himself, had he any reason for murder?

“Regarded from Mrs. Leidner’s point of view, Carl Reiter was far too easy a victim for good sport. He was prepared to fall on his face and worship immediately. Mrs. Leidner despised undiscriminating adoration—and the doormat attitude nearly always brings out the worst side of a woman. In her treatment of Carl Reiter Mrs. Leidner displayed really deliberate cruelty. She inserted a gibe here—a prick there. She made the poor young man’s life a hell to him.”

Poirot broke off suddenly and addressed the young man in a personal, highly confidential manner.

“Mon ami, let this be a lesson to you. You are a man. Behave, then, like a man! It is against Nature for a man to grovel. Women and Nature have almost exactly the same reactions! Remember it is better to take the largest plate within reach and fling it at a woman’s head than it is to wriggle like a worm whenever she looks at you!”

He dropped his private manner and reverted to his lecture style.

“Could Carl Reiter have been goaded to such a pitch of torment that he turned on his tormentor and killed her? Suffering does queer things to a man. I could not be sure that it was not so!

“Next William Coleman. His behaviour, as reported by Miss Reilly, is certainly suspicious. If he was the criminal it could only be because his cheerful personality concealed the hidden one of William Bosner. I do not think William Coleman, as William Coleman, has the temperament of a murderer. His faults might lie in another direction. Ah! perhaps Nurse Leatheran can guess what they would be?”

How did the man do it? I’m sure I didn’t look as though I was thinking anything at all.

“It’s nothing really,” I said, hesitating. “Only if it’s to be all truth, Mr. Coleman did say once himself that he would have made a good forger.”

“A good point,” said Poirot. “Therefore if he had come across some of the old threatening letters, he could have copied them without difficulty.”

“Oy, oy, oy!” called out Mr. Coleman. “This is what they call a frame-up.”

Poirot swept on.

“As to his being or not being William Bosner, such a matter is difficult of verification. But Mr. Coleman has spoken of a guardian—not of a father—and there is nothing definitely to veto the idea.”

“Tommyrot,” said Mr. Coleman. “Why all of you listen to this chap beats me.”

“Of the three young men there remains Mr. Emmott,” went on Poirot. “He again might be a possible shield for the identity of William Bosner. Whatever personal reasons he might have for the removal of Mrs. Leidner I soon realized that I should have no means of learning them from him. He could keep his own counsel remarkably well, and there was not the least chance of provoking him nor of tricking him into betraying himself on any point. Of all the expedition he seemed to be the best and most dispassionate judge of Mrs. Leidner’s personality. I think that he always knew her for exactly what she was—but what impression her personality made on him I was unable to discover. I fancy that Mrs. Leidner herself must have been provoked and angered by his attitude.

“I may say that of all the expedition, as far as character and capacity were concerned, Mr. Emmott seemed to me the most fitted to bring a clever and well-timed crime off satisfactorily.”

For the first time, Mr. Emmott raised his eyes from the toes of his boots.

“Thank you,” he said.

There seemed to be just a trace of amusement in his voice.

“The last two people on my list were Richard Carey and Father Lavigny.

“According to the testimony of Nurse Leatheran and others, Mr. Carey and Mrs. Leidner disliked each other. They were both civil with an effort. Another person, Miss Reilly, propounded a totally different theory to account for their attitude of frigid politeness.

“I soon had very little doubt that Miss Reilly’s explanation was the correct one. I acquired my certitude by the simple expedient of provoking Mr. Carey into reckless and unguarded speech. It was not difficult. As I soon saw, he was in a state of high nervous tension. In fact he was—and is—very near a complete nervous breakdown. A man who is suffering up to the limit of his capacity can seldom put up much of a fight.

“Mr. Carey’s barriers came down almost immediately. He told me, with a sincerity that I did not for a moment doubt, that he hated Mrs. Leidner.

“And he was undoubtedly speaking the truth. He did hate Mrs. Leidner. But why did he hate her?

“I have spoken of women who have a calamitous magic. But men have that magic too. There are men who are able without the least effort to attract women. What they call in these days le sex appeal! Mr. Carey had this quality very strongly. He was to begin with devoted to his friend and employer, and indifferent to his employer’s wife. That did not suit Mrs. Leidner. She must dominate—and she set herself out to capture Richard Carey. But here, I believe, something entirely unforeseen took place. She herself for perhaps the first time in her life, fell a victim to an overmastering passion. She fell in love—really in love—with Richard Carey.

“And he—was unable to resist her. Here is the truth of the terrible state of nervous tension that he has been enduring. He has been a man torn by two opposing passions. He loved Louise Leidner—yes, but he also hated her. He hated her for undermining his loyalty to his friend. There is no hatred so great as that of a man who has been made to love a woman against his will.

“I had here all the motive that I needed. I was convinced that at certain moments the most natural thing for Richard Carey to do would have been to strike with all the force of his arm at the beautiful face that had cast a spell over him.

“All along I had felt sure that the murder of Louise Leidner was a crime passionnel. In Mr. Carey I had found an ideal murderer for that type of crime.

“There remains one other candidate for the title of murderer—Father Lavigny. My attention was attracted to the good Father straightaway by a certain discrepancy between his description of the strange man who had been seen peering in at the window and the one given by Nurse Leatheran. In all accounts given by different witnesses there is usually some discrepancy, but this was absolutely glaring. Moreover, Father Lavigny insisted on a certain characteristic—a squint—which ought to make identification much easier.

“But very soon it became apparent that while Nurse Leatheran’s description was substantially accurate, Father Lavigny’s was nothing of the kind. It looked almost as though Father Lavigny was deliberately misleading us—as though he did not want the man caught.

“But in that case he must know something about this curious person. He had been seen talking to the man but we had only his word for what they had been talking about.

“What had the Iraqi been doing when Nurse Leatheran and Mrs. Leidner saw him? Trying to peer through the window—Mrs. Leidner’s window, so they thought, but I realized when I went and stood where they had been, that it might equally have been the antika room window.

“The night after that an alarm was given. Someone was in the antika room. Nothing proved to have been taken, however. The interesting point to me is that when Dr. Leidner got there he found Father Lavigny there before him. Father Lavigny tells his story of seeing a light. But again we have only his word for it.

“I begin to get curious about Father Lavigny. The other day when I make the suggestion that Father Lavigny may be Frederick Bosner, Dr. Leidner pooh-poohs the suggestion. He says Father Lavigny is a well-known man. I advance the supposition that Frederick Bosner, who has had nearly twenty years to make a career for himself, under a new name, may very possibly be a well-known man by this time! All the same, I do not think that he has spent the intervening time in a religious community. A very much simpler solution presents itself.

“Did anyone at the expedition know Father Lavigny by sight before he came? Apparently not. Why then should not it be someone impersonating the good Father? I found out that a telegram had been sent to Carthage on the sudden illness of Dr. Byrd, who was to have accompanied the expedition. To intercept a telegram, what could be easier? As to the work, there was no other epigraphist attached to the expedition. With a smattering of knowledge a clever man might bluff his way through. There had been very few tablets and inscriptions so far, and already I gathered that Father Lavigny's pronouncements had been felt to be somewhat unusual.

"It looked very much as though Father Lavigny were an imposter.

"But was he Frederick Bosner?

"Somehow, affairs did not seem to be shaping themselves that way. The truth seemed likely to lie in quite a different direction.

"I had a lengthy conversation with Father Lavigny. I am a practising Catholic and I know many priests and members of religious communities. Father Lavigny struck me as not ringing quite true to his role. But he struck me, on the other hand, as familiar in quite a different capacity. I had met men of his type quite frequently—but they were not members of a religious community. Far from it!

"I began to send off telegrams.

"And then, unwittingly, Nurse Leatheran gave me a valuable clue. We were examining the gold ornaments in the antika room and she mentioned a trace of wax having been found adhering to a gold cup. Me, I say, 'Wax?' and Father Lavigny, he said 'Wax?' and his tone was enough! I knew in a flash exactly what he was doing here."

Poirot paused and addressed himself directly to Dr. Leidner.

"I regret to tell you, monsieur, that the gold cup in the antika room, the gold dagger, the hair ornaments and several other things are not the genuine articles found by you. They are very clever electrotypes. Father Lavigny, I have just learned by this last answer to my telegrams, is none other than Raoul Menier, one of the cleverest thieves known to the French police. He specializes in thefts from museums of objets d'art and such like. Associated with him is Ali Yusuf, a semi-Turk, who is a first-class working jeweller. Our first knowledge of Menier was when certain objects in the Louvre were found not to be genuine—in every case it was discovered that a distinguished archaeologist not known previously by sight to the director had recently had the handling of the spurious articles when paying a visit to the Louvre. On inquiry all these distinguished gentlemen denied having paid a visit to the Louvre at the times stated!

“I have learned that Menier was in Tunis preparing the way for a theft from the Holy Fathers when your telegram arrived. Father Lavigny, who was in ill health, was forced to refuse, but Menier managed to get hold of the telegram and substitute one of acceptance. He was quite safe in doing so. Even if the monks should read in some paper (in itself an unlikely thing) that Father Lavigny was in Iraq they would only think that the newspapers had got hold of a half-truth as so often happens.

“Menier and his accomplice arrived. The latter is seen when he is reconnoitring the antika room from outside. The plan is for Father Lavigny to take wax impressions. Ali then makes clever duplicates. There are always certain collectors who are willing to pay a good price for genuine antiques and will ask no embarrassing questions. Father Lavigny will effect the substitution of the fake for the genuine article—preferably at night.

“And that is doubtless what he was doing when Mrs. Leidner heard him and gave the alarm. What can he do? He hurriedly makes up a story of having seen a light in the antika room.

“That ‘went down,’ as you say, very well. But Mrs. Leidner was no fool. She may have remembered the trace of wax she had noticed and then put two and two together. And if she did, what will she do then? Would it not be dans son caracte“re to do nothing at once, but enjoy herself by letting hints slip to the discomfiture of Father Lavigny? She will let him see that she suspects—but not that she knows. It is, perhaps, a dangerous game, but she enjoys a dangerous game.

“And perhaps she plays that game too long. Father Lavigny sees the truth, and strikes before she realizes what he means to do.

“Father Lavigny is Raoul Menier—a thief. Is he also—a murderer?”

Poirot paced the room. He took out a handkerchief, wiped his forehead and went on: “That was my position this morning. There were eight distinct possibilities and I did not know which of these possibilities was the right one. I still did not know who was the murderer.

“But murder is a habit. The man or woman who kills once will kill again.

“And by the second murder, the murderer was delivered into my hands.

“All along it was ever present in the back of my mind that some one of these people might have knowledge that they had kept back—knowledge incriminating the murderer.

“If so, that person would be in danger.

“My solicitude was mainly on account of Nurse Leatheran. She had an energetic personality and a brisk inquisitive mind. I was terrified of her finding out more than it was safe for her to know.

“As you all know, a second murder did take place. But the victim was not Nurse Leatheran—it was Miss Johnson.

“I like to think that I should have reached the correct solution anyway by pure reasoning, but it is certain that Miss Johnson’s murder helped me to it much quicker.

“To begin with, one suspect was eliminated—Miss Johnson herself—for I did not for a moment entertain the theory of suicide.

“Let us examine now the facts of this second murder.

“Fact One: On Sunday evening Nurse Leatheran finds Miss Johnson in tears, and that same evening Miss Johnson burns a fragment of a letter which nurse believes to be in the same handwriting as that of the anonymous letters.

“Fact Two: The evening before her death Miss Johnson is found by Nurse Leatheran standing on the roof in a state that nurse describes as one of incredulous horror. When nurse questions her she says, ‘I’ve seen how someone could come in from outside—and no one would ever guess.’ She won’t say any more. Father Lavigny is crossing the courtyard and Mr. Reiter is at the door of the photographic room.

“Fact Three: Miss Johnson is found dying. The only words she can manage to articulate are ‘the window—the window—’

“Those are the facts, and these are the problems with which we are faced:

“What is the truth of the letters?

“What did Miss Johnson see from the roof?

“What did she mean by ‘the window—the window?’

“Eh bien, let us take the second problem first as the easiest of solution. I went up with Nurse Leatheran and I stood where Miss Johnson had stood. From there she could see the courtyard and the archway and the north side of the building and two members of the staff. Had her words anything to do with either Mr. Reiter or Father Lavigny?

“Almost at once a possible explanation leaped to my brain. If a stranger came in from outside he could only do so in disguise. And there was only one person whose general appearance lent itself to such an impersonation. Father Lavigny! With a sun helmet, sun glasses, black beard and a monk’s long woollen robe, a stranger could pass in without the servants realising that a stranger had entered.

“Was that Miss Johnson’s meaning? Or had she gone further? Did she realize that Father Lavigny’s whole personality was a disguise? That he was someone other than he pretended to be?

“Knowing what I did know about Father Lavigny, I was inclined to call the mystery solved. Raoul Menier was the murderer. He had killed Mrs. Leidner to silence her before she could give him away. Now another person lets him see that she has penetrated his secret. She, too, must be removed.

“And so everything is explained! The second murder. Father Lavigny’s flight—minus robe and beard. (He and his friend are doubtless careering through Syria with excellent passports as two commercial travellers.) His action in placing the blood-stained quern under Miss Johnson’s bed.

“As I say, I was almost satisfied—but not quite. For the perfect solution must explain everything—and this does not do so.

“It does not explain, for instance, why Miss Johnson should say ‘the window,’ as she was dying. It does not explain her fit of weeping over the letter. It does not explain her mental attitude on the roof—her incredulous horror and her refusal to tell Nurse Leatheran what it was that she now suspected or knew.

“It was a solution that fitted the outer facts, but it did not satisfy the psychological requirements.

“And then, as I stood on the roof, going over in my mind those three points: the letters, the roof, the window, I saw—just as Miss Johnson had seen!

“And this time what I saw explained everything!”

Twenty-eight

JOURNEY’S END

Poirot looked round. Every eye was now fixed upon him. There had been a certain relaxation—a slackening of tension. Now the tension suddenly returned.

There was something coming . . . something . . .

Poirot’s voice, quiet and unimpassioned, went on: “The letters, the roof, ‘the window’ . . . Yes, everything was explained—everything fell into place.

“I said just now that three men had alibis for the time of the crime. Two of those alibis I have shown to be worthless. I saw now my great—my amazing mistake. The third alibi was worthless too. Not only could Dr. Leidner have committed the murder—but I was convinced that he had committed it.”

There was a silence, a bewildered, uncomprehending silence. Dr. Leidner said nothing. He seemed lost in his faraway world still. David Emmott, however, stirred uneasily and spoke.

“I don’t know what you mean to imply, M. Poirot. I told you that Dr. Leidner never left the roof until at least a quarter to three. That is the absolute truth. I swear it solemnly. I am not lying. And it would have been quite impossible for him to have done so without my seeing him.”

Poirot nodded.

“Oh, I believe you. Dr. Leidner did not leave the roof. That is an undisputed fact. But what I saw—and what Miss Johnson had seen—was that Dr. Leidner could murder his wife from the roof without leaving it.”

We all stared.

“The window,” cried Poirot. “Her window! That is what I realized—just as Miss Johnson realized it. Her window was directly underneath, on the side away from the courtyard. And Dr. Leidner was alone up there with no one to witness his actions. And those heavy stone querns and grinders were up there all ready to his hand. So simple, so very simple, granted one thing—that the murderer had the opportunity to move the body before anyone else saw it . . . Oh, it is beautiful—of an unbelievable simplicity!

“Listen—it went like this:

“Dr. Leidner is on the roof working with the pottery. He calls you up, Mr. Emmott, and while he holds you in talk he notices that, as usually happens, the small boy takes advantage of your absence to leave his work and go outside the courtyard. He keeps you with him ten minutes, then he lets you go and as soon as you are down below shouting to the boy he sets his plan in operation.

“He takes from his pocket the plasticine-smeared mask with which he has already scared his wife on a former occasion and dangles it over the edge of the parapet till it taps on his wife’s window.

“That, remember, is the window giving on the countryside facing the opposite direction to the courtyard.

“Mrs. Leidner is lying on her bed half asleep. She is peaceful and happy. Suddenly the mask begins tapping on the window and attracts her attention. But it is not dusk now—it is broad daylight—there is nothing terrifying about it. She recognizes it for what it is—a crude form of trickery! She is not frightened but indignant. She does what any other woman would do in her place. Jumps off the bed, opens the window, passes her head through the bars and turns her face upward to see who is playing the trick on her.

“Dr. Leidner is waiting. He has in his hands, poised and ready, a heavy quern. At the psychological moment he drops it. . . .

“With a faint cry (heard by Miss Johnson) Mrs. Leidner collapses on the rug underneath the window.

“Now there is a hole in this quern, and through that Dr. Leidner had previously passed a cord. He has now only to haul in the cord and bring up the quern. He replaces the latter neatly, bloodstained side down, amongst the other objects of that kind on the roof.

“Then he continues his work for an hour or more till he judges the moment has come for the second act. He descends the stairs, speaks to Mr. Emmott and Nurse Leatheran, crosses the courtyard and enters his wife’s room. This is the explanation he himself gives of his movements there:

“ ‘I saw my wife’s body in a heap by the bed. For a moment or two I felt paralysed as though I couldn’t move. Then at last I went and knelt down by her and lifted up her head. I saw she was dead . . . At last I got up. I felt dazed and as though I were drunk. I managed to get to the door and call out.’

“A perfectly possible account of the actions of a grief-dazed man. Now listen to what I believe to be the truth. Dr. Leidner enters the room, hurries to the window, and, having pulled on a pair of gloves, closes and fastens it, then picks up his wife’s body and transports it to a position between the bed and the door. Then he notices a slight stain on the window-side rug. He cannot change it with the other rug, they are a different size, but he does the next best thing. He puts the stained rug in front of the washstand and the rug from the washstand under the window. If the stain is noticed, it will be connected with the washstand—not with the window—a very important point. There must be no suggestion that the window played any part in the business. Then he comes to the door and acts the part of the overcome husband, and that, I imagine, is not difficult. For he did love his wife.”

“My good man,” cried Dr. Reilly impatiently, “if he loved her, why did he kill her? Where’s the motive? Can’t you speak, Leidner? Tell him he’s mad.”

Dr. Leidner neither spoke nor moved.

Poirot said: “Did I not tell you all along that this was a crime passionnel? Why did her first husband, Frederick Bosner, threaten to kill her? Because he loved her . . . And in the end, you see, he made his boast good. . . .

“Mais oui—mais oui—once I realize that it is Dr. Leidner who did the killing, everything falls into place. . . .

“For the second time, I recommence my journey from the beginning—Mrs. Leidner’s first marriage—the threatening letters—her second marriage. The letters prevented her marrying any other man—but they did not prevent her marrying Dr. Leidner. How simple that is—if Dr. Leidner is actually Frederick Bosner.

“Once more let us start our journey—from the point of view this time of young Frederick Bosner.

“To begin with, he loves his wife Louise with an overpowering passion such as only a woman of her kind can evoke. She betrays him. He is sentenced to death. He escapes. He is involved in a railway accident but he manages to emerge with a second personality—that of a young Swedish archaeologist, Eric Leidner, whose body is badly disfigured and who will be conveniently buried as Frederick Bosner.

“What is the new Eric Leidner’s attitude to the woman who was willing to send him to his death? First and most important, he still loves her. He sets to work to build up his new life. He is a man of great ability, his profession is congenial to him and he makes a success of it. But he never forgets the ruling passion of his life. He keeps himself informed of his wife’s movements. Of one thing he is cold-bloodedly determined (remember Mrs. Leidner’s own description of him to Nurse Leatheran—gentle and kind but ruthless), she shall belong to no other man. Whenever he judges it necessary he despatches a letter. He imitates some of the peculiarities of her handwriting in case she should think of taking his letters to the police. Women who write sensational anonymous letters to themselves are such a common phenomenon that the police will be sure to jump to that solution given the likeness of the handwriting. At the same time he leaves her in doubt as to whether he is really alive or not.

“At last, after many years, he judges that the time has arrived; he reenters her life. All goes well. His wife never dreams of his real identity. He is a well-known man. The upstanding, good-looking young fellow is now a middle-aged man with a beard and stooping shoulders. And so we see history repeating itself. As before, Frederick is able to dominate Louise. For the second time she consents to marry him. And no letter comes to forbid the banns.

“But afterwards a letter does come. Why?

“I think that Dr. Leidner was taking no chances. The intimacy of marriage might awaken a memory. He wishes to impress on his wife, once and for all, that Eric Leidner and Frederick Bosner are two different people. So much so that a threatening letter comes from the former on account of the latter. The rather puerile gas poisoning business follows—arranged by Dr. Leidner, of course. Still with the same object in view.

“After that he is satisfied. No more letters need come. They can settle down to happy married life together.

“And then, after nearly two years, the letters recommence.

“Why? Eh bien, I think I know. Because the threat underlying the letters was always a genuine threat. (That is why Mrs. Leidner has always been frightened. She knew her Frederick’s gentle but ruthless nature.) If she belongs to any other man but him he would kill her. And she has given herself to Richard Carey.

“And so, having discovered this, cold-bloodedly, calmly, Dr. Leidner prepares the scene for murder.

“You see now the important part played by Nurse Leatheran? Dr. Leidner’s rather curious conduct (it puzzled me at the very first) in securing her services for his wife is explained. It was vital that a reliable professional witness should be able to state incontrovertibly that Mrs. Leidner had been dead over an hour when her body was found—that is, that she had been killed at a time when everybody could swear her husband was on the roof. A suspicion might have arisen that he had killed her when he entered the room and found the body—but that was out of the question when a trained hospital nurse would assert positively that she had already been dead an hour.

“Another thing that is explained is the curious state of tension and strain that had come over the expedition this year. I never from the first thought that that could be attributed solely to Mrs. Leidner’s influence. For several years this particular expedition had had a reputation for happy good fellowship. In my opinion, the state of mind of a community is always directly due to the influence of the man at the top. Dr. Leidner, quiet though he was, was a man of great personality. It was due to his tact, to his judgment, to his sympathetic manipulation of human beings that the atmosphere had always been such a happy one.

“If there was a change, therefore, the change must be due to the man at the top—in other words, to Dr. Leidner. It was Dr. Leidner, not Mrs. Leidner, who was responsible for the tension and uneasiness. No wonder the staff felt the change without understanding it. The kindly, genial Dr. Leidner, outwardly the same, was only playing the part of himself. The real man was an obsessed fanatic plotting to kill.

“And now we will pass on to the second murder—that of Miss Johnson. In tidying up Dr. Leidner’s papers in the office (a job she took on herself unasked, craving for something to do) she must have come on some unfinished draft of one of the anonymous letters.

“It must have been both incomprehensible and extremely upsetting to her! Dr. Leidner has been deliberately terrorizing his wife! She cannot understand it—but it upsets her badly. It is in this mood that Nurse Leatheran discovers her crying.

“I do not think at the moment that she suspected Dr. Leidner of being the murderer, but my experiments with sounds in Mrs. Leidner’s and Father Lavigny’s rooms are not lost upon her. She realizes that if it was Mrs. Leidner’s cry she heard, the window in her room must have been open, not shut. At the moment that conveys nothing vital to her, but she remembers it.

“Her mind goes on working—ferreting its way towards the truth. Perhaps she makes some reference to the letters which Dr. Leidner understands and his manner changes. She may see that he is, suddenly, afraid.

“But Dr. Leidner cannot have killed his wife! He was on the roof all the time.

“And then, one evening, as she herself is on the roof puzzling about it, the truth comes to her in a flash. Mrs. Leidner has been killed from up here, through the open window.

“It was at that minute that Nurse Leatheran found her.

“And immediately, her old affection reasserting itself, she puts up a quick camouflage. Nurse Leatheran must not guess the horrifying discovery she has just made.

“She looks deliberately in the opposite direction (towards the courtyard) and makes a remark suggested to her by Father Lavigny’s appearance as he crosses the courtyard.

“She refuses to say more. She has got to ‘think things out.’

“And Dr. Leidner, who has been watching her anxiously, realizes that she knows the truth. She is not the kind of woman to conceal her horror and distress from him.

“It is true that as yet she has not given him away—but how long can he depend upon her?

“Murder is a habit. That night he substitutes a glass of acid for her glass of water. There is just a chance she may be believed to have deliberately poisoned herself. There is even a chance she may be considered to have done the first murder and has now been overcome with remorse. To strengthen the latter idea he takes the quern from the roof and puts it under her bed.

"No wonder that poor Miss Johnson, in her death agony, could only try desperately to impart her hard-won information. Through 'the window,' that is how Mrs. Leidner was killed, not through the door—through the window. . . .

"And so thus, everything is explained, everything falls into place . . . Psychologically perfect.

"But there is no proof . . . No proof at all . . ."

None of us spoke. We were lost in a sea of horror . . . Yes, and not only horror. Pity, too.

Dr. Leidner had neither moved nor spoken. He sat just as he had done all along. A tired, worn elderly man.

At last he stirred slightly and looked at Poirot with gentle, tired eyes.

"No," he said, "there is no proof. But that does not matter. You knew that I would not deny truth . . . I have never denied truth . . . I think—really—I am rather glad . . . I'm so tired. . . ."

Then he said simply: "I'm sorry about Anne. That was bad—senseless—it wasn't me! And she suffered, too, poor soul. Yes, that wasn't me. It was fear. . . ."

A little smile just hovered on his pain-twisted lips.

"You would have made a good archaeologist, M. Poirot. You have the gift of recreating the past.

"It was all very much as you said.

"I loved Louise and I killed her . . . if you'd known Louise you'd have understood . . . No, I think you understand anyway. . . ."

Twenty-nine

L’ENVOI

There isn’t really any more to say about things.

They got “Father” Lavigny and the other man just as they were going to board a steamer at Beyrouth.

Sheila Reilly married young Emmott. I think that will be good for her. He’s no door-mat—he’ll keep her in her place. She’d have ridden roughshod over poor Bill Coleman.

I nursed him, by the way, when he had appendicitis a year ago. I got quite fond of him. His people were sending him out to farm in South Africa.

I’ve never been out East again. It’s funny—sometimes I wish I could. I think of the noise the water-wheel made and the women washing, and that queer haughty look that camels give you—and I get quite a homesick feeling. After all, perhaps dirt isn’t really so unhealthy as one is brought up to believe!

Dr. Reilly usually looks me up when he’s in England, and as I said, it’s he who’s got me into this. “Take it or leave it,” I said to him. “I know the grammar’s all wrong and it’s not properly written or anything like that—but there it is.”

And he took it. Made no bones about it. It will give me a queer feeling if it’s ever printed.

M. Poirot went back to Syria and about a week later he went home on the Orient Express and got himself mixed up in another murder. He was clever, I don’t deny it, but I shan’t forgive him in a hurry for pulling my leg the way he did. Pretending to think I might be mixed up in the crime and not a real hospital nurse at all!

Doctors are like that sometimes. Will have their joke, some of them will, and never think of your feelings!

I've thought and thought about Mrs. Leidner and what she was really like . . . Sometimes it seems to me she was just a terrible woman—and other times I remember how nice she was to me and how soft her voice was—and her lovely fair hair and everything—and I feel that perhaps, after all, she was more to be pitied than blamed. . . .

And I can't help but pity Dr. Leidner. I know he was a murderer twice over, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. He was so dreadfully fond of her. It's awful to be fond of anyone like that.

Somehow, the more I get older, and the more I see of people and sadness and illness and everything, the sorrier I get for everyone. Sometimes, I declare, I don't know what's becoming of the good, strict principles my aunt brought me up with. A very religious woman she was, and most particular. There wasn't one of our neighbours whose faults she didn't know backwards and forwards. . . .

Oh, dear, it's quite true what Dr. Reilly said. How does one stop writing? If I could find a really good telling phrase.

I must ask Dr. Reilly for some Arab one.

Like the one M. Poirot used.

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate . . .

Something like that.

Cards On The Table (1936)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Foreword

There is an idea prevalent that a detective story is rather like a big race—a number of starters—likely horses and jockeys. “You pays your money and you takes your choice!” The favourite is by common consent the opposite of a favourite on the race course. In other words he is likely to be a complete outsider! Spot the least likely person to have committed the crime and in nine times out of ten your task is finished.

Since I do not want my faithful readers to fling away this book in disgust, I prefer to warn them beforehand that this is not that kind of book. There are only four starters and any one of them, given the right circumstances, might have committed the crime. That knocks out forcibly the element of surprise. Nevertheless there should be, I think, an equal interest attached to four persons, each of whom has committed murder and is capable of committing further murders. They are four widely divergent types, the motive that drives each one of them to crime is peculiar to that person, and each one would employ a different method. The deduction must, therefore, be entirely psychological, but it is none the less interesting for that, because when all is said and done it is the mind of the murderer that is of supreme interest.

I may say, as an additional argument in favour of this story, that it was one of Hercule Poirot’s favourite cases. His friend, Captain Hastings, however, when Poirot described it to him, considered it very dull! I wonder with which of them my readers will agree.

image

One

MR. SHAITANA

“My dear M. Poirot!”

It was a soft purring voice—a voice used deliberately as an instrument—nothing impulsive or premeditated about it.

Hercule Poirot swung round.

He bowed.

He shook hands ceremoniously.

There was something in his eye that was unusual. One would have said that this chance encounter awakened in him an emotion that he seldom had occasion to feel.

“My dear Mr. Shaitana,” he said.

They both paused. They were like duellists en garde.

Around them a well-dressed languid London crowd eddied mildly. Voices drawled or murmured.

“Darling—exquisite!”

“Simply divine, aren’t they, my dear?”

It was the Exhibition of Snuffboxes at Wessex House. Admission one guinea, in aid of the London hospitals.

“My dear man,” said Mr. Shaitana, “how nice to see you! Not hanging or guillotining much just at present? Slack season in the criminal world? Or is there to be a robbery here this afternoon—that would be too delicious.”

“Alas, Monsieur,” said Poirot. “I came here in a purely private capacity.”

Mr. Shaitana was diverted for a moment by a Lovely Young Thing with tight poodle curls up one side of her head and three cornucopias in black straw on the other.

He said:

“My dear—why didn’t you come to my party? It really was a marvellous party! Quite a lot of people actually spoke to me! One woman even said, ‘How do you do,’ and ‘Good-bye’ and ‘Thank you so much’—but of course she came from a Garden City, poor dear!”

While the Lovely Young Thing made a suitable reply, Poirot allowed himself a good study of the hirsute adornment on Mr. Shaitana’s upper lip.

A fine moustache—a very fine moustache—the only moustache in London, perhaps, that could compete with that of M. Hercule Poirot.

“But it is not so luxuriant,” he murmured to himself. “No, decidedly it is inferior in every respect. Tout de même, it catches the eye.”

The whole of Mr. Shaitana’s person caught the eye—it was designed to do so. He deliberately attempted a Mephistophelian effect. He was tall and thin, his face was long and melancholy, his eyebrows were heavily accented and jet black, he wore a moustache with stiff waxed ends and a tiny black imperial. His clothes were works of art—of exquisite cut—but with a suggestion of bizarre.

Every healthy Englishman who saw him longed earnestly and fervently to kick him! They said, with a singular lack of originality, “There’s that damned Dago, Shaitana!”

Their wives, daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers, and even grandmothers said, varying the idiom according to their generation, words to this effect: “I know, my dear. Of course, he is too terrible. But so rich! And such marvellous parties! And he’s always got something amusing and spiteful to tell you about people.”

Whether Mr. Shaitana was an Argentine, or a Portuguese, or a Greek, or some other nationality rightly despised by the insular Briton, nobody knew.

But three facts were quite certain:

He existed richly and beautifully in a super flat in Park Lane.

He gave wonderful parties—large parties, small parties, macabre parties, respectable parties and definitely "queer" parties.

He was a man of whom nearly everybody was a little afraid.

Why this last was so can hardly be stated in definite words. There was a feeling, perhaps, that he knew a little too much about everybody. And there was a feeling, too, that his sense of humour was a curious one.

People nearly always felt that it would be better not to risk offending Mr. Shaitana.

It was his humour this afternoon to bait that ridiculous-looking little man, Hercule Poirot.

"So even a policeman needs recreation?" he said. "You study the arts in your old age, M. Poirot?"

Poirot smiled good-humouredly.

"I see," he said, "that you yourself have lent three snuffboxes to the Exhibition."

Mr. Shaitana waved a deprecating hand.

"One picks up trifles here and there. You must come to my flat one day. I have some interesting pieces. I do not confine myself to any particular period or class of object."

"Your tastes are catholic," said Poirot smiling.

"As you say."

Suddenly Mr. Shaitana's eyes danced, the corners of his lips curled up, his eyebrows assumed a fantastic tilt.

"I could even show you objects in your own line, M. Poirot!"

"You have then a private 'Black Museum.'"

"Bah!" Mr. Shaitana snapped disdainful fingers. "The cup used by the Brighton murderer, the jemmy of a celebrated burglar—absurd childishness! I should never burden myself with rubbish like that. I collect only the best objects of their kind."

"And what do you consider the best objects, artistically speaking, in crime?" inquired Poirot.

Mr. Shaitana leaned forward and laid two fingers on Poirot's shoulder. He hissed his words dramatically.

"The human beings who commit them, M. Poirot."

Poirot's eyebrows rose a trifle.

"Aha, I have startled you," said Mr. Shaitana. "My dear, dear man, you and I look on these things as from poles apart! For you crime is a matter of routine: a murder, an investigation, a clue, and ultimately (for you are undoubtedly an able fellow) a conviction. Such banalities would not interest me! I am not interested in poor specimens of any kind. And the caught murderer is necessarily one of the failures. He is second-rate. No, I look on the matter from the artistic point of view. I collect only the best!"

"The best being—?" asked Poirot.

"My dear fellow—the ones who have got away with it! The successes! The criminals who lead an agreeable life which no breath of suspicion has ever touched. Admit that is an amusing hobby."

"It was another word I was thinking of—not amusing."

“An idea!” cried Shaitana, paying no attention to Poirot. “A little dinner! A dinner to meet my exhibits! Really, that is a most amusing thought. I cannot think why it has never occurred to me before. Yes—yes, I see it exactly … You must give me a little time—not next week—let us say the week after next. You are free? What day shall we say?”

“Any day of the week after next would suit me,” said Poirot with a bow.

“Good—then let us say Friday. Friday the 18th, that will be. I will write it down at once in my little book. Really, the idea pleases me enormously.”

“I am not quite sure if it pleases me,” said Poirot slowly. “I do not mean that I am insensible to the kindness of your invitation—no—not that—”

Shaitana interrupted him.

“But it shocks your bourgeois sensibilities? My dear fellow, you must free yourself from the limitations of the policeman mentality.”

Poirot said slowly:

“It is true that I have a thoroughly bourgeois attitude to murder.”

“But, my dear, why? A stupid, bungled, butchering business—yes, I agree with you. But murder can be an art! A murderer can be an artist.”

“Oh, I admit it.”

“Well then?” Mr. Shaitana asked.

“But he is still a murderer!”

“Surely, my dear M. Poirot, to do a thing supremely well is a justification! You want, very unimaginatively, to take every murderer, handcuff him, shut him up, and eventually break his neck for him in the early hours of the morning. In my opinion a really successful murderer should be granted a pension out of the public funds and asked out to dinner!”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not as insensitive to art in crime as you think. I can admire the perfect murder—I can also admire a tiger—that splendid tawny-striped beast. But I will admire him from outside his cage. I will not go inside. That is to say, not unless it is my duty to do so. For you see, Mr. Shaitana, the tiger might spring…."

Mr. Shaitana laughed.

"I see. And the murderer?"

"Might murder," said Poirot gravely.

"My dear fellow—what an alarmist you are! Then you will not come to meet my collection of—tigers?"

"On the contrary, I shall be enchanted."

"How brave!"

"You do not quite understand me, Mr. Shaitana. My words were in the nature of a warning. You asked me just now to admit that your idea of a collection of murderers was amusing. I said I could think of another word other than amusing. That word was dangerous. I fancy, Mr. Shaitana, that your hobby might be a dangerous one!"

Mr. Shaitana laughed, a very Mephistophelian laugh.

He said:

"I may expect you, then, on the 18th?"

Poirot gave a little bow.

"You may expect me on the 18th. Mille remerciments."

"I shall arrange a little party," mused Shaitana. "Do not forget. Eight o'clock."

He moved away. Poirot stood a minute or two looking after him.

He shook his head slowly and thoughtfully.

Two

DINNER AT MR. SHAITANA’S

The door of Mr. Shaitana’s flat opened noiselessly. A grey-haired butler drew it back to let Poirot enter. He closed it equally noiselessly and deftly relieved the guest of his overcoat and hat.

He murmured in a low expressionless voice:

“What name shall I say?”

“M. Hercule Poirot.”

There was a little hum of talk that eddied out into the hall as the butler opened a door and announced:

“M. Hercule Poirot.”

Sherry glass in hand, Shaitana came forward to meet him. He was, as usual, immaculately dressed. The Mephistophelian suggestion was heightened tonight, the eyebrows seemed accentuated in their mocking twist.

“Let me introduce you—do you know Mrs. Oliver?”

The showman in him enjoyed the little start of surprise that Poirot gave.

Mrs. Ariadne Oliver was extremely well-known as one of the foremost writers of detective and other sensational stories. She wrote chatty (if not particularly grammatical) articles on The Tendency of the Criminal; Famous Crimes Passionnels; Murder for Love v. Murder for Gain. She was also a hotheaded feminist, and when any murder of importance was occupying space in the Press there was sure to be an interview with Mrs. Oliver, and it was mentioned that Mrs. Oliver had said, “Now if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard!” She was an earnest believer in woman’s intuition.

For the rest she was an agreeable woman of middle age, handsome in a rather untidy fashion with fine eyes, substantial shoulders and a large quantity of rebellious grey hair with which she was continually experimenting. One day her appearance would be highly intellectual—a brow with the hair scraped back from it and coiled in a large bun in the neck—on another Mrs. Oliver would suddenly appear with Madonna loops, or large masses of slightly untidy curls. On this particular evening Mrs. Oliver was trying out a fringe.

She greeted Poirot, whom she had met before at a literary dinner, in an agreeable bass voice.

“And Superintendent Battle you doubtless know,” said Mr. Shaitana.

A big, square, wooden-faced man moved forward. Not only did an onlooker feel that Superintendent Battle was carved out of wood—he also managed to convey the impression that the wood in question was the timber out of a battleship.

Superintendent Battle was supposed to be Scotland Yard’s best representative. He always looked stolid and rather stupid.

“I know M. Poirot,” said Superintendent Battle.

And his wooden face creased into a smile and then returned to its former unexpressiveness.

“Colonel Race,” went on Mr. Shaitana.

Poirot had not previously met Colonel Race, but he knew something about him. A dark, handsome, deeply bronzed man of fifty, he was usually to be found in some outpost of empire—especially if there were trouble brewing. Secret Service is a melodramatic term, but it described pretty accurately to the lay mind the nature and scope of Colonel Race’s activities.

Poirot had by now taken in and appreciated the particular essence of his host’s humorous intentions.

"Our other guests are late," said Mr. Shaitana. "My fault, perhaps. I believe I told them 8:15."

But at that moment the door opened and the butler announced:

"Dr. Roberts."

The man who came in did so with a kind of parody of a brisk bedside manner. He was a cheerful, highly-coloured individual of middle age. Small twinkling eyes, a touch of baldness, a tendency to embonpoint and a general air of well-scrubbed and disinfected medical practitioner. His manner was cheerful and confident. You felt that his diagnosis would be correct and his treatments agreeable and practical—"a little champagne in convalescence perhaps." A man of the world!

"Not late, I hope?" said Dr. Roberts genially.

He shook hands with his host and was introduced to the others. He seemed particularly gratified at meeting Battle.

"Why, you're one of the big noises at Scotland Yard, aren't you? This is interesting! Too bad to make you talk shop but I warn you I shall have a try at it. Always been interested in crime. Bad thing for a doctor, perhaps. Mustn't say so to my nervous patients—ha ha!"

Again the door opened.

"Mrs. Lorrimer."

Mrs. Lorrimer was a well-dressed woman of sixty. She had finely cut features, beautifully arranged grey hair, and a clear, incisive voice.

"I hope I'm not late," she said, advancing to her host.

She turned from him to greet Dr. Roberts, with whom she was acquainted.

The butler announced:

"Major Despard."

Major Despard was a tall, lean, handsome man, his face slightly marred by a scar on the temple. Introductions completed, he gravitated naturally to the side of Colonel Race—and the two men were soon talking sport and comparing their experiences on safari.

For the last time the door opened and the butler announced:

“Miss Meredith.”

A girl in the early twenties entered. She was of medium height and pretty. Brown curls clustered in her neck, her grey eyes were large and wide apart. Her face was powdered but not made-up. Her voice was slow and rather shy.

She said:

“Oh dear, am I the last?”

Mr. Shaitana descended on her with sherry and an ornate and complimentary reply. His introductions were formal and almost ceremonious.

Miss Meredith was left sipping her sherry by Poirot’s side.

“Our friend is very punctilious,” said Poirot with a smile.

The girl agreed.

“I know. People rather dispense with introductions nowadays. They just say ‘I expect you know everybody’ and leave it at that.”

“Whether you do or you don’t?”

“Whether you do or don’t. Sometimes it makes it awkward—but I think this is more awe-inspiring.”

She hesitated and then said:

“Is that Mrs. Oliver, the novelist?”

Mrs. Oliver’s bass voice rose powerfully at that minute, speaking to Dr. Roberts.

“You can’t get away from a woman’s instinct, doctor. Women know these things.”

Forgetting that she no longer had a brow she endeavoured to sweep her hair back from it but was foiled by the fringe.

“That is Mrs. Oliver,” said Poirot.

“The one who wrote The Body in the Library?”

“That identical one.”

Miss Meredith frowned a little.

“And that wooden-looking man—a superintendent did Mr. Shaitana say?”

“From Scotland Yard.”

“And you?”

“And me?”

“I know all about you, M. Poirot. It was you who really solved the A.B.C. crimes.”

“Madamoiselle, you cover me with confusion.”

Miss Meredith drew her brows together.

“Mr. Shaitana,” she began and then stopped. “Mr. Shaitana—”

Poirot said quietly:

“One might say he was ‘crime-minded.’ It seems so. Doubtless he wishes to hear us dispute ourselves. He is already egging on Mrs. Oliver and Dr. Roberts. They are now discussing untraceable poisons.”

Miss Meredith gave a little gasp as she said:

“What a queer man he is!”

“Dr. Roberts?”

“No, Mr. Shaitana.”

She shivered a little and said:

“There’s always something a little frightening about him, I think. You never know what would strike him as amusing. It might—it might be something cruel.”

“Such as foxhunting, eh?”

Miss Meredith threw him a reproachful glance.

“I meant—oh! something Oriental!”

“He has perhaps the tortuous mind,” admitted Poirot.

“Torturer’s?”

“No, no tortuous, I said.”

“I don’t think I like him frightfully,” confided Miss Meredith, her voice dropping.

“You will like his dinner, though,” Poirot assured her. “He has a marvellous cook.”

She looked at him doubtfully and then laughed.

“Why,” she exclaimed, “I believe you are quite human.”

“But certainly I am human!”

"You see," said Miss Meredith, "all these celebrities are rather intimidating."

"Mademoiselle, you should not be intimidated—you should be thrilled! You should have all ready your autograph book and your fountain pen."

"Well, you see, I'm not really terribly interested in crime. I don't think women are: it's always men who read detective stories."

Hercule Poirot sighed affectedly.

"Alas!" he murmured. "What would I not give at this minute to be even the most minor of film stars!"

The butler threw the door open.

"Dinner is served," he murmured.

Poirot's prognostication was amply justified. The dinner was delicious and its serving perfection. Subdued light, polished wood, the blue gleam of Irish glass. In the dimness, at the head of the table, Mr. Shaitana looked more than ever diabolical.

He apologized gracefully for the uneven number of the sexes.

Mrs. Lorrimer was on his right hand, Mrs. Oliver on his left. Miss Meredith was between Superintendent Battle and Major Despard. Poirot was between Mrs. Lorrimer and Dr. Roberts.

The latter murmured facetiously to him.

"You're not going to be allowed to monopolize the only pretty girl all the evening. You French fellows, you don't waste your time, do you?"

"I happen to be Belgian," murmured Poirot.

"Same thing where the ladies are concerned, I expect, my boy," said the doctor cheerfully.

Then, dropping the facetiousness, and adopting a professional tone, he began to talk to Colonel Race on his other side about the latest developments in the treatment of sleeping sickness.

Mrs. Lorrimer turned to Poirot and began to talk of the latest plays. Her judgements were sound and her criticisms apt. They drifted on to books and then to world politics. He found her a well-informed and thoroughly intelligent woman.

On the opposite side of the table Mrs. Oliver was asking Major Despard if he knew of any unheard-of-out-of-the-way poisons.

“Well, there’s curare.”

“My dear man, vieux jeu! That’s been done hundreds of times. I mean something new!”

Major Despard said drily:

“Primitive tribes are rather old-fashioned. They stick to the good old stuff their grandfathers and great-grandfathers used before them.”

“Very tiresome of them,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I should have thought they were always experimenting with pounding up herbs and things. Such a chance for explorers, I always think. They could come home and kill off all their rich old uncles with some new drug that no one’s ever heard of.”

“You should go to civilization, not to the wilds for that,” said Despard. “In the modern laboratory, for instance. Cultures of innocent-looking germs that will produce bona fide diseases.”

“That wouldn’t do for my public,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Besides one is so apt to get the names wrong—staphylococcus and streptococcus and all those things—so difficult for my secretary and anyway rather dull, don’t you think so? What do you think, Superintendent Battle?”

“In real life people don’t bother about being too subtle, Mrs. Oliver,” said the superintendent. “They usually stick to arsenic because it’s nice and handy to get hold of.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That’s simply because there are lots of crimes you people at Scotland Yard never find out. Now if you had a woman there—”

“As a matter of fact we have—”

“Yes, those dreadful policewomen in funny hats who bother people in parks! I mean a woman at the head of things. Women know about crime.”

“They’re usually very successful criminals,” said Superintendent Battle. “Keep their heads well. It’s amazing how they’ll brazen things out.”

Mr. Shaitana laughed gently.

“Poison is a woman’s weapon,” he said. “There must be many secret women poisoners—never found out.”

“Of course there are,” said Mrs. Oliver happily, helping herself lavishly to a mousse of foie gras.

“A doctor, too, has opportunities,” went on Mr. Shaitana thoughtfully.

“I protest,” cried Dr. Roberts. “When we poison our patients it’s entirely by accident.” He laughed heartily.

“But if I were to commit a crime,” went on Mr. Shaitana.

He stopped, and something in that pause compelled attention.

All faces were turned to him.

“I should make it very simple, I think. There’s always an accident—a shooting accident, for instance—or the domestic kind of accident.”

Then he shrugged his shoulders and picked up his wineglass.

“But who am I to pronounce—with so many experts present….”

He drank. The candlelight threw a red shade from the wine onto his face with its waxed moustache, its little imperial, its fantastic eyebrows….

There was a momentary silence.

Mrs. Oliver said:

“Is it twenty-to or twenty past? An angel passing … My feet aren’t crossed—it must be a black angel!”

Three

A GAME OF BRIDGE

When the company returned to the drawing room a bridge table had been set out. Coffee was handed round.

“Who plays bridge?” asked Mr. Shaitana. “Mrs. Lorrimer, I know. And Dr. Roberts. Do you play, Miss Meredith?”

“Yes. I’m not frightfully good, though.”

“Excellent. And Major Despard? Good. Supposing you four play here.”

“Thank goodness there’s to be bridge,” said Mrs. Lorrimer in an aside to Poirot. “I’m one of the worst bridge fiends that ever lived. It’s growing on me. I simply will not go out to dinner now if there’s no bridge afterwards! I just fall asleep. I’m ashamed of myself, but there it is.”

They cut for partners. Mrs. Lorrimer was partnered with Anne Meredith against Major Despard and Dr. Roberts.

“Women against men,” said Mrs. Lorrimer as she took her seat and began shuffling the cards in an expert manner. “The blue cards, don’t you think, partner? I’m a forcing two.”

“Mind you win,” said Mrs. Oliver, her feminist feelings rising. “Show the men they can’t have it all their own way.”

“They haven’t got a hope, the poor dears,” said Dr. Roberts cheerfully as he started shuffling the other pack. “Your deal, I think, Mrs. Lorrimer.”

Major Despard sat down rather slowly. He was looking at Anne Meredith as though he had just made the discovery that she was remarkably pretty.

“Cut, please,” said Mrs. Lorrimer impatiently. And with a start of apology he cut the pack she was presenting to him.

Mrs. Lorrimer began to deal with a practised hand.

“There is another bridge table in the other room,” said Mr. Shaitana.

He crossed to a second door and the other four followed him into a small comfortably furnished smoking room where a second bridge table was set ready.

“We must cut out,” said Colonel Race.

Mr. Shaitana shook his head.

“I do not play,” he said. “Bridge is not one of the games that amuse me.”

The others protested that they would much rather not play, but he overruled them firmly and in the end they sat down. Poirot and Mrs. Oliver against Battle and Race.

Mr. Shaitana watched them for a little while, smiled in a Mephistophelian manner as he observed on what hand Mrs. Oliver declared Two No Trumps, and then went noiselessly through into the other room.

There they were well down to it, their faces serious, the bids coming quickly. “One heart.” “Pass.” “Three clubs.” “Three spades.” “Four diamonds.” “Double.” “Four hearts.”

Mr. Shaitana stood watching a moment, smiling to himself.

Then he crossed the room and sat down in a big chair by the fireplace. A tray of drinks had been brought in and placed on an adjacent table. The firelight gleamed on the crystal stoppers.

Always an artist in lighting, Mr. Shaitana had simulated the appearance of a merely firelit room. A small shaded lamp at his elbow gave him light to read by if he so desired. Discreet floodlighting gave the room a subdued look. A slightly stronger light shone over the bridge table, from whence the monotonous ejaculations continued.

“One no trump”—clear and decisive—Mrs. Lorrimer.

“Three hearts”—an aggressive note in the voice—Dr. Roberts.

“No bid”—a quiet voice—Anne Meredith’s.

A slight pause always before Despard’s voice came. Not so much a slow thinker as a man who liked to be sure before he spoke.

“Four hearts.”

“Double.”

His face lit up by the flickering firelight, Mr. Shaitana smiled.

He smiled and he went on smiling. His eyelids flickered a little….

His party was amusing him.

II

“Five diamonds. Game and rubber,” said Colonel Race.

“Good for you, partner,” he said to Poirot. “I didn’t think you’d do it. Lucky they didn’t lead a spade.”

“Wouldn’t have made much difference, I expect,” said Superintendent Battle, a man of gentle magnanimity.

He had called spades. His partner, Mrs. Oliver, had had a spade, but “something had told her” to lead a club—with disastrous results.

Colonel Race looked at his watch.

“Ten past twelve. Time for another?”

“You’ll excuse me,” said Superintendent Battle. “But I’m by way of being an ‘early-to-bed’ man.”

“I, too,” said Hercule Poirot.

“We’d better add up,” said Race.

The result of the evening’s five rubbers was an overwhelming victory for the male sex. Mrs. Oliver had lost three pounds and seven shillings to the other three. The biggest winner was Colonel Race.

Mrs. Oliver, though a bad bridge player, was a sporting loser. She paid up cheerfully.

“Everything went wrong for me tonight,” she said. “It is like that sometimes. I held the most beautiful cards yesterday. A hundred and fifty honours three times running.”

She rose and gathered up her embroidered evening bag, just refraining in time from stroking her hair off her brow.

“I suppose our host is next door,” she said.

She went through the communicating door, the others behind her.

Mr. Shaitana was in his chair by the fire. The bridge players were absorbed in their game.

“Double five clubs,” Mrs. Lorrimer was saying in her cool, incisive voice.

“Five No Trumps.”

“Double five No Trumps.”

Mrs. Oliver came up to the bridge table. This was likely to be an exciting hand.

Superintendent Battle came with her.

Colonel Race went towards Mr. Shaitana, Poirot behind him.

“Got to be going, Shaitana,” said Race.

Mr. Shaitana did not answer. His head had fallen forward, and he seemed to be asleep. Race gave a momentary whimsical glance at Poirot and went a little nearer. Suddenly he uttered a muffled exclamation, bent forward. Poirot was beside him in a minute, he, too, looking where Colonel Race was pointing—something that might have been a particularly ornate shirt stud—but was not….

Poirot bent, raised one of Mr. Shaitana’s hands, then let it fall. He met Race’s inquiring glance and nodded. The latter raised his voice.

“Superintendent Battle, just a minute.”

The superintendent came over to them. Mrs. Oliver continued to watch the play of Five No Trumps doubled.

Superintendent Battle, despite his appearance of stolidity, was a very quick man. His eyebrows went up and he said in a low voice as he joined them:

“Something wrong?”

With a nod Colonel Race indicated the silent figure in the chair.

As Battle bent over it, Poirot looked thoughtfully at what he could see of Mr. Shaitana’s face. Rather a silly face it looked now, the mouth drooping open—the devilish expression lacking….

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

Superintendent Battle straightened himself. He had examined, without touching, the thing which looked like an extra stud in Mr. Shaitana’s shirt—and it was not an extra stud. He had raised the limp hand and let it fall.

Now he stood up, unemotional, capable, soldierly—prepared to take charge efficiently of the situation.

“Just a minute, please,” he said.

And the raised voice was his official voice, so different that all the heads at the bridge table turned to him, and Anne Meredith’s hand remained poised over an ace of spades in dummy.

“I’m sorry to tell you all,” he said, “that our host, Mr. Shaitana, is dead.”

Mrs. Lorrimer and Dr. Roberts rose to their feet. Despard stared and frowned. Anne Meredith gave a little gasp.

“Are you sure, man?”

Dr. Roberts, his professional instincts aroused, came briskly across the floor with a bounding medical “in-at-the-death” step.

Without seeming to, the bulk of Superintendent Battle impeded his progress.

“Just a minute, Dr. Roberts. Can you tell me first who’s been in and out of this room this evening?”

Roberts stared at him.

“In and out? I don’t understand you. Nobody has.”

The superintendent transferred his gaze.

“Is that right, Mrs. Lorrimer?”

“Quite right.”

“Not the butler nor any of the servants?”

“No. The butler brought in that tray as we sat down to bridge. He has not been in since.”

Superintendent Battle looked at Despard.

Despard nodded in agreement.

Anne said rather breathlessly, “Yes—yes, that’s right.”

“What’s all this, man,” said Roberts impatiently. “Just let me examine him; maybe just a fainting fit.”

“It isn’t a fainting fit, and I’m sorry—but nobody’s going to touch him until the divisional surgeon comes. Mr. Shaitana’s been murdered, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Murdered?” A horrified incredulous sigh from Anne.

A stare—a very blank stare—from Despard.

A sharp incisive “Murdered?” from Mrs. Lorrimer.

A “Good God!” from Dr. Roberts.

Superintendent Battle nodded his head slowly. He looked rather like a Chinese porcelain mandarin. His expression was quite blank.

“Stabbed,” he said. “That’s the way of it. Stabbed.”

Then he shot out a question:

“Any of you leave the bridge table during the evening?”

He saw four expressions break up—waver. He saw fear—comprehension—indignation—dismay—horror; but he saw nothing definitely helpful.

“Well?”

There was a pause, and then Major Despard said quietly (he had risen now and was standing like a soldier on parade, his narrow, intelligent face turned to Battle):

“I think every one of us, at one time or another, moved from the bridge table—either to get drinks or to put wood on the fire. I did both. When I went to the fire Shaitana was asleep in the chair.”

“Asleep?”

“I thought so—yes.”

“He may have been,” said Battle. “Or he may have been dead then. We’ll go into that presently. I’ll ask you now to go into the room next door.” He turned to the quiet figure at his elbow: “Colonel Race, perhaps you’ll go with them?”

Race gave a quick nod of comprehension.

“Right, Superintendent.”

The four bridge players went slowly through the doorway.

Mrs. Oliver sat down in a chair at the far end of the room and began to sob quietly.

Battle took up the telephone receiver and spoke. Then he said:

“The local police will be round immediately. Orders from headquarters are that I’m to take on the case. Divisional surgeon will be here almost at once. How long should you say he’d been dead, M. Poirot? I’d say well over an hour myself.”

“I agree. Alas, that one cannot be more exact—that one cannot say, ‘This man has been dead one hour, twenty-five minutes and forty seconds.’”

Battle nodded absently.

“He was sitting right in front of the fire. That makes a slight difference. Over an hour—not more than two and a half: that’s what our doctor will say, I’ll be bound. And nobody heard anything and nobody saw anything. Amazing! What a desperate chance to take. He might have cried out.”

“But he did not. The murderer’s luck held. As you say, mon ami, it was a very desperate business.”

“Any idea, M. Poirot, as to motive? Anything of that kind?”

Poirot said slowly:

“Yes, I have something to say on that score. Tell me, M. Shaitana—he did not give you any hint of what kind of a party you were coming to tonight?”

Superintendent Battle looked at him curiously.

“No, M. Poirot. He didn’t say anything at all. Why?”

A bell whirred in the distance and a knocker was plied.

“That’s our people,” said Superintendent Battle. “I’ll go and let ’em in. We’ll have your story presently. Must get on with the routine work.”

Poirot nodded.

Battle left the room.

Mrs. Oliver continued to sob.

Poirot went over to the bridge table. Without touching anything, he examined the scores. He shook his head once or twice.

“The stupid little man! Oh, the stupid little man,” murmured Hercule Poirot. “To dress up as the devil and try to frighten people. Quel enfantillage!”

The door opened. The divisional surgeon came in, bag in hand. He was followed by the divisional inspector, talking to Battle. A camera man came next. There was a constable in the hall.

The routine of the detection of crime had begun.

Four

FIRST MURDERER?

Hercule Poirot, Mrs. Oliver, Colonel Race and Superintendent Battle sat round the dining room table.

It was an hour later. The body had been examined, photographed and removed. A fingerprint expert had been and gone.

Superintendent Battle looked at Poirot.

“Before I have those four in, I want to hear what you’ve got to tell me. According to you there was something behind this party tonight?”

Very deliberately and carefully Poirot retold the conversation he had held with Shaitana at Wessex House.

Superintendent Battle pursed his lips. He very nearly whistled.

“Exhibits—eh? Murderers all alive oh! And you think he meant it? You don’t think he was pulling your leg?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Oh, no, he meant it. Shaitana was a man who prided himself on his Mephistophelian attitude to life. He was a man of great vanity. He was also a stupid man—that is why he is dead.”

“I get you,” said Superintendent Battle, following things out in his mind. “A party of eight and himself. Four ‘sleuths,’ so to speak—and four murderers!”

“It’s impossible!” cried Mrs. Oliver. “Absolutely impossible. None of those people can be criminals.”

Superintendent Battle shook his head thoughtfully.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, Mrs. Oliver. Murderers look and behave very much like everybody else. Nice, quiet, well-behaved, reasonable folk very often.”

“In that case, it’s Dr. Roberts,” said Mrs. Oliver firmly. “I felt instinctively that there was something wrong with that man as soon as I saw him. My instincts never lie.”

Battle turned to Colonel Race.

Race shrugged his shoulders. He took the question as referring to Poirot’s statment and not to Mrs. Oliver’s suspicions.

“It could be,” he said. “It could be. It shows that Shaitana was right in one case at least! After all, he can only have suspected that these people were murderers—he can’t have been sure. He may have been right in all four cases, he may have been right in only one case—but he was right in one case; his death proved that.”

“One of them got the wind up. Think that’s it, M. Poirot?”

Poirot nodded.

“The late Mr. Shaitana had a reputation,” he said. “He had a dangerous sense of humour, and was reputed to be merciless. The victim thought that Shaitana was giving himself an evening’s amusement, leading up to a moment when he’d hand the victim over to the police—you! He (or she) must have thought that Shaitana had definite evidence.”

“Had he?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“That we shall never know.”

“Dr. Roberts!” repeated Mrs. Oliver firmly. “Such a hearty man. Murderers are often hearty—as a disguise! If I were you, Superintendent Battle, I should arrest him at once.”

“I daresay we would if there was a Woman at the Head of Scotland Yard,” said Superintendent Battle, a momentary twinkle showing in his unemotional eye. “But, you see, mere men being in charge, we’ve got to be careful. We’ve got to get there slowly.”

“Oh, men—men,” sighed Mrs. Oliver, and began to compose newspaper articles in her head.

“Better have them in now,” said Superintendent Battle. “It won’t do to keep them hanging about too long.”

Colonel Race half rose.

“If you’d like us to go—”

Superintendent Battle hesitated a minute as he caught Mrs. Oliver’s eloquent eye. He was well aware of Colonel Race’s official position, and Poirot had worked with the police on many occasions. For Mrs. Oliver to remain was decidedly stretching a point. But Battle was a kindly man. He remembered that Mrs. Oliver had lost three pounds and seven shillings at bridge, and that she had been a cheerful loser.

“You can all stay,” he said, “as far as I’m concerned. But no interruptions, please (he looked at Mrs. Oliver), and there mustn’t be a hint of what M. Poirot has just told us. That was Shaitana’s little secret, and to all intents and purposes it died with him. Understand?”

“Perfectly,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Battle strode to the door and called the constable who was on duty in the hall.

“Go to the little smoking room. You’ll find Anderson there with four guests. Ask Dr. Roberts if he’ll be so good as to step this way.”

“I should have kept him to the end,” said Mrs. Oliver. “In a book, I mean,” she added apologetically.

“Real life’s a bit different,” said Battle.

"I know," said Mrs. Oliver. "Badly constructed."

Dr. Roberts entered with the springiness of his step slightly subdued.

"I say, Battle," he said. "This is the devil of a business! Excuse me, Mrs. Oliver, but it is. Professionally speaking, I could hardly have believed it! To stab a man with three other people a few yards away." He shook his head. "Whew! I wouldn't like to have done it!" A slight smile twitched up the corners of his mouth. "What can I say or do to convince you that I didn't do it?"

"Well, there's motive, Dr. Roberts."

The doctor nodded his head emphatically.

"That's all clear. I hadn't the shadow of a motive for doing away with poor Shaitana. I didn't even know him very well. He amused me—he was such a fantastic fellow. Touch of the Oriental about him. Naturally, you'll investigate my relations with him closely—I expect that. I'm not a fool. But you won't find anything. I'd no reason for killing Shaitana, and I didn't kill him."

Superintendent Battle nodded woodenly.

"That's all right, Dr. Roberts. I've got to investigate as you know. You're a sensible man. Now, can you tell me anything about the other three people?"

"I'm afraid I don't know very much. Despard and Miss Meredith I met for the first time tonight. I knew of Despard before—read his travel book, and a jolly good yarn it is."

"Did you know that he and Mr. Shaitana were acquainted?"

"No. Shaitana never mentioned him to me. As I say, I'd heard of him, but never met him. Miss Meredith I've never seen before. Mrs. Lorrimer I know slightly."

"What do you know about her?"

Roberts shrugged his shoulders.

“She’s a widow. Moderately well off. Intelligent, well-bred woman—first-class bridge player. That’s where I’ve met her, as a matter of fact—playing bridge.”

“And Mr. Shaitana never mentioned her, either?”

“No.”

“H’m—that doesn’t help us much. Now, Dr. Roberts, perhaps you’ll be so kind as to tax your memory carefully and tell me how often you yourself left your seat at the bridge table, and all you can remember about the movements of the others.”

Dr. Roberts took a few minutes to think.

“It’s difficult,” he said frankly. “I can remember my own movements, more or less. I got up three times—that is, on three occasions when I was dummy I left my seat and made myself useful. Once I went over and put wood on the fire. Once I brought drinks to the two ladies. Once I poured out a whisky and soda for myself.”

“Can you remember the times?”

“I could only say very roughly. We began to play about nine thirty, I imagine. I should say it was about an hour later that I stoked the fire, quite a short time after that I fetched the drinks (next hand but one, I think), and perhaps half past eleven when I got myself a whisky and soda—but those times are quite approximate. I couldn’t answer for their being correct.”

“The table with the drinks was beyond Mr. Shaitana’s chair?”

“Yes. That’s to say, I passed quite near him three times.”

“And each time, to the best of your belief, he was asleep?”

“That’s what I thought the first time. The second time I didn’t even look at him. Third time I rather fancy the thought just passed through my mind:

‘How the beggar does sleep.’ But I didn’t really look closely at him.”

“Very good. Now, when did your fellow players leave their seats?”

Dr. Roberts frowned.

“Difficult—very difficult. Despard went and fetched an extra ashtray, I think. And he went for a drink. That was before me, for I remember he asked me if I’d have one, and I said I wasn’t quite ready.”

“And the ladies?”

“Mrs. Lorrimer went over to the fire once. Poked it, I think. I rather fancy she spoke to Shaitana, but I don’t know. I was playing a rather tricky no trump at the time.”

“And Miss Meredith?”

“She certainly left the table once. Came round and looked at my hand—I was her partner at the time. Then she looked at the other people’s hands, and then she wandered round the room. I don’t know what she was doing exactly. I wasn’t paying attention.”

Superintendent Battle said thoughtfully:

“As you were sitting at the bridge table, no one’s chair was directly facing the fireplace?”

“No, sort of sideways on, and there was a big cabinet between—Chinese piece, very handsome. I can see, of course, that it would be perfectly possible to stab the old boy. After all, when you’re playing bridge, you’re playing bridge. You’re not looking round you, and noticing what is going on. The only person who’s likely to be doing that is dummy. And in this case—”

“In this case, undoubtedly, dummy was the murderer,” said Superintendent Battle.

"All the same," said Dr. Roberts, "it wanted nerve, you know. After all, who is to say that somebody won't look up just at the critical moment?"

"Yes," said Battle. "It was a big risk. The motive must have been a strong one. I wish we knew what it was," he added with unblushing mendacity.

"You'll find out, I expect," said Roberts. "You'll go through his papers, and all that sort of thing. There will probably be a clue."

"We'll hope so," said Superintendent Battle gloomily.

He shot a keen glance at the other.

"I wonder if you'd oblige me, Dr. Roberts, by giving me a personal opinion—as man to man."

"Certainly."

"Which do you fancy yourself of the three?"

Dr. Roberts shrugged his shoulders.

"That's easy. Offhand, I'd say Despard. The man's got plenty of nerve; he's used to a dangerous life where you've got to act quickly. He wouldn't mind taking a risk. It doesn't seem to me likely the women are in on this. Take a bit of strength, I should imagine."

"Not so much as you might think. Take a look at this."

Rather like a conjurer, Battle suddenly produced a long thin instrument of gleaming metal with a small round jewelled head.

Dr. Roberts leaned forward, took it, and examined it with rich professional appreciation. He tried the point and whistled.

"What a tool! What a tool! Absolutely made for murder, this little boy. Go in like butter—absolutely like butter. Brought it with him, I suppose."

"No. It was Mr. Shaitana's. It lay on the table near the door with a good many other knickknacks."

"So the murderer helped himself. A bit of luck finding a tool like that."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it," said Battle slowly.

"Well, of course, it wasn't luck for Shaitana, poor fellow."

"I didn't mean that, Dr. Roberts. I meant that there was another angle of looking at the business. It occurs to me that it was noticing this weapon that put the idea of murder into our criminal's mind."

"You mean it was a sudden inspiration—that the murder wasn't premeditated? He conceived the idea after he got here? Er—anything to suggest that idea to you?"

He glanced at him searchingly.

"It's just an idea," said Superintendent Battle stolidly.

"Well, it might be so, of course," said Dr. Roberts slowly.

Superintendent Battle cleared his throat.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer, doctor. Thank you for your help. Perhaps you'll leave your address."

"Certainly. 200 Gloucester Terrace, W. 2. Telephone No. Bayswater 23896."

"Thank you. I may have to call upon you shortly."

"Delighted to see you anytime. Hope there won't be too much in the papers. I don't want my nervous patients upset."

Superintendent Battle looked round at Poirot.

“Excuse me, M. Poirot. If you’d like to ask any questions, I’m sure the doctor wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course not. Of course not. Great admirer of yours, M. Poirot. Little grey cells—order and method. I know all about it. I feel sure you’ll think of something most intriguing to ask me.”

Hercule Poirot spread out his hands in his most foreign manner.

“No, no. I just like to get all the details clear in my mind. For instance, how many rubbers did you play?”

“Three,” said Roberts promptly. “We’d got to one game all, in the fourth rubber, when you came in.”

“And who played with who?”

“First rubber, Despard and I against the ladies. They beat us, God bless ’em. Walk over; we never held a card.

“Second rubber, Miss Meredith and I against Despard and Mrs. Lorrimer. Third rubber, Mrs. Lorrimer and I against Miss Meredith and Despard. We cut each time, but it worked out like a pivot. Fourth rubber, Miss Meredith and I again.”

“Who won and who lost?”

“Mrs. Lorrimer won every rubber. Miss Meredith won the first and lost the next two. I was a bit up and Miss Meredith and Despard must have been down.”

Poirot said, smiling, “The good superintendent has asked you your opinion of your companions as candidates for murder. I now ask you for your opinion of them as bridge players.”

“Mrs. Lorrimer’s first class,” Dr. Roberts replied promptly. “I’ll bet she makes a good income a year out of bridge. Despard’s a good player, too—what I call a sound player—longheaded chap. Miss Meredith you might describe as quite a safe player. She doesn’t make mistakes, but she isn’t brilliant.”

“And you yourself, doctor?”

Roberts’ eyes twinkled.

“I overcall my hand a bit, or so they say. But I’ve always found it pays.”

Poirot smiled.

Dr. Roberts rose.

“Anything more?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Well, goodnight, then. Goodnight, Mrs. Oliver. You ought to get some copy out of this. Better than your untraceable poisons, eh?”

Dr. Roberts left the room, his bearing springy once more. Mrs. Oliver said bitterly as the door closed behind him:

“Copy! Copy indeed! People are so unintelligent. I could invent a better murder any day than anything real. I’m never at a loss for a plot. And the people who read my books like untraceable poisons!”

Five

SECOND MURDERER?

Mrs. Lorrimer came into the dining room like a gentlewoman. She looked a little pale, but composed.

“I’m sorry to have to bother you,” Superintendent Battle began.

“You must do your duty, of course,” said Mrs. Lorrimer quietly. “It is, I agree, an unpleasant position in which to be placed, but there is no good shirking it. I quite realize that one of the four people in that room must be guilty. Naturally, I can’t expect you to take my word that I am not the person.”

She accepted the chair that Colonel Race offered her and sat down opposite the superintendent. Her intelligent grey eyes met his. She waited attentively.

“You knew Mr. Shaitana well?” began the superintendent.

“Not very well. I have known him over a period of some years, but never intimately.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“At a hotel in Egypt—the Winter Palace at Luxor, I think.”

“What did you think of him?”

Mrs. Lorrimer shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“I thought him—I may as well say so—rather a charlatan.”

“You had—excuse me for asking—no motive for wishing him out of the way?”

Mrs. Lorrimer looked slightly amused.

“Really, Superintendent Battle, do you think I should admit it if I had?”

“You might,” said Battle. “A really intelligent person might know that a thing was bound to come out.”

Mrs. Lorrimer inclined her head thoughtfully.

“There is that, of course. No, Superintendent Battle, I had no motive for wishing Mr. Shaitana out of the way. It is really a matter of indifference to me whether he is alive or dead. I thought him a poseur, and rather theatrical, and sometimes he irritated me. That is—or rather was—my attitude towards him.”

“That is that, then. Now, Mrs. Lorrimer, can you tell me anything about your three companions?”

“I’m afraid not. Major Despard and Miss Meredith I met for the first time tonight. Both of them seem charming people. Dr. Roberts I know slightly. He’s a very popular doctor, I believe.”

“He is not your own doctor?”

“Oh, no.”

“Now, Mrs. Lorrimer, can you tell me how often you got up from your seat tonight, and will you also describe the movements of the other three?”

Mrs. Lorrimer did not take any time to think.

“I thought you would probably ask me that. I have been trying to think it out. I got up once myself when I was dummy. I went over to the fire. Mr. Shaitana was alive then. I mentioned to him how nice it was to see a wood fire.”

“And he answered?”

“That he hated radiators.”

“Did anyone overhear your conversation?”

“I don’t think so. I lowered my voice, not to interrupt the players.” She added dryly: “In fact, you have only my word for it that Mr. Shaitana was alive and spoke to me.”

Superintendent Battle made no protest. He went on with his quiet methodical questioning.

“What time was that?”

“I should think we had been playing a little over an hour.”

“What about the others?”

“Dr. Roberts got me a drink. He also got himself one—that was later. Major Despard also went to get a drink—at about 11:15, I should say.”

“Only once?”

“No—twice, I think. The men moved about a fair amount—but I didn’t notice what they did. Miss Meredith left her seat once only, I think. She went round to look at her partner’s hand.”

“But she remained near the bridge table?”

“I couldn’t say at all. She may have moved away.”

Battle nodded.

“It’s all very vague,” he grumbled.

“I am sorry.”

Once again Battle did his conjuring trick and produced the long delicate stiletto.

“Will you look at this, Mrs. Lorrimer?”

Mrs. Lorrimer took it without emotion.

“Have you ever seen that before?”

“Never.”

“Yet it was lying on a table in the drawing room.”

“I didn’t notice it.”

“You realize, perhaps, Mrs. Lorrimer, that with a weapon like that a woman could do the trick just as easily as a man.”

“I suppose she could,” said Mrs. Lorrimer quietly.

She leaned forward and handed the dainty little thing back to him.

“But all the same,” said Superintendent Battle, “the woman would have to be pretty desperate. It was a long chance to take.”

He waited a minute, but Mrs. Lorrimer did not speak.

“Do you know anything of the relations between the other three and Mr. Shaitana?”

She shook her head.

“Nothing at all.”

“Would you care to give me an opinion as to which of them you consider the most likely person?”

Mrs. Lorrimer drew herself up stiffly.

“I should not care to do anything of the kind. I consider that a most improper question.”

The superintendent looked like an abashed little boy who has been reprimanded by his grandmother.

“Address, please,” he mumbled, drawing his notebook towards him.

“111 Cheyne Lane, Chelsea.”

“Telephone number?”

“Chelsea 45632.”

Mrs. Lorrimer rose.

“Anything you want to ask, M. Poirot?” said Battle hurriedly.

Mrs. Lorrimer paused, her head slightly inclined.

“Would it be a proper question, madame, to ask you your opinion of your companions, not as potential murderers but as bridge players?”

Mrs. Lorrimer answered coldly:

“I have no objection to answering that—if it bears upon the matter at issue in any way—though I fail to see how it can.”

“I will be the judge of that. Your answer, if you please, madame.”

In the tone of a patient adult humouring an idiot child, Mrs. Lorrimer replied:

“Major Despard is a good sound player. Dr. Roberts overcalls, but plays his hand brilliantly. Miss Meredith is quite a nice little player, but a bit too cautious. Anything more?”

In his turn doing a conjuring trick, Poirot produced four crumpled bridge scores.

“These scores, madame, is one of these yours?”

She examined them.

“This is my writing. It is the score of the third rubber.”

“And this score?”

“That must be Major Despard’s. He cancels as he goes.”

“And this one?”

“Miss Meredith’s. The first rubber.”

“So this unfinished one is Dr. Roberts’?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, madame, I think that is all.”

Mrs. Lorrimer turned to Mrs. Oliver.

“Goodnight, Mrs. Oliver. Goodnight, Colonel Race.”

Then, having shaken hands with all four of them, she went out.

Six

THIRD MURDERER?

“Didn’t get any extra change out of her,” commented Battle. “Put me in my place, too. She’s the old-fashioned kind, full of consideration for others, but arrogant as the devil! I can’t believe she did it, but you never know! She’s got plenty of resolution. What’s the idea of the bridge scores, M. Poirot?”

Poirot spread them on the table.

“They are illuminating, do you not think? What do we want in this case? A clue to character. And a clue not to one character, but to four characters. And this is where we are most likely to find it—in these scribbled figures. Here is the first rubber, you see—a tame business, soon over. Small neat figures—careful addition and subtraction—that is Miss Meredith’s score. She was playing with Mrs. Lorrimer. They had the cards, and they won.

“In this next one it is not so easy to follow the play, since it is kept in the cancellation style. But it tells us perhaps something about Major Despard—a man who likes the whole time to know at a glance where he stands. The figures are small and full of character.

image

image

“This next score is Mrs. Lorrimer’s—she and Dr. Roberts against the other two—a Homeric combat—figures mounting up above the line each side. Overcalling on the doctor’s part, and they go down; but, since they are both first-class players, they never go down very much. If the doctor’s overcalling induces rash bidding on the other side there is the chance seized of doubling. See—these figures here are doubled tricks gone down. A characteristic handwriting, graceful, very legible, firm.

"Here is the last score—the unfinished rubber. I collected one score in each person's handwriting, you see. Figures rather flamboyant. Not such high scores as the preceding rubber. That is probably because the doctor was playing with Miss Meredith, and she is a timid player. His calling would make her more so!

"You think, perhaps, that they are foolish, these questions that I ask? But it is not so. I want to get at the characters of these four players, and when it is only about bridge I ask, everyone is ready and willing to speak."

"I never think your questions foolish, M. Poirot," said Battle. "I've seen too much of your work. Everyone's got their own ways of working. I know that. I give my inspectors a free hand always. Everyone's got to find out for themselves what method suits them best. But we'd better not discuss that now. We'll have the girl in."

Anne Meredith was upset. She stopped in the doorway. Her breath came unevenly.

Superintendent Battle was immediately fatherly. He rose, set a chair for her at a slightly different angle.

"Sit down, Miss Meredith, sit down, Now, don't be alarmed. I know all this seems rather dreadful, but it's not so bad, really."

"I don't think anything could be worse," said the girl in a low voice. "It's so awful—so awful—to think that one of us—that one of us—"

"You let me do the thinking," said Battle kindly. "Now, then, Miss Meredith, suppose we have your address first of all."

"Wendon Cottage, Wallingford."

"No address in town?"

"No, I'm staying at my club for a day or two."

"And your club is?"

“Ladies’ Naval and Military.”

“Good. Now, then, Miss Meredith, how well did you know Mr. Shaitana?”

“I didn’t know him well at all. I always thought he was a most frightening man.”

“Why?”

“Oh, well he was! That awful smile! And a way he had of bending over you. As though he might bite you.”

“Had you known him long?”

“About nine months. I met him in Switzerland during the winter sports.”

“I should never have thought he went in for winter sports,” said Battle, surprised.

“He only skated. He was a marvellous skater. Lots of figures and tricks.”

“Yes, that sounds more like him. And did you see much of him after that?”

“Well—a fair amount. He asked me to parties and things like that. They were rather fun.”

“But you didn’t like him himself?”

“No, I thought he was a shivery kind of man.”

Battle said gently:

“But you’d no special reason for being afraid of him?”

Anne Meredith raised wide limpid eyes to his.

“Special reason? Oh, no.”

“That’s all right, then. Now about tonight. Did you leave your seat at all?”

"I don't think so. Oh, yes, I may have done once. I went round to look at the others' hands."

"But you stayed by the bridge table all the time?"

"Yes."

"Quite sure, Miss Meredith?"

The girl's cheeks flamed suddenly.

"No—no, I think I walked about."

"Right. You'll excuse me, Miss Meredith, but try and speak the truth. I know you're nervous, and when one's nervous one's apt to—well, to say the thing the way you want it to be. But that doesn't really pay in the end. You walked about. Did you walk over in the direction of Mr. Shaitana?"

The girl was silent for a minute, then she said:

"Honestly—honestly—I don't remember."

"Well, we'll leave it that you may have done. Know anything about the other three?"

The girl shook her head.

"I've never seen any of them before."

"What do you think of them? Any likely murderers amongst them?"

"I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. It couldn't be Major Despard. And I don't believe it could be the doctor—after all, a doctor could kill anyone in much easier ways. A drug—or something like that."

"Then, if it's anyone, you think it's Mrs. Lorrimer."

"Oh, I don't. I'm sure she wouldn't. She's so charming—and so kind to play bridge with. She's so good herself, and yet she doesn't make one feel nervous, or point out one’s mistakes.”

“Yet you left her name to the last,” said Battle.

“Only because stabbing seems somehow more like a woman.”

Battle did his conjuring trick. Anne Meredith shrank back.

“Oh, horrible. Must I—take it?”

“I’d rather you did.”

He watched her as she took the stiletto gingerly, her face contracted with repulsion.

“With this tiny thing—with this—”

“Go in like butter,” said Battle with gusto. “A child could do it.”

“You mean—you mean”—wide, terrified eyes fixed themselves on his face—“that I might have done it? But I didn’t. Why should I?”

“That’s just the question we’d like to know,” said Battle. “What’s the motive? Why did anyone want to kill Shaitana? He was a picturesque person, but he wasn’t dangerous, as far as I can make out.”

Was there a slight indrawing of her breath—a sudden lifting of her breast?

“Not a blackmailer, for instance, or anything of that sort?” went on Battle. “And anyway, Miss Meredith, you don’t look the sort of girl who’s got a lot of guilty secrets.”

For the first time she smiled, reassured by his geniality.

“No, indeed I haven’t. I haven’t got any secrets at all.”

“Then don’t worry, Miss Meredith. We shall have to come round and ask you a few more questions, I expect, but it will be all a matter of routine.”

He got up.

“Now off you go. My constable will get you a taxi; and don’t you lie awake worrying yourself. Take a couple of aspirins.”

He ushered her out. As he came back Colonel Race said in a low, amused voice:

“Battle, what a really accomplished liar you are! Your fatherly air was unsurpassed.”

“No good dallying about with her, Colonel Race. Either the poor kid is dead scared—in which case it’s cruelty, and I’m not a cruel man; I never have been—or she’s a highly accomplished little actress, and we shouldn’t get any further if we were to keep her here half the night.”

Mrs. Oliver gave a sigh and ran her hands freely through her fringe until it stood upright and gave her a wholly drunken appearance.

“Do you know,” she said, “I rather believe now that she did it! It’s lucky it’s not in a book. They don’t really like the young and beautiful girl to have done it. All the same, I rather think she did. What do you think, M. Poirot?”

“Me, I have just made a discovery.”

“In the bridge scores again?”

“Yes, Miss Anne Meredith turns her score over, draws lines and uses the back.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means she has the habit of poverty or else is of a naturally economical turn of mind.”

“She’s expensively dressed,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Send in Major Despard,” said Superintendent Battle.

Seven

FOURTH MURDERER?

Despard entered the room with a quick springing step—a step that reminded Poirot of something or someone.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting all this while, Major Despard,” said Battle. “But I wanted to let the ladies get away as soon as possible.”

“Don’t apologize. I understand.”

He sat down and looked inquiringly at the superintendent.

“How well did you know Mr. Shaitana?” began the latter.

“I’ve met him twice,” said Despard crisply.

“Only twice?”

“That’s all.”

“On what occasions?”

“About a month ago we were both dining at the same house. Then he asked me to a cocktail party a week later.”

“A cocktail party here?”

“Yes.”

“Where did it take place—this room or the drawing room?”

“In all the rooms.”

“See this little thing lying about?”

Battle once more produced the stiletto.

Major Despard’s lip twisted slightly.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t mark it down on that occasion for future use.”

“There’s no need to go ahead of what I say, Major Despard.”

“I beg your pardon. The inference was fairly obvious.”

There was a moment’s pause, then Battle resumed his inquiries.

“Had you any motive for disliking Mr. Shaitana?”

“Every motive.”

“Eh?” The superintendent sounded startled.

“For disliking him—not for killing him,” said Despard. “I hadn’t the least wish to kill him, but I would thoroughly have enjoyed kicking him. A pity. It’s too late now.”

“Why did you want to kick him, Major Despard?”

“Because he was the sort of Dago who needed kicking badly. He used to make the toe of my boot fairly itch.”

“Know anything about him—to his discredit, I mean?”

“He was too well dressed—he wore his hair too long—and he smelt of scent.”

“Yet you accepted his invitation to dinner,” Battle pointed out.

“If I were only to dine in houses where I thoroughly approved of my host I’m afraid I shouldn’t dine out very much, Superintendent Battle,” said Despard drily.

“You like society, but you don’t approve of it?” suggested the other.

“I like it for very short periods. To come back from the wilds to lighted rooms and women in lovely clothes, to dancing and good food and laughter—yes, I enjoy that—for a time. And then the insincerity of it all sickens me, and I want to be off again.”

“It must be a dangerous sort of life that you lead, Major Despard, wandering about in these wild places.”

Despard shrugged his shoulders. He smiled slightly.

“Mr. Shaitana didn’t lead a dangerous life—but he is dead, and I am alive!”

“He may have led a more dangerous life than you think,” said Battle meaningly.

“What do you mean?”

“The late Mr. Shaitana was a bit of a Nosey Parker,” said Battle.

The other leaned forward.

“You mean that he meddled with other people’s lives—that he discovered—what?”

“I really meant that perhaps he was the sort of man who meddled—er—well, with women.”

Major Despard leant back in his chair. He laughed, an amused but indifferent laugh.

“I don’t think women would take a mountebank like that seriously.”

“What’s your theory of who killed him, Major Despard?”

“Well, I know I didn’t. Little Miss Meredith didn’t. I can’t imagine Mrs. Lorrimer doing so—she reminds me of one of my more God-fearing aunts. That leaves the medical gentleman.”

“Can you describe your own and other people’s movements this evening?”

"I got up twice—once for an ashtray, and I also poked the fire—and once for a drink—"

"At what times?"

"I couldn't say. First time might have been about half past ten, the second time eleven, but that's pure guesswork. Mrs. Lorrimer went over to the fire once and said something to Shaitana. I didn't actually hear him answer, but, then, I wasn't paying attention. I couldn't swear he didn't. Miss Meredith wandered about the room a bit, but I don't think she went over near the fireplace. Roberts was always jumping up and down—three or four times at least."

"I'll ask you M. Poirot's question," said Battle with a smile. "What did you think of them as bridge players?"

"Miss Meredith's quite a good player. Roberts overcalls his hand disgracefully. He deserves to go down more than he does. Mrs. Lorrimer's damned good."

Battle turned to Poirot.

"Anything else, M. Poirot?"

Poirot shook his head.

Despard gave his address as the Albany, wished them goodnight and left the room.

As he closed the door behind him, Poirot made a slight movement.

"What is it?" demanded Battle.

"Nothing," said Poirot. "It just occurred to me that he walked like a tiger—yes, just so—lithe, easy, does the tiger move along."

"H'm!" said Battle. "Now, then"—his eyes glanced round at his three companions—"which of 'em did it?"

Eight

WHICH OF THEM?

Battle looked from one face to another. Only one person answered his question. Mrs. Oliver, never averse to giving her views, rushed into speech.

“The girl or the doctor,” she said.

Battle looked questioningly at the other two. But both the men were unwilling to make a pronouncement. Race shook his head. Poirot carefully smoothed his crumpled bridge scores.

“One of ’em did it,” said Battle musingly. “One of ’em’s lying like hell. But which? It’s not easy—no, it’s not easy.”

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

“If we’re to go by what they say, the medico thinks Despard did it, Despard thinks the medico did it, the girl thinks Mrs. Lorrimer did it—and Mrs. Lorrimer won’t say! Nothing very illuminating there.”

“Perhaps not,” said Poirot.

Battle shot him a quick glance.

“You think there is?”

Poirot waved an airy hand.

“A nuance—nothing more! Nothing to go upon.”

Battle continued:

“You two gentlemen won’t say what you think—”

“No evidence,” said Race curtly.

“Oh, you men!” sighed Mrs. Oliver, despising such reticence.

“Let’s look at the rough possibilities,” said Battle. He considered a minute. “I put the doctor first, I think. Specious sort of customer. Would know the right spot to shove the dagger in. But there’s not much more than that to it. Then take Despard. There’s a man with any amount of nerve. A man accustomed to quick decisions and a man who’s quite at home doing dangerous things. Mrs. Lorrmier? She’s got any amount of nerve, too, and she’s the sort of woman who might have a secret in her life. She looks as though she’s known trouble. On the other hand, I’d say she’s what I call a high-principled woman—sort of woman who might be headmistress of a girls’ school. It isn’t easy to think of her sticking a knife into anyone. In fact, I don’t think she did. And lastly, there’s little Miss Meredith. We don’t know anything about her. She seems an ordinary good-looking, rather shy girl. But one doesn’t know, as I say, anything about her.”

“We know that Shaitana believed she had committed murder,” said Poirot.

“The angelic face masking the demon,” mused Mrs. Oliver.

“This getting us anywhere, Battle?” asked Colonel Race.

“Unprofitable speculation, you think, sir? Well, there’s bound to be speculation in a case like this.”

“Isn’t it better to find out something about these people?”

Battle smiled.

“Oh, we shall be hard at work on that. I think you could help us there.”

“Certainly. How?”

“As regards Major Despard. He’s been abroad a lot—in South America, in East Africa, in South Africa—you’ve means of knowing those parts. You could get information about him.”

Race nodded.

“It shall be done. I’ll get all available data.”

“Oh,” cried Mrs. Oliver. “I’ve got a plan. There are four of us—four sleuths, as you might say—and four of them! How would it be if we each took one. Backed our fancy! Colonel Race takes Major Despard, Superintendent Battle takes Dr. Roberts, I’ll take Anne Meredith, and M. Poirot takes Mrs. Lorrimer. Each of us to follow our own line!”

Superintendent Battle shook his head decisively.

“Couldn’t quite do that, Mrs. Oliver. That is official, you see. I’m in charge. I’ve got to investigate all lines. Besides, it’s all very well to say back your fancy. Two of us might want to back the same horse! Colonel Race hasn’t said he suspects Major Despard. And M. Poirot mayn’t be putting his money on Mrs. Lorrimer.”

Mrs. Oliver sighed.

“It was such a good plan,” she sighed regretfully. “So neat.” Then she cheered up a little. “But you don’t mind me doing a little investigating on my own, do you?”

“No,” said Superintendent Battle slowly. “I can’t say I object to that. In fact, it’s out of my power to object. Having been at this party tonight, you’re naturally free to do anything your own curiosity or interest suggests. But I’d like to point out to you, Mrs. Oliver, that you’d better be a little careful.”

“Discretion itself,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I shan’t breathe a word of—of anything—” she ended a little lamely.

“I do not think that was quite Superintendent Battle’s meaning,” said Hercule Poirot. “He meant that you will be dealing with a person who has already, to the best of our belief, killed twice. A person, therefore, who will not hesitate to kill a third time—if he considers it necessary.”

Mrs. Oliver looked at him thoughtfully. Then she smiled—an agreeable engaging smile, rather like that of an impudent small child.

"YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED," she quoted. "Thank you, M. Poirot. I'll watch my step. But I'm not going to be out of this."

Poirot bowed gracefully.

"Permit me to say—you are the sport, madame."

"I presume," said Mrs. Oliver, sitting up very straight and speaking in a businesslike committee-meeting manner, "that all information we receive will be pooled—that is that we will not keep any knowledge to ourselves. Our own deductions and impressions, of course, we are entitled to keep up our sleeves."

Superintendent Battle sighed.

"This isn't a detective story, Mrs. Oliver," he said.

Race said:

"Naturally, all information must be handed over to the police."

Having said this in his most "Orderly Room" voice, he added with a slight twinkle in his eye: "I'm sure you'll play fair, Mrs. Oliver—the stained glove, the fingerprint on the tooth glass, the fragment of burnt paper—you'll turn them over to Battle here."

"You may laugh," said Mrs. Oliver. "But a woman's intuition—"

She nodded her head with decision.

Race rose to his feet.

"I'll have Despard looked up for you. It may take a little time. Anything else I can do?"

"I don't think so, thank you, sir. You've no hints? I'd value anything of that kind."

"H'm. Well—I'd keep a special lookout for shooting or poison or accidents, but I expect you're onto that already."

"I'd made a note of that—yes, sir."

"Good man, Battle. You don't need me to teach you your job. Goodnight, Mrs. Oliver. Goodnight, M. Poirot."

And with a final nod to Battle, Colonel Race left the room.

"Who is he?" asked Mrs. Oliver.

"Very fine Army record," said Battle. "Travelled a lot, too. Not many parts of the world he doesn't know about."

"Secret Service, I suppose," said Mrs. Oliver. "You can't tell me so—I know; but he wouldn't have been asked otherwise this evening. The four murderers and the four sleuths—Scotland Yard. Secret Service. Private. Fiction. A clever idea."

Poirot shook his head.

"You are in error, madame. It was a very stupid idea. The tiger was alarmed—and the tiger sprang."

"The tiger? Why the tiger?"

"By the tiger I mean the murderer," said Poirot.

Battle said bluntly:

"What's your idea of the right line to take, M. Poirot? That's one question. And I'd also like to know what you think of the psychology of these four people. You're rather hot on that."

Still smoothing his bridge scores, Poirot said:

"You are right—psychology is very important. We know the kind of murder that has been committed, the way it was committed. If we have a person who from the psychological point of view could not have committed that particular type of murder, then we can dismiss that person from our calculations. We know something about these people. We have our own impression of them, we know the line that each has elected to take, and we know something about their minds and their characters from what we have learned about them as card players and from the study of their handwriting and of these scores. But alas! it is not too easy to give a definite pronouncement. This murder required audacity and nerve—a person who was willing to take a risk. Well, we have Dr. Roberts—a bluffer—an overcaller of his hand—a man with complete confidence in his own powers to pull off a risky thing. His psychology fits very well with the crime. One might say, then, that that automatically wipes out Miss Meredith. She is timid, frightened of overcalling her hand, careful, economical, prudent and lacking in self-confidence. The last type of person to carry out a bold and risky coup. But a timid person will murder out of fear. A frightened nervous person can be made desperate, can turn like a rat at bay if driven into a corner. If Miss Meredith had committed a crime in the past, and if she believed that Mr. Shaitana knew the circumstances of that crime and was about to deliver her up to justice she would be wild with terror—she would stick at nothing to save herself. It would be the same result, though brought about through a different reaction—not cool nerve and daring, but desperate panic. Then take Major Despard—a cool, resourceful man willing to try a long shot if he believed it absolutely necessary. He would weigh the pros and cons and might decide that there was a sporting chance in his favour—and he is the type of man to prefer action to inaction, and a man who would never shrink from taking the dangerous way if he believed there was a reasonable chance of success. Finally, there is Mrs. Lorrimer, an elderly woman, but a woman in full possession of her wits and faculties. A cool woman. A woman with a mathematical brain. She has probably the best brain of the four. I confess that if Mrs. Lorrimer committed a crime, I should expect it to be a premeditated crime. I can see her planning a crime slowly and carefully, making sure that there were no flaws in her scheme. For that reason she seems to me slightly more unlikely than the other three. She is, however, the most dominating personality, and whatever she undertook she would probably carry through without a flaw. She is a thoroughly efficient woman.”

He paused:

"So you see, that does not help us much. No—there is only one way in this crime. We must go back into the past."

Battle sighed.

"You've said it," he murmured.

"In the opinion of Mr. Shaitana, each of those four people had committed murder. Had he evidence? Or was it a guess? We cannot tell. It is unlikely, I think, that he could have had actual evidence in all four cases—"

"I agree with you there," said Battle, nodding his head. "That would be a bit too much of a coincidence."

"I suggest that it might come about this way—murder or a certain form of murder is mentioned, and Mr. Shaitana surprised a look on someone's face. He was very quick—very sensitive to expression. It amuses him to experiment—to probe gently in the course of apparently aimless conversation—he is alert to notice a wince, a reservation, a desire to turn the conversation. Oh, it is easily done. If you suspect a certain secret, nothing is easier than to confirm your suspicion. Every time a word goes home you notice it—if you are watching for such a thing."

"It's the sort of game that would have amused our late friend," said Battle, nodding.

"We may assume, then, that such was the procedure in one or more cases. He may have come across a piece of actual evidence in another case and followed it up. I doubt whether, in any of the cases, he had sufficient actual knowledge with which, for instance, to have gone to the police."

"Or it mayn't have been the kind of case," said Battle. "Often enough there's a fishy business—we suspect foul play, but we can't ever prove it. Anyway, the course is clear. We've got to go through the records of all these people—and note any deaths that may be significant. I expect you noticed, just as the Colonel did, what Shaitana said at dinner."

“The black angel,” murmured Mrs. Oliver.

“A neat little reference to poison, to accident, to a doctor’s opportunities, to shooting accidents. I shouldn’t be surprised if he signed his death warrant when he said those words.”

“It was a nasty sort of pause,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Yes,” said Poirot. “Those words went home to one person at least—that person probably thought that Shaitana knew far more than he really did. That listener thought that they were the prelude to the end—that the party was a dramatic entertainment arranged by Shaitana leading up to arrest for murder as its climax! Yes, as you say, he signed his death warrant when he baited his guests with those words.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“This will be a long business,” said Battle with a sigh. “We can’t find out all we want in a moment—and we’ve got to be careful. We don’t want any of the four to suspect what we’re doing. All our questioning and so on must seem to have to do with this murder. There mustn’t be a suspicion that we’ve got any idea of the motive for the crime. And the devil of it is we’ve got to check up on four possible murders in the past, not one.”

Poirot demurred.

“Our friend Mr. Shaitana was not infallible,” he said. “He may—it is just possible—have made a mistake.”

“About all four?”

“No—he was more intelligent than that.”

“Call it fifty-fifty?”

“Not even that. For me, I say one in four.”

“One innocent and three guilty? That’s bad enough. And the devil of it is, even if we get at the truth it mayn’t help us. Even if somebody did push their great-aunts down the stairs in 1912, it won't be much use to us in 1937."

"Yes, yes, it will be of use to us." Poirot encouraged him. "You know that. You know it as well as I do."

Battle nodded slowly.

"I know what you mean," he said. "Same hallmark."

"Do you mean," said Mrs. Oliver, "that the former victim will have been stabbed with a dagger too?"

"Not quite as crude as that, Mrs. Oliver," said Battle turning to her. "But I don't doubt it will be essentially the same type of crime. The details may be different, but the essentials underlying them will be the same. It's odd, but a criminal gives himself away every time by that."

"Man is an unoriginal animal," said Hercule Poirot.

"Women," said Mrs. Oliver, "are capable of infinite variation. I should never commit the same type of murder twice running."

"Don't you ever write the same plot twice running?" asked Battle.

"The Lotus Murder," murmured Poirot. "The Clue of the Candle Wax."

Mrs. Oliver turned on him, her eyes beaming appreciation.

"That's clever of you—that's really very clever of you. Because, of course, those two are exactly the same plot—but nobody else has seen it. One is stolen papers at an informal weekend party of the Cabinet, and the other's a murder in Borneo in a rubber planter's bungalow."

"But the essential point on which the story turns is the same," said Poirot. "One of your neatest tricks. The rubber planter arranges his own murder—the Cabinet Minister arranges the robbery of his own papers. At the last minute the third person steps in and turns deception into reality."

“I enjoyed your last, Mrs. Oliver,” said Superintendent Battle kindly. “The one where all the Chief Constables were shot simultaneously. You just slipped up once or twice on official details. I know you’re keen on accuracy, so I wondered if—”

Mrs. Oliver interrupted him.

“As a matter of fact I don’t care two pins about accuracy. Who is accurate? Nobody nowadays. If a reporter writes that a beautiful girl of twenty-two dies by turning on the gas after looking out over the sea and kissing her favourite labrador, Bob, good-bye, does anybody make a fuss because the girl was twenty-six, the room faced inland, and the dog was a Sealyham terrier called Bonnie? If a journalist can do that sort of thing, I don’t see that it matters if I mix up police ranks and say a revolver when I mean an automatic, and a dictograph when I mean a phonograph, and use a poison that just allows you to gasp one dying sentence and no more. What really matters is plenty of bodies! If the thing’s getting a little dull, some more blood cheers it up. Somebody is going to tell something—and then they’re killed first. That always goes down well. It comes in all my books—camouflaged different ways, of course. And people like untraceable poisons, and idiotic police inspectors and girls tied up in cellars with sewer gas or water pouring in (such a troublesome way of killing anyone really) and a hero who can dispose of anything from three to seven villains single-handed. I’ve written thirty-two books by now—and of course they’re all exactly the same really, as M. Poirot seems to have noticed—but nobody else has—and I only regret one thing—making my detective a Finn. I don’t really know anything about Finns and I’m always getting letters from Finland pointing out something impossible that he’s said or done. They seem to read detective stories a good deal in Finland. I suppose it’s the long winters with no daylight. In Bulgaria and Romania they don’t seem to read at all. I’d have done better to have made him a Bulgar.”

She broke off.

“I’m so sorry. I’m talking shop. And this is a real murder.” Her face lit up. “What a good idea it would be if none of them had murdered him. If he’d asked them all, and then quietly committed suicide just for the fun of making a schemozzle.”

Poirot nodded approvingly.

“An admirable solution. So neat. So ironic. But, alas, Mr. Shaitana was not that sort of man. He was very fond of life.”

“I don’t think he was really a nice man,” said Mrs. Oliver slowly.

“He was not nice, no,” said Poirot. “But he was alive—and now he is dead, and as I told him once, I have a bourgeois attitude to murder, I disapprove of it.”

He added softly:

“And so—I am prepared to go inside the tiger’s cage….”

Nine

DR. ROBERTS

“Good morning, Superintendent Battle.”

Dr. Roberts rose from his chair and offered a large pink hand smelling of a mixture of good soap and faint carbolic.

“How are things going?” he went on.

Superintendent Battle glanced round the comfortable consulting room before answering.

“Well, Dr. Roberts, strictly speaking, they’re not going. They’re standing still.”

“There’s been nothing much in the papers, I’ve been glad to see.”

“Sudden death of the well-known Mr. Shaitana at an evening party in his own home. It’s left at that for the moment. We’ve had the autopsy—I brought a report of the findings along—thought it might interest you—”

“That’s very kind of you—it would—h’m—h’m. Yes, very interesting.”

He handed it back.

“And we’ve interviewed Mr. Shaitana’s solicitor. We know the terms of his will. Nothing of interest there. He has relatives in Syria, it seems. And then, of course, we’ve been through all his private papers.”

Was it fancy or did that broad, clean-shaven countenance look a little strained—a little wooden?

“And?” said Dr. Roberts.

"Nothing," said Superintendent Battle, watching him. There wasn't a sigh of relief. Nothing so blatant as that. But the doctor's figure seemed to relax just a shade more comfortably in his chair.

"And so you've come to me?"

"And so, as you say, I've come to you."

The doctor's eyebrows rose a little and his shrewd eyes looked into Battle's.

"Want to go through my private papers—eh?"

"That was my idea."

"Got a search warrant?"

"No."

"Well; you could get one easily enough, I suppose. I'm not going to make difficulties. It's not very pleasant being suspected of murder but I suppose I can't blame you for what's obviously your duty."

"Thank you, sir," said Superintendent Battle with real gratitude. "I appreciate your attitude, if I may say so, very much. I hope all the others will be as reasonable, I'm sure."

"What can't be cured must be endured," said the doctor good-humouredly.

He went on:

"I've finished seeing my patients here. I'm just off on my rounds. I'll leave you my keys and just say a word to my secretary and you can rootle to your heart's content."

"That's all very nice and pleasant, I'm sure," said Battle. "I'd like to ask you a few more questions before you go."

"About the other night? Really, I told you all I know."

“No, not about the other night. About yourself.”

“Well, man, ask away, what do you want to know?”

“I’d just like a rough sketch of your career, Dr. Roberts. Birth, marriage, and so on.”

“It will get me into practice for Who’s Who,” said the doctor dryly. “My career’s a perfectly straightforward one. I’m a Shropshire man, born at Ludlow. My father was in practice there. He died when I was fifteen. I was educated at Shrewsbury and went in for medicine like my father before me. I’m a St. Christopher’s man—but you’ll have all the medical details already, I expect.”

“I looked you up, yes, sir. You an only child or have you any brothers or sisters?”

“I’m an only child. Both my parents are dead and I’m unmarried. Will that do to get on with? I came into partnership here with Dr. Emery. He retired about fifteen years ago. Lives in Ireland. I’ll give you his address if you like. I live here with a cook, a parlour maid and a housemaid. My secretary comes in daily. I make a good income and I only kill a reasonable number of my patients. How’s that?”

Superintendent Battle grinned.

“That’s fairly comprehensive, Dr. Roberts. I’m glad you’ve got a sense of humour. Now I’m going to ask you one more thing.”

“I’m a strictly moral man, superintendent.”

“Oh, that wasn’t my meaning. No, I was going to ask you if you’d give me the names of four friends—people who’ve known you intimately for a number of years. Kind of references, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I think so. Let me see now. You’d prefer people who are actually in London now?”

“It would make it a bit easier, but it doesn’t really matter.”

The doctor thought for a minute or two, then with his fountain pen he scribbled four names and addresses on a sheet of paper and pushed it across the desk to Battle.

“Will those do? They’re the best I can think of on the spur of the moment.”

Battle read carefully, nodded his head in satisfaction and put the sheet of paper away in an inner pocket.

“It’s just a question of elimination,” he said. “The sooner I can get one person eliminated and go onto the next, the better it is for everyone concerned. I’ve got to make perfectly certain that you weren’t on bad terms with the late Mr. Shaitana, that you had no private connections or business dealings with him, that there was no question of his having injured you at any time and your bearing resentment. I may believe you when you say you only knew him slightly—but it isn’t a question of my belief. I’ve got to say I’ve made sure.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly. You’ve got to think everybody’s a liar till he’s proved he’s speaking the truth. Here are my keys, superintendent. That’s the drawers of the desk—that’s the bureau—that little one’s the key of the poison cupboard. Be sure to lock it up again. Perhaps I’d better just have a word with my secretary.”

He pressed a button on his desk.

Almost immediately the door opened and a competent-looking young woman appeared.

“You rang, doctor?”

“This is Miss Burgess—Superintendent Battle from Scotland Yard.”

Miss Burgess turned a cool gaze on Battle. It seemed to say:

“Dear me, what sort of an animal is this?”

“I should be glad, Miss Burgess, if you will answer any questions Superintendent Battle may put to you, and give him any help he may need.”

"Certainly, if you say so, doctor."

"Well," said Roberts, rising, "I'll be off. Did you put the morphia in my case? I shall need it for the Lockheart case."

He bustled out, still talking, and Miss Burgess followed him.

"Will you press that button when you want me, Superintendent Battle?"

Superintendent Battle thanked her and said he would do so. Then he set to work.

His search was careful and methodical, though he had no great hopes of finding anything of importance. Roberts' ready acquiescence dispelled the chance of that. Roberts was no fool. He would realize that a search would be bound to come and he would make provisions accordingly. There was, however, a faint chance that Battle might come across a hint of the information he was really after, since Roberts would not know the real object of his search.

Superintendent Battle opened and shut drawers, rifled pigeonholes, glanced through a chequebook, estimated the unpaid bills—noted what those same bills were for, scrutinized Roberts' passbook, ran through his case notes and generally left no written document unturned. The result was meagre in the extreme. He next took a look through the poison cupboard, noted the wholesale firms with which the doctor dealt, and the system of checking, relocked the cupboard and passed on to the bureau. The contents of the latter were of a more personal nature, but Battle found nothing germane to his search. He shook his head, sat down in the doctor's chair and pressed the desk button.

Miss Burgess appeared with commendable promptitude.

Superintendent Battle asked her politely to be seated and then sat studying her for a moment, before he decided which way to tackle her. He had sensed immediately her hostility and he was uncertain whether to provoke her into unguarded speech by increasing that hostility or whether to try a softer method of approach.

"I suppose you know what all this is about, Miss Burgess?" he said at last.

"Dr. Roberts told me," said Miss Burgess shortly.

"The whole thing's rather delicate," said Superintendent Battle.

"Is it?" said Miss Burgess.

"Well, it's rather a nasty business. Four people are under suspicion and one of them must have done it. What I want to know is whether you've ever seen this Mr. Shaitana?"

"Never."

"Ever heard Dr. Roberts speak of him?"

"Never—no, I am wrong. About a week ago Dr. Roberts told me to enter up a dinner appointment in his engagement book. Mr. Shaitana, 8:15, on the 18th."

"And that is the first you ever heard of this Mr. Shaitana?"

"Yes."

"Never seen his name in the papers? He was often in the fashionable news."

"I've got better things to do than reading the fashionable news."

"I expect you have. Oh, I expect you have," said the superintendent mildly.

"Well," he went on. "There it is. All four of these people will only admit to knowing Mr. Shaitana slightly. But one of them knew him well enough to kill him. It's my job to find out which of them it was."

There was an unhelpful pause. Miss Burgess seemed quite uninterested in the performance of Superintendent Battle's job. It was her job to obey her employer's orders and sit here listening to what Superintendent Battle chose to say and answer any direct questions he might choose to put to her.

“You know, Miss Burgess,” the superintendent found it uphill work but he persevered, “I doubt if you appreciate half the difficulties of our job. People say things, for instance. Well, we mayn’t believe a word of it, but we’ve got to take notice of it all the same. It’s particularly noticeable in a case of this kind. I don’t want to say anything against your sex but there’s no doubt that a woman, when she’s rattled, is apt to lash out with her tongue a bit. She makes unfounded accusations, hints this, that and the other, and rakes up all sorts of old scandals that have probably nothing whatever to do with the case.”

“Do you mean,” demanded Miss Burgess, “that one of these other people has been saying things against the doctor?”

“Not exactly said anything,” said Battle cautiously. “But all the same, I’m bound to take notice. Suspicious circumstances about the death of a patient. Probably all a lot of nonsense. I’m ashamed to bother the doctor with it.”

“I suppose someone’s got hold of that story about Mrs. Graves,” said Miss Burgess wrathfully. “The way people talk about things they know nothing whatever about is disgraceful. Lots of old ladies get like that—they think everybody is poisoning them—their relations and their servants and even their doctors. Mrs. Graves had had three doctors before she came to Dr. Roberts and then when she got the same fancies about him he was quite willing for her to have Dr. Lee instead. It’s the only thing to do in these cases, he said. And after Dr. Lee she had Dr. Steele, and then Dr. Farmer—until she died, poor old thing.”

“You’d be surprised the way the smallest thing starts a story,” said Battle. “Whenever a doctor benefits by the death of a patient somebody has something ill-natured to say. And yet why shouldn’t a grateful patient leave a little something, or even a big something to her medical attendant.”

“It’s the relations,” said Miss Burgess. “I always think there’s nothing like death for bringing out the meanness of human nature. Squabbling over who’s to have what before the body’s cold. Luckily, Dr. Roberts has never had any trouble of that kind. He always says he hopes his patients won’t leave him anything. I believe he once had a legacy of fifty pounds and he’s had two walking sticks and a gold watch, but nothing else.”

"It's a difficult life, that of a professional man," said Battle with a sigh. "He's always open to blackmail. The most innocent occurrences lend themselves sometimes to a scandalous appearance. A doctor's got to avoid even the appearance of evil—that means he's got to have his wits about him good and sharp."

"A lot of what you say is true," said Miss Burgess. "Doctors have a difficult time with hysterical women."

"Hysterical women. That's right. I thought in my own mind, that that was all it amounted to."

"I suppose you mean that dreadful Mrs. Craddock?"

Battle pretended to think.

"Let me see, was it three years ago? No, more."

"Four or five, I think. She was a most unbalanced woman! I was glad when she went abroad and so was Dr. Roberts. She told her husband the most frightful lies—they always do, of course. Poor man, he wasn't quite himself—he'd begun to be ill. He died of anthrax, you know, an infected shaving brush."

"I'd forgotten that," said Battle untruthfully.

"And then she went abroad and died not long afterwards. But I always thought she was a nasty type of woman—man-mad, you know."

"I know the kind," said Battle. "Very dangerous, they are. A doctor's got to give them a wide berth. Whereabouts did she die abroad—I seem to remember."

"Egypt, I think it was. She got blood poisoning—some native infection."

"Another thing that must be difficult for a doctor," said Battle, making a conversational leap, "is when he suspects that one of his patients is being poisoned by one of their relatives. What's he to do? He's got to be sure—or else hold his tongue. And if he's done the latter, then it's awkward for him if there’s talk of foul play afterwards. I wonder if any case of that kind has ever come Dr. Roberts’ way?”

“I really don’t think it has,” said Miss Burgess, considering. “I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“From the statistical point of view, it would be interesting to know how many deaths occur among a doctor’s practice per year. For instance now, you’ve been with Dr. Roberts some years—”

“Seven.”

“Seven. Well, how many deaths have there been in that time offhand?”

“Really, it’s difficult to say.” Miss Burgess gave herself up to calculation. She was by now quite thawed and unsuspicious. “Seven, eight—of course, I can’t remember exactly—I shouldn’t say more than thirty in the time.”

“Then I fancy Dr. Roberts must be a better doctor than most,” said Battle genially. “I suppose, too, most of his patients are upper class. They can afford to take care of themselves.”

“He’s a very popular doctor. He’s so good at diagnosis.”

Battle sighed and rose to his feet.

“I’m afraid I’ve been wandering from my duty, which is to find out a connection between the doctor and this Mr. Shaitana. You’re quite sure he wasn’t a patient of the doctor’s?”

“Quite sure.”

“Under another name, perhaps?” Battle handed her a photograph. “Recognize him at all?”

“What a very theatrical-looking person. No, I’ve never seen him here at any time.”

“Well, that’s that.” Battle sighed. “I’m much obliged to the doctor, I’m sure, for being so pleasant about everything. Tell him from me, will you? Tell him I’m passing on to No. 2. Good-bye, Miss Burgess, and thank you for your help.”

He shook hands and departed. Walking along the street he took a small notebook from his pocket and made a couple of entries in it under the letter R.

Mrs. Graves? Unlikely.

Mrs. Craddock?

No legacies.

No wife. (Pity.)

Investigate deaths of patients. Difficult.

He closed the book and turned into the Lancaster Gate branch of the London and Wessex Bank.

The display of his official card brought him to a private interview with the manager.

“Good morning, sir. One of your clients is a Dr. Geoffrey Roberts, I understand.”

“Quite correct, superintendent.”

“I shall want some information about that gentleman’s account going back over a period of years.”

“I will see what I can do for you.”

A complicated half hour followed. Finally Battle, with a sigh, tucked away a sheet of pencilled figures.

“Got what you want?” inquired the bank manager curiously.

“No, I haven’t. Not one suggestive lead. Thank you all the same.”

At that same moment, Dr. Roberts, washing his hands in his consulting room, said over his shoulder to Miss Burgess:

“What about our stolid sleuth, eh? Did he turn the place upside down and you inside out?”

“He didn’t get much out of me, I can tell you,” said Miss Burgess, setting her lips tightly.

“My dear girl, no need to be an oyster. I told you to tell him all he wanted to know. What did he want to know, by the way?”

“Oh, he kept harping on your knowing that man Shaitana—suggested even that he might have come here as a patient under a different name. He showed me his photograph. Such a theatrical-looking man!”

“Shaitana? Oh, yes, fond of posing as a modern Mephistopheles. It went down rather well on the whole. What else did Battle ask you?”

“Really nothing very much. Except—oh, yes, somebody had been telling him some absurd nonsense about Mrs. Graves—you know the way she used to go on.”

“Graves? Graves? Oh, yes, old Mrs. Graves. That’s rather funny!” The doctor laughed with considerable amusement. “That’s really very funny indeed.”

And in high good humour he went in to lunch.

Ten

DR. ROBERTS (CONTINUED)

Superintendent Battle was lunching with M. Hercule Poirot.

The former looked downcast, the latter sympathetic.

“Your morning, then, has not been entirely successful,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

Battle shook his head.

“It’s going to be uphill work, M. Poirot.”

“What do you think of him?”

“Of the doctor? Well, frankly, I think Shaitana was right. He’s a killer. Reminds me of Westaway. And of that lawyer chap in Norfolk. Same hearty, self-confident manner. Same popularity. Both of them were clever devils—so’s Roberts. All the same, it doesn’t follow that Roberts killed Shaitana—and as a matter of fact I don’t think he did. He’d know the risk too well—better than a layman would—that Shaitana might wake and cry out. No, I don’t think Roberts murdered him.”

“But you think he has murdered someone?”

“Possibly quite a lot of people. Westaway had. But it’s going to be hard to get at. I’ve looked over his bank account—nothing suspicious there—no large sums suddenly paid in. At any rate, in the last seven years he’s not had any legacy from a patient. That wipes out murder for direct gain. He’s never married—that’s a pity—so ideally simple for a doctor to kill his own wife. He’s well-to-do, but then he’s got a thriving practice among well-to-do people.”

"In fact he appears to lead a thoroughly blameless life—and perhaps does do so."

"Maybe. But I prefer to believe the worst."

He went on:

"There's the hint of a scandal over a woman—one of his patients—name of Craddock. That's worth looking up, I think. I'll get someone onto that straightaway. Woman actually died out in Egypt of some local disease so I don't think there's anything in that—but it might throw a light on his general character and morals."

"Was there a husband?"

"Yes. Husband died of anthrax."

"Anthrax?"

"Yes, there were a lot of cheap shaving brushes on the market just then—some of them infected. There was a regular scandal about it."

"Convenient," suggested Poirot.

"That's what I thought. If her husband were threatening to kick up a row—But there, it's all conjecture. We haven't a leg to stand upon."

"Courage, my friend. I know your patience. In the end, you will have perhaps as many legs as a centipede."

"And fall into the ditch as a result of thinking about them," grinned Battle.

Then he asked curiously:

"What about you, M. Poirot? Going to take a hand?"

"I, too, might call on Dr. Roberts."

"Two of us in one day. That ought to put the wind up him."

"Oh, I shall be very discreet. I shall not inquire into his past life."

"I'd like to know just exactly what line you'll take," said Battle curiously, "but don't tell me unless you want to."

"Du tout—du tout. I am most willing. I shall talk a little of bridge, that is all."

"Bridge again. You harp on that, don't you, M. Poirot?"

"I find the subject very useful."

"Well, every man to his taste. I don't deal much in the fancy approaches. They don't suit my style."

"What is your style, superintendent?"

The superintendent met the twinkle in Poirot's eyes with an answering twinkle in his own.

"A straightforward, honest, zealous officer doing his duty in the most laborious manner—that's my style. No frills. No fancy work. Just honest perspiration. Stolid and a bit stupid—that's my ticket."

Poirot raised his glass.

"To our respective methods—and may success crown our joint efforts."

"I expect Colonel Race may get us something worth having about Despard," said Battle. "He's got a good many sources of information."

"And Mrs. Oliver?"

"Bit of a toss-up there. I rather like that woman. Talks a lot of nonsense, but she's a sport. And women get to know things about other women that men can't get at. She may spot something useful."

They separated. Battle went back to Scotland Yard to issue instructions for certain lines to be followed up. Poirot betook himself to 200 Gloucester

Terrace.

Dr. Roberts' eyebrows rose comically as he greeted his guest.

"Two sleuths in one day," he asked. "Handcuffs by this evening, I suppose."

Poirot smiled.

"I can assure you, Dr. Roberts, that my attentions are being equally divided between all four of you."

"That's something to be thankful for, at all events. Smoke?"

"If you permit, I prefer my own."

Poirot lighted one of his tiny Russian cigarettes.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked Roberts.

Poirot was silent for a minute or two puffing, then he said:

"Are you a keen observer of human nature, doctor?"

"I don't know. I suppose I am. A doctor has to be."

"That was exactly my reasoning. I said to myself, 'A doctor has always to be studying his patients—their expressions, their colour, how fast they breathe, any signs of restlessness—a doctor notices these things automatically almost without noticing he notices! Dr. Roberts is the man to help me.'"

"I'm willing enough to help. What's the trouble?"

Poirot produced from a neat little pocketcase three carefully folded bridge scores.

"These are the first three rubbers the other evening," he explained. "Here is the first one—in Miss Meredith's handwriting. Now can you tell me—with this to refresh your memory—exactly what the calling was and how each hand went?”

Roberts stared at him in astonishment.

“You’re joking, M. Poirot. How can I possibly remember?”

“Can’t you? I should be very grateful if you could. Take this first rubber. The first game must have resulted in a game call in hearts or spades, or else one or other side must have gone down fifty.”

“Let me see—that was the first hand. Yes, I think they went out in spades.”

“And the next hand?”

“I suppose one or other of us went down fifty—but I can’t remember which or what it was in. Really, M. Poirot, you can hardly expect me to do so.”

“Can’t you remember any of the calling or the hands?”

“I got a grand slam—I remember that. It was doubled too. And I also remember going down a nasty smack—playing three no trumps, I think it was—went down a packet. But that was later on.”

“Do you remember with whom you were playing?”

“Mrs. Lorrimer. She looked a bit grim, I remember. Didn’t like my overcalling, I expect.”

“And you can’t remember any other of the hands or the calling?”

Roberts laughed.

“My dear M. Poirot, did you really expect I could. First there was the murder—enough to drive the most spectacular hands out of one’s mind—and in addition I’ve played at least half a dozen rubbers since then.”

Poirot sat looking rather crestfallen.

“I’m sorry,” said Roberts.

“It does not matter very much,” said Poirot slowly. “I hoped that you might remember one or two, at least, of the hands, because I thought they might be valuable landmarks in remembering other things.”

“What other things?”

“Well you might have noticed, for instance, that your partner made a mess of playing a perfectly simple no trumper, or that an opponent, say, presented you with a couple of unexpected tricks by failing to lead an obvious card.”

Dr. Roberts became suddenly serious. He leaned forward in his chair.

“Ah,” he said. “Now I see what you’re driving at. Forgive me. I thought at first you were talking pure nonsense. You mean that the murder—the successful accomplishment of the murder—might have made a definite difference in the guilty party’s play?”

Poirot nodded.

“You have seized the idea correctly. It would be a clue of the first excellence if you had been four players who knew each other’s game well. A variation, a sudden lack of brilliance, a missed opportunity—that would have been immediately noticed. Unluckily, you were all strangers to each other. Variation in play would not be so noticeable. But think, M. le docteur, I beg of you to think. Do you remember any inequalities—any sudden glaring mistakes—in the play of anyone?”

There was silence for a minute or two, then Dr. Roberts shook his head.

“It’s no good. I can’t help you,” he said frankly. “I simply don’t remember. All I can tell you is what I told you before: Mrs. Lorrimer is a first-class player—she never made a slip that I noticed. She was brilliant from start to finish. Despard’s play was uniformly good too. Rather a conventional player—that is, his bidding is strictly conventional. He never steps outside the rules. Won’t take a long chance. Miss Meredith—” He hesitated.

“Yes? Miss Meredith?” Poirot prompted him.

“She did make mistakes—once or twice—I remember—towards the end of the evening, but that may simply have been because she was tired—not being a very experienced player. Her hand shook, too—”

He stopped.

“When did her hand shake?”

“When was it now? I can’t remember … I think she was just nervous. M. Poirot, you’re making me imagine things.”

“I apologize. There is another point on which I seek your help.”

“Yes?”

Poirot said slowly:

“It is difficult. I do not, you see, wish to ask you a leading question. If I say, did you notice so and so—well, I have put the thing into your head. Your answer will not be so valuable. Let me try to get at the matter another way. If you will be so kind, Dr. Roberts, describe to me the contents of the room in which you played.”

Roberts looked thoroughly astonished.

“The contents of the room?”

“If you will be so good.”

“My dear fellow, I simply don’t know where to begin.”

“Begin anywhere you choose.”

“Well, there was a good deal of furniture—”

“Non, non, non, be precise, I pray of you.”

Dr. Roberts sighed.

He began facetiously after the manner of an auctioneer.

“One large settee upholstered in ivory brocade—one ditto in green ditto—four or five large chairs. Eight or nine Persian rugs—a set of twelve small gilt Empire chairs. William and Mary bureau. (I feel just like an auctioneer’s clerk.) Very beautiful Chinese cabinet. Grand piano. There was other furniture but I’m afraid I didn’t notice it. Six first-class Japanese prints. Two Chinese pictures on looking glass. Five or six very beautiful snuffboxes. Some Japanese ivory netsuke figures on a table by themselves. Some old silver—Charles I tazzas, I think. One or two pieces of Battersea enamel—”

“Bravo, bravo!” Poirot applauded.

“A couple of old English slipware birds—and, I think, a Ralph Wood figure. Then there was some Eastern stuff—intricate silver work. Some jewellery, I don’t know much about that. Some Chelsea birds, I remember. Oh, and some miniatures in a case—pretty good ones, I fancy. That’s not all by a long way—but it’s all I can think of for the minute.”

“It is magnificent,” said Poirot with due appreciation. “You have the true observer’s eye.”

The doctor asked curiously:

“Have I included the object you had in mind?”

“That is the interesting thing about it,” said Poirot. “If you had mentioned the object I had in mind it would have been extremely surprising to me. As I thought, you could not mention it.”

“Why?”

Poirot twinkled.

“Perhaps—because it was not there to mention.”

Roberts stared.

“That seems to remind me of something.”

“It reminds you of Sherlock Holmes, does it not? The curious incident of the dog in the night. The dog did not howl in the night. That is the curious thing! Ah, well, I am not above stealing the tricks of others.”

“Do you know, M. Poirot, I am completely at sea as to what you are driving at.”

“That is excellent, that. In confidence, that is how I get my little effects.”

Then, as Dr. Roberts still looked rather dazed, Poirot said with a smile as he rose to his feet:

“You may at least comprehend this, what you have told me is going to be very helpful to me in my next interview.”

The doctor rose also.

“I can’t see how, but I’ll take your word for it,” he said.

They shook hands.

Poirot went down the steps of the doctor’s house, and hailed a passing taxi.

“111 Cheyne Lane, Chelsea,” he told the driver.

Eleven

MRS. LORRIMER

111 Cheyne Lane was a small house of very neat and trim appearance standing in a quiet street. The door was painted black and the steps were particularly well whitened, the brass of the knocker and handle gleamed in the afternoon sun.

The door was opened by an elderly parlourmaid with an immaculate white cap and apron.

In answer to Poirot’s inquiry she said that her mistress was at home.

She preceded him up the narrow staircase.

“What name, sir?”

“M. Hercule Poirot.”

He was ushered into a drawing room of the usual L shape. Poirot looked about him, noting details. Good furniture, well polished, of the old family type. Shiny chintz on the chairs and settees. A few silver photograph frames about in the old-fashioned manner. Otherwise an agreeable amount of space and light, and some really beautiful chrysanthemums arranged in a tall jar.

Mrs. Lorrimer came forward to meet him.

She shook hands without showing any particular surprise at seeing him, indicated a chair, took one herself and remarked favourably on the weather.

There was a pause.

“I hope, madame,” said Hercule Poirot, “that you will forgive this visit.”

Looking directly at him, Mrs. Lorrimer asked:

“Is this a professional visit?”

“I confess it.”

“You realize, I suppose, M. Poirot, that though I shall naturally give Superintendent Battle and the official police any information and help they may require, I am by no means bound to do the same for any unofficial investigator?”

“I am quite aware of that fact, madame. If you show me the door, me, I march to that door with complete submission.”

Mrs. Lorrimer smiled very slightly.

“I am not yet prepared to go to those extremes, M. Poirot. I can give you ten minutes. At the end of that time I have to go out to a bridge party.”

“Ten minutes will be ample for my purpose. I want you to describe to me, madame, the room in which you played bridge the other evening—the room in which Mr. Shaitana was killed.”

Mrs. Lorrimer’s eyebrows rose.

“What an extraordinary question! I do not see the point of it.”

“Madame, if when you were playing bridge, someone were to say to you—why do you play that ace or why do you put on the knave that is taken by the queen and not the king which would take the trick? If people were to ask you such questions, the answers would be rather long and tedious, would they not?”

Mrs. Lorrimer smiled slightly.

“Meaning that in this game you are the expert and I am the novice. Very well.” She reflected a minute. “It was a large room. There were a good many things in it.”

“Can you describe some of those things?”

“There were some glass flowers—modern—rather beautiful … And I think there were some Chinese or Japanese pictures. And there was a bowl of tiny red tulips—amazingly early for them.”

“Anything else?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t notice anything in detail.”

“The furniture—do you remember the colour of the upholstery?”

“Something silky, I think. That’s all I can say.”

“Did you notice any of the small objects?”

“I’m afraid not. There were so many. I know it struck me as quite a collector’s room.”

There was silence for a minute. Mrs. Lorrimer said with a faint smile:

“I’m afraid I have not been very helpful.”

“There is something else.” He produced the bridge scores. “Here are the first three rubbers played. I wondered if you could help me with the aid of these scores to reconstruct the hands.”

“Let me see.” Mrs. Lorrimer looked interested. She bent over the scores.

“That was the first rubber. Miss Meredith and I were playing against the two men. The first game was played in four spades. We made it and an over trick. Then the next hand was left at two diamonds and Dr. Roberts went down one trick on it. There was quite a lot of bidding on the third hand, I remember. Miss Meredith passed. Major Despard went a heart. I passed. Dr. Roberts gave a jump bid of three clubs. Miss Meredith went three spades. Major Despard bid four diamonds. I doubled. Dr. Roberts took it into four hearts. They went down one.”

“Epatant,” said Poirot. “What a memory!”

Mrs. Lorrimer went on, disregarding him:

"On the next hand Major Despard passed and I bid a no trump. Dr. Roberts bid three hearts. My partner said nothing. Despard put his partner to four. I doubled and they went down two tricks. Then I dealt and we went out on a four-spade call."

She took up the next score.

"It is difficult, that," said Poirot. "Major Despard scores in the cancellation manner."

"I rather fancy both sides went down fifty to start with—then Dr. Roberts went to five diamonds and we doubled and got him down to three tricks. Then we made three clubs, but immediately after the others went game in spades. We made the second game in five clubs. Then we went down a hundred. The others made one heart, we made two no trumps and we finally won the rubber with a four-club call."

She picked up the next score.

"This rubber was rather a battle, I remember. It started tamely. Major Despard and Miss Meredith made a one-heart call. Then we went down a couple of fifties trying for four hearts and four spades. Then the others made game in spades—no use trying to stop them. We went down three hands running after that but undoubled. Then we won the second game in no trumps. Then a battle royal started. Each side went down in turn. Dr. Roberts overcalled but though he went down badly once or twice, his calling paid, for more than once he frightened Miss Meredith out of bidding her hand. Then he bid an original two spades, I gave him three diamonds, he bid four no trumps, I bid five spades and he suddenly jumped to seven diamonds. We were doubled, of course. He had no business to make such a call. By a kind of miracle we got it. I never thought we should when I saw his hand go down. If the others had led a heart we would have been three tricks down. As it was they led the king of clubs and we got it. It was really very exciting."

"Je crois bien—a Grand Slam Vulnerable doubled. It causes the emotions, that! Me, I admit it, I have not the nerve to go for the slams. I content myself with the game."

"Oh, but you shouldn't," said Mrs. Lorrimer with energy. "You must play the game properly."

"Take risks, you mean?"

"There is no risk if the bidding is correct. It should be a mathematical certainty. Unfortunately, few people really bid well. They know the opening bids but later they lose their heads. They cannot distinguish between a hand with winning cards in it and a hand without losing cards—but I mustn't give you a lecture on bridge, or on the losing count, M. Poirot."

"It would improve my play, I am sure, madame."

Mrs. Lorrimer resumed her study of the score.

"After that excitement the next hands were rather tame. Have you the fourth score there? Ah, yes. A ding-dong battle—neither side able to score below."

"It is often like that as the evening wears on."

"Yes, one starts tamely and then the cards get worked up."

Poirot collected the scores and made a little bow.

"Madame, I congratulate you. Your card memory is magnificent—but magnificent! You remember, one might say, every card that was played!"

"I believe I do!"

"Memory is a wonderful gift. With it the past is never the past—I should imagine, madame, that to you the past unrolls itself, every incident clear as yesterday. Is that so?"

She looked at him quickly. Her eyes were wide and dark.

It was only for a moment, then she had resumed her woman-of-the-world manner, but Hercule Poirot did not doubt. That shot had gone home.

Mrs. Lorrimer rose.

“I’m afraid I shall have to leave now. I am so sorry—but I really mustn’t be late.”

“Of course not—of course not. I apologize for trespassing on your time.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been able to help you more.”

“But you have helped me,” said Hercule Poirot.

“I hardly think so.”

She spoke with decision.

“But yes. You have told me something I wanted to know.”

She asked no question as to what that something was.

He held out his hand.

“Thank you, madame, for your forbearance.”

As she shook hands with him she said:

“You are an extraordinary man, M. Poirot.”

“I am as the good God made me, madame.”

“We are all that, I suppose.”

“Not all, madame. Some of us have tried to improve on His pattern. Mr. Shaitana, for instance.”

“In what way do you mean?”

“He had a very pretty taste in objets de vertu and bric-à-brac—he should have been content with that. Instead, he collected other things.”

“What sort of things?”

“Well—shall we say—sensations?”

“And don’t you think that was dans son caractère?”

Poirot shook his head gravely.

“He played the part of the devil too successfully. But he was not the devil. Au fond, he was a stupid man. And so—he died.”

“Because he was stupid?”

“It is the sin that is never forgiven and always punished, madame.”

There was a silence. Then Poirot said:

“I take my departure. A thousand thanks for your amiability, madame. I will not come again unless you send for me.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“Dear me, M. Poirot, why should I send for you?”

“You might. It is just an idea. If so, I will come. Remember that.”

He bowed once more and left the room.

In the street he said to himself:

“I am right … I am sure I am right … It must be that!”

Twelve

ANNE MEREDITH

Mrs. Oliver extricated herself from the driving seat of her little two-seater with some difficulty. To begin with, the makers of modern motorcars assume that only a pair of sylphlike knees will ever be under the steering wheel. It is also the fashion to sit low. That being so, for a middle-aged woman of generous proportions it requires a good deal of superhuman wriggling to get out from under the steering wheel. In the second place, the seat next to the driving seat was encumbered by several maps, a handbag, three novels and a large bag of apples. Mrs. Oliver was partial to apples and had indeed been known to eat as many as five pounds straight off whilst composing the complicated plot of The Death in the Drain Pipe—coming to herself with a start and an incipient stomachache an hour and ten minutes after she was due at an important luncheon party given in her honour.

With a final determined heave and a sharp shove with a knee against a recalcitrant door, Mrs. Oliver arrived a little too suddenly on the sidewalk outside the gate of Wendon Cottage, showering apple cores freely round her as she did so.

She gave a deep sigh, pushed back her country hat to an unfashionable angle, looked down with approval at the tweeds she had remembered to put on, frowned a little when she saw that she had absentmindedly retained her London high-heeled patent leather shoes, and pushing open the gate of Wendon Cottage walked up the flagged path to the front door. She rang the bell and executed a cheerful little rat-a-tat-tat on the knocker—a quaint conceit in the form of a toad’s head.

As nothing happened she repeated the performance.

After a further pause of a minute and a half, Mrs. Oliver stepped briskly round the side of the house on a voyage of exploration.

There was a small old-fashioned garden with Michaelmas daisies and straggling chrysanthemums behind the cottage, and beyond it a field. Beyond the field was the river. For an October day the sun was warm.

Two girls were just crossing the field in the direction of the cottage. As they came through the gate into the garden, the foremost of the two stopped dead.

Mrs. Oliver came forward.

“How do you do, Miss Meredith? You remember me, don’t you?”

“Oh—oh, of course.” Anne Meredith extended her hand hurriedly. Her eyes looked wide and startled. Then she pulled herself together.

“This is my friend who lives with me—Miss Dawes. Rhoda, this is Mrs. Oliver.”

The other girl was tall, dark, and vigorous-looking. She said excitedly:

“Oh, are you the Mrs. Oliver? Ariadne Oliver?”

“I am,” said Mrs. Oliver, and she added to Anne, “Now let us sit down somewhere, my dear, because I’ve got a lot to say to you.”

“Of course. And we’ll have tea—”

“Tea can wait,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Anne led the way to a little group of deck and basket chairs, all rather dilapidated. Mrs. Oliver chose the strongest-looking with some care, having had various unfortunate experiences with flimsy summer furniture.

“Now, my dear,” she said briskly. “Don’t let’s beat about the bush. About this murder the other evening. We’ve got to get busy and do something.”

“Do something?” queried Anne.

"Naturally," said Mrs. Oliver. "I don't know what you think, but I haven't the least doubt who did it. That doctor. What was his name? Roberts. That's it! Roberts. A Welsh name! I never trust the Welsh! I had a Welsh nurse and she took me to Harrogate one day and went home having forgotten all about me. Very unstable. But never mind about her. Roberts did it—that's the point and we must put our heads together and prove he did."

Rhoda Dawes laughed suddenly—then she blushed.

"I beg your pardon. But you're—you're so different from what I would have imagined."

"A disappointment, I expect," said Mrs. Oliver serenely. "I'm used to that. Never mind. What we must do is prove that Roberts did it!"

"How can we?" said Anne.

"Oh, don't be so defeatist, Anne," cried Rhoda Dawes. "I think Mrs. Oliver's splendid. Of course, she knows all about these things. She'll do just as Sven Hjerson does."

Blushing slightly at the name of her celebrated Finnish detective, Mrs. Oliver said:

"It's got to be done, and I'll tell you why, child. You don't want people thinking you did it?"

"Why should they?" asked Anne, her colour rising.

"You know what people are!" said Mrs. Oliver. "The three who didn't do it will come in for just as much suspicion as the one who did."

Anne Meredith said slowly:

"I still don't quite see why you come to me, Mrs. Oliver?"

"Because in my opinion the other two don't matter! Mrs. Lorrimer is one of those women who play bridge at bridge clubs all day. Women like that must be made of armourplating—they can look after themselves all right! And anyway she’s old. It wouldn’t matter if anyone thought she’d done it. A girl’s different. She’s got her life in front of her.”

“And Major Despard?” asked Anne.

“Pah!” said Mrs. Oliver. “He’s a man! I never worry about men. Men can look after themselves. Do it remarkably well, if you ask me. Besides, Major Despard enjoys a dangerous life. He’s getting his fun at home instead of on the Irrawaddy—or do I mean the Limpopo? You know what I mean—that yellow African river that men like so much. No, I’m not worrying my head about either of those two.”

“It’s very kind of you,” said Anne slowly.

“It was a beastly thing to happen,” said Rhoda. “It’s broken Anne up, Mrs. Oliver. She’s awfully sensitive. And I think you’re quite right. It would be ever so much better to do something than just to sit here thinking about it all.”

“Of course it would,” said Mrs. Oliver. “To tell you the truth, a real murder has never come my way before. And, to continue telling the truth, I don’t believe real murder is very much in my line. I’m so used to loading the dice—if you understand what I mean. But I wasn’t going to be out of it and let those three men have all the fun to themselves. I’ve always said that if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard—”

“Yes?” said Rhoda, leaning forward with parted lips. “If you were head of Scotland Yard, what would you do?”

“I should arrest Dr. Roberts straight away—”

“Yes?”

“However, I’m not the head of Scotland Yard,” said Mrs. Oliver, retreating from dangerous ground. “I’m a private individual—”

“Oh, you’re not that,” said Rhoda, confusedly complimentary.

“Here we are,” continued Mrs. Oliver, “three private individuals—all women. Let us see what we can do by putting our heads together.”

Anne Meredith nodded thoughtfully. Then she said:

“Why do you think Dr. Roberts did it?”

“He’s that sort of man,” replied Mrs. Oliver promptly.

“Don’t you think, though—” Anne hesitated. “Wouldn’t a doctor—? I mean something like poison would be so much easier for him.”

“Not at all. Poison—drugs of any kind would point straight to a doctor. Look how they are always leaving cases of dangerous drugs in cars all over London and getting them stolen. No, just because he was a doctor he’d take special care not to use anything of a medical kind.”

“I see,” said Anne doubtfully.

Then she said:

“But why do you think he wanted to kill Mr. Shaitana? Have you any idea?”

“Idea? I’ve got any amount of ideas. In fact, that’s just the difficulty. It always is my difficulty. I can never think of even one plot at a time. I always think of at least five, and it’s agony to decide between them. I can think of six beautiful reasons for the murder. The trouble is I’ve no earthly means of knowing which is right. To begin with, perhaps Shaitana was a moneylender. He had a very oily look. Roberts was in his clutches, and killed him because he couldn’t get the money to repay the loan. Or perhaps Shaitana ruined his daughter or his sister. Or perhaps Roberts is a bigamist, and Shaitana knew it. Or possibly Roberts married Shaitana’s second cousin, and will inherit all Shaitana’s money through her. Or—How many have I got to?”

“Four,” said Rhoda.

“Or—and this is a really good one—suppose Shaitana knew some secret in Roberts’ past. Perhaps you didn’t notice, my dear, but Shaitana said something rather peculiar at dinner—just before a rather queer pause."

Anne stooped to tickle a caterpillar. She said, "I don't think I remember."

"What did he say?" asked Rhoda.

"Something about—what was it?—an accident and poison. Don't you remember?"

Anne's left hand tightened on the basketwork of her chair.

"I do remember something of the kind," she said composedly.

Rhoda said suddenly, "Darling, you ought to have a coat. It's not summer, remember. Go and get one."

Anne shook her head.

"I'm quite warm."

But she gave a queer little shiver as she spoke.

"You see my theory," went on Mrs. Oliver. "I daresay one of the doctor's patients poisoned himself by accident; but, of course, really, it was the doctor's own doing. I daresay he's murdered lots of people that way."

A sudden colour came into Anne's cheeks. She said, "Do doctors usually want to murder their patients wholesale? Wouldn't it have rather a regrettable effect on their practice?"

"There would be a reason, of course," said Mrs. Oliver vaguely.

"I think the idea is absurd," said Anne crisply. "Absolutely absurdly melodramatic."

"Oh, Anne!" cried Rhoda in an agony of apology. She looked at Mrs. Oliver. Her eyes, rather like those of an intelligent spaniel, seemed to be trying to say something. "Try and understand. Try and understand," those eyes said.

"I think it's a splendid idea, Mrs. Oliver," Rhoda said earnestly. "And a doctor could get hold of something quite untraceable, couldn't he?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Anne.

The other two turned to look at her.

"I remember something else," she said. "Mr. Shaitana said something about a doctor's opportunities in a laboratory. He must have meant something by that."

"It wasn't Mr. Shaitana who said that." Mrs. Oliver shook her head. "It was Major Despard."

A footfall on the garden walk made her turn her head.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "Talk of the devil!"

Major Despard had just come round the corner of the house.

Thirteen

SECOND VISITOR

At the sight of Mrs. Oliver, Major Despard looked slightly taken aback. Under his tan his face flushed a rich brick red. Embarrassment made him jerky. He made for Anne.

“I apologize, Miss Meredith,” he said. “Been ringing your bell. Nothing happened. Was passing this way. Thought I might just look you up.”

“I’m so sorry you’ve been ringing,” said Anne. “We haven’t got a maid—only a woman who comes in the mornings.”

She introduced him to Rhoda.

Rhoda said briskly:

“Let’s have some tea. It’s getting chilly. We’d better go in.”

They all went into the house. Rhoda disappeared into the kitchen. Mrs. Oliver said:

“This is quite a coincidence—our all meeting here.”

Despard said slowly, “Yes.”

His eyes rested on her thoughtfully—appraising eyes.

“I’ve been telling Miss Meredith,” said Mrs. Oliver, who was thoroughly enjoying herself, “that we ought to have a plan of campaign. About the murder, I mean. Of course, that doctor did it. Don’t you agree with me?”

“Couldn’t say. Very little to go on.”

Mrs. Oliver put on her “How like a man!” expression.

A certain air of constraint had settled over the three. Mrs. Oliver sensed it quickly enough. When Rhoda brought in tea she rose and said she must be getting back to town. No, it was ever so kind of them, but she wouldn’t have any tea.

“I’m going to leave you my card,” she said. “Here it is, with my address on it. Come and see me when you come up to town, and we’ll talk everything over and see if we can’t think of something ingenious to get to the bottom of things.”

“I’ll come out to the gate with you,” said Rhoda.

Just as they were walking down the path to the front gate, Anne Meredith ran out of the house and overtook them.

“I’ve been thinking things over,” she said.

Her pale face looked unusually resolute.

“Yes, my dear?”

“It’s extraordinarily kind of you, Mrs. Oliver, to have taken all this trouble. But I’d really rather not do anything at all. I mean—it was all so horrible. I just want to forget about it.”

“My dear child, the question is, will you be allowed to forget about it?”

“Oh, I quite understand that the police won’t let it drop. They’ll probably come here and ask me a lot more questions. I’m prepared for that. But privately, I mean, I don’t want to think about it—or be reminded of it in any way. I daresay I’m a coward, but that’s how I feel about it.”

“Oh, Anne!” cried Rhoda Dawes.

“I can understand your feeling, but I’m not at all sure that you’re wise,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Left to themselves, the police will probably never find out the truth.”

Anne Meredith shrugged her shoulders.

“Does that really matter?”

“Matter?” cried Rhoda. “Of course it matters. It does matter, doesn’t it, Mrs. Oliver?”

“I should certainly say so,” said Mrs. Oliver dryly.

“I don’t agree,” said Anne obstinately. “Nobody who knows me would ever think I’d done it. I don’t see any reason for interfering. It’s the business of the police to get at the truth.”

“Oh, Anne, you are spiritless,” said Rhoda.

“That’s how I feel, anyway,” said Anne. She held out her hand. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Oliver. It’s very good of you to have bothered.”

“Of course, if you feel that way, there’s nothing more to be said,” said Mrs. Oliver cheerfully. “I, at any rate, shall not let the grass grow under my feet. Good-bye, my dear. Look me up in London if you change your mind.”

She climbed into the car, started it, and drove off, waving a cheerful hand at the two girls.

Rhoda suddenly made a dash after the car and leapt on the running board.

“What you said—about looking you up in London,” she said breathlessly. “Did you only mean Anne, or did you mean me, too?”

Mrs. Oliver applied the brake.

“I meant both of you, of course.”

“Oh, thank you. Don’t stop. I—perhaps I might come one day. There’s something—No, don’t stop. I can jump off.”

She did so and, waving a hand, ran back to the gate, where Anne was standing.

“What on earth—?” began Anne.

"Isn't she a duck?" asked Rhoda enthusiastically. "I do like her. She had on odd stockings, did you notice? I'm sure she's frightfully clever. She must be—to write all those books. What fun if she found out the truth when the police and everyone were baffled."

"Why did she come here?" asked Anne.

Rhoda's eyes opened wide.

"Darling—she told you—"

Anne made an impatient gesture.

"We must go in. I forgot. I've left him all alone."

"Major Despard? Anne, he's frightfully good-looking, isn't he?"

"I suppose he is."

They walked up the path together.

Major Despard was standing by the mantelpiece, teacup in hand.

He cut short Anne's apologies for leaving him.

"Miss Meredith, I want to explain why I've butted in like this."

"Oh—but—"

"I said that I happened to be passing—that wasn't strictly true. I came here on purpose."

"How did you know my address?" asked Anne slowly.

"I got it from Superintendent Battle."

He saw her shrink slightly at the name.

He went on quickly:

"Battle's on his way here now. I happened to see him at Paddington. I got my car out and came down here. I knew I could beat the train easily."

"But why?"

Despard hesitated just a minute.

"I may have been presumptuous—but I had the impression that you were, perhaps, what is called 'alone in the world.'"

"She's got me," said Rhoda.

Despard shot a quick glance at her, rather liking the gallant boyish figure that leant against the mantelpiece and was following his words so intensely. They were an attractive pair, these two.

"I'm sure she couldn't have a more devoted friend than you, Miss Dawes," he said courteously; "but it occurred to me that, in the peculiar circumstances, the advice of someone with a good dash of world wisdom might not be amiss. Frankly, the situation is this: Miss Meredith is under suspicion of having committed murder. The same thing applies to me and to the two other people who were in the room last night. Such a situation is not agreeable—and it has its own peculiar difficulties and dangers which someone as young and inexperienced as you are, Miss Meredith, might not recognize. In my opinion, you ought to put yourself in the hands of a thoroughly good solicitor. Perhaps you have already done so?"

Anne Meredith shook her head.

"I never thought of it."

"Exactly as I suspected. Have you got a good man—a London man, for choice?"

Again Anne shook her head.

"I've hardly ever needed a solicitor."

“There’s Mr. Bury,” said Rhoda. “But he’s about a hundred-and-two, and quite gaga.”

“If you’ll allow me to advise you, Miss Meredith, I recommend your going to Mr. Myherne, my own solicitor. Jacobs, Peel & Jacobs is the actual name of the firm. They’re first-class people, and they know all the ropes.”

Anne had got paler. She sat down.

“Is it really necessary?” she asked in a low voice.

“I should say emphatically so. There are all sorts of legal pitfalls.”

“Are these people very—expensive?”

“That doesn’t matter a bit,” said Rhoda. “That will be quite all right, Major Despard. I think everything you say is quite true. Anne ought to be protected.”

“Their charges will, I think, be quite reasonable,” said Despard. He added seriously: “I really do think it’s a wise course, Miss Meredith.”

“Very well,” said Anne slowly. “I’ll do it if you think so.”

“Good.”

Rhoda said warmly:

“I think it’s awfully nice of you, Major Despard. Really frightfully nice.”

Anne said, “Thank you.”

She hesitated, and then said:

“Did you say Superintendent Battle was coming here?”

“Yes. You mustn’t be alarmed by that. It’s inevitable.”

“Oh, I know. As a matter of fact, I’ve been expecting him.”

Rhoda said impulsively:

“Poor darling—it’s nearly killing her, this business. It’s such a shame—so frightfully unfair.”

Despard said:

“I agree—it’s a pretty beastly business—dragging a young girl into an affair of this kind. If anyone wanted to stick a knife into Shaitana, they ought to have chosen some other place or time.”

Rhoda asked squarely:

“Who do you think did it? Dr. Roberts or that Mrs. Lorrimer?”

A very faint smile stirred Despard’s moustache.

“May have done it myself, for all you know.”

“Oh, no,” cried Rhoda. “Anne and I know you didn’t do it.”

He looked at them both with kindly eyes.

A nice pair of kids. Touchingly full of faith and trust. A timid little creature, the Meredith girl. Never mind, Myherne would see her through. The other was a fighter. He doubted if she would have crumpled up in the same way if she’d been in her friend’s place. Nice girls. He’d like to know more about them.

These thoughts passed through his mind. Aloud he said: “Never take anything for granted, Miss Dawes. I don’t set as much value on human life as most people do. All this hysterical fuss about road deaths, for instance. Man is always in danger—from traffic, from germs, from a hundred-and-one things. As well be killed one way as another. The moment you begin being careful of yourself—adopting as your motto ‘Safety First’—you might as well be dead, in my opinion.”

“Oh, I do agree with you,” cried Rhoda. “I think one ought to live frightfully dangerously—if one gets the chance that is. But life, on the whole, is terribly tame."

"It has its moments."

"Yes, for you. You go to out-of-the-way places and get mauled by tigers and shoot things and jiggers bury themselves in your toes and insects sting you, and everything's terribly uncomfortable but frightfully thrilling."

"Well, Miss Meredith has had her thrill, too. I don't suppose it often happens that you've actually been in the room while a murder was committed—"

"Oh, don't!" cried Anne.

He said quickly:

"I'm sorry."

But Rhoda said with a sigh:

"Of course it was awful—but it was exciting, too! I don't think Anne appreciates that side of it. You know, I think that Mrs. Oliver is thrilled to the core to have been there that night."

"Mrs.—? Oh, your fat friend who writes the books about the unpronounceable Finn. Is she trying her hand at detection in real life?"

"She wants to."

"Well, let's wish her luck. It would be amusing if she put one over on Battle and Co."

"What is Superintendent Battle like?" asked Rhoda curiously.

Major Despard said gravely:

"He's an extraordinarily astute man. A man of remarkable ability."

"Oh!" said Rhoda. "Anne said he looked rather stupid."

“That, I should imagine, is part of Battle’s stock-in-trade. But we mustn’t make any mistakes. Battle’s no fool.”

He rose.

“Well, I must be off. There’s just one other thing I’d like to say.”

Anne had risen also.

“Yes?” she said, as she held out her hand.

Despard paused a minute, picking his words carefully. He took her hand and retained it in his. He looked straight into the wide, beautiful grey eyes.

“Don’t be offended with me,” he said. “I just want to say this: It’s humanly possible that there may be some feature of your acquaintanceship with Shaitana that you don’t want to come out. If so—don’t be angry, please” (he felt the instinctive pull of her hand)—“you are perfectly within your rights in refusing to answer any questions Battle may ask unless your solicitor is present.”

Anne tore her hand away. Her eyes opened, their grey darkening with anger.

“There’s nothing—nothing … I hardly knew the beastly man.”

“Sorry,” said Major Despard. “Thought I ought to mention it.”

“It’s quite true,” said Rhoda. “Anne barely knew him. She didn’t like him much, but he gave frightfully good parties.”

“That,” said Major Despard grimly, “seems to have been the only justification for the late Mr. Shaitana’s existence.”

Anne said in a cold voice:

“Superintendent Battle can ask me anything he likes. I’ve nothing to hide—nothing.”

Despard said very gently, “Please forgive me.”

She looked at him. Her anger dwindled. She smiled—it was a very sweet smile.

“It’s all right,” she said. “You meant it kindly, I know.”

She held out her hand again. He took it and said:

“We’re in the same boat, you know. We ought to be pals….”

It was Anne who went with him to the gate. When she came back Rhoda was staring out of the window and whistling. She turned as her friend entered the room.

“He’s frightfully attractive, Anne.”

“He’s nice, isn’t he?”

“A great deal more than nice … I’ve got an absolute passion for him. Why wasn’t I at that damned dinner instead of you? I’d have enjoyed the excitement—the net closing round me—the shadow of the scaffold—”

“No, you wouldn’t. You’re talking nonsense, Rhoda.”

Anne’s voice was sharp. Then it softened as she said:

“It was nice of him to come all this way—for a stranger—a girl he’s only met once.”

“Oh, he fell for you. Obviously. Men don’t do purely disinterested kindnesses. He wouldn’t have come toddling down if you’d been cross-eyed and covered with pimples.”

“Don’t you think so?”

“I do not, my good idiot. Mrs. Oliver’s a much more disinterested party.”

“I don’t like her,” said Anne abruptly. “I had a sort of feeling about her … I wonder what she really came for?”

“The usual suspicions of your own sex. I daresay Major Despard had an axe to grind if it comes to that.”

“I’m sure he hadn’t,” cried Anne hotly.

Then she blushed as Rhoda Dawes laughed.

Fourteen

THIRD VISITOR

Superintendent Battle arrived at Wallingford about six o'clock. It was his intention to learn as much as he could from innocent local gossip before interviewing Miss Anne Meredith.

It was not difficult to glean such information as there was. Without committing himself definitely to any statement, the superintendent nevertheless gave several different impressions of his rank and calling in life.

At least two people would have said confidently that he was a London builder come down to see about a new wing to be added to the cottage, from another you would have learned that he was "one of these weekenders wanting to take a furnished cottage," and two more would have said they knew positively, and for a fact, that he was a representative of a hardcourt tennis firm.

The information that the superintendent gathered was entirely favourable.

"Wendon Cottage—Yes, that's right—on the Marlbury Road. You can't miss it. Yes, two young ladies. Miss Dawes and Miss Meredith. Very nice young ladies, too. The quiet kind.

"Here for years? Oh, no, not that long. Just over two years. September quarter they come in. Mr. Pickersgill they bought it from. Never used it much, he didn't, after his wife died."

Superintendent Battle's informant had never heard they came from Northumberland. London, he thought they came from. Popular in the neighbourhood, though some people were old-fashioned and didn't think two young ladies ought to be living alone. But very quiet, they were. None of this cocktail-drinking weekend lot. Miss Rhoda, she was the dashing one.

Miss Meredith was the quiet one. Yes, it was Miss Dawes what paid the bills. She was the one had got the money.

The superintendent's researches at last led him inevitably to Mrs. Astwell—who "did" for the ladies at Wendon Cottage.

Mrs. Astwell was a locquacious lady.

"Well, no, sir. I hardly think they'd want to sell. Not so soon. They only got in two years ago. I've done for them from the beginning, yes, sir. Eight o'clock till twelve—those are my hours. Very nice, lively young ladies, always ready for a joke or a bit of fun. Not stuck up at all.

"Well, of course, I couldn't say if it's the same Miss Dawes you knew, sir—the same family, I mean. It's my fancy her home's in Devonshire. She gets the cream sent her now and again, and says it reminds her of home; so I think it must be.

"As you say, sir, it's sad for so many young ladies having to earn their living nowadays. These young ladies aren't what you'd call rich, but they have a very pleasant life. It's Miss Dawes has got the money, of course. Miss Anne's her companion, in a manner of speaking, I suppose you might say. The cottage belongs to Miss Dawes.

"I couldn't really say what part Miss Anne comes from. I've heard her mention the Isle of Wight, and I know she doesn't like the North of England; and she and Miss Rhoda were together in Devonshire, because I've heard them joke about the hills and talk about the pretty coves and beaches."

The flow went on. Every now and then Superintendent Battle made a mental note. Later, a cryptic word or two was jotted down in his little book.

At half past eight that evening he walked up the path to the door of Wendon Cottage.

It was opened to him by a tall, dark girl wearing a frock of orange cretonne.

“Miss Meredith live here?” inquired Superintendent Battle.

He looked very wooden and soldierly.

“Yes, she does.”

“I’d like to speak to her, please. Superintendent Battle.”

He was immediately favoured with a piercing stare.

“Come in,” said Rhoda Dawes, drawing back from the doorway.

Anne Meredith was sitting in a cosy chair by the fire, sipping coffee. She was wearing embroidered crêpe de chine pyjamas.

“It’s Superintendent Battle,” said Rhoda, ushering in the guest.

Anne rose and came forward with outstretched hand.

“A bit late for a call,” said Battle. “But I wanted to find you in, and it’s been a fine day.”

Anne smiled.

“Will you have some coffee, Superintendent? Rhoda, fetch another cup.”

“Well, it’s very kind of you, Miss Meredith.”

“We think we make rather good coffee,” said Anne.

She indicated a chair, and Superintendent Battle sat down. Rhoda brought a cup, and Anne poured out his coffee. The fire crackled and the flowers in the vases made an agreeable impression upon the superintendent.

It was a pleasant homey atmosphere. Anne seemed self-possessed and at her ease, and the other girl continued to stare at him with devouring interest.

“We’ve been expecting you,” said Anne.

Her tone was almost reproachful. “Why have you neglected me?” it seemed to say.

“Sorry, Miss Meredith. I’ve had a lot of routine work to do.”

“Satisfactory?”

“Not particularly. But it all has to be done. I’ve turned Dr. Roberts inside out, so to speak. And the same for Mrs. Lorrimer. And now I’ve come to do the same for you, Miss Meredith.”

Anne smiled.

“I’m ready.”

“What about Major Despard?” asked Rhoda.

“Oh, he won’t be overlooked. I can promise you that,” said Battle.

He set down his coffee cup and looked towards Anne. She sat up a little straighter in her chair.

“I’m quite ready, superintendent. What do you want to know?”

“Well, roughly, all about yourself, Miss Meredith.”

“I’m quite a respectable person,” said Anne, smiling.

“She’s led a blameless life, too,” said Rhoda. “I can answer for that.”

“Well, that’s very nice,” said Superintendent Battle cheerfully. “You’ve known Miss Meredith a long time, then?”

“We were at school together,” said Rhoda. “What ages ago, it seems, doesn’t it, Anne?”

“So long ago, you can hardly remember it, I suppose,” said Battle with a chuckle. “Now, then, Miss Meredith, I’m afraid I’m going to be rather like those forms you fill up for passports.”

“I was born—” began Anne.

“Of poor but honest parents,” Rhoda put in.

Superintendent Battle held up a slightly reproving hand.

“Now, now, young lady,” he said.

“Rhoda, darling,” said Anne gravely. “It’s serious, this.”

“Sorry,” said Rhoda.

“Now, Miss Meredith, you were born—where?”

“At Quetta, in India.”

“Ah, yes. Your people were Army folk?”

“Yes—my father was Major John Meredith. My mother died when I was eleven. Father retired when I was fifteen and went to live in Cheltenham. He died when I was eighteen and left practically no money.”

Battle nodded his head sympathetically.

“Bit of a shock to you, I expect.”

“It was, rather. I always knew that we weren’t well off, but to find there was practically nothing—well, that’s different.”

“What did you do, Miss Meredith?”

“I had to take a job. I hadn’t been particularly well educated and I wasn’t clever. I didn’t know typing or shorthand, or anything. A friend in Cheltenham found me a job with friends of hers—two small boys home in the holidays, and general help in the house.”

“Name, please?”

“That was Mrs. Eldon, The Larches, Ventnor. I stayed there for two years, and then the Eldons went abroad. Then I went to a Mrs. Deering.”

“My aunt,” put in Rhoda.

“Yes, Rhoda got me the job. I was very happy. Rhoda used to come and stay sometimes, and we had great fun.”

“What were you there—companion?”

“Yes—it amounted to that.”

“More like undergardener,” said Rhoda.

She explained:

“My Aunt Emily is just mad on gardening. Anne spent most of her time weeding or putting in bulbs.”

“And you left Mrs. Deering?”

“Her health got worse, and she had to have a regular nurse.”

“She’s got cancer,” said Rhoda. “Poor darling, she has to have morphia and things like that.”

“She had been very kind to me. I was very sorry to go,” went on Anne.

“I was looking about for a cottage,” said Rhoda, “and wanting someone to share it with me. Daddy’s married again—not my sort at all. I asked Anne to come here with me, and she’s been here ever since.”

“Well, that certainly seems a most blameless life,” said Battle. “Let’s just get the dates clear. You were with Mrs. Eldon two years, you say. By the way, what is her address now?”

“She’s in Palestine. Her husband has some Government appointment out there—I’m not sure what.”

"Ah, well, I can soon find out. And after that you went to Mrs. Deering?"

"I was with her three years," said Anne quickly. "Her address is Marsh Dene, Little Hembury, Devon."

"I see," said Battle. "So you are now twenty-five, Miss Meredith. Now, there's just one thing more—the name and address of a couple of people in Cheltenham who knew you and your father."

Anne supplied him with these.

"Now, about this trip to Switzerland—where you met Mr. Shaitana. Did you go alone there—or was Miss Dawes here with you?"

"We went out together. We joined some other people. There was a party of eight."

"Tell me about your meeting with Mr. Shaitana."

Anne crinkled her brows.

"There's really nothing to tell. He was just there. We knew him in the way you know people in a hotel. He got first prize at the fancy dress ball. He went as Mephistopheles."

Superintendent Battle sighed.

"Yes, that always was his favourite effect."

"He really was marvellous," said Rhoda. "He hardly had to make up at all."

The superintendent looked from one girl to the other.

"Which of you two young ladies knew him best?"

Anne hesitated. It was Rhoda who answered.

"Both the same to begin with. Awfully little, that is. You see, our crowd was the skiing lot, and we were off doing runs most days and dancing together in the evenings. But then Shaitana seemed to take rather a fancy to Anne. You know, went out of his way to pay her compliments, and all that. We ragged her about it, rather."

"I just think he did it to annoy me," said Anne. "Because I didn't like him. I think it amused him to make me feel embarrassed."

Rhoda said laughing:

"We told Anne it would be a nice rich marriage for her. She got simply wild with us."

"Perhaps," said Battle, "you'd give me the names of the other people in your party?"

"You aren't what I call a trustful man," said Rhoda. "Do you think that every word we're telling you is downright lies?"

Superintendent Battle twinkled.

"I'm going to make sure it isn't, anyway," he said.

"You are suspicious," said Rhoda.

She scribbled some names on a piece of paper and gave it to him.

Battle rose.

"Well, thank you very much, Miss Meredith," he said. "As Miss Dawes says, you seem to have led a particularly blameless life. I don't think you need worry much. It's odd the way Mr. Shaitana's manner changed to you. You'll excuse my asking, but he didn't ask you to marry him—or—er—pester you with attentions of another kind?"

"He didn't try to seduce her," said Rhoda helpfully. "If that's what you mean."

Anne was blushing.

“Nothing of the kind,” she said. “He was always most polite and—and—formal. It was just his elaborate manners that made me uncomfortable.”

“And little things he said or hinted?”

“Yes—at least—no. He never hinted things.”

“Sorry. These lady-killers do sometimes. Well, goodnight, Miss Meredith. Thank you very much. Excellent coffee. Goodnight, Miss Dawes.”

“There,” said Rhoda as Anne came back into the room after shutting the door after Battle. “That’s over, and not so very terrible. He’s a nice fatherly man, and he evidently doesn’t suspect you in the least. It was all ever so much better than I expected.”

Anne sank down with a sigh.

“It was really quite easy,” she said. “It was silly of me to work myself up so. I thought he’d try to browbeat me—like K.C.s on the stage.”

“He looks sensible,” said Rhoda. “He’d know well enough you’re not a murdering kind of female.”

She hesitated and then said:

“I say, Anne, you didn’t mention being at Croftways. Did you forget?”

Anne said slowly:

“I didn’t think it counted. I was only there a few months. And there’s no one to ask about me there. I can write and tell him if you think it matters; but I’m sure it doesn’t. Let’s leave it.”

“Right, if you say so.”

Rhoda rose and turned on the wireless.

A raucous voice said:

“You have just heard the Black Nubians play ‘Why do you tell me lies, Baby?’”

Fifteen

MAJOR DESPARD

Major Despard came out of the Albany, turned sharply into Regent Street and jumped on a bus.

It was the quiet time of day—the top of the bus had very few seats occupied. Despard made his way forward and sat down on the front seat.

He had jumped on the bus while it was going. Now it came to a halt, took up passengers and made its way once more up Regent Street.

A second traveller climbed the steps, made his way forward and sat down in the front seat on the other side.

Despard did not notice the newcomer, but after a few minutes a tentative voice murmured:

“It is a good view of London, is it not, that one gets from the top of a bus?”

Despard turned his head. He looked puzzled for a moment, then his face cleared.

“I beg your pardon, M. Poirot. I didn’t see it was you. Yes as you say, one has a good bird’s eye view of the world from here. It was better, though, in the old days, when there wasn’t all this caged-in glass business.”

Poirot sighed.

“Tout de même, it was not always agreeable in the wet weather when the inside was full. And there is much wet weather in this country.”

“Rain? Rain never did any harm to anyone.”

“You are in error,” said Poirot. “It leads often to a fluxion de poitrine.”

Despard smiled.

“I see you belong to the well-wrapped-up school, M. Poirot.”

Poirot was indeed well equipped against any treachery of an autumn day. He wore a greatcoat and a muffler.

“Rather odd, running into you like this,” said Despard.

He did not see the smile that the muffler concealed. There was nothing odd in this encounter. Having ascertained a likely hour for Despard to leave his rooms, Poirot had been waiting for him. He had prudently not risked leaping on the bus, but he had trotted after it to its next stopping place and boarded it there.

“True. We have not seen each other since the evening at Mr. Shaitana’s,” he replied.

“Aren’t you taking a hand in the business?” asked Despard.

Poirot scratched his ear delicately.

“I reflect,” he said. “I reflect a good deal. To run to and fro, to make the investigations, that, no. It does not suit my age, my temperament, or my figure.”

Despard said unexpectedly:

“Reflect, eh? Well, you might do worse. There’s too much rushing about nowadays. If people sat tight and thought about a thing before they tackled it, there’d be less mess-ups than there are.”

“Is that your procedure in life, Major Despard?”

“Usually,” said the other simply. “Get your bearings, figure out your route, weigh up the pros and cons, make your decision—stick to it.”

His mouth set grimly.

“And, after that, nothing will turn you from your path, eh?” asked Poirot.

“Oh, I don’t say that. No use in being pigheaded over things. If you’ve made a mistake, admit it.”

“But I imagine that you do not often make a mistake, Major Despard.”

“We all make mistakes, M. Poirot.”

“Some of us,” said Poirot with a certain coldness, possibly due to the pronoun the other had used, “make less than others.”

Despard looked at him, smiled slightly and said:

“Don’t you ever have a failure, M. Poirot?”

“The last time was twenty-eight years ago,” said Poirot with dignity. “And even then, there were circumstances—but no matter.”

“That seems a pretty good record,” said Despard.

He added: “What about Shaitana’s death? That doesn’t count, I suppose, since it isn’t officially your business.”

“It is not my business—no. But, all the same, it offends my amour propre. I consider it an impertinence, you comprehend, for a murder to be committed under my very nose—by someone who mocks himself at my ability to solve it!”

“Not under your nose only,” said Despard drily. “Under the nose of the Criminal Investigation Department also.”

“That was probably a bad mistake,” said Poirot gravely. “The good Superintendent Battle, he may look wooden, but he is not wooden in the head—not at all.”

“I agree,” said Despard. “That stolidity is a pose. He’s a very clever and able officer.”

“And I think he is very active in the case.”

“Oh, he’s active enough. See a nice quiet soldierly-looking fellow on one of the back seats?”

Poirot looked over his shoulder.

“There is no one here now but ourselves.”

“Oh, well, he’s inside, then. He never loses me. Very efficient fellow. Varies his appearance, too, from time to time. Quite artistic about it.”

“Ah, but that would not deceive you. You have the very quick and accurate eye.”

“I never forget a face—even a black one—and that’s a lot more than most people can say.”

“You are just the person I need,” said Poirot. “What a chance, meeting you today! I need someone with a good eye and a good memory. Malheureusement the two seldom go together. I have asked the Dr. Roberts a question, without result, and the same with Madame Lorrimer. Now, I will try you and see if I get what I want. Cast your mind back to the room in which you played cards at Mr. Shaitana’s, and tell me what you remember of it.”

Despard looked puzzled.

“I don’t quite understand.”

“Give me a description of the room—the furnishings—the objects in it.”

“I don’t know that I’m much of a hand at that sort of thing,” said Despard slowly. “It was a rotten sort of room—to my mind. Not a man’s room at all. A lot of brocade and silk and stuff. Sort of room a fellow like Shaitana would have.”

“But to particularize—”

Despard shook his head.

“Afraid I didn’t notice … He’d got some good rugs. Two Bokharas and three or four really good Persian ones, including a Hamadan and a Tabriz. Rather a good eland head—no, that was in the hall. From Rowland Ward’s, I expect.”

“You do not think that the late Mr. Shaitana was one to go out and shoot wild beasts?”

“Not he. Never potted anything but sitting game, I’ll bet. What else was there? I’m sorry to fail you, but I really can’t help much. Any amount of knickknacks lying about. Tables were thick with them. Only thing I noticed was a rather jolly idol. Easter Island, I should say. Highly polished wood. You don’t see many of them. There was some Malay stuff, too. No, I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“No matter,” said Poirot, looking slightly crestfallen.

He went on:

“Do you know, Mrs. Lorrimer, she has the most amazing card memory! She could tell me the bidding and play of nearly every hand. It was astonishing.”

Despard shrugged his shoulders.

“Some women are like that. Because they play pretty well all day long, I suppose.”

“You could not do it, eh?”

The other shook his head.

“I just remember a couple of hands. One where I could have got game in diamonds—and Roberts bluffed me out of it. Went down himself, but we didn’t double him, worse luck. I remember a no trumper, too. Tricky business—every card wrong. We went down a couple—lucky not to have gone down more.”

“Do you play much bridge, Major Despard?”

“No, I’m not a regular player. It’s a good game, though.”

“You prefer it to poker?”

“I do personally. Poker’s too much of a gamble.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“I do not think Mr. Shaitana played any game—any card game, that is.”

“There’s only one game that Shaitana played consistently,” said Despard grimly.

“And that?”

“A low-down game.”

Poirot was silent for a minute, then he said:

“Is it that you know that? Or do you just think it?”

Despard went brick red.

“Meaning one oughtn’t to say things without giving chapter and verse? I suppose that’s true. Well, it’s accurate enough. I happen to know. On the other hand, I’m not prepared to give chapter and verse. Such information as I’ve got came to me privately.”

“Meaning a woman or women are concerned?”

“Yes. Shaitana, like the dirty dog he was, preferred to deal with women.”

“You think he was a blackmailer? That is interesting.”

Despard shook his head.

“No, no, you’ve misunderstood me. In a way, Shaitana was a blackmailer, but not the common or garden sort. He wasn’t after money. He was a spiritual blackmailer, if there can be such a thing.”

“And he got out of it—what?”

“He got a kick out of it. That’s the only way I can put it. He got a thrill out of seeing people quail and flinch. I suppose it made him feel less of a louse and more of a man. And it’s a very effective pose with women. He’d only got to hint that he knew everything—and they’d start telling him a lot of things that perhaps he didn’t know. That would tickle his sense of humour. Then he’d strut about in his Mephistophelian attitude of ‘I know everything! I am the great Shaitana!’ The man was an ape!”

“So you think that he frightened Miss Meredith that way,” said Poirot slowly.

“Miss Meredith?” Despard stared. “I wasn’t thinking of her. She isn’t the kind to be afraid of a man like Shaitana.”

“Pardon. You meant Mrs. Lorrimer.”

“No, no, no. You misunderstand me. I was speaking generally. It wouldn’t be easy to frighten Mrs. Lorrimer. And she’s not the kind of woman who you can imagine having a guilty secret. No, I was not thinking of anyone in particular.”

“It was the general method to which you referred?”

“Exactly.”

“There is no doubt,” said Poirot slowly, “that what you call a Dago often has a very clever understanding of women. He knows how to approach them. He worms secrets out of them—”

He paused.

Despard broke in impatiently:

“It’s absurd. The man was a mountebank—nothing really dangerous about him. And yet women were afraid of him. Ridiculously so.”

He started up suddenly.

“Hallo, I’ve overshot the mark. Got too interested in what we were discussing. Good-bye, M. Poirot. Look down and you’ll see my faithful shadow leave the bus when I do.”

He hurried to the back and down the steps. The conductor’s bell jangled. But a double pull sounded before it had time to stop.

Looking down to the street below, Poirot noticed Despard striding back along the pavement. He did not trouble to pick out the following figure. Something else was interesting him.

“No one in particular,” he murmured to himself. “Now, I wonder.”

Sixteen

THE EVIDENCE OF ELSIE BATT

Sergeant O’Connor was unkindly nicknamed by his colleagues at the Yard: “The Maidservant’s Prayer.”

There was no doubt that he was an extremely handsome man. Tall, erect, broad-shouldered, it was less the regularity of his features than the roguish and daredevil spark in his eye which made him so irresistible to the fair sex. It was indubitable that Sergeant O’Connor got results, and got them quickly.

So rapid was he, that only four days after the murder of Mr. Shaitana, Sergeant O’Connor was sitting in the three-and-sixpenny seats at the Willy Nilly Revue side by side with Miss Elsie Batt, late parlourmaid to Mrs. Craddock of 117 North Audley Street.

Having laid his line of approach carefully, Sergeant O’Connor was just launching the great offensive.

“—Reminds me,” he was saying, “of the way one of my old governors used to carry on. Name of Craddock. He was an old cuss, if you like.”

“Craddock,” said Elsie. “I was with some Craddocks once.”

“Well, that’s funny. Wonder whether they were the same?”

“Lived in North Audley Street, they did,” said Elsie.

“My lot were going to London when I left them,” said O’Connor promptly. “Yes, I believe it was North Audley Street. Mrs. Craddock was rather a one for the gents.”

Elsie tossed her head.

“I’d no patience with her. Always finding fault and grumbling. Nothing you did right.”

“Her husband got some of it, too, didn’t he?”

“She was always complaining he neglected her—that he didn’t understand her. And she was always saying how bad her health was and gasping and groaning. Not ill at all, if you ask me.”

O’Connor slapped his knee.

“Got it. Wasn’t there something about her and some doctor? A bit too thick or something?”

“You mean Dr. Roberts? He was a nice gentleman, he was.”

“You girls, you’re all alike,” said Sergeant O’Connor. “The moment a man’s a bad lot, all the girls stick up for him. I know his kind.”

“No, you don’t, and you’re all wrong about him. There wasn’t anything of that kind about him. Wasn’t his fault, was it, if Mrs. Craddock was always sending for him? What’s a doctor to do? If you ask me, he didn’t think nothing of her at all, except as a patient. It was all her doing. Wouldn’t leave him alone, she wouldn’t.”

“That’s all very well, Elsie. Don’t mind me calling you Elsie, do you? Feel as though I’d known you all my life.”

“Well, you haven’t! Elsie, indeed.”

She tossed her head.

“Oh, very well, Miss Batt.” He gave her a glance. “As I was saying, that’s all very well, but the husband, he cut up rough, all the same, didn’t he?”

“He was a bit ratty one day,” admitted Elsie. “But, if you ask me, he was ill at the time. He died just after, you know.”

“I remember—died of something queer, didn’t he?”

“Something Japanese, it was—all from a new shaving brush, he’d got. Seems awful, doesn’t it, that they’re not more careful? I’ve not fancied anything Japanese since.”

“Buy British, that’s my motto,” said Sergeant O’Connor sententiously. “And you were saying he and the doctor had a row?”

Elsie nodded, enjoying herself as she relived past scandals.

“Hammer and tongs, they went at it,” she said. “At least, the master did. Dr. Roberts was ever so quiet. Just said, ‘Nonsense.’ And, ‘What have you got into your head?’”

“This was at the house, I suppose?”

“Yes. She’d sent for him. And then she and the master had words, and in the middle of it Dr. Roberts arrived, and the master went for him.”

“What did he say exactly?”

“Well, of course, I wasn’t supposed to hear. It was all in the Missus’s bedroom. I thought something was up, so I got the dustpan and did the stairs. I wasn’t going to miss anything.”

Sergeant O’Connor heartily concurred in this sentiment, reflecting how fortunate it was that Elsie was being approached unofficially. On interrogation by Sergeant O’Connor of the Police, she would have virtuously protested that she had not overheard anything at all.

“As I say,” went on Elsie, “Dr. Roberts, he was very quiet—the master was doing all the shouting.”

“What was he saying?” asked O’Connor, for the second time approaching the vital point.

“Abusing of him proper,” said Elsie with relish.

“How do you mean?”

Would the girl never come to actual words and phrases?

“Well, I don’t understand a lot of it,” admitted Elsie. “There were a lot of long words, ‘unprofessional conduct,’ and ‘taking advantage,’ and things like that—and I heard him say he’d get Dr. Roberts struck off the—Medical Register, would it be? Something like that.”

“That’s right,” said O’Connor. “Complain to the Medical Council.”

“Yes, he said something like that. And the Missus was going on in sort of hysterics, saying ‘You never cared for me. You neglected me. You left me alone.’ And I heard her say that Dr. Roberts had been an angel of goodness to her.

“And then the doctor, he came through into the dressing room with the master and shut the door of the bedroom—and he said quite plain:

“‘My good man, don’t you realize your wife’s hysterical? She doesn’t know what she’s saying. To tell you the truth, it’s been a very difficult and trying case, and I’d have thrown it up long ago if I’d thought it was con—con—some long word; oh, yes, consistent—that was it—consistent with my duty.’ That’s what he said. He said something about not overstepping a boundary, too—something between doctor and patient. He got the master quietened a bit, and then he said:

“‘You’ll be late at the office, you know. You’d better be off. Just think things over quietly. I think you’ll realize that the whole business is a mare’s nest. I’ll just wash my hands here before I go onto my next case. Now, you think it over, my dear fellow. I can assure you that the whole thing arises out of your wife’s disordered imagination.’

“And the master, he said, ‘I don’t know what to think.’

“And he come out—and, of course, I was brushing hard—but he never even noticed me. I thought afterwards he looked ill. The doctor, he was whistling quite cheerily and washing his hands in the dressing room, where there was hot and cold laid on. And presently he came out, with his bag, and he spoke to me very nicely and cheerily, as he always did, and he went down the stairs, quite cheerful and gay and his usual self. So you see, I'm quite sure as he hadn't done anything wrong. It was all her."

"And then Craddock got this anthrax?"

"Yes, I think he'd got it already. The mistress, she nursed him very devoted, but he died. Lovely wreaths there was at the funeral."

"And afterwards? Did Dr. Roberts come to the house again?"

"No, he didn't, Nosey! You've got some grudge against him. I tell you there was nothing in it. If there were he'd have married her when the master was dead, wouldn't he? And he never did. No such fool. He'd taken her measure all right. She used to ring him up, though, but somehow he was never in. And then she sold the house, and we all got our notices, and she went abroad to Egypt."

"And you didn't see Dr. Roberts in all that time?"

"No. She did, because she went to him to have this—what do you call it?—'noculation against the typhoid fever. She came back with her arm ever so sore with it. If you ask me, he made it clear to her then that there was nothing doing. She didn't ring him up no more, and she went off very cheerful with a lovely lot of new clothes—all light colours, although it was the middle of winter, but she said it would be all sunshine and hot out there."

"That's right," said Sergeant O'Connor. "It's too hot sometimes, I've heard. She died out there. You know that, I suppose?"

"No, indeed I didn't. Well, fancy that! She may have been worse than I thought, poor soul."

She added with a sigh:

"I wonder what they did with all that lovely lot of clothes. They're blacks out there, so they couldn't wear them."

"You'd have looked a treat in them, I expect," said Sergeant O'Connor.

“Impudence,” said Elsie.

“Well, you won’t have my impudence much longer,” said Sergeant O’Connor. “I’ve got to go away on business for my firm.”

“You going for long?”

“May be going abroad,” said the Sergeant.

Elsie’s face fell.

Though unacquainted with Lord Byron’s famous poem, “I never loved a dear gazelle,” etc., its sentiments were at that moment hers. She thought to herself:

“Funny how all the really attractive ones never come to anything. Oh, well, there’s always Fred.”

Which is gratifying, since it shows that the sudden incursion of Sergeant O’Connor into Elsie’s life did not affect it permanently. “Fred” may even have been the gainer!

Seventeen

THE EVIDENCE OF RHODA DAWES

Rhoda Dawes came out of Debenham's and stood meditatively upon the pavement. Indecision was written all over her face. It was an expressive face; each fleeting emotion showed itself in a quickly varying expression.

Quite plainly at this moment Rhoda's face said: "Shall I or shan't I? I'd like to … But perhaps I'd better not…."

The commissionaire said, "Taxi, Miss?" to her hopefully.

Rhoda shook her head.

A stout woman carrying parcels with an eager "shopping early for Christmas" expression on her face, cannoned into her severely, but still Rhoda stood stock-still, trying to make up her mind.

Chaotic odds and ends of thoughts flashed through her mind.

"After all, why shouldn't I? She asked me to—but perhaps it's just a thing she says to everyone … She doesn't mean it to be taken seriously … Well, after all, Anne didn't want me. She made it quite clear she'd rather go with Major Despard to the solicitor man alone … And why shouldn't she? I mean, three is a crowd … And it isn't really any business of mine … It isn't as though I particularly wanted to see Major Despard … He is nice, though … I think he must have fallen for Anne. Men don't take a lot of trouble unless they have … I mean, it's never just kindness…."

A messenger boy bumped into Rhoda and said, "Beg pardon, Miss," in a reproachful tone.

"Oh, dear," thought Rhoda. "I can't go on standing here all day. Just because I'm such an idiot that I can't make up my mind … I think that coat and skirt's going to be awfully nice. I wonder if brown would have been more useful than green? No, I don’t think so. Well, come on, shall I go or shan’t I? Half past three, it’s quite a good time—I mean, it doesn’t look as though I’m cadging a meal or anything. I might just go and look, anyway.”

She plunged across the road, turned to the right, and then to the left, up Harley Street, finally pausing by the block of flats always airily described by Mrs. Oliver as “all among the nursing homes.”

“Well, she can’t eat me,” thought Rhoda, and plunged boldly into the building.

Mrs. Oliver’s flat was on the top floor. A uniformed attendant whisked her up in a lift and decanted her on a smart new mat outside a bright green door.

“This is awful,” thought Rhoda. “Worse than dentists. I must go through with it now, though.”

Pink with embarrassment, she pushed the bell.

The door was opened by an elderly maid.

“Is—could I—is Mrs. Oliver at home?” asked Rhoda.

The maid drew back, Rhoda entered, she was shown into a very untidy drawing room. The maid said:

“What name shall I say, please?”

“Oh—eh—Miss Dawes—Miss Rhoda Dawes.”

The maid withdrew. After what seemed to Rhoda about a hundred years, but was really exactly a minute and forty-five seconds, the maid returned.

“Will you step this way, Miss?”

Pinker than ever, Rhoda followed her. Along a passage, round a corner, a door was opened. Nervously she entered into what seemed at first to her startled eyes to be an African forest!

Birds—masses of birds, parrots, macaws, birds unknown to ornithology, twined themselves in and out of what seemed to be a primeval forest. In the middle of this riot of bird and vegetable life, Rhoda perceived a battered kitchen table with a typewriter on it, masses of typescript littered all over the floor and Mrs. Oliver, her hair in wild confusion, rising from a somewhat rickety-looking chair.

“My dear, how nice to see you,” said Mrs. Oliver, holding out a carbon-stained hand and trying with her other hand to smooth her hair, a quite impossible proceeding.

A paper bag, touched by her elbow, fell from the desk, and apples rolled energetically all over the floor.

“Never mind, my dear, don’t bother, someone will pick them up sometime.”

Rather breathless, Rhoda rose from a stooping position with five apples in her grasp.

“Oh, thank you—no, I shouldn’t put them back in the bag. I think it’s got a hole in it. Put them on the mantelpiece. That’s right. Now, then, sit down and let’s talk.”

Rhoda accepted a second battered chair and focussed her eyes on her hostess.

“I say, I’m terribly sorry. Am I interrupting, or anything?” she asked breathlessly.

“Well, you are and you aren’t,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I am working, as you see. But that dreadful Finn of mine has got himself terribly tangled up. He did some awfully clever deduction with a dish of French beans, and now he’s just detected deadly poison in the sage and onion stuffing of the Michaelmas goose, and I’ve just remembered that French beans are over by Michaelmas.”

Thrilled by this peep into the inner world of creative detective fiction, Rhoda said breathlessly, “They might be tinned.”

“They might, of course,” said Mrs. Oliver doubtfully. “But it would rather spoil the point. I’m always getting tangled up in horticulture and things like that. People write to me and say I’ve got the wrong flowers all out together. As though it mattered—and anyway, they are all out together in a London shop.”

“Of course it doesn’t matter,” said Rhoda loyally. “Oh, Mrs. Oliver, it must be marvellous to write.”

Mrs. Oliver rubbed her forehead with a carbonny finger and said:

“Why?”

“Oh,” said Rhoda, a little taken aback. “Because it must. It must be wonderful just to sit down and write off a whole book.”

“It doesn’t happen exactly like that,” said Mrs. Oliver. “One actually has to think, you know. And thinking is always a bore. And you have to plan things. And then one gets stuck every now and then, and you feel you’ll never get out of the mess—but you do! Writing’s not particularly enjoyable. It’s hard work like everything else.”

“It doesn’t seem like work,” said Rhoda.

“Not to you,” said Mrs. Oliver, “because you don’t have to do it! It feels very like work to me. Some days I can only keep going by repeating over and over to myself the amount of money I might get for my next serial rights. That spurs you on, you know. So does your bankbook when you see how much overdrawn you are.”

“I never imagined you actually typed your books yourself,” said Rhoda. “I thought you’d have a secretary.”

“I did have a secretary, and I used to try and dictate to her, but she was so competent that it used to depress me. I felt she knew so much more about English and grammar and full stops and semicolons than I did, that it gave me a kind of inferiority complex. Then I tried having a thoroughly incompetent secretary, but, of course, that didn’t answer very well, either.”

“It must be so wonderful to be able to think of things,” said Rhoda.

“I can always think of things,” said Mrs. Oliver happily. “What is so tiring is writing them down. I always think I’ve finished, and then when I count up I find I’ve only written thirty thousand words instead of sixty thousand, and so then I have to throw in another murder and get the heroine kidnapped again. It’s all very boring.”

Rhoda did not answer. She was staring at Mrs. Oliver with the reverence felt by youth for celebrity—slightly tinged by disappointment.

“Do you like the wallpaper?” asked Mrs. Oliver waving an airy hand. “I’m frightfully fond of birds. The foliage is supposed to be tropical. It makes me feel it’s a hot day, even when it’s freezing. I can’t do anything unless I feel very, very warm. But Sven Hjerson breaks the ice on his bath every morning!”

“I think it’s all marvellous,” said Rhoda. “And it’s awfully nice of you to say I’m not interrupting you.”

“We’ll have some coffee and toast,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Very black coffee and very hot toast. I can always eat that anytime.”

She went to the door, opened it and shouted. Then she returned and said:

“What brings you to town—shopping?”

“Yes, I’ve been doing some shopping.”

“Is Miss Meredith up, too?”

“Yes, she’s gone with Major Despard to a solicitor.”

“Solicitor, eh?”

Mrs. Oliver’s eyebrows rose inquiringly.

“Yes. You see, Major Despard told her she ought to have one. He’s been awfully kind—he really has.”

"I was kind, too," said Mrs. Oliver, "but it didn't seem to go down very well, did it? In fact, I think your friend rather resented my coming."

"Oh, she didn't—really she didn't." Rhoda wriggled on her chair in a paroxysm of embarrassment. "That's really one reason why I wanted to come today—to explain. You see, I saw you had got it all wrong. She did seem very ungracious, but it wasn't that, really. I mean, it wasn't your coming. It was something you said."

"Something I said?"

"Yes. You couldn't tell, of course. It was just unfortunate."

"What did I say?"

"I don't expect you remember, even. It was just the way you put it. You said something about an accident and poison."

"Did I?"

"I knew you'd probably not remember. Yes. You see, Anne had a ghastly experience once. She was in a house where a woman took some poison—hat paint, I think it was—by mistake for something else. And she died. And, of course, it was an awful shock to Anne. She can't bear thinking of it or speaking of it. And your saying that reminded her, of course, and she dried up and got all stiff and queer like she does. And I saw you noticed it. And I couldn't say anything in front of her. But I did want you to know that it wasn't what you thought. She wasn't ungrateful."

Mrs. Oliver looked at Rhoda's flushed eager face. She said slowly:

"I see."

"Anne's awfully sensitive," said Rhoda. "And she's bad about—well, facing things. If anything's upset her, she'd just rather not talk about it, although that isn't any good, really—at least, I don't think so. Things are there just the same—whether you talk about them or not. It's only running away from them to pretend they don’t exist. I’d rather have it all out, however painful it would be.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Oliver quietly. “But you, my dear, are a soldier. Your Anne isn’t.”

Rhoda flushed.

“Anne’s a darling.”

Mrs. Oliver smiled.

She said, “I didn’t say she wasn’t. I only said she hadn’t got your particular brand of courage.”

She sighed, then said rather unexpectedly to the girl:

“Do you believe in the value of truth, my dear, or don’t you?”

“Of course I believe in the truth,” said Rhoda staring.

“Yes, you say that—but perhaps you haven’t thought about it. The truth hurts sometimes—and destroys one’s illusions.”

“I’d rather have it, all the same,” said Rhoda.

“So would I. But I don’t know that we’re wise.”

Rhoda said earnestly:

“Don’t tell Anne, will you, what I’ve told you? She wouldn’t like it.”

“I certainly shouldn’t dream of doing any such thing. Was this long ago?

“About four years ago. It’s odd, isn’t it, how the same things happen again and again to people. I had an aunt who was always in shipwrecks. And here’s Anne mixed up in two sudden deaths—only, of course, this one is much worse. Murder’s rather awful, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

The black coffee and the hot buttered toast appeared at this minute.

Rhoda ate and drank with childish gusto. It was very exciting to her thus to be sharing an intimate meal with a celebrity.

When they had finished she rose and said:

“I do hope I haven’t interrupted you too terribly. Would you mind—I mean, would it bother you awfully—if I sent one of your books to you, would you sign it for me?”

Mrs. Oliver laughed.

“Oh, I can do better than that for you.” She opened a cupboard at the far end of the room. “Which would you like? I rather fancy The Affair of the Second Goldfish myself. It’s not quite such frightful tripe as the rest.”

A little shocked at hearing an authoress thus describe the children of her pen, Rhoda accepted eagerly. Mrs. Oliver took the book, opened it, inscribed her name with a superlative flourish and handed it to Rhoda.

“There you are.”

“Thank you very much. I have enjoyed myself. Sure you didn’t mind my coming?”

“I wanted you to,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She added after a moment’s pause:

“You’re a nice child. Good-bye. Take care of yourself, my dear.”

“Now, why did I say that?” she murmured to herself as the door closed behind her guest.

She shook her head, ruffled her hair, and returned to the masterly dealings of Sven Hjerson with the sage and onion stuffing.

Eighteen

TEA INTERLUDE

Mrs. Lorrimer came out of a certain door in Harley Street.

She stood for a minute at the top of the steps, and then she descended them slowly.

There was a curious expression on her face—a mingling of grim determination and of strange indecision. She bent her brows a little, as though to concentrate on some all-absorbing problem.

It was just then that she caught sight of Anne Meredith on the opposite pavement.

Anne was standing staring up at a big block of flats just on the corner.

Mrs. Lorrimer hesitated a moment, then she crossed the road.

“How do you do, Miss Meredith?”

Anne started and turned.

“Oh, how do you do?”

“Still in London?” said Mrs. Lorrimer.

“No. I’ve only come up for the day. To do some legal business.”

Her eyes were still straying to the big block of flats.

Mrs. Lorrimer said:

“Is anything the matter?”

Anne started guiltily.

"The matter? Oh, no, what should be the matter?"

"You were looking as though you had something on your mind."

"I haven't—well, at least I have, but it's nothing important, something quite silly." She laughed a little.

She went on:

"It's only that I thought I saw my friend—the girl I live with—go in there, and I wondered if she'd gone to see Mrs. Oliver."

"Is that where Mrs. Oliver lives? I didn't know."

"Yes. She came to see us the other day and she gave us her address and asked us to come and see her. I wondered if it was Rhoda I saw or not."

"Do you want to go up and see?"

"No, I'd rather not do that."

"Come and have tea with me," said Mrs. Lorrimer. "There is a shop quite near here that I know."

"It's very kind of you," said Anne, hesitating.

Side by side they walked down the street and turned into a side street. In a small pastry cook's they were served with tea and muffins.

They did not talk much. Each of them seemed to find the other's silence restful.

Anne asked suddenly:

"Has Mrs. Oliver been to see you?"

Mrs. Lorrimer shook her head.

"No one has been to see me except M. Poirot."

"I didn't mean—" began Anne.

"Didn't you? I think you did," said Mrs. Lorrimer.

The girl looked up—a quick, frightened glance. Something she saw in Mrs. Lorrimer's face seemed to reassure her.

"He hasn't been to see me," she said slowly.

There was a pause.

"Hasn't Superintendent Battle been to see you?" asked Anne.

"Oh, yes, of course," said Mrs. Lorrimer.

Anne said hesitatingly:

"What sort of things did he ask you?"

Mrs. Lorrimer sighed wearily.

"The usual things, I suppose. Routine inquiries. He was very pleasant over it all."

"I suppose he interviewed everyone?"

"I should think so."

There was another pause.

Anne said:

"Mrs. Lorrimer, do you think—they will ever find out who did it?"

Her eyes were bent on her plate. She did not see the curious expression in the older woman's eyes as she watched the downcast head.

Mrs. Lorrimer said quietly:

“I don’t know….”

Anne murmured:

“It’s not—very nice, is it?”

There was that same curious appraising and yet sympathetic look on Mrs. Lorrimer’s face, as she asked:

“How old are you, Anne Meredith?”

“I—I?” the girl stammered. “I’m twenty-five.”

“And I’m sixty-three,” said Mrs. Lorrimer.

She went on slowly:

“Most of your life is in front of you….”

Anne shivered.

“I might be run over by a bus on the way home,” she said.

“Yes, that’s true. And I—might not.”

She said it in an odd way. Anne looked at her in astonishment.

“Life is a difficult business,” said Mrs. Lorrimer. “You’ll know that when you come to my age. It needs infinite courage and a lot of endurance. And in the end one wonders: ‘Was it worthwhile?’”

“Oh, don’t,” said Anne.

Mrs. Lorrimer laughed, her old competent self again.

“It’s rather cheap to say gloomy things about life,” she said.

She called the waitress and settled the bill.

As they got to the shop door a taxi crawled past, and Mrs. Lorrimer hailed it.

“Can I give you a lift?” she asked. “I am going south of the park.”

Anne’s face had lighted up.

“No, thank you. I see my friend turning the corner. Thank you so much, Mrs. Lorrimer. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye. Good luck,” said the older woman.

She drove away and Anne hurried forward.

Rhoda’s face lit up when she saw her friend, then changed to a slightly guilty expression.

“Rhoda, have you been to see Mrs. Oliver?” demanded Anne.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I have.”

“And I just caught you.”

“I don’t know what you mean by caught. Let’s go down here and take a bus. You’d gone off on your own ploys with the boyfriend. I thought at least he’d give you tea.”

Anne was silent for a minute—a voice ringing in her ears.

“Can’t we pick up your friend somewhere and all have tea together?”

And her own answer—hurried, without taking time to think:

“Thanks awfully, but we’ve got to go out to tea together with some people.”

A lie—and such a silly lie. The stupid way one said the first thing that came into one’s head instead of just taking a minute or two to think. Perfectly easy to have said “Thanks, but my friend has got to go out to tea.” That is, if you didn’t, as she hadn’t, wanted to have Rhoda too.

Rather odd, that, the way she hadn't wanted Rhoda. She had wanted, definitely, to keep Despard to herself. She had felt jealous. Jealous of Rhoda. Rhoda was so bright, so ready to talk, so full of enthusiasm and life. The other evening Major Despard had looked as though he thought Rhoda nice. But it was her, Anne Meredith, he had come down to see. Rhoda was like that. She didn't mean it, but she reduced you to the background. No, definitely she hadn't wanted Rhoda there.

But she had managed it very stupidly, getting flurried like that. If she'd managed better, she might be sitting now having tea with Major Despard at his club or somewhere.

She felt definitely annoyed with Rhoda. Rhoda was a nuisance. And what had she been doing going to see Mrs. Oliver?

Out loud she said:

"Why did you go and see Mrs. Oliver?"

"Well, she asked us to."

"Yes, but I didn't suppose she really meant it. I expect she always has to say that."

"She did mean it. She was awfully nice—couldn't have been nicer. She gave me one of her books. Look."

Rhoda flourished her prize.

Anne said suspiciously:

"What did you talk about? Not me?"

"Listen to the conceit of the girl!"

"No, but did you? Did you talk about the—the murder?"

"We talked about her murders. She's writing one where there's poison in the sage and onions. She was frightfully human—and said writing was awfully hard work and how she got into tangles with plots, and we had black coffee and hot buttered toast," finished Rhoda in a triumphant burst.

Then she added:

"Oh, Anne, you want your tea."

"No, I don't. I've had it. With Mrs. Lorrimer."

"Mrs. Lorrimer? Isn't that the one—the one who was there?"

Anne nodded.

"Where did you come across her? Did you go and see her?"

"No. I ran across her in Harley Street."

"What was she like?"

Anne said slowly:

"I don't know. She was—rather queer. Not at all like the other night."

"Do you still think she did it?" asked Rhoda.

Anne was silent for a minute or two. Then she said:

"I don't know. Don't let's talk of it, Rhoda! You know how I hate talking of things."

"All right, darling. What was the solicitor like? Very dry and legal?"

"Rather alert and Jewish."

"Sounds all right." She waited a little and then said:

"How was Major Despard?"

"Very kind."

“He’s fallen for you, Anne. I’m sure he has.”

“Rhoda, don’t talk nonsense.”

“Well, you’ll see.”

Rhoda began humming to herself. She thought:

“Of course he’s fallen for her. Anne’s awfully pretty. But a bit wishy-washy … She’ll never go on treks with him. Why, she’d scream if she saw a snake … Men always do take fancies to unsuitable women.”

Then she said aloud.

“That bus will take us to Paddington. We’ll just catch the 4:48.”

Nineteen

CONSULTATION

The telephone rang in Poirot's room and a respectful voice spoke.

"Sergeant O'Connor. Superintendent Battle's compliments and would it be convenient for Mr. Hercule Poirot to come to Scotland Yard at 11:30?"

Poirot replied in the affirmative and Sergeant O'Connor rang off.

It was 11:30 to the minute when Poirot descended from his taxi at the door of New Scotland Yard—to be at once seized upon by Mrs. Oliver.

"M. Poirot. How splendid! Will you come to my rescue?"

"Enchanté, madame. What can I do?"

"Pay my taxi for me. I don't know how it happened but I brought out the bag I keep my going-abroad money in and the man simply won't take francs or liras or marks!"

Poirot gallantly produced some loose change, and he and Mrs. Oliver went inside the building together.

They were taken to Superintendent Battle's own room. The superintendent was sitting behind a table and looking more wooden than ever. "Just like a little piece of modern sculpture," whispered Mrs. Oliver to Poirot.

Battle rose and shook hands with them both and they sat down.

"I thought it was about time for a little meeting," said Battle. "You'd like to hear how I've got on, and I'd like to hear how you've got on. We're just waiting for Colonel Race and then—"

But at that moment the door opened and the colonel appeared.

"Sorry I'm late, Battle. How do you do, Mrs. Oliver. Hallo, M. Poirot. Very sorry if I've kept you waiting. But I'm off tomorrow and had a lot of things to see to."

"Where are you going to?" asked Mrs. Oliver.

"A little shooting trip—Baluchistan way."

Poirot said, smiling ironically:

"A little trouble, is there not, in that part of the world? You will have to be careful."

"I mean to be," said Race gravely—but his eyes twinkled.

"Got anything for us, sir?" asked Battle.

"I've got you your information re Despard. Here it is—"

He pushed over a sheaf of papers.

"There's a mass of dates and places there. Most of it quite irrelevant, I should imagine. Nothing against him. He's a stout fellow. Record quite unblemished. Strict disciplinarian. Liked and trusted by the natives everywhere. One of their cumbrous names for him in Africa, where they go in for such things, is 'The man who keeps his mouth shut and judges fairly.' General opinion of the white races that Despard is a Pukka Sahib. Fine shot. Cool head. Generally long-sighted and dependable."

Unmoved by this eulogy, Battle asked:

"Any sudden deaths connected with him?"

"I laid special stress on that point. There's one fine rescue to his credit. Pal of his was being mauled by a lion."

Battle sighed.

"It's not rescues I want."

“You’re a persistent fellow, Battle. There’s only one incident I’ve been able to rake up that might suit your book. Trip into the interior in South America. Despard accompanied Professor Luxmore, the celebrated botanist, and his wife. The professor died of fever and was buried somewhere up the Amazon.”

“Fever—eh?”

“Fever. But I’ll play fair with you. One of the native bearers (who was sacked for stealing, incidentally) had a story that the professor didn’t die of fever, but was shot. The rumour was never taken seriously.”

“About time it was, perhaps.”

Race shook his head.

“I’ve given you the facts. You asked for them and you’re entitled to them, but I’d lay long odds against its being Despard who did the dirty work the other evening. He’s a white man, Battle.”

“Incapable of murder, you mean?”

Colonel Race hesitated.

“Incapable of what I’d call murder—yes,” he said.

“But not incapable of killing a man for what would seem to him good and sufficient reasons, is that it?”

“If so, they would be good and sufficient reasons!”

Battle shook his head.

“You can’t have human beings judging other human beings and taking the law into their own hands.”

“It happens, Battle—it happens.”

“It shouldn’t happen—that’s my point. What do you say, M. Poirot?”

"I agree with you, Battle. I have always disapproved of murder."

"What a delightfully droll way of putting it," said Mrs. Oliver. "Rather as though it were foxhunting or killing ospreys for hats. Don't you think there are people who ought to be murdered?"

"That, very possibly."

"Well then!"

"You do not comprehend. It is not the victim who concerns me so much. It is the effect on the character of the slayer."

"What about war?"

"In war you do not exercise the right of private judgement. That is what is so dangerous. Once a man is imbued with the idea that he knows who ought to be allowed to live and who ought not—then he is halfway to becoming the most dangerous killer there is—the arrogant criminal who kills not for profit—but for an idea. He has usurped the functions of le bon Dieu."

Colonel Race rose:

"I'm sorry I can't stop with you. Too much to do. I'd like to see the end of this business. Shouldn't be surprised if there never was an end. Even if you find out who did it, it's going to be next to impossible to prove. I've given you the facts you wanted, but in my opinion Despard's not the man. I don't believe he's ever committed murder. Shaitana may have heard some garbled rumour of Professor Luxmore's death, but I don't believe there's more to it than that. Despard's a white man, and I don't believe he's ever been a murderer. That's my opinion. And I know something of men."

"What's Mrs. Luxmore like?" asked Battle.

"She lives in London, so you can see for yourself. You'll find the address among those papers. Somewhere in South Kensington. But I repeat, Despard isn't the man."

Colonel Race left the room, stepping with the springy noiseless tread of a hunter.

Battle nodded his head thoughtfully as the door closed behind him.

“He’s probably right,” he said. “He knows men, Colonel Race does. But all the same, one can’t take anything for granted.”

He looked through the mass of documents Race had deposited on the table, occasionally making a pencil note on the pad beside him.

“Well, Superintendent Battle,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Aren’t you going to tell us what you have been doing?”

He looked up and smiled, a slow smile that creased his wooden face from side to side.

“This is all very irregular, Mrs. Oliver. I hope you realize that.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t suppose for a moment you’ll tell us anything you don’t want to.”

Battle shook his head.

“No,” he said decidedly. “Cards on the table. That’s the motto for this business. I mean to play fair.”

Mrs. Oliver hitched her chair nearer.

“Tell us,” she begged.

Superintendent Battle said slowly:

“First of all, I’ll say this. As far as the actual murder of Mr. Shaitana goes, I’m not a penny the wiser. There’s no hint or clue of any kind to be found in his papers. As for the four others, I’ve had them shadowed, naturally, but without any tangible result. No, as M. Poirot said, there’s only one hope—the past. Find out what crime exactly (if any, that is to say—after all, Shaitana may have been talking through his hat to make an impression on

M. Poirot) these people have committed—and it may tell you who committed this crime.”

“Well, have you found out anything?”

“I’ve got a line on one of them.”

“Which?”

“Dr. Roberts.”

Mrs. Oliver looked at him with thrilled expectation. “As M. Poirot here knows, I tried out all kinds of theories. I established the fact pretty clearly that none of his immediate family had met with a sudden death. I’ve explored every alley as well as I could, and the whole thing boils down to one possibility—and rather an outside possibility at that. A few years ago Roberts must have been guilty of indiscretion, at least, with one of his lady patients. There may have been nothing in it—probably wasn’t. But the woman was the hysterical, emotional kind who likes to make a scene, and either the husband got wind of what was going on, or his wife ‘confessed.’ Anyway, the fat was in the fire as far as the doctor was concerned. Enraged husband threatening to report him to the General Medical Council—which would probably have meant the ruin of his professional career.”

“What happened?” demanded Mrs. Oliver breathlessly.

“Apparently Roberts managed to calm down the irate gentleman temporarily—and he died of anthrax almost immediately afterwards.”

“Anthrax? But that’s a cattle disease?”

The superintendent grinned.

“Quite right, Mrs. Oliver. It isn’t the untraceable arrow poison of the South American Indians! You may remember that there was rather a scare about infected shaving brushes of cheap make about that time. Craddock’s shaving brush was proved to have been the cause of infection.”

“Did Dr. Roberts attend him?”

“Oh, no. Too canny for that. Daresay Craddock wouldn’t have wanted him in any case. The only evidence I’ve got—and that’s precious little—is that among the doctor’s patients there was a case of anthrax at the time.”

“You mean the doctor infected the shaving brush?”

“That’s the big idea. And mind you, it’s only an idea. Nothing whatever to go on. Pure conjecture. But it could be.”

“He didn’t marry Mrs. Craddock afterwards?”

“Oh, dear me, no, I imagine the affection was always on the lady’s side. She tended to cut up rough, I hear, but suddenly went off to Egypt quite happily for the winter. She died there. A case of some obscure blood poisoning. It’s got a long name, but I don’t expect it would convey much to you. Most uncommon in this country, fairly common among the natives in Egypt.”

“So the doctor couldn’t have poisoned her?”

“I don’t know,” said Battle slowly. “I’ve been chatting to a bacteriologist friend of mine—awfully difficult to get straight answers out of these people. They never can say yes or no. It’s always ‘that might be possible under certain conditions’—‘it would depend on the pathological condition of the recipient’—‘such cases have been known’—‘a lot depends on individual idiosyncrasy’—all that sort of stuff. But as far as I could pin my friend down I got at this—the germ, or germs, I suppose, might have been introduced into the blood before leaving England. The symptoms would not make their appearance for sometime to come.”

Poirot asked:

“Was Mrs. Craddock inoculated for typhoid before going to Egypt? Most people are, I fancy.”

“Good for you, M. Poirot.”

“And Dr. Roberts did the inoculation?”

"That's right. There you are again—we can't prove anything. She had the usual two inoculations—and they may have been typhoid inoculations for all we know. Or one of them may have been typhoid inoculation and the other—something else. We don't know. We never shall know. The whole thing is pure hypothesis. All we can say is: it might be."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"It agrees very well with some remarks made to me by Mr. Shaitana. He was exalting the successful murderer—the man against whom his crime could never be brought home."

"How did Mr. Shaitana know about it, then?" asked Mrs. Oliver.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"That we shall never learn. He himself was in Egypt at one time. We know that, because he met Mrs. Lorrimer there. He may have heard some local doctor comment on curious features of Mrs. Craddock's case—a wonder as to how the infection arose. At some other time he may have heard gossip about Roberts and Mrs. Craddock. He might have amused himself by making some cryptic remark to the doctor and noted the startled awareness in his eye—all that one can never know. Some people have an uncanny gift of divining secrets. Mr. Shaitana was one of those people. All that does not concern us. We have only to say—he guessed. Did he guess right?"

"Well, I think he did," said Battle. "I've a feeling that our cheerful, genial doctor wouldn't be too scrupulous. I've known one or two like him—wonderful how certain types resemble each other. In my opinion he's a killer all right. He killed Craddock. He may have killed Mrs. Craddock if she was beginning to be a nuisance and cause a scandal. But did he kill Shaitana? That's the real question. And comparing the crimes, I rather doubt it. In the case of the Craddocks he used medical methods each time. The deaths appeared to be due to natural causes. In my opinion if he had killed Shaitana, he would have done so in a medical way. He'd have used the germ and not the knife."

"I never thought it was him," said Mrs. Oliver. "Not for a minute. He's too obvious, somehow."

"Exit Roberts," murmured Poirot. "And the others?"

Battle made a gesture of impatience.

"I've pretty well drawn blank. Mrs. Lorrimer's been a widow for twenty years now. She's lived in London most of the time, occasionally going abroad in the winter. Civilized places—the Riviera, Egypt, that sort of thing. Can't find any mysterious death associated with her. She seems to have led a perfectly normal, respectable life—the life of a woman of the world. Everyone seems to respect her and to have the highest opinion of her character. The worst that they can say about her is that she doesn't suffer fools gladly! I don't mind admitting I've been beaten all along the line there. And yet there must be something! Shaitana thought there was."

He sighed in a dispirited manner.

"Then there's Miss Meredith. I've got her history taped out quite clearly. Usual sort of story. Army officer's daughter. Left with very little money. Had to earn her living. Not properly trained for anything. I've checked up on her early days at Cheltenham. All quite straightforward. Everyone very sorry for the poor little thing. She went first to some people in the Isle of Wight—kind of nursery-governess and mother's help. The woman she was with is out in Palestine but I've talked with her sister and she says Mrs. Eldon liked the girl very much. Certainly no mysterious deaths nor anything of that kind.

"When Mrs. Eldon went abroad, Miss Meredith went to Devonshire and took a post as companion to an aunt of a school friend. The school friend is the girl she is living with now—Miss Rhoda Dawes. She was there over two years until Miss Dawes got too ill and she had to have a regular trained nurse. Cancer, I gather. She's alive still, but very vague. Kept under morphia a good deal, I imagine. I had an interview with her. She remembered 'Anne,' said she was a nice child. I also talked to a neighbour of hers who would be better able to remember the happenings of the last few years. No deaths in the parish except one or two of the older villagers, with whom, as far as I can make out, Anne Meredith never came into contact.

“Since then there’s been Switzerland. Thought I might get on the track of some fatal accident there, but nothing doing. And there’s nothing in Wallingford either.”

“So Anne Meredith is acquitted?” asked Poirot.

Battle hesitated.

“I wouldn’t say that. There’s something … There’s a scared look about her that can’t quite be accounted for by panic over Shaitana. She’s too watchful. Too much on the alert. I’d swear there was something. But there it is—she’s led a perfectly blameless life.”

Mrs. Oliver took a deep breath—a breath of pure enjoyment.

“And yet,” she said, “Anne Meredith was in the house when a woman took poison by mistake and died.”

She had nothing to complain of in the effect her words produced.

Superintendent Battle spun round in his chair and stared at her in amazement.

“Is this true, Mrs. Oliver? How do you know?”

“I’ve been sleuthing,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I get on with girls. I went down to see those two and told them a cock-and-bull story about suspecting Dr. Roberts. The Rhoda girl was friendly—oh, and rather impressed by thinking I was a celebrity. The little Meredith hated my coming and showed it quite plainly. She was suspicious. Why should she be if she hadn’t got anything to hide? I asked either of them to come and see me in London. The Rhoda girl did. And she blurted the whole thing out. How Anne had been rude to me the other day because something I’d said had reminded her of a painful incident, and then she went on to describe the incident.”

“Did she say when and where it happened?”

"Three years ago in Devonshire."

The superintendent muttered something under his breath and scribbled on his pad. His wooden calm was shaken.

Mrs. Oliver sat enjoying her triumph. It was a moment of great sweetness to her.

"I take off my hat to you, Mrs. Oliver," he said. "You've put one over on us this time. That is very valuable information. And it just shows how easily you can miss a thing."

He frowned a little.

"She can't have been there—wherever it was—long. A couple of months at most. It must have been between the Isle of Wight and going to Miss Dawes. Yes, that could be it right enough. Naturally Mrs. Eldon's sister only remembers she went off to a place in Devonshire—she doesn't remember exactly who or where."

"Tell me," said Poirot, "was this Mrs. Eldon an untidy woman?"

Battle bent a curious gaze upon him.

"It's odd your saying that, M. Poirot. I don't see how you could have known. The sister was rather a precise party. In talking I remember her saying 'My sister is so dreadfully untidy and slapdash.' But how did you know?"

"Because she needed a mother's help," said Mrs. Oliver.

Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, it was not that. It is of no moment. I was only curious. Continue, Superintendent Battle."

"In the same way," went on Battle, "I took it for granted that she went to Miss Dawes straight from the Isle of Wight. She's sly, that girl. She deceived me all right. Lying the whole time."

“Lying is not always a sign of guilt,” said Poirot.

“I know that, M. Poirot. There’s the natural liar. I should say she was one, as a matter of fact. Always says the thing that sounds best. But all the same it’s a pretty grave risk to take, suppressing facts like that.”

“She wouldn’t know you had any idea of past crimes,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“That’s all the more reason for not suppressing that little piece of information. It must have been accepted as a bona fide case of accidental death, so she’d nothing to fear—unless she were guilty.”

“Unless she were guilty of the Devonshire death, yes,” said Poirot.

Battle turned to him.

“Oh, I know. Even if that accidental death turns out to be not so accidental, it doesn’t follow that she killed Shaitana. But these other murders are murders too. I want to be able to bring home a crime to the person responsible for it.”

“According to Mr. Shaitana, that is impossible,” remarked Poirot.

“It is in Roberts’ case. It remains to be seen if it is in Miss Meredith’s. I shall go down to Devon tomorrow.”

“Will you know where to go?” asked Mrs. Oliver. “I didn’t like to ask Rhoda for more details.”

“No, that was wise of you. I shan’t have much difficulty. There must have been an inquest. I shall find it in the coroner’s records. That’s routine police work. They’ll have it all taped out for me by tomorrow morning.”

“What about Major Despard?” asked Mrs. Oliver. “Have you found out anything about him?”

“I’ve been waiting for Colonel Race’s report. I’ve had him shadowed, of course. One rather interesting thing, he went down to see Miss Meredith at

Wallingford. You remember he said he’d never met her until the other night.”

“But she is a very pretty girl,” murmured Poirot.

Battle laughed.

“Yes, I expect that’s all there is to it. By the way, Despard’s taking no chances. He’s already consulted a solicitor. That looks as though he’s expecting trouble.”

“He is a man who looks ahead,” said Poirot. “He is a man who prepares for every contingency.”

“And therefore not the kind of man to stick a knife into a man in a hurry,” said Battle with a sigh.

“Not unless it was the only way,” said Poirot. “He can act quickly, remember.”

Battle looked across the table at him.

“Now, M. Poirot, what about your cards? Haven’t seen your hand down on the table yet.”

Poirot smiled.

“There is so little in it. You think I conceal facts from you? It is not so. I have not learned many facts. I have talked with Dr. Roberts, with Mrs. Lorrimer, with Major Despard (I have still to talk to Miss Meredith) and what have I learnt? This! That Dr. Roberts is a keen observer, that Mrs. Lorrimer on the other hand has a most remarkable power of concentration but is, in consequence, almost blind to her surroundings. But she is fond of flowers. Despard notices only those things which appeal to him—rugs, trophies of sport. He has neither what I call the outward vision (seeing details all around you—what is called an observant person) nor the inner vision—concentration, the focusing of the mind on one object. He has a purposefully limited vision. He sees only what blends and harmonizes with the bent of his mind."

"So those are what you call facts—eh?" said Battle curiously.

"They are facts—very small fry—perhaps."

"What about Miss Meredith?"

"I have left her to the end. But I shall question her too as to what she remembers in that room."

"It's an odd method of approach," said Battle thoughtfully. "Purely psychological. Suppose they're leading you up the garden path?"

Poirot shook his head with a smile.

"No, that would be impossible. Whether they try to hinder or to help, they necessarily reveal their type of mind."

"There's something in it, no doubt," said Battle thoughtfully. "I couldn't work that way myself, though."

Poirot said, still smiling:

"I feel I have done very little in comparison with you and with Mrs. Oliver—and with Colonel Race. My cards, that I place on the table, are very low ones."

Battle twinkled at him.

"As to that, M. Poirot, the two of trumps is a low card but it can take any one of three aces. All the same, I'm going to ask you to do a practical job of work."

"And that is?"

"I want you to interview Professor Luxmore's widow."

“Why do you not do that yourself?”

“Because, as I said just now, I’m off to Devonshire.”

“Why do you not do that yourself?” repeated Poirot.

“Won’t be put off, will you? Well, I’ll speak the truth. I think you’ll get more out of her than I shall.”

“My methods being less straightforward?”

“You can put it that way if you like,” said Battle grinning. “I’ve heard Inspector Japp say that you’ve got a tortuous mind.”

“Like the late Mr. Shaitana?”

“You think he would have been able to get things out of her?”

Poirot said slowly:

“I rather think he did get things out of her!”

“What makes you think so?” asked Battle sharply.

“A chance remark of Major Despard’s.”

“Gave himself away, did he? That sounds unlike him.”

“Oh, my dear friend, it is impossible not to give oneself away—unless one never opens one’s mouth! Speech is the deadliest of revealers.”

“Even if people tell lies?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

“Yes, madame, because it can be seen at once that you tell a certain kind of lie.”

“You make me feel quite uncomfortable,” said Mrs. Oliver, getting up.

Superintendent Battle accompanied her to the door and shook her by the hand.

“You’ve been the goods, Mrs. Oliver,” he said. “You’re a much better detective than that long lanky Laplander of yours.”

“Finn,” corrected Mrs. Oliver. “Of course he’s idiotic. But people like him. Good-bye.”

“I, too, must depart,” said Poirot.

Battle scribbled an address on a piece of paper and shoved it into Poirot’s hand.

“There you are. Go and tackle her.”

Poirot smiled.

“And what do you want me to find out?”

“The truth about Professor Luxmore’s death.”

“Mon cher Battle! Does anybody know the truth about anything?”

“I’m going to about this business in Devonshire,” said the superintendent with decision.

Poirot murmured:

“I wonder.”

Twenty

THE EVIDENCE OF MRS. LUXMORE

The maid who opened the door at Mrs. Luxmore’s South Kensington address looked at Hercule Poirot with deep disapproval. She showed no disposition to admit him into the house.

Unperturbed, Poirot gave her a card.

“Give that to your mistress. I think she will see me.”

It was one of his more ostentatious cards. The words “Private Detective” were printed in one corner. He had had them specially engraved for the purpose of obtaining interviews with the so-called fair sex. Nearly every woman, whether conscious of innocence or not, was anxious to have a look at a private detective and find out what he wanted.

Left ignominiously on the mat, Poirot studied the doorknocker with intense disgust at its unpolished condition.

“Ah! for some Brasso and a rag,” he murmured to himself.

Breathing excitedly the maid returned and Poirot was bidden to enter.

He was shown into a room on the first floor—a rather dark room smelling of stale flowers and unemptied ashtrays. There were large quantities of silk cushions of exotic colours all in need of cleaning. The walls were emerald green and the ceiling was of pseudo copper.

A tall, rather handsome woman was standing by the mantelpiece. She came forward and spoke in a deep husky voice.

“M. Hercule Poirot?”

Poirot bowed. His manner was not quite his own. He was not only foreign but ornately foreign. His gestures were positively baroque. Faintly, very faintly, it was the manner of the late Mr. Shaitana.

“What did you want to see me about?”

Again Poirot bowed.

“If I might be seated? It will take a little time—”

She waved him impatiently to a chair and sat down herself on the edge of a sofa.

“Yes? Well?”

“It is, madame, that I make the inquiries—the private inquiries, you understand?”

The more deliberate his approach, the greater her eagerness.

“Yes—yes?”

“I make inquiries into the death of the late Professor Luxmore.”

She gave a gasp. Her dismay was evident.

“But why? What do you mean? What has it got to do with you?”

Poirot watched her carefully before proceeding.

“There is, you comprehend, a book being written. A life of your eminent husband. The writer, naturally, is anxious to get all his facts exact. As to your husband’s death, for instance—”

She broke in at once:

“My husband died of fever—on the Amazon.”

Poirot leaned back in his chair. Slowly, very, very slowly, he shook his head to and fro—a maddening, monotonous motion.

“Madame—madame—” he protested.

“But I know! I was there at the time.”

“Ah, yes, certainly. You were there. Yes, my information says so.”

She cried out:

“What information?”

Eyeing her closely Poirot said:

“Information supplied to me by the late Mr. Shaitana.”

She shrank back as though flicked with a whip.

“Shaitana?” she muttered.

“A man,” said Poirot, “possessed of vast stores of knowledge. A remarkable man. That man knew many secrets.”

“I suppose he did,” she murmured, passing a tongue over her dry lips.

Poirot leaned forward. He achieved a little tap on her knee.

“He knew, for instance, that your husband did not die of fever.”

She stared at him. Her eyes looked wild and desperate.

He leaned back and watched the effect of his words.

She pulled herself together with an effort.

“I don’t—I don’t know what you mean.”

It was very unconvincingly said.

“Madame,” said Poirot, “I will come out into the open. I will,” he smiled, “place my cards upon the table. Your husband did not die of fever. He died of a bullet!”

“Oh!” she cried.

She covered her face with her hands. She rocked herself to and fro. She was in terrible distress. But somewhere, in some remote fibre of her being, she was enjoying her own emotions. Poirot was quite sure of that.

“And therefore,” said Poirot in a matter-of-fact tone, “you might just as well tell me the whole story.”

She uncovered her face and said:

“It wasn’t in the least way you think.”

Again Poirot leaned forward—again he tapped her knee.

“You misunderstand me—you misunderstand me utterly,” he said. “I know very well that it was not you who shot him. It was Major Despard. But you were the cause.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I suppose I was. It was all too terrible. There is a sort of fatality that pursues me.”

“Ah, how true that is,” cried Poirot. “How often have I not seen it? There are some women like that. Wherever they go, tragedies follow in their wake. It is not their fault. These things happen in spite of themselves.”

Mrs. Luxmore drew a deep breath.

“You understand. I see you understand. It all happened so naturally.”

“You travelled together into the interior, did you not?”

“Yes. My husband was writing a book on various rare plants. Major Despard was introduced to us as a man who knew the conditions and would arrange the necessary expedition. My husband liked him very much. We started.”

There was a pause. Poirot allowed it to continue for about a minute and a half and then murmured as though to himself.

“Yes, one can picture it. The winding river—the tropical night—the hum of the insects—the strong soldierly man—the beautiful woman….”

Mrs. Luxmore sighed.

“My husband was, of course, years older than I was. I married as a mere child before I knew what I was doing….”

Poirot shook his head sadly.

“I know. I know. How often does that not occur?”

“Neither of us would admit what was happening,” went on Mrs. Luxmore. “John Despard never said anything. He was the soul of honour.”

“But a woman always knows,” prompted Poirot.

“How right you are … Yes, a woman knows … But I never showed him that I knew. We were Major Despard and Mrs. Luxmore to each other right up to the end … We were both determined to play the game.”

She was silent, lost in admiration of that noble attitude.

“True,” murmured Poirot. “One must play the cricket. As one of your poets so finely says, ‘I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not cricket more.’”

“Honour,” corrected Mrs. Luxmore with a slight frown.

“Of course—of course—honour. ‘Loved I not honour more.’”

“Those words might have been written for us,” murmured Mrs. Luxmore. “No matter what it cost us, we were both determined never to say the fatal word. And then—"

"And then—" prompted Poirot.

"That ghastly night." Mrs. Luxmore shuddered.

"Yes?"

"I suppose they must have quarrelled—John and Timothy, I mean. I came out of my tent … I came out of my tent…."

"Yes—yes?"

Mrs. Luxmore's eyes were wide and dark. She was seeing the scene as though it were being repeated in front of her.

"I came out of my tent," she repeated. "John and Timothy were—Oh!" she shuddered. "I can't remember it all clearly. I came between them … I said 'No—no, it isn't true!' Timothy wouldn't listen. He was threatening John. John had to fire—in self-defence. Ah!" she gave a cry and covered her face with her hands. "He was dead—stone dead—shot through the heart."

"A terrible moment for you, madame."

"I shall never forget it. John was noble. He was all for giving himself up. I refused to hear of it. We argued all night. 'For my sake,' I kept saying. He saw that in the end. Naturally he couldn't let me suffer. The awful publicity. Think of the headlines. Two Men and a Woman in the Jungle. Primeval Passions.

"I put it all to John. In the end he gave in. The boys had seen and heard nothing. Timothy had been having a bout of fever. We said he had died of it. We buried him there beside the Amazon."

A deep, tortured sigh shook her form.

"And then—back to civilization—and to part forever."

"Was it necessary, madame?"

“Yes, yes. Timothy dead stood between us just as Timothy alive had done—more so. We said good-bye to each other—forever. I meet John Despard sometimes—out in the world. We smile, we speak politely—no one would ever guess that there was anything between us. But I see in his eyes—and he in mine—that we will never forget….”

There was a long pause. Poirot paid tribute to the curtain by not breaking the silence.

Mrs. Luxmore took out a vanity case and powdered her nose—the spell was broken.

“What a tragedy,” said Poirot, but in a more everyday tone.

“You can see, M. Poirot,” said Mrs. Luxmore earnestly, “that the truth must never be told.”

“It would be painful—”

“It would be impossible. This friend, this writer—surely he would not wish to blight the life of a perfectly innocent woman?”

“Or even to hang a perfectly innocent man?” murmured Poirot.

“You see it like that? I am glad. He was innocent. A crime passionnel is not really a crime. And in any case it was self-defence. He had to shoot. So you do understand, M. Poirot, that the world must continue to think Timothy died of fever?”

Poirot murmured.

“Writers are sometimes curiously callous.”

“Your friend is a woman-hater? He wants to make us suffer? But you must not allow that. I shall not allow it. If necessary I shall take the blame on myself. I shall say I shot Timothy.

She had risen to her feet. Her head was thrown back.

Poirot also rose.

“Madame,” he said as he took her hand, “such splendid self-sacrifice is unnecessary. I will do my best so that the true facts shall never be known.”

A sweet womanly smile stole over Mrs. Luxmore’s face. She raised her hand slightly, so that Poirot, whether he had meant to do so or not, was forced to kiss it.

“An unhappy woman thanks you, M. Poirot,” she said.

It was the last word of a persecuted queen to a favoured courtier—clearly an exit line. Poirot duly made his exit.

Once out in the street, he drew a long breath of fresh air.

Twenty-one

MAJOR DESPARD

"Quelle femme," murmured Hercule Poirot. "Ce pauvre Despard! Ce qu'il a dû souffrir! Quel voyage épouvantable!"

Suddenly he began to laugh.

He was now walking along the Brompton Road. He paused, took out his watch, and made a calculation.

"But yes, I have the time. In any case to wait will do him no harm. I can now attend to the other little matter. What was it that my friend in the English police force used to sing—how many years—forty years ago? 'A little piece of sugar for the bird.'"

Humming a long-forgotten tune, Hercule Poirot entered a sumptuous-looking shop mainly devoted to the clothing and general embellishment of women and made his way to the stocking counter.

Selecting a sympathetic-looking and not too haughty damsel he made known his requirements.

"Silk stockings? Oh, yes, we have a very nice line here. Guaranteed pure silk."

Poirot waved them away. He waxed eloquent once more.

"French silk stockings? With the duty, you know, they are very expensive."

A fresh lot of boxes was produced.

"Very nice, mademoiselle, but I had something of a finer texture in mind."

"These are a hundred gauge. Of course, we have some extra fine, but I'm afraid they come out at about thirty-five shillings a pair. And no durability, of course. Just like cobwebs."

"C'est ça. C'est ça, exactement."

A prolonged absence of the young lady this time.

She returned at last.

"I'm afraid they are actually thirty-seven and sixpence a pair. But beautiful, aren't they?"

She slid them tenderly from a gauzy envelope—the finest, gauziest wisps of stockings.

"Enfin—that is it exactly!"

"Lovely, aren't they? How many pairs, sir?"

"I want—let me see, nineteen pairs."

The young lady very nearly fell down behind the counter, but long training in scornfulness just kept her erect.

"There would be a reduction on two dozen," she said faintly.

"No, I want nineteen pairs. Of slightly different colours, please."

The girl sorted them out obediently, packed them up and made out the bill.

As Poirot departed with his purchase, the next girl at the counter said:

"Wonder who the lucky girl is? Must be a nasty old man. Oh, well, she seems to be stringing him along good and proper. Stockings at thirty-seven and sixpence indeed!"

Unaware of the low estimate formed by the young ladies of Messrs Harvey Robinson's upon his character, Poirot was trotting homewards.

He had been in for about half an hour when he heard the doorbell ring. A few minutes later Major Despard entered the room.

He was obviously keeping his temper with difficulty.

“What the devil did you want to go and see Mrs. Luxmore for?” he asked.

Poirot smiled.

“I wished, you see, for the true story of Professor Luxmore’s death.”

“True story? Do you think that woman’s capable of telling the truth about anything?” demanded Despard wrathfully.

“Eh bien, I did wonder now and then,” admitted Poirot.

“I should think you did. That woman’s crazy.”

Poirot demurred.

“Not at all. She is a romantic woman, that is all.”

“Romantic be damned. She’s an out-and-out liar. I sometimes think she even believes her own lies.”

“It is quite possible.”

“She’s an appalling woman. I had the hell of a time with her out there.”

“That also I can well believe.”

Despard sat down abruptly.

“Look here, M. Poirot, I’m going to tell you the truth.”

“You mean you are going to give me your version of the story?”

“My version will be the true version.”

Poirot did not reply.

Despard went on drily:

“I quite realize that I can’t claim any merit in coming out with this now. I’m telling the truth because it’s the only thing to be done at this stage. Whether you believe me or not is up to you. I’ve no kind of proof that my story is the correct one.”

He paused for a minute and then began.

“I arranged the trip for the Luxmores. He was a nice old boy quite batty about mosses and plants and things. She was a—well, she was what you’ve no doubt observed her to be! That trip was a nightmare. I didn’t care a damn for the woman—rather disliked her, as a matter of fact. She was the intense, soulful kind that always makes me feel prickly with embarrassment. Everything went all right for the first fortnight. Then we all had a go of fever. She and I had it slightly. Old Luxmore was pretty bad. One night—now you’ve got to listen to this carefully—I was sitting outside my tent. Suddenly I saw Luxmore in the distance staggering off into the bush by the river. He was absolutely delirious and quite unconscious of what he was doing. In another minute he would be in the river—and at that particular spot it would have been the end of him. No chance of a rescue. There wasn’t time to rush after him—only one thing to be done. My rifle was beside me as usual. I snatched it up. I’m a pretty accurate shot. I was quite sure I could bring the old boy down—get him in the leg. And then, just as I fired, that idiotic fool of a woman flung herself from somewhere upon me, yelping out, ‘Don’t shoot. For God’s sake, don’t shoot.’ She caught my arm and jerked it ever so slightly just as the rifle went off—with the result that the bullet got him in the back and killed him dead!

“I can tell you that was a pretty ghastly moment. And that damned fool of a woman still didn’t understand what she’d done. Instead of realizing that she’d been responsible for her husband’s death, she firmly believed that I’d been trying to shoot the old boy in cold blood—for the love of her, if you please! We had the devil of a scene—she insisting that we should say he died of fever. I was sorry for her—especially as I saw she didn’t realize what she’d done. But she’d have to realize it if the truth came out! And then her complete certainty that I was head over heels in love with her gave me a bit of a jar. It was going to be a pretty kettle of fish if she went about giving that out. In the end I agreed to do what she wanted—partly for the sake of peace, I'll admit. After all, it didn't seem to matter much. Fever or accident. And I didn't want to drag a woman through a lot of unpleasantness—even if she was a damned fool. I gave it out next day that the professor was dead of fever and we buried him. The bearers knew the truth, of course, but they were all devoted to me and I knew that what I said they'd swear to if need be. We buried poor old Luxmore and got back to civilization. Since then I've spent a good deal of time dodging the woman."

He paused, then said quietly:

"That's my story, M. Poirot."

Poirot said slowly:

"It was to that incident that Mr. Shaitana referred, or so you thought, at dinner that night?"

Despard nodded.

"He must have heard it from Mrs. Luxmore. Easy enough to get the story out of her. That sort of thing would have amused him."

"It might have been a dangerous story—to you—in the hands of a man like Shaitana."

Despard shrugged his shoulders.

"I wasn't afraid of Shaitana."

Poirot didn't answer.

Despard said quietly:

"That again you have to take my word for. It's true enough, I suppose, that I had a kind of motive for Shaitana's death. Well, the truth's out now—take it or leave it."

Poirot held out a hand.

“I will take it, Major Despard. I have no doubt at all that things in South America happened exactly as you have described.”

Despard’s face lit up.

“Thanks,” he said laconically.

And he clasped Poirot’s hand warmly.

Twenty-two

EVIDENCE FROM COMBEACRE

Superintendent Battle was in the police station of Combeacre.

Inspector Harper, rather red in the face, talked in a slow, pleasing Devonshire voice.

“That’s how it was, sir. Seemed all as right as rain. The doctor was satisfied. Everyone was satisfied. Why not?”

“Just give me the facts about the two bottles again. I want to get it quite clear.”

“Syrup of Figs—that’s what the bottle was. She took it regular, it seems. Then there was this hat paint she’d been using—or rather the young lady, her companion, had been using for her. Brightening up a garden hat. There was a good deal left over, and the bottle broke, and Mrs. Benson herself said, ‘Put it in that old bottle—the Syrup of Figs bottle.’ That’s all right. The servants heard her. The young lady, Miss Meredith, and the housemaid and the parlourmaid—they all agree on that. The paint was put into the old Syrup of Figs bottle and it was put up on the top shelf in the bathroom with other odds and ends.”

“Not relabelled?”

“No. Careless, of course; the coroner commented on that.”

“Go on.”

“On this particular night the deceased went into the bathroom, took down a Syrup of Figs bottle, poured herself out a good dose and drank it. Realized what she’d done and they sent off at once for the doctor. He was out on a case, and it was some time before they could get at him. They did all they could, but she died.”

"She herself believed it to be an accident?"

"Oh, yes—everyone thought so. It seems clear the bottles must have got mixed-up somehow. It was suggested the housemaid did it when she dusted, but she swears she didn't."

Superintendent Battle was silent—thinking. Such an easy business. A bottle taken down from an upper shelf, put in place of the other. So difficult to trace a mistake like that to its source. Handled with gloves, possibly, and anyway, the last prints would be those of Mrs. Benson herself. Yes, so easy—so simple. But, all the same, murder! The perfect crime.

But why? That still puzzled him—why?

"This young lady-companion, this Miss Meredith, she didn't come into money at Mrs. Benson's death?" he asked.

Inspector Harper shook his head.

"No. She'd only been there about six weeks. Difficult place, I should imagine. Young ladies didn't stay long as a rule."

Battle was still puzzled. Young ladies didn't stay long. A difficult woman, evidently. But if Anne Meredith had been unhappy, she could have left as her predecessors had done. No need to kill—unless it were sheer unreasoning vindictiveness. He shook his head. That suggestion did not ring true.

"Who did get Mrs. Benson's money?"

"I couldn't say, sir, nephews and nieces, I believe. But it wouldn't be very much—not when it was divided up, and I heard as how most of her income was one of these annuities."

Nothing there then. But Mrs. Benson had died. And Anne Meredith had not told him that she had been at Combeacre.

It was all profoundly unsatisfactory.

He made diligent and painstaking inquiries. The doctor was quite clear and emphatic. No reason to believe it was anything but an accident. Miss—couldn't remember her name—nice girl but rather helpless—had been very upset and distressed. There was the vicar. He remembered Mrs. Benson's last companion—a nice modest-looking girl. Always came to church with Mrs. Benson. Mrs. Benson had been—not difficult—but a trifle severe towards young people. She was the rigid type of Christian.

Battle tried one or two other people but learned nothing of value. Anne Meredith was hardly remembered. She had lived among them a few months—that was all—and her personality was not sufficiently vivid to make a lasting impression. A nice little thing seemed to be the accepted description.

Mrs. Benson loomed out a little more clearly. A self-righteous grenadier of a woman, working her companions hard and changing her servants often. A disagreeable woman—but that was all.

Nevertheless Superintendent Battle left Devonshire under the firm impression that, for some reason unknown, Anne Meredith had deliberately murdered her employer.

Twenty-three

THE EVIDENCE OF A PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS

As Superintendent Battle’s train rushed eastwards through England, Anne Meredith and Rhoda Dawes were in Hercule Poirot’s sitting room.

Anne had been unwilling to accept the invitation that had reached her by the morning’s post, but Rhoda’s counsel had prevailed.

“Anne—you’re a coward—yes, a coward. It’s no good going on being an ostrich, burying your head in the sand. There’s been a murder and you’re one of the suspects—the least likely one perhaps—”

“That would be the worst,” said Anne with a touch of humour. “It’s always the least likely person who did it.”

“But you are one,” continued Rhoda, undisturbed by the interruption. “And it’s no use putting your nose in the air as though murder was a nasty smell and nothing to do with you.”

“It is nothing to do with me,” Anne persisted. “I mean, I’m quite willing to answer any questions the police want to ask me, but this man, this Hercule Poirot, he’s an outsider.”

“And what will he think if you hedge and try to get out of it? He’ll think you’re bursting with guilt.”

“I’m certainly not bursting with guilt,” said Anne coldly.

“Darling, I know that. You couldn’t murder anybody if you tried. But horrible suspicious foreigners don’t know that. I think we ought to go nicely to his house. Otherwise he’ll come down here and try to worm things out of the servants.”

"We haven't got any servants."

"We've got Mother Astwell. She can wag a tongue with anybody! Come on, Anne, let's go. It will be rather fun really."

"I don't see why he wants to see me." Anne was obstinate.

"To put one over on the official police, of course," said Rhoda impatiently. "They always do—the amateurs, I mean. They make out that Scotland Yard are all boots and brainlessness."

"Do you think this man Poirot is clever?"

"He doesn't look a Sherlock," said Rhoda. "I expect he has been quite good in his day. He's gaga now, of course. He must be at least sixty. Oh, come on, Anne, let's go and see the old boy. He may tell us dreadful things about the others."

"All right," said Anne, and added, "You do enjoy all this so, Rhoda."

"I suppose because it isn't my funeral," said Rhoda. "You were a noddle, Anne, not just to have looked up at the right minute. If only you had, you could live like a duchess for the rest of your life on blackmail."

So it came about that at three o'clock of that same afternoon, Rhoda Dawes and Anne Meredith sat primly on their chairs in Poirot's neat room and sipped blackberry sirop (which they disliked very much but were too polite to refuse) from old-fashioned glasses.

"It was most amiable of you to accede to my request, mademoiselle," Poirot was saying.

"I'm sure I shall be glad to help in any way I can," murmured Anne vaguely.

"It is a little matter of memory."

"Memory?"

“Yes, I have already put these questions to Mrs. Lorrimer, to Dr. Roberts and to Major Despard. None of them, alas, have given me the response that I hoped for.”

Anne continued to look at him inquiringly.

“I want you, mademoiselle, to cast your mind back to that evening in the drawing room of Mr. Shaitana.”

A weary shadow passed over Anne’s face. Was she never to be free of that nightmare?”

Poirot noticed the expression.

“C’est pénible, n’est ce pas? That is very natural. You, so young as you are, to be brought in contact with horror for the first time. Probably you have never known or seen a violent death.”

Rhoda’s feet shifted a little uncomfortably on the floor.

“Well?” said Anne.

“Cast your mind back. I want you to tell me what you remember of that room?”

Anne stared at him suspiciously.

“I don’t understand?”

“But yes. The chairs, the tables, the ornaments, the wallpaper, the curtains, the fire irons. You saw them all. Can you not then describe them?”

“Oh, I see.” Anne hesitated, frowning. “It’s difficult. I don’t really think I remember. I couldn’t say what the wallpaper was like. I think the walls were painted—some inconspicuous colour. There were rugs on the floor. There was a piano.” She shook her head. “I really couldn’t tell you any more.”

"But you are not trying, mademoiselle. You must remember some object, some ornament, some piece of bric-à-brac?"

"There was a case of Egyptian jewellery, I remember," said Anne slowly. "Over by the window."

"Oh, yes, at the extreme other end of the room from the table on which lay the little dagger."

Anne looked at him.

"I never heard which table that was on."

"Pas si bête," commented Poirot to himself. "But then, no more is Hercule Poirot! If she knew me better she would realize I would never lay a piège as gross as that!"

Aloud he said:

"A case of Egyptian jewellery, you say?"

Anne answered with some enthusiasm.

"Yes—some of it was lovely. Blues and red. Enamel. One or two lovely rings. And scarabs—but I don't like them so much."

"He was a great collector, Mr. Shaitana," murmured Poirot.

"Yes, he must have been," Anne agreed. "The room was full of stuff. One couldn't begin to look at it all."

"So that you cannot mention anything else that particularly struck your notice?"

Anne smiled a little as she said:

"Only a vase of chrysanthemums that badly wanted their water changed."

"Ah, yes, servants are not always too particular about that."

Poirot was silent for a moment or two.

Anne asked timidly:

“I’m afraid I didn’t notice—whatever it is you wanted me to notice.”

Poirot smiled kindly.

“It does not matter, mon enfant. It was, indeed, an outside chance. Tell me, have you seen the good Major Despard lately?”

He saw the delicate pink colour come up in the girl’s face. She replied:

“He said he would come and see us again quite soon.”

Rhoda said impetuously:

“He didn’t do it, anyway! Anne and I are quite sure of that.”

Poirot twinkled at them.

“How fortunate—to have convinced two such charming young ladies of one’s innocence.”

“Oh, dear,” thought Rhoda. “He’s going to be French, and it does embarrass me so.”

She got up and began examining some etchings on the wall.

“These are awfully good,” she said.

“They are not bad,” said Poirot.

He hesitated, looking at Anne.

“Mademoiselle,” he said at last. “I wonder if I might ask you to do me a great favour—oh, nothing to do with the murder. This is an entirely private and personal matter.”

Anne looked a little surprised. Poirot went on speaking in a slightly embarrassed manner.

“It is, you understand, that Christmas is coming on. I have to buy presents for many nieces and grandnieces. And it is a little difficult to choose what young ladies like in this present time. My tastes, alas, are rather old-fashioned.”

“Yes?” said Anne kindly.

“Silk stockings, now—are silk stockings a welcome present to receive?”

“Yes, indeed. It’s always nice to be given stockings.”

“You relieve my mind. I will ask my favour. I have obtained some different colours. There are, I think, about fifteen or sixteen pairs. Would you be so amiable as to look through them and set aside half a dozen pairs that seem to you the most desirable?”

“Certainly I will,” said Anne, rising, with a laugh.

Poirot directed her towards a table in an alcove—a table whose contents were strangely at variance, had she but known it, with the well-known order and neatness of Hercule Poirot. There were stockings piled up in untidy heaps—some fur-lined gloves—calendars and boxes of bonbons.

“I send off my parcels very much à l’avance,” Poirot explained. “See, mademoiselle, here are the stockings. Select me, I pray of you, six pairs.”

He turned, intercepting Rhoda, who was following him.

“As for mademoiselle here, I have a little treat for her—a treat that would be no treat to you, I fancy, Mademoiselle Meredith.”

“What is it?” cried Rhoda.

He lowered his voice.

"A knife, mademoiselle, with which twelve people once stabbed a man. It was given to me as a souvenir by the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits."

"Horrible," cried Anne.

"Ooh! Let me see," said Rhoda.

Poirot led her through into the other room, talking as he went.

"It was given me by the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits because —"

They passed out of the room.

They returned three minutes later. Anne came towards them.

"I think these six are the nicest, M. Poirot. Both these are very good evening shades, and this lighter colour would be nice when summer comes and it's daylight in the evening."

"Mille remercîments, mademoiselle."

He offered them more sirop, which they refused, and finally accompanied them to the door, still talking genially.

When they had finally departed he returned to the room and went straight to the littered table. The pile of stockings still lay in a confused heap. Poirot counted the six selected pairs and then went on to count the others.

He had bought nineteen pairs. There were now only seventeen.

He nodded his head slowly.

Twenty-four

ELIMINATION OF THREE MURDERERS?

On arrival in London, Superintendent Battle came straight to Poirot. Anne and Rhoda had then been gone an hour or more.

Without more ado, the superintendent recounted the result of his researches in Devonshire.

“We’re onto it—not a doubt of it,” he finished. “That’s what Shaitana was aiming at—with his ‘domestic accident’ business. But what gets me is the motive. Why did she want to kill the woman?”

“I think I can help you there, my friend.”

“Go ahead, M. Poirot.”

“This afternoon I conducted a little experiment. I induced mademoiselle and her friend to come here. I put to them my usual questions as to what there was in the room that night.”

Battle looked at him curiously.

“You’re very keen on that question.”

“Yes, it’s useful. It tells me a good deal. Mademoiselle Meredith was suspicious—very suspicious. She takes nothing for granted, that young lady. So that good dog, Hercule Poirot, he does one of his best tricks. He lays a clumsy amateurish trap. Mademoiselle mentions a case of jewellery. I say was not that at the opposite end of the room from the table with the dagger. Mademoiselle does not fall into the trap. She avoids it cleverly. And after that she is pleased with herself, and her vigilance relaxes. So that is the object of this visit—to get her to admit that she knew where the dagger was, and that she noticed it! Her spirits rise when she has, as she thinks, defeated me. She talked quite freely about the jewellery. She has noticed many details of it. There is nothing else in the room that she remembers—except that a vase of chrysanthemums needed its water changing."

"Well?" said Battle.

"Well, it is significant, that. Suppose we knew nothing about this girl. Her word would give us a clue to her character. She notices flowers. She is, then, fond of flowers? No, since she does not mention a very big bowl of early tulips which would at once have attracted the attention of a flower lover. No, it is the paid companion who speaks—the girl whose duty it has been to put fresh water in the vases—and, allied to that, there is a girl who loves and notices jewellery. Is not that, at least, suggestive?"

"Ah," said Battle. "I'm beginning to see what you're driving at."

"Precisely. As I told you the other day, I place my cards on the table. When you recounted her history the other day, and Mrs. Oliver made her startling announcement, my mind went at once to an important point. The murder could not have been committed for gain, since Miss Meredith had still to earn her living after it happened. Why, then? I considered Miss Meredith's temperament as it appeared superficially. A rather timid young girl, poor, but well-dressed, fond of pretty things … The temperament, is it not, of a thief, rather than a murderer. And I asked immediately if Mrs. Eldon had been a tidy woman. You replied that no, she had not been tidy. I formed a hypothesis. Supposing that Anne Meredith was a girl with a weak streak in her character—the kind of girl who takes little things from the big shops. Supposing that, poor, and yet loving pretty things, she helped herself once or twice to things from her employer. A brooch, perhaps, an odd half crown or two, a string of beads. Mrs. Eldon, careless, untidy, would put down these disappearances to her own carelessness. She would not suspect her gentle little mother's help. But, now, suppose a different type of employer—an employer who did notice—accused Anne Meredith of theft. That would be a possible motive for murder. As I said the other evening, Miss Meredith would only commit a murder through fear. She knows that her employer will be able to prove the theft. There is only one thing that can save her: her employer must die. And so she changes the bottles, and Mrs. Benson dies—ironically enough convinced that the mistake is her own, and not suspecting for a minute that the cowed, frightened girl has had a hand in it."

"It's possible," said Superintendent Battle. "It's only a hypothesis, but it's possible."

"It is a little more than possible, my friend—it is also probable. For this afternoon I laid a little trap nicely baited—the real trap—after the sham one had been circumvented. If what I suspect is true, Anne Meredith will never, never be able to resist a really expensive pair of stockings! I ask her to aid me. I let her know carefully that I am not sure exactly how many stockings there are, I go out of the room, leaving her alone—and the result, my friend, is that I have now seventeen pairs of stockings, instead of nineteen, and that two pairs have gone away in Anne Meredith's handbag."

"Whew!" Superintendent Battle whistled. "What a risk to take, though."

"Pas du tout. What does she think I suspect her of? Murder. What is the risk, then, in stealing a pair, or two pairs, of silk stockings? I am not looking for a thief. And, besides, the thief, or the kleptomaniac, is always the same—convinced that she can get away with it."

Battle nodded his head.

"That's true enough. Incredibly stupid. The pitcher goes to the well time after time. Well, I think between us we've arrived fairly clearly at the truth. Anne Meredith was caught stealing. Anne Meredith changed a bottle from one shelf to another. We know that was murder—but I'm damned if we could ever prove it. Successful crime No. 2. Roberts gets away with it. Anne Meredith gets away with it. But what about Shaitana? Did Anne Meredith kill Shaitana?"

He remained silent for a moment or two, then he shook his head.

"It doesn't work out right," he said reluctantly. "She's not one to take a risk. Change a couple of bottles, yes. She knew no one could fasten that on her. It was absolutely safe—because anyone might have done it! Of course, it mightn't have worked. Mrs. Benson might have noticed before she drank the stuff, or she mightn't have died from it. It was what I call a hopeful kind of murder. It might work or it mightn't. Actually, it did. But Shaitana was a very different pair of shoes. That was deliberate, audacious, purposeful murder."

Poirot nodded his head.

"I agree with you. The two types of crime are not the same."

Battle rubbed his nose.

"So that seems to wipe her out as far as he's concerned. Roberts and the girl, both crossed off our list. What about Despard? Any luck with the Luxmore woman?"

Poirot narrated his adventures of the preceding afternoon.

Battle grinned.

"I know that type. You can't disentangle what they remember from what they invent."

Poirot went on. He described Despard's visit, and the story the latter had told.

"Believe him?" Battle asked abruptly.

"Yes, I do."

Battle sighed.

"So do I. Not the type to shoot a man because he wanted the man's wife. Anyway, what's wrong with the divorce court? Everyone flocks there. And he's not a professional man; it wouldn't ruin him, or anything like that. No, I'm of the opinion that our late lamented Mr. Shaitana struck a snag there. Murderer No. 3. wasn't a murderer, after all."

He looked at Poirot.

“That leaves—”

“Mrs. Lorrimer,” said Poirot.

The telephone rang. Poirot got up and answered it. He spoke a few words, waited, spoke again. Then he hung up the receiver and returned to Battle.

His face was very grave.

“That was Mrs. Lorrimer speaking,” he said. “She wants me to come round and see her—now.”

He and Battle looked at each other. The latter shook his head slowly.

“Am I wrong?” he said. “Or were you expecting something of the kind?”

“I wondered,” said Hercule Poirot. “That was all. I wondered.”

“You’d better get along,” said Battle. “Perhaps you’ll manage to get at the truth at last.”

Twenty-five

MRS. LORRIMER SPEAKS

The day was not a bright one, and Mrs. Lorrimer’s room seemed rather dark and cheerless. She herself had a grey look, and seemed much older than she had done on the occasion of Poirot’s last visit.

She greeted him with her usual smiling assurance.

“It is very nice of you to come so promptly, M. Poirot. You are a busy man, I know.”

“At your service, madame,” said Poirot with a little bow.

Mrs. Lorrimer pressed the bell by the fireplace.

“We will have tea brought in. I don’t know what you feel about it, but I always think it’s a mistake to rush straight into confidences without any decent paving of the way.”

“There are to be confidences, then, madame?”

Mrs. Lorrimer did not answer, for at that moment her maid answered the bell. When she had received the order and gone again, Mrs. Lorrimer said dryly:

“You said, if you remember, when you were last here, that you would come if I sent for you. You had an idea, I think, of the reason that should prompt me to send.”

There was no more just then. Tea was brought. Mrs. Lorrimer dispensed it, talking intelligently on various topics of the day.

Taking advantage of a pause, Poirot remarked:

“I hear you and little Mademoiselle Meredith had tea together the other day.”

“We did. Have you seen her lately?”

“This very afternoon.”

“She is in London, then, or have you been down to Wallingford?”

“No. She and her friend were so amiable as to pay me a visit.”

“Ah, the friend. I have not met her.”

Poirot said, smiling a little:

“This murder—it has made for me a rapprochement. You and Mademoiselle Meredith have tea together. Major Despard, he, too, cultivates Miss Meredith’s acquaintance. The Dr. Roberts, he is perhaps the only one out of it.”

“I saw him out at bridge the other day,” said Mrs. Lorrimer. “He seemed quite his usual cheerful self.”

“As fond of bridge as ever?”

“Yes—still making the most outrageous bids—and very often getting away with it.”

She was silent for a moment or two, then said:

“Have you seen Superintendent Battle lately?”

“Also this afternoon. He was with me when you telephoned.”

Shading her face from the fire with one hand, Mrs. Lorrimer asked:

“How is he getting on?”

Poirot said gravely:

“He is not very rapid, the good Battle. He gets there slowly, but he does get there in the end, madame.”

“I wonder.” Her lips curved in a faintly ironical smile.

She went on:

“He has paid me quite a lot of attention. He has delved, I think, into my past history right back to my girlhood. He has interviewed my friends, and chatted to my servants—the ones I have now and the ones who have been with me in former years. What he hoped to find I do not know, but he certainly did not find it. He might as well have accepted what I told him. It was the truth. I knew Mr. Shaitana very slightly. I met him at Luxor, as I said, and our acquaintanceship was never more than an acquaintanceship. Superintendent Battle will not be able to get away from these facts.”

“Perhaps not,” said Poirot.

“And you, M. Poirot? Have not you made any inquiries?”

“About you, madame?”

“That is what I meant.”

Slowly the little man shook his head.

“It would have been to no avail.”

“Just exactly what do you mean by that, M. Poirot?”

“I will be quite frank, madame. I have realized from the beginning that, of the four persons in Mr. Shaitana’s room that night, the one with the best brains, with the coolest, most logical head, was you, madame. If I had to lay money on the chance of one of those four planning a murder and getting away with it successfully, it is on you that I should place my money.”

Mrs. Lorrimer’s brows rose.

“Am I expected to feel flattered?” she asked drily.

Poirot went on, without paying any attention to her interruption:

“For a crime to be successful, it is usually necessary to think every detail of it out beforehand. All possible contingencies must be taken into account. The timing must be accurate. The placing must be scrupulously correct. Dr. Roberts might bungle a crime through haste and overconfidence; Major Despard would probably be too prudent to commit one; Miss Meredith might lose her head and give herself away. You, madame, would do none of these things. You would be clearheaded and cool, you are sufficiently resolute of character, and could be sufficiently obsessed with an idea to the extent of overruling prudence, you are not the kind of woman to lose her head.”

Mrs. Lorrimer sat silent for a minute or two, a curious smile playing round her lips. At last she said:

“So that is what you think of me, M. Poirot. That I am the kind of woman to commit an ideal murder.”

“At least you have the amiability not to resent the idea.”

“I find it very interesting. So it is your idea that I am the only person who could successfully have murdered Shaitana?”

Poirot said slowly:

“There is a difficulty there, madame.”

“Really? Do tell me.”

“You may have noticed that I said just now a phrase something like this: ‘For a crime to be successful it is usually necessary to plan every detail of it carefully beforehand.’ ‘Usually’ is the word to which I want to draw your attention. For there is another type of successful crime. Have you ever said suddenly to anyone, ‘Throw a stone and see if you can hit that tree,’ and the person obeys quickly, without thinking—and surprisingly often he does hit the tree? But when he comes to repeat the throw it is not so easy—for he has begun to think. ‘So hard—no harder—a little more to the right—to the left.’ The first was an almost unconscious action, the body obeying the mind as the body of an animal does. Eh bien, madame, there is a type of crime like that, a crime committed on the spur of the moment—an inspiration—a flash of genius—without time to pause or think. And that, madame, was the kind of crime that killed Mr. Shaitana. A sudden dire necessity, a flash of inspiration, rapid execution.”

He shook his head.

“And that, madame, is not your type of crime at all. If you killed Mr. Shaitana, it should have been a premeditated crime.”

“I see.” Her hand waved softly to and fro, keeping the heat of the fire from her face. “And, of course, it wasn’t a premeditated crime, so I couldn’t have killed him—eh, M. Poirot?”

Poirot bowed.

“That is right, madame.”

“And yet—” She leaned forward, her waving hand stopped. “I did kill Shaitana, M. Poirot….”

Twenty-six

THE TRUTH

There was a pause—a very long pause.

The room was growing dark. The firelight leaped and flickered.

Mrs. Lorrimer and Hercule Poirot looked not at each other, but at the fire. It was as though time was momentarily in abeyance.

Then Hercule Poirot sighed and stirred.

“So it was that—all the time … Why did you kill him, madame?”

“I think you know why, M. Poirot.”

“Because he knew something about you—something that had happened long ago?”

“Yes.”

“And that something was—another death, madame?”

She bowed her head.

Poirot said gently:

“Why did you tell me? What made you send for me today?”

“You told me once that I should do so someday.”

“Yes—that is, I hoped … I knew, madame, that there was only one way of learning the truth as far as you were concerned—and that was by your own free will. If you did not choose to speak, you would not do so, and you would never give yourself away. But there was a chance—that you yourself might wish to speak.”

Mrs. Lorrimer nodded.

“It was clever of you to foresee that—the weariness—the loneliness—”

Her voice died away.

Poirot looked at her curiously.

“So it has been like that? Yes, I can understand it might be….”

“Alone—quite alone,” said Mrs. Lorrimer. “No one knows what that means unless they have lived, as I have lived, with the knowledge of what one has done.”

Poirot said gently:

“Is it an impertinence, madame, or may I be permitted to offer my sympathy?”

She bent her head a little.

“Thank you, M. Poirot.”

There was another pause, then Poirot said, speaking in a slightly brisker tone:

“Am I to understand, madame, that you took the words Mr. Shaitana spoke at dinner as a direct menace aimed at you?”

She nodded.

“I realized at once that he was speaking so that one person should understand him. That person was myself. The reference to a woman’s weapon being poison was meant for me. He knew. I had suspected it once before. He had brought the conversation round to a certain famous trial, and I saw his eyes watching me. There was a kind of uncanny knowledge in them. But, of course, that night I was quite sure.”

“And you were sure, too, of his future intentions?”

Mrs. Lorrimer said drily:

“It was hardly likely that the presence of Superintendent Battle and yourself was an accident. I took it that Shaitana was going to advertise his own cleverness by pointing out to you both that he had discovered something that no one else had suspected.”

“How soon did you make up your mind to act, madame?”

Mrs. Lorrimer hesitated a little.

“It is difficult to remember exactly when the idea came into my mind,” she said. “I had noticed the dagger before going into dinner. When we returned to the drawing room I picked it up and slipped it into my sleeve. No one saw me do it. I made sure of that.”

“It would be dexterously done, I have no doubt, madame.”

“I made up my mind then exactly what I was going to do. I had only to carry it out. It was risky, perhaps, but I considered that it was worth trying.”

“That is your coolness, your successful weighing of chances, coming into play. Yes, I see that.”

“We started to play bridge,” continued Mrs. Lorrimer. Her voice cool and unemotional. “At last an opportunity arose. I was dummy. I strolled across the room to the fireplace. Shaitana had dozed off to sleep. I looked over at the others. They were all intent on the game. I leant over and—and did it—”

Her voice shook just a little, but instantly it regained its cool aloofness.

“I spoke to him. It came into my head that that would make a kind of alibi for me. I made some remark about the fire, and then pretended he had answered me and went on again, saying something like: ‘I agree with you. I do not like radiators, either.’”

“He did not cry out at all?”

"No. I think he made a little grunt—that was all. It might have been taken for words from a distance."

"And then?"

"And then I went back to the bridge table. The last trick was just being played."

"And you sat down and resumed play?"

"Yes."

"With sufficient interest in the game to be able to tell me nearly all the calling and the hands two days later?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Lorrimer simply.

"Epatant!" said Hercule Poirot.

He leaned back in his chair. He nodded his head several times. Then, by way of a change, he shook it.

"But there is still something, madame, that I do not understand."

"Yes?"

"It seems to me that there is some factor that I have missed. You are a woman who considers and weighs everything carefully. You decide that, for a certain reason, you will run an enormous risk. You do run it—successfully. And then, not two weeks later, you change your mind. Frankly, madame, that does not seem to me to ring true."

A queer little smile twisted her lips.

"You are quite right, M. Poirot, there is one factor that you do not know. Did Miss Meredith tell you where she met me the other day?"

"It was, I think she said, near Mrs. Oliver's flat."

“I believe that is so. But I meant the actual name of the street. Anne Meredith met me in Harley Street.”

“Ah!” He looked at her attentively. “I begin to see.”

“Yes, I thought you would. I had been to see a specialist there. He told me what I already half suspected.”

Her smile widened. It was no longer twisted and bitter. It was suddenly sweet.

“I shall not play very much more bridge, M. Poirot. Oh, he didn’t say so in so many words. He wrapped up the truth a little. With great care, etc., etc., I might live several years. But I shall not take any great care. I am not that kind of a woman.”

“Yes, yes, I begin to understand,” said Poirot.

“It made a difference, you see. A month—two months, perhaps—not more. And then, just as I left the specialist, I met Miss Meredith. I asked her to have tea with me.”

She paused, then went on:

“I am not, after all, a wholly wicked woman. All the time we were having tea I was thinking. By my action the other evening I had not only deprived the man Shaitana of life (that was done, and could not be undone), I had also, to a varying degree, affected unfavourably the lives of three other people. Because of what I had done, Dr. Roberts, Major Despard and Anne Meredith, none of whom had injured me in any way, were passing through a very grave ordeal, and might even be in danger. That, at least, I could undo. I don’t know that I felt particularly moved by the plight of either Dr. Roberts or Major Despard—although both of them had presumably a much longer span of life in front of them than I had. They were men, and could, to a certain extent, look after themselves. But when I looked at Anne Meredith—”

She hesitated, then continued slowly:

“Anne Meredith was only a girl. She had the whole of her life in front of her. This miserable business might ruin that life….

“I didn’t like the thought of that….

“And then, M. Poirot, with these ideas growing in my mind, I realized that what you had hinted had come true. I was not going to be able to keep silence. This afternoon I rang you up….”

Minutes passed.

Hercule Poirot leaned forward. He stared, deliberately stared through the gathering gloom, at Mrs. Lorrimer. She returned that intent gaze quietly and without any nervousness.

He said at last:

“Mrs. Lorrimer, are you sure—are you positive (you will tell me the truth, will you not?)—that the murder of Mr. Shaitana was not premeditated? Is it not a fact that you planned the crime beforehand—that you went to that dinner with the murder already mapped out in your mind?”

Mrs. Lorrimer stared at him for a moment, then she shook her head sharply.

“No,” she said.

“You did not plan the murder beforehand?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then—then … Oh, you are lying to me—you must be lying! … ”

Mrs. Lorrimer’s voice cut into the air like ice.

“Really, M. Poirot, you forget yourself.”

The little man sprang to his feet. He paced up and down the room, muttering to himself, uttering ejaculations.

Suddenly he said:

“Permit me.”

And, going to the switch, he turned on the electric lights.

He came back, sat down in his chair, placed both hands on his knees and stared straight at his hostess.

“The question is,” he said, “can Hercule Poirot possibly be wrong?”

“No one can always be right,” said Mrs. Lorrimer coldly.

“I am,” said Poirot. “Always I am right. It is so invariable that it startles me. But now it looks, it very much looks, as though I am wrong. And that upsets me. Presumably, you know what you are saying. It is your murder! Fantastic, then, that Hercule Poirot should know better than you do how you committed it.”

“Fantastic and very absurd,” said Mrs. Lorrimer still more coldly.

“I am, then, mad. Decidedly I am mad: No—sacré nom d’un petit bonhomme—I am not mad! I am right. I must be right. I am willing to believe that you killed Mr. Shaitana—but you cannot have killed him in the way you say you did. No one can do a thing that is not dans son charactère!”

He paused. Mrs. Lorrimer drew in an angry breath and bit her lips. She was about to speak, but Poirot forestalled her.

“Either the killing of Shaitana was planned beforehand—or you did not kill him at all!”

Mrs. Lorrimer said sharply:

“I really believe you are mad, M. Poirot. If I am willing to admit I committed the crime, I should not be likely to lie about the way I did it. What would be the point of such a thing?”

Poirot got up again and took one turn round the room. When he came back to his seat his manner had changed. He was gentle and kindly.

“You did not kill Shaitana,” he said softly. “I see that now. I see everything. Harley Street. And little Anne Meredith standing forlorn on the pavement. I see, too, another girl—a very long time ago, a girl who has gone through life always alone—terribly alone. Yes, I see all that. But one thing I do not see—why are you so certain that Anne Meredith did it?”

“Really, M. Poirot—”

“Absolutely useless to protest—to lie further to me, madame. I tell you, I know the truth. I know the very emotions that swept over you that day in Harley Street. You would not have done it for Dr. Roberts—oh, no! You would not have done it for Major Despard, non plus. But Anne Meredith is different. You have compassion for her, because she has done what you once did. You do not know even—or so I imagine—what reason she had for the crime. But you are quite sure she did it. You were sure that first evening—the evening it happened—when Superintendent Battle invited you to give your views on the case. Yes, I know it all, you see. It is quite useless to lie further to me. You see that, do you not?”

He paused for an answer, but none came. He nodded his head in satisfaction.

“Yes, you are sensible. That is good. It is a very noble action that you perform there, madame, to take the blame on yourself and to let this child escape.”

“You forget,” said Mrs. Lorrimer in a dry voice, “I am not an innocent woman. Years ago, M. Poirot, I killed my husband….”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I see,” said Poirot. “It is justice. After all, only justice. You have the logical mind. You are willing to suffer for the act you committed. Murder is murder—it does not matter who the victim is. Madame, you have courage, and you have clearsightedness. But I ask of you once more: How can you be so sure? How do you know that it was Anne Meredith who killed Mr. Shaitana?”

A deep sigh broke from Mrs. Lorrimer. Her last resistance had gone down before Poirot’s insistence. She answered his question quite simply like a child.

“Because,” she said, “I saw her.”

Twenty-seven

THE EYEWITNESS

Suddenly Poirot laughed. He could not help it. His head went back, and his high Gallic laugh filled the room.

“Pardon, madame,” he said, wiping his eyes. “I could not help it. Here we argue and we reason! We ask questions! We invoke the psychology—and all the time there was an eyewitness of the crime. Tell me, I pray of you.”

“It was fairly late in the evening. Anne Meredith was dummy. She got up and looked over her partner’s hand, and then she moved about the room. The hand wasn’t very interesting—the conclusion was inevitable. I didn’t need to concentrate on the cards. Just as we got to the last three tricks I looked over towards the fireplace. Anne Meredith was bent over Mr. Shaitana. As I watched, she straightened herself—her hand had been actually on his breast—a gesture which awakened my surprise. She straightened herself, and I saw her face and her quick look over towards us. Guilt and fear—that is what I saw on her face. Of course, I didn’t know what had happened then. I only wondered what on earth the girl could have been doing. Later—I knew.”

Poirot nodded.

“But she did not know that you knew. She did not know that you had seen her?”

“Poor child,” said Mrs. Lorrimer. “Young, frightened—her way to make in the world. Do you wonder that I—well, held my tongue?”

“No, no, I do not wonder.”

“Especially knowing that I—that I myself—” She finished the sentence with a shrug. “It was certainly not my place to stand accuser. It was up to the police.”

“Quite so—but today you have gone further than that.”

Mrs. Lorrimer said grimly:

“I’ve never been a very softhearted or compassionate woman, but I suppose these qualities grow upon one in one’s old age. I assure you, I’m not often actuated by pity.”

“It is not always a very safe guide, madame. Mademoiselle Anne is young, she is fragile, she looks timid and frightened—oh, yes, she seems a very worthy subject for compassion. But I, I do not agree. Shall I tell you, madame, why Miss Anne Meredith killed Mr. Shaitana. It was because he knew that she had previously killed an elderly lady to whom she was companion—because that lady had found her out in a petty theft.”

Mrs. Lorrimer looked a little startled.

“Is that true, M. Poirot?”

“I have no doubt of it, whatsoever. She is so soft—so gentle—one would say. Pah! She is dangerous, madame, that little Mademoiselle Anne! Where her own safety, her own comfort, is concerned, she will strike wildly—treacherously. With Mademoiselle Anne those two crimes will not be the end. She will gain confidence from them….”

Mrs. Lorrimer said sharply:

“What you say is horrible, M. Poirot. Horrible!”

Poirot rose.

“Madame, I will now take my leave. Reflect on what I have said.”

Mrs. Lorrimer was looking a little uncertain of herself. She said with an attempt at her old manner:

“If it suits me, M. Poirot, I shall deny this whole conversation. You have no witnesses, remember. What I have just told you that I saw on that fatal evening is—well, private between ourselves.”

Poirot said gravely:

“Nothing shall be done without your consent, madame. And be at peace; I have my own methods. Now that I know what I am driving at—”

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“Permit me to tell you, madame, that you are a most remarkable woman. All my homage and respect. Yes, indeed, a woman in a thousand. Why, you have not even done what nine hundred and ninety-nine women out of a thousand could not have resisted doing.”

“What is that?”

“Told me just why you killed your husband—and how entirely justified such a proceeding really was.”

Mrs. Lorrimer drew herself up.

“Really, M. Poirot,” she said stiffly. “My reasons were entirely my own business.”

“Magnifique!” said Poirot, and, once more raising her hand to his lips, he left the room.

It was cold outside the house, and he looked up and down for a taxi, but there was none in sight.

He began to walk in the direction of King’s Road.

As he walked he was thinking hard. Occasionally he nodded his head; once he shook it.

He looked back over his shoulder. Someone was going up the steps of Mrs. Lorrimer’s house. In figure it looked very like Anne Meredith. He hesitated for a minute, wondering whether to turn back or not, but in the end he went on.

On arrival at home, he found that Battle had gone without leaving any message.

He proceeded to ring the superintendent up.

“Hallo.” Battle’s voice came through. “Got anything?”

“Je crois bien. Mon ami, we must get after the Meredith girl—and quickly.”

“I’m getting after her—but why quickly?”

“Because, my friend, she may be dangerous.”

Battle was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“I know what you mean. But there’s no one … Oh, well, we mustn’t take chances. As a matter of fact, I’ve written her. Official note, saying I’m calling to see her tomorrow. I thought it might be a good thing to get her rattled.”

“It is a possibility, at least. I may accompany you?”

“Naturally. Honoured to have your company, M. Poirot.”

Poirot hung up the receiver with a thoughtful face.

His mind was not quite at rest. He sat for a long time in front of his fire, frowning to himself. At last, putting his fears and doubts aside, he went to bed.

“We will see in the morning,” he murmured.

But of what the morning would bring he had no idea.

Twenty-eight

SUICIDE

The summons came by telephone at the moment when Poirot was sitting down to his morning coffee and rolls.

He lifted the telephone receiver, and Battle's voice spoke:

"That M. Poirot?"

"Yes, it is. Qu'est ce qu'il y a?"

The mere inflection of the superintendent's voice had told him that something had happened. His own vague misgivings came back to him.

"But quickly, my friend, tell me."

"It's Mrs. Lorrimer."

"Lorrimer—yes?"

"What the devil did you say to her—or did she say to you—yesterday? You never told me anything; in fact, you let me think that the Meredith girl was the one we were after."

Poirot said quietly:

"What has happened?"

"Suicide."

"Mrs. Lorrimer has committed suicide?"

"That's right. It seems she has been very depressed and unlike herself lately. Her doctor had ordered her some sleeping stuff. Last night she took an overdose."

Poirot drew a deep breath.

“There is no question of—accident?”

“Not the least. It’s all cut and dried. She wrote to the three of them.”

“Which three?”

“The other three. Roberts, Despard and Miss Meredith. All fair and square—no beating about the bush. Just wrote that she would like them to know that she was taking a shortcut out of all the mess—that it was she who had killed Shaitana—and that she apologized—apologized—to all three of them for the inconvenience and annoyance they had suffered. Perfectly calm, businesslike letter. Absolutely typical of the woman. She was a cool customer all right.”

For a minute or two Poirot did not answer.

So this was Mrs. Lorrimer’s final word. She had determined, after all, to shield Anne Meredith. A quick painless death instead of a protracted painful one, and her last action an altruistic one—the saving of the girl with whom she felt a secret bond of sympathy. The whole thing planned and carried out with quite ruthless efficiency—a suicide carefully announced to the three interested parties. What a woman! His admiration quickened. It was like her—like her clearcut determination, her insistence on what she had decided being carried out.

He had thought to have convinced her—but evidently she had preferred her own judgement. A woman of very strong will.

Battle’s voice cut into his meditations.

“What the devil did you say to her yesterday? You must have put the wind up her, and this is the result. But you implied that the result of your interview was definite suspicion of the Meredith girl.”

Poirot was silent a minute or two. He felt that, dead, Mrs. Lorrimer constrained him to her will, as she could not have done if she were living.

He said at last slowly:

“I was in error….”

They were unaccustomed words on his tongue, and he did not like them.

“You made a mistake, eh?” said Battle. “All the same, she must have thought you were onto her. It’s a bad business—letting her slip through our fingers like this.”

“You could not have proved anything against her,” said Poirot.

“No—I suppose that’s true … Perhaps it’s all for the best. You—er—didn’t mean this to happen, M. Poirot?”

Poirot’s disclaimer was indignant. Then he said:

“Tell me exactly what has occurred.”

“Roberts opened his letter just before eight o’clock. He lost no time, dashed off at once in his car, leaving his parlourmaid to communicate with us, which she did. He got to the house to find that Mrs. Lorrimer hadn’t been called yet, rushed up to her bedroom—but it was too late. He tried artificial respiration, but there was nothing doing. Our divisional surgeon arrived soon after and confirmed his treatment.”

“What was the sleeping stuff?”

“Veronal, I think. One of the barbituric group, at any rate. There was a bottle of tablets by her bed.”

“What about the other two? Did they not try to communicate with you?”

“Despard is out of town. He hasn’t had this morning’s post.”

“And—Miss Meredith?”

“I’ve just rung her up.”

“Eh bien?”

“She had just opened the letter a few moments before my call came through. Post is later there.”

“What was her reaction?”

“A perfectly proper attitude. Intense relief decently veiled. Shocked and grieved—that sort of thing.”

Poirot paused a moment, then he said:

“Where are you now, my friend?”

“At Cheyne Lane.”

“Bien. I will come round immediately.”

In the hall at Cheyne Lane he found Dr. Roberts on the point of departure. The doctor’s usual florid manner was rather in abeyance this morning. He looked pale and shaken.

“Nasty business this, M. Poirot. I can’t say I’m not relieved—from my own point of view—but, to tell you the truth, it’s a bit of a shock. I never really thought for a minute that it was Mrs. Lorrimer who stabbed Shaitana. It’s been the greatest surprise to me.”

“I, too, am surprised.”

“Quiet, well-bred, self-contained woman. Can’t imagine her doing a violent thing like that. What was the motive, I wonder? Oh, well, we shall never know now. I confess I’m curious, though.”

“It must take a load off your mind—this occurrence.”

“Oh, it does, undoubtedly. It would be hypocrisy not to admit it. It’s not very pleasant to have a suspicion of murder hanging over you. As for the poor woman herself—well, it was undoubtedly the best way out.”

“So she thought herself.”

Roberts nodded.

“Conscience, I suppose,” he said as he let himself out of the house.

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully. The doctor had misread the situation. It was not remorse that had made Mrs. Lorrimer take her life.

On his way upstairs he paused to say a few words of comfort to the elderly parlourmaid, who was weeping quietly.

“It’s so dreadful, sir. So very dreadful. We were all so fond of her. And you having tea with her yesterday so nice and quiet. And now today she’s gone. I shall never forget this morning—never as long as I live. The gentleman pealing at the bell. Rang three times, he did, before I could get to it. And, ‘Where’s your mistress?’ he shot out at me. I was so flustered, I couldn’t hardly answer. You see, we never went in to the mistress till she rang—that was her orders. And I just couldn’t get out anything. And the doctor he says, ‘Where’s her room?’ and ran up the stairs, and me behind him, and I showed him the door, and he rushes in, not so much as knocking, and takes one look at her lying there, and, ‘Too late,’ he says. She was dead, sir. But he sent me for brandy and hot water, and he tried desperate to bring her back, but it couldn’t be done. And then the police coming and all—it isn’t—it isn’t—decent, sir. Mrs. Lorrimer wouldn’t have liked it. And why the police? It’s none of their business, surely, even if an accident has occurred and the poor mistress did take an overdose by mistake.”

Poirot did not reply to her question.

He said:

“Last night, was your mistress quite as usual? Did she seem upset or worried at all?”

“No, I don’t think so, sir. She was tired—and I think she was in pain. She hasn’t been well lately, sir.”

"No, I know."

The sympathy in his tone made the woman go on.

"She was never one for complaining, sir, but both cook and I had been worried about her for some time. She couldn't do as much as she used to do, and things tired her. I think, perhaps, the young lady coming after you left was a bit too much for her."

With his foot on the stairs, Poirot turned back.

"The young lady? Did a young lady come here yesterday evening?"

"Yes, sir. Just after you left, it was. Miss Meredith, her name was."

"Did she stay long?"

"About an hour, sir."

Poirot was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

"And afterwards?"

"The mistress went to bed. She had dinner in bed. She said she was tired."

Again Poirot was silent; then he said:

"Do you know if your mistress wrote any letters yesterday evening?"

"Do you mean after she went to bed? I don't think so, sir."

"But you are not sure?"

"There were some letters on the hall table ready to be posted, sir. We always took them last thing before shutting up. But I think they had been lying there since earlier in the day."

"How many were there?"

“Two or three—I’m not quite sure, sir. Three, I think.”

“You—or cook—whoever posted them—did not happen to notice to whom they were addressed? Do not be offended at my question. It is of the utmost importance.”

“I went to the post myself with them, sir. I noticed the top one—it was to Fortnum and Mason’s. I couldn’t say as to the others.”

The woman’s tone was earnest and sincere.

“Are you sure there were not more than three letters?”

“Yes, sir, I’m quite certain of that.”

Poirot nodded his head gravely. Once more he started up the staircase. Then he said:

“You knew, I take it, that your mistress took medicine to make her sleep?”

“Oh, yes, sir, it was the doctor’s orders. Dr. Lang.”

“Where was this sleeping medicine kept?”

“In the little cupboard in the mistress’s room.”

Poirot did not ask any further questions. He went upstairs. His face was very grave.

On the upper landing Battle greeted him. The superintendent looked worried and harassed.

“I’m glad you’ve come, M. Poirot. Let me introduce you to Dr. Davidson.”

The divisional surgeon shook hands. He was a tall, melancholy man.

“The luck was against us,” he said. “An hour or two earlier, and we might have saved her.”

“H’m,” said Battle. “I mustn’t say so officially, but I’m not sorry. She was a—well, she was a lady. I don’t know what her reasons were for killing Shaitana, but she may just conceivably have been justified.”

“In any case,” said Poirot, “it is doubtful if she would have lived to stand her trial. She was a very ill woman.”

The surgeon nodded in agreement.

“I should say you were quite right. Well, perhaps it is all for the best.”

He started down the stairs.

Battle moved after him.

“One minute, doctor.”

Poirot, his hand on the bedroom door, murmured, “I may enter—yes?”

Battle nodded over his shoulder. “Quite all right. We’re through.” Poirot passed into the room, closing the door behind him….

He went over to the bed and stood looking down at the quiet, dead face.

He was very disturbed.

Had the dead woman gone to the grave in a last determined effort to save a young girl from death and disgrace—or was there a different, a more sinister explanation?

There were certain facts….

Suddenly he bent down, examining a dark, discoloured bruise on the dead woman’s arm.

He straightened himself up again. There was a strange, catlike gleam in his eyes that certain close associates of his would have recognized.

He left the room quickly and went downstairs. Battle and a subordinate were at the telephone. The latter laid down the receiver and said:

“He hasn’t come back, sir.”

Battle said:

“Despard. I’ve been trying to get him. There’s a letter for him with the Chelsea postmark all right.”

Poirot asked an irrelevant question.

“Had Dr. Roberts had his breakfast when he came here?”

Battle stared.

“No,” he said, “I remember he mentioned that he’d come out without it.”

“Then he will be at his house now. We can get him.”

“But why—?”

But Poirot was already busy at the dial. Then he spoke:

“Dr. Roberts? It is Dr. Roberts speaking? Mais oui, it is Poirot here. Just one question. Are you well acquainted with the handwriting of Mrs. Lorrimer?”

“Mrs. Lorrimer’s handwriting? I—no, I don’t know that I’d ever seen it before.”

“Je vous remercie.”

Poirot laid down the receiver quickly.

Battle was staring at him.

“What’s the big idea, M. Poirot?” he asked quietly.

Poirot took him by the arm.

“Listen, my friend. A few minutes after I left this house yesterday Anne Meredith arrived. I actually saw her going up the steps, though I was not quite sure of her identity at the time. Immediately after Anne Meredith left Mrs. Lorrimer went to bed. As far as the maid knows, she did not write any letters then. And, for reasons which you will understand when I recount to you our interview, I do not believe that she wrote those three letters before my visit. When did she write them, then?”

“After the servants had gone to bed?” suggested Battle. “She got up and posted them herself.”

“That is possible, yes, but there is another possibility—that she did not write them at all.”

Battle whistled.

“My God, you mean—”

The telephone trilled. The sergeant picked up the receiver. He listened a minute, then turned to Battle.

“Sergeant O’Connor speaking from Despard’s flat, sir. There’s reason to believe that Despard’s down at Wallingford-on-Thames.”

Poirot caught Battle by the arm.

“Quickly, my friend. We, too, must go to Wallingford. I tell you, I am not easy in my mind. This may not be the end. I tell you again, my friend, this young lady, she is dangerous.”

Twenty-nine

ACCIDENT

“Anne,” said Rhoda.

“Mmm?”

“No, really, Anne, don’t answer with half your mind on a crossword puzzle. I want you to attend to me.”

“I am attending.”

Anne sat bolt upright and put down the paper.

“That’s better. Look here, Anne.” Rhoda hesitated. “About this man coming.”

“Superintendent Battle?”

“Yes, Anne, I wish you’d tell him—about being at the Bensons.’”

Anne’s voice grew rather cold.

“Nonsense. Why should I?”

“Because—well, it might look—as though you’d been keeping something back. I’m sure it would be better to mention it.”

“I can’t very well now,” said Anne coldly.

“I wish you had in the first place.”

“Well, it’s too late to bother about that now.”

“Yes.” Rhoda did not sound convinced.

Anne said rather irritably:

“In any case, I can’t see why. It’s got nothing to do with all this.”

“No, of course not.”

“I was only there about two months. He only wants these things as—well—references. Two months doesn’t count.”

“No, I know. I expect I’m being rather foolish, but it does worry me rather. I feel you ought to mention it. You see, if it came out some other way, it might look rather bad—your keeping dark about it, I mean.”

“I don’t see how it can come out. Nobody knows but you.”

“N-no?”

Anne pounced on the slight hesitation in Rhoda’s voice.

“Why, who does know?”

“Well, everyone at Combeacre,” said Rhoda after a moment’s silence.

“Oh, that!” Anne dismissed it with a shrug. “The superintendent isn’t likely to come up against anyone from there. It would be an extraordinary coincidence if he did.”

“Coincidences happen.”

“Rhoda, you’re being extraordinary about this. Fuss, fuss, fuss.”

“I’m terribly sorry, darling. Only you know what the police might be like if they thought you were—well—hiding things.”

“They won’t know. Who’s to tell them? Nobody knows but you.”

It was the second time she had said those words. At this second repetition her voice changed a little—something queer and speculative came into it.

"Oh, dear, I wish you would," sighed Rhoda unhappily.

She looked guiltily at Anne, but Anne was not looking at her. She was sitting with a frown on her face, as though working out some calculation.

"Rather fun, Major Despard turning up," said Rhoda.

"What? Oh, yes."

"Anne, he is attractive. If you don't want him, do, do, do hand him over to me!"

"Don't be absurd, Rhoda. He doesn't care tuppence for me."

"Then why does he keep on turning up? Of course he's keen on you. You're just the sort of distressed damsel that he'd enjoy rescuing. You look so beautifully helpless, Anne."

"He's equally pleasant to both of us."

"That's only his niceness. But if you don't want him, I could do the sympathetic friend act—console his broken heart, etc., etc., and in the end I might get him. Who knows?" Rhoda concluded inelegantly.

"I'm sure you're quite welcome to him, my dear," said Anne, laughing.

"He's got such a lovely back to his neck," sighed Rhoda. "Very brick red and muscular."

"Darling, must you be so mawkish?"

"Do you like him, Anne?"

"Yes, very much."

"Aren't we prim and sedate? I think he likes me a little—not as much as you, but a little."

"Oh, but he does like you," said Anne.

Again there was an unusual note in her voice, but Rhoda did not hear it.

“What time is our sleuth coming?” she asked.

“Twelve,” said Anne. She was silent for a minute or two, then she said, “It’s only half past ten now. Let’s go out on the river.”

“But isn’t—didn’t—didn’t Despard say he’d come round about eleven?”

“Why should we wait in for him? We can leave a message with Mrs. Astwell which way we’ve gone, and he can follow us along the towpath.”

“In fact, don’t make yourself cheap, dear, as mother always said!” laughed Rhoda. “Come on, then.”

She went out of the room and through the garden door. Anne followed her.

Major Despard called at Wendon Cottage about ten minutes later. He was before his time, he knew, so he was a little surprised to find both girls had already gone out.

He went through the garden and across the fields, and turned to the right along the towpath.

Mrs. Astwell remained a minute or two looking after him, instead of getting on with her morning chores.

“Sweet on one or other of ’em, he is,” she observed to herself. “I think it’s Miss Anne, but I’m not certain. He don’t give much away by his face. Treats ’em both alike. I’m not sure they ain’t both sweet on him, too. If so, they won’t be such dear friends so much longer. Nothing like a gentleman for coming between two young ladies.”

Pleasurably excited by the prospect of assisting at a budding romance, Mrs. Astwell turned indoors to her task of washing up the breakfast things, when once again the doorbell rang.

“Drat that door,” said Mrs. Astwell. “Do it on purpose, they do. Parcel, I suppose. Or might be a telegram.”

She moved slowly to the front door.

Two gentlemen stood there, a small foreign gentleman and an exceedingly English, big, burly gentleman. The latter she had seen before, she remembered.

“Miss Meredith at home?” asked the big man.

Mrs. Astwell shook her head.

“Just gone out.”

“Really? Which way? We didn’t meet her.”

Mrs. Astwell, secretly studying the amazing moustache of the other gentleman, and deciding that they looked an unlikely pair to be friends, volunteered further information.

“Gone out on the river,” she explained.

The other gentleman broke in:

“And the other lady? Miss Dawes?”

“They’ve both gone.”

“Ah, thank you,” said Battle. “Let me see, which way does one get to the river?”

“First turning to the left, down the lane,” Mrs. Astwell replied promptly. “When you get to the towpath, go right. I heard them say that’s the way they were going,” she added helpfully. “Not above a quarter of an hour ago. You’ll soon catch ’em up.”

“And I wonder,” she added to herself as she unwillingly closed the front door, having stared inquisitively at their retreating backs, “who you two might be. Can’t place you, somehow.”

Mrs. Astwell returned to the kitchen sink, and Battle and Poirot duly took the first turning to the left—a straggling lane which soon ended abruptly at the towpath.

Poirot was hurrying along, and Battle eyed him curiously.

“Anything the matter, M. Poirot? You seem in a mighty hurry.”

“It is true. I am uneasy, my friend.”

“Anything particular?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No. But there are possibilities. You never know….”

“You’ve got something in your head,” said Battle. “You were urgent that we should come down here this morning without losing a moment—and, my word, you made Constable Turner step on the gas! What are you afraid of? The girl’s shot her bolt.”

Poirot was silent.

“What are you afraid of?” Battle repeated.

“What is one always afraid of in these cases?”

Battle nodded.

“You’re quite right. I wonder—”

“You wonder what, my friend?”

Battle said slowly:

“I’m wondering if Miss Meredith knows that her friend told Mrs. Oliver a certain fact.”

Poirot nodded his head in vigorous appreciation.

"Hurry, my friend," he said.

They hastened along the riverbank. There was no craft visible on the water's surface, but presently they rounded a bend, and Poirot suddenly stopped dead. Battle's quick eyes saw also.

"Major Despard," he said.

Despard was about two hundred yards ahead of them, striding along the riverbank.

A little farther on the two girls were in view in a punt on the water, Rhoda punting—Anne lying and laughing up at her. Neither of them were looking towards the bank.

And then—it happened. Anne's hand outstretched, Rhoda's stagger, her plunge overboard—her desperate grasp at Anne's sleeve—the rocking boat—then an overturned punt and two girls struggling in the water.

"See it?" cried Battle as he started to run. "Little Meredith caught her round the ankle and tipped her in. My God, that's her fourth murder!"

They were both running hard. But someone was ahead of them. It was clear that neither girl could swim, but Despard had run quickly along the path to the nearest point, and now he plunged in and swam towards them.

"Mon Dieu, this is interesting," cried Poirot. He caught Battle's arm. "Which of them will he go for first?"

The two girls were not together. About twelve yards separated them.

Despard swam powerfully towards them—there was no check in his stroke. He was making straight for Rhoda.

Battle, in his turn, reached the nearest bank and went in. Despard had just brought Rhoda successfully to shore. He hauled her up, flung her down and plunged in again, swimming towards the spot where Anne had just gone under.

“Be careful,” called Battle. “Weeds.”

He and Battle got to the spot at the same time, but Anne had gone under before they reached her.

They got her at last and between them towed her to the shore.

Rhoda was being ministered to by Poirot. She was sitting up now, her breath coming unevenly.

Despard and Battle laid Anne Meredith down.

“Artificial respiration,” said Battle. “Only thing to do. But I’m afraid she’s gone.”

He set to work methodically. Poirot stood by, ready to relieve him.

Despard dropped down by Rhoda.

“Are you all right?” he asked hoarsely.

She said slowly:

“You saved me. You saved me … ” She held out her hands to him, and as he took them she burst suddenly into tears.

He said, “Rhoda….”

Their hands clung together….

He had a sudden vision—of African scrub, and Rhoda, laughing and adventurous, by his side….

Thirty

MURDER

"Do you mean to say," said Rhoda incredulously, "that Anne meant to push me in? I know it felt like it. And she knew I can't swim. But—but was it deliberate?"

"It was quite deliberate," said Poirot.

They were driving through the outskirts of London.

"But—but—why?"

Poirot did not reply for a minute or two. He thought he knew one of the motives that had led Anne to act as she had done, and that motive was sitting next to Rhoda at the minute.

Superintendent Battle coughed.

"You'll have to prepare yourself, Miss Dawes, for a bit of a shock. This Mrs. Benson your friend lived with, her death wasn't quite the accident that it appeared—at least, so we've reason to suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"We believe," said Poirot, "that Anne Meredith changed two bottles."

"Oh, no—no, how horrible! It's impossible. Anne? Why should she?"

"She had her reasons," said Superintendent Battle. "But the point is, Miss Dawes, that, as far as Miss Meredith knew, you were the only person who could give us a clue to that incident. You didn't tell her, I suppose, that you'd mentioned it to Mrs. Oliver?"

Rhoda said slowly:

"No. I thought she'd be annoyed with me."

"She would. Very annoyed," said Battle grimly. "But she thought that the only danger could come from you, and that's why she decided to—er—eliminate you."

"Eliminate? Me? Oh, how beastly! It can't be all true."

"Well, she's dead now," said Superintendent Battle, "so we might as well leave it at that; but she wasn't a nice friend for you to have, Miss Dawes—and that's a fact."

The car drew up in front of a door.

"We'll go in to M. Poirot's," said Superintendent Battle, "and have a bit of a talk about it all."

In Poirot's sitting room they were welcomed by Mrs. Oliver, who was entertaining Dr. Roberts. They were drinking sherry. Mrs. Oliver was wearing one of her new horsy hats and a velvet dress with a bow on the chest on which reposed a large piece of apple core.

"Come in. Come in," said Mrs. Oliver hospitably and quite as though it were her house and not Poirot's.

"As soon as I got your telephone call I rang up Dr. Roberts, and we came round here. And all his patients are dying, but he doesn't care. They're probably getting better, really. We want to hear all about everything."

"Yes, indeed, I'm thoroughly fogged," said Roberts.

"Eh bien," said Poirot. "The case is ended. The murderer of Mr. Shaitana is found at last."

"So Mrs. Oliver told me. That pretty little thing, Anne Meredith. I can hardly believe it. A most unbelievable murderess."

"She was a murderess all right," said Battle. "Three murders to her credit—and not her fault that she didn't get away with a fourth one."

“Incredible!” murmured Roberts.

“Not at all,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Least likely person. It seems to work out in real life just the same as in books.”

“It’s been an amazing day,” said Roberts. “First Mrs. Lorrimer’s letter. I suppose that was a forgery, eh?”

“Precisely. A forgery written in triplicate.”

“She wrote one to herself, too?”

“Naturally. The forgery was quite skilful—it would not deceive an expert, of course—but, then, it was highly unlikely that an expert would have been called in. All the evidence pointed to Mrs. Lorrimer’s having committed suicide.”

“You will excuse my curiosity, M. Poirot, but what made you suspect that she had not committed suicide?”

“A little conversation that I had with a maidservant at Cheyne Lane.”

“She told you of Anne Meredith’s visit the former evening?”

“That among other things. And then, you see, I had already come to a conclusion in my own mind as to the identity of the guilty person—that is, the person who killed Mr. Shaitana. That person was not Mrs. Lorrimer.”

“What made you suspect Miss Meredith?”

Poirot raised his hand.

“A little minute. Let me approach this matter in my own way. Let me, that is to say, eliminate. The murderer of Mr. Shaitana was not Mrs. Lorrimer, nor was it Major Despard, and, curiously enough, it was not Anne Meredith….”

He leaned forward. His voice purred, soft and catlike.

"You see, Dr. Roberts, you were the person who killed Mr. Shaitana; and you also killed Mrs. Lorrimer…."

II

There was at least three minutes' silence. Then Roberts laughed a rather menacing laugh.

"Are you quite mad, M. Poirot? I certainly did not murder Mr. Shaitana, and I could not possibly have murdered Mrs. Lorrimer. My dear Battle"—he turned to the Scotland Yard man—"are you standing for this?"

"I think you'd better listen to what M. Poirot has to say," said Battle quietly.

Poirot said:

"It is true that though I have known for some time that you—and only you—could have killed Shaitana, it would not be an easy matter to prove it. But Mrs. Lorrimer's case is quite different." He leaned forward. "It is not a case of my knowing. It is much simpler than that—for we have an eyewitness who saw you do it."

Roberts grew very quiet. His eyes glittered. He said sharply:

"You are talking rubbish!"

"Oh, no, I am not. It was early in the morning. You bluffed your way into Mrs. Lorrimer's room, where she was still heavily asleep under the influence of the drug she had taken the night before. You bluff again—pretend to see at a glance that she is dead! You pack the parlourmaid off for brandy—hot water—all the rest of it. You are left alone in the room. The maid has only had the barest peep. And then what happens?

"You may not be aware of the fact, Dr. Roberts, but certain firms of window cleaners specialize in early morning work. A window cleaner with his ladder arrived at the same time as you did. He placed his ladder against the side of the house and began his work. The first window he tackled was that of Mrs. Lorrimer's room. When, however, he saw what was going on, he quickly retired to another window, but he had seen something first. He shall tell us his own story."

Poirot stepped lightly across the floor, turned a door handle, called:

"Come in, Stephens," and returned.

A big awkward-looking man with red hair entered. In his hand he held a uniformed hat bearing the legend "Chelsea Window Cleaners' Association" which he twirled awkwardly.

Poirot said:

"Is there anybody you recognize in this room?"

The man looked round, then gave a bashful nod of the head towards Dr. Roberts.

"Him," he said.

"Tell us when you saw him last and what he was doing."

"This morning it was. Eight o'clock job at a lady's house in Cheyne Lane. I started on the windows there. Lady was in bed. Looked ill she did. She was just turning her head round on the pillow. This gent I took to be a doctor. He shoved her sleeve up and jabbed something into her arm about here—" He gestured. "She just dropped back on the pillow again. I thought I'd better hop it to another window, so I did. Hope I didn't do wrong in any way?"

"You did admirably, my friend," said Poirot.

He said quietly:

"Eh bien, Dr. Roberts?"

"A—a simple restorative—" stammered Roberts. "A last hope of bringing her round. It's monstrous—"

Poirot interrupted him.

“A simple restorative?—N-methyl—cyclo—hexenyl—methyl—malonyl urea,” said Poirot. He rolled out the syllables unctuously. “Known more simply as Evipan. Used as an anaesthetic for short operations. Injected intravenously in large doses it produces instant unconsciousness. It is dangerous to use it after veronal or any barbiturates have been given. I noticed the bruised place on her arm where something had obviously been injected into a vein. A hint to the police surgeon and the drug was easily discovered by no less a person than Sir Charles Imphery, the Home Office Analyst.”

“That about cooks your goose, I think,” said Superinten dent Battle. “No need to prove the Shaitana business, though, of course, if necessary we can bring a further charge as to the murder of Mr. Charles Craddock—and possibly his wife also.”

The mention of those two names finished Roberts.

He leaned back in his chair.

“I throw in my hand,” he said. “You’ve got me! I suppose that sly devil Shaitana put you wise before you came that evening. And I thought I’d settled his hash so nicely.”

“It isn’t Shaitana you’ve got to thank,” said Battle. “The honours lie with M. Poirot here.”

He went to the door and two men entered.

Superintendent Battle’s voice became official as he made the formal arrest.

As the door closed behind the accused man Mrs. Oliver said happily, if not quite truthfully:

“I always said he did it!”

Thirty-one

CARDS ON THE TABLE

It was Poirot's moment, every face was turned to his in eager anticipation.

"You are very kind," he said, smiling. "You know, I think, that I enjoy my little lecture. I am a prosy old fellow.

"This case, to my mind, has been one of the most interesting cases I have ever come across. There was nothing, you see, to go upon. There were four people, one of whom must have committed the crime but which of the four? Was there anything to tell one? In the material sense—no. There were no tangible clues—no fingerprints—no incriminating papers or documents. There were only—the people themselves.

"And one tangible clue—the bridge scores.

"You may remember that from the beginning I showed a particular interest in those scores. They told me something about the various people who had kept them and they did more. They gave me one valuable hint. I noticed at once, in the third rubber, the figure of 1500 above the line. That figure could only represent one thing—a call of grand slam. Now if a person were to make up their minds to commit a crime under these somewhat unusual circumstances (that is, during a rubber game of bridge) that person was clearly running two serious risks. The first was that the victim might cry out and the second was that even if the victim did not cry out someone of the other three might chance to look up at the psychological moment and actually witness the deed.

"Now as to the first risk, nothing could be done about it. It was a matter of gambler's luck. But something could be done about the second. It stands to reason that during an interesting or an exciting hand the attention of the three players would be wholly on the game, whereas during a dull hand they were more likely to be looking about them. Now a bid of grand slam is always exciting. It is very often (as in this case it was) doubled. Every one of the three players is playing with close attention—the declarer to get his contract, the adversaries to discard correctly and to get him down. It was, then, a distinct possibility that the murder was committed during this particular hand and I determined to find out, if I could, exactly how the bidding had gone. I soon discovered that dummy during this particular hand had been Dr. Roberts. I bore that in mind and approached the matter from my second angle—psychological probability. Of the four suspects Mrs. Lorrimer struck me as by far the most likely to plan and carry out a successful murder—but I could not see her as committing any crime that had to be improvised on the spur of the moment. On the other hand her manner that first evening puzzled me. It suggested either that she had committed the murder herself or that she knew who had committed it. Miss Meredith, Major Despard and Dr. Roberts were all psychological possibilities, though, as I have already mentioned, each of them would have committed the crime from an entirely different angle.

“I next made a second test. I got everyone in turn to tell me just what they remembered of the room. From that I got some very valuable information. First of all, by far the most likely person to have noticed the dagger was Dr. Roberts. He was a natural observer of trifles of all kinds—what is called an observant man. Of the bridge hands, however, he remembered practically nothing at all. I did not expect him to remember much, but his complete forgetfulness looked as though he had had something else on his mind all the evening. Again, you see, Dr. Roberts was indicated.

“Mrs. Lorrimer I found to have a marvellous card memory, and I could well imagine that with anyone of her powers of concentration a murder could easily be committed close at hand and she would never notice anything. She gave me a valuable piece of information. The grand slam was bid by Dr. Roberts (quite unjustifiably)—and he bid it in her suit, not his own, so that she necessarily played the hand.

“The third test, the test on which Superintendent Battle and I built a good deal, was the discovery of the earlier murders so as to establish a similarity of method. Well, the credit for those discoveries belongs to Superintendent Battle, to Mrs. Oliver and to Colonel Race. Discussing the matter with my friend Battle, he confessed himself disappointed because there were no points of similarity between any of the three earlier crimes and that of the murder of Mr. Shaitana. But actually that was not true. The two murders attributed to Dr. Roberts, when examined closely, and from the psychological point of view and not the material one, proved to be almost exactly the same. They, too, had been what I might describe as public murders. A shaving brush boldly infected in the victim's own dressing room while the doctor officially washes his hands after a visit. The murder of Mrs. Craddock under cover of a typhoid inoculation. Again done quite openly—in the sight of the world, as you might say. And the reaction of the man is the same. Pushed into a corner, he seizes a chance and acts at once—sheer bold audacious bluff—exactly like his play at bridge. As at bridge, so in the murder of Shaitana, he took a long chance and played his cards well. The blow was perfectly struck and at exactly the right moment.

"Now just at the moment that I had decided quite definitely that Dr. Roberts was the man, Mrs. Lorrimer asked me to come and see her—and quite convincingly accused herself of the crime! I nearly believed her! For a minute or two I did believe her—and then my little grey cells reasserted their mastery. It could not be—so it was not!

"But what she told me was more difficult still.

"She assured me that she had actually seen Anne Meredith commit the crime.

"It was not till the following morning—when I stood by a dead woman's bed—that I saw how I could still be right and Mrs. Lorrimer still have spoken the truth.

"Anne Meredith went over to the fireplace—and saw that Mr. Shaitana was dead! She stooped over him—perhaps stretched out her hand to the gleaming head of the jewelled pin.

"Her lips part to call out, but she does not call out. She remembers Shaitana's talk at dinner. Perhaps he had left some record. She, Anne Meredith, has a motive for desiring his death. Everyone will say that she has killed him. She dare not call out. Trembling with fear and apprehension she goes back to her seat.

"So Mrs. Lorrimer is right, since she, as she thought, saw the crime committed—but I am right too, for actually she did not see it.

"If Roberts had held his hand at this point, I doubt if we could have ever brought his crimes home to him. We might have done so—by a mixture of bluff and various ingenious devices. I would at any rate have tried.

"But he lost his nerve and once again overbid his hand. And this time the cards lay wrong for him and he came down heavily.

"No doubt he was uneasy. He knew that Battle was nosing about. He foresaw the present situation going on indefinitely, the police still searching—and perhaps, by some miracle—coming on traces of his former crimes. He hit upon the brilliant idea of making Mrs. Lorrimer the scapegoat for the party. His practised eye guessed, no doubt, that she was ill, and that her life could not be very much prolonged. How natural in those circumstances for her to choose a quick way out, and before taking it, confess to the crime! So he manages to get a sample of her handwriting—forges three identical letters and arrives at the house hotfoot in the morning with his story of the letter he has just received. His parlourmaid quite correctly is instructed to ring up the police. All he needs is a start. And he gets it. By the time the police surgeon arrives it is all over. Dr. Roberts is ready with his story of artificial respiration that has failed. It is all perfectly plausible—perfectly straightforward.

"In all this he has no idea of throwing suspicion on Anne Meredith. He does not even know of her visit the night before. It is suicide and security only that he is aiming at.

"It is in fact an awkward moment for him when I ask if he is acquainted with Mrs. Lorrimer's handwriting. If the forgery has been detected he must save himself by saying that he has never seen her handwriting. His mind works quickly, but not quickly enough.

"From Wallingford I telephone to Mrs. Oliver. She plays her part by lulling his suspicions and bringing him here. And then when he is congratulating himself that all is well, though not exactly the way he has planned, the blow falls. Hercule Poirot springs! And so—the gambler will gather in no more tricks. He has thrown his cards upon the table. C’est fini.”

There was silence. Rhoda broke it with a sigh.

“What amazing luck that window cleaner happened to be there,” she said.

“Luck? Luck? That was not luck, mademoiselle. That was the grey cells of Hercule Poirot. And that reminds me—”

He went to the door.

“Come in—come in, my dear fellow. You acted your part à merveille.”

He returned accompanied by the window cleaner, who now held his red hair in his hand and who looked somehow a very different person.

“My friend Mr. Gerald Hemmingway, a very promising young actor.”

“Then there was no window cleaner?” cried Rhoda. “Nobody saw him?”

“I saw,” said Poirot. “With the eyes of the mind one can see more than with the eyes of the body. One leans back and closes the eyes—”

Despard said cheerfully:

“Let’s stab him, Rhoda, and see if his ghost can come back and find out who did it.”

Dumb Witness (1937)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE MISTRESS OF LITTLEGREEN HOUSE

Miss Arundell died on May 1st. Though her illness was short her death did not occasion much surprise in the little country town of Market Basing where she had lived since she was a girl of sixteen. For Emily Arundell was well over seventy, the last of a family of five, and she had been known to be in delicate health for many years and had indeed nearly died of a similar attack to the one that killed her some eighteen months before.

But though Miss Arundell’s death surprised no one, something else did. The provisions of her will gave rise to varying emotions, astonishment, pleasurable excitement, deep condemnation, fury, despair, anger and general gossip. For weeks and even months Market Basing was to talk of nothing else! Everyone had their own contribution to make to the subject from Mr. Jones the grocer, who held that “blood was thicker than water,” to Mrs. Lamphrey at the post office, who repeated ad nauseam that “there’s something behind it, depend upon it! You mark my words.”

What added zest to the speculations on the subject was the fact that the will had been made as lately as April 21st. Add to this the further fact that Emily Arundell’s near relations had been staying with her just before that date over Easter Bank Holiday and it will be realized that the most scandalous theories could be propounded, pleasurably relieving the monotony of everyday life in Market Basing.

There was one person who was shrewdly suspected of knowing more about the matter than she was willing to admit. That was Miss Wilhelmina Lawson, Miss Arundell’s companion. Miss Lawson, however, professed herself just as much in the dark as everyone else. She, too, she declared, had been dumbfounded when the will was read out.

A lot of people, of course, did not believe this. Nevertheless, whether Miss Lawson was or was not as ignorant as she declared herself to be, only one person really knew the true facts. That person was the dead woman herself.

Emily Arundell had kept her own counsel as she was in the habit of doing. Even to her lawyer she had said nothing of the motives underlying her action. She was content with making her wishes clear.

In that reticence could be found the keynote of Emily Arundell's character. She was, in every respect, a typical product of her generation. She had both its virtues and its vices. She was autocratic and often overbearing, but she was also intensely warmhearted. Her tongue was sharp but her actions were kind. She was outwardly sentimental but inwardly shrewd. She had a succession of companions whom she bullied unmercifully, but treated with great generosity. She had a great sense of family obligation. On the Friday before Easter Emily Arundell was standing in the hall of Littlegreen House giving various directions to Miss Lawson.

Emily Arundell had been a handsome girl and she was now a well-preserved handsome old lady with a straight back and a brisk manner. A faint yellowness in her skin was a warning that she could not eat rich food with impunity.

Miss Arundell was saying:

"Now then, Minnie, where have you put them all?"

"Well, I thought—I hope I've done right—Dr. and Mrs. Tanios in the Oak room and Theresa in the Blue room and Mr. Charles in the Old Nursery—"

Miss Arundell interrupted:

"Theresa can have the Old Nursery and Charles will have the Blue room."

"Oh, yes—I'm sorry—I thought the Old Nursery being rather more inconvenient—"

"It will do very nicely for Theresa."

In Miss Arundell's day, women took second place. Men were the important members of society.

“I’m so sorry the dear little children aren’t coming,” murmured Miss Lawson, sentimentally.

She loved children and was quite incapable of managing them.

“Four visitors will be quite enough,” said Miss Arundell. “In any case Bella spoils her children abominably. They never dream of doing what they are told.”

Minnie Lawson murmured:

“Mrs. Tanios is a very devoted mother.”

Miss Arundell said with grave approval:

“Bella is a good woman.”

Miss Lawson sighed and said:

“It must be very hard for her sometimes—living in an outlandish place like Smyrna.”

Emily Arundell replied:

“She has made her bed and she must lie on it.”

And having uttered this final Victorian pronouncement she went on:

“I am going to the village now to speak about the orders for the weekend.”

“Oh, Miss Arundell, do let me. I mean—”

“Nonsense. I prefer to go myself. Rogers needs a sharp word. The trouble with you is, Minnie, that you’re not emphatic enough. Bob! Bob! Where is the dog?”

A wirehaired terrier came tearing down the stairs. He circled round and round his mistress uttering short staccato barks of delight and expectation.

Together mistress and dog passed out of the front door and down the short path to the gate.

Miss Lawson stood in the doorway smiling rather foolishly after them, her mouth a little open. Behind her a voice said tartly:

“Them pillowcases you gave me, miss, isn’t a pair.”

“What? How stupid of me….”

Minnie Lawson plunged once more into household routine.

Emily Arundell, attended by Bob, made a royal progress down the main street of Market Basing.

It was very much of a royal progress. In each shop she entered the proprietor always hurried forward to attend to her.

She was Miss Arundell of Littlegreen House. She was “one of our oldest customers.” She was “one of the old school. Not many about like her nowadays.”

“Good morning, miss. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you—Not tender? Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I thought myself it was as nice a little saddle—Yes, of course, Miss Arundell. If you say so, it is so—No, indeed I wouldn’t think of sending Canterbury to you, Miss Arundell—Yes, I’ll see to it myself, Miss Arundell.”

Bob and Spot, the butcher’s dog, circled slowly round each other, hackles raised, growling gently. Spot was a stout dog of nondescript breed. He knew that he must not fight with customers’ dogs, but he permitted himself to tell them, by subtle indication, just exactly what mincemeat he would make of them were he free to do so.

Bob, a dog of spirit, replied in kind.

Emily Arundell said “Bob!” sharply and passed on.

In the greengrocer's there was a meeting of heavenly bodies. Another old lady, spherical in outline, but equally distinguished by that air of royalty, said:

"Mornin', Emily."

"Good morning, Caroline."

Caroline Peabody said:

"Expecting any of your young people down?"

"Yes, all of them. Theresa, Charles and Bella."

"So Bella's home, is she? Husband too?"

"Yes."

It was a simple monosyllable, but underlying it was knowledge common to both ladies.

For Bella Biggs, Emily Arundell's niece, had married a Greek. And Emily Arundell's people, who were what is known as "all service people," simply did not marry Greeks.

By way of being obscurely comforting (for of course such a matter could not be referred to openly) Miss Peabody said:

"Bella's husband's got brains. And charming manners!"

"His manners are delightful," agreed Miss Arundell.

Moving out into the street Miss Peabody asked:

"What's this about Theresa being engaged to young Donaldson?"

Miss Arundell shrugged her shoulders.

"Young people are so casual nowadays. I'm afraid it will have to be a rather long engagement—that is, if anything comes of it. He has no money."

"Of course Theresa has her own money," said Miss Peabody.

Miss Arundell said stiffly:

"A man could not possibly wish to live on his wife's money."

Miss Peabody gave a rich, throaty chuckle.

"They don't seem to mind doing it, nowadays. You and I are out of date, Emily. What I can't understand is what the child sees in him. Of all the namby-pamby young men!"

"He's a clever doctor, I believe."

"Those pince-nez—and that stiff way of talking! In my young days we'd have called him a poor stick!"

There was a pause while Miss Peabody's memory, diving into the past, conjured up visions of dashing, bewhiskered young men….

She said with a sigh:

"Send that young dog Charles along to see me—if he'll come."

"Of course. I'll tell him."

The two ladies parted.

They had known each other for considerably over fifty years. Miss Peabody knew of certain regrettable lapses in the life of General Arundell, Emily's father. She knew just precisely what a shock Thomas Arundell's marriage had been to his sisters. She had a very shrewd idea of certain troubles connected with the younger generation.

But no word had ever passed between the two ladies on any of these subjects. They were both upholders of family dignity, family solidarity, and complete reticence on family matters.

Miss Arundell walked home, Bob trotting sedately at her heels. To herself, Emily Arundell admitted what she would never have admitted to another human being, her dissatisfaction with the younger generation of her family.

Theresa, for instance. She had no control over Theresa since the latter had come into her own money at the age of twenty-one. Since then the girl had achieved a certain notoriety. Her picture was often in the papers. She belonged to a young, bright, go-ahead set in London—a set that had freak parties and occasionally ended up in the police courts. It was not the kind of notoriety that Emily Arundell approved of for an Arundell. In fact, she disapproved very much of Theresa's way of living. As regards the girl's engagement, her feelings were slightly confused. On the one hand she did not consider an upstart Dr. Donaldson good enough for an Arundell. On the other she was uneasily conscious that Theresa was a most unsuitable wife for a quiet country doctor.

With a sigh her thoughts passed on to Bella. There was no fault to find with Bella. She was a good woman—a devoted wife and mother, quite exemplary in behaviour—and extremely dull! But even Bella could not be regarded with complete approval. For Bella had married a foreigner—and not only a foreigner—but a Greek. In Miss Arundell's prejudiced mind a Greek was almost as bad as an Argentine or a Turk. The fact that Dr. Tanios had a charming manner and was said to be extremely able to his profession only prejudiced the old lady slightly more against him. She distrusted charm and easy compliments. For this reason, too, she found it difficult to be fond of the two children. They had both taken after their father in looks—there was really nothing English about them.

And then Charles….

Yes, Charles….

It was no use blinding one's eyes to facts. Charles, charming though he was, was not to be trusted….

Emily Arundell sighed. She felt suddenly tired, old, depressed….

She supposed that she couldn’t last much longer….

Her mind reverted to the will she had made some years ago.

Legacies to the servants—to charities—and the main bulk of her considerable fortune to be divided equally between these, her three surviving relations….

It still seemed to her that she had done the right and equitable thing. It just crossed her mind to wonder whether there might not be someway of securing Bella’s share of the money so that her husband could not touch it….She must ask Mr. Purvis.

She turned in at the gate of Littlegreen House.

Charles and Theresa Arundell arrived by car—the Tanioses, by train.

The brother and sister arrived first. Charles, tall and good-looking, with his slightly mocking manner, said:

“Hullo, Aunt Emily, how’s the girl? You look fine.”

And he kissed her.

Theresa put an indifferent young cheek against her withered one.

“How are you, Aunt Emily?”

Theresa, her aunt thought, was looking far from well. Her face, beneath its plentiful makeup, was slightly haggard and there were lines round her eyes.

They had tea in the drawing room. Bella Tanios, her hair inclined to straggle in wisps from below the fashionable hat that she wore at the wrong angle, stared at her cousin Theresa with a pathetic eagerness to assimilate and memorize her clothes. It was poor Bella’s fate in life to be passionately fond of clothes without having any clothes sense. Theresa’s clothes were expensive, slightly bizarre, and she herself had an exquisite figure.

Bella, when she arrived in England from Smyrna, had tried earnestly to copy Theresa’s elegance at an inferior price and cut.

Dr. Tanios, who was a big-bearded jolly-looking man, was talking to Miss Arundell. His voice was warm and full—an attractive voice that charmed a listener almost against his or her will. Almost in spite of herself, it charmed Miss Arundell.

Miss Lawson was fidgeting a good deal. She jumped up and down, handing plates, fussing over the tea table. Charles, whose manners were excellent, rose more than once to help her, but she expressed no gratitude.

When, after tea, the party went out to make a tour of the garden Charles murmured to his sister:

“Lawson doesn’t like me. Odd, isn’t it?”

Theresa said, mockingly:

“Very odd. So there is one person who can withstand your fatal fascination?”

Charles grinned—an engaging grin—and said:

“Lucky it’s only Lawson….”

In the garden Miss Lawson walked with Mrs. Tanios and asked her questions about the children. Bella Tanios’ rather drab face lighted up. She forgot to watch Theresa. She talked eagerly and animatedly. Mary had said such a quaint thing on the boat….

She found Minnie Lawson a most sympathetic listener.

Presently a fair-haired young man with a solemn face and pince-nez was shown into the garden from the house. He looked rather embarrassed. Miss Arundell greeted him politely.

Theresa said:

"Hullo, Rex!"

She slipped an arm through his. They wandered away.

Charles made a face. He slipped away to have a word with the gardener, an ally of his from old days.

When Miss Arundell reentered the house Charles was playing with Bob. The dog stood at the top of the stairs, his ball in his mouth, his tail gently wagging.

"Come on, old man," said Charles.

Bob sank down on his haunches, nosed his ball slowly and slowly nearer the edge. As he finally bunted it over he sprang to his feet in great excitement. The ball bumped slowly down the stairs. Charles caught it and tossed it up to him. Bob caught it neatly in his mouth. The performance was repeated.

"Regular game of his," said Charles.

Emily Arundell smiled.

"He'll go on for hours," she said.

She turned into the drawing room and Charles followed her. Bob gave a disappointed bark.

Glancing through the window Charles said:

"Look at Theresa and her young man. They are an odd couple!"

"You think Theresa is really serious over this?"

"Oh, she's crazy about him!" said Charles with confidence. "Odd taste, but there it is. I think it must be the way he looks at her as though she were a scientific specimen and not a live woman. That's rather a novelty for Theresa. Pity the fellow's so poor. Theresa's got expensive tastes."

Miss Arundell said drily:

“I’ve no doubt she can change her way of living—if she wants to! And after all she has her own income.”

“Eh? Oh yes, yes, of course.” Charles shot an almost guilty look at her.

That evening, as the others were assembled in the drawing room waiting to go in to dinner, there was a scurry and a burst of profanity on the stairs. Charles entered with his face rather red.

“Sorry, Aunt Emily, am I late? That dog of yours nearly made me take the most frightful toss. He’d left that ball of his on the top of the stairs.”

“Careless little doggie,” cried Miss Lawson, bending down to Bob.

Bob looked at her contemptuously and turned his head away.

“I know,” said Miss Arundell. “It’s most dangerous. Minnie, fetch the ball and put it away.”

Miss Lawson hurried out.

Dr. Tanios monopolized the conversation at the dinner table most of the time. He told amusing stories of his life in Smyrna.

The party went to bed early. Miss Lawson carrying wool, spectacles, a large velvet bag and a book accompanied her employer to her bedroom chattering happily.

“Really most amusing, Dr. Tanios. He is such good company! Not that I should care for that kind of life myself….One would have to boil the water, I expect….And goat’s milk, perhaps—such a disagreeable taste—”

Miss Arundell snapped:

“Don’t be a fool, Minnie. You told Ellen to call me at half past six?”

"Oh, yes, Miss Arundell. I said no tea, but don't you think it might be wiser—You know, the vicar at Southbridge—a most conscientious man, told me distinctly that there was no obligation to come fasting—"

Once more Miss Arundell cut her short.

"I've never yet taken anything before Early Service and I'm not going to begin now. You can do as you like."

"Oh, no—I didn't mean—I'm sure—"

Miss Lawson was flustered and upset.

"Take Bob's collar off," said Miss Arundell.

The slave hastened to obey.

Still trying to please she said:

"Such a pleasant evening. They all seem so pleased to be here."

"Hmph," said Emily Arundell. "All here for what they can get."

"Oh, dear Miss Arundell—"

"My good Minnie, I'm not a fool whatever else I am! I just wonder which of them will open the subject first."

She was not long left in doubt on that point. She and Miss Lawson returned from attending Early Service just after nine. Dr. and Mrs. Tanios were in the dining room, but there were no signs of the two Arundells. After breakfast, when the others had left, Miss Arundell sat on, entering up some accounts in a little book.

Charles entered the room about ten.

"Sorry I'm late, Aunt Emily. But Theresa's worse. She's not unclosed an eyelid yet."

“At half past ten breakfast will be cleared away,” said Miss Arundell. “I know it is the fashion not to consider servants nowadays, but that is not the case in my house.”

“Good. That’s the true die-hard spirit!”

Charles helped himself to kidneys and sat down beside her.

His grin, as always, was very attractive. Emily Arundell soon found herself smiling indulgently at him. Emboldened by this sign of favour, Charles plunged.

“Look here, Aunt Emily, sorry to bother you, but I’m in the devil of a hole. Can you possibly help me out? A hundred would do it.”

His aunt’s face was not encouraging. A certain grimness showed itself in her expression.

Emily Arundell was not afraid of speaking her mind. She spoke it.

Miss Lawson hustling across the hall almost collided with Charles as he left the dining room. She glanced at him curiously. She entered the dining room to find Miss Arundell sitting very upright with a flushed face.

Two

THE RELATIONS

Charles ran lightly up the stairs and tapped on his sister’s door. Her answering “Come in” came promptly and he entered.

Theresa was sitting up in bed yawning.

Charles took a seat on the bed.

“What a decorative female you are, Theresa,” he remarked appreciatively.

Theresa said sharply:

“What’s the matter?” Charles grinned.

“Sharp, aren’t you? Well, I stole a march on you, my girl! Thought I’d make my touch before you got to work.”

“Well?”

Charles spread his hands downwards in negation.

“Nothing doing! Aunt Emily ticked me off good and proper. She intimated that she was under no illusions as to why her affectionate family had gathered round her! And she also intimated that the said affectionate family would be disappointed. Nothing being handed out but affection—and not so much of that.”

“You might have waited a bit,” said Theresa drily.

Charles grinned again.

“I was afraid you or Tanios might get in ahead of me. I’m sadly afraid, Theresa my sweet, that there’ll be nothing doing this time. Old Emily is by no means a fool.”

“I never thought she was.”

“I even tried to put the wind up her.”

“What d’you mean?” asked his sister sharply.

“Told her she was going about it the right way to get bumped off. After all she can’t take the dibs to heaven with her. Why not loosen up a bit?”

“Charles, you are a fool!”

“No, I’m not. I’m a bit of a psychologist in my way. It’s never a bit of good sucking up to the old girl. She much prefers you to stand up to her. And after all, I was only talking sense. We get the money when she dies—she might just as well part with a little beforehand! Otherwise the temptation to help her out of the way might become overwhelming.”

“Did she see your point?” asked Theresa, her delicate mouth curling up scornfully.

“I’m not sure. She didn’t admit it. Just thanked me rather nastily for my advice and said she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’ve warned you.’ ‘I’ll remember it,’ she said.”

Theresa said angrily:

“Really, Charles, you are an utter fool.”

“Damn it all, Theresa, I was a bit ratty myself! The old girl’s rolling—simply rolling. I bet she doesn’t spend a tenth part of her income—what has she got to spend it on, anyway? And here we are—young, able to enjoy life—and to spite us she’s capable of living to a hundred….I want my fun now….So do you….”

Theresa nodded.

She said in a low, breathless voice:

“They don’t understand—old people don’t….they can’t….They don’t know what it is to live!”

Brother and sister were silent for some minutes.

Charles got up.

“Well, my love, I wish you better success than I’ve had. But I rather doubt it.”

Theresa said:

“I’m rather counting on Rex to do the trick. If I can make old Emily realize how brilliant he is, and how it matters terrifically that he should have his chance and not have to sink into a rut as a general practitioner… Oh, Charles, a few thousand of capital just at this minute would make all the difference in the world to our lives!”

“Hope you get it, but I don’t think you will. You’ve got through a bit too much capital in riotous living in your time. I say, Theresa, you don’t think the dreary Bella or the dubious Tanios will get anything, do you?”

“I don’t see that money would be any good to Bella. She goes about looking like a ragbag and her tastes are purely domestic.”

“Oh, well,” said Charles, vaguely. “I expect she wants things for those unprepossessing children of hers, schools, and plates for their front teeth and music lessons. And anyway it isn’t Bella—it’s Tanios. I bet he’s got a nose for money all right! Trust a Greek for that. You know he’s got through most of Bella’s? Speculated with it and lost it all.”

“Do you think he’ll get something out of old Emily?”

“He won’t if I can prevent him,” said Charles, grimly.

He left the room and wandered downstairs. Bob was in the hall. He fussed up to Charles agreeably. Dogs liked Charles.

He ran towards the drawing room door and looked back at Charles.

“What’s the matter?” said Charles, strolling after him.

Bob hurried into the drawing room and sat down expectantly by a small bureau.

Charles strolled over to him.

“What’s it all about?”

Bob wagged his tail, looked hard at the drawers of the bureau and uttered an appealing squeak.

“Want something that’s in here?”

Charles pulled open the top drawer. His eyebrows rose.

“Dear, dear,” he said.

At one side of the drawer was a little pile of treasury notes.

Charles picked up the bundle and counted them. With a grin he removed three one pound notes and two ten shilling ones and put them in his pocket. He replaced the rest of the notes carefully in the drawer where he had found them.

“That was a good idea, Bob,” he said. “Your Uncle Charles will be able at any rate to cover expenses. A little ready cash always comes in handy.”

Bob uttered a faint reproachful bark as Charles shut the drawer.

“Sorry old man,” Charles apologized. He opened the next drawer. Bob’s ball was in the corner of it. He took it out.

“Here you are. Enjoy yourself with it.” Bob caught the ball, trotted out of the room and presently bump, bump, bump, was heard down the stairs.

Charles strolled out into the garden. It was a fine sunny morning with a scent of lilac.

Miss Arundell had Dr. Tanios by her side. He was speaking of the advantage of an English education—a good education—for children and how deeply he regretted that he could not afford such a luxury for his own children.

Charles smiled with satisfied malice. He joined in the conversation in a lighthearted manner, turning it adroitly into entirely different channels.

Emily Arundell smiled at him quite amiably. He even fancied that she was amused by his tactics and was subtly encouraging them.

Charles’ spirits rose. Perhaps, after all, before he left—

Charles was an incurable optimist.

Dr. Donaldson called for Theresa in his car that afternoon and drove her to Worthem Abbey, one of the local beauty spots. They wandered away from the Abbey itself into the woods.

There Rex Donaldson told Theresa at length about his theories and some of his recent experiments. She understood very little but listened in a spellbound manner, thinking to herself:

“How clever Rex is—and how absolutely adorable!”

Her fiancé paused once and said rather doubtfully:

“I’m afraid this is dull stuff for you, Theresa.”

“Darling, it’s too thrilling,” said Theresa, firmly. “Go on. You take some of the blood of the infected rabbit—?”

Presently Theresa said with a sigh:

“Your work means a terrible lot to you, my sweet.”

“Naturally,” said Dr. Donaldson.

It did not seem at all natural to Theresa. Very few of her friends did any work at all, and if they did they made extremely heavy weather about it.

She thought as she had thought once or twice before, how singularly unsuitable it was that she should have fallen in love with Rex Donaldson. Why did these things, these ludicrous and amazing madnesses, happen to one? A profitless question. This had happened to her.

She frowned, wondered at herself. Her crowd had been so gay—so cynical. Love affairs were necessary to life, of course, but why take them seriously? One loved and passed on.

But this feeling of hers for Rex Donaldson was different, it went deeper. She felt instinctively that here there would be no passing on… Her need of him was simple and profound. Everything about him fascinated her. His calmness and detachment, so different from her own hectic, grasping life, the clear, logical coldness of his scientific mind, and something else, imperfectly understood, a secret force in the man masked by his unassuming slightly pedantic manner, but which she nevertheless felt and sensed instinctively.

In Rex Donaldson there was genius—and the fact that his profession was the main preoccupation of his life and that she was only a part—though a necessary part—of existence to him only heightened his attraction for her. She found herself for the first time in her selfish pleasure-loving life content to take second place. The prospect fascinated her. For Rex she would do anything—anything!

"What a damned nuisance money is," she said, petulantly. "If only Aunt Emily were to die we could get married at once, and you could come to London and have a laboratory full of test tubes and guinea pigs, and never bother anymore about children with mumps and old ladies with livers."

Donaldson said:

"There's no reason why your aunt shouldn't live for many years to come—if she's careful."

Theresa said despondently:

“I know that….”

In the big double-bedded room with the old-fashioned oak furniture, Dr. Tanios said to his wife:

“I think that I have prepared the ground sufficiently. It is now your turn, my dear.”

He was pouring water from the old-fashioned copper can into the rose-patterned china basin.

Bella Tanios sat in front of the dressing table wondering why, when she combed her hair as Theresa did, it should not look like Theresa’s!

There was a moment before she replied. Then she said:

“I don’t think I want—to ask Aunt Emily for money.”

“It’s not for yourself, Bella, it’s for the sake of the children. Our investments have been so unlucky.”

His back was turned, he did not see the swift glance she gave him—a furtive, shrinking glance.

She said with mild obstinacy:

“All the same, I think I’d rather not… Aunt Emily is rather difficult. She can be generous but she doesn’t like being asked.” Drying his hands, Tanios came across from the washstand.

“Really, Bella, it isn’t like you to be so obstinate. After all, what have we come down here for?”

She murmured:

“I didn’t—I never meant—it wasn’t to ask for money….”

“Yet you agreed that the only hope if we are to educate the children properly is for your aunt to come to the rescue.”

Bella Tanios did not answer. She moved uneasily.

But her face bore the mild mulish look that many clever husbands of stupid wives know to their cost.

She said:

“Perhaps Aunt Emily herself may suggest—”

“It is possible, but I’ve seen no signs of it so far.”

Bella said:

“If we could have brought the children with us. Aunt Emily couldn’t have helped loving Mary. And Edward is so intelligent.”

Tanios said, drily:

“I don’t think your aunt is a great child lover. It is probably just as well the children aren’t here.”

“Oh, Jacob, but—”

“Yes, yes, my dear. I know your feelings. But these desiccated English spinsters—bah, they are not human. We want to do the best we can, do we not, for our Mary and our Edward? To help us a little would involve no hardship to Miss Arundell.”

Mrs. Tanios turned, there was a flush in her cheeks.

“Oh, please, please, Jacob, not this time. I’m sure it would be unwise. I would so very very much rather not.”

Tanios stood close behind her, his arm encircled her shoulders. She trembled a little and then was still—almost rigid.

He said and his voice was still pleasant:

“All the same, Bella, I think—I think you will do what I ask… You usually do, you know—in the end… Yes, I think you will do what I say….”

Three

THE ACCIDENT

It was Tuesday afternoon. The side door to the garden was open. Miss Arundell stood on the threshold and threw Bob’s ball the length of the garden path. The terrier rushed after it.

“Just once more, Bob,” said Emily Arundell. “A good one.”

Once again the ball sped along the ground with Bob racing at full speed in pursuit.

Miss Arundell stooped down, picked up the ball from where Bob laid it at her feet and went into the house, Bob followed her closely. She shut the side door, went into the drawing room, Bob still at her heels, and put the ball away in the drawer.

She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was half past six.

“A little rest before dinner, I think, Bob.”

She ascended the stairs to her bedroom. Bob accompanied her. Lying on the big chintz-covered couch with Bob at her feet, Miss Arundell sighed. She was glad that it was Tuesday and that her guests would be going tomorrow. It was not that this weekend had disclosed anything to her that she had not known before. It was more the fact that it had not permitted her to forget her own knowledge.

She said to herself:

“I’m getting old, I suppose…” And then, with a little shock of surprise: “I am old….”

She lay with her eyes closed for half an hour, then the elderly house-parlourmaid, Ellen, brought hot water and she rose and prepared for dinner.

Dr. Donaldson was to dine with them that night. Emily Arundell wished to have an opportunity of studying him at close quarters. It still seemed to her a little incredible that the exotic Theresa should want to marry this rather stiff and pedantic young man. It also seemed a little odd that this stiff and pedantic young man should want to marry Theresa.

She did not feel as the evening progressed that she was getting to know Dr. Donaldson any better. He was very polite, very formal and, to her mind, intensely boring. In her own mind she agreed with Miss Peabody's judgement. The thought flashed across her brain, "Better stuff in our young days."

Dr. Donaldson did not stay late. He rose to go at ten o'clock. After he had taken his departure Emily Arundell herself announced that she was going to bed. She went upstairs and her young relations went up also. They all seemed somewhat subdued tonight. Miss Lawson remained downstairs performing her final duties, letting Bob out for his run, poking down the fire, putting the guard up and rolling back the hearth rug in case of fire.

She arrived rather breathless in her employer's room about five minutes later.

"I think I've got everything," she said, putting down wool, workbag, and a library book. "I do hope the book will be all right. She hadn't got any of the ones on your list but she said she was sure you'd like this one."

"That girl's a fool," said Emily Arundell. "Her taste in books is the worst I've ever come across."

"Oh, dear. I'm so sorry—Perhaps I ought—"

"Nonsense, it's not your fault." Emily Arundell added kindly. "I hope you enjoyed yourself this afternoon."

Miss Lawson's face lighted up. She looked eager and almost youthful.

"Oh, yes, thank you very much. So kind of you to spare me. I had the most interesting time. We had the Planchette and really—it wrote the most interesting things. There were several messages… Of course its not quite the same thing as the sittings… Julia Tripp has been having a lot of success with the automatic writing. Several messages from Those who have Passed Over. It—it really makes one feel so grateful—that such things should be permitted….”

Miss Arundell said with a slight smile:

“Better not let the vicar hear you.”

“Oh, but indeed, dear Miss Arundell, I am convinced—quite convinced—there can be nothing wrong about it. I only wish dear Mr. Lonsdale would examine the subject. It seems to me so narrow-minded to condemn a thing that you have not even investigated. Both Julia and Isabel Tripp are such truly spiritual women.”

“Almost too spiritual to be alive,” said Miss Arundell.

She did not care much for Julia and Isabel Tripp. She thought their clothes ridiculous, their vegetarian and uncooked fruit meals absurd, and their manner affected. They were women of no traditions, no roots—in fact—no breeding! But she got a certain amount of amusement out of their earnestness and she was at bottom kindhearted enough not to grudge the pleasure that their friendship obviously gave to poor Minnie.

Poor Minnie! Emily Arundell looked at her companion with mingled affection and contempt. She had had so many of these foolish, middle-aged women to minister to her—all much the same, kind, fussy, subservient and almost entirely mindless.

Really poor Minnie was looking quite excited tonight. Her eyes were shining. She fussed about the room vaguely touching things here and there without the least idea of what she was doing, her eyes all bright and shining.

She stammered out rather nervously:

"I—I do wish you'd been there… I feel, you know, that you're not quite a believer yet. But tonight there was a message—for E.A., the initials came quite definitely. It was from a man who had passed over many years ago—a very good-looking military man—Isabel saw him quite distinctly. It must have been dear General Arundell. Such a beautiful message, so full of love and comfort, and how through patience all could be attained."

"Those sentiments sound very unlike papa," said Miss Arundell.

"Oh, but our Dear Ones change so—on the other side. Everything is love and understanding. And then the Planchette spelt out something about a key—I think it was the key of the Boule cabinet—could that be it?"

"The key of the Boule cabinet?" Emily Arundell's voice sounded sharp and interested.

"I think that was it. I thought perhaps it might be important papers—something of the kind. There was a well-authenticated case where a message came to look in a certain piece of furniture and actually a will was discovered there."

"There wasn't a will in the Boule cabinet," said Miss Arundell. She added abruptly: "Go to bed, Minnie. You're tired. So am I. We'll ask the Tripps in for an evening soon."

"Oh, that will be nice! Good night, dear. Sure you've got everything? I hope you haven't been tired with so many people here. I must tell Ellen to air the drawing room very well tomorrow, and shake out the curtains—all this smoking leaves such a smell. I must say I think it's very good of you to let them all smoke in the drawing room!"

"I must make some concessions to modernity," said Emily Arundell. "Good night, Minnie."

As the other woman left the room, Emily Arundell wondered if this spiritualistic business was really good for Minnie. Her eyes had been popping out of her head, and she had looked so restless and excited.

Odd about the Boule cabinet, thought Emily Arundell as she got into bed. She smiled grimly as she remembered the scene of long ago. The key that had come to light after papa’s death, and the cascade of empty brandy bottles that had tumbled out when the cabinet had been unlocked! It was little things like that, things that surely neither Minnie Lawson nor Isabel and Julia Tripp could possibly know, which made one wonder whether, after all, there wasn’t something in this spiritualistic business….

She felt wakeful lying on her big four-poster bed. Nowadays she found it increasingly difficult to sleep. But she scorned Dr. Grainger’s tentative suggestion of a sleeping draught. Sleeping draughts were for weaklings, for people who couldn’t bear a finger ache, or a little toothache, or the tedium of a sleepless night.

Often she would get up and wander noiselessly round the house, picking up a book, fingering an ornament, rearranging a vase of flowers, writing a letter or two. In those midnight hours she had a feeling of the equal liveliness of the house through which she wandered. They were not disagreeable, those nocturnal wanderings. It was as though ghosts walked beside her, the ghosts of her sisters, Arabella, Matilda and Agnes, the ghost of her brother Thomas, the dear fellow as he was before That Woman got hold of him! Even the ghost of General Charles Laverton Arundell, that domestic tyrant with the charming manners who shouted and bullied his daughters but who nevertheless was an object of pride to them with his experiences in the Indian Mutiny and his knowledge of the world. What if there were days when he was “not quite so well” as his daughters put it evasively?

Her mind reverting to her niece’s fiancé, Miss Arundell thought, “I don’t suppose he’ll ever take to drink! Calls himself a man and drank barley water this evening! Barley water! And I opened papa’s special port.”

Charles had done justice to the port all right. Oh! if only Charles were to be trusted. If only one didn’t know that with him—

Her thoughts broke off… Her mind ranged over the events of the weekend….

Everything seemed vaguely disquieting….

She tried to put worrying thoughts out of her mind.

It was no good.

She raised herself on her elbow and by the light of the nightlight that always burned in a little saucer she looked at the time.

One o’clock and she had never felt less like sleep.

She got out of bed and put on her slippers and her warm dressing gown. She would go downstairs and just check over the weekly books ready for the paying of them the following morning.

Like a shadow she slipped from her room and along the corridor where one small electric bulb was allowed to burn all night.

She came to the head of the stairs, stretched out one hand to the baluster rail and then, unaccountably, she stumbled, tried to recover her balance, failed and went headlong down the stairs.

The sound of her fall, the cry she gave, stirred the sleeping house to wakefulness. Doors opened, lights flashed on.

Miss Lawson popped out of her room at the head of the staircase.

Uttering little cries of distress she pattered down the stairs. One by one the others arrived—Charles, yawning, in a resplendent dressing gown. Theresa, wrapped in dark silk. Bella in a navy-blue kimono, her hair bristling with combs to “set the wave.”

Dazed and confused Emily Arundell lay in a crushed heap. Her shoulder hurt her and her ankle—her whole body was a confused mass of pain. She was conscious of people standing over her, of that fool Minnie Lawson crying and making ineffectual gestures with her hands, of Theresa with a startled look in her dark eyes, of Bella standing with her mouth open looking expectant, of the voice of Charles saying from somewhere—very far away so it seemed—

"It's that damned dog's ball! He must have left it here and she tripped over it. See? Here it is!"

And then she was conscious of authority, putting the others aside, kneeling beside her, touching her with hands that did not fumble but knew.

A feeling of relief swept over her. It would be all right now.

Dr. Tanios was saying in firm, reassuring tones:

"No, it's all right. No bones broken… Just badly shaken and bruised—and of course she's had a bad shock. But she's been very lucky that it's no worse."

Then he cleared the others off a little and picked her up quite easily and carried her up to her bedroom, where he had held her wrist for a minute, counting, then nodded his head, sent Minnie (who was still crying and being generally a nuisance) out of the room to fetch brandy and to heat water for a hot bottle.

Confused, shaken, and racked with pain, she felt acutely grateful to Jacob Tanios in that moment. The relief of feeling oneself in capable hands. He gave you just that feeling of assurance—of confidence—that a doctor ought to give.

There was something—something she couldn't quite get hold of—something vaguely disquieting—but she wouldn't think of it now. She would drink this and go to sleep as they told her.

But surely there was something missing—someone.

Oh well, she wouldn't think… Her shoulder hurt her—She drank down what she was given.

She heard Dr. Tanios say—and in what a comfortable assured voice—"She'll be all right, now."

She closed her eyes.

She awoke to a sound that she knew—a soft, muffled bark.

She was wide awake in a minute.

Bob—naughty Bob! He was barking outside the front door—his own particular “out all night very ashamed of himself” bark, pitched in a subdued key but repeated hopefully.

Miss Arundell strained her ears. Ah, yes, that was all right. She could hear Minnie going down to let him in. She heard the creak of the opening front door, a confused low murmur—Minnie’s futile reproaches—“Oh, you naughty little doggie—a very naughty little Bobsie—” She heard the pantry door open. Bob’s bed was under the pantry table.

And at that moment Emily realized what it was she had subconsciously missed at the moment of her accident. It was Bob. All that commotion—her fall, people running—normally Bob would have responded by a crescendo of barking from inside the pantry.

So that was what had been worrying her at the back of her mind. But it was explained now—Bob, when he had been let out last night, had shamelessly and deliberately gone off on pleasure bent. From time to time he had these lapses from virtue—though his apologies afterwards were always all that could be desired.

So that was all right. But was it? What else was there worrying her, nagging at the back of her head. Her accident—something to do with her accident.

Ah, yes, somebody had said—Charles—that she had slipped on Bob’s ball which he had left on the top of the stairs….

The ball had been there—he had held it up in his hand….

Emily Arundell’s head ached. Her shoulder throbbed. Her bruised body suffered….

But in the midst of her suffering her mind was clear and lucid. She was no longer confused by shock. Her memory was perfectly clear.

She went over in her mind all the events from six o’clock yesterday evening… She retraced every step…till she came to the moment when she arrived at the stairhead and started to descend the stairs….

A thrill of incredulous horror shot through her….

Surely—surely, she must be mistaken… One often had queer fancies after an event had happened. She tried—earnestly she tried—to recall the slippery roundness of Bob’s ball under her foot….

But she could recall nothing of the kind.

Instead—

“Sheer nerves,” said Emily Arundell. “Ridiculous fancies.”

But her sensible, shrewd, Victorian mind would not admit that for a moment. There was no foolish optimism about the Victorians. They could believe the worst with the utmost ease.

Emily Arundell believed the worst.

Four

MISS ARUNDELL WRITES A LETTER

It was Friday.

The relations had left.

They left on the Wednesday as originally planned. One and all, they had offered to stay on. One and all they had been steadfastly refused. Miss Arundell explained that she preferred to be “quite quiet.”

During the two days that had elapsed since their departure, Emily Arundell had been alarmingly meditative. Often she did not hear what Minnie Lawson said to her. She would stare at her and curtly order her to begin all over again.

“It’s the shock, poor dear,” said Miss Lawson.

And she added with the kind of gloomy relish in disaster which brightens so many otherwise drab lives:

“I daresay she’ll never be quite herself again.”

Dr. Grainger, on the other hand, rallied her heartily.

He told her that she’d be downstairs again by the end of the week, that it was a positive disgrace she had no bones broken, and what kind of patient was she for a struggling medical man? If all his patients were like her, he might as well take down his plate straight away.

Emily Arundell replied with spirit—she and old Dr. Grainger were allies of long-standing. He bullied and she defied—they always got a good deal of pleasure out of each other’s company!

But now, after the doctor had stumped away, the old lady lay with a frown on her face, thinking—thinking—responding absentmindedly to Minnie Lawson's well-meant fussing—and then suddenly coming back to consciousness and rending her with a vitriolic tongue.

"Poor little Bobsie," twittered Miss Lawson, bending over Bob who had a rug spread on the corner of his mistress's bed. "Wouldn't little Bobsie be unhappy if he knew what he'd done to his poor, poor Missus?"

Miss Arundell snapped:

"Don't be idiotic, Minnie. And where's your English sense of justice? Don't you know that everyone in this country is accounted innocent until he or she is proved guilty?"

"Oh, but we do know—"

Emily snapped:

"We don't know anything at all. Do stop fidgeting, Minnie. Pulling this and pulling that. Haven't you any idea how to behave in a sickroom? Go away and send Ellen to me."

Meekly Miss Lawson crept away.

Emily Arundell looked after her with a slight feeling of self-reproach. Maddening as Minnie was, she did her best.

Then the frown settled down again on her face.

She was desperately unhappy. She had all a vigorous strong-minded old lady's dislike of inaction in any given situation. But in this particular situation she could not decide upon her line of action.

There were moments when she distrusted her own faculties, her own memory of events. And there was no one, absolutely no one in whom she could confide.

Half an hour later, when Miss Lawson tiptoed creakingly into the room, carrying a cup of beef tea, and then paused irresolute at the view of her employer lying with closed eyes, Emily Arundell suddenly spoke two words with such force and decision that Miss Lawson nearly dropped the cup.

“Mary Fox,” said Miss Arundell.

“A box, dear?” said Miss Lawson. “Did you say you wanted a box?”

“You’re getting deaf, Minnie. I didn’t say anything about a box. I said Mary Fox. The woman I met at Cheltenham last year. She was the sister of one of the Canons of Exeter Cathedral. Give me that cup. You’ve spilt it into the saucer. And don’t tiptoe when you come into a room. You don’t know how irritating it is. Now go downstairs and get me the London telephone book.”

“Can I find the number for you, dear? Or the address?”

“If I’d wanted you to do that I’d have told you so. Do what I tell you. Bring it here, and put my writing things by the bed.”

Miss Lawson obeyed orders.

As she was going out of the room after having done everything required of her, Emily Arundell said unexpectedly:

“You’re a good, faithful creature, Minnie. Don’t mind my bark. It’s a good deal worse than my bite. You’re very patient and good to me.”

Miss Lawson went out of the room with her face pink and incoherent words burbling from her lips.

Sitting up in bed, Miss Arundell wrote a letter. She wrote it slowly and carefully, with numerous pauses for thought and copious underlining. She crossed and recrossed the page—for she had been brought up in a school that was taught never to waste notepaper. Finally, with a sigh of satisfaction, she signed her name and put it into an envelope. She wrote a name upon the envelope. Then she took a fresh sheet of paper. This time she made a rough draft and after having reread it and made certain alterations and erasures, she wrote out a fair copy. She read the whole thing through very carefully, then satisfied that she had expressed her meaning she enclosed it in an envelope and addressed it to William Purvis, Esq., Messrs Purvis, Purvis, Charlesworth and Purvis, Solicitors, Harchester.

She took up the first envelope again, which was addressed to M. Hercule Poirot, and opened the telephone directory. Having found the address she added it.

A tap sounded at the door.

Miss Arundell hastily thrust the letter she had just finished addressing—the letter to Hercule Poirot—inside the flap of her writing case.

She had no intention of rousing Minnie’s curiosity. Minnie was a great deal too inquisitive.

She called “Come in” and lay back on her pillows with a sigh of relief.

She had taken steps to deal with the situation.

Five

HERCULE POIROT RECEIVES A LETTER

The events which I have just narrated were not, of course, known to me until a long time afterwards. But by questioning various members of the family in detail, I have, I think, set them down accurately enough.

Poirot and I were only drawn into the affair when we received Miss Arundell's letter.

I remember the day well. It was a hot, airless morning towards the end of June.

Poirot had a particular routine when opening his morning correspondence. He picked up each letter, scrutinized it carefully and neatly slit the envelope open with his paper cutter. Its contents were perused and then placed in one of four piles beyond the chocolate pot. (Poirot always drank chocolate for breakfast—a revolting habit.) All this with a machinelike regularity!

So much was this the case that the least interruption of the rhythm attracted one's attention.

I was sitting by the window, looking out at the passing traffic. I had recently returned from Argentina and there was something particularly exciting to me in being once more in the roar of London.

Turning my head, I said with a smile:

"Poirot, I—the humble Watson—am going to hazard a deduction."

"Enchanted, my friend. What is it?"

I struck an attitude and said pompously:

"You have received this morning one letter of particular interest!"

“You are indeed the Sherlock Holmes! Yes, you are perfectly right.”

I laughed.

“You see, I know your methods, Poirot. If you read a letter through twice it must mean that it is of special interest.”

“You shall judge for yourself, Hastings.”

With a smile my friend tendered me the letter in question.

I took it with no little interest, but immediately made a slight grimace. It was written in one of those old-fashioned spidery handwritings, and it was, moreover, crossed on two pages.

“Must I read this, Poirot?” I complained.

“Ah, no, there is no compulsion. Assuredly not.”

“Can’t you tell me what it says?”

“I would prefer you to form your own judgement. But do not trouble if it bores you.”

“No, no, I want to know what it’s all about,” I protested.

My friend remarked drily:

“You can hardly do that. In effect, the letter says nothing at all.”

Taking this as an exaggeration I plunged without more ado into the letter.

M. Hercule Poirot.

Dear Sir,

After much doubt and indecision, I am writing (the last word was crossed out and the letter went on) I am emboldened to write to you in the hope that you may be able to assist me in a matter of a strictly private nature. (The words strictly private were underlined three times.) I may say that your name is not unknown to me. It was mentioned to me by a Miss Fox of Exeter, and although Miss Fox was not herself acquainted with you, she mentioned that her brother-in-law’s sister (whose name I cannot, I am sorry to say, recall) had spoken of your kindness and discretion in the highest terms (highest terms underlined once). I did not inquire, of course, as to the nature (nature underlined) of the inquiry you had conducted on her behalf, but I understood from Miss Fox that it was of a painful and confidential nature (last four words underlined heavily).

I broke off my difficult task of spelling out the spidery words.

“Poirot,” I said. “Must I go on? Does she ever get to the point?”

“Continue, my friend. Patience.”

“Patience!” I grumbled. “It’s exactly as though a spider had got into an inkpot and was walking over a sheet of notepaper! I remember my Great-Aunt Mary’s writing used to be much the same!”

Once more I plunged into the epistle.

In my present dilemma, it occurs to me that you might undertake the necessary investigations on my behalf. The matter is such, as you will readily understand, as calls for the utmost discretion and I may, in fact—and I need hardly say how sincerely I hope and pray (pray underlined twice) that this may be the case—I may, in fact, be completely mistaken. One is apt sometimes to attribute too much significance to facts capable of a natural explanation.

“I haven’t left out a sheet?” I murmured in some perplexity.

Poirot chuckled.

“No, no.”

“Because this doesn’t seem to make sense. What is it she is talking about?”

“Continuez toujours.”

“The matter is such, as you will readily understand—No, I’d got past that. Oh! here we are. In the circumstances as I am sure you will be the first to appreciate, it is quite impossible for me to consult anyone in Market Basing (I glanced back at the heading of the letter. Littlegreen House, Market Basing, Berks), but at the same time you will naturally understand that I feel uneasy (uneasy underlined). During the last few days I have reproached myself with being unduly fanciful (fanciful underlined three times) but have only felt increasingly perturbed. I may be attaching undue importance to what is, after all, a trifle (trifle underlined twice) but my uneasiness remains. I feel definitely that my mind must be set at rest on the matter. It is actually preying on my mind and affecting my health, and naturally I am in a difficult position as I can say nothing to anyone (nothing to anyone underlined with heavy lines). In your wisdom you may say, of course, that the whole thing is nothing but a mare’s nest. The facts may be capable of a perfectly innocent explanation (innocent underlined). Nevertheless, however trivial it may seem, ever since the incident of the dog’s ball, I have felt increasingly doubtful and alarmed. I should therefore welcome your views and counsel on the matter. It would, I feel sure, take a great weight off my mind. Perhaps you would kindly let me know what your fees are and what you advise me to do in the matter?

I must impress on you again that nobody here knows anything at all. The facts are, I know, very trivial and unimportant, but my health is not too good and my nerves (nerves underlined three times) are not what they used to be. Worry of this kind, I am convinced, is very bad for me, and the more I think over the matter, the more I am convinced that I was quite right and no mistake was possible. Of course, I shall not dream of saying anything (underlined) to anyone (underlined).

Hoping to have your advice in the matter at an early date.

I remain, Yours faithfully,

Emily Arundell.”

I turned the letter over and scanned each page closely. “But, Poirot,” I expostulated, “what is it all about?”

My friend shrugged his shoulders.

“What indeed?”

I tapped the sheets with some impatience.

“What a woman! Why can’t Mrs.—or Miss Arundell—”

“Miss, I think. It is typically the letter of a spinster.”

“Yes,” I said. “A real, fussy old maid. Why can’t she say what she’s talking about?”

Poirot sighed.

“As you say—a regrettable failure to employ order and method in the mental processes, and without order and method, Hastings—”

“Quite so,” I interrupted hastily. “Little grey cells practically nonexistent.”

“I would not say that, my friend.”

“I would. What’s the sense of writing a letter like that?”

“Very little—that is true,” Poirot admitted.

“A long rigmarole all about nothing,” I went on. “Probably some upset to her fat lapdog—an asthmatic pug or a yapping Pekinese!” I looked at my friend curiously. “And yet you read that letter through twice. I do not understand you, Poirot.”

Poirot smiled.

“You, Hastings, you would have put it straight in the wastepaper basket?”

“I’m afraid I should.” I frowned down on the letter. “I suppose I’m being dense, as usual, but I can’t see anything of interest in this letter!”

"Yet there is one point in it of great interest—a point that struck me at once."

"Wait," I cried. "Don't tell me. Let me see if I can't discover it for myself."

It was childish of me, perhaps. I examined the letter very thoroughly. Then I shook my head.

"No, I don't see it. The old lady's got the wind up, I realize that—but then, old ladies often do! It may be about nothing—it may conceivably be about something, but I don't see that you can tell that that is so. Unless your instinct—"

Poirot raised an offended hand.

"Instinct! You know how I dislike that word. 'Something seems to tell me'—that is what you infer. Jamais de la vie! Me, I reason. I employ the little grey cells. There is one interesting point about that letter which you have overlooked utterly, Hastings."

"Oh, well," I said wearily. "I'll buy it."

"Buy it? Buy what?"

"An expression. Meaning that I will permit you to enjoy yourself by telling me just where I have been a fool."

"Not a fool, Hastings, merely unobservant."

"Well, out with it. What's the interesting point? I suppose, like the 'incident of the dog's ball,' the point is that there is no interesting point!"

Poirot disregarded this sally on my part. He said quietly and calmly:

"The interesting point is the date."

"The date?"

I picked up the letter. On the top left-hand corner was written April 17th.

"Yes," I said slowly. "That is odd. April 17th."

"And we are today June 28th. C'est curieux, n'est ce pas? Over two months ago."

I shook my head doubtfully.

"It probably doesn't mean anything. A slip. She meant to put June and wrote April instead."

"Even then it would be ten or eleven days old—an odd fact. But actually you are in error. Look at the colour of the ink. That letter was written more than ten or eleven days ago. No, April 17th is the date assuredly. But why was the letter not sent?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"That's easy. The old pussy changed her mind."

"Then why did she not destroy the letter? Why keep it over two months and post it now?"

I had to admit that that was harder to answer. In fact I couldn't think of a really satisfactory answer. I merely shook my head and said nothing.

Poirot nodded.

"You see—it is a point! Yes, decidedly a curious point."

"You are answering the letter?" I asked.

"Oui, mon ami."

The room was silent except for the scratching of Poirot's pen. It was a hot, airless morning. A smell of dust and tar came in through the window.

Poirot rose from his desk, the completed letter in his hand. He opened a drawer and drew out a little square box. From this he took out a stamp. Moistening this with a little sponge he prepared to affix it to the letter.

Then suddenly he paused, stamp in hand, shaking his head with vigour.

“Non!” he exclaimed. “That is the wrong thing I do.” He tore the letter across and threw it into the wastepaper basket.

“Not so must we tackle this matter! We will go, my friend.”

“You mean to go down to Market Basing?”

“Precisely. Why not? Does not one stifle in London today? Would not the country air be agreeable?”

“Well, if you put it like that,” I said. “Shall we go in the car?”

I had acquired a secondhand Austin.

“Excellent. A very pleasant day for motoring. One will hardly need the muffler. A light overcoat, a silk scarf—”

“My dear fellow, you’re not going to the North Pole!” I protested.

“One must be careful of catching the chill,” said Poirot sententiously.

“On a day like this?”

Disregarding my protests, Poirot proceeded to don a fawn-coloured overcoat and wrap his neck up with a white silk handkerchief. Having carefully placed the wetted stamp face downwards on the blotting paper to dry, we left the room together.

Six

WE GO TO LITTLEGREEN HOUSE

I don’t know what Poirot felt like in his coat and muffler but I myself felt roasted before we got out of London. An open car in traffic is far from being a refreshing place on a hot summer’s day.

Once we were outside London, however, and getting a bit of pace on the Great West Road my spirits rose.

Our drive took us about an hour and a half, and it was close upon twelve o’clock when we came into the little town of Market Basing. Originally on the main road, a modern bypass now left it some three miles to the north of the main stream of traffic and in consequence it had kept an air of old-fashioned dignity and quietude about it. Its one wide street and ample market square seemed to say, “I was a place of importance once and to any person of sense and breeding I am still the same. Let this modern speeding world dash along their newfangled road; I was built to endure in a day when solidarity and beauty went hand in hand.”

There was a parking area in the middle of the big square, though there were only a few cars occupying it. I duly parked the Austin, Poirot divested himself of his superfluous garments, assured himself that his moustaches were in their proper condition of symmetrical flamboyance and we were then ready to proceed.

For once in a way our first tentative inquiry did not meet with the usual response, “Sorry, but I’m a stranger in these parts.” It would seem indeed probable that there were no strangers in Market Basing! It had that effect! Already, I felt, Poirot and myself (and especially Poirot) were somewhat noticeable. We tended to stick out from the mellow background of an English market town secure in its traditions.

“Littlegreen House?” The man, a burly, ox-eyed fellow, looked us over thoughtfully. “You go straight up the High Street and you can’t miss it. On your left. There’s no name on the gate, but it’s the first big house after the bank.” He repeated again, “You can’t miss it.”

His eyes followed us as we started on our course.

“Dear me,” I complained. “There is something about this place that makes me feel extremely conspicuous. As for you, Poirot, you look positively exotic.”

“You think it is noticed that I am a foreigner—yes?”

“The fact cries aloud to heaven,” I assured him.

“And yet my clothes are made by an English tailor,” mused Poirot.

“Clothes are not everything,” I said. “It cannot be denied, Poirot, that you have a noticeable personality. I have often wondered that it has not hindered you in your career.”

Poirot sighed.

“That is because you have the mistaken idea implanted in your head that a detective is necessarily a man who puts on a false beard and hides behind a pillar! The false beard, it is vieux jeu, and shadowing is only done by the lowest branch of my profession. The Hercule Poirots, my friend, need only to sit back in a chair and think.”

“Which explains why we are walking along this exceedingly hot street on an exceedingly hot morning.”

“That is very neatly replied, Hastings. For once, I admit, you have made the score off me.”

We found Littlegreen House easily enough, but a shock awaited us—a house agent’s board.

As we were staring at it, a dog’s bark attracted my attention.

The bushes were thin at that point and the dog could be easily seen. He was a wirehaired terrier, somewhat shaggy as to coat. His feet were planted wide apart, slightly to one side, and he barked with an obvious enjoyment of his own performance that showed him to be actuated by the most amiable motives.

“Good watchdog, aren’t I?” he seemed to be saying. “Don’t mind me! This is just my fun! My duty too, of course. Just have to let ’em know there’s a dog about the place! Deadly dull morning. Quite a blessing to have something to do. Coming into our place? Hope so. It’s darned dull. I could do with a little conversation.”

“Hallo, old man,” I said and shoved forward a fist.

Craning his neck through the railings he sniffed suspiciously, then gently wagged his tail, uttering a few short staccato barks.

“Not been properly introduced, of course, have to keep this up! But I see you know the proper advances to make.”

“Good old boy,” I said.

“Wuff,” said the terrier amiably.

“Well, Poirot?” I said, desisting from this conversation and turning to my friend.

There was an odd expression on his face—one that I could not quite fathom. A kind of deliberately suppressed excitement seems to describe it best.

“The Incident of the Dog’s Ball,” he murmured. “Well, at least, we have here a dog.”

“Wuff,” observed our new friend. Then he sat down, yawned widely and looked at us hopefully.

“What next?” I asked.

The dog seemed to be asking the same question.

“Parbleu, to Messrs—what is it—Messrs Gabler and Stretcher.”

“That does seem indicated,” I agreed.

We turned and retraced our steps, our canine acquaintance sending a few disgusted barks after us.

The premises of Messrs Gabler and Stretcher were situated in the Market Square. We entered a dim outer office where we were received by a young woman with adenoids and a lacklustre eye.

“Good morning,” said Poirot politely.

The young woman was at the moment speaking into a telephone but she indicated a chair and Poirot sat down. I found another and brought it forward.

“I couldn’t say, I’m sure,” said the young woman into the telephone vacantly. “No, I don’t know what the rates would be… Pardon? Oh, main water, I think, but, of course, I couldn’t be certain… I’m very sorry, I’m sure… No, he’s out… No, I couldn’t say… Yes, of course I’ll ask him… Yes…8135? I’m afraid I haven’t quite got it. Oh…8935…39… Oh, 5135… Yes, I’ll ask him to ring you…after six… Oh, pardon, before six… Thank you so much.”

She replaced the receiver, scribbled 5319 on the blotting pad and turned a mildly inquiring but uninterested gaze on Poirot.

Poirot began briskly.

“I observe that there is a house to be sold just on the outskirts of this town. Littlegreen House, I think is the name.”

“Pardon?”

“A house to be let or sold,” said Poirot slowly and distinctly. “Littlegreen House.”

“Oh, Littlegreen House,” said the young woman vaguely. “Littlegreen House, did you say?”

“That is what I said.”

“Littlegreen House,” said the young woman, making a tremendous mental effort. “Oh, well, I expect Mr. Gabler would know about that.”

“Can I see Mr. Gabler?”

“He’s out,” said the young woman with a kind of faint, anaemic satisfaction as of one who says, “A point to me.”

“Do you know when he will be in?”

“I couldn’t say, I’m sure,” said the young woman.

“You comprehend, I am looking for a house in this neighbourhood,” said Poirot.

“Oh, yes,” said the young woman, uninterested.

“And Littlegreen House seems to me just what I am looking for. Can you give me particulars?”

“Particulars?” The young woman seemed startled.

“Particulars of Littlegreen House.”

Unwillingly she opened a drawer and took out an untidy file of papers.

Then she called, “John.”

A lanky youth sitting in a corner looked up.

“Yes, miss.”

“Have we got any particulars of—what did you say?”

“Littlegreen House,” said Poirot distinctly.

“You’ve got a large bill of it here,” I remarked, pointing to the wall.

She looked at me coldly. Two to one, she seemed to think, was an unfair way of playing the game. She called up her own reinforcements.

“You don’t know anything about Littlegreen House, do you, John?”

“No, miss. Should be in the file.”

“I’m sorry,” said the young woman without looking so in the least. “I rather fancy we must have sent all the particulars out.”

“C’est dommage.”

“Pardon?”

“A pity.”

“We’ve a nice bungalow at Hemel End, two bed., one sitt.”

She spoke without enthusiasm, but with the air of one willing to do her duty by her employer.

“I thank you, no.”

“And a semidetached with small conservatory. I could give you particulars of that.”

“No, thank you. I desired to know what rent you were asking for Littlegreen House.”

“It’s not to be rented,” said the young woman, abandoning her position of complete ignorance of anything to do with Littlegreen House in the pleasure of scoring a point. “Only to be sold outright.”

“The board says, ‘To be Let or Sold.’”

"I couldn't say as to that, but it's for sale only."

At this stage in the battle the door opened and a grey-haired, middle-aged man entered with a rush. His eye, a militant one, swept over us with a gleam. His eyebrows asked a question of his employee.

"This is Mr. Gabler," said the young woman.

Mr. Gabler opened the door of an inner sanctum with a flourish.

"Step in here, gentlemen." He ushered us in, an ample gesture swept us into chairs and he himself was facing us across a flat-topped desk.

"And now what can I do for you?"

Poirot began again perseveringly.

"I desired a few particulars of Littlegreen House—"

He got no further. Mr. Gabler took command.

"Ah! Littlegreen House—there's a property! An absolute bargain. Only just come into the market. I can tell you gentlemen, we don't often get a house of that class going at the price. Taste's swinging round. People are fed up with jerry-building. They want sound stuff. Good, honest building. A beautiful property—character—feeling—Georgian throughout. That's what people want nowadays—there's a feeling for period houses if you understand what I mean. Ah, yes, Littlegreen House won't be long in the market. It'll be snapped up. Snapped up! A member of parliament came to look at it only last Saturday. Liked it so much he's coming down again this weekend. And there's a stock exchange gentleman after it too. People want quiet nowadays when they come to the country, want to be well away from main roads. That's all very well for some people, but we attract class here. And that's what that house has got. Class! You've got to admit, they knew how to build for gentlemen in those days. Yes, we shan't have Littlegreen long on our books."

Mr. Gabler, who, it occurred to me, lived up to his name very happily, paused for breath.

“Has it changed hands often in the last few years?” inquired Poirot.

“On the contrary. Been in one family over fifty years. Name of Arundell. Very much respected in the town. Ladies of the old school.”

He shot up, opened the door and called:

“Particulars of Littlegreen House, Miss Jenkins. Quickly now.”

He returned to the desk.

“I require a house about this distance from London,” said Poirot. “In the country, but not in the dead country, if you understand me—”

“Perfectly—perfectly. Too much in the country doesn’t do. Servants don’t like it for one thing. Here, you have the advantages of the country but not the disadvantages.” Miss Jenkins flitted in with a typewritten sheet of paper which she placed in front of her employer who dismissed her with a nod.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Gabler, reading with practised rapidity. “Period House of character: four recep., eight bed and dressing, usual offices, commodious kitchen premises, ample outbuildings, stables, etc. Main water, old-world gardens, inexpensive upkeep, amounting in all to three acres, two summerhouses, etc., etc. Price £2,850 or near offer.”

“You can give me an order to view?”

“Certainly, my dear sir.” Mr. Gabler began writing in a flourishing fashion. “Your name and address?”

Slightly to my surprise, Poirot gave his name as Mr. Parotti.

“We have one or two other properties on our books which might interest you,” Mr. Gabler went on.

Poirot allowed him to add two further additions.

“Littlegreen House can be viewed anytime?” he inquired.

“Certainly, my dear sir. There are servants in residence. I might perhaps ring up to make certain. You will be going there immediately? Or after lunch?”

“Perhaps after lunch would be better.”

“Certainly—certainly. I’ll ring up and tell them to expect you about two o’clock—eh? Is that right?”

“Thank you. Did you say the owner of the house—a Miss Arundell, I think you said?”

“Lawson. Miss Lawson. That is the name of the present owner. Miss Arundell, I am sorry to say, died a short time ago. That is how the place has come into the market. And I can assure you it will be snapped up. Not a doubt of it. Between you and me, just in confidence, if you do think of making an offer I should make it quickly. As I’ve told you, there are two gentlemen after it already, and I shouldn’t be surprised to get an offer for it any day from one or other of them. Each of them knows the other’s after it, you see. And there’s no doubt that competition spurs a man on. Ha, ha! I shouldn’t like you to be disappointed.”

“Miss Lawson is anxious to sell, I gather.”

Mr. Gabler lowered his voice confidentially.

“That’s just it. The place is larger than she wants—one middle-aged lady living by herself. She wants to get rid of this and take a house in London. Quite understandable. That’s why the place is going so ridiculously cheap.”

“She would be open, perhaps, to an offer?”

“That’s the idea, sir. Make an offer and set the ball rolling. But you can take it from me that there will be no difficulty in getting a price very near the figure named. Why, it’s ridiculous! To build a house like that nowadays would cost every penny of six thousand, let alone the land value and the valuable frontages.”

“Miss Arundell died very suddenly, didn’t she?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Anno domini—anno domini. She had passed her threescore and ten some time ago. And she’d been ailing for a long time. The last of her family—you know something about the family, perhaps?”

“I know some people of the same name who have relations in this part of the world. I fancy it must be the same family.”

“Very likely. Four sisters there were. One married fairly late in life and the other three lived on here. Ladies of the old school. Miss Emily was the last of them. Very highly thought of in the town.”

He leant forward and handed Poirot the orders.

“You’ll drop in again and let me know what you think of it, eh? Of course, it may need a little modernizing here and there. That’s only to be expected. But I always say, ‘What’s a bathroom or two? That’s easily done.’”

We took our leave and the last thing we heard was the vacant voice of Miss Jenkins saying:

“Mrs. Samuels rang up, sir. She’d like you to ring her—Holland 5391.”

As far as I could remember that was neither the number Miss Jenkins had scribbled on her pad nor the number finally arrived at through the telephone.

I felt convinced that Miss Jenkins was having her revenge for having been forced to find the particulars of Littlegreen House.

Seven

LUNCH AT THE GEORGE

As we emerged into the market square, I remarked that Mr. Gabler lived up to his name! Poirot assented with a smile.

“He’ll be rather disappointed when you don’t return,” I said. “I think he feels he has as good as sold you that house already.”

“Indeed, yes, I fear there is a deception in store for him.”

“I suppose we might as well have lunch here before returning to London, or shall we lunch at some more likely spot on our way back?”

“My dear Hastings, I am not proposing to leave Market Basing so quickly. We have not yet accomplished that which we came to do.”

I stared.

“Do you mean—but, my dear fellow, that’s all a washout. The old lady is dead.”

“Exactly.”

The tone of that one word made me stare at him harder than ever. It was evident that he had some bee in his bonnet over this incoherent letter.

“But if she’s dead, Poirot,” I said gently, “what’s the use? She can’t tell you anything now. Whatever the trouble was, it’s over and finished with.”

“How lightly and easily you put the matter aside! Let me tell you that no matter is finished with until Hercule Poirot ceases to concern himself with it!”

I should have known from experience that to argue with Poirot is quite useless. Unwarily I proceeded.

"But since she is dead—"

"Exactly, Hastings. Exactly—exactly—exactly… You keep repeating the significant point with a magnificently obtuse disregard of its significance. Do you not see the importance of the point? Miss Arundell is dead."

"But my dear Poirot, her death was perfectly natural and ordinary! There wasn't anything odd or unexplained about it. We have old Gabler's word for that."

"We have his word that Littlegreen House is a bargain at £2,850. Do you accept that as gospel also?"

"No, indeed. It struck me that Gabler was all out to get the place sold—it probably needs modernizing from top to toe. I'd swear he—or rather his client—will be willing to accept a very much lower figure than that. These large Georgian houses fronting right on the street must be the devil to get rid of."

"Eh bien, then," said Poirot. "Do not say, 'But Gabler says so!' as though he were an inspired prophet who could not lie."

I was about to protest further, but at this minute we passed the threshold of the George and with an emphatic "Chut!" Poirot put a damper on further conversation.

We were directed to the coffee room, a room of fine proportions, tightly shut windows and an odour of stale food. An elderly waiter attended to us, a slow, heavy-breathing man. We appeared to be the only lunchers. We had some excellent mutton, large slabs of watery cabbage and some dispirited potatoes. Some rather tasteless stewed fruit and custard followed. After gorgonzola and biscuits the waiter brought us two cups of a doubtful fluid called coffee.

At this point Poirot produced his orders to view and invited the waiter's aid.

"Yes, sir. I know where most of these are. Hemel Down is three miles away—on the Much Benham road—quite a little place. Naylor's Farm is about a mile away. There’s a kind of lane goes off to it not long after the King’s Head. Bisset Grange? No, I’ve never heard of that. Littlegreen House is just close by, not more than a few minutes’ walk.”

“Ah, I think I have already seen it from the outside. That is the most possible one, I think. It is in good repair—yes?”

“Oh, yes, sir. It’s in good condition—roof and drains and all that. Old-fashioned, of course. It’s never been modernized in any way. The gardens are a picture. Very fond of her garden Miss Arundell was.”

“It belongs, I see, to a Miss Lawson.”

“That’s right, sir. Miss Lawson, she was Miss Arundell’s companion and when the old lady died everything was left to her—house and all.”

“Indeed? I suppose she had no relations to whom to leave it?”

“Well, it was not quite like that, sir. She had nieces and nephews living. But, of course, Miss Lawson was with her all the time. And, of course, she was an old lady and—well—that’s how it was.”

“In any case I suppose there was just the house and not much money?”

I have often had occasion to notice how, where a direct question would fail to elicit a response, a false assumption brings instant information in the form of a contradiction.

“Very far from that, sir. Very far indeed. Everyone was surprised at the amount the old lady left. The will was in the paper and the amount and everything. It seems she hadn’t lived up to her income for many a long year. Something like three or four hundred thousand pounds she left.”

“You astonish me,” cried Poirot. “It is like a fairy tale—eh? The poor companion suddenly becomes unbelievably wealthy. Is she still young, this Miss Lawson? Can she enjoy her newfound wealth?”

“Oh, no, sir, she’s a middle-aged person, sir.”

His enunciation of the word person was quite an artistic performance. It was clear that Miss Lawson, ex-companion, had cut no kind of a figure in Market Basing.

“It must have been disappointing for the nephews and nieces,” mused Poirot.

“Yes, sir, I believe it came as somewhat of a shock to them. Very unexpected. There’s been feeling over it here in Market Basing. There are those who hold it isn’t right to leave things away from your own flesh and blood. But, of course, there’s others as hold that everyone’s got a right to do as they like with their own. There’s something to be said for both points of view, of course.”

“Miss Arundell had lived for many years here, had she not?”

“Yes, sir. She and her sisters and old General Arundell, their father, before them. Not that I remember him, naturally, but I believe he was quite a character. Was in the Indian Mutiny.”

“There were several daughters?”

“Three of them that I remember, and I believe there was one that married. Yes, Miss Matilda, Miss Agnes, and Miss Emily. Miss Matilda, she died first, and then Miss Agnes, and finally Miss Emily.”

“That was quite recently?”

“Beginning of May—or it may have been the end of April.”

“Had she been ill some time?”

“On and off—on and off. She was on the sickly side. Nearly went off a year ago with that there jaundice. Yellow as an orange she was for sometime after. Yes, she’d had poor health for the last five years of her life.”

“I suppose you have some good doctors down here?”

"Well, there's Dr. Grainger. Been here close on forty years, he has, and folks mostly go to him. He's a bit crotchety and he has his fancies but he's a good doctor, none better. He's got a young partner, Dr. Donaldson. He's more the newfangled kind. Some folk prefer him. Then, of course, there's Dr. Harding, but he doesn't do much."

"Dr. Grainger was Miss Arundell's doctor, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. He's pulled her through many a bad turn. He's the kind that fair bullies you into living whether you want to or not."

Poirot nodded.

"One should learn a little about a place before one comes to settle in it," he remarked. "A good doctor is one of the most important people."

"That's very true, sir."

Poirot then asked for his bill to which he added a substantial tip.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much, sir. I'm sure I hope you'll settle here, sir."

"I hope so, too," said Poirot mendaciously.

We set forth from the George.

"Satisfied yet, Poirot?" I asked as we emerged into the street.

"Not in the least, my friend."

He turned in an unexpected direction.

"Where are you off to now, Poirot?"

"The church, my friend. It may be interesting. Some brasses—an old monument." I shook my head doubtfully.

Poirot’s scrutiny of the interior of the church was brief. Though an attractive specimen of what the guidebook calls Early Perp., it had been so conscientiously restored in Victorian vandal days that little of interest remained.

Poirot next wandered seemingly aimlessly about the churchyard reading some of the epitaphs, commenting on the number of deaths in certain families, occasionally exclaiming over the quaintness of a name.

I was not surprised, however, when he finally halted before what I was pretty sure had been his objective from the beginning:

An imposing marble slab bore a partly effaced inscription:

SACRED

TO THE MEMORY OF

JOHN LAVERTON ARUNDELL

GENERAL 24TH SIKHS

WHO FELL ASLEEP IN CHRIST MAY 19TH 1888

AGED 69

“FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT WITH ALL THY MIGHT”

ALSO OF

MATILDA ANN ARUNDELL

DIED MARCH 10TH 1912

“I WILL ARISE AND GO TO MY FATHER”

ALSO OF

AGNES GEORGINA MARY ARUNDELL

DIED NOVEMBER 20TH 1921

“ASK AND YE SHALL RECEIVE”

Then came a brand new piece of lettering, evidently just done:

ALSO OF

EMILY HARRIET LAVERTON ARUNDELL DIED MAY 1ST 1936

“THY WILL BE DONE”

Poirot stood looking for some time.

He murmured softly:

“May 1st… May 1st… And today, June 28th, I receive her letter. You see, do you not, Hastings, that that fact has got to be explained?”

I saw that it had.

That is to say, I saw that Poirot was determined that it should be explained.

Eight

INTERIOR OF LITTLEGREEN HOUSE

On leaving the churchyard, Poirot led the way briskly in the direction of Littlegreen House. I gathered that his role was still that of the prospective purchaser. Carefully holding the various orders to view in his hand, with the Littlegreen House one uppermost, he pushed open the gate and walked up the path to the front door.

On this occasion our friend the terrier was not to be seen, but the sound of barking could be heard inside the house, though at some distance—I guessed in the kitchen quarters.

Presently we heard footsteps crossing the hall and the door was opened by a pleasant-faced woman of between fifty and sixty, clearly the old-fashioned type of servant seldom seen nowadays.

Poirot presented his credentials.

“Yes, sir, the house agent telephoned. Will you step this way, sir?”

The shutters which I had noticed were closed on our first visit to spy out the land, were now all thrown open in preparation for our visit. Everything, I observed, was spotlessly clean and well kept. Clearly our guide was a thoroughly conscientious woman.

“This is the morning room, sir.”

I glanced round approvingly. A pleasant room with its long windows giving on the street. It was furnished with good, solid, old-fashioned furniture, mostly Victorian, but there was a Chippendale bookcase and a set of attractive Hepplewhite chairs.

Poirot and I behaved in the customary fashion of people being shown over houses. We stood stock-still, looking a little ill at ease, murmuring remarks such as “very nice.” “A very pleasant room.” “The morning room, you say?”

The maid conducted us across the hall and into the corresponding room on the other side. This was much larger.

“The dining room, sir.”

This room was definitely Victorian. A heavy mahogany dining table, a massive sideboard of almost purplish mahogany with great clusters of carved fruit, solid leather-covered dining room chairs. On the wall hung what were obviously family portraits.

The terrier had continued to bark in some sequestered spot. Now the sound suddenly increased in volume. With a crescendo of barking he could be heard galloping across the hall.

“Who’s come into the house? I’ll tear him limb from limb,” was clearly the “burden of his song.”

He arrived in the doorway, sniffing violently.

“Oh, Bob, you naughty dog,” exclaimed our conductress. “Don’t mind him, sir. He won’t do you no harm.”

Bob, indeed, having discovered the intruders, completely changed his manner. He fussed in and introduced himself to us in an agreeable manner.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure,” he observed as he sniffed round our ankles. “Excuse the noise, won’t you, but I have my job to do. Got to be careful who we let in, you know. But it’s a dull life and I’m really quite pleased to see a visitor. Dogs of your own, I fancy?”

This last was addressed to me as I stooped and patted him.

“Nice little fellow,” I said to the woman. “Needs plucking a bit, though.”

“Yes, sir, he’s usually plucked three times a year.”

“Is he an old dog?”

“Oh, no, sir. Bob’s not more than six. And sometimes he behaves just like a puppy. Gets hold of cook’s slippers and prances about with them. And he’s very gentle though you wouldn’t believe it to hear the noise he makes sometimes. The only person he goes for is the postman. Downright scared of him the postman is.”

Bob was now investigating the legs of Poirot’s trousers. Having learned all he could he gave vent to a prolonged sniff (“H’m, not too bad, but not really a doggy person”) and returned to me cocking his head on one side and looking at me expectantly.

“I don’t know why dogs always go for postmen, I’m sure,” continued our guide.

“It’s a matter of reasoning,” said Poirot. “The dog, he argues from reason. He is intelligent, he makes his deductions according to his point of view. There are people who may enter a house and there are people who may not—that a dog soon learns. Eh bien, who is the person who most persistently tries to gain admission, rattling on the door twice or three times a day—and who is never by any chance admitted? The postman. Clearly, then, an undesirable guest from the point of view of the master of the house. He is always sent about his business, but he persistently returns and tries again. Then a dog’s duty is clear, to aid in driving this undesirable man away, and to bite him if possible. A most reasonable proceeding.”

He beamed on Bob.

“And a most intelligent person, I fancy.”

“Oh, he is, sir. He’s almost human, Bob is.”

She flung open another door.

“The drawing room, sir.”

The drawing room conjured up memories of the past. A faint fragrance of potpourri hung about it. The chintzes were worn, their pattern faded garlands of roses. On the walls were prints and water-colour drawings. There was a good deal of china—fragile shepherds and shepherdesses. There were cushions worked in crewel stitch. There were faded photographs in handsome silver frames. There were many inlaid workboxes and tea caddies. Most fascinating of all to me were two exquisitely cut tissue paper ladies under glass stands. One with a spinning wheel, one with a cat on her knee.

The atmosphere of a bygone day, a day of leisure, of refinement, of “ladies and gentlemen” closed round me. This was indeed a “withdrawing room.” Here ladies sat and did their fancywork, and if a cigarette was ever smoked by a favoured member of the male sex, what a shaking out of curtains and general airing of the room there would be afterwards!

My attention was drawn by Bob. He was sitting in an attitude of rapt attention close beside an elegant little table with two drawers in it.

As he saw that I was noticing him, he gave a short, plaintive yelp, looking from me to the table.

“What does he want?” I asked.

Our interest in Bob was clearly pleasing to the maid, who obviously was very fond of him.

“It’s his ball, sir. It was always kept in that drawer. That’s why he sits there and asks.”

Her voice changed. She addressed Bob in a high falsetto.

“It isn’t there any longer, beautiful. Bob’s ball is in the kitchen. In the kitchen, Bobsie.”

Bob shifted his gaze impatiently to Poirot.

“This woman’s a fool,” he seemed to be saying. “You look a brainy sort of chap. Balls are kept in certain places—this drawer is one of those places. There always has been a ball here. Therefore there should be a ball there now. That’s obvious dog logic, isn’t it?”

“It’s not there now, boy,” I said.

He looked at me doubtfully. Then, as we went out of the room he followed slowly in an unconvinced manner.

We were shown various cupboards, a downstairs cloakroom, and a small pantry place, “where the mistress used to do the flowers, sir.”

“You were with your mistress a long time?” asked Poirot.

“Twenty-two years, sir.”

“You are alone here caretaking?”

“Me and cook, sir.”

“She was also a long time with Miss Arundell?”

“Four years, sir. The old cook died.”

“Supposing I were to buy the house, would you be prepared to stay on?”

She blushed a little.

“It’s very kind of you, sir, I’m sure, but I’m going to retire from service. The mistress left me a nice little sum, you see, and I’m going to my brother. I’m only remaining here as a convenience to Miss Lawson until the place is sold—to look after everything.”

Poirot nodded.

In the momentary silence a new sound was heard.

“Bump, bump, BUMP.”

A monotonous sound increasing in volume and seeming to descend from above.

“It’s Bob, sir.” She was smiling. “He’s got hold of his ball and he’s bumping it down the stairs. It’s a little game of his.”

As we reached the bottom of the stairs a black rubber ball arrived with a thud on the last step. I caught it and looked up. Bob was lying on the top step, his paws splayed out, his tail gently wagging. I threw it up to him. He caught it neatly, chewed it for a minute or two with evident relish, then laid it between his paws and gently edged it forward with his nose till he finally bunted it over and it bumped once more down the stairs, Bob wagging his tail furiously as he watched its progress.

“He’ll stay like that for hours, sir. Regular game of his. He’d go on all day at it. That’ll do now, Bob. The gentlemen have got something else to do than play with you.”

A dog is a great promoter of friendly intercourse. Our interest and liking for Bob had quite broken down the natural stiffness of the good servant. As we went up to the bedroom floors, our guide was talking quite garrulously as she gave us accounts of Bob’s wonderful sagacity. The ball had been left at the foot of the stairs. As we passed him, Bob gave us a look of deep disgust and stalked down in a dignified fashion to retrieve it. As we turned to the right I saw him slowly coming up again with it in his mouth, his gait that of an extremely old man forced by unthinking persons to exert himself unduly.

As we went round the bedrooms, Poirot began gradually to draw our conductress out.

“There were four Miss Arundells lived here, did they not?” he asked.

“Originally, yes, sir, but that was before my time. There was only Miss Agnes and Miss Emily when I came and Miss Agnes died soon afterwards. She was the youngest of the family. It seemed odd she should go before her sister.”

“I suppose she was not so strong as her sister?”

"No, sir, it's odd that. My Miss Arundell, Miss Emily, she was always the delicate one. She'd had a lot to do with doctors all her life. Miss Agnes was always strong and robust and yet she went first and Miss Emily who'd been delicate from a child outlived all the family. Very odd the way things happen."

"Astonishing how often that is the case."

Poirot plunged into (I feel sure) a wholly mendacious story of an invalid uncle which I will not trouble to repeat here. It suffices to say that it had its effect. Discussions of death and such matters do more to unlock the human tongue than any other subject. Poirot was in a position to ask questions that would have been regarded with suspicious hostility twenty minutes earlier.

"Was Miss Arundell's illness a long and painful one?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, sir. She'd been ailing, if you know what I mean, for a long time—ever since two winters before. Very bad she was then—this here jaundice. Yellow in the face they go and the whites of their eyes—"

"Ah, yes, indeed—" (Anecdote of Poirot's cousin who appeared to have been the Yellow Peril in person.)

"That's right—just as you say, sir. Terribly ill she was, poor dear. Couldn't keep anything down. If you ask me, Dr. Grainger hardly thought she'd pull through. But he'd a wonderful way with her—bullying, you know. 'Made up your mind to lie back and order your tombstone?' he'd say. And she'd say, 'I've a bit of fight in me still, doctor,' and he'd say, 'That's right—that's what I like to hear.' A hospital nurse we had, and she made up her mind that it was all over—even said to the doctor once that she supposed she'd better not worry the old lady too much by forcing her to take food—but the doctor rounded on her. 'Nonsense,' he said, 'Worry her? You've got to bully her into taking nourishment.' Valentine's beef juice at such and such a time, Brand's essence—teaspoonfuls of brandy. And at the end he said something that I've never forgotten. 'You're young, my girl,' he said to her, 'you don't realize what fine fighting material there is in age. It's young people who turn up their toes and die because they're not interested enough to live. You show me anyone who's lived to over seventy and you show me a fighter—someone who's got the will to live.' And it's true, sir—we're always saying how wonderful old people are—their vitality and the way they've kept their faculties—but as the doctor put it that's just why they've lived so long and got to be so old."

"But it is profound what you say there—very profound! And Miss Arundell was like that? Very alive. Very interested in life?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, sir. Her health was poor, but her brain was as keen as anything. And as I was saying, she got over that illness of hers—surprised the nurse, it did. A stuck-up young thing she was, all starched collars and cuffs and the waiting on she had to have and tea at all hours."

"A fine recovery."

"Yes, indeed, sir. Of course, the mistress had to be very careful as to diet at first, everything boiled and steamed, no grease in the cooking, and she wasn't allowed to eat eggs either. Very monotonous it was for her."

"Still the main thing is she got well."

"Yes, sir. Of course, she had her little turns. What I'd call bilious attacks. She wasn't always very careful about her food after a time—but still they weren't very serious until the last attack."

"Was it like her illness of two years before?"

"Yes, just the same sort of thing, sir. That nasty jaundice—an awful yellow colour again—and the terrible sickness and all the rest of it. Brought it on herself I'm afraid she did, poor dear. Ate a lot of things she shouldn't have done. That very evening she was took bad she'd had curry for supper and as you know, sir, curry's rich and a bit oily."

"Her illness came on suddenly, did it?"

"Well, it seemed so, sir, but Dr. Grainger he said it had been working up for some time. A chill—the weather had been very changeable—and too rich feeding.”

“Surely her companion—Miss Lawson was her companion was she not—could have dissuaded her from rich dishes?”

“Oh, I don’t think Miss Lawson would have much say. Miss Arundell wasn’t one to take orders from anyone.”

“Had Miss Lawson been with her during her previous illness?”

“No, she came after that. She’d been with her about a year.”

“I suppose she’d had companions before that?”

“Oh, quite a number, sir.”

“Her companions didn’t stay as long as her servants,” said Poirot, smiling.

The woman flushed.

“Well, you see, sir, it was different. Miss Arundell didn’t get out much and what with one thing and another—” she paused.

Poirot eyed her for a minute then he said:

“I understand a little the mentality of elderly ladies. They crave, do they not, for novelty. They get, perhaps, to the end of a person.”

“Well, now, that’s very clever of you, sir. You’ve hit it exactly. When a new lady came Miss Arundell was always interested to start with—about her life and her childhood and where she’d been and what she thought about things, and then, when she knew all about her, well, she’d get—well, I suppose bored is the real word.”

“Exactly. And between you and me, these ladies who go as companions, they are not usually very interesting—very amusing, eh?”

“No, indeed, sir. They’re poor-spirited creatures, most of them. Downright foolish, now and then. Miss Arundell soon got through with them, so to speak. And then she'd make a change and have someone else."

"She must have been unusually attached to Miss Lawson, though."

"Oh, I don't think so, sir."

"Miss Lawson was not in any way a remarkable woman?"

"I shouldn't have said so, sir. Quite an ordinary person."

"You liked her, yes?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"There wasn't anything to like or dislike. Fussy she was—a regular old maid and full of this nonsense about spirits."

"Spirits?" Poirot looked alert.

"Yes, sir, spirits. Sitting in the dark round a table and dead people came back and spoke to you. Downright irreligious I call it—as if we didn't know departed souls had their rightful place and aren't likely to leave it."

"So Miss Lawson was a spiritualist! Was Miss Arundell a believer too?"

"Miss Lawson would have liked her to be!" snapped the other. There was a spice of satisfied malice in her tone.

"But she wasn't?" Poirot persisted.

"The mistress had too much sense." She snorted. "Mind you, I don't say it didn't amuse her. 'I'm willing to be convinced,' she'd say. But she'd often look at Miss Lawson as much as to say, 'My poor dear, what a fool you are to be so taken in!'"

"I comprehend. She did not believe in it, but it was a source of amusement to her."

“That’s right, sir. I sometimes wondered if she didn’t—well have a bit of quiet fun, so to speak, pushing the table and that sort of thing. And the others all as serious as death.”

“The others?”

“Miss Lawson and the two Miss Tripps.”

“Miss Lawson was a very convinced spiritualist?”

“Took it all for gospel, sir.”

“And Miss Arundell was very attached to Miss Lawson, of course.”

It was the second time Poirot had made this certain remark and he got the same response.

“Well, hardly that, sir.”

“But surely,” said Poirot. “If she left her everything. She did, did she not?”

The change was immediate. The human being vanished. The correct maidservant returned. The woman drew herself up and said in a colourless voice that held reproof for familiarity in it:

“The way the mistress left her money is hardly my business, sir.”

I felt that Poirot had bungled the job. Having got the woman in a friendly mood, he was now proceeding to throw away his advantage. He was wise enough to make no immediate attempt to recover lost ground. After a commonplace remark about the size and number of the bedrooms he went towards the head of the stairs.

Bob had disappeared, but as I came to the stairhead, I stumbled and nearly fell. Catching at the baluster to steady myself I looked down and saw that I had inadvertently placed my foot on Bob’s ball which he had left lying on the top of the stairs.

The woman apologized quickly.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's Bob's fault. He leaves his ball there. And you can't see it against the dark carpet. Death of someone some day it'll be. The poor mistress had a nasty fall through it. Might easily have been the death of her."

Poirot stopped suddenly on the stairs.

"She had an accident you say?"

"Yes, sir. Bob left his ball there, as he often did, and the mistress came out of her room and fell over it and went right down the stairs. Might have been killed."

"Was she much hurt?"

"Not as much as you'd think. Very lucky she was, Dr. Grainger said. Cut her head a little, and strained her back, and of course there were bruises and it was a nasty shock. She was in bed for about a week, but it wasn't serious."

"Was this long ago?"

"Just a week or two before she died."

Poirot stooped to recover something he had dropped.

"Pardon—my fountain pen—ah, yes, there it is."

He stood up again.

"He is careless, this Master Bob," he observed.

"Ah well, he don't know no better, sir," said the woman in an indulgent voice. "Nearly human he may be, but you can't have everything. The mistress, you see, usedn't to sleep well at night and often she'd get up and wander downstairs and round and about the house."

"She did that often?"

“Most nights. But she wouldn’t have Miss Lawson or anyone fussing after her.”

Poirot had turned into the drawing room again.

“A beautiful room this,” he observed. “I wonder, would there be space in this recess for my bookcase? What do you think, Hastings?”

Quite fogged I remarked cautiously that it would be difficult to say.

“Yes, sizes are so deceptive. Take, I pray you, my little rule and measure the width of it and I will write it down.”

Obediently I took the folding rule that Poirot handed me and took various measurements under his direction whilst he wrote on the back of an envelope.

I was just wondering why he adopted such an untidy and uncharacteristic method instead of making a neat entry in his little pocketbook when he handed the envelope to me, saying:

“That is right, is it not? Perhaps you had better verify it.”

There were no figures on the envelope. Instead was written: “When we go upstairs again, pretend to remember an appointment and ask if you can telephone. Let the woman come with you and delay her as long as you can.”

“That’s all right,” I said, pocketing the envelope. “I should say both bookcases would go in perfectly.”

“It is as well to be sure though. I think, if it is not too much trouble, I would like to look at the principal bedroom again. I am not quite sure of the wall space there.”

“Certainly, sir. It’s no trouble.”

We went up again. Poirot measured a portion of wall, and was just commenting aloud on the respective possible positions of bed, wardrobe and writing table, when I looked at my watch, gave a somewhat exaggerated start and exclaimed:

“By Jove, do you know it’s three o’clock already? What will Anderson think? I ought to telephone to him.” I turned to the woman. “I wonder if I might use your telephone if you have one.”

“Why, certainly, sir. It’s in the little room off the hall. I’ll show you.”

She bustled down with me, indicating the instrument, and then I got her to help me in finding a number in the telephone directory. In the end I made a call—to a Mr. Anderson in the neighbouring town of Harchester. Fortunately he was out and I was able to leave a message saying it was unimportant and that I would ring up later!

When I emerged Poirot had descended the staircase and was standing in the hall. His eyes had a slightly green tinge. I had no clue to his excitement but I realized that he was excited.

Poirot said:

“That fall from the top of the stairs must have given your mistress a great shock. Did she seem perturbed about Bob and his ball after it?”

“It’s funny your saying that, sir. It worried her a lot. Why, just as she was dying, she was delirious and she rambled on a lot about Bob and his ball and something about a picture that was ajar.”

“A picture that was ajar,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“Of course, it didn’t make sense, sir, but she was rambling, you see.”

“One moment—I must just go into the drawing room once more.”

He wandered round the room examining the ornaments. In especial, one big jar with a lid on it seemed to attract him. It was not, I fancy, a particularly good bit of china. A piece of Victorian humour—it had on it a rather crude picture of a bulldog sitting outside a front door with a mournful expression on its face. Below was written: Out all night and no key.

Poirot, whose taste I have always been convinced, is hopelessly Bourgeois, seemed lost in admiration.

“Out all night and no key,” he murmured. “It is amusing, that! Is that true of our Master Bob? Does he sometimes stay out all night?”

“Very occasional, sir. Oh, very occasional. He’s a very good dog, Bob is.”

“I am sure he is. But even the best of dogs—”

“Oh, it’s quite true, sir. Once or twice he’s gone off and come home perhaps at four in the morning. Then he sits down on the step and barks till he’s let in.”

“Who lets him in—Miss Lawson?”

“Well, anyone who hears him, sir. It was Miss Lawson, sir, last time. It was the night of the mistress’s accident. And Bob came home about five. Miss Lawson hurried down to let him in before he could make a noise. She was afraid of waking up the mistress and hadn’t told her Bob was missing for fear of worrying her.”

“I see. She thought it was better Miss Arundell shouldn’t be told?”

“That’s what she said, sir. She said, ‘He’s sure to come back. He always does, but she might worry and that would never do.’ So we didn’t say anything.”

“Was Bob fond of Miss Lawson?”

“Well, he was rather contemptuous of her if you know what I mean, sir. Dogs can be. She was kind to him. Called him a good doggie and a nice doggie, but he used to look at her kind of scornful like and he didn’t pay any attention at all to what she told him to do.”

Poirot nodded. “I see,” he said.

Suddenly he did something which startled me.

He pulled a letter from his pocket—the letter he had received this morning.

“Ellen,” he said, “do you know anything about this?”

The change that came over Ellen’s face was remarkable.

Her jaw dropped and she stared at Poirot with an almost comical expression of bewilderment.

“Well,” she ejaculated. “I never did!”

The observation lacked coherency, perhaps, but it left no doubt of Ellen’s meaning.

Gathering her wits about her she said slowly:

“Are you the gentleman that letter was written to then?”

“I am. I am Hercule Poirot.”

Like most people, Ellen had not glanced at the name on the order Poirot had held out to her on his arrival. She nodded her head slowly.

“That was it,” she said. “Hercules Poirot.” She added an S to the Christian name and sounded the T of the surname.

“My word!” she exclaimed. “Cook will be surprised.”

Poirot said, quickly:

“Would it not be advisable, perhaps, for us to go to the kitchen and there in company with your friend, we could talk this matter over?”

“Well—if you don’t mind, sir.”

Ellen sounded just a little doubtful. This particular social dilemma was clearly new to her. But Poirot’s matter-of-fact manner reassured her and we departed forthwith to the kitchen, Ellen elucidating the situation to a large, pleasant-faced woman who was just lifting a kettle from a gas ring.

“You’ll never believe it, Annie. This is actually the gentleman that letter was to. You know, the one I found in the blotter.”

“You must remember I am in the dark,” said Poirot. “Perhaps you will tell me how the letter came to be posted so late in the day?”

“Well, sir, to tell the truth I didn’t know what to do. Neither of us did, did we?”

“Indeed, we didn’t,” the cook confirmed.

“You see, sir, when Miss Lawson was turning out things after the mistress’s death a good lot of things were given away or thrown away. Among them was a little papier-mâché, I think they call it, blotter. Very pretty it was, with a lily of the valley on it. The mistress always used it when she wrote in bed. Well, Miss Lawson didn’t want it so she gave it to me along with a lot of other little odds and ends that had belonged to the mistress. I put it away in a drawer, and it wasn’t till yesterday that I took it out. I was going to put some new blotting paper in it so that it was ready for me to use. There was a sort of pocket inside and I just slipped my hand in it when what should I find but a letter in the mistress’s handwriting, tucked away.

“Well, as I say I didn’t know rightly what to do about it. It was the mistress’s hand all right, and I saw as she’d written it and slipped it in there waiting to post it the next day and then she’d forgot, which is the kind of thing she did many a time, poor dear. Once it was a dividend warrant to her bank and no one could think where it had got to, and at last it was found pushed right back in the pigeonholes of the desk.”

“Was she untidy?”

“Oh, no, sir, just the opposite. She was always putting things away and clearing them up. That was half the trouble. If she’d left things about it would really have been better. It was their being tidied away and then forgotten that was always happening.”

“Things like Bob’s ball, for instance?” asked Poirot with a smile.

The sagacious terrier had just trotted in from outdoors and greeted us anew in a very friendly manner.

“Yes, indeed, sir. As soon as Bob finished playing with his ball she’d put it away. But that was all right because it had its own place—in the drawer I showed you.”

“I see. But I interrupted you. Pray go on. You discovered the letter in the blotter?”

“Yes, sir, that was the way of it, and I asked Annie what she thought I’d better do. I didn’t like to put it in the fire—and of course, I couldn’t take upon myself to open it, and neither Annie nor I could see that it was any business of Miss Lawson’s so after we’d talked it over a bit, I just put a stamp on it and ran out to the postbox and posted it.”

Poirot turned slightly to me.

“Voilà,” he murmured.

I could not help saying, maliciously:

“Amazing how simple an explanation can be!”

I thought he looked a little crestfallen, and rather wished I hadn’t been so quick to try and rub it in.

He turned again to Ellen.

“As my friend says: How simple an explanation can be! You understand, when I received a letter dated over two months ago, I was somewhat surprised.”

“Yes, I suppose you must have been, sir. We didn’t think of that.”

“Also—” Poirot coughed. “I am in a little dilemma. That letter, you see—it was a commission with which Miss Arundell wished to entrust me. A matter of a somewhat private character.” He cleared his throat importantly. “Now that Miss Arundell is dead I am in some doubt how to act. Would

Miss Arundell have wished me to undertake the commission in these circumstances or not? It is difficult—very difficult."

Both women were looking at him respectfully.

"I shall have, I think, to consult Miss Arundell's lawyer. She had a lawyer, did she not?"

Ellen answered, quickly.

"Oh, yes, sir. Mr. Purvis from Harchester."

"He knew all her affairs?"

"I think so, sir. He's done everything for her ever since I can remember. It was him she sent for after the fall she had."

"The fall down the stairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now let me see when was that exactly?"

The cook broke in.

"Day after Bank Holiday it was. I remember that well. I stayed in to oblige on Bank Holiday seeing she had all those people staying and I had the day on Wednesday instead."

Poirot whipped out his pocket almanac.

"Precisely—precisely. Easter Bank Holiday, I see, fell on the thirteenth this year. Then Miss Arundell had her accident on the fourteenth. This letter to me was written three days later. A pity it was never sent. However, it may still not be too late—" he paused. "I rather fancy that the—er—commission she wished me to perform was connected with one of the—er—guests you mentioned just now."

This remark, which could only have been a pure shot in the dark, met with immediate response. A quick look of intelligence passed across Ellen’s face. She turned to the cook who gave her back an answering glance.

“That’ll be Mr. Charles,” she said.

“If you would tell me just who was there—” Poirot suggested.

“Dr. Tanios and his wife, Miss Bella that was, and Miss Theresa and Mr. Charles.”

“They were all nephews and nieces?”

“That’s right, sir. Dr. Tanios, of course, is no relation. In fact he’s a foreigner, a Greek or something of the sort, I believe. He married Miss Bella, Miss Arundell’s niece, her sister’s child. Mr. Charles and Miss Theresa are brother and sister.”

“Ah, yes, I see. A family party. And when did they leave?”

“On the Wednesday morning, sir. And Dr. Tanios and Miss Bella came down again the next weekend because they were worried about Miss Arundell.”

“And Mr. Charles and Miss Theresa?”

“They came the weekend after. The weekend before she died.”

Poirot’s curiosity, I felt, was quite insatiable. I could see no point in these continued questions. He got the explanation of his mystery, and in my opinion the sooner he retired with dignity the better.

The thought seemed to go from my brain to his.

“Eh bien,” he said. “This information you have given me is very helpful. I must consult this Mr. Purvis, I think you said? Thank you very much for all your help.”

He stooped and patted Bob.

“Brave chien, va! You loved your mistress.”

Bob responded amiably to these overtures and, hopeful of a little play, went and fetched a large piece of coal. For this he was reproved and the coal removed from him. He sent me a glance in search of sympathy.

“These women,” he seemed to say. “Generous with the food, but not really sportsmen!”

Nine

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DOG’S BALL INCIDENT

“Well, Poirot,” I said, as the gate of Littlegreen House closed behind us. “You are satisfied now, I hope!”

“Yes, my friend. I am satisfied.”

“Thank heavens for that! All the mysteries explained! The Wicked Companion and the Rich Old Lady myth exploded. The delayed letter and even the famous incident of the dog’s ball shown in their true colours. Everything settled satisfactorily and according to Cocker!”

Poirot gave a dry little cough and said:

“I would not use the word satisfactorily, Hastings.”

“You did a minute ago.”

“No, no. I did not say the matter was satisfactory. I said that, personally, my curiosity was satisfied. I know the truth of the Dog’s Ball incident.”

“And very simple it was too!”

“Not quite so simple as you think.” He nodded his head several times. Then he went on: “You see, I know one little thing which you do not.”

“And what is that?” I asked somewhat sceptically.

“I know that there is a nail driven into the skirting board at the top of the stairs.”

I stared at him. His face was quite grave.

“Well,” I said after a minute or two. “Why shouldn’t there be?”

“The question is, Hastings, why should there be.”

“How do I know. Some household reason, perhaps. Does it matter?”

“Certainly it matters. And I think of no household reason for a nail to be driven in at the top of the skirting board in that particular place. It was carefully varnished, too, so as not to show.”

“What are you driving at, Poirot? Do you know the reason?”

“I can imagine it quite easily. If you wanted to stretch a piece of strong thread or wire across the top of the stairs about a foot from the ground, you could tie it on one side to the balusters, but on the inner wall side you would need something like a nail to attach the thread to.”

“Poirot!” I cried. “What on earth are you driving at?”

“Mon cher ami, I am reconstructing the incident of the Dog’s Ball! Would you like to hear my reconstruction?”

“Go ahead.”

“Eh bien, here it is. Someone had noticed the habit Bob had of leaving his ball at the top of the stairs. A dangerous thing to do—it might lead to an accident.” Poirot paused a minute, then said in a slightly different tone. “If you wished to kill someone, Hastings, how would you set about it?”

“I—well really—I don’t know. Fake up some alibi or something, I suppose.”

“A proceeding, I assure you, both difficult and dangerous. But then you are not the type of a cold-blooded cautious murderer. Does it not strike you that the easiest way of removing someone you want to remove from your path is to take advantage of accident? Accidents are happening all the time. And sometimes—Hastings—they can be helped to happen!”

He paused a minute then went on:

"I think the dog's ball left so fortuitously at the top of the stairs gave our murderer an idea. Miss Arundell was in the habit of coming out of her room in the night and wandering about—her eyesight was not good, it was quite within the bounds of probability that she might stumble over it and fall headlong down those stairs. But a careful murderer does not leave things to chance. A thread stretched across the top of the stairs would be a much better way. It would send her pitching head foremost. Then, when the household come rushing out—there, plain to see, is the cause of the accident—Bob's ball!"

"How horrible!" I cried.

Poirot said, gravely:

"Yes, it was horrible… It was also unsuccessful… Miss Arundell was very little hurt though she might easily have broken her neck. Very disappointing for our unknown friend! But Miss Arundell was a sharp-witted old lady. Everyone told her she had slipped on the ball, and there the ball was in evidence, but she herself recalling the happening felt that the accident had arisen differently. She had not slipped on the ball. And in addition she remembered something else. She remembered hearing Bob barking for admission at five o'clock the next morning.

"This, I admit, is something in the way of guesswork but I believe I am right. Miss Arundell had put away Bob's ball herself the evening before in its drawer. After that he went out and did not return. In that case it was not Bob who put that ball on the top of the stairs."

"That is pure guesswork, Poirot," I objected.

He demurred.

"Not quite, my friend. There are the significant words uttered by Miss Arundell when she was delirious—something about Bob's ball and a 'picture ajar.' You see the point, do you not?"

"Not in the least."

“Curious. I know your language well enough to realize that one does not talk of a picture being ajar. A door is ajar. A picture is awry.”

“Or simply crooked.”

“Or simply crooked, as you say. So I realized at once that Ellen has mistaken the meaning of the words she heard. It is not ajar—but a or the jar that was meant. Now in the drawing room there is a rather noticeable china jar. There, I have already observed a picture of a dog on it. With the remembrance of these delirious ravings in my mind I go up and examine it more closely. I find that it deals with the subject of a dog who has been out all night. You see the trend of the feverish woman’s thoughts? Bob was like the dog in the picture on the jar—out all night—so it was not he who left the ball on the stairs.”

I cried out, feeling some admiration in spite of myself.

“You’re an ingenious devil, Poirot! How you think of these things beats me!”

“I do not ‘think of them.’ They are there—plain—for anyone to see. Eh bien, you realize the position? Miss Arundell, lying in bed after her fall, becomes suspicious. That suspicion she feels is perhaps fanciful and absurd but there it is. ‘Since the incident of the dog’s ball I have been increasingly uneasy.’ And so—and so she writes to me, and by a piece of bad luck her letter does not reach me until over two months have gone by. Tell me, does her letter not fit in perfectly with these facts?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “It does.”

Poirot went on:

“There is another point worthy of consideration. Miss Lawson was exceedingly anxious that the fact of Bob’s being out all night should not get to Miss Arundell’s ears.”

“You think that she—”

"I think that the fact should be noted very carefully."

I turned the thing over in my mind for a minute or two.

"Well," I said at last with a sigh. "It's all very interesting—as a mental exercise that is. And I take off my hat to you. It's been a masterful piece of reconstruction. It's almost a pity really that the old lady has died."

"A pity—yes. She wrote to me that someone had attempted to murder her (that is what it amounts to, after all) and a very short time after, she was dead."

"Yes," I said. "And it's a grand disappointment to you that she died a natural death, isn't it? Come, admit it."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Or perhaps you think she was poisoned," I said maliciously. Poirot shook his head somewhat despondently.

"It certainly seems," he admitted, "as though Miss Arundell died from natural causes."

"And therefore," I said, "we return to London with our tail between our legs."

"Pardon, my friend, but we do not return to London."

"What do you mean, Poirot," I cried.

"If you show the dog the rabbit, my friend, does he return to London? No, he goes into the rabbit hole."

"What do you mean?"

"The dog hunts rabbits. Hercule Poirot hunts murderers. We have here a murderer—a murderer whose crime failed, yes, perhaps, but nevertheless a murderer. And I, my friend, am going into the burrow after him—or her as the case may be."

He turned sharply in at the gate.

“Where are you off to, Poirot?”

“Into the burrow, my friend. This is the house of Dr. Grainger who attended Miss Arundell in her last illness.”

Dr. Grainger was a man of sixty odd. His face was thin and bony with an aggressive chin, bushy eyebrows, and a pair of very shrewd eyes. He looked keenly from me to Poirot.

“Well, what can I do for you?” he asked abruptly.

Poirot swept into speech in the most flamboyant manner.

“I must apologize, Dr. Grainger, for this intrusion. I must confess straightaway that I do not come to consult you professionally.”

Dr. Grainger said drily:

“Glad to hear it. You look healthy enough!”

“I must explain the purpose of my visit,” went on Poirot. “The truth of the matter is that I am writing a book—the life of the late General Arundell who I understand lived in Market Basing for some years before his death.”

The doctor looked rather surprised.

“Yes, General Arundell lived here till his death. At Littlegreen House—just up the road past the Bank—you’ve been there, perhaps?” Poirot nodded assent. “But you understand that was a good bit before my time. I came here in 1919.”

“You knew his daughter, however, the late Miss Arundell?”

“I knew Emily Arundell well.”

“You comprehend, it has been a severe blow to me to find that Miss Arundell has recently died.”

“End of April.”

“So I discovered. I counted, you see, on her giving me various personal details and reminiscences of her father.”

“Quite—quite. But I don’t see what I can do about it.”

Poirot asked:

“General Arundell has no other sons or daughters living?”

“No. All dead, the lot of them.”

“How many were there?”

“Five. Four daughters, one son.”

“And in the next generation?”

“Charles Arundell and his sister Theresa. You could get onto them. I doubt, though, if it would be much use to you. The younger generation doesn’t take much interest in its grandfathers. And there’s a Mrs. Tanios, but I doubt if you’d get much there either.”

“They might have family papers—documents?”

“They might have. Doubt it, though. A lot of stuff was cleared out and burnt after Miss Emily’s death, I know.”

Poirot uttered a groan of anguish.

Grainger looked at him curiously.

“What’s the interest in old Arundell? I never heard he was a big pot in any way?”

“My dear sir.” Poirot’s eyes gleamed with the excitement of the fanatic. “Is there not a saying that History knows nothing of its greatest men? Recently certain papers have come to light which throw an entirely different light on the whole subject of the Indian Mutiny. There is secret history there. And in that secret history John Arundell played a big part. The whole thing is fascinating—fascinating! And let me tell you, my dear sir, it is of especial interest at the present time. India—the English policy in regard to it—is the burning question of the hour.”

“H’m,” said the doctor. “I have heard that old General Arundell used to hold forth a good deal on the subject of the Mutiny. As a matter of fact, he was considered a prize bore on the subject.”

“Who told you that?”

“A Miss Peabody. You might call on her, by the way. She’s our oldest inhabitant—knew the Arundells intimately. And gossip is her chief recreation. She’s worth seeing for her own sake—a character.”

“Thank you. That is an excellent idea. Perhaps, too, you would give me the address of young Mr. Arundell, the grandson of the late General Arundell.”

“Charles? Yes, I can put you onto him. But he’s an irreverent young devil. Family history means nothing to him.”

“He is quite young?”

“He’s what an old fogy like me calls young,” said the doctor with a twinkle. “Early thirties. The kind of young man that’s born to be a trouble and responsibility to their families. Charm of personality and nothing else. He’s been shipped about all over the world and done no good anywhere.”

“His aunt was doubtless fond of him?” ventured Poirot. “It is often that way.”

“H’m—I don’t know. Emily Arundell was no fool. As far as I know he never succeeded in getting any money out of her. Bit of a tartar that old lady. I liked her. Respected her too. An old soldier every inch of her.”

“Was her death sudden?”

"Yes, in a way. Mind you, she'd been in poor health for some years. But she'd pulled through some narrow squeaks."

"There was some story—I apologize for repeating gossip—" Poirot spread out his hands deprecatingly—"that she had quarrelled with her family?"

"She didn't exactly quarrel with them," said Dr. Grainger slowly. "No, there was no open quarrel as far as I know."

"I beg your pardon. I am, perhaps, being indiscreet."

"No, no. After all, the information's public property."

"She left her money away from her family, I understand?"

"Yes, left it all to a frightened, fluttering hen of a companion. Odd thing to do. Can't understand it myself. Not like her."

"Ah, well," said Poirot thoughtfully. "One can imagine such a thing happening. An old lady, frail and in ill health. Very dependent on the person who attends and cares for her. A clever woman with a certain amount of personality could gain a great ascendency that way."

The word ascendency seemed to act like a red rag to a bull.

Dr. Grainger snorted out:

"Ascendency? Ascendency? Nothing of the kind! Emily Arundell treated Minnie Lawson worse than a dog. Characteristic of that generation! Anyway, women who earn their living as companions are usually fools. If they've got brains they're earning a better living some other way. Emily Arundell didn't suffer fools gladly. She usually wore out one poor devil a year. Ascendency? Nothing of the sort!"

Poirot hastened off the treacherous ground.

"It is possible, perhaps," he suggested, "that there are old family letters and documents in this Miss—er—Lawson's possession?"

“Might be,” agreed Grainger. “Usually are a lot of things tucked away in an old maid’s house. I don’t suppose Miss Lawson’s been through half of it yet.”

Poirot rose.

“Thank you very much, Dr. Grainger. You have been most kind.”

“Don’t thank me,” said the doctor. “Sorry I can’t do anything helpful. Miss Peabody’s your best chance. Lives at Morton Manor—about a mile out.”

Poirot was sniffing at a large bouquet of roses on the doctor’s table.

“Delicious,” he murmured.

“Yes, I suppose so. Can’t smell ’em myself. Lost my sense of smell when I had flu four years ago. Nice admission for a doctor, eh? ‘Physician, heal thyself.’ Damned nuisance. Can’t enjoy a smoke as I used to.”

“Unfortunate, yes. By the way, you will give me young Arundell’s address?”

“I can get it for you, yes.” He ushered us out into the hall and called: “Donaldson.”

“My partner,” he explained. “He should have it all right. He’s by way of being engaged to Charles’s sister, Theresa.”

He called again: “Donaldson.”

A young man came out from a room at the back of the house. He was of medium height and of rather colourless appearance. His manner was precise. A greater contrast to Dr. Grainger could not be imagined.

The latter explained what he wanted.

Dr. Donaldson’s eyes, very pale blue eyes slightly prominent, swept over us appraisingly. When he spoke it was in a dry, precise manner.

“I don’t know exactly where Charles is to be found,” he said. “I can give you Miss Theresa Arundell’s address. Doubtless she will be able to put you in touch with her brother.”

Poirot assured him that that would do perfectly.

The doctor wrote down an address on a page of his notebook, tore it out and handed it to Poirot. Poirot thanked him and said good-bye to both doctors. As we went out of the door I was conscious of Dr. Donaldson standing in the hall peering after us with a slightly startled look on his face.

Ten

VISIT TO MISS PEABODY

“Is it really necessary to tell such elaborate lies, Poirot?” I asked as we walked away.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“If one is going to tell a lie at all—and I notice, by the way, that your nature is very much averse to lying—now, me, it does not trouble at all—”

“So I’ve noticed,” I interjected.

“—As I was remarking, if one is going to tell a lie at all, it might as well be an artistic lie, a romantic lie, a convincing lie!”

“Do you consider this a convincing lie? Do you think Dr. Donaldson was convinced?”

“That young man is of a sceptical nature,” admitted Poirot, thoughtfully.

“He looked definitely suspicious to me.”

“I do not see why he should be so. Imbeciles are writing the lives of other imbeciles every day. It is as you say, done.”

“First time I’ve heard you call yourself an imbecile,” I said, grinning.

“I can adopt a rôle, I hope, as well as anyone,” said Poirot coldly. “I am sorry you do not think my little fiction well imagined. I was rather pleased with it myself.”

I changed the subject.

“What do we do next?”

“That is easy. We get into your car and pay a visit to Morton Manor.”

Morton Manor proved to be an ugly substantial house of the Victorian period. A decrepit butler received us somewhat doubtfully and presently returned to ask if “we had an appointment.”

“Please tell Miss Peabody that we come from Dr. Grainger,” said Poirot.

After a wait of a few minutes the door opened and a short fat woman waddled into the room. Her sparse, white hair was neatly parted in the middle. She wore a black velvet dress, the nap of which was completely rubbed off in various places, and some really beautiful fine point lace was fastened at her neck with a large cameo brooch.

She came across the room peering at us shortsightedly. Her first words were somewhat of a surprise.

“Got anything to sell?”

“Nothing, madame,” said Poirot.

“Sure?”

“But absolutely.”

“No vacuum cleaners?”

“No.”

“No stockings?”

“No.”

“No rugs?”

“No.”

“Oh, well,” said Miss Peabody, settling herself in a chair. “I suppose it’s all right. You’d better sit down then.”

We sat obediently.

“You’ll excuse my asking,” said Miss Peabody with a trace of apology in her manner. “Got to be careful. You wouldn’t believe the people who come along. Servants are no good. They can’t tell. Can’t blame ’em either. Right voices, right clothes, right names. How are they to tell? Commander Ridgeway, Mr. Scot Edgerton, Captain d’Arcy Fitzherbert. Nice-looking fellows, some of ’em. But before you know where you are they’ve shoved a cream-making machine under your nose.”

Poirot said earnestly:

“I assure you, madame, that we have nothing whatever of that kind.”

“Well, you should know,” said Miss Peabody.

Poirot plunged into his story. Miss Peabody heard him out without comment, blinking once or twice out of her small eyes. At the end she said:

“Goin’ to write a book, eh?”

“Yes.”

“In English?”

“Certainly—in English.”

“But you’re a foreigner. Eh? Come now, you’re a foreigner, aren’t you?”

“That is true.”

She transferred her gaze to me.

“You are his secretary, I suppose?”

“Er—yes,” I said doubtfully.

“Can you write decent English?”

"I hope so."

"H'm—where did you go to school?"

"Eton."

"Then you can't."

I was forced to let this sweeping charge against an old and venerable centre of education pass unchallenged as Miss Peabody turned her attention once more to Poirot.

"Goin' to write a life of General Arundell, eh?"

"Yes. You knew him, I think."

"Yes, I knew John Arundell. He drank."

There was a momentary pause. Then Miss Peabody went on musingly:

"Indian Mutiny, eh? Seems a bit like flogging a dead horse to me. But that's your business."

"You know, madame, there is a fashion in these things. At the moment India is the mode."

"Something in that. Things do come round. Look at sleeves."

We maintained a respectful silence.

"Leg o' muttons were always ugly," said Miss Peabody. "But I always looked well in Bishops." She fixed a bright eye on Poirot. "Now then, what do you want to know?"

Poirot spread out his hands.

"Anything! Family history. Gossip. Home life."

“Can’t tell you anything about India,” said Miss Peabody. “Truth is, I didn’t listen. Rather boring these old men and their anecdotes. He was a very stupid man—but I daresay none the worse General for that. I’ve always heard that intelligence didn’t get you far in the army. Pay attention to your Colonel’s wife and listen respectfully to your superior officers and you’ll get on—that’s what my father used to say.”

Treating this dictum respectfully, Poirot allowed a moment or two to elapse before he said:

“You knew the Arundell family intimately, did you not?”

“Knew ’em all,” said Miss Peabody. “Matilda, she was the eldest. A spotty girl. Used to teach in Sunday School. Was sweet on one of the curates. Then there was Emily. Good seat on a horse, she had. She was the only one who could do anything with her father when he had one of his bouts on. Cartloads of bottles used to be taken out of that house. Buried them at night, they did. Then, let me see, who came next, Arabella or Thomas? Thomas, I think. Always felt sorry for Thomas. One man and four women. Makes a man look a fool. He was a bit of an old woman himself, Thomas was. Nobody thought he’d ever marry. Bit of a shock when he did.”

She chuckled—a rich Victorian fruity chuckle.

It was clear that Miss Peabody was enjoying herself. As an audience we were almost forgotten. Miss Peabody was well away in the past.

“Then came Arabella. Plain girl. Face like a scone. She married all right though, even if she were the plainest of the family. Professor at Cambridge. Quite an old man. Must have been sixty if he was a day. He gave a series of lectures here—on the wonders of Modern Chemistry I think it was. I went to ’em. He mumbled, I remember. Had a beard. Couldn’t hear much of what he said. Arabella used to stay behind and ask questions. She wasn’t a chicken herself. Must have been getting on for forty. Ah well, they’re both dead now. Quite a happy marriage it was. There’s something to be said for marrying a plain woman—you know the worst at once and she’s not so likely to be flighty. Then there was Agnes. She was the youngest—the pretty one. Rather gay we used to think her. Almost fast! Odd, you’d think if any of them had married it would have been Agnes, but she didn’t. She died not long after the war.”

Poirot murmured:

“You said that Mr. Thomas’s marriage was rather unexpected.”

Again Miss Peabody produced that rich, throaty chuckle.

“Unexpected? I should say it was! Made a nine days’ scandal. You’d never have thought it of him—such a quiet, timid, retiring man and devoted to his sisters.”

She paused a minute.

“Remember a case that made rather a stir in the late nineties? Mrs. Varley? Supposed to have poisoned her husband with arsenic. Good-looking woman. Made a big do, that case. She was acquitted. Well, Thomas Arundell quite lost his head. Used to get all the papers and read about the case and cut out the photographs of Mrs. Varley. And would you believe it, when the trial was over, off he went to London and asked her to marry him? Thomas! Quiet, stay at home Thomas! Never can tell with men, can you? They’re always liable to break out.”

“And what happened?”

“Oh, she married him all right.”

“It was a great shock to his sisters?”

“I should think so! They wouldn’t receive her. I don’t know that I blame them, all things considered. Thomas was mortally offended. He went off to live in the Channel Islands and nobody heard anymore of him. Don’t know whether his wife poisoned her first husband. She didn’t poison Thomas. He survived her by three years. There were two children, boy and girl. Good-looking pair—took after their mother.”

“I suppose they came here to their aunt a good deal?”

“Not till after their parents died. They were at school and almost grown up by then. They used to come for holidays. Emily was alone in the world then and they and Bella Biggs were the only kith and kin she had.”

“Biggs?”

“Arabella’s daughter. Dull girl—some years older than Theresa. Made a fool of herself though. Married some Dago who was over at the University. A Greek doctor. Dreadful-looking man—got rather a charming manner, though, I must admit. Well, I don’t suppose poor Bella had many chances. Spent her time helping her father or holding wool for her mother. This fellow was exotic. It appealed to her.”

“Has it been a happy marriage?”

Miss Peabody snapped out:

“I wouldn’t like to say for certain about any marriage! They seem quite happy. Two rather yellow-looking children. They live in Smyrna.”

“But they are now in England, are they not?”

“Yes, they came over in March. I rather fancy they’ll be going back soon.”

“Was Miss Emily Arundell fond of her niece?”

“Fond of Bella? Oh, quite. She’s a dull woman—wrapped up in her children and that sort of thing.”

“Did she approve of the husband?”

Miss Peabody chuckled.

“She didn’t approve of him, but I think she rather liked the rascal. He’s got brains, you know. If you ask me, he was jockeying her along very nicely. Got a nose for money that man.”

Poirot coughed.

“I understand Miss Arundell died a rich woman?” he murmured.

Miss Peabody settled herself more comfortably in her chair.

“Yes, that’s what made all the pother! Nobody dreamed she was quite as well off as she was. How it came about was this way. Old General Arundell left quite a nice little income—divided equally among his son and daughters. Some of it was reinvested, and I think every investment has done well. There were some original shares of Mortauld. Now, of course, Thomas and Arabella took their shares with them when they married. The other three sisters lived here, and they didn’t spend a tenth part of their joint income, it all went back and was reinvested. When Matilda died, she left her money to be divided between Emily and Agnes, and when Agnes died she left hers to Emily. And Emily still went on spending very little. Result, she died a rich woman—and the Lawson woman gets it all!”

Miss Peabody brought out the last sentence as a kind of triumphal climax.

“Did that come as a surprise to you, Miss Peabody?”

“To tell you the truth, it did! Emily had always given out quite openly that at her death her money was to be divided between her nieces and her nephew. And as a matter of fact that was the way it was in the original will. Legacies to the servants and so on and then to be divided between Theresa, Charles and Bella. My goodness, there was a to-do when, after her death, it was found she’d made a new will leaving it all to poor Miss Lawson!”

“Was the will made just before her death?”

Miss Peabody directed a sharp glance at him.

“Thinking of undue influence. No, I’m afraid that’s no use. And I shouldn’t think poor Lawson had the brains or the nerve to attempt anything of the sort. To tell you the truth, she seemed as much surprised as anybody—or said she was!”

Poirot smiled at the addition.

“The will was made about ten days before her death,” went on Miss Peabody. “Lawyer says it’s all right. Well—it may be.”

“You mean—” Poirot leaned forward.

“Hanky-panky, that’s what I say,” said Miss Peabody. “Something fishy somewhere.”

“Just what exactly is your idea?”

“Haven’t got one! How should I know where the hanky-panky comes in? I’m not a lawyer. But there’s something queer about it, mark my words.”

Poirot said, slowly:

“Has there been any question of contesting the will?”

“Theresa’s taken counsel’s opinion, I believe. A lot of good that’ll do her! What’s a lawyer’s opinion nine times out of ten? ‘Don’t!’ Five lawyers advised me once against bringing an action. What did I do? Paid no attention. Won my case too. They had me in the witness box and a clever young whippersnapper from London tried to make me contradict myself. But he didn’t manage it. ‘You can hardly identify these furs positively, Miss Peabody,’ he said. ‘There is no furrier’s mark on them.’

“‘That may be,’ I said. ‘But there’s a darn on the lining and if anyone can do a darn like that nowadays I’ll eat my umbrella.’ Collapsed utterly, he did.”

Miss Peabody chuckled heartily.

“I suppose,” said Poirot cautiously, “that—er—feeling—runs rather high between Miss Lawson and members of Miss Arundell’s family?”

“What do you expect? You know what human nature is. Always trouble after a death, anyway. A man or woman is hardly cold in their coffin before most of the mourners are scratching each other’s eyes out.”

Poirot sighed.

“Too true.”

“That’s human nature,” said Miss Peabody tolerantly.

Poirot changed to another subject.

“Is it true that Miss Arundell dabbled in spiritualism?”

Miss Peabody’s penetrating eye observed him very acutely.

“If you think,” she said, “that the spirit of John Arundell came back and ordered Emily to leave her money to Minnie Lawson and that Emily obeyed, I can tell you that you’re very much mistaken. Emily wouldn’t be that kind of fool. If you ask me, she found spiritualism one degree better than playing patience or cribbage. Seen the Tripps?”

“No.”

“If you had, you’d realize just the sort of silliness it was. Irritating women. Always giving you messages from one or other of your relations—and always totally incongruous ones. They believe it all. So did Minnie Lawson. Oh, well, one way of passing your evenings is as good as another, I suppose.”

Poirot tried yet another tack.

“You know young Charles Arundell, I presume? What kind of person is he?”

“He’s no good. Charmin’ fellow. Always hard up—always in debt—always returning like a bad penny from all over the world. Knows how to get round women all right.” She chuckled. “I’ve seen too many like him to be taken in! Funny son for Thomas to have had, I must say. He was a staid old fogy if you like. Model of rectitude. Ah, well, bad blood somewhere. Mind you, I like the rascal—but he’s the kind who would murder his grandmother for a shilling or two quite cheerfully. No moral sense. Odd the way some people seem to be born without it.”

“And his sister?”

“Theresa?” Miss Peabody shook her head and said slowly: “I don’t know. She’s an exotic creature. Not usual. She’s engaged to that namby-pamby doctor down here. You’ve seen him, perhaps?”

“Dr. Donaldson.”

“Yes. Clever in his profession, they say. But he’s a poor stick in other ways. Not the sort of young man I’d fancy if I were a young girl. Well, Theresa should know her mind. She’s had her experiences, I’ll be bound.”

“Dr. Donaldson did not attend Miss Arundell?”

“He used to when Grainger was away on holiday.”

“But not in her last illness.”

“Don’t think so.”

Poirot said, smiling:

“I gather, Miss Peabody, that you don’t think much of him as a doctor?”

“Never said so. As a matter of fact you’re wrong. He’s sharp enough, and clever enough in his way—but it’s not my way. Take an instance. In the old days when a child ate too many green apples it had a bilious attack and the doctor called it a bilious attack and went home and sent you along a few pills from the surgery. Nowadays, you’re told the child suffers from pronounced acidosis, that its diet must be supervised and you get the same medicine, only it’s in nice little white tablets put up by manufacturing chemists and costs you about three times as much! Donaldson belongs to that school, and mind you, most young mothers prefer it. It sounds better. Not that that young man will be in this place long ministering to measles and bilious attacks. He’s got his eye on London. He’s ambitious. He means to specialize.”

“In any particular line?”

“Serum therapeutics. I think I’ve got it right. The idea being that you get one of these nasty hypodermic needles stuck into you no matter how well you feel, just in case you should catch something. I don’t hold with all these messy injections myself.”

“Is Dr. Donaldson experimenting with any particular disease?”

“Don’t ask me. All I know is a G.P.’s practice isn’t good enough for him. He wants to set up in London. But to do that he’s got to have money and he’s as poor as a church mouse, whatever a church mouse may be.”

Poirot murmured:

“Sad that real ability is so often baulked by lack of money. And yet there are people who do not spend a quarter of their incomes.”

“Emily Arundell didn’t,” said Miss Peabody. “It was quite a surprise to some people when that will was read. The amount, I mean, not the way it was left.”

“Was it a surprise, do you think, to the members of her own family?”

“That’s telling,” said Miss Peabody screwing up her eyes with a good deal of enjoyment. “I wouldn’t say yes, and I wouldn’t say no. One of ’em had a pretty shrewd idea.”

“Which one?”

“Master Charles. He’d done a bit of calculation on his own account. He’s no fool, Charles.”

“But a little bit of a rogue, eh?”

“At any rate, he isn’t a namby-pamby stick,” said Miss Peabody viciously.

She paused a minute and then asked:

“Going to get in touch with him?”

“That was my intention.” Poirot went on solemnly, “It seems to me possible that he might have certain family papers relating to his grandfather?”

“More likely to have made a bonfire of them. No respect for his elders, that young man.”

“One must try all avenues,” said Poirot sententiously.

“So it seems,” said Miss Peabody drily.

There was a momentary glint in her blue eye that seemed to affect Poirot disagreeably. He rose.

“I must not trespass any longer on your time, madame. I am most grateful for what you have been able to tell me.”

“I’ve done my best,” said Miss Peabody. “Seem to have got rather a long way from the Indian Mutiny, don’t we?”

She shook hands with us both.

“Let me know when the book comes out,” was her parting remark. “I shall be so interested.”

And the last thing we heard as we left the room was a rich, throaty chuckle.

Eleven

VISIT TO THE MISSES TRIPP

“And now,” said Poirot as we reentered the car. “What do we do next?”

Warned by experience I did not this time suggest a return to town. After all, if Poirot was enjoying himself in his own fashion why should I object?

I suggested some tea.

“Tea, Hastings? What an idea! Regard the time.”

“I have regarded it—looked at it, I mean. It’s half past five. Tea is clearly indicated.”

Poirot sighed.

“Always the afternoon tea with you English! No, mon ami, no tea for us. In a book of etiquette I read the other day that one must not make the afternoon call after six o’clock. To do so is to commit the solecism. We have, therefore, but half an hour in which to accomplish our purpose.”

“How social you are today, Poirot! On whom are we calling now?”

“Les demoiselles Tripp.”

“Are you writing a book on spiritualism now? Or is it still the life of General Arundell?”

“It will be simpler than that, my friend. But we must inquire where these ladies live.”

Directions were forthcoming readily enough, but of a somewhat confused nature involving as they did a series of lanes. The abode of the Misses Tripp turned out to be a picturesque cottage—so extremely old-world and picturesque that it looked as though it might collapse any minute.

A child of fourteen or thereabouts opened the door and with difficulty squeezed herself against the wall sufficiently to allow us to pass inside.

The interior was very rich in old oak beams—there was a big open fireplace and such very small windows that it was difficult to see clearly. All the furniture was of pseudo simplicity—ye olde oake for ye cottage dweller—there was a good deal of fruit in wooden bowls and large numbers of photographs—most of them, I noticed, of the same two people represented in different poses—usually with bunches of flowers clasped to their breasts or clutching large leghorn picture hats.

The child who had admitted us had murmured something and disappeared, but her voice was clearly audible in an upper story.

“Two gentlemen to see you, Miss.”

A sort of twitter of female voices arose and presently with a good deal of creaking and rustling a lady descended the staircase and came graciously towards us.

She was nearer fifty than forty, her hair was parted in the middle in Madonna fashion, her eyes were brown and slightly prominent. She wore a sprigged muslin dress that conveyed an odd suggestion of fancy dress.

Poirot stepped forward and started the conversation in his most flourishing manner.

“I must apologize for intruding upon you, mademoiselle, but I am in somewhat of a predicament. I came here to find a certain lady, but she has left Market Basing and I was told that you would certainly have her address.”

“Really? Who was that?”

“Miss Lawson.”

“Oh, Minnie Lawson. Of course! We are the greatest friends. Do sit down, Mr.—er—?”

“Parotti—my friend, Captain Hastings.”

Miss Tripp acknowledged the introductions and began to fuss a little.

“Sit here, won’t you—no, please—really, I always prefer an upright chair myself. Now, are you sure you are comfortable there? Dear Minnie Lawson—oh, here is my sister.”

More creaking and rustling and we were joined by a second lady, dressed in green gingham that would have been suitable for a girl of sixteen.

“My sister Isabel—Mr.—er—Parrot—and—er—Captain Hawkins. Isabel dear, these gentlemen are friends of Minnie Lawson’s.”

Miss Isabel Tripp was less buxom than her sister. She might indeed have been described as scraggy. She had very fair hair done up into a large quantity of rather messy curls. She cultivated a girlish manner and was easily recognizable as the subject of most of the flower poses in the photography. She clasped her hands now in girlish excitement.

“How delightful! Dear Minnie! You have seen her lately?”

“Not for some years,” explained Poirot. “We have quite lost touch with each other. I have been travelling. That is why I was so astonished and delighted to hear of the good fortune that had befallen my old friend.”

“Yes, indeed. And so well deserved! Minnie is such a rare soul. So simple—so earnest.”

“Julia,” cried Isabel.

“Yes, Isabel?”

“How remarkable. P. You remember the planchette distinctly insisted on P. last night. A visitor from over the water and the initial P.”

“So it did,” agreed Julia.

Both ladies looked at Poirot in rapt and delighted surprise.

"It never lies," said Miss Julia softly.

"Are you interested at all in the occult, Mr. Parrot?"

"I have little experience, mademoiselle, but—like anyone who has travelled much in the East, I am bound to admit that there is much one does not understand and that cannot be explained by natural means."

"So true," said Julia. "Profoundly true."

"The East," murmured Isabel. "The home of mysticism and the occult."

Poirot's travellings in the East, as far as I knew, consisted of one journey to Syria extended to Iraq, and which occupied perhaps a few weeks. To judge by his present conversation one would swear that he had spent most of his life in jungles and bazaars and in intimate converse with fakirs, dervishes, and mahatmas.

As far as I could make out the Misses Tripp were vegetarians, theosophists, British Israelites, Christian Scientists, spiritualists and enthusiastic amateur photographers.

"One sometimes feels," said Julia with a sigh, "that Market Basing is an impossible place to live. There is no beauty here—no soul. One must have soul, don't you think so, Captain Hawkins?"

"Quite," I said slightly embarrassed. "Oh, quite."

"Where there is no vision the people perish," quoted Isabel with a sigh. "I have often tried to discuss things with the vicar, but find him painfully narrow. Don't you think, Mr. Parrot, that any definite creed is bound to be narrowing?"

"And everything is so simple, really," put in her sister. "As we know so well, everything is joy and love!"

"As you say, as you say," said Poirot. "What a pity it seems that misunderstandings and quarrels should arise—especially over money."

"Money is too sordid," sighed Julia.

"I gather that the late Miss Arundell was one of your converts?" said Poirot.

The two sisters looked at each other.

"I wonder," said Isabel.

"We were never quite sure," breathed Julia. "One minute she seemed to be convinced and then she would say something—so—so ribald."

"Ah, but you remember that last manifestation," said Julia. "That was really most remarkable." She turned to Poirot. "It was the night dear Miss Arundell was taken ill. My sister and I went round after dinner and we had a sitting—just the four of us. And you know we saw—we all three saw—most distinctly, a kind of halo round Miss Arundell's head."

"Comment?"

"Yes. It was a kind of luminous haze." She turned to her sister. "Isn't that how you would describe it, Isabel?"

"Yes. Yes, just that. A luminous haze gradually surrounding Miss Arundell's head—an aureole of faint light. It was a sign—we know that now—a sign that she was about to pass over to the other side."

"Remarkable," said Poirot in a suitably impressed voice. "It was dark in the room, yes?"

"Oh, yes, we always get better results in the dark, and it was quite a warm evening so we didn't even have the fire on."

"A most interesting spirit spoke to us," said Isabel. "Fatima, her name was. She told us she had passed over in the time of the Crusades. She gave us a most beautiful message."

"She actually spoke to you?"

“No, not direct voice. She rapped it out. Love. Hope. Life. Beautiful words.”

“And Miss Arundell was actually taken ill at the seance?”

“It was just after. Some sandwiches and port wine were brought in, and dear Miss Arundell said she wouldn’t have any as she wasn’t feeling very well. That was the beginning of her illness. Mercifully, she did not have to endure much suffering.”

“She passed over four days later,” said Isabel. “And we have already had messages from her,” said Julia eagerly. “Saying that she is very happy and that everything is beautiful and that she hopes that there is love and peace among all her dear ones.”

Poirot coughed.

“That—er—is hardly the case, I fear?”

“The relations have behaved disgracefully to poor Minnie,” said Isabel. Her face flushed with indignation.

“Minnie is the most unworldly soul,” chimed in Julia.

“People have gone about saying the unkindest things—that she schemed for this money to be left her!”

“When really it was the greatest surprise to her—”

“She could hardly believe her ears when the lawyer read the will—”

“She told us so herself. ‘Julia,’ she said to me. ‘My dear, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Just a few bequests to the servants and then Littlegreen House and the residue of my estate to Wilhelmina Lawson.’ She was so flabbergasted she could hardly speak. And when she could she asked how much it would be—thinking perhaps it would be a few thousand pounds—and Mr. Purvis, after humming and hawing and talking about confusing things like gross and net personalities, said it would be in the neighbourhood of three hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds. Poor Minnie nearly fainted, she told us.”

“She had no idea,” the other sister reiterated. “She never thought of such a thing happening!”

“That is what she told you, yes?”

“Oh, yes, she repeated it several times. And that’s what makes it so wicked of the Arundell family to go on as they have done—cold-shouldering her and treating her with suspicion. After all, this is a free country—”

“English people seem to labour under that misapprehension,” murmured Poirot.

“And I should hope anyone can leave their money exactly as they choose! I think Miss Arundell acted very wisely. Obviously she mistrusted her own relatives and I daresay she had her reasons.”

“Ah?” Poirot leant forward with interest. “Indeed?”

This flattering attention encouraged Isabel to proceed.

“Yes, indeed. Mr. Charles Arundell, her nephew, is a thoroughly bad lot. That’s well known! I believe he’s even wanted by the police in some foreign country. Not at all a desirable character. As for his sister, well, I’ve not actually spoken to her, but she’s a very queer-looking girl. Ultra modern, of course, and terribly made-up. Really, the sight of her mouth made me quite ill. It looked like blood. And I rather suspect she takes drugs—her manner was so odd sometimes. She’s by way of being engaged to that nice young Dr. Donaldson, but I fancy even he looked disgusted sometimes. Of course, she is attractive in her way, but I hope that he will come to his senses in time and marry some nice English girl who is fond of country life and outdoor pursuits.”

“And the other relations?”

“Well, there you are again. Very undesirable. Not that I’ve anything to say against Mrs. Tanios—she’s quite a nice woman—but absolutely stupid and completely under her husband’s thumb. Of course, he’s really a Turk, I believe—rather dreadful for an English girl to marry a Turk, I think, don’t you? It shows a certain lack of fastidiousness. Of course, Mrs. Tanios is a very good mother, though the children are singularly unattractive, poor little things.”

“So altogether you think Miss Lawson was a more worthy recipient of Miss Arundell’s fortune?”

Julia said serenely:

“Minnie Lawson is a thoroughly good woman. And so unworldly. It isn’t as though she had ever thought about money. She was never grasping.”

“Still, she has never thought of refusing to accept the legacy?”

Isabel drew back a little.

“Oh, well—one would hardly do that.”

Poirot smiled.

“No, perhaps not….”

“You see, Mr. Parrot,” put in Julia. “She regards it as a trust—a sacred trust.”

“And she is quite willing to do something for Mrs. Tanios or for the Tanios children,” went on Isabel. “Only she doesn’t want him to get hold of it.”

“She even said she would consider making Theresa an allowance.”

“And that, I think, was very generous of her—considering the offhand way that girl has always treated her.”

“Indeed, Mr. Parrot, Minnie is the most generous of creatures. But there now, you know her, of course!”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “I know her. But I still do not know—her address.”

“Of course! How stupid of me! Shall I write it down for you?”

“I can write it down.”

Poirot produced the invariable notebook.

“17, Clanroyden Mansions, W.2. Not very far from Whiteleys. You’ll give her our love, won’t you? We haven’t heard from her just lately.”

Poirot rose and I followed suit.

“I have to thank you both very much,” he declared, “for a most charming talk as well as for your kindness in supplying me with my friend’s address.”

“I wonder they didn’t give it to you at the house,” exclaimed Isabel. “It must be that Ellen! Servants are so jealous and so small-minded. They used to be quite rude to Minnie sometimes.”

Julia shook hands in a grande dame manner.

“We have enjoyed your visit,” she declared graciously. “I wonder—”

She flashed a glance of inquiry at her sister.

“You would, perhaps—” Isabel flushed a little. “Would you, that is to say, stay and share our evening meal? A very simple one—some shredded raw vegetables, brown bread and butter, fruit.”

“It sounds delicious,” Poirot said hastily. “But alas! my friend and I have to return to London.”

With renewed handshaking and messages to be delivered to Miss Lawson, we at last made our exit.

Twelve

POIROT DISCUSSES THE CASE

“Thank goodness, Poirot,” I said with fervour, “you got us out of those raw carrots! What awful women!”

“Pour nous, un bon bifteck—with the fried potatoes—and a good bottle of wine. What should we have had to drink there, I wonder?”

“Well, water, I should think,” I replied with a shudder. “Or nonalcoholic cider. It was that kind of place! I bet there’s no bath and no sanitation except an E.C. in the garden!”

“Strange how women enjoy living an uncomfortable life,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “It is not always poverty, though they are good at making the best of straitened circumstances.”

“What orders for the chauffeur now?” I asked, as I negotiated the last bend of the winding lanes, and we emerged on the road to Market Basing. “On what local light do we call next? Or do we return to the George and interrogate the asthmatic waiter once more?”

“You will be glad to hear, Hastings, that we have finished with Market Basing—”

“Splendid.”

“For the moment only. I shall return!”

“Still on the track of your unsuccessful murderer?”

“Exactly.”

“Did you learn anything from the fandango of nonsense we’ve just been listening to?”

Poirot said precisely:

“There were certain points deserving of attention. The various characters in our drama begin to emerge more clearly. In some ways it resembles, does it not, a novelette of older days? The humble companion, once despised, is raised to affluence and now plays the part of lady bountiful.”

“I should imagine that such a patronage must be very galling to people who regard themselves as the rightful heirs!”

“As you say, Hastings. Yes, that is very true.”

We drove on in silence for some minutes. We had passed through Market Basing and were now once more on the main road. I hummed to myself softly the tune of “Little Man, You’ve had a Busy Day.”

“Enjoyed yourself, Poirot?” I asked at last.

Poirot said coldly:

“I do not know quite what you mean by ‘enjoyed myself,’ Hastings.”

“Well,” I said, “it seemed to me you’ve been treating yourself to a busman’s holiday!”

“You do not think that I am serious?”

“Oh, you’re serious enough. But this business seems to be of the academic kind. You’re tackling it for your own mental satisfaction. What I mean is—it’s not real.”

“Au contraire, it is intensely real.”

“I express myself badly. What I mean is, if there were a question of helping our old lady, or protecting her against further attack—well, there would be some excitement then. But as it is, I can’t help feeling that as she is dead, why worry?”

“In that case, mon ami, one would not investigate a murder case at all!”

“No, no, no. That’s quite different. I mean, then you have a body… Oh, dash it all!”

“Do not enrage yourself. I comprehend perfectly. You make a distinction between a body and a mere decease. Supposing, for instance, that Miss Arundell had died with sudden and alarming violence instead of respectably of a long-standing illness—then you would not remain indifferent to my efforts to discover the truth?”

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

“But all the same, someone did attempt to murder her?”

“Yes, but they didn’t succeed. That makes all the difference.”

“It does not intrigue you at all to know who attempted to kill her?”

“Well, yes, it does in a way.”

“We have a very restricted circle,” said Poirot musingly. “That thread—”

“The thread which you merely deduce from a nail in the skirting board!” I interrupted. “Why, that nail may have been there for years!”

“No. The varnish was quite fresh.”

“Well, I still think there might be all sorts of explanations of it.”

“Give me one.”

At the moment I could not think of anything sufficiently plausible. Poirot took advantage of my silence to sweep on with his discourse.

“Yes, a restricted circle. That thread could only have been stretched across the top of the stairs after everyone had gone to bed. Therefore we have only the occupants of the house to consider. That is to say, the guilt lies between seven people. Dr. Tanios. Mrs. Tanios. Theresa Arundell. Charles Arundell. Miss Lawson. Ellen. Cook.”

"Surely you can leave the servants out of it."

"They received legacies, mon cher. And there might have been other reasons—spite—a quarrel—dishonesty—one cannot be certain."

"It seems to me very unlikely."

"Unlikely, I agree. But one must take all possibilities into consideration."

"In that case, you must allow for eight people, not seven."

"How so?"

I felt I was about to score a point.

"You must include Miss Arundell herself. How do you know she may not have stretched that thread across the stairs in order to trip up some other members of the house party?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"It is a bêtise you say there, my friend. If Miss Arundell laid a trap, she would be careful not to fall into it herself. It was she who fell down the stairs, remember."

I retired crestfallen.

Poirot went on in a thoughtful voice:

"The sequence of events is quite clear—the fall—the letter to me—the visit of the lawyer—but there is one doubtful point. Did Miss Arundell deliberately hold back the letter to me, hesitating to post it? Or did she, once having written it, assume it was posted?"

"That we can't possibly tell," I said. "No. We can only guess. Personally, I fancy that she assumed it had been posted. She must have been surprised at getting no reply…."

My thoughts had been busy in another direction.

“Do you think this spiritualistic nonsense counted at all?” I asked. “I mean, do you think, in spite of Miss Peabody’s ridiculing of the suggestion, that a command was given at one of these séances that she should alter her will and leave her money to the Lawson woman?”

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

“That does not seem to fit in with the general impression I have formed of Miss Arundell’s character.”

“The Tripp women say that Miss Lawson was completely taken aback when the will was read,” I said thoughtfully.

“That is what she told them, yes,” agreed Poirot.

“But you don’t believe it?”

“Mon ami—you know my suspicious nature! I believe nothing that anyone says unless it can be confirmed or corroborated.”

“That’s right, old boy,” I said affectionately. “A thoroughly nice, trustful nature.”

“‘He says,’ ‘she says,’ ‘they say’—Bah! what does that mean? Nothing at all. It may be absolute truth. It may be useful falsehood. Me, I deal only with facts.”

“And the facts are?”

“Miss Arundell had a fall. That, nobody disputes. The fall was not a natural one—it was contrived.”

“The evidence for that being that Hercule Poirot says so!”

“Not at all. There is the evidence of the nail. The evidence of Miss Arundell’s letter to me. The evidence of the dog having been out that night. The evidence of Miss Arundell’s words about the jar and the picture and Bob’s ball. All these things are facts.”

“And the next fact, please?”

“The next fact is the answer to our usual question. Who benefits by Miss Arundell’s death? Answer—Miss Lawson.”

“The wicked companion! On the other hand, the others thought they were going to benefit. And at the time of the accident they would have benefited.”

“Exactly, Hastings. That is why they all lie equally under suspicion. There is also the little fact that Miss Lawson took pains to prevent Miss Arundell learning that Bob had been out all night.”

“You call that suspicious?”

“Not at all. I merely note it. It may have been natural concern for the old lady’s peace of mind. That is by far the most likely explanation.”

I looked at Poirot sideways. He is so confoundedly slippery.

“Miss Peabody expressed the opinion that there was ‘hanky-panky’ about the will,” I said. “What do you suppose she meant by that?”

“It was, I think, her way of expressing various nebulous and unformulated suspicions.”

“Undue influence, it seems, can be washed out,” I said thoughtfully. “And it certainly looks as though Emily Arundell was much too sensible to believe in any tomfoolery like spiritualism.”

“What makes you say that spiritualism is tomfoolery, Hastings?”

I stared at him in astonishment.

“My dear Poirot—those appalling women—”

He smiled.

“I quite agree with your estimate of the Misses Tripp. But the mere fact that the Misses Tripp have adopted with enthusiasm Christian Science, vegetarianism, theosophy and spiritualism does not really constitute a damning indictment of those subjects! Because a foolish woman will tell you a lot of nonsense about a fake scarab which she has bought from a rascal dealer, that does not necessarily bring discredit on the general subject of Egyptology!”

“Do you mean you believe in spiritualism, Poirot?”

“I have an open mind on the subject. I have never studied any of its manifestations myself, but it must be accepted that many men of science and learning have pronounced themselves satisfied that there are phenomena which cannot be accounted for by—shall we say the credulity of a Miss Tripp?”

“Then you believe in this rigmarole of an aureole of light surrounding Miss Arundell’s head?”

Poirot waved a hand.

“I was speaking generally—rebuking your attitude of quite unreasoning scepticism. I may say that, having formed a certain opinion of Miss Tripp and her sister, I should examine very carefully any fact they presented for my notice. Foolish women, mon ami, are foolish women, whether they are talking about spiritualism or politics or the relation of the sexes or the tenets of the Buddhist faith.”

“Yet you listened to what they had to say very carefully.”

“That has been my task today—to listen. To hear what everyone has got to tell me about these seven people—and mainly, of course, the five people primarily concerned. Already we know certain aspects of these people. Take Miss Lawson. From the Misses Tripp we learn she was devoted, unselfish, unworldly and altogether a beautiful character. From Miss Peabody we learn that she was credulous, stupid, without the nerve or the brains to attempt anything criminal. From Dr. Grainger we learn that she was downtrodden, that her position was precarious, and that she was a poor ‘frightened, fluttering hen,’ were, I think, the words he used. From our waiter we learned that Miss Lawson was ‘a person,’ and from Ellen that Bob, the dog, despised her! Everyone, you see, saw her from a slightly different angle. That is the same with the others. Nobody’s opinion of Charles Arundell’s morals seems to have been high, but nevertheless they vary in their manner of speaking of him. Dr. Grainger calls him indulgently ‘an irreverent young devil.’ Miss Peabody says he would murder his grandmother for twopence but clearly prefers a rascal to a ‘stick.’ Miss Tripp hints not only that he would do a criminal action but that he has done one—or more. These sidelights are all very useful and interesting. They lead to the next thing.”

“Which is?”

“To see for ourselves, my friend.”

Thirteen

THERESA ARUNDELL

On the following morning we made our way to the address given us by Dr. Donaldson.

I suggested to Poirot that a visit to the lawyer, Mr. Purvis, might be a good thing, but Poirot negatived the idea strongly.

“No, indeed, my friend. What could we say—what reason could we advance for seeking information?”

“You’re usually pretty ready with reasons, Poirot! Any old lie would do, wouldn’t it?”

“On the contrary, my friend, ‘any old lie,’ as you put it, would not do. Not with a lawyer. We should be—how do you say it—thrown out with the flea upon the ear.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “Don’t let us risk that!”

So, as I have said, we set out for the flat occupied by Theresa Arundell.

The flat in question was situated in a block at Chelsea overlooking the river. It was furnished expensively in the modern style, with gleaming chromium and thick rugs with geometric designs upon them.

We were kept waiting a few minutes and then a girl entered the room and looked at us inquiringly.

Theresa Arundell looked about twenty-eight or nine. She was tall and very slender, and she looked rather like an exaggerated drawing in black and white. Her hair was jet black—her face heavily made-up, dead pale. Her eyebrows, freakishly plucked, gave her an air of mocking irony. Her lips were the only spot of colour, a brilliant gash of scarlet in a white face. She also conveyed the impression—how I do not quite know, for her manner was almost wearily indifferent—of being at least twice as much alive as most people. There hung about her the restrained energy of a whiplash.

With an air of cool inquiry she looked from me to Poirot.

Wearied (I hoped) of deceit, Poirot had on this occasion sent in his own card. She was holding it now in her fingers, twirling it to and for.

“I suppose,” she said, “you’re M. Poirot?”

Poirot bowed in his best manner.

“At your service, mademoiselle. You permit me to trespass for a few moments of your valuable time?”

With a faint imitation of Poirot’s manner she replied:

“Enchanted, M. Poirot. Pray sit down.”

Poirot sat, rather gingerly, on a low square easy chair. I took an upright one of webbing and chromium. Theresa sat negligently on a low stool in front of the fireplace. She offered us both cigarettes. We refused and she lighted one herself.

“You know my name perhaps, mademoiselle?”

She nodded.

“Little friend of Scotland Yard. That’s right, isn’t it?”

Poirot, I think, did not much relish this description. He said with some importance:

“I concern myself with problems of crime, mademoiselle.”

“How frightfully thrilling,” said Theresa Arundell in a bored voice. “And to think I’ve lost my autograph book!”

“The matter with which I concern myself is this,” continued Poirot. “Yesterday I received a letter from your aunt.”

Her eyes—very long, almond-shaped eyes—opened a little. She puffed smoke in a cloud.

“From my aunt, M. Poirot?”

“That is what I said, mademoiselle.”

She murmured:

“I’m sorry if I’m spoiling sport in any way, but really, you know, there isn’t any such person! All my aunts are mercifully dead. The last died two months ago.”

“Miss Emily Arundell?”

“Yes, Miss Emily Arundell. You don’t receive letters from corpses, do you, M. Poirot?”

“Sometimes I do, mademoiselle.”

“How macabre!”

But there was a new note in her voice—a note suddenly alert and watchful.

“And what did my aunt say, M. Poirot?”

“That, mademoiselle, I can hardly tell you just at present. It was, you see, a somewhat”—he coughed—“delicate matter.”

There was silence for a minute or two. Theresa Arundell smoked. Then she said:

“It all sounds delightfully hush-hush. But where exactly do I come in?”

“I hoped, mademoiselle, that you might consent to answer a few questions.”

“Questions? What about?”

“Questions of a family nature.”

Again I saw her eyes widen.

“That sounds rather pompous! Supposing you give me a specimen.”

“Certainly. Can you tell me the present address of your brother Charles?”

The eyes narrowed again. Her latent energy was less apparent. It was as though she withdrew into a shell.

“I’m afraid I can’t. We don’t correspond much. I rather think he has left England.”

“I see.”

Poirot was silent for a minute or two.

“Was that all you wanted to know?”

“Oh, I have other questions. For one—are you satisfied with the way in which your aunt disposed of her fortune? For another—how long have you been engaged to Dr. Donaldson?”

“You do jump about, don’t you?”

“Eh bien?”

“Eh bien—since we are so foreign!—my answer to both those questions is they are none of your business! Ca ne vous regarde pas, M. Hercule Poirot.”

Poirot studied her for a moment or two attentively. Then, with no trace of disappointment, he got up.

“So it is like that! Ah, well, perhaps it is not surprising. Allow me, mademoiselle, to congratulate you upon your French accent. And to wish you a very good morning. Come, Hastings.”

We had reached the door when the girl spoke. The simile of a whiplash came again into my mind. She did not move from her position but the two words were like the flick of a whip.

“Come back!” she said.

Poirot obeyed slowly. He sat down again and looked at her inquiringly.

“Let’s stop playing the fool,” she said. “It’s just possible that you might be useful to me, M. Hercule Poirot.”

“Delighted, mademoiselle—and how?”

Between two puffs of cigarette smoke she said very quietly and evenly:

“Tell me how to break that will.”

“Surely a lawyer—”

“Yes, a lawyer, perhaps—if I knew the right lawyer. But the only lawyers I know are respectable men! Their advice is that the will holds good in law and that any attempts to contest it will be useless expense.”

“But you do not believe them.”

“I believe there is always a way to do things—if you don’t mind being unscrupulous and are prepared to pay. Well, I am prepared to pay.”

“And you take it for granted that I am prepared to be unscrupulous if I am paid?”

“I’ve found that to be true of most people! I don’t see why you should be an exception. People always protest about their honesty and their rectitude to begin with, of course.”

“Just so, that is part of the game, eh? But what, given that I was prepared to be—unscrupulous—do you think I could do?”

“I don’t know. But you’re a clever man. Everyone knows that. You could think out some scheme.”

“Such as?”

Theresa Arundell shrugged her shoulders.

“That’s your business. Steal the will and substitute a forgery… Kidnap the Lawson and frighten her into saying she bullied Aunt Emily into making it. Produce a later will made on old Emily’s deathbed.”

“Your fertile imagination takes my breath away, mademoiselle!”

“Well, what is your answer? I’ve been frank enough. If it’s righteous refusal, there’s the door.”

“It is not righteous refusal—yet—” said Poirot.

Theresa Arundell laughed. She looked at me.

“Your friend,” she observed, “looks shocked. Shall we send him out to chase himself round the block?”

Poirot addressed himself to me with some slight irritation.

“Control, I pray of you, your beautiful and upright nature, Hastings. I demand pardon for my friend, mademoiselle. He is, as you have perceived, honest. But he is also faithful. His loyalty to myself is absolute. In any case, let me emphasize this point”—he looked at her very hard—“whatever we are about to do will be strictly within the law.”

She raised her eyebrows slightly.

“The law,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “has a lot of latitude.”

“I see,” she smiled faintly. “All right, we’ll let that be understood. Do you want to discuss your share of the booty—if there turns out to be any booty?”

“That, also, can be understood. Some nice little pickings—that is all I ask?”

“Done,” said Theresa.

Poirot leant forward.

“Now listen, mademoiselle, usually—in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred cases, shall we say, I am on the side of the law. The hundredth—well, the hundredth is different. For one thing, it is usually much more lucrative… But it has to be done very quietly, you understand—very, very quietly. My reputation, it must not suffer. I have to be careful.”

Theresa Arundell nodded.

“And I must have all the facts of the case! I must have the truth! You comprehend that once one knows the truth it is an easier matter to know just what lies to tell!”

“That seems eminently reasonable.”

“Very well then. Now, on what date was this will made?”

“On April 21st.”

“And the previous will?”

“Aunt Emily made a will five years ago.”

“Its provisions being—?”

“After a legacy to Ellen and one to a former cook, all her property was to be divided between the children of her brother Thomas and the children of her sister Arabella.”

“Was this money left in trust?”

“No, it was left to us absolutely.”

“Now, be careful. Did you all know the provisions of this will?”

“Oh, yes. Charles and I knew—and Bella knew too. Aunt Emily made no secret of it. In fact, if any of us asked for a loan she would usually say, ‘You’ll have all my money when I’m dead and gone. Be content with that fact.’”

“Would she have refused a loan if there had been a case of illness or any dire necessity?”

“No, I don’t think she would,” said Theresa slowly.

“But she considered you all had enough to live on?”

“She considered so—yes.”

There was bitterness in that voice.

“But you—did not?”

Theresa waited a minute or two before speaking. Then she said:

“My father left us thirty thousand pounds each. The interest on that, safely invested, amounts to about twelve hundred a year. Income tax takes another wedge off it. A nice little income on which one can manage very prettily. But I—” her voice changed, her slim body straightened, her head went back—all that wonderful aliveness I had sensed in her came to the fore—“but I want something better than that out of life! I want the best! The best food, the best clothes—something with line to it—beauty—not just suitable covering in the prevailing fashion. I want to live and enjoy—to go to the Mediterranean and lie in the warm summer sea—to sit round a table and play with exciting wads of money—to give parties—wild, absurd, extravagant parties—I want everything that’s going in this rotten world—and I don’t want it some day—I want it now!”

Her voice was wonderfully exciting, warm, exhilarating, intoxicating.

Poirot was studying her intently.

“And you have, I fancy, had it now?”

“Yes, Hercule—I’ve had it!”

“And how much of the thirty thousand is left?”

She laughed suddenly.

“Two hundred and twenty-one pounds, fourteen and seven-pence. That’s the exact balance. So you see, little man, you’ve got to be paid by results. No results—no fees.”

“In that case,” said Poirot in a matter-of-fact manner, “there will certainly be results.”

“You’re a great little man, Hercule. I’m glad we got together.”

Poirot went on in a businesslike way:

“There are a few things that are actually necessary that I should know. Do you drug?”

“No, never.”

“Drink?”

“Quite heavily—but not for the love of it. My crowd drinks and I drink with them, but I could give it up tomorrow.”

“That is very satisfactory.”

She laughed.

“I shan’t give the show away in my cups, Hercule.”

Poirot proceeded:

“Love affairs?”

“Plenty in the past.”

“And the present?”

“Only Rex.”

“That is Dr. Donaldson?”

“Yes.”

“He seems, somehow, very alien from the life you mention.”

“Oh, he is.”

“And yet you care for him. Why, I wonder?”

“Oh, what are reasons? Why did Juliet fall for Romeo?”

“Well for one thing, with all due deference to Shakespeare, he happened to be the first man she had seen.”

Theresa said slowly:

“Rex wasn’t the first man I saw—not by a long way.” She added in a lower voice, “But I think—I feel—he’ll be the last man I’ll ever see.”

“And he is a poor man, mademoiselle.”

She nodded.

“And he, too, needs money?”

“Desperately. Oh, not for the reasons I did. He doesn’t want luxury—or beauty—or excitement—or any of these things. He’d wear the same suit until it went into holes—and eat a congealed chop every day for lunch quite happily, and wash in a cracked tin bath. If he had money it would all go on test tubes and a laboratory and all the rest of it. He’s ambitious. His profession means everything to him. It means more to him than—I do.”

“He knew that you would come into money when Miss Arundell died?”

“I told him so. Oh! after we were engaged. He isn’t really marrying me for my money if that is what you are getting at.”

“You are still engaged?”

“Of course we are.”

Poirot did not reply. His silence seemed to disquiet her.

“Of course we are,” she repeated sharply. And then she added, “You—have you seen him?”

“I saw him yesterday—at Market Basing.”

“Why? What did you say to him?”

“I said nothing. I only asked him for your brother’s address.”

“Charles?” Her voice was sharp again. “What did you want with Charles?”

“Charles? Who wants Charles?”

It was a new voice—a delightful, man’s voice.

A bronze-faced young man with an agreeable grin strolled into the room.

“Who is talking about me?” he asked. “I heard my name in the hall, but I didn’t eavesdrop. They were very particular about eavesdropping at Borstal. Now then, Theresa my girl, what’s all this? Spill the beans.”

Fourteen

CHARLES ARUNDELL

I must confess that from the moment I set eyes on him I entertained a sneaking liking for Charles Arundell. There was something so debonair and carefree about him. His eyes had an agreeable and humorous twinkle and his grin was one of the most disarming I have ever encountered.

He came across the room and sat down on the arm of one of the massive, upholstered chairs.

“What’s it all about, old girl?” he asked.

“This is M. Hercule Poirot, Charles. He is prepared to—er—do some dirty work for us in return for a small consideration.”

“I protest,” cried Poirot. “Not dirty work—shall we say a little harmless deception of some kind—so that the original intention of the testator is carried out? Let us put it that way.”

“Put it anyway you like,” said Charles agreeably. “What made Theresa think of you, I wonder?”

“She did not,” said Poirot quickly. “I came here of my own accord.”

“Offering your services?”

“Not quite that. I was asking for you. Your sister told me you had gone abroad.”

“Theresa,” said Charles, “is a very careful sister. She hardly ever makes a mistake. In fact, she’s suspicious as the devil.”

He smiled at her affectionately but she did not smile back. She looked worried and thoughtful.

“Surely,” said Charles. “We’ve got things the wrong way round? Isn’t M. Poirot famous for tracking down criminals? Surely not for aiding and abetting them?”

“We’re not criminals,” said Theresa sharply.

“But we’re willing to be,” said Charles affably. “I’d thought of a spot of forgery myself—that’s rather my line. I got sent down from Oxford because of a little misunderstanding about a cheque. That was childishly simple, though—merely a question of adding a nought. Then there was another little fracas with Aunt Emily and the local bank. Foolish on my part, of course. I ought to have realized the old lady was sharp as needles. However, all these incidents have been very small fry—fivers and tenners—that class. A deathbed will would be admittedly risky. One would have to get hold of the stiff and starched Ellen and—is suborn the word?—anyway, induce her to say she had witnessed it. It would take some doing, I fear. I might even marry her and then she wouldn’t be able to give evidence against me afterwards.”

He grinned amiably at Poirot.

“I feel sure you’ve installed a secret dictaphone and Scotland Yard is listening in,” he said.

“Your problem interests me,” said Poirot with a touch of reproof in his manner. “Naturally I could not connive at anything against the law. But there are more ways than one—” he stopped significantly.

Charles Arundell shrugged his graceful shoulders.

“I’ve no doubt there’s an equal choice of devious ways inside the law,” he said agreeably. “You should know.”

“By whom was the will witnessed? I mean the one made on April 21st?”

“Purvis brought down his clerk and the second witness was the gardener.”

“It was signed then in Mr. Purvis’s presence?”

"It was."

"And Mr. Purvis, I fancy, is a man of the highest respectability?"

"Purvis, Purvis, Charlesworth and once more Purvis are just about as respectable and impeccable as the Bank of England," said Charles.

"He didn't like making the will," said Theresa. "In an ultracorrect fashion I believe he even tried to dissuade Aunt Emily from making it."

Charles said sharply:

"Did he tell you that, Theresa?"

"Yes. I went to see him again yesterday."

"It's no good, my sweet—you ought to realize that. Only piles up the six and eightpences."

Theresa shrugged her shoulders.

Poirot said:

"I will ask you to give me as much information as you can about the last weeks of Miss Arundell's life. Now, to begin with, I understand that you and your brother and also Dr. Tanios and his wife stayed there for Easter?"

"Yes, we did."

"Did anything happen of significance during that weekend?"

"I don't think so."

"Nothing? But I thought—"

Charles broke in.

"What a self-centred creature you are, Theresa. Nothing of significance happened to you! Wrapped in love's young dream! Let me tell you, M.

Poirot, that Theresa has a blue-eyed boy in Market Basing. One of the local sawbones. She's got rather a faulty sense of proportion in consequence. As a matter of fact, my revered aunt took a header down the stairs and nearly passed out. Wish she had. It would have saved all this fuss."

"She fell down the stairs?"

"Yes, tripped over the dog's ball. Intelligent little brute left it at the top of the stairs and she took a header over it in the night."

"This was—when?"

"Let me see—Tuesday—the evening before we left."

"Your aunt was seriously injured?"

"Unfortunately she didn't fall on her head. If she had we might have pleaded softening of the brain—or whatever it's called scientifically. No, she was hardly hurt at all."

Poirot said drily:

"Very disappointing for you!"

"Eh? Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, as you say, very disappointing. Tough nuts, these old ladies."

"And you all left on the Wednesday morning?"

"That's right."

"That was Wednesday, the fifteenth. When did you next see your aunt?"

"Well, it wasn't the next weekend. It was the weekend after that."

That would be—let me see—the twenty-fifth, would it not?"

"Yes, I think that was the date."

“And your aunt died—when?”

“The following Friday.”

“Having been taken ill on the Monday night?”

“Yes.”

“That was the Monday that you left?”

“Yes.”

“You did not return during her illness?”

“Not until the Friday. We didn’t realize she was really bad.”

“You got there in time to see her alive?”

“No, she died before we arrived.”

Poirot shifted his glance to Theresa Arundell.

“You accompanied your brother on both these occasions?”

“Yes.”

“And nothing was said during the second weekend about a new will having been made?”

“Nothing,” said Theresa.

Charles, however, had answered at the same moment.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “It was.”

He spoke airily as ever, but there was something a little constrained as though the airiness were more artificial than usual.

“It was?” said Poirot.

“Charles!” cried Theresa.

Charles seemed anxious not to meet his sister’s eye.

He spoke to her without looking at her.

“Surely you remember, old girl? I told you. Aunt Emily made a kind of ultimatum of it. Sat there like a judge in court. Made a kind of speech. Said she thoroughly disapproved of all her relations—that is to say, of me and Theresa. Bella, she allowed, she had nothing against, but on the other hand she disliked and distrusted her husband. Buy British was ever Aunt Emily’s motto. If Bella were to inherit any considerable sum of money she said she was convinced that Tanios would somehow or other get possession of it. Trust a Greek to do that! ‘She’s safer as she is,’ she went on to say. Then she said that neither I nor Theresa were fit people to be trusted with money. We would only gamble and squander it away. Therefore, she finished up, she had made a new will and had left the entire estate to Miss Lawson. ‘She is a fool,’ said Aunt Emily, ‘but she is a faithful soul. And I really believe she is devoted to me. She cannot help her lack of brains. I have thought it fairer to tell you this, Charles, as you may as well realize that it will not be possible for you to raise money on your expectations from me.’ Rather a nasty one, that. Just what I’d been trying to do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Charles?” demanded Theresa fiercely.

Poirot asked:

“And what did you say, Mr. Arundell?”

“I?” said Charles airily. “Oh, I just laughed. No good cutting up rough. That’s not the way. ‘Just as you please, Aunt Emily,’ I said. ‘Bit of a blow, perhaps, but after all, it’s your own money and you can do what you like with it.’”

“And your aunt’s reaction to that?”

“Oh, it went down well—very well indeed. She said, ‘Well, I will say you’re a sportsman, Charles.’ And I said, ‘Got to take the rough with the smooth. As a matter of fact, if I've no expectations what about giving me a tenner now?' And she said I was an impudent boy and actually parted with a fiver."

"You concealed your feelings very cleverly."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't take it very seriously."

"You didn't?"

"No. I thought it was what you might call a gesture on the old bean's part. She wanted to frighten us all. I'd a pretty shrewd suspicion that after a few weeks or perhaps months she'd tear that will up. She was pretty hot on family, Aunt Emily. And, as a matter of fact, I believe that's what she would have done if she hadn't died so confoundedly suddenly."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "It is an interesting idea that."

He remained silent for a minute or two then went on:

"Could anyone, Miss Lawson, for instance, have overheard your conversation?"

"Rather. We weren't speaking any too low. As a matter of fact, the Lawson bird was hovering about outside the door when I went out. Been doing a bit of snooping in my opinion."

Poirot turned a thoughtful glance on Theresa.

"And you knew nothing of this?"

Before she could answer, Charles broke in.

"Theresa, old girl, I'm sure I told you—or hinted to you?"

There was a queer sort of pause. Charles was looking fixedly at Theresa, and there was an anxiety, a fixity, about his gaze that seemed out of all proportion to the subject matter.

Theresa said slowly:

“If you had told me—I don’t think—I could have forgotten, do you, M. Poirot?”

Her long dark eyes turned to him.

Poirot said slowly:

“No, I don’t think you could have forgotten, Miss Arundell.”

Then he turned sharply to Charles.

“Let me be quite clear on one point. Did Miss Arundell tell you she was about to alter her will, or did she tell you specifically that she had altered it?”

Charles said quickly:

“Oh, she was quite definite. As a matter of fact she showed me the will.”

Poirot leaned forward. His eyes opened wide.

“This is very important. You say that Miss Arundell actually showed you the will?”

Charles gave a sudden schoolboy wriggle—a rather disarming action. Poirot’s gravity made him quite uncomfortable.

“Yes,” he said. “She showed it to me.”

“You can swear definitely to that?”

“Of course I can.” Charles looked nervously at Poirot. “I don’t see what is so significant about that.”

There was a sudden brusque movement from Theresa. She had risen and was standing by the mantelpiece. She quickly lit another cigarette.

"And you, mademoiselle?" Poirot whirled suddenly round on her. "Did your aunt say nothing of importance to you during that weekend?"

"I don't think so. She was—quite amiable. That is, as amiable as she usually was. Lectured me a bit about my way of life and all that. But then, she always did. She seemed perhaps a bit more jumpy than usual."

Poirot said, smiling:

"I suppose, mademoiselle, that you were more taken up with your fiancé?"

Theresa said sharply:

"He wasn't there. He was away, he'd gone to some medical congress."

"You had not seen him then since the Easter weekend? Was that the last time you had seen him?"

"Yes—on the evening before we left he came to dinner."

"You had not—excuse me—had any quarrel with him then?"

"Certainly not."

"I only thought seeing that he was away on your second visit—"

Charles broke in:

"Ah, but you see, that second weekend was rather unpremeditated. We went down on the spur of the moment."

"Really?"

"Oh, let's have the truth," said Theresa wearily. "You see, Bella and her husband were down the weekend before—fussing over Aunt Emily because of her accident. We thought they might steal a march on us—"

"We thought," said Charles with a grin, "that we'd better show a little concern for Aunt Emily's health too. Really, though, the old lady was much too sharp to be taken in by the dutiful attention stunt. She knew very well how much it was worth. No fool, Aunt Emily.”

Theresa laughed suddenly.

“It’s a pretty story, isn’t it? All of us with our tongues hanging out for money.”

“Was that the case with your cousin and her husband?”

“Oh, yes, Bella’s always hard up. Rather pathetic the way she tries to copy all my clothes at about an eighth of the price. Tanios speculated with her money, I believe. They’re hard put to it to make both ends meet. They’ve got two children and want to educate them in England.”

“Can you perhaps give me their address?” said Poirot.

“They’re staying at the Durham Hotel in Bloomsbury.”

“What is she like, your cousin?”

“Bella? Well, she’s a dreary woman. Eh, Charles?”

“Oh, definitely a dreary woman. Rather like an earwig. She’s a devoted mother. So are earwigs, I believe.”

“And her husband.”

“Tanios? Well, he looks a bit odd, but he’s really a thoroughly nice fellow. Clever, amusing and a thorough good sport.”

“You agree, mademoiselle?”

“Well, I must admit I prefer him to Bella. He’s a damned clever doctor, I believe. All the same, I wouldn’t trust him very far.”

“Theresa,” said Charles, “doesn’t trust anybody.”

He put an arm round her.

“She doesn’t trust me.”

“Anyone who trusted you, my sweet, would be mentally deficient,” said Theresa kindly.

The brother and sister moved apart and looked at Poirot.

Poirot bowed and moved to the door.

“I am—as you say—on the job! It is difficult, but mademoiselle is right. There is always a way. Ah, by the way, this Miss Lawson, is she the kind that might conceivably lose her head under cross-examination in court?”

Charles and Theresa exchanged glances.

“I should say,” said Charles, “that a really bullying K.C. could make her say black was white!”

“That,” said Poirot, “may be very useful.”

He skipped out of the room and I followed him. In the hall he picked up his hat, moved to the front door, opened it and shut it again quickly with a bang. Then he tiptoed to the door of the sitting room and unblushingly applied his ear to the crack. At whatever school Poirot was educated, there were clearly no unwritten rules about eavesdropping. I was horrified but powerless. I made urgent signs to Poirot but he took no notice.

And then, clearly, in Theresa Arundell’s deep, vibrant voice, there came two words:

“You fool!”

There was the noise of footsteps along the passage and Poirot quickly seized me by the arm, opened the front door and passed through, closing it noiselessly behind him.

Fifteen

MISS LAWSON

“Poirot,” I said. “Have we got to listen at doors?”

“Calm yourself, my friend. It was only I who listened! It was not you who put your ear to the crack. On the contrary, you stood bolt upright like a soldier.”

“But I heard just the same.”

“True. Mademoiselle was hardly whispering.”

“Because she thought that we had left the flat.”

“Yes, we practised a little deception there.”

“I don’t like that sort of thing.”

“Your moral attitude is irreproachable! But let us not repeat ourselves. This conversation has occurred on previous occasions. You are about to say that it is not playing the game. And my reply is that murder is not a game.”

“But there is no question of murder here.”

“Do not be sure of that.”

“The intention, yes, perhaps. But after all, murder, and attempted murder are not the same thing.”

“Morally they are exactly the same thing. But what I meant was, are you so sure that it is only attempted murder that occupies our attention?”

I stared at him.

“But old Miss Arundell died a perfectly natural death.”

"I repeat again—are you so sure?"

"Everyone says so!"

"Everyone? Oh, là, là!"

"The doctor says so," I pointed out. "Dr. Grainger. He ought to know."

"Yes, he ought to know." Poirot's voice was dissatisfied. "But remember, Hastings, again and again a body is exhumed—and in each case a certificate has been signed in all good faith by the doctor attending the case."

"Yes, but in this case, Miss Arundell died of a long-standing complaint."

"It seems so—yes."

Poirot's voice was still dissatisfied. I looked at him keenly.

"Poirot," I said, "I'll begin a sentence with Are you sure! Are you sure you are not being carried away by professional zeal? You want it to be murder and so you think it must be murder."

The shadow on his brow deepened. He nodded his head slowly.

"It is clever what you say, there, Hastings. It is a weak spot on which you put your finger. Murder is my business. I am like a great surgeon who specializes in—say—appendicitis or some rarer operation. A patient comes to him and he regards that patient solely from the standpoint of his own specialized subject. Is there any possible reason for thinking this man suffers from so and so…? Me, I am like that, too. I say to myself always, 'Can this possibly be murder?' And you see, my friend, there is nearly always a possibility."

"I shouldn't say there was much possibility here," I remarked.

"But she died, Hastings! You cannot get away from that fact. She died!"

"She was in poor health. She was past seventy. It all seems perfectly natural to me."

"And does it also seem natural to you that Theresa Arundell should call her brother a fool with that degree of intensity?"

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Everything! Tell me, what did you think of that statement of Mr. Charles Arundell's—that his aunt had shown him her new will?"

I looked at Poirot, warily.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

Why should Poirot always be the one to ask the questions?

"I call it very interesting—very interesting indeed. So was Miss Theresa Arundell's reaction to it. Their passage of arms was suggestive—very suggestive."

"H'm," I said, in oracular fashion.

"It opens up two distinct lines of inquiry."

"They seem a nice pair of crooks," I remarked. "Ready for anything. The girl's amazingly good-looking. As for young Charles, he's certainly an attractive scoundrel."

Poirot was just hailing a taxi. It drew into the kerb and Poirot gave an address to the driver.

"17 Clanroyden Mansions, Bayswater."

"So it's Lawson next," I commented. "And after that—the Tanioses?"

"Quite right, Hastings."

"What rôle are you adopting here?" I inquired as the taxi drew up at Clanroyden Mansions. "The biographer of General Arundell, a prospective tenant of Littlegreen House, or something more subtle still?"

“I shall present myself simply as Hercule Poirot.”

“How very disappointing,” I gibed.

Poirot merely threw me a glance and paid off the taxi.

No. 17 was on the second floor. A pert-looking maid opened the door and showed us into a room that really struck a ludicrous note after the one we had just left.

Theresa Arundell’s flat had been bare to the point of emptiness. Miss Lawson’s on the other hand was so crammed with furniture and odds and ends that one could hardly move about without the fear of knocking something over.

The door opened and a rather stout, middle-aged lady came in. Miss Lawson was very much as I had pictured her. She had an eager, rather foolish face, untidy greyish hair and pince-nez perched a little askew on her nose. Her style of conversation was spasmodic and consisted of gasps.

“Good morning—er—I don’t think—”

“Miss Wilhelmina Lawson?”

“Yes—yes—that is my name….”

“My name is Poirot—Hercule Poirot. Yesterday I was looking over Littlegreen House.”

“Oh, yes?”

Miss Lawson’s mouth fell a little wider open and she made some inefficient dabs at her untidy hair.

“Won’t you sit down?” she went on. “Sit here, won’t you? Oh, dear, I’m afraid that table is in your way. I’m just a leetle bit crowded here. So difficult! These flats! Just a teeny bit on the small side. But so central! And I do like being central. Don’t you?”

With a gasp she sat down on an uncomfortable-looking Victorian chair and, her pince-nez still awry, leaned forward breathlessly and looked at Poirot hopefully.

“I went to Littlegreen House in the guise of a purchaser,” went on Poirot. “But I should like to say at once—this is in the strictest confidence—”

“Oh, yes,” breathed Miss Lawson, apparently pleasurably excited.

“The very strictest confidence,” continued Poirot, “that I went there with another object… You may or may not be aware that shortly before she died Miss Arundell wrote to me—”

He paused and then went on:

“I am a well-known private detective.”

A variety of expressions chased themselves over Miss Lawson’s slightly flushed countenance. I wondered which one Poirot would single out as relevant to his inquiry. Alarm, excitement, surprise, puzzlement….

“Oh,” she said. Then after a pause, “Oh,” again.

And then, quite unexpectedly, she asked:

“Was it about the money?”

Poirot, even, was slightly taken aback. He said tentatively:

“You mean the money that was—”

“Yes, yes. The money that was taken from the drawer?”

Poirot said, quietly:

“Miss Arundell didn’t tell you she had written to me on the subject of that money?”

“No, indeed. I had no idea—Well, really, I must say I’m very surprised—”

"You thought she would not have mentioned it to anyone?"

"I certainly didn't think so. You see, she had a very good idea—"

She stopped again. Poirot said, quickly:

"She had a very good idea who took it. That is what you would say, is it not?"

Miss Lawson nodded and continued breathlessly:

"And I shouldn't have thought she would have wanted—well, I mean she said—that is, she seemed to feel—"

Again Poirot cut in neatly into the midst of these incoherencies.

"It was a family matter?"

"Exactly."

"But me," said Poirot, "I specialize in family matters. I am, you see, very very discreet."

Miss Lawson nodded vigorously.

"Oh! of course—that makes a difference. It's not like the police."

"No, no. I am not at all like the police. That would not have done at all."

"Oh, no. Dear Miss Arundell was such a proud woman. Of course, there had been trouble before with Charles, but it was always hushed up. Once, I believe, he had to go to Australia!"

"Just so," said Poirot. "Now the facts of the case were as follows, were they not? Miss Arundell had a sum of money in a drawer—"

He paused. Miss Lawson hastened to confirm his statement.

"Yes—from the Bank. For the wages, you know, and the books."

"And how much was missing exactly?"

"Four pound notes. No, no, I am wrong, three pound notes and two ten-shilling notes. One must be exact, I know, very exact, in such matters." Miss Lawson looked at him earnestly and absentmindedly knocked her pince-nez a little farther awry. Her rather prominent eyes seemed to goggle at him.

"Thank you, Miss Lawson. I see you have an excellent business sense."

Miss Lawson bridled a little and uttered a deprecatory laugh.

"Miss Arundell suspected, no doubt with reason, that her nephew Charles was responsible for this theft," went on Poirot.

"Yes."

"Although there was no particular evidence to show who actually took the money?"

"Oh, but it must have been Charles! Mrs. Tanios wouldn't do such a thing, and her husband was quite a stranger and wouldn't have known where the money was kept—neither of them would. And I don't think Theresa Arundell would dream of such a thing. She's got plenty of money and always so beautifully dressed."

"It might have been one of the servants," Poirot suggested.

Miss Lawson seemed horrified by the idea.

"Oh, no, indeed, neither Ellen nor Annie would have dreamed of such a thing. They are both most superior women and absolutely honest I am sure."

Poirot waited a minute or two. Then he said:

"I wonder if you can give me any idea—I am sure you can, for if anyone possessed Miss Arundell's confidence you did—"

Miss Lawson murmured confusedly:

“Oh, I don’t know about that, I’m sure—” but she was clearly flattered.

“I feel that you will be able to help me.”

“Oh, I’m sure, if I can—anything I can do—”

Poirot went on:

“This is in confidence—”

A sort of owlish expression appeared on Miss Lawson’s face. The magical words “in confidence” seemed to be a kind of Open Sesame.

“Have you any idea of the reason which caused Miss Arundell to alter her will?”

“Her will? Oh—her will?”

Miss Lawson seemed slightly taken aback.

Poirot said, watching her closely:

“It is true, is it not, that she made a new will shortly before her death, leaving all her fortune to you?”

“Yes, but I knew nothing about it. Nothing at all!” Miss Lawson was shrill in protest. “It was the greatest surprise to me! A wonderful surprise, of course! So good of dear Miss Arundell. And she never even gave me a hint. Not the smallest hint! I was so taken aback when Mr. Purvis read it out, I didn’t know where to look, or whether to laugh or cry! I assure you, M. Poirot, the shock of it—the shock, you know. The kindness—the wonderful kindness of dear Miss Arundell. Of course, I’d hoped perhaps, for just a little something—perhaps just a teeny, teeny legacy—though of course, there was no reason she should have left me even that. I’d not been with her so very long. But this—it was like—it was like a fairy story! Even now I can’t quite believe in it, if you know what I mean. And sometimes—well sometimes—I don't feel altogether comfortable about it. I mean—well, I mean—"

She knocked off her pince-nez, picked them up, fumbled with them and went on even more incoherently.

"Sometimes I feel that—well, flesh and blood is flesh and blood after all, and I don't feel quite comfortable at Miss Arundell's leaving all her money away from her family. I mean, it doesn't seem right, does it? Not all of it. Such a large fortune, too! Nobody had any idea! But—well—it does make one feel uncomfortable—and everyone saying things, you know—and I'm sure I've never been an ill-natured woman! I mean I wouldn't have dreamed of influencing Miss Arundell in any way! And it's not as though I could, either. Truth to tell, I was always just a teeny weeny bit afraid of her! She was so sharp, you know, so inclined to jump on you. And quite rude sometimes! 'Don't be a downright fool,' she'd snap. And really, after all, I had my feelings and sometimes I'd feel quite upset… And then to find out that all the time she'd really been fond of me—well, it was very wonderful, wasn't it? Only of course, as I say, there's been a lot of unkindness, and really in some ways one feels—I mean, well, it does seem a little hard, doesn't it, on some people?"

"You mean that you would prefer to relinquish the money?" asked Poirot.

Just for a moment I fancied a flicker of some quite different expression showed itself in Miss Lawson's dull, pale blue eyes. I imagined that, just for a moment, a shrewd, intelligent woman sat there instead of an amiable, foolish one.

She said with a little laugh.

"Well—of course, there is the other side of it too… I mean there are two sides to every question. What I say is, Miss Arundell meant me to have the money. I mean if I didn't take it I should be going against her wishes. And that wouldn't be right, either, would it?"

"It is a difficult question," said Poirot, shaking his head. "Yes, indeed, I have worried over it a great deal. Mrs. Tanios—Bella—she is such a nice woman—and those dear children! I mean, I feel sure Miss Arundell wouldn't have wanted her to—I feel, you see, that dear Miss Arundell intended me to use my discretion. She didn't want to leave any money outright to Bella because she was afraid that man would get hold of it."

"What man?"

"Her husband. You know, Mr. Poirot, the poor girl is quite under his thumb. She does anything he tells her. I daresay she'd murder someone if he told her to! And she's afraid of him. I'm quite sure she's afraid of him. I've seen her look simply terrified once or twice. Now that isn't right, Mr. Poirot—you can't say that's right."

Poirot did not say so. Instead he inquired:

"What sort of man is Dr. Tanios?"

"Well," said Miss Lawson, hesitating, "he's a very pleasant man."

She stopped, doubtfully.

"But you don't trust him?"

"Well—no, I don't. I don't know," went on Miss Lawson doubtfully, "that I'd trust any man very much! Such dreadful things one hears! And all their poor wives go through! It's really terrible! Of course, Dr. Tanios pretends to be very fond of his wife and he's quite charming to her. His manners are really delightful. But I don't trust foreigners. They're so artful! And I'm quite sure dear Miss Arundell didn't want her money to get into his hands!"

"It is hard on Miss Theresa Arundell and Mr. Charles Arundell also to be deprived of their inheritance," Poirot suggested.

A spot of colour came into Miss Lawson's face.

"I think Theresa has quite as much money as is good for her!" she said sharply. "She spends hundreds of pounds on her clothes, alone. And her underclothing—it's wicked! When one thinks of so many nice, well-bred girls who have to earn their own living—"

Poirot gently completed the sentence.

“You think it would do no harm for her to earn hers for a bit?”

Miss Lawson looked at him solemnly.

“It might do her a lot of good,” she said. “It might bring her to her senses. Adversity teaches us many things.”

Poirot nodded slowly. He was watching her intently.

“And Charles?”

“Charles doesn’t deserve a penny,” said Miss Lawson, sharply. “If Miss Arundell cut him out of her will, it was for a very good cause—after his wicked threats.”

“Threats?” Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes, threats.”

“What threats? When did he threaten her?”

“Let me see, it was—yes, of course, it was at Easter. Actually on Easter Sunday—which made it even worse!”

“What did he say?”

“He asked her for money and she refused to give it him! And then he told her that it wasn’t wise of her. He said if she kept up that attitude he would—now what was the phrase—a very vulgar American one—oh, yes, he said he would bump her off!”

“He threatened to bump her off?”

“Yes.”

“And what did Miss Arundell say?”

“She said: ‘I think you’ll find, Charles, that I can look after myself.’”

“You were in the room at the time?”

“Not exactly in the room,” said Miss Lawson after a momentary pause.

“Quite, quite,” said Poirot, hastily. “And Charles, what did he say to that?”

“He said: ‘Don’t be too sure.’”

Poirot said slowly:

“Did Miss Arundell take this threat seriously?”

“Well, I don’t know… She didn’t say anything to me about it… But then she wouldn’t do that, anyway.”

Poirot said quietly:

“You knew, of course, that Miss Arundell was making a new will?”

“No, no. I’ve told you, it was a complete surprise. I never dreamt—”

Poirot interrupted.

“You did not know the contents. But you knew the fact—that there was a will being made?”

“Well—I suspected—I mean her sending for the lawyer when she was laid up—”

“Exactly. That was after she had a fall, was it not?”

“Yes, Bob—Bob was the dog—he had left his ball at the top of the stairs—and she tripped over it and fell.”

“A nasty accident.”

"Oh, yes, why, she might easily have broken her leg or her arm. The doctor said so."

"She might quite easily have been killed."

"Yes, indeed."

Her answer seemed quite natural and frank.

Poirot said, smiling:

"I think I saw Master Bob at Littlegreen House."

"Oh, yes, I expect you did. He's a dear little doggie." Nothing annoys me more than to hear a sporting terrier called a dear little doggie. No wonder, I thought, that Bob despised Miss Lawson and refused to do anything she told him.

"And he is very intelligent?" went on Poirot.

"Oh, yes, very."

"How upset he'd be if he knew he had nearly killed his mistress?"

Miss Lawson did not answer. She merely shook her head and sighed.

Poirot asked:

"Do you think it possible that that fall influenced Miss Arundell to remake her will?"

We were getting perilously near the bone here, I thought, but Miss Lawson seemed to find the question quite natural.

"You know," she said, "I shouldn't wonder if you weren't right. It gave her a shock—I'm sure of that. Old people never like to think there's any chance of their dying. But an accident like that makes one think. Or perhaps she might have had a premonition that her death wasn't far off."

Poirot said casually:

“She was in fairly good health, was she not?”

“Oh, yes. Very well, indeed.”

“Her illness must have come on very suddenly?”

“Oh, it did. It was quite a shock. We had had some friends that evening—” Miss Lawson paused.

“Your friends, the Misses Tripp. I have met those ladies. They are quite charming.”

Miss Lawson’s face flushed with pleasure.

“Yes, aren’t they? Such cultured women! Such wide interests! And so very spiritual! They told you, perhaps—about our sittings? I expect you are a sceptic—but indeed, I wish I could tell you the inexpressible joy of getting into touch with those who’ve passed over!”

“I am sure of it. I am sure of it.”

“Do you know, Mr. Poirot, my mother has spoken to me—more than once. It is such a joy to know that one’s dear ones are still thinking of one and watching over one.”

“Yes, yes, I can well understand that,” said Poirot, gently. “And was Miss Arundell also a believer?”

Miss Lawson’s face clouded over a little.

“She was willing to be convinced,” she said, doubtfully. “But I do not think she always approached the matter in the right frame of mind. She was sceptical and unbelieving—and once or twice her attitude attracted a most undesirable type of spirit! There were some very ribald messages—all due, I am convinced, to Miss Arundell’s attitude.”

“I should think very likely due to Miss Arundell,” agreed Poirot.

“But on that last evening—” continued Miss Lawson, “perhaps Isabel and Julia told you?—there were distinct phenomena. Actually the beginning of a materialization. Ectoplasm—you know what ectoplasm is perhaps?”

“Yes, yes, I am acquainted with its nature.”

“It proceeds, you know, from the medium’s mouth in the form of a ribbon and builds itself up into a form. Now I am convinced, Mr. Poirot, that unknown to herself Miss Arundell was a medium. On that evening I distinctly saw a luminous ribbon issuing from dear Miss Arundell’s mouth! Then her head became enveloped in a luminous mist.”

“Most interesting!”

“And then, unfortunately, Miss Arundell was suddenly taken ill and we had to break up the séance.”

“You sent for the doctor—when?”

“First thing the following morning.”

“Did he think the matter grave?”

“Well, he sent in a hospital nurse the following evening, but I think he hoped she would pull through.”

“The—excuse me—the relatives were not sent for?”

Miss Lawson flushed.

“They were notified as soon as possible—that is to say, when Dr. Grainger pronounced her to be in danger.”

“What was the cause of the attack? Something she had eaten?”

“No, I don’t think there was anything in particular. Dr. Grainger said she hadn’t been quite as careful in diet as she should have been. I think he thought the attack was probably brought on by a chill. The weather had been very treacherous.”

“Theresa and Charles Arundell had been down that weekend, had they not?”

Miss Lawson pursed her lips together.

“They had.”

“The visit was not a success,” Poirot suggested, watching her.

“It was not.” She added quite spitefully. “Miss Arundell knew what they’d come for!”

“Which was?” asked Poirot, watching her.

“Money!” snapped Miss Lawson. “And they didn’t get it.”

“No?” said Poirot.

“And I believe that’s what Dr. Tanios was after too,” she went on.

“Dr. Tanios. He was not down that same weekend, was he?”

“Yes, he came down on the Sunday. He only stayed about an hour.”

“Everyone seems to have been after poor Miss Arundell’s money,” hazarded Poirot.

“I know, it is not very nice to think of, is it?”

“No, indeed,” said Poirot. “It must have been a shock to Charles and Theresa Arundell that weekend when they learned that Miss Arundell had definitely disinherited them!”

Miss Lawson stared at him.

Poirot said:

“Is that not so? Did she not specifically inform them of the fact?”

“As to that, I couldn’t say. I didn’t hear anything about it! There wasn’t any fuss, or anything, as far as I know. Both Charles and his sister seemed to go away quite cheerful.”

“Ah! possibly I have been misinformed. Miss Arundell actually kept her will in the house, did she not?”

Miss Lawson dropped her pince-nez and stooped to pick them up.

“I really couldn’t say. No, I think it was with Mr. Purvis.”

“Who was the executor?”

“Mr. Purvis was.”

“After the death did he come over and look through her papers?”

“Yes, he did.”

Poirot looked at her keenly and asked her an unexpected question.

“Do you like Mr. Purvis?”

Miss Lawson was flustered.

“Like Mr. Purvis? Well, really, that’s difficult to say, isn’t it? I mean, I’m sure he’s a very clever man—that is a clever lawyer, I mean. But rather a brusque manner! I mean, it’s not very pleasant always, to have someone speaking to you as though—well, really I can’t explain what I mean—he was quite civil and yet at the same time, almost rude if you know what I mean.”

“A difficult situation for you,” said Poirot, sympathetically.

“Yes, indeed it was.”

Miss Lawson sighed and shook her head.

Poirot rose to his feet.

“Thank you very much, mademoiselle, for all your kindness and help.”

Miss Lawson rose too. She sounded slightly flustered.

“I’m sure there’s nothing to thank me for—nothing at all! So glad if I’ve been able to do anything—if there’s anything more I can do—”

Poirot came back from the door. He lowered his voice.

“I think, Miss Lawson, that there is something you ought to be told. Charles and Theresa Arundell are hoping to upset this will.”

A sharp flush of colour came into Miss Lawson’s cheeks.

“They can’t do that,” she said, sharply. “My lawyer says so.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. “You have consulted a lawyer, then?”

“Certainly. Why shouldn’t I?”

“No reason at all. A very wise proceeding. Good day to you, mademoiselle.”

When we emerged from Clanroyden Mansions into the street Poirot drew a deep breath.

“Hastings, mon ami, that woman is either exactly what she seems or else she is a very good actress.”

“She doesn’t believe Miss Arundell’s death was anything but natural. You can see that,” I said.

Poirot did not answer. There are moments when he is conveniently deaf. He hailed a taxi.

“Durham Hotel, Bloomsbury,” he told the driver.

Sixteen

MRS. TANIOS

“Gentleman to see you, madame.”

The woman who was sitting writing at one of the tables in the writing room of the Durham Hotel turned her head and then rose, coming towards us uncertainly.

Mrs. Tanios might have been any age over thirty. She was a tall, thin woman with dark hair, rather prominent light “boiled gooseberry” eyes and a worried face. A fashionable hat was perched on her head at an unfashionable angle and she wore a rather depressed-looking cotton frock.

“I don’t think—” she began vaguely.

Poirot bowed.

“I have just come from your cousin, Miss Theresa Arundell.”

“Oh! from Theresa? Yes?”

“Perhaps I could have a few minutes’ private conversation?”

Mrs. Tanios looked about her rather vacantly. Poirot suggested a leather sofa at the far end of the room.

As we made our way there a high voice squeaked out:

“Mother, where are you going?”

“I shall be just over there. Go on with your letter, darling.”

The child, a thin, peaky-looking girl of about seven, settled down again to what was evidently a laborious task. Her tongue showed through her parted lips in the effort of composition.

The far end of the room was quite deserted. Mrs. Tanios sat down, we did the same. She looked inquiringly at Poirot.

He began:

“It is in reference to the death of your aunt, the late Miss Emily Arundell.”

Was I beginning to fancy things, or did a look of alarm spring up suddenly in those pale, prominent eyes.

“Yes?”

“Miss Arundell,” said Poirot, “altered her will a very short time before she died. By the new will everything was left to Miss Wilhelmina Lawson. What I want to know, Mrs. Tanios, is whether you will join with your cousins, Miss Theresa and Mr. Charles Arundell, in trying to contest that will?”

“Oh!” Mrs. Tanios drew a deep breath. “But I don’t think that’s possible, is it? I mean, my husband consulted a lawyer and he seemed to think that it was better not to attempt it.”

“Lawyers, madame, are cautious people. Their advice is usually to avoid litigation at all costs—and no doubt they are usually right. But there are times when it pays to take a risk. I am not a lawyer myself and therefore I look at the matter differently. Miss Arundell—Miss Theresa Arundell, I mean—is prepared to fight. What about you?”

“I—Oh! I really don’t know.” She twisted her fingers nervously together: “I should have to consult my husband.”

“Certainly, you must consult your husband before anything definite is undertaken. But what is your own feeling in the matter?”

“Well, really, I don’t know.” Mrs. Tanios looked more worried than ever. “It depends so much on my husband.”

“But you yourself, what do you think, madame?”

Mrs. Tanios frowned, then she said slowly:

“I don’t think I like the idea very much. It seems—it seems rather indecent, doesn’t it?”

“Does it, madame?”

“Yes—after all if Aunt Emily chose to leave her money away from her family, I suppose we must put up with it.”

“You do not feel aggrieved in the matter, then?”

“Oh, yes, I do.” A quick flush showed in her cheeks. “I think it was most unfair! Most unfair! And so unexpected. It was so unlike Aunt Emily. And so very unfair on the children.”

“You think it is very unlike Miss Emily Arundell?”

“I think it was extraordinary of her!”

“Then isn’t it possible that she was not acting of her own free will? Don’t you think that perhaps she was being unduly influenced?”

Mrs. Tanios frowned again. Then she said almost unwillingly:

“The difficult thing is that I can’t see Aunt Emily being influenced by anybody! She was such a decided old lady.”

Poirot nodded approvingly.

“Yes, what you say is true. And Miss Lawson is hardly what one would describe as a strong character.”

“No, she’s a nice creature really—rather foolish, perhaps—but very, very kind. That’s partly why I feel—”

“Yes, madame?” said Poirot as she paused.

Mrs. Tanios twisted her fingers nervously again as she answered:

“Well, that it would be mean to try and upset the will. I feel certain that it wasn’t in any way Miss Lawson’s doing—I’m sure she’d be quite incapable of scheming and intriguing—”

“Again, I agree with you, madame.”

“And that’s why I feel that to go to law would be—well, would be undignified and spiteful, and besides it would be very expensive, wouldn’t it?”

“It would be expensive, yes.”

“And probably useless, too. But you must speak to my husband about it. He’s got a much better head for business than I have.”

Poirot waited a minute or two, then he said:

“What reason do you think lay behind the making of that will?”

A quick colour rose in Mrs. Tanios’ cheeks as she murmured:

“I haven’t the least idea.”

“Madame, I have told you I am not a lawyer. But you have not asked me what my profession is.”

She looked at him inquiringly.

“I am a detective. And, a short time before she died, Miss Emily Arundell wrote me a letter.”

Mrs. Tanios leaned forward, her hands pressed themselves together.

“A letter?” she asked, abruptly. “About my husband?”

Poirot watched her for a minute or two, then he said, slowly:

“I am afraid I am not at liberty to answer that question.”

"Then it was about my husband." Her voice rose slightly. "What did she say? I can assure you, Mr.—er—I don't know your name."

"Poirot is my name. Hercule Poirot."

"I can assure you, Mr. Poirot, that if anything was said in that letter against my husband, it was entirely untrue! I know, too, who will have inspired that letter! And that is another reason why I would rather have nothing to do with any action undertaken by Theresa and Charles! Theresa has never liked my husband. She has said things! I know she has said things! Aunt Emily was prejudiced against my husband because he was not an Englishman, and she may therefore have believed things that Theresa said about him. But they are not true, Mr. Poirot, you can take my word for that!"

"Mother—I've finished my letter."

Mrs. Tanios turned quickly. With an affectionate smile she took the letter the little girl held out to her.

"That's very nice, darling, very nice, indeed. And that's a beautiful drawing of Mickey Mouse."

"What shall I do now, Mother?"

"Would you like to get a nice postcard with a picture on it? Here's the money. You go to the gentleman in the hall and choose one and then you can send it to Selim."

The child moved away. I remembered what Charles Arundell had said. Mrs. Tanios was evidently a devoted wife and mother. She was also, as he had said, a little like an earwig.

"That is your only child, madame?"

"No, I have a little boy also. He is out with his father at the moment."

"They did not accompany you to Littlegreen House on your visits?"

“Oh yes, sometimes, but you see, my aunt was rather old and children were inclined to worry her. But she was very kind and always sent them out nice presents at Christmas.”

“Let me see, when did you last see Miss Emily Arundell?”

“I think it was about ten days before she died.”

“You and your husband and your two cousins were all down there together, were you not?”

“Oh, no, that was the weekend before—at Easter.”

“And you and your husband were down there the weekend after Easter as well?”

“Yes.”

“And Miss Arundell was in good health and spirits then?”

“Yes, she seemed much as usual.”

“She was not ill in bed?”

“She was laid up with a fall she had had, but she came downstairs again while we were there.”

“Did she say anything to you about having made a new will?”

“No, nothing at all.”

“And her manner to you was quite unchanged?”

A slightly longer pause this time before Mrs. Tanios said:

“Yes.”

I feel sure that at that moment Poirot and I had the same conviction.

Mrs. Tanios was lying!

Poirot paused a minute and then said:

“Perhaps I should explain that when I asked if Miss Arundell’s manner to you was unchanged, I was not using the ‘you’ plural. I referred to you personally.”

Mrs. Tanios replied quickly.

“Oh! I see. Aunt Emily was very nice to me. She gave me a little pearl and diamond brooch and she sent ten shillings to each of the children.”

There was no constraint in her manner now. The words came freely with a rush.

“And as regards your husband—was there no change in her manner to him?”

The constraint had returned. Mrs. Tanios did not meet Poirot’s eye as she replied:

“No, of course not—why should there be?”

“But since you suggest that your cousin Theresa Arundell might have tried to poison your aunt’s mind—”

“She did! I’m sure she did!” Mrs. Tanios leant forward eagerly. “You are quite right. There was a change! Aunt Emily was suddenly far more distant to him. And she behaved very oddly. There was a special digestive mixture he recommended—even went to the trouble of getting her some—going to the chemist and having it made up. She thanked him and all that—but rather stiffly, and later I actually saw her pouring the bottle down the sink!”

Her indignation was quite fierce.

Poirot’s eyes flickered.

“A very odd procedure,” he said. His voice was carefully unexcited.

“I thought it most ungrateful,” said Dr. Tanios’ wife hotly.

“As you say, elderly ladies distrust foreigners sometimes,” said Poirot. “I am sure they think that English doctors are the only doctors in the world. Insularity accounts for a lot.”

“Yes, I suppose it does.” Mrs. Tanios looked slightly mollified.

“When do you return to Smyrna, madame?”

“In a few weeks’ time. My husband—ah! here is my husband and Edward with him.”

Seventeen

DR. TANIOS

I must say that my first sight of Dr. Tanios was rather a shock. I had been imbuing him in my mind with all sorts of sinister attributes. I had been picturing to myself a dark-bearded foreigner with a swarthy aspect and a sinister cast of countenance.

Instead, I saw a rotund, jolly, brown-haired, brown-eyed man. And though it is true he had a beard, it was a modest brown affair that made him look more like an artist.

He spoke English perfectly. His voice had a pleasant timbre and matched the cheerful good humour of his face.

“Here we are,” he said, smiling to his wife. “Edward has been passionately thrilled by his first ride in the tube. He has always been in buses until today.”

Edward was not unlike his father in appearance, but both he and his little sister had a definitely foreign-looking appearance and I understood what Miss Peabody had meant when she described them as rather yellow-looking children.

The presence of her husband seemed to make Mrs. Tanios nervous. Stammering a little she introduced Poirot to him. Me, she ignored.

Dr. Tanios took up the name sharply.

“Poirot? Monsieur Hercule Poirot? But I know that name well! And what brings you to us, M. Poirot?”

“It is the affair of a lady lately deceased. Miss Emily Arundell,” replied Poirot.

“My wife’s aunt? Yes—what of her?”

Poirot said slowly:

“Certain matters have arisen in connection with her death—”

Mrs. Tanios broke in suddenly.

“It’s about the will, Jacob. M. Poirot has been conferring with Theresa and Charles.”

Some of the tensity went out of Dr. Tanios’ attitude. He dropped into a chair.

“Ah, the will! An iniquitous will—but there, it is not my business, I suppose.”

Poirot sketched an account of his interview with the two Arundells (hardly a truthful one, I may say) and cautiously hinted at a fighting chance of upsetting the will.

“You interest me, M. Poirot, very much. I may say I am of your opinion. Something could be done. I actually went as far as to consult a lawyer on the subject, but his advice was not encouraging. Therefore—” he shrugged his shoulders.

“Lawyers, as I have told your wife, are cautious people. They do not like taking chances. But me, I am different! And you?”

Dr. Tanios laughed—a rich rollicking laugh.

“Oh, I’d take a chance all right! Often have, haven’t I, Bella, old girl?” He smiled across at her, and she smiled back at him—but in a rather mechanical manner, I thought.

He turned his attention back to Poirot.

“I am not a lawyer,” he said. “But in my opinion it is perfectly clear that that will was made when the old lady was not responsible for what she was doing. That Lawson woman is both clever and cunning.”

Mrs. Tanios moved uneasily. Poirot looked at her quickly.

“You do not agree, madame?”

She said rather weakly:

“She has always been very kind. I shouldn’t call her clever.”

“She’s been kind to you,” said Dr. Tanios, “because she had nothing to fear from you, my dear Bella. You’re easily taken in!”

He spoke good-humouredly, but his wife flushed.

“With me it was different,” he went on. “She didn’t like me. And she made no bones about showing it! I’ll give you an instance. The old lady had a fall down the stairs when we were staying there. I insisted on coming back the following weekend to see how she was. Miss Lawson did her utmost to prevent us. She didn’t succeed, but she was annoyed about it, I could see. The reason was clear. She wanted the old lady to herself.”

Again Poirot turned to the wife.

“You agree, madame?”

Her husband did not give her time to answer.

“Bella’s too kindhearted,” he said. “You won’t get her to impute bad motives to anybody. But I’m quite sure I was right. I’ll tell you another thing, M. Poirot. The secret of her ascendency over old Miss Arundell was spiritualism! That’s how it was done, depend upon it!”

“You think so?”

“Sure of it, my dear fellow. I’ve seen a lot of that sort of thing. It gets hold of people. You’d be amazed! Especially anyone of Miss Arundell’s age. I’d be prepared to bet that that’s how the suggestion came. Some spirit—

possibly her dead father—ordered her to alter her will and leave her money to the Lawson woman. She was in bad health—credulous—”

There was a very faint movement from Mrs. Tanios. Poirot turned to her.

“You think it possible—yes?”

“Speak up, Bella,” said Dr. Tanios. “Tell us your views?”

He looked at her encouragingly. Her quick look back at him was an odd one. She hesitated, then said:

“I know so little about these things. I daresay you’re right, Jacob.”

“Depend upon it I’m right, eh, M. Poirot?”

Poirot nodded his head.

“It may be—yes.” Then he said, “You were down at Market Basing, I think, the weekend before Miss Arundell’s death?”

“We were down at Easter and again the weekend after—that is right.”

“No, no, I meant the weekend after that—on the 26th. You were there on the Sunday, I think?”

“Oh, Jacob, were you?” Mrs. Tanios looked at him wide-eyed.

He turned quickly.

“Yes, you remember? I just ran down in the afternoon. I told you about it.”

Both Poirot and I were looking at her. Nervously she pushed her hat a little farther back on her head.

“Surely you remember, Bella,” her husband continued. “What a terrible memory you’ve got.”

“Of course!” she apologized, a thin smile on her face. “It’s quite true, I have a shocking memory. And it’s nearly two months ago now.”

“Miss Theresa Arundell and Mr. Charles Arundell were there then, I believe?” said Poirot.

“They may have been,” said Tanios easily. “I didn’t see them.”

“You were not there very long then?”

“Oh, no—just half an hour or so.”

Poirot’s inquiring gaze seemed to make him a little uneasy.

“Might as well confess,” he said with a twinkle. “I hoped to get a loan—but I didn’t get it. I’m afraid my wife’s aunt didn’t take to me as much as she might. Pity, because I liked her. She was a sporting old lady.”

“May I ask you a frank question, Dr. Tanios?”

Was there or was there not a momentary apprehension in Tanios’ eye?

“Certainly, M. Poirot.”

“What is your opinion of Charles and Theresa Arundell?”

The doctor looked slightly relieved.

“Charles and Theresa?” he looked at his wife with an affectionate smile. “Bella, my dear, I don’t suppose you mind my being frank about your family?”

She shook her head, smiling faintly.

“Then it’s my opinion they’re rotten to the core, both of them! Funnily enough I like Charles the best. He’s a rogue but he’s a likeable rogue. He’s no moral sense but he can’t help that. People are born that way.”

“And Theresa?”

He hesitated.

"I don't know. She's an amazingly attractive young woman. But she's quite ruthless, I should say. She'd murder anyone in cold blood if it suited her book. At least that's my fancy. You may have heard, perhaps, that her mother was tried for murder?"

"And acquitted," said Poirot.

"As you say, and acquitted," said Tanios quickly. "But all the same, it makes one—wonder sometimes."

"You met the young man to whom she is engaged?"

"Donaldson? Yes, he came to supper one night."

"What do you think of him?"

"A clever fellow. I fancy he'll go far—if he gets the chance. It takes money to specialize."

"You mean that he is clever in his profession."

"That is what I mean, yes. A first-class brain." He smiled. "Not quite a shining light in society yet. A little precise and prim in manner. He and Theresa make a comic pair. The attraction of opposites. She's a social butterfly and he's a recluse."

The two children were bombarding their mother.

"Mother, can't we go in to lunch? I'm hungry. We'll be late."

Poirot looked at his watch and gave an exclamation.

"A thousand pardons! I delay your lunch hour."

Glancing at her husband Mrs. Tanios said, uncertainly:

"Perhaps we can offer you—"

Poirot said quickly:

“You are most amiable, madame, but I have a luncheon engagement for which I am already late.”

He shook hands with both the Tanioses and with the children. I did the same.

We delayed for a minute or two in the hall. Poirot wanted to put through a telephone call. I waited for him by the hall porter’s desk. I was standing there when I saw Mrs. Tanios come out into the hall and look searchingly around. She had a hunted, harried look. She saw me and came swiftly across to me.

“Your friend—M. Poirot—I suppose he has gone?”

“No, he is in the telephone box.”

“Oh.”

“You wanted to speak to him?”

She nodded. Her air of nervousness increased.

Poirot came out of the box at that moment and saw us standing together. He came quickly across to us.

“M. Poirot,” she began quickly in a low, hurried voice. “There is something that I would like to say—that I must tell you—”

“Yes, madame.”

“It is important—very important. You see—”

She stopped. Dr. Tanios and the two children had just emerged from the writing room. He came across and joined us.

“Having a few last words with M. Poirot, Bella?”

His tone was good-humoured, the smile on his face pleasantness itself.

“Yes—” She hesitated, then said, ‘Well, that is really all, M. Poirot. I just wanted you to tell Theresa that we will back her up in anything she decides to do. I quite see that the family must stand together.”

She nodded brightly to us, then taking her husband’s arm she moved off in the direction of the dining room.

I caught Poirot by the shoulder. “That wasn’t what she started to say, Poirot!”

He shook his head slowly, watching the retreating couple. “She changed her mind,” I went on. “Yes, mon ami, she changed her mind.” “Why?” “I wish I knew,” he murmured. “She will tell us some other time,” I said hopefully. “I wonder. I rather fear—she may not….”

Eighteen

“A NIGGER IN THE WOODPILE”

We had lunch at a small restaurant not far away. I was eager to learn what he made of the various members of the Arundell family.

“Well, Poirot?” I asked impatiently.

With a look of reproof Poirot turned his whole attention to the menu. When he had ordered he leaned back in his chair, broke his roll of bread in half and said with a slightly mocking intonation:

“Well, Hastings?”

“What do you think of them now you’ve seen them all?”

Poirot replied slowly.

“Ma foi, I think they are an interesting lot! Really, this case is an enchanting study! It is, how do you say, the box of surprises? Look how each time I say, ‘I got a letter from Miss Arundell before she died,’ something crops up. From Miss Lawson I learn about the missing money. Mrs. Tanios says at once, ‘About my husband?’ Why about her husband? Why should Miss Arundell write to me, Hercule Poirot, about Dr. Tanios?”

“That woman has something on her mind,” I said.

“Yes, she knows something. But what? Miss Peabody tells us that Charles Arundell would murder his grandmother for twopence, Miss Lawson says that Mrs. Tanios would murder anyone if her husband told her to do so. Dr. Tanios says that Charles and Theresa are rotten to the core, and he hints that their mother was a murderess and says apparently carelessly that Theresa is capable of murdering anyone in cold blood.

"They have a pretty opinion of each other, all these people! Dr. Tanios thinks, or says he thinks, that there was undue influence. His wife, before he came in, evidently did not think so. She does not want to contest the will at first. Later she veers round. See you, Hastings—it is a pot that boils and seethes and every now and then a significant fact comes to the surface and can be seen. There is something in the depths there—yes, there is something! I swear it, by my faith as Hercule Poirot, I swear it!"

I was impressed in spite of myself by his earnestness.

After a minute or two I said:

"Perhaps you are right, but it seems too vague—so nebulous."

"But you agree with me that there is something?"

"Yes," I said hesitatingly. "I believe I do."

Poirot leaned across the table. His eyes bored into mine.

"Yes—you have changed. You are no longer amused, superior—indulging me in my academic pleasures. But what is it that has convinced you? It is not my excellent reasoning—non, ce n'est pas ça! But something—something quite independent—has produced an effect on you. Tell me, my friend, what is it that has suddenly induced you to take this matter seriously?"

"I think," I said slowly, "it was Mrs. Tanios. She looked—she looked—afraid.…"

"Afraid of me?"

"No—no, not of you. It was something else. She spoke so quietly and sensibly to begin with—a natural resentment at the terms of the will, perhaps, but otherwise she seemed so resigned and willing to leave things as they are. It seemed the natural attitude of a well-bred but rather apathetic woman. And then that sudden change—the eagerness with which she came over to Dr. Tanios' point of view. The way she came out into the hall after us—the—almost furtive way—"

Poirot nodded encouragingly.

"And another little thing which you may not have noticed—"

"I notice everything!"

"I mean the point about her husband's visit to Littlegreen House on that last Sunday. I could swear she knew nothing of it—that it was the most complete surprise to her—and yet she took her cue so quickly—agreed that he had told her about it and that she had forgotten. I—I didn't like it, Poirot."

"You are quite right, Hastings—it was significant that."

"It left an ugly impression of—of fear on me."

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

"You felt the same?" I asked.

"Yes—that impression was definitely in the air." He paused and then went on. "And yet you liked Tanios, did you not? You found him an agreeable man, openhearted, good-natured, genial. Attractive in spite of your insular prejudice against the Argentines, the Portuguese and the Greeks—a thoroughly congenial personality?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I did."

In the silence that ensued, I watched Poirot. Presently I said:

"What are you thinking of, Poirot?"

"I am reflecting on various people, handsome young Norman Gale, bluff, hearty Evelyn Howard, the pleasant Dr. Sheppard, the quiet, reliable Knighton."

For a moment I did not understand these references to people who had figured in past cases.

“What of them?” I asked.

“They were all delightful personalities….”

“My goodness, Poirot, do you really think that Tanios—”

“No, no. Do not jump to conclusions, Hastings. I am only pointing out that one’s own personal reactions to people are singularly unsafe guides. One must go not by one’s feelings but by facts.”

“H’m,” I said. “Facts are not our strong suit. No, no, Poirot, don’t go over it all again!”

“I will be brief, my friend, do not fear. To begin with, we have quite certainly a case of attempted murder. You admit that, do you not?”

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I do.”

I had, up to now, been a little sceptical over Poirot’s (as I thought) somewhat fanciful reconstruction of the events on the night of Easter Tuesday. I was forced to admit, however, that his deductions were perfectly logical.

“Très bien. Now one cannot have attempted murder without a murderer. One of the people present on that evening was a murderer—in intention if not in fact.”

“Granted.”

“Then that is our starting point—a murderer. We make a few inquiries—we, as you would say—stir the mud—and what do we get—several very interesting accusations uttered apparently casually in the course of conversations.”

“You think they were not casual?”

“Impossible to tell at the moment! Miss Lawson’s innocent seeming way of bringing out the fact that Charles threatened his aunt may have been quite innocent or it may not. Dr. Tanios’ remarks about Theresa Arundell may have absolutely no malice behind them, but be merely a physician’s genuine opinion. Miss Peabody, on the other hand, is probably quite genuine in her opinion of Charles Arundell’s proclivities—but it is, after all, merely an opinion. So it goes on. There is a saying, is there not, a nigger in the woodpile. Eh bien, that is just what I find here. There is—not a nigger—but a murderer in our woodpile.”

“What I’d like to know is, what you yourself really think, Poirot?”

“Hastings—Hastings—I do not permit myself to ‘think’—not, that is, in the sense that you are using the word. At the moment I only make certain reflections.”

“Such as?”

“I consider the question of motive. What are the likely motives for Miss Arundell’s death? Clearly the most obvious one is gain. Who would have gained by Miss Arundell’s death—if she had died on Easter Tuesday?”

“Everyone—with the exception of Miss Lawson.”

“Precisely.”

“Well, at any rate, one person is automatically cleared.”

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “It would seem so. But the interesting thing is that the person who would have gained nothing if death had occurred on Easter Tuesday, gains everything when death occurs two weeks later.”

“What are you getting at, Poirot?” I said, slightly puzzled.

“Cause and effect, my friend, cause and effect.”

I looked at him doubtfully.

He went on:

"Proceed logically! What exactly happened—after the accident?"

I hate Poirot in this mood. Whatever one says is bound to be wrong! I proceeded with intense caution.

"Miss Arundell was laid up in bed."

"Exactly. With plently of time to think. What next?"

"She wrote to you." Poirot nodded.

"Yes, she wrote to me. And the letter was not posted. A thousand pities, that."

"Do you suspect that there was something fishy about that letter not being posted?"

Poirot frowned.

"There, Hastings, I have to confess that I do not know. I think—in view of everything I am almost sure—that the letter was genuinely mislaid. I believe—but I cannot be sure—that the fact that such a letter was written was unsuspected by anybody. Continue—what happened next?"

I reflected.

"The lawyer's visit," I suggested.

"Yes—she sent for her lawyer and in due course he arrived."

"And she made a new will," I continued.

"Precisely. She made a new and very unexpected will. Now, in view of that will we have to consider very carefully a statement made to us by Ellen. Ellen said, if you remember, that Miss Lawson was particularly anxious that the news that Bob had been out all night should not get to Miss Arundell's ears."

“But—oh, I see—no, I don’t. Or do I begin to see what you are hinting at…?”

“I doubt it!” said Poirot. “But if you do, you realize, I hope, the supreme importance of that statement.”

He fixed me with a fierce eye.

“Of course. Of course,” I said hurriedly.

“And then,” continued Poirot, “various other things happen. Charles and Theresa come for the weekend, and Miss Arundell shows the new will to Charles—or so he says.”

“Don’t you believe him?”

“I only believe statements that are checked. Miss Arundell does not show it to Theresa.”

“Because she thought Charles would tell her.”

“But he doesn’t. Why doesn’t he?”

“According to Charles himself he did tell her.”

“Theresa said quite positively that he didn’t—a very interesting and suggestive little clash. And when we depart she calls him a fool.”

“I’m getting fogged, Poirot,” I said plaintively.

“Let us return to the sequence of events. Dr. Tanios comes down on Sunday—possibly without the knowledge of his wife.”

“I should say certainly without her knowledge.”

“Let us say probably. To proceed! Charles and Theresa leave on the Monday. Miss Arundell is in good health and spirits. She eats a good dinner and sits in the dark with the Tripps and the Lawson. Towards the end of the séance she is taken ill. She retires to bed and dies four days later and Miss

Lawson inherits all her money, and Captain Hastings says she died a natural death!”

“Whereas Hercule Poirot says she was given poison in her dinner on no evidence at all!”

“I have some evidence, Hastings. Think over our conversation with the Misses Tripp. And also one statement that stood out from Miss Lawson’s somewhat rambling conversation.”

“Do you mean the fact that she had curry for dinner? Curry would mask the taste of a drug. Is that what you meant?”

Poirot said slowly:

“Yes, the curry has a certain significance, perhaps.”

“But,” I said, “if what you advance (in defiance of all the medical evidence) is true, only Miss Lawson or one of the maids could have killed her.”

“I wonder.”

“Or the Tripp women? Nonsense. I can’t believe that! All these people are palpably innocent.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Remember this, Hastings, stupidity—or even silliness, for that matter—can go hand in hand with intense cunning. And do not forget the original attempt at murder. That was not the handiwork of a particularly clever or complex brain. It was a very simple little murder, suggested by Bob and his habit of leaving the ball at the top of the stairs. The thought of putting a thread across the stairs was quite simple and easy—a child could have thought of it!”

I frowned.

“You mean—”

"I mean that what we are seeking to find here is just one thing—the wish to kill. Nothing more than that."

"But the poison must have been a very skilful one to leave no trace," I argued. "Something that the ordinary person would have difficulty in getting hold of. Oh, damn it all, Poirot. I simply can't believe it now. You can't know! It's all pure hypothesis."

"You are wrong, my friend. As the result of our various conversations this morning. I have now something definite to go upon. Certain faint but unmistakable indications. The only thing is—I am afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

He said gravely:

"Of disturbing the dogs that sleep. That is one of your proverbs, is it not? To let the sleeping dogs lie! That is what our murderer does at present—sleeps happily in the sun… Do we not know, you and I, Hastings, how often a murderer, his confidence disturbed, turns and kills a second—or even a third time!"

"You are afraid of that happening?"

He nodded.

"Yes. If there is a murderer in the woodpile—and I think there is, Hastings. Yes, I think there is…."

Nineteen

VISIT TO MR. PURVIS

Poirot called for his bill and paid it.

“What do we do next?” I asked.

“We are going to do what you suggested earlier in the morning. We are going to Harchester to interview Mr. Purvis. That is why I telephoned from the Durham Hotel.”

“You telephoned to Purvis?”

“No, to Theresa Arundell. I asked her to write me a letter of introduction to him. To approach him with any chance of success we must be accredited by the family. She promised to send it round to my flat by hand. It should be awaiting us there now.”

We found not only the letter but Charles Arundell who had brought it round in person.

“Nice place you have here, M. Poirot,” he remarked, glancing round the sitting room of the flat.

At that moment my eye was caught by an imperfectly shut drawer in the desk. A small slip of paper was preventing it from shutting.

Now if there was one thing absolutely incredible it was that Poirot should shut a drawer in such a fashion! I looked thoughtfully at Charles. He had been alone in this room awaiting our arrival. I had no doubt that he had been passing the time by snooping among Poirot’s papers. What a young crook the fellow was! I felt myself burning with indignation.

Charles himself was in a most cheerful mood.

“Here we are,” he remarked, presenting a letter. “All present and correct—and I hope you’ll have more luck with old Purvis than we did.”

“He held out very little hope, I suppose?”

“Definitely discouraging… In his opinion the Lawson bird had clearly got away with the doings.”

“You and your sister have never considered an appeal to the lady’s feelings?”

Charles grinned.

“I considered it—yes. But there seemed to be nothing doing. My eloquence was in vain. The pathetic picture of the disinherited black sheep—and a sheep not so black as he was painted—(or so I endeavoured to suggest)—failed to move the woman! You know, she definitely seems to dislike me! I don’t know why.” He laughed. “Most old women fall for me quite easily. They think I’ve never been properly understood and that I’ve never had a fair chance!”

“A useful point of view.”

“Oh, it’s been extremely useful before now. But, as I say, with the Lawson, nothing doing. I think she’s rather anti-man. Probably used to chain herself to railings and wave a suffragette flag in good old prewar days.”

“Ah, well,” said Poirot, shaking his head. “If simpler methods fail—”

“We must take to crime,” said Charles cheerfully.

“Aha,” said Poirot. “Now, speaking of crime, young man, is it true that you threatened your aunt—that you said that you would ‘bump her off,’ or words to that effect?”

Charles sat down in a chair, stretched his legs out in front of him and stared hard at Poirot.

“Now who told you that?” he said.

“No matter. Is it true?”

“Well, there are elements of truth about it.”

“Come, come, let me hear the story—the true story, mind.”

“Oh, you can have it, sir. There was nothing melodramatic about it. I’d been attempting a touch—if you gather what I mean.”

“I comprehend.”

“Well, that didn’t go according to plan. Aunt Emily intimated that any efforts to separate her and her money would be quite unavailing! Well, I didn’t lose my temper, but I put it to her plainly. ‘Now look here, Aunt Emily,’ I said, ‘you know, you’re going about things in such a way that you’ll end by getting bumped off!’ She said, rather sniffily, what did I mean. ‘Just that,’ I said. ‘Here are your friends and relations all hanging around with their mouths open, all as poor as church mice—whatever church mice may be—all hoping. And what do you do? Sit down on the dibs and refuse to part. That’s the way people get themselves murdered. Take it from me, if you’re bumped off, you’ll only have yourself to blame.’

“She looked at me then, over the top of her spectacles in a way she had. Looked at me rather nastily. ‘Oh,’ she said drily enough, ‘so that’s your opinion, is it?’ ‘It is,’ I said. ‘You loosen up a bit, that’s my advice to you.’ ‘Thank you, Charles,’ she said, ‘for your well-meant advice. But I think you’ll find I’m well able to take care of myself.’ ‘Please yourself, Aunt Emily,’ I said. I was grinning all over my face—and I fancy she wasn’t as grim as she tried to look. ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ ‘I’ll remember it,’ she said.”

He paused.

“That’s all there was to it.”

“And so,” said Poirot, “you contented yourself with a few pound notes you found in a drawer.”

Charles stared at him, then burst out laughing.

“I take off my hat to you,” he said. “You’re some sleuth! How did you get hold of that?”

“It is true, then?”

“Oh, it’s true enough! I was damned hard up. Had to get money somewhere. Found a nice little wad of notes in a drawer and helped myself to a few. I was very modest—didn’t think my little subtraction would be noticed. Even then, they’d probably think it was the servants.”

Poirot said drily:

“It would be very serious for the servants if such an idea had been entertained.”

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

“Everyone for himself,” he murmured.

“And le diable takes the hindermost,” said Poirot. “That is your creed, is it?”

Charles was looking at him curiously.

“I didn’t know the old lady had ever spotted it. How did you come to know about it—and about the bumping off conversation?”

“Miss Lawson told me.”

“The sly old pussy cat!” He looked, I thought, just a shade disturbed. “She doesn’t like me and she doesn’t like Theresa,” he said presently. “You don’t think—she’s got anything more up her sleeve?”

“What could she have?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just that she strikes me as a malicious old devil.” He paused. “She hates Theresa…” he added.

“Did you know, Mr. Arundell, that Dr. Tanios came down to see your aunt on the Sunday before she died?”

“What—on the Sunday that we were there?”

“Yes. You did not see him?”

“No. We were out for a walk in the afternoon. I suppose he must have come then. Funny that Aunt Emily didn’t mention his visit. Who told you?”

“Miss Lawson.”

“Lawson again? She seems to be a mine of information.”

He paused and then said:

“You know, Tanios is a nice fellow. I like him. Such a jolly, smiling chap.”

“He has an attractive personality, yes,” said Poirot.

Charles rose to his feet.

“If I’d been him I’d have murdered the dreary Bella years ago! Doesn’t she strike you as the type of woman who is marked out by fate to be a victim? You know, I should never be surprised if bits of her turned up in a trunk at Margate or somewhere!”

“It is not a pretty action that you attribute there to her husband the good doctor,” said Poirot severely.

“No,” said Charles meditatively. “And I don’t think really that Tanios would hurt a fly. He’s much too kindhearted.”

“And what about you? Would you do murder if it were made worth while?”

Charles laughed—a ringing, genuine laugh.

“Thinking about a spot of blackmail, M. Poirot? Nothing doing. I can assure you that I didn’t put—” he stopped suddenly and then went on

—“strychnine in Aunt Emily’s soup.”

With a careless wave of his hand he departed.

“Were you trying to frighten him, Poirot?” I asked. “If so, I don’t think you succeeded. He showed no guilty reactions whatsoever.”

“No?”

“No. He seemed quite unruffled.”

“Curious that pause he made,” said Poirot.

“A pause?”

“Yes. A pause before the word strychnine. Almost as though he had been about to say something else and thought better of it.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“He was probably thinking of a good, venomous-sounding poison.”

“It is possible. It is possible. But let us set off. We will, I think, stay the night at the George in Market Basing.”

Ten minutes later saw us speeding through London, bound once more for the country.

We arrived in Harchester about four o’clock and made our way straight to the offices of Purvis, Purvis, Charlesworth and Purvis.

Mr. Purvis was a big solidly-built man with white hair and a rosy complexion. He had a little the look of a country squire. His manner was courteous but reserved.

He read the letter we had brought and then looked at us across the top of his desk. It was a shrewd look and a somewhat searching one.

"I know you by name, of course, M. Poirot," he said politely. "Miss Arundell and her brother have, I gather, engaged your services in this matter, but exactly in what capacity you propose to be of use to them I am at a loss to imagine."

"Shall we say, Mr. Purvis, a fuller investigation of all the circumstances?"

The lawyer said drily:

"Miss Arundell and her brother have already had my opinion as to the legal position. The circumstances were perfectly clear and admit of no misrepresentation."

"Perfectly, perfectly," said Poirot quickly. "But you will not, I am sure, object to just repeating them so that I can envisage the situation clearly."

The lawyer bowed his head.

"I am at your service."

Poirot began:

"Miss Arundell wrote to you giving you instructions on the seventeenth of April, I believe?"

Mr. Purvis consulted some papers on the table before him.

"Yes, that is correct."

"Can you tell me what she said?"

"She asked me to draw up a will. There were to be legacies to two servants and to three or four charities. The rest of her estate was to pass to Wilhelmina Lawson absolutely."

"You will pardon me, Mr. Purvis, but you were surprised?"

"I will admit that—yes, I was surprised."

“Miss Arundell had made a will previously?”

“Yes, she had made a will five years ago.”

“That will, after certain small legacies, left her property to her nephew and nieces?”

“The bulk of her estate was to be divided equally between the children of her brother Thomas and the daughter of Arabella Biggs, her sister.

“What has happened to that will?”

“At Miss Arundell’s request I brought it with me when I visited her at Littlegreen House on April 21st.”

“I should be much obliged to you, Mr. Purvis, if you would give me a full description of everything that occurred on that occasion.”

The lawyer paused for a minute or two. Then he said, very precisely:

“I arrived at Littlegreen House at three o’clock in the afternoon. One of my clerks accompanied me. Miss Arundell received me in the drawing room.”

“How did she look to you?”

“She seemed to me in good health in spite of the fact that she was walking with a stick. That, I understand, was on account of a fall she had had recently. Her general health, as I say, seemed good. She struck me as slightly nervous and overexcited in manner.”

“Was Miss Lawson with her?”

“She was with her when I arrived. But she left us immediately.”

“And then?”

“Miss Arundell asked me if I had done what she had asked me to do, and if I had brought the new will with me for her to sign.

"I said I had done so. I—er—" he hesitated for a minute or two, then went on stiffly. "I may as well say that, as far as it was proper for me to do so, I remonstrated with Miss Arundell. I pointed out to her that this new will might be regarded as grossly unfair to her family who were, after all, her own flesh and blood."

"And her answer?"

"She asked me if the money was or was not her own to do with as she liked. I replied that certainly that was the case. 'Very well then,' she said. I reminded her that she had known this Miss Lawson a very short time, and I asked her if she was quite sure that the injustice she was doing her own family was legitimate. Her reply was, 'My dear friend, I know perfectly what I am doing.'"

"Her manner was excited, you say."

"I think I can definitely say that it was, but understand me, M. Poirot, she was in full possession of her faculties. She was in every sense of the word fully competent to manage her own affairs. Though my sympathies are entirely with Miss Arundell's family, I should be obliged to maintain that in any court of law."

"That is quite understood. Proceed, I pray you."

"Miss Arundell read through her existing will. Then she stretched out her hand for the one I had had drawn up. I may say that I would have preferred to submit a draft first but she had impressed upon me that the will must be brought her ready to sign. That presented no difficulties as its provisions were so simple. She read it through, nodded her head and said she would sign it straightaway. I felt it my duty to enter one last protest. She heard me out patiently, but said that her mind was quite made up. I called in my clerk and he and the gardener acted as witnesses to her signature. The servants, of course, were ineligible owing to the fact that they were beneficiaries under the will."

"And afterwards, did she entrust the will to you for safekeeping?"

“No, she placed it in a drawer of her desk, which drawer she locked.”

“What was done with the original will? Did she destroy it?”

“No, she locked it away with the other.”

“After her death, where was the will found?”

“In that same drawer. As executor I had her keys and went through her papers and business documents.”

“Were both wills in the drawer?”

“Yes, exactly as she had placed them there.”

“Did you question her at all as to the motive for this rather surprising action?”

“I did. But I got no satisfactory answer. She merely assured me that ‘she knew what she was doing.’”

“Nevertheless you were surprised at the proceeding?”

“Very surprised. Miss Arundell, I should say, had always shown herself to have a strong sense of family feeling.”

Poirot was silent a minute, then he asked:

“You did not, I suppose, have any conversation with Miss Lawson on the subject?”

“Certainly not. Such a proceeding would have been highly improper.”

Mr. Purvis looked scandalized at the mere suggestion.

“Did Miss Arundell say anything to indicate that Miss Lawson knew that a will was being drawn in her favour?”

“On the contrary. I asked her if Miss Lawson was aware of what was being done, and Miss Arundell snapped out that she knew nothing about it.

“It was advisable, I thought, that Miss Lawson should not be aware of what had happened. I endeavoured to hint as much and Miss Arundell seemed quite of my opinion.”

“Just why did you stress that point, Mr. Purvis?”

The old gentleman returned his glance with dignity.

“Such things, in my opinion, are better undiscussed. Also it might have led to future disappointment.”

“Ah,” Poirot drew a long breath. “I take it that you thought it probable that Miss Arundell might change her mind in the near future?”

The lawyer bowed his head.

“That is so. I fancied that Miss Arundell had had some violent altercation with her family. I thought it probable that when she cooled down, she would repent of her rash decision.”

“In which case she would have done—what?”

“She would have given me instructions to prepare a new will.”

“She might have taken the simpler course of merely destroying the will lately made, in which case the older will would have been good?”

“That is a somewhat debatable point. All earlier wills, you understand, had been definitely revoked by the testator.”

“But Miss Arundell would not have had the legal knowledge to appreciate that point. She may have thought that by destroying the latter will, the earlier one would stand.”

“It is quite possible.”

“Actually, if she died intestate, her money would pass to her family?”

“Yes. One half to Mrs. Tanios, one half divisible between Charles and Theresa Arundell. But the fact remains, however, that she did not change her mind! She died with her decision unchanged.”

“But that,” said Poirot, “is where I come in.”

The lawyer looked at him inquiringly.

Poirot leaned forward.

“Supposing,” he said, “that Miss Arundell, on her deathbed, wished to destroy that will. Supposing that she believed that she had destroyed it—but that, in reality, she only destroyed the first will.”

Mr. Purvis shook his head.

“No, both wills were intact.”

“Then supposing she destroyed a dummy will—under the impression that she was destroying the genuine document. She was very ill, remember, it would be easy to deceive her.”

“You would have to bring evidence to that effect,” said the lawyer sharply.

“Oh! undoubtedly—undoubtedly….”

“Is there—may I ask—is there any reason to believe something of that kind happened?”

Poirot drew back a little.

“I should not like to commit myself at this stage—”

“Naturally, naturally,” said Mr. Purvis, agreeing with a phrase that was familiar to him.

"But may I say, strictly in confidence, that there are some curious features about this business!"

"Really? You don't say so?"

Mr. Purvis rubbed his hands together with a kind of pleasurable anticipation.

"What I wanted from you and what I have got," continued Poirot, "is your opinion that Miss Arundell would, sooner or later, have changed her mind and relented towards her family."

"That is only my personal opinion, of course," the lawyer pointed out.

"My dear sir, I quite understand. You do not, I believe, act for Miss Lawson?"

"I advised Miss Lawson to consult an independent solicitor," said Mr. Purvis.

His tone was wooden.

Poirot shook hands with him, thanking him for his kindness and the information he had given us.

Twenty

SECOND VISIT TO LITTLEGREEN HOUSE

On our way from Harchester to Market Basing, a matter of some ten miles, we discussed the situation.

“Have you any grounds at all, Poirot, for that suggestion you threw out?”

“You mean that Miss Arundell may have believed that that particular will was destroyed? No, mon ami—frankly, no. But it was incumbent upon me—you must perceive that—to make some sort of suggestion! Mr. Purvis is a shrewd man. Unless I threw out some hint of the kind I did, he would ask himself what I could be doing in this affair.”

“Do you know what you remind me of, Poirot?” I said.

“No, mon ami.”

“Of a juggler juggling with a lot of different coloured balls! They are all in the air at once.”

“The different coloured balls are the different lies I tell—eh?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“And some day, you think, there will come the grand crash?”

“You can’t keep it up forever,” I pointed out.

“That is true. There will come the grand moment when I catch the balls one by one, make my bow, and walk off the stage.”

“To the sound of thunderous applause from the audience.”

Poirot looked at me rather suspiciously.

"That well may be, yes."

"We didn't learn very much from Mr. Purvis," I remarked, edging away from the danger point.

"No, except that it confirmed our general ideas."

"And it confirmed Miss Lawson's statement that she knew nothing about the will until after the old lady's death."

"Me, I do not see that it confirmed anything of the sort."

"Purvis advised Miss Arundell not to tell her, and Miss Arundell replied that she had no intention of doing so."

"Yes, that is all very nice and clear. But there are keyholes, my friend, and keys that unlock locked drawers."

"Do you really think that Miss Lawson would eavesdrop and poke and pry around?" I asked rather shocked.

Poirot smiled.

"Miss Lawson—she is not an old school tie, mon cher. We know that she overheard one conversation which she was not supposed to have heard—I refer to the one in which Charles and his aunt discussed the question of bumping off miserly relatives."

I admitted the truth of that.

"So you see, Hastings, she may easily have overheard some of the conversation between Mr. Purvis and Miss Arundell. He has a good resonant voice."

"As for poking and prying," went on Poirot. "More people do it than you would suppose. Timid and easily frightened people such as Miss Lawson often acquire a number of mildly dishonourable habits which are a great solace and recreation to them."

“Really, Poirot!” I protested.

He nodded his head a good many times.

“But yes, it is so, it is so.”

We arrived at the George and took a couple of rooms. Then we strolled off in the direction of Littlegreen House.

When we rang the bell, Bob immediately answered the challenge. Dashing across the hall, barking furiously, he flung himself against the front door.

“I’ll have your liver and your lights!” he snarled. “I’ll tear you limb from limb! I’ll teach you to try and get into this house! Just wait until I get my teeth into you.”

A soothing murmur added itself to the clamour.

“Now then, boy. Now then, there’s a good doggie. Come in here.”

Bob, dragged by the collar, was immured in the morning room much against his will.

“Always spoiling a fellow’s sport,” he grumbled. “First chance I’ve had of giving anyone a really good fright for ever so long. Just aching to get my teeth into a trouser leg. You be careful of yourself without me to protect you.”

The door of the morning room was shut on him, and Ellen drew back bolts and bars and opened the front door.

“Oh, it’s you, sir,” she exclaimed.

She drew the door right back. A look of highly pleasurable excitement spread over her face.

“Come in, sir, if you please, sir.”

We entered the hall. From beneath the door on the left, loud snuffling sounds proceeded, interspersed with growls. Bob was endeavouring to "place" us correctly.

"You can let him out," I suggested.

"I will, sir. He's quite all right, really, but he makes such a noise and rushes at people so it frightens them. He's a splendid watchdog though."

She opened the morning room door, and Bob shot through like a suddenly projected cannonball.

"Who is it? Where are they? Oh, there you are. Dear me, don't I seem to remember—" sniff—sniff—sniff—prolonged snort. "Of course! We have met!"

"Hullo, old man," I said. "How goes it?"

Bob wagged his tail perfunctorily.

"Nicely, thank you. Let me just see—" he resumed his researches. "Been talking to a spaniel lately, I smell. Foolish dogs, I think. What's this? A cat? That is interesting. Wish we had her here. We'd have rare sport. H'm—not a bad bull terrier."

Having correctly diagnosed a visit I had lately paid to some doggy friends, he transferred his attention to Poirot, inhaled a noseful of benzine and walked away reproachfully.

"Bob," I called.

He threw me a look over his shoulder.

"It's all right. I know what I'm doing. I'll be back in a jiffy."

"The house is all shut up. I hope you'll excuse—" Ellen hurried into the morning room and began to unfasten the shutters.

"Excellent, this is excellent," said Poirot, following her in and sitting down. As I was about to join him, Bob reappeared from some mysterious region, ball in mouth. He dashed up the stairs and sprawled himself on the top step, his ball between his paws. His tail wagged slowly.

"Come on," he said. "Come on. Let's have a game."

My interest in detection momentarily eclipsed, we played for some minutes, then with a feeling of guilt I hurried into the morning room.

Poirot and Ellen seemed to be well away on the subject of illness and medicines.

"Some little white pills, sir, that's all she used to take. Two or three after every meal. That was Dr. Grainger's orders. Oh, yes, she was very good about it. Tiny little things they were. And then there was some stuff Miss Lawson swore by. Capsules, they were, Dr. Loughbarrow's Liver Capsules. You can see advertisements of them on all the hoardings."

"She took those too?"

"Yes. Miss Lawson got her them to begin with, and she thought they did her good."

"Did Dr. Grainger know?"

"Oh, sir, he didn't mind. 'You take 'em if you think they do you good,' he'd say to her. And she said, 'Well, you may laugh, but they do do me good. A lot better than any of your physic.' And Dr. Grainger, he laughed, and said faith was worth all the drugs ever invented."

"She didn't take anything else?"

"No. Miss Bella's husband, the foreign doctor, he went out and got her a bottle of something, but although she thanked him very politely she poured it away and that I know for a fact! And I think she was right. You don't know where you are with these foreign things."

"Mrs. Tanios saw her pouring it away, didn't she?"

“Yes, and I’m afraid she was rather hurt about it, poor lady. I’m sorry, too, for no doubt it was kindly meant on the doctor’s part.”

“No doubt. No doubt. I suppose any medicines that were left in the house were thrown away when Miss Arundell died?”

Ellen looked a little surprised at the question.

“Oh, yes, sir. The nurse threw away some and Miss Lawson got rid of all the old lot in the medicine cupboard in the bathroom.”

“Is that where the—er—Dr. Loughbarrow’s Liver Capsules were kept?”

“No, they were kept in the corner cupboard in the dining room so as to be handy for taking after meals as directed.”

“What nurse attended Miss Arundell? Can you give me her name and address?”

Ellen could supply that at once and did.

Poirot continued to ask questions about Miss Arundell’s last illness.

Ellen gave details with relish, describing the sickness, the pain, the onset of jaundice, and the final delirium. I don’t know whether Poirot got any satisfaction out of the catalogue. He listened patiently enough and occasionally interpolated some pertinent little question, usually about Miss Lawson and the amount of time she spent in the sickroom. He was also exceedingly interested in the diet administered to the ill woman, comparing it with that administered to some dead relative (nonexistent) of his own.

Seeing that they were enjoying themselves so much, I stole out in the hall again. Bob had gone to sleep on the landing, his ball lying under his chin.

I whistled to him and he sprang up, alert at once. This time, however, doubtless out of offended dignity, he made a protracted business of despatching the ball down to me, several times catching it back at the last minute.

"Disappointed, aren't you? Well, perhaps I will let you have it this time."

When I next went back to the morning room, Poirot was talking about Dr. Tanios' surprise visit on the Sunday before the old lady's death.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Charles and Miss Theresa were out for a walk. Dr. Tanios wasn't expected, I know. The mistress was lying down and she was very surprised when I told her who it was. 'Dr. Tanios?' she said. 'Is Mrs. Tanios with him?' I told her no, the gentleman had come alone. So she said to tell him she'd be down in a minute."

"Did he stay long?"

"Not above an hour, sir. He didn't look too pleased when he went away."

"Have you any idea of the—er—purpose of his visit?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir."

"You did not happen to hear anything?"

Ellen's face flushed suddenly.

"No, I did not, sir! I've never been one to listen at doors, no matter what some people will do—and people who ought to know better!"

"Oh, but you misunderstand me." Poirot was eager, apologetic. "It just occurred to me that perhaps you might have brought in tea while the gentleman was there and if so, you could hardly have helped hearing what he and your mistress were talking about."

Ellen was mollified.

"I'm sorry, sir, I misunderstood you. No, Dr. Tanios didn't stay for tea."

Poirot looked up at her and twinkled a little.

"And if I want to know what he came down for—well, it is possible that Miss Lawson might be in a position to know? Is that it?"

“Well, if she doesn’t know, sir, nobody does,” said Ellen with a sniff.

“Let me see,” Poirot frowned as though trying to remember. “Miss Lawson’s bedroom—was it next to Miss Arundell’s?”

“No, sir. Miss Lawson’s room is right at the top of the staircase. I can show you, sir.”

Poirot accepted the offer. As he went up the stairs he kept close to the wall side, and just as he reached the top uttered an exclamation and stooped to his trouser leg.

“Ah—I have just caught a thread—ah, yes, there is a nail here in the skirting board.”

“Yes, there is, sir. I think it must have worked loose or something. I’ve caught my dress on it once or twice.”

“Has it been like that long?”

“Well, some time, I’m afraid, sir. I noticed it first when the mistress was laid up—after her accident, that was, sir—I tried to pull it out but I couldn’t.”

“It had a thread round it sometime, I think.”

“That’s right, sir, there was a little loop of thread, I remember. I can’t think what for, I’m sure.”

But there was no suspicion in Ellen’s voice. To her it was just one of the things that occur in houses and which one does not bother to explain!

Poirot had stepped into the room at the top of the stairs. It was of moderate size. There were two windows directly facing us. There was a dressing table across one corner and between the windows was a wardrobe with a long mirror. The bed was to the right behind the door facing the windows. On the left-hand wall of the room was a big mahogany chest of drawers and a marble-topped washstand.

Poirot looked round the room thoughtfully and then came out again on the landing. He went along the passage, passing two other bedrooms and then came to the large bedchamber which had belonged to Emily Arundell.

“The nurse had the little room next door,” Ellen explained.

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

As we descended the stairs, he asked if he might walk round the garden.

“Oh, yes, sir, certainly. It looks lovely just now.”

“The gardener is still employed?”

“Angus? Oh, yes, Angus is still here. Miss Lawson wants everything kept nice because she thinks it will sell better that way.”

“I think she is wise. To let a place run to seed is not the good policy.”

The garden was very peaceful and beautiful. The wide borders were full of lupins and delphiniums and great scarlet poppies. The peonies were in bud. Wandering along we came presently to a potting shed where a big, rugged old man was busy. He saluted us respectfully and Poirot engaged him in conversation.

A mention that we had seen Mr. Charles that day thawed the old man and he became quite garrulous.

“Always a one, he was! I’ve known him come out here with half a gooseberry pie and the cook hunting high and low for it! And he’d go back with such an innocent face that durned if they wouldn’t say it must have been the cat, though I’ve never known a cat eat a gooseberry pie! Oh, he’s a one, Mr. Charles is!”

“He was down here in April, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, down here two weekends. Just before the missus died, it was.”

“Did you see much of him?”

“A good bit, I did. There wasn’t much for a young gentleman to do down here, and that’s a fact. Used to stroll up to the George and have one. And then he’d potter round here, asking me questions about one thing and another.”

“About flowers?”

“Yes—flowers—and weeds too.” The old man chuckled.

“Weeds?”

Poirot’s voice held a sudden, tentative note. He turned his head and looked searchingly along the shelves. His eye stopped at a tin.

“Perhaps he wanted to know how you got rid of them?”

“He did that!”

“I suppose this is the stuff you use.”

Poirot turned the tin gently round and read the label.

“That’s it,” said Angus. “Very handy stuff it is.”

“Dangerous stuff?”

“Not if you use it right. It’s arsenic, of course. Had a bit of a joke about that, Mr. Charles and I did. Said as how when he had a wife and didn’t like her, he’d come to me and get a little of that stuff to put her away with! Maybe, I sez, she’ll be the one that wants to do away with you! Ah, that made him laugh proper, that did! It was a good one, that!”

We laughed as in duty bound. Poirot prised up the lid of the tin.

“Nearly empty,” he murmured.

The old man had a look.

“Aye, there’s more gone than I thought. No idea I’d used that much. I’ll be having to order some more.”

“Yes,” said Poirot smiling. “I’m afraid there’s hardly enough for you to spare me some for my wife!”

We all had another good laugh over this witticism.

“You’re not married, I take it, mister?”

“No.”

“Ah! it’s always them as isn’t that can afford to joke about it. Those that isn’t don’t know what trouble is!”

“I gather that your wife—?” Poirot paused delicately.

“She’s alive all right—very much so.”

Angus seemed a little depressed about it.

Complimenting him on his garden, we bade him farewell.

Twenty-one

THE CHEMIST; THE NURSE; THE DOCTOR

The tin of weed killer had started a new train of thought in my mind. It was the first definite suspicious circumstance that I had encountered. Charles' interest in it, the old gardener's obvious surprise at finding the tin almost empty—it all seemed to point in the right direction.

Poirot was, as usual when I am excited, very noncommittal.

"Even if some of the weed killer has been taken, there is as yet no evidence that Charles was the person to take it, Hastings."

"But he talked so much to the gardener about it!"

"Not a very wise procedure if he was going to help himself to some."

Then he went on:

"What is the first and simplest poison to come into your mind if you were asked to name one quickly?"

"Arsenic, I suppose."

"Yes. You understand then, that very marked pause before the word strychnine when Charles was talking to us today."

"You mean—?"

"That he was about to say 'arsenic in the soup,' and stopped himself."

"Ah!" I said, "and why did he stop himself?"

"Exactly. Why? I may say, Hastings, that it was to find the answer to that particular 'why?' which made me go out into the garden in search of any likely source of weed killer."

“And you found it!”

“And I found it.”

I shook my head.

“It begins to look rather bad for young Charles. You had a good talk with Ellen over the old lady’s illness. Did her symptoms resemble those of arsenic poisoning?”

Poirot rubbed his nose.

“It is difficult to say. There was abdominal pain—sickness.”

“Of course—that’s it!”

“H’m, I am not so sure.”

“What poison did it resemble?”

“Eh bien, my friend, it resembled not so much poison as disease of the liver and death from that cause!”

“Oh, Poirot,” I cried. “It can’t be natural death! It’s got to be murder!”

“Oh, là, là, we seem to have changed places, you and I.”

He turned abruptly into a chemist’s shop. After a long discussion of Poirot’s particular internal troubles, he purchased a small box of indigestion lozenges. Then, when his purchase was wrapped up and he was about to leave the shop, his attention was taken by an attractively-wrapped package of Dr. Loughbarrow’s Liver Capsules.

“Yes, sir, a very good preparation.” The chemist was a middleaged man of a chatty disposition. “You’ll find them very efficacious.”

“Miss Arundell used to take them, I remember. Miss Emily Arundell.”

“Indeed she did, sir. Miss Arundell of Littlegreen House. A fine old lady, one of the old school. I used to serve her.”

“Did she take many patent medicines?”

“Not really, sir. Not so many as some elderly ladies I could name. Miss Lawson, now, her companion, the one that’s come into all the money—”

Poirot nodded.

“She was a one for this, that, and the other. Pills, lozenges, dyspepsia tablets, digestive mixtures, blood mixtures. Really enjoyed herself among the bottles.” He smiled ruefully. “I wish there were more like her. People nowadays don’t take to medicines as they used. Still, we sell a lot of toilet preparations to make up for it.”

“Did Miss Arundell take these Liver Capsules regularly?”

“Yes, she’d been taking them for three months, I think, before she died.”

“A relative of hers, a Dr. Tanios, came in to have a mixture made up one day, didn’t he?”

“Yes, of course, the Greek gentleman that married Miss Arundell’s niece. Yes, a very interesting mixture it was. One I’ve not previously become acquainted with.”

The man spoke as of a rare botanical trophy.

“It makes a change sir, when you get something new. Very interesting combination of drugs, I remember. Of course, the gentleman is a doctor. Very nice he was—a pleasant way with him.”

“Did his wife do any shopping here?”

“Did she now? I don’t recall. Oh, yes, came in for a sleeping draught—chloral it was, I remember. A double quantity the prescription was for. It’s always a little difficult for us with hypnotic drugs. You see, most doctors don’t prescribe much at a time.”

"Whose prescription was it?"

"Her husband's I think. Oh, of course, it was quite all right—but, you know, we have to be careful nowadays. Perhaps you don't know the fact, but if a doctor makes a mistake in a prescription and we make it up in all good faith and anything goes wrong it's we who have to have the blame—not the doctor."

"That seems very unfair!"

"It's worrying, I'll admit. Ah, well, I can't complain. No trouble has come my way—touching wood."

He rapped the counter sharply with his knuckles.

Poirot decided to buy a package of Dr. Loughbarrow's Liver Capsules.

"Thank you, sir. Which size? 25, 50, 100?"

"I suppose the larger ones are better value—but still—"

"Have the 50, sir. That's the size Miss Arundell had. Eight and six."

Poirot agreed, paid over eight and six and received the parcel.

Then we left the shop.

"So Mrs. Tanios bought a sleeping draught," I exclaimed as we got out into the street. "An overdose of that would kill anyone, wouldn't it?"

"With the greatest of ease."

"Do you think old Miss Arundell—"

I was remembering Miss Lawson's words, "I daresay she'd murder someone if he told her to!"

Poirot shook his head.

“Chloral is a narcotic, and a hypnotic. Used to alleviate pain and as a sleeping draught. It can also become a habit.”

“Do you think Mrs. Tanios had acquired the habit?”

Poirot shook his head perplexedly.

“No, I hardly think so. But it is curious. I can think of one explanation. But that would mean—”

He broke off and looked at his watch.

“Come, let us see if we can find this nurse Carruthers who was with Miss Arundell in her last illness.”

Nurse Carruthers proved to be a sensible-looking, middle-aged woman.

Poirot now appeared in yet another rôle and with one more fictitious relative. This time he had an aged mother for whom he was anxious to find a sympathetic hospital nurse.

“You comprehend—I am going to speak to you quite frankly. My mother, she is difficult. We have had some excellent nurses, young women, fully competent, but the very fact that they are young has been against them. My mother dislikes young women, she insults them, she is rude and fractious, she fights against open windows and modern hygiene. It is very difficult.”

He sighed mournfully.

“I know,” said Nurse Carruthers sympathetically. “It’s very trying sometimes. One has to use a lot of tact. It’s no use upsetting a patient. Better to give in to them as far as you can. And once they feel you’re not trying to force things on them, they very often relax and give in like lambs.”

“Ah, I see that you would be ideal in the part. You understand old ladies.”

“I’ve had to do with a few in my time,” said Nurse Carruthers with a laugh. “You can do a lot with patience and good humour.”

“That is so wise. You nursed Miss Arundell, I believe. Now, she could not have been an easy old lady.”

“Oh, I don’t know. She was strong willed, but I didn’t find her difficult at all. Of course, I wasn’t there any length of time. She died on the fourth day.”

“I was talking to her niece, Miss Theresa Arundell, only yesterday.”

“Really. Fancy that now! What I always say is—the world’s a small place!”

“You know her, I expect?”

“Well, of course, she came down after her aunt’s death and she was here for the funeral. And, of course, I’ve seen her about before when she’s been staying down here. A very handsome girl.”

“Yes, indeed—but too thin—definitely too thin.”

Nurse Carruthers, conscious of her own comfortable plumpness, preened herself slightly.

“Of course,” she said, “one shouldn’t be too thin.”

“Poor girl,” continued Poirot. “I am sorry for her. Entre nous,” he leaned forward confidentially, “her aunt’s will was a great blow.”

“I suppose it must have been,” said Nurse Carruthers. “I know it caused a good deal of talk.”

“I cannot imagine what induced Miss Arundell to disinherit all her family. It seems an extraordinary procedure.”

“Most extraordinary. I agree with you. And, of course, people say there must have been something behind it all.”

“Did you ever get any idea of the reason? Did old Miss Arundell say anything?”

"No. Not to me, that is."

"But to somebody else?"

"Well, I rather fancy she mentioned something to Miss Lawson because I heard Miss Lawson say, 'Yes, dear, but you see it's at the lawyer's.' And Miss Arundell said, 'I'm sure it's in the drawer downstairs.' And Miss Lawson said, 'No, you sent it to Mr. Purvis. Don't you remember?' And then my patient had an attack of nausea again and Miss Lawson went away while I saw to her, but I've often wondered if it was the will they were talking about."

"It certainly seems probable."

Nurse Carruthers went on:

"If so, I expect Miss Arundell was worried and perhaps wanted to alter it—but there, she was so ill, poor dear, after that—that she was past thinking of anything."

"Did Miss Lawson take part in the nursing at all?" asked Poirot.

"Oh, dear no, she was no manner of good! Too fussy, you know. She only irritated my patient."

"Did you, then, do all the nursing yourself? C'est formidable ça."

"The maid—what was her name—Ellen, helped me. Ellen was very good. She was used to illness and used to looking after the old lady. We managed pretty well between us. As a matter of fact, Dr. Grainger was sending in a night nurse on the Friday, but Miss Arundell died before the night nurse arrived."

"Perhaps Miss Lawson helped to prepare some of the invalid's food?"

"No, she didn't do anything at all. There wasn't really anything to prepare. I had the Valentine and the brandy—and the Brand's and glucose and all that. All Miss Lawson did was to go about the house crying and getting in everyone's way."

The nurse's tone held distinct acrimony.

"I can see," said Poirot smiling, "that you have not a very high opinion of Miss Lawson's usefulness."

"Companions are usually a poor lot, in my opinion. They're not trained, you see, in any way. Just amateurs. And usually they're women who wouldn't be any good at anything else."

"Do you think Miss Lawson was very attached to Miss Arundell?"

"She seemed to be. Very upset and took on terribly when the old lady died. More than the relatives did, in my opinion," Nurse Carruthers finished with a sniff.

"Perhaps, then," said Poirot nodding his head sagely, "Miss Arundell knew what she was doing when she left her money as she did."

"She was a very shrewd old lady," said the nurse. "There wasn't much she didn't take in and know about, I must say!"

"Did she mention the dog, Bob, at all?"

"It's funny you should say that! She talked about him a lot—when she was delirious. Something about his ball and a fall she'd had. A nice dog, Bob was—I'm very fond of dogs. Poor fellow, he was very miserable when she died. Wonderful, aren't they? Quite human."

And on the note of the humanity of dogs, we parted.

"There is one who had clearly no suspicions," remarked Poirot after we had left.

He sounded slightly discouraged.

We had a bad dinner at the George—Poirot groaning a good deal, especially over the soup.

"And it is so easy, Hastings, to make good soup. Le pot au feu—"

I avoided a disquisition on cookery with some difficulty.

After dinner we had a surprise.

We were sitting in the “lounge” which we had to ourselves. There had been one other man at dinner—a commercial traveller by his appearance—but he had gone out. I was just idly turning over the pages of an antiquated Stock Breeder’s Gazette or some such periodical when I suddenly heard Poirot’s name being mentioned.

The voice in question was somewhere outside.

“Where is he? In here? Right—I can find him.”

The door was flung violently open, and Dr. Grainger, his face rather red, his eyebrows working irritably, strode into the room. He paused to close the door and then advanced upon us in no uncertain fashion.

“Oh, here you are! Now then, M. Hercule Poirot, what the devil do you mean by coming round to see me and telling me a pack of lies?”

“One of the juggler’s balls?” I murmured maliciously.

Poirot said in his oiliest voice:

“My dear doctor, you must allow me to explain—”

“Allow you? Allow you? Damn it, I’ll force you to explain! You’re a detective, that’s what you are! A nosing, prying detective! Coming round to me and feeding me up with a pack of lies about writing old General Arundell’s biography! More fool me to be taken in by such a damn’ fool story.”

“Who told you of my identity?” asked Poirot.

“Who told me? Miss Peabody told me. She saw through you all right!”

“Miss Peabody—yes.” Poirot sounded reflective. “I rather thought—”

Dr. Grainger cut in angrily.

“Now then, sir, I’m waiting for your explanation!”

“Certainly. My explanation is very simple. Attempted murder.”

“What? What’s that?”

Poirot said quietly:

“Miss Arundell had a fall, did she not? A fall down the stairs shortly before her death?”

“Yes, what of it? She slipped on that damned dog’s ball.”

Poirot shook his head.

“No, Doctor, she did not. A thread was fastened across the top of the stairs so as to trip her up.”

Dr. Grainger stared.

“Then why didn’t she tell me so?” he demanded. “Never said a word to me about it.”

“That is perhaps understandable—if it were a member of her own family who placed that thread there!”

“H’m—I see.” Grainger cast a sharp glance at Poirot, then threw himself into a chair. “Well?” he said. “How did you come to be mixed up in this affair?”

“Miss Arundell wrote to me, stressing the utmost secrecy. Unfortunately the letter was delayed.”

Poirot proceeded to give certain carefully edited details and explained the finding of the nail driven into the skirting board.

The doctor listened with a grave face. His anger had abated. "You can comprehend my position was a difficult one," Poirot finished. "I was employed, you see, by a dead woman. But I counted the obligation none the less strong for that."

Dr. Grainger's brows were drawn together in thought.

"And you've no idea who it was stretched that thread across the head of the stairs?" he asked.

"I have no evidence as to who it was. I will not say I have no idea."

"It's a nasty story," said Grainger, his face grim.

"Yes. You can understand, can you not, that to begin with I was uncertain whether there had or had not been a sequel?"

"Eh? What's that?"

"To all intents and purposes Miss Arundell died a natural death, but could one be sure of that? There had been one attempt on her life. How could I be sure that there had not been a second? And this time a successful one!"

Grainger nodded thoughtfully.

"I suppose you are sure, Dr. Grainger—please do not get angry—that Miss Arundell's death was a natural one? I have come across certain evidence today—"

He detailed the conversation he had had with old Angus, Charles Arundell's interest in the weed killer, and finally the old man's surprise at the emptiness of the tin.

Grainger listened with keen attention. When Poirot had finished he said, quietly:

"I see your point. Many a case of arsenical poisoning has been diagnosed as acute gastro enteritis and a certificate given—especially when there are no suspicious contributing circumstances. In any case, arsenical poisoning presents certain difficulties—it has so many different forms. It may be acute, subacute, nervous or chronic. There may be vomiting and abdominal pain—these symptoms may be entirely absent—the person may fall suddenly to the ground and expire shortly afterwards—there may be narcotism and paralysis. The symptoms vary widely."

Poirot said:

"Eh bien, taking the facts into account, what is your opinion?"

Dr. Grainger was silent for a minute or two. Then he said slowly:

"Taking everything into account, and without any bias whatever, I am of the opinion that no form of arsenical poisoning could account for the symptoms in Miss Arundell's case. She died, I am quite convinced, of yellow atrophy of the liver. I have, as you know, attended her for many years, and she has suffered previously from attacks similar to that which caused her death. That is my considered opinion, M. Poirot." And there, perforce, the matter had to rest.

It seemed rather an anticlimax when, somewhat apologetically, Poirot produced the package of Liver Capsules he had bought at the chemists.

"Miss Arundell took these, I believe?" he said. "I suppose they could not be injurious in any way?"

"That stuff? No harm at all. Aloes—podophyllin—all quite mild and harmless," said Grainger. "She liked trying the stuff. I didn't mind."

He got up.

"You dispensed certain medicines for her yourself?" asked Poirot.

"Yes—a mild liver pill to be taken after food." His eyes twinkled. "She could have taken a boxful without hurting herself. I'm not given to poisoning my patients, M. Poirot."

Then, with a smile, he shook hands with us both and departed.

Poirot undid the package he had purchased at the chemists. The medicament consisted of transparent capsules, three-quarters full of dark brown powder.

“They look like a seasick remedy I once took,” I remarked.

Poirot opened a capsule, examined its contents and tasted it gingerly with his tongue. He made a grimace.

“Well,” I said, throwing myself back in my chair and yawning, “everything seems harmless enough. Dr. Loughbarrow’s specialities, and Dr. Grainger’s pills! And Dr. Grainger seems definitely to negative the arsenic theory. Are you convinced at last, my stubborn Poirot?”

“It is true that I am pigheaded—that is your expression, I think?—Yes, definitely I have the head of the pig,” said my friend, meditatively.

“Then, in spite of having the chemist, the nurse and the doctor, against you, you still think that Miss Arundell was murdered?”

Poirot said, quietly:

“That is what I believe. No—more than believe. I am sure of it, Hastings.”

“There’s one way of proving it, I suppose,” I said slowly. “Exhumation.”

Poirot nodded.

“Is that the next step?”

“My friend, I have to go carefully.”

“Why?”

“Because,” his voice dropped, “I am afraid of a second tragedy.”

“You mean—?”

“I am afraid, Hastings, I am afraid. Let us leave it at that.”

Twenty-two

THE WOMAN ON THE STAIRS

On the following morning a note arrived by hand. It was in a rather weak, uncertain handwriting slanting very much uphill.

Dear M. Poirot,

I hear from Ellen that you were at Littlegreen House yesterday. I shall be much obliged if you would call and see me sometime today.

Yours truly,

Wilhelmina Lawson.

“So she’s down here,” I remarked.

“Yes.”

“Why has she come, I wonder?”

Poirot smiled.

“I do not suppose there is any sinister reason. After all, the house belongs to her.”

“Yes, that’s true, of course. You know, Poirot, that’s the worst of this game of ours. Every single little thing that anyone does is open to the most sinister constructions.”

“It is true that I myself have enjoined upon you the motto, ‘suspect everyone.’”

“Are you still in that state yourself?”

“No—for me it has boiled down to this. I suspect one particular person.”

“Which one?”

“Since, at the moment, it is only suspicion and there is no definite proof, I think I must leave you to draw your own deductions, Hastings. And do not neglect the psychology—that is important. The character of the murder—implying as it does a certain temperament in the murderer—that is an essential clue to the crime.”

“I can’t consider the character of the murderer if I don’t know who the murderer is!”

“No, no, you have not paid attention to what I have just said. If you reflect sufficiently on the character—the necessary character of the murder—then you will realize who the murderer is!”

“Do you really know, Poirot?” I asked, curiously.

“I cannot say I know because I have no proofs. That is why I cannot say more at the present. But I am quite sure—yes, my friend, in my own mind I am very sure.”

“Well,” I said, laughing, “mind he doesn’t get you! That would be a tragedy!”

Poirot started a little. He did not take the matter as a joke. Instead he murmured: “You are right. I must be careful—extremely careful.”

“You ought to wear a coat of chain mail,” I said, chaffingly. “And employ a taster in case of poison! In fact, you ought to have a regular band of gunmen to protect you!”

“Merci, Hastings, I shall rely on my wits.”

He then wrote a note to Miss Lawson saying that he would call at Littlegreen House at eleven o’clock.

After that we breakfasted and then strolled out into the Square. It was about a quarter past ten and a hot sleepy morning.

I was looking into the window of the antique shop at a very nice set of Hepplewhite chairs when I received a highly painful lunge in the ribs, and a sharp, penetrating voice said: “Hi!”

I spun round indignantly to find myself face to face with Miss Peabody. In her hand (the instrument of her assault upon me) was a large and powerful umbrella with a spiked point.

Apparently completely callous to the severe pain she had inflicted, she observed in a satisfied voice:

“Ha! Thought it was you. Don’t often make a mistake.”

I said rather coldly:

“Er—Good morning. Can I do anything for you?”

“You can tell me how that friend of yours is getting on with his book—Life of General Arundell?”

“He hasn’t actually started to write it yet,” I said.

Miss Peabody indulged in a little silent but apparently satisfying laughter. She shook like a jelly. Recovering from that attack, she remarked:

“No, I don’t suppose he will be starting to write it.”

I said, smiling:

“So you saw through our little fiction?”

“What d’you take me for—a fool?” asked Miss Peabody. “I saw soon enough what your downy friend was after! Wanted me to talk! Well, I didn’t mind. I like talking. Hard to get anyone to listen nowadays. Quite enjoyed myself that afternoon.”

She cocked a shrewd eye at me.

“What’s it all about, eh? What’s it all about?”

I was hesitating what exactly to reply when Poirot joined us. He bowed with empressement to Miss Peabody.

“Good morning, mademoiselle. Enchanted to encounter you.”

“Good mornin’,” said Miss Peabody. “What are you this morning, Parotti or Poirot—eh?”

“It was very clever of you to pierce my disguise so rapidly,” said Poirot, smiling.

“Wasn’t much disguise to pierce! Not many like you about, are there? Don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad one. Difficult to say.”

“I prefer, mademoiselle, to be unique.”

“You’ve got your wish, I should say,” said Miss Peabody, drily. “Now then, Mr. Poirot, I gave you all the gossip you wanted the other day. Now it’s my turn to ask questions. What’s it all about? Eh? What’s it all about?”

“Are you not asking a question to which you already know the answer?”

“I wonder.” She shot a glance at him. “Something fishy about that will? Or is it something else? Going to dig Emily up? Is that it?”

Poirot did not answer.

Miss Peabody nodded her head slowly and thoughtfully as though she had received a reply.

“Often wondered,” she said inconsequently, “what it would feel like… Readin’ the papers, you know—wondered if anyone would ever be dug up in Market Basing… Didn’t think it would be Emily Arundell….”

She gave him a sudden, piercing look.

“She wouldn’t have liked it, you know. I suppose you’ve thought of that—hey?”

“Yes, I have thought of it.”

“I suppose you would do—you’re not a fool! Don’t think you’re particularly officious either.”

Poirot bowed.

“Thank you, mademoiselle.”

“And that’s more than most people would say—looking at your moustache. Why d’you have a moustache like that? D’you like it?”

I turned away convulsed with laughter.

“In England the cult of the moustache is lamentably neglected,” said Poirot. His hand surreptitiously caressed the hirsute adornment.

“Oh, I see! Funny,” said Miss Peabody. “Knew a woman who once had a goitre and was proud of it! Wouldn’t believe that, but it’s true! Well, what I say is, it’s lucky when you’re pleased with what the Lord has given you. It’s usually the other way about.” She shook her head and sighed.

“Never thought there would be a murder in this out of the world spot.” Again she shot a sudden, piercing look at Poirot. “Which of ’em did it?”

“Am I to shout that to you here in the street?”

“Probably means you don’t know. or do you? Oh, well—bad blood—bad blood. I’d like to know whether that Varley woman poisoned her husband or not. Makes a difference.”

“You believe in heredity?”

Miss Peabody said, suddenly:

“I’d rather it was Tanios. An outsider! But wishes ain’t horses, worse luck. Well, I’ll be getting along. I can see you’re not goin’ to tell me anything… Who are you actin’ for, by the way?”

Poirot said, gravely:

“I am acting for the dead, mademoiselle.”

I am sorry to say that Miss Peabody received this remark with a sudden shriek of laughter. Quickly subduing her mind she said:

“Excuse me. It sounded like Isabel Tripp—that’s all! What an awful woman! Julia’s worse, I think. So painfully girlish. Never did like mutton dressed lamb fashion. Well, good-bye. Seen Dr. Grainger at all?”

“Mademoiselle, I have the bone to pick with you. You betrayed my secret.”

Miss Peabody indulged in her peculiar throaty chuckle.

“Men are simple! He’d swallowed that preposterous tissue of lies you told him. Wasn’t he mad when I told him? Went away snorting with rage! He’s looking for you.”

“He found me last night.”

“Oh! I wish I’d been there.”

“I wish you had, mademoiselle,” said Poirot gallantly.

Miss Peabody laughed and prepared to waddle away. She addressed me over her shoulder.

“Good-bye, young man. Don’t go buying those chairs. They’re a fake.”

She moved off, chuckling.

“That,” said Poirot, “is a very clever old woman.”

“Even although she did not admire your moustaches?”

“Taste is one thing,” said Poirot coldly. “Brains are another.”

We passed into the shop and spent a pleasant twenty minutes looking round. We emerged unscathed in pocket and proceeded in the direction of Littlegreen House.

Ellen, rather redder in the face than usual, admitted us and showed us into the drawing room. Presently footsteps were heard descending the stairs and Miss Lawson came in. She seemed somewhat out of breath and flustered. Her hair was pinned up in a silk handkerchief.

“I hope you’ll excuse my coming in like this, M. Poirot. I’ve been going through some locked-up cupboards—so many things—old people are inclined to hoard a little, I’m afraid—dear Miss Arundell was no exception—and one gets so much dust in one’s hair—astonishing, you know, the things people collect—if you can believe me, two dozen needlebooks—actually, two dozen.”

“You mean that Miss Arundell had bought two dozen needlebooks?”

“Yes, and put them away and forgot about them—and, of course, now the needles are all rusty—such a pity. She used to give them to the maids as Christmas presents.”

“She was very forgetful—yes?”

“Oh, very. Especially in the way of putting things away. Like a dog with a bone, you know. That’s what we used to call it between us. ‘Now don’t go and dog and bone it,’ I used to say to her.”

She laughed and then producing a small handkerchief from her pocket suddenly began to sniff.

“Oh, dear,” she said tearfully. “It seems so dreadful of me to be laughing here.”

“You have too much sensibility,” said Poirot. “You feel things too much.”

“That’s what my mother always used to say to me, M. Poirot. ‘You take things to heart too much, Minnie,’ she used to say. It’s a great drawback, M.

Poirot, to be so sensitive. Especially when one has one's living to get."

"Ah, yes, indeed, but that is all a thing of the past. You are now your own mistress. You can enjoy yourself—travel—you have absolutely no worries or anxieties."

"I suppose that's true," said Miss Lawson, rather doubtfully.

"Assuredly it is true. Now talking of Miss Arundell's forgetfulness I see how it was that her letter to me never reached me for so long a time."

He explained the circumstances of the finding of the letter. A red spot showed in Miss Lawson's cheek. She said sharply:

"Ellen should have told me! To send that letter off to you without a word was great impertinence! She should have consulted me first. Great impertinence, I call it! Not one word did I hear about the whole thing. Disgraceful!"

"Oh, my dear lady, I am sure it was done in all good faith."

"Well, I think it was very peculiar myself! Very peculiar! Servants really do the oddest things. Ellen should have remembered that I am the mistress of the house now."

She drew herself up, importantly.

"Ellen was very devoted to her mistress, was she not?" said Poirot.

"Oh, I agree that it's no good making a fuss after things have happened, but all the same I think Ellen ought to be told that she mustn't take it upon herself to do things without asking first!" She stopped, a red spot on each cheekbone.

Poirot was silent for a minute, then he said:

"You wanted to see me today? In what way can I be of service to you?"

Miss Lawson's annoyance subsided as promptly as it had arisen. She began to be flustered and incoherent again.

"Well, really—you see, I just wondered… Well, to tell the truth, M. Poirot, I arrived down here yesterday and, of course, Ellen told me you had been here, and I just wondered—well, as you hadn't mentioned to me that you were coming—Well, it seemed rather odd—that I couldn't see—"

"You couldn't see what I was doing down here?" Poirot finished for her.

"I—well—no, that's exactly it. I couldn't."

She looked at him, flushed but inquiring.

"I must make a little confession to you," said Poirot. "I have permitted you to remain under a misapprehension, I am afraid. You assumed that the letter I received from Miss Arundell concerned itself with the question of a small sum of money, abstracted by—in all possibility—Mr. Charles Arundell."

Miss Lawson nodded.

"But that, you see, was not the case… In fact, the first I heard of the stolen money was from you… Miss Arundell wrote to me on the subject of her accident."

"Her accident?"

"Yes, she had a fall down the stairs, I understand."

"Oh, quite—quite—" Miss Lawson looked bewildered. She stared vacantly at Poirot. She went on. "But—I'm sorry—I'm sure it's very stupid of me—but why should she write to you? I understand—in fact, I think you said so—that you are a detective. You're not a—a doctor, too? Or a faith healer, perhaps?"

"No, I am not a doctor—nor a faith healer. But, like the doctor, I concern myself sometimes with so-called accidental deaths."

"With accidental deaths?"

"With so-called accidental deaths, I said. It is true that Miss Arundell did not die—but she might have died!"

"Oh, dear me, yes, the doctor said so, but I don't understand—"

Miss Lawson sounded still bewildered.

"The cause of the accident was supposed to be the ball of the little Bob, was it not?"

"Yes, yes, that was it. It was Bob's ball."

"Oh, no, it was not Bob's ball."

"But, excuse me, M. Poirot, I saw it there myself—as we all ran down."

"You saw it—yes, perhaps. But it was not the cause of the accident. The cause of the accident, Miss Lawson, was a dark-coloured thread stretched about a foot above the top of the stairs!"

"But—but a dog couldn't—"

"Exactly," said Poirot quickly. "A dog could not do that—he is not sufficiently intelligent—or, if you like, he is not sufficiently evil…A human being put that thread in position…."

Miss Lawson's face had gone deadly white. She raised a shaking hand to her face.

"Oh, M. Poirot—I can't believe it—you don't mean—but that is awful—really awful. You mean it was done on purpose?"

"Yes, it was done on purpose."

"But that's dreadful. It's almost like—like killing a person."

"If it had succeeded it would have been killing a person! In other words—it would have been murder!"

Miss Lawson gave a little shrill cry.

Poirot went on in the same grave tone.

“A nail was driven into the skirting board so that the thread could be attached. That nail was varnished so as not to show. Tell me, do you ever remember a smell of varnish that you could not account for?”

Miss Lawson gave a cry.

“Oh, how extraordinary! To think of that! Why, of course! And to think I never thought—never dreamed—but then, how could I? And yet it did seem odd to me at the time.”

Poirot leant forward.

“So—you can help us, mademoiselle. Once again you can help us. C’est épatant!”

“To think that was it! Oh, well, it all fits in.”

“Tell me, I pray of you. You smelt varnish—yes?”

“Yes. Of course, I didn’t know what it was. I thought—dear me—is it paint—no, it’s more like floor stain, and then, of course, I thought I must have imagined it.”

“When was this?”

“Now let me see—when was it?”

“Was it during that Easter weekend when the house was full of guests?”

“Yes, that was the time—but I’m trying to recall just which day it was… Now, let me see, it wasn’t Sunday. No, and it wasn’t on Tuesday—that was the night Dr. Donaldson came to dinner. And on the Wednesday they had all left. No, of course, it was the Monday—Bank Holiday. I’d been lying awake—rather worried, you know. I always think Bank Holiday is such a worrying day! There had been only just enough cold beef to go round at supper and I was afraid Miss Arundell might be annoyed about it. You see I'd ordered the joint on the Saturday, and of course I ought to have said seven pounds but I thought five pounds would do nicely, but Miss Arundell was always so vexed if there was any shortage—she was so hospitable—"

Miss Lawson paused to draw a deep breath and then rushed on.

"And so I was lying awake and wondering whether she'd say anything about it tomorrow, and what with one thing and another I was a long time dropping off—and then just as I was going off something seemed to wake me up—a sort of rap or tap—and I sat up in bed, and then I sniffed. Of course, I'm always terrified of fire—sometimes I think I smell fire two or three times a night—(so awful wouldn't it be if one were trapped?) Anyway there was a smell, and I sniffed hard but it wasn't smoke or anything like that. And I said to myself it's more like paint or floor stain—but of course, one wouldn't smell that in the middle of the night. But it was quite strong and I sat up sniffing and sniffing, and then I saw her in the glass—"

"Saw her? Saw whom?"

"In my looking glass, you know, it's really most convenient. I left my door open a little always, so as to hear Miss Arundell if she were to call, and if she went up and down stairs I could see her. The one light was always left switched on in the passage. That's how I came to see her kneeling on the stair—Theresa, I mean. She was kneeling on about the third step with her head bent down over something and I was just thinking, 'How odd, I wonder if she's ill?' when she got up and went away, so I supposed she'd just slipped or something. Or perhaps was stooping to pick something up. But, of course, I never thought about it again one way or another."

"The tap that aroused you would be the tap of the hammer on the nail," mused Poirot.

"Yes, I suppose it would. But oh, M. Poirot, how dreadful—how truly dreadful. I've always felt Theresa was, perhaps a little wild, but to do a thing like that."

"You are sure it was Theresa?"

"Oh, dear me, yes."

"It couldn't have been Mrs. Tanios or one of the maids, for instance?"

"Oh, no, it was Theresa."

Miss Lawson shook her head and murmured to herself:

"Oh dear. Oh dear," several times.

Poirot was staring at her in a way I found it hard to understand.

"Permit me," he said suddenly, "to make an experiment. Let us go upstairs and endeavour to reconstruct this little scene."

"Reconstruction? Oh, really—I don't know—I mean I don't quite see—"

"I will show you," said Poirot, cutting in upon these doubts in an authoritative manner.

Somewhat flustered, Miss Lawson led the way upstairs.

"I hope the room's tidy—so much to do—what with one thing and another—" she tailed off incoherently.

The room was indeed somewhat heavily littered with miscellaneous articles, obviously the result of Miss Lawson's turning out of cupboards. With her usual incoherence Miss Lawson managed to indicate her own position and Poirot was able to verify for himself the fact that a portion of the staircase was reflected in the wall mirror.

"And now, mademoiselle," he suggested, "if you will be so good as to go out and reproduce the actions that you saw."

Miss Lawson, still murmuring, "Oh, dear—" bustled out to fulfil her part. Poirot acted the part of the observer.

The performance concluded, he went out on the landing and asked which electric light had been left switched on.

“This one—this one along here. Just outside Miss Arundell’s door.”

Poirot reached up, detached the bulb and examined it.

“A forty watt lamp, I see. Not very powerful.”

“No, it was just so that the passage shouldn’t be quite dark.”

Poirot retraced his steps to the top of the stairs.

“You will pardon me, mademoiselle, but with the light being fairly dim and the way that shadow falls it is hardly possible that you can have seen very clearly. Can you be positive it was Miss Theresa Arundell and not just an indeterminate female figure in a dressing gown?”

Miss Lawson was indignant.

“No, indeed, M. Poirot! I’m perfectly sure! I know Theresa well enough, I should hope! Oh, it was her all right. Her dark dressing gown and that big shining brooch she wears with the initials—I saw that plainly.”

“So that there is no possible doubt. You saw the initials?”

“Yes, T.A. I know the brooch. Theresa often wore it. Oh, yes, I could swear to its being Theresa—and I will swear to it if necessary!”

There was a firmness and decision in those last two sentences that was quite at variance with her usual manner.

Poirot looked at her. Again there was something curious in his glance. It was aloof, appraising—and had also a queer appearance of finality about it.

“You would swear to that, yes?” he said.

“If—if—it’s necessary. But I suppose it—will it be necessary?”

Again Poirot turned that appraising glance upon her.

“That will depend on the result of the exhumation,” he said.

"Ex—exhumation?"

Poirot put out a restraining hand. In her excitement Miss Lawson very nearly went headlong down the stairs.

"It may possibly be a question of exhumation," he said.

"Oh, but surely—how very unpleasant! But I mean, I'm sure the family would oppose the idea very strongly—very strongly indeed."

"Probably they will."

"I'm quite sure they won't hear of such a thing!"

"Ah, but if it is an order from the Home Office."

"But M. Poirot—why? I mean it's not as though—not as though—"

"Not as though what?"

"Not as though there were anything—wrong."

"You think not?"

"No, of course not. Why, there couldn't be! I mean the doctor and the nurse and everything—"

"Do not upset yourself," said Poirot calmly and soothingly.

"Oh, but I can't help it! Poor dear Miss Arundell! It's not even as though Theresa had been here in the house when she died."

"No, she left on the Monday before she was taken ill, did she not?"

"Quite early in the morning. So you see, she can't have had anything to do with it!"

"Let us hope not," said Poirot.

“Oh, dear.” Miss Lawson clasped her hands together. “I’ve never known anything so dreadful as all this! Really, I don’t know whether I’m on my head or my heels.”

Poirot glanced at his watch.

“We must depart. We are returning to London. And you, mademoiselle, you are remaining down here some little time?”

“No—no… I have really no settled plans. Actually I’m going back myself today… I only came down just for a night to—to settle things a little.”

“I see. Well, good-bye, mademoiselle, and forgive me if I have upset you at all.”

“Oh, M. Poirot. Upset me? I feel quite ill! Oh dear—Oh, dear, it’s such a wicked world! Such a dreadfully wicked world.”

Poirot cut short her lamentations by taking her hand firmly in his.

“Quite so. And you are still ready to swear that you saw Theresa Arundell kneeling on the stairs on the night of Easter Bank Holiday?”

“Oh, yes, I can swear to that.”

“And you can also swear that you saw a halo of light round Miss Arundell’s head during the séance?”

Miss Lawson’s mouth fell open.

“Oh, M. Poirot, don’t—don’t joke about these things.”

“I am not joking. I am perfectly serious.”

Miss Lawson said with dignity:

“It wasn’t exactly a halo. It was more like the beginning of a manifestation. A ribbon of some luminous material. I think it was beginning to form into a face.”

“Extremely interesting. Au revoir, mademoiselle, and please keep all this to yourself.”

“Oh, of course—of course. I shouldn’t dream of doing anything else….”

The last we saw of Miss Lawson was her rather sheeplike face gazing after us from the front doorstep.

Twenty-three

DR. TANIOS CALLS ON US

No sooner had we left the house than Poirot’s manner changed. His face was grim and set.

“Dépêchons nous, Hastings,” he said. “We must get back to London as soon as possible.”

“I’m willing.” I quickened my pace to suit his. I stole a look at his grave face.

“Who do you suspect, Poirot?” I asked. “I wish you’d tell me. Do you believe it was Theresa Arundell on the stairs or not?”

Poirot did not reply to my questions. Instead he asked a question of his own.

“Did it strike you—reflect before you answer—did it strike you that there was something wrong with that statement of Miss Lawson’s?”

“How do you mean—wrong with it?”

“If I knew that I should not be asking you!”

“Yes, but wrong in what way?”

“That is just it. I cannot be precise. But as she was talking I had, somehow, a feeling of unreality…as though there was something—some small point that was wrong—that was, yes, that was the feeling—something that was impossible.…”

“She seemed quite positive it was Theresa!”

“Yes, yes.”

"But after all, the light couldn't have been very good. I don't see how she can be quite so sure."

"No, no, Hastings, you are not helping me. It was some small point—something connected with—yes, I am sure of it—with the bedroom."

"With the bedroom?" I repeated, trying to recall the details of the room. "No," I said at last. "I can't help you."

Poirot shook his head, vexedly.

"Why did you bring up that spiritualistic business again?" I asked.

"Because it is important."

"What is important? Miss Lawson's luminous 'ribbon development?'"

"You remember the Misses Tripp's description of the séance?"

"I know they saw a halo round the old lady's head." I laughed in spite of myself. "I shouldn't think she was a saint by all accounts! Miss Lawson seems to have been terrified by her. I felt quite sorry for the poor woman when she described how she lay awake, worried to death because she might get into trouble over ordering too small a sirloin of beef."

"Yes, it was an interesting touch that."

"What are we going to do when we get to London?" I asked as we turned into the George and Poirot asked for the bill.

"We must go and see Theresa Arundell immediately."

"And find out the truth? But won't she deny the whole thing anyway?"

"Mon cher, it is not a criminal offence to kneel upon a flight of stairs! She may have been picking up a pin to bring her luck—something of that sort!"

"And the smell of varnish?"

We could say no more just then, as the waiter arrived with the bill.

On the way to London we talked very little. I am not fond of talking and driving, and Poirot was so busy protecting his moustaches with his muffler from the disastrous effects of wind and dust that speech was quite beyond him.

We arrived at the flat at about twenty to two.

George, Poirot's immaculate and extremely English manservant, opened the door.

“A Dr. Tanios is waiting to see you, sir. He has been here for half an hour.”

“Dr. Tanios? Where is he?”

“In the sitting room, sir. A lady also called to see you, sir. She seemed very distressed to find you were absent from home. It was before I received your telephone message, sir, so I could not tell her when you would be returning to London.”

“Describe this lady.”

“She was about five foot seven, sir, with dark hair and light blue eyes. She was wearing a grey coat and skirt and a hat worn very much to the back of the head instead of over the right eye.”

“Mrs. Tanios,” I ejaculated in a low voice.

“She seemed in a condition of great nervous excitement, sir. Said it was of the utmost importance she should find you quickly.”

“What time was this?”

“About half past ten, sir.”

Poirot shook his head as he passed on towards the sitting room.

“That is the second time I have missed hearing what Mrs. Tanios has to say. What would you say, Hastings? Is there a fate in it?”

“Third time lucky,” I said consolingly.

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

“Will there be a third time? I wonder. Come, let us hear what the husband has to say.”

Dr. Tanios was sitting in an armchair reading one of Poirot’s books on psychology. He sprang up and greeted us.

“You must forgive this intrusion. I hope you don’t mind my forcing my way in and waiting for you like this.”

“Du tout, du tout. Pray sit down. Permit me to offer you a glass of sherry.”

“Thank you. As a matter of fact I have an excuse. M. Poirot, I am worried, terribly worried, about my wife.”

“About your wife? I’m very sorry. What’s the matter?”

Tanios said:

“You have seen her perhaps lately?”

It seemed quite a natural question, but the quick look that accompanied it was not so natural.

Poirot replied in the most matter-of-fact manner.

“No, not since I saw her at the hotel with you yesterday.”

“Ah—I thought perhaps she might have called upon you.”

Poirot was busy pouring out three glasses of sherry.

He said in a slightly abstracted voice:

“No. Was there any—reason for her calling on me?”

“No, no.” Dr. Tanios accepted his sherry. “Thank you. Thank you very much. No, there was no exact reason, but to be frank I am very much concerned about my wife’s state of health.”

“Ah, she is not strong?”

“Her bodily health,” said Tanios slowly, “is good. I wish I could say the same for her mind.”

“Ah?”

“I fear, M. Poirot, that she is on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown.”

“My dear Dr. Tanios, I am extremely sorry to hear this.”

“This condition has been growing for some time. During the last two months her manner towards me has completely changed. She is nervous, easily startled, and she has the oddest fancies—actually they are more than fancies—they are delusions!”

“Really?”

“Yes. She is suffering from what is commonly known as persecution mania—a fairly well-known condition.”

Poirot made a sympathetic noise with his tongue.

“You can understand my anxiety!”

“Naturally. Naturally. But what I do not quite understand is why you have come to me. How can I help you?”

Dr. Tanios seemed a little embarrassed.

“It occurred to me that my wife might have—or may yet—come to you with some extraordinary tale. She may conceivably say that she is in danger from me—something of the kind.”

“But why should she come to me?”

Dr. Tanios smiled—it was a charming smile—genial yet wistful.

“You are a celebrated detective, M. Poirot. I saw—I could see at once—that my wife was very impressed at meeting you yesterday. The mere fact of meeting a detective would make a powerful impression on her in her present state. It seems to me highly probable that she might seek you out and—and—well, confide in you. That is the way these nervous affections go! There is a tendency to turn against those nearest and dearest to you.”

“Very distressing.”

“Yes, indeed. I am very fond of my wife.” There was a rich tenderness in his voice. “I always feel it was so brave of her to marry me—a man of another race—to come out to a far country—to leave all her own friends and surroundings. For the last few days I have been really distraught… I can see only one thing for it….”

“Yes?”

“Perfect rest and quiet—and suitable psychological treatment. There is a splendid home I know of run by a first-class man. I want to take her there—it is in Norfolk—straightaway. Perfect rest and isolation from outside influence—that is what is needed. I feel convinced that once she has been there a month or two under skilled treatment there will be a change for the better.”

“I see,” said Poirot.

He uttered the words in a matter-of-fact manner without any clue to the feelings that prompted him.

Tanios again shot a quick glance at him.

“That is why, if she should come to you, I should be obliged if you will let me know at once.”

"But certainly. I will telephone you. You are at the Durham Hotel still?"

"Yes. I am going back there now."

"And your wife is not there?"

"She went out directly after breakfast."

"Without telling you where she was going?"

"Without saying a word. That is most unlike her."

"And the children?"

"She took them with her."

"I see."

Tanios got up.

"I thank you so much, M. Poirot. I need hardly say that if she does tell you any high-flown stories of intimidation and persecution pay no attention to them. It is, unfortunately, a part of her malady."

"Most distressing," said Poirot with sympathy.

"It is indeed. Although one knows, medically speaking, that it is part of a recognized mental disease, yet one cannot help being hurt when a person very near and dear to you turns against you and all their affection changes to dislike."

"You have my deepest sympathy," said Poirot as he shook hands with his guest.

"By the way—" Poirot's voice recalled Tanios just as he was at the door.

"Yes?"

"Do you ever prescribe chloral for your wife?"

Tanios gave a startled movement.

“I—no—at least I may have done. But not lately. She seems to have taken an aversion to any form of sleeping draught.”

“Ah! I suppose because she does not trust you?”

“M. Poirot!”

Tanios came striding forward angrily.

“That would be part of the disease,” said Poirot smoothly.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“She is probably highly suspicious of anything you give her to eat or drink. Probably suspects you of wanting to poison her?”

“Dear me, M. Poirot, you are quite right. You know something of such cases, then?”

“One comes across them now and then in my profession, naturally. But do not let me detain you. You may find her waiting for you at the hotel.”

“True. I hope I shall. I feel terribly anxious.”

He hurried out of the room.

Poirot went swiftly to the telephone. He flicked over the pages of the telephone directory and asked for a number.

“Allo—Allo—is that the Durham Hotel. Can you tell me if Mrs. Tanios is in? What? T A N I O S. Yes, that is right. Yes? Yes? Oh, I see.”

He replaced the receiver.

“Mrs. Tanios left the hotel this morning early. She returned at eleven, waited in the taxi whilst her luggage was brought down and drove away with it.”

“Does Tanios know she took away her luggage?”

“I think not as yet.”

“Where has she gone?”

“Impossible to tell.”

“Do you think she will come back here?”

“Possibly. I cannot tell.”

“Perhaps she will write.”

“Perhaps.”

“What can we do?”

Poirot shook his head. He looked worried and distressed.

“Nothing at the moment. A hasty lunch and then we will go and see Theresa Arundell.”

“Do you believe it was her on the stairs?”

“Impossible to tell. One thing I made sure of—Miss Lawson could not have seen her face. She saw a tall figure in a dark dressing gown, that is all.”

“And the brooch.”

“My dear friend, a brooch is not part of a person’s anatomy! It can be detached from that person. It can be lost—or borrowed—or even stolen.”

“In other words you don’t want to believe Theresa Arundell guilty.”

“I want to hear what she has to say on the matter.”

“And if Mrs. Tanios comes back?”

"I will arrange for that."

George brought in an omelette.

"Listen, George," said Poirot. "If that lady comes back, you will ask her to wait. If Dr. Tanios comes while she is here on no account let him in. If he asks if his wife is here, you will tell him she is not. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Poirot attacked the omelette.

"This business complicates itself," he said. "We must step very carefully. If not—the murderer will strike again."

"If he did you might get him."

"Quite possibly, but I prefer the life of the innocent to the conviction of the guilty. We must go very, very carefully."

Twenty-four

THERESA’S DENIAL

We found Theresa Arundell just preparing to go out.

She was looking extraordinarily attractive. A small hat of the most outrageous fashion descended rakishly over one eye. I recognized with momentary amusement that Bella Tanios had worn a cheap imitation of such a hat yesterday and had worn it—as George had put it—on the back of the head instead of over the right eye. I remembered well how she had pushed it farther and farther back on her untidy hair.

Poirot said, politely:

“Can I have just a minute or two, mademoiselle, or will it delay you too much?”

Theresa laughed.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I’m always three-quarters of an hour late for everything. I might just as well make it an hour.”

She led him into the sitting room. To my surprise Dr. Donaldson rose from a chair by the window.

“You’ve met M. Poirot already, Rex, haven’t you?”

“We met at Market Basing,” said Donaldson, stiffly.

“You were pretending to write the life of my drunken grandfather, I understand,” said Theresa. “Rex, my angel, will you leave us?”

“Thank you, Theresa, but I think that from every point of view it would be advisable for me to be present at this interview.”

There was a brief duel of eyes. Theresa's were commanding. Donaldson's were impervious. She showed a quick flash of anger.

"All right, stay then, damn you!"

Dr. Donaldson seemed unperturbed.

He seated himself again in the chair by the window, laying down his book on the arm of it. It was a book on the pituitary gland, I noticed.

Theresa sat down on her favourite low stool and looked impatiently at Poirot.

"Well, you've seen Purvis? What about it?"

Poirot said in a noncommittal voice:

"There are—possibilities, mademoiselle."

She looked at him thoughtfully. Then she sent a very faint glance in the direction of the doctor. It was, I think, intended as a warning to Poirot.

"But it would be well, I think," went on Poirot, "for me to report later when my plans are more advanced."

A faint smile showed for a minute on Theresa's face.

Poirot continued:

"I have today come from Market Basing and while there I have talked to Miss Lawson. Tell me, mademoiselle, did you on the night of April 13th (that was the night of the Easter Bank Holiday) kneel upon the stairs after everyone had gone to bed?"

"My dear Hercule Poirot, what an extraordinary question. Why should I?"

"The question, mademoiselle, is not why you should, but whether you did."

"I'm sure I don't know. I should think it most unlikely."

“You comprehend, mademoiselle, Miss Lawson says you did.”

Theresa shrugged her attractive shoulders.

“Does it matter?”

“It matters very much.”

She stared at him. In a perfectly amiable fashion, Poirot stared back.

“Loopy!” said Theresa.

“Pardon?”

“Definitely loopy!” said Theresa. “Don’t you think so, Rex?”

Dr. Donaldson coughed.

“Excuse me, M. Poirot, but what is the point of the question?”

My friend spread out his hands.

“It is most simple! Someone drove in a nail in a convenient position at the head of the stairs. The nail was just touched with brown varnish to match the skirting board.”

“Is this a new kind of witchcraft?” asked Theresa.

“No, mademoiselle, it is much more homely and simple than that. On the following evening, the Tuesday, someone attached a string of thread from the nail to the balusters with the result that when Miss Arundell came out of her room she caught her foot in it and went headlong down the stairs.”

Theresa drew in her breath sharply.

“That was Bob’s ball!”

“Pardon, it was not.”

There was a pause. It was broken by Donaldson who said in his quiet, precise voice:

“Excuse me, but what evidence have you in support of this statement?”

Poirot said quietly:

“The evidence of the nail, the evidence of Miss Arundell’s own written words, and finally the evidence of Miss Lawson’s eyes.”

Theresa found her voice.

“She says I did it, does she?”

Poirot did not answer except by bending his head a little.

“Well, it’s a lie! I had nothing to do with it!”

“You were kneeling on the stairs for quite another reason?”

“I wasn’t kneeling on the stairs at all!”

“Be careful, mademoiselle.”

“I wasn’t there! I never came out of my room after I went to bed on any evening I was there.”

“Miss Lawson recognized you.”

“It was probably Bella Tanios or one of the maids she saw.”

“She says it was you.”

“She’s a damned liar!”

“She recognized your dressing gown and a brooch you wear.”

“A brooch—what brooch?”

“A brooch with your initials.”

“Oh, I know the one! What a circumstantial liar she is!”

“You still deny that it was you she saw?”

“If it’s my word against hers—”

“You are a better liar than she is—eh?”

Theresa said, calmly:

“That’s probably quite true. But in this case I’m speaking the truth. I wasn’t preparing a booby trap, or saying my prayers, or picking up gold or silver, or doing anything at all on the stairs.”

“Have you this brooch that was mentioned?”

“Probably. Do you want to see it?”

“If you please, mademoiselle.”

Theresa got up and left the room. There was an awkward silence. Dr. Donaldson looked at Poirot much as I imagined he might have looked at an anatomical specimen.

Theresa returned.

“Here it is.”

She almost flung the ornament at Poirot. It was a large rather showy chromium or stainless steel brooch with T.A. enclosed in a circle. I had to admit that it was large enough and showy enough to be easily seen in Miss Lawson’s mirror.

“I never wear it now. I’m tired of it,” said Theresa. “London’s been flooded with them. Every little skivvy wears one.”

“But it was expensive when you bought it?”

"Oh, yes. They were quite exclusive to begin with."

"When was that?"

"Last Christmas, I think it was. Yes, about then."

"Have you ever lent it to anyone?"

"No."

"You had it with you at Littlegreen House?"

"I suppose I did. Yes, I did. I remember."

"Did you leave it about at all? Was it out of your possession while you were there?"

"No, it wasn't. I wore it on a green jumper. I remember. And I wore the same jumper every day."

"And at night?"

"It was still in the jumper."

"And the jumper."

"Oh, hell, the jumper was sitting on a chair."

"You are sure no one removed the brooch and put it back again the next day?"

"We'll say so in court if you like—if you think that's the best lie to tell! Actually I'm quite sure that nothing like that happened! It's a pretty idea that somebody framed me—but I don't think it's true."

Poirot frowned. Then he got up, attached the brooch carefully to his coat lapel and approached a mirror on a table at the other end of the room. He stood in front of it and then moved slowly backward, getting an effect of distance.

Then he uttered a grunt.

“Imbecile that I am! Of course!”

He came back and handed the brooch to Theresa with a bow.

“You are quite right, mademoiselle. The brooch did not leave your possession! I have been regrettably dense.”

“I do like modesty,” said Theresa, pinning the brooch on carelessly.

She looked up at him.

“Anything more? I ought to be going.”

“Nothing that cannot be discussed later.”

Theresa moved towards the door. Poirot went on in a quiet voice:

“There is a question of exhumation, it is true—”

Theresa stopped dead. The brooch fell to the ground.

“What’s that?”

Poirot said clearly:

“It is possible that the body of Miss Emily Arundell may be exhumed.”

Theresa stood still, her hands clenched. She said in a low, angry voice:

“Is this your doing? It can’t be done without an application from the family!”

“You are wrong, mademoiselle. It can be done on an order from the Home Office.”

“My God!” said Theresa.

She turned and walked swiftly up and down.

Donaldson said quietly:

“I really don’t see that there is any need to be upset, Tessa. I daresay that to an outsider the idea is not very pleasant, but—”

She interrupted him.

“Don’t be a fool, Rex!”

Poirot asked:

“The idea disturbs you, mademoiselle?”

“Of course it does! It isn’t decent. Poor old Aunt Emily. Why the devil should she be exhumed?”

“I presume,” said Donaldson, “that there is some doubt as to the cause of death?” He looked inquiringly at Poirot. He went on. “I confess that I am surprised. I think that there is no doubt that Miss Arundell died a natural death from a disease of long standing.”

“You told me something about a rabbit and liver trouble once,” said Theresa. “I’ve forgotten it now, but you infect a rabbit with blood from a person with yellow atrophy of the liver, and then you inject that rabbit’s blood into another rabbit, and then that second rabbit’s blood into a person and the person gets a diseased liver. Something like that.”

“That was merely an illustration of serum therapeutics,” said Donaldson patiently.

“Pity there are so many rabbits in the story!” said Theresa with a reckless laugh. “None of us keep rabbits.” She turned on Poirot and her voice altered.

“M. Poirot, is this true?” she asked.

“It is true enough, but—there are ways of avoiding such a contingency, mademoiselle.”

“Then avoid it!” her voice sank almost to a whisper. It was urgent, compelling. “Avoid it at all costs!”

Poirot rose to his feet.

“Those are your instructions?” His voice was formal.

“Those are my instructions.”

“But Tessa—” Donaldson interrupted.

She whirled round on her fiancé.

“Be quiet! She was my aunt, wasn’t she? Why should my aunt be dug up? Don’t you know there will be paragraphs in the papers and gossip and general unpleasantness?” She swung round again on Poirot.

“You must stop it! I give you carte blanche. Do anything you like, but stop it!”

Poirot bowed formally.

“I will do what I can. Au revoir, mademoiselle, au revoir, doctor.”

“Oh, go away!” cried Theresa. “And take St. Leonards with you. I wish I’d never set eyes on either of you.”

We left the room. Poirot did not this time deliberately place his ear to the crack but he dallied—yes, he dallied.

And not in vain. Theresa’s voice rose clear and defiant:

“Don’t look at me like that, Rex.”

And then suddenly, with a break in her voice—“Darling.” Dr. Donaldson’s precise voice answered her.

He said very clearly: “That man means mischief.”

Poirot grinned suddenly. He drew me through the front door. “Come, St. Leonards,” he said. “C’est drôle, ça!” Personally I thought the joke a particularly stupid one.

Twenty-five

I LIE BACK AND REFLECT

No, I thought, as I hurried after Poirot, there was no doubt about it now. Miss Arundell had been murdered and Theresa knew it. But was she herself the criminal or was there another explanation?

She was afraid—yes. But was she afraid for herself or for someone else? Could that someone be the quiet, precise young doctor with the calm, aloof manner?

Had the old lady died of genuine disease artificially induced?

Up to a point it all fitted in—Donaldson's ambitions, his belief that Theresa would inherit money at her aunt's death. Even the fact that he had been at dinner there on the evening of the accident. How easy to leave a convenient window open and return in the dead of night to tie the murderous thread across the staircase. But then, what about the placing of the nail in position?

No, Theresa must have done that. Theresa, his fiancée and accomplice. With the two of them working in together, the whole thing seemed clear enough. In that case it was probably Theresa who had actually placed the thread in position. The first crime, the crime that failed, had been her work. The second crime, the crime that had succeeded, was Donaldson's more scientific masterpiece.

Yes—it all fitted in.

Yet even now there were loose strands. Why had Theresa blurted out those facts about inducing liver disease in human beings? It was almost as though she did not realize the truth… But in that case—and I felt my mind growing bewildered, and I interrupted my speculations to ask:

"Where are we going, Poirot?"

“Back to my flat. It is possible that we may find Mrs. Tanios there.”

My thoughts switched off on a different track.

Mrs. Tanios! That was another mystery! If Donaldson and Theresa were guilty, where did Mrs. Tanios and her smiling husband come in? What did the woman want to tell Poirot and what was Tanios’ anxiety to prevent her doing so?

“Poirot,” I said humbly. “I’m getting rather muddled. They’re not all in it, are they?”

“Murder by a syndicate? A family sydicate? No, not this time. There is the mark of one brain and one brain only in this. The psychology is very clear.”

“You mean that either Theresa or Donaldson did it—but not both of them? Did he get her to hammer that nail in on some entirely innocent pretext, then?”

“My dear friend, from the moment I heard Miss Lawson’s story I realized that there were three possibilities. (1) That Miss Lawson was telling the exact truth. (2) That Miss Lawson had invented the story for reasons of her own. (3) That Miss Lawson actually believed her own story, but that her identification rested upon the brooch—and as I have already pointed out to you—a brooch is easily detachable from its owner.”

“Yes, but Theresa insists that the brooch did not leave her possession.”

“And she is perfectly right. I had overlooked a small but intensely significant fact.”

“Very unlike you, Poirot,” I said solemnly.

“N’est ce pas? But one has one’s lapses.”

“Age will tell!”

“Age has nothing to do with it,” said Poirot coldly.

“Well, what is the significant fact?” I asked as we turned in at the entrance of the Mansions.

“I will show you.”

We had just reached the flat.

George opened the door to us. In reply to Poirot’s anxious question he shook his head.

“No, sir. Mrs. Tanios has not called. Neither has she telephoned.” Poirot went into the sitting room. He paced up and down for a few minutes. Then he picked up the telephone. He got first onto the Durham Hotel.

“Yes—yes, please. Ah, Dr. Tanios, this is Hercule Poirot speaking. Your wife has returned? Oh, not returned. Dear me… Taken her luggage, you say… And the children… You have no idea where she has gone… Yes, quite… Oh, perfectly… If my professional services are of any use to you? I have certain experience in these matters… Such things can be done quite discreetly… No, of course not… Yes, of course that is true… Certainly—certainly. I shall respect your wishes in the matter.”

He hung up the receiver thoughtfully.

“He does not know where she is,” he said thoughtfully. “I think that is quite genuine. The anxiety in his voice is unmistakable. He does not want to go to the police, that is understandable. Yes, I understand that. He does not want my assistance either. That is, perhaps, not quite so understandable… He wants her found—but he does not want me to find her… No, definitely he does not want me to find her… He seems confident that he can manage the matter himself. He does not think she can remain long hidden, for she has very little money with her. Also she has the children. Yes, I fancy he will be able to hunt her down before long. But, I think, Hastings, that we shall be a little quicker than he is. It is important, I think, that we should be.”

“Do you think it’s true that she is slightly batty?” I asked.

“I think that she is in a highly nervous, overwrought condition.”

“But not to such a point that she ought to be in a mental home?”

“That, very definitely, no.”

“You know, Poirot, I don’t quite understand all this.”

“If you will pardon my saying so, Hastings, you do not understand at all!”

“There seem so many—well—side issues.”

“Naturally there are side issues. To separate the main issue from the side issues is the first task of the orderly mind.”

“Tell me, Poirot, have you realized all along that there were eight possible suspects and not seven?”

Poirot replied drily:

“I have taken that fact into consideration from the moment that Theresa Arundell mentioned that the last time she saw Dr. Donaldson was when he dined at Littlegreen House on April 14th.”

“I can’t quite see—” I broke off.

“What is it you cannot quite see?”

“Well, if Donaldson had planned to do away with Miss Arundell by scientific means—by inoculation, that is to say—I can’t see why he resorted to such a clumsy device as a string across the stairs.”

“En vérité, Hastings, there are moments when I lose patience with you! One method is a highly scientific one needing fully specialized knowledge. That is so, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“And the other is a homely simple method—‘the kind that mother makes’—as the advertisements say. Is that not right?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Then think, Hastings—think. Lie back in your chair, close the eyes, employ the little grey cells.”

I obeyed. That is to say, I leant back in the chair and closed my eyes and endeavoured to carry out the third part of Poirot’s instructions. The result, however, did not seem to clarify matters much.

I opened my eyes to find Poirot regarding me with the kindly attention a nurse might display towards a childish charge.

“Eh bien?”

I made a desperate attempt to emulate Poirot’s manner.

“Well,” I said, “it seems to me that the kind of person who laid the original booby trap is not the kind of person to plan out a scientific murder.”

“Exactly.”

“And I doubt if a mind trained to scientific complexities would think of anything so childish as the accident plan—it would be altogether too haphazard.”

“Very clearly reasoned.”

Emboldened, I went on:

“Therefore, the only logical solution seems to be this—the two attempts were planned by two different people. We have here to deal with murder attempted by two entirely different people.”

“You do not think that is too much of a coincidence?”

“You said yourself once that one coincidence is nearly always found in a murder case.”

“Yes, that is true. I have to admit it.”

“Well, then.”

“And who do you suggest for your villains?”

“Donaldson and Theresa Arundell. A doctor is clearly indicated for the final successful murder. On the other hand we know that Theresa Arundell is concerned in the first attempt. I think it’s possible that they acted quite independently of each other.”

“You are so fond of saying, ‘we know,’ Hastings. I can assure you that no matter what you know, I do not know that Theresa was implicated.”

“But Miss Lawson’s story.”

“Miss Lawson’s story is Miss Lawson’s story. Just that.”

“But she says—”

“She says—she says… Always you are so ready to take what people say for a proved and accepted fact. Now listen, mon cher, I told you at the time, did I not, that something struck me as wrong about Miss Lawson’s story?”

“Yes, I remember your saying so. But you couldn’t get hold of what it was.”

“Well, I have done so now. A little moment and I will show you what I, imbecile that I am, ought to have seen at once.” He went over to the desk and opening a drawer took out a sheet of cardboard. He cut into this with a pair of scissors, motioning to me not to overlook what he was doing.

“Patience, Hastings, in a little moment we will proceed to our experiment.”

I averted my eyes obligingly.

In a minute or two Poirot uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. He put away the scissors, dropped the fragments of cardboard into the wastepaper basket and came across the room to me.

“Now, do not look. Continue to avert the eyes while I pin something to the lapel of your coat.”

I humoured him. Poirot completed the proceeding to his satisfaction, then, propelling me gently to my feet he drew me across the room, and into the adjoining bedroom.

“Now, Hastings, regard yourself in the glass. You are wearing, are you not, a fashionable brooch with your initials on it—only, bien entendu, the brooch is made not of chromium nor stainless steel, nor gold, nor platinum—but of humble cardboard!”

I looked at myself and smiled. Poirot is uncommonly neat with his fingers. I was wearing a very fair representation of Theresa Arundell’s brooch—a circle cut out of cardboard and enclosing my initials. A.H.

“Eh bien,” said Poirot. “You are satisfied? You have there, have you not, a very smart brooch with your initials?”

“A most handsome affair,” I agreed.

“It is true that it does not gleam and reflect the light, but all the same you are prepared to admit that that brooch could be seen plainly from some distance away?”

“I’ve never doubted it.”

“Quite so. Doubt is not your strong point. Simple faith is more characteristic of you. And now, Hastings, be so good as to remove your coat.”

Wondering a little, I did so. Poirot divested himself of his own coat and slipped on mine, turning away a little as he did so.

“And now,” he said. “Regard how the brooch—the brooch with your initials—becomes me?”

He whisked round. I stared at him—for the moment uncomprehendingly. Then I saw the point.

“What a blithering fool I am! Of course. It’s H.A. in the brooch, not A.H. at all.”

Poirot beamed on me, as he reassumed his own clothes and handed me mine.

“Exactly—and now you see what struck me as wrong with Miss Lawson’s story. She stated that she had seen Theresa’s initials clearly on the brooch she was wearing. But she saw Theresa in the glass. So, if she saw the initials at all, she must have seen them reversed.”

“Well,” I argued, “perhaps she did, and realized that they were reversed.”

“Mon cher, did that occur to you just now? Did you exclaim, ‘Ha! Poirot, you’ve got it wrong. That’s H.A. really—not A.H.’ No, you did not. And yet you are a good deal more intelligent, I should say, than Miss Lawson. Do not tell me that a muddleheaded woman like that woke up suddenly, and still half asleep, realized that A.T. was really T.A. No, that is not at all consistent with the mentality of Miss Lawson.”

“She was determined it should be Theresa,” I said slowly.

“You are getting nearer, my friend. You remember, I hint to her that she could not really see the face of anyone on the stairs, and immediately—what does she do?”

“Remembers Theresa’s brooch and lugs that in—forgetting that the mere fact of having seen it in the glass gave her own story the lie.”

The telephone bell rang sharply. Poirot crossed to it.

He only spoke a few noncommittal words.

“Yes? Yes… certainly. Yes, quite convenient. The afternoon, I think. Yes, two o’clock will do admirably.” He replaced the receiver and turned to me with a smile.

“Dr. Donaldson is anxious to have a talk with me. He is coming here tomorrow afternoon at two o’clock. We progress, mon ami, we progress.”

Twenty-six

MRS. TANIOS REFUSES TO SPEAK

When I came round after breakfast the following morning I found Poirot busy at the writing table.

He raised a hand in salutation, then proceeded with his task. Presently he gathered up the sheets, enclosed them in an envelope and sealed them up carefully.

“Well, old boy, what are you doing?” I asked facetiously.

“Writing an account of the case to be placed in safekeeping in case someone bumps you off during the course of the day?”

“You know, Hastings, you are not so far wrong as you think.”

His manner was serious.

“Is our murderer really about to get dangerous?”

“A murderer is always dangerous,” said Poirot gravely.

“Astonishing how often that fact is overlooked.”

“Any news?”

“Dr. Tanios rang up.”

“Still no trace of his wife?”

“No.”

“Then that’s all right.”

“I wonder.”

“Dash it all, Poirot, you don’t think she’s been bumped off, do you?”

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

“I confess,” he murmured, “that I should like to know where she is.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “She’ll turn up.”

“Your cheerful optimism never fails to delight me, Hastings!”

“My goodness, Poirot, you don’t think she’ll turn up in parcels or dismembered in a trunk?”

Poirot said slowly:

“I find the anxiety of Dr. Tanios somewhat excessive—but no more of that. The first thing to do is to interview Miss Lawson.”

“Are you going to point out that little error over the brooch?”

“Certainly not. That little fact remains up my sleeve until the right moment comes.”

“Then what are you going to say to her?”

“That, mon ami, you will hear in due course.”

“More lies, I suppose?”

“You are really offensive sometimes, Hastings. Anybody would think I enjoyed telling lies.”

“I rather think you do. In fact, I’m sure of it.”

“It is true that I sometimes compliment myself upon my ingenuity,” Poirot confessed naively.

I could not help giving a shout of laughter. Poirot looked at me reproachfully and we set off for Clanroyden Mansions.

We were shown into the same crowded sitting room and Miss Lawson came bustling in, her manner even more incoherent than usual.

“Oh, dear, M. Poirot, good morning. Such a to-do—rather untidy, I’m afraid. But then, everything is at sixes and sevens this morning. Ever since Bella arrived—”

“What is that you say? Bella?”

“Yes, Bella Tanios. She turned up half an hour ago—and the children—completely exhausted, poor soul! Really, I don’t know what to do about it. You see, she’s left her husband.”

“Left him?”

“So she says. Of course, I’ve no doubt she’s fully justified, poor thing.”

“She has confided in you?”

“Well—not exactly that. In fact, she won’t say anything at all. Just repeats that she’s left him and that nothing will induce her to go back to him!”

“That is a very serious step to take?”

“Of course it is! In fact, if he’d been an Englishman, I would have advised her—but there, he isn’t an Englishman… And she looks so peculiar, poor thing, so—well, so scared. What can he have been doing to her? I believe Turks are frightfully cruel sometimes.”

“Dr. Tanios is a Greek.”

“Yes, of course, that’s the other way about—I mean, they’re usually the ones who get massacred by the Turks—or am I thinking of Armenians? But all the same, I don’t like to think of it. I don’t think she ought to go back to him, do you, M. Poirot? Anyway, I mean, she says she won’t… She doesn’t even want him to know where she is.”

“As bad as that?”

"Yes, you see it's the children. She's so afraid he could take them back to Smyrna. Poor soul, she really is in a terrible way. You see, she's got no money—no money at all. She doesn't know where to go or what to do. She wants to try and earn her living but really, you know, M. Poirot, that's not so easy as it sounds. I know that. It's not as though she were trained for anything."

"When did she leave her husband?"

"Yesterday. She spent last night in a little hotel near Paddington. She came to me because she couldn't think of anyone else to go to, poor thing."

"And are you going to help her? That is very good of you."

"Well, you see, M. Poirot, I really feel it's my duty. But of course, it's all very difficult. This is a very small flat and there's no room—and what with one thing and another."

"You could send her to Littlegreen House?"

"I suppose I could—but you see, her husband might think of that. Just for the moment I've got her rooms at the Wellington Hotel in Queen's Road. She's staying there under the name of Mrs. Peters."

"I see," said Poirot.

He paused for a minute, then said:

"I would like to see Mrs. Tanios. You see, she called at my flat yesterday but I was out."

"Oh, did she? She didn't tell me that. I'll tell her, shall I?"

"If you would be so good."

Miss Lawson hurried out of the room. We could hear her voice.

"Bella—Bella—my dear, will you come and see M. Poirot?"

We did not hear Mrs. Tanios' reply, but a minute or two later she came into the room.

I was really shocked at her appearance. There were dark circles under her eyes and her cheeks were completely destitute of colour, but what struck me far more than this was her obvious air of terror. She started at the least provocation, and she seemed to be continually listening.

Poirot greeted her in his most soothing manner. He came forward, shook hands, arranged a chair for her and handed her a cushion. He treated the pale, frightened woman as though she had been a queen.

"And now, madame, let us have a little chat. You came to see me yesterday, I believe?"

She nodded.

"I regret very much that I was away from home."

"Yes—yes, I wish you had been there."

"You came because you wanted to tell me something?"

"Yes, I—I meant to—"

"Eh bien, I am here, at your service."

Mrs. Tanios did not respond. She sat quite still, twisting a ring round and round on her finger.

"Well, madame?"

Slowly, almost reluctantly, she shook her head.

"No," she said. "I daren't."

"You daren't, madame?"

"No. I—if he knew—he'd—Oh, something would happen to me!"

“Come, come, madame—that is absurd.”

“Oh, but it isn’t absurd—it isn’t absurd at all. You don’t know him….”

“By him, you mean your husband, madame?”

“Yes, of course.”

Poirot was silent a minute or two, then he said:

“Your husband came to see me yesterday, madame.”

A quick look of alarm sprang up in her face.

“Oh, no! You didn’t tell him—but of course you didn’t! You couldn’t. You didn’t know where I was. Did he—did he say I was mad?”

Poirot answered cautiously.

“He said that you were—highly nervous.”

But she shook her head, undeceived.

“No, he said that I was mad—or that I was going mad! He wants to shut me up so that I shan’t be able to tell anyone ever.”

“Tell anyone—what?”

But she shook her head. Twisting her fingers nervously round and round, she muttered:

“I’m afraid….”

“But madame, once you have told me—you are safe! The secret is out! That fact will protect you automatically.”

But she did not reply. She went on twisting—twisting at her ring.

“You must see that yourself,” said Poirot gently.

She gave a sort of gasp.

“How am I to know… Oh, dear, it’s terrible. He’s so plausible! And he’s a doctor! People will believe him and not me. I know they will. I should myself. Nobody will believe me. How could they?”

“You will not even give me the chance?”

She shot a troubled glance at him.

“How do I know? You may be on his side.”

“I am on no one’s side, madame. I am—always—on the side of truth.”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Tanios hopelessly. “Oh, I don’t know.” She went on, her words gathering volume, tumbling over each other.

“It’s been so awful—for years now. I’ve seen things happening again and again. And I couldn’t say anything or do anything. There have been the children. It’s been like a long nightmare. And now this… But I won’t go back to him. I won’t let him have the children! I’ll go somewhere where he can’t find me. Minnie Lawson will help me. She’s been so kind—so wonderfully kind. Nobody could have been kinder.” She stopped, then shot a quick look at Poirot and asked:

“What did he say about me? Did he say I had delusions?”

“He said, madame, that you had—changed towards him.”

She nodded.

“And he said I had delusions. He did say that, didn’t he?”

“Yes, madame, to be frank, he did.”

“That’s it, you see. That’s what it will sound like. And I’ve no proof—no real proof.”

Poirot leaned back in his chair. When he next spoke it was with an entire change of manner.

He spoke in a matter-of-fact, businesslike voice with as little emotion as if he had been discussing some dry matter of business.

“Do you suspect your husband of doing away with Miss Emily Arundell?”

Her answer came quickly—a spontaneous flash.

“I don’t suspect—I know.”

“Then, madame, it is your duty to speak.”

“Ah, but it isn’t so easy—no, it isn’t so easy.”

“How did he kill her?”

“I don’t know exactly—but he did kill her.”

“But you don’t know the method he employed?”

“No—it was something—something he did that last Sunday.”

“The Sunday he went down to see her?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know what it was?”

“No.”

“Then how, forgive me, madame, can you be so sure?”

“Because he—” she stopped and said slowly, “I am sure!”

“Pardon, madame, but there is something you are keeping back. Something you have not yet told me?”

“Yes.”

“Come, then.”

Bella Tanios got up suddenly.

“No. No. I can’t do that. The children. Their father. I can’t. I simply can’t….”

“But madame—”

“I can’t, I tell you.”

Her voice rose almost to a scream. The door opened and Miss Lawson came in, her head cocked on one side with a sort of pleasurable excitement.

“May I come in? Have you had your little talk? Bella, my dear, don’t you think you ought to have a cup of tea, or some soup, or perhaps a little brandy even?”

Mrs. Tanios shook her head.

“I’m quite all right.” She gave a weak smile. “I must be getting back to the children. I have left them to unpack.”

“Dear little things,” said Miss Lawson. “I’m so fond of children.”

Mrs. Tanios turned to her suddenly.

“I don’t know what I should do without you,” she said. “You—you’ve been wonderfully kind.”

“There, there, my dear, don’t cry. Everything’s going to be all right. You shall come round and see my lawyer—such a nice man, so sympathetic, and he’ll advise you the best way to get a divorce. Divorce is so simple nowadays, isn’t it, everybody says so? Oh, dear, there’s the bell. I wonder who that is.”

She left the room hurriedly. There was a murmur of voices in the hall. Miss Lawson reappeared. She tiptoed in and shut the door carefully behind her. She spoke in an excited whisper, mouthing the words exaggeratedly.

“Oh, dear, Bella, it’s your husband. I’m sure I don’t know—”

Mrs. Tanios gave one bound towards a door at the other end of the room. Miss Lawson nodded her head violently.

“That’s right, dear, go in there, and then you can slip out when I’ve brought him in here.”

Mrs. Tanios whispered:

“Don’t say I’ve been here. Don’t say you’ve seen me.”

“No, no, of course I won’t.”

Mrs. Tanios slipped through the door. Poirot and I followed hastily. We found ourselves in a small dining room.

Poirot crossed to the door into the hall, opened it a crack and listened. Then he beckoned.

“All is clear. Miss Lawson has taken him into the other room.”

We crept through the hall and out by the front door. Poirot drew it to as noiselessly as possible after him.

Mrs. Tanios began to run down the steps, stumbling and clutching at the banisters. Poirot steadied her with a hand under her arm.

“Du calme—du calme. All is well.”

We reached the entrance hall.

“Come with me,” said Mrs. Tanios piteously. She looked as though she might be going to faint.

“Certainly I will come,” said Poirot reassuringly.

We crossed the road, turned a corner, and found ourselves in Queen’s Road. The Wellington was a small, inconspicuous hotel of the boardinghouse variety.

When we were inside Mrs. Tanios sank down on a plush sofa. Her hand was on her beating heart.

Poirot patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

“It was the narrow squeak—yes. Now, madame, you are to listen to me very carefully.”

“I can’t tell you anything more, M. Poirot. It wouldn’t be right. You—you know what I think—what I believe. You—you must be satisfied with that.”

“I asked you to listen, madame. Supposing—this is a supposition only—that I already know the facts of the case. Supposing that what you could tell me I have already guessed—that would make a difference, would it not?”

She looked at him doubtfully. Her eyes were painful in their intensity.

“Oh, believe me, madame, I am not trying to trap you into saying what you do not wish to. But it would make a difference—yes?”

“I—I suppose it would.”

“Good. Then let me say this. I, Hercule Poirot, know the truth. I am not going to ask you to accept my word for it. Take this.” He thrust upon her the bulky envelope I had seen him seal up that morning. “The facts are there. After you have read them, if they satisfy you, ring me up. My number is on the notepaper.”

Almost reluctantly she accepted the envelope.

Poirot went on briskly:

“And now, one more point, you must leave this hotel at once.”

"But why?"

"You will go to the Coniston Hotel near Euston. Tell no one where you are going."

"But surely—here—Minnie Lawson won't tell my husband where I am."

"You think not?"

"Oh, no—she's entirely on my side."

"Yes, but your husband, madame, is a very clever man. He will not find it difficult to turn a middle-aged lady inside out. It is essential—essential, you understand, that your husband should not know where you are."

She nodded dumbly.

Poirot held out a sheet of paper.

"Here is the address. Pack up and drive there with the children as soon as possible. You understand?"

She nodded.

"I understand."

"It is the children you must think of, madame, not yourself. You love your chldren."

He had touched the right note.

A little colour crept into her cheeks, her head went back. She looked, not a frightened drudge, but an arrogant, almost handsome woman.

"It is arranged, then," said Poirot.

He shook hands and he and I departed. But not far. From the shelter of a convenient café, we sipped coffee and watched the entrance of the hotel. In about five minutes we saw Dr. Tanios walking down the street. He did not even glance up at the Wellington. He passed it, his head bowed in thought, then he turned into the Underground station.

About ten minutes later we saw Mrs. Tanios and the children get into the taxi with their luggage and drive away.

“Bien,” said Poirot, rising with the check in his hand. “We have done our part. Now it is on the knees of the gods.”

Twenty-seven

VISIT OF DR. DONALDSON

Donaldson arrived punctually at two o’clock. He was as calm and precise as ever.

The personality of Donaldson had begun to intrigue me. I had started by regarding him as a rather nondescript young man. I had wondered what a vivid, compelling creature like Theresa could see in him. But I now began to realize that Donaldson was anything but negligible. Behind that pedantic manner there was force.

After our preliminary greetings were over, Donaldson said:

“The reason for my visit is this. I am at a loss to understand exactly what your position is in this matter, M. Poirot?”

Poirot replied guardedly:

“You know my profession, I think?”

“Certainly. I may say that I have taken the trouble to make inquiries about you.”

“You are a careful man, doctor.”

Donaldson said drily:

“I like to be sure of my facts.”

“You have the scientific mind!”

“I may say that all reports on you are the same. You are obviously a very clever man in your profession. You have also the reputation of being a scrupulous and honest one.”

“You are too flattering,” murmured Poirot.

“That is why I am at a loss to explain your connection with this affair.”

“And yet it is so simple!”

“Hardly that,” said Donaldson. “You first present yourself as a writer of biographies.”

“A pardonable deception, do you not think? One cannot go everywhere announcing the fact that one is a detective—though that, too, has its uses sometimes.”

“So I should imagine.” Again Donaldson’s tone was dry. “Your next proceeding,” he went on, “was to call on Miss Theresa Arundell and represent to her that her aunt’s will might conceivably be set aside.”

Poirot merely bowed his head in assent.

“That, of course, was ridiculous.” Donaldson’s voice was sharp. “You knew perfectly well that that will was valid in law and that nothing could be done about it.”

“You think that is the case?”

“I am not a fool, M. Poirot—”

“No, Dr. Donaldson, you are certainly not a fool.”

“I know something—not very much, but enough—of the law. That will can certainly not be upset. Why did you pretend it could? Clearly for reasons of your own—reasons which Miss Theresa Arundell did not for a moment grasp.”

“You seem very certain of her reactions.”

A very faint smile passed across the young man’s face.

He said unexpectedly:

"I know a good deal more about Theresa than she suspects. I have no doubt that she and Charles think they have enlisted your aid in some questionable business. Charles is almost completely amoral. Theresa has a bad heredity and her upbringing has been unfortunate."

"It is thus you speak of your fiancée—as though she was a guinea pig?"

Donaldson peered at him through his pince-nez.

"I see no occasion to blink the truth. I love Theresa Arundell and I love her for what she is and not for any imagined qualities."

"Do you realize that Theresa Arundell is devoted to you and that her wish for money is mainly in order that your ambitions should be gratified?"

"Of course I realize it. I've already told you I'm not a fool. But I have no intention of allowing Theresa to embroil herself in any questionable situation on my account. In many ways Theresa is a child still. I am quite capable of furthering my career by my own efforts. I do not say that a substantial legacy would not have been acceptable. It would have been most acceptable. But it would merely have provided a shortcut."

"You have, in fact, full confidence in your own abilities?"

"It probably sounds conceited, but I have," said Donaldson composedly.

"Let us proceed, then. I admit that I gained Miss Theresa's confidence by a trick. I let her think that I would be—shall we say, reasonably dishonest—for money. She believed that without the least difficulty."

"Theresa believes that anyone would do anything for money," said the young doctor in the matter-of-fact tone one uses when stating a self-evident truth.

"True. That seems to be her attitude—her brother's also."

"Charles probably would do anything for money!"

"You have no illusions, I see, about your future brother-in-law."

"No. I find him quite an interesting study. There is, I think, some deep-seated neurosis—but that is talking shop. To return to what we are discussing. I have asked myself why you should act in the way you have done, and I have found only one answer. It is clear that you suspect either Theresa or Charles of having a hand in Miss Arundell's death. No, please don't bother to contradict me! Your mention of exhumation was, I think, a mere device to see what reaction you would get. Have you, in actual fact, taken any steps towards getting a Home Office order for exhumation?"

"I will be frank with you. As yet, I have not."

Donaldson nodded.

"So I thought. I suppose you have considered the possibility that Miss Arundell's death may turn out to be from natural causes?"

"I have considered the fact that it may appear to be so—yes."

"But your own mind is made up?"

"Very definitely. If you have a case of—say—tuberculosis that looks like tuberculosis, behaves like tuberculosis, and in which the blood gives a positive reaction—eh bien, you consider it is tuberculosis, do you not?"

"You look at it that way? Then what exactly are you waiting for?"

"I am waiting for a final piece of evidence."

The telephone bell rang. At a gesture from Poirot I got up and answered it. I recognized the voice.

"Captain Hastings? This is Mrs. Tanios speaking. Will you tell M. Poirot that he is perfectly right. If he will come here tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, I will give him what he wants."

"At ten o'clock tomorrow?"

"Yes."

“Right, I’ll tell him.”

Poirot’s eyes asked a question. I nodded.

He turned to Donaldson. His manner had changed. It was brisk—assured.

“Let me make myself clear,” he said. “I have diagnosed this case of mine as a case of murder. It looked like murder, it gave all the characteristic reactions of murder—in fact, it was murder! Of that there is not the least doubt.”

“Where then, does the doubt—for I perceive there is a doubt—lie?”

“The doubt lay in the identity of the murderer—but that is a doubt no longer!”

“Really? You know?”

“Let us say that I shall have definite proof in my hands tomorrow.”

Dr. Donaldson’s eyebrows rose in a slightly ironical fashion.

“Ah,” he said. “Tomorrow! Sometimes, M. Poirot, tomorrow is a long way off.”

“On the contrary,” said Poirot, “I always find that it succeeds today with monotonous regularity.”

Donaldson smiled. He rose.

“I fear I have wasted your time, M. Poirot.”

“Not at all. It is always as well to understand each other.”

With a slight bow Dr. Donaldson left the room.

Twenty-eight

ANOTHER VICTIM

“That is a clever man,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“It’s rather difficult to know what he is driving at.”

“Yes. He is a little inhuman. But extremely perceptive.”

“That telephone call was from Mrs. Tanios.”

“So I gathered.”

I repeated the message. Poirot nodded approval.

“Good. All marches well. Twenty-four hours, Hastings, and I think we shall know exactly where we stand.”

“I’m still a little fogged. Who exactly do we suspect?”

“I really could not say who you suspect, Hastings! Everybody in turn, I should imagine!”

“Sometimes I think you like to get me into that state!”

“No, no, I would not amuse myself in such a way.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Poirot shook his head, but somewhat absently. I studied him.

“Is anything the matter?” I asked.

“My friend, I am always nervous towards the end of a case. If anything should go wrong—”

"Is anything likely to go wrong?"

"I do not think so." He paused—frowning. "I have, I think, provided against every contingency."

"Then, supposing we forget crime and go to a show?"

"Ma foi, Hastings, that is a good idea!"

We passed a very pleasant evening, though I made the slight mistake of taking Poirot to a crook play. There is one piece of advice I offer all my readers. Never take a soldier to a military play, a sailor to a naval play, a Scotsman to a Scottish play, a detective to a thriller—and an actor to any play whatsoever! The shower of destructive criticism in each case is somewhat devastating. Poirot never ceased to complain of faulty psychology, and the hero detective's lack of order and method nearly drove him demented. We parted that night with Poirot still explaining how the whole business might have been laid bare in the first half of the first act.

"But in that case, Poirot, there would have been no play," I pointed out.

Poirot was forced to admit that perhaps that was so.

It was a few minutes past nine when I entered the sitting room the next morning. Poirot was at the breakfast table—as usual neatly slitting open his letters.

The telephone rang and I answered it.

A heavy breathing female voice spoke:

"Is that M. Poirot? Oh, it's you, Captain Hastings."

There was a sort of gasp and a sob.

"Is that Miss Lawson?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, such a terrible thing has happened!"

I grasped the receiver tightly.

“What is it?”

“She left the Wellington, you know—Bella, I mean. I went there late in the afternoon yesterday and they said she’d left. Without a word to me, either! Most extraordinary! It makes me feel that perhaps after all, Dr. Tanios was right. He spoke so nicely about her and seemed so distressed, and now it really looks as though he were right after all.”

“But what’s happened, Miss Lawson? Is is just that Mrs. Tanios left the hotel without telling you?”

“Oh, no, it’s not that! Oh, dear me, no. If that were all it would be quite all right. Though I do think it was odd, you know. Dr. Tanios did say that he was afraid she wasn’t quite—not quite—if you know what I mean. Persecution mania, he called it.”

“Yes.” (Damn the woman!) “But what’s happened?”

“Oh, dear—it is terrible. Died in her sleep. An overdose of some sleeping stuff. And those poor children! It all seems so dreadfully sad! I’ve done nothing but cry since I heard.”

“How did you hear? Tell me all about it.”

Out of the tail of my eye I noticed that Poirot had stopped opening his letters. He was listening to my side of the conversation. I did not like to cede my place to him. If I did it seemed highly probable that Miss Lawson would start with lamentations all over again.

“They rang me up. From the hotel. The Coniston it’s called. It seems they found my name and address in her bag. Oh, dear, M. Poirot—Captain Hastings, I mean, isn’t it terrible? Those poor children left motherless.”

“Look here,” I said. “Are you sure it’s an accident? They didn’t think it could be suicide?”

"Oh, what a dreadful idea, Captain Hastings! Oh, dear, I don't know, I'm sure. Do you think it could be? That would be dreadful. Of course she did seem very depressed. But she needn't have. I mean there wouldn't have been any difficulty about money. I was going to share with her—indeed I was. Dear Miss Arundell would have wished it. I'm sure of that! It seems so awful to think of her taking her own life—but perhaps she didn't… The hotel people seemed to think it was an accident?"

"What did she take?"

"One of those sleeping things. Veronal, I think. No, chloral. Yes, that was it. Chloral. Oh, dear, Captain Hastings, do you think—"

Unceremoniously I banged down the receiver. I turned to Poirot.

"Mrs. Tanios—"

He raised a hand.

"Yes, yes, I know what you are going to say. She is dead, is she not?"

"Yes. Overdose of sleeping draught. Chloral."

Poirot got up.

"Come, Hastings, we must go there at once."

"Is this what you feared—last night? When you said you were always nervous towards the end of a case?"

"I feared another death—yes."

Poirot's face was set and stern. We said very little as we drove towards Euston. Once or twice Poirot shook his head.

I said timidly:

"You don't think—? Could it be an accident?"

“No, Hastings—no. It was not an accident.”

“How on earth did he find out where she had gone?”

Poirot only shook his head without replying.

The Coniston was an unsavoury-looking place quite near Euston station. Poirot, with his card, and a suddenly bullying manner, soon fought his way into the manager’s office.

The facts were quite simple.

Mrs. Peters as she had called herself and her two children had arrived about half past twelve. They had had lunch at one o’clock.

At four o’clock a man had arrived with a note for Mrs. Peters. The note had been sent up to her. A few minutes later she had come down with the two children and a suitcase. The children had then left with the visitor. Mrs. Peters had gone to the office and explained that she should only want the one room after all.

She had not appeared exceptionally distressed or upset, indeed she had seemed quite calm and collected. She had had dinner about seven thirty and had gone to her room soon afterwards.

On calling her in the morning the chambermaid had found her dead.

A doctor had been sent for and had pronounced her to have been dead for some hours. An empty glass was found on the table by the bed. It seemed fairly obvious that she had taken a sleeping draught, and by mistake, taken an overdose. Chloral hydrate, the doctor said, was a somewhat uncertain drug. There were no indications of suicide. No letter had been left. Searching for means of notifying her relations, Miss Lawson’s name and address had been found and she had been communicated with by telephone.

Poirot asked if anything had been found in the way of letters or papers. The letter, for instance, brought by the man who had called for the children.

No papers of any kind had been found, the man said, but there was a pile of charred paper on the hearth.

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

As far as anyone could say, Mrs. Peters had had no visitors and no one had come to her room—with the solitary exception of the man who had called for the two children.

I questioned the porter myself as to his appearance, but the man was very vague. A man of medium height—he thought fair-haired—rather military build—of somewhat nondescript appearance. No, he was positive the man had no beard.

“It wasn’t Tanios,” I murmured to Poirot.

“My dear Hastings! Do you really believe that Mrs. Tanios, after all the trouble she was taking to get the children away from their father, would quite meekly hand them over to him without the least fuss or protest? Ah, that, no!”

“Then who was the man?”

“Clearly it was someone in whom Mrs. Tanios had confidence or rather it was someone sent by a third person in whom Mrs. Tanios had confidence.”

“A man of medium height,” I mused.

“You need hardly trouble yourself about his appearance, Hastings. I am quite sure that the man who actually called for the children was some quite unimportant personage. The real agent kept himself in the background!”

“And the note was from this third person?”

“Yes.”

“Someone in whom Mrs. Tanios had confidence?”

“Obviously.”

“And the note is now burnt?”

“Yes, she was instructed to burn it.”

“What about that résumé of the case that you gave her?”

Poirot’s face looked unusually grim.

“That, too, is burned. But that does not matter!”

“No?”

“No. For you see—it is all in the head of Hercule Poirot.”

He took me by the arm.

“Come, Hastings, let us leave here. Our concern is not with the dead but with the living. It is with them I have to deal.”

Twenty-nine

INQUEST AT LITTLEGREEN HOUSE

It was eleven o’clock the following morning.

Seven people were assembled at Littlegreen House.

Hercule Poirot stood by the mantelpiece. Charles and Theresa were on the sofa, Charles on the arm of it with his hand on Theresa’s shoulder. Dr. Tanios sat in a grandfather chair. His eyes were red rimmed and he wore a black band round his arm.

On an upright chair by a round table sat the owner of the house, Miss Lawson. She, too, had red eyes. Her hair was even untidier than usual. Dr. Donaldson sat directly facing Poirot. His face was quite expressionless.

My interest quickened as I looked at each face in turn.

In the course of my association with Poirot I had assisted at many such a scene. A little company of people, all outwardly composed with well-bred masks for faces. And I had seen Poirot strip the mask from one face and show it for what it was—the face of a killer!

Yes, there was no doubt of it. One of these people was a murderer! But which? Even now I was not sure.

Poirot cleared his throat—a little pompously as was his habit—and began to speak.

“We are assembled here, ladies and gentlemen, to inquire into the death of Emily Arundell on the first of May last. There are four possibilities—that she died naturally—that she died as the result of an accident—that she took her own life—or lastly that she met her death at the hands of some person known or unknown.

"No inquest was held at the time of her death, since it was assumed that she died from natural causes and a medical certificate to that effect was given by Dr. Grainger.

"In a case where suspicion arises after burial has taken place it is usual to exhume the body of the person in question. There are reasons why I have not advocated that course. The chief of them is that my client would not have liked it."

It was Dr. Donaldson who interrupted. He said:

"Your client?"

Poirot turned to him.

"My client is Miss Emily Arundell. I am acting for her. Her greatest desire was that there should be no scandal."

I will pass over the next ten minutes since it would involve much needless repetition. Poirot told of the letter he had received, and producing it he read it aloud. He went on to explain the steps he had taken on coming to Market Basing, and of his discovery of the means taken to bring about the accident.

Then he paused, cleared his throat once more, and went on:

"I am now going to take you over the ground I travelled to get at the truth. I am going to show you what I believe to be a true reconstruction of the facts of the case.

"To begin with it is necessary to picture exactly what passed in Miss Arundell's mind. That, I think, is fairly easy. She has a fall, her fall is supposed to be occasioned by a dog's ball, but she herself knows better. Lying there on her bed her active and shrewd mind goes over the circumstances of her fall and she comes to a very definite conclusion about it. Someone has deliberately tried to injure—perhaps to kill her.

"From that conclusion she passes to a consideration of who that person can be. There were seven people in the house—four guests, her companion and two servants. Of these seven people only one can be entirely exonerated—since to that one person no advantage could accrue. She does not seriously suspect the two servants, both of whom have been with her for many years and whom she knows to be devoted to her. There remain then, four persons, three of them members of her family, and one of them a connection by marriage. Each of those four persons benefit, three directly, one indirectly, by her death.

“She is in a difficult position since she is a woman with a strong sense of family feeling. Essentially she is not one who wishes to wash the dirty linen in public, as the saying goes. On the other hand, she is not one to submit tamely to attempted murder!

“She takes her decision and writes to me. She also takes a further step. That further step was, I believe, actuated by two motives. One, I think, was a distinct feeling of spite against her entire family! She suspected them all impartially, and she determined at all costs to score off them! The second and more reasoned motive was a wish to protect herself and a realization of how this could be accomplished. As you know, she wrote to her lawyer, Mr. Purvis, and directed him to draw up a will in favour of the one person in the house whom, she felt convinced, could have had no hand in her accident.

“Now I may say that, from the terms of her letter to me and from her subsequent actions, I am quite sure that Miss Arundell passed from indefinite suspicion of four people to definite suspicion of one of those four. The whole tenor of her letter to me is an insistence that this business must be kept strictly private since the honour of the family is involved.

“I think that, from a Victorian point of view, this means that a person of her own name was indicated—and preferably a man.

“If she had suspected Mrs. Tanios she would have been quite as anxious to secure her own safety, but not quite as concerned for the family honour. She might have felt much the same about Theresa Arundell, but not nearly as intensely as she would feel about Charles.

“Charles was an Arundell. He bore the family name! Her reasons for suspecting him seem quite clear. To begin with, she had no illusions about

Charles. He had come near to disgracing the family once before. That is, she knew him to be not only a potential but an actual criminal! He had already forged her name to a cheque. After forgery—a step further—murder!

“Also she had had a somewhat suggestive conversation with him only two days before her accident. He had asked her for money and she had refused and he had thereupon remarked—oh, lightly enough—that she was going the right way to get herself bumped off. To this she had responded that she could take care of herself! To this, we are told, her nephew responded, ‘Don’t be too sure.’ And two days later this sinister accident takes place.

“It is hardly to be wondered at that lying there and brooding over the occurrence, Miss Arundell came definitely to the conclusion that it was Charles Arundell who had made an attempt upon her life.

“The sequence of events is perfectly clear. The conversation with Charles. The accident. The letter written to me in great distress of mind. The letter to the lawyer. On the following Tuesday, the 21st, Mr. Purvis brings the will and she signs it.

“Charles and Theresa Arundell come down the following weekend and Miss Arundell at once takes the necessary steps to safeguard herself. She tells Charles about the will. She not only tells him but she actually shows it to him! That, to my mind, is absolutely conclusive. She is making it quite clear to a would-be murderer that murder would bring him nothing whatever!

“She probably thought that Charles would pass on that information to his sister. But he did not do so. Why? I fancy that he had a very good reason—he felt guilty! He believed that it was his doing that the will had been made. But why did he feel guilty? Because he had really attempted murder? Or merely because he had helped himself to a small sum of ready cash? Either the serious crime or the petty one might account for his reluctance. He said nothing, hoping that his aunt would relent and change her mind.

“As far as Miss Arundell’s state of mind was concerned I felt that I had reconstructed events with a fair amount of correctness. I had next to make up my mind if her suspicions were, in actual fact, justified.

“Just as she had done, I realized that my suspicions were limited to a narrow circle—seven people to be exact. Charles and Theresa Arundell, Dr. Tanios and Mrs. Tanios. The two servants, Miss Lawson. There was an eighth person who had to be taken into account—namely, Dr. Donaldson, who dined there that night, but I did not learn of his presence until later.

“These seven persons that I was considering fell easily into two categories. Six of them stood to benefit in a greater or lesser degree by Miss Arundell’s death. If any one of those six had committed the crime the reason was probably a plain matter of gain. The second category contained one person only—Miss Lawson. Miss Lawson did not stand to gain by Miss Arundell’s death, but as a result of the accident, she did benefit considerably later!

“That meant that if Miss Lawson staged the so-called accident—”

“I never did anything of the kind!” Miss Lawson interrupted. “It’s disgraceful! Standing up there and saying such things!”

“A little patience, mademoiselle. And be kind enough not to interrupt,” said Poirot.

Miss Lawson tossed her head angrily.

“I insist on making my protest! Disgraceful, that’s what it is! Disgraceful!”

Poirot went on unheeding.

“I was saying that if Miss Lawson staged that accident she did so for an entirely different reason—that is, she engineered it so that Miss Arundell would naturally suspect her own family and become alienated from them. That was a possibility! I searched to see if there were any confirmation or otherwise and I unearthed one very definite fact. If Miss Lawson wanted Miss Arundell to suspect her own family, she would have stressed the fact of the dog, Bob, being out that night. But on the contrary Miss Lawson took the utmost pains to prevent Miss Arundell hearing of that. Therefore, I argued, Miss Lawson must be innocent.”

Miss Lawson said sharply:

“I should hope so!”

“I next considered the problem of Miss Arundell’s death. If one attempt to murder a person is made, a second attempt usually follows. It seemed to me significant that within a fortnight of the first attempt Miss Arundell should have died. I began to make inquiries.

“Dr. Grainger did not seem to think there was anything unusual about his patient’s death. That was a little damping to my theory. But, inquiring into the happenings of the last evening before she was taken ill, I came across a significant fact. Miss Isabel Tripp mentioned a halo of light that had appeared round Miss Arundell’s head. Her sister confirmed her statement. They might, of course, be inventing—in a romantic spirit—but I did not think that the incident was quite a likely one to occur to them unprompted. When questioning Miss Lawson she also gave me an interesting piece of information. She referred to a luminous ribbon issuing from Miss Arundell’s mouth and forming a luminous haze round her head.

“Obviously, though described somewhat differently by two different observers, the actual fact was the same. What it amounted to, shorn of spiritualistic significance, was this: On the night in question Miss Arundell’s breath was phosphorescent!”

Dr. Donaldson moved a little in his chair.

Poirot nodded to him.

“Yes, you begin to see. There are not very many phosphorescent substances. The first and most common one gave me exactly what I was looking for. I will read you a short extract from an article on phosphorus poisoning.

“The person’s breath may be phosphorescent before he feels in any way affected. That is what Miss Lawson and the Misses Tripp saw in the dark—Miss Arundell’s phosphorescent breath—‘a luminous haze.’ And here I will read you again. The jaundice having thoroughly pronounced itself, the system may be considered as not only under the influence of the toxic action of phosphorus, but as suffering in addition from all the accidents incidental to the retention of the biliary secretion in the blood, nor is there from this point any special difference between phosphorus poisoning and certain affections of the liver—such for example as yellow atrophy.

“You see the cleverness of that? Miss Arundell has suffered for years from liver trouble. The symptoms of phosphorus poisoning would only look like another attack of the same complaint. There will be nothing new, nothing startling about it.

“Oh! It was well-planned! Foreign matches—vermin paste? It is not difficult to get hold of phosphorus and a very small dose will kill. The medicinal dose is from 1/100 to 1/30 grain.

“Voilà. How clear—how marvellously clear the whole business becomes! Naturally, the doctor is deceived—especially as I find his sense of smell is affected—the garlic odour of the breath is a distinct symptom of phosphorus poisoning. He had no suspicions—why should he have? There were no suspicious circumstances and the one thing that might have given him a hint was the one thing he would never hear—or if he did hear it he would only class it as spiritualistic nonsense.

“I was now sure (from the evidence of Miss Lawson and the Misses Tripp) that murder had been committed. The question still was by whom? I eliminated the servants—their mentality was obviously not adapted to such a crime. I eliminated Miss Lawson since she would hardly have prattled on about luminous ectoplasm if she had been connected with the crime. I eliminated Charles Arundell since he knew, having seen the will, that he would gain nothing by his aunt’s death.

“There remained his sister Theresa, Dr. Tanios, Mrs. Tanios and Dr. Donaldson whom I discovered to have been dining in the house on the evening of the dog’s ball incident.

“At this point I had very little to help me. I had to fall back upon the psychology of the crime and the personality of the murderer! Both crimes had roughly the same outline. They were both simple. They were cunning, and carried out with efficiency. They required a certain amount of knowledge but not a great deal. The facts about phosphorus poisoning are easily learned, and the stuff itself, as I say, is quite easily obtained, especially abroad.

“I considered first the two men. Both of them were doctors, and both were clever men. Either of them might have thought of phosphorus and its suitability in this particular case, but the incident of the dog’s ball did not seem to fit a masculine mind. The incident of the ball seemed to me essentially a woman’s idea.

“I considered first of all Theresa Arundell. She had certain potentialities. She was bold, ruthless, and not over scrupulous. She had led a selfish and greedy life. She had always had everything she wanted and she had reached a point where she was desperate for money—both for herself and for the man she loved. Her manner, also, showed plainly that she knew her aunt had been murdered.

“There was an interesting little passage between her and her brother. I conceived the idea that each suspected the other of the crime. Charles endeavoured to make her say that she knew of the existence of the new will. Why? Clearly because if she knew of it she could not be suspected of the murder. She, on the other hand, clearly did not believe Charles’ statement that Miss Arundell had shown it to him! She regarded it as a singularly clumsy attempt on his part to divert suspicion from himself.

“There was another significant point. Charles displayed a reluctance to use the word arsenic. Later I found that he had questioned the old gardener at length upon the strength of some weed killer. It was clear what had been in his mind.”

Charles Arundell shifted his position a little.

“I thought of it,” he said. “But—well, I suppose I hadn’t got the nerve.”

Poirot nodded at him.

“Precisely, it is not in your psychology. Your crimes will always be the crimes of weakness. To steal, to forge—yes, it is the easiest way—but to kill—no! To kill one needs the type of mind that can be obsessed by an idea.”

He resumed his lecturing manner.

“Theresa Arundell, I decided, had quite sufficient strength of mind to carry such a design through, but there were other facts to take into consideration. She had never been thwarted, she had lived fully and selfishly—but that type of person is not the type that kills—except perhaps in sudden anger. And yet—I felt sure—it was Theresa Arundell who had taken the weed killer from the tin.”

Theresa spoke suddenly:

“I’ll tell you the truth. I thought of it. I actually took some weed killer from a tin down at Littlegreen House. But I couldn’t do it! I’m too fond of living—of being alive—I couldn’t do that to anyone—take life from them… I may be bad and selfish but there are things I can’t do! I couldn’t kill a living, breathing human creature!”

Poirot nodded.

“No, that is true. And you are not as bad as you paint yourself, mademoiselle. You are only young—and reckless.”

He went on:

“There remained Mrs. Tanios. As soon as I saw her I realized that she was afraid. She saw that I realized that and she very quickly made capital out of that momentary betrayal. She gave a very convincing portrait of a woman who is afraid for her husband. A little later she changed her tactics. It was very cleverly done—but the change did not deceive me. A woman can be afraid for her husband or she can be afraid of her husband—but she can hardly be both. Mrs. Tanios decided on the latter rôle—and she played her part cleverly—even to coming out after me into the hall of the hotel and pretending that there was something she wanted to tell me. When her husband followed her as she knew he would, she pretended that she could not speak before him.

“I realized at once, not that she feared her husband, but that she disliked him. And at once, summing the matter up, I felt convinced that here was the exact character I had been looking for. Here was—not a self-indulgent woman—but a thwarted one. A plain girl, leading a dull existence, unable to attract the men she would like to attract, finally accepting a man she did not care for rather than be left an old maid. I could trace her growing dissatisfaction with life, her life in Smyrna exiled from all she cared for in life. Then the birth of her children and her passionate attachment to them.

“Her husband was devoted to her but she came secretly to dislike him more and more. He had speculated with her money and lost it—another grudge against him.

“There was only one thing that illuminated her drab life, the expectation of her Aunt Emily’s death. Then she would have money, independence, the means to educate her children as she wished—and remember education meant a lot to her—she was a Professor’s daughter!

“She may have already planned the crime, or had the idea of it in her mind, before she came to England. She had a certain knowledge of chemistry, having assisted her father in the laboratory. She knew the nature of Miss Arundell’s complaint and she was well aware that phosphorus would be an ideal substance for her purpose.

“Then, when she came to Littlegreen House, a simpler method presented itself to her. The dog’s ball—a thread or string across the top of the stairs. A simple, ingenious woman’s idea.

“She made her attempt—and failed. I do not think that she had any idea that Miss Arundell was aware of the true facts of the matter. Miss Arundell’s suspicions were directed entirely against Charles. I doubt if her manner to Bella showed any alteration. And so, quietly and determinedly, this self-contained, unhappy, ambitious woman put her original plan into execution. She found an excellent vehicle for the poison, some patent capsules that Miss Arundell was in the habit of taking after meals. To open a capsule, place the phosphorus inside and close it again, was child’s play.

"The capsule was replaced among the others. Sooner or later Miss Arundell would swallow it. Poison was not likely to be suspected. Even if, by some unlikely chance it was, she herself would be nowhere near Market Basing at the time.

"Yet she took one precaution. She obtained a double supply of chloral hydrate at the chemist's, forging her husband's name to the prescription. I have no doubt of what that was for—to keep by her in case anything went wrong.

"As I say, I was convinced from the first moment I saw her that Mrs. Tanios was the person I was looking for, but I had absolutely no proof of the fact. I had to proceed carefully. If Mrs. Tanios had any idea I suspected her, I was afraid that she might proceed to a further crime. Furthermore, I believed that the idea of that crime had already occurred to her. Her one wish in life was to shake herself free of her husband.

"Her original murder had proved a bitter disappointment. The money, the wonderful all-intoxicating money, had all gone to Miss Lawson! It was a blow, but she set to work most intelligently. She began to work on Miss Lawson's conscience which, I suspect, was already not too comfortable."

There was a sudden outburst of sobs. Miss Lawson took out her handkerchief and cried into it.

"It's been dreadful," she sobbed. "I've been wicked! Very wicked. You see, I was very curious about the will—why Miss Arundell had made a new one, I mean. And one day, when Miss Arundell was resting, I managed to unlock the drawer in the desk. And then I found she'd left it all to me! Of course, I never dreamed it was so much. Just a few thousand—that's all I thought it was. And why not? After all, her own relations didn't really care for her! But then, when she was so ill, she asked for the will. I could see—I felt sure—she was going to destroy it… And that's when I was so wicked. I told her she'd sent it back to Mr. Purvis. Poor dear, she was so forgetful. She never remembered what she'd done with things. She believed me. Said I must write for it and I said I would.

“Oh, dear—Oh, dear—and then she got worse and couldn’t think of anything. And she died. And when the will was read and it was all that money I felt dreadful. Three hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds. I’d never dreamed for a minute it was anything like that or I wouldn’t have done it.

“I felt just as though I’d embezzled the money—and I didn’t know what to do. The other day, when Bella came to me, I told her that she should have half of it. I felt sure that then I would feel happy again.”

“You see?” said Poirot, “Mrs. Tanios was succeeding in her object. That is why she was so averse to any attempt to contest the will. She had her own plans and the last thing she wanted to do was to antagonize Miss Lawson. She pretended, of course, to fall in at once with her husband’s wishes, but she made it quite clear what her real feelings were.

“She had at that time two objects, to detach herself and her children from Dr. Tanios and to obtain her share of the money. Then she would have what she wanted—a rich contented life in England with her children.

“As time went on she could no longer conceal her dislike for her husband. In fact, she did not try to. He, poor man, was seriously upset and distressed. Her actions must have seemed quite incomprehensible to him. Really, they were logical enough. She was playing the part of the terrorized woman. If I had suspicions—and she was fairly sure that that must be the case—she wished me to believe that her husband had committed the murder. And at any moment that second murder which I am convinced was already planned in her mind might occur. I knew that she had a lethal dose of chloral in her possession. I feared that she would stage a pretended suicide and confession on his part.

“And still I had no evidence against her! And then, when I was quite in despair, I got something at last! Miss Lawson told me that she had seen Theresa Arundell kneeling on the stairs on the night of Easter Monday. I soon discovered that Miss Lawson could not have seen Theresa at all clearly—not clearly enough to recognize her features. Yet she was quite positive in her identification. On being pressed she mentioned a brooch with Theresa’s initials—T.A.

"On my request Miss Theresa Arundell showed me the brooch in question. At the same time she absolutely denied having been on the stairs at the time stated. At first I fancied someone else had borrowed her brooch, but when I looked at the brooch in the glass the truth leaped at me. Miss Lawson waking up had seen a dim figure with the initials T.A. flashing in the light. She had leapt to the conclusion it was Theresa.

"But if in the glass she had seen the initials T.A.—then the real initials must have been A.T. since the glass naturally reversed the order.

"Of course! Mrs. Tanios' mother was Arabella Arundell. Bella is only a contraction. A.T. stood for Arabella Tanios. There was nothing odd in Mrs. Tanios possessing a similar type of brooch. It had been exclusive last Christmas but by the spring they were all the rage, and I had already observed that Mrs. Tanios copied her cousin Theresa's hats and clothes as far as she was able with her limited means.

"In my own mind, at any rate, my case was proved.

"Now—what was I to do? Obtain a Home Office order for the exhumation of the body? That could doubtless be managed. I might prove that Miss Arundell had been poisoned with phosphorus though there was a little doubt about that. The body had been buried two months, and I understand that there have been cases of phosphorus poisoning where no lesions have been found and where the postmortem appearances are very indecisive. Even then, could I connect Mrs. Tanios with the purchase or possession of phosphorus? Very doubtful, since she had probably obtained it abroad.

"At this juncture Mrs. Tanios took a decisive action. She left her husband, throwing herself on the pity of Miss Lawson. She also definitely accused her husband of the murder.

"Unless I acted I felt convinced that he would be her next victim. I took steps to isolate them one from the other on the pretext that it was for her safety. She could not very well contradict that. Really, it was his safety I had in mind. And then—and then—" He paused—a long pause. His face had gone rather white.

“But that was only a temporary measure. I had to make sure that the killer would kill no more. I had to assure the safety of the innocent.

“So I wrote out my construction of the case and gave it to Mrs. Tanios.”

There was a long silence.

Dr. Tanios cried out:

“Oh, my God, so that’s why she killed herself.”

Poirot said gently:

“Was it not the best way? She thought so. There were, you see, the children to consider.”

Dr. Tanios buried his face in his hands.

Poirot came forward and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“It had to be. Believe me it was necessary. There would have been more deaths. First yours—then possibly, under certain circumstances, Miss Lawson’s. And so it goes on.”

He paused.

In a broken voice Tanios said:

“She wanted me—to take a sleeping draught one night… There was something in her face—I threw it away. That was when I began to believe her mind was going….”

“Think of it that way. It is indeed partly true. But not in the legal meaning of the term. She knew the meaning of her action….”

Dr. Tanios said wistfully:

“She was much too good for me—always.”

A strange epitaph on a self-confessed murderess!

Thirty

THE LAST WORD

There is very little more to tell.

Theresa married her doctor shortly afterwards. I know them fairly well now and I have learnt to appreciate Donaldson—his clarity of vision and the deep, underlying force and humanity of the man. His manner I may say is just as dry and precise as ever, Theresa often mimics him to his face. She is, I think, amazingly happy and absolutely wrapped up in her husband’s career. He is already making a big name for himself and is an authority on the functions of ductless glands.

Miss Lawson, in an acute attack of conscience, had to be restrained forcibly from denuding herself of every penny. A settlement agreeable to all parties was drawn up by Mr. Purvis whereby Miss Arundell’s fortune was shared out between Miss Lawson, the two Arundells and the Tanios children.

Charles went through his share in a little over a year and is now, I believe, in British Columbia.

Just two incidents.

“You’re a downy fellow, ain’t you?” said Miss Peabody, stopping us as we emerged from the gate of Littlegreen House one day. “Managed to hush everything up! No exhumation. Everything done decently.”

“There seems to be no doubt that Miss Arundell died of yellow atrophy of the liver,” said Poirot gently.

“That’s very satisfactory,” said Miss Peabody. “Bella Tanios took an overdose of sleeping stuff, I hear.”

“Yes, it was very sad.”

"She was a miserable kind of woman—always wanting what she hadn't got. People go a bit queer sometimes when they're like that. Had a kitchenmaid once. Same thing. Plain girl. Felt it. Started writing anonymous letters. Queer kinks people get. Ah, well, I daresay it's all for the best."

"One hopes so, madame. One hopes so."

"Well," said Miss Peabody, preparing to resume her walk, "I'll say this for you. You've hushed things up nicely. Very nicely indeed." She walked on.

There was a plaintive "Wuff" behind me.

I turned and opened the gate.

"Come on, old man."

Bob bounced through. There was a ball in his mouth.

"You can't take that for a walk."

Bob sighed, turned and slowly ejected the ball inside the gate. He looked at it anxiously then passed through.

He looked up at me.

"If you say so, master, I suppose it's all right."

I drew a long breath.

"My word, Poirot, it's good to have a dog again."

"The spoils of war," said Poirot. "But I would remind you, my friend, that it was to me that Miss Lawson presented Bob, not to you."

"Possibly," I said. "But you're not really any good with a dog, Poirot. You don't understand dog psychology! Now Bob and I understand each other perfectly, don't we?"

"Woof," said Bob in energetic assent.

Death On The Nile (1937)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Author’s Foreword

Death on the Nile was written after coming back from a winter in Egypt. When I read it now I feel myself back again on the steamer from Assuan to Wadi Halfa. There were quite a number of passengers on board, but the ones in this book travelled in my mind and became increasingly real to me—in the setting of a Nile steamer. The book has a lot of characters and a very elaborately worked out plot. I think the central situation is intriguing and has dramatic possibilities, and the three characters, Simon, Linnet, and Jacqueline, seem to me to be real and alive.

My friend, Francis L. Sullivan, liked the book so much that he kept urging me to adapt it for the stage, which in the end I did.

I think, myself, that the book is one of the best of my “foreign travel” ones, and if detective stories are “escape literature” (and why shouldn’t they be!) the reader can escape to sunny skies and blue water as well as to crime in the confines of an armchair.

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One

I

"Linnet Ridgeway!"

"That's her!" said Mr. Burnaby, the landlord of the Three Crowns.

He nudged his companion.

The two men stared with round bucolic eyes and slightly open mouths.

A big scarlet Rolls-Royce had just stopped in front of the local post office.

A girl jumped out, a girl without a hat and wearing a frock that looked (but only looked) simple. A girl with golden hair and straight autocratic features—a girl with a lovely shape—a girl such as was seldom seen in Malton-under-Wode.

With a quick imperative step she passed into the post office.

"That's her!" said Mr. Burnaby again. And he went on in a low awed voice: "Millions she's got…Going to spend thousands on the place. Swimming pools there's going to be, and Italian gardens and a ballroom and half of the house pulled down and rebuilt…."

"She'll bring money into the town," said his friend. He was a lean, seedy-looking man. His tone was envious and grudging.

Mr. Burnaby agreed.

"Yes, it's a great thing for Malton-under-Wode. A great thing it is."

Mr. Burnaby was complacent about it.

"Wake us all up proper," he added.

“Bit of difference from Sir George,” said the other.

“Ah, it was the ’orses did for him,” said Mr. Burnaby indulgently. “Never ’ad no luck.”

“What did he get for the place?”

“A cool sixty thousand, so I’ve heard.”

The lean man whistled.

Mr. Burnaby went on triumphantly: “And they say she’ll have spent another sixty thousand before she’s finished!”

“Wicked!” said the lean man. “Where’d she get all that money from?”

“America, so I’ve heard. Her mother was the only daughter of one of those millionaire blokes. Quite like the pictures, isn’t it?”

The girl came out of the post office and climbed into the car.

As she drove off, the lean man followed her with his eyes. He muttered:

“It seems all wrong to me—her looking like that. Money and looks—it’s too much! If a girl’s as rich as that she’s no right to be a good-looker as well. And she is a good-looker…Got everything, that girl has. Doesn’t seem fair….”

II

Extract from the Social column of the Daily Blague.

Among those supping at Chez Ma Tante I noticed beautiful Linnet Ridgeway. She was with the Hon. Joanna Southwood, Lord Windlesham and Mr. Toby Bryce. Miss Ridgeway, as everyone knows, is the daughter of Melhuish Ridgeway, who married Anna Hartz. She inherits from her grandfather, Leopold Hartz, an immense fortune. The lovely Linnet is the sensation of the moment and it is rumoured that an engagement may be announced shortly. Certainly Lord Windlesham seemed very épris!!

III

The Hon. Joanna Southwood said:

“Darling, I think it’s going to be all perfectly marvellous!”

She was sitting in Linnet Ridgeway’s bedroom at Wode Hall.

From the window the eye passed over the gardens to open country with blue shadows of woodlands.

“It’s rather perfect, isn’t it?” said Linnet.

She leaned her arms on the window sill. Her face was eager, alive, dynamic. Beside her, Joanna Southwood seemed, somehow, a little dim—a tall thin young woman of twenty-seven, with a long clever face and freakishly plucked eyebrows.

“And you’ve done so much in the time! Did you have lots of architects and things?”

“Three.”

“What are architects like? I don’t think I’ve ever seen any.”

“They were all right. I found them rather unpractical sometimes.”

“Darling, you soon put that right! You are the most practical creature!”

Joanna picked up a string of pearls from the dressing table.

“I suppose these are real, aren’t they, Linnet?”

“Of course.”

“I know it’s ‘of course’ to you, my sweet, but it wouldn’t be to most people. Heavily cultured or even Woolworth! Darling, they really are incredible, so exquisitely matched. They must be worth the most fabulous sum!”

“Rather vulgar, you think?”

“No, not at all—just pure beauty. What are they worth?”

“About fifty thousand.”

“What a lovely lot of money! Aren’t you afraid of having them stolen?”

“No, I always wear them—and anyway they’re insured.”

“Let me wear them till dinnertime, will you, darling? It would give me such a thrill.”

Linnet laughed.

“Of course, if you like.”

“You know, Linnet, I really do envy you. You’ve simply got everything. Here you are at twenty, your own mistress, with any amount of money, looks, superb health. You’ve even got brains! When are you twenty-one?”

“Next June. I shall have a grand coming-of-age party in London.”

“And then are you going to marry Charles Windlesham? All the dreadful little gossip writers are getting so excited about it. And he really is frightfully devoted.”

Linnet shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know. I don’t really want to marry anyone yet.”

“Darling, how right you are! It’s never quite the same afterwards, is it?”

The telephone shrilled and Linnet went to it.

“Yes? Yes?”

The butler’s voice answered her:

“Miss de Bellefort is on the line. Shall I put her through?”

“Bellefort? Oh, of course, yes, put her through.”

A click and a voice, an eager, soft, slightly breathless voice: “Hullo, is that Miss Ridgeway? Linnet!”

“Jackie darling! I haven’t heard anything of you for ages and ages!”

“I know. It’s awful. Linnet, I want to see you terribly.”

“Darling, can’t you come down here? My new toy. I’d love to show it to you.”

“That’s just what I want to do.”

“Well, jump into a train or a car.”

“Right, I will. A frightfully dilapidated two-seater. I bought it for fifteen pounds, and some days it goes beautifully. But it has moods. If I haven’t arrived by teatime you’ll know it’s had a mood. So long, my sweet.”

Linnet replaced the receiver. She crossed back to Joanna.

“That’s my oldest friend, Jacqueline de Bellefort. We were together at a convent in Paris. She’s had the most terrible bad luck. Her father was a French Count, her mother was American—a Southerner. The father went off with some woman, and her mother lost all her money in the Wall Street crash. Jackie was left absolutely broke. I don’t know how she’s managed to get along the last two years.”

Joanna was polishing her deep-blood-coloured nails with her friend’s nail pad. She leant back with her head on one side scrutinizing the effect.

“Darling,” she drawled, “won’t that be rather tiresome? If any misfortunes happen to my friends I always drop them at once! It sounds heartless, but it saves such a lot of trouble later! They always want to borrow money off you, or else they start a dressmaking business and you have to get the most terrible clothes from them. Or they paint lampshades, or do batik scarves.”

“So, if I lost all my money, you’d drop me tomorrow?”

“Yes, darling, I would. You can’t say I’m not honest about it! I only like successful people. And you’ll find that’s true of nearly everybody—only most people won’t admit it. They just say that really they can’t put up with Mary or Emily or Pamela anymore! ‘Her troubles have made her so bitter and peculiar, poor dear!’”

“How beastly you are, Joanna!”

“I’m only on the make, like everyone else.”

“I’m not on the make!”

“For obvious reasons! You don’t have to be sordid when good-looking, middle-aged American trustees pay you over a vast allowance every quarter.”

“And you’re wrong about Jacqueline,” said Linnet. “She’s not a sponge. I’ve wanted to help her, but she won’t let me. She’s as proud as the devil.”

“What’s she in such a hurry to see you for? I’ll bet she wants something! You just wait and see.”

“She sounded excited about something,” admitted Linnet. “Jackie always did get frightfully worked up over things. She once stuck a penknife into someone!”

“Darling, how thrilling!”

“A boy was teasing a dog. Jackie tried to get him to stop. He wouldn’t. She pulled him and shook him, but he was much stronger than she was, and at last she whipped out a penknife and plunged it right into him. There was the most awful row!”

“I should think so. It sounds most uncomfortable!”

Linnet’s maid entered the room. With a murmured word of apology, she took down a dress from the wardrobe and went out of the room with it.

“What’s the matter with Marie?” asked Joanna.

“She’s been crying.”

“Poor thing! You know I told you she wanted to marry a man who has a job in Egypt. She didn’t know much about him, so I thought I’d better make sure he was all right. It turned out that he had a wife already—and three children.”

“What a lot of enemies you must make, Linnet.”

“Enemies?” Linnet looked surprised.

Joanna nodded and helped herself to a cigarette.

“Enemies, my sweet. You’re so devastatingly efficient. And you’re so frightfully good at doing the right thing.”

Linnet laughed.

“Why, I haven’t got an enemy in the world.”

IV

Lord Windlesham sat under the cedar tree. His eyes rested on the graceful proportions of Wode Hall. There was nothing to mar its old-world beauty; the new buildings and additions were out of sight round the corner. It was a fair and peaceful sight bathed in the autumn sunshine. Nevertheless, as he gazed, it was no longer Wode Hall that Charles Windlesham saw. Instead, he seemed to see a more imposing Elizabethan mansion, a long sweep of park, a more bleak background…It was his own family seat, Charltonbury, and in the foreground stood a figure—a girl’s figure, with bright golden hair and an eager confident face…Linnet as mistress of Charltonbury!

He felt very hopeful. That refusal of hers had not been at all a definite refusal. It had been little more than a plea for time. Well, he could afford to wait a little….

How amazingly suitable the whole thing was! It was certainly advisable that he should marry money, but not such a matter of necessity that he could regard himself as forced to put his own feelings on one side. And he loved Linnet. He would have wanted to marry her even if she had been practically penniless, instead of one of the richest girls in England. Only, fortunately, she was one of the richest girls in England….

His mind played with attractive plans for the future. The Mastership of the Roxdale perhaps, the restoration of the west wing, no need to let the Scotch shooting….

Charles Windlesham dreamed in the sun.

V

It was four o'clock when the dilapidated little two-seater stopped with a sound of crunching gravel. A girl got out of it—a small slender creature with a mop of dark hair. She ran up the steps and tugged at the bell.

A few minutes later she was being ushered into the long stately drawing room, and an ecclesiastical butler was saying with the proper mournful intonation: "Miss de Bellefort."

"Linnet!"

"Jackie!"

Windlesham stood a little aside, watching sympathetically as this fiery little creature flung herself open-armed upon Linnet.

"Lord Windlesham—Miss de Bellefort—my best friend."

A pretty child, he thought—not really pretty but decidedly attractive, with her dark curly hair and her enormous eyes. He murmured a few tactful nothings and then managed unobtrusively to leave the two friends together.

Jacqueline pounced—in a fashion that Linnet remembered as being characteristic of her.

“Windlesham? Windlesham? That’s the man the papers always say you’re going to marry! Are you, Linnet? Are you?”

Linnet murmured: “Perhaps.”

“Darling—I’m so glad! He looks nice.”

“Oh, don’t make up your mind about it—I haven’t made up my own mind yet.”

“Of course not! Queens always proceed with due deliberation to the choosing of a consort!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jackie.”

“But you are a queen, Linnet! You always were. Sa Majesté, la reine Linette. Linette la blonde! And I—I’m the Queen’s confidante! The trusted Maid of Honour.”

“What nonsense you talk, Jackie darling! Where have you been all this time? You just disappear. And you never write.”

“I hate writing letters. Where have I been? Oh, about three parts submerged, darling. In JOBS, you know. Grim jobs with grim women!”

“Darling, I wish you’d—”

“Take the Queen’s bounty? Well, frankly, darling, that’s what I’m here for. No, not to borrow money. It’s not got to that yet! But I’ve come to ask a great big important favour!”

“Go on.”

“If you’re going to marry the Windlesham man, you’ll understand, perhaps.”

Linnet looked puzzled for a minute; then her face cleared.

“Jackie, do you mean—?”

"Yes, darling, I'm engaged!"

"So that's it! I thought you were looking particularly alive somehow. You always do, of course, but even more than usual."

"That's just what I feel like."

"Tell me all about him."

"His name's Simon Doyle. He's big and square and incredibly simple and boyish and utterly adorable! He's poor—got no money. He's what you call 'county' all right—but very impoverished county—a younger son and all that. His people come from Devonshire. He loves the country and country things. And for the last five years he's been in the City in a stuffy office. And now they're cutting down and he's out of a job. Linnet, I shall die if I can't marry him! I shall die! I shall die! I shall die…."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jackie."

"I shall die, I tell you! I'm crazy about him. He's crazy about me. We can't live without each other."

"Darling, you have got it badly!"

"I know. It's awful, isn't it? This love business gets hold of you and you can't do anything about it."

She paused for a minute. Her dark eyes dilated, looked suddenly tragic. She gave a little shiver.

"It's—even frightening sometimes! Simon and I were made for each other. I shall never care for anyone else. And you've got to help us, Linnet. I heard you'd bought this place and it put an idea into my head. Listen, you'll have to have a land agent—perhaps two. I want you to give the job to Simon."

"Oh!" Linnet was startled.

Jacqueline rushed on: "He's got all that sort of thing at his fingertips. He knows all about estates—was brought up on one. And he's got his business training too. Oh, Linnet, you will give him a job, won’t you, for love of me? If he doesn’t make good, sack him. But he will. And we can live in a little house, and I shall see lots of you, and everything in the garden will be too, too divine.”

She got up.

“Say you will, Linnet. Say you will. Beautiful Linnet! Tall golden Linnet! My own very special Linnet! Say you will!”

“Jackie—”

“You will?”

Linnet burst out laughing.

“Ridiculous Jackie! Bring along your young man and let me have a look at him and we’ll talk it over.”

Jackie darted at her, kissing her exuberantly.

“Darling Linnet—you’re a real friend! I knew you were. You wouldn’t let me down—ever. You’re just the loveliest thing in the world. Good-bye.”

“But, Jackie, you’re staying.”

“Me? No, I’m not. I’m going back to London, and tomorrow I’ll come back and bring Simon and we’ll settle it all up. You’ll adore him. He really is a pet.”

“But can’t you wait and just have tea?”

“No, I can’t wait, Linnet. I’m too excited. I must get back and tell Simon. I know I’m mad, darling, but I can’t help it. Marriage will cure me, I expect. It always seems to have a very sobering effect on people.”

She turned at the door, stood a moment, then rushed back for a last quick birdlike embrace.

"Dear Linnet—there's no one like you."

VI

M. Gaston Blondin, the proprietor of that modish little restaurant Chez Ma Tante, was not a man who delighted to honour many of his clientèle. The rich, the beautiful, the notorious, and the well-born might wait in vain to be singled out and paid special attention. Only in the rarest cases did M. Blondin, with gracious condescension, greet a guest, accompany him to a privileged table, and exchange with him suitable and apposite remarks.

On this particular night, M. Blondin had exercised his royal prerogative three times—once for a Duchess, once for a famous racing peer, and once for a little man of comical appearance with immense black moustaches, who, a casual onlooker would have thought, could bestow no favour on Chez Ma Tante by his presence there.

M. Blondin, however, was positively fulsome in his attentions. Though clients had been told for the last half hour that a table was not to be had, one now mysteriously appeared, placed in a most favourable position. M. Blondin conducted the client to it with every appearance of empressement.

"But naturally, for you there is always a table, Monsieur Poirot! How I wish that you would honour us oftener!"

Hercule Poirot smiled, remembering that past incident wherein a dead body, a waiter, M. Blondin, and a very lovely lady had played a part.

"You are too amiable, Monsieur Blondin," he said.

"And you are alone, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Yes, I am alone."

"Oh, well, Jules here will compose for you a little meal that will be a poem—positively a poem! Women, however charming, have this disadvantage: They distract the mind from food! You will enjoy your dinner, Monsieur Poirot; I promise you that. Now as to wine—"

A technical conversation ensued, Jules, the maître d'hotel, assisting.

Before departing, M. Blondin lingered a moment, lowering his voice confidentially.

“You have grave affairs on hand?”

Poirot shook his head.

“I am, alas, a man of leisure,” he said softly. “I have made the economies in my time and I have now the means to enjoy the life of idleness.”

“I envy you.”

“No, no, you would be unwise to do so. I can assure you, it is not so gay as it sounds.” He sighed. “How true is the saying that man was forced to invent work in order to escape the strain of having to think.”

M. Blondin threw up his hands.

“But there is so much! There is travel!”

“Yes, there is travel. Already I have not done so badly. This winter I shall visit Egypt, I think. The climate, they say, is superb! One will escape from the fogs, the greyness, the monotony of the constantly falling rain.”

“Ah! Egypt,” breathed M. Blondin.

“One can even voyage there now, I believe, by train, escaping all sea travel except the Channel.”

“Ah, the sea, it does not agree with you?”

Hercule Poirot shook his head and shuddered slightly.

“I, too,” said M. Blondin with sympathy. “Curious the effect it has upon the stomach.”

"But only upon certain stomachs! There are people on whom the motion makes no impression whatever. They actually enjoy it!"

"An unfairness of the good God," said M. Blondin.

He shook his head sadly, and, brooding on the impious thought, withdrew.

Smooth-footed, deft-handed waiters ministered to the table. Toast Melba, butter, an ice pail, all the adjuncts to a meal of quality.

The Negro orchestra broke into an ecstasy of strange discordant noises. London danced.

Hercule Poirot looked on, registered impressions in his neat orderly mind.

How bored and weary most of the faces were! Some of those stout men, however, were enjoying themselves…whereas a patient endurance seemed to be the sentiment exhibited on their partners' faces. The fat woman in purple was looking radiant…Undoubtedly the fat had certain compensations in life…a zest—a gusto—denied to those of more fashionable contours.

A good sprinkling of young people—some vacant-looking—some bored—some definitely unhappy. How absurd to call youth the time of happiness—youth, the time of greatest vulnerability!

His glance softened as it rested on one particular couple. A well-matched pair—tall broad-shouldered man, slender delicate girl. Two bodies that moved in perfect rhythm of happiness. Happiness in the place, the hour, and in each other.

The dance stopped abruptly. Hands clapped and it started again. After a second encore the couple returned to their table close by Poirot. The girl was flushed, laughing. As she sat, he could study her face, lifted laughing to her companion.

There was something else beside laughter in her eyes. Hercule Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

"She cares too much, that little one," he said to himself. It is not safe. No, it is not safe."

And then a word caught his ear, "Egypt."

Their voices came to him clearly—the girl's young, fresh, arrogant, with just a trace of soft-sounding foreign R's, and the man's pleasant, low-toned, well-bred English.

"I'm not counting my chickens before they're hatched, Simon. I tell you Linnet won't let us down!"

"I might let her down."

"Nonsense—it's just the right job for you."

"As a matter of fact I think it is…I haven't really any doubts as to my capability. And I mean to make good—for your sake!"

The girl laughed softly, a laugh of pure happiness.

"We'll wait three months—to make sure you don't get the sack—and then—"

"And then I'll endow thee with my worldly goods—that's the hang of it, isn't it?"

"And, as I say, we'll go to Egypt for our honeymoon. Damn the expense! I've always wanted to go to Egypt all my life. The Nile and the Pyramids and the sand…."

He said, his voice slightly indistinct: "We'll see it together, Jackie… together. Won't it be marvellous?"

"I wonder. Will it be as marvellous to you as it is to me? Do you really care—as much as I do?"

Her voice was suddenly sharp—her eyes dilated—almost with fear.

The man’s answer came quickly crisp: “Don’t be absurd, Jackie.”

But the girl repeated: “I wonder….”

Then she shrugged her shoulders. “Let’s dance.”

Hercule Poirot murmured to himself:

“Une qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer. Yes, I wonder too.”

VII

Joanna Southwood said: “And suppose he’s a terrible tough?”

Linnet shook her head. “Oh, he won’t be. I can trust Jacqueline’s taste.”

Joanna murmured: “Ah, but people don’t run true to form in love affairs.”

Linnet shook her head impatiently. Then she changed the subject. “I must go and see Mr. Pierce about those plans.”

“Plans?”

“Yes, some dreadful insanitary old cottages. I’m having them pulled down and the people moved.”

“How sanitary and public-spirited of you, darling!”

“They’d have had to go anyway. Those cottages would have overlooked my new swimming pool.”

“Do the people who live in them like going?”

“Most of them are delighted. One or two are being rather stupid about it—really tiresome in fact. They don’t seem to realize how vastly improved their living conditions will be!”

“But you’re being quite high-handed about it, I presume.”

“My dear Joanna, it’s to their advantage really.”

“Yes, dear. I’m sure it is. Compulsory benefit.”

Linnet frowned. Joanna laughed.

“Come now, you are a tyrant, admit it. A beneficent tyrant if you like!”

“I’m not the least bit of a tyrant.”

“But you like your own way!”

“Not especially.”

“Linnet Ridgeway, can you look me in the face and tell me of any one occasion on which you’ve failed to do exactly as you wanted?”

“Heaps of times.”

“Oh, yes, ‘heaps of times’—just like that—but no concrete example. And you simply can’t think up one, darling, however hard you try! The triumphal progress of Linnet Ridgeway in her golden car.”

Linnet said sharply: “You think I’m selfish?”

“No—just irresistible. The combined effect of money and charm. Everything goes down before you. What you can’t buy with cash you buy with a smile. Result: Linnet Ridgeway, the Girl Who Has Everything.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Joanna!”

“Well, haven’t you got everything?”

“I suppose I have…It sounds rather disgusting, somehow!”

“Of course it’s disgusting, darling! You’ll probably get terribly bored and blasé by and by. In the meantime, enjoy the triumphal progress in the golden car. Only I wonder, I really do wonder, what will happen when you want to go down a street which has a board saying ‘No Thoroughfare.’”

“Don’t be idiotic, Joanna.” As Lord Windlesham joined them, Linnet said, turning to him: “Joanna is saying the nastiest things to me.”

“All spite, darling, all spite,” said Joanna vaguely as she got up from her seat.

She made no apology for leaving them. She had caught the glint in Windlesham’s eye.

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he went straight to the point.

“Have you come to a decision, Linnet?”

Linnet said slowly: “Am I being a brute? I suppose, if I’m not sure, I ought to say ‘No’—”

He interrupted her:

“Don’t say it. You shall have time—as much time as you want. But I think, you know, we should be happy together.”

“You see,” Linnet’s tone was apologetic, almost childish, “I’m enjoying myself so much—especially with all this.” She waved a hand. “I wanted to make Wode Hall into my real ideal of a country house, and I do think I’ve got it nice, don’t you?”

“It’s beautiful. Beautifully planned. Everything perfect. You’re very clever, Linnet.”

He paused a minute and went on: “And you like Charltonbury, don’t you? Of course it wants modernizing and all that—but you’re so clever at that sort of thing. You enjoy it.”

“Why, of course, Charltonbury’s divine.”

She spoke with ready enthusiasm, but inwardly she was conscious of a sudden chill. An alien note had sounded, disturbing her complete satisfaction with life. She did not analyse the feeling at the moment, but later, when Windlesham had left her, she tried to probe the recesses of her mind.

Charltonbury—yes, that was it—she had resented the mention of Charltonbury. But why? Charltonbury was modestly famous. Windlesham's ancestors had held it since the time of Elizabeth. To be mistress of Charltonbury was a position unsurpassed in society. Windlesham was one of the most desirable peers in England.

Naturally he couldn't take Wode seriously…It was not in any way to be compared with Charltonbury.

Ah, but Wode was hers! She had seen it, acquired it, rebuilt and redressed it, lavished money on it. It was her own possession—her kingdom.

But in a sense it wouldn't count if she married Windlesham. What would they want with two country places? And of the two, naturally Wode Hall would be the one to be given up.

She, Linnet Ridgeway, wouldn't exist any longer. She would be Countess of Windlesham, bringing a fine dowry to Charltonbury and its master. She would be queen consort, not queen any longer.

"I'm being ridiculous," said Linnet to herself.

But it was curious how she did hate the idea of abandoning Wode….

And wasn't there something else nagging at her?

Jackie's voice with that queer blurred note in it saying: "I shall die if I can't marry him! I shall die. I shall die…."

So positive, so earnest. Did she, Linnet, feel like that about Windlesham? Assuredly she didn't. Perhaps she could never feel like that about anyone. It must be—rather wonderful—to feel like that….

The sound of a car came through the open window.

Linnet shook herself impatiently. That must be Jackie and her young man. She'd go out and meet them.

She was standing in the open doorway as Jacqueline and Simon Doyle got out of the car.

"Linnet!" Jackie ran to her. "This is Simon. Simon, here's Linnet. She's just the most wonderful person in the world."

Linnet saw a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with very dark blue eyes, crisply curling brown hair, a square chin, and a boyish, appealing, simple smile….

She stretched out a hand. The hand that clasped hers was firm and warm… She liked the way he looked at her, the naïve genuine admiration.

Jackie had told him she was wonderful, and he clearly thought that she was wonderful….

A warm sweet feeling of intoxication ran through her veins.

"Isn't this all lovely?" she said. "Come in, Simon, and let me welcome my new land agent properly."

And as she turned to lead the way she thought: "I'm frightfully—frightfully happy. I like Jackie's young man…I like him enormously…."

And then a sudden pang: "Lucky Jackie…."

VIII

Tim Allerton leant back in his wicker chair and yawned as he looked out over the sea. He shot a quick sidelong glance at his mother.

Mrs. Allerton was a good-looking, white-haired woman of fifty. By imparting an expression of pinched severity to her mouth every time she looked at her son, she sought to disguise the fact of her intense affection for him. Even total strangers were seldom deceived by this device and Tim himself saw through it perfectly.

He said: “Do you really like Majorca, Mother?”

“Well,” Mrs. Allerton considered, “it’s cheap.”

“And cold,” said Tim with a slight shiver.

He was a tall, thin young man, with dark hair and a rather narrow chest. His mouth had a very sweet expression: His eyes were sad and his chin was indecisive. He had long delicate hands.

Threatened by consumption some years ago, he had never displayed a really robust physique. He was popularly supposed “to write,” but it was understood among his friends that inquiries as to literary output were not encouraged.

“What are you thinking of, Tim?”

Mrs. Allerton was alert. Her bright, dark-brown eyes looked suspicious.

Tim Allerton grinned at her:

“I was thinking of Egypt.”

“Egypt?” Mrs. Allerton sounded doubtful.

“Real warmth, darling. Lazy golden sands. The Nile. I’d like to go up the Nile, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, I’d like it.” Her tone was dry. “But Egypt’s expensive, my dear. Not for those who have to count the pennies.”

Tim laughed. He rose, stretched himself. Suddenly he looked alive and eager. There was an excited note in his voice.

“The expense will be my affair. Yes, darling. A little flutter on the Stock Exchange. With thoroughly satisfactory results. I heard this morning.”

“This morning?” said Mrs. Allerton sharply. “You only had one letter and that—”

She stopped and bit her lip.

Tim looked momentarily undecided whether to be amused or annoyed. Amusement gained the day.

“And that was from Joanna,” he finished coolly. “Quite right, Mother. What a queen of detectives you’d make! The famous Hercule Poirot would have to look to his laurels if you were about.”

Mrs. Allerton looked rather cross.

“I just happened to see the handwriting—”

“And knew it wasn’t that of a stockbroker? Quite right. As a matter of fact it was yesterday I heard from them. Poor Joanna’s handwriting is rather noticeable—sprawls about all over the envelope like an inebriated spider.”

“What does Joanna say? Any news?”

Mrs. Allerton strove to make her voice sound casual and ordinary. The friendship between her son and his second cousin, Joanna Southwood, always irritated her. Not, as she put it to herself, that there was “anything in it.” She was quite sure there wasn’t. Tim had never manifested a sentimental interest in Joanna, nor she in him. Their mutual attraction seemed to be founded on gossip and the possession of a large number of friends and acquaintances in common. They both liked people and discussing people. Joanna had an amusing if caustic tongue.

It was not because Mrs. Allerton feared that Tim might fall in love with Joanna that she found herself always becoming a little stiff in manner if Joanna were present or when letters from her arrived.

It was some other feeling hard to define—perhaps an unacknowledged jealousy in the unfeigned pleasure Tim always seemed to take in Joanna’s society. He and his mother were such perfect companions that the sight of him absorbed and interested in another woman always startled Mrs. Allerton slightly. She fancied, too, that her own presence on these occasions set some barrier between the two members of the younger generation. Often she had come upon them eagerly absorbed in some conversation and, at sight of her, their talk had wavered, had seemed to include her rather too purposefully and as if duty bound. Quite definitely, Mrs. Allerton did not like Joanna Southwood. She thought her insincere, affected, and essentially superficial. She found it very hard to prevent herself saying so in unmeasured tones.

In answer to her question, Tim pulled the letter out of his pocket and glanced through it. It was quite a long letter, his mother noted.

“Nothing much,” he said. “The Devenishes are getting a divorce. Old Monty’s been had up for being drunk in charge of a car. Windlesham’s gone to Canada. Seems he was pretty badly hit when Linnet Ridgeway turned him down. She’s definitely going to marry this land agent person.”

“How extraordinary! Is he very dreadful?”

“No, no, not at all. He’s one of the Devonshire Doyles. No money, of course—and he was actually engaged to one of Linnet’s best friends. Pretty thick, that.”

“I don’t think it’s at all nice,” said Mrs. Allerton, flushing.

Tim flashed her a quick affectionate glance.

“I know, darling. You don’t approve of snaffling other people’s husbands and all that sort of thing.”

“In my day we had our standards,” said Mrs. Allerton. “And a very good thing too! Nowadays young people seem to think they can just go about doing anything they choose.”

Tim smiled. “They don’t only think it. They do it.

Vide Linnet Ridgeway!”

“Well, I think it’s horrid!”

Tim twinkled at her.

“Cheer up, you old die-hard! Perhaps I agree with you. Anyway, I haven’t helped myself to anyone’s wife or fiancée yet.”

“I’m sure you’d never do such a thing,” said Mrs. Allerton. She added with spirit, “I’ve brought you up properly.”

“So the credit is yours, not mine.”

He smiled teasingly at her as he folded the letter and put it away again. Mrs. Allerton let the thought just flash across her mind: “Most letters he shows to me. He only reads me snippets from Joanna’s.”

But she put the unworthy thought away from her, and decided, as ever, to behave like a gentlewoman.

“Is Joanna enjoying life?” she asked.

“So so. Says she thinks of opening a delicatessen shop in Mayfair.”

“She always talks about being hard up,” said Mrs. Allerton with a tinge of spite, “but she goes about everywhere and her clothes must cost her a lot. She’s always beautifully dressed.”

“Ah, well,” said Tim, “she probably doesn’t pay for them. No, mother, I don’t mean what your Edwardian mind suggests to you. I just mean quite literally that she leaves her bills unpaid.”

Mrs. Allerton sighed.

“I never know how people manage to do that.”

“It’s a kind of special gift,” said Tim. “If only you have sufficiently extravagant tastes, and absolutely no sense of money values, people will give you any amount of credit.”

“Yes, but you come to the Bankruptcy Court in the end like poor Sir George Wode.”

“You have a soft spot for that old horse coper—probably because he called you a rosebud in eighteen seventy-nine at a dance.”

“I wasn’t born in eighteen seventy-nine,” Mrs. Allerton retorted with spirit. “Sir George has charming manners, and I won’t have you calling him a horse coper.”

“I’ve heard funny stories about him from people that know.”

“You and Joanna don’t mind what you say about people; anything will do so long as it’s sufficiently ill-natured.”

Tim raised his eyebrows.

“My dear, you’re quite heated. I didn’t know old Wode was such a favourite of yours.”

“You don’t realize how hard it was for him, having to sell Wode Hall. He cared terribly about that place.”

Tim suppressed the easy retort. After all, who was he to judge? Instead he said thoughtfully:

“You know, I think you’re not far wrong there. Linnet asked him to come down and see what she’d done to the place, and he refused quite rudely.”

“Of course. She ought to have known better than to ask him.”

“And I believe he’s quite venomous about her—mutters things under his breath whenever he sees her. Can’t forgive her for having given him an absolutely top price for the worm-eaten family estate.”

“And you can’t understand that?” Mrs. Allerton spoke sharply.

“Frankly,” said Tim calmly, “I can’t. Why live in the past? Why cling on to things that have been?”

“What are you going to put in their place?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Excitement, perhaps. Novelty. The joy of never knowing what may turn up from day to day. Instead of inheriting a useless tract of land, the pleasure of making money for yourself—by your own brains and skill.”

“A successful deal on the Stock Exchange, in fact!”

He laughed. “Why not?”

“And what about an equal loss on the Stock Exchange?”

“That, dear, is rather tactless. And quite inappropriate today…What about this Egypt plan?”

“Well—”

He cut in smiling at her: “That’s settled. We’ve both always wanted to see Egypt.”

“When do you suggest?”

“Oh, next month. January’s about the best time there. We’ll enjoy the delightful society in this hotel a few weeks longer.”

“Tim,” said Mrs. Allerton reproachfully. Then she added guiltily: “I’m afraid I promised Mrs. Leech that you’d go with her to the police station. She doesn’t understand any Spanish.”

Tim made a grimace.

“About her ring? The blood-red ruby of the horse-leech’s daughter? Does she still persist in thinking it’s been stolen? I’ll go if you like, but it’s a waste of time. She’ll only get some wretched chambermaid into trouble. I distinctly saw it on her finger when she went into the sea that day. It came off in the water and she never noticed.”

“She says she is quite sure she took it off and left it on her dressing table.”

"Well, she didn't. I saw it with my own eyes. The woman's a fool. Any woman's a fool who goes prancing into the sea in December, pretending the water's quite warm just because the sun happens to be shining rather brightly at the moment. Stout women oughtn't to be allowed to bathe anyway; they look so revolting in bathing dresses."

Mrs. Allerton murmured, "I really feel I ought to give up bathing."

Tim gave a shout of laughter.

"You? You can give most of the young things points and to spare."

Mrs. Allerton sighed and said, "I wish there were a few more young people for you here."

Tim Allerton shook his head decidedly.

"I don't. You and I get along rather comfortably without outside distractions."

"You'd like it if Joanna were here."

"I wouldn't." His tone was unexpectedly resolute. "You're all wrong there. Joanna amuses me, but I don't really like her, and to have her around much gets on my nerves. I'm thankful she isn't here. I should be quite resigned if I were never to see Joanna again."

He added, almost below his breath, "There's only one woman in the world I've got a real respect and admiration for, and I think, Mrs. Allerton, you know very well who that woman is."

His mother blushed and looked quite confused.

Tim said gravely: "There aren't very many really nice women in the world. You happen to be one of them."

IX

In an apartment overlooking Central Park in New York Mrs. Robson exclaimed: “If that isn’t just too lovely! You really are the luckiest girl, Cornelia.”

Cornelia Robson flushed responsively. She was a big clumsy looking girl with brown doglike eyes.

“Oh, it will be wonderful!” she gasped.

Old Miss Van Schuyler inclined her head in a satisfied fashion at this correct attitude on the part of poor relations. “I’ve always dreamed of a trip to Europe,” sighed Cornelia, “but I just didn’t feel I’d ever get there.”

“Miss Bowers will come with me as usual, of course,” said Miss Van Schuyler, “but as a social companion I find her limited—very limited. There are many little things that Cornelia can do for me.”

“I’d just love to, Cousin Marie,” said Cornelia eagerly.

“Well, well, then that’s settled,” said Miss Van Schuyler. “Just run and find Miss Bowers, my dear. It’s time for my eggnog.”

Cornelia departed. Her mother said: “My dear Marie, I’m really most grateful to you! You know I think Cornelia suffers a lot from not being a social success. It makes her feel kind of mortified. If I could afford to take her to places—but you know how it’s been since Ned died.”

“I’m very glad to take her,” said Miss Van Schuyler. “Cornelia has always been a nice handy girl, willing to run errands, and not so selfish as some of these young people nowadays.”

Mrs. Robson rose and kissed her rich relative’s wrinkled and slightly yellow face.

“I’m just ever so grateful,” she declared.

On the stairs she met a tall capable-looking woman who was carrying a glass containing a yellow foamy liquid.

"Well, Miss Bowers, so you're off to Europe?"

"Why, yes, Mrs. Robson."

"What a lovely trip!"

"Why, yes, I should think it would be very enjoyable."

"But you've been abroad before?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Robson. I went over to Paris with Miss Van Schuyler last fall. But I've never been to Egypt before."

Mrs. Robson hesitated.

"I do hope—there won't be any—trouble."

She had lowered her voice. Miss Bowers, however, replied in her usual tone:

"Oh, no, Mrs. Robson; I shall take good care of that. I keep a very sharp look out always."

But there was still a faint shadow on Mrs. Robson's face as she slowly continued down the stairs.

X

In his office downtown Mr. Andrew Pennington was opening his personal mail. Suddenly his fist clenched itself and came down on his desk with a bang; his face crimsoned and two big veins stood out on his forehead. He pressed a buzzer on his desk and a smart-looking stenographer appeared with commendable promptitude.

"Tell Mr. Rockford to step in here."

"Yes, Mr. Pennington."

A few minutes later, Sterndale Rockford, Pennington's partner, entered the office. The two men were not unlike—both tall, spare, with greying hair and clean-shaven, clever faces.

"What's up, Pennington?"

Pennington looked up from the letter he was rereading. He said. "Linnet's married…."

"What?"

"You heard what I said! Linnet Ridgeway's married!"

"How? When? Why didn't we hear about it?"

Pennington glanced at the calendar on his desk.

"She wasn't married when she wrote this letter, but she's married now. Morning of the fourth. That's today."

Rockford dropped into a chair.

"Whew! No warning! Nothing? Who's the man?"

Pennington referred again to the letter.

"Doyle. Simon Doyle."

"What sort of a fellow is he? Ever heard of him?"

"No. She doesn't say much…" He scanned the lines of clear, upright handwriting. "Got an idea there's something hole-and-corner about this business…That doesn't matter. The whole point is, she's married."

The eyes of the two men met. Rockford nodded.

"This needs a bit of thinking out," he said quietly.

"What are we going to do about it?"

“I’m asking you.”

The two men sat silent. Then Rockford asked, “Got any plan?”

Pennington said slowly: “The Normandie sails today. One of us could just make it.”

“You’re crazy! What’s the big idea?”

Pennington began: “Those British lawyers—” and stopped.

“What about ’em. Surely you’re not going over to tackle ’em? You’re mad!”

“I’m not suggesting that you—or I—should go to England.”

“What’s the big idea, then?”

Pennington smoothed out the letter on the table.

“Linnet’s going to Egypt for her honeymoon. Expects to be there a month or more….”

“Egypt—eh?”

Rockford considered. Then he looked up and met the other’s glance.

“Egypt,” he said. “That’s your idea!”

“Yes—a chance meeting. Over on a trip. Linnet and her husband—honeymoon atmosphere. It might be done.”

Rockford said doubtfully: “She’s sharp, Linnet is…but—”

Pennington went on softly: “I think there might be ways of—managing it.”

Again their eyes met. Rockford nodded.

“All right, big boy.”

Pennington looked at the clock.

“We’ll have to hustle—whichever of us is going.”

“You go,” said Rockford promptly. “You always made a hit with Linnet. ‘Uncle Andrew.’ That’s the ticket!”

Pennington’s face had hardened. He said: “I hope I can pull it off.”

“You’ve got to pull it off,” his partner said.

“The situation’s critical….”

XI

William Carmichael said to the thin, weedy youth who opened the door inquiringly: “Send Mr. Jim to me, please.”

Jim Fanthorp entered the room and looked inquiringly at his uncle. The older man looked up with a nod and a grunt.

“Humph, there you are.”

“You asked for me?”

“Just cast an eye over this.”

The young man sat down and drew the sheaf of papers towards him. The elder man watched him.

“Well?”

The answer came promptly. “Looks fishy to me, sir.”

Again the senior partner of Carmichael, Grant & Carmichael uttered his characteristic grunt.

Jim Fanthorp reread the letter which had just arrived by air mail from Egypt:

…It seems wicked to be writing business letters on such a day. We have spent a week at Mena House and made an expedition to the Fayum. The day after tomorrow we are going up the Nile to Luxor and Assuan by steamer, and perhaps on to Khartoum. When we went into Cook's this morning to see about our tickets who do you think was the first person I saw?—my American trustee, Andrew Pennington. I think you met him two years ago when he was over. I had no idea he was in Egypt and he had no idea that I was! Nor that I was married! My letter, telling him of my marriage, must just have missed him. He is actually going up the Nile on the same trip that we are. Isn't it a coincidence? Thank you so much for all you have done in this busy time. I—

As the young man was about to turn the page, Mr. Carmichael took the letter from him.

"That's all," he said. "The rest doesn't matter. Well, what do you think?"

His nephew considered for a moment—then he said:

"Well—I think—not a coincidence…."

The other nodded approval.

"Like a trip to Egypt?" he barked out.

"You think that's advisable?"

"I think there's no time to lose."

"But, why me?"

"Use your brains, boy; use your brains. Linnet Ridgeway has never met you; no more has Pennington. If you go by air you may get there in time."

"I—I don't like it."

"Perhaps not—but you've got to do it."

"It's—necessary?"

“In my opinion,” said Mr. Carmichael, “it’s absolutely vital.”

XII

Mrs. Otterbourne, readjusting the turban of native material that she wore draped round her head, said fretfully:

“I really don’t see why we shouldn’t go on to Egypt. I’m sick and tired of Jerusalem.”

As her daughter made no reply, she said, “You might at least answer when you’re spoken to.”

Rosalie Otterbourne was looking at a newspaper reproduction of a face. Below it was printed:

Mrs. Simon Doyle, who before her marriage was the well-known society beauty, Miss Linnet Ridgeway. Mr. and Mrs. Doyle are spending their holiday in Egypt. Rosalie said, “You’d like to move on to Egypt, Mother?”

“Yes, I would,” Mrs. Otterbourne snapped. “I consider they’ve treated us in a most cavalier fashion here. My being here is an advertisement—I ought to get a special reduction in terms. When I hinted as much, I consider they were most impertinent—most impertinent. I told them exactly what I thought of them.”

The girl sighed. She said: “One place is very like another. I wish we could get right away.”

“And this morning,” went on Mrs. Otterbourne, “the manager actually had the impertinence to tell me that all the rooms had been booked in advance and that he would require ours in two days’ time.”

“So we’ve got to go somewhere.”

“Not at all. I’m quite prepared to fight for my rights.”

Rosalie murmured: “I suppose we might as well go on to Egypt. It doesn’t make any difference.”

“It’s certainly not a matter of life or death,” agreed Mrs. Otterbourne.

But there she was quite wrong—for a matter of life and death was exactly what it was.

Two

“That’s Hercule Poirot, the detective,” said Mrs. Allerton.

She and her son were sitting in brightly painted scarlet basket chairs outside the Cataract Hotel in Assuan. They were watching the retreating figures of two people—a short man dressed in a white silk suit and a tall slim girl.

Tim Allerton sat up in an unusually alert fashion.

“That funny little man?” he asked incredulously.

“That funny little man!”

“What on earth’s he doing here?” Tim asked.

His mother laughed. “Darling, you sound quite excited. Why do men enjoy crime so much? I hate detective stories and never read them. But I don’t think Monsieur Poirot is here with any ulterior motive. He’s made a good deal of money and he’s seeing life, I fancy.”

“Seems to have an eye for the best-looking girl in the place.”

Mrs. Allerton tilted her head a little on one side as she considered the retreating backs of M. Poirot and his companion.

The girl by his side overtopped him by some three inches. She walked well, neither stiffly nor sloughingly.

“I suppose she is quite good-looking,” said Mrs. Allerton. She shot a little glance sideways at Tim. Somewhat to her amusement the fish rose at once.

“She’s more than quite. Pity she looks so bad-tempered and sulky.”

“Perhaps that’s just expression, dear.”

“Unpleasant young devil, I think. But she’s pretty enough.”

The subject of these remarks was walking slowly by Poirot’s side. Rosalie Otterbourne was twirling an unopened parasol, and her expression certainly bore out what Tim had just said. She looked both sulky and bad-tempered. Her eyebrows were drawn together in a frown, and the scarlet line of her mouth was drawn downward.

They turned to the left out of the hotel gate and entered the cool shade of the public gardens.

Hercule Poirot was prattling gently, his expression that of beatific good humour. He wore a white silk suit, carefully pressed, and a panama hat, and carried a highly ornamental fly whisk with a sham amber handle.

“—it enchants me,” he was saying. “The black rocks of Elephantine, and the sun, and the little boats on the river. Yes, it is good to be alive.”

He paused and then added: “You do not find it so, Mademoiselle?”

Rosalie Otterbourne said shortly: “It’s all right, I suppose. I think Assuan’s a gloomy sort of place. The hotel’s half empty, and everyone’s about a hundred—”

She stopped—biting her lip.

Hercule Poirot’s eyes twinkled.

“It is true, yes, I have one leg in the grave.”

“I—I wasn’t thinking of you,” said the girl.

“I’m sorry. That sounded rude.”

“Not at all. It is natural you should wish for companions of your own age. Ah, well, there is one young man, at least.”

“The one who sits with his mother all the time? I like her—but I think he looks dreadful—so conceited!”

Poirot smiled.

"And I—am I conceited?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

She was obviously uninterested—but the fact did not seem to annoy Poirot. He merely remarked with placid satisfaction:

"My best friend says that I am very conceited."

"Oh, well," said Rosalie vaguely, "I suppose you have something to be conceited about. Unfortunately crime doesn't interest me in the least."

Poirot said solemnly, "I am delighted to learn that you have no guilty secret to hide."

Just for a moment the sulky mask of her face was transformed as she shot him a swift questioning glance. Poirot did not seem to notice it as he went on:

"Madame, your mother, was not at lunch today. She is not indisposed, I trust?"

"This place doesn't suit her," said Rosalie briefly. "I shall be glad when we leave."

"We are fellow passengers, are we not? We both make the excursion up to Wadi Halfa and the Second Cataract?"

"Yes."

They came out from the shade of the gardens on to a dusty stretch of road bordered by the river. Five watchful bead-sellers, two vendors of postcards, three sellers of plaster scarabs, a couple of donkey boys and some detached but hopeful infantile riff-raff closed in upon them.

"You want beads, sir? Very good, sir. Very cheap…."

"Lady, you want scarab? Look—great queen—very lucky…."

“You look, sir—real lapis. Very good, very cheap….”

“You want ride donkey, sir? This very good donkey. This donkey Whiskey and Soda, sir….”

“You want to go granite quarries, sir? This very good donkey. Other donkey very bad, sir, that donkey fall down….”

“You want postcard—very cheap—very nice….”

“Look, lady…Only ten piastres—very cheap—lapis—this ivory….”

“This very good fly whisk—this all-amber….”

“You go out in boat, sir? I got very good boat, sir….”

“You go back to hotel, lady? This first-class donkey….”

Hercule Poirot made vague gestures to rid himself of this human cluster of flies. Rosalie stalked through them like a sleepwalker.

“It’s best to pretend to be deaf and blind,” she remarked.

The infantile riff-raff ran alongside murmuring plaintively: “Bakshish? Bakshish? Hip hip hurrah—very good, very nice….”

Their gaily coloured rags trailed picturesquely, and the flies lay in clusters on their eyelids. They were the most persistent. The others fell back and launched a fresh attack on the next corner.

Now Poirot and Rosalie only ran the gauntlet of the shops—suave, persuasive accents here….

“You visit my shop today, sir?” “You want that ivory crocodile, sir?” “You not been in my shop yet, sir? I show you very beautiful things.”

They turned into the fifth shop and Rosalie handed over several rolls of film—the object of the walk.

Then they came out again and walked towards the river's edge.

One of the Nile steamers was just mooring. Poirot and Rosalie looked interestedly at the passengers.

"Quite a lot, aren't there?" commented Rosalie.

She turned her head as Tim Allerton came up and joined them. He was a little out of breath as though he had been walking fast.

They stood there for a moment or two, and then Tim spoke.

"An awful crowd as usual, I suppose," he remarked disparagingly, indicating the disembarking passengers.

"They're usually quite terrible," agreed Rosalie.

All three wore the air of superiority assumed by people who are already in a place when studying new arrivals.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Tim, his voice suddenly excited. "I'm damned if that isn't Linnet Ridgeway."

If the information left Poirot unmoved, it stirred Rosalie's interest. She leaned forward and her sulkiness quite dropped from her as she asked: "Where? That one in white?"

"Yes, there with the tall man. They're coming ashore now. He's the new husband, I suppose. Can't remember his name now."

"Doyle," said Rosalie. "Simon Doyle. It was in all the newspapers. She's simply rolling, isn't she?"

"Only about the richest girl in England," replied Tim cheerfully.

The three lookers-on were silent watching the passengers come ashore. Poirot gazed with interest at the subject of the remarks of his companions. He murmured: "She is beautiful."

“Some people have got everything,” said Rosalie bitterly.

There was a queer grudging expression on her face as she watched the other girl come up the gangplank.

Linnet Doyle was looking as perfectly turned out as if she were stepping on to the centre of the stage of a revue. She had something too of the assurance of a famous actress. She was used to being looked at, to being admired, to being the centre of the stage wherever she went.

She was aware of the keen glances bent upon her—and at the same time almost unaware of them; such tributes were part of her life.

She came ashore playing a role, even though she played it unconsciously. The rich beautiful society bride on her honeymoon. She turned, with a little smile and a light remark, to the tall man by her side. He answered, and the sound of his voice seemed to interest Hercule Poirot. His eyes lit up and he drew his brows together.

The couple passed close to him. He heard Simon Doyle say:

“We’ll try and make time for it, darling. We can easily stay a week or two if you like it here.”

His face was turned towards her, eager, adoring, a little humble.

Poirot’s eyes ran over him thoughtfully—the square shoulders, the bronzed face, the dark blue eyes, the rather childlike simplicity of the smile.

“Lucky devil,” said Tim after they had passed. “Fancy finding an heiress who hasn’t got adenoids and flat feet!”

“They look frightfully happy,” said Rosalie with a note of envy in her voice. She added suddenly, but so low that Tim did not catch the words, “It isn’t fair.”

Poirot heard, however. He had been frowning somewhat perplexedly, but now he flashed a quick glance towards her.

Tim said: “I must collect some stuff for my mother now.”

He raised his hat and moved off. Poirot and Rosalie retraced their steps slowly in the direction of the hotel, waving aside fresh proffers of donkeys.

“So it is not fair, Mademoiselle?” asked Poirot gently.

The girl flushed angrily.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I am repeating what you said just now under your breath. Oh, yes, you did.”

Rosalie Otterbourne shrugged her shoulders.

“It really seems a little too much for one person. Money, good looks, marvellous figure and—”

She paused and Poirot said:

“And love? Eh? And love? But you do not know—she may have been married for her money!”

“Didn’t you see the way he looked at her?”

“Oh, yes, Mademoiselle. I saw all there was to see—indeed I saw something that you did not.”

“What was that?”

Poirot said slowly: “I saw, Mademoiselle, dark lines below a woman’s eyes. I saw a hand that clutched a sunshade so tight that the knuckles were white….”

Rosalie was staring at him.

“What do you mean?”

"I mean that all is not the gold that glitters. I mean that, though this lady is rich and beautiful and beloved, there is all the same something that is not right. And I know something else."

"Yes?"

"I know," said Poirot, frowning, "that somewhere, at some time, I have heard that voice before—the voice of Monsieur Doyle—and I wish I could remember where."

But Rosalie was not listening. She had stopped dead. With the point of her sunshade she was tracing patterns in the loose sand. Suddenly she broke out fiercely:

"I'm odious. I'm quite odious. I'm just a beast through and through. I'd like to tear the clothes off her back and stamp on her lovely, arrogant, self-confident face. I'm just a jealous cat—but that's what I feel like. She's so horribly successful and poised and assured."

Hercule Poirot looked a little astonished by the outburst. He took her by the arm and gave her a friendly little shake.

"Tenez—you will feel better for having said that!"

"I just hate her! I've never hated anyone so much at first sight."

"Magnificent!"

Rosalie looked at him doubtfully. Then her mouth twitched and she laughed.

"Bien," said Poirot, and laughed too.

They proceeded amicably back to the hotel.

"I must find Mother," said Rosalie, as they came into the cool dim hall.

Poirot passed out on the other side on to the terrace overlooking the Nile. Here were little tables set for tea, but it was early still. He stood for a few moments looking at the river, then strolled down through the garden.

Some people were playing tennis in the hot sun. He paused to watch them for a while, then went on down the steep path. It was here, sitting on a bench overlooking the Nile, that he came upon the girl of Chez Ma Tante. He recognized her at once. Her face, as he had seen it that night, was securely etched upon his memory. The expression on it now was very different. She was paler, thinner, and there were lines that told of a great weariness and misery of spirit.

He drew back a little. She had not seen him, and he watched her for a while without her suspecting his presence. Her small foot tapped impatiently on the ground. Her eyes, dark with a kind of smouldering fire, had a queer kind of suffering dark triumph in them. She was looking out across the Nile where the white-sailed boats glided up and down the river.

A face—and a voice. He remembered them both. This girl's face and the voice he had heard just now, the voice of a newly made bridegroom….

And even as he stood there considering the unconscious girl, the next scene in the drama was played.

Voices sounded above. The girl on the seat started to her feet. Linnet Doyle and her husband came down the path. Linnet's voice was happy and confident. The look of strain and tenseness of muscle had quite disappeared, Linnet was happy.

The girl who was standing there took a step or two forward. The other two stopped dead.

"Hullo, Linnet," said Jacqueline de Bellefort. "So here you are! We never seem to stop running into each other. Hullo, Simon, how are you?"

Linnet Doyle had shrunk back against the rock with a little cry. Simon Doyle's good-looking face was suddenly convulsed with rage. He moved forward as though he would have liked to strike the slim girlish figure.

With a quick birdlike turn of her head she signalled her realization of a stranger's presence. Simon turned his head and noticed Poirot. He said awkwardly: "Hullo, Jacqueline; we didn't expect to see you here."

The words were unconvincing in the extreme.

The girl flashed white teeth at them.

"Quite a surprise?" she asked. Then, with a little nod, she walked up the path.

Poirot moved delicately in the opposite direction. As he went, he heard Linnet Doyle say:

"Simon—for God's sake! Simon—what can we do?"

Three

Dinner was over. The terrace outside the Cataract Hotel was softly lit. Most of the guests staying at the hotel were sitting at little tables.

Simon and Linnet Doyle came out, a tall, distinguished looking grey-haired man, with a keen, clean-shaven American face, beside them. As the little group hesitated in the doorway, Tim Allerton rose from his chair nearby and came forward.

“You don’t remember me I’m sure,” he said pleasantly to Linnet, “but I’m Joanna Southwood’s cousin.”

“Of course—how stupid of me! You’re Tim Allerton. This is my husband”—a faint tremor in the voice, pride, shyness?—“and this is my American trustee, Mr. Pennington.”

Tim said: “You must meet my mother.”

A few minutes later they were sitting together in a party—Linnet in the corner, Tim and Pennington each side of her, both talking to her, vying for her attention. Mrs. Allerton talked to Simon Doyle.

The swing doors revolved. A sudden tension came into the beautiful upright figure sitting in the corner between the two men. Then it relaxed as a small man came out and walked across the terrace.

Mrs. Allerton said: “You’re not the only celebrity here, my dear. That funny little man is Hercule Poirot.”

She had spoken lightly, just out of instinctive social tact to bridge an awkward pause, but Linnet seemed struck by the information.

“Hercule Poirot? Of course—I’ve heard of him….”

She seemed to sink into a fit of abstraction. The two men on either side of her were momentarily at a loss.

Poirot had strolled across to the edge of the terrace, but his attention was immediately solicited.

“Sit down, Monsieur Poirot. What a lovely night!”

He obeyed.

“Mais oui, Madame, it is indeed beautiful.”

He smiled politely at Mrs. Otterbourne. What draperies of black ninon and that ridiculous turban effect! Mrs. Otterbourne went on in her high complaining voice:

“Quite a lot of notabilities here now, aren’t there? I expect we shall see a paragraph about it in the papers soon. Society beauties, famous novelists—”

She paused with a slight mock-modest laugh.

Poirot felt, rather than saw, the sulky frowning girl opposite him flinch and set her mouth in a sulkier line than before.

“You have a novel on the way at present, Madame?” he inquired.

Mrs. Otterbourne gave her little self-conscious laugh again.

“I’m being dreadfully lazy. I really must set to. My public is getting terribly impatient—and my publisher, poor man! Appeals by every post! Even cables!”

Again he felt the girl shift in the darkness.

“I don’t mind telling you, Monsieur Poirot, I am partly here for local colour. Snow on the Desert’s Face—that is the title of my new book. Powerful—suggestive. Snow—on the desert—melted in the first flaming breath of passion.”

Rosalie got up, muttering something, and moved away down into the dark garden.

"One must be strong," went on Mrs. Otterbourne, wagging the turban emphatically. "Strong meat—that is what my books are—all important. Libraries banned—no matter! I speak the truth. Sex—ah! Monsieur Poirot—why is everyone so afraid of sex? The pivot of the universe! You have read my books?"

"Alas, Madame! You comprehend, I do not read many novels. My work—"

Mrs. Otterbourne said firmly: "I must give you a copy of Under the Fig Tree. I think you will find it significant. It is outspoken—but it is real!"

"That is most kind of you, Madame. I will read it with pleasure."

Mrs. Otterbourne was silent a minute or two. She fidgeted with a long chain of beads that was wound twice round her neck. She looked swiftly from side to side.

"Perhaps—I'll just slip up and get it for you now."

"Oh, Madame, pray do not trouble yourself. Later—"

"No, no. It's no trouble." She rose. "I'd like to show you—"

"What is it, Mother?"

Rosalie was suddenly at her side.

"Nothing, dear. I was just going up to get a book for Monsieur Poirot."

"The Fig Tree? I'll get it."

"You don't know where it is, dear. I'll go."

"Yes, I do."

The girl went swiftly across the terrace and into the hotel.

"Let me congratulate you, Madame, on a very lovely daughter," said Poirot, with a bow.

“Rosalie? Yes, yes—she is good-looking. But she’s very hard, Monsieur Poirot. And no sympathy with illness. She always thinks she knows best. She imagines she knows more about my health than I do myself—”

Poirot signalled to a passing waiter.

“A liqueur, Madame? A chartreuse? A crème de menthe?”

Mrs. Otterbourne shook her head vigorously.

“No, no. I am practically a teetotaller. You may have noticed I never drink anything but water—or perhaps lemonade. I cannot bear the taste of spirits.”

“Then may I order you a lemon squash, Madame?”

He gave the order—one lemon squash and one benedictine.

The swing door revolved. Rosalie passed through and came towards them, a book in her hand.

“Here you are,” she said. Her voice was quite expressionless—almost remarkably so.

“Monsieur Poirot has just ordered me a lemon squash,” said her mother.

“And you, Mademoiselle, what will you take?”

“Nothing.” She added, suddenly conscious of the curtness: “Nothing, thank you.”

Poirot took the volume which Mrs. Otterbourne held out to him. It still bore its original jacket, a gaily coloured affair representing a lady, with smartly shingled hair and scarlet fingernails, sitting on a tiger skin, in the traditional costume of Eve. Above her was a tree with the leaves of an oak, bearing large and improbably coloured apples.

It was entitled Under the Fig Tree, by Salome Otterbourne. On the inside was a publisher’s blurb. It spoke enthusiastically of the superb courage and realism of this study of a modern woman’s love life. “Fearless, unconventional, realistic,” were the adjectives used.

Poirot bowed and murmured: “I am honoured, Madame.”

As he raised his head, his eyes met those of the authoress’s daughter. Almost involuntarily he made a little movement. He was astonished and grieved at the eloquent pain they revealed.

It was at that moment that the drinks arrived and created a welcome diversion.

Poirot lifted his glass gallantly.

“A votre santé, Madame—Mademoiselle.”

Mrs. Otterbourne, sipping her lemonade, murmured, “So refreshing—delicious!”

Silence fell on the three of them. They looked down to the shining black rocks in the Nile. There was something fantastic about them in the moonlight. They were like vast prehistoric monsters lying half out of the water. A little breeze came up suddenly and as suddenly died away. There was a feeling in the air of hush—of expectancy.

Hercule Poirot brought his gaze back to the terrace and its occupants. Was he wrong, or was there the same hush of expectancy there? It was like a moment on the stage when one is waiting for the entrance of the leading lady.

And just at that moment the swing doors began to revolve once more. This time it seemed as though they did so with a special air of importance. Everyone had stopped talking and was looking towards them.

A dark slender girl in a wine-coloured evening frock came through. She paused for a minute, then walked deliberately across the terrace and sat down at an empty table. There was nothing flaunting, nothing out of the way about her demeanour, and yet it had somehow the studied effect of a stage entrance.

“Well,” said Mrs. Otterbourne. She tossed her turbaned head. “She seems to think she is somebody, that girl!”

Poirot did not answer. He was watching. The girl had sat down in a place where she could look deliberately across at Linnet Doyle. Presently, Poirot noticed, Linnet Doyle leant forward and said something and a moment later got up and changed her seat. She was now sitting facing in the opposite direction.

Poirot nodded thoughtfully to himself.

It was about five minutes later that the other girl changed her seat to the opposite side of the terrace. She sat smoking and smiling quietly, the picture of contented ease. But always, as though unconsciously, her meditative gaze was on Simon Doyle’s wife.

After a quarter of an hour Linnet Doyle got up abruptly and went into the hotel. Her husband followed her almost immediately.

Jacqueline de Bellefort smiled and twisted her chair round. She lit a cigarette and stared out over the Nile. She went on smiling to herself.

Four

“Monsieur Poirot.”

Poirot got hastily to his feet. He had remained sitting out on the terrace alone after everyone else had left. Lost in meditation he had been staring at the smooth shiny black rocks when the sound of his name recalled him to himself.

It was a well-bred, assured voice, a charming voice, although perhaps a trifle arrogant.

Hercule Poirot, rising quickly, looked into the commanding eyes of Linnet Doyle. She wore a wrap of rich purple velvet over her white satin gown and she looked more lovely and more regal than Poirot had imagined possible.

“You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot?” said Linnet.

It was hardly a question.

“At your service, Madame.”

“You know who I am, perhaps?”

“Yes, Madame. I have heard your name. I know exactly who you are.”

Linnet nodded. That was only what she had expected. She went on, in her charming autocratic manner: “Will you come with me into the card room, Monsieur Poirot? I am very anxious to speak to you.”

“Certainly, Madame.”

She led the way into the hotel. He followed. She led him into the deserted card room and motioned him to close the door. Then she sank down on a chair at one of the tables and he sat down opposite her.

She plunged straightaway into what she wanted to say. There were no hesitations. Her speech came flowingly.

“I have heard a great deal about you, Monsieur Poirot, and I know that you are a very clever man. It happens that I am urgently in need of someone to help me—and I think very possibly that you are the man who would do it.”

Poirot inclined his head.

“You are very amiable, Madame, but you see, I am on holiday, and when I am on holiday I do not take cases.”

“That could be arranged.”

It was not offensively said—only with the quiet confidence of a young woman who had always been able to arrange matters to her satisfaction.

Linnet Doyle went on: “I am the subject, Monsieur Poirot, of an intolerable persecution. That persecution has got to stop! My own idea was to go to the police about it, but my—my husband seems to think that the police would be powerless to do anything.”

“Perhaps—if you would explain a little further?” murmured Poirot politely.

“Oh, yes, I will do so. The matter is perfectly simple.”

There was still no hesitation—no faltering. Linnet Doyle had a clear-cut businesslike mind. She only paused a minute so as to present the facts as concisely as possible.

“Before I met my husband, he was engaged to a Miss de Bellefort. She was also a friend of mine. My husband broke off his engagement to her—they were not suited in any way. She, I am sorry to say, took it rather hard…I—am very sorry about that—but these things cannot be helped. She made certain—well, threats—to which I paid very little attention, and which, I may say, she has not attempted to carry out. But instead she has adopted the extraordinary course of—of following us about wherever we go.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"Ah—rather an unusual—er—revenge."

"Very unusual—and very ridiculous! But also—annoying."

She bit her lip.

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, I can imagine that. You are, I understand, on your honeymoon?"

"Yes. It happened—the first time—at Venice. She was there—at Danielli's. I thought it was just coincidence. Rather embarrassing, but that was all. Then we found her on board the boat at Brindisi. We—we understood that she was going on to Palestine. We left her, as we thought, on the boat. But—but when we got to Mena House she was there—waiting for us."

Poirot nodded.

"And now?"

"We came up the Nile by boat. I—I was half expecting to find her on board. When she wasn't there I thought she had stopped being so—so childish. But when we got here—she—she was here—waiting."

Poirot eyed her keenly for a moment. She was still perfectly composed, but the knuckles of the hand that was gripping the table were white with the force of her grip.

He said: "And you are afraid this state of things may continue?"

"Yes." She paused. "Of course the whole thing is idiotic! Jacqueline is making herself utterly ridiculous. I am surprised she hasn't got more pride—more dignity."

Poirot made a slight gesture.

"There are times, Madame, when pride and dignity—they go by the board! There are other—stronger emotions."

“Yes, possibly.” Linnet spoke impatiently. “But what on earth can she hope to gain by all this?”

“It is not always a question of gain, Madame.”

Something in his tone struck Linnet disagreeably. She flushed and said quickly: “You are right. A discussion of motives is beside the point. The crux of the matter is that this has got to be stopped.”

“And how do you propose that that should be accomplished, Madame?” Poirot asked.

“Well—naturally—my husband and I cannot continue being subjected to this annoyance. There must be some kind of legal redress against such a thing.”

She spoke impatiently. Poirot looked at her thoughtfully as he asked: “Has she threatened you in actual words in public? Used insulting language? Attempted any bodily harm?”

“No.”

“Then, frankly, Madame, I do not see what you can do. If it is a young lady’s pleasure to travel in certain places, and those places are the same where you and your husband find themselves—eh bien—what of it? The air is free to all! There is no question of her forcing herself upon your privacy? It is always in public that these encounters take place?”

“You mean there is nothing that I can do about it?”

Linnet sounded incredulous.

Poirot said placidly: “Nothing at all, as far as I can see. Mademoiselle de Bellefort is within her rights.”

“But—but it is maddening! It is intolerable that I should have to put up with this!”

Poirot said dryly: “I must sympathize with you, Madame—especially as I imagine that you have not often had to put up with things.”

Linnet was frowning.

“There must be some way of stopping it,” she murmured.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“You can always leave—move on somewhere else,” he suggested.

“Then she will follow!”

“Very possibly—yes.”

“It’s absurd!”

“Precisely.”

“Anyway, why should I—we—run away? As though—as though—”

She stopped.

“Exactly, Madame. As though—! It is all there, is it not?”

Linnet lifted her head and stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

Poirot altered his tone. He leant forward; his voice was confidential, appealing. He said very gently: “Why do you mind so much, Madame?”

“Why? But it’s maddening! Irritating to the last degree! I’ve told you why!”

Poirot shook his head.

“Not altogether.”

“What do you mean?” Linnet asked again.

Poirot leant back, folded his arms and spoke in a detached impersonal manner.

“Ecoutez, Madame. I will recount to you a little history. It is that one day, a month or two ago, I am dining in a restaurant in London. At the table next to me are two people, a man and a girl. They are very happy, so it seems, very much in love. They talk with confidence of the future. It is not that I listen to what is not meant for me; they are quite oblivious of who hears them and who does not. The man’s back is to me, but I can watch the girl’s face. It is very intense. She is in love—heart, soul, and body—and she is not of those who love lightly and often. With her it is clearly the life and the death. They are engaged to be married, these two; that is what I gather; and they talk of where they shall pass the days of their honeymoon. They plan to go to Egypt.”

He paused. Linnet said sharply: “Well?”

Poirot went on: “That is a month or two ago, but the girl’s face—I do not forget it. I know that I shall remember if I see it again. And I remember too the man’s voice. And I think you can guess, Madame, when it is I see the one and hear the other again. It is here in Egypt. The man is on his honeymoon, yes—but he is on his honeymoon with another woman.”

Linnet said sharply: “What of it? I had already mentioned the facts.”

“The facts—yes.”

“Well then?”

Poirot said slowly: “The girl in the restaurant mentioned a friend—a friend who, she was very positive, would not let her down. That friend, I think, was you, Madame.”

“Yes. I told you we had been friends.”

Linnet flushed.

“And she trusted you?”

“Yes.”

She hesitated for a moment, biting her lip impatiently; then, as Poirot did not seem disposed to speak, she broke out:

“Of course the whole thing was very unfortunate. But these things happen, Monsieur Poirot.”

“Ah! Yes, they happen, Madame.” He paused. “You are of the Church of England, I presume?”

“Yes.” Linnet looked slightly bewildered.

“Then you have heard portions of the Bible read aloud in church. You have heard of King David and of the rich man who had many flocks and herds and the poor man who had one ewe lamb—and of how the rich man took the poor man’s one ewe lamb. That was something that happened, Madame.”

Linnet sat up. Her eyes flashed angrily.

“I see perfectly what you are driving at, Monsieur Poirot! You think, to put it vulgarly, that I stole my friend’s young man. Looking at the matter sentimentally—which is, I suppose, the way people of your generation cannot help looking at things—that is possibly true. But the real hard truth is different. I don’t deny that Jackie was passionately in love with Simon, but I don’t think you take into account that he may not have been equally devoted to her. He was very fond of her, but I think that even before he met me he was beginning to feel that he had made a mistake. Look at it clearly, Monsieur Poirot. Simon discovers that it is I he loves, not Jackie. What is he to do? Be heroically noble and marry a woman he does not care for—and thereby probably ruin three lives—for it is doubtful whether he could make Jackie happy under those circumstances? If he were actually married to her when he met me I agree that it might be his duty to stick to her—though I’m not really sure of that. If one person is unhappy the other suffers too. But an engagement is not really binding. If a mistake has been made, then surely it is better to face the fact before it is too late. I admit that it was very hard on Jackie, and I’m very sorry about it—but there it is. It was inevitable.”

“I wonder.”

She stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“It is very sensible, very logical—all that you say! But it does not explain one thing.”

“What is that?”

“Your own attitude, Madame. See you, this pursuit of you, you might take it in two ways, It might cause you annoyance—yes, or it might stir your pity—that your friend should have been so deeply hurt as to throw all regard for the conventions aside. But that is not the way you react. No, to you this persecution is intolerable—and why? It can be for one reason only—that you feel a sense of guilt.”

Linnet sprang to her feet.

“How dare you? Really, Monsieur Poirot, this is going too far.”

“But I do dare, Madame! I am going to speak to you quite frankly. I suggest to you that, although you may have endeavoured to gloss over the fact to yourself, you did deliberately set about taking your husband from your friend. I suggest that you felt strongly attracted to him at once. But I suggest that there was a moment when you hesitated, when you realized that there was a choice—that you could refrain or go on. I suggest that the initiative rested with you—not with Monsieur Doyle. You are beautiful, Madame; you are rich; you are clever; intelligent—and you have charm. You could have exercised that charm or you could have restrained it. You had everything, Madame, that life can offer. Your friend’s life was bound up in one person. You knew that, but, though you hesitated, you did not hold your hand. You stretched it out and, like the rich man in the Bible, you took the poor man’s one ewe lamb.”

There was a silence. Linnet controlled herself with an effort and said in a cold voice: “All this is quite beside the point!”

“No, it is not beside the point. I am explaining to you just why the unexpected appearances of Mademoiselle de Bellefort have upset you so much. It is because though she may be unwomanly and undignified in what she is doing, you have the inner conviction that she has right on her side.”

“That’s not true.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“You refuse to be honest with yourself.”

“Not at all.”

Poirot said gently: “I should say, Madame, that you have had a happy life, that you have been generous and kindly in your attitude towards others.”

“I have tried to be,” said Linnet. The impatient anger died out of her face. She spoke simply—almost forlornly.

“And that is why the feeling that you have deliberately caused injury to someone upsets you so much, and why you are so reluctant to admit the fact. Pardon me if I have been impertinent, but the psychology, it is the most important fact in a case.”

Linnet said slowly: “Even supposing what you say were true—and I don’t admit it, mind—what can be done about it now? One can’t alter the past; one must deal with things as they are.”

Poirot nodded.

“You have the clear brain. Yes, one cannot go back over the past. One must accept things as they are. And sometimes, Madame, that is all one can do—accept the consequences of one’s past deeds.”

“You mean,” asked Linnet incredulously, “that I can do nothing—nothing?”

“You must have courage, Madame; that is what it seems like to me.”

Linnet said slowly:

“Couldn’t you—talk to Jackie—to Miss de Bellefort? Reason with her?”

“Yes, I could do that. I will do that if you would like me to do so. But do not expect much result. I fancy that Mademoiselle de Bellefort is so much in the grip of a fixed idea that nothing will turn her from it.”

“But surely we can do something to extricate ourselves?”

“You could, of course, return to England and establish yourselves in your own house.”

“Even then, I suppose, Jacqueline is capable of planting herself in the village, so that I should see her everytime I went out of the grounds.”

“True.”

“Besides,” said Linnet slowly, “I don’t think that Simon would agree to run away.”

“What is his attitude in this?”

“He’s furious—simply furious.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Linnet said appealingly, “You will—talk to her?”

“Yes, I will do that. But it is my opinion that I shall not be able to accomplish anything.”

Linnet said violently: “Jackie is extraordinary! One can’t tell what she will do!”

“You spoke just now of certain threats she had made. Would you tell me what those threats were?”

Linnet shrugged her shoulders.

“She threatened to—well—kill us both. Jackie can be rather—Latin sometimes.”

“I see.” Poirot’s tone was grave.

Linnet turned to him appealingly.

“You will act for me?”

“No, Madame.” His tone was firm. “I will not accept a commission from you. I will do what I can in the interests of humanity. That, yes. There is here a situation that is full of difficulty and danger. I will do what I can to clear it up—but I am not very sanguine as to my chance of success.”

Linnet Doyle said slowly: “But you will not act for me?”

“No, Madame,” said Hercule Poirot.

Five

Hercule Poirot found Jacqueline de Bellefort sitting on the rocks directly overlooking the Nile. He had felt fairly certain that she had not retired for the night and that he would find her somewhere about the grounds of the hotel.

She was sitting with her chin cupped in the palms of her hands, and she did not turn her head or look around at the sound of his approach.

“Mademoiselle de Bellefort?” asked Poirot. “You permit that I speak to you for a little moment?”

Jacqueline turned her head slightly. A faint smile played round her lips.

“Certainly,” she said. “You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot, I think? Shall I make a guess? You are acting for Mrs. Doyle, who has promised you a large fee if you succeed in your mission.”

Poirot sat down on the bench near her.

“Your assumption is partially correct,” he said, smiling. “I have just come from Madame Doyle, but I am not accepting any fee from her and, strictly speaking, I am not acting for her.”

“Oh!”

Jacqueline studied him attentively.

“Then why have you come?” she asked abruptly.

Hercule Poirot’s reply was in the form of another question.

“Have you ever seen me before, Mademoiselle?”

She shook her head.

“No, I do not think so.”

“Yet I have seen you. I sat next to you once at Chez Ma Tante. You were there with Monsieur Simon Doyle.”

A strange masklike expression came over the girl’s face. She said, “I remember that evening….”

“Since then,” said Poirot, “many things have occurred.”

“As you say, many things have occurred.”

Her voice was hard with an undertone of desperate bitterness.

“Mademoiselle, I speak as a friend. Bury your dead!”

She looked startled.

“What do you mean?”

“Give up the past! Turn to the future! What is done is done. Bitterness will not undo it.”

“I’m sure that that would suit dear Linnet admirably.”

Poirot made a gesture.

“I am not thinking of her at this moment! I am thinking of you. You have suffered—yes—but what you are doing now will only prolong the suffering.”

She shook her head.

“You’re wrong. There are times when I almost enjoy myself.”

“And that, Mademoiselle, is the worst of all.”

She looked up swiftly.

"You're not stupid," she said. She added slowly, "I believe you mean to be kind."

"Go home, Mademoiselle. You are young; you have brains, the world is before you."

Jacqueline shook her head slowly.

"You don't understand—or you won't. Simon is my world."

"Love is not everything, Mademoiselle," Poirot said gently. "It is only when we are young that we think it is."

But the girl still shook her head.

"You don't understand." She shot him a quick look. "You know all about it, of course? You've talked to Linnet? And you were in the restaurant that night…Simon and I loved each other."

"I know that you loved him."

She was quick to perceive the inflection of his words. She repeated with emphasis:

"We loved each other. And I loved Linnet…I trusted her. She was my best friend. All her life Linnet has been able to buy everything she wanted. She's never denied herself anything. When she saw Simon she wanted him—and she just took him."

"And he allowed himself to be—bought?"

Jacqueline shook her dark head slowly.

"No, it's not quite like that. If it were, I shouldn't be here now…You're suggesting that Simon isn't worth caring for…If he'd married Linnet for her money, that would be true. But he didn't marry her for her money. It's more complicated than that. There's such a thing as glamour, Monsieur Poirot. And money helps that. Linnet had an 'atmosphere,' you see. She was the queen of a kingdom—the young princess—luxurious to her fingertips. It was like a stage setting. She had the world at her feet, one of the richest and most sought-after peers in England wanting to marry her. And she stoops instead to the obscure Simon Doyle…Do you wonder it went to his head?" She made a sudden gesture. "Look at the moon up there. You see her very plainly, don't you? She's very real. But if the sun were to shine you wouldn't be able to see her at all. It was rather like that. I was the moon… When the sun came out, Simon couldn't see me anymore…He was dazzled. He couldn't see anything but the sun—Linnet."

She paused and then she went on: "So you see it was—glamour. She went to his head. And then there's her complete assurance—her habit of command. She's so sure of herself that she makes other people sure. Simon was weak, perhaps, but then he's a very simple person. He would have loved me and me only if Linnet hadn't come along and snatched him up in her golden chariot. And I know—I know perfectly—that he wouldn't ever have fallen in love with her if she hadn't made him."

"That is what you think—yes."

"I know it. He loved me—he will always love me."

Poirot said: "Even now?"

A quick answer seemed to rise to her lips, then be stifled. She looked at Poirot and a deep burning colour spread over her face. She looked away; her head dropped down. She said in a low stifled voice: "Yes, I know. He hates me now. Yes, hates me…He'd better be careful!"

With a quick gesture she fumbled in a little silk bag that lay on the seat. Then she held out her hand. On the palm of it was a small pearl-handled pistol—a dainty toy it looked.

"Nice little thing, isn't it? she said. "Looks too foolish to be real, but it is real! One of those bullets would kill a man or a woman. And I'm a good shot." She smiled a faraway, reminiscent smile.

"When I went home as a child with my mother, to South Carolina, my grandfather taught me to shoot. He was the old-fashioned kind that believes in shooting—especially where honour is concerned. My father, too, he fought several duels as a young man. He was a good swordsman. He killed a man once. That was over a woman. So you see, Monsieur Poirot”—she met his eyes squarely—“I’ve hot blood in me! I bought this when it first happened. I meant to kill one or other of them—the trouble was I couldn’t decide which. Both of them would have been unsatisfactory. If I’d thought Linnet would have looked afraid—but she’s got plenty of physical courage. She can stand up to physical action. And then I thought I’d—wait! That appealed to me more and more. After all, I could do it any time; it would be more fun to wait and—think about it! And then this idea came to my mind—to follow them! Whenever they arrived at some faraway spot and were together and happy, they should see Me! And it worked. It got Linnet badly—in a way nothing else could have done! It got right under her skin…That was when I began to enjoy myself…And there’s nothing she can do about it! I’m always perfectly pleasant and polite! There’s not a word they can take hold of! It’s poisoning everything—everything—for them.” Her laugh rang out, clear and silvery.

Poirot grasped her arm.

“Be quiet. Quiet, I tell you.”

Jacqueline looked at him.

“Well?” she asked. Her smile was definitely challenging.

“Mademoiselle, I beseech you, do not do what you are doing.”

“Leave dear Linnet alone, you mean!”

“It is deeper than that. Do not open your heart to evil.”

Her lips fell apart; a look of bewilderment came into her eyes.

Poirot went on gravely: “Because—if you do—evil will come…Yes, very surely evil will come…It will enter in and make its home within you, and after a little while it will no longer be possible to drive it out.”

Jacqueline stared at him. Her glance seemed to waver, to flicker uncertainly.

She said: “I—don’t know—” Then she cried out definitely, “You can’t stop me.”

“No,” said Hercule Poirot. “I cannot stop you.” His voice was sad.

“Even if I were to—kill her, you couldn’t stop me.”

“No—not if you were willing to pay the price.”

Jacqueline de Bellefort laughed.

“Oh, I’m not afraid of death! What have I got to live for, after all? I suppose you believe it’s very wrong to kill a person who has injured you—even if they’ve taken away everything you had in the world?”

Poirot said steadily: “Yes, Mademoiselle. I believe it is the unforgivable offence—to kill.”

Jacqueline laughed again.

“Then you ought to approve of my present scheme of revenge; because, you see, as long as it works, I shan’t use that pistol…But I’m afraid—yes, afraid sometimes—it all goes red—I want to hurt her—to stick a knife into her, to put my dear little pistol close against her head and then—just press with my finger—Oh!”

The exclamation startled him.

“What is it, Mademoiselle!”

She turned her head and was staring into the shadows.

“Someone—standing over there. He’s gone now.”

Hercule Poirot looked round sharply.

The place seemed quite deserted.

“There seems no one here but ourselves, Mademoiselle.” He got up. “In any case I have said all I came to say. I wish you good night.”

Jacqueline got up too. She said almost pleadingly, “You do understand—that I can’t do what you ask me to do?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No—for you could do it! There is always a moment! Your friend Linnet—there was a moment, too, in which she could have held her hand…She let it pass by. And if one does that, then one is committed to the enterprise and there comes no second chance.”

“No second chance…” said Jacqueline de Bellefort.

She stood brooding for a moment; then she lifted her head defiantly.

“Good night, Monsieur Poirot.”

He shook his head sadly and followed her up the path to the hotel.

Six

On the following morning Simon Doyle joined Hercule Poirot as the latter was leaving the hotel to walk down to the town.

“Good morning, Monsieur Poirot.”

“Good morning, Monsieur Doyle.”

“You going to the town? Mind if I stroll along with you?”

“But certainly. I shall be delighted.”

The two men walked side by side, passed out through the gateway and turned into the cool shade of the gardens. Then Simon removed his pipe from his mouth and said, “I understand, Monsieur Poirot, that my wife had a talk with you last night?”

“That is so.”

Simon Doyle was frowning a little. He belonged to that type of men of action who find it difficult to put thoughts into words and who have trouble in expressing themselves clearly.

“I’m glad of one thing,” he said. “You’ve made her realize that we’re more or less powerless in the matter.”

“There is clearly no legal redress,” agreed Poirot.

“Exactly. Linnet didn’t seem to understand that.” He gave a faint smile. “Linnet’s been brought up to believe that every annoyance can automatically be referred to the police.”

“It would be pleasant if such were the case,” said Poirot.

There was a pause. Then Simon said suddenly, his face going very red as he spoke:

“It’s—it’s infamous that she should be victimized like this! She’s done nothing! If anyone likes to say I behaved like a cad, they’re welcome to say so! I suppose I did. But I won’t have the whole thing visited on Linnet. She had nothing whatever to do with it.”

Poirot bowed his head gravely but said nothing.

“Did you—er—have you—talked to Jackie—Miss de Bellefort?”

“Yes, I have spoken with her.”

“Did you get her to see sense?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Simon broke out irritably: “Can’t she see what an ass she’s making of herself? Doesn’t she realize that no decent woman would behave as she is doing? Hasn’t she got any pride or self-respect?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“She has only a sense of—injury, shall we say?” he replied.

“Yes, but damn it all, man, decent girls don’t behave like this! I admit I was entirely to blame. I treated her damned badly and all that. I should quite understand her being thoroughly fed up with me and never wishing to see me again. But this following me round—it’s—it’s indecent! Making a show of herself! What the devil does she hope to get out of it?”

“Perhaps—revenge!”

“Idiotic! I’d really understand better if she’d tried to do something melodramatic—like taking a pot shot at me.”

“You think that would be more like her—yes?”

“Frankly I do. She’s hot-blooded—and she’s got an ungovernable temper. I shouldn’t be surprised at her doing anything while she was in a white-hot rage. But this spying business—” He shook his head.

“It is more subtle—yes! It is intelligent!”

Doyle stared at him.

“You don’t understand. It’s playing hell with Linnet’s nerves.”

“And yours?”

Simon looked at him with momentary surprise.

“Me? I’d like to wring the little devil’s neck.”

“There is nothing, then, of the old feeling left?”

“My dear Monsieur Poirot—how can I put it? It’s like the moon when the sun comes out. You don’t know it’s there anymore. When once I’d met Linnet—Jackie didn’t exist.”

“Tiens, c’est drôle, ça!” muttered Poirot.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your simile interested me, that is all.”

Again flushing, Simon said: “I suppose Jackie told you that I’d only married Linnet for her money? Well, that’s a damned lie! I wouldn’t marry any woman for money! What Jackie doesn’t understand is that it’s difficult for a fellow when—when—a woman cares for him as she cared for me.”

“Ah?”

Poirot looked up sharply.

Simon blundered on: “It—it—sounds a caddish thing to say, but Jackie was too fond of me!”

“Une qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer,” murmured Poirot.

"Eh? What's that you say? You see, a man doesn't want to feel that a woman cares more for him than he does for her." His voice grew warm as he went on. "He doesn't want to feel owned, body and soul. It's the damned possessive attitude! This man is mine—he belongs to me! That's the sort of thing I can't stick—no man could stick! He wants to get away—to get free. He wants to own his woman; he doesn't want her to own him."

He broke off, and with fingers that trembled slightly he lit a cigarette.

Poirot said: "And it is like that that you felt with Mademoiselle Jacqueline?"

"Eh?" Simon stared and then admitted: "Er—yes—well, yes, as a matter of fact I did. She doesn't realize that, of course. And it's not the sort of thing I could ever tell her. But I was feeling restless—and then I met Linnet, and she just swept me off my feet! I'd never seen anything so lovely. It was all so amazing. Everyone kowtowing to her—and then her singling out a poor chump like me."

His tone held boyish awe and astonishment.

"I see," said Poirot. He nodded thoughtfully. "Yes—I see."

"Why can't Jackie take it like a man?" demanded Simon resentfully.

A very faint smile twitched Poirot's upper lip.

"Well, you see, Monsieur Doyle, to begin with she is not a man."

"No, no—but I meant take it like a good sport! After all, you've got to take your medicine when it comes to you. The fault's mine, I admit. But there it is! If you no longer care for a girl, it's simply madness to marry her. And, now that I see what Jackie's really like and the lengths she is likely to go to, I feel I've had rather a lucky escape."

"The lengths she is likely to go to," Poirot repeated thoughtfully. "Have you an idea, Monsieur Doyle, what those lengths are?"

Simon looked at him rather startled.

"No—at least, what do you mean?"

"You know she carries a pistol about with her?"

Simon frowned, then shook his head.

"I don't believe she'll use that—now. She might have done so earlier. But I believe it's got past that. She's just spiteful now—trying to take it out on us both."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be so," he said doubtfully.

"It's Linnet I'm worrying about," declared Simon, somewhat unnecessarily.

"I quite realize that," said Poirot.

"I'm not really afraid of Jackie doing any melodramatic shooting stuff, but this spying and following business has absolutely got Linnet on the raw. I'll tell you the plan I've made, and perhaps you can suggest improvements on it. To begin with, I've announced fairly openly that we're going to stay here ten days. But tomorrow the steamer Karnak starts from Shellal to Wadi Halfa. I propose to book passages on that under an assumed name. Tomorrow we'll go on an excursion to Philae. Linnet's maid can take the luggage. We'll join the Karnak at Shellal. When Jackie finds we don't come back, it will be too late—we shall be well on our way. She'll assume we have given her the slip and gone back to Cairo. In fact I might even bribe the porter to say so. Inquiry at the tourist offices won't help her, because our names won't appear. How does that strike you?"

"It is well imagined, yes. And suppose she waits here till you return?"

"We may not return. We would go on to Khartoum and then perhaps by air to Kenya. She can't follow us all over the globe."

"No; there must come a time when financial reasons forbid. She has very little money, I understand."

Simon looked at him with admiration.

“That’s clever of you. Do you know, I hadn’t thought of that. Jackie’s as poor as they make them.”

“And yet she has managed to follow you so far?”

Simon said doubtfully:

“She’s got a small income, of course. Something under two hundred a year, I imagine. I suppose—yes, I suppose she must have sold out the capital to do what she’s doing.”

“So that the time will come when she has exhausted her resources and is quite penniless?”

“Yes….”

Simon wriggled uneasily. The thought seemed to make him uncomfortable. Poirot watched him attentively.

“No,” he remarked. “No, it is not a pretty thought….”

Simon said rather angrily, “Well, I can’t help it!” Then he added, “What do you think of my plan?”

“I think it may work, yes. But it is, of course, a retreat.”

Simon flushed.

“You mean, we’re running away? Yes, that’s true…But Linnet—”

Poirot watched him, then gave a short nod.

“As you say, it may be the best way. But remember, Mademoiselle de Bellefort has brains.”

Simon said sombrely: “Some day, I feel, we’ve got to make a stand and fight it out. Her attitude isn’t reasonable.”

“Reasonable, mon Dieu!” cried Poirot.

“There’s no reason why women shouldn’t behave like rational beings,” Simon asserted stolidly.

Poirot said dryly: “Quite frequently they do. That is even more upsetting!” He added, “I, too, shall be on the Karnak. It is part of my itinerary.

“Oh!” Simon hesitated, then said, choosing his words with some embarrassment: “That isn’t—isn’t—er—on our account in any way? I mean I wouldn’t like to think—”

Poirot disabused him quickly:

“Not at all. It was all arranged before I left London. I always make my plans well in advance.”

“You don’t just move on from place to place as the fancy takes you? Isn’t the latter really pleasanter?”

“Perhaps. But to succeed in life every detail should be arranged well beforehand.”

Simon laughed and said: “That is how the more skilful murderer behaves, I suppose.”

“Yes—though I must admit that the most brilliant crime I remember and one of the most difficult to solve was committed on the spur of the moment.”

Simon said boyishly: “You must tell us something about your cases on board the Karnak.”

“No, no; that would be to talk—what do you call it?—the shop.”

“Yes, but your kind of shop is rather thrilling. Mrs. Allerton thinks so. She’s longing to get a chance to cross-question you.”

“Mrs. Allerton? That is the charming grey-haired woman who has such a devoted son?”

“Yes. She’ll be on the Karnak too.”

“Does she know that you—?”

“Certainly not,” said Simon with emphasis. “Nobody knows. I’ve gone on the principle that it’s better not to trust anybody.”

“An admirable sentiment—and one which I always adopt. By the way, the third member of your party, the tall grey-haired man—”

“Pennington?”

“Yes. He is travelling with you?”

Simon said grimly: “Not very usual on a honeymoon, you were thinking? Pennington is Linnet’s American trustee. We ran across him by chance in Cairo.”

“Ah, vraiment! You permit a question? She is of age, Madame your wife?”

Simon looked amused.

“She isn’t actually twenty-one yet—but she hadn’t got to ask anyone’s consent before marrying me. It was the greatest surprise to Pennington. He left New York on the Carmanic two days before Linnet’s letter got there telling him of our marriage, so he knew nothing about it.”

“The Carmanic—” murmured Poirot.

“It was the greatest surprise to him when we ran into him at Shepheard’s in Cairo.”

“That was indeed the coincident!”

“Yes, and we found that he was coming on this Nile trip—so naturally we foregathered; couldn’t have done anything else decently. Besides that, it’s been—well, a relief in some ways.” He looked embarrassed again. “You see, Linnet’s been all strung up—expecting Jackie to turn up anywhere and everywhere. While we were alone together, the subject kept coming up. Andrew Pennington’s a help that way, we have to talk of outside matters.”

“Your wife has not confided in Mr. Pennington?”

“No.” Simon’s jaw looked aggressive. “It’s nothing to do with anyone else. Besides, when we started on this Nile trip we thought we’d seen the end of the business.”

Poirot shook his head.

“You have not seen the end of it yet. No—the end is not yet at hand. I am very sure of that.”

“I say, Monsieur Poirot, you’re not very encouraging.”

Poirot looked at him with a slight feeling of irritation. He thought to himself: “The Anglo-Saxon, he takes nothing seriously but playing games! He does not grow up.”

Linnet Doyle—Jacqueline de Bellefort—both of them took the business seriously enough. But in Simon’s attitude he could find nothing but male impatience and annoyance. He said: “You will permit me an impertinent question? Was it your idea to come to Egypt for your honeymoon?”

Simon flushed.

“No, of course not. As a matter of fact I’d rather have gone anywhere else, but Linnet was absolutely set upon it. And so—and so—”

He stopped rather lamely.

“Naturally,” said Poirot gravely.

He appreciated the fact that, if Linnet Doyle was set upon anything, that thing had to happen.

He thought to himself: “I have now heard three separate accounts of the affair—Linnet Doyle’s, Jacqueline de Bellefort’s, Simon Doyle’s. Which of them is nearest to the truth?”

Seven

Simon and Linnet Doyle set off on their expedition to Philae about eleven o’clock the following morning. Jacqueline de Bellefort, sitting on the hotel balcony, watched them set off in the picturesque sailing-boat. What she did not see was the departure of the car—laden with luggage, and in which sat a demure-looking maid—from the front door of the hotel. It turned to the right in the direction of Shellal.

Hercule Poirot decided to pass the remaining two hours before lunch on the island of Elephantine, immediately opposite the hotel.

He went down to the landing stage. There were two men just stepping into one of the hotel boats, and Poirot joined them. The men were obviously strangers to each other. The younger of them had arrived by train the day before. He was a tall, dark-haired young man, with a thin face and a pugnacious chin. He was wearing an extremely dirty pair of grey flannel trousers and a high-necked polo jumper singularly unsuited to the climate. The other was a slightly podgy middle-aged man who lost no time in entering into conversation with Poirot in idiomatic but slightly broken English. Far from taking part in the conversation, the younger man merely scowled at them both and then deliberately turned his back on them and proceeded to admire the agility with which the Nubian boatman steered the boat with his toes as he manipulated the sail with his hands.

It was very peaceful on the water, the great smooth slippery black rocks gliding by and the soft breeze fanning their faces. Elephantine was reached very quickly and on going ashore Poirot and his loquacious acquaintance made straight for the museum. By this time the latter had produced a card which he handed to Poirot with a little bow. It bore the inscription: “Signor Guido Richetti, Archeologo.”

Not to be outdone, Poirot returned the bow and extracted his own card. These formalities completed, the two men stepped into the Museum together, the Italian pouring forth a stream of erudite information. They were by now conversing in French.

The young man in the flannel trousers strolled listlessly round the Museum, yawning from time to time, and then escaped to the outer air.

Poirot and Signor Richetti at last found him. The Italian was energetic in examining the ruins, but presently Poirot, espying a green-lined sunshade which he recognized on the rocks down by the river, escaped in that direction.

Mrs. Allerton was sitting on a large rock, a sketchbook by her side and a book on her lap.

Poirot removed his hat politely and Mrs. Allerton at once entered into conversation.

“Good morning,” she said. “I suppose it would be quite impossible to get rid of some of these awful children.”

A group of small black figures surrounded her, all grinning and posturing and holding out imploring hands as they lisped “Bakshish,” at intervals, hopefully.

“I thought they’d get tired of me,” said Mrs. Allerton sadly. “They’ve been watching me for over two hours now—and they close in on me little by little; and then I yell ‘Imshi’ and brandish my sunshade at them and they scatter for a minute or two. And then they come back and stare and stare, and their eyes are simply disgusting, and so are their noses, and I don’t believe I really like children—not unless they’re more or less washed and have the rudiments of manners.”

She laughed ruefully.

Poirot gallantly attempted to disperse the mob for her, but without avail. They scattered and then reappeared, closing in once more.

“If there were only any peace in Egypt, I should like it better,” said Mrs. Allerton. “But you can never be alone anywhere. Someone is always pestering you for money, or offering you donkeys, or beads, or expeditions to native villages, or duck shooting.”

“It is the great disadvantage, that is true,” said Poirot.

He spread his handkerchief cautiously on the rock and sat somewhat gingerly upon it.

“Your son is not with you this morning?” he went on.

“No, Tim had some letters to get off before we leave. We’re doing the trip to the Second Cataract, you know.”

“I, too.”

“I’m so glad. I want to tell you that I’m quite thrilled to meet you. When we were in Majorca, there was a Mrs. Leech there, and she was telling us the most wonderful things about you. She’d lost a ruby ring bathing, and she was just lamenting that you weren’t there to find it for her.

“Ah, parbleu, but I am not the diving seal!”

They both laughed.

Mrs. Allerton went on.

“I saw you from my window walking down the drive with Simon Doyle this morning. Do tell me what you make of him! We’re so excited about him.”

“Ah? Truly?”

“Yes. You know his marriage to Linnet Ridgeway was the greatest surprise. She was supposed to be going to marry Lord Windlesham and then suddenly she gets engaged to this man no one had ever heard of!”

“You know her well, Madame?”

“No, but a cousin of mine, Joanna Southwood, is one of her best friends.”

“Ah, yes, I have read that name in the papers.” He was silent a moment and then went on, “She is a young lady very much in the news, Mademoiselle Joanna Southwood.”

“Oh, she knows how to advertise herself all right,” snapped Mrs. Allerton.

“You do not like her, Madame?”

“That was a nasty remark of mine.” Mrs. Allerton looked penitent. “You see I’m old-fashioned. I don’t like her much. Tim and she are the greatest of friends, though.”

“I see,” said Poirot.

His companion shot a quick look at him. She changed the subject.

“How very few young people there are out here! That pretty girl with the chestnut hair and the appalling mother in the turban is almost the only young creature in the place. You have talked to her a good deal, I notice. She interests me, that child.”

“Why is that, Madame?”

“I feel sorry for her. You can suffer so much when you are young and sensitive. I think she is suffering.”

“Yes, she is not happy, poor little one.”

“Tim and I call her the ‘sulky girl.’ I’ve tried to talk to her once or twice, but she’s snubbed me on each occasion. However, I believe she’s going on this Nile trip too, and I expect we’ll have to be more or less all matey together, shan’t we?”

“It is a possible contingency, Madame.”

“I’m very matey really—people interest me enormously. All the different types.” She paused, then said: “Tim tells me that that dark girl—her name is de Bellefort—is the girl who was engaged to Simon Doyle. It’s rather awkward for them—meeting like this.”

“It is awkward—yes,” agreed Poirot.

"You know, it may sound foolish, but she almost frightened me. She looked so—intense."

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

"You were not far wrong, Madame. A great force of emotion is always frightening."

"Do people interest you too, Monsieur Poirot? Or do you reserve your interest for potential criminals?"

"Madame—that category would not leave many people outside it."

Mrs. Allerton looked a trifle startled.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Given the particular incentive, that is to say," Poirot added.

"Which would differ?"

"Naturally."

Mrs. Allerton hesitated—a little smile on her lips.

"Even I perhaps?"

"Mothers, Madame, are particularly ruthless when their children are in danger."

She said gravely, "I think that's true—yes, you're quite right."

She was silent a minute or two, then she said, smiling: I'm trying to imagine motives for crime suitable for everyone in the hotel. It's quite entertaining. Simon Doyle, for instance?"

Poirot said, smiling: "A very simple crime—a direct shortcut to his objective. No subtlety about it."

“And therefore very easily detected?”

“Yes; he would not be ingenious.”

“And Linnet?”

“That would be like the Queen in your Alice in Wonderland, ‘Off with her head.’”

“Of course. The divine right of monarchy! Just a little bit of the Naboth’s vineyard touch. And the dangerous girl—Jacqueline de Bellefort—could she do a murder?”

Poirot hesitated for a minute or two, then he said doubtfully, “Yes, I think she could.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“No. She puzzles me, that little one.”

“I don’t think Mr. Pennington could do one, do you? He looks so desiccated and dyspeptic—with no red blood in him.”

“But possibly a strong sense of self-preservation.”

“Yes, I suppose so. And poor Mrs. Otterbourne in her turban?”

“There is always vanity.”

“As a motive for murder?” Mrs. Allerton asked doubtfully.

“Motives for murder are sometimes very trivial, Madame.”

“What are the most usual motives, Monsieur Poirot?”

“Most frequent—money. That is to say, gain in its various ramifications. Then there is revenge—and love, and fear, and pure hate, and beneficence—”

“Monsieur Poirot!”

“Oh, yes, Madame. I have known of—shall we say A?—being removed by B solely in order to benefit C. Political murders often come under the same heading. Someone is considered to be harmful to civilization and is removed on that account. Such people forget that life and death are the affair of the good God.”

He spoke gravely.

Mrs. Allerton said quietly: “I am glad to hear you say that. All the same, God chooses his instruments.”

“There is a danger in thinking like that, Madame.”

She adopted a lighter tone.

“After this conversation, Monsieur Poirot, I shall wonder that there is anyone left alive!”

She got up.

“We must be getting back. We have to start immediately after lunch.”

When they reached the landing stage they found the young man in the polo jumper just taking his place in the boat. The Italian was already waiting. As the Nubian boatman cast the sail loose and they started, Poirot addressed a polite remark to the stranger.

“There are very wonderful things to be seen in Egypt, are there not?”

The young man was now smoking a somewhat noisome pipe. He removed it from his mouth and remarked briefly and very emphatically, in astonishingly well-bred accents: “They make me sick.”

Mrs. Allerton put on her pince-nez and surveyed him with pleasurable interest.

“Indeed? And why is that?” Poirot asked.

"Take the Pyramids. Great blocks of useless masonry, put up to minister to the egoism of a despotic bloated king. Think of the sweated masses who toiled to build them and died doing it. It makes me sick to think of the suffering and torture they represent."

Mrs. Allerton said cheerfully: "You'd rather have no Pyramids, no Parthenon, no beautiful tombs or temples—just the solid satisfaction of knowing that people got three meals a day and died in their beds."

The young man directed his scowl in her direction.

"I think human beings matter more than stones."

"But they do not endure as well," remarked Hercule Poirot.

"I'd rather see a well fed worker than any so-called work of art. What matters is the future—not the past."

This was too much for Signor Richetti, who burst into a torrent of impassioned speech not too easy to follow.

The young man retorted by telling everybody exactly what he thought of the capitalist system. He spoke with the utmost venom.

When the tirade was over they had arrived at the hotel landing stage.

Mrs. Allerton murmured cheerfully: "Well, well," and stepped ashore. The young man directed a baleful glance after her.

In the hall of the hotel Poirot encountered Jacqueline de Bellefort. She was dressed in riding clothes. She gave him an ironical little bow.

"I'm going donkey-riding. Do you recommend the native villages, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Is that your excursion today, Mademoiselle? Eh bien, they are picturesque—but do not spend large sums on native curios."

“Which are shipped here from Europe? No, I am not so easy to deceive as that.”

With a little nod she passed out into the brilliant sunshine.

Poirot completed his packing—a very simple affair, since his possessions were always in the most meticulous order. Then he repaired to the dining room and ate an early lunch.

After lunch the hotel bus took the passengers for the Second Cataract to the station where they were to catch the daily express from Cairo to Shellal—a ten-minute run.

The Allertons, Poirot, the young man in the dirty flannel trousers and the Italian were the passengers. Mrs. Otterbourne and her daughter had made the expedition to the Dam and to Philae and would join the steamer at Shellal.

The train from Cairo and Luxor was about twenty minutes late. However, it arrived at last, and the usual scenes of wild activity occurred. Native porters taking suitcases out of the train collided with other porters putting them in.

Finally, somewhat breathless, Poirot found himself, with an assortment of his own, the Allertons’, and some totally unknown luggage, in one compartment, while Tim and his mother were elsewhere with the remains of the assorted baggage.

The compartment in which Poirot found himself was occupied by an elderly lady with a very wrinkled face, a stiff white stock, a good many diamonds and an expression of reptilian contempt for the majority of mankind.

She treated Poirot to an aristocratic glare and retired behind the pages of an American magazine. A big, rather clumsy young woman of under thirty was sitting opposite her. She had eager brown eyes, rather like a dog’s, untidy hair, and a terrific air of willingness to please. At intervals the old lady looked over the top of her magazine and snapped an order at her.

“Cornelia, collect the rugs.” “When we arrive look after my dressing-case. On no account let anyone else handle it.” “Don’t forget my paper-cutter.”

The train run was brief. In ten minutes’ time they came to rest on the jetty where the S.S. Karnak was awaiting them. The Otterbournes were already on board.

The Karnak was a smaller steamer than the Papyrus and the Lotus, the First Cataract steamers, which are too large to pass through the locks of the Assuan dam. The passengers went on board and were shown their accommodation. Since the boat was not full, most of the passengers had accommodation on the promenade deck. The entire forward part of this deck was occupied by an observation saloon, all glass-enclosed, where the passengers could sit and watch the river unfold before them. On the deck below were a smoking room and a small drawing room and on the deck below that, the dining saloon.

Having seen his possessions disposed in his cabin, Poirot came out on the deck again to watch the process of departure. He joined Rosalie Otterbourne, who was leaning over the side.

“So now we journey into Nubia. You are pleased, Mademoiselle?”

The girl drew a deep breath.

“Yes. I feel that one’s really getting away from things at last.”

She made a gesture with her hand. There was a savage aspect about the sheet of water in front of them, the masses of rock without vegetation that came down to the water’s edge—here and there a trace of houses, abandoned and ruined as a result of the damming up of the waters. The whole scene had a melancholy, almost sinister charm.

“Away from people,” said Rosalie Otterbourne.

“Except those of our own number, Mademoiselle?”

She shrugged her shoulders. Then she said: “There’s something about this country that makes me feel—wicked. It brings to the surface all the things that are boiling inside one. Everything’s so unfair—so unjust.”

“I wonder. You cannot judge by material evidence.”

Rosalie muttered: “Look at—at some people’s mothers—and look at mine. There is no God but Sex, and Salome Otterbourne is its Prophet.” She stopped. “I shouldn’t have said that, I suppose.”

Poirot made a gesture with his hands.

“Why not say it—to me? I am one of those who hear many things. If, as you say, you boil inside—like the jam—eh bien, let the scum come to the surface, and then one can take it off with a spoon, so.”

He made a gesture of dropping something into the Nile.

“Then, it has gone.”

“What an extraordinary man you are!” Rosalie said. Her sulky mouth twisted into a smile. Then she suddenly stiffened as she exclaimed: “Well, here are Mrs. Doyle and her husband! I’d no idea they were coming on this trip!”

Linnet had just emerged from a cabin halfway down the deck. Simon was behind her. Poirot was almost startled by the look of her—so radiant, so assured. She looked positively arrogant with happiness. Simon Doyle, too, was a transformed being. He was grinning from ear to ear and looking like a happy schoolboy.

“This is grand,” he said as he too leaned on the rail. “I’m really looking forward to this trip, aren’t you, Linnet? It feels, somehow, so much less touristy—as though we were really going into the heart of Egypt.”

His wife responded quickly: “I know. It’s so much—wilder, somehow.”

Her hand slipped through his arm. He pressed it close to his side.

"We're off, Lin," he murmured.

The steamer was drawing away from the jetty. They had started on their seven-day journey to the Second Cataract and back.

Behind them a light silvery laugh rang out. Linnet whipped round.

Jacqueline de Bellefort was standing there. She seemed amused.

"Hullo, Linnet! I didn't expect to find you here. I thought you said you were staying in Assuan another ten days. This is a surprise!"

"You—you didn't—" Linnet's tongue stammered. She forced a ghastly conventional smile. "I—I didn't expect to see you either."

"No?"

Jacqueline moved away to the other side of the boat. Linnet's grasp on her husband's arm tightened.

"Simon—Simon—"

All Doyle's good-natured pleasure had gone. He looked furious. His hands clenched themselves in spite of his effort at self-control.

The two of them moved a little away. Without turning his head Poirot caught scraps of disjointed words:

"…turn back…impossible…we could…" and then, slightly louder, Doyle's voice, despairing but grim: "We can't run away forever, Lin. We've got to go through with it now…."

It was some hours later. Daylight was just fading. Poirot stood in the glass-enclosed saloon looking straight ahead. The Karnak was going through a narrow gorge. The rocks came down with a kind of sheer ferocity to the river flowing deep and swift between them. They were in Nubia now.

He heard a movement and Linnet Doyle stood by his side. Her fingers twisted and untwisted themselves; she looked as he had never yet seen her look. There was about her the air of a bewildered child. She said:

“Monsieur Poirot, I’m afraid—I’m afraid of everything. I’ve never felt like this before. All these wild rocks and the awful grimness and starkness. Where are we going? What’s going to happen? I’m afraid, I tell you. Everyone hates me. I’ve never felt like that before. I’ve always been nice to people—I’ve done things for them—and they hate me—lots of people hate me. Except for Simon, I’m surrounded by enemies…It’s terrible to feel—that there are people who hate you….”

“But what is all this, Madame?”

She shook her head.

“I suppose—it’s nerves…I just feel that—everything’s unsafe all round me.”

She cast a quick nervous glance over his shoulder Then she said abruptly: “How will all this end? We’re caught here. Trapped! There’s no way out. We’ve got to go on. I—I don’t know where I am.”

She slipped down on to a seat. Poirot looked down on her gravely; his glance was not untinged with compassion.

“How did she know we were coming on this boat?” she said. “How could she have known?”

Poirot shook his head as he answered: “She has brains, you know.”

“I feel as though I shall never escape from her.”

Poirot said: “There is one plan you might have adopted. In fact I am surprised that it did not occur to you. After all, with you, Madame, money is no object. Why did you not engage in your own private dahabiyeh?”

“If we’d known about all this—but you see we didn’t—then. And it was difficult…” She flashed out with sudden impatience: “Oh! you don’t understand half my difficulties. I’ve got to be careful with Simon…He’s—he’s absurdly sensitive—about money. About my having so much! He wanted me to go to some little place in Spain with him—he—he wanted to pay all our honeymoon expenses himself. As if it mattered! Men are stupid! He's got to get used to—to—living comfortably. The mere idea of a dahabiyeh upset him—the—the needless expense. I've got to educate him—gradually."

She looked up, bit her lip vexedly, as though feeling that she had been led into discussing her difficulties rather too unguardedly.

She got up.

"I must change. I'm sorry, Monsieur Poirot. I'm afraid I've been talking a lot of foolish nonsense."

Eight

Mrs. Allerton, looking quiet and distinguished in her simple black lace evening gown, descended two decks to the dining room. At the door of it her son caught her up.

“Sorry, darling. I thought I was going to be late.”

“I wonder where we sit.” The saloon was dotted with little tables. Mrs. Allerton paused till the steward, who was busy seating a party of people, could attend to them.

“By the way,” she added, “I asked little Hercule Poirot to sit at our table.”

“Mother, you didn’t!” Tim sounded really taken aback and annoyed.

His mother stared at him in surprise. Tim was usually so easy-going.

“My dear, do you mind?”

“Yes, I do. He’s an unmitigated little bounder!”

“Oh, no, Tim! I don’t agree with you.”

“Anyway, what do we want to get mixed up with an outsider for? Cooped up like this on a small boat, that sort of thing is always a bore. He’ll be with us morning, noon, and night.”

“I’m sorry, dear.” Mrs. Allerton looked distressed. “I thought really it would amuse you. After all, he must have had a varied experience. And you love detective stories.”

Tim grunted.

“I wish you wouldn’t have these bright ideas, Mother. We can’t get out of it now, I suppose?”

“Really, Tim, I don’t see how we can.”

“Oh, well, we shall have to put up with it, I suppose.”

The steward came to them at this minute and led them to a table. Mrs. Allerton’s face wore rather a puzzled expression as she followed him. Tim was usually so easy-going and good-tempered. This outburst was quite unlike him. It wasn’t as though he had the ordinary Britisher’s dislike—and mistrust—of foreigners. Tim was very cosmopolitan. Oh, well—she sighed. Men were incomprehensible! Even one’s nearest and dearest had unsuspected reactions and feelings.

As they took their places, Hercule Poirot came quickly and silently into the dining saloon. He paused with his hand on the back of the third chair.

“You really permit, Madame, that I avail myself of your kind suggestion?”

“Of course. Sit down, Monsieur Poirot.”

“You are most amiable.”

She was uneasily conscious that, as he seated himself, he shot a swift glance at Tim, and that Tim had not quite succeeded in masking a somewhat sullen expression.

Mrs. Allerton set herself to produce a pleasant atmosphere. As they drank their soup, she picked up the passenger list which had been placed beside her plate.

“Let’s try and identify everybody,” she suggested cheerfully. “I always think that’s rather fun.”

She began reading: “Mrs. Allerton, Mr. T. Allerton. That’s easy enough! Miss de Bellefort. They’ve put her at the same table as the Otterbournes, I see. I wonder what she and Rosalie will make of each other. Who comes next? Dr. Bessner. Dr. Bessner? Who can identify Dr. Bessner?”

She bent her glance on a table at which four men sat together.

"I think he must be the fat one with the closely shaved head and the moustache. A German, I should imagine. He seems to be enjoying his soup very much." Certain succulent noises floated across to them.

Mrs. Allerton continued: "Miss Bowers? Can we make a guess at Miss Bowers? There are three or four women—no, we'll leave her for the present. Mr. and Mrs. Doyle. Yes, indeed, the lions of this trip. She really is very beautiful, and what a perfectly lovely frock she is wearing."

Tim turned round in his chair. Linnet and her husband and Andrew Pennington had been given a table in the corner. Linnet was wearing a white dress and pearls.

"It looks frightfully simple to me," said Tim. "Just a length of stuff with a kind of cord round the middle."

"Yes, darling," said his mother. "A very nice manly description of an eighty-guinea model."

"I can't think why women pay so much for their clothes," Tim said. "It seems absurd to me."

Mrs. Allerton proceeded with her study of her fellow passengers.

"Mr. Fanthorp must be one of the four at that table. The intensely quiet young man who never speaks. Rather a nice face, cautious and intelligent."

Poirot agreed.

"He is intelligent—yes. He does not talk, but he listens very attentively, and he also watches. Yes, he makes good use of his eyes. Not quite the type you would expect to find travelling for pleasure in this part of the world. I wonder what he is doing here."

"Mr. Ferguson," read Mrs. Allerton. "I feel that Ferguson must be our anti-capitalist friend. Mrs. Otterbourne, Miss Otterbourne. We know all about them. Mr. Pennington? Alias Uncle Andrew. He's a good-looking man, I think—"

“Now, Mother,” said Tim.

“I think he’s very good-looking in a dry sort of way,” said Mrs. Allerton. “Rather a ruthless jaw. Probably the kind of man one reads about in the paper, who operates on Wall Street—or is it in Wall Street? I’m sure he must be extremely rich. Next—Monsieur Hercule Poirot—whose talents are really being wasted. Can’t you get up a crime for Monsieur Poirot, Tim?”

But her well-meant banter only seemed to annoy her son anew. He scowled and Mrs. Allerton hurried on: “Mr. Richetti. Our Italian archaeological friend. Then Miss Robson and last of all Miss Van Schuyler. The last’s easy. The very ugly old American lady who is clearly going to be very exclusive and speak to nobody who doesn’t come up to the most exacting standards! She’s rather marvellous, isn’t she, really? A kind of period piece. The two women with her must be Miss Bowers and Miss Robson—perhaps a secretary, the thin one with pince-nez, and a poor relation, the rather pathetic young woman who is obviously enjoying herself in spite of being treated like a black slave. I think Robson’s the secretary woman and Bowers is the poor relation.”

“Wrong, Mother,” said Tim, grinning. He had suddenly recovered his good humour.

“How do you know?”

“Because I was in the lounge before dinner and the old bean said to the companion woman: ‘Where’s Miss Bowers? Fetch her at once, Cornelia.’ And away trotted Cornelia like an obedient dog.”

“I shall have to talk to Miss Van Schuyler,” mused Mrs. Allerton.

Tim grinned again.

“She’ll snub you, Mother.”

“Not at all. I shall pave the way by sitting near her and conversing, in low (but penetrating), well-bred tones, about any titled relations and friends I can remember. I think a casual mention of your second cousin, once removed, the Duke of Glasgow, would probably do the trick.”

“How unscrupulous you are, Mother!”

Events after dinner were not without their amusing side to a student of human nature.

The socialistic young man (who turned out to be Mr. Ferguson as deduced) retired to the smoking room, scorning the assemblage of passengers in the observation saloon on the top deck.

Miss Van Schuyler duly secured the best and most undraughty position there by advancing firmly on a table at which Mrs. Otterbourne was sitting and saying, “You’ll excuse me, I am sure, but I think my knitting was left here!”

Fixed by a hypnotic eye, the turban rose and gave ground. Miss Van Schuyler established herself and her suite. Mrs. Otterbourne sat down nearby and hazarded various remarks, which were met with such chilling politeness that she soon gave up. Miss Van Schuyler then sat in glorious isolation. The Doyles sat with the Allertons. Dr. Bessner retained the quiet Mr. Fanthorp as a companion. Jacqueline de Bellefort sat by herself with a book. Rosalie Otterbourne was restless. Mrs. Allerton spoke to her once or twice and tried to draw her into their group, but the girl responded ungraciously.

M. Hercule Poirot spent his evening listening to an account of Mrs. Otterbourne’s mission as a writer.

On his way to his cabin that night he encountered Jacqueline de Bellefort. She was leaning over the rail and, as she turned her head, he was struck by the look of acute misery on her face. There was now no insouciance, no malicious defiance, no dark flaming triumph.

“Good night, Mademoiselle.”

“Good night, Monsieur Poirot.” She hesitated, then said: “You were surprised to find me here?”

“I was not so much surprised as sorry—very sorry….”

He spoke gravely.

“You mean sorry—for me?”

“That is what I meant. You have chosen, Mademoiselle, the dangerous course…As we here in this boat have embarked on a journey, so you too have embarked on your own private journey—a journey on a swift moving river, between dangerous rocks, and heading for who knows what currents of disaster….”

“Why do you say this?”

“Because it is true…You have cut the bonds that moored you to safety. I doubt now if you could turn back if you would.”

She said very slowly: “That is true….”

Then she flung her head back.

“Ah, well—one must follow one’s star, wherever it leads.”

“Beware, Mademoiselle, that it is not a false star….”

She laughed and mimicked the parrot cry of the donkey boys:

“That very bad star, sir! That star fall down….”

He was just dropping off to sleep when the murmur of voices awoke him. It was Simon Doyle’s voice he heard, repeating the same words he had used when the steamer left Shellal.

“We’ve got to go through with it now….”

“Yes,” thought Hercule Poirot to himself, “we have got to go through with it now….”

He was not happy.

Nine

I

The steamer arrived early next morning at Ez-Zebua.

Cornelia Robson, her face beaming, a large flapping hat on her head, was one of the first to hurry on shore. Cornelia was not good at snubbing people. She was of an amiable disposition and disposed to like all her fellow creatures.

The sight of Hercule Poirot, in a white suit, pink shirt, large black bow tie and a white topee, did not make her wince as the aristocratic Miss Van Schuyler would assuredly have winced. As they walked together up an avenue of sphinxes, she responded readily to his conventional opening, "Your companions are not coming ashore to view the temple?"

"Well, you see, Cousin Marie—that's Miss Van Schuyler—never gets up very early. She has to be very, very careful of her health. And of course she wanted Miss Bowers, that's her hospital nurse, to do things for her. And she said, too, that this isn't one of the best temples—but she was frightfully kind and said it would be quite all right for me to come."

"That was very gracious of her," said Poirot dryly.

The ingenuous Cornelia agreed unsuspectingly.

"Oh, she's very kind. It's simply wonderful of her to bring me on this trip. I do feel I'm a lucky girl. I just could hardly believe it when she suggested to Mother that I should come too."

"And you have enjoyed it—yes?"

"Oh, it's been wonderful! I've seen Italy—Venice and Padua and Pisa—and then Cairo—only cousin Marie wasn't very well in Cairo, so I couldn't get round much, and now this wonderful trip up the Wadi Halfa and back."

Poirot said, smiling, “You have the happy nature, Mademoiselle.”

He looked thoughtfully from her to silent, frowning Rosalie, who was walking ahead by herself.

“She’s very nice-looking, isn’t she?” said Cornelia, following his glance. “Only kind of scornful-looking. She’s very English, of course. She’s not as lovely as Mrs. Doyle. I think Mrs. Doyle’s the loveliest, the most elegant woman I’ve ever seen! And her husband just worships the ground she walks on, doesn’t he? I think that grey-haired lady is kind of distinguished-looking, don’t you? She’s a cousin of a Duke, I believe. She was talking about him right near us last night. But she isn’t actually titled herself, is she?”

She prattled on until the dragoman in charge called a halt and began to intone: “This temple was dedicated to Egyptian God Amun and the Sun God Re-Harakhte—whose symbol was a hawk’s head….”

It droned on. Dr. Bessner, Baedeker in hand, mumbled to himself in German. He preferred the written word.

Tim Allerton had not joined the party. His mother was breaking the ice with the reserved Mr. Fanthorp. Andrew Pennington, his arm through Linnet Doyle’s, was listening attentively, seemingly most interested in the measurements as recited by the guide.

“Sixty-five feet high, is that so? Looks a little less to me. Great fellow, this Rameses. An Egyptian live wire.”

“A big business man, Uncle Andrew.”

Andrew Pennington looked at her appreciatively.

“You look fine this morning, Linnet. I’ve been a mite worried about you lately. You’ve looked kind of peaky.”

Chatting together, the party returned to the boat. Once more the Karnak glided up the river. The scenery was less stern now. There were palms, cultivation.

It was as though the change in the scenery had relieved some secret oppression that had brooded over the passengers. Tim Allerton had got over his fit of moodiness. Rosalie looked less sulky. Linnet seemed almost lighthearted.

Pennington said to her: “It’s tactless to talk business to a bride on her honeymoon, but there are just one or two things—”

“Why, of course, Uncle Andrew.” Linnet at once became businesslike. “My marriage has made a difference, of course.”

“That’s just it. Some time or other I want your signature to several documents.”

“Why not now?”

Andrew Pennington glanced round. Their corner of the observation saloon was quite untenanted. Most of the people were outside on the deck space between the observation saloon and the cabin. The only occupants of the saloon were Mr. Ferguson—who was drinking beer at a small table in the middle, his legs, encased in their dirty flannel trousers, stuck out in front of him, whilst he whistled to himself in the intervals of drinking—M. Hercule Poirot, who was sitting before him—and Miss Van Schuyler, who was sitting in a corner reading a book on Egypt.

“That’s fine,” said Andrew Pennington. He left the saloon.

Linnet and Simon smiled at each other—a slow smile that took a few minutes to come to full fruition.

“All right, sweet?” he asked.

“Yes, still all right…Funny how I’m not rattled anymore.”

Simon said with deep conviction in his tone: “You’re marvellous.”

Pennington came back. He brought with him a sheaf of closely written documents.

“Mercy!” cried Linnet. “Have I got to sign all these?”

Andrew Pennington was apologetic.

“It’s tough on you, I know, but I’d just like to get your affairs put in proper shape. First of all there’s the lease of the Fifth Avenue property…then there are the Western Land Concessions…” He talked on, rustling and sorting the papers. Simon yawned.

The door to the deck swung open and Mr. Fanthorp came in. He gazed aimlessly round, then strolled forward and stood by Poirot looking out at the pale blue water and the yellow enveloping sands….

“—you sign just there,” concluded Pennington, spreading a paper before Linnet and indicating a space.

Linnet picked up the document and glanced through it. She turned back once to the first page, then, taking up the fountain pen Pennington had laid beside her, she signed her name Linnet Doyle….

Pennington took away the paper and spread out another.

Fanthorp wandered over in their direction. He peered out through the side window at something that seemed to interest him on the bank they were passing.

“That’s just the transfer,” said Pennington. “You needn’t read it.”

But Linnet took a brief glance through it. Pennington laid down a third paper. Again Linnet perused it carefully.

“They’re all quite straightforward,” said Andrew. “Nothing of interest. Only legal phraseology.”

Simon yawned again.

“My dear girl, you’re not going to read the whole lot through, are you? You’ll be at it till lunchtime and longer.”

“I always read everything through,” said Linnet. “Father taught me to do that. He said there might be some clerical error.”

Pennington laughed rather harshly.

“You’re a grand woman of business, Linnet.”

“She’s much more conscientious than I’d be,” said Simon, laughing. “I’ve never read a legal document in my life. I sign where they tell me to sign on the dotted line—and that’s that.”

“That’s frightfully slipshod,” said Linnet disapprovingly.

“I’ve no business head,” declared Simon cheerfully. “Never had. A fellow tells me to sign—I sign. It’s much the simplest way.”

Andrew Pennington was looking at him thoughtfully. He said dryly, stroking his upper lip, “A little risky sometimes, Doyle?”

“Nonsense,” replied Simon. “I’m not one of those people who believe the whole world is out to do one down. I’m a trusting kind of fellow—and it pays, you know. I’ve hardly ever been let down.”

Suddenly, to everyone’s surprise, the silent Mr. Fanthorp swung around and addressed Linnet.

“I hope I’m not butting in, but you must let me say how much I admire your businesslike capacity. In my profession—er—I am a lawyer—I find ladies sadly unbusinesslike. Never to sign a document unless you read it through is admirable—altogether admirable.”

He gave a little bow. Then, rather red in the face, he turned once more to contemplate the banks of the Nile.

Linnet looked rather uncertainly: “Er—thank you…” She bit her lip to repress a giggle. The young man had looked so preternaturally solemn.

Andrew Pennington looked seriously annoyed.

Simon Doyle looked uncertain whether to be annoyed or amused.

The backs of Mr. Fanthorp’s ears were bright crimson.

“Next, please,” said Linnet, smiling up at Pennington.

But Pennington looked decidedly ruffled.

“I think perhaps some other time would be better,” he said stiffly. “As—er—Doyle says, if you have to read through all these we shall be here till lunchtime. We mustn’t miss enjoying the scenery. Anyway those first two papers were the only urgent ones. We’ll settle down to business later.”

“It’s frightfully hot in here,” Linnet said. “Let’s go outside.”

The three of them passed through the swing door. Hercule Poirot turned his head. His gaze rested thoughtfully on Mr. Fanthorp’s back; then it shifted to the lounging figure of Mr. Ferguson who had his head thrown back and was still whistling softly to himself.

Finally Poirot looked over at the upright figure of Miss Van Schuyler in her corner. Miss Van Schuyler was glaring at Mr. Ferguson.

The swing door on the port side opened and Cornelia Robson hurried in.

“You’ve been a long time,” snapped the old lady. “Where’ve you been?”

“I’m so sorry, Cousin Marie. The wool wasn’t where you said it was. It was in another case altogether—”

“My dear child, you are perfectly hopeless at finding anything! You are willing, I know, my dear, but you must try to be a little cleverer and quicker. It only needs concentration.”

“I’m so sorry, Cousin Marie. I’m afraid I am very stupid.”

“Nobody need be stupid if they try, my dear. I have brought you on this trip, and I expect a little attention in return.”

Cornelia flushed.

“I’m very sorry, Cousin Marie.”

“And where is Miss Bowers? It was time for my drops ten minutes ago. Please go and find her at once. The doctor said it was most important—”

But at this stage Miss Bowers entered, carrying a small medicine glass.

“Your drops, Miss Van Schuyler.”

“I should have had them at eleven,” snapped the old lady. “If there’s one thing I detest it’s unpunctuality.”

“Quite,” said Miss Bowers. She glanced at her wristwatch. “It’s exactly half a minute to eleven.”

“By my watch it’s ten past.”

“I think you’ll find my watch is right. It’s a perfect timekeeper. It never loses or gains.” Miss Bowers was quite imperturbable.

Miss Van Schuyler swallowed the contents of the medicine glass.

“I feel definitely worse,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Miss Van Schuyler.”

Miss Bowers did not sound sorry. She sounded completely uninterested. She was obviously making the correct reply mechanically.

“It’s too hot in here,” snapped Miss Van Schuyler. “Find me a chair on the deck, Miss Bowers. Cornelia, bring my knitting. Don’t be clumsy or drop it. And then I shall want you to wind some wool.”

The procession passed out.

Mr. Ferguson sighed, stirred his legs and remarked to the world at large, “Gosh, I’d like to scrag that dame.”

Poirot asked interestedly: “She is a type you dislike, eh?”

“Dislike? I should say so. What good has that woman ever been to anyone or anything? She’s never worked or lifted a finger. She’s just battened on other people. She’s a parasite—and a damned unpleasant parasite. There are a lot of people on this boat I’d say the world could do without.”

“Really?”

“Yes. That girl in here just now, signing share transfers and throwing her weight about. Hundreds and thousands of wretched workers slaving for a mere pittance to keep her in silk stockings and useless luxuries. One of the richest women in England, so someone told me—and never done a hand’s turn in her life.”

“Who told you she was one of the richest women in England?”

Mr. Ferguson cast a belligerent eye at him.

“A man you wouldn’t be seen speaking to! A man who works with his hands and isn’t ashamed of it! Not one of your dressed-up, foppish good-for-nothings.”

His eye rested unfavourably on the bow tie and pink shirt.

“Me, I work with my brains and am not ashamed of it,” said Poirot, answering the glance.

Mr. Ferguson merely snorted.

“Ought to be shot—the lot of them!” he asserted.

“My dear young man,” said Poirot, “what a passion you have for violence!”

“Can you tell me of any good that can be done without it? You’ve got to break down and destroy before you can build up.”

"It is certainly much easier and much noisier and much more spectacular."

"What do you do for a living? Nothing at all, I bet. Probably call yourself a middle man."

"I am not a middle man. I am a top man," declared Hercule Poirot with a slight arrogance.

"What are you?"

"I am a detective," said Hercule Poirot with the modest air of one who says "I am a king."

"Good God!" The young man seemed seriously taken aback. "Do you mean that girl actually totes about a dumb dick? Is she as careful of her precious skin as that?"

"I have no connection whatever with Monsieur and Madame Doyle," said Poirot stiffly. "I am on holiday."

"Enjoying a vacation—eh?"

"And you? Is it not that you are on holiday also?"

"Holiday!" Mr. Ferguson snorted. Then he added cryptically: "I'm studying conditions."

"Very interesting," murmured Poirot and moved gently out on to the deck.

Miss Van Schuyler was established in the best corner. Cornelia knelt in front of her, her arms outstretched with a skein of grey wool upon them. Miss Bowers was sitting very upright reading the Saturday Evening Post.

Poirot wandered gently onward down the starboard deck. As he passed round the stern of the boat he almost ran into a woman who turned a startled face towards him—a dark, piquant, Latin face. She was neatly dressed in black and had been standing talking to a big burly man in uniform—one of the engineers, by the look of him. There was a queer expression on both their faces—guilt and alarm. Poirot wondered what they had been talking about.

He rounded the stern and continued his walk along the port side. A cabin door opened and Mrs. Otterbourne emerged and nearly fell into his arms. She was wearing a scarlet satin dressing-gown.

“So sorry,” she apologized. “Dear Mr. Poirot—so very sorry. The motion—just the motion, you know. Never did have any sea legs. If the boat would only keep still…” She clutched at his arm. “It’s the pitching I can’t stand… Never really happy at sea…And left all alone here hour after hour. That girl of mine—no sympathy—no understanding of her poor old mother who’s done everything for her…” Mrs. Otterbourne began to weep. “Slaved for her I have—worn myself to the bone—to the bone. A grande amoureuse—that’s what I might have been—a grande amoureuse—sacrificed everything—everything…And nobody cares! But I’ll tell everyone—I’ll tell them now—how she neglects me—how hard she is—making me come on this journey—bored to death…I’ll go and tell them now—”

She surged forward. Poirot gently repressed the action.

“I will send her to you, Madame. Re-enter your cabin. It is best that way—”

“No. I want to tell everyone—everyone on the boat—”

“It is too dangerous, Madame. The sea is too rough. You might be swept overboard.”

Mrs. Otterbourne looked at him doubtfully.

“You think so. You really think so?”

“I do.”

He was successful. Mrs. Otterbourne wavered, faltered and re-entered her cabin.

Poirot’s nostrils twitched once or twice. Then he nodded and walked on to where Rosalie Otterbourne was sitting between Mrs. Allerton and Tim.

"Your mother wants you, Mademoiselle."

She had been laughing quite happily. Now her face clouded over. She shot a quick suspicious look at him and hurried along the deck.

"I can't make that child out," said Mrs. Allerton. "She varies so. One day she's friendly; the next day, she's positively rude."

"Thoroughly spoilt and bad-tempered," said Tim.

Mrs. Allerton shook her head.

"No. I don't think it's that. I think she's unhappy."

Tim shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, I suppose we've all got our private troubles." His voice sounded hard and curt.

A booming noise was heard.

"Lunch," cried Mrs. Allerton delightedly.

"I'm starving."

II

That evening, Poirot noticed that Mrs. Allerton was sitting talking to Miss Van Schuyler. As he passed, Mrs. Allerton closed one eye and opened it again. She was saying, "Of course at Calfries Castle—the dear Duke—"

Cornelia, released from her attendance, was out on the deck. She was listening to Dr. Bessner, who was instructing her somewhat ponderously in Egyptology as culled from the pages of Baedeker. Cornelia listened with rapt attention.

Leaning over the rail Tim Allerton was saying: "Anyhow, it's a rotten world…."

Rosalie Otterbourne answered: “It’s unfair; some people have everything.”

Poirot sighed. He was glad that he was no longer young.

Ten

On the Monday morning various expressions of delight and appreciation were heard on the deck of the Karnak. The steamer was moored to the bank and a few hundred yards away, the morning sun just striking it, was a great temple carved out of the face of the rock. Four colossal figures, hewn out of the cliff, look out eternally over the Nile and face the rising sun.

Cornelia Robson said incoherently: “Oh, Monsieur Poirot, isn’t it wonderful? I mean they’re so big and peaceful—and looking at them makes one feel that one’s so small—and rather like an insect—and that nothing matters very much really, does it?”

Mr. Fanthorp, who was standing near by, murmured, “Very—er—impressive.”

“Grand, isn’t it?” said Simon Doyle, strolling up.

He went on confidentially to Poirot: “You know, I’m not much of a fellow for temples and sightseeing and all that, but a place like this sort of gets you, if you know what I mean. Those old Pharaohs must have been wonderful fellows.”

The other had drifted away. Simon lowered his voice.

“I’m no end glad we came on this trip. It’s—well, it’s cleared things up. Amazing why it should—but there it is. Linnet’s got her nerve back. She say’s it’s because shes actually faced the business at last.”

“I think that is very probable,” said Poirot.

“She says that when she actually saw Jackie on the boat she felt terrible—and then, suddenly, it didn’t matter anymore. We’re both agreed that we won’t try to dodge her anymore. We’ll just meet her on her own ground and show her that this ridiculous stunt of hers doesn’t worry us a bit. It’s just damned bad form—that’s all. She thought she’d got us badly rattled, but now, well, we just aren’t rattled anymore. That ought to show her.”

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"So that's splendid, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

Linnet came along the deck. She was dressed in a soft shade of apricot linen. She was smiling. She greeted Poirot with no particular enthusiasm, just gave him a cool nod and then drew her husband away.

Poirot realized with a momentary flicker of amusement that he had not made himself popular by his critical attitude. Linnet was used to unqualified admiration of all she was or did. Hercule Poirot had sinned noticeably against this creed.

Mrs. Allerton, joining him, murmured:

"What a difference in that girl! She looked worried and not very happy at Assuan. Today she looks so happy that one might almost be afraid she was fey."

Before Poirot could respond as he meant, the party was called to order. The official dragoman took charge and the party was led ashore to visit Abu Simbel.

Poirot himself fell into step with Andrew Pennington.

"It is your first visit to Egypt—yes?" he asked.

"Why, no, I was here in nineteen twenty-three. That is to say I was in Cairo. I've never been this trip up the Nile before."

"You came over on the Carmanic, I believe—at least so Madame Doyle was telling me."

Pennington shot a shrewd glance in his direction.

"Why, yes, that is so," he admitted.

“I wondered if you had happened to come across some friends of mine who were aboard—the Rushington Smiths.”

“I can’t recall anyone of that name. The boat was full and we had bad weather. A lot of passengers hardly appeared, and in any case the voyage is so short one doesn’t get to know who is on board and who isn’t.”

“Yes, that is very true. What a pleasant surprise your running into Madame Doyle and her husband. You had no idea they were married?”

“No. Mrs. Doyle had written me, but the letter was forwarded on and I only received it some days after our unexpected meeting in Cairo.”

“You have known her for many years, I understand?”

“Why, I should say I have, Monsieur Poirot. I’ve known Linnet Ridgeway since she was just a cute little thing so high—” He made an illustrating gesture. “Her father and I were lifelong friends. A very remarkable man, Melhuish Ridgeway—and a very successful one.”

“His daughter comes into a considerable fortune, I understand…Ah, pardon—perhaps it is not delicate what I say there.”

Andrew Pennington seemed slightly amused.

“Oh, that’s pretty common knowledge. Yes, Linnet’s a wealthy woman.”

“I suppose, though, that the recent slump is bound to affect any stocks, however sound they may be?”

Pennington took a moment or two to answer. He said at last: “That, of course, is true to a certain extent. The position is very difficult in these days.”

Poirot murmured: “I should imagine, however, that Madame Doyle has a keen business head.”

“That is so. Yes, that is so. Linnet is a clever practical girl.”

They came to a halt. The guide proceeded to instruct them on the subject of the temple built by the great Rameses. The four colossi of Rameses himself, one pair on each side of the entrance, hewn out of the living rock, looked down on the little straggling party of tourists.

Signor Richetti, disdaining the remarks of the dragoman, was busy examining the reliefs of Negro and Syrian captives on the bases of the colossi on either side of the entrance.

When the party entered the temple, a sense of dimness and peace came over them. The still vividly coloured reliefs on some of the inner walls were pointed out, but the party tended to break up into groups.

Dr. Bessner read sonorously in German from a Baedeker, pausing every now and then to translate for the benefit of Cornelia, who walked in a docile manner beside him. This was not to continue, however. Miss Van Schuyler, entering on the arm of the phlegmatic Miss Bowers, uttered a commanding: “Cornelia, come here,” and the instruction had perforce to cease. Dr. Bessner beamed after her vaguely through his thick lenses.

“A very nice maiden, that,” he announced to Poirot. “She does not look so starved as some of these young women. No, she has the nice curves. She listens too very intelligently; it is a pleasure to instruct her.”

It fleeted across Poirot’s mind that it seemed to be Cornelia’s fate either to be bullied or instructed. In any case she was always the listener, never the talker.

Miss Bowers, momentarily released by the peremptory summons of Cornelia, was standing in the middle of the temple, looking about her with her cool, incurious gaze. Her reaction to the wonders of the past was succinct.

“The guide says the name of one of these gods or goddesses was Mut. Can you beat it?”

There was an inner sanctuary where sat four figures eternally presiding, strangely dignified in their dim aloofness.

Before them stood Linnet and her husband. Her arm was in his, her face lifted—a typical face of the new civilization, intelligent, curious, untouched by the past.

Simon said suddenly: “Let’s get out of here. I don’t like these four fellows—especially the one in the high hat.”

“That’s Amon, I suppose. And that one is Rameses. Why don’t you like them? I think they’re very impressive.”

“They’re a damned sight too impressive; there’s something uncanny about them. Come out into the sunlight.”

Linnet laughed but yielded.

They came out of the temple into the sunshine with the sand yellow and warm about their feet. Linnet began to laugh. At their feet in a row, presenting a momentarily gruesome appearance as though sawn from their bodies, were the heads of half a dozen Nubian boys. The eyes rolled, the heads moved rhythmically from side to side, the lips chanted a new invocation:

“Hip, hip hurray! Hip, hip hurray! Very good, very nice. Thank you very much.”

“How absurd! How do they do it? Are they really buried very deep?”

Simon produced some small change.

“Very good, very nice, very expensive,” he mimicked.

Two small boys in charge of the “show” picked up the coins neatly.

Linnet and Simon passed on. They had no wish to return to the boat, and they were weary of sightseeing. They settled themselves with their backs to the cliff and let the warm sun bake them through.

“How lovely the sun is,” thought Linnet. “How warm—how safe…How lovely it is to be happy…How lovely to be me—me…me…Linnet….”

Her eyes closed. She was half asleep, half awake, drifting in the midst of thought that was like the sand drifting and blowing.

Simon’s eyes were open. They too held contentment. What a fool he’d been to be rattled that first night…There was nothing to be rattled about… Everything was all right…After all, one could trust Jackie—

There was a shout—people running towards him waving their arms—shouting….

Simon stared stupidly for a moment. Then he sprang to his feet and dragged Linnet with him.

Not a minute too soon. A big boulder hurtling down the cliff crashed past them. If Linnet had remained where she was she would have been crushed to atoms.

White-faced they clung together. Hercule Poirot and Tim Allerton ran up to them.

“Ma foi, Madame, that was a near thing.”

All four instinctively looked up at the cliff. There was nothing to be seen. But there was a path along the top. Poirot remembered seeing some natives walking along there when they had first come ashore.

He looked at the husband and wife. Linnet looked dazed still—bewildered. Simon, however, was inarticulate with rage.

“God damn her!” he ejaculated.

He checked himself with a quick glance at Tim Allerton.

The latter said: “Phew, that was near! Did some fool bowl that thing over, or did it get detached on its own?”

Linnet was very pale. She said with difficulty: “I think—some fool must have done it.”

"Might have crushed you like an eggshell. Sure you haven't got an enemy, Linnet?"

Linnet swallowed twice and found a difficulty in answering the lighthearted raillery.

"Come back to the boat, Madame," Poirot said quickly. "You must have a restorative."

They walked quickly, Simon still full of pent-up rage, Tim trying to talk cheerfully and distract Linnet's mind from the danger she had run, Poirot with a grave face.

And then, just as they reached the gangplank, Simon stopped dead. A look of amazement spread over his face.

Jacqueline de Bellefort was just coming ashore. Dressed in blue gingham, she looked childish this morning.

"Good God!" said Simon under his breath. "So it was an accident, after all."

The anger went out of his face. An overwhelming relief showed so plainly that Jacqueline noticed something amiss.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm afraid I'm a little on the late side."

She gave them all a nod and stepped ashore and proceeded in the direction of the temple.

Simon clutched Poirot's arm. The other two had gone on.

"My God, that's a relief. I thought—I thought—"

Poirot nodded. "Yes, yes, I know what you thought." But he himself still looked grave and preoccupied. He turned his head and noted carefully what had become of the rest of the party from the ship.

Miss Van Schuyler was slowly returning on the arm of Miss Bowers.

A little farther away Mrs. Allerton was standing laughing at the little Nubian row of heads. Mrs. Otterbourne was with her.

The others were nowhere in sight.

Poirot shook his head as he followed Simon slowly on to the boat.

Eleven

“Will you explain to me, Madame, the meaning of the word ‘fey’?”

Mrs. Allerton looked slightly surprised. She and Poirot were toiling slowly up to the rock overlooking the Second Cataract. Most of the others had gone up on camels, but Poirot had felt that the motion of the camel was slightly reminiscent of that of a ship. Mrs. Allerton had put it on the grounds of personal indignity.

They had arrived at Wadi Halfa the night before. This morning two launches had conveyed all the party to the Second Cataract, with the exception of Signor Richetti, who had insisted on making an excursion of his own to a remote spot called Semna, which, he explained, was of paramount interest as being the gateway of Nubia in the time of Amenemhet III, and where there was a stele recording the fact that on entering Egypt Negroes must pay customs duties. Everything had been done to discourage this example of individuality, but with no avail. Signor Richetti was determined and had waved aside each objection: (1) that the expedition was not worth making, (2) that the expedition could not be made, owing to the impossibility of getting a car there, (3) that no car could be obtained to do the trip, (4) that a car would be a prohibitive price. Having scoffed at (1), expressed incredulity at (2), offered to find a car himself to (3), and bargained fluently in Arabic for (4), Signor Richetti had at last departed—his departure being arranged in a secret and furtive manner, in case some of the other tourists should take it into their heads to stray from the appointed paths of sightseeing.

“Fey?” Mrs. Allerton put her head on one side as she considered her reply. “Well, it’s a Scotch word, really. It means the kind of exalted happiness that comes before disaster. You know—it’s too good to be true.”

She enlarged on the theme. Poirot listened attentively.

“I thank you, Madame. I understand now. It is odd that you should have said that yesterday—when Madame Doyle was to escape death so shortly afterwards.”

Mrs. Allerton gave a little shiver.

“It must have been a very near escape. Do you think some of these little black wretches rolled it over for fun? It’s the sort of thing boys might do all over the world—not perhaps really meaning any harm.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“It may be, Madame.”

He changed the subject, talking of Majorca and asking various practical questions from the point of view of a possible visit.

Mrs. Allerton had grown to like the little man very much—partly perhaps out of a contradictory spirit. Tim, she felt, was always trying to make her less friendly to Hercule Poirot, whom he summarized firmly as “the worst kind of bounder.” But she herself did not call him a bounder; she supposed it was his somewhat foreign exotic clothing which roused her son’s prejudices. She herself found him an intelligent and stimulating companion. He was also extremely sympathetic. She found herself suddenly confiding in him her dislike of Joanna Southwood. It eased her to talk of the matter. And after all, why not? He did not know Joanna—would probably never meet her. Why should she not ease herself of that constantly borne burden of jealous thought?

At the same moment Tim and Rosalie Otterbourne were talking of her. Tim had just been half jestingly abusing his luck. His rotten health, never bad enough to be really interesting, yet not good enough for him to have led the life he would have chosen. Very little money, no congenial occupation.

“A thoroughly lukewarm, tame existence,” he finished discontentedly.

Rosalie said abruptly, “You’ve got something heaps of people would envy you.”

“What’s that?”

“Your mother.”

Tim was surprised and pleased.

“Mother? Yes, of course she is quite unique. It’s nice of you to see it.”

“I think she’s marvellous. She looks so lovely—so composed and calm—as though nothing could ever touch her, and yet—and yet somehow she’s always ready to be funny about things too….”

Rosalie was stammering slightly in her earnestness.

Tim felt a rising warmth to the girl. He wished he could return the compliment, but lamentably, Mrs. Otterbourne was his idea of the world’s greatest menace. The inability to respond in kind made him embarrassed.

Miss Van Schuyler had stayed in the launch. She could not risk the ascent either on a camel or on her legs. She had said snappily:

“I’m sorry to have to ask you to stay with me, Miss Bowers. I intended you to go and Cornelia to stay, but girls are so selfish. She rushed off without a word to me. And I actually saw her talking to that very unpleasant and ill-bred young man, Ferguson. Cornelia has disappointed me sadly. She has absolutely no social sense.”

Miss Bowers replied in her usual matter-of-fact fashion:

“That’s quite all right, Miss Van Schuyler. It would have been a hot walk up there, and I don’t fancy the look of those saddles on the camels. Fleas, as likely as not.”

She adjusted her glasses, screwed up her eyes to look at the party descending the hill and remarked: “Miss Robson isn’t with that young man anymore. She’s with Dr. Bessner.”

Miss Van Schuyler grunted.

Since she had discovered that Dr. Bessner had a large clinic in Czechoslovakia and a European reputation as a fashionable physician, she was disposed to be gracious to him. Besides she might need his professional services before the journey was over.

When the party returned to the Karnak Linnet gave a cry of surprise.

“A telegram for me.”

She snatched it off the board and tore it open.

“Why—I don’t understand—potatoes, beetroots—what does it mean, Simon?”

Simon was just coming to look over her shoulder when a furious voice said: “Excuse me, that telegram is for me,” and Signor Richetti snatched it rudely from her hand, fixing her with a furious glare as he did so.

Linnet stared in surprise for a moment, then turned over the envelope.

“Oh, Simon, what a fool I am! It’s Richetti—not Ridgeway—and anyway of course my name isn’t Ridgeway now. I must apologize.”

She followed the little archaeologist up to the stern of the boat.

“I am so sorry, Signor Richetti. You see my name was Ridgeway before I married, and I haven’t been married very long, and so….”

She paused, her face dimpled with smiles, inviting him to smile upon a young bride’s faux pas.

But Richetti was obviously “not amused.” Queen Victoria at her most disapproving could not have looked more grim. “Names should be read carefully. It is inexcusable to be careless in these matters.”

Linnet bit her lip and her colour rose. She was not accustomed to have her apologies received in this fashion. She turned away and, rejoining Simon, said angrily, “These Italians are really insupportable.”

“Never mind, darling; let’s go and look at that big ivory crocodile you liked.”

They went ashore together.

Poirot, watching them walk up the landing stage, heard a sharp indrawn breath. He turned to see Jacqueline de Bellefort at his side. Her hands were clenched on the rail. The expression on her face, as she turned it towards him, quite startled him. It was no longer gay or malicious. She looked devoured by some inner consuming fire.

“They don’t care anymore.” The words came low and fast. “They’ve got beyond me. I can’t reach them…They don’t mind if I’m here or not…I can’t—I can’t hurt them anymore….”

Her hands on the rail trembled.

“Mademoiselle—”

She broke in: “Oh, it’s too late now—too late for warnings…You were right. I ought not to have come. Not on this journey. What did you call it? A journey of the soul? I can’t go back; I’ve got to go on. And I’m going on. They shan’t be happy together; they shan’t. I’d kill him sooner….”

She turned abruptly away. Poirot, staring after her, felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Your girl friend seems a trifle upset, Monsieur Poirot.” Poirot turned. He stared in surprise, seeing an old acquaintance.

“Colonel Race.”

The tall bronzed man smiled.

“Bit of a surprise, eh?”

Hercule Poirot had come across Colonel Race a year previously in London. They had been fellow guests at a very strange dinner party—a dinner party that had ended in death for that strange man, their host.

Poirot knew that Race was a man of unadvertised goings and comings. He was usually to be found in one of the outposts of Empire where trouble was brewing.

“So you are here at Wadi Halfa,” he remarked thoughtfully.

“I am here on this boat.”

“You mean?”

“That I am making the return journey with you to Shellal.”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“That is very interesting. Shall we, perhaps, have a little drink?”

They went into the observation saloon, now quite empty. Poirot ordered a whisky for the Colonel and a double orangeade full of sugar for himself.

“So you make the return journey with us,” said Poirot as he sipped. “You would go faster, would you not, on the Government steamer, which travels by night as well as day?”

Colonel Race’s face creased appreciatively.

“You’re right on the spot as usual, Monsieur Poirot,” he said pleasantly.

“It is, then, the passengers?”

“One of the passengers.”

“Now which one, I wonder?” Hercule Poirot asked of the ornate ceiling.

“Unfortunately I don’t know myself,” said Race ruefully.

Poirot looked interested.

Race said: “There’s no need to be mysterious to you. We’ve had a good deal of trouble out here—one way and another. It isn’t the people who ostensibly lead the rioters that we’re after. It’s the men who very cleverly put the match to the gunpowder. There were three of them. One’s dead. One’s in prison. I want the third man—a man with five or six cold-blooded murders to his credit. He’s one of the cleverest paid agitators that ever existed…He’s on this boat. I know that from a passage in a letter that passed through our hands. Decoded it said: ‘X will be on the Karnak trip seventh to thirteenth.’ It didn’t say under what name X would be passing.”

“Have you any description of him?”

“No. American, Irish, and French descent. Bit of a mongrel. That doesn’t help us much. Have you got any ideas?”

“An idea—it is all very well,” said Poirot meditatively.

Such was the understanding between them that Race pressed him no further. He knew Hercule Poirot did not ever speak unless he was sure.

Poirot rubbed his nose and said unhappily: “There passes itself something on this boat that causes me much inquietude.”

Race looked at him inquiringly.

“Figure to yourself,” said Poirot, “a person A who has grievously wronged a person B. The person B desires the revenge. The person B makes the threats.”

“A and B being both on this boat?”

Poirot nodded. “Precisely.”

“And B, I gather, being a woman?”

“Exactly.”

Race lit a cigarette.

“I shouldn’t worry. People who go about talking of what they are going to do don’t usually do it.”

"And particularly is that the case with les femmes, you would say! Yes, that is true."

But he still did not look happy.

"Anything else?" asked Race.

"Yes, there is something. Yesterday the person A had a very near escape from death, the kind of death that might very conveniently be called an accident."

"Engineered by B?"

"No, that is just the point. B could have had nothing to do with it."

"Then it was an accident."

"I suppose so—but I don't like such accidents."

"You're quite sure B could have had no hand in it?"

"Absolutely."

"Oh, well, coincidences do happen. Who is A, by the way? A particularly disagreeable person?"

"On the contrary. A is a charming, rich, and beautiful young lady."

Race grinned.

"Sounds quite like a novelette."

"Peut-être. But I tell you, I am not happy, my friend. If I am right, and after all I am constantly in the habit of being right"—Race smiled into his moustache at this typical utterance—"then there is matter for grave inquietude. And now, you come to add yet another complication. You tell me that there is a man on the Karnak who kills."

"He doesn't usually kill charming young ladies."

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“I am afraid, my friend,” he said. “I am afraid…Today, I advised this lady, Madame Doyle, to go with her husband to Khartoum, not to return on this boat. But they would not agree. I pray to Heaven that we may arrive at Shellal without catastrophe.”

“Aren’t you taking rather a gloomy view?”

Poirot shook his head.

“I am afraid,” he said simply. “Yes, I, Hercule Poirot, I’m afraid….”

Twelve

I

Cornelia Robson stood inside the temple of Abu Simbel. It was the evening of the following day—a hot still evening. The Karnak was anchored once more at Abu Simbel to permit a second visit to be made to the temple, this time by artificial light. The difference this made was considerable, and Cornelia commented wonderingly on the fact to Mr. Ferguson, who was standing by her side.

“Why, you see it ever so much better now!” she exclaimed. “All those enemies having their heads cut off by the King—they just stand right out. That’s a cute kind of castle there that I never noticed before. I wish Dr. Bessner was here, he’d tell me what it was.”

“How you can stand that old fool beats me,” said Ferguson gloomily.

“Why, he’s just one of the kindest men I’ve ever met.”

“Pompous old bore.”

“I don’t think you ought to speak that way.”

The young man gripped her suddenly by the arm. They were just emerging from the temple into the moonlight.

“Why do you stick being bored by fat old men—and bullied and snubbed by a vicious old harridan?”

“Why, Mr. Ferguson!”

“Haven’t you got any spirit? Don’t you know you’re just as good as she is?”

“But I’m not!” Cornelia spoke with honest conviction.

“You’re not as rich; that’s all you mean.”

“No, it isn’t. Cousin Marie’s very cultured, and—”

“Cultured!” The young man let go of her arm as suddenly as he had taken it. “That word makes me sick.”

Cornelia looked at him in alarm.

“She doesn’t like you talking to me, does she?” asked the young man.

Cornelia blushed and looked embarrassed.

“Why? Because she thinks I’m not her social equal! Pah! Doesn’t that make you see red?”

Cornelia faltered out: “I wish you wouldn’t get so mad about things.”

“Don’t you realize—and you an American—that everyone is born free and equal?”

“They’re not,” said Cornelia with calm certainty.

“My good girl, it’s part of your constitution!”

“Cousin Marie says politicians aren’t gentlemen,” said Cornelia. “And of course people aren’t equal. It doesn’t make sense. I know I’m kind of homely-looking, and I used to feel mortified about it sometimes, but I’ve got over that. I’d like to have been born elegant and beautiful like Mrs. Doyle, but I wasn’t, so I guess it’s no use worrying.”

“Mrs. Doyle!” exclaimed Ferguson with deep contempt. “She’s the sort of woman who ought to be shot as an example.”

Cornelia looked at him anxiously.

“I believe it’s your digestion,” she said kindly. “I’ve got a special kind of pepsin that Cousin Marie tried once. Would you like to try it?”

Mr. Ferguson said: “You’re impossible!”

He turned and strode away. Cornelia went on towards the boat. Just as she was crossing the gangway he caught her up once more.

"You're the nicest person on the boat," he said. "And mind you remember it."

Blushing with pleasure Cornelia repaired to the observation saloon. Miss Van Schuyler was conversing with Dr. Bessner—an agreeable conversation dealing with certain royal patients of his.

Cornelia said guiltily: "I do hope I haven't been a long time, Cousin Marie."

Glancing at her watch, the old lady snapped: "You haven't exactly hurried, my dear. And what have you done with my velvet stole?"

Cornelia looked round.

"Shall I see if it's in the cabin, Cousin Marie?"

"Of course it isn't! I had it just after dinner in here, and I haven't moved out of the place. It was on that chair."

Cornelia made a desultory search.

"I can't see it anywhere, Cousin Marie."

"Nonsense!" said Miss Van Schuyler. "Look about." It was an order such as one might give to a dog, and in her doglike fashion Cornelia obeyed. The quiet Mr. Fanthorp, who was sitting at a table near by, rose and assisted her. But the stole could not be found.

The day had been such an unusually hot and sultry one that most people had retired early after going ashore to view the temple. The Doyles were playing bridge with Pennington and Race at a table in a corner. The only other occupant of the saloon was Hercule Poirot, who was yawning his head off at a small table near the door.

Miss Van Schuyler, making a Royal Progress bedward, with Cornelia and Miss Bowers in attendance, paused by his chair. He sprang politely to his feet, stifling a yawn of gargantuan dimensions.

Miss Van Schuyler said: “I have only just realized who you are, Monsieur Poirot. I may tell you that I have heard of you from my old friend Rufus Van Aldin. You must tell me about your cases sometime.”

Poirot, his eyes twinkling a little through their sleepiness, bowed in an exaggerated manner. With a kindly but condescending nod, Miss Van Schuyler passed on.

Poirot yawned once more. He felt heavy and stupid with sleep and could hardly keep his eyes open. He glanced over at the bridge players, absorbed in their game, then at young Fanthorp, who was deep in a book. Apart from them the saloon was empty.

He passed through the swing door out on to the deck. Jacqueline de Bellefort, coming precipitately along the deck, almost collided with him.

“Pardon, Mademoiselle.”

She said: “You look sleepy, Monsieur Poirot.”

He admitted it frankly:

“Mais oui—I am consumed with sleep. I can hardly keep my eyes open. It has been a day very close and oppressive.”

“Yes.” She seemed to brood over it. “It’s been the sort of day when things—snap! Break! When one can’t go on….”

Her voice was low and charged with passion. She looked not at him, but towards the sandy shore. Her hands were clenched, rigid….

Suddenly the tension relaxed. She said: “Good night, Monsieur Poirot.”

“Good night, Mademoiselle.”

Her eyes met his, just for a swift moment. Thinking it over the next day, he came to the conclusion that there had been appeal in that glance. He was to remember it afterwards.

Then he passed on to his cabin and she went towards the saloon.

II

Cornelia, having dealt with Miss Van Schuyler's many needs and fantasies, took some needlework with her back to the saloon. She herself did not feel in the least sleepy. On the contrary she felt wide awake and slightly excited.

The bridge four were still at it. In another chair the quiet Fanthorp read a book. Cornelia sat down to her needlework.

Suddenly the door opened and Jacqueline de Bellefort came in. She stood in the doorway, her head thrown back. Then she pressed a bell and sauntered across to Cornelia and sat down.

"Been ashore?" she asked.

"Yes. I thought it was just fascinating in the moonlight."

Jacqueline nodded.

"Yes, lovely night…A real honeymoon night."

Her eyes went to the bridge table—rested a moment on Linnet Doyle.

The boy came in answer to the bell. Jacqueline ordered a double gin. As she gave the order Simon Doyle shot a quick glance at her. A faint line of anxiety showed between his eyebrows.

His wife said: "Simon, we're waiting for you to call."

Jacqueline hummed a little tune to herself. When the drink came, she picked it up, said: "Well, here's to crime," drank it off and ordered another.

Again Simon looked across from the bridge table. His calls became slightly absentminded. His partner, Pennington, took him to task.

Jacqueline began to hum again, at first under her breath, then louder:

“He was her man and he did her wrong….”

“Sorry,” said Simon to Pennington. “Stupid of me not to return your lead. That gives ’em rubber.”

Linnet rose to her feet.

“I’m sleepy. I think I’ll go to bed.”

“About time to turn in,” said Colonel Race.

“I’m with you,” agreed Pennington.

“Coming, Simon?”

Doyle said slowly: “Not just yet. I think I’ll have a drink first.”

Linnet nodded and went out. Race followed her. Pennington finished his drink and then followed suit.

Cornelia began to gather up her embroidery.

“Don’t go to bed, Miss Robson,” said Jacqueline. “Please don’t. I feel like making a night of it. Don’t desert me.”

Cornelia sat down again.

“We girls must stick together,” said Jacqueline.

She threw back her head and laughed—a shrill laugh without merriment.

The second drink came.

“Have something,” said Jacqueline.

“No, thank you very much,” replied Cornelia.

Jacqueline tilted back her chair. She hummed now loudly: “He was her man and he did her wrong….”

Mr. Fanthorp turned a page of Europe from Within.

Simon Doyle picked up a magazine.

“Really, I think I’ll go to bed,” said Cornelia. “It’s getting very late.”

“You can’t go to bed yet,” Jacqueline declared. “I forbid you to. Tell me about yourself.”

“Well—I don’t know. There isn’t much to tell,” Cornelia faltered. “I’ve just lived at home, and I haven’t been around much. This is my first trip to Europe. I’m just loving every minute of it.”

Jacqueline laughed.

“You’re a happy sort of person, aren’t you? God, I’d like to be you.”

“Oh, would you? But I mean—I’m sure—”

Cornelia felt flustered. Undoubtedly Miss de Bellefort was drinking too much. That wasn’t exactly a novelty to Cornelia. She had seen plenty of drunkenness during Prohibition years. But there was something else… Jacqueline de Bellefort was talking to her—was looking at her—and yet, Cornelia felt, it was as though, somehow, she was talking to someone else….

But there were only two other people in the room, Mr. Fanthorp and Mr. Doyle. Mr. Fanthorp seemed quite absorbed in his book. Mr. Doyle was looking rather odd—a queer sort of watchful look on his face.

Jacqueline said again: “Tell me all about yourself.”

Always obedient, Cornelia tried to comply. She talked, rather heavily, going into unnecessary small details about her daily life. She was so unused to being the talker. Her role was so constantly that of the listener. And yet Miss de Bellefort seemed to want to know. When Cornelia faltered to a standstill, the other girl was quick to prompt her.

“Go on—tell me more.”

And so Cornelia went on (“Of course, Mother’s very delicate—some days she touches nothing but cereals—”) unhappily conscious that all she said was supremely uninteresting, yet flattered by the other girl’s seeming interest. But was she interested? Wasn’t she, somehow, listening to something else—or, perhaps, for something else? She was looking at Cornelia, yes, but wasn’t there someone else, sitting in the room?

“And of course we get very good art classes, and last winter I had a course of—”

(How late was it? Surely very late. She had been talking and talking. If only something definite would happen—)

And immediately, as though in answer to her wish, something did happen. Only, at that moment, it seemed very natural.

Jacqueline turned her head and spoke to Simon Doyle.

“Ring the bell, Simon. I want another drink.”

Simon Doyle looked up from his magazine and said quietly: “The stewards have gone to bed. It’s after midnight.”

“I tell you I want another drink.”

Simon said: “You’ve had quite enough to drink, Jackie.”

She swung round at him.

“What damned business is it of yours?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “None.”

She watched him for a minute or two. Then she said: “What’s the matter, Simon? Are you afraid?”

Simon did not answer. Rather elaborately he picked up his magazine again.

Cornelia murmured: “Oh, dear—as late as that—I—must—”

She began to fumble, dropped a thimble….

Jacqueline said: “Don’t go to bed. I’d like another woman here—to support me.” She began to laugh again. “Do you know what Simon over there is afraid of? He’s afraid I’m going to tell you the story of my life.”

“Oh, really?”

Cornelia was the prey of conflicting emotions. She was deeply embarrassed but at the same time pleasurably thrilled. How—how black Simon Doyle was looking.

“Yes, it’s a very sad story,” said Jacqueline; her soft voice was low and mocking. “He treated me rather badly, didn’t you, Simon?”

Simon Doyle said brutally: “Go to bed, Jackie. You’re drunk.”

“If you’re embarrassed, Simon dear, you’d better leave the room.”

Simon Doyle looked at her. The hand that held the magazine shook a little, but he spoke bluntly.

“I’m staying,” he said.

Cornelia murmured for the third time, “I really must—it’s so late—”

“You’re not to go,” said Jacqueline. Her hand shot out and held the other girl in her chair. “You’re to stay and hear what I’ve go to say.”

“Jackie,” said Simon sharply, “you’re making a fool of yourself! For God’s sake, go to bed.”

Jacqueline sat up suddenly in her chair. Words poured from her rapidly in a soft hissing stream.

“You’re afraid of a scene, aren’t you? That’s because you’re so English—so reticent! You want me to behave ‘decently,’ don’t you? But I don’t care whether I behave decently or not! You’d better get out of here quickly—because I’m going to talk—a lot.”

Jim Fanthorp carefully shut his book, yawned, glanced at his watch, got up and strolled out. It was a very British and utterly unconvincing performance.

Jacqueline swung round in her chair and glared at Simon.

“You damned fool,” she said thickly, “do you think you can treat me as you have done and get away with it?”

Simon Doyle opened his lips, then shut them again. He sat quite still as though he were hoping that her outburst would exhaust itself if he said nothing to provoke her further.

Jacqueline’s voice came thick and blurred. It fascinated Cornelia, totally unused to naked emotions of any kind.

“I told you,” said Jacqueline, “that I’d kill you sooner than see you go to another woman…You don’t think I meant that? You’re wrong. I’ve only been—waiting! You’re my man! Do you hear? You belong to me….”

Still Simon did not speak. Jacqueline’s hand fumbled a moment or two on her lap. She leant forward.

“I told you I’d kill you and I meant it…” Her hand came up suddenly with something in it that flashed and gleamed. “I’ll shoot you like a dog—like the dirty dog you are….”

Now at last Simon acted. He sprang to his feet, but at the same moment she pulled the trigger….

Simon fell twisted—fell across a chair…Cornelia screamed and rushed to the door. Jim Fanthorp was on the deck leaning over the rail. She called to him.

“Mr. Fanthorp…Mr. Fanthorp….”

He ran to her; she clutched at him incoherently….

“She’s shot him—Oh! she’s shot him….”

Simon Doyle still lay as he had fallen half into and across a chair…Jacqueline stood as though paralysed. She was trembling violently, and her eyes, dilated and frightened, were staring at the crimson stain slowly soaking through Simon’s trouser leg just below the knee where he held a handkerchief close against the wound.

She stammered out:

“I didn’t mean…Oh, my God, I didn’t really mean….”

The pistol dropped from her nervous fingers with a clatter on the floor. She kicked it away with her foot. It slid under one of the settees.

Simon, his voice faint, murmured: “Fanthorp, for heaven’s sake—there’s someone coming…Say it’s all right—an accident—something. There mustn’t be a scandal over this.”

Fanthorp nodded in quick comprehension. He wheeled round to the door where a startled Nubian face showed. He said: “All right—all right! Just fun!”

The black face looked doubtful, puzzled, then reassured. The teeth showed in a wide grin. The boy nodded and went off.

Fanthorp turned back.

“That’s all right. Don’t think anybody else heard. Only sounded like a cork, you know. Now the next thing—”

He was startled. Jacqueline suddenly began to weep hysterically.

“Oh, God, I wish I were dead…I’ll kill myself.

I’ll be better dead…Oh, what have I done—what have I done?”

Cornelia hurried to her.

“Hush, dear, hush.”

Simon, his brow wet, his face twisted with pain, said urgently:

“Get her away. For God’s sake, get her out of here! Get her to her cabin, Fanthorp. Look here, Miss Robson, get that hospital nurse of yours.” He looked appealingly from one to the other of them. “Don’t leave her. Make quite sure she’s safe with the nurse looking after her. Then get hold of old Bessner and bring him here. For God’s sake, don’t let any news of this get to my wife.”

Jim Fanthorp nodded comprehendingly. The quiet young man was cool and competent in an emergency.

Between them, he and Cornelia got the weeping, struggling girl out of the saloon and along the deck to her cabin. There they had more trouble with her. She fought to free herself; her sobs redoubled.

“I’ll drown myself…I’ll drown myself….

I’m not fit to live…Oh, Simon—Simon!”

Fanthorp said to Cornelia: “Better get hold of Miss Bowers. I’ll stay while you get her.”

Cornelia nodded and hurried out.

As soon as she left, Jacqueline clutched Fanthorp.

“His leg—it’s bleeding—broken…He may bleed to death. I must go to him…Oh, Simon—Simon—how could I?”

Her voice rose. Fanthorp said urgently: “Quietly—quietly…He’ll be all right.”

She began to struggle again.

“Let me go! Let me throw myself overboard…Let me kill myself!”

Fanthorp holding her by the shoulders forced her back on to the bed.

“You must stay here. Don’t make a fuss. Pull yourself together. It’s all right, I tell you.”

To his relief, the distraught girl did manage to control herself a little, but he was thankful when the curtains were pushed aside and the efficient Miss Bowers, neatly dressed in a hideous kimono, entered, accompanied by Cornelia.

“Now then,” said Miss Bowers briskly, “what’s all this?”

She took charge without any sign of surprise and alarm.

Fanthorp thankfully left the overwrought girl in her capable hands and hurried along to the cabin occupied by Dr. Bessner. He knocked and entered on top of the knock.

“Dr. Bessner?”

A terrific snore resolved itself, and a startled voice asked: “So? What is it?”

By this time Fanthorp had switched the light on. The doctor blinked up at him, looking rather like a large owl.

“It’s Doyle. He’s been shot. Miss de Bellefort shot him. He’s in the saloon. Can you come?”

The stout doctor reacted promptly. He asked a few curt questions, pulled on his bedroom slippers and a dressing-gown, picked up a little case of necessaries and accompanied Fanthorp to the lounge.

Simon had managed to get the window beside him open. He was leaning his head against it, inhaling the air. His face was a ghastly colour.

Dr. Bessner came over to him.

“Ha? So? What have we here?”

A handkerchief sodden with blood lay on the carpet, and on the carpet itself was a dark stain.

The doctor’s examination was punctuated with Teutonic grunts and exclamations.

“Yes, it is bad this…The bone is fractured. And a big loss of blood. Herr Fanthorp, you and I must get him to my cabin. So—like this. He cannot walk. We must carry him, thus.”

As they lifted him Cornelia appeared in the doorway. Catching sight of her, the doctor uttered a grunt of satisfaction.

“Ach, it is you? Goot. Come with us. I have need of assistance. You will be better than my friend here. He looks a little pale already.”

Fanthorp emitted a rather sickly smile.

“Shall I get Miss Bowers?” he asked.

“You will do very well, young lady,” he announced. “You will not faint or be foolish, hein?”

“I can do what you tell me,” said Cornelia eagerly.

Bessner nodded in a satisfied fashion.

The procession passed along the deck.

The next ten minutes were purely surgical and Mr. Jim Fanthorp did not enjoy it at all. He felt secretly ashamed of the superior fortitude exhibited by Cornelia.

“So, that is the best I can do,” announced Dr. Bessner at last. “You have been a hero, my friend.” He patted Simon approvingly on the shoulder. Then he rolled up his sleeve and produced a hypodermic needle.

“And now I will give you something to make you sleep. Your wife, what about her?”

Simon said weakly: “She needn’t know till the morning…” He went on: “I—you mustn’t blame Jackie…It’s been all my fault. I treated her disgracefully…poor kid—she didn’t know what she was doing….”

Dr. Bessner nodded comprehendingly.

“Yes, yes—I understand….”

“My fault—” Simon urged. His eyes went to Cornelia. “Someone—ought to stay with her. She might—hurt herself—”

Dr. Bessner injected the needle. Cornelia said, with quiet competence: It’s all right, Mr. Doyle. Miss Bowers is going to stay with her all night….”

A grateful look flashed over Simon’s face. His body relaxed. His eyes closed. Suddenly he jerked them open. “Fanthorp?”

“Yes, Doyle.”

“The pistol…ought not to leave it…lying about. The boys will find it in the morning….”

Fanthorp nodded. “Quite right. I’ll go and get hold of it now.”

He went out of the cabin and along the deck. Miss Bowers appeared at the door of Jacqueline’s cabin.

“She’ll be all right now,” she announced.

“I’ve given her a morphine injection.”

“But you’ll stay with her?”

“Oh, yes. Morphia excites some people. I shall stay all night.”

Fanthorp went on to the lounge.

Some three minutes later there was a tap on Bessner’s cabin door.

“Dr. Bessner?”

“Yes?” The stout man appeared.

Fanthorp beckoned him out on the deck.

“Look here—I can’t find that pistol….”

“What is that?”

“The pistol. It dropped out of the girl’s hand. She kicked it away and it went under a settee. It isn’t under that settee now.”

They stared at each other.

“But who can have taken it?”

Fanthorp shrugged his shoulders.

Bessner said: “It is curious, that. But I do not see what we can do about it.”

Puzzled and vaguely alarmed, the two men separated.

Thirteen

Hercule Poirot was just wiping the lather from his freshly shaved face when there was a quick tap on the door, and hard on top of it Colonel Race entered unceremoniously. He closed the door behind him.

He said: “Your instinct was quite correct. It’s happened.”

Poirot straightened up and asked sharply: “What has happened?”

“Linnet Doyle’s dead—shot through the head last night.”

Poirot was silent for a minute, two memories vividly before him—a girl in a garden at Assuan saying in a hard breathless voice: “I’d like to put my dear little pistol against her head and just press the trigger,” and another more recent memory, the same voice saying: “One feels one can’t go on—the kind of day when something breaks”—and that strange momentary flash of appeal in her eyes. What had been the matter with him not to respond to that appeal? He had been blind, deaf, stupid with his need for sleep….

Race went on: “I’ve got some slight official standing; they sent for me, put it in my hands. The boat’s due to start in half an hour, but it will be delayed till I give the word. There’s a possibility, of course, that the murderer came from the shore.”

Poirot shook his head.

Race acquiesced in the gesture.

“I agree. One can pretty well rule that out. Well, man, it’s up to you. This is your show.”

Poirot had been attiring himself with a neat-fingered celerity. He said now: “I am at your disposal.”

The two men stepped out on the deck.

Race said: “Bessner should be there by now. I sent the steward for him.”

There were four cabins de luxe, with bathrooms, on the boat. Of the two on the port side one was occupied by Dr. Bessner, the other by Andrew Pennington. On the starboard side the first was occupied by Miss Van Schuyler, and the one next to it by Linnet Doyle. Her husband’s dressing cabin was next door.

A white-faced steward was standing outside the door of Linnet Doyle’s cabin. He opened the door for them and they passed inside. Dr. Bessner was bending over the bed. He looked up and grunted as the other two entered.

“What can you tell us, Doctor, about this business?” asked Race.

Bessner rubbed his unshaven jaw meditatively.

“Ach! She was shot—shot at close quarters. See—here just above the ear—that is where the bullet entered. A very little bullet—I should say a twenty-two. The pistol, it was held close against her head, see, there is blackening here, the skin is scorched.”

Again in a sick wave of memory Poirot thought of those words uttered in Assuan.

Bessner went on: “She was asleep; there was no struggle; the murderer crept up in the dark and shot her as she lay there.”

“Ah! non!” Poirot cried out. His sense of psychology was outraged. Jacqueline de Bellefort creeping into a darkened cabin, pistol in hand—no, it did not “fit,” that picture.

Bessner stared at him with his thick lenses.

“But that is what happened, I tell you.”

“Yes, yes. I did not mean what you thought. I was not contradicting you.”

Bessner gave a satisfied grunt.

Poirot came up and stood beside him. Linnet Doyle was lying on her side. Her attitude was natural and peaceful. But above the ear was a tiny hole with an incrustation of dried blood round it.

Poirot shook his head sadly.

Then his gaze fell on the white painted wall just in front of him and he drew in his breath sharply. Its white neatness was marred by a big wavering letter J scrawled in some brownish-red medium.

Poirot stared at it, then he leaned over the dead girl and very gently picked up her right hand. One finger of it was stained a brownish-red.

“Non d’un nom d’un nom!” ejaculated Hercule Poirot.

“Eh? What is that?”

Dr. Bessner looked up.

“Ach! That.”

Race said: “Well, I’m damned. What do you make of that, Poirot?”

Poirot swayed a little on his toes.

“You ask me what I make of it. Eh bien, it is very simple, is it not? Madame Doyle is dying; she wishes to indicate her murderer, and so she writes with her finger, dipped in her own blood, the initial letter of her murderer’s name. Oh, yes, it is astonishingly simple.”

“Ach, but—”

Dr. Bessner was about to break out, but a peremptory gesture from Race silenced him.

“So it strikes you that?” he asked slowly.

Poirot turned round on him nodding his head.

“Yes, yes. It is, as I say, of an astonishing simplicity! It is so familiar, is it not? It has been done so often, in the pages of the romance of crime! It is now, indeed, a little vieux jeu! It leads one to suspect that our murderer is—old-fashioned!”

“C’est de l’enfantillage,” agreed Poirot.

“But it was done with a purpose,” suggested Race.

“That—naturally,” agreed Poirot, and his face was grave.

“What does J stand for?” asked Race.

Poirot replied promptly: “J stands for Jacqueline de Bellefort, a young lady who declared to me less than a week ago that she would like nothing better than to—” he paused and then deliberately quoted, “‘to put my dear little pistol close against her head and then just press with my finger—’”

“Gott im Himmel” exclaimed Dr. Bessner.

There was a momentary silence. Then Race drew a deep breath and said: “Which is just what was done here?”

Bessner nodded.

“That is so, yes. It was a pistol of very small calibre—as I say, probably a twenty-two. The bullet has got to be extracted, of course, before we can say definitely.”

Race nodded in swift comprehension. Then he asked: “What about time of death?”

Bessner stroked his jaw again. His fingers made a rasping sound.

“I would not care to be too precise. It is now eight o’clock. I will say, with due regard to the temperature last night, that she has been dead certainly six hours and probably not longer than eight.”

“That puts it between midnight and two a.m.”

"That is so."

There was a pause. Race looked around.

"What about her husband? I suppose he sleeps in the cabin next door."

"At the moment," said Dr. Bessner, "he is asleep in my cabin." Both men looked very surprised.

Bessner nodded his head several times.

"Ach, so. I see you have not been told about that. Mr. Doyle was shot last night in the saloon."

"Shot? By whom?"

"By the young lady, Jacqueline de Bellefort."

Race asked sharply, "Is he badly hurt?"

"Yes, the bone is splintered. I have done all that is possible at the moment, but it is necessary, you understand, that the fracture should be X-rayed as soon as possible and proper treatment given such as is impossible on this boat."

Poirot murmured: "Jacqueline de Bellefort."

His eyes went again to the J on the wall.

Race said abruptly: "If there is nothing more we can do here for the moment, let's go below. The management has put the smoking room at our disposal. We must get the details of what happened last night."

They left the cabin. Race locked the door and took the key with him.

"We can come back later," he said. "The first thing to do is to get all the facts clear."

They went down to the deck below, where they found the manager of the Karnak waiting uneasily in the doorway of the smoking room. The poor man was terribly upset and worried over the whole business, and was eager to leave everything in Colonel Race’s hands.

“I feel I can’t do better than leave it to you, sir, seeing your official position. I’d had orders to put myself at your disposal in the—er—other matter. If you will take charge, I’ll see that everything is done as you wish.”

“Good man! To begin with I’d like this room kept clear for me and Monsieur Poirot during this inquiry.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“That’s all at present. Go on with your own work. I know where to find you.”

Looking slightly relieved, the manager left the room.

Race said, “Sit down, Bessner, and let’s have the whole story of what happened last night.”

They listened in silence to the doctor’s rumbling voice.

“Clear enough,” said Race, when he had finished. “The girl worked herself up, helped by a drink or two, and finally took a pot shot at the man with a twenty-two pistol. Then she went along to Linnet Doyle’s cabin and shot her as well.”

But Dr. Bessner was shaking his head.

“No, no, I do not think so. I do not think that was possible. For one thing she would not write her own initial on the wall; it would be ridiculous, nicht wahr?”

“She might,” Race declared, “if she were as blindly mad and jealous as she sounds; she might want to—well—sign her name to the crime, so to speak.”

Poirot shook his head. “No, no, I do not think she would be as—as crude as that.”

“Then there’s only one reason for that J. It was put there by someone else deliberately to throw suspicion on her.”

Bessner nodded. “Yes, and the criminal was unlucky, because, you see, it is not only unlikely that the young Fräulein did the murder; it is also I think impossible.”

“How’s that?”

Bessner explained Jacqueline’s hysterics and the circumstances which had led Miss Bowers to take charge of her.

“And I think—I am sure—that Miss Bowers stayed with her all night.”

Race said: “If that’s so, it’s going to simplify matters very much.”

“Who discovered the crime?” Poirot asked.

“Mrs. Doyle’s maid, Louise Bourget. She went to call her mistress as usual, found her dead, and came out and flopped into the steward’s arms in a dead faint. He went to the manager, who came to me. I got hold of Bessner and then came for you.”

Poirot nodded.

Race said: “Doyle’s got to know. You say he’s asleep still?”

Bessner nodded. “Yes, he’s still asleep in my cabin. I gave him a strong opiate last night.”

Race turned to Poirot.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think we need detain the doctor any longer, eh? Thank you, Doctor.”

Bessner rose. “I will have my breakfast, yes. And then I will go back to my cabin and see if Mr. Doyle is ready to wake.”

“Thanks.”

Bessner went out. The two men looked at each other.

“Well, what about it, Poirot?” Race asked. “You’re the man in charge. I’ll take my orders from you. You say what’s to be done.”

Poirot bowed.

“Eh bien!” he said, “we must hold the court of inquiry. First of all, I think we must verify the story of the affair last night. That is to say, we must question Fanthorp and Miss Robson, who were the actual witnesses of what occurred. The disappearance of the pistol is very significant.”

Race rang a bell and sent a message by the steward.

Poirot sighed and shook his head. “It is bad, this,” he murmured. “It is bad.”

“Have you any ideas?” asked Race curiously.

“My ideas conflict. They are not well arranged; they are not orderly. There is, you see, the big fact that this girl hated Linnet Doyle and wanted to kill her.”

“You think she’s capable of it?”

“I think so—yes.” Poirot sounded doubtful.

“But not in this way? That’s what’s worrying you, isn’t it? Not to creep into her cabin in the dark and shoot her while she was sleeping. It’s the cold-bloodedness that strikes you as not ringing true.”

“In a sense, yes.”

“You think that this girl, Jacqueline de Bellefort, is incapable of a premeditated cold-blooded murder?”

Poirot said slowly: “I am not sure, you see. She would have the brains—yes. But I doubt if, physically, she could bring herself to do the act….”

Race nodded. “Yes, I see…Well, according to Bessner’s story, it would also have been physically impossible.”

“If that is true it clears the ground considerably. Let us hope it is true.” Poirot paused and then added simply: “I shall be glad if it is so, for I have for that little one much sympathy.”

The door opened and Fanthorp and Cornelia came in. Bessner followed them.

Cornelia gasped out: “Isn’t this just awful? Poor, poor Mrs. Doyle! And she was so lovely too. It must have been a real fiend who could hurt her! And poor Mr. Doyle; he’ll go half crazy when he knows! Why, even last night he was so frightfully worried lest she should hear about his accident.”

“That is just what we want you to tell us about, Miss Robson,” said Race. “We want to know exactly what happened last night.”

Cornelia began a little confusedly, but a question or two from Poirot helped matters.

“Ah, yes, I understand. After the bridge, Madame Doyle went to her cabin. Did she really go to her cabin, I wonder?”

“She did,” said Race. “I actually saw her. I said good night to her at the door.”

“And the time?”

“Mercy, I couldn’t say,” replied Cornelia.

“It was twenty past eleven,” said Race.

“Bien. Then at twenty past eleven, Madame Doyle was alive and well. At that moment there was, in the saloon, who?”

Fanthorp answered: “Doyle was there. And Miss de Bellefort. Myself and Miss Robson.”

“That’s so,” agreed Cornelia. “Mr. Pennington had a drink and then went off to bed.”

“That was how much later?”

“Oh, about three or four minutes.”

“Before half-past eleven, then?”

“Oh, yes.”

“So that there were left in the saloon you, Mademoiselle Robson, Mademoiselle de Bellefort, Monsieur Doyle, and Monsieur Fanthorp. What were you all doing?”

“Mr. Fanthorp was reading a book. I’d got some embroidery. Miss de Bellefort was—she was—”

Fanthorp came to the rescue. “She was drinking pretty heavily.”

“Yes,” agreed Cornelia. “She was talking to me mostly and asking me about things at home. And she kept saying things—to me mostly, but I think they were kind of meant for Mr. Doyle. He was getting kind of mad at her, but he didn’t say anything. I think he thought if he kept quiet she might simmer down.

“But she didn’t?”

Cornelia shook her head.

“I tried to go once or twice, but she made me stay, and I was getting very, very uncomfortable. And then Mr. Fanthorp got up and went out—”

“It was a little embarrassing,” said Fanthorp. “I thought I’d make an unobtrusive exit. Miss de Bellefort was clearly working up for a scene.”

“And then she pulled out the pistol,” went on Cornelia, “and Mr. Doyle jumped up to try and get it away from her, and it went off and shot him through the leg; and then she began to sob and cry—and I was scared to death and ran out after Mr. Fanthorp, and he came back with me, and Mr. Doyle said not to make a fuss, and one of the Nubian boys heard the noise of the shot and came along, but Mr. Fanthorp told him it was all right; and then we got Jacqueline away to her cabin, and Mr. Fanthorp stayed with her while I got Miss Bowers.” Cornelia paused breathless.

“What time was this?” asked Race.

Cornelia said again, “Mercy, I don’t know,” but Fanthorp answered promptly:

“It must have been about twenty minutes past twelve. I know that it was actually half-past twelve when I finally got to my cabin.”

“Now let me be quite sure on one or two points,” said Poirot. “After Madame Doyle left the saloon, did any of you four leave it?”

“No.”

“You are quite certain Mademoiselle de Bellefort did not leave the saloon at all?”

Fanthorp answered promptly: “Positive. Neither Doyle, Miss de Bellefort, Miss Robson, nor myself left the saloon.”

“Good. That establishes the fact that Mademoiselle de Bellefort could not possibly have shot Madame Doyle before—let us say—twenty past twelve. Now, Mademoiselle Robson, you went to fetch Mademoiselle Bowers. Was Mademoiselle de Bellefort alone in her cabin during that period?”

“No. Mr. Fanthorp stayed with her.”

“Good! So far, Mademoiselle de Bellefort has a perfect alibi. Mademoiselle Bowers is the next person to interview, but, before I send for her, I should like to have your opinion on one or two points. Monsieur Doyle, you say, was very anxious that Mademoiselle de Bellefort should not be left alone. Was he afraid, do you think, that she was contemplating some further rash act?"

"That is my opinion," said Fanthorp.

"He was definitely afraid she might attack Madame Doyle?"

"No." Fanthorp shook his head. "I don't think that was his idea at all. I think he was afraid she might—er—do something rash to herself."

"Suicide?"

"Yes. You see, she seemed completely sobered and heartbroken at what she had done. She was full of self-reproach. She kept saying she would be better dead."

Cornelia said timidly: "I think he was rather upset about her. He spoke—quite nicely. He said it was all his fault—that he'd treated her badly. He—he was really very nice."

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "Now about that pistol," he went on. "What happened to that?"

"She dropped it," said Cornelia.

"And afterwards?"

Fanthorp explained how he had gone back to search for it, but had not been able to find it.

"Aha!" said Poirot. "Now we begin to arrive. Let us, I pray you, be very precise. Describe to me exactly what happened."

"Miss de Bellefort let it fall. Then she kicked it away from her with her foot."

"She sort of hated it," explained Cornelia. "I know just what she felt."

“And it went under a settee, you say. Now be very careful. Mademoiselle de Bellefort did not recover that pistol before she left the saloon?”

Both Fanthorp and Cornelia were positive on that point.

“Précisément. I seek only to be very exact, you comprehend. Then we arrive at this point. When Mademoiselle de Bellefort leaves the saloon the pistol is under the settee, and, since Mademoiselle de Bellefort is not left alone—Monsieur Fanthorp, Mademoiselle Robson or Mademoiselle Bowers being with her—she has no opportunity to get back the pistol after she left the saloon. What time was it, Monsieur Fanthorp, when you went back to look for it?”

“It must have been just before half-past twelve.”

“And how long would have elapsed between the time you and Dr. Bessner carried Monsieur Doyle out of the saloon until you returned to look for the pistol?”

“Perhaps five minutes—perhaps a little more.”

“Then in that five minutes someone removes that pistol from where it lay out of sight under the settee. That someone was not Mademoiselle de Bellefort. Who was it? It seems highly probable that the person who removed it was the murderer of Madame Doyle. We may assume, too, that the person had overheard or seen something of the events immediately preceding.”

“I don’t see how you make that out,” objected Fanthorp.

“Because,” said Hercule Poirot, “you have just told us that the pistol was out of sight under the settee. Therefore it is hardly credible that it was discovered by accident. It was taken by someone who knew it was there. Therefore that someone must have assisted at the scene.”

Fanthorp shook his head. “I saw no one when I went out on the deck just before the shot was fired.”

“Ah, but you went out by the door on the starboard side.”

“Yes. The same side as my cabin.”

“Then if there had been anybody at the port door looking through the glass you would not have seen him?”

“No,” admitted Fanthorp.

“Did anyone hear the shot except the Nubian boy?”

“Not as far as I know.”

Fanthorp went on: “You see, the windows in here were all closed. Miss Van Schuyler felt a draught earlier in the evening. The swing doors were shut. I doubt if the shot would be clearly heard. It would only sound like the pop of a cork.”

Race said: “As far as I know, no one seems to have heard the other shot—the shot that killed Mrs. Doyle.”

“That we will inquire into presently,” said Poirot.

“For the moment we still concern ourselves with Mademoiselle de Bellefort. We must speak to Mademoiselle Bowers. But first, before you go”—he arrested Fanthorp and Cornelia with a gesture—“you will give me a little information about yourselves. Then it will not be necessary to call you again later. You first, Monsieur—your full name.”

“James Lechdale Fanthorp.”

“Address?”

“Glasmore House, Market Donnington, Northamptonshire.”

“Your profession?”

“I am a lawyer.”

“And your reasons for visiting this country?”

There was a pause. For the first time the impassive Mr. Fanthorp seemed taken aback. He said at last, almost mumbling the words, “Er—pleasure.”

“Aha!” said Poirot. “You take the holiday; that is it, yes?”

“Er—yes.”

“Very well, Monsieur Fanthorp. Will you give me a brief account of your own movements last night after the events we have just been narrating?”

“I went straight to bed.”

“That was at—?”

“Just after half-past twelve.”

“Your cabin is number twenty-two on the starboard side—the one nearest the saloon.”

“Yes.”

“I will ask you one more question. Did you hear anything—anything at all—after you went to your cabin?”

Fanthorp considered.

“I turned in very quickly. I think I heard a kind of splash just as I was dropping off to sleep. Nothing else.”

“You heard a kind of splash? Near at hand?”

Fanthorp shook his head.

“Really, I couldn’t say. I was half asleep.”

“And what time would that be?”

"It might have been about one o'clock. I can't really say."

"Thank you, Monsieur Fanthorp. That is all."

Poirot turned his attention to Cornelia.

"And now, Mademoiselle Robson. Your full name?"

"Cornelia Ruth. And my address is The Red House, Bellfield, Connecticut."

"What brought you to Egypt?"

"Cousin Marie, Miss Van Schuyler, brought me along on a trip."

"Had you ever met Madame Doyle previous to this journey?"

"No, never."

"And what did you do last night?"

"I went right to bed after helping Dr. Bessner with Mr. Doyle's leg."

"Your cabin is—?"

"Forty-three on the port side—right next door to Miss de Bellefort."

"And did you hear anything?"

Cornelia shook her head. "I didn't hear a thing."

"No splash?"

"No, but then I wouldn't, because the boat's against the bank on my side."

Poirot nodded. "Thank you, Mademoiselle Robson. Now perhaps you will be so kind as to ask Mademoiselle Bowers to come here."

Fanthorp and Cornelia went out.

“That seems clear enough,” said Race. “Unless three independent witnesses are lying, Jacqueline de Bellefort couldn’t have got hold of the pistol. But somebody did. And somebody overheard the scene. And somebody was B.F. enough to write a big J on the wall.”

There was a tap on the door and Miss Bowers entered. The hospital nurse sat down in her usual composed efficient manner. In answer to Poirot she gave her name, address, and qualifications, adding: “I’ve been looking after Miss Van Schuyler for over two years now.”

“Is Mademoiselle Van Schuyler’s health very bad?”

“Why, no, I wouldn’t say that,” replied Miss Bowers. “She’s not very young, and she’s nervous about herself, and she likes to have a nurse around handy. There’s nothing serious the matter with her. She just likes plenty of attention, and she’s willing to pay for it.”

Poirot nodded comprehendingly. Then he said: “I understand that Mademoiselle Robson fetched you last night?”

“Why, yes, that’s so.”

“Will you tell me exactly what happened?”

“Well, Miss Robson just gave me a brief outline of what had occurred, and I came along with her. I found Miss de Bellefort in a very excited, hysterical condition.”

“Did she utter any threats against Madame Doyle?”

“No, nothing of that kind. She was in a condition of morbid self-reproach. She’d taken a good deal of alcohol, I should say, and she was suffering from reaction. I didn’t think she ought to be left. I gave her a shot of morphia and sat with her.”

“Now, Mademoiselle Bowers, I want you to answer this. Did Mademoiselle de Bellefort leave her cabin at all?”

“No, she did not.”

“And you yourself?”

“I stayed with her until early this morning.”

“You are quite sure of that?”

“Absolutely sure.”

“Thank you, Mademoiselle Bowers.”

The nurse went out. The two men looked at each other.

Jacqueline de Bellefort was definitely cleared of the crime. Who then had shot Linnet Doyle?

Fourteen

Race said: “Someone pinched the pistol. It wasn’t Jacqueline de Bellefort. Someone knew enough to feel that his crime would be attributed to her. But that someone did not know that a hospital nurse was going to give her morphia and sit up with her all night. And one thing more. Someone had already attempted to kill Linnet Doyle by rolling a boulder over the cliff; that someone was not Jacqueline de Bellefort. Who was it?”

Poirot said: “It will be simpler to say who it could not have been. Neither Monsieur Doyle, Madame Allerton, Monsieur Allerton, Mademoiselle Van Schuyler, nor Mademoiselle Bowers could have had anything to do with it. They were all within my sight.”

“H’m,” said Race; “that leaves rather a large field. What about motive?

“That is where I hope Monsieur Doyle may be able to help us. There have been several incidents—”

The door opened and Jacqueline de Bellefort entered. She was very pale and she stumbled a little as she walked.

“I didn’t do it,” she said. Her voice was that of a frightened child. “I didn’t do it. Oh, please believe me. Everyone will think I did it—but I didn’t—I didn’t. It’s—it’s awful. I wish it hadn’t happened. I might have killed Simon last night; I was mad, I think. But I didn’t do the other….”

She sat down and burst into tears.

Poirot patted her on the shoulder.

“There, there. We know that you did not kill Madame Doyle. It is proved—yes, proved, mon enfant. It was not you.”

Jackie sat up suddenly, her wet handkerchief clasped in her hand.

“But who did?”

“That,” said Poirot, “is just the question we are asking ourselves. You cannot help us there, my child?”

Jacqueline shook her head.

“I don’t know…I can’t imagine…No, I haven’t the faintest idea.” She frowned deeply. “No,” she said at last. “I can’t think of anyone who wanted her dead.” Her voice faltered a little. “Except me.”

Race said: “Excuse me a minute—just thought of something.” He hurried out of the room.

Jacqueline de Bellefort sat with her head downcast, nervously twisting her fingers. She broke out suddenly: “Death’s horrible—horrible! I—hate the thought of it.”

Poirot said: “Yes. It is not pleasant to think, is it, that now, at this very moment, someone is rejoicing at the successful carrying out of his or her plan.”

“Don’t—don’t!” cried Jackie. “It sounds horrible, the way you put it.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “It is true.”

Jackie said in a low voice: “I—I wanted her dead—and she is dead…And, what is worse…she died—just like I said.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle. She was shot through the head.”

She cried out: “Then I was right, that night at the Cataract Hotel. There was someone listening!”

“Ah!” Poirot nodded his head. “I wondered if you would remember that. Yes, it is altogether too much of a coincidence—that Madame Doyle should be killed in just the way you described.”

Jackie shuddered.

“That man that night—who can he have been?”

Poirot was silent for a minute or two, then he said in quite a different tone of voice: “You are sure it was a man, Mademoiselle?”

Jackie looked at him in surprise.

“Yes, of course. At least—”

“Well, Mademoiselle?”

She frowned, half closing her eyes in an effort to remember. She said slowly: “I thought it was a man….”

“But now you are not so sure?”

Jackie said slowly: “No, I can’t be certain. I just assumed it was a man—but it was really just a—a figure—a shadow….”

She paused and then, as Poirot did not speak, she added: “You think it must have been a woman? But surely none of the women on this boat can have wanted to kill Linnet?”

Poirot merely moved his head from side to side.

The door opened and Bessner appeared.

“Will you come and speak with Mr. Doyle, please, Monsieur Poirot? He would like to see you.”

Jackie sprang up. She caught Bessner by the arm.

“How is he? Is he—all right?”

“Naturally he is not all right,” replied Dr. Bessner reproachfully. “The bone is fractured, you understand.”

“But he’s not going to die?” cried Jackie.

“Ach, who said anything about dying? We will get him to civilization and there we will have an X-ray and proper treatment.”

“Oh!” The girl’s hands came together in convulsive pressure. She sank down again on a chair.

Poirot stepped out on to the deck with the doctor and at that moment Race joined them. They went up to the promenade deck and along to Bessner’s cabin.

Simon Doyle was lying propped with cushions and pillows, an improvised cage over his leg. His face was ghastly in colour, the ravages of pain with shock on top of it. But the predominant expression on his face was bewilderment—the sick bewilderment of a child.

He muttered: “Please come in. The doctor’s told me—told me—about Linnet…I can’t believe it. I simply can’t believe it’s true.”

“I know. It’s a bad knock,” said Race.

Simon stammered: “You know—Jackie didn’t do it. I’m certain Jackie didn’t do it! It looks black against her, I dare say, but she didn’t do it. She—she was a bit tight last night, and all worked up, and that’s why she went for me. But she wouldn’t—she wouldn’t do murder… not cold-blooded murder….”

Poirot said gently: “Do not distress yourself, Monsieur Doyle. Whoever shot your wife, it was not Mademoiselle de Bellefort.”

Simon looked at him doubtfully.

“Is that on the square?”

“But since it was not Mademoiselle de Bellefort,” continued Poirot, “can you give us any idea of who it might have been?”

Simon shook his head. The look of bewilderment increased.

“It’s crazy—impossible. Apart from Jackie nobody could have wanted to do her in.”

"Reflect, Monsieur Doyle. Had she no enemies? Is there no one who had a grudge against her?"

Again Simon shook his head with the same hopeless gesture.

"It sounds absolutely fantastic. There's Windlesham, of course. She more or less chucked him to marry me—but I can't see a polite stick like Windlesham committing murder, and anyway he's miles away. Same thing with old Sir George Wode. He'd got a down on Linnet over the house—disliked the way she was pulling it about; but he's miles away in London, and anyway to think of murder in such a connection would be fantastic."

"Listen, Monsieur Doyle." Poirot spoke very earnestly. "On the first day we came on board the Karnak I was impressed by a little conversation which I had with Madame your wife. She was very upset—very distraught. She said—mark this well—that everybody hated her. She said she felt afraid—unsafe—as though everyone round her were an enemy."

"She was pretty upset at finding Jackie aboard. So was I," said Simon.

"That is true, but it does not quite explain those words. When she said she was surrounded by enemies, she was almost certainly exaggerating, but all the same she did mean more than one person."

"You might be right there," admitted Simon. "I think I can explain that. It was a name in the passenger list that upset her."

"A name in the passenger list? What name?"

"Well, you see, she didn't actually tell me. As a matter of fact I wasn't even listening very carefully. I was going over the Jacqueline business in my mind. As far as I remember, Linnet said something about doing people down in business, and that it made her uncomfortable to meet anyone who had a grudge against her family. You see, although I don't really know the family history very well, I gather that Linnet's mother was a millionaire's daughter. Her father was only just ordinary plain wealthy, but after his marriage he naturally began playing the markets or whatever you call it. And as a result of that, of course, several people got it in the neck. You know, affluence one day, the gutter the next. Well, I gather there was someone on board whose father had got up against Linnet's father and taken a pretty hard knock. I remember Linnet saying: 'It's pretty awful when people hate you without even knowing you.'"

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "That would explain what she said to me. For the first time she was feeling the burden of her inheritance and not its advantages. You are quite sure, Monsieur Doyle, that she did not mention this man's name?"

Simon shook his head ruefully.

"I didn't really pay much attention. Just said: 'Oh, nobody minds what happened to their fathers nowadays. Life goes too fast for that.' Something of that kind."

Bessner said dryly: "Ach, but I can have a guess. There is certainly a young man with a grievance on board."

"You mean Ferguson?" said Poirot.

"Yes. He spoke against Mrs. Doyle once or twice. I myself have heard him."

"What can we do to find out?" asked Simon.

Poirot replied: "Colonel Race and I must interview all the passengers. Until we have got their stories it would be unwise to form theories. Then there is the maid. We ought to interview her first of all. It would, perhaps, be as well if we did that here. Monsieur Doyle's presence might be helpful."

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Simon.

"Had she been with Mrs. Doyle long?"

"Just a couple of months, that's all."

"Only a couple of months!" exclaimed Poirot.

“Why, you don’t think—”

“Had Madame any valuable jewellery?”

“There were her pearls,” said Simon. “She once told me they were worth forty or fifty thousand.” He shivered. “My God, do you think those damned pearls—?”

“Robbery is a possible motive,” said Poirot. “All the same it seems hardly credible…Well, we shall see. Let us have the maid here.”

Louise Bourget was that same vivacious Latin brunette who Poirot had seen one day and noticed.

She was anything but vivacious now. She had been crying and looked frightened. Yet there was a kind of sharp cunning apparent in her face which did not prepossess the two men favourably towards her.

“You are Louise Bourget?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“When did you last see Madame Doyle alive?”

“Last night, Monsieur. I was in her cabin to undress her.”

“What time was that?”

“It was some time after eleven, Monsieur. I cannot say exactly when. I undress Madame and put her to bed, and then I leave.”

“How long did all that take?”

“Ten minutes, Monsieur. Madame was tired. She told me to put the lights out when I went.”

“And when you had left her, what did you do?”

“I went to my own cabin, Monsieur, on the deck below.”

“And you heard or saw nothing more that can help us?”

“How could I, Monsieur?”

“That, Mademoiselle, is for you to say, not for us,” Hercule Poirot retorted.

She stole a sideways glance at him.

“But, Monsieur, I was nowhere near…What could I have seen or heard? I was on the deck below. My cabin, it was on the other side of the boat, even. It is impossible that I should have heard anything. Naturally if I had been unable to sleep, if I had mounted the stairs, then perhaps I might have seen the assassin, this monster, enter or leave Madame’s cabin, but as it is—”

She threw out her hands appealingly to Simon.

“Monsieur, I implore you—you see how it is? What can I say?”

“My good girl,” said Simon harshly, “don’t be a fool. Nobody thinks you saw or heard anything. You’ll be quite all right. I’ll look after you. Nobody’s accusing you of anything.”

Louise murmured, “Monsieur is very good,” and dropped her eyelids modestly.

“We take it, then, that you saw and heard nothing?” asked Race impatiently.

“That is what I said, Monsieur.”

“And you know of no one who had a grudge against your mistress?”

To the surprise of the listeners Louise nodded her head vigorously.

“Oh, yes. That I do know. To that question I can answer Yes most emphatically.”

Poirot said, “You mean Mademoiselle de Bellefort?”

“She, certainly. But it is not of her I speak. There was someone else on this boat who disliked Madame, who was very angry because of the way Madame had injured him.”

“Good lord!” Simon exclaimed. “What’s all this?”

Louise went on, still emphatically nodding her head with the utmost vigour.

“Yes, yes, yes, it is as I say! It concerns the former maid of Madame—my predecessor. There was a man, one of the engineers on this boat, who wanted her to marry him. And my predecessor, Marie her name was, she would have done so. But Madame Doyle, she made inquiries and she discovered that this Fleetwood already had a wife—a wife of colour you understand, a wife of this country. She had gone back to her own people, but he was still married to her, you understand. And so Madame she told all this to Marie, and Marie was very unhappy and she would not see Fleetwood anymore. And this Fleetwood, he was infuriated, and when he found out that this Madame Doyle had formerly been Mademoiselle Linnet Ridgeway he tells me that he would like to kill her! Her interference ruined his life, he said.”

Louise paused triumphantly.

“This is interesting,” said Race.

Poirot turned to Simon.

“Had you any idea of this?”

“None whatever,” Simon replied with patent sincerity. “I doubt if Linnet even knew the man was on the boat. She had probably forgotten all about the incident.”

He turned sharply to the maid.

“Did you say anything to Mrs. Doyle about this?”

“No, Monsieur, of course not.”

Poirot asked: “Do you know anything about your mistress’s pearls?”

“Her pearls? Louise’s eyes opened very wide. “She was wearing them last night.”

“You saw them when she came to bed?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Where did she put them?”

“On the table by the side as always.”

“That is where you last saw them?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Did you see them there this morning?”

A startled look came into the girl’s face.

“Mon Dieu! I did not even look. I come up to the bed, I see—I see Madame; and then I cry out and rush out of the door, and I faint.”

Hercule Poirot nodded his head.

“You did not look. But I, I have the eyes which notice, and there were no pearls on the table beside the bed this morning.”

Fifteen

Hercule Poirot's observation had not been at fault. There were no pearls on the table by Linnet Doyle's bed.

Louise Bourget was bidden to make a search among Linnet's belongings. According to her, all was in order. Only the pearls had disappeared.

As they emerged from the cabin a steward was waiting to tell them that breakfast had been served in the smoking room. As they passed along the deck, Race paused to look over the rail.

"Aha! I see you have had an idea, my friend."

"Yes. It suddenly came to me, when Fanthorp mentioned thinking he had heard a splash. It's perfectly possible that after the murder, the murderer threw the pistol overboard."

Poirot said slowly: "You really think that is possible, my friend?" Race shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a suggestion. After all, the pistol wasn't anywhere in the cabin. First thing I looked for."

"All the same," said Poirot, "it is incredible that it should have been thrown overboard."

Race asked: "Where is it then?"

Poirot replied thoughtfully, "If it is not in Madame Doyle's cabin, there is, logically, only one other place where it could be."

"Where's that?"

"In Mademoiselle de Bellefort's cabin."

Race said thoughtfully: "Yes. I see—"

He stopped suddenly.

"She's out of her cabin. Shall we go and have a look now?"

Poirot shook his head. "No, my friend, that would be precipitate. It may not yet have been put there."

"What about an immediate search of the whole boat."

"That way we should show our hand. We must work with great care. It is very delicate, our position, at the moment. Let us discuss the situation as we eat."

Race agreed. They went into the smoking room.

"Well," said Race as he poured himself out a cup of coffee, "we've got two definite leads. There's the disappearance of the pearls. And there's the man Fleetwood. As regards the pearls, robbery seems indicated, but—I don't know whether you'll agree with me—"

Poirot said quickly: "But it was an odd moment to choose?"

"Exactly. To steal the pearls at such a moment invites a close search of everybody on board. How then could the thief hope to get away with his booty?"

"He might have gone ashore and dumped it."

"The company always has a watchman on the bank."

"Then that is not feasible. Was the murder committed to divert attention from the robbery? No, that does not make sense; it is profoundly unsatisfactory. But supposing that Madame Doyle woke up and caught the thief in the act?"

"And therefore the thief shot her? But she was shot whilst she slept."

"So that does not make sense…You know, I have a little idea about those pearls—and yet—no—it is impossible. Because if my idea was right the pearls would not have disappeared. Tell me, what did you think of the maid?”

“I wondered,” said Race slowly, “if she knew more than she said.”

“Ah, you too had that impression?”

“Definitely not a nice girl,” said Race.

Hercule Poirot nodded. “Yes, I would not trust her.”

“You think she had something to do with the murder?”

“No. I would not say that.”

“With the theft of the pearls, then?”

“That is more probable. She had only been with Madame Doyle a very short time. She may be a member of a gang that specializes in jewel robberies. In such a case there is often a maid with excellent references. Unfortunately we are not in a position to seek information on these points. And yet that explanation does not quite satisfy me…Those pearls—ah, sacré, my little idea ought to be right. And yet nobody would be so imbecile—” He broke off.

“What about the man Fleetwood?”

“We must question him. It may be that we have there the solution. If Louise Bourget’s story is true, he had a definite motive for revenge. He could have overheard the scene between Jacqueline and Monsieur Doyle, and when they had left the saloon he could have darted in and secured the gun. Yes, it is all quite possible. And that letter J scrawled in blood. That, too, would accord with a simple, rather crude nature.”

“In fact, he’s just the person we are looking for?”

“Yes—only—” Poirot rubbed his nose. He said with a slight grimace: “See you, I recognize my own weaknesses. It has been said of me that I like to make a case difficult. This solution that you put to me—it is too simple, too easy. I cannot feel that it really happened. And yet, that may be the sheer prejudice on my part."

"Well, we'd better have the fellow here."

Race rang the bell and gave the order. Then he asked, "Any other—possibilities?"

"Plenty, my friend. There is, for example, the American trustee."

"Pennington?"

"Yes, Pennington. There was a curious little scene in here the other day." He narrated the happenings to Race. "You see—it is significant. Madame, she wanted to read all the papers before signing. So he makes the excuse of another day. And then, the husband, he makes a very significant remark."

"What was that?"

"He says—'I never read anything. I sign where I am told to sign.' You perceive the significance of that. Pennington did. I saw it in his eye. He looked at Doyle as though an entirely new idea had come into his head. Just imagine, my friend, that you have been left trustee to the daughter of an intensely wealthy man. You use, perhaps, that money to speculate with. I know it is so in all detective novels—but you read of it too in the newspapers. It happens, my friend, it happens."

"I don't dispute it," said Race.

"There is, perhaps, still time to make good by speculating wildly. Your ward is not yet of age. And then—she marries! The control passes from your hands into hers at a moment's notice! A disaster! But there is still a chance. She is on a honeymoon. She will perhaps be careless about business. A casual paper, slipped in among others, signed without reading…But Linnet Doyle was not like that. Honeymoon or no honeymoon, she is a business woman. And then her husband makes a remark, and a new idea comes to that desperate man who is seeking a way out from ruin. If Linnet Doyle were to die, her fortune would pass to her husband—and he would be easy to deal with; he would be a child in the hands of an astute man like Andrew Pennington. Mon cher Colonel, I tell you I saw the thought pass through Andrew Pennington's head. 'If only it were Doyle I had got to deal with…' That is what he was thinking."

"Quite possible, I dare say," said Race dryly, "but you've no evidence."

"Alas, no."

"Then there's young Ferguson," said Race. "He talks bitterly enough. Not that I go by talk. Still, he might be the fellow whose father was ruined by old Ridgeway. It's a little far-fetched but it's possible. People do brood over bygone wrongs sometimes." He paused a minute and then said: "And there's my fellow."

"Yes, there is 'your fellow' as you call him."

"He's a killer," said Race. "We know that. On the other hand, I can't see any way in which he could have come up against Linnet Doyle. Their orbits don't touch."

Poirot said slowly: "Unless, accidentally, she had become possessed of evidence showing his identity."

"That's possible, but it seems highly unlikely."

There was a knock at the door. "Ah, here's our would-be bigamist."

Fleetwood was a big, truculent-looking man. He looked suspiciously from one to the other of them as he entered the room. Poirot recognized him as the man he had seen talking to Louise Bourget.

Fleetwood asked suspiciously: "You wanted to see me?"

"We did," said Race. "You probably know that a murder was committed on this boat last night?"

Fleetwood nodded.

“And I believe it is true that you had reason to feel anger against the woman who was killed.”

A look of alarm sprang up in Fleetwood’s eyes.

“Who told you that?”

“You considered that Mrs. Doyle had interfered between you and a young woman.”

“I know who told you that—that lying French hussy. She’s a liar through and through, that girl.”

“But this particular story happens to be true.”

“It’s a dirty lie!”

“You say that, although you don’t know what it is yet.”

The shot told. The man flushed and gulped.

“It is true, is it not, that you were going to marry the girl Marie, and that she broke it off when she discovered that you were a married man already?”

“What business was it of hers?”

“You mean, what business was it of Mrs. Doyle’s? Well, you know, bigamy is bigamy.”

“It wasn’t like that. I married one of the locals out here. It didn’t answer. She went back to her people. I’ve not seen her for a half a dozen years.”

“Still you were married to her.”

The man was silent. Race went on: “Mrs. Doyle, or Miss Ridgeway as she then was, found out all this?”

“Yes, she did, curse her! Nosing about where no one ever asked her to. I’d have treated Marie right. I’d have done anything for her. And she’d never have known about the other, if it hadn't been for that meddlesome young lady of hers. Yes, I'll say it, I did have a grudge against the lady, and I felt bitter about it when I saw her on this boat, all dressed up in pearls and diamonds and lording it all over the place, with never a thought that she'd broken up a man's life for him! I felt bitter all right, but if you think I'm a dirty murderer—if you think I went and shot her with a gun, well, that's a damned lie! I never touched her. And that's God's truth."

He stopped. The sweat was rolling down his face.

"Where were you last night between the hours of twelve and two?"

"In my bunk asleep—and my mate will tell you so."

"We shall see," said Race. He dismissed him with a curt nod. "That'll do."

"Eh bien?" inquired Poirot as the door closed behind Fleetwood.

Race shrugged his shoulders. "He tells quite a straight story. He's nervous, of course, but not unduly so. We'll have to investigate his alibi—though I don't suppose it will be decisive. His mate was probably asleep, and this fellow could have slipped in and out if he wanted to. It depends whether anyone else saw him."

"Yes, one must inquire as to that."

"The next thing, I think," said Race, "is whether anyone heard anything which might give a clue as to the time of the crime. Bessner places it as having occurred between twelve and two. It seems reasonable to hope that someone among the passengers may have heard the shot—even if they did not recognize it for what it was. I didn't hear anything of the kind myself. What about you?"

Poirot shook his head.

"Me, I slept absolutely like the log. I heard nothing—but nothing at all. I might have been drugged, I slept so soundly."

"A pity," said Race. "Well, let's hope we have a bit of luck with the people who have cabins on the starboard side. Fanthorp we've done. The Allertons come next. I'll send the steward to fetch them."

Mrs. Allerton came in briskly. She was wearing a soft grey striped silk dress. Her face looked distressed.

"It's too horrible," she said as she accepted the chair that Poirot placed for her. "I can hardly believe it. That lovely creature, with everything to live for—dead. I almost feel I can't believe it."

"I know how you feel, Madame," said Poirot sympathetically.

"I'm glad you are on board," said Mrs. Allerton simply. "You'll be able to find out who did it. I'm so glad it isn't that poor tragic girl."

"You mean Mademoiselle de Bellefort. Who told you she did not do it?"

"Cornelia Robson," replied Mrs. Allerton, with a faint smile. "You know, she's simply thrilled by it all. It's probably the only exciting thing that has ever happened to her, and probably the only exciting thing that ever will happen to her. But she's so nice that she's terribly ashamed of enjoying it. She thinks it's awful of her."

Mrs. Allerton gave a look at Poirot and then added: "But I mustn't chatter. You want to ask me questions."

"If you please. You went to bed at what time, Madame?"

"Just after half past ten."

"And you went to sleep at once?"

"Yes. I was sleepy."

"And did you hear anything—anything at all—during the night?"

Mrs. Allerton wrinkled her brows.

"Yes, I think I heard a splash and someone running—or was it the other way about? I'm rather hazy. I just had a vague idea that someone had fallen overboard at sea—a dream, you know—and then I woke up and listened, but it was all quite quiet."

"Do you know what time that was?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. But I don't think it was very long after I went to sleep. I mean it was within the first hour or so."

"Alas, Madame, that is not very definite."

"No, I know it isn't. But it's no good trying to guess, is it, when I haven't really the vaguest idea?"

"And that is all you can tell us, Madame?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Had you ever actually met Madame Doyle before?"

"No, Tim had met her. And I'd heard a good deal about her—through a cousin of ours, Joanna Southwood, but I'd never spoken to her till we met at Assuan."

"I have one other question, Madame, if you will pardon me for asking."

Mrs. Allerton murmured with a faint smile, "I should love to be asked an indiscreet question."

"It is this. Did you, or your family, ever suffer any financial loss through the operations of Madame Doyle's father, Melhuish Ridgeway?"

Mrs. Allerton looked thoroughly astonished.

"Oh, no! The family finances have never suffered except by dwindling… you know, everything paying less interest than it used to. There's never been anything melodramatic about our poverty. My husband left very little money, but what he left I still have, though it doesn’t yield as much as it used to yield.”

“I thank you, Madame. Perhaps you will ask your son to come to us.”

Tim said lightly, when his mother came: “Ordeal over? My turn now! What sort of things did they ask you?”

“Only whether I heard anything last night,” said Mrs. Allerton. “And unluckily I didn’t hear anything at all. I can’t think why not. After all, Linnet’s cabin is only one away from mine. I should think I’d have been bound to hear the shot. Go along, Tim; they’re waiting for you.”

To Tim Allerton Poirot repeated his previous questions.

Tim answered: “I went to bed early, half-past ten or so. I read for a bit. Put out my light just after eleven.”

“Did you hear anything after that?”

“Heard a man’s voice saying good night, I think, not far away.”

“That was me saying good night to Mrs. Doyle,” said Race.

“Yes. After that I went to sleep. Then, later, I heard a kind of hullabaloo going on, somebody calling Fanthorp, I remember.”

“Mademoiselle Robson when she ran out from the observation saloon.”

“Yes, I suppose that was it. And then a lot of different voices. And then somebody running along the deck. And then a splash. And then I heard old Bessner booming out something about ‘Careful now’ and ‘Not too quick.’”

“You heard a splash.”

“Well, something of that kind.”

“You are sure it was not a shot you heard?”

“Yes, I suppose it might have been…I did hear a cork pop. Perhaps that was the shot. I may have imagined the splash from connecting the idea of the cork with liquid pouring into a glass…I know my foggy idea was that there was some kind of party on, and I wished they’d all go to bed and shut up.”

“Anything more after that?”

Tim shrugged his shoulders. “After that—oblivion.”

“You heard nothing more?”

“Nothing whatever.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Allerton.”

Tim got up and left the cabin.

Sixteen

Race pored thoughtfully over a plan of the promenade deck of the Karnak.

“Fanthorp, young Allerton, Mrs. Allerton. Then an empty cabin—Simon Doyle’s. Now who’s on the other side of Mrs. Doyle’s? The old American dame. If anyone heard anything she would have done. If she’s up we’d better have her along.”

Miss Van Schuyler entered the room. She looked even older and yellower than usual this morning. Her small dark eyes had an air of venomous displeasure in them.

Race rose and bowed.

“We’re very sorry to trouble you, Miss Van Schuyler. It’s very good of you. Please sit down.”

Miss Van Schuyler said sharply: “I dislike being mixed up in this. I resent it very much. I do not wish to be associated in any way with this—er—very unpleasant affair.”

“Quite—quite. I was just saying to Monsieur Poirot that the sooner we took your statement the better, as then you need have no further trouble.”

Miss Van Schuyler looked at Poirot with something approaching favour.

“I’m glad you both realize my feelings. I am not accustomed to anything of this kind.”

Poirot said soothingly: “Precisely, Mademoiselle. That is why we wish to free you from unpleasantness as quickly as possible. Now you went to bed last night—at what time?”

“Ten o’clock is my usual time. Last night I was rather later, as Cornelia Robson, very inconsiderately, kept me waiting.”

“Très bien, Mademoiselle. Now what did you hear after you had retired?”

Miss Van Schuyler said: “I sleep very lightly.”

“A merveille! That is very fortunate for us.”

“I was awakened by that rather flashy young woman, Mrs. Doyle’s maid, who said, ‘Bonne nuit, Madame’ in what I cannot but think an unnecessarily loud voice.”

“And after that?”

“I went to sleep again. I woke up thinking someone was in my cabin, but I realized that it was someone in the cabin next door.”

“In Madame Doyle’s cabin?”

“Yes. Then I heard someone outside on the deck and then a splash.”

“You have no idea what time this was?”

“I can tell you the time exactly. It was ten minutes past one.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes. I looked at my little clock that stands by my bed.”

“You did not hear a shot?”

“No, nothing of the kind.”

“But it might possibly have been a shot that awakened you?”

Miss Van Schuyler considered the question, her toadlike head on one side.

“It might,” she admitted rather grudgingly.

“And you have no idea what might have caused the splash you heard?”

“Not at all—I know perfectly.”

Colonel Race sat up alertly. “You know?”

“Certainly. I did not like this sound of prowling around. I got up and went to the door of my cabin. Miss Otterbourne was leaning over the side. She had just dropped something into the water.”

“Miss Otterbourne?” Race sounded really surprised.

“Yes.”

“You are quite sure it was Miss Otterbourne?”

“I saw her face distinctly.”

“She did not see you?”

“I do not think so.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“And what did her face look like, Mademoiselle?”

“She was in a condition of considerable emotion.”

Race and Poirot exchanged a quick glance.

“And then?” Race prompted.

“Miss Otterbourne went away round the stern of the boat and I returned to bed.”

There was a knock at the door and the manager entered. He carried in his hand a dripping bundle.

“We’ve got it, Colonel.”

Race took the package. He unwrapped fold after fold of sodden velvet. Out of it fell a coarse handkerchief, faintly stained with pink, wrapped round a small pearl-handled pistol.

Race gave Poirot a glance of slightly malicious triumph.

“You see,” he said, “my idea was right. It was thrown overboard.”

He held the pistol out on the palm of his hand.

“What do you say, Monsieur Poirot? Is this the pistol you saw at the Cataract Hotel that night?”

Poirot examined it carefully; then he said quietly: “Yes—that is it. There is the ornamental work on it—and the initials J.B. It is an article de luxe, a very feminine production, but it is none the less a lethal weapon.”

“Twenty-two,” murmured Race. He took out the clip. “Two bullets fired. Yes, there doesn’t seem much doubt about it.”

Miss Van Schuyler coughed significantly.

“And what about my stole?” she demanded.

“Your stole, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, that is my velvet stole you have there.”

Race picked up the dripping folds of material.

“This is yours, Miss Van Schuyler?”

“Certainly it’s mine!” the old lady snapped. “I missed it last night. I was asking everyone if they’d seen it.”

Poirot questioned Race with a glance, and the latter gave a slight nod of assent.

“Where did you see it last, Miss Van Schuyler?”

“I had it in the saloon yesterday evening. When I came to go to bed I could not find it anywhere.”

Race said quickly: “You realize what it’s been used for?” He spread it out, indicating with a finger the scorching and several small holes. “The murderer wrapped it round the pistol to deaden the noise of the shot.”

“Impertinence!” snapped Miss Van Schuyler. The colour rose in her wizened cheeks.

Race said: “I shall be glad, Miss Van Schuyler, if you will tell me the extent of your previous acquaintance with Mrs. Doyle.”

“There was no previous acquaintance.”

“But you knew of her?”

“I knew who she was, of course.”

“But your families were not acquainted?”

“As a family we have always prided ourselves on being exclusive, Colonel Race. My dear mother would never have dreamed of calling upon any of the Hartz family, who, outside their wealth, were nobodies.”

“That is all you have to say, Miss Van Schuyler?”

“I have nothing to add to what I have told you. Linnet Ridgeway was brought up in England and I never saw her till I came aboard this boat.”

She rose. Poirot opened the door and she marched out.

The eyes of the two men met.

“That’s her story,” said Race, “and she’s going to stick to it! It may be true. I don’t know. But—Rosalie Otterbourne? I hadn’t expected that.”

Poirot shook his head in a perplexed manner. Then he brought down his hand on the table with a sudden bang.

“But it does not make sense,” he cried. “Nom d’un nom d’un nom! It does not make sense.”

Race looked at him.

“What do you mean exactly?”

“I mean that up to a point it is all the clear sailing. Someone wished to kill Linnet Doyle. Someone overheard the scene in the saloon last night. Someone sneaked in there and retrieved the pistol—Jacqueline de Bellefort’s pistol, remember. Somebody shot Linnet Doyle with that pistol and wrote the letter J on the wall…All so clear, is it not? All pointing to Jacqueline de Bellefort as the murderess. And then what does the murderer do? Leave the pistol—the damning pistol—Jacqueline de Bellefort’s pistol, for everyone to find? No, he—or she—throws the pistol, that particularly damning bit of evidence, overboard. Why, my friend, why?”

Race shook his head. “It’s odd.”

“It is more than odd—it is impossible!”

“Not impossible, since it happened!”

“I do not mean that. I mean the sequence of events is impossible. Something is wrong.”

Seventeen

Colonel Race glanced curiously at his colleague. He respected—he had reason to respect—the brain of Hercule Poirot. Yet for the moment he did not follow the other's process of thought. He asked no question, however. He seldom did ask questions. He proceeded straightforwardly with the matter in hand.

"What's the next thing to be done? Question the Otterbourne girl?"

"Yes, that may advance us a little."

Rosalie Otterbourne entered ungraciously. She did not look nervous or frightened in any way—merely unwilling and sulky.

"Well," she asked, "what is it?"

Race was the spokesman.

"We're investigating Mrs. Doyle's death," he explained.

Rosalie nodded.

"Will you tell me what you did last night?"

Rosalie reflected a minute.

"Mother and I went to bed early—before eleven. We didn't hear anything in particular, except a bit of fuss outside Dr. Bessner's cabin. I heard the old man's German voice booming away. Of course I didn't know what it was all about till this morning."

"You didn't hear a shot?"

"No."

"Did you leave your cabin at all last night?"

“No.”

“You are quite sure of that?”

Rosalie stared at him.

“What do you mean? Of course I’m sure of it.”

“You did not, for instance, go round to the starboard side of the boat and throw something overboard?”

The colour rose in her face.

“Is there any rule against throwing things overboard?”

“No, of course not. Then you did?”

“No, I didn’t. I never left my cabin, I tell you.”

“Then if anyone says that they saw you—?”

She interrupted him. “Who says they saw me?”

“Miss Van Schuyler.”

“Miss Van Schuyler?” She sounded genuinely astonished.

“Yes. Miss Van Schuyler says she looked out of her cabin and saw you throw something over the side.”

Rosalie said clearly, “That’s a damned lie.” Then, as though struck by a sudden thought, she asked: “What time was this?”

It was Poirot who answered.

“It was ten minutes past one, Mademoiselle.”

She nodded her head thoughtfully. “Did she see anything else?”

Poirot looked at her curiously. He stroked his chin.

“See—no,” he replied, “but she heard something.”

“What did she hear?”

“Someone moving about in Madame Doyle’s cabin.”

“I see,” muttered Rosalie.

She was pale now—deadly pale.

“And you persist in saying that you threw nothing overboard, Mademoiselle?”

“What on earth should I run about throwing things overboard for in the middle of the night?”

“There might be a reason—an innocent reason.”

“Innocent?” repeated the girl sharply.

“That’s what I said. You see, Mademoiselle, something was thrown overboard last night—something that was not innocent.”

Race silently held out the bundle of stained velvet, opening it to display its contents.

Rosalie Otterbourne shrank back. “Was that—what—she was killed with?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“And you think that I—I did it? What utter nonsense! Why on earth should I want to kill Linnet Doyle? I don’t even know her!”

She laughed and stood up scornfully. “The whole thing is too ridiculous.”

“Remember, Miss Otterbourne,” said Race, “that Miss Van Schuyler is prepared to swear she saw your face quite clearly in the moonlight.”

Rosalie laughed again. “That old cat? She’s probably half blind anyway. It wasn’t me she saw.” She paused. “Can I go now?”

Race nodded and Rosalie Otterbourne left the room.

The eyes of the two men met. Race lighted a cigarette.

“Well, that’s that. Flat contradiction. Which of ’em do we believe?”

Poirot shook his head. “I have a little idea that neither of them was being quite frank.”

“That’s the worst of our job,” said Race despondently. “So many people keep back the truth for positively futile reasons. What’s our next move? Get on with the questioning of the passengers?”

“I think so. It is always well to proceed with order and method.”

Race nodded.

Mrs. Otterbourne, dressed in floating batik material, succeeded her daughter. She corroborated Rosalie’s statement that they had both gone to bed before eleven o’clock. She herself had heard nothing of interest during the night. She could not say whether Rosalie had left their cabin or not. On the subject of the crime she was inclined to hold forth.

“The crime passionel!” she exclaimed. “The primitive instinct—to kill! So closely allied to the sex instinct. That girl, Jacqueline, half Latin, hot-blooded, obeying the deepest instincts of her being, stealing forth, revolver in hand—”

“But Jacqueline de Bellefort did not shoot Madame Doyle. That we know for certain. It is proved,” explained Poirot.

“Her husband, then,” said Mrs. Otterbourne, rallying from the blow. “The blood lust and the sex instinct—a sexual crime. There are many well-known instances.”

“Mr. Doyle was shot through the leg and he was quite unable to move—the bone was fractured,” explained Colonel Race. “He spent the night with Dr. Bessner.”

Mrs. Otterbourne was even more disappointed. She searched her mind hopefully.

“Of course!” she said. “How foolish of me! Miss Bowers!”

“Miss Bowers?”

“Yes. Naturally. It’s so clear psychologically. Repression! The repressed virgin! Maddened by the sight of these two—a young husband and wife passionately in love with each other. Of course it was her! She’s just the type—sexually unattractive, innately respectable. In my book, The Barren Vine—”

Colonel Race interrupted tactfully: “Your suggestions have been most helpful, Mrs. Otterbourne. We must get on with our job now. Thank you so much.”

He escorted her gallantly to the door and came back wiping his brow.

“What a poisonous woman! Whew! Why didn’t somebody murder her!”

“It may yet happen,” Poirot consoled him.

“There might be some sense in that. Whom have we got left? Pennington—we’ll keep him for the end, I think. Richetti—Ferguson.”

Signor Richetti was very voluble, very agitated.

“But what a horror, what an infamy—a woman so young and so beautiful—indeed an inhuman crime!”

Signor Richetti’s hands flew expressively up in the air.

His answers were prompt. He had gone to bed early—very early. In fact immediately after dinner. He had read for a while—a very interesting pamphlet lately published—Prähistorische Forschung in Kleinasien—throwing an entirely new light on the painted pottery of the Anatolian foothills.

He had put out his light some time before eleven. No, he had not heard any shot. Not any sound like the pop of a cork. The only thing he had heard—but that was later, in the middle of the night—was a splash, a big splash, just near his porthole.

“Your cabin is on the lower deck, on the starboard side, is it not?”

“Yes, yes, that is so. And I heard the big splash.” His arms flew up once more to describe the bigness of the splash.

“Can you tell me at all what time that was?”

Signor Richetti reflected.

“It was one, two, three hours after I go to sleep. Perhaps two hours.”

“About ten minutes past one, for instance?”

“It might very well be, yes. Ah! But what a terrible crime—how inhuman… So charming a woman….”

Exit Signor Richetti, still gesticulating freely.

Race looked at Poirot. Poirot raised his eyebrows expressively, then shrugged his shoulders. They passed on to Mr. Ferguson.

Ferguson was difficult. He sprawled insolently in a chair.

“Grand to-do about this business!” he sneered. “What’s it really matter? Lots of superfluous women in the world!”

Race said coldly: “Can we have an account of your movements last night, Mr. Ferguson?”

“Don’t see why you should, but I don’t mind. I mooched around a good bit. Went ashore with Miss Robson. When she went back to the boat I mooched around by myself for a while. Came back and turned in round about midnight.”

“Your cabin is on the lower deck, starboard side?”

“Yes. I’m up among the nobs.”

“Did you hear a shot? It might only have sounded like the popping of a cork.”

Ferguson considered. “Yes, I think I did hear something like a cork…Can’t remember when—before I went to sleep. But there was still a lot of people about then—commotion, running about on the deck above.”

“That was probably the shot fired by Miss de Bellefort. You didn’t hear another?”

Ferguson shook his head.

“Nor a splash?”

“A splash? Yes, I believe I did hear a splash. But there was so much row going on I can’t be sure about it.”

“Did you leave your cabin during the night?”

Ferguson grinned. “No, I didn’t. And I didn’t participate in the good work, worse luck.”

“Come, come, Mr. Ferguson, don’t behave childishly.”

The young man reacted angrily.

“Why shouldn’t I say what I think? I believe in violence.”

“But you don’t practice what you preach?” murmured Poirot. “I wonder.”

He leaned forward.

“It was the man, Fleetwood, was it not, who told you that Linnet Doyle was one of the richest women in England?”

“What’s Fleetwood got to do with this?”

“Fleetwood, my friend, had an excellent motive for killing Linnet Doyle. He had a special grudge against her.”

Mr. Ferguson came up out of his seat like a jack-in-the-box.

“So that’s your dirty game, is it?” he demanded wrathfully. “Put it on to a poor devil like Fleetwood, who can’t defend himself, who’s got no money to hire lawyers. But I tell you this—if you try and saddle Fleetwood with this business you’ll have me to deal with.”

“And who exactly are you?” asked Poirot sweetly.

Mr. Ferguson got rather red.

“I can stick by my friends anyway,” he said gruffly.

“Well, Mr. Ferguson, I think that’s all we need for the present,” said Race.

As the door closed behind Ferguson he remarked unexpectedly: “Rather a likeable young cub, really.”

“You don’t think he is the man you are after?” asked Poirot.

“I hardly think so. I suppose he is on board. The information was very precise. Oh, well, one job at a time. Let’s have a go at Pennington.”

Eighteen

Andrew Pennington displayed all the conventional reactions of grief and shock. He was, as usual, carefully dressed. He had changed into a black tie. His long clean-shaven face bore a bewildered expression.

“Gentlemen,” he said sadly, “this business has got me right down! Little Linnet—why, I remember her as the cutest little thing you can imagine. How proud of her Melhuish Ridgeway used to be, too! Well, there’s no point in going into that. Just tell me what I can do; that’s all I ask.”

Race said: “To begin with, Mr. Pennington, did you hear anything last night?”

“No, sir, I can’t say I did. I have the cabin right next to Dr. Bessner’s number forty—forty-one, and I heard a certain commotion going on in there round about midnight or so. Of course I didn’t know what it was at the time.”

“You heard nothing else? No shots?”

Andrew Pennington shook his head.

“Nothing whatever of that kind.”

“And you went to bed at what time?”

“Must have been some time after eleven.”

He leant forward.

“I don’t suppose it’s news to you to know that there’s plenty of rumours going about the boat. That half-French girl—Jacqueline de Bellefort—there was something fishy there, you know. Linnet didn’t tell me anything, but naturally I wasn’t born blind and deaf. There’d been some affair between her and Simon, some time, hadn’t there—Cherchez la femme—that’s a pretty good sound rule, and I should say you wouldn’t have to cherchez far.”

“You mean that in your belief Jacqueline de Bellefort shot Madame Doyle?” Poirot asked.

“That’s what it looks like to me. Of course I don’t know anything….”

“Unfortunately we do know something!”

“Eh?” Mr. Pennington looked startled.

“We know that it is quite impossible for Mademoiselle de Bellefort to have shot Madame Doyle.”

He explained carefully the circumstances. Pennington seemed reluctant to accept them.

“I agree it looks all right on the face of it—but this hospital nurse woman, I’ll bet she didn’t stay awake all night. She dozed off and the girl slipped out and in again.”

“Hardly likely, Monsieur Pennington. She had administered a strong opiate, remember. And anyway a nurse is in the habit of sleeping lightly and waking when her patient wakes.”

“It all sounds rather fishy to me,” declared Pennington.

Race said in a gently authoritative manner: “I think you must take it from me, Mr. Pennington, that we have examined all the possibilities very carefully. The result is quite definite—Jacqueline de Bellefort did not shoot Mrs. Doyle. So we are forced to look elsewhere. That is where we hope you may be able to help us.”

“I?” Pennington gave a nervous start.

“Yes. You were an intimate friend of the dead woman. You know the circumstances of her life, in all probability, much better than her husband does, since he only made her acquaintance a few months ago. You would know, for instance, of anyone who had a grudge against her. You would know, perhaps, whether there was anyone who had a motive for desiring her death.”

Andrew Pennington passed his tongue over rather dry-looking lips.

“I assure you, I have no idea…You see Linnet was brought up in England. I know very little of her surroundings and associations.”

“And yet,” mused Poirot, “there was someone on board who was interested in Madame’s removal. She had a near escape before, you remember, at this very place, when that boulder crashed down—ah! but you were not there, perhaps?”

“No. I was inside the temple at the time. I heard about it afterwards, of course. A very near escape. But possibly an accident, don’t you think?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“One thought so at the time. Now—one wonders.”

“Yes—yes, of course.” Pennington wiped his face with a fine silk handkerchief.

Colonel Race went on: “Mr. Doyle happened to mention someone being on board who bore a grudge—not against her personally, but against her family. Do you know who that could be?”

Pennington looked genuinely astonished.

“No, I’ve no idea.”

“She didn’t mention the matter to you?”

“No.”

“You were an intimate friend of her father’s—you cannot remember any business operations of his that might have resulted in ruin for some business opponent?”

Pennington shook his head helplessly. “No outstanding case. Such operations were frequent, of course, but I can’t recall anyone who uttered threats—nothing of that kind.”

In short, Mr. Pennington, you cannot help us?”

“It seems so. I deplore my inadequacy, gentlemen.”

Race interchanged a glance with Poirot, then he said: “I’m sorry too. We’d had hopes.”

He got up as a sign the interview was at an end.

Andrew Pennington said: “As Doyle’s laid up, I expect he’d like me to see to things. Pardon me, Colonel, but what exactly are the arrangements?”

“When we leave here we shall make a nonstop run to Shellal, arriving there tomorrow morning.”

“And the body?”

“Will be removed to one of the cold storage chambers.”

Andrew Pennington bowed his head. Then he left the room.

Poirot and Race again interchanged a glance.

“Mr. Pennington,” said Race, lighting a cigarette, “was not at all comfortable.”

Poirot nodded. “And,” he said, “Mr. Pennington was sufficiently perturbed to tell a rather stupid lie. He was not in the temple of Abu Simbel when that boulder fell. I—moi qui vous parle—can swear to that. I had just come from there.”

“A very stupid lie,” said Race, “and a very revealing one.”

Again Poirot nodded.

"But for the moment," he said, and smiled, "we handle him with the gloves of kid, is it not so?"

"That was the idea," agreed Race.

"My friend, you and I understand each other to a marvel."

There was a faint grinding noise, a stir beneath their feet. The Karnak had started on her homeward journey to Shellal.

"The pearls," said Race. "That is the next thing to be cleared up."

"You have a plan?"

"Yes." He glanced at his watch. "It will be lunchtime in half an hour. At the end of the meal I propose to make an announcement—just state the fact that the pearls have been stolen, and that I must request everyone to stay in the dining saloon while a search is conducted."

Poirot nodded approvingly.

"It is well imagined. Whoever took the pearls still has them. By giving no warning beforehand, there will be no chance of their being thrown overboard in a panic."

Race drew some sheets of paper towards him. He murmured apologetically: "I'd like to make a brief précis of the facts as I go along. It keeps one's mind free of confusion."

"You do well. Method and order, they are everything," replied Poirot.

Race wrote for some minutes in his small neat script. Finally he pushed the result of his labours towards Poirot.

"Anything you don't agree with there?" Poirot took up the sheets. They were headed:

MURDER OF MRS. LINNET DOYLE

Mrs. Doyle was last seen alive by her maid, Louise Bourget. Time: 11:30 (approx.).

From 11:30–12:20 following have alibis: Cornelia Robson, James Fanthorp, Simon Doyle, Jacqueline de Bellefort—nobody else—but crime almost certainly committed after that time, since it is practically certain that pistol used was Jacqueline de Bellefort's, which was then in her handbag. That her pistol was used is not absolutely certain until after postmortem and expert evidence re bullet—but it may be taken as overwhelmingly probable.

Probable course of events: X (murderer) was witness of scene between Jacqueline and Simon Doyle in observation saloon and noted where pistol went under settee. After the saloon was vacant, X procured pistol—his or her idea being that Jacqueline de Bellefort would be thought guilty of crime. On this theory certain people are automatically cleared of suspicion:

Cornelia Robson, since she had no opportunity to take pistol before James Fanthorp returned to search for it.

Miss Bowers—same.

Dr. Bessner—same.

N.B.—Fanthorp is not definitely excluded from suspicion, since he could actually have pocketed pistol while declaring himself unable to find it.

Any other person could have taken the pistol during that ten minutes' interval.

Possible motives for the murder:

Andrew Pennington. This is on the assumption that he has been guilty of fraudulent practices. There is a certain amount of evidence in favour of that assumption, but not enough to justify making out a case against him. If it was he who rolled down the boulder, he is a man who can seize a chance when it presents itself. The crime, clearly, was not premeditated except in a general way. Last night's shooting scene was an ideal opportunity.

Objections to the theory of Pennington's guilt: Why did he throw the pistol overboard, since it constituted a valuable clue against J.B.?

Fleetwood. Motive, revenge. Fleetwood considered himself injured by Linnet Doyle. Might have overheard scene and noted position of pistol. He may have taken pistol because it was a handy weapon, rather than with the idea of throwing guilt on Jacqueline. This would fit in with throwing it overboard. But if that were the case, why did he write J in blood on the wall?

N.B.—Cheap handkerchief found with pistol more likely to have belonged to a man like Fleetwood than to one of the well-to-do passengers.

Rosalie Otterbourne. Are we to accept Miss Van Schuyler's evidence or Rosalie's denial? Something was thrown overboard at the time and that something was presumably the pistol wrapped up in the velvet stole.

Points to be noted. Had Rosalie any motive? She may have disliked Linnet Doyle and even been envious of her—but as a motive for murder that seems grossly inadequate. The evidence against her can be convincing only if we discover an adequate motive. As far as we know, there is no previous knowledge or link between Rosalie Otterbourne and Linnet Doyle.

Miss Van Schuyler. The velvet stole in which pistol was wrapped belonged to Miss Van Schuyler. According to her own statement she last saw it in the observation saloon. She drew attention to its loss during the evening, and a search was made for it without success.

How did the stole come into the possession of X? Did X purloin it some time early in the evening? But if so, why? Nobody could tell, in advance, that there was going to be a scene between Jacqueline and Simon. Did X find the stole in the saloon when he went to get the pistol from under the settee? But if so, why was it not found when the search for it was made? Did it never leave Miss Van Schuyler's possession? That is to say: Did Miss Van Schuyler murder Linnet Doyle? Is her accusation of Rosalie Otterbourne a deliberate lie? If she did murder her, what was her motive?

Other possibilities:

Robbery as a motive. Possible, since the pearls have disappeared, and Linnet Doyle was certainly wearing them last night.

Someone with a grudge against the Ridgeway family. Possible—again no evidence.

We know that there is a dangerous man on board—a killer. Here we have a killer and a death. May not the two be connected? But we should have to show that Linnet Doyle possessed dangerous knowledge concerning this man.

Conclusions: We can group the persons on board into two classes—those who had a possible motive or against whom there is definite evidence, and those who, as far as we know, are free of suspicion.

Group I: Andrew Pennington

Group II: Mrs. Allerton

Group I: Fleetwood

Group II: Tim Allerton

Group I: Rosalie Otterbourne

Group II: Cornelia Robson

Group I: Miss Van Schuyler

Group II: Miss Bowers

Group I: Louise Bourget (Robbery?)

Group II: Dr. Bessner

Group I: Ferguson (Political?)

Group II: Signor Richetti

Group II: Mrs. Otterbourne

Group II: James Fanthorp

Poirot pushed the paper back.

“It is very just, very exact, what you have written there.”

“You agree with it?”

“Yes.”

“And now what is your contribution?”

Poirot drew himself up in an important manner.

“Me, I pose myself one question: ‘Why was the pistol thrown overboard?’”

“That’s all?”

“At the moment, yes. Until I can arrive at a satisfactory answer to that question, there is not sense anywhere. That is—that must be the starting point. You will notice, my friend, that, in your summary of where we stand, you have not attempted to answer that point.”

Race shrugged his shoulders.

“Panic.”

Poirot shook his head perplexedly. He picked up the sodden velvet wrap and smoothed it out, wet and limp, on the table. His fingers traced the scorched marks and the burnt holes.

“Tell me, my friend,” he said suddenly. “You are more conversant with firearms than I am. Would such a thing as this, wrapped round a pistol, make much difference in muffling the sound?”

“No, it wouldn’t. Not like a silencer, for instance.”

Poirot nodded. He went on: “A man—certainly a man who had had much handling of firearms—would know that. But a woman—a woman would not know.”

Race looked at him curiously. “Probably not.”

“No. She would have read the detective stories where they are not always very exact as to details.”

Race flicked the little pearl-handled pistol with his finger.

“This little fellow wouldn’t make much noise anyway,” he said. “Just a pop, that’s all. With any other noise around, ten to one you wouldn’t notice it.”

“Yes, I have reflected as to that.”

Poirot picked up the handkerchief and examined it.

“A man’s handkerchief—but not a gentleman’s handkerchief. Ce cher Woolworth, I imagine. Threepence at most.”

“The sort of handkerchief a man like Fleetwood would own.”

“Yes. Andrew Pennington, I notice, carries a very fine silk handkerchief.”

“Ferguson?” suggested Race.

“Possibly. As a gesture. But then it ought to be a bandana.”

“Used it instead of a glove, I suppose, to hold the pistol and obviate fingerprints.” Race added, with slight facetiousness, “‘The Clue of the Blushing Handkerchief.’”

“Ah, yes. Quite a jeune fille colour, is it not?” He laid it down and returned to the stole, once more examining the powder marks.

“All the same,” he murmured, “it is odd….”

“What’s that?”

Poirot said gently: “Cette pauvre Madame Doyle. Lying there so peacefully…with the little hole in her head. You remember how she looked?”

Race looked at him curiously. “You know,” he said, “I’ve got an idea you’re trying to tell me something—but I haven’t the faintest idea what it is.”

Nineteen

There was a tap on the door.

“Come in,” Race called.

A steward entered.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to Poirot, “but Mr. Doyle is asking for you.”

“I will come.”

Poirot rose. He went out of the room and up the companion-way to the promenade deck and along it to Dr. Bessner’s cabin.

Simon, his face flushed and feverish, was propped up with pillows. He looked embarrassed.

“Awfully good of you to come along, Monsieur Poirot. Look here, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Yes?”

Simon got still redder in the face.

“It’s—it’s about Jackie. I want to see her. Do you think—would you mind—would she mind, d’you think, if you asked her to come along here? You know I’ve been lying here thinking…That wretched kid—she is only a kid after all—and I treated her damn’ badly—and—” He stammered to silence.

Poirot looked at him with interest.

“You desire to see Mademoiselle Jacqueline? I will fetch her.”

“Thanks. Awfully good of you.”

Poirot went on his quest. He found Jacqueline de Bellefort sitting huddled up in a corner of the observation saloon. There was an open book on her lap but she was not reading.

Poirot said gently: “Will you come with me, Mademoiselle? Monsieur Doyle wants to see you.”

She started up. Her face flushed—then paled. She looked bewildered.

“Simon? He wants to see me—to see me?”

He found her incredulity moving.

“Will you come, Mademoiselle?”

She went with him in a docile fashion, like a child, but like a puzzled child.

“I—yes, of course I will.”

Poirot passed into the cabin.

“Here is Mademoiselle.”

She stepped in after him, wavered, stood still…standing there mute and dumb, her eyes fixed on Simon’s face.

“Hullo, Jackie.” He, too, was embarrassed. He went on: “Awfully good of you to come. I wanted to say—I mean—what I mean is—”

She interrupted him then. Her words came out in a rush—breathless, desperate.

“Simon—I didn’t kill Linnet. You know I didn’t do that…I—I—was mad last night. Oh, can you ever forgive me?”

Words came more easily to him now.

“Of course. That’s all right! Absolutely all right! That’s what I wanted to say. Thought you might be worrying a bit, you know….”

“Worrying? A bit? Oh! Simon!”

“That’s what I wanted to see you about. It’s quite all right, see, old girl? You just got a bit rattled last night—a shade tight. All perfectly natural.”

“Oh, Simon! I might have killed you!”

“Not you. Not with a rotten little peashooter like that….”

“And your leg! Perhaps you’ll never walk again….”

“Now, look here, Jackie, don’t be maudlin. As soon as we get to Assuan they’re going to put the X-ray to work, and dig out that tin-pot bullet, and everything will be as right as rain.”

Jacqueline gulped twice, then she rushed forward and knelt down by Simon’s bed, burying her face and sobbing. Simon patted her awkwardly on the head. His eyes met Poirot’s and, with a reluctant sigh, the latter left the cabin.

He heard broken murmurs as he went:

“How could I be such a devil? Oh, Simon!…I’m so dreadfully sorry.”

Outside Cornelia Robson was leaning over the rail. She turned her head.

“Oh, it’s you, Monsieur Poirot. It seems so awful somehow that it should be such a lovely day.”

Poirot looked up at the sky.

“When the sun shines you cannot see the moon,” he said. “But when the sun is gone—ah, when the sun is gone.”

Cornelia’s mouth fell open.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was saying, Mademoiselle, that when the sun has gone down, we shall see the moon. That is so, is it not?”

“Why—why, yes—certainly.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

Poirot laughed gently.

“I utter the imbecilities,” he said. “Take no notice.”

He strolled gently towards the stern of the boat. As he passed the next cabin he paused for a minute. He caught fragments of speech from within.

“Utterly ungrateful—after all I’ve done for you—no consideration for your wretched mother—no idea of what I suffer….”

Poirot’s lips stiffened as he pressed them together. He raised a hand and knocked.

“Is Mademoiselle Rosalie there?”

Rosalie appeared in the doorway. Poirot was shocked at her appearance. There were dark circles under her eyes and drawn lines round her mouth.

“What’s the matter?” she said ungraciously. “What do you want?”

“The pleasure of a few minutes’ conversation with you, Mademoiselle. Will you come?”

Her mouth went sulky at once. She shot him a suspicious look.

“Why should I?”

“I entreat you, Mademoiselle.”

“Oh, I suppose—”

She stepped out on the deck, closing the door behind her.

“Well?”

Poirot took her gently by the arm and drew her along the deck, still in the direction of the stern. They passed the bathrooms and round the corner. They had the stern part of the deck to themselves. The Nile flowed away behind them.

Poirot rested his elbows on the rail. Rosalie stood up straight and stiff.

“Well?” she asked again, and her voice held the same ungracious tone.

Poirot spoke slowly, choosing his words. “I could ask you certain questions, Mademoiselle, but I do not think for one moment that you would consent to answer them.”

“Seems rather a waste to bring me along here then.”

Poirot drew a finger slowly along the wooden rail.

“You are accustomed, Mademoiselle, to carrying your own burdens…But you can do that too long. The strain becomes too great. For you, Mademoiselle, the strain is becoming too great.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Rosalie.

“I am talking about facts, Mademoiselle—plain ugly facts. Let us call the spade the spade and say it in one little short sentence. Your mother drinks, Mademoiselle.”

Rosalie did not answer. Her mouth opened; then she closed it again. For once she seemed at a loss.

“There is no need for you to talk, Mademoiselle. I will do all the talking. I was interested at Assuan in the relations existing between you. I saw at once that, in spite of your carefully studied unfilial remarks, you were in reality passionately protecting her from something. I very soon knew what that something was. I knew it long before I encountered your mother one morning in an unmistakable state of intoxication. Moreover, her case, I could see, was one of secret bouts of drinking—by far the most difficult kind of case with which to deal. You were coping with it manfully. Nevertheless, she had all the secret drunkard's cunning. She managed to get hold of a secret supply of spirits and to keep it successfully hidden from you. I should not be surprised if you discovered its hiding place only yesterday. Accordingly, last night, as soon as your mother was really soundly asleep, you stole out with the contents of the cache, went round to the other side of the boat (since your own side was up against the bank) and cast it overboard into the Nile."

He paused.

"I am right, am I not?"

"Yes—you're quite right." Rosalie spoke with sudden passion. "I was a fool not to say so, I suppose! But I didn't want everyone to know. It would go all over the boat. And it seemed so—so silly—I mean—that I—"

Poirot finished the sentence for her.

"So silly that you should be suspected of committing a murder?"

Rosalie nodded.

Then she burst out again: "I've tried so hard to—keep everyone from knowing…It isn't really her fault. She got discouraged. Her books didn't sell anymore. People are tired of all that cheap sex stuff…It hurt her—it hurt her dreadfully. And so she began to—to drink. For a long time I didn't know why she was so queer. Then, when I found out, I tried to—to stop it. She'd be all right for a bit, and then, suddenly, she'd start, and there would be dreadful quarrels and rows with people. It was awful." She shuddered. "I had always to be on the watch—to get her away…."

"And then—she began to dislike me for it. She—she's turned right against me. I think she almost hates me sometimes."

"Pauvre petite," said Poirot.

She turned on him vehemently.

"Don't be sorry for me. Don't be kind. It's easier if you're not." She sighed—a long heartrending sigh. "I'm so tired…I'm so deadly, deadly tired."

"I know," said Poirot.

"People think I'm awful. Stuck-up and cross and bad-tempered. I can't help it. I've forgotten how to be—to be nice."

"That is what I said to you; you have carried your burden by yourself too long."

Rosalie said slowly. "It's a relief—to talk about it. You—you've always been kind to me, Monsieur Poirot. I'm afraid I've been rude to you often."

"La politesse, it is not necessary between friends."

The suspicion came back to her face suddenly.

"Are you—are you going to tell everyone? I suppose you must, because of those damned bottles I threw overboard."

"No, no, it is not necessary. Just tell me what I want to know. At what time was this? Ten minutes past one?"

"About that, I should think. I don't remember exactly."

"Now tell me, Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle Van Schuyler saw you, did you see her?"

Rosalie shook her head.

"No, I didn't."

"She says that she looked out of the door of her cabin."

"I don't think I should have seen her. I just looked along the deck and then out to the river."

Poirot nodded.

“And did you see anyone—anyone at all, when you looked down the deck?”

There was a pause—quite a long pause. Rosalie was frowning. She seemed to be thinking earnestly.

At last she shook her head quite decisively.

“No,” she said. “I saw nobody.”

Hercule Poirot slowly nodded his head. But his eyes were grave.

Twenty

People crept into the dining saloon by ones and twos in a very subdued manner. There seemed a general feeling that to sit down eagerly to food displayed an unfortunate heartlessness. It was with an almost apologetic air that one passenger after another came and sat down at their tables.

Tim Allerton arrived some few minutes after his mother had taken her seat. He was looking in a thoroughly bad temper.

“I wish we’d never come on this blasted trip,” he growled.

Mrs. Allerton shook her head sadly.

“Oh, my dear, so do I. That beautiful girl! It all seems such a waste. To think that anyone could shoot her in cold blood. It seems awful to me that anyone could do such a thing. And that other poor child.”

“Jacqueline?”

“Yes; my heart aches for her. She looks so dreadfully unhappy.”

“Teach her not to go round loosing off toy firearms,” said Tim unfeelingly as he helped himself to butter.

“I expect she was badly brought up.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Mother, don’t go all maternal about it.”

“You’re in a shocking bad temper, Tim.”

“Yes I am. Who wouldn’t be?”

“I don’t see what there is to be cross about. It’s just frightfully sad.”

Tim said crossly: “You’re taking the romantic point of view! What you don’t seem to realize is that it’s no joke being mixed up in a murder case.”

Mrs. Allerton looked a little startled.

“But surely—”

“That’s just it. There’s no ‘But surely’ about it. Everyone on this damned boat is under suspicion—you and I as well as the rest of them.”

Mrs. Allerton demurred. “Technically we are, I suppose—but actually it’s ridiculous!”

“There’s nothing ridiculous where murder’s concerned! You may sit there, darling, just exuding virtue and conscious rectitude, but a lot of unpleasant policeman at Shellal or Assuan won’t take you at your face value.”

“Perhaps the truth will be known before then.”

“Why should it be?”

“Monsieur Poirot may find out.”

“That old mountebank? He won’t find out anything. He’s all talk and moustaches.”

“Well, Tim,” said Mrs. Allerton. “I dare say everything you say is true, but, even if it is, we’ve got to go through with it, so we might as well make up our minds to it and go through with it as cheerfully as we can.”

But her son showed no abatement of gloom.

“There’s this blasted business of the pearls being missing, too.”

“Linnet’s pearls?”

“Yes. It seems somebody must have pinched ’em.”

“I suppose that was the motive for the crime,” said Mrs. Allerton.

“Why should it be? You’re mixing up two perfectly different things.”

“Who told you that they were missing?”

“Ferguson. He got it from his tough friend in the engine room, who got it from the maid.”

“They were lovely pearls,” declared Mrs. Allerton.

Poirot sat down at the table, bowing to Mrs. Allerton.

“I am a little late,” he said.

“I expect you have been busy,” Mrs. Allerton replied.

“Yes, I have been much occupied.”

He ordered a fresh bottle of wine from the waiter.

“We’re very catholic in our tastes,” said Mrs. Allerton. “You drink wine always; Tim drinks whisky and soda, and I try all the different brands of mineral water in turn.”

“Tiens!” said Poirot. He stared at her for a moment. He murmured to himself: “It is an idea, that….”

Then, with an impatient shrug of his shoulders, he dismissed the sudden preoccupation that had distracted him and began to chat lightly of other matters.

“Is Mr. Doyle badly hurt?” asked Mrs. Allerton.

“Yes, it is a fairly serious injury. Dr. Bessner is anxious to reach Assuan so that his leg can be X-rayed and the bullet removed. But he hopes there will be no permanent lameness.”

“Poor Simon,” said Mrs. Allerton. “Only yesterday he looked such a happy boy, with everything in the world he wanted. And now his beautiful wife killed and he himself laid up and helpless. I do hope, though—”

“What do you hope, Madame?” asked Poirot as Mrs. Allerton paused.

"I hope he's not too angry with that poor child."

"With Mademoiselle Jacqueline? Quite the contrary. He was full of anxiety on her behalf."

He turned to Tim.

"You know, it is a pretty little problem of psychology, that. All the time that Mademoiselle Jacqueline was following them from place to place, he was absolutely furious; but now, when she has actually shot him, and wounded him dangerously—perhaps made him lame for life—all his anger seems to have evaporated. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," said Tim thoughtfully, "I think I can. The first thing made him feel a fool—"

Poirot nodded. "You are right. It offended his male dignity."

"But now—if you look at it a certain way, it's she who's made a fool of herself. Everyone's down on her, and so—"

"He can be generously forgiving," finished Mrs. Allerton. "What children men are!"

"A profoundly untrue statement that women always make," murmured Tim.

Poirot smiled. Then he said to Tim: "Tell me, Madame Doyle's cousin, Miss Joanna Southwood, did she resemble Madame Doyle?"

"You've got it a little wrong, Monsieur Poirot. She was our cousin and Linnet's friend."

"Ah, pardon—I was confused. She is a young lady much in the news, that. I have been interested in her for some time."

"Why?" asked Tim sharply.

Poirot half rose to bow to Jacqueline de Bellefort, who had just come in and passed their table on the way to her own. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, and her breath came a little unevenly. As he resumed his seat Poirot seemed to have forgotten Tim's question. He murmured vaguely: "I wonder if all young ladies with valuable jewels are as careless as Madame Doyle was?"

"It is true, then, that they were stolen?" asked Mrs. Allerton.

"Who told you so, Madame?"

"Ferguson said so," Tim volunteered.

Poirot nodded gravely.

"It is quite true."

"I suppose," Mrs. Allerton nervously, "that this will mean a lot of unpleasantness for all of us. Tim says it will."

Her son scowled, but Poirot had turned to him.

"Ah! You have had previous experience, perhaps? You have been in a house where there was a robbery?"

"Never," said Tim.

"Oh, yes, darling, you were at the Portarlingtons' that time—when that awful woman's diamonds were stolen."

"You always get things hopelessly wrong, Mother. I was there when it was discovered that the diamonds she was wearing round her fat neck were only paste! The actual substitution was probably done months earlier. As a matter of fact, of lot of people said she'd had it done herself!"

"Joanna said so, I expect."

"Joanna wasn't there."

"But she knew them quite well. And it's very like her to make that kind of suggestion."

"You're always down on Joanna, Mother."

Poirot hastily changed the subject. He had it in mind to make a really big purchase at one of the Assuanshops. Some very attractive purple and gold material at one of the Indian merchants. There would, of course, be the duty to pay, but—

"They tell me that they can—how do you say—expedite it for me. And that the charges will not be too high. How think you, will it arrive all right?"

Mrs. Allerton said that many people, so she had heard, had had things sent straight to England from the shops in question and that everything had arrived safely.

"Bien. Then I will do that. But the trouble one has, when one is abroad, if a parcel comes out from England! Have you had experience of that? Have you had any parcels arrive since you have been on your travels?"

"I don't think we have, have we, Tim? You get books sometimes, but of course there is never any trouble about them."

"Ah, no, books are different."

Dessert had been served. Now, without any previous warning, Colonel Race stood up and made his speech.

He touched on the circumstances of the crime and announced the theft of the pearls. A search of the boat was about to be instituted, and he would be obliged if all the passengers would remain in the saloon until this was completed. Then, after that, if the passengers agreed, as he was sure they would, they themselves would be kind enough to submit to a search.

Poirot slipped nimbly along to his side. There was a little buzz and hum all round them. Voices doubtful, indignant, excited….

Poirot reached Race's side and murmured something in his ear just as the latter was about to leave the dining saloon.

Race listened, nodded assent, and beckoned a steward. He said a few brief words to him; then, together with Poirot, he passed out on to the deck, closing the door behind him.

They stood for a minute or two by the rail. Race lit a cigarette.

“Not a bad idea of yours,” he said. “We’ll soon see if there’s anything in it. I’ll give ’em three minutes.”

The door of the dining saloon opened and the same steward to whom they had spoken came out. He saluted Race and said: “Quite right, sir. There’s a lady who says it’s urgent she should speak to you at once without delay.”

“Ah!” Race’s face showed satisfaction.

“Who is it?”

“Miss Bowers, sir, the hospital nurse lady.”

A slight shade of surprise showed on Race’s face. He said, “Bring her to the smoking room. Don’t let anyone else leave.”

“No, sir—the other steward will attend to that.”

He went back into the dining room. Poirot and Race went to the smoking room.

“Bowers, eh?” muttered Race.

They had hardly got inside the smoking room before the steward reappeared with Miss Bowers. He ushered her in and left, shutting the door behind him.

“Well, Miss Bowers?” Colonel Race looked at her inquiringly. “What’s all this?”

Miss Bowers looked her usual composed, unhurried self. She displayed no particular emotion.

“You’ll excuse me, Colonel Race,” she said, “but under the circumstances I thought the best thing to do would be to speak to you at once”—she opened her neat black handbag—“and to return you these.”

She took out a string of pearls and laid them on the table.

Twenty-One

If Miss Bowers had been the kind of woman who enjoyed creating a sensation, she would have been richly repaid by the result of her action.

A look of utter astonishment passed over Colonel Race's face as he picked up the pearls from the table.

"This is most extraordinary," he said. "Will you kindly explain, Miss Bowers?"

"Of course. That's what I've come to do." Miss Bowers settled herself comfortably in a chair. "Naturally it was a little difficult for me to decide what it was best for me to do. The family would naturally be averse to scandal of any kind, and they trusted my discretion, but the circumstances are so very unusual that it really leaves me no choice. Of course, when you didn't find anything in the cabins, your next move would be a search of the passengers, and, if the pearls were then found in my possession, it would be rather an awkward situation and the truth would come out just the same."

"And just what is the truth? Did you take these pearls from Mrs. Doyle's cabin?"

"Oh, no, Colonel Race, of course not. Miss Van Schuyler did."

"Miss Van Schuyler?"

"Yes. She can't help it, you know, but she does—er—take things. Especially jewellery. That's really why I'm always with her. It's not her health at all; it's this little idiosyncrasy. I keep on the alert, and fortunately there's never been any trouble since I've been with her. It just means being watchful, you know. And she always hides the things she takes in the same place—rolled up in a pair of stockings—so that it makes it very simple. I look each morning. Of course I'm a light sleeper, and I always sleep next door to her, and with the communicating door open if it's in a hotel, so that I usually hear. Then I go after her and persuade her to go back to bed. Of course it’s been rather more difficult on a boat. But she doesn’t usually do it at night. It’s more just picking up things that she sees left about. Of course, pearls have a great attraction for her always.”

Miss Bowers ceased speaking.

Race asked: “How did you discover they had been taken?”

“They were in her stockings this morning. I knew whose they were, of course. I’ve often noticed them. I went along to put them back, hoping that Mrs. Doyle wasn’t up yet and hadn’t discovered her loss. But there was a steward standing there, and he told me about the murder and that no one could go in. So then, you see, I was in a regular quandary. But I still hoped to slip them back in the cabin later, before their absence had been noticed. I can assure you I’ve passed a very unpleasant morning wondering what was the best thing to do. You see, the Van Schuyler family is so very particular and exclusive. It would never do if this got into the newspapers. But that won’t be necessary, will it?”

Miss Bowers really looked worried.

“That depends on circumstances,” said Colonel Race cautiously.

“But we shall do our best for you, of course. What does Miss Van Schuyler say to this?”

“Oh, she’ll deny it, of course. She always does. Says some wicked person has put it there. She never admits taking anything. That’s why if you catch her in time she goes back to bed like a lamb. Says she just went out to look at the moon. Something like that.”

“Does Miss Robson know about this—er—failing?”

“No, she doesn’t. Her mother knows, but she’s a very simple kind of girl and her mother thought it best she should know nothing about it. I was quite equal to dealing with Miss Van Schuyler,” added the competent Miss Bowers.

“We have to thank you, Mademoiselle, for coming to us so promptly,” said Poirot.

Miss Bowers stood up.

“I’m sure I hope I acted for the best.”

“Be assured that you have.”

“You see, what with there being a murder as well—”

Colonel Race interrupted her. His voice was grave.

“Miss Bowers, I am going to ask you a question, and I want to impress upon you that it has got to be answered truthfully. Miss Van Schuyler is unhinged mentally to the extent of being a kleptomaniac. Has she also a tendency to homicidal mania?”

Miss Bowers’ answer came immediately: “Oh, dear me, no! Nothing of that kind. You can take my word for it absolutely. The old lady wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

The reply came with such positive assurance that there seemed nothing more to be said. Nevertheless Poirot did interpolate one mild inquiry.

“Does Miss Van Schuyler suffer at all from deafness?”

“As a matter of fact she does, Monsieur Poirot. Not so that you’d notice in any way, not if you were speaking to her, I mean. But quite often she doesn’t hear you when you come into a room. Things like that.”

“Do you think she would have heard anyone moving about in Mrs. Doyle’s cabin, which is next door to her own?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so—not for a minute. You see, the bunk is the other side of the cabin, not even against the partition wall. No, I don’t think she would have heard anything.”

“Thank you, Miss Bowers.”

Race said: “Perhaps you will now go back to the dining saloon and wait with the others?”

He opened the door for her and watched her go down the staircase and enter the saloon. Then he shut the door and came back to the table. Poirot had picked up the pearls.

“Well,” said Race grimly, “that reaction came pretty quickly. That’s a very coolheaded and astute young woman—perfectly capable of holding out on us and still further if she thinks it suits her book. What about Miss Marie Van Schuyler now? I don’t think we can eliminate her from the possible suspects. You know, she might have committed murder to get hold of those jewels. We can’t take the nurse’s word for it. She’s all out to do the best for the family.”

Poirot nodded in agreement. He was very busy with the pearls, running them through his fingers, holding them up to his eyes.

He said: “We may take it, I think, that part of the old lady’s story to us is true. She did look out of her cabin and she did see Rosalie Otterbourne. But I don’t think she heard anything or anyone in Linnet Doyle’s cabin. I think she was just peering out from her cabin preparatory to slipping along and purloining the pearls.”

“The Otterbourne girl was there, then?”

“Yes. Throwing her mother’s secret cache of drink overboard.”

Colonel Race shook his head sympathetically.

“So that’s it! Tough on a young ’un.”

“Yes, her life has not been very gay, cette pauvre petite Rosalie.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s been cleared up. She didn’t see or hear anything?”

“I asked her that. She responded—after a lapse of quite twenty seconds—that she saw nobody.”

“Oh?” Race looked alert.

“Yes, it is suggestive, that.”

Race said slowly: “If Linnet Doyle was shot round about ten minutes past one, or indeed any time after the boat had quieted down, it has seemed amazing to me that no one heard the shot. I grant you that a little pistol like that wouldn’t make much noise, but all the same the boat would be deadly quiet, and any noise, even a little pop, should have been heard. But I begin to understand better now. The cabin on the forward side of hers was unoccupied—since her husband was in Dr. Bessner’s cabin. The one aft was occupied by the Van Schuyler woman, who was deaf. That leaves only—”

He paused and looked expectantly at Poirot, who nodded.

“The cabin next to her on the other side of the boat. In other words—Pennington. We always seem to come back to Pennington.”

“We will come back to him presently with the kid gloves removed! Ah, yes, I am promising myself that pleasure.”

“In the meantime we’d better get on with our search of the boat. The pearls still make a convenient excuse, even though they have been returned—but Miss Bowers is not likely to advertise the fact.”

“Ah, these pearls!” Poirot held them up against the light once more. He stuck out his tongue and licked them; he even gingerly tried one of them between his teeth. Then, with a sigh, he threw them down on the table.

“Here are more complications, my friend,” he said. “I am not an expert on precious stones, but I have had a good deal to do with them in my time and I am fairly certain of what I say. These pearls are only a clever imitation.”

Twenty-Two

Colonel Race swore hastily.

“This damned case gets more and more involved.” He picked up the pearls. “I suppose you’ve not made a mistake? They look all right to me.”

“They are a very good imitation—yes.”

“Now where does that lead us? I suppose Linnet Doyle didn’t deliberately have an imitation made and bring it aboard with her for safety. Many women do.”

“I think, if that were so, her husband would know about it.”

“She may not have told him.”

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“No, I do not think that is so. I was admiring Madame Doyle’s pearls the first evening on the boat—their wonderful sheen and lustre. I am sure that she was wearing the genuine ones then.”

“That brings us up against two possibilities. First, that Miss Van Schuyler only stole the imitation string after the real ones had been stolen by someone else. Second, that the whole kleptomaniac story is a fabrication. Either Miss Bowers is a thief, and quickly invented the story and allayed suspicion by handing over the false pearls, or else that whole party is in it together. That is to say, they are a gang of clever jewel thieves masquerading as an exclusive American family.”

“Yes,” Poirot murmured. “It is difficult to say. But I will point out to you one thing—to make a perfect and exact copy of the pearls, clasp and all, good enough to stand a chance of deceiving Madame Doyle, is a highly skilled technical performance. It could not be done in a hurry. Whoever copied those pearls must have had a good opportunity of studying the original.”

Race rose to his feet.

“Useless to speculate about it any further now. Let’s get on with the job. We’ve got to find the real pearls. And at the same time we’ll keep our eyes open.”

They disposed of the cabins occupied on the lower deck. That of Signor Richetti contained various archaeological works in different languages, a varied assortment of clothing, hair lotions of a highly scented kind and two personal letters—one from an archaeological expedition in Syria, and one from, apparently, a sister in Rome. His handkerchiefs were all of coloured silk.

They passed on to Ferguson’s cabin.

There was a sprinkling of communistic literature, a good many snapshots, Samuel Butler’s Erewhon and a cheap edition of Pepys’ Diary. His personal possessions were not many. Most of what outer clothing there was was torn and dirty; the underclothing, on the other hand, was of really good quality. The handkerchiefs were expensive linen ones.

“Some interesting discrepancies,” murmured Poirot.

Race nodded. “Rather odd that there are absolutely no personal papers, letters, etc.”

“Yes; that gives one to think. An odd young man, Monsieur Ferguson.” He looked thoughtfully at a signet ring he held in his hand, before replacing it in the drawer where he had found it.

They went along to the cabin occupied by Louise Bourget. The maid had her meals after the other passengers, but Race had sent word that she was to be taken to join the others. A cabin steward met them.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he apologized, “but I’ve not been able to find the young woman anywhere. I can’t think where she can have got to.”

Race glanced inside the cabin. It was empty.

They went up to the promenade deck and started on the starboard side. The first cabin was that occupied by James Fanthorp. Here all was in meticulous order. Mr. Fanthorp travelled light, but all that he had was of good quality.

“No letters,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “He is careful, our Mr. Fanthorp, to destroy his correspondence.”

They passed on to Tim Allerton’s cabin, next door.

There were evidences here of an Anglo-Catholic turn of mind—an exquisite little triptych, and a big rosary of intricately carved wood. Besides personal clothing, there was a half completed manuscript, a good deal annotated and scribbled over, and a good collection of books, most of them recently published. There were also a quantity of letters thrown carelessly into a drawer. Poirot, never in the least scrupulous about reading other people’s correspondence, glanced through them. He noted that amongst them there were no letters from Joanna Southwood. He picked up a tube of Seccotine, fingered it absently for a minute or two, then said: “Let us pass on.”

“No Woolworth handkerchiefs,” reported Race, rapidly replacing the contents of a drawer.

Mrs. Allerton’s cabin was the next. It was exquisitely neat, and a faint old-fashioned smell of lavender hung about it. The two men’s search was soon over. Race remarked as they left it: “Nice woman, that.”

The next cabin was that which had been used as a dressing room by Simon Doyle. His immediate necessities—pyjamas, toilet things, etc.—had been moved to Bessner’s cabin, but the remainder of his possessions were still there—two good-sized leather suitcases and a kitbag. There were also some clothes in the wardrobe.

“We will look carefully here, my friend,” said Poirot, “for it is possible that the thief hid the pearls here.”

“You think it is likely?”

“But yes, indeed. Consider! The thief, whoever he or she may be, must know that sooner or later a search will be made, and therefore a hiding place in his or her own cabin would be injudicious in the extreme. The public rooms present other difficulties. But here is a cabin belonging to a man who cannot possibly visit it himself so that, if the pearls are found here, it tells us nothing at all.” But the most meticulous search failed to reveal any trace of the missing necklace.

Poirot murmured “Zut!” to himself and they emerged once more on the deck.

Linnet Doyle’s cabin had been locked after the body was removed, but Race had the key with him. He unlocked the door and the two men stepped inside.

Except for the removal of the girl’s body, the cabin was exactly as it had been that morning.

“Poirot,” said Race, “if there’s anything to be found here, for God’s sake go ahead and find it. You can if anyone can—I know that.”

“This time you do not mean the pearls, mon ami?”

“No. The murder’s the main thing. There may be something I overlooked this morning.”

Quietly, deftly, Poirot went about his search. He went down on his knees and scrutinized the floor inch by inch. He examined the bed. He went rapidly through the wardrobe and chest of drawers. He went through the wardrobe trunk and the two costly suitcases. He looked through the expensive gold-fitted dressing-case. Finally he turned his attention to the washstand. There were various creams, powders, face lotions. But the only thing that seemed to interest Poirot were two little bottles labelled Nailex. He picked them up at last and brought them to the dressing table. One, which bore the inscription Nailex Rose, was empty but for a drop or two of dark red fluid at the bottom. The other, the same size, but labelled Nailex Cardinal, was nearly full. Poirot uncorked first the empty, then the full one, and sniffed them both delicately.

An odour of peardrops billowed into the room. With a slight grimace he recorked them.

“Get anything?” asked Race.

Poirot replied by a French proverb: “On ne prend pas les mouches avec le vinaigre.” Then he said with a sigh: “My friend, we have not been fortunate. The murderer has not been obliging. He has not dropped for us the cuff link, the cigarette end, the cigar ash—or, in the case of the woman, the handkerchief, the lipstick, or the hair slide.”

“Only the bottle of nail polish?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “I must ask the maid. There is something—yes—a little curious there.”

“I wonder where the devil the girl’s got to?” said Race.

They left the cabin, locking the door behind them, and passed on to that of Miss Van Schuyler.

Here again were all the appurtenances of wealth—expensive toilet fittings, good luggage, a certain number of private letters and papers all perfectly in order.

The next cabin was the double one occupied by Poirot, and beyond it that of Race. “Hardly like to hide ’em in either of these,” said the Colonel.

Poirot demurred. “It might be. Once, on the Orient Express, I investigated a murder. There was a little matter of a scarlet kimono. It had disappeared, and yet it must be on the train. I found it—where do you think? In my own locked suitcase! Ah! It was an impertinence, that!”

“Well, let’s see if anybody has been impertinent with you or me this time.”

But the thief of the pearls had not been impertinent with Hercule Poirot or with Colonel Race.

Rounding the stern they made a very careful search of Miss Bowers' cabin but could find nothing of a suspicious nature. Her handkerchiefs were of plain linen with an initial.

The Otterbournes' cabin came next. Here, again, Poirot made a very meticulous search, but with no result.

The next cabin was Bessner's. Simon Doyle lay with an untasted tray of food beside him.

"Off my feed," he said apologetically.

He was looking feverish and very much worse than earlier in the day. Poirot appreciated Bessner's anxiety to get him as swiftly as possible to hospital and skilled appliances. The little Belgian explained what the two of them were doing, and Simon nodded approval. On learning that the pearls had been restored by Miss Bowers, but proved to be merely imitation, he expressed the most complete astonishment.

"You are quite sure, Monsieur Doyle, that your wife did not have an imitation string which she brought aboard with her instead of the real ones?"

Simon shook his head decisively.

"Oh, no. I'm quite sure of that. Linnet loved those pearls and she wore 'em everywhere. They were insured against every possible risk, so I think that made her a bit careless."

"Then we must continue our search."

He started opening drawers. Race attacked a suitcase.

Simon stared. "Look here, you surely don't suspect old Bessner pinched them?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“It might be so. After all, what do we know of Dr. Bessner? Only what he himself gives out.”

“But he couldn’t have hidden them in here without my seeing him.”

“He could not have hidden anything today without your having seen him. But we do not know when the substitution took place. He may have effected the exchange some days ago.”

“I never thought of that.”

But the search was unavailing.

The next cabin was Pennington’s. The two men spent some time in their search. In particular, Poirot and Race examined carefully a case full of legal and business documents, most of them requiring Linnet’s signature.

Poirot shook his head gloomily. “These seem all square and aboveboard. You agree?”

“Absolutely. Still, the man isn’t a born fool. If there had been a compromising document there—a power of attorney or something of that kind—he’d be pretty sure to have destroyed it first thing.”

“That is so, yes.”

Poirot lifted a heavy Colt revolver out of the top drawer of the chest of drawers, looked at it and put it back.

“So it seems there are still some people who travel with revolvers,” he murmured.

“Yes, a little suggestive, perhaps. Still, Linnet Doyle wasn’t shot with a thing that size.” Race paused and then said: “You know, I’ve thought of a possible answer to your point about the pistol being thrown overboard. Supposing that the actual murderer did leave it in Linnet Doyle’s cabin, and that someone else—some second person—took it away and threw it into the river?”

“Yes, that is possible. I have thought of it. But it opens up a whole string of questions. Who was that second person? What interest had they in endeavouring to shield Jacqueline de Bellefort by taking away the pistol? What was the second person doing there? The only other person we know of who went into the cabin was Mademoiselle Van Schuyler. Was it conceivably Mademoiselle Van Schuyler who removed it? Why should she wish to shield Jacqueline de Bellefort? And yet—what other reason can there be for the removal of the pistol?”

Race suggested, “She may have recognized the stole as hers, got the wind up, and thrown the whole bag of tricks over on that account.”

“The stole, perhaps, but would she have got rid of the pistol, too? Still, I agree that it is a possible solution. But it is always—bon Dieu! It is clumsy. And you still have not appreciated one point about the stole—”

As they emerged from Pennington’s cabin Poirot suggested that Race should search the remaining cabins, those occupied by Jacqueline, Cornelia, and two empty ones at the end, while he himself had a few words with Simon Doyle. Accordingly he retraced his steps along the deck and re-entered Bessner’s cabin.

Simon said: “Look here, I’ve been thinking. I’m perfectly sure that those pearls were all right yesterday.”

“Why is that, Monsieur Doyle?”

“Because Linnet”—he winced as he uttered his wife’s name—“was passing them through her hands just before dinner and talking about them. She knew something about pearls. I feel certain she’d have known if they were a fake.”

“They were a very good imitation, though. Tell me, was Madame Doyle in the habit of letting those pearls out of her hands? Did she ever lend them to a friend for instance?”

Simon flushed with slight embarrassment.

“You see, Monsieur Poirot, it’s difficult for me to say…I—I—well, you see, I hadn’t known Linnet very long.”

“Ah, no, it was a quick romance—yours.”

Simon went on. “And so—really—I shouldn’t know a thing like that. But Linnet was awfully generous with her things. I should think she might have done.”

“She never, for instance”—Poirot’s voice was very smooth—“she never, for instance, lent them to Mademoiselle de Bellefort?”

“What d’you mean?” Simon flushed brick-red, tried to sit up and, wincing, fell back. “What are you getting at? That Jackie stole the pearls? She didn’t. I’ll swear she didn’t. Jackie’s as straight as a die. The mere idea of her being a thief is ridiculous—absolutely ridiculous.”

Poirot looked at him with gently twinkling eyes. “Oh, la! la! la!” he said unexpectedly. “That suggestion of mine, it has indeed stirred up the nest of hornets.”

Simon repeated doggedly, unmoved by Poirot’s lighter note, “Jackie’s straight!”

Poirot remembered a girl’s voice by the Nile in Assuan saying, “I love Simon—and he loves me….”

He had wondered which of the three statements he had heard that night was the true one. It seemed to him that it had turned out to be Jacqueline who had come closest to the truth.

The door opened and Race came in.

“Nothing,” he said brusquely. “Well, we didn’t expect it. I see the stewards coming along with their report as to the searching of the passengers.”

A steward and stewardess appeared in the doorway. The former spoke first. “Nothing, sir.”

"Any of the gentlemen make any fuss?"

"Only the Italian gentleman, sir. He carried on a good deal. Said it was a dishonour—something of that kind. He'd got a gun on him, too."

"What kind of a gun?"

"Mauser automatic twenty-five, sir."

"Italians are pretty hot-tempered," said Simon. "Richetti got in no end of a stew at Wadi Halfa just because of a mistake over a telegram. He was darned rude to Linnet over it."

Race turned to the stewardess. She was a big handsome-looking woman.

"Nothing on any of the ladies, sir. They made a good deal of fuss—except for Mrs. Allerton, who was as nice as nice could be. Not a sign of the pearls. By the way, the young lady, Miss Rosalie Otterbourne, had a little pistol in her handbag."

"What kind?"

"It was a very small one, sir, with a pearl handle. A kind of toy."

Race stared. "Devil take this case," he muttered. "I thought we'd got her cleared of suspicion, and now—Does every girl on this blinking boat carry around pearl-handled toy pistols?"

He shot a question at the stewardess. "Did she show any feeling over your finding it?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't think she noticed. I had my back turned whilst I was going through the handbag."

"Still, she must have known you'd come across it. Oh, well, it beats me. What about the maid?"

"We've looked all over the boat, sir. We can't find her anywhere."

“What’s this?” asked Simon.

“Mrs. Doyle’s maid—Louise Bourget. She’s disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

Race said thoughtfully: “She might have stolen the pearls. She is the one person who had ample opportunity to get a replica made.”

“And then, when she found a search was being instituted, she threw herself overboard?” Simon suggested.

“Nonsense,” replied Race, irritably. “A woman can’t throw herself overboard in broad daylight, from a boat like this, without somebody realizing the fact. She’s bound to be somewhere on board.” He addressed the stewardess once more. “When was she last seen?”

“About half an hour before the bell went for lunch, sir.”

“We’ll have a look at her cabin anyway,” said Race. “That may tell us something.”

He led the way to the deck below. Poirot followed him. They unlocked the door of the cabin and passed inside.

Louise Bourget, whose trade it was to keep other people’s belongings in order, had taken a holiday where her own were concerned. Odds and ends littered the top of the chest of drawers; a suitcase gaped open, with clothes hanging out of the side of it and preventing it shutting; underclothing hung limply over the sides of the chairs.

As Poirot, with swift neat fingers, opened the drawers of the dressing-chest, Race examined the suitcase.

Louise’s shoes were lined along by the bed. One of them, a black patent leather, seemed to be resting at an extraordinary angle, almost unsupported. The appearance of it was so odd that it attracted Race’s attention.

He closed the suitcase and bent over the line of shoes. Then he uttered a sharp exclamation.

“Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?”

Race said grimly: “She hasn’t disappeared. She’s here—under the bed….”

Twenty-Three

The body of the dead woman, who in life had been Louise Bourget, lay on the floor of her cabin. The two men bent over it.

Race straightened himself first.

“Been dead close on an hour, I should say. We’ll get Bessner on to it. Stabbed to the heart. Death pretty well instantaneous, I should imagine. She doesn’t look pretty, does she?”

“No.”

Poirot shook his head with a slight shudder.

The dark feline face was convulsed, as though with surprise and fury, the lips drawn back from the teeth.

Poirot bent again gently and picked up the right hand. Something just showed within the fingers. He detached it and held it out to Race, a little sliver of flimsy paper coloured a pale mauvish pink.

“You see what it is?”

“Money,” said Race.

“The corner of a thousand-franc note, I fancy.”

“Well, it’s clear what happened,” said Race. “She knew something—and she was blackmailing the murderer with her knowledge. We thought she wasn’t being quite straight this morning.”

Poirot cried out: “We have been idiots—fools! We should have known—then. What did she say? ‘What could I have seen or heard? I was on the deck below. Naturally, if I had been unable to sleep, if I had mounted the stairs, then perhaps I might have seen this assassin, this monster, enter or leave Madame’s cabin, but as it is—’ Of course, that is what did happen!

She did come up. She did see someone gliding into Linnet Doyle's cabin—or coming out of it. And, because of her greed, her insensate greed, she lies here—"

"And we are no nearer to knowing who killed her," finished Race disgustedly.

Poirot shook his head. "No, no. We know much more now. We know—we know almost everything. Only what we know seems incredible…Yet it must be so. Only I do not see. Pah! What a fool I was this morning! We felt—both of us felt—that she was keeping something back, and yet we never realized that logical reason, blackmail."

"She must have demanded hush money straight away," said Race. "Demanded it with threats. The murderer was forced to accede to that request and paid her in French notes. Anything there?"

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully. "I hardly think so. Many people take a reserve of money with them when travelling—sometimes five-pound notes, sometimes dollars, but very often French notes as well. Possibly the murderer paid her all he had in a mixture of currencies. Let us continue our reconstruction."

"The murderer comes to her cabin, gives her the money, and then—"

"And then," said Poirot, "she counts it. Oh, yes, I know that class. She would count the money, and while she counted it she was completely off her guard. The murderer struck. Having done so successfully, he gathered up the money and fled—not noticing that the corner of one of the notes was torn."

"We may get him that way," suggested Race doubtfully.

"I doubt it," said Poirot. "He will examine those notes, and will probably notice the tear. Of course if he were of a parsimonious disposition he would not be able to bring himself to destroy a mille note—but I very much fear that his temperament is just the opposite."

"How do you make that out?"

"Both this crime and the murder of Madame Doyle demanded certain qualities—courage, audacity, bold execution, lightning action; those qualities do not accord with a saving, prudent disposition."

Race shook his head sadly. "I'd better get Bessner down," he said.

The stout doctor's examination did not take long. Accompanied by a good many Ach's and So's, he went to work.

"She has been dead not more than an hour," he announced. "Death it was very quick—at once."

"And what weapon do you think was used?"

"Ach, it is interesting that. It was something very sharp, very thin, very delicate. I could show you the kind of thing."

Back again in his cabin he opened a case and extracted a long, delicate, surgical knife.

"It was something like that, my friend; it was not a common table knife."

"I suppose," suggested Race smoothly, "that none of your own knives are—er—missing, Doctor?"

Bessner stared at him; then his face grew red with indignation.

"What is that you say? Do you think I—I, Carl Bessner—who is so well-known all over Austria—I with my clients, my highly born patients—I have killed a miserable little femme de chambre? Ah, but it is ridiculous—absurd, what you say! None of my knives are missing—not one, I tell you. They are all here, correct, in their places. You can see for yourself. And this insult to my profession I will not forget."

Dr. Bessner closed his case with a snap, flung it down, and stamped out on to the deck.

“Whew!” said Simon. “You’ve put the old boy’s back up.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “It is regrettable.”

“You’re on the wrong tack. Old Bessner’s one of the best, even though he is a kind of Boche.”

Dr. Bessner reappeared suddenly.

“Will you be so kind as to leave me now my cabin? I have to do the dressing of my patient’s leg.”

Miss Bowers had entered with him and stood, brisk and professional, waiting for the others to go.

Race and Poirot crept out meekly. Race muttered something and went off. Poirot turned to his left. He heard scraps of girlish conversation, a little laugh. Jacqueline and Rosalie were together in the latter’s cabin.

The door was open and the two girls were standing near it. As his shadow fell on them they looked up. He saw Rosalie Otterbourne smile at him for the first time—a shy welcoming smile—a little uncertain in its lines, as of one who does a new and unfamiliar thing.

“You talk the scandal, Mesdemoiselles?” he accused them.

“No, indeed,” said Rosalie. “As a matter of fact we were just comparing lipsticks.”

Poirot smiled. “Les chiffons d’aujourd’hui,” he murmured.

But there was something a little mechanical about his smile, and Jacqueline de Bellefort, quicker and more observant than Rosalie, saw it. She dropped the lipstick she was holding and came out upon the deck.

“Has something—what has happened now?”

“It is as you guess, Mademoiselle; something has happened.”

“What?” Rosalie came out too.

“Another death,” said Poirot.

Rosalie caught her breath sharply. Poirot was watching her narrowly. He saw alarm and something more—consternation—show for a minute or two in her eyes.

“Madame Doyle’s maid has been killed,” he told them bluntly.

“Killed?” cried Jacqueline. “Killed, do you say?”

“Yes, that is what I said.” Though his answer was nominally to her, it was Rosalie whom he watched. It was Rosalie to whom he spoke as he went on: “You see, this maid she saw something she was not intended to see. And so—she was silenced, in case she should not hold her tongue.”

“What was it she saw?”

Again it was Jacqueline who asked, and again Poirot’s answer was to Rosalie. It was an odd little three-cornered scene.

“There is, I think, very little doubt what it was she saw,” said Poirot. “She saw someone enter and leave Linnet Doyle’s cabin on that fatal night.”

His ears were quick. He heard the sharp intake of breath and saw the eyelids flicker. Rosalie Otterbourne had reacted just as he intended she should.

“Did she say who it was she saw?” Rosalie asked.

Gently—regretfully—Poirot shook his head.

Footsteps pattered up the deck. It was Cornelia Robson, her eyes wide and startled.

“Oh, Jacqueline,” she cried, “something awful has happened! Another dreadful thing!”

Jacqueline turned to her. The two moved a few steps forward. Almost unconsciously Poirot and Rosalie Otterbourne moved in the other direction.

Rosalie said sharply: “Why do you look at me? What have you got in your mind?”

“That is two questions you ask me. I will ask you only one in return. Why do you not tell me all the truth, Mademoiselle?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I told you—everything—this morning.”

“No, there were things you did not tell me. You did not tell me that you carry about in your handbag a small-calibre pistol with a pearl handle. You did not tell me all that you saw last night.”

She flushed. Then she said sharply: “It’s quite untrue. I haven’t got a revolver.”

“I did not say a revolver. I said a small pistol that you carry about in your handbag.”

She wheeled round, darted into her cabin and out again and thrust her grey leather handbag into his hands.

“You’re talking nonsense. Look for yourself if you like.”

Poirot opened the bag. There was no pistol inside.

He handed the bag back to her, meeting her scornful triumphant glance.

“No,” he said pleasantly. “It is not there.”

“You see. You’re not always right, Monsieur Poirot. And you’re wrong about that other ridiculous thing you said.”

“No, I do not think so.”

“You’re infuriating!” She stamped an angry foot.

"You get an idea into your head, and you go on and on and on about it."

"Because I want you to tell me the truth."

"What is the truth? You seem to know it better than I do."

Poirot said: "You want me to tell what it was you saw? If I am right, will you admit that I am right? I will tell you my little idea. I think that when you came round the stern of the boat you stopped involuntarily because you saw a man come out of a cabin about halfway down the deck—Linnet Doyle's cabin, as you realized next day. You saw him come out, close the door behind him, and walk away from you down the deck and—perhaps—enter one of the two end cabins. Now, then, am I right, Mademoiselle?"

She did not answer.

Poirot said: "Perhaps you think it is wiser not to speak. Perhaps you are afraid that, if you do, you too will be killed."

For a moment he thought she had risen to the easy bait, that the accusation against her courage would succeed where more subtle arguments would have failed.

Her lips opened—trembled—then, "I saw no one," said Rosalie Otterbourne.

Twenty-Four

Miss Bowers came out of Dr. Bessner’s cabin, smoothing her cuffs over her wrists.

Jacqueline left Cornelia abruptly and accosted the hospital nurse.

“How is he?” she demanded.

Poirot came up in time to hear the answer. Miss Bowers was looking rather worried.

“Things aren’t going too badly,” she said.

Jacqueline cried: “You mean, he’s worse?”

“Well, I must say I shall be relieved when we get in and can get a proper X-ray done and the whole thing cleaned up under an anaesthetic. When do you think we shall get to Shellal, Monsieur Poirot?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Miss Bowers pursed her lips and shook her head.

“It’s very fortunate. We are doing all we can, but there’s always such a danger of septicæmia.”

Jacqueline caught Miss Bowers’ arm and shook it.

“Is he going to die? Is he going to die?”

“Dear me, no, Miss de Bellefort. That is, I hope not, I’m sure. The wound in itself isn’t dangerous, but there’s no doubt it ought to be X-rayed as soon as possible. And then, of course poor Mr. Doyle ought to have been kept absolutely quiet today. He’s had far too much worry and excitement. No wonder his temperature is rising. What with the shock of his wife’s death, and one thing and another—”

Jacqueline relinquished her grasp of the nurse’s arm and turned away. She stood leaning over the side, her back to the other two.

“What I say is, we’ve got to hope for the best always,” said Miss Bowers. “Of course Mr. Doyle has a very strong constitution—one can see that—probably never had a day’s illness in his life. So that’s in his favour. But there’s no denying that this rise in temperature is a nasty sign and—”

She shook her head, adjusted her cuffs once more, and moved briskly away.

Jacqueline turned and walked gropingly, blinded by tears, towards her cabin. A hand below her elbow steadied and guided her. She looked up through the tears to find Poirot by her side. She leaned on him a little and he guided her through the cabin door.

She sank down on the bed and the tears came more freely, punctuated by great shuddering sobs.

“He’ll die! He’ll die! I know he’ll die…And I shall have killed him. Yes, I shall have killed him….”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He shook his head a little, sadly. “Mademoiselle, what is done is done. One cannot take back the accomplished action. It is too late to regret.”

She cried out more vehemently: “I shall have killed him! And I love him so…I love him so.”

Poirot sighed. “Too much….”

It had been his thought long ago in the restaurant of M. Blondin. It was his thought again now.

He said, hesitating a little: “Do not, at all events, go by what Miss Bowers says. Hospital nurses, me, I find them always gloomy! The night nurse, always, she is astonished to find her patient alive in the evening; the day nurse, always, she is surprised to find him alive in the morning! They know too much, you see, of the possibilities that may arise. When one is motoring one might easily say to oneself: ‘If a car came out from that crossroad—or if that lorry backed suddenly—or if the wheel came off the car that is approaching—or if a dog jumped off the hedge on to my driving arm—eh bien, I should probably be killed!’ But one assumes, and usually rightly, that none of these things will happen, and that one will get to one’s journey’s end. But if, of course, one has been in an accident, or seen one or more accidents, then one is inclined to take the opposite point of view.”

Jacqueline asked, half smiling through her tears: “Are you trying to console me, Monsieur Poirot?”

“The bon Dieu knows what I am trying to do! You should not have come on this journey.”

“No—I wish I hadn’t. It’s been—so awful. But—it will be soon over now.”

“Mais oui—mais oui.”

“And Simon will go to the hospital, and they’ll give the proper treatment and everything will be all right.”

“You speak like the child! ‘And they lived happily ever afterward.’ That is it, is it not?”

She flushed suddenly scarlet.

“Monsieur Poirot, I never meant—never—”

“It is too soon to think of such a thing! That is the proper hypocritical thing to say, is it not? But you are partly a Latin, Mademoiselle Jacqueline. You should be able to admit facts even if they do not sound very decorous. Le roi est mort—vive le roi! The sun has gone and the moon rises. That is so, is it not?”

“You don’t understand. He’s just sorry for me—awfully sorry for me, because he knows how terrible it is for me to know I’ve hurt him so badly.”

“Ah, well,” said Poirot. “The pure pity, it is a very lofty sentiment.”

He looked at her half mockingly, half with some other emotion.

He murmured softly under his breath words in French:

“La vie est vaine.

Un peu d’amour,

Un peu de haine,

Et puis bonjour.

La vie est brève.

Un peu d’espoir,

Un peu de rêve,

Et puis bonsoir.”

He went out again on to the deck. Colonel Race was striding along the deck and hailed him at once.

“Poirot. Good man! I want you. I’ve got an idea.”

Thrusting his arm through Poirot’s he walked him up the deck.

“Just a chance remark of Doyle’s. I hardly noticed it at the time. Something about a telegram.”

“Tiens—c’est vrai.”

“Nothing in it, perhaps, but one can’t leave any avenue unexplored. Damn it all, man, two murders, and we’re still in the dark.”

Poirot shook his head. “No, not in the dark. In the light.”

Race looked at him curiously. “You have an idea?”

“It is more than an idea now. I am sure.”

“Since—when?”

“Since the death of the maid, Louise Bourget.”

“Damned if I see it!”

“My friend, it is so clear—so clear. Only there are difficulties—embarrassments—impediments! See you, around a person like Linnet Doyle there is so much—so many conflicting hates and jealousies and envies and meannesses. It is like a cloud of flies, buzzing, buzzing….”

“But you think you know?” The other looked at him curiously. “You wouldn’t say so unless you were sure. Can’t say I’ve any real light, myself. I’ve suspicions, of course….”

Poirot stopped. He laid an impressive hand on Race’s arm.

“You are a great man, mon Colonel… You do not say: ‘Tell me. What is it that you think?’ You know that if I could speak now I would. But there is much to be cleared away first. But think, think for a moment along the lines that I shall indicate. There are certain points…There is the statement of Mademoiselle de Bellefort that someone overheard our conversation that night in the garden at Assuan. There is the statement of Monsieur Tim Allerton as to what he heard and did on the night of the crime. There are Louise Bourget’s significant answers to our questions this morning. There is the fact that Madame Allerton drinks water, that her son drinks whisky and soda and that I drink wine. Add to that the fact of two bottles of nail polish and the proverb I quoted. And finally we come to the crux of the whole business, the fact that the pistol was wrapped up in a cheap handkerchief and a velvet stole and thrown overboard….”

Race was silent a minute or two, then he shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I don’t see it. Mind, I’ve got a faint idea what you’re driving at, but as far as I can see, it doesn’t work.”

“But yes…but yes. You are seeing only half the truth. And remember this—we must start again from the beginning, since our first conception was entirely wrong.”

Race made a slight grimace.

“I’m used to that. It often seems to me that’s all detective work is, wiping out your false starts and beginning again.”

“Yes, it is very true, that. And it is just what some people will not do. They conceive a certain theory, and everything has to fit into that theory. If one little fact will not fit it, they throw it aside. But it is always the facts that will not fit in that are significant. All along I have realized the significance of that pistol being removed from the scene of the crime. I knew that it meant something, but what that something was I only realized one little half hour ago.”

“And I still don’t see it!”

“But you will! Only reflect along the lines I indicated. And now let us clear up this matter of a telegram. That is, if the Herr Doktor will admit us.”

Dr. Bessner was still in a very bad humour. In answer to their knock he disclosed a scowling face.

“What is it? Once more you wish to see my patient? But I tell you it is not wise. He has fever. He has had more than enough excitement today.”

“Just one question,” said Race. “Nothing more, I assure you.”

With an unwilling grunt the doctor moved aside and the two men entered the cabin. Dr. Bessner, growling to himself, pushed past them.

“I return in three minutes,” he said. “And then—positively—you go!”

They heard him stumping down the deck.

Simon Doyle looked from one to the other of them inquiringly.

“Yes,” he said, “what is it?”

“A very little thing,” Race replied. “Just now, when the stewards were reporting to me, they mentioned that Signor Richetti had been particularly troublesome. You said that that didn’t surprise you, as you knew he had a bad temper, and that he had been rude to your wife over some matter of a telegram. Now can you tell me about the incident?”

“Easily. It was at Wadi Halfa. We’d just come back from the Second Cataract. Linnet thought she saw a telegram for her sticking up on the board. She’d forgotten, you see, that she wasn’t called Ridgeway any longer, and Richetti and Ridgeway do look rather alike when written in an atrocious handwriting. So she tore it open, couldn’t make head or tail of it, and was puzzling over it when this fellow Richetti came along, fairly tore it out of her hand and gibbered with rage. She went after him to apologize and he was frightfully rude to her about it.”

Race drew a deep breath. “And do you know at all, Mr. Doyle, what was in that telegram?”

“Yes. Linnet read part of it out aloud. It said—”

He paused. There was a commotion outside. A high-pitched voice was rapidly approaching.

“Where are Monsieur Poirot and Colonel Race? I must see them immediately! It is most important. I have vital information. I—Are they with Mr. Doyle?”

Bessner had not closed the door. Only the curtain hung across the open doorway. Mrs. Otterbourne swept it to one side and entered like a tornado. Her face was suffused with colour, her gait slightly unsteady, her command of words not quite under her control.

“Mr. Doyle,” she said dramatically, “I know who killed your wife!”

“What?”

Simon stared at her. So did the other two.

Mrs. Otterbourne swept all three of them with a triumphant glance. She was happy—superbly happy.

“Yes,” she said. “My theories are completely vindicated. The deep, primeval, primordial urges—it may appear impossible—fantastic—but it is the truth!”

Race said sharply: “Do I understand that you have evidence in your possession to show who killed Mrs. Doyle?”

Mrs. Otterbourne sat down in a chair and leaned forward, nodding her head vigorously.

“Certainly I have. You will agree, will you not, that whoever killed Louise Bourget also killed Linnet Doyle—that the two crimes were committed by one and the same hand?”

“Yes, yes,” said Simon impatiently. “Of course. That stands to reason. Go on.”

“Then my assertion holds. I know who killed Louise Bourget; therefore I know who killed Linnet Doyle.”

“You mean, you have a theory as to who killed Louise Bourget,” suggested Race sceptically.

Mrs. Otterbourne turned on him like a tiger.

“No, I have exact knowledge. I saw the person with my own eyes.”

Simon, fevered, shouted out: “For God’s sake, start at the beginning. You know the person who killed Louise Bourget, you say.”

Mrs. Otterbourne nodded.

“I will tell you exactly what occurred.”

Yes, she was very happy—no doubt of it! This was her moment, her triumph! What of it if her books were failing to sell, if the stupid public that once had bought them and devoured them voraciously now turned to newer favourites? Salome Otterbourne would once again be notorious. Her name would be in all the papers. She would be principal witness for the prosecution at the trial.

She took a deep breath and opened her mouth.

“It was when I went down to lunch. I hardly felt like eating—all the horror of the recent tragedy—Well, I needn’t go into that. Halfway down I remembered that I had—er—left something in my cabin. I told Rosalie to go on without me. She did.”

Mrs. Otterbourne paused a minute.

The curtain across the door moved slightly as though lifted by the wind, but none of the three men noticed it.

“I—er—” Mrs. Otterbourne paused. Thin ice to skate over here, but it must be done somehow. “I—er—had an arrangement with one of the—er—personnel of the ship. He was to—er—get me something I needed, but I did not wish my daughter to know of it. She is inclined to be tiresome in certain ways—”

Not too good, this, but she could think of something that sounded better before it came to telling the story in court.

Race’s eyebrows lifted as his eyes asked a question of Poirot.

Poirot gave an infinitesimal nod. His lips formed the word: “Drink.”

The curtain across the door moved again. Between it and the door itself something showed with a faint steel-blue gleam.

Mrs. Otterbourne continued: “The arrangement was that I should go round to the stern on the deck below this, and there I should find the man waiting for me. As I went along the deck a cabin door opened and somebody looked out. It was this girl—Louise Bourget, or whatever her name is. She seemed to be expecting someone. When she saw it was me, she looked disappointed and went abruptly inside again. I didn't think anything of it, of course. I went along just as I had said I would and got the—the stuff from the man. I paid him and—er—just had a word with him. Then I started back. Just as I came around the corner I saw someone knock on the maid's door and go into the cabin."

Race said, "And that person was—?"

Bang!

The noise of the explosion filled the cabin. There was an acrid sour smell of smoke. Mrs. Otterbourne turned slowly sideways, as though in supreme inquiry, then her body slumped forward and she fell to the ground with a crash. From just behind her ear the blood flowed from a round neat hole.

There was a moment's stupefied silence. Then both the able-bodied men jumped to their feet. The woman's body hindered their movements a little. Race bent over her while Poirot made a catlike jump for the door and the deck.

The deck was empty. On the ground just in front of the sill lay a big Colt revolver.

Poirot glanced in both directions. The deck was empty. He then sprinted towards the stern. As he rounded the corner he ran into Tim Allerton, who was coming full tilt from the opposite direction.

"What the devil was that?" cried Tim breathlessly.

Poirot said sharply: "Did you meet anyone on your way here?"

"Meet anyone? No."

"Then come with me." He took the young man by the arm and retraced his steps. A little crowd had assembled by now. Rosalie, Jacqueline, and

Cornelia had rushed out of their cabins. More people were coming along the deck from the saloon—Ferguson, Jim Fanthorp, and Mrs. Allerton.

Race stood by the revolver. Poirot turned his head and said sharply to Tim Allerton: "Got any gloves in your pocket?"

Tim fumbled.

"Yes, I have."

Poirot seized them from him, put them on, and bent to examine the revolver. Race did the same. The others watched breathlessly.

Race said: "He didn't go the other way. Fanthorp and Ferguson were sitting on this deck lounge; they'd have seen him."

Poirot responded, "And Mr. Allerton would have met him if he'd gone aft."

Race said, pointing to the revolver: "Rather fancy we've seen this not so very long ago. Must make sure, though."

He knocked on the door of Pennington's cabin. There was no answer. The cabin was empty. Race strode to the right-hand drawer of the chest and jerked it open. The revolver was gone.

"Settles that," said Race. "Now then, where's Pennington himself?"

They went out again on deck. Mrs. Allerton had joined the group. Poirot moved swiftly over to her.

"Madame, take Miss Otterbourne with you and look after her. Her mother has been"—he consulted Race with an eye and Race nodded—"killed."

Dr. Bessner came bustling along.

"Gott im Himmel! What is there now?"

They made way for him. Race indicated the cabin. Ressner went inside.

“Find Pennington,” said Race. “Any fingerprints on that revolver?”

“None,” said Poirot.

They found Pennington on the deck below. He was sitting in the little drawing room writing letters. He lifted a handsome, clean-shaven face.

“Anything new?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear a shot?”

“Why—now you mention it—I believe I did hear a kind of a bang. But I never dreamed—Who’s been shot?”

“Mrs. Otterbourne.”

“Mrs. Otterbourne?” Pennington sounded quite astounded. “Well, you do surprise me. Mrs. Otterbourne.” He shook his head. “I can’t see that at all.” He lowered his voice. “Strikes me, gentlemen, we’ve got a homicidal maniac aboard. We ought to organize a defence system.”

“Mr. Pennington,” said Race, “how long have you been in this room?”

“Why, let me see.” Mr. Pennington gently rubbed his chin. “I should say a matter of twenty minutes or so.”

“And you haven’t left it?”

“Why no—certainly not.”

He looked inquiringly at the two men.

“You see, Mr. Pennington,” said Race, “Mrs. Otterbourne was shot with your revolver.”

Twenty-Five

Mr. Pennington was shocked. Mr. Pennington could hardly believe it.

“Why, gentlemen,” he said, “this is a very serious matter. Very serious indeed.”

“Extremely serious for you, Mr. Pennington.”

“For me?” Pennington’s eyebrows rose in startled surprise. “But, my dear sir, I was sitting quietly writing in here when that shot was fired.”

“You have, perhaps, a witness to prove that?”

Pennington shook his head.

“Why, no—I wouldn’t say that. But it’s clearly impossible that I should have gone to the deck above, shot this poor woman (and why should I shoot her anyway?) and come down again with no one seeing me. There are always plenty of people on the deck lounge this time of day.”

“How do you account for your pistol being used?”

“Well—I’m afraid I may be to blame there. Quite soon after getting aboard there was a conversation in the saloon one evening, I remember, about firearms, and I mentioned then that I always carried a revolver with me when I travel.”

“Who was there?”

“Well, I can’t remember exactly. Most people, I think. Quite a crowd, anyway.”

He shook his head gently.

“Why, yes,” he said. “I am certainly to blame there.”

He went on: “First Linnet, then Linnet’s maid, and now Mrs. Otterbourne. There seems no reason in it all!”

“There was reason,” said Race.

“There was?”

“Yes. Mrs. Otterbourne was on the point of telling us that she had seen a certain person go into Louise’s cabin. Before she could name that person she was shot dead.”

Andrew Pennington passed a fine silk handkerchief over his brow.

“All this is terrible,” he murmured.

Poirot said: “Monsieur Pennington, I would like to discuss certain aspects of the case with you. Will you come to my cabin in half an hour’s time?”

“I should be delighted.”

Pennington did not sound delighted. He did not look delighted either. Race and Poirot exchanged glances and then abruptly left the room.

“Cunning old devil,” said Race, “but he’s afraid. Eh?”

Poirot nodded. “Yes, he is not happy, our Monsieur Pennington.”

As they reached the promenade deck again, Mrs. Allerton came out of her cabin and, seeing Poirot, beckoned him imperiously.

“Madame?”

“That poor child! Tell me, Monsieur Poirot, is there a double cabin somewhere that I could share with her? She oughtn’t to go back to the one she shared with her mother, and mine is only a single one.”

“That can be arranged, Madame. It is very good of you.”

"It's mere decency. Besides, I'm very fond of the girl. I've always liked her."

"Is she very upset?"

"Terribly. She seems to have been absolutely devoted to that odious woman. That is what is so pathetic about it all. Tim says he believes she drank. Is that true?"

Poirot nodded.

"Oh, well, poor woman, one must not judge her, I suppose; but that girl must have had a terrible life."

"She did, Madame. She is very proud and she was very loyal."

"Yes, I like that—loyalty, I mean. It's out of fashion nowadays. She's an odd character, that girl—proud, reserved, stubborn, and terribly warm-hearted underneath, I fancy."

"I see that I have given her into good hands, Madame."

"Yes, don't worry. I'll look after her. She's inclined to cling to me in the most pathetic fashion."

Mrs. Allerton went back into the cabin. Poirot returned to the scene of the tragedy.

Cornelia was still standing on the deck, her eyes wide. She said: "I don't understand, Monsieur Poirot. How did the person who shot her get away without our seeing him?"

"Yes, how?" echoed Jacqueline.

"Ah," said Poirot, "it was not quite such a disappearing trick as you think, Mademoiselle. There were three distinct ways the murderer might have gone."

Jacqueline looked puzzled. She said, "Three?"

"He might have gone to the right, or he might have gone to the left, but I don't see any other way," puzzled Cornelia.

Jacqueline too frowned. Then her brow cleared.

She said: "Of course. He could move in two directions on one plane, but he could go at right angles to that plane too. That is, he couldn't go up very well, but he could go down."

Poirot smiled. "You have brains, Mademoiselle."

Cornelia said: "I know I'm just a plain mutt, but I still don't see."

Jacqueline said: "Monsieur Poirot means, darling, that he could swing himself over the rail and down on to the deck below."

"My!" gasped Cornelia. "I never thought of that. He'd have to be mighty quick about it, though. I suppose he could just do it?"

"He could do it easily enough," said Tim Allerton. "Remember, there's always a minute of shock after a thing like this. One hears a shot and one's too paralysed to move for a second or two."

"That was your experience, Monsieur Allerton?"

"Yes, it was. I just stood like a dummy for quite five seconds. Then I fairly sprinted round the deck."

Race came out of Bessner's cabin and said authoritatively: "Would you mind all clearing off? We want to bring out the body."

Everyone moved away obediently. Poirot went with them. Cornelia said to him with sad earnestness: "I'll never forget this trip as long as I live. Three deaths…It's just like living in a nightmare."

Ferguson overheard her. He said aggressively: "That's because you're over-civilized. You should look on death as the Oriental does. It's a mere incident—hardly noticeable."

“That’s all very well,” Cornelia said.

“They’re not educated, poor creatures.”

“No, and a good thing too. Education has devitalized the white races. Look at America—goes in for an orgy of culture. Simply disgusting.”

“I think you’re talking nonsense,” said Cornelia, flushing. “I attend lectures every winter on Greek Art and the Renaissance, and I went to some on famous Women of History.”

Mr. Ferguson groaned in agony: “Greek Art; Renaissance! Famous Women of History! It makes me quite sick to hear you. It’s the future that matters, woman, not the past. Three women are dead on this boat. Well, what of it? They’re no loss! Linnet Doyle and her money! The French maid—a domestic parasite. Mrs. Otterbourne—a useless fool of a woman. Do you think anyone really cares whether they’re dead or not? I don’t. I think it’s a damned good thing!”

“Then you’re wrong!” Cornelia blazed out at him. “And it makes me sick to hear you talk and talk, as though nobody mattered but you. I didn’t like Mrs. Otterbourne much, but her daughter was ever so fond of her, and she’s all broken up over her mother’s death. I don’t know much about the French maid, but I expect somebody was fond of her somewhere; and as for Linnet Doyle—well, apart from everything else, she was just lovely! She was so beautiful when she came into a room that it made a lump come in your throat. I’m homely myself, and that makes me appreciate beauty a lot more. She was as beautiful—just as a woman—as anything in Greek Art. And when anything beautiful’s dead, it’s a loss to the world. So there!”

Mr. Ferguson stepped back a pace. He caught hold of his hair with both hands and tugged at it vehemently.

“I give it up,” he said. “You’re unbelievable. Just haven’t got a bit of natural female spite in you anywhere.” He turned to Poirot. “Do you know, sir, that Cornelia’s father was practically ruined by Linnet Ridgeway’s old man? But does the girl gnash her teeth when she sees the heiress sailing about in pearls and Paris models? No, she just bleats out: ‘Isn’t she beautiful?’ like a blessed Baa Lamb. I don’t believe she even felt sore at her.”

Cornelia flushed. “I did—just for a minute. Poppa kind of died of discouragement, you know, because he hadn’t made good.”

“Felt sore for a minute! I ask you.”

Cornelia flashed round on him.

“Well, didn’t you say just now it was the future that mattered, not the past? All that was in the past, wasn’t it? It’s over.”

“Got me there,” said Ferguson. “Cornelia Robson, you’re the only nice woman I’ve ever come across. Will you marry me?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“It’s a genuine proposal—even if it is made in the presence of Old Man Sleuth. Anyway, you’re a witness, Monsieur Poirot. I’ve deliberately offered marriage to this female—against all my principles, because I don’t believe in legal contracts between the sexes; but I don’t think she’d stand for anything else, so marriage it shall be. Come on, Cornelia, say yes.”

“I think you’re utterly ridiculous,” said Cornelia, flushing.

“Why won’t you marry me?”

“You’re not serious,” said Cornelia.

“Do you mean not serious in proposing or do you mean not serious in character?”

“Both, but I really meant character. You laugh at all sorts of serious things. Education and Culture—and—and Death. You wouldn’t be reliable.”

She broke off, flushed again, and hurried along into her cabin.

Ferguson stared after her. “Damn the girl! I believe she really means it. She wants a man to be reliable. Reliable—ye gods!” He paused and then said curiously: “What’s the matter with you, Monsieur Poirot? You seem very deep in thought.”

Poirot roused himself with a start.

“I reflect, that is all. I reflect.”

“Meditation on Death. Death, the Recurring Decimal, by Hercule Poirot. One of his well-known monographs.”

“Monsieur Ferguson,” said Poirot, “you are a very impertinent young man.”

“You must excuse me. I like attacking established institutions.”

“And I am an established institution?”

“Precisely. What do you think of that girl?”

“Of Miss Robson?”

“Yes.”

“I think that she has a great deal of character.”

“You’re right. She’s got spirit. She looks meek, but she isn’t. She’s got guts. She’s—oh, damn it, I want that girl. It mightn’t be a bad move if I tackled the old lady. If I could once get her thoroughly against me, it might cut some ice with Cornelia.”

He wheeled and went into the observation saloon. Miss Van Schuyler was seated in her usual corner. She looked even more arrogant than usual. She was knitting. Ferguson strode up to her. Hercule Poirot, entering unobtrusively, took a seat a discreet distance away and appeared to be absorbed in a magazine.

“Good afternoon, Miss Van Schuyler.”

Miss Van Schuyler raised her eyes for a bare second, dropped them again and murmured frigidly, “Er—good afternoon.”

“Look here, Miss Van Schuyler, I want to talk to you about something pretty important. It’s just this. I want to marry your cousin.”

Miss Van Schuyler’s ball of wool dropped on to the ground and ran wildly across the saloon.

She said in a venomous tone: “You must be out of your senses, young man.”

“Not at all. I’m determined to marry her. I’ve asked her to marry me!”

Miss Van Schuyler surveyed him coldly, with the kind of speculative interest she might have accorded to an odd sort of beetle.

“Indeed? And I presume she sent you about your business.”

“She refused me.”

“Naturally.”

“Not ‘naturally’ at all. I’m going to go on asking her till she agrees.”

“I can assure you, sir, that I shall take steps to see that my young cousin is not subjected to any such persecution,” said Miss Van Schuyler in a biting tone.

“What have you got against me?”

Miss Van Schuyler merely raised her eyebrows and gave a vehement tug to her wool, preparatory to regaining it and closing the interview.

“Come now,” persisted Mr. Ferguson, “what have you got against me?”

“I should think that was quite obvious, Mr—er—I don’t know your name.”

“Ferguson.”

"Mr. Ferguson." Miss Van Schuyler uttered the name with definite distaste. "Any such idea is quite out of the question."

"You mean," said Ferguson, "that I'm not good enough for her?"

"I should think that would have been obvious to you."

"In what way am I not good enough?"

Miss Van Schuyler again did not answer.

"I've got two legs, two arms, good health, and quite reasonable brains. What's wrong with that?"

"There is such a thing as social position, Mr. Ferguson."

"Social position is bunk!"

The door swung open and Cornelia came in. She stopped dead on seeing her redoubtable Cousin Marie in conversation with her would-be suitor.

The outrageous Mr. Ferguson turned his head, grinned broadly and called out: "Come along, Cornelia. I'm asking for your hand in marriage in the best conventional manner."

"Cornelia," said Miss Van Schuyler, and her voice was truly awful in quality, "have you encouraged this young man?"

"I—no, of course not—at least—not exactly—I mean—"

"What do you mean?"

"She hasn't encouraged me," said Mr. Ferguson helpfully. "I've done it all. She hasn't actually pushed me in the face, because she's got too kind a heart. Cornelia, your cousin says I'm not good enough for you. That, of course, is true, but not in the way she means it. My moral nature certainly doesn't equal yours, but her point is that I'm hopelessly below you socially."

“That I think, is equally obvious to Cornelia,” said Miss Van Schuyler.

“Is it?” Mr. Ferguson looked at her searchingly. “Is that why you won’t marry me?”

“No, it isn’t.” Cornelia flushed. “If—if I liked you, I’d marry you no matter who you were.”

“But you don’t like me?”

“I—I think you’re just outrageous. The way you say things…The things you say…I—I’ve never met anyone the least like you. I—”

Tears threatened to overcome her. She rushed from the room.

“On the whole,” said Mr. Ferguson, “that’s not too bad for a start.” He leaned back in his chair, gazed at the ceiling, whistled, crossed his disreputable knees and remarked: “I’ll be calling you Cousin yet.”

Miss Van Schuyler trembled with rage. “Leave this room at once, sir, or I’ll ring for the steward.”

“I’ve paid for my ticket,” said Mr. Ferguson. “They can’t possibly turn me out of the public lounge. But I’ll humour you.” He sang softly, “Yo ho ho, and a bottle of rum.” Rising, he sauntered nonchalantly to the door and passed out.

Choking with anger Miss Van Schuyler struggled to her feet. Poirot, discreetly emerging from retirement behind his magazine, sprang up and retrieved the ball of wool.

“Thank you, Monsieur Poirot. If you would send Miss Bowers to me—I feel quite upset—that insolent young man.”

“Rather eccentric, I’m afraid,” said Poirot. “Most of that family are. Spoilt, of course. Always inclined to tilt at windmills.” He added carelessly, “You recognized him, I suppose?”

“Recognized him?”

“Calls himself Ferguson and won’t use his title because of his advanced ideas.”

“His title?” Miss Van Schuyler’s tone was sharp.

“Yes, that’s young Lord Dawlish. Rolling in money, of course, but he became a communist when he was at Oxford.”

Miss Van Schuyler, her face a battleground of contradictory emotions, said: “How long have you known this, Monsieur Poirot?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“There was a picture in one of these papers—I noticed the resemblance. Then I found a signet ring with a coat of arms on it. Oh, there’s no doubt about it, I assure you.”

He quite enjoyed reading the conflicting expressions that succeeded each other on Miss Van Schuyler’s face. Finally, with a gracious inclination of the head, she said, “I am very much obliged to you, Monsieur Poirot.”

Poirot looked after her and smiled as she went out of the saloon. Then he sat down and his face grew grave once more. He was following out a train of thought in his mind. From time to time he nodded his head.

“Mais oui,” he said at last. “It all fits in.”

Twenty-Six

Race found him still sitting there.

“Well, Poirot, what about it? Pennington’s due in ten minutes. I’m leaving this in your hands.”

Poirot rose quickly to his feet. “First, get hold of young Fanthorp.”

“Fanthorp?” Race looked surprised.

“Yes. Bring him to my cabin.”

Race nodded and went off. Poirot went along to his cabin. Race arrived with young Fanthorp a minute or two afterward.

Poirot indicated chairs and offered cigarettes.

“Now, Monsieur Fanthorp,” he said, “to our business! I perceive that you wear the same tie that my friend Hastings wears.”

Jim Fanthorp looked down at his neckwear with some bewilderment.

“It’s an O.E. tie,” he said.

“Exactly. You must understand that, though I am a foreigner, I know something of the English point of view. I know, for instance, that there are ‘things which are done’ and ‘things which are not done.’”

Jim Fanthorp grinned.

“We don’t say that sort of thing much nowadays, sir.”

“Perhaps not, but the custom, it still remains. The Old School Tie is the Old School Tie, and there are certain things (I know this from experience) that the Old School Tie does not do! One of those things, Monsieur Fanthorp, is to butt into a private conversation unasked when one does not know the people who are conducting it.”

Fanthorp stared.

Poirot went on: “But the other day, Monsieur Fanthorp, that is exactly what you did do. Certain persons were quietly transacting some private business in the observation saloon. You strolled near them, obviously in order to overhear what it was that was in progress, and presently you actually turned round and congratulated a lady—Madame Simon Doyle—on the soundness of her business methods.”

Jim Fanthorp’s face got very red. Poirot swept on, not waiting for a comment.

“Now that, Monsieur Fanthorp, was not at all the behaviour of one who wears a tie similar to that worn by my friend Hastings! Hastings is all delicacy, would die of shame before he did such a thing! Therefore, taking that action of yours in conjunction with the fact that you are a very young man to be able to afford an expensive holiday, that you are a member of a country solicitor’s firm, and therefore probably not extravagantly well off, and that you show no signs of recent illness such as might necessitate a prolonged visit abroad, I ask myself—and am now asking you—what is the reason for your presence on this boat?”

Jim Fanthorp jerked his head back.

“I decline to give you any information whatever, Monsieur Poirot. I really think you must be mad.”

“I am not mad. I am very, very sane. Where is your firm? In Northampton; that is not very far from Wode Hall. What conversation did you try to overhear? One concerning legal documents. What was the object of your remark—a remark which you uttered with obvious embarrassment and malaise? Your object was to prevent Madame Doyle from signing any document unread.”

He paused.

"On this boat we have had a murder, and following that murder two other murders in rapid succession. If I further give you the information that the weapon which killed Madame Otterbourne was a revolver owned by Monsieur Andrew Pennington, then perhaps you will realize that it is actually your duty to tell us all you can."

Jim Fanthorp was silent for some minutes. At last he said: "You have rather an odd way of going about things, Monsieur Poirot, but I appreciate the points you have made. The trouble is that I have no exact information to lay before you."

"You mean that it is a case, merely, of suspicion."

"Yes."

"And therefore you think it injudicious to speak? That may be true, legally speaking. But this is not a court of law. Colonel Race and myself are endeavouring to track down a murderer. Anything that can help us to do so may be valuable."

Again Jim Fanthorp reflected. Then he said: "Very well. What is it you want to know?"

"Why did you come on this trip?"

"My uncle, Mr. Carmichael, Mrs. Doyle's English solicitor, sent me. He handled a good many of her affairs. In this way, he was often in correspondence with Mr. Andrew Pennington, who was Mrs. Doyle's American trustee. Several small incidents (I cannot enumerate them all) made my uncle suspicious that all was not quite as it should be."

"In plain language," said Race, "your uncle suspected that Pennington was a crook?"

Jim Fanthorp nodded, a faint smile on his face.

"You put it rather more bluntly than I should, but the main idea is correct. Various excuses made by Pennington, certain plausible explanations of the disposal of funds, aroused my uncle’s distrust.

“While these suspicions of his were still nebulous, Miss Ridgeway married unexpectedly and went off on her honeymoon to Egypt. Her marriage relieved my uncle’s mind, as he knew that on her return to England the estate would have to be formally settled and handed over.

“However, in a letter she wrote him from Cairo, she mentioned casually that she had unexpectedly run across Andrew Pennington. My uncle’s suspicions became acute. He felt sure that Pennington, perhaps by now in a desperate position, was going to try and obtain signatures from her which would cover his own defalcations. Since my uncle had no definite evidence to lay before her, he was in a most difficult position. The only thing he could think of was to send me out here, travelling by air, with instruction to discover what was in the wind. I was to keep my eyes open and act summarily if necessary—a most unpleasant mission, I can assure you. As a matter of fact, on the occasion you mention I had to behave more or less as a cad! It was awkward, but on the whole I was satisfied with the result.”

“You mean you put Madame Doyle on her guard?” asked Race.

“Not so much that, but I think I put the wind up Pennington. I felt convinced he wouldn’t try anymore funny business for some time, and by then I hoped to have got intimate enough with Mr. and Mrs. Doyle to convey some kind of a warning. As a matter of fact I hoped to do so through Doyle. Mrs. Doyle was so attached to Mr. Pennington that it would have been a bit awkward to suggest things to her about him. It would have been easier for me to approach the husband.”

Race nodded.

Poirot asked: “Will you give me a candid opinion on one point, Monsieur Fanthorp? If you were engaged in putting a swindle over, would you choose Madame Doyle or Monsieur Doyle as a victim?”

Fanthorp smiled faintly.

“Mr. Doyle, every time. Linnet Doyle was very shrewd in business matters. Her husband, I should fancy, is one of those trustful fellows who know nothing of business and are always ready to ‘sign on the dotted line’ as he himself put it.”

“I agree,” said Poirot. He looked at Race. “And there’s your motive.”

Jim Fanthorp said: “But this is all pure conjecture. It isn’t evidence.”

Poirot replied, easily: “Ah, bah! we will get evidence!”

“How?”

“Possibly from Mr. Pennington himself.”

Fanthorp looked doubtful.

“I wonder. I very much wonder.”

Race glanced at his watch. “He’s about due now.”

Jim Fanthorp was quick to take the hint. He left them.

Two minutes later Andrew Pennington made his appearance. His manner was all smiling urbanity. Only the taut line of his jaw and the wariness of his eyes betrayed the fact that a thoroughly experienced fighter was on his guard.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, “here I am.”

He sat down and looked at them inquiringly.

“We asked you to come here, Monsieur Pennington,” began Poirot, “because it is fairly obvious that you have a very special and immediate interest in the case.”

Pennington raised his eyebrows slightly.

“Is that so?”

Poirot said gently: “Surely. You have known Linnet Ridgeway, I understand, since she was quite a child.”

“Oh! that—” His face altered, became less alert. “I beg pardon, I didn’t quite get you. Yes, as I told you this morning, I’ve known Linnet since she was a cute little thing in pinafores.”

“You were on terms of close intimacy with her father?”

“That’s so. Melhuish Ridgeway and I were very close—very close.”

“You were so intimately associated that on his death he appointed you business guardian to his daughter and trustee to the vast fortune she inherited?”

“Why, roughly, that is so.” The wariness was back again. The note was more cautious. “I was not the only trustee, naturally; others were associated with me.”

“Who have since died?”

“Two of them are dead. The other, Mr. Sterndale Rockford, is alive.”

“Your partner?”

“Yes.”

“Mademoiselle Ridgeway, I understand, was not yet of age when she married?”

“She would have been twenty-one next July.”

“And in the normal course of events she would have come into control of her fortune then?”

“Yes.”

“But her marriage precipitated matters?”

Pennington's jaw hardened. He shot out his chin at them aggressively.

"You'll pardon me, gentlemen, but what exact business is all this of yours?"

"If you dislike answering the question—"

"There's no dislike about it. I don't mind what you ask me. But I don't see the relevance of all this."

"Oh, but surely, Monsieur Pennington"—Poirot leaned forward, his eyes green and catlike—"there is the question of motive. In considering that, financial considerations must always be taken into account."

Pennington said sullenly: "By Ridgeway's will, Linnet got control of her dough when she was twenty-one or when she married."

"No conditions of any kind?"

"No conditions."

"And it is a matter, I am credibly assured, of millions."

"Millions it is."

Poirot said softly: "Your responsibility, Mr. Pennington, and that of your partner, has been a very grave one."

Pennington replied curtly: "We're used to responsibility. Doesn't worry us any."

"I wonder."

Something in his tone flicked the other man on the raw. He asked angrily: "What the devil do you mean?"

Poirot replied with an air of engaging frankness: "I was wondering, Mr. Pennington, whether Linnet Ridgeway's sudden marriage caused any—consternation, in your office?"

"Consternation?"

"That was the word I used."

"What the hell are you driving at?"

"Something quite simple. Are Linnet Doyle's affairs in the perfect order they should be?"

Pennington rose to his feet.

"That's enough. I'm through." He made for the door.

"But you will answer my question first?"

Pennington snapped: "They're in perfect order."

"You were not so alarmed when the news of Linnet Ridgeway's marriage reached you that you rushed over to Europe by the first boat and staged an apparently fortuitous meeting in Egypt?"

Pennington came back towards them. He had himself under control once more.

"What you are saying is absolute balderdash! I didn't even know that Linnet was married till I met her in Cairo. I was utterly astonished. Her letter must have missed me by a day in New York. It was forwarded and I got it about a week later."

"You came over by the Carmanic, I think you said."

"That's right."

"And the letter reached New York after the Carmanic sailed?"

"How many times have I got to repeat it?"

"It is strange," said Poirot.

“What’s strange?”

“That on your luggage there are no labels of the Carmanic. The only recent labels of transatlantic sailing are the Normandie. The Normandie, I remember, sailed two days after the Carmanic.”

For a moment the other was at a loss. His eyes wavered.

Colonel Race weighed in with telling effect.

“Come now, Mr. Pennington,” he said. “We’ve several reasons for believing that you came over on the Normandie and not by the Carmanic, as you said. In that case, you received Mrs. Doyle’s letter before you left New York. It’s no good denying it, for it’s the easiest thing in the world to check up the steamship companies.”

Andrew Pennington felt absentmindedly for a chair and sat down. His face was impassive—a poker face. Behind that mask his agile brain looked ahead to the next move.

“I’ll have to hand it to you, gentlemen. You’ve been too smart for me. But I had my reasons for acting as I did.”

“No doubt.” Race’s tone was curt.

“If I give them to you, it must be understood I do so in confidence.”

“I think you can trust us to behave fittingly. Naturally I cannot give assurances blindly.”

“Well—” Pennington sighed. “I’ll come clean. There was some monkey business going on in England. It worried me. I couldn’t do much about it by letter. The only thing was to come over and see for myself.”

“What do you mean by monkey business?”

“I’d good reason to believe that Linnet was being swindled.”

“By whom?”

“Her British lawyer. Now that’s not the kind of accusation you can fling around anyhow. I made up my mind to come over right away and see into matters myself.”

“That does great credit to your vigilance, I am sure. But why the little deception about not having received the letter?”

“Well, I ask you—” Pennington spread out his hands. “You can’t butt in on a honeymoon couple without more or less coming down to brass tacks and giving your reasons. I thought it best to make the meeting accidental. Besides, I didn’t know anything about the husband. He might have been mixed up in the racket for all I knew.”

“In fact all your actions were actuated by pure disinterestedness,” said Colonel Race dryly.

“You’ve said it, Colonel.”

There was a pause. Race glanced at Poirot. The little man leant forward.

“Monsieur Pennington, we do not believe a word of your story.”

“The hell you don’t! And what the hell do you believe?”

“We believe that Linnet Ridgeway’s unexpected marriage put you in a financial quandary. That you came over posthaste to try and find some way out of the mess you were in—that is to say, some way of gaining time. That, with that end in view, you endeavoured to obtain Madame Doyle’s signature to certain documents and failed. That on the journey up the Nile, when walking along the cliff top at Abu Simbel, you dislodged a boulder which fell and only very narrowly missed its object—”

“You’re crazy.”

“We believe that the same kind of circumstances occurred on the return journey. That is to say, an opportunity presented itself of putting Madame Doyle out of the way at a moment when her death would be almost certainly ascribed to the action of another person. We not only believe, but know, that it was your revolver which killed a woman who was about to reveal to us the name of the person who she had reason to believe killed both Linnet Doyle and the maid Louise—”

“Hell!” The forcible ejaculation broke forth and interrupted Poirot’s stream of eloquence. “What are you getting at? Are you crazy? What motive had I to kill Linnet? I wouldn’t get her money; that goes to her husband. Why don’t you pick on him? He’s the one to benefit—not me.”

Race said coldly: “Doyle never left the lounge on the night of the tragedy till he was shot at and wounded in the leg. The impossibility of his walking a step after that is attested to by a doctor and a nurse—both independent and reliable witnesses. Simon Doyle could not have killed his wife. He could not have killed Louise Bourget. He most definitely did not kill Mrs. Otterbourne. You know that as well as we do.”

“I know he didn’t kill her.” Pennington sounded a little calmer. “All I say is, why pick on me when I don’t benefit by her death?”

“But, my dear sir,” Poirot’s voice came soft as a purring cat, “that is rather a matter of opinion. Madame Doyle was a keen woman of business, fully conversant with her own affairs and very quick to spot any irregularity. As soon as she took up the control of her property, which she would have done on her return to England, her suspicions were bound to be aroused. But now that she is dead and that her husband, as you have just pointed out, inherits, the whole thing is different. Simon Doyle knows nothing whatever of his wife’s affairs except that she was a rich woman. He is of a simple, trusting disposition. You will find it easy to place complicated statements before him, to involve the real issue in a net of figures, and to delay settlement with pleas of legal formalities and the recent depression. I think that it makes a very considerable difference to you whether you deal with the husband or the wife.”

Pennington shrugged his shoulders.

“Your ideas are—fantastic.”

“Time will show.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Time will show!’ This is a matter of three deaths—three murders. The law will demand the most searching investigation into the condition of Madame Doyle’s estate.”

He saw the sudden sag in the other’s shoulders and knew that he had won. Jim Fanthorp’s suspicions were well founded.

Poirot went on: “You’ve played—and lost. Useless to go on bluffing.”

“You don’t understand,” Pennington muttered. “It’s all square enough really. It’s been this damned slump—Wall Street’s been crazy. But I’d staged a comeback. With luck everything will be O.K. by the middle of June.”

With shaking hands he took a cigarette, tried to light it, failed.

“I suppose,” mused Poirot, “that the boulder was a sudden temptation. You thought nobody saw you.”

“That was an accident. I swear it was an accident!” The man leant forward, his face working, his eyes terrified. “I stumbled and fell against it. I swear it was an accident….”

The two men said nothing.

Pennington suddenly pulled himself together. He was still a wreck of a man, but his fighting spirit had returned in a certain measure. He moved towards the door.

“You can’t pin that on me, gentlemen. It was an accident. And it wasn’t I who shot her. D’you hear? You can’t pin that on me either—and you never will.”

He went out.

Twenty-Seven

As the door closed behind him, Race gave a deep sigh.

“We got more than I thought we should. Admission of fraud. Admission of attempted murder. Further than that it’s impossible to go. A man will confess, more or less, to attempted murder, but you won’t get him to confess to the real thing.”

“Sometimes it can be done,” said Poirot. His eyes were dreamy—catlike.

Race looked at him curiously.

“Got a plan?”

Poirot nodded. Then he said, ticking off the items on his fingers: “The garden at Assuan. Mr. Allerton’s statement. The two bottles of nail polish. My bottle of wine. The velvet stole. The stained handkerchief. The pistol that was left on the scene of the crime. The death of Louise. The death of Madame Otterbourne. Yes, it’s all there. Pennington didn’t do it, Race!”

“What?” Race was startled.

“Pennington didn’t do it. He had the motive, yes. He had the will to do it, yes. He got as far as attempting to do it. Mais c’est tout. For this crime, something was wanted that Pennington hadn’t got! This is a crime that needed audacity, swift and faultless execution, courage, indifference to danger, and a resourceful, calculating brain. Pennington hasn’t got those attributes. He couldn’t do a crime unless he knew it to be safe. This crime wasn’t safe! It hung on a razor edge. It needed boldness. Pennington isn’t bold. He’s only astute.”

Race looked at him with the respect one able man gives to another.

“You’ve got it all well taped,” he said.

“I think so, yes. There are one or two things—that telegram for instance, that Linnet Doyle read. I should like to get that cleared up.”

“By Jove, we forgot to ask Doyle. He was telling us when poor old Ma Otterbourne came along. We’ll ask him again.”

“Presently. First, I have someone else to whom I wish to speak.”

“Who’s that?”

“Tim Allerton.”

Race raised his eyebrows.

“Allerton? Well, we’ll get him here.”

He pressed a bell and sent the steward with a message.

Tim Allerton entered with a questioning look.

“Steward said you wanted to see me?”

“That is right, Monsieur Allerton. Sit down.”

Tim sat. His face was attentive but very slightly bored.

“Anything I can do?” His tone was polite but not enthusiastic.

Poirot said: “In a sense, perhaps. What I really require is for you to listen.”

Tim’s eyebrows rose in polite surprise.

“Certainly. I’m the world’s best listener. Can be relied on to say ‘Ooer!’ at the right moments.”

“That is very satisfactory. ‘Oo-er!’ will be very expressive. Eh bien, let us commence. When I met you and your mother at Assuan, Monsieur Allerton, I was attracted to your company very strongly. To begin with, I thought your mother was one of the most charming people I had ever met—”

The weary face flickered for a moment; a shade of expression came into it.

"She is—unique," he said.

"But the second thing that interested me was your mention of a certain lady."

"Really?"

"Yes, a Mademoiselle Joanna Southwood. You see, I had recently been hearing that name."

He paused and went on: "For the last three years there have been certain jewel robberies that have been worrying Scotland Yard a good deal. They are what may be described as Society robberies. The method is usually the same—the substitution of an imitation piece of jewellery for an original. My friend, Chief Inspector Japp, came to the conclusion that the robberies were not the work of one person, but of two people working in with each other very cleverly. He was convinced, from the considerable inside knowledge displayed, that the robberies were the work of people in a good social position. And finally his attention became riveted on Mademoiselle Joanna Southwood.

"Every one of the victims had been either a friend or acquaintance of hers, and in each case she had either handled or been lent the piece of jewellery in question. Also, her style of living was far in excess of her income. On the other hand it was quite clear that the actual robbery—that is to say the substitution—had not been accomplished by her. In some cases she had been out of England during the period when the jewellery must have been replaced.

"So gradually a little picture grew up in Chief Inspector Japp's mind. Mademoiselle Southwood was at one time associated with a Guild of Modern Jewellery. He suspected that she handled the jewels in question, made accurate drawings of them, got them copied by some humble but dishonest working jeweller and that the third part of the operation was the successful substitution by another person—somebody who could have been proved never to have handled the jewels and never to have had anything to do with copies or imitations of precious stones. Of the identity of this other person Japp was ignorant.

“Certain things that fell from you in conversation interested me. A ring that disappeared when you were in Majorca, the fact that you had been in a house party where one of these fake substitutions had occurred, your close association with Mademoiselle Southwood. There was also the fact that you obviously resented my presence and tried to get your mother to be less friendly towards me. That might, of course, have been just personal dislike, but I thought not. You were too anxious to try and hide your distaste under a genial manner.

“Eh bien! after the murder of Linnet Doyle, it is discovered that her pearls are missing. You comprehend, at once I think of you! But I am not quite satisfied. For if you are working, as I suspect, with Mademoiselle Southwood (who was an intimate friend of Madame Doyle’s), then substitution would be the method employed—not barefaced theft. But then, the pearls quite unexpectedly are returned, and what do I discover? That they are not genuine, but imitation.

“I know then who the real thief is. It was the imitation string which was stolen and returned—an imitation which you had previously substituted for the real necklace.”

He looked at the young man in front of him. Tim was white under his tan. He was not so good a fighter as Pennington; his stamina was bad. He said, with an effort to sustain his mocking manner: “Indeed? And if so, what did I do with them?”

“That I know also.”

The young man’s face changed—broke up.

Poirot went on slowly: “There is only one place where they can be. I have reflected, and my reason tells me that that is so. Those pearls, Monsieur Allerton, are concealed in a rosary that hangs in your cabin. The beads of it are very elaborately carved. I think you had it made specially. Those beads unscrew, though you would never think so to look at them. Inside each is a pearl, stuck with Seccotine. Most police searchers respect religious symbols unless there is something obviously queer about them. You counted on that. I endeavoured to find out how Mademoiselle Southwood sent the imitation necklace out to you. She must have done so, since you came here from Majorca on hearing that Madame Doyle would be here for her honeymoon. My theory is that it was sent in a book—a square hole being cut out of the pages in the middle. A book goes with the ends open and is practically never opened in the post."

There was a pause—a long pause. Then Tim said quietly: "You win! It's been a good game, but it's over at last. There's nothing for it now, I suppose, but to take my medicine."

Poirot nodded gently.

"Do you realize that you were seen that night?"

"Seen?" Tim started.

"Yes, on the night that Linnet Doyle died, someone saw you leave her cabin just after one in the morning."

Tim said: "Look here—you aren't thinking…it wasn't I who killed her! I'll swear that! I've been in the most awful stew. To have chosen that night of all others…God, it's been awful!"

Poirot said: "Yes, you must have had uneasy moments. But, now that the truth has come out, you may be able to help us. Was Madame Doyle alive or dead when you stole the pearls?"

"I don't know," Tim said hoarsely. "Honest to God, Monsieur Poirot, I don't know! I'd found out where she put them at night—on the little table by the bed. I crept in, felt very softly on the table and grabbed 'em, put down the others and crept out again. I assumed, of course, that she was asleep."

"Did you hear her breathing? Surely you would have listened for that?"

Tim thought earnestly.

“It was very still—very still indeed. No, I can’t remember actually hearing her breathe.”

“Was there any smell of smoke lingering in the air, as there would have been if a firearm had been discharged recently?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t remember it.”

Poirot sighed.

“Then we are no further.”

Tim asked curiously, “Who was it saw me?”

“Rosalie Otterbourne. She came round from the other side of the boat and saw you leave Linnet Doyle’s cabin and go to your own.”

“So it was she who told you.”

Poirot said gently, “Excuse me; she did not tell me.”

“But then, how do you know?”

“Because I am Hercule Poirot I do not need to be told. When I taxed her with it, do you know what she said? She said: ‘I saw nobody.’ And she lied.”

“But why?”

Poirot said in a detached voice: “Perhaps because she thought the man she saw was the murderer. It looked like that, you know.”

“That seems to me all the more reason for telling you.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “She did not think so, it seems.”

Tim said, a queer note in his voice: “She’s an extraordinary sort of a girl. She must have been through a pretty rough time with that mother of hers.”

"Yes, life has not been easy for her."

"Poor kid," Tim muttered. Then he looked towards Race.

"Well, sir, where do we go from here? I admit taking the pearls from Linnet's cabin and you'll find them just where you say they are. I'm guilty all right. But as far as Miss Southwood is concerned, I'm not admitting anything. You've no evidence whatever against her. How I got hold of the fake necklace is my own business."

Poirot murmured: "A very correct attitude."

Tim said with a flash of humour: "Always the gentleman!" He added: "Perhaps you can imagine how annoying it was to me to find my mother cottoning on to you! I'm not a sufficiently hardened criminal to enjoy sitting cheek by jowl with a successful detective just before bringing off a rather risky coup! Some people might get a kick out of it. I didn't. Frankly, it gave me cold feet."

"But it did not deter you from making your attempt?"

Tim shrugged his shoulders.

"I couldn't funk it to that extent. The exchange had to be made sometime and I'd got a unique opportunity on this boat—a cabin only two doors off, and Linnet herself so preoccupied with her own troubles that she wasn't likely to detect the change."

"I wonder if that was so—"

Tim looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

Poirot pressed the bell. "I am going to ask Miss Otterbourne if she will come here for a minute."

Tim frowned but said nothing. A steward came, received the order and went away with the message.

Rosalie came after a few minutes. Her eyes, reddened with recent weeping, widened a little at seeing Tim, but her old attitude of suspicion and defiance seemed entirely absent. She sat down and with a new docility looked from Race to Poirot.

“We’re very sorry to bother you, Miss Otterbourne,” said Race gently. He was slightly annoyed with Poirot.

“It doesn’t matter,” the girl said in a low voice.

Poirot said: “It is necessary to clear up one or two points. When I asked you whether you saw anyone on the starboard deck at one-ten this morning, your answer was that you saw nobody. Fortunately I have been able to arrive at the truth without your help. Monsieur Allerton has admitted that he was in Linnet Doyle’s cabin last night.”

She flashed a swift glance at Tim. Tim, his face grim and set, gave a curt nod.

“The time is correct, Monsieur Allerton?”

Allerton replied, “Quite correct.”

Rosalie was staring at him. Her lips trembled—fell apart….

“But you didn’t—you didn’t—”

He said quickly: “No, I didn’t kill her. I’m a thief, not a murderer. It’s all going to come out, so you might as well know. I was after her pearls.”

Poirot said, “Mr. Allerton’s story is that he went to her cabin last night and exchanged a string of fake pearls for the real ones.”

“Did you?” asked Rosalie. Her eyes, grave, sad, childlike, questioned his.

“Yes,” said Tim.

There was a pause. Colonel Race shifted restlessly.

Poirot said in a curious voice: “That, as I say, is Monsieur Allerton’s story, partially confirmed by your evidence. That is to say, there is evidence that he did visit Linnet Doyle’s cabin last night, but there is no evidence to show why he did so.”

Tim stared at him. “But you know!”

“What do I know?”

“Well—you know I’ve got the pearls.”

“Mais oui—mais oui! I know you have the pearls, but I do not know when you got them. It may have been before last night…You said just now that Linnet Doyle would not have noticed the substitution. I am not so sure of that. Supposing she did notice it…Supposing, even, she knew who did it…Supposing that last night she threatened to expose the whole business, and that you knew she meant to do so…and supposing that you overheard the scene in the saloon between Jacqueline de Bellefort and Simon Doyle and, as soon as the saloon was empty, you slipped in and secured the pistol, and then, an hour later, when the boat had quieted down, you crept along to Linnet Doyle’s cabin and made quite sure that no exposure would come….”

“My God!” said Tim. Out of his ashen face, two tortured, agonized eyes gazed dumbly at Hercule Poirot.

The latter went on: “But somebody else saw you—the girl Louise. The next day she came to you and blackmailed you. You must pay her handsomely or she would tell what she knew. You realized that to submit to blackmail would be the beginning of the end. You pretended to agree, made an appointment to come to her cabin just before lunch with the money. Then, when she was counting the notes, you stabbed her.

“But again luck was against you. Somebody saw you go to her cabin”—he half turned to Rosalie—“your mother. Once again you had to act—dangerously, foolhardily—but it was the only chance. You had heard Pennington talk about his revolver. You rushed into his cabin, got hold of it, listened outside Dr. Bessner’s cabin door, and shot Madame Otterbourne before she could reveal your name.”

“No-o!” cried Rosalie. “He didn’t! He didn’t!”

“After that, you did the only thing you could do—rushed round the stern. And when I rushed after you, you had turned and pretended to be coming in the opposite direction. You had handled the revolver in gloves; those gloves were in your pocket when I asked for them….”

Tim said, “Before God, I swear it isn’t true—not a word of it.” But his voice, ill-assured and trembling, failed to convince.

It was then that Rosalie Otterbourne surprised them.

“Of course it isn’t true! And Monsieur Poirot knows it isn’t! He’s saying it for some reason of his own.”

Poirot looked at her. A faint smile came to his lips. He spread out his hands in token surrender.

“Mademoiselle is too clever…But you agree—it was a good case?”

“What the devil—” Tim began with rising anger, but Poirot held up a hand.

“There is a very good case against you, Monsieur Allerton. I wanted you to realize that. Now I will tell you something more pleasant. I have not yet examined that rosary in your cabin. It may be that, when I do, I shall find nothing there. And then, since Mademoiselle Otterbourne sticks to it that she saw no one on the deck last night, eh bien! there is no case against you at all. The pearls were taken by a kleptomaniac who has since returned them. They are in a little box on the table by the door, if you would like to examine them with Mademoiselle.”

Tim got up. He stood for a moment unable to speak. When he did, his words seemed inadequate, but it is possible that they satisfied his listeners.

“Thanks!” he said. “You won’t have to give me another chance!”

He held the door open for the girl; she passed out and, picking up the little cardboard box, he followed her.

Side by side they went. Tim opened the box, took out the sham string of pearls and hurled it far from him into the Nile.

"There!" he said. "That's gone. When I return the box to Poirot the real string will be in it. What a damned fool I've been!"

Rosalie said in a low voice: "Why did you come to do it in the first place?"

"How did I come to start, do you mean? Oh, I don't know. Boredom—laziness—the fun of the thing. Such a much more attractive way of earning a living than just pegging away at a job. Sounds pretty sordid to you, I expect, but you know there was an attraction about it—mainly the risk, I suppose."

"I think I understand."

"Yes, but you wouldn't ever do it."

Rosalie considered for a moment or two, her grave young head bent.

"No," she said simply. "I wouldn't."

He said: "Oh, my dear—you're so lovely…so utterly lovely. Why wouldn't you say you'd seen me last night?"

"I thought—they might suspect you," Rosalie said.

"Did you suspect me?"

"No. I couldn't believe that you'd kill anyone."

"No. I'm not the strong stuff murderers are made of. I'm only a miserable sneak-thief."

She put out a timid hand and touched his arm.

"Don't say that."

He caught her hand in his.

“Rosalie, would you—you know what I mean? Or would you always despise me and throw it in my teeth?”

She smiled faintly. “There are things you could throw in my teeth, too….”

“Rosalie—darling….”

But she held back a minute longer.

“This—Joanna?”

Tim gave a sudden shout.

“Joanna? You’re as bad as Mother. I don’t care a damn about Joanna. She’s got a face like a horse and a predatory eye. A most unattractive female.”

Presently Rosalie said: “Your mother need never know about you.”

“I’m not sure,” Tim said thoughtfully. “I think I shall tell her. Mother’s got plenty of stuffing, you know. She can stand up to things. Yes, I think I shall shatter her maternal illusions about me. She’ll be so relieved to know that my relations with Joanna were purely of a business nature that she’ll forgive me everything else.”

They had come to Mrs. Allerton’s cabin and Tim knocked firmly on the door. It opened and Mrs. Allerton stood on the threshold.

“Rosalie and I—” began Tim. He paused.

“Oh, my dears,” said Mrs. Allerton. She folded Rosalie in her arms. “My dear, dear child. I always hoped—but Tim was so tiresome—and pretended he didn’t like you. But of course I saw through that!”

Rosalie said in a broken voice: “You’ve been so sweet to me—always. I used to wish—to wish—”

She broke off and sobbed happily on Mrs. Allerton’s shoulder.

Twenty-Eight

As the door closed behind Tim and Rosalie, Poirot looked somewhat apologetically at Colonel Race. The Colonel was looking rather grim.

“You will consent to my little arrangement, yes?” Poirot pleaded. “It is irregular—I know it is irregular, yes—but I have a high regard for human happiness.”

“You’ve none for mine,” said Race.

“That jeune fille. I have a tenderness towards her, and she loves that young man. It will be an excellent match; she has the stiffening he needs; the mother likes her; everything thoroughly suitable.”

“In fact the marriage has been arranged by heaven and Hercule Poirot. All I have to do is to compound a felony.”

“But, mon ami, I told you, it was all conjecture on my part.”

Race grinned suddenly.

“It’s all right by me,” he said. “I’m not a damned policeman, thank God! I dare say the young fool will go straight enough now. The girl’s straight all right. No, what I’m complaining of is your treatment of me! I’m a patient man, but there are limits to patience! Do you know who committed the three murders on this boat or don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Then why all this beating about the bush?”

“You think that I am just amusing myself with side issues? And it annoys you? But it is not that. Once I went professionally to an archæological expedition—and I learnt something there. In the course of an excavation, when something comes up out of the ground, everything is cleared away very carefully all around it. You take away the loose earth, and you scrape here and there with a knife until finally your object is there, all alone, ready to be drawn and photographed with no extraneous matter confusing it. That is what I have been seeking to do—clear away the extraneous matter so that we can see the truth—the naked shining truth."

"Good," said Race. "Let's have this naked shining truth. It wasn't Pennington. It wasn't young Allerton. I presume it wasn't Fleetwood. Let's hear who it was for a change."

"My friend, I am just about to tell you."

There was a knock on the door. Race uttered a muffled curse. It was Dr. Bessner and Cornelia. The latter was looking upset.

"Oh, Colonel Race," she exclaimed, "Miss Bowers has just told me about Cousin Marie. It's been the most dreadful shock. She said she couldn't bear the responsibility all by herself any longer, and that I'd better know, as I was one of the family. I just couldn't believe it at first, but Dr. Bessner here has been just wonderful."

"No, no," protested the doctor modestly.

"He's been so kind, explaining it all, and how people really can't help it. He's had kleptomaniacs in his clinic And he's explained to me how it's very often due to a deep-seated neurosis."

Cornelia repeated the words with awe.

"It's planted very deeply in the subconscious; sometimes it's just some little thing that happened when you were a child. And he's cured people by getting them to think back and remember what that little thing was."

Cornelia paused, drew a deep breath, and started off again.

"But it's worrying me dreadfully in case it all gets out. It would be too, too terrible in New York. Why, all the tabloids would have it. Cousin Marie and Mother and everybody—they'd never hold up their heads again."

Race sighed. "That's all right," he said.

"This is Hush Hush House."

"I beg your pardon, Colonel Race?"

"What I was endeavouring to say was that anything short of murder is being hushed up."

"Oh!" Cornelia clasped her hands. "I'm so relieved. I've just been worrying and worrying."

"You have the heart too tender," said Dr. Bessner, and patted her benevolently on the shoulder. He said to the others: "She has a very sensitive and beautiful nature."

"Oh, I haven't really. You're too kind."

Poirot murmured, "Have you seen anymore of Mr. Ferguson?"

Cornelia blushed.

"No—but Cousin Marie's been talking about him."

"It seems the young man is highly born," said Dr. Bessner. "I must confess he does not look it. His clothes are terrible. Not for a moment does he appear a well-bred man."

"And what do you think, Mademoiselle?"

"I think he must be just plain crazy," said Cornelia.

Poirot turned to the doctor. "How is your patient?"

"Ach, he is going on splendidly. I have just reassured the Fräulein de Bellefort. Would you believe it, I found her in despair. Just because the fellow had a bit of a temperature this afternoon! But what could be more natural? It is amazing that he is not in a high fever now. But no, he is like some of our peasants; he has a magnificent constitution, the constitution of an ox. I have seen them with deep wounds that they hardly notice. It is the same with Mr. Doyle. His pulse is steady, his temperature only slightly above normal. I was able to pooh-pooh the little lady's fears. All the same, it is ridiculous, nicht wahr? One minute you shoot a man; the next you are in hysterics in case he may not be doing well."

Cornelia said: "She loves him terribly, you see."

"Ach! but it is not sensible, that. If you loved a man, would you try and shoot him? No, you are sensible."

"I don't like things that go off with bangs anyway," said Cornelia.

"Naturally you do not. You are very feminine."

Race interrupted this scene of heavy approval. "Since Doyle is all right there's no reason I shouldn't come along and resume our talk of this afternoon. He was just telling me about a telegram."

Dr. Bessner's bulk moved up and down appreciatively.

"Ho, ho, ho, it was very funny that! Doyle, he tells me about it. It was a telegram all about vegetables—potatoes, artichokes, leeks—Ach! pardon?"

With a stifled exclamation, Race had sat up in his chair.

"My God," he said. "So that's it! Richetti!"

He looked round on three uncomprehending faces.

"A new code—it was used in the South African rebellion. Potatoes mean machine guns, artichokes are high explosives—and so on. Richetti is no more an archæologist than I am! He's a very dangerous agitator, a man who's killed more than once, and I'll swear that he's killed once again. Mrs. Doyle opened that telegram by mistake, you see. If she were ever to repeat what was in it before me, he knew his goose would be cooked!"

He turned to Poirot. "Am I right?" he asked. "Is Richetti the man?"

"He is your man," said Poirot. "I always thought there was something wrong about him. He was almost too word-perfect in his rôle; he was all archæologist, not enough human being.”

He paused and then said: “But it was not Richetti who killed Linnet Doyle. For some time now I have known what I may express as the ‘first half ’ of the murderer. Now I know the ‘second half ’ also. The picture is complete. But you understand that, although I know what must have happened, I have no proof that it happened. Intellectually the case is satisfying. Actually it is profoundly unsatisfactory. There is only one hope—a confession from the murderer.”

Dr. Bessner raised his shoulders sceptically. “Ah! but that—it would be a miracle.”

“I think not. Not under the circumstances.”

Cornelia cried out: “But who is it? Aren’t you going to tell us?”

Poirot’s eyes ranged quietly over the three of them. Race, smiling sardonically, Bessner, still looking sceptical, Cornelia, her mouth hanging a little open, gazing at him with eager eyes.

“Mais oui,” he said. “I like an audience, I must confess. I am vain, you see. I am puffed up with conceit. I like to say: ‘See how clever is Hercule Poirot!’”

Race shifted a little in his chair.

“Well,” he asked gently, “just how clever is Hercule Poirot?”

Shaking his head sadly from side to side Poirot said: “To begin with I was stupid—incredibly stupid. To me the stumbling block was the pistol—Jacqueline de Bellefort’s pistol. Why had that pistol not been left on the scene of the crime? The idea of the murderer was quite plainly to incriminate her. Why then did the murderer take it away? I was so stupid that I thought of all sorts of fantastic reasons. The real one was very simple. The murderer took it away because he had to take it away—because he had no choice in the matter.”

Twenty-Nine

“You and I, my friend,” Poirot leaned towards Race, “started our investigation with a preconceived idea. That idea was that the crime was committed on the spur of the moment, without any preliminary planning. Somebody wished to remove Linnet Doyle and had seized their opportunity to do so at a moment when the crime would almost certainly be attributed to Jacqueline de Bellefort. It therefore followed that the person in question had overheard the scene between Jacqueline and Simon Doyle and had obtained possession of the pistol after the others had left the saloon.

“But, my friends, if that preconceived idea was wrong, the whole aspect of the case altered. And it was wrong! This was no spontaneous crime committed on the spur of the moment. It was, on the contrary, very carefully planned and accurately timed, with all the details meticulously worked out beforehand, even to the drugging of Hercule Poirot’s bottle of wine on the night in question!

“But yes, that is so! I was put to sleep so that there should be no possibility of my participating in the events of the night. It did just occur to me as a possibility. I drink wine; my two companions at table drink whisky and mineral water respectively. Nothing easier than to slip a dose of harmless narcotic into my bottle of wine—the bottles stand on the tables all day. But I dismissed the thought. It had been a hot day; I had been unusually tired; it was not really extraordinary that I should for once have slept heavily instead of lightly as I usually do.

“You see, I was still in the grip of the preconceived idea. If I had been drugged, that would have implied premeditation, it would mean that before seven-thirty, when dinner is served, the crime had already been decided upon; and that (always from the point of view of the preconceived idea) was absurd.

“The first blow to the preconceived idea was when the pistol was recovered from the Nile. To begin with, if we were right in our assumptions, the pistol ought never to have been thrown overboard at all…And there was more to follow.”

Poirot turned to Dr. Bessner.

“You, Dr. Bessner, examined Linnet Doyle’s body. You will remember that the wound showed signs of scorching—that is to say, that the pistol had been placed close against the head before being fired.”

Bessner nodded. “So. That is exact.”

“But when the pistol was found it was wrapped in a velvet stole, and that velvet showed definite signs that a pistol had been fired through its folds, presumably under the impression that that would deaden the sound of the shot. But if the pistol had been fired through the velvet, there would have been no signs of burning on the victim’s skin. Therefore, the shot fired by Jacqueline de Bellefort at Simon Doyle? Again no, for there had been two witnesses of that shooting, and we knew all about it. It appeared, therefore, as though a third shot had been fired—one we knew nothing about. But only two shots had been fired from the pistol, and there was no hint or suggestion of another shot.

“Here we were face to face with a very curious unexplained circumstance. The next interesting point was the fact that in Linnet Doyle’s cabin I found two bottles of coloured nail polish. Now ladies very often vary the colour of their nails, but so far Linnet Doyle’s nails had always been the shade called Cardinal—a deep dark red. The other bottle was labelled Rose, which is a shade of pale pink, but the few drops remaining in the bottle were not pale pink but a bright red. I was sufficiently curious to take out the stopper and sniff. Instead of the usual strong odour of peardrops, the bottle smelt of vinegar! That is to say, it suggested that the drop or two of fluid in it was red ink. Now there is no reason why Madame Doyle should not have had a bottle of red ink, but it would have been more natural if she had had red ink in a red ink bottle and not in a nail polish bottle. It suggested a link with the faintly stained handkerchief which had been wrapped round the pistol. Red ink washes out quickly but always leaves a pale pink stain.

"I should perhaps have arrived at the truth with these slender indications, but an event occurred which rendered all doubt superfluous. Louise Bourget was killed in circumstances which pointed unmistakably to the fact that she had been blackmailing the murderer. Not only was a fragment of a mille franc note still clasped in her hand, but I remembered some very significant words she had used this morning.

"Listen carefully, for here is the crux of the whole matter. When I asked her if she had seen anything the previous night she gave this very curious answer: 'Naturally, if I had been unable to sleep, if I had mounted the stairs, then perhaps I might have seen this assassin, this monster enter or leave Madame's cabin…' Now what exactly did that tell us?"

Bessner, his nose wrinkling with intellectual interest, replied promptly: "It told you that she had mounted the stairs."

"No, no; you fail to see the point. Why should she have said that, to us?"

"To convey a hint."

"But why hint to us? If she knows who the murderer is, there are two courses open to her—to tell us the truth, or to hold her tongue and demand money for her silence from the person concerned! But she does neither. She neither says promptly: 'I saw nobody. I was asleep.' Nor does she say: 'Yes, I saw someone, and it was so and so.' Why use that significant indeterminate rigmarole of words? Parbleu, there can be only one reason! She is hinting to the murderer; therefore the murderer must have been present at the time. But, besides myself and Colonel Race, only two people were present—Simon Doyle and Dr. Bessner."

The doctor sprang up with a roar.

"Ach! what is that you say? You accuse me? Again? But it is ridiculous—beneath contempt."

Poirot said sharply: "Be quiet. I am telling you what I thought at the time. Let us remain impersonal."

“He doesn’t mean he thinks it’s you now,” said Cornelia soothingly.

Poirot went on quickly: “So it lay there—between Simon Doyle and Dr. Bessner. But what reason has Bessner to kill Linnet Doyle? None, so far as I know. Simon Doyle, then? But that was impossible! There were plenty of witnesses who could swear that Doyle never left the saloon that evening until the quarrel broke out. After that he was wounded and it would then have been physically impossible for him to have done so. Had I good evidence on both those points? Yes, I had the evidence of Mademoiselle Robson, of Jim Fanthorp, and of Jacqueline de Bellefort as to the first, and I had the skilled testimony of Dr. Bessner and of Mademoiselle Bowers as to the other. No doubt was possible.

“So Dr. Bessner must be the guilty one. In favour of this theory there was the fact that the maid had been stabbed with a surgical knife. On the other hand Bessner had deliberately called attention to this fact.

“And then, my friends, a second perfectly indisputable fact became apparent to me. Louise Bourget’s hint could not have been intended for Dr. Bessner, because she could perfectly well have spoken to him in private at any time she liked. There was one person, and one person only, who corresponded to her necessity—Simon Doyle! Simon Doyle was wounded, was constantly attended by a doctor, was in that doctor’s cabin. It was to him therefore that she risked saying those ambiguous words, in case she might not get another chance. And I remember how she had gone on, turning to him: ‘Monsieur, I implore you—you see how it is? What can I say?’ And this answer: ‘My good girl, don’t be a fool. Nobody thinks you saw or heard anything. You’ll be quite all right. I’ll look after you. Nobody’s accusing you of anything.’ That was the assurance she wanted, and she got it!”

Bessner uttered a colossal snort.

“Ach! it is foolish, that! Do you think a man with a fractured bone and a splint on his leg could go walking about the boat and stabbing people? I tell you, it was impossible for Simon Doyle to leave his cabin.”

Poirot said gently: “I know. That is quite true. The thing was impossible. It was impossible, but it was also true! There could be only one logical meaning behind Louise Bourget’s words.

“So I returned to the beginning and reviewed the crime in the light of this new knowledge. Was it possible that in the period preceding the quarrel Simon Doyle had left the saloon and the others had forgotten or not noticed it? I could not see that it was possible. Could the skilled testimony of Dr. Bessner and Mademoiselle Bowers be disregarded? Again I felt sure it could not. But, I remembered, there was a gap between the two. Simon Doyle had been alone in the saloon for a period of five minutes, and the skilled testimony of Dr. Bessner only applied to the time after that period. For that period we had only the evidence of visual appearance, and, though apparently that was perfectly sound, it was no longer certain. What had actually been seen—leaving assumption out of the question?

“Mademoiselle Robson had seen Mademoiselle de Bellefort fire her pistol, had seen Simon Doyle collapse on to a chair, had seen him clasp a handkerchief to his leg and seen that handkerchief gradually soak through red. What had Monsieur Fanthorp heard and seen? He heard a shot, he found Doyle with a red-stained handkerchief clasped to his leg. What had happened then? Doyle had been very insistent that Mademoiselle de Bellefort should be got away, that she should not be left alone. After that, he suggested that Fanthorp should get hold of the doctor.

“Accordingly Mademoiselle Robson and Monsieur Fanthorp got out with Mademoiselle de Bellefort and for the next five minutes they are busy, on the port side of the deck. Mademoiselle Bowers’, Dr. Bessner’s and Mademoiselle de Bellefort’s cabins are all on the port side. Two minutes are all that Simon Doyle needs. He picks up the pistol from under the sofa, slips out of his shoes, runs like a hare silently along the starboard deck, enters his wife’s cabin, creeps up to her as she lies asleep, shoots her through the head, puts the bottle that has contained the red ink on her washstand (it mustn’t be found on him), runs back, gets hold of Mademoiselle Van Schuyler’s velvet stole, which he has quietly stuffed down the side of a chair in readiness, muffles it round the pistol and fires a bullet into his leg. His chair into which he falls (in genuine agony this time) is by a window.

He lifts the window and throws the pistol (wrapped up with the telltale handkerchief in the velvet stole) into the Nile.”

“Impossible!” said Race.

“No, my friend, not impossible. Remember the evidence of Tim Allerton. He heard a pop—followed by a splash. And he heard something else—the footsteps of a man running—a man running past his door. But nobody could have been running along the starboard side of the deck. What he heard was the stockinged feet of Simon Doyle running past his cabin.”

Race said: “I still say it’s impossible. No man could work out the whole caboodle like that in a flash—especially a chap like Doyle who is slow in his mental processes.”

“But very quick and deft in his physical actions!”

“That, yes. But he wouldn’t be capable of thinking the whole thing out.”

“But he did not think it out himself, my friend. That is where we were all wrong. It looked like a crime committed on the spur of the moment, but it was not a crime committed on the spur of the moment. As I say, it was a very cleverly planned and well thought out piece of work. It could not be chance that Simon Doyle had a bottle of red ink in his pocket. No, it must be design. It was not chance that Jacqueline de Bellefort’s foot kicked the pistol under the settee, where it would be out of sight and unremembered until later.”

“Jacqueline?”

“Certainly. The two halves of the murder. What gave Simon his alibi? The shot fired by Jacqueline. What gave Jacqueline her alibi? The insistence of Simon which resulted in a hospital nurse remaining with her all night. There, between the two of them, you get all the qualities you require—the cool, resourceful, planning brain, Jacqueline de Bellefort’s brain, and the man of action to carry it out with incredible swiftness and timing.”

“Look at it the right way, and it answers every question. Simon Doyle and Jacqueline had been lovers. Realize that they are still lovers, and it is all clear. Simon does away with his rich wife, inherits her money, and in due course will marry his old love. It was all very ingenious. The persecution of Madame Doyle by Jacqueline, all part of the plan. Simon’s pretended rage…And yet—there were lapses. He held forth to me once about possessive women—held forth with real bitterness. It ought to have been clear to me that it was his wife he was thinking about—not Jacqueline. Then his manner to his wife in public. An ordinary, inarticulate Englishman, such as Simon Doyle, is very embarrassed at showing any affection. Simon was not a really good actor. He overdid the devoted manner. That conversation I had with Mademoiselle Jacqueline, too, when she pretended that somebody had overheard, I saw no one. And there was no one! But it was to be a useful red herring later. Then one night on this boat I thought I heard Simon and Linnet outside my cabin. He was saying, ‘We’ve got to go through with it now.’ It was Doyle all right, but it was to Jacqueline he was speaking.

“The final drama was perfectly planned and timed. There was a sleeping draught for me, in case I might put an inconvenient finger in the pie. There was the selection of Mademoiselle Robson as a witness—the working up of the scene, Mademoiselle de Bellefort’s exaggerated remorse and hysterics. She made a good deal of noise, in case the shot should be heard. En vérité, it was an extraordinarily clever idea. Jacqueline says she has shot Doyle; Mademoiselle Robson says so; Fanthorp says so—and when Simon’s leg is examined he has been shot. It looks unanswerable! For both of them there is a perfect alibi—at the cost, it is true, of a certain amount of pain and risk to Simon Doyle, but it is necessary that his wound should definitely disable him.

“And then the plan goes wrong. Louise Bourget has been wakeful. She has come up the stairway and she has seen Simon Doyle run along to his wife’s cabin and come back. Easy enough to piece together what has happened the following day. And so she makes her greedy bit for hush money, and in so doing signs her death warrant.”

“But Mr. Doyle couldn’t have killed her?” Cornelia objected.

“No, the other partner did that murder. As soon as he can, Simon Doyle asks to see Jacqueline. He even asks me to leave them alone together. He tells her then of the new danger. They must act at once. He knows where Bessner’s scalpels are kept. After the crime the scalpel is wiped and returned, and then, very late and rather out of breath, Jacqueline de Bellefort hurries in to lunch.

“And still all is not well, for Madame Otterbourne has seen Jacqueline go into Louise Bourget’s cabin. And she comes hot-foot to tell Simon about it. Jacqueline is the murderess. Do you remember how Simon shouted at the poor woman? Nerves, we thought. But the door was open and he was trying to convey the danger to his accomplice. She heard and she acted—acted like lightning. She remembered Pennington had talked about a revolver. She got hold of it, crept up outside the door, listened and, at the critical moment, fired. She boasted once that she was a good shot, and her boast was not an idle one.

“I remarked after that third crime that there were three ways the murderer could have gone. I meant that he could have gone aft (in which case Tim Allerton was the criminal), he could have gone over the side (very improbable) or he could have gone into a cabin. Jacqueline’s cabin was just two away from Dr. Bessner’s. She had only to throw down the revolver, bolt into the cabin, ruffle her hair and fling herself down on the bunk. It was risky, but it was the only possible chance.”

There was a silence, then Race asked: “What happened to the first bullet fired at Doyle by the girl?”

“I think it went into the table. There is a recently made hole there. I think Doyle had time to dig it out with a penknife and fling it through the window. He had, of course, a spare cartridge, so that it would appear that only two shots had been fired.”

Cornelia sighed. “They thought of everything,” she said. “It’s—horrible!”

Poirot was silent. But it was not a modest silence. His eyes seemed to be saying: “You are wrong. They didn’t allow for Hercule Poirot.”

Aloud he said, “And now, Doctor, we will go and have a word with your patient.”

Thirty

It was very much later that evening that Hercule Poirot came and knocked on the door of a cabin.

A voice said “Come in” and he entered.

Jacqueline de Bellefort was sitting in a chair. In another chair, close against the wall, sat the big stewardess.

Jacqueline’s eyes surveyed Poirot thoughtfully. She made a gesture towards the stewardess.

“Can she go?”

Poirot nodded to the woman and she went out. Poirot drew up her chair and sat down near Jacqueline. Neither of them spoke. Poirot’s face was unhappy.

In the end it was the girl who spoke first.

“Well,” she said, “it is all over! You were too clever for us, Monsieur Poirot.”

Poirot sighed. He spread out his hands. He seemed strangely dumb.

“All the same,” said Jacqueline reflectively, “I can’t really see that you had much proof. You were quite right, of course, but if we’d bluffed you out—”

“In no other way, Mademoiselle, could the thing have happened.”

“That’s proof enough for a logical mind, but I don’t believe it would have convinced a jury. Oh, well—it can’t be helped. You sprang it all on Simon, and he went down like a ninepin. He just lost his head utterly, poor lamb, and admitted everything.” She shook her head. “He’s a bad loser.”

“But you, Mademoiselle, are a good loser.”

She laughed suddenly—a queer, gay, defiant little laugh.

“Oh, yes, I’m a good loser all right.” She looked at him.

She said suddenly and impulsively: “Don’t mind so much, Monsieur Poirot! About me, I mean. You do mind, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“But it wouldn’t have occurred to you to let me off?”

Hercule Poirot said quietly, “No.”

She nodded her head in quiet agreement.

“No, it’s no use being sentimental. I might do it again…I’m not a safe person any longer. I can feel that myself…” She went on broodingly: “It’s so dreadfully easy—killing people. And you begin to feel that it doesn’t matter…that it’s only you that matters! It’s dangerous—that.”

She paused, then said with a little smile: “You did your best for me, you know. That night at Assuan—you told me not to open my heart to evil…Did you realize then what was in my mind?”

He shook his head.

“I only knew that what I said was true.”

“It was true. I could have stopped, then, you know. I nearly did…I could have told Simon that I wouldn’t go on with it…But then perhaps—”

She broke off. She said: “Would you like to hear about it? From the beginning?”

“If you care to tell me, Mademoiselle.”

“I think I want to tell you. It was all very simple really. You see, Simon and I loved each other….”

It was a matter-of-fact statement, yet, underneath the lightness of her tone, there were echoes….

Poirot said simply: “And for you love would have been enough, but not for him.”

“You might put it that way, perhaps. But you don’t quite understand Simon. You see, he’s always wanted money so dreadfully. He liked all the things you get with money—horses and yachts and sport—nice things all of them, things a man ought to be keen about. And he’d never been able to have any of them. He’s awfully simple, Simon is. He wants things just as a child wants them—you know—terribly.

“All the same he never tried to marry anybody rich and horrid. He wasn’t that sort. And then we met—and—and that sort of settled things. Only we didn’t see when we’d be able to marry. He’d had rather a decent job, but he’d lost it. In a way it was his own fault. He tried to do something smart over money, and got found out at once. I don’t believe he really meant to be dishonest. He just thought it was the sort of thing people did in the City.”

A flicker passed over her listener’s face, but he guarded his tongue.

“There we were, up against it; and then I thought of Linnet and her new country house, and I rushed off to her. You know, Monsieur Poirot, I loved Linnet, really I did. She was my best friend, and I never dreamed that anything would ever come between us. I just thought how lucky it was she was rich. It might make all the difference to me and Simon if she’d give him a job. And she was awfully sweet about it and told me to bring Simon down to see her. It was about then you saw us that night at Chez Ma Tante. We were making whoopee, although we couldn’t really afford it.”

She paused, sighed, then went on: “What I’m going to say now is quite true, Monsieur Poirot. Even though Linnet is dead, it doesn’t alter the truth. That’s why I’m not really sorry about her, even now. She went all out to get Simon away from me. That’s the absolute truth! I don’t think she even hesitated for more than about a minute. I was her friend, but she didn’t care. She just went bald-headed for Simon….

“And Simon didn’t care a damn about her! I talked a lot to you about glamour, but of course that wasn’t true. He didn’t want Linnet. He thought her good-looking but terribly bossy, and he hated bossy women! The whole thing embarrassed him frightfully. But he did like the thought of her money.

“Of course I saw that…and at last I suggested to him that it might be a good thing if he—got rid of me and married Linnet. But he scouted the idea. He said, money or no money, it would be hell to be married to her. He said his idea of having money was to have it himself—not to have a rich wife holding the purse strings. ‘I’d be a kind of damned Prince Consort,’ he said to me. He said, too, that he didn’t want anyone but me….

“I think I know when the idea came into his head. He said one day: ‘If I’d any luck, I’d marry her and she’d die in about a year and leave me all the boodle.’ And then a queer startled look came into his eyes. That was when he first thought of it….

“He talked about it a good deal, one way and another—about how convenient it would be if Linnet died. I said it was an awful idea, and then he shut up about it. Then, one day, I found him reading up all about arsenic. I taxed him with it then, and he laughed and said: ‘Nothing venture, nothing have! It’s about the only time in my life I shall be near to touching a far lot of money.’

“After a bit I saw that he’d made up his mind. And I was terrified—simply terrified. Because, you see, I realized that he’d never pull it off. He’s so childishly simple. He’d have no kind of subtlety about it—and he’s got no imagination. He would probably have just bunged arsenic into her and assumed the doctor would say she’d died of gastritis. He always thought things would go right.

“So I had to come into it, too, to look after him….”

She said it very simply but in complete good faith. Poirot had no doubt whatever that her motive had been exactly what she said it was. She herself had not coveted Linnet Ridgeway’s money, but she had loved Simon Doyle, had loved him beyond reason and beyond rectitude and beyond pity.

"I thought and I thought—trying to work out a plan. It seemed to me that the basis of the idea ought to be a kind of two-handed alibi. You know—if Simon and I could somehow or other give evidence against each other, but actually that evidence would clear us of every thing. It would be easy enough for me to pretend to hate Simon. It was quite a likely thing to happen under the circumstances. Then, if Linnet was killed, I should probably be suspected, so it would be better if I was suspected right away. We worked out details little by little. I wanted it to be so that, if anything went wrong, they'd get me and not Simon. But Simon was worried about me.

"The only thing I was glad about was that I hadn't got to do it. I simply couldn't have! Not go along in cold blood and kill her when she was asleep! You see, I hadn't forgiven her—I think I could have killed her face to face, but not the other way….

"We worked everything out carefully. Even then, Simon went and wrote a J in blood which was a silly melodramatic thing to do. It's just the sort of thing he would think of! But it went off all right."

Poirot nodded.

"Yes. It was not your fault that Louise Bourget could not sleep that night… And afterwards, Mademoiselle?"

She met his eyes squarely.

"Yes," she said "it's rather horrible isn't it? I can't believe that I—did that! I know now what you meant by opening your heart to evil…You know pretty well how it happened. Louise made it clear to Simon that she knew. Simon got you to bring me to him. As soon as we were alone together he told me what had happened. He told me what I'd got to do. I wasn't even horrified. I was so afraid—so deadly afraid…That's what murder does to you. Simon and I were safe—quite safe—except for this miserable blackmailing French girl. I took her all the money we could get hold of. I pretended to grovel. And then, when she was counting the money, I—did it! It was quite easy. That's what's so horribly, horribly frightening about it…It's so terribly easy….

"And even then we weren't safe. Mrs. Otterbourne had seen me. She came triumphantly along the deck looking for you and Colonel Race. I'd no time to think. I just acted like a flash. It was almost exciting. I knew it was touch or go that time. That seemed to make it better…."

She stopped again.

"Do you remember when you came into my cabin afterwards? You said you were not sure why you had come. I was so miserable—so terrified. I thought Simon was going to die…."

"And I—was hoping it," said Poirot.

Jacqueline nodded.

"Yes, it would have been better for him that way."

"That was not my thought."

Jacqueline looked at the sternness of his face.

She said gently: "Don't mind so much for me, Monsieur Poirot. After all, I've lived hard always, you know. If we'd won out, I'd have been very happy and enjoyed things and probably should never have regretted anything. As it is—well, one goes through with it."

She added: "I suppose the stewardess is in attendance to see I don't hang myself or swallow a miraculous capsule of prussic acid as people always do in books. You needn't be afraid! I shan't do that. It will be easier for Simon if I'm standing by."

Poirot got up. Jacqueline rose also. She said with a sudden smile: "Do you remember when I said I must follow my star? You said it might be a false star. And I said: 'That very bad star, that star fell down.'"

He went out to the deck with her laughter ringing in his ears.

Thirty-One

It was early dawn when they came into Shellal. The rocks came down grimly to the water's edge.

Poirot murmured: "Quel pays sauvage!"

Race stood beside him. "Well," he said, "we've done our job. I've arranged for Richetti to be taken ashore first. Glad we've got him. He's been a slippery customer, I can tell you. Given us the slip dozens of times."

He went on: "We must get hold of a stretcher for Doyle. Remarkable how he went to pieces."

"Not really," said Poirot. "That boyish type of criminal is usually intensely vain. Once prick the bubble of their self-esteem and it is finished! They go to pieces like children."

"Deserves to be hanged," said Race. "He's a cold-blooded scoundrel. I'm sorry for the girl—but there's nothing to be done about it."

Poirot shook his head.

"People say love justifies everything, but that is not true…Women who care for men as Jacqueline cares for Simon Doyle are very dangerous. It is what I said when I saw her first. 'She cares too much, that little one!' It is true."

Cornelia Robson came up beside him.

"Oh," she said, "we're nearly in." She paused a minute or two, then added, "I've been with her."

"With Mademoiselle de Bellefort?"

"Yes. I felt it was kind of awful for her boxed up with that stewardess. Cousin Marie's very angry, though, I'm afraid."

Miss Van Schuyler was progressing slowly down the deck towards them. Her eyes were venomous.

“Cornelia,” she snapped, “you’ve behaved outrageously. I shall send you straight home.”

Cornelia took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Cousin Marie, but I’m not going home. I’m going to get married.”

“So you’ve seen sense at last,” snapped the old lady.

Ferguson came striding round the corner of the deck. He said: “Cornelia, what’s this I hear? It’s not true!”

“It’s quite true,” said Cornelia. “I’m going to marry Dr. Bessner. He asked me last night.”

“And why are you going to marry him?” asked Ferguson furiously. “Simply because he’s rich?”

“No, I’m not,” said Cornelia indignantly. “I like him. He’s kind, and he knows a lot. And I’ve always been interested in sick folks and clinics, and I shall have just a wonderful life with him.”

“Do you mean to say,” asked Mr. Ferguson incredulously, “that you’d rather marry that disgusting old man than Me?”

“Yes, I would. You’re not reliable! You wouldn’t be at all a comfortable sort of person to live with. And he’s not old. He’s not fifty yet.”

“He’s got a stomach,” said Mr. Ferguson venomously.

“Well, I’ve got round shoulders,” retorted Cornelia. “What one looks like doesn’t matter. He says I really could help him in his work, and he’s going to teach me all about neurosis.”

She moved away.

Ferguson said to Poirot: “Do you think she really means that?”

"Certainly."

"She prefers that pompous old bore to me?"

"Undoubtedly."

"The girl's mad," declared Ferguson.

Poirot's eyes twinkled.

"She is a woman of an original mind," he said. "It is probably the first time you have met one."

The boat drew in to the landing stage. A cordon had been drawn round the passengers. They had been asked to wait before disembarking.

Richetti, dark-faced and sullen, was marched ashore by two engineers.

Then, after a certain amount of delay, a stretcher was brought. Simon Doyle was carried along the deck to the gangway.

He looked a different man—cringing, frightened, all his boyish insouciance vanished.

Jacqueline de Bellefort followed. A stewardess walked beside her. She was pale but otherwise looked much as usual. She came up to the stretcher.

"Hullo, Simon!" she said.

He looked up at her quickly. The old boyish look came back to his face for a moment.

"I messed it up," he said. "Lost my head and admitted everything! Sorry, Jackie. I've let you down."

She smiled at him then. "It's all right, Simon," she said. "A fool's game, and we've lost. That's all."

She stood aside. The bearers picked up the handles of the stretcher. Jacqueline bent down and tied the lace of her shoe. Then her hand went to her stocking top and she straightened up with something in her hand.

There was a sharp explosive “pop.”

Simon Doyle gave one convulsed shudder and then lay still.

Jacqueline de Bellefort nodded. She stood for a minute, pistol in hand. She gave a fleeting smile at Poirot.

Then, as Race jumped forward, she turned the little glittering toy against her heart and pressed the trigger.

She sank down in a soft huddled heap.

Race shouted: “Where the devil did she get that pistol?”

Poirot felt a hand on his arm. Mrs. Allerton said softly, “You—knew?”

He nodded. “She had a pair of these pistols. I realized that when I heard that one had been found in Rosalie Otterbourne’s handbag the day of the search. Jacqueline sat at the same table as they did. When she realized that there was going to be a search, she slipped it into the other girl’s handbag. Later she went to Rosalie’s cabin and got it back, after having distracted her attention with a comparison of lipsticks. As both she and her cabin had been searched yesterday, it wasn’t thought necessary to do it again.”

Mrs. Allerton said: “You wanted her to take that way out?”

“Yes. But she would not take it alone. That is why Simon Doyle has died an easier death than he deserved.”

Mrs. Allerton shivered. “Love can be a very frightening thing.”

“That is why most great love stories are tragedies.”

Mrs. Allerton’s eyes rested upon Tim and Rosalie, standing side by side in the sunlight, and she said suddenly and passionately: “But thank God, there is happiness in the world."

"As you say, Madame, thank God for it."

Presently the passengers went ashore.

Later the bodies of Louise Bourget and Mrs. Otterbourne were carried off the Karnak.

Lastly the body of Linnet Doyle was brought ashore, and all over the world wires began to hum, telling the public that Linnet Doyle, who had been Linnet Ridgeway, the famous, the beautiful, the wealthy Linnet Doyle was dead.

Sir George Wode read about it in his London club, and Sterndale Rockford in New York, and Joanna Southwood in Switzerland, and it was discussed in the bar of the Three Crowns in Malton-under-Wode.

And Mr. Burnaby said acutely: "Well, it doesn't seem to have done her much good, poor lass."

But after a while they stopped talking about her and discussed instead who was going to win the Grand National. For, as Mr. Ferguson was saying at that minute in Luxor, it is not the past that matters but the future.

Murder In The Mews (1937)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

MURDER IN THE MEWS

One

I

“Penny for the guy, sir?”

A small boy with a grimy face grinned ingratiatingly.

“Certainly not!” said Chief Inspector Japp. “And, look here, my lad—”

A short homily followed. The dismayed urchin beat a precipitate retreat, remarking briefly and succinctly to his youthful friends:

“Blimey, if it ain’t a cop all togged up!”

The band took to its heels, chanting the incantation:

Remember, remember

The fifth of November

Gunpowder treason and plot.

We see no reason

Why gunpowder treason

Should ever be forgot.

The chief inspector’s companion, a small, elderly man with an egg-shaped head and large, military-looking moustaches, was smiling to himself.

“Très bien, Japp,” he observed. “You preach the sermon very well! I congratulate you!”

“Rank excuse for begging, that’s what Guy Fawkes’ Day is!” said Japp.

“An interesting survival,” mused Hercule Poirot. “The fireworks go up—crack—crack—long after the man they commemorate and his deed are forgotten.”

The Scotland Yard man agreed.

“Don’t suppose many of those kids really know who Guy Fawkes was.”

“And soon, doubtless, there will be confusion of thought. Is it in honour or in execration that on the fifth of November the feu d’artifice are sent up? To blow up an English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?”

Japp chuckled.

“Some people would say undoubtedly the latter.”

Turning off the main road, the two men passed into the comparative quiet of a mews. They had been dining together and were now taking a short cut to Hercule Poirot’s flat.

As they walked along the sound of squibs was still heard periodically. An occasional shower of golden rain illuminated the sky.

“Good night for a murder,” remarked Japp with professional interest. “Nobody would hear a shot, for instance, on a night like this.”

“It has always seemed odd to me that more criminals do not take advantage of the fact,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Do you know, Poirot, I almost wish sometimes that you would commit a murder.”

“Mon cher!”

“Yes, I’d like to see just how you’d set about it.”

“My dear Japp, if I committed a murder you would not have the least chance of seeing—how I set about it! You would not even be aware, probably, that a murder had been committed.”

Japp laughed good-humouredly and affectionately.

“Cocky little devil, aren’t you?” he said indulgently.

II

At half past eleven the following morning, Hercule Poirot’s telephone rang.

“ ’Allo? ’Allo?”

“Hallo, that you, Poirot?”

“Oui, c’est moi.”

“Japp speaking here. Remember we came home last night through Bardsley Gardens Mews?”

“Yes?”

“And that we talked about how easy it would be to shoot a person with all those squibs and crackers and the rest of it going off?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, there was a suicide in that mews. No. 14. A young widow—Mrs. Allen. I’m going round there now. Like to come?”

“Excuse me, but does someone of your eminence, my dear friend, usually get sent to a case of suicide?”

“Sharp fellow. No—he doesn’t. As a matter of fact our doctor seems to think there’s something funny about this. Will you come? I kind of feel you ought to be in on it.”

“Certainly I will come. No. 14, you say?”

"That's right."

III

Poirot arrived at No. 14 Bardsley Gardens Mews almost at the same moment as a car drew up containing Japp and three other men.

No. 14 was clearly marked out as the centre of interest. A big circle of people, chauffeurs, their wives, errand boys, loafers, well-dressed passersby and innumerable children were drawn up all staring at No. 14 with open mouths and a fascinated stare.

A police constable in uniform stood on the step and did his best to keep back the curious. Alert-looking young men with cameras were busy and surged forward as Japp alighted.

"Nothing for you now," said Japp, brushing them aside. He nodded to Poirot. "So here you are. Let's get inside."

They passed in quickly, the door shut behind them and they found themselves squeezed together at the foot of a ladderlike flight of stairs.

A man came to the top of the staircase, recognized Japp and said:

"Up here, sir."

Japp and Poirot mounted the stairs.

The man at the stairhead opened a door on the left and they found themselves in a small bedroom.

"Thought you'd like me to run over the chief points, sir."

"Quite right, Jameson," said Japp. "What about it?"

Divisional Inspector Jameson took up the tale.

"Deceased's a Mrs. Allen, sir. Lived here with a friend—a Miss Plenderleith. Miss Plenderleith was away staying in the country and returned this morning. She let herself in with her key, was surprised to find no one about. A woman usually comes in at nine o'clock to do for them. She went upstairs first into her own room (that's this room) then across the landing to her friend's room. Door was locked on the inside. She rattled the handle, knocked and called, but couldn't get any answer. In the end getting alarmed she rang up the police station. That was at ten forty-five. We came along at once and forced the door open. Mrs. Allen was lying in a heap on the ground shot through the head. There was an automatic in her hand—a Webley .25—and it looked a clear case of suicide."

"Where is Miss Plenderleith now?"

"She's downstairs in the sitting room, sir. A very cool, efficient young lady, I should say. Got a head on her."

"I'll talk to her presently. I'd better see Brett now."

Accompanied by Poirot he crossed the landing and entered the opposite room. A tall, elderly man looked up and nodded.

"Hallo, Japp, glad you've got here. Funny business, this."

Japp advanced towards him. Hercule Poirot sent a quick searching glance round the room.

It was much larger than the room they had just quitted. It had a built-out bay window, and whereas the other room had been a bedroom pure and simple, this was emphatically a bedroom disguised as a sitting room.

The walls were silver and the ceiling emerald green. There were curtains of a modernistic pattern in silver and green. There was a divan covered with a shimmering emerald green silk quilt and numbers of gold and silver cushions. There was a tall antique walnut bureau, a walnut tallboy, and several modern chairs of gleaming chromium. On a low glass table there was a big ashtray full of cigarette stubs.

Delicately Hercule Poirot sniffed the air. Then he joined Japp where the latter stood looking down at the body.

In a heap on the floor, lying as she had fallen from one of the chromium chairs, was the body of a young woman of perhaps twenty-seven. She had fair hair and delicate features. There was very little makeup on the face. It was a pretty, wistful, perhaps slightly stupid face. On the left side of the head was a mass of congealed blood. The fingers of the right hand were clasped round a small pistol. The woman was dressed in a simple frock of dark green high to the neck.

“Well, Brett, what’s the trouble?”

Japp was looking down also at the huddled figure.

“Position’s all right,” said the doctor. “If she shot herself she’d probably have slipped from the chair into just that position. The door was locked and the window was fastened on the inside.”

“That’s all right, you say. Then what’s wrong?”

“Take a look at the pistol. I haven’t handled it—waiting for the fingerprint men. But you can see quite well what I mean.”

Together Poirot and Japp knelt down and examined the pistol closely.

“I see what you mean,” said Japp rising. “It’s in the curve of her hand. It looks as though she’s holding it—but as a matter of fact she isn’t holding it. Anything else?”

“Plenty. She’s got the pistol in her right hand. Now take a look at the wound. The pistol was held close to the head just above the left ear—the left ear, mark you.”

“H’m,” said Japp. “That does seem to settle it. She couldn’t hold a pistol and fire it in that position with her right hand?”

“Plumb impossible, I should say. You might get your arm round but I doubt if you could fire the shot.”

“That seems pretty obvious then. Someone else shot her and tried to make it look like suicide. What about the locked door and window, though?”

Inspector Jameson answered this.

“Window was closed and bolted, sir, but although the door was locked we haven’t been able to find the key.”

Japp nodded.

“Yes, that was a bad break. Whoever did it locked the door when he left and hoped the absence of the key wouldn’t be noticed.”

Poirot murmured:

“C’est bête, ça!”

“Oh, come now, Poirot, old man, you mustn’t judge everybody else by the light of your shining intellect! As a matter of fact that’s the sort of little detail that’s quite apt to be overlooked. Door’s locked. People break in. Woman found dead—pistol in her hand—clear case of suicide—she locked herself in to do it. They don’t go hunting about for keys. As a matter of fact, Miss Plenderleith’s sending for the police was lucky. She might have got one or two of the chauffeurs to come and burst in the door—and then the key question would have been overlooked altogether.”

“Yes, I suppose that is true,” said Hercule Poirot. “It would have been many people’s natural reaction. The police, they are the last resource, are they not?”

He was still staring down at the body.

“Anything strike you?” Japp asked.

The question was careless but his eyes were keen and attentive.

Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly.

“I was looking at her wristwatch.”

He bent over and just touched it with a fingertip. It was a dainty jewelled affair on a black moiré strap on the wrist of the hand that held the pistol.

"Rather a swell piece that," observed Japp. "Must have cost money!" He cocked his head inquiringly at Poirot. "Something in that maybe?"

"It is possible—yes."

Poirot strayed across to the writing bureau. It was the kind that has a front flap that lets down. This was daintily set out to match the general colour scheme.

There was a somewhat massive silver inkstand in the centre, in front of it a handsome green lacquer blotter. To the left of the blotter was an emerald glass pen tray containing a silver penholder—a stick of green sealing wax, a pencil and two stamps. On the right of the blotter was a movable calendar giving the day of the week, date and month. There was also a little glass jar of shot and standing in it a flamboyant green quill pen. Poirot seemed interested in the pen. He took it out and looked at it but the quill was innocent of ink. It was clearly a decoration—nothing more. The silver penholder with the ink-stained nib was the one in use. His eyes strayed to the calendar.

"Tuesday, November fifth," said Japp. "Yesterday. That's all correct."

He turned to Brett.

"How long has she been dead?"

"She was killed at eleven thirty-three yesterday evening," said Brett promptly.

Then he grinned as he saw Japp's surprised face.

"Sorry, old boy," he said. "Had to do the super doctor of fiction! As a matter of fact eleven is about as near as I can put it—with a margin of about an hour either way."

"Oh, I thought the wristwatch might have stopped—or something."

"It's stopped all right, but it's stopped at a quarter past four."

“And I suppose she couldn’t have been killed possibly at a quarter past four.”

“You can put that right out of your mind.”

Poirot had turned back the cover of the blotter.

“Good idea,” said Japp. “But no luck.”

The blotter showed an innocent white sheet of blotting paper. Poirot turned over the leaves but they were all the same.

He turned his attention to the wastepaper basket.

It contained two or three torn-up letters and circulars. They were only torn once and were easily reconstructed. An appeal for money from some society for assisting ex-servicemen, an invitation to a cocktail party on November 3rd, an appointment with a dressmaker. The circulars were an announcement of a furrier’s sale and a catalogue from a department store.

“Nothing there,” said Japp.

“No, it is odd . . .” said Poirot.

“You mean they usually leave a letter when it’s suicide?”

“Exactly.”

“In fact, one more proof that it isn’t suicide.”

He moved away.

“I’ll have my men get to work now. We’d better go down and interview this Miss Plenderleith. Coming, Poirot?”

Poirot still seemed fascinated by the writing bureau and its appointments.

He left the room, but at the door his eyes went back once more to the flaunting emerald quill pen.

Two

At the foot of the narrow flight of stairs a door gave admission to a large-sized living room—actually the converted stable. In this room, the walls of which were finished in a roughened plaster effect and on which hung etchings and woodcuts, two people were sitting.

One, in a chair near the fireplace, her hand stretched out to the blaze, was a dark efficient-looking young woman of twenty-seven or eight. The other, an elderly woman of ample proportions who carried a string bag, was panting and talking when the two men entered the room.

"—and as I said, Miss, such a turn it gave me I nearly dropped down where I stood. And to think that this morning of all mornings—"

The other cut her short.

"That will do, Mrs. Pierce. These gentlemen are police officers, I think."

"Miss Plenderleith?" asked Japp, advancing.

The girl nodded.

"That is my name. This is Mrs. Pierce who comes in to work for us every day."

The irrepressible Mrs. Pierce broke out again.

"And as I was saying to Miss Plenderleith, to think that this morning of all mornings, my sister's Louisa Maud should have been took with a fit and me the only one handy and as I say flesh and blood is flesh and blood, and I didn't think Mrs. Allen would mind, though I never likes to disappoint my ladies—"

Japp broke in with some dexterity.

“Quite so, Mrs. Pierce. Now perhaps you would take Inspector Jameson into the kitchen and give him a brief statement.”

Having then got rid of the voluble Mrs. Pierce, who departed with Jameson talking thirteen to the dozen, Japp turned his attention once more to the girl.

“I am Chief Inspector Japp. Now, Miss Plenderleith, I should like to know all you can tell me about this business.”

“Certainly. Where shall I begin?”

Her self-possession was admirable. There were no signs of grief or shock save for an almost unnatural rigidity of manner.

“You arrived this morning at what time?”

“I think it was just before half past ten. Mrs. Pierce, the old liar, wasn’t here, I found—”

“Is that a frequent occurrence?”

Jane Plenderleith shrugged her shoulders.

“About twice a week she turns up at twelve—or not at all. She’s supposed to come at nine. Actually, as I say, twice a week she either ‘comes over queer,’ or else some member of her family is overtaken by sickness. All these daily women are like that—fail you now and again. She’s not bad as they go.”

“You’ve had her long?”

“Just over a month. Our last one pinched things.”

“Please go on, Miss Plenderleith.”

“I paid off the taxi, carried in my suitcase, looked round for Mrs. P., couldn’t see her and went upstairs to my room. I tidied up a bit then I went across to Barbara—Mrs. Allen—and found the door locked. I rattled the handle and knocked but could get no reply. I came downstairs and rang up the police station.”

“Pardon!” Poirot interposed a quick, deft question. “It did not occur to you to try and break down the door—with the help of one of the chauffeurs in the mews, say?”

Her eyes turned to him—cool, grey-green eyes. Her glance seemed to sweep over him quickly and appraisingly.

“No, I don’t think I thought of that. If anything was wrong, it seemed to me that the police were the people to send for.”

“Then you thought—pardon, mademoiselle—that there was something wrong?”

“Naturally.”

“Because you could not get a reply to your knocks? But possibly your friend might have taken a sleeping draught or something of that kind—”

“She didn’t take sleeping draughts.”

The reply came sharply.

“Or she might have gone away and locked her door before going?”

“Why should she lock it? In any case she would have left a note for me.”

“And she did not—leave a note for you? You are quite sure of that?”

“Of course I am sure of it. I should have seen it at once.”

The sharpness of her tone was accentuated.

Japp said:

“You didn’t try and look through the keyhole, Miss Plenderleith?”

"No," said Jane Plenderleith thoughtfully. "I never thought of that. But I couldn't have seen anything, could I? Because the key would have been in it?"

Her inquiring gaze, innocent, wide-eyed, met Japp's. Poirot smiled suddenly to himself.

"You did quite right, of course, Miss Plenderleith," said Japp. "I suppose you'd no reason to believe that your friend was likely to commit suicide?"

"Oh, no."

"She hadn't seemed worried—or distressed in any way?"

There was a pause—an appreciable pause before the girl answered.

"No."

"Did you know she had a pistol?"

Jane Plenderleith nodded.

"Yes, she had it out in India. She always kept it in a drawer in her room."

"H'm. Got a licence for it?"

"I imagine so. I don't know for certain."

"Now, Miss Plenderleith, will you tell me all you can about Mrs. Allen, how long you've known her, where her relations are—everything in fact."

Jane Plenderleith nodded.

"I've known Barbara about five years. I met her first travelling abroad—in Egypt to be exact. She was on her way home from India. I'd been at the British School in Athens for a bit and was having a few weeks in Egypt before going home. We were on a Nile cruise together. We made friends, decided we liked each other. I was looking at the time for someone to share a flat or a tiny house with me. Barbara was alone in the world. We thought we'd get on well together."

"And you did get on well together?" asked Poirot.

"Very well. We each had our own friends—Barbara was more social in her likings—my friends were more of the artistic kind. It probably worked better that way."

Poirot nodded. Japp went on:

"What do you know about Mrs. Allen's family and her life before she met you?"

Jane Plenderleith shrugged her shoulders.

"Not very much really. Her maiden name was Armitage, I believe."

"Her husband?"

"I don't fancy that he was anything to write home about. He drank, I think. I gather he died a year or two after the marriage. There was one child, a little girl, which died when it was three years old. Barbara didn't talk much about her husband. I believe she married him in India when she was about seventeen. Then they went off to Borneo or one of the godforsaken spots you send ne'er-do-wells to—but as it was obviously a painful subject I didn't refer to it."

"Do you know if Mrs. Allen was in any financial difficulties?"

"No, I'm sure she wasn't."

"Not in debt—anything of that kind?"

"Oh, no! I'm sure she wasn't in that kind of a jam."

"Now there's another question I must ask—and I hope you won't be upset about it, Miss Plenderleith. Had Mrs. Allen any particular man friend or men friends?"

Jane Plenderleith answered coolly:

“Well, she was engaged to be married if that answers your question.”

“What is the name of the man she was engaged to?”

“Charles Laverton-West. He’s M.P. for some place in Hampshire.”

“Had she known him long?”

“A little over a year.”

“And she has been engaged to him—how long?”

“Two—no—nearer three months.”

“As far as you know there has not been any quarrel?”

Miss Plenderleith shook her head.

“No. I should have been surprised if there had been anything of that sort. Barbara wasn’t the quarrelling kind.”

“How long is it since you last saw Mrs. Allen?”

“Friday last, just before I went away for the weekend.”

“Mrs. Allen was remaining in town?”

“Yes. She was going out with her fiancé on the Sunday, I believe.”

“And you yourself, where did you spend the weekend?”

“At Laidells Hall, Laidells, Essex.”

“And the name of the people with whom you were staying?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Bentinck.”

“You only left them this morning?”

“Yes.”

“You must have left very early?”

“Mr. Bentinck motored me up. He starts early because he has to get to the city by ten.”

“I see.”

Japp nodded comprehendingly. Miss Plenderleith’s replies had all been crisp and convincing.

Poirot in his turn put a question.

“What is your own opinion of Mr. Laverton-West?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“Does that matter?”

“No, it does not matter, perhaps, but I should like to have your opinion.”

“I don’t know that I’ve thought about him one way or the other. He’s young—not more than thirty-one or two—ambitious—a good public speaker—means to get on in the world.”

“That is on the credit side—and on the debit?”

“Well,” Miss Plenderleith considered for a moment or two. “In my opinion he’s commonplace—his ideas are not particularly original—and he’s slightly pompous.”

“Those are not very serious faults, mademoiselle,” said Poirot, smiling.

“Don’t you think so?”

Her tone was slightly ironic.

“They might be to you.”

He was watching her, saw her look a little disconcerted. He pursued his advantage.

“But to Mrs. Allen—no, she would not notice them.”

“You’re perfectly right. Barbara thought he was wonderful—took him entirely at his own valuation.”

Poirot said gently:

“You were fond of your friend?”

He saw the hand clench on her knee, the tightening of the line of the jaw, yet the answer came in a matter-of-fact voice free from emotion.

“You are quite right. I was.”

Japp said:

“Just one other thing, Miss Plenderleith. You and she didn’t have a quarrel? There was no upset between you?”

“None whatever.”

“Not over this engagement business?”

“Certainly not. I was glad she was able to be so happy about it.”

There was a momentary pause, then Japp said:

“As far as you know, did Mrs. Allen have any enemies?”

This time there was a definite interval before Jane Plenderleith replied. When she did so, her tone had altered very slightly.

“I don’t know quite what you mean by enemies?”

“Anyone, for instance, who would profit by her death?”

“Oh, no, that would be ridiculous. She had a very small income anyway.”

“And who inherits that income?”

Jame Plenderleith’s voice sounded mildly surprised as she said:

“Do you know, I really don’t know. I shouldn’t be surprised if I did. That is, if she ever made a will.”

“And no enemies in any other sense?” Japp slid off to another aspect quickly. “People with a grudge against her?”

“I don’t think anyone had a grudge against her. She was a very gentle creature, always anxious to please. She had a really sweet, lovable nature.”

For the first time that hard, matter-of-fact voice broke a little. Poirot nodded gently.

Japp said:

“So it amounts to this—Mrs. Allen has been in good spirits lately, she wasn’t in any financial difficulty, she was engaged to be married and was happy in her engagement. There was nothing in the world to make her commit suicide. That’s right, isn’t it?”

There was a momentary silence before Jane said:

“Yes.”

Japp rose.

“Excuse me, I must have a word with Inspector Jameson.”

He left the room.

Hercule Poirot remained tête à tête with Jane Plenderleith.

Three

For a few minutes there was silence.

Jane Plenderleith shot a swift appraising glance at the little man, but after that she stared in front of her and did not speak. Yet a consciousness of his presence showed itself in a certain nervous tension. Her body was still but not relaxed. When at last Poirot did break the silence the mere sound of his voice seemed to give her a certain relief. In an agreeable everyday voice he asked a question.

“When did you light the fire, mademoiselle?”

“The fire?” Her voice sounded vague and rather absentminded. “Oh, as soon as I arrived this morning.”

“Before you went upstairs or afterwards?”

“Before.”

“I see. Yes, naturally . . . And it was already laid—or did you have to lay it?”

“It was laid. I only had to put a match to it.”

There was a slight impatience in her voice. Clearly she suspected him of making conversation. Possibly that was what he was doing. At any rate he went on in quiet conversational tones.

“But your friend—in her room I noticed there was a gas fire only?”

Jane Plenderleith answered mechanically.

“This is the only coal fire we have—the others are all gas fires.”

“And you cook with gas, too?”

“I think everyone does nowadays.”

“True. It is much labour saving.”

The little interchange died down. Jane Plenderleith tapped on the ground with her shoe. Then she said abruptly:

“That man—Chief Inspector Japp—is he considered clever?”

“He is very sound. Yes, he is well thought of. He works hard and painstakingly and very little escapes him.”

“I wonder—” muttered the girl.

Poirot watched her. His eyes looked very green in the firelight. He asked quietly:

“It was a great shock to you, your friend’s death?”

“Terrible.”

She spoke with abrupt sincerity.

“You did not expect it—no?”

“Of course not.”

“So that it seemed to you at first, perhaps, that it was impossible—that it could not be?”

The quiet sympathy of his tone seemed to break down Jane Plenderleith’s defences. She replied eagerly, naturally, without stiffness.

“That’s just it. Even if Barbara did kill herself, I can’t imagine her killing herself that way.”

“Yet she had a pistol?”

Jane Plenderleith made an impatient gesture.

“Yes, but that pistol was a—oh! a hang over. She’d been in out-of-the-way places. She kept it out of habit—not with any other idea. I’m sure of that.”

“Ah! and why are you sure of that?”

“Oh, because of the things she said.”

“Such as—?”

His voice was very gentle and friendly. It led her on subtly.

“Well, for instance, we were discussing suicide once and she said much the easiest way would be to turn the gas on and stuff up all the cracks and just go to bed. I said I thought that would be impossible—to lie there waiting. I said I’d far rather shoot myself. And she said no, she could never shoot herself. She’d be too frightened in case it didn’t come off and anyway she said she’d hate the bang.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “As you say, it is odd . . . Because, as you have just told me, there was a gas fire in her room.”

Jane Plenderleith looked at him, slightly startled.

“Yes, there was . . . I can’t understand—no, I can’t understand why she didn’t do it that way.”

Poirot shook his head.

“Yes, it seems—odd—not natural somehow.”

“The whole thing doesn’t seem natural. I still can’t believe she killed herself. I suppose it must be suicide?”

“Well, there is one other possibility.”

“What do you mean?”

Poirot looked straight at her.

“It might be—murder.”

“Oh, no?” Jane Plenderleith shrank back. “Oh no! What a horrible suggestion.”

“Horrible, perhaps, but does it strike you as an impossible one?”

“But the door was locked on the inside. So was the window.”

“The door was locked—yes. But there is nothing to show if it were locked from the inside or the outside. You see, the key was missing.”

“But then—if it is missing . . .” She took a minute or two. “Then it must have been locked from the outside. Otherwise it would be somewhere in the room.”

“Ah, but it may be. The room has not been thoroughly searched yet, remember. Or it may have been thrown out of the window and somebody may have picked it up.”

“Murder!” said Jane Plenderleith. She turned over the possibility, her dark clever face eager on the scent. “I believe you’re right.”

“But if it were murder there would have been a motive. Do you know of a motive, mademoiselle?”

Slowly she shook her head. And yet, in spite of the denial, Poirot again got the impression that Jane Plenderleith was deliberately keeping something back. The door opened and Japp came in.

Poirot rose.

“I have been suggesting to Miss Plenderleith,” he said, “that her friend’s death was not suicide.”

Japp looked momentarily put out. He cast a glance of reproach at Poirot.

“It’s a bit early to say anything definite,” he remarked. “We’ve always got to take all possibilities into account, you understand. That’s all there is to it at the moment.”

Jane Plenderleith replied quietly.

“I see.”

Japp came towards her.

“Now then, Miss Plenderleith, have you ever seen this before?”

On the palm of his hand he held out a small oval of dark blue enamel.

Jane Plenderleith shook her head.

“No, never.”

“It’s not yours nor Mrs. Allen’s?”

“No. It’s not the kind of thing usually worn by our sex, is it?”

“Oh! so you recognize it.”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? That’s half of a man’s cuff link.”

Four

"That young woman's too cocky by half," Japp complained.

The two men were once more in Mrs. Allen's bedroom. The body had been photographed and removed and the fingerprint man had done his work and departed.

"It would be unadvisable to treat her as a fool," agreed Poirot. "She most emphatically is not a fool. She is, in fact, a particularly clever and competent young woman."

"Think she did it?" asked Japp with a momentary ray of hope. "She might have, you know. We'll have to get her alibi looked into. Some quarrel over this young man—this budding M.P. She's rather too scathing about him, I think! Sounds fishy. Rather as though she were sweet on him herself and he'd turned her down. She's the kind that would bump anyone off if she felt like it, and keep her head while she was doing it, too. Yes, we'll have to look into that alibi. She had it very pat and after all Essex isn't very far away. Plenty of trains. Or a fast car. It's worthwhile finding out if she went to bed with a headache for instance last night."

"You are right," agreed Poirot.

"In any case," continued Japp, "she's holding out on us. Eh? Didn't you feel that too? That young woman knows something."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, that could be clearly seen."

"That's always a difficulty in these cases," Japp complained. "People will hold their tongues—sometimes out of the most honourable motives."

“For which one can hardly blame them, my friend.”

“No, but it makes it much harder for us,” Japp grumbled.

“It merely displays to its full advantage your ingenuity,” Poirot consoled him. “What about fingerprints, by the way?”

“Well, it’s murder all right. No prints whatever on the pistol. Wiped clean before being placed in her hand. Even if she managed to wind her arm round her head in some marvellous acrobatic fashion she could hardly fire off a pistol without hanging on to it and she couldn’t wipe it after she was dead.”

“No, no, an outside agency is clearly indicated.”

“Otherwise the prints are disappointing. None on the door-handle. None on the window. Suggestive, eh? Plenty of Mrs. Allen’s all over the place.”

“Did Jameson get anything?”

“Out of the daily woman? No. She talked a lot but she didn’t really know much. Confirmed the fact that Allen and Plenderleith were on good terms. I’ve sent Jameson out to make inquiries in the mews. We’ll have to have a word with Mr. Laverton-West too. Find out where he was and what he was doing last night. In the meantime we’ll have a look through her papers.”

He set to without more ado. Occasionally he grunted and tossed something over to Poirot. The search did not take long. There were not many papers in the desk and what there were were neatly arranged and docketed.

Finally Japp leant back and uttered a sigh.

“Not very much, is there?”

“As you say.”

“Most of it quite straightforward—receipted bills, a few bills as yet unpaid—nothing particularly outstanding. Social stuff—invitations. Notes from friends. These—” he laid his hand on a pile of seven or eight letters—“and her cheque book and passbook. Anything strike you there?”

“Yes, she was overdrawn.”

“Anything else?”

Poirot smiled.

“Is it an examination that you put me through? But yes, I noticed what you are thinking of. Two hundred pounds drawn to self three months ago—and two hundred pounds drawn out yesterday—”

“And nothing on the counterfoil of the cheque book. No other cheques to self except small sums—fifteen pounds the highest. And I’ll tell you this—there’s no such sum of money in the house. Four pounds ten in a handbag and an odd shilling or two in another bag. That’s pretty clear, I think.”

“Meaning that she paid that sum away yesterday.”

“Yes. Now who did she pay it to?”

The door opened and Inspector Jameson entered.

“Well, Jameson, get anything?”

“Yes, sir, several things. To begin with, nobody actually heard the shot. Two or three women say they did because they want to think they did—but that’s all there is to it. With all those fireworks going off there isn’t a dog’s chance.”

Japp grunted.

“Don’t suppose there is. Go on.”

“Mrs. Allen was at home most of yesterday afternoon and evening. Came in about five o’clock. Then she went out again about six but only to the postbox at the end of the mews. At about nine-thirty a car drove up—Standard Swallow saloon—and a man got out. Description about forty-five, well set up military-looking gent, dark blue overcoat, bowler hat, toothbrush moustache. James Hogg, chauffeur from No. 18 says he’s seen him calling on Mrs. Allen before.”

“Forty-five,” said Japp. “Can’t very well be Laverton-West.”

“This man, whoever he was, stayed here for just under an hour. Left at about ten-twenty. Stopped in the doorway to speak to Mrs. Allen. Small boy, Frederick Hogg, was hanging about quite near and heard what he said.”

“And what did he say?”

“ ‘Well, think it over and let me know.’ And then she said something and he answered: ‘All right. So long.’ After that he got in his car and drove away.”

“That was at ten-twenty,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

Japp rubbed his nose.

“Then at ten-twenty Mrs. Allen was still alive,” he said. “What next?”

“Nothing more, sir, as far as I can learn. The chauffeur at No. 22 got in at half-past ten and he’d promised his kids to let off some fireworks for them. They’d been waiting for him—and all the other kids in the mews too. He let ’em off and everybody around about was busy watching them. After that everyone went to bed.”

“And nobody else was seen to enter No. 14?”

“No—but that’s not to say they didn’t. Nobody would have noticed.”

“H’m,” said Japp. “That’s true. Well, we’ll have to get hold of this ‘military gentleman with the toothbrush moustache.’ It’s pretty clear that he was the last person to see her alive. I wonder who he was?”

“Miss Plenderleith might tell us,” suggested Poirot.

“She might,” said Japp gloomily. “On the other hand she might not. I’ve no doubt she could tell us a good deal if she liked. What about you, Poirot, old boy? You were alone with her for a bit. Didn’t you trot out that Father Confessor manner of yours that sometimes makes such a hit?”

Poirot spread out his hands.

“Alas, we talked only of gas fires.”

“Gas fires—gas fires.” Japp sounded disgusted. “What’s the matter with you, old cock? Ever since you’ve been here the only things you’ve taken an interest in are quill pens and wastepaper baskets. Oh, yes, I saw you having a quiet look into the one downstairs. Anything in it?”

Poirot sighed.

“A catalogue of bulbs and an old magazine.”

“What’s the idea, anyway? If anyone wants to throw away an incriminating document or whatever it is you have in mind they’re not likely just to pitch it into a wastepaper basket.”

“That is very true what you say there. Only something quite unimportant would be thrown away like that.”

Poirot spoke meekly. Nevertheless Japp looked at him suspiciously.

“Well,” he said. “I know what I’m going to do next. What about you?”

“Eh bien,” said Poirot. “I shall complete my search for the unimportant. There is still the dustbin.”

He skipped nimbly out of the room. Japp looked after him with an air of disgust.

“Potty,” he said. “Absolutely potty.”

Inspector Jameson preserved a respectful silence. His face said with British superiority: “Foreigners!”

Aloud he said:

“So that’s Mr. Hercule Poirot! I’ve heard of him.”

“Old friend of mine,” explained Japp. “Not half as balmy as he looks, mind you. All the same he’s getting on now.”

“Gone a bit gaga as they say, sir,” suggested Inspector Jameson. “Ah well, age will tell.”

“All the same,” said Japp, “I wish I knew what he was up to.”

He walked over to the writing table and stared uneasily at an emerald green quill pen.

Five

Japp was just engaging his third chauffeur's wife in conversation when Poirot, walking noiselessly as a cat, suddenly appeared at his elbow.

"Whew, you made me jump," said Japp. "Got anything?"

"Not what I was looking for."

Japp turned back to Mrs. James Hogg.

"And you say you've seen this gentleman before?"

"Oh, yes sir. And my husband too. We knew him at once."

"Now look here, Mrs. Hogg, you're a shrewd woman, I can see. I've no doubt that you know all about everyone in the mews. And you're a woman of judgment—unusually good judgment, I can tell that—" Unblushingly he repeated this remark for the third time. Mrs. Hogg bridled slightly and assumed an expression of superhuman intelligence. "Give me a line on those two young women—Mrs. Allen and Miss Plenderleith. What were they like? Gay? Lots of parties? That sort of thing?"

"Oh, no sir, nothing of the kind. They went out a good bit—Mrs. Allen especially—but they're class, if you know what I mean. Not like some as I could name down the other end. I'm sure the way that Mrs. Stevens goes on—if she is a Mrs. at all which I doubt—well I shouldn't like to tell you what goes on there—I. . . ."

"Quite so," said Japp, dexterously stopping the flow. "Now that's very important what you've told me. Mrs. Allen and Miss Plenderleith were well liked, then?"

“Oh yes, sir, very nice ladies, both of them—especially Mrs. Allen. Always spoke a nice word to the children, she did. Lost her own little girl, I believe, poor dear. Ah well, I’ve buried three myself. And what I say is . . .”

“Yes, yes, very sad. And Miss Plenderleith?”

“Well, of course she was a nice lady too, but much more abrupt if you know what I mean. Just go by with a nod, she would, and not stop to pass the time of day. But I’ve nothing against her—nothing at all.”

“She and Mrs. Allen got on well together?”

“Oh, yes sir. No quarrelling—nothing like that. Very happy and contented they were—I’m sure Mrs. Pierce will bear me out.”

“Yes, we’ve talked to her. Do you know Mrs. Allen’s fiancé by sight?”

“The gentleman she’s going to marry? Oh, yes. He’s been here quite a bit off and on. Member of Parliament, they do say.”

“It wasn’t he who came last night?”

“No, sir, it was not.” Mrs. Hogg drew herself up. A note of excitement disguised beneath intense primness came into her voice. “And if you ask me, sir, what you are thinking is all wrong. Mrs. Allen wasn’t that kind of lady, I’m sure. It’s true there was no one in the house, but I do not believe anything of the kind—I said so to Hogg only this morning. ‘No, Hogg,’ I said, ‘Mrs. Allen was a lady—a real lady—so don’t go suggesting things’—knowing what a man’s mind is, if you’ll excuse my mentioning it. Always coarse in their ideas.”

Passing this insult by, Japp proceeded:

“You saw him arrive and you saw him leave—that’s so, isn’t it?”

“That’s so, sir.”

“And you didn’t hear anything else? Any sounds of a quarrel?”

“No, sir, nor likely to. Not, that is to say, that such things couldn’t be heard—because the contrary to that is well-known—and down the other end the way Mrs. Stevens goes for that poor frightened maid of hers is common talk—and one and all we’ve advised her not to stand it, but there, the wages is good—temper of the devil she may have but pays for it—thirty shillings a week. . . .”

Japp said quickly:

“But you didn’t hear anything of the kind at No. 14?”

“No, sir. Nor likely to with fireworks popping off here, there and everywhere and my Eddie with his eyebrows singed off as near as nothing.”

“This man left at ten-twenty—that’s right, is it?”

“It might be, sir. I couldn’t say myself. But Hogg says so and he’s a very reliable, steady man.”

“You actually saw him leave. Did you hear what he said?”

“No, sir. I wasn’t near enough for that. Just saw him from my windows, standing in the doorway talking to Mrs. Allen.”

“See her too?”

“Yes, sir, she was standing just inside the doorway.”

“Notice what she was wearing?”

“Now really, sir, I couldn’t say. Not noticing particularly as it were.”

Poirot said:

“You did not even notice if she was wearing day dress or evening dress?”

“No, sir, I can’t say I did.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully up at the window above and then across to No. 14. He smiled and for a moment his eye caught Japp's.

"And the gentleman?"

"He was in a dark-blue overcoat and a bowler hat. Very smart and well set up."

Japp asked a few more questions and then proceeded to his next interview. This was with Master Frederick Hogg, an impish-faced, bright-eyed lad, considerably swollen with self-importance.

"Yes, sir. I heard them talking. 'Think it over and let me know,' the gent said. Pleasant like, you know. And then she said something and he answered, 'All right. So long.' And he got into the car—I was holding the door open but he didn't give me nothing," said Master Hogg with a slight tinge of depression in his tone. "And he drove away."

"You didn't hear what Mrs. Allen said?"

"No, sir, can't say I did."

"Can you tell me what she was wearing? What colour, for instance?"

"Couldn't say, sir. You see, I didn't really see her. She must have been round behind the door."

"Just so," said Japp. "Now look here, my boy, I want you to think and answer my next question very carefully. If you don't know and can't remember, say so. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Master Hogg looked at him eagerly.

"Which of 'em closed the door, Mrs. Allen or the gentleman?"

"The front door?"

“The front door, naturally.”

The child reflected. His eyes screwed themselves up in an effort of remembrance.

“Think the lady probably did—No, she didn’t. He did. Pulled it to with a bit of a bang and jumped into the car quick. Looked as though he had a date somewhere.”

“Right. Well, young man, you seem a bright kind of shaver. Here’s sixpence for you.”

Dismissing Master Hogg, Japp turned to his friend. Slowly with one accord they nodded.

“Could be!” said Japp.

“There are possibilities,” agreed Poirot.

His eyes shone with a green light. They looked like a cat’s.

Six

On reentering the sitting room of No. 14, Japp wasted no time in beating about the bush. He came straight to the point.

“Now look here, Miss Plenderleith, don’t you think it’s better to spill the beans here and now. It’s going to come to that in the end.”

Jane Plenderleith raised her eyebrows. She was standing by the mantelpiece, gently warming one foot at the fire.

“I really don’t know what you mean.”

“Is that quite true, Miss Plenderleith?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ve answered all your questions. I don’t see what more I can do.”

“Well, it’s my opinion you could do a lot more—if you chose.”

“That’s only an opinion, though, isn’t it, Chief Inspector?”

Japp grew rather red in the face.

“I think,” said Poirot, “that mademoiselle would appreciate better the reason for your questions if you told her just how the case stands.”

“That’s very simple. Now then, Miss Plenderleith, the facts are as follows. Your friend was found shot through the head with a pistol in her hand and the door and the window fastened. That looked like a plain case of suicide. But it wasn’t suicide. The medical evidence alone proves that.”

“How?”

All her ironic coolness had disappeared. She leaned forward—intent—watching his face.

“The pistol was in her hand—but the fingers weren’t grasping it. Moreover there were no fingerprints at all on the pistol. And the angle of the wound makes it impossible that the wound should have been self-inflicted. Then again, she left no letter—rather an unusual thing for a suicide. And though the door was locked the key has not been found.”

Jane Plenderleith turned slowly and sat down in a chair facing them.

“So that’s it!” she said. “All along I’ve felt it was impossible that she should have killed herself! I was right! She didn’t kill herself. Someone else killed her.”

For a moment or two she remained lost in thought. Then she raised her head brusquely.

“Ask me any questions you like,” she said. “I will answer them to the best of my ability.”

Japp began:

“Last night Mrs. Allen had a visitor. He is described as a man of forty-five, military bearing, toothbrush moustache, smartly dressed and driving a Standard Swallow saloon car. Do you know who that is?”

“I can’t be sure, of course, but it sounds like Major Eustace.”

“Who is Major Eustace? Tell me all you can about him?”

“He was a man Barbara had known abroad—in India. He turned up about a year ago, and we’ve seen him on and off since.”

“He was a friend of Mrs. Allen’s?”

“He behaved like one,” said Jane dryly.

“What was her attitude to him?”

"I don't think she really liked him—in fact, I'm sure she didn't."

"But she treated him with outward friendliness?"

"Yes."

"Did she ever seem—think carefully, Miss Plenderleith—afraid of him?"

Jane Plenderleith considered this thoughtfully for a minute or two. Then she said:

"Yes—I think she was. She was always nervous when he was about."

"Did he and Mr. Laverton-West meet at all?"

"Only once, I think. They didn't take to each other much. That is to say, Major Eustace made himself as agreeable as he could to Charles, but Charles wasn't having any. Charles has got a very good nose for anybody who isn't well—quite—quite."

"And Major Eustace was not—what you call—quite—quite?" asked Poirot.

The girl said dryly:

"No, he wasn't. Bit hairy at the heel. Definitely not out of the top drawer."

"Alas—I do not know those two expressions. You mean to say he was not the pukka sahib?"

A fleeting smile passed across Jane Plenderleith's face, but she replied gravely, "No."

"Would it come as a great surprise to you, Miss Plenderleith, if I suggested that this man was blackmailing Mrs. Allen?"

Japp sat forward to observe the result of his suggestion.

He was well satisfied. The girl started forward, the colour rose in her cheeks, she brought down her hand sharply on the arm of her chair.

"So that was it! What a fool I was not to have guessed. Of course!"

"You think the suggestion feasible, mademoiselle?" asked Poirot.

"I was a fool not to have thought of it! Barbara's borrowed small sums off me several times during the last six months. And I've seen her sitting poring over her passbook. I knew she was living well within her income, so I didn't bother, but, of course, if she was paying out sums of money—"

"And it would accord with her general demeanour—yes?" asked Poirot.

"Absolutely. She was nervous. Quite jumpy sometimes. Altogether different from what she used to be."

Poirot said gently:

"Excuse me, but that is not just what you told us before."

"That was different," Jane Plenderleith waved an impatient hand. "She wasn't depressed. I mean she wasn't feeling suicidal or anything like that. But blackmail—yes. I wish she'd told me. I'd have sent him to the devil."

"But he might have gone—not to the devil, but to Mr. Charles Laverton-West?" observed Poirot.

"Yes," said Jane Plenderleith slowly. "Yes . . . that's true. . . ."

"You've no idea of what this man's hold over her may have been?" asked Japp.

The girl shook her head.

"I haven't the faintest idea. I can't believe, knowing Barbara, that it could have been anything really serious. On the other hand—" she paused, then went on. "What I mean is, Barbara was a bit of a simpleton in some ways. She'd be very easily frightened. In fact, she was the kind of girl who would be a positive gift to a blackmailer! The nasty brute!"

She snapped out the last three words with real venom.

“Unfortunately,” said Poirot, “the crime seems to have taken place the wrong way round. It is the victim who should kill the blackmailer, not the blackmailer his victim.”

Jane Plenderleith frowned a little.

“No—that is true—but I can imagine circumstances—”

“Such as?”

“Supposing Barbara got desperate. She may have threatened him with that silly little pistol of hers. He tries to wrench it away from her and in the struggle he fires it and kills her. Then he’s horrified at what he’s done and tries to pretend it was suicide.”

“Might be,” said Japp. “But there’s a difficulty.”

She looked at him inquiringly.

“Major Eustace (if it was him) left here last night at ten-twenty and said goodbye to Mrs. Allen on the doorstep.”

“Oh,” the girl’s face fell. “I see.” She paused a minute or two. “But he might have come back later,” she said slowly.

“Yes, that is possible,” said Poirot.

Japp continued:

“Tell me, Miss Plenderleith, where was Mrs. Allen in the habit of receiving guests, here or in the room upstairs?”

“Both. But this room was used for more communal parties or for my own special friends. You see, the arrangement was that Barbara had the big bedroom and used it as a sitting room as well, and I had the little bedroom and used this room.”

“If Major Eustace came by appointment last night, in which room do you think Mrs. Allen would have received him?”

“I think she would probably bring him in here.” The girl sounded a little doubtful. “It would be less intimate. On the other hand, if she wanted to write a cheque or anything of that kind, she would probably take him upstairs. There are no writing materials down here.”

Japp shook his head.

“There was no question of a cheque. Mrs. Allen drew out two hundred pounds in cash yesterday. And so far we’ve not been able to find any trace of it in the house.”

“And she gave it to that brute? Oh, poor Barbara! Poor, poor Barbara!”

Poirot coughed.

“Unless, as you suggest, it was more or less an accident, it still seems a remarkable fact that he should kill an apparently regular source of income.”

“Accident? It wasn’t an accident. He lost his temper and saw red and shot her.”

“That is how you think it happened?”

“Yes.” She added vehemently, “It was murder—murder!”

Poirot said gravely:

“I will not say that you are wrong, mademoiselle.”

Japp said:

“What cigarettes did Mrs. Allen smoke?”

“Gaspers. There are some in that box.”

Japp opened the box, took out a cigarette and nodded. He slipped the cigarette into his pocket.

“And you, mademoiselle?” asked Poirot.

“The same.”

“You do not smoke Turkish?”

“Never.”

“Nor Mrs. Allen?”

“No. She didn’t like them.”

Poirot asked:

“And Mr. Laverton-West. What did he smoke?”

She stared hard at him.

“Charles? What does it matter what he smoked? You’re not going to pretend that he killed her?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“A man has killed the woman he loved before now, mademoiselle.”

Jane shook her head impatiently.

“Charles wouldn’t kill anybody. He’s a very careful man.”

“All the same, mademoiselle, it is the careful men who commit the cleverest murders.”

She stared at him.

“But not for the motive you have just advanced, M. Poirot.”

He bowed his head.

“No, that is true.”

Japp rose.

“Well, I don’t think that there’s much more I can do here. I’d like to have one more look round.”

“In case that money should be tucked away somewhere? Certainly. Look anywhere you like. And in my room too—although it isn’t likely Barbara would hide it there.”

Japp’s search was quick but efficient. The living room had given up all its secrets in a very few minutes. Then he went upstairs. Jane Plenderleith sat on the arm of a chair, smoking a cigarette and frowning at the fire. Poirot watched her.

After some minutes, he said quietly:

“Do you know if Mr. Laverton-West is in London at present?”

“I don’t know at all. I rather fancy he’s in Hampshire with his people. I suppose I ought to have wired him. How dreadful. I forgot.”

“It is not easy to remember everything, mademoiselle, when a catastrophe occurs. And after all, the bad news, it will keep. One hears it only too soon.”

“Yes, that’s true,” the girl said absently.

Japp’s footsteps were heard descending the stairs. Jane went out to meet him.

“Well?”

Japp shook his head.

“Nothing helpful, I’m afraid, Miss Plenderleith. I’ve been over the whole house now. Oh, I suppose I’d better just have a look in this cupboard under the stairs.”

He caught hold of the handle as he spoke, and pulled.

Jane Plenderleith said:

"It's locked."

Something in her voice made both men look at her sharply.

"Yes," said Japp pleasantly. "I can see it's locked. Perhaps you'll get the key."

The girl was standing as though carved in stone.

"I—I'm not sure where it is."

Japp shot a quick glance at her. His voice continued resolutely pleasant and offhand.

"Dear me, that's too bad. Don't want to splinter the wood, opening it by force. I'll send Jameson out to get an assortment of keys."

She moved forward stiffly.

"Oh," she said. "One minute. It might be—"

She went back into the living room and reappeared a moment later holding a fair-sized key in her hand.

"We keep it locked," she explained, "because one's umbrellas and things have a habit of getting pinched."

"Very wise precaution," said Japp, cheerfully accepting the key.

He turned it in the lock and threw the door open. It was dark inside the cupboard. Japp took out his pocket flashlight and let it play round the inside.

Poirot felt the girl at his side stiffen and stop breathing for a second. His eyes followed the sweep of Japp's torch.

There was not very much in the cupboard. Three umbrellas—one broken, four walking sticks, a set of golf clubs, two tennis racquets, a neatly-folded rug and several sofa cushions in various stages of dilapidation. On the top of these last reposed a small, smart-looking attaché case.

As Japp stretched out a hand towards it, Jane Plenderleith said quickly:

“That’s mine. I—it came back with me this morning. So there can’t be anything there.”

“Just as well to make quite sure,” said Japp, his cheery friendliness increasing slightly.

The case was unlocked. Inside it was fitted with shagreen brushes and toilet bottles. There were two magazines in it but nothing else.

Japp examined the whole outfit with meticulous attention. When at last he shut the lid and began a cursory examination of the cushions, the girl gave an audible sigh of relief.

There was nothing else in the cupboard beyond what was plainly to be seen. Japp’s examination was soon finished.

He relocked the door and handed the key to Jane Plenderleith.

“Well,” he said, “that concludes matters. Can you give me Mr. Laverton-West’s address?”

“Farlescombe Hall, Little Ledbury, Hampshire.”

“Thank you, Miss Plenderleith. That’s all for the present. I may be round again later. By the way, mum’s the word. Leave it at suicide as far as the general public’s concerned.”

“Of course, I quite understand.”

She shook hands with them both.

As they walked away down the mews, Japp exploded:

“What the—the hell was there in that cupboard? There was something.”

“Yes, there was something.”

“And I’ll bet ten to one it was something to do with the attaché case! But like the double-dyed mutt I must be, I couldn’t find anything. Looked in all the bottles—felt the lining—what the devil could it be?”

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

“That girl’s in it somehow,” Japp went on. “Brought that case back this morning? Not on your life, she didn’t! Notice that there were two magazines in it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, one of them was for last July!”

Seven

I

It was the following day when Japp walked into Poirot's flat, flung his hat on the table in deep disgust and dropped into a chair.

"Well," he growled. "She's out of it!"

"Who is out of it?"

"Plenderleith. Was playing bridge up to midnight. Host, hostess, naval commander guest and two servants can all swear to that. No doubt about it, we've got to give up any idea of her being concerned in the business. All the same, I'd like to know why she went all hot and bothered about that little attaché case under the stairs. That's something in your line, Poirot. You like solving the kind of triviality that leads nowhere. The Mystery of the Small Attaché Case. Sounds quite promising!"

"I will give you yet another suggestion for a title. The Mystery of the Smell of Cigarette Smoke."

"A bit clumsy for a title. Smell—eh? Was that why you were sniffing so when we first examined the body? I saw you—and heard you! Sniff—sniff—sniff. Thought you had a cold in your head."

"You were entirely in error."

Japp sighed.

"I always thought it was the little grey cells of the brain. Don't tell me the cells of your nose are equally superior to anyone else's."

"No, no, calm yourself."

“I didn’t smell any cigarette smoke,” went on Japp suspiciously.

“No more did I, my friend.”

Japp looked at him doubtfully. Then he extracted a cigarette from his pocket.

“That’s the kind Mrs. Allen smoked—gaspers. Six of those stubs were hers. The other three were Turkish.”

“Exactly.”

“Your wonderful nose knew that without looking at them, I suppose!”

“I assure you my nose does not enter into the matter. My nose registered nothing.”

“But the brain cells registered a lot?”

“Well—there were certain indications—do you not think so?”

Japp looked at him sideways.

“Such as?”

“Eh bien, there was very definitely something missing from the room. Also something added, I think . . . And then, on the writing bureau . . .”

“I knew it! We’re coming to that damned quill pen!”

“Du tout. The quill pen plays a purely negative rôle.”

Japp retreated to safer ground.

“I’ve got Charles Laverton-West coming to see me at Scotland Yard in half an hour. I thought you might like to be there.”

“I should very much.”

"And you'll be glad to hear we've tracked down Major Eustace. Got a service flat in the Cromwell Road."

"Excellent."

"And we've got a little to go on there. Not at all a nice person, Major Eustace. After I've seen Laverton-West, we'll go and see him. That suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, come along then."

II

At half past eleven, Charles Laverton-West was ushered into Chief Inspector Japp's room. Japp rose and shook hands.

The M.P. was a man of medium height with a very definite personality. He was clean-shaven, with the mobile mouth of an actor, and the slightly prominent eyes that so often go with the gift of oratory. He was good-looking in a quiet, well-bred way.

Though looking pale and somewhat distressed, his manner was perfectly formal and composed.

He took a seat, laid his gloves and hat on the table and looked towards Japp.

"I'd like to say, first of all, Mr. Laverton-West, that I fully appreciate how distressing this must be to you."

Laverton-West waved this aside.

"Do not let us discuss my feelings. Tell me, Chief Inspector, have you any idea what caused my—Mrs. Allen to take her own life?"

"You yourself cannot help us in any way?"

"No, indeed."

“There was no quarrel? No estrangement of any kind between you?”

“Nothing of the kind. It has been the greatest shock to me.”

“Perhaps it will be more understandable, sir, if I tell you that it was not suicide—but murder!”

“Murder?” Charles Laverton-West’s eyes popped nearly out of his head. “You say murder?”

“Quite correct. Now, Mr. Laverton-West, have you any idea who might be likely to make away with Mrs. Allen?”

Laverton-West fairly spluttered out his answer.

“No—no, indeed—nothing of the sort! The mere idea is—is unimaginable!”

“She never mentioned any enemies? Anyone who might have a grudge against her?”

“Never.”

“Did you know that she had a pistol?”

“I was not aware of the fact.”

He looked a little startled.

“Miss Plenderleith says that Mrs. Allen brought this pistol back from abroad with her some years ago.”

“Really?”

“Of course, we have only Miss Plenderleith’s word for that. It is quite possible that Mrs. Allen felt herself to be in danger from some source and kept the pistol handy for reasons of her own.”

Charles Laverton-West shook his head doubtfully. He seemed quite bewildered and dazed.

“What is your opinion of Miss Plenderleith, Mr. Laverton-West? I mean, does she strike you as a reliable, truthful person?”

The other pondered a minute.

“I think so—yes, I should say so.”

“You don’t like her?” suggested Japp, who had been watching him closely.

“I wouldn’t say that. She is not the type of young woman I admire. That sarcastic, independent type is not attractive to me, but I should say she was quite truthful.”

“H’m,” said Japp. “Do you know a Major Eustace?”

“Eustace? Eustace? Ah, yes, I remember the name. I met him once at Barbara’s—Mrs. Allen’s. Rather a doubtful customer in my opinion. I said as much to my—to Mrs. Allen. He wasn’t the type of man I should have encouraged to come to the house after we were married.”

“And what did Mrs. Allen say?”

“Oh! she quite agreed. She trusted my judgment implicitly. A man knows other men better than a woman can do. She explained that she couldn’t very well be rude to a man whom she had not seen for some time—I think she felt especially a horror of being snobbish! Naturally, as my wife, she would find a good many of her old associates well—unsuitable, shall we say?”

“Meaning that in marrying you she was bettering her position?” Japp asked bluntly.

Laverton-West held up a well-manicured hand.

“No, no, not quite that. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Allen’s mother was a distant relation of my own family. She was fully my equal in birth. But of course, in my position, I have to be especially careful in choosing my friends—and my wife in choosing hers. One is to a certain extent in the limelight."

"Oh, quite," said Japp dryly. He went on, "So you can't help us in any way?"

"No indeed. I am utterly at sea. Barbara! Murdered! It seems incredible."

"Now, Mr. Laverton-West, can you tell me what your own movements were on the night of November fifth?"

"My movements? My movements?"

Laverton-West's voice rose in shrill protest.

"Purely a matter of routine," explained Japp. "We—er—have to ask everybody."

Charles Laverton-West looked at him with dignity.

"I should hope that a man in my position might be exempt."

Japp merely waited.

"I was—now let me see . . . Ah, yes. I was at the House. Left at half past ten. Went for a walk along the Embankment. Watched some of the fireworks."

"Nice to think there aren't any plots of that kind nowadays," said Japp cheerily.

Laverton-West gave him a fish-like stare.

"Then I—er—walked home."

"Reaching home—your London address is Onslow Square, I think—at what time?"

"I hardly know exactly."

"Eleven? Half past?"

"Somewhere about then."

"Perhaps someone let you in."

"No, I have my key."

"Meet anybody whilst you were walking?"

"No—er—really, Chief Inspector, I resent these questions very much!"

"I assure you, it's just a matter of routine, Mr. Laverton-West. They aren't personal, you know."

The reply seemed to soothe the irate M.P.

"If that is all—"

"That is all for the present, Mr. Laverton-West."

"You will keep me informed—"

"Naturally, sir. By the way, let me introduce M. Hercule Poirot. You may have heard of him."

Mr. Laverton-West's eye fastened itself interestedly on the little Belgian.

"Yes—yes—I have heard the name."

"Monsieur," said Poirot, his manner suddenly very foreign. "Believe me, my heart bleeds for you. Such a loss! Such agony as you must be enduring! Ah, but I will say no more. How magnificently the English hide their emotions." He whipped out his cigarette case. "Permit me—Ah, it is empty. Japp?"

Japp slapped his pockets and shook his head.

Laverton-West produced his own cigarette case, murmured, “Er—have one of mine, M. Poirot.”

“Thank you—thank you.” The little man helped himself.

“As you say, M. Poirot,” resumed the other, “we English do not parade our emotions. A stiff upper lip—that is our motto.”

He bowed to the two men and went out.

“Bit of a stuffed fish,” said Japp disgustedly. “And a boiled owl! The Plenderleith girl was quite right about him. Yet he’s a good-looking sort of chap—might go down well with some woman who had no sense of humour. What about that cigarette?”

Poirot handed it over, shaking his head.

“Egyptian. An expensive variety.”

“No, that’s no good. A pity, for I’ve never heard a weaker alibi! In fact, it wasn’t an alibi at all . . . You know, Poirot, it’s a pity the boot wasn’t on the other leg. If she’d been blackmailing him . . . He’s a lovely type for blackmail—would pay out like a lamb! Anything to avoid a scandal.”

“My friend, it is very pretty to reconstruct the case as you would like it to be, but that is not strictly our affair.”

“No, Eustace is our affair. I’ve got a few lines on him. Definitely a nasty fellow.”

“By the way, did you do as I suggested about Miss Plenderleith?”

“Yes. Wait a sec, I’ll ring through and get the latest.”

He picked up the telephone receiver and spoke through it.

After a brief interchange he replaced it and looked up at Poirot.

“Pretty heartless piece of goods. Gone off to play golf. That’s a nice thing to do when your friend’s been murdered only the day before.”

Poirot uttered an exclamation.

“What’s the matter now?” asked Japp.

But Poirot was murmuring to himself.

“Of course . . . of course . . . but naturally . . . What an imbecile I am—why, it leapt to the eye!”

Japp said rudely:

“Stop jabbering to yourself and let’s go and tackle Eustace.”

He was amazed to see the radiant smile that spread over Poirot’s face.

“But—yes—most certainly let us tackle him. For now, see you, I know everything—but everything!”

Eight

Major Eustace received the two men with the easy assurance of a man of the world.

His flat was small, a mere pied à terre, as he explained. He offered the two men a drink and when that was refused he took out his cigarette case.

Both Japp and Poirot accepted a cigarette. A quick glance passed between them.

“You smoke Turkish, I see,” said Japp as he twirled the cigarette between his fingers.

“Yes. I’m sorry, do you prefer a gasper? I’ve got one somewhere about.”

“No, no, this will do me very well.” Then he leaned forward—his tone changed. “Perhaps you can guess, Major Eustace, what it was I came to see you about?”

The other shook his head. His manner was nonchalant. Major Eustace was a tall man, good-looking in a somewhat coarse fashion. There was a puffiness round the eyes—small, crafty eyes that belied the good-humoured geniality of his manner.

He said:

“No—I’ve no idea what brings such a big gun as a chief inspector to see me. Anything to do with my car?”

“No, it is not your car. I think you knew a Mrs. Barbara Allen, Major Eustace?”

The major leant back, puffed out a cloud of smoke, and said in an enlightened voice:

“Oh, so that’s it! Of course, I might have guessed. Very sad business.”

“You know about it?”

“Saw it in the paper last night. Too bad.”

“You knew Mrs. Allen out in India, I think.”

“Yes, that’s some years ago now.”

“Did you also know her husband?”

There was a pause—a mere fraction of a second—but during that fraction the little pig eyes flashed a quick look at the faces of the two men. Then he answered:

“No, as a matter of fact, I never came across Allen.”

“But you know something about him?”

“Heard he was by way of being a bad hat. Of course, that was only rumour.”

“Mrs. Allen did not say anything?”

“Never talked about him.”

“You were on intimate terms with her?”

Major Eustace shrugged his shoulders.

“We were old friends, you know, old friends. But we didn’t see each other very often.”

“But you did see her that last evening? The evening of November fifth?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did.”

“You called at her house, I think.”

Major Eustace nodded. His voice took on a gentle, regretful note.

“Yes, she asked me to advise her about some investments. Of course, I can see what you’re driving at—her state of mind—all that sort of thing. Well, really, it’s very difficult to say. Her manner seemed normal enough and yet she was a bit jumpy, come to think of it.”

“But she gave you no hint as to what she contemplated doing?”

“Not the least in the world. As a matter of fact, when I said goodbye I said I’d ring her up soon and we’d do a show together.”

“You said you’d ring her up. Those were your last words?”

“Yes.”

“Curious. I have information that you said something quite different.”

Eustace changed colour.

“Well, of course, I can’t remember the exact words.”

“My information is that what you actually said was, ‘Well, think it over and let me know.’ ”

“Let me see, yes I believe you’re right. Not exactly that. I think I was suggesting she should let me know when she was free.”

“Not quite the same thing, is it?” said Japp.

Major Eustace shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear fellow, you can’t expect a man to remember word for word what he said on any given occasion.”

“And what did Mrs. Allen reply?”

“She said she’d give me a ring. That is, as near as I can remember.”

“And then you said, ‘All right. So long.’ ”

“Probably. Something of the kind anyway.”

Japp said quietly:

“You say that Mrs. Allen asked you to advise her about her investments. Did she, by any chance, entrust you with the sum of two hundred pounds in cash to invest for her?”

Eustace’s face flushed a dark purple. He leaned forward and growled out:

“What the devil do you mean by that?”

“Did she or did she not?”

“That’s my business, Mr. Chief Inspector.”

Japp said quietly:

“Mrs. Allen drew out the sum of two hundred pounds in cash from her bank. Some of the money was in five-pound notes. The numbers of these can, of course, be traced.”

“What if she did?”

“Was the money for investment—or was it—blackmail, Major Eustace?”

“That’s a preposterous idea. What next will you suggest?”

Japp said in his most official manner:

“I think, Major Eustace, that at this point I must ask you if you are willing to come to Scotland Yard and make a statement. There is, of course, no compulsion and you can, if you prefer it, have your solicitor present.”

“Solicitor? What the devil should I want with a solicitor? And what are you cautioning me for?”

“I am inquiring into the circumstances of the death of Mrs. Allen.”

“Good God, man, you don’t suppose—Why, that’s nonsense! Look here, what happened was this. I called round to see Barbara by appointment. . . .”

“That was at what time?”

“At about half past nine, I should say. We sat and talked. . . .”

“And smoked?”

“Yes, and smoked. Anything damaging in that?” demanded the major belligerently.

“Where did this conversation take place?”

“In the sitting room. Left of the door as you go in. We talked together quite amicably, as I say. I left a little before half past ten. I stayed for a minute on the doorstep for a few last words. . . .”

“Last words—precisely,” murmured Poirot.

“Who are you, I’d like to know?” Eustace turned and spart the words at him. “Some kind of damned dago! What are you butting in for?”

“I am Hercule Poirot,” said the little man with dignity.

“I don’t care if you are the Achilles statue. As I say, Barbara and I parted quite amicably. I drove straight to the Far East Club. Got there at five and twenty to eleven and went straight up to the card-room. Stayed there playing bridge until one-thirty. Now then, put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

“I do not smoke the pipe,” said Poirot. “It is a pretty alibi you have there.”

“It should be a pretty cast iron one anyway! Now then, sir,” he looked at Japp. “Are you satisfied?”

“You remained in the sitting room throughout your visit?”

“Yes.”

“You did not go upstairs to Mrs. Allen’s own boudoir?”

“No, I tell you. We stayed in the one room and didn’t leave it.”

Japp looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or two. Then he said:

“How many sets of cuff links have you?”

“Cuff links? Cuff links? What’s that got to do with it?”

“You are not bound to answer the question, of course.”

“Answer it? I don’t mind answering it. I’ve got nothing to hide. And I shall demand an apology. There are these . . .” he stretched out his arms.

Japp noted the gold and platinum with a nod.

“And I’ve got these.”

He rose, opened a drawer and taking out a case, he opened it and shoved it rudely almost under Japp’s nose.

“Very nice design,” said the chief inspector. “I see one is broken—bit of enamel chipped off.”

“What of it?”

“You don’t remember when that happened, I suppose?”

“A day or two ago, not longer.”

“Would you be surprised to hear that it happened when you were visiting Mrs. Allen?”

“Why shouldn’t it? I’ve not denied that I was there.” The major spoke haughtily. He continued to bluster, to act the part of the justly indignant man, but his hands were trembling.

Japp leaned forward and said with emphasis:

“Yes, but that bit of cuff link wasn’t found in the sitting room. It was found upstairs in Mrs. Allen’s boudoir—there in the room where she was killed, and where a man sat smoking the same kind of cigarettes as you smoke.”

The shot told. Eustace fell back into his chair. His eyes went from side to side. The collapse of the bully and the appearance of the craven was not a pretty sight.

“You’ve got nothing on me.” His voice was almost a whine. “You’re trying to frame me . . . But you can’t do it. I’ve got an alibi . . . I never came near the house again that night. . . .”

Poirot in his turn, spoke.

“No, you did not come near the house again . . . You did not need to . . . For perhaps Mrs. Allen was already dead when you left it.”

“That’s impossible—impossible—She was just inside the door—she spoke to me—People must have heard her—seen her. . . .”

Poirot said softly:

“They heard you speaking to her . . . and pretending to wait for her answer and then speaking again . . . It is an old trick that . . . People may have assumed she was there, but they did not see her, because they could not even say whether she was wearing evening dress or not—not even mention what colour she was wearing. . . .”

“My God—it isn’t true—it isn’t true—”

He was shaking now—collapsed. . . .

Japp looked at him with disgust. He spoke crisply.

“I’ll have to ask you, sir, to come with me.”

“You’re arresting me?”

“Detained for inquiry—we’ll put it that way.”

The silence was broken with a long, shuddering sigh. The despairing voice of the erstwhile blustering Major Eustace said:

“I’m sunk. . . .”

Hercule Poirot rubbed his hands together and smiled cheerfully. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

Nine

"Pretty the way he went all to pieces," said Japp with professional appreciation, later that day.

He and Poirot were driving in a car along the Brompton Road.

"He knew the game was up," said Poirot absently.

"We've got plenty on him," said Japp. "Two or three different aliases, a tricky business over a cheque, and a very nice affair when he stayed at the Ritz and called himself Colonel de Bathe. Swindled half a dozen Piccadilly tradesmen. We're holding him on that charge for the moment—until we get this affair finally squared up. What's the idea of this rush to the country, old man?"

"My friend, an affair must be rounded off properly. Everything must be explained. I am on the quest of the mystery you suggested. The Mystery of the Missing Attaché Case."

"The Mystery of the Small Attaché Case—that's what I called it—It isn't missing that I know of."

"Wait, mon ami."

The car turned into the mews. At the door of No. 14, Jane Plenderleith was just alighting from a small Austin Seven. She was in golfing clothes.

She looked from one to the other of the two men, then produced a key and opened the door.

"Come in, won't you?"

She led the way. Japp followed her into the sitting room. Poirot remained for a minute or two in the hall, muttering something about:

“C’est embêtant—how difficult to get out of these sleeves.”

In a moment or two he also entered the sitting room minus his overcoat but Japp’s lips twitched under his moustache. He had heard the very faint squeak of an opening cupboard door.

Japp threw Poirot an inquiring glance and the other gave a hardly perceptible nod.

“We won’t detain you, Miss Plenderleith,” said Japp briskly.

“Only came to ask if you could tell us the name of Mrs. Allen’s solicitor.”

“Her solicitor?” The girl shook her head. “I don’t even know that she had one.”

“Well, when she rented this house with you, someone must have drawn up the agreement?”

“No, I don’t think so. You see, I took the house, the lease is in my name. Barbara paid me half the rent. It was quite informal.”

“I see. Oh! well, I suppose there’s nothing doing then.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help you,” said Jane politely.

“It doesn’t really matter very much.” Japp turned towards the door. “Been playing golf?”

“Yes.” She flushed. “I suppose it seems rather heartless to you. But as a matter of fact it got me down rather, being here in this house. I felt I must go out and do something—tire myself—or I’d choke!”

She spoke with intensity.

Poirot said quickly:

“I comprehend, mademoiselle. It is most understandable—most natural. To sit in this house and think—no, it would not be pleasant.”

“So long as you understand,” said Jane shortly.

“You belong to a club?”

“Yes, I play at Wentworth.”

“It has been a pleasant day,” said Poirot.

“Alas, there are few leaves left on the trees now! A week ago the woods were magnificent.”

“It was quite lovely today.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Plenderleith,” said Japp formally. “I’ll let you know when there’s anything definite. As a matter of fact we have got a man detained on suspicion.”

“What man?”

She looked at them eagerly.

“Major Eustace.”

She nodded and turned away, stooping down to put a match to the fire.

“Well?” said Japp as the car turned the corner of the mews.

Poirot grinned.

“It was quite simple. The key was in the door this time.”

“And—?”

Poirot smiled.

“Eh, bien, the golf clubs had gone—”

“Naturally. The girl isn’t a fool, whatever else she is. Anything else gone?”

Poirot nodded his head.

“Yes, my friend—the little attaché case!”

The accelerator leaped under Japp’s foot.

“Damnation!” he said. “I knew there was something. But what the devil is it? I searched that case pretty thoroughly.”

“My poor Japp—but it is—how do you say, ‘obvious, my dear Watson?’ ”

Japp threw him an exasperated look.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Poirot consulted his watch.

“It is not yet four o’clock. We could get to Wentworth, I think, before it is dark.”

“Do you think she really went there?”

“I think so—yes. She would know that we might make inquiries. Oh, yes, I think we will find that she has been there.”

Japp grunted.

“Oh well, come on.” He threaded his way dexterously through the traffic. “Though what this attaché case business has to do with the crime I can’t imagine. I can’t see that it’s got anything at all to do with it.”

“Precisely, my friend, I agree with you—it has nothing to do with it.”

“Then why—No, don’t tell me! Order and method and everything nicely rounded off! Oh, well, it’s a fine day.”

The car was a fast one. They arrived at Wentworth Golf Club a little after half past four. There was no great congestion there on a week day.

Poirot went straight to the caddie-master and asked for Miss Plenderleith’s clubs. She would be playing on a different course tomorrow, he explained.

The caddie master raised his voice and a boy sorted through some golf clubs standing in a corner. He finally produced a bag bearing the initials, J.P.

“Thank you,” said Poirot. He moved away, then turned carelessly and asked, “She did not leave with you a small attaché case also, did she?”

“Not today, sir. May have left it in the clubhouse.”

“She was down here today?”

“Oh, yes, I saw her.”

“Which caddie did she have, do you know? She’s mislaid an attaché case and can’t remember where she had it last.”

“She didn’t take a caddie. She came in here and bought a couple of balls. Just took out a couple of irons. I rather fancy she had a little case in her hand then.”

Poirot turned away with a word of thanks. The two men walked round the clubhouse. Poirot stood a moment admiring the view.

“It is beautiful, is it not, the dark pine trees—and then the lake. Yes, the lake —”

Japp gave him a quick glance.

“That’s the idea, is it?”

Poirot smiled.

“I think it possible that someone may have seen something. I should set the inquiries in motion if I were you.”

Ten

I

Poirot stepped back, his head a little on one side as he surveyed the arrangement of the room. A chair here—another chair there. Yes, that was very nice. And now a ring at the bell—that would be Japp.

The Scotland Yard man came in alertly.

"Quite right, old cock! Straight from the horse's mouth. A young woman was seen to throw something into the lake at Wentworth yesterday. Description of her answers to Jane Plenderleith. We managed to fish it up without much difficulty. A lot of reeds just there."

"And it was?"

"It was the attaché case all right! But why, in heaven's name? Well, it beats me! Nothing inside it—not even the magazines.
Why a presumably sane young woman should want to fling an expensively-fitted dressing case into a lake—d'you know, I worried all night because I couldn't get the hang of it."

"Mon pauvre Japp! But you need worry no longer. Here is the answer coming. The bell has just rung."

George, Poirot's immaculate manservant, opened the door and announced:

"Miss Plenderleith."

The girl came into the room with her usual air of complete self-assurance. She greeted the two men.

“I asked you to come here—” explained Poirot. “Sit here, will you not, and you here, Japp—because I have certain news to give you.”

The girl sat down. She looked from one to the other, pushing aside her hat. She took it off and laid it aside impatiently.

“Well,” she said. “Major Eustace has been arrested.”

“You saw that, I expect, in the morning paper?”

“Yes.”

“He is at the moment charged with a minor offence,” went on Poirot. “In the meantime we are gathering evidence in connection with the murder.”

“It was murder, then?”

The girl asked it eagerly.

Poirot nodded his head.

“Yes,” he said. “It was murder. The wilful destruction of one human being by another human being.”

She shivered a little.

“Don’t,” she murmured. “It sounds horrible when you say it like that.”

“Yes—but it is horrible!”

He paused—then he said:

“Now, Miss Plenderleith, I am going to tell you just how I arrived at the truth in this matter.”

She looked from Poirot to Japp. The latter was smiling.

“He has his methods, Miss Plenderleith,” he said. “I humour him, you know. I think we’ll listen to what he has to say.”

Poirot began:

“As you know, mademoiselle, I arrived with my friend at the scene of the crime on the morning of November the sixth. We went into the room where the body of Mrs. Allen had been found and I was struck at once by several significant details. There were things, you see, in that room that were decidedly odd.”

“Go on,” said the girl.

“To begin with,” said Poirot, “there was the smell of cigarette smoke.”

“I think you’re exaggerating there, Poirot,” said Japp. “I didn’t smell anything.”

Poirot turned on him in a flash.

“Precisely. You did not smell any stale smoke. No more did I. And that was very, very strange—for the door and the window were both closed and on an ashtray there were the stubs of no fewer than ten cigarettes. It was odd, very odd, that the room should smell—as it did, perfectly fresh.”

“So that’s what you were getting at!” Japp sighed. “Always have to get at things in such a tortuous way.”

“Your Sherlock Holmes did the same. He drew attention, remember, to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time—and the answer to that was there was no curious incident. The dog did nothing in the nighttime. To proceed:

“The next thing that attracted my attention was a wristwatch worn by the dead woman.”

“What about it?”

“Nothing particular about it, but it was worn on the right wrist. Now in my experience it is more usual for a watch to be worn on the left wrist.”

Japp shrugged his shoulders. Before he could speak, Poirot hurried on:

"But as you say, there is nothing very definite about that. Some people prefer to wear one on the right hand. And now I come to something really interesting—I come, my friends, to the writing bureau."

"Yes, I guessed that," said Japp.

"That was really very odd—very remarkable! For two reasons. The first reason was that something was missing from that writing table."

Jane Plenderleith spoke.

"What was missing?"

Poirot turned to her.

"A sheet of blotting paper, mademoiselle. The blotting book had on top a clean, untouched piece of blotting paper."

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

"Really, M. Poirot. People do occasionally tear off a very much used sheet!"

"Yes, but what do they do with it? Throw it into the waste-paper basket, do they not? But it was not in the wastepaper basket. I looked."

Jane Plenderleith seemed impatient.

"Because it had probably been already thrown away the day before. The sheet was clean because Barbara hadn't written any letters that day."

"That could hardly be the case, mademoiselle. For Mrs. Allen was seen going to the postbox that evening. Therefore she must have been writing letters. She could not write downstairs—there were no writing materials. She would be hardly likely to go to your room to write. So, then, what had happened to the sheet of paper on which she had blotted her letters? It is true that people sometimes throw things in the fire instead of the wastepaper basket, but there was only a gas fire in the room. And the fire downstairs had not been alight the previous day, since you told me it was all laid ready when you put a match to it."

He paused.

"A curious little problem. I looked everywhere, in the wastepaper baskets, in the dustbin, but I could not find a sheet of used blotting paper—and that seemed to me very important. It looked as though someone had deliberately taken that sheet of blotting paper away. Why? Because there was writing on it that could easily have been read by holding it up to a mirror.

"But there was a second curious point about the writing table. Perhaps, Japp, you remember roughly the arrangement of it? Blotter and inkstand in the centre, pen tray to the left, calendar and quill pen to the right. Eh bien? You do not see? The quill pen, remember, I examined, it was for show only—it had not been used. Ah! still you do not see? I will say it again. Blotter in the centre, pen tray to the left—to the left, Japp. But is it not usual to find a pen tray on the right, convenient to the right hand?

"Ah, now it comes to you, does it not? The pen tray on the left—the wristwatch on the right wrist—the blotting paper removed—and something else brought into the room—the ashtray with the cigarette ends!

"That room was fresh and pure smelling, Japp, a room in which the window had been open, not closed all night . . . And I made myself a picture."

He spun round and faced Jane.

"A picture of you, mademoiselle, driving up in your taxi, paying it off, running up the stairs, calling perhaps, 'Barbara'—and you open the door and you find your friend there lying dead with the pistol clasped in her hand—the left hand, naturally, since she is left-handed and therefore, too, the bullet has entered on the left side of the head. There is a note there addressed to you. It tells you what it is that has driven her to take her own life. It was, I fancy, a very moving letter . . . A young, gentle, unhappy woman driven by blackmail to take her life. . . .

"I think that, almost at once, the idea flashed into your head. This was a certain man's doing. Let him be punished—fully and adequately punished! You take the pistol, wipe it and place it in the right hand. You take the note and you tear off the top sheet of the blotting paper on which the note has been blotted. You go down, light the fire and put them both on the flames. Then you carry up the ashtray—to further the illusion that two people sat there talking—and you also take up a fragment of enamel cuff link that is on the floor. That is a lucky find and you expect it to clinch matters. Then you close the window and lock the door. There must be no suspicion that you have tampered with the room. The police must see it exactly as it is—so you do not seek help in the mews but ring up the police straightaway.

"And so it goes on. You play your chosen rôle with judgment and coolness. You refuse at first to say anything but cleverly you suggest doubts of suicide. Later you are quite ready to set us on the trail of Major Eustace. . . .

"Yes, mademoiselle, it was clever—a very clever murder—for that is what it is. The attempted murder of Major Eustace."

Jane Plenderleith sprang to her feet.

"It wasn't murder—it was justice. That man hounded poor Barbara to her death! She was so sweet and helpless. You see, poor kid, she got involved with a man in India when she first went out. She was only seventeen and he was a married man years older than her. Then she had a baby. She could have put it in a home but she wouldn't hear of that. She went off to some out of the way spot and came back calling herself Mrs. Allen. Later the child died. She came back here and she fell in love with Charles—that pompous, stuffed owl; she adored him—and he took her adoration very complacently. If he had been a different kind of man I'd have advised her to tell him everything. But as it was, I urged her to hold her tongue. After all, nobody knew anything about that business except me.

"And then that devil Eustace turned up! You know the rest. He began to bleed her systematically, but it wasn't till that last evening that she realised that she was exposing Charles too, to the risk of scandal. Once married to Charles, Eustace had got her where he wanted her—married to a rich man with a horror of any scandal! When Eustace had gone with the money she had got for him she sat thinking it over. Then she came up and wrote a letter to me. She said she loved Charles and couldn’t live without him, but that for his own sake she mustn’t marry him. She was taking the best way out, she said.”

Jane flung her head back.

“Do you wonder I did what I did? And you stand there calling it murder!”

“Because it is murder,” Poirot’s voice was stern. “Murder can sometimes seem justified, but it is murder all the same. You are truthful and clear-minded—face the truth, mademoiselle! Your friend died, in the last resort, because she had not the courage to live. We may sympathize with her. We may pity her. But the fact remains—the act was hers—not another.”

He paused.

“And you? That man is now in prison, he will serve a long sentence for other matters. Do you really wish, of your own volition, to destroy the life—the life, mind—of any human being?”

She stared at him. Her eyes darkened. Suddenly she muttered:

“No. You’re right. I don’t.”

Then, turning on her heel, she went swiftly from the room. The outer door banged. . . .

II

Japp gave a long—a very prolonged—whistle.

“Well, I’m damned!” he said.

Poirot sat down and smiled at him amiably. It was quite a long time before the silence was broken. Then Japp said:

“Not murder disguised as suicide, but suicide made to look like murder!”

"Yes, and very cleverly done, too. Nothing overemphasized."

Japp said suddenly:

"But the attaché case? Where did that come in?"

"But, my dear, my very dear friend, I have already told you that it did not come in."

"Then why—"

"The golf clubs. The golf clubs, Japp. They were the golf clubs of a left-handed person. Jane Plenderleith kept her clubs at Wentworth. Those were Barbara Allen's clubs. No wonder the girl got, as you say, the wind up when we opened that cupboard. Her whole plan might have been ruined. But she is quick, she realized that she had, for one short moment, given herself away. She saw that we saw. So she does the best thing she can think of on the spur of the moment. She tries to focus our attention on the wrong object. She says of the attaché case 'That's mine. I—it came back with me this morning. So there can't be anything there.' And, as she hoped, away you go on the false trail. For the same reason, when she sets out the following day to get rid of the golf clubs, she continues to use the attaché case as a—what is it—kippered herring?"

"Red herring. Do you mean that her real object was—?"

"Consider, my friend. Where is the best place to get rid of a bag of golf clubs? One cannot burn them or put them in a dustbin. If one leaves them somewhere they may be returned to you. Miss Plenderleith took them to a golf course. She leaves them in the clubhouse while she gets a couple of irons from her own bag, and then she goes round without a caddy. Doubtless at judicious intervals she breaks a club in half and throws it into some deep undergrowth, and ends by throwing the empty bag away. If anyone should find a broken golf club here and there it will not create surprise. People have been known to break and throw away all their clubs in a mood of intense exasperation over the game! It is, in fact, that kind of game!

“But since she realizes that her actions may still be a matter of interest, she throws that useful red herring—the attaché case—in a somewhat spectacular manner into the lake—and that, my friend, is the truth of ‘The Mystery of the Attaché Case.’ ”

Japp looked at his friend for some moments in silence. Then he rose, clapped him on the shoulder, and burst out laughing.

“Not so bad for an old dog! Upon my word, you take the cake! Come out and have a spot of lunch?”

“With pleasure, my friend, but we will not have the cake. Indeed, an Omelette aux Champignons, Blanquette de Veau, Petits pois à la Francaise, and—to follow—a Baba au Rhum.”

“Lead me to it,” said Japp.

THE INCREDIBLE THEFT

One

As the butler handed round the soufflé, Lord Mayfield leaned confidentially towards his neighbour on the right, Lady Julia Carrington. Known as a perfect host, Lord Mayfield took trouble to live up to his reputation. Although unmarried, he was always charming to women.

Lady Julia Carrington was a woman of forty, tall, dark and vivacious. She was very thin, but still beautiful. Her hands and feet in particular were exquisite. Her manner was abrupt and restless, that of a woman who lived on her nerves.

About opposite to her at the round table sat her husband, Air Marshal Sir George Carrington. His career had begun in the Navy, and he still retained the bluff breeziness of the ex-Naval man. He was laughing and chaffing the beautiful Mrs. Vanderlyn, who was sitting on the other side of her host.

Mrs. Vanderlyn was an extremely good-looking blonde. Her voice held a soupçon of American accent, just enough to be pleasant without undue exaggeration.

On the other side of Sir George Carrington sat Mrs. Macatta, M.P. Mrs. Macatta was a great authority on Housing and Infant Welfare. She barked out short sentences rather than spoke them, and was generally of somewhat alarming aspect. It was perhaps natural that the Air Marshal would find his right-hand neighbour the pleasanter to talk to.

Mrs. Macatta, who always talked shop wherever she was, barked out short spates of information on her special subjects to her left-hand neighbour, young Reggie Carrington.

Reggie Carrington was twenty-one, and completely uninterested in Housing, Infant Welfare, and indeed any political subject. He said at intervals, “How frightful!” and “I absolutely agree with you,” and his mind was clearly elsewhere. Mr. Carlile, Lord Mayfield’s private secretary, sat between young Reggie and his mother. A pale young man with pince-nez and an air of intelligent reserve, he talked little, but was always ready to fling himself into any conversational breach. Noticing that Reggie Carrington was struggling with a yawn, he leaned forward and adroitly asked Mrs. Macatta a question about her “Fitness for Children” scheme.

Round the table, moving silently in the subdued amber light, a butler and two footmen offered dishes and filled up wine glasses. Lord Mayfield paid a very high salary to his chef, and was noted as a connoisseur of wines.

The table was a round one, but there was no mistaking who was the host. Where Lord Mayfield sat was so very decidedly the head of the table. A big man, square-shouldered, with thick silvery hair, a big straight nose and a slightly prominent chin. It was a face that lent itself easily to caricature. As Sir Charles McLaughlin, Lord Mayfield had combined a political career with being the head of a big engineering firm. He was himself a first-class engineer. His peerage had come a year ago, and at the same time he had been created first Minister of Armaments, a new ministry which had only just come into being.

The dessert had been placed on the table. The port had circulated once. Catching Mrs. Vanderlyn’s eye, Lady Julia rose. The three women left the room.

The port passed once more, and Lord Mayfield referred lightly to pheasants. The conversation for five minutes or so was sporting. Then Sir George said:

“Expect you’d like to join the others in the drawing room, Reggie, my boy. Lord Mayfield won’t mind.”

The boy took the hint easily enough.

“Thanks, Lord Mayfield, I think I will.”

Mr. Carlile mumured:

"If you'll excuse me, Lord Mayfield—certain memoranda and other work to get through. . . ."

Lord Mayfield nodded. The two young men left the room. The servants had retired some time before. The Minister for Armaments and the head of the Air Force were alone.

After a minute or two, Carrington said:

"Well—O.K.?"

"Absolutely! There's nothing to touch this new bomber in any country in Europe."

"Make rings round 'em, eh? That's what I thought."

"Supremacy of the air," said Lord Mayfield decisively.

Sir George Carrington gave a deep sigh.

"About time! You know, Charles, we've been through a ticklish spell. Lots of gunpowder everywhere all over Europe. And we weren't ready, damn it! We've had a narrow squeak. And we're not out of the wood yet, however much we hurry on construction."

Lord Mayfield murmured:

"Nevertheless, George, there are some advantages in starting late. A lot of the European stuff is out of date already—and they're perilously near bankruptcy."

"I don't believe that means anything," said Sir George gloomily. "One's always hearing this nation and that is bankrupt! But they carry on just the same. You know, finance is an absolute mystery to me."

Lord Mayfield's eyes twinkled a little. Sir George Carrington was always so very much the old-fashioned "bluff, honest old sea dog." There were people who said that it was a pose he deliberately adopted.

Changing the subject, Carrington said in a slightly overcasual manner:

“Attractive woman, Mrs. Vanderlyn—eh?”

Lord Mayfield said:

“Are you wondering what she’s doing here?”

His eyes were amused.

Carrington looked a little confused.

“Not at all—not at all.”

“Oh, yes, you were! Don’t be an old humbug, George. You were wondering, in a slightly dismayed fashion, whether I was the latest victim!”

Carrington said slowly:

“I’ll admit that it did seem a trifle odd to me that she should be here—well, this particular weekend.”

Lord Mayfield nodded.

“Where the carcass is, there are the vultures gathered together. We’ve got a very definite carcass, and Mrs. Vanderlyn might be described as Vulture No. 1.”

The Air Marshal said abruptly:

“Know anything about this Vanderlyn woman?”

Lord Mayfield clipped off the end of a cigar, lit it with precision and, throwing his head back, dropped out his words with careful deliberation.

“What do I know about Mrs. Vanderlyn? I know that she’s an American subject. I know that she’s had three husbands, one Italian, one German and one Russian, and that in consequence she has made useful what I think are called ‘contacts’ in three countries. I know that she manages to buy very expensive clothes and live in a very luxurious manner, and that there is some slight uncertainty as to where the income comes from which permits her to do so."

With a grin, Sir George Carrington murmured:

"Your spies have not been inactive, Charles, I see."

"I know," Lord Mayfield continued, "that in addition to having a seductive type of beauty, Mrs. Vanderlyn is also a very good listener, and that she can display a fascinating interest in what we call 'shop.' That is to say, a man can tell her all about his job and feel that he is being intensely interesting to the lady! Sundry young officers have gone a little too far in their zeal to be interesting, and their careers have suffered in consequence. They have told Mrs. Vanderlyn a little more than they should have done. Nearly all the lady's friends are in the Services—but last winter she was hunting in a certain county near one of our largest armament firms, and she formed various friendships not at all sporting in character. To put it briefly, Mrs. Vanderlyn is a very useful person to . . ." He described a circle in the air with his cigar. "Perhaps we had better not say to whom! We will just say to a European power—and perhaps to more than one European power."

Carrington drew a deep breath.

"You take a great load off my mind, Charles."

"You thought I had fallen for the siren? My dear George! Mrs. Vanderlyn is just a little too obvious in her methods for a wary old bird like me. Besides, she is, as they say, not quite so young as she once was. Your young squadron leaders wouldn't notice that. But I am fifty-six, my boy. In another four years I shall probably be a nasty old man continually haunting the society of unwilling debutantes."

"I was a fool," said Carrington apologetically, "but it seemed a bit odd—"

"It seemed to you odd that she should be here, in a somewhat intimate family party just at the moment when you and I were to hold an unofficial conference over a discovery that will probably revolutionize the whole problem of air defence?”

Sir George Carrington nodded.

Lord Mayfield said, smiling:

“That’s exactly it. That’s the bait.”

“The bait?”

“You see, George, to use the language of the movies, we’ve nothing actually ‘on’ the woman. And we want something! She’s got away with rather more than she should in the past. But she’s been careful—damnably careful. We know what she’s been up to, but we’ve got no definite proof of it. We’ve got to tempt her with something big.”

“Something big being the specification of the new bomber?”

“Exactly. It’s got to be something big enough to induce her to take a risk—to come out into the open. And then—we’ve got her!”

Sir George grunted.

“Oh, well,” he said. “I dare say it’s all right. But suppose she won’t take the risk?”

“That would be a pity,” said Lord Mayfield. Then he added: “But I think she will. . . .”

He rose.

“Shall we join the ladies in the drawing room? We mustn’t deprive your wife of her bridge.”

Sir George grunted:

“Julia’s a damned sight too fond of her bridge. Drops a packet over it. She can’t afford to play as high as she does, and I’ve told her so. The trouble is,

Julia’s a born gambler.”

Coming round the table to join his host, he said:

“Well, I hope your plan comes off, Charles.”

Two

In the drawing room conversation had flagged more than once. Mrs. Vanderlyn was usually at a disadvantage when left alone with members of her own sex. That charming sympathetic manner of hers, so much appreciated by members of the male sex, did not for some reason or other commend itself to women. Lady Julia was a woman whose manners were either very good or very bad. On this occasion she disliked Mrs. Vanderlyn, and was bored by Mrs. Macatta, and made no secret of her feelings. Conversation languished, and might have ceased altogether but for the latter.

Mrs. Macatta was a woman of great earnestness of purpose. Mrs. Vanderlyn she dismissed immediately as a useless and parasitic type. Lady Julia she tried to interest in a forthcoming charity entertainment which she was organizing. Lady Julia answered vaguely, stifled a yawn or two and retired into her own inner preoccupation. Why didn't Charles and George come? How tiresome men were. Her comments became even more perfunctory as she became absorbed in her own thoughts and worries.

The three women were sitting in silence when the men finally entered the room.

Lord Mayfield thought to himself:

"Julia looks ill tonight. What a mass of nerves the woman is."

Aloud he said:

"What about a rubber—eh?"

Lady Julia brightened at once. Bridge was as the breath of life to her.

Reggie Carrington entered the room at that minute, and a four was arranged. Lady Julia, Mrs. Vanderlyn, Sir George and young Reggie sat down to the card-table. Lord Mayfield devoted himself to the task of entertaining Mrs. Macatta.

When two rubbers had been played, Sir George looked ostentatiously at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“Hardly worth while beginning another,” he remarked.

His wife looked annoyed.

“It’s only a quarter to eleven. A short one.”

“They never are, my dear,” said Sir George good-temperedly. “Anyway, Charles and I have some work to do.”

Mrs. Vanderlyn murmured:

“How important that sounds! I suppose you clever men who are at the top of things never get a real rest.”

“No forty-eight hour week for us,” said Sir George.

Mrs. Vanderlyn murmured:

“You know, I feel rather ashamed of myself as a raw American, but I do get so thrilled at meeting people who control the destinies of a country. I expect that seems a very crude point of view to you, Sir George.”

“My dear Mrs. Vanderlyn, I should never think of you as ‘crude’ or ‘raw.’ ”

He smiled into her eyes. There was, perhaps, a hint of irony in the voice which she did not miss. Adroitly she turned to Reggie, smiling sweetly into his eyes.

“I’m sorry we’re not continuing our partnership. That was a frightfully clever four no-trump call of yours.”

Flushed and pleased, Reggie mumbled:

“Bit of a fluke that it came off.”

“Oh, no, it was really a clever bit of deduction on your part. You’d deduced from the bidding exactly where the cards must be, and you played accordingly. I thought it was brilliant.”

Lady Julia rose abruptly.

“The woman lays it on with a palette knife,” she thought disgustedly.

Then her eyes softened as they rested on her son. He believed it all. How pathetically young and pleased he looked. How incredibly naïve he was. No wonder he got into scrapes. He was too trusting. The truth of it was he had too sweet a nature. George didn’t understand him in the least. Men were so unsympathetic in their judgments. They forgot that they had ever been young themselves. George was much too harsh with Reggie.

Mrs. Macatta had risen. Goodnights were said.

The three women went out of the room. Lord Mayfield helped himself to a drink after giving one to Sir George, then he looked up as Mr. Carlile appeared at the door.

“Get out the files and all the papers, will you, Carlile? Including the plans and the prints. The Air Marshal and I will be along shortly. We’ll just take a turn outside first, eh, George? It’s stopped raining.”

Mr. Carlile, turning to depart, murmured an apology as he almost collided with Mrs. Vanderlyn.

She drifted towards them, murmuring:

“My book, I was reading it before dinner.”

Reggie sprang forward and held up a book.

“Is this it? On the sofa?”

"Oh, yes. Thank you so much."

She smiled sweetly, said goodnight again and went out of the room.

Sir George had opened one of the french windows.

"Beautiful night now," he announced. "Good idea of yours to take a turn."

Reggie said:

"Well, goodnight, sir. I'll be toddling off to bed."

"Goodnight, my boy," said Lord Mayfield.

Reggie picked up a detective story which he had begun earlier in the evening and left the room.

Lord Mayfield and Sir George stepped out upon the terrace.

It was a beautiful night, with a clear sky studded with stars.

Sir George drew a deep breath.

"Phew, that woman uses a lot of scent," he remarked.

Lord Mayfield laughed.

"Anyway, it's not cheap scent. One of the most expensive brands on the market, I should say."

Sir George gave a grimace.

"I suppose one should be thankful for that."

"You should, indeed. I think a woman smothered in cheap scent is one of the greatest abominations known to mankind."

Sir George glanced up at the sky.

“Extraordinary the way it’s cleared. I heard the rain beating down when we were at dinner.”

The two men strolled gently along the terrace.

The terrace ran the whole length of the house. Below it the ground sloped gently away, permitting a magnificent view over the Sussex weald.

Sir George lit a cigar.

“About this metal alloy—” he began.

The talk became technical.

As they approached the far end of the terrace for the fifth time, Lord Mayfield said with a sigh:

“Oh, well, I suppose we’d better get down to it.”

“Yes, good bit of work to get through.”

The two men turned, and Lord Mayfield uttered a surprised ejaculation.

“Hallo! See that?”

“See what?” asked Sir George.

“Thought I saw someone slip across the terrace from my study window.”

“Nonsense, old boy. I didn’t see anything.”

“Well, I did—or I thought I did.”

“Your eyes are playing tricks on you. I was looking straight down the terrace, and I’d have seen anything there was to be seen. There’s precious little I don’t see—even if I do have to hold a newspaper at arm’s length.”

Lord Mayfield chuckled.

“I can put one over on you there, George. I read easily without glasses.”

“But you can’t always distinguish the fellow on the other side of the House. Or is that eyeglass of yours sheer intimidation?”

Laughing, the two men entered Lord Mayfield’s study, the french window of which was open.

Mr. Carlile was busy arranging some papers in a file by the safe.

He looked up as they entered.

“Ha, Carlile, everything ready?”

“Yes, Lord Mayfield, all the papers are on your desk.”

The desk in question was a big important-looking writing table of mahogany set across a corner by the window. Lord Mayfield went over to it, and began sorting through the various documents laid out.

“Lovely night now,” said Sir George.

Mr. Carlile agreed.

“Yes, indeed. Remarkable the way it’s cleared up after the rain.”

Putting away his file, Mr. Carlile asked:

“Will you want me any more tonight, Lord Mayfield?”

“No, I don’t think so, Carlile. I’ll put all these away myself. We shall probably be late. You’d better turn in.”

“Thank you. Goodnight, Lord Mayfield. Goodnight, Sir George.”

“Goodnight, Carlile.”

As the secretary was about to leave the room, Lord Mayfield said sharply:

“Just a minute, Carlile. You’ve forgotten the most important of the lot.”

“I beg your pardon, Lord Mayfield.”

“The actual plans of the bomber, man.”

The secretary stared.

“They’re right on the top, sir.”

“They’re nothing of the sort.”

“But I’ve just put them there.”

“Look for yourself, man.”

With a bewildered expression, the young man came forward and joined Lord Mayfield at the desk.

Somewhat impatiently the Minister indicated the pile of papers. Carlile sorted through them, his expression of bewilderment growing.

“You see, they’re not there.”

The secretary stammered:

“But—but it’s incredible. I laid them there not three minutes ago.”

Lord Mayfield said good-humouredly:

“You must have made a mistake, they must be still in the safe.”

“I don’t see how—I know I put them there!”

Lord Mayfield brushed past him to the open safe. Sir George joined them. A very few minutes sufficed to show that the plans of the bomber were not there.

Dazed and unbelieving, the three men returned to the desk and once more turned over the papers.

“My God!” said Mayfield. “They’re gone!”

Mr. Carlile cried:

“But it’s impossible!”

“Who’s been in this room?” snapped out the Minister.

“No one. No one at all.”

“Look here, Carlile, those plans haven’t vanished into thin air. Someone has taken them. Has Mrs. Vanderlyn been in here?”

“Mrs. Vanderlyn? Oh, no, sir.”

“I’ll back that,” said Carrington. He sniffed the air! “You’d soon smell if she had. That scent of hers.”

“Nobody has been in here,” insisted Carlile. “I can’t understand it.”

“Look here, Carlile,” said Lord Mayfield. “Pull yourself together. We’ve got to get to the bottom of this. You’re absolutely sure the plans were in the safe?”

“Absolutely.”

“You actually saw them? You didn’t just assume they were among the others?”

“No, no, Lord Mayfield. I saw them. I put them on top of the others on the desk.”

“And since then, you say, nobody has been in the room. Have you been out of the room?”

“No—at least—yes.”

“Ah!” cried Sir George. “Now we’re getting at it!”

Lord Mayfield said sharply:

“What on earth—” when Carlile interrupted.

“In the normal course of events, Lord Mayfield, I should not, of course, have dreamt of leaving the room. when important papers were lying about, but hearing a woman scream—”

“A woman scream?” ejaculated Lord Mayfield in a surprised voice.

“Yes, Lord Mayfield. It startled me more than I can say. I was just laying the papers on the desk when I heard it, and naturally I ran out into the hall.”

“Who screamed?”

“Mrs. Vanderlyn’s French maid. She was standing halfway up the stairs, looking very white and upset and shaking all over. She said she had seen a ghost.”

“Seen a ghost?”

“Yes, a tall woman dressed all in white who moved without a sound and floated in the air.”

“What a ridiculous story!”

“Yes, Lord Mayfield, that is what I told her. I must say she seemed rather ashamed of herself. She went off upstairs and I came back in here.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Just a minute or two before you and Sir George came in.”

“And you were out of the room—how long?”

The secretary considered.

“Two minutes—at the most three.”

“Long enough,” groaned Lord Mayfield. Suddenly he clutched his friend’s arm.

“George, that shadow I saw—slinking away from this window. That was it! As soon as Carlile left the room, he nipped in, seized the plans and made off.”

“Dirty work,” said Sir George.

Then he seized his friend by the arm.

“Look here, Charles, this is the devil of a business. What the hell are we going to do about it?”

Three

“At any rate give it a trial, Charles.”

It was half an hour later. The two men were in Lord Mayfield’s study, and Sir George had been expending a considerable amount of persuasion to induce his friend to adopt a certain course.

Lord Mayfield, at first most unwilling, was gradually becoming less averse to the idea.

Sir George went on:

“Don’t be so damned pigheaded, Charles.”

Lord Mayfield said slowly:

“Why drag in a wretched foreigner we know nothing about?”

“But I happen to know a lot about him. The man’s a marvel.”

“Humph.”

“Look here, Charles. It’s a chance! Discretion is the essence of this business. If it leaks out—”

“When it leaks out is what you mean!”

“Not necessarily. This man, Hercule Poirot—”

“Will come down here and produce the plans like a conjurer taking rabbits out of his hat, I suppose?”

"He'll get at the truth. And the truth is what we want. Look here, Charles, I take all responsibility on myself."

Lord Mayfield said slowly:

"Oh, well, have it your own way, but I don't see what the fellow can do. . . ."

Sir George picked up the phone.

"I'm going to get through to him—now."

"He'll be in bed."

"He can get up. Dash it all, Charles, you can't let that woman get away with it."

"Mrs. Vanderlyn, you mean?"

"Yes. You don't doubt, do you, that she's at the bottom of this?"

"No, I don't. She's turned the tables on me with a vengeance. I don't like admitting, George, that a woman's been too clever for us. It goes against the grain. But it's true. We shan't be able to prove anything against her, and yet we both know that she's been the prime mover in the affair."

"Women are the devil," said Carrington with feeling.

"Nothing to connect her with it, damn it all! We may believe that she put the girl up to that screaming trick, and that the man lurking outside was her accomplice, but the devil of it is we can't prove it."

"Perhaps Hercule Poirot can."

Suddenly Lord Mayfield laughed.

"By the Lord, George, I thought you were too much of an old John Bull to put your trust in a Frenchman, however clever."

“He’s not even a Frenchman, he’s a Belgian,” said Sir George in a rather shamefaced manner.

“Well, have your Belgian down. Let him try his wits on this business. I’ll bet he can’t make more of it than we can.”

Without replying, Sir George stretched a hand to the telephone.

Four

Blinking a little, Hercule Poirot turned his head from one man to the other. Very delicately he smothered a yawn.

It was half past two in the morning. He had been roused from sleep and rushed down through the darkness in a big Rolls Royce. Now he had just finished hearing what the two men had to tell him.

“Those are the facts, M. Poirot,” said Lord Mayfield.

He leaned back in his chair, and slowly fixed his monocle in one eye. Through it a shrewd, pale-blue eye watched Poirot attentively. Besides being shrewd the eye was definitely sceptical. Poirot cast a swift glance at Sir George Carrington.

That gentleman was leaning forward with an expression of almost childlike hopefulness on his face.

Poirot said slowly:

“I have the facts, yes. The maid screams, the secretary goes out, the nameless watcher comes in, the plans are there on top of the desk, he snatches them up and goes. The facts—they are all very convenient.”

Something in the way he uttered the last phrase seemed to attract Lord Mayfield’s attention. He sat up a little straighter, his monocle dropped. It was as though a new alertness came to him.

“I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?”

“I said, Lord Mayfield, that the facts were all very convenient—for the thief. By the way, you are sure it was a man you saw?”

Lord Mayfield shook his head.

“That I couldn’t say. It was just a—shadow. In fact, I was almost doubtful if I had seen anyone.”

Poirot transferred his gaze to the Air Marshal.

“And you, Sir George? Could you say if it was a man or a woman?”

“I didn’t see anyone myself.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he skipped suddenly to his feet and went over to the writing table.

“I can assure you that the plans are not there,” said Lord Mayfield. “We have all three been through those papers half a dozen times.”

“All three? You mean, your secretary also?”

“Yes, Carlile.”

Poirot turned suddenly.

“Tell me, Lord Mayfield, which paper was on top when you went over to the desk?”

Mayfield frowned a little in the effort of remembrance.

“Let me see—yes, it was a rough memorandum of some sort of our air defence positions.”

Deftly, Poirot nipped out a paper and brought it over.

“Is this the one, Lord Mayfield?”

Lord Mayfield took it and glanced over it.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Poirot took it over to Carrington.

“Did you notice this paper on the desk?”

Sir George took it, held it away from him, then slipped on his pince-nez.

“Yes, that’s right. I looked through them too, with Carlile and Mayfield. This was on top.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He replaced the paper on the desk. Mayfield looked at him in a slightly puzzled manner.

“If there are any other questions—” he began.

“But yes, certainly there is a question. Carlile. Carlile is the question!”

Lord Mayfield’s colour rose a little.

“Carlile, M. Poirot, is quite above suspicion! He has been my confidential secretary for nine years. He has access to all my private papers, and I may point out to you that he could have made a copy of the plans and a tracing of the specifications quite easily without anyone being the wiser.”

“I appreciate your point,” said Poirot. “If he had been guilty there would be no need for him to stage a clumsy robbery.”

“In any case,” said Lord Mayfield, “I am sure of Carlile. I will guarantee him.”

“Carlile,” said Carrington gruffly, “is all right.”

Poirot spread out his hands gracefully.

“And this Mrs. Vanderlyn—she is all wrong?”

“She’s a wrong ’un all right,” said Sir George.

Lord Mayfield said in more measured tones:

“I think, M. Poirot, that there can be no doubt of Mrs. Vanderlyn’s—well—activities. The Foreign Office can give you more precious data as to that.”

“And the maid, you take it, is in with her mistress?”

“Not a doubt of it,” said Sir George.

“It seems to me a plausible assumption,” said Lord Mayfield more cautiously.

There was a pause. Poirot sighed, and absentmindedly rearranged one or two articles on a table at his right hand. Then he said:

“I take it that these papers represented money? That is, the stolen papers would be definitely worth a large sum in cash.”

“If presented in a certain quarter—yes.”

“Such as?”

Sir George mentioned the names of two European powers.

Poirot nodded.

“That fact would be known to anyone, I take it?”

“Mrs. Vanderlyn would know it all right.”

“I said to anyone?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Anyone with a minimum of intelligence would appreciate the cash value of the plans?”

“Yes, but M. Poirot—” Lord Mayfield was looking rather uncomfortable.

Poirot held up a hand.

"I do what you call explore all the avenues."

Suddenly he rose again, stepped nimbly out of the window and with a flashlight examined the edge of the grass at the farther side of the terrace.

The two men watched him.

He came in again, sat down and said:

"Tell me, Lord Mayfield, this malefactor, this skulker in the shadows, you do not have him pursued?"

Lord Mayfield shrugged his shoulders.

"At the bottom of the garden he could make his way out to a main road. If he had a car waiting there, he would soon be out of reach—"

"But there are the police—the A.A. scouts—"

Sir George interrupted.

"You forget, M. Poirot. We cannot risk publicity. If it were to get out that these plans had been stolen, the result would be extremely unfavourable to the Party."

"Ah, yes," said Poirot. "One must remember La Politique. The great discretion must be observed. You send instead for me. Ah well, perhaps it is simpler."

"You are hopeful of success, M. Poirot?" Lord Mayfield sounded a trifle incredulous.

The little man shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not? One has only to reason—to reflect."

He paused a moment and then said:

"I would like now to speak to Mr. Carlile."

“Certainly.” Lord Mayfield rose. “I asked him to wait up. He will be somewhere at hand.”

He went out of the room.

Poirot looked at Sir George.

“Eh bien,” he said. “What about this man on the terrace?”

“My dear M. Poirot. Don’t ask me! I didn’t see him, and I can’t describe him.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“So you have already said. But it is a little different from that is it not?”

“What d’you mean?” asked Sir George abruptly.

“How shall I say it? Your disbelief, it is more profound.”

Sir George started to speak, then stopped.

“But yes,” said Poirot encouragingly. “Tell me. You are both at the end of the terrace. Lord Mayfield sees a shadow slip from the window and across the grass. Why do you not see that shadow?”

Carrington stared at him.

“You’ve hit it, M. Poirot. I’ve been worrying about that ever since. You see, I’d swear that no one did leave this window. I thought Mayfield had imagined it—branch of a tree waving—something of that kind. And then when we came in here and found there had been a robbery, it seemed as though Mayfield must have been right and I’d been wrong. And yet—”

Poirot smiled.

“And yet you still in your heart of hearts believe in the evidence (the negative evidence) of your own eyes?”

"You're right, M. Poirot, I do."

Poirot gave a sudden smile.

"How wise you are."

Sir George said sharply:

"There were no footprints on the grass edge?"

Poirot nodded.

"Exactly. Lord Mayfield, he fancies he sees a shadow. Then there comes the robbery and he is sure—but sure! It is no longer a fancy—he actually saw the man. But that is not so. Me, I do not concern myself much with footprints and such things but for what it is worth we have that negative evidence. There were no footprints on the grass. It had rained heavily this evening. If a man had crossed the terrace to the grass this evening his footprints would have shown."

Sir George said, staring: "But then—but then—"

"It brings us back to the house. To the people in the house."

He broke off as the door opened and Lord Mayfield entered with Mr. Carlile.

Though still looking very pale and worried, the secretary had regained a certain composure of manner. Adjusting his pince-nez he sat down and looked at Poirot inquiringly.

"How long had you been in this room when you heard the scream, monsieur?"

Carlile considered.

"Between five and ten minutes, I should say."

"And before that there had been no disturbance of any kind?"

“No.”

“I understand that the house party had been in one room for the greater part of the evening.”

“Yes, the drawing room.”

Poirot consulted his notebook.

“Sir George Carrington and his wife. Mrs. Macatta. Mrs. Vanderlyn. Mr. Reggie Carrington. Lord Mayfield and yourself. Is that right?”

“I myself was not in the drawing room. I was working here the greater part of the evening.”

Poirot turned to Lord Mayfield.

“Who went up to bed first?”

“Lady Julia Carrington, I think. As a matter of fact, the three ladies went out together.”

“And then?”

“Mr. Carlile came in and I told him to get out the papers as Sir George and I would be along in a minute.”

“It was then that you decided to take a turn on the terrace?”

“It was.”

“Was anything said in Mrs. Vanderlyn’s hearing as to your working in the study?”

“The matter was mentioned, yes.”

“But she was not in the room when you instructed Mr. Carlile to get out the papers?”

"No."

"Excuse me, Lord Mayfield," said Carlile. "Just after you had said that, I collided with her in the doorway. She had come back for a book."

"So you think she might have overheard?"

"I think it quite possible, yes."

"She came back for a book," mused Poirot. "Did you find her her book, Lord Mayfield?"

"Yes, Reggie gave it to her."

"Ah, yes, it is what you call the old gasp—no, pardon, the old wheeze—that—to come back for a book. It is often useful!"

"You think it was deliberate?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"And after that, you two gentlemen go out on the terrace. And Mrs. Vanderlyn?"

"She went off with her book."

"And the young M. Reggie. He went to bed also?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Carlile he comes here and sometime between five and ten minutes later he heard a scream. Continue, M. Carlile. You heard a scream and you went out into the hall. Ah, perhaps it would be simplest if you reproduced exactly your actions."

Mr. Carlile got up a little awkwardly.

"Here I scream," said Poirot helpfully. He opened his mouth and emitted a shrill bleat. Lord Mayfield turned his head away to hide a smile and Mr.

Carlile looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Allez! Forward! March!" cried Poirot. "It is your cue that I give you there."

Mr. Carlile walked stiffly to the door, opened it and went out. Poirot followed him. The other two came behind.

"The door, did you close it after you or leave it open?"

"I can't really remember. I think I must have left it open."

"No matter. Proceed."

Still with extreme stiffness, Mr. Carlile walked to the bottom of the staircase and stood there looking up.

Poirot said:

"The maid, you say, was on the stairs. Whereabouts?"

"About halfway up."

"And she was looking upset."

"Definitely so."

"Eh bien, me, I am the maid." Poirot ran nimbly up the stairs. "About here?"

"A step or two higher."

"Like this?"

Poirot struck an attitude.

"Well—er—not quite like that."

"How then?"

“Well, she had her hands to her head.”

“Ah, her hands to her head. That is very interesting. Like this?” Poirot raised his arms, his hands rested on his head just above each ear.

“Yes that’s it.”

“Aha! And tell me, M. Carlile, she was a pretty girl—yes?”

“Really, I didn’t notice.”

Carlile’s voice was repressive.

“Aha, you did not notice? But you are a young man. Does not a young man notice when a girl is pretty?”

“Really, M. Poirot, I can only repeat that I did not do so.”

Carlile cast an agonized glance at his employer. Sir George Carrington gave a sudden chuckle.

“M. Poirot seems determined to make you out a gay dog, Carlile,” he remarked.

“Me, I always notice when a girl is pretty,” announced Poirot as he descended the stairs.

The silence with which Mr. Carlile greeted this remark was somewhat pointed. Poirot went on:

“And it was then she told this tale of having seen a ghost?”

“Yes.”

“Did you believe the story?”

“Well, hardly, M. Poirot!”

"I do not mean, do you believe in ghosts. I mean, did it strike you that the girl herself really thought she had seen something?"

"Oh, as to that, I couldn't say. She was certainly breathing fast and seemed upset."

"You did not see or hear anything of her mistress?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did. She came out of her room in the gallery above and called, 'Leonie.' "

"And then?"

"The girl ran up to her and I went back to the study."

"Whilst you were standing at the foot of the stairs here, could anyone have entered the study by the door you had left open?"

Carlile shook his head.

"Not without passing me. The study door is at the end of the passage, as you see."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Mr. Carlile went on in his careful, precise voice.

"I may say that I am very thankful that Lord Mayfield actually saw the thief leaving the window. Otherwise I myself should be in a very unpleasant position."

"Nonsense, my dear Carlile," broke in Lord Mayfield impatiently. "No suspicion could possibly attach to you."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Lord Mayfield, but facts are facts, and I can quite see that it looks badly for me. In any case I hope that my belongings and myself may be searched."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," said Mayfield.

Poirot murmured:

“You are serious in wishing that?”

“I should infinitely prefer it.”

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or two and murmured, “I see.”

Then he asked:

“Where is Mrs. Vanderlyn’s room situated in regard to the study?”

“It is directly over it.”

“With a window looking out over the terrace?”

“Yes.”

Again Poirot nodded. Then he said:

“Let us go to the drawing room.”

Here he wandered round the room, examined the fastenings of the windows, glanced at the scorers on the bridge table and then finally addressed Lord Mayfield.

“This affair,” he said, “is more complicated than it appears. But one thing is quite certain. The stolen plans have not left this house.”

Lord Mayfield stared at him.

“But, my dear M. Poirot, the man I saw leaving the study—”

“There was no man.”

“But I saw him—”

"With the greatest respect, Lord Mayfield, you imagined you saw him. The shadow cast by the branch of a tree deceived you. The fact that a robbery occurred naturally seemed a proof that what you had imagined was true."

"Really, M. Poirot, the evidence of my own eyes—"

"Back my eyes against yours any day, old boy," put in Sir George.

"You must permit me, Lord Mayfield, to be very definite on that point. No one crossed the terrace to the grass."

Looking very pale and speaking stiffly, Mr. Carlile said:

"In that case, if M. Poirot is correct, suspicion automatically attaches itself to me. I am the only person who could possibly have committed the robbery."

Lord Mayfield sprang up.

"Nonsense. Whatever M. Poirot thinks about it, I don't agree with him. I am convinced of your innocence, my dear Carlile. In fact, I'm willing to guarantee it."

Poirot murmured mildly:

"But I have not said that I suspect M. Carlile."

Carlile answered:

"No, but you've made it perfectly clear that no one else had a chance to commit the robbery."

"Du tout! Du tout!"

"But I have told you nobody passed me in the hall to get to the study door."

"I agree. But someone might have come in through the study window."

"But that is just what you said did not happen?"

“I said that no one from outside could have come and left without leaving marks on the grass. But it could have been managed from inside the house. Someone could have gone out from his room by one of these windows, slipped along the terrace, in at the study window, and back again in here.”

Mr. Carlile objected:

“But Lord Mayfield and Sir George Carrington were on the terrace.”

“They were on the terrace, yes, but they were en promenade. Sir George Carrington’s eyes may be of the most reliable”—Poirot made a little bow—“but he does not keep them in the back of his head! The study window is at the extreme left of the terrace, the windows of this room come next, but the terrace continues to the right past one, two, three, perhaps four rooms?”

“Dining room, billiard room, morning room and library,” said Lord Mayfield.

“And you walked up and down the terrace, how many times?”

“At least five or six.”

“You see, it is easy enough, the thief has only to watch for the right moment!”

Carlile said slowly:

“You mean that when I was in the hall, talking to the French girl, the thief was waiting in the drawing room?”

“That is my suggestion. It is, of course, only a suggestion.”

“It doesn’t sound very probable to me,” said Lord Mayfield. “Too risky.”

The Air Marshal demurred.

“I don’t agree with you, Charles. It’s perfectly possible. Wonder I hadn’t the wits to think of it for myself.”

“So you see,” said Poirot, “why I believe that the plans are still in the house. The problem now is to find them!”

Sir George snorted.

“That’s simple enough. Search everybody.”

Lord Mayfield made a movement of dissent, but Poirot spoke before he could.

“No, no, it is not so simple as that. The person who took those plans will anticipate that a search will be made and will make quite sure that they are not found amongst his or her belongings. They will have been hidden in neutral ground.”

“Do you suggest that we’ve got to go playing hide and seek all over the bally house?”

Poirot smiled.

“No, no, we need not be so crude as that. We can arrive at the hiding place (or alternatively at the identity of the guilty person) by reflection. That will simplify matters. In the morning I would like an interview with every person in the house. It would, I think, be unwise to seek those interviews now.”

Lord Mayfield nodded.

“Cause too much comment,” he said, “if we dragged everybody out of their beds at three in the morning. In any case you’ll have to proceed with a good deal of camouflage, M. Poirot. This matter has got to be kept dark.”

Poirot waved an airy hand.

“Leave it to Hercule Poirot. The lies I invent are always most delicate and most convincing. Tomorrow, then, I conduct my investigations. But tonight, I should like to begin by interviewing you, Sir George and you, Lord Mayfield.”

He bowed to them both.

“You mean—alone?”

“That was my meaning.”

Lord Mayfield raised his eyes slightly, then he said:

“Certainly. I’ll leave you alone with Sir George. When you want me, you’ll find me in my study. Come, Carlile.”

He and the secretary went out, shutting the door behind them.

Sir George sat down, reaching mechanically for a cigarette. He turned a puzzled face to Poirot.

“You know,” he said slowly. “I don’t quite get this.”

“That is very simply explained,” said Poirot with a smile. “In two words, to be accurate. Mrs. Vanderlyn!”

“Oh,” said Carrington. “I think I see. Mrs. Vanderlyn?”

“Precisely. It might be, you see, that it would not be very delicate to ask Lord Mayfield the question I want to ask. Why Mrs. Vanderlyn? This lady, she is known to be a suspicious character. Why, then, should she be here? I say to myself there are three explanations. One, that Lord Mayfield has a penchant for the lady (and that is why I seek to talk to you alone. I do not wish to embarrass him). Two, that Mrs. Vanderlyn is perhaps the dear friend of someone else in the house?”

“You can count me out!” said Sir George with a grin.

“Then, if neither of those cases is true, the question returns in redoubled force. Why Mrs. Vanderlyn? And it seems to me I perceive a shadowy answer. There was a reason. Her presence at this particular juncture was definitely desired by Lord Mayfield for a special reason. Am I right?”

Sir George nodded.

“You’re quite right,” he said. “Mayfield is too old a bird to fall for her wiles. He wanted her here for quite another reason. It was like this.”

He retailed the conversation that had taken place at the dinner table. Poirot listened attentively.

“Ah,” he said. “I comprehend now. Nevertheless, it seems that the lady has turned the tables on you both rather neatly!”

Sir George swore freely.

Poirot watched him with some slight amusement, then he said:

“You do not doubt that this theft is her doing—I mean, that she is responsible for it, whether or no she played an active part?”

Sir George stared.

“Of course not! There isn’t any doubt of that. Why, who else would have any interest in stealing those plans?”

“Ah!” said Hercule Poirot. He leaned back and looked at the ceiling. “And yet, Sir George, we agreed, not a quarter of an hour ago, that these papers represented very definitely money. Not perhaps, in quite so obvious a form as banknotes, or gold, or jewellery, but nevertheless they were potential money. If there were anyone here who was hard up—”

The other interrupted him with a snort.

“Who isn’t these days? I suppose I can say it without incriminating myself.”

He smiled and Poirot smiled politely back at him and murmured:

“Mais oui, you can say what you like, for you, Sir George, have the one unimpeachable alibi in this affair.”

“But I’m damned hard up myself!”

Poirot shook his head sadly.

"Yes, indeed, a man in your position has heavy living expenses. Then you have a young son at a most expensive age—"

Sir George groaned.

"Education's bad enough, then debts on top of it. Mind you, this lad's not a bad lad."

Poirot listened sympathetically. He heard a lot of the Air Marshal's accumulated grievances. The lack of grit and stamina in the younger generation, the fantastic way in which mothers spoilt their children and always took their side, the curse of gambling once it got hold of a woman, the folly of playing for higher stakes than you could afford. It was couched in general terms, Sir George did not allude directly to either his wife or his son, but his natural transparency made his generalizations very easy to see through.

He broke off suddenly.

"Sorry, mustn't take up your time with something that's right off the subject, especially at this hour of the night—or rather, morning."

He stifled a yawn.

"I suggest, Sir George, that you should go to bed. You have been most kind and helpful."

"Right, think I will turn in. You really think there is a chance of getting the plans back?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I mean to try. I do not see why not."

"Well, I'll be off. Goodnight."

He left the room.

Poirot remained in his chair staring thoughtfully at the ceiling, then he took out a little notebook and turning to a clean page, he wrote:

Mrs. Vanderlyn?

Lady Julia Carrington?

Mrs. Macatta?

Reggie Carrington?

Mr. Carlile?

Underneath he wrote:

Mrs. Vanderlyn and Mr. Reggie Carrington?

Mrs. Vanderlyn and Lady Julia?

Mrs. Vanderlyn and Mr. Carlile?

He shook his head in a dissatisifed manner, murmuring: “C’est plus simple que ça.”

Then he added a few short sentences.

Did Lord Mayfield see a “shadow?” If not, why did he say he did? Did Sir George see anything? He was positive he had seen nothing AFTER I examined flower-bed. Note: Lord Mayfield is nearsighted, can read without glasses but has to use a monocle to look across a room. Sir George is long-sighted. Therefore, from the far end of the terrace, his sight is more to be depended upon than Lord Mayfield’s. Yet Lord Mayfield is very positive that he DID see something and is quite unshaken by his friend’s denial.

Can anyone be quite as above suspicion as Mr. Carlile appears to be? Lord Mayfield is very emphatic as to his innocence. Too much so. Why? Because he secretly suspects him and is ashamed of his suspicions? Or because he definitely suspects some other person? That is to say, some person OTHER than Mrs. Vanderlyn?

He put the notebook away.

Then, getting up, he went along to the study.

Five

Lord Mayfield was seated at his desk when Poirot entered the study. He swung round, laid down his pen, and looked up inquiringly.

"Well, M. Poirot, had your interview with Carrington?"

Poirot smiled and sat down.

"Yes, Lord Mayfield. He cleared up a point that had puzzled me."

"What was that?"

"The reason for Mrs. Vanderlyn's presence here. You comprehend, I thought it possible—"

Mayfield was quick to realize the cause of Poirot's somewhat exaggerated embarrassment.

"You thought I had a weakness for the lady? Not at all. Far from it. Funnily enough, Carrington thought the same."

"Yes, he has told me of the conversation he held with you on the subject."

Lord Mayfield looked rather rueful.

"My little scheme didn't come off. Always annoying to have to admit that a woman has got the better of you."

"Ah, but she has not got the better of you yet, Lord Mayfield."

"You think we may yet win? Well, I'm glad to hear you say so. I'd like to think it was true."

He sighed.

“I feel I’ve acted like a complete fool—so pleased with my stratagem for entrapping the lady.”

Hercule Poirot said, as he lit one of his tiny cigarettes:

“What was your stratagem exactly, Lord Mayfield?”

“Well,” Lord Mayfield hesitated. “I hadn’t exactly got down to details.”

“You didn’t discuss it with anyone?”

“No.”

“Not even with Mr. Carlile?”

“No.”

Poirot smiled.

“You prefer to play a lone hand, Lord Mayfield.”

“I have usually found it the best way,” said the other a little grimly.

“Yes, you are wise. Trust no one. But you did mention the matter to Sir George Carrington?”

“Simply because I realized that the dear fellow was seriously perturbed about me.”

Lord Mayfield smiled at the remembrance.

“He is an old friend of yours?”

“Yes. I have known him for over twenty years.”

“And his wife?”

"I have known his wife also, of course."

"But (pardon me if I am impertinent) you are not on the same terms of intimacy with her?"

"I don't really see what my personal relationships to people has to do with the matter in hand, M. Poirot."

"But I think, Lord Mayfield, that they may have a good deal to do with it. You agreed, did you not, that my theory of someone in the drawing room was a possible one?"

"Yes. In fact, I agree with you that that is what must have happened."

"We will not say 'must.' That is too self-confident a word. But if that theory of mine is true, who do you think the person in the drawing room could have been?"

"Obviously Mrs. Vanderlyn. She had been back there once for a book. She could have come back for another book, or a handbag, or a dropped handkerchief—one of a dozen feminine excuses. She arranges with her maid to scream and get Carlile away from the study. Then she slips in and out by the windows as you said."

"You forget it could not have been Mrs. Vanderlyn. Carlile heard her call the maid from upstairs while he was talking to the girl."

Lord Mayfield bit his lip.

"True. I forgot that." He looked throughly annoyed.

"You see," said Poirot gently. "We progress. We have first the simple explanation of a thief who comes from outside and makes off with the booty. A very convenient theory as I said at the time, too convenient to be readily accepted. We have disposed of that. Then we come to the theory of the foreign agent, Mrs. Vanderlyn, and that again seems to fit together beautifully up to a certain point. But now it looks as though that, too, was too easy—too convenient—to be accepted."

“You’d wash Mrs. Vanderlyn out of it altogether?”

“It was not Mrs. Vanderlyn in the drawing room. It may have been an ally of Mrs. Vanderlyn’s who committed the theft, but it is just possible that it was committed by another person altogether. If so, we have to consider the question of motive.”

“Isn’t this rather far-fetched, M. Poirot?”

“I do not think so. Now what motives could there be? There is the motive of money. The papers may have been stolen with the object of turning them into cash. That is the simplest motive to consider. But the motive might possibly be something quite different.”

“Such as—”

Poirot said slowly:

“It might have been done definitely with the idea of damaging someone.”

“Who?”

“Possibly Mr. Carlile. He would be the obvious suspect. But there might be more to it than that. The men who control the destiny of a country, Lord Mayfield, are particularly vulnerable to displays of popular feeling.”

“Meaning that the theft was aimed at damaging me?”

Poirot nodded.

“I think I am correct in saying, Lord Mayfield, that about five years ago you passed through a somewhat trying time. You were suspected of friendship with a European Power at that time bitterly unpopular with the electorate of this country.”

“Quite true, M. Poirot.”

“A statesman in these days has a difficult task. He has to pursue the policy he deems advantageous to his country, but he has at the same time to recognize the force of popular feeling. Popular feeling is very often sentimental, muddleheaded, and eminently unsound, but it cannot be disregarded for all that."

"How well you express it! That is exactly the curse of a politician's life. He has to bow to the country's feeling, however dangerous and foolhardy he knows it to be."

"That was your dilemma, I think. There were rumours that you had concluded an agreement with the country in question. This country and the newspapers were up in arms about it. Fortunately the Prime Minister was able categorically to deny the story, and you repudiated it, though still making no secret of the way your sympathies lay."

"All this is quite true, M. Poirot, but why rake up past history?"

"Because I consider it possible that an enemy, disappointed in the way you surmounted that crisis, might endeavour to stage a further dilemma. You soon regained public confidence. Those particular circumstances have passed away, you are now, deservedly, one of the most popular figures in political life. You are spoken of freely as the next Prime Minister when Mr. Hunberly retires."

"You think this is an attempt to discredit me? Nonsense!"

"Tout de même, Lord Mayfield, it would not look well if it were known that the plans of Britain's new bomber had been stolen during a weekend when a certain very charming lady had been your guest. Little hints in the newspapers as to your relationship with that lady would create a feeling of distrust in you."

"Such a thing could not really be taken seriously."

"My dear Lord Mayfield, you know perfectly well it could! It takes so little to undermine public confidence in a man."

"Yes, that's true," said Lord Mayfield. He looked suddenly very worried. "God! how desperately complicated this business is becoming. Do you really think—but it's impossible—impossible."

"You know of nobody who is—jealous of you?"

"Absurd!"

"At any rate you will admit that my questions about your personal relationships with the members of this house party are not totally irrelevant."

"Oh, perhaps—perhaps. You asked me about Julia Carrington. There's really not very much to say. I've never taken to her very much, and I don't think she cares for me. She's one of these restless, nervy women, recklessly extravagant and mad about cards. She's old-fashioned enough, I think, to despise me as being a self-made man."

Poirot said:

"I looked you up in Who's Who before I came down. You were the head of a famous engineering firm and you are yourself a first-class engineer."

"There's certainly nothing I don't know about the practical side. I've worked my way up from the bottom."

Lord Mayfield spoke rather grimly.

"Oh la la!" cried Poirot. "I have been a fool—but a fool!"

The other stared at him.

"I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?"

"It is that a portion of the puzzle has become clear to me. Something I did not see before . . . But it all fits in. Yes—it fits in with beautiful precision."

Lord Mayfield looked at him in somewhat astonished inquiry.

But with a slight smile Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, not now. I must arrange my ideas a little more clearly."

He rose.

"Goodnight, Lord Mayfield. I think I know where those plans are."

Lord Mayfield cried out:

"You know? Then let us get hold of them at once!"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, that would not do. Precipitancy would be fatal. But leave it all to Hercule Poirot."

He went out of the room. Lord Mayfield raised his shoulders in contempt.

"Man's a mountebank," he muttered. Then, putting away his papers and turning out the lights, he, too, made his way up to bed.

Six

"If there's been a burglary, why the devil doesn't old Mayfield send for the police?" demanded Reggie Carrington.

He pushed his chair slightly back from the breakfast table.

He was the last down. His host, Mrs. Macatta and Sir George had finished their breakfasts some time before. His mother and Mrs. Vanderlyn were breakfasting in bed.

Sir George, repeating his statement on the lines agreed upon between Lord Mayfield and Hercule Poirot, had a feeling that he was not managing it as well as he might have done.

"To send for a queer foreigner like this seems very odd to me," said Reggie. "What has been taken, Father?"

"I don't know exactly, my boy."

Reggie got up. He looked rather nervy and on edge this morning.

"Nothing—important? No—papers or anything like that?"

"To tell you the truth, Reggie, I can't tell you exactly."

"Very hush-hush, is it? I see."

Reggie ran up the stairs, paused for a moment halfway with a frown on his face, and then continued his ascent and tapped on his mother's door. Her voice bade him enter.

Lady Julia was sitting up in bed, scribbling figures on the back of an envelope.

“Good morning, darling.” She looked up, then said sharply:

“Reggie, is anything the matter?”

“Nothing much, but it seems there was a burglary last night.”

“A burglary? What was taken?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s all very hush-hush. There’s some odd kind of private inquiry agent downstairs asking everybody questions.”

“How extraordinary!”

“It’s rather unpleasant,” said Reggie slowly, “staying in a house when that kind of thing happens.”

“What did happen exactly?”

“Don’t know. It was some time after we all went to bed. Look out, Mother, you’ll have that tray off.”

He rescued the breakfast tray and carried it to a table by the window.

“Was money taken?”

“I tell you I don’t know.”

Lady Julia said slowly:

“I suppose this inquiry man is asking everybody questions?”

“I suppose so.”

“Where they were last night? All that kind of thing?”

“Probably. Well, I can’t tell him much. I went straight up to bed and was asleep in next to no time.”

Lady Julia did not answer.

"I say, Mother, I suppose you couldn't let me have a spot of cash. I'm absolutely broke."

"No, I couldn't," his mother replied decisively. "I've got the most frightful overdraft myself. I don't know what your father will say when he hears about it."

There was a tap at the door and Sir George entered.

"Ah, there you are, Reggie. Will you go down to the library? M. Hercule Poirot wants to see you."

Poirot had just concluded an interview with the redoubtable Mrs. Macatta.

A few brief questions had elicited the information that Mrs. Macatta had gone up to bed just before eleven, and had heard or seen nothing helpful.

Poirot slid gently from the topic of the burglary to more personal matters. He himself had a great admiration for Lord Mayfield. As a member of the general public he felt that Lord Mayfield was a truly great man. Of course, Mrs. Macatta, being in the know, would have a far better means of estimating that than himself.

"Lord Mayfield has brains," allowed Mrs. Macatta. "And he has carved his career out entirely for himself. He owes nothing to hereditary influence. He has a certain lack of vision, perhaps. In that I find all men sadly alike. They lack the breadth of a woman's imagination. Woman, M. Poirot, is going to be the great force in government in ten years' time."

Poirot said that he was sure of it.

He slid to the topic of Mrs. Vanderlyn. Was it true, as he had heard hinted, that she and Lord Mayfield were very close friends?

"Not in the least. To tell you the truth I was very surprised to meet her here. Very surprised indeed."

Poirot invited Mrs. Macatta's opinion of Mrs. Vanderlyn—and got it.

“One of those absolutely useless women, M. Poirot. Women that make one despair of one’s own sex! A parasite, first and last a parasite.”

“Men admired her?”

“Men!” Mrs. Macatta spoke the word with contempt. “Men are always taken in by those very obvious good looks. That boy, now, young Reggie Carrington, flushing up every time she spoke to him, absurdly flattered by being taken notice of by her. And the silly way she flattered him too. Praising his bridge—which actually was far from brilliant.”

“He is not a good player?”

“He made all sorts of mistakes last night.”

“Lady Julia is a good player, is she not?”

“Much too good in my opinion,” said Mrs. Macatta. “It’s almost a profession with her. She plays morning, noon, and night.”

“For high stakes?”

“Yes, indeed, much higher than I would care to play. Indeed I shouldn’t consider it right.”

“She makes a good deal of money at the game?”

Mrs. Macatta gave a loud and virtuous snort.

“She reckons on paying her debts that way. But she’s been having a run of bad luck lately, so I’ve heard. She looked last night as though she had something on her mind. The evils of gambling, M. Poirot, are only slightly less than the evils caused by drink. If I had my way this country should be purified—”

Poirot was forced to listen to a somewhat lengthy discussion on the purification of England’s morals. Then he closed the conversation adroitly and sent for Reggie Carrington.

He summed the young man up carefully as he entered the room, the weak mouth camouflaged by the rather charming smile, the indecisive chin, the eyes set far apart, the rather narrow head. He thought that he knew Reggie Carrington's type fairly well.

"Mr. Reggie Carrington?"

"Yes. Anything I can do?"

"Just tell me what you can about last night?"

"Well, let me see, we played bridge—in the drawing room. After that I went up to bed."

"That was at what time?"

"Just before eleven. I suppose the robbery took place after that?"

"Yes, after that. You did not hear or see anything?"

Reggie shook his head regretfully.

"I'm afraid not. I went straight to bed and I sleep pretty soundly."

"You went straight up from the drawing room to your bedroom and remained there until the morning?"

"That's right."

"Curious," said Poirot.

Reggie said sharply:

"What do you mean, curious?"

"You did not, for instance, hear a scream?"

"No, I didn't."

“Ah, very curious.”

“Look here, I don’t know what you mean.”

“You are, perhaps, slightly deaf?”

“Certainly not.”

Poirot’s lips moved. It was possible that he was repeating the word curious for the third time. Then he said:

“Well, thank you, Mr. Carrington, that is all.”

Reggie got up and stood rather irresolutely.

“You know,” he said, “now you come to mention it, I believe I did hear something of the kind.”

“Ah, you did hear something?”

“Yes, but you see, I was reading a book—a detective story as a matter of fact—and I—well, I didn’t really quite take it in.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “a most satisfying explanation.”

His face was quite impassive.

Reggie still hesitated, then he turned and walked slowly to the door. There he paused and asked:

“I say, what was stolen?”

“Something of great value, Mr. Carrington. That is all I am at liberty to say.”

“Oh,” said Reggie rather blankly.

He went out.

Poirot nodded his head.

“It fits,” he murmured. “It fits very nicely.”

He touched a bell and inquired courteously if Mrs. Vanderlyn was up yet.

Seven

Mrs. Vanderlyn swept into the room looking very handsome. She was wearing an artfully-cut russet sports suit that showed up the warm lights of her hair. She swept to a chair and smiled in a dazzling fashion at the little man in front of her.

For a moment something showed through the smile. It might have been triumph, it might almost have been mockery. It was gone almost immediately, but it had been there. Poirot found the suggestion of it interesting.

“Burglars? Last night? But how dreadful! Why no, I never heard a thing. What about the police? Can’t they do anything?”

Again, just for a moment, the mockery showed in her eyes.

Hercule Poirot thought:

“It is very clear that you are not afraid of the police, my lady. You know very well that they are not going to be called in.”

And from that followed—what?

He said soberly:

“You comprehend, madame, it is an affair of the most discreet.”

“Why, naturally, M.—Poirot—isn’t it?—I shouldn’t dream of breathing a word. I’m much too great an admirer of dear Lord Mayfield’s to do anything to cause him the least little bit of worry.”

She crossed her knees. A highly-polished slipper of brown leather dangled on the tip of her silk-shod foot.

She smiled, a warm, compelling smile of perfect health and deep satisfaction.

“Do tell me if there’s anything at all I can do?”

“I thank you, madame. You played bridge in the drawing room last night?”

“Yes.”

“I understand that then all the ladies went up to bed?”

“That is right.”

“But someone came back to fetch a book. That was you, was it not, Mrs. Vanderlyn?”

“I was the first one to come back—yes.”

“What do you mean—the first one?” said Poirot sharply.

“I came back right away,” explained Mrs. Vanderlyn. “Then I went up and rang for my maid. She was a long time in coming. I rang again. Then I went out on the landing. I heard her voice and I called her. After she had brushed my hair I sent her away, she was in a nervous, upset state and tangled the brush in my hair once or twice. It was then, just as I sent her away, that I saw Lady Julia coming up the stairs. She told me she had been down again for a book, too. Curious, wasn’t it?”

Mrs. Vanderlyn smiled as she finished, a wide, rather feline smile. Hercule Poirot thought to himself that Mrs. Vanderlyn did not like Lady Julia Carrington.

“As you say, madame. Tell me, did you hear your maid scream?”

“Why, yes, I did hear something of that kind.”

“Did you ask her about it?”

“Yes. She told me she thought she had seen a floating figure in white—such nonsense!”

“What was Lady Julia wearing last night?”

“Oh, you think perhaps—Yes, I see. She was wearing a white evening dress. Of course, that explains it. She must have caught sight of her in the darkness just as a white figure. These girls are so superstitious.”

“Your maid has been with you a long time, madame?”

“Oh, no.” Mrs. Vanderlyn opened her eyes rather wide. “Only about five months.”

“I should like to see her presently, if you do not mind, madame.”

Mrs. Vanderlyn raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, certainly,” she said rather coldly.

“I should like, you understand, to question her.”

“Oh, yes.”

Again a flicker of amusement.

Poirot rose and bowed.

“Madame,” he said. “You have my complete admiration.”

Mrs. Vanderlyn for once seemed a trifle taken aback.

“Oh, M. Poirot, how nice of you, but why?”

“You are, madame, so perfectly armoured, so completely sure of yourself.”

Mrs. Vanderlyn laughed a little uncertainly.

“Now I wonder,” she said, “if I am to take that as a compliment?”

Poirot said:

“It is, perhaps, a warning—not to treat life with arrogance.”

Mrs. Vanderlyn laughed with more assurance. She got up and held out a hand.

“Dear M. Poirot, I do wish you all success. Thank you for all the charming things you have said to me.”

She went out. Poirot murmured to himself:

“You wish me success, do you? Ah, but you are very sure I am not going to meet with success! Yes, you are very sure indeed. That, it annoys me very much.”

With a certain petulance, he pulled the bell and asked that Mademoiselle Leonie might be sent to him.

His eyes roamed over her appreciatively as she stood hestiating in the doorway, demure in her black dress with her neatly parted black waves of hair and her modestly-dropped eyelids. He nodded slow approval.

“Come in, Mademoiselle Leonie,” he said. “Do not be afraid.”

She came in and stood demurely before him.

“Do you know,” said Poirot with a sudden change of tone, “that I find you very good to look at.”

Leonie responded promptly. She flashed him a glance out of the corner of her eyes and murmured softly:

“Monsieur is very kind.”

“Figure to yourself,” said Poirot. “I demand of M. Carlile whether you are or not good-looking and he replies that he does not know!”

Leonie cocked her chin up contemptuously.

“That image!”

“That describes him very well.”

“I do not believe he has ever looked at a girl in his life, that one.”

“Probably not. A pity. He has missed a lot. But there are others in this house who are more appreciative, is it not so?”

“Really, I do not know what monsieur means.”

“Oh, yes, Mademoiselle Leonie, you know very well. A pretty history that you recount last night about a ghost that you have seen. As soon as I hear that you are standing there with your hands to your head, I know very well that there is no question of ghosts. If a girl is frightened she clasps her heart, or she raises her hands to her mouth to stifle a cry, but if her hands are on her hair it means something very different. It means that her hair has been ruffled and that she is hastily getting it into shape again! Now then, mademoiselle, let us have the truth. Why did you scream on the stairs?”

“But monsieur it is true, I saw a tall figure all in white—”

“Mademoiselle, do not insult my intelligence. That story, it may have been good enough for M. Carlile, but it is not good enough for Hercule Poirot. The truth is that you had just been kissed, is it not so? And I will make a guess that it was M. Reggie Carrington who kissed you.”

Leonie twinkled an unabashed eye at him.

“Eh bien,” she demanded, “after all, what is a kiss?”

“What, indeed?” said Poirot gallantly.

“You see, the young gentleman he came up behind me and caught me round the waist—and so naturally he startled me and I screamed. If I had known —well, then naturally I would not have screamed.”

“Naturally,” agreed Poirot.

“But he came upon me like a cat. Then the study door opened and out came M. le secrétaire and the young gentleman slipped away upstairs and there I was looking like a fool. Naturally I had to say something—especially to ——” she broke into French, “un jeune homme comme ça, tellement comme il faut!”

“So you invent a ghost?”

“Indeed, monsieur, it was all I could think of. A tall figure all in white, that floated. It is ridiculous but what else could I do?”

“Nothing. So now, all is explained. I had my suspicions from the first.”

Leonie shot him a provocative glance.

“Monsieur is very clever, and very sympathetic.”

“And since I am not going to make you any embarrassments over the affair you will do something for me in return?”

“Most willingly, monsieur.”

“How much do you know of your mistress’s affairs?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“Not very much, monsieur. I have my ideas, of course.”

“And those ideas?”

“Well, it does not escape me that the friends of madame are always soldiers or sailors or airmen. And then there are other friends—foreign gentlemen who come to see her very quietly sometimes. Madame is very handsome, though I do not think she will be so much longer. The young men, they find her very attractive. Sometimes I think, they say too much. But it is only my idea, that. Madame does not confide in me.”

“What you would have me to understand is that madame plays a lone hand?”

"That is right, monsieur."

"In other words, you cannot help me."

"I fear not, monsieur. I would do if I could."

"Tell me, your mistress is in a good mood today?"

"Decidedly, monsieur."

"Something has happened to please her?"

"She has been in good spirits ever since she came here."

"Well, Leonie, you should know."

The girl answered confidently:

"Yes, monsieur. I could not be mistaken there. I know all madame's moods. She is in high spirits."

"Positively triumphant?"

"That is exactly the word, monsieur."

Poirot nodded gloomily.

"I find that—a little hard to bear. Yet I perceive that it is inevitable. Thank you, mademoiselle, that is all."

Leonie threw him a coquettish glance.

"Thank you, monsieur. If I meet monsieur on the stairs, be well-assured that I shall not scream."

"My child," said Poirot with dignity. "I am of advanced years. What have I to do with such frivolities?"

But with a little twitter of laughter, Leonie took herself off.

Poirot paced slowly up and down the room. His face became grave and anxious.

“And now,” he said at last, “for Lady Julia. What will she say, I wonder?”

Lady Julia came into the room with a quiet air of assurance. She bent her head graciously, accepted the chair that Poirot drew forward and spoke in a low, well-bred voice.

“Lord Mayfield says that you wish to ask me some questions.”

“Yes, madame. It is about last night.”

“About last night, yes?”

“What happened after you had finished your game of bridge?”

“My husband thought it was too late to begin another. I went up to bed.”

“And then?”

“I went to sleep.”

“That is all?”

“Yes. I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything of much interest. When did this”—she hesitated—“burglary occur?”

“Very soon after you went upstairs.”

“I see. And what exactly was taken?”

“Some private papers, madame.”

“Important papers?”

“Very important.”

She frowned a little and then said:

“They were—valuable?”

“Yes, madame, they were worth a good deal of money.”

“I see.”

There was a pause, and then Poirot said:

“What about your book, madame?”

“My book?” She raised bewildered eyes to him.

“Yes, I understand Mrs. Vanderlyn to say that some time after you three ladies had retired you went down again to fetch a book.”

“Yes, of course, so I did.”

“So that, as a matter of fact, you did not go straight to bed when you went upstairs? You returned to the drawing room?”

“Yes, that is true. I had forgotten.”

“While you were in the drawing room, did you hear someone scream?”

“No—yes—I don’t think so.”

“Surely, madame. You could not have failed to hear it in the drawing room.”

Lady Julia flung her head back and said firmly:

“I heard nothing.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

The silence grew uncomfortable. Lady Julia asked abruptly:

“What is being done?”

“Being done? I do not understand you, madame.”

“I mean about the robbery. Surely the police must be doing something.”

Poirot shook his head.

“The police have not been called in. I am in charge.”

She stared at him, her restless haggard face sharpened and tense. Her eyes, dark and searching, sought to pierce his impassivity.

They fell at last—defeated.

“You cannot tell me what is being done?”

“I can only assure you, madame, that I am leaving no stone unturned.”

“To catch the thief—or to—recover the papers?”

“The recovery of the papers is the main thing, madame.”

Her manner changed. It became bored, listless.

“Yes,” she said indifferently. “I suppose it is.”

There was another pause.

“Is there anything else, M. Poirot?”

“No, madame. I will not detain you further.”

“Thank you.”

He opened the door for her. She passed out without glancing at him.

Poirot went back to the fireplace and carefully rearranged the ornaments on the mantelpiece. He was still at it when Lord Mayfield came in through the window.

“Well?” said the latter.

“Very well, I think. Events are shaping themselves as they should.”

Lord Mayfield said, staring at him:

“You are pleased.”

“No, I am not pleased. But I am content.”

“Really, M. Poirot, I cannot make you out.”

“I am not such a charlatan as you think.”

“I never said—”

“No, but you thought! No matter. I am not offended. It is sometimes necessary for me to adopt a certain pose.”

Lord Mayfield looked at him doubtfully with a certain amount of distrust. Hercule Poirot was a man he did not understand. He wanted to despise him, but something warned him that this ridiculous little man was not so futile as he appeared. Charles McLaughlin had always been able to recognize capability when he saw it.

“Well,” he said, “we are in your hands. What do you advise next?”

“Can you get rid of your guests?”

“I think it might be arranged . . . I could explain that I have to go to London over this affair. They will then probably offer to leave.”

“Very good. Try and arrange it like that.”

Lord Mayfield hesitated.

“You don’t think—?”

“I am quite sure that that would be the wise course to take.”

Lord Mayfield shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, if you say so.”

He went out.

Eight

The guests left after lunch. Mrs. Vanderlyn and Mrs. Macatta went by train, the Carringtons had their car. Poirot was standing in the hall as Mrs. Vanderlyn bade her host a charming farewell.

"So terribly sorry for you having this bother and anxiety. I do hope it will turn out all right for you. I shan't breathe a word of anything."

She pressed his hand and went out to where the Rolls was waiting to take her to the station. Mrs. Macatta was already inside. Her adieu had been curt and unsympathetic.

Suddenly Leonie, who had been getting in front with the chauffeur, came running back into the hall.

"The dressing case of madame, it is not in the car," she exclaimed.

There was a hurried search. At last Lord Mayfield discovered it where it had been put down in the shadow of an old oak chest. Leonie uttered a glad little cry as she seized the elegant affair of green morocco, and hurried out with it.

Then Mrs. Vanderlyn leaned out of the car.

"Lord Mayfield, Lord Mayfield." She handed him a letter. "Would you mind putting this in your postbag? If I keep it meaning to post it in town, I'm sure to forget. Letters just stay in my bag for days."

Sir George Carrington was fidgeting with his watch, opening and shutting it. He was a maniac for punctuality.

“They’re cutting it fine,” he murmured. “Very fine. Unless they’re careful, they’ll miss the train—”

His wife said irritably:

“Oh, don’t fuss, George. After all, it’s their train, not ours!”

He looked at her reproachfully.

The Rolls drove off.

Reggie drew up at the front door in the Carringtons’ Morris.

“All ready, Father,” he said.

The servants began bringing out the Carringtons’ luggage. Reggie supervised its disposal in the dickey.

Poirot moved out of the front door, watching the proceedings.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his arm. Lady Julia’s voice spoke in an agitated whisper.

“M. Poirot. I must speak to you—at once.”

He yielded to her insistent hand. She drew him into a small morning room and closed the door. She came close to him.

“Is it true what you said—that the discovery of the papers is what matters most to Lord Mayfield?”

Poirot looked at her curiously.

“It is quite true, madame.”

“If—if those papers were returned to you, would you undertake that they should be given back to Lord Mayfield, and no question asked?”

“I am not sure that I understand you.”

“You must! I am sure that you do! I am suggesting that the—the thief should remain anonymous if the papers are returned.”

Poirot asked:

“How soon would that be, madame?”

“Definitely within twelve hours.”

“You can promise that?”

“I can promise it.”

As he did not answer, she repeated urgently:

“Will you guarantee that there will be no publicity?”

He answered then—very gravely:

“Yes, madame, I will guarantee that.”

“Then everything can be arranged.”

She passed abruptly from the room. A moment later Poirot heard the car drive away.

He crossed the hall and went along the passage to the study. Lord Mayfield was there. He looked up as Poirot entered.

“Well?” he said.

Poirot spread out his hands.

“The case is ended, Lord Mayfield.”

“What?”

Poirot repeated word for word the scene between himself and Lady Julia.

Lord Mayfield looked at him with a stupefied expression.

“But what does it mean? I don’t understand.”

“It is very clear, is it not? Lady Julia knows who stole the plans.”

“You don’t mean she took them herself?”

“Certainly not. Lady Julia may be a gambler. She is not a thief. But if she offers to return the plans, it means that they were taken by her husband or her son. Now Sir George Carrington was out on the terrace with you. That leaves us the son. I think I can reconstruct the happenings of last night fairly accurately. Lady Julia went to her son’s room last night and found it empty. She came downstairs to look for him, but did not find him. This morning she hears of the theft, and she also hears that her son declares that he went straight to his room and never left it. That, she knows, is not true. And she knows something else about her son. She knows that he is weak, that he is desperately hard up for money. She has observed his infatuation for Mrs. Vanderlyn. The whole thing is clear to her. Mrs. Vanderlyn has persuaded Reggie to steal the plans. But she determines to play her part also. She will tackle Reggie, get hold of the papers and return them.”

“But the whole thing is quite impossible,” cried Lord Mayfield.

“Yes, it is impossible, but Lady Julia does not know that. She does not know what I, Hercule Poirot, know, that young Reggie Carrington was not stealing papers last night, but instead was philandering with Mrs. Vanderlyn’s French maid.”

“The whole thing is a mare’s nest!”

“Exactly.”

“And the case is not ended at all!”

“Yes, it is ended. I, Hercule Poirot, know the truth. You do not believe me? You did not believe me yesterday when I said I knew where the plans were. But I did know. They were very close at hand.”

“Where?”

“They were in your pocket, my lord.”

There was a pause, then Lord Mayfield said:

“Do you really know what you are saying, M. Poirot?”

“Yes, I know. I know that I am speaking to a very clever man. From the first it worried me that you, who were admittedly shortsighted, should be so positive about the figure you had seen leaving the window. You wanted that solution—the convenient solution—to be accepted. Why? Later, one by one, I eliminated everyone else. Mrs. Vanderlyn was upstairs, Sir George was with you on the terrace, Reggie Carrington was with the French girl on the stairs, Mrs. Macatta was blamelessly in her bedroom. (It is next to the housekeeper’s room, and Mrs. Macatta snores!) Lady Julia clearly believed her son guilty. So there remained only two possibilities. Either Carlile did not put the papers on the desk but into his own pocket (and that is not reasonable, because, as you pointed out, he could have taken a tracing of them), or else—or else the plans were there when you walked over to the desk, and the only place they could have gone was into your pocket. In that case everything was clear. Your insistence on the figure you had seen, your insistence on Carlile’s innocence, your disinclination to have me summoned.

“One thing did puzzle me—the motive. You were, I was convinced, an honest man, a man of integrity. That showed in your anxiety that no innocent person should be suspected. It was also obvious that the theft of the plans might easily affect your career unfavourably. Why, then, this wholly unreasonable theft? And at last the answer came to me. The crisis in your career, some years ago, the assurances given to the world by the Prime Minister that you had had no negotiations with the power in question. Suppose that that was not strictly true, that there remained some record—a letter, perhaps—showing that in actual fact you had done what you had publicly denied. Such a denial was necessary in the interests of public policy. But it is doubtful if the man in the street would see it that way. It might mean that at the moment when supreme power might be given into your hands, some stupid echo from the past would undo everything.

"I suspect that that letter has been preserved in the hands of a certain government, that that government offered to trade with you—the letter in exchange for the plans of the new bomber. Some men would have refused. You—did not! You agreed. Mrs. Vanderlyn was the agent in the matter. She came here by arrangement to make the exchange. You gave yourself away when you admitted that you had formed no definite stratagem for entrapping her. That admission made your reason for inviting her here incredibly weak.

"You arranged the robbery. Pretended to see the thief on the terrace—thereby clearing Carlile of suspicion. Even if he had not left the room, the desk was so near the window that a thief might have taken the plans while Carlile was busy at the safe with his back turned. You walked over to the desk, took the plans and kept them on your own person until the moment when, by prearranged plan, you slipped them into Mrs. Vanderlyn's dressing case. In return she handed you the fatal letter disguised as an unposted letter of her own."

Poirot stopped.

Lord Mayfield said:

"Your knowledge is very complete, M. Poirot. You must think me an unutterable skunk."

Poirot made a quick gesture.

"No, no, Lord Mayfield. I think, as I said, that you are a very clever man. It came to me suddenly as we talked here last night. You are a first-class engineer. There will be, I think, some subtle alterations in the specifications of that bomber, alterations done so skilfully that it will be difficult to grasp why the machine is not the success it ought to be. A certain foreign power will find the type a failure . . . It will be a disappointment to them, I am sure. . . ."

Again there was a silence—then Lord Mayfield said:

“You are much too clever, M. Poirot. I will only ask you to believe one thing. I have faith in myself. I believe that I am the man to guide England through the days of crisis that I see coming. If I did not honestly believe that I am needed by my country to steer the ship of state, I would not have done what I have done—made the best of both worlds—saved myself from disaster by a clever trick.”

“My lord,” said Poirot, “if you could not make the best of both worlds, you could not be a politician!”

DEAD MAN’S MIRROR

One

I

The flat was a modern one. The furnishings of the room were modern, too. The armchairs were squarely built, the upright chairs were angular. A modern writing table was set squarely in front of the window, and at it sat a small, elderly man. His head was practically the only thing in the room that was not square. It was egg-shaped.

M. Hercule Poirot was reading a letter:

Station: Whimperley. Hamborough Close,

Telegrams: Hamborough St. Mary

Hamborough St. John. Westshire.

September 24th, 1936.

M. Hercule Poirot.

Dear Sir,—A matter has arisen which requires handling with great delicacy and discretion. I have heard good accounts of you, and have decided to entrust the matter to you. I have reason to believe that I am the victim of fraud, but for family reasons I do not wish to call in the police. I am taking certain measures of my own to deal with the business, but you must be prepared to come down here immediately on receipt of a telegram. I should be obliged if you will not answer this letter.

Yours faithfully,

Gervase Chevenix-Gore.

The eyebrows of M. Hercule Poirot climbed slowly up his forehead until they nearly disappeared into his hair.

“And who, then,” he demanded of space, “is this Gervase Chevenix-Gore?”

He crossed to a bookcase and took out a large, fat book.

He found what he wanted easily enough.

Chevenix-Gore, Sir Gervase Francis Xavier, 10th Bt. cr. 1694; formerly Captain 17th Lancers; b. 18th May, 1878; e.s. of Sir Guy Chevenix-Gore, 9th Bt., and Lady Claudia Bretherton, 2nd. d. of 8th Earl of Wallingford. S. father, 1911; m. 1912, Vanda Elizabeth, e.d. of Colonel Frederick Arbuthnot, q.v.; educ. Eton. Served European War, 1914–18. Recreations: travelling, big game hunting. Address: Hamborough St. Mary, Westshire, and 218 Lowndes Square, S.W.1. Clubs: Cavalry. Travellers.

Poirot shook his head in a slightly dissatisfied manner. For a moment or two he remained lost in thought, then he went to the desk, pulled open a drawer and took out a little pile of invitation cards.

His face brightened.

“A la bonne heure! Exactly my affair! He will certainly be there.”

II

A duchess greeted M. Hercule Poirot in fulsome tones.

“So you could manage to come after all, M. Poirot! Why, that’s splendid.”

“The pleasure is mine, madame,” murmured Poirot, bowing.

He escaped from several important and splendid beings—a famous diplomat, an equally famous actress and a well-known sporting peer—and found at last the person he had come to seek, that invariably "also present" guest, Mr. Satterthwaite.

Mr. Satterthwaite twittered amiably.

"The dear duchess—I always enjoy her parties . . . Such a personality, if you know what I mean. I saw a lot of her in Corsica some years ago. . . ."

Mr. Satterthwaite's conversation was apt to be unduly burdened by mentions of his titled acquaintances. It is possible that he may sometimes have found pleasure in the company of Messrs. Jones, Brown or Robinson, but, if so, he did not mention the fact. And yet, to describe Mr. Satterthwaite as a mere snob and leave it at that would have been to do him an injustice. He was a keen observer of human nature, and if it is true that the looker-on knows most of the game, Mr. Satterthwaite knew a good deal.

"You know, my dear fellow, it is really ages since I saw you. I always feel myself privileged to have seen you work at close quarters in the Crow's Nest business. I feel since then that I am in the know, so to speak. I saw Lady Mary only last week, by the way. A charming creature—pot pourri and lavender!"

After passing lightly on one or two scandals of the moment—the indiscretions of an earl's daughter, and the lamentable conduct of a viscount—Poirot succeeded in introducing the name of Gervase Chevenix-Gore.

Mr. Satterthwaite responded immediately.

"Ah, now, there is a character, if you like! The Last of the Baronets—that's his nickname."

"Pardon, I do not quite comprehend."

Mr. Satterthwaite unbent indulgently to the lower comprehension of a foreigner.

"It's a joke, you know—a joke. Naturally, he's not really the last baronet in England—but he does represent the end of an era. The Bold Bad Baronet—the mad harum-scarum baronet so popular in the novels of the last century—the kind of fellow who laid impossible wagers and won 'em."

He went on to expound what he meant in more detail. In younger years, Gervase Chevenix-Gore had sailed round the world in a windjammer. He had been on an expedition to the Pole. He had challenged a racing peer to a duel. For a wager he had ridden his favourite mare up the staircase of a ducal house. He had once leapt from a box to the stage and carried off a well-known actress in the middle of her rôle.

The anecdotes of him were innumerable.

"It's an old family," went on Mr. Satterthwaite. "Sir Guy de Chevenix went on the first crusade. Now, alas, the line looks like it's coming to an end. Old Gervase is the last Chevenix-Gore."

"The estate, it is impoverished?"

"Not a bit of it. Gervase is fabulously wealthy. Owns valuable house property—coalfields—and in addition he staked out a claim to some mine in Peru or somewhere in South America, when he was a young man, which has yielded him a fortune. An amazing man. Always lucky in everything he's undertaken."

"He is now an elderly man, of course?"

"Yes, poor old Gervase." Mr. Satterthwaite sighed, shook his head. "Most people would describe him to you as mad as a hatter. It's true, in a way. He is mad—not in the sense of being certifiable or having delusions—but mad in the sense of being abnormal. He's always been a man of great originality of character."

"And originality becomes eccentricity as the years go by?" suggested Poirot.

"Very true. That's exactly what's happened to poor old Gervase."

“He has perhaps, a swollen idea of his own importance?”

“Absolutely. I should imagine that, in Gervase’s mind, the world has always been divided into two parts—there are the Chevenix-Gores, and the other people!”

“An exaggerated sense of family!”

“Yes. The Chevenix-Gores are all arrogant as the devil—a law unto themselves. Gervase, being the last of them, has got it badly. He is—well, really, you know, to hear him talk, you might imagine him to be—er, the Almighty!”

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully.

“Yes, I imagined that. I have had, you see, a letter from him. It was an unusual letter. It did not demand. It summoned!”

“A royal command,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, tittering a little.

“Precisely. It did not seem to occur to this Sir Gervase that I, Hercule Poirot, am a man of importance, a man of infinite affairs! That it was extremely unlikely that I should be able to fling everything aside and come hastening like an obedient dog—like a mere nobody, gratified to receive a commission!”

Mr. Satterthwaite bit his lip in an effort to suppress a smile. It may have occurred to him that where egoism was concerned, there was not much to choose between Hercule Poirot and Gervase Chevenix-Gore.

He murmured:

“Of course, if the cause of the summons was urgent—?”

“It was not!” Poirot’s hands rose in the air in an emphatic gesture. “I was to hold myself at his disposition, that was all, in case he should require me! Enfin, je vous demande!”

Again the hands rose eloquently, expressing better than words could do M. Hercule Poirot's sense of utter outrage.

"I take it," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "that you refused?"

"I have not yet had the opportunity," said Poirot slowly.

"But you will refuse?"

A new expression passed over the little man's face. His brow furrowed itself perplexedly.

He said:

"How can I express myself? To refuse—yes, that was my first instinct. But I do not know . . . One has, sometimes, a feeling. Faintly, I seem to smell the fish. . . ."

Mr. Satterthwaite received this last statement without any sign of amusement.

"Oh?" he said. "That is interesting. . . ."

"It seems to me," went on Hercule Poirot, "that a man such as you have described might be very vulnerable—"

"Vulnerable?" queried Mr. Satterthwaite. For the moment he was surprised. The word was not one that he would naturally have associated with Gervase Chevenix-Gore. But he was a man of perception, quick in observation. He said slowly:

"I think I see what you mean."

"Such a one is encased, is he not, in an armour—such an armour! The armour of the crusaders was nothing to it—an armour of arrogance, of pride, of complete self-esteem. This armour, it is in some ways a protection, the arrows, the everyday arrows of life glance off it. But there is this danger; Sometimes a man in armour might not even know he was being attacked. He will be slow to see, slow to hear—slower still to feel."

He paused, then asked with a change of manner:

"Of what does the family of this Sir Gervase consist?"

"There's Vanda—his wife. She was an Arbuthnot—very handsome girl. She's still quite a handsome woman. Frightfully vague, though. Devoted to Gervase. She's got a leaning towards the occult, I believe. Wears amulets and scarabs and gives out that she's the reincarnation of an Egyptian Queen . . . Then there's Ruth—she's their adopted daughter. They've no children of their own. Very attractive girl in the modern style. That's all the family. Except, of course, for Hugo Trent. He's Gervase's nephew. Pamela Chevenix-Gore married Reggie Trent and Hugo was their only child. He's an orphan. He can't inherit the title, of course, but I imagine he'll come in for most of Gervase's money in the end. Good-looking lad, he's in the Blues."

Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully. Then he asked:

"It is a grief to Sir Gervase, yes, that he has no son to inherit his name?"

"I should imagine that it cuts pretty deep."

"The family name, it is a passion with him?"

"Yes."

Mr. Satterthwaite was silent a moment or two. He was very intrigued. Finally he ventured:

"You see a definite reason for going down to Hamborough Close?"

Slowly, Poirot shook his head.

"No," he said. "As far as I can see, there is no reason at all. But, all the same, I fancy I shall go."

Two

Hercule Poirot sat in the corner of a first-class carriage speeding through the English countryside.

Meditatively he took from his pocket a neatly folded telegram, which he opened and reread:

Take four-thirty from St. Pancras instruct guard have express stopped at Whimperley.

Chevenix-Gore.

He folded up the telegram again and put it back in his pocket.

The guard on the train had been obsequious. The gentleman was going to Hamborough Close? Oh, yes, Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore's guests always had the express stopped at Whimperley. "A special kind of prerogative, I think it is, sir."

Since then the guard had paid two visits to the carriage—the first in order to assure the traveller that everything would be done to keep the carriage for himself, the second to announce that the express was running ten minutes late.

The train was due to arrive at 7:50, but it was exactly two minutes past eight when Hercule Poirot descended on to the platform of the little country station and pressed the expected half crown into the attentive guard's hand.

There was a whistle from the engine, and the Northern Express began to move once more. A tall chauffeur in dark green uniform stepped up to Poirot.

"Mr. Poirot? For Hamborough Close?"

He picked up the detective's neat valise and led the way out of the station. A big Rolls was waiting. The chauffeur held the door open for Poirot to get in, arranged a sumptuous fur rug over his knees, and they drove off.

After some ten minutes of cross-country driving, round sharp corners and down country lanes, the car turned in at a wide gateway flanked with huge stone griffons.

They drove through a park and up to the house. The door of it was opened as they drew up, and a butler of imposing proportions showed himself upon the front step.

"Mr. Poirot? This way, sir."

He led the way along the hall and threw open a door halfway along it on the right.

"Mr. Hercule Poirot," he announced.

The room contained a number of people in evening dress, and as Poirot walked in his quick eyes perceived at once that his appearance was not expected. The eyes of all present rested on him in unfeigned surprise.

Then a tall woman, whose dark hair was threaded with grey, made an uncertain advance towards him.

Poirot bowed over her hand.

"My apologies, madame," he said. "I fear that my train was late."

"Not at all," said Lady Chevenix-Gore vaguely. Her eyes still stared at him in a puzzled fashion. "Not at all, Mr.—er—I didn't quite hear—"

"Hercule Poirot."

He said the name clearly and distinctly.

Somewhere behind him he heard a sudden sharp intake of breath.

At the same time he realized that clearly his host could not be in the room. He murmured gently:

“You knew I was coming, madame?”

“Oh—oh, yes . . .” Her manner was not convincing. “I think—I mean I suppose so, but I am so terribly impractical, M. Poirot. I forget everything.” Her tone held a melancholy pleasure in the fact. “I am told things. I appear to take them in—but they just pass through my brain and are gone! Vanished! As though they had never been.”

Then, with a slight air of performing a duty long overdue, she glanced round her vaguely and murmured:

“I expect you know everybody.”

Though this was patently not the case, the phrase was clearly a well-worn formula by means of which Lady Chevenix-Gore spared herself the trouble of introduction and the strain of remembering people’s right names.

Making a supreme effort to meet the difficulties of this particular case, she added:

“My daughter—Ruth.”

The girl who stood before him was also tall and dark, but she was of a very different type. Instead of the flattish, indeterminate features of Lady Chevenix-Gore, she had a well-chiselled nose, slightly aquiline, and a clear, sharp line of jaw. Her black hair swept back from her face into a mass of little tight curls. Her colouring was of carnation clearness and brilliance, and owed little to makeup. She was, so Hercule Poirot thought, one of the loveliest girls he had seen.

He recognized, too, that she had brains as well as beauty, and guessed at certain qualities of pride and temper. Her voice, when she spoke, came with a slight drawl that struck him as deliberately put on.

“How exciting,” she said, “to entertain M. Hercule Poirot! The old man arranged a little surprise for us, I suppose.”

“So you did not know I was coming, mademoiselle?” he said quickly.

“I hadn’t an idea of it. As it is, I must postpone getting my autograph book until after dinner.”

The notes of a gong sounded from the hall, then the butler opened the door and announced:

“Dinner is served.”

And then, almost before the last word, “served,” had been uttered, something very curious happened. The pontificial domestic figure became, just for one moment, a highly astonished human being. . . .

The metamorphosis was so quick and the mask of the well-trained servant was back again so soon, that anyone who had not happened to be looking would not have noticed the change. Poirot, however, had happened to be looking. He wondered.

The butler hesitated in the doorway. Though his face was again correctly expressionless, an air of tension hung about his figure.

Lady Chevenix-Gore said uncertainly:

“Oh, dear—this is most extraordinary. Really, I—one hardly knows what to do.”

Ruth said to Poirot:

“This singular consternation, M. Poirot, is occasioned by the fact that my father, for the first time for at least twenty years, is late for dinner.”

“It is most extraordinary—” wailed Lady Chevenix-Gore. “Gervase never—”

An elderly man of upright soldierly carriage came to her side. He laughed genially.

“Good old Gervase! Late at last! Upon my word, we’ll rag him over this. Elusive collar stud, d’you think? Or is Gervase immune from our common weaknesses?”

Lady Chevenix-Gore said in a low, puzzled voice:

“But Gervase is never late.”

It was almost ludicrous, the consternation caused by this simple contretemps. And yet, to Hercule Poirot, it was not ludicrous . . . Behind the consternation he felt uneasiness—perhaps even apprehension. And he, too, found it strange that Gervase Chevenix-Gore should not appear to greet the guest he had summoned in such a mysterious manner.

In the meantime, it was clear that nobody knew quite what to do. An unprecedented situation had arisen with which nobody knew how to deal.

Lady Chevenix-Gore at last took the initiative, if initiative it can be called. Certainly her manner was vague in the extreme.

“Snell,” she said, “is your master—?”

She did not finish the sentence, merely looked at the butler expectantly.

Snell, who was clearly used to his mistress’s methods of seeking information, replied promptly to the unspecified question:

“Sir Gervase came downstairs at five minutes to eight, m’lady, and went straight to the study.”

“Oh, I see—” Her mouth remained open, her eyes seemed far away. “You don’t think—I mean—he heard the gong?”

“I think he must have done so, m’lady, the gong being immediately outside the study door. I did not, of course, know that Sir Gervase was still in the study, otherwise I should have announced to him that dinner was ready. Shall I do so now, m’lady?”

Lady Chevenix-Gore seized on the suggestion with manifest relief.

“Oh, thank you, Snell. Yes, please do. Yes, certainly.”

She said, as the butler left the room:

“Snell is such a treasure. I rely on him absolutely. I really don’t know what I should do without Snell.”

Somebody murmured a sympathetic assent, but nobody spoke. Hercule Poirot, watching that room full of people with suddenly sharpened attention, had an idea that one and all were in a state of tension. His eyes ran quickly over them, tabulating them roughly. Two elderly men, the soldierly one who had spoken just now, and a thin, spare, grey-haired man with closely pinched legal lips. Two youngish men—very different in type from each other. One with a moustache and an air of modest arrogance, he guessed to be possibly Sir Gervase’s nephew, the one in the Blues. The other, with sleek brushed-back hair and a rather obvious style of good looks, he put down as of a definitely inferior social class. There was a small middle-aged woman with pince-nez and intelligent eyes, and there was a girl with flaming red hair.

Snell appeared at the door. His manner was perfect, but once again the veneer of the impersonal butler showed signs of the perturbed human being beneath the surface.

“Excuse me, m’lady, the study door is locked.”

“Locked?”

It was a man’s voice—young, alert, with a ring of excitement in it. It was the good-looking young man with the slicked-back hair who had spoken. He went on, hurrying forward:

“Shall I go and see—?”

But very quietly Hercule Poirot took command. He did it so naturally that no one thought it odd that this stranger, who had just arrived, should suddenly assume charge of the situation.

“Come,” he said. “Let us go to the study.”

He continued, speaking to Snell:

“Lead the way, if you please.”

Snell obeyed. Poirot followed close behind him, and, like a flock of sheep, everyone else followed.

Snell led the way through the big hall, past the great branching curve of the staircase, past an enormous grandfather clock and a recess in which stood a gong, along a narrow passage which ended in a door.

Here Poirot passed Snell and gently tried the handle. It turned, but the door did not open. Poirot rapped gently with his knuckles on the panel of the door. He rapped louder and louder. Then, suddenly desisting, he dropped to his knees and applied his eye to the keyhole.

Fig.1.eps

Slowly he rose to his feet and looked round. His face was stern.

“Gentlemen!” he said. “This door must be broken open immediately!”

Under his direction the two young men, who were both tall and powerfully built, attacked the door. It was no easy matter. The doors of Hamborough Close were solidly built.

At last, however, the lock gave, and the door swung inwards with a noise of splintering, rending wood.

And then, for a moment, everyone stood still, huddled in the doorway looking at the scene inside. The lights were on. Along the left-hand wall was a big writing table, a massive affair of solid mahogany. Sitting, not at the table, but sideways to it, so that his back was directly towards them, was a big man slouched down in a chair. His head and the upper part of his body hung down over the right side of the chair, and his right hand and arm hung limply down. Just below it on the carpet was a small, gleaming pistol. . . .

There was no need of speculation. The picture was clear. Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore had shot himself.

Three

For a moment or two the group in the doorway stood motionless, staring at the scene. Then Poirot strode forward.

At the same moment Hugo Trent said crisply:

“My God, the Old Man’s shot himself!”

And there was a long, shuddering moan from Lady Chevenix-Gore.

“Oh, Gervase—Gervase!”

Over his shoulder Poirot said sharply:

“Take Lady Chevenix-Gore away. She can do nothing here.”

The elderly soldierly man obeyed. He said:

“Come, Vanda. Come, my dear. You can do nothing. It’s all over. Ruth, come and look after your mother.”

But Ruth Chevenix-Gore had pressed into the room and stood close by Poirot’s side as he bent over the dreadful sprawled figure in the chair—the figure of a man of Herculean build with a Viking beard.

She said in a low, tense voice, curiously restrained and muffled:

“You’re quite sure he’s—dead?”

Poirot looked up.

The girl’s face was alive with some emotion—an emotion sternly checked and repressed—that he did not quite understand. It was not grief—it seemed more like a kind of half-fearful excitement.

The little woman in the pince-nez murmured:

“Your mother, my dear—don’t you think—?”

In a high, hysterical voice the girl with the red hair cried out:

“Then it wasn’t a car or a champagne cork! It was a shot we heard. . . .”

Poirot turned and faced them all.

“Somebody must communicate with the police—”

Ruth Chevenix-Gore cried out violently:

“No!”

The elderly man with the legal face said:

“Unavoidable, I am afraid. Will you see to that, Burrows? Hugo—”

Poirot said:

“You are Mr. Hugo Trent?” to the tall young man with the moustache. “It would be well, I think, if everyone except you and I were to leave this room.”

Again his authority was not questioned. The lawyer shepherded the others away. Poirot and Hugo Trent were left alone.

The latter said, staring:

“Look here—who are you? I mean, I haven’t the foggiest idea. What are you doing here?”

Poirot took a card case from his pocket and selected a card.

Hugo Trent said, staring at it:

"Private detective—eh? Of course, I've heard of you . . . But I still don't see what you are doing here."

"You did not know that your uncle—he was your uncle, was he not—?"

Hugo's eyes dropped for a fleeting moment to the dead man.

"The Old Man? Yes, he was my uncle all right."

"You did not know that he had sent for me?"

Hugo shook his head. He said slowly:

"I'd no idea of it."

There was an emotion in his voice that was rather hard to classify. His face looked wooden and stupid—the kind of expression, Poirot thought, that made a useful mask in times of stress.

Poirot said quietly:

"We are in Westshire, are we not? I know your Chief Constable, Major Riddle, very well."

Hugo said:

"Riddle lives about half a mile away. He'll probably come over himself."

"That," said Poirot, "will be very convenient."

He began prowling gently round the room. He twitched aside the window curtain and examined the french windows, trying them gently. They were closed.

On the wall behind the desk there hung a round mirror. The mirror was shivered. Poirot bent down and picked up a small object.

"What's that?" asked Hugo Trent.

“The bullet.”

“It passed straight through his head and struck the mirror?”

“It seems so.”

Poirot replaced the bullet meticulously where he had found it. He came up to the desk. Some papers were arranged neatly stacked in heaps. On the blotting pad itself there was a loose sheet of paper with the word SORRY printed across it in large, shaky handwriting.

Hugo said: “He must have written that just before he—did it.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

He looked again at the smashed mirror, then at the dead man. His brow creased itself a little as though in perplexity. He went over to the door, where it hung crookedly with its splintered lock. There was no key in the door, as he knew—otherwise he would not have been able to see through the keyhole. There was no sign of it on the floor. Poirot leaned over the dead man and ran his fingers over him.

“Yes,” he said. “The key is in his pocket.”

Hugo drew out a cigarette case and lighted a cigarette. He spoke rather hoarsely.

“It seems all quite clear,” he said. “My uncle shut himself up in here, scrawled that message on a piece of paper, and then shot himself.”

Poirot nodded meditatively. Hugo went on:

“But I don’t understand why he sent for you. What was it all about?”

“That is rather more difficult to explain. While we are waiting, Mr. Trent, for the authorities to take charge, perhaps you will tell me exactly who all the people are whom I saw tonight when I arrived?”

“Who they are?” Hugo spoke almost absently. “Oh, yes, of course. Sorry. Shall we sit down?” He indicated a settee in the farthest corner of the room from the body. He went on, speaking jerkily: “Well, there’s Vanda—my aunt, you know. And Ruth, my cousin. But you know them. Then the other girl is Susan Cardwell. She’s just staying here. And there’s Colonel Bury. He’s an old friend of the family. And Mr. Forbes. He’s an old friend, too, beside being the family lawyer and all that. Both the old boys had a passion for Vanda when she was young, and they still hang round in a faithful, devoted sort of way. Ridiculous, but rather touching. Then there’s Godfrey Burrows, the Old Man’s—I mean my uncle’s—secretary, and Miss Lingard, who’s here to help him write a history of the Chevenix-Gores. She mugs up historical stuff for writers. That’s the lot, I think.”

Poirot nodded. Then he said:

“And I understand you actually heard the shot that killed your uncle?”

“Yes, we did. Thought it was a champagne cork—at least, I did. Susan and Miss Lingard thought it was a car backfiring outside—the road runs quite near, you know.”

“When was this?”

“Oh, about ten past eight. Snell had just sounded the first gong.”

“And where were you when you heard it?”

“In the hall. We—we were laughing about it—arguing, you know, as to where the sound came from. I said it came from the dining room, and Susan said it came from the direction of the drawing room, and Miss Lingard said it sounded like upstairs, and Snell said it came from the road outside, only it came through the upstairs windows. And Susan said, “Any more theories?” And I laughed and said there was always murder! Seems pretty rotten to think of it now.”

His face twitched nervously.

“It did not occur to anyone that Sir Gervase might have shot himself?”

“No, of course not.”

“You have, in fact, no idea why he should have shot himself?”

Hugo said slowly:

“Oh, well, I shouldn’t say that—”

“You have an idea?”

“Yes—well—it’s difficult to explain. Naturally I didn’t expect him to commit suicide, but all the same I’m not frightfully surprised. The truth of it is that my uncle was as mad as a hatter, M. Poirot. Everyone knew that.”

“That strikes you as a sufficient explanation?”

“Well, people do shoot themselves when they’re a bit barmy.”

“An explanation of an admirable simplicity.”

Hugo stared.

Poirot got up again and wandered aimlessly round the room. It was comfortably furnished, mainly in a rather heavy Victorian style. There were massive bookcases, huge armchairs, and some upright chairs of genuine Chippendale. There were not many ornaments, but some bronzes on the mantelpiece attracted Poirot’s attention and apparently stirred his admiration. He picked them up one by one, carefully examining them before replacing them with care. From the one on the extreme left he detached something with a fingernail.

“What’s that?” asked Hugo without much interest.

“Nothing very much. A tiny sliver of looking glass.”

Hugo said:

“Funny the way that mirror was smashed by the shot. A broken mirror means bad luck. Poor old Gervase . . . I suppose his luck had held a bit too long.”

“Your uncle was a lucky man?”

Hugo gave a short laugh.

“Why, his luck was proverbial! Everything he touched turned to gold! If he backed an outsider, it romped home! If he invested in a doubtful mine, they struck a vein of ore at once! He’s had the most amazing escapes from the tightest of tight places. His life’s been saved by a kind of miracle more than once. He was rather a fine old boy, in his way, you know. He’d certainly ‘been places and seen things’—more than most of his generation.”

Poirot murmured in a conversational tone:

“You were attached to your uncle, Mr. Trent?”

Hugo Trent seemed a little startled by the question.

“Oh—er—yes, of course,” he said rather vaguely. “You know, he was a bit difficult at times. Frightful strain to live with, and all that. Fortunately I didn’t have to see much of him.”

“He was fond of you?”

“Not so that you’d notice it! As a matter of fact, he rather resented my existence, so to speak.”

“How was that, Mr. Trent?”

“Well, you see, he had no son of his own—and he was pretty sore about it. He was mad about family and all that sort of thing. I believe it cut him to the quick to know that when he died the Chevenix-Gores would cease to exist. They’ve been going ever since the Norman Conquest, you know. The Old Man was the last of them. I suppose it was rather rotten from his point of view.”

“You yourself do not share that sentiment?”

Hugo shrugged his shoulders.

“All that sort of thing seems to me rather out of date.”

“What will happen to the estate?”

“Don’t really know. I might get it. Or he may have left it to Ruth. Probably Vanda has it for her lifetime.”

“Your uncle did not definitely declare his intentions?”

“Well, he had his pet idea.”

“And what was that?”

“His idea was that Ruth and I should make a match of it.”

“That would doubtless have been very suitable.”

“Eminently suitable. But Ruth—well, Ruth has very decided views of her own about life. Mind you, she’s an extremely attractive young woman, and she knows it. She’s in no hurry to marry and settle down.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“But you yourself would have been willing, M. Trent?”

Hugo said in a bored tone of voice:

“I really can’t see it makes a ha’p’orth of difference who you marry nowadays. Divorce is so easy. If you’re not hitting it off, nothing is easier than to cut the tangle and start again.”

The door opened and Forbes entered with a tall, spruce-looking man.

The latter nodded to Trent.

“Hallo, Hugo. I’m extremely sorry about this. Very rough on all of you.”

Hercule Poirot came forward.

“How do you do, Major Riddle? You remember me?”

“Yes, indeed.” The chief constable shook hands. “So you’re down here?”

There was a meditative note in his voice. He glanced curiously at Hercule Poirot.

Four

“Well?” said Major Riddle.

It was twenty minutes later. The chief constable’s interrogative “Well?” was addressed to the police surgeon, a lank elderly man with grizzled hair.

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

“He’s been dead over half an hour—but not more than an hour. You don’t want technicalities, I know, so I’ll spare you them. The man was shot through the head, the pistol being held a few inches from the right temple. Bullet passed right through the brain and out again.”

“Perfectly compatible with suicide?”

“Oh, perfectly. The body then slumped down in the chair, and the pistol dropped from his hand.”

“You’ve got the bullet?”

“Yes.” The doctor held it up.

“Good,” said Major Riddle. “We’ll keep it for comparison with the pistol. Glad it’s a clear case and no difficulties.”

Hercule Poirot asked gently:

“You are sure there are no difficulties, Doctor?”

The doctor replied slowly:

“Well, I suppose you might call one thing a little odd. When he shot himself he must have been leaning slightly over to the right. Otherwise the bullet would have hit the wall below the mirror, instead of plumb in the middle.”

“An uncomfortable position in which to commit suicide,” said Poirot.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, well—comfort—if you’re going to end it all—” He left the sentence unfinished.

Major Riddle said:

“The body can be moved now?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve done with it until the P.-M.”

“What about you, Inspector?” Major Riddle spoke to a tall impassive-faced man in plain clothes.

“O.K., sir. We’ve got all we want. Only the deceased’s fingerprints on the pistol.”

“Then you can get on with it.”

The mortal remains of Gervase Chevenix-Gore were removed. The chief constable and Poirot were left together.

“Well,” said Riddle, “everything seems quite clear and aboveboard. Door locked, window fastened, key of door in dead man’s pocket. Everything according to Cocker—but for one circumstance.”

“And what is that, my friend?” inquired Poirot.

“You!” said Riddle bluntly. “What are you doing down here?”

By way of reply, Poirot handed to him the letter he had received from the dead man a week ago, and the telegram which had finally brought him there.

“Humph,” said the chief constable. “Interesting. We’ll have to get to the bottom of this. I should say it had a direct bearing upon his suicide.”

“I agree.”

“We must check up on who is in the house.”

“I can tell you their names. I have just been making inquiries of Mr. Trent.”

He repeated the list of names.

“Perhaps you, Major Riddle, know something about these people?”

“I know something of them, naturally. Lady Chevenix-Gore is quite as mad in her own way as old Sir Gervase. They were devoted to each other—and both quite mad. She’s the vaguest creature that ever lived, with an occasional uncanny shrewdness that strikes the nail on the head in the most surprising fashion. People laugh at her a good deal. I think she knows it, but she doesn’t care. She’s absolutely no sense of humour.”

“Miss Chevenix-Gore is only their adopted daughter, I understand?”

“Yes.”

“A very handsome young lady.”

“She’s a devilishly attractive girl. Has played havoc with most of the young fellows round here. Leads them all on and then turns round and laughs at them. Good seat on a horse, and wonderful hands.”

“That, for the moment, does not concern us.”

“Er—no, perhaps not . . . Well, about the other people. I know old Bury, of course. He’s here most of the time. Almost a tame cat about the house. Kind of A.D.C. to Lady Chevenix-Gore. He’s a very old friend. They’ve known him all their lives. I think he and Sir Gervase were both interested in some company of which Bury was a director.”

“Oswald Forbes, do you know anything of him?”

“I rather believe I’ve met him once.”

“Miss Lingard?”

“Never heard of her.”

“Miss Susan Cardwell?”

“Rather a good-looking girl with red hair? I’ve seen her about with Ruth Chevenix-Gore the last few days.”

“Mr. Burrows?”

“Yes, I know him. Chevenix-Gore’s secretary. Between you and me, I don’t take to him much. He’s good-looking, and knows it. Not quite out of the top drawer.”

“Had he been with Sir Gervase long?”

“About two years, I fancy.”

“And there is no one else—?”

Poirot broke off.

A tall, fair-haired man in a lounge suit came hurrying in. He was out of breath and looked disturbed.

“Good evening, Major Riddle. I heard a rumour that Sir Gervase had shot himself, and I hurried up here. Snell tells me it’s true. It’s incredible! I can’t believe it!”

“It’s true enough, Lake. Let me introduce you. This is Captain Lake, Sir Gervase’s agent for the estate. M. Hercule Poirot, of whom you may have heard.”

Lake’s face lit up with what seemed a kind of delighted incredulity.

“M. Hercule Poirot? I’m most awfully pleased to meet you. At least—” He broke off, the quick charming smile vanished—he looked disturbed and upset. “There isn’t anything—fishy—about this suicide, is there, sir?”

“Why should there be anything ‘fishy,’ as you call it?” asked the chief constable sharply.

“I mean, because M. Poirot is here. Oh, and because the whole business seems so incredible!”

“No, no,” said Poirot quickly. “I am not here on account of the death of Sir Gervase. I was already in the house—as a guest.”

“Oh, I see. Funny, he never told me you were coming when I was going over accounts with him this afternoon.”

Poirot said quietly:

“You have twice used the word ‘incredible,’ Captain Lake. Are you, then, so surprised to hear of Sir Gervase commiting suicide?”

“Indeed I am. Of course, he was mad as a hatter; everyone would agree about that. But all the same, I simply can’t imagine his thinking the world would be able to get on without him.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It is a point, that.” And he looked with appreciation at the frank, intelligent countenance of the young man.

Major Riddle cleared his throat.

“Since you are here, Captain Lake, perhaps you will sit down and answer a few questions.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Lake took a chair opposite the other two.

“When did you last see Sir Gervase?”

“This afternoon, just before three o’clock. There were some accounts to be checked, and the question of a new tenant for one of the farms.”

“How long were you with him?”

“Perhaps half an hour.”

“Think carefully, and tell me whether you noticed anything unusual in his manner.”

The young man considered.

“No, I hardly think so. He was, perhaps, a trifle excited—but that wasn’t unusual with him.”

“He was not depressed in any way?”

“Oh, no, he seemed in good spirits. He was enjoying himself very much just now, writing up a history of the family.”

“How long had he been doing this?”

“He began it about six months ago.”

“Is that when Miss Lingard came here?”

“No. She arrived about two months ago when he had discovered that he could not manage the necessary research work by himself.”

“And you consider he was enjoying himself?”

“Oh, simply enormously! He really didn’t think that anything else mattered in the world except his family.”

There was a momentary bitterness in the young man’s tone.

“Then, as far as you know, Sir Gervase had no worries of any kind?”

There was a slight—a very slight—pause before Captain Lake answered.

“No.”

Poirot suddenly interposed a question:

“Sir Gervase was not, you think, worried about his daughter in any way?”

“His daughter?”

“That is what I said.”

“Not as far as I know,” said the young man stiffly.

Poirot said nothing further. Major Riddle said:

“Well, thank you, Lake. Perhaps you’d stay around in case I might want to ask you anything.”

“Certainly, sir.” He rose. “Anything I can do?”

“Yes, you might send the butler here. And perhaps you’d find out for me how Lady Chevenix-Gore is, and if I could have a few words with her presently, or if she’s too upset.”

The young man nodded and left the room with a quick, decisive step.

“An attractive personality,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Yes, nice fellow, and good at his job. Everyone likes him.”

Five

“Sit down, Snell,” said Major Riddle in a friendly tone. “I’ve a good many questions to ask you, and I expect this has been a shock to you.”

“Oh, it has indeed, sir. Thank you, sir.” Snell sat down with such a discreet air that it was practically the same as though he had remained on his feet.

“Been here a good long time, haven’t you?”

“Sixteen years, sir, ever since Sir Gervase—er—settled down, so to speak.”

“Ah, yes, of course, your master was a great traveller in his day.”

“Yes, sir. He went on an expedition to the Pole and many other interesting places.”

“Now, Snell, can you tell me when you last saw your master this evening?”

“I was in the dining room, sir, seeing that the table arrangements were all complete. The door into the hall was open, and I saw Sir Gervase come down the stairs, cross the hall and go along the passage to the study.”

“That was at what time?”

“Just before eight o’clock. It might have been as much as five minutes before eight.”

“And that was the last you saw of him?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you hear a shot?”

“Oh, yes, indeed, sir; but of course I had no idea at the time—how should I have had?”

“What did you think it was?”

“I thought it was a car, sir. The road runs quite near the park wall. Or it might have been a shot in the woods—a poacher, perhaps. I never dreamed —”

Major Riddle cut him short.

“What time was that?”

“It was exactly eight minutes past eight, sir.”

The chief constable said sharply:

“How is it you can fix the time to a minute?”

“That’s easy, sir. I had just sounded the first going.”

“The first gong?”

“Yes, sir. By Sir Gervase’s orders, a gong was always to be sounded seven minutes before the actual dinner gong. Very particular he was, sir, that everyone should be assembled ready in the drawing room when the second gong went. As soon as I had sounded the second gong, I went to the drawing room and announced dinner, and everyone went in.”

“I begin to understand,” said Hercule Poirot, “why you looked so surprised when you announced dinner this evening. It was usual for Sir Gervase to be in the drawing room?”

“I’d never known him not be there before, sir. It was quite a shock. I little thought—”

Again Major Riddle interrupted adroitly:

“And were the others also usually there?”

Snell coughed.

“Anyone who was late for dinner, sir, was never asked to the house again.”

“H’m, very drastic.”

“Sir Gervase, sir, employed a chef who was formerly with the Emperor of Moravia. He used to say, sir, that dinner was as important as a religious ritual.”

“And what about his own family?”

“Lady Chevenix-Gore was always very particular not to upset him, sir, and even Miss Ruth dared not be late for dinner.”

“Interesting,” murmured Hercule Poirot.

“I see,” said Riddle. “So, dinner being at a quarter past eight, you sounded the first gong at eight minutes past as usual?”

“That is so, sir—but it wasn’t as usual. Dinner was usually at eight. Sir Gervase gave orders that dinner was to be a quarter of an hour later this evening, as he was expecting a gentleman by the late train.”

Snell made a little bow towards Poirot as he spoke.

“When your master went to the study, did he look upset or worried in any way?”

“I could not say, sir. It was too far for me to judge of his expression. I just noticed him, that was all.”

“Was he left alone when he went to the study?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did anyone go to the study after that?”

“I could not say, sir. I went to the butler’s pantry after that, and was there until I sounded the first gong at eight minutes past eight.”

“That was when you heard the shot?”

“Yes, sir.”

Poirot gently interposed a question.

“There were others, I think, who also heard the shot?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Hugo and Miss Cardwell. And Miss Lingard.”

“These people were also in the hall?”

“Miss Lingard came out from the drawing room, and Miss Cardwell and Mr. Hugo were just coming down the stairs.”

Poirot asked:

“Was there any conversation about the matter?”

“Well, sir, Mr. Hugo asked if there was champagne for dinner. I told him that sherry, hock and burgundy were being served.”

“He thought it was a champagne cork?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But nobody took it seriously?”

“Oh, no, sir. They all went into the drawing room talking and laughing.”

“Where were the other members of the household?”

“I could not say, sir.”

Major Riddle said:

“Do you know anything about this pistol?” He held it out as he spoke.

“Oh, yes, sir. That belonged to Sir Gervase. He always kept it in the drawer of his desk in here.”

“Was it usually loaded?”

“I couldn’t say, sir.”

Major Riddle laid down the pistol and cleared his throat.

“Now, Snell, I’m going to ask you a rather important question. I hope you will answer it as truthfully as you can. Do you know of any reason which might lead your master to commit suicide?”

“No, sir. I know of nothing.”

“Sir Gervase had not been odd in his manner of late? Not depressed? Or worried?”

Snell coughed apologetically.

“You’ll excuse my saying it, sir, but Sir Gervase was always what might have seemed to strangers a little odd in his manner. He was a highly original gentleman, sir.”

“Yes, yes, I am quite aware of that.”

“Outsiders, sir, did not always Understand Sir Gervase.”

Snell gave the phrase a definite value of capital letter.

“I know. I know. But there was nothing that you would have called unusual?”

The butler hesitated.

“I think, sir, that Sir Gervase was worried about something,” he said at last.

“Worried and depressed?”

“I shouldn’t say depressed, sir. But worried, yes.”

“Have you any idea of the cause of that worry?”

“No, sir.”

“Was it connected with any particular person, for instance?”

“I could not say at all, sir. In any case, it is only an impression of mine.”

Poirot spoke again.

“You were surprised at his suicide?”

“Very surprised, sir. It has been a terrible shock to me. I never dreamed of such a thing.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Riddle glanced at him, then he said:

“Well, Snell, I think that is all we want to ask you. You are quite sure that there is nothing else you can tell us—no unusual incident, for instance, that has happened in the last few days?”

The butler, rising to his feet, shook his head.

“There is nothing, sir, nothing whatever.”

“Then you can go.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Moving towards the doorway, Snell drew back and stood aside. Lady Chevenix-Gore floated into the room.

She was wearing an oriental-looking garment of purple and orange silk wound tightly round her body. Her face was serene and her manner collected and calm.

“Lady Chevenix-Gore.” Major Riddle sprang to his feet.

She said:

“They told me you would like to talk to me, so I came.”

“Shall we go into another room? This must be painful for you in the extreme.”

Lady Chevenix-Gore shook her head and sat down on one of the Chippendale chairs. She murmured:

“Oh, no, what does it matter?”

“It is very good of you, Lady Chevenix-Gore, to put your feelings aside. I know what a frightful shock this must have been and—”

She interrupted him.

“It was rather a shock at first,” she admitted. Her tone was easy and conversational. “But there is no such thing as Death, really, you know, only Change.” She added: “As a matter of fact, Gervase is standing just behind your left shoulder now. I can see him distinctly.”

Major Riddle’s left shoulder twitched slightly. He looked at Lady Chevenix-Gore rather doubtfully.

She smiled at him, a vague, happy smile.

“You don’t believe, of course! So few people will. To me, the spirit world is quite as real as this one. But please ask me anything you like, and don’t worry about distressing me. I’m not in the least distressed. Everything, you see, is Fate. One cannot escape one’s Karma. It all fits in—the mirror—everything.”

“The mirror, madame?” asked Poirot.

She nodded her head towards it vaguely.

“Yes. It’s splintered, you see. A symbol! You know Tennyson’s poem? I used to read it as a girl—though, of course, I didn’t realise then the esoteric side of it. ‘The mirror cracked from side to side. “The curse is come upon me!” cried the Lady of Shalott.’ That’s what happened to Gervase. The Curse came upon him suddenly. I think, you know, most very old families have a curse . . . the mirror cracked. He knew that he was doomed! The Curse had come!”

“But, madame, it was not a curse that cracked the mirror—it was a bullet!”

Lady Chevenix-Gore said, still in the same sweet vague manner:

“It’s all the same thing, really . . . It was Fate.”

“But your husband shot himself.”

Lady Chevenix-Gore smiled indulgently.

“He shouldn’t have done that, of course. But Gervase was always impatient. He could never wait. His hour had come—he went forward to meet it. It’s all so simple, really.”

Major Riddle, clearing his throat in exasperation, said sharply:

“Then you weren’t surprised at your husband’s taking his own life? Had you been expecting such a thing to happen?”

“Oh, no.” Her eyes opened wide. “One can’t always foresee the future. Gervase, of course, was a very strange man, a very unusual man. He was quite unlike anyone else. He was one of the Great Ones born again. I’ve known that for some time. I think he knew it himself. He found it very hard to conform to the silly little standards of the everyday world.” She added, looking over Major Riddle’s shoulder, “He’s smiling now. He’s thinking how foolish we all are. So we are really. Just like children. Pretending that life is real and that it matters . . . Life is only one of the Great Illusions."

Feeling that he was fighting a losing battle, Major Riddle asked desperately:

"You can't help us at all as to why your husband should have taken his life?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders.

"Forces move us—they move us . . . You cannot understand. You move only on the material plane."

Poirot coughed.

"Talking of the material plane, have you any idea, madame, as to how your husband has left his money?"

"Money?" she stared at him. "I never think of money."

Her tone was disdainful.

Poirot switched to another point.

"At what time did you come downstairs to dinner tonight?"

"Time? What is Time? Infinite, that is the answer. Time is infinite."

Poirot murmured:

"But your husband, madame, was rather particular about time—especially, so I have been told, as regards the dinner hour."

"Dear Gervase," she smiled indulgently. "He was very foolish about that. But it made him happy. So we were never late."

"Were you in the drawing room, madame, when the first gong went?"

"No, I was in my room then."

“Do you remember who was in the drawing room when you did come down?”

“Nearly everybody, I think,” said Lady Chevenix-Gore vaguely. “Does it matter?”

“Possibly not,” admitted Poirot. “Then there is something else. Did your husband ever tell you that he suspected he was being robbed?”

Lady Chevenix-Gore did not seem much interested in the question.

“Robbed? No, I don’t think so.”

“Robbed, swindled—victimized in some way—?”

“No—no—I don’t think so . . . Gervase would have been very angry if anybody had dared to do anything like that.”

“At any rate he said nothing about it to you?”

“No—no.” Lady Chevenix-Gore shook her head, still without much real interest. “I should have remembered. . . .”

“When did you last see your husband alive?”

“He looked in, as usual, on his way downstairs before dinner. My maid was there. He just said he was going down.”

“What has he talked about most in the last few weeks?”

“Oh, the family history. He was getting on so well with it. He found that funny old thing, Miss Lingard, quite invaluable. She looked up things for him in the British Museum—all that sort of thing. She worked with Lord Mulcaster on his book, you know. And she was tactful—I mean, she didn’t look up the wrong things. After all, there are ancestors one doesn’t want raked up. Gervase was very sensitive. She helped me, too. She got a lot of information for me about Hatshepsut. I am a reincarnation of Hatshepsut, you know.”

Lady Chevenix-Gore made this announcement in a calm voice.

“Before that,” she went on, “I was a Priestess in Atlantis.”

Major Riddle shifted a little in his chair.

“Er—er—very interesting,” he said. “Well, really, Lady Chevenix-Gore, I think that will be all. Very kind of you.”

Lady Chevenix-Gore rose, clasping her oriental robes about her.

“Goodnight,” she said. And then, her eyes shifting to a point behind Major Riddle. “Goodnight, Gervase dear. I wish you could come, but I know you have to stay here.” She added in an explanatory fashion, “You have to stay in the place where you’ve passed over for at least twenty-four hours. It’s some time before you can move about freely and communicate.”

She trailed out of the room.

Major Riddle wiped his brow.

“Phew,” he murmured. “She’s a great deal madder than I ever thought. Does she really believe all that nonsense?”

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

“It is possible that she finds it helpful,” he said. “She needs, at this moment, to create for herself a world of illusion so that she can escape the stark reality of her husband’s death.”

“She seems almost certifiable to me,” said Major Riddle. “A long farrago of nonsense without one word of sense in it.”

“No, no, my friend. The interesting thing is, as Mr. Hugo Trent casually remarked to me, that amidst all the vapouring there is an occasional shrewd thrust. She showed it by her remark about Miss Lingard’s tact in not stressing undesirable ancestors. Believe me, Lady Chevenix-Gore is no fool.”

He got up and paced up and down the room.

“There are things in this affair that I do not like. No, I do not like them at all.”

Riddle looked at him curiously.

“You mean the motive for his suicide?”

“Suicide—suicide! It is all wrong, I tell you. It is wrong psychologically. How did Chevenix-Gore think of himself? As a Colossus, as an immensely important person, as the centre of the universe! Does such a man destroy himself? Surely not. He is far more likely to destroy someone else—some miserable crawling ant of a human being who had dared to cause him annoyance . . . Such an act he might regard as necessary—as sanctified! But self-destruction? The destruction of such a Self?”

“It’s all very well, Poirot. But the evidence is clear enough. Door locked, key in his own pocket. Window closed and fastened. I know these things happen in books—but I’ve never come across them in real life. Anything else?”

“But yes, there is something else.” Poirot sat down in the chair. “Here I am. I am Chevenix-Gore. I am sitting at my desk. I am determined to kill myself—because, let us say, I have made a discovery concerning some terrific dishonour to the family name. It is not very convincing, that, but it must suffice.

“Eh bien, what do I do? I scrawl on a piece of paper the word SORRY. Yes, that is quite possible. Then I open a drawer of the desk, take out the pistol which I keep there, load it, if it is not loaded, and then—do I proceed to shoot myself? No, I first turn my chair round—so, and I lean over a little to the right—so—and then I put the pistol to my temple and fire!”

Poirot sprang up from his chair, and wheeling round, demanded:

“I ask you, does that make sense? Why turn the chair round? If, for instance, there had been a picture on the wall there, then, yes, there might be an explanation. Some portrait which a dying man might wish to be the last thing on earth his eyes would see, but a window curtain—ah non, that does not make sense."

"He might have wished to look out of the window. Last view out over the estate."

"My dear friend, you do not suggest that with any conviction. In fact, you know it is nonsense. At eight minutes past eight it was dark, and in any case the curtains are drawn. No, there must be some other explanation. . . ."

"There's only one as far as I can see. Gervase Chevenix-Gore was mad."

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

Major Riddle rose.

"Come," he said. "Let us go and interview the rest of the party. We may get at something that way."

Six

After the difficulties of getting a direct statement from Lady Chevenix-Gore, Major Riddle found considerable relief in dealing with a shrewd lawyer like Forbes.

Mr. Forbes was extremely guarded and cautious in his statements, but his replies were all directly to the point.

He admitted that Sir Gervase's suicide had been a great shock to him. He should never have considered Sir Gervase the kind of man who would take his own life. He knew nothing of any cause for such an act.

"Sir Gervase was not only my client, but was a very old friend. I have known him since boyhood. I should say that he had always enjoyed life."

"In the circumstances, Mr. Forbes, I must ask you to speak quite candidly. You did not know of any secret anxiety or sorrow in Sir Gervase's life?"

"No. He had minor worries, like most men, but there was nothing of a serious nature."

"No illness? No trouble between him and his wife?"

"No. Sir Gervase and Lady Chevenix-Gore were devoted to each other."

Major Riddle said cautiously:

"Lady Chevenix-Gore appears to hold somewhat curious views."

Mr. Forbes smiled—an indulgent, manly smile.

"Ladies," he said, "must be allowed their fancies."

The chief constable went on:

“You managed all Sir Gervase’s legal affairs?”

“Yes, my firm, Forbes, Ogilvie and Spence, have acted for the Chevenix-Gore family for well over a hundred years.”

“Were there any—scandals in the Chevenix-Gore family?”

Mr. Forbes’s eyebrows rose.

“Really, I fail to understand you?”

“M. Poirot, will you show Mr. Forbes the letter you showed me?”

In silence Poirot rose and handed the letter to Mr. Forbes with a little bow.

Mr. Forbes read it and his eyebrows rose still more.

“A most remarkable letter,” he said. “I appreciate your question now. No, so far as my knowledge went, there was nothing to justify the writing of such a letter.”

“Sir Gervase said nothing of this matter to you?”

“Nothing at all. I must say I find it very curious that he should not have done so.”

“He was accustomed to confide in you?”

“I think he relied on my judgment.”

“And you have no idea as to what this letter refers?”

“I should not like to make any rash speculations.”

Major Riddle appreciated the subtlety of this reply.

"Now, Mr. Forbes, perhaps you can tell us how Sir Gervase has left his property."

"Certainly. I see no objection to such a course. To his wife, Sir Gervase left an annual income of six thousand pounds chargeable on the estate, and the choice of the Dower House or the town house in Lowndes Square, whichever she should prefer. There were, of course, several legacies and bequests, but nothing of an outstanding nature. The residue of his property was left to his adopted daughter, Ruth, on condition that, if she married, her husband should take the name of Chevenix-Gore."

"Was nothing left to his nephew, Mr. Hugo Trent?"

"Yes. A legacy of five thousand pounds."

"And I take it that Sir Gervase was a rich man?"

"He was extremely wealthy. He had a vast private fortune apart from the estate. Of course, he was not quite so well-off as in the past. Practically all invested incomes have felt the strain. Also, Sir Gervase had dropped a good deal of money over a certain company—the Paragon Synthetic Rubber Substitute in which Colonel Bury persuaded him to invest a good deal of money."

"Not very wise advice?"

Mr. Forbes sighed.

"Retired soldiers are the worst sufferers when they engage in financial operations. I have found that their credulity far exceeds that of widows—and that is saying a good deal."

"But these unfortunate investments did not seriously affect Sir Gervase's income?"

"Oh, no, not seriously. He was still an extremely rich man."

"When was this will made?"

"Two years ago."

Poirot murmured:

"This arrangement, was it not possibly a little unfair to Mr. Hugo Trent, Sir Gervase's nephew? He is, after all, Sir Gervase's nearest blood relation."

Mr. Forbes shrugged his shoulders.

"One has to take a certain amount of family history into account."

"Such as—?"

Mr. Forbes seemed slightly unwilling to proceed.

Major Riddle said:

"You mustn't think we're unduly concerned with raking up old scandals or anything of that sort. But this letter of Sir Gervase's to M. Poirot has got to be explained."

"There is certainly nothing scandalous in the explanation of Sir Gervase's attitude to his nephew," said Mr. Forbes quickly. "It was simply that Sir Gervase always took his position as head of the family very seriously. He had a younger brother and sister. The brother, Anthony Chevenix-Gore, was killed in the war. The sister, Pamela, married, and Sir Gervase disapproved of the marriage. That is to say, he considered that she ought to obtain his consent and approval before marrying. He thought that Captain Trent's family was not of sufficient prominence to be allied with a Chevenix-Gore. His sister was merely amused by his attitude. As a result, Sir Gervase has always been inclined to dislike his nephew. I think that dislike may have influenced him in deciding to adopt a child."

"There was no hope of his having children of his own?"

"No. There was a stillborn child about a year after his marriage. The doctors told Lady Chevenix-Gore that she would never be able to have another child. About two years later he adopted Ruth."

“And who was Mademoiselle Ruth? How did they come to settle upon her?”

“She was, I believe, the child of a distant connection.”

“That I had guessed,” said Poirot. He looked up at the wall which was hung with family portraits. “One can see that she was of the same blood—the nose, the line of the chin. It repeats itself on these walls many times.”

“She inherits the temper too,” said Mr. Forbes dryly.

“So I should imagine. How did she and her adopted father get on?”

“Much as you might imagine. There was a fierce clash of wills more than once. But in spite of these quarrels I believe there was also an underlying harmony.”

“Nevertheless, she caused him a good deal of anxiety?”

“Incessant anxiety. But I can assure you not to the point of causing him to take his own life.”

“Ah, that, no,” agreed Poirot. “One does not blow one’s brains out because one has a headstrong daughter! And so mademoiselle inherits! Sir Gervase, he never thought of altering his will?”

“Ahem!” Mr. Forbes coughed to hide a little discomposure. “As a matter of fact, I took instructions from Sir Gervase on my arrival here (two days ago, that is to say) as to the drafting of a new will.”

“What’s this?” Major Riddle hitched his chair a little closer. “You didn’t tell us this.”

Mr. Forbes said quickly:

“You merely asked me what the terms of Sir Gervase’s will were. I gave you the information for which you asked. The new will was not even properly drawn up—much less signed.”

“What were its provisions? They may be some guide to Sir Gervase’s state of mind.”

“In the main, they were the same as before, but Miss Chevenix-Gore was only to inherit on condition that she married Mr. Hugo Trent.”

“Aha,” said Poirot. “But there is a very decided difference there.”

“I did not approve of the clause,” said Mr. Forbes. “And I felt bound to point out that it was quite possible it might be contested successfully. The Court does not look upon such conditional bequests with approval. Sir Gervase, however, was quite decided.”

“And if Miss Chevenix-Gore (or, incidentally, Mr. Trent) refused to comply?”

“If Mr. Trent was not willing to marry Miss Chevenix-Gore, then the money went to her unconditionally. But if he was willing and she refused, then the money went to him instead.”

“Odd business,” said Major Riddle.

Poirot leaned forward. He tapped the lawyer on the knee.

“But what is behind it? What was in the mind of Sir Gervase when he made that stipulation? There must have been something very definite . . . There must, I think, have been the image of another man . . . a man of whom he disapproved. I think, Mr. Forbes, that you must know who that man was?”

“Really, M. Poirot, I have no information.”

“But you could make a guess.”

“I never guess,” said Mr. Forbes, and his tone was scandalized.

Removing his pince-nez, he wiped them with a silk handkerchief and inquired:

“Is there anything else that you desire to know?”

“At the moment, no,” said Poirot. “Not, that is, as far as I am concerned.”

Mr. Forbes looked as though, in his opinion, that was not very far, and bent his attention on the chief constable.

“Thank you, Mr. Forbes. I think that’s all. I should like, if I may, to speak to Miss Chevenix-Gore.”

“Certainly. I think she is upstairs with Lady Chevenix-Gore.”

“Oh, well, perhaps I’ll have a word with—what’s his name?—Burrows, first, and the family history woman.”

“They’re both in the library. I will tell them.”

Seven

“Hard work, that,” said Major Riddle, as the lawyer left the room. “Extracting information from these old-fashioned legal wallahs takes a bit of doing. The whole business seems to me to centre about the girl.”

“It would seem so—yes.”

“Ah, here comes Burrows.”

Godfrey Burrows came in with a pleasant eagerness to be of use. His smile was discreetly tempered with gloom and showed only a fraction too much teeth. It seemed more mechanical than spontaneous.

“Now, Mr. Burrows, we want to ask you a few questions.”

“Certainly, Major Riddle. Anything you like.”

“Well, first and foremost, to put it quite simply, have you any ideas of your own about Sir Gervase’s suicide?”

“Absolutely none. It was the greatest shock to me.”

“You heard the shot?”

“No; I must have been in the library at the time, as far as I can make out. I came down rather early and went to the library to look up a reference I wanted. The library’s right the other side of the house from the study, so I shouldn’t hear anything.”

“Was anyone with you in the library?” asked Poirot.

“No one at all.”

“You’ve no idea where the other members of the household were at that time?”

“Mostly upstairs dressing, I should imagine.”

“When did you come to the drawing room?”

“Just before M. Poirot arrived. Everybody was there then—except Sir Gervase, of course.”

“Did it strike you as strange that he wasn’t there?”

“Yes, it did, as a matter of fact. As a rule he was always in the drawing room before the first gong sounded.”

“Have you noticed any difference in Sir Gervase’s manner lately? Has he been worried? Or anxious? Depressed?”

Godfrey Burrows considered.

“No—I don’t think so. A little—well, preoccupied, perhaps.”

“But he did not appear to be worried about any one definite matter?”

“Oh, no.”

“No—financial worries of any kind?”

“He was rather perturbed about the affairs of one particular company—the Paragon Synthetic Rubber Company to be exact.”

“What did he actually say about it?”

Again Godfrey Burrows’ mechanical smile flashed out, and again it seemed slightly unreal.

“Well—as a matter of fact—what he said was, ‘Old Bury’s either a fool or a knave. A fool, I suppose. I must go easy with him for Vanda’s sake.’ ”

"And why did he say that—for Vanda's sake?" inquired Poirot.

"Well, you see, Lady Chevenix-Gore was very fond of Colonel Bury, and he worshipped her. Followed her about like a dog."

"Sir Gervase was not—jealous at all?"

"Jealous?" Burrows stared and then laughed. "Sir Gervase jealous? He wouldn't know how to set about it. Why, it would never have entered his head that anyone could ever prefer another man to him. Such a thing couldn't be, you understand."

Poirot said gently:

"You did not, I think, like Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore very much?"

Burrows flushed.

"Oh, yes, I did. At least—well, all that sort of thing strikes one as rather ridiculous nowadays."

"All what sort of thing?" asked Poirot.

"Well, the feudal motif, if you like. This worship of ancestry and personal arrogance. Sir Gervase was a very able man in many ways, and had led an interesting life, but he would have been more interesting if he hadn't been so entirely wrapped up in himself and his own egoism."

"Did his daughter agree with you there?"

Burrows flushed again—this time a deep purple.

He said:

"I should imagine Miss Chevenix-Gore is quite one of the moderns! Naturally, I shouldn't discuss her father with her."

"But the moderns do discuss their fathers a good deal!" said Poirot. "It is entirely in the modern spirit to criticize your parents!"

Burrows shrugged his shoulders.

Major Riddle asked:

“And there was nothing else—no other financial anxiety? Sir Gervase never spoke of having been victimized?”

“Victimized?” Burrows sounded very astonished. “Oh, no.”

“And you yourself were on quite good terms with him?”

“Certainly I was. Why not?”

“I am asking you, Mr. Burrows.”

The young man looked sulky.

“We were on the best of terms.”

“Did you know that Sir Gervase had written to M. Poirot asking him to come down here?”

“No.”

“Did Sir Gervase usually write his own letters?”

“No, he nearly always dictated them to me.”

“But he did not do so in this case?”

“No.”

“Why was that, do you think?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“You can suggest no reason why he should have written this particular letter himself?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Ah!” said Major Riddle, adding smoothly, “Rather curious. When did you last see Sir Gervase?”

“Just before I went to dress for dinner. I took him some letters to sign.”

“What was his manner then?”

“Quite normal. In fact I should say he was feeling rather pleased with himself about something.”

Poirot stirred a little in his chair.

“Ah?” he said. “So that was your impression, was it? That he was pleased about something. And yet, not so very long afterwards, he shoots himself. It is odd, that!”

Godfrey Burrows shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m only telling you my impressions.”

“Yes, yes, they are very valuable. After all, you are probably one of the last people who saw Sir Gervase alive.”

“Snell was the last person to see him.”

“To see him, yes, but not to speak to him.”

Burrows did not reply.

Major Riddle said:

“What time was it when you went up to dress for dinner?”

“About five minutes past seven.”

“What did Sir Gervase do?”

"I left him in the study."

"How long did he usually take to change?"

"He usually gave himself a full three quarters of an hour."

"Then, if dinner was at a quarter past eight, he would probably have gone up at half past seven at the latest?"

"Very likely."

"You yourself went to change early?"

"Yes, I thought I would change and then go to the library and look up the references I wanted."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Major Riddle said:

"Well, I think that's all for the moment. Will you send Miss What's-her-name along?"

Little Miss Lingard tripped in almost immediately. She was wearing several chains which tinkled a little as she sat down and looked inquiringly from one to the other of the two men.

"This is all very—er—sad, Miss Lingard," began Major Riddle.

"Very sad indeed," said Miss Lingard decorously.

"You came to this house—when?"

"About two months ago. Sir Gervase wrote to a friend of his in the Museum—Colonel Fotheringay it was—and Colonel Fotheringary recommended me. I have done a good deal of historical research work."

"Did you find Sir Gervase difficult to work for?"

"Oh, not really. One had to humour him a little, of course. But then I always find one has to do that with men."

With an uneasy feeling that Miss Lingard was probably humouring him at this moment, Major Riddle went on:

"Your work here was to help Sir Gervase with the book he was writing?"

"Yes."

"What did it involve?"

For a moment, Miss Lingard looked quite human. Her eyes twinkled as she replied:

"Well, actually, you know, it involved writing the book! I looked up all the information and made notes, and arranged the material. And then, later, I revised what Sir Gervase had written."

"You must have had to exercise a good deal of tact, mademoiselle," said Poirot.

"Tact and firmness. One needs them both," said Miss Lingard.

"Sir Gervase did not resent your—er—firmness?"

"Oh not at all. Of course I put it to him that he mustn't be bothered with all the petty detail."

"Oh, yes, I see."

"It was quite simple, really," said Miss Lingard. "Sir Gervase was perfectly easy to manage if one took him the right way."

"Now, Miss Lingard, I wonder if you know anything that can throw light on this tragedy?"

Miss Lingard shook her head.

"I'm afraid I don't. You see, naturally he wouldn't confide in me at all. I was practically a stranger. In any case I think he was far too proud to speak to anyone of family troubles."

"But you think it was family troubles that caused him to take his life?"

Miss Lingard looked rather surprised.

"But of course! Is there any other suggestion?"

"You feel sure that there were family troubles worrying him?"

"I know that he was in great distress of mind."

"Oh, you know that?"

"Why, of course."

"Tell me, mademoiselle, did he speak to you of the matter?"

"Not explicitly."

"What did he say?"

"Let me see. I found that he didn't seem to be taking in what I was saying—"

"One moment. Pardon. When was this?"

"This afternoon. We usually worked from three to five."

"Pray go on."

"As I say, Sir Gervase seemed to be finding it hard to concentrate—in fact, he said as much, adding that he had several grave matters preying on his mind. And he said—let me see—something like this—(of course, I can't be sure of the exact words): 'It's a terrible thing, Miss Lingard, when a family has been one of the proudest in the land, that dishonour should be brought on it.' "

"And what did you say to that?"

"Oh, just something soothing. I think I said that every generation had its weaklings—that that was one of the penalties of greatness—but that their failings were seldom remembered by posterity."

"And did that have the soothing effect you hoped?"

"More or less. We got back to Sir Roger Chevenix-Gore. I had found a most interesting mention of him in a contemporary manuscript. But Sir Gervase's attention wandered again. In the end he said he would not do any more work that afternoon. He said he had had a shock."

"A shock?"

"That is what he said. Of course, I didn't ask any questions. I just said, 'I am sorry to hear it, Sir Gervase.' And then he asked me to tell Snell that M. Poirot would be arriving and to put off dinner until eight-fifteen, and send the car to meet the seven-fifty train."

"Did he usually ask you to make these arrangements?"

"Well—no—that was really Mr. Burrows's business. I did nothing but my own literary work. I wasn't a secretary in any sense of the word."

Poirot asked:

"Do you think Sir Gervase had a definite reason for asking you to make these arrangements, instead of asking Mr. Burrows to do so?"

Miss Lingard considered.

"Well, he may have had . . . I did not think of it at the time. I thought it was just a matter of convenience. Still, it's true now I come to think of it, that he did ask me not to tell anyone that M. Poirot was coming. It was to be a surprise, he said."

"Ah! he said that, did he? Very curious, very interesting. And did you tell anyone?"

“Certainly not, M. Poirot. I told Snell about dinner and to send the chauffeur to meet the seven-fifty as a gentleman was arriving by it.”

“Did Sir Gervase say anything else that may have had a bearing on the situation?”

Miss Lingard thought.

“No—I don’t think so—he was very much strung up—I do remember that just as I was leaving the room, he said, ‘Not that it’s any good his coming now. It’s too late.’ ”

“And you have no idea at all what he meant by that?”

“N—no.”

Just the faintest suspicion of indecision about the simple negative. Poirot repeated with a frown:

“ ‘Too late.’ That is what he said, is it? ‘Too late.’ ”

Major Riddle said:

“You can give us no idea, Miss Lingard, as to the nature of the circumstance that so distressed Sir Gervase?”

Miss Lingard said slowly:

“I have an idea that it was in some way connected with Mr. Hugo Trent.”

“With Hugo Trent? Why do you think that?”

“Well, it was nothing definite, but yesterday afternoon we were just touching on Sir Hugo de Chevenix (who, I’m afraid, didn’t bear too good a character in the Wars of the Roses), and Sir Gervase said, ‘My sister would choose the family name of Hugo for her son! It’s always been an unsatisfactory name in our family. She might have known no Hugo would turn out well.’ ”

“What you tell us there is suggestive,” said Poirot. “Yes, it suggests a new idea to me.”

“Sir Gervase said nothing more definite than that?” asked Major Riddle.

Miss Lingard shook her head.

“No, and of course it wouldn’t have done for me to say anything. Sir Gervase was really just talking to himself. He wasn’t really speaking to me.”

“Quite so.”

Poirot said:

“Mademoiselle, you, a stranger, have been here for two months. It would be, I think, very valuable if you were to tell us quite frankly your impressions of the family and household.”

Miss Lingard took off her pince-nez and blinked reflectively.

“Well, at first, quite frankly, I felt as though I’d walked straight into a madhouse! What with Lady Chevenix-Gore continually seeing things that weren’t there, and Sir Gervase behaving like—like a king—and dramatizing himself in the most extraordinary way—well, I really did think they were the queerest people I had ever come across. Of course, Miss Chevenix-Gore was perfectly normal, and I soon found that Lady Chevenix-Gore was really an extremely kind, nice woman. Nobody could be kinder and nicer to me than she has been. Sir Gervase—well, I really think he was mad. His egomania—isn’t that what you call it?—was getting worse and worse every day.”

“And the others?”

“Mr. Burrows had rather a difficult time with Sir Gervase, I should imagine. I think he was glad that our work on the book gave him a little more breathing space. Colonel Bury was always charming. He was devoted to Lady Chevenix-Gore and he managed Sir Gervase quite well. Mr. Trent, Mr. Forbes and Miss Cardwell have only been here a few days, so of course I don't know much about them."

"Thank you, mademoiselle. And what about Captain Lake, the agent?"

"Oh, he's very nice. Everybody liked him."

"Including Sir Gervase?"

"Oh, yes. I've heard him say Lake was much the best agent he'd had. Of course, Captain Lake had his difficulties with Sir Gervase, too—but he managed pretty well on the whole. It wasn't easy."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He murmured, "There was something—something—that I had in mind to ask you—some little thing . . . What was it now?"

Miss Lingard turned a patient face towards him.

Poirot shook his head vexedly.

"Tchah! It is on the tip of my tongue."

Major Riddle waited a minute or two, then as Poirot continued to frown perplexedly, he took up the interrogation once more.

"When was the last time you saw Sir Gervase?"

"At teatime, in this room."

"What was his manner then? Normal?"

"As normal as it ever was."

"Was there any sense of strain among the party?"

"No, I think everybody seemed quite ordinary."

"Where did Sir Gervase go after tea?"

“He took Mr. Burrows with him into the study, as usual.”

“That was the last time you saw him?”

“Yes. I went to the small morning room where I worked, and typed a chapter of the book from the notes I had gone over with Sir Gervase, until seven o’clock, when I went upstairs to rest and dress for dinner.”

“You actually heard the shot, I understand?”

“Yes, I was in this room. I heard what sounded like a shot and I went out into the hall. Mr. Trent was there, and Miss Cardwell. Mr. Trent asked Snell if there was champagne for dinner, and made rather a joke of it. It never entered our heads to take the matter seriously, I’m afraid. We felt sure it must have been a car backfiring.”

Poirot said:

“Did you hear Mr. Trent say, ‘There’s always murder?’ ”

“I believe he did say something like that—joking, of course.”

“What happened next?”

“We all came in here.”

“Can you remember the order in which the others came down to dinner?”

“Miss Chevenix-Gore was the first, I think, and then Mr. Forbes. Then Colonel Bury and Lady Chevenix-Gore together, and Mr. Burrows immediately after them. I think that was the order, but I can’t be quite sure because they more or less came in all together.”

“Gathered by the sound of the first gong?”

“Yes. Everyone always hustled when they heard that gong. Sir Gervase was a terrible stickler for punctuality in the evening.”

“What time did he himself usually come down?”

“He was nearly always in the room before the first gong went.”

“Did it surprise you that he was not down on this occasion?”

“Very much.”

“Ah, I have it!” cried Poirot.

As the other two looked inquiringly at him he went on:

“I have remembered what I wanted to ask. This evening, mademoiselle, as we all went along to the study on Snell’s reporting it to be locked, you stooped and picked something up.”

“I did?” Miss Lingard seemed very surprised.

“Yes, just as we turned into the straight passage to the study. Something small and bright.”

“How extraordinary—I don’t remember. Wait a minute—yes, I do. Only I wasn’t thinking. Let me see—it must be in here.”

Opening her black satin bag, she poured the contents on a table.

Poirot and Major Riddle surveyed the collection with interest. There were two handkerchiefs, a powder compact, a small bunch of keys, a spectacle case and one other object on which Poirot pounced eagerly.

“A bullet, by jove!” said Major Riddle.

The thing was indeed shaped like a bullet, but it proved to be a small pencil.

“That’s what I picked up,” said Miss Lingard. “I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Do you know who this belongs to, Miss Lingard?”

“Oh, yes, it’s Colonel Bury’s. He had it made out of a bullet that hit him—or rather, didn’t hit him, if you know what I mean—in the South African War.”

“Do you know when he had it last?”

“Well, he had it this afternoon when they were playing bridge, because I noticed him writing with it on the score when I came in to tea.”

“Who was playing bridge?”

“Colonel Bury, Lady Chevenix-Gore, Mr. Trent and Miss Cardwell.”

“I think,” said Poirot gently, “we will keep this and return it to the colonel ourselves.”

“Oh, please do. I am so forgetful, I might not remember to so.”

“Perhaps, mademoiselle, you would be so good as to ask Colonel Bury to come here now?”

“Certainly. I will go and find him at once.”

She hurried away. Poirot got up and began walking aimlessly round the room.

“We begin,” he said, “to reconstruct the afternoon. It is interesting. At half past two Sir Gervase goes over accounts with Captain Lake. He is slightly preoccupied. At three, he discusses the book he is writing with Miss Lingard. He is in great distress of mind. Miss Lingard associates that distress of mind with Hugo Trent on the strength of a chance remark. At teatime his behaviour is normal. After tea, Godfrey Burrows tells us he was in good spirits over something. At five minutes to eight he comes downstairs, goes to his study, scrawls ‘Sorry’ on a sheet of paper, and shoots himself!”

Riddle said slowly:

“I see what you mean. It isn’t consistent.”

“Strange alteration of moods in Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore! He is preoccupied—he is seriously upset—he is normal—he is in high spirits!

There is something very curious here! And then that phrase he used, ‘Too late.’ That I should get here ‘Too late.’ Well, it is true that. I did get here too late—to see him alive.”

“I see. You really think—?”

“I shall never know now why Sir Gervase sent for me! That is certain!”

Poirot was still wandering round the room. He straightened one or two objects on the mantelpiece; he examined a card table that stood against a wall, he opened the drawer of it and took out the bridge-markers. Then he wandered over to the writing table and peered into the wastepaper basket. There was nothing in it but a paper bag. Poirot took it out, smelt it, murmured “Oranges” and flattened it out, reading the name on it. “Carpenter and Sons, Fruiterers, Hamborough St. Mary.” He was just folding it neatly into squares when Colonel Bury entered the room.

Eight

The Colonel dropped into a chair, shook his head, sighed and said:

“Terrible business, this, Riddle. Lady Chevenix-Gore is being wonderful—wonderful. Grand woman! Full of courage!”

Coming softly back to his chair, Poirot said:

“You have known her very many years, I think?”

“Yes, indeed, I was at her coming out dance. Wore rosebuds in her hair, I remember. And a white, fluffy dress . . . Wasn’t anyone to touch her in the room!”

His voice was full of enthusiasm. Poirot held out the pencil to him.

“This is yours, I think?”

“Eh? What? Oh, thank you, had it this afternoon when we were playing bridge. Amazing, you know, I held a hundred honours in spades three times running. Never done such a thing before.”

“You were playing bridge before tea, I understand?” said Poirot. “What was Sir Gervase’s frame of mind when he came in to tea?”

“Usual—quite usual. Never dreamed he was thinking of making away with himself. Perhaps he was a little more excitable than usual, now I come to think of it.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Why, then! Teatime. Never saw the poor chap alive again.”

“You didn’t go to the study at all after tea?”

“No, never saw him again.”

“What time did you come down to dinner?”

“After the first gong went.”

“You and Lady Chevenix-Gore came down together?”

“No, we—er—met in the hall. I think she’d been into the dining room to see to the flowers—something like that.”

Major Riddle said:

“I hope you won’t mind, Colonel Bury, if I ask you a somewhat personal question. Was there any trouble between you and Sir Gervase over the question of the Paragon Synthetic Rubber Company?”

Colonel Bury’s face became suddenly purple. He spluttered a little.

“Not at all. Not at all. Old Gervase was an unreasonable sort of fellow. You’ve got to remember that. He always expected everything he touched to turn out trumps! Didn’t seem to realize that the whole world was going through a period of crisis. All stocks and shares bound to be affected.”

“So there was a certain amount of trouble between you?”

“No trouble. Just damned unreasonable of Gervase!”

“He blamed you for certain losses he had sustained?”

“Gervase wasn’t normal! Vanda knew that. But she could always handle him. I was content to leave it all in her hands.”

Poirot coughed and Major Riddle, after glancing at him, changed the subject.

“You are a very old friend of the family, I know, Colonel Bury. Had you any knowledge as to how Sir Gervase had left his money?”

“Well, I should imagine the bulk of it would go to Ruth. That’s what I gathered from what Gervase let fall.”

“You don’t think that was at all unfair on Hugo Trent?”

“Gervase didn’t like Hugo. Never could stick him.”

“But he had a great sense of family. Miss Chevenix-Gore was, after all, only his adopted daughter.”

Colonel Bury hesitated, then after humming and hawing a moment, he said:

“Look here, I think I’d better tell you something. Strict confidence, and all that.”

“Of course—of course.”

“Ruth’s illegitimate, but she’s a Chevenix-Gore all right. Daughter of Gervase’s brother, Anthony, who was killed in the war. Seemed he’d had an affair with a typist. When he was killed, the girl wrote to Vanda. Vanda went to see her—girl was expecting a baby. Vanda took it up with Gervase, she’d just been told that she herself could never have another child. Result was they took over the child when it was born, adopted it legally. The mother renounced all rights in it. They’ve brought Ruth up as their own daughter and to all intents and purposes, she is their own daughter, and you’ve only got to look at her to realise she’s a Chevenix-Gore all right!”

“Aha,” said Poirot. “I see. That makes Sir Gervase’s attitude very much clearer. But if he did not like Mr. Hugo Trent, why was he so anxious to arrange a marriage between him and Mademoiselle Ruth?”

“To regularize the family position. It pleased his sense of fitness.”

“Even though he did not like or trust the young man?”

Colonel Bury snorted.

"You don't understand old Gervase. He couldn't regard people as human beings. He arranged alliances as though the parties were royal personages! He considered it fitting that Ruth and Hugo should marry, Hugo taking the name of Chevenix-Gore. What Hugo and Ruth thought about it didn't matter."

"And was Mademoiselle Ruth willing to fall in with this arrangement?"

Colonel Bury chuckled.

"Not she! She's a tartar!"

"Did you know that shortly before his death Sir Gervase was drafting a new will by which Miss Chevenix-Gore would inherit only on condition that she should marry Mr. Trent?"

Colonel Bury whistled.

"Then he really had got the windup about her and Burrows—"

As soon as he had spoken, he bit the words off, but it was too late. Poirot had pounced upon the admission.

"There was something between Mademoiselle Ruth and young Monsieur Burrows?"

"Probably nothing in it—nothing in it at all."

Major Riddle coughed and said:

"I think, Colonel Bury, that you must tell us all you know. It might have a direct bearing on Sir Gervase's state of mind."

"I suppose it might," said Colonel Bury, doubtfully. "Well, the truth of it is, young Burrows is not a bad-looking chap—at least, women seem to think so. He and Ruth seem to have got as thick as thieves just lately, and Gervase didn't like it—didn't like it at all. Didn't like to sack Burrows for fear of precipitating matters. He knows what Ruth's like. She won't be dictated to in any way. So I suppose he hit on this scheme. Ruth's not the sort of girl to sacrifice everything for love. She’s fond of the fleshpots and she likes money.”

“Do you yourself approve of Mr. Burrows?”

The colonel delivered himself of the opinion that Godfrey Burrows was slightly hairy at the heel, a pronouncement which baffled Poirot completely, but made Major Riddle smile into his moustache.

A few more questions were asked and answered, and then Colonel Bury departed.

Riddle glanced over at Poirot who was sitting absorbed in thought.

“What do you make of it all, M. Poirot?”

The little man raised his hands.

“I seem to see a pattern—a purposeful design.”

Riddle said, “It’s difficult.”

“Yes, it is difficult. But more and more one phrase, lightly uttered, strikes me as significant.”

“What was that?”

“That laughing sentence spoken by Hugo Trent: ‘There’s always murder . . . ’ ”

Riddle said sharply:

“Yes, I can see that you’ve been leaning that way all along.”

“Do you not agree, my friend, that the more we learn, the less and less motive we find for suicide? But for murder, we begin to have a surprising collection of motives!”

"Still, you've got to remember the facts—door locked, key in dead man's pocket. Oh, I know there are ways and means. Bent pins, strings—all sorts of devices. It would, I suppose, be possible . . . But do those things really work? That's what I very much doubt."

"At all events, let us examine the position from the point of view of murder, not of suicide."

"Oh, all right. As you are on the scene, it probably would be murder!"

For a moment Poirot smiled.

"I hardly like that remark."

Then he became grave once more.

"Yes, let us examine the case from the standpoint of murder. The shot is heard, four people are in the hall, Miss Lingard, Hugo Trent, Miss Cardwell and Snell. Where are all the others?"

"Burrows was in the library, according to his own story. No one to check that statement. The others were presumably in their rooms, but who is to know if they were really there? Everybody seems to have come down separately. Even Lady Chevenix-Gore and Bury only met in the hall. Lady Chevenix-Gore came from the dining room. Where did Bury come from? Isn't it possible that he came, not from upstairs, but from the study? There's that pencil."

"Yes, the pencil is interesting. He showed no emotion when I produced it, but that might be because he did not know where I found it and was unaware himself of having dropped it. Let us see, who else was playing bridge when the pencil was in use? Hugo Trent and Miss Cardwell. They're out of it. Miss Lingard and the butler can vouch for their alibis. The fourth was Lady Chevenix-Gore."

"You can't seriously suspect her."

"Why not, my friend? I tell you, me, I can suspect everybody! Supposing that, in spite of her apparent devotion to her husband, it is the faithful Bury she really loves?"

"H'm," said Riddle. "In a way it has been a kind of ménage à trois for years."

"And there is some trouble about this company between Sir Gervase and Colonel Bury."

"It's true that Sir Gervase might have been meaning to turn really nasty. We don't know the ins-and-outs of it. It might fit in with that summons to you. Say Sir Gervase suspects that Bury has deliberately fleeced him, but he doesn't want publicity because of a suspicion that his wife may be mixed up in it. Yes, that's possible. That gives either of those two a possible motive. And it is a bit odd really that Lady Chevenix-Gore should take her husband's death so calmly. All this spirit business may be acting!"

"Then there is the other complication," said Poirot. "Miss Chevenix-Gore and Burrows. It is very much to their interest that Sir Gervase should not sign the new will. As it is, she gets everything on condition that her husband takes the family name—"

"Yes, and Burrows's account of Sir Gervase's attitude this evening is a bit fishy. High spirits, pleased about something! That doesn't fit with anything else we've been told."

"There is, too, Mr. Forbes. Most correct, most severe, of an old and well-established firm. But lawyers, even the most respectable, have been known to embezzle their client's money when they themselves are in a hole."

"You're getting a bit too sensational, I think, Poirot."

"You think what I suggest is too like the pictures? But life, Major Riddle, is often amazingly like the pictures."

"It has been, so far, in Westshire," said the chief constable. "We'd better finish interviewing the rest of them, don't you think? It's getting late. We haven’t seen Ruth Chevenix-Gore yet, and she’s probably the most important of the lot.”

“I agree. There is Miss Cardwell, too. Perhaps we might see her first, since that will not take long, and interview Miss Chevenix-Gore last.

“Quite a good idea.”

Nine

That evening Poirot had only given Susan Cardwell a fleeting glance. He examined her now more attentively. An intelligent face, he thought, not strictly good-looking, but possessing an attraction that a merely pretty girl might envy. Her hair was magnificent, her face skilfully made-up. Her eyes, he thought, were watchful.

After a few preliminary questions, Major Riddle said:

"I don't know how close a friend you are of the family, Miss Cardwell?"

"I don't know them at all. Hugo arranged that I should be asked down here."

"You are, then, a friend of Hugo Trent's?"

"Yes, that's my position. Hugo's girlfriend." Susan Cardwell smiled as she drawled out the words.

"You have known him a long time?"

"Oh, no, just a month or so."

She paused and then added:

"I'm by way of being engaged to him."

"And he brought you down here to introduce you to his people?"

"Oh, dear no, nothing like that. We were keeping it very hush-hush. I just came down to spy out the land. Hugo told me the place was just like a madhouse. I thought I'd better come and see for myself. Hugo, poor sweet, is a perfect pet, but he's got absolutely no brains. The position, you see, was rather critical. Neither Hugo nor I have any money, and old Sir Gervase, who was Hugo's main hope, had set his heart on Hugo making a match of it with Ruth. Hugo's a bit weak, you know. He might agree to this marriage and count on being able to get out of it later."

"That idea did not commend itself to you, mademoiselle?" inquired Poirot gently.

"Definitely not. Ruth might have gone all peculiar and refused to divorce him or something. I put my foot down. No trotting off to St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, until I could be there dithering with a sheaf of lilies."

"So you came down to study the situation for yourself?"

"Yes."

"Eh bien!" said Poirot.

"Well, of course, Hugo was right! The whole family were bughouse! Except Ruth, who seems perfectly sensible. She'd got her own boyfriend and wasn't any keener on the marriage idea than I was."

"You refer to M. Burrows?"

"Burrows? Of course not. Ruth wouldn't fall for a bogus person like that."

"Then who was the object of her affection?"

Susan Cardwell paused, stretched for a cigarette, lit it, and remarked:

"You'd better ask her that. After all, it isn't my business."

Major Riddle asked:

"When was the last time you saw Sir Gervase?"

"At tea."

"Did his manner strike you as peculiar in any way?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“Not more than usual.”

“What did you do after tea?”

“Played billiards with Hugo.”

“You didn’t see Sir Gervase again?”

“No.”

“What about the shot?”

“That was rather odd. You see, I thought the first gong had gone, so I hurried up with my dressing, came dashing out of my room, heard, as I thought, the second gong and fairly raced down the stairs. I’d been one minute late for dinner the first night I was here and Hugo told me it had about wrecked our chances with the old man, so I fairly hared down. Hugo was just ahead of me and then there was a queer kind of pop-bang and Hugo said it was a champagne cork, but Snell said ‘No’ to that and, anyway, I didn’t think it had come from the dining room. Miss Lingard thought it came from upstairs, but anyway we agreed it was a backfire and we trooped into the drawing room and forgot about it.”

“It did not occur to you for one moment that Sir Gervase might have shot himself?” asked Poirot.

“I ask you, should I be likely to think of such a thing? The Old Man seemed to enjoy himself throwing his weight about. I never imagined he’d do such a thing. I can’t think why he did it. I suppose just because he was nuts.”

“An unfortunate occurrence.”

“Very—for Hugo and me. I gather he’s left Hugo nothing at all, or practically nothing.”

“Who told you that?”

“Hugo got it out of old Forbes.”

“Well, Miss Cardwell—” Major Riddle paused a moment, “I think that’s all. Do you think Miss Chevenix-Gore is feeling well enough to come down and talk to us?”

“Oh, I should think so. I’ll tell her.”

Poirot intervened.

“A little moment, mademoiselle. Have you seen this before?”

He held out the bullet pencil.

“Oh, yes, we had it at bridge this afternoon. Belongs to old Colonel Bury, I think.”

“Did he take it when the rubber was over?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle. That is all.”

“Right, I’ll tell Ruth.”

Ruth Chevenix-Gore came into the room like a queen. Her colour was vivid, her head held high. But her eyes, like the eyes of Susan Cardwell, were watchful. She wore the same frock she had had on when Poirot arrived. It was a pale shade of apricot. On her shoulder was pinned a deep, salmon-pink rose. It had been fresh and blooming an hour earlier, now it drooped.

“Well?” said Ruth.

“I’m extremely sorry to bother you,” began Major Riddle.

She interrupted him.

“Of course you have to bother me. You have to bother everyone. I can save you time, though. I haven’t the faintest idea why the Old Man killed himself. All I can tell you is that it wasn’t a bit like him.”

“Did you notice anything amiss in his manner today? Was he depressed, or unduly excited—was there anything at all abnormal?”

“I don’t think so. I wasn’t noticing—”

“When did you see him last?”

“Teatime.”

Poirot spoke:

“You did not go to the study—later?”

“No. The last I saw of him was in this room. Sitting there.”

She indicated a chair.

“I see. Do you know this pencil, mademoiselle?”

“It’s Colonel Bury’s.”

“Have you seen it lately?”

“I don’t really remember.”

“Do you know anything of a—disagreement between Sir Gervase and Colonel Bury?”

“Over the Paragon Rubber Company, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I should think so. The Old Man was rabid about it!”

“He considered, perhaps, that he had been swindled?”

Ruth shrugged her shoulders.

“He didn’t understand the first thing about finance.”

Poirot said:

“May I ask you a question, mademoiselle—a somewhat impertinent question?”

“Certainly, if you like.”

“It is this—are you sorry that your—father is dead?”

She stared at him.

“Of course I’m sorry. I don’t indulge in sob stuff. But I shall miss him . . . I was fond of the Old Man. That’s what we called him, Hugo and I, always. The ‘Old Man’—you know—something of the primitive—anthropoid-ape-original-Patriarch-of-the-tribe business. It sounds disrespectful, but there’s really a lot of affection behind it. Of course, he was really the most complete, muddleheaded old ass that ever lived!”

“You interest me, mademoiselle.”

“The Old Man had the brains of a louse! Sorry to have to say it, but it’s true. He was incapable of any kind of headwork. Mind you, he was a character. Fantastically brave and all that! Could go careering off to the Pole, or fighting duels. I always think that he blustered such a lot because he really knew that his brains weren’t up to much. Anyone could have got the better of him.”

Poirot took the letter from his pocket.

“Read this, mademoiselle.”

She read it through and handed it back to him.

“So that’s what brought you here!”

“Does it suggest anything to you, that letter?”

She shook her head.

“No. It’s probably quite true. Anyone could have robbed the poor old pet. John says the last agent before him swindled him right and left. You see, the Old Man was so grand and so pompous that he never really condescended to look into details! He was an invitation to crooks.”

“You paint a different picture of him, mademoiselle, from the accepted one.”

“Oh, well—he put up a pretty good camouflage. Vanda (my mother) backed him for all she was worth. He was so happy stalking round pretending he was God Almighty. That’s why, in a way, I’m glad he’s dead. It’s the best thing for him.”

“I do not quite follow you, mademoiselle.”

Ruth said broodingly:

“It was growing on him. One of these days he would have had to be locked up . . . People were beginning to talk as it was.”

“Did you know, mademoiselle, that he was contemplating a will whereby you could only inherit his money if you married Mr. Trent?”

She cried:

“How absurd! Anyway, I’m sure that could be set aside by law . . . I’m sure you can’t dictate to people about whom they shall marry.”

“If he had actually signed such a will, would you have complied with its provisions, mademoiselle?”

She stared.

“I—I—”

She broke off. For two or three minutes she sat irresolute, looking down at her dangling slipper. A little piece of earth detached itself from the heel and fell on the carpet.

Suddenly Ruth Chevenix-Gore said:

“Wait!”

She got up and ran out of the room. She returned almost immediately with Captain Lake by her side.

“It’s got to come out,” she said rather breathlessly. “You might as well know now. John and I were married in London three weeks ago.”

Ten

Of the two of them, Captain Lake looked far the more embarrassed.

“This is a great surprise, Miss Chevenix-Gore—Mrs. Lake, I should say,” said Major Riddle. “Did no one know of this marriage of yours?”

“No, we kept it quite dark. John didn’t like that part of it much.”

Lake said, stammering a little:

“I—I know that it seems rather a rotten way to set about things. I ought to have gone straight to Sir Gervase—”

Ruth interrupted:

“And told him you wanted to marry his daughter, and have been kicked out on your head and he’d probably have disinherited me, raised hell generally in the house, and we could have told each other how beautifully we’d behaved! Believe me, my way was better! If a thing’s done, it’s done. There would still have been a row—but he’d have come round.”

Lake still looked unhappy. Poirot asked:

“When did you intend to break the news to Sir Gervase?”

Ruth answered:

“I was preparing the ground. He’d been rather suspicious about me and John, so I pretended to turn my attentions to Godfrey. Naturally, he was ready to go quite off the deep end about that. I figured it out that the news I was married to John would come almost as a relief!”

“Did anybody at all know of this marriage?”

“Yes, I told Vanda in the end. I wanted to get her on my side.”

“And you succeeded in doing so?”

“Yes. You see, she wasn’t very keen about my marrying Hugo—because he was a cousin, I think. She seemed to think the family was so batty already that we’d probably have completely batty children. That was probably rather absurd, because I’m only adopted, you know. I believe I’m some quite distant cousin’s child.”

“You are sure Sir Gervase had no suspicion of the truth?”

“Oh, no.”

Poirot said:

“Is that true, Captain Lake? In your interview with Sir Gervase this afternoon, are you quite sure the matter was not mentioned?”

“No, sir. It was not.”

“Because, you see, Captain Lake, there is certain evidence to show that Sir Gervase was in a highly-excitable condition after the time he spent with you, and that he spoke once or twice of family dishonour.”

“The matter was not mentioned,” Lake repeated. His face had gone very white.

“Was that the last time you saw Sir Gervase?”

“Yes, I have already told you so.”

“Where were you at eight minutes past eight this evening?”

“Where was I? In my house. At the end of the village, about half a mile away.”

“You did not come up to Hamborough Close round about that time?”

“No.”

Poirot turned to the girl.

“Where were you, mademoiselle, when your father shot himself?”

“In the garden.”

“In the garden? You heard the shot?”

“Oh, yes. But I didn’t think about it particularly. I thought it was someone out shooting rabbits, although now I remember I did think it sounded quite close at hand.”

“You returned to the house—which way?”

“I came in through this window.”

Ruth indicated with a turn of her head the window behind her.

“Was anyone in here?”

“No. But Hugo and Susan and Miss Lingard came in from the hall almost immediately. They were talking about shooting and murders and things.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “Yes, I think I see now. . . .”

Major Riddle said rather doubtfully:

“Well—er—thank you. I think that’s all for the moment.”

Ruth and her husband turned and left the room.

“What the devil——” began Major Riddle, and ended rather hopelessly: “It gets more and more difficult to keep track of this business.”

Poirot nodded. He had picked up the little piece of earth that had fallen from Ruth’s shoe and was holding it thoughtfully in his hand.

“It is like the mirror smashed on the wall,” he said. “The dead man’s mirror. Every new fact we come across shows us some different angle of the dead man. He is reflected from every conceivable point of view. We shall have soon a complete picture. . . .”

He rose and put the little piece of earth tidily in the waste-paper basket.

“I will tell you one thing, my friend. The clue to the whole mystery is the mirror. Go into the study and look for yourself, if you do not believe me.”

Major Riddle, said decisively:

“If it’s murder, it’s up to you to prove it. If you ask me, I say it’s definitely suicide. Did you notice what the girl said about a former agent having swindled old Gervase? I bet Lake told that tale for his own purposes. He was probably helping himself a bit, Sir Gervase suspected it, and sent for you because he didn’t know how far things had gone between Lake and Ruth. Then this afternoon Lake told him they were married. That broke Gervase up. It was ‘too late’ now for anything to be done. He determined to get out of it all. In fact his brain, never very well-balanced at the best of times, gave way. In my opinion that’s what happened. What have you got to say against it?”

Poirot stood still in the middle of the room.

“What have I to say? This: I have nothing to say against your theory—but it does not go far enough. There are certain things it does not take into account.”

“Such as?”

“The discrepancies in Sir Gervase’s moods today, the finding of Colonel Bury’s pencil, the evidence of Miss Cardwell (which is very important), the evidence of Miss Lingard as to the order in which people came down to dinner, the position of Sir Gervase’s chair when he was found, the paper bag which had held oranges and, finally, the all-important clue of the broken mirror.”

Major Riddle stared.

“Are you going to tell me that that rigmarole makes sense?” he asked.

Hercule Poirot replied softly:

“I hope to make it do so—by tomorrow.”

Eleven

It was just after dawn when Hercule Poirot awoke on the following morning. He had been given a bedroom on the east side of the house.

Getting out of bed, he drew aside the window blind and satisfied himself that the sun had risen, and that it was a fine morning.

He began to dress with his usual meticulous care. Having finished his toilet, he wrapped himself up in a thick overcoat and wound a muffler round his neck.

Then he tiptoed out of his room and through the silent house down to the drawing room. He opened the french windows noiselessly and passed out into the garden.

The sun was just showing now. The air was misty, with the mist of a fine morning. Hercule Poirot followed the terraced walk round the side of the house till he came to the windows of Sir Gervase's study. Here he stopped and surveyed the scene.

Immediately outside the windows was a strip of grass that ran parallel with the house. In front of that was a wide herbaceous border. The michaelmas daisies still made a fine show. In front of the border was the flagged walk where Poirot was standing. A strip of grass ran from the grass walk behind the border to the terrace. Poirot examined it carefully, then shook his head. He turned his attention to the border on either side of it.

Very slowly he nodded his head. In the right-hand bed, distinct in the soft mould, there were footprints.

As he stared down at them, frowning, a sound caught his ears and he lifted his head sharply.

Above him a window had been pushed up. He saw a red head of hair. Framed in an aureole of golden red he saw the intelligent face of Susan Cardwell.

“What on earth are you doing at this hour, M. Poirot? A spot of sleuthing?”

Poirot bowed with the utmost correctitude.

“Good morning, mademoiselle. Yes, it is as you say. You now behold a detective—a great detective, I may say—in the act of detecting!”

The remark was a little flamboyant. Susan put her head on one side.

“I must remember this in my memoirs,” she remarked. “Shall I come down and help?”

“I should be enchanted.”

“I thought you were a burglar at first. Which way did you get out?”

“Through the drawing room window.”

“Just a minute and I’ll be with you.”

She was as good as her word. To all appearances Poirot was exactly in the same position as when she had first seen him.

“You are awake very early, mademoiselle?”

“I haven’t been to sleep really properly. I was just getting that desperate feeling that one does get at five in the morning.”

“It’s not quite so early as that!”

“It feels like it! Now then, my super sleuth, what are we looking at?”

“But observe, mademoiselle, footprints.”

“So they are.”

“Four of them,” continued Poirot. “See, I will point them out to you. Two going towards the window, two coming from it.”

“Whose are they? The gardener’s?”

“Mademoiselle, mademoiselle! Those footmarks are made by the small dainty high-heeled shoes of a woman. See, convince yourself. Step, I beg of you, in the earth here beside them.”

Susan hesitated a minute, then placed a foot gingerly on to the mould in the place indicated by Poirot. She was wearing small high-heeled slippers of dark brown leather.

“You see, yours are nearly the same size. Nearly, but not quite. These others are made by a rather longer foot than yours. Perhaps Miss Chevenix-Gore’s—or Miss Lingard’s—or even Lady Chevenix-Gore’s.”

“Not Lady Chevenix-Gore—she’s got tiny feet. People did in those days—manage to have small feet, I mean. And Miss Lingard wears queer flat-heeled things.”

“Then they are the marks of Miss Chevenix-Gore. Ah, yes, I remember she mentioned having been out in the garden yesterday evening.”

He led the way back round the house.

“Are we still sleuthing?” asked Susan.

“But certainly. We will go now to Sir Gervase’s study.”

He led the way. Susan Cardwell followed him.

The door still hung in a melancholy fashion. Inside, the room was as it had been last night. Poirot pulled the curtains and admitted the daylight.

He stood looking out at the border a minute or two, then he said:

“You have not, I presume, mademoiselle, much acquaintance with burglars?”

Susan Cardwell shook her red head regretfully.

“I’m afraid not, M. Poirot.”

“The chief constable, he, too, has not had the advantages of a friendly relationship with them. His connection with the criminal clases has always been strictly official. With me that is not so. I had a very pleasant chat with a burglar once. He told me an interesting thing about french windows—a trick that could sometimes be employed if the fastening was sufficiently loose.”

He turned the handle of the left-hand window as he spoke, the middle shaft came up out of the hole in the ground, and Poirot was able to pull the two doors of the window towards him. Having opened them wide, he closed them again—closed them without turning the handle, so as not to send the shaft down into its socket. He let go of the handle, waited a moment, then struck a quick, jarring blow high up on the centre of the shaft. The jar of the blow sent the shaft down into the socket in the ground—the handle turned of its own accord.

“You see, mademoiselle?”

“I think I do.”

Susan had gone rather pale.

“The window is now closed. It is impossible to enter a room when the window is closed, but it is possible to leave a room, pull the doors to from outside, then hit it as I did, and the bolt goes down into the ground, turning the handle. The window then is firmly closed, and anyone looking at it would say it had been closed from the inside.”

“Is that”—Susan’s voice shook a little—“is that what happened last night?”

“I think so, yes, mademoiselle.”

Susan said violently:

“I don’t believe a word of it.”

Poirot did not answer. He walked over to the mantelpiece. He wheeled sharply round.

“Mademoiselle, I have need of you as a witness. I have already one witness, Mr. Trent. He saw me find this tiny sliver of looking glass last night. I spoke of it to him. I left it where it was for the police. I even told the chief constable that a valuable clue was the broken mirror. But he did not avail himself of my hint. Now you are a witness that I place this sliver of looking glass (to which, remember, I have already called Mr. Trent’s attention) into a little envelope—so.” He suited the action to the word. “And I write on it—so—and seal it up. You are a witness, mademoiselle?”

“Yes—but—but I don’t know what it means.”

Poirot walked over to the other side of the room. He stood in front of the desk and stared at the shattered mirror on the wall in front of him.

“I will tell you what it means, mademoiselle. If you had been standing here last night, looking into this mirror, you could have seen in it murder being committed. . . .”

Twelve

I

For once in her life Ruth Chevenix-Gore—now Ruth Lake—came down to breakfast in good time. Hercule Poirot was in the hall and drew her aside before she went into the dining room.

“I have a question to ask you, madame.”

“Yes?”

“You were in the garden last night. Did you at any time step in the flower bed outside Sir Gervase’s study window?”

Ruth stared at him.

“Yes, twice.”

“Ah! Twice. How twice?”

“The first time I was picking michaelmas daisies. That was about seven o’clock.”

“Was it not rather an odd time of day to pick flowers?”

“Yes, it was, as a matter of fact. I’d done the flowers yesterday morning, but Vanda said after tea that the flowers on the dinner table weren’t good enough. I had thought they would be all right, so I hadn’t done them fresh.”

“But your mother requested you to do them? Is that right?”

“Yes. So I went out just before seven. I took them from that part of the border because hardly anyone goes round there, and so it didn’t matter spoiling the effect."

"Yes, yes, but the second time. You went there a second time, you said?"

"That was just before dinner. I had dropped a spot of brilliantine on my dress—just by the shoulder. I didn't want to bother to change, and none of my artificial flowers went with the yellow of that dress. I remembered I'd seen a late rose when I was picking the michaelmas daisies, so I hurried out and got it and pinned it on my shoulder."

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

"Yes, I remember that you wore a rose last night. What time was it, madame, when you picked that rose?"

"I don't really know."

"But it is essential, madame. Consider—reflect."

Ruth frowned. She looked swiftly at Poirot and then away again.

"I can't say exactly," she said at last. "It must have been—oh, of course—it must have been about five minutes past eight. It was when I was on my way back round the house that I heard the gong go, and then that funny bang. I was hurrying because I thought it was the second gong and not the first."

"Ah, so you thought that—and did you not try the study window when you stood there in the flowerbed?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I thought it might be open, and it would be quicker to come in that way. But it was fastened."

"So everything is explained. I congratulate you, madame."

She stared at him.

"What do you mean?"

“That you have an explanation for everything, for the mould on your shoes, for your footprints in the flower bed, for your fingerprints on the outside of the window. It is very convenient that.”

Before Ruth could answer, Miss Lingard came hurrying down the stairs. There was a queer purple flush on her cheeks, and she looked a little startled at seeing Poirot and Ruth standing together.

“I beg your pardon,” she said. “Is anything the matter?”

Ruth said angrily:

“I think M. Poirot has gone mad!”

She swept by them and into the dining room. Miss Lingard turned an astonished face on Poirot.

He shook his head.

“After breakfast,” he said. “I will explain. I should like everyone to assemble in Sir Gervase’s study at ten o’clock.”

He repeated this request on entering the dining room.

Susan Cardwell gave him a quick glance, then transferred her gaze to Ruth. When Hugo said:

“Eh? What’s the idea?” she gave him a sharp nudge in the side, and he shut up obediently.

When he had finished his breakfast, Poirot rose and walked to the door. He turned and drew out a large old-fashioned watch.

“It is five minutes to ten. In five minutes—in the study.”

II

Poirot looked round him. A circle of interested faces stared back at him. Everyone was there, he noted, with one exception, and at that very moment the exception swept into the room. Lady Chevenix-Gore came in with a soft, gliding step. She looked haggard and ill.

Poirot drew forward a big chair for her, and she sat down.

She looked up at the broken mirror, shivered, and pulled her chair a little way round.

“Gervase is still here,” she remarked in a matter-of-fact tone. “Poor Gervase . . . He will soon be free now.”

Poirot cleared his throat and announced:

“I have asked you all to come here so that you may hear the true facts of Sir Gervase’s suicide.”

“It was Fate,” said Lady Chevenix-Gore. “Gervase was strong, but his Fate was stronger.”

Colonel Bury moved forward a little.

“Vanda—my dear.”

She smiled up at him, then put up her hand. He took it in his. She said softly: “You are such a comfort, Ned.”

Ruth said sharply:

“Are we to understand, M. Poirot, that you have definitely ascertained the cause of my father’s suicide?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No, madame.”

“Then what is all this rigmarole about?”

Poirot said quietly:

"I do not know the cause of Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore's suicide, because Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore did not commit suicide. He did not kill himself. He was killed. . . ."

"Killed?" Several voices echoed the word. Startled faces were turned in Poirot's direction. Lady Chevenix-Gore looked up, said, "Killed? Oh, no!" and gently shook her head.

"Killed, did you say?" It was Hugo who spoke now. "Impossible. There was no one in the room when we broke in. The window was fastened. The door was locked on the inside, and the key was in my uncle's pocket. How could he have been killed?"

"Nevertheless, he was killed."

"And the murderer escaped through the keyhole, I suppose?" said Colonel Bury sceptically. "Or flew up the chimney?"

"The murderer," said Poirot, "went out through the window. I will show you how."

He repeated his manoeuvres with the window.

"You see?" he said. "That was how it was done! From the first I could not consider it likely that Sir Gervase had committed suicide. He had pronounced egomania, and such a man does not kill himself.

"And there were other things! Apparently, just before his death, Sir Gervase had sat down at his desk, scrawled the word SORRY on a sheet of notepaper and had then shot himself. But before this last action he had, for some reason or other altered the position of his chair, turning it so that it was sideways to the desk. Why? There must be some reason. I began to see light when I found, sticking to the base of a heavy bronze statuette, a tiny sliver of looking glass. . . .

"I asked myself, how does a sliver of broken looking glass come to be there?—and an answer suggested itself to me. The mirror had been broken, not by a bullet, but by being struck with the heavy bronze figure. That mirror had been broken deliberately.

“But why? I returned to the desk and looked down at the chair. Yes, I saw now. It was all wrong. No suicide would turn his chair round, lean over the edge of it, and then shoot himself. The whole thing was arranged. The suicide was a fake!

“And now I come to something very important. The evidence of Miss Cardwell. Miss Cardwell said that she hurried downstairs last night because she thought that the second gong had sounded. That is to say, she thought that she had already heard the first gong.

“Now observe, if Sir Gervase was sitting at his desk in the normal fashion when he was shot, where would the bullet go? Travelling in a straight line, it would pass through the door, if the door were open, and finally hit the gong!

“You see now the importance of Miss Cardwell’s statement? No one else heard the first gong, but, then, her room is situated immediately above this one, and she was in the best position for hearing it. It would consist of only one single note, remember.

“There could be no question of Sir Gervase’s shooting himself. A dead man cannot get up, shut the door, lock it and arrange himself in a convenient position! Somebody else was concerned, and therefore it was not suicide, but murder. Someone whose presence was easily accepted by Sir Gervase, stood by his side talking to him. Sir Gervase was busy writing, perhaps. The murderer brings the pistol up to the right side of his head and fires. The deed is done! Then quick, to work! The murderer slips on gloves. The door is locked, the key put in Sir Gervase’s pocket. But supposing that one loud note of the gong has been heard? Then it will be realized that the door was open, not shut, when the shot was fired. So the chair is turned, the body rearranged, the dead man’s fingers pressed on the pistol, the mirror deliberately smashed. Then the murderer goes out through the window, jars it shut, steps, not on the grass, but in the flower bed where footprints can be smoothed out afterwards; then round the side of the house and into the drawing room.”

He paused and said:

“There was only one person who was out in the garden when the shot was fired. That same person left her footprints in the flower bed and her fingerprints on the outside of the window.”

He came towards Ruth.

“And there was a motive, wasn’t there? Your father had learnt of your secret marriage. He was preparing to disinherit you.”

“It’s a lie!” Ruth’s voice came scornful and clear. “There’s not a word of truth in your story. It’s a lie from start to finish!”

“The proofs against you are very strong, madame. A jury may believe you. It may not!”

“She won’t have to face a jury.”

The others turned—startled. Miss Lingard was on her feet. Her face altered. She was trembling all over.

“I shot him. I admit it! I had my reason. I—I’ve been waiting for some time. M. Poirot is quite right. I followed him in here. I had taken the pistol out of the drawer earlier. I stood beside him talking about the book—and I shot him. That was just after eight. The bullet struck the gong. I never dreamt it would pass right through his head like that. There wasn’t time to go out and look for it. I locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then I swung the chair round, smashed the mirror, and, after scrawling “Sorry” on a piece of paper, I went out through the window and shut it the way M. Poirot showed you. I stepped in the flower bed, but I smoothed out the footprints with a little rake I had put there ready. Then I went round to the drawing room. I had left the window open. I didn’t know Ruth had gone out through it. She must have come round the front of the house while I went round the back. I had to put the rake away, you see, in a shed. I waited in the drawing room till I heard someone coming downstairs and Snell going to the gong, and then—”

She looked at Poirot.

“You don’t know what I did then?”

“Oh yes, I do. I found the bag in the wastepaper basket. It was very clever, that idea of yours. You did what children love to do. You blew up the bag and then hit it. It made a satisfactory big bang. You threw the bag into the wastepaper basket and rushed out into the hall. You had established the time of the suicide—and an alibi for yourself. But there was still one thing that worried you. You had not had time to pick up the bullet. It must be somewhere near the gong. It was essential that the bullet should be found in the study somewhere near the mirror. I didn’t know when you had the idea of taking Colonel Bury’s pencil—”

“It was just then,” said Miss Lingard. “When we all came in from the hall. I was surprised to see Ruth in the room. I realized she must have come from the garden through the window. Then I noticed Colonel Bury’s pencil lying on the bridge table. I slipped it into my bag. If, later, anyone saw me pick up the bullet, I could pretend it was the pencil. As a matter of fact, I didn’t think anyone saw me pick up the bullet. I dropped it by the mirror while you were looking at the body. When you tackled me on the subject, I was very glad I had thought of the pencil.”

“Yes, that was clever. It confused me completely.”

“I was afraid someone must hear the real shot, but I knew everyone was dressing for dinner, and would be shut away in their rooms. The servants were in their quarters. Miss Cardwell was the only one at all likely to hear it, and she would probably think it was a backfire. What she did hear was the gong. I thought—I thought everything had gone without a hitch. . . .”

Mr. Forbes said slowly in his precise tones:

“This is a most extraordinary story. There seems no motive—”

Miss Lingard said clearly: “There was a motive. . . .”

She added fiercely:

"Go on, ring up the police! What are you waiting for?"

Poirot said gently:

"Will you all please leave the room? Mr. Forbes, ring up Major Riddle. I will stay here till he comes."

Slowly, one by one, the family filed out of the room. Puzzled, uncomprehending, shocked, they cast abashed glances at the trim, upright figure with its neatly-parted grey hair.

Ruth was the last to go. She stood, hesitating in the doorway.

"I don't understand." She spoke angrily, defiantly, accusing Poirot. "Just now, you thought I had done it."

"No, no," Poirot shook his head. "No, I never thought that."

Ruth went out slowly.

Poirot was left with the little middle-aged prim woman who had just confessed to a cleverly-planned and cold-blooded murder.

"No," said Miss Lingard. "You didn't think she had done it. You accused her to make me speak. That's right, isn't it?"

Poirot bowed his head.

"While we're waiting," said Miss Lingard in a conversational tone, "you might tell me what made you suspect me."

"Several things. To begin with, your account of Sir Gervase. A proud man like Sir Gervase would never speak disparagingly of his nephew to an outsider, especially someone in your position. You wanted to strengthen the theory of suicide. You also went out of your way to suggest that the cause of the suicide was some dishonourable trouble connected with Hugo Trent. That, again, was a thing Sir Gervase would never have admitted to a stranger. Then there was the object you picked up in the hall, and the very significant fact that you did not mention that Ruth, when she entered the drawing room, did so from the garden. And then I found the paper bag—a most unlikely object to find in the wastepaper basket in the drawing room of a house like Hamborough Close! You were the only person who had been in the drawing room when the ‘shot’ was heard. The paper bag trick was one that would suggest itself to a woman—an ingenious homemade device. So everything fitted in. The endeavour to throw suspicion on Hugo, and to keep it away from Ruth. The mechanism of crime—and its motive.”

The little grey-haired woman stirred.

“You know the motive?”

“I think so. Ruth’s happiness—that was the motive! I fancy that you had seen her with John Lake—you knew how it was with them. And then with your easy access to Sir Gervase’s papers, you came across the draft of his new will—Ruth disinherited unless she married Hugo Trent. That decided you to take the law into your own hands, using the fact that Sir Gervase had previously written to me. You probably saw a copy of that letter. What muddled feeling of suspicion and fear had caused him to write originally, I do not know. He must have suspected either Burrows or Lake of systematically robbing him. His uncertainty regarding Ruth’s feelings made him seek a private investigation. You used that fact and deliberately set the stage for suicide, backing it up by your account of his being very distressed over something connected with Hugo Trent. You sent a telegram to me and reported Sir Gervase as having said I should arrive ‘too late.’ ”

Miss Lingard said fiercely:

“Gervase Chevenix-Gore was a bully, a snob and a windbag! I wasn’t going to have him ruin Ruth’s happiness.”

Poirot said gently:

“Ruth is your daughter?”

“Yes—she is my daughter—I’ve often—thought about her. When I heard Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore wanted someone to help him with a family history, I jumped at the chance. I was curious to see my—my girl. I knew

Lady Chevenix-Gore wouldn’t recognize me. It was years ago—I was young and pretty then, and I changed my name after that time. Besides Lady Chevenix-Gore is too vague to know anything definitely. I liked her, but I hated the Chevenix-Gore family. They treated me like dirt. And here was Gervase going to ruin Ruth’s life with pride and snobbery. But I determined that she should be happy. And she will be happy—if she never knows about me!”

It was a plea—not a question.

Poirot bent his head gently.

“No one shall know from me.”

Miss Lingard said quietly:

“Thank you.”

III

Later, when the police had come and gone, Poirot found Ruth Lake with her husband in the garden.

She said challengingly:

“Did you really think that I had done it, M. Poirot?”

“I knew, madame, that you could not have done it—because of the michaelmas daisies.”

“The michaelmas daisies? I don’t understand.”

“Madame, there were four footprints and four footprints only in the border. But if you had been picking flowers there would have been many more. That meant that between your first visit and your second, someone had smoothed all those footsteps away. That could only have been done by the guilty person, and since your footprints had not been removed, you were not the guilty person. You were automatically cleared.”

Ruth’s face lightened.

“Oh, I see. You know—I suppose it’s dreadful, but I feel rather sorry for that poor woman. After all, she did confess rather than let me be arrested—or at any rate, that is what she thought. That was—rather noble in a way. I hate to think of her going through a trial for murder.”

Poirot said gently:

“Do not distress yourself. It will not come to that. The doctor, he tells me that she has serious heart trouble. She will not live many weeks.”

“I’m glad of that.” Ruth picked an autumn crocus and pressed it idly against her cheek.

“Poor woman. I wonder why she did it. . . .”

TRIANGLE AT RHODES

One

Hercule Poirot sat on the white sand and looked out across the sparkling blue water. He was carefully dressed in a dandified fashion in white flannels and a large panama hat protected his head. He belonged to the old-fashioned generation which believed in covering itself carefully from the sun. Miss Pamela Lyall, who sat beside him and talked ceaselessly, represented the modern school of thought in that she was wearing the barest minimum of clothing on her sun-browned person.

Occasionally her flow of conversation stopped whilst she reanointed herself from a bottle of oily fluid which stood beside her.

On the farther side of Miss Pamela Lyall her great friend, Miss Sarah Blake, lay face downwards on a gaudily-striped towel. Miss Blake’s tanning was as perfect as possible and her friend cast dissatisfied glances at her more than once.

“I’m so patchy still,” she murmured regretfully. “M. Poirot—would you mind? Just below the right shoulder blade—I can’t reach to rub it in properly.”

M. Poirot obliged and then wiped his oily hand carefully on his handkerchief. Miss Lyall, whose principal interests in life were the observation of people round her and the sound of her own voice, continued to talk.

“I was right about that woman—the one in the Chanel model—it is Valentine Dacres—Chantry, I mean. I thought it was. I recognized her at once. She’s really rather marvellous, isn’t she? I mean I can understand how people go quite crazy about her. She just obviously expects them to! That’s half the battle. Those other people who came last night are called Gold. He's terribly good-looking."

"Honeymooners?" murmured Sarah in a stifled voice.

Miss Lyall shook her head in an experienced manner.

"Oh, no—her clothes aren't new enough. You can always tell brides! Don't you think it's the most fascinating thing in the world to watch people, M. Poirot, and see what you can find out about them by just looking?"

"Not just looking, darling," said Sarah sweetly. "You ask a lot of questions, too."

"I haven't even spoken to the Golds yet," said Miss Lyall with dignity. "And anyway I don't see why one shouldn't be interested in one's fellow creatures? Human nature is simply fascinating. Don't you think so, M. Poirot?"

This time she paused long enough to allow her companion to reply.

Without taking his eyes off the blue water, M. Poirot replied:

"Ça depend."

Pamela was shocked.

"Oh, M. Poirot! I don't think anything's so interesting—so incalculable as a human being!"

"Incalculable? That, no."

"Oh, but they are. Just as you think you've got them beautifully taped—they do something completely unexpected."

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, that is not true. It is most rare that anyone does an action that is not dans son caractère. It is in the end monotonous."

“I don’t agree with you at all!” said Miss Pamela Lyall.

She was silent for quite a minute and a half before returning to the attack.

“As soon as I see people I begin wondering about them—what they’re like—what relations they are to each other—what they’re thinking and feeling. It’s—oh, it’s quite thrilling.”

“Hardly that,” said Hercule Poirot. “Nature repeats herself more than one would imagine. The sea,” he added thoughtfully, “has infinitely more variety.”

Sarah turned her head sideways and asked:

“You think that human beings tend to reproduce certain patterns? Stereotyped patterns?”

“Précisément,” said Poirot, and traced a design in the sand with his finger.

“What’s that you’re drawing?” asked Pamela curiously.

“A triangle,” said Poirot.

But Pamela’s attention had been diverted elsewhere.

“Here are the Chantrys,” she said.

A woman was coming down the beach—a tall woman, very conscious of herself and her body. She gave a half nod and smile and sat down a little distance away on the beach. The scarlet and gold silk wrap slipped down from her shoulders. She was wearing a white bathing dress.

Pamela sighed.

“Hasn’t she got a lovely figure?”

But Poirot was looking at her face—the face of a woman of thirty-nine who had been famous since sixteen for her beauty.

He knew, as everyone knew, all about Valentine Chantry. She had been famous for many things—for her caprices, for her wealth, for her enormous sapphire-blue eyes, for her matrimonial ventures and adventures. She had had five husbands and innumerable lovers. She had in turn been the wife of an Italian count, of an American steel magnate, of a tennis professional, of a racing motorist. Of these four the American had died, but the others had been shed negligently in the divorce court. Six months ago she had married a fifth time—a commander in the navy.

He it was who came striding down the beach behind her. Silent, dark—with a pugnacious jaw and a sullen manner. A touch of the primeval ape about him.

She said:

"Tony darling—my cigarette case . . ."

He had it ready for her—lighted her cigarette—helped her to slip the straps of the white bathing dress from her shoulders. She lay, arms outstretched in the sun. He sat by her like some wild beast that guards its prey.

Pamela said, her voice just lowered sufficiently:

"You know they interest me frightfully . . . He's such a brute! So silent and —sort of glowering. I suppose a woman of her kind likes that. It must be like controlling a tiger! I wonder how long it will last. She gets tired of them very soon, I believe—especially nowadays. All the same, if she tried to get rid of him, I think he might be dangerous."

Another couple came down the beach—rather shyly. They were the newcomers of the night before. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Gold as Miss Lyall knew from her inspection of the hotel visitors' book. She knew, too, for such were the Italian regulations—their Christian names and their ages as set down from their passports.

Mr. Douglas Cameron Gold was thirty-one and Mrs. Marjorie Emma Gold was thirty-five.

Miss Lyall's hobby in life, as has been said, was the study of human beings. Unlike most English people, she was capable of speaking to strangers on sight instead of allowing four days to a week to elapse before making the first cautious advance as is the customary British habit. She, therefore, noting the slight hesitancy and shyness of Mrs. Gold's advance, called out:

"Good morning, isn't it a lovely day?"

Mrs. Gold was a small woman—rather like a mouse. She was not bad-looking, indeed her features were regular and her complexion good, but she had a certain air of diffidence and dowdiness that made her liable to be overlooked. Her husband, on the other hand, was extremely good-looking, in an almost theatrical manner. Very fair, crisply curling hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, narrow hips. He looked more like a young man on the stage than a young man in real life, but the moment he opened his mouth that impression faded. He was quite natural and unaffected, even, perhaps, a little stupid.

Mrs. Gold looked gratefully at Pamela and sat down near her.

"What a lovely shade of brown you are. I feel terribly underdone!"

"One has to take a frightful lot of trouble to brown evenly," sighed Miss Lyall.

She paused a minute and then went on:

"You've only just arrived, haven't you?"

"Yes. Last night. We came on the Vapo d'Italia boat."

"Have you ever been to Rhodes before?"

"No. It is lovely, isn't it?"

Her husband said:

"Pity it's such a long way to come."

“Yes, if it were only nearer England—”

In a muffled voice Sarah said:

“Yes, but then it would be awful. Rows and rows of people laid out like fish on a slab. Bodies everywhere!”

“That’s true, of course,” said Douglas Gold. “It’s a nuisance the Italian exchange is so absolutely ruinous at present.”

“It does make a difference, doesn’t it?”

The conversation was running on strictly stereotyped lines. It could hardly have been called brilliant.

A little way along the beach, Valentine Chantry stirred and sat up. With one hand she held her bathing dress in position across her breast.

She yawned, a wide yet delicate cat-like yawn. She glanced casually down the beach. Her eyes slanted past Marjorie Gold—and stayed thoughtfully on the crisp, golden head of Douglas Gold.

She moved her shoulders sinuously.She spoke and her voice was raised a little higher than it need have been.

“Tony darling—isn’t it divine—this sun? I simply must have been a sun worshipper once—don’t you think so?”

Her husband grunted something in reply that failed to reach the others. Valentine Chantry went on in that high, drawling voice.

“Just pull that towel a little flatter, will you, darling?”

She took infinite pains in the resettling of her beautiful body. Douglas Gold was looking now. His eyes were frankly interested.

Mrs. Gold chirped happily in a subdued key to Miss Lyall.

“What a beautiful woman!”

Pamela, as delighted to give as to receive information, replied in a lower voice:

“That’s Valentine Chantry—you know, who used to be Valentine Dacres—she is rather marvellous, isn’t she? He’s simply crazy about her—won’t let her out of his sight!”

Mrs. Gold looked once more along the beach. Then she said:

“The sea really is lovely—so blue. I think we ought to go in now, don’t you, Douglas?”

He was still watching Valentine Chantry and took a minute or two to answer. Then he said, rather absently:

“Go in? Oh, yes, rather, in a minute.”

Marjorie Gold got up and strolled down to the water’s edge.

Valentine Chantry rolled over a little on one side. Her eyes looked along at Douglas Gold. Her scarlet mouth curved faintly into a smile.

The neck of Mr. Douglas Gold became slightly red.

Valentine Chantry said:

“Tony darling—would you mind? I want a little pot of face cream—it’s up on the dressing table. I meant to bring it down. Do get it for me—there’s an angel.”

The commander rose obediently. He stalked off into the hotel.

Marjorie Gold plunged into the sea, calling out:

“It’s lovely, Douglas—so warm. Do come.”

Pamela Lyall said to him:

“Aren’t you going in?”

He answered vaguely:

“Oh! I like to get well hotted up first.”

Valentine Chantry stirred. Her head was lifted for a moment as though to recall her husband—but he was just passing inside the wall of the hotel garden.

“I like my dip the last thing,” explained Mr. Gold.

Mrs. Chantry sat up again. She picked up a flask of sunbathing oil. She had some difficulty with it—the screw top seemed to resist her efforts.

She spoke loudly and petulantly.

“Oh, dear—I can’t get this thing undone!”

She looked towards the other group—

“I wonder—”

Always gallant, Poirot rose to his feet, but Douglas Gold had the advantage of youth and suppleness. He was by her side in a moment.

“Can I do it for you?”

“Oh, thank you—” It was the sweet, empty drawl again.

“You are kind. I’m such a fool at undoing things—I always seem to screw them the wrong way. Oh! you’ve done it! Thank you ever so much—”

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself.

He got up and wandered along the beach in the opposite direction. He did not go very far but his progress was leisurely. As he was on his way back, Mrs. Gold came out of the sea and joined him. She had been swimming. Her face, under a singularly unbecoming bathing cap, was radiant.

She said breathlessly, “I do love the sea. And it’s so warm and lovely here.”

She was, he perceived, an enthusiastic bather.

She said, “Douglas and I are simply mad on bathing. He can stay in for hours.”

And at that Hercule Poirot’s eyes slid over her shoulder to the spot on the beach where that enthusiastic bather, Mr. Douglas Gold, was sitting talking to Valentine Chantry.

His wife said:

“I can’t think why he doesn’t come. . . .”

Her voice held a kind of childish bewilderment.

Poirot’s eyes rested thoughtfully on Valentine Chantry. He thought that other women in their time had made that same remark.

Beside him, he heard Mrs. Gold draw in her breath sharply.

She said—and her voice was cold:

“She’s supposed to be very attractive, I believe. But Douglas doesn’t like that type of woman.”

Hercule Poirot did not reply.

Mrs. Gold plunged into the sea again.

She swam away from the shore with slow, steady strokes. You could see that she loved the water.

Poirot retraced his steps to the group on the beach.

It had been augmented by the arrival of old General Barnes, a veteran who was usually in the company of the young. He was sitting now between Pamela and Sarah, and he and Pamela were engaged in dishing up various scandals with appropriate embellishments.

Commander Chantry had returned from his errand. He and Douglas Gold were sitting on either side of Valentine.

Valentine was sitting up very straight between the two men and talking. She talked easily and lightly in her sweet, drawling voice, turning her head to take first one man and then the other in the conversation.

She was just finishing an anecdote.

“—and what do you think the foolish man said? ‘It may have been only a minute, but I’d remember you anywhere, Mum!’ Didn’t he, Tony? And you know, I thought it was so sweet of him. I do think it’s such a kind world—I mean, everybody is so frightfully kind to me always—I don’t know why—they just are. But I said to Tony—d’you remember, darling—‘Tony, if you want to be a teeny-weeny bit jealous, you can be jealous of that commissionaire.’ Because he really was too adorable. . . .”

There was a pause and Douglas Gold said:

“Good fellows—some of these commissionaires.”

“Oh, yes—but he took such trouble—really an immense amount of trouble—and seemed just pleased to be able to help me.”

Douglas Gold said:

“Nothing odd about that. Anyone would for you, I’m sure.”

She cried delightedly:

“How nice of you! Tony, did you hear that?”

Commander Chantry grunted.

His wife sighed:

“Tony never makes pretty speeches—do you, my lamb?”

Her white hand with its long red nails ruffled up his dark head.

He gave her a sudden sidelong look. She murmured:

“I don’t really know how he puts up with me. He’s simply frightfully clever—absolutely frantic with brains—and I just go on talking nonsense the whole time, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Nobody minds what I do or say—everybody spoils me. I’m sure it’s frightfully bad for me.”

Commander Chantry said across her to the other man:

“That your missus in the sea?”

“Yes. Expect it’s about time I joined her.”

Valentine murmured:

“But it’s so lovely here in the sun. You mustn’t go into the sea yet. Tony darling, I don’t think I shall actually bathe today—not my first day. I might get a chill or something. But why don’t you go in now, Tony darling? Mr.—Mr. Gold will stay and keep me company while you’re in.”

Chantry said rather grimly:

“No, thanks. Shan’t go in just yet. Your wife seems to be waving to you, Gold.”

Valentine said:

“How well your wife swims. I’m sure she’s one of those terribly efficient women who do everything well. They always frighten me so because I feel they despise me. I’m so frightfully bad at everything—an absolute duffer, aren’t I, Tony darling?”

But again Commander Chantry only grunted.

His wife murmured affectionately:

“You’re too sweet to admit it. Men are so wonderfully loyal—that’s what I like about them. I do think men are so much more loyal than women—and they never say nasty things. Women, I always think, are rather petty.”

Sarah Blake rolled over on her side towards Poirot.

She murmured between her teeth.

“Examples of pettiness, to suggest that dear Mrs. Chantry is in any way not absolute perfection! What a complete idiot the woman is! I really do think Valentine Chantry is very nearly the most idiotic woman I ever met. She can’t do anything but say, ‘Tony, darling,’ and roll her eyes. I should fancy she’d got cottonwool padding instead of brains.”

Poirot raised his expressive eyebrows.

“Un peu sévère!”

“Oh, yes. Put it down as pure ‘Cat,’ if you like. She certainly has her methods! Can’t she leave any man alone? Her husband’s looking like thunder.”

Looking out to sea, Poirot remarked:

“Mrs. Gold swims well.”

“Yes, she isn’t like us who find it a nuisance to get wet. I wonder if Mrs. Chantry will ever go into the sea at all while she’s out here.”

“Not she,” said General Barnes huskily. “She won’t risk that makeup of hers coming off. Not that she isn’t a fine-looking woman although perhaps a bit long in the tooth.”

“She’s looking your way, General,” said Sarah wickedly. “And you’re wrong about the makeup. We’re all waterproof and kissproof nowadays.”

“Mrs. Gold’s coming out,” announced Pamela.

“Here we go gathering nuts and may,” hummed Sarah. “Here comes his wife to fetch him away—fetch him away—fetch him away. . . .”

Mrs. Gold came straight up the beach. She had quite a pretty figure but her plain, waterproof cap was rather too serviceable to be attractive.

“Aren’t you coming, Douglas?” she demanded impatiently. “The sea is lovely and warm.”

“Rather.”

Douglas Gold rose hastily to his feet. He paused a moment and as he did so Valentine Chantry looked up at him with a sweet smile.

“Au revoir,” she said.

Gold and his wife went down the beach.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Pamela said critically:

“I don’t think, you know, that that was wise. To snatch your husband away from another woman is always bad policy. It makes you seem so possessive. And husbands hate that.”

“You seem to know a lot about husbands, Miss Pamela,” said General Barnes.

“Other people’s—not my own!”

“Ah! that’s where the difference comes in.”

“Yes, but General, I shall have learnt a lot of Do Nots.”

“Well, darling,” said Sarah, “I shouldn’t wear a cap like that for one thing. . . .”

“Seems very sensible to me,” said the General. “Seems a nice, sensible little woman altogether.”

“You’ve hit it exactly, General,” said Sarah. “But you know there’s a limit to the sensibleness of sensible women. I have a feeling she won’t be so sensible when it’s a case of Valentine Chantry.”

She turned her head and exclaimed in a low, excited whisper:

“Look at him now. Just like thunder. That man looks as though he had got the most frightful temper. . . .”

Commander Chantry was indeed scowling after the retreating husband and wife in a singularly unpleasant fashion.

Sarah looked up at Poirot.

“Well?” she said. “What do you make of all this?”

Hercule Poirot did not reply in words, but once again his forefinger traced a design in the sand. The same design—a triangle.

“The eternal triangle,” mused Sarah. “Perhaps you’re right. If so, we’re in for an exciting time in the next few weeks.”

Two

M. Hercule Poirot was disappointed with Rhodes. He had come to Rhodes for a rest and for a holiday. A holiday, especially, from crime. In late October, so he had been told, Rhodes would be nearly empty. A peaceful, secluded spot.

That, in itself, was true enough. The Chantrys, the Golds, Pamela and Sarah, the General and himself and two Italian couples were the only guests. But within that restricted circle the intelligent brain of M. Poirot perceived the inevitable shaping of events to come.

"It is that I am criminal-minded," he told himself reproachfully. "I have the indigestion! I imagine things."

But still he worried.

One morning he came down to find Mrs. Gold sitting on the terrace doing needlework.

As he came up to her he had the impression that there was the flicker of a cambric handkerchief swiftly whisked out of sight.

Mrs. Gold's eyes were dry, but they were suspiciously bright. Her manner, too, struck him as being a shade too cheerful. The brightness of it was a shade overdone.

She said:

"Good morning, M. Poirot," with such enthusiasm as to arouse his doubts.

He felt that she could not possibly be quite as pleased to see him as she appeared to be. For she did not, after all, know him very well. And though

Hercule Poirot was a conceited little man where his profession was concerned, he was quite modest in his estimate of his personal attractions.

“Good morning, madame,” he responded. “Another beautiful day.”

“Yes, isn’t it fortunate? But Douglas and I are always lucky in our weather.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. We’re really very lucky altogether. You know, M. Poirot, when one sees so much trouble and unhappiness, and so many couples divorcing each other and all that sort of thing, well, one does feel very grateful for one’s own happiness.”

“It is pleasant to hear you say so, madame.”

“Yes. Douglas and I are so wonderfully happy together. We’ve been married five years, you know, and after all, five years is quite a long time nowadays—”

“I have no doubt that in some cases it can seem an eternity, madame,” said Poirot dryly.

“—but I really believe that we’re happier now than when we were first married. You see, we’re so absolutely suited to each other.”

“That, of course, is everything.”

“That’s why I feel so sorry for people who aren’t happy.”

“You mean—”

“Oh! I was speaking generally, M. Poirot.”

“I see. I see.”

Mrs. Gold picked up a strand of silk, held it to the light, approved of it, and went on:

“Mrs. Chantry, for instance—”

“Yes, Mrs. Chantry?”

“I don’t think she’s at all a nice woman.”

“No. No, perhaps not.”

“In fact, I’m quite sure she’s not a nice woman. But in a way one feels sorry for her. Because in spite of her money and her good looks and all that”—Mrs. Gold’s fingers were trembling and she was quite unable to thread her needle—“she’s not the sort of woman men really stick to. She’s the sort of woman, I think, that men would get tired of very easily. Don’t you think so?”

“I myself should certainly get tired of her conversation before any great space of time had passed,” said Poirot cautiously.

“Yes, that’s what I mean. She has, of course, a kind of appeal . . .” Mrs. Gold hesitated, her lips trembled, she stabbed uncertainly at her work. A less acute observer than Hercule Poirot could not have failed to notice her distress. She went on inconsequently:

“Men are just like children! They believe anything. . . .”

She bent over her work. The tiny wisp of cambric came out again unobtrusively.

Perhaps Hercule Poirot thought it well to change the subject.

He said:

“You do not bathe this morning? And monsieur your husband, is he down on the beach?”

Mrs. Gold looked up, blinked, resumed her almost defiantly bright manner and replied:

“No, not this morning. We arranged to go round the walls of the old city. But somehow or other we—we missed each other. They started without me.”

The pronoun was revealing, but before Poirot could say anything, General Barnes came up from the beach below and dropped into a chair beside them.

“Good morning, Mrs. Gold. Good morning, Poirot. Both deserters this morning? A lot of absentees. You two, and your husband, Mrs. Gold—and Mrs. Chantry.”

“And Commander Chantry?” inquired Poirot casually.

“Oh, no, he’s down there. Miss Pamela’s got him in hand.” The General chuckled. “She’s finding him a little bit difficult! One of the strong, silent men you hear about in books.”

Marjorie Gold said with a little shiver:

“He frightens me a little, that man. He—he looks so black sometimes. As though he might do—anything!”

She shivered.

“Just indigestion, I expect,” said the General cheerfully. “Dyspepsia is responsible for many a reputation for romantic melancholy or ungovernable rages.”

Marjorie Gold smiled a polite little smile.

“And where’s your good man?” inquired the General.

Her reply came without hesitation—in a natural, cheerful voice.

“Douglas? Oh, he and Mrs. Chantry have gone into the town. I believe they’ve gone to have a look at the walls of the old city.”

"Ha, yes—very interesting. Time of the knights and all that. You ought to have gone too, little lady."

Mrs. Gold said:

"I'm afraid I came down rather late."

She got up suddenly with a murmured excuse and went into the hotel.

General Barnes looked after her with a concerned expression, shaking his head gently.

"Nice little woman, that. Worth a dozen painted trollops like someone whose name we won't mention! Ha! Husband's a fool! Doesn't know when he's well-off."

He shook his head again. Then, rising, he went indoors.

Sarah Blake had just come up from the beach and had heard the General's last speech.

Making a face at the departing warrior's back, she remarked as she flung herself into a chair:

"Nice little woman—nice little woman! Men always approve of dowdy women—but when it comes to brass tacks the dress-up trollops win hands down! Sad, but there it is."

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, and his voice was abrupt. "I do not like all this!"

"Don't you? Nor do I. No, let's be honest, I suppose I do like it really. There is a horrid side of one that enjoys accidents and public calamities and unpleasant things that happen to one's friends."

Poirot asked:

"Where is Commander Chantry?"

“On the beach being dissected by Pamela (she’s enjoying herself if you like!) and not being improved in temper by the proceeding. He was looking like a thunder cloud when I came up. There are squalls ahead, believe me.”

Poirot murmured:

“There is something I do not understand—”

“It’s not easy to understand,” said Sarah. “But what’s going to happen that’s the question.”

Poirot shook his head and murmured:

“As you say, mademoiselle—it is the future that causes one inquietude.”

“What a nice way of putting it,” said Sarah and went into the hotel.

In the doorway she almost collided with Douglas Gold. The young man came out looking rather pleased with himself but at the same time slightly guilty. He said:

“Hallo, M. Poirot,” and added rather self-consciously, “Been showing Mrs. Chantry the Crusaders’ walls. Marjorie didn’t feel up to going.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose slightly, but even had he wished he would have had no time to make a comment for Valentine Chantry came sweeping out, crying in her high voice:

“Douglas—a pink gin—positively I must have a pink gin.”

Douglas Gold went off to order the drink. Valentine sank into a chair by Poirot. She was looking radiant this morning.

She saw her husband and Pamela coming up towards them and waved a hand, crying out:

“Have a nice bathe, Tony darling? Isn’t it a divine morning?”

Commander Chantry did not answer. He swung up the steps, passed her without a word or a look and vanished into the bar.

His hands were clenched by his sides and that faint likeness to a gorilla was accentuated.

Valentine Chantry's perfect but rather foolish mouth fell open.

She said, "Oh," rather blankly.

Pamela Lyall's face expressed keen enjoyment of the situation. Masking it as far as was possible to one of her ingenuous disposition she sat down by Valentine Chantry and inquired:

"Have you had a nice morning?"

As Valentine began, "Simply marvellous. We—" Poirot got up and in his turn strolled gently towards the bar. He found young Gold waiting for the pink gin with a flushed face. He looked disturbed and angry.

He said to Poirot, "That man's a brute!" And he nodded his head in the direction of the retreating figure of Commander Chantry.

"It is possible," said Poirot. "Yes, it is quite possible. But les femmes, they like brutes, remember that!"

Douglas muttered:

"I shouldn't be surprised if he ill-treats her!"

"She probably likes that too."

Douglas Gold looked at him in a puzzled way, took up the pink gin and went out with it.

Hercule Poirot sat on a stool and ordered a sirop de cassis. Whilst he was sipping it with long sighs of enjoyment, Chantry came in and drank several pink gins in rapid succession.

He said suddenly and violently to the world at large rather than to Poirot:

“If Valentine thinks she can get rid of me like she’s got rid of a lot of other damned fools, she’s mistaken! I’ve got her and I mean to keep her. No other fellow’s going to get her except over my dead body.”

He flung down some money, turned on his heel and went out.

Three

It was three days later that Hercule Poirot went to the Mount of the Prophet. It was a cool, agreeable drive through the golden green fir trees, winding higher and higher, far above the petty wrangling and squabbling of human beings. The car stopped at the restaurant. Poirot got out and wandered into the woods. He came out at last on a spot that seemed truly on top of the world. Far below, deeply and dazzlingly blue, was the sea.

Here at last he was at peace—removed from cares—above the world. Carefully placing his folded overcoat on a tree stump, Hercule Poirot sat down.

“Doubtless le bon Dieu knows what he does. But it is odd that he should have permitted himself to fashion certain human beings. Eh bien, here for a while at least I am away from these vexing problems.” Thus he mused.

He looked up with a start. A little woman in a brown coat and skirt was hurrying towards him. It was Marjorie Gold and this time she had abandoned all pretence. Her face was wet with tears.

Poirot could not escape. She was upon him.

“M. Poirot. You’ve got to help me. I’m so miserable I don’t know what to do! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

She looked up at him with a distracted face. Her fingers fastened on his coat sleeve. Then, as something she saw in his face alarmed her, she drew back a little.

“What—what is it?” she faltered.

“You want my advice, madame? It is that you ask?”

She stammered, “Yes . . . Yes. . . .”

“Eh bien—here it is.” He spoke curtly—trenchantly. “Leave this place at once—before it is too late.”

“What?” She stared at him.

“You heard me. Leave this island.”

“Leave the island?”

She stared at him stupefied.

“That is what I say.”

“But why—why?”

“It is my advice to you—if you value your life.”

She gave a gasp.

“Oh! what do you mean? You’re frightening me—you’re frightening me.”

“Yes,” said Poirot gravely, “that is my intention.”

She sank down, her face in her hands.

“But I can’t! He wouldn’t come! Douglas wouldn’t, I mean. She wouldn’t let him. She’s got hold of him—body and soul. He won’t listen to anything against her . . . He’s crazy about her . . . He believes everything she tells him—that her husband ill-treats her—that she’s an injured innocent—that nobody has ever understood her . . . He doesn’t even think about me any more—I don’t count—I’m not real to him. He wants me to give him his freedom—to divorce him. He believes that she’ll divorce her husband and marry him. But I’m afraid . . . Chantry won’t give her up. He’s not that kind of man. Last night she showed Douglas bruises on her arm—said her husband had done it. It made Douglas wild. He’s so chivalrous . . . Oh! I’m afraid! What will come of it all? Tell me what to do!”

Hercule Poirot stood looking straight across the water to the blue line of hills on the mainland of Asia. He said:

“I have told you. Leave the island before it is too late. . . .”

She shook her head.

“I can’t—I can’t—unless Douglas . . .”

Poirot sighed.

He shrugged his shoulders.

Four

Hercule Poirot sat with Pamela Lyall on the beach.

She said with a certain amount of gusto, “The triangle’s going strong! They sat one each side of her last night—glowering at each other! Chantry had had too much to drink. He was positively insulting to Douglas Gold. Gold behaved very well. Kept his temper. The Valentine woman enjoyed it, of course. Purred like the man-eating tiger she is. What do you think will happen?”

Poirot shook his head.

“I am afraid. I am very much afraid. . . .”

“Oh, we all are,” said Miss Lyall hypocritically. She added, “This business is rather in your line. Or it may come to be. Can’t you do anything?”

“I have done what I could.”

Miss Lyall leaned forward eagerly.

“What have you done?” she asked with pleasurable excitement.

“I advised Mrs. Gold to leave the island before it was too late.”

“Oo-er—so you think—” she stopped.

“Yes, mademoiselle?”

“So that’s what you think is going to happen!” said Pamela slowly. “But he couldn’t—he’d never do a thing like that . . . He’s so nice really. It’s all that Chantry woman. He wouldn’t—He wouldn’t—do—”

She stopped—then she said softly:

“Murder? Is that—is that really the word that’s in your mind?”

“It is in someone’s mind, mademoiselle. I will tell you that.”

Pamela gave a sudden shiver.

“I don’t believe it,” she declared.

Five

The sequence of events on the night of October the twenty-ninth was perfectly clear.

To begin with, there was a scene between the two men—Gold and Chantry. Chantry's voice rose louder and louder and his last words were overheard by four persons—the cashier at the desk, the manager, General Barnes and Pamela Lyall.

"You goddamned swine! If you and my wife think you can put this over on me, you're mistaken! As long as I'm alive, Valentine will remain my wife."

Then he had flung out of the hotel, his face livid with rage.

That was before dinner. After dinner (how arranged no one knew) a reconciliation took place. Valentine asked Marjorie Gold to come out for a moonlight drive. Pamela and Sarah went with them. Gold and Chantry played billiards together. Afterwards they joined Hercule Poirot and General Barnes in the lounge.

For the first time almost, Chantry's face was smiling and good-tempered.

"Have a good game?" asked the General.

The Commander said:

"This fellow's too good for me! Ran out with a break of forty-six."

Douglas Gold deprecated this modestly.

"Pure fluke. I assure you it was. What'll you have? I'll go and get hold of a waiter."

“Pink gin for me, thanks.”

“Right. General?”

“Thanks. I’ll have a whisky and soda.”

“Same for me. What about you, M. Poirot?”

“You are most amiable. I should like a sirop de cassis.”

“A sirop—excuse me?”

“Sirop de cassis. The syrup of blackcurrants.”

“Oh, a liqueur! I see. I suppose they have it here? I never heard of it.”

“They have it, yes. But it is not a liqueur.”

Douglas Gold said, laughing:

“Sounds a funny taste to me—but every man his own poison! I’ll go and order them.”

Commander Chantry sat down. Though not by nature a talkative or a social man, he was clearly doing his best to be genial.

“Odd how one gets used to doing without any news,” he remarked.

The General grunted.

“Can’t say the Continental Daily Mail four days old is much use to me. Of course I get The Times sent to me and Punch every week, but they’re a devilish long time in coming.”

“Wonder if we’ll have a general election over this Palestine business?”

“Whole thing’s been badly mismanaged,” declared the General just as Douglas Gold reappeared followed by a waiter with the drinks.

The General had just begun on an anecdote of his military career in India in the year 1905. The two Englishmen were listening politely, if without great interest. Hercule Poirot was sipping his sirop de cassis.

The General reached the point of his narrative and there was dutiful laughter all round.

Then the women appeared at the doorway of the lounge. They all four seemed in the best of spirits and were talking and laughing.

“Tony, darling, it was too divine,” cried Valentine as she dropped into a chair by his side. “The most marvellous idea of Mrs. Gold’s. You all ought to have come!”

Her husband said:

“What about a drink?”

He looked inquiringly at the others.

“Pink gin for me, darling,” said Valentine.

“Gin and gingerbeer,” said Pamela.

“Sidecar,” said Sarah.

“Right.” Chantry stood up. He pushed his own untouched pink gin over to his wife. “You have this. I’ll order another for myself. What’s yours, Mrs. Gold?”

Mrs. Gold was being helped out of her coat by her husband. She turned smiling:

“Can I have an orangeade, please?”

“Right you are. Orangeade.”

He went towards the door. Mrs. Gold smiled up in her husband’s face.

“It was so lovely, Douglas. I wish you had come.”

“I wish I had too. We’ll go another night, shall we?” They smiled at each other.

Valentine Chantry picked up the pink gin and drained it.

“Oo! I needed that,” she sighed.

Douglas Gold took Marjorie’s coat and laid it on a settee.

As he strolled back to the others he said sharply:

“Hallo, what’s the matter?”

Valentine Chantry was leaning back in her chair. Her lips were blue and her hand had gone to her heart.

“I feel—rather queer. . . .”

She gasped, fighting for breath.

Chantry came back into the room. He quickened his step.

“Hallo, Val, what’s the matter?”

“I—I don’t know . . . That drink—it tasted queer. . . .”

“The pink gin?”

Chantry swung round his face worked. He caught Douglas Gold by the shoulder.

“That was my drink . . . Gold, what the hell did you put in it?”

Douglas Gold was staring at the convulsed face of the woman in the chair. He had gone dead white.

“I—I—never—”

Valentine Chantry slipped down in her chair.

General Barnes cried out:

“Get a doctor—quick. . . .”

Five minutes later Valentine Chantry died. . . .

Six

There was no bathing the next morning.

Pamela Lyall, white-faced, clad in a simple dark dress, clutched at Hercule Poirot in the hall and drew him into the little writing room.

“It’s horrible!” she said. “Horrible! You said so! You foresaw it! Murder!”

He bent his head gravely.

“Oh!” she cried out. She stamped her foot on the floor. “You should have stopped it! Somehow! It could have been stopped!”

“How?” asked Hercule Poirot.

That brought her up short for the moment.

“Couldn’t you go to someone—to the police—?”

“And say what? What is there to say—before the event? That someone has murder in their heart? I tell you, mon enfant, if one human being is determined to kill another human being—”

“You could warn the victim,” insisted Pamela.

“Sometimes,” said Hercule Poirot, “warnings are useless.”

Pamela said slowly, “You could warn the murderer—show him that you knew what was intended. . . .”

Poirot nodded appreciatively.

"Yes—a better plan, that. But even then you have to reckon with a criminal's chief vice."

"What is that?"

"Conceit. A criminal never believes that his crime can fail."

"But it's absurd—stupid," cried Pamela. "The whole crime was childish! Why, the police arrested Douglas Gold at once last night."

"Yes." He added thoughtfully, "Douglas Gold is a very stupid young man."

"Incredibly stupid! I hear that they found the rest of the poison—whatever it was—?"

"A form of stropanthin. A heart poison."

"That they actually found the rest of it in his dinner jacket pocket?"

"Quite true."

"Incredibly stupid!" said Pamela again. "Perhaps he meant to get rid of it—and the shock of the wrong person being poisoned paralysed him. What a scene it would make on the stage. The lover putting the stropanthin in the husband's glass and then, just when his attention is elsewhere, the wife drinks it instead . . . Think of the ghastly moment when Douglas Gold turned round and realized he had killed the woman he loved. . . ."

She gave a little shiver.

"Your triangle. The Eternal Triangle! Who would have thought it would end like this?"

"I was afraid of it," murmured Poirot.

Pamela turned on him.

"You warned her—Mrs. Gold. Then why didn't you warn him as well?"

“You mean, why didn’t I warn Douglas Gold?”

“No. I mean Commander Chantry. You could have told him that he was in danger—after all, he was the real obstacle! I’ve no doubt Douglas Gold relied on being able to bully his wife into giving him a divorce—she’s a meek-spirited little woman and terribly fond of him. But Chantry is a mulish sort of devil. He was determined not to give Valentine her freedom.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“It would have been no good my speaking to Chantry,” he said.

“Perhaps not,” Pamela admitted. “He’d probably have said he could look after himself and told you to go to the devil. But I do feel there ought to have been something one could have done.”

“I did think,” said Poirot slowly, “of trying to persuade Valentine Chantry to leave the island, but she would not have believed what I had to tell her. She was far too stupid a woman to take in a thing like that. Pauvre femme, her stupidity killed her.”

“I don’t believe it would have been any good if she had left the island,” said Pamela. “He would simply have followed her.”

“He?”

“Douglas Gold.”

“You think Douglas Gold would have followed her? Oh, no, mademoiselle, you are wrong—you are completely wrong. You have not yet appreciated the truth of this matter. If Valentine Chantry had left the island, her husband would have gone with her.”

Pamela looked puzzled.

“Well, naturally.”

“And then, you see, the crime would simply have taken place somewhere else.”

“I don’t understand you?”

“I am saying to you that the same crime would have occurred somewhere else—that crime being the murder of Valentine Chantry by her husband.”

Pamela stared.

“Are you trying to say that it was Commander Chantry—Tony Chantry—who murdered Valentine?”

“Yes. You saw him do it! Douglas Gold brought him his drink. He sat with it in front of him. When the women came in we all looked across the room, he had the stropanthin ready, he dropped it into the pink gin and presently, courteously, he passed it along to his wife and she drank it.”

“But the packet of stropanthin was found in Douglas Gold’s pocket!”

“A very simple matter to slip it there when we were all crowding round the dying woman.”

It was quite two minutes before Pamela got her breath.

“But I don’t understand a word! The triangle—you said yourself—”

Hercule Poirot nodded his head vigorously.

“I said there was a triangle—yes. But you, you imagined the wrong one. You were deceived by some very clever acting! You thought, as you were meant to think, that both Tony Chantry and Douglas Gold were in love with Valentine Chantry. You believed, as you were meant to believe, that Douglas Gold, being in love with Valentine Chantry (whose husband refused to divorce her) took the desperate step of administering a powerful heart poison to Chantry and that, by a fatal mistake, Valentine Chantry drank that poison instead. All that is illusion. Chantry has been meaning to do away with his wife for some time. He was bored to death with her, I could see that from the first. He married her for her money. Now he wants to marry another woman—so he planned to get rid of Valentine and keep her money. That entailed murder.”

“Another woman?”

Poirot said slowly:

“Yes, yes—the little Marjorie Gold. It was the eternal triangle all right! But you saw it the wrong way round. Neither of those two men cared in the least for Valentine Chantry. It was her vanity and Marjorie Gold’s very clever stage managing that made you think they did! A very clever woman, Mrs. Gold, and amazingly attractive in her demure Madonna, poor-little-thing-way! I have known four women criminals of the same type. There was Mrs. Adams who was acquitted of murdering her husband, but everybody knows she did it. Mary Parker did away with an aunt, a sweetheart and two brothers before she got a little careless and was caught. Then there was Mrs. Rowden, she was hanged all right. Mrs. Lecray escaped by the skin of her teeth. This woman is exactly the same type. I recognized it as soon as I saw her! That type takes to crime like a duck to water! And a very pretty bit of well-planned work it was. Tell me, what evidence did you ever have that Douglas Gold was in love with Valentine Chantry? When you come to think it out, you will realize that there was only Mrs. Gold’s confidences and Chantry’s jealous bluster. Yes? You see?”

“It’s horrible,” cried Pamela.

“They were a clever pair,” said Poirot with professional detachment. “They planned to ‘meet’ here and stage their crime. That Marjorie Gold, she is a cold-blooded devil! She would have sent her poor, innocent fool of a husband to the scaffold without the least remorse.”

Pamela cried out:

“But he was arrested and taken away by the police last night.”

“Ah,” said Hercule Poirot, “but after that, me, I had a few little words with the police. It is true that I did not see Chantry put the stropanthin in the glass. I, like everyone else, looked up when the ladies came in. But the moment I realized that Valentine Chantry had been poisoned, I watched her husband without taking my eyes off him. And so, you see, I actually saw him slip the packet of stropanthin in Douglas Gold’s coat pocket. . . .”

He added with a grim expression on his face:

“I am a good witness. My name is well-known. The moment the police heard my story they realized that it put an entirely different complexion on the matter.”

“And then?” demanded Pamela, fascinated.

“Eh bien, then they asked Commander Chantry a few questions. He tried to bluster it out, but he is not really clever, he soon broke down.”

“So Douglas Gold was set at liberty?”

“Yes.”

“And—Marjorie Gold?”

Poirot’s face grew stern.

“I warned her,” he said. “Yes, I warned her . . . Up on the Mount of the Prophet . . . It was the only chance of averting the crime. I as good as told her that I suspected her. She understood. But she believed herself too clever . . . I told her to leave the island if she valued her life. She chose—to remain. . . .”

Appointment With Death (1938)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Part I

Chapter 1

‘You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?’

The question floated out into the still night air, seemed to hang there a moment and then drift away down into the darkness towards the Dead Sea.

Hercule Poirot paused a minute with his hand on the window catch. Frowning, he shut it decisively, thereby excluding any injurious night air! Hercule Poirot had been brought up to believe that all outside air was best left outside, and that night air was especially dangerous to the health.

As he pulled the curtains neatly over the window and walked to his bed, he smiled tolerantly to himself.

‘You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?’

Curious words for one Hercule Poirot, detective, to overhear on his first night in Jerusalem.

‘Decidedly, wherever I go, there is something to remind me of crime!’ he murmured to himself.

His smile continued as he remembered a story he had once heard concerning Anthony Trollope the novelist. Trollope was crossing the Atlantic at the time and had overheard two fellow passengers discussing the last published installment of one of his novels.

‘Very good,’ one man had declared. ‘But he ought to kill off that tiresome old woman.’

With a broad smile the novelist had addressed them:

‘Gentlemen, I am much obliged to you! I will go and kill her immediately!’

Hercule Poirot wondered what had occasioned the words he had just overheard. A collaboration, perhaps, over a play or a book.

He thought, still smiling: ‘Those words might be remembered, one day, and given a more sinister meaning.’

There had been, he now recollected, a curious nervous intensity in the voice—a tremor that spoke of some intense emotional strain. A man’s voice—or a boy’s…

Hercule Poirot thought to himself as he turned out the light by his bed: ‘I should know that voice again…’

II

Their elbows on the window-sill, their heads close together, Raymond and Carol Boynton gazed out into the blue depths of the night. Nervously, Raymond repeated his former words: ‘You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?’

Carol Boynton stirred slightly. She said, her voice deep and hoarse: ‘It’s horrible…’

‘It’s not more horrible than this!’

‘I suppose not…’

Raymond said violently: ‘It can’t go on like this—it can’t…We must do something…And there isn’t anything else we can do…’

Carol said—but her voice was unconvincing and she knew it: ‘If we could get away somehow—?’

‘We can’t.’ His voice was empty and hopeless. ‘Carol, you know we can’t…’

The girl shivered. ‘I know, Ray—I know.’

He gave a sudden short, bitter laugh.

‘People would say we were crazy—not to be able just to walk out—’

Carol said slowly: ‘Perhaps we—are crazy!’

‘I dare say. Yes, I dare say we are. Anyway, we soon shall be…I suppose some people would say we are already—here we are calmly planning, in cold blood, to kill our own mother!’

Carol said sharply: ‘She isn’t our own mother!’

‘No, that’s true.’

There was a pause and then Raymond said, his voice now quietly matter-of-fact: ‘You do agree, Carol?’

Carol answered steadily: ‘I think she ought to die—yes…’

Then she broke out suddenly: ‘She’s mad…I’m quite sure she’s mad…She—she couldn’t torture us like she does if she were sane. For years we’ve been saying: “This can’t go on!” and it has gone on! We’ve said, “She’ll die some time”—but she hasn’t died! I don’t think she ever will die unless—’

Raymond said steadily: ‘Unless we kill her…’

‘Yes.’

She clenched her hands on the window-sill in front of her.

Her brother went on in a cool, matter-of-fact tone, with just a slight tremor denoting his deep underlying excitement.

‘You see why it’s got to be one of us, don’t you? With Lennox, there’s Nadine to consider. And we couldn’t bring Jinny into it.’

Carol shivered.

‘Poor Jinny…I’m so afraid…’

‘I know. It’s getting pretty bad, isn’t it? That’s why something’s got to be done quickly—before she goes right over the edge.’

Carol stood up suddenly, pushing back the tumbled chestnut hair from her forehead.

‘Ray,’ she said, ‘you don’t think it’s really wrong, do you?’

He answered in that same would-be dispassionate tone. ‘No. I think it’s just like killing a mad dog—something that’s doing harm in the world and must be stopped. This is the only way of stopping it.’

Carol murmured: ‘But they’d—they’d send us to the chair just the same…I mean we couldn’t explain what she’s like…It would sound fantastic…In a way, you know, it’s all in our own minds!’

Raymond said: ‘Nobody will ever know. I’ve got a plan. I’ve thought it all out. We shall be quite safe.’

Carol turned suddenly round on him.

‘Ray—somehow or another—you’re different. Something’s happened to you…What’s put all this into your head?’

‘Why should you think anything’s happened to me?’

He turned his head away, staring out into the night.

‘Because it has…Ray, was it that girl on the train?’

‘No, of course not—why should it be? Oh, Carol, don’t talk nonsense. Let’s get back again to—to—’

‘To your plan? Are you sure it’s a—good plan?’

‘Yes. I think so…We must wait for the right opportunity, of course. And then—if it goes all right—we shall be free—all of us.’

‘Free?’ Carol gave a little sigh. She looked up at the stars. Then suddenly she shook from head to foot in a sudden storm of weeping.

‘Carol, what’s the matter?’

She sobbed out brokenly: ‘It’s so lovely—the night and the blueness and the stars. If only we could be part of it all…If only we could be like other people instead of being as we are—all queer and warped and wrong.’

‘But we shall be—all right—when she’s dead!’

‘Are you sure? Isn’t it too late? Shan’t we always be queer and different?’

‘No, no, no.’

‘I wonder—’

‘Carol, if you’d rather not—’

She pushed his comforting arm aside.

‘No, I’m with you—definitely I’m with you! Because of the others—especially Jinny. We must save Jinny!’

Raymond paused a moment. ‘Then—we’ll go on with it?’

‘Yes!’

‘Good. I’ll tell you my plan…’

He bent his head to hers.

Chapter 2

Miss Sarah King, M.B., stood by the table in the writing-room of the Solomon Hotel in Jerusalem, idly turning over the papers and magazines. A frown contracted her brows and she looked preoccupied.

The tall middle-aged Frenchman who entered the room from the hall watched her for a moment or two before strolling up to the opposite side of the table. When their eyes met, Sarah made a little gesture of smiling recognition. She remembered that this man had come to help her when travelling from Cairo and had carried one of her suitcases at a moment when no porter appeared to be available.

‘You like Jerusalem, yes?’ asked Dr Gerard after they had exchanged greetings.

‘It’s rather terrible in some ways,’ said Sarah, and added: ‘Religion is very odd!’

The Frenchman looked amused.

‘I know what you mean.’ His English was very nearly perfect. ‘Every imaginable sect squabbling and fighting!’

‘And the awful things they’ve built, too!’ said Sarah.

‘Yes, indeed.’

Sarah sighed.

‘They turned me out of one place today because I had on a sleeveless dress,’ she said ruefully. ‘Apparently the Almighty doesn’t like my arms in spite of having made them.’

Dr Gerard laughed. Then he said: ‘I was about to order some coffee. You will join me, Miss—?’

‘King, my name is. Sarah King.’

‘And mine—permit me.’ He whipped out a card. Taking it, Sarah’s eyes widened in delighted awe.

‘Dr Theodore Gerard? Oh! I am excited to meet you. I’ve read all your works, of course. Your views on schizophrenia are frightfully interesting.’

‘Of course?’ Gerard’s eyebrows rose inquisitively.

Sarah explained rather diffidently.

‘You see—I’m by way of being a doctor myself. Just got my M.B.’

‘Ah! I see.’

Dr Gerard ordered coffee and they sat down in a corner of the lounge. The Frenchman was less interested in Sarah’s medical achievements than in the black hair that rippled back from her forehead and the beautifully shaped red mouth. He was amused at the obvious awe with which she regarded him.

‘You are staying here long?’ he asked conversationally.

‘A few days. That is all. Then I want to go to Petra.’

‘Aha! I, too, was thinking of going there if it does not take too long. You see, I have to be back in Paris on the fourteenth.’

‘It takes about a week, I believe. Two days to go, two days there and two days back again.’

‘I must go to the travel bureau in the morning and see what can be arranged.’

A party of people entered the lounge and sat down. Sarah watched them with some interest. She lowered her voice.

‘Those people who have just come in, did you notice them on the train the other night? They left Cairo the same time as we did.’

Dr Gerard screwed in an eyeglass and directed his glance across the room. ‘Americans?’

Sarah nodded.

‘Yes. An American family. But—rather an unusual one, I think.’

‘Unusual? How unusual?’

‘Well, look at them. Especially at the old woman.’

Dr Gerard complied. His keen professional glance flitted swiftly from face to face.

He noticed first a tall rather loose-boned man—age about thirty. The face was pleasant but weak and his manner seemed oddly apathetic. Then there were two good-looking youngsters—the boy had almost a Greek head. ‘Something the matter with him, too,’ thought Dr Gerard. ‘Yes—a definite state of nervous tension.’ The girl was clearly his sister, a strong resemblance, and she also was in an excitable condition. There was another girl younger still—with golden-red hair that stood out like a halo; her hands were very restless, they were tearing and pulling at the handkerchief in her lap. Yet another woman, young, calm, dark-haired with a creamy pallor, a placid face not unlike a Luini Madonna. Nothing jumpy about her! And the centre of the group—‘Heavens!’ thought Dr Gerard, with a Frenchman’s candid repulsion. ‘What a horror of a woman!’ Old, swollen, bloated, sitting there immovable in the midst of them—a distorted old Buddha—a gross spider in the centre of a web!

To Sarah he said: ‘La Maman, she is not beautiful, eh?’ And he shrugged his shoulders.

‘There’s something rather—sinister about her, don’t you think?’ asked Sarah.

Dr Gerard scrutinized her again. This time his eye was professional, not aesthetic.

‘Dropsy—cardiac—’ he added a glib medical phrase.

‘Oh, yes, that!’ Sarah dismissed the medical side.

‘But there is something odd in their attitude to her, don’t you think?’

‘Who are they, do you know?’

‘Their name is Boynton. Mother, married son, his wife, one younger son and two younger daughters.’

Dr Gerard murmured: ‘La famille Boynton sees the world.’

‘Yes, but there’s something odd about the way they’re seeing it. They never speak to anyone else. And none of them can do anything unless the old woman says so!’

‘She is of the matriarchal type,’ said Gerard thoughtfully.

‘She’s a complete tyrant, I think,’ said Sarah.

Dr Gerard shrugged his shoulders and remarked that the American woman ruled the earth—that was well known.

‘Yes, but it’s more than just that.’ Sarah was persistent. ‘She’s—oh, she’s got them all so cowed—so positively under her thumb—that it’s—it’s indecent!’

‘To have too much power is bad for women,’ Gerard agreed with sudden gravity. He shook his head.

‘It is difficult for a woman not to abuse power.’

He shot a quick sideways glance at Sarah. She was watching the Boynton family—or rather she was watching one particular member of it. Dr Gerard smiled a quick comprehending Gallic smile. Ah! So it was like that, was it?

He murmured tentatively: ‘You have spoken with them—yes?’

‘Yes—at least with one of them.’

‘The young man—the younger son?’

‘Yes. On the train coming here from Kantara. He was standing in the corridor. I spoke to him.’

There was no self-consciousness in her attitude to life. She was interested in humanity and was of a friendly though impatient disposition.

‘What made you speak to him?’ asked Gerard.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders.

‘Why not? I often speak to people travelling. I’m interested in people—in what they do and think and feel.’

‘You put them under the microscope, that is to say.’

‘I suppose you might call it that,’ the girl admitted.

‘And what were your impressions in this case?’

‘Well,’ she hesitated, ‘it was rather odd…To begin with, the boy flushed right up to the roots of his hair.’

‘Is that so remarkable?’ asked Gerard drily.

Sarah laughed.

‘You mean that he thought I was a shameless hussy making advances to him? Oh, no, I don’t think he thought that. Men can always tell, can’t they?’

She gave him a frank questioning glance. Dr Gerard nodded his head.

‘I got the impression,’ said Sarah, speaking slowly and frowning a little, ‘that he was—how shall I put it?—both excited and appalled. Excited out of all proportion—and quite absurdly apprehensive at the same time. Now that's odd, isn't it? Because I've always found Americans unusually self-possessed. An American boy of twenty, say, has infinitely more knowledge of the world and far more savoir-faire than an English boy of the same age. And this boy must be over twenty.'

'About twenty-three or four, I should say.'

'As much as that?'

'I should think so.'

'Yes…perhaps you're right…Only, somehow, he seems very young…'

'Maladjustment mentally. The "child" factor persists.'

'Then I am right? I mean, there is something not quite normal about him?'

Dr Gerard shrugged his shoulders, smiling a little at her earnestness.

'My dear young lady, are any of us quite normal? But I grant you that there is probably a neurosis of some kind.'

'Connected with that horrible old woman, I'm sure.'

'You seem to dislike her very much,' said Gerard, looking at her curiously.

'I do. She's got a—oh, a malevolent eye!'

Gerard murmured: 'So have many mothers when their sons are attracted to fascinating young ladies!'

Sarah shrugged an impatient shoulder. Frenchmen were all alike, she thought, obsessed by sex! Though, of course, as a conscientious psychologist she herself was bound to admit that there was always an underlying basis of sex to most phenomena. Sarah's thoughts ran along a familiar psychological track.

She came out of her meditations with a start. Raymond Boynton was crossing the room to the centre table. He selected a magazine. As he passed her chair on his return journey she looked at him and spoke.

‘Have you been busy sightseeing today?’

She selected her words at random, her real interest was to see how they would be received.

Raymond half stopped, flushed, shied like a nervous horse and his eyes went apprehensively to the centre of his family group. He muttered: ‘Oh—oh, yes—why, yes, certainly. I—’

Then, as suddenly as though he had received the prick of a spur, he hurried back to his family, holding out the magazine.

The grotesque Buddha-like figure held out a fat hand for it, but as she took it her eyes, Dr Gerard noticed, were on the boy’s face. She gave a grunt, certainly no audible thanks. The position of her head shifted very slightly. The doctor saw that she was now looking hard at Sarah. Her face was quite impassive, it had no expression in it. Impossible to tell what was passing in the woman’s mind.

Sarah looked at her watch and uttered an exclamation.

‘It’s much later than I thought.’ She got up. ‘Thank you so much, Dr Gerard, for standing me coffee. I must write some letters now.’

He rose and took her hand.

‘We shall meet again, I hope,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes! Perhaps you will come to Petra?’

‘I shall certainly try to do so.’

Sarah smiled at him and turned away. Her way out of the room led her past the Boynton family.

Dr Gerard, watching, saw Mrs Boynton's gaze shift to her son's face. He saw the boy's eyes meet hers. As Sarah passed, Raymond Boynton half turned his head—not towards her, but away from her…It was a slow, unwilling motion and conveyed the idea that old Mrs Boynton had pulled an invisible string.

Sarah King noticed the avoidance, and was young enough and human enough to be annoyed by it. They had had such a friendly talk together in the swaying corridor of the wagons-lits. They had compared notes on Egypt, had laughed at the ridiculous language of the donkey boys and street touts. Sarah had described how a camel man when he had started hopefully and impudently, 'You English lady or American?' had received the answer: 'No, Chinese.' And her pleasure in seeing the man's complete bewilderment as he stared at her. The boy had been, she thought, like a nice eager schoolboy—there had been, perhaps, something almost pathetic about his eagerness. And now, for no reason at all, he was shy, boorish—positively rude.

'I shan't take any more trouble with him,' said Sarah indignantly.

For Sarah, without being unduly conceited, had a fairly good opinion of herself. She knew herself to be definitely attractive to the opposite sex, and she was not one to take a snubbing lying down!

She had been, perhaps, a shade over-friendly to this boy because, for some obscure reason, she had felt sorry for him.

But now, it was apparent, he was merely a rude, stuck-up, boorish young American!

Instead of writing the letters she had mentioned, Sarah King sat down in front of her dressing-table, combed the hair back from her forehead, looked into a pair of troubled hazel eyes in the glass, and took stock of her situation in life.

She had just passed through a difficult emotional crisis. A month ago she had broken off her engagement to a young doctor some four years her senior. They had been very much attracted to each other, but had been too much alike in temperament. Disagreements and quarrels had been of common occurrence. Sarah was of too imperious a temperament herself to brook a calm assertion of autocracy. Like many high-spirited women, Sarah believed herself to admire strength. She had always told herself that she wanted to be mastered. When she met a man capable of mastering her she found that she did not like it at all! To break off her engagement had cost her a good deal of heart-burning, but she was clear-sighted enough to realize that mere mutual attraction was not a sufficient basis on which to build a lifetime of happiness. She had treated herself deliberately to an interesting holiday abroad in order to help on forgetfulness before she went back to start working in earnest.

Sarah’s thoughts came back from the past to the present.

‘I wonder,’ she thought, ‘if Dr Gerard will let me talk to him about his work. He’s done such marvelous work. If only he’ll take me seriously… Perhaps—if he comes to Petra—’

Then she thought again of the strange boorish young American.

She had no doubt that it was the presence of his family which had caused him to react in such a peculiar manner, but she felt slightly scornful of him, nevertheless. To be under the thumb of one’s family like that—it was really rather ridiculous—especially for a man!

And yet…

A queer feeling passed over her. Surely there was something a little odd about it all?

She said suddenly out loud: ‘That boy wants rescuing! I’m going to see to it!’

Chapter 3

When Sarah had left the lounge, Dr Gerard sat where he was for some minutes. Then he strolled to the table, picked up the latest number of Le Matin and strolled with it to a chair a few yards away from the Boynton family. His curiosity was aroused.

He had at first been amused by the English girl's interest in this American family, shrewdly diagnosing that it was inspired by interest in one particular member of the family. But now something out of the ordinary about this family party awakened in him the deeper, more impartial interest of the scientist. He sensed that there was something here of definite psychological interest.

Very discreetly, under the cover of his paper, he took stock of them. First the boy in whom that attractive English girl took such a decided interest. Yes, thought Gerard, definitely the type to appeal to her temperamentally. Sarah King had strength—she possessed well-balanced nerves, cool wits and a resolute will. Dr Gerard judged the young man to be sensitive, perceptive, diffident and intensely suggestible. He noted with a physician's eye the obvious fact that the boy was at the moment in a state of high nervous tension. Dr Gerard wondered why. He was puzzled. Why should a young man whose physical health was obviously good, who was abroad ostensibly enjoying himself, be in such a condition that nervous breakdown was imminent?

The doctor turned his attention to the other members of the party. The girl with the chestnut hair was obviously Raymond's sister. They were of the same racial type, small-boned, well-shaped, aristocratic looking. They had the same slender well-formed hands, the same clean line of jaw, and the same poise of the head on a long, slender neck. And the girl, too, was nervous…She made slight involuntary nervous movements, her eyes were deeply shadowed underneath and over bright. Her voice, when she spoke, was too quick and a shade breathless. She was watchful—alert—unable to relax.

‘And she is afraid, too,’ decided Dr Gerard. ‘Yes, she is afraid!’

He overheard scraps of conversation—a very ordinary normal conversation.

‘We might go to Solomon’s Stables?’ ‘Would that be too much for Mother?’ ‘The Wailing Wall in the morning?’ ‘The Temple, of course—the Mosque of Omar they call it—I wonder why?’ ‘Because it’s been made into a Moslem mosque, of course, Lennox.’

Ordinary commonplace tourist’s talk. And yet, somehow, Dr Gerard felt a queer conviction that these overheard scraps of dialogue were all singularly unreal. They were a mask—a cover for something that surged and eddied underneath—something too deep and formless for words…Again he shot a covert glance from behind the shelter of Le Matin.

Lennox? That was the elder brother. The same family likeness could be traced, but there was a difference. Lennox was not so highly strung; he was, Gerard decided, of a less nervous temperament. But about him, too, there seemed something odd. There was no sign of muscular tension about him as there was about the other two. He sat relaxed, limp. Puzzling, searching among memories of patients he had seen sitting like that in hospital wards, Gerard thought:

‘He is exhausted—yes, exhausted with suffering. That look in the eyes—the look you see in a wounded dog or a sick horse—dumb bestial endurance…It is odd, that…Physically there seems nothing wrong with him…Yet there is no doubt that lately he has been through much suffering—mental suffering—now he no longer suffers—he endures dumbly—waiting, I think, for the blow to fall…What blow? Am I fancying all this? No, the man is waiting for something, for the end to come. So cancer patients lie and wait, thankful that an anodyne dulls the pain a little…’

Lennox Boynton got up and retrieved a ball of wool that the old lady had dropped.

‘Here you are, Mother.’

‘Thank you.’

What was she knitting, this monumental impassive old woman? Something thick and coarse. Gerard thought: ‘Mittens for inhabitants of a workhouse!’ And smiled at his own fantasy.

He turned his attention to the youngest member of the party—the girl with the golden-red hair. She was, perhaps, nineteen. Her skin had the exquisite clearness that often goes with red hair. Although over thin, it was a beautiful face. She was sitting smiling to herself—smiling into space. There was something a little curious about that smile. It was so far removed from the Solomon Hotel, from Jerusalem…It reminded Dr Gerard of something…Presently it came to him in a flash. It was the strange unearthly smile that lifts the lips of the Maidens in the Acropolis at Athens—something remote and lovely and a little inhuman…The magic of the smile, her exquisite stillness gave him a little pang.

And then with a shock, Dr Gerard noticed her hands. They were concealed from the group round her by the table, but he could see them clearly from where he sat. In the shelter of her lap they were picking—picking—tearing a delicate handkerchief into tiny shreds.

It gave him a horrible shock. The aloof remote smile—the still body—and the busy destructive hands…

Chapter 4

There was a slow asthmatic wheezing cough—then the monumental knitting woman spoke.

‘Ginevra, you’re tired, you’d better go to bed.’

The girl started, her fingers stopped their mechanical action. ‘I’m not tired, Mother.’

Gerard recognized appreciatively the musical quality of her voice. It had the sweet singing quality that lends enchantment to the most commonplace utterances.

‘Yes, you are. I always know. I don’t think you’ll be able to do any sightseeing tomorrow.’

‘Oh! but I shall. I’m quite all right.’

In a thick hoarse voice—almost a grating voice, her mother said: ‘No, you’re not. You’re going to be ill.’

‘I’m not! I’m not!’

The girl began trembling violently.

A soft, calm voice said: ‘I’ll come up with you, Jinny.’

The quiet young woman with wide, thoughtful grey eyes and neatly-coiled dark hair rose to her feet.

Old Mrs Boynton said: ‘No. Let her go up alone.’

The girl cried: ‘I want Nadine to come!’

‘Then of course I will.’ The young woman moved a step forward.

The old woman said: ‘The child prefers to go by herself—don’t you, Jinny?’

There was a pause—a pause of a moment, then Ginevra Boynton said, her voice suddenly flat and dull:

‘Yes; I’d rather go alone. Thank you, Nadine.’

She moved away, a tall angular figure that moved with a surprising grace.

Dr Gerard lowered his paper and took a full satisfying gaze at old Mrs Boynton. She was looking after her daughter and her fat face was creased into a peculiar smile. It was, very faintly, a caricature of the lovely unearthly smile that had transformed the girl’s face so short a time before.

Then the old woman transferred her gaze to Nadine. The latter had just sat down again. She raised her eyes and met her mother-in-law’s glance. Her face was quite imperturbable. The old woman’s glance was malicious.

Dr Gerard thought: ‘What an absurdity of an old tyrant!’

And then, suddenly, the old woman’s eyes were full on him, and he drew in his breath sharply. Small black smouldering eyes they were, but something came from them, a power, a definite force, a wave of evil malignancy. Dr Gerard knew something about the power of personality. He realized that this was no spoilt tyrannical invalid indulging petty whims. This old woman was a definite force. In the malignancy of her glare he felt a resemblance to the effect produced by a cobra. Mrs Boynton might be old, infirm, a prey to disease, but she was not powerless. She was a woman who knew the meaning of power, who had exercised a lifetime of power and who had never once doubted her own force. Dr Gerard had once met a woman who performed a most dangerous and spectacular act with tigers. The great slinking brutes had crawled to their places and performed their degrading and humiliating tricks. Their eyes and subdued snarls told of hatred, bitter fanatical hatred, but they had obeyed, cringed. That had been a young woman, a woman with an arrogant dark beauty, but the look had been the same.

‘Une dompteuse,’ said Dr Gerard to himself.

And he understood now what that undercurrent to the harmless family talk had been. It was hatred—a dark eddying stream of hatred.

He thought: ‘How fanciful and absurd most people would think me! Here is a commonplace devoted American family reveling in Palestine—and I weave a story of black magic round it!’

Then he looked with interest at the quiet young woman who was called Nadine. There was a wedding ring on her left hand, and as he watched her he saw her give one swift betraying glance at the fair-haired, loose-limbed Lennox. He knew, then…

They were man and wife, those two. But it was a mother’s glance rather than a wife’s—a true mother’s glance—protecting, anxious. And he knew something more. He knew that, alone out of that group, Nadine Boynton was unaffected by her mother-in-law’s spell. She may have disliked the old woman, but she was not afraid of her. The power did not touch her.

She was unhappy, deeply concerned about her husband, but she was free.

Dr Gerard said to himself: ‘All this is very interesting.’

Chapter 5

Into these dark imaginings a breath of the commonplace came with almost ludicrous effect.

A man came into the lounge, caught sight of the Boyntons and came across to them. He was a pleasant middle-aged American of a strictly conventional type. He was carefully dressed, with a long clean-shaven face and he had a slow, pleasant, somewhat monotonous voice.

‘I was looking around for you all,’ he said.

Meticulously he shook hands with the entire family. ‘And how do you find yourself, Mrs Boynton? Not too tired by the journey?’

Almost graciously, the old lady wheezed out: ‘No, thank you. My health’s never good, as you know—’

‘Why, of course, too bad—too bad.’

‘But I’m certainly no worse.’

Mrs Boynton added with a slow reptilian smile: ‘Nadine, here, takes good care of me, don’t you, Nadine?’

‘I do my best.’ Her voice was expressionless.

‘Why, I bet you do,’ said the stranger heartily. ‘Well, Lennox, and what do you think of King David’s city?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

Lennox spoke apathetically—without interest.

‘Find it kind of disappointing, do you? I’ll confess it struck me that way at first. But perhaps you haven’t been around much yet?’

Carol Boynton said: ‘We can’t do very much because of Mother.’

Mrs Boynton explained: ‘A couple of hours’ sightseeing is about all I can manage every day.’

The stranger said heartily: ‘I think it’s wonderful you manage to do all you do, Mrs Boynton.’

Mrs Boynton gave a slow, wheezy chuckle; it had an almost gloating sound.

‘I don’t give in to my body! It’s the mind that matters! Yes, it’s the mind…’

Her voice died away. Gerard saw Raymond Boynton give a nervous jerk.

‘Have you been to the Wailing Wall yet, Mr Cope?’ he asked.

‘Why, yes, that was one of the first places I visited. I hope to have done Jerusalem thoroughly in a couple more days, and I’m letting them get me out an itinerary at Cook’s so as to do the Holy Land thoroughly—Bethlehem, Nazareth, Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee. It’s all going to be mighty interesting. Then there’s Jerash, there are some very interesting ruins there—Roman, you know. And I’d very much like to have a look at the Rose Red City of Petra, a most remarkable natural phenomenon, I believe that is—and right off the beaten track—but it takes the best part of a week to get there and back, and do it properly.’

Carol said: ‘I’d love to go there. It sounds marvelous.’

‘Why, I should say it was definitely worth seeing—yes, definitely worth seeing.’ Mr Cope paused, shot a somewhat dubious glance at Mrs Boynton, and then went on in a voice that to the listening Frenchman was palpably uncertain:

‘I wonder now if I couldn’t persuade some of you people to come with me? Naturally I know you couldn’t manage it, Mrs Boynton, and naturally some of your family would want to remain with you, but if you were to divide forces, so to speak—’

He paused. Gerard heard the even click of Mrs Boynton’s knitting needles. Then she said:

‘I don’t think we’d care to divide up. We’re a very homey group.’ She looked up. ‘Well, children, what do you say?’

There was a queer ring in her voice. The answers came promptly. ‘No, Mother.’ ‘Oh, no.’ ‘No, of course not.’

Mrs Boynton said, smiling that very odd smile of hers: ‘You see—they won’t leave me. What about you, Nadine? You didn’t say anything.’

‘No, thank you, Mother, not unless Lennox cares about it.’

Mrs Boynton turned her head slowly towards her son.

‘Well, Lennox, what about it, why don’t you and Nadine go? She seems to want to.’

He started—looked up. ‘I—well—no, I—I think we’d better all stay together.’

Mr Cope said genially: ‘Well, you are a devoted family!’ But something in his geniality rang a little hollow and forced.

‘We keep to ourselves,’ said Mrs Boynton. She began to wind up her ball of wool. ‘By the way, Raymond, who was that young woman who spoke to you just now?’

Raymond started nervously. He flushed, then went white.

‘I—I don’t know her name. She—she was on the train the other night.’

Mrs Boynton began slowly to try to heave herself out of her chair.

‘I don’t think we’ll have much to do with her,’ she said.

Nadine rose and assisted the old woman to struggle out of her chair. She did it with a professional deftness that attracted Gerard’s attention.

‘Bedtime,’ said Mrs Boynton. ‘Good night, Mr Cope.’

‘Good night, Mrs Boynton. Good night, Mrs Lennox.’

They went off—a little procession. It did not seem to occur to any of the younger members of the party to stay behind.

Mr Cope was left looking after them. The expression on his face was an odd one.

As Dr Gerard knew by experience, Americans are disposed to be a friendly race. They have not the uneasy suspicion of the travelling Briton. To a man of Dr Gerard’s tact making the acquaintance of Mr Cope presented few difficulties. The American was lonely and was, like most of his race, disposed to friendliness. Dr Gerard’s card-case was again to the fore.

Reading the name on it, Mr Jefferson Cope was duly impressed.

‘Why, surely, Dr Gerard, you were over in the States not very long ago?’

‘Last autumn. I was lecturing at Harvard.’

‘Of course. Yours, Dr Gerard, is one of the most distinguished names in your profession. You’re pretty well at the head of your subject in Paris.’

‘My dear sir, you are far too kind! I protest.’

‘No, no, this is a great privilege—meeting you like this. As a matter of fact, there are several very distinguished people here in Jerusalem just at present. There’s yourself and there’s Lord Welldon, and Sir Gabriel Steinbaum, the financier. Then there’s the veteran English archaeologist, Sir Manders Stone. And there’s Lady Westholme, who’s very prominent in English politics. And there’s that famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot.’

‘Little Hercule Poirot? Is he here?’

‘I read his name in the local paper as having lately arrived. Seems to me all the world and his wife are at the Solomon Hotel. A mighty fine hotel it is, too. And very tastefully decorated.’

Mr Jefferson Cope was clearly enjoying himself. Dr Gerard was a man who could display a lot of charm when he chose. Before long the two men had adjourned to the bar.

After a couple of highballs Gerard said: ‘Tell me, is that a typical American family to whom you were talking?’

Jefferson Cope sipped his drink thoughtfully. Then he said: ‘Why, no, I wouldn’t say it was exactly typical.’

‘No? A very devoted family, I thought.’

Mr Cope said slowly: ‘You mean they all seem to revolve round the old lady? That’s true enough. She’s a very remarkable old lady, you know.’

‘Indeed?’

Mr Cope needed very little encouragement. The gentle invitation was enough.

‘I don’t mind telling you, Dr Gerard, I’ve been having that family a good deal on my mind lately. I’ve been thinking about them a lot. If I may say so, it would ease my mind to talk to you about the matter. If it won’t bore you, that is?’

Dr Gerard disclaimed boredom. Mr Jefferson Cope went on slowly, his pleasant clean-shaven face creased with perplexity.

‘I’ll tell you straight away that I’m just a little worried. Mrs Boynton, you see, is an old friend of mine. That is to say, not the old Mrs Boynton, the young one, Mrs Lennox Boynton.’

‘Ah, yes, that very charming dark-haired young lady.’

‘That’s right. That’s Nadine. Nadine Boynton, Dr Gerard, is a very lovely character. I knew her before she was married. She was in hospital then, working to be a trained nurse. Then she went for a vacation to stay with the Boyntons and she married Lennox.’

‘Yes?’

Mr Jefferson Cope took another sip of highball and went on:

‘I’d like to tell you, Dr Gerard, just a little of the Boynton family history.’

‘Yes? I should be most interested.’

‘Well, you see, the late Elmer Boynton—he was quite a well-known man and a very charming personality—was twice married. His first wife died when Carol and Raymond were tiny toddlers. The second Mrs Boynton, so I’ve been told, was a handsome woman when he married her, though not very young. Seems odd to think she can ever have been handsome to look at her now, but that’s what I’ve been told on very good authority. Anyway, her husband thought a lot of her and adopted her judgement on almost every point. He was an invalid for some years before he died, and she practically ruled the roost. She’s a very capable woman with a fine head for business. A very conscientious woman, too. After Elmer died, she devoted herself absolutely to these children. There’s one of her own, too, Ginevra—pretty red-haired girl, but a bit delicate. Well, as I was telling you, Mrs Boynton devoted herself entirely to her family. She just shut out the outside world entirely. Now I don’t know what you think, Dr Gerard, but I don’t think that’s always a very sound thing.’

‘I agree with you. It is most harmful to developing mentalities.’

‘Yes, I should say that just about expresses it. Mrs Boynton shielded these children from the outside world and never let them make any outside contacts. The result of that is that they’ve grown up—well, kind of nervy. They’re jumpy, if you know what I mean. Can’t make friends with strangers. It’s bad, that.’

‘It is very bad.’

‘I’ve no doubt Mrs Boynton meant well. It was just over-devotion on her part.’

‘They all live at home?’ asked the doctor.

‘Yes.’

‘Do neither of the sons work?’

‘Why, no. Elmer Boynton was a rich man. He left all his money to Mrs Boynton for her lifetime—but it was understood that it was for the family upkeep generally.’

‘So they are dependent on her financially?’

‘That is so. And she’s encouraged them to live at home and not go out and look for jobs. Well, maybe that’s all right, there’s plenty of money, they don’t need to take a job, but I think for the male sex, anyway, work’s a good tonic. Then, there’s another thing—they’ve none of them got any hobbies. They don’t play golf. They don’t belong to any country club. They don’t go around to dances or do anything with the other young people. They live in a great barrack of a house way down in the country miles from anywhere. I tell you, Dr Gerard, it seems all wrong to me.’

‘I agree with you,’ said Dr Gerard.

‘Not one of them has got the least social sense. The community spirit—that’s what’s lacking! They may be a very devoted family, but they’re all bound up in themselves.’

‘There has never been any question of one or other of them branching out for him or herself?’

‘Not that I’ve heard of. They just sit around.’

‘Do you put the blame for that on them or on Mrs Boynton?’

Jefferson Cope shifted uneasily.

‘Well, in a sense, I feel she is more or less responsible. It’s bad bringing-up on her part. All the same, when a young fellow comes to maturity it’s up to him to kick over the traces of his own accord. No boy ought to keep on being tied to his mother’s apron strings. He ought to choose to be independent.’

Dr Gerard said thoughtfully: ‘That might be impossible.’

‘Why impossible?’

‘There are methods, Mr Cope, of preventing a tree from growing.’

Cope stared. ‘They’re a fine healthy lot, Dr Gerard.’

‘The mind can be stunted and warped as well as the body.’

‘They’re bright mentally, too.’

Jefferson Cope went on: ‘No, Dr Gerard, take it from me, a man has got the control of his own destiny right there in his own hands. A man who respects himself strikes out on his own and makes something of his life. He doesn’t just sit round and twiddle his thumbs. No woman ought to respect a man who does that.’

Gerard looked at him curiously for a minute or two. Then he said: ‘You refer particularly, I think, to Mr Lennox Boynton?’

‘Why, yes, it was Lennox I was thinking of. Raymond’s only a boy still. But Lennox is just on thirty. Time he showed he was made of something.’

‘It is a difficult life, perhaps, for his wife?’

‘Of course it’s a difficult life for her! Nadine is a very fine girl. I admire her more than I can say. She’s never let drop one word of complaint. But she’s not happy, Dr Gerard. She’s just as unhappy as she can be.’

Gerard nodded his head.

‘Yes, I think that well might be.’

‘I don’t know what you think about it, Dr Gerard, but I think that there’s a limit to what a woman ought to put up with! If I were Nadine I’d put it to young Lennox straight. Either he sets to and proves what he’s made of, or else—’

‘Or else, you think, she should leave him?’

‘She’s got her own life to live, Dr Gerard. If Lennox doesn’t appreciate her as she ought to be appreciated—well, there are other men who will.’

‘There is—yourself, for instance?’

The American flushed. Then he looked straight at the other with a certain simple dignity.

‘That’s so,’ he said. ‘I’m not ashamed of my feeling for that lady. I respect her and I am very deeply attached to her. All I want is her happiness. If she were happy with Lennox, I’d sit right back and fade out of the picture.’

‘But as it is?’

‘But as it is I’m standing by! If she wants me, I’m here!’

‘You are, in fact, the parfait gentil knight,’ murmured Gerard.

‘Pardon?’

‘My dear sir, chivalry only lives nowadays in the American nation! You are content to serve your lady without hope of reward! It is most admirable, that! What exactly do you hope to be able to do for her?’

‘My idea is to be right here at hand if she needs me.’

‘And what, may I ask, is the older Mrs Boynton’s attitude towards you?’

Jefferson Cope said slowly: ‘I’m never quite sure about that old lady. As I’ve told you, she isn’t fond of making outside contacts. But she’s been different to me, she’s always very gracious and treats me quite like one of the family.’

‘In fact, she approves of your friendship with Mrs Lennox?’

‘She does.’

Dr Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

‘That is, perhaps, a little odd?’

Jefferson Cope said stiffly: ‘Let me assure you, Dr Gerard, there is nothing dishonourable in that friendship. It is purely platonic.’

‘My dear sir, I am quite sure of that. I repeat, though, that for Mrs Boynton to encourage that friendship is a curious action on her part. You know, Mr Cope, Mrs Boynton interests me—she interests me greatly.’

‘She is certainly a remarkable woman. She has great force of character—a most prominent personality. As I say, Elmer Boynton had the greatest faith in her judgement.’

‘So much so that he was content to leave his children completely at her mercy from the financial point of view. In my country, Mr Cope, it is impossible by law to do such a thing.’

Mr Cope rose. ‘In America,’ he said, ‘we’re great believers in absolute freedom.’

Dr Gerard rose also. He was unimpressed by the remark. He had heard it made before by people of many different nationalities. The illusion that freedom is the prerogative of one’s own particular race is fairly widespread.

Dr Gerard was wiser. He knew that no race, no country and no individual could be described as free. But he also knew that there were different degrees of bondage.

He went up to bed thoughtful and interested.

Chapter 6

Sarah King stood in the precincts of the Temple—the Haramesh-Sherif. Her back was to the Dome of the Rock. The splashing of fountains sounded in her ears. Little groups of tourists passed by without disturbing the peace of the oriental atmosphere.

Strange, thought Sarah, that once a Jebusite should have made this rocky summit into a threshing floor and that David should have purchased it for six hundred shekels of gold and made it a Holy Place. And now the loud chattering tongues of sightseers of all nations could be heard.

She turned and looked at the Mosque which now covered the shrine and wondered if Solomon’s temple would have looked half as beautiful.

There was a clatter of footsteps and a little party came out from the interior of the Mosque. It was the Boyntons escorted by a voluble dragoman. Mrs Boynton was supported between Lennox and Raymond. Nadine and Mr Cope walked behind. Carol came last. As they were moving off, the latter caught sight of Sarah.

She hesitated, then, on a sudden decision, she wheeled round and ran swiftly and noiselessly across the courtyard.

‘Excuse me,’ she said breathlessly. ‘I must—I—I felt I must speak to you.’

‘Yes?’ said Sarah.

Carol was trembling violently. Her face was quite white.

‘It’s about—my brother. When you—you spoke to him last night you must have thought him very rude. But he didn’t mean to be—he—he couldn’t help it. Oh, do please believe me.’

Sarah felt that the whole scene was ridiculous. Both her pride and her good taste were offended. Why should a strange girl suddenly rush up and tender a ridiculous apology for a boorish brother?

An off-hand reply trembled on her lips—and then, quickly, her mood changed.

There was something out of the ordinary here. This girl was in deadly earnest. That something in Sarah which had led her to adopt a medical career reacted to the girl’s need. Her instinct told her there was something badly wrong.

She said encouragingly: ‘Tell me about it.’

‘He spoke to you on the train, didn’t he?’ began Carol.

Sarah nodded. ‘Yes; at least, I spoke to him.’

‘Oh, of course. It would be that way round. But, you see, last night Ray was afraid—’

She stopped.

‘Afraid?’

Carol’s white face crimsoned.

‘Oh, I know it sounds absurd—mad. You see, my mother—she’s—she’s not well—and she doesn’t like us making friends outside. But—but I know Ray would—would like to be friends with you.’

Sarah was interested. Before she could speak, Carol went on: ‘I—I know what I’m saying sounds very silly, but we are—rather an odd family.’ She cast a quick look round—it was a look of fear.

‘I—I mustn’t stay,’ she murmured. ‘They may miss me.’

Sarah made up her mind. She spoke.

‘Why shouldn’t you stay—if you want to? We might walk back together.’

‘Oh, no.’ Carol drew back. ‘I—I couldn’t do that.’

‘Why not?’ said Sarah.

‘I couldn’t really. My mother would be—would be—’

Sarah said clearly and calmly:

‘I know it’s awfully difficult sometimes for parents to realize that their children are grown up. They will go on trying to run their lives for them. But it’s a pity, you know, to give in! One must stand up for one’s rights.’

Carol murmured: ‘You don’t understand—you don’t understand in the least…’

Her hands twisted together nervously.

Sarah went on: ‘One gives in sometimes because one is afraid of rows. Rows are very unpleasant, but I think freedom of action is always worth fighting for.’

‘Freedom?’ Carol stared at her. ‘None of us have ever been free. We never will be.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Sarah clearly.

Carol leaned forward and touched her arm.

‘Listen. I must try and make you understand! Before her marriage my mother—she’s my stepmother really—was a wardress in a prison. My father was the Governor and he married her. Well, it’s been like that ever since. She’s gone on being a wardress—to us. That’s why our life is just—being in prison!’

Her head jerked round again.

‘They’ve missed me. I—I must go.’

Sarah caught her by the arm as she was darting off.

‘One minute. We must meet again and talk.’

‘I can’t. I shan’t be able to.’

‘Yes, you can.’ She spoke authoritatively. ‘Come to my room after you go to bed. It’s 319. Don’t forget, 319.’

She released her hold. Carol ran off after her family.

Sarah stood staring after her. She awoke from her thoughts to find Dr Gerard by her side.

‘Good morning, Miss King. So you’ve been talking to Miss Carol Boynton?’

‘Yes, we had the most extraordinary conversation. Let me tell you.’

She repeated the substance of her conversation with the girl. Gerard pounced on one point.

‘Wardress in a prison, was she, that old hippopotamus? That is significant, perhaps.’

Sarah said:

‘You mean that that is the cause of her tyranny? It is the habit of her former profession.’

Gerard shook his head.

‘No, that is approaching it from the wrong angle. There is some deep underlying compulsion. She does not love tyranny because she has been a wardress. Let us rather say that she became a wardress because she loved tyranny. In my theory it was a secret desire for power over other human beings that led her to adopt that profession.’

His face was very grave.

‘There are such strange things buried down in the unconscious. A lust for power—a lust for cruelty—a savage desire to tear and rend—all the inheritance of our past racial memories…They are all there, Miss King, all the cruelty and savagery and lust…We shut the door on them and deny them conscious life, but sometimes—they are too strong.'

Sarah shivered. 'I know.'

Gerard continued: 'We see it all round us today—in political creeds, in the conduct of nations. A reaction from humanitarianism—from pity—from brotherly good-will. The creeds sound well sometimes—a wise régime—a beneficent government—but imposed by force—resting on a basis of cruelty and fear. They are opening the door, these apostles of violence, they are letting up the old savagery, the old delight in cruelty for its own sake! Oh, it is difficult—Man is an animal very delicately balanced. He has one prime necessity—to survive. To advance too quickly is as fatal as to lag behind. He must survive! He must, perhaps, retain some of the old savagery, but he must not—no definitely he must not—deify it!'

There was a pause. Then Sarah said:

'You think old Mrs Boynton is a kind of sadist?'

'I am almost sure of it. I think she rejoices in the infliction of pain—mental pain, mind you, not physical. That is very much rarer and very much more difficult to deal with. She likes to have control of other human beings and she likes to make them suffer.'

'It's pretty beastly,' said Sarah.

Gerard told her of his conversation with Jefferson Cope. 'He doesn't realize what is going on?' she said thoughtfully.

'How should he? He is not a psychologist.'

'True. He hasn't got our disgusting minds!'

'Exactly. He has a nice, upright, sentimental, normal American mind. He believes in good rather than evil. He sees that the atmosphere of the Boynton family is all wrong, but he credits Mrs Boynton with misguided devotion rather than active maleficence.'

‘That should amuse her,’ said Sarah.

‘I should imagine it does!’

Sarah said impatiently:

‘But why don’t they break away? They could.’

Gerard shook his head.

‘No, there you are wrong. They cannot. Have you ever seen the old experiment with a cock? You chalk a line on the floor and put the cock’s beak on it. The cock believes he is tied there. He cannot raise his head. So with these unfortunates. She has worked on them, remember, since they were children. And her dominance has been mental. She has hypnotized them to believe that they cannot disobey her. Oh, I know most people would say that was nonsense—but you and I know better. She has made them believe that utter dependence on her is inevitable. They have been in prison so long that if the prison door stands open they would no longer notice! One of them, at least, no longer even wants to be free! And they would all be afraid of freedom.’

Sarah asked practically: ‘What will happen when she dies?’

Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

‘It depends. On how soon that happens. If it happened now—well, I think it might not be too late. The boy and girl—they are still young—impressionable. They would become, I believe, normal human beings. With Lennox, possibly, it has gone too far. He looks to me like a man who has parted company with hope—he lives and endures like a brute beast.’

Sarah said impatiently: ‘His wife ought to have done something! She ought to have yanked him out of it.’

‘I wonder. She may have tried—and failed.’

‘Do you think she’s under the spell, too?’

Gerard shook his head.

‘No. I don’t think the old lady has any power over her, and for that reason she hates her with a bitter hatred. Watch her eyes.’

Sarah frowned. ‘I can’t make her out—the young one, I mean. Does she know what is going on?’

‘I think she must have a pretty shrewd idea.’

‘H’m,’ said Sarah. ‘That old woman ought to be murdered! Arsenic in her early morning tea would be my prescription.’

Then she said abruptly:

‘What about the youngest girl—the red-haired one with the rather fascinating vacant smile?’

Gerard frowned. ‘I don’t know. There is something queer there. Ginevra Boynton is the old woman’s own daughter, of course.’

‘Yes. I suppose that would be different—or wouldn’t it?’

Gerard said slowly: ‘I do not believe that when once the mania for power (and the lust for cruelty) has taken possession of a human being it can spare anybody—not even its nearest and dearest.’

He was silent for a moment, then he said: ‘Are you a Christian, mademoiselle?’

Sarah said slowly: ‘I don’t know. I used to think that I wasn’t anything. But now—I’m not sure. I feel—oh, I feel that if I could sweep all this away’—she made a violent gesture—‘all the buildings and the sects and the fierce squabbling churches—that—that I might see Christ’s quiet figure riding into Jerusalem on a donkey—and believe in Him.’

Dr Gerard said gravely: ‘I believe at least in one of the chief tenets of the Christian faith—contentment with a lowly place. I am a doctor and I know that ambition—the desire to succeed—to have power—leads to most ills of the human soul. If the desire is realized it leads to arrogance, violence and final satiety—and if it is denied—ah! if it is denied—let all the asylums for the insane rise up and give their testimony! They are filled with human beings who were unable to face being mediocre, insignificant, ineffective and who therefore created for themselves ways of escape from reality so as to be shut off from life itself for ever.'

Sarah said abruptly: 'It's a pity the old Boynton woman isn't in an asylum.'

Gerard shook his head.

'No—her place is not there among the failures. It is worse than that. She has succeeded, you see! She has accomplished her dream.'

Sarah shuddered.

She cried passionately: 'Such things ought not to be!'

Chapter 7

Sarah wondered very much whether Carol Boynton would keep her appointment that night.

On the whole she rather doubted it. She was afraid that Carol would have a sharp reaction after her semi-confidences of the morning.

Nevertheless she made her preparations, slipping on a blue satin dressing-gown and getting out her little spirit lamp and boiling up water.

She was just on the point of giving Carol up (it was after one o’clock) and going to bed, when there was a tap on her door. She opened it and drew quickly back to let Carol come in.

The latter said breathlessly: ‘I was afraid you might have gone to bed…’

Sarah’s manner was carefully matter-of-fact.

‘Oh, no, I was waiting for you. Have some tea, will you? It’s real Lapsang Souchong.’

She brought over a cup. Carol had been nervous and uncertain of herself. Now she accepted the cup and a biscuit and her manner became calmer.

‘This is rather fun,’ said Sarah, smiling.

Carol looked a little startled.

‘Yes,’ she said doubtfully. ‘Yes, I suppose it is.’

‘Rather like the midnight feasts we used to have at school,’ went on Sarah. ‘I suppose you didn’t go to school?’

Carol shook her head.

‘No, we never left home. We had a governess—different governesses. They never stayed long.’

‘Did you never go away at all?’

‘No. We’ve lived always in the same house. This coming abroad is the first time I’ve ever been away.’

Sarah said casually: ‘It must have been a great adventure.’

‘Oh, it was. It—it’s all been like a dream.’

‘What made your—your stepmother decide to come abroad?’

At the mention of Mrs Boynton’s name, Carol had flinched. Sarah said quickly:

‘You know, I’m by way of being a doctor. I’ve just taken my M.B. Your mother—or stepmother rather—is very interesting to me—as a case, you know. I should say she was quite definitely a pathological case.’

Carol stared. It was clearly a very unexpected point of view to her. Sarah had spoken as she had with deliberate intent. She realized that to her family Mrs Boynton loomed as a kind of powerful obscene idol. It was Sarah’s object to rob her of her more terrifying aspect.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘There’s a kind of disease of—of grandeur—that gets hold of people. They get very autocratic and insist on everything being done exactly as they say and are altogether very difficult to deal with.’

Carol put down her cup.

‘Oh,’ she cried, ‘I’m so glad to be talking to you. Really, you know, I believe Ray and I have been getting quite—well, quite queer. We’d get terribly worked up about things.’

‘Talking with an outsider is always a good thing,’ said Sarah. ‘Inside a family one is apt to get too intense.’ Then she asked casually: ‘If you are unhappy, haven’t you ever thought of leaving home?’

Carol looked startled. ‘Oh, no! How could we? I—I mean Mother would never allow it.’

‘But she couldn’t stop you,’ said Sarah gently. ‘You’re over age.’

‘I’m twenty-three.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But still, I don’t see how—I mean, I wouldn’t know where to go and what to do.’

Her tone seemed bewildered.

‘You see,’ she said, ‘we haven’t got any money.’

‘Haven’t you any friends you could go to?’

‘Friends?’ Carol shook her head. ‘Oh, no, we don’t know anyone!’

‘Did none of you ever think of leaving home?’

‘No—I don’t think so. Oh—oh—we couldn’t.’

Sarah changed the subject. She found the girl’s bewilderment pitiful.

She said: ‘Are you fond of your stepmother?’

Slowly Carol shook her head. She whispered in a low scared voice: ‘I hate her. So does Ray…We’ve—we’ve often wished she would die.’

Again Sarah changed the subject.

‘Tell me about your elder brother.’

‘Lennox? I don’t know what’s the matter with Lennox. He hardly ever speaks now. He goes about in a kind of daydream. Nadine’s terribly worried about him.’

‘You are fond of your sister-in-law?’

‘Yes, Nadine is different. She’s always kind. But she’s very unhappy.’

‘About your brother?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have they been married long?’

‘Four years.’

‘And they’ve always lived at home?’

‘Yes.’

Sarah asked: ‘Does your sister-in-law like that?’

‘No.’

There was a pause. Then Carol said:

‘There was an awful fuss just over four years ago. You see, as I told you, none of us ever go outside the house at home. I mean we go into the grounds, but nowhere else. But Lennox did. He got out at night. He went into Fountain Springs—there was a sort of dance going on. Mother was frightfully angry when she found out. It was terrible. And then, after that, she asked Nadine to come and stay. Nadine was a very distant cousin of Father’s. She was very poor and was training to be a hospital nurse. She came and stayed with us for a month. I can’t tell you how exciting it was to have someone to stay! And she and Lennox fell in love with each other. And Mother said they’d better be married quickly and live on with us.’

‘And was Nadine willing to do that?’

Carol hesitated.

‘I don’t think she wanted to do that very much, but she didn’t really mind. Then, later, she wanted to go away—with Lennox, of course—’

‘But they didn’t go?’ asked Sarah.

‘No, Mother wouldn’t hear of it.’

Carol paused, and then said:

‘I don’t think—she likes Nadine any longer. Nadine is—funny. You never know what she’s thinking. She tries to help Jinny and Mother doesn’t like it.’

‘Jinny is your youngest sister?’

‘Yes. Ginevra is her real name.’

‘Is she—unhappy, too?’

Carol shook her head doubtfully.

‘Jinny’s been very queer lately. I don’t understand her. You see, she’s always been rather delicate—and—and Mother fusses about her and—and it makes her worse. And lately Jinny has been very queer indeed. She—she frightens me sometimes. She—she doesn’t always know what she’s doing.’

‘Has she seen a doctor?’

‘No, Nadine wanted her to, but Mother said no—and Jinny got very hysterical and screamed, and said she wouldn’t see a doctor. But I’m worried about her.’

Suddenly Carol rose.

‘I mustn’t keep you up. It’s—it’s very good of you letting me come and talk to you. You must think us very odd as a family.’

‘Oh, everybody’s odd, really,’ said Sarah lightly. ‘Come again, will you? And bring your brother, if you like.’

‘May I really?’

‘Yes; we’ll do some secret plotting. I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, too, a Dr Gerard, an awfully nice Frenchman.’

The colour came into Carol’s cheeks.

‘Oh, what fun it sounds. If only Mother doesn’t find out!’

Sarah suppressed her original retort and said instead, ‘Why should she? Good night. Shall we say tomorrow night at the same time?’

‘Oh, yes. The day after, you see, we may be going away.’

‘Then let’s have a definite date for tomorrow. Good night.’

‘Good night—and thank you.’

Carol went out of the room and slipped noiselessly along the corridor. Her own room was on the floor above. She reached it, opened the door—and stood appalled on the threshold. Mrs Boynton was sitting in an armchair by the fireplace in a crimson wool dressing-gown.

A little cry escaped from Carol’s lips. ‘Oh!’

A pair of black eyes bored into hers.

‘Where have you been, Carol?’

‘I—I—’

‘Where have you been?’

A soft, husky voice with that queer menacing under-tone in it that always made Carol’s heart beat with unreasoning terror.

‘To see a Miss King—Sarah King.’

‘The girl who spoke to Raymond the other evening?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Have you made any plans to see her again?’

Carol’s lips moved soundlessly. She nodded assent. Fright—great sickening waves of fright…

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow night.’

‘You are not to go. You understand?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘You promise?’

‘Yes—yes.’

Mrs Boynton struggled to get up. Mechanically Carol came forward and helped her. Mrs Boynton walked slowly across the room, supporting herself on her stick. She paused in the doorway and looked back at the cowering girl.

‘You are to have nothing more to do with this Miss King. You understand?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Repeat it.’

‘I am to have nothing more to do with her.’

‘Good.’

Mrs Boynton went out and shut the door.

Stiffly, Carol moved across the bedroom. She felt sick, her whole body felt wooden and unreal. She dropped on to the bed and suddenly she was shaken by a storm of weeping.

It was as though a vista had opened before her—a vista of sunlight and trees and flowers…

Now the black walls had closed round her once more.

Chapter 8

‘Can I speak to you a minute?’

Nadine Boynton turned in surprise, staring into the dark eager face of an entirely unknown young woman.

‘Why, certainly.’

But as she spoke, almost unconsciously she threw a quick nervous glance over her shoulder.

‘My name is Sarah King,’ went on the other.

‘Oh, yes?’

‘Mrs Boynton, I’m going to say something rather odd to you. I talked to your sister-in-law for quite a long time the other evening.’

A faint shadow seemed to ruffle the serenity of Nadine Boynton’s face.

‘You talked to Ginevra?’

‘No, not to Ginevra—to Carol.’

The shadow lifted.

‘Oh, I see—to Carol.’

Nadine Boynton seemed pleased, but very much surprised. ‘How did you manage that?’

Sarah said: ‘She came to my room—quite late.’

She saw the faint raising of the pencilled brows on the white forehead. She said with some embarrassment: ‘I’m sure this must seem very odd to you.’

‘No,’ said Nadine Boynton. ‘I am very glad. Very glad indeed. It is very nice for Carol to have a friend to talk to.’

‘We—we got on very well together.’ Sarah tried to choose her words carefully. ‘In fact we arranged to—to meet again the following night.’

‘Yes.’

‘But Carol didn’t come.’

‘Didn’t she?’

Nadine’s voice was cool—reflective. Her face, so quiet and gentle, told Sarah nothing.

‘No. Yesterday she was passing through the hall. I spoke to her and she didn’t answer. Just looked at me once, and then away again, and hurried on.’

‘I see.’

There was a pause. Sarah found it difficult to go on. Nadine Boynton said presently: ‘I’m—very sorry. Carol is—rather a nervous girl.’

Again that pause. Sarah took her courage in both hands. ‘You know, Mrs Boynton, I’m by way of being a doctor. I think—I think it would be good for your sister-in-law not to—not to shut herself away too much from people.’

Nadine Boynton looked thoughtfully at Sarah.

She said: ‘I see. You’re a doctor. That makes a difference.’

‘You see what I mean?’ Sarah urged.

Nadine bent her head. She was still thoughtful.

‘You are quite right, of course,’ she said after a minute or two. ‘But there are difficulties. My mother-in-law is in bad health and she has what I can only describe as a morbid dislike of any outsiders penetrating into her family circle.’

Sarah said mutinously: ‘But Carol is a grown-up woman.’

Nadine Boynton shook her head.

‘Oh, no,’ she said. ‘In body, but not in mind. If you talked to her you must have noticed that. In an emergency she would always behave like a frightened child.’

‘Do you think that’s what happened? Do you think she became—afraid?’

‘I should imagine, Miss King, that my mother-in-law insisted on Carol having nothing more to do with you.’

‘And Carol gave in?’

Nadine Boynton said quietly: ‘Can you really imagine her doing anything else?’

The eyes of the two women met. Sarah felt that behind the mask of conventional words they understood each other. Nadine, she felt, understood the position. But she was clearly not prepared to discuss it in any way.

Sarah felt discouraged. The other evening it had seemed to her as though half the battle were won. By means of secret meetings she would imbue Carol with the spirit of revolt—yes, and Raymond, too. (Be honest now, wasn’t it Raymond really she had had in mind all along?) And now, in the very first round of the battle she had been ignominiously defeated by that hulk of shapeless flesh with her evil, gloating eyes. Carol had capitulated without a struggle.

‘It’s all wrong!’ cried Sarah.

Nadine did not answer. Something in her silence went home to Sarah like a cold hand laid on her heart. She thought: ‘This woman knows the hopelessness of it much better than I do. She’s lived with it!’

The lift gates opened. The older Mrs Boynton emerged. She leaned on a stick and Raymond supported her on the other side.

Sarah gave a slight start. She saw the old woman's eyes sweep from her to Nadine and back again. She had been prepared for dislike in those eyes—for hatred even. She was not prepared for what she saw—a triumphant and malicious enjoyment. Sarah turned away. Nadine went forward and joined the other two.

'So there you are, Nadine,' said Mrs Boynton. 'I'll sit down and rest a little before I go out.'

They settled her in a high-backed chair. Nadine sat down beside her.

'Who were you talking to, Nadine?'

'A Miss King.'

'Oh, yes. The girl who spoke to Raymond the other night. Well, Ray, why don't you go and speak to her now? She's over there at the writing-table.'

The old woman's mouth widened into a malicious smile as she looked at Raymond. His face flushed. He turned his head away and muttered something.

'What's that you say, son?'

'I don't want to speak to her.'

'No, I thought not. You won't speak to her. You couldn't however much you wanted to!'

She coughed suddenly—a wheezing cough.

'I'm enjoying this trip, Nadine,' she said. 'I wouldn't have missed it for anything.'

'No?'

Nadine’s voice was expressionless.

‘Ray.’

‘Yes, Mother?’

‘Get me a piece of notepaper—from the table over there in the corner.’

Raymond went off obediently. Nadine raised her head. She watched, not the boy, but the old woman. Mrs Boynton was leaning forward, her nostrils dilated as though with pleasure. Ray passed close by Sarah. She looked up, a sudden hope showing in her face. It died down as he brushed past her, took some notepaper from the case and went back across the room.

There were little beads of sweat on his forehead as he rejoined them, and his face was dead white.

Very softly Mrs Boynton murmured: ‘Ah…’ as she watched his face.

Then she saw Nadine’s eyes fixed on her. Something in them made her own snap with sudden anger.

‘Where’s Mr Cope this morning?’ she said.

Nadine’s eyes dropped again. She answered in her gentle, expressionless voice:

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen him.’

‘I like him,’ said Mrs Boynton. ‘I like him very much. We must see a good deal of him. You’ll like that, won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Nadine. ‘I, too, like him very much.’

‘What’s the matter with Lennox lately? He seems very dull and quiet. Nothing wrong between you, is there?’

‘Oh, no. Why should there be?’

‘I wondered. Married people don’t always hit it off. Perhaps you’d be happier living in a home of your own?’

Nadine did not answer.

‘Well, what do you say to the idea? Does it appeal to you?’

Nadine shook her head. She said, smiling: ‘I don’t think it would appeal to you, Mother.’

Mrs Boynton’s eyelids flickered. She said sharply and venomously, ‘You’ve always been against me, Nadine.’

The younger woman replied evenly:

‘I’m sorry you should think that.’

The old woman’s hand closed on her stick. Her face seemed to get a shade more purple.

She said, with a change of tone: ‘I forgot my drops. Get them for me, Nadine.’

‘Certainly.’

Nadine got up and crossed the lounge to the lift. Mrs Boynton looked after her. Raymond sat limply in a chair, his eyes glazed with dull misery.

Nadine went upstairs and along the corridor. She entered the sitting-room of their suite. Lennox was sitting by the window. There was a book in his hand, but he was not reading. He roused himself as Nadine came in. ‘Hallo, Nadine.’

‘I’ve come up for Mother’s drops. She forgot them.’

She went on into Mrs Boynton’s bedroom. From a bottle on the washstand she carefully measured a dose into a small medicine glass, filling it up with water. As she passed through the sitting-room again she paused.

‘Lennox.’

It was a moment or two before he answered her. It was as though the message had a long way to travel.

Then he said: ‘I beg your pardon. What is it?’

Nadine Boynton set down the glass carefully on the table. Then she went over and stood beside him.

‘Lennox, look at the sunshine—out there, through the window. Look at life. It’s beautiful. We might be out in it—instead of being here looking through a window.’

Again there was a pause. Then he said: ‘I’m sorry. Do you want to go out?’

She answered him quickly: ‘Yes, I want to go out—with you—out into the sunshine—out into life—and live—the two of us together.’

He shrank back into his chair. His eyes looked restless, hunted.

‘Nadine, my dear—must we go into all this again?’

‘Yes, we must. Let us go away and lead our own life somewhere.’

‘How can we? We’ve no money.’

‘We can earn money.’

‘How could we? What could we do? I’m untrained. Thousands of men—qualified men—trained men—are out of a job as it is. We couldn’t manage it.’

‘I would earn money for both of us.’

‘My dear child, you’d never even completed your training. It’s hopeless—impossible.’

‘No, what is hopeless and impossible is our present life.’

‘You don’t know what you are talking about. Mother is very good to us. She gives us every luxury.’

‘Except freedom. Lennox, make an effort. Come with me now—today—’

‘Nadine, I think you’re quite mad.’

‘No, I’m sane. Absolutely and completely sane. I want a life of my own, with you, in the sunshine—not stifled in the shadow of an old woman who is a tyrant and who delights in making you unhappy.’

‘Mother may be rather an autocrat—’

‘Your mother is mad! She’s insane!’

He answered mildly: ‘That’s not true. She’s got a remarkably good head for business.’

‘Perhaps—yes.’

‘And you must realize, Nadine, she can’t live for ever. She’s getting old and she’s in very bad health. At her death my father’s money is divided equally among us share and share alike. You remember, she read us the will?’

‘When she dies,’ said Nadine, ‘it may be too late.’

‘Too late?’

‘Too late for happiness.’

Lennox murmured: ‘Too late for happiness.’ He shivered suddenly. Nadine went closer to him. She put her hand on his shoulder.

‘Lennox, I love you. It’s a battle between me and your mother. Are you going to be on her side or mine?’

‘On yours—on yours!’

‘Then do what I ask.’

‘It’s impossible!’

‘No, it’s not impossible. Think, Lennox, we could have children…’

‘Mother wants us to have children. She has said so.’

‘I know, but I won’t bring children into the world to live in the shadow you have all been brought up in. Your mother can influence you, but she’s no power over me.’

Lennox murmured: ‘You make her angry sometimes, Nadine; it isn’t wise.’

‘She is only angry because she knows that she can’t influence my mind or dictate my thoughts!’

‘I know you are always polite and gentle with her. You’re wonderful. You’re too good for me. You always have been. When you said you would marry me it was like an unbelievable dream.’

Nadine said quietly: ‘I was wrong to marry you.’

Lennox said hopelessly: ‘Yes, you were wrong.’

‘You don’t understand. What I mean is that if I had gone away then and asked you to follow me you would have done so. Yes, I really believe you would…I was not clever enough then to understand your mother and what she wanted.’

She paused, then she said: ‘You refuse to come away? Well, I can’t make you. But I am free to go! I think—I think I shall go…’

He stared up at her incredulously. For the first time his reply came quickly, as though at last the sluggish current of his thoughts was accelerated. He stammered: ‘But—but—you can’t do that. Mother—Mother would never hear of it.’

‘She couldn’t stop me.’

‘You’ve no money.’

‘I could make, borrow, beg or steal it. Understand, Lennox, your mother has no power over me! I can go or stay at my will. I am beginning to feel that I have borne this life long enough.’

‘Nadine—don’t leave me—don’t leave me…’

She looked at him thoughtfully—quietly—with an inscrutable expression.

‘Don’t leave me, Nadine.’

He spoke like a child. She turned her head away, so that he should not see the sudden pain in her eyes.

She knelt down beside him.

‘Then come with me. Come with me! You can. Indeed you can if you only will!’

He shrank back from her.

‘I can’t. I can’t, I tell you. I haven’t—God help me—I haven’t the courage…’

Chapter 9

Dr Gerard walked into the office of Messrs Castle, the tourist agents, and found Sarah King at the counter.

She looked up.

‘Oh, good morning. I’m fixing up my tour to Petra. I’ve just heard you are going after all.’

‘Yes, I find I can just manage it.’

‘How nice.’

‘Shall we be a large party, I wonder?’

‘They say just two other women—and you and me. One car load.’

‘That will be delightful,’ said Gerard, with a little bow. Then he, in turn, attended to his business.

Presently, holding his mail in his hands, he joined Sarah as she stepped out of the office. It was a crisp, sunny day, with a slight cold tang in the air.

‘What news of our friends, the Boyntons?’ asked Dr Gerard. ‘I have been to Bethlehem and Nazareth and other places—a tour of three days.’

Slowly and rather unwillingly, Sarah narrated her abortive efforts to establish contact.

‘Anyhow, I failed,’ she finished. ‘And they’re leaving today.’

‘Where are they going?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

She went on vexedly: ‘I feel, you know, that I’ve made rather a fool of myself!’

‘In what way?’

‘Interfering in other people’s business.’

Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

‘That is a matter of opinion.’

‘You mean whether one should interfere or not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you?’

The Frenchman looked amused.

‘You mean, is it my habit to concern myself with other people’s affairs? I will say to you frankly: No.’

‘Then you think I’m wrong to have tried butting in?’

‘No, no, you misunderstand me.’ Gerard spoke quickly and energetically. ‘It is, I think, a moot question. Should one, if one sees a wrong being done, attempt to put it right? One’s interference may do good—but it may do incalculable harm! It is impossible to lay down any ruling on the subject. Some people have a genius for interference—they do it well! Some people do it clumsily and had therefore better leave it alone! Then there is, too, the question of age. Young people have the courage of their ideals and convictions—their values are more theoretical than practical. They have not experienced, as yet, that fact contradicts theory! If you have a belief in yourself and in the rightness of what you are doing, you can often accomplish things that are well worth while! (Incidentally, you often do a good deal of harm!) On the other hand, the middle-aged person has experience—he has found that harm as well as, and perhaps more often than, good comes of trying to interfere and so—very wisely, he refrains! So the result is even—the earnest young do both harm and good—the prudent middle-aged do neither!’

‘All that isn’t very helpful,’ objected Sarah.

‘Can one person ever be helpful to another? It is your problem, not mine.’

‘You mean you are not going to do anything about the Boyntons?’

‘No. For me, there would be no chance of success.’

‘Then there isn’t for me, either?’

‘For you, there might be.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you have special qualifications. The appeal of your youth and sex.’

‘Sex? Oh, I see.’

‘One comes always back to sex, does one not? You have failed with the girl. It does not follow that you would fail with her brother. What you have just told me (what the girl Carol told you) shows very clearly the one menace to Mrs Boynton’s autocracy. The eldest son, Lennox, defied her in the force of his young manhood. He played truant from home, went to local dances. The desire of a man for a mate was stronger than the hypnotic spell. But the old woman was quite aware of the power of sex. (She will have seen something of it in her career.) She dealt with it very cleverly—brought a pretty but penniless girl into the house—encouraged a marriage. And so acquired yet another slave.’

Sarah shook her head.

‘I don’t think young Mrs Boynton is a slave.’

Gerard agreed.

‘No, perhaps not. I think that, because she was a quiet, docile young girl, old Mrs Boynton underestimated her force of will and character. Nadine Boynton was too young and inexperienced at the time to appreciate the true position. She appreciates it now, but it is too late.’

‘Do you think she has given up hope?’

Dr Gerard shook his head doubtfully.

‘If she has plans no one would know about them. There are, you know, certain possibilities where Cope is concerned. Man is a naturally jealous animal—and jealousy is a strong force. Lennox Boynton might still be roused from the inertia in which he is sinking.’

‘And you think’—Sarah purposely made her tone very business-like and professional—‘that there’s a chance I might be able to do something about Raymond?’

‘I do.’

Sarah sighed.

‘I suppose I might have tried. Oh, well, it’s too late now, anyway. And—and I don’t like the idea.’

Gerard looked amused.

‘That is because you are English! The English have a complex about sex. They think it is “not quite nice”.’

Sarah’s indignant response failed to move him.

‘Yes, yes; I know you are very modern—that you use freely in public the most unpleasant words you can find in the dictionary—that you are professional and entirely uninhibited! Tout de même, I repeat, you have the same facial characteristics as your mother and your grandmother. You are still the blushing English Miss although you do not blush!’

‘I never heard such rubbish!’

Dr Gerard, a twinkle in his eye, and quite unperturbed, added: ‘And it makes you very charming.’

This time Sarah was speechless.

Dr Gerard hastily raised his hat. ‘I take my leave,’ he said, ‘before you have time to begin to say all that you think.’ He escaped into the hotel.

Sarah followed him more slowly.

There was a good deal of activity going on. Several cars loaded with luggage were in the process of departing. Lennox and Nadine Boynton and Mr Cope were standing by a big saloon car superintending arrangements. A fat dragoman was standing talking to Carol with quite unintelligible fluency.

Sarah passed them and went into the hotel.

Mrs Boynton, wrapped in a thick coat, was sitting in a chair, waiting to depart. Looking at her, a queer revulsion of feeling swept over Sarah. She had felt that Mrs Boynton was a sinister figure, an incarnation of evil malignancy.

Now, suddenly, she saw the old woman as a pathetic ineffectual figure. To be born with such a lust for power, such a desire for dominion—and to achieve only a petty domestic tyranny! If only her children could see her as Sarah saw her that minute—an object of pity—a stupid, malignant, pathetic, posturing old woman. On an impulse Sarah went up to her.

‘Goodbye, Mrs Boynton,’ she said. ‘I hope you’ll have a nice trip.’

The old lady looked at her. Malignancy struggled with outrage in those eyes.

‘You’ve wanted to be very rude to me,’ said Sarah.

(Was she crazy, she wondered, what on earth was urging her on to talk like this?)

‘You’ve tried to prevent your son and daughter making friends with me. Don’t you think, really, that that is all very silly and childish? You like to make yourself out a kind of ogre, but really, you know, you’re just pathetic and rather ludicrous. If I were you I’d give up all this silly play-acting. I expect you’ll hate me for saying this, but I mean it—and some of it may stick. You know you could have a lot of fun still. It’s really much better to be—friendly—and kind. You could be if you tried.’

There was a pause.

Mrs Boynton had frozen into a deadly immobility. At last she passed her tongue over her dry lips, her mouth opened…Still for a moment, no words came.

‘Go on,’ said Sarah encouragingly. ‘Say it! It doesn’t matter what you say to me. But think over what I’ve said to you.’

The words came at last—in a soft, husky, but penetrating voice. Mrs Boynton’s basilisk eyes looked, not at Sarah, but oddly over her shoulder. She seemed to address, not Sarah, but some familiar spirit.

‘I never forget,’ she said. ‘Remember that. I’ve never forgotten anything—not an action, not a name, not a face…’

There was nothing in the words themselves, but the venom with which they were spoken made Sarah retreat a step. And then Mrs Boynton laughed—it was, definitely, rather a horrible laugh.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. ‘You poor old thing,’ she said.

She turned away. As she went towards the lift she almost collided with Raymond Boynton. On an impulse she spoke quickly.

‘Goodbye. I hope you’ll have a lovely time. Perhaps we’ll meet again some day.’ She smiled at him, a warm, friendly smile, and passed quickly on.

Raymond stood as though turned to stone. So lost in his own thoughts was he that a small man with big moustaches, endeavouring to pass out of the lift, had to speak several times.

‘Pardon.’

At last it penetrated. Raymond stepped aside.

‘So sorry,’ he said. ‘I—I was thinking.’

Carol came towards him.

‘Ray, get Jinny, will you? She went back to her room. We’re going to start.’

‘Right. I’ll tell her she’s got to come straight away.’

Raymond walked into the lift.

Hercule Poirot stood for a moment looking after him, his eyebrows raised, his head a little on one side as though he was listening.

Then he nodded his head as though in agreement. Walking through the lounge, he took a good look at Carol, who had joined her mother.

Then he beckoned the head waiter who was passing.

‘Pardon. Can you tell me the name of those people over there?’

‘The name is Boynton, monsieur; they are Americans.’

‘Thank you,’ said Hercule Poirot.

On the third floor Dr Gerard, going to his room, passed Raymond Boynton and Ginevra walking towards the waiting lift. Just as they were about to get into it, Ginevra said: ‘Just a minute, Ray, wait for me in the lift.’

She ran back, turned a corner, caught up with the walking man. ‘Please—I must speak to you.’

Dr Gerard looked up in astonishment.

The girl came up close to him and caught his arm.

‘They’re taking me away! They may be going to kill me…I don’t really belong to them, you know. My name isn’t really Boynton…’

She hurried on, her words coming fast and tumbling over each other.

‘I’ll trust you with the secret. I’m—I’m royal, really! I’m the heiress to a throne. That’s why—there are enemies all round me. They try to poison me—all sorts of things…If you could help me—to get away—’

She broke off. Footsteps. ‘Jinny—’

Beautiful in her sudden startled gesture, the girl put a finger to her lips, threw Gerard an imploring glance, and ran back.

‘I’m coming, Ray.’

Dr Gerard walked on with his eyebrows raised. Slowly he shook his head and frowned.

Chapter 10

It was the morning of the start to Petra.

Sarah came down to find a big masterful woman with a rocking-horse nose, whom she had already noticed in the hotel, outside the main entrance, objecting fiercely to the size of the car.

‘A great deal too small! Four passengers? And a dragoman? Then, of course, we must have a much larger saloon. Please take that car away and return with one of an adequate size.’

In vain did the representative of Messrs Castle raise his voice in explanation. That was the size of car always provided. It was really a most comfortable car. A larger car was not suitable for desert travel. The large woman, metaphorically speaking, rolled over him like a large steamroller.

Then she turned her attention to Sarah.

‘Miss King? I am Lady Westholme. I am sure you agree with me that that car was grossly inadequate as to size?’

‘Well,’ said Sarah cautiously, ‘I agree that a larger one would be more comfortable!’

The young man from Castle’s murmured that a larger car would add to the price.

‘The price,’ said Lady Westholme firmly, ‘is inclusive, and I shall certainly refuse to sanction any addition to it. Your prospectus distinctly states “in comfortable saloon car”. You will keep to the terms of your agreement.’

Recognizing defeat, the young man from Castle’s murmured something about seeing what he could do and wilted away from the spot.

Lady Westholme turned to Sarah, a smile of triumph on her weather-beaten countenance, her large red rocking-horse nostrils dilated exultantly.

Lady Westholme was a very well-known figure in the English political world. When Lord Westholme, a middle-aged, simple-minded peer whose only interests in life were hunting, shooting and fishing, was returning from a trip to the United States, one of his fellow passengers was a Mrs Vansittart. Shortly afterwards Mrs Vansittart became Lady Westholme. The match was often cited as one of the examples of the danger of ocean voyages. The new Lady Westholme lived entirely in tweeds and stout brogues, bred dogs, bullied the villagers and forced her husband pitilessly into public life. It being borne in upon her, however, that politics were not Lord Westholme's métier in life and never would be, she graciously allowed him to resume his sporting activities and herself stood for Parliament. Being elected with a substantial majority, Lady Westholme threw herself with vigour into political life, being especially active at Question Time. Cartoons of her soon began to appear (always a sure sign of success). As a public figure she stood for the old-fashioned values of family life, welfare work amongst women, and was an ardent supporter of the League of Nations. She had decided views on questions of Agriculture, Housing and Slum Clearance. She was much respected and almost universally disliked! It was highly possible that she would be given an under-secretaryship when her party returned to power. At the moment a Liberal Government (owing to a split in the National Government between Labour and Conservatives) was somewhat unexpectedly in power.

Lady Westholme looked with grim satisfaction after the departing car. 'Men always think they can impose upon women,' she said.

Sarah thought that it would be a brave man who thought he could impose upon Lady Westholme! She introduced Dr Gerard, who had just come out of the hotel.

'Your name is, of course, familiar to me,' said Lady Westholme, shaking hands. 'I was talking to Professor Chantereau the other day in Paris. I have been taking up the question of the treatment of pauper lunatics very strongly lately. Very strongly indeed. Shall we come inside while we wait for a better car to be obtained?'

A vague little middle-aged lady with wisps of grey hair who was hovering nearby turned out to be Miss Amabel Pierce, the fourth member of the party. She, too, was swept into the lounge under Lady Westholme's protecting wing.

'You are a professional woman, Miss King?'

'I've just taken my M.B.'

'Good,' said Lady Westholme with condescending approval. 'If anything is to be accomplished, mark my words, it is women who will do it.'

Uneasily conscious for the first time of her sex, Sarah followed Lady Westholme meekly to a seat.

There, as they sat waiting, Lady Westholme informed them that she had refused an invitation to stay with the High Commissioner during her stay in Jerusalem. 'I did not want to be hampered by officialdom. I wished to look into things by myself.'

'What things?' Sarah wondered.

Lady Westholme went on to explain that she was staying at the Solomon Hotel so as to remain unhampered. She added that she had made several suggestions to the manager for the more competent running of his hotel.

'Efficiency,' said Lady Westholme, 'is my watchword.'

It certainly seemed to be! In a quarter of an hour a large and extremely comfortable car arrived and in due course—after advice from Lady Westholme as to how the luggage should be stowed—the party set off.

Their first halt was the Dead Sea. They had lunch at Jericho. Afterwards when Lady Westholme, armed with a Baedeker, had gone off with Miss Pierce, the doctor and the fat dragoman, to do a tour of old Jericho, Sarah remained in the garden of the hotel.

Her head ached slightly and she wanted to be alone. A deep depression weighed her down—a depression for which she found it hard to account. She felt suddenly listless and uninterested, disinclined for sightseeing, bored by her companions. She wished at this moment that she had never committed herself to this Petra tour. It was going to be very expensive and she felt quite sure she wasn’t going to enjoy it! Lady Westholme’s booming voice, Miss Pierce’s endless twitterings, and the anti-Zionist lamentation of the dragoman, were already fraying her nerves to a frazzle. She disliked almost as much Dr Gerard’s amused air of knowing exactly how she was feeling.

She wondered where the Boyntons were now—perhaps they had gone on to Syria—they might be at Baalbek or Damascus. Raymond—she wondered what Raymond was doing. Strange how clearly she could see his face—its eagerness—its diffidence—its nervous tension…

Oh, hell! Why go on thinking of people she would probably never see again? That scene the other day with the old woman—what could have possessed her to march up to the old lady and spurt out a lot of nonsense. Other people must have heard some of it. She fancied that Lady Westholme had been quite close by. Sarah tried to remember exactly what it was she had said. Something that probably sounded quite absurdly hysterical. Goodness, what a fool she had made of herself! But it wasn’t her fault really; it was old Mrs Boynton’s. There was something about her that made you lose your sense of proportion.

Dr Gerard entered and plumped down in a chair, wiping his hot forehead.

‘Phew! That woman should be poisoned!’ he declared.

Sarah started. ‘Mrs Boynton?’

‘Mrs Boynton! No, I meant that Lady Westholme! It is incredible to me that she has had a husband for many years and that he has not already done so. What can he be made of, that husband?’

Sarah laughed.

‘Oh, he’s the “huntin’, fishin’, shootin’ ” kind,’ she explained.

‘Psychologically that is very sound! He appeases his lust to kill on the (so-called) lower creations.’

‘I believe he is very proud of his wife’s activities.’

The Frenchman suggested:

‘Because they take her a good deal away from home? That is understandable.’ Then he went on, ‘What did you say just now? Mrs Boynton? Undoubtedly it would be a very good idea to poison her, too. Undeniably the simplest solution of that family problem! In fact a great many women would be better poisoned. All women who have grown old and ugly.’

He made an expressive face.

Sarah cried out, laughing:

‘Oh, you Frenchmen! You’ve got no use for any woman who isn’t young and attractive.’

Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

‘We are more honest about it, that is all. Englishmen, they do not get up in tubes and trains for ugly women—no, no.’

‘How depressing life is,’ said Sarah with a sigh.

‘There is no need for you to sigh, mademoiselle.’

‘Well, I feel thoroughly disgruntled today.’

‘Naturally.’

‘What do you mean—naturally?’ snapped Sarah.

‘You could find the reason very easily if you examine your state of mind honestly.’

‘I think it’s our fellow travelers who depress me,’ said Sarah. ‘It’s awful, isn’t it, but I do hate women! When they’re inefficient and idiotic like Miss

Pierce, they infuriate me—and, when they're efficient like Lady Westholme, they annoy me more still.'

'It is, I should say, unavoidable that these two people should annoy you. Lady Westholme is exactly fitted to the life she leads and is completely happy and successful. Miss Pierce has worked for years as a nursery governess and has suddenly come into a small legacy which has enabled her to fulfill her life-long wish and travel. So far, travel has lived up to her expectations. Consequently you, who have just been thwarted in obtaining what you want, naturally resent the existence of people who have been more successful in life than you are.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Sarah gloomily. 'What a horribly accurate mind-reader you are. I keep trying to humbug myself and you won't let me.'

At this moment the others returned. The guide seemed the most exhausted of the three. He was quite subdued and hardly exuded any information on the way to Amman. He did not even mention the Jews. For which everyone was profoundly grateful. His voluble and frenzied account of their iniquities had done much to try everyone's temper on the journey from Jerusalem.

Now the road wound upward from the Jordan, twisting and turning, with clumps of oleanders showing rose-coloured flowers.

They reached Amman late in the afternoon and after a short visit to the Graeco-Roman theatre went to bed early. They were to make an early start the next morning as it was a full day's motor run across the desert to Ma'an.

They left soon after eight o'clock. The party was inclined to be silent. It was a hot airless day and by noon when a halt was made for a picnic lunch to be eaten, it was really stiflingly hot. The irritation of a hot day of being boxed up closely with three other human beings had got a little on everyone's nerves.

Lady Westholme and Dr Gerard had a somewhat irritable argument over the League of Nations. Lady Westholme was a fervent supporter of the League. The Frenchman, on the other hand, chose to be witty at the League's expense. From the attitude of the League concerning Abyssinia and Spain they passed to the Litvania boundary dispute of which Sarah had never heard and from there to the activities of the League in suppressing dope gangs.

‘You must admit they have done wonderful work. Wonderful!’ snapped Lady Westholme.

Dr Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

‘Perhaps. And at wonderful expense too!’

‘The matter is a very serious one. Under the Dangerous Drugs Act—’ The argument waged on.

Miss Pierce twittered to Sarah: ‘It is really most interesting travelling with Lady Westholme.’

Sarah said acidly: ‘Is it?’ but Miss Pierce did not notice the acerbity and twittered happily on.

‘I’ve so often seen her name in the papers. So clever of women to go into public life and hold their own. I’m always so glad when a woman accomplishes something!’

‘Why?’ demanded Sarah ferociously.

Miss Pierce’s mouth fell open and she stammered a little.

‘Oh, because—I mean—just because—well—it’s so nice that women are able to do things!’

‘I don’t agree,’ said Sarah. ‘It’s nice when any human being is able to accomplish something worth while! It doesn’t matter a bit whether it’s a man or a woman. Why should it?’

‘Well, of course—’ said Miss Pierce. ‘Yes, I confess—of course, looking at it in that light—’

But she looked slightly wistful. Sarah said more gently:

‘I’m sorry, but I do hate this differentiation between the sexes. “The modern girl has a thoroughly business-like attitude towards life.” That sort of thing. It’s not a bit true! Some girls are business-like and some aren’t.

Some men are sentimental and muddle-headed, others are clear-headed and logical. There are just different types of brains. Sex only matters where sex is directly concerned.’

Miss Pierce flushed a little at the word sex and adroitly changed the subject.

‘One can’t help wishing that there were a little shade,’ she murmured. ‘But I do think all this emptiness is so wonderful, don’t you?’

Sarah nodded.

Yes, she thought, the emptiness was marvellous…Healing…Peaceful…No human beings to agitate one with their tiresome inter-relationships…No burning personal problems! Now, at last, she felt, she was free of the Boyntons. Free of that strange compelling wish to interfere in the lives of people whose orbit did not remotely touch her own. She felt soothed and at peace. Here was loneliness, emptiness, spaciousness…In fact, peace…

Only, of course, one wasn’t alone to enjoy it. Lady Westholme and Dr Gerard had finished with drugs and were now arguing about guileless young women who were exported in a sinister manner to Argentinian cabarets. Dr Gerard had displayed throughout the conversation a levity which Lady Westholme, who, being a true politician, had no sense of humour, found definitely deplorable.

‘We go on now, yes?’ announced the tarbrushed dragoman, and began to talk about the iniquities of Jews again.

It was about an hour off sunset when they reached Ma’an at last. Strange wild-faced men crowded round the car. After a short halt they went on.

Looking over the flat desert country, Sarah was at a loss as to where the rocky stronghold of Petra could be. Surely they could see for miles and miles all round them? There were no mountains, no hills anywhere. Were they, then, still many miles from their journey’s end?

They reached the village of Ain Musa where the cars were to be left. Here horses were waiting for them—sorry-looking thin beasts. The inadequacy of her striped washing-frock disturbed Miss Pierce greatly. Lady Westholme was sensibly attired in riding breeches, not perhaps a particularly becoming style to her type of figure, but certainly practical.

The horses were led out of the village along a slippery path with loose stones. The ground fell away and the horses zig-zagged down. The sun was close on setting.

Sarah was very tired with the long, hot journey in the car. Her senses felt dazed. The ride was like a dream. It seemed to her afterwards that it was like the pit of Hell opening at one’s feet. The way wound down—down into the ground. The shapes of rock rose up round them—down, down into the bowels of the earth, through a labyrinth of red cliffs. They towered now on either side. Sarah felt stifled—menaced by the ever-narrowing gorge.

She thought confusedly to herself: ‘Down into the valley of death—down into the valley of death…’

On and on. It grew dark—the vivid red of the walls faded—and still on, winding in and out, imprisoned, lost in the bowels of the earth.

She thought: ‘It’s fantastic and unbelievable…a dead city.’

And again like a refrain came the words: ‘The valley of death…’

Lanterns were lit now. The horses wound along through the narrow ways. Suddenly they came out into a wide space—the cliffs receded. Far ahead of them was a cluster of lights.

‘That is camp!’ said the guide.

The horses quickened their pace a little—not very much—they were too starved and dispirited for that, but they showed just a shade of enthusiasm. Now the way ran along a gravelly water-bed. The lights grew nearer.

They could see a cluster of tents, a higher row up against the face of a cliff. Caves, too, hollowed out in the rock.

They were arriving. Bedouin servants came running out.

Sarah stared up at one of the caves. It held a sitting figure. What was it? An idol? A gigantic squatting image?

No, that was the flickering lights that made it loom so large. But it must be an idol of some kind, sitting there immovable, brooding over the place…

And then, suddenly her heart gave a leap of recognition.

Gone was the feeling of peace—of escape—that the desert had given her. She had been led from freedom back into captivity. She had ridden down into this dark winding valley and here, like an archpriestess of some forgotten cult, like a monstrous swollen female Buddha, sat Mrs Boynton…

Chapter 11

Mrs Boynton was here, at Petra!

Sarah answered mechanically questions that were addressed to her. Would she have dinner straight away—it was ready—or would she like to wash first? Would she prefer to sleep in a tent or a cave?

Her answer to that came quickly. A tent. She flinched at the thought of a cave, the vision of that monstrous squatting figure recurred to her. (Why was it that something about the woman seemed hardly human?)

Finally she followed one of the native servants. He wore khaki breeches, much patched, and untidy puttees and a ragged coat very much the worse for wear. On his head the native headdress, the cheffiyah, its long folds protecting the neck and secured in place with a black silk twist fitting tightly to the crown of his head. Sarah admired the easy swing with which he walked—the careless proud carriage of his head. Only the European part of his costume seemed tawdry and wrong. She thought: 'Civilization is all wrong—all wrong! But for civilization there wouldn't be a Mrs Boynton! In savage tribes they'd probably have killed and eaten her years ago!'

She realized, half-humorously, that she was over-tired and on edge. A wash in hot water and a dusting of powder over her face and she felt herself again—cool, poised, and ashamed of her recent panic.

She passed a comb through her thick black hair, squinting sideways at her reflection in the wavering light of a small oil-lamp in a very inadequate glass.

Then she pushed aside the tent-flap and came out into the night prepared to descend to the big marquee below.

'You—here?'

It was a low cry—dazed, incredulous.

She turned to look straight into Raymond Boynton's eyes. So amazed they were! And something in them held her silent and almost afraid. Such an unbelievable joy…It was as though he had seen a vision of Paradise—wondering, dazed, thankful, humble! Never, in all her life, was Sarah to forget that look. So might the damned look up and see Paradise…

He said again: 'You…'

It did something to her—that low, vibrant tone. It made her heart turn over in her breast. It made her feel shy, afraid, humble and yet suddenly arrogantly glad. She said quite simply: 'Yes.'

He came nearer—still dazed—still only half believing.

Then suddenly he took her hand.

'It is you,' he said. 'You're real. I thought at first you were a ghost—because I'd been thinking about you so much.' He paused and then said, 'I love you, you know…I have from the moment I saw you in the train. I know that now. And I want you to know it so that—so that you'll know it isn't me—the real me—who—who behaves so caddishly. You see I can't answer for myself even now. I might do–anything! I might pass you by or cut you, but I do want you to know that it isn't me—the real me—who is responsible for that. It's my nerves. I can't depend on them…When she tells me to do things—I do them! My nerves make me! You will understand, won't you? Despise me if you have to—'

She interrupted him. Her voice was low and unexpectedly sweet. 'I won't despise you.'

'All the same, I'm pretty despicable! I ought to—to be able to behave like a man.'

It was partly an echo of Gerard's advice, but more out of her own knowledge and hope that Sarah answered—and behind the sweetness of her voice there was a ring of certainty and conscious authority.

'You will now.'

‘Shall I?’ His voice was wistful. ‘Perhaps…’

‘You’ll have courage now. I’m sure of it.’

He drew himself up—flung back his head.

‘Courage? Yes, that’s all that’s needed. Courage!’

Suddenly he bent his head, touched her hand with his lips. A minute later he had left her.

Chapter 12

Sarah went down to the big marquee. She found her three fellow travelers there. They were sitting at table eating. The guide was explaining that there was another party here.

‘They came two days ago. Go day after tomorrow. Americans. The mother, very fat, very difficult get here! Carried in chair by bearers—they say very hard work—they get very hot—yes.’

Sarah gave a sudden spurt of laughter. Of course, take it properly, the whole thing was funny!

The fat dragoman looked at her gratefully. He was not finding his task too easy. Lady Westholme had contradicted him out of Baedeker three times that day and had now found fault with the type of bed provided. He was grateful to the one member of his party who seemed to be unaccountably in a good temper.

‘Ha!’ said Lady Westholme. ‘I think these people were at the Solomon. I recognized the old mother as we arrived here. I think I saw you talking to her at the hotel, Miss King.’

Sarah blushed guiltily, hoping Lady Westholme had not overheard much of that conversation.

‘Really, what possessed me!’ she thought to herself in an agony.

In the meantime Lady Westholme had made a pronouncement. ‘Not interesting people at all. Very provincial,’ she said.

Miss Pierce made eager sycophantish noises and Lady Westholme embarked on a history of various interesting and prominent Americans whom she had met recently.

The weather being so unusually hot for the time of year, an early start was arranged for the morrow.

The four assembled for breakfast at six o'clock. There were no signs of any of the Boynton family. After Lady Westholme had commented unfavourably on the absence of fruit, they consumed tea, tinned milk, and fried eggs in a generous allowance of fat flanked by extremely salt bacon.

Then they started forth, Lady Westholme and Dr Gerard discussing with animation on the part of the former the exact value of vitamins in diet and the proper nutrition of the working classes.

Then there was a sudden hail from the camp and they halted to allow another person to join the party. It was Mr Jefferson Cope who hurried after them, his pleasant face flushed with the exertion of running.

'Why, if you don't mind, I'd like to join your party this morning. Good morning, Miss King. Quite a surprise meeting you and Dr Gerard here. What do you think of it?'

He made a gesture indicating the fantastic red rocks that stretched in every direction.

'I think it's rather wonderful and just a little horrible,' said Sarah. 'I always thought of it as romantic and dream-like—the "rose-red city". But it's much more real than that—it's as real as—as raw beef.'

'And very much the colour of it,' agreed Mr Cope.

'But it's marvelous, too,' admitted Sarah.

The party began to climb. Two Bedouin guides accompanied them. Tall men, with an easy carriage, they swung upward unconcernedly in their hobnailed boots completely foot-sure on the slippery slope. Difficulties soon began. Sarah had a good head for heights and so had Dr Gerard. But both Mr Cope and Lady Westholme were far from happy, and the unfortunate Miss Pierce had to be almost carried over the precipitous places, her eyes shut, her face green, while her voice rose ceaselessly in a perpetual wail.

'I never could look down places. Never—from a child!'

Once she declared her intention of going back, but on turning to face the descent, her skin assumed an even greener tinge, and she reluctantly decided that to go on was the only thing to be done.

Dr Gerard was kind and reassuring. He went up behind her, holding a stick between her and the sheer drop like a balustrade and she confessed that the illusion of a rail did much to conquer the feeling of vertigo.

Sarah, panting a little, asked the dragoman, Mahmoud, who, in spite of his ample proportions, showed no signs of distress:

‘Don’t you ever have trouble getting people up here? Elderly ones, I mean.’

‘Always—always we have trouble,’ agreed Mahmoud serenely.

‘Do you always try and take them?’

Mahmoud shrugged his thick shoulders.

‘They like to come. They have paid money to see these things. They wish to see them. The Bedouin guides are very clever—very sure-footed—always they manage.’

They arrived at last at the summit. Sarah drew a deep breath.

All around and below stretched the blood-red rocks—a strange and unbelievable country unparalleled anywhere. Here in the exquisite pure morning air they stood like gods, surveying a baser world—a world of flaring violence.

Here was, as the guide told them, the ‘Place of Sacrifice’—the ‘High Place’. He showed them the trough cut in the flat rock at their feet.

Sarah strayed away from the rest, from the glib phrases that flowed so readily from the dragoman’s tongue. She sat on a rock, pushed her hands through her thick black hair, and gazed down on the world at her feet. Presently she was aware of someone standing by her side. Dr Gerard’s voice said:

‘You appreciate the appositeness of the devil’s temptation in the New Testament. Satan took Our Lord up to the summit of a mountain and showed Him the world. “All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.” How much greater the temptation up on high to be a God of Material Power.’

Sarah assented, but her thoughts were so clearly elsewhere that Gerard observed her in some surprise.

‘You are pondering something very deeply,’ he said.

‘Yes, I am.’ She turned a perplexed face to him.

‘It’s a wonderful idea—to have a place of sacrifice up here. I think sometimes, don’t you, that a sacrifice is necessary…I mean, one can have too much regard for life. Death isn’t really so important as we make out.’

‘If you feel that, Miss King, you should not have adopted our profession. To us, Death is and must always be—the Enemy.’

Sarah shivered.

‘Yes, I suppose you’re right. And yet, so often death might solve a problem. It might mean, even, fuller life…’

‘It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people!’ quoted Gerard gravely.

Sarah turned a startled face on him.

‘I didn’t mean—’ She broke off. Jefferson Cope was approaching them.

‘Now this is really a most remarkable spot,’ he declared. ‘Most remarkable, and I’m only too pleased not to have missed it. I don’t mind confessing that though Mrs Boynton is certainly a most remarkable woman—I greatly admire her pluck in being determined to come here—it does certainly complicate matters travelling with her. Her health is poor, and I suppose it naturally makes her a little inconsiderate of other people’s feelings, but it does not seem to occur to her that her family might like occasionally to go on excursions without her. She's just so used to them clustering round her that I suppose she doesn't think—'

Mr Cope broke off. His nice kindly face looked a little disturbed and uncomfortable.

'You know,' he said, 'I heard a piece of information about Mrs Boynton that disturbed me greatly.'

Sarah was lost in her own thoughts again—Mr Cope's voice just flowed pleasantly in her ears like the agreeable murmur of a remote stream, but Dr Gerard said:

'Indeed? What was it?'

'My informant was a lady I came across in the hotel at Tiberias. It concerned a servant girl who had been in Mrs Boynton's employ. The girl, I gather, was—had—'

Mr Cope paused, glanced delicately at Sarah and lowered his voice. 'She was going to have a child. The old lady, it seemed, discovered this, but was apparently quite kind to the girl. Then a few weeks before the child was born she turned her out of the house.'

Dr Gerard's eyebrows went up.

'Ah,' he said reflectively.

'My informant seemed very positive of her facts. I don't know whether you agree with me, but that seems to me a very cruel and heartless thing to do. I cannot understand—'

Dr Gerard interrupted him.

'You should try to. That incident, I have no doubt, gave Mrs Boynton a good deal of quiet enjoyment.'

Mr Cope turned a shocked face on him.

‘No, sir,’ he said with emphasis. ‘That I cannot believe. Such an idea is quite inconceivable.’

Softly Dr Gerard quoted:

‘So I returned and did consider all the oppressions done beneath the sun. And there was weeping and wailing from those that were oppressed and had no comfort; for with their oppressors there was power, so that no one came to comfort them. Then I did praise the dead which are already dead, yea, more than the living which linger still in life; yea, he that is not is better than dead or living; for he doth not know of the evil that is wrought for ever on earth…’

He broke off and said:

‘My dear sir, I have made a life’s study of the strange things that go on in the human mind. It is no good turning one’s face only to the fairer side of life. Below the decencies and conventions of everyday life, there lies a vast reservoir of strange things. There is such a thing, for instance, as delight in cruelty for its own sake. But when you have found that, there is something deeper still. The desire, profound and pitiful, to be appreciated. If that is thwarted, if through an unpleasing personality a human being is unable to get the response it needs, it turns to other methods—it must be felt—it must count—and so to innumerable strange perversions. The habit of cruelty, like any other habit, can be cultivated, can take hold of one—’

Mr Cope coughed. ‘I think, Dr Gerard, that you are slightly exaggerating. Really, the air up here is too wonderful…’

He edged away. Gerard smiled a little. He looked again at Sarah. She was frowning—her face was set in a youthful sternness. She looked, he thought, like a young judge delivering sentence…

He turned as Miss Pierce tripped unsteadily towards him.

‘We are going down now,’ she fluttered. ‘Oh dear! I am sure I shall never manage it, but the guide says the way down is quite a different route and much easier. I do hope so, because from a child I never have been able to look down from heights…’

The descent was down the course of a waterfall. Although there were loose stones which were a possible source of danger to ankles, it presented no dizzy vistas.

The party arrived back at the camp weary but in good spirits and with an excellent appetite for a late lunch. It was past two o’clock.

The Boynton family was sitting round the big table in the marquee. They were just finishing their meal.

Lady Westholme addressed a gracious sentence to them in her most condescending manner.

‘Really a most interesting morning,’ she said. ‘Petra is a wonderful spot.’

Carol, to whom the words seemed addressed, shot a quick look at her mother and murmured:

‘Oh, yes—yes, it is,’ and relapsed into silence.

Lady Westholme, feeling she had done her duty, addressed herself to her food.

As they ate, the four discussed plans for the afternoon.

‘I think I shall rest most of the afternoon,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘It is important, I think, not to do too much.’

‘I shall go for a walk and explore,’ said Sarah. ‘What about you, Dr Gerard?’

‘I will go with you.’

Mrs Boynton dropped a spoon with a ringing clatter and everyone jumped.

‘I think,’ said Lady Westholme, ‘that I shall follow your example, Miss Pierce. Perhaps half an hour with a book, then I shall lie down and take an hour’s rest at least. After that, perhaps, a short stroll.’

Slowly, with the help of Lennox, old Mrs Boynton struggled to her feet. She stood for a moment and then spoke.

‘You’d better all go for a walk this afternoon,’ she said with unexpected amiability.

It was, perhaps, slightly ludicrous to see the startled faces of her family.

‘But, Mother, what about you?’

‘I don’t need any of you. I like sitting alone with my book. Jinny had better not go. She’ll lie down and have a sleep.’

‘Mother, I’m not tired. I want to go with the others.’

‘You are tired. You’ve got a headache! You must be careful of yourself. Go and lie down and sleep. I know what’s best for you.’

‘I—I—’

Her head thrown back, the girl stared rebelliously. Then her eyes dropped—faltered…

‘Silly child,’ said Mrs Boynton. ‘Go to your tent.’

She stumped out of the marquee–the others followed.

‘Dear me,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘What very peculiar people. Such a very odd colour—the mother. Quite purple. Heart, I should imagine. The heat must be very trying to her.’

Sarah thought: ‘She’s letting them go free this afternoon. She knows Raymond wants to be with me. Why? Is it a trap?’

After lunch, when she had gone to her tent and had changed into a fresh linen dress, the thought still worried her. Since last night her feeling towards Raymond had swelled into a passion of protective tenderness. This, then, was love—this agony on another's behalf—this desire to avert, at all costs, pain from the beloved…Yes, she loved Raymond Boynton. It was St George and the Dragon reversed. It was she who was the rescuer and Raymond who was the chained victim.

And Mrs Boynton was the Dragon. A dragon whose sudden amiability was, to Sarah's suspicious mind, definitely sinister.

It was about a quarter-past three when Sarah strolled down to the marquee.

Lady Westholme was sitting on a chair. Despite the heat of the day she was still wearing her serviceable Harris tweed skirt. On her lap was the report of a Royal Commission. Dr Gerard was talking to Miss Pierce, who was standing by her tent holding a book entitled The Love Quest and described on its wrapper as a thrilling tale of passion and misunderstanding.

'I don't think it's wise to lie down too soon after lunch,' explained Miss Pierce. 'One's digestion, you know. Quite cool and pleasant in the shadow of the marquee. Oh dear, do you think that old lady is wise to sit in the sun up there?'

They all looked at the ridge in front of them. Mrs Boynton was sitting as she had sat last night, a motionless Buddha in the door of her cave. There was no other human creature in sight. All the camp personnel were asleep. A short distance away, following the line of the valley, a little group of people walked together.

'For once,' said Dr Gerard, 'the good Mamma permits them to enjoy themselves without her. A new devilment on her part, perhaps?'

'Do you know,' said Sarah, 'that's just what I thought.'

'What suspicious minds we have. Come, let us join the truants.'

Leaving Miss Pierce to her exciting reading, they set off. Once round the bend of the valley, they caught up the other party who were walking slowly. For once, the Boyntons looked happy and carefree.

Lennox and Nadine, Carol and Raymond, Mr Cope with a broad smile on his face and the last arrivals, Gerard and Sarah, were soon all laughing and talking together.

A sudden wild hilarity was born. In everyone’s mind was the feeling that this was a snatched pleasure—a stolen joy to enjoy to the full. Sarah and Raymond did not draw apart. Instead, Sarah walked with Carol and Lennox. Dr Gerard chatted to Raymond close behind them. Nadine and Jefferson Cope walked a little apart.

It was the Frenchman who broke up the party. His words had been coming spasmodically for some time. Suddenly he stopped.

‘A thousand excuses. I fear I must go back.’

Sarah looked at him. ‘Anything the matter?’

He nodded. ‘Yes, fever. It’s been coming on ever since lunch.’

Sarah scrutinized him. ‘Malaria?’

‘Yes. I’ll go back and take quinine. Hope this won’t be a bad attack. It is a legacy from a visit to the Congo.’

‘Shall I come with you?’ asked Sarah.

‘No, no. I have my case of drugs with me. A confounded nuisance. Go on, all of you.’

He walked quickly back in the direction of the camp.

Sarah looked undecidedly after him for a minute, then she met Raymond’s eyes, smiled at him, and the Frenchman was forgotten.

For a time the six of them, Carol, herself, Lennox, Mr Cope, Nadine and Raymond, kept together.

Then, somehow or other, she and Raymond had drifted apart. They walked on, climbing up rocks, turning ledges, and rested at last in a shady spot.

There was a silence—then Raymond said:

‘What’s your name? It’s King, I know. But your other name.’

‘Sarah.’

‘Sarah. May I call you that?’

‘Of course.’

‘Sarah, will you tell me something about yourself?’

Leaning back against the rocks, she talked, telling him of her life at home in Yorkshire, of her dogs and the aunt who had brought her up.

Then, in his turn, Raymond told her a little, disjointedly, of his own life.

After that there was a long silence. Their hands strayed together. They sat, like children, hand in hand, strangely content.

Then, as the sun grew lower, Raymond stirred.

‘I’m going back now,’ he said. ‘No, not with you. I want to go back by myself. There’s something I have to say and do. Once that’s done, once I’ve proved to myself that I’m not a coward—then—then—I shan’t be ashamed to come to you and ask you to help me. I shall need help, you know, I shall probably have to borrow money from you.’

Sarah smiled.

‘I’m glad you’re a realist. You can count on me.’

‘But first I’ve got to do this alone.’

‘Do what?’

The young boyish face grew suddenly stern. Raymond Boynton said: ‘I’ve got to prove my courage. It’s now or never.’

Then, abruptly, he turned and strode away.

Sarah leant back against the rock and watched his receding figure. Something in his words had vaguely alarmed her. He had seemed so intense—so terribly in earnest and strung up. For a moment she wished she had gone with him…

But she rebuked herself sternly for that wish. Raymond had desired to stand alone, to test his new-found courage. That was his right.

But she prayed with all her heart that that courage would not fail…

The sun was setting when Sarah came once more in sight of the camp. As she came nearer in the dim light she could make out the grim figure of Mrs Boynton still sitting in the mouth of the cave. Sarah shivered a little at the sight of that grim, motionless figure…

She hurried past on the path below and came into the lighted marquee.

Lady Westholme was sitting knitting a navy-blue jumper, a skein of wool hung round her neck. Miss Pierce was embroidering a table-mat with anaemic blue forget-me-nots, and being instructed on the proper reform of the Divorce Laws.

The servants came in and out preparing for the evening meal. The Boyntons were at the far end of the marquee in deck-chairs reading. Mahmoud appeared, fat and dignified, and was plaintively reproachful. Very nice after-tea ramble had been arranged to take place, but everyone absent from camp…The programme was now entirely thrown out…Very instructive visit to Nabataen architecture.

Sarah said hastily that they had all enjoyed themselves very much.

She went off to her tent to wash for supper. On the way back she paused by Dr Gerard’s tent, calling in a low voice: ‘Dr Gerard.’

There was no answer. She lifted the flap and looked in. The doctor was lying motionless on his bed. Sarah withdrew noiselessly, hoping he was asleep.

A servant came to her and pointed to the marquee. Evidently supper was ready. She strolled down again. Everyone else was assembled there round the table with the exception of Dr Gerard and Mrs Boynton. A servant was dispatched to tell the old lady dinner was ready. Then there was a sudden commotion outside. Two frightened servants rushed in and spoke excitedly to the dragoman in Arabic.

Mahmoud looked round him in a flustered manner and went outside. On an impulse Sarah joined him.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

Mahmoud replied: ‘The old lady. Abdul says she is ill—cannot move.’

‘I’ll come and see.’

Sarah quickened her step. Following Mahmoud, she climbed the rock and walked along until she came to the squat figure in the chair, touched the puffy hand, felt for the pulse, bent over her…

When she straightened herself she was paler.

She retraced her steps back to the marquee. In the doorway she paused a minute looking at the group at the far end of the table. Her voice when she spoke sounded to herself brusque and unnatural.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said. She forced herself to address the head of the family, Lennox. ‘Your mother is dead, Mr Boynton.’

And curiously, as though from a great distance, she watched the faces of five people to whom that announcement meant freedom…

Part II

Chapter 1

Colonel Carbury smiled across the table at his guest and raised his glass. ‘Well, here’s to crime!’

Hercule Poirot’s eyes twinkled in acknowledgement of the aptness of the toast.

He had come to Amman with a letter of introduction to Colonel Carbury from Colonel Race.

Carbury had been interested to see this world-famous person to whose gifts his old friend and ally in the Intelligence had paid such unstinting tribute.

‘As neat a bit of psychological deduction as you’ll ever find!’ Race had written of the solution of the Shaitana murder.

‘We must show you all we can of the neighbourhood,’ said Carbury, twisting a somewhat ragged brindled moustache. He was an untidy stocky man of medium height with a semibald head and vague, mild, blue eyes. He did not look in the least like a soldier. He did not look even particularly alert. He was not in the least one’s idea of a disciplinarian. Yet in Transjordania he was a power.

‘There’s Jerash,’ he said. ‘Care about that sort of thing?’

‘I am interested in everything!’

‘Yes,’ said Carbury. ‘That’s the only way to react to life.’ He paused.

‘Tell me, d’you ever find your own special job has a way of following you round?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Well—to put it plainly—do you come to places expecting a holiday from crime—and find instead bodies cropping up?’

‘It has happened, yes; more than once.’

‘H’m,’ said Colonel Carbury and looked particularly abstracted.

Then he roused himself with a jerk. ‘Got a body now I’m not very happy about,’ he said.

‘Indeed?’

‘Yes. Here in Amman. Old American woman. Went to Petra with her family. Trying journey, unusual heat for time of year, old woman suffered from heart trouble, difficulties of the journey a bit harder for her than she imagined, extra strain on heart—she popped off!’

‘Here—in Amman?’

‘No, down at Petra. They brought the body here today.’

‘Ah!’

‘All quite natural. Perfectly possible. Likeliest thing in the world to happen. Only—’

‘Yes? Only—?’

Colonel Carbury scratched his bald head.

‘I’ve got the idea,’ he said, ‘that her family did her in!’

‘Aha! And what makes you think that?’

Colonel Carbury did not reply to that question directly.

‘Unpleasant old woman, it seems. No loss. General feeling all round that her popping off was a good thing. Anyway, very difficult to prove anything so long as the family stick together and if necessary lie like hell. One doesn’t want complications—or international unpleasantness. Easiest thing to do—let it go! Nothing really to go upon. Knew a doctor chap once. He told me—often had suspicions in cases of his patients—hurried into the next world a little ahead of time! He said—best thing to do to keep quiet unless you really had something damned good to go upon! Otherwise beastly stink, case not proved, black mark against an earnest hard-working G.P. Something in that. All the same—' He scratched his head again. 'I'm a tidy man,' he said unexpectedly.

Colonel Carbury's tie was under his left ear, his socks were wrinkled, his coat stained and torn. Yet Hercule Poirot did not smile. He saw, clearly enough, the inner neatness of Colonel Carbury's mind, his neatly docketed facts, his carefully sorted impressions.

'Yes. I'm a tidy man,' said Carbury. He waved a vague hand. 'Don't like a mess. When I come across a mess I want to clear it up. See?'

Hercule Poirot nodded gravely. He saw.

'There was no doctor down there?' he asked.

'Yes, two. One of 'em was down with malaria, though. The other's a girl—just out of the medical student stage. Still, she knows her job, I suppose. There wasn't anything odd about the death. Old woman had got a dicky heart. She'd been taking heart medicine for some time. Nothing really surprising about her conking out suddenly like she did.'

'Then what, my friend, is worrying you?' asked Poirot gently.

Colonel Carbury turned a harassed blue eye on him.

'Heard of a Frenchman called Gerard? Theodore Gerard?'

'Certainly. A very distinguished man in his own line.'

'Loony bins,' confirmed Colonel Carbury. 'Passion for a charwoman at the age of four makes you insist you're the Archbishop of Canterbury when you're thirty-eight. Can't see why and never have, but these chaps explain it very convincingly.'

'Dr Gerard is certainly an authority on certain forms of deep-seated neurosis,' agreed Poirot, with a smile. 'Is—er—are—er—his views on the happening at Petra based on that line of argument?’

Colonel Carbury shook his head vigorously.

‘No, no. Shouldn’t have worried about them if they had been! Not, mind you, that I don’t believe it’s all true. It’s just one of those things I don’t understand—like one of my Bedouin fellows who can get out of a car in the middle of a flat desert, feel the ground with his hand and tell you to within a mile or two where you are. It isn’t magic, but it looks like it. No, Dr Gerard’s story is quite straightforward. Just plain facts. I think, if you’re interested—you are interested?’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Good man. Then I think I’ll just phone over and get Gerard along here, and you can hear his story for yourself.’

When the Colonel had dispatched an orderly on this quest, Poirot said:

‘Of what does this family consist?’

‘Name’s Boynton. There are two sons, one of ’em married. His wife’s a nice-looking girl—the quiet, sensible kind. And there are two daughters. Both of ’em quite good-looking in totally different styles. Younger one a bit nervy—but that may be just shock.’

‘Boynton,’ said Poirot. His eyebrows rose. ‘That is curious—very curious.’

Carbury cocked an inquiring eye at him. But as Poirot said nothing more, he himself went on:

‘Seems pretty obvious Mother was a pest! Had to be waited on hand and foot and kept the whole lot of them dancing attendance. And she held the purse strings. None of them had a penny of their own.’

‘Aha! All very interesting. Is it known how she left her money?’

‘I did just slip that question in—casual like, you know. It gets divided equally between the lot of them.’

Poirot nodded his head. Then he asked:

‘You are of the opinion that they are all in it?’

‘Don’t know. That’s where the difficulty’s going to lie. Whether it was a concerted effort, or whether it was one bright member’s idea—I don’t know. Maybe the whole thing’s a mare’s nest! What it comes to is this: I’d like to have your professional opinion. Ah, here comes Gerard.’

Chapter 2

The Frenchman came in with a quick yet unhurried tread. As he shook hands with Colonel Carbury he shot a keen, interested glance at Poirot. Carbury said:

‘This is M. Hercule Poirot. Staying with me. Been talking to him about this business down at Petra.’

‘Ah, yes?’ Gerard’s quick eyes looked Poirot up and down. ‘You are interested?’

Hercule Poirot threw up his hands.

‘Alas! one is always incurably interested in one’s own subject.’

‘True,’ said Gerard.

‘Have a drink?’ said Carbury.

He poured out a whisky and soda and placed it by Gerard’s elbow. He held up the decanter inquiringly, but Poirot shook his head. Colonel Carbury set it down again and drew his chair a little nearer.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘where are we?’

‘I gather,’ said Poirot to Gerard, ‘that Colonel Carbury is not satisfied.’

Gerard made an expressive gesture.

‘And that,’ he said, ‘is my fault! And I may be wrong. Remember that, Colonel Carbury, I may be entirely wrong.’

Carbury gave a grunt.

‘Give Poirot the facts,’ he said.

Dr Gerard began by a brief recapitulation of the events preceding the journey to Petra. He gave a short sketch of the various members of the Boynton family and described the condition of emotional strain under which they were labouring.

Poirot listened with interest.

Then Gerard proceeded to the actual events of their first day at Petra, describing how he had returned to the camp.

‘I was in for a bad bout of malaria—cerebral type,’ he explained. ‘For that I proposed to treat myself by an intravenous injection of quinine. That is the usual method.’

Poirot nodded his comprehension.

‘The fever was on me badly. I fairly staggered into my tent. I could not at first find my case of drugs, someone had moved it from where I had originally placed it. Then, when I had found that, I could not find my hypodermic syringe. I hunted for it for some time, then gave it up and took a large dose of quinine by the mouth and flung myself on my bed.’

Gerard paused, then went on:

‘Mrs Boynton’s death was not discovered until after sunset. Owing to the way in which she was sitting and the support the chair gave to her body, no change occurred in her position and it was not until one of the boys went to summon her to dinner at six-thirty that it was noticed that anything was wrong.’

He explained in full detail the position of the cave and its distance away from the big marquee.

‘Miss King, who is a qualified doctor, examined the body. She did not disturb me, knowing that I had fever. There was, indeed, nothing that could be done. Mrs Boynton was dead—and had been dead for some little time.’

Poirot murmured: ‘How long exactly?’

Gerard said slowly:

‘I do not think that Miss King gave much attention to that point. She did not, I presume, think it of any importance.’

‘One can say, at least, when she was last definitely known to be alive?’ said Poirot.

Colonel Carbury cleared his throat and referred to an official-looking document.

‘Mrs Boynton was spoken to by Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce shortly after 4 p.m. Lennox Boynton spoke to his mother about four-thirty. Mrs Lennox Boynton had a long conversation with her about five minutes later. Carol Boynton had a word with her mother at a time she is unable to state precisely—but which from the evidence of others would seem to have been about ten minutes past five.

‘Jefferson Cope, an American friend of the family, returning to the camp with Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce, saw her asleep. He did not speak to her. That was about twenty to six. Raymond Boynton, the younger son, seems to have been the last person to see her alive. On his return from a walk he went and spoke to her at about ten minutes to six. The discovery of the body was made at six-thirty when a servant went to tell her dinner was ready.’

‘Between the time that Mr Raymond Boynton spoke to her and half-past six did no one go near her?’ asked Poirot.

‘I understand not.’

‘But someone might have done so?’ Poirot persisted.

‘I don’t think so. From close on six onwards servants were moving about the camp, people were going to and from their tents. No one can be found who saw anyone approaching the old lady.’

‘Then Raymond Boynton was definitely the last person to see his mother alive?’ said Poirot.

Dr Gerard and Colonel Carbury interchanged a quick glance. Colonel Carbury drummed on the table with his fingers.

‘This is where we begin to get into deep waters,’ he said. ‘Go on, Gerard. This is your pigeon.’

‘As I mentioned just now, Sarah King, when she examined Mrs Boynton, saw no reason for determining the exact time of death. She merely said that Mrs Boynton had been dead “some little time”, but when, on the following day for reasons of my own, I endeavoured to narrow things down and happened to mention that Mrs Boynton was last seen alive by her son Raymond at a little before six, Miss King, to my great surprise, said point-blank that that was impossible—that at that time Mrs Boynton must already have been dead.’

Poirot’s eyebrows rose. ‘Odd. Extremely odd. And what does M. Raymond Boynton say to that?’

Colonel Carbury said abruptly: ‘He swears that his mother was alive. He went up to her and said, “I’m back. Hope you have had a nice afternoon?” Something of that kind. He says she just grunted, “Quite all right,” and he went on to his tent.’

Poirot frowned perplexedly.

‘Curious,’ he said. ‘Extremely curious. Tell me, was it growing dusk by then?’

‘The sun was just setting.’

‘Curious,’ said Poirot again. ‘And you, Dr Gerard, when did you see the body?’

‘Not until the following day. At 9 a.m. to be precise.’

‘And your estimate of the time death had occurred?’

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

‘It is difficult to be exact after that length of time. There must necessarily be a margin of several hours. Were I giving evidence on oath I could only say that she had been dead certainly twelve hours and not longer than eighteen. You see, that does not help at all.’

‘Go on, Gerard,’ said Colonel Carbury. ‘Give him the rest of it.’

‘On getting up in the morning,’ said Dr Gerard, ‘I found my hypodermic syringe—it was behind a case of bottles on my dressing-table.’

He leaned forward.

‘You may say, if you like, that I had overlooked it the day before. I was in a miserable state of fever and wretchedness, shaking from head to foot, and how often does one look for a thing that is there all the time and yet be unable to find it! I can only say that I am quite positive the syringe was not there then.’

‘There’s something more still,’ said Carbury.

‘Yes, two facts for what they are worth and they mean a great deal. There was a mark on the dead woman’s wrist—a mark such as would be caused by the insertion of a hypodermic syringe. Her daughter, I may say, explains it as having been caused by the prick of a pin—’

Poirot stirred. ‘Which daughter?’

‘Her daughter Carol.’

‘Yes, continue, I pray you.’

‘And there is the last fact. Happening to examine my little case of drugs, I noticed that my stock of digitoxin was very much diminished.’

‘Digitoxin,’ said Poirot, ‘is a heart poison, is it not?’

‘Yes. It is obtained from Digitalis purpurea—the common foxglove. There are four active principles—digitalin—digitonin—digitalein—and digitoxin. Of these digitoxin is considered the most active poisonous constituent of digitalis leaves. According to Kopp’s experiments it is from six to ten times stronger than digitalin or digitalein. It is official in France—but not in the British Pharmacopoeia.’

‘And a large dose of digitoxin?’

Dr Gerard said gravely: ‘A large dose of digitoxin thrown suddenly on the circulation by intravenous injection would cause sudden death by quick palsy of the heart. It has been estimated that four milligrams might prove fatal to an adult man.’

‘And Mrs Boynton already suffered with heart trouble?’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact she was actually taking a medicine containing digitalin.’

‘That,’ said Poirot, ‘is extremely interesting.’

‘D’you mean,’ asked Colonel Carbury, ‘that her death might have been attributed to an overdose of her own medicine?’

‘That—yes. But I meant more than that.’

‘In some senses,’ said Dr Gerard, ‘digitalin may be considered a cumulative drug. Moreover, as regards post-mortem appearance, the active principles of the digitalis may destroy life and leave no appreciable sign.’

Poirot nodded slow appreciation.

‘Yes, that is clever—very clever. Almost impossible to prove satisfactorily to a jury. Ah, but let me tell you, gentlemen, if this is a murder, it is a very clever murder! The hypodermic replaced, the poison employed, a poison which the victim was already taking—the possibilities of a mistake—or accident—are overwhelming. Oh, yes, there are brains here. There is thought—care—genius.’

For a moment he sat in silence, then he raised his head. ‘And yet, one thing puzzles me.’

‘What is that?’

‘The theft of the hypodermic syringe.’

‘It was taken,’ said Dr Gerard quickly.

‘Taken—and returned?’

‘Yes.’

‘Odd,’ said Poirot. ‘Very odd. Otherwise everything fits so well…’

Colonel Carbury looked at him curiously.

‘Well?’ he said. ‘What’s your expert opinion? Was it murder—or wasn’t it?’

Poirot held up a hand.

‘One moment. We have not yet arrived at that point. There is still some evidence to consider.’

‘What evidence? You’ve had it all.’

‘Ah! but this is evidence that I, Hercule Poirot, bring to you.’

He nodded his head and smiled a little at their two astonished faces.

‘Yes, it is droll, that! That I, to whom you tell the story, should in return present you with a piece of evidence about which you do not know. It was like this. In the Solomon Hotel, one night, I go to the window to make sure it is closed—’

‘Closed—or open?’ asked Carbury.

‘Closed,’ said Poirot firmly. ‘It was open, so naturally I go to close it. But before I do so, as my hand is on the latch, I hear a voice speaking—an agreeable voice, low and clear with a tremor in it of nervous excitement. I say to myself it is a voice I will know again. And what does it say, this voice? It says these words, “You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?”’

‘At the moment, naturellement, I do not take those words as referring to a killing of flesh and blood. I think it is an author or perhaps a playwright who speaks. But now—I am not so sure. That is to say I am sure it was nothing of the kind.’

Again he paused before saying: ‘Messieurs, I will tell you this—to the best of my knowledge and belief those words were spoken by a young man whom I saw later in the lounge of the hotel and who was, so they told me on inquiring, a young man of the name of Raymond Boynton.’

Chapter 3

‘Raymond Boynton said that!’

The exclamation broke from the Frenchman.

‘You think it unlikely—psychologically speaking?’ Poirot inquired placidly.

Gerard shook his head.

‘No, I should not say that. I was surprised, yes. If you follow me, I was surprised just because Raymond Boynton was so eminently fitted to be a suspect.’

Colonel Carbury sighed. ‘These psychological fellers!’ the sigh seemed to say.

‘Question is,’ he murmured, ‘what are we going to do about it?’

Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

‘I do not see what you can do,’ he confessed. ‘The evidence is bound to be inconclusive. You may know that murder has been done but it will be difficult to prove it.’

‘I see,’ said Colonel Carbury. ‘We suspect that murder’s been done and we just sit back and twiddle our fingers! Don’t like it!’ He added, as if in extenuation, his former odd plea, ‘I’m a tidy man.’

‘I know. I know.’ Poirot nodded his head sympathetically. ‘You would like to clear this up. You would like to know definitely, exactly what occurred and how it occurred. And you, Dr Gerard? You have said that there is nothing to be done—that the evidence is bound to be inconclusive? That is probably true. But are you satisfied that the matter should rest so?’

‘She was a bad life,’ said Gerard slowly. ‘In any case, she might have died very shortly—a week—a month—a year.’

‘So you are satisfied?’ persisted Poirot.

Gerard went on:

‘There is no doubt that her death was—how shall we put it?—beneficial to the community. It has brought freedom to her family. They will have scope to develop—they are all, I think, people of good character and intelligence. They will be—now—useful members of society! The death of Mrs Boynton, as I see it, has resulted in nothing but good.’

Poirot repeated for the third time: ‘So you are satisfied?’

‘No.’ Gerard pounded a fist suddenly on the table. ‘I am not “satisfied”, as you put it! It is my instinct to preserve life—not to hasten death. Therefore, though my conscious mind may repeat that this woman’s death was a good thing, my unconscious mind rebels against it! It is not well, gentlemen, that a human being should die before her time has come.’

Poirot smiled. He leaned back contented with the answer he had probed for so patiently.

Colonel Carbury said unemotionally: ‘He don’t like murder! Quite right! No more do I.’

He rose and poured himself out a stiff whisky and soda. His guests’ glasses were still full.

‘And now,’ he said, returning to the subject, ‘let’s get down to brass tacks. Is there anything to be done about it? We don’t like it—no! But we may have to lump it! No good making a fuss if you can’t deliver the goods.’

Gerard leaned forward. ‘What is your professional opinion, M. Poirot? You are the expert.’

Poirot took a little time to speak. Methodically he arranged an ash-tray or two and made a little heap of used matches. Then he said:

‘You desire to know, do you not, Colonel Carbury, who killed Mrs Boynton? (That is if she was killed and did not die a natural death.) Exactly how and when she was killed—and in fact the whole truth of the matter?'

'I should like to know that, yes.' Carbury spoke unemotionally.

Hercule Poirot said slowly: 'I see no reason why you should not know it!'

Dr Gerard looked incredulous. Colonel Carbury looked mildly interested.

'Oh,' he said. 'So you don't, don't you? That's interestin'. How d'you propose to set about it?'

'By methodical sifting of the evidence, by a process of reasoning.'

'Suits me,' said Colonel Carbury.

'And by a study of the psychological possibilities.'

'Suits Dr Gerard, I expect,' said Carbury. 'And after that—after you've sifted the evidence and done some reasoning and paddled in psychology—hey presto!—you think you can produce the rabbit out of the hat?'

'I should be extremely surprised if I could not do so,' said Poirot calmly.

Colonel Carbury stared at him over the rim of his glass. Just for a moment the vague eyes were no longer vague—they measured—and appraised.

He put down his glass with a grunt.

'What do you say to that, Dr Gerard?'

'I admit that I am skeptical of success…Yes, I know that M. Poirot has great powers.'

'I am gifted—yes,' said the little man. He smiled modestly.

Colonel Carbury turned away his head and coughed.

Poirot said: 'The first thing to decide is whether this is a composite murder—planned and carried out by the Boynton family as a whole, or whether it is the work of one of them only. If the latter, which is the most likely member of the family to have attempted it.'

Dr Gerard said: 'There is your own evidence. One must, I think, consider first Raymond Boynton.'

'I agree,' said Poirot. 'The words I overheard and the discrepancy between his evidence and that of the young woman doctor puts him definitely in the forefront of the suspects.'

'He was the last person to see Mrs Boynton alive. That is his own story. Sarah King contradicts that. Tell me, Dr Gerard, is there—eh?—you know what I mean—a little tendresse, shall we say—there?'

The Frenchman nodded. 'Emphatically so.'

'Aha! Is she, this young lady, a brunette with hair that goes back from her forehead—so—and big hazel eyes and a manner very decided?'

Dr Gerard looked rather surprised.

'Yes, that describes her very well.'

'I think I have seen her—in the Solomon Hotel. She spoke to this Raymond Boynton and afterwards he remained plantélà—in a dream—blocking the exit from the lift. Three times I had to say "Pardon" before he heard me and moved.'

He remained in thought for some moments. Then he said: 'So, to begin with, we will accept the medical evidence of Miss Sarah King with certain mental reservations. She is an interested party.' He paused—then went on: 'Tell me, Dr Gerard, do you think Raymond Boynton is of the temperament that could commit murder easily?'

Gerard said slowly: 'You mean deliberate planned murder? Yes, I think it is possible—but only under conditions of intense emotional strain.'

'Those conditions were present?'

‘Definitely. This journey abroad undoubtedly heightened the nervous and mental strain under which all these people were living. The contrast between their own lives and those of other people was more apparent to them. And in Raymond Boynton’s case—’

‘Yes?’

‘There was the additional complication of being strongly attracted to Sarah King.’

‘That would give him an additional motive? And an additional stimulus?’

‘That is so.’

Colonel Carbury coughed.

‘Like to butt in a moment. That sentence of his you overheard, “You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?” Must have been spoken to someone.’

‘A good point,’ said Poirot. ‘I had not forgotten it. Yes, to whom was Raymond Boynton speaking? Undoubtedly to a member of his family. But which member? Can you tell us something, Doctor, of the mental condition of the other members of the family?’

Gerard replied promptly:

‘Carol Boynton was, I should say, in very much the same state as Raymond—a state of rebellion accompanied by a severe nervous excitement, but uncomplicated in her case by the introduction of a sex factor. Lennox Boynton had passed the stage of revolt. He was sunk in apathy. He was finding it, I think, difficult to concentrate. His method of reaction to his surroundings was to retire further and further within himself. He was definitely an introvert.’

‘And his wife?’

‘His wife, though tired and unhappy, showed no signs of mental conflict. She was, I believe, hesitating on the brink of a decision.’

‘Such a decision being?’

‘Whether or not to leave her husband.’

He repeated the conversation he had held with Jefferson Cope. Poirot nodded in comprehension.

‘And what of the younger girl—Ginevra her name is, is it not?’

The Frenchman’s face was grave. He said:

‘I should say that mentally she is in an extremely dangerous condition. She has already begun to display symptoms of schizophrenia. Unable to bear the suppression of her life, she is escaping into a realm of fantasy. She has advanced delusions of persecution—that is to say, she claims to be a royal personage—in danger—enemies surrounding her—all the usual things!’

‘And that—is dangerous?’

‘Very dangerous. It is the beginning of what is often homicidal mania. The sufferer kills—not for the lust of killing—but in self-defence. He or she kills in order not to be killed themselves. From their point of view it is eminently rational.’

‘So you think that Ginevra Boynton might have killed her mother?’

‘Yes. But I doubt if she would have had the knowledge or the constructiveness to do it the way it was done. The cunning of that class of mania is usually very simple and obvious. And I am almost certain she would have chosen a more spectacular method.’

‘But she is a possibility?’ Poirot insisted.

‘Yes,’ admitted Gerard.

‘And afterwards—when the deed was done? Do you think the rest of the family knew who had done it?’

‘They know!’ said Colonel Carbury unexpectedly. ‘If ever I came across a bunch of people who had something to hide—these are they! They’re putting something over all right.’

‘We will make them tell us what it is,’ said Poirot.

‘Third degree?’ said Colonel Carbury.

‘No.’ Poirot shook his head. ‘Just ordinary conversation. On the whole, you know, people tell you the truth. Because it is easier! Because it is less strain on the inventive faculties! You can tell one lie—or two lies—or three lies—or even four lies—but you cannot lie all the time. And so—the truth becomes plain.’

‘Something in that,’ agreed Carbury.

Then he said bluntly: ‘You’ll talk to them, you say? That means you’re willing to take this on.’

Poirot bowed his head.

‘Let us be very clear about this,’ he said. ‘What you demand, and what I undertake to supply, is the truth. But mark this, even when we have got the truth, there may be no proof. That is to say, no proof that would be accepted in a court of law. You comprehend?’

‘Quite,’ said Carbury. ‘You satisfy me of what really happened. Then it’s up to me to decide whether action is possible or not—having regard to the international aspects. Anyway, it will be cleared up—no mess. Don’t like mess.’

Poirot smiled.

‘One thing more,’ said Carbury. ‘I can’t give you much time. Can’t detain these people here indefinitely.’

Poirot said quietly:

‘You can detain them twenty-four hours. You shall have the truth by tomorrow night.’

Colonel Carbury stared hard at him.

‘Pretty confident, aren’t you?’ he asked.

‘I know my own ability,’ murmured Poirot.

Rendered uncomfortable by this un-British attitude, Colonel Carbury looked away and fingered his untidy moustaches.

‘Well,’ he mumbled, ‘it’s up to you.’

‘And if you succeed, my friend,’ said Dr Gerard, ‘you are indeed a marvel!’

Chapter 4

Sarah King looked long and searchingly at Hercule Poirot. She noted the egg-shaped head, the gigantic moustaches, the dandified appearance and the suspicious blackness of his hair. A look of doubt crept into her eyes. ‘Well, mademoiselle, are you satisfied?’

Sarah flushed as she met the amused ironical glance of his eyes.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said awkwardly.

‘Du tout! To use an expression I have recently learnt, you give me the once-over, is it not so?’

Sarah smiled a little. ‘Well, at any rate, you can do the same to me,’ she said.

‘Assuredly. I have not neglected to do so.’

She glanced at him sharply. Something in his tone. But Poirot was twirling his moustaches complacently, and Sarah thought (for the second time), ‘The man’s a mountebank!’

Her self-confidence restored, she sat up a little straighter and said inquiringly: ‘I don’t think I quite understand the object of this interview?’

‘The good Dr Gerard did not explain?’

Sarah said frowning: ‘I don’t understand Dr Gerard. He seems to think—’

‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,’ quoted Poirot. ‘You see, I know your Shakespeare.’

Sarah waved aside Shakespeare.

‘What exactly is all this fuss about?’ she demanded.

‘Eh bien, one wants, does one not, to get at the truth of this affair?’

‘Are you talking about Mrs Boynton’s death?’

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t it rather a fuss about nothing? You, of course, are a specialist, M. Poirot. It is natural for you—’

Poirot finished the sentence for her.

‘It is natural for me to suspect crime whenever I can possibly find an excuse for doing so?’

‘Well—yes—perhaps.’

‘You have no doubt yourself as to Mrs Boynton’s death?’

Sarah shrugged her shoulders.

‘Really, M. Poirot, if you had been to Petra you would realize that the journey there was a somewhat strenuous business for an old woman whose cardiac condition was unsatisfactory.’

‘It seems a perfectly straight forward business to you?’

‘Certainly. I can’t understand Dr Gerard’s attitude. He didn’t even know anything about it. He was down with fever. I’d bow to his superior medical knowledge naturally—in this case he had nothing whatever to go on. I suppose they can have a P.M. in Jerusalem if they like—if they’re not satisfied with my verdict.’

Poirot was silent for a moment, then he said:

‘There is a fact, Miss King, that you do not yet know. Dr Gerard has not told you of it.’

‘What fact?’ demanded Sarah.

‘A supply of a drug—digitoxin—is missing from Dr Gerard’s travelling medicine case.’

‘Oh!’ Quickly Sarah took in this new aspect of the case. Equally quickly she pounced on the one doubtful point.

‘Is Dr Gerard quite sure of that?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘A doctor, as you should know, mademoiselle, is usually fairly careful in making his statements.’

‘Oh, of course. That goes without saying. But Dr Gerard had malaria at the time.’

‘That is so, of course.’

‘Has he any idea when it could have been taken?’

‘He had occasion to go to his case on the night of his arrival in Petra. He wanted some phenacetin—as his head was aching badly. When he replaced the phenacetin the following morning and shut up the case he is almost certain that all the drugs were intact.’

‘Almost—’ said Sarah.

Poirot shrugged.

‘Yes, there is a doubt! There is the doubt that any man, who is honest, would be likely to feel.’

Sarah nodded. ‘Yes, I know. One always distrusts those people who are over sure. But all the same, M. Poirot, the evidence is very slight. It seems to me—’ She paused. Poirot finished the sentence for her.

‘It seems to you that an inquiry on my part is ill-advised!’

Sarah looked him squarely in the face.

‘Frankly, it does. Are you sure, M. Poirot, that this is not a case of Roman Holiday?’

Poirot smiled. ‘The private lives of a family upset and disturbed—so that Hercule Poirot can play a little game of detection to amuse himself?’

‘I didn’t mean to be offensive—but isn’t it a little like that?’

‘You, then, are on the side of the famille Boynton, mademoiselle?’

‘I think I am. They’ve suffered a good deal. They—they oughtn’t to have to stand any more.’

‘And la Maman, she was unpleasant, tyrannical, disagreeable and decidedly better dead than alive? That also—hein?’

‘When you put it like that—’ Sarah paused, flushed, went on: ‘One shouldn’t, I agree, take that into consideration.’

‘But all the same—one does! That is, you do, mademoiselle! I—do not! To me it is all the same. The victim may be one of the good God’s saints—or, on the contrary—a monster of infamy. It moves me not. The fact is the same. A life—taken! I say it always—I do not approve of murder.’

‘Murder?’ Sarah drew in her breath sharply. ‘But what evidence of that is there? The flimsiest imaginable! Dr Gerard himself cannot be sure!’

Poirot said quietly: ‘But there is other evidence, mademoiselle.’

‘What evidence?’ Her voice was sharp.

‘The mark of a hypodermic puncture upon the dead woman’s wrist. And something more still—some words that I overheard spoken in Jerusalem on a clear, still night when I went to close my bedroom window. Shall I tell you what those words were, Miss King? They were these. I heard Mr Raymond Boynton say: “You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?”’

He saw the colour drain slowly from Sarah’s face.

She said: ‘You heard that?’

‘Yes.’

The girl stared straight ahead of her.

She said at last: ‘It would be you who heard it!’

He acquiesced.

‘Yes, it would be me. These things happen. You see now why I think there should be an investigation?’

Sarah said quietly: ‘I think you are quite right.’

‘Ah! And you will help me?’

‘Certainly.’

Her tone was matter-of-fact—unemotional. Her eyes met his coolly.

Poirot bowed. ‘Thank you, mademoiselle. Now I will ask you to tell me in your own words exactly what you can remember of that particular day.’

Sarah considered for a moment.

‘Let me see. I went on an expedition in the morning. None of the Boyntons were with us. I saw them at lunch. They were finishing as we came in. Mrs Boynton seemed in an unusually good temper.’

‘She was not usually amiable, I understand.’

‘Very far from it,’ said Sarah with a slight grimace.

She then described how Mrs Boynton had released her family from attendance on her.

‘That too, was unusual?’

‘Yes. She usually kept them around her.’

‘Do you think, perhaps, that she suddenly felt remorseful—that she had what is called—un bon moment?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said Sarah bluntly.

‘What did you think, then?’

‘I was puzzled. I suspected it was something of the cat-and-mouse order.’

‘If you would elaborate, mademoiselle?’

‘A cat enjoys letting a mouse away—and then catching it again. Mrs Boynton had that kind of mentality. I thought she was up to some new devilry or other.’

‘What happened next, mademoiselle?’

‘The Boyntons started off—’

‘All of them?’

‘No, the youngest, Ginevra, was left behind. She was told to go and rest.’

‘Did she wish to do so?’

‘No. But that didn’t matter. She did what she was told. The others started off. Dr Gerard and I joined them—’

‘When was this?’

‘About half-past three.’

‘Where was Mrs Boynton then?’

‘Nadine—young Mrs Boynton—had settled her in her chair outside her cave.’

‘Proceed.’

‘When we got round the bend, Dr Gerard and I caught up the others. We all walked together. Then, after a while, Dr Gerard turned back. He had been looking rather queer for some time. I could see he had fever. I wanted to go back with him, but he wouldn’t hear of it.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Oh! about four, I suppose.’

‘And the rest?’

‘We went on.’

‘Were you all together?’

‘At first. Then we split up.’ Sarah hurried on as though foreseeing the next question. ‘Nadine Boynton and Mr Cope went one way and Carol, Lennox, Raymond and I went another.’

‘And you continued like that?’

‘Well—no. Raymond Boynton and I separated from the others. We sat down on a slab of rock and admired the wildness of the scenery. Then he went off and I stayed where I was for some time longer. It was about half-past five when I looked at my watch and realized I had better get back. I reached the camp at six o’clock. It was just about sunset.’

‘You passed Mrs Boynton on the way?’

‘I noticed she was still in her chair up on the ridge.’

‘That did not strike you as odd—that she had not moved?’

‘No, because I had seen her sitting there the night before when we arrived.’

‘I see. Continuez.’

‘I went into the marquee. The others were all there—except Dr Gerard. I washed and then came back. They brought in dinner and one of the servants went to tell Mrs Boynton. He came running back to say she was ill. I hurried out. She was sitting in her chair just as she had been, but as soon as I touched her I realized she was dead.’

‘You had no doubt at all as to her death being natural?’

‘None whatever. I had heard that she suffered from heart trouble, though no specified disease had been mentioned.’

‘You simply thought she had died sitting there in her chair?’

‘Yes.’

‘Without calling out for assistance?’

‘Yes. It happens that way sometimes. She might even have died in her sleep. She was quite likely to have dozed off. In any case, all the camp was asleep most of the afternoon. No one would have heard her unless she had called very loud.’

‘Did you form an opinion as to how long she had been dead?’

‘Well, I didn’t really think very much about it. She had clearly been dead some time.’

‘What do you call some time?’ asked Poirot.

‘Well—over an hour. It might have been much longer. The refraction of the rock would keep her body from cooling quickly.’

‘Over an hour? Are you aware, Mademoiselle King, that Raymond Boynton spoke to her only a little over half an hour earlier, and that she was then alive and well?’

Now her eyes no longer met his. But she shook her head. ‘He must have made a mistake. It must have been earlier than that.’

‘No, mademoiselle, it was not.’

She looked at him point-blank. He noticed again the firm set of her mouth.

‘Well,’ said Sarah, ‘I’m young and I haven’t got much experience of dead bodies—but I know enough to be quite sure of one thing. Mrs Boynton had been dead at least an hour when I examined her body!’

‘That,’ said Hercule Poirot unexpectedly, ‘is your story and you are going to stick to it! Then can you explain why Mr Boynton should say his mother was alive when she was, in point of fact, dead?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Sarah. ‘They’re probably rather vague about times, all of them! They’re a very nervy family.’

‘On how many occasions, mademoiselle, have you spoken with them?’

Sarah was silent a moment, frowning a little.

‘I can tell you exactly,’ she said. ‘I talked to Raymond Boynton in the wagons-lits corridor coming to Jerusalem. I had two conversations with Carol Boynton—one at the Mosque of Omar and one late that evening in my bedroom. I had a conversation with Mrs Lennox Boynton the following morning. That’s all—up to the afternoon of Mrs Boynton’s death, when we all went walking together.’

‘You did not have any conversation with Mrs Boynton herself?’

Sarah flushed uncomfortably.

‘Yes. I exchanged a few words with her on the day she left Jerusalem.’ She paused and then blurted out: ‘As a matter of fact, I made a fool of myself.’

‘Ah?’

The interrogation was so patent that, stiffly and unwillingly, Sarah gave an account of the conversation.

Poirot seemed interested and cross-examined her closely.

‘The mentality of Mrs Boynton—it is very important in this case,’ he said. ‘And you are an outsider—an unbiased observer. That is why your account of her is very significant.’

Sarah did not reply. She still felt hot and uncomfortable when she thought of that interview.

‘Thank you, mademoiselle,’ said Poirot. ‘I will now converse with the other witnesses.’

Sarah rose. ‘Excuse me, M. Poirot, but if I might make a suggestion—’

‘Certainly. Certainly.’

‘Why not postpone all this until an autopsy can be made and you discover whether or not your suspicions are justified? I think all this is rather like putting the cart before the horse.’

Poirot waved a grandiloquent hand. ‘This is the method of Hercule Poirot,’ he announced.

Pressing her lips together, Sarah left the room.

Chapter 5

Lady Westholme entered the room with the assurance of a transatlantic liner coming into dock.

Miss Amabel Pierce, an indeterminate craft, followed in the liner’s wake and sat down in an inferior make of chair slightly in the background.

‘Certainly, M. Poirot,’ boomed Lady Westholme. ‘I shall be delighted to assist you by any means in my power. I have always considered that in matters of this kind one has a public duty to perform—’

When Lady Westholme’s public duty had held the stage for some minutes, Poirot was adroit enough to get in a question.

‘I have a perfect recollection of the afternoon in question,’ replied Lady Westholme. ‘Miss Pierce and I will do all we can to assist you.’

‘Oh, yes,’ sighed Miss Pierce, almost ecstatically. ‘So tragic, was it not? Dead—just like that—in the twinkle of an eye!’

‘If you will tell me exactly what occurred on the afternoon in question?’

‘Certainly,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘After we had finished lunch I decided to take a brief siesta. The morning excursion had been somewhat fatiguing. Not that I was really tired—I seldom am. I do not really know what fatigue is. One has so often, on public occasions, no matter what one really feels—’

Again an adroit murmur from Poirot.

‘As I say, I was in favour of a siesta. Miss Pierce agreed with me.’

‘Oh, yes,’ sighed Miss Pierce. ‘And I was terribly tired after the morning. Such a dangerous climb—and although interesting, most exhausting. I’m afraid I’m not quite as strong as Lady Westholme.’

‘Fatigue,’ said Lady Westholme, ‘can be conquered like everything else. I make a point of never giving in to my bodily needs.’

Poirot said:

‘After lunch, then, you two ladies went to your tents?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mrs Boynton was then sitting at the mouth of her cave?’

‘Her daughter-in-law assisted her there before she herself went off.’

‘You could both see her?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘She was opposite, you know—only, of course, a little way along and up above.’

Lady Westholme elucidated the statement.

‘The caves opened on to a ledge. Below that ledge were some tents. Then there was a small stream and across that stream was the big marquee and some other tents. Miss Pierce and I had tents near the marquee. She was on the right side of the marquee and I was on the left. The opening of our tents faced the ledge, but of course it was some distance away.’

‘Nearly two hundred yards, I understand.’

‘Possibly.’

‘I have here a plan,’ said Poirot, ‘concocted with the help of the dragoman, Mahmoud.’

Lady Westholme remarked that in that case it was probably wrong!

‘That man is grossly inaccurate. I have checked his statements from my Baedeker. Several times his information was definitely misleading.’

‘According to my plan,’ said Poirot, ‘the cave next to Mrs Boynton’s was occupied by her son, Lennox, and his wife. Raymond, Carol and Ginevra Boynton had tents just below but more to the right—in fact, almost opposite the marquee. On the right of Ginevra Boynton’s was Dr Gerard’s tent and next to that again that of Miss King. On the other side of the stream—next to the marquee on the left—you and Mr Cope had tents. Miss Pierce’s, as you mentioned, was on the right of the marquee. Is that correct?’

Lady Westholme admitted grudgingly that as far as she knew it was.

‘I thank you. That is perfectly clear. Pray continue, Lady Westholme.’

Lady Westholme smiled graciously on him and went on:

‘At about quarter to four I strolled along to Miss Pierce’s tent to see if she were awake yet and felt like a stroll. She was sitting in the doorway of the tent reading. We agreed to start in about half an hour when the sun was less hot. I went back to my tent and read for about twenty-five minutes. Then I went along and joined Miss Pierce. She was ready and we started out. Everyone in the camp seemed asleep—there was no one about, and seeing Mrs Boynton sitting up there alone, I suggested to Miss Pierce that we should ask her if she wanted anything before we left.’

‘Yes, you did. Most thoughtful of you, I considered,’ murmured Miss Pierce.

‘I felt it to be my duty,’ said Lady Westholme with a rich complacency.

‘And then for her to be so rude about it!’ exclaimed Miss Pierce.

Poirot looked inquiring.

‘Our path passed just under the ledge,’ explained Lady Westholme, ‘and I called up to her, saying that we were going for a stroll and could we do anything for her before we went. Do you know, M. Poirot, absolutely the only answer she gave us was a grunt! A grunt! She just looked at us as though we were—as though we were dirt!’

‘Disgraceful it was!’ said Miss Pierce, flushing.

‘I must confess,’ said Lady Westholme, reddening a little, ‘that I made then a somewhat uncharitable remark.’

‘I think you were quite justified,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘Quite—under the circumstances.’

‘What was this remark?’ asked Poirot.

‘I said to Miss Pierce that perhaps she drank! Really her manner was most peculiar. It had been all along. I thought it possible that drink might account for it. The evils of alcoholic indulgence, as I very well know—’

Dexterously, Poirot steered the conversation away from the drink question.

‘Had her manner been very peculiar on this particular day? At lunch-time, for instance?’

‘N-No,’ said Lady Westholme, considering. ‘No, I should say then that her manner had been fairly normal—for an American of that type, that is to say,’ she added condescendingly.

‘She was very abusive to that servant,’ said Miss Pierce.

‘Which one?’

‘Not very long before we started out.’

‘Oh! yes, I remember, she did seem extraordinarily annoyed with him! Of course,’ went on Lady Westholme, ‘to have servants about who cannot understand a word of English is very trying, but what I say is that when one is travelling one must make allowances.’

‘What servant was this?’ asked Poirot.

‘One of the Bedouin servants attached to the camp. He went up to her—I think she must have sent him to fetch her something, and I suppose he brought the wrong thing—I don’t really know what it was—but she was very angry about it. The poor man slunk away as fast as he could, and she shook her stick at him and called out.’

‘What did she call out?’

‘We were too far away to hear. At least I didn’t hear anything distinctly, did you, Miss Pierce?’

‘No, I didn’t. I think she’d sent him to fetch something from her youngest daughter’s tent—or perhaps she was angry with him for going into her daughter’s tent—I couldn’t say exactly.’

‘What did he look like?’

Miss Pierce, to whom the question was addressed, shook her head vaguely.

‘Really, I couldn’t say. He was too far away. All these Arabs look alike to me.’

‘He was a man of more than average height,’ said Lady Westholme, ‘and wore the usual native head-dress. He had on a pair of very torn and patched breeches—really disgraceful they were—and his puttees were wound most untidily—all anyhow! These men need discipline!’

‘You could point the man out among the camp servants?’

‘I doubt it. We didn’t see his face—it was too far away. And, as Miss Pierce says, really these Arabs look all alike.’

‘I wonder,’ said Poirot thoughtfully, ‘what it was he did to make Mrs Boynton so angry?’

‘They are very trying to the patience sometimes,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘One of them took my shoes away, though I had expressly told him—by pantomime too—that I preferred to clean my shoes myself.’

‘Always I do that, too,’ said Poirot, diverted for a moment from his interrogation. ‘I take everywhere my little shoe-cleaning outfit. Also, I take a duster.’

‘So do I.’ Lady Westholme sounded quite human.

‘Because these Arabs they do not remove the dust from one’s belongings—’

‘Never! Of course one has to dust one’s things three or four times a day—’

‘But it is well worth it.’

‘Yes, indeed. I cannot STAND dirt!’

Lady Westholme looked positively militant.

She added with feeling:

‘The flies—in the bazaars—terrible!’

‘Well, well,’ said Poirot, looking slightly guilty. ‘We can soon inquire from this man what it was that irritated Mrs Boynton. To continue with your story?’

‘We strolled along slowly,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘And then we met Dr Gerard. He was staggering along and looked very ill. I could see at once he had fever.’

‘He was shaking,’ put in Miss Pierce. ‘Shaking all over.’

‘I saw at once he had an attack of malaria coming on,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘I offered to come back with him and get him some quinine, but he said he had his own supply with him.’

‘Poor man,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘You know it always seems so dreadful to me to see a doctor ill. It seems all wrong somehow.’

‘We strolled on,’ continued Lady Westholme. ‘And then we sat down on a rock.’

Miss Pierce murmured: ‘Really—so tired after the morning’s exertion—the climbing—’

‘I never feel fatigue,’ said Lady Westholme firmly. ‘But there was no point in going farther. We had a very good view of all the surrounding scenery.’

‘Were you out of sight of the camp?’

‘No, we were sitting facing towards it.’

‘So romantic,’ murmured Miss Pierce. ‘A camp pitched in the middle of a wilderness of rose-red rocks.’

She sighed and shook her head.

‘That camp could be much better run than it is,’ said Lady Westholme. Her rocking-horse nostrils dilated. ‘I shall take up the matter with Castle’s. I am not at all sure that the drinking water is boiled as well as filtered. It should be. I shall point that out to them.’

Poirot coughed and led the conversation quickly away from the subject of drinking water.

‘Did you see any other members of the party?’ he inquired.

‘Yes. The elder Mr Boynton and his wife passed us on their way back to the camp.’

‘Were they together?’

‘No, Mr Boynton came first. He looked a little as though he had had a touch of the sun. He was walking as though he were slightly dizzy.’

‘The back of the neck,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘One must protect the back of the neck! I always wear a thick silk handkerchief.’

‘What did Mr Lennox Boynton do on his return to the camp?’ asked Poirot.

For once Miss Pierce managed to get in first before Lady Westholme could speak.

‘He went right up to his mother, but he didn’t stay long with her.’

‘How long?’

‘Just a minute or two.’

‘I should put it at just over a minute myself,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘Then he went on into his cave and after that he went down to the marquee.’

‘And his wife?’

‘She came along about a quarter of an hour later. She stopped a minute and spoke to us—quite civilly.’

‘I think she’s very nice,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘Very nice indeed.’

‘She is not so impossible as the rest of the family,’ allowed Lady Westholme.

‘You watched her return to the camp?’

‘Yes. She went up and spoke to her mother-in-law. Then she went into her cave and brought out a chair, and sat by her talking for some time—about ten minutes, I should say.’

‘And then?’

‘Then she took the chair back to the cave and went down to the marquee where her husband was.’

‘What happened next?’

‘That very peculiar American came along,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘Cope, I think his name is. He told us that there was a very good example of the debased architecture of the period just round the bend of the valley. He said we ought not to miss it. Accordingly, we walked there. Mr Cope had with him quite an interesting article on Petra and the Nabateans.’

‘It was all most interesting,’ declared Miss Pierce.

Lady Westholme continued:

‘We strolled back to the camp, it being then about twenty minutes to six. It was growing quite chilly.’

‘Mrs Boynton was still sitting where you had left her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you speak to her?’

‘No. As a matter of fact I hardly noticed her.’

‘What did you do next?’

‘I went to my tent, changed my shoes and got out my own packet of China tea. I then went to the marquee. The dragoman was there and I directed him to make some tea for Miss Pierce and myself with the tea I had brought and to make quite sure that the water with which it was made was boiling. He said that dinner would be ready in about half an hour—the boys were laying the table at the time—but I said that made no difference.’

‘I always say a cup of tea makes all the difference,’ murmured Miss Pierce vaguely.

‘Was there anyone in the marquee?’

‘Oh, yes. Mr and Mrs Lennox Boynton were sitting at one end reading. And Carol Boynton was there too.’

‘And Mr Cope?’

‘He joined us at our tea,’ said Miss Pierce. ‘Though he said tea-drinking wasn’t an American habit.’

Lady Westholme coughed.

‘I became just a little afraid that Mr Cope was going to be a nuisance—that he might fasten himself upon me. It is a little difficult sometimes to keep people at arm’s length when one is travelling. I find they are inclined to presume. Americans, especially, are sometimes rather dense.’

Poirot murmured suavely:

‘I am sure, Lady Westholme, that you are quite capable of dealing with situations of that kind. When travelling acquaintances are no longer of any use to you, I am sure you are an adept at dropping them.’

‘I think I am capable of dealing with most situations,’ said Lady Westholme complacently.

The twinkle in Poirot’s eye was quite lost upon her.

‘If you will just conclude your recital of the day’s happenings?’ murmured Poirot.

‘Certainly. As far as I can remember, Raymond Boynton and the red-haired Boynton girl came in shortly afterwards. Miss King arrived last. Dinner was then ready to be served. One of the servants was dispatched by the dragoman to announce the fact to old Mrs Boynton. The man came running back with one of his comrades in a state of some agitation and spoke to the dragoman in Arabic. There was some mention of Mrs Boynton being taken ill. Miss King offered her services. She went out with the dragoman. She came back and broke the news to the members of Mrs Boynton’s family.’

‘She did it very abruptly,’ put in Miss Pierce. ‘Just blurted it out. I think myself it ought to have been done more gradually.’

‘And how did Mrs Boynton’s family take the news?’ asked Poirot.

For once both Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce seemed a little at a loss. The former said at last in a voice lacking its usual self-assurance:

‘Well—really—it is difficult to say. They—they were very quiet about it.’

‘Stunned,’ said Miss Pierce.

She offered the word more as a suggestion than as a fact.

‘They all went out with Miss King,’ said Lady Westholme. ‘Miss Pierce and I very sensibly remained where we were.’

A faintly wistful look was observable in Miss Pierce's eye at this point.

'I detest vulgar curiosity!' continued Lady Westholme.

The wistful look became more pronounced. It was clear that Miss Pierce had had perforce to hate vulgar curiosity, too!

'Later,' concluded Lady Westholme, 'the dragoman and Miss King returned. I suggested that dinner should be served immediately to the four of us, so that the Boynton family could dine later in the marquee without the embarrassment of strangers being present. My suggestion was adopted and immediately after the meal I retired to my tent. Miss King and Miss Pierce did the same. Mr Cope, I believe, remained in the marquee as he was a friend of the family and thought he might be of some assistance to them. That is all I know, M. Poirot.'

'When Miss King had broken the news, all the Boynton family accompanied her out of the marquee?'

'Yes—no, I believe, now that you come to mention it, that the red-haired girl stayed behind. Perhaps you can remember, Miss Pierce?'

'Yes, I think—I am quite sure she did.'

Poirot asked: 'What did she do?'

Lady Westholme stared at him.

'What did she do, M. Poirot? She did not do anything as far as I can remember.'

'I mean was she sewing—or reading—did she look anxious—did she say anything?'

'Well, really—' Lady Westholme frowned. 'She—er—she just sat there as far as I can remember.'

'She twiddled her fingers,' said Miss Pierce suddenly. 'I remember noticing—poor thing, I thought, it shows what she's feeling! Not that there was anything to show in her face, you know—just her hands turning and twisting.'

'Once,' went on Miss Pierce conversationally, 'I remember tearing up a pound note that way—not thinking of what I was doing. "Shall I catch the first train and go to her?" I thought (it was a great-aunt of mine—taken suddenly ill). "Or shall I not?" And I couldn't make up my mind one way or the other and there, I looked down, and instead of the telegram I was tearing up a pound note—a pound note—into tiny pieces!'

Miss Pierce paused dramatically.

Not entirely approving of this sudden bid for the limelight on the part of her satellite, Lady Westholme said coldly: 'Is there anything else, M. Poirot?'

With a start, Poirot seemed to come out of a brown study. 'Nothing—nothing—you have been most clear—most definite.'

'I have an excellent memory,' said Lady Westholme with satisfaction.

'One last little demand, Lady Westholme,' said Poirot. 'Please continue to sit as you are sitting—without looking round. Now would you be so kind as to describe to me just what Miss Pierce is wearing today—that is if Miss Pierce does not object?'

'Oh, no! not in the least!' twittered Miss Pierce.

'Really, M. Poirot, is there any object—'

'Please be so kind as to do as I ask, madame.'

Lady Westholme shrugged her shoulders and then said with a rather bad grace:

'Miss Pierce has on a striped brown and white cotton dress, and is wearing with it a Sudanese belt of red, blue and beige leather. She is wearing beige silk stockings and brown glacé strap shoes. There is a ladder in her left stocking. She has a necklace of cornelian beads and one of bright royal blue beads—and is wearing a brooch with a pearl butterfly on it. She has an imitation scarab ring on the third finger of her right hand. On her head she has a double terai of pink and brown felt.’

She paused—a pause of quiet competence. Then:

‘Is there anything further?’ she asked coldly.

Poirot spread out his hands in a wild gesture.

‘You have my entire admiration, madame. Your observation is of the highest order.’

‘Details rarely escape me.’

Lady Westholme rose, made a slight inclination of her head, and left the room. As Miss Pierce was following her, gazing down ruefully at her left leg, Poirot said:

‘A little moment, please, mademoiselle?’

‘Yes?’ Miss Pierce looked up, a slightly apprehensive look upon her face.

Poirot leaned forward confidentially.

‘You see this bunch of wild flowers on the table here?’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Pierce—staring.

‘And you noticed that when you first came into the room I sneezed once or twice?’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you notice if I had just been sniffing those flowers?’

‘Well—really—no—I couldn’t say.’

‘But you remember my sneezing?’

‘Oh yes, I remember that!’

Ah, well—no matter. I wondered, you see, if these flowers might induce the hay fever. No matter!’

‘Hay fever?’ cried Miss Pierce. ‘I remember a cousin of mine was a martyr to it! She always said that if you sprayed your nose daily with a solution of boracic—’

With some difficulty Poirot shelved the cousin’s nasal treatment and got rid of Miss Pierce. He shut the door and came back into the room with his eyebrows raised.

‘But I did not sneeze,’ he murmured. ‘So much for that. No, I did not sneeze.’

Chapter 6

Lennox Boynton came into the room with a quick, resolute step. Had he been there, Dr Gerard would have been surprised at the change in the man. The apathy was gone. His bearing was alert—although he was plainly nervous. His eyes had a tendency to shift rapidly from point to point about the room.

‘Good morning, M. Boynton.’ Poirot rose and bowed ceremoniously. Lennox responded somewhat awkwardly. ‘I much appreciate your giving me this interview.’

Lennox Boynton said rather uncertainly: ‘Er—Colonel Carbury said it would be a good thing—advised it—some formalities—he said.’

‘Please sit down, M. Boynton.’

Lennox sat down on the chair lately vacated by Lady Westholme. Poirot went on conversationally:

‘This has been a great shock to you, I am afraid?’

‘Yes, of course. Well, no, perhaps not…We always knew that my mother’s heart was not strong.’

‘Was it wise, under those circumstances, to allow her to undertake such an arduous expedition?’

Lennox Boynton raised his head. He spoke not without a certain sad dignity.

‘My mother, M.—er—Poirot, made her own decisions. If she made up her mind to anything it was no good our opposing her.’

He drew in his breath sharply as he said the last words. His face suddenly went rather white.

‘I know well,’ admitted Poirot, ‘that elderly ladies are sometimes headstrong.’

Lennox said irritably:

‘What is the purpose of all this? That is what I want to know. Why have all these formalities arisen?’

‘Perhaps you do not realize, Mr Boynton, that in cases of sudden and unexplained deaths, formalities must necessarily arise.’

Lennox said sharply: ‘What do you mean by “unexplained”?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘There is always the question to be considered: Is a death natural—or might it perhaps be suicide?’

‘Suicide?’ Lennox Boynton stared.

Poirot said lightly:

‘You, of course, would know best about such possibilities. Colonel Carbury, naturally, is in the dark. It is necessary for him to decide whether to order an inquiry—an autopsy—all the rest of it. As I was on the spot and as I have much experience of these matters, he suggested that I should make a few inquiries and advise him upon the matter. Naturally he does not wish to cause you inconvenience if it can be helped.’

Lennox Boynton said angrily: ‘I shall wire to our Consul in Jerusalem.’

Poirot said non-committally: ‘You are quite within your rights in doing so, of course.’

There was a pause. Then Poirot said, spreading out his hands:

‘If you object to answering my questions—’

Lennox Boynton said quickly: ‘Not at all. Only—it seems—all so unnecessary.’

‘I comprehend. I comprehend perfectly. But it is all very simple, really. A matter, as they say, of routine. Now, on the afternoon of your mother’s death, M. Boynton, I believe you left the camp at Petra and went for a walk?’

‘Yes. We all went—with the exception of my mother and my youngest sister.’

‘Your mother was then sitting in the mouth of her cave?’

‘Yes, just outside it. She sat there every afternoon.’

‘Quite so. You started—when?’

‘Soon after three, I should say.’

‘You returned from your walk—when?’

‘I really couldn’t say what time it was—four o’clock, five o’clock, perhaps.’

‘About an hour or two hours after you set out?’

‘Yes—about that, I should think.’

‘Did you pass anyone on your way back?’

‘Did I what?’

‘Pass anyone. Two ladies sitting on a rock, for instance.’

‘I don’t know. Yes, I think I did.’

‘You were, perhaps, too absorbed in your thoughts to notice?’

‘Yes, I was.’

‘Did you speak to your mother when you got back to the camp?’

‘Yes—yes, I did.’

‘She did not then complain of feeling ill?’

‘No—no, she seemed perfectly all right.’

‘May I ask what exactly passed between you?’

Lennox paused a minute.

‘She said I had come back soon. I said, yes, I had.’ He paused again in an effort of concentration. ‘I said it was hot. She—she asked me the time—said her wrist-watch had stopped. I took it from her, wound it up, set it, and put it back on her wrist.’

Poirot interrupted gently: ‘And what time was it?’

‘Eh?’ said Lennox.

‘What time was it when you set the hands of the wrist-watch?’

‘Oh, I see. It—it was twenty-five minutes to five.’

‘So, you do know exactly the time you returned to the camp!’ said Poirot gently.

Lennox flushed.

‘Yes, what a fool I am! I’m sorry, M. Poirot, my wits are all astray, I’m afraid. All this worry—’

Poirot chimed in quickly: ‘Oh! I understand—I understand perfectly! It is all of the most disquieting! And what happened next?’

‘I asked my mother if she wanted anything. A drink—tea, coffee, etc. She said no. Then I went to the marquee. None of the servants seemed to be about, but I found some soda water and drank it. I was thirsty. I sat there reading some old numbers of the Saturday Evening Post. I think I must have dozed off.’

‘Your wife joined you in the marquee?’

‘Yes, she came in not long after.’

‘And you did not see your mother again alive?’

‘No.’

‘She did not seem in any way agitated or upset when you were talking to her?’

‘No, she was exactly as usual.’

‘She did not refer to any trouble or annoyance with one of the servants?’

Lennox stared.

‘No, nothing at all.’

‘And that is all you can tell me?’

‘I am afraid so—yes.’

‘Thank you, Mr Boynton.’

Poirot inclined his head as a sign that the interview was over. Lennox did not seem very willing to depart. He stood hesitating by the door. ‘Er—there’s nothing else?’

‘Nothing. Perhaps you would be so good as to ask your wife to come here?’

Lennox went slowly out. On the pad beside him Poirot wrote L.B. 4.35 p.m.

Chapter 7

Poirot looked with interest at the tall, dignified young woman who entered the room. He rose and bowed to her politely. ‘Mrs Lennox Boynton? Hercule Poirot, at your service.’

Nadine Boynton sat down. Her thoughtful eyes were on Poirot’s face.

‘I hope you do not mind, madame, my intruding on your sorrow in this way?’

Her eyes did not waver. She did not reply at once. Her eyes remained steady and grave. At last she gave a sigh and said: ‘I think it is best for me to be quite frank with you, M. Poirot.’

‘I agree with you, madame.’

‘You apologized for intruding upon my sorrow. That sorrow, M. Poirot, does not exist and it is idle to pretend that it does. I had no love for my mother-in-law and I cannot honestly say that I regret her death.’

‘Thank you, madame, for your plain speaking.’

Nadine went on: ‘Still, although I cannot pretend sorrow, I can admit to another feeling—remorse.’

‘Remorse?’ Poirot’s eyebrows went up.

‘Yes. Because, you see, it was I who brought about her death. For that I blame myself bitterly.’

‘What is this you are saying, madame?’

‘I am saying that I was the cause of my mother-in-law’s death. I was acting, as I thought, honestly—but the result was unfortunate. To all intents and purposes, I killed her.’

Poirot leaned back in his chair. ‘Will you be so kind as to elucidate this statement, madame?’

Nadine bent her head.

‘Yes, that is what I wish to do. My first reaction, naturally, was to keep my private affairs to myself, but I see that the time has come when it would be better to speak out. I have no doubt, M. Poirot, that you have often received confidences of a somewhat intimate nature?’

‘That, yes.’

‘Then I will tell you quite simply what occurred. My married life, M. Poirot, has not been particularly happy. My husband is not entirely to blame for that—his mother’s influence over him has been unfortunate—but I have been feeling for some time that my life was becoming intolerable.’

She paused and then went on:

‘On the afternoon of my mother-in-law’s death I came to a decision. I have a friend—a very good friend. He has suggested more than once that I should throw in my lot with him. On that afternoon I accepted his proposal.’

‘You decided to leave your husband?’

‘Yes.’

‘Continue, madame.’

Nadine said in a lower voice:

‘Having once made my decision, I wanted to—to establish it as soon as possible. I walked home to the camp by myself. My mother-in-law was sitting alone, there was no one about, and I decided to break the news to her there and then. I got a chair—sat down by her and told her abruptly what I had decided.’

‘She was surprised?’

‘Yes, I am afraid it was a great shock to her. She was both surprised and angry—very angry. She—she worked herself into quite a state about it! Presently I refused to discuss the matter any longer. I got up and walked away.’ Her voice dropped. ‘I—I never saw her again alive.’

Poirot nodded his head slowly. He said: ‘I see.’

Then he said: ‘You think her death was the result of the shock?’

‘It seems to me almost certain. You see, she had already over-exerted herself considerably getting to this place. My news, and her anger at it, would do the rest…I feel additionally guilty because I have had a certain amount of training in illness and so I, more than anyone else, ought to have realized the possibility of such a thing happening.’

Poirot sat in silence for some minutes, then he said:

‘What exactly did you do when you left her?’

‘I took the chair I had brought out back into my cave, then I went down to the marquee. My husband was there.’

Poirot watched her closely as he said:

‘Did you tell him of your decision? Or had you already told him?’

There was a pause, an infinitesimal pause, before Nadine said: ‘I told him then.’

‘How did he take it?’

She answered quietly: ‘He was very upset.’

‘Did he urge you to reconsider your decision?’

She shook her head.

‘He—he didn’t say very much. You see, we had both known for some time that something like this might happen.’

Poirot said: ‘You will pardon me, but—the other man was, of course, Mr Jefferson Cope?’

She bent her head. ‘Yes.’

There was a long pause, then, without any change of voice, Poirot asked: ‘Do you own a hypodermic syringe, madame?’

‘Yes—no.’

His eyebrows rose.

She explained: ‘I have an old hypodermic amongst other things in a travelling medicine chest, but it is in our big luggage which we left in Jerusalem.’

‘I see.’

There was a pause, then she said, with a shiver of uneasiness: ‘Why did you ask me that, M. Poirot?’

He did not answer the question. Instead he put one of his own. ‘Mrs Boynton was, I believe, taking a mixture containing digitalis?’

‘Yes.’

He thought that she was definitely watchful now.

‘That was for her heart trouble?’

‘Yes.’

‘Digitalis is, to some extent, a cumulative drug?’

‘I believe it is. I do not know very much about it.’

‘If Mrs Boynton had taken a big overdose of digitalis—’

She interrupted him quickly but with decision.

‘She did not. She was always most careful. So was I if I measured the dose for her.’

‘There might have been an overdose in this particular bottle. A mistake of the chemist who made it up?’

‘I think that is very unlikely,’ she replied quietly.

‘Ah, well: the analysis will soon tell us.’

Nadine said: ‘Unfortunately the bottle was broken.’

Poirot eyed her with sudden interest.

‘Indeed. Who broke it?’

‘I’m not quite sure. One of the servants, I think. In carrying my mother-in-law’s body into her cave, there was a good deal of confusion and the light was very poor. A table got knocked over.’

Poirot eyed her steadily for a minute or two.

‘That,’ he said, ‘is very interesting.’

Nadine Boynton shifted wearily in her chair.

‘You are suggesting, I think, that my mother-in-law did not die of shock, but of an overdose of digitalis?’ she said, and went on: ‘That seems to me most improbable.’

Poirot leaned forward.

‘Even when I tell you that Dr Gerard, the French physician who was staying in the camp, had missed an appreciable quantity of a preparation of digitoxin from his medicine chest?’

Her face grew very pale. He saw the clutch of her hand on the table. Her eyes dropped. She sat very still. She was like a Madonna carved in stone.

‘Well, madame,’ said Poirot at last, ‘what have you to say to that?’

The seconds ticked on but she did not speak. It was quite two minutes before she raised her head, and he started a little when he saw the look in her eyes.

‘M. Poirot, I did not kill my mother-in-law. That you know! She was alive and well when I left her. There are many people who can testify to that! Therefore, being innocent of the crime, I can venture to appeal to you. Why must you mix yourself up in this business? If I swear to you on my honour that justice and only justice has been done, will you not abandon this inquiry? There has been so much suffering—you do not know. Now that at last there is peace and the possibility of happiness, must you destroy it all?’

Poirot sat up very straight. His eyes shone with a green light. ‘Let me be clear, madame; what are you asking me to do?’

‘I am telling you that my mother-in-law died a natural death and I am asking you to accept that statement.’

‘Let us be definite. You believe that your mother-in-law was deliberately killed, and you are asking me to condone murder!’

‘I am asking you to have pity!’

‘Yes—on someone who had no pity!’

‘You do not understand—it was not like that.’

‘Did you commit the crime yourself, madame, that you know so well?’

Nadine shook her head. She showed no signs of guilt. ‘No,’ she said quietly. ‘She was alive when I left her.’

‘And then—what happened? You know—or you suspect?’

Nadine said passionately:

‘I have heard, M. Poirot, that once, in that affair of the Orient Express, you accepted an official verdict of what had happened?’

Poirot looked at her curiously. ‘I wonder who told you that?’

‘Is it true?’

He said slowly: ‘That case was—different.’

‘No. No, it was not different! The man who was killed was evil’—her voice dropped—‘as she was…’

Poirot said: ‘The moral character of the victim has nothing to do with it! A human being who has exercised the right of private judgement and taken the life of another human being is not safe to exist amongst the community. I tell you that! I, Hercule Poirot!’

‘How hard you are!’

‘Madame, in some ways I am adamant. I will not condone murder! That is the final word of Hercule Poirot.’

She got up. Her dark eyes flashed with sudden fire.

‘Then go on! Bring ruin and misery into the lives of innocent people! I have nothing more to say.’

‘But I, I think, madame, that you have a lot to say…’

‘No, nothing more.’

‘But, yes. What happened, madame, after you left your mother-in-law? Whilst you and your husband were in the marquee together?’

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘How should I know?’

‘You do know—or you suspect.’

She looked him straight in the eyes. ‘I know nothing, M. Poirot.’

Turning, she left the room.

Chapter 8

After noting on his pad—N.B. 4.40—Poirot opened the door and called to the orderly whom Colonel Carbury had left at his disposal, an intelligent man with a good knowledge of English. He asked him to fetch Miss Carol Boynton.

He looked with some interest at the girl as she entered, at the chestnut hair, the poise of the head on the long neck, the nervous energy of the beautifully shaped hands.

He said: ‘Sit down, mademoiselle.’

She sat down obediently. Her face was colourless and expressionless. Poirot began with a mechanical expression of sympathy to which the girl acquiesced without any change of expression.

‘And now, mademoiselle, will you recount to me how you spent the afternoon of the day in question?’

Her answer came promptly, raising the suspicion that it had already been well rehearsed.

‘After luncheon we all went for a stroll. I returned to the camp—’

Poirot interrupted. ‘A little minute. Were you all together until then?’

‘No, I was with my brother Raymond and Miss King for most of the time. Then I strolled off on my own.’

‘Thank you. And you were saying you returned to the camp. Do you know the approximate time?’

‘I believe it was just about ten minutes past five.’

Poirot put down C.B. 5.10.

‘And what then?’

‘My mother was still sitting where she had been when we set out. I went up and spoke to her, and then went on to my tent.’

‘Can you remember exactly what passed between you?’

‘I just said it was very hot and that I was going to lie down. My mother said she would remain where she was. That was all.’

‘Did anything in her appearance strike you as out of the ordinary?’

‘No. At least that is—’

She paused doubtfully, staring at Poirot.

‘It is not from me that you can get the answer, mademoiselle,’ said Poirot quietly.

‘I was just considering. I hardly noticed at the time, but now, looking back—’

‘Yes?’

Carol said slowly: ‘It is true—she was a funny colour—her face was very red—more so than usual.’

‘She might, perhaps, have had a shock of some kind?’ Poirot suggested.

‘A shock?’ she stared at him.

‘Yes, she might have had, let us say, some trouble with one of the Arab servants.’

‘Oh!’ Her face cleared. ‘Yes—she might.’

‘She did not mention such a thing having happened?’

‘N-o—no, nothing at all.’

Poirot went on: ‘And what did you do next, mademoiselle?’

‘I went to my tent and lay down for about half an hour. Then I went down to the marquee. My brother and his wife were there reading.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘Oh! I had some sewing to do. And then I picked up a magazine.’

‘Did you speak to your mother again on your way to the marquee?’

‘No. I went straight down. I don’t think I even glanced in her direction.’

‘And then?’

‘I remained in the marquee until—until Miss King told us she was dead.’

‘And that is all you know, mademoiselle?’

‘Yes.’

Poirot leaned forward. His tone was the same, light and conversational.

‘And what did you feel, mademoiselle?’

‘What did I feel?’

‘Yes—when you found that your mother—pardon—your stepmother, was she not?—what did you feel when you found her dead?’

She stared at him.

‘I don’t understand what you mean!’

‘I think you understand very well.’

Her eyes dropped. She said uncertainly:

‘It was—a great shock.’

‘Was it?’

The blood rushed to her face. She stared at him helplessly. Now he saw fear in her eyes.

‘Was it such a great shock, mademoiselle? Remembering a certain conversation you had with your brother Raymond one night in Jerusalem?’

His shot proved right. He saw it in the way the colour drained out of her cheeks again.

‘You know about that?’ she whispered.

‘Yes, I know.’

‘But how—how?’

‘Part of your conversation was overheard.’

‘Oh!’ Carol Boynton buried her face in her hands. Her sobs shook the table.

Hercule Poirot waited a minute, then he said quietly:

‘You were planning together to bring about your stepmother’s death.’

Carol sobbed out brokenly: ‘We were mad—mad—that evening!’

‘Perhaps.’

‘It’s impossible for you to understand the state we were in!’ She sat up, pushing back the hair from her face. ‘It would sound fantastic. It wasn’t so bad in America—but travelling brought it home to us so.’

‘Brought what home to you?’ His voice was kind now, sympathetic.

‘Our being different from—other people! We—we got desperate about it. And there was Jinny.’

‘Jinny?’

‘My sister. You haven’t seen her. She was going—well, queer. And Mother was making her worse. She didn’t seem to realize. We were afraid, Ray and I, that Jinny was going quite, quite mad! And we saw Nadine thought so, too, and that made us more afraid because Nadine knows about nursing and things like that.’

‘Yes, yes?’

‘That evening in Jerusalem things kind of boiled up! Ray was beside himself. He and I got all strung up and it seemed—oh, indeed, it did seem right to plan as we did! Mother—Mother wasn’t sane. I don’t know what you think, but it can seem quite right—almost noble—to kill someone!’

Poirot nodded his head slowly. ‘Yes, it has seemed so, I know, to many. That is proved by history.’

‘That’s how Ray and I felt—that night…’ She beat her hand on the table. ‘But we didn’t really do it. Of course we didn’t do it! When daylight came the whole thing seemed absurd, melodramatic—oh, yes, and wicked too! Indeed, indeed, M. Poirot, Mother died perfectly naturally of heart failure. Ray and I had nothing to do with it.’

Poirot said quietly: ‘Will you swear to me, mademoiselle, as you hope for salvation after death, that Mrs Boynton did not die as the result of any action of yours?’

She lifted her head. Her voice came steady and deep:

‘I swear,’ said Carol, ‘as I hope for salvation, that I never harmed her…’

Poirot leaned back in his chair.

‘So,’ he said, ‘that is that.’

There was silence. Poirot thoughtfully caressed his superb moustaches. Then he said: ‘What exactly was your plan?’

‘Plan?’

‘Yes, you and you brother must have had a plan.’

In his mind he ticked off the seconds before her answer came. One, two, three.

‘We had no plan,’ said Carol at last. ‘We never got as far as that.’

Hercule Poirot got up.

‘That is all, mademoiselle. Will you be so good as to send your brother to me?’

Carol rose. She stood undecidedly for a minute.

‘M. Poirot, you do—you do believe me?’

‘Have I said,’ asked Poirot, ‘that I do not?’

‘No, but—’ She stopped.

He said: ‘You will ask your brother to come here?’

‘Yes.’

She went slowly towards the door. She stopped as she got to it, turning round passionately.

‘I have told you the truth—I have!’

Hercule Poirot did not answer.

Carol Boynton went slowly out of the room.

Chapter 9

Poirot noted the likeness between brother and sister as Raymond Boynton came into the room.

His face was stern and set. He did not seem nervous or afraid. He dropped into a chair, stared hard at Poirot, and said: ‘Well?’

Poirot said gently: ‘Your sister has spoken with you?’

Raymond nodded. ‘Yes, when she told me to come here. Of course I realize that your suspicions are quite justified. If our conversation was overheard that night, the fact that my stepmother died rather suddenly certainly would seem suspicious! I can only assure you that the conversation was—the madness of an evening! We were, at the time, under an intolerable strain. This fantastic plan of killing my stepmother did—oh, how shall I put it?—it let off steam somehow!’

Hercule Poirot bent his head slowly.

‘That,’ he said, ‘is possible.’

‘In the morning, of course, it all seemed—rather absurd! I swear to you, M. Poirot, that I never thought of the matter again!’

Poirot did not answer.

Raymond said quickly:

‘Oh, yes, I know that that is easy enough to say. I cannot expect you to believe me on my bare word. But consider the facts. I spoke to my mother just a little before six o’clock. She was certainly alive and well then. I went to my tent, had a wash and joined the others in the marquee. From that time onwards neither Carol nor I moved from the place. We were in full sight of everyone. You must see, M. Poirot, that my mother’s death was natural—a case of heart failure—it couldn’t be anything else! There were servants about, a lot of coming and going. Any other idea is absurd.’

Poirot said quietly: ‘Do you know, Mr Boynton, that Miss King is of the opinion that when she examined the body—at six-thirty—death had occurred at least an hour and a half and probably two hours earlier?’

Raymond stared at him. He looked dumbfounded.

‘Sarah said that?’ he gasped.

Poirot nodded. ‘What have you to say now?’

‘But—it’s impossible!’

‘That is Miss King’s testimony. Now you come and tell me that your mother was alive and well only forty minutes before Miss King examined the body.’

Raymond said: ‘But she was!’

‘Be careful, Mr Boynton.’

‘Sarah must be mistaken! There must be some factor she didn’t take into account. Refraction off the rock—something. I can assure you, M. Poirot, that my mother was alive at just before six and that I spoke to her.’

Poirot’s face showed nothing.

Raymond leant forward earnestly.

‘M. Poirot, I know how it must seem to you, but look at the thing fairly. You are a biased person. You are bound to be by the nature of things. You live in an atmosphere of crime. Every sudden death must seem to you a possible crime! Can’t you realize that your sense of proportion is not to be relied upon? People die every day—especially people with weak hearts—and there is nothing in the least sinister about such deaths.’

Poirot sighed. ‘So you would teach me my business, is that it?’

‘No, of course not. But I do think that you are prejudiced—because of that unfortunate conversation. There is nothing really about my mother’s death to awaken suspicion except that unlucky hysterical conversation between Carol and myself.’

Poirot shook his head. ‘You are in error,’ he said. ‘There is something else. There is the poison taken from Dr Gerard’s medicine chest.’

‘Poison?’ Ray stared at him. ‘Poison?’ He pushed his chair back a little. He looked completely stupefied. ‘Is that what you suspect?’

Poirot gave him a minute or two. Then he said quietly, almost indifferently: ‘Your plan was different—eh?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Raymond answered mechanically. ‘That’s why—this changes everything…I—I can’t think clearly.’

‘What was your plan?’

‘Our plan? It was—’

Raymond stopped abruptly. His eyes became alert, suddenly watchful.

‘I don’t think,’ he said, ‘that I’ll say any more.’

‘As you please,’ said Poirot.

He watched the young man out of the room.

He drew his pad towards him and in small, neat characters made a final entry. R.B. 5.55?

Then, taking a large sheet of paper, he proceeded to write. His task completed, he sat back with his head on one side contemplating the result. It ran as follows:

Boyntons and Jefferson Cope leave the camp	3.5 (approx.)
Dr Gerard and Sarah King leave the camp	3.15 (approx.)
Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce leave the camp	4.15

Dr Gerard returns to camp	4.20 (approx.)
Lennox Boynton returns to camp	4.35
Nadine Boynton returns to camp and talks to Mrs Boynton	4.40
Nadine Boynton leaves her mother-in-law and goes to marquee	4.50 (approx.)
Carol Boynton returns to camp	5.10
Lady Westholme, Miss Pierce and Mr Jefferson Cope return to camp	5.40
Raymond Boynton returns to camp	5.50
Sarah King returns to camp	6.0
Body discovered	6.30

Chapter 10

‘I wonder,’ said Hercule Poirot. He folded up the list, went to the door and ordered Mahmoud to be brought to him. The stout dragoman was voluble. Words dripped from him in a rising flood.

‘Always, always, I am blamed. When anything happens, say always, my fault. Always my fault. When Lady Ellen Hunt sprain her ankle coming down from Place of Sacrifice it my fault, though she would go high-heeled shoes and she sixty at least—perhaps seventy. My life all one misery! Ah! what with miseries and iniquities, Jews do to us—’

At last Poirot succeeded in stemming the flood and in getting in his question.

‘Half-past five o’clock, you say? No, I not think any of servants were about then. You see, lunch is late—two o’clock. And then to clear it away. After the lunch all afternoon sleep. Yes, Americans, they not take tea. We all settle sleep by half-past three. At five I who am soul of efficiency—always—always I watch for the comfort of ladies and gentlemen I serving, I come out knowing that time all English ladies want tea. But no one there. They all gone walking. For me, that is very well—better than usual. I can go back sleep. At quarter to six trouble begin—large English lady—very grand lady—come back and want tea although boys are now laying dinner. She makes quite fuss—says water must be boiling—I am to see myself. Ah, my good gentlemen! What a life—what a life! I do all I can—always I blamed—I—’

Poirot asked about the recriminations.

‘There is another small matter. The dead lady was angry with one of the boys. Do you know which one it was and what it was about?’

Mahmoud’s hands rose to heaven.

‘Should I know? But naturally not. Old lady did not complain to me.’

‘Could you find out?’

‘No, my good gentlemen, that would be impossible. None of the boys admit it for a moment. Old lady angry, you say? Then naturally boys would not tell. Abdul say it Mohammed, and Mohammed say it Aziz and Aziz say it Aissa, and so on. They are all very stupid Bedouin—understand nothing.’

He took a breath and continued: ‘Now I, I have advantage of Mission education. I recite to you Keats—Shelley—“Iadadoveandasweedovedied—”’

Poirot flinched. Though English was not his native tongue, he knew it well enough to suffer from the strange enunciation of Mahmoud.

‘Superb!’ he said hastily. ‘Superb! Definitely I recommend you to all my friends.’

He contrived to escape from the dragoman’s eloquence. Then he took his list to Colonel Carbury, whom he found in his office.

Carbury pushed his tie a little more askew and asked:

‘Got anything?’

Poirot said: ‘Shall I tell you a theory of mine?’

‘If you like,’ said Colonel Carbury and sighed. One way and another he heard a good many theories in the course of his existence.

‘My theory is that criminology is the easiest science in the world! One has only to let the criminal talk—sooner or later he will tell you everything.’

‘I remember you said something of the kind before. Who’s been telling you things?’

‘Everybody.’ Briefly, Poirot retailed the interviews he had had that morning.

‘H’m,’ said Carbury. ‘Yes, you’ve got hold of a pointer or two, perhaps. Pity of it is they all seem to point in opposite directions. Have we got a case, that’s what I want to know?’

‘No.’

Carbury sighed again. ‘I was afraid not.’

‘But before nightfall,’ said Poirot, ‘you shall have the truth!’

‘Well, that’s all you ever promised me,’ said Colonel Carbury. ‘And I rather doubted you getting that! Sure of it?’

‘I am very sure.’

‘Must be nice to feel like that,’ commented the other.

If there was a faint twinkle in his eye, Poirot appeared unaware of it. He produced his list.

‘Neat,’ said Colonel Carbury approvingly.

He bent over it.

After a minute or two he said: ‘Know what I think?’

‘I should be delighted if you would tell me.’

‘Young Raymond Boynton’s out of it.’

‘Ah! you think so?’

‘Yes. Clear as a bell what he thought. We might have known he’d be out of it. Being, as in detective stories, the most likely person. Since you practically overheard him saying he was going to bump off the old lady—we might have known that meant he was innocent!’

‘You read the detective stories, yes?’

‘Thousands of them,’ said Colonel Carbury. He added, and his tone was that of a wistful schoolboy: ‘I suppose you couldn’t do the things the detective does in books? Write a list of significant facts—things that don’t seem to mean anything but are really frightfully important—that sort of thing.’

‘Ah,’ said Poirot kindly. ‘You like that kind of detective story? But certainly, I will do it for you with pleasure.’

He drew a sheet of paper towards him and wrote quickly and neatly:

Significant points

1. Mrs Boynton was taking a mixture containing digitalis.
2. Dr Gerard missed a hypodermic syringe.
3. Mrs Boynton took definite pleasure in keeping her family from enjoying themselves with other people.
4. Mrs Boynton, on the afternoon in question, encouraged her family to go away and leave her.
5. Mrs Boynton was a mental sadist.
6. The distance from the marquee to the place where Mrs Boynton was sitting is (roughly) two hundred yards.
7. Mr Lennox Boynton said at first he did not know what time he returned to the camp, but later he admitted having set his mother’s wrist-watch to the right time.
8. Dr Gerard and Miss Genevra Boynton occupied tents next door to each other.
9. At half-past six, when dinner was ready, a servant was dispatched to announce the fact to Mrs Boynton.

The Colonel perused this with great satisfaction.

‘Capital!’ he said. ‘Just the thing! You’ve made it difficult—and seemingly irrelevant—absolutely the authentic touch! By the way, it seems to me there are one or two noticeable omissions. But that, I suppose, is what you tempt the mug with?’

Poirot’s eyes twinkled a little, but he did not answer.

‘Point two, for instance,’ said Colonel Carbury tentatively. ‘Dr Gerard missed a hypodermic syringe—yes. He also missed a concentrated solution of digitalis—or something of that kind.’

‘The latter point,’ said Poirot, ‘is not important in the way the absence of his hypodermic syringe is important.’

‘Splendid!’ said Colonel Carbury, his face irradiated with smiles. ‘I don’t get it at all. I should have said the digitalis was much more important than the syringe! And what about that servant motif that keeps cropping up—a servant being sent to tell her dinner was ready—and that story of her shaking her stick at a servant earlier in the afternoon? You’re not going to tell me one of my poor desert mutts bumped her off after all? Because,’ added Colonel Carbury sternly, ‘if so, that would be cheating.’

Poirot smiled, but did not answer.

As he left the office he murmured to himself:

‘Incredible! The English never grow up!’

Chapter 11

Sarah King sat on a hill-top absently plucking up wild flowers. Dr Gerard sat on a rough wall of stones near her.

She said suddenly and fiercely: ‘Why did you start all this? If it hadn’t been for you—’

Dr Gerard said slowly: ‘You think I should have kept silence?’

‘Yes.’

‘Knowing what I knew?’

‘You didn’t know,’ said Sarah.

The Frenchman sighed. ‘I did know. But I admit one can never be absolutely sure.’

‘Yes, one can,’ said Sarah uncompromisingly.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. ‘You, perhaps!’

Sarah said: ‘You had fever—a high temperature—you couldn’t be clear-headed about the business. The syringe was probably there all the time. And you may have made a mistake about the digitoxin or one of the servants may have meddled with the case.’

Gerard said cynically: ‘You need not worry! The evidence is almost bound to be inconclusive. You will see, your friends the Boyntons will get away with it!’

Sarah said fiercely: ‘I don’t want that, either.’

He shook his head. ‘You are illogical!’

‘Wasn’t it you—’ Sarah demanded, ‘in Jerusalem—who said a great deal about not interfering? And now look!’

‘I have not interfered. I have only told what I know!’

‘And I say you don’t know it. Oh dear, there we are, back again! I’m arguing in a circle.’

Gerard said gently: ‘I am sorry, Miss King.’

Sarah said in a low voice:

‘You see, after all, they haven’t escaped—any of them! She’s still there! Even from her grave she can still reach out and hold them. There was something—terrible about her—she’s just as terrible now she’s dead! I feel—I feel she’s enjoying all this!’

She clenched her hands. Then she said in an entirely different tone, a light everyday voice: ‘That little man’s coming up the hill.’

Dr Gerard looked over his shoulder.

‘Ah! he comes in search of us, I think.’

‘Is he as much of a fool as he looks?’ asked Sarah.

Dr Gerard said gravely: ‘He is not a fool at all.’

‘I was afraid of that,’ said Sarah King.

With sombre eyes she watched the uphill progress of Hercule Poirot.

He reached them at last, uttered a loud ‘ouf’ and wiped his forehead. Then he looked sadly down at his patent leather shoes.

‘Alas!’ he said. ‘This stony country! My poor shoes.’

‘You can borrow Lady Westholme’s shoe-cleaning apparatus,’ said Sarah unkindly. ‘And her duster. She travels with a kind of patent housemaid’s equipment.’

‘That will not remove the scratches, mademoiselle,’ Poirot shook his head sadly.

‘Perhaps not. Why on earth do you wear shoes like that in this sort of country?’

Poirot put his head a little on one side.

‘I like to have the appearance soigné,’ he said.

‘I should give up trying for that in the desert,’ said Sarah.

‘Women do not look their best in the desert,’ said Dr Gerard dreamily. ‘But Miss King here, yes—she always looks neat and well-turned out. But that Lady Westholme in her great thick coats and skirts and those terrible unbecoming riding breeches and boots—quelle horreur de femme! And the poor Miss Pierce—her clothes so limp, like faded cabbage leaves, and the chains and the beads that clink! Even young Mrs Boynton, who is a good-looking woman, is not what you call chic! Her clothes are uninteresting.’

Sarah said restively: ‘Well, I don’t suppose M. Poirot climbed up here to talk about clothes!’

‘True,’ said Poirot. ‘I came to consult Dr Gerard—his opinion should be of value to me—and yours, too, mademoiselle—you are young and up to date in your psychology. I want to know, you see, all that you can tell me of Mrs Boynton.’

‘Don’t you know all that by heart now?’ asked Sarah.

‘No. I have a feeling—more than a feeling—a certainty that the mental equipment of Mrs Boynton is very important in this case. Such types as hers are no doubt familiar to Dr Gerard.’

‘From my point of view she was certainly an interesting study,’ said the doctor.

‘Tell me.’

Dr Gerard was nothing loath. He described his own interest in the family group, his conversation with Jefferson Cope, and the latter’s complete misreading of the situation.

‘He is a sentimentalist, then,’ said Poirot.

‘Oh, essentially! He has ideals—based, really, on a deep instinct of laziness. To take human nature at its best, and the world as a pleasant place is undoubtedly the easiest course in life! Jefferson Cope has, consequently, not the least idea what people are really like.’

‘That might be dangerous sometimes,’ said Poirot.

Dr Gerard went on: ‘He persisted in regarding what I may describe as “the Boynton situation” as a case of mistaken devotion. Of the underlying hate, rebellion, slavery and misery he had only the faintest notion.’

‘It is stupid, that,’ Poirot commented.

‘All the same,’ went on Dr Gerard, ‘even the most willfully obtuse of sentimental optimists cannot be quite blind. I think, on the journey to Petra, Mr Jefferson Cope’s eyes were being opened.’

And he described the conversation he had had with the American on the morning of Mrs Boynton’s death.

‘That is an interesting story, that story of a servant girl,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘It throws light on the old woman’s methods.’

Gerard said: ‘It was altogether an odd strange morning, that! You have not been to Petra, M. Poirot. If you go you must certainly climb to the Place of Sacrifice. It has an—how shall I say?—an atmosphere!’ He described the scene in detail, adding: ‘Mademoiselle here sat like a young judge, speaking of the sacrifice of one to save many. You remember, Miss King?’

Sarah shivered. ‘Don’t! Don’t let’s talk of that day.’

‘No, no,’ said Poirot. ‘Let us talk of events further back in the past. I am interested, Dr Gerard, in your sketch of Mrs Boynton’s mentality. What I do not quite understand is this, having brought her family into absolute subjection, why did she then arrange this trip abroad where surely there was danger of outside contacts and of her authority being weakened?’

Dr Gerard leaned forward excitedly.

‘But, mon vieux, that is just it! Old ladies are the same all the world over. They get bored! If their specialty is playing patience, they sicken of the patience they know too well. They want to learn a new patience. And it is just the same with an old lady whose recreation (incredible as it may sound) is the dominating and tormenting of human creatures! Mrs Boynton—to speak of her as une dompteuse—had tamed her tigers. There was perhaps some excitement as they passed through the stage of adolescence. Lennox’s marriage to Nadine was an adventure. But then, suddenly, all was stale. Lennox is so sunk in melancholy that it is practically impossible to wound or distress him. Raymond and Carol show no signs of rebellion. Ginevra—ah! la pauvre Ginevra—she, from her mother’s point of view, gives the poorest sport of all. For Ginevra has found a way of escape! She escapes from reality into fantasy. The more her mother goads her, the more easily she gets a secret thrill out of being a persecuted heroine! From Mrs Boynton’s point of view it is all deadly dull. She seeks, like Alexander, new worlds to conquer. And so she plans the voyage abroad. There will be the danger of her tamed beasts rebelling, there will be opportunities for inflicting fresh pain! It sounds absurd, does it not, but it was so! She wanted a new thrill.’

Poirot took a deep breath. ‘It is perfect, that. Yes, I see exactly what you mean. It was so. It all fits in. She chose to live dangerously, la maman Boynton—and she paid the penalty!’

Sarah leaned forward, her pale, intelligent face very serious. ‘You mean,’ she said, ‘that she drove her victims too far and—and they turned on her—or—or one of them did?’

Poirot bowed his head.

Sarah said, and her voice was a little breathless:

‘Which of them?’

Poirot looked at her, at her hands clenched fiercely on the wild flowers, at the pale rigidity of her face.

He did not answer—was indeed saved from answering, for at that moment Gerard touched his shoulder and said: ‘Look.’

A girl was wandering along the side of the hill. She moved with a strange rhythmic grace that somehow gave the impression that she was not quite real. The gold red of her hair shone in the sunlight, a strange secretive smile lifted the beautiful corners of her mouth. Poirot drew in his breath.

He said: ‘How beautiful…How strangely movingly beautiful…That is how Ophelia should be played—like a young goddess straying from another world, happy because she has escaped out of the bondage of human joys and griefs.’

‘Yes, yes, you are right,’ said Gerard. ‘It is a face to dream of, is it not? I dreamt of it. In my fever I opened my eyes and saw that face—with its sweet, unearthly smile…It was a good dream. I was sorry to wake…’

Then, with a return to his commonplace manner:

‘That is Ginevra Boynton,’ he said.

Chapter 12

In another minute the girl had reached them.

Dr Gerard performed the introduction.

‘Miss Boynton, this is M. Hercule Poirot.’

‘Oh.’ She looked at him uncertainly. Her fingers joined together, twined themselves uneasily in and out. The enchanted nymph had come back from the country of enchantment. She was now just an ordinary awkward girl, slightly nervous and ill at ease.

Poirot said: ‘It is a piece of good fortune meeting you here, mademoiselle. I tried to see you in the hotel.’

‘Did you?’

Her smile was vacant. Her fingers began plucking at the belt of her dress. He said gently:

‘Will you walk with me a little way?’

She moved docilely enough, obedient to his whim.

Presently she said, rather unexpectedly, in a queer, hurried voice:

‘You are—you are a detective, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, mademoiselle.’

‘A very well-known detective?’

‘The best detective in the world,’ said Poirot, stating it as a simple truth, no more, no less.

Ginevra Boynton breathed very softly:

‘You have come here to protect me?’

Poirot stroked his moustaches thoughtfully. He said:

‘Are you, then, in danger, mademoiselle?’

‘Yes, yes.’ She looked round with a quick, suspicious glance. ‘I told Dr Gerard about it in Jerusalem. He was very clever. He gave no sign at the time. But he followed me—to that terrible place with the red rocks.’ She shivered. ‘They meant to kill me there. I have to be continually on my guard.’

Poirot nodded gently and indulgently.

Ginevra Boynton said: ‘He is kind—and good. He is in love with me!’

‘Yes?’

‘Oh, yes. He says my name in his sleep…’ Her voice softened—again a kind of trembling, unearthly beauty hovered there. ‘I saw him—lying there turning and tossing—and saying my name…I stole away quietly.’ She paused. ‘I thought, perhaps, he had sent for you? I have a terrible lot of enemies, you know. They are all round me. Sometimes they are disguised.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Poirot gently. ‘But you are safe here—with all your family round you.’

She drew herself up proudly.

‘They are not my family! I have nothing to do with them. I cannot tell you who I really am—that is a great secret. It would surprise you if you knew.’

He said gently: ‘Was your mother’s death a great shock to you, mademoiselle?’

Ginevra stamped her feet.

‘I tell you—she wasn’t my mother! My enemies paid her to pretend she was and to see I did not escape!’

‘Where were you on the afternoon of her death?’

‘I was in the tent…It was hot in there, but I didn’t dare come out…They might have got me…’ She gave a little quiver. ‘One of them—looked into my tent. He was disguised but I knew him. I pretended to be asleep. The Sheikh had sent him. The Sheikh wanted to kidnap me, of course.’

For a few moments Poirot walked in silence, then he said: ‘They are very pretty, these histories you recount to yourself?’

She stopped. She glared at him. ‘They’re true. They’re all true.’ Again she stamped an angry foot.

‘Yes,’ said Poirot, ‘they are certainly ingenious.’

She cried out: ‘They are true—true—’

Then, angrily, she turned from him and ran down the hillside. Poirot stood looking after her. In a minute or two he heard a voice close behind him.

‘What did you say to her?’

Poirot turned to where Dr Gerard, a little out of breath, stood beside him. Sarah was coming towards them both, but she came at a more leisurely pace.

Poirot answered Gerard’s question.

‘I told her,’ he said, ‘that she had imagined to herself some pretty stories.’

The doctor nodded his head thoughtfully.

‘And she was angry? That is a good sign. It shows, you see, that she has not yet completely passed through the door. She still knows that it is not the truth! I shall cure her.’

‘Ah, you are undertaking a cure?’

‘Yes. I have discussed the matter with young Mrs Boynton and her husband. Ginevra will come to Paris and enter one of my clinics. Afterwards she will have her training for the stage.’

‘The stage?’

‘Yes—there is a possibility there for her of great success. And that is what she needs—what she must have! In many essentials she has the same nature as her mother.’

‘No!’ cried Sarah, revolted.

‘It seems impossible to you, but certain fundamental traits are the same. They were both born with a great yearning for importance; they both demand that their personality shall impress! This poor child has been thwarted and suppressed at every turn; she has been given no outlet for her fierce ambition, for her love of life, for the expression of her vivid romantic personality.’ He gave a little laugh. ‘Nous allons changer tout ça!’

Then, with a little bow, he murmured: ‘You will excuse me?’ And he hurried down the hill after the girl.

Sarah said: ‘Dr Gerard is tremendously keen on his job.’

‘I perceive his keenness,’ said Poirot.

Sarah said, with a frown: ‘All the same, I can’t bear his comparing her to that horrible old woman—although, once—I felt sorry for Mrs Boynton myself.’

‘When was that, mademoiselle?’

‘That time I told you about in Jerusalem. I suddenly felt as though I’d got the whole business wrong. You know that feeling one has sometimes when just for a short time you see everything the other way round? I got all het-up about it and went and made a fool of myself!’

‘Oh, no—not that!’

Sarah, as always when she remembered her conversation with Mrs Boynton, was blushing acutely.

‘I felt all exalted as though I had a mission! And then later, when Lady W. fixed a fishy eye on me and said she had seen me talking to Mrs Boynton, I thought she had probably overheard, and I felt the most complete ass.’

Poirot said: ‘What exactly was it that old Mrs Boynton said to you? Can you remember the exact words?’

‘I think so. They made rather an impression on me. “I never forget,” that’s what she said. “Remember that. I’ve never forgotten anything—not an action, not a name, not a face.”’ Sarah shivered. ‘She said it so malevolently—not even looking at me. I feel—I feel as if, even now, I can hear her…’

Poirot said gently: ‘It impressed you very much?’

‘Yes. I’m not easily frightened—but sometimes I dream of her saying just those words and her evil, leering triumphant face. Ugh!’ She gave a quick shiver. Then she turned suddenly to him.

‘M. Poirot, perhaps I ought not to ask, but have you come to a conclusion about this business? Have you found out anything definite?’

‘Yes.’

He saw her lips tremble as she asked, ‘What?’

‘I have found out to whom Raymond Boynton spoke that night in Jerusalem. It was to his sister Carol.’

‘Carol—of course!’

Then she went on: ‘Did you tell him—did you ask him—’

It was no use. She could not go on. Poirot looked at her gravely and compassionately. He said quietly:

‘It means—so much to you, mademoiselle?’

‘It means just everything!’ said Sarah. Then she squared her shoulders. ‘But I’ve got to know.’

Poirot said quietly: ‘He told me that it was a hysterical outburst—no more! That he and his sister were worked up. He told me that in daylight such an idea appeared fantastic to them both.’

‘I see…’

Poirot said gently: ‘Miss Sarah, will you not tell me what it is you fear?’

Sarah turned a white despairing face upon him.

‘That afternoon—we were together. And he left me saying—saying he wanted to do something now—while he had the courage. I thought he meant just to—to tell her. But supposing he meant…’

Her voice died away. She stood rigid, fighting for control.

Chapter 13

Nadine Boynton came out of the hotel. As she hesitated uncertainly, a waiting figure sprang forward.

Mr Jefferson Cope was immediately at his lady’s side.

‘Shall we walk up this way? I think it’s the pleasantest.’

She acquiesced.

They walked along and Mr Cope talked. His words came freely if a trifle monotonously. It is not certain whether he perceived that Nadine was not listening. As they turned aside on to the stony flower-covered hill-side, she interrupted him.

‘Jefferson, I’m sorry. I’ve got to talk to you.’

Her face had grown pale.

‘Why, certainly, my dear. Anything you like, but don’t distress yourself.’

She said: ‘You’re cleverer than I thought. You know, don’t you, what I’m going to say?’

‘It is undoubtedly true,’ said Mr Cope, ‘that circumstances alter cases. I do feel, very profoundly, that in the present circumstances decisions may have to be reconsidered.’ He sighed. ‘You’ve got to go right ahead, Nadine, and do just what you feel.’

She said with real emotion: ‘You’re so good, Jefferson. So patient! I feel I’ve treated you very badly. I really have been downright mean to you.’

‘Now, look here, Nadine, let’s get this right. I’ve always known what my limitations were where you were concerned. I’ve had the deepest affection and respect for you ever since I’ve known you. All I want is your happiness. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Seeing you unhappy has very nearly driven me crazy. And I may say that I've blamed Lennox. I've felt that he didn't deserve to keep you if he didn't value your happiness a little more than he seemed to do.'

Mr Cope took a breath and went on:

'Now I'll admit that after travelling with you to Petra, I felt that perhaps Lennox wasn't quite so much to blame as I thought. He wasn't so much selfish where you were concerned, as too unselfish where his mother was concerned. I don't want to say anything against the dead, but I do think that your mother-in-law was perhaps an unusually difficult woman.'

'Yes, I think you may say that,' murmured Nadine.

'Anyway,' went on Mr Cope, 'you came to me yesterday and told me that you'd definitely decided to leave Lennox. I applaud your decision. It wasn't right—the life you were leading. You were quite honest with me. You didn't pretend to be more than just mildly fond of me. Well, that was all right with me. All I asked was the chance to look after you and treat you as you should be treated. I may say that afternoon was one of the happiest afternoons in my life.'

Nadine cried out: 'I'm sorry—I'm sorry.'

'No, my dear, because all along I had a kind of feeling that it wasn't real. I felt it was quite on the cards that you would have changed your mind by the next morning. Well, things are different now. You and Lennox can lead a life of your own.'

Nadine said quietly: 'Yes. I can't leave Lennox. Please forgive me.'

'Nothing to forgive,' declared Mr Cope. 'You and I will go back to being old friends. We'll just forget about that afternoon.'

Nadine placed a gentle hand on his arm. 'Dear Jefferson, thank you. I'm going to find Lennox now.'

She turned and left him. Mr Cope went on alone.

II

Nadine found Lennox sitting at the top of the Graeco-Roman theatre. He was in such a brown study that he hardly noticed her till she sank breathless at his side. ‘Lennox.’

‘Nadine.’ He half turned.

She said: ‘We haven’t been able to talk until now. But you know, don’t you, that I am not leaving you?’

He said gravely: ‘Did you ever really mean to, Nadine?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. You see, it seemed to be the only possible thing left to do. I hoped—I hoped that you would come after me. Poor Jefferson, how mean I have been to him.’

Lennox gave a sudden curt laugh.

‘No, you haven’t. Anyone who is as unselfish as Cope ought to be given full scope for his nobility! And you were right, you know, Nadine. When you told me that you were going away with him you gave me the shock of my life! You know, honestly, I think I must have been going queer or something lately. Why the hell didn’t I snap my fingers in Mother’s face and go off with you when you wanted me to?’

She said gently: ‘You couldn’t, my dear, you couldn’t.’

Lennox said musingly: ‘Mother was a damned queer character…I believe she’d got us all half hypnotized.’

‘She had.’

Lennox mused a minute or two longer. Then he said: ‘When you told me that afternoon—it was just like being hit a crack on the head! I walked back half dazed, and then, suddenly I saw what a damned fool I’d been! I realized that there was only one thing to be done if I didn’t want to lose you.’

He felt her stiffen. His tone became grimmer.

‘I went and—’

‘Don’t…’

He gave her a quick glance.

‘I went and—argued with her.’ He spoke with a complete change of tone—careful and rather toneless. ‘I told her that I got to choose between her and you—and that I chose you.’

There was a pause.

He repeated, in a tone of curious self-approval:

‘Yes, that’s what I said to her.’

Chapter 14

Poirot met two people on his way home. The first was Mr Jefferson Cope.

‘M. Hercule Poirot? My name’s Jefferson Cope.’

The two men shook hands ceremoniously.

Then, falling into step beside Poirot, Mr Cope explained: ‘It’s just got round to me that you’re making a kind of routine inquiry into the death of my old friend Mrs Boynton. That certainly was a shocking business. Of course, mind you, the old lady ought never to have undertaken such a fatiguing journey. But she was headstrong, M. Poirot. Her family could do nothing with her. She was by way of being a household tyrant—had had her own way too long, I guess. It certainly is true what she said went. Yes, sir, that certainly was true.’

There was a momentary pause.

‘I’d just like to tell you, M. Poirot, that I’m an old friend of the Boynton family. Naturally they’re all a good deal upset over this business; they’re a trifle nervous and highly strung, too, you know, so if there are any arrangements to be made—necessary formalities, arrangements for the funeral—transport of the body to Jerusalem, why, I’ll take as much trouble as I can off their hands. Just call upon me for anything that needs doing.’

‘I am sure the family will appreciate your offer,’ said Poirot. He added, ‘You are, I think, a special friend of young Mrs Boynton’s.’

Mr Jefferson Cope went a little pink.

‘Well, we won’t say much about that, M. Poirot. I hear you had an interview with Mrs Lennox Boynton this morning, and she may have given you a hint how things were between us, but that’s all over now. Mrs Boynton is a very fine woman and she feels that her first duty is to her husband in his sad bereavement.’

There was a pause. Poirot received the information by a delicate gesture of the head. Then he murmured:

'It is the desire of Colonel Carbury to have a clear statement concerning the afternoon of Mrs Boynton's death. Can you give me an account of that afternoon?'

'Why, certainly. After our luncheon and a brief rest we set out for a kind of informal tour round. We escaped, I'm glad to say, without that pestilential dragoman. That man's just crazy on the subject of the Jews. I don't think he's quite sane on that point. Anyway, as I was saying, we set out. It was then that I had my interview with Nadine. Afterwards she wished to be alone with her husband to discuss matters with him. I went off on my own, working gradually back towards the camp. About half-way there I met the two English ladies who had been on the morning expedition—one of them's an English peeress, I understand?'

Poirot said that such was the case.

'Ah, she's a fine woman, a very powerful intellect and very well informed. The other seemed to me rather a weak sister—and she looked about dead with fatigue. That expedition in the morning was very strenuous for an elderly lady, especially when she doesn't like heights. Well, as I was saying, I met these two ladies and was able to give them some information on the subject of the Nabateans. We went around a bit and got back to the camp about six. Lady Westholme insisted on having tea and I had the pleasure of having a cup with her—the tea was kind of weak, but it had an interesting flavour. Then the boys laid the table for supper and sent out to the old lady only to find that she was sitting there dead in her chair.'

'Did you notice her as you walked home?'

'I did notice she was there—it was her usual seat in the afternoon and evening, but I didn't pay special attention. I was just explaining to Lady Westholme the conditions of our slump. I had to keep an eye on Miss Pierce, too. She was so tired she kept turning her ankles.'

‘Thank you, Mr Cope. May I be so indiscreet as to ask if Mrs Boynton is likely to have left a large fortune?’

‘A very considerable one. That is to say, strictly speaking, it was not hers to leave. She had a life interest in it and at her death it is divided between the late Elmer Boynton’s children. Yes, they will all be very comfortably off now.’

‘Money,’ murmured Poirot, ‘makes a lot of difference. How many crimes have been committed for it?’

Mr Cope looked a little startled.

‘Why, that’s so, I suppose,’ he admitted.

Poirot smiled sweetly and murmured: ‘But there are so many motives for murder, are there not? Thank you, Mr Cope, for your kind co-operation.’

‘You’re welcome, I’m sure,’ said Mr Cope. ‘Do I see Miss King sitting up there? I think I’ll go and have a word with her.’

Poirot continued to descend the hill.

He met Miss Pierce fluttering up it.

She greeted him breathlessly.

‘Oh, M. Poirot, I’m so glad to meet you. I’ve been talking to that very odd girl—the youngest one, you know. She has been saying the strangest things—about enemies, and some sheikh that wanted to kidnap her and how she has spies all round her. Really, it sounded most romantic! Lady Westholme says it is all nonsense and that she once had a red-headed kitchenmaid who told lies just like that, but I think sometimes that Lady Westholme is rather hard. And after all, it might be true, mightn’t it, M. Poirot? I read some years ago that one of the Czar’s daughters was not killed in the Revolution in Russia, but escaped secretly to America. The Grand Duchess Tatiana, I think it was. If so, this might be her daughter, mightn’t it? She did hint at something royal—and she has a look, don't you think? Rather Slavonic—those cheek-bones. How thrilling it would be!'

Poirot said somewhat sententiously: 'It is true that there are many strange things in life.'

'I didn't really take in this morning who you were,' said Miss Pierce, clasping her hands. 'Of course you are that very famous detective! I read all about the ABC case. It was so thrilling. I had actually a post as governess near Doncaster at the time.'

Poirot murmured something. Miss Pierce went on with growing agitation.

'That is why I felt perhaps—I had been wrong—this morning. One must always tell everything, must one not? Even the smallest detail, however unrelated it may seem. Because, of course, if you are mixed up in this, poor Mrs Boynton must have been murdered! I see that now! I suppose Mr Mah Mood—I cannot remember his name—but the dragoman, I mean—I suppose he could not be a Bolshevik agent? Or even, perhaps, Miss King? I believe many quite well-brought-up girls of good family belong to these dreadful Communists! That's why I wondered if I ought to tell you—because, you see, it was rather peculiar when one comes to think of it.'

'Precisely,' said Poirot. 'And therefore you will tell me all about it.'

'Well, it's not really anything very much. It's only that on the next morning after the discovery I was up rather early—and I looked out of my tent to see the effect of the sunrise you know (only, of course, it wasn't actually sunrise because the sun must have risen quite an hour before). But it was early—'

'Yes, yes. And you saw?'

'That's the curious thing—at least, at the time it didn't seem much. It was only that I saw that Boynton girl come out of her tent and fling something right out into the stream—nothing in that, of course, but it glittered—in the sunlight! As it went through the air. It glittered, you know.'

'Which Boynton girl was it?'

‘I think it was the one they call Carol—a very nice-looking girl—so like her brother—really they might be twins. Or, of course, it might have been the youngest one. The sun was in my eyes, so I couldn’t quite see. But I don’t think the hair was red—just bronze. I’m so fond of that coppery-bronze hair! Red hair always says carrots to me!’ She tittered.

‘And she threw away a brightly glittering object?’ said Poirot.

‘Yes. And of course, as I said, I didn’t think much of it at the time. But later I walked along the stream and Miss King was there. And there amongst a lot of other very unsuitable things—even a tin or two—I saw a little bright metal box—not an exact square—a sort of long square, if you understand what I mean—’

‘But yes, I understand perfectly. About so long?’

‘Yes, how clever of you! And I thought to myself, “I suppose that’s what the Boynton girl threw away, but it’s a nice little box.” And just out of curiosity I picked it up and opened it. It had a kind of syringe inside—the same thing they stuck into my arm when I was being inoculated for typhoid. And I thought how curious to throw it away like that because it didn’t seem broken or anything. But just as I was wondering, Miss King spoke behind me. I hadn’t heard her come up. And she said, “Oh, thank you—that’s my hypodermic. I was coming to look for it.” So I gave it to her, and she went back to the camp with it.’

Miss Pierce paused and then went on hurriedly:

‘And, of course, I expect there is nothing in it—only it did seem a little curious that Carol Boynton should throw away Miss King’s syringe. I mean, it was odd, if you know what I mean. Though, of course, I expect there is a very good explanation.’

She paused, looking expectantly at Poirot.

His face was grave. ‘Thank you, mademoiselle. What you have told me may not be important in itself, but I will tell you this! It completes my case! Everything is now clear and in order.’

‘Oh, really?’ Miss Pierce looked as flushed and pleased as a child.

Poirot escorted her to the hotel.

Back in his own room he added one line to his memorandum. Point No. 10. ‘I never forget. Remember that. I’ve never forgotten anything…’

‘Mais oui,’ he said. ‘It is all clear now!’

Chapter 15

‘My preparations are complete,’ said Hercule Poirot.

With a little sigh he stepped back a pace or two and contemplated his arrangement of one of the unoccupied hotel bedrooms.

Colonel Carbury, leaning inelegantly against the bed which had been pushed against the wall, smiled as he puffed at his pipe. ‘Funny feller, aren’t you, Poirot?’ he said. ‘Like to dramatize things.’

‘Perhaps—that is true,’ admitted the little detective. ‘But indeed it is not all self-indulgence. If one plays a comedy, one must first set the scene.’

‘Is this a comedy?’

‘Even if it is a tragedy—there, too, the décor must be correct.’

Colonel Carbury looked at him curiously.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s up to you! I don’t know what you’re driving at. I gather, though, that you’ve got something.’

‘I shall have the honour to present to you what you asked me for—the truth!’

‘Do you think we can get a conviction?’

‘That, my friend, I did not promise you.’

‘True enough. Maybe I’m glad you haven’t. It depends.’

‘My arguments are mainly psychological,’ said Poirot.

Colonel Carbury sighed. ‘I was afraid they might be.’

‘But they will convince you,’ Poirot reassured him. ‘Oh, yes, they will convince you. The truth, I have always thought, is curious and beautiful.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Colonel Carbury, ‘it’s damned unpleasant.’

‘No, no.’ Poirot was earnest. ‘You take there the personal view. Take instead the abstract, the detached point of vision. Then the absolute logic of events is fascinating and orderly.’

‘I’ll try to look on it that way,’ said the Colonel.

Poirot glanced at his watch, a large grotesque turnip of a watch.

‘But yes, indeed, it belonged to my grandfather.’

‘Thought it might have done.’

‘It is time to commence our proceedings,’ said Poirot. ‘You, mon Colonel, will sit here behind this table in an official position.’

‘Oh, all right,’ Carbury grunted. ‘You don’t want me to put my uniform on, do you?’

‘No, no. If you would permit that I straightened your tie.’ He suited the action to the word. Colonel Carbury grinned again, sat down in the chair indicated and a moment later, unconsciously, tweaked his tie round under his left ear again.

‘Here,’ continued Poirot, slightly altering the position of the chairs, ‘we place la famille Boynton.

‘And over here,’ he went on, ‘we will place the three outsiders who have a definite stake in the case. Dr Gerard, on whose evidence the case for the prosecution depends. Miss Sarah King, who has two separate interests in the case, a personal one, and that of medical examiner. Also Mr Jefferson Cope, who was on intimate terms with the Boyntons and so may be definitely described as an interested party.’

He broke off. ‘Aha—here they come.’

He opened the door to admit the party.

Lennox Boynton and his wife came in first. Raymond and Carol followed. Ginevra walked by herself, a faint, faraway smile on her lips. Dr Gerard and Sarah King brought up the rear. Mr Jefferson Cope was a few minutes late and came in with an apology.

When he had taken his place Poirot stepped forward.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said, ‘this is an entirely informal gathering. It has come about through the accident of my presence in Amman. Colonel Carbury did me the honour to consult me—’

Poirot was interrupted. The interruption came from what was seemingly the most unlikely quarter. Lennox Boynton said suddenly and pugnaciously:

‘Why? Why the devil should he bring you into this business?’

Poirot waved a hand gracefully.

‘Me, I am often called in in cases of sudden death.’

Lennox Boynton said: ‘Doctors send for you whenever there is a case of heart failure?’

Poirot said gently: ‘Heart failure is such a very loose and unscientific term.’

Colonel Carbury cleared his throat. It was an official noise. He spoke in an official tone.

‘Best to make it quite clear. Circumstance of death reported to me. Very natural occurrence. Weather unusually hot—journey a very trying one for an elderly lady in bad health. So far all quite clear. But Dr Gerard came to me and volunteered a statement—’

He looked inquiringly at Poirot. Poirot nodded.

‘Dr Gerard is a very eminent physician with a worldwide reputation. Any statement he makes is bound to be received with attention. Dr Gerard’s statement was as follows. On the morning after Mrs Boynton's death he noted that a certain quantity of a powerful drug acting on the heart was missing from his medical supplies. On the previous afternoon he had noticed the disappearance of a hypodermic syringe. Syringe was returned during the night. Final point—there was a puncture on the dead woman's wrist corresponding to the mark of a hypodermic syringe.'

Colonel Carbury paused.

'In these circumstances I considered that it was the duty of those in authority to inquire into the matter. M. Hercule Poirot was my guest and very considerately offered his highly specialized services. I gave him full authority to make any investigations he pleased. We are assembled here now to hear his report on the matter.'

There was silence—a silence so acute that you could have heard—as the saying is—a pin drop. Actually someone did drop what was probably a shoe in the next room. It sounded like a bomb in the hushed atmosphere.

Poirot cast a quick glance at the little group of three people on his right, then turned his gaze to the five people huddled together on his left—a group of people with frightened eyes.

Poirot said quietly: 'When Colonel Carbury mentioned this business to me, I gave him my opinion as an expert. I told him that it might not be possible to bring proof—such proof as would be admissible in a court of law—but I told him very definitely that I was sure I could arrive at the truth—simply by questioning the people concerned. For let me tell you this, my friends, to investigate a crime it is only necessary to let the guilty party or parties talk—always, in the end, they tell you what you want to know!' He paused.

'So, in this case, although you have lied to me, you have also, unwittingly, told me the truth.'

He heard a faint sigh, the scrape of a chair on the floor to his right, but he did not look round. He continued to look at the Boyntons.

‘First, I examined the possibility of Mrs Boynton having died a natural death—and I decided against it. The missing drug—the hypodermic syringe—and above all, the attitude of the dead lady’s family all convinced me that that supposition could not be entertained.

‘Not only was Mrs Boynton killed in cold blood—but every member of her family was aware of the fact! Collectively they reacted as guilty parties.

‘But there are degrees in guilt. I examined the evidence carefully with a view to ascertaining whether the murder—yes, it was murder—had been committed by the old lady’s family acting on a concerted plan.

‘There was, I may say, overwhelming motive. One and all stood to gain by her death—both in the financial sense—for they would at once attain financial independence and indeed enjoy very considerable wealth—and also in the sense of being freed from what had become an almost insupportable tyranny.

‘To continue: I decided, almost immediately, that the concerted theory would not hold water. The stories of the Boynton family did not dovetail neatly into each other, and no system of workable alibis had been arranged. The facts seemed more to suggest that one—or possibly two—members of the family had acted in collusion and that the others were accessories after the fact. I next considered which particular member or members—were indicated. Here, I may say, I was inclined to be biased by a certain piece of evidence known only to myself.’

Here Poirot recounted his experience in Jerusalem.

‘Naturally, that pointed very strongly to Mr Raymond Boynton as the prime mover in the affair. Studying the family, I came to the conclusion that the most likely recipient of his confidences that night would be his sister Carol. They strongly resembled each other in appearance and temperament, and so would have a keen bond of sympathy and they also possessed the nervous rebellious temperament necessary for the conception of such an act. That their motive was partly unselfish—to free the whole family and particularly their younger sister—only made the planning of the deed more plausible.’ Poirot paused a minute.

Raymond Boynton half opened his lips, then shut them again. His eyes looked steadily at Poirot with a kind of dumb agony in them.

‘Before I go into the case against Raymond Boynton, I would like to read to you a list of significant points which I drew up and submitted to Colonel Carbury this afternoon.

Significant points

1. Mrs Boynton was taking a mixture containing digitalin.
2. Dr Gerard missed a hypodermic syringe.
3. Mrs Boynton took definite pleasure in keeping her family from enjoying themselves with other people.
4. Mrs Boynton, on the afternoon in question, encouraged her family to go away and leave her.
5. Mrs Boynton is a mental sadist.
6. The distance from the marquee to the place where Mrs Boynton was sitting is (roughly) two hundred yards.
7. Mr Lennox Boynton said at first he did not know what time he returned to the camp, but later he admitted having set his mother’s wrist-watch to the right time.
8. Dr Gerard and Miss Genevra Boynton occupied tents next door to each other.
9. At half-past six, when dinner was ready, a servant was dispatched to announce the fact to Mrs Boynton.
10. Mrs Boynton, in Jerusalem, used these words: “I never forget. Remember that. I’ve never forgotten anything.”

‘Although I have numbered the points separately, occasionally they can be bracketed in pairs. That is the case, for instance, with the first two. Mrs Boynton taking a mixture containing digitalis. Dr Gerard had missed a hypodermic syringe. Those two points were the first thing that struck me about the case, and I may say to you that I found them most extraordinary—and quite irreconcilable. You do not see what I mean? No matter. I will return to the point presently. Let it suffice that I noticed those two points as something that had definitely got to be explained satisfactorily.

‘I will conclude now with my study of the possibility of Raymond Boynton’s guilt. The following are the facts. He had been heard to discuss the possibility of taking Mrs Boynton’s life. He was in a condition of great nervous excitement. He had—mademoiselle will forgive me’—he bowed apologetically to Sarah—‘just passed through a moment of great emotional crisis. That is, he had fallen in love. The exaltation of his feelings might lead him to act in one of several ways. He might feel mellowed and softened towards the world in general, including his stepmother—he might feel the courage at last to defy her and shake off her influence—or he might find just the additional spur to turn his crime from theory to practice. That is the psychology! Let us now examine the facts.

‘Raymond Boynton left the camp with the others about three-fifteen. Mrs Boynton was then alive and well. Before long Raymond and Sarah King had a tête-à-tête interview. Then he left her. According to him, he returned to the camp at ten minutes to six. He went up to his mother, exchanged a few words with her, then went to his tent and afterwards down to the marquee. He says that at ten minutes to six, Mrs Boynton was alive and well.

‘But we now come to a fact which directly contradicts that statement. At half-past six Mrs Boynton’s death was discovered by a servant. Miss King, who holds a medical degree, examined her body and she swears definitely that at that time, though she did not pay any special attention to the time when death had occurred, it had most certainly and decisively taken place at least an hour (and probably a good deal more) before six o’clock.

‘We have here, you see, two conflicting statements. Setting aside the possibility that Miss King may have made a mistake—’

Sarah interrupted him. ‘I don’t make mistakes. That is, if I had, I would admit to it.’

Her tone was hard and clear.

Poirot bowed to her politely.

‘Then there are only two possibilities—either Miss King or Mr Boynton is lying! Let us examine Raymond Boynton’s reasons for so doing. Let us assume that Miss King was not mistaken and not deliberately lying. What, then, was the sequence of events? Raymond Boynton returns to the camp, sees his mother sitting at the mouth of her cave, goes up to her and finds she is dead. What does he do? Does he call for help? Does he immediately inform the camp of what has happened? No, he waits a minute or two, then passes on to his tent and joins his family in the marquee and says nothing. Such conduct is exceedingly curious, is it not?’

Raymond said in a nervous, sharp voice:

‘It would be idiotic, of course. That ought to show you that my mother was alive and well as I’ve said. Miss King was flustered and upset and made a mistake.’

‘One asks oneself,’ said Poirot, calmly sweeping on, ‘whether there could possibly be a reason for such conduct? It seems, on the face of it, that Raymond Boynton cannot be guilty, since at the only time he was known to approach his stepmother that afternoon she had already been dead for some time. Now, supposing, therefore, that Raymond Boynton is innocent, can we explain his conduct?

‘And I say, that on the assumption that he is innocent, we can! For I remember that fragment of conversation I overheard. “You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?” He comes back from his walk and finds her dead and at once his guilty memory envisages a certain possibility. The plan has been carried out—not by him—but by his fellow planner. Tout simplement—he suspects that his sister, Carol Boynton, is guilty.’

‘It’s a lie,’ said Raymond in a low, trembling voice.

Poirot went on: ‘Let us now take the possibility of Carol Boynton being the murderess. What is the evidence against her? She has the same highly-strung temperament—the kind of temperament that might see such a deed coloured with heroism. It was she to whom Raymond Boynton was talking that night in Jerusalem. Carol Boynton returned to the camp at ten minues past five. According to her own story she went up and spoke to her mother.

No one saw her do so. The camp was deserted—the boys were asleep. Lady Westholme, Miss Pierce and Mr Cope were exploring caves out of sight of the camp. There was no witness of Carol Boynton's possible action. The time would agree well enough. The case, then, against Carol Boynton is a perfectly possible one.' He paused. Carol had raised her head. Her eyes looked steadily and sorrowfully into his.

'There is one other point. The following morning, very early, Carol Boynton was seen to throw something into the stream. There is reason to believe that that something was a hypodermic syringe.'

'Comment?' Dr Gerard looked up surprised. 'But my hypodermic was returned. Yes, yes, I have it now.'

Poirot nodded vigorously.

'Yes, yes. This second hypodermic, it is very curious—very interesting. I have been given to understand that this hypodermic belonged to Miss King. Is that so?'

Sarah paused for a fraction of a second.

Carol spoke quickly: 'It was not Miss King's syringe,' she said. 'It was mine.'

'Then you admit throwing it away, mademoiselle?'

She hesitated just a second.

'Yes, of course. Why shouldn't I?'

'Carol!' It was Nadine. She leaned forward, her eyes wide and distressed. 'Carol…Oh, I don't understand…'

Carol turned and looked at her. There was something hostile in her glance.

'There's nothing to understand! I threw away an old hypodermic. I never touched the—the poison.'

Sarah’s voice broke in: ‘It is quite true what Miss Pierce told you, M. Poirot. It was my syringe.’

Poirot smiled.

‘It is very confusing, this affair of the hypodermic—and yet, I think, it could be explained. Ah, well, we have now two cases made out—the case for the innocence of Raymond Boynton—the case for the guilt of his sister Carol. But me, I am scrupulously fair. I look always on both sides. Let us examine what occurred if Carol Boynton was innocent.

‘She returns to the camp, she goes up to her stepmother, and she finds her—shall we say—dead! What is the first thing she will think? She will suspect that her brother Raymond may have killed her. She does not know what to do. So she says nothing. And presently, about an hour later, Raymond Boynton returns and having presumably spoken to his mother, says nothing of anything being amiss. Do you not think that then her suspicions would become certainties? Perhaps she goes to his tent and finds there a hypodermic syringe. Then, indeed, she is sure! She takes it quickly and hides it. Early in the morning she flings it as far away as she can.

‘There is one more indication that Carol Boynton is innocent. She assures me when I question her that she and her brother never seriously intended to carry out their plan. I ask her to swear—and she swears immediately and with the utmost solemnity that she is not guilty of the crime! You see, that is the way she puts it. She does not swear that they are not guilty. She swears for herself, not her brother—and thinks that I will not pay special attention to the pronoun.

‘Eh bien, that is the case for the innocence of Carol Boynton. And now let us go back a step and consider not the innocence but the possible guilt of Raymond. Let us suppose that Carol is speaking the truth, that Mrs Boynton was alive at five-ten. Under what circumstances can Raymond be guilty? We can suppose that he killed his mother at ten minutes to six when he went up to speak to her. There were boys about the camp, true, but the light was fading. It might have been managed, but it then follows that Miss King lied. Remember, she came back to the camp only five minutes after Raymond. From the distance she would see him go up to his mother. Then, when later she is found dead, Miss King realizes that Raymond has killed her, and to save him, she lies—knowing that Dr Gerard is down with fever and cannot expose her lie!'

'I did not lie!' said Sarah clearly.

'There is yet another possibility. Miss King, as I have said, reached the camp a few minutes after Raymond. If Raymond Boynton found his mother alive, it may have been Miss King who administered the fatal injection. She believed that Mrs Boynton was fundamentally evil. She may have seen herself as a just executioner. That would equally well explain her lying about the time of death.'

Sarah had grown very pale. She spoke in a low, steady voice.

'It is true that I spoke of the expediency of one person dying to save many. It was the Place of Sacrifice that suggested the idea to me. But I can swear to you that I never harmed that disgusting old woman—nor would the idea of doing so ever have entered my head!'

'And yet,' said Poirot softly, 'one of you two must be lying.'

Raymond Boynton shifted in his chair. He cried out impetuously:

'You win, M. Poirot! I'm the liar. Mother was dead when I went up to her. It—it quite knocked me out. I'd been going, you see, to have it out with her. To tell her that from henceforth I was a free agent. I was—all set, you understand. And there she was—dead! Her hand all cold and flabby. And I thought—just what you said. I thought maybe Carol—you see, there was the mark on her wrist—'

Poirot said quickly: 'That is the one point on which I am not completely informed. What was the method you counted on employing? You had a method—and it was connected with a hypodermic syringe. That much I know. If you want me to believe you, you must tell me the rest.'

Raymond said hurriedly: 'It was a way I read in a book—an English detective story—you stuck an empty hypodermic syringe into someone and it did the trick. It sounded perfectly scientific. I—I thought we'd do it that way.'

'Ah,' said Poirot. 'I comprehend. And you purchased a syringe?'

'No. As a matter of fact I pinched Nadine's.'

Poirot shot a quick look at her. 'The syringe that is in your baggage in Jerusalem?' he murmured.

A faint colour showed in the young woman's face.

'I—I wasn't sure what had become of it,' she murmured. Poirot murmured: 'You are so quick-witted, madame.'

Chapter 16

There was a pause. Then clearing his throat with a slightly affected sound, Poirot went on:

‘We have now solved the mystery of what I might term the second hypodermic. That belonged to Mrs Lennox Boynton, was taken by Raymond Boynton before leaving Jerusalem, was taken from Raymond by Carol after the discovery of Mrs Boynton’s dead body, was thrown away by her, found by Miss Pierce, and claimed by Miss King as hers. I presume Miss King has it now.’

‘I have,’ said Sarah.

‘So that when you said it was yours just now, you were doing what you told us you do not do—you told a lie.’

Sarah said calmly: ‘That’s a different kind of lie. It isn’t—it isn’t a professional lie.’

Gerard nodded appreciation.

‘Yes, it is a point that. I understand you perfectly, mademoiselle.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sarah.

Again Poirot cleared his throat.

‘Let us now review our time-table. Thus:

Boyntons and Jefferson Cope leave the camp	3.5 (approx.)
Dr Gerard and Sarah King leave the camp	3.15 (approx.)
Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce leave the camp	4.15
Dr Gerard returns to camp	4.20

	(approx.)
Lennox Boynton returns to camp	4.35
Nadine Boynton returns to camp and talks to Mrs Boynton	4.40
Nadine Boynton leaves her mother-in-law and goes to marquee	4.50 (approx.)
Carol Boynton returns to camp	5.10
Lady Westholme, Miss Pierce and Mr Jefferson Cope return to camp	5.40
Raymond Boynton returns to camp	5.50
Sarah King returns to camp	6.0
Body discovered	6.30

‘There is, you will notice, a gap of twenty minutes between four-fifty when Nadine Boynton left her mother-in-law and five-ten when Carol returned. Therefore, if Carol is speaking the truth, Mrs Boynton must have been killed in that twenty minutes.

‘Now who could have killed her? At that time Miss King and Raymond Boynton were together. Mr Cope (not that he had any perceivable motive for killing her) has an alibi. He was with Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce. Lennox Boynton was with his wife in the marquee. Dr Gerard was groaning with fever in his tent. The camp is deserted, the boys are asleep. It is a suitable moment for a crime! Was there a person who could have committed it?’

His eyes went thoughtfully to Ginevra Boynton.

‘There was one person. Ginevra Boynton was in her tent all the afternoon. That is what we have been told—but actually there is evidence that she was not in her tent all the time. Ginevra Boynton made a very significant remark. She said that Dr Gerard spoke her name in his fever. And Dr Gerard has also told us that he dreamt in his fever of Ginevra Boynton’s face. But it was not a dream! It was actually her face he saw, standing there by his bed. He thought it an effect of fever—but it was the truth. Ginevra was in Dr Gerard’s tent. Is it not possible that she had come to put back the hypodermic syringe after using it?’

Ginevra Boynton raised her head with its crown of red-gold hair. Her wide beautiful eyes stared at Poirot. They were singularly expressionless. She looked like a vague saint.

‘Ah, ça non!’ cried Dr Gerard.

‘Is it, then, so psychologically impossible?’ inquired Poirot.

The Frenchman’s eyes dropped.

Nadine Boynton said sharply: ‘It’s quite impossible!’

Poirot’s eyes came quickly round to her.

‘Impossible, madame?’

‘Yes.’ She paused, bit her lip, then went on, ‘I will not hear of such a disgraceful accusation against my young sister-in-law. We—all of us—know it to be impossible.’

Ginevra moved a little on her chair. The lines of her mouth relaxed into a smile—the touching, innocent half-unconscious smile of a very young girl.

Nadine said again: ‘Impossible.’

Her gentle face had hardened into lines of determination. The eyes that met Poirot’s were hard and unflinching.

Poirot leaned forward in what was half a bow.

‘Madame is very intelligent,’ he said.

Nadine said quietly: ‘What do you mean by that, M. Poirot?’

‘I mean, madame, that all along I have realized that you have what I believe is called an “excellent headpiece”.’

‘You flatter me.’

‘I think not. All along you have envisaged the situation calmly and collectively. You have remained on outwardly good terms with your husband’s mother, deeming that the best thing to be done, but inwardly you have judged and condemned her. I think that some time ago you realized that the only chance for your husband’s happiness was for him to make an effort to leave home—strike out on his own no matter how difficult and penurious such a life might be. You were willing to take all risks and you endeavoured to influence him to exactly that course of action. But you failed, madame. Lennox Boynton had no longer the will to freedom. He was content to sink into a condition of apathy and melancholy.

‘Now I have no doubt at all, madame, but that you love your husband. Your decision to leave him was not actuated by a greater love for another man. It was, I think, a desperate venture undertaken as a last hope. A woman in your position could only try three things. She could try appeal. That, as I have said, failed. She could threaten to leave herself. But it is possible that even that threat would not have moved Lennox Boynton. It would plunge him deeper in misery, but it would not cause him to rebel. There was one last desperate throw. You could go away with another man. Jealousy and the instinct of possession is one of the most deeply rooted fundamental instincts in man. You showed your wisdom in trying to reach that deep underground savage instinct. If Lennox Boynton would let you go without an effort to another man—then he must indeed be beyond human aid, and you might as well then try to make a new life for yourself elsewhere.

‘But let us suppose that even that last desperate remedy failed. Your husband was terribly upset at your decision, but in spite of that he did not, as you had hoped, react as a primitive man might have done with an uprush of the possessive instinct. Was there anything at all that could save your husband from his own rapidly failing mental condition? Only one thing. If his stepmother were to die, it might not be too late. He might be able to start life anew as a free man, building up in himself independence and manliness once more.’

Poirot paused, then repeated gently: ‘If your mother-in-law were to die…’

Nadine’s eyes were still fixed on him. In an unmoved gentle voice she said: ‘You are suggesting that I helped to bring that event about, are you not? But you cannot do so, M. Poirot. After I had broken the news of my impending departure to Mrs Boynton, I went straight to the marquee and joined Lennox. I did not leave it again until my mother-in-law was found dead. Guilty of her death I may be, in the sense that I gave her a shock—that, of course, presupposes a natural death. But if, as you say (though so far you have no direct evidence of it and cannot have until an autopsy has taken place) she was deliberately killed, then I had no opportunity of doing so.'

Poirot said: 'You did not leave the marquee again until your mother-in-law was found dead. That is what you have just said. That, Mrs Boynton, was one of the points I found curious about this case.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is here on my list. Point nine. At half-past six, when dinner was ready, a servant was dispatched to announce the fact to Mrs Boynton.'

Raymond said: 'I don't understand.'

Carol said: 'No more do I.'

Poirot looked from one to the other of them.

'You do not, eh? "A servant was sent"—why a servant? Were you not, all of you, most assiduous in your attendance on the old lady as a general rule? Did not one or other of you always escort her to meals? She was infirm. It was difficult for her to rise from a chair without assistance. Always one or other of you was at her elbow. I suggest then, that on dinner being announced the natural thing would have been for one or other of her family to go out and help her. But not one of you offered to do so. You all sat there, paralyzed, watching each other, wondering, perhaps, why no one went.'

Nadine said sharply: 'All this is absurd, M. Poirot! We were all tired that evening. We ought to have gone, I admit, but—on that evening—we just didn't!'

'Precisely—precisely—on that particular evening! You, madame, did perhaps more waiting on her than anyone else. It was one of the duties that you accepted mechanically. But that evening you did not offer to go out to help her in. Why? That is what I asked myself—why? And I tell you my answer. Because you knew quite well that she was dead…

‘No, no, do not interrupt me, madame.’ He raised an impassioned hand. ‘You will now listen to me—Hercule Poirot! There were witnesses to your conversation with your mother-in-law. Witnesses who could see but could not hear! Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce were a long way away. They saw you apparently having a conversation with your mother-in-law, but what actual evidence is there of what occurred? I will propound to you instead a little theory. You have brains, madame. If in your quiet unhurried fashion you have decided on—shall we say the elimination of your husband’s mother—you will carry it out with intelligence and with due preparation. You have access to Dr Gerard’s tent during his absence on the morning excursion. You are fairly sure that you will find a suitable drug. Your nursing training helps you there. You choose digitoxin—the same kind of drug that the old lady is taking—you also take his hypodermic syringe since, to your annoyance, your own has disappeared. You hope to replace the syringe before the doctor notices its absence.’

‘Before proceeding to carry out your plan, you make one last attempt to stir your husband into action. You tell him of your intention to marry Jefferson Cope. Though your husband is terribly upset he does not react as you had hoped—so you are forced to put your plan of murder into action. You return to the camp exchanging a pleasant natural word with Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce as you pass. You go up to where your mother-in-law is sitting. You have the syringe with the drug in it ready. It is easy to seize her wrist and—proficient as you are with your nurse’s training—force home the plunger. It is done before your mother-in-law realizes what you are doing. From far down the valley the others only see you talking to her, bending over her. Then deliberately you go and fetch a chair and sit there apparently engaged in an amicable conversation for some minutes. Death must have been almost instantaneous. It is a dead woman to whom you sit talking, but who shall guess that? Then you put away the chair and go down to the marquee, where you find your husband reading a book. And you are careful not to leave that marquee! Mrs Boynton’s death, you are sure, will be put down to heart trouble. (It will, indeed, be due to heart trouble.) In only one thing have your plans gone astray. You cannot return the syringe to Dr Gerard’s tent because the doctor is in there shivering with malaria—and although you do not know it, he has already missed the syringe. That, madame, was the flaw in an otherwise perfect crime.’

There was silence—a moment’s dead silence—then Lennox Boynton sprang to his feet.

‘No,’ he shouted. ‘That’s a damned lie. Nadine did nothing. She couldn’t have done anything. My mother—my mother was already dead.’

‘Ah?’ Poirot’s eyes came gently round to him. ‘So, after all, it was you who killed her, Mr Boynton.’

Again a moment’s pause—then Lennox dropped back into his chair and raised trembling hands to his face.

‘Yes—that’s right—I killed her.’

‘You took the digitoxin from Dr Gerard’s tent?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘As—as—you said—in the morning.’

‘And the syringe?’

‘The syringe? Yes.’

‘Why did you kill her?’

‘Can you ask?’

‘I am asking, Mr Boynton!’

‘But you know—my wife was leaving me—with Cope—’

‘Yes, but you only learnt that in the afternoon.’

Lennox stared at him. ‘Of course. When we were out—’

‘But you took the poison and the syringe in the morning—before you knew?’

‘Why the hell do you badger me with questions?’ He paused and passed a shaking hand across his forehead. ‘What does it matter, anyway?’

‘It matters a great deal. I advise you, Mr Lennox Boynton, to tell me the truth.’

‘The truth?’ Lennox stared at him.

‘That is what I said—the truth.’

‘By God, I will,’ said Lennox suddenly. ‘But I don’t know whether you will believe me.’ He drew a deep breath. ‘That afternoon, when I left Nadine, I was absolutely all to pieces. I’d never dreamed she’d go from me to someone else. I was—I was nearly mad! I felt as though I was drunk or recovering from a bad illness.’

Poirot nodded. He said: ‘I noted Lady Westholme’s description of your gait when you passed her. That is why I knew your wife was not speaking the truth when she said she told you after you were both back at the camp. Continue, Mr Boynton.’

‘I hardly knew what I was doing…But as I got near, my brain seemed to clear. It flashed over me that I had only myself to blame! I’d been a miserable worm! I ought to have defied my stepmother and cleared out years ago. And it came to me that it mightn’t be too late even now. There she was, the old devil, sitting up like an obscene idol against the red cliffs. I went right up to have it out with her. I meant to tell her just what I thought and to announce that I was clearing out. I had a wild idea I might get away at once that evening—clear out with Nadine and get as far as Ma’an, anyway, that night.’

‘Oh, Lennox—my dear—’

It was a long, soft sigh.

He went on: ‘And then, my God—you could have struck me down with a touch! She was dead. Sitting there—dead…I—I didn’t know what to do—I was dumb—dazed—everything I was going to shout out at her bottled up inside me—turning to lead—I can’t explain…Stone—that’s what it felt like—being turned to stone. I did something mechanically—I picked up her wrist-watch—it was lying in her lap—and put it round her wrist—her horrid limp dead wrist…’

He shuddered. ‘God—it was awful…Then I stumbled down, went into the marquee. I ought to have called someone, I suppose—but I couldn’t. I just sat there, turning the pages—waiting…’

He stopped.

‘You won’t believe that—you can’t. Why didn’t I call someone? Tell Nadine? I don’t know.’

Dr Gerard cleared his throat.

‘Your statement is perfectly plausible, Mr Boynton,’ he said. ‘You were in a bad nervous condition. Two severe shocks administered in rapid succession would be quite enough to put you in the condition you have described. It is the Weissenhalter reaction—best exemplified in the case of a bird that has dashed its head against a window. Even after its recovery it refrains instinctively from all action—giving itself time to readjust the nerve centres—I do not express myself well in English, but what I mean is this: You could not have acted any other way. Any decisive action of any kind would have been quite impossible for you! You passed through a period of mental paralysis.’

He turned to Poirot.

‘I assure you, my friend, that is so!’

‘Oh, I do not doubt it,’ said Poirot. ‘There was a little fact I had already noted—the fact that Mr Boynton had replaced his mother’s wrist-watch—that was capable of two explanations—it might have been a cover for the actual deed, or it might have been observed and misinterpreted by Mrs Boynton. She returned only five minutes after her husband. She must therefore have seen that action. When she got up to her mother-in-law and found her dead with a mark of a hypodermic syringe on her wrist she would naturally jump to the conclusion that her husband had committed the deed—that her announcement of her decision to leave him had produced a reaction in him different from that for which she had hoped. Briefly, Nadine Boynton believed that she had inspired her husband to commit murder.’

He looked at Nadine. ‘That is so, madame?’

She bowed her head. Then she asked:

‘Did you really suspect me, M. Poirot?’

‘I thought you were a possibility, madame.’

She leaned forward.

‘And now? What really happened, M. Poirot?’

Chapter 17

‘What really happened?’ Poirot repeated.

He reached behind him, drew forward a chair and sat down. His manner was now friendly—informal.

‘It is a question, is it not? For the digitoxin was taken—the syringe was missing—there was the mark of a hypodermic on Mrs Boynton’s wrist.

‘It is true that in a few days’ time we shall know definitely—the autopsy will tell us—whether Mrs Boynton died of an overdose of digitalis or not. But then it may be too late! It would be better to reach the truth tonight—while the murderer is here under our hand.’

Nadine raised her head sharply.

‘You mean that you still believe—that one of us—here in this room…’ Her voice died away.

Poirot was slowly nodding to himself.

‘The truth, that is what I promised Colonel Carbury. And so, having cleared our path we are back again where I was earlier in the day, writing down a list of printed facts and being faced straightway with two glaring inconsistencies.’

Colonel Carbury spoke for the first time. ‘Suppose, now, we hear what they are?’ he suggested.

Poirot said with dignity: ‘I am about to tell you. We will take once more those first two facts on my list. Mrs Boynton was taking a mixture of digitalis and Dr Gerard missed a hypodermic syringe. Take those facts and set them against the undeniable fact (with which I was immediately confronted) that the Boynton family showed unmistakably guilty reactions. It would seem, therefore, certain that one of the Boynton family must have committed the crime! And yet, those two facts I mentioned were all against the theory. For, you see, to take a concentrated solution of digitalis—that, yes, it is a clever idea, because Mrs Boynton was already taking the drug. But what would a member of her family do then? Ah, ma foi! there was only one sensible thing to do. Put the poison into her bottle of medicine! That is what anyone, anyone with a grain of sense and who had access to the medicine would certainly do!

‘Sooner or later Mrs Boynton takes a dose and dies—and even if the digitalis is discovered in the bottle it may be set down as a mistake of the chemist who made it up. Certainly nothing can be proved!

‘Why, then, the theft of the hypodermic needle?

‘There can be only two explanations of that—either Dr Gerard overlooked the syringe and it was never stolen, or else the syringe was taken because the murderer had not got access to the medicine—that is to say the murderer was not a member of the Boynton family. Those two first facts point overwhelmingly to an outsider as having committed the crime!

‘I saw that—but I was puzzled, as I say, by the strong evidences of guilt displayed by the Boynton family. Was it possible that, in spite of that consciousness of guilt, the Boynton family were innocent? I set out to prove—not the guilt—but the innocence of those people!

‘That is where we stand now. The murder was committed by an outsider—that is, by someone who was not sufficiently intimate with Mrs Boynton to enter her tent or to handle her medicine bottle.’

He paused.

‘There are three people in this room who are, technically, outsiders, but who have a definite connection with the case.

‘Mr Cope, whom we will consider first, has been closely associated with the Boynton family for some time. Can we discover motive and opportunity on his part? It seems not. Mrs Boynton’s death has affected him adversely—since it has brought about the frustration of certain hopes. Unless Mr Cope’s motive was an almost fanatical desire to benefit others, we can find no reason for his desiring Mrs Boynton's death. (Unless, of course, there is a motive about which we are entirely in the dark. We do not know what Mr Cope's dealings with the Boynton family have been.)'

Mr Cope said with dignity: 'This seems to me a little farfetched, M. Poirot. You must remember I had absolutely no opportunity for committing this deed and, in any case I hold very strong views as to the sanctity of human life.'

'Your position certainly seems impeccable,' said Poirot with gravity. 'In a work of fiction you would be strongly suspected on that account.'

He turned a little in his chair. 'We now come to Miss King. Miss King had a certain amount of motive and she had the necessary medical knowledge and is a person of character and determination, but since she left the camp before three-thirty with the others and did not return to it until six o'clock, it seems difficult to see where she could have got her opportunity.

'Next we must consider Dr Gerard. Now here we must take into account the actual time that the murder was committed. According to Mr Lennox Boynton's last statement, his mother was dead at four thirty-five. According to Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce, she was alive at four-sixteen when they started on their walk. That leaves exactly twenty minutes unaccounted for. Now, as these two ladies walked away from the camp, Dr Gerard passed them going to it. There is no one to say what Dr Gerard's movements were when he reached the camp because the two ladies' backs were towards it. They were walking away from it. Therefore it is perfectly possible for Dr Gerard to have committed the crime. Being a doctor, he could easily counterfeit the appearance of malaria. There is, I should say, a possible motive. Dr Gerard might have wished to save a certain person whose reason (perhaps more vital a loss than loss of life) was in danger, and he may have considered the sacrifice of an old and worn-out life worth it!'

'Your ideas,' said Dr Gerard, 'are fantastic!'

Without taking any notice, Poirot went on:

‘But if so, why did Gerard call attention to the possibility of foul play? It is quite certain that, but for his statement to Colonel Carbury, Mrs Boynton’s death would have been put down to natural causes. It was Dr Gerard who first pointed out the possibility of murder. That, my friends,’ said Poirot, ‘does not make common sense!’

‘Doesn’t seem to,’ said Colonel Carbury gruffly.

‘There is one more possibility,’ said Poirot. ‘Mrs Lennox Boynton just now negatived strongly the possibility of her young sister-in-law being guilty. The force of her objection lay in the fact that she knew her mother-in-law to be dead at the time. But remember this, Ginevra Boynton was at the camp all the afternoon. And there was a moment—a moment when Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce were walking away from the camp and before Dr Gerard had returned to it…’

Ginevra stirred. She leaned forward, staring into Poirot’s face with a strange, innocent, puzzled stare.

‘I did it? You think I did it?’

Then suddenly, with a movement of swift incomparable beauty, she was up from her chair and had flung herself across the room and down on her knees beside Dr Gerard, clinging to him, gazing up passionately into his face.

‘No, no, don’t let them say it! They’re making the walls close round me again! It’s not true! I never did anything! They are my enemies—they want to put me in prison—to shut me up. You must help me. You must help me!’

‘There, there, my child.’ Gently the doctor patted her head. Then he addressed Poirot.

‘What you say is nonsense—absurd.’

‘Delusions of persecution?’ murmured Poirot.

‘Yes; but she could never have done it that way. She would have done it, you must perceive, dramatically—a dagger—something flamboyant—

spectacular—never this cool, calm logic! I tell you, my friends, it is so. This was a reasoned crime—a sane crime.’

Poirot smiled. Unexpectedly he bowed. ‘Je suis entièrement de votre avis,’ he said smoothly.

Chapter 18

‘Come,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘We have still a little way to go! Dr Gerard has invoked the psychology. So let us now examine the psychological side of this case. We have taken the facts, we have established a chronological sequence of events, we have heard the evidence. There remains—the psychology. And the most important psychological evidence concerns the dead woman—it is the psychology of Mrs Boynton herself that is the most important thing in this case.

‘Take from my list of specified facts points three and four. Mrs Boynton took definite pleasure in keeping her family from enjoying themselves with other people. Mrs Boynton, on the afternoon in question, encouraged her family to go away and leave her.

‘These two facts, they contradict each other flatly! Why, on this particular afternoon, should Mrs Boynton suddenly display a complete reversal of her usual policy? Was it that she felt a sudden warmth of the heart—an instinct of benevolence? That, it seems to me from all I have heard, was extremely unlikely! Yet there must have been a reason. What was that reason?

‘Let us examine closely the character of Mrs Boynton. There have been many different accounts of her. She was a tyrannical old martinet—she was a mental sadist—she was an incarnation of evil—she was crazy. Which of these views is the true one?

‘I think myself that Sarah King came nearest to the truth when in a flash of inspiration in Jerusalem she saw the old lady as intensely pathetic. But not only pathetic—futile!

‘Let us, if we can, think ourselves into the mental condition of Mrs Boynton. A human creature born with immense ambition, with a yearning to dominate and to impress her personality on other people. She neither sublimated that intense craving for power—nor did she seek to master it—no, mesdames and messieurs—she fed it! But in the end—listen well to this—in the end what did it amount to? She was not a great power! She was not feared and hated over a wide area! She was the petty tyrant of one isolated family! And as Dr Gerard said to me—she became bored like any other old lady with her hobby and she sought to extend her activities and to amuse herself by making her dominance more precarious! But that led to an entirely different aspect of the case! By coming abroad, she realized for the first time how extremely insignificant she was!

‘And now we come directly to point number ten—the words spoken to Sarah King in Jerusalem. Sarah King, you see, had put her finger on the truth. She had revealed fully and uncompromisingly the pitiful futility of Mrs Boynton’s scheme of existence! And now listen very carefully—all of you—to what her exact words to Miss King were. Miss King has said that Mrs Boynton spoke “so malevolently—not even looking at me”. And this is what she actually said, “I’ve never forgotten anything—not an action, not a name, not a face.”

‘Those words made a great impression on Miss King. Their extraordinary intensity and the loud hoarse tone in which they were uttered! So strong was the impression that they left on her mind that I think she quite failed to realize their extraordinary significance!

‘Do you see that significance, any of you?’ He waited a minute. ‘It seems not…But, mes amis, does it escape you that those words were not a reasonable answer at all to what Miss King had just been saying? “I’ve never forgotten anything—not an action, not a name, not a face.” It does not make sense! If she had said, “I never forget impertinence”—something of that kind—but no—a face is what she said…

‘Ah!’ cried Poirot, beating his hands together. ‘But it leaps to the eye! Those words, ostensibly spoken to Miss King, were not meant for Miss King at all! They were addressed to someone else standing behind Miss King.’

He paused, noting their expressions.

‘Yes, it leaps to the eye! That was, I tell you, a psychological moment in Mrs Boynton’s life! She had been exposed to herself by an intelligent young woman! She was full of baffled fury—and at that moment she recognized someone—a face from the past—a victim delivered into her hands!

‘We are back, you see, at the outsider! And now the meaning of Mrs Boynton’s unexpected amiability on the afternoon of her death is clear. She wanted to get rid of her family because—to use a vulgarity—she had other fish to fry! She wanted the field left clear for an interview with a new victim…

‘Now, from that new standpoint, let us consider the events of the afternoon! The Boynton family go off. Mrs Boynton sits up by her cave. Now let us consider very carefully the evidence of Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce. The latter is an unreliable witness, she is unobservant and very suggestible. Lady Westholme, on the other hand, is perfectly clear as to her facts and meticulously observant. Both ladies agree on one fact! An Arab, one of the servants, approaches Mrs Boynton, angers her in some way and retires hastily. Lady Westholme stated definitely that the servant had first been into the tent occupied by Ginevra Boynton, but you may remember that Dr Gerard’s tent was next door to Ginevra’s. It is possible that it was Dr Gerard’s tent the Arab entered…’

Colonel Carbury said: ‘D’you mean to tell me that one of those Bedouin fellows of mine murdered an old lady by sticking her with a hypodermic? Fantastic!’

‘Wait, Colonel Carbury, I have not yet finished. Let us agree that the Arab might have come from Dr Gerard’s tent and not Ginevra Boynton’s. What is the next thing? Both ladies agree that they could not see his face clearly enough to identify him and that they did not hear what was said. That is understandable. The distance between the marquee and the ledge was about two hundred yards. Lady Westholme gave a clear description of the man otherwise, describing in detail his ragged breeches and the untidiness with which his puttees were rolled.’

Poirot leaned forward.

‘And that, my friends, was very odd indeed! Because if she could not see his face or hear what was said, she could not possibly have noticed the state of his breeches and puttees! Not at two hundred yards!

‘It was an error, that, you see! It suggested a curious idea to me. Why insist so on the ragged breeches and untidy puttees? Could it be because the breeches were not torn and the puttees were non-existent? Lady Westholme and Miss Pierce both saw the man—but from where they were sitting they could not see each other. That is shown by the fact that Lady Westholme came to see if Miss Pierce was awake and found her sitting in the entrance of her tent.’

‘Good lord,’ said Colonel Carbury, suddenly sitting up very straight. ‘Are you suggesting—?’

‘I am suggesting that, having ascertained just what Miss Pierce (the only witness likely to be awake) was doing, Lady Westholme returned to her tent, put on her riding breeches, boots and khaki-coloured coat, made herself an Arab head-dress with her checked duster and a skein of knitting-wool and that, thus attired, she went boldly up to Dr Gerard’s tent, looked in his medicine chest, selected a suitable drug, took the hypodermic, filled it and went boldly up to her victim.

‘Mrs Boynton may have been dozing. Lady Westholme was quick. She caught her by the wrist and injected the stuff. Mrs Boynton half cried out—tried to rise—then sank back. The “Arab” hurried away with every evidence of being ashamed and abashed. Mrs Boynton shook her stick, tried to rise, then fell back into her chair.

‘Five minutes later Lady Westholme rejoins Miss Pierce and comments on the scene she has just witnessed, impressing her own version of it on the other. Then they go for a walk, pausing below the ledge where Lady Westholme shouts up to the old lady. She receives no answer. Mrs Boynton is dead—but she remarks to Miss Pierce, “Very rude just to snort at us like that!” Miss Pierce accepts the suggestion—she has often heard Mrs Boynton receive a remark with a snort—she will swear quite sincerely if necessary that she actually heard it. Lady Westholme has sat on committees often enough with women of Miss Pierce’s type to know exactly how her own eminence and masterful personality can influence them. The only point where her plan went astray was the replacing of the syringe. Dr Gerard returning so soon upset her scheme. She hoped he might not have noticed its absence, or might think he had overlooked it, and she put it back during the night.'

He stopped.

Sarah said: 'But why? Why should Lady Westholme want to kill old Mrs Boynton?'

'Did you not tell me that Lady Westholme had been quite near you in Jerusalem when you spoke to Mrs Boynton? It was to Lady Westholme that Mrs Boynton's words were addressed. "I've never forgotten anything—not an action, not a name, not a face." Put that with the fact that Mrs Boynton had been a wardress in a prison and you can get a very shrewd idea of the truth. Lord Westholme met his wife on a voyage back from America. Lady Westholme before her marriage had been a criminal and had served a prison sentence.

'You see the terrible dilemma she was in? Her career, her ambitions, her social position—all at stake! What the crime was for which she served a sentence in prison we do not yet know (though we soon shall), but it must have been one that would effectually blast her political career if it was made public. And remember this, Mrs Boynton was not an ordinary blackmailer. She did not want money. She wanted the pleasure of torturing her victim for a while and then she would have enjoyed revealing the truth in the most spectacular fashion! No, while Mrs Boynton lived, Lady Westholme was not safe. She obeyed Mrs Boynton's instructions to meet her at Petra (I thought it strange all along that a woman with such a sense of her own importance as Lady Westholme should have preferred to travel as a mere tourist), but in her own mind she was doubtless revolving ways and means of murder. She saw her chance and carried it out boldly. She only made two slips. One was to say a little too much—the description of the torn breeches—which first drew my attention to her, and the other was when she mistook Dr Gerard's tent and looked first into the one where Ginevra was lying half asleep. Hence the girl's story—half make-believe, half true—of a sheikh in disguise. She put it the wrong way round, obeying her instinct to distort the truth by making it more dramatic, but the indication was quite significant enough for me.'

He paused.

‘But we shall soon know. I obtained Lady Westholme’s fingerprints today without her being aware of the fact. If these are sent to the prison where Mrs Boynton was once a wardress, we shall soon know the truth when they are compared with the files.’

He stopped.

In the momentary stillness a sharp sound was heard.

‘What’s that?’ asked Dr Gerard.

‘Sounded like a shot to me,’ said Colonel Carbury, rising to his feet quickly. ‘In the next room. Who’s got that room, by the way?’

Poirot murmured: ‘I have a little idea—it is the room of Lady Westholme…’

Epilogue

Extract from the Evening Shout:

We regret to announce the death of Lady Westholme, M.P., the result of a tragic accident. Lady Westholme, who was fond of travelling in out-of-the-way countries, always took a small revolver with her. She was cleaning this when it went off accidentally and killed her. Death was instantaneous. The deepest sympathy will be felt for Lord Westholme, etc., etc.

On a warm June evening five years later Sarah Boynton and her husband sat in the stalls of a London theatre. The play was Hamlet. Sarah gripped Raymond’s arm as Ophelia’s words came floating over the footlights:

How should I your true love know

From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff,

And his sandal shoon.

He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone;

At his head a grass-green turf;

At his heels a stone.

O, ho!

A lump rose in Sarah’s throat. That exquisite witless beauty, that lovely unearthly smile of one gone beyond trouble and grief to a region where only a floating mirage was truth…

Sarah said to herself: ‘She’s lovely…’

That haunting, lilting voice, always beautiful in tone, but now disciplined and modulated to be the perfect instrument.

Sarah said with decision as the curtain fell at the end of the act: ‘Jinny’s a great actress—a great—great actress!’

Later they sat round a supper-table at the Savoy. Ginevra, smiling, remote, turned to the bearded man by her side.

‘I was good, wasn’t I, Theodore?’

‘You were wonderful, chérie.’

A happy smile floated on her lips.

She murmured: ‘You always believed in me—you always knew I could do great things—sway multitudes…’

At a table not far away the Hamlet of the evening was saying gloomily:

‘Her mannerisms! Of course people like it just at first—but what I say is, it’s not Shakespeare. Did you see how she ruined my exit?’

Nadine, sitting opposite Ginevra, said: ‘How exciting it is to be here in London with Jinny acting Ophelia and being so famous!’

Ginevra said softly: ‘It was nice of you to come over.’

‘A regular family party,’ said Nadine, smiling as she looked round. Then she said to Lennox: ‘I think the children might go to the matinée, don’t you? They’re quite old enough, and they do so want to see Aunt Jinny on the stage!’

Lennox, a sane, happy-looking Lennox with humorous eyes, lifted his glass.

‘To the newly-weds, Mr and Mrs Cope.’

Jefferson Cope and Carol acknowledged the toast.

‘The unfaithful swain!’ said Carol, laughing. ‘Jeff, you’d better drink to your first love as she’s sitting right opposite you.’

Raymond said gaily: ‘Jeff’s blushing. He doesn’t like being reminded of the old days.’

His face clouded suddenly.

Sarah touched his hand with hers, and the cloud lifted. He looked at her and grinned.

‘Seems just like a bad dream!’

A dapper figure stopped by their table. Hercule Poirot, faultlessly and beautifully apparelled, his moustaches proudly twisted, bowed regally.

‘Mademoiselle,’ he said to Ginevra, ‘mes hommages. You were superb!’

They greeted him affectionately, made a place for him beside Sarah.

He beamed round on them all and when they were all talking he leaned a little sideways and said softly to Sarah:

‘Eh bien, it seems that all marches well now with la famille Boynton!’

‘Thanks to you!’ said Sarah.

‘He becomes very eminent, your husband. I read today an excellent review of his last book.’

‘It’s really rather good—although I say it! Did you know that Carol and Jefferson Cope had made a match of it at last? And Lennox and Nadine have got two of the nicest children—cute, Raymond calls them. As for Jinny—well, I rather think Jinny’s a genius.’

She looked across the table at the lovely face and the red-gold crown of hair, and then she gave a tiny start.

For a moment her face was grave. She raised her glass slowly to her lips.

‘You drink a toast, madame?’ asked Poirot.

Sarah said slowly:

‘I thought—suddenly—of Her. Looking at Jinny, I saw—for the first time—the likeness. The same thing—only Jinny is in light—where She was in darkness…’

And from opposite, Ginevra said unexpectedly:

‘Poor Mother…She was queer…Now—that we’re all so happy—I feel kind of sorry for her. She didn’t get what she wanted out of life. It must have been tough for her.’

Almost without a pause, her voice quivered softly into the lines from Cymbeline while the others listened spell-bound to the music of them:

‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,

Nor the furious winter’s rages;

Thou the worldly task hast done,

Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages…’

Hercule Poirot's Christmas (1938)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

PART ONE

DECEMBER 22ND

Stephen pulled up the collar of his coat as he walked briskly along the platform. Overhead a dim fog clouded the station. Large engines hissed superbly, throwing off clouds of steam into the cold raw air. Everything was dirty and smoke-grimed.

Stephen thought with revulsion:

“What a foul country—what a foul city!”

His first excited reaction to London, its shops, its restaurants, its well-dressed, attractive women, had faded. He saw it now as a glittering rhinestone set in a dingy setting.

Supposing he were back in South Africa now . . . He felt a quick pang of homesickness. Sunshine—blue skies—gardens of flowers—cool blue flowers—hedges of plumbago—blue convolvulus clinging to every little shanty.

And here—dirt, grime, and endless, incessant crowds—moving, hurrying—jostling. Busy ants running industriously about their anthill.

For a moment he thought, “I wish I hadn’t come. . . .”

Then he remembered his purpose and his lips set back in a grim line. No, by hell, he’d go on with it! He’d planned this for years. He’d always meant to do—what he was going to do. Yes, he’d go on with it!

That momentary reluctance, that sudden questioning of himself: “Why? Is it worth it? Why dwell on the past? Why not wipe out the whole thing?”—all that was only weakness. He was not a boy—to be turned this way and that by the whim of the moment. He was a man of forty, assured, purposeful. He would go on with it. He would do what he had come to England to do.

He got on the train and passed along the corridor looking for a place. He had waved aside a porter and was carrying his own rawhide suitcase. He looked into carriage after carriage. The train was full. It was only three days before Christmas. Stephen Farr looked distastefully at the crowded carriages.

People! Incessant, innumerable people! And all so—so—what was the word—so drab-looking! So alike, so horribly alike! Those that hadn’t got faces like sheep had faces like rabbits, he thought. Some of them chattered and fussed. Some, heavily middle-aged men, grunted. More like pigs, those. Even the girls, slender, egg-faced, scarlet-lipped, were of a depressing uniformity.

He thought with a sudden longing of open veldt, sunbaked and lonely. . . .

And then, suddenly, he caught his breath, looking into a carriage. This girl was different. Black hair, rich creamy pallor—eyes with the depth and darkness of night in them. The sad proud eyes of the South . . . It was all wrong that this girl should be sitting in this train among these dull, drab-looking people—all wrong that she should be going into the dreary midlands of England. She should have been on a balcony, a rose between her lips, a piece of black lace draping her proud head, and there should have been dust and heat and the smell of blood—the smell of the bullring—in the air . .

. She should be somewhere splendid, not squeezed into the corner of a third-class carriage.

He was an observant man. He did not fail to note the shabbiness of her little black coat and skirt, the cheap quality of her fabric gloves, the flimsy shoes and the defiant note of a flame-red handbag. Nevertheless splendour was the quality he associated with her. She was splendid, fine, exotic. . . .

What the hell was she doing in this country of fogs and chills and hurrying industrious ants?

He thought, “I’ve got to know who she is and what she’s doing here . . . I’ve got to know. . . .”

II

Pilar sat squeezed up against the window and thought how very odd the English smelt . . . It was what had struck her so far most forcibly about England—the difference of smell. There was no garlic and no dust and very little perfume. In this carriage now there was a smell of cold stuffiness—the sulphur smell of the trains—the smell of soap and another very unpleasant smell—it came, she thought, from the fur collar of the stout woman sitting beside her. Pilar sniffed delicately, imbibing the odour of mothballs reluctantly. It was a funny scent to choose to put on yourself, she thought.

A whistle blew, a stentorian voice cried out something and the train jerked slowly out of the station. They had started. She was on her way. . . .

Her heart beat a little faster. Would it be all right? Would she be able to accomplish what she had set out to do? Surely—surely—she had thought it all out so carefully . . . She was prepared for every eventuality. Oh, yes, she would succeed—she must succeed. . . .

The curve of Pilar's red mouth curved upwards. It was suddenly cruel, that mouth. Cruel and greedy—like the mouth of a child or a kitten—a mouth that knew only its own desires and that was as yet unaware of pity.

She looked round her with the frank curiosity of a child. All these people, seven of them—how funny they were, the English! They all seemed so rich, so prosperous—their clothes—their boots—Oh! undoubtedly England was a very rich country as she had always heard. But they were not at all gay—no, decidedly not gay.

That was a handsome man standing in the corridor . . . Pilar thought he was very handsome. She liked his deeply bronzed face and his high-bridged nose and his square shoulders. More quickly than any English girl, Pilar had seen that the man admired her. She had not looked at him once directly, but she knew perfectly how often he had looked at her and exactly how he had looked.

She registered the facts without much interest or emotion. She came from a country where men looked at women as a matter of course and did not disguise the fact unduly. She wondered if he was an Englishman and decided that he was not.

"He is too alive, too real, to be English," Pilar decided. "And yet he is fair. He may be perhaps Americano." He was, she thought, rather like the actors she had seen in Wild West films.

An attendant pushed his way along the corridor.

“First lunch, please. First lunch. Take your seats for first lunch.”

The seven occupants of Pilar’s carriage all held tickets for the first lunch. They rose in a body and the carriage was suddenly deserted and peaceful.

Pilar quickly pulled up the window which had been let down a couple of inches at the top by a militant-looking, grey-haired lady in the opposite corner. Then she sprawled comfortably back on her seat and peered out of the window at the northern suburbs of London. She did not turn her head at the sound of the door sliding back. It was the man from the corridor, and Pilar knew, of course, that he had entered the carriage on purpose to talk to her.

She continued to look pensively out of the window.

Stephen Farr said:

“Would you like the window down at all?”

Pilar replied demurely:

“On the contrary. I have just shut it.”

She spoke English perfectly, but with a slight accent.

During the pause that ensued, Stephen thought:

“A delicious voice. It has the sun in it . . . It is warm like a summer night. . . .”

Pilar thought:

“I like his voice. It is big and strong. He is attractive—yes, he is attractive.”

Stephen said: “The train is very full.”

“Oh, yes, indeed. The people go away from London, I suppose, because it is so black there.”

Pilar had not been brought up to believe that it was a crime to talk to strange men in trains. She could take care of herself as well as any girl, but she had no rigid taboos.

If Stephen had been brought up in England he might have felt ill at ease at entering into conversation with a young girl. But Stephen was a friendly soul who found it perfectly natural to talk to anyone if he felt like it.

He smiled without any self-consciousness and said:

“London’s rather a terrible place, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. I do not like it at all.”

“No more do I.”

Pilar said: “You are not English, no?”

“I’m British, but I come from South Africa.”

“Oh, I see, that explains it.”

“Have you just come from abroad?”

Pilar nodded. “I come from Spain.”

Stephen was interested.

“From Spain, do you? You’re Spanish, then?”

“I am half-Spanish. My mother was English. That is why I talk English so well.”

“What about this war business?” asked Stephen.

“It is very terrible, yes—very sad. There has been damage done, quite a lot—yes.”

“Which side are you on?”

Pilar’s politics seemed to be rather vague. In the village where she came from, she explained, nobody had paid very much attention to the war. “It has not been near us, you understand. The Mayor, he is, of course, an officer of the Government, so he is for the Government, and the priest is for General Franco—but most of the people are busy with the vines and the land, they have not time to go into these questions.”

“So there wasn’t any fighting round you?”

Pilar said that there had not been. “But then I drove in a car,” she explained, “all across the country and there was much destruction. And I saw a bomb drop and it blew up a car—yes, and another destroyed a house. It was very exciting!”

Stephen Farr smiled a faintly twisted smile.

“So that’s how it seemed to you?”

“It was a nuisance, too,” explained Pilar. “Because I wanted to get on, and the driver of my car, he was killed.”

Stephen said, watching her:

“That didn’t upset you?”

Pilar’s great dark eyes opened very wide.

“Everyone must die! That is so, is it not? If it comes quickly from the sky—bouff—like that, it is as well as any other way. One is alive for a time—yes, and then one is dead. That is what happens in this world.”

Stephen Farr laughed.

“I don’t think you are a pacifist.”

“You do not think I am what?” Pilar seemed puzzled by a word which had not previously entered her vocabulary.

“Do you forgive your enemies, señorita?”

Pilar shook her head.

“I have no enemies. But if I had—”

“Well?”

He was watching her, fascinated anew by the sweet, cruel upward-curving mouth.

Pilar said gravely:

"If I had an enemy—if anyone hated me and I hated them—then I would cut my enemy's throat like this. . . ."

She made a graphic gesture.

It was so swift and so crude that Stephen Farr was momentarily taken aback. He said:

"You are a bloodthirsty young woman!"

Pilar asked in a matter-of-fact tone:

"What would you do to your enemy?"

He started—stared at her, then laughed aloud.

"I wonder—" he said. "I wonder!"

Pilar said disapprovingly:

"But surely—you know."

He checked his laughter, drew in his breath and said in a low voice:

"Yes. I know. . . ."

Then with a rapid change of manner, he asked:

"What made you come to England?"

Pilar replied with a certain demureness.

"I am going to stay with my relations—with my English relations."

"I see."

He leaned back in his seat, studying her—wondering what these English relations of whom she spoke were like—wondering what they would make of this Spanish stranger . . . trying to picture her in the midst of some sober British family at Christmastime.

Pilar asked: "Is it nice, South Africa, yes?"

He began to talk to her about South Africa. She listened with the pleased attention of a child hearing a story. He enjoyed her näive but shrewd questions and amused himself by making a kind of exaggerated fairy story of it all.

The return of the proper occupants of the carriage put an end to this diversion. He rose, smiled into her eyes, and made his way out again into the corridor.

As he stood back for a minute in the doorway, to allow an elderly lady to come in, his eyes fell on the label of Pilar's obviously foreign straw case. He read the name with interest—Miss Pilar Estravados—then as his eye caught the address it widened to incredulity and some other feeling—Gorston Hall, Longdale, Addlesfield.

He half turned, staring at the girl with a new expression—puzzled, resentful, suspicious . . . He went out into the corridor and stood there smoking a cigarette and frowning to himself. . . .

III

In the big blue and gold drawing room at Gorston Hall, Alfred Lee and Lydia, his wife, sat discussing their plans for Christmas. Alfred was a squarely built man of middle age with a gentle face and mild brown eyes. His voice when he spoke was quiet and precise with a very clear enunciation. His head was sunk into his shoulders and he gave a curious impression of inertia. Lydia, his wife, was an energetic, lean greyhound of a woman. She was amazingly thin, but all her movements had a swift, startled grace about them.

There was no beauty in her careless, haggard face, but it had distinction. Her voice was charming.

Alfred said:

“Father insists! There’s nothing else to it.”

Lydia controlled a sudden impatient movement. She said:

“Must you always give in to him?”

“He’s a very old man, my dear—”

“Oh, I know—I know!”

“He expects to have his own way.”

Lydia said dryly:

“Naturally, since he has always had it! But some time or other, Alfred, you will have to make a stand.”

“What do you mean, Lydia?”

He stared at her, so palpably upset and startled, that for a moment she bit her lip and seemed doubtful whether to go on.

Alfred Lee repeated:

“What do you mean, Lydia?”

She shrugged her thin, graceful shoulders.

She said, trying to choose her words cautiously:

“Your father is—inclined to be—tyrannical—”

“He’s old.”

“And will grow older. And consequently more tyrannical. Where will it end? Already he dictates our lives to us completely. We can’t make a plan of our own! If we do, it is always liable to be upset.”

Alfred said:

“Father expects to come first. He is very good to us, remember.”

“Oh! good to us!”

“Very good to us.”

Alfred spoke with a trace of sternness.

“Lydia said calmly:

“You mean financially?”

“Yes. His own wants are very simple. But he never grudges us money. You can spend what you like on dress and on this house, and the bills are paid without a murmur. He gave us a new car only last week.”

"As far as money goes, your father is very generous, I admit," said Lydia. "But in return he expects us to behave like slaves."

"Slaves?"

"That's the word I used. You are his slave, Alfred. If we have planned to go away and Father suddenly wishes us not to go, you cancel your arrangements and remain without a murmur! If the whim takes him to send us away, we go . . . We have no lives of our own—no independence."

Her husband said distressfully:

"I wish you wouldn't talk like this, Lydia. It is very ungrateful. My father has done everything for us. . . ."

She bit off a retort that was on her lips. She shrugged those thin, graceful shoulders once more.

Alfred said:

"You know, Lydia, the old man is very fond of you—"

His wife said clearly and distinctly:

"I am not at all fond of him."

"Lydia, it distresses me to hear you say things like that. It is so unkind—"

"Perhaps. But sometimes a compulsion comes over one to speak the truth."

"If Father guessed—"

“Your father knows perfectly well that I do not like him! It amuses him, I think.”

“Really, Lydia, I am sure you are wrong there. He has often told me how charming your manner to him is.”

“Naturally I’ve always been polite. I always shall be. I’m just letting you know what my real feelings are. I dislike your father, Alfred. I think he is a malicious and tyrannical old man. He bullies you and presumes on your affection for him. You ought to have stood up to him years ago.”

Alfred said sharply:

“That will do, Lydia. Please don’t say any more.”

She sighed.

“I’m sorry. Perhaps I was wrong . . . Let’s talk of our Christmas arrangements. Do you think your brother David will really come?”

“Why not?”

She shook her head doubtfully.

“David is—queer. He’s not been inside the house for years, remember. He was so devoted to your mother—he’s got some feeling about this place.”

“David always got on Father’s nerves,” said Alfred, “with his music and his dreamy ways. Father was, perhaps, a bit hard on him sometimes. But I think David and Hilda will come all right. Christmastime, you know.”

“Peace and goodwill,” said Lydia. Her delicate mouth curved ironically. “I wonder! George and Magdalene are coming. They said they would probably arrive tomorrow. I’m afraid Magdalene will be frightfully bored.”

Alfred said with some slight annoyance:

“Why my brother George ever married a girl twenty years younger than himself I can’t think! George was always a fool!”

“He’s very successful in his career,” said Lydia. “His constituents like him. I believe Magdalene works quite hard politically for him.”

Alfred said slowly:

“I don’t think I like her very much. She is very good-looking—but I sometimes think she is like one of those beautiful pears one gets—they have a rosy flush and a rather waxen appearance—” He shook his head.

“And they’re bad inside?” said Lydia. “How funny you should say that, Alfred!”

“Why funny?”

She answered:

“Because—usually—you are such a gentle soul. You hardly ever say an unkind thing about anyone. I get annoyed with you sometimes because you’re not sufficiently—oh, what shall I say?—sufficiently suspicious—not worldly enough!”

Her husband smiled.

“The world, I always think, is as you yourself make it.”

Lydia said sharply:

“No! Evil is not only in one’s mind. Evil exists! You seem to have no consciousness of the evil in the world. I have. I can feel it. I’ve always felt it—here in this house—” She bit her lip and turned away.

Alfred said, “Lydia—”

But she raised a quick admonitory hand, her eyes looking past him at something over his shoulder. Alfred turned.

A dark man with a smooth face was standing there deferentially.

Lydia said sharply:

“What is it, Horbury?”

Horbury’s voice was low, a mere deferential murmur.

“It’s Mr. Lee, madam. He asked me to tell you that there would be two more guests arriving for Christmas, and would you have rooms prepared for them.”

Lydia said, “Two more guests?”

Horbury said smoothly, “Yes, madam, another gentleman and a young lady.”

Alfred said wonderingly: “A young lady?”

“That’s what Mr. Lee said, sir.”

Lydia said quickly:

“I will go up and see him—”

Horbury made one little step, it was a mere ghost of a movement but it stopped Lydia’s rapid progress automatically.

“Excuse me, madam, but Mr. Lee is having his afternoon sleep. He asked specifically that he should not be disturbed.”

“I see,” said Alfred. “Of course we won’t disturb him.”

“Thank you, sir.” Horbury withdrew.

Lydia said vehemently:

“How I dislike that man! He creeps about the house like a cat! One never hears him going or coming.”

“I don’t like him very much either. But he knows his job. It’s not so easy to get a good male nurse attendant. And Father likes him, that’s the main thing.”

“Yes, that’s the main thing, as you say. Alfred, what is this about a young lady? What young lady?”

Her husband shook his head.

“I can’t imagine. I can’t even think of anyone it might be likely to be.”

They stared at each other. Then Lydia said, with a sudden twist of her expressive mouth:

“Do you know what I think, Alfred?”

“What?”

“I think your father has been bored lately. I think he is planning a little Christmas diversion for himself.”

“By introducing two strangers into a family gathering?”

“Oh! I don’t know what the details are—but I do fancy that your father is preparing to—amuse himself.”

“I hope he will get some pleasure out of it,” said Alfred gravely. “Poor old chap, tied by the leg, an invalid—after the adventurous life he has led.”

Lydia said slowly:

“After the—adventurous life he has led.”

The pause she made before the adjective gave it some special though obscure significance. Alfred seemed to feel it. He flushed and looked unhappy.

She cried out suddenly:

“How he ever had a son like you, I can’t imagine! You two are poles apart. And he fascinates you—you simply worship him!”

Alfred said with a trace of vexation:

"Aren't you going a little far, Lydia? It's natural, I should say, for a son to love his father. It would be very unnatural not to do so."

Lydia said:

"In that case, most of the members of this family are—unnatural! Oh, don't let's argue! I apologize. I've hurt your feelings, I know. Believe me, Alfred, I really didn't mean to do that. I admire you enormously for your—your—fidelity. Loyalty is such a rare virtue in these days. Let us say, shall we, that I am jealous? Women are supposed to be jealous of their mothers-in-law—why not, then, of their fathers-in-law?"

He put a gentle arm round her.

"Your tongue runs away with you, Lydia. There's no reason for you to be jealous."

She gave him a quick remorseful kiss, a delicate caress on the tip of his ear.

"I know. All the same, Alfred, I don't believe I should have been in the least jealous of your mother. I wish I'd known her."

"She was a poor creature," he said.

His wife looked at him interestedly.

"So that's how she struck you . . . as a poor creature . . . That's interesting."

He said dreamily:

“I remember her as nearly always ill . . . Often in tears . . .” He shook his head. “She had no spirit.”

Still staring at him, she murmured very softly:

“How odd. . . .”

But as he turned a questioning glance on her, she shook her head quickly and changed the subject.

“Since we are not allowed to know who our mysterious guests are I shall go out and finish my garden.”

“It’s very cold, my dear, a biting wind.”

“I’ll wrap up warmly.”

She left the room. Alfred Lee, left alone, stood for some minutes motionless, frowning a little to himself, then he walked over to the big window at the end of the room. Outside was a terrace running the whole length of the house. Here, after a minute or two, he saw Lydia emerge, carrying a flat basket. She was wearing a big blanket coat. She set down the basket and began to work at a square stone sink slightly raised above ground level.

Her husband watched for some time. At last he went out of the room, fetched himself a coat and muffler, and emerged on to the terrace by a side door. As he walked along he passed various other stone sinks arranged as miniature gardens, all the products of Lydia’s agile fingers.

One represented a desert scene with smooth yellow sand, a little clump of green palm trees in coloured tin, and a procession of camels with one or two little Arab figures. Some primitive mud houses had been constructed of plasticine. There was an Italian garden with terraces and formal beds with flowers in coloured sealing wax. There was an Arctic one, too, with clumps of green glass for icebergs, and a little cluster of penguins. Next came a Japanese garden with a couple of beautiful little stunted trees, looking glass arranged for water, and bridges modelled out of plasticine.

He came at last to stand beside her where she was at work. She had laid down blue paper and covered it over with glass. Round this were lumps of rock piled up. At the moment she was pouring out coarse pebbles from a little bag and forming them into a beach. Between the rocks were some small cactuses.

Lydia was murmuring to herself:

“Yes, that’s exactly right—exactly what I want.”

Alfred said:

“What’s this latest work of art?”

She started, for she had not heard him come up.

“This? Oh, it’s the Dead Sea, Alfred. Do you like it?”

He said, “It’s rather arid, isn’t it? Oughtn’t there to be more vegetation?”

She shook her head.

“It’s my idea of the Dead Sea. It is dead, you see—”

"It's not so attractive as some of the others."

"It's not meant to be specially attractive."

Footsteps sounded on the terrace. An elderly butler, white-haired and slightly bowed, was coming towards them.

"Mrs. George Lee on the telephone, madam. She says will it be convenient if she and Mr. George arrive by the five twenty tomorrow?"

"Yes, tell her that will be quite all right."

"Thank you, madam."

The butler hurried away. Lydia looked after him with a softened expression on her face.

"Dear old Tressilian. What a standby he is! I can't imagine what we should do without him."

Alfred agreed.

"He's one of the old school. He's been with us nearly forty years. He's devoted to us all."

Lydia nodded.

"Yes. He's like the faithful old retainers of fiction. I believe he'd lie himself blue in the face if it was necessary to protect one of the family!"

Alfred said:

“I believe he would . . . Yes, I believe he would.”

Lydia smoothed over the last bit of her shingle.

“There,” she said. “That’s ready.”

“Ready?” Alfred looked puzzled.

She laughed.

“For Christmas, silly! For this sentimental family Christmas we’re going to have.”

IV

David was reading the letter. Once he screwed it up into a ball and thrust it away from him. Then, reaching for it, he smoothed it out and read it again.

Quietly, without saying anything, his wife, Hilda, watched him. She noted the jerking muscle (or was it a nerve?) in his temple, the slight tremor of the long delicate hands, the nervous spasmodic movements of his whole body. When he pushed aside the lock of fair hair that always tended to stray down over his forehead and looked across at her with appealing blue eyes she was ready.

“Hilda, what shall we do about it?”

Hilda hesitated a minute before speaking. She had heard the appeal in his voice. She knew how dependent he was upon her—had always been ever since their marriage—knew that she could probably influence his decision finally and decisively. But for just that reason she was chary of pronouncing anything too final.

She said, and her voice had the calm, soothing quality that can be heard in the voice of an experienced nannie in a nursery:

"It depends on how you feel about it, David."

A broad woman, Hilda, not beautiful, but with a certain magnetic quality. Something about her like a Dutch picture. Something warming and endearing in the sound of her voice. Something strong about her—the vital hidden strength that appeals to weakness. An overstout dumpy middle-aged woman—not clever—not brilliant—but with something about her that you couldn't pass over. Force! Hilda Lee had force!

David got up and began pacing up and down. His hair was practically untouched by grey. He was strangely boyish-looking. His face had the mild quality of a Burne Jones knight. It was, somehow, not very real. . . .

He said, and his voice was wistful:

"You know how I feel about it, Hilda. You must."

"I'm not sure."

"But I've told you—I've told you again and again! How I hate it all—the house and the country round and everything! It brings back nothing but misery. I hated every moment that I spent there! When I think of it—of all that she suffered—my mother . . ."

His wife nodded sympathetically.

"She was so sweet, Hilda, and so patient. Lying there, often in pain, but bearing it—enduring everything. And when I think of my father"—his face darkened—"bringing all that misery into her life—humiliating her—boasting of his love affairs—constantly unfaithful to her and never troubling to conceal it."

Hilda Lee said:

"She should not have put up with it. She should have left him."

He said with a touch of reproof:

"She was too good to do that. She thought it was her duty to remain. Besides, it was her home—where else should she go?"

"She could have made a life of her own."

David said fretfully:

"Not in those days! You don't understand. Women didn't behave like that. They put up with things. They endured patiently. She had us to consider. Even if she divorced my father, what would have happened? He would probably have married again. There might have been a second family. Our interests might have gone to the wall. She had to think of all those considerations."

Hilda did not answer.

David went on:

"No, she did right. She was a saint! She endured to the end—uncomplainingly."

Hilda said, "Not quite uncomplainingly or you would not know so much, David!"

He said softly, his face lighting up:

“Yes—she told me things—She knew how I loved her. When she died—”

He stopped. He ran his hands through his hair.

“Hilda, it was awful—horrible! The desolation! She was quite young still, she needn’t have died. He killed her—my father! He was responsible for her dying. He broke her heart. I decided then that I’d not go on living under his roof. I broke away—got away from it all.”

Hilda nodded.

“You were very wise,” she said. “It was the right thing to do.”

David said:

“Father wanted me to go into the works. That would have meant living at home. I couldn’t have stood that. I can’t think how Alfred stands it—how he has stood it all these years.”

“Did he never rebel against it?” asked Hilda with some interest. “I thought you told me something about his having given up some other career.”

David nodded.

“Alfred was going into the army. Father arranged it all. Alfred, the eldest, was to go into some cavalry regiment, Harry was to go into the works, so was I. George was to enter politics.”

“And it didn’t work out like that?”

David shook his head.

“Harry broke all that up! He was always frightfully wild. Got into debt—and all sorts of other troubles. Finally he went off one day with several hundred pounds that didn’t belong to him, leaving a note behind him saying an office stool didn’t suit him and he was going to see the world.”

“And you never heard any more of him?”

“Oh, yes, we did!” David laughed. “We heard quite often! He was always cabling for money from all over the world. He usually got it too!”

“And Alfred?”

“Father made him chuck up the army and come back and go into the works.”

“Did he mind?”

“Very much to begin with. He hated it. But Father could always twist Alfred round his little finger. He’s absolutely under Father’s thumb still, I believe.”

“And you—escaped!” said Hilda.

“Yes. I went to London and studied painting. Father told me plainly that if I went off on a fool’s errand like that I’d get a small allowance from him during his lifetime and nothing when he died. I said I didn’t care. He called me a young fool, and that was that! I’ve never seen him since.”

Hilda said gently:

“And you haven’t regretted it?”

“No, indeed. I realize I shan’t ever get anywhere with my art. I shall never be a great artist—but we’re happy enough in this cottage—we’ve got everything we want—all the essentials. And if I die, well, my life’s insured for you.”

He paused and then said:

“And now—this!”

He struck the letter with his open hand.

“I am sorry your father ever wrote that letter, if it upsets you so much,” said Hilda.

David went on as though he had not heard her.

“Asking me to bring my wife for Christmas, expressing a hope that we may be all together for Christmas; a united family! What can it mean?”

Hilda said:

“Need it mean anything more than it says?”

He looked at her questioningly.

“I mean,” she said, smiling, “that your father is growing old. He’s beginning to feel sentimental about family ties. That does happen, you know.”

“I suppose it does,” said David slowly.

“He’s an old man and he’s lonely.”

He gave her a quick look.

“You want me to go, don’t you, Hilda?”

She said slowly:

“It seems a pity—not to answer an appeal. I’m old-fashioned, I dare say, but why not have peace and goodwill at Christmastime?”

“After all I’ve told you?”

“I know, dear, I know. But all that’s in the past. It’s all done and finished with.”

“Not for me.”

“No, because you won’t let it die. You keep the past alive in your own mind.”

“I can’t forget.”

“You won’t forget—that’s what you mean, David.”

His mouth set in a firm line.

"We're like that, we Lees. We remember things for years—brood about them, keep memory green."

Hilda said with a touch of impatience:

"Is that anything to be proud of? I do not think so!"

He looked thoughtfully at her, a touch of reserve in his manner.

He said: "You don't attach much value to loyalty, then—loyalty to a memory?"

Hilda said:

"I believe the present matters—not the past! The past must go. If we seek to keep the past alive, we end, I think, by distorting it. We see it in exaggerated terms—a false perspective."

"I can remember every word and every incident of those days perfectly," said David passionately.

"Yes, but you shouldn't, my dear! It isn't natural to do so! You're applying the judgment of a boy to those days instead of looking back on them with the more temperate outlook of a man."

"What difference would that make?" demanded David.

Hilda hesitated. She was aware of unwisdom in going on, and yet there were things she badly wanted to say.

"I think," she said, "that you're seeing your father as a bogy! Probably, if you were to see him now, you would realize that he was only a very ordinary man; a man, perhaps, whose passions ran away with him, a man whose life was far from blameless, but nevertheless merely a man—not a kind of inhuman monster!”

“You don’t understand! His treatment of my mother—”

Hilda said gravely:

“There is a certain kind of meekness—of submission—brings out the worst in a man—whereas that same man, faced by spirit and determination, might be a different creature!”

“So you say it was her fault—”

Hilda interrupted him.

“No, of course I don’t! I’ve no doubt your father treated your mother very badly indeed, but marriage is an extraordinary thing—and I doubt if any outsider—even a child of the marriage—has the right to judge. Besides, all this resentment on your part now cannot help your mother. It is all gone—it is behind you! What is left now is an old man, in feeble health, asking his son to come home for Christmas.”

“And you want me to go?”

Hilda hesitated, then she suddenly made up her mind. “Yes,” she said. “I do. I want you to go and lay the bogy once and for all.”

V

George Lee, M.P. for Westeringham, was a somewhat corpulent gentleman of forty-one. His eyes were pale blue and slightly prominent with a suspicious expression, he had a heavy jowl, and a slow pedantic utterance.

He said now in a weighty manner:

“I have told you, Magdalene, that I think it my duty to go.”

His wife shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

She was a slender creature, a platinum blonde with plucked eyebrows and a smooth egglike face. It could, on occasions, look quite blank and devoid of any expression whatever. She was looking like that now.

“Darling,” she said, “it will be perfectly grim, I am sure of it.”

“Moreover,” said George Lee, and his face lit up as an attractive idea occurred to him, “it will enable us to save considerably. Christmas is always an expensive time. We can put the servants on board wages.”

“Oh, well!” said Magdalene. “After all, Christmas is pretty grim anywhere!”

“I suppose,” said George, pursuing his own line of thought, “they will expect to have a Christmas dinner? A nice piece of beef, perhaps, instead of a turkey.”

“Who?” The servants? Oh, George, don’t fuss so. You’re always worrying about money.”

“Somebody has to worry,” said George.

“Yes, but it’s absurd to pinch and scrape in all these little ways. Why don’t you make your father give you some more money?”

“He already gives me a very handsome allowance.”

“It’s awful to be completely dependent on your father, as you are! He ought to settle some money on you outright.”

“That’s not his way of doing things.”

Magdalene looked at him. Her hazel eyes were suddenly sharp and keen. The expressionless egglike face showed sudden meaning.

“He’s frightfully rich, isn’t he, George? A kind of millionaire, isn’t he?”

“A millionaire twice over, I believe.”

Magdalene gave an envious sigh.

“How did he make it all? South Africa, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, he made a big fortune there in his early days. Mainly diamonds.”

“Thrilling!” said Magdalene.

“Then he came to England and started in business and his fortune has actually doubled or trebled itself, I believe.”

“What will happen when he dies?” asked Magdalene.

“Father’s never said much on the subject. Of course one can’t exactly ask. I should imagine that the bulk of his money will go to

Alfred and myself. Alfred, of course, will get the larger share.”

“You’ve got other brothers, haven’t you?”

“Yes, there’s my brother David. I don’t fancy he will get much. He went off to do art or some tomfoolery of that kind. I believe Father warned him that he would cut him out of his will and David said he didn’t care.”

“How silly!” said Magdalene with scorn.

“There was my sister Jennifer too. She went off with a foreigner—a Spanish artist—one of David’s friends. But she died just over a year ago. She left a daughter, I believe. Father might leave a little money to her, but nothing much. And of course there’s Harry—”

He stopped, slightly embarrassed.

“Harry?” said Magdalene, surprised. “Who is Harry?”

“Ah—er—my brother.”

“I never knew you had another brother.”

“My dear, he wasn’t a great—er—credit—to us. We don’t mention him. His behaviour was disgraceful. We haven’t heard anything of him for some years now. He’s probably dead.”

Magdalene laughed suddenly.

“What is it? What are you laughing at?”

Magdalene said:

"I was only thinking how funny it was that you—you, George, should have a disreputable brother! You're so very respectable."

"I should hope so," said George coldly.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Your father isn't—very respectable, George."

"Really, Magdalene!"

"Sometimes the things he says make me feel quite uncomfortable."

George said:

"Really, Magdalene, you surprise me. Does—er—does Lydia feel the same?"

"He doesn't say the same kind of things to Lydia," said Magdalene. She added angrily, "No, he never says them to her. I can't think why not."

George glanced at her quickly and then glanced away.

"Oh, well," he said vaguely. "One must make allowances. At Father's age—and with his health being so bad—"

He paused. His wife asked:

"Is he really—pretty ill?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. He's remarkably tough. All the same, since he wants to have his family round him at Christmas, I think we are quite right to go. It may be his last Christmas."

She said sharply:

“You say that, George, but really, I suppose, he may live for years?”

Slightly taken aback, her husband stammered:

“Yes—yes, of course he may.”

Magdalene turned away.

“Oh, well,” she said, “I suppose we’re doing the right thing by going.”

“I have no doubt about it.”

“But I hate it! Alfred’s so dull, and Lydia snubs me.”

“Nonsense.”

“She does. And I hate that beastly manservant.”

“Old Tressilian?”

“No, Horbury. Sneaking round like a cat and smirking.”

“Really, Magdalene, I can’t see that Horbury can affect you in any way!”

“He just gets on my nerves, that’s all. But don’t let’s bother. We’ve got to go, I can see that. Won’t do to offend the old man.”

“No—no, that’s just the point. About the servants’ Christmas dinner—”

“Not now, George, some other time. I’ll just ring up Lydia and tell her that we’ll come by the five twenty tomorrow.”

Magdalene left the room precipitately. After telephoning she went up to her own room and sat down in front of the desk. She let down the flap and rummaged in its various pigeonholes. Cascades of bills came tumbling out. Magdalene sorted through them, trying to arrange them in some kind of order. Finally, with an impatient sigh, she bundled them up and thrust them back whence they had come. She passed a hand over her smooth platinum head.

“What on earth am I to do?” she murmured.

VI

On the first floor of Gorston Hall a long passage led to a big room overlooking the front drive. It was a room furnished in the more flamboyant of old-fashioned styles. It had heavy brocaded wallpaper, rich leather armchairs, large vases embossed with dragons, sculptures in bronze . . . Everything in it was magnificent, costly and solid.

In a big grandfather armchair, the biggest and most imposing of all the chairs, sat the thin, shrivelled figure of an old man. His long clawlike hands rested on the arms of the chair. A gold-mounted stick was by his side. He wore an old shabby blue dressing gown. On his feet were carpet slippers. His hair was white and the skin of his face was yellow.

A shabby, insignificant figure, one might have thought. But the nose, aquiline and proud, and the eyes, dark and intensely alive, might cause an observer to alter his opinion. Here was fire and life and vigour.

Old Simeon Lee cackled to himself, a sudden, high cackle of amusement.

He said:

“You gave my message to Mrs. Alfred, hey?”

Horbury was standing beside his chair. He replied in his soft deferential voice:

“Yes, sir.”

“Exactly in the words I told you? Exactly, mind?”

“Yes, sir. I didn’t make a mistake, sir.”

“No—you don’t make mistakes. You’d better not make mistakes either—or you’ll regret it! And what did she say, Horbury? What did Mr. Alfred say?”

Quietly, unemotionally, Horbury repeated what had passed. The old man cackled again and rubbed his hands together.

“Splendid . . . First rate . . . They’ll have been thinking and wondering—all the afternoon! Splendid! I’ll have ’em up now. Go and get them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Horbury walked noiselessly across the room and went out.

“And, Horbury—”

The old man looked round, then cursed to himself.

“Fellow moves like a cat. Never know where he is.”

He sat quite still in his chair, his fingers caressing his chin till there was a tap on the door, and Alfred and Lydia came in.

“Ah, there you are, there you are. Sit here, Lydia, my dear, by me. What a nice colour you’ve got.”

“I’ve been out in the cold. It makes one’s cheeks burn afterwards.”

Alfred said:

“How are you, Father, did you have a good rest this afternoon?”

“First rate—first rate. Dreamt about the old days! That was before I settled down and became a pillar of society.”

He cackled with sudden laughter.

His daughter-in-law sat silently smiling with polite attention.

Alfred said:

“What’s this, Father, about two extra being expected for Christmas?”

“Ah, that! Yes, I must tell you about that. It’s going to be a grand Christmas for me this year—a grand Christmas. Let me see, George is coming and Magdalene—”

Lydia said:

“Yes, they are arriving tomorrow by the five twenty.”

Old Simeon said:

“Poor stick, George! Nothing but a gasbag! Still, he is my son.”

Alfred said:

“His constituents like him.”

Simeon cackled again.

“They probably think he’s honest. Honest! There never was a Lee who was honest yet.”

“Oh, come now, Father.”

“I except you, my boy. I except you.”

“And David?” asked Lydia.

“David now. I’m curious to see the boy after all these years. He was a namby-pamby youngster. Wonder what his wife is like? At any rate he hasn’t married a girl twenty years younger than himself, like that fool George!”

“Hilda wrote a very nice letter,” said Lydia. “I’ve just had a wire from her confirming it and saying they are definitely arriving tomorrow.”

Her father-in-law looked at her, a keen, penetrating glance.

He laughed.

“I never get any change out of Lydia,” he said. “I’ll say this for you, Lydia, you’re a well-bred woman. Breeding tells. I know that well enough. A funny thing, though, heredity. There’s only one of you that’s taken after me—only one out of all the litter.”

His eyes danced.

“Now guess who’s coming for Christmas. I’ll give you three guesses and I’ll bet you a fiver you won’t get the answer.”

He looked from one face to the other. Alfred said frowning:

“Horbury said you expected a young lady.”

“That intrigued you—yes, I dare say it did. Pilar will be arriving any minute now. I gave orders for the car to go and meet her.”

Alfred said sharply:

“Pilar?”

Simeon said:

“Pilar Estravados. Jennifer’s girl. My granddaughter. I wonder what she’ll be like.”

Alfred cried out:

“Good heavens, Father, you never told me. . . .”

The old man was grinning.

“No, I thought I’d keep it a secret! Got Charlton to write out and fix things.”

Alfred repeated, his tone hurt and reproachful:

“You never told me. . . .”

His father said, still grinning wickedly:

“It would have spoilt the surprise! Wonder what it will be like to have young blood under this roof again? I never saw Estravados. Wonder which the girl takes after—her mother or her father?”

“Do you really think it’s wise, Father,” began Alfred. “Taking everything into consideration—”

The old man interrupted him.

“Safety—safety—you play for safety too much, Alfred! Always have! That hasn’t been my way! Do what you want and be damned to it! That’s what I say! The girl’s my granddaughter—the only grandchild in the family! I don’t care what her father was or what he did! She’s my flesh and blood! And she’s coming to live here in my house.”

Lydia said sharply: “She’s coming to live here?”

He darted a quick look at her. “Do you object?”

She shook her head. She said smiling:

“I couldn’t very well object to your asking someone to your own house, could I? No, I was wondering about—her.”

“About her—what d’you mean?”

“Whether she would be happy here.”

Old Simeon flung up his head.

"She's not got a penny in the world. She ought to be thankful!"

Lydia shrugged her shoulders.

Simeon turned to Alfred:

"You see? It's going to be a grand Christmas! All my children round me. All my children! There, Alfred, there's your clue. Now guess who the other visitor is."

Alfred stared at him.

"All my children! Guess, boy! Harry, of course! Your brother Harry!"

Alfred had gone very pale. He stammered:

"Harry—not Harry—"

"Harry himself!"

"But we thought he was dead!"

"Not he!"

"You—you are having him back here? After everything?"

"The prodigal son, eh? You're right. The fatted calf! We must kill the fatted calf, Alfred. We must give him a grand welcome."

Alfred said:

"He treated you—all of us—disgracefully. He—"

"No need to recite his crimes! It's a long list. But Christmas, you'll remember, is the season of forgiveness! We'll welcome the prodigal home."

Alfred rose. He murmured:

"This has been—rather a shock. I never dreamt that Harry would ever come inside these walls again."

Simeon leaned forward.

"You never liked Harry, did you?" he said softly.

"After the way he behaved to you—"

Simeon cackled. He said:

"Ah, but bygones must be bygones. That's the spirit for Christmas, isn't it, Lydia?"

Lydia, too, had gone pale. She said dryly:

"I see that you have thought a good deal about Christmas this year."

"I want my family round me. Peace and goodwill. I'm an old man. Are you going, my dear?"

Alfred had hurried out. Lydia paused a moment before following him.

Simeon nodded his head after the retreating figure.

“It’s upset him. He and Harry never got on. Harry used to jeer at Alfred. Called him old Slow and Sure.”

Lydia’s lips parted. She was about to speak, then, as she saw the old man’s eager expression, she checked herself. Her self-control, she saw, disappointed him. The perception of that fact enabled her to say:

“The hare and the tortoise. Ah, well, the tortoise wins the race.”

“Not always,” said Simeon. “Not always, my dear Lydia.”

She said, still smiling:

“Excuse me, I must go after Alfred. Sudden excitements always upset him.”

Simeon cackled.

“Yes, Alfred doesn’t like changes. He always was a regular sobersides.”

Lydia said:

“Alfred is very devoted to you.”

“That seems odd to you, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes,” said Lydia, “it does.”

She left the room. Simeon looked after her.

He chuckled softly and rubbed his palms together. “Lots of fun,” he said. “Lots of fun still. I’m going to enjoy this Christmas.”

With an effort he pulled himself upright, and with the help of his stick, shuffled across the room.

He went to a big safe that stood at the corner of the room. He twirled the handle of the combination. The door came open and, with shaking fingers, he felt inside.

He lifted out a small wash-leather bag, and opening it, let a stream of uncut diamonds pass through his fingers.

“Well, my beauties, well . . . Still the same—still my old friends. Those were good days—good days . . . They shan’t carve you and cut you about, my friends. You shan’t hang round the necks of women or sit on their fingers or hang on their ears. You’re mine! My old friends! We know a thing or two, you and I. I’m old, they say, and ill, but I’m not done for! Lots of life in the old dog yet. And there’s still some fun to be got out of life. Still some fun—”

PART TWO

DECEMBER 23RD

Tressilian went to answer the doorbell. It had been an unusually aggressive peal, and now, before he could make his slow way across the hall, it pealed out again.

Tressilian flushed. An ill-mannered, impatient way of ringing the bell at a gentleman’s house! If it was a fresh lot of those carol singers he’d give them a piece of his mind.

Through the frosted glass of the upper half of the door he saw a silhouette—a big man in a slouch hat. He opened the door. As he had thought—a cheap, flashy stranger—nasty pattern of suit he was wearing—loud! Some impudent begging fellow!

“Blessed if it isn’t Tressilian,” said the stranger. “How are you, Tressilian?”

Tressilian stared—took a deep breath—stared again. That bold arrogant jaw, the high-bridged nose, the rollicking eye. Yes, they had all been there three years ago. More subdued then. . . .

He said with a gasp:

“Mr. Harry!”

Harry Lee laughed.

“Looks as though I’d given you quite a shock. Why? I’m expected, aren’t I?”

“Yes, indeed, sir. Certainly, sir.”

“Then why the surprise act?” Harry stepped back a foot or two and looked up at the house—a good solid mass of red brick, unimaginative but solid.

“Just the same ugly old mansion,” he remarked. “Still standing, though, that’s the main thing. How’s my father, Tressilian?”

“He’s somewhat of an invalid, sir. Keeps his room, and can’t get about much. But he’s wonderfully well, considering.”

“The old sinner!”

Harry Lee came inside, let Tressilian remove his scarf and take the somewhat theatrical hat.

“How’s my dear brother Alfred, Tressilian?”

“He’s very well, sir.”

Harry grinned.

“Looking forward to seeing me? Eh?”

“I expect so, sir.”

“I don’t! Quite the contrary. I bet it’s given him a nasty jolt, my turning up! Alfred and I never did get on. Ever read your Bible, Tressilian?”

“Why, yes, sir, sometimes, sir.”

“Remember the tale of the prodigal’s return? The good brother didn’t like it, remember? Didn’t like it at all! Good old stay-at-home Alfred doesn’t like it either, I bet.”

Tressilian remained silent looking down his nose. His stiffened back expressed protest. Harry clapped him on the shoulder.

“Lead on, old son,” he said. “The fatted calf awaits me! Lead me right to it.”

Tressilian murmured:

“If you will come this way into the drawing room, sir. I am not quite sure where everyone is . . . They were unable to send to meet you, sir, not knowing the time of your arrival.”

Harry nodded. He followed Tressilian along the hall, turning his head to look about him as he went.

“All the old exhibits in their place, I see,” he remarked. “I don’t believe anything has changed since I went away twenty years ago.”

He followed Tressilian into the drawing room. The old man murmured:

“I will see if I can find Mr. or Mrs. Alfred,” and hurried out.

Harry Lee had marched into the room and had then stopped, staring at the figure who was seated on one of the windowsills. His eyes roamed incredulously over the black hair and the creamy exotic pallor.

“Good Lord!” he said. “Are you my father’s seventh and most beautiful wife?”

Pilar slipped down and came towards him.

“I am Pilar Estravados,” she announced. “And you must be my Uncle Harry, my mother’s brother.”

Harry said, staring:

“So that’s who you are! Jenny’s daughter.”

Pilar said: “Why did you ask me if I was your father’s seventh wife? Has he really had six wives?”

Harry laughed.

“No, I believe he’s only had one official one. Well—Pil—what’s your name?”

“Pilar, yes.”

“Well, Pilar, it really gives me quite a turn to see something like you blooming in this mausoleum.”

“This—maus—please?”

“This museum of stuffed dummies! I always thought this house was lousy! Now I see it again I think it’s lousier than ever!”

Pilar said in a shocked voice:

“Oh, no, it is very handsome here! The furniture is good and the carpets—thick carpets everywhere—and there are lots of ornaments. Everything is very good quality and very, very rich!”

“You’re right there,” said Harry, grinning. He looked at her with amusement. “You know, I can’t help getting a kick out of seeing you in the midst—”

He broke off as Lydia came rapidly into the room.

She came straight to him.

“How d’you do, Harry? I’m Lydia—Alfred’s wife.”

“How de do, Lydia.” He shook hands, examining her intelligent mobile face in a swift glance and approving mentally of the way she walked—very few women moved well.

Lydia in her turn took quick stock of him.

She thought: “He looks a frightful tough—attractive though. I wouldn’t trust him an inch. . . .”

She said smiling:

“How does it look after all these years? Quite different, or very much the same?”

“Pretty much the same.” He looked round him. “This room’s been done over.”

“Oh, many times.”

He said:

“I meant by you. You’ve made it—different.”

“Yes, I expect so. . . .”

He grinned at her, a sudden impish grin that reminded her with a start of the old man upstairs.

“It’s got more class about it now! I remember hearing that old Alfred had married a girl whose people came over with the Conqueror.”

Lydia smiled. She said:

“I believe they did. But they’ve rather run to seed since those days.”

Harry said:

“How’s old Alfred? Just the same blessed old stick-in-the-mud as ever?”

“I’ve no idea whether you will find him changed or not.”

“How are the others? Scattered all over England?”

“No—they’re all here for Christmas, you know.”

Harry’s eyes opened.

“Regular Christmas family reunion? What’s the matter with the old man? He used not to give a damn for sentiment. Don’t remember his caring much for his family, either. He must have changed!”

“Perhaps.” Lydia’s voice was dry.

Pilar was staring, her big eyes wide and interested.

Harry said:

“How’s old George? Still the same skinflint? How he used to howl if he had to part with a halfpenny of his pocket money!”

Lydia said:

"George is in Parliament. He's member for Westeringham."

"What? Popeye in Parliament? Lord, that's good."

Harry threw back his head and laughed.

It was rich stentorian laughter—it sounded uncontrolled and brutal in the confined space of the room. Pilar drew in her breath with a gasp. Lydia flinched a little.

Then, at a movement behind him, Harry broke off his laugh and turned sharply. He had not heard anyone coming in, but Alfred was standing there quietly. He was looking at Harry with an odd expression on his face.

Harry stood a minute, then a slow smile crept to his lips. He advanced a step.

"Why," he said, "it's Alfred!"

Alfred nodded.

"Hallo, Harry," he said.

They stood staring at each other. Lydia caught her breath. She thought:

"How absurd! Like two dogs—looking at each other. . . ."

Pilar's gaze widened even further. She thought to herself:

"How silly they look standing there . . . Why do they not embrace? No, of course the English do not do that. But they might say something. Why do they just look?"

Harry said at last:

"Well, well. Feels funny to be here again!"

"I expect so—yes. A good many years since you—got out."

Harry threw up his head. He drew his finger along the line of his jaw. It was a gesture that was habitual with him. It expressed belligerence.

"Yes," he said. "I'm glad I have come"—he paused to bring out the word with greater significance—"home. . . ."

II

"I've been, I suppose, a very wicked man," said Simeon Lee.

He was leaning back in his chair. His chin was raised and with one finger he was stroking his jaw reflectively. In front of him a big fire glowed and danced. Beside it sat Pilar, a little screen of papier-mâché held in her hand. With it she shielded her face from the blaze. Occasionally she fanned herself with it, using her wrist in a supple gesture. Simeon looked at her with satisfaction.

He went on talking, perhaps more to himself than to the girl, and stimulated by the fact of her presence.

"Yes," he said. "I've been a wicked man. What do you say to that, Pilar?"

Pilar shrugged her shoulders. She said:

“All men are wicked. The nuns say so. That is why one has to pray for them.”

“Ah, but I’ve been more wicked than most.” Simeon laughed. “I don’t regret it, you know. No, I don’t regret anything. I’ve enjoyed myself . . . every minute! They say you repent when you get old. That’s bunkum. I don’t repent. And as I tell you, I’ve done most things . . . all the good old sins! I’ve cheated and stolen and lied . . . lord, yes! And women—always women! Someone told me the other day of an Arab chief who had a bodyguard of forty of his sons—all roughly the same age! Aha! Forty! I don’t know about forty, but I bet I could produce a very fair bodyguard if I went about looking for the brats! Hey, Pilar, what do you think of that? Shocked?”

Pilar stared.

“No, why should I be shocked? Men always desire women. My father, too. That is why wives are so often unhappy and why they go to church and pray.”

Old Simeon was frowning.

“I made Adelaide unhappy,” he said. He spoke almost under his breath, to himself. “Lord, what a woman! Pink and white and pretty as they make ’em when I married her! And afterwards? Always wailing and weeping. It rouses the devil in a man when his wife is always crying . . . She’d no guts, that’s what was the matter with Adelaide. If she’d stood up to me! But she never did—not once. I believed when I married her that I was going to be able to settle down, raise a family—cut loose from the old life. . . .”

His voice died away. He stared—stared into the glowing heart of the fire.

"Raise a family . . . God, what a family!" He gave a sudden shrill pipe of angry laughter. "Look at 'em—look at 'em! Not a child among them—to carry on! What's the matter with them? Haven't they got any of my blood in their veins? Not a son among 'em, legitimate or illegitimate. Alfred, for instance—heavens above, how bored I get with Alfred! Looking at me with his dog's eyes. Ready to do anything I ask. Lord, what a fool! His wife, now—Lydia—I like Lydia. She's got spirit. She doesn't like me, though. No, she doesn't like me. But she has to put up with me for that nincompoop Alfred's sake." He looked over at the girl by the fire. "Pilar—remember—nothing is so boring as devotion."

She smiled at him. He went on, warmed by the presence of her youth and strong femininity.

"George? What's George? A stick! A stuffed codfish! a pompous windbag with no brains and no guts—and mean about money as well! David? David always was a fool—a fool and a dreamer. His mother's boy, that was always David. Only sensible thing he ever did was to marry that solid comfortable-looking woman." He brought down his hand with a bang on the edge of his chair. "Harry's the best of 'em! Poor old Harry, the wrong 'un! But at any rate he's alive!"

Pilar agreed.

"Yes, he is nice. He laughs—laughs out loud—and throws his head back. Oh, yes, I like him very much."

The old man looked at her.

“You do, do you, Pilar? Harry always had a way with the girls. Takes after me there.” He began to laugh, a slow wheezy chuckle. “I’ve had a good life—a very good life. Plenty of everything.”

Pilar said:

“In Spain we have a proverb. It is like this:

“Take what you like and pay for it, says God.”

Simeon beat an appreciative hand on the arm of his chair.

“That’s good. That’s the stuff. Take what you like . . . I’ve done that—all my life—taken what I wanted. . . .”

Pilar said, her voice high and clear, and suddenly arresting:

“And you have paid for it?”

Simeon stopped laughing to himself. He sat up and stared at her. He said, “What’s that you say?”

“I said, have you paid for it, Grandfather?”

Simeon Lee said slowly:

“I—don’t know. . . .”

Then, beating his fist on the arm of the chair, he cried out with sudden anger:

“What makes you say that, girl? What makes you say that?”

Pilar said:

“I—wondered.”

Her hand, holding the screen, was arrested. Her eyes were dark and mysterious. She sat, her head thrown back, conscious of herself, of her womanhood.

Simeon said:

“You devil’s brat . . .”

She said softly:

“But you like me, Grandfather. You like me to sit here with you.”

Simeon said: “Yes, I like it. It’s a long time since I’ve seen anything so young and beautiful . . . It does me good, warms my old bones . . . And you’re my own flesh and blood . . . Good for Jennifer, she turned out to be the best of the bunch after all!”

Pilar sat there smiling.

“Mind you, you don’t fool me,” said Simeon. “I know why you sit here so patiently and listen to me droning on. It’s money—it’s all money . . . Or do you pretend you love your old grandfather?”

Pilar said: “No, I do not love you. But I like you. I like you very much. You must believe that, for it is true. I think you have been wicked, but I like that too. You are more real than the other people in this house. And you have interesting things to say. You have travelled and you have led a life of adventure. If I were a man I would be like that, too.”

Simeon nodded.

"Yes, I believe you would . . . We've gypsy blood in us, so it's always been said. It hasn't shown much in my children—except Harry—but I think it's come out in you. I can be patient, mind you, when it's necessary. I waited once fifteen years to get even with a man who'd done me an injury. That's another characteristic of the Lees—they don't forget! They'll avenge a wrong if they have to wait years to do it. A man swindled me. I waited fifteen years till I saw my chance—and then I struck. I ruined him. Cleaned him right out!"

He laughed softly.

Pilar said:

"That was in South Africa?"

"Yes. A grand country."

"You have been back there, yes?"

"I went back last five years after I married. That was the last time."

"But before that? You were there for many years?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

He began to talk. Pilar, shielding her face, listened.

His voice slowed, wearied. He said:

"Wait, I'll show you something."

He pulled himself carefully to his feet. Then, with his stick, he limped slowly across the room. He opened the big safe. Turning, he beckoned her to him.

“There, look at these. Feel them, let them run through your fingers.”

He looked into her wondering face and laughed.

“Do you know what they are? Diamonds, child, diamonds.”

Pilar’s eyes opened. She said as she bent over:

“But they are little pebbles, that is all.”

Simeon laughed.

“They are uncut diamonds. That is how they are found—like this.”

Pilar asked incredulously:

“And if they were cut they would be real diamonds?”

“Certainly.”

“They would flash and sparkle?”

“Flash and sparkle.”

Pilar said childishly:

“O-o-o, I cannot believe it!”

He was amused.

“It’s quite true.”

“They are valuable?”

“Fairly valuable. Difficult to say before they are cut. Anyway, this little lot is worth several thousands of pounds.”

Pilar said with a space between each word:

“Several—thousands—of—pounds?”

“Say nine or ten thousands—they’re biggish stones, you see.”

Pilar asked, her eyes opening:

“But why do you not sell them, then?”

“Because I like to have them here.”

“But all that money?”

“I don’t need the money.”

“Oh—I see,” Pilar looked impressed.

She said:

“But why do you not have them cut and made beautiful?”

“Because I prefer them like this.” His face was set in a grim line. He turned away and began speaking to himself. “They take me back—the touch of them, the feel of them through my fingers . . . It all comes back to me, the sunshine, and the smell of the veldt, the oxen—old Eb—all the boys—the evenings. . . .”

There was a soft tap on the door.

Simeon said: “Put ’em back in the safe and bang it to.”

Then he called: “Come in.”

Horbury came in, soft and deferential.

He said: “Tea is ready downstairs.”

III

Hilda said: “So there you are, David. I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Don’t let’s stay in this room, it’s so frightfully cold.”

David did not answer for a minute. He was standing looking at a chair, a low chair with faded satin upholstery. He said abruptly:

“That’s her chair . . . the chair she always sat in . . . just the same—it’s just the same. Only faded, of course.”

A little frown creased Hilda’s forehead. She said:

“I see. Do let’s come out of here, David. It’s frightfully cold.”

David took no notice. Looking round, he said:

“She sat in here mostly. I remember sitting on that stool there while she read to me. Jack the Giant Killer—that was it—Jack the Giant Killer. I must have been six years old then.”

Hilda put a firm hand through his arm.

“Come back to the drawing room, dear. There’s no heating in this room.”

He turned obediently, but she felt a little shiver go through him.

“Just the same,” he murmured. “Just the same. As though time had stood still.”

Hilda looked worried. She said in a cheerful determined voice:

“I wonder where the others are? It must be nearly teatime.”

David disengaged his arm and opened another door.

“There used to be a piano in here . . . Oh, yes, here it is! I wonder if it’s in tune.”

He sat down and opened the lid, running his hands lightly over the keys.

“Yes, it’s evidently kept tuned.”

He began to play. His touch was good, the melody flowed out from under his fingers.

Hilda asked: “What is that? I seem to know it, and I can’t quite remember.”

He said: “I haven’t played it for years. She used to play it. One of Mendelssohn’s Songs Without Words.”

The sweet, over-sweet, melody filled the room. Hilda said:

“Play some Mozart, do.”

David shook his head. He began another Mendelssohn.

Then suddenly he brought his hands down upon the keys in a harsh discord. He got up. He was trembling all over. Hilda went to him.

She said: “David—David.”

He said: “It’s nothing—it’s nothing. . . .”

IV

The bell pealed aggressively. Tressilian rose from his seat in the pantry and went slowly out and along to the door.

The bell pealed again. Tressilian frowned. Through the frosted glass of the door he saw the silhouette of a man wearing a slouch hat.

Tressilian passed a hand over his forehead. Something worried him. It was as though everything was happening twice.

Surely this had happened before. Surely—

He drew back the latch and opened the door.

Then the spell broke. The man standing there said:

“Is this where Mr. Simeon Lee lives?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d like to see him, please.”

A faint echo of memory awoke in Tressilian. It was an intonation of voice that he remembered from the old days when Mr. Lee was first in England.

Tressilian shook his head dubiously.

“Mr. Lee is an invalid, sir. He doesn’t see many people now. If you —”

The stranger interrupted.

He drew out an envelope and handed it to the butler.

“Please give this to Mr. Lee.”

“Yes, sir.”

V

Simeon Lee took the envelope. He drew out the single sheet of paper it held. He looked surprised. His eyebrows rose, but he smiled.

“By all that’s wonderful!” he said.

Then to the butler: “Show Mr. Farr up here, Tressilian.”

“Yes, sir.”

Simeon said: “I was just thinking of old Ebenezer Farr. He was my partner out there in Kimberley. Now here’s his son come along!”

Tressilian reappeared. He announced: “Mr. Farr.”

Stephen Farr came in with a trace of nervousness. He disguised it by putting on a little extra swagger. He said—and just for the moment his South African accent was more marked than usual: “Mr. Lee?”

“I’m glad to see you. So you’re Eb’s boy?”

Stephen Farr grinned rather sheepishly.

He said: “My first visit to the old country. Father always told me to look you up if I did come.”

“Quite right.” The old man looked round. “This is my granddaughter, Pilar Estravados.”

“How do you do?” said Pilar demurely.

Stephen Farr thought with a touch of admiration:

“Cool little devil. She was surprised to see me, but it only showed for a flash.”

He said, rather heavily: “I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Estravados.”

“Thank you,” said Pilar.

Simeon Lee said: “Sit down and tell me all about yourself. Are you in England for long?”

“Oh, I shan’t hurry myself now I’ve really got here!”

He laughed, throwing his head back.

Simeon Lee said: “Quite right. You must stay here with us for a while.”

“Oh, look here, sir. I can’t butt in like that. It’s only two days to Christmas.”

“You must spend Christmas with us—unless you’ve got other plans?”

“Well, no, I haven’t, but I don’t like—”

Simeon said: “That’s settled.” He turned his head. “Pilar?”

“Yes, Grandfather.”

“Go and tell Lydia we shall have another guest. Ask her to come up here.”

Pilar left the room. Stephen’s eyes followed her. Simeon noted the fact with amusement.

He said: “You’ve come straight here from South Africa?”

“Pretty well.”

They began to talk of that country.

Lydia entered a few minutes later.

Simeon said: “This is Stephen Farr, son of my old friend and partner, Ebenezer Farr. He’s going to be with us for Christmas if you can find room for him.”

Lydia smiled.

“Of course.” Her eyes took in the stranger’s appearance. His bronzed face and blue eyes and the easy backward tilt of his head.

“My daughter-in-law,” said Simeon.

Stephen said: “I feel rather embarrassed—butting in on a family party like this.”

“You’re one of the family, my boy,” said Simeon. “Think of yourself as that.”

“You’re too kind, sir.”

Pilar reentered the room. She sat down quietly by the fire and picked up the hand screen. She used it as a fan, slowly tilting her wrist to and fro. Her eyes were demure and downcast.

PART THREE

DECEMBER 24TH

“Do you really want me to stay on here, Father?” asked Harry. He tilted his head back. “I’m stirring up rather a hornet’s nest, you know.”

“What do you mean?” asked Simeon sharply.

“Brother Alfred,” said Harry. “Good brother Alfred! He, if I may say so, resents my presence here.”

“The devil he does!” snapped Simeon. “I’m master in this house.”

“All the same, sir, I expect you’re pretty dependent on Alfred. I don’t want to upset—”

“You’ll do as I tell you,” snapped his father.

Harry yawned.

“Don’t know that I shall be able to stick a stay-at-home life. Pretty stifling to a fellow who’s knocked about the world.”

His father said: “You’d better marry and settle down.”

Harry said: “Who shall I marry? Pity one can’t marry one’s niece. Young Pilar is devilish attractive.”

“You’ve noticed that?”

“Talking of settling down, fat George has done well for himself as far as looks go. Who was she?”

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

“How should I know? George picked her up at a mannequin parade, I believe. She says her father was a retired naval officer.”

Harry said:

“Probably a second mate of a coasting steamer. George will have a bit of trouble with her if he’s not careful.”

“George,” said Simeon Lee, “is a fool.”

Harry said: “What did she marry him for—his money?”

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

Harry said: “Well, you think that you can square Alfred all right?”

“We’ll soon settle that,” said Simeon grimly.

He touched a bell that stood on a table near him.

Horbury appeared promptly. Simeon said:

“Ask Mr. Alfred to come here.”

Horbury went out and Harry drawled:

“That fellow listens at doors!”

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

“Probably.”

Alfred hurried in. His face twitched when he saw his brother. Ignoring Harry, he said pointedly:

"You wanted me, Father?"

"Yes, sit down. I was just thinking we must reorganize things a bit now that we have two more people living in the house."

"Two?"

"Pilar will make her home here, naturally. And Harry is home for good."

Alfred said: "Harry is coming to live here?"

"Why not, old boy?" said Harry.

Alfred turned sharply to him.

"I should think that you yourself would see that!"

"Well, sorry—but I don't."

"After everything that has happened? The disgraceful way you behaved. The scandal—"

Harry waved an easy hand.

"All that's in the past, old boy."

"You behaved abominably to Father, after all he's done for you."

"Look here, Alfred, it strikes me that's Father's business, not yours. If he's willing to forgive and forget—"

“I’m willing,” said Simeon. “Harry’s my son, after all, you know, Alfred.”

“Yes, but—I resent it—for Father’s sake.”

Simeon said: “Harry’s coming here! I wish it.” He laid a hand gently on the latter’s shoulder. “I’m very fond of Harry.”

Alfred got up and left the room. His face was white. Harry rose too and went after him, laughing.

Simeon sat chuckling to himself. Then he started and looked round. “Who the devil’s that? Oh, it’s you, Horbury. Don’t creep about that way.”

“I beg your pardon, sir.”

“Never mind. Listen, I’ve got some orders for you. I want everybody to come up here after lunch—everybody.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s something else. When they come, you come with them. And when you get halfway along the passage raise your voice so that I can hear. Any pretext will do. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Horbury went downstairs. He said to Tressilian:

“If you ask me, we are going to have a Merry Christmas.”

Tressilian said sharply: “What d’you mean?”

"You wait and see, Mr. Tressilian. It's Christmas Eve today, and a nice Christmas spirit abroad—I don't think!"

II

They came into the room and paused at the doorway.

Simeon was speaking into the telephone. He waved a hand to them.

"Sit down, all of you. I shan't be a minute."

He went on speaking into the telephone.

"Is that Charlton, Hodgkins & Bruce? Is that you, Charlton? Simeon Lee speaking. Yes, isn't it? . . . Yes . . . No, I wanted you to make a new will for me . . . Yes, it's some time since I made the other . . . Circumstances have altered . . . Oh no, no hurry. Don't want you to spoil your Christmas. Say Boxing Day or the day after. Come along, and I'll tell you what I want done. No, that's quite all right. I shan't be dying just yet."

He replaced the receiver, then looked round at the eight members of his family. He cackled and said:

"You're all looking very glum. What is the matter?"

Alfred said: "You sent for us. . . ."

Simeon said quickly: "Oh, sorry—nothing portentous about it. Did you think it was a family council? No, I'm just rather tired today, that's all. None of you need come up after dinner. I shall go to bed. I want to be fresh for Christmas Day."

He grinned at them. George said earnestly:

“Of course . . . of course. . . .”

Simeon said: “Grand old institution, Christmas. Promotes solidarity of family feeling. What do you think, Magdalene, my dear?”

Magdalene Lee jumped. Her rather silly little mouth flew open and then shut itself. She said: “Oh—oh, yes!”

Simeon said: “Let me see, you lived with a retired naval officer”—he paused—“your father. Don’t suppose you made much of Christmas. It needs a big family for that!”

“Well—well—yes, perhaps it does.”

Simeon’s eyes slid past her.

“Don’t want to talk of anything unpleasant at this time of year, but you know, George, I’m afraid I’ll have to cut down your allowance a bit. My establishment here is going to cost me a bit more to run in future.”

George got very red.

“But look here, Father, you can’t do that!”

Simeon said softly: “Oh, can’t I!”

“My expenses are very heavy already. Very heavy. As it is, I don’t know how I make both ends meet. It needs the most rigorous economy.”

“Let your wife do a bit more of it,” said Simeon. “Women are good at that sort of thing. They often think of economies where a man would never have dreamt of them. And a clever woman can make her own clothes. My wife, I remember, was clever with her needle. About all she was clever with—a good woman, but deadly dull—”

David sprang up. His father said:

“Sit down, boy, you’ll knock something over—”

David said: “My mother—”

Simeon said: “Your mother had the brains of a louse! And it seems to me she’s transmitted those brains to her children.” He raised himself up suddenly. A red spot appeared on each cheek. His voice came high and shrill. “You’re not worth a penny piece, any of you! I’m sick of you all! You’re not men! You’re weaklings—a set of namby-pamby weaklings. Pilar’s worth any two of you put together! I’ll swear to heaven I’ve got a better son somewhere in the world than any of you, even if you are born the right side of the blanket!”

“Here, Father, hold hard,” cried Harry.

He had jumped up and stood there, a frown on his usually good-humoured face. Simeon snapped:

“The same goes for you! What have you ever done? Whined to me for money from all over the world! I tell you I’m sick of the sight of you all! Get out!”

He leaned back in his chair, panting a little.

Slowly, one by one, his family went out. George was red and indignant. Magdalene looked frightened. David was pale and quivering. Harry blustered out of the room. Alfred went like a man in a dream. Lydia followed him with her head held high. Only Hilda paused in the doorway and came slowly back.

She stood over him, and he started when he opened his eyes and found her standing there. There was something menacing in the solid way she stood there quite immovably.

He said irritably: “What is it?”

Hilda said: “When your letter came I believed what you said—that you wanted your family round you for Christmas, I persuaded David to come.”

Simeon said: “Well, what of it?”

Hilda said slowly: “You did want your family round you—but not for the purpose you said! You wanted them there, didn’t you, in order to set them all by the ears? God help you, it’s your idea of fun!”

Simeon chuckled. He said: “I always had rather a specialized sense of humour. I don’t expect anyone else to appreciate the joke. I’m enjoying it!”

She said nothing. A vague feeling of apprehension came over Simeon Lee. He said sharply:

“What are you thinking about?”

Hilda Lee said slowly: “I’m afraid. . . .”

Simeon said: “You’re afraid—of me?”

Hilda said: “Not of you. I’m afraid—for you!”

Like a judge who has delivered sentence, she turned away. She marched, slowly and heavily, out of the room. . . .

Simeon sat staring at the door.

Then he got to his feet and made his way over to the safe. He murmured: “Let’s have a look at my beauties.”

III

The doorbell rang about a quarter to eight.

Tressilian went to answer it. he returned to his pantry to find Horbury there, picking up the coffee cups off the tray and looking at the mark on them.

“Who was it?” said Horbury.

“Superintendent of Police—Mr. Sugden—mind what you’re doing!”

Horbury had dropped one of the cups with a crash.

“Look at that now,” lamented Tressilian. “Eleven years I’ve had the washing up of those and never one broken, and now you come along touching things you’ve no business to touch, and look what happens!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Tressilian. I am indeed,” the other apologized. His face was covered with perspiration. “I don’t know how it happened.

Did you say a Superintendent of Police had called?”

“Yes—Mr. Sugden.”

The valet passed a tongue over pale lips.

“What—what did he want?”

“Collecting for the Police Orphanage.”

“Oh!” The valet straightened his shoulders. In a more natural voice he said:

“Did he get anything?”

“I took up the book to old Mr. Lee, and he told me to fetch the superintendent up and to put the sherry on the table.”

“Nothing but begging, this time of year,” said Horbury. “The old devil’s generous, I will say that for him, in spite of his other failings.”

Tressilian said with dignity:

“Mr. Lee has always been an open-handed gentleman.”

Horbury nodded.

“It’s the best thing about him! Well, I’ll be off now.”

“Going to the pictures?”

“I expect so. Ta-ta, Mr. Tressilian.”

He went through the door that led to the servants’ hall.

Tressilian looked up at the clock hanging on the wall.

He went into the dining room and laid the rolls in the napkins.

Then, after assuring himself that everything was as it should be, he sounded the gong in the hall.

As the last note died away the police superintendent came down the stairs. Superintendent Sugden was a large handsome man. He wore a tightly buttoned blue suit and moved with a sense of his own importance.

He said affably: “I rather think we shall have a frost tonight. Good thing: the weather’s been very unseasonable lately.”

Tressilian said, shaking his head:

“The damp affects my rheumatism.”

The superintendent said that the rheumatism was a painful complaint, and Tressilian let him out by the front door.

The old butler refastened the door and came back slowly into the hall. He passed his hand over his eyes and sighed. Then he straightened his back as he saw Lydia pass into the drawing room. George Lee was just coming down the stairs.

Tressilian hovered ready. When the last guest, Magdalene, had entered the drawing room, he made his own appearance, murmuring:

“Dinner is served.”

In his way Tressilian was a connoisseur of ladies’ dress. He always noted and criticized the gowns of the ladies as he circled round the table, decanter in hand.

Mrs. Alfred, he noted, had got on her new flowered black and white taffeta. A bold design, very striking, but she could carry it off, though many ladies couldn’t. The dress Mrs. George had on was a model, he was pretty sure of that. Must have cost a pretty penny. He wondered how Mr. George would like paying for it! Mr. George didn’t like spending money—he never had. Mrs. David now: a nice lady, but didn’t have any idea of how to dress. For her figure, plain black velvet would have been the best. Figured velvet, and crimson at that, was a bad choice. Miss Pilar, now, it didn’t matter what she wore, with her figure and her hair she looked well in anything. A flimsy cheap little white gown it was, though. Still, Mr. Lee would soon see to that! Taken to her wonderful, he had. Always was the same way when a gentleman was elderly. A young face could do anything with him!

“Hock or claret?” murmured Tressilian in a deferential whisper in Mrs. George’s ear. Out of the tail of his eye he noted that Walter, the footman, was handing the vegetables before the gravy again—after all he had been told!

Tressilian went round with the soufflé. It struck him, now that his interest in the ladies’ toilettes and his misgivings over Walter’s deficiencies were a thing of the past, that everyone was very silent tonight. At least, not exactly silent: Mr. Harry was talking enough for twenty—no, not Mr. Harry, the South African gentleman. And the others were talking too, but only, as it were, in spasms. There was something a little—queer about them.

Mr. Alfred, for instance, he looked downright ill. As though he had had a shock or something. Quite dazed he looked and just turning over the food on his plate without eating it. The mistress, she was worried about him. Tressilian could see that. Kept looking down the table towards him—not noticeably, of course, just quietly. Mr. George was very red in the face—gobbling his food, he was, without tasting it. He'd get a stroke one day if he wasn't careful. Mrs. George wasn't eating. Slimming, as likely as not. Miss Pilar seemed to be enjoying her food all right and talking and laughing up at the South African gentleman. Properly taken with her, he was. Didn't seem to be anything on their minds!

Mr. David? Tressilian felt worried about Mr. David. Just like his mother, he was, to look at. And remarkably young-looking still. But nervy; there, he'd knocked over his glass.

Tressilian whisked it away, mopped up the stream deftly. It was all over. Mr. David hardly seemed to notice what he had done, just sat staring in front of him with a white face.

Thinking of white faces, funny the way Horbury had looked in the pantry just now when he'd heard a police officer had come to the house . . . almost as though—

Tressilian's mind stopped with a jerk. Walter had dropped a pear off the dish he was handing. Footmen were no good nowadays! They might be stable boys, the way they went on!

He went round with the port. Mr. Harry seemed a bit distrait tonight. Kept looking at Mr. Alfred. Never had been any love lost between those two, not even as boys. Mr. Harry, of course, had always been his father’s favourite, and that had rankled with Mr. Alfred. Mr. Lee had never cared for Mr. Alfred much. A pity, when Mr. Alfred always seemed so devoted to his father.

There, Mrs. Alfred was getting up now. She swept round the table. Very nice that design on the taffeta; that cape suited her. A very graceful lady.

He went out to the pantry, closing the dining room door on the gentlemen with their port.

He took the coffee tray into the drawing room. The four ladies were sitting there rather uncomfortably, he thought. They were not talking. He handed round the coffee in silence.

He went out again. As he went into his pantry he heard the dining room door open. David Lee came out and went along the hall to the drawing room.

Tressilian went back into his pantry. He read the riot act to Walter. Walter was nearly, if not quite, impertinent!

Tressilian, alone in his pantry, sat down rather wearily.

He had a feeling of depression. Christmas Eve, and all this strain and tension . . . He didn’t like it!

With an effort he roused himself. He went to the drawing room and collected the coffee cups. The room was empty except for Lydia, who was standing half concealed by the window curtain at the far end of the room. She was standing there looking out into the night.

From next door the piano sounded.

Mr. David was playing. But why, Tressilian asked himself, did Mr. David play the “Dead March?” For that’s what it was. Oh, indeed things were very wrong.

He went slowly along the hall and back into his pantry.

It was then he first heard the noise from overhead: a crashing of china, the overthrowing of furniture, a series of cracks and bumps.

“Good gracious!” thought Tressilian. “Whatever is the master doing? What’s happening up there?”

And then, clear and high, came a scream—a horrible high wailing scream that died away in a choke or gurgle.

Tressilian stood there a moment paralysed, then he ran out into the hall and up the broad staircase. Others were with him. That scream had been heard all over the house.

They raced up the stairs and round the bend, past a recess with statues gleaming white and eerie, and along the straight passage to Simeon Lee’s door. Mr. Farr was there already and Mrs. David. She was leaning back against the wall and he was twisting at the door handle.

“The door’s locked,” he was saying. “The door’s locked!”

Harry Lee pushed past and wrested it from him. He, too, turned and twisted at the handle.

“Father,” he shouted. “Father, let us in.”

He held up his hand and in the silence they all listened. There was no answer. No sound from inside the room.

The front door bell rang, but no one paid any attention to it.

Stephen Farr said:

“We’ve got to break the door down. It’s the only way.”

Harry said: “That’s going to be a tough job. These doors are good solid stuff. Come on, Alfred.”

They heaved and strained. Finally they went and got an oak bench and used it as a battering ram. The door gave at last. Its hinges splintered and the door sank shuddering from its frame.

For a minute they stood there huddled together looking in. What they saw was a sight that no one of them ever forgot. . . .

There had clearly been a terrific struggle. Heavy furniture was overturned. China vases lay splintered on the floor. In the middle of the hearthrug in front of the blazing fire lay Simeon Lee in a great pool of blood . . . Blood was splashed all round. The place was like a shambles.

There was a long shuddering sigh, and then two voices spoke in turn. Strangely enough, the words they uttered were both quotations.

David Lee said:

“The mills of God grind slowly. . . .”

Lydia’s voice came like a fluttering whisper:

“Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? . . .”

IV

Superintendent Sugden had rung the bell three times. Finally, in desperation, he pounded on the knocker.

A scared Walter at length opened the door.

“Oo-er,” he said. A look of relief came over his face. “I was just ringing up the police.”

“What for?” said Superintendent Sugden sharply. “What’s going on here?”

Walter whispered:

“It’s old Mr. Lee. He’s been done in. . . .”

The superintendent pushed past him and ran up the stairs. He came into the room without anyone being aware of his entrance. As he entered he saw Pilar bend forward and pick up something from the floor. He saw David Lee standing with his hands over his eyes.

He saw the others huddled into a little group. Alfred Lee alone had stepped near his father’s body. He stood now quite close, looking down. His face was blank.

George Lee was saying importantly:

"Nothing must be touched—remember that—nothing—till the police arrive. That is most important!"

"Excuse me," said Sugden.

He pushed his way forward, gently thrusting the ladies aside.

Alfred Lee recognized him.

"Ah," he said. "It's you, Superintendent Sugden. You've got here very quickly."

"Yes, Mr. Lee." Superintendent Sugden did not waste time on explanations. "What's all this?"

"My father," said Alfred Lee, "has been killed—murdered. . . ."

His voice broke.

Magdalene began suddenly to sob hysterically.

Superintendent Sugden held up a large official hand. He said authoritatively:

"Will everybody kindly leave the room except Mr. Lee and—er—Mr. George Lee?. . . ."

They moved slowly towards the door, reluctantly, like sheep. Superintendent Sugden intercepted Pilar suddenly.

"Excuse me, miss," he said pleasantly. "Nothing must be touched or disturbed."

She stared at him. Stephen Farr said impatiently:

"Of course not. She understands that."

Superintendent Sugden said, still in the same pleasant manner: "You picked up something from the floor just now?"

Pilar's eyes opened. She stared and said incredulously: "I did?"

Superintendent Sugden was still pleasant. His voice was just a little firmer.

"Yes, I saw you. . . ."

"Oh!"

"So please give it to me. It's in your hand now."

Slowly Pilar unclosed her hand. There lay in it a wisp of rubber and a small object made of wood. Superintendent Sugden took them, enclosed them in an envelope and put them away in his breast pocket. He said: "Thank you."

He turned away. Just for a minute Stephen Farr's eyes showed a startled respect. It was as though he had underestimated the large handsome superintendent.

They went slowly out of the room. Behind them they heard the superintendent's voice saying officially:

"And now, if you please. . . ."

V

"Nothing like a wood fire," said Colonel Johnson as he threw on an additional log and then drew his chair nearer to the blaze. "Help yourself," he added, hospitably calling attention to the tantalus and siphon that stood near his guest's elbow.

The guest raised a polite hand in negation. Cautiously he edged his own chair nearer to the blazing logs, though he was of the opinion that the opportunity for roasting the soles of one's feet (like some mediaeval torture) did not offset the cold draught that swirled round the back of the shoulders.

Colonel Johnson, Chief Constable of Middleshire, might be of the opinion that nothing could beat a wood fire, but Hercule Poirot was of the opinion that central heating could and did every time!

"Amazing business that Cartwright case," remarked the host reminiscently. "Amazing man! Enormous charm of manner. Why, when he came here with you, he had us all eating out of his hand."

He shook his head.

"We'll never have anything like that case!" he said. "Nicotine poisoning is rare, fortunately."

"There was a time when you would have considered all poisoning unEnglish," suggested Hercule Poirot. "A device of foreigners! Unsportsmanlike!"

"I hardly think we could say that," said the chief constable. "Plenty of poisoning by arsenic—probably a good deal more than has ever been suspected."

"Possibly, yes."

"Always an awkward business, a poisoning case," said Johnson. "Conflicting testimony of the experts—then doctors are usually so extremely cautious in what they say. Always a difficult case to take to a jury. No, if one must have murder (which heaven forbid!) give me a straightforward case. Something where there's no ambiguity about the cause of death."

Poirot nodded.

"The bullet wound, the cut throat, the crushed-in skull? It is there your preference lies?"

"Oh, don't call it a preference, my dear fellow. Don't harbour the idea that I like murder cases! Hope I never have another. Anyway, we ought to be safe enough during your visit."

Poirot began modestly:

"My reputation—"

But Johnson had gone on.

"Christmastime," he said. "Peace, goodwill—and all that kind of thing. Goodwill all round."

Hercule Poirot leaned back in his chair. He joined his fingertips. He studied his host thoughtfully.

He murmured: "It is, then, your opinion that Christmastime is an unlikely season for crime?"

"That's what I said."

"Why?"

"Why?" Johnson was thrown slightly out of his stride. "Well, as I've just said—season of good cheer, and all that!"

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"The British, they are so sentimental!"

Johnson said stoutly: "What if we are? What if we do like the old ways, the old traditional festivities? What's the harm?"

"There is no harm. It is all most charming! But let us for a moment examine facts. You have said that Christmas is a season of good cheer. That means, does it not, a lot of eating and drinking? It means, in fact, the overeating! And with the overeating there comes the indigestion! And with the indigestion there comes the irritability!"

"Crimes," said Colonel Johnson, "are not committed from irritability."

"I am not so sure! Take another point. There is, at Christmas, a spirit of goodwill. It is, as you say, 'the thing to do.' Old quarrels are patched up, those who have disagreed consent to agree once more, even if it is only temporarily."

Johnson nodded.

"Bury the hatchet, that's right."

Poirot pursued his theme:

"And families now, families who have been separated throughout the year, assemble once more together. Now under these conditions, my friend, you must admit that there will occur a great amount of strain. People who do not feel amiable are putting great pressure on themselves to appear amiable! There is at Christmastime a great deal of hypocrisy, honourable hypocrisy, hypocrisy undertaken pour le bon motif, c'est entendu, but nevertheless hypocrisy!"

"Well, I shouldn't put it quite like that myself," said Colonel Johnson doubtfully.

Poirot beamed upon him.

"No, no. It is I who am putting it like that, not you. I am pointing out to you that under these conditions—mental strain, physical malaise—it is highly probable that dislikes that were before merely mild and disagreements that were trivial might suddenly assume a more serious character. The result of pretending to be a more amiable, a more forgiving, a more high-minded person than one really is, has sooner or later the effect of causing one to behave as a more disagreeable, a more ruthless and an altogether more unpleasant person than is actually the case! If you dam the stream of natural behaviour, mon ami, sooner or later the dam bursts and a cataclysm occurs!"

Colonel Johnson looked at him doubtfully.

"Never know when you're serious and when you're pulling my leg," he grumbled.

Poirot smiled at him.

"I am not serious! Not in the least am I serious! But all the same, it is true what I say—artificial conditions bring about their natural reaction."

Colonel Johnson's manservant entered the room.

"Superintendent Sugden on the phone, sir."

"Right. I'll come."

With a word of apology the chief constable left the room.

He returned some three minutes later. His face was grave and perturbed.

"Damn it all!" he said. "Case of murder! On Christmas Eve, too!"

Poirot's eyebrows rose.

"It is that definitely—murder, I mean?"

"Eh? Oh, no other solution possible! Perfectly clear case. Murder—and a brutal murder at that!"

"Who is the victim?"

"Old Simeon Lee. One of the richest men we've got! Made his money in South Africa originally. Gold—no, diamonds, I believe. He sunk an immense fortune in manufacturing some particular gadget of mining machinery. His own invention, I believe. Anyway, it's paid him hand over fist! They say he's a millionaire twice over."

Poirot said: "He was well-liked, yes?"

Johnson said slowly:

“Don’t think anyone liked him. Queer sort of chap. He’s been an invalid for some years now. I don’t know very much about him myself. But of course he is one of the big figures of the county.”

“So this case, it will make a big stir?”

“Yes. I must get over to Longdale as fast as I can.”

He hesitated, looking at his guest. Poirot answered the unspoken question:

“You would like that I should accompany you?”

Johnson said awkwardly:

“Seems a shame to ask you. But, well, you know how it is! Superintendent Sugden is a good man, none better, painstaking, careful, thoroughly sound—but—well, he’s not an imaginative chap in any way. Should like very much, as you are here, benefit of your advice.”

He halted a little over the end part of his speech, making it somewhat telegraphic in style. Poirot responded quickly.

“I shall be delighted. You can count on me to assist you in any way I can. We must not hurt the feelings of the good superintendent. It will be his case—not mine. I am only the unofficial consultant.”

Colonel Johnson said warmly:

“You’re a good fellow, Poirot.”

With those words of commendation, the two men started out.

VI

It was a constable who opened the front door to them and saluted. Behind him, Superintendent Sugden advanced down the hall and said:

“Glad you’ve got here, sir. Shall we come into this room here on the left—Mr. Lee’s study? I’d like to run over the main outlines. The whole thing’s a rum business.”

He ushered them into a small room on the left of the hall. There was a telephone there and a big desk covered with papers. The walls were lined with bookcases.

The chief constable said: “Sugden, this is M. Hercule Poirot. You may have heard of him. Just happened to be staying with me. Superintendent Sugden.”

Poirot made a little bow and looked the other man over. He saw a tall man with square shoulders and a military bearing who had an aquiline nose, a pugnacious jaw and a large flourishing chestnut-coloured moustache. Sugden stared hard at Hercule Poirot after acknowledging the introduction. Hercule Poirot stared hard at Superintendent Sugden’s moustache. Its luxuriance seemed to fascinate him.

The superintendent said:

“Of course I have heard of you, Mr. Poirot. You were in this part of the world some years ago, if I remember rightly. Death of Sir

Bartholomew Strange. Poisoning case. Nicotine. Not my district, but of course I heard all about it.”

Colonel Johnson said impatiently:

“Now, then, Sugden, let’s have the facts. A clear case, you said.”

“Yes, sir, it’s murder right enough—not a doubt of that. Mr. Lee’s throat was cut—jugular vein severed, I understand from the doctor. But there’s something very odd about the whole matter.”

“You mean—?”

“I’d like you to hear my story first, sir. These are the circumstances: This afternoon, about five o’clock, I was rung up by Mr. Lee at Addlesfield police station. He sounded a bit odd over the phone—asked me to come and see him at eight o’clock this evening—made a special point of the time. Moreover, he instructed me to say to the butler that I was collecting subscriptions for some police charity.”

The chief constable looked up sharply.

“Wanted some plausible pretext to get you into the house?”

“That’s right, sir. Well, naturally, Mr. Lee is an important person, and I acceded to his request. I got here a little before eight o’clock, and represented myself as seeking subscriptions for the Police Orphanage. The butler went away and returned to tell me that Mr. Lee would see me. Thereupon he showed me up to Mr. Lee’s room, which is situated on the first floor, immediately over the dining room.”

Superintendent Sugden paused, drew a breath and then proceeded in a somewhat official manner with his report.

“Mr. Lee was seated in a chair by the fireplace. He was wearing a dressing gown. When the butler had left the room and closed the door, Mr. Lee asked me to sit near him. He then said rather hesitatingly that he wanted to give me particulars of a robbery. I asked him what had been taken. He replied that he had reason to believe that diamonds (uncut diamonds, I think he said) to the value of several thousand pounds had been stolen from his safe.”

“Diamonds, eh?” said the chief constable.

“Yes, sir. I asked him various routine questions, but his manner was very uncertain and his replies were somewhat vague in character. At last he said, ‘You must understand, Superintendent, that I may be mistaken in this matter.’ I said, ‘I do not quite understand, sir. Either the diamonds are missing or they are not missing—one or the other.’ He replied, ‘The diamonds are certainly missing, but it is just possible, Superintendent, that their disappearance may be simply a rather foolish kind of practical joke.’ Well, that seemed odd to me, but I said nothing. He went on: ‘It is difficult for me to explain in detail, but what it amounts to is this: So far as I can see, only two persons can possibly have the stones. One of those persons might have done it as a joke. If the other person took them, then they have definitely been stolen.’ I said, ‘What exactly do you want me to do, sir?’ He said quickly, ‘I want you, Superintendent, to return here in about an hour—no, make it a little more than that—say nine fifteen. At that time I shall be able to tell you definitely whether I have been robbed or not.’ I was a little mystified, but I agreed and went away.”

Colonel Johnson commented:

“Curious—very curious. What do you say, Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“May I ask, Superintendent, what conclusions you yourself drew?”

The superintendent stroked his jaw as he replied carefully:

“Well, various ideas occurred to me, but on the whole, I figured it out this way. There was no question of any practical joke. The diamonds had been stolen all right. But the old gentleman wasn’t sure who’d done it. It’s my opinion that he was speaking the truth when he said that it might have been one of two people—and of those two people one was a servant and the other was a member of the family.”

Poirot nodded appreciatively.

“Très bien. Yes, that explains his attitude very well.”

“Hence his desire that I should return later. In the interval he meant to have an interview with the person in question. He would tell them that he had already spoken of the matter to the police but that, if restitution were promptly made, he could hush the matter up.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“And if the suspect didn’t respond?”

“In that case, he meant to place the investigation in our hands.”

Colonel Johnson frowned and twisted his moustache. He demurred.

"Why not take that course before calling you in?"

"No, no, sir." The superintendent shook his head. "Don't you see, if he had done that, it might have been bluff. It wouldn't have been half so convincing. The person might say to himself, 'The old man won't call the police in, no matter what he suspects!' But if the old gentleman says to him, 'I've already spoken to the police, the superintendent has only just left.' Then the thief asks the butler, say, and the butler confirms that. He says, 'Yes, the superintendent was here just before dinner.' Then the chief is convinced the old gentleman means business and it's up to him to cough up the stones."

"H'm, yes, I see that," said Colonel Johnson. "Any idea, Sugden, who this 'member of the family' might be?"

"No, sir."

"No indication whatsoever?"

"None."

Johnson shook his head. Then he said:

"Well, let's get on with it."

Superintendent Sugden resumed his official manner.

"I returned to the house, sir, at nine fifteen precisely. Just as I was about to ring the front door bell, I heard a scream from inside the house, and then a confused sound of shouts and a general commotion. I rang several times and also used the knocker. It was three or four minutes before the door was answered. When the footman at last opened it I could see that something momentous had occurred. He was shaking all over and looked as though he was about to faint. He gasped out that Mr. Lee had been murdered. I ran hastily upstairs. I found Mr. Lee's room in a state of wild confusion. There had evidently been a severe struggle. Mr. Lee himself was lying in front of the fire with his throat cut in a pool of blood."

The chief constable said sharply:

"He couldn't have done it himself?"

Sugden shook his head.

"Impossible, sir. For one thing, there were the chairs and tables overturned, and the broken crockery and ornaments, and then there was no sign of the razor or knife with which the crime had been committed."

The chief constable said thoughtfully:

"Yes, that seems conclusive. Anyone in the room?"

"Most of the family were there, sir. Just standing round."

Colonel Johnson said sharply:

"Any ideas, Sugden?"

The superintendent said slowly:

"It's a bad business, sir. It looks to me as though one of them must have done it. I don't see how anyone from outside could have done it and got away in time.”

“What about the window? Closed or open?”

“There are two windows in the room, sir. One was closed and locked. The other was open a few inches at the bottom—but it was fixed in that position by a burglar screw, and moreover, I’ve tried it and it’s stuck fast—hasn’t been opened for years, I should say. Also the wall outside is quite smooth and unbroken—no ivy or creepers. I don’t see how anyone could have left that way.”

“How many doors in the room?”

“Just one. The room is at the end of a passage. That door was locked on the inside. When they heard the noise of the struggle and the old man’s dying scream, and rushed upstairs, they had to break down the door to get in.”

Johnson said sharply:

“And who was in the room?”

Superintendent Sugden replied gravely:

“Nobody was in the room, sir, except the old man who had been killed not more than a few minutes previously.”

VII

Colonel Johnson stared at Sugden for some minutes before he spluttered:

“Do you mean to tell me, Superintendent, that this is one of those damned cases you get in detective stories where a man is killed in a locked room by some apparently supernatural agency?”

A very faint smile agitated the superintendent’s moustache as he replied gravely:

“I do not think it’s quite as bad as that, sir.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“Suicide. It must be suicide!”

“Where’s the weapon, if so? No, sir, suicide won’t do.”

“Then how did the murderer escape? By the window?” Sugden shook his head.

“I’ll take my oath he didn’t do that.”

“But the door was locked, you say, on the inside.”

The superintendent nodded. He drew a key from his pocket and laid it on the table.

“No fingerprints,” he announced. “But just look at that key, sir. Take a look at it with that magnifying glass there.”

Poirot bent forward. He and Johnson examined the key together. The chief constable uttered an exclamation.

“By Jove, I get you. Those faint scratches on the end of the barrel. You see ’em, Poirot?”

“But yes, I see. That means, does it not, that the key was turned from outside the door—turned by means of a special implement that went through the keyhole and gripped the barrel—possibily an ordinary pair of pliers would do it.”

The superintendent nodded.

“It can be done all right.”

Poirot said: “The idea being, then, that the death would be thought to be suicide, since the door was locked and no one was in the room?”

“That was the idea, M. Poirot, not a doubt of it, I should say.”

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

“But the disorder in the room! As you say, that by itself wiped out the idea of suicide. Surely the murderer would first of all have set the room to rights.”

Superintendent Sugden said: “But he hadn’t time, Mr. Poirot. That’s the whole point. He hadn’t time. Let’s say he counted on catching the old gentleman unawares. Well, that didn’t come off. There was a struggle—a struggle heard plainly in the room underneath; and, what’s more, the old gentleman called out for help. Everyone came rushing up. The murderer’s only got time to nip out of the room and turn the key from the outside.”

“That is true,” Poirot admitted. “Your murderer, he may have made the bungle. But why, oh why, did he not at least leave the weapon? For naturally, if there is no weapon, it cannot be suicide! That was an error most grave.”

Superintendent Sugden said stolidly:

“Criminals usually make mistakes. That’s our experience.”

Poirot gave a light sigh. He murmured:

“But all the same, in spite of his mistakes, he has escaped this criminal.”

“I don’t think he has exactly escaped.”

“You mean he is in the house still?”

“I don’t see where else he can be. It was an inside job.”

“But, tout de même,” Poirot pointed out gently, “he has escaped to this extent: You do not know who he is.”

Superintendent Sugden said gently but firmly:

“I rather fancy that we soon shall. We haven’t done any questioning of the household yet.”

Colonel Johnson cut in:

“Look here, Sugden, one thing strikes me. Whoever turned that key from the outside must have had some knowledge of the job. That’s to say, he probably has had criminal experience. These sort of tools aren’t easy to manage.”

“You mean it was a professional job, sir?”

“That’s what I mean.”

"It does seem like it," the other admitted. "Following that up, it looks as though there were a professional thief among the servants. That would explain the diamonds being taken and the murder would follow on logically from that."

"Well, anything wrong with that theory?"

"It's what I thought myself to begin with. But it's difficult. There are eight servants in the house; six of them are women, and of those six, five have been here for four years and more. Then there's the butler and the footman. The butler has been here for close on forty years—bit of a record that, I should say. The footman's local, son of the gardener, and brought up here. Don't see very well how he can be a professional. The only other person is Mr. Lee's valet attendant. He's comparatively new, but he was out of the house—still is—went out just before eight o'clock."

Colonel Johnson said:

"Have you got a list of just who exactly was in the house?"

"Yes, sir. I got it from the butler." He took out his notebook. "Shall I read it to you?"

"Please, Sugden."

"Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lee. Mr. George Lee, M.P., and his wife, Mr. Henry Lee, Mr. and Mrs. David Lee. Miss"—the superintendent paused a little, taking the words carefully—"Pilar"—he pronounced it like a piece of architecture—"Estravados. Mr. Stephen Farr. Then for the servants: Edward Tressilian, butler. Walter Champion, footman. Emily Reeves, cook. Queenie Jones, kitchenmaid. Gladys Spent, head housemaid. Grace Best, second housemaid. Beatrice Moscombe, third housemaid. Joan Kench, betweenmaid. Sydney Horbury, valet attendant."

"That's the lot, eh?"

"That's the lot, sir."

"Any idea where everybody was at the time of the murder?"

"Only roughly. As I told you, I haven't questioned anybody yet. According to Tressilian, the gentlemen were in the dining room still. The ladies had gone to the drawing room. Tressilian had served coffee. According to his statement, he had just got back to his pantry when he heard a noise upstairs. It was followed by a scream. He ran out into the hall and upstairs in the wake of the others."

Colonel Johnson said:

"How many of the family live in the house, and who are just staying here?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lee live here. The others are just visiting."

Johnson nodded.

"Where are they all?"

"I asked them to stay in the drawing-room until I was ready to take their statements."

"I see. Well, we'd better go upstairs and take a look at the doings."

The superintendent led the way up the broad stairs and along the passage.

As he entered the room where the crime had taken place, Johnson drew a deep breath.

“Pretty horrible,” he commented.

He stood for a minute studying the overturned chairs, the smashed china, and the blood-bespattered débris.

A thin elderly man stood up from where he had been kneeling by the body and gave a nod.

“Evening, Johnson,” he said. “Bit of a shambles, eh?”

“I should say it was. Got anything for us, doctor?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. He grinned.

“I’ll let you have the scientific language at the inquest! Nothing complicated about it. Throat cut like a pig. He bled to death in less than a minute. No sign of the weapon.”

Poirot went across the room to the windows. As the superintendent had said, one was shut and bolted. The other was open about four inches at the bottom. A thick patent screw of the kind known many years ago as an anti-burglar screw secured it in that position.

Sugden said: “According to the butler, that window was never shut wet or fine. There’s a linoleum mat underneath it in case rain beat in, but it didn’t much, as the overhanging roof protects it.”

Poirot nodded.

He came back to the body and stared down at the old man.

The lips were drawn back from the bloodless gums in something that looked like a snarl. The fingers were curved like claws.

Poirot said:

“He does not seem a strong man, no.”

The doctor said:

“He was pretty tough, I believe. He’d survived several pretty bad illnesses that would have killed most men.”

Poirot said: “I do not mean that. I mean, he was not big, not strong physically.”

“No, he’s frail enough.”

Poirot turned from the dead man. He bent to examine an overturned chair, a big chair of mahogany. Beside it was a round mahogany table and the fragments of a big china lamp. Two other smaller chairs lay nearby, also the smashed fragments of a decanter and two glasses, a heavy glass paperweight was unbroken, some miscellaneous books, a big Japanese vase smashed in pieces, and a bronze statuette of a naked girl completed the débris.

Poirot bent over all these exhibits, studying them gravely, but without touching them. He frowned to himself as though perplexed.

The chief constable said:

“Anything strike you, Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot sighed. He murmured:

“Such a frail shrunken old man—and yet—all this.”

Johnson looked puzzled. He turned away and said to the sergeant, who was busy at his work:

“What about prints?”

“Plenty of them, sir, all over the room.”

“What about the safe?”

“No good. Only prints on that are those of the old gentleman himself.”

Johnson turned to the doctor.

“What about bloodstains?” he asked. “Surely whoever killed him must have got blood on him.”

The doctor said doubtfully:

“Not necessarily. Bleeding was almost entirely from the jugular vein. That wouldn’t spout like an artery.”

“No, no. Still, there seems a lot of blood about.”

Poirot said:

“Yes, there is a lot of blood—it strikes one, that. A lot of blood.”

Superintendent Sugden said respectfully:

“Do you—er—does that suggest anything to you, Mr. Poirot?”

Poirot looked about him. He shook his head perplexedly.

He said:

“There is something here—some violence . . .” He stopped a minute, then went on: “Yes, that is it—violence . . . And blood—an insistence on blood . . . There is—how shall I put it?—there is too much blood. Blood on the chairs, on the tables, on the carpet . . . The blood ritual? Sacrificial blood? Is that it? Perhaps. Such a frail old man, so thin, so shrivelled, so dried up—and yet—in his death—so much blood . . .”

His voice died away. Superintendent Sugden, staring at him with round, startled eyes, said in an awed voice:

“Funny—that’s what she said—the lady. . . .”

Poirot said sharply:

“What lady? What was it she said?”

Sugden answered: “Mrs. Lee—Mrs. Alfred. Stood over there by the door and half whispered it. It didn’t make sense to me.”

“What did she say?”

“Something about who would have thought the old gentleman had so much blood in him. . . .”

Poirot said softly:

"'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' The words of Lady Macbeth. She said that . . . Ah, that is interesting. . . ."

VIII

Alfred Lee and his wife came into the small study where Poirot, Sugden and the chief constable were standing waiting. Colonel Johnson came forward.

"How do you do, Mr. Lee? We've never actually met, but as you know, I'm chief constable of the county. Johnson's my name. I can't tell you how distressed I am by this."

Alfred, his brown eyes like those of a suffering dog, said hoarsely:

"Thank you. It's terrible—quite terrible. I—this is my wife."

Lydia said in her quiet voice:

"It has been a frightful shock to my husband—to all of us—but particularly to him."

Her hand was on her husband's shoulder.

Colonel Johnson said:

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Lee? Let me introduce M. Hercule Poirot."

Hercule Poirot bowed. His eyes went interestedly from husband to wife.

Lydia's hands pressed gently on Alfred's shoulder.

“Sit down, Alfred.”

Alfred sat. He murmured:

“Hercule Poirot. Now, who—who—?”

He passed his hand in a dazed fashion over his forehead.

Lydia Lee said:

“Colonel Johnson will want to ask you a lot of questions, Alfred.”

The chief constable looked at her with approval. He was thankful that Mrs. Alfred Lee was turning out to be such a sensible and competent woman.

Alfred said:

“Of course. Of course . . .”

Johnson said to himself;

“Shock seems to have knocked him out completely. Hope he can pull himself together a bit.”

Aloud he said:

“I’ve got a list here of everybody who was in the house tonight. Perhaps you’ll tell me, Mr. Lee, if it is correct.”

He made a slight gesture to Sugden and the latter pulled out his note-book and once more recited the list of names.

The businesslike procedure seemed to restore Alfred Lee to something more like his normal self. He had regained command of himself, his eyes no longer looked dazed and staring. When Sugden finished, he nodded in agreement.

“That’s quite right,” he said.

“Do you mind telling me a little more about your guests? Mr. and Mrs. George Lee and Mr. and Mrs. David Lee are, I gather, relatives?”

“They are my two younger brothers and their wives.”

“They are staying here only?”

“Yes, they came to us for Christmas.”

“Mr. Henry Lee is also a brother?”

“Yes.”

“And your two other guests? Miss Estravados and Mr. Farr?”

“Miss Estravados is my niece. Mr. Farr is the son of my father’s onetime partner in South Africa.”

“Ah, an old friend.”

Lydia intervened.

“No, actually we have never seen him before.”

“I see. But you invited him to stay with you for Christmas?”

Alfred hesitated, then looked towards his wife. She said clearly:

“Mr. Farr turned up quite unexpectedly yesterday. He happened to be in the neighbourhood and came to call upon my father-in-law. When my father-in-law found he was the son of his old friend and partner, he insisted on his remaining with us for Christmas.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“I see. That explains the household. As regards the servants, Mrs. Lee, do you consider them all trustworthy?”

Lydia considered for a moment before replying. Then she said:

“Yes. I am quite sure they are all thoroughly reliable. They have mostly been with us for many years. Tressilian, the butler, has been here since my husband was a young child. The only newcomers are the betweenmaid, Joan, and the nurse-valet who attended on my father-in-law.”

“What about them?”

“Joan is rather a silly little thing. That is the worst that can be said of her. I know very little about Horbury. He has been here just over a year. He was quite competent at his job and my father-in-law seemed satisfied with him.”

Poirot said acutely:

“But you, madame, were not so satisfied?”

Lydia shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“It was nothing to do with me.”

“But you are the mistress of the house, madame. The servants are your concern?”

“Oh yes, of course. But Horbury was my father-in-law’s personal attendant. He did not come under my jurisdiction.”

“I see.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“We come now to the events of tonight. I’m afraid this will be painful for you, Mr. Lee, but I would like your account of what happened.”

Alfred said in a low voice: “Of course.”

Colonel Johnson said, prompting him:

“When, for instance, did you last see your father?”

A slight spasm of pain crossed Alfred’s face as he replied in a low voice:

“It was after tea. I was with him for a short time. Finally I said good night to him and left him at—let me see—about a quarter to six.”

Poirot observed: “You said good night to him? You did not then expect to see him again that evening?”

“No. My father’s supper, a light meal, was always brought to him at seven. After that he sometimes went to bed early or sometimes sat up in his chair, but he did not expect to see any members of the family again unless he specially sent for them.”

“Did he often send for them?”

“Sometimes. If he felt like it.”

“But it was not the ordinary procedure?”

“No.”

“Go on, please, Mr. Lee.”

Alfred continued:

“We had our dinner at eight o’clock. Dinner was over and my wife and the other ladies had gone into the drawing room.” His voice faltered. His eyes began to stare again. “We were sitting there—at the table . . . Suddenly there was the most astounding noise overheard. Chairs overturning, furniture crashing, breaking glass and china, and then—Oh, God”—he shuddered—“I can hear it still—my father screamed—a horrible, long-drawn scream—the scream of a man in mortal agony. . . .”

He raised shaking hands to cover his face. Lydia stretched out her hand and touched his sleeve. Colonel Johnson said gently: “And then?”

Alfred said in a broken voice:

“I think—just for a moment we were stunned. Then we sprang up and went out of the door and up the stairs to my father’s room. The door was locked. We couldn't get in. It had to be broken open. Then, when we did get in, we saw—"

His voice died away.

Johnson said quickly:

"There's no need to go into that part of it, Mr. Lee. To go back a little, to the time you were in the dining room. Who was there with you when you heard the cry?"

"Who was there? Why, we were all—No, let me see. My brother was there—my brother Harry."

"Nobody else?"

"No one else."

"Where were the other gentlemen?"

Alfred sighed and frowned in an effort of remembrance.

"Let me see—it seems so long ago—yes, like years—what did happen? Oh, of course, George had gone to telephone. Then we began to talk of family matters, and Stephen Farr said something about seeing we wanted to discuss things, and he took himself off. He did it very nicely and tactfully."

"And your brother David?"

Alfred frowned.

"David? Wasn't he there? No, of course, he wasn't. I don't quite know when he slipped away."

Poirot said gently:

“So you had the family matters to discuss?”

“Er—yes.”

“That is to say, you had matters to discuss with one member of your family?”

Lydia said:

“What do you mean, M. Poirot?”

He turned quickly to her.

“Madame, your husband says that Mr. Farr left them because he saw they had affairs of the family to discuss. But it was not a conseil de famille, since M. David was not there and M. George was not there. It was, then, a discussion between two members of the family only.”

Lydia said:

“My brother-in-law, Harry, had been abroad for a great number of years. It was natural that he and my husband should have things to talk over.”

“Ah! I see. It was like that.”

She shot him a quick glance, then turned her eyes away.

Johnson said:

“Well, that seems clear enough. Did you notice anyone else as you ran upstairs to your father’s room?”

“I—really I don’t know. I think so. We all came from different directions. But I’m afraid I didn’t notice—I was so alarmed. That terrible cry . . .”

Colonel Johnson passed quickly to another subject.

“Thank you, Mr. Lee. Now, there is another point. I understand that your father had some valuable diamonds in his possession.”

Alfred looked rather surprised.

“Yes,” he said. “That is so.”

“Where did he keep them?”

“In the safe in his room.”

“Can you describe them at all?”

“They were rough diamonds—that is, uncut stones.”

“Why did your father have them there?”

“It was a whim of his. They were stones he had brought with him from South Africa. He never had them cut. He just liked keeping them in his possession. As I say, it was a whim of his.”

“I see,” said the chief constable.

From his tone it was plain that he did not see. He went on: “Were they of much value?”

“My father estimated their value at about ten thousand pounds.”

“In fact, they were very valuable stones?”

“Yes.”

“It seems a curious idea to keep such stones in a bedroom safe.”

Lydia interposed.

“My father-in-law, Colonel Johnson, was a somewhat curious man. His ideas were not the conventional ones. It definitely gave him pleasure to handle those stones.”

“They recalled, perhaps, the past to him,” said Poirot.

She gave him a quick appreciative look.

“Yes,” she said. “I think they did.”

“Were they insured?” asked the chief constable.

“I think not.”

Johnson leaned forward. He asked quietly:

“Did you know, Mr. Lee, that those stones had been stolen?”

“What?” Alfred Lee stared at him.

“Your father said nothing to you of their disappearance?”

“Not a word.”

"You did not know that he had sent for Superintendent Sugden here and had reported the loss to him?"

"I hadn't the faintest idea of such a thing!"

The chief constable transferred his gaze.

"What about you, Mrs. Lee?"

Lydia shook her head.

"I heard nothing about it."

"As far as you knew, the stones were still in the safe?"

"Yes."

She hesitated and then asked:

"Is that why he was killed? For the sake of those stones?"

Colonel Johnson said:

"That is what we are going to find out!"

He went on:

"Have you any idea, Mrs. Lee, who could have engineered such a theft?"

She shook her head.

"No, indeed. I am sure the servants are all honest. In any case, it would be very difficult for them to get at the safe. My father-in-law was always in his room. He never came downstairs.”

“Who attended to the room?”

“Horbury. He made the bed and dusted. The second housemaid went in to do the grate and lay the fire every morning, otherwise Horbury did everything.”

Poirot said:

“So Horbury would be the person with the best opportunity?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that it was he who stole the diamonds, then?”

“It is possible. I suppose . . . He had the best opportunity. Oh! I don’t know what to think.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“Your husband has given us his account of the evening. Will you do the same, Mrs. Lee? When did you last see your father-in-law?”

“We were all up in his room this afternoon—before tea. That was the last time I saw him.”

“You did not see him later to bid him good night?”

“No.”

Poirot said:

“Do you usually go and say good night to him?”

Lydia said sharply:

“No.”

The chief constable went on:

“Where were you when the crime took place?”

“In the drawing room.”

“You heard the noise of the struggle?”

“I think I heard something heavy fall. Of course my father-in-law’s room is over the dining room, not the drawing room, so I shouldn’t hear so much.”

“But you heard the cry?”

Lydia shuddered.

“Yes, I heard that . . . It was horrible—like—like a soul in hell. I knew at once something dreadful had happened. I hurried out and followed my husband and Harry up the stairs.”

“Who else was in the drawing room at the time?”

Lydia frowned.

“Really—I can’t remember. David was next door in the music-room, playing Mendelssohn. I think Hilda had gone to join him.”

“And the other two ladies?”

Lydia said slowly:

"Magdalene went to telephone. I can't remember whether she had come back or not. I don't know where Pilar was."

Poirot said gently:

"In fact, you may have been quite alone in the drawing room?"

"Yes—yes—as a matter of fact, I believe I was."

Colonel Johnson said:

"About these diamonds. We ought, I think, to make quite sure about them. Do you know the combination of your father's safe, Mr. Lee? I see it is of a somewhat old-fashioned pattern."

"You will find it written down in a small notebook he carried in the pocket of his dressing gown."

"Good. We will go and look presently. It will be better, perhaps, if we interview the other members of the house party first. The ladies may want to get to bed."

Lydia stood up.

"Come, Alfred." She turned to them. "Shall I send them in to you?"

"One by one, if you wouldn't mind, Mrs. Lee."

"Certainly."

She moved towards the door. Alfred followed her.

Suddenly, at the last moment, he swung round.

"Of course," he said. He came quickly back to Poirot. "You are Hercule Poirot! I don't know where my wits have been. I should have realized at once."

He spoke quickly, in a low, excited voice.

"It's an absolute godsend your being here! You must find out the truth, M. Poirot. Spare no expense! I will be responsible for any expense. But find out . . . My poor father—killed by someone—killed with the utmost brutality! You must find out, M. Poirot. My father has got to be avenged."

Poirot answered quietly:

"I can assure you, M. Lee, that I am prepared to do my utmost to assist Colonel Johnson and Superintendent Sugden."

Alfred Lee said:

"I want you to work for me. My father has got to be avenged."

He began to tremble violently. Lydia had come back. She went up to him and drew his arm through hers.

"Come, Alfred," she said. "We must get the others."

Her eyes met Poirot's. They were eyes that kept their own secrets. They did not waver.

Poirot said softly:

"Who would have thought the old man—"

She interrupted him:

“Stop! Don’t say that!”

Poirot murmured:

“You said it, madame.”

She breathed softly:

“I know . . . I remember . . . It was—so horrible.”

Then she went abruptly out of the room, her husband beside her.

IX

George Lee was solemn and correct.

“A terrible business,” he said, shaking his head. “A terrible, terrible business. I can only believe that it must—er—have been the work of a lunatic!”

Colonel Johnson said politely:

“That is your theory?”

“Yes. Yes, indeed. A homicidal maniac. Escaped, perhaps, from some mental home in the vicinity.”

Superintendent Sugden put in:

“And how do you suggest this—er—lunatic gained admittance to the house, Mr. Lee? And how did he leave it?”

George shook his head.

“That,” he said firmly, “is for the police to discover.”

Sugden said:

“We made the round of the house at once. All windows were closed and barred. The side door was locked, so was the front door. Nobody could have left by the kitchen premises without being seen by the kitchen staff.”

George Lee cried:

“But that’s absurd! You’ll be saying next that my father was never murdered at all!”

“He was murdered all right,” said Superintendent Sugden. “There’s no doubt about that.”

The chief constable cleared his throat and took up the questioning.

“Just where were you, Mr. Lee, at the time of the crime?”

“I was in the dining room. It was just after dinner. No, I was, I think, in this room. I had just finished telephoning.”

“You had been telephoning?”

“Yes. I had put a call through to the Conservative agent in Westeringham—my constituency. Some urgent matters.”

“And it was after that that you heard the scream?”

George Lee gave a slight shiver.

“Yes, very unpleasant. It—er—froze my marrow. It died away in a kind of choke or gurgle.”

He took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead where the perspiration had broken out.

“Terrible business,” he muttered.

“And then you hurried upstairs?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see your brothers, Mr. Alfred and Mr. Harry Lee?”

“No, they must have gone up just ahead of me, I think.”

“When did you last see your father, Mr. Lee?”

“This afternoon. We were all up there.”

“You did not see him after that?”

“No.”

The chief constable paused, then he said:

“Were you aware that your father kept a quantity of valuable uncut diamonds in the safe in his bedroom?”

George Lee nodded.

“A most unwise procedure,” he said pompously. “I often told him so. He might have been murdered for them—I mean—that is to say —”

Colonel Johnson cut in: “Are you aware that these stones have disappeared?”

George’s jaw dropped. His protuberant eyes stared.

“Then he was murdered for them?”

The chief constable said slowly:

“He was aware of their loss and reported it to the police some hours before his death.”

George said:

“But, then—I don’t understand—I— . . .”

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“We, too, do not understand. . . .”

X

Harry Lee came into the room with a swagger. For a moment Poirot stared at him, frowning. He had a feeling that somewhere he had seen this man before. He noted the features: the high-bridged nose, the arrogant poise of the head, the line of the jaw; and he realized that though Harry was a big man and his father had been a man of merely middle height, yet there had been a good deal of resemblance between them.

He noted something else, too. For all his swagger, Harry Lee was nervous. He was carrying it off with a swing, but the anxiety underneath was real enough.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said. “What can I tell you?”

Colonel Johnson said:

“We shall be glad of any light you can throw on the events of this evening.”

Harry Lee shook his head.

“I don’t know anything at all. It’s all pretty horrible and utterly unexpected.”

Poirot said:

“You have recently returned from abroad, I think, Mr. Lee?”

Harry turned to him quickly.

“Yes. Landed in England a week ago.”

Poirot said:

“You had been away a long time?”

Harry Lee lifted up his chin and laughed.

“You might as well hear straight away—someone will soon tell you! I’m the prodigal son, gentlemen! It’s nearly twenty years since I last set foot in this house.”

“But you returned—now. Will you tell us why?” asked Poirot.

With the same appearance of frankness Harry answered readily enough.

"It's the good old parable still. I got tired of the husks that the swine do eat—or don't eat, I forget which. I thought to myself that the fatted calf would be a welcome exchange. I had a letter from my father suggesting that I come home. I obeyed the summons and came. That's all."

Poirot said:

"You came for a short visit—or a long one?"

Harry said: "I came home—for good!"

"Your father was willing?"

"The old man was delighted." He laughed again. The corners of his eyes crinkled engagingly. "Pretty boring for the old man living here with Alfred! Alfred's a dull stick—very worthy and all that, but poor company. My father had been a bit of a rip in his time. He was looking forward to my company."

"And your brother and his wife, were they pleased that you were to live here?"

Poirot asked the question with a slight lifting of his eyebrows.

"Alfred? Alfred was livid with rage. Don't know about Lydia. She was probably annoyed on Alfred's behalf. But I've no doubt she'd be quite pleased in the end. I like Lydia. She's a delightful woman. I should have got on with Lydia. But Alfred was quite another pair of shoes." He laughed again. "Alfred's always been as jealous as hell of me. He's always been the good dutiful stay-at-home stick-in-the-mud son. And what was he going to get for it in the end?—what the good boy of the family always gets—a kick in the pants.

Take it from me, gentlemen, virtue doesn't pay." He looked from one face to another.

"Hope you're not shocked by my frankness. But after all, it's the truth you're after. You'll drag out all the family dirty linen into the light of day in the end. I might as well display mine straight away. I'm not particularly brokenhearted by my father's death—after all, I hadn't seen the old devil since I was a boy—but nevertheless he was my father and he was murdered. I'm all out for revenge on the murderer." He stroked his jawbone, watching them. "We're rather hot on revenge in our family. None of the Lees forget easily. I mean to make sure that my father's murderer is caught and hanged."

"I think you can trust us to do our best in that line, Mr. Lee," said Sugden.

"If you don't I shall take the law into my own hands," said Harry Lee.

The chief constable said sharply:

"Have you any ideas on the subject of the murderer's identity, then, Mr. Lee?"

Harry shook his head.

"No," he said slowly. "No—I haven't. You know it's rather a jolt. Because I've been thinking about it—and I don't see that it can have been an outside job. . . ."

"Ah," said Sugden, nodding his head.

"And if so," said Harry Lee, "then someone here in the house killed him . . . But who the devil could have done it? Can't suspect the servants. Tressilian has been here since the year one. The half-witted footman? Not on your life. Horbury, now, he's a cool customer, but Tressilian tells me he was out at the pictures. So what do you come to? Passing over Stephen Farr (and why the devil should Stephen Farr come all the way from South Africa and murder a total stranger?) there's only the family. And for the life of me I can't see one of us doing it. Alfred? He adored Father. George? He hasn't got the guts. David? David's always been a moon dreamer. He'd faint if he saw his own finger bleed. The wives? Women don't go and slit a man's throat in cold blood. So who did? Blessed if I know. But it's damned disturbing."

Colonel Johnson cleared his throat—an official habit of his—and said:

"When did you last see your father this evening?"

"After tea. He'd just had a row with Alfred—about your humble servant. The old man was no end bucked with himself. He always liked stirring up trouble. In my opinion, that's why he kept my arrival dark from the others. Wanted to see the fur fly when I blew in unexpectedly! That's why he talked about altering his will, too."

Poirot stirred softly. He murmured:

"So your father mentioned his will?"

"Yes—in front of the whole lot of us, watching us like a cat to see how we reacted. Just told the lawyer chap to come over and see him about it after Christmas."

Poirot asked:

“What changes did he contemplate making?”

Harry Lee grinned:

“He didn’t tell us that! Trust the old fox! I imagine—or shall we say I hoped—that the change was to the advantage of your humble servant! I should imagine I’d been cut out of any former wills. Now, I rather fancy, I was to go back. Nasty blow for the others. Pilar, too—he’d taken a fancy to her. She was in for something good, I should imagine. You haven’t seen her yet? My Spanish niece. She’s a beautiful creature, Pilar—with the lovely warmth of the South—and its cruelty. Wish I wasn’t a mere uncle!”

“You say your father took to her?”

Harry nodded.

“She knew how to get round the old man. Sat up there with him a good deal. I bet she knew just what she was after! Well, he’s dead now. No wills can be altered in Pilar’s favour—nor mine either, worse luck.”

He frowned, paused a minute, and then went on with a change of tone.

“But I’m wandering from the point. You wanted to know what was the last time I saw my father? As I’ve told you, it was after tea—might have been a little past six. The old man was in good spirits then—a bit tired, perhaps. I went away and left him with Horbury. I never saw him again.”

“Where were you at the time of his death?”

“In the dining room with brother Alfred. Not a very harmonious after-dinner session. We were in the middle of a pretty sharp argument when we heard the noise overhead. Sounded as though ten men were wrestling up there. And then poor old Father screamed. It was like killing a pig. The sound of it paralysed Alfred. He just sat there with his jaw dropping. I fairly shook him back to life, and we started off upstairs. The door was locked. Had to break it open. Took some doing, too. How the devil that door came to be locked, I can’t imagine! There was no one in the room but Father, and I’m damned if anyone could have got away through the windows.”

Superintendent Sugden said:

“The door was locked from the outside.”

“What?” Harry stared. “But I’ll swear the key was on the inside.”

Poirot murmured:

“So you noticed that?”

Harry Lee said sharply:

“I do notice things. It’s a habit of mine.”

He looked sharply from one face to the other.

“Is there anything more you want to know, gentlemen?”

Johnson shook his head.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee, not for the moment. Perhaps you will ask the next member of the family to come along?"

"Certainly I will."

He walked to the door and went out without looking back.

The three men looked at each other.

Colonel Johnson said:

"What about it, Sugden?"

The superintendent shook his head doubtfully. He said:

"He's afraid of something. I wonder why?. . . ."

XI

Magdalene Lee paused effectively in the doorway. One long slender hand touched the burnished platinum sheen of her hair. The leaf-green velvet frock she wore clung to the delicate lines of her figure. She looked very young and a little frightened.

The three men were arrested for a moment looking at her. Johnson's eyes showed a sudden surprised admiration. Superintendent Sugden's showed no animation, merely the impatience of a man anxious to get on with his job. Hercule Poirot's eyes were deeply appreciative (as she saw) but the appreciation was not for her beauty, but for the effective use she made of it. She did not know that he was thinking to himself:

"Jolie mannequin, la petite. Mais elle a les yeux durs."

Colonel Johnson was thinking:

“Damned good-looking girl. George Lee will have trouble with her if he doesn’t look out. Got an eye for a man all right.”

Superintendent Sugden was thinking:

“Empty-headed vain piece of goods. Hope we get through with her quickly.”

“Will you sit down, Mrs. Lee? Let me see, you are—?”

“Mrs. George Lee.”

She accepted the chair with a warm smile of thanks. “After all,” the glance seemed to say, “although you are a man and a policeman, you are not so dreadful after all.”

The tail end of the smile included Poirot. Foreigners were so susceptible where women were concerned. About Superintendent Sugden she did not bother.

She murmured, twisting her hands together in a pretty distress:

“It’s all so terrible. I feel so frightened.”

“Come, come, Mrs. Lee,” said Colonel Johnson kindly but briskly. “It’s been a shock, I know, but it’s all over now. We just want an account from you of what happened this evening.”

She cried out:

“But I don’t know anything about it—I don’t indeed.”

For a moment the chief constable's eyes narrowed. He said gently: "No, of course not."

"We only arrived here yesterday. George would make me come here for Christmas! I wish we hadn't. I'm sure I shall never feel the same again!"

"Very upsetting—yes."

"I hardly know George's family, you see. I've only seen Mr. Lee once or twice—at our wedding and once since. Of course I've seen Alfred and Lydia more often, but they're really all quite strangers to me."

Again the wide-eyed frightened-child look. Again Hercule Poirot's eyes were appreciative—and again he thought to himself:

"Elle joue très bien la comédie, cette petite. . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Colonel Johnson. "Now just tell me about the last time you saw your father-in-law—Mr. Lee—alive."

"Oh, that! That was this afternoon. It was dreadful!"

Johnson said quickly:

"Dreadful? Why?"

"They were so angry!"

"Who was angry?"

"Oh, all of them . . . I don't mean George. His father didn't say anything to him. But all the others."

“What happened exactly?”

“Well, when we got there—he asked for all of us—he was speaking into the telephone—to his lawyers about his will. And then he told Alfred he was looking very glum. I think that was because of Harry coming home to live. Alfred was very upset about that, I believe. You see, Harry did something quite dreadful. And then he said something about his wife—she’s dead long ago—but she had the brains of a louse, he said, and David sprang up and looked as though he’d like to murder him—Oh!” She stopped suddenly, her eyes alarmed. “I didn’t mean that—I didn’t mean it at all!”

Colonel Johnson said soothingly:

“Quite—quite, figure of speech, that was all.”

“Hilda, that’s David’s wife, quieted him down and—well, I think that’s all. Mr. Lee said he didn’t want to see anyone again that evening. So we all went away.”

“And that was the last time you saw him?”

“Yes. Until—until—”

She shivered.

Colonel Johnson said:

“Yes, quite so. Now, where were you at the time of the crime?”

“Oh—let me see, I think I was in the drawing room.”

“Aren’t you sure?”

Magdalene’s eyes flickered a little, the lids drooped over them.

She said:

“Of course! How stupid of me . . . I’d gone to telephone. One gets so mixed up.”

“You were telephoning, you say. In this room?”

“Yes, that’s the only telephone except the one upstairs in my father-in-law’s room.”

Superintendent Sugden said:

“Was anybody else in the room with you?”

Her eyes widened.

“Oh, no, I was quite alone.”

“Had you been here long?”

“Well—a little time. It takes some time to put a call through in the evening.”

“It was a trunk call, then?”

“Yes—to Westeringham.”

“I see.”

“And then?”

“And then there was that awful scream—and everybody running—and the door being locked and having to break it down. Oh! It was like a nightmare! I shall always remember it!”

“No, no,” Colonel Johnson’s tone was mechanically kind. He went on:

“Did you know that your father-in-law kept a quantity of valuable diamonds in his safe?”

“No, did he?” Her tone was quite frankly thrilled. “Real diamonds?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Diamonds worth about ten thousand pounds.”

“Oh!” It was a soft gasping sound—holding in it the essence of feminine cupidity.

“Well,” said Colonel Johnson, “I think that’s all for the present. We needn’t bother you any further, Mrs. Lee.”

“Oh, thank you.”

She stood up—smiled from Johnson to Poirot—the smile of a grateful little girl, then she went out walking with her head held high and her palms a little turned outwards.

Colonel Johnson called:

“Will you ask your brother-in-law, Mr. David Lee, to come here?” Closing the door after her, he came back to the table.

“Well,” he said, “what do you think? We’re getting at some of it now! You notice one thing: George Lee was telephoning when he heard the scream! His wife was telephoning when she heard it! That doesn’t fit—it doesn’t fit at all.”

He added:

“What do you think, Sugden?”

The superintendent said slowly:

“I don’t want to speak offensively of the lady, but I should say that though she’s the kind who would be first class at getting money out a gentleman, I don’t think she’s the kind who’d cut a gentleman’s throat. That wouldn’t be her line at all.”

“Ah, but one never knows, mon vieux,” murmured Poirot.

The chief constable turned round on him.

“And you, Poirot, what do you think?”

Hercule Poirot leaned forward. He straightened the blotter in front of him and flicked a minute speck of dust from a candlestick. He answered:

“I would say that the character of the late Mr. Simeon Lee begins to emerge for us. It is there, I think, that the whole importance of the case lies . . . in the character of the dead man.”

Superintendent Sugden turned a puzzled face to him.

“I don’t quite get you, Mr. Poirot,” he said. “What exactly has the character of the deceased got to do with his murder?”

Poirot said dreamily:

“The character of the victim has always something to do with his or her murder. The frank and unsuspicious mind of Desdemona was the direct cause of her death. A more suspicious woman would have seen Iago’s machinations and circumvented them much earlier. The uncleanness of Marat directly invited his end in a bath. From the temper of Mercutio’s mind came his death at the sword’s point.”

Colonel Johnson pulled his moustache.

“What exactly are you getting at, Poirot?”

“I am telling you that because Simeon Lee was a certain kind of man, he set in motion certain forces, which forces in the end brought about his death.”

“You don’t think the diamonds had anything to do with it, then?”

Poirot smiled at the honest perplexity in Johnson’s face.

“Mon cher,” he said. “It was because of Simeon Lee’s peculiar character that he kept ten thousand pounds worth of uncut diamonds in his safe! You have not there the action of every man.”

“That’s very true, Mr. Poirot,” said Superintendent Sugden, nodding his head with the air of a man who at last sees what a fellow conversationalist is driving at. “He was a queer one, Mr. Lee was. He kept those stones there so he could take them out and handle them and get the feeling of the past back. Depend upon it, that's why he never had them cut."

Poirot nodded energetically.

"Precisely—precisely. I see you have great acumen, Superintendent."

The superintendent looked a little doubtful at the compliment, but Colonel Johnson cut in:

"There's something else, Poirot. I don't know whether it has struck you—"

"Mais oui," said Poirot. "I know what you mean. Mrs. George Lee, she let the cat out of the bag more than she knew! She gave us a pretty impression of that last family meeting. She indicates—oh! so naïvely—that Alfred was angry with his father—and that David looked as 'though he could murder him.' Both those statements I think were true. But from them we can draw our own reconstruction. What did Simeon Lee assemble his family for? Why should they have arrived in time to hear him telephoning to his lawyer? Parbleu, it was no error, that. He wanted them to hear it! The poor old one, he sits in his chair and he has lost the diversions of his younger days. So he invents a new diversion for himself. He amuses himself by playing upon the cupidity and the greed of human nature—yes, and on its emotions and its passions, too! But from that arises one further deduction. In his game of rousing the greed and emotion of his children, he would not omit anyone. He must, logically and necessarily, have had his dig at Mr. George Lee as well as at the others! His wife is carefully silent about that. At her, too, he may have shot a poisoned arrow or two.

We shall find out, I think, from others, what Simeon Lee had to say to George Lee and George Lee's wife—"

He broke off. The door opened and David Lee came in.

XII

David Lee had himself well in hand. His demeanour was calm—almost unnaturally so. He came up to them, drew a chair forward and sat down, looking with grave interrogation at Colonel Johnson.

The electric light touched the fair peak of hair that grew on his forehead and showed up the sensitive modelling of the cheek bones. He looked absurdly young to be the son of that shrivelled old man who lay dead upstairs.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said, "what can I tell you?"

Colonel Johnson said:

"I understand, Mr. Lee, that there was a kind of family meeting held in your father's room this afternoon?"

"There was. But it was quite informal. I mean, it was not a family council or anything of that kind."

"What took place there?"

David Lee answered calmly:

"My father was in a difficult mood. He was an old man and an invalid, of course, one had to make allowances for him. He seemed to have assembled us there in order to—well—vent his spite upon us.”

“Can you remember what he said?”

David said quietly:

“It was really all rather foolish. He said we were no use—any of us—that there wasn’t a single man in the family! He said Pilar (that is my Spanish niece) was worth two of any of us. He said—” David stopped.

Poirot said:

“Please, Mr. Lee, the exact words, if you can.”

David said reluctantly:

“He spoke rather coarsely—said he hoped that somewhere in the world he had better sons—even if they were born the wrong side of the blanket. . . .”

His sensitive face showed distaste for the words he was repeating. Superintendent Sugden looked up, suddenly alert. Leaning forward, he said:

“Did your father say anything in particular to your brother, Mr. George Lee?”

“To George? I don’t remember. Oh, yes, I believe he told him he would have to cut down expenses in future; he’d have to reduce his allowance. George was very upset, got as red as a turkey cock. He spluttered and said he couldn’t possibly manage with less. My father said quite coolly that he'd have to. He said he'd better get his wife to help him economize. Rather a nasty dig, that—George has always been the economical one—saves and stints on every penny. Magdalene, I fancy, is a bit of a spender—she has extravagant tastes."

Poirot said:

"So that she, too, was annoyed?"

"Yes. Besides, my father worded something else rather crudely—mentioned her as having lived with a naval officer. Of course he really meant her father, but it sounded rather dubious. Magdalene went scarlet. I don't blame her."

Poirot said:

"Did your father mention his late wife, your mother?"

The red blood ran in waves up David's temples. His hands clenched themselves on the table in front of him, trembling slightly.

He said in a low choked voice:

"Yes, he did. He insulted her."

Colonel Johnson said:

"What did he say?"

David said abruptly:

"I don't remember. Just some slighting reference."

Poirot said softly:

“Your mother has been dead some years?”

David said shortly:

“She died when I was a boy.”

“She was not—perhaps—very happy in her life here?”

David gave a scornful laugh:

“Who could be happy with a man like my father? My mother was a saint. She died a brokenhearted woman.”

Poirot went on:

“Your father was, perhaps, distressed by her death?”

David said abruptly:

“I don’t know. I left home.”

He paused and then said:

“Perhaps you may not be aware of the fact that when I came on this visit I had not seen my father for nearly twenty years. So you see I can’t tell you very much about his habits or his enemies or what went on here.”

Colonel Johnson asked:

“Did you know that your father kept a lot of valuable diamonds in the safe in his bedroom?”

David said indifferently:

“Did he? Seems a foolish sort of thing to do.”

Johnson said:

“Will you describe briefly your own movements last night?”

“Mine? Oh, I went away from the dinner table fairly quickly. It bores me, this sitting round over port. Besides, I could see that Alfred and Harry were working up for a quarrel. I hate rows. I slipped away and went to the music room and played the piano.”

Poirot asked:

“The music room, it is next to the drawing room, is it not?”

“Yes. I played there for some time—till—till the thing happened.”

“What did you hear exactly?”

“Oh! A far-off noise of furniture being overturned somewhere upstairs. And then a pretty ghastly cry.” He clenched his hands again. “Like a soul in hell. God, it was awful!”

Johnson said:

“Were you alone in the music room?”

“Eh? No, my wife, Hilda, was there. She’d come in from the drawing room. We—we went up with the others.”

He added quickly and nervously:

“You don’t want me, do you, to describe what—what I saw there?”

Colonel Johnson said:

“No, quite unnecessary. Thank you, Mr. Lee, there’s nothing more. You can’t imagine, I suppose, who would be likely to want to murder your father?”

David Lee said recklessly:

“I should think—quite a lot of people! I don’t know of anyone definite.”

He went out rapidly, shutting the door loudly behind him.

XIII

Colonel Johnson had had no time to do more than clear his throat when the door opened again and Hilda Lee came in.

Hercule Poirot looked at her with interest. He had to admit to himself that the wives these Lees had married were an interesting study. The swift intelligence and greyhound grace of Lydia, the meretricious airs and graces of Magdalene, and now, the solid comfortable strength of Hilda. She was, he saw, younger than her rather dowdy style of hairdressing and unfashionable clothes made her appear. Her mouse-brown hair was unflecked with grey and her steady hazel eyes set in the rather podgy face shone out like beacons of kindliness. She was, he thought, a nice woman.

Colonel Johnson was talking in his kindliest tone.

“. . . A great strain on all of you,” he was saying. “I gather from your husband, Mrs. Lee, that this is the first time you have been to Gorston Hall?”

She bowed her head.

“Were you previously acquainted with your father-in-law, Mr. Lee?”

Hilda replied in her pleasant voice:

“No. We were married soon after David left home. He always wanted to have nothing to do with his family. Until now we have not seen any of them.”

“How, then, did this visit come about?”

“My father-in-law wrote to David. He stressed his age and his desire that all his children should be with him this Christmas.”

“And your husband responded to this appeal?”

Hilda said:

“His acceptance was, I am afraid, all my doing—I misunderstood the situation.”

Poirot interposed. He said:

“Will you be so kind as to explain yourself a little more clearly, madame? I think what you can tell us may be of value.”

She turned to him immediately.

She said:

“At that time I had never seen my father-in-law. I had no idea what his real motive was. I assumed that he was old and lonely and that he really wanted to be reconciled to all his children.”

“And what was his real motive, in your opinion, madame?”

Hilda hesitated a moment. Then she said slowly:

“I have no doubt—no doubt at all—that what my father-in-law really wanted was not to promote peace but to stir up strife.”

“In what way?”

Hilda said in a low voice:

“It amused him to—to appeal to the worst instincts in human nature. There was—how can I put it?—a kind of diabolical impishness about him. He wished to set every member of the family at loggerheads with one another.”

Johnson said sharply: “And did he succeed?”

“Oh, yes,” said Hilda Lee. “He succeeded.”

Poirot said:

“We have been told, madame, of a scene that took place this afternoon. It was, I think, rather a violent scene.”

She bowed her head.

“Will you describe it to us—as truthfully as possible, if you please.”

She reflected a minute.

“When we went in my father-in-law was telephoning.”

“To his lawyer, I understand?”

“Yes, he was suggesting that Mr.—was it Charlton?—I don’t quite remember the name—should come over as he, my father-in-law, wanted to make a new will. His old one, he said, was quite out of date.”

Poirot said:

“Think carefully, madame; in your opinion did your father-in-law deliberately ensure that you should all overhear this conversation, or was it just by chance that you overheard it?”

Hilda Lee said:

“I am almost sure that he meant us to overhear.”

“With the object of fomenting doubt and suspicions among you?”

“Yes.”

“So that, really, he may not have meant to alter his will at all?”

She demurred.

“No, I think that part of it was quite genuine. He probably did wish to make a new will—but he enjoyed underlining the fact.”

“Madame,” said Poirot, “I have no official standing and my questions, you understand, are not perhaps those that an English officer of the law would ask. But I have a great desire to know what form you think that new will would have taken. I am asking, you perceive, not for your knowledge, but simply for your opinion. Les femmes, they are never slow to form an opinion, Dieu merci.”

Hilda Lee smiled a little.

“I don’t mind saying what I think. My husband’s sister Jennifer married a Spaniard, Juan Estravados. Her daughter, Pilar, has just arrived here. She is a very lovely girl—and she is, of course, the only grandchild in the family. Old Mr. Lee was delighted with her. He took a tremendous fancy to her. In my opinion, he wished to leave her a considerable sum in his new will. Probably he had only left her a small portion or even nothing at all in an old one.”

“Did you know your sister-in-law at all?”

“No, I never met her. Her Spanish husband died in tragic circumstances, I believe, soon after the marriage. Jennifer herself died a year ago. Pilar was left an orphan. This is why Mr. Lee sent for her to come and live with him in England.”

“And the other members of the family, did they welcome her coming?”

Hilda said quietly:

“I think they all liked her. It was very pleasant to have someone young and alive in the house.”

“And she, did she seem to like being here?”

Hilda said slowly:

“I don’t know. It must seem cold and strange to a girl brought up in the South—in Spain.”

Johnson said:

“Can’t be very pleasant being in Spain just at present. Now, Mrs. Lee, we’d like to hear your account of the conversation this afternoon.”

Poirot murmured:

“I apologize. I have made the digressions.”

Hilda Lee said:

“After my father-in-law finished telephoning, he looked round at us and laughed, and said we all looked very glum. Then he said he was tired and should go to bed early. Nobody was to come up and see him this evening. He said he wanted to be in good form for Christmas Day. Something like that.”

“Then—” Her brows knit in an effort of remembrance. “I think he said something about its being necessary to be one of a large family to appreciate Christmas, and then he went on to speak of money. He said it would cost him more to run this house in future. He told George and Magdalene they would have to economize. Told her she ought to make her own clothes. Rather an old-fashioned idea, I’m afraid. I don’t wonder it annoyed her. He said his own wife had been clever with her needle.”

Poirot said gently:

"Is that all that he said about her?"

Hilda flushed.

"He made a slighting reference to her brains. My husband was very devoted to his mother, and that upset him very much. And then, suddenly Mr. Lee began shouting at us all. He worked himself up about it. I can understand, of course, how he felt—"

Poirot said gently, interrupting her:

"How did he feel?"

She turned her tranquil eyes upon him.

"He was disappointed, of course," she said. "Because there are no grandchildren—no boys, I mean—no Lees to carry on. I can see that that must have festered for a long time. And suddenly he couldn't keep it in any longer and vented his rage against his sons—saying they were a lot of namby-pamby old women—something like that. I felt sorry for him, then, because I realized how his pride was hurt by it."

"And then?"

"And then," said Hilda slowly, "we all went away."

"That was the last you saw of him?"

She bowed her head.

"Where were you at the time the crime occurred?"

"I was with my husband in the music room. He was playing to me."

"And then?"

"We heard tables and chairs overturned upstairs, and china being broken—some terrible struggle. And then that awful scream as his throat was cut. . . ."

Poirot said:

"Was it such an awful scream? Was it"—he paused—"like a soul in hell?"

Hilda Lee said:

"It was worse than that!"

"What do you mean, madame?"

"It was like someone who had no soul . . . It was inhuman like a beast. . . ."

Poirot said gravely:

"So—you have judged him, madame?"

She raised a hand in sudden distress. Her eyes fell and she stared down at the floor.

XIV

Pilar came into the room with the wariness of an animal who suspects a trap. Her eyes went quickly from side to side. She looked not so much afraid as deeply suspicious.

Colonel Johnson rose and put a chair for her. Then he said:

“You understand English, I suppose, Miss Estravados?”

Pilar’s eyes opened wide. She said:

“Of course. My mother was English. I am really very English indeed.”

A faint smile came to Colonel Johnson’s lips, as his eyes took in the black gloss of her hair, the proud dark eyes, and the curling red lips. Very English! An incongruous term to apply to Pilar Estravados.

He said:

“Mr. Lee was your grandfather. He sent for you to come from Spain. And you arrived a few days ago. Is that right?”

Pilar nodded.

“That is right. I had—oh! a lot of adventures getting out of Spain—there was a bomb from the air and the chauffeur he was killed—where his head had been there was all blood. And I could not drive a car, so for a long way I had to walk—and I do not like walking. I never walk. My feet were sore—but sore—”

Colonel Johnson smiled. He said:

“At any rate you arrived here. Had your mother spoken to you of your grandfather much?”

Pilar nodded cheerfully.

“Oh, yes, she said he was an old devil.”

Hercule Poirot smiled. He said:

“And what did you think of him when you arrived, mademoiselle?”

Pilar said:

“Of course he was very, very old. He had to sit in a chair—and his face was all dried up. But I liked him all the same. I think that when he was a young man, he must have been handsome—very handsome, like you,” said Pilar to Superintendent Sugden. Her eyes dwelt with näive pleasure on his handsome face, which had turned brick-red at the compliment.

Colonel Johnson stifled a chuckle. It was one of the few occasions when he had seen the stolid superintendent taken aback.

“But of course,” Pilar continued regretfully, “he could never have been so big as you.”

Hercule Poirot sighed.

“You like, then, big men, señorita?” he inquired.

Pilar agreed enthusiastically.

“Oh, yes, I like a man to be very big, tall, and the shoulders broad, and very, very strong.”

Colonel Johnson said sharply:

“Did you see much of your grandfather when you arrived here?”

Pilar said:

“Oh, yes. I went to sit with him. He told me things—that he had been a very wicked man, and all the things he did in South Africa.”

“Did he ever tell you that he had diamonds in the safe in his room?”

“Yes, he showed them to me. But they were not like diamonds—they were just like pebbles—very ugly—very ugly indeed.”

Superintendent Sugden said shortly:

“So he showed them to you, did he?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t give you any of them?”

Pilar shook her head.

“No, he did not. I thought that perhaps one day he would—if I were very nice to him and came often to sit with him. Because old gentlemen they like very much young girls.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“Do you know that those diamonds have been stolen?”

Pilar opened her eyes very wide.

“Stolen?”

“Yes, have you any idea who might have taken them?”

Pilar nodded her head.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “It would be Horbury.”

“Horbury? You mean the valet?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because he has the face of a thief. His eyes go so, from side to side, he walks softly and listens at doors. He is like a cat. And all cats are thieves.”

“H’m,” said Colonel Johnson. “We’ll leave it at that. Now I understand that all the family were up in your grandfather’s room this afternoon, and that some—er—angry words passed.”

Pilar nodded and smiled.

“Yes,” she said. “It was great fun. Grandfather made them oh! so angry!”

“Oh, you enjoyed it, did you?”

“Yes. I like to see people get angry. I like it very much. But here in England they do not get angry like they do in Spain. In Spain they take out their knives and they curse and shout. In England they do nothing, just get very red in the face and shut up their mouths tight.”

“Do you remember what was said?”

Pilar seemed rather doubtful.

“I am not sure. Grandfather said they were no good—that they had not got any children. He said I was better than any of them. He liked me, very much.”

“Did he say anything about money or a will?”

“A will—no, I don’t think so. I don’t remember.”

“What happened?”

“They all went away—except Hilda—the fat one, David’s wife, she stayed behind.”

“Oh, she did, did she?”

“Yes. David looked very funny. He was all shaking and oh! so white. He looked as though he might be sick.”

“And what then?”

“Then I went and found Stephen. We danced to the gramophone.”

“Stephen Farr?”

“Yes. He is from South Africa—he is the son of Grandfather’s partner. He is very handsome too. Very brown and big, and he has nice eyes.”

Johnson asked:

“Where were you when the crime occurred?”

“You ask where I was?”

"Yes."

"I had gone into the drawing room with Lydia. And then I went up to my room and did my face. I was going to dance again with Stephen. And then, far away, I heard a scream and everyone was running, so I went too. And they were trying to break down Grandfather's door. Harry did it with Stephen, they are both big strong men."

"Yes?"

"And then—crash—down it went—and we all looked in. Oh, such a sight—everything smashed and knocked over, and Grandfather lying in a lot of blood, and his throat was cut like this"—she made a vivid dramatic gesture at her own neck—"right up under his ear."

She paused, having obviously enjoyed her narrative.

Johnson said:

"The blood didn't make you feel ill?"

She stared.

"No, why should it? There is usually blood when people are killed. There was, oh! so much blood everywhere!"

Poirot said: "Did anyone say anything?"

Pilar said:

"David said such a funny thing—what was it? Oh, yes. The mills of God—that is what he said"—she repeated it with emphasis on each word—“The mills—of—God—What does that mean? Mills are what make flour, are they not?”

Colonel Johnson said:

“Well, I don’t think there is anything more just now, Miss Estravados.”

Pilar got up obediently. She flashed a quick charming smile at each man in turn.

“I will go now, then.” She went out.

Colonel Johnson said:

“The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small. And David Lee said that!”

XV

As the door opened once more, Colonel Johnson looked up. For a moment he took the entering figure to be that of Harry Lee, but as Stephen Farr advanced into the room he saw his error.

“Sit down, Mr. Farr,” he said.

Stephen sat. His eyes, cool, intelligent eyes, went from one to the other of the three men. He said:

“I’m afraid I shan’t be much use to you. But please ask me anything that you think may help. Perhaps I’d better explain, to start with, who I am. My father, Ebenezer Farr, was Simeon Lee’s partner in South Africa in the old days. I’m talking of over forty years ago.”

He paused.

“My dad talked to me a lot about Simeon Lee—what a personality he was. He and Dad cleaned up a good bit together. Simeon Lee went home with a fortune and my father didn’t do badly either. My father always told me that when I came to this country I was to look up Mr. Lee. I said once that it was a long time ago and that he’d probably not know who I was, but Dad scoffed at the idea. He said, ‘When two men have been through what Simeon and I went through, they don’t forget.’ Well, my father died a couple of years ago. This year I came over to England for the first time, and I thought I’d act on Dad’s advice and look up Mr. Lee.”

With a slight smile he went on:

“I was just a little nervous when I came along here, but I needn’t have been. Mr. Lee gave me a warm welcome and absolutely insisted that I should stay with the family over Christmas. I was afraid I was butting in, but he wouldn’t hear of a refusal.”

He added rather shyly:

“They were all very nice to me—Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lee couldn’t have been nicer. I’m terribly sorry for them that all this should come upon them.”

“How long have you been here, Mr. Farr?”

“Since yesterday.”

"Did you see Mr. Lee today at all?"

"Yes, I had a chat with him this morning. He was in good spirits then and anxious to hear about a lot of people and places."

"That was the last time you saw him?"

"Yes."

"Did he mention to you that he kept a quantity of uncut diamonds in his safe?"

"No."

He added before the other could speak:

"Do you mean that this business was murder and robbery?"

"We're not sure yet," said Johnson. "Now to come to the events of this evening, will you tell me, in your own words, what you were doing?"

"Certainly. After the ladies left the dining room I stayed and had a glass of port. Then I realized that the Lees had family business they wanted to discuss and that my being there was hampering them so I excused myself and left them."

"And what did you do then?"

Stephen Farr leaned back in his chair. His forefinger caressed his jaw. He said rather woodenly:

"I—er—went along to a big room with a parquet floor—a kind of ballroom, I fancy. There's a gramophone there and dance records. I put some records on."

Poirot said:

"It was possible, perhaps, that someone might join you there?"

A very faint smile curved Stephen Farr's lips. He answered:

"It was possible, yes. One always hopes."

And he grinned outright.

Poirot said:

"Señorita Estravados is very beautiful."

Stephen answered:

"She's easily the best thing to look at that I've seen since I came to England."

"Did Miss Estravados join you?" asked Colonel Johnson.

Stephen shook his head.

"I was still there when I heard the rumpus. I came out into the hall and ran hell for leather to see what was the matter. I helped Harry Lee to break the door down."

"And that's all you have to tell us?"

"Absolutely all, I'm afraid."

Hercule Poirot leaned forward. He said softly:

"But I think, Monsieur Farr, that you could tell us a good deal if you liked."

Farr said sharply:

"What d'you mean?"

"You can tell us something that is very important in this case—the character of Mr. Lee. You say that your father talked much of him to you. What manner of a man was it that he described to you?"

Stephen Farr said slowly:

"I think I see what you're driving at. What was Simeon Lee like in his young days? Well—you want me to be frank, I suppose?"

"If you please."

"Well, to begin with, I don't think that Simeon Lee was a highly moral member of society. I don't mean that he was exactly a crook, but he sailed pretty near the wind. His morals were nothing to boast about anyway. He had charm, though, a good deal of it. And he was fantastically generous. No one with a hard-luck story ever appealed to him in vain. He drank a bit, but not overmuch, was attractive to women, and had a sense of humour. All the same, he had a queer revengeful streak in him. Talk of the elephant never forgets and you talk of Simeon Lee. My father told me of several cases where Lee waited years to get even with someone who'd done him a nasty turn."

Superintendent Sugden said:

"Two might play at that game. You've no knowledge, I suppose, Mr. Farr, of anyone who Simeon Lee had done a bad turn to out there? Nothing out of the past that could explain the crime committed here this evening?"

Stephen Farr shook his head.

"He had enemies, of course, must have had, being the man he was. But I know of no specific case. Besides," his eyes narrowed, "I understand (as a matter of fact, I've been questioning Tressilian) there have been no strangers in or near the house this evening."

Hercule Poirot said:

"With the exception of yourself, M. Farr."

Stephen Farr swung round upon him.

"Oh, so that's it? Suspicious stranger within the gates! Well, you won't find anything of that kind. No back history of Simeon Lee doing Ebenezer Farr down, and Eb's son coming over to revenge his dad! No," he shook his head. "Simeon and Ebenezer had nothing against each other. I came here, as I've told you, out of sheer curiosity. And moreover, I should imagine a gramophone is as good an alibi as anything else. I never stopped putting on records—somebody must have heard them. One record wouldn't give me time to race away upstairs—these passages are a mile long, anyway—slit an old man's throat, wash off the blood, and get back again before the others came rushing up. The idea's farcical!"

Colonel Johnson said:

"We're not making any insinuations against you, Mr. Farr."

Stephen Farr said:

“I didn’t care much for the tone of Mr. Hercule Poirot’s voice.”

“That,” said Hercule Poirot, “is unfortunate!”

He smiled benignly at the other.

Stephen Farr looked angrily at him.

Colonel Johnson interposed quickly:

“Thank you, Mr. Farr. That will be all for the present. You will, of course, not leave this house.”

Stephen Farr nodded. He got up and left the room, walking with a freely swinging stride.

As the door closed behind him, Johnson said:

“There goes X, the unknown quantity. His story seems straightforward enough. All the same, he’s the dark horse. He might have pinched those diamonds—might have come here with a bogus story just to gain admittance. You’d better get his fingerprints, Sugden, and see if he’s known.”

“I’ve already got them,” said the superintendent with a dry smile.

“Good man. You don’t overlook much. I suppose you’re on to all the obvious lines?”

Superintendent Sugden checked off on his fingers.

“Check up on those telephone calls—times, etc. Check up on Horbury. What time he left, who saw him go. Check up all entrances and exits. Check up on staff generally. Check up financial position of members of family. Get on to the lawyers and check up on will. Search house for the weapon and for bloodstains on clothing—also possibly diamonds hidden somewhere.”

“That covers everything, I think,” said Colonel Johnson approvingly. “Can you suggest anything, M. Poirot?”

Poirot shook his head. He said:

“I find the superintendent admirably thorough.”

Sugden said gloomily:

“It won’t be any joke looking through this house for the missing diamonds. Never saw so many ornaments and knickknacks in my life.”

“The hiding places are certainly abundant,” Poirot agreed.

“And there’s really nothing you would suggest, Poirot?”

The chief constable looked a little disappointed—rather like a man whose dog has refused to do its trick.

Poirot said:

“You will permit that I take a line of my own?”

“Certainly—certainly,” said Johnson at the same moment as Superintendent Sugden said rather suspiciously:

“What line?”

“I would like,” said Hercule Poirot, “to converse—very often—very frequently—with members of the family.”

“You mean you’d like to have another shot at questioning them?” asked the colonel, a little puzzled.

“No, no, not to question—to converse!”

“Why?” asked Sugden.

Hercule Poirot waved an emphatic hand.

“In conversation, points arise! If a human being converses much, it is impossible for him to avoid the truth!”

Sugden said:

“Then you think someone is lying?”

Poirot sighed.

“Mon cher, everyone lies—in parts like the egg of the English curate. It is profitable to separate the harmless lies from the vital ones.”

Colonel Johnson said sharply:

“All the same, it’s incredible, you know. Here’s a particularly crude and brutal murder—and whom have we as suspects? Alfred Lee and his wife—both charming, well-bred, quiet people. George Lee, who’s a Member of Parliament and the essence of respectability. His wife? She’s just an ordinary modern lovely. David Lee seems a gentle creature and we’ve got his brother Harry’s word for it that he can’t stand the sight of blood. His wife seems a nice sensible woman—quite commonplace. Remains the Spanish niece and the man from South Africa. Spanish beauties have hot tempers, but I don’t see that attractive creature slitting the old man’s neck in cold blood, especially as from what has come out she had every reason to keep him alive—at any rate until he had signed a new will. Stephen Farr’s a possibility—that is to say, he may be a professional crook and have come here after the diamonds. The old man discovered the loss and Farr slit his throat to keep him quiet. That could have been so—that gramophone alibi isn’t too good.”

Poirot shook his head.

“My dear friend,” he said. “Compare the physique of M. Stephen Farr and old Simeon Lee. If Farr decided to kill the old man he could have done it in a minute—Simeon Lee couldn’t possibly have put up that fight against him. Can one believe that that frail old man and that magnificent specimen of humanity struggled for some minutes overturning chairs and breaking china? To imagine such a thing is fantastic!”

Colonel Johnson’s eyes narrowed.

“You mean,” he said, “that it was a weak man who killed Simeon Lee?”

“Or a woman!” said the superintendent.

XVI

Colonel Johnson looked at his watch.

"Nothing much more that I can do here. You've got things well in hand, Sugden. Oh, just one thing. We ought to see the butler fellow. I know you've questioned him, but we know a bit more about things now. It's important to get confirmation of just where everybody says he was at the time of the murder."

Tressilian came in slowly. The chief constable told him to sit down.

"Thank you, sir. I will, if you don't mind. I've been feeling very queer—very queer indeed. My legs, sir, and my head."

Poirot said gently: "You have had the shock, yes."

The butler shuddered. "Such—such a violent thing to happen. In this house! Where everything has always gone on so quietly."

Poirot said:

"It was a well-ordered house, yes? But not a happy one?"

"I wouldn't like to say that, sir."

"In the old days when all the family was at home, it was happy then?"

Tressilian said slowly:

"It wasn't perhaps what one would call very harmonious, sir."

"The late Mrs. Lee was somewhat of an invalid, was she not?"

"Yes, sir, very poorly she was."

"Were her children fond of her?"

"Mr. David, he was devoted to her. More like a daughter than a son. And after she died he broke away, couldn't face living here any longer."

Poirot said: "And Mr. Harry? What was he like?"

"Always rather a wild young gentleman, sir, but good-hearted. Oh, dear, gave me quite a turn, it did, when the bell rang—and then again, so impatient like, and I opened the door and there was a strange man, and then Mr. Harry's voice said, 'Hallo, Tressilian. Still here, eh?' Just the same as ever."

Poirot said sympathetically:

"It must have been the strange feeling, yes, indeed."

Tressilian said, a little pink flush showing in his cheek:

"It seems sometimes, sir, as though the past isn't the past! I believe there's been a play on in London about something like that. There's something in it, sir—there really is. There's a feeling comes over you—as though you'd done everything before. It just seems to me as though the bell rings and I go to answer it and there's Mr. Harry—even if it should be Mr. Farr or some other person—I'm just saying to myself—but I've done this before. . . ."

Poirot said:

"That is very interesting—very interesting."

Tressilian looked at him gratefully.

Johnson, somewhat impatient, cleared his throat and took charge of the conversation.

“Just want to get various times checked correctly,” he said. “Now, when the noise upstairs started, I understand that only Mr. Alfred Lee and Mr. Harry Lee were in the dining room. Is that so?”

“I really couldn’t tell you, sir. All the gentlemen were there when I served coffee to them—but that would be about a quarter of an hour earlier.”

“Mr. George Lee was telephoning. Can you confirm that?”

“I think somebody did telephone, sir. The bell rings in my pantry, and when anybody takes off the receiver to call a number, there’s just a faint noise on the bell. I do remember hearing that, but I didn’t pay attention to it.”

“You don’t know exactly when it was?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. It was after I had taken coffee to the gentlemen, that is all I can say.”

“Do you know where any of the ladies were at the time I mentioned?”

“Mrs. Alfred was in the drawing room, sir, when I went for the coffee tray. That was just a minute or two before I heard the cry upstairs.”

Poirot asked:

“What was she doing?”

“She was standing by the far window, sir. She was holding the curtain a little back and looking out.”

“And none of the other ladies were in the room?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know where they were?”

“I couldn’t say at all, sir.”

“You don’t know where anyone else was?”

“Mr. David, I think, was playing in the music room next door to the drawing room.”

“You heard him playing?”

“Yes, sir.” Again the old man shivered. “It was like a sign, sir, so I felt afterwards. It was the ‘Dead March’ he was playing. Even at the time, I remember, it gave me the creeps.”

“It is curious, yes,” said Poirot.

“Now, about this fellow, Horbury, the valet,” said the chief constable. “Are you definitely prepared to swear that he was out of the house by eight o’clock?”

“Oh yes, sir. It was just after Mr. Sugden here arrived. I remember particular because he broke a coffee cup.”

Poirot said:

“Horbury broke a coffee cup?”

"Yes, sir—one of the old Worcester ones. Eleven years I've washed them up and never one broken till this evening."

Poirot said:

"What was Horbury doing with the coffee cups?"

"Well, of course, sir, he'd no business to have been handling them at all. He was just holding one up, admiring it like, and I happened to mention that Mr. Sugden had called, and he dropped it."

Poirot said:

"Did you say 'Mr. Sugden' or did you mention the word police?"

Tressilian looked a little startled.

"Now I come to think of it, sir, I mentioned that the police superintendent had called."

"And Horbury dropped the coffee cup," said Poirot.

"Seems suggestive, that," said the chief constable. "Did Horbury ask any questions about the superintendent's visit?"

"Yes, sir, asked what he wanted here. I said he'd come collecting for the Police Orphanage and had gone up to Mr. Lee."

"Did Horbury seemed relieved when you said that?"

"Do you know, sir, now you mention it, he certainly did. His manner changed at once. Said Mr. Lee was a good old chap and free with his money—rather disrepectfully he spoke—and then he went off."

“Which way?”

“Out through the door to the servants’ hall.”

Sugden interposed:

“All that’s O.K., sir. He passed through the kitchen, where the cook and the kitchenmaid saw him, and out through the back door.”

“Now listen, Tressilian, and think carefully. Is there any means by which Horbury could return to the house without anyone seeing him?”

The old man shook his head.

“I don’t see how he could have done so, sir. All the doors are locked on the inside.”

“Supposing he had had a key?”

“The doors are bolted as well.”

“How does he get in when he comes?”

“He has a key of the back door, sir. All the servants come in that way.”

“He could have returned that way, then?”

“Not without passing through the kitchen, sir. And the kitchen would be occupied till well after half past nine or a quarter to ten.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“That seems conclusive. Thank you, Tressilian.”

The old man got up and with a bow left the room. He returned, however, a minute or two later.

“Horbury has just returned, sir. Would you like to see him now?”

“Yes, please, send him in at once.”

XVII

Sydney Horbury did not present a very prepossessing appearance. He came into the room and stood rubbing his hands together and darting quick looks from one person to another. His manner was unctuous.

Johnson said:

“You’re Sydney Horbury?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Valet attendant to the late Mr. Lee?”

“Yes, sir. It’s terrible, isn’t it? You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard from Gladys. Poor old gentleman—”

Johnson cut him short.

“Just answer my questions, please.”

“Yes, sir, certainly, sir.”

“What time did you go out tonight, and where have you been?”

“I left the house just before eight, sir. I went to the Superb, sir, just five minutes’ walk away. Love in Old Seville was the picture, sir.”

“Anyone who saw you there?”

“The young lady in the box office, sir, she knows me. And the commissionaire at the door, he knows me too. And—er—as a matter of fact, I was with a young lady, sir. I met her there by appointment.”

“Oh, you did, did you? What’s her name?”

“Doris Buckle, sir. She works in the Combined Dairies, sir, 23, Markham Road.”

“Good. We’ll look into that. Did you come straight home?”

“I saw my young lady home first, sir. Then I came straight back. You’ll find it’s quite all right, sir. I didn’t have anything to do with this. I was—”

Colonel Johnson said curtly:

“Nobody’s accusing you of having anything to do with it.”

“No, sir, of course not, sir. But it’s not very pleasant when a murder happens in a house.”

“Nobody said it was. Now, then, how long had you been in Mr. Lee’s service?”

“Just over a year, sir.”

“Did you like your place here?”

“Yes, sir. I was quite satisfied. The pay was good. Mr. Lee was rather difficult sometimes, but of course I’m used to attending on invalids.”

“You’ve had previous experience?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I was with Major West and with the Honourable Jasper Finch—”

“You can give all those particulars to Sugden later. What I want to know is this: At what time did you last see Mr. Lee this evening?”

“It was about half past seven, sir. Mr. Lee had a light supper brought to him every evening at seven o’clock. I then prepared him for bed. After that he would sit in front of the fire in his dressing gown till he felt like going to bed.”

“What time was that usually?”

“It varied, sir. Sometimes he would go to bed as early as eight o’clock—that’s if he felt tired. Sometimes he would sit up till eleven or after.”

“What did he do when he did want to go to bed?”

“Usually he rang for me, sir.”

“And you assisted him to bed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But this was your evening out. Did you always have Fridays?”

“Yes, sir. Friday was my regular day.”

“What happened then when Mr. Lee wanted to go to bed?”

“He would ring his bell and either Tressilian or Walter would see to him.”

“He was not helpless? He could move about?”

“Yes, sir, but not very easily. Rheumatoid arthritis was what he suffered from, sir. He was worse some days than others.”

“Did he never go into another room in the daytime?”

“No, sir. He preferred to be in just the one room. Mr. Lee wasn’t luxurious in his tastes. It was a big room with plenty of air and light in it.”

“Mr. Lee had his supper at seven, you say?”

“Yes, sir. I took the tray away and put out the sherry and two glasses on the bureau.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Mr. Lee’s orders.”

“Was that usual?”

“Sometimes. It was the rule that none of the family came to see Mr. Lee in the evening unless he invited them. Some evenings he liked to be alone. Other evenings he’d send down and ask Mr. Alfred, or Mrs. Alfred, or both of them, to come up after dinner.”

“But, as far as you know, he had not done so on this occasion? That is, he had not sent a message to any member of the family requesting their presence?”

“He hadn’t sent any message by me, sir.”

“So that he wasn’t expecting any of the family?”

“He might have asked one of them personally, sir.”

“Of course.”

Horbury continued:

“I saw that everything was in order, wished Mr. Lee good night and left the room.”

Poirot asked:

“Did you make up the fire before you left the room?”

The valet hesitated.

“It wasn’t necessary, sir. It was well built up.”

“Could Mr. Lee have done that himself?”

“Oh no, sir. I expect Mr. Harry Lee had done it.”

“Mr. Harry Lee was with him when you came in before supper?”

“Yes, sir. He went away when I came.”

“What was the relationship between the two as far as you could judge?”

“Mr. Harry Lee seemed in very good spirits, sir. Throwing back his head and laughing a good deal.”

“And Mr. Lee?”

“He was quiet and rather thoughtful.”

“I see. Now, there’s something more I want to know, Horbury: What can you tell us about the diamonds Mr. Lee kept in his safe?”

“Diamonds, sir? I never saw any diamonds.”

“Mr. Lee kept a quantity of uncut stones there. You must have seen him handling them.”

“Those funny little pebbles, sir? Yes, I did see him with them once or twice. But I didn’t know they were diamonds. He was showing them to the foreign young lady only yesterday—or was it the day before?”

Colonel Johnson said abruptly:

“These stones have been stolen.”

Horbury cried out:

“I hope you don’t think, sir, that I had anything to do with it!”

“I’m not making any accusations,” said Johnson. “Now then, is there anything you can tell us that has any bearing on this matter?”

“The diamonds, sir? Or the murder?”

“Both.”

“Horbury considered. He passed his tongue over his pale lips. At last he looked up with eyes that were a shade furtive.

“I don’t think there’s anything, sir.”

Poirot said softly:

“Nothing you’ve overheard, say, in the course of your duties, which might be helpful?”

The valet’s eyelids flickered a little.

“No, sir, I don’t think so, sir. There was a little awkwardness between Mr. Lee and—and some members of his family.”

“Which members?”

“I gathered there was a little trouble over Mr. Harry Lee’s return. Mr. Alfred Lee resented it. I understand he and his father had a few words about it—but that was all there was to it. Mr. Lee didn’t accuse him for a minute of having taken any diamonds. And I’m sure Mr. Alfred wouldn’t do such a thing.”

Poirot said quickly:

“His interview with Mr. Alfred was after he had discovered the loss of the diamonds, was it not, though?”

“Yes, sir.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“I thought, Horbury,” he said softly, “that you did not know of the theft of the diamonds until we informed you of it just now. How, then, do you know that Mr. Lee had discovered his loss before he had this conversation with his son?”

Horbury turned brick red.

“No use lying. Out with it,” said Sugden. “When did you know?”

Horbury said sullenly:

“I heard him telephoning to someone about it.”

“You weren’t in the room?”

“No, outside the door. Couldn’t hear much—only a word or two.”

“What did you hear exactly?” asked Poirot sweetly.

“I heard the words robbery and diamonds, and I heard him say, ‘I don’t know who to suspect’—and I heard him say something about this evening at eight o’clock.”

Superintendent Sugden nodded.

“That was to me he was speaking, my lad. About five ten, was it?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“And when you went into his room afterwards, did he look upset?”

“Just a bit, sir. Seemed absentminded and worried.”

“So much so that you got the wind up—eh?”

"Look here, Mr. Sugden, I won't have you saying things like that. Never touched any diamonds, I didn't, and you can't prove I did. I'm not a thief."

Superintendent Sugden, unimpressed, said:

"That remains to be seen." He glanced questioningly at the chief constable, received a nod, and went on: "That'll do for you, my lad. Shan't want you again tonight."

Horbury went out gratefully in haste.

Sugden said appreciatively:

"Pretty bit of work, M. Poirot. You trapped him as neatly as I've ever seen it done. He may be a thief or he may not, but he's certainly a first-class liar!"

"An unprepossessing person," said Poirot.

"Nasty bit of goods," agreed Johnson. "Question is, what do we think of his evidence?"

Sugden summarized the position neatly.

"Seems to me there are three possibilities: (1) Horbury's a thief and a murderer. (2) Horbury's a thief, but not a murderer. (3) Horbury's an innocent man. Certain amount of evidence for (1). He overheard telephone call and knew the theft had been discovered. Gathered from old man's manner that he was suspected. Made his plans accordingly. Went out ostentatiously at eight o'clock and cooked up an alibi. Easy enough to slip out of a cinema and return there unnoticed. He'd have to be pretty sure of the girl, though, that she wouldn’t give him away. I’ll see what I can get out of her tomorrow.”

“How, then, did he manage to reenter the house?” asked Poirot.

“That’s more difficult,” Sugden admitted. “But there might be ways. Say one of the women servants unlocked a side door for him.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows quizzically.

“He places, then, his life at the mercy of two women? With one woman it would be taking a big risk; with two—eh bien, I find the risk fantastic!”

Sugden said:

“Some criminals think they can get away with anything!”

He went on:

“Let’s take (2). Horbury pinched those diamonds. He took ’em out of the house tonight and has possibly passed them on to some accomplice. That’s quite easy going and highly probable. Now we’ve got to admit that somebody else chose this night to murder Mr. Lee. That somebody being quite unaware of the diamond complication. It’s possible, of course, but it’s a bit of a coincidence.

“Possibility (3)—Horbury’s innocent. Somebody else both took the diamonds and murdered the old gentleman. There it is; it’s up to us to get at the truth.”

Colonel Johnson yawned. He looked again at his watch and got up.

“Well,” he said, “I think we’ll call it a night, eh? Better just have a look in the safe before we go. Odd thing if those wretched diamonds were there all the time.”

But the diamonds were not in the safe. They found the combination where Alfred Lee had told them, in the small notebook taken from the dressing gown pocket of the dead man. In the safe they found an empty chamois-leather bag. Among the papers the safe contained only one was of interest.

It was a will dated some fifteen years previously. After various legacies and bequests, the provisions were simple enough. Half Simeon Lee’s fortune went to Alfred Lee. The other half was to be divided in equal shares between his remaining children: Harry, George, David and Jennifer.

PART FOUR

DECEMBER 25TH

In the bright sun of Christmas noon, Poirot walked in the gardens of Gorston Hall. The Hall itself was a large solidly built house with no special architectural pretensions.

Here, on the south side, was a broad terrace flanked with a hedge of clipped yew. Little plants grew in the interstices of the stone flags and at intervals along the terrace there were stone sinks arranged as miniature gardens.

Poirot surveyed them with benign approval. He murmured to himself:

“C’est bien imaginé, ça!”

In the distance he caught sight of two figures going towards an ornamental sheet of water some three hundred yards away. Pilar was easily recognizable as one of the figures, and he thought at first the other was Stephen Farr, then he saw that the man with Pilar was Harry Lee. Harry seemed very attentive to his attractive niece. At intervals he flung his head back and laughed, then bent once more attentively towards her.

“Assuredly, there is one who does not mourn,” Poirot murmured to himself.

A soft sound behind him made him turn. Magdalene Lee was standing there. She, too, was looking at the retreating figures of the man and girl. She turned her head and smiled enchantingly at Poirot. She said:

“It’s such a glorious sunny day! One can hardly believe in all the horrors of last night, can one, M. Poirot?”

“It is difficult, truly, madame.”

Magdalene sighed.

“I’ve never been mixed up in tragedy before. I’ve—I’ve really only just grown up. I stayed a child too long, I think—That’s not a good thing to do.”

Again she sighed. She said:

“Pilar, now, seems so extraordinarily self-possessed—I suppose it’s the Spanish blood. It’s all very odd, isn’t it?”

“What is odd, madame?”

“The way she turned up here, out of the blue!”

Poirot said:

“I have learned that Mr. Lee had been searching for her for some time. He had been in correspondence with the Consulate in Madrid and with the vice-consul at Aliquara, where her mother died.”

“He was very secretive about it all,” said Magdalene. “Alfred knew nothing about it. No more did Lydia.”

“Ah!” said Poirot.

Magdalene came a little nearer to him. He could smell the delicate perfume she used.

"You know, M. Poirot, there's some story connected with Jennifer's husband, Estravados. He died quite soon after the marriage, and there's some mystery about it. Alfred and Lydia know. I believe it was something—rather disgraceful. . . ."

"That," said Poirot, "is indeed sad."

Magdalene said:

"My husband feels—and I agree with him—that the family ought to have been told more about the girl's antecedents. After all, if her father was a criminal—"

She paused, but Hercule Poirot said nothing. He seemed to be admiring such beauties of nature as could be seen in the winter season in the grounds of Gorston Hall.

Magdalene said:

"I can't help feeling that the manner of my father-in-law's death was somehow significant. It—it was so very unEnglish."

Hercule Poirot turned slowly. His grave eyes met hers in innocent inquiry.

"Ah," he said. "The Spanish touch, you think?"

"Well, they are cruel, aren't they?" Magdalene spoke with an effect of childish appeal. "All those bullfights and things!"

Hercule Poirot said pleasantly:

“You are saying that in your opinion Señorita Estravados cut her grandfather’s throat?”

“Oh no, M. Poirot!” Magdalene was vehement. She was shocked. “I never said anything of the kind! Indeed I didn’t!”

“Well,” said Poirot. “Perhaps you did not.”

“But I do think that she is—well, a suspicious person. The furtive way she picked up something from the floor of that room last night, for instance.”

A different note crept into Hercule Poirot’s voice. He said sharply:

“She picked up something from the floor last night?”

Magdalene nodded. Her childish mouth curved spitefully.

“Yes, as soon as we got into the room. She gave a quick glance round to see if anyone was looking, and then pounced on it. But the superintendent man saw her, I’m glad to say, and made her give it up.”

“What was it that she picked up, do you know, madame?”

“No. I wasn’t near enough to see.” Magdalene’s voice held regret. “It was something quite small.”

Poirot frowned to himself.

“It is interesting, that,” he murmured to himself.

Magdalene said quickly:

“Yes, I thought you ought to know about it. After all, we don’t know anything about Pilar’s upbringing and what her life has been like. Alfred is always so suspicious and dear Lydia is so casual.” Then she murmured: “Perhaps I’d better go and see if I can help Lydia in any way. There may be letters to write.”

She left him with a smile of satisfied malice on her lips.

Poirot remained lost in thought on the terrace.

II

To him there came Superintendent Sugden. The police superintendent looked gloomy. He said:

“Good morning, Mr. Poirot. Doesn’t seem quite the right thing to say Merry Christmas, does it?”

“Mon cher collègue, I certainly do not observe any traces of merriment on your countenance. If you had said Merry Christmas I should not have replied ‘Many of them!’ ”

“I don’t want another one like this one, and that’s a fact,” said Sugden.

“You have made the progress, yes?”

“I’ve checked up on a good many points. Horbury’s alibi is holding water all right. The commissionaire at the cinema saw him go in with the girl, and saw him come out with her at the end of the performance, and seems pretty positive he didn’t leave, and couldn’t have left and returned during the performance. The girl swears quite definitely he was with her in the cinema all the time.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“I hardly see, then, what more there is to say.”

The cynical Sugden said:

“Well, one never knows with girls! Lie themselves black in the face for the sake of a man.”

“That does credit to their hearts,” said Hercule Poirot.

Sugden growled.

“That’s a foreign way of looking at it. It’s defeating the ends of justice.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Justice is a very strange thing. Have you ever reflected on it?”

Sugden stared at him. He said:

“You’re a queer one, Mr. Poirot.”

“Not at all. I follow a logical train of thought. But we will not enter into a dispute on the question. It is your belief, then, that this demoiselle from the milk shop is not speaking the truth?”

Sugden shook his head.

“No,” he said, “it’s not like that at all. As a matter of fact, I think she is telling the truth. She’s a simple kind of girl, and I think if she was telling me a pack of lies I’d spot it.”

Poirot said:

“You have the experience, yes?”

“That’s just it, Mr. Poirot. One does know, more or less, after a lifetime of taking down statements, when a person’s lying and when they’re not. No, I think the girl’s evidence is genuine, and if so, Horbury couldn’t have murdered old Mr. Lee, and that brings us right back to the people in the house.”

He drew a deep breath.

“One of ’em did it, Mr. Poirot. One of ’em did it. But which?”

“You have no new data?”

“Yes, I’ve had a certain amount of luck over the telephone calls. Mr. George Lee put through a call to Westeringham at two minutes to nine. That call lasted under six minutes.”

“Aha!”

“As you say! Moreover, no other call was put through—to Westeringham or anywhere else.”

“Very interesting,” said Poirot, with approval. “M. George Lee says he has just finished telephoning when he hears the noise overhead—but actually he had finished telephoning nearly ten minutes before that. Where was he in those ten minutes? Mrs. George Lee says that she was telephoning—but actually she never put through a call at all. Where was she?”

Sugden said:

“I saw you talking to her, M. Poirot?”

His voice held a question, but Poirot replied:

“You are in error!”

“Eh?”

“I was not talking to her—she was talking to me!”

“Oh—” Sugden seemed to be about to brush the distinction aside impatiently; then, as its significance sank in, he said:

“She was talking to you, you say?”

“Most definitely. She came out here for that purpose.”

“What did she have to say?”

“She wished to stress certain points: the unEnglish character of the crime—the possibly undesirable antecedents of Miss Estravados on the paternal side—the fact that Miss Estravados had furtively picked up something from the floor last night.”

“She told you that, did she?” said Sugden with interest.

“Yes. What was it that the señorita picked up?”

Sugden sighed.

“I could give you three hundred guesses! I’ll show it to you. It’s the sort of thing that solves the whole mystery in detective stories! If you can make anything out of it, I’ll retire from the police force!”

"Show it me."

Sugden took an envelope from his pocket and tilted its contents on to the palm of his hand. A faint grin showed on his face.

"There you are. What do you make of it?"

On the superintendent's broad palm lay a little triangular piece of pink rubber and a small wooden peg.

His grin broadened as Poirot picked up the articles and frowned over them.

"Make anything of them, Mr. Poirot?"

"This little piece of stuff might have been cut from a sponge bag?"

"It was. It comes from a sponge bag in Mr. Lee's room. Somebody with sharp scissors just cut a small triangular piece out of it. Mr. Lee may have done it himself, for all I know. But it beats me why he should do it. Horbury can't throw any light on the matter. As for the peg, it's about the size of a cribbage peg, but they're usually made of ivory. This is just rough wood—whittled out of a bit of deal, I should say."

"Most remarkable," murmured Poirot.

"Keep 'em if you like," said Sugden kindly. "I don't want them."

"Mon ami, I would not deprive you of them!"

"They don't mean anything at all to you?"

"I must confess—nothing whatever!"

“Splendid!” said Sugden with heavy sarcasm, returning them to his pocket. “We are getting on!”

Poirot said:

“Mrs. George Lee, she recounts that the young lady stooped and picked these bagatelles up in a furtive manner. Should you say that that was true?”

Sugden considered the point.

“N-o,” he said hesitatingly. “I shouldn’t quite go as far as that. She didn’t look guilty—nothing of that kind—but she did set about it rather—well, quickly and quietly—if you know what I mean. And she didn’t know I’d seen her do it! That I’m sure of. She jumped when I rounded on her.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“Then there was a reason? But what conceivable reason could there have been? That little piece of rubber is quite fresh. It has not been used for anything. It can have no meaning whatsoever; and yet—”

Sugden said impatiently:

“Well, you can worry about it if you like, Mr. Poirot. I’ve got other things to think about.”

Poirot asked:

“The case stands—where, in your opinion?”

Sugden took out his notebook.

“Let’s get down to facts. To begin with, there are the people who couldn’t have done it. Let’s get them out of the way first—”

“They are—?”

“Alfred and Harry Lee. They’ve got a definite alibi. Also Mrs. Alfred Lee, since Tressilian saw her in the drawing room only about a minute before the row started upstairs. Those three are clear. Now for the others. Here’s a list. I’ve put it this way for clearness.”

He handed the book to Poirot.

	At the time of the crime
George Lee	?
Mrs. George Lee	?
David Lee	playing piano in music room (confirmed by his wife)
Mrs. David Lee	in music room (confirmed by husband)
Miss Estravados	in her bedroom (no confirmation)

Stephen Farr	in ballroom playing gramophone (confirmed by three of staff who could hear the music in servants' hall).

Poirot said, handing back the list:

"And therefore?"

"And therefore," said Sugden, "George Lee could have killed the old man. Mrs. George Lee could have killed him. Pilar Estravados could have killed him; and either Mr. or Mrs. David Lee could have killed him, but not both."

"You do not, then, accept that alibi?"

Superintendent Sugden shook his head emphatically.

"Not on your life! Husband and wife—devoted to each other! They may be in it together, or if one of them did it, the other is ready to swear to an alibi. I look at it this way: Someone was in the music room playing the piano. It may have been David Lee. It probably was, since he was an acknowledged musician, but there's nothing to say his wife was there too except her word and his. In the same way, it may have been Hilda who was playing that piano while David Lee crept upstairs and killed his father! No, it's an absolutely different case from the two brothers in the dining room. Alfred Lee and Harry Lee don't love each other. Neither of them would perjure himself for the other's sake."

"What about Stephen Farr?"

"He's a possible suspect because that gramophone alibi is a bit thin. On the other hand, it's the sort of alibi that's really sounder than a good cast-iron dyed-in-the-wool alibi which, ten to one, has been faked up beforehand!”

Poirot bowed his head thoughtfully.

“I know what you mean. It is the alibi of a man who did not know that he would be called upon to provide such a thing.”

“Exactly! And anyway, somehow, I don’t believe a stranger was mixed up in this thing.”

Poirot said quickly:

“I agree with you. It is here a family affair. It is a poison that works in the blood—it is intimate—it is deep-seated. There is here, I think, hate and knowledge. . . .”

He waved his hands.

“I do not know—it is difficult!”

Superintendent Sugden had waited respectfully, but without being much impressed. He said:

“Quite so, Mr. Poirot. But we’ll get at it, never fear, with elimination and logic. We’ve got the possibilities now—the people with opportunity. George Lee, Magdalene Lee, David Lee, Hilda Lee, Pilar Estravados, and I’ll add, Stephen Farr. Now we come to motive. Who had a motive for putting old Mr. Lee out of the way? There again we can wash out certain people. Miss Estravados, for one. I gather that as the will stands now, she doesn’t get anything at all. If Simeon Lee had died before her mother, her mother’s share would have come down to her (unless her mother willed it otherwise), but as Jennifer Estravados predeceased Simeon Lee, that particular legacy reverts to the other members of the family. So it was definitely to Miss Estravados' interests to keep the old man alive. He'd taken a fancy to her; it's pretty certain he'd have left her a good slice of money when he made a new will. She had everything to lose and nothing to gain by his murder. You agree to that?"

"Perfectly."

"There remains, of course, the possibility that she cut his throat in the heat of a quarrel, but that seems extremely unlikely to me. To begin with, they were on the best of terms, and she hadn't been here long enough to bear him a grudge about anything. It therefore seems highly unlikely that Miss Estravados has anything to do with the crime—except that you might argue that to cut a man's throat is an unEnglish sort of thing to do, as your friend Mrs. George put it?"

"Do not call her my friend," said Poirot hastily. "Or I shall speak of your friend Miss Estravados, who finds you such a handsome man!"

He had the pleasure of seeing the superintendent's official poise upset again. The police officer turned crimson. Poirot looked at him with malicious amusement.

He said, and there was a wistful note in his voice:

"It is true that your moustache is superb . . . Tell me, do you use for it a special pomade?"

"Pomade? Good lord, no!"

"What do you use?"

"Use? Nothing at all. It—it just grows."

Poirot sighed.

"You are favoured by nature." He caressed his own luxuriant black moustache, then sighed. "However expensive the preparation," he murmured, "to restore the natural colour does somewhat impoverish the quality of the hair."

Superintendent Sugden, uninterested in hairdressing problems, was continuing in a stolid manner:

"Considering the motive for the crime, I should say that we can probably wash out Mr. Stephen Farr. It's just possible that there was some hanky-panky between his father and Mr. Lee and the former suffered, but I doubt it. Farr's manner was too easy and assured when he mentioned that subject. He was quite confident—and I don't think he was acting. No, I don't think we'll find anything there."

"I do not think you will," said Poirot.

"And there's one other person with a motive for keeping old Mr. Lee alive—his son Harry. It's true that he benefits under the will, but I don't believe he was aware of the fact. Certainly couldn't have been sure of it! The general impression seemed to be that Harry had been definitely cut out of his share of the inheritance at the time he cut loose. But now he was on the point of coming back into favour! It was all to his advantage that his father should make a new will. He wouldn't be such a fool as to kill him now. Actually, as we know, he couldn’t have done it. You see, we’re getting on; we’re clearing quite a lot of people out of the way.”

“How true. Very soon there will be nobody left!”

Sugden grinned.

“We’re not going as fast as that! We’ve got George Lee and his wife, and David Lee and Mrs. David. They all benefit by the death, and George Lee, from all I can make out, is grasping about money. Moreover, his father was threatening to cut down supplies. So we’ve got George Lee with motive and opportunity!”

“Continue,” said Poirot.

“And we’ve got Mrs. George! As fond of money as a cat is fond of cream; and I’d be prepared to bet she’s heavily in debt at the minute! She was jealous of the Spanish girl. She was quick to spot that the other was gaining an ascendancy over the old man. She’d heard him say that he was sending for the lawyer. So she struck quickly. You could make out a case.”

“Possibly.”

“Then there’s David Lee and his wife. They inherit under the present will, but I don’t believe, somehow, that the money motive would be particularly strong in their case.”

“No?”

“No. David Lee seems to be a bit of a dreamer—not a mercenary type. But he’s—well, he’s odd. As I see it, there are three possible motives for this murder: There’s the diamond complication, there’s the will, and there’s—well—just plain hate.”

“Ah, you see that, do you?”

Sugden said:

“Naturally. It’s been present in my mind all along. If David Lee killed his father, I don’t think it was for money. And if he was the criminal it might explain the—well, the bloodletting!”

Poirot looked at him appreciatively.

“Yes, I wondered when you would take that into consideration. So much blood—that is what Mrs. Alfred said. It takes one back to ancient rituals—to blood sacrifice, to the anointing with the blood of the sacrifice. . . .”

Sugden said, frowning:

“You mean whoever did it was mad?”

“Mon cher—there are all sorts of deep instincts in man of which he himself is unaware. The craving for blood—the demand for sacrifice!”

Sugden said doubtfully:

“David Lee looks a quiet, harmless fellow.”

Poirot said:

“You do not understand the psychology. David Lee is a man who lives in the past—a man in whom the memory of his mother is still very much alive. He kept away from his father for many years because he could not forgive his father's treatment of his mother. He came here, let us suppose, to forgive. But he may not have been able to forgive . . . We do know one thing—that when David Lee stood by his father's dead body, some part of him was appeased and satisfied. 'The mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.' Retribution! Payment! The wrong wiped out by expiation!"

Sugden gave a sudden shudder. He said:

"Don't talk like that, Mr. Poirot. You give me quite a turn. It may be that it's as you say. If so, Mrs. David knows—and means to shield him all she knows how. I can imagine her doing that. On the other hand, I can't imagine her being a murderess. She's such a comfortable commonplace sort of woman."

Poirot looked at him curiously.

"So she strikes you like that?" he murmured.

"Well, yes—a homely body, if you know what I mean!"

"Oh, I know what you mean perfectly!"

Sugden looked at him.

"Come, now, Mr. Poirot, you've got ideas about the case. Let's have them."

Poirot said slowly: "I have ideas, yes, but they are rather nebulous. Let me first hear your summing-up of the case."

“Well, it’s as I said—three possible motives: hate, gain, and this diamond complication. Take the facts chronologically.

“3:30. Family gathering. Telephone conversation to lawyer overheard by all the family. Then the old man lets loose on his family, tells them where they all get off. They slink out like a lot of scared rabbits.”

“Hilda Lee remained behind,” said Poirot.

“So she did. But not for long. Then about six Alfred has an interview with his father—unpleasant interview. Harry is to be reinstated. Alfred isn’t pleased. Alfred, of course, ought to be our principal suspect. He had by far the strongest motive. However, to get on, Harry comes along next. Is in boisterous spirits. Has got the old man just where he wants him. But before those two interviews Simeon Lee has discovered the loss of the diamonds and has telephoned to me. He doesn’t mention his loss to either of his two sons. Why? In my opinion because he was quite sure neither of them had anything to do with it. Neither of them were under suspicion. I believe, as I’ve said all along, that the old man suspected Horbury and one other person. And I’m pretty sure of what he meant to do. Remember, he said definitely he didn’t want anyone to come and sit with him that evening. Why? Because he was preparing the way for two things: First, my visit; and second, the visit of that other suspected person. He did ask someone to come and see him immediately after dinner. Now who was that person likely to be? Might have been George Lee. Much more likely to have been his wife. And there’s another person who comes back into the picture here—Pilar Estravados. He’s shown her the diamonds. He’d told her their value. How do we know that girl isn’t a thief? Remember these mysterious hints about the disgraceful behaviour of her father. Perhaps he was a professional thief and finally went to prison for it."

Poirot said slowly:

"And so, as you say, Pilar Estravados comes back into the picture. . . ."

"Yes—as a thief. No other way. She may have lost her head when she was found out. She may have flown at her grandfather and attacked him."

Poirot said slowly:

"It is possible—yes. . . ."

Superintendent Sugden looked at him keenly.

"But that's not your idea? Come, Mr. Poirot, what is your idea?"

Poirot said:

"I go back always to the same thing: the character of the dead man. What manner of a man was Simeon Lee?"

"There isn't much mystery about that," said Sugden, staring.

"Tell me, then. That is to say, tell me from the local point of view what was known of the man."

Superintendent Sugden drew a doubtful finger along his jawbone. He looked perplexed. He said:

“I’m not a local man myself. I come from Reeveshire, over the border—next county. But of course old Mr. Lee was a well-known figure in these parts. I know all about him by hearsay.”

“Yes? And that hearsay was—what?”

Sugden said:

“Well, he was a sharp customer; there weren’t many who could get the better of him. But he was generous with his money. Openhanded as they make ’em. Beats me how Mr. George Lee can be the exact opposite, and be his father’s son.”

“Ah! But there are two distinct strains in the family. Alfred, George, and David resemble—superficially at least—their mother’s side of the family. I have been looking at some portraits in the gallery this morning.”

“He was hot-tempered,” continued Superintendent Sugden, “and of course he had a bad reputation with women—that was in his younger days. He’s been an invalid for many years now. But even there he always behaved generously. If there was trouble, he always paid up handsomely and got the girl married off as often as not. He may have been a bad lot, but he wasn’t mean. He treated his wife badly, ran after other women, and neglected her. She died of a broken heart, so they say. It’s a convenient term, but I believe she was really very unhappy, poor lady. She was always sickly and never went about much. There’s no doubt that Mr. Lee was an odd character. Had a revengeful streak in him, too. If anyone did him a nasty turn he always paid it back, so they say, and didn’t mind how long he had to wait to do it.”

“The mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small,” murmured Poirot.

Superintendent Sugden said heavily:

“Mills of the devil, more likely! Nothing saintly about Simeon Lee. The kind of man you might say had sold his soul to the devil and enjoyed the bargain! And he was proud, too, proud as Lucifer.”

“Proud as Lucifer!” said Poirot. “It is suggestive, what you say there.”

Superintendent Sugden said, looking puzzled:

“You don’t mean that he was murdered because he was proud?”

“I mean,” said Poirot, “that there is such a thing as inheritance. Simeon Lee transmitted that pride to his sons—”

He broke off. Hilda Lee had come out of the house and was standing looking along the terrace.

III

“I wanted to find you, M. Poirot.”

Superintendent Sugden had excused himself and gone back into the house. Looking after him, Hilda said:

“I didn’t know he was with you. I thought he was with Pilar. He seems a nice man, quite considerate.”

Her voice was pleasant, a low, soothing cadence to it.

Poirot asked:

“You wanted to see me, you say?”

She inclined her head.

“Yes. I think you can help me.”

“I shall be delighted to do so, madame.”

She said:

“You are a very intelligent man, M. Poirot. I saw that last night. There are things which you will, I think, find out quite easily. I want you to understand my husband.”

“Yes, madame?”

“I shouldn’t talk like this to Superintendent Sugden. He wouldn’t understand. But you will.”

Poirot bowed. “You honour me, madame.”

Hilda went calmly on:

“My husband, for many years, ever since I married him, has been what I can only describe as a mental cripple.”

“Ah!”

“When one suffers some great hurt physically, it causes shock and pain, but slowly it mends, the flesh heals, the bone knits. There may be, perhaps, a little weakness, a slight scar, but nothing more. My husband, M. Poirot, suffered a great hurt mentally at his most susceptible age. He adored his mother and he saw her die. He believed that his father was morally responsible for that death. From that shock he has never quite recovered. His resentment against his father never died down. It was I who persuaded David to come here this Christmas, to be reconciled to his father. I wanted it—for his sake—I wanted that mental wound to heal. I realize now that coming here was a mistake. Simeon Lee amused himself by probing into that old wound. It was—a very dangerous thing to do. . . .”

Poirot said: “Are you telling me, madame, that your husband killed his father?”

“I am telling you, M. Poirot, that he easily might have done so . . . And I will also tell you this—that he did not! When Simeon Lee was killed, his son was playing the ‘Dead March.’ The wish to kill was in his heart. It passed out through his fingers and died in waves of sound—that is the truth.”

Poirot was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

“And you, madame, what is your verdict on that past drama?”

“You mean the death of Simeon Lee’s wife?”

“Yes.”

Hilda said slowly:

“I know enough of life to know that you can never judge any case on its outside merits. To all seeming, Simeon Lee was entirely to blame and his wife was abominably treated. At the same time, I honestly believe that there is a kind of meekness, a predisposition to martyrdom which does arouse the worst instincts in men of a certain type. Simeon Lee would have admired, I think, spirit and force of character. He was merely irritated by patience and tears.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“Your husband said last night: ‘My mother never complained.’ Is that true?”

Hilda Lee said impatiently:

“Of course it isn’t! She complained the whole time to David! She laid the whole burden of her unhappiness on his shoulders. He was too young—far too young to bear all she gave him to bear!”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at her. She flushed under his gaze and bit her lip.

He said:

“I see.”

She said sharply:

“What do you see?”

He answered:

“I see that you have had to be a mother to your husband when you would have preferred to be a wife.”

She turned away.

At that moment David Lee came out of the house and along the terrace towards them. He said, and his voice had a clear joyful note in it:

"Hilda, isn't it a glorious day? Almost like spring instead of winter."

He came nearer. His head was thrown back, a lock of fair hair fell across his forehead, his blue eyes shone. He looked amazingly young and boyish. There was about him a youthful eagerness, a carefree radiance. Hercule Poirot caught his breath. . . .

David said: "Let's go down to the lake, Hilda."

She smiled, put her arm through his, and they moved off together.

As Poirot watched them go, he saw her turn and give him a rapid glance. He caught a momentary glimpse of swift anxiety—or was it, he wondered, fear?

Slowly Hercule Poirot walked to the other end of the terrace. He murmured to himself:

"As I have always said, me, I am the father confessor! And since women come to confession more frequently than men, it is women who have come to me this morning. Will there, I wonder, be another very shortly?"

As he turned at the end of the terrace and paced back again, he knew that his question was answered. Lydia Lee was coming towards him.

IV

Lydia said:

“Good morning, M. Poirot. Tressilian told me I should find you out here with Harry; but I am glad to find you alone. My husband has been speaking about you. I know he is very anxious to talk to you.”

“Ah! Yes? Shall I go and see him now?”

“Not just yet. He got hardly any sleep last night. In the end I gave him a strong sleeping draught. He is still asleep, and I don’t want to disturb him.”

“I quite understand. That was very wise. I could see last night that the shock had been very great.”

She said seriously:

“You see, M. Poirot, he really cared—much more than the others.”

“I understand.”

She asked:

“Have you—has the superintendent—any idea of who can have done this awful thing?”

Poirot said deliberately:

“We have certain ideas, madame, as to who did not do it.”

Lydia said, almost impatiently:

“It’s like a nightmare—so fantastic—I can’t believe it’s real!”

She added:

“What about Horbury? Was he really at the cinema, as he said?”

“Yes, madame, his story has been checked. He was speaking the truth.”

Lydia stopped and plucked at a bit of yew. Her face went a little paler. She said:

“But that’s awful! It only leaves—the family!”

“Exactly.”

“M. Poirot, I can’t believe it!”

“Madame, you can and you do believe it!”

She seemed about to protest. Then suddenly she smiled ruefully.

She said:

“What a hypocrite one is!”

He nodded.

“If you were to be frank with me, madame,” he said, “you would admit that to you it seems quite natural that one of his family should murder your father-in-law.”

Lydia said sharply:

“That’s really a fantastic thing to say, M. Poirot!”

“Yes, it is. But your father-in-law was a fantastic person!”

Lydia said:

“Poor old man. I can feel sorry for him now. When he was alive, he just annoyed me unspeakably!”

Poirot said:

“So I should imagine!”

He bent over one of the stone sinks.

“They are very ingenious, these. Very pleasing.”

“I’m glad you like them. It’s one of my hobbies. Do you like this Arctic one with the penguins and the ice?”

“Charming. And this—what is this?”

“Oh, that’s the Dead Sea—or going to be. It isn’t finished yet. You mustn’t look at it. Now this one is supposed to be Piana in Corsica. The rocks there, you know, are quite pink and too lovely where they go down into the blue sea. This desert scene is rather fun, don’t you think?”

She led him along. When they had reached the farther end she glanced at her wristwatch.

“I must go and see if Alfred is awake.”

When she had gone Poirot went slowly back again to the garden representing the Dead Sea. He looked at it with a good deal of interest. Then he scooped up a few of the pebbles and let them run through his fingers.

Suddenly his face changed. He held up the pebbles close to his face.

“Sapristi!” he said. “This is a surprise! Now what exactly does this mean?”

PART FIVE

DECEMBER 26TH

The chief constable and Superintendent Sugden stared at Poirot incredulously. The latter returned a stream of small pebbles carefully into a small cardboard box and pushed it across to the chief constable.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “It is the diamonds all right.”

“And you found them where, did you say? In the garden?”

“In one of the small gardens constructed by Madame Alfred Lee.”

“Mrs. Alfred?” Sugden shook his head. “Doesn’t seem likely.”

Poirot said:

“You mean, I suppose, that you do not consider it likely that Mrs. Alfred cut her father-in-law’s throat?”

Sugden said quickly:

“We know she didn’t do that. I meant it seemed unlikely that she pinched these diamonds.”

Poirot said:

“One would not easily believe her a thief—no.”

Sugden said:

“Anybody could have hidden them there.”

“That is true. It was convenient that in that particular garden—the Dead Sea as it represents—there happened to be pebbles very similar in shape and appearance.”

Sugden said:

“You mean she fixed it like that beforehand? Ready?”

Colonel Johnson said warmly:

“I don’t believe it for a moment. Not for a moment. Why should she take the diamonds in the first place?”

“Well, as to that—” Sugden said slowly.

Poirot nipped in quickly:

“There is a possible answer to that. She took the diamonds to suggest a motive for the murder. That is to say she knew that murder was going to be done though she herself took no active part in it.”

Johnson frowned.

“That won’t hold water for a minute. You’re making her out to be an accomplice—but whose accomplice would she be likely to be? Only her husband’s. But as we know that he, too, had nothing to do with the murder, the whole theory falls to the ground.”

Sugden stroked his jaw reflectively.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s so. No, if Mrs. Lee took the diamonds—and it’s a big if—it was just plain robbery, and it’s true she might have prepared that garden specially as a hiding place for them till the hue and cry had died down. Another possibility is that of coincidence. That garden, with its similarity of pebbles, struck the thief, whoever he or she was, as an ideal hiding place."

Poirot said:

"That is quite possible. I am always prepared to admit one coincidence."

Superintendent Sugden shook his head dubiously.

Poirot said:

"What is your opinion, Superintendent?"

The superintendent said cautiously:

"Mrs. Lee's a very nice lady. Doesn't seem likely that she'd be mixed up in any business that was fishy. But, of course, one never knows."

Colonel Johnson said testily:

"In any case, whatever the truth is about the diamonds, her being mixed up in the murder is out of the question. The butler saw her in the drawing room at the actual time of the crime. You remember that, Poirot?"

Poirot said:

"I had not forgotten that."

The chief constable turned to his subordinate.

“We’d better get on. What have you to report? Anything fresh?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve got hold of some new information. To start with—Horbury. There’s a reason why he might be scared of the police.”

“Robbery? Eh?”

“No, sir. Extorting money under threats. Modified blackmail. The case couldn’t be proved so he got off, but I rather fancy he’s got away with a thing or two in that line. Having a guilty conscience, he probably thought we were on to something of that kind when Tressilian mentioned a police officer last night and it made him get the wind up.”

The chief constable said:

“H’m! So much for Horbury. What else?”

The superintendent coughed.

“Er—Mrs. George Lee, sir. We’ve got a line on her before her marriage. Was living with a Commander Jones. Passed as his daughter—but she wasn’t his daughter . . . I think from what we’ve been told, that old Mr. Lee summed her up pretty correctly—he was smart where women were concerned, knew a bad lot when he saw one—and was just amusing himself by taking a shot in the dark. And he got her on the raw!”

Colonel Johnson said thoughtfully:

“That gives her another possible motive—apart from the money angle. She may have thought he knew something definite and was going to give her away to her husband. That telephone story of hers is pretty fishy. She didn’t telephone.”

Sugden suggested:

“Why not have them in together, sir, and get at that telephone business straight? See what we get.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“Good idea.”

He rang the bell. Tressilian answered it.

“Ask Mr. and Mrs. George Lee to come here.”

“Very good, sir.”

As the old man turned away, Poirot said:

“The date on that wall calendar, has it remained like it is since the murder?”

Tressilian turned back.

“Which calendar, sir?”

“The one on the wall over there.”

The three men were sitting once more in Alfred Lee’s small sitting room. The calendar in question was a large one with tear-off leaves, a bold date on each leaf.

Tressilian peered across the room, then shuffled slowly across till he was a foot or two away.

He said:

“Excuse me, sir, it has been torn off. It’s the twenty-sixth today.”

“Ah, pardon. Who would have been the person to tear it off?”

“Mr. Lee does, sir, every morning. Mr. Alfred, he’s a very methodical gentleman.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Tressilian went out. Sugden said, puzzled:

“Is there anything fishy about that calendar, Mr. Poirot? Have I missed something there?”

With a shrug of his shoulders Poirot said:

“The calendar is of no importance. It was just a little experiment I was making.”

Colonel Johnson said:

“Inquest tomorrow. There’ll be an adjournment, of course.”

Sugden said:

“Yes, sir, I’ve seen the Coroner and it’s all arranged for.”

II

George Lee came into the room, accompanied by his wife.

Colonel Johnson said:

“Good morning. Sit down, will you? There are a few questions I want to ask both of you. Something I’m not quite clear about.”

“I shall be glad to give you any assistance I can,” said George, somewhat pompously.

Magdalene said faintly:

“Of course!”

The chief constable gave a slight nod to Sugden. The latter said:

“About those telephone calls on the night of the crime. You put through a call to Westeringham, I think you said, Mr. Lee?”

George said coldly:

“Yes, I did. To my agent in the constituency. I can refer you to him and—”

Superintendent Sugden held up his hand to stem the flow.

“Quite so—quite so, Mr. Lee. We’re not disputing that point. Your call went through at 8:59 exactly.”

“Well—I—er—couldn’t say as to the exact time.”

“Ah,” said Sugden. “But we can! We always check up on these things very carefully. Very carefully indeed. The call was put through at 8:59 and it was terminated at 9:4. Your father, Mr. Lee, was killed about 9:15. I must ask you once more for an account of your movements."

"I've told you—I was telephoning!"

"No, Mr. Lee, you weren't."

"Nonsense—you must have made a mistake! Well, I may, perhaps, have just finished telephoning—I think I debated making another call—was just considering whether it was—er—worth—the expense—when I heard the noise upstairs."

"You would hardly debate whether or not to make a telephone call for ten minutes."

George went purple. He began to splutter.

"What do you mean? What the devil do you mean? Damned impudence! Are you doubting my word? Doubting the word of a man of my position? I—er—why should I have to account for every minute of my time?"

Superintendent Sugden said with a stolidness that Poirot admired:

"It's usual."

George turned angrily on the chief constable.

"Colonel Johnson. Do you countenance this—this unprecedented attitude?"

The chief constable said crisply: "In a murder case, Mr. Lee, then questions must be asked—and answered."

“I have answered them! I had finished telephoning and was—er—debating a further call.”

“You were in this room when the alarm was raised upstairs?”

“I was—yes, I was.”

Johnson turned to Magdalene.

“I think, Mrs. Lee,” he said, “that you stated that you were telephoning when the alarm broke out, and that at the time you were alone in this room?”

Magdalene was flustered. She caught her breath, looked sideways at George—at Sugden, then appealingly at Colonel Johnson. She said:

“Oh, really—I don’t know—I don’t remember what I said . . . I was so upset. . . .”

Sugden said:

“We’ve got it all written down, you know.”

She turned her batteries on him—wide appealing eyes—quivering mouth. But she met in return the rigid aloofness of a man of stern respectability who didn’t approve of her type.

She said uncertainly:

“I—I—of course I telephoned. I can’t be quite sure just when—”

She stopped.

George said:

“What’s all this? Where did you telephone from? Not in here.”

Superintendent Sugden said:

“I suggest, Mrs. Lee, that you didn’t telephone at all. In that case, where were you and what were you doing?”

Magdalene glanced distractedly about her and burst into tears. She sobbed:

“George, don’t let them bully me! You know that if anyone frightens me and thunders questions at me, I can’t remember anything at all! I—I don’t know what I was saying that night—it was all so horrible—and I was so upset—and they’re being so beastly to me. . . .”

She jumped up and ran sobbing out of the room.

Springing up, George Lee blustered:

“What d’you mean? I won’t have my wife bullied and frightened out of her life! She’s very sensitive. It’s disgraceful! I shall have a question asked in the House about the disgraceful bullying methods of the police. It’s absolutely disgraceful!”

He strode out of the room and banged the door.

Superintendent Sugden threw his head back and laughed.

He said:

“We’ve got them going properly! Now we’ll see!”

Johnson said frowning:

“Extraordinary business! Looks fishy. We must get a further statement out of her.”

Sugden said easily:

“Oh! She’ll be back in a minute or two. When she’s decided what to say. Eh, Mr. Poirot?”

Poirot, who had been sitting in a dream, gave a start.

“Pardon!”

“I said she’ll be back.”

“Probably—yes, possibly—oh, yes!”

Sugden said, staring at him:

“What’s the matter, Mr. Poirot? Seen a ghost?”

Poirot said slowly:

“You know—I am not sure that I have not done just exactly that.”

Colonel Johnson said impatiently:

“Well, Sugden, anything else?”

Sugden said:

“I’ve been trying to check up on the order in which everyone arrived on the scene of the murder. It’s quite clear what must have happened. After the murder when the victim’s dying cry had given the alarm, the murderer slipped out, locked the door with pliers, or something of that kind, and a moment or two later became one of the people hurrying to the scene of the crime. Unfortunately it’s not easy to check exactly whom everyone has seen because people’s memories aren’t very accurate on a point like that. Tressilian says he saw Harry and Alfred Lee cross the hall from the dining room and race upstairs. That lets them out, but we don’t suspect them anyway. As far as I can make out, Miss Estravados got there late—one of the last. The general idea seems to be that Farr, Mrs. George, and Mrs. David were the first. Each of those three says one of the others was just ahead of them. That’s what’s so difficult, you can’t distinguish between a deliberate lie and a genuine haziness of recollection. Everybody ran there—that’s agreed, but in what order they ran isn’t so easy to get at.”

Poirot said slowly:

“You think that important?”

Sugden said:

“It’s the time element. The time, remember, was incredibly short.”

Poirot said:

“I agree with you that the time element is very important in this case.”

Sugden went on:

“What makes it more difficult is that there are two staircases. There’s the main one in the hall here about equidistant from the dining room and the drawing room doors. Then there's one the other end of the house. Stephen Farr came up by the latter. Miss Estravados came along the upper landing from that end of the house (her room is right the other end). The others say they went up by this one."

Poirot said:

"It is a confusion, yes."

The door opened and Magdalene came quickly in. She was breathing fast and had a bright spot of colour in each cheek. She came up to the table and said quietly:

"My husband thinks I'm lying down. I slipped out of my room quietly. Colonel Johnson," she appealed to him with wide, distressed eyes, "if I tell you the truth you will keep quiet about it, won't you? I mean you don't have to make everything public?"

Colonel Johnson said:

"You mean, I take it, Mrs. Lee, something that has no connection with the crime?"

"Yes, no connection at all. Just something in my—my private life."

The chief constable said:

"You'd better make a clean breast of it, Mrs. Lee, and leave us to judge."

Magdalene said, her eyes swimming:

"Yes, I will trust you. I know I can. You look so kind. You see, it's like this. There's somebody—" She stopped.

"Yes, Mrs. Lee?"

"I wanted to telephone to somebody last night—a man—a friend of mine, and I didn't want George to know about it. I know it was very wrong of me—but well, it was like that. So I went to telephone after dinner when I thought George would be safely in the dining room. But when I got here I heard him telephoning, so I waited."

"Where did you wait, madame?" asked Poirot.

"There's a place for coats and things behind the stairs. It's dark there. I slipped back there, where I could see George come out from this room. But he didn't come out, and then all the noise happened and Mr. Lee screamed, and I ran upstairs."

"So your husband did not leave this room until the moment of the murder?"

"No."

The chief constable said:

"And you yourself from nine o'clock to nine fifteen were waiting in the recess behind the stairs?"

"Yes, but I couldn't say so, you see! They'd want to know what I was doing there. It's been very, very awkward for me, you do see that, don't you?"

Johnson said dryly:

“It was certainly awkward.”

She smiled at him sweetly.

“I’m so relieved to have told you the truth. And you won’t tell my husband, will you? No, I’m sure you won’t! I can trust you, all of you.”

She included them all in her final pleading look, then she slipped quickly out of the room.

Colonel Johnson drew a deep breath.

“Well,” he said. “It might be like that! It’s a perfectly plausible story. On the other hand—”

“It might not,” finished Sugden. “That’s just it. We don’t know.”

III

Lydia Lee stood by the far window of the drawing room looking out. Her figure was half hidden by the heavy window curtains. A sound in the room made her turn with a start to see Hercule Poirot standing by the door.

She said:

“You startled me, M. Poirot.”

“I apologize, madame. I walk softly.”

She said:

"I thought it was Horbury."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"It is true, he steps softly, that one—like a cat—or a thief."

He paused a minute, watching her.

Her face showed nothing, but she made a slight grimace of distate as she said:

"I have never cared for that man. I shall be glad to get rid of him."

"I think you will be wise to do so, madame."

She looked at him quickly. She said:

"What do you mean? Do you know anything against him?"

Poirot said:

"He is a man who collects secrets—and uses them to his advantage."

She said sharply:

"Do you think he knows anything—about the murder?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He said:

"He has quiet feet and long ears. He may have overheard something that he is keeping to himself."

Lydia said clearly:

“Do you mean that he may try to blackmail one of us?”

“It is within the bounds of possibility. But that is not what I came here to say.”

“What did you come to say?”

Poirot said slowly:

“I have been talking with M. Alfred Lee. He has made me a proposition, and I wished to discuss it with you before accepting or declining it. But I was so struck by the picture you made—the charming pattern of your jumper against the deep red of the curtains, that I paused to admire.”

Lydia said sharply:

“Really, M. Poirot, must we waste time in compliments?”

“I beg your pardon, madame. So few English ladies understand la toilette. The dress you were wearing the first night I saw you, its bold but simple pattern, it had grace—distinction.”

Lydia said impatiently:

“What was it you wanted to see me about?”

Poirot became grave.

“Just this, madame. Your husband, he wishes me to take up the investigation very seriously. He demands that I stay here, in the house, and do my utmost to get to the bottom of the matter.”

Lydia said sharply:

“Well?”

Poirot said slowly:

“I should not wish to accept an invitation that was not endorsed by the lady of the house.”

She said coldly:

“Naturally I endorse my husband’s invitation.”

“Yes, madame, but I need more than that. Do you really want me to come here?”

“Why not?”

“Let us be more frank. What I ask you is this: do you want the truth to come out, or not?”

“Naturally.”

Poirot sighed.

“Must you return me these conventional replies?”

Lydia said:

“I am a conventional woman.”

Then she bit her lip, hesitated, and said:

“Perhaps it is better to speak frankly. Of course I understand you! The position is not a pleasant one. My father-in-law has been brutally murdered, and unless a case can be made out against the most likely suspect—Horbury—for robbery and murder—and it seems that it cannot—then it comes to this—one of his own family killed him. To bring that person to justice will mean bringing shame and disgrace on us all . . . If I am to speak honestly I must say that I do not want this to happen.”

Poirot said:

“You are content for the murderer to escape unpunished?”

“There are probably several undiscovered murderers at large in the world.”

“That, I grant you.”

“Does one more matter, then?”

Poirot said:

“And what about the other members of the family? The innocent?”

She stared.

“What about them?”

“Do you realize that if it turns out as you hope, no one will ever know. The shadow will remain on all alike. . . .”

She said uncertainly:

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Poirot said:

“No one will ever know who the guilty person is. . . .”

He added softly:

“Unless you already know, madame?”

She cried out:

“You have no business to say that! It’s not true! Oh! If only it could be a stranger—not a member of the family.”

Poirot said:

“It might be both.”

She stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“It might be a member of the family—and, at the same time, a stranger . . . You do not see what I mean? Eh bien, it is an idea that has occurred to the mind of Hercule Poirot.”

He looked at her.

“Well, madame, what am I to say to Mr. Lee?”

Lydia raised her hands and let them fall in a sudden helpless gesture.

She said:

“Of course—you must accept.”

IV

Pilar stood in the centre of the music room. She stood very straight, her eyes darting from side to side like an animal who fears an attack.

She said:

“I want to get away from here!”

Stephen Farr said gently:

“You’re not the only one who feels like that. But they won’t let us go, my dear.”

“You mean—the police?”

“Yes.”

Pilar said very seriously:

“It is not nice to be mixed up with the police. It is a thing that should not happen to respectable people.”

Stephen said with a faint smile:

“Meaning yourself?”

Pilar said:

“No, I mean Alfred and Lydia and David and George and Hilda and—yes—Magdalene too.”

Stephen lit a cigarette. He puffed at it for a moment or two before saying:

“Why the exception?”

“What is that, please?”

Stephen said:

“Why leave out brother Harry?”

Pilar laughed, her teeth showing white and even.

“Oh, Harry is different! I think he knows very well what it is to be mixed up with the police.”

“Perhaps you are right. He certainly is a little too picturesque to blend well into the domestic picture.”

He went on:

“Do you like your English relations, Pilar?”

Pilar said doubtfully:

“They are kind—they are all very kind. But they do not laugh much, they are not gay.”

“My dear girl, there’s just been a murder in the house!”

“Y-es,” said Pilar doubtfully.

“A murder,” said Stephen instructively, “is not such an everyday occurrence as your nonchalance seems to imply. In England they take their murders seriously whatever they may do in Spain.”

Pilar said:

“You are laughing at me. . . .”

Stephen said:

“You’re wrong. I’m not in a laughing mood.”

Pilar looked at him and said:

“Because you, too, wish to get away from here?”

“Yes.”

“And the big, handsome policeman will not let you go?”

“I haven’t asked him. But if I did, I’ve no doubt he’d say no. I’ve got to watch my step, Pilar, and be very very careful.”

“That is tiresome,” said Pilar, nodding her head.

“It’s just a little bit more than tiresome, my dear. Then there’s that lunatic foreigner prowling about. I don’t suppose he’s any good but he makes me feel jumpy.”

Pilar was frowning. She said:

“My grandfather was very, very rich, was he not?”

“I should imagine so.”

“Where does his money go to now? To Alfred and the others?”

“Depends on his will.”

Pilar said thoughtfully: “He might have left me some money, but I am afraid that perhaps he did not.”

Stephen said kindly:

“You’ll be all right. After all, you’re one of the family. You belong here. They’ll have to look after you.”

Pilar said with a sigh: “I—belong here. It is very funny, that. And yet it is not funny at all.”

“I can see that you mightn’t find it very humorous.”

Pilar sighed again. She said:

“Do you think if we put on the gramophone, we could dance?”

Stephen said dubiously:

“It wouldn’t look any too good. This is a house of mourning, you callous Spanish baggage.”

Pilar said, her big eyes opening very wide:

“But I do not feel sad at all. Because I did not really know my grandfather, and though I liked to talk to him, I do not want to cry and be unhappy because he is dead. It is very silly to pretend.”

Stephen said: “You’re adorable!”

Pilar said coaxingly:

“We could put some stockings and some gloves in the gramophone, and then it would not make much noise, and no one would hear.”

“Come along then, temptress.”

She laughed happily and ran out of the room, going along towards the ballroom at the far end of the house.

Then, as she reached the side passage which led to the garden door, she stopped dead. Stephen caught up with her and stopped also.

Hercule Poirot had unhooked a portrait from the wall and was studying it by the light from the terrace. He looked up and saw them.

“Aha!” he said. “You arrive at an opportune moment.”

Pilar said: “What are you doing?”

She came and stood beside him.

Poirot said gravely:

“I am studying something very important, the face of Simeon Lee when he was a young man.”

“Oh, is that my grandfather?”

“Yes, mademoiselle.”

She stared at the painted face. She said slowly:

“How different—how very different . . . He was so old, so shrivelled up. Here he is like Harry, like Harry might have been ten years ago."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"Yes, mademoiselle. Harry Lee is very much the son of his father. Now here—" He led her a little way along the gallery. "Here is madame, your grandmother—a long gentle face, very blonde hair, mild blue eyes."

Pilar said:

"Like David."

Stephen said:

"Just a look of Alfred too."

Poirot said:

"The heredity, it is very interesting. Mr. Lee and his wife were diametrically opposite types. On the whole, the children of the marriage took after the mother. See here, mademoiselle."

He pointed to a picture of a girl of nineteen or so, with hair like spun gold and wide, laughing blue eyes. The colouring was that of Simeon Lee's wife, but there was a spirit, a vivacity that those mild blue eyes and placid features had never known.

"Oh!" said Pilar.

The colour came up in her face.

Her hand went to her neck. She drew out a locket on a long gold chain. She pressed the catch and it flew open. The same laughing face looked up at Poirot.

“My mother,” said Pilar.

Poirot nodded. On the opposite side of the locket was the portrait of a man. He was young and handsome, with black hair and dark blue eyes.

Poirot said: “Your father?”

Pilar said:

“Yes, my father. He is very beautiful, is he not?”

“Yes, indeed. Few Spaniards have blue eyes, have they, señorita?”

“Sometimes, in the North. Besides, my father’s mother was Irish.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“So you have Spanish blood, and Irish and English, and a touch of gipsy too. Do you know what I think, mademoiselle? With that inheritance, you should make a bad enemy.”

Stephen said, laughing:

“Remember what you said in the train, Pilar? That your way of dealing with your enemies would be to cut their throats. Oh!”

He stopped—suddenly realizing the import of his words.

Hercule Poirot was quick to lead the conversation away. He said:

“Ah, yes, there was something, señorita, I had to ask you. Your passport. It is needed by my friend the superintendent. There are, you know, police regulations—very stupid, very tiresome, but necessary—for a foreigner in this country. And of course, by law, you are a foreigner.”

Pilar’s eyebrows rose.

“My passport? Yes, I will get it. It is in my room.”

Poirot said apologetically as he walked by her side:

“I am most sorry to trouble you. I am indeed.”

They had reached the end of the long gallery. Here was a flight of stairs. Pilar ran up and Poirot followed. Stephen came too. Pilar’s bedroom was just at the head of the stairs.

She said as she reached the door: “I will get it for you.”

She went in. Poirot and Stephen Farr remained waiting outside.

Stephen said remorsefully:

“Damn” silly of me to say a thing like that. I don’t think she noticed, though, do you?”

Poirot did not answer. He held his head a little on one side as though listening.

He said:

“The English are extraordinarily fond of fresh air. Miss Estravados must have inherited that characteristic.”

Stephen said staring:

“Why?”

Poirot said softly:

“Because though it is today extremely cold—the black frost you call it (not like yesterday so mild and sunny) Miss Estravados has just flung up her lower window sash. Amazing to love so much the fresh air.”

Suddenly there was an exclamation in Spanish from inside the room and Pilar reappeared laughingly dismayed.

“Ah!” she cried. “But I am stupid—and clumsy. My little case it was on the windowsill, and I was sorting through it so quickly and very stupidly I knock my passport out of the window. It is down on the flowerbed below. I will get it.”

“I’ll get it,” said Stephen, but Pilar had flown past him and cried back over her shoulder:

“No, it was my stupidity. You go to the drawing room with M. Poirot and I will bring it to you there.”

Stephen Farr seemed inclined to go after her, but Poirot’s hand fell gently on his arm and Poirot’s voice said:

“Let us go this way.”

They went along the first floor corridor towards the other end of the house until they got to the head of the main staircase. Here Poirot said:

“Let us not go down for a minute. If you will come with me to the room of the crime there is something I want to ask you.”

They went along the corridor which led to Simeon Lee’s room. On their left they passed an alcove which contained two marble statues, stalwart nymphs clasping their draperies in an agony of Victorian propriety.

Stephen Farr glanced at them and murmured:

“Pretty frightful by daylight. I thought there were three of them when I came along the other night, but thank goodness there are only two!”

“They are not what is admired nowadays,” admitted Poirot. “But no doubt they cost much money in their time. They look better by night, I think.”

“Yes, one sees only a white glimmering figure.”

Poirot murmured:

“All cats are grey in the dark!”

They found Superintendent Sugden in the room. He was kneeling by the safe and examining it with a magnifying glass. He looked up as they entered.

“This was opened with the key all right,” he said. “By someone who knew the combination. No sign of anything else.”

Poirot went up to him, drew him aside, and whispered something. The superintendent nodded and left the room.

Poirot turned to Stephen Farr, who was standing staring at the armchair in which Simeon Lee always sat. His brows were drawn together and the veins showed in his forehead. Poirot looked at him for a minute or two in silence, then he said:

“You have the memories—yes?”

Stephen said slowly:

“Two days ago he sat there alive—and now . . .”

Then, shaking off his absorption, he said: “Yes, M. Poirot, you brought me here to ask me something?”

“Ah, yes. You were, I think, the first person to arrive on the scene that night?”

“Was I? I don’t remember. No, I think one of the ladies was here before me.”

“Which lady?”

“One of the wives—George’s wife or David’s—I know they were both here pretty soon.”

“You did not hear the scream, I think you said?”

“I don’t think I did. I can’t quite remember. Somebody did cry out but that may have been someone downstairs.”

Poirot said:

“You did not hear a noise like this?”

He threw his head back and suddenly gave vent to a piercing yell.

It was so unexpected that Stephen started backwards and nearly fell over. He said angrily:

“For the Lord’s sake, do you want to scare the whole house? No, I didn’t hear anything in the least like that! You’ll have the whole place by the ears again! They’ll think another murder has happened!”

Poirot looked crestfallen. He murmured:

“True . . . it was foolish . . . We must go at once.”

He hurried out of the room. Lydia and Alfred were at the foot of the stairs peering up—George came out of the library to join them, and Pilar came running, a passport held in her hand.

Poirot cried:

“It is nothing—nothing. Do not be alarmed. A little experiment that I make. That was all.”

Alfred looked annoyed and George indignant. Poirot left Stephen to explain and he hurriedly slipped away along the passage to the other end of the house.

At the end of the passage Superintendent Sugden came quietly out of Pilar’s door and met Poirot.

“Eh bien?” asked Poirot.

The superintendent shook his head.

“Not a sound.”

His eyes met Poirot’s appreciatively and he nodded.

V

Alfred Lee said: “Then you accept, M. Poirot?”

His hand, as it went to his mouth, shook slightly. His mild brown eyes were alight with a new and feverish expression. He stammered slightly in his speech. Lydia, standing silently by, looked at him with some anxiety.

Alfred said:

“You don’t know—you c-c-can’t imagine—what it m-m-means to me . . . My father’s murderer must be f-f-found.”

Poirot said:

“Since you have assured me that you have reflected long and carefully—yes, I accept. But you comprehend, Mr. Lee, there can be no drawing back. I am not the dog one sets on to hunt and then recalls because you do not like the game he puts up!”

“Of course . . . of course . . . Everything is ready. Your bedroom is prepared. Stay as long as you like—”

Poirot said gravely: “It will not be long.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“I said it will not be long. There is in this crime such a restricted circle that it cannot possibly take long to arrive at the truth.

Already, I think, the end draws near."

Alfred stared at him, "Impossible!" he said.

"Not at all. The facts all point more or less clearly in one direction. There is just some irrelevant matter to be cleared out of the way. When this is done the truth will appear."

Alfred said incredulously:

"You mean you know?"

Poirot smiled. "Oh, yes," he said. "I know."

Alfred said:

"My father—my father—" He turned away.

Poirot said briskly:

"There are, M. Lee, two requests that I have to make."

Alfred said in a muffled voice:

"Anything—anything."

"Then, in the first place, I would like the portrait of M. Lee as a young man placed in the bedroom you are good enough to allot to me."

Alfred and Lydia stared at him.

The former said: "My father's portrait—but why?"

Poirot said with a wave of the hand:

“It will—how shall I say—inspire me.”

Lydia said sharply:

“Do you propose, M. Poirot, to solve a crime by clairvoyance?”

“Let us say, madame, that I intend to use not only the eyes of the body, but the eyes of the mind.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

Poirot continued:

“Next, M. Lee, I should like to know of the true circumstances attending the death of your sister’s husband, Juan Estravados.”

Lydia said: “Is that necessary?”

“I want all the facts, madame.”

Alfred said:

“Juan Estravados, as the result of a quarrel about a woman, killed another man in a café.”

“How did he kill him?”

Alfred looked appealingly at Lydia. She said evenly:

“He stabbed him. Juan Estravados was not condemned to death, as there had been provocation. He was sentenced to a term of imprisonment and died in prison.”

“Does his daughter know about her father?”

“I think not.”

Alfred said:

“No, Jennifer never told her.”

“Thank you.”

Lydia said:

“You don’t think that Pilar—Oh, it’s absurd!”

Poirot said:

“Now, M. Lee, will you give me some facts about your brother, M. Harry Lee?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I understand that he was considered somewhat of a disgrace to the family. Why?”

Lydia said:

“It is so long ago. . . .”

Alfred said, the colour coming up in his face:

“If you want to know, M. Poirot, he stole a large sum of money by forging my father’s name to a cheque. Naturally my father didn’t prosecute. Harry’s always been crooked. He’s been in trouble all over the world. Always cabling for money to get out of a scrape. He’s been in and out of gaol here, there and everywhere.”

Lydia said:

“You don’t really know all this, Alfred.”

Alfred said angrily, his hands shaking:

“Harry’s no good—no good whatever! He never has been!”

Poirot said:

“There is, I see, no love lost between you?”

Alfred said:

“He victimized my father—victimized him shamefully!”

Lydia sighed—a quick, impatient sigh. Poirot heard it and gave her a sharp glance.

She said:

“If only those diamonds could be found. I’m sure the solution lies there.”

Poirot said:

“They have been found, madame.”

“What?”

Poirot said gently:

“They were found in your little garden of the Dead Sea. . . .”

Lydia cried:

“In my garden? How—how extraordinary!”

Poirot said softly:

“Is it not, madame?”

PART SIX

DECEMBER 27TH

Alfred Lee said with a sigh:

“That was better than I feared!”

They had just returned from the inquest.

Mr. Charlton, an old-fashioned type of solicitor with a cautious blue eye, had been present and had returned with them. He said:

“Ah—I told you the proceedings would be purely formal—purely formal—there was bound to be an adjournment—to enable the police to gather up additional evidence.”

George Lee said vexedly:

“It is all most unpleasant—really most unpleasant—a terrible position in which to be placed! I myself am quite convinced that this crime was done by a maniac who somehow or other gained admittance to the house. That man Sugden is as obstinate as a mule. Colonel Johnson should enlist the aid of Scotland Yard. These local police are no good. Thickheaded. What about this man Horbury, for instance? I hear his past is definitely unsatisfactory but the police do nothing whatever about it.”

Mr. Charlton said:

“Ah—I believe the man Horbury has a satisfactory alibi covering the period of time in question. The police have accepted it.”

“Why should they?” George fumed. “If I were they, I should accept such an alibi with reserve—with great reserve. Naturally, a criminal always provides himself with an alibi! It is the duty of the police to break down the alibi—that is, if they know their job.”

“Well, well,” said Mr. Charlton. “I don’t think it’s quite our business to teach the police their jobs, eh? Pretty competent body of men on the whole.”

George shook his head darkly.

“Scotland Yard should be called in. I’m not at all satisfied with Superintendent Sugden—he may be painstaking—but he is certainly far from brilliant.”

Mr. Charlton said:

“I don’t agree with you, you know. Sugden’s a good man. Doesn’t throw his weight about, but he gets there.”

Lydia said:

“I’m sure the police are doing their best. Mr. Charlton, will you have a glass of sherry?”

Mr. Charlton thanked her politely, but declined. Then, clearing his throat, he proceeded to the reading of the will, all members of the family being assembled.

He read it with a certain relish, lingering over its more obscure phraseology, and savouring its legal technicalities.

He came to the end, took off his glasses, wiped them, and looked round on the assembled company inquiringly.

Harry Lee said:

“All this legal stuff's a bit hard to follow. Give us the bare bones of it, will you?”

“Really,” said Mr. Charlton. “It’s a perfectly simple will.”

Harry said:

“My God, what’s a difficult will like then?”

Mr. Charlton rebuked him with a cold glance. He said:

“The main provisions of the will are quite simple. Half Mr. Lee’s property goes to his son, Mr. Alfred Lee, the remainder is divided between his other children.”

Harry laughed unpleasantly. He said:

“As usual, Alfred’s struck lucky! Half my father’s fortune! Lucky dog, aren’t you, Alfred?”

Alfred flushed. Lydia said sharply:

“Alfred was a loyal and devoted son to his father. He’s managed the works for years and has had all the responsibility.”

Harry said: “Oh, yes, Alfred was always the good boy.”

Alfred said sharply:

“You may consider yourself lucky, I think, Harry, that my father left you anything at all!”

Harry laughed, throwing his head back. He said:

“You’d have liked it better if he’d cut me right out, wouldn’t you? You’ve always disliked me.”

Mr. Charlton coughed. He was used—only too well used—to the painful scenes that succeeded the reading of a will. He was anxious to get away before the usual family quarrel got too well under way.

He murmured:

“I think—er—that that is all that I need—er—”

Harry said sharply: “What about Pilar?”

Mr. Charlton coughed again, this time apologetically.

“Er—Miss Estravados is not mentioned in the will.”

Harry said: Doesn’t she get her mother’s share?”

Mr. Charlton explained.

“Señora Estravados, if she had lived, would of course have received an equal share with the rest of you, but as she is dead, the portion that would have been hers goes back into the estate to be shared out between you.”

Pilar said slowly in her rich Southern voice:

“Then—I have—nothing?”

Lydia said quickly:

“My dear, the family will see to that, of course.”

George Lee said:

“You will be able to make your home here with Alfred—eh, Alfred? We—er—you are our niece—it is our duty to look after you.”

Hilda said: “We shall always be glad to have Pilar with us.”

Harry said:

“She ought to have her proper share. She ought to have Jennifer’s whack.”

Mr. Charlton murmured:

“Must really—er—be going. Goodbye, Mrs. Lee—anything I can do—er—consult me at any time. . . .”

He escaped quickly. His experience enabled him to predict that all the ingredients for a family row were present.

As the door shut behind him Lydia said in her clear voice:

“I agree with Harry. I think Pilar is entitled to a definite share. This will was made many years before Jennifer’s death.”

“Nonsense,” said George. “Very slipshod and illegal way of thinking, Lydia. The law’s the law. We must abide by it.”

Magdalene said:

“It’s hard luck, of course, and we’re all very sorry for Pilar, but George is right. As he says, the law is the law.”

Lydia got up. She took Pilar by the hand.

“My dear,” she said. “This must be very unpleasant for you. Will you please leave us while we discuss the question?”

She led the girl to the door.

“Don’t worry, Pilar, dear,” she said. “Leave it to me.”

Pilar went slowly out of the room. Lydia shut the door behind her and turned back.

There was a moment’s pause while everyone drew breath and in another moment the battle was in full swing.

Harry said:

“You’ve always been a damned skinflint, George.”

George retorted:

“At any rate, I’ve not been a sponge and a rotter!”

“You’ve been just as much of a sponge as I have! You’ve battened on Father all these years.”

“You seem to forget that I hold a responsible and arduous position which—”

Harry said:

“Responsible and arduous my foot! You’re only an inflated gasbag!”

Magdalene screamed: “How dare you?”

Hilda’s calm voice, slightly raised, said:

“Couldn’t we just discuss this quietly?”

Lydia threw her a grateful glance.

David said with sudden violence:

“Must we have all this disgraceful fuss over money!”

Magdalene said venomously to him:

“It’s all very well to be so high-minded. You’re not going to refuse your legacy, are you? You want money just as much as the rest of us do! All this unworldliness is just a pose!”

David said in a strangled voice:

“You think I ought to refuse it? I wonder—”

Hilda said sharply:

“Of course you oughtn’t. Must we all behave like children? Alfred, you’re the head of the family—”

Alfred seemed to wake out of a dream. He said:

“I beg your pardon. All of you shouting at once. It—it confuses me.”

Lydia said:

“As Hilda has just pointed out, why must we behave like greedy children? Let us discuss this thing quietly and sanely and”—she added this quickly—“one thing at a time. Alfred shall speak first because he is the eldest. What do you think, Alfred, we should do about Pilar?”

He said slowly:

“She must make her home here, certainly. And we should make her an allowance. I do not see she has any legal claim to the money which would have gone to her mother. She’s not a Lee, remember. She’s a Spanish subject.”

“No legal claim, no,” said Lydia. “But I think she has a moral claim. As I see it, your father, although his daughter had married a Spaniard against his wishes, recognized her to have an equal claim upon him. George, Harry, David, and Jennifer were to share equally. Jennifer only died last year. I am sure that when he sent for Mr. Charlton, he meant to make ample provision for Pilar in a new will. He would have allotted her at least her mother’s share. It is possible that he might have done much more than that. She was the only grandchild, remember. I think the least we can do is to endeavour to remedy any injustice that your father himself was preparing to remedy.”

Alfred said warmly:

“Well put, Lydia! I was wrong. I agree with you that Pilar must be given Jennifer’s share of my father’s fortune.”

Lydia said: “Your turn, Harry.”

Harry said:

“As you know, I agree. I think Lydia has put the case very well, and I’d like to say I admire her for it.”

Lydia said:

“George?”

George was red in the face. He spluttered:

“Certainly not! Whole thing’s preposterous! Give her a home and a decent dress allowance. Quite enough for her!”

“Then you refuse to cooperate?” asked Alfred.

“Yes, I do.”

“And he’s quite right,” said Magdalene. “It’s disgraceful to suggest he should do anything of the kind! Considering that George is the only member of the family who has done anything in the world, I think it’s a shame his father left him so little!”

Lydia said: “David?”

David said vaguely:

“Oh, I think you’re right. It’s a pity there’s got to be so much ugliness and disputing about it all.”

Hilda said:

“You’re quite right, Lydia. It’s only justice!”

Harry looked round. He said:

“Well, that’s clear. Of the family, Alfred, myself and David are in favour of the motion. George is against it. The ayes have it.”

George said sharply:

“There is no question of ayes and noes. My share of my father’s estate is mine absolutely. I shall not part with a penny of it.”

“No, indeed,” said Magdalene.

Lydia said sharply:

“If you like to stand out, that is your business. The rest of us will make up your share of the total.”

She looked round for assent and the others nodded.

Harry said: “Alfred’s got the lion’s share. He ought to stand most of the racket.”

Alfred said: “I see that your original disinterested suggestion will soon break down.”

Hilda said firmly:

“Don’t let’s start again! Lydia shall tell Pilar what we’ve decided. We can settle details later.” She added in the hope of making a diversion, “I wonder where Mr. Farr is, and M. Poirot?”

Alfred said:

"We dropped Poirot in the village on our way to the inquest. He said he had an important purchase to make."

Harry said: "Why didn't he go to the inquest? Surely he ought to have done!"

Lydia said:

"Perhaps he knew it was not going to be important. Who's that out there in the garden? Superintendent Sugden, or Mr. Farr?"

The efforts of the two women were successful. The family conclave broke up.

Lydia said to Hilda privately:

"Thank you, Hilda. It was nice of you to back me up. You know, you really have been a comfort in all this."

Hilda said thoughtfully: "Queer how money upsets people."

The others had all left the room. The two women were alone.

Lydia said:

"Yes—even Harry—although it was his suggestion! And my poor Alfred—he is so British—he doesn't really like Lee money going to a Spanish subject."

Hilda said, smiling:

"Do you think we women are more unworldly?"

Lydia said with a shrug of her graceful shoulders:

"Well, you know, it isn't really our money—not our own! That may make a difference."

Hilda said thoughtfully:

"She is a strange child—Pilar, I mean. I wonder what will become of her?"

Lydia sighed.

"I'm glad that she will be independent. To live here, to be given a home and a dress allowance, would not, I think, be very satisfactory to her. She's too proud and, I think, too—too alien."

She added musingly:

"I once brought some beautiful blue lapis home from Egypt. Out there, against the sun and the sand, it was a glorious colour—a brilliant warm blue. But when I got it home, the blue of it hardly showed any more. It was just a dull, darkish string of beads."

Hilda said:

"Yes, I see. . . ."

Lydia said gently:

"I am so glad to come to know you and David at last. I'm glad you both came here."

Hilda sighed:

"How often I've wished in the last few days that we hadn't!"

“I know. You must have done . . . But you know, Hilda, the shock hasn’t affected David nearly as badly as it might have done. I mean, he is so sensitive that it might have upset him completely. Actually, since the murder, he’s seemed ever so much better—”

Hilda looked slightly disturbed. She said:

“So you’ve noticed that? It’s rather dreadful in a way . . . But oh! Lydia, it’s undoubtedly so!”

She was silent a minute recollecting words that her husband had spoken only the night before. He had said to her, eagerly, his fair hair tossed back from his forehead:

“Hilda, you remember in Tosca—when Scarpia is dead and Tosca lights the candles at his head and feet? Do you remember what she says: “Now I can forgive him . . .” That is what I feel—about Father. I see now that all these years I couldn’t forgive him, and yet I really wanted to . . . But no—now there’s no rancour any more. It’s all wiped away. And I feel—oh, I feel as though a great load had been lifted from my back.”

She had said, striving to fight back a sudden fear:

“Because he’s dead?”

He had answered quickly, stammering in his eagerness:

“No, no, you don’t understand. Not because he is dead, but because my childish stupid hate of him is dead. . . .”

Hilda thought of those words now.

She would have liked to repeat them to the woman at her side, but she felt instinctively that it was wiser not.

She followed Lydia out of the drawing room into the hall.

Magdalene was there, standing by the hall table with a little parcel in her hand. She jumped when she saw them. She said:

“Oh, this must be M Poirot’s important purchase. I saw him put it down here just now. I wonder what it is.”

She looked from one to the other of them, giggling a little, but her eyes were sharp and anxious, belying the affected gaiety of her words.

Lydia’s eyebrows rose. She said:

“I must go and wash before lunch.”

Magdalene said, still with that affectation of childishness, but unable to keep the desperate note out of her voice:

“I must just peep!”

She unrolled the piece of paper and gave a sharp exclamation. She stared at the thing in her hand.

Lydia stopped and Hilda too. Both women stared.

Magdalene said in a puzzled voice:

“It’s a false moustache. But—but—why?”

Hilda said doubtfully:

“Disguise? But—”

Lydia finished the sentence for her.

“But M. Poirot has a very fine moustache of his own!”

Magdalene was wrapping the parcel up again. She said:

“I don’t understand. It’s—it’s mad. Why does M. Poirot buy a false moustache?”

II

When Pilar left the drawing room she walked slowly along the hall. Stephen Farr was coming in through the garden door. He said:

“Well? Is the family conclave over? Has the will been read?”

Pilar said, her breath coming fast:

“I have got nothing—nothing at all! It was a will made many years ago. My grandfather left money to my mother, but because she is dead it does not go to me but goes back to them.”

Stephen said:

“That seems rather hard lines.”

Pilar said:

“If that old man had lived, he would have made another will. He would have left money to me—a lot of money! Perhaps in time he would have left me all the money!”

Stephen said, smiling:

“That wouldn’t have been very fair either, would it?”

“Why not? He would have liked me best, that is all.”

Stephen said:

“What a greedy child you are. A real little golddigger.”

Pilar said soberly:

“The world is very cruel to women. They must do what they can for themselves—while they are young. When they are old and ugly no one will help them.”

Stephen said slowly:

“That’s more true than I like to think. But it isn’t quite true. Alfred Lee, for instance, was genuinely fond of his father in spite of the old man being thoroughly trying and exacting.”

Pilar’s chin went up.

“Alfred,” she said, “is rather a fool.”

Stephen laughed.

Then he said:

“Well, don’t worry, lovely Pilar. The Lees are bound to look after you, you know.”

Pilar said disconsolately:

“It will not be very amusing, that.”

Stephen said slowly:

“No, I’m afraid it won’t. I can’t see you living here, Pilar. Would you like to come to South Africa?”

Pilar nodded.

Stephen said:

“There’s sun there, and space. There’s hard work too. Are you good at work, Pilar?”

Pilar said doubtfully:

“I do not know.”

He said:

“You’d rather sit on a balcony and eat sweets all day long? And grow enormously fat and have three double chins?”

Pilar laughed and Stephen said:

“That’s better. I’ve made you laugh.”

Pilar said:

“I thought I should laugh this Christmas! In books I have read that an English Christmas is very gay, that one eats burning raisins and there is a plum pudding all in flames, and something that is called a Yule log.”

Stephen said:

“Ah, but you must have a Christmas uncomplicated by murder. Come in here a minute. Lydia took me in here yesterday. It’s her storeroom.”

He led her into a small room little bigger than a cupboard.

“Look, Pilar, boxes and boxes of crackers, and preserved fruits and oranges and dates and nuts. And here—”

“Oh!” Pilar clasped her hands. “They are pretty, these gold and silver balls.”

“Those were to hang on a tree, with presents for the servants. And here are little snowmen all glittering with frost to put on the dinner table. And here are balloons of every colour all ready to blow up!”

“Oh!” Pilar’s eyes shone. “Oh! can we blow one up? Lydia would not mind. I do love balloons.”

Stephen said: “Baby! Here, which will you have?”

Pilar said: “I will have a red one.”

They selected their balloons and blew, their cheeks distended. Pilar stopped blowing to laugh, and her balloon went down again.

She said:

“You look so funny—blowing—with your cheeks puffed out.”

Her laugh rang out. Then she fell to, blowing industriously. They tied up their balloons carefully and began to play with them, patting them upwards, sending them to and fro.

Pilar said:

“Out in the hall there would be more room.”

They were sending the balloons to each other, and laughing, when Poirot came along the hall. He regarded them indulgently.

“So you play les jeux d’enfants? It is pretty, that!”

Pilar said breathlessly:

“Mine is the red one. It is bigger than his. Much bigger. If we took it outside it would go right up in the sky.”

“Let’s send them up and wish,” said Stephen.

“Oh, yes, that is a good idea.”

Pilar ran to the garden door, Stephen followed. Poirot came behind, still looking indulgent.

“I will wish for a great deal of money,” announced Pilar.

She stood on tiptoe, holding the string of the balloon. It tugged gently as a puff of wind came. Pilar let go and it floated along, taken by the breeze.

Stephen laughed.

“You mustn’t tell your wish.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t come true. Now, I’m going to wish.”

He released his balloon. But he was not so lucky. It floated sideways, caught on a holly bush and expired with a bang.

Pilar ran to it.

She announced tragically:

“It is gone. . . .”

Then, as she stirred the little limp wisp of rubber with her toe, she said:

“So that was what I picked up in Grandfather’s room. He, too, had had a balloon, only his was a pink one.”

Poirot gave a sharp exclamation. Pilar turned inquiringly.

Poirot said:

“It is nothing. I stabbed—no stubbed—the toe.”

He wheeled round and looked at the house.

He said:

“So many windows! A house, mademoiselle, has its eyes—and its ears. It is indeed regrettable that the English are so fond of open windows.”

Lydia came out on the terrace. She said:

"Lunch is just ready. Pilar, my dear, everything has been settled quite satisfactorily. Alfred will explain the exact details to you after lunch. Shall we come in?"

They went into the house. Poirot came last. He was looking grave.

III

Lunch was over.

As they came out of the dining room, Alfred said to Pilar:

"Will you come into my room? There is something I want to talk over with you."

He led her across the hall and into his study, shutting the door after him. The others went on into the drawing room. Only Hercule Poirot remained in the hall looking thoughtfully at the closed study door.

He was aware suddenly of the old butler hovering uneasily near him.

Poirot said: "Yes, Tressilian, what is it?"

The old man seemed troubled. He said:

"I wanted to speak to Mr. Lee. But I don't like to disturb him now."

Poirot said: "Something has occurred?"

Tressilian said slowly:

"It's such a queer thing. It doesn't make sense."

“Tell me,” said Hercule Poirot.

Tressilian hesitated. Then he said:

“Well, it’s this, sir. You may have noticed that each side of the front door there was a cannon ball. Big heavy stone things. Well, sir, one of them’s gone.”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose. He said; “Since when?”

“They were both there this morning, sir. I’ll take my oath on that.”

“Let me see.”

Together they went outside the front door. Poirot bent and examined the remaining cannon ball. When he straightened himself, his face was very grave.

Tressilian quavered:

“Who’d want to steal a thing like that, sir? It doesn’t make sense.”

Poirot said: “I do not like it. I do not like it at all. . . .”

Tressilian was watching him anxiously. He said slowly:

“What’s come to the house, sir? Ever since the master was murdered it doesn’t seem like the same place. I feel the whole time as though I was going about in a dream. I mix things up, and I sometimes feel I can’t trust my own eyes.”

Hercule Poirot shook his head. He said:

“You are wrong. Your own eyes are just what you must trust.”

Tressilian said, shaking his head:

“My sight’s bad—I can’t see like I used to do. I get things mixed up—and people. I’m getting too old for my work.”

Hercule Poirot clapped him on the shoulder and said:

“Courage.”

“Thank you, sir. You mean it kindly, I know. But there it is, I am too old. I’m always going back to the old days and the old faces. Miss Jenny and Master David and Master Alfred. I’m always seeing them as young gentlemen and ladies. Ever since that night when Mr. Harry came home—”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “that is what I thought. You said just now ‘Ever since the master was murdered’—but it began before that. It is ever since Mr. Harry came home, is it not, that things have altered and seemed unreal?”

The butler said:

“You’re quite right, sir. It was then. Mr. Harry always brought trouble into the house, even in the old days.”

His eyes wandered back to the empty stone base.

“Who can have taken it, sir?” he whispered. “And why? It’s—it’s like a madhouse.”

Hercule Poirot said:

"It is not madness I am afraid of. It is sanity! Somebody, Tressilian, is in great danger."

He turned and reentered the house.

At that moment Pilar came out from the study. A red spot shone on either cheek. She held her head high and her eyes glittered.

As Poirot came up to her, she suddenly stamped her foot and said: "I will not take it."

Poirot raised his eyebrows. He said:

"What is it that you will not take, mademoiselle?"

Pilar said:

"Alfred has just told me that I am to have my mother's share of the money my grandfather left."

"Well?"

"I could not get it by law, he said. But he and Lydia and the others consider it should be mine. They say it is a matter of justice. And so they will hand it over to me."

Poirot said again:

"Well?"

Pilar stamped once more with her foot.

"Do you not understand? They are giving it to me—giving it to me."

"Need that hurt your pride? Since what they say is true—that it should in justice be yours?"

Pilar said:

"You do not understand. . . ."

Poirot said:

"On the contrary—I understand very well."

"Oh! . . ." She turned away pettishly.

There was a ring at the bell. Poirot glanced over his shoulder. He saw the silhouette of Superintendent Sugden outside the door. He said hurriedly to Pilar:

"Where are you going?"

She said sulkily:

"To the drawing room. To the others."

Poirot said quickly:

"Good. Stay with them there. Do not wander about the house alone, especially after dark. Be on your guard. You are in great danger, mademoiselle. You will never be in greater danger than you are today."

He turned away from her and went to meet Sugden.

The latter waited till Tressilian had gone back into his pantry.

Then he shoved a cable form under Poirot’s nose.

“Now we’ve got it!” he said. “Read that. It’s from the South African Police.”

The cable said:

“Ebenezer Farr’s only son died two years ago.”

Sugden said:

“So now we know! Funny—I was on a different tack altogether. . . .”

IV

Pilar marched into the drawing room, her head held high.

She went straight up to Lydia, who was sitting in the window with some knitting.

Pilar said:

“Lydia, I have come to tell you that I will not take that money. I am going away—at once. . . .”

Lydia looked astonished. She laid down her knitting. She said:

“My dear child, Alfred must have explained very badly! It is not in the least a matter of charity, if that is what you feel. Really, it is not a question of kindness or generosity on our part. It is a plain matter of right and wrong. In the ordinary course of events your mother would have inherited this money, and you would have come into it from her. It is your right—your blood right. It is a matter, not of charity, but of justice!"

Pilar said fiercely:

"And that is why I cannot do it—not when you speak like that—not when you are like that! I enjoyed coming here. It was fun! It was an adventure, but now you have spoilt it all! I am going away now, at once—you will never be bothered by me again. . . ."

Tears choked her voice. She turned and ran blindly out of the room.

Lydia stared. She said helplessly:

"I'd no idea she would take it like that!"

Hilda said:

"The child seems quite upset."

George cleared his throat and said portentously:

"Er—as I pointed out this morning—the principle involved is wrong. Pilar has the wit to see that for herself. She refuses to accept charity—"

Lydia said sharply:

"It is not charity. It is her right!"

George said:

"She does not seem to think so!"

Superintendent Sugden and Hercule Poirot came in. The former looked round and asked:

“Where’s Mr. Farr? I want a word with him.”

Before anyone had time to answer, Hercule Poirot said sharply:

“Where is the Señorita Estravados?”

George Lee said with a trace of malicious satisfaction:

“Going to clear out, so she says. Apparently she has had enough of her English relations.”

Poirot wheeled round.

He said to Sugden:

“Come!”

As the two men emerged into the hall, there was the sound of a heavy crash and a faraway shriek.

Poirot cried:

“Quick . . . Come. . . .”

They raced along the hall and up the far staircase. The door of Pilar’s room was open and a man stood in the doorway. He turned his head as they ran up. It was Stephen Farr.

He said:

“She’s alive. . . .”

Pilar stood crouched against the wall of her room. She was staring at the floor where a big stone cannon ball was lying.

She said breathlessly:

“It was on top of my door, balanced there. It would have crashed down on my head when I came in, but my skirt caught on a nail and jerked me back just as I was coming in.”

Poirot knelt down and examined the nail. On it was a thread of purple tweed. He looked up and nodded gravely.

“That nail, mademoiselle,” he said, “saved your life.”

The superintendent said, bewildered:

“Look here, what’s the meaning of all this?”

Pilar said:

“Someone tried to kill me!”

She nodded her head several times.

Superintendent Sugden glanced up at the door.

“Booby trap,” he said. “An old-fashioned booby trap—and its purpose was murder! That’s the second murder planned in this house. But this time it didn’t come off!”

Stephen Farr said huskily:

“Thank God you’re safe.”

Pilar flung out her hands in a wide, appealing gesture.

“Madre de Dios,” she cried. “Why should anyone wish to kill me? What have I done?”

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

“You should rather ask, mademoiselle, what do I know?”

She stared.

“Know? I do not know anything.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“That is where you are wrong. Tell me, Mademoiselle Pilar, where were you at the time of the murder? You were not in this room.”

“I was. I have told you so!”

Superintendent Sugden said with deceptive mildness:

“Yes, but you weren’t speaking the truth when you said that, you know. You told us you heard your grandfather scream—you couldn’t have heard that if you were in here—Mr. Poirot and I tested that yesterday.”

“Oh!” Pilar caught her breath.

Poirot said:

“You were somewhere very much nearer his room. I will tell you where I think you were, mademoiselle. You were in the recess with the statues quite close to your grandfather’s door.”

Pilar said, startled:

“Oh . . . How did you know?”

Poirot said with a faint smile:

“Mr. Farr saw you there.”

Stephen said sharply:

“I did not. That’s an absolute lie!”

Poirot said:

“I ask your pardon, Mr. Farr, but you did see her. Remember your impression that there were three statues in that recess, not two. Only one person wore a white dress that night, Mademoiselle Estravados. She was the third white figure you saw. That is so, is it not, mademoiselle?”

Pilar said, after a moment’s hesitation: “Yes, it is true.”

Poirot said gently: “Now tell us, mademoiselle, the whole truth. Why were you there?”

Pilar said:

“I left the drawing room after dinner and I thought I would go and see my grandfather. I thought he would be pleased. But when I turned into the passage I saw someone else was there at his door. I did not want to be seen because I knew my grandfather had said he did not want to see anyone that night. I slipped into the recess in case the person at the door turned round.”

"Then, all at once, I heard the most horrible sounds, tables—chairs"—she waved her hands—"everything falling and crashing. I did not move. I do not know why. I was frightened. And then there was a terrible scream"—she crossed herself—"and my heart it stopped beating, and I said, 'Someone is dead. . . .' "

"And then?"

"And then people began coming running along the passage and I came out at the end and joined them."

Superintendent Sugden said sharply:

"You said nothing of all this when we first questioned you. Why not?"

Pilar shook her head. She said, with an air of wisdom:

"It is not good to tell too much to the police. I thought, you see, that if I said I was near there you might think that I had killed him. So I said I was in my room."

Sugden said sharply:

"If you tell deliberate lies all that it ends in is that you're bound to come under suspicion."

Stephen Farr said: "Pilar?"

"Yes?"

"Who did you see standing at the door when you turned into the passage? Tell us."

Sugden said: “Yes, tell us.”

For a moment the girl hesitated. Her eyes opened, then narrowed. She said slowly:

“I don’t know who it was. It was too dimly lit to see. But it was a woman. . . .”

V

Superintendent Sugden looked round at the circle of faces. He said, with something as near irritation as he had yet shown:

“This is very irregular, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot said:

“It is a little idea of mine. I wish to share with everyone the knowledge that I have acquired. I shall then invite their cooperation, and so we shall get at the truth.”

Sugden murmured under his breath: “Monkey tricks.”

He leaned back in his chair. Poirot said:

“To begin with, you have, I think, an explanation to ask of Mr. Farr.”

Sugden’s mouth tightened.

“I should have chosen a less public moment,” he said. “However, I’ve no objection.” He handed the cable to Stephen Farr. “Now, Mr. Farr, as you call yourself, perhaps you can explain this?”

Stephen Farr took it. Raising his eyebrows, he read it slowly out loud. Then, with a bow, he handed it back to the superintendent.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s pretty damning, isn’t it?”

Sugden said:

“Is that all you’ve got to say about it? You quite understand there is no obligation on you to make a statement—”

Stephen Farr interrupted. He said:

“You needn’t caution me, Superintendent. I can see it trembling on your tongue! Yes, I’ll give you an explanation. It’s not a very good one, but it’s the truth.”

He paused. Then he began:

“I’m not Ebenezer Farr’s son. But I knew both father and son quite well. Now try and put yourself in my place. (My name is Stephen Grant, by the way.) I arrived in this country for the first time in my life. I was disappointed. Everything and everybody seemed drab and lifeless. Then I was travelling by train and I saw a girl. I’ve got to say it straight out: I fell for that girl! She was the loveliest and most unlikely creature in the world! I talked to her for a while in the train and I made up my mind then and there not to lose sight of her. As I was leaving the compartment I caught sight of the label on her suitcase. Her name meant nothing to me, but the address to which she was travelling did. I’d heard of Gorston Hall, and I knew all about its owner. He was Ebenezer Farr’s one-time partner and old Eb often talked about him and said what a personality he was.

"Well, the idea came to me to go to Gorston Hall and pretend I was Eb's son. He had died, as this cable says, two years ago, but I remembered old Eb saying that he had not heard from Simeon Lee now for many years, and I judged that Lee would not know of the death of Eb's son. Anyway, I felt it was worth trying."

Sugden said: "You didn't try it on at once, though. You stayed in the King's Arms at Addlesfield for two days."

Stephen said:

"I was thinking it over—whether to try it or not. At last I made up my mind I would. It appealed to me as a bit of an adventure. Well, it worked like a charm! The old man greeted me in the friendliest manner and at once asked me to come and stay in the house. I accepted. There you are, Superintendent, there's my explanation. If you don't fancy it, cast your mind back to your courting days and see if you don't remember some bit of foolishness you indulged in then. As for my real name, as I say, it's Stephen Grant. You can cable to South Africa and check up on me, but I'll tell you this: you'll find I'm a perfectly respectable citizen. I'm not a crook or a jewel thief."

Poirot said softly: "I never believed you were."

Superintendent Sugden stroked his jaw cautiously. He said:

"I'll have to check up on that story. What I'd like to know is this: Why didn't you come clean after the murder instead of telling us a pack of lies?"

Stephen said disarmingly:

“Because I was a fool! I thought I could get away with it! I thought it would look fishy if I admitted to being here under a false name. If I hadn’t been a complete idiot I would have realized you were bound to cable to Jo’burg.”

Sugden said:

“Well, Mr. Farr—er—Grant—I’m not saying I disbelieve your story. It will be proved or disproved soon enough.”

He looked across inquiringly at Poirot. The latter said:

“I think Miss Estravados has something to say.”

Pilar had gone very white. She said, in a breathless voice:

“It is true. I would never have told you, but for Lydia and the money. To come here and pretend and cheat and act—that was fun, but when Lydia said the money was mine and that it was only justice, that was different; it was not fun any longer.”

Alfred Lee said with a puzzled face:

“I do not understand, my dear, what you are talking about.”

Pilar said:

“You think I am your niece, Pilar Estravados? But that is not so! Pilar was killed when I was travelling with her in a car in Spain. A bomb came and it hit the car and she was killed, but I was not touched. I did not know her very well, but she had told me all about herself and how her grandfather had sent for her to go to England and that he was very rich. And I had no money at all and I did not know where to go or what to do. And I thought suddenly: ‘Why should not I take Pilar’s passport and go to England and become very rich?’ ” Her face lit up with its sudden wide smile. “Oh, it was fun wondering if I could get away with it! Our faces on the photograph were not unlike. But when they wanted my passport here I opened the window and threw it out and ran down to get it, and then I rubbed some earth just over the face a little because at a barrier travelling they do not look very closely, but here they might —”

Alfred Lee said angrily:

“Do you mean to say that you represented yourself to my father as his granddaughter, and played on his affection for you?”

Pilar nodded. She said complacently:

“Yes, I saw at once I could make him like me very much.”

George Lee broke out:

“Preposterous!” he spluttered. “Criminal! Attempting to get money by false pretences.”

Harry Lee said:

“She didn’t get any from you, old boy! Pilar, I’m on your side! I’ve got a profound admiration for your daring. And, thank goodness, I’m not your uncle any more! That gives me a much freer hand.”

Pilar said to Poirot: “You knew? When did you know?”

Poirot smiled:

"Mademoiselle, if you have studied the laws of Mendel you would know that two blue-eyed people are not likely to have a brown-eyed child. Your mother was, I was sure, a most chaste and respectable lady. It followed, then, that you were not Pilar Estravados at all. When you did your trick with the passport, I was quite sure of it. It was ingenious, but not, you understand, quite ingenious enough."

Superintendent Sugden said unpleasantly:

"The whole thing's not quite ingenious enough."

Pilar stared at him. She said:

"I don't understand. . . ."

Sugden said: "You've told us a story—but I think there's a good deal more you haven't told."

Stephen said: "You leave her alone!"

Superintendent Sugden took no notice. He went on:

"You've told us that you went up to your grandfather's room after dinner. You said it was an impulse on your part. I'm going to suggest something else. It was you who stole those diamonds. You'd handled them. On occasion, perhaps, you'd put them away in the safe and the old man hadn't watched you do it! When he found the stones were missing, he saw at once that only two people could have taken them. One was Horbury, who might have got to know the combination and have crept in and stolen them during the night. The other person was you.

“Well, Mr. Lee at once took measures. He rang me up and had me come to see him. Then he sent word to you to come and see him immediately after dinner. You did so and he accused you of the theft. You denied it; he pressed the charge. I don’t know what happened next—perhaps he tumbled to the fact that you weren’t his granddaughter, but a very clever little professional thief. Anyway, the game was up, exposure loomed over you, and you slashed at him with a knife. There was a struggle and he screamed. You were properly up against it then. You hurried out of the room, turned the key from the outside and then, knowing you could not get away, before the others came, you slipped into the recess by the statues.”

Pilar cried shrilly:

“It is not true! It is not true! I did not steal the diamonds! I did not kill him. I swear it by the Blessed Virgin.”

Sugden said sharply:

“Then who did? You say you saw a figure standing outside Mr. Lee’s door. According to your story, that person must have been the murderer. No one else passed the recess! But we’ve only your word for it that there was a figure there at all. In other words, you made that up to exculpate yourself!”

George Lee said sharply:

“Of course she’s guilty! It’s all clear enough! I always said an outsider killed my father! Preposterous nonsense to pretend one of his family would do a thing like that! It—it wouldn’t be natural!”

Poirot stirred in his seat. He said:

“I disagree with you. Taking into consideration the character of Simeon Lee, it would be a very natural thing to happen.”

“Eh?” George’s jaw dropped. He stared at Poirot.

Poirot went on:

“And, in my opinion, that very thing did happen. Simeon Lee was killed by his own flesh and blood, for what seemed to the murderer a very good and sufficient reason.”

George cried: “One of us? I deny—”

Poirot’s voice broke in hard as steel.

“There is a case against every person here. We will, Mr. George Lee, begin with the case against you. You had no love for your father! You kept on good terms with him for the sake of money. On the day of his death he threatened to cut down your allowance. You knew that on his death you would probably inherit a very substantial sum. There is the motive. After dinner you went, as you say, to telephone. You did telephone—but the call lasted only five minutes. After that you could easily have gone to your father’s room, chatted with him, and then attacked him and killed him. You left the room and turned the key from outside, for you hoped the affair would be put down to a burglar. You omitted, in your panic, to make sure that the window was fully open so as to support the burglar theory. That was stupid; but you are, if you will pardon my saying so, rather a stupid man!

“However,” said Poirot, after a brief pause during which George tried to speak and failed, “many stupid men have been criminals!”

He turned his eyes on Magdalene.

“Madame, too, she also had a motive. She is, I think, in debt, and the tone of certain of your father’s remarks may—have caused her uneasiness. She, too, has no alibi. She went to telephone, but she did not telephone, and we have only her word for what she did do. . . .

“Then,” he paused, “there is Mr. David Lee. We have heard, not once but many times, of the revengeful tempers and long memories that went with the Lee blood. Mr. David Lee did not forget or forgive the way his father had treated his mother. A final jibe directed at the dead lady may have been the last straw. David Lee is said to have been playing the piano at the time of the murder. By a coincidence he was playing the ‘Dead March.’ But suppose somebody else was playing that ‘Dead March,’ somebody who knew what he was going to do, and who approved his action?”

Hilda Lee said quietly:

“That is an infamous suggestion.”

Poirot turned to her. “I will offer you another, madame. It was your hand that did the deed. It was you who crept upstairs to execute judgment on a man you considered beyond human forgiveness. You are of those, madame, who can be terrible in anger. . . .”

Hilda said: “I did not kill him.”

Superintendent Sugden said brusquely:

“Mr. Poirot’s quite right. There is a possible case against everyone except Mr. Alfred Lee, Mr. Harry Lee, and Mrs. Alfred Lee.”

Poirot said gently:

"I should not even except those three. . . ."

The superintendent protested: "Oh, come now, Mr. Poirot!"

Lydia Lee said:

"And what is the case against me, M. Poirot?"

She smiled a little as she spoke, her brows raised ironically.

Poirot bowed. He said:

"Your motive, madame, I pass over. It is sufficiently obvious. As to the rest, you were wearing last night a flowered taffeta dress of a very distinctive pattern with a cape. I will remind you of the fact that Tressilian, the butler, is shortsighted. Objects at a distance are dim and vague to him. I will also point out that your drawing room is big and lighted by heavily shaded lamps. On that night, a minute or two before the cries were heard, Tressilian came into the drawing room to take away the coffee-cups. He saw you, as he thought, in a familiar attitude by the far window half concealed by the heavy curtains."

Lydia Lee said: "He did see me."

Poirot went on:

"I suggest that it is possible that what Tressilian saw was the cape of your dress, arranged to show by the window curtain, as though you yourself were standing there."

Lydia said: “I was standing there. . . .”

Alfred said: “How dare you suggest—?”

Harry interrupted him.

“Let him go on, Alfred. It’s our turn next. How do you suggest that dear Alfred killed his beloved father since we were both together in the dining room at the time?”

Poirot beamed at him.

“That,” he said, “is very simple. An alibi gains in force accordingly as it is unwillingly given. You and your brother are on bad terms. It is well known. You jibe at him in public. He has not a good word to say for you! But, supposing that were all part of a very clever plot. Supposing that Alfred Lee is tired of dancing attendance upon an exacting taskmaster. Supposing that you and he have got together some time ago. Your plan is laid. You come home. Alfred appears to resent your presence. He shows jealousy and dislike of you. You show contempt for him. And then comes the night of the murder you have so cleverly planned together. One of you remains in the dining room, talking and perhaps quarrelling aloud as though two people were there. The other goes upstairs and commits the crime. . . .”

Alfred sprang to his feet.

“You devil!” he said. His voice was inarticulate.

Sugden was staring at Poirot. He said:

“Do you really mean—?”

Poirot said, with a sudden ring of authority in his voice:

“I have had to show you the possibilities! These are the things that might have happened! Which of them actually did happen we can only tell by passing from the outside appearance to the inside reality. . . .”

He paused and then said slowly:

“We must come back, as I said before, to the character of Simeon Lee himself. . . .”

VI

There was a momentary pause. Strangely enough, all indignation and all rancour had died down. Hercule Poirot held his audience under the spell of his personality. They watched him, fascinated, as he began slowly to speak.

“It is all there, you see. The dead man is the focus and centre of the mystery! We must probe deep into the heart and mind of Simeon Lee and see what we find there. For a man does not live and die to himself alone. That which he has, he hands on—to those who come after him. . . .

“What had Simeon Lee to bequeath to his sons and daughter? Pride, to begin with—a pride which, in the old man, was frustrated in his disappointment over his children. Then there was the quality of patience. We have been told that Simeon Lee waited patiently for years in order to revenge himself upon someone who had done him an injury. We see that that aspect of his temperament was inherited by the son who resembled him least in face. David Lee also could remember and continue to harbour resentment through long years. In face, Harry Lee was the only one of his children who closely resembled him. That resemblance is quite striking when we examine the portrait of Simeon Lee as a young man. There is the same high-bridged aquiline nose, the long sharp line of the jaw, the backward poise of the head. I think, too, that Harry inherited many of his father's mannerisms—that habit, for instance, of throwing back his head and laughing, and another habit of drawing his finger along the line of his jaw.

"Bearing all these things in mind, and being convinced that the murder was committed by a person closely connected with the dead man, I studied the family from the psychological standpoint. That is, I tried to decide which of them were psychologically possible criminals. And, in my judgment, only two persons qualified in that respect. They were Alfred Lee and Hilda Lee, David's wife. David himself I rejected as a possible murderer. I do not think a person of his delicate susceptibilities could have faced the actual bloodshed of a cut throat. George Lee and his wife I likewise rejected. Whatever their desires, I did not think they had the temperament to take a risk. They were both essentially cautious. Mrs. Alfred Lee I felt sure was quite incapable of an act of violence. She has too much irony in her nature. About Harry Lee I hesitated. He had a certain coarse truculence of aspect, but I was nearly sure that Harry Lee, in spite of his bluff and his bluster, was essentially a weakling. That, I now know, was also his father's opinion. Harry, he said, was worth no more than the rest. That left me with two people I have already mentioned. Alfred Lee was a person capable of a great deal of selfless devotion. He was a man who had controlled and subordinated himself to the will of another for many years. It was always possible under these conditions for something to snap. Moreover, he might quite possibly have harboured a secret grudge against his father which might gradually have grown in force through never being expressed in any way. It is the quietest and meekest people who are often capable of the most sudden and unexpected violence for the reason that when their control does snap, it does so entirely! The other person I considered was capable of the crime was Hilda Lee. She is the kind of individual who is capable, on occasions, of taking the law into her own hands—though never through selfish motives. Such people judge and also execute. Many Old Testament characters are of this type. Jael and Judith, for example.

“And now having got so far I examined the circumstances of the crime itself. And the first thing that arises—that strikes one in the face, as it were—is the extraordinary conditions under which that crime took place! Take your minds back to that room where Simeon Lee lay dead. If you remember, there was both a heavy table and a heavy chair overturned, a lamp, crockery, glasses, etc. But the chair and the table were especially surprising. They were of solid mahogany. It was hard to see how any struggle between that frail old man and his opponent could result in so much solid furniture being overturned and knocked down. The whole thing seemed unreal. And yet surely no one in their senses would stage such an effect if it had not really occurred—unless possibly Simeon Lee had been killed by a powerful man and the idea was to suggest that the assailant was a woman or somebody of weak physique.

“But such an idea was unconvincing in the extreme, since the noise of the furniture would give the alarm and the murderer would thereby have very little time to make his exit. It would surely be to anyone’s advantage to cut Simeon Lee’s throat as quietly as possible.

“Another extraordinary point was the turning of the key in the lock from the outside. Again, there seemed no reason for such a proceeding. It could not suggest suicide, since nothing in the death itself accorded with suicide. It was not to suggest escape through the windows—for those windows were so arranged that escape that way was impossible! Moreover, once again, it involved time. Time which must be precious to the murderer!

“There was one other incomprehensible thing—a piece of rubber cut from Simeon Lee’s spongebag and a small wooden peg shown to me by Superintendent Sugden. These had been picked up from the floor by one of the persons who first entered the room. There again—these things did not make sense! They meant exactly nothing at all! Yet they had been there.

“The crime, you perceive, is becoming increasingly incomprehensible. It has no order, no method—enfin, it is not reasonable.

“And now we come to a further difficulty. Superintendent Sugden was sent for by the dead man; a robbery was reported to him, and he was asked to return an hour and a half later. Why? If it is because Simeon Lee suspected his granddaughter or some other member of the family, why does he not ask Superintendent Sugden to wait downstairs while he has his interview straight away with the suspected party? With the superintendent actually in the house, his lever over the guilty person would have been much stronger.

“So now we arrive at the point where not only the behaviour of the murderer is extraordinary, but the behaviour of Simeon Lee also is extraordinary!

"And I say to myself: 'This thing is all wrong!' Why? Because we are looking at it from the wrong angle. We are looking at it from the angle that the murderer wants us to look at it. . . .

"We have three things that do not make sense: the struggle, the turned key, and the snip of rubber. But there must be some way of looking at those three things which would make sense! And I empty my mind blank and forget the circumstances of the crime and take these things on their own merits. I say—a struggle. What does that suggest? Violence—breakage—noise . . . The key? Why does one turn a key? So that no one shall enter? But the key did not prevent that, since the door was broken down almost immediately. To keep someone in? To keep someone out? A snip of rubber? I say to myself: 'A little piece of a spongebag is a little piece of a spongebag, and that is all!'

"So you would say there is nothing there—and yet that is not strictly true, for three impressions remain: noise—seclusion—blankness. . . .

"Do they fit with either of my two possibles? No, they do not. To both Alfred Lee and Hilda Lee a quiet murder would have been infinitely preferable, to have wasted time in locking the door from the outside is absurd, and the little piece of spongebag means yet once more—nothing at all!

"And yet I have very strongly the feeling that there is nothing absurd about this crime—that it is on the contrary, very well planned and admirably executed. That is has, in fact, succeeded! Therefore that everything that has happened was meant . . .

"And then, going over it again, I got my first glimmer of light. . . .

"Blood—so much blood—blood everywhere . . . An insistence on blood—fresh, wet, gleaming blood . . . So much blood—too much blood . . .

"And a second thought comes with that. This is a crime of blood—it is in the blood. It is Simeon Lee's own blood that rises up against him. . . ."

Hercule Poirot leaned forward.

"The two most valuable clues in this case were uttered quite unconsciously by two different people. The first was when Mrs. Alfred Lee quoted a line from Macbeth: 'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' The other was a phrase uttered by Tressilian, the butler. He described how he felt dazed and things seemed to be happening that had happened before. It was a very simple occurrence that gave him that strange feeling. He heard a ring at the bell and went to open the door to Harry Lee, and the next day he did the same thing to Stephen Farr.

"Now why did he have that feeling? Look at Harry Lee and Stephen Farr and you will see why. They are astoundingly alike! That was why opening the door to Stephen Farr was just like opening the door to Harry Lee. It might almost have been the same man standing there. And then, only today, Tressilian mentioned that he was always getting muddled between people. No wonder! Stephen Farr has a high-bridged nose, a habit of throwing his head back when he laughs, and a trick of stroking his jaw with his forefinger. Look long and earnestly at the portrait of Simeon Lee as a young man and you see not only Harry Lee, but Stephen Farr. . . ."

Stephen moved. His chair creaked. Poirot said:

“Remember that outburst of Simeon Lee, his tirade against his family. He said, you remember it, that he would swear he had better sons born the wrong side of the blanket. We are back again at the character of Simeon Lee. Simeon Lee, who was successful with women and who broke his wife’s heart! Simeon Lee, who boasted to Pilar that he might have a bodyguard of sons almost the same age! So I came to this conclusion: Simeon Lee had not only his legitimate family in the house, but an unacknowledged and unrecognized son of his own blood.”

Stephen got to his feet. Poirot said:

“That was your real reason, wasn’t it? Not that pretty romance of the girl you met in the train! You were coming here before you met her. Coming to see what kind of a man your father was. . . .”

Stephen had gone dead white. He said, and his voice was broken and husky:

“Yes, I’ve always wondered . . . Mother spoke about him sometimes. It grew into a kind of obsession with me—to see what he was like! I made a bit of money and I came to England. I wasn’t going to let him know who I was. I pretended to be old Eb’s son. I came here for one reason only—to see the man who was my father. . . .”

Superintendent Sugden said in almost a whisper:

“Lord, I’ve been blind . . . I can see it now. Twice I’ve taken you for Mr. Harry Lee and then seen my mistake, and yet I never guessed!”

He turned on Pilar.

“That was it, wasn’t it? It was Stephen Farr you saw standing outside that door? You hesitated, I remember, and looked at him before you said it was a woman. It was Farr you saw, and you weren’t going to give him away.”

There was a gentle rustle. Hilda Lee’s deep voice spoke:

“No,” she said. “You’re wrong. It was I whom Pilar saw. . . .”

Poirot said:

“You, madame? Yes, I thought so. . . .”

Hilda said quietly:

“Self-preservation is a curious thing. I wouldn’t believe I could be such a coward. To keep silence just because I was afraid!”

Poirot said:

“You will tell us now?”

She nodded.

“I was with David in the music room. He was playing. He was in a very queer mood. I was a little frightened and I felt my responsibility very keenly because it was I who had insisted on coming here. David began to play the ‘Dead March,’ and suddenly I made up my mind. However odd it might seem, I determined that we would both leave at once—that night. I went quietly out of the music room and upstairs. I meant to go to old Mr. Lee and tell him quite plainly why we were going. I went along the corridor to his room and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I knocked again a little louder. There was still no answer. Then I tried the door handle. The door was locked. And then, as I stood hesitating, I heard a sound inside the room—"

She stopped.

"You won't believe me, but it's true! Someone was in there—assaulting Mr. Lee. I heard tables and chairs overturned and the crash of glass and china, and then I heard that one last horrible cry that died away to nothing—and then silence.

"I stood there paralysed! I couldn't move! And then Mr. Farr came running along and Magdalene and all the others and Mr. Farr and Harry began to batter on the door. It went down and we saw the room, and there was no one in it—except Mr. Lee lying dead in all that blood."

Her quiet voice rose higher. She cried:

"There was no one else there—no one, you understand! And no one had come out of the room. . . ."

VII

Superintendent Sugden drew a deep breath. He said:

"Either I'm going mad or everybody else is! What you've said, Mrs. Lee, is just plumb impossible. It's crazy!"

Hilda Lee cried:

"I tell you I heard them fighting in there, and I heard the old man scream when his throat was cut—and no one came out and no one was in the room!"

Hercule Poirot said:

"And all this time you have said nothing."

Hilda Lee's face was white, but she said steadily:

"No, because if I told you what had happened, there's only one thing you could say or think—that it was I who killed him. . . ."

Poirot shook his head.

"No," he said. "You did not kill him. His son killed him."

Stephen Farr said:

"I swear before God I never touched him!"

"Not you," said Poirot. "He had other sons!"

Harry said:

"What the hell—"

George stared. David drew his hand across his eyes. Alfred blinked twice.

Poirot said:

"The very first night I was here—the night of the murder—I saw a ghost. It was the ghost of the dead man. When I first saw Harry Lee

I was puzzled. I felt I had seen him before. Then I noted his features carefully and I realized how like his father he was, and I told myself that that was what caused the feeling of familiarity.

“But yesterday a man sitting opposite me threw back his head and laughed—and I knew who it was Harry Lee reminded me of. And I traced again, in another face, the features of the dead man.

“No wonder poor old Tressilian felt confused when he had answered the door not to two, but to three men who resembled each other closely. No wonder he confessed to getting muddled about people when there were three men in the house who, at a little distance, could pass for each other! The same build, the same gestures (one in particular, a trick of stroking the jaw), the same habit of laughing with the head thrown back, the same distinctive high-bridged nose. Yet the similarity was not always easy to see—for the third man had a moustache.”

He leaned forward.

“One forgets sometimes that police officers are men, that they have wives and children, mothers”—he paused—“and fathers . . . Remember Simeon Lee’s local reputation: a man who broke his wife’s heart because of his affairs with women. A son born the wrong side of the blanket may inherit many things. He may inherit his father’s features and even his gestures. He may inherit his pride and his patience and his revengeful spirit!”

His voice rose.

“All your life, Sugden, you’ve resented the wrong your father did you. I think you determined long ago to kill him. You come from the next county, not very far away. Doubtless your mother, with the money Simeon Lee so generously gave her, was able to find a husband who would stand father to her child. Easy for you to enter the Middleshire Police Force and wait your opportunity. A police superintendent has a grand opportunity of committing a murder and getting away with it.”

Sugden’s face had gone white as paper.

He said:

“You’re mad! I was outside the house when he was killed.”

Poirot shook his head.

“No, you killed him before you left the house the first time. No one saw him alive after you left. It was all so easy for you. Simeon Lee expected you, yes, but he never sent for you. It was you who rang him up and spoke vaguely about an attempt at robbery. You said you would call upon him just before eight that night and would pretend to be collecting for a police charity. Simeon Lee had no suspicions. He did not know you were his son. You came and told him a tale of substituted diamonds. He opened the safe to show you that the real diamonds were safe in his possession. You apologized, came back to the hearth with him and, catching him unawares, you cut his throat, holding your hand over his mouth so that he shouldn’t cry out. Child’s play to a man of your powerful physique.

“Then you set the scene. You took the diamonds. You piled up tables and chairs, lamps and glasses, and twined a very thin rope or cord which you had brought in coiled round your body, in and out between them. You had with you a bottle of some freshly killed animal’s blood to which you had added a quantity of sodium citrate. You sprinkled this about freely and added more sodium citrate to the pool of blood which flowed from Simeon Lee's wound. You made up up the fire so that the body should keep its warmth. Then you passed the two ends of the cord out through the narrow slit at the bottom of the window and let them hang down the wall. You left the room and turned the key from the outside. That was vital, since no one must, by any chance, enter that room.

"Then you went out and hid the diamonds in the stone sink garden. If, sooner or later, they were discovered there, they would only focus suspicion more strongly where you wanted it: on the members of Simeon Lee's legitimate family. A little before nine fifteen you returned and, going up to the wall underneath the window, you pulled on the cord. That dislodged the carefully piled-up structure you had arranged. Furniture and china fell with a crash. You pulled on one end of the cord and rewound it round your body under your coat and waistcoat.

"You had one further device!"

He turned to the others.

"Do you remember, all of you, how each of you described the dying scream of Mr. Lee in a different way? You, Mr. Lee, described it as the cry of a man in mortal agony. Your wife and David Lee both used the expression: a soul in hell. Mrs. David Lee, on the contrary, said it was the cry of someone who had no soul. She said it was inhuman, like a beast. It was Harry Lee who came nearest to the truth. He said it sounded like killing a pig.

"Do you know those long pink bladders that are sold at fairs with faces painted on them called 'Dying Pigs?' As the air rushes out they give forth an inhuman wail. That, Sugden, was your final touch. You arranged one of those in the room. The mouth of it was stopped up with a peg, but that peg was connected to the cord. When you pulled on the cord the peg came out and the pig began to deflate. On top of the falling furniture came the scream of the 'Dying Pig.' "

He turned once more to the others.

"You see now what it was that Pilar Estravados picked up? The superintendent had hoped to get there in time to retrieve that little wisp of rubber before anyone noticed it. However, he took it from Pilar quickly enough in his most official manner. But remember he never mentioned that incident to anyone. In itself, that was a singularly suspicious fact. I heard of it from Magdalene Lee and tackled him about it. He was prepared for that eventuality. He had snipped a piece from Mr. Lee's rubber spongebag and produced that, together with a wooden peg. Superficially it answered to the same description—a fragment of rubber and a piece of wood. It meant, as I realized at the time, absolutely nothing! But, fool that I was, I did not at once say; 'This means nothing, so it cannot have been there, and Superintendent Sugden is lying . . .' No, I foolishly went on trying to find an explanation for it. It was not until Mademoiselle Estravados was playing with a balloon that burst, and she cried out that it must have been a burst balloon she picked up in Simeon Lee's room, that I saw the truth.

"You see now how everything fits in? The improbable struggle, which is necessary to establish a false time of death; the locked door—so that nobody shall find the body too soon; the dying man's scream. The crime is now logical and reasonable.

“But from the moment that Pilar Estravados cried aloud her discovery about the balloon, she was a source of danger to the murderer. And if that remark had been heard by him from the house (which it well might, for her voice was high and clear and the windows were open), she herself was in considerable danger. Already she had given the murderer one very nasty moment. She had said, speaking of old Mr. Lee, ‘He must have been very good-looking when he was young.’ And had added, speaking directly to Sugden: ‘Like you.’ She meant that literally, and Sugden knew it. No wonder Sugden went purple in the face and nearly choked. It was so unexpected and so deadly dangerous. He hoped, after that, to fix the guilt on her, but it proved unexpectedly difficult, since, as the old man’s portionless granddaughter, she had obviously no motive for the crime. Later, when he overheard from the house her clear, high voice calling out its remark about the balloon, he decided on desperate measures. He set that booby trap when we were at lunch. Luckily, almost by a miracle, it failed. . . .”

There was dead silence. Then Sugden said quietly:

“When were you sure?”

Poirot said:

“I was not quite sure till I brought home a false moustache and tried it on Simeon Lee’s picture. Then—the face that looked at me was yours.”

Sugden said:

“God rot his soul in hell! I’m glad I did it!”

PART SEVEN

DECEMBER 28TH

Lydia Lee said:

“Pilar, I think you had better stay with us until we can arrange something definite for you.”

Pilar said meekly:

“You are very good, Lydia. You are nice. You forgive people quite easily without making a fuss about it.”

Lydia said, smiling:

“I still call you Pilar, though I suppose your name is something else.”

“Yes, I am really Conchita Lopez.”

“Conchita is a pretty name too.”

“You are really almost too nice, Lydia. But you don’t need to be bothered by me. I am going to marry Stephen, and we are going to South Africa.”

Lydia said, smiling:

“Well, that rounds off things very nicely.”

Pilar said timidly:

“Since you have been so kind, do you think, Lydia, that one day we might come back and stay with you—perhaps for Christmas—and then we could have the crackers and the burning raisins and those shiny things on a tree and the little snowmen?”

“Certainly, you shall come and have a real English Christmas.”

“That will be lovely. You see, Lydia, I feel that this year it was not a nice Christmas at all.”

Lydia caught her breath. She said:

“No, it was not a nice Christmas. . . .”

II

Harry said:

“Well, goodbye, Alfred. Don’t suppose you’ll be troubled by seeing much of me. I’m off to Hawaii. Always meant to live there if I had a bit of money.”

Alfred said:

“Goodbye, Harry. I expect you’ll enjoy yourself. I hope so.”

Harry said rather awkwardly:

“Sorry I riled you so much, old man. Rotten sense of humour I’ve got. Can’t help trying to pull a fellow’s leg.”

Alfred said with an effort:

“Suppose I must learn to take a joke.”

Harry said with relief:

“Well—so-long.”

III

Alfred said:

“David, Lydia and I have decided to sell up this place. I thought perhaps you’d like some of the things that were our mother’s—her chair and that footstool. You were always her favourite.”

David hesitated a minute. Then he said slowly:

“Thanks for the thought, Alfred, but do you know, I don’t think I will. I don’t want anything out of the house. I feel it’s better to break with the past altogether.”

Alfred said:

“Yes, I understand. Maybe you’re right.”

IV

George said:

“Well, goodbye, Alfred. Goodbye, Lydia. What a terrible time we have been through. There’s the trial coming on, too. I suppose the whole disgraceful story is bound to come out—Sugden being—er—my father’s son. One couldn’t arrange for it to be put to him, I suppose, that it would be better if he pleaded advanced Communist views and dislike of my father as a capitalist—something of that kind?”

Lydia said:

“My dear George, do you really imagine that a man like Sugden would tell lies to soothe our feelings?”

George said:

“Er—perhaps not. No, I see your point. All the same, the man must be mad. Well, good-bye again.”

Magdalene said:

“Good-bye. Next year do let’s all go to the Riviera or somewhere for Christmas and be really gay.”

George said:

“Depends on the Exchange.”

Magdalene said:

“Darling, don’t be mean.”

V

Alfred came out on the terrace. Lydia was bending over a stone sink. She straightened up when she saw him.

He said with a sigh:

“Well—they’ve all gone.”

Lydia said:

“Yes—what a blessing.”

“It is, rather.”

Alfred said:

“You’ll be glad to leave here.”

She asked:

“Will you mind very much?”

“No, I shall be glad. There are so many interesting things we can do together. To live on here would be to be constantly reminded of that nightmare. Thank God it’s all over!”

Lydia said:

“Thanks to Hercule Poirot.”

“Yes. You know, it was really amazing the way everything fell into place when he explained it.”

“I know. Like when you finish a jigsaw puzzle and all the queer-shaped bits you swear won’t fit in anywhere find their places quite naturally.”

Alfred said:

“There’s one little thing that never fitted in. What was George doing after he telephoned? Why wouldn’t he say?”

“Don’t you know? I knew all the time. He was having a look through your papers on your desk.”

“Oh! No, Lydia, no one would do a thing like that!”

"George would. He's frightfully curious about money matters. But of course he couldn't say so. He'd have had to be actually in the dock before he'd have owned up to that."

Alfred said:

"Are you making another garden?"

"Yes."

"What is it this time?"

"I think," said Lydia, "it's an attempt at the Garden of Eden. A new version—without any serpent—and Adam and Eve are definitely middle-aged."

Alfred said gently:

"Dear Lydia, how patient you have been all these years. You have been very good to me."

Lydia said:

"But, you see, Alfred, I love you. . . ."

VI

Colonel Johnson said:

"God bless my soul!" Then he said:

"Upon my word!" And finally, once more: "God bless my soul!

He leaned back in his chair and stared at Poirot. He said plaintively:

“My best man! What’s the police coming to?”

Poirot said:

“Even policemen have private lives! Sugden was a very proud man.”

Colonel Johnson shook his head.

To relieve his feelings he kicked at the logs in the grate. He said jerkily:

“I always say—nothing like a wood fire.”

Hercule Poirot, conscious of the draughts round his neck, thought to himself:

“Pour moi, every time the central heating. . . .”

The Regetta Mystery And Other Stories (1939)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE REGATTA MYSTERY

“The Regatta Mystery” was first published as “Poirot and the Regatta Mystery” in the USA in the Chicago Tribune, 3 May 1936, and then in Strand Magazine, June 1936. It first appeared in its current form in the American book The Regatta Mystery and Other Stories, published by Dodd, Mead, June 1939.

Mr. Isaac Pointz removed a cigar from his lips and said approvingly:

“Pretty little place.”

Having thus set the seal of his approval upon Dartmouth harbour, he replaced the cigar and looked about him with the air of a man pleased with himself, his appearance, his surroundings and life generally.

As regards the first of these, Mr. Isaac Pointz was a man of fifty-eight, in good health and condition with perhaps a slight tendency to liver. He was not exactly stout, but comfortable-looking, and a yachting costume, which he wore at the moment, is not the most kindly of attires for a middle-aged man with a tendency to embonpoint. Mr. Pointz was very well turned out—correct to every crease and button—his dark and slightly Oriental face beaming out under the peak of his yachting cap. As regards his surroundings, these may have been taken to mean his companions—his partner Mr. Leo Stein, Sir George and Lady Marroway, an American business acquaintance Mr. Samuel Leathern and his schoolgirl daughter Eve, Mrs. Rustington and Evan Llewellyn.

The party had just come ashore from Mr. Pointz’ yacht—the Merrimaid. In the morning they had watched the yacht racing and they had now come ashore to join for a while in the fun of the fair—Coconut shies, Fat Ladies, the Human Spider and the Merry-go-round. It is hardly to be doubted that these delights were relished most by Eve Leathern. When Mr. Pointz finally suggested that it was time to adjourn to the Royal George for dinner hers was the only dissentient voice.

“Oh, Mr. Pointz—I did so want to have my fortune told by the Real Gypsy in the Caravan.”

Mr. Pointz had doubts of the essential Realness of the Gypsy in question but he gave indulgent assent.

“Eve’s just crazy about the fair,” said her father apologetically. “But don’t you pay any attention if you want to be getting along.”

“Plenty of time,” said Mr. Pointz benignantly. “Let the little lady enjoy herself. I’ll take you on at darts, Leo.”

“Twenty-five and over wins a prize,” chanted the man in charge of the darts in a high nasal voice.

“Bet you a fiver my total score beats yours,” said Pointz.

“Done,” said Stein with alacrity.

The two men were soon wholeheartedly engaged in their battle.

Lady Marroway murmured to Evan Llewellyn:

“Eve is not the only child in the party.”

Llewellyn smiled assent but somewhat absently.

He had been absentminded all that day. Once or twice his answers had been wide of the point.

Pamela Marroway drew away from him and said to her husband:

“That young man has something on his mind.”

Sir George murmured:

“Or someone?”

And his glance swept quickly over Janet Rustington.

Lady Marroway frowned a little. She was a tall woman exquisitely groomed. The scarlet of her fingernails was matched by the dark red coral studs in her ears. Her eyes were dark and watchful. Sir George affected a careless “hearty English gentleman” manner—but his bright blue eyes held the same watchful look as his wife’s.

Isaac Pointz and Leo Stein were Hatton Garden diamond merchants. Sir George and Lady Marroway came from a different world—the world of Antibes and Juan les Pins—of golf at St. Jean-de-Luz—of bathing from the rocks at Madeira in the winter.

In outward seeming they were as the lilies that toiled not, neither did they spin. But perhaps this was not quite true. There are diverse ways of toiling and also of spinning.

“Here’s the kid back again,” said Evan Llewellyn to Mrs. Rustington.

He was a dark young man—there was a faintly hungry wolfish look about him which some women found attractive.

It was difficult to say whether Mrs. Rustington found him so. She did not wear her heart on her sleeve. She had married young—and the marriage had ended in disaster in less than a year. Since that time it was difficult to know what Janet Rustington thought of anyone or anything—her manner was always the same—charming but completely aloof.

Eve Leathern came dancing up to them, her lank fair hair bobbing excitedly. She was fifteen—an awkward child—but full of vitality.

“I’m going to be married by the time I’m seventeen,” she exclaimed breathlessly. “To a very rich man and we’re going to have six children and Tuesdays and Thursdays are my lucky days and I ought always to wear green or blue and an emerald is my lucky stone and—”

“Why, pet, I think we ought to be getting along,” said her father.

Mr. Leathern was a tall, fair, dyspeptic-looking man with a somewhat mournful expression.

Mr. Pointz and Mr. Stein were turning away from the darts. Mr. Pointz was chuckling and Mr. Stein was looking somewhat rueful.

“It’s all a matter of luck,” he was saying.

Mr. Pointz slapped his pocket cheerfully.

“Took a fiver off you all right. Skill, my boy, skill. My old Dad was a first class darts player. Well, folks, let’s be getting along. Had your fortune told, Eve? Did they tell you to beware of a dark man?”

“A dark woman,” corrected Eve. “She’s got a cast in her eye and she’ll be real mean to me if I give her a chance. And I’m to be married by the time I’m seventeen. . . .”

She ran on happily as the party steered its way to the Royal George.

Dinner had been ordered beforehand by the forethought of Mr. Pointz and a bowing waiter led them upstairs and into a private room on the first floor. Here a round table was ready laid. The big bulging bow window opened on the harbour square and was open. The noise of the fair came up to them, and the raucous squeal of three roundabouts each blaring a different tune.

“Best shut that if we’re to hear ourselves speak,” observed Mr. Pointz drily, and suited the action to the word.

They took their seats round the table and Mr. Pointz beamed affectionately at his guests. He felt he was doing them well and he liked to do people well. His eye rested on one after another. Lady Marroway—fine woman—not quite the goods, of course, he knew that—he was perfectly well aware that what he had called all his life the crême de la crême would have very little to do with the Marroways—but then the crême de la crême were supremely unaware of his own existence. Anyway, Lady Marroway was a damned smart-looking woman—and he didn't mind if she did rook him at Bridge. Didn't enjoy it quite so much from Sir George. Fishy eye the fellow had. Brazenly on the make. But he wouldn't make too much out of Isaac Pointz. He'd see to that all right.

Old Leathern wasn't a bad fellow—longwinded, of course, like most Americans—fond of telling endless long stories. And he had that disconcerting habit of requiring precise information. What was the population of Dartmouth? In what year had the Naval College been built? And so on. Expected his host to be a kind of walking Baedeker. Eve was a nice cheery kid—he enjoyed chaffing her. Voice rather like a corncake, but she had all her wits about her. A bright kid.

Young Llewellyn—he seemed a bit quiet. Looked as though he had something on his mind. Hard up, probably. These writing fellows usually were. Looked as though he might be keen on Janet Rustington. A nice woman—attractive and clever, too. But she didn't ram her writing down your throat. Highbrow sort of stuff she wrote but you'd never think it to hear her talk. And old Leo! He wasn't getting younger or thinner. And blissfully unaware that his partner was at that moment thinking precisely the same thing about him, Mr. Pointz corrected Mr. Leathern as to pilchards being connected with Devon and not Cornwall, and prepared to enjoy his dinner.

"Mr. Pointz," said Eve when plates of hot mackerel had been set before them and the waiters had left the room.

"Yes, young lady."

"Have you got that big diamond with you right now? The one you showed us last night and said you always took about with you?"

Mr. Pointz chuckled.

"That's right. My mascot, I call it. Yes, I've got it with me all right."

"I think that's awfully dangerous. Somebody might get it away from you in the crowd at the fair."

“Not they,” said Mr. Pointz. “I’ll take good care of that.”

“But they might,” insisted Eve. “You’ve got gangsters in England as well as we have, haven’t you?”

“They won’t get the Morning Star,” said Mr. Pointz. “To begin with it’s in a special inner pocket. And anyway—old Pointz knows what he’s about. Nobody’s going to steal the Morning Star.”

Eve laughed.

“Ugh-huh—bet I could steal it!”

“I bet you couldn’t.” Mr. Pointz twinkled back at her.

“Well, I bet I could. I was thinking about it last night in bed—after you’d handed it round the table, for us all to look at. I thought of a real cute way to steal it.”

“And what’s that?”

Eve put her head on one side, her fair hair wagged excitedly. “I’m not telling you—now. What do you bet I couldn’t?”

Memories of Mr. Pointz’s youth rose in his mind.

“Half a dozen pairs of gloves,” he said.

“Gloves,” cried Eve disgustedly. “Who wears gloves?”

“Well—do you wear nylon stockings?”

“Do I not? My best pair ran this morning.”

“Very well, then. Half a dozen pairs of the finest nylon stockings—”

“Oo-er,” said Eve blissfully. “And what about you?”

“Well, I need a new tobacco pouch.”

“Right. That’s a deal. Not that you’ll get your tobacco pouch. Now I’ll tell you what you’ve got to do. You must hand it round like you did last night —”

She broke off as two waiters entered to remove the plates. When they were starting on the next course of chicken, Mr. Pointz said:

“Remember this, young woman, if this is to represent a real theft, I should send for the police and you’d be searched.”

“That’s quite OK by me. You needn’t be quite so lifelike as to bring the police into it. But Lady Marroway or Mrs. Rustington can do all the searching you like.”

“Well, that’s that then,” said Mr. Pointz. “What are you setting up to be? A first class jewel thief?”

“I might take to it as a career—if it really paid.”

“If you got away with the Morning Star it would pay you. Even after recutting that stone would be worth over thirty thousand pounds.”

“My!” said Eve, impressed. “What’s that in dollars?”

Lady Marroway uttered an exclamation.

“And you carry such a stone about with you?” she said reproachfully. “Thirty thousand pounds.” Her darkened eyelashes quivered.

Mrs. Rustington said softly: “It’s a lot of money . . . And then there’s the fascination of the stone itself . . . It’s beautiful.”

“Just a piece of carbon,” said Evan Llewellyn.

“I’ve always understood it’s the ‘fence’ that’s the difficulty in jewel robberies,” said Sir George. “He takes the lion’s share—eh, what?”

“Come on,” said Eve excitedly. “Let’s start. Take the diamond out and say what you said last night.”

Mr. Leathern said in his deep melancholy voice, “I do apologize for my offspring. She gets kinder worked up—”

“That’ll do, Pops,” said Eve. “Now then, Mr. Pointz—”

Smiling, Mr. Pointz fumbled in an inner pocket. He drew something out. It lay on the palm of his hand, blinking in the light.

“A diamond. . . .”

Rather stiffly, Mr. Pointz repeated as far as he could remember his speech of the previous evening on the Merrimaid.

“Perhaps you ladies and gentlemen would like to have a look at this? It’s an unusually beautiful stone. I call it the Morning Star and it’s by way of being my mascot—goes about with me anywhere. Like to see it?”

He handed it to Lady Marroway, who took it, exclaimed at its beauty and passed it to Mr. Leathern who said, “Pretty good—yes, pretty good,” in a somewhat artificial manner and in his turn passed it to Llewellyn.

The waiters coming in at that moment, there was a slight hitch in the proceedings. When they had gone again, Evan said, “Very fine stone,” and passed it to Leo Stein who did not trouble to make any comment but handed it quickly on to Eve.

“How perfectly lovely,” cried Eve in a high affected voice.

“Oh!” She gave a cry of consternation as it slipped from her hand. “I’ve dropped it.”

She pushed back her chair and got down to grope under the table. Sir George at her right, bent also. A glass got swept off the table in the confusion. Stein, Llewellyn and Mrs. Rustington all helped in the search. Finally Lady Marroway joined in.

Only Mr. Pointz took no part in the proceedings. He remained in his seat sipping his wine and smiling sardonically.

“Oh, dear,” said Eve, still in her artificial manner, “How dreadful! Where can it have rolled to? I can’t find it anywhere.”

One by one the assistant searchers rose to their feet.

“It’s disappeared all right, Pointz,” said Sir George smiling.

“Very nicely done,” said Mr. Pointz, nodding approval. “You’d make a very good actress, Eve. Now the question is, have you hidden it somewhere or have you got it on you?”

“Search me,” said Eve dramatically.

Mr. Pointz’ eye sought out a large screen in the corner of the room.

He nodded towards it and then looked at Lady Marroway and Mrs. Rustington.

“If you ladies will be so good—”

“Why, certainly,” said Lady Marroway, smiling.

The two women rose.

Lady Marroway said, “Don’t be afraid, Mr. Pointz. We’ll vet her properly.”

The three went behind the screen.

The room was hot. Evan Llewellyn flung open the window. A news vendor was passing. Evan threw down a coin and the man threw up a paper.

Llewellyn unfolded it.

“Hungarian situation’s none too good,” he said.

“That the local rag?” asked Sir George. “There’s a horse I’m interested in ought to have run at Haldon today—Natty Boy.”

“Leo,” said Mr. Pointz. “Lock the door. We don’t want those damned waiters popping in and out till this business is over.”

“Natty Boy won three to one,” said Evan.

“Rotten odds,” said Sir George.

“Mostly Regatta news,” said Evan, glancing over the sheet.

The three young women came out from the screen.

“Not a sign of it,” said Janet Rustington.

“You can take it from me she hasn’t got it on her,” said Lady Marroway.

Mr. Pointz thought he would be quite ready to take it from her. There was a grim tone in her voice and he felt no doubt that the search had been thorough.

“Say, Eve, you haven’t swallowed it?” asked Mr. Leathern anxiously. “Because maybe that wouldn’t be too good for you.”

“I’d have seen her do that,” said Leo Stein quietly. “I was watching her. She didn’t put anything in her mouth.”

“I couldn’t swallow a great thing all points like that,” said Eve. She put her hands on her hips and looked at Mr. Pointz. “What about it, big boy?” she asked.

“You stand over there where you are and don’t move,” said that gentleman.

Among them, the men stripped the table and turned it upside down. Mr. Pointz examined every inch of it. Then he transferred his attention to the chair on which Eve had been sitting and those on either side of her.

The thoroughness of the search left nothing to be desired. The other four men joined in and the women also. Eve Leathern stood by the wall near the screen and laughed with intense enjoyment.

Five minutes later Mr. Pointz rose with a slight groan from his knees and dusted his trousers sadly. His pristine freshness was somewhat impaired.

“Eve,” he said. “I take off my hat to you. You’re the finest thing in jewel thieves I’ve ever come across. What you’ve done with that stone beats me. As far as I can see it must be in the room as it isn’t on you. I give you best.”

“Are the stockings mine?” demanded Eve.

“They’re yours, young lady.”

“Eve, my child, where can you have hidden it?” demanded Mrs. Rustington curiously.

Eve pranced forward.

“I’ll show you. You’ll all be just mad with yourselves.”

She went across to the side table where the things from the dinner table had been roughly stacked. She picked up her little black evening bag—

“Right under your eyes. Right. . . .”

Her voice, gay and triumphant, trailed off suddenly.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh . . .”

“What’s the matter, honey?” said her father.

Eve whispered: “It’s gone . . . it’s gone. . . .”

“What’s all this?” asked Pointz, coming forward.

Eve turned to him impetuously.

“It was like this. This pochette of mine has a big paste stone in the middle of the clasp. It fell out last night and just when you were showing that diamond round I noticed that it was much the same size. And so I thought in the night what a good idea for a robbery it would be to wedge your diamond into the gap with a bit of plasticine. I felt sure nobody would ever spot it. That’s what I did tonight. First I dropped it—then went down after it with the bag in my hand, stuck it into the gap with a bit of plasticine which I had handy, put my bag on the table and went on pretending to look for the diamond. I thought it would be like the Purloined Letter—you know—lying there in full view under all your noses—and just looking like a common bit of rhinestone. And it was a good plan—none of you did notice.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Stein.

“What did you say?”

Mr. Pointz took the bag, looked at the empty hole with a fragment of plasticine still adhering to it and said slowly: “It may have fallen out. We’d better look again.”

The search was repeated, but this time it was a curiously silent business. An atmosphere of tension pervaded the room.

Finally everyone in turn gave it up. They stood looking at each other.

“It’s not in this room,” said Stein.

“And nobody’s left the room,” said Sir George significantly.

There was a moment’s pause. Eve burst into tears.

Her father patted her on the shoulder.

“There, there,” he said awkwardly.

Sir George turned to Leo Stein.

“Mr. Stein,” he said. “Just now you murmured something under your breath. When I asked you to repeat it, you said it was nothing. But as a matter of fact I heard what you said. Miss Eve had just said that none of us noticed the place where she had put the diamond. The words you murmured were: ‘I wonder.’ What we have to face is the probability that one person did notice—that that person is in this room now. I suggest that the only fair and honourable thing is for every one present to submit to a search. The diamond cannot have left the room."

When Sir George played the part of the old English gentleman, none could play it better. His voice rang with sincerity and indignation.

"Bit unpleasant, all this," said Mr. Pointz unhappily.

"It's all my fault," sobbed Eve. "I didn't mean—"

"Buck up, kiddo," said Mr. Stein kindly. "Nobody's blaming you."

Mr. Leathern said in his slow pedantic manner:

"Why, certainly, I think that Sir George's suggestion will meet with the fullest approval from all of us. It does from me."

"I agree," said Evan Llewellyn.

Mrs. Rustington looked at Lady Marroway who nodded a brief assent. The two of them went back behind the screen and the sobbing Eve accompanied them.

A waiter knocked on the door and was told to go away.

Five minutes later eight people looked at each other incredulously.

The Morning Star had vanished into space. . . .

Mr. Parker Pyne looked thoughtfully at the dark agitated face of the young man opposite him.

"Of course," he said. "You're Welsh, Mr. Llewellyn."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Mr. Parker Pyne waved a large, well-cared-for hand.

“Nothing at all, I admit. I am interested in the classification of emotional reactions as exemplified by certain racial types. That is all. Let us return to the consideration of your particular problem.”

“I don’t really know why I came to you,” said Evan Llewellyn. His hands twitched nervously, and his dark face had a haggard look. He did not look at Mr. Parker Pyne and that gentleman’s scrutiny seemed to make him uncomfortable. “I don’t know why I came to you,” he repeated. “But where the Hell can I go? And what the Hell can I do? It’s the powerlessness of not being able to do anything at all that gets me . . . I saw your advertisement and I remembered that a chap had once spoken of you and said that you got results . . . And—well—I came! I suppose I was a fool. It’s the sort of position nobody can do anything about.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I am the proper person to come to. I am a specialist in unhappiness. This business has obviously caused you a good deal of pain. You are sure the facts are exactly as you have told me?”

“I don’t think I’ve left out anything. Pointz brought out the diamond and passed it around—that wretched American child stuck it on her ridiculous bag and when we came to look at the bag, the diamond was gone. It wasn’t on anyone—old Pointz himself even was searched—he suggested it himself—and I’ll swear it was nowhere in that room! And nobody left the room—”

“No waiters, for instance?” suggested Mr. Parker Pyne.

Llewellyn shook his head.

“They went out before the girl began messing about with the diamond, and afterwards Pointz locked the door so as to keep them out. No, it lies between one of us.”

“It would certainly seem so,” said Mr. Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

“That damned evening paper,” said Evan Llewellyn bitterly. “I saw it come into their minds—that that was the only way—”

“Just tell me again exactly what occurred.”

"It was perfectly simple. I threw open the window, whistled to the man, threw down a copper and he tossed me up the paper. And there it is, you see—the only possible way the diamond could have left the room—thrown by me to an accomplice waiting in the street below."

"Not the only possible way," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"What other way can you suggest?"

"If you didn't throw it out, there must have been some other way."

"Oh, I see. I hoped you meant something more definite than that. Well, I can only say that I didn't throw it out. I can't expect you to believe me—or anyone else."

"Oh, yes, I believe you," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"You do? Why?"

"Not a criminal type," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "Not, that is, the particular criminal type that steals jewellery. There are crimes, of course, that you might commit—but we won't enter into that subject. At any rate I do not see you as the purloiner of the Morning Star."

"Everyone else does though," said Llewellyn bitterly.

"I see," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"They looked at me in a queer sort of way at the time. Marroway picked up the paper and just glanced over at the window. He didn't say anything. But Pointz cottoned on to it quick enough! I could see what they thought. There hasn't been any open accusation, that's the devil of it."

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded sympathetically.

"It is worse than that," he said.

"Yes. It's just suspicion. I've had a fellow round asking questions—routine inquiries, he called it. One of the new dress-shirted lot of police, I suppose.

Very tactful—nothing at all hinted. Just interested in the fact that I'd been hard up and was suddenly cutting a bit of a splash."

"And were you?"

"Yes—some luck with a horse or two. Unluckily my bets were made on the course—there's nothing to show that that's how the money came in. They can't disprove it, of course—but that's just the sort of easy lie a fellow would invent if he didn't want to show where the money came from."

"I agree. Still they will have to have a good deal more than that to go upon."

"Oh! I'm not afraid of actually being arrested and charged with the theft. In a way that would be easier—one would know, where one was. It's the ghastly fact that all those people believe I took it."

"One person in particular?"

"What do you mean?"

"A suggestion—nothing more—" Again Mr. Parker Pyne waved his comfortable-looking hand. "There was one person in particular, wasn't there? Shall we say Mrs. Rustington?"

Llewellyn's dark face flushed.

"Why pitch on her?"

"Oh, my dear sir—there is obviously someone whose opinion matters to you greatly—probably a lady. What ladies were there? An American flapper? Lady Marroway? But you would probably rise not fall in Lady Marroway's estimation if you had brought off such a coup. I know something of the lady. Clearly then, Mrs. Rustington."

Llewellyn said with something of an effort,

"She—she's had rather an unfortunate experience. Her husband was a down and out rotter. It's made her unwilling to trust anyone. She—if she thinks

—”

He found it difficult to go on.

“Quite so,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “I see the matter is important. It must be cleared up.”

Evan gave a short laugh.

“That’s easy to say.”

“And quite easy to do,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You think so?”

“Oh, yes—the problem is so clear cut. So many possibilities are ruled out. The answer must really be extremely simple. Indeed already I have a kind of glimmering—”

Llewellyn stared at him incredulously.

Mr. Parker Pyne drew a pad of paper towards him and picked up a pen.

“Perhaps you would give me a brief description of the party.”

“Haven’t I already done so?”

“Their personal appearance—colour of hair and so on.”

“But, Mr. Parker Pyne, what can that have to do with it?”

“A good deal, young man, a good deal. Classification and so on.”

Somewhat unbelievingly, Evan described the personal appearance of the members of the yachting party.

Mr. Parker Pyne made a note or two, pushed away the pad and said:

“Excellent. By the way, did you say a wine glass was broken?”

Evan stared again.

“Yes, it was knocked off the table and then it got stepped on.”

“Nasty thing, splinters of glass,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Whose wine glass was it?”

“I think it was the child’s—Eve.”

“Ah!—and who sat next to her on that side?”

“Sir George Marroway.”

“You didn’t see which of them knocked it off the table?”

“Afraid I didn’t. Does it matter?”

“Not really. No. That was a superfluous question. Well”—he stood up—“good morning, Mr. Llewellyn. Will you call again in three days’ time? I think the whole thing will be quite satisfactorily cleared up by then.”

“Are you joking, Mr. Parker Pyne?”

“I never joke on professional matters, my dear sir. It would occasion distrust in my clients. Shall we say Friday at eleven thirty? Thank you.”

Evan entered Mr. Parker Pyne’s office on the Friday morning in a considerable turmoil. Hope and scepticism fought for mastery.

Mr. Parker Pyne rose to meet him with a beaming smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Llewellyn. Sit down. Have a cigarette?”

Llewellyn waved aside the proffered box.

“Well?” he said.

“Very well indeed,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “The police arrested the gang last night.”

“The gang? What gang?”

“The Amalfi gang. I thought of them at once when you told me your story. I recognized their methods and once you had described the guests, well, there was no doubt at all in my mind.”

“Who are the Amalfi gang?”

“Father, son and daughter-in-law—that is if Pietro and Maria are really married—which some doubt.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite simple. The name is Italian and no doubt the origin is Italian, but old Amalfi was born in America. His methods are usually the same. He impersonates a real business man, introduces himself to some prominent figure in the jewel business in some European country and then plays his little trick. In this case he was deliberately on the track of the Morning Star. Pointz’ idiosyncrasy was well known in the trade. Maria Amalfi played the part of his daughter (amazing creature, twenty-seven at least, and nearly always plays a part of sixteen).”

“Not Eve!” gasped Llewellyn.

“Exactly. The third member of the gang got himself taken on as an extra waiter at the Royal George—it was holiday time, remember, and they would need extra staff. He may even have bribed a regular man to stay away. The scene is set. Eve challenges old Pointz and he takes on the bet. He passes round the diamond as he had done the night before. The waiters enter the room and Leathern retains the stone until they have left the room. When they do leave, the diamond leaves also, neatly attached with a morsel of chewing gum to the underside of the plate that Pietro bears away. So simple!”

“But I saw it after that.”

"No, no, you saw a paste replica, good enough to deceive a casual glance. Stein, you told me, hardly looked at it. Eve drops it, sweeps off a glass too and steps firmly on stone and glass together. Miraculous disappearance of diamond. Both Eve and Leathern can submit to as much searching as anyone pleases."

"Well—I'm—" Evan shook his head, at a loss for words.

"You say you recognized the gang from my description. Had they worked this trick before?"

"Not exactly—but it was their kind of business. Naturally my attention was at once directed to the girl Eve."

"Why? I didn't suspect her—nobody did. She seemed such a—such a child."

"That is the peculiar genius of Maria Amalfi. She is more like a child than any child could possibly be! And then the plasticine! This bet was supposed to have arisen quite spontaneously—yet the little lady had some plasticine with her all handy. That spoke of premeditation. My suspicions fastened on her at once."

Llewellyn rose to his feet.

"Well, Mr. Parker Pyne, I'm no end obliged to you."

"Classification," murmured Mr. Parker Pyne. "The classification of criminal types—it interests me."

"You'll let me know how much—er—"

"My fee will be quite moderate," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "It will not make too big a hole in the—er—horse racing profits. All the same, young man, I should, I think, leave the horses alone in future. Very uncertain animal, the horse."

"That's all right," said Evan.

He shook Mr. Parker Pyne by the hand and strode from the office.

He hailed a taxi and gave the address of Janet Rustington’s flat.

He felt in a mood to carry all before him.

Two

THE MYSTERY OF THE BAGHDAD CHEST

“The Mystery of the Baghdad Chest” was first published in Strand Magazine, January 1932, and in the USA as “The Mystery of the Bagdad Chest” in Ladies’ Home Journal the same month. It was later expanded into “The Mystery of the Spanish Chest” for the book The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding and a Selection of Entrées (Collins, October 1960), appearing first in the USA in three parts in Women’s Illustrated, 17 and 24 September and 1 October 1960.

The words made a catchy headline, and I said as much to my friend, Hercule Poirot. I knew none of the parties. My interest was merely the dispassionate one of the man in the street. Poirot agreed.

“Yes, it has a flavour of the Oriental, of the mysterious. The chest may very well have been a sham Jacobean one from the Tottenham Court Road; none the less the reporter who thought of naming it the Baghdad Chest was happily inspired. The word ‘mystery’ is also thoughtfully placed in juxtaposition, though I understand there is very little mystery about the case.”

“Exactly. It is all rather horrible and macabre, but it is not mysterious.”

“Horrible and macabre,” repeated Poirot thoughtfully.

“The whole idea is revolting,” I said, rising to my feet and pacing up and down the room. “The murderer kills this man—his friend—shoves him into the chest, and half an hour later is dancing in that same room with the wife of his victim. Think! If she had imagined for one moment—”

“True,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “That much-vaunted possession, a woman’s intuition—it does not seem to have been working.”

“The party seems to have gone off very merrily,” I said with a slight shiver. “And all that time, as they danced and played poker, there was a dead man in the room with them. One could write a play about such an idea.”

“It has been done,” said Poirot. “But console yourself, Hastings,” he added kindly. “Because a theme has been used once, there is no reason why it should not be used again. Compose your drama.”

I had picked up the paper and was studying the rather blurred reproduction of a photograph.

“She must be a beautiful woman,” I said slowly. “Even from this, one gets an idea.”

Below the picture ran the inscription:

A recent portrait of Mrs. Clayton,

the wife of the murdered man

Poirot took the paper from me.

“Yes,” he said. “She is beautiful. Doubtless she is of those born to trouble the souls of men.”

He handed the paper back to me with a sigh.

“Dieu merci, I am not of an ardent temperament. It has saved me from many embarrassments. I am duly thankful.”

I do not remember that we discussed the case further. Poirot displayed no special interest in it at the time. The facts were so clear, and there was so little ambiguity about them, that discussion seemed merely futile.

Mr. and Mrs. Clayton and Major Rich were friends of fairly longstanding. On the day in question, the tenth of March, the Claytons had accepted an invitation to spend the evening with Major Rich. At about seven thirty, however, Clayton explained to another friend, a Major Curtiss, with whom he was having a drink, that he had been unexpectedly called to Scotland and was leaving by the eight o’clock train.

“I’ll just have time to drop in and explain to old Jack,” went on Clayton. “Marguerita is going, of course. I’m sorry about it, but Jack will understand how it is.”

Mr. Clayton was as good as his word. He arrived at Major Rich’s rooms about twenty to eight. The major was out at the time, but his manservant, who knew Mr. Clayton well, suggested that he come in and wait. Mr. Clayton said that he had no time, but that he would come in and write a note. He added that he was on his way to catch a train.

The valet accordingly showed him into the sitting room.

About five minutes later Major Rich, who must have let himself in without the valet hearing him, opened the door of the sitting room, called his man and told him to go out and get some cigarettes. On his return the man brought them to his master, who was then alone in the sitting room. The man naturally concluded that Mr. Clayton had left.

The guests arrived shortly afterwards. They comprised Mrs. Clayton, Major Curtiss and a Mr. and Mrs. Spence. The evening was spent dancing to the phonograph and playing poker. The guests left shortly after midnight.

The following morning, on coming to do the sitting room, the valet was startled to find a deep stain discolouring the carpet below and in front of a piece of furniture which Major Rich had brought from the East and which was called the Baghdad Chest.

Instinctively the valet lifted the lid of the chest and was horrified to find inside the doubled-up body of a man who had been stabbed to the heart.

Terrified, the man ran out of the flat and fetched the nearest policeman. The dead man proved to be Mr. Clayton. The arrest of Major Rich followed very shortly afterward. The major’s defence, it was understood, consisted of a sturdy denial of everything. He had not seen Mr. Clayton the preceding evening and the first he had heard of his going to Scotland had been from Mrs. Clayton.

Such were the bald facts of the case. Innuendoes and suggestions naturally abounded. The close friendship and intimacy of Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were so stressed that only a fool could fail to read between the lines. The motive for the crime was plainly indicated.

Long experience has taught me to make allowance for baseless calumny. The motive suggested might, for all the evidence, be entirely nonexistent. Some quite other reason might have precipitated the issue. But one thing did stand out clearly—that Rich was the murderer.

As I say, the matter might have rested there, had it not happened that Poirot and I were due at a party given by Lady Chatterton that night.

Poirot, whilst bemoaning social engagements and declaring a passion for solitude, really enjoyed these affairs enormously. To be made a fuss of and treated as a lion suited him down to the ground.

On occasions he positively purred! I have seen him blandly receiving the most outrageous compliments as no more than his due, and uttering the most blatantly conceited remarks, such as I can hardly bear to set down.

Sometimes he would argue with me on the subject.

“But, my friend, I am not an Anglo-Saxon. Why should I play the hypocrite? Si, si, that is what you do, all of you. The airman who has made a difficult flight, the tennis champion—they look down their noses, they mutter inaudibly that ‘it is nothing.’ But do they really think that themselves? Not for a moment. They would admire the exploit in someone else. So, being reasonable men, they admire it in themselves. But their training prevents them from saying so. Me, I am not like that. The talents that I possess—I would salute them in another. As it happens, in my own particular line, there is no one to touch me. C’est dommage! As it is, I admit freely and without hypocrisy that I am a great man. I have the order, the method and the psychology in an unusual degree. I am, in fact, Hercule

Poirot! Why should I turn red and stammer and mutter into my chin that really I am very stupid? It would not be true."

"There is certainly only one Hercule Poirot," I agreed—not without a spice of malice of which, fortunately, Poirot remained quite oblivious.

Lady Chatterton was one of Poirot's most ardent admirers. Starting from the mysterious conduct of a Pekingese, he had unravelled a chain which led to a noted burglar and housebreaker. Lady Chatterton had been loud in his praises ever since.

To see Poirot at a party was a great sight. His faultless evening clothes, the exquisite set of his white tie, the exact symmetry of his hair parting, the sheen of pomade on his hair, and the tortured splendour of his famous moustaches—all combined to paint the perfect picture of an inveterate dandy. It was hard, at these moments, to take the little man seriously.

It was about half past eleven when Lady Chatterton, bearing down upon us, whisked Poirot neatly out of an admiring group, and carried him off—I need hardly say, with myself in tow.

"I want you to go into my little room upstairs," said Lady Chatterton rather breathlessly as soon as she was out of earshot of her other guests. "You know where it is, M. Poirot. You'll find someone there who needs your help very badly—and you will help her, I know. She's one of my dearest friends—so don't say no."

Energetically leading the way as she talked, Lady Chatterton flung open a door, exclaiming as she did so, "I've got him, Marguerita darling. And he'll do anything you want. You will help Mrs. Clayton, won't you, M. Poirot?"

And taking the answer for granted, she withdrew with the same energy that characterized all her movements.

Mrs. Clayton had been sitting in a chair by the window. She rose now and came toward us. Dressed in deep mourning, the dull black showed up her fair colouring. She was a singularly lovely woman, and there was about her a simple childlike candour which made her charm quite irresistible.

“Alice Chatterton is so kind,” she said. “She arranged this. She said you would help me, M. Poirot. Of course I don’t know whether you will or not—but I hope you will.”

She had held out her hand and Poirot had taken it. He held it now for a moment or two while he stood scrutinizing her closely. There was nothing ill-bred in his manner of doing it. It was more the kind but searching look that a famous consultant gives a new patient as the latter is ushered into his presence.

“Are you sure, madame,” he said at last, “that I can help you?”

“Alice says so.”

“Yes, but I am asking you, madame.”

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“What is it, madame, that you want me to do?”

“You—you—know who I am?” she asked.

“Assuredly.”

“Then you can guess what it is I am asking you to do, M. Poirot—Captain Hastings”—I was gratified that she realized my identity—“Major Rich did not kill my husband.”

“Why not?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Poirot smiled at her slight discomfiture.

“I said, ‘Why not?’ ” he repeated.

“I’m not sure that I understand.”

"Yet it is very simple. The police—the lawyers—they will all ask the same question: Why did Major Rich kill M. Clayton? I ask the opposite. I ask you, madame, why did Major Rich not kill Mr. Clayton."

"You mean—why I'm so sure? Well, but I know. I know Major Rich so well."

"You know Major Rich so well," repeated Poirot tonelessly.

The colour flamed into her cheeks.

"Yes, that's what they'll say—what they'll think! Oh, I know!"

"C'est vrai. That is what they will ask you about—how well you knew Major Rich. Perhaps you will speak the truth, perhaps you will lie. It is very necessary for a woman to lie, it is a good weapon. But there are three people, madame, to whom a woman should speak the truth. To her Father Confessor, to her hairdresser and to her private detective—if she trusts him. Do you trust me, madame?"

Marguerita Clayton drew a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "I do. I must," she added rather childishly.

"Then, how well do you know Major Rich?"

She looked at him for a moment in silence, then she raised her chin defiantly.

"I will answer your question. I loved Jack from the first moment I saw him—two years ago. Lately I think—I believe—he has come to love me. But he has never said so."

"Épatant!" said Poirot. "You have saved me a good quarter of an hour by coming to the point without beating the bush. You have the good sense. Now your husband—did he suspect your feelings?"

"I don't know," said Marguerita slowly. "I thought—lately—that he might. His manner has been different . . . But that may have been merely my fancy."

“Nobody else knew?”

“I do not think so.”

“And—pardon me, madame—you did not love your husband?”

There were, I think, very few women who would have answered that question as simply as this woman did. They would have tried to explain their feelings.

Marguerita Clayton said quite simply: “No.”

“Bien. Now we know where we are. According to you, madame, Major Rich did not kill your husband, but you realize that all the evidence points to his having done so. Are you aware, privately, of any flaw in that evidence?”

“No. I know nothing.”

“When did your husband first inform you of his visit to Scotland?”

“Just after lunch. He said it was a bore, but he’d have to go. Something to do with land values, he said it was.”

“And after that?”

“He went out—to his club, I think. I—I didn’t see him again.”

“Now as to Major Rich—what was his manner that evening? Just as usual?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“You are not sure?”

Marguerita wrinkled her brows.

“He was—a little constrained. With me—not with the others. But I thought I knew why that was. You understand? I am sure the constraint or—or—absentmindedness perhaps describes it better—had nothing to do with

Edward. He was surprised to hear that Edward had gone to Scotland, but not unduly so."

"And nothing else unusual occurs to you in connection with that evening?"

Marguerita thought.

"No, nothing whatever."

"You—noticed the chest?"

She shook her head with a little shiver.

"I don't even remember it—or what it was like. We played poker most of the evening."

"Who won?"

"Major Rich. I had very bad luck, and so did Major Curtiss. The Spences won a little, but Major Rich was the chief winner."

"The party broke up—when?"

"About half past twelve, I think. We all left together."

"Ah!"

Poirot remained silent, lost in thought.

"I wish I could be more helpful to you," said Mrs. Clayton. "I seem to be able to tell you so little."

"About the present—yes. What about the past, madame?"

"The past?"

"Yes. Have there not been incidents?"

She flushed.

"You mean that dreadful little man who shot himself. It wasn't my fault, M. Poirot. Indeed it wasn't."

"It was not precisely of that incident that I was thinking."

"That ridiculous duel? But Italians do fight duels. I was so thankful the man wasn't killed."

"It must have been a relief to you," agreed Poirot gravely.

She was looking at him doubtfully. He rose and took her hand in his.

"I shall not fight a duel for you, madame," he said. "But I will do what you have asked me. I will discover the truth. And let us hope that your instincts are correct—that the truth will help and not harm you."

Our first interview was with Major Curtiss. He was a man of about forty, of soldierly build, with very dark hair and a bronzed face. He had known the Claytons for some years and Major Rich also. He confirmed the press reports.

Clayton and he had had a drink together at the club just before half past seven, and Clayton had then announced his intention of looking in on Major Rich on his way to Euston.

"What was Mr. Clayton's manner? Was he depressed or cheerful?"

The major considered. He was a slow-spoken man.

"Seemed in fairly good spirits," he said at last.

"He said nothing about being on bad terms with Major Rich?"

"Good Lord, no. They were pals."

"He didn't object to—his wife's friendship with Major Rich?"

The major became very red in the face.

“You’ve been reading those damned newspapers, with their hints and lies. Of course he didn’t object. Why, he said to me: ‘Marguerita’s going, of course.’ ”

“I see. Now during the evening—the manner of Major Rich—was that much as usual?”

“I didn’t notice any difference.”

“And madame? She, too, was as usual.”

“Well,” he reflected, “now I come to think of it, she was a bit quiet. You know, thoughtful and faraway.”

“Who arrived first?”

“The Spences. They were there when I got there. As a matter of fact, I’d called round for Mrs. Clayton, but found she’d already started. So I got there a bit late.”

“And how did you amuse yourselves? You danced? You played the cards?”

“A bit of both. Danced first of all.”

“There were five of you?”

“Yes, but that’s all right, because I don’t dance. I put on the records and the others danced.”

“Who danced most with whom?”

“Well, as a matter of fact the Spences like dancing together. They’ve got a sort of craze on it—fancy steps and all that.”

“So that Mrs. Clayton danced mostly with Major Rich?”

“That’s about it.”

“And then you played poker?”

“Yes.”

“And when did you leave?”

“Oh, quite early. A little after midnight.”

“Did you all leave together?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, we shared a taxi, dropped Mrs. Clayton first, then me, and the Spences took it on to Kensington.”

Our next visit was to Mr. and Mrs. Spence. Only Mrs. Spence was at home, but her account of the evening tallied with that of Major Curtiss except that she displayed a slight acidity concerning Major Rich’s luck at cards.

Earlier in the morning Poirot had had a telephone conversation with Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. As a result we arrived at Major Rich’s rooms and found his manservant, Burgoyne, expecting us.

The valet’s evidence was very precise and clear.

Mr. Clayton had arrived at twenty minutes to eight. Unluckily Major Rich had just that very minute gone out. Mr. Clayton had said that he couldn’t wait, as he had to catch a train, but he would just scrawl a note. He accordingly went into the sitting room to do so. Burgoyne had not actually heard his master come in, as he was running the bath, and Major Rich, of course, let himself in with his own key. In his opinion it was about ten minutes later that Major Rich called him and sent him out for cigarettes. No, he had not gone into the sitting room. Major Rich had stood in the doorway. He had returned with the cigarettes five minutes later and on this occasion he had gone into the sitting room, which was then empty, save for his master, who was standing by the window smoking. His master had inquired if his bath were ready and on being told it was had proceeded to take it. He, Burgoyne, had not mentioned Mr. Clayton, as he assumed that his master had found Mr. Clayton there and let him out himself. His master’s manner had been precisely the same as usual. He had taken his bath, changed, and shortly after, Mr. and Mrs. Spence had arrived, to be followed by Major Curtiss and Mrs. Clayton.

It had not occurred to him, Burgoyne explained, that Mr. Clayton might have left before his master's return. To do so, Mr. Clayton would have had to bang the front door behind him and that the valet was sure he would have heard.

Still in the same impersonal manner, Burgoyne proceeded to his finding of the body. For the first time my attention was directed to the fatal chest. It was a good-sized piece of furniture standing against the wall next to the phonograph cabinet. It was made of some dark wood and plentifully studded with brass nails. The lid opened simply enough. I looked in and shivered. Though well scrubbed, ominous stains remained.

Suddenly Poirot uttered an exclamation. "Those holes there—they are curious. One would say that they had been newly made."

The holes in question were at the back of the chest against the wall. There were three or four of them. They were about a quarter of an inch in diameter and certainly had the effect of having been freshly made.

Poirot bent down to examine them, looking inquiringly at the valet.

"It's certainly curious, sir. I don't remember ever seeing those holes in the past, though maybe I wouldn't notice them."

"It makes no matter," said Poirot.

Closing the lid of the chest, he stepped back into the room until he was standing with his back against the window. Then he suddenly asked a question.

"Tell me," he said. "When you brought the cigarettes into your master that night, was there not something out of place in the room?"

Burgoyne hesitated for a minute, then with some slight reluctance he replied, "It's odd your saying that, sir. Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draught from the bedroom door—it was moved a bit more to the left."

“Like this?”

Poirot darted nimbly forward and pulled at the screen. It was a handsome affair of painted leather. It already slightly obscured the view of the chest, and as Poirot adjusted it, it hid the chest altogether.

“That’s right, sir,” said the valet. “It was like that.”

“And the next morning?”

“It was still like that. I remember. I moved it away and it was then I saw the stain. The carpet’s gone to be cleaned, sir. That’s why the boards are bare.”

Poirot nodded.

“I see,” he said. “I thank you.”

He placed a crisp piece of paper in the valet’s palm.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Poirot,” I said when we were out in the street, “that point about the screen—is that a point helpful to Rich?”

“It is a further point against him,” said Poirot ruefully. “The screen hid the chest from the room. It also hid the stain on the carpet. Sooner or later the blood was bound to soak through the wood and stain the carpet. The screen would prevent discovery for the moment. Yes—but there is something there that I do not understand. The valet, Hastings, the valet.”

“What about the valet? He seemed a most intelligent fellow.”

“As you say, most intelligent. Is it credible, then, that Major Rich failed to realize that the valet would certainly discover the body in the morning? Immediately after the deed he had no time for anything—granted. He shoves the body into the chest, pulls the screen in front of it and goes through the evening hoping for the best. But after the guests are gone? Surely, then is the time to dispose of the body.”

“Perhaps he hoped the valet wouldn’t notice the stain?”

“That, mon ami, is absurd. A stained carpet is the first thing a good servant would be bound to notice.

And Major Rich, he goes to bed and snores there comfortably and does nothing at all about the matter. Very remarkable and interesting, that.”

“Curtiss might have seen the stains when he was changing the records the night before?” I suggested.

“That is unlikely. The screen would throw a deep shadow just there, No, but I begin to see. Yes, dimly I begin to see.”

“See what?” I asked eagerly.

“The possibilities, shall we say, of an alternative explanation. Our next visit may throw light on things.”

Our next visit was to the doctor who had examined the body. His evidence was a mere recapitulation of what he had already given at the inquest. Deceased had been stabbed to the heart with a long thin knife something like a stiletto. The knife had been left in the wound. Death had been instantaneous. The knife was the property of Major Rich and usually lay on his writing table. There were no fingerprints on it, the doctor understood. It had been either wiped or held in a handkerchief. As regards time, any time between seven and nine seemed indicated.

“He could not, for instance, have been killed after midnight?” asked Poirot.

“No. That I can say. Ten o’clock at the outside—but seven thirty to eight seems clearly indicated.”

“There is a second hypothesis possible,” Poirot said when we were back home. “I wonder if you see it, Hastings. To me it is very plain, and I only need one point to clear up the matter for good and all.”

“It’s no good,” I said. “I’m not there.”

“But make an effort, Hastings. Make an effort.”

“Very well,” I said. “At seven-forty Clayton is alive and well. The last person to see him alive is Rich—”

“So we assume.”

“Well, isn’t it so?”

“You forget, mon ami, that Major Rich denies that. He states explicitly that Clayton had gone when he came in.”

“But the valet says that he would have heard Clayton leave because of the bang of the door. And also, if Clayton had left, when did he return? He couldn’t have returned after midnight because the doctor says positively that he was dead at least two hours before that. That only leaves one alternative.”

“Yes, mon ami?” said Poirot.

“That in the five minutes Clayton was alone in the sitting room, someone else came in and killed him. But there we have the same objection. Only someone with a key could come in without the valet’s knowing, and in the same way the murderer on leaving would have had to bang the door, and that again the valet would have heard.”

“Exactly,” said Poirot. “And therefore—”

“And therefore—nothing,” I said. “I can see no other solution.”

“It is a pity,” murmured Poirot. “And it is really so exceedingly simple—as the clear blue eyes of Madame Clayton.”

“You really believe—”

“I believe nothing—until I have got proof. One little proof will convince me.”

He took up the telephone and called Japp at Scotland Yard.

Twenty minutes later we were standing before a little heap of assorted objects laid out on a table. They were the contents of the dead man's pockets.

There was a handkerchief, a handful of loose change, a pocketbook containing three pounds ten shillings, a couple of bills and a worn snapshot of Marguerita Clayton. There was also a pocketknife, a gold pencil and a cumbersome wooden tool.

It was on this latter that Poirot swooped. He unscrewed it and several small blades fell out.

"You see, Hastings, a gimlet and all the rest of it. Ah! it would be a matter of a very few minutes to bore a few holes in the chest with this."

"Those holes we saw?"

"Precisely."

"You mean it was Clayton who bored them himself?"

"Mais, oui—mais, oui! What did they suggest to you, those holes? They were not to see through, because they were at the back of the chest. What were they for, then? Clearly for air? But you do not make air holes for a dead body, so clearly they were not made by the murderer. They suggest one thing—and one thing only—that a man was going to hide in that chest. And at once, on that hypothesis, things become intelligible. Mr. Clayton is jealous of his wife and Rich. He plays the old, old trick of pretending to go away. He watches Rich go out, then he gains admission, is left alone to write a note, quickly bores those holes and hides inside the chest. His wife is coming there that night. Possibly Rich will put the others off, possibly she will remain after the others have gone, or pretend to go and return. Whatever it is, Clayton will know. Anything is preferable to the ghastly torment of suspicion he is enduring."

"Then you mean that Rich killed him after the others had gone? But the doctor said that was impossible."

“Exactly. So you see, Hastings, he must have been killed during the evening.”

“But everyone was in the room!”

“Precisely,” said Poirot gravely. “You see the beauty of that? ‘Everyone was in the room.’ What an alibi! What sang-froid—what nerve—what audacity!”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Who went behind that screen to wind up the phonograph and change the records? The phonograph and the chest were side by side, remember. The others are dancing—the phonograph is playing. And the man who does not dance lifts the lid of the chest and thrusts the knife he has just slipped into his sleeve deep into the body of the man who was hiding there.”

“Impossible! The man would cry out.”

“Not if he were drugged first?”

“Drugged?”

“Yes. Who did Clayton have a drink with at seven thirty? Ah! Now you see. Curtiss! Curtiss has inflamed Clayton’s mind with suspicions against his wife and Rich. Curtiss suggests this plan—the visit to Scotland, the concealment in the chest, the final touch of moving the screen. Not so that Clayton can raise the lid a little and get relief—no, so that he, Curtiss, can raise that lid unobserved. The plan is Curtiss’s, and observe the beauty of it, Hastings. If Rich had observed the screen was out of place and moved it back—well, no harm is done. He can make another plan. Clayton hides in the chest, the mild narcotic that Curtiss had administered takes effect. He sinks into unconsciousness. Curtiss lifts up the lid and strikes—and the phonograph goes on playing ‘Walking My Baby Back Home.’ ”

I found my voice. “Why? But why?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Why did a man shoot himself? Why did two Italians fight a duel? Curtiss is of a dark passionate temperament. He wanted Marguerita Clayton. With her husband and Rich out of the way, she would, or so he thought, turn to him.”

He added musingly:

“These simple childlike women . . . they are very dangerous. But mon Dieu! what an artistic masterpiece! It goes to my heart to hang a man like that. I may be a genius myself, but I am capable of recognizing genius in other people. A perfect murder, mon ami. I, Hercule Poirot, say it to you. A perfect murder. Épatant!”

Three

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

I

Hercule Poirot arranged his letters in a neat pile in front of him. He picked up the topmost letter, studied the address for a moment, then neatly slit the back of the envelope with a little paper knife that he kept on the breakfast table for that express purpose and extracted the contents. Inside was yet another envelope, carefully sealed with purple wax and marked “Private and Confidential.”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose a little on his egg-shaped head. He murmured, “Patience! Nous allons arriver!” and once more brought the little paper knife into play. This time the envelope yielded a letter—written in a rather shaky and spiky handwriting. Several words were heavily underlined.

Hercule Poirot unfolded it and read. The letter was headed once again “Private and Confidential.” On the right-hand side was the address—Rosebank, Charman’s Green, Bucks—and the date—March twenty-first.

Dear M. Poirot,

I have been recommended to you by an old and valued friend of mine who knows the worry and distress I have been in lately. Not that this friend knows the actual circumstances—those I have kept entirely to myself—the matter being strictly private. My friend assures me that you are discretion itself—and that there will be no fear of my being involved in a police matter which, if my suspicions should prove correct, I should very much dislike. But it is of course possible that I am entirely mistaken. I do not feel myself clearheaded enough nowadays—suffering as I do from insomnia and the result of a severe illness last winter—to investigate things for myself. I have neither the means nor the ability. On the other hand, I must reiterate once more that this is a very delicate family matter and that for many reasons I may want the whole thing hushed up. If I am once assured of the facts, I can deal with the matter myself and should prefer to do so. I hope that I have made myself clear on this point. If you will undertake this investigation perhaps you will let me know to the above address?

Yours very truly,

Amelia Barrowby

Poirot read the letter through twice. Again his eyebrows rose slightly. Then he placed it on one side and proceeded to the next envelope in the pile.

At ten o’clock precisely he entered the room where Miss Lemon, his confidential secretary, sat awaiting her instructions for the day. Miss Lemon was forty-eight and of unprepossessing appearance. Her general effect was that of a lot of bones flung together at random. She had a passion for order almost equalling that of Poirot himself; and though capable of thinking, she never thought unless told to do so.

Poirot handed her the morning correspondence. “Have the goodness, mademoiselle, to write refusals couched in correct terms to all of these.”

Miss Lemon ran an eye over the various letters, scribbling in turn a hieroglyphic on each of them. These marks were legible to her alone and were in a code of her own: “Soft soap;” “slap in the face;” “purr purr;” “cut;” and so on. Having done this, she nodded and looked up for further instructions.

Poirot handed her Amelia Barrowby’s letter. She extracted it from its double envelope, read it through and looked up inquiringly.

“Yes, M. Poirot?” Her pencil hovered—ready—over her shorthand pad.

“What is your opinion of that letter, Miss Lemon?”

With a slight frown Miss Lemon put down the pencil and read through the letter again.

The contents of a letter meant nothing to Miss Lemon except from the point of view of composing an adequate reply. Very occasionally her employer appealed to her human, as opposed to her official, capacities. It slightly annoyed Miss Lemon when he did so—she was very nearly the perfect machine, completely and gloriously uninterested in all human affairs. Her real passion in life was the perfection of a filing system beside which all other filing systems should sink into oblivion. She dreamed of such a system at night. Nevertheless, Miss Lemon was perfectly capable of intelligence on purely human matters, as Hercule Poirot well knew.

“Well?” he demanded.

“Old lady,” said Miss Lemon. “Got the wind up pretty badly.”

“Ah! The wind rises in her, you think?”

Miss Lemon, who considered that Poirot had been long enough in Great Britain to understand its slang terms, did not reply. She took a brief look at the double envelope.

“Very hush-hush,” she said. “And tells you nothing at all.”

“Yes,” said Hercule Poirot. “I observed that.”

Miss Lemon’s hand hung once more hopefully over the shorthand pad. This time Hercule Poirot responded.

“Tell her I will do myself the honour to call upon her at any time she suggests, unless she prefers to consult me here. Do not type the letter—write it by hand.”

“Yes, M. Poirot.”

Poirot produced more correspondence. “These are bills.”

Miss Lemon’s efficient hands sorted them quickly. “I’ll pay all but these two.”

“Why those two? There is no error in them.”

“They are firms you’ve only just begun to deal with. It looks bad to pay too promptly when you’ve just opened an account—looks as though you were working up to get some credit later on.”

“Ah!” murmured Poirot. “I bow to your superior knowledge of the British tradesman.”

“There’s nothing much I don’t know about them,” said Miss Lemon grimly.

II

The letter to Miss Amelia Barrowby was duly written and sent, but no reply was forthcoming. Perhaps, thought Hercule Poirot, the old lady had unravelled her mystery herself. Yet he felt a shade of surprise that in that case she should not have written a courteous word to say that his services were no longer required.

It was five days later when Miss Lemon, after receiving her morning’s instructions, said, “That Miss Barrowby we wrote to—no wonder there’s been no answer. She’s dead.”

Hercule Poirot said very softly, “Ah—dead.” It sounded not so much like a question as an answer.

Opening her handbag, Miss Lemon produced a newspaper cutting. “I saw it in the tube and tore it out.”

Just registering in his mind approval of the fact that, though Miss Lemon used the word “tore,” she had neatly cut the entry with scissors, Poirot read the announcement taken from the Births, Deaths and Marriages in the Morning Post: “On March 26th—suddenly—at Rosebank, Charman’s Green, Amelia Jan Barrowby, in her seventy-third year. No flowers, by request.”

Poirot read it over. He murmured under his breath, “Suddenly.” Then he said briskly, “If you will be so obliging as to take a letter, Miss Lemon?”

The pencil hovered. Miss Lemon, her mind dwelling on the intricacies of the filing system, took down in rapid and correct shorthand:

Dear Miss Barrowby,

I have received no reply from you, but as I shall be in the neighbourhood of Charman’s Green on Friday, I will call upon you on that day and discuss more fully the matter mentioned to me in your letter.

Yours, etc.

“Type this letter, please; and if it is posted at once, it should get to Charman’s Green tonight.”

On the following morning a letter in a black-edged envelope arrived by the second post:

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter my aunt, Miss Barrowby, passed away on the twenty-sixth, so the matter you speak of is no longer of importance.

Yours truly,

Mary Delafontaine

Poirot smiled to himself. “No longer of importance . . . Ah—that is what we shall see. En avant—to Charman’s Green.”

Rosebank was a house that seemed likely to live up to its name, which is more than can be said for most houses of its class and character.

Hercule Poirot paused as he walked up the path to the front door and looked approvingly at the neatly planned beds on either side of him. Rose trees that promised a good harvest later in the year, and at present daffodils, early tulips, blue hyacinths—the last bed was partly edged with shells.

Poirot murmured to himself, “How does it go, the English rhyme the children sing?

“Mistress Mary, quite contrary,

How does your garden grow?

With cockle-shells, and silver bells.

And pretty maids all in a row.

“Not a row, perhaps,” he considered, “but here is at least one pretty maid to make the little rhyme come right.”

The front door had opened and a neat little maid in cap and apron was looking somewhat dubiously at the spectacle of a heavily moustached foreign gentleman talking aloud to himself in the front garden. She was, as Poirot had noted, a very pretty little maid, with round blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

Poirot raised his hat with courtesy and addressed her: “Pardon, but does a Miss Amelia Barrowby live here?”

The little maid gasped and her eyes grew rounder. “Oh, sir, didn’t you know? She’s dead. Ever so sudden it was. Tuesday night.”

She hesitated, divided between two strong instincts: the first, distrust of a foreigner; the second, the pleasurable enjoyment of her class in dwelling on the subject of illness and death.

“You amaze me,” said Hercule Poirot, not very truthfully. “I had an appointment with the lady for today. However, I can perhaps see the other lady who lives here.”

The little maid seemed slightly doubtful. “The mistress? Well, you could see her, perhaps, but I don’t know whether she’ll be seeing anyone or not.”

"She will see me," said Poirot, and handed her a card.

The authority of his tone had its effect. The rosy-cheeked maid fell back and ushered Poirot into a sitting room on the right of the hall. Then, card in hand, she departed to summon her mistress.

Hercule Poirot looked round him. The room was a perfectly conventional drawing room—oatmeal-coloured paper with a frieze round the top, indeterminate cretonnes, rose-coloured cushions and curtains, a good many china knickknacks and ornaments. There was nothing in the room that stood out, that announced a definite personality.

Suddenly Poirot, who was very sensitive, felt eyes watching him. He wheeled round. A girl was standing in the entrance of the french window—a small, sallow girl, with very black hair and suspicious eyes.

She came in, and as Poirot made a little bow she burst out abruptly, "Why have you come?"

Poirot did not reply. He merely raised his eyebrows.

"You are not a lawyer—no?" Her English was good, but not for a minute would anyone have taken her to be English.

"Why should I be a lawyer, mademoiselle?"

The girl stared at him sullenly. "I thought you might be. I thought you had come perhaps to say that she did not know what she was doing. I have heard of such things—the not due influence; that is what they call it, no? But that is not right. She wanted me to have the money, and I shall have it. If it is needful I shall have a lawyer of my own. The money is mine. She wrote it down so, and so it shall be." She looked ugly, her chin thrust out, her eyes gleaming.

The door opened and a tall woman entered and said, "Katrina."

The girl shrank, flushed, muttered something and went out through the window.

Poirot turned to face the newcomer who had so effectually dealt with the situation by uttering a single word. There had been authority in her voice, and contempt and a shade of well-bred irony. He realized at once that this was the owner of the house, Mary Delafontaine.

“M. Poirot? I wrote to you. You cannot have received my letter.”

“Alas, I have been away from London.”

“Oh, I see; that explains it. I must introduce myself. My name is Delafontaine. This is my husband. Miss Barrowby was my aunt.”

Mr. Delafontaine had entered so quietly that his arrival had passed unnoticed. He was a tall man with grizzled hair and an indeterminate manner. He had a nervous way of fingering his chin. He looked often towards his wife, and it was plain that he expected her to take the lead in any conversation.

“I must regret that I intrude in the midst of your bereavement,” said Hercule Poirot.

“I quite realize that it is not your fault,” said Mrs. Delafontaine. “My aunt died on Tuesday evening. It was quite unexpected.”

“Most unexpected,” said Mr. Delafontaine. “Great blow.” His eyes watched the window where the foreign girl had disappeared.

“I apologize,” said Hercule Poirot. “And I withdraw.” He moved a step towards the door.

“Half a sec,” said Mr. Delafontaine. “You—er—had an appointment with Aunt Amelia, you say?”

“Parfaitement.”

“Perhaps you will tell us about it,” said his wife. “If there is anything we can do—”

“It was of a private nature,” said Poirot. “I am a detective,” he added simply.

Mr. Delafontaine knocked over a little china figure he was handling. His wife looked puzzled.

“A detective? And you had an appointment with Auntie? But how extraordinary!” She stared at him. “Can’t you tell us a little more, M. Poirot? It—it seems quite fantastic.”

Poirot was silent for a moment. He chose his words with care.

“It is difficult for me, madame, to know what to do.”

“Look here,” said Mr. Delafontaine. “She didn’t mention Russians, did she?”

“Russians?”

“Yes, you know—Bolshies, Reds, all that sort of thing.”

“Don’t be absurd, Henry,” said his wife.

Mr. Delafontaine collapsed. “Sorry—sorry—I just wondered.”

Mary Delafontaine looked frankly at Poirot. Her eyes were very blue—the colour of forget-me-nots. “If you can tell us anything, M. Poirot, I should be glad if you would do so. I can assure you that I have a—a reason for asking.”

Mr. Delafontaine looked alarmed. “Be careful, old girl—you know there may be nothing in it.”

Again his wife quelled him with a glance. “Well, M. Poirot?”

Slowly, gravely, Hercule Poirot shook his head. He shook it with visible regret, but he shook it. “At present, madame,” he said, “I fear I must say nothing.”

He bowed, picked up his hat and moved to the door. Mary Delafontaine came with him into the hall. On the doorstep he paused and looked at her.

"You are fond of your garden, I think, madame?"

"I? Yes, I spend a lot of time gardening."

"Je vous fais mes compliments."

He bowed once more and strode down to the gate. As he passed out of it and turned to the right he glanced back and registered two impressions—a sallow face watching him from the first floor window, and a man of erect and soldierly carriage pacing up and down on the opposite side of the street.

Hercule Poirot nodded to himself. "Définitivement," he said. "There is a mouse in this hole! What move must the cat make now?"

His decision took him to the nearest post office. Here he put through a couple of telephone calls. The result seemed to be satisfactory. He bent his steps to Charman's Green police station, where he inquired for Inspector Sims.

Inspector Sims was a big, burly man with a hearty manner. "M. Poirot?" he inquired. "I thought so. I've just this minute had a telephone call through from the chief constable about you. He said you'd be dropping in. Come into my office."

The door shut, the inspector waved Poirot to one chair, settled himself in another, and turned a gaze of acute inquiry upon his visitor.

"You're very quick on to the mark, M. Poirot. Come to see us about this Rosebank case almost before we know it is a case. What put you on to it?"

Poirot drew out the letter he had received and handed it to the inspector. The latter read it with some interest.

"Interesting," he said. "The trouble is, it might mean so many things. Pity she couldn't have been a little more explicit. It would have helped us now."

“Or there might have been no need for help.”

“You mean?”

“She might have been alive.”

“You go as far as that, do you? H’m—I’m not sure you’re wrong.”

“I pray of you, Inspector, recount to me the facts. I know nothing at all.”

“That’s easily done. Old lady was taken bad after dinner on Tuesday night. Very alarming. Convulsions—spasms—whatnot. They sent for the doctor. By the time he arrived she was dead. Idea was she’d died of a fit. Well, he didn’t much like the look of things. He hemmed and hawed and put it with a bit of soft sawder, but he made it clear that he couldn’t give a death certificate. And as far as the family go, that’s where the matter stands. They’re awaiting the result of the postmortem. We’ve got a bit further. The doctor gave us the tip right away—he and the police surgeon did the autopsy together—and the result is in no doubt whatever. The old lady died of a large dose of strychnine.”

“Aha!”

“That’s right. Very nasty bit of work. Point is, who gave it to her? It must have been administered very shortly before death. First idea was it was given to her in her food at dinner—but, frankly, that seems to be a washout. They had artichoke soup, served from a tureen, fish pie and apple tart.

“Miss Barrowby, Mr. Delafontaine and Mrs. Delafontaine. Miss Barrowby had a kind of nurse-attendant—a half-Russian girl—but she didn’t eat with the family. She had the remains as they came out from the dining room. There’s a maid, but it was her night out. She left the soup on the stove and the fish pie in the oven, and the apple tart was cold. All three of them ate the same thing—and, apart from that, I don’t think you could get strychnine down anyone’s throat that way. Stuff’s as bitter as gall. The doctor told me you could taste it in a solution of one in a thousand, or something like that.”

“Coffee?”

"Coffee's more like it, but the old lady never took coffee."

"I see your point. Yes, it seems an insuperable difficulty. What did she drink at the meal?"

"Water."

"Worse and worse."

"Bit of a teaser, isn't it?"

"She had money, the old lady?"

"Very well to do, I imagine. Of course, we haven't got exact details yet. The Delafontaines are pretty badly off, from what I can make out. The old lady helped with the upkeep of the house."

Poirot smiled a little. He said, "So you suspect the Delafontaines. Which of them?"

"I don't exactly say I suspect either of them in particular. But there it is; they're her only near relations, and her death brings them a tidy sum of money, I've no doubt. We all know what human nature is!"

"Sometimes inhuman—yes, that is very true. And there was nothing else the old lady ate or drank?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—"

"Ah, voilà! I felt that you had something, as you say, up your sleeve—the soup, the fish pie, the apple tart—a bêtise! Now we come to the hub of the affair."

"I don't know about that. But as a matter of fact, the old girl took a cachet before meals. You know, not a pill or a tablet; one of those rice paper things with a powder inside. Some perfectly harmless thing for the digestion."

"Admirable. Nothing is easier than to fill a cachet with strychnine and substitute it for one of the others. It slips down the throat with a drink of water and is not tasted.”

“That’s all right. The trouble is, the girl gave it to her.”

“The Russian girl?”

“Yes. Katrina Rieger. She was a kind of lady-help, nurse-companion to Miss Barrowby. Fairly ordered about by her, too, I gather. Fetch this, fetch that, fetch the other, rub my back, pour out my medicine, run round to the chemist—all that sort of business. You know how it is with these old women—they mean to be kind, but what they need is a sort of black slave!”

Poirot smiled.

“And there you are, you see,” continued Inspector Sims. “It doesn’t fit in what you might call nicely. Why should the girl poison her? Miss Barrowby dies and now the girl will be out of a job, and jobs aren’t easy to find—she’s not trained or anything.”

“Still,” suggested Poirot, “if the box of cachets was left about, anyone in the house might have the opportunity.”

“Naturally we’re making inquiries—quiet like, if you understand me. When the prescription was last made up, where it was usually kept; patience and a lot of spade work—that’s what will do the trick in the end. And then there’s Miss Barrowby’s solicitor. I’m having an interview with him tomorrow. And the bank manager. There’s a lot to be done still.”

Poirot rose. “A little favour, Inspector Sims; you will send me a little word how the affair marches. I would esteem it a great favour. Here is my telephone number.”

“Why, certainly, M. Poirot. Two heads are better than one; and besides, you ought to be in on this, having had that letter and all.”

“You are too amiable, Inspector.” Politely, Poirot shook hands and took his leave.

III

He was called to the telephone on the following afternoon. “Is that M. Poirot? Inspector Sims here. Things are beginning to sit up and look pretty in the little matter you and I know of.”

“In verity? Tell me, I pray of you.”

“Well, here’s item No. 1—and a pretty big item. Miss B. left a small legacy to her niece and everything else to K. In consideration of her great kindness and attention—that’s the way it was put. That alters the complexion of things.”

A picture rose swiftly in Poirot’s mind. A sullen face and a passionate voice saying, “The money is mine. She wrote it down and so it shall be.” The legacy would not come as a surprise to Katrina—she knew about it beforehand.

“Item No. 2,” continued the voice of Inspector Sims. “Nobody but K. handled that cachet.”

“You can be sure of that?”

“The girl herself doesn’t deny it. What do you think of that?”

“Extremely interesting.”

“We only want one thing more—evidence of how the strychnine came into her possession. That oughtn’t to be difficult.”

“But so far you haven’t been successful?”

“I’ve barely started. The inquest was only this morning.”

“What happened at it?”

“Adjourned for a week.”

“And the young lady—K.?”

"I'm detaining her on suspicion. Don't want to run any risks. She might have some funny friends in the country who'd try to get her out of it."

"No," said Poirot. "I do not think she has any friends."

"Really? What makes you say that, M. Poirot?"

"It is just an idea of mine. There were no other 'items,' as you call them?"

"Nothing that's strictly relevant. Miss B. seems to have been monkeying about a bit with her shares lately—must have dropped quite a tidy sum. It's rather a funny business, one way and another, but I don't see how it affects the main issue—not at present, that is."

"No, perhaps you are right. Well, my best thanks to you. It was most amiable of you to ring me up."

"Not at all. I'm a man of my word. I could see you were interested. Who knows, you may be able to give me a helping hand before the end."

"That would give me great pleasure. It might help you, for instance, if I could lay my hand on a friend of the girl Katrina."

"I thought you said she hadn't got any friends?" said Inspector Sims, surprised.

"I was wrong," said Hercule Poirot. "She has one."

Before the inspector could ask a further question, Poirot had rung off.

With a serious face he wandered into the room where Miss Lemon sat at her typewriter. She raised her hands from the keys at her employer's approach and looked at him inquiringly.

"I want you," said Poirot, "to figure to yourself a little history."

Miss Lemon dropped her hands into her lap in a resigned manner. She enjoyed typing, paying bills, filing papers and entering up engagements. To be asked to imagine herself in hypothetical situations bored her very much, but she accepted it as a disagreeable part of a duty.

“You are a Russian girl,” began Poirot.

“Yes,” said Miss Lemon, looking intensely British.

“You are alone and friendless in this country. You have reasons for not wishing to return to Russia. You are employed as a kind of drudge, nurse-attendant and companion to an old lady. You are meek and uncomplaining.”

“Yes,” said Miss Lemon obediently, but entirely failing to see herself being meek to any old lady under the sun.

“The old lady takes a fancy to you. She decides to leave her money to you. She tells you so.” Poirot paused.

Miss Lemon said “Yes” again.

“And then the old lady finds out something; perhaps it is a matter of money—she may find that you have not been honest with her. Or it might be more grave still—a medicine that tasted different, some food that disagreed. Anyway, she begins to suspect you of something and she writes to a very famous detective—enfin, to the most famous detective—me! I am to call upon her shortly. And then, as you say, the dripping will be in the fire. The great thing is to act quickly. And so—before the great detective arrives—the old lady is dead. And the money comes to you . . . Tell me, does that seem to you reasonable?”

“Quite reasonable,” said Miss Lemon. “Quite reasonable for a Russian, that is. Personally, I should never take a post as a companion. I like my duties clearly defined. And of course I should not dream of murdering anyone.”

Poirot sighed. “How I miss my friend Hastings. He had such imagination. Such a romantic mind! It is true that he always imagined wrong—but that in itself was a guide.”

Miss Lemon was silent. She looked longingly at the typewritten sheet in front of her.

“So it seems to you reasonable,” mused Poirot.

“Doesn’t it to you?”

“I am almost afraid it does,” sighed Poirot.

The telephone rang and Miss Lemon went out of the room to answer it. She came back to say “It’s Inspector Sims again.” Poirot hurried to the instrument. “ ’Allo, ’allo. What is that you say?”

Sims repeated his statement. “We’ve found a packet of strychnine in the girl’s bedroom—tucked underneath the mattress. The sergeant’s just come in with the news. That about clinches it, I think.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I think that clinches it.” His voice had changed. It rang with sudden confidence.

When he had rung off, he sat down at his writing table and arranged the objects on it in a mechanical manner. He murmured to himself, “There was something wrong. I felt it—no, not felt. It must have been something I saw. En avant, the little grey cells. Ponder—reflect. Was everything logical and in order? The girl—her anxiety about the money: Mme. Delafontaine; her husband—his suggestion of Russians—imbecile, but he is an imbecile; the room; the garden—ah! Yes, the garden.”

He sat up very stiff. The green light shone in his eyes. He sprang up and went into the adjoining room.

“Miss Lemon, will you have the kindness to leave what you are doing and make an investigation for me?”

“An investigation, M. Poirot? I’m afraid I’m not very good—”

Poirot interrupted her. “You said one day that you knew all about tradesmen.”

“Certainly I do,” said Miss Lemon with confidence.

“Then the matter is simple. You are to go to Charman’s Green and you are to discover a fishmonger.”

“A fishmonger?” asked Miss Lemon, surprised.

“Precisely. The fishmonger who supplied Rosebank with fish. When you have found him you will ask him a certain question.”

He handed her a slip of paper. Miss Lemon took it, noted its contents without interest, then nodded and slipped the lid on her typewriter.

“We will go to Charman’s Green together,” said Poirot. “You go to the fishmonger and I to the police station. It will take us but half an hour from Baker Street.”

On arrival at his destination, he was greeted by the surprised Inspector Sims. “Well, this is quick work, M. Poirot. I was talking to you on the phone only an hour ago.”

“I have a request to make to you; that you allow me to see this girl Katrina—what is her name?”

“Katrina Rieger. Well, I don’t suppose there’s any objection to that.”

The girl Katrina looked even more sallow and sullen than ever.

Poirot spoke to her very gently. “Mademoiselle, I want you to believe that I am not your enemy. I want you to tell me the truth.”

Her eyes snapped defiantly. “I have told the truth. To everyone I have told the truth! If the old lady was poisoned, it was not I who poisoned her. It is all a mistake. You wish to prevent me having the money.” Her voice was rasping. She looked, he thought, like a miserable little cornered rat.

“Did no one handle it but you?”

“I have said so, have I not? They were made up at the chemist’s that afternoon. I brought them back with me in my bag—that was just before supper. I opened the box and gave Miss Barrowby one with a glass of water.”

“No one touched them but you?”

“No.” A cornered rat—with courage!

“And Miss Barrowby had for supper only what we have been told. The soup, the fish pie, the tart?”

“Yes.” A hopeless “yes”—dark, smouldering eyes that saw no light anywhere.

Poirot patted her shoulder. “Be of good courage, mademoiselle. There may yet be freedom—yes, and money—a life of ease.”

She looked at him suspiciously.

As she went out Sims said to him, “I didn’t quite get what you said through the telephone—something about the girl having a friend.”

“She has one. Me!” said Hercule Poirot, and had left the police station before the inspector could pull his wits together.

IV

At the Green Cat tearooms, Miss Lemon did not keep her employer waiting. She went straight to the point.

“The man’s name is Rudge, in the High Street, and you were quite right. A dozen and a half exactly. I’ve made a note of what he said.” She handed it to him.

“Arrr.” It was a deep, rich sound like a purr of a cat.

V

Hercule Poirot betook himself to Rosebank. As he stood in the front garden, the sun setting behind him, Mary Delafontaine came out to him.

“M. Poirot?” Her voice sounded surprised. “You have come back?”

“Yes, I have come back.” He paused and then said, “When I first came here, madame, the children’s nursery rhyme came into my head:

“Mistress Mary, quite contrary,

How does your garden grow?

With cockle-shells, and silver bells,

And pretty maids all in a row.

“Only they are not cockle shells, are they, madame? They are oyster shells.” His hand pointed.

He heard her catch her breath and then stay very still. Her eyes asked a question.

He nodded. “Mais, oui,” I know! The maid left the dinner ready—she will swear and Katrina will swear that that is all you had. Only you and your husband know that you brought back a dozen and a half oysters—a little treat pour la bonne tante. So easy to put the strychnine in an oyster. It is swallowed—comme ça! But there remain the shells—they must not go in the bucket. The maid would see them. And so you thought of making an edging of them to a bed. But there were not enough—the edging is not complete. The effect is bad—it spoils the symmetry of the otherwise charming garden. Those few oyster shells struck an alien note—they displeased my eye on my first visit.”

Mary Delafontaine said, “I suppose you guessed from the letter. I knew she had written—but I didn’t know how much she’d said.”

Poirot answered evasively, “I knew at least that it was a family matter. If it had been a question of Katrina there would have been no point in hushing things up. I understand that you or your husband handled Miss Barrowby's securities to your own profit, and that she found out—"

Mary Delafontaine nodded. "We've done it for years—a little here and there. I never realized she was sharp enough to find out. And then I learned she had sent for a detective; and I found out, too, that she was leaving her money to Katrina—that miserable little creature!"

"And so the strychnine was put in Katrina's bedroom? I comprehend. You save yourself and your husband from what I may discover, and you saddle an innocent child with murder. Had you no pity, madame?"

Mary Delafontaine shrugged her shoulders—her blue forget-me-not eyes looked into Poirot's. He remembered the perfection of her acting the first day he had come and the bungling attempts of her husband. A woman above the average—but inhuman.

She said, "Pity? For that miserable intriguing little rat?" Her contempt rang out.

Hercule Poirot said slowly, "I think, madame, that you have cared in your life for two things only. One is your husband."

He saw her lips tremble.

"And the other—is your garden."

He looked round him. His glance seemed to apologize to the flowers for that which he had done and was about to do.

Four

PROBLEM AT POLLENSA BAY

“Problem at Pollensa Bay” was first published in Strand Magazine, November 1935, and then in the USA as “Siren Business” in Liberty, 5 September 1936.

The steamer from Barcelona to Majorca landed Mr. Parker Pyne at Palma in the early hours of the morning—and straightaway he met with disillusionment. The hotels were full! The best that could be done for him was an airless cupboard overlooking an inner court in a hotel in the centre of the town—and with that Mr. Parker Pyne was not prepared to put up. The proprietor of the hotel was indifferent to his disappointment.

“What will you?” he observed with a shrug.

Palma was popular now! The exchange was favourable! Everyone—the English, the Americans—they all came to Majorca in the winter. The whole place was crowded. It was doubtful if the English gentleman would be able to get in anywhere—except perhaps at Formentor where the prices were so ruinous that even foreigners blenched at them.

Mr. Parker Pyne partook of some coffee and a roll and went out to view the cathedral, but found himself in no mood for appreciating the beauties of architecture.

He next had a conference with a friendly taxi driver in inadequate French interlarded with native Spanish, and they discussed the merits and possibilities of Soller, Alcudia, Pollensa and Formentor—where there were fine hotels but very expensive.

Mr. Parker Pyne was goaded to inquire how expensive.

They asked, said the taxi driver, an amount that it would be absurd and ridiculous to pay—was it not well known that the English came here because prices were cheap and reasonable?

Mr. Parker Pyne said that that was quite so, but all the same what sums did they charge at Formentor?

A price incredible!

Perfectly—but WHAT PRICE EXACTLY?

The driver consented at last to reply in terms of figures.

Fresh from the exactions of hotels in Jerusalem and Egypt, the figure did not stagger Mr. Parker Pyne unduly.

A bargain was struck, Mr. Parker Pyne's suitcases were loaded on the taxi in a somewhat haphazard manner, and they started off to drive round the island, trying cheaper hostelries en route but with the final objective of Formentor.

But they never reached that final abode of plutocracy, for after they had passed through the narrow streets of Pollensa and were following the curved line of the seashore, they came to the Hotel Pino d'Oro—a small hotel standing on the edge of the sea looking out over a view that in the misty haze of a fine morning had the exquisite vagueness of a Japanese print. At once Mr. Parker Pyne knew that this, and this only, was what he was looking for. He stopped the taxi, passed through the painted gate with the hope that he would find a resting place.

The elderly couple to whom the hotel belonged knew no English or French. Nevertheless the matter was concluded satisfactorily. Mr. Parker Pyne was allotted a room overlooking the sea, the suitcases were unloaded, the driver congratulated his passenger upon avoiding the monstrous exigencies of "these new hotels," received his fare and departed with a cheerful Spanish salutation.

Mr. Parker Pyne glanced at his watch and perceiving that it was, even now, but a quarter to ten, he went out onto the small terrace now bathed in a dazzling morning light and ordered, for the second time that morning, coffee and rolls.

There were four tables there, his own, one from which breakfast was being cleared away and two occupied ones. At the one nearest him sat a family of father and mother and two elderly daughters—Germans. Beyond them, at the corner of the terrace, sat what were clearly an English mother and son.

The woman was about fifty-five. She had grey hair of a pretty tone—was sensibly but not fashionably dressed in a tweed coat and skirt—and had that comfortable self-possession which marks an Englishwoman used to much travelling abroad.

The young man who sat opposite her might have been twenty-five and he too was typical of his class and age. He was neither good-looking nor plain, tall nor short. He was clearly on the best of terms with his mother—they made little jokes together—and he was assiduous in passing her things.

As they talked, her eye met that of Mr. Parker Pyne. It passed over him with well-bred nonchalance, but he knew that he had been assimilated and labelled.

He had been recognized as English and doubtless, in due course, some pleasant noncommittal remark would be addressed to him.

Mr. Parker Pyne had no particular objection. His own countrymen and women abroad were inclined to bore him slightly, but he was quite willing to pass the time of day in an amiable manner. In a small hotel it caused constraint if one did not do so. This particular woman, he felt sure, had excellent “hotel manners,” as he put it.

The English boy rose from his seat, made some laughing remark and passed into the hotel. The woman took her letters and bag and settled herself in a chair facing the sea. She unfolded a copy of the Continental Daily Mail. Her back was to Mr. Parker Pyne.

As he drank the last drop of his coffee, Mr. Parker Pyne glanced in her direction, and instantly he stiffened. He was alarmed—alarmed for the peaceful continuance of his holiday! That back was horribly expressive. In his time he had classified many such backs. Its rigidity—the tenseness of its poise—without seeing her face he knew well enough that the eyes were bright with unshed tears—that the woman was keeping herself in hand by a rigid effort.

Moving warily, like a much-hunted animal, Mr. Parker Pyne retreated into the hotel. Not half an hour before he had been invited to sign his name in the book lying on the desk. There it was—a neat signature—C. Parker Pyne, London.

A few lines above Mr. Parker Pyne noticed the entries: Mrs. R. Chester, Mr. Basil Chester—Holm Park, Devon.

Seizing a pen, Mr. Parker Pyne wrote rapidly over his signature. It now read (with difficulty) Christopher Pyne.

If Mrs. R. Chester was unhappy in Pollensa Bay, it was not going to be made easy for her to consult Mr. Parker Pyne.

Already it had been a source of abiding wonder to that gentleman that so many people he had come across abroad should know his name and have noted his advertisements. In England many thousands of people read the Times every day and could have answered quite truthfully that they had never heard such a name in their lives. Abroad, he reflected, they read their newspapers more thoroughly. No item, not even the advertisement columns, escaped them.

Already his holidays had been interrupted on several occasions. He had dealt with a whole series of problems from murder to attempted blackmail. He was determined in Majorca to have peace. He felt instinctively that a distressed mother might trouble that peace considerably.

Mr. Parker Pyne settled down at the Pino d’Oro very happily. There was a larger hotel not far off, the Mariposa, where a good many English people stayed. There was also quite an artist colony living all around. You could walk along by the sea to the fishing village where there was a cocktail bar where people met—there were a few shops. It was all very peaceful and pleasant. Girls strolled about in trousers with brightly coloured handkerchiefs tied round the upper halves of their bodies. Young men in berets with rather long hair held forth in “Mac’s Bar” on such subjects as plastic values and abstraction in art.

On the day after Mr. Parker Pyne’s arrival, Mrs. Chester made a few conventional remarks to him on the subject of the view and the likelihood of the weather keeping fine. She then chatted a little with the German lady about knitting, and had a few pleasant words about the sadness of the political situation with two Danish gentlemen who spent their time rising at dawn and walking for eleven hours.

Mr. Parker Pyne found Basil Chester a most likeable young man. He called Mr. Parker Pyne “sir” and listened most politely to anything the older man said. Sometimes the three English people had coffee together after dinner in the evening. After the third day, Basil left the party after ten minutes or so and Mr. Parker Pyne was left tete-a-tete with Mrs. Chester.

They talked about flowers and the growing of them, of the lamentable state of the English pound and of how expensive France had become, and of the difficulty of getting good afternoon tea.

Every evening when her son departed, Mr. Parker Pyne saw the quickly concealed tremor of her lips, but immediately she recovered and discoursed pleasantly on the above-mentioned subjects.

Little by little she began to talk of Basil—of how well he had done at school—“he was in the First XI, you know”—of how everyone liked him, of how proud his father would have been of the boy had he lived, of how thankful she had been that Basil had never been “wild.” “Of course I always urge him to be with young people, but he really seems to prefer being with me.”

She said it with a kind of nice modest pleasure in the fact.

But for once Mr. Parker Pyne did not make the usual tactful response he could usually achieve so easily. He said instead:

“Oh! well, there seem to be plenty of young people here—not in the hotel, but round about.”

At that, he noticed, Mrs. Chester stiffened. She said: Of course there were a lot of artists. Perhaps she was very old-fashioned—real art, of course, was different, but a lot of young people just made that sort of thing an excuse for lounging about and doing nothing—and the girls drank a lot too much.

On the following day Basil said to Mr. Parker Pyne:

“I’m awfully glad you turned up here, sir—especially for my mother’s sake. She likes having you to talk to in the evenings.”

“What did you do when you were first here?”

“As a matter of fact we used to play piquet.”

“I see.”

“Of course one gets rather tired of piquet. As a matter of fact I’ve got some friends here—frightfully cheery crowd. I don’t really think my mother approves of them—” He laughed as though he felt this ought to be amusing. “The mater’s very old-fashioned . . . Even girls in trousers shock her!”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

“What I tell her is—one’s got to move with the times . . . The girls at home round us are frightfully dull. . . .”

“I see,” said Mr. Parker Pyne.

All this interested him well enough. He was a spectator of a miniature drama, but he was not called upon to take part in it.

And then the worst—from Mr. Parker Pyne’s point of view—happened. A gushing lady of his acquaintance came to stay at the Mariposa. They met in the tea shop in the presence of Mrs. Chester.

The newcomer screamed:

“Why—if it isn’t Mr. Parker Pyne—the one and only Mr. Parker Pyne! And Adela Chester! Do you know each other? Oh, you do? You’re staying at the same hotel? He’s the one and only original wizard, Adela—the marvel of the century—all your troubles smoothed out while you wait! Didn’t you know? You must have heard about him? Haven’t you read his advertisements? ‘Are you in trouble? Consult Mr. Parker Pyne.’ There’s just nothing he can’t do. Husbands and wives flying at each other’s throats and he brings ’em together—if you’ve lost interest in life he gives you the most thrilling adventures. As I say the man’s just a wizard!”

It went on a good deal longer—Mr. Parker Pyne at intervals making modest disclaimers. He disliked the look that Mrs. Chester turned upon him. He disliked even more seeing her return along the beach in close confabulation with the garrulous singer of his praises.

The climax came quicker than he expected. That evening, after coffee, Mrs. Chester said abruptly,

“Will you come into the little salon, Mr. Pyne? There is something I want to say to you.”

He could but bow and submit.

Mrs. Chester’s self-control had been wearing thin—as the door of the little salon closed behind them, it snapped. She sat down and burst into tears.

“My boy, Mr. Parker Pyne. You must save him. We must save him. It’s breaking my heart!”

“My dear lady, as a mere outsider—”

“Nina Wycherley says you can do anything. She said I was to have the utmost confidence in you. She advised me to tell you everything—and that you’d put the whole thing right.”

Inwardly Mr. Parker Pyne cursed the obtrusive Mrs. Wycherley.

Resigning himself he said:

“Well, let us thrash the matter out. A girl, I suppose?”

“Did he tell you about her?”

“Only indirectly.”

Words poured in a vehement stream from Mrs. Chester. “The girl was dreadful. She drank, she swore—she wore no clothes to speak of. Her sister lived out here—was married to an artist—a Dutchman. The whole set was most undesirable. Half of them were living together without being married. Basil was completely changed. He had always been so quiet, so interested in serious subjects. He had thought at one time of taking up archaeology—”

“Well, well,” said Mr. Parker Pyne. “Nature will have her revenge.”

“What do you mean?”

“It isn’t healthy for a young man to be interested in serious subjects. He ought to be making an idiot of himself over one girl after another.”

“Please be serious, Mr. Pyne.”

“I’m perfectly serious. Is the young lady, by any chance, the one who had tea with you yesterday?”

He had noticed her—her grey flannel trousers—the scarlet handkerchief tied loosely around her breast—the vermilion mouth and the fact that she had chosen a cocktail in preference to tea.

“You saw her? Terrible! Not the kind of girl Basil has ever admired.”

“You haven’t given him much chance to admire a girl, have you?”

“I?”

“He’s been too fond of your company! Bad! However, I daresay he’ll get over this—if you don’t precipitate matters.”

“You don’t understand. He wants to marry this girl—Betty Gregg—they’re engaged.”

“It’s gone as far as that?”

“Yes. Mr. Parker Pyne, you must do something. You must get my boy out of this disastrous marriage! His whole life will be ruined.”

“Nobody’s life can be ruined except by themselves.”

“Basil’s will be,” said Mrs. Chester positively.

“I’m not worrying about Basil.”

“You’re not worrying about the girl?”

“No, I’m worrying about you. You’ve been squandering your birthright.”

Mrs. Chester looked at him, slightly taken aback.

“What are the years from twenty to forty? Fettered and bound by personal and emotional relationships. That’s bound to be. That’s living. But later there’s a new stage. You can think, observe life, discover something about other people and the truth about yourself. Life becomes real—significant. You see it as a whole. Not just one scene—the scene you, as an actor, are playing. No man or woman is actually himself (or herself) till after forty-five. That’s when individuality has a chance.”

Mrs. Chester said:

“I’ve been wrapped up in Basil. He’s been everything to me.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have been. That’s what you’re paying for now. Love him as much as you like—but you’re Adela Chester, remember, a person—not just Basil’s mother.”

"It will break my heart if Basil's life is ruined," said Basil's mother.

He looked at the delicate lines of her face, the wistful droop of her mouth. She was, somehow, a lovable woman. He did not want her to be hurt. He said:

"I'll see what I can do."

He found Basil Chester only too ready to talk, eager to urge his point of view.

"This business is being just hellish. Mother's hopeless—prejudiced, narrow-minded. If only she'd let herself, she'd see how fine Betty is."

"And Betty?"

He sighed.

"Betty's being damned difficult! If she'd just conform a bit—I mean leave off the lipstick for a day—it might make all the difference. She seems to go out of her way to be—well—modern—when Mother's about."

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled.

"Betty and Mother are two of the dearest people in the world, I should have thought they would have taken to each other like hot cakes."

"You have a lot to learn, young man," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"I wish you'd come along and see Betty and have a good talk about it all."

Mr. Parker Pyne accepted the invitation readily.

Betty and her sister and her husband lived in a small dilapidated villa a little way back from the sea. Their life was of a refreshing simplicity. Their furniture comprised three chairs, a table and beds. There was a cupboard in the wall that held the bare requirements of cups and plates. Hans was an excitable young man with wild blond hair that stood up all over his head. He spoke very odd English with incredible rapidity, walking up and down as he did so. Stella, his wife, was small and fair. Betty Gregg had red hair and freckles and a mischievous eye. She was, he noticed, not nearly so made-up as she had been the previous day at the Pino d'Oro.

She gave him a cocktail and said with a twinkle:

"You're in on the big bust-up?"

Mr. Parker Pyne nodded.

"And whose side are you on, big boy? The young lovers—or the disapproving dame?"

"May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Have you been very tactful over all this?"

"Not at all," said Miss Gregg frankly. "But the old cat put my back up." (She glanced round to make sure that Basil was out of carshot.) "That woman just makes me feel mad. She's kept Basil tied to her apron strings all these years—that sort of things makes a man look a fool. Basil isn't a fool really. Then she's so terribly pukka sahib."

"That's not really such a bad thing. It's merely 'unfashionable' just at present."

Betty Gregg gave a sudden twinkle.

"You mean it's like putting Chippendale chairs in the attic in Victorian days? Later you get them down again and say, 'Aren't they marvellous?' "

"Something of the kind."

Betty Gregg considered.

"Perhaps you're right. I'll be honest. It was Basil who put my back up—being so anxious about what impression I'd make on his mother. It drove me to extremes. Even now I believe he might give me up—if his mother worked on him good and hard."

"He might," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "If she went about it the right way."

"Are you going to tell her the right way? She won't think of it herself, you know. She'll just go on disapproving and that won't do the trick. But if you prompted her—"

She bit her lip—raised frank blue eyes to his.

"I've heard about you, Mr. Parker Pyne. You're supposed to know something about human nature.

Do you think Basil and I could make a go of it—or not?"

"I should like an answer to three questions."

"Suitability test? All right, go ahead."

"Do you sleep with your window open or shut?"

"Open. I like lots of air."

"Do you and Basil enjoy the same kind of food?"

"Yes."

"Do you like going to bed early or late?"

"Really, under the rose, early. At half past ten I yawn—and I secretly feel rather hearty in the mornings—but of course I daren't admit it."

"You ought to suit each other very well," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"Rather a superficial test."

"Not at all. I have known seven marriages at least, entirely wrecked, because the husband liked sitting up till midnight and the wife fell asleep at half past nine and vice versa.”

“It’s a pity,” said Betty, “that everybody can’t be happy. Basil and I, and his mother giving us her blessing.”

Mr. Parker Pyne coughed.

“I think,” he said, “that that could possibly be managed.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

“Now I wonder,” she said, “if you’re double-crossing me?”

Mr. Parker Pyne’s face told nothing.

To Mrs. Chester he was soothing, but vague. An engagement was not marriage. He himself was going to Soller for a week. He suggested that her line of action should be noncommittal. Let her appear to acquiesce.

He spent a very enjoyable week at Soller.

On his return he found that a totally unexpected development had arisen.

As he entered the Pino d’Oro the first thing he saw was Mrs. Chester and Betty Gregg having tea together. Basil was not there. Mrs. Chester looked haggard. Betty, too, was looking off colour. She was hardly made-up at all, and her eyelids looked as though she had been crying.

They greeted him in a friendly fashion, but neither of them mentioned Basil.

Suddenly he heard the girl beside him draw in her breath sharply as though something had hurt her. Mr. Parker Pyne turned his head.

Basil Chester was coming up the steps from the sea front. With him was a girl so exotically beautiful that it quite took your breath away. She was dark and her figure was marvellous. No one could fail to notice the fact since she wore nothing but a single garment of pale blue crêpe. She was heavily made-up with ochre powder and an orange scarlet mouth—but the unguents only displayed her remarkable beauty in a more pronounced fashion. As for young Basil, he seemed unable to take his eyes from her face.

“You’re very late, Basil,” said his mother. “You were to have taken Betty to Mac’s.”

“My fault,” drawled the beautiful unknown. “We just drifted.” She turned to Basil. “Angel—get me something with a kick in it!”

She tossed off her shoe and stretched out her manicured toenails which were done emerald green to match her fingernails.

She paid no attention to the two women, but she leaned a little towards Mr. Parker Pyne.

“Terrible island this,” she said. “I was just dying with boredom before I met Basil. He is rather a pet!”

“Mr. Parker Pyne—Miss Ramona,” said Mrs. Chester.

The girl acknowledged the introduction with a lazy smile.

“I guess I’ll call you Parker almost at once,” she murmured. “My name’s Dolores.”

Basil returned with the drinks. Miss Ramona divided her conversation (what there was of it—it was mostly glances) between Basil and Mr. Parker Pyne. Of the two women she took no notice whatever. Betty attempted once or twice to join in the conversation but the other girl merely stared at her and yawned.

Suddenly Dolores rose.

“Guess I’ll be going along now. I’m at the other hotel. Anyone coming to see me home?”

Basil sprang up.

“I’ll come with you.”

Mrs. Chester said: “Basil, my dear—”

“I’ll be back presently, Mother.”

“Isn’t he the mother’s boy?” Miss Ramona asked of the world at large. “Just toots round after her, don’t you?”

Basil flushed and looked awkward. Miss Ramona gave a nod in Mrs. Chester’s direction, a dazzling smile to Mr. Parker Pyne and she and Basil moved off together.

After they had gone there was rather an awkward silence. Mr. Parker Pyne did not like to speak first. Betty Gregg was twisting her fingers and looking out to sea. Mrs. Chester looked flushed and angry.

Betty said: “Well, what do you think of our new acquisition in Pollensa Bay?” Her voice was not quite steady.

Mr. Parker Pyne said cautiously:

“A little—er—exotic.”

“Exotic?” Betty gave a short bitter laugh.

Mrs. Chester said: “She’s terrible—terrible. Basil must be quite mad.”

Betty said sharply: “Basil’s all right.”

“Her toenails,” said Mrs. Chester with a shiver of nausea.

Betty rose suddenly.

“I think, Mrs. Chester, I’ll go home and not stay to dinner after all.”

“Oh, my dear—Basil will be so disappointed.”

“Will he?” asked Betty with a short laugh. “Anyway, I think I will. I’ve got rather a headache.”

She smiled at them both and went off. Mrs. Chester turned to Mr. Parker Pyne.

“I wish we had never come to this place—never!”

Mr. Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

“You shouldn’t have gone away,” said Mrs. Chester. “If you’d been here this wouldn’t have happened.”

Mr. Parker Pyne was stung to respond.

“My dear lady, I can assure you that when it comes to a question of a beautiful young woman, I should have no influence over your son whatever. He—er—seems to be of a very susceptible nature.”

“He never used to be,” said Mrs. Chester tearfully.

“Well,” said Mr. Parker Pyne with an attempt at cheerfulness, “this new attraction seems to have broken the back of his infatuation for Miss Gregg. That must be some satisfaction to you.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Mrs. Chester. “Betty is a dear child and devoted to Basil. She is behaving extremely well over this. I think my boy must be mad.”

Mr. Parker Pyne received this startling change of face without wincing. He had met inconsistency in women before. He said mildly:

“Not exactly mad—just bewitched.”

“The creature’s a Dago. She’s impossible.”

“But extremely good-looking.”

Mrs. Chester snorted.

Basil ran up the steps from the sea front.

“Hullo, Mater, here I am. Where’s Betty?”

“Betty’s gone home with a headache. I don’t wonder.”

“Sulking, you mean.”

“I consider, Basil, that you are being extremely unkind to Betty.”

“For God’s sake, Mother, don’t jaw. If Betty is going to make this fuss every time I speak to another girl a nice sort of life we’ll lead together.”

“You are engaged.”

“Oh, we’re engaged all right. That doesn’t mean that we’re not going to have any friends of our own. Nowadays people have to lead their own lives and try to cut out jealousy.”

He paused.

“Look here, if Betty isn’t going to dine with us—I think I’ll go back to the Mariposa. They did ask me to dine. . . .”

“Oh, Basil—”

The boy gave her an exasperated look, then ran off down the steps.

Mrs. Chester looked eloquently at Mr. Parker Pyne.

“You see,” she said.

He saw.

Matters came to a head a couple of days later. Betty and Basil were to have gone for a long walk, taking a picnic lunch with them. Betty arrived at the Pino d’Oro to find that Basil had forgotten the plan and gone over to Formentor for the day with Dolores Ramona’s party.

Beyond a tightening of the lips the girl made no sign. Presently, however, she got up and stood in front of Mrs. Chester (the two women were alone on the terrace).

“It’s quite all right,” she said. “It doesn’t matter. But I think—all the same—that we’d better call the whole thing off.”

She slipped from her finger the signet ring that Basil had given her—he would buy the real engagement ring later.

“Will you give him back this Mrs. Chester? And tell him it’s all right—not to worry. . . .”

“Betty dear, don’t! He does love you—really.”

“It looks like it, doesn’t it?” said the girl with a short laugh. “No—I’ve got some pride. Tell him everything’s all right and that I—I wish him luck.”

When Basil returned at sunset he was greeted by a storm.

He flushed a little at the sight of his ring.

“So that’s how she feels, is it? Well, I daresay it’s the best thing.”

“Basil!”

“Well, frankly, Mother, we don’t seem to have been hitting it off lately.”

“Whose fault was that?”

“I don’t see that it was mine particularly. Jealousy’s beastly and I really don’t see why you should get all worked up about it. You begged me yourself not to marry Betty.”

“That was before I knew her. Basil—my dear—you’re not thinking of marrying this other creature.”

Basil Chester said soberly:

“I’d marry her like a shot if she’d have me—but I’m afraid she won’t.”

Cold chills went down Mrs. Chester's spine. She sought and found Mr. Parker Pyne, placidly reading a book in a sheltered corner.

"You must do something! You must do something! My boy's life will be ruined."

Mr. Parker Pyne was getting a little tired of Basil Chester's life being ruined.

"What can I do?"

"Go and see this terrible creature. If necessary buy her off."

"That may come very expensive."

"I don't care."

"It seems a pity. Still there are, possibly, other ways."

She looked a question. He shook his head.

"I'll make no promises—but I'll see what I can do. I have handled that kind before. By the way, not a word to Basil—that would be fatal."

"Of course not."

Mr. Parker Pyne returned from the Mariposa at midnight. Mrs. Chester was sitting up for him.

"Well?" she demanded breathlessly.

His eyes twinkled.

"The Señorita Dolores Ramona will leave Pollensa tomorrow morning and the island tomorrow night."

"Oh, Mr. Parker Pyne! How did you manage it?"

"It won't cost a cent," said Mr. Parker Pyne. Again his eyes twinkled. "I rather fancied I might have a hold over her—and I was right."

"You are wonderful. Nina Wycherley was quite right. You must let me know—er—your fees—"

Mr. Parker Pyne held up a well-manicured hand.

"Not a penny. It has been a pleasure. I hope all will go well. Of course the boy will be very upset at first when he finds she's disappeared and left no address. Just go easy with him for a week or two."

"If only Betty will forgive him—"

"She'll forgive him all right. They're a nice couple. By the way, I'm leaving tomorrow, too."

"Oh, Mr. Parker Pyne, we shall miss you."

"Perhaps it's just as well I should go before that boy of yours gets infatuated with yet a third girl."

Mr. Parker Pyne leaned over the rail of the steamer and looked at the lights of Palma. Beside him stood Dolores Ramona. He was saying appreciatively:

"A very nice piece of work, Madeleine. I'm glad I wired you to come out. It's odd when you're such a quiet, stay-at-home girl really."

Madeleine de Sara, alias Dolores Ramona, alias Maggie Sayers, said primly: "I'm glad you're pleased, Mr. Parker Pyne. It's been a nice little change. I think I'll go below now and get to bed before the boat starts. I'm such a bad sailor."

A few minutes later a hand fell on Mr. Parker Pyne's shoulder. He turned to see Basil Chester.

"Had to come and see you off, Mr. Parker Pyne, and give you Betty's love and her and my best thanks. It was a grand stunt of yours. Betty and Mother are as thick as thieves. Seemed a shame to deceive the old darling—but she was being difficult. Anyway it's all right now. I must just be careful to keep up the annoyance stuff a couple of days longer. We're no end grateful to you, Betty and I."

"I wish you every happiness," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

"Thanks."

There was a pause, then Basil said with somewhat overdone carelessness:

"Is Miss—Miss de Sara—anywhere about? I'd like to thank her, too."

Mr. Parker Pyne shot a keen glance at him.

He said:

"I'm afraid Miss de Sara's gone to bed."

"Oh, too bad—well, perhaps I'll see her in London sometime."

"As a matter of fact she is going to America on business for me almost at once."

"Oh!" Basil's tone was blank. "Well," he said. "I'll be getting along. . . ."

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled. On his way to his cabin he tapped on the door of Madeleine's.

"How are you, my dear? All right? Our young friend has been along. The usual slight attack of Madeleinitis. He'll get over it in a day or two, but you are rather distracting."

Five

YELLOW IRIS

"Yellow Iris" was first published in The Strand, July 1937.

Hercule Poirot stretched out his feet towards the electric radiator set in the wall. Its neat arrangement of red hot bars pleased his orderly mind.

"A coal fire," he mused to himself, "was always shapeless and haphazard! Never did it achieve the symmetry."

The telephone bell rang. Poirot rose, glancing at his watch as he did so. The time was close on half past eleven. He wondered who was ringing him up at this hour. It might, of course, be a wrong number.

"And it might," he murmured to himself with a whimsical smile, "be a millionaire newspaper proprietor, found dead in the library of his country house, with a spotted orchid clasped in his left hand and a page torn from a cookbook pinned to his breast."

Smiling at the pleasing conceit, he lifted the receiver.

Immediately a voice spoke—a soft husky woman's voice with a kind of desperate urgency about it.

"Is that M. Hercule Poirot? Is that M. Hercule Poirot?"

"Hercule Poirot speaks."

"M. Poirot—can you come at once—at once—I'm in danger—in great danger—I know it . . ."

Poirot said sharply:

"Who are you? Where are you speaking from?"

The voice came more faintly but with an even greater urgency.

“At once . . . it’s life or death . . . the Jardin des Cygnes . . . at once . . . table with yellow irises . . .”

There was a pause—a queer kind of gasp—the line went dead.

Hercule Poirot hung up. His face was puzzled. He murmured between his teeth:

“There is something here very curious.”

In the doorway of the Jardin des Cygnes, fat Luigi hurried forward.

“Buona sera, M. Poirot. You desire a table—yes?”

“No, no, my good Luigi. I seek here for some friends. I will look round—perhaps they are not here yet. Ah, let me see, that table there in the corner with the yellow irises—a little question by the way, if it is not indiscreet. On all the other tables there are tulips—pink tulips—why on that one table do you have yellow irises?”

Luigi shrugged his expressive shoulders.

“A command, Monsieur! A special order! Without doubt, the favourite flowers of one of the ladies. That table it is the table of Mr. Barton Russell—an American—immensely rich.”

“Aha, one must study the whims of the ladies, must one not, Luigi?”

“Monsieur has said it,” said Luigi.

“I see at that table an acquaintance of mine. I must go and speak to him.”

Poirot skirted his way delicately round the dancing floor on which couples were revolving. The table in question was set for six, but it had at the moment only one occupant, a young man who was thoughtfully, and it seemed pessimistically, drinking champagne.

He was not at all the person that Poirot had expected to see. It seemed impossible to associate the idea of danger or melodrama with any party of which Tony Chapell was a member.

Poirot paused delicately by the table.

“Ah, it is, is it not, my friend Anthony Chapell?”

“By all that’s wonderful—Poirot, the police hound!” cried the young man. “Not Anthony, my dear fellow—Tony to friends!”

He drew out a chair.

“Come, sit with me. Let us discourse of crime! Let us go further and drink to crime.” He poured champagne into an empty glass. “But what are you doing in this haunt of song and dance and merriment, my dear Poirot? We have no bodies here, positively not a single body to offer you.”

Poirot sipped the champagne.

“You seem very gay, mon cher?”

“Gay? I am steeped in misery—wallowing in gloom. Tell me, you hear this tune they are playing. You recognize it?”

Poirot hazarded cautiously:

“Something perhaps to do with your baby having left you?”

“Not a bad guess,” said the young man. “But wrong for once. ‘There’s nothing like love for making you miserable!’ That’s what it’s called.”

“Aha?”

“My favourite tune,” said Tony Chapell mournfully. “And my favourite restaurant and my favourite band—and my favourite girl’s here and she’s dancing it with somebody else.”

“Hence the melancholy?” said Poirot.

“Exactly. Pauline and I, you see, have had what the vulgar call words. That is to say, she’s had ninety-five words to five of mine out of every hundred. My five are: ‘But, darling—I can explain.’—Then she starts in on her ninety-five again and we get no further. I think,” added Tony sadly, “that I shall poison myself.”

“Pauline?” murmured Poirot.

“Pauline Weatherby. Barton Russell’s young sister-in-law. Young, lovely, disgustingly rich. Tonight Barton Russell gives a party. You know him? Big Business, clean-shaven American—full of pep and personality. His wife was Pauline’s sister.”

“And who else is there at this party?”

“You’ll meet ’em in a minute when the music stops. There’s Lola Valdez—you know, the South American dancer in the new show at the Metropole, and there’s Stephen Carter. D’you know Carter—he’s in the diplomatic service. Very hush-hush. Known as silent Stephen. Sort of man who says, ‘I am not a liberty to state, etc, etc.’ Hullo, here they come.”

Poirot rose. He was introduced to Barton Russell, to Stephen Carter, to Señora Lola Valdez, a dark and luscious creature, and to Pauline Weatherby, very young, very fair, with eyes like cornflowers.

Barton Russell said:

“What, is this the great M. Hercule Poirot? I am indeed pleased to meet you, sir. Won’t you sit down and join us? That is, unless—”

Tony Chapell broke in.

“He’s got an appointment with a body, I believe, or is it an absconding financier, or the Rajah of Borrioboolagah’s great ruby?”

“Ah, my friend, do you think I am never off duty? Can I not, for once, seek only to amuse myself?”

“Perhaps you’ve got an appointment with Carter here. The latest from the UN International situation now acute. The stolen plans must be found or war will be declared tomorrow!”

Pauline Weatherby said cuttingly:

“Must you be so completely idiotic, Tony?”

“Sorry, Pauline.”

Tony Chapell relapsed into crestfallen silence.

“How severe you are, Mademoiselle.”

“I hate people who play the fool all the time!”

“I must be careful, I see. I must converse only of serious matters.”

“Oh, no, M. Poirot. I didn’t mean you.”

She turned a smiling face to him and asked:

“Are you really a kind of Sherlock Holmes and do wonderful deductions?”

“Ah, the deductions—they are not so easy in real life. But shall I try? Now then, I deduce—that yellow irises are your favourite flowers?”

“Quite wrong, M. Poirot. Lilies of the valley or roses.”

Poirot sighed.

“A failure. I will try once more. This evening, not very long ago, you telephoned to someone.”

Pauline laughed and clapped her hands.

“Quite right.”

“It was not long after you arrived here?”

“Right again. I telephoned the minute I got inside the doors.”

“Ah—that is not so good. You telephoned before you came to this table?”

“Yes.”

“Decidedly very bad.”

“Oh, no, I think it was very clever of you. How did you know I had telephoned?”

“That, Mademoiselle, is the great detective’s secret. And the person to whom you telephoned—does the name begin with a P—or perhaps with an H?”

Pauline laughed.

“Quite wrong. I telephoned to my maid to post some frightfully important letters that I’d never sent off. Her name’s Louise.”

“I am confused—quite confused.”

The music began again.

“What about it, Pauline?” asked Tony.

“I don’t think I want to dance again so soon, Tony.”

“Isn’t that too bad?” said Tony bitterly to the world at large.

Poirot murmured to the South American girl on his other side:

“Señora, I would not dare to ask you to dance with me. I am too much of the antique.”

Lola Valdez said:

“Ah, it ees nonsense that you talk there! You are steel young. Your hair, eet is still black!”

Poirot winced slightly.

“Pauline, as your brother-in-law and your guardian,” Barton Russell spoke heavily, “I’m just going to force you onto the floor! This one’s a waltz and a waltz is about the only dance I really can do.”

“Why, of course, Barton, we’ll take the floor right away.”

“Good girl, Pauline, that’s swell of you.”

They went off together. Tony tipped back his chair. Then he looked at Stephen Carter.

“Talkative little fellow, aren’t you, Carter?” he remarked. “Help to make a party go with your merry chatter, eh, what?”

“Really, Chapell, I don’t know what you mean?”

“Oh, you don’t—don’t you?” Tony mimicked him.

“My dear fellow.”

“Drink, man, drink, if you won’t talk.”

“No, thanks.”

“Then I will.”

Stephen Carter shrugged his shoulders.

“Excuse me, must just speak to a fellow I know over there. Fellow I was with at Eton.”

Stephen Carter got up and walked to a table a few places away.

Tony said gloomily:

“Somebody ought to drown old Etonians at birth.”

Hercule Poirot was still being gallant to the dark beauty beside him.

He murmured:

“I wonder, may I ask, what are the favourite flowers of mademoiselle?”

“Ah, now, why ees eet you want to know?”

Lola was arch.

“Mademoiselle, if I send flowers to a lady, I am particular that they should be flowers she likes.”

“That ees very charming of you, M. Poirot. I weel tell you—I adore the big dark red carnations—or the dark red roses.”

“Superb—yes, superb! You do not, then, like yellow irises?”

“Yellow flowers—no—they do not accord with my temperament.”

“How wise . . . Tell me, Mademoiselle, did you ring up a friend tonight, since you arrived here?”

“I? Ring up a friend? No, what a curious question!”

“Ah, but I, I am a very curious man.”

“I’m sure you are.” She rolled her dark eyes at him. “A vairy dangerous man.”

“No, no, not dangerous; say, a man who may be useful—in danger! You understand?”

Lola giggled. She showed white even teeth.

“No, no,” she laughed. “You are dangerous.”

Hercule Poirot sighed.

"I see that you do not understand. All this is very strange."

Tony came out of a fit of abstraction and said suddenly:

"Lola, what about a spot of swoop and dip? Come along."

"I weel come—yes. Since M. Poirot ees not brave enough!"

Tony put an arm round her and remarked over his shoulder to Poirot as they glided off:

"You can meditate on crime yet to come, old boy!"

Poirot said: "It is profound what you say there. Yes, it is profound. . . ."

He sat meditatively for a minute or two, then he raised a finger. Luigi came promptly, his wide Italian face wreathed in smiles.

"Mon vieux," said Poirot. "I need some information."

"Always at your service, Monsieur."

"I desire to know how many of these people at this table here have used to telephone tonight?"

"I can tell you, Monsieur. The young lady, the one in white, she telephoned at once when she got here. Then she went to leave her cloak and while she was doing that the other lady came out of the cloakroom and went into the telephone box."

"So the Señora did telephone! Was that before she came into the restaurant?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Anyone else?"

"No, Monsieur."

“All this, Luigi, gives me furiously to think!”

“Indeed, Monsieur.”

“Yes. I think, Luigi, that tonight of all nights, I must have my wits about me! Something is going to happen, Luigi, and I am not at all sure what it is.”

“Anything I can do. Monsieur—”

Poirot made a sign. Luigi slipped discreetly away. Stephen Carter was returning to the table.

“We are still deserted, Mr. Carter,” said Poirot.

“Oh—er—quite,” said the other.

“You know Mr. Barton Russell well?”

“Yes, known him a good while.”

“His sister-in-law, little Miss Weatherby, is very charming.”

“Yes, pretty girl.”

“You know her well, too?”

“Quite.”

“Oh, quite, quite,” said Poirot.

Carter stared at him.

The music stopped and the others returned.

Barton Russell said to a waiter:

“Another bottle of champagne—quickly.”

Then he raised his glass.

"See here, folks. I'm going to ask you to drink a toast. To tell you the truth, there's an idea back of this little party tonight. As you know, I'd ordered a table for six. There were only five of us. That gave us an empty place. Then, by a very strange coincidence, M. Hercule Poirot happened to pass by and I asked him to join our party.

"You don't know yet what an apt coincidence that was. You see that empty seat tonight represents a lady—the lady in whose memory this party is being given. This party, ladies and gentlemen, is being held in memory of my dear wife—Iris—who died exactly four years ago on this very date!"

There was a startled movement round the table. Barton Russell, his face quietly impassive, raised his glass.

"I'll ask you to drink to her memory. Iris!"

"Iris?" said Poirot sharply.

He looked at the flowers. Barton Russell caught his glance and gently nodded his head.

There were little murmurs round the table.

"Iris—Iris. . . ."

Everyone looked startled and uncomfortable.

Barton Russell went on, speaking with his slow monotonous American intonation, each word coming out weightily.

"It may seem odd to you all that I should celebrate the anniversary of a death in this way—by a supper party in a fashionable restaurant. But I have a reason—yes, I have a reason. For M. Poirot's benefit, I'll explain."

He turned his head towards Poirot.

“Four years ago tonight, M. Poirot, there was a supper party held in New York. At it were my wife and myself, Mr. Stephen Carter, who was attached to the Embassy in Washington, Mr. Anthony Chapell, who had been a guest in our house for some weeks, and Señora Valdez, who was at that time enchanting New York City with her dancing. Little Pauline here—” he patted her shoulder “—was only sixteen but she came to the supper party as a special treat. You remember, Pauline?”

“I remember—yes.” Her voice shook a little.

“M. Poirot, on that night a tragedy happened. There was a roll of drums and the cabaret started. The lights went down—all but a spotlight in the middle of the floor. When the lights went up again, M. Poirot, my wife was seen to have fallen forward on the table. She was dead—stone dead. There was potassium cyanide found in the dregs of her wine glass, and the remains of the packet was discovered in her handbag.”

“She had committed suicide?” said Poirot.

“That was the accepted verdict . . . It broke me up, M. Poirot. There was, perhaps, a possible reason for such an action—the police thought so. I accepted their decision.”

He pounded suddenly on the table.

“But I was not satisfied . . . No, for four years I’ve been thinking and brooding—and I’m not satisfied: I don’t believe Iris killed herself. I believe, M. Poirot, that she was murdered—by one of those people at the table.”

“Look here, sir—”

Tony Chapell half sprung to his feet.

“Be quiet, Tony,” said Russell. “I haven’t finished. One of them did it—I’m sure of that now. Someone who, under cover of the darkness, slipped the half emptied packet of cyanide into her handbag. I think I know which of them it was. I mean to know the truth—”

Lola’s voice rose sharply.

“You are mad—crazee—who would have harmed her? No, you are mad. Me, I will not stay—”

She broke off. There was a roll of drums.

Barton Russell said:

“The cabaret. Afterwards we will go on with this. Stay where you are, all of you. I’ve got to go and speak to the dance band. Little arrangement I’ve made with them.”

He got up and left the table.

“Extraordinary business,” commented Carter. “Man’s mad.”

“He ees crazee, yes,” said Lola.

The lights were lowered.

“For two pins I’d clear out,” said Tony.

“No!” Pauline spoke sharply. Then she murmured, “Oh, dear—oh, dear—”

“What is it, Mademoiselle?” murmured Poirot.

She answered almost in a whisper.

“It’s horrible! It’s just like it was that night—”

“Sh! Sh!” said several people.

Poirot lowered his voice.

“A little word in your ear.” He whispered, then patted her shoulder. “All will be well,” he assured her.

“My God, listen,” cried Lola.

“What is it, Señora?”

“It’s the same tune—the same song that they played that night in New York. Barton Russell must have fixed it. I don’t like this.”

“Courage—courage—”

There was a fresh hush.

A girl walked out into the middle of the floor, a coal black girl with rolling eyeballs and white glistening teeth. She began to sing in a deep hoarse voice—a voice that was curiously moving.

I’ve forgotten you

I never think of you

The way you walked

The way you talked

The things you used to say

I’ve forgotten you

I never think of you

I couldn’t say

For sure today

Whether your eyes were blue or grey

I’ve forgotten you

I never think of you.

I’m through

Thinking of you

I tell you I’m through

Thinking of you. . . .

You . . . you . . . you. . . .

The sobbing tune, the deep golden Negro voice had a powerful effect. It hypnotized—cast a spell. Even the waiters felt it. The whole room stared at her, hypnotized by the thick cloying emotion she distilled.

A waiter passed softly round the table filling up glasses, murmuring “champagne” in an undertone but all attention was on the one glowing spot of light—the black woman whose ancestors came from Africa, singing in her deep voice:

I’ve forgotten you

I never think of you

Oh, what a lie

I shall think of you, think of you, think of you

till I die. . . .

The applause broke out frenziedly. The lights went up. Barton Russell came back and slipped into his seat.

“She’s great, that girl—” cried Tony.

But his words were cut short by a low cry from Lola.

“Look—look. . . .”

And then they all saw. Pauline Weatherby dropped forward onto the table.

Lola cried:

“She’s dead—just like Iris—like Iris in New York.”

Poirot sprang from his seat, signing to the others to keep back. He bent over the huddled form, very gently lifted a limp hand and felt for a pulse.

His face was white and stern. The others watched him. They were paralysed, held in a trance.

Slowly, Poirot nodded his head.

“Yes, she is dead—la pauvre petite. And I sitting by her! Ah! but this time the murderer shall not escape.”

Barton Russell, his face grey, muttered:

“Just like Iris . . . She saw something—Pauline saw something that night—Only she wasn’t sure—she told me she wasn’t sure . . . We must get the police . . . Oh, God, little Pauline.”

Poirot said:

“Where is her glass?” He raised it to his nose. “Yes, I can smell the cyanide. A smell of bitter almonds . . . the same method, the same poison. . . .”

He picked up her handbag.

“Let us look in her handbag.”

Barton Russell cried out:

“You don’t believe this is suicide, too? Not on your life.”

“Wait,” Poirot commanded. “No, there is nothing here. The lights went up, you see, too quickly, the murderer had not time. Therefore, the poison is still on him.”

“Or her,” said Carter.

He was looking at Lola Valdez.

She spat out:

“What do you mean—what do you say? That I killed her—eet is not true—not true—why should I do such a thing!”

“You had rather a fancy for Barton Russell yourself in New York. That’s the gossip I heard. Argentine beauties are notoriously jealous.”

“That ees a pack of lies. And I do not come from the Argentine. I come from Peru. Ah—I spit upon you. I—” She lapsed into Spanish.

“I demand silence,” cried Poirot. “It is for me to speak.”

Barton Russell said heavily:

“Everyone must be searched.”

Poirot said calmly.

“Non, non, it is not necessary.”

“What d’you mean, not necessary?”

“I, Hercule Poirot, know. I see with the eyes of the mind. And I will speak! M. Carter, will you show us the packet in your breast pocket?”

“There’s nothing in my pocket. What the hell—”

“Tony, my good friend, if you will be so obliging.”

Carter cried out:

“Damn you—”

Tony flipped the packet neatly out before Carter could defend himself.

“There you are, M. Poirot, just as you said!”

“IT’S A DAMNED LIE,” cried Carter.

Poirot picked up the packet, read the label.

“Cyanide potassium. The case is complete.”

Barton Russell’s voice came thickly.

“Carter! I always thought so. Iris was in love with you. She wanted to go away with you. You didn’t want a scandal for the sake of your precious career so you poisoned her. You’ll hang for this, you dirty dog.”

“Silence!” Poirot’s voice rang out, firm and authoritative. “This is not finished yet. I, Hercule Poirot, have something to say. My friend here, Tony Chapell, he says to me when I arrive, that I have come in search of crime. That, it is partly true. There was crime in my mind—but it was to prevent a crime that I came. And I have prevented it. The murderer, he planned well—but Hercule Poirot he was one move ahead. He had to think fast, and to whisper quickly in Mademoiselle’s ear when the lights went down. She is very quick and clever, Mademoiselle Pauline, she played her part well. Mademoiselle, will you be so kind as to show us that you are not dead after all?”

Pauline sat up. She gave an unsteady laugh.

“Resurrection of Pauline,” she said.

“Pauline—darling.”

“Tony!”

“My sweet!”

“Angel.”

Barton Russell gasped.

“I—I don’t understand. . . .”

“I will help you to understand, Mr. Barton Russell. Your plan has miscarried.”

“My plan?”

“Yes, your plan. Who was the only man who had an alibi during the darkness. The man who left the table—you, Mr. Barton Russell. But you returned to it under cover of the darkness, circling round it, with a champagne bottle, filling up glasses, putting cyanide in Pauline’s glass and dropping the half empty packet in Carter’s pocket as you bent over him to remove a glass. Oh, yes, it is easy to play the part of a waiter in darkness when the attention of everyone is elsewhere. That was the real reason for your party tonight. The safest place to commit a murder is in the middle of a crowd.”

“What the—why the hell should I want to kill Pauline?”

“It might be, perhaps, a question of money. Your wife left you guardian to her sister. You mentioned that fact tonight. Pauline is twenty. At twenty-one or on her marriage you would have to render an account of your stewardship. I suggest that you could not do that. You have speculated with it. I do not know, Mr. Barton Russell, whether you killed your wife in the same way, or whether her suicide suggested the idea of this crime to you, but I do know that tonight you have been guilty of attempted murder. It rests with Miss Pauline whether you are prosecuted for that.”

“No,” said Pauline. “He can get out of my sight and out of this country. I don’t want a scandal.”

“You had better go quickly, Mr. Barton Russell, and I advise you to be careful in future.”

Barton Russell got up, his face working.

“To hell with you, you interfering little Belgian jackanapes.”

He strode out angrily.

Pauline sighed.

“M. Poirot, you’ve been wonderful. . . .”

“You, Mademoiselle, you have been the marvellous one. To pour away the champagne, to act the dead body so prettily.”

“Ugh,” she shivered, “you give me the creeps.”

He said gently:

“It was you who telephoned me, was it not?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I was worried and—frightened without knowing quite why I was frightened. Barton told me he was having this party to commemorate Iris’ death. I realized he had some scheme on—but he wouldn’t tell me what it was. He looked so—so queer and so excited that I felt something terrible might happen—only, of course, I never dreamed that he meant to—to get rid of me.”

“And so, Mademoiselle?”

“I’d heard people talking about you. I thought if I could only get you here perhaps it would stop anything happening. I thought that being a—a foreigner—if I rang up and pretended to be in danger and—and made it sound mysterious—”

“You thought the melodrama, it would attract me? That is what puzzled me. The message itself—definitely it was what you call ‘bogus’—it did not ring true. But the fear in the voice—that was real. Then I came—and you denied very categorically having sent me a message.”

“I had to. Besides, I didn’t want you to know it was me.”

“Ah, but I was fairly sure of that! Not at first. But I soon realized that the only two people who could know about the yellow irises on the table were you or Mr. Barton Russell.”

Pauline nodded.

"I heard him ordering them to be put on the table," she explained. "That, and his ordering a table for six when I knew only five were coming, made me suspect—" She stopped, biting her lip.

"What did you suspect, Mademoiselle?"

She said slowly:

"I was afraid—of something happening—to Mr. Carter."

Stephen Carter cleared his throat. Unhurriedly but quite decisively he rose from the table.

"Er—h'm—I have to—er—thank you, Mr. Poirot. I owe you a great deal. You'll excuse me, I'm sure, if I leave you. Tonight's happenings have been—rather upsetting."

Looking after his retreating figure, Pauline said violently:

"I hate him. I've always thought it was—because of him that Iris killed herself. Or perhaps—Barton killed her. Oh, it's all so hateful. . . ."

Poirot said gently:

"Forget, Mademoiselle . . . forget . . . Let the past go . . . Think only of the present. . . ."

Pauline murmured, "Yes—you're right. . . ."

Poirot turned to Lola Valdez.

"Señora, as the evening advances I become more brave. If you would dance with me now—"

"Oh, yes, indeed. You are—you are ze cat's whiskers, M. Poirot. I inseest on dancing with you."

"You are too kind, Señora."

Tony and Pauline were left. They leant towards each other across the table.

“Darling Pauline.”

“Oh, Tony, I’ve been such a nasty spiteful spitfiring little cat to you all day. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Angel! This is Our Tune again. Let’s dance.”

They danced off, smiling at each other and humming softly:

There’s nothing like Love for making you miserable

There’s nothing like Love for making you blue

Depressed

Possessed

Sentimental

Temperamental

There’s nothing like Love

For getting you down.

There’s nothing like Love for driving you crazy

There’s nothing like Love for making you mad

Abusive

Allusive

Suicidal

Homicidal

There’s nothing like Love

There’s nothing like Love. . . .

Six

MISS MARPLE TELLS A STORY

I don’t think I’ve ever told you, my dears—you, Raymond, and you, Joan, about the rather curious little business that happened some years ago now. I don’t want to seem vain in any way—of course I know that in comparison with you young people I’m not clever at all—Raymond writes those very modern books all about rather unpleasant young men and women—and Joan paints those very remarkable pictures of square people with curious bulges on them—very clever of you, my dear, but as Raymond always says (only quite kindly, because he is the kindest of nephews) I am hopelessly Victorian. I admire Mr. Alma-Tadema and Mr. Frederic Leighton and I suppose to you they seem hopelessly vieux jeu. Now let me see, what was I saying? Oh, yes—that I didn’t want to appear vain—but I couldn’t help being just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself, because, just by applying a little common sense, I believe I really did solve a problem that had baffled cleverer heads than mine. Though really I should have thought the whole thing was obvious from the beginning. . . .

Well, I’ll tell you my little story, and if you think I’m inclined to be conceited about it, you must remember that I did at least help a fellow creature who was in very grave distress.

The first I knew of this business was one evening about nine o’clock when Gwen—(you remember Gwen? My little maid with red hair) well—Gwen came in and told me that Mr. Petherick and a gentleman had called to see me. Gwen had shown them into the drawing room—quite rightly. I was sitting in the dining room because in early spring I think it is so wasteful to have two fires going.

I directed Gwen to bring in the cherry brandy and some glasses and I hurried into the drawing room. I don’t know whether you remember Mr. Petherick? He died two years ago, but he had been a friend of mine for many years as well as attending to all my legal business. A very shrewd man and a really clever solicitor. His son does my business for me now—a very nice lad and very up to date—but somehow I don't feel quite the confidence I had with Mr. Petherick.

I explained to Mr. Petherick about the fires and he said at once that he and his friend would come into the dining room—and then he introduced his friend—a Mr. Rhodes. He was a youngish man—not much over forty—and I saw at once there was something very wrong. His manner was most peculiar. One might have called it rude if one hadn't realized that the poor fellow was suffering from strain.

When we were settled in the dining room and Gwen had brought the cherry brandy, Mr. Petherick explained the reason for his visit.

"Miss Marple," he said, "you must forgive an old friend for taking a liberty. What I have come here for is a consultation."

I couldn't understand at all what he meant, and he went on:

"In a case of illness one likes two points of view—that of the specialist and that of the family physician. It is the fashion to regard the former as of more value, but I am not sure that I agree. The specialist has experience only in his own subject—the family doctor has, perhaps, less knowledge—but a wider experience."

I knew just what he meant, because a young niece of mine not long before had hurried her child off to a very well-known specialist in skin diseases without consulting her own doctor whom she considered an old dodderer, and the specialist had ordered some very expensive treatment, and later found that all the child was suffering from was a rather unusual form of measles.

I just mention this—though I have a horror of digressing—to show that I appreciate Mr. Petherick's point—but I still hadn't any idea what he was driving at.

"If Mr. Rhodes is ill—" I said, and stopped—because the poor man gave a most dreadful laugh.

He said: “I expect to die of a broken neck in a few months’ time.”

And then it all came out. There had been a case of murder lately in Barnchester—a town about twenty miles away. I’m afraid I hadn’t paid much attention to it at the time, because we had been having a lot of excitement in the village about our district nurse, and outside occurrences like an earthquake in India and a murder in Barnchester, although of course far more important really—had given way to our own little local excitements. I’m afraid villages are like that. Still, I did remember having read about a woman having been stabbed in a hotel, though I hadn’t remembered her name. But now it seemed that this woman had been Mr. Rhodes’s wife—and as if that wasn’t bad enough—he was actually under suspicion of having murdered her himself.

All this Mr. Petherick explained to me very clearly, saying that, although the Coronor’s jury had brought in a verdict of murder by a person or persons unknown, Mr. Rhodes had reason to believe that he would probably be arrested within a day or two, and that he had come to Mr. Petherick and placed himself in his hands. Mr. Petherick went on to say that they had that afternoon consulted Sir Malcolm Olde, K.C., and that in the event of the case coming to trial Sir Malcolm had been briefed to defend Mr. Rhodes.

Sir Malcolm was a young man, Mr. Petherick said, very up to date in his methods, and he had indicated a certain line of defence. But with that line of defence Mr. Petherick was not entirely satisfied.

“You see, my dear lady,” he said, “it is tainted with what I call the specialist’s point of view. Give Sir Malcolm a case and he sees only one point—the most likely line of defence. But even the best line of defence may ignore completely what is, to my mind, the vital point. It takes no account of what actually happened.”

Then he went on to say some very kind and flattering things about my acumen and judgement and my knowledge of human nature, and asked permission to tell me the story of the case in the hopes that I might be able to suggest some explanation.

I could see that Mr. Rhodes was highly sceptical of my being of any use and he was annoyed at being brought here. But Mr. Petherick took no notice and proceeded to give me the facts of what occurred on the night of March 8th.

Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes had been staying at the Crown Hotel in Barnchester. Mrs. Rhodes who (so I gathered from Mr. Petherick's careful language) was perhaps just a shade of a hypochondriac, had retired to bed immediately after dinner. She and her husband occupied adjoining rooms with a connecting door. Mr. Rhodes, who is writing a book on prehistoric flints, settled down to work in the adjoining room. At eleven o'clock he tidied up his papers and prepared to go to bed. Before doing so, he just glanced into his wife's room to make sure that there was nothing she wanted. He discovered the electric light on and his wife lying in bed stabbed through the heart. She had been dead at least an hour—probably longer. The following were the points made. There was another door in Mrs. Rhodes's room leading into the corridor. This door was locked and bolted on the inside. The only window in the room was closed and latched. According to Mr. Rhodes nobody had passed through the room in which he was sitting except a chambermaid bringing hot-water bottles. The weapon found in the wound was a stiletto dagger which had been lying on Mrs. Rhodes's dressing table. She was in the habit of using it as a paper knife. There were no fingerprints on it.

The situation boiled down to this—no one but Mr. Rhodes and the chambermaid had entered the victim's room.

I enquired about the chambermaid.

"That was our first line of enquiry," said Mr. Petherick. "Mary Hill is a local woman. She had been chambermaid at the Crown for ten years. There seems absolutely no reason why she should commit a sudden assault on a guest. She is, in any case, extraordinarily stupid, almost half-witted. Her story has never varied. She brought Mrs. Rhodes her hot-water bottle and says the lady was drowsy—just dropping off to sleep. Frankly, I cannot believe, and I am sure no jury would believe, that she committed the crime."

Mr. Petherick went on to mention a few additional details. At the head of the staircase in the Crown Hotel is a kind of miniature lounge where people sometimes sit and have coffee. A passage goes off to the right and the last door in it is the door into the room occupied by Mr. Rhodes. The passage then turns sharply to the right again and the first door round the corner is the door into Mrs. Rhodes's room. As it happened, both these doors could be seen by witnesses. The first door—that into Mr. Rhodes's room, which I will call A, could be seen by four people, two commercial travellers and an elderly married couple who were having coffee. According to them nobody went in or out of door A except Mr. Rhodes and the chambermaid. As to the other door in the passage B, there was an electrician at work there and he also swears that nobody entered or left door B except the chambermaid.

It was certainly a very curious and interesting case. On the face of it, it looked as though Mr. Rhodes must have murdered his wife. But I could see that Mr. Petherick was quite convinced of his client's innocence and Mr. Petherick was a very shrewd man.

At the inquest Mr. Rhodes had told a hesitating and rambling story about some woman who had written threatening letters to his wife. His story, I gathered, had been unconvincing in the extreme. Appealed to by Mr. Petherick, he explained himself.

“Frankly,” he said, “I never believed it. I thought Amy had made most of it up.”

Mrs. Rhodes, I gathered, was one of those romantic liars who go through life embroidering everything that happens to them. The amount of adventures that, according to her own account, happened to her in a year was simply incredible. If she slipped on a bit of banana peel it was a case of near escape from death. If a lampshade caught fire she was rescued from a burning building at the hazard of her life. Her husband got into the habit of discounting her statements. Her tale as to some woman whose child she had injured in a motor accident and who had vowed vengeance on her—well—Mr. Rhodes had simply not taken any notice of it. The incident had happened before he married his wife and although she had read him letters couched in crazy language, he had suspected her of composing them herself. She had actually done such a thing once or twice before. She was a woman of hysterical tendencies who craved ceaselessly for excitement.

Now, all that seemed to me very natural—indeed, we have a young woman in the village who does much the same thing. The danger with such people is that when anything at all extraordinary really does happen to them, nobody believes they are speaking the truth. It seemed to me that that was what had happened in this case. The police, I gathered, merely believed that Mr. Rhodes was making up this unconvincing tale in order to avert suspicion from himself.

I asked if there had been any women staying by themselves in the hotel. It seemed there were two—a Mrs. Granby, an Anglo-Indian widow, and a Miss Carruthers, rather a horsey spinster who dropped her g’s. Mr. Petherick added that the most minute enquiries had failed to elicit anyone who had seen either of them near the scene of the crime and there was nothing to connect either of them with it in any way. I asked him to describe their personal appearance. He said that Mrs. Granby had reddish hair rather untidily done, was sallow-faced and about fifty years of age. Her clothes were rather picturesque, being made mostly of native silk, etc. Miss Carruthers was about forty, wore pince-nez, had close-cropped hair like a man and wore mannish coats and skirts.

“Dear me,” I said, “that makes it very difficult.”

Mr. Petherick looked enquiringly at me, but I didn’t want to say anymore just then, so I asked what Sir Malcolm Olde had said.

Sir Malcolm was confident of being able to call conflicting medical testimony and to suggest some way of getting over the fingerprint difficulty. I asked Mr. Rhodes what he thought and he said all doctors were fools but he himself couldn’t really believe that his wife had killed herself. “She wasn’t that kind of woman,” he said simply—and I believed him. Hysterical people don’t usually commit suicide.

I thought a minute and then I asked if the door from Mrs. Rhodes’s room led straight into the corridor. Mr. Rhodes said no—there was a little hallway with a bathroom and lavatory. It was the door from the bedroom to the hallway that was locked and bolted on the inside.

“In that case,” I said, “the whole thing seems remarkably simple.”

And really, you know, it did . . . the simplest thing in the world. And yet no one seemed to have seen it that way.

Both Mr. Petherick and Mr. Rhodes were staring at me so that I felt quite embarrassed.

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Rhodes, “Miss Marple hasn’t quite appreciated the difficulties.”

“Yes,” I said, “I think I have. There are four possibilities. Either Mrs. Rhodes was killed by her husband, or by the chambermaid, or she committed suicide, or she was killed by an outsider whom nobody saw enter or leave.”

“And that’s impossible,” Mr. Rhodes broke in. “Nobody could come in or go out through my room without my seeing them, and even if anyone did manage to come in through my wife’s room without the electrician seeing them, how the devil could they get out again leaving the door locked and bolted on the inside?”

Mr. Petherick looked at me and said: “Well, Miss Marple?” in an encouraging manner.

“I should like,” I said, “to ask a question. Mr. Rhodes, what did the chambermaid look like?”

He said he wasn’t sure—she was tallish, he thought—he didn’t remember if she was fair or dark. I turned to Mr. Petherick and asked the same question.

He said she was of medium height, had fairish hair and blue eyes and rather a high colour.

Mr. Rhodes said: “You are a better observer than I am, Petherick.”

I ventured to disagree. I then asked Mr. Rhodes if he could describe the maid in my house. Neither he nor Mr. Petherick could do so.

“Don’t you see what that means?” I said. “You both came here full of your own affairs and the person who let you in was only a parlourmaid. The same applies to Mr. Rhodes at the hotel. He saw her uniform and her apron. He was engrossed by his work. But Mr. Petherick has interviewed the same woman in a different capacity. He has looked at her as a person.

“That’s what the woman who did the murder counted upon.”

As they still didn’t see, I had to explain.

“I think,” I said, “that this is how it went. The chambermaid came in by door A, passed through Mr. Rhodes’s room into Mrs. Rhodes’s room with the hot-water bottle and went out through the hallway into passage B. X—as I will call our murderess—came in by door B into the little hallway, concealed herself in—well, in a certain apartment, ahem—and waited until the chambermaid had passed out. Then she entered Mrs. Rhodes’s room, took the stiletto from the dressing table (she had doubtless explored the room earlier in the day), went up to the bed, stabbed the dozing woman, wiped the handle of the stiletto, locked and bolted the door by which she had entered, and then passed out through the room where Mr. Rhodes was working.”

Mr. Rhodes cried out: “But I should have seen her. The electrician would have seen her go in.”

“No,” I said. “That’s where you’re wrong. You wouldn’t see her—not if she were dressed as a chambermaid.” I let it sink in, then I went on, “You were engrossed in your work—out of the tail of your eye you saw a chambermaid come in, go into your wife’s room, come back and go out. It was the same dress—but not the same woman. That’s what the people having coffee saw—a chambermaid go in and a chambermaid come out. The electrician did the same. I daresay if a chambermaid were very pretty a gentleman might notice her face—human nature being what it is—but if she were just an ordinary middle-aged woman—well—it would be the chambermaid’s dress you would see—not the woman herself.”

Mr. Rhodes cried: “Who was she?”

“Well,” I said, “that is going to be a little difficult. It must be either Mrs. Granby or Miss Carruthers. Mrs. Granby sounds as though she might wear a wig normally—so she could wear her own hair as a chambermaid. On the other hand, Miss Carruthers with her close-cropped mannish head might easily put on a wig to play her part. I daresay you will find out easily enough which of them it is. Personally, I incline myself to think it will be Miss Carruthers.”

And really, my dears, that is the end of the story. Carruthers was a false name, but she was the woman all right. There was insanity in her family. Mrs. Rhodes, who was a most reckless and dangerous driver, had run over her little girl, and it had driven the poor woman off her head. She concealed her madness very cunningly except for writing distinctly insane latters to her intended victim. She had been following her about for some time, and she laid her plans very cleverly. The false hair and maid’s dress she posted in a parcel first thing the next morning. When taxed with the truth she broke down and confessed at once. The poor thing is in Broadmoor now. Completely unbalanced of course, but a very cleverly planned crime.

Mr. Petherick came to me afterwards and brought me a very nice letter from Mr. Rhodes—really, it made me blush. Then my old friend said to me: “Just one thing—why did you think it was more likely to be Carruthers than Granby? You’d never seen either of them.”

“Well,” I said. “It was the g’s. You said she dropped her g’s. Now, that’s done by a lot of hunting people in books, but I don’t know many people who do it in reality—and certainly no one under sixty. You said this woman was forty. Those dropped g’s sounded to me like a woman who was playing a part and overdoing it.”

I shan’t tell you what Mr. Petherick said to that—but he was very complimentary—and I really couldn’t help feeling just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself.

And it’s extraordinary how things turn out for the best in this world. Mr. Rhodes has married again—such a nice, sensible girl—and they’ve got a dear little baby and—what do you think?—they asked me to be godmother. Wasn’t it nice of them?

Now I do hope you don’t think I’ve been running on too long. . . .

Seven

THE DREAM

“The Dream” was first published in the USA in the Saturday Evening Post, 23 October 1937, then in The Strand, February 1938.

Hercule Poirot gave the house a steady appraising glance. His eyes wandered a moment to its surroundings, the shops, the big factory building on the right, the blocks of cheap mansion flats opposite.

Then once more his eyes returned to Northway House, relic of an earlier age—an age of space and leisure, when green fields had surrounded its well-bred arrogance. Now it was an anachronism, submerged and forgotten in the hectic sea of modern London, and not one man in fifty could have told you where it stood.

Furthermore, very few people could have told you to whom it belonged, though its owner’s name would have been recognized as one of the world’s richest men. But money can quench publicity as well as flaunt it. Benedict Farley, that eccentric millionaire, chose not to advertise his choice of residence. He himself was rarely seen, seldom making a public appearance. From time to time, he appeared at board meetings, his lean figure, beaked nose, and rasping voice easily dominating the assembled directors. Apart from that, he was just a well-known figure of legend. There were his strange meannesses, his incredible generosities, as well as more personal details—his famous patchwork dressing gown, now reputed to be twenty-eight years old, his invariable diet of cabbage soup and caviare, his hatred of cats. All these things the public knew.

Hercule Poirot knew them also. It was all he did know of the man he was about to visit. The letter which was in his coat pocket told him little more.

After surveying this melancholy landmark of a past age for a minute or two in silence, he walked up the steps to the front door and pressed the bell, glancing as he did so at the neat wristwatch which had at last replaced an old favourite—the large turnip-faced watch of earlier days. Yes, it was exactly nine thirty. As ever, Hercule Poirot was exact to the minute.

The door opened after just the right interval. A perfect specimen of the genus butler stood outlined against the lighted hall.

“Mr. Benedict Farley?” asked Hercule Poirot.

The impersonal glance surveyed him from head to foot, inoffensively but effectively.

En gros et en détail, thought Hercule Poirot to himself with appreciation.

“You have an appointment, sir?” asked the suave voice.

“Yes.”

“Your name, sir?”

“Monsieur Hercule Poirot.”

The butler bowed and drew back. Hercule Poirot entered the house. The butler closed the door behind him.

But there was yet one more formality before the deft hands took hat and stick from the visitor.

“You will excuse me, sir. I was to ask for a letter.”

With deliberation Poirot took from his pocket the folded letter and handed it to the butler. The latter gave it a mere glance, then returned it with a bow. Hercule Poirot returned it to his pocket. Its contents were simple.

Northway House, W.8

M. Hercule Poirot

Dear Sir,

Mr. Benedict Farley would like to have the benefit of your advice. If convenient to yourself he would be glad if you would call upon him at the above address at 9:30 tomorrow (Thursday) evening.

Yours truly,

HUGO CORNWORTHY

(Secretary)

P.S. Please bring this letter with you.

Deftly the butler relieved Poirot of hat, stick and overcoat. He said:

“Will you please come up to Mr. Cornworthy’s room?”

He led the way up the broad staircase. Poirot followed him, looking with appreciation at such objets d’art as were of an opulent and florid nature! His taste in art was always somewhat bourgeois.

On the first floor the butler knocked on a door.

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose very slightly. It was the first jarring note. For the best butlers do not knock at doors—and yet indubitably this was a first-class butler!

It was, so to speak, the first intimation of contact with the eccentricity of a millionaire.

A voice from within called out something. The butler threw open the door. He announced (and again Poirot sensed the deliberate departure from orthodoxy):

“The gentleman you are expecting, sir.”

Poirot passed into the room. It was a fair-sized room, very plainly furnished in a workmanlike fashion. Filing cabinets, books of reference, a couple of easy chairs, and a large and imposing desk covered with neatly docketed papers. The corners of the room were dim, for the only light came from a big green-shaded reading lamp which stood on a small table by the arm of one of the easy chairs. It was placed so as to cast its full light on anyone approaching from the door. Hercule Poirot blinked a little, realizing that the lamp bulb was at least 150 watts. In the armchair sat a thin figure in a patchwork dressing gown—Benedict Farley. His head was stuck forward in a characteristic attitude, his beaked nose projecting like that of a bird. A crest of white hair like that of a cockatoo rose above his forehead. His eyes glittered behind thick lenses as he peered suspiciously at his visitor.

“Hey,” he said at last—and his voice was shrill and harsh, with a rasping note in it. “So you’re Hercule Poirot, hey?”

“At your service,” said Poirot politely and bowed, one hand on the back of the chair.

“Sit down—sit down,” said the old man testily.

Hercule Poirot sat down—in the full glare of the lamp. From behind it the old man seemed to be studying him attentively.

“How do I know you’re Hercule Poirot—hey?” he demanded fretfully. “Tell me that—hey?”

Once more Poirot drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to Farley.

“Yes,” admitted the millionaire grudgingly. “That’s it. That’s what I got Cornworthy to write.” He folded it up and tossed it back. “So you’re the fellow, are you?”

With a little wave of his hand Poirot said:

“I assure you there is no deception!”

Benedict Farley chuckled suddenly.

"That's what the conjurer says before he takes the goldfish out of the hat! Saying that is part of the trick, you know!"

Poirot did not reply. Farley said suddenly:

"Think I'm a suspicious old man, hey? So I am. Don't trust anybody! That's my motto. Can't trust anybody when you're rich. No, no, it doesn't do."

"You wished," Poirot hinted gently, "to consult me?"

The old man nodded.

"Go to the expert and don't count the cost. You'll notice, M. Poirot, I haven't asked you your fee. I'm not going to! Send me in the bill later—I shan't cut up rough over it. Damned fools at the dairy thought they could charge me two and nine for eggs when two and seven's the market price—lot of swindlers! I won't be swindled. But the man at the top's different. He's worth the money. I'm at the top myself—I know."

Hercule Poirot made no reply. He listened attentively, his head poised a little on one side.

Behind his impassive exterior he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He could not exactly put his finger on it. So far Benedict Farley had run true to type—that is, he had conformed to the popular idea of himself; and yet—Poirot was disappointed.

"The man," he said disgustedly to himself, "is a mountebank—nothing but a mountebank!"

He had known other millionaires, eccentric men too, but in nearly every case he had been conscious of a certain force, an inner energy that had commanded his respect. If they had worn a patchwork dressing gown, it would have been because they liked wearing such a dressing gown. But the dressing gown of Benedict Farley, or so it seemed to Poirot, was essentially a stage property. And the man himself was essentially stagy. Every word he spoke was uttered, so Poirot felt assured, sheerly for effect.

He repeated again unemotionally, “You wished to consult me, Mr. Farley?”

Abruptly the millionaire’s manner changed.

He leaned forward. His voice dropped to a croak.

“Yes. Yes . . . I want to hear what you’ve got to say—what you think . . . Go to the top! That’s my way! The best doctor—the best detective—it’s between the two of them.”

“As yet, Monsieur, I do not understand.”

“Naturally,” snapped Farley. “I haven’t begun to tell you.”

He leaned forward once more and shot out an abrupt question.

“What do you know, M. Poirot, about dreams?”

The little man’s eyebrows rose. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

“For that, M. Farley, I should recommend Napoleon’s Book of Dreams—or the latest practising psychologist from Harley Street.”

Benedict Farley said soberly, “I’ve tried both. . . .”

There was a pause, then the millionaire spoke, at first almost in a whisper, then with a voice growing higher and higher.

“It’s the same dream—night after night. And I’m afraid, I tell you—I’m afraid . . . It’s always the same. I’m sitting in my room next door to this. Sitting at my desk, writing. There’s a clock there and I glance at it and see the time—exactly twenty-eight minutes past three. Always the same time, you understand.

“And when I see the time, M. Poirot, I know I’ve got to do it. I don’t want to do it—I loathe doing it—but I’ve got to. . . .”

His voice had risen shrilly.

Unperturbed, Poirot said, “And what is it that you have to do?”

“At twenty-eight minutes past three,” Benedict Farley said hoarsely, “I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it and walk over to the window. And then—and then—”

“Yes?”

Benedict Farley said in a whisper:

“Then I shoot myself . . .”

There was silence.

Then Poirot said, “That is your dream?”

“Yes.”

“The same every night?”

“Yes.”

“What happens after you shoot yourself?”

“I wake up.”

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully. “As a matter of interest, do you keep a revolver in that particular drawer?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I have always done so. It is as well to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

Farley said irritably, “A man in my position has to be on his guard. All rich men have enemies.”

Poirot did not pursue the subject. He remained silent for a moment or two, then he said:

“Why exactly did you send for me?”

“I will tell you. First of all I consulted a doctor—three doctors to be exact.”

“Yes?”

“The first told me it was all a question of diet. He was an elderly man. The second was a young man of the modern school. He assured me that it all hinged on a certain event that took place in infancy at that particular time of day—three twenty-eight. I am so determined, he says, not to remember the event, that I symbolize it by destroying myself. That is his explanation.”

“And the third doctor?” asked Poirot.

Benedict Farley’s voice rose in shrill anger.

“He’s a young man too. He has a preposterous theory! He asserts that I, myself, am tired of life, that my life is so unbearable to me that I deliberately want to end it! But since to acknowledge that fact would be to acknowledge that essentially I am a failure, I refuse in my waking moments to face the truth. But when I am asleep, all inhibitions are removed, and I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself.”

“His view is that you really wish, unknown to yourself, to commit suicide?” said Poirot.

Benedict Farley cried shrilly:

“And that’s impossible—impossible! I’m perfectly happy! I’ve got everything I want—everything money can buy! It’s fantastic—unbelievable even to suggest a thing like that!”

Poirot looked at him with interest. Perhaps something in the shaking hands, the trembling shrillness of the voice, warned him that the denial was too vehement, that its very insistence was in itself suspect. He contented himself with saying:

“And where do I come in, Monsieur?”

Benedict Farley calmed down suddenly. He tapped with an emphatic finger on the table beside him.

“There’s another possibility. And if it’s right, you’re the man to know about it! You’re famous, you’ve had hundreds of cases—fantastic, improbable cases! You’d know if anyone does.”

“Know what?”

Farley’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Supposing someone wants to kill me . . . Could they do it this way? Could they make me dream that dream night after night?”

“Hypnotism, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Hercule Poirot considered the question.

“It would be possible, I suppose,” he said at last. “It is more a question for a doctor.”

“You don’t know of such a case in your experience?”

“Not precisely on those lines, no.”

“You see what I’m driving at? I’m made to dream the same dream, night after night, night after night—and then—one day the suggestion is too much for me—and I act upon it. I do what I’ve dreamed of so often—kill myself!”

Slowly Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“You don’t think that is possible?” asked Farley.

"Possible?" Poirot shook his head. "That is not a word I care to meddle with."

"But you think it improbable?"

"Most improbable."

Benedict Farley murmured. "The doctor said so too . . ." Then his voice rising shrilly again, he cried out, "But why do I have this dream? Why? Why?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head. Benedict Farley said abruptly, "You're sure you've never come across anything like this in your experience?"

"Never."

"That's what I wanted to know."

Delicately, Poirot cleared his throat.

"You permit," he said, "a question?"

"What is it? What is it? Say what you like."

"Who is it you suspect of wanting to kill you?"

Farley snapped out, "Nobody. Nobody at all."

"But the idea presented itself to your mind?" Poirot persisted.

"I wanted to know—if it was a possibility."

"Speaking from my own experience, I should say No. Have you ever been hypnotized, by the way?"

"Of course not. D'you think I'd lend myself to such tomfoolery?"

"Then I think one can say that your theory is definitely improbable."

“But the dream, you fool, the dream.”

“The dream is certainly remarkable,” said Poirot thoughtfully. He paused and then went on. “I should like to see the scene of this drama—the table, the clock, and the revolver.”

“Of course, I’ll take you next door.”

Wrapping the folds of his dressing gown round him, the old man half rose from his chair. Then suddenly, as though a thought had struck him, he resumed his seat.

“No,” he said. “There’s nothing to see there. I’ve told you all there is to tell.”

“But I should like to see for myself—”

“There’s no need,” Farley snapped. “You’ve given me your opinion. That’s the end.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “As you please.” He rose to his feet. “I am sorry, Mr. Farley, that I have not been able to be of assistance to you.”

Benedict Farley was staring straight ahead of him.

“Don’t want a lot of hanky-pankying around,” he growled out. “I’ve told you the facts—you can’t make anything of them. That closes the matter. You can send me a bill for the consultation fee.”

“I shall not fail to do so,” said the detective drily. He walked towards the door.

“Stop a minute.” The millionaire called him back. “That letter—I want it.”

“The letter from your secretary?”

“Yes.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose. He put his hand into his pocket, drew out a folded sheet, and handed it to the old man. The latter scrutinized it, then put it down on the table beside him with a nod.

Once more Hercule Poirot walked to the door. He was puzzled. His busy mind was going over and over the story he had been told. Yet in the midst of his mental preoccupation, a nagging sense of something wrong obtruded itself. And that something had to do with himself—not with Benedict Farley.

With his hand on the door knob, his mind cleared. He, Hercule Poirot, had been guilty of an error! He turned back into the room once more.

“A thousand pardons! In the interest of your problem I have committed a folly! That letter I handed to you—by mischance I put my hand into my right-hand pocket instead of the left—”

“What’s all this? What’s all this?”

“The letter that I handed you just now—an apology from my laundress concerning the treatment of my collars.” Poirot was smiling, apologetic. He dipped into his left-hand pocket. “This is your letter.”

Benedict Farley snatched at it—grunted: “Why the devil can’t you mind what you’re doing?”

Poirot retrieved his laundress’s communication, apologized gracefully once more, and left the room.

He paused for a moment outside on the landing. It was a spacious one. Directly facing him was a big old oak settle with a refectory table in front of it. On the table were magazines. There were also two armchairs and a table with flowers. It reminded him a little of a dentist’s waiting room.

The butler was in the hall below waiting to let him out.

“Can I get you a taxi, sir?”

“No, I thank you. The night is fine. I will walk.”

Hercule Poirot paused a moment on the pavement waiting for a lull in the traffic before crossing the busy street.

A frown creased his forehead.

“No,” he said to himself. “I do not understand at all. Nothing makes sense. Regrettable to have to admit it, but I, Hercule Poirot, am completely baffled.”

That was what might be termed the first act of the drama. The second act followed a week later. It opened with a telephone call from one John Stillingfleet, MD.

He said with a remarkable lack of medical decorum:

“That you, Poirot, old horse? Stillingfleet here.”

“Yes, my friend. What is it?”

“I’m speaking from Northway House—Benedict Farley’s.”

“Ah, yes?” Poirot’s voice quickened with interest. “What of—Mr. Farley?”

“Farley’s dead. Shot himself this afternoon.”

There was a pause, then Poirot said:

“Yes. . . .”

“I notice you’re not overcome with surprise. Know something about it, old horse?”

“Why should you think that?”

“Well, it isn’t brilliant deduction or telepathy or anything like that. We found a note from Farley to you making an appointment about a week ago.”

“I see.”

"We've got a tame police inspector here—got to be careful, you know, when one of these millionaire blokes bumps himself off. Wondered whether you could throw any light on the case. If so, perhaps you'd come round?"

"I will come immediately."

"Good for you, old boy. Some dirty work at the crossroads—eh?"

Poirot merely repeated that he would set forth immediately.

"Don't want to spill the beans over the telephone? Quite right. So long."

A quarter of an hour later Poirot was sitting in the library, a low long room at the back of Northway House on the ground floor. There were five other persons in the room. Inspector Barnett, Dr. Stillingfleet, Mrs. Farley, the widow of the millionaire, Joanna Farley, his only daughter, and Hugo Cornworthy, his private secretary.

Of these, Inspector Barnett was a discreet soldierly-looking man. Dr. Stillingfleet, whose professional manner was entirely different from his telephonic style, was a tall, long-faced young man of thirty. Mrs. Farley was obviously very much younger than her husband. She was a handsome dark-haired woman. Her mouth was hard and her black eyes gave absolutely no clue to her emotions. She appeared perfectly self-possessed. Joanna Farley had fair hair and a freckled face. The prominence of her nose and chin was clearly inherited from her father. Her eyes were intelligent and shrewd. Hugo Cornworthy was a good-looking young fellow, very correctly dressed. He seemed intelligent and efficient.

After greetings and introductions, Poirot narrated simply and clearly the circumstances of his visit and the story told him by Benedict Farley. He could not complain of any lack of interest.

"Most extraordinary story I've ever heard!" said the inspector. "A dream, eh? Did you know anything about this, Mrs. Farley?"

She bowed her head.

“My husband mentioned it to me. It upset him very much. I—I told him it was indigestion—his diet, you know, was very peculiar—and suggested his calling in Dr. Stillingfleet.”

The young man shook his head.

“He didn’t consult me. From M. Poirot’s story, I gather he went to Harley Street.”

“I would like your advice on that point, Doctor,” said Poirot. “Mr. Farley told me that he consulted three specialists. What do you think of the theories they advanced?”

Stillingfleet frowned.

“It’s difficult to say. You’ve got to take into account that what he passed on to you wasn’t exactly what had been said to him. It was a layman’s interpretation.”

“You mean he had got the phraseology wrong?”

“Not exactly. I mean they would put a thing to him in professional terms, he’d get the meaning a little distorted, and then recast it in his own language.”

“So that what he told me was not really what the doctors said.”

“That’s what it amounts to. He’s just got it all a little wrong, if you know what I mean.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. “Is it known whom he consulted?” he asked.

Mrs. Farley shook her head, and Joanna Farley remarked:

“None of us had any idea he had consulted anyone.”

“Did he speak to you about his dream?” asked Poirot.

The girl shook her head.

"And you, Mr. Cornworthy?"

"No, he said nothing at all. I took down a letter to you at his dictation, but I had no idea why he wished to consult you. I thought it might possibly have something to do with some business irregularity."

Poirot asked: "And now as to the actual facts of Mr. Farley's death?"

Inspector Barnett looked interrogatively at Mrs. Farley and at Dr. Stillingfleet, and then took upon himself the role of spokesman.

"Mr. Farley was in the habit of working in his own room on the first floor every afternoon. I understand that there was a big amalgamation of business in prospect—"

He looked at Hugo Cornworthy who said, "Consolidated Coachlines."

"In connection with that," continued Inspector Barnett, "Mr. Farley had agreed to give an interview to two members of the Press. He very seldom did anything of the kind—only about once in five years, I understand. Accordingly two reporters, one from the Associated Newsgroups, and one from Amalgamated Press-sheets, arrived at a quarter past three by appointment. They waited on the first floor outside Mr. Farley's door—which was the customary place for people to wait who had an appointment with Mr. Farley. At twenty past three a messenger arrived from the office of Consolidated Coachlines with some urgent papers. He was shown into Mr. Farley's room where he handed over the documents. Mr. Farley accompanied him to the door, and from there spoke to the two members of the Press. He said:

" 'I'm sorry, gentlemen, to have to keep you waiting, but I have some urgent business to attend to. I will be as quick as I can.'

"The two gentlemen, Mr. Adams and Mr. Stoddart, assured Mr. Farley that they would await his convenience. He went back into his room, shut the door—and was never seen alive again!"

"Continue," said Poirot.

“At a little after four o’clock,” went on the inspector, “Mr. Cornworthy here came out of his room which is next door to Mr. Farley’s and was surprised to see the two reporters still waiting. He wanted Mr. Farley’s signature to some letters and thought he had also better remind him that these two gentlemen were waiting. He accordingly went into Mr. Farley’s room. To his surprise he could not at first see Mr. Farley and thought the room was empty. Then he caught sight of a boot sticking out behind the desk (which is placed in front of the window). He went quickly across and discovered Mr. Farley lying there dead, with a revolver beside him.

“Mr. Cornworthy hurried out of the room and directed the butler to ring up Dr. Stillingfleet. By the latter’s advice, Mr. Cornworthy also informed the police.”

“Was the shot heard?” asked Poirot.

“No. The traffic is very noisy here, the landing window was open. What with lorries and motor horns it would be most unlikely if it had been noticed.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. “What time is it supposed he died?” he asked.

Stillingfleet said:

“I examined the body as soon as I got here—that is, at thirty-two minutes past four. Mr. Farley had been dead at least an hour.”

Poirot’s face was very grave.

“So then, it seems possible that his death could have occurred at the time he mentioned to me—that is, at twenty-eight minutes past three.”

“Exactly,” said Stillingfleet.

“Any fingermarks on the revolver?”

“Yes, his own.”

“And the revolver itself?”

The inspector took up the tale.

“Was one which he kept in the second right-hand drawer of his desk, just as he told you. Mrs. Farley has identified it positively. Moreover, you understand, there is only one entrance to the room, the door giving on to the landing. The two reporters were sitting exactly opposite that door and they swear that no one entered the room from the time Mr. Farley spoke to them, until Mr. Cornworthy entered it at a little after four o’clock.”

“So that there is every reason to suppose that Mr. Farley committed suicide.”

Inspector Barnett smiled a little.

“There would have been no doubt at all but for one point.”

“And that?”

“The letter written to you.”

Poirot smiled too.

“I see! Where Hercule Poirot is concerned—immediately the suspicion of murder arises!”

“Precisely,” said the inspector dryly. “However, after your clearing up of the situation—”

Poirot interrupted him. “One little minute.” He turned to Mrs. Farley. “Had your husband ever been hypnotized?”

“Never.”

“Had he studied the question of hypnotism? Was he interested in the subject?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Suddenly her self-control seemed to break down. “That horrible dream! It’s uncanny! That he should have dreamed that—night after night—and then—it’s as though he were—hounded to death!”

Poirot remembered Benedict Farley saying—“I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself.”

He said, “Had it ever occurred to you that your husband might be tempted to do away with himself?”

“No—at least—sometimes he was very queer. . . .”

Joanna Farley’s voice broke in clear and scornful. “Father would never have killed himself. He was far too careful of himself.”

Dr. Stillingfleet said, “It isn’t the people who threaten to commit suicide who usually do it, you know, Miss Farley. That’s why suicides sometimes seem unaccountable.”

Poirot rose to his feet. “Is it permitted,” he asked, “that I see the room where the tragedy occurred?”

“Certainly. Dr. Stillingfleet—”

The doctor accompanied Poirot upstairs.

Benedict Farley’s room was a much larger one than the secretary’s next door. It was luxuriously furnished with deep leather-covered armchairs, a thick pile carpet, and a superb outsize writing desk.

Poirot passed behind the latter to where a dark stain on the carpet showed just before the window. He remembered the millionaire saying, “At twenty-eight minutes past three I open the second drawer on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it, and walk over to the window. And then—and then I shoot myself.”

He nodded slowly. Then he said:

“The window was open like this?”

“Yes. But nobody could have got in that way.”

Poirot put his head out. There was no sill or parapet and no pipes near. Not even a cat could have gained access that way. Opposite rose the blank wall of the factory, a dead wall with no windows in it.

Stillingfleet said, “Funny room for a rich man to choose as his own sanctum, with that outlook. It’s like looking out on to a prison wall.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. He drew his head in and stared at the expanse of solid brick. “I think,” he said, “that that wall is important.”

Stillingfleet looked at him curiously. “You mean— psychologically?”

Poirot had moved to the desk. Idly, or so it seemed, he picked up a pair of what are usually called lazy-tongs. He pressed the handles; the tongs shot out to their full length. Delicately, Poirot picked up a burnt match stump with them from beside a chair some feet away and conveyed it carefully to the wastepaper basket.

“When you’ve finished playing with those things . . .” said Stillingfleet irritably.

Hercule Poirot murmured, “An ingenious invention,” and replaced the tongs neatly on the writing table. Then he asked:

“Where were Mrs. Farley and Miss Farley at the time of the—death?”

“Mrs. Farley was resting in her room on the floor above this. Miss Farley was painting in her studio at the top of the house.”

Hercule Poirot drummed idly with his fingers on the table for a minute or two. Then he said:

“I should like to see Miss Farley. Do you think you could ask her to come here for a minute or two?”

“If you like.”

Stillingfleet glanced at him curiously, then left the room. In another minute or two the door opened and Joanna Farley came in.

“You do not mind, Mademoiselle, if I ask you a few questions?”

She returned his glance coolly. “Please ask anything you choose.”

“Did you know that your father kept a revolver in his desk?”

“No.”

“Where were you and your mother—that is to say your stepmother—that is right?”

“Yes, Louise is my father’s second wife. She is only eight years older than I am. You were about to say—?”

“Where were you and she on Thursday of last week? That is to say, on Thursday night.”

She reflected for a minute or two.

“Thursday? Let me see. Oh, yes, we had gone to the theatre. To see Little Dog Laughed.”

“Your father did not suggest accompanying you?”

“He never went out to theatres.”

“What did he usually do in the evenings?”

“He sat in here and read.”

“He was not a very sociable man?”

The girl looked at him directly. “My father,” she said, “had a singularly unpleasant personality. No one who lived in close association with him could possibly be fond of him.”

“That, Mademoiselle, is a very candid statement.”

“I am saving you time, M. Poirot. I realize quite well what you are getting at. My stepmother married my father for his money. I live here because I have no money to live elsewhere. There is a man I wish to marry—a poor man; my father saw to it that he lost his job. He wanted me, you see, to marry well—an easy matter since I was to be his heiress!”

“Your father’s fortune passes to you?”

“Yes. That is, he left Louise, my stepmother, a quarter of a million free of tax, and there are other legacies, but the residue goes to me.” She smiled suddenly. “So you see, M. Poirot, I had every reason to desire my father’s death!”

“I see, Mademoiselle, that you have inherited your father’s intelligence.”

She said thoughtfully, “Father was clever . . . One felt that with him—that he had force—driving power—but it had all turned sour—bitter—there was no humanity left . . . .”

Hercule Poirot said softly, “Grand Dieu, but what an imbecile I am. . . .”

Joanna Farley turned towards the door. “Is there anything more?”

“Two little questions. These tongs here,” he picked up the lazy-tongs, “were they always on the table?”

“Yes. Father used them for picking up things. He didn’t like stooping.”

“One other question. Was your father’s eyesight good?”

She stared at him.

“Oh, no—he couldn’t see at all—I mean he couldn’t see without his glasses. His sight had always been bad from a boy.”

“But with his glasses?”

"Oh, he could see all right then, of course."

"He could read newspapers and fine print?"

"Oh, yes."

"That is all, Mademoiselle."

She went out of the room.

Poirot murmured, "I was stupid. It was there, all the time, under my nose. And because it was so near I could not see it."

He leaned out of the window once more. Down below, in the narrow way between the house and the factory, he saw a small dark object.

Hercule Poirot nodded, satisfied, and went downstairs again.

The others were still in the library. Poirot addressed himself to the secretary:

"I want you, Mr. Cornworthy, to recount to me in detail the exact circumstances of Mr. Farley's summons to me. When, for instance, did Mr. Farley dictate that letter?"

"On Wednesday afternoon—at five thirty, as far as I can remember."

"Were there any special directions about posting it?"

"He told me to post it myself."

"And you did so?"

"Yes."

"Did he give any special instructions to the butler about admitting me?"

"Yes. He told me to tell Holmes (Holmes is the butler) that a gentleman would be calling at nine thirty. He was to ask the gentleman's name. He was also to ask to see the letter.”

“Rather peculiar precaution to take, don’t you think?”

Cornworthy shrugged his shoulders.

“Mr. Farley,” he said carefully, “was rather a peculiar man.”

“Any other instructions?”

“Yes. He told me to take the evening off.”

“Did you do so?”

“Yes, immediately after dinner I went to the cinema.”

“When did you return?”

“I let myself in about a quarter past eleven.”

“Did you see Mr. Farley again that evening?”

“No.”

“And he did not mention the matter the next morning?”

“No.”

Poirot paused a moment, then resumed, “When I arrived I was not shown into Mr. Farley’s own room.”

“No. He told me that I was to tell Holmes to show you into my room.”

“Why was that? Do you know?”

Cornworthy shook his head. “I never questioned any of Mr. Farley’s orders,” he said dryly. “He would have resented it if I had.”

“Did he usually receive visitors in his own room?”

“Usually, but not always. Sometimes he saw them in my room.”

“Was there any reason for that?”

Hugo Cornworthy considered.

“No—I hardly think so—I’ve never really thought about it.”

Turning to Mrs. Farley, Poirot asked:

“You permit that I ring for your butler?”

“Certainly, M. Poirot.”

Very correct, very urbane, Holmes answered the bell.

“You rang, madam?”

Mrs. Farley indicated Poirot with a gesture. Holmes turned politely. “Yes, sir?”

“What were your instructions, Holmes, on the Thursday night when I came here?”

Holmes cleared his throat, then said:

“After dinner Mr. Cornworthy told me that Mr. Farley expected a Mr. Hercule Poirot at nine thirty. I was to ascertain the gentleman’s name, and I was to verify the information by glancing at a letter. Then I was to show him up to Mr. Cornworthy’s room.”

“Were you also told to knock on the door?”

An expression of distaste crossed the butler’s countenance.

“That was one of Mr. Farley’s orders. I was always to knock when introducing visitors—business visitors, that is,” he added.

“Ah, that puzzled me! Were you given any other instructions concerning me?”

“No, sir. When Mr. Cornworthy had told me what I have just repeated to you he went out.”

“What time was that?”

“Ten minutes to nine, sir.”

“Did you see Mr. Farley after that?”

“Yes, sir, I took him up a glass of hot water as usual at nine o’clock.”

“Was he then in his own room or in Mr. Cornworthy’s?”

“He was in his own room, sir.”

“You noticed nothing unusual about that room?”

“Unusual? No, sir.”

“Where were Mrs. Farley and Miss Farley?”

“They had gone to the theatre, sir.”

“Thank you, Holmes, that will do.”

Holmes bowed and left the room. Poirot turned to the millionaire’s widow.

“One more question, Mrs. Farley. Had your husband good sight?”

“No. Not without his glasses.”

“He was very shortsighted?”

“Oh, yes, he was quite helpless without his spectacles.”

“He had several pairs of glasses?”

“Yes.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. He leaned back. “I think that that concludes the case. . . .”

There was silence in the room. They were all looking at the little man who sat there complacently stroking his moustache. On the inspector’s face was perplexity, Dr. Stillingfleet was frowning, Cornworthy merely stared uncomprehendingly, Mrs. Farley gazed in blank astonishment, Joanna Farley looked eager.

Mrs. Farley broke the silence.

“I don’t understand, M. Poirot.” Her voice was fretful. “The dream—”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “That dream was very important.”

Mrs. Farley shivered. She said:

“I’ve never believed in anything supernatural before—but now—to dream it night after night beforehand—”

“It’s extraordinary,” said Stillingfleet. “Extraordinary! If we hadn’t got your word for it, Poirot, and if you hadn’t had it straight from the horse’s mouth—” he coughed in embarrassment, and readopting his professional manner, “I beg your pardon, Mrs. Farley. If Mr. Farley himself had not told that story—”

“Exactly,” said Poirot. His eyes, which had been half-closed, opened suddenly. They were very green. “If Benedict Farley hadn’t told me—”

He paused a minute, looking around at a circle of blank faces.

“There are certain things, you comprehend, that happened that evening which I was quite at a loss to explain. First, why make such a point of my bringing that letter with me?”

“Identification,” suggested Cornworthy.

“No, no, my dear young man. Really that idea is too ridiculous. There must be some much more valid reason. For not only did Mr. Farley require to see that letter produced, but he definitely demanded that I should leave it behind me. And moreover even then he did not destroy it! It was found among his papers this afternoon. Why did he keep it?”

Joanna Farley’s voice broke in. “He wanted, in case anything happened to him, that the facts of his strange dream should be made known.”

Poirot nodded approvingly.

“You are astute, Mademoiselle. That must be—that can only be—the point of the keeping of the letter. When Mr. Farley was dead, the story of that strange dream was to be told! That dream was very important. That dream, Mademoiselle, was vital!

“I will come now,” he went on, “to the second point. After hearing his story I ask Mr. Farley to show me the desk and the revolver. He seems about to get up to do so, then suddenly refuses. Why did he refuse?”

This time no one advanced an answer.

“I will put that question differently. What was there in that next room that Mr. Farley did not want me to see?”

There was still silence.

“Yes,” said Poirot, “it is difficult, that. And yet there was some reason—some urgent reason why Mr. Farley received me in his secretary’s room and refused point blank to take me into his own room. There was something in that room he could not afford to have me see.

“And now I come to the third inexplicable thing that happened on that evening. Mr. Farley, just as I was leaving, requested me to hand him the letter I had received. By inadvertence I handed him a communication from my laundress. He glanced at it and laid it down beside him. Just before I left the room I discovered my error—and rectified it! After that I left the house and—I admit it—I was completely at sea! The whole affair and especially that last incident seemed to me quite inexplicable."

He looked round from one to the other.

"You do not see?"

Stillingfleet said, "I don't really see how your laundress comes into it, Poirot."

"My laundress," said Poirot, "was very important. That miserable woman who ruins my collars, was, for the first time in her life, useful to somebody. Surely you see—it is so obvious. Mr. Farley glanced at that communication—one glance would have told him that it was the wrong letter—and yet he knew nothing. Why? Because he could not see it properly!"

Inspector Barnett said sharply, "Didn't he have his glasses on?"

Hercule Poirot smiled. "Yes," he said. "He had his glasses on. That is what makes it so very interesting."

He leaned forward.

"Mr. Farley's dream was very important. He dreamed, you see, that he committed suicide. And a little later on, he did commit suicide. That is to say he was alone in a room and was found there with a revolver by him, and no one entered or left the room at the time that he was shot. What does that mean? It means, does it not, that it must be suicide!"

"Yes," said Stillingfleet.

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"On the contrary," he said. "It was murder. An unusual and a very cleverly planned murder."

Again he leaned forward, tapping the table, his eyes green and shining.

"Why did Mr. Farley not allow me to go into his own room that evening? What was there in there that I must not be allowed to see? I think, my friends, that there was—Benedict Farley himself!"

He smiled at the blank faces.

"Yes, yes, it is not nonsense what I say. Why could the Mr. Farley to whom I had been talking not realize the difference between two totally dissimilar letters? Because, mes amis, he was a man of normal sight wearing a pair of very powerful glasses. Those glasses would render a man of normal eyesight practically blind. Isn't that so, Doctor?"

Stillingfleet murmured, "That's so—of course."

"Why did I feel that in talking to Mr. Farley I was talking to a mountebank, to an actor playing a part! Consider the setting. The dim room, the greenshaded light turned blindingly away from the figure in the chair. What did I see—the famous patchwork dressing gown, the beaked nose (faked with that useful substance, nose putty), the white crest of hair, the powerful lenses concealing the eyes. What evidence is there that Mr. Farley ever had a dream? Only the story I was told and the evidence of Mrs. Farley. What evidence is there that Benedict Farley kept a revolver in his desk? Again only the story told me and the word of Mrs. Farley. Two people carried this fraud through—Mrs. Farley and Hugo Cornworthy. Cornworthy wrote the letter to me, gave instructions to the butler, went out ostensibly to the cinema, but let himself in again immediately with a key, went to his room, made himself up, and played the part of Benedict Farley.

"And so we come to this afternoon. The opportunity for which Mr. Cornworthy has been waiting arrives. There are two witnesses on the landing to swear that no one goes in or out of Benedict Farley's room. Cornworthy waits until a particularly heavy batch of traffic is about to pass. Then he leans out of his window, and with the lazy-tongs which he has purloined from the desk next door he holds an object against the window of that room. Benedict Farley comes to the window. Cornworthy snatches back the tongs and as Farley leans out, and the lorries are passing outside, Cornworthy shoots him with the revolver that he has ready. There is a blank wall opposite, remember. There can be no witness of the crime. Cornworthy waits for over half an hour, then gathers up some papers, conceals the lazy-tongs and the revolver between them and goes out on to the landing and into the next room. He replaces the tongs on the desk, lays down the revolver after pressing the dead man's fingers on it, and hurries out with the news of Mr. Farley's 'suicide.'

"He arranges that the letter to me shall be found and that I shall arrive with my story—the story I heard from Mr. Farley's own lips—of his extraordinary 'dream'—the strange compulsion he felt to kill himself! A few credulous people will discuss the hypnotism theory—but the main result will be to confirm without a doubt that the actual hand that held the revolver was Benedict Farley's own."

Hercule Poirot's eyes went to the widow's face—he noted with satisfaction the dismay—the ashy pallor—the blind fear. . . .

"And in due course," he finished gently, "the happy ending would have been achieved. A quarter of a million and two hearts that beat as one. . . ."

John Stillingfleet, MD, and Hercule Poirot walked along the side of Northway House. On their right was the towering wall of the factory. Above them, on their left, were the windows of Benedict Farley's and Hugo Cornworthy's rooms. Hercule Poirot stopped and picked up a small object—a black stuffed cat.

"Voilà," he said. "That is what Cornworthy held in the lazy-tongs against Farley's window. You remember, he hated cats? Naturally he rushed to the window."

"Why on earth didn't Cornworthy come out and pick it up after he'd dropped it?"

"How could he? To do so would have been definitely suspicious. After all, if this object were found what would anyone think—that some child had wandered round here and dropped it."

"Yes," said Stillingfleet with a sigh. "That's probably what the ordinary person would have thought. But not good old Hercule! D'you know, old horse, up to the very last minute I thought you were leading up to some subtle theory of highfalutin' psychological 'suggested' murder? I bet those two thought so too! Nasty bit of goods, the Farley. Goodness, how she cracked! Cornworthy might have got away with it if she hadn't had hysterics and tried to spoil your beauty by going for you with her nails. I only got her off you just in time."

He paused a minute and then said:

"I rather like the girl. Grit, you know, and brains. I suppose I'd be thought to be a fortune hunter if I had a shot at her . . . ?"

"You are too late, my friend. There is already someone sur le tapis. Her father's death has opened the way to happiness."

"Take it all round, she had a pretty good motive for bumping off the unpleasant parent."

"Motive and opportunity are not enough," said Poirot. "There must also be the criminal temperament!"

"I wonder if you'll ever commit a crime, Poirot?" said Stillingfleet. "I bet you could get away with it all right. As a matter of fact, it would be too easy for you—I mean the thing would be off as definitely too unsporting."

"That," said Poirot, "is a typical English idea."

Eight

IN A GLASS DARKLY

"In a Glass Darkly" was first published in the USA in Collier's, July 1934, and then in Woman's Journal, December 1934. However, its very first public airing was on 6 April 1934 when Agatha Christie read the story on BBC Radio's National Programme. No recording of this 15-minute performance is known to exist.

I've no explanation of this story. I've no theories about the why and wherefore of it. It's just a thing—that happened.

All the same, I sometimes wonder how things would have gone if I'd noticed at the time just that one essential detail that I never appreciated until so many years afterwards. If I had noticed it—well, I suppose the course of three lives would have been entirely altered. Somehow—that's a very frightening thought.

For the beginning of it all, I've got to go back to the summer of 1914—just before the war—when I went down to Badgeworthy with Neil Carslake. Neil was, I suppose, about my best friend. I'd known his brother Alan too, but not so well. Sylvia, their sister, I'd never met. She was two years younger than Alan and three years younger than Neil. Twice, while we were at school together, I'd been going to spend part of the holidays with Neil at Badgeworthy and twice something had intervened. So it came about that I was twenty-three when I first saw Neil and Alan's home.

We were to be quite a big party there. Neil's sister Sylvia had just got engaged to a fellow called Charles Crawley. He was, so Neil said, a good deal older than she was, but a thoroughly decent chap and quite reasonably well-off.

We arrived, I remember, about seven o'clock in the evening. Everyone had gone to his room to dress for dinner. Neil took me to mine. Badgeworthy was an attractive, rambling old house. It had been added to freely in the last three centuries and was full of little steps up and down, and unexpected staircases. It was the sort of house in which it’s not easy to find your way about. I remember Neil promised to come and fetch me on his way down to dinner. I was feeling a little shy at the prospect of meeting his people for the first time. I remember saying with a laugh that it was the kind of house one expected to meet ghosts in the passages, and he said carelessly that he believed the place was said to be haunted but that none of them had ever seen anything, and he didn’t even know what form the ghost was supposed to take.

Then he hurried away and I set to work to dive into my suitcases for my evening clothes. The Carslakes weren’t well-off; they clung on to their old home, but there were no menservants to unpack for you or valet you.

Well, I’d just got to the stage of tying my tie. I was standing in front of the glass. I could see my own face and shoulders and behind them the wall of the room—a plain stretch of wall just broken in the middle by a door—and just as I finally settled my tie I noticed that the door was opening.

I don’t know why I didn’t turn around—I think that would have been the natural thing to do; anyway, I didn’t. I just watched the door swing slowly open—and as it swung I saw into the room beyond.

It was a bedroom—a larger room than mine—with two bedsteads in it, and suddenly I caught my breath.

For at the foot of one of those beds was a girl and round her neck were a pair of man’s hands and the man was slowly forcing her backwards and squeezing her throat as he did so, so that the girl was being slowly suffocated.

There wasn’t the least possibility of a mistake. What I saw was perfectly clear. What was being done was murder.

I could see the girl’s face clearly, her vivid golden hair, the agonized terror of her beautiful face, slowly suffusing with blood. Of the man I could see his back, his hands, and a scar that ran down the left side of his face towards his neck.

It’s taken some time to tell, but in reality only a moment or two passed while I stared dumbfounded. Then I wheeled round to the rescue. . . .

And on the wall behind me, the wall reflected in the glass, there was only a Victorian mahogany wardrobe. No door open—no scene of violence. I swung back to the mirror. The mirror reflected only the wardrobe. . . .

I passed my hands across my eyes. Then I sprang across the room and tried to pull forward the wardrobe and at that moment Neil entered by the other door from the passage and asked me what the hell I was trying to do.

He must have thought me slightly barmy as I turned on him and demanded whether there was a door behind the wardrobe. He said, yes, there was a door, it led into the next room. I asked him who was occupying the next room and he said people called Oldham—a Major Oldham and his wife. I asked him then if Mrs. Oldham had very fair hair and when he replied dryly that she was dark I began to realize that I was probably making a fool of myself. I pulled myself together, made some lame explanation and we went downstairs together. I told myself that I must have had some kind of hallucination—and felt generally rather ashamed and a bit of an ass.

And then—and then—Neil said, ‘My sister Sylvia,’ and I was looking into the lovely face of the girl I had just seen being suffocated to death . . . and I was introduced to her fiancé, a tall dark man with a scar down the left side of his face.

Well—that’s that. I’d like you to think and say what you’d have done in my place. Here was the girl—the identical girl—and here was the man I’d seen throttling her—and they were to be married in about a month’s time. . . .

Had I—or had I not—had a prophetic vision of the future? Would Sylvia and her husband come down here to stay some time in the future, and be given that room (the best spare room) and would that scene I’d witnessed take place in grim reality?

What was I to do about it? Could I do anything? Would anyone—Neil—or the girl herself—would they believe me?

I turned the whole business over and over in my mind the week I was down there. To speak or not to speak? And almost at once another complication set in. You see, I fell in love with Sylvia Carslake the first moment I saw her . . . I wanted her more than anything on earth . . . And in a way that tied my hands.

And yet, if I didn't say anything, Sylvia would marry Charles Crawley and Crawley would kill her . . . .

And so, the day before I left, I blurted it all out to her. I said I expect she'd think me touched in the intellect or something, but I swore solemnly that I'd seen the thing just as I told it to her and that I felt if she was determined to marry Crawley, I ought to tell her my strange experience.

She listened very quietly. There was something in her eyes I didn't understand. She wasn't angry at all. When I'd finished, she just thanked me gravely. I kept repeating like an idiot, 'I did see it. I really did see it,' and she said, 'I'm sure you did if you say so. I believe you.'

Well, the upshot was that I went off not knowing whether I'd done right or been a fool, and a week later Sylvia broke off her engagement to Charles Crawley.

After that the war happened, and there wasn't much leisure for thinking of anything else. Once or twice when I was on leave, I came across Sylvia, but as far as possible I avoided her.

I loved her and wanted her just as badly as ever, but I felt somehow that it wouldn't be playing the game. It was owing to me that she'd broken off her engagement to Crawley, and I kept saying to myself that I could only justify the action I had taken by making my attitude a purely disinterested one.

Then, in 1916, Neil was killed and it fell to me to tell Sylvia about his last moments. We couldn't remain on formal footing after that. Sylvia had adored Neil and he had been my best friend. She was sweet—adorably sweet in her grief. I just managed to hold my tongue and went out again praying that a bullet might end the whole miserable business. Life without Sylvia wasn’t worth living.

But there was no bullet with my name on it. One nearly got me below the right ear and one was deflected by a cigarette case in my pocket, but I came through unscathed. Charles Crawley was killed in action at the beginning of 1918.

Somehow that made a difference. I came home in the autumn of 1918 just before the Armistice and I went straight to Sylvia and told her that I loved her. I hadn’t much hope that she’d care for me straight away, and you could have knocked me down with a feather when she asked me why I hadn’t told her sooner. I stammered out something about Crawley and she said, ‘But why did you think I broke it off with him?’ and then she told me that she’d fallen in love with me just as I’d done with her—from the very first minute.

I said I thought she’d broken off her engagement because of the story I told her and she laughed scornfully and said that if you loved a man you wouldn’t be as cowardly as that, and we went over that old vision of mine again and agreed that it was queer, but nothing more.

Well, there’s nothing much to tell for some time after that. Sylvia and I were married and we were very happy. But I realized, as soon as she was really mine, that I wasn’t cut out for the best kind of husband. I loved Sylvia devotedly, but I was jealous, absurdly jealous of anyone she so much as smiled at. It amused her at first, I think she even rather like it. It proved, at least, how devoted I was.

As for me, I realized quite fully and unmistakably that I was not only making a fool of myself, but that I was endangering all the peace and happiness of our life together. I knew, I say, but I couldn’t change. Every time Sylvia got a letter she didn’t show to me I wondered who it was from. If she laughed and talked with any man, I found myself getting sulky and watchful.

At first, as I say, Sylvia laughed at me. She thought it a huge joke. Then she didn’t think the joke so funny. Finally she didn’t think it a joke at all—

And slowly, she began to draw away from me. Not in any physical sense, but she withdrew her secret mind from me. I no longer knew what her thoughts were. She was kind—but sadly, as though from a long distance.

Little by little I realized that she no longer loved me. Her love had died and it was I who had killed it. . . .

The next step was inevitable, I found myself waiting for it—dreading it. . . .

Then Derek Wainwright came into our lives. He had everything that I hadn't. He had brains and a witty tongue. He was good-looking, too, and—I'm forced to admit it—a thoroughly good chap. As soon as I saw him I said to myself, 'This is just the man for Sylvia. . . .'

She fought against it. I know she struggled . . . but I gave her no help. I couldn't. I was entrenched in my gloomy, sullen reserve. I was suffering like hell—and I couldn't stretch out a finger to save myself. I didn't help her. I made things worse. I let loose at her one day—a string of savage, unwarranted abuse. I was nearly mad with jealousy and misery. The things I said were cruel and untrue and I knew while I was saying them how cruel and how untrue they were. And yet I took a savage pleasure in saying them. . . .

I remember how Sylvia flushed and shrank. . . .

I drove her to the edge of endurance.

I remember she said, "This can't go on. . . ."

When I came home that night the house was empty—empty. There was a note—quite in the traditional fashion.

In it she said that she was leaving me—for good. She was going down to Badgeworthy for a day or two. After that she was going to the one person who loved her and needed her. I was to take that as final.

I suppose that up to then I hadn't really believed my own suspicions. This confirmation in black and white of my worst fears sent me raving mad. I went down to Badgeworthy after her as fast as the car would take me.

She had just changed her frock for dinner, I remember, when I burst into the room. I can see her face—startled—beautiful—afraid.

I said, ‘No one but me shall ever have you. No one.’

And I caught her throat in my hands and gripped it and bent her backwards.

Suddenly I saw our reflection in the mirror. Sylvia choking and myself strangling her, and the scar on my cheek where the bullet grazed it under the right ear.

No—I didn’t kill her. That sudden revelation paralyzed me and I loosened my grasp and let her slip on to the floor. . . .

And then I broke down—and she comforted me . . . Yes, she comforted me.

I told her everything and she told me that by the phrase ‘the one person who loved and needed her’ she had meant her brother Alan . . . We saw into each other’s hearts that night, and I don’t think, from that moment, that we ever drifted away from each other again. . . .

It’s a sobering thought to go through life with—that, but for the grace of God and a mirror, one might be a murderer. . . .

One thing did die that night—the devil of jealousy that had possessed me so long. . . .

But I wonder sometimes—suppose I hadn’t made that initial mistake—the scar on the left cheek—when really it was the right—reversed by the mirror . . . Should I have been so sure the man was Charles Crawley? Would I have warned Sylvia? Would she be married to me—or to him?

Or are the past and the future all one?

I’m a simple fellow—and I can’t pretend to understand these things—but I saw what I saw—and because of what I saw, Sylvia and I are together in the old-fashioned words—till death do us part. And perhaps beyond. . . .”

Nine

PROBLEM AT SEA

"Problem at Sea" was first published in the USA in This Week, 12 January 1936, then as "Poirot and the Crime in Cabin 66" in The Strand, February 1936.

Colonel Clapperton!" said General Forbes.

He said it with an effect midway between a snort and a sniff.

Miss Ellie Henderson leaned forward, a strand of her soft grey hair blowing across her face. Her eyes, dark and snapping, gleamed with a wicked pleasure.

"Such a soldierly-looking man!" she said with malicious intent, and smoothed back the lock of hair to await the result.

"Soldierly!" exploded General Forbes. He tugged at his military moustache and his face became bright red.

"In the Guards, wasn't he?" murmured Miss Henderson, completing her work.

"Guards? Guards? Pack of nonsense. Fellow was on the music hall stage! Fact! Joined up and was out in France counting tins of plum and apple. Huns dropped a stray bomb and he went home with a flesh wound in the arm. Somehow or other got into Lady Carrington's hospital."

"So that's how they met."

"Fact! Fellow played the wounded hero. Lady Carrington had no sense and oceans of money. Old Carrington had been in munitions. She'd been a widow only six months. This fellow snaps her up in no time. She wangled him a job at the War Office. Colonel Clapperton! Pah!" he snorted.

“And before the war he was on the music hall stage,” mused Miss Henderson, trying to reconcile the distinguished grey-haired Colonel Clapperton with a red-nosed comedian singing mirth-provoking songs.

“Fact!” said General Forbes. “Heard it from old Bassington-ffrench. And he heard it from old Badger Cotterill who’d got it from Snooks Parker.”

Miss Henderson nodded brightly. “That does seem to settle it!” she said.

A fleeting smile showed for a minute on the face of a small man sitting near them. Miss Henderson noticed the smile. She was observant. It had shown appreciation of the irony underlying her last remark—irony which the General never for a moment suspected.

The General himself did not notice the smile. He glanced at his watch, rose and remarked: “Exercise. Got to keep oneself fit on a boat,” and passed out through the open door on to the deck.

Miss Henderson glanced at the man who had smiled. It was a well-bred glance indicating that she was ready to enter into conversation with a fellow traveller.

“He is energetic—yes?” said the little man.

“He goes round the deck forty-eight times exactly,” said Miss Henderson. “What an old gossip! And they say we are the scandal-loving sex.”

“What an impoliteness!”

“Frenchmen are always polite,” said Miss Henderson—there was the nuance of a question in her voice.

The little man responded promptly. “Belgian, mademoiselle.”

“Oh! Belgian.”

“Hercule Poirot. At your service.”

The name aroused some memory. Surely she had heard it before—? “Are you enjoying this trip, M. Poirot?”

“Frankly, no. It was an imbecility to allow myself to be persuaded to come. I detest la mer. Never does it remain tranquil—no, not for a little minute.”

“Well, you admit it’s quite calm now.”

M. Poirot admitted this grudgingly. “A ce moment, yes. That is why I revive. I once more interest myself in what passes around me—your very adept handling of the General Forbes, for instance.”

“You mean—” Miss Henderson paused.

Hercule Poirot bowed. “Your methods of extracting the scandalous matter. Admirable!”

Miss Henderson laughed in an unashamed manner. “That touch about the Guards? I knew that would bring the old boy up spluttering and gasping.” She leaned forward confidentially. “I admit I like scandal—the more ill-natured, the better!”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at her—her slim well-preserved figure, her keen dark eyes, her grey hair; a woman of forty-five who was content to look her age.

Ellie said abruptly: “I have it! Aren’t you the great detective?”

Poirot bowed. “You are too amiable, mademoiselle.” But he made no disclaimer.

“How thrilling,” said Miss Henderson. “Are you ‘hot on the trail’ as they say in books? Have we a criminal secretly in our midst? Or am I being indiscreet?”

“Not at all. Not at all. It pains me to disappoint your expectations, but I am simply here, like everyone else, to amuse myself.”

He said it in such a gloomy voice that Miss Henderson laughed.

“Oh! Well, you will be able to get ashore tomorrow at Alexandria. You have been to Egypt before?”

“Never, mademoiselle.”

Miss Henderson rose somewhat abruptly.

“I think I shall join the General on his constitutional,” she announced.

Poirot sprang politely to his feet.

She gave him a little nod and passed on to the deck.

A faint puzzled look showed for a moment in Poirot’s eyes, then, a little smile creasing his lips, he rose, put his head through the door and glanced down the deck. Miss Henderson was leaning against the rail talking to a tall, soldierly-looking man.

Poirot’s smile deepened. He drew himself back into the smoking room with the same exaggerated care with which a tortoise withdraws itself into its shell. For the moment he had the smoking room to himself, though he rightly conjectured that that would not last long.

It did not. Mrs. Clapperton, her carefully waved platinum head protected with a net, her massaged and dieted form dressed in a smart sports suit, came through the door from the bar with the purposeful air of a woman who has always been able to pay top price for anything she needed.

She said: “John—? Oh! Good morning, M. Poirot—have you seen John?”

“He’s on the starboard deck, madame. Shall I—?”

She arrested him with a gesture. “I’ll sit here a minute.” She sat down in a regal fashion in the chair opposite him. From the distance she had looked a possible twenty-eight. Now, in spite of her exquisitely made-up face, her delicately plucked eyebrows, she looked not her actual forty-nine years, but a possible fifty-five. Her eyes were a hard pale blue with tiny pupils.

“I was sorry not to have seen you at dinner last night,” she said. “It was just a shade choppy, of course—”

“Précisément,” said Poirot with feeling.

“Luckily, I am an excellent sailor,” said Mrs. Clapperton. “I say luckily, because, with my weak heart, seasickness would probably be the death of me.”

“You have the weak heart, madame?”

“Yes, I have to be most careful. I must not overtire myself! All the specialists say so!” Mrs. Clapperton had embarked on the—to her—ever fascinating topic of her health. “John, poor darling, wears himself out trying to prevent me from doing too much. I live so intensely, if you know what I mean, M. Poirot?”

“Yes, yes.”

“He always says to me: ‘Try to be more of a vegetable, Adeline.’ But I can’t. Life was meant to be lived, I feel. As a matter of fact I wore myself out as a girl in the war. My hospital—you’ve heard of my hospital? Of course I had nurses and matrons and all that—but I actually ran it.” She sighed.

“Your vitality is marvellous, dear lady,” said Poirot, with the slightly mechanical air of one responding to his cue.

Mrs. Clapperton gave a girlish laugh.

“Everyone tells me how young I am! It’s absurd. I never try to pretend I’m a day less than forty-three,” she continued with slightly mendacious candour, “but a lot of people find it hard to believe. ‘You’re so alive, Adeline,’ they say to me. But really, M. Poirot, what would one be if one wasn’t alive?”

“Dead,” said Poirot.

Mrs. Clapperton frowned. The reply was not to her liking. The man, she decided, was trying to be funny. She got up and said coldly: “I must find John.”

As she stepped through the door she dropped her handbag. It opened and the contents flew far and wide. Poirot rushed gallantly to the rescue. It was some few minutes before the lipsticks, vanity boxes, cigarette case and lighter and other odds and ends were collected. Mrs. Clapperton thanked him politely, then she swept down the deck and said, “John—”

Colonel Clapperton was still deep in conversation with Miss Henderson. He swung round and came quickly to meet his wife. He bent over her protectively. Her deck chair—was it in the right place? Wouldn’t it be better—? His manner was courteous—full of gentle consideration. Clearly an adored wife spoilt by an adoring husband.

Miss Ellie Henderson looked out at the horizon as though something about it rather disgusted her.

Standing in the smoking room door, Poirot looked on.

A hoarse quavering voice behind him said: “I’d take a hatchet to that woman if I were her husband.” The old gentleman known disrespectfully among the younger set on board as the Grandfather of All the Tea Planters, had just shuffled in. “Boy!” he called. “Get me a whisky peg.”

Poirot stooped to retrieve a torn scrap of notepaper, an overlooked item from the contents of Mrs. Clapperton’s bag. Part of a prescription, he noted, containing digitalin. He put it in his pocket, meaning to restore it to Mrs. Clapperton later.

“Yes,” went on the aged passenger. “Poisonous woman. I remember a woman like that in Poona. In ’87 that was.”

“Did anyone take a hatchet to her?” inquired Poirot.

The old gentleman shook his head sadly.

“Worried her husband into his grave within the year. Clapperton ought to assert himself. Gives his wife her head too much.”

“She holds the purse strings,” said Poirot gravely.

“Ha, ha!” chuckled the old gentleman. “You’ve put the matter in a nutshell. Holds the purse strings. Ha, ha!”

Two girls burst into the smoking room. One had a round face with freckles and dark hair streaming out in a windswept confusion, the other had freckles and curly chestnut hair.

“A rescue—a rescue!” cried Kitty Mooney. “Pam and I are going to rescue Colonel Clapperton.”

“From his wife,” gasped Pamela Cregan.

“We think he’s a pet. . . .”

“And she’s just awful—she won’t let him do anything,” the two girls exclaimed.

“And if he isn’t with her, he’s usually grabbed by the Henderson woman. . . .”

“Who’s quite nice. But terribly old. . . .”

They ran out, gasping in between giggles. “A rescue—a rescue. . . .”

That the rescue of Colonel Clapperton was no isolated sally, but a fixed project, was made clear that same evening when the eighteen-year-old Pam Cregan came up to Hercule Poirot, and murmured: “Watch us, M. Poirot. He’s going to be cut out from under her nose and taken to walk in the moonlight on the boat deck.”

It was just at that moment that Colonel Clapperton was saying: “I grant you the price of a Rolls-Royce. But it’s practically good for a lifetime. Now my car—”

“My car, I think, John.” Mrs. Clapperton’s voice was shrill and penetrating.

He showed no annoyance at her ungraciousness. Either he was used to it by this time, or else—

“Or else?” thought Poirot and let himself speculate.

“Certainly, my dear, your car,” Clapperton bowed to his wife and finished what he had been saying, perfectly unruffled.

“Voilà ce qu’on appelle le pukka sahib,” thought Poirot. “But the General Forbes says that Clapperton is no gentleman at all. I wonder now.”

There was a suggestion of bridge. Mrs. Clapperton, General Forbes and a hawk-eyed couple sat down to it. Miss Henderson had excused herself and gone out on deck.

“What about your husband?” asked General Forbes, hesitating.

“John won’t play,” said Mrs. Clapperton. “Most tiresome of him.”

The four bridge players began shuffling the cards.

Pam and Kitty advanced on Colonel Clapperton. Each one took an arm.

“You’re coming with us!” said Pam. “To the boat deck. There’s a moon.”

“Don’t be foolish, John,” said Mrs. Clapperton. “You’ll catch a chill.”

“Not with us, he won’t,” said Kitty. “We’re hot stuff!”

He went with them, laughing.

Poirot noticed that Mrs. Clapperton said No Bid to her initial bid of Two Clubs.

He strolled out on to the promenade deck. Miss Henderson was standing by the rail. She looked round expectantly as he came to stand beside her and he saw the drop in her expression.

They chatted for a while. Then presently as he fell silent she asked: “What are you thinking about?”

Poirot replied: “I am wondering about my knowledge of English. Mrs. Clapperton said: ‘John won’t play bridge.’ Is not ‘can’t play’ the usual term?”

“She takes it as a personal insult that he doesn’t, I suppose,” said Ellie drily. “The man was a fool ever to have married her.”

In the darkness Poirot smiled. “You don’t think it’s just possible that the marriage may be a success?” he asked diffidently.

“With a woman like that?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “Many odious women have devoted husbands. An enigma of nature. You will admit that nothing she says or does appears to gall him.” Miss Henderson was considering her reply when Mrs. Clapperton’s voice floated out through the smoking room window.

“No—I don’t think I will play another rubber. So stuffy. I think I’ll go up and get some air on the boat deck.”

“Good night,” said Miss Henderson. “I’m going to bed.” She disappeared abruptly.

Poirot strolled forward to the lounge—deserted save for Colonel Clapperton and the two girls. He was doing card tricks for them and noting the dexterity of his shuffling and handling of the cards, Poirot remembered the General’s story of a career on the music hall stage.

“I see you enjoy the cards even though you do not play bridge,” he remarked.

“I’ve my reasons for not playing bridge,” said Clapperton, his charming smile breaking out. “I’ll show you. We’ll play one hand.”

He dealt the cards rapidly. “Pick up your hands. Well, what about it?” He laughed at the bewildered expression on Kitty’s face. He laid down his hand

and the others followed suit. Kitty held the entire club suit, M. Poirot the hearts, Pam the diamonds and Colonel Clapperton the spades.

“You see?” he said. “A man who can deal his partner and his adversaries any hand he pleases had better stand aloof from a friendly game! If the luck goes too much his way, ill-natured things might be said.”

“Oh!” gasped Kitty. “How could you do that? It all looked perfectly ordinary.”

“The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,” said Poirot sententiously—and caught the sudden change in the Colonel’s expression.

It was as though he realized that he had been off his guard for a moment or two.

Poirot smiled. The conjuror had shown himself through the mask of the pukka sahib.

The ship reached Alexandria at dawn the following morning.

As Poirot came up from breakfast he found the two girls all ready to go on shore. They were talking to Colonel Clapperton.

“We ought to get off now,” urged Kitty. “The passport people will be going off the ship presently. You’ll come with us won’t you? You wouldn’t let us go ashore all by ourselves? Awful things might happen to us.”

“I certainly don’t think you ought to go by yourselves,” said Clapperton, smiling. “But I’m not sure my wife feels up to it.”

“That’s too bad,” said Pam. “But she can have a nice long rest.”

Colonel Clapperton looked a little irresolute. Evidently the desire to play truant was strong upon him. He noticed Poirot.

“Hullo, M. Poirot—you going ashore?”

“No, I think not,” M. Poirot replied.

“I’ll—I’ll—just have a word with Adeline,” decided Colonel Clapperton.

“We’ll come with you,” said Pam. She flashed a wink at Poirot. “Perhaps we can persuade her to come too,” she added gravely.

Colonel Clapperton seemed to welcome this suggestion. He looked decidedly relieved.

“Come along then, the pair of you,” he said lightly. They all three went along the passage of B deck together.

Poirot, whose cabin was just opposite the Clappertons’, followed them out of curiosity.

Colonel Clapperton rapped a little nervously at the cabin door.

“Adeline, my dear, are you up?”

The sleepy voice of Mrs. Clapperton from within replied: “Oh, bother—what is it?”

“It’s John. What about going ashore?”

“Certainly not.” The voice was shrill and decisive. “I’ve had a very bad night. I shall stay in bed most of the day.”

Pam nipped in quickly. “Oh, Mrs. Clapperton, I’m so sorry. We did so want you to come with us. Are you sure you’re not up to it?”

“I’m quite certain.” Mrs. Clapperton’s voice sounded even shriller.

The Colonel was turning the door handle without result.

“What is it, John? The door’s locked. I don’t want to be disturbed by the stewards.”

“Sorry, my dear, sorry. Just wanted my Baedeker.”

“Well, you can’t have it,” snapped Mrs. Clapperton. “I’m not going to get out of bed. Do go away, John, and let me have a little peace.”

“Certainly, certainly, my dear.” The Colonel backed away from the door. Pam and Kitty closed in on him.

“Let’s start at once. Thank goodness your hat’s on your head. Oh, gracious—your passport isn’t in the cabin, is it?”

“As a matter of fact it’s in my pocket—” began the Colonel.

Kitty squeezed his arm. “Glory be!” she exclaimed. “Now, come on.”

Leaning over the rail, Poirot watched the three of them leave the ship. He heard a faint intake of breath beside him and turned to see Miss Henderson. Her eyes were fastened on the three retreating figures.

“So they’ve gone ashore,” she said flatly.

“Yes. Are you going?”

She had a shade hat, he noticed, and a smart bag and shoes. There was a shore-going appearance about her. Nevertheless, after the most infinitesimal of pauses, she shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I think I’ll stay on board. I have a lot of letters to write.”

She turned and left him.

Puffing after his morning tour of forty-eight rounds of the deck, General Forbes took her place. “Aha!” he exclaimed as his eyes noted the retreating figures of the Colonel and the two girls. “So that’s the game! Where’s the Madam?”

Poirot explained that Mrs. Clapperton was having a quiet day in bed.

“Don’t you believe it!” the old warrior closed one knowing eye. “She’ll be up for tiffin—and if the poor devil’s found to be absent without leave, there’ll be ructions.”

But the General’s prognostications were not fulfilled. Mrs. Clapperton did not appear at lunch and by the time the Colonel and his attendant damsels returned to the ship at four o’clock, she had not shown herself.

Poirot was in his cabin and heard the husband’s slightly guilty knock on his cabin door. Heard the knock repeated, the cabin door tried, and finally heard the Colonel’s call to a steward.

“Look here, I can’t get an answer. Have you a key?”

Poirot rose quickly from his bunk and came out into the passage.

The news went like wildfire round the ship. With horrified incredulity people heard that Mrs. Clapperton had been found dead in her bunk—a native dagger driven through her heart. A string of amber beads was found on the floor of her cabin.

Rumour succeeded rumour. All bead sellers who had been allowed on board that day were being rounded up and questioned! A large sum in cash had disappeared from a drawer in the cabin! The notes had been traced! They had not been traced! Jewellery worth a fortune had been taken! No jewellery had been taken at all! A steward had been arrested and had confessed to the murder!

“What is the truth of it all?” demanded Miss Ellie Henderson waylaying Poirot. Her face was pale and troubled.

“My dear lady, how should I know?”

“Of course you know,” said Miss Henderson.

It was late in the evening. Most people had retired to their cabins. Miss Henderson led Poirot to a couple of deck chairs on the sheltered side of the ship. “Now tell me,” she commanded.

Poirot surveyed her thoughtfully. “It’s an interesting case,” he said.

“Is it true that she had some very valuable jewellery stolen?”

Poirot shook his head. “No. No jewellery was taken. A small amount of loose cash that was in a drawer has disappeared, though.”

“I’ll never feel safe on a ship again,” said Miss Henderson with a shiver. “Any clue as to which of those coffee-coloured brutes did it?”

“No,” said Hercule Poirot. “The whole thing is rather—strange.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ellie sharply.

Poirot spread out his hands. “Eh bien—take the facts. Mrs. Clapperton had been dead at least five hours when she was found. Some money had disappeared. A string of beads was on the floor by her bed. The door was locked and the key was missing. The window—window, not porthole—gives on the deck and was open.”

“Well?” asked the woman impatiently.

“Do you not think it is curious for a murder to be committed under those particular circumstances? Remember that the postcard sellers, money changers and bead sellers who are allowed on board are all well known to the police.”

“The stewards usually lock your cabin, all the same,” Ellie pointed out.

“Yes, to prevent any chance of petty pilfering. But this—was murder.”

“What exactly are you thinking of, M. Poirot?” Her voice sounded a little breathless.

“I am thinking of the locked door.”

Miss Henderson considered this. “I don’t see anything in that. The man left by the door, locked it and took the key with him so as to avoid having the murder discovered too soon. Quite intelligent of him, for it wasn’t discovered until four o’clock in the afternoon.”

“No, no, mademoiselle, you don’t appreciate the point I’m trying to make. I’m not worried as to how he got out, but as to how he got in.”

“The window of course.”

“C’est possible. But it would be a very narrow fit—and there were people passing up and down the deck all the time, remember.”

“Then through the door,” said Miss Henderson impatiently.

“But you forget, mademoiselle. Mrs. Clapperton had locked the door on the inside. She had done so before Colonel Clapperton left the boat this morning. He actually tried it—so we know that is so.”

“Nonsense. It probably stuck—or he didn’t turn the handle properly.”

“But it does not rest on his word. We actually heard Mrs. Clapperton herself say so.”

“We?”

“Miss Mooney, Miss Cregan, Colonel Clapperton and myself.”

Ellie Henderson tapped a neatly shod foot. She did not speak for a moment or two. Then she said in a slightly irritable tone: “Well—what exactly do you deduce from that? If Mrs. Clapperton could lock the door she could unlock it too, I suppose.”

“Precisely, precisely.” Poirot turned a beaming face upon her. “And you see where that leaves us. Mrs. Clapperton unlocked the door and let the murderer in. Now would she be likely to do that for a bead seller?”

Ellie objected: “She might not have known who it was. He may have knocked—she got up and opened the door—and he forced his way in and killed her.”

Poirot shook his head. “Au contraire. She was lying peacefully in bed when she was stabbed.”

Miss Henderson stared at him. “What’s your idea?” she asked abruptly.

Poirot smiled. “Well, it looks, does it not, as though she knew the person she admitted. . . .”

“You mean,” said Miss Henderson and her voice sounded a little harsh, “that the murderer is a passenger on the ship?”

Poirot nodded. “It seems indicated.”

“And the string of beads left on the floor was a blind?”

“Precisely.”

“The theft of the money also?”

“Exactly.”

There was a pause, then Miss Henderson said slowly: “I thought Mrs. Clapperton a very unpleasant woman and I don’t think anyone on board really liked her—but there wasn’t anyone who had any reason to kill her.”

“Except her husband, perhaps,” said Poirot.

“You don’t really think—” She stopped.

“It is the opinion of every person on this ship that Colonel Clapperton would have been quite justified in ‘taking a hatchet to her.’ That was, I think, the expression used.”

Ellie Henderson looked at him—waiting.

“But I am bound to say,” went on Poirot, “that I myself have not noted any signs of exasperation on the good Colonel’s part. Also what is more important, he had an alibi. He was with those two girls all day and did not return to the ship till four o’clock. By then, Mrs. Clapperton had been dead many hours.”

There was another minute of silence. Ellie Henderson said softly: “But you still think—a passenger on the ship?”

Poirot bowed his head.

Ellie Henderson laughed suddenly—a reckless defiant laugh. “Your theory may be difficult to prove, M. Poirot. There are a good many passengers on this ship.”

Poirot bowed to her. “I will use a phrase from one of your detective stories. ‘I have my methods, Watson.’ ”

The following evening, at dinner, every passenger found a typewritten slip by his plate requesting him to be in the main lounge at 8:30. When the company were assembled, the Captain stepped on to the raised platform where the orchestra usually played and addressed them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you all know of the tragedy which took place yesterday. I am sure you all wish to co-operate in bringing the perpetrator of that foul crime to justice.” He paused and cleared his throat. “We have on board with us M. Hercule Poirot who is probably known to you all as a man who has had wide experience in—er—such matters. I hope you will listen carefully to what he has to say.”

It was at this moment that Colonel Clapperton, who had not been at dinner, came in and sat down next to General Forbes. He looked like a man bewildered by sorrow—not at all like a man conscious of great relief. Either he was a very good actor or else he had been genuinely fond of his disagreeable wife.

“M. Hercule Poirot,” said the Captain and stepped down. Poirot took his place. He looked comically self-important as he beamed on his audience.

“Messieurs, mesdames,” he began. “It is most kind of you to be so indulgent as to listen to me. M. le Capitaine has told you that I have had a certain experience in these matters. I have, it is true, a little idea of my own about how to get to the bottom of this particular case.” He made a sign and a steward pushed forward and passed on to him a bulky, shapeless object wrapped in a sheet.

"What I am about to do may surprise you a little," Poirot warned them. "It may occur to you that I am eccentric, perhaps mad. Nevertheless I assure you that behind my madness there is—as you English say—a method."

His eyes met those of Miss Henderson for just a minute. He began unwrapping the bulky object.

"I have here, messieurs and mesdames, an important witness to the truth of who killed Mrs. Clapperton." With a deft hand he whisked away the last enveloping cloth, and the object it concealed was revealed—an almost life-sized wooden doll, dressed in a velvet suit and lace collar.

"Now, Arthur," said Poirot and his voice changed subtly—it was no longer foreign—it had instead a confident English, a slightly Cockney inflection. "Can you tell me—I repeat—can you tell me—anything at all about the death of Mrs. Clapperton?"

The doll's neck oscillated a little, its wooden lower jaw dropped and wavered and a shrill high-pitched woman's voice spoke:

"What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be disturbed by the stewards. . . ."

There was a cry—an overturned chair—a man stood swaying, his hand to his throat—trying to speak—trying . . . Then suddenly, his figure seemed to crumple up. He pitched headlong.

It was Colonel Clapperton.

Poirot and the ship's doctor rose from their knees by the prostrate figure.

"All over, I'm afraid. Heart," said the doctor briefly.

Poirot nodded. "The shock of having his trick seen through," he said.

He turned to General Forbes. "It was you, General, who gave me a valuable hint with your mention of the music hall stage. I puzzle—I think—and then it comes to me. Supposing that before the war Clapperton was a ventriloquist. In that case, it would be perfectly possible for three people to hear Mrs. Clapperton speak from inside her cabin when she was already dead. . . .”

Ellie Henderson was beside him. Her eyes were dark and full of pain. “Did you know his heart was weak?” she asked.

“I guessed it . . . Mrs. Clapperton talked of her own heart being affected, but she struck me as the type of woman who likes to be thought ill. Then I picked up a torn prescription with a very strong dose of digitalin in it. Digitalin is a heart medicine but it couldn’t be Mrs. Clapperton’s because digitalin dilates the pupils of the eyes. I have never noticed such a phenomenon with her—but when I looked at his eyes I saw the signs at once.”

Ellie murmured: “So you thought—it might end—this way?”

“The best way, don’t you think, mademoiselle?” he said gently.

He saw the tears rise in her eyes. She said: “You’ve known. You’ve known all along . . . That I cared . . . But he didn’t do it for me . . . It was those girls—youth—it made him feel his slavery. He wanted to be free before it was too late . . . Yes, I’m sure that’s how it was . . . When did you guess—that it was he?”

“His self-control was too perfect,” said Poirot simply. “No matter how galling his wife’s conduct, it never seemed to touch him. That meant either that he was so used to it that it no longer stung him, or else—eh bien—I decided on the latter alternative . . . And I was right. . . .

“And then there was his insistence on his conjuring ability—the evening before the crime he pretended to give himself away. But a man like Clapperton doesn’t give himself away. There must be a reason. So long as people thought he had been a conjuror they weren’t likely to think of his having been a ventriloquist.”

“And the voice we heard—Mrs. Clapperton’s voice?”

“One of the stewardesses had a voice not unlike hers. I induced her to hide behind the stage and taught her the words to say.”

“It was a trick—a cruel trick,” cried out Ellie.

“I do not approve of murder,” said Hercule Poirot.

Sad Cypress (1940)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Prologue

“Elinor Katharine Carlisle. You stand charged upon this indictment with the murder of Mary Gerrard upon the 27th of July last. Are you guilty or not guilty?”

Elinor Carlisle stood very straight, her head raised. It was a graceful head, the modelling of the bones sharp and well-defined. The eyes were a deep vivid blue, the hair black. The brows had been plucked to a faint thin line.

There was a silence—quite a noticeable silence.

Sir Edwin Bulmer, Counsel for the Defence, felt a thrill of dismay.

He thought:

“My God, she’s going to plead guilty… She’s lost her nerve….”

Elinor Carlisle’s lips parted. She said:

“Not guilty.”

Counsel for the Defence sank back. He passed a handkerchief over his brow, realizing that it had been a near shave.

Sir Samuel Attenbury was on his feet, outlining the case for the Crown.

“May it please your lordship, gentlemen of the jury, on the 27th of July, at half past three in the afternoon, Mary Gerrard died at Hunterbury, Maidensford….”

His voice ran on, sonorous and pleasing to the ear. It lulled Elinor almost into unconsciousness. From the simple and concise narrative, only an occasional phrase seeped through to her conscious mind.

“…case a peculiarly simple and straightforward one…

"…It is the duty of the Crown…prove motive and opportunity…

"…No one, as far as can be seen, had any motive to kill this unfortunate girl, Mary Gerrard, except the accused. A young girl of a charming disposition—liked by everybody—without, one would have said, an enemy in the world…."

Mary, Mary Gerrard! How far away it all seemed now. Not real any longer….

"…Your attention will be particularly directed to the following considerations:

1. What opportunities and means had the accused for administering poison?

2. What motive had she for so doing?

"It will be my duty to call before you witnesses who can help you to form a true conclusion on these matters….

"…As regards the poisoning of Mary Gerrard, I shall endeavour to show you that no one had any opportunity to commit this crime except the accused…."

Elinor felt as though imprisoned in a thick mist. Detached words came drifting through the fog.

"…Sandwiches…

"…Fish paste…

"…Empty house…"

The words stabbed through the thick enveloping blanket of Elinor's thoughts—pin-pricks through a heavy muffling veil….

The court. Faces. Rows and rows of faces! One particular face with a big black moustache and shrewd eyes. Hercule Poirot, his head a little on one side, his eyes thoughtful, was watching her.

She thought: He’s trying to see just exactly why I did it… He’s trying to get inside my head to see what I thought—what I felt….

Felt…? A little blur—a slight sense of shock… Roddy’s face—his dear, dear face with its long nose, its sensitive mouth… Roddy! Always Roddy—always, ever since she could remember…since those days at Hunterbury amongst the raspberries and up in the warren and down by the brook. Roddy—Roddy—Roddy…

Other faces! Nurse O’Brien, her mouth slightly open, her freckled fresh face thrust forward. Nurse Hopkins looking smug—smug and implacable. Peter Lord’s face—Peter Lord—so kind, so sensible, so—so comforting! But looking now—what was it—lost? Yes—lost! Minding—minding all this frightfully! While she herself, the star performer, didn’t mind at all!

Here she was, quite calm and cold, standing in the dock, accused of murder. She was in court.

Something stirred; the folds of blanket round her brain lightened—became mere wraiths. In court!…People…

People leaning forward, their lips parted a little, their eyes agog, staring at her, Elinor, with a horrible ghoulish enjoyment—listening with a kind of slow, cruel relish to what that tall man with the Jewish nose was saying about her.

“The facts in this case are extremely easy to follow and are not in dispute. I shall put them before you quite simply. From the very beginning…”

Elinor thought:

“The beginning… The beginning? The day that horrible anonymous letter came! That was the beginning of it….”

PART I

One

An anonymous letter!

Elinor Carlisle stood looking down at it as it lay open in her hand. She’d never had such a thing before. It gave one an unpleasant sensation. Ill-written, badly spelt, on cheap pink paper.

This is to Warn You (it ran),

I’m naming no Names but there’s Someone sucking up to your Aunt and if you’re not kareful you’ll get Cut Out of Everything. Girls Are very Artful and Old Ladies is Soft when Young Ones suck up to Them and Flatter them What I say is You’d best come down and see for Yourself whats Going On its not right you and the Young Gentleman should be Done Out of What’s yours—and She’s Very Artful and the Old Lady might Pop off at any time.

Well-Wisher

Elinor was still staring at this missive, her plucked brows drawn together in distaste, when the door opened. The maid announced, “Mr. Welman,” and Roddy came in.

Roddy! As always when she saw Roddy, Elinor was conscious of a slightly giddy feeling, a throb of sudden pleasure, a feeling that it was incumbent upon her to be very matter-of-fact and unemotional. Because it was so very obvious that Roddy, although he loved her, didn’t feel about her the way she felt about him. The first sight of him did something to her, twisted her heart round so that it almost hurt. Absurd that a man—an ordinary, yes, a perfectly ordinary young man—should be able to do that to one! That the mere look of him should set the world spinning, that his voice should make you want—just a little—to cry… Love surely should be a pleasurable emotion—not something that hurt you by its intensity….

One thing was clear: one must be very, very careful to be offhand and casual about it all. Men didn’t like devotion and adoration. Certainly Roddy didn’t.

She said lightly:

“Hallo, Roddy!”

Roddy said:

“Hallo, darling. You’re looking very tragic. Is it a bill?”

Elinor shook her head.

Roddy said:

“I thought it might be—midsummer, you know—when the fairies dance, and the accounts rendered come tripping along!”

Elinor said:

“It’s rather horrid. It’s an anonymous letter.”

Roddy’s brows went up. His keen fastidious face stiffened and changed. He said—a sharp, disgusted exclamation:

“No!”

Elinor said again:

“It’s rather horrid….”

She moved a step towards her desk.

“I’d better tear it up, I suppose.”

She could have done that—she almost did—for Roddy and anonymous letters were two things that ought not to come together. She might have thrown it away and thought no more about it. He would not have stopped her. His fastidiousness was far more strongly developed than his curiosity.

But on impulse Elinor decided differently. She said:

“Perhaps, though, you’d better read it first. Then we’ll burn it. It’s about Aunt Laura.”

Roddy’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Aunt Laura?”

He took the letter, read it, gave a frown of distaste, and handed it back.

“Yes,” he said. “Definitely to be burnt! How extraordinary people are!”

Elinor said:

“One of the servants, do you think?”

“I suppose so.” He hesitated. “I wonder who—who the person is—the one they mention?”

Elinor said thoughtfully:

“It must be Mary Gerrard, I think.”

Roddy frowned in an effort of remembrance.

“Mary Gerrard? Who’s she?”

“The daughter of the people at the lodge. You must remember her as a child? Aunt Laura was always fond of the girl, and took an interest in her. She paid for her schooling and for various extras—piano lessons and French and things.”

Roddy said:

“Oh, yes, I remember her now: scrawny kid, all legs and arms, with a lot of messy fair hair.”

Elinor nodded.

“Yes, you probably haven’t seen her since those summer holidays when Mum and Dad were abroad. You’ve not been down at Hunterbury as often as I have, of course, and she’s been abroad au pair in Germany lately, but we used to rout her out and play with her when we were all kids.”

“What’s she like now?” asked Roddy.

Elinor said:

“She’s turned out very nice looking. Good manners and all that. As a result of her education, you’d never take her for old Gerrard’s daughter.”

“Gone all ladylike, has she?”

“Yes. I think, as a result of that, she doesn’t get on very well at the lodge. Mrs. Gerrard died some years ago, you know, and Mary and her father don’t get on. He jeers at her schooling and her ‘fine ways.’”

Roddy said irritably:

“People never dream what harm they may do by ‘educating’ someone! Often it’s cruelty, not kindness!”

Elinor said:

“I suppose she is up at the house a good deal… She reads aloud to Aunt Laura, I know, since she had her stroke.”

Roddy said:

“Why can’t the nurse read to her?”

Elinor said with a smile:

“Nurse O’Brien’s got a brogue you can cut with a knife! I don’t wonder Aunt Laura prefers Mary.”

Roddy walked rapidly and nervously up and down the room for a minute or two. Then he said:

"You know, Elinor, I believe we ought to go down."

Elinor said with a slight recoil:

"Because of this—?"

"No, no—not at all. Oh, damn it all, one must be honest, yes! Foul as that communication is, there may be some truth behind it. I mean, the old girl is pretty ill—"

"Yes, Roddy."

He looked at her with his charming smile—admitting the fallibility of human nature. He said:

"And the money does matter—to you and me, Elinor."

She admitted it quickly.

"Oh, it does."

He said seriously:

"It's not that I'm mercenary. But, after all, Aunt Laura herself has said over and over again that you and I are her only family ties. You're her own niece, her brother's child, and I'm her husband's nephew. She's always given us to understand that at her death all she's got would come to one or other—or more probably both—of us. And—and it's a pretty large sum, Elinor."

"Yes," said Elinor thoughtfully. "It must be."

"It's no joke keeping up Hunterbury." He paused. "Uncle Henry was what you'd call, I suppose, comfortably off when he met your Aunt Laura. But she was an heiress. She and your father were both left very wealthy. Pity your father speculated and lost most of his."

Elinor sighed.

"Poor Father never had much business sense. He got very worried over things before he died."

"Yes, your Aunt Laura had a much better head than he had. She married Uncle Henry and they bought Hunterbury, and she told me the other day that she'd been exceedingly lucky always in her investments. Practically nothing had slumped."

"Uncle Henry left all he had to her when he died, didn't he?"

Roddy nodded.

"Yes, tragic his dying so soon. And she's never married again. Faithful old bean. And she's always been very good to us. She's treated me as if I was her nephew by blood. If I've been in a hole she's helped me out; luckily I haven't done that too often!"

"She's been awfully generous to me, too," said Elinor gratefully.

Roddy nodded.

"Aunt Laura," he said, "is a brick. But, you know, Elinor, perhaps without meaning to do so, you and I live pretty extravagantly, considering what our means really are!"

She said ruefully:

"I suppose we do… Everything costs so much—clothes and one's face—and just silly things like cinemas and cocktails—and even gramophone records!"

Roddy said:

"Darling, you are one of the lilies of the field, aren't you? You toil not, neither do you spin!"

Elinor said:

"Do you think I ought to, Roddy?"

He shook his head.

“I like you as you are: delicate and aloof and ironical. I’d hate you to go all earnest. I’m only saying that if it weren’t for Aunt Laura you probably would be working at some grim job.”

He went on:

“The same with me. I’ve got a job, of sorts. Being with Lewis & Hume is not too arduous. It suits me. I preserve my self-respect by having a job; but—mark this—but I don’t worry about the future because of my expectations—from Aunt Laura.”

Elinor said:

“We sound rather like human leeches!”

“Nonsense! We’ve been given to understand that some day we shall have money—that’s all. Naturally, that fact influences our conduct.”

Elinor said thoughtfully:

“Aunt Laura has never told us definitely just how she has left her money?”

Roddy said:

“That doesn’t matter! In all probability she’s divided it between us; but if that isn’t so—if she’s left all of it or most of it to you as her own flesh and blood—why, then, darling, I shall share in it, because I’m going to marry you—and if the old pet thinks the majority should go to me as the male representative of the Welmans, that’s still all right, because you’re marrying me.”

He grinned at her affectionately. He said:

“Lucky we happen to love each other. You do love me, don’t you, Elinor?”

“Yes.”

She said it coldly, almost primly.

“Yes!” Roddy mimicked her. “You’re adorable, Elinor. That little air of yours—aloof—untouchable—la Princesse Lointaine. It’s that quality of yours that made me love you, I believe.”

Elinor caught her breath. She said, “Is it?”

“Yes.” He frowned. “Some women are so—oh, I don’t know—so damned possessive—so—so doglike and devoted—their emotions slopping all over the place! I’d hate that. With you I never know—I’m never sure—any minute you might turn round in that cool, detached way of yours and say you’d changed your mind—quite coolly, like that—without batting an eyelash! You’re a fascinating creature, Elinor. You’re like a work of art—so—so—finished!”

He went on:

“You know, I think ours will be the perfect marriage… We both love each other enough and not too much. We’re good friends. We’ve got a lot of tastes in common. We know each other through and through. We’ve all the advantages of cousinship without the disadvantages of blood relationship. I shall never get tired of you, because you’re such an elusive creature. You may get tired of me, though. I’m such an ordinary sort of chap—”

Elinor shook her head. She said:

“I shan’t get tired of you, Roddy—never.”

“My sweet!”

He kissed her.

He said:

“Aunt Laura has a pretty shrewd idea of how it is with us, I think, although we haven’t been down since we finally fixed it up. It rather gives us an excuse, doesn’t it, for going down?”

“Yes. I was thinking the other day—”

Roddy finished the sentence for her:

“—That we hadn’t been down as often as we might. I thought that, too. When she first had her stroke we went down almost every other weekend. And now it must be almost two months since we were there.”

Elinor said:

“We’d have gone if she’d asked for us—at once.”

“Yes, of course. And we know that she likes Nurse O’Brien and is well looked after. All the same, perhaps we have been a bit slack. I’m talking now not from the money point of view—but the sheer human one.”

Elinor nodded.

“I know.”

“So that filthy letter has done some good, after all! We’ll go down to protect our interests and because we’re fond of the old dear!”

He lit a match and set fire to the letter which he took from Elinor’s hand.

“Wonder who wrote it?” he said. “Not that it matters… Someone who was ‘on our side,’ as we used to say when we were kids. Perhaps they’ve done us a good turn, too. Jim Partington’s mother went out to the Riviera to live, had a handsome young Italian doctor to attend her, became quite crazy about him and left him every penny she had. Jim and his sisters tried to upset the will, but couldn’t.”

Elinor said:

“Aunt Laura likes the new doctor who’s taken over Dr. Ransome’s practice—but not to that extent! Anyway, that horrid letter mentioned a girl. It must be Mary.”

Roddy said:

"We'll go down and see for ourselves…."

II

Nurse O'Brien rustled out of Mrs. Welman's bedroom and into the bathroom. She said over her shoulder:

"I'll just pop the kettle on. You could do with a cup of tea before you go on, I'm sure, Nurse."

Nurse Hopkins said comfortably:

"Well, dear, I can always do with a cup of tea. I always say there's nothing like a nice cup of tea—a strong cup!"

Nurse O'Brien said as she filled the kettle and lit the gas ring:

"I've got everything here in this cupboard—teapot and cups and sugar—and Edna brings me up fresh milk twice a day. No need to be forever ringing bells. 'Tis a fine gas ring, this; boils a kettle in a flash."

Nurse O'Brien was a tall red-haired woman of thirty with flashing white teeth, a freckled face and an engaging smile. Her cheerfulness and vitality made her a favourite with her patients. Nurse Hopkins, the District Nurse who came every morning to assist with the bed making and toilet of the heavy old lady, was a homely-looking middle-aged woman with a capable air and a brisk manner.

She said now approvingly:

"Everything's very well-done in this house."

The other nodded.

"Yes, old-fashioned, some of it, no central heating, but plenty of fires and all the maids are very obliging girls and Mrs. Bishop looks after them well."

Nurse Hopkins said:

“These girls nowadays—I’ve no patience with ’em—don’t know what they want, most of them—and can’t do a decent day’s work.”

“Mary Gerrard’s a nice girl,” said Nurse O’Brien. “I really don’t know what Mrs. Welman would do without her. You saw how she asked for her now? Ah, well, she’s a lovely creature, I will say, and she’s got a way with her.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“I’m sorry for Mary. That old father of hers does his best to spite the girl.”

“Not a civil word in his head, the old curmudgeon,” said Nurse O’Brien. “There, the kettle’s singing. I’ll wet the tea as soon as it comes to the boil.”

The tea was made and poured, hot and strong. The two nurses sat with it in Nurse O’Brien’s room next door to Mrs. Welman’s bedroom.

“Mr. Welman and Miss Carlisle are coming down,” said Nurse O’Brien. “There was a telegram came this morning.”

“There now, dear,” said Nurse Hopkins. “I thought the old lady was looking excited about something. It’s some time since they’ve been down, isn’t it?”

“It must be two months and over. Such a nice young gentleman, Mr. Welman. But very proud-looking.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“I saw her picture in the Tatler the other day—with a friend at Newmarket.”

Nurse O’Brien said:

“She’s very well-known in society, isn’t she? And always has such lovely clothes. Do you think she’s really good-looking, Nurse?”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Difficult to tell what these girls really look like under their makeup! In my opinion, she hasn’t got anything like the looks Mary Gerrard has!”

Nurse O'Brien pursed her lips and put her head on one side.

"You may be right now. But Mary hasn't got the style!"

Nurse Hopkins said sententiously:

"Fine feathers make fine birds."

"Another cup of tea, Nurse?"

"Thank you, Nurse. I don't mind if I do."

Over their steaming cups the women drew a little closer together.

Nurse O'Brien said:

"An odd thing happened last night. I went in at two o'clock to settle my dear comfortably, as I always do, and she was lying there awake. But she must have been dreaming, for as soon as I got into the room she said, 'The photograph. I must have the photograph.'

"So I said, 'Why, of course, Mrs. Welman. But wouldn't you rather wait till morning?' And she said, 'No, I want to look at it now.' So I said, 'Well, where is this photograph? Is it the one of Mr. Roderick you're meaning?' And she said, 'Roder-ick? No. Lewis.' And she began to struggle, and I went to lift her and she got out her keys from the little box beside her bed and told me to unlock the second drawer of the tallboy, and there, sure enough, was a big photograph in a silver frame. Such a handsome man. And 'Lewis' written across the corner. Old-fashioned, of course, must have been taken many years ago. I took it to her and she held it there, staring at it a long time. And she just murmured. 'Lewis—Lewis.' Then she sighed and gave it to me and told me to put it back. And would you believe it, when I turned round again she'd gone off as sweetly as a child."

Nurse Hopkins said:

"Was it her husband, do you think?"

Nurse O'Brien said:

“It was not! For this morning I asked Mrs. Bishop, careless-like, what was the late Mr. Welman’s first name, and it was Henry, she told me!”

The two women exchanged glances. Nurse Hopkins had a long nose, and the end of it quivered a little with pleasurable emotion. She said thoughtfully:

“Lewis—Lewis. I wonder, now. I don’t recall the name anywhere round these parts.”

“It would be many years ago, dear,” the other reminded her.

“Yes, and, of course, I’ve only been here a couple of years. I wonder now —”

Nurse O’Brien said:

“A very handsome man. Looked as though he might be a cavalry officer!”

Nurse Hopkins sipped her tea. She said:

“That’s very interesting.”

Nurse O’Brien said romantically:

“Maybe they were boy and girl together and a cruel father separated them….”

Nurse Hopkins said with a deep sigh:

“Perhaps he was killed in the war….”

III

When Nurse Hopkins, pleasantly stimulated by tea and romantic speculation, finally left the house, Mary Gerrard ran out of the door to overtake her.

“Oh, Nurse, may I walk down to the village with you?”

“Of course you can, Mary, my dear.”

Mary Gerrard said breathlessly:

“I must talk to you. I’m so worried about everything.”

The older woman looked at her kindly.

At twenty-one, Mary Gerrard was a lovely creature with a kind of wild-rose unreality about her: a long delicate neck, pale golden hair lying close to her exquisitely shaped head in soft natural waves, and eyes of a deep vivid blue.

Nurse Hopkins said:

“What’s the trouble?”

“The trouble is that the time is going on and on and I’m not doing anything!”

Nurse Hopkins said drily:

“Time enough for that.”

“No, but it is so—so unsettling. Mrs. Welman has been wonderfully kind, giving me all that expensive schooling. I do feel now that I ought to be starting to earn my own living. I ought to be training for something.”

Nurse Hopkins nodded sympathetically.

“It’s such a waste of everything if I don’t. I’ve tried to—to explain what I feel to Mrs. Welman, but—it’s difficult—she doesn’t seem to understand. She keeps saying there’s plenty of time.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“She’s a sick woman, remember.”

Mary flushed a contrite flush.

"Oh, I know. I suppose I oughtn't to bother her. But it is worrying—and Father's so—so beastly about it! Keeps jibing at me for being a fine lady! But indeed I don't want to sit about doing nothing!"

"I know you don't."

"The trouble is that training of any kind is nearly always expensive. I know German pretty well now, and I might do something with that. But I think really I want to be a hospital nurse. I do like nursing and sick people."

Nurse Hopkins said unromantically:

"You've got to be as strong as a horse, remember!"

"I am strong! And I really do like nursing. Mother's sister, the one in New Zealand, was a nurse. So it's in my blood, you see."

"What about massage?" suggested Nurse Hopkins. "Or Norland? You're fond of children. There's good money to be made in massage."

Mary said doubtfully:

"It's expensive to train for it, isn't it? I hoped—but of course that's very greedy of me—she's done so much for me already."

"Mrs. Welman, you mean? Nonsense. In my opinion, she owes you that. She's given you a slap-up education, but not the kind that leads to anything much. You don't want to teach?"

"I'm not clever enough."

Nurse Hopkins said:

"There's brains and brains! If you take my advice, Mary, you'll be patient for the present. In my opinion, as I said, Mrs. Welman owes it to you to help you get a start at making your living. And I've no doubt she means to do it. But the truth of the matter is, she's got fond of you, and she doesn't want to lose you."

Mary said:

“Oh!” She drew in her breath with a little gasp. “Do you really think that’s it?”

“I haven’t the least doubt of it! There she is, poor old lady, more or less helpless, paralysed one side and nothing and nobody much to amuse her. It means a lot to her to have a fresh, pretty young thing like you about the house. You’ve a very nice way with you in a sickroom.”

Mary said softly:

“If you really think so—that makes me feel better… Dear Mrs. Welman, I’m very, very fond of her! She’s been so good to me always. I’d do anything for her!”

Nurse Hopkins said drily:

“Then the best thing you can do is to stay where you are and stop worrying! It won’t be for long.”

Mary said, “Do you mean—?”

Her eyes looked wide and frightened.

The District Nurse nodded.

“She’s rallied wonderfully, but it won’t be for long. There will be a second stroke and then a third. I know the way of it only too well. You be patient, my dear. If you keep the old lady’s last days happy and occupied, that’s a better deed than many. The time for the other will come.”

Mary said:

“You’re very kind.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

"Here's your father coming out from the lodge—and not to pass the time of day pleasantly, I should say!"

They were just nearing the big iron gates. On the steps of the lodge an elderly man with a bent back was painfully hobbling down the two steps.

Nurse Hopkins said cheerfully:

"Good morning, Mr. Gerrard."

Ephraim Gerrard said crustily:

"Ah!"

"Very nice weather," said Nurse Hopkins.

Old Gerrard said crossly:

"May be for you. 'Tisn't for me. My lumbago's been at me something cruel."

Nurse Hopkins said cheerfully:

"That was the wet spell last week, I expect. This hot dry weather will soon clear that away."

Her brisk professional manner appeared to annoy the old man.

He said disagreeably:

"Nurses—nurses, you'm all the same. Full of cheerfulness over other people's troubles. Little you care! And there's Mary talks about being a nurse, too. Should have thought she'd want to be something better than that, with her French and her German and her piano playing and all the things she's learned at her grand school and her travels abroad."

Mary said sharply:

"Being a hospital nurse would be quite good enough for me!"

"Yes, and you'd sooner do nothing at all, wouldn't you? Strutting about with your airs and your graces and your fine-lady-do-nothing ways. Laziness, that's what you like, my girl!"

Mary protested, tears springing to her eyes:

"It isn't true, Dad. You've no right to say that!"

Nurse Hopkins intervened with a heavy, determinedly humorous air.

"Just a bit under the weather, aren't we, this morning? You don't really mean what you say, Gerrard. Mary's a good girl and a good daughter to you."

Gerrard looked at his daughter with an air of almost active malevolence.

"She's no daughter of mine—nowadays—with her French and her history and her mincing talk. Pah!"

He turned and went into the lodge again.

Mary said, the tears still standing in her eyes:

"You do see, Nurse, don't you, how difficult it is? He's so unreasonable. He's never really liked me even when I was a little girl. Mum was always standing up for me."

Nurse Hopkins said kindly:

"There, there, don't worry. These things are sent to try us! Goodness, I must hurry. Such a round as I've got this morning."

And as she stood watching the brisk retreating figure, Mary Gerrard thought forlornly that nobody was any real good or could really help you. Nurse Hopkins, for all her kindness, was quite content to bring out a little stock of platitudes and offer them with an air of novelty.

Mary thought disconsolately:

“What shall I do?”

Two

Mrs. Welman lay on her carefully built-up pillows. Her breathing was a little heavy, but she was not asleep. Her eyes—eyes still deep and blue like those of her niece Elinor, looked up at the ceiling. She was a big, heavy woman, with a handsome, hawklike profile. Pride and determination showed in her face.

The eyes dropped and came to rest on the figure sitting by the window. They rested there tenderly—almost wistfully.

She said at last:

“Mary—”

The girl turned quickly.

“Oh, you’re awake, Mrs. Welman.”

Laura Welman said:

“Yes, I’ve been awake some time….”

“Oh, I didn’t know. I’d have—”

Mrs. Welman broke in:

“No, that’s all right. I was thinking—thinking of many things.”

“Yes, Mrs. Welman?”

The sympathetic look, the interested voice, made a tender look come into the older woman’s face. She said gently:

“I’m very fond of you, my dear. You’re very good to me.”

"Oh, Mrs. Welman, it's you who have been good to me. If it hadn't been for you, I don't know what I should have done! You've done everything for me."

"I don't know… I don't know, I'm sure…" The sick woman moved restlessly, her right arm twitched—the left remaining inert and lifeless. "One means to do the best one can; but it's so difficult to know what is best—what is right. I've been too sure of myself always…."

Mary Gerrard said:

"Oh, no, I'm sure you always know what is best and right to do."

But Laura Welman shook her head.

"No—no. It worries me. I've had one besetting sin always, Mary: I'm proud. Pride can be the devil. It runs in our family. Elinor has it, too."

Mary said quickly:

"It will be nice for you to have Miss Elinor and Mr. Roderick down. It will cheer you up a lot. It's quite a time since they were here."

Mrs. Welman said softly:

"They're good children—very good children. And fond of me, both of them. I always know I've only got to send and they'll come at any time. But I don't want to do that too often. They're young and happy—the world in front of them. No need to bring them near decay and suffering before their time."

Mary said, "I'm sure they'd never feel like that, Mrs. Welman."

Mrs. Welman went on, talking perhaps more to herself than to the girl:

"I always hoped they might marry. But I tried never to suggest anything of the kind. Young people are so contradictory. It would have put them off! I had an idea, long ago when they were children, that Elinor had set her heart on Roddy. But I wasn’t at all sure about him. He’s a funny creature. Henry was like that—very reserved and fastidious… Yes, Henry…”

She was silent for a little, thinking of her dead husband.

She murmured:

“So long ago…so very long ago… We had only been married five years when he died. Double pneumonia… We were happy—yes, very happy; but somehow it all seems very unreal, that happiness. I was an odd, solemn, undeveloped girl—my head full of ideas and hero worship. No reality…”

Mary murmured:

“You must have been very lonely—afterwards.”

“After? Oh, yes—terribly lonely. I was twenty-six…and now I’m over sixty. A long time, my dear…a long, long time…” She said with sudden brisk acerbity, “And now this!”

“Your illness?”

“Yes. A stroke is the thing I’ve always dreaded. The indignity of it all! Washed and tended like a baby! Helpless to do anything for yourself. It maddens me. The O’Brien creature is good-natured—I will say that for her. She doesn’t mind my snapping at her and she’s not more idiotic than most of them. But it makes a lot of difference to me to have you about, Mary.”

“Does it?” The girl flushed. “I—I’m so glad, Mrs. Welman.”

Laura Welman said shrewdly:

“You’ve been worrying, haven’t you? About the future. You leave it to me, my dear. I’ll see to it that you shall have the means to be independent and take up a profession. But be patient for a little—it means too much to me to have you here.”

“Oh, Mrs. Welman, of course—of course! I wouldn’t leave you for the world. Not if you want me—”

"I do want you…" The voice was unusually deep and full. "You're—you're quite like a daughter to me, Mary. I've seen you grow up here at Hunterbury from a little toddling thing—seen you grow into a beautiful girl… I'm proud of you, child. I only hope I've done what was best for you."

Mary said quickly:

"If you mean that your having been so good to me and having educated me above—well, above my station—if you think it's made me dissatisfied or—or—given me what Father calls fine-lady ideas, indeed that isn't true. I'm just ever so grateful, that's all. And if I'm anxious to start earning my living, it's only because I feel it's right that I should, and not—and not—well, do nothing after all you've done for me. I—I shouldn't like it to be thought that I was sponging on you."

Laura Welman said, and her voice was suddenly sharp-edged:

"So that's what Gerrard's been putting into your head? Pay no attention to your father, Mary; there never has been and never will be any question of your sponging on me! I'm asking you to stay here a little longer solely on my account. Soon it will be over… If they went the proper way about things, my life could be ended here and now—none of this long-drawn-out tomfoolery with nurses and doctors."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Welman, Dr. Lord says you may live for years."

"I'm not at all anxious to, thank you! I told him the other day that in a decently civilized state, all there would be to do would be for me to intimate to him that I wished to end it, and he'd finish me off painlessly with some nice drug. 'And if you'd any courage, Doctor,' I said, 'you'd do it, anyway!'"

Mary cried:

"Oh! What did he say?"

“The disrespectful young man merely grinned at me, my dear, and said he wasn’t going to risk being hanged. He said, ‘If you’d left me all your money, Mrs. Welman, that would be different, of course!’ Impudent young jackanapes! But I like him. His visits do me more good than his medicines.”

“Yes, he’s very nice,” said Mary. “Nurse O’Brien thinks a lot of him and so does Nurse Hopkins.”

Mrs. Welman said:

“Hopkins ought to have more sense at her age. As for O’Brien, she simpers and says, ‘Oh, doctor,’ and tosses those long streamers of hers whenever he comes near her.”

“Poor Nurse O’Brien.”

Mrs. Welman said indulgently:

“She’s not a bad sort, really, but all nurses annoy me; they always will think that you’d like a ‘nice cup of tea’ at five in the morning!” She paused. “What’s that? Is it the car?”

Mary looked out of the window.

“Yes, it’s the car. Miss Elinor and Mr. Roderick have arrived.”

II

Mrs. Welman said to her niece:

“I’m very glad, Elinor, about you and Roddy.”

Elinor smiled at her.

“I thought you would be, Aunt Laura.”

The older woman said, after a moment’s hesitation:

“You do—care about him, Elinor?”

Elinor’s delicate brows lifted.

“Of course.”

Laura Welman said quickly:

“You must forgive me, dear. You know, you’re very reserved. It’s very difficult to know what you’re thinking or feeling. When you were both much younger I thought you were perhaps beginning to care for Roddy—too much….”

Again Elinor’s delicate brows were raised.

“Too much?”

The older woman nodded.

“Yes. It’s not wise to care too much. Sometimes a very young girl does do just that… I was glad when you went abroad to Germany to finish. Then, when you came back, you seemed quite indifferent to him—and, well, I was sorry for that, too! I’m a tiresome old woman, difficult to satisfy! But I’ve always fancied that you had, perhaps, rather an intense nature—that kind of temperament runs in our family. It isn’t a very happy one for its possessors… But, as I say, when you came back from abroad so indifferent to Roddy, I was sorry about that, because I had always hoped you two would come together. And now you have, and so everything is all right! And you do really care for him?”

Elinor said gravely:

“I care for Roddy enough and not too much.”

Mrs. Welman nodded approval.

“I think, then, you’ll be happy. Roddy needs love—but he doesn’t like violent emotion. He’d shy off from possessiveness.”

Elinor said with feeling:

“You know Roddy very well!”

Mrs. Welman said:

“If Roddy cares for you just a little more than you care for him—well, that’s all to the good.”

Elinor said sharply:

“Aunt Agatha’s Advice column. ‘Keep your boyfriend guessing! Don’t let him be too sure of you!’”

Laura Welman said sharply:

“Are you unhappy, child? Is anything wrong?”

“No, no, nothing.”

Laura Welman said:

“You just thought I was being rather—cheap? My dear, you’re young and sensitive. Life, I’m afraid, is rather cheap….”

Elinor said with some slight bitterness:

“I suppose it is.”

Laura Welman said:

“My child—you are unhappy? What is it?”

“Nothing—absolutely nothing.” She got up and went to the window. Half turning, she said:

“Aunt Laura, tell me, honestly, do you think love is ever a happy thing?”

Mrs. Welman’s face became grave.

“In the sense you mean, Elinor—no, probably not… To care passionately for another human creature brings always more sorrow than joy; but all the same, Elinor, one would not be without that experience. Anyone who has never really loved has never really lived….”

The girl nodded.

She said:

“Yes—you understand—you’ve known what it’s like—”

She turned suddenly, a questioning look in her eyes:

“Aunt Laura—”

The door opened and red-haired Nurse O’Brien came in.

She said in a sprightly manner:

“Mrs. Welman, here’s Doctor come to see you.”

III

Dr. Lord was a young man of thirty-two. He had sandy hair, a pleasantly ugly freckled face and a remarkably square jaw. His eyes were a keen, piercing light blue.

“Good morning, Mrs. Welman,” he said.

“Good morning, Dr. Lord. This is my niece, Miss Carlisle.”

A very obvious admiration sprang into Dr. Lord’s transparent face. He said, “How do you do?” The hand that Elinor extended to him he took rather gingerly as though he thought he might break it.

Mrs. Welman went on:

“Elinor and my nephew have come down to cheer me up.”

“Splendid!” said Dr. Lord. “Just what you need! It will do you a lot of good, I am sure, Mrs. Welman.”

He was still looking at Elinor with obvious admiration.

Elinor said, moving towards the door:

“Perhaps I shall see you before you go, Dr. Lord?”

“Oh—er—yes, of course.”

She went out, shutting the door behind her. Dr. Lord approached the bed, Nurse O’Brien fluttering behind him.

Mrs. Welman said with a twinkle:

“Going through the usual bag of tricks, Doctor: pulse, respiration, temperature? What humbugs you doctors are!”

Nurse O’Brien said with a sigh:

“Oh, Mrs. Welman. What a thing, now, to be saying to the doctor!”

Dr. Lord said with a twinkle:

“Mrs. Welman sees through me, Nurse! All the same, Mrs. Welman, I’ve got to do my stuff, you know. The trouble with me is I’ve never learnt the right bedside manner.”

“Your bedside manner’s all right. Actually you’re rather proud of it.”

Peter Lord chuckled and remarked:

“That’s what you say.”

After a few routine questions had been asked and answered, Dr. Lord leant back in his chair and smiled at his patient.

“Well,” he said. “You’re going on splendidly.”

Laura Welman said: “So I shall be up and walking round the house in a few weeks’ time?”

“Not quite so quickly as that.”

“No, indeed. You humbug! What’s the good of living stretched out like this, and cared for like a baby?”

Dr. Lord said:

“What’s the good of life, anyway? That’s the real question. Ever read about that nice mediaeval invention, the Little Ease? You couldn’t stand, sit or lie in it. You’d think anyone condemned to that would die in a few weeks. Not at all. One man lived for sixteen years in an iron cage, was released and lived to a hearty old age.”

Laura Welman said:

“What’s the point of this story?”

Peter Lord said:

“The point is that one’s got an instinct to live. One doesn’t live because one’s reason assents to living. People who, as we say, ‘would be better dead,’ don’t want to die! People who apparently have got everything to live for just let themselves fade out of life because they haven’t got the energy to fight.”

“Go on.”

“There’s nothing more. You’re one of the people who really want to live, whatever you say about it! And if your body wants to live, it’s no good your brain dishing out the other stuff.”

Mrs. Welman said with an abrupt change of subject:

“How do you like it down here?”

Peter Lord said, smiling:

“It suits me fine.”

“Isn’t it a bit irksome for a young man like you? Don’t you want to specialize? Don’t you find a country GP practice rather boring?”

Lord shook his sandy head.

“No, I like my job. I like people, you know, and I like ordinary everyday diseases. I don’t really want to pin down the rare bacillus of an obscure disease. I like measles and chicken pox and all the rest of it. I like seeing how different bodies react to them. I like seeing if I can’t improve on recognized treatment. The trouble with me is I’ve got absolutely no ambition. I shall stay here till I grow side-whiskers and people begin saying, ‘Of course, we’ve always had Dr. Lord, and he’s a nice old man: but he is very old-fashioned in his methods and perhaps we’d better call in young so-and-so, who’s so very up to date….’”

“H’m,” said Mrs. Welman. “You seem to have got it all taped out!”

Peter Lord got up.

“Well,” he said. “I must be off.”

Mrs. Welman said:

“My niece will want to speak to you, I expect. By the way, what do you think of her? You haven’t seen her before.”

Dr. Lord went suddenly scarlet. His very eyebrows blushed. He said:

“I—oh! she’s very good-looking, isn’t she? And—eh—clever and all that, I should think.”

Mrs. Welman was diverted. She thought to herself:

“How very young he is, really….”

Aloud she said:

"You ought to get married."

IV

Roddy had wandered into the garden. He had crossed the broad sweep of lawn and along a paved walk and had then entered the walled kitchen garden. It was well-kept and well-stocked. He wondered if he and Elinor would live at Hunterbury one day. He supposed that they would. He himself would like that. He preferred country life. He was a little doubtful about Elinor. Perhaps she'd like living in London better….

A little difficult to know where you were with Elinor. She didn't reveal much of what she thought and felt about things. He liked that about her… He hated people who reeled off their thoughts and feelings to you, who took it for granted that you wanted to know all their inner mechanism. Reserve was always more interesting.

Elinor, he thought judicially, was really quite perfect. Nothing about her ever jarred or offended. She was delightful to look at, witty to talk to—altogether the most charming of companions.

He thought complacently to himself:

"I'm damned lucky to have got her. Can't think what she sees in a chap like me."

For Roderick Welman, in spite of his fastidiousness, was not conceited. It did honestly strike him as strange that Elinor should have consented to marry him.

Life stretched ahead of him pleasantly enough. One knew pretty well where one was; that was always a blessing. He supposed that Elinor and he would be married quite soon—that is, if Elinor wanted to; perhaps she'd rather put it off for a bit. He mustn't rush her. They'd be a bit hard up at first. Nothing to worry about, though. He hoped sincerely that Aunt Laura wouldn't die for a long time to come. She was a dear and had always been nice to him, having him there for holidays, always interested in what he was doing.

His mind shied away from the thought of her actual death (his mind usually did shy away from any concrete unpleasantness). He didn’t like to visualize anything unpleasant too clearly… But—er—afterwards—well, it would be very pleasant to live here, especially as there would be plenty of money to keep it up. He wondered exactly how his aunt had left it. Not that it really mattered. With some women it would matter a good deal whether husband or wife had the money. But not with Elinor. She had plenty of tact and she didn’t care enough about money to make too much of it.

He thought: “No, there’s nothing to worry about—whatever happens!”

He went out of the walled garden by the gate at the far end. From there he wandered into the little wood where the daffodils were in spring. They were over now, of course. But the green light was very lovely where the sunlight came filtering through the trees.

Just for a moment an odd restlessness came to him—a rippling of his previous placidity. He felt: “There’s something—something I haven’t got—something I want—I want—I want….”

The golden green light, the softness in the air—with them came a quickened pulse, a stirring of the blood, a sudden impatience.

A girl came through the trees towards him—a girl with pale, gleaming hair and a rose-flushed skin.

He thought, “How beautiful—how unutterably beautiful.”

Something gripped him; he stood quite still, as though frozen into immobility. The world, he felt, was spinning, was topsy-turvy, was suddenly and impossibly and gloriously crazy!

The girl stopped suddenly, then she came on. She came up to him where he stood, dumb and absurdly fishlike, his mouth open.

She said with a little hesitation:

“Don’t you remember me, Mr. Roderick? It’s a long time of course. I’m Mary Gerrard, from the lodge.”

Roddy said:

“Oh—oh—you’re Mary Gerrard?”

She said: “Yes.”

Then she went on rather shyly:

“I’ve changed, of course, since you saw me.”

He said: “Yes, you’ve changed. I—I wouldn’t have recognized you.”

He stood staring at her. He did not hear footsteps behind him. Mary did and turned.

Elinor stood motionless a minute. Then she said:

“Hello, Mary.”

Mary said:

“How do you do, Miss Elinor? It’s nice to see you. Mrs. Welman has been looking forward to you coming down.”

Elinor said:

“Yes—it’s a long time. I—Nurse O’Brien sent me to look for you. She wants to lift Mrs. Welman up, and she says you usually do it with her.”

Mary said: “I’ll go at once.”

She moved off, breaking into a run. Elinor stood looking after her. Mary ran well, grace in every movement.

Roddy said softly: “Atalanta…”

Elinor did not answer. She stood quite still for a minute or two. Then she said:

“It’s nearly lunchtime. We’d better go back.”

They walked side by side towards the house.

V

“Oh! Come on, Mary. It’s Garbo, and a grand film—all about Paris. And a story by a tiptop author. There was an opera of it once.”

“It’s frightfully nice of you, Ted, but I really won’t.”

Ted Bigland said angrily:

“I can’t make you out nowadays, Mary. You’re different—altogether different.”

“No, I’m not, Ted.”

“You are! I suppose because you’ve been away to that grand school and to Germany. You’re too good for us now.”

“It’s not true, Ted. I’m not like that.”

She spoke vehemently.

The young man, a fine sturdy specimen, looked at her appraisingly in spite of his anger.

“Yes, you are. You’re almost a lady, Mary.”

Mary said with sudden bitterness:

“Almost isn’t much good, is it?”

He said with sudden understanding:

“No, I reckon it isn’t.”

Mary said quickly:

“Anyway, who cares about that sort of thing nowadays? Ladies and gentlemen, and all that!”

“It doesn’t matter like it did—no,” Ted assented, but thoughtfully. “All the same, there’s a feeling. Lord, Mary, you look like a duchess or a countess or something.”

Mary said:

“That’s not saying much. I’ve seen countesses looking like old-clothes women!”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

A stately figure of ample proportions, handsomely dressed in black, bore down upon them. Her eyes gave them a sharp glance. Ted moved aside a step or two. He said:

“Afternoon, Mrs. Bishop.”

Mrs. Bishop inclined her head graciously.

“Good afternoon, Ted Bigland. Good afternoon, Mary.”

She passed on, a ship in full sail.

Ted looked respectfully after her.

Mary murmured.

“Now, she really is like a duchess!”

“Yes—she’s got a manner. Always makes me feel hot inside my collar.”

Mary said slowly:

"She doesn't like me."

"Nonsense, my girl."

"It's true. She doesn't. She's always saying sharp things to me."

"Jealous," said Ted, nodding his head sapiently. "That's all it is."

Mary said doubtfully:

"I suppose it might be that…."

"That's it, depend upon it. She's been housekeeper at Hunterbury for years, ruling the roost and ordering everyone about and now old Mrs. Welman takes a fancy to you, and it puts her out! That's all it is."

Mary said, a shade of trouble on her forehead:

"It's silly of me, but I can't bear it when anyone doesn't like me. I want people to like me."

"Sure to be women who don't like you, Mary! Jealous cats who think you're too good-looking!"

Mary said:

"I think jealousy's horrible."

Ted said slowly:

"Maybe—but it exists all right. Say, I saw a lovely film over at Alledore last week. Clark Gable. All about one of these millionaire blokes who neglected his wife; and then she pretended she'd done the dirty on him. And there was another fellow…."

Mary moved away. She said:

"Sorry, Ted, I must go. I'm late."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to have tea with Nurse Hopkins."

Ted made a face.

"Funny taste. That woman's the biggest gossip in the village! Pokes that long nose of hers into everything."

Mary said:

"She's been very kind to me always."

"Oh, I'm not saying there's any harm in her. But she talks."

Mary said:

"Goodbye, Ted."

She hurried off, leaving him standing gazing resentfully after her.

VI

Nurse Hopkins occupied a small cottage at the end of the village. She herself had just come in and was untying her bonnet strings when Mary entered.

"Ah, there you are. I'm a bit late. Old Mrs. Caldecott was bad again. Made me late with my round of dressings. I saw you with Ted Bigland at the end of the street."

Mary said rather dispiritedly:

"Yes…."

Nurse Hopkins looked up alertly from where she was stooping to light the gas ring under the kettle.

Her long nose twitched.

“Was he saying something particular to you, my dear?”

“No. He just asked me to go to the cinema.”

“I see,” said Nurse Hopkins promptly. “Well, of course, he’s a nice young fellow and doesn’t do too badly at the garage, and his father does rather better than most of the farmers round here. All the same, my dear, you don’t seem to me cut out for Ted Bigland’s wife. Not with your education and all. As I was saying, if I was you I’d go in for massage when the time comes. You get about a bit and see people that way; and your time’s more or less your own.”

Mary said:

“I’ll think it over. Mrs. Welman spoke to me the other day. She was very sweet about it. It was just exactly as you said it was. She doesn’t want me to go away just now. She’d miss me, she said. But she told me not to worry about the future, that she meant to help me.”

Nurse Hopkins said dubiously:

“Let’s hope she’s put that down in black and white! Sick people are odd.”

Mary asked:

“Do you think Mrs. Bishop really dislikes me—or is it only my fancy?”

Nurse Hopkins considered a minute.

“She puts on a sour face, I must say. She’s one of those who don’t like seeing young people having a good time or anything done for them. Thinks, perhaps, Mrs. Welman is a bit too fond of you, and resents it.”

She laughed cheerfully.

“I shouldn’t worry if I was you, Mary, my dear. Just open that paper bag, will you? There’s a couple of doughnuts in it.”

Three

Your Aunt had second stroke last night No cause immediate anxiety but suggest you should come down if possible Lord.

II

Immediately on receipt of the telegram Elinor had rung up Roddy, and now they were in the train together bound for Hunterbury.

Elinor had not seen much of Roddy in the week that had elapsed since their visit. On the two brief occasions when they had met, there had been an odd kind of constraint between them. Roddy had sent her flowers—a great sheaf of long stemmed roses. It was unusual on his part. At a dinner they had had together he had seemed more attentive than usual, consulting her preferences in food and drink, being unusually assiduous in helping her on and off with her coat. A little, Elinor thought, as though he were playing a part in a play—the part of the devoted fiancé….

Then she had said to herself:

“Don’t be an idiot. Nothing’s wrong… You imagine things! It’s that beastly brooding, possessive mind of yours.”

Her manner to him had been perhaps a shade more detached, more aloof than usual.

Now, in this sudden emergency, the constraint passed, they talked together naturally enough.

Roddy said:

“Poor old dear, and she was so well when we saw her the other day.”

Elinor said:

"I do mind so terribly for her. I know how she hated being ill, anyway, and now I suppose she'll be more helpless still, and she'll simply loathe that! One does feel, Roddy, that people ought to be set free—if they themselves really want it."

Roddy said:

"I agree. It's the only civilized thing to do. You put animals out of their pain. I suppose you don't do it with human beings simply because, human nature being what it is, people would get shoved off for their money by their fond relations—perhaps when they weren't really bad at all."

Elinor said thoughtfully:

"It would be in the doctors' hands, of course."

"A doctor might be a crook."

"You could trust a man like Dr. Lord."

Roddy said carelessly:

"Yes, he seems straightforward enough. Nice fellow."

III

Dr. Lord was leaning over the bed. Nurse O'Brien hovered behind him. He was trying, his forehead puckered, to understand the slurred sounds coming from his patient's mouth.

He said:

"Yes, yes. Now, don't get excited. Take plenty of time. Just raise this right hand a little when you mean yes. There's something you're worried about?"

He received the affirmatory sign.

"Something urgent? Yes. Something you want done? Someone sent for? Miss Carlisle? And Mr. Welman? They're on their way."

Again Mrs. Welman tried incoherently to speak. Dr. Lord listened attentively.

“You wanted them to come, but it’s not that? Someone else? A relation? No? Some business matter? I see. Something to do with money? Lawyer? That’s right, isn’t it? You want to see your lawyer? Want to give him instructions about something?

“Now, now—that’s all right. Keep calm. Plenty of time. What’s that you’re saying—Elinor?” He caught the garbled name. “She knows what lawyer? And she will arrange with him? Good. She’ll be here in about half an hour. I’ll tell her what you want and I’ll come up with her and we’ll get it all straight. Now, don’t worry any more. Leave it all to me. I’ll see that things are arranged the way you want them to be.”

He stood a moment watching her relax, then he moved quietly away and went out on the landing. Nurse O’Brien followed him. Nurse Hopkins was just coming up the stairs. He nodded to her. She said breathlessly:

“Good evening, Doctor.”

“Good evening, Nurse.”

He went with the two of them into Nurse O’Brien’s room next door and gave them their instructions. Nurse Hopkins would remain on overnight and take charge with Nurse O’Brien.

“Tomorrow I’ll have to get hold of a second resident nurse. Awkward, this diphtheria epidemic over at Stamford. The nursing homes there are working shorthanded as it is.”

Then, having given his orders, which were listened to with reverent attention (which sometimes tickled him), Dr. Lord went downstairs, ready to receive the niece and nephew who, his watch told him, were due to arrive at any minute now.

In the hall he encountered Mary Gerrard. Her face was pale and anxious. She asked:

“Is she better?”

Dr. Lord said:

“I can ensure her a peaceful night—that’s about all that can be done.”

Mary said brokenly:

“It seems so cruel—so unfair—”

He nodded sympathetically enough.

“Yes, it does seem like that sometimes. I believe—”

He broke off.

“That’s the car.”

He went out into the hall. Mary ran upstairs.

Elinor exclaimed as she came into the drawing room:

“Is she very bad?”

Roddy was looking pale and apprehensive.

The doctor said gravely:

“I’m afraid it will be rather a shock to you. She’s badly paralysed. Her speech is almost unrecognizable. By the way, she’s definitely worried about something. It’s to do with sending for her lawyer. You know who he is, Miss Carlisle?”

Elinor said quickly:

“Mr. Seddon—of Bloomsbury Square. But he wouldn’t be there at this time of the evening, and I don’t know his home address.”

Dr. Lord said reassuringly:

"Tomorrow will be in plenty of time. But I'm anxious to set Mrs. Welman's mind at rest as soon as possible. If you will come up with me now, Miss Carlisle, I think together we shall be able to reassure her."

"Of course. I will come up at once."

Roddy said hopefully:

"You don't want me?"

He felt faintly ashamed of himself, but he had a nervous dread of going up to the sickroom, of seeing Aunt Laura lying there in-articulate and helpless.

Dr. Lord reassured him promptly.

"Not the least need, Mr. Welman. Better not to have too many people in the room."

Roddy's relief showed plainly.

Dr. Lord and Elinor went upstairs. Nurse O'Brien was with the patient.

Laura Welman, breathing deeply and stertorously, lay as though in a stupor. Elinor stood looking down on her, shocked by the drawn, twisted face.

Suddenly Mrs. Welman's right eyelid quivered and opened. A faint change came over her face as she recognized Elinor.

She tried to speak.

"Elinor…" The word would have been meaningless to anyone who had not guessed at what she wanted to say.

Elinor said quickly:

"I'm here, Aunt Laura. You're worried about something? You want me to send for Mr. Seddon?"

Another of those hoarse raucous sounds. Elinor guessed at the meaning. She said:

“Mary Gerrard?”

Slowly the right hand moved shakily in assent.

A long burble of sound came from the sick woman’s lips. Dr. Lord and Elinor frowned helplessly. Again and again it came. Then Elinor got a word.

“Provision? You want to make provision for her in your will? You want her to have some money? I see, dear Aunt Laura. That will be quite simple. Mr. Seddon will come down tomorrow and everything shall be arranged exactly as you wish.”

The sufferer seemed relieved. The look of distress faded from that appealing eye. Elinor took her hand in hers and felt a feeble pressure from the fingers.

Mrs. Welman said with a great effort:

“You—all—you…”

Elinor said: “Yes, yes, leave it all to me. I will see that everything you want is done!”

She felt the pressure of the fingers again. Then it relaxed. The eyelids drooped and closed.

Dr. Lord laid a hand on Elinor’s arm and drew her gently away out of the room. Nurse O’Brien resumed her seat near the bed.

Outside on the landing Mary Gerrard was talking to Nurse Hopkins. She started forward.

“Oh, Dr. Lord, can I go in to her, please?”

He nodded.

“Keep quite quiet, though, and don’t disturb her.”

Mary went into the sickroom.

Dr. Lord said:

“Your train was late. You—” He stopped.

Elinor had turned her head to look after Mary. Suddenly she became aware of his abrupt silence. She turned her head and looked at him inquiringly. He was staring at her, a startled look in his face. The colour rose in Elinor’s cheeks.

She said hurriedly:

“I beg your pardon. What did you say?”

Peter Lord said slowly:

“What was I saying? I don’t remember. Miss Carlisle, you were splendid in there!” He spoke warmly. “Quick to understand, reassuring, everything you should have been.”

The very faintest of sniffs came from Nurse Hopkins.

Elinor said:

“Poor darling. It upset me terribly seeing her like that.”

“Of course. But you didn’t show it. You must have great self-control.”

Elinor said, her lips set very straight:

“I’ve learnt not—to show my feelings.”

The doctor said slowly:

“All the same the mask’s bound to slip once in a while.”

Nurse Hopkins had bustled into the bathroom. Elinor said, raising her delicate eyebrows and looking full at him:

“The mask?”

Dr. Lord said:

“The human face is, after all, nothing more nor less than a mask.”

“And underneath?”

“Underneath is the primitive human man or woman.”

She turned away quickly and led the way downstairs.

Peter Lord followed, puzzled and unwontedly serious.

Roddy came out into the hall to meet them.

“Well?” he asked anxiously.

Elinor said:

“Poor darling. It’s very sad to see her… I shouldn’t go, Roddy—till—till—she asks for you.”

Roddy asked:

“Did she want anything—special?”

Peter Lord said to Elinor:

“I must be off now. There’s nothing more I can do for the moment. I’ll look in early tomorrow. Good-bye, Miss Carlisle. Don’t—don’t worry too much.”

He held her hand in his for a moment or two. He had a strangely reassuring and comforting clasp. He looked at her, Elinor thought, rather oddly as though—as though he was sorry for her.

As the door shut behind the doctor, Roddy repeated his question.

Elinor said:

“Aunt Laura is worried about—about certain business matters. I managed to pacify her and told her Mr. Seddon would certainly come down tomorrow. We must telephone him first thing.”

Roddy asked:

“Does she want to make a new will?”

Elinor answered:

“She didn’t say so.”

“What did she—?”

He stopped in the middle of the question.

Mary Gerrard was running down the stairs. She crossed the hall and disappeared through the door to the kitchen quarters.

Elinor said in a harsh voice:

“Yes? What is it you wanted to ask?”

Roddy said vaguely:

“I—what? I’ve forgotten what it was.”

He was staring at the door through which Mary Gerrard had gone.

Elinor’s hands closed. She could feel her long, pointed nails biting into the flesh of her palms.

She thought:

“I can’t bear it—I can’t bear it…it’s not imagination…it’s true… Roddy—Roddy I can’t lose you….”

And she thought:

“What did that man—the doctor—what did he see in my face upstairs? He saw something… Oh, God, how awful life is—to feel as I feel now. Say something, fool. Pull yourself together!”

Aloud she said, in her calm voice:

“About meals, Roddy. I’m not very hungry. I’ll sit with Aunt Laura and the nurses can both come down.”

Roddy said in alarm:

“And have dinner with me?”

Elinor said coldly:

“They won’t bite you!”

“But what about you? You must have something. Why don’t we dine first, and let them come down afterwards?”

Elinor said:

“No, the other way’s better.” She added wildly, “They’re so touchy, you know.”

She thought:

“I can’t sit through a meal with him—alone—talking—behaving as usual….”

She said impatiently:

“Oh, do let me arrange things my own way!”

Four

It was no mere housemaid who wakened Elinor the following morning. It was Mrs. Bishop in person, rustling in her old-fashioned black, and weeping unashamedly.

“Oh, Miss Elinor, she’s gone….”

“What?”

Elinor sat up in bed.

“Your dear aunt. Mrs. Welman. My dear mistress. Passed away in her sleep.”

“Aunt Laura? Dead?”

Elinor stared. She seemed unable to take it in.

Mrs. Bishop was weeping now with more abandon.

“To think of it,” she sobbed. “After all these years! Eighteen years I’ve been here. But indeed it doesn’t seem like it….”

Elinor said slowly:

“So Aunt Laura died in her sleep—quite peacefully… What a blessing for her!”

Mrs. Bishop wept.

“So sudden. The doctor saying he’d call again this morning and everything just as usual.”

Elinor said rather sharply:

"It wasn't exactly sudden. After all, she's been ill for some time. I'm just so thankful she's been spared more suffering."

Mrs. Bishop said tearfully that there was indeed that to be thankful for. She added:

"Who'll tell Mr. Roderick?"

Elinor said:

"I will."

She threw on a dressing gown and went along to his door and tapped. His voice answered, saying, "Come in."

She entered.

"Aunt Laura's dead, Roddy. She died in her sleep."

Roddy, sitting up in bed, drew a deep sigh.

"Poor dear Aunt Laura! Thank God for it, I say. I couldn't have borne to see her go on lingering in the state she was yesterday."

Elinor said mechanically:

"I didn't know you'd seen her?"

He nodded rather shamefacedly.

"The truth is, Elinor, I felt the most awful coward, because I'd funked it! I went along there yesterday evening. The nurse, the fat one, left the room for something—went down with a hot-water bottle, I think—and I slipped in. She didn't know I was there, of course. I just stood a bit and looked at her. Then, when I heard Mrs. Gamp stumping up the stairs again, I slipped away. But it was—pretty terrible!"

Elinor nodded.

"Yes, it was."

Roddy said:

"She'd have hated it like hell—every minute of it!"

"I know."

Roddy said:

"It's marvellous the way you and I always see alike over things."

Elinor said in a low voice:

"Yes it is."

He said:

"We're both feeling the same thing at this minute: just utter thankfulness that she's out of it all…."

II

Nurse O'Brien said:

"What is it, Nurse? Can't you find something?"

Nurse Hopkins, her face rather red, was hunting through the little attaché case that she had laid down in the hall the preceding evening.

She grunted:

"Most annoying. How I came to do such a thing I can't imagine!"

"What is it?"

Nurse Hopkins replied not very intelligibly:

"It's Eliza Rykin—that sarcoma, you know. She's got to have double injections—night and morning—morphine. Gave her the last tablet in the old tube last night on my way here, and I could swear I had the new tube in here, too."

"Look again. Those tubes are so small."

Nurse Hopkins gave a final stir to the contents of the attaché case.

"No, it's not here! I must have left it in my cupboard after all! Really, I did think I could trust my memory better than that. I could have sworn I took it out with me!"

"You didn't leave the case anywhere, did you, on the way here?"

"Of course not!" said Nurse Hopkins sharply.

"Oh, well, dear," said Nurse O'Brien, "it must be all right?"

"Oh, yes! The only place I've laid my case down was here in this hall, and nobody here would pinch anything! Just my memory, I suppose. But it vexes me, if you understand, Nurse. Besides, I shall have to go right home first to the other end of the village and back again."

Nurse O'Brien said:

"Hope you won't have too tiring a day, dear, after last night. Poor old lady. I didn't think she would last long."

"No, nor I. I daresay Doctor will be surprised!"

Nurse O'Brien said with a tinge of disapproval:

"He's always so hopeful about his cases."

Nurse Hopkins, as she prepared to depart, said:

"Ah, he's young! He hasn't our experience."

On which gloomy pronouncement she departed.

III

Dr. Lord raised himself up on his toes. His sandy eyebrows climbed right up his forehead till they nearly got merged in his hair.

He said in surprise:

“So she’s conked out—eh?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

On Nurse O’Brien’s tongue exact details were tingling to be uttered, but with stern discipline she waited.

Peter Lord said thoughtfully:

“Conked out?”

He stood for a moment thinking, then he said sharply:

“Get me some boiling water.”

Nurse O’Brien was surprised and mystified, but true to the spirit of hospital training, hers not to reason why. If a doctor had told her to go and get the skin of an alligator she would have murmured automatically, “Yes, Doctor,” and glided obediently from the room to tackle the problem.

IV

Roderick Welman said:

“Do you mean to say that my aunt died intestate—that she never made a will at all?”

Mr. Seddon polished his eyeglasses. He said:

“That seems to be the case.”

Roddy said:

“But how extraordinary!”

Mr. Seddon gave a deprecating cough.

“Not so extraordinary as you might imagine. It happens oftener than you would think. There’s a kind of superstition about it. People will think they’ve got plenty of time. The mere fact of making a will seems to bring the possibility of death nearer to them. Very odd—but there it is!”

Roddy said:

“Didn’t you ever—er—expostulate with her on the subject?”

Mr. Seddon replied drily:

“Frequently.”

“And what did she say?”

Mr. Seddon sighed.

“The usual things. That there was plenty of time! That she didn’t intend to die just yet! That she hadn’t made up her mind definitely, exactly how she wished to dispose of her money!”

Elinor said:

“But surely, after her first stroke—?”

Mr. Seddon shook his head.

“Oh, no, it was worse then. She wouldn’t hear the subject mentioned!”

Roddy said:

“Surely that’s very odd?”

Mr. Seddon said again:

“Oh, no. Naturally, her illness made her much more nervous.”

Elinor said in a puzzled voice:

“But she wanted to die….”

Polishing his eyeglasses, Mr. Seddon said:

“Ah, my dear Miss Elinor, the human mind is a very curious piece of mechanism. Mrs. Welman may have thought she wanted to die; but side by side with that feeling there ran the hope that she would recover absolutely. And because of that hope, I think she felt that to make a will would be unlucky. It isn’t so much that she didn’t mean to make one, as that she was eternally putting it off.”

“You know,” went on Mr. Seddon, suddenly addressing Roddy in an almost personal manner, “how one puts off and avoids a thing that is distasteful—that you don’t want to face?”

Roddy flushed. He muttered:

“Yes, I—I—yes, of course. I know what you mean.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Seddon. “Mrs. Welman always meant to make a will, but tomorrow was always a better day to make it than today! She kept telling herself that there was plenty of time.”

Elinor said slowly:

“So that’s why she was so upset last night—and in such a panic that you should be sent for….”

Mr. Seddon replied:

“Undoubtedly!”

Roddy said in a bewildered voice:

“But what happens now?”

“To Mrs. Welman’s estate?” The lawyer coughed. “Since Mrs. Welman died intestate, all her property goes to her next of kin—that is, to Miss Elinor Carlisle.”

Elinor said slowly.

“All to me?”

“The Crown takes a certain percentage,” Mr. Seddon explained.

He went into details.

He ended:

“There are no settlements or trusts. Mrs. Welman’s money was hers absolutely to do with as she chose. It passes, therefore, straight to Miss Carlisle. Er—the death duties, I am afraid, will be somewhat heavy, but even after their payment, the fortune will still be a considerable one, and it is very well invested in sound gilt-edged securities.”

Elinor said:

“But Roderick—”

Mr. Seddon said with a little apologetic cough:

“Mr. Welman is only Mrs. Welman’s husband’s nephew. There is no blood relationship.”

“Quite,” said Roddy.

Elinor said slowly:

“Of course, it doesn’t much matter which of us gets it, as we’re going to be married.”

But she did not look at Roddy.

It was Mr. Seddon’s turn to say, “Quite!”

He said it rather quickly.

V

“But it doesn’t matter, does it?” Elinor said.

She spoke almost pleadingly.

Mr. Seddon had departed.

Roddy’s face twitched nervously.

He said:

“You ought to have it. It’s quite right you should. For heaven’s sake, Elinor, don’t get it into your head that I grudge it to you. I don’t want the damned money!”

Elinor said, her voice slightly unsteady:

“We did agree, Roddy, in London that it wouldn’t matter which of us it was, as—as we were going to be married…?”

He did not answer. She persisted:

“Don’t you remember saying that, Roddy?”

He said:

“Yes.”

He looked down at his feet. His face was white and sullen, there was pain in the taut lines of his sensitive mouth.

Elinor said with a sudden gallant lift of the head:

“It doesn’t matter—if we’re going to be married… But are we, Roddy?”

He said:

“Are we what?”

“Are we going to marry each other?”

“I understood that was the idea.”

His tone was indifferent, with a slight edge to it. He went on:

“Of course, Elinor, if you’ve other ideas now….”

Elinor cried out:

“Oh, Roddy, can’t you be honest?”

He winced.

Then he said in a low, bewildered voice:

“I don’t know what’s happened to me….”

Elinor said in a stifled voice:

“I do….”

He said quickly:

“Perhaps it’s true, that. I don’t after all, quite like the idea of living on my wife’s money….”

Elinor, her face white, said:

“It’s not that… It’s something else…” She paused, then she said, “It’s—Mary, isn’t it?”

Roddy murmured unhappily:

“I suppose so. How did you know?”

Elinor said, her mouth twisting sideways in a crooked smile:

“It wasn’t difficult… Every time you look at her—it’s there in your face for anyone to read….”

Suddenly his composure broke.

“Oh, Elinor—I don’t know what’s the matter! I think I’m going mad! It happened when I saw her—that first day—in the wood…just her face—it’s—it’s turned everything upside down. You can’t understand that….”

Elinor said:

“Yes, I can. Go on.”

Roddy said helplessly:

“I didn’t want to fall in love with her… I was quite happy with you. Oh, Elinor, what a cad I am, talking like this to you….”

Elinor said:

“Nonsense. Go on. Tell me….”

He said brokenly:

“You’re wonderful… Talking to you helps frightfully. I’m so terribly fond of you, Elinor! You must believe that. This other thing is like an enchantment! It’s upset everything: my conception of life—and my enjoyment of things—and—all the decent ordered reasonable things….”

Elinor said gently:

“Love—isn’t very reasonable….”

Roddy said miserably:

“No….”

Elinor said, and her voice trembled a little:

“Have you said anything to her?”

Roddy said:

“This morning—like a fool—I lost my head—”

Elinor said:

“Yes?”

Roddy said:

“Of course she—she shut me up at once! She was shocked. Because of Aunt Laura and—of you—”

Elinor drew the diamond ring off her finger. She said:

“You’d better take it back, Roddy.”

Taking it, he murmured without looking at her:

“Elinor, you’ve no idea what a beast I feel.”

Elinor said in her calm voice:

“Do you think she’ll marry you?”

He shook his head.

“I’ve no idea. Not—not for a long time. I don’t think she cares for me now; but she might come to care….”

Elinor said:

“I think you’re right. You must give her time. Not see her for a bit, and then—start afresh.”

“Darling Elinor! You’re the best friend anyone ever had.” He took her hand suddenly and kissed it. “You know, Elinor, I do love you—just as much as ever! Sometimes Mary seems just like a dream. I might wake up from it—and find she wasn’t there….”

Elinor said:

“If Mary wasn’t there….”

Roddy said with sudden feeling:

“Sometimes I wish she wasn’t… You and I, Elinor, belong. We do belong, don’t we?”

Slowly she bent her head.

She said:

“Oh, yes—we belong.”

She thought:

“If Mary wasn’t there….”

Five

Nurse Hopkins said with emotion:

“It was a beautiful funeral!”

Nurse O’Brien responded:

“It was, indeed. And the flowers! Did you ever see such beautiful flowers? A harp of white lilies there was, and a cross of yellow roses. Beautiful.”

Nurse Hopkins sighed and helped herself to buttered teacake. The two nurses were sitting in the Blue Tit Café.

Nurse Hopkins went on:

“Miss Carlisle is a generous girl. She gave me a nice present, though she’d no call to do so.”

“She’s a fine generous girl,” agreed Nurse O’Brien warmly. “I do detest stinginess.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Well, it’s a grand fortune she’s inherited.”

Nurse O’Brien said, “I wonder…” and stopped.

Nurse Hopkins said, “Yes?” encouragingly.

“’Twas strange the way the old lady made no will.”

“It was wicked,” Nurse Hopkins said sharply. “People ought to be forced to make wills! It only leads to unpleasantness when they don’t.”

“I’m wondering,” said Nurse O’Brien, “if she had made a will, how she’d have left her money?”

Nurse Hopkins said firmly:

“I know one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“She’d have left a sum of money to Mary—Mary Gerrard.”

“Yes, indeed, and that’s true,” agreed the other. She added excitedly, “Wasn’t I after telling you that night of the state she was in, poor dear, and the doctor doing his best to calm her down. Miss Elinor was there holding her auntie’s hand and swearing by God Almighty,” said Nurse O’Brien, her Irish imagination suddenly running away with her, “that the lawyer should be sent for and everything done accordingly. ‘Mary! Mary!’ the poor old lady said. ‘Is it Mary Gerrard you’re meaning?’ says Miss Elinor, and straightaway she swore that Mary should have her rights!”

Nurse Hopkins said rather doubtfully:

“Was it like that?”

Nurse O’Brien replied firmly:

“That was the way of it, and I’ll tell you this, Nurse Hopkins: In my opinion, if Mrs. Welman had lived to make that will, it’s likely there might have been surprises for all! Who knows she mightn’t have left every penny she possessed to Mary Gerrard!”

Nurse Hopkins said dubiously:

“I don’t think she’d do that. I don’t hold with leaving your money away from your own flesh and blood.”

Nurse O’Brien said oracularly:

“There’s flesh and blood and flesh and blood.”

Nurse Hopkins responded instantly:

“Now, what might you mean by that?”

Nurse O’Brien said with dignity:

“I’m not one to gossip! And I wouldn’t be blackening anyone’s name that’s dead.”

Nurse Hopkins nodded her head slowly and said:

“That’s right. I agree with you. Least said soonest mended.”

She filled up the teapot.

Nurse O’Brien said:

“By the way, now, did you find that tube of morphine all right when you got home?”

Nurse Hopkins frowned. She said:

“No. It beats me to know what can have become of it, but I think it may have been this way: I might have set it down on the edge of the mantelpiece as I often do while I lock the cupboard, and it might have rolled and fallen into the wastepaper basket that was all full of rubbish and that was emptied out into the dustbin just as I left the house.” She paused. “It must be that way, for I don’t see what else could have become of it.”

“I see,” said Nurse O’Brien. “Well, dear, that must have been it. It’s not as though you’d left your case about anywhere else—only just in the hall at Hunterbury—so it seems to me that what you suggested just now must be so. It’s gone into the rubbish bin.”

“That’s right,” said Nurse Hopkins eagerly. “It couldn’t be any other way, could it?”

She helped herself to a pink sugar cake. She said, “It’s not as though…” and stopped.

The other agreed quickly—perhaps a little too quickly.

“I’d not be worrying about it any more if I was you,” she said comfortably.

Nurse Hopkins said:

“I’m not worrying….”

II

Young and severe in her black dress, Elinor sat in front of Mrs. Welman’s massive writing table in the library. Various papers were spread out in front of her. She had finished interviewing the servants and Mrs. Bishop. Now it was Mary Gerrard who entered the room and hesitated a minute by the doorway.

“You wanted to see me, Miss Elinor?” she said.

Elinor looked up.

“Oh, yes, Mary. Come here and sit down, will you?”

Mary came and sat in the chair Elinor indicated. It was turned a little towards the window, and the light from it fell on her face, showing the dazzling purity of the skin and bringing out the pale gold of the girl’s hair.

Elinor held one hand shielding her face a little. Between the fingers she could watch the other girl’s face.

She thought:

“Is it possible to hate anyone so much and not show it?”

Aloud she said in a pleasant, businesslike voice:

“I think you know, Mary, that my aunt always took a great interest in you and would have been concerned about your future.”

Mary murmured in her soft voice:

“Mrs. Welman was very good to me always.”

Elinor went on, her voice cold and detached:

“My aunt, if she had had time to make a will, would have wished, I know, to leave several legacies. Since she died without making a will, the responsibility of carrying out her wishes rests on me. I have consulted with Mr. Seddon, and by his advice we have drawn up a schedule of sums for the servants according to their length of service, etc.” She paused. “You, of course, don’t come quite into that class.”

She half-hoped, perhaps, that those words might hold a sting, but the face she was looking at showed no change. Mary accepted the words at their face value and listened to what more was to come.

Elinor said:

“Though it was difficult for my aunt to speak coherently, she was able to make her meaning understood that last evening. She definitely wanted to make some provision for your future.”

Mary said quietly:

“That was very good of her.”

Elinor said brusquely:

“As soon as probate is granted, I am arranging that two thousand pounds should be made over to you—that sum to be yours to do with absolutely as you please.”

Mary’s colour rose.

“Two thousand pounds? Oh, Miss Elinor, that is good of you! I don’t know what to say.”

Elinor said sharply:

“It isn’t particularly good of me, and please don’t say anything.”

Mary flushed.

"You don't know what a difference it will make to me," she murmured.

Elinor said:

"I'm glad."

She hesitated. She looked away from Mary to the other side of the room. She said with a slight effort:

"I wonder—have you any plans?"

Mary said quickly:

"Oh, yes. I shall train for something. Massage, perhaps. That's what Nurse Hopkins advises."

Elinor said:

"That sounds a very good idea. I will try and arrange with Mr. Seddon that some money shall be advanced to you as soon as possible—at once, if that is feasible."

"You're very, very good, Miss Elinor," said Mary gratefully.

Elinor said curtly:

"It was Aunt Laura's wish." She hesitated, then said, "Well, that's all, I think."

This time the definite dismissal in the words pierced Mary's sensitive skin. She got up, said quietly, "Thank you very much, Miss Elinor," and left the room.

Elinor sat quite still, staring ahead of her. Her face was quite impassive. There was no clue in it as to what was going on in her mind. But she sat there, motionless, for a long time….

III

Elinor went at last in search of Roddy. She found him in the morning room. He was standing staring out of the window. He turned sharply as Elinor came in.

She said:

“I’ve got through it all! Five hundred for Mrs. Bishop—she’s been here such years. A hundred for the cook and fifty each for Milly and Olive. Five pounds each to the others. Twenty-five for Stephens, the head gardener; and there’s old Gerrard, of course, at the Lodge. I haven’t done anything about him yet. It’s awkward. He’ll have to be pensioned off, I suppose?”

She paused and then went on rather hurriedly:

“I’m settling two thousand on Mary Gerrard. Do you think that’s what Aunt Laura would have wished? It seemed to me about the right sum.”

Roddy said without looking at her:

“Yes, exactly right. You’ve always got excellent judgement, Elinor.”

He turned to look out of the window again.

Elinor held her breath for a minute, then she began to speak with nervous haste, the words tumbling out incoherently:

“There’s something more: I want to—it’s only right—I mean, you’ve got to have your proper share, Roddy.”

As he wheeled round, anger on his face, she hurried on:

“No, listen, Roddy. This is just bare justice! The money that was your uncle’s—that he left to his wife—naturally he always assumed it would come to you. Aunt Laura meant it to, too. I know she did, from lots of things she said. If I have her money, you should have the amount that was his—it’s only right. I—I can’t bear to feel I’ve robbed you—just because Aunt Laura funked making a will. You must—you must see sense about this!”

Roderick’s long, sensitive face had gone dead white.

He said:

“My God, Elinor, do you want to make me feel an utter cad? Do you think for one moment I could—could take this money from you?”

“I’m not giving it to you. It’s just—fair.”

Roddy cried out:

“I don’t want your money!”

“It isn’t mine!”

“It’s yours by law—and that’s all that matters! For God’s sake, don’t let’s be anything but strictly businesslike! I won’t take a penny from you. You’re not going to do the Lady Bountiful to me!”

Elinor cried out:

“Roddy!”

He made a quick gesture.

“Oh, my dear, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m saying. I feel so bewildered—so utterly lost….”

Elinor said gently:

“Poor Roddy….”

He had turned away again and was playing with the blind tassel of the window. He said in a different tone, a detached one:

“Do you know what—Mary Gerrard proposes doing?”

“She’s going to train as a masseuse, so she says.”

He said, “I see.”

There was a silence. Elinor drew herself up; she flung back her head. Her voice when she spoke was suddenly compelling.

She said:

“Roddy, I want you to listen to me carefully!”

He turned to her, slightly surprised.

“Of course, Elinor.”

“I want you, if you will, to follow my advice.”

“And what is your advice?”

Elinor said calmly:

“You are not particularly tied? You can always get a holiday, can’t you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then do—just that. Go abroad somewhere for—say, three months. Go by yourself. Make new friends and see new places. Let’s speak quite frankly. At this moment you think you’re in love with Mary Gerrard. Perhaps you are. But it isn’t a moment for approaching her—you know that only too well. Our engagement is definitely broken off. Go abroad, then, as a free man, and at the end of the three months, as a free man, make up your mind. You’ll know then whether you—really love Mary or whether it was only a temporary infatuation. And if you are quite sure you do love her—well, then, come back and go to her and tell her so, and that you’re quite sure about it, and perhaps then she’ll listen.”

Roddy came to her. He caught her hand in his.

“Elinor, you’re wonderful! So clearheaded! So marvellously impersonal! There’s no trace of pettiness or meanness about you. I admire you more than I can ever say. I’ll do exactly what you suggest. Go away, cut free from everything—and find out whether I've got the genuine disease or if I've just been making the most ghastly fool of myself. Oh, Elinor, my dear, you don't know how truly fond I am of you. I do realize you were always a thousand times too good for me. Bless you, dear, for all your goodness."

Quickly, impulsively, he kissed her cheek and went out of the room.

It was as well, perhaps, that he did not look back and see her face.

IV

It was a couple of days later that Mary acquainted Nurse Hopkins with her improved prospects.

That practical woman was warmly congratulatory.

"That's a great piece of luck for you, Mary," she said. "The old lady may have meant well by you, but unless a thing's down in black and white, intentions don't go for much! You might easily have got nothing at all."

"Miss Elinor said that the night Mrs. Welman died she told her to do something for me."

Nurse Hopkins snorted.

"Maybe she did. But there's many would have forgotten conveniently afterwards. Relations are like that. I've seen a few things, I can tell you! People dying and saying they know they can leave it to their dear son or their dear daughter to carry out their wishes. Nine times out of ten, dear son and dear daughter find some very good reason to do nothing of the kind. Human nature's human nature, and nobody likes parting with money if they're not legally compelled to! I tell you, Mary, my girl, you've been lucky. Miss Carlisle's straighter than most."

Mary said slowly:

"And yet—somehow—I feel she doesn't like me."

"With good reason, I should say," said Nurse Hopkins bluntly. "Now, don't look so innocent, Mary! Mr. Roderick's been making sheep's eyes at you for some time now."

Mary went red.

Nurse Hopkins went on:

"He's got it badly, in my opinion. Fell for you all of a sudden. What about you, my girl? Got any feelings for him?"

Mary said hesitatingly:

"I—I don't know. I don't think so. But of course, he's very nice."

"H'm," said Nurse Hopkins. "He wouldn't be my fancy! One of those men who are finicky and a bundle of nerves. Fussy about their food, too, as likely as not. Men aren't much at the best of times. Don't be in too much of a hurry, Mary, my dear. With your looks you can afford to pick and choose. Nurse O'Brien passed the remark to me the other day that you ought to go on the films. They like blondes, I've always heard."

Mary said, with a slight frown creasing her forehead:

"Nurse, what do you think I ought to do about Father? He thinks I ought to give some of this money to him."

"Don't you do anything of the kind," said Nurse Hopkins wrathfully. "Mrs. Welman never meant that money for him. It's my opinion he'd have lost his job years ago if it hadn't been for you. A lazier man never stepped!"

Mary said:

"It seems funny when she'd all that money that she never made a will to say how it was to go."

Nurse Hopkins shook her head.

"People are like that. You'd be surprised. Always putting it off."

Mary said:

"It seems downright silly to me."

Nurse Hopkins said with a faint twinkle:

"Made a will yourself, Mary?"

Mary stared at her.

"Oh, no."

"And yet you're over twenty-one."

"But I—I haven't got anything to leave—at least I suppose I have now."

Nurse Hopkins said sharply:

"Of course you have. And a nice tidy little sum, too."

Mary said:

"Oh, well, there's no hurry…."

"There you go," said Nurse Hopkins drily. "Just like everyone else. Because you're a healthy young girl isn't a reason why you shouldn't be smashed up in a charabanc or a bus, or run over in the street any minute."

Mary laughed. She said:

"I don't even know how to make a will."

"Easy enough. You can get a form at the post office. Let's go and get one right away."

In Nurse Hopkins' cottage, the form was spread out and the important matter discussed. Nurse Hopkins was enjoying herself thoroughly. A will, as she said, was next best to a death, in her opinion.

Mary said:

“Who’d get the money if I didn’t make a will?”

Nurse Hopkins said rather doubtfully:

“Your father, I suppose.”

Mary said sharply:

“He shan’t have it. I’d rather leave it to my auntie in New Zealand.”

Nurse Hopkins said cheerfully:

“It wouldn’t be much use leaving it to your father, anyway—he’s not long for this world, I should say.”

Mary had heard Nurse Hopkins make this kind of pronouncement too often to be impressed by it.

“I can’t remember my auntie’s address. We’ve not heard from her for years.”

“I don’t suppose that matters,” said Nurse Hopkins. “You know her Christian name?”

“Mary. Mary Riley.”

“That’s all right. Put down you leave everything to Mary Riley, sister of the late Eliza Gerrard of Hunterbury, Maidensford.”

Mary bent over the form, writing. As she came to the end she shivered suddenly. A shadow had come between her and the sun. She looked up to see Elinor Carlisle standing outside the window looking in. Elinor said:

“What are you doing so busily?”

Nurse Hopkins said with a laugh:

“She’s making her will, that’s what she’s doing.”

“Making her will?” Suddenly Elinor laughed—a strange laugh—almost hysterical.

She said:

“So you’re making your will, Mary. That’s funny. That’s very funny….”

Still laughing, she turned away and walked rapidly along the street.

Nurse Hopkins stared.

“Did you ever? What’s come to her?”

V

Elinor had not taken more than half a dozen steps—she was still laughing—when a hand fell on her arm from behind. She stopped abruptly and turned.

Dr. Lord looked straight at her, his brow creased into a frown.

He said peremptorily:

“What were you laughing at?”

Elinor said:

“Really—I don’t know.”

Peter Lord said:

“That’s rather a silly answer!”

Elinor flushed. She said:

“I think I must be nervous—or something. I looked in at the District Nurse’s cottage and—and Mary Gerrard was writing out her will. It made me laugh; I don’t know why!”

Lord said abruptly:

“Don’t you?”

Elinor said:

“It was silly of me—I tell you—I’m nervous.”

Peter Lord said:

“I’ll write you out a tonic.”

Elinor said incisively:

“How useful!”

He grinned disarmingly.

“Quite useless, I agree. But it’s the only thing one can do when people won’t tell one what is the matter with them!”

Elinor said:

“There’s nothing the matter with me.”

Peter Lord said calmly:

“There’s quite a lot the matter with you.”

Elinor said:

“I’ve had a certain amount of nervous strain, I suppose….”

He said:

“I expect you’ve had quite a lot. But that’s not what I’m talking about.” He paused. “Are you—are you staying down here much longer?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“You won’t—live down here?”

Elinor shook her head.

“No—never. I think—I think—I shall sell the place if I can get a good offer.”

Dr. Lord said rather flatly:

“I see….”

Elinor said:

“I must be getting home now.”

She held out her hand firmly. Peter Lord took it. He held it. He said very earnestly:

“Miss Carlisle, will you please tell me what was in your mind when you laughed just now?”

She wrenched her hand away quickly.

“What should there be in my mind?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

His face was grave and a little unhappy.

Elinor said impatiently:

“It just struck me as funny, that was all!”

“That Mary Gerrard was making a will? Why? Making a will is a perfectly sensible procedure. Saves a lot of trouble. Sometimes, of course, it makes trouble!”

Elinor said impatiently:

“Of course—everyone should make a will. I didn’t mean that.”

Dr. Lord said:

“Mrs. Welman ought to have made a will.”

Elinor said with feeling:

“Yes, indeed.”

The colour rose in her face.

Dr. Lord said unexpectedly:

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you said just now everyone should make a will! Have you?”

Elinor stared at him for a minute, then she laughed.

“How extraordinary!” she said. “No, I haven’t. I hadn’t thought of it! I’m just like Aunt Laura. Do you know, Dr. Lord, I shall go home and write to Mr. Seddon about it at once.”

Peter Lord said:

“Very sensible.”

VI

In the library Elinor had just finished a letter:

Dear Mr. Seddon,—Will you draft a will for me to sign? Quite a simple one. I want to leave everything to Roderick Welman absolutely.

Yours sincerely,
Elinor Carlisle

She glanced at the clock. The post would be going in a few minutes.

She opened the drawer of the desk, then remembered she had used the last stamp that morning.

There were some in her bedroom, though, she was almost sure.

She went upstairs. When she reentered the library with the stamp in her hand, Roddy was standing by the window.

He said:

“So we leave here tomorrow. Good old Hunterbury. We’ve had some good times here.”

Elinor said:

“Do you mind its being sold?”

“Oh, no, no! I quite see it’s the best thing to be done.”

There was a silence. Elinor picked up her letter, glanced through it to see if it was all right. Then she sealed and stamped it.

Six

Letter from Nurse O’Brien to Nurse Hopkins, July 14th:

Laborough Court

Dear Hopkins,—Have been meaning to write to you for some days now. This is a lovely house and the pictures, I believe, quite famous. But I can’t say it’s as comfortable as Hunterbury was, if you know what I mean. Being in the dead country it’s difficult to get maids, and the girls they have got are a raw lot, and some of them not too obliging, and though I’m sure I’m never one to give trouble, meals sent up on a tray should at least be hot, and no facilities for boiling a kettle, and the tea not always made with boiling water! Still, all that’s neither here nor there. The patient’s a nice quiet gentleman—double pneumonia, but the crisis is past and doctor says going on well.

What I’ve got to tell you that will really interest you is the very queerest coincidence you ever knew. In the drawing room, on the grand piano, there’s a photograph in a big silver frame; and would you believe it, it’s the same photograph that I told you about—the one signed Lewis that old Mrs. Welman asked for. Well, of course, I was intrigued—and who wouldn’t be? And I asked the butler who it was, which he answered at once saying it was Lady Rattery’s brother—Sir Lewis Rycroft. He lived, it seems, not far from here and he was killed in the War. Very sad, wasn’t it? I asked casual like was he married, and the butler said yes, but that Lady Rycroft went into a lunatic asylum, poor thing, soon after the marriage. She was still alive, he said. Now, isn’t that interesting? And we were quite wrong, you see, in all our ideas. They must have been very fond of each other, he and Mrs. W., and unable to marry because of the wife being in an asylum. Just like the pictures, isn’t it? And her remembering all those years and looking at his photograph just before she died. He was killed in 1917, the butler said. Quite a romance, that’s what I feel.

Have you seen that new picture with Myrna Loy? I saw it was coming to Maidensford this week. No cinema anywhere near here! Oh, it’s awful to be buried in the country. No wonder they can’t get decent maids!

Well, goodbye for the present, dear, write and tell me all the news.

Yours sincerely,
Eileen O’Brien

Letter from Nurse Hopkins to Nurse O’Brien, July 14th:

Rose Cottage

Dear O’Brien,—Everything goes on here much as usual. Hunterbury is deserted—all the servants gone and a board up: For Sale. I saw Mrs. Bishop the other day, she is staying with her sister who lives about a mile away. She was very upset, as you can imagine, at the place being sold. It seems she made sure Miss Carlisle would marry Mr. Welman and live there. Mrs. B. says that the engagement is off! Miss Carlisle went away to London soon after you left. She was very peculiar in her manner once or twice. I really didn’t know what to make of her! Mary Gerrard has gone to London and is starting to train for a masseuse. Very sensible of her, I think. Miss Carlisle’s going to settle two thousand pounds on her, which I call very handsome and more than what many would do.

By the way, it’s funny how things come about. Do you remember telling me something about a photograph signed Lewis that Mrs. Welman showed you? I was having a chat the other day with Mrs. Slattery (she was housekeeper to old Dr. Ransome who had the practice before Dr. Lord), and of course she’s lived here all her life and knows a lot about the gentry round about. I just brought the subject up in a casual manner, speaking of Christian names and saying that the name of Lewis was uncommon and amongst others she mentioned Sir Lewis Rycroft over at Forbes Park. He served in the War in the 17th Lancers and was killed towards the end of the War. So I said he was a great friend of Mrs. Welman’s at Hunterbury, wasn’t he? And at once she gave me a look and said, Yes, very close friends they’d been, and some said more than friends, but that she herself wasn’t one to talk—and why shouldn’t they be friends? So I said but surely Mrs. Welman was a widow at the time, and she said Oh yes, she was a widow. So, dear, I saw at once she meant something by that, so I said it was odd then, that they'd never married, and she said at once, "They couldn't marry. He'd got a wife in a lunatic asylum!" So now, you see, we know all about it! Curious the way things come about, isn't it? Considering the easy way you get divorces nowadays, it does seem a shame that insanity shouldn't have been a ground for it then.

Do you remember a good-looking young chap, Ted Bigland, who used to hang around after Mary Gerrard a lot? He's been at me for her address in London, but I haven't given it to him. In my opinion, Mary's a cut above Ted Bigland. I don't know if you realized it, dear, but Mr. R—W—was very taken with her. A pity, because it's made trouble. Mark my words, that's the reason for the engagement between him and Miss Carlisle being off. And, if you ask me, it's hit her badly. I don't know what she saw in him, I'm sure—he wouldn't have been my cup of tea, but I hear from a reliable source that she's always been madly in love with him. It does seem a mix-up, doesn't it? And she's got all that money, too. I believe he was always led to expect his aunt would leave him something substantial.

Old Gerrard at the Lodge is failing rapidly—has had several nasty dizzy spells. He's just as rude and cross-grained as ever. He actually said the other day that Mary wasn't his daughter. "Well," I said, "I'd be ashamed to say a thing like that about your wife if I were you." He just looked at me and said, "You're nothing but a fool. You don't understand." Polite, wasn't it? I took him up pretty sharply, I can tell you. His wife was lady's maid to Mrs. Welman before her marriage, I believe.

I saw The Good Earth last week. It was lovely! Women have to put up with a lot in China, it seems.

Yours ever,
Jessie Hopkins

Post-card from Nurse Hopkins to Nurse O'Brien:

Fancy our letters just crossing! Isn't this weather awful?

Post-card from Nurse O'Brien to Nurse Hopkins:

Got your letter this morning. What a coincidence!

Letter from Roderick Welman to Elinor Carlisle, July 15th:

Dear Elinor,—Just got your letter. No, really, I have no feelings about Hunterbury being sold. Nice of you to consult me. I think you're doing the wisest thing if you don't fancy living there, which you obviously don't. You may have some difficulty in getting rid of it, though. It's a biggish place for present-day needs, though, of course, it's been modernized and is up to date, with good servants' quarters, and gas and electric light and all that. Anyway, I hope you'll have luck!

The heat here is glorious. I spend hours in the sea. Rather a funny crowd of people, but I don't mix much. You told me once that I wasn't a good mixer. I'm afraid it's true. I find most of the human race extraordinarily repulsive. They probably reciprocate this feeling.

I have long felt that you are one of the only really satisfactory representatives of humanity. Am thinking of wandering on to the Dalmatian coast in a week or two. Address c/o Thomas Cook, Dubrovnik, from the 22nd onwards. If there's anything I can do, let me know.

Yours, with admiration and gratitude,
Roddy

Letter from Mr. Seddon of Messrs Seddon, Blatherwick & Seddon to Miss Elinor Carlisle, July 20th:

104 Bloomsbury Square

Dear Miss Carlisle,—I certainly think you should accept Major Somervell's offer of twelve thousand five hundred (£12,500) for Hunterbury. Large properties are extremely difficult to sell at the moment, and the price offered seems to be most advantageous. The offer depends, however, on immediate possession, and I know Major Somervell has been seeing other properties in the neighbourhood, so I would advise immediate acceptance.

Major Somervell is willing, I understand, to take the place furnished for three months, by which time the legal formalities should be accomplished and the sale can go through.

As regards the lodge keeper, Gerrard, and the question of pensioning him off, I hear from Dr. Lord that the old man is seriously ill and not expected to live.

Probate has not yet been granted, but I have advanced one hundred pounds to Miss Mary Gerrard pending the settlement.

Yours sincerely,
Edmund Seddon

Letter from Dr. Lord to Miss Elinor Carlisle, July 24th:

Dear Miss Carlisle,—Old Gerrard passed away today. Is there anything I can do for you in any way? I hear you have sold the house to our new MP, Major Somervell.

Yours sincerely,
Peter Lord

Letter from Elinor Carlisle to Mary Gerrard, July 25th:

Dear Mary,—I am so sorry to hear of your father’s death.

I have had an offer for Hunterbury—from a Major Somervell. He is anxious to get in as soon as possible. I am going down there to go through my aunt’s papers and clear up generally. Would it be possible for you to get your father’s things moved out of the Lodge as quickly as possible? I hope you are doing well and not finding your massage training too strenuous.

Yours very sincerely,
Elinor Carlisle

Letter from Mary Gerrard to Nurse Hopkins, July 25th:

Dear Nurse Hopkins,—Thank you so much for writing to me about Father. I’m glad he didn’t suffer. Miss Elinor writes me that the house is sold and that she would like the Lodge cleared out as soon as possible. Could you put me up if I came down tomorrow for the funeral? Don’t bother to answer if that’s all right.

Yours affectionately,
Mary Gerrard

Seven

Elinor Carlisle came out of the King’s Arms on the morning of Thursday, July 27th, and stood for a minute or two looking up and down the main street of Maidensford.

Suddenly, with an exclamation of pleasure, she crossed the road.

There was no mistaking that large dignified presence, that serene gait as of a galleon in full sail.

“Mrs. Bishop!”

“Why, Miss Elinor! This is a surprise! I’d no notion you were in these parts! If I’d known you were coming to Hunterbury I’d have been there myself! Who’s doing for you there? Have you brought someone down from London?”

Elinor shook her head.

“I’m not staying at the house. I am staying at the King’s Arms.”

Mrs. Bishop looked across the road and sniffed dubiously.

“It is possible to stay there, I’ve heard,” she allowed. “It’s clean, I know. And the cooking, they say, is fair, but it’s hardly what you’re accustomed to, Miss Elinor.”

Elinor said, smiling:

“I’m really quite comfortable. It’s only for a day or two. I have to sort out things at the house. All my aunt’s personal things; and then there are a few pieces of furniture I should like to have in London.”

“The house is really sold, then?”

“Yes. To a Major Somervell. Our new Member. Sir George Kerr died, you know, and there’s been a bye-election.”

“Returned unopposed,” said Mrs. Bishop grandly. “We’ve never had anyone but a Conservative for Maidenford.”

Elinor said:

“I’m glad someone has bought the house who really wants to live in it. I should have been sorry if it had been turned into a hotel or built upon.”

Mrs. Bishop shut her eyes and shivered all over her plump aristocratic person.

“Yes, indeed, that would have been dreadful—quite dreadful. It’s bad enough as it is to think of Hunterbury passing into the hands of strangers.”

Elinor said:

“Yes, but, you see, it would have been a very large house for me to live in—alone.”

Mrs. Bishop sniffed.

Elinor said quickly:

“I meant to ask you: Is there any especial piece of furniture that you might care to have? I should be very glad for you to have it, if so.”

Mrs. Bishop beamed. She said graciously:

“Well, Miss Elinor, that is very thoughtful of you—very kind, I’m sure. If it’s not taking a liberty…?”

She paused and Elinor said:

“Oh, no.”

“I have always had a great admiration for the secretaire in the drawing room. Such a handsome piece.”

Elinor remembered it, a somewhat flamboyant piece of inlaid marqueterie. She said quickly:

“Of course you shall have it, Mrs. Bishop. Anything else?”

“No, indeed, Miss Elinor. You have already been extremely generous.”

Elinor said:

“There are some chairs in the same style as the secretaire. Would you care for those?”

Mrs. Bishop accepted the chairs with becoming thanks. She explained:

“I am staying at the moment with my sister. Is there anything I can do for you up at the house, Miss Elinor? I could come up there with you, if you like.”

“No, thank you.”

Elinor spoke quickly, rather abruptly.

Mrs. Bishop said:

“It would be no trouble, I assure you—a pleasure. Such a melancholy task going through all dear Mrs. Welman’s things.”

Elinor said:

“Thank you, Mrs. Bishop, but I would rather tackle it alone. One can do some things better alone—”

Mrs. Bishop said stiffly:

“As you please, of course.”

She went on:

“That daughter of Gerrard’s is down here. The funeral was yesterday. She’s staying with Nurse Hopkins. I did hear they were going up to the Lodge this morning.”

Elinor nodded. She said:

“Yes, I asked Mary to come down and see to that. Major Somervell wants to get in as soon as possible.”

“I see.”

Elinor said:

“Well, I must be getting on now. So glad to have seen you, Mrs. Bishop. I’ll remember about the secretaire and the chairs.”

She shook hands and passed on.

She went into the baker’s and bought a loaf of bread. Then she went into the dairy and bought half a pound of butter and some milk.

Finally she went into the grocer’s.

“I want some paste for sandwiches, please.”

“Certainly, Miss Carlisle.” Mr. Abbott himself bustled forward, elbowing aside his junior apprentice.

“What would you like? Salmon and shrimp? Turkey and tongue? Salmon and sardine? Ham and tongue?”

He whipped down pot after pot and arrayed them on the counter.

Elinor said with a faint smile:

“In spite of their names, I always think they taste much alike.”

Mr. Abbott agreed instantly.

“Well, perhaps they do, in a way. Yes, in a way. But, of course, they’re very tasty—very tasty.”

Elinor said:

“One used to be rather afraid of eating fish pastes. There have been cases of ptomaine poisoning from them, haven’t there?”

Mr. Abbot put on a horrified expression.

“I can assure you this is an excellent brand—most reliable—we never have any complaints.”

Elinor said:

“I’ll have one of salmon and anchovy and one of salmon and shrimp. Thank you.”

II

Elinor Carlisle entered the grounds of Hunterbury by the back gate.

It was a hot, clear summer’s day. There were sweetpeas in flower. Elinor passed close by a row of them. The undergardener, Horlick, who was remaining on to keep the place in order, greeted her respectfully.

“Good morning, miss. I got your letter. You’ll find the side door open, miss. I’ve unfastened the shutters and opened most of the windows.”

Elinor said:

“Thank you, Horlick.”

As she moved on, the young man said nervously, his Adam’s apple jerking up and down in spasmodic fashion:

“Excuse me, miss—”

Elinor turned back. “Yes?”

“Is it true that the house is sold? I mean, is it really settled?”

“Oh, yes!”

Horlick said nervously:

“I was wondering, miss, if you would say a word for me—to Major Somervell, I mean. He’ll be wanting gardeners. Maybe he’ll think I’m too young for head gardener, but I’ve worked under Mr. Stephens for four years now, and I reckon I know a tidyish bit, and I’ve kept things going fairly well since I’ve been here, single-handed.”

Elinor said quickly:

“Of course I will do all I can for you, Horlick. As a matter of fact, I intended to mention you to Major Somervell and tell him what a good gardener you are.”

Horlick’s face grew dusky red.

“Thank you, miss. That’s very kind of you. You can understand it’s been a bit of a blow, like—Mrs. Welman dying, and then the place being sold off so quick—and I—well, the fact of the matter is I was going to get married this autumn, only one’s got to be sure….”

He stopped.

Elinor said kindly:

“I hope Major Somervell will take you on. You can rely on me to do all I can.”

Horlick said again:

“Thank you, miss. We all hoped, you see, as how the place would be kept on by the family. Thank you, miss.”

Elinor walked on.

Suddenly, rushing over her like the stream from a broken dam, a wave of anger, of wild resentment, swept over her.

“We all hoped the place would be kept on by the family….”

She and Roddy could have lived here! She and Roddy… Roddy would have wanted that. It was what she herself would have wanted. They had always loved Hunterbury, both of them. Dear Hunterbury… In the years before her parents had died, when they had been in India, she had come here for holidays. She had played in the woods, rambled by the stream, picked sweetpeas in great flowering armloads, eaten fat green gooseberries and dark red luscious raspberries. Later, there had been apples. There had been places, secret lairs, where she had curled up with a book and read for hours.

She had loved Hunterbury. Always, at the back of her mind, she had felt sure of living there permanently some day. Aunt Laura had fostered that idea. Little words and phrases:

“Some day, Elinor, you may like to cut down those yews. They are a little gloomy, perhaps!”

“One might have a water garden here. Some day, perhaps, you will.”

And Roddy? Roddy, too, had looked forward to Hunterbury being his home. It had lain, perhaps, behind his feeling for her, Elinor. He had felt, subconsciously, that it was fitting and right that they two should be together at Hunterbury.

And they would have been together there. They would have been together here—now—not packing up the house for selling, but redecorating it, planning new beauties in house and garden, walking side by side in gentle proprietary pleasure, happy—yes, happy together—but for the fatal accident of a girl’s wild-rose beauty….

What did Roddy know of Mary Gerrard? Nothing—less than nothing! What did he care for her—for the real Mary? She had, quite possibly, admirable qualities, but did Roddy know anything about them? It was the old story—Nature’s hoary old joke!

Hadn’t Roddy himself said it was an “enchantment?”

Didn’t Roddy himself—really—want to be free of it?

If Mary Gerrard were to—die, for instance, wouldn’t Roddy some day acknowledge: “It was all for the best. I see that now. We had nothing in common….”

He would add, perhaps, with gentle melancholy:

“She was a lovely creature….”

Let her be that to him—yes—an exquisite memory—a thing of beauty and a joy forever….

If anything were to happen to Mary Gerrard, Roddy would come back to her—Elinor… She was quite sure of that!

If anything were to happen to Mary Gerrard…

Elinor turned the handle of the side door. She passed from the warm sunlight into the shadow of the house. She shivered.

It felt cold in here, dark, sinister… It was as though Something was there, waiting for her, in the house….

She walked along the hall and pushed the baize door that led into the butler’s pantry.

It smelt slightly musty. She pushed up the window, opening it wide.

She laid down her parcels—the butter, the loaf, the little glass bottle of milk. She thought:

“Stupid! I meant to get coffee.”

She looked in the canisters on a shelf. There was a little tea in one of them, but no coffee.

She thought: “Oh, well, it doesn’t matter.”

She unwrapped the two glass jars of fish paste.

She stood staring at them for a minute. Then she left the pantry and went upstairs. She went straight to Mrs. Welman’s room. She began on the big tallboy, opening drawers, sorting, arranging, folding clothes in little piles….

III

In the Lodge Mary Gerrard was looking round rather helplessly.

She hadn’t realized, somehow, how cramped it all was.

Her past life rushed back over her in a flood. Mum making clothes for her dolls. Dad always cross and surly. Disliking her. Yes, disliking her….

She said suddenly to Nurse Hopkins:

“Dad didn’t say anything—send me any message before he died, did he?”

Nurse Hopkins said cheerfully and callously:

“Oh, dear me, no. He was unconscious for an hour before he passed away.”

Mary said slowly:

“I feel perhaps I ought to have come down and looked after him. After all, he was my father.”

Nurse Hopkins said with a trace of embarrassment:

“Now, just you listen to me, Mary: whether he was your father or not doesn’t enter into it. Children don’t care much about their parents in these days, from what I can see, and a good many parents don’t care for their children, either. Miss Lambert, at the secondary school, says that’s as it should be. According to her, family life is all wrong, and children should be brought up by the state. That’s as may be—just a glorified orphanage, it sounds to me—but, anyway, it’s a waste of breath to go back over the past and sentimentalize. We’ve got to get on with living—that’s our job and not too easy, either, sometimes!”

Mary said slowly:

“I expect you’re right. But I feel perhaps it was my fault we didn’t get on better.”

Nurse Hopkins said robustly:

“Nonsense.”

The word exploded like a bomb.

It quelled Mary. Nurse Hopkins turned to more practical matters.

“What are you going to do with the furniture? Store it? Or sell it?”

Mary said doubtfully:

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

Running a practical eye over it, Nurse Hopkins said:

“Some of it’s quite good and solid. You might store it and furnish a little flat of your own in London some day. Get rid of the rubbish. The chairs are good—so’s the table. And that’s a nice bureau—it’s the kind that’s out of fashion, but it’s solid mahogany, and they say Victorian stuff will come in again one day. I’d get rid of that great wardrobe, if I were you. Too big to fit in anywhere. Takes up half the bedroom as it is.”

They made a list between them of pieces to be kept or let go.

Mary said:

"The lawyer's been very kind—Mr. Seddon, I mean. He advanced me some money, so that I could get started with my training fees and other expenses. It will be a month or so before the money can be definitely made over to me, so he said."

Nurse Hopkins said:

"How do you like your work?"

"I think I shall like it very much. It's rather strenuous at first. I come home tired to death."

Nurse Hopkins said grimly:

"I thought I was going to die when I was a probationer at St. Luke's. I felt I could never stick it for three years. But I did."

They had sorted through the old man's clothes. Now they came to a tin box full of papers.

Mary said:

"We must go through these, I suppose."

They sat down one on each side of the table.

Nurse Hopkins grumbled as she started with a handful.

"Extraordinary what rubbish people keep! Newspaper cuttings! Old letters. All sorts of things!"

Mary said, unfolding a document:

"Here's Dad's and Mum's marriage certificate. At St. Albans, 1919."

Nurse Hopkins said:

"Marriage lines, that's the old-fashioned term. Lots of the people in this village use that term yet."

Mary said in a stifled voice:

“But, Nurse—”

“What’s the matter?”

Mary Gerrard said in a shaky voice:

“Don’t you see? This is 1939. And I’m twenty-one. In 1919 I was a year old. That means—that means—that my father and mother weren’t married till—till—afterwards.”

Nurse Hopkins frowned. She said robustly:

“Well, after all, what of it? Don’t go worrying about that, at this time of day!”

“But, Nurse, I can’t help it.”

Nurse Hopkins spoke with authority:

“There’s many couples that don’t go to church till a bit after they should do so. But so long as they do it in the end, what’s the odds? That’s what I say!”

Mary said in a low voice:

“Is that why—do you think—my father never liked me? Because, perhaps my mother made him marry her?”

Nurse Hopkins hesitated. She bit her lip, then she said:

“It wasn’t quite like that, I imagine.” She paused. “Oh, well, if you’re going to worry about it, you may as well know the truth: You aren’t Gerrard’s daughter at all.”

Mary said:

“Then that was why!”

Nurse Hopkins said: “Maybe.”

Mary said, a red spot suddenly burning in each cheek:

“I suppose it’s wrong of me, but I’m glad! I’ve always felt uncomfortable because I didn’t care for my father, but if he wasn’t my father, well, that makes it all right! How did you know about it?”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Gerrard talked about it a good deal before he died. I shut him up pretty sharply, but he didn’t care. Naturally, I shouldn’t have said anything to you about it if this hadn’t cropped up.”

Mary said slowly:

“I wonder who my real father was….”

Nurse Hopkins hesitated. She opened her mouth, then shut it again. She appeared to be finding it hard to make up her mind on some point.

Then a shadow fell across the room, and the two women looked round to see Elinor Carlisle standing at the window.

Elinor said:

“Good morning.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Good morning, Miss Carlisle. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

Mary said:

“Oh—good morning, Miss Elinor.”

Elinor said:

“I’ve been making some sandwiches. Won’t you come up and have some? It’s just on one o’clock, and it’s such a bother to have to go home for lunch. I got enough for three on purpose.”

Nurse Hopkins said in pleased surprise:

“Well, I must say, Miss Carlisle, that’s extremely thoughtful of you. It is a nuisance to have to break off what you’re doing and come all the way back from the village. I hoped we might finish this morning. I went round and saw my cases early. But, there, turning out takes you longer than you think.”

Mary said gratefully:

“Thank you, Miss Elinor, it’s very kind of you.”

The three of them walked up the drive to the house. Elinor had left the front door open. They passed inside into the cool of the hall. Mary shivered a little. Elinor looked at her sharply.

She said:

“What is it?”

Mary said:

“Oh, nothing—just a shiver. It was coming in—out of the sun….”

Elinor said in a low voice:

“That’s queer. That’s what I felt this morning.”

Nurse Hopkins said in a loud, cheerful voice and with a laugh:

“Come, now, you’ll be pretending there are ghosts in the house next. I didn’t feel anything!”

Elinor smiled. She led the way into the morning room on the right of the front door. The blinds were up and the windows open. It looked cheerful.

Elinor went across the hall and brought back from the pantry a big plate of sandwiches. She handed it to Mary, saying:

“Have one?”

Mary took one. Elinor stood watching her for a moment as the girl’s even white teeth bit into the sandwich.

She held her breath for a minute, then expelled it in a little sigh.

Absentmindedly she stood for a minute with the plate held to her waist, then at the sight of Nurse Hopkins’ slightly parted lips and hungry expression she flushed and quickly proffered the plate to the older woman.

Elinor took a sandwich herself. She said apologetically:

“I meant to make some coffee, but I forgot to get any. There’s some beer on that table, though, if anyone likes that?”

Nurse Hopkins said sadly:

“If only I’d thought to bring along some tea now.”

Elinor said absently:

“There’s a little tea still in the canister in the pantry.”

Nurse Hopkins’ face brightened.

“Then I’ll just pop out and put the kettle on. No milk, I suppose?”

Elinor said:

“Yes, I brought some.”

“Well, then, that’s all right,” said Nurse Hopkins and hurried out.

Elinor and Mary were alone together.

A queer tension crept into the atmosphere. Elinor, with an obvious effort, tried to make conversation. Her lips were dry. She passed her tongue over them. She said, rather stiffly:

“You—like your work in London?”

“Yes, thank you. I—I’m very grateful to you—”

A sudden harsh sound broke from Elinor. A laugh so discordant, so unlike her that Mary stared at her in surprise.

Elinor said:

“You needn’t be so grateful!”

Mary, rather embarrassed, said:

“I didn’t mean—that is—”

She stopped.

Elinor was staring at her—a glance so searching, so, yes, strange that Mary flinched under it.

She said:

“Is—is anything wrong?”

Elinor got up quickly. She said, turning away:

“What should be wrong?”

Mary murmured.

“You—you looked—”

Elinor said with a little laugh:

“Was I staring? I’m so sorry. I do sometimes—when I’m thinking of something else.”

Nurse Hopkins looked in at the door and remarked brightly, “I’ve put the kettle on,” and went out again.

Elinor was taken with a sudden fit of laughter.

“Polly put the kettle on, Polly put the kettle on, Polly put the kettle on—we’ll all have tea! Do you remember playing that, Mary, when we were children?”

“Yes, indeed I do.”

Elinor said:

“When we were children… It’s a pity, Mary isn’t it, that one can never go back…?”

Mary said:

“Would you like to go back?”

Elinor said with force:

“Yes… yes….”

Silence fell between them for a little while.

Then Mary said, her face flushing:

“Miss Elinor, you mustn’t think—”

She stopped, warned by the sudden stiffening of Elinor’s slender figure, the uplifted line of her chin.

Elinor said in a cold, steel-like voice:

“What mustn’t I think?”

Mary murmured:

“I—I’ve forgotten what I was going to say.”

Elinor’s body relaxed—as at a danger past.

Nurse Hopkins came in with a tray. On it was a brown teapot, and milk and three cups.

She said, quite unconscious of anticlimax:

“Here’s the tea!”

She put the tray in front of Elinor. Elinor shook her head.

“I won’t have any.”

She pushed the tray along towards Mary.

Mary poured out two cups.

Nurse Hopkins sighed with satisfaction.

“It’s nice and strong.”

Elinor got up and moved over to the window. Nurse Hopkins said persuasively:

“Are you sure you won’t have a cup, Miss Carlisle? Do you good.”

Elinor murmured, “No, thank you.”

Nurse Hopkins drained her cup, replaced it in the saucer and murmured:

“I’ll just turn off the kettle. I put it on in case we needed to fill up the pot again.”

She bustled out.

Elinor wheeled round from the window.

She said, and her voice was suddenly charged with a desperate appeal:

“Mary…”

Mary Gerrard answered quickly:

“Yes?”

Slowly the light died out of Elinor’s face. The lips closed. The desperate pleading faded and left a mere mask—frozen and still.

She said:

“Nothing.”

The silence came down heavily on the room.

Mary thought:

“How queer everything is today. As though—as though we were waiting for something.”

Elinor moved at last.

She came from the window and picked up the tea tray, placing on it the empty sandwich plate.

Mary jumped up.

“Oh, Miss Elinor, let me.”

Elinor said sharply:

“No, you stay here. I’ll do this.”

She carried the tray out of the room. She looked back, once, over her shoulder at Mary Gerrard by the window, young and alive and beautiful….

IV

Nurse Hopkins was in the pantry. She was wiping her face with a handkerchief. She looked up sharply as Elinor entered. She said:

“My word, it’s hot in here!”

Elinor answered mechanically:

“Yes, the pantry faces south.”

Nurse Hopkins relieved her of the tray.

“You let me wash up, Miss Carlisle. You’re not looking quite the thing.”

Elinor said:

“Oh, I’m all right.”

She picked up a dishcloth.

“I’ll dry.”

Nurse Hopkins slipped off her cuffs. She poured hot water from the kettle into the papier-mâché basin.

Elinor said idly, looking at her wrist:

“You’ve pricked yourself.”

Nurse Hopkins laughed.

“On the rose trellis at the Lodge—a thorn. I’ll get it out presently.”

The rose trellis at the Lodge… Memory poured in waves over Elinor. She and Roddy quarrelling—the Wars of the Roses. She and Roddy quarrelling—and making it up. Lovely, laughing, happy days. A sick wave of revulsion passed over her. What had she come to now? What black abyss of hate—of evil… She swayed a little as she stood.

She thought:

“I’ve been mad—quite mad.”

Nurse Hopkins was staring at her curiously.

“Downright odd, she seemed…” so ran Nurse Hopkins’ narrative later. “Talking as if she didn’t know what she was saying, and her eyes so bright and queer.”

The cups and saucers rattled in the basin. Elinor picked up an empty fish paste pot from the table and put it into the basin. As she did so she said, and marvelled at the steadiness of her voice:

“I’ve sorted out some clothes upstairs, Aunt Laura’s things. I thought, perhaps, Nurse, you could advise me where they would be useful in the village.”

Nurse Hopkins said briskly:

“I will indeed. There’s Mrs. Parkinson, and old Nellie, and that poor creature who’s not quite all there at Ivy Cottage. Be a godsend to them.”

She and Elinor cleared up the pantry. Then they went upstairs together.

In Mrs. Welman’s room clothes were folded in neat bundles: underclothing, dresses, and certain articles of handsome clothing, velvet tea gowns, a musquash coat. The latter, Elinor explained, she thought of giving to Mrs. Bishop. Nurse Hopkins nodded assent.

She noticed that Mrs. Welman’s sables were laid on the chest of drawers.

“Going to have them remodelled for herself,” she thought to herself.

She cast a look at the big tallboy. She wondered if Elinor had found that photograph signed “Lewis,” and what she had made of it, if so.

“Funny,” she thought to herself, “the way O’Brien’s letter crossed mine. I never dreamt a thing like that could happen. Her hitting on that photo just the day I wrote to her about Mrs. Slattery.”

She helped Elinor sort through the clothing and volunteered to tie it up in separate bundles for the different families and see to their distribution herself.

She said:

“I can be getting on with that while Mary goes down to the Lodge and finishes up there. She’s only got a box of papers to go through. Where is the girl, by the way? Did she go down to the Lodge?”

Elinor said:

“I left her in the morning room….”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“She’d not be there all this time.” She glanced at her watch. “Why, it’s nearly an hour we’ve been up here!”

She bustled down the stairs. Elinor followed her.

They went into the morning room.

Nurse Hopkins exclaimed:

“Well, I never, she’s fallen asleep.”

Mary Gerrard was sitting in a big armchair by the window. She had dropped down a little in it. There was a queer sound in the room: stertorous, laboured breathing.

Nurse Hopkins went across and shook the girl.

“Wake up, my dear—”

She broke off. She bent lower, pulled down an eyelid. Then she started shaking the girl in grim earnest.

She turned on Elinor. There was something menacing in her voice as she said:

“What’s all this?”

Elinor said:

“I don’t know what you mean. Is she ill?”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Where’s the phone? Get hold of Dr. Lord as soon as you can.”

Elinor said:

“What’s the matter?”

“The matter? The girl’s ill. She’s dying.”

Elinor recoiled a step.

“Dying?”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“She’s been poisoned….”

Her eyes, hard with suspicion, glared at Elinor.

PART II

One

Hercule Poirot, his egg-shaped head gently tilted to one side, his eyebrows raised inquiringly, his fingertips joined together, watched the young man who was striding so savagely up and down the room, his pleasant freckled face puckered and drawn.

Hercule Poirot said:

“Eh bien, my friend, what is all this?”

Peter Lord stopped dead in his pacing.

He said:

“M. Poirot. You’re the only man in the world who can help me. I’ve heard Stillingfleet talk about you; he’s told me what you did in that Benedict Farley case. How every mortal soul thought it was suicide and you showed that it was murder.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Have you, then, a case of suicide among your patients about which you are not satisfied?”

Peter Lord shook his head.

He sat down opposite Poirot.

He said:

“There’s a young woman. She’s been arrested and she’s going to be tried for murder! I want you to find evidence that will prove that she didn’t do it!”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose a little higher. Then he assumed a discreet and confidential manner.

He said:

“You and this young lady—you are affianced—yes? You are in love with each other?”

Peter Lord laughed—a sharp, bitter laugh.

He said:

“No, it’s not like that! She has the bad taste to prefer a long-nosed supercilious ass with a face like a melancholy horse! Stupid of her, but there it is!”

Poirot said:

“I see.”

Lord said bitterly:

“Oh, yes, you see all right! No need to be so tactful about it. I fell for her straightaway. And because of that I don’t want her hanged. See?”

Poirot said:

“What is the charge against her?”

“She’s accused of murdering a girl called Mary Gerrard, by poisoning her with morphine hydrochloride. You’ve probably read the account of the inquest in the papers.”

Poirot said:

“And the motive?”

“Jealousy!”

“And in your opinion she didn’t do it?”

“No, of course not.”

Hercule Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two, then he said:

“What is it exactly that you want me to do? To investigate this matter?”

“I want you to get her off.”

“I am not a defending counsel, mon cher.”

“I’ll put it more clearly: I want you to find evidence that will enable her counsel to get her off.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“You put this a little curiously.”

Peter Lord said:

“Because I don’t wrap it up, you mean? It seems simple enough to me. I want this girl acquitted. I think you are the only man who can do it!”

“You wish me to look into the facts? To find out the truth? To discover what really happened?”

“I want you to find any facts that will tell in her favour.”

Hercule Poirot, with care and precision, lighted a very tiny cigarette. He said:

“But is it not a little unethical what you say there? To arrive at the truth, yes, that always interests me. But the truth is a two-edged weapon. Supposing that I find facts against the lady? Do you demand that I suppress them?”

Peter Lord stood up. He was very white. He said:

“That’s impossible! Nothing that you could find could be more against her than the facts are already! They’re utterly and completely damning! There’s any amount of evidence against her black and plain for all the world to see!

You couldn’t find anything that would damn her more completely than she is already! I’m asking you to use all your ingenuity—Stillfleet says you’re damned ingenious—to ferret out a loophole, a possible alternative.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Surely her lawyers will do that?”

“Will they?” the young man laughed scornfully. “They’re licked before they start! Think it’s hopeless! They’ve briefed Bulmer, K.C.—the forlorn hope man; that’s a giveaway in itself! Big orator—sob stuff—stressing the prisoner’s youth—all that! But the judge won’t let him get away with it. Not a hope!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Supposing she is guilty—do you still want to get her acquitted?”

Peter Lord said quietly:

“Yes.”

Hercule Poirot moved in his chair. He said:

“You interest me….”

After a minute or two he said:

“You had better, I think, tell me the exact facts of the case.”

“Haven’t you read anything about it in the papers?”

Hercule Poirot waved a hand.

“A mention of it—yes. But the newspapers, they are so inaccurate, I never go by what they say.”

Peter Lord said:

"It's quite simple. Horribly simple. This girl, Elinor Carlisle, had just come into a place near here—Hunterbury Hall—and a fortune from her aunt, who died intestate. Aunt's name was Welman. Aunt had a nephew by marriage Roderick Welman. He was engaged to Elinor Carlisle—long-standing business, known each other since children. There was a girl down at Hunterbury: Mary Gerrard, daughter of the lodgekeeper. Old Mrs. Welman had made a lot of fuss about her, paid for her education, etc. Consequence is, girl was to outward seeming a lady. Roderick Welman, it seems, fell for her. In consequence, engagement was broken off.

"Now we come to the doings. Elinor Carlisle put up the place for sale and a man called Somervell bought it. Elinor came down to clear out her aunt's personal possessions and so on. Mary Gerrard, whose father had just died, was clearing out the Lodge. That brings us to the morning of July 27th.

"Elinor Carlisle was staying at the local pub. In the street she met the former housekeeper, Mrs. Bishop. Mrs. Bishop suggested coming up to the house to help her. Elinor refused—rather over-vehemently. Then she went into the grocer's shop and bought some fish paste, and there she made a remark about food poisoning. You see? Perfectly innocent thing to do; but, of course, it tells against her! She went up to the house, and about one o'clock she went down to the Lodge, where Mary Gerrard was busy with the District Nurse, a Nosey Parker of a woman called Hopkins, helping her, and told them that she had some sandwiches ready up at the house. They came up to the house with her, ate sandwiches, and about an hour or so later I was sent for and found Mary Gerrard unconscious. Did all I could, but it was no good. Autopsy revealed large dose of morphine had been taken a short time previously. And the police found a scrap of a label with morphia hydrochlor on it just where Elinor Carlisle had been spreading the sandwiches."

"What else did Mary Gerrard eat or drink?"

"She and the District Nurse drank tea with the sandwiches. Nurse made it and Mary poured it out. Couldn't have been anything there. Of course, I understand Counsel will make a song and dance about sandwiches, too, saying all three ate them, therefore impossible to ensure that only one person should be poisoned. They said that in the Hearne case, you remember.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“But actually it is very simple. You make your pile of sandwiches. In one of them is the poison. You hand the plate. In our state of civilization it is a foregone conclusion that the person to whom the plate is offered will take the sandwich that is nearest to them. I presume that Elinor Carlisle handed the plate to Mary Gerrard first?”

“Exactly.”

“Although the nurse, who was an older woman, was in the room?”

“Yes.”

“That does not look very good.”

“It doesn’t mean a thing, really. You don’t stand on ceremony at a picnic lunch.”

“Who cut the sandwiches?”

“Elinor Carlisle.”

“Was there anyone else in the house?”

“No one.”

Poirot shook his head.

“It is bad, that. And the girl had nothing but the tea and the sandwiches?”

“Nothing. Stomach contents tell us that.”

Poirot said:

“It is suggested that Elinor Carlisle hoped the girl’s death would be taken for food poisoning? How did she propose to explain the fact that only one member of the party was affected?”

Peter Lord said:

“It does happen that way sometimes. Also, there were two pots of paste—both much alike in appearance. The idea would be that one pot was all right and that by a coincidence all the bad paste was eaten by Mary.”

“An interesting study in the laws of probability,” said Poirot. “The mathematical chances against that happening would be high, I fancy. But another point, if food poisoning was to be suggested: Why not choose a different poison? The symptoms of morphine are not in the least like those of food poisoning. Atropine, surely, would have been a better choice!”

Peter Lord said slowly:

“Yes, that’s true. But there’s something more. That damned District Nurse swears she lost a tube of morphine!”

“When?”

“Oh, weeks earlier, the night old Mrs. Welman died. The nurse says she left her case in the hall and found a tube of morphine missing in the morning. All bunkum, I believe. Probably smashed it at home some time before and forgot about it.”

“She has only remembered it since the death of Mary Gerrard?”

Peter Lord said reluctantly:

“As a matter of fact, she did mention it at the time—to the nurse on duty.”

Hercule Poirot was looking at Peter Lord with some interest.

He said gently:

"I think, mon cher, there is something else—something that you have not yet told me."

Peter Lord said:

"Oh, well, I suppose you'd better have it all. They're applying for an exhumation order and going to dig up old Mrs. Welman."

Poirot said:

"Eh bien?"

Peter Lord said:

"When they do, they'll probably find what they're looking for—morphine!"

"You knew that?"

Peter Lord, his face white under the freckles, muttered:

"I suspected it."

Hercule Poirot beat with his hand on the arm of his chair. He cried out:

"Mon Dieu, I do not understand you! You knew when she died that she had been murdered?"

Peter Lord shouted:

"Good lord, no! I never dreamt of such a thing! I thought she'd taken it herself."

Poirot sank back in his chair.

"Ah! You thought that…."

"Of course I did! She'd talked to me about it. Asked me more than once if I couldn't 'finish her off.' She hated illness, the helplessness of it—the—

what she called the indignity of lying there tended like a baby. And she was a very determined woman."

He was silent a moment, then he went on:

"I was surprised at her death. I hadn't expected it. I sent the nurse out of the room and made as thorough an investigation as I could. Of course, it was impossible to be sure without an autopsy. Well, what was the good of that? If she'd taken a shortcut, why make a song and dance about it and create a scandal? Better sign the certificate and let her be buried in peace. After all, I couldn't be sure. I decided wrong, I suppose. But I never dreamed for one moment of foul play. I was quite sure she'd done it herself."

Poirot asked:

"How do you think she had got hold of the morphine?"

"I hadn't the least idea. But, as I tell you, she was a clever, resourceful woman, with plenty of ingenuity and remarkable determination."

"Would she have got it from the nurses?"

Peter Lord shook his head.

"Never on your life! You don't know nurses!"

"From her family?"

"Possibly. Might have worked on their feelings."

Hercule Poirot said:

"You have told me that Mrs. Welman died intestate. If she had lived, would she have made a will?"

Peter Lord grinned suddenly.

"Putting your finger with fiendish accuracy on all the vital spots, aren't you? Yes, she was going to make a will; very agitated about it. Couldn't speak intelligently, but made her wishes clear. Elinor Carlisle was to have telephoned the lawyer first thing in the morning."

"So Elinor Carlisle knew that her aunt wanted to make a will? And if her aunt died without making one, Elinor Carlisle inherited everything?"

Peter Lord said quickly:

"She didn't know that. She'd no idea her aunt had never made a will."

"That, my friend, is what she says. She may have known."

"Look here, Poirot, are you the Prosecuting Counsel?"

"At the moment, yes. I must know the full strength of the case against her. Could Elinor Carlisle have taken the morphine from the attaché case?"

"Yes. So could anyone else. Roderick Welman. Nurse O'Brien. Any of the servants."

"Or Dr. Lord?"

Peter Lord's eyes opened wide. He said:

"Certainly… But what would be the idea?"

"Mercy, perhaps."

Peter Lord shook his head.

"Nothing doing there! You'll have to believe me!"

Hercule Poirot leaned back in his chair. He said:

"Let us entertain a supposition. Let us say that Elinor Carlisle did take that morphine from the attaché case and did administer it to her aunt. Was anything said about the loss of the morphine?"

"Not to the household. The two nurses kept it to themselves."

Poirot said:

“What, in your opinion, will be the action of the Crown?”

“You mean if they find morphine in Mrs. Welman’s body?”

“Yes.”

Peter Lord said grimly:

“It’s possible that if Elinor is acquitted of the present charge she will be rearrested and charged with the murder of her aunt.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“The motives are different; that is to say, in the case of Mrs. Welman the motive would have been gain, whereas in the case of Mary Gerrard the motive is supposed to be jealousy.”

“That’s right.”

Poirot said:

“What line does the defence propose to take?”

Peter Lord said:

“Bulmer proposes to take the line that there was no motive. He’ll put forward the theory that the engagement between Elinor and Roderick was a family business, entered into for family reasons, to please Mrs. Welman, and that the moment the old lady was dead Elinor broke it off of her own accord. Roderick Welman will give evidence to that effect. I think he almost believes it!”

“Believes that Elinor did not care for him to any great extent?”

“Yes.”

“In which case,” said Poirot, “she would have no reason for murdering Mary Gerrard.”

“Exactly.”

“But in that case, who did murder Mary Gerrard?”

“As you say.”

Poirot shook his head.

“C’est difficile.”

Peter Lord said vehemently:

“That’s just it! If she didn’t, who did? There’s the tea; but both Nurse Hopkins and Mary drank that. The defence will try to suggest that Mary Gerrard took the morphine herself after the other two had left the room—that she committed suicide, in fact.”

“Had she any reason for committing suicide?”

“None whatever.”

“Was she of a suicidal type?”

“No.”

Poirot said:

“What was she like, this Mary Gerrard?”

Peter Lord considered:

“She was—well, she was a nice kid. Yes, definitely a nice kid.”

Poirot sighed. He murmured:

“This Roderick Welman, did he fall in love with her because she was a nice kid?”

Peter Lord smiled.

“Oh, I get what you mean. She was beautiful, all right.”

“And you yourself? You had no feeling for her?”

Peter Lord stared.

“Good lord, no.”

Hercule Poirot reflected for a moment or two, then he said:

“Roderick Welman says that there was affection between him and Elinor Carlisle, but nothing stronger. Do you agree to that?”

“How the hell should I know?”

Poirot shook his head.

“You told me when you came into this room that Elinor Carlisle had the bad taste to be in love with a long-nosed, supercilious ass. That, I presume, is a description of Roderick Welman. So, according to you, she does care for him.”

Peter Lord said in a low, exasperated voice:

“She cares for him all right! Cares like hell!”

Poirot said:

“Then there was a motive….”

Peter Lord swerved round on him, his face alight with anger.

“Does it matter? She might have done it, yes! I don’t care if she did.”

Poirot said:

“Aha!”

“But I don’t want her hanged, I tell you! Supposing she was driven desperate? Love’s a desperate and twisting business. It can turn a worm into a fine fellow—and it can bring a decent, straight man down to the dregs! Suppose she did do it. Haven’t you got any pity?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I do not approve of murder.”

Peter Lord stared at him, looked away, stared again and finally burst out laughing.

“Of all the things to say—so prim and smug, too! Who’s asking you to approve? I’m not asking you to tell lies! Truth’s truth, isn’t it? If you find something that tells in an accused person’s favour, you wouldn’t be inclined to suppress it because she’s guilty, would you?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then why the hell can’t you do what I ask you?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“My friend, I am perfectly prepared to do so….”

Two

Peter Lord stared at him, took out a handkerchief, wiped his face and threw himself down in a chair.

“Whoof!” he said. “You got me all worked up! I didn’t see in the least what you were getting at!”

Poirot said:

“I was examining the case against Elinor Carlisle. Now I know it. Morphine was administered to Mary Gerrard; and, as far as I can see, it must have been given in the sandwiches. Nobody touched those sandwiches except Elinor Carlisle. Elinor Carlisle had a motive for killing Mary Gerrard, and she is, in your opinion, capable of killing Mary Gerrard, and in all probability she did kill Mary Gerrard. I see no reason for believing otherwise.

“That, mon ami, is one side of the question. Now we will proceed to stage two. We will dismiss all those considerations from our mind and we will approach the matter from the opposite angle: If Elinor Carlisle did not kill Mary Gerrard, who did? Or did Mary Gerrard commit suicide?”

Peter Lord sat up. A frown creased his forehead. He said:

“You weren’t quite accurate just now.”

“I? Not accurate?”

Poirot sounded affronted.

Peter Lord pursued relentlessly:

“No. You said nobody but Elinor Carlisle touched those sandwiches. You don’t know that.”

“There was no one else in the house.”

“As far as we know. But you are excluding a short period of time. There was a time during which Elinor Carlisle left the house to go down to the Lodge. During that period of time the sandwiches were on a plate in the pantry, and somebody could have tampered with them.”

Poirot drew a deep breath.

He said:

“You are right, my friend. I admit it. There was a time during which somebody could have had access to the plate of sandwiches. We must try to form some idea who that somebody could be; that is to say, what kind of person….”

He paused.

“Let us consider this Mary Gerrard. Someone, not Elinor Carlisle, desires her death. Why? Did anyone stand to gain by her death? Had she money to leave?”

Peter Lord shook his head.

“Not now. In another month she would have had two thousand pounds. Elinor Carlisle was making that sum over to her because she believed her aunt would have wished it. But the old lady’s estate isn’t wound up yet.”

Poirot said:

“Then we can wash out the money angle. Mary Gerrard was beautiful, you say. With that there are always complications. She had admirers?”

“Probably. I don’t know much about it.”

“Who would know?”

Peter Lord grinned.

“I’d better put you on to Nurse Hopkins. She’s the town crier. She knows everything that goes on in Maidensford.”

“I was going to ask you to give me your impressions of the two nurses.”

“Well, O’Brien’s Irish, good nurse, competent, a bit silly, could be spiteful, a bit of a liar—the imaginative kind that’s not so much deceitful, but just has to make a good story out of everything.”

Poirot nodded.

“Hopkins is a sensible, shrewd, middle-aged woman, quite kindly and competent, but a sight too much interested in other people’s business!”

“If there had been trouble over some young man in the village, would Nurse Hopkins know about it?”

“You bet!”

He added slowly:

“All the same, I don’t believe there can be anything very obvious in that line. Mary hadn’t been home long. She’d been away in Germany for two years.”

“She was twenty-one?”

“Yes.”

“There may be some German complication.”

Peter Lord’s face brightened.

He said eagerly:

“You mean that some German fellow may have had it in for her? He may have followed her over here, waited his time, and finally achieved his object?”

“It sounds a little melodramatic,” said Hercule Poirot doubtfully.

“But it’s possible?”

“Not very probable, though.”

Peter Lord said:

“I don’t agree. Someone might get all het up about the girl, and see red when she turned him down. He may have fancied she treated him badly. It’s an idea.”

“It is an idea, yes,” said Hercule Poirot, but his tone was not encouraging.

Peter Lord said pleadingly:

“Go on, M. Poirot.”

“You want me, I see, to be the conjurer. To take out of the empty hat rabbit after rabbit.”

“You can put it that way if you like.”

“There is another possibility,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Go on.”

“Someone abstracted a tube of morphine from Nurse Hopkins’ case that evening in June. Suppose Mary Gerrard saw the person who did it?”

“She would have said so.”

“No, no, mon cher. Be reasonable. If Elinor Carlisle, or Roderick Welman, or Nurse O’Brien, or even any of the servants, were to open that case and abstract a little glass tube, what would anyone think? Simply that the person in question had been sent by the nurse to fetch something from it. The matter would pass straight out of Mary Gerrard’s mind again, but it is possible that, later, she might recollect the fact and might mention it casually to the person in question—oh, without the least suspicion in the world. But to the person guilty of the murder of Mrs. Welman, imagine the effect of that remark! Mary had seen: Mary must be silenced at all costs! I can assure you, my friend, that anyone who has once committed a murder finds it only too easy to commit another!”

Peter Lord said with a frown:

“I’ve believed all along that Mrs. Welman took the stuff herself….”

“But she was paralysed—helpless—she had just had a second stroke.”

“Oh, I know. My idea was that, having got hold of morphine somehow or other, she kept it by her in a receptacle close at hand.”

“But in that case she must have got hold of the morphine before her second attack and the nurse missed it afterwards.”

“Hopkins may only have missed the morphine that morning. It might have been taken a couple of days before, and she hadn’t noticed it.”

“How would the old lady have got hold of it?”

“I don’t know. Bribed a servant, perhaps. If so, that servant’s never going to tell.”

“You don’t think either of the nurses were bribable?”

Lord shook his head.

“Not on your life! To begin with, they’re both very strict about their professional ethics—and in addition they’d be scared to death to do such a thing. They’d know the danger to themselves.”

Poirot said:

“That is so.”

He added thoughtfully:

“It looks, does it not, as though we return to our muttons? Who is the most likely person to have taken that morphine tube? Elinor Carlisle. We may say that she wished to make sure of inheriting a large fortune. We may be more generous and say that she was actuated by pity, that she took the morphine and administered it in compliance with her aunt’s often-repeated request;

but she took it—and Mary Gerrard saw her do it. And so we are back at the sandwiches and the empty house, and we have Elinor Carlisle once more—but this time with a different motive: to save her neck."

Peter Lord cried out:

"That's fantastic. I tell you, she isn't that kind of person! Money doesn't really mean anything to her—or to Roderick Welman, either, I'm bound to admit. I've heard them both say as much!"

"You have? That is very interesting. That is the kind of statement I always look upon with a good deal of suspicion myself."

Peter Lord said:

"Damn you, Poirot, must you always twist everything round so that it comes back to that girl?"

"It is not I that twist things round: they come round of themselves. It is like the pointer at the fair. It swings round, and when it comes to rest it points always at the same name—Elinor Carlisle."

Peter Lord said:

"No!"

Hercule Poirot shook his head sadly.

Then he said:

"Has she relations, this Elinor Carlisle? Sisters, cousins? A father or mother?"

"No. She's an orphan—alone in the world…."

"How pathetic it sounds! Bulmer, I am sure, will make great play with that! Who, then, inherits her money if she dies?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought."

Poirot said reprovingly:

“One should always think of these things. Has she made a will, for instance?”

Peter Lord flushed. He said uncertainly:

“I—I don’t know.”

Hercule Poirot looked at the ceiling and joined his fingertips.

He remarked:

“It would be well, you know, to tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Exactly what is in your mind—no matter how damaging it may happen to be to Elinor Carlisle.”

“How do you know—?”

“Yes, yes, I know. There is something—some incident in your mind! It will be as well to tell me, otherwise I shall imagine it is something worse than it is!”

“It’s nothing, really—”

“We will agree it is nothing. But let me hear what it is.”

Slowly, unwillingly, Peter Lord allowed the story to be dragged from him—that scene of Elinor leaning in at the window of Nurse Hopkins’ cottage, and of her laughter.

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“She said that, did she, ‘So you’re making your will, Mary? That’s funny—that’s very funny.’ And it was very clear to you what was in her mind…She had been thinking, perhaps, that Mary Gerrard was not going to live long….”

Peter Lord said:

“I only imagined that. I don’t know.”

Poirot said:

“No, you did not only imagine it….”

Three

Hercule Poirot sat in Nurse Hopkins' cottage.

Dr. Lord had brought him there, had introducd him and had then, at a glance from Poirot, left him to a tête-à-tête.

Having, to begin with, eyed his foreign appearance somewhat askance, Nurse Hopkins was now thawing rapidly.

She said with a faintly gloomy relish:

"Yes, it's a terrible thing. One of the most terrible things I've ever known. Mary was one of the most beautiful girls you've ever seen. Might have gone on the films any time! And a nice steady girl, too, and not stuck-up, as she might have been with all the notice taken of her."

Poirot, inserting a question adroitly, said:

"You mean the notice taken of her by Mrs. Welman?"

"That's what I mean. The old lady had taken a tremendous fancy to her—really, a tremendous fancy."

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"Surprising, perhaps?"

"That depends. It might be quite natural, really. I mean…" Nurse Hopkins bit her lip and looked confused. "What I mean is, Mary had a very pretty way with her: nice soft voice and pleasant manners. And it's my opinion it does an elderly person good to have a young face about."

Hercule Poirot said:

"Miss Carlisle came down occasionally, I suppose, to see her aunt?"

Nurse Hopkins said sharply:

“Miss Carlisle came down when it suited her.”

Poirot murmured:

“You do not like Miss Carlisle.”

Nurse Hopkins cried out:

“I should hope not, indeed! A poisoner! A cold-blooded poisoner!”

“Ah,” said Hercule Poirot, “I see you have made up your mind.”

Nurse Hopkins said suspiciously:

“What do you mean? Made up my mind?”

“You are quite sure that it was she who administered morphine to Mary Gerrard?”

“Who else could have done it, I should like to know? You’re not suggesting that I did?”

“Not for a moment. But her guilt has not yet been proved, remember.”

Nurse Hopkins said with calm assurance:

“She did it all right. Apart from anything else, you could see it in her face. Queer she was, all the time. And taking me away upstairs and keeping me there—delaying as long as possible. And then when I turned on her, after finding Mary like that, it was there in her face as plain as anything. She knew I knew!”

Hercule Poirot said thoughtfully:

“It is certainly difficult to see who else could have done it. Unless of course, she did it herself.”

“What do you mean, did it herself? Do you mean that Mary committed suicide? I never heard such nonsense!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“One can never tell. The heart of a young girl, it is very sensitive, very tender.” He paused. “It would have been possible, I suppose? She could have slipped something into her tea without your noticing her?”

“Slipped it into her cup, you mean?”

“Yes. You weren’t watching her all the time.”

“I wasn’t watching her—no. Yes, I suppose she could have done that… But it’s all nonsense! What would she want to do a thing like that for?”

Hercule Poirot shook his head with a resumption of his former manner.

“A young girl’s heart…as I say, so sensitive. An unhappy love affair, perhaps—”

Nurse Hopkins gave a snort.

“Girls don’t kill themselves for love affairs—not unless they’re in the family way—and Mary wasn’t that, let me tell you!” She glared at him belligerently.

“And she was not in love?”

“Not she. Quite fancy free. Keen on her job and enjoying her life.”

“But she must have had admirers, since she was such an attractive girl.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“She wasn’t one of these girls who are all S.A. and IT. She was a quiet girl!”

“But there were young men, no doubt, in the village who admired her.”

“There was Ted Bigland, of course,” said Nurse Hopkins.

Poirot extracted various details as to Ted Bigland.

“Very gone on Mary, he was,” said Nurse Hopkins. “But, as I told her, she was a cut above him.”

Poirot said:

“He must have been angry when she would not have anything to do with him?”

“He was sore about it, yes,” admitted Nurse Hopkins. “Blamed me for it, too.”

“He thought it was your fault?”

“That’s what he said. I’d a perfect right to advise the girl. After all, I know something of the world. I didn’t want the girl to throw herself away.”

Poirot said gently:

“What made you take so much interest in the girl?”

“Well, I don’t know…” Nurse Hopkins hesitated. She looked shy and a little ashamed of herself. “There was something—well—romantic about Mary.”

Poirot murmured:

“About her, perhaps, but not about her circumstances. She was the lodge keeper’s daughter, wasn’t she?”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Yes—yes, of course. At least—”

She hesitated, looked at Poirot, who was gazing at her in the most sympathetic manner.

“As a matter of fact,” said Nurse Hopkins, in a burst of confidence, “she wasn’t old Gerrard’s daughter at all. He told me so. Her father was a gentleman.”

Poirot murmured:

“I see… And her mother?”

Nurse Hopkins hesitated, bit her lip, and then went on:

“Her mother had been a lady’s maid to old Mrs. Welman. She married Gerrard after Mary was born.”

“As you say, quite a romance—a mystery romance.”

Nurse Hopkins’ face lit up.

“Wasn’t it? One can’t help taking an interest in people when one knows something that nobody else does about them. Just by chance I happened to find out a good deal. As a matter of fact, it was Nurse O’Brien who set me on the track; but that’s another story. But, as you say, it’s interesting knowing past history. There’s many a tragedy that goes unguessed at. It’s a sad world.”

Poirot sighed and shook his head.

Nurse Hopkins said with sudden alarm:

“But I oughtn’t to have gone talking like this. I wouldn’t have a word of this get out for anything! After all, it’s nothing to do with the case. As far as the world is concerned, Mary was Gerrard’s daughter, and there mustn’t be a hint of anything else. Damaging her in the eyes of the world after she’s dead! He married her mother, and that’s enough.”

Poirot murmured:

“But you know, perhaps, who her real father was?”

Nurse Hopkins said reluctantly:

“Well, perhaps I do; but, then again, perhaps I don’t. That is, I don’t know anything. I could take a guess. Old sins have long shadows, as they say! But I’m not one to talk, and I shan’t say another word.”

Poirot tactfully retired from the fray and attacked another subject.

“There is something else—a delicate matter. But I am sure I can rely on your discretion.”

Nurse Hopkins bridled. A broad smile appeared on her homely face.

Poirot continued:

“I speak of Mr. Roderick Welman. He was, so I hear, attracted by Mary Gerrard.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“Bowled over by her!”

“Although at the time he was engaged to Miss Carlisle?”

“If you ask me,” said Nurse Hopkins, “he was never really sweet on Miss Carlisle. Not what I’d call sweet on her.”

Poirot asked, using an old-fashioned term:

“Did Mary Gerrard—er—encourage his advances?”

Nurse Hopkins said sharply:

“She behaved very well. Nobody could say she led him on!”

Poirot said:

“Was she in love with him?”

Nurse Hopkins said sharply:

“No, she wasn’t.”

“But she liked him?”

“Oh, yes, she liked him well enough.”

“And I suppose, in time, something might have come of it?”

Nurse Hopkins admitted that.

“That may be. But Mary wouldn’t have done anything in a hurry. She told him down here he had no business to speak like that to her when he was engaged to Miss Elinor. And when he came to see her in London she said the same.”

Poirot asked with an air of engaging candour:

“What do you think yourself of Mr. Roderick Welman?”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“He’s a nice enough young fellow. Nervy, though. Looks as though he might be dyspeptic later on. Those nervy ones often are.”

“Was he very fond of his aunt?”

“I believe so.”

“Did he sit with her much when she was so ill?”

“You mean when she had that second stroke? The night before she died when they came down? I don’t believe he even went into her room!”

“Really.”

Nurse Hopkins said quickly:

“She didn’t ask for him. And, of course, we’d no idea the end was so near. There are a lot of men like that, you know: fight shy of a sickroom. They can’t help it. And it’s not heartlessness. They just don’t want to be upset in their feelings.”

Poirot nodded comprehendingly.

He said:

“Are you sure Mr. Welman did not go into his aunt’s room before she died?”

“Well not while I was on duty! Nurse O’Brien relieved me at 3 a.m., and she may have fetched him before the end; but, if so, she didn’t mention it to me.”

Poirot suggested:

“He may have gone into her room when you were absent?”

Nurse Hopkins snapped:

“I don’t leave my patients unattended, Mr. Poirot.”

“A thousand apologies. I did not mean that. I thought perhaps you might have had to boil water, or to run downstairs for some necessary stimulant.”

Mollified, Nurse Hopkins said:

“I did go down to change the bottles and get them refilled. I knew there’d be a kettle on the boil down in the kitchen.”

“You were away long?”

“Five minutes, perhaps.”

“Ah, yes, then Mr. Welman may have just looked in on her then?”

“He must have been very quick about it if he did.”

Poirot sighed. He said:

"As you say, men fight shy of illness. It is the women who are the ministering angels. What should we do without them? Especially women of your profession—a truly noble calling."

Nurse Hopkins, slightly red in the face, said:

"It's very kind of you to say that. I've never thought of it that way myself. Too much hard work in nursing to think about the noble side of it."

Poirot said:

"And there is nothing else you can tell me about Mary Gerrard?"

There was an appreciable pause before Nurse Hopkins answered:

"I don't know of anything."

"Are you quite sure?"

Nurse Hopkins said rather incoherently:

"You don't understand. I was fond of Mary."

"And there is nothing more you can tell me?"

"No, there is not! And that's flat."

Four

In the awesome majesty of Mrs. Bishop's black-clad presence Hercule Poirot sat humbly insignificant.

The thawing of Mrs. Bishop was no easy matter. For Mrs. Bishop, a lady of Conservative habits and views, strongly disapproved of foreigners. And a foreigner most indubitably Hercule Poirot was. Her responses were frosty and she eyed him with disfavour and suspicion.

Dr. Lord's introduction of him had done little to soften the situation.

"I am sure," said Mrs. Bishop when Dr. Lord had gone, "Dr. Lord is a very clever doctor and means well. Dr. Ransome, his predecessor, had been here many years!"

Dr. Ransome, that is to say, could be trusted to behave in a manner suitable to the county. Dr. Lord, a mere irresponsible youngster, an upstart who had taken Dr. Ransome's place, had only one recommendation: "cleverness" in his profession.

Cleverness, the whole demeamour of Mrs. Bishop seemed to say, is not enough!

Hercule Poirot was persuasive. He was adroit. But charm he never so wisely, Mrs. Bishop remained aloof and implacable.

The death of Mrs. Welman had been very sad. She had been much respected in the neighbourhood. The arrest of Miss Carlisle was "Disgraceful!" and believed to be the result of "these newfangled police methods." The views of Mrs. Bishop upon the death of Mary Gerrard were vague in the extreme. "I couldn't say, I'm sure," being the most she could be brought to say.

Hercule Poirot played his last card. He recounted with naïve pride a recent visit of his to Sandringham. He spoke with admiration of the graciousness and delightful simplicity and kindness of Royalty.

Mrs. Bishop, who followed daily in the court circular the exact movements of Royalty, was overborne. After all, if They had sent for Mr. Poirot… Well, naturally, that made All the Difference. Foreigner or no foreigner, who was she, Emma Bishop, to hold back where Royalty had led the way?

Presently she and M. Poirot were engaged in pleasant conversation on a really interesting theme—no less than the selection of a suitable future husband for Princess Elizabeth.

Having finally exhausted all possible candidates as Not Good Enough, the talk reverted to less exalted circles.

Poirot observed sententiously:

“Marriage, alas, is fraught with dangers and pitfalls!”

Mrs. Bishop said:

“Yes, indeed—with this nasty divorce,” rather as though she were speaking of a contagious disease such as chickenpox.

“I expect,” said Poirot, “that Mrs. Welman, before her death, must have been anxious to see her niece suitably settled in life?”

Mrs. Bishop bowed her head.

“Yes, indeed. The engagement between Miss Elinor and Mr. Roderick was a great relief to her. It was a thing she had always hoped for.”

Poirot ventured:

“The engagement was perhaps entered into partly from a wish to please her?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t say that, Mr. Poirot. Miss Elinor has always been devoted to Mr. Roddy—always was, as a tiny tot—quite beautiful to see. Miss Elinor has a very loyal and devoted nature!”

Poirot murmured:

"And he?"

Mrs. Bishop said austerely:

"Mr. Roderick was devoted to Miss Elinor."

Poirot said:

"Yet the engagement, I think, was broken off?"

The colour rose in Mrs. Bishop's face. She said:

"Owing, Mr. Poirot, to the machinations of a snake in the grass."

Poirot said, appearing suitably impressed:

"Indeed?"

Mrs. Bishop, her face becoming redder still, explained:

"In this country, Mr. Poirot, there is a certain Decency to be observed when mentioning the Dead. But that young woman, Mr. Poirot, was Underhand in her Dealings."

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully for a moment.

Then he said with an apparent lack of guile:

"You surprise me. I had been given the impression that she was a very simple and unassuming girl."

Mrs. Bishop's chin trembled a little.

"She was Artful, Mr. Poirot. People were Taken In by her. That Nurse Hopkins, for instance! Yes, and my poor dear mistress too!"

Poirot shook his head sympathetically and made a clacking noise with his tongue.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Bishop, stimulated by these encouraging noises. "She was failing, poor dear, and that young woman Wormed her way into her Confidence. She knew which side of her bread was buttered. Always hovering about, reading to her, bringing her little nosegays of flowers. It was Mary this and Mary that and 'Where's Mary?' all the time! The money she spent on the girl, too! Expensive schools and finishing places abroad—and the girl nothing but old Gerrard's daughter! He didn't like it, I can tell you! Used to complain of her Fine Lady ways. Above Herself, that's what She was."

This time Poirot shook his head and said commiseratingly:

"Dear, dear."

"And then Making Up to Mr. Roddy the way she did! He was too simple to see through Her. And Miss Elinor, a nice-minded young lady as she is, of course she wouldn't realize what was Going On. But Men, they are all alike: easily caught by flattery and a pretty face!"

Poirot sighed.

"She had, I suppose, admirers of her own class?" he asked.

"Of course she had. There was Rufus Bigland's son Ted—as nice a boy as you could find. But oh, no, my fine lady was too good for him! I'd no patience with such airs and graces!"

Poirot said:

"Was he not angry about her treatment of him?"

"Yes, indeed. He accused her of carrying on with Mr. Roddy. I know that for a fact. I don't blame the boy for feeling sore!"

"Nor I," said Poirot. "You interest me extremely, Mrs. Bishop. Some people have the knack of presenting a character clearly and vigorously in a few words. It is a great gift. I have at last a clear picture of Mary Gerrard."

"Mind you," said Mrs. Bishop, "I'm not saying a word against the girl! I wouldn't do such a thing—and she in her grave. But there's no doubt that she caused a lot of trouble!"

Poirot murmured:

"Where would it have ended, I wonder?"

"That's what I say!" said Mrs. Bishop. "You can take it from me, Mr. Poirot, that if my dear mistress hadn't died when she did—awful as the shock was at the time, I see now that it was a Mercy in Disguise—I don't know what might have been the end of it!"

Poirot said invitingly:

"You mean?"

Mrs. Bishop said solemnly:

"I've come across it time and again. My own sister was in service where it happened. Once when old Colonel Randolph died and left every penny away from his poor wife to a hussy living at Eastbourne—and once old Mrs. Dacres—left it to the organist of the church—one of those long-haired young men—and she with married sons and daughters."

Poirot said:

"You mean, I take it, that Mrs. Welman might have left all her money to Mary Gerrard?"

"It wouldn't have surprised me!" said Mrs. Bishop. "That's what the young woman was working up to, I've no doubt. And if I ventured to say a word, Mrs. Welman was ready to bite my head off, though I'd been with her nearly twenty years. It's an ungrateful world, Mr. Poirot. You try to do your duty and it is not appreciated."

"Alas," sighed Poirot, "how true that is!"

"But Wickedness doesn't always flourish," said Mrs. Bishop.

Poirot said:

“True. Mary Gerrard is dead….”

Mrs. Bishop said comfortably:

“She’s gone to her reckoning, and we mustn’t judge her.”

Poirot mused:

“The circumstances of her death seem quite inexplicable.”

“These police and their newfangled ideas,” said Mrs. Bishop. “Is it likely that a well-bred, nicely brought up young lady like Miss Elinor would go about poisoning anyone? Trying to drag me into it, too, saying I said her manner was peculiar!”

“But was it not peculiar?”

“And why shouldn’t it be?” Mrs. Bishop’s bust heaved with a flash of jet. “Miss Elinor’s a young lady of feelings. She was going to turn out her aunt’s things—and that’s always a painful business.”

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

He said:

“It would have made it much easier for her if you had accompanied her.”

“I wanted to, Mr. Poirot, but she took me up quite sharp. Oh, well, Miss Elinor was always a very proud and reserved young lady. I wish, though, that I had gone with her.”

Poirot murmured:

“You did not think of following her up to the house?”

Mrs. Bishop reared her head majestically.

“I don’t go where I’m not wanted, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot looked abashed. He murmured:

“Besides, you had doubtless matters of importance to attend to that morning?”

“It was a very warm day, I remember. Very sultry.” She sighed. “I walked to the cemetery to place a few flowers on Mrs. Welman’s grave, a token of respect, and I had to rest there quite a long time. Quite overcome by the heat, I was. I got home late for lunch, and my sister was quite upset when she saw the State of Heat I was in! Said I never should have done it on a day like that.”

Poirot looked at her with admiration.

He said:

“I envy you, Mrs. Bishop. It is pleasant indeed to have nothing with which to reproach oneself after a death. Mr. Roderick Welman, I fancy, must blame himself for not going in to see his aunt that night, though naturally he could not know she was going to pass away so soon.”

“Oh, but you’re quite wrong, Mr. Poirot. I can tell you that for a fact. Mr. Roddy did go into his aunt’s room. I was just outside on the landing myself. I’d heard that nurse go off downstairs, and I thought maybe I’d better make sure the mistress wasn’t needing anything, for you know what nurses are: always staying downstairs to gossip with the maids, or else worrying them to death by asking them for things. Not that Nurse Hopkins was as bad as that red-haired Irish nurse. Always chattering and making trouble, she was! But, as I say, I thought I’d just see everything was all right, and it was then that I saw Mr. Roddy slip into his aunt’s room. I don’t know whether she knew him or not; but anyway he hasn’t got anything to reproach himself with!”

Poirot said:

“I am glad. He is of a somewhat nervous disposition.”

“Just a trifle cranky. He always has been.”

Poirot said:

“Mrs. Bishop, you are evidently a woman of great understanding. I have formed a high regard for your judgement. What do you think is the truth about the death of Mary Gerrard?”

Mrs. Bishop snorted.

“Clear enough, I should think! One of those nasty pots of paste of Abbott’s. Keeps them on those shelves for months! My second cousin was took ill and nearly died once, with tinned crab!”

Poirot objected:

“But what about the morphine found in the body?”

Mrs. Bishop said grandly:

“I don’t know anything about morphine! I know what doctors are: Tell them to look for something, and they’ll find it! Tainted fish paste isn’t good enough for them!”

Poirot said:

“You do not think it possible that she committed suicide?”

“She?” Mrs. Bishop snorted. “No indeed. Hadn’t she made up her mind to marry Mr. Roddy? Catch her committing suicide!”

Five

Since it was a Sunday, Hercule Poirot found Ted Bigland at his father's farm.

There was little difficulty in getting Ted Bigland to talk. He seemed to welcome the opportunity—as though it was a relief.

He said thoughtfully:

"So you're trying to find out who killed Mary? It's a black mystery, that."

Poirot said:

"You do not believe that Miss Carlisle killed her, then?"

Ted Bigland frowned—a puzzled, almost childlike frown it was.

He said slowly:

"Miss Elinor's a lady. She's the kind—well, you couldn't imagine her doing anything like that—anything violent, if you know what I mean. After all, 'tisn't likely, is it, sir, that a nice young lady would go and do a thing of that kind?"

Hercule Poirot nodded in a contemplative manner.

He said:

"No, it is not likely… But when it comes to jealousy—"

He paused, watching the good-looking, fair young giant before him.

Ted Bigland said:

"Jealousy? I know things happen that way; but it's usually drink and getting worked up that makes a fellow see red and run amok. Miss Elinor—a nice quiet young lady like that—”

Poirot said:

“But Mary Gerrard died…and she did not die a natural death. Have you any idea—is there anything you can tell me to help me find out—who killed Mary Gerrard?”

Slowly the other shook his head.

He said:

“It doesn’t seem right. It doesn’t seem possible, if you take my meaning, that anyone could have killed Mary. She was—she was like a flower.”

And suddenly, for a vivid minute, Hercule Poirot had a new conception of the dead girl… In that halting rustic voice the girl Mary lived and bloomed again. “She was like a flower.”

II

There was suddenly a poignant sense of loss, of something exquisite destroyed….

In his mind phrase after phrase succeeded each other. Peter Lord’s “She was a nice kid.” Nurse Hopkins’ “She could have gone on the films any time.” Mrs. Bishop’s venomous “No patience with her airs and graces.” And now last, putting to shame, laying aside those other views, the quiet wondering: “She was like a flower.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“But, then…?”

He spread out his hands in a wide, appealing foreign gesture.

Ted Bigland nodded his head. His eyes had still the dumb, glazed look of an animal in pain.

He said:

“I know, sir. I know what you say’s true. She didn’t die natural. But I’ve been wondering….”

He paused.

Poirot said:

“Yes?”

Ted Bigland said slowly:

“I’ve been wondering if in some way it couldn’t have been an accident?”

“An accident? But what kind of an accident?”

“I know, sir. I know. It doesn’t sound like sense. But I keep thinking and thinking, and it seems to me it must have been that way. Something that wasn’t meant to happen or something that was all a mistake. Just—well, just an accident!”

He looked pleadingly at Poirot, embarrassed by his own lack of eloquence.

Poirot was silent a moment or two. He seemed to be considering. He said at last:

“It is interesting that you feel that.”

Ted Bigland said deprecatingly:

“I dare say it doesn’t make sense to you, sir. I can’t figure out any how and why about it. It’s just a feeling I’ve got.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Feeling is sometimes an important guide… You will pardon me, I hope, if I seem to tread on painful ground, but you cared very much for Mary Gerrard, did you not?”

A little dark colour came up in the tanned face.

Ted said simply:

“Everyone knows that around here, I reckon.”

“You wanted to marry her?”

“Yes.”

“But she—was not willing?”

Ted’s face darkened a little. He said, with a hint of surpressed anger:

“Mean well, people do, but they shouldn’t muck up people’s lives by interfering. All this schooling and going abroad! It changed Mary. I don’t mean spoilt her, or that she was stuck-up—she wasn’t. But it…oh, it bewildered her! She didn’t know where she was any more. She was—well, put it crudely—she was too good for me; but she still wasn’t good enough for a real gentleman like Mr. Welman.”

Hercule Poirot said, watching him:

“You don’t like Mr. Welman?”

Ted Bigland said with simple violence:

“Why the hell should I? Mr. Welman’s all right. I’ve nothing against him. He’s not what I call much of a man! I could pick him up and break him in two. He’s got brains, I suppose… But that’s not much help to you if your car breaks down, for instance. You may know the principle that makes a car run; but it doesn’t stop you from being as helpless as a baby when all that’s needed is to take the mag out and give it a wipe.”

Poirot said:

“Of course, you work in a garage?”

Ted Bigland nodded.

“Henderson’s, down the road.”

“You were there on the morning when—this thing happened?”

Ted Bigland said:

“Yes, testing out a car for a gentleman. A choke somewhere, and I couldn’t locate it. Ran it round for a bit. Seems odd to think of now. It was a lovely day, some honeysuckle still in the hedges… Mary used to like honeysuckle. We used to go picking it together before she went away abroad….”

Again there was that puzzled child-like wonder on his face.

Hercule Poirot was silent.

With a start Ted Bigland came out of his trance.

He said:

“Sorry, sir, forget what I said about Mr. Welman. I was sore—because of his hanging round after Mary. He ought to have left her alone. She wasn’t his sort—not really.”

Poirot said:

“Do you think she cared for him?”

Again Ted Bigland frowned.

“I don’t—not really. But she might have done. I couldn’t say.”

Poirot asked:

“Was there any other man in Mary’s life? Anyone, for instance, she had met abroad?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. She never mentioned anybody.”

“Any enemies—here in Maidensford?”

"You mean anyone who had it in for her?" He shook his head. "Nobody knew her very well. But they all liked her."

Poirot said:

"Did Mrs. Bishop, the housekeeper at Hunterbury, like her?"

Ted gave a sudden grin. He said:

"Oh, that was just spite! The old dame didn't like Mrs. Welman taking such a fancy to Mary."

Poirot asked:

"Was Mary Gerrard happy when she was down here? Was she fond of old Mrs. Welman?"

"She'd have been happy enough, I dare say, if Nurse had let her alone. Nurse Hopkins, I mean. Putting ideas into her head of earning a living and going off to do massage."

"She was fond of Mary, though?"

"Oh, yes, she was fond enough of her; but she's the kind who always knows what's best for everyone!"

Poirot said slowly:

"Supposing that Nurse Hopkins knows something—something, let us say, that would throw a discreditable light on Mary—do you think she would keep it to herself?"

Ted Bigland looked at him curiously.

"I don't quite get your meaning, sir?"

"Do you think that if Nurse Hopkins knew something against Mary Gerrard she would hold her tongue about it?"

Ted Bigland said:

“I doubt if that woman could hold her tongue about anything! She’s the greatest gossip in the village. But if she’d hold her tongue about anybody, it would probably be about Mary.” He added, his curiosity getting the better of him, “I’d like to know why you ask that?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“One has, in talking to people, a certain impression. Nurse Hopkins was, to all seeming, perfectly frank and outspoken, but I formed the impression—very strongly—that she was keeping something back. It is not necessarily an important thing. It may have no bearing on the crime. But there is something that she knows which she has not told. I also formed the impression that this something—whatever it is—is something definitely damaging or detrimental to the character of Mary Gerrard….”

Ted shook his head helplessly.

Hercule Poirot sighed:

“Ah, well. I shall learn what it is in time.”

Six

Poirot looked with interest at the long, sensitive face of Roderick Welman.

Roddy’s nerves were in a pitiable condition. His hands twitched, his eyes were bloodshot, his voice was husky and irritable.

He said, looking down at the card:

“Of course, I know your name, M. Poirot. But I don’t see what Dr. Lord thinks you can do in this matter! And, anyway, what business is it of his? He attended my aunt, but otherwise he’s a complete stranger. Elinor and I had not even met him until we went down there this June. Surely it is Seddon’s business to attend to all this sort of thing?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Technically that is correct.”

Roddy went on unhappily:

“Not that Seddon gives me much confidence. He’s so confoundedly gloomy.”

“It is a habit, that, of lawyers.”

“Still,” said Roddy, cheering up a little, “we’ve briefed Bulmer. He’s supposed to be pretty well at the top of the tree, isn’t he?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“He has a reputation for leading forlorn hopes.”

Roddy winced palpably.

Poirot said:

"It does not displease you, I hope, that I should endeavour to be of assistance to Miss Elinor Carlisle?"

"No, no, of course not. But—"

"But what can I do? It is that, that you would ask?"

A quick smile flashed across Roddy's worried face—a smile so suddenly charming that Hercule Poirot understood the subtle attraction of the man.

Roddy said apologetically:

"It sounds a little rude, put like that. But, really, of course, that is the point. I won't beat about the bush. What can you do, M. Poirot?"

Poirot said:

"I can search for the truth."

"Yes." Roddy sounded a little doubtful.

Poirot said:

"I might discover facts that would be helpful to the accused."

Roddy sighed.

"If you only could!"

Hercule Poirot went on:

"It is my earnest desire to be helpful. Will you assist me by telling me just exactly what you think of the whole business?"

Roddy got up and walked restlessly up and down.

"What can I say? The whole thing's so absurd—so fantastic! The mere idea of Elinor—Elinor, whom I've known since she was a child—actually doing such a melodramatic thing as poisoning someone. It's quite laughable, of course! But how on earth explain that to a jury?"

Poirot said stolidly:

"You consider it quite impossible that Miss Carlisle should have done such a thing?"

"Oh quite! That goes without saying! Elinor's an exquisite creature—beautifully poised and balanced—no violence in her nature. She's intellectual, sensitive and altogether devoid of animal passions. But get twelve fatheaded fools in a jury box, and God knows what they can be made to believe! After all, let's be reasonable: they're not there to judge character; they're there to sift evidence. Facts—facts—facts. And the facts are unfortunate!"

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

He said:

"You are a person, Mr. Welman, of sensibility and intelligence. The facts condemn Miss Carlisle. Your knowledge of her acquits her. What, then, really happened? What can have happened?"

Roddy spread out his hands in exasperation.

"That's the devil of it all! I suppose the nurse couldn't have done it?"

"She was never near the sandwiches—oh, I have made the inquiries very minutely—and she could not have poisoned the tea without poisoning herself as well. I have made quite sure of that. Moreover, why should she wish to kill Mary Gerrard?"

Roddy cried out:

"Why should anyone wish to kill Mary Gerrard?"

"That," said Poirot, "seems to be the unanswerable question in this case. No one wished to kill Mary Gerrard." (He added in his own mind: "Except

Elinor Carlisle.”) “Therefore, the next step logically would seem to be: Mary Gerrard was not killed! But that, alas, is not so. She was killed!”

He added, slightly melodramatically:

“But she is in her grave, and oh,

The difference to me!”

“I beg your pardon,” said Roddy.

Hercule Poirot explained:

“Wordsworth. I read him much. Those lines express, perhaps, what you feel?”

“I?”

Roddy looked stiff and unapproachable.

Poirot said:

“I apologize—I apologize deeply! It is so hard—to be a detective and also a pukka sahib. As it is so well expressed in your language, there are things that one does not say. But, alas, a detective is forced to say them! He must ask questions: about people’s private affairs, about their feelings!”

Roddy said:

“Surely all this is quite unnecessary?”

Poirot said quickly and humbly:

“If I might just understand the position? Then we will pass from the unpleasant subject and not refer to it again. It is fairly widely known, Mr. Welman, that you—admired Mary Gerrard? That is, I think, true?”

Roddy got up and stood by the window. He played with the blind tassel. He said:

“Yes.”

“You fell in love with her?”

“I suppose so.”

“Ah, and you are now heartbroken by her death—”

“I—I suppose—I mean—well, really, M. Poirot—”

He turned—a nervous, irritable, sensitive creature at bay.

Hercule Poirot said:

“If you could just tell me—just show me clearly—then it would be finished with.”

Roddy Welman sat down in a chair. He did not look at the other man. He spoke in a series of jerks.

“It’s very difficult to explain. Must we go into it?”

Poirot said:

“One cannot always turn aside and pass by from the unpleasantnesses of life, Mr. Welman! You say you suppose you cared for this girl. You are not sure, then?”

Roddy said:

“I don’t know… She was so lovely. Like a dream… That’s what it seems like now. A dream! Not real! All that—my seeing her first—my—well, my infatuation for her! A kind of madness! And now everything is finished—gone…as though—as though it had never happened.”

Poirot nodded his head….

He said:

“Yes, I understand….”

He added:

“You were not in England yourself at the time of her death?”

“No, I went abroad on July 9th and returned on August 1st. Elinor’s telegram followed me about from place to place. I hurried home as soon as I got the news.”

Poirot said:

“It must have been a great shock to you. You had cared for the girl very much.”

Roddy said, and there was bitterness and exasperation in his voice:

“Why should these things happen to one? It’s not as though one wished them to happen! It is contrary to all—to all one’s ordered expectation of life!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Ah, but life is like that! It does not permit you to arrange and order it as you will. It will not permit you to escape emotion, to live by the intellect and by reason! You cannot say, ‘I will feel so much and no more.’ Life, Mr. Welman, whatever else it is, is not reasonable!”

Roderick Welman murmured:

“So it seems….”

Poirot said:

“A spring morning, a girl’s face—and the well-ordered sequence of existence is routed.”

Roddy winced and Poirot went on:

“Sometimes it is little more than that—a face. What did you really know of Mary Gerrard, Mr. Welman?”

Roddy said heavily:

“What did I know? So little; I see that now. She was sweet, I think, and gentle; but really, I know nothing—nothing at all… That’s why, I suppose, I don’t miss her….”

His antagonism and resentment were gone now. He spoke naturally and simply. Hercule Poirot, as he had a knack of doing, had penetrated the other’s defences. Roddy seemed to feel a certain relief in unburdening himself.

He said:

“Sweet—gentle—not very clever. Sensitive, I think, and kind. She had a refinement that you would not expect to find in a girl of her class.”

“Was she the kind of girl who would make enemies unconsciously?”

Roddy shook his head vigorously.

“No, no, I can’t imagine anyone disliking her—really disliking her, I mean. Spite is different.”

Poirot said quickly.

“Spite? So there was spite, you think?”

Roddy said absently:

“Must have been—to account for that letter.”

Poirot said sharply:

“What letter?”

Roddy flushed and looked annoyed. He said:

“Oh, nothing important.”

Poirot repeated:

“What letter?”

“An anonymous letter.”

He spoke reluctantly.

“When did it come? To whom was it written?”

Rather unwillingly Roddy explained.

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“It is interesting, that. Can I see it, this letter?”

“Afraid you can’t. As a matter of fact, I burnt it.”

“Now, why did you do that, Mr. Welman?”

Roddy said rather stiffly:

“It seemed the natural thing to do at the time.”

Poirot said:

“And in consequence of this letter, you and Miss Carlisle went hurriedly down to Hunterbury?”

“We went down, yes. I don’t know about hurriedly.”

“But you were a little uneasy, were you not? Perhaps even, a little alarmed?”

Roddy said even more stiffly:

“I won’t admit that.”

Hercule Poirot cried:

“But surely that was only natural! Your inheritance—that which was promised you—was in jeopardy! Surely it is natural that you should be unquiet about the matter! Money, it is very important!”

“Not as important as you make out.”

Poirot said:

“Such unworldliness is indeed remarkable!”

Roddy flushed. He said:

“Oh, of course, the money did matter to us. We weren’t completely indifferent to it. But our main object was to—to see my aunt and make sure she was all right.”

Poirot said:

“You went down there with Miss Carlisle. At that time your aunt had not made a will. Shortly afterwards she had another attack of her illness. She then wished to make a will, but, conveniently for Miss Carlisle, perhaps, she dies that night before that will can be made.”

“Look here, what are you hinting at?”

Roddy’s face was wrathful.

Poirot answered him like a flash:

“You have told me, Mr. Welman, as regards the death of Mary Gerrard, that the motive attributed to Elinor Carlisle is absurd—that she was, emphatically, not that kind of a person. But there is now another interpretation. Elinor Carlisle had reason to fear that she might be disinherited in favour of an outsider. The letter has warned her—her aunt’s broken murmurings confirm that fear. In the hall below is an attaché case with various drugs and medical supplies. It is easy to abstract a tube of morphine. And afterwards, so I have learned, she sits in the sick room alone with her aunt while you and the nurses are at dinner….”

Roddy cried:

“Good God, M. Poirot, what are you suggesting now? That Elinor killed Aunt Laura? Of all the ridiculous ideas!”

Poirot said:

“But you know, do you not, that an order to exhume Mrs. Welman’s body has been applied for?”

“Yes, I know. But they won’t find anything!”

“Suppose they do?”

“They won’t!” Roddy spoke positively.

Poirot shook his head.

“I am not so sure. And there was only one person, you realize, who would benefit by Mrs. Welman’s dying at that moment….”

Roddy sat down. His face was white and he was shaking a little. He stared at Poirot. Then he said:

“I thought—you were on her side….”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Whatever side one is on, one must face facts! I think, Mr. Welman, that you have so far preferred in life to avoid facing an awkward truth whenever it is possible.”

Roddy said:

“Why harrow oneself by looking on the worst side?”

Hercule Poirot replied gravely:

“Because it is something necessary….”

He paused a minute and then said:

“Let us face the possibility that your aunt’s death may be found to be due to the administration of morphine. What then?”

Roddy shook his head helplessly.

“I don’t know.”

“But you must try to think. Who could have given it to her? You must admit that Elinor Carlisle had the best opportunity to do so?”

“What about the nurses?”

“Either of them could have done so, certainly. But Nurse Hopkins was concerned about the disappearance of the tube at the time and mentioned it openly. There was no need for her to do so. The death certificate had been signed. Why call attention to the missing morphine if she were guilty? It will probably bring her censure for carelessness as it is, and if she poisoned Mrs. Welman it was surely idiotic to draw attention to the morphine. Besides, what could she gain by Mrs. Welman’s death? Nothing. The same applies to Nurse O’Brien. She could have administered morphine, could have taken it from Nurse Hopkins’ case; but, again—why should she?”

Roddy shook his head.

“All that’s true enough.”

Poirot said:

“Then there is yourself.”

Roddy started like a nervous horse.

“Me?”

“Certainly. You could have abstracted the morphine. You could have given it to Mrs. Welman! You were alone with her for a short period that night. But, again, why should you? If she lived to make a will, it is at least probable that you would have been mentioned in it. So again, you see, there is no motive. Only two people had a motive.”

Roddy’s eyes brightened.

“Two people?”

“Yes. One was Elinor Carlisle.”

“And the other?”

Poirot said slowly:

“The other was the writer of that anonymous letter.”

Roddy looked incredulous.

Poirot said:

“Somebody wrote that letter—somebody who hated Mary Gerrard or at least disliked her—somebody who was, as they say, ‘on your side.’ Somebody, that is, who did not want Mary Gerrard to benefit at Mrs. Welman’s death. Now, have you any idea, Mr. Welman, who the writer of that letter could be?”

Roddy shook his head.

“I’ve no idea at all. It was an illiterate letter, misspelt, cheap-looking.”

Poirot waved a hand.

“There is nothing much to that! It might easily have been written by an educated person who chose to disguise the fact. That is why I wish you had the letter still. People who try to write in an uneducated manner usually give themselves away.”

Roddy said thoughtfully:

“Elinor and I thought it might be one of the servants.”

“Had you any idea which of them?”

“No—no idea whatsoever.”

“Could it, do you think, have been Mrs. Bishop, the housekeeper?”

Roddy looked shocked.

“Oh, no, she’s a most respectable, high-and-mighty creature. Writes beautifully involved and ornate letters with long words in them. Besides, I’m sure she would never—”

As he hesitated, Poirot cut in:

“She did not like Mary Gerrard!”

“I suppose she didn’t. I never noticed anything, though.”

“But perhaps, Mr. Welman, you do not notice very much?”

Roddy said slowly:

“You don’t think, M. Poirot, that my aunt could have taken that morphine herself?”

Poirot said slowly:

“It is an idea, yes.”

Roddy said:

“She hated her—her helplessness, you know. Often said she wished she could die.”

Poirot said:

"But, then, she could not have risen from her bed, gone downstairs and helped herself to the tube of morphine from the nurse's case?"

Roddy said slowly:

"No, but somebody could have got it for her."

"Who?"

"Well, one of the nurses."

"No, neither of the nurses. They would understand the danger to themselves far too well! The nurses are the last people to suspect."

"Then—somebody else…."

He started, opened his mouth, shut it again.

Poirot said quietly:

"You have remembered something, have you not?"

Roddy said doubtfully:

"Yes—but—"

"You wonder if you ought to tell me?"

"Well, yes…."

Poirot said, a curious smile tilting the corners of his mouth:

"When did Miss Carlisle say it?"

Roddy drew a deep breath.

"By Jove, you are a wizard! It was in the train coming down. We'd had the telegram, you know, saying Aunt Laura had had another stroke. Elinor said how terribly sorry she was for her, how the poor dear hated being ill, and that now she would be more helpless still and that it would be absolute hell for her. Elinor said, ‘One does feel that people ought to be set free if they themselves really want it.’”

“And you said—what?”

“I agreed.”

Poirot spoke very gravely:

“Just now, Mr. Welman, you scouted the possibility of Miss Carlisle having killed your aunt for monetary gain. Do you also scout the possibility that she may have killed Mrs. Welman out of compassion?”

Roddy said:

“I—I—no, I can’t….”

Hercule Poirot bowed his head.

He said:

“Yes, I thought—I was sure—that you would say that….”

Seven

In the offices of Messrs Seddon, Blatherwick & Seddon, Hercule Poirot was received with extreme caution, not to say distrust.

Mr. Seddon, a forefinger stroking his closely shaven chin, was noncommittal and his shrewd grey eyes appraised the detective thoughtfully.

“Your name is familiar to me, M. Poirot, of course. But I am at a loss to understand your position in this case.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I am acting, Monsieur, in the interests of your client.”

“Ah—indeed? And who—er—engaged you in that capacity?”

“I am here at the request of Dr. Lord.”

Mr. Seddon’s eyebrows rose very high.

“Indeed! That seems to me very irregular—very irregular. Dr. Lord, I understand, has been subpoenaed as a witness for the prosecution.”

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Does that matter?”

Mr. Seddon said:

“The arrangements for Miss Carlisle’s defence are entirely in our hands. I really do not think we need any outside assistance in this case.”

Poirot asked:

“Is that because your client’s innocence will be so easily proved?”

Mr. Seddon winced. Then he became wrathful in a dry legal fashion.

“That,” he said, “is a most improper question. Most improper.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“The case against your client is a very strong one….”

“I really fail to see, M. Poirot, how you know anything about it.”

Poirot said:

“Although I am actually retained by Dr. Lord, I have here a note from Mr. Roderick Welman.”

He handed it over with a bow.

Mr. Seddon perused the few lines it contained and remarked grudgingly:

“That, of course, throws a new complexion on the matter. Mr. Welman has made himself responsible for Miss Carlisle’s defence. We are acting at his request.”

He added with visible distaste:

“Our firm does very little in—er—criminal procedure, but I felt it my duty to my—er—late client—to undertake the defence of her niece. I may say we have already briefed Sir Edwin Bulmer, K.C.”

Poirot said, and his smile was suddenly ironic:

“No expense will be spared. Very right and proper!”

Looking over his glasses, Mr. Seddon said:

“Really, M. Poirot—”

Poirot cut into his protest.

"Eloquence and emotional appeal will not save your client. It will need more than that."

Mr. Seddon said drily:

"What do you advise?"

"There is always the truth."

"Quite so."

"But in this case will the truth help us?"

Mr. Seddon said sharply:

"That, again, is a most improper remark."

Poirot said:

"There are certain questions to which I should like answers."

Mr. Seddon said cautiously:

"I cannot, of course, guarantee to answer without the consent of my client."

"Naturally. I understand that." He paused and then said, "Has Elinor Carlisle any enemies?"

Mr. Seddon showed a faint surprise.

"As far as I know, none."

"Did the late Mrs. Welman, at any period of her life, make a will?"

"Never. She always put it off."

"Has Elinor Carlisle made a will?"

"Yes."

“Recently? Since her aunt’s death?”

“Yes.”

“To whom has she left her property?”

“That, M. Poirot, is confidential. I cannot tell you without authorization from my client.”

Poirot said:

“Then I shall have to interview your client!”

Mr. Seddon said with a cold smile:

“That, I fear, will not be easy.”

Poirot rose and made a gesture.

“Everything,” he said, “is easy to Hercule Poirot.”

Eight

Chief Inspector Marsden was affable.

“Well, M. Poirot,” he said. “Come to set me right about one of my cases?”

Poirot murmured deprecatingly:

“No, no. A little curiosity on my part, that is all.”

“Only too happy to satisfy it. Which case is it?”

“Elinor Carlisle.”

“Oh, yes, girl who poisoned Mary Gerrard. Coming up for trial in two weeks’ time. Interesting case. She did in the old woman too, by the way. Final report isn’t in yet, but it seems there’s no doubt of it. Morphia. Cold-blooded bit of goods. Never turned a hair at the time of her arrest or after. Giving nothing away. But we’ve got the goods on her all right. She’s for it.”

“You think she did it?”

Marsden, an experienced, kindly looking man, nodded his head affirmatively.

“Not a doubt of it. Put the stuff in the top sandwich. She’s a cool customer.”

“You have no doubts? No doubts at all?”

“Oh, no! I’m quite sure. It’s a pleasant feeling when you are sure! We don’t like making mistakes any more than anyone else would. We’re not just out to get a conviction, as some people think. This time I can go ahead with a clear conscience.”

Poirot said slowly:

“I see.”

The Scotland Yard man looked at him curiously.

“Is there anything on the other side?”

Slowly Poirot shook his head.

“As yet, no. So far everything I have found out about the case points to Elinor Carlisle’s being guilty.”

Inspector Marsden said with cheerful certainty:

“She’s guilty, all right.”

Poirot said:

“I should like to see her.”

Inspector Marsden smiled indulgently. He said:

“Got the present Home Secretary in your pocket, haven’t you? That will be easy enough.”

Nine

Peter Lord said:

“Well?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“No, it is not very well.”

Peter Lord said heavily:

“You haven’t got hold of anything?”

Poirot said slowly:

“Elinor Carlisle killed Mary Gerrard out of jealousy… Elinor Carlisle killed her aunt so as to inherit her money… Elinor Carlisle killed her aunt out of compassion… My friend, you may make your choice!”

Peter Lord said:

“You’re talking nonsense!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Am I?”

Lord’s freckled face looked angry. He said:

“What is all this?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Do you think it is possible, that?”

“Do I think what is possible?”

“That Elinor Carlisle was unable to bear the sight of her aunt’s misery and helped her out of existence.”

“Nonsense!”

“Is it nonsense? You have told me yourself that the old lady asked you to help her.”

“She didn’t mean it seriously. She knew I wouldn’t do anything of the sort.”

“Still, the idea was in her mind. Elinor Carlisle might have helped her.”

Peter Lord strolled up and down. He said at last:

“One can’t deny that that sort of thing is possible. But Elinor Carlisle is a levelheaded, clear-thinking kind of young woman. I don’t think she’d be so carried away by pity as to lose sight of the risk. And she’d realize exactly what the risk was. She’d be liable to stand accused of murder.”

“So you don’t think she would do it?”

Peter Lord said slowly:

“I think a woman might do such a thing for her husband; or for her child; or for her mother, perhaps. I don’t think she’d do it for an aunt, though she might be fond of that aunt. And I think in any case she’d only do it if the person in question was actually suffering unbearable pain.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“Perhaps you are right.”

Then he added:

“Do you think Roderick Welman’s feelings could have been sufficiently worked upon to induce him to do such a thing?”

Peter Lord replied scornfully:

“He wouldn’t have the guts!”

Poirot murmured:

“I wonder. In some ways, mon cher, you underestimate that young man.”

“Oh, he’s clever and intellectual and all that, I dare say.”

“Exactly,” said Poirot. “And he has charm, too… Yes, I felt that.”

“Did you? I never have!”

Then Peter Lord said earnestly:

“Look here, Poirot, isn’t there anything?”

Poirot said:

“They are not fortunate so far, my investigations! They lead always back to the same place. No one stood to gain by Mary Gerrard’s death. No one hated Mary Gerrard—except Elinor Carlisle. There is only one question that we might perhaps ask ourselves. We might say, perhaps: Did anyone hate Elinor Carlisle?”

Slowly Dr. Lord shook his head.

“Not that I know of… You mean—that someone might have framed her for the crime?”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“It is a very far-fetched speculation, that, and there is nothing to support it…except, perhaps, the very completeness of the case against her.”

He told the other of the anonymous letter.

“You see,” he said, “that makes it possible to outline a very strong case against her. She was warned that she might be completely cut out of her aunt’s will—that this girl, a stranger, might get all the money. So, when her aunt in her halting speech was asking for a lawyer, Elinor took no chances, and saw to it that the old lady should die that night!"

Peter Lord cried:

"What about Roderick Welman? He stood to lose, too!"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, it was to his advantage that the old lady should make a will. If she died intestate, he got nothing, remember. Elinor was the next of kin."

Lord said:

"But he was going to marry Elinor!"

Poirot said, "True. But remember that immediately afterwards the engagement was broken off—that he showed her clearly that he wished to be released from it."

Peter Lord groaned and held his head. He said:

"It comes back to her, then. Every time!"

"Yes. Unless…."

He was silent for a minute. Then he said:

"There is something…."

"Yes?"

"Something—some little piece of the puzzle that is missing. It is something—of that I am certain—that concerns Mary Gerrard. My friend, you hear a certain amount of gossip, of scandal, down here. Have you ever heard anything against her?"

"Against Mary Gerrard? Her character, you mean?"

"Anything. Some bygone story about her. Some indiscretion on her part. A hint of scandal. A doubt of her honesty. A malicious rumour concerning her. Anything—anything at all—but something that definitely is damaging to her…."

Peter Lord said slowly:

"I hope you're not going to suggest that line… Trying to rake up things about a harmless young woman who's dead and can't defend herself… And, anyway, I don't believe you can do it!"

"She was like the female Sir Galahad—a blameless life?"

"As far as I know, she was. I never heard anything else."

Poirot said gently:

"You must not think, my friend, that I would stir the mud where no mud is… No, no, it is not like that at all. But the good Nurse Hopkins is not an adept at hiding her feelings. She was fond of Mary, and there is something about Mary she does not want known; that is to say, there is something against Mary that she is afraid I will find out. She does not think that it has any bearing on the crime. But, then, she is convinced that the crime was committed by Elinor Carlisle, and clearly this fact, whatever it is, has nothing to do with Elinor. But, you see, my friend, it is imperative that I should know everything. For it may be that there is a wrong done by Mary to some third person, and in that case, that third person might have a motive for desiring her death."

Peter Lord said:

"But surely, in that case, Nurse Hopkins would realize that, too."

Poirot said:

"Nurse Hopkins is quite an intelligent woman within her limitations, but her intellect is hardly the equal of mine. She might not see, but Hercule Poirot would!"

Peter Lord said, shaking his head:

“I’m sorry. I don’t know anything.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“No more does Ted Bigland—and he has lived here all his life and Mary’s. No more does Mrs. Bishop; for if she knew anything unpleasant about the girl, she would not have been able to keep it to herself! Eh bien, there is one more hope.”

“Yes?”

“I am seeing the other nurse, Nurse O’Brien, today.”

Peter Lord said, shaking his head:

“She doesn’t know much about this part of the world. She was only here for a month or two.”

Poirot said:

“I am aware of that. But, my friend, Nurse Hopkins, we have been told, has the long tongue. She has not gossiped in the village, where such talk might have done Mary Gerrard harm. But I doubt if she could refrain from giving at least a hint about something that was occupying her mind to a stranger and a colleague! Nurse O’Brien may know something.”

Ten

Nurse O’Brien tossed her red head and smiled widely across the tea table at the little man opposite her.

She thought to herself:

“It’s the funny little fellow he is—and his eyes green like any cat’s, and with all that Dr. Lord saying he’s the clever one!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“It is a pleasure to meet someone so full of health and vitality. Your patients, I am sure, must all recover.”

Nurse O’Brien said:

“I’m not one for pulling a long face, and not many of my patients die on me, I’m thankful to say.”

Poirot said:

“Of course, in Mrs. Welman’s case, it was a merciful release.”

“Ah! It was that, the poor dear.” Her eyes were shrewd as she looked at Poirot and asked:

“Is it about that you want to talk to me? I was after hearing that they’re digging her up.”

Poirot said:

“You yourself had no suspicion at the time?”

“Not the least in the world, though indeed I might have had, with the face Dr. Lord had on him that morning, and him sending me here, there and everywhere for things he didn't need! But he signed the certificate, for all that."

Poirot began, "He had his reasons—" but she took the words out of his mouth.

"Indeed and he was right. It does a doctor no good to think things and offend the family, and then if he's wrong it's the end of him, and no one would be wishing to call him in any more. A doctor's got to be sure!"

Poirot said:

"There is a suggestion that Mrs. Welman might have committed suicide."

"She? And her lying there helpless? Just lift one hand, that was all she could do!"

"Someone might have helped her?"

"Ah! I see now what you're meaning. Miss Carlisle, or Mr. Welman, or maybe Mary Gerrard?"

"It would be possible, would it not?"

Nurse O'Brien shook her head. She said:

"They'd not dare—any of them!"

Poirot said slowly:

"Perhaps not."

Then he said:

"When was it Nurse Hopkins missed the tube of morphine?"

"It was that very morning. 'I'm sure I had it here,' she said. Very sure she was at first; but you know how it is, after a while your mind gets confused, and in the end she made sure she'd left it at home."

Poirot murmured:

“And even then you had no suspicion?”

“Not the least in the world! Sure, it never entered my head for a moment that things weren’t as they should be. And even now ’tis only a suspicion they have.”

“The thought of that missing tube never caused either you or Nurse Hopkins an uneasy moment?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that… I do remember that it came into my head—and into Nurse Hopkins’ head, too, I believe—in the Blue Tit Café, we were at the time. And I saw the thought pass into her mind from mine. ‘It couldn’t be any other way than that I left it on the mantelpiece and it fell into the dustbin, could it?’ she says. And ‘No, indeed, that was the way of it,’ I said to her; and neither of us saying what was in our minds and the fear that was on us.”

Hercule Poirot asked:

“And what do you think now?”

Nurse O’Brien said:

“If they find morphine in her there’ll be little doubt who took that tube, nor what it was used for—though I’ll not be believing she sent the old lady the same road till it’s proved there’s morphine in her.”

Poirot said:

“You have no doubt at all that Elinor Carlisle killed Mary Gerrard?”

“There’s no question of it at all, in my opinion! Who else had the reason or the wish to do it?”

“That is the question,” said Poirot.

Nurse O’Brien went on dramatically:

“Wasn’t I there that night when the old lady was trying to speak, and Miss Elinor promising her that everything should be done decently and according to her wishes? And didn’t I see her face looking after Mary as she went down the stairs one day, and the black hate that was on it? ’Twas murder she had in her heart that minute.”

Poirot said:

“If Elinor Carlisle killed Mrs. Welman, why did she do it?”

“Why? For the money, of course. Two hundred thousand pounds, no less. That’s what she got by it, and that’s why she did it—if she did it. She’s a bold, clever young lady, with no fear in her, and plenty of brains.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“If Mrs. Welman had lived to make a will, how do you think she’d have left her money?”

“Ah, it’s not for me to be saying that,” said Nurse O’Brien, betraying, however, every symptom of being about to do so. “But it’s my opinion that every penny the old lady had would have gone to Mary Gerrard.”

“Why?” said Hercule Poirot.

The simple monosyllable seemed to upset Nurse O’Brien.

“Why? Is it why you’re asking? Well—I’d say that that would be the way of it.”

Poirot murmured:

“Some people might say that Mary Gerrard had played her cards very cleverly, that she had managed so to ingratiate herself with the old woman, as to make her forget the ties of blood and affection.”

“They might that,” said Nurse O’Brien slowly.

Poirot asked:

“Was Mary Gerrard a clever, scheming girl?”

Nurse O’Brien said, still rather slowly:

“I’ll not think that of her… All she did was natural enough, with no thought of scheming. She wasn’t that kind. And there’s reasons often for these things that never get made public….”

Hercule Poirot said softly:

“You are, I think, a very discreet woman, Nurse O’Brien.”

“I’m not one to be talking of what doesn’t concern me.”

Watching her very closely, Poirot went on:

“You and Nurse Hopkins, you have agreed together, have you not, that there are some things which are best not brought out into the light of day.”

Nurse O’Brien said:

“What would you be meaning by that?”

Poirot said quickly:

“Nothing to do with the crime—or crimes. I mean—the other matter.”

Nurse O’Brien said, nodding her head:

“What would be the use of raking up mud and an old story, and she a decent elderly woman with never a breath of scandal about her, and dying respected and looked up to by everybody.”

Hercule Poirot nodded in assent. He said cautiously:

“As you say, Mrs. Welman was much respected in Maidensford.”

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn, but his face expressed no surprise or puzzlement.

Nurse O’Brien went on:

“It’s so long ago, too. All dead and forgotten. I’ve a soft heart for a romance myself, and I do say and I always have said that it’s hard for a man who’s got a wife in an asylum to be tied all his life with nothing but death that can free him.”

Poirot murmured, still in bewilderment:

“Yes, it is hard….”

Nurse O’Brien said:

“Did Nurse Hopkins tell you how her letter crossed mine?”

Poirot said truthfully:

“She did not tell me that.”

“’Twas an odd coincidence. But there, that’s always the way of it! Once you hear a name, maybe, and a day or two later you’ll come across it again, and so on and so on. That I should be seeing the selfsame photograph on the piano and at the same minute Nurse Hopkins was hearing all about it from the doctor’s housekeeper.”

“That,” said Poirot, “is very interesting.”

He murmured tentatively:

“Did Mary Gerrard know—about this?”

“Who’d be telling her?” said Nurse O’Brien. “Not I—and not Hopkins. After all, what good would it be to her?”

She flung up her red head and gazed at him steadily.

Poirot said with a sigh:

“What, indeed?”

Eleven

Elinor Carlisle….

Across the width of the table that separated them Poirot looked at her searchingly.

They were alone together. Through a glass wall a warder watched them.

Poirot noted the sensitive intelligent face with the square, white forehead, and the delicate modelling of the ears and nose. Fine lines; a proud, sensitive creature, showing breeding, self-restraint and—something else—a capacity for passion.

He said:

“I am Hercule Poirot. I have been sent to you by Dr. Peter Lord. He thinks that I can help you.”

Elinor Carlisle said:

“Peter Lord…” Her tone was reminiscent. For a moment she smiled a little wistfully. She went on formally: “It was kind of him, but I do not think there is anything you can do.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Will you answer my questions?”

She sighed. She said:

“Believe me—really—it would be better not to ask them. I am in good hands. Mr. Seddon has been most kind. I am to have a very famous counsel.”

Poirot said:

“He is not so famous as I am!”

Elinor Carlisle said with a touch of weariness:

“He has a great reputation.”

“Yes, for defending criminals. I have a great reputation—for demonstrating innocence.”

She lifted her eyes at last—eyes of a vivid, beautiful blue. They looked straight into Poirot’s. She said:

“Do you believe I am innocent?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Are you?”

Elinor smiled, an ironic little smile. She said:

“Is that a sample of your questions? It is very easy, isn’t it, to answer Yes?”

He said unexpectedly:

“You are very tired, are you not?”

Her eyes widened a little. She answered:

“Why, yes—that more than anything. How did you know?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I knew….”

Elinor said:

“I shall be glad when it is—over.”

Poirot looked at her for a minute in silence. Then he said:

“I have seen your—cousin, shall I call him for convenience?—Mr. Roderick Welman.”

Into the white proud face the colour crept slowly up. He knew then that one question of his was answered without his asking it.

She said, and her voice shook very slightly:

“You’ve seen Roddy?”

Poirot said:

“He is doing all he can for you.”

“I know.”

Her voice was quick and soft.

Poirot said:

“Is he poor or rich?”

“Roddy? He has not very much money of his own.”

“And he is extravagant?”

She said, almost absently:

“Neither of us ever thought it mattered. We knew that some day….”

She stopped.

Poirot said quickly:

“You counted on your inheritance? That is understandable.”

He went on:

"You have heard, perhaps, the result of the autopsy on your aunt's body. She died of morphine poisoning."

Elinor Carlisle said coldly:

"I did not kill her."

"Did you help her to kill herself?"

"Did I help—? Oh, I see. No, I did not."

"Did you know that your aunt had not made a will?"

"No, I had no idea of that."

Her voice was flat now—dull. The answer was mechanical, uninterested.

Poirot said:

"And you yourself, have you made a will?"

"Yes."

"Did you make it the day Dr. Lord spoke to you about it?"

"Yes."

Again that swift wave of colour.

Poirot said:

"How have you left your fortune, Miss Carlisle?"

Elinor said quietly:

"I have left everything to Roddy—to Roderick Welman."

Poirot said:

"Does he know that?"

She said quickly:

“Certainly not.”

“You didn’t discuss it with him?”

“Of course not. He would have been horribly embarrassed and would have disliked what I was doing very much.”

“Who else knows the contents of your will?”

“Only Mr. Seddon—and his clerks, I suppose.”

“Did Mr. Seddon draw up the will for you?”

“Yes. I wrote to him that same evening—I mean the evening of the day Dr. Lord spoke to me about it.”

“Did you post your letter yourself?”

“No. It went in the box from the house with the other letters.”

“You wrote it, put it in an envelope, sealed it, stamped it and put it in the box—comme ça? You did not pause to reflect? To read it over?”

Elinor said, staring at him:

“I read it over—yes. I had gone to look for some stamps. When I came back with them, I just reread the letter to be sure I had put it clearly.”

“Was anyone in the room with you?”

“Only Roddy.”

“Did he know what you were doing?”

“I told you—no.”

“Could anyone have read that letter when you were out of the room?”

“I don’t know… One of the servants, you mean? I suppose they could have if they had chanced to come in while I was out of the room.”

“And before Mr. Roderick Welman entered it?”

“Yes.”

Poirot said:

“And he could have read it, too?”

Elinor’s voice was clear and scornful. She said:

“I can assure you, M. Poirot, that my ‘cousin,’ as you call him, does not read other people’s letters.”

Poirot said:

“That is the accepted idea, I know. You would be surprised how many people do the things that ‘are not done.’”

Elinor shrugged her shoulders.

Poirot said in a casual voice:

“Was it on that day that the idea of killing Mary Gerrard first came to you?”

For the third time colour swept over Elinor Carlisle’s face. This time it was a burning tide. She said:

“Did Peter Lord tell you that?”

Poirot said gently:

“It was then, wasn’t it? When you looked through the window and saw her making her will. It was then, was it not, that it struck you how funny it would be—and how convenient—if Mary Gerrard should happen to die….”

Elinor said in a low suffocated voice:

"He knew—he looked at me and he knew…."

Poirot said:

"Dr. Lord knows a good deal… He is no fool, that young man with the freckled face and the red hair…."

Elinor said in a low voice:

"Is it true that he sent you to—help me?"

"It is true, Mademoiselle."

She sighed and said:

"I don't understand. No, I don't understand."

Poirot said:

"Listen, Miss Carlisle. It is necessary that you tell me just what happened that day when Mary Gerrard died: where you went, what you did; more than that, I want to know even what you thought."

She stared at him. Then slowly a queer little smile came to her lips. She said:

"You must be an incredibly simple man. Don't you realize how easy it is for me to lie to you?"

Hercule Poirot said placidly:

"It does not matter."

She was puzzled.

"Not matter?"

"No. For lies, Mademoiselle, tell a listener just as much as truth can. Sometimes they tell more. Come, now, commence. You met your housekeeper, the good Mrs. Bishop. She wanted to come and help you. You would not let her. Why?”

“I wanted to be alone.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why? Because I wanted to—to think.”

“You wanted to imagine—yes. And then what did you do next?”

Elinor, her chin raised defiantly, said:

“I bought some paste for sandwiches.”

“Two pots?”

“Two.”

“And you went to Hunterbury. What did you do there?”

“I went up to my aunt’s room and began to go through her things.”

“What did you find?”

“Find?” She frowned. “Clothes—old letters—photographs—jewellery.”

Poirot said:

“No secrets?”

“Secrets? I don’t understand you.”

“Then let us proceed. What next?”

Elinor said:

“I came down to the pantry and I cut sandwiches….”

Poirot said softly:

“And you thought—what?”

Her blue eyes flushed suddenly. She said:

“I thought of my namesake, Eleanor of Aquitaine….”

Poirot said:

“I understand perfectly.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes. I know the story. She offered Fair Rosamund, did she not, the choice of a dagger or a cup of poison. Rosamund chose the poison….”

Elinor said nothing. She was white now.

Poirot said:

“But perhaps, this time, there was to be no choice… Go on, Mademoiselle, what next?”

Elinor said:

“I put the sandwiches ready on a plate and I went down to the Lodge. Nurse Hopkins was there as well as Mary. I told them I had some sandwiches up at the house.”

Poirot was watching her. He said softly:

“Yes, and you all came up to the house together, did you not?”

“Yes. We—ate the sandwiches in the morning room.”

Poirot said in the same soft tone:

“Yes, yes—still in the dream… And then…”

“Then?” She stared. “I left her—standing by the window. I went out into the pantry. It was still like you say—in a dream… Nurse was there washing up… I gave her the paste pot.”

“Yes—yes. And what happened then? What did you think of next?”

Elinor said dreamily:

“There was a mark on Nurse’s wrist. I mentioned it and she said it was a thorn from the rose trellis by the Lodge. The roses by the Lodge… Roddy and I had a quarrel once—long ago—about the Wars of the Roses. I was Lancaster and he was York. He liked white roses. I said they weren’t real—they didn’t even smell! I liked red roses, big and dark and velvety and smelling of summer… We quarrelled in the most idiotic way. You see, it all came back to me—there in the pantry—and something—something broke—the black hate I’d had in my heart—it went away—with remembering how we were together as children. I didn’t hate Mary any more. I didn’t want her to die….”

She stopped.

“But later, when we went back into the morning room, she was dying….”

She stopped. Poirot was staring at her very intently. She flushed and said:

“Will you ask me—again—did I kill Mary Gerrard?”

Poirot rose to his feet. He said quickly:

“I shall ask you—nothing. There are things I do not want to know….”

Twelve

Dr. Lord met the train at the station as requested.

Hercule Poirot alighted from it. He looked very Londonified and was wearing pointed patent leather shoes.

Peter Lord scrutinized his face anxiously, but Hercule Poirot was giving nothing away.

Peter Lord said:

“I’ve done my best to get answers to your questions. First, Mary Gerrard left here for London on July 10th. Second, I haven’t got a housekeeper—a couple of giggling girls run my house. I think you must mean Mrs. Slattery, who was Ransome’s (my predecessor’s) housekeeper. I can take you to her this morning if you like. I’ve arranged that she shall be in.”

Poirot said:

“Yes, I think it would be as well if I saw her first.”

“Then you said you wanted to go to Hunterbury, I could come with you there. It beats me why you haven’t been there already. I can’t think why you wouldn’t go when you were down here before. I should have thought the first thing to be done in a case like this was to visit the place where the crime took place.”

Holding his head a little on one side, Hercule Poirot inquired:

“Why?”

“Why?” Peter Lord was rather disconcerted by the question. “Isn’t it the usual thing to do?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“One does not practise detection with a textbook! One uses one’s natural intelligence.”

Peter Lord said:

“You might find a clue of some sort there.”

Poirot sighed:

“You read too much detective fiction. Your police force in this country is quite admirable. I have no doubt that they searched the house and grounds most carefully.”

“For evidence against Elinor Carlisle—not for evidence in her favour.”

Poirot sighed:

“My dear friend, it is not a monster—this police force! Elinor Carlisle was arrested because sufficient evidence was found to make out a case against her—a very strong case, I may say. It was useless for me to go over ground when the police had gone over it already.”

“But you do want to go there now?” objected Peter.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head. He said:

“Yes—now it is necessary. Because now I know exactly what I am looking for. One must understand with the cells of one’s brain before one uses one’s eyes.”

“Then you do think there might be—something—there still?”

Poirot said gently:

“I have a little idea we shall find something—yes.”

“Something to prove Elinor’s innocence?”

“Ah, I did not say that.”

Peter Lord stopped dead.

“You don’t mean you still think she’s guilty?”

Poirot said gravely:

“You must wait, my friend, before you get an answer to that question.”

II

Poirot lunched with the doctor in a pleasant square room with a window open on to the garden.

Lord said:

“Did you get what you wanted out of old Slattery?”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes.”

“What did you want with her?”

“Gossip! Talk about old days. Some crimes have their roots in the past. I think this one had.”

Peter Lord said irritably:

“I don’t understand a word you are talking about.”

Poirot smiled. He said:

“This fish is deliciously fresh.”

Lord said impatiently:

“I dare say. I caught it myself before breakfast this morning. Look here, Poirot, am I to have any idea what you’re driving at? Why keep me in the dark?”

The other shook his head.

“Because as yet there is no light. I am always brought up short by the fact that there was no one who had any reason to kill Mary Gerrard—except Elinor Carlisle.”

Peter Lord said:

“You can’t be sure of that. She’d been abroad for some time, remember.”

“Yes, yes, I have made the inquiries.”

“You’ve been to Germany yourself?”

“Myself, no.” With a slight chuckle he added: “I have my spies!”

“Can you depend on other people?”

“Certainly. It is not for me to run here and there, doing amateurishly the things that for a small sum someone else can do with professional skill. I can assure you, mon cher, I have several irons on the fire. I have some useful assistants—one of them a former burglar.”

“What do you use him for?”

“The last thing I have used him for was a very thorough search of Mr. Welman’s flat.”

“What was he looking for?”

Poirot said:

“One always likes to know exactly what lies have been told one.”

“Did Welman tell you a lie?”

“Definitely.”

“Who else has lied to you?”

"Everybody, I think: Nurse O'Brien romantically; Nurse Hopkins stubbornly; Mrs. Bishop venomously. You yourself—"

"Good God!" Peter Lord interrupted him unceremoniously. "You don't think I've lied to you, do you?"

"Not yet," Poirot admitted.

Dr. Lord sank back in his chair. He said:

"You're a disbelieving sort of fellow, Poirot."

Then he said:

"If you've finished, shall we set off for Hunterbury? I've got some patients to see later, and then there's the surgery."

"I am at your disposal, my friend."

They set off on foot, entering the grounds by the back drive. Halfway up it they met a tall, good-looking young fellow wheeling a barrow. He touched his cap respectfully to Dr. Lord.

"Good morning, Horlick. This is Horlick, the gardener, Poirot. He was working here that morning."

Horlick said:

"Yes, sir, I was. I saw Miss Elinor that morning and talked to her."

Poirot asked:

"What did she say to you?"

"She told me the house was as good as sold, and that rather took me aback, sir; but Miss Elinor said as how she'd speak for me to Major Somervell, and that maybe he'd keep me on—if he didn't think me too young, perhaps, as head—seeing as how I'd had good training under Mr. Stephens, here."

Dr. Lord said:

“Did she seem much the same as usual, Horlick?”

“Why, yes, sir, except that she looked a bit excited like—and as though she had something on her mind.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Did you know Mary Gerrard?”

“Oh, yes, sir. But not very well.”

Poirot said:

“What was she like?”

Horlick looked puzzled.

“Like sir? Do you mean to look at?”

“Not exactly. I mean, what kind of a girl was she?”

“Oh, well, sir, she was a very superior sort of a girl. Nice spoken and all that. Thought a lot of herself, I should say. You see, old Mrs. Welman had made a lot of fuss over her. Made her father wild, that did. He was like a bear with a sore head about it.”

Poirot said:

“By all that I’ve heard, he had not the best of tempers, that old one?”

“No, indeed, he hadn’t. Always grumbling, and crusty as they make them. Seldom had a civil word for you.”

Poirot said:

“You were here on that morning. Whereabouts were you working?”

“Mostly in the kitchen garden, sir.”

“You cannot see the house from there?”

“No, sir.”

Peter Lord said:

“If anybody had come up to the house—up to the pantry window—you wouldn’t have seen them?”

“No, I wouldn’t, sir.”

Peter Lord said:

“When did you go to your dinner?”

“One o’clock, sir.”

“And you didn’t see anything—any man hanging about—or a car outside—anything like that?”

The man’s eyebrows rose in slight surprise.

“Outside the back gate, sir? There was your car there—nobody else’s.”

Peter Lord cried:

“My car: It wasn’t my car! I was over Withenbury direction that morning. Didn’t get back till after two.”

Horlick looked puzzled.

“I made sure it was your car, sir,” he said doubtfully.

Peter Lord said quickly:

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. Good morning, Horlick.”

He and Poirot moved on. Horlick stared after them for a minute or two, then slowly resumed his progress with the wheelbarrow.

Peter Lord said softly—but with great excitement:

“Something—at last. Whose car was it standing in the lane that morning?”

Poirot said:

“What make is your car, my friend?”

“A Ford ten—sea-green. They’re pretty common, of course.”

“And you are sure that it was not yours? You haven’t mistaken the day?”

“Absolutely certain. I was over at Withenbury, came back late, snatched a bit of lunch, and then the call came through about Mary Gerrard and I rushed over.”

Poirot said softly:

“Then it would seem, my friend, that we have come upon something tangible at last.”

Peter Lord said:

“Someone was here that morning…someone who was not Elinor Carlisle, nor Mary Gerrard, nor Nurse Hopkins….”

Poirot said:

“This is very interesting. Come, let us make our investigations. Let us see, for instance, supposing a man (or woman) were to wish to approach the house unseen, how they would set about it.”

Halfway along the drive a path branched off through some shrubbery. They took this and at a certain turn in it Peter Lord clutched Poirot’s arm, pointing to a window.

He said:

“That’s the window of the pantry where Elinor Carlisle was cutting the sandwiches.”

Poirot murmured:

“And from here, anyone could see her cutting them. The window was open, if I remember rightly?”

Peter Lord said:

“It was wide open. It was a hot day, remember.”

Hercule Poirot said musingly:

“Then if anyone wished to watch unseen what was going on, somewhere about here would be a good spot.”

The two men cast about. Peter Lord said:

“There’s a place here—behind these bushes. Some stuff’s been trampled down here. It’s grown up again now, but you can see plainly enough.”

Poirot joined him. He said thoughtfully:

“Yes, this is a good place. It is concealed from the path, and that opening in the shrubs gives one a good view of the window. Now, what did he do, our friend who stood here? Did he perhaps smoke?”

They bent down, examining the ground and pushing aside the leaves and branches.

Suddenly Hercule Poirot uttered a grunt.

Peter Lord straightened up from his own search.

“What is it?”

“A matchbox, my friend. An empty matchbox, trodden heavily into the ground, sodden and decayed.”

With care and delicacy he salved the object. He displayed it at last on a sheet of notepaper taken from his pocket.

Peter Lord said:

“It’s foreign. My god! German matches!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“And Mary Gerrard had recently come from Germany!”

Peter Lord said exultantly:

“We’ve got something now! You can’t deny it.”

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

“Perhaps….”

“But, damn it all, man. Who on earth round here would have had foreign matches?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I know—I know.”

His eyes, perplexed eyes, went to the gap in the bushes and the view of the window.

He said:

“It is not quite so simple as you think. There is one great difficulty. Do you not see it yourself?”

“What? Tell me.”

Poirot sighed.

“If you do not see for yourself… But come, let us go on.”

They went on to the house. Peter Lord unlocked the back door with a key.

He led the way through the scullery to the kitchen, through that, along a passage where there was a cloakroom on one side and the butler’s pantry on the other. The two men looked round the pantry.

It had the usual cupboards with sliding glass doors for glass and china. There was a gas ring and two kettles and canisters marked Tea and Coffee on a shelf above. There was a sink and draining board and a papier-mâché washing-up bowl. In front of the window was a table.

Peter Lord said:

“It was on this table that Elinor Carlisle cut the sandwiches. The fragment of the morphine label was found in this crack in the floor under the sink.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“The police are careful searchers. They do not miss much.”

Peter Lord said violently:

“There’s no evidence that Elinor ever handled that tube! I tell you, someone was watching her from the shrubbery outside. She went down to the Lodge and he saw his chance and slipped in, uncorked the tube, crushed some tablets of morphine to powder and put them into the top sandwich.

He never noticed that he’d torn a bit off the label of the tube, and that it had fluttered down the crack. He hurried away, started up his car and went off again.”

Poirot sighed.

“And still you do not see! It is extraordinary how dense an intelligent man can be.”

Peter Lord demanded angrily:

“Do you mean to say that you don’t believe someone stood in those bushes watching the window?”

Poirot said:

“Yes, I believe that….”

“Then we’ve got to find whoever it was!”

Poirot murmured:

“We shall not have to look far, I fancy.”

“Do you mean you know?”

“I have a very shrewd idea.”

Peter Lord said slowly:

“Then your minions who made inquiries in Germany did bring you something….”

Hercule Poirot said, tapping his forehead:

“My friend, it is all here, in my head… Come, let us look over the house.”

III

They stood at last in the room where Mary Gerrard had died.

The house had a strange atmosphere in it: it seemed alive with memories and forebodings.

Peter Lord flung up one of the windows.

He said with a slight shiver:

“This place feels like a tomb….”

Poirot said:

“If walls could speak… It is all here, is it not, here in the house—the beginning of the whole story.”

He paused and then said softly:

“It was here in this room that Mary Gerrard died.”

Peter Lord said:

“They found her sitting in that chair by the window….”

Hercule Poirot said thoughtfully:

“A young girl—beautiful—romantic? Did she scheme and intrigue? Was she a superior person who gave herself airs? Was she gentle and sweet, with no thought of intrigue…just a young thing beginning life…a girl like a flower?…”

“Whatever she was,” said Peter Lord, “someone wished her dead.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“I wonder….”

Lord stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Not yet.”

He turned about.

“We have been all through the house. We have seen all that there is to be seen here. Let us go down to the Lodge.”

Here again all was in order: the rooms dusty, but neat and emptied of personal possessions. The two men stayed only a few minutes. As they came out into the sun, Poirot touched the leaves of a pillar rose growing up a trellis. It was pink and sweet-scented.

He murmured:

“Do you know the name of this rose? It is Zephyrine Drouhin, my friend.”

Peter Lord said irritably:

“What of it?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“When I saw Elinor Carlisle, she spoke to me of roses. It was then that I began to see—not daylight, but the little glimpse of light that one gets in a train when one is about to come out of a tunnel. It is not so much daylight, but the promise of daylight.”

Peter Lord said harshly:

“What did she tell you?”

“She told me of her childhood, of playing here in this garden, and of how she and Roderick Welman were on different sides. They were enemies, for he preferred the white rose of York—cold and austere—and she, so she told me, loved red roses, the red rose of Lancaster. Red roses that have scent and colour and passion and warmth. And that, my friend, is the difference between Elinor Carlisle and Roderick Welman.”

Peter Lord said:

“Does that explain—anything?”

Poirot said:

“It explains Elinor Carlisle—who is passionate and proud and who loved desperately a man who was incapable of loving her….”

Peter Lord said:

“I don’t understand you….”

Poirot said:

“But I understand her… I understand both of them. Now my friend, we will go back once more to that little clearing in the shrubbery.”

They went there in silence. Peter Lord’s freckled face was troubled and angry.

When they came to the spot, Poirot stood motionless for some time, and Peter Lord watched him.

Then suddenly the little detective gave a vexed sigh.

He said:

“It is so simple, really. Do you not see, my friend, the fatal fallacy in your reasoning? According to your theory someone, a man, presumably, who had known Mary Gerrard in Germany came here intent on killing her. But look, my friend, look! Use the two eyes of your body, since the eyes of the mind do not seem to serve you. What do you see from here: a window, is it not? And at that window—a girl. A girl cutting sandwiches. That is to say, Elinor Carlisle. But think for a minute of this: What on earth was to tell the watching man that those sandwiches were going to be offered to Mary Gerrard? No one knew that but Elinor Carlisle—herself—nobody! Not even Mary Gerrard, nor Nurse Hopkins.

“So what follows—if a man stood here watching, and if he afterwards went to that window and climbed in and tampered with the sandwiches? What did he think and believe? He thought, he must have thought, that the sandwiches were to be eaten by Elinor Carlisle herself….”

Thirteen

Poirot knocked at the door of Nurse Hopkins' cottage. She opened it to him with her mouth full of Bath bun.

She said sharply:

"Well, Mr. Poirot, what do you want now?"

"I may enter?"

Somewhat grudgingly Nurse Hopkins drew back and Poirot was permitted to cross the threshold. Nurse Hopkins was hospitable with the teapot, and a minute later Poirot was regarding with some dismay a cup of inky beverage.

"Just made—nice and strong!" said Nurse Hopkins.

Poirot stirred his tea cautiously and took one heroic sip.

He said:

"Have you any idea why I have come here?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, until you tell me. I don't profess to be a mind reader."

"I have come to ask you for the truth."

Nurse Hopkins uprose in wrath.

"And what's the meaning of that, I should like to know? A truthful woman I've always been. Not one to shield myself in any way. I spoke up about that missing tube of morphine at the inquest when many a one in my place would have sat tight and said nothing. For well enough did I know that I should get censured for carelessness in leaving my case about; and, after all, it's a thing might happen to anybody! I was blamed for that—and it won't do me any good in my profession, I can tell you. But that didn't make any difference to me! I knew something that had a bearing on the case, and so I spoke out. And I'll thank you, Mr. Poirot, to keep any nasty insinuations to yourself! There's not a thing about Mary Gerrard's death that I haven't been open and aboveboard as daylight about, and if you think differently, I'd be obliged if you'd give chapter and verse for it! I've concealed nothing—nothing at all! And I'm prepared to take the oath and stand up in court and say so."

Poirot did not attempt to interrupt. He knew only too well the technique of dealing with an angry woman. He allowed Nurse Hopkins to flare up and simmer down. Then he spoke—quietly and mildly.

He said:

"I did not suggest that there is anything about the crime which you have not told."

"Then what did you suggest, I'd like to know?"

"I asked you to tell the truth—not about the death, but about the life of Mary Gerrard."

"Oh!" Nurse Hopkins seemed momentarily taken aback. She said, "So that's what you're getting at? But it's got nothing to do with the murder."

"I did not say that it had, I said that you were withholding knowledge concerning her."

"Why shouldn't I—if it's nothing to do with the crime?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should you?"

Nurse Hopkins, very red in the face, said:

"Because it's common decency! They're all dead now—everyone concerned. And it's no business of anyone else's!"

“If it is only surmise—perhaps not. But if you have actual knowledge, that is different.”

Nurse Hopkins said slowly:

“I don’t know exactly what you mean….”

Poirot said:

“I will help you. I have had hints from Nurse O’Brien and I have had a long conversation with Mrs. Slattery, who has a very good memory for events that happened over twenty years ago. I will tell you exactly what I have learned. Well, over twenty years ago there was a love affair between two people. One of them was Mrs. Welman, who had been a widow for some years and who was a woman capable of a deep and passionate love. The other party was Sir Lewis Rycroft, who had the great misfortune to have a wife who was hopelessly insane. The law in those days gave no promise of relief by divorce, and Lady Rycroft, whose physical health was excellent, might live to be ninety. The liaison between those two people was, I think, guessed at, but they were both discreet and careful to keep up appearances. Then Sir Lewis Rycroft was killed in action.”

“Well?” said Nurse Hopkins.

“I suggest,” said Poirot, “that there was a child born after his death, and that that child was Mary Gerrard.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“You seem to know all about it!”

Poirot said:

“That is what I think. But it is possible that you have got definite proof that that is so.”

Nurse Hopkins sat silent a minute or two, frowning, then abruptly she rose, went across the room, opened a drawer and took out an envelope. She brought it across to Poirot.

She said:

“I’ll tell you how this came into my hands. Mind, I’d had my suspicions. The way Mrs. Welman looked at the girl, for one thing, and then hearing the gossip on top of it. And old Gerrard told me when he was ill that Mary wasn’t his daughter.

“Well, after Mary died I finished clearing up the Lodge, and in a drawer amongst some of the old man’s things I came across this letter. You see what’s written on it.”

Poirot read the superscription written in faded ink:

“For Mary—to be sent to her after my death.”

Poirot said:

“This writing is not recent?”

“It wasn’t Gerrard who wrote that,” explained Nurse Hopkins. “It was Mary’s mother, who died fourteen years ago. She meant this for the girl, but the old man kept it among his things and so she never saw it—and I’m thankful she didn’t! She was able to hold up her head to the end, and she’d no cause to feel ashamed.”

She paused and then said:

“Well, it was sealed up, but when I found it I’ll admit to you that I opened it and read it then and there, which I dare say I should not have done. But Mary was dead, and I guessed more or less at what was inside it and I didn’t see that it was any concern of anyone else’s. All the same, I haven’t liked to destroy it, because I didn’t feel somehow it would be right to do that. But, there, you’d better read it yourself.”

Poirot drew out the sheet of paper covered in small angular writing:

This is the truth I’ve written down here in case it should ever be needed. I was lady’s maid to Mrs. Welman at Hunterbury, and very kind to me she was. I got into trouble, and she stood by me and took me back into her service when it was all over; but the baby died. My mistress and Sir Lewis Rycroft were fond of each other, but they couldn’t marry, because he had a wife already and she was in a madhouse, poor lady. He was a fine gentleman and devoted to Mrs. Welman. He was killed, and she told me soon after that she was going to have a child. After that she went up to Scotland and took me with her. The child was born there—at Ardlochrie. Bob Gerrard, who had washed his hands of me and flung me off when I had my trouble, had been writing to me again. The arrangement was that we should marry and live at the Lodge and he should think that the baby was mine. If we lived on the place it would seem natural that Mrs. Welman should be interested in the child and she’d see to educating her and giving her a place in the world. She thought it would be better for Mary never to know the truth. Mrs. Welman gave us both a handsome sum of money; but I would have helped her without that. I’ve been quite happy with Bob, but he never took to Mary. I’ve held my tongue and never said anything to anybody, but I think it’s right in case I die that I should put this down in black and white.

Eliza Gerrard (born Eliza Riley)

Hercule Poirot drew a deep breath and folded up the letter again.

Nurse Hopkins said anxiously:

“What are you going to do about it? They’re all dead now! It’s no good raking up these things. Everyone looked up to Mrs. Welman in these parts; there’s never been anything said against her. All this old scandal—it would be cruel. The same with Mary. She was a sweet girl. Why should anyone have to know she was a bastard? Let the dead rest in peace in their graves, that’s what I say.”

Poirot said:

“One has to consider the living.”

Nurse Hopkins said:

“But this has got nothing to do with the murder.”

Hercule Poirot said gravely:

“It may have a great deal to do with it.”

He went out of the cottage, leaving Nurse Hopkins with her mouth open, staring after him.

He had walked some way when he became aware of hesitating footsteps just behind him. He stopped and turned round.

It was Horlick, the young gardener from Hunterbury. He was looking the picture of embarrassment and twisting his cap round and round in his hands.

“Excuse me, sir. Could I have a word with you?”

Horlick spoke with a kind of gulp.

“Certainly. What is it?”

Horlick twisted the cap even more fiercely. He said, averting his eyes and looking the picture of misery and embarrassment:

“It’s about that car.”

“The car that was outside the back gate that morning?”

“Yes, sir. Dr. Lord said this morning that it wasn’t his car—but it was, sir.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“Yes, sir. Because of the number, sir. It was MSS 2022. I noticed it particular—MSS 2022. You see, we know it in the village, and always call it Miss Tou-Tou! I’m quite sure of it, sir.”

Poirot said with a faint smile:

“But Dr. Lord says he was over at Withenbury that morning.”

Horlick said miserably:

“Yes, sir. I heard him. But it was his car, sir… I’ll take my oath on that.”

Poirot said gently:

“Thank you, Horlick, that’s just exactly what you may have to do….”

PART III

One

Was it very hot in the court? Or very cold? Elinor Carlisle could not be quite sure. Sometimes she felt burning, as though with fever, and immediately after she shivered.

She had not heard the end of the Prosecuting Counsel’s speech. She had gone back to the past—gone slowly through the whole business again, from the day when that miserable letter came to the moment when that smooth-faced police officer had said with horrible fluency:

“You are Elinor Katharine Carlisle. I have here a warrant for your arrest upon the charge of murdering Mary Gerrard by administering poison to her on the 27th of July last, and I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used as evidence at your trial.”

Horrible, frightening fluency… She felt caught up in a smooth-running, well-oiled machine—inhuman, passionless.

And now here she was, standing in the dock in the open glare of publicity, with hundreds of eyes that were neither impersonal nor inhuman, feasting upon her and gloating….

Only the jury did not look at her. Embarrassed, they kept their eyes studiously turned away… She thought: “It’s because—soon—they know what they’re going to say….”

II

Dr. Lord was giving evidence. Was this Peter Lord—that freckled, cheery young doctor who had been so kind and so friendly at Hunterbury? He was very stiff now. Sternly professional. His answers came monotonously: He had been summoned by telephone to Hunterbury Hall; too late for anything to be done; Mary Gerrard had died a few minutes after his arrival; death consistent, in his opinion, with morphia poisoning in one of its less common forms—the “foudroyante” variety.

Sir Edwin Bulmer rose to cross-examine.

“You were the late Mrs. Welman’s regular medical attendant?”

“I was.”

“During your visits to Hunterbury in June last, you had occasion to see the accused and Mary Gerrard together?”

“Several times.”

“What would you say was the manner of the accused to Mary Gerrard?”

“Perfectly pleasant and natural.”

Sir Edwin Bulmer said with a slight disdainful smile:

“You never saw any signs of this ‘jealous hatred’ we have heard so much about?”

Peter Lord, his jaw set, said firmly:

“No.”

Elinor thought:

“But he did—he did… He told a lie for me there… He knew…”

Peter Lord was succeeded by the police surgeon. His evidence was longer, more detailed. Death was due to morphia poisoning of the “foudroyante” variety. Would he kindly explain that term? With some enjoyment he did so. Death from morphine poisoning might occur in several different ways. The most common was a period of intense excitement followed by drowsiness and narcosis, pupils of eyes contracted. Another not so common form had been named by the French, “foudroyante.” In these cases deep sleep supervened in a very short time—about ten minutes; the pupils of the eyes were usually dilated….

III

The court had adjourned and sat again. There had been some hours of expert medical testimony.

Dr. Alan Garcia, the distinguished analyst, full of learned terms, spoke with gusto of the stomach contents: Bread, fish paste, tea, presence of morphia… more learned terms and various decimal points. Amount taken by the deceased estimated to be about four grains. Fatal dose could be as low as one grain.

Sir Edwin rose, still bland.

“I should like to get it quite clear. You found in the stomach nothing but bread, butter, fish paste, tea and morphia. There were no other foodstuffs?”

“None.”

“That is to say, the deceased had eaten nothing but sandwiches and tea for some considerable time?”

“That is so.”

“Was there anything to show in what particular vehicle the morphia had been administered?”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“I will simplify that question. The morphia could have been taken in the fish paste, or in the bread, or in the butter on the bread, or in the tea, or in the milk that had been added to the tea?”

“Certainly.”

“There was no special evidence that the morphia was in the fish paste rather than in any of the other mediums?”

“No.”

“And, in fact, the morphia might have been taken separately—that is to say, not in any vehicle at all? It could have been simply swallowed in its tablet form?”

“That is so, of course.”

“Sir Edwin sat down.

Sir Samuel re-examined.

“Nevertheless, you are of the opinion that, however the morphia was taken, it was taken at the same time as the other food and drink?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

IV

Inspector Brill had taken the oath with mechanical fluency. He stood there, soldierly and stolid, reeling off his evidence with practised ease.

“Summoned to the house… The accused said, ‘It must have been bad fish paste.’…search of the premises…one jar of fish paste washed out was standing on the draining board in the pantry, another half full…further search of pantry kitchen….”

“What did you find?”

“In a crack behind the table, between the floorboards, I found a tiny scrap of paper.”

The exhibit went to the jury.

image

“What did you take it to be?”

“A fragment torn off a printed label—such as are used on glass tubes of morphia.”

Counsel for the Defence arose with leisurely ease.

He said:

“You found this scrap in a crack in the flooring?”

“Yes.”

“Part of a label?”

“Yes.”

“Did you find the rest of that label?”

“No.”

“You did not find any glass tube or any bottle to which that label might have been affixed?”

“No.”

“What was the state of that scrap of paper when you found it? Was it clean or dirty?”

“It was quite fresh.”

“What do you mean, quite fresh?”

“There was surface dust on it from the flooring, but it was quite clean otherwise.”

“It could not have been there for any length of time?”

“No, it had found its way there quite recently.”

“You would say, then, that it had come there on the actual day you found it—not earlier?”

“Yes.”

With a grunt Sir Edwin sat down.

V

Nurse Hopkins in the box, her face red and self-righteous.

All the same, Elinor thought, Nurse Hopkins was not so frightening as Inspector Brill. It was the inhumanity of Inspector Brill that was so paralysing. He was so definitely part of a great machine. Nurse Hopkins had human passions, prejudices.

“Your name is Jessie Hopkins?”

“Yes.”

“You are a certificated District Nurse and you reside at Rose Cottage, Hunterbury?”

“Yes.”

“Where were you on the 28th of June last?”

“I was at Hunterbury Hall.”

“You had been sent for?”

“Yes. Mrs. Welman had had a stroke—the second. I went to assist Nurse O’Brien until a second nurse could be found.”

“Did you take a small attaché case with you?”

“Yes.”

“Tell the jury what was in it.”

“Bandages, dressings, a hypodermic syringe and certain drugs, including a tube of morphine hydrochloride.”

“For what purpose was it there?”

“One of the cases in the village had to have hypodermic injections of morphia morning and evening.”

“What were the contents of the tube?”

“There were twenty tablets, each containing half grain morphine hydrochloride.”

“What did you do with your attaché case?”

“I laid it down in the hall.”

“That was on the evening of the 28th. When did you next have occasion to look in the case?”

“The following morning about nine o’clock, just as I was preparing to leave the house.”

“Was anything missing?”

“The tube of morphine was missing.”

“Did you mention this loss?”

“I spoke of it to Nurse O’Brien, the nurse in charge of the patient.”

“This case was lying in the hall, where people were in the habit of passing to and fro?”

“Yes.”

Sir Samuel paused. Then he said:

“You knew the dead girl Mary Gerrard intimately?”

“Yes.”

“What was your opinion of her?”

“She was a very sweet girl—and a good girl.”

“Was she of a happy disposition?”

“Very happy.”

“She had no troubles that you know of?”

“No.”

“At the time of her death was there anything whatever to worry her or make her unhappy about the future?”

“Nothing.”

“She would have had no reason to have taken her own life?”

“No reason at all.”

It went on and on—the damning story. How Nurse Hopkins had accompanied Mary to the Lodge, the appearance of Elinor, her excitable manner, the invitation to sandwiches, the plate being handed first to Mary. Elinor’s suggestion that everything be washed up, and her further suggestion that Nurse Hopkins should come upstairs with her and assist in sorting out clothes.

There were frequent interruptions and objections from Sir Edwin Bulmer.

Elinor thought:

“Yes, it’s all true—and she believes it. She’s certain I did it. And every word she says is the truth—that’s what’s so horrible. It’s all true.”

Once more, as she looked across the court, she saw the face of Hercule Poirot regarding her thoughtfully—almost kindly. Seeing her with too much knowledge….

The piece of cardboard with the scrap of label pasted on to it was handed to the witness.

“Do you know what this is?”

“It’s a bit of a label.”

“Can you tell the jury what label?”

“Yes—it’s a part of a label off a tube of hypodermic tablets. Morphine tablets half grain—like the one I lost.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Of course I’m sure. It’s off my tube.”

The judge said:

“Is there any special mark on it by which you can identify it as the label of the tube you lost?”

“No, my lord, but it must be the same.”

“Actually, all you can say is that it is exactly similar?”

“Well, yes, that’s what I mean.”

The court adjourned.

Two

It was another day.

Sir Edwin Bulmer was on his feet cross-examining. He was not at all bland now. He said sharply:

“This attaché case we’ve heard so much about. On June 28th it was left in the main hall of Hunterbury all night?”

Nurse Hopkins agreed:

“Yes.”

“Rather a careless thing to do, wasn’t it?”

Nurse Hopkins flushed.

“Yes, I suppose it was.”

“Are you in the habit of leaving dangerous drugs lying about where anyone could get at ’em?”

“No, of course not.”

“Oh! you’re not? But you did it on this occasion?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s a fact, isn’t it, that anybody in the house could have got at that morphia if they’d wanted to?”

“I suppose so.”

“No suppose about it. It is so, isn’t it?”

“Well—yes.”

“It wasn’t only Miss Carlisle who could have got at it? Any of the servants could. Or Dr. Lord. Or Mr. Roderick Welman. Or Nurse O’Brien. Or Mary Gerrard herself.”

“I suppose so—yes.”

“It is so, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Was anyone aware you’d got morphia in that case?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, did you talk about it to anyone?”

“No.”

“So, as a matter of fact, Miss Carlisle couldn’t have known that there was any morphia there?”

“She might have looked to see.”

“That’s very unlikely, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure.”

“There were people who’d be more likely to know about the morphia than Miss Carlisle. Dr. Lord, for instance. He’d know. You were administering this morphia under his orders, weren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Mary Gerrard knew you had it there, too?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“She was often in your cottage, wasn’t she?”

“Not very often.”

“I suggest to you that she was there very frequently, and that she, of all the people in the house, would be the most likely to guess that there was morphia in your case.”

“I don’t agree.”

Sir Edwin paused a minute.

“You told Nurse O’Brien in the morning that the morphia was missing?”

“Yes.”

“I put it to you that what you really said was: ‘I have left the morphia at home. I shall have to go back for it.’”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You didn’t suggest that the morphia had been left on the mantelpiece in your cottage?”

“Well, when I couldn’t find it I thought that must have been what had happened.”

“In fact, you didn’t really know what you’d done with it!”

“Yes, I did. I put it in the case.”

“Then why did you suggest on the morning of June 29th that you had left it at home?”

“Because I thought I might have done.”

“I put it to you that you’re a very careless woman.”

“That’s not true.”

“You make rather inaccurate statements sometimes, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. I’m very careful what I say.”

“Did you make a remark about a prick from a rose tree on July 27th—the day of Mary Gerrard’s death?”

“I don’t see what that’s got to do with it!”

The judge said:

“Is that relevant, Sir Edwin?”

“Yes, my lord, it is an essential part of the defence, and I intend to call witnesses to prove that that statement was a lie.”

He resumed:

“Do you still say you pricked your wrist on a rose tree on July 27th?”

“Yes, I did.”

Nurse Hopkins looked defiant.

“When did you do that?”

“Just before leaving the Lodge and coming up to the house on the morning of July 27th.”

Sir Edwin said sceptically:

“And what rose tree was this?”

“A climbing one just outside the Lodge, with pink flowers.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“I’m quite sure.”

Sir Edwin paused and then asked:

“You persist in saying the morphia was in the attaché case when you came to Hunterbury on June 28th?”

“I do. I had it with me.”

“Supposing that presently Nurse O’Brien goes into the box and swears that you said you had probably left it at home?”

“It was in my case. I’m sure of it.”

Sir Edwin sighed.

“You didn’t feel at all uneasy about the disappearance of the morphia?”

“Not—uneasy—no.”

“Oh, so you were quite at ease, notwithstanding the fact that a large quantity of a dangerous drug had disappeared?”

“I didn’t think at the time anyone had taken it.”

“I see. You just couldn’t remember for the moment what you had done with it?”

“Not at all. It was in the case.”

“Twenty half grain tablets—that is, ten grains of morphia. Enough to kill several people, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“But you are not uneasy—and you don’t even report the loss officially?”

“I thought it was all right.”

“I put it to you that if the morphia had really disappeared the way it did you would have been bound, as a conscientious person, to report the loss officially.”

Nurse Hopkins, very red in the face, said:

“Well, I didn’t.”

“That was surely a piece of criminal carelessness on your part? You don’t seem to take your responsibilities very seriously. Did you often mislay these dangerous drugs?”

“It never happened before.”

It went on for some minutes. Nurse Hopkins, flustered, red in the face, contradicting herself…an easy prey to Sir Edwin’s skill.

“Is it a fact that on Thursday, July 6th, the dead girl, Mary Gerrard, made a will?”

“She did.”

“Why did she do that?”

“Because she thought it was the proper thing to do. And so it was.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t because she was depressed and uncertain about her future?”

“Nonsense.”

“It showed, though, that the idea of death was present in her mind—that she was brooding on the subject.”

“Not at all. She just thought it was the proper thing to do.”

“Is this the will? Signed by Mary Gerrard, witnessed by Emily Biggs and Roger Wade, confectioners’ assistants, and leaving everything of which she died possessed to Mary Riley, sister of Eliza Riley?”

“That’s right.”

It was handed to the jury.

“To your knowledge, had Mary Gerrard any property to leave?”

“Not then, she hadn’t.”

“But she was shortly going to have?”

“Yes.”

“Is it not a fact that a considerable sum of money—two thousand pounds—was being given to Mary by Miss Carlisle?”

“Yes.”

“There was no compulsion on Miss Carlisle to do this? It was entirely a generous impulse on her part?”

“She did it of her own free will, yes.”

“But surely, if she had hated Mary Gerrard, as is suggested, she would not of her own free will have handed over to her a large sum of money.”

“That’s as may be.”

“What do you mean by that answer?”

“I don’t mean anything.”

“Exactly. Now, had you heard any local gossip about Mary Gerrard and Mr. Roderick Welman?”

“He was sweet on her.”

“Have you any evidence of that?”

“I just knew it, that’s all.”

“Oh—you ‘just knew it.’ That’s not very convincing to the jury, I’m afraid. Did you say on one occasion Mary would have nothing to do with him because he was engaged to Miss Elinor and she said the same to him in London?”

“That’s what she told me.”

Sir Samuel Attenbury re-examined:

“When Mary Gerrard was discussing with you the wording of this will, did the accused look in through the window?”

“Yes, she did.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘So you’re making your will, Mary. That’s funny.’ And she laughed. Laughed and laughed. And it’s my opinion,” said the witness viciously, “that it was at that moment the idea came into her head. The idea of making away with the girl! She’d murder in her heart that very minute.”

The judge spoke sharply:

“Confine yourself to answering the questions that are asked you. The last part of that answer is to be struck out….”

Elinor thought:

“How queer… When anyone says what’s true, they strike it out….”

She wanted to laugh hysterically.

II

Nurse O’Brien was in the box.

“On the morning of June 29th did Nurse Hopkins make a statement to you?”

“Yes. She said she had a tube of morphine hydrochloride missing from her case.”

“What did you do?”

“I helped her to hunt for it.”

“But you could not find it?”

“No.”

“To your knowledge, was the case left overnight in the hall?”

“It was.”

“Mr. Welman and the accused were both staying in the house at the time of Mrs. Welman’s death—that is, on June 28th to 29th?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell us of an incident that occurred on June 29th—the day after Mrs. Welman’s death?”

“I saw Mr. Roderick Welman with Mary Gerrard. He was telling her he loved her, and he tried to kiss her.”

“He was at the time engaged to the accused?”

“Yes.”

“What happened next?”

“Mary told him to think shame of himself, and him engaged to Miss Elinor!”

“In your opinion, what was the feeling of the accused towards Mary Gerrard?”

“She hated her. She would look after her as though she’d like to destroy her.”

Sir Edwin jumped up.

Elinor thought: “Why do they wrangle about it? What does it matter?”

Sir Edwin Bulmer cross-examined.

“Is it not a fact that Nurse Hopkins said she thought she had left the morphia at home?”

“Well, you see, it was this way: After—”

“Kindly answer my question. Did she not say that she had probably left the morphia at home?”

“Yes.”

“She was not really worried at the time about it?”

“No, not then.”

“Because she thought she had left it at home. So naturally she was not uneasy.”

“She couldn’t imagine anyone taking it.”

“Exactly. It wasn’t till after Mary Gerrard’s death from morphia that her imagination got to work.”

The judge interrupted:

“I think, Sir Edwin, that you have already been over that point with the former witness.”

“As your lordship pleases.”

“Now, regarding the attitude of the accused to Mary Gerrard, there was no quarrel between them at any time?”

“No quarrel, no.”

“Miss Carlisle was always quite pleasant to the girl?”

“Yes. ’Twas the way she looked at her.”

“Yes—yes—yes. But we can’t go by that sort of thing. You’re Irish, I think?”

“I am that.”

“And the Irish have rather a vivid imagination, haven’t they?”

Nurse O’Brien cried excitedly:

“Every word I’ve told you is the truth.”

III

Mr. Abbott, the grocer, in the box. Flustered—unsure of himself (slightly thrilled, though, at his importance). His evidence was short. The purchase of two pots of fish paste. The accused had said, “There’s a lot of food poisoning with fish paste.” She had seemed excited and queer.

No cross-examination.

Three

Opening speech for the Defence:

“Gentlemen of the Jury, I might, if I like, submit to you that there is no case against the accused. The onus of proof is on the Prosecution, and so far, in my opinion—and, I have no doubt, yours—they have proved exactly nothing at all! The Prosecution avers that Elinor Carlisle, having obtained possession of morphine (which everyone else in the house had had equal opportunity of purloining, and as to which there exists considerable doubt whether it was ever in the house at all), proceeds to poison Mary Gerrard. Here the Prosecution has relied solely on opportunity. It has sought to prove motive, but I submit that that is just what it has not been able to do. For, members of the jury, there is no motive! The Prosecution has spoken of a broken engagement. I ask you—a broken engagement! If a broken engagement is a cause for murder, why are we not having murders committed every day? And this engagement, mark you, was not an affair of desperate passion, it was an engagement entered into mainly for family reasons. Miss Carlisle and Mr. Welman had grown up together; they had always been fond of each other, and gradually they drifted into a warmer attachment; but I intend to prove to you it was at best a very lukewarm affair.”

(Oh Roddy—Roddy. A lukewarm affair?)

“Moreover, this engagement was broken off, not by Mr. Welman—but by the prisoner. I submit to you that the engagement between Elinor Carlisle and Roderick Welman was entered into mainly to please old Mrs. Welman. When she died, both parties realized that their feelings were not strong enough to justify them in entering upon matrimony. They remained, however, good friends. Moreover, Elinor Carlisle, who had inherited her aunt’s fortune, in the kindliness of her nature, was planning to settle a considerable sum of money on Mary Gerrard. And this is the girl she is accused of poisoning! The thing is farcical.

"The only thing that there is against Elinor Carlisle is the circumstances under which the poisoning took place.

"The Prosecution has said in effect:

"No one but Elinor Carlisle could have killed Mary Gerrard. Therefore they have had to search about for a possible motive. But, as I have said to you, they have been unable to find any motive because there was none.

"Now, is it true that no one but Elinor Carlisle could have killed Mary Gerrard? No, it is not. There is the possibility that Mary Gerrard committed suicide. There is the possibility that someone tampered with the sandwiches while Elinor Carlisle was out of the house at the Lodge. There is a third possibility. It is a fundamental law of evidence that if it can be shown that there is an alternative theory which is possible and consistent with the evidence, the accused must be acquitted. I propose to show you that there was another person who had not only an equal opportunity to poison Mary Gerrard, but who had a far better motive for doing so. I propose to call evidence to show you that there was another person who had access to the morphine, and who had a very good motive for killing Mary Gerrard, and I can show that that person had an equally good opportunity of doing so. I submit to you that no jury in the world will convict this woman of murder when there is no evidence against her except that of opportunity, and when it can be shown that there is not only evidence of opportunity against another person, but an overwhelming motive. I shall also call witness to prove that there has been deliberate perjury on the part of one of the witnesses for the Crown. But first I will call the prisoner, that she may tell you her own story, and that you may see for yourself how entirely unfounded the charges against her are."

II

She had taken the oath. She was answering Sir Edwin's questions in a low voice. The judge leaned forward. He told her to speak louder….

Sir Edwin was talking gently and encouragingly—all the questions to which she had rehearsed the answers.

“You were fond of Roderick Welman?”

“Very fond. He was like a brother to me—or a cousin. I always thought of him as a cousin.”

The engagement…drifted into it…very pleasant to marry someone you had known all your life….

“Not, perhaps, what might be called a passionate affair?”

(Passionate? Oh, Roddy…)

“Well, no…you see we knew each other so well….”

“After the death of Mrs. Welman was there a slightly strained feeling between you?”

“Yes, there was.”

“How did you account for this?”

“I think it was partly the money.”

“The money?”

“Yes. Roderick felt uncomfortable. He thought people might think he was marrying me for that….”

“The engagement was not broken off on account of Mary Gerrard?”

“I did think Roderick was rather taken with her, but I didn’t believe it was anything serious.”

“Would you have been upset if it had been?”

“Oh, no. I should have thought it rather unsuitable, that is all.”

“Now, Miss Carlisle. Did you or did you not take a tube of morphine from Nurse Hopkins’ attaché case on June 28th?”

“I did not.”

“Have you at any time had morphine in your possession?”

“Never.”

“Were you aware that your aunt had not made a will?”

“No. It came as a great surprise to me.”

“Did you think she was trying to convey to you a message on the night of June 28th when she died?”

“I understood that she had made no provision for Mary Gerrard, and was anxious to do so.”

“And in order to carry out her wishes, you yourself were prepared to settle a sum of money on the girl?”

“Yes. I wanted to carry out Aunt Laura’s wishes. And I was grateful for the kindness Mary had shown to my aunt.”

“On July 26th did you come down from London to Maidensford and stay at the King’s Arms?”

“Yes.”

“What was your purpose in coming down?”

“I had an offer for the house, and the man who had bought it wanted possession as quickly as possible. I had to look through my aunt’s personal things and settle things up generally.”

“Did you buy various provisions on your way to the Hall on July 27th?”

“Yes. I thought it would be easier to have a picnic lunch there than to come back to the village.”

“Did you then go on to the house, and did you sort through your aunt’s personal effects?”

“I did.”

“And after that?”

“I came down to the pantry and cut some sandwiches. I then went down to the Lodge and invited the District Nurse and Mary Gerrard to come up to the house.”

“Why did you do this?”

“I wished to save them a hot walk back to the village and back again to the Lodge.”

“It was, in fact, a natural and kindly action on your part. Did they accept the invitation?”

“Yes. They walked up to the house with me.”

“Where were the sandwiches you had cut?”

“I left them in the pantry on a plate.”

“Was the window open?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone could have got into the pantry while you were absent?”

“Certainly.”

“If anybody had observed you from outside while you were cutting the sandwiches, what would they have thought?”

“I suppose that I was preparing to have a picnic lunch.”

“They could not know, could they, that anyone was to share the lunch?”

“No. The idea of inviting the other two only came to me when I saw what a quantity of food I had.”

“So that if anyone had entered the house during your absence and placed morphine in one of those sandwiches, it would be you they were attempting to poison?”

“Well, yes, it would.”

“What happened when you had all arrived back at the house?”

“We went into the morning room. I fetched the sandwiches and handed them to the other two.”

“Did you drink anything with them?”

“I drank water. There was beer on a table; but Nurse Hopkins and Mary preferred tea. Nurse Hopkins went into the pantry and made it. She brought it in on a tray and Mary poured it out.”

“Did you have any?”

“No.”

“But Mary Gerrard and Nurse Hopkins both drank tea?”

“Yes.”

“What happened next?”

“Nurse Hopkins went and turned the gas ring off.”

“Leaving you alone with Mary Gerrard?”

“Yes.”

“What happened next?”

“After a few minutes I picked up the tray and the sandwich plate and carried them into the pantry. Nurse Hopkins was there, and we washed them together.”

“Did Nurse Hopkins have her cuffs off at the time?”

“Yes. She was washing the things, while I dried them.”

“Did you make a certain remark to her about a scratch on her wrist?”

“I asked her if she had pricked herself.”

“What did she reply?”

“She said, ‘It was a thorn from the rose tree outside the Lodge. I’ll get it out presently.’”

“What was her manner at the time?”

“I think she was feeling the heat. She was perspiring and her face was a queer colour.”

“What happened after that?”

“We went upstairs, and she helped me with my aunt’s things.”

“What time was it when you went downstairs again?”

“It must have been an hour later.”

“Where was Mary Gerrard?”

“She was sitting in the morning room. She was breathing very queerly and was in a coma. I rang up the doctor on Nurse Hopkins’ instructions. He arrived just before she died.”

Sir Edwin squared his shoulders dramatically.

“Miss Carlisle, did you kill Mary Gerrard?”

(That’s your cue! Head up, eyes straight.)

“No!”

III

Sir Samuel Attenbury. A sick beating at one’s heart. Now—now she was at the mercy of an enemy! No more gentleness, no more questions to which she knew the answers!

But he began quite mildly.

“You were engaged to be married, you have told us, to Mr. Roderick Welman?”

“Yes.”

“You were fond of him?”

“Very fond.”

“I put it to you that you were deeply in love with Roderick Welman and that you were wildly jealous of his love for Mary Gerrard?”

“No.” (Did it sound properly indignant, that “no?”)

Sir Samuel said menacingly:

“I put it to you that you deliberately planned to put this girl out of the way, in the hope that Roderick Welman would return to you.”

“Certainly not.” (Disdainful—a little weary. That was better.)

The questions went on. It was just like a dream…a bad dream … a nightmare ….

Question after question … horrible, hurting questions… Some of them she was prepared for, some took her unawares….

Always trying to remember her part. Never once to let go, to say:

“Yes, I did hate her… Yes, I did want her dead… Yes, all the time I was cutting the sandwiches I was thinking of her dying….”

To remain calm and cool and answer as briefly and passionlessly as possible….

Fighting….

Fighting every inch of the way….

Over now… The horrible man with the Jewish nose was sitting down. And the kindly, unctuous voice of Sir Edwin Bulmer was asking a few more questions. Easy, pleasant questions, designed to remove any bad impression she might have made under cross-examination….

She was back again in the dock. Looking at the jury, wondering….

IV

Roddy. Roddy standing there, blinking a little, hating it all. Roddy—looking somehow—not quite real.

But nothing’s real any more. Everything is whirling round in a devilish way. Black’s white, and top is bottom and east is west… And I’m not Elinor Carlisle; I’m “the accused.” And, whether they hang me or whether they let me go, nothing will ever be the same again. If there were just something—just one sane thing to hold on to….

(Peter Lord’s face, perhaps, with its freckles and its extraordinary air of being just the same as usual…)

Where had Sir Edwin got to now?

“Will you tell us what were the state of Miss Carlisle’s feelings towards you?”

Roddy answered in his precise voice:

"I should say she was deeply attached to me, but certainly not passionately in love with me."

"You considered your engagement satisfactory?"

"Oh, quite. We had a good deal in common."

"Will you tell the jury, Mr. Welman, exactly why that engagement was broken off?"

"Well, after Mrs. Welman died it pulled us up, I think, with a bit of a shock. I didn't like the idea of marrying a rich woman when I myself was penniless. Actually the engagement was dissolved by mutual consent. We were both rather relieved."

"Now, will you tell us just what your relations were with Mary Gerrard?"

(Oh, Roddy, poor Roddy, how you must hate all this!)

"I thought her very lovely."

"Were you in love with her?"

"Just a little."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Let me see. It must have been the 5th or 6th of July."

Sir Edwin said, a touch of steel in his voice:

"You saw her after that, I think."

"No, I went abroad—to Venice and Dalmatia."

"You returned to England—when?"

"When I received a telegram—let me see—on the 1st of August, it must have been."

"But you were actually in England on July 27th, I think."

"No."

"Come, now, Mr. Welman. You are on oath, remember. Is it not a fact that your passport shows that you returned to England on July 25th and left it again on the night of the 27th?"

Sir Edwin's voice held a subtly menacing note. Elinor frowned, suddenly jerked back to reality. Why was Counsel bullying his own witness?

Roderick had turned rather pale. He was silent for a minute or two, then he said with an effort:

"Well—yes, that is so."

"Did you go and see this girl Mary Gerrard in London on the 25th at her lodgings?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

"Er—er—yes."

"What was her answer?"

"She refused."

"You are not a rich man, Mr. Welman?"

"No."

"And you are rather heavily in debt?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"Were you not aware of the fact that Miss Carlisle had left all her money to you in the event of her death?"

“This is the first I have heard of it.”

“Were you in Maidensford on the morning of July 27th?”

“I was not.”

Sir Edwin sat down.

Counsel for the Prosecution said:

“You say that in your opinion the accused was not deeply in love with you.”

“That is what I said.”

“Are you a chivalrous man, Mr. Welman?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“If a lady were deeply in love with you and you were not in love with her, would you feel it incumbent upon you to conceal the fact?”

“Certainly not.”

“Where did you go to school, Mr. Welman?”

“Eton.”

Sir Samuel said with a quiet smile:

“That is all.”

V

Alfred James Wargrave.

“You are a rose grower and live at Emsworth, Berks?”

“Yes.”

"Did you on October 20th go to Maidensford and examine a rose tree growing at the Lodge at Hunterbury Hall?"

"I did."

"Will you describe this tree?"

"It was a climbing rose—Zephyrine Drouhin. It bears a sweetly scented pink flower. It has no thorns."

"It would be impossible to prick oneself on a rose tree of this description?"

"It would be quite impossible. It is a thornless tree."

No cross-examination.

VI

"You are James Arthur Littledale. You are a qualified chemist and employed by the wholesale chemists, Jenkins & Hale?"

"I am."

"Will you tell me what this scrap of paper is?"

The exhibit was handed to him.

"It is a fragment of one of our labels."

"What kind of label?"

"The label we attach to tubes of hypodermic tablets."

"Is there enough here for you to say definitely what drug was in the tube to which this label was attached?"

"Yes. I should say quite definitely that the tube in question contained hypodermic tablets of apomorphine hydrochloride 1/20 grain."

“Not morphine hydrochloride?”

“No, it could not be that.”

“Why not?”

“On such a tube the word Morphine is spelt with a capital M. The end of the line of the m here, seen under my magnifying glass, shows plainly that it is part of a small m, not a capital M.”

“Please let the jury examine it with the glass. Have you labels here to show what you mean?”

The labels were handed to the jury.

Sir Edwin resumed:

“You say this is from a tube of apomorphine hydrochloride? What exactly is apomorphine hydrochloride?”

“The formula is $C_{17}H_{17}NO_{2.}$ It is a derivative of morphine prepared by saponifying morphine by heating it with dilute hydrochloric acid in sealed tubes. The morphine loses one molecule of water.”

“What are the special properties of apomorphine?”

Mr. Littledale said quietly:

“Apomorphine is the quickest and most powerful emetic known. It acts within a few minutes.”

“So if anybody had swallowed a lethal dose of morphine and were to inject a dose of apomorphine hypodermically within a few minutes, what would result?”

“Vomiting would take place almost immediately and the morphine would be expelled from the system.”

“Therefore, if two people were to share the same sandwich or drink from the same pot of tea, and one of them were then to inject a dose of apomorphine hypodermically, what would be the result, supposing the shared food or drink to have contained morphine?”

“The food or drink together with the morphine would be vomited by the person who injected the apomorphine.”

“And that person would suffer no ill results?”

“No.”

There was suddenly a stir of excitement in court and order for silence from the judge.

VII

“You are Amelia Mary Sedley and you reside ordinarily at 17 Charles Street, Boonamba, Auckland?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know a Mrs. Draper?”

“Yes. I have known her for over twenty years.”

“Do you know her maiden name?”

“Yes. I was at her marriage. Her name was Mary Riley.”

“Is she a native of New Zealand?”

“No, she came out from England.”

“You have been in court since the beginning of these proceedings?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Have you seen this Mary Riley—or Draper—in court?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you see her?”

“Giving evidence in this box.”

“Under what name?”

“Jessie Hopkins.”

“And you are quite sure that this Jessie Hopkins is the woman you know as Mary Riley or Draper?”

“Not a doubt of it.”

A slight commotion at the back of the court.

“When did you last see Mary Draper—until today?”

“Five years ago. She went to England.”

Sir Edwin said with a bow:

“Your witness.”

Sir Samuel, rising with a slightly perplexed face, began:

“I suggest to you, Mrs.—Sedley, that you may be mistaken.”

“I’m not mistaken.”

“You may have been misled by a chance resemblance.”

“I know Mary Draper well enough.”

“Nurse Hopkins is a certificated District Nurse.”

“Mary Draper was a hospital nurse before her marriage.”

"You understand, do you not, that you are accusing a Crown witness of perjury?"

"I understand what I'm saying."

VIII

"Edward John Marshall, you lived for some years in Auckland, New Zealand, and now reside at 14 Wren Street, Deptford?"

"That's right."

"Do you know Mary Draper?"

"I've known her for years in New Zealand."

"Have you seen her today in court?"

"I have. She called herself Hopkins; but it was Mrs. Draper all right."

The judge lifted his head. He spoke in a small, clear, penetrating voice:

"It is desirable, I think, that the witness Jessie Hopkins should be recalled."

A pause, a murmur.

"Your lordship, Jessie Hopkins left the court a few minutes ago."

IX

"Hercule Poirot."

Hercule Poirot entered the box, took the oath, twirled his moustache and waited, with his head a little on one side. He gave his name and address and calling.

"M. Poirot, do you recognize this document?"

"Certainly."

“How did it originally come into your possession?”

“It was given me by the District Nurse, Nurse Hopkins.”

Sir Edwin said:

“With your permission, my lord, I will read this aloud, and it can then go to the jury.”

Four

Closing speech for the Defence.

"Gentlemen of the jury, the responsibility now rests with you. It is for you to say if Elinor Carlisle is to go forth free from the court. If, after the evidence you have heard, you are satisfied that Elinor Carlisle poisoned Mary Gerrard, then it is your duty to pronounce her guilty.

"But if it should seem to you that there is equally strong evidence, and perhaps far stronger evidence against another person, then it is your duty to free the accused without more ado.

"You will have realized by now that the facts of the case are very different from what they originally appeared to be.

"Yesterday, after the dramatic evidence given by M. Hercule Poirot, I called other witnesses to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the girl Mary Gerrard was the illegitimate daughter of Laura Welman. That being true, it follows, as his lordship will doubtless instruct you, that Mrs. Welman's next of kin was not her niece, Elinor Carlisle, but her illegitimate daughter who went by the name of Mary Gerrard. And therefore Mary Gerrard at Mrs. Welman's death inherited a vast fortune. That, gentlemen, is the crux of the situation. A sum in the neighbourhood of two hundred thousand pounds was inherited by Mary Gerrard. But she herself was unaware of the fact. She was also unaware of the true identity of the woman Hopkins. You may think, gentlemen, that Mary Riley or Draper may have had some perfectly legitimate reason for changing her name to Hopkins. If so, why has she not come forward to state what the reason was?

"All that we do know is this: That at Nurse Hopkins' instigation, Mary Gerrard made a will leaving everything she had to 'Mary Riley, sister of Eliza Riley.' We know that Nurse Hopkins, by reason of her profession, had access to morphine and to apomorphine and was well acquainted with their properties. Furthermore, it has been proved that Nurse Hopkins was not speaking the truth when she said that her wrist had been pricked by a thorn from a thornless rose tree. Why did she lie, if it were not that she wanted hurriedly to account for the mark just made by the hypodermic needle? Remember, too, that the accused has stated on oath that Nurse Hopkins, when she joined her in the pantry, was looking ill, and her face was of a greenish colour—comprehensible enough if she had just been violently sick.

"I will underline yet another point: If Mrs. Welman had lived twenty-four hours longer, she would have made a will; and in all probability that will would have made a suitable provision for Mary Gerrard, but would not have left her the bulk of her fortune, since it was Mrs. Welman's belief that her unacknowledged daughter would be happier if she remained in another sphere of life.

"It is not for me to pronounce on the evidence against another person, except to show that this other person had equal opportunities and a far stronger motive for the murder.

"Looked at from that point of view, gentlemen of the jury, I submit to you that the case against Elinor Carlisle falls to the ground…."

II

From Mr. Justice Beddingfield's summing-up:

"…You must be perfectly satisfied that this woman did, in fact, administer a dangerous dose of morphia to Mary Gerrard on July 27th. If you are not satisfied, you must acquit the prisoner.

"The Prosecution has stated that the only person who had the opportunity to administer poison to Mary Gerrard was the accused. The Defence has sought to prove that there were other alternatives. There is the theory that Mary Gerrard committed suicide, but the only evidence in support of that theory is the fact that Mary Gerrard made a will shortly before she died. There is not the slightest proof that she was depressed or unhappy or in a state of mind likely to lead her to take her own life. It has also been suggested that the morphine might have been introduced into the sandwiches by someone entering the pantry during the time that Elinor

Carlisle was at the Lodge. In that case, the poison was intended for Elinor Carlisle, and Mary Gerrard's death was a mistake. The third alternative suggested by the Defence is that another person had an equal opportunity to administer morphine, and that in the latter case the poison was introduced into the tea and not into the sandwiches. In support of that theory the Defence has called the witness Littledale, who has sworn that the scrap of paper found in the pantry was part of a label on a tube containing tablets of apomorphine hydrochloride, a very powerful emetic. You have had an example of both types of labels submitted to you. In my view, the police were guilty of gross carelessness in not checking the original fragment more closely and in jumping to the conclusion that it was a morphine label.

"The witness Hopkins has stated that she pricked her wrist on a rose tree at the Lodge. The witness Wargrave has examined that tree, and it has no thorns on it. You have to decide what caused the mark on Nurse Hopkins' wrist and why she should tell a lie about it….

"If the Prosecution has convinced you that the accused and no other committed the crime, then you must find the accused guilty.

"If the alternative theory suggested by the Defence is possible and consistent with the evidence, the accused must be acquitted.

"I will ask you to consider the verdict with courage and diligence, weighing only the evidence that has been put before you."

III

Elinor was brought back into the court.

The jury filed in.

"Gentlemen of the jury, are you agreed upon your verdict?"

"Yes."

"Look upon the prisoner at the bar, and say whether she is guilty or not guilty."

“Not guilty….”

Five

They had brought her out by a side door.

She had been aware of faces welcoming her… Roddy…the detective with the big moustaches….

But it was to Peter Lord that she turned.

“I want to get away….”

She was with him now in the smooth Daimler, driving rapidly out of London.

He had said nothing to her. She had sat in the blessed silence.

Every minute taking her farther and farther away.

A new life….

That was what she wanted….

A new life.

She said suddenly:

“I—I want to go somewhere quiet…where there won’t be any faces….”

Peter Lord said quietly:

“That’s all arranged. You’re going to a sanatorium. Quiet place. Lovely gardens. No one will bother you—or get at you.”

She said with a sigh:

“Yes—that’s what I want….”

It was being a doctor, she supposed, that made him understand. He knew—and didn't bother her. So blessedly peaceful to be here with him, going away from it all, out of London…to a place that was safe….

She wanted to forget—forget everything… None of it was real any longer. It was all gone, vanished, finished with—the old life and the old emotions. She was a new, strange, defenceless creature, very crude and raw, beginning all over again. Very strange and very afraid….

But it was comforting to be with Peter Lord….

They were out of London now, passing through suburbs.

She said at last:

"It was all you—all you…."

Peter Lord said:

"It was Hercule Poirot. The fellow's a kind of magician!"

But Elinor shook her head. She said obstinately:

"It was you. You got hold of him and made him do it!"

Peter grinned.

"I made him do it all right…."

Elinor said:

"Did you know I hadn't done it, or weren't you sure?"

Peter said simply:

"I was never quite sure."

Elinor said:

“That’s why I nearly said: ‘guilty’ right at the beginning…because, you see, I had thought of it… I thought of it that day when I laughed outside the cottage.”

Peter said:

“Yes, I knew.”

She said wonderingly:

“It seems so queer now…like a kind of possession. That day I bought the paste and cut the sandwiches I was pretending to myself, I was thinking: ‘I’ve mixed poison with this, and when she eats she will die—and then Roddy will come back to me.’”

Peter Lord said:

“It helps some people to pretend that sort of thing to themselves. It isn’t a bad thing, really. You take it out of yourself in a fantasy. Like sweating a thing out of your system.”

Elinor said:

“Yes, that’s true. Because it went—suddenly! The blackness, I mean! When that woman mentioned the rose tree outside the Lodge—it all swung back into—into being normal again….”

Then with a shiver she said:

“Afterwards when we went into the morning room and she was dead—dying, at least—I felt then: Is there much difference between thinking and doing murder?”

Peter Lord said:

“All the difference in the world!”

“Yes, but is there?”

"Of course there is! Thinking murder doesn't really do any harm. People have silly ideas about that; they think it's the same as planning murder! It isn't. If you think murder long enough, you suddenly come through the blackness and feel that it's all rather silly!"

Elinor cried:

"Oh! you are a comforting person…."

Peter Lord said rather incoherently:

"Not at all. Just common sense."

Elinor said, and there were suddenly tears in her eyes:

"Every now and then—in court—I looked at you. It gave me courage. You looked so—so ordinary."

Then she laughed. "That's rude!"

He said:

"I understand. When you're in the middle of a nightmare something ordinary is the only hope. Anyway, ordinary things are the best, I've always thought so."

For the first time since she had entered the car she turned her head and looked at him.

The sight of his face didn't hurt her as Roddy's face always hurt her; it gave her no sharp pang of pain and pleasure mixed; instead, it made her feel warm and comforted.

She thought:

"How nice his face is…nice and funny—and, yes, comforting…."

They drove on.

They came at last to a gateway and a drive that wound upwards till it reached a quiet white house on the side of a hill.

He said:

“You’ll be quite safe here. No one will bother you.”

Impulsively she laid her hand on his arm.

She said:

“You—you’ll come and see me?”

“Of course.”

“Often?”

Peter Lord said:

“As often as you want me.”

She said:

“Please come—very often….”

Six

Hercule Poirot said:

“So you see, my friend, the lies people tell are just as useful as the truth?”

Peter Lord said:

“Did everyone tell you lies?”

Hercule Poirot nodded.

“Oh, yes! For one reason or another, you comprehend. The one person to whom truth was an obligation and who was sensitive and scrupulous concerning it—that person was the one who puzzled me most!”

Peter Lord murmured:

“Elinor herself!”

“Precisely. The evidence pointed to her as the guilty party. And she herself, with her sensitive and fastidious conscience, did nothing to dispel that assumption. Accusing herself of the will, if not the deed, she came very near to abandoning a distasteful and sordid fight and pleading guilty in court to a crime she had not committed.”

Peter Lord breathed a sigh of exasperation.

“Incredible.”

Poirot shook his head.

“Not at all. She condemned herself—because she judged herself by a more exacting standard than ordinary humanity applies!”

Peter Lord said thoughtfully:

"Yes, she's like that."

Hercule Poirot went on:

"From the moment that I started my investigations there was always the strong possibility that Elinor Carlisle was guilty of the crime of which she was accused. But I fulfilled my obligations towards you and I discovered that a fairly strong case could be made out against another person."

"Nurse Hopkins?"

"Not to begin with. Roderick Welman was the first person to attract my attention. In his case, again, we start with a lie. He told me that he left England on July 9th and returned on August 1st. But Nurse Hopkins had mentioned casually that Mary Gerrard had rebuffed Roderick. Welman's advances both in Maidensford 'and again when she saw him in London.' Mary Gerrard, you informed me, went to London on July 10th—a day after Roderick Welman had left England. When then did Mary Gerrard have an interview with Roderick Welman in London? I set my burglarious friend to work, and by an examination of Welman's passport I discovered that he had been in England from July 25th to the 27th. And he had deliberately lied about it.

"There had always been that period of time in my mind when the sandwiches were on a plate in the pantry and Elinor Carlisle was down at the Lodge. But all along I realized that in that case Elinor must have been the intended victim, not Mary. Had Roderick Welman any motive for killing Elinor Carlisle? Yes, a very good one. She had made a will leaving him her entire fortune; and by adroit questioning I discovered that Roderick Welman could have made himself acquainted with that fact."

Peter Lord said:

"And why did you decide that he was innocent?"

"Because of one more lie. Such a silly stupid negligible little lie, too. Nurse Hopkins said that she had scratched her wrist on a rose tree, that she had got a thorn in it. And I went and saw the rose tree, and it had no thorns… So clearly Nurse Hopkins had told a lie—and the lie was so silly and so seemingly pointless that it focused my attention upon her.

“I began to wonder about Nurse Hopkins. Up till then she had struck me as a perfectly credible witness, consistent throughout, with a strong bias against the accused arising naturally enough out of her affection for the dead girl. But now, with that silly pointless little lie in my mind, I considered Nurse Hopkins and her evidence very carefully, and I realized something that I had not been clever enough to see before. Nurse Hopkins knew something about Mary Gerrard which she was very anxious should come out.”

Peter Lord said in surprise:

“I thought it was the other way round?”

“Ostensibly, yes. She gave a very fine performance of someone who knows something and isn’t going to tell! But when I thought it over carefully I realized that every word she had said on the subject had been uttered with diametrically the opposite end in view. My conversation with Nurse O’Brien confirmed that belief. Hopkins had used her very cleverly without Nurse O’Brien being conscious of the fact.

“It was clear then that Nurse Hopkins had a game of her own to play. I contrasted the two lies, her and Roderick Welman’s. Was either of them capable of an innocent explanation?

“In Roderick’s case, I answered immediately: Yes. Roderick Welman is a very sensitive creature. To admit that he had been unable to keep to his plan of staying abroad, and had been compelled to slink back and hang round the girl, who would have nothing to do with him, would have been most hurtful to his pride. Since there was no question of his having been near the scene of the murder or of knowing anything about it, he took the line of least resistance and avoided unpleasantness (a most characteristic trait!) by ignoring that hurried visit to England and simply stating that he returned on August 1st when the news of the murder reached him.

"Now as to Nurse Hopkins, could there be an innocent explanation of her lie? The more I thought of it, the more extraordinary it seemed to me. Why should Nurse Hopkins find it necessary to lie because she had a mark on her wrist? What was the significance of that mark?

"I began to ask myself certain questions. Who did the morphine that was stolen belong to? Nurse Hopkins. Who could have administered that morphine to old Mrs. Welman? Nurse Hopkins. Yes, but why call attention to its disappearance? There could be only one answer to that if Nurse Hopkins was guilty: because the other murder, the murder of Mary Gerrard, was already planned, and a scapegoat had been selected, but that scapegoat must be shown to have had a chance of obtaining morphine.

"Certain other things fitted in. The anonymous letter written to Elinor. That was to create bad feeling between Elinor and Mary. The idea doubtless was that Elinor would come down and object to Mary's influence over Mrs. Welman. The fact that Roderick Welman fell violently in love with Mary was, of course, a totally unforeseen circumstance—but one that Nurse Hopkins was quick to appreciate. Here was a perfect motive for the scapegoat, Elinor.

"But what was the reason for the two crimes? What motive could there be for Nurse Hopkins to do away with Mary Gerrard? I began to see a light—oh, very dim as yet. Nurse Hopkins had a good deal of influence over Mary, and one of the ways she had used that influence was to induce the girl to make a will. But the will did not benefit Nurse Hopkins. It benefited an aunt of Mary's who lived in New Zealand. And then I remembered a chance remark that someone in the village had made to me. That aunt had been a hospital nurse.

"The light was not quite so dim now. The pattern—the design of the crime—was becoming apparent. The next step was easy. I visited Nurse Hopkins once more. We both played the comedy very prettily. In the end she allowed herself to be persuaded to tell what she had been aiming to tell all along! Only she tells it, perhaps, just a little sooner than she meant to do! But the opportunity is so good that she cannot resist. And, after all, the truth has got to be known some time. So, with well-feigned reluctance, she produces the letter. And then, my friend, it is no longer conjecture. I know! The letter gives her away."

Peter Lord frowned and said:

"How?"

"Mon cher! The superscription on that letter was as follows: 'For Mary, to be sent to her after my death.' But the gist of the contents made it perfectly plain that Mary Gerrard was not to know the truth. Also, the word sent (not given) on the envelope was illuminating. It was not Mary Gerrard to whom that letter was written, but another Mary. It was to her sister, Mary Riley, in New Zealand, that Eliza Riley wrote the truth.

"Nurse Hopkins did not find that letter at the Lodge after Mary Gerrard's death. She had had it in her possession for many years. She received it in New Zealand, where it was sent to her after her sister's death."

He paused.

"Once one had seen the truth with the eyes of the mind the rest was easy. The quickness of air travel made it possible for a witness who knew Mary Draper well in New Zealand to be present in court."

Peter Lord said:

"Supposing you had been wrong and Nurse Hopkins and Mary Draper had been two entirely different people?"

Poirot said coldly:

"I am never wrong!"

Peter Lord laughed:

Hercule Poirot went on:

"My friend, we know something now of this woman Mary Riley or Draper. The police of New Zealand were unable to get sufficient evidence for a conviction, but they had been watching her for some time when she suddenly left the country. There was a patient of hers, an old lady, who left her ‘dear Nurse Riley’ a very snug little legacy, and whose death was somewhat of a puzzle to the doctor attending her. Mary Draper’s husband insured his life in her favour for a considerable sum, and his death was sudden and unaccountable. Unfortunately for her, though he had made out a cheque to the Insurance Company, he had forgotten to post it. Other deaths may lie at her door. It is certain she is a remorseless and unscrupulous woman.

“One can imagine that her sister’s letter suggested possibilities to her resourceful mind. When New Zealand became too hot, as you say, to hold her, and she came to this country and resumed her profession in the name of Hopkins (a former colleague of hers in hospital who died abroad), Maidensford was her objective. She may perhaps have contemplated some form of blackmail. But old Mrs. Welman was not the kind of woman to allow herself to be blackmailed, and Nurse Riley, or Hopkins, very wisely did not attempt anything of the sort. Doubtless she made inquiries and discovered that Mrs. Welman was a very wealthy woman, and some chance word of Mrs. Welman’s may have revealed the fact that the old lady had not made a will.

“So, on that June evening, when Nurse O’Brien retailed to her colleague that Mrs. Welman was asking for her lawyer, Hopkins did not hesitate. Mrs. Welman must die intestate so that her illegitimate daughter would inherit her money. Hopkins had already made friends with Mary Gerrard and acquired a good deal of influence over the girl. All that she had to do now was to persuade the girl to make a will leaving her money to her mother’s sister; and she inspired the wording of that will very carefully. There was no mention of the relationship: just ‘Mary Riley, sister of the late Eliza Riley.’ Once that was signed, Mary Gerrard was doomed. The woman only had to wait for a suitable opportunity. She had, I fancy, already planned the method of the crime, with the use of the apomorphine to secure her own alibi. She may have meant to get Elinor and Mary to her cottage, but when Elinor came down to the Lodge and asked them both to come up and have sandwiches she realized at once that a perfect opportunity had arisen. The circumstances were such that Elinor was practically certain to be convicted.”

Peter Lord said slowly:

“If it hadn’t been for you—she would have been convicted.”

Hercule Poirot said quickly:

“No, it is you, my friend, she has to thank for her life.”

“I? I didn’t do anything. I tried—”

He broke off. Hercule Poirot smiled a little.

“Mais oui, you tried very hard, did you not? You were impatient because I did not seem to you to be getting anywhere. And you were afraid, too, that she might, after all, be guilty. And so, with great impertinence, you also told me the lies! But, mon cher, you were not very clever about it. In future I advise you to stick to the measles and the whooping cough and leave crime detection alone.”

Peter Lord blushed.

He said:

“Did you know—all the time?”

Poirot said severely:

“You lead me by the hand to a clearing in the shrubs, and you assist me to find a German matchbox that you have just put there! C’est l’enfantillage!”

Peter Lord winced.

He groaned:

“Rub it in!”

Poirot went on:

“You converse with the gardener and lead him to say that he saw your car in the road; and then you give a start and pretend that it was not your car. And you look hard at me to make sure that I realize that someone, a stranger, must have been there that morning.”

“I was a damned fool,” said Peter Lord.

“What were you doing at Hunterbury that morning?”

Peter Lord blushed.

“It was just sheer idiocy… I—I’d heard she was down. I went up to the house on the chance of seeing her. I didn’t mean to speak to her. I—I just wanted to—well—see her. From the path in the shrubbery I saw her in the pantry cutting bread and butter—”

“Charlotte and the poet Werther. Continue, my friend.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to tell. I just slipped into the bushes and stayed there watching her till she went away.”

Poirot said gently:

“Did you fall in love with Elinor Carlisle the first time you saw her?”

There was a long silence.

“I suppose so.”

Then Peter Lord said:

“Oh, well, I suppose she and Roderick Welman will live happy ever afterwards.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“My dear friend, you suppose nothing of the sort!”

“Why not? She’ll forgive him the Mary Gerrard business. It was only a wild infatuation on his part, anyway.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“It goes deeper than that… There is, sometimes, a deep chasm between the past and the future. When one has walked in the valley of the shadow of death, and come out of it into the sunshine—then, mon cher, it is a new life that begins… The past will not serve….”

He waited a minute and then went on:

“A new life… That is what Elinor Carlisle is beginning now—and it is you who have given her that life.”

“No.”

“Yes. It was your determination, your arrogant insistence that compelled me to do as you asked. Admit now, it is to you she turns in gratitude, is it not?”

Peter Lord said slowly:

“Yes, she’s very grateful—now… She asked me to go and see her—often.”

“Yes, she needs you.”

Peter Lord said violently:

“Not as she needs—him!”

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“She never needed Roderick Welman. She loved him, yes, unhappily—even desperately.”

Peter Lord, his face set and grim, said harshly:

“She will never love me like that.”

Hercule Poirot said softly:

“Perhaps not. But she needs you, my friend, because it is only with you that she can begin the world again.”

Peter Lord said nothing.

Hercule Poirot’s voice was very gentle as he said:

“Can you not accept facts? She loved Roderick Welman. What of it? With you, she can be happy….”

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe (1940)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

ONE, TWO, BUCKLE MY SHOE

I

Mr. Morley was not in the best of tempers at breakfast. He complained of the bacon, wondered why the coffee had to have the appearance of liquid mud, and remarked that breakfast cereals were each one worse than the last.

Mr. Morley was a small man with a decided jaw and a pugnacious chin. His sister, who kept house for him, was a large woman rather like a female grenadier. She eyed her brother thoughtfully and asked whether the bath water had been cold again.

Rather grudgingly, Mr. Morley said it had not.

He glanced at the paper and remarked that the Government seemed to be passing from a state of incompetence to one of positive imbecility!

Miss Morley said in a deep bass voice that it was Disgraceful!

As a mere woman she had always found whatever Government happened to be in power distinctly useful. She urged her brother on to explain why the Government’s present policy was inconclusive, idiotic, imbecile and frankly suicidal!

When Mr. Morley had expressed himself fully on these points, he had a second cup of the despised coffee and unburdened himself of his true grievance.

“These girls,” he said, “are all the same! Unreliable, self-centred—not to be depended on in any way.”

Miss Morley said interrogatively:

“Gladys?”

“I’ve just had the message. Her aunt’s had a stroke and she’s had to go down to Somerset.”

Miss Morley said:

“Very trying, dear, but after all hardly the girl’s fault.”

Mr. Morley shook his head gloomily.

“How do I know the aunt has had a stroke? How do I know the whole thing hasn’t been arranged between the girl and that very unsuitable young fellow she goes about with? That young man is a wrong ’un if I ever saw one! They’ve probably planned some outing together for today.”

“Oh, no, dear, I don’t think Gladys would do a thing like that. You know, you’ve always found her very conscientious.”

“Yes, yes.”

“An intelligent girl and really keen on her work, you said.”

“Yes, yes, Georgina, but that was before this undesirable young man came along. She’s been quite different lately—quite different—absentminded—upset—nervy.”

The Grenadier produced a deep sigh. She said:

“After all, Henry, girls do fall in love. It can’t be helped.”

Mr. Morley snapped:

“She oughtn’t to let it affect her efficiency as my secretary. And today, in particular, I’m extremely busy! Several very important patients. It is most trying!”

“I’m sure it must be extremely vexing, Henry. How is the new boy shaping, by the way?”

Henry Morley said gloomily:

"He's the worst I've had yet! Can't get a single name right and has the most uncouth manners. If he doesn't improve I shall sack him and try again. I don't know what's the good of our education nowadays. It seems to turn out a collection of nitwits who can't understand a single thing you say to them, let alone remember it."

He glanced at his watch.

"I must be getting along. A full morning, and that Sainsbury Seale woman to fit in somewhere as she is in pain. I suggested that she should see Reilly, but she wouldn't hear of it."

"Of course not," said Georgina loyally.

"Reilly's very able—very able indeed. First-class diplomas. Thoroughly up-to-date in his work."

"His hand shakes," said Miss Morley. "In my opinion he drinks."

Her brother laughed, his good temper restored. He said:

"I'll be up for a sandwich at half past one as usual."

II

At the Savoy Hotel Mr. Amberiotis was picking his teeth with a toothpick and grinning to himself.

Everything was going very nicely.

He had had his usual luck. Fancy those few kind words of his to that idiotic hen of a woman being so richly repaid. Oh! well—cast your bread upon the waters. He had always been a kindhearted man. And generous! In the future he would be able to be even more generous. Benevolent visions floated before his eyes. Little Dimitri … And the good Constantopopolus struggling with his little restaurant … What pleasant surprises for them….

The toothpick probed unguardedly and Mr. Amberiotis winced. Rosy visions of the future faded and gave way to apprehensions of the immediate future. He explored tenderly with his tongue. He took out his notebook. Twelve o’clock. 58, Queen Charlotte Street.

He tried to recapture his former exultant mood. But in vain. The horizon had shrunk to six bare words:

“58, Queen Charlotte Street. Twelve o’clock.”

III

At the Glengowrie Court Hotel, South Kensington, breakfast was over. In the lounge, Miss Sainsbury Seale was sitting talking to Mrs. Bolitho. They occupied adjacent tables in the dining room and had made friends the day after Miss Sainsbury Seale’s arrival a week ago.

Miss Sainsbury Seale said:

“You know, dear, it really has stopped aching! Not a twinge! I think perhaps I’ll ring up—”

Mrs. Bolitho interrupted her.

“Now don’t be foolish, my dear. You go to the dentist and get it over.”

Mrs. Bolitho was a tall, commanding female with a deep voice. Miss Sainsbury Seale was a woman of forty odd with indecisively bleached hair rolled up in untidy curls. Her clothes were shapeless and rather artistic, and her pince-nez were always dropping off. She was a great talker.

She said now wistfully:

“But really, you know, it doesn’t ache at all.”

“Nonsense, you told me you hardly slept a wink last night.”

“No, I didn’t—no, indeed—but perhaps, now, the nerve has actually died.”

“All the more reason to go to the dentist,” said Mrs. Bolitho firmly. “We all like to put it off, but that’s just cowardice. Better make up one’s mind and get it over!”

Something hovered on Miss Sainsbury Seale’s lips. Was it the rebellious murmur of: “Yes, but it’s not your tooth!”

All she actually said, however, was:

“I expect you’re right. And Mr. Morley is such a careful man and really never hurts one at all.”

IV

The meeting of the Board of Directors was over. It had passed off smoothly. The report was good. There should have been no discordant note. Yet to the sensitive Mr. Samuel Rotherstein there had been something, some nuance in the chairman’s manner.

There had been, once or twice, a shortness, an acerbity, in his tone—quite uncalled for by the proceedings.

Some secret worry, perhaps? But somehow Rotherstein could not connect a secret worry with Alistair Blunt. He was such an unemotional man. He was so very normal. So essentially British.

There was, of course, always liver … Mr. Rotherstein’s liver gave him a bit of trouble from time to time. But he’d never known Alistair to complain of his liver. Alistair’s health was as sound as his brain and his grasp of finance. It was not annoying heartiness—just quiet well-being.

And yet—there was something—once or twice the chairman’s hand had wandered to his face. He had sat supporting his chin. Not his normal attitude. And once or twice he had seemed actually—yes, distrait.

They came out of the boardroom and passed down the stairs.

Rotherstein said:

“Can’t give you a lift, I suppose?”

Alistair Blunt smiled and shook his head.

“My car’s waiting.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m not going back to the city.” He paused. “As a matter of fact I’ve got an appointment with the dentist.”

The mystery was solved.

V

Hercule Poirot descended from his taxi, paid the man and rang the bell of 58, Queen Charlotte Street.

After a little delay it was opened by a boy in page boy’s uniform with a freckled face, red hair, and an earnest manner.

Hercule Poirot said:

“Mr. Morley?”

There was in his heart a ridiculous hope that Mr. Morley might have been called away, might be indisposed, might not be seeing patients today … All in vain. The page boy drew back, Hercule Poirot stepped inside, and the door closed behind him with the quiet remorselessness of unalterable doom.

The boy said: “Name, please?”

Poirot gave it to him, a door on the right of the hall was thrown open and he stepped into the waiting room.

It was a room furnished in quiet good taste and, to Hercule Poirot, indescribably gloomy. On the polished (reproduction) Sheraton table were carefully arranged papers and periodicals. The (reproduction) Hepplewhite sideboard held two Sheffield plated candlesticks and an épergne. The mantelpiece held a bronze clock and two bronze vases. The windows were shrouded by curtains of blue velvet. The chairs were upholstered in a Jacobean design of red birds and flowers.

In one of them sat a military-looking gentleman with a fierce moustache and a yellow complexion. He looked at Poirot with an air of one considering some noxious insect. It was not so much his gun he looked as though he wished he had with him, as his Flit spray. Poirot, eyeing him with distaste, said to himself, “In verity, there are some Englishmen who are altogether so unpleasing and ridiculous that they should have been put out of their misery at birth.”

The military gentleman, after a prolonged glare, snatched up The Times, turned his chair so as to avoid seeing Poirot, and settled down to read it.

Poirot picked up Punch.

He went through it meticulously, but failed to find any of the jokes funny.

The page boy came in and said, “Colonel Arrow-Bumby?”—and the military gentleman was led away.

Poirot was speculating on the probabilities of there really being such a name, when the door opened to admit a young man of about thirty.

As the young man stood by the table, restlessly flicking over the covers of magazines, Poirot looked at him sideways. An unpleasant and dangerous looking young man, he thought, and not impossibly a murderer. At any rate he looked far more like a murderer than any of the murderers Hercule Poirot had arrested in the course of his career.

The page boy opened the door and said to midair:

“Mr. Peerer.”

Rightly construing this as a summons to himself, Poirot rose. The boy led him to the back of the hall and round the corner to a small lift in which he took him up to the second floor. Here he led him along a passage, opened a door which led into a little anteroom, tapped at a second door; and without waiting for a reply opened it and stood back for Poirot to enter.

Poirot entered to a sound of running water and came round the back of the door to discover Mr. Morley washing his hands with professional gusto at a basin on the wall.

VI

There are certain humiliating moments in the lives of the greatest of men. It has been said that no man is a hero to his valet. To that may be added that few men are heroes to themselves at the moment of visiting their dentist.

Hercule Poirot was morbidly conscious of this fact.

He was a man who was accustomed to have a good opinion of himself. He was Hercule Poirot, superior in most ways to other men. But in this moment he was unable to feel superior in any way whatever. His morale was down to zero. He was just that ordinary, craven figure, a man afraid of the dentist's chair.

Mr. Morley had finished his professional ablutions. He was speaking now in his encouraging professional manner.

"Hardly as warm as it should be, is it, for the time of year?"

Gently he led the way to the appointed spot—to The Chair! Deftly he played with its head rest, running it up and down.

Hercule Poirot took a deep breath, stepped up, sat down and relaxed his head to Mr. Morley's professional fiddlings.

"There," said Mr. Morley with hideous cheerfulness. "That quite comfortable? Sure?"

In sepulchral tones Poirot said that it was quite comfortable.

Mr. Morley swung his little table nearer, picked up his little mirror, seized an instrument and prepared to get on with the job.

Hercule Poirot grasped the arms of the chair, shut his eyes and opened his mouth.

“Any special trouble?” Mr. Morley inquired.

Slightly indistinctly, owing to the difficulty of forming consonants while keeping the mouth open, Hercule Poirot was understood to say that there was no special trouble. This was, indeed, the twice yearly overhaul that his sense of order and neatness demanded. It was, of course, possible that there might be nothing to do … Mr. Morley might, perhaps, overlook that second tooth from the back from which those twinges had come … He might—but it was unlikely—for Mr. Morley was a very good dentist.

Mr. Morley passed slowly from tooth to tooth, tapping and probing, murmuring little comments as he did so.

“That filling is wearing down a little—nothing serious, though. Gums are in pretty good condition, I’m glad to see.” A pause at a suspect, a twist of the probe—no, on again, false alarm. He passed to the lower side. One, two—on to three?—No—“The dog,” Hercule Poirot thought in confused idiom, “has seen the rabbit!”

“A little trouble here. Not been giving you any pain? Hm, I’m surprised.” The probe went on.

Finally Mr. Morley drew back, satisfied.

“Nothing very serious. Just a couple of fillings—and a trace of decay on that upper molar. We can get it all done, I think, this morning.”

He turned on a switch and there was a hum. Mr. Morley un-hooked the drill and fitted a needle to it with loving care.

“Guide me,” he said briefly, and started the dread work.

It was not necessary for Poirot to avail himself of this permission, to raise a hand, to wince, or even to yell. At exactly the right moment, Mr. Morley stopped the drill, gave the brief command “Rinse,” applied a little dressing, selected a new needle and continued. The ordeal of the drill was terror rather than pain.

Presently, while Mr. Morley was preparing the filling, conversation was resumed.

“Have to do this myself this morning,” he explained. “Miss Nevill has been called away. You remember Miss Nevill?”

Poirot untruthfully assented.

“Called away to the country by the illness of a relative. Sort of thing that does happen on a busy day. I’m behindhand already this morning. The patient before you was late. Very vexing when that happens. It throws the whole morning out. Then I have to fit in an extra patient because she is in pain. I always allow a quarter of an hour in the morning in case that happens. Still, it adds to the rush.”

Mr. Morley peered into his little mortar as he ground. Then he resumed his discourse.

“I’ll tell you something that I’ve always noticed, M. Poirot. The big people—the important people—they’re always on time—never keep you waiting. Royalty, for instance. Most punctilious. And these big City men are the same. Now this morning I’ve got a most important man coming—Alistair Blunt!”

Mr. Morley spoke the name in a voice of triumph.

Poirot, prohibited from speech by several rolls of cotton wool and a glass tube that gurgled under his tongue, made an indeterminate noise.

Alistair Blunt! Those were the names that thrilled nowadays. Not Dukes, not Earls, not Prime Ministers. No, plain Mr. Alistair Blunt. A man whose face was almost unknown to the general public—a man who only figured in an occasional quiet paragraph. Not a spectacular person.

Just a quiet nondescript Englishman who was the head of the greatest banking firm in England. A man of vast wealth. A man who said Yes and No to Governments. A man who lived a quiet, unobtrusive life and never appeared on a public platform or made speeches. Yet a man in whose hands lay supreme power.

Mr. Morley’s voice still held a reverent tone as he stood over Poirot ramming the filling home.

“Always comes to his appointments absolutely on time. Often sends his car away and walks back to his office. Nice, quiet, unassuming fellow. Fond of golf and keen on his garden. You’d never dream he could buy up half Europe! Just like you and me.”

A momentary resentment rose in Poirot at this offhand coupling of names. Mr. Morley was a good dentist, yes, but there were other good dentists in London. There was only one Hercule Poirot.

“Rinse, please,” said Mr. Morley.

“It’s the answer, you know, to their Hitlers and Mussolinis and all the rest of them,” went on Mr. Morley, as he proceeded to tooth number two. “We don’t make a fuss over here. Look how democratic our King and Queen are. Of course, a Frenchman like you, accustomed to the Republican idea—”

“I ah nah a Frahah—I ah—ah a Benyon.”

“Tchut—tchut—” said Mr. Morley sadly. “We must have the cavity completely dry.” He puffed hot air relentlessly on it.

Then he went on:

“I didn’t realize you were a Belgian. Very interesting. Very fine man, King Leopold, so I’ve always heard. I’m a great believer in the tradition of Royalty myself. The training is good, you know. Look at the remarkable way they remember names and faces. All the result of training—though of course some people have a natural aptitude for that sort of thing. I, myself, for instance. I don’t remember names, but it’s remarkable the way I never forget a face. One of my patients the other day, for instance—I’ve seen that patient before. The name meant nothing to me—but I said to myself at once, ‘Now where have I met you before?’ I’ve not remembered yet—but it will come back to me—I’m sure of it. Just another rinse, please.”

The rinse accomplished, Mr. Morley peered critically into his patient’s mouth.

“Well, I think that seems all right. Just close—very gently … Quite comfortable? You don’t feel the filling at all? Open again, please. No, that seems quite all right.”

Hercule Poirot descended, a free man.

“Well, good-bye, M. Poirot. Not detected any criminals in my house, I hope?”

Poirot said with a smile:

“Before I came up, every one looked to me like a criminal! Now, perhaps, it will be different!”

“Ah, yes, a great deal of difference between before and after! All the same, we dentists aren’t such devils now as we used to be! Shall I ring for the lift for you?”

“No, no, I will walk down.”

“As you like—the lift is just by the stairs.”

Poirot went out. He heard the taps start to run as he closed the door behind him.

He walked down the two flights of stairs. As he came to the last bend, he saw the Anglo-Indian Colonel being shown out. Not at all a bad-looking man, Poirot reflected mellowly. Probably a fine shot who had killed many a tiger. A useful man—a regular outpost of Empire.

He went into the waiting room to fetch his hat and stick which he had left there. The restless young man was still there, somewhat to Poirot’s surprise. Another patient, a man, was reading the Field.

Poirot studied the young man in his newborn spirit of kindliness. He still looked very fierce—and as though he wanted to do a murder—but not really a murderer, thought Poirot kindly. Doubtless, presently, this young man would come tripping down the stairs, his ordeal over, happy and smiling and wishing no ill to anyone.

The page boy entered and said firmly and distinctly:

“Mr. Blunt.”

The man at the table laid down the Field and got up. A man of middle height, of middle age, neither fat nor thin. Well-dressed, quiet.

He went out after the boy.

One of the richest and most powerful men in England—but he still had to go to the dentist just like anybody else, and no doubt felt just the same as anybody else about it!

These reflections passing through his mind, Hercule Poirot picked up his hat and stick and went to the door. He glanced back as he did so, and the startled thought went through his mind that that young man must have very bad toothache indeed.

In the hall Poirot paused before the mirror there to adjust his moustaches, slightly disarranged as the result of Mr. Morley’s ministrations.

He had just completed their arrangement to his satisfaction when the lift came down again and the page boy emerged from the back of the hall whistling discordantly. He broke off abruptly at the sight of Poirot and came to open the front door for him.

A taxi had just drawn up before the house and a foot was protruding from it. Poirot surveyed the foot with gallant interest.

A neat ankle, quite a good quality stocking. Not a bad foot. But he didn’t like the shoe. A brand new patent leather shoe with a large gleaming buckle. He shook his head.

Not chic—very provincial!

The lady got out of the taxi, but in doing so she caught her other foot in the door and the buckle was wrenched off. It fell tinkling on to the pavement. Gallantly, Poirot sprang forward and picked it up, restoring it with a bow.

Alas! Nearer fifty than forty. Pince-nez. Untidy yellow-grey hair—unbecoming clothes—those depressing art greens! She thanked him, dropping her pince-nez, then her handbag.

Poirot, polite if no longer gallant, picked them up for her.

She went up the steps of 58, Queen Charlotte Street, and Poirot interrupted the taxi driver's disgusted contemplation of a meagre tip.

“You are free, hein?”

The taxi driver said gloomily: “Oh, I'm free.”

“So am I,” said Hercule Poirot. “Free of care!”

He saw the taxi man's air of deep suspicion.

“No, my friend, I am not drunk. It is that I have been to the dentist and I need not go again for six months. It is a beautiful thought.”

THREE, FOUR, SHUT THE DOOR

I

It was a quarter to three when the telephone rang.

Hercule Poirot was sitting in an easy chair happily digesting an excellent lunch.

He did not move when the bell rang but waited for the faithful George to come and take the call.

“Eh bien?” he said, as George, with a “Just a minute, sir,” lowered the receiver.

“It’s Chief Inspector Japp, sir.”

“Aha?”

Poirot lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Eh bien, mon vieux,” he said. “How goes it?”

“That you, Poirot?”

“Naturally.”

“I hear you went to the dentist this morning? Is that so?”

Poirot murmured:

“Scotland Yard knows everything!”

“Man of the name of Morley. 58, Queen Charlotte Street?”

“Yes.” Poirot’s voice had changed. “Why?”

“It was a genuine visit, was it? I mean you didn’t go to put the wind up him or anything of that sort?”

“Certainly not. I had three teeth filled if you want to know.”

“What did he seem like to you—manner much as usual?”

“I should say so, yes. Why?”

Japp’s voice was rigidly unemotional.

“Because not very much later he shot himself.”

“What?”

Japp said sharply:

“That surprises you?”

“Frankly, it does.”

Japp said:

“I’m not too happy about it myself … I’d like to have a talk with you. I suppose you wouldn’t like to come round?”

“Where are you?”

“Queen Charlotte Street.”

Poirot said:

“I will join you immediately.”

II

It was a police constable who opened the door of 58. He said respectfully:

“M. Poirot?”

"It's I, myself."

"The Chief Inspector is upstairs. Second floor—you know it?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"I was there this morning."

There were three men in the room. Japp looked up as Poirot entered.

He said:

"Glad to see you, Poirot. We're just going to move him. Like to see him first?"

A man with a camera who had been kneeling near the body got up.

Poirot came forward. The body was lying near the fireplace.

In death Mr. Morley looked very much as he had looked in life. There was a little blackened hole just below his right temple. A small pistol lay on the floor near his outflung right hand.

Poirot shook his head gently.

Japp said:

"All right, you can move him now."

They took Mr. Morley away. Japp and Poirot were left alone.

Japp said:

"We're through all the routine. Fingerprints, etc."

Poirot sat down. He said:

"Tell me."

Japp pursed his lips. He said:

“He could have shot himself. He probably did shoot himself. There are only his fingerprints on the gun—but I’m not quite satisfied.”

“What are your objections?”

“Well, to begin with, there doesn’t seem to be any reason why he should shoot himself … He was in good health, he was making money, he hadn’t any worries that anyone knew of. He wasn’t mixed up with a woman—at least,” Japp corrected himself cautiously, “as far as we know he wasn’t. He hasn’t been moody or depressed or unlike himself. That’s partly why I was anxious to hear what you said. You saw him this morning, and I wondered if you’d noticed anything.”

Poirot shook his head.

“Nothing at all. He was—what shall I say—normality itself.”

“Then that makes it odd, doesn’t it? Anyway, you wouldn’t think a man would shoot himself in the middle of business hours, so to speak. Why not wait till this evening? That would be the natural thing to do.”

Poirot agreed.

“When did the tragedy occur?”

“Can’t say exactly. Nobody seems to have heard the shot. But I don’t think they would. There are two doors between here and the passage and they have baize fitted round the edges—to deaden the noise from the victims of the dental chair, I imagine.”

“Very probably. Patients under gas sometimes make a lot of noise.”

“Quite. And outside, in the street, there’s plenty of traffic, so you wouldn’t be likely to hear it out there.”

“When was it discovered?”

"Round about one thirty—by the page boy, Alfred Biggs. Not a very bright specimen, by all accounts. It seems that Morley's twelve thirty patient kicked up a bit of a row at being kept waiting. About one ten the boy came up and knocked. There was no answer and apparently he didn't dare come in. He'd got in a few rows already from Morley and he was nervous of doing the wrong thing. He went down again and the patient walked out in a huff at one fifteen. I don't blame her. She'd been kept waiting three-quarters of an hour and she wanted her lunch."

"Who was she?"

Japp grinned.

"According to the boy she was Miss Shirty—but from the appointment book her name was Kirby."

"What system was there for showing up patients?"

"When Morley was ready for his next patient he pressed that buzzer over there and the boy then showed the patient up."

"And Morley pressed the buzzer last?"

"At five minutes past twelve, and the boy showed up the patient who was waiting. Mr. Amberiotis, Savoy Hotel, according to the appointment book."

A faint smile came to Poirot's lips. He murmured:

"I wonder what our page boy made of that name!"

"A pretty hash, I should say. We'll ask him presently if we feel like a laugh."

Poirot said:

"And at what time did this Mr. Amberiotis leave?"

"The boy didn't show him out, so he doesn't know … A good many patients just go down the stairs without ringing for the lift and let themselves out."

Poirot nodded.

Japp went on:

"But I rang up the Savoy Hotel. Mr. Amberiotis was quite precise. He said he looked at his watch as he closed the front door and it was then twenty-five minutes past twelve."

"He could tell you nothing of importance?"

"No, all he could say was that the dentist had seemed perfectly normal and calm in his manner."

"Eh bien," said Poirot. "Then that seems quite clear. Between five and twenty past twelve and half past one something happened—and presumably nearer the former time."

"Quite. Because otherwise—"

"Otherwise he would have pressed the buzzer for the next patient."

"Exactly. The medical evidence agrees with that for what it's worth. The divisional surgeon examined the body—at twenty past two. He wouldn't commit himself—they never do nowadays—too many individual idiosyncrasies, they say. But Morley couldn't have been shot later than one o'clock, he says—probably considerably earlier—but he wouldn't be definite."

Poirot said thoughtfully:

"Then at twenty-five minutes past twelve our dentist is a normal dentist, cheerful, urbane, competent. And after that? Despair—misery—what you will—and he shoots himself?"

"It's funny," said Japp. "You've got to admit, it's funny."

"Funny," said Poirot, "is not the word."

"I know it isn't really—but it's the sort of thing one says. It's odd, then, if you like that better."

"Was it his own pistol?"

"No, it wasn't. He hadn't got a pistol. Never had had one. According to his sister there wasn't such a thing in the house. There isn't in most houses. Of course he might have bought it if he'd made up his mind to do away with himself. If so, we'll soon know about it."

Poirot asked:

"Is there anything else that worries you?"

Japp rubbed his nose.

"Well, there was the way he was lying. I wouldn't say a man couldn't fall like that—but it wasn't quite right somehow! And there was just a trace or two on the carpet—as though something had been dragged along it."

"That, then, is decidedly suggestive."

"Yes, unless it was that dratted boy. I've a feeling that he may have tried to move Morley when he found him. He denies it, of course, but then he was scared. He's that kind of young ass. The kind that's always putting their foot in it and getting cursed, and so they come to lie about things almost automatically."

Poirot looked thoughtfully round the room.

At the washbasin on the wall behind the door, at the tall filing cabinet on the other side of the door. At the dental chair and surrounding apparatus near the window, then along to the fireplace and back to where the body lay; there was a second door in the wall near the fireplace.

Japp had followed his glance. "Just a small office through there." He flung open the door.

It was as he had said, a small room, with a desk, a table with a spirit lamp and tea apparatus and some chairs. There was no other door.

“This is where his secretary worked,” explained Japp. “Miss Nevill. It seems she’s away today.”

His eyes met Poirot’s. The latter said:

“He told me, I remember. That again—might be a point against suicide?”

“You mean she was got out of the way?”

Japp paused. He said:

“If it wasn’t suicide, he was murdered. But why? That solution seems almost as unlikely as the other. He seems to have been a quiet, inoffensive sort of chap. Who would want to murder him?”

Poirot said:

“Who could have murdered him?”

Japp said:

“The answer to that is—almost anybody! His sister could have come down from their flat above and shot him, one of the servants could have come in and shot him. His partner, Reilly, could have shot him. The boy Alfred could have shot him. One of the patients could have shot him.” He paused and said, “And Amberiotis could have shot him—easiest of the lot.”

Poirot nodded.

“But in that case—we have to find out why.”

“Exactly. You’ve come round again to the original problem. Why? Amberiotis is staying at the Savoy. Why does a rich Greek want to come and shoot an inoffensive dentist?”

“That’s really going to be our stumbling block. Motive!”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“It would seem that death selected, most inartistically, the wrong man. The Mysterious Greek, the Rich Banker, the Famous Detective—how natural that one of them should be shot! For mysterious foreigners may be mixed up in espionage and rich bankers have connections who will benefit by their deaths and famous detectives may be dangerous to criminals.”

“Whereas poor old Morley wasn’t dangerous to anybody,” observed Japp gloomily.

“I wonder.”

Japp whirled round on him.

“What’s up your sleeve now?”

“Nothing. A chance remark.”

He repeated to Japp those few casual words of Mr. Morley’s about recognizing faces, and his mention of a patient.

Japp looked doubtful.

“It’s possible, I suppose. But it’s a bit far-fetched. It might have been someone who wanted their identity kept dark. You didn’t notice any of the other patients this morning?”

Poirot murmured:

“I noticed in the waiting room a young man who looked exactly like a murderer!”

Japp said, startled: “What’s that?”

Poirot smiled:

“Mon cher, it was upon my arrival here! I was nervous, fanciful—enfin, in a mood. Everything seemed sinister to me, the waiting room, the patients, the very carpet on the stairs! Actually, I think the young man had very bad toothache. That was all!”

“I know what it can be,” said Japp. “However, we’ll check up on your murderer all the same. We’ll check up on everybody, whether it’s suicide or not. I think the first thing is to have another talk with Miss Morley. I’ve only had a word or two. It was a shock to her, of course, but she’s the kind that doesn’t break down. We’ll go and see her now.”

III

Tall and grim, Georgina Morley listened to what the two men had said and answered their questions. She said with emphasis:

“It’s incredible to me—quite incredible—that my brother should have committed suicide!”

Poirot said:

“You realize the alternative, Mademoiselle?”

“You mean—murder.” She paused. Then she said slowly: “It is true—that alternative seems nearly as impossible as the other.”

“But not quite as impossible?”

“No—because—oh, in the first case, you see, I am speaking of something I know—that is: my brother’s state of mind. I know he had nothing on his mind—I know that there was no reason—no reason at all why he should take his own life!”

“You saw him this morning—before he started work?”

“At breakfast—yes.”

“And he was quite as usual—not upset in any way?”

“He was upset—but not in the way you mean. He was just annoyed!”

“Why was that?”

“He had a busy morning in front of him, and his secretary and assistant had been called away.”

“That is Miss Nevill?”

“Yes.”

“What used she to do for him?”

“She did all his correspondence, of course, and kept the appointment book, and filed all the charts. She also saw to the sterilizing of the instruments and ground up his fillings and handed them to him when he was working.”

“Had she been with him long?”

“Three years. She is a very reliable girl and we are—were both very fond of her.”

Poirot said:

“She was called away owing to the illness of a relative, so your brother told me.”

“Yes, she got a telegram to say her aunt had had a stroke. She went off to Somerset by an early train.”

“And that was what annoyed your brother so much?”

“Ye-es.” There was a faint hesitation in Miss Morley’s answer. She went on rather hurriedly. “You—you mustn’t think my brother unfeeling. It was only that he thought—just for a moment—”

“Yes, Miss Morley?”

“Well, that she might have played truant on purpose. Oh! Please don’t misunderstand me—I’m quite certain that Gladys would never do such a thing. I told Henry so. But the fact of the matter is, that she has got herself engaged to rather an unsuitable young man—Henry was very vexed about it—and it occurred to him that this young man might have persuaded her to take a day off.”

“Was that likely?”

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t. Gladys is a very conscientious girl.”

“But it is the sort of thing the young man might have suggested?”

Miss Morley sniffed.

“Quite likely, I should say.”

“What does he do, this young fellow—what is his name, by the way?”

“Carter, Frank Carter. He is—or was—an insurance clerk, I believe. He lost his job some weeks ago and doesn’t seem able to get another. Henry said—and I daresay he was right—that he is a complete rotter. Gladys had actually lent him some of her savings and Henry was very annoyed about it.”

Japp said sharply:

“Did your brother try to persuade her to break her engagement?”

“Yes, he did, I know.”

“Then this Frank Carter would, quite possibly, have a grudge against your brother.”

The Grenadier said robustly:

“Nonsense—that is if you are suggesting that Frank Carter shot Henry. Henry advised the girl against young Carter, certainly; but she didn’t take his advice—she is foolishly devoted to Frank.”

“Is there anyone else you can think of who had a grudge against your brother?”

Miss Morley shook her head.

“Did he get on well with his partner, Mr. Reilly?”

Miss Morley replied acidly:

“As well as you can ever hope to get on with an Irishman!”

“What do you mean by that, Miss Morley?”

“Well, Irishmen have hot tempers and they thoroughly enjoy a row of any kind. Mr. Reilly liked arguing about politics.”

“That was all?”

“That was all. Mr. Reilly is unsatisfactory in many ways, but he was very skilled in his profession—or so my brother said.”

Japp persisted:

“How is he unsatisfactory?”

Miss Morley hesitated, then said acidly:

“He drinks too much—but please don’t let that go any further.”

“Was there any trouble between him and your brother on that subject?”

“Henry gave him one or two hints. In dentistry,” continued Miss Morley didactically, “a steady hand is needed, and an alcoholic breath does not inspire confidence.”

Japp bowed his head in agreement. Then he said:

“Can you tell us anything of your brother’s financial position?”

“Henry was making a good income and he had a certain amount put by. We each had a small private income of our own left to us by our father.”

Japp murmured with a slight cough:

“You don’t know, I suppose, if your brother left a will?”

“He did—and I can tell you its contents. He left a hundred pounds to Gladys Nevill, otherwise everything comes to me.”

“I see. Now—”

There was a fierce thump on the door. Alfred’s face then appeared round it. His goggling eyes took in each detail of the two visitors as he ejaculated:

“It’s Miss Nevill. She’s back—and in a rare taking. Shall she come in, she wants to know?”

Japp nodded and Miss Morley said:

“Tell her to come here, Alfred.”

“O.K.,” said Alfred, and disappeared. Miss Morley said with a sigh and in obvious capital letters:

“That Boy is a Sad Trial.”

IV

Gladys Nevill was a tall, fair, somewhat anemic girl of about twenty-eight. Though obviously very upset, she at once showed that she was capable and intelligent.

Under the pretext of looking through Mr. Morley’s papers, Japp got her away from Miss Morley down to the little office next door to the surgery.

She repeated more than once:

“I simply cannot believe it! It seems quite incredible that Mr. Morley should do such a thing!”

She was emphatic that he had not seemed troubled or worried in any way.

Then Japp began:

"You were called away today, Miss Nevill—"

She interrupted him.

"Yes, and the whole thing was a wicked practical joke! I do think it's awful of people to do things like that. I really do."

"What do you mean, Miss Nevill?"

"Why, there wasn't anything the matter with Aunt at all. She'd never been better. She couldn't understand it when I suddenly turned up. Of course I was ever so glad—but it did make me mad. Sending a telegram like that and upsetting me and everything."

"Have you got that telegram, Miss Nevill?"

"I threw it away, I think, at the station. It just said, Your aunt had a stroke last night. Please come at once."

"You are quite sure—well—" Japp coughed delicately—"that it wasn't your friend, Mr. Carter, who sent that telegram?"

"Frank? Whatever for? Oh! I see, you mean—a put-up job between us? No, indeed, Inspector—neither of us would do such a thing."

Her indignation seemed genuine enough and Japp had a little trouble in soothing her down. But a question as to the patients on this particular morning restored her to her competent self.

"They are all here in the book. I daresay you have seen it already. I know about most of them. Ten o'clock, Mrs. Soames—that was about her new plate. Ten thirty, Lady Grant—she's an elderly lady—lives in Lowndes Square. Eleven o'clock, M. Hercule Poirot, he comes regularly—oh, of course this is him—sorry, M. Poirot, but I really am so upset! Eleven thirty, Mr. Alistair Blunt—that's the banker, you know—a short appointment, because Mr. Morley had prepared the filling last time. Then Miss Sainsbury Seale—she rang up specially—had toothache and so Mr. Morley fitted her in. A terrible talker, she is, never stops—the fussy kind, too. Then twelve o’clock, Mr. Amberiotis—he was a new patient—made an appointment from the Savoy Hotel. Mr. Morley gets quite a lot of foreigners and Americans. Then twelve thirty, Miss Kirby. She comes up from Worthing.”

Poirot asked:

“There was here when I arrived a tall military gentleman. Who would he be?”

“One of Mr. Reilly’s patients, I expect. I’ll just get his list for you, shall I?”

“Thank you, Miss Nevill.”

She was absent only a few minutes. She returned with a similar book to that of Mr. Morley.

She read out:

“Ten o’clock, Betty Heath (that’s a little girl of nine). Eleven o’clock, Colonel Abercrombie.”

“Abercrombie!” murmured Poirot. “C’etait ça!”

“Eleven thirty, Mr. Howard Raikes. Twelve o’clock, Mr. Barnes. That was all the patients this morning. Mr. Reilly isn’t so booked up as Mr. Morley, of course.”

“Can you tell us anything about any of these patients of Mr. Reilly’s?”

“Colonel Abercrombie has been a patient for a long time, and all Mrs. Heath’s children come to Mr. Reilly. I can’t tell you anything about Mr. Raikes or Mr. Barnes, though I fancy I have heard their names. I take all the telephone calls, you see—”

Japp said:

“We can ask Mr. Reilly ourselves. I should like to see him as soon as possible.”

Miss Nevill went out. Japp said to Poirot:

“All old patients of Mr. Morley’s except Amberiotis. I’m going to have an interesting talk with Mr. Amberiotis presently. He’s the last person, as it stands, to see Morley alive, and we’ve got to make quite sure that when he last saw him, Morley was alive.”

Poirot said slowly, shaking his head:

“You have still to prove motive.”

“I know. That’s what is going to be the teaser. But we may have something about Amberiotis at the Yard.” He added sharply: “You’re very thoughtful, Poirot!”

“I was wondering about something.”

“What was it?”

Poirot said with a faint smile:

“Why Chief Inspector Japp?”

“Eh?”

“I said, ‘Why Chief Inspector Japp?’ An officer of your eminence—is he usually called in to a case of suicide?”

“As a matter of fact, I happened to be nearby at the time. At Lavenham’s—in Wigmore Street. Rather an ingenious system of frauds they’ve had there. They telephoned me there to come on here.”

“But why did they telephone you?”

“Oh, that—that’s simple enough. Alistair Blunt. As soon as the Divisional Inspector heard he’d been here this morning, he got on to the Yard. Mr. Blunt is the kind of person we take care of in this country.”

“You mean that there are people who would like him—out of the way?”

"You bet there are. The Reds, to begin with—and our Black-shirted friends, too. It's Blunt and his group who are standing solid behind the present Government. Good sound Conservative finance. That's why, if there were the least chance that there was any funny stuff intended against him this morning, they wanted a thorough investigation."

Poirot nodded.

"That is what I more or less guessed. And that is the feeling I have"—he waved his hands expressively—"that there was, perhaps—a hitch of some kind. The proper victim was—should have been—Alistair Blunt. Or is this only a beginning—the beginning of a campaign of some kind? I smell—I smell—" he sniffed the air, "—big money in this business!"

Japp said:

"You're assuming a lot, you know."

"I am suggesting that ce pauvre Morley was only a pawn in the game. Perhaps he knew something—perhaps he told Blunt something—or they feared he would tell Blunt something—"

He stopped as Gladys Nevill entered the room.

"Mr. Reilly is busy on an extraction case," she said. "He will be free in about ten minutes if that will be all right?"

Japp said that it would. In the meantime, he said, he would have another talk to the boy Alfred.

V

Alfred was divided between nervousness, enjoyment, and a morbid fear of being blamed for everything that had occurred! He had only been a fortnight in Mr. Morley's employment, and during that fortnight he had consistently and unvaryingly done everything wrong. Persistent blame had sapped his self-confidence.

"He was a bit rattier than usual, perhaps," said Alfred in answer to a question, "nothing else as I can remember. I'd never have thought he was going to do himself in."

Poirot interposed.

"You must tell us," he said, "everything that you can remember about this morning. You are a very important witness, and your recollections may be of immense service to us."

Alfred's face was suffused by vivid crimson and his chest swelled. He had already given Japp a brief account of the morning's happenings. He proposed now to spread himself. A comforting sense of importance oozed into him.

"I can tell you orl right," he said. "Just you ask me."

"To begin with, did anything out of the way happen this morning?"

Alfred reflected a minute and then said rather sadly: "Can't say as it did. It was orl just as usual."

"Did any strangers come to the house?"

"No, sir."

"Not even among the patients?"

"I didn't know as you meant the patients. Nobody come what hadn't got an appointment, if that's what you mean. They were all down in the book."

Japp nodded. Poirot asked:

"Could anybody have walked in from outside?"

"No, they couldn't. They'd have to have a key, see?"

"But it was quite easy to leave the house?"

“Oh, yes, just turn the handle and go out and pull the door to after you. As I was saying most of ’em do. They often come down the stairs while I’m taking up the next party in the lift, see?”

“I see. Now just tell us who came first this morning and so on. Describe them if you can’t remember their names.”

Alfred reflected a minute. Then he said: “Lady with a little girl, that was for Mr. Reilly and a Mrs. Soap or some such name for Mr. Morley.”

Poirot said:

“Quite right. Go on.”

“Then another elderly lady—bit of a toff she was—come in a Daimler. As she went out a tall military gent come in, and just after him, you came,” he nodded to Poirot.

“Right.”

“Then the American gent came—”

Japp said sharply:

“American?”

“Yes, sir. Young fellow. He was American all right—you could tell by his voice. Come early, he did. His appointment wasn’t till eleven thirty—and what’s more he didn’t keep it—neither.”

Japp said sharply:

“What’s that?”

“Not him. Come in for him when Mr. Reilly’s buzzer went at eleven thirty—a bit later it was, as a matter of fact, might have been twenty to twelve—and he wasn’t there. Must have funked it and gone away.” He added with a knowledgeable air, “They do sometimes.”

Poirot said:

“Then he must have gone out soon after me?”

“That’s right, sir. You went out after I’d taken up a toff what come in a Rolls. Coo—it was a loverly car, Mr. Blunt—eleven thirty. Then I come down and let you out, and a lady in. Miss Some Berry Seal, or something like that—and then I—well, as a matter of fact I just nipped down to the kitchen to get my elevenses, and when I was down there the buzzer went—Mr. Reilly’s buzzer—so I come up and, as I say, the American gentleman had hooked it. I went and told Mr. Reilly and he swore a bit, as is his way.”

Poirot said:

“Continue.”

“Lemme see, what happened next? Oh, yes, Mr. Morley’s buzzer went for that Miss Seal, and the toff came down and went out as I took Miss Whatsername up in the lift. Then I come down again and two gentlemen came—one a little man with a funny squeaky voice—I can’t remember his name. For Mr. Reilly, he was. And a fat foreign gentleman for Mr. Morley.

“Miss Seal wasn’t very long—not above a quarter of an hour. I let her out and then I took up the foreign gentleman. I’d already taken the other gent into Mr. Reilly right away as soon as he came.”

Japp said:

“And you didn’t see Mr. Amberiotis, the foreign gentleman, leave?”

“No, sir, I can’t say as I did. He must have let himself out. I didn’t see either of those two gentlemen go.”

“Where were you from twelve o’clock onwards?”

“I always sit in the lift, sir, waiting until the front doorbell or one of the buzzers goes.”

Poirot said:

“And you were perhaps reading?”

Alfred blushed again.

“There ain’t no harm in that, sir. It’s not as though I could be doing anything else.”

“Quite so. What were you reading?”

“Death at Eleven-Forty-Five, sir. It’s an American detective story. It’s a corker, sir, it really is! All about gunmen.”

Poirot smiled faintly. He said:

“Would you hear the front door close from where you were?”

“You mean anyone going out? I don’t think I should, sir. What I mean is, I shouldn’t notice it! You see, the lift is right at the back of the hall and a little round the corner. The bell rings just behind it, and the buzzers too. You can’t miss them.”

Poirot nodded and Japp asked:

“What happened next?”

Alfred frowned in a supreme effort of memory.

“Only the last lady, Miss Shirty. I waited for Mr. Morley’s buzzer to go, but nothing happened and at one o’clock the lady who was waiting, she got rather ratty.”

“It did not occur to you to go up before and see if Mr. Morley was ready?”

Alfred shook his head very positively.

“Not me, sir. I wouldn’t have dreamed of it. For all I knew the last gentleman was still up there. I’d got to wait for the buzzer. Of course if I’d knowed as Mr. Morley had done himself in—”

Alfred shook his head with morbid relish.

Poirot asked:

“Did the buzzer usually go before the patient came down, or the other way about?”

“Depends. Usually the patient would come down the stairs and then the buzzer would go. If they rang for the lift, that buzzer would go perhaps as I was bringing them down. But it wasn’t fixed in any way. Sometimes Mr. Morley would be a few minutes before he rang for the next patient. If he was in a hurry, he’d ring as soon as they were out of the room.”

“I see—” Poirot paused and then went on:

“Were you surprised at Mr. Morley’s suicide, Alfred?”

“Knocked all of a heap, I was. He hadn’t no call to go doing himself in as far as I can see—oh!” Alfred’s eyes grew large and round. “Oo—er—he wasn’t murdered, was he?”

Poirot cut in before Japp could speak.

“Supposing he were, would it surprise you less?”

“Well, I don’t know, sir, I’m sure. I can’t see who’d want to murder Mr. Morley. He was—well, he was a very ordinary gentleman, sir. Was he really murdered, sir?”

Poirot said gravely:

“We have to take every possibility into account. That is why I told you you would be a very important witness and that you must try and recollect everything that happened this morning.”

He stressed the words and Alfred frowned with a prodigious effort of memory.

“I can’t think of anything else, sir. I can’t indeed.”

Alfred’s tone was rueful.

“Very good, Alfred. And you are quite sure no one except patients came to the house this morning?”

“No stranger did, sir. That Miss Nevill’s young man came round—and in a rare taking not to find her here.”

Japp said sharply:

“When was that?”

“Some time after twelve it was. When I told him Miss Nevill was away for the day, he seemed very put out and he said he’d wait and see Mr. Morley. I told him Mr. Morley was busy right up to lunch time, but he said: Never mind, he’d wait.”

Poirot asked:

“And did he wait?”

A startled look came into Alfred’s eyes. He said:

“Cor—I never thought of that! He went into the waiting room, but he wasn’t there later. He must have got tired of waiting, and thought he’d come back another time.”

VI

When Alfred had gone out of the room, Japp said sharply:

“D’you think it wise to suggest murder to that lad?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“I think so—yes. Anything suggestive that he may have seen or heard will come back to him under the stimulus, and he will be keenly alert to everything that goes on here.”

“All the same, we don’t want it to get about too soon.”

“Mon cher, it will not. Alfred reads detective stories—Alfred is enamoured of crime. Whatever Alfred lets slip will be put down to Alfred’s morbid criminal imagination.”

“Well, perhaps you are right, Poirot. Now we’ve got to hear what Reilly has to say.”

Mr. Reilly’s surgery and office were on the first floor. They were as spacious as the ones above but had less light in them, and were not quite so richly appointed.

Mr. Morley’s partner was a tall, dark young man, with a plume of hair that fell untidily over his forehead. He had an attractive voice and a very shrewd eye.

“We’re hoping, Mr. Reilly,” said Japp, after introducing himself, “that you can throw some light on this matter.”

“You’re wrong then, because I can’t,” replied the other. “I’d say this—that Henry Morley was the last person to go taking his own life. I might have done it—but he wouldn’t.”

“Why might you have done it?” asked Poirot.

“Because I’ve oceans of worries,” replied the other. “Money troubles, for one! I’ve never yet been able to suit my expenditure to my income. But Morley was a careful man. You’ll find no debts, nor money troubles, I’m sure of that.”

“Love affairs?” suggested Japp.

“Is it Morley you mean? He had no joy of living at all! Right under his sister’s thumb he was, poor man.”

Japp went on to ask Reilly details about the patients he had seen that morning.

"Oh, I fancy they're all square and aboveboard. Little Betty Heath, she's a nice child—I've had the whole family one after another. Colonel Abercrombie's an old patient, too."

"What about Mr. Howard Raikes?" asked Japp.

Reilly grinned broadly.

"The one who walked out on me? He's never been to me before. I know nothing about him. He rang up and particularly asked for an appointment this morning."

"Where did he ring up from?"

"Holborn Palace Hotel. He's an American, I fancy."

"So Alfred said."

"Alfred should know," said Mr. Reilly. "He's a film fan, our Alfred."

"And your other patient?"

"Barnes? A funny precise little man. Retired Civil Servant. Lives out Ealing way."

Japp paused a minute and then said:

"What can you tell us about Miss Nevill?"

Mr. Reilly raised his eyebrows.

"The bee-yewtiful blonde secretary? Nothing doing, old boy! Her relations with old Morley were perfectly pewer—I'm sure of it."

"I never suggested they weren't," said Japp, reddening slightly.

"My fault," said Reilly. "Excuse my filthy mind, won't you? I thought it might be an attempt on your part to cherchez la femme.

"Excuse me for speaking your language," he added parenthetically to Poirot. "Beautiful accent, haven't I? It comes of being educated by nuns."

Japp disapproved of this flippancy. He asked:

"Do you know anything about the young man she is engaged to? His name is Carter, I understand. Frank Carter."

"Morley didn't think much of him," said Reilly. "He tried to get la Nevill to turn him down."

"That might have annoyed Carter?"

"Probably annoyed him frightfully," agreed Mr. Reilly cheerfully.

He paused and then added:

"Excuse me, this is a suicide you are investigating, not a murder?"

Japp said sharply:

"If it were a murder, would you have anything to suggest?"

"Not I! I'd like it to be Georgina! One of those grim females with temperance on the brain. But I'm afraid Georgina is full of moral rectitude. Of course I could easily have nipped upstairs and shot the old boy myself, but I didn't. In fact, I can't imagine anyone wanting to kill Morley. But then I can't conceive of his killing himself."

He added—in a different voice:

"As a matter of fact, I'm very sorry about it … You mustn't judge by my manner. That's just nervousness, you know. I was fond of old Morley and I shall miss him."

VII

Japp put down the telephone receiver. His face, as he turned to Poirot, was rather grim.

He said:

“Mr. Amberiotis isn’t feeling very well—would rather not see any one this afternoon.

“He’s going to see me—and he’s not going to give me the slip either! I’ve got a man at the Savoy ready to trail him if he tries to make a getaway.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“You think Amberiotis shot Morley?”

“I don’t know. But he was the last person to see Morley alive. And he was a new patient. According to his story, he left Morley alive and well at twenty-five minutes past twelve. That may be true or it may not. If Morley was all right then we’ve got to reconstruct what happened next. There was still five minutes to go before his next appointment. Did someone come in and see him during that five minutes? Carter, say? Or Reilly? What happened? Depend upon it, by half past twelve, or five-and-twenty to one at the latest, Morley was dead—otherwise he’d either have sounded his buzzer or else sent down word to Miss Kirby that he couldn’t see her. No, either he was killed, or else somebody told him something which upset the whole tenor of his mind, and he took his own life.”

He paused.

“I’m going to have a word with every patient he saw this morning. There’s just the possibility that he may have said something to one of them that will put us on the right track.”

He glanced at his watch.

“Mr. Alistair Blunt said he could give me a few minutes at four fifteen. We’ll go to him first. His house is on Chelsea Embankment. Then we might take the Sainsbury Seale woman on our way to Amberiotis. I’d prefer to know all we can before tackling our Greek friend. After that, I’d like a word or two with the American who, according to you ‘looked like murder.’”

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“Not murder—toothache.”

“All the same, we’ll see this Mr. Raikes. His conduct was queer to say the least of it. And we’ll check up on Miss Nevill’s telegram and on her aunt and on her young man. In fact, we’ll check up on everything and everybody!”

VIII

Alistair Blunt had never loomed large in the public eye. Possibly because he was himself a very quiet and retiring man. Possibly because for many years he had functioned as a Prince Consort rather than as a King.

Rebecca Sanseverato, née Arnholt, came to London a disillusioned woman of forty-five. On either side she came of the Royalty of wealth. Her mother was an heiress of the European family of Rothersteins. Her father was the head of the great American banking house of Arnholt. Rebecca Arnholt, owing to the calamitous deaths of two brothers and a cousin in an air accident, was sole heiress to immense wealth. She married a European aristocrat with a famous name, Prince Felipe di Sanseverato. Three years later she obtained a divorce and custody of the child of the marriage, having spent two years of wretchedness with a well-bred scoundrel whose conduct was notorious. A few years later her child died.

Embittered by her sufferings, Rebecca Arnholt turned her undoubted brains to the business of finance—the aptitude for it ran in her blood. She associated herself with her father in banking.

After his death she continued to be a powerful figure in the financial world with her immense holdings. She came to London—and a junior partner of the London house was sent to Claridge’s to see her with various documents. Six months later the world was electrified to hear that Rebecca Sanseverato was marrying Alistair Blunt, a man nearly twenty years younger than herself.

There were the usual jeers—and smiles. Rebecca, her friends said, was really an incurable fool where men were concerned! First Sanseverato—now this young man. Of course he was only marrying her for her money. She was in for a second disaster! But to everyone's surprise the marriage was a success. The people who prophesied that Alistair Blunt would spend her money on other women were wrong. He remained quietly devoted to his wife. Even after her death, ten years later, when as inheritor of her vast wealth he might have been supposed to cut loose, he did not marry again. He lived the same quiet and simple life. His genius for finance had been no less than his wife's. His judgements and dealings were sound—his integrity above question. He dominated the vast Arnholt and Rotherstein interests by his sheer ability.

He went very little into society, had a house in Kent and one in Norfolk where he spent weekends—not with gay parties, but with a few quiet stodgy friends. He was fond of golf and played moderately well. He was interested in his garden.

This was the man towards whom Chief Inspector Japp and Hercule Poirot were bouncing along in a somewhat elderly taxi.

The Gothic House was a well-known feature on Chelsea Embankment. Inside it was luxurious with an expensive simplicity. It was not very modern but it was eminently comfortable.

Alistair Blunt did not keep them waiting. He came to them almost at once.

“Chief Inspector Japp?”

Japp came forward and introduced Hercule Poirot. Blunt looked at him with interest.

“I know your name, of course, M. Poirot. And surely—somewhere—quite recently—” he paused, frowning.

Poirot said:

“This morning, Monsieur, in the waiting room of ce pauvre M. Morley.”

Alistair Blunt's brow cleared. He said:

"Of course. I knew I had seen you somewhere." He turned to Japp. "What can I do for you? I am extremely sorry to hear about poor Morley."

"You were surprised, Mr. Blunt?"

"Very surprised. Of course I knew very little about him, but I should have thought him a most unlikely person to commit suicide."

"He seemed in good health and spirits then, this morning?"

"I think so—yes." Alistair Blunt paused, then said with an almost boyish smile: "To tell you the truth, I'm a most awful coward about going to the dentist. And I simply hate that beastly drill thing they run into you. That's why I really didn't notice anything much. Not till it was over, you know, and I got up to go. But I must say Morley seemed perfectly natural then. Cheerful and busy."

"You have been to him often?"

"I think this was my third or fourth visit. I've never had much trouble with my teeth until the last year. Breaking up, I suppose."

Hercule Poirot asked:

"Who recommended Mr. Morley to you originally?"

Blunt drew his brows together in an effort of concentration.

"Let me see now—I had a twinge—somebody told me Morley of Queen Charlotte Street was the man to go to—no, I can't for the life of me remember who it was. Sorry."

Poirot said:

"If it should come back to you, perhaps you will let one of us know?"

Alistair Blunt looked at him curiously.

He said:

“I will—certainly. Why? Does it matter?”

“I have an idea,” said Poirot, “that it might matter very much.”

They were going down the steps of the house when a car drew up in front of it. It was a car of sporting build—one of those cars from which it is necessary to wriggle from under the wheel in sections.

The young woman who did so appeared to consist chiefly of arms and legs. She had finally dislodged herself as the men turned to walk down the street.

The girl stood on the pavement looking after them. Then, suddenly and vigorously, she ejaculated, “Hi!”

Not realizing that the call was addressed to them, neither man turned, and the girl repeated: “Hi! Hi! You there!”

They stopped and looked round inquiringly. The girl walked towards them. The impression of arms and legs remained. She was tall, thin, and her face had an intelligence and aliveness that redeemed its lack of actual beauty. She was dark with a deeply tanned skin.

She was addressing Poirot:

“I know who you are—you’re the detective man, Hercule Poirot!” Her voice was warm and deep, with a trace of American accent.

Poirot said:

“At your service, Mademoiselle.”

Her eyes went on to his companion.

Poirot said:

“Chief Inspector Japp.”

Her eyes widened—almost it seemed with alarm. She said, and there was a slight breathlessness in her voice:

“What have you been doing here? Nothing—nothing has happened to Uncle Alistair, has it?”

Poirot said quickly:

“Why should you think so, Mademoiselle?”

“It hasn’t? Good.”

Japp took up Poirot’s question.

“Why should you think anything had happened to Mr. Blunt, Miss—”

He paused inquiringly.

The girl said mechanically:

“Olivera. Jane Olivera.” Then she gave a slight and rather unconvincing laugh. “Sleuths on the doorstep rather suggest bombs in the attic, don’t they?”

“There’s nothing wrong with Mr. Blunt, I’m thankful to say, Miss Olivera.”

She looked directly at Poirot.

“Did he call you in about something?”

Japp said:

“We called on him, Miss Olivera, to see if he could throw any light on a case of suicide that occurred this morning.”

She said sharply:

“Suicide? Whose? Where?”

"A Mr. Morley, a dentist, of 58, Queen Charlotte Street."

"Oh!" said Jane Olivera blankly. "Oh!—" She started ahead of her, frowning. Then she said unexpectedly:

"Oh, but that's absurd!" And turning on her heel she left them abruptly and without ceremony, running up the steps of the Gothic House and letting herself in with a key.

"Well!" said Japp, staring after her, "that's an extraordinary thing to say."

"Interesting," observed Poirot mildly.

Japp pulled himself together, glanced at his watch and hailed an approaching taxi.

"We'll have time to take the Sainsbury Seale on our way to the Savoy."

IX

Miss Sainsbury Seale was in the dimly lit lounge of the Glengowrie Court Hotel having tea.

She was flustered by the appearance of a police officer in plain clothes—but her excitement was of a pleasurable nature, he observed. Poirot noticed, with sorrow, that she had not yet sewn the buckle on her shoe.

"Really, officer," fluted Miss Sainsbury Seale, glancing round, "I really don't know where we could go to be private. So difficult—just teatime—but perhaps you would care for some tea—and—and your friend—"

"Not for me, Madam," said Japp. "This is M. Hercule Poirot."

"Really?" said Miss Sainsbury Seale. "Then perhaps—you're sure—you won't either of you have tea? No. Well, perhaps we might try the drawing room, though that's very often full—Oh, I see, there is a corner over there—in the recess. The people are just leaving. Shall we go there—"

She led the way to the comparative seclusion of a sofa and two chairs in an alcove. Poirot and Japp followed her, the former picking up a scarf and a handkerchief that Miss Sainsbury Seale had shed en route.

He restored them to her.

“Oh, thank you—so careless of me. Now please, Inspector—No, Chief Inspector, isn’t it?—do ask me anything you like. So distressing, the whole business. Poor man—I suppose he had something on his mind? Such worrying times we live in!”

“Did he seem to you worried, Miss Sainsbury Seale?”

“Well—” Miss Sainsbury Seale reflected, and finally said unwillingly:

“I can’t really say, you know, that he did! But then perhaps I shouldn’t notice—not under the circumstances. I’m afraid I’m rather a coward, you know.” Miss Sainsbury Seale tittered a little and patted her bird’s-nest-like curls.

“Can you tell us who else was in the waiting room while you were there?”

“Now let me see—there was just one young man there when I went in. I think he was in pain because he was muttering to himself and looking quite wild and turning over the leaves of a magazine just anyhow. And then suddenly he jumped up and went out. Really acute toothache he must have had.”

“You don’t know whether he left the house when he went out of the room?”

“I don’t know at all. I imagined he just felt he couldn’t wait any longer and must see the dentist. But it couldn’t have been Mr. Morley he was going to, because the boy came in and took me up to Mr. Morley only a few minutes later.”

“Did you go into the waiting room again on your way out?”

“No. Because, you see, I’d already put on my hat and straightened my hair up in Mr. Morley’s room. Some people,” went on Miss Sainsbury Seale, warming to her subject, “take off their hats downstairs in the waiting room, but I never do. A most distressing thing happened to a friend of mine who did that. It was a new hat and she put it very carefully on a chair, and when she came down, would you believe it, a child had sat on it and squashed it flat. Ruined! Absolutely ruined!”

“A catastrophe,” said Poirot politely.

“I blame the mother entirely,” said Miss Sainsbury Seale judicially. “Mothers should keep an eye on their children. The little dears do not mean any harm, but they have to be watched.”

Japp said:

“Then this young man with toothache was the only other patient you noticed at 58, Queen Charlotte Street.”

“A gentleman came down the stairs and went out just as I went up to Mr. Morley—Oh! and I remember—a very peculiar looking foreigner came out of the house just as I arrived.”

Japp coughed. Poirot said with dignity:

“That was I, Madame.”

“Oh dear!” Miss Sainsbury Seale peered at him. “So it was! Do forgive—so shortsighted—and very dark here, isn’t it?” She tailed off into incoherencies. “And really, you know, I flatter myself that I have a very good memory for faces. But the light here is dim, isn’t it? Do forgive my most unfortunate mistake!”

They soothed the lady down, and Japp asked:

“You are quite sure Mr. Morley didn’t say anything such as—for instance—that he was expecting a painful interview this morning? Anything of that kind?”

“No, indeed, I’m sure he didn’t.”

“He didn’t mention a patient by the name of Amberiotis?”

“No, no. He really said nothing—except, I mean, the things that dentists have to say.”

Through Poirot’s mind there ran quickly: “Rinse. Open a little wider, please. Now close gently.”

Japp had proceeded to his next step. It would possibly be necessary for Miss Sainsbury Seale to give evidence at the inquest.

After a first scream of dismay, Miss Sainsbury Seale seemed to take kindly to the idea. A tentative inquiry from Japp produced Miss Sainsbury Seale’s whole life history.

She had, it seemed, come from India to England six months ago. She had lived in various hotels and boardinghouses and had finally come to the Glengowrie Court which she liked very much because of its homely atmosphere; in India she had lived mostly in Calcutta where she had done Mission work and had also taught elocution.

“Pure, well-enunciated English—most important, Chief Inspector. You see,” Miss Sainsbury Seale simpered and bridled, “as a girl I was on the stage. Oh! only in small parts, you know. The provinces! But I had great ambitions. Repertory. Then I went on a world tour—Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw.” She sighed. “The trouble with us poor women is heart—at the mercy of our hearts. A rash impulsive marriage. Alas! we parted almost immediately. I—I had been sadly deceived. I resumed my maiden name. A friend kindly provided me with a little capital and I started my elocution school. I helped to found a very good amateur dramatic society. I must show you some of our notices.”

Chief Inspector Japp knew the dangers of that! He escaped, Miss Sainsbury Seale’s last words being: “and if, by any chance, my name should be in the papers—as a witness at the inquest, I mean—you will be sure that it is spelt right. Mabelle Sainsbury Seale—Mabelle spelt M.A.B.E.L.L.E, and Seale S.E.A.L.E. And, of course, if they did care to mention that I appeared in As You Like It at the Oxford Repertory Theatre—”

"Of course, of course." Chief Inspector Japp fairly fled.

In the taxi, he sighed and wiped his forehead.

"If it's ever necessary, we ought to be able to check up on her all right," he observed, "unless it was all lies—but that I don't believe!"

Poirot shook his head. "Liars," he said, "are neither so circumstantial nor so inconsequential."

Japp went on:

"I was afraid she'd jib at the inquest—most middle-aged spinsters do—but her having been an actress accounts for her being eager. Bit of limelight for her!"

Poirot said:

"Do you really want her at the inquest?"

"Probably not. It depends." He paused and then said: "I'm more than ever convinced, Poirot. This wasn't suicide."

"And the motive?"

"Has us beat for the moment. Suppose Morley once seduced Amberiotis' daughter?"

Poirot was silent. He tried to visualize Mr. Morley in the role of seducer to a luscious-eyed Greek maiden, but failed lamentably.

He reminded Japp that Mr. Reilly had said his partner had had no joy of living.

Japp said vaguely: "Oh well, you never know what may happen on a cruise!" and he added with satisfaction, "We shall know better where we stand when we've talked to this fellow."

They paid off the taxi and entered the Savoy.

Japp asked for Mr. Amberiotis.

The clerk looked at them rather oddly. He said:

“Mr. Amberiotis? I’m sorry, sir, I’m afraid you can’t see him.”

“Oh, yes, I can, my lad,” Japp said grimly. He drew the other a little aside and showed him his credentials.

The clerk said:

“You don’t understand, sir. Mr. Amberiotis died half an hour ago.”

To Hercule Poirot it was as though a door had gently but firmly shut.

FIVE, SIX, PICKING UP STICKS

I

Twenty-four hours later Japp rang Poirot up. His tone was bitter.

“Washout! The whole thing!”

“What do you mean, my friend?”

“Morley committed suicide all right. We’ve got the motive.”

“What was it?”

“I’ve just had the doctor’s report on Amberiotis’ death. I won’t give you the official jargon but in plain English he died as a result of an overdose of adrenaline and novocaine. It acted on his heart, I understand, and he collapsed. When the wretched devil said he was feeling bad yesterday afternoon, he was just speaking the truth. Well, there you are! Adrenaline and procaine is the stuff dentists inject into your gum—local anesthetic. Morley made an error, injected an overdose, and then after Amberiotis left, he realized what he had done, couldn’t face the music and shot himself.”

“With a pistol he was not known to possess?” queried Poirot.

“He may have possessed it all the same. Relations don’t know everything. You’d be surprised sometimes, the things they don’t know!”

“That is true, yes.”

Japp said:

“Well, there you are. It’s a perfectly logical explanation of the whole thing.”

Poirot said:

"You know, my friend, it does not quite satisfy me. It is true that patients have been known to react unfavourably to these local anesthetics. Adrenaline idiosyncrasy is well-known. In combination with procaine toxic effects have followed quite small doses. But the doctor or dentist who employed the drug does not usually carry his concern as far as killing himself!"

"Yes, but you're talking of cases where the employment of the anesthetic was normal. In that case no particular blame attaches to the surgeon concerned. It is the idiosyncrasy of the patient that has caused death. But in this case it's pretty clear that there was a definite overdose. They haven't got the exact amount yet—these quantitive analyses seem to take a month of Sundays—but it was definitely more than the normal dose. That means that Morley must have made a mistake."

"Even then," said Poirot, "it was a mistake. It would not be a criminal matter."

"No, but it wouldn't do him any good in his profession. In fact, it would pretty well ruin him. Nobody's going to go to a dentist who's likely to shoot lethal doses of poison into you just because he happens to be a bit absentminded."

"It was a curious thing to do, I admit."

"These things happen—they happen to doctors—they happen to chemists … Careful and reliable for years, and then—one moment's inattention—and the mischief's done and the poor devils are for it. Morley was a sensitive man. In the case of a doctor, there's usually a chemist or a dispenser to share the blame—or to shoulder it altogether. In this case Morley was solely responsible."

Poirot demurred.

"Would he not have left some message behind him? Saying what he had done? And that he could not face the consequences? Something of that kind? Just a word for his sister?"

"No, as I see it, he suddenly realized what had happened—and just lost his nerve and took the quickest way out."

Poirot did not answer.

Japp said:

"I know you, old boy. Once you've got your teeth into a case of murder, you like it to be a case of murder! I admit I'm responsible for setting you on the track this time. Well, I made a mistake. I admit it freely."

Poirot said:

"I still think, you know, that there might be another explanation."

"Plenty of other explanations, I daresay. I've thought of them—but they're all too fantastic. Let's say that Amberiotis shot Morley, went home, was filled with remorse and committed suicide, using some stuff he'd pinched from Morley's surgery. If you think that's likely, I think it's damned unlikely. We've got a record of Amberiotis at the Yard. Quite interesting. Started as a little hotelkeeper in Greece, then he mixed himself up in politics. He's done espionage work in Germany and in France—and made very pretty little sums of money. But he wasn't getting rich quick enough that way, and he's believed to have done a spot or two of blackmail. Not a nice man, our Mr. Amberiotis. He was out in India last year and is believed to have bled one of the native princes rather freely. The difficult thing has been ever to prove anything against him. Slippery as an eel! There is another possibility. He might have been blackmailing Morley over something or other. Morley, having a golden opportunity, plugs an overdose of adrenaline and novocaine into him, hoping that the verdict will be an unfortunate accident—adrenaline idiosyncrasy—something of that sort. Then, after the man's gone away Morley gets a fit of remorse and does himself in. That's possible, of course, but I can't somehow see Morley as a deliberate murderer. No, I'm pretty sure it was what I first said—a genuine mistake, made on a morning when he was overworked. We'll have to leave it at that, Poirot. I've talked to the A.C. and he's quite clear on it."

"I see," said Poirot, with a sigh. "I see…."

Japp said kindly:

“I know what you feel, old boy. But you can’t have a nice juicy murder every time! So long. All I can say by way of apology is the old phrase: ‘Sorry you have been troubled!’”

He rang off.

II

Hercule Poirot sat at his handsome modern desk. He liked modern furniture. Its squareness and solidity were more agreeable to him than the soft contours of antique models.

In front of him was a square sheet of paper with neat headings and comments. Against some of them were query marks.

First came:

Amberiotis. Espionage. In England for that purpose? Was in India last year. During period of riots and unrest. Could be a Communist agent.

There was a space, and then the next heading:

Frank Carter? Morley thought him unsatisfactory. Was discharged from his employment recently. Why?

After that came a name with merely a question mark:

Howard Raikes?

Next came a sentence in inverted commas.

“But that’s absurd!” ???

Hercule Poirot’s head was poised interrogatively. Outside the window a bird was carrying a twig to build its nest. Hercule Poirot looked rather like a bird as he sat there with his egg-shaped head cocked to one side.

He made another entry a little farther down:

Mr. Barnes?

He paused and then wrote:

Morley’s office? Mark on carpet. Possibilities.

He considered that last entry for some time.

Then he got up, called for his hat and stick and went out.

III

Three-quarters of an hour later Hercule Poirot came out of the underground station at Ealing Broadway and five minutes after that he had reached his destination—No. 88, Castlegardens Road.

It was a small semidetached house, and the neatness of the front garden drew an admiring nod from Hercule Poirot.

“Admirably symmetrical,” he murmured to himself.

Mr. Barnes was at home and Poirot was shown into a small, precise dining room and here presently Mr. Barnes came to him.

Mr. Barnes was a small man with twinkling eyes and a nearly bald head. He peeped over the top of his glasses at his visitor while in his left hand he twirled the card that Poirot had given the maid.

He said in a small, prim, almost falsetto voice:

“Well, well, M. Poirot? I am honoured, I am sure.”

“You must excuse my calling upon you in this informal manner,” said Poirot punctiliously.

“Much the best way,” said Mr. Barnes. “And the time is admirable, too. A quarter to seven—very sound time at this period of the year for catching anyone at home.” He waved his hand. “Sit down, M. Poirot. I’ve no doubt we’ve got a good deal to talk about. 58, Queen Charlotte Street, I suppose?”

Poirot said:

“You suppose rightly—but why should you suppose anything of the kind?”

“My dear sir,” said Mr. Barnes, “I’ve been retired from the Home Office for some time now—but I’ve not gone quite rusty yet. If there’s any hush-hush business, it’s far better not to use the police. Draws attention to it all!”

Poirot said:

“I will ask yet another question. Why should you suppose this is a hush-hush business?”

“Isn’t it?” asked the other. “Well, if it isn’t, in my opinion it ought to be.” He leant forward and tapped with his pince-nez on the arm of the chair. “In Secret Service work it’s never the little fry you want—it’s the big bugs at the top—but to get them you’ve got to be careful not to alarm the little fry.”

“It seems to me, Mr. Barnes, that you know more than I do,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Don’t know anything at all,” replied the other, “just put two and two together.”

“One of those two being?”

“Amberiotis,” said Mr. Barnes promptly. “You forget I sat opposite him in the waiting room for a minute or two. He didn’t know me. I was always an insignificant chap. Not a bad thing sometimes. But I knew him all right—and I could guess what he was up to over here.”

“Which was?”

Mr. Barnes twinkled more than ever.

“We’re very tiresome people in this country. We’re conservative, you know, conservative to the backbone. We grumble a lot, but we don’t really want to smash our democratic government and try newfangled experiments. That’s what’s so heartbreaking to the wretched foreign agitator who’s working full time and over! The whole trouble is—from their point of view—that we really are, as a country, comparatively solvent. Hardly any other country in Europe is at the moment! To upset England—really upset it—you’ve got to play hell with its finance—that’s what it comes to! And you can’t play hell with its finance when you’ve got men like Alistair Blunt at the helm.”

Mr. Barnes paused and then went on:

“Blunt is the kind of man who in private life would always pay his bills and live within his income—whether he’d got two-pence a year or several million makes no difference. He is that type of fellow. And he just simply thinks that there’s no reason why a country shouldn’t be the same! No costly experiments. No frenzied expenditure on possible Utopias. That’s why”—he paused—“that’s why certain people have made up their minds that Blunt must go.”

“Ah,” said Poirot.

Mr. Barnes nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “I know what I’m talking about. Quite nice people some of ’em. Long-haired, earnest-eyed, and full of ideals of a better world. Others not so nice, rather nasty in fact. Furtive little rats with beards and foreign accents. And another lot again of the Big Bully type. But they’ve all got the same idea: Blunt Must Go!”

He tilted his chair gently back and forward again.

“Sweep away the old order! The Tories, the Conservatives, the Diehards, the hardheaded suspicious Business Men, that’s the idea. Perhaps these people are right—I don’t know—but I know one thing—you’ve got to have something to put in place of the old order—something that will work—not just something that sounds all right. Well, we needn’t go into that. We are dealing with concrete facts, not abstract theories. Take away the props and the building will come down. Blunt is one of the props of Things as They Are."

He leaned forward.

"They're out after Blunt all right. That I know. And it's my opinion that yesterday morning they nearly got him. I may be wrong—but it's been tried before. The method, I mean."

He paused and then quietly, circumspectly, he mentioned three names. An unusually able Chancellor of the Exchequer, a progressive and farsighted manufacturer, and a hopeful young politician who had captured the public fancy. The first had died on the operating table, the second had succumbed to an obscure disease which had been recognized too late, the third had been run down by a car and killed.

"It's very easy," said Mr. Barnes. "The anesthetist muffed the giving of the anesthetic—well, that does happen. In the second case the symptoms were puzzling. The doctor was just a well-meaning G.P., couldn't be expected to recognize them. In the third case, anxious mother was driving car in a hurry to get to her sick child. Sob stuff—the jury acquitted her of blame!"

He paused:

"All quite natural. And soon forgotten. But I'll just tell you where those three people are now. The anesthetist is set up on his own with a first-class research laboratory—no expense spared. That G.P. has retired from practice. He's got a yacht, and a nice little place on the Broads. The mother is giving all her children a first-class education, ponies to ride in the holidays, nice house in the country with a big garden and paddocks."

He nodded his head slowly.

"In every profession and walk of life there is someone who is vulnerable to temptation. The trouble in our case is that Morley wasn't!"

"You think it was like that?" said Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Barnes said:

“I do. It’s not easy to get at one of these big men, you know. They’re fairly well protected. The car stunt is risky and doesn’t always succeed. But a man is defenceless enough in a dentist’s chair.”

He took off his pince-nez, polished them and put them on again. He said:

“That’s my theory! Morley wouldn’t do the job. He knew too much, though, so they had to put him out.”

“They?” asked Poirot.

“When I say they—I mean the organization that’s behind all this. Only one person actually did the job, of course.”

“Which person?”

“Well, I could make a guess,” said Mr. Barnes, “but it’s only a guess and I might be wrong.”

Poirot said quietly: “Reilly?”

“Of course! He’s the obvious person. I think that probably they never asked Morley to do the job himself. What he was to do, was to turn Blunt over to his partner at the last minute. Sudden illness, something of that sort. Reilly would have done the actual business—and there would have been another regrettable accident—death of a famous banker—unhappy young dentist in court in such a state of dither and misery that he would have been let down light. He’d have given up dentistry afterwards—and settled down somewhere on a nice income of several thousands a year.”

Mr. Barnes looked across at Poirot.

“Don’t think I’m romancing,” he said. “These things happen.”

“Yes, yes, I know they happen.”

Mr. Barnes went on, tapping a book with a lurid jacket that lay on a table close at hand: “I read a lot of these spy yarns. Fantastic, some of them. But curiously enough they’re not any more fantastic than the real thing. There are beautiful adventuresses, and dark sinister men with foreign accents, and gangs and international associations and super crooks! I’d blush to see some of the things I know set down in print—nobody would believe them for a minute!”

Poirot said:

“In your theory, where does Amberiotis come in?”

“I’m not quite sure. I think he was meant to take the rap. He’s played a double game more than once and I daresay he was framed. That’s only an idea, mind.”

Hercule Poirot said quietly:

“Granting that your ideas are correct—what will happen next?”

Mr. Barnes rubbed his nose.

“They’ll try to get him again,” he said. “Oh, yes. They’ll have another try. Time’s short. Blunt has got people looking after him, I daresay. They’ll have to be extra careful. It won’t be a man hiding in a bush with a pistol. Nothing so crude as that. You tell ’em to look out for the respectable people—the relations, the old servants, the chemist’s assistant who makes up a medicine, the wine merchant who sells him his port. Getting Alistair Blunt out of the way is worth a great many millions, and it’s wonderful what people will do for—say a nice little income of four thousand a year!”

“As much as that?”

“Possibly more …”

Poirot was silent a moment, then he said:

“I have had Reilly in mind from the first.”

“Irish? I.R.A.?”

“Not that so much, but there was a mark, you see, on the carpet, as though the body had been dragged along it. But if Morley had been shot by a patient he would be shot in the surgery and there would be no need to move the body. That is why, from the first, I suspected that he had been shot, not in the surgery, but in his office—next door. That would mean that it was not a patient who shot him, but some member of his own household.”

“Neat,” said Mr. Barnes appreciatively.

Hercule Poirot got up and held out a hand.

“Thank you,” he said. “You have helped me a great deal.”

IV

On his way home, Poirot called in at the Glengowrie Court Hotel.

As a result of that visit he rang Japp up very early the following morning.

“Bonjour, mon ami. The inquest is today, is it not?”

“It is. Are you going to attend?”

“I do not think so.”

“It won’t really be worth your while, I expect.”

“Are you calling Miss Sainsbury Seale as a witness?”

“The lovely Mabelle—why can’t she just spell it plain Mabel. These women get my goat! No, I’m not calling her. There’s no need.”

“You have heard nothing from her?”

“No, why should I?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I wondered, that was all. Perhaps it may interest you to learn that Miss Sainsbury Seale walked out of the Glengowrie Court Hotel just before dinner the night before last—and did not come back.”

“What? She’s hooked it?”

“That is a possible explanation.”

“But why should she? She’s quite all right, you know. Perfectly genuine and aboveboard. I cabled Calcutta about her—that was before I knew the reason for Amberiotis’ death, otherwise I shouldn’t have bothered—and I got the reply last night. Everything O.K. She’s been known there for years, and her whole account of herself is true—except that she’s slurred over her marriage a bit. Married a Hindu student and then found he’d got a few attachments already. So she resumed her maiden name and took to good works. She’s hand and glove with the missionaries—teaches elocution, and helps in amateur dramatic shows. In fact, what I call a terrible woman—but definitely above suspicion of being mixed up in a murder. And now you say she’s walked out on us! I can’t understand it.” He paused a minute and then went on doubtfully: “Perhaps she just got fed up with that hotel? I could have easily.”

Poirot said:

“Her luggage is still there. She took nothing with her.”

Japp swore.

“When did she go?”

“About a quarter to seven.”

“What about the hotel people?”

“They’re very upset. Manageress looked quite distraught.”

“Why didn’t they report to the police?”

"Because, mon cher, supposing that a lady does happen to stay out for a night (however unlikely it may seem from her appearance) she will be justifiably annoyed by finding on her return that the police have been called in. Mrs. Harrison, the manageress in question, called up various hospitals in case there had been an accident. She was considering notifying the police when I called. My appearance seemed to her like an answer to a prayer. I charged myself with everything, and explained that I would enlist the help of a very discreet police officer."

"The discreet police officer being yours truly, I suppose?"

"You suppose rightly."

Japp groaned:

"All right. I'll meet you at the Glengowrie Court Hotel after the inquest."

V

Japp grumbled as they were waiting for the manageress.

"What does the woman want to disappear for?"

"It is curious, you admit?"

They had no time for more.

Mrs. Harrison, proprietor of the Glengowrie Court, was with them.

Mrs. Harrison was voluble and almost tearful. She was so worried about Miss Sainsbury Seale. What could have happened to her? Rapidly she went over every possibility of disaster. Loss of memory, sudden illness, haemorrhage, run down by an omnibus, robbery and assault—

She paused at last for breath, murmuring:

"Such a nice type of woman—and she seemed so happy and comfortable here."

She took them, at Japp's request, up to the chaste bedroom occupied by the missing lady. Everything was neat and orderly. Clothes hung in the wardrobe, nightclothes were folded ready on the bed, in a corner were Miss Sainsbury Seale's two modest suitcases. A row of shoes stood under the dressing table—some serviceable Oxfords, two pairs of rather meretricious glacé fancy shoes with court heels and ornament with bows of leather, some plain black satin evening shoes, practically new, and a pair of moccasins. Poirot noted that the evening shoes were a size smaller than the day ones—a fact that might be put down to corns or to vanity. He wondered whether Miss Sainsbury Seale had found time to sew the second buckle on her shoe before she went out. He hoped so. Slovenliness in dress always annoyed him.

Japp was busy looking through some letters in a drawer of the dressing table. Hercule Poirot gingerly pulled open a drawer of the chest of drawers. It was full of underclothing. He shut it again modestly, murmuring that Miss Sainsbury Seale seemed to believe in wearing wool next to the skin, and opened another drawer which contained stockings.

Japp said:

"Got anything, Poirot?"

Poirot said sadly, as he dangled a pair: "Ten inch, cheap shiny silk, price probably two-and-eleven."

Japp said:

"You're not valuing for probate, old boy. Two letters here from India, one or two receipts from charitable organizations, no bills. Most estimable character, our Miss Sainsbury Seale."

"But very little taste in dress," said Poirot sadly.

"Probably thought dress wordly." Japp was noting down an address from an old letter dated two months back.

“These people may know something about her,” he said. “Address up Hampstead way. Sound as though they were fairly intimate.”

There was nothing more to be gleaned at the Glengowrie Court Hotel except the negative fact that Miss Sainsbury Seale had not seemed excited or worried in any way when she went out, and it would appear that she had definitely intended to return since on passing her friend Mrs. Bolitho in the hall, she had called out:

“After dinner I will show you that Patience I was telling you about.”

Moreover, it was the custom at the Glengowrie Court to give notice in the dining room if you intended to be out for a meal. Miss Sainsbury Seale had not done so. Therefore it seemed clear that she had intended returning for dinner which was served from seven thirty to eight thirty.

But she had not returned. She had walked out into the Cromwell Road and disappeared.

Japp and Poirot called at the address in West Hampstead which had headed the letter found.

It was a pleasant house and the Adams were pleasant people with a large family. They had lived in India for many years and spoke warmly of Miss Sainsbury Seale. But they could not help.

They had not seen her lately, not for a month, not in fact since they came back from their Easter holidays. She had been staying then at a hotel near Russell Square. Mrs. Adams gave Poirot the address of it and also the address of some other Anglo-Indian friends of Miss Sainsbury Seale’s who lived in Streatham.

But the two men drew a blank in both places. Miss Sainsbury Seale had stayed at the hotel in question, but they remembered very little about her and nothing that could be of any help. She was a nice quiet lady and had lived abroad. The people in Streatham were no help either. They had not seen Miss Sainsbury Seale since February.

There remained the possibility of an accident, but that possibility was dispelled too. No hospital had admitted any casualty answering to the description given.

Miss Sainsbury Seale had disappeared into space.

VI

On the following morning, Poirot went to the Holborn Palace Hotel and asked for Mr. Howard Raikes.

By this time it would hardly have surprised him to hear that Mr. Howard Raikes, too, had stepped out one evening and had never returned.

Mr. Howard Raikes, however, was still at the Holborn Palace and was said to be breakfasting.

The apparition of Hercule Poirot at the breakfast table seemed to give Mr. Howard Raikes doubtful pleasure.

Though not looking so murderous as in Poirot's disordered recollection of him, his scowl was still formidable—he stared at his uninvited guest and said ungraciously:

"What the hell?"

"You permit?"

Hercule Poirot drew a chair from another table.

Mr. Raikes said:

"Don't mind me! Sit down and make yourself at home!"

Poirot smiling availed himself of the permission.

Mr. Raikes said ungraciously:

"Well, what do you want?"

“Do you remember me at all, Mr. Raikes?”

“Never set eyes on you in my life.”

“There you are wrong. You sat in the same room with me for at least five minutes not more than three days ago.”

“I can’t remember every one I meet at some Goddamned party or other.”

“It was not a party,” said Poirot. “It was a dentist’s waiting room.”

Some swift emotion flashed into the young man’s eyes and died again at once. His manner changed. It was no longer impatient and casual. It became suddenly wary. He looked across at Poirot and said:

“Well!”

Poirot studied him carefully before replying. He felt, quite positively, that this was indeed a dangerous young man. A lean hungry face, an aggressive jaw, the eyes of a fanatic. It was a face, though, that women might find attractive. He was untidily, even shabbily dressed, and he ate with a careless voraciousness that was, so the man watching him thought, significant.

Poirot summed him up to himself.

“It is a wolf with ideas….”

Raikes said harshly:

“What the hell do you mean—coming here like this?”

“My visit is disagreeable to you?”

“I don’t even know who you are.”

“I apologize.”

Dexterously Poirot whipped out his card case. He extracted a card and passed it across the table.

Again that emotion that he could not quite define showed upon Mr. Raikes' lean face. It was not fear—it was more aggressive than fear. After it, quite unquestionably, came anger.

He tossed the card back.

"So that's who you are, is it? I've heard of you."

"Most people have," said Hercule Poirot modestly.

"You're a private dick, aren't you? The expensive kind. The kind people hire when money is no object—when it's worth paying anything in order to save their miserable skins!"

"If you do not drink your coffee," said Hercule Poirot, "it will get cold."

He spoke kindly and with authority.

Raikes stared at him.

"Say, just what kind of an insect are you?"

"The coffee in this country is very bad anyway—" said Poirot.

"I'll say it is," agreed Mr. Raikes with fervour.

"But if you allow it to get cold it is practically undrinkable."

The young man leant forward.

"What are you getting at? What's the big idea in coming round here?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I wanted to—see you."

"Oh yes?" said Mr. Raikes sceptically.

His eyes narrowed.

“If it’s the money you’re after, you’ve come to the wrong man! The people I’m in with can’t afford to buy what they want. Better go back to the man who pays your salary.”

Poirot said, sighing:

“Nobody has paid me anything—yet.”

“You’re telling me,” said Mr. Raikes.

“It is the truth,” said Hercule Poirot. “I am wasting a good deal of valuable time for no recompense whatsoever. Simply, shall we say, to assuage my curiosity.”

“And I suppose,” said Mr. Raikes, “you were just assuaging your curiosity at that darned dentist’s the other day.”

Poirot shook his head. He said:

“You seem to overlook the most ordinary reason for being in a dentist’s waiting room—which is that one is waiting to have one’s teeth attended to.”

“So that’s what you were doing?” Mr. Raikes’ tone expressed contemptuous unbelief. “Waiting to have your teeth seen to?”

“Certainly.”

“You’ll excuse me if I say I don’t believe it.”

“May I ask then, Mr. Raikes, what you were doing there?”

Mr. Raikes grinned suddenly. He said:

“Got you there! I was waiting to have my teeth seen to also.”

“You had perhaps the toothache?”

“That’s right, big boy.”

"But all the same, you went away without having your teeth attended to?"

"What if I did? That's my business."

He paused—then he said, with a quick savagery of tone: "Oh, what the hell's the use of all this slick talking? You were there to look after your big shot. Well, he's all right, isn't he? Nothing happened to your precious Mr. Alistair Blunt. You've nothing on me."

Poirot said:

"Where did you go when you went so abruptly out of the waiting room?"

"Left the house, of course."

"Ah!" Poirot looked up at the ceiling.

"But nobody saw you leave, Mr. Raikes."

"Does that matter?"

"It might. Somebody died in that house not long afterwards, remember."

Raikes said carelessly:

"Oh, you mean the dentist fellow."

Poirot's tone was hard as he said:

"Yes, I mean the dentist fellow."

Raikes stared. He said:

"You trying to pin that on me? Is that the game? Well, you can't do it. I've just read the account of the inquest yesterday. The poor devil shot himself because he'd made a mistake with a local anesthetic and one of his patients died."

Poirot went on unmoved: “Can you prove that you left the house when you say you did? Is there anyone who can say definitely where you were between twelve and one?”

The other’s eyes narrowed.

“So you are trying to pin it on me? I suppose Blunt put you up to this?”

Poirot sighed. He said:

“You will pardon me, but it seems an obsession with you—this persistent harping on Mr. Alistair Blunt. I am not employed by him, I never have been employed by him. I am concerned, not with his safety, but with the death of a man who did good work in his chosen profession.”

Raikes shook his head.

“Sorry,” he said, “I don’t believe you. You’re Blunt’s private dick all right.” His face darkened as he leaned across the table. “But you can’t save him, you know. He’s got to go—he and everything he stands for! There’s got to be a new deal—the old corrupt system of finance has got to go—this cursed net of bankers all over the world like a spider’s web. They’ve got to be swept away. I’ve nothing against Blunt personally—but he’s the type of man I hate. He’s mediocre—he’s smug. He’s the sort you can’t move unless you use dynamite. He’s the sort of man who says, ‘You can’t disrupt the foundations of civilization.’ Can’t you, though? Let him wait and see! He’s an obstruction in the way of Progress and he’s got to be removed. There’s no room in the world today for men like Blunt—men who hark back to the past—men who want to live as their fathers lived or even as their grandfathers lived! You’ve got a lot of them here in England—crusted old diehards—useless, worn-out symbols of a decayed era. And, my God, they’ve got to go! There’s got to be a new world. Do you get me—a new world, see?”

Poirot sighed and rose. He said:

“I see, Mr. Raikes, that you are an idealist.”

“What if I am?”

“Too much of an idealist to care about the death of a dentist.”

Mr. Raikes said scornfully:

“What does the death of one miserable dentist matter?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“It does not matter to you. It matters to me. That is the difference between us.”

VII

Poirot arrived home to be informed by George that a lady was waiting to see him.

“She is—ahem—a little nervous, sir,” said George.

Since the lady had given no name Poirot was at liberty to guess. He guessed wrong, for the young woman who rose agitatedly from the sofa as he entered was the late Mr. Morley’s secretary, Miss Gladys Nevill.

“Oh, dear, M. Poirot. I am so sorry to worry you like this—and really I don’t know how I had the courage to come—I’m afraid you’ll think it very bold of me—and I’m sure I don’t want to take up your time—I know what time means to a busy professional man—but really I have been so unhappy—only I daresay you will think it all a waste of time—”

Profiting by a long experience of the English people, Poirot suggested a cup of tea. Miss Nevill’s reaction was all that could be hoped for.

“Well, really, M. Poirot, that’s very kind of you. Not that it’s so very long since breakfast, but one can always do with a cup of tea, can’t one?”

Poirot, who could always do without one, assented mendaciously. George was instructed to this effect, and in a miraculously short time Poirot and his visitor faced each other across a tea tray.

“I must apologize to you,” said Miss Nevill, regaining her aplomb under the influence of the beverage, “but as a matter of fact the inquest yesterday upset me a good deal.”

“I’m sure it must have done,” said Poirot kindly.

“There was no question of my giving evidence, or anything like that. But I felt somebody ought to go with Miss Morley. Mr. Reilly was there, of course—but I meant a woman. Besides, Miss Morley doesn’t like Mr. Reilly. So I thought it was my duty to go.”

“That was very kind of you,” said Poirot encouragingly.

“Oh, no, I just felt I had to. You see, I have worked for Mr. Morley for quite a number of years now—and the whole thing was a great shock to me—and of course the inquest made it worse—”

“I’m afraid it must have done.”

Miss Nevill leaned forward earnestly.

“But it’s all wrong, M. Poirot. It really is all wrong.”

“What is wrong, Mademoiselle?”

“Well, it just couldn’t have happened—not the way they make out—giving a patient an overdose in injecting the gum, I mean.”

“You think not.”

“I’m sure about it. Occasionally patients do suffer ill effects, but that is because they are physiologically unfit subjects—their heart action isn’t normal. But I’m sure that an overdose is a very rare thing. You see practitioners get so into the habit of giving the regulation amount that it is absolutely mechanical—they’d give the right dose automatically.”

Poirot nodded approvingly. He said:

“That is what I thought myself, yes.”

"It's so standardized, you see. It's not like a chemist who is making up different amounts the whole time, or multiplying dosage where an error might creep in through inattention. Or a doctor who writes a great many different prescriptions. But a dentist isn't like that at all."

Poirot asked:

"You did not ask to be allowed to make these observations in the Coroner's Court?"

Gladys Nevill shook her head. She twisted her fingers uncertainly.

"You see," she broke out at last, "I was afraid of—of making things worse. Of course I know that Mr. Morley wouldn't do such a thing—but it might make people think that he had done it deliberately."

Poirot nodded.

Gladys Nevill said:

"That's why I came to you, M. Poirot. Because with you it—it wouldn't be official in any way. But I do think somebody ought to know how—how unconvincing the whole thing is!"

"Nobody wants to know," said Poirot.

She stared at him, puzzled.

Poirot said:

"I should like to know a little more about that telegram you received, summoning you away that day."

"Honestly, I don't know what to think about that, M. Poirot. It does seem so queer. You see, it must have been sent by someone who knew all about me—and Aunt—where she lived and everything."

"Yes, it would seem as though it must have been sent by one of your intimate friends, or by someone who lived in the house and knew all about you."

"None of my friends would do such a thing, M. Poirot."

"You have no ideas yourself on the subject?"

The girl hesitated. She said slowly:

"Just at first, when I realized that Mr. Morley had shot himself, I wondered if he could possibly have sent it."

"You mean, out of consideration for you, to get you out of the way?"

The girl nodded.

"But that really seemed a fantastic idea, even if he had got the idea of suicide in his mind that morning. It's really very odd. Frank—my friend, you know—was quite absurd at first about it. He accused me of wanting to go off for the day with somebody else—as though I would do such a thing."

"Is there somebody else?"

"No, of course there isn't. But Frank has been so different lately—so moody and suspicious. Really, you know, it was losing his job and not being able to get another. Just hanging about is so bad for a man. I've been very worried about Frank."

"He was upset, was he not, to find you had gone away that day?"

"Yes, you see, he came round to tell me he had got a new job—a marvellous job—ten pounds a week. And he couldn't wait. He wanted me to know right away. And I think he wanted Mr. Morley to know, too, because he'd been very hurt at the way Mr. Morley didn't appreciate him, and he suspected Mr. Morley of trying to influence me against him."

"Which was true, was it not?"

"Well, yes, it was, in a way! Of course, Frank has lost a good many jobs and he hasn't been, perhaps, what most people would call very steady. But it will be different now. I think one can do so much by influence, don't you, M. Poirot? If a man feels a woman expects a lot of him, he tries to live up to her ideal of him."

Poirot sighed. But he did not argue. He had heard many hundreds of women produce that same argument, with the same blithe belief in the redeeming power of a woman's love. Once in a thousand times, he supposed, cynically, it might be true.

He merely said:

"I should like to meet this friend of yours."

"I'd love to have you meet him, M. Poirot. But just at present Sunday is his only free day. He's away in the country all the week, you see."

"Ah, on the new job. What is the job, by the way?"

"Well, I don't exactly know, M. Poirot. Something in the secretarial line, I imagine. Or some government department. I know I have to send letters to Frank's London address and they get forwarded."

"That is a little odd, is it not?"

"Well, I thought so—but Frank says it is often done nowadays."

Poirot looked at her for a moment or two without speaking.

Then he said deliberately:

"Tomorrow is Sunday, is it not? Perhaps you would both give me the pleasure of lunching with me—at Logan's Corner House? I should like to discuss this sad business with you both."

"Well—thank you, M. Poirot. I—yes, I'm sure we'd like to lunch with you very much."

VIII

Frank Carter was a fair young man of medium height. His appearance was cheaply smart. He talked readily and fluently. His eyes were set rather close together and they had a way of shifting uneasily from side to side when he was embarrassed.

He was inclined to be suspicious and slightly hostile.

“I’d no idea we were to have the pleasure of lunching with you, M. Poirot. Gladys didn’t tell me anything about it.”

He shot her a rather annoyed glance as he spoke.

“It was only arranged yesterday,” said Poirot, smiling. “Miss Nevill is very upset by the circumstances of Mr. Morley’s death and I wondered if we put our heads together—”

Frank Carter interrupted him rudely.

“Morley’s death? I’m sick of Morley’s death! Why can’t you forget him, Gladys? There wasn’t anything so wonderful about him that I can see.”

“Oh, Frank, I don’t think you ought to say that. Why, he left me a hundred pounds. I got the letter about it last night.”

“That’s all right,” admitted Frank grudgingly. “But after all, why shouldn’t he? He worked you like a nigger—and who pocketed all the fat fees? Why, he did!”

“Well, of course he did—he paid me a very good salary.”

“Not according to my ideas! You’re too humble altogether, Gladys, my girl, you let yourself be put upon, you know. I sized Morley up all right. You know as well as I do that he tried his best to get you to give me the chuck.”

“He didn’t understand.”

“He understood all right. The man’s dead now—otherwise I can tell you I’d have given him a piece of my mind.”

“You actually came round to do so on the morning of his death, did you not?” Hercule Poirot inquired gently.

Frank Carter said angrily:

“Who’s been saying so?”

“You did come round, did you not?”

“What if I did? I wanted to see Miss Nevill here.”

“But they told you she was away.”

“Yes, and that made me pretty suspicious, I can tell you. I told that red-headed oaf I’d wait and see Morley myself. This business of putting Gladys against me had gone on long enough. I meant to tell Morley that, instead of being a poor unemployed rotter, I’d landed a good job and that it was about time Gladys handed in her notice and thought about her trousseau.”

“But you did not actually tell him so?”

“No, I got tired of waiting in that dingy mausoleum. I went away.”

“What time did you leave?”

“I can’t remember.”

“What time did you arrive then?”

“I don’t know. Soon after twelve, I should imagine.”

“And you stayed half an hour—or longer—or less than half an hour?”

“I don’t know, I tell you. I’m not the sort of chap who’s always looking at a clock.”

“Was there anyone in the waiting room while you were there?”

“There was an oily fat bloke when I went in, but he wasn’t there long. After that I was alone.”

“Then you must have left before half past twelve—for at that time a lady arrived.”

“Daresay I did. The place got on my nerves as I tell you.”

Poirot eyed him thoughtfully.

The bluster was uneasy—it did not ring quite true. And yet that might be explained by mere nervousness.

Poirot’s manner was simple and friendly as he said:

“Miss Nevill tells me that you have been very fortunate and have found a very good job indeed.”

“The pay’s good.”

“Ten pounds a week, she tells me.”

“That’s right. Not too dusty, is it? Shows I can pull it off when I set my mind to it.”

He swaggered a little.

“Yes, indeed. And the work is not too arduous?”

Frank Carter said shortly:

“Not too bad.”

“And interesting?”

“Oh, yes, quite interesting. Talking of jobs, I’ve always been interested to know how you private detectives go about things? I suppose there’s not much of the Sherlock Holmes touch really, mostly divorce nowadays?”

"I do not concern myself with divorce."

"Really? Then I don't see how you live."

"I manage, my friend, I manage."

"But you're right at the top of the tree, aren't you, M. Poirot?" put in Gladys Nevill. "Mr. Morley used to say so. I mean you're the sort of person Royalty calls in, or the Home Office or Duchesses."

Poirot smiled upon her.

"You flatter me," he said.

IX

Poirot walked home through the deserted streets in a thoughtful frame of mind.

When he got in, he rang up Japp.

"Forgive my troubling you, my friend, but did you ever do anything in the matter of tracing that telegram that was sent to Gladys Nevill?"

"Still harping on the subject? Yes, we did, as a matter of fact. There was a telegram and—rather clever—the aunt lives at Richbourne in Somerset. The telegram was handed in at Richbarn—you know, the London suburb."

Hercule Poirot said appreciatively:

"That was clever—yes, that was clever. If the recipient happened to glance at where the telegram was handed in, the word would look sufficiently like Richbourne to carry conviction."

He paused.

"Do you know what I think, Japp?"

"Well?"

“There are signs of brains in this business.”

“Hercule Poirot wants it to be murder, so it’s got to be murder.”

“How do you explain that telegram?”

“Coincidence. Someone was hoaxing the girl.”

“Why should they?”

“Oh, my goodness, Poirot, why do people do things? Practical jokes, hoaxes. Misplaced sense of humour, that’s all.”

“And somebody felt like being funny just on the day that Morley was going to make a mistake over an injection.”

“There may have been a certain amount of cause and effect. Because Miss Nevill was away, Morley was more rushed than usual and consequently was more likely to make a mistake.”

“I am still not satisfied.”

“I daresay—but don’t you see where your view is leading you? If anybody got la Nevill out of the way, it was probably Morley himself. Making his killing of Amberiotis deliberate and not an accident.”

Poirot was silent. Japp said:

“You see?”

Poirot said:

“Amberiotis might have been killed in some other way.”

“Not he. Nobody came to see him at the Savoy. He lunched up in his room. And the doctors say the stuff was definitely injected, not taken by mouth—it wasn’t in the stomach. So there you are. It’s a clear case.”

“That is what we are meant to think.”

“The A.C. is satisfied anyway.”

“And he is satisfied with the disappearing lady?”

“The Case of the Vanishing Seal? No, I can tell you, we’re still working on that. That woman’s got to be somewhere. You just can’t walk out into the street and disappear.”

“She seems to have done so.”

“For the moment. But she must be somewhere, alive or dead, and I don’t think she is dead.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’d have found her body by now.”

“Oh, my Japp, do bodies always come to light so soon?”

“I suppose you’re hinting that she’s been murdered now and that we’ll find her in a quarry, cut up in little pieces like Mrs. Ruxton?”

“After all, mon ami, you do have missing persons who are not found.”

“Very seldom, old boy. Lots of women disappear, yes, but we usually find ’em, all right. Nine times out of ten it’s a case of good old sex. They’re somewhere with a man. But I don’t think it could be that with our Mabelle, do you?”

“One never knows,” said Poirot cautiously. “But I do not think it likely. So you are sure of finding her?”

“We’ll find her all right. We’re publishing a description of her to the Press and we’re roping in the B.B.C.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “I fancy that may bring developments.”

“Don’t worry, old boy. We’ll find your missing beauty for you—woollen underwear and all.”

He rang off.

George entered the room with his usual noiseless tread. He set down on a little table a steaming pot of chocolate and some sugar biscuits.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“I am in great perplexity of mind, Georges.”

“Indeed, sir? I am sorry to hear it.”

Hercule Poirot poured himself out some chocolate and stirred his cup thoughtfully.

George stood deferentially waiting, recognizing the signs. There were moments when Hercule Poirot discussed his cases with his valet. He always said that he found George’s comments singularly helpful.

“You are aware, no doubt, Georges, of the death of my dentist?”

“Mr. Morley, sir? Yes, sir. Very distressing, sir. He shot himself, I understand.”

“That is the general understanding. If he did not shoot himself, he was murdered.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The question is, if he was murdered, who murdered him?”

“Quite so, sir.”

“There are only a certain number of people, Georges, who could have murdered him. That is to say the people who were actually in, or could have been in, the house at the time.”

“Quite so, sir.”

“Those people are: a cook and housemaid, amiable domestics and highly unlikely to do anything of the kind. A devoted sister, also highly unlikely, but who does inherit her brother’s money such as it was—and one can never entirely neglect the financial aspect. An able and efficient partner—no motive known. A somewhat boneheaded page boy addicted to cheap crime stories. And lastly, a Greek gentleman of somewhat doubtful antecedents.”

George coughed.

“These foreigners, sir—”

“Exactly. I agree perfectly. The Greek gentleman is decidedly indicated. But you see, Georges, the Greek gentleman also died and apparently it was Mr. Morley who killed him—whether by intention or as the result of an unfortunate error we cannot be sure.”

“It might be, sir, that they killed each other. I mean, sir, each gentleman had formed the idea of doing the other gentleman in, though of course each gentleman was unaware of the other gentleman’s intention.”

Hercule Poirot purred approvingly.

“Very ingenious, Georges. The dentist murders the unfortunate gentleman who sits in the chair, not realizing that the said victim is at that moment meditating exactly at what moment to whip out his pistol. It could, of course, be so but it seems to me, Georges, extremely unlikely. And we have not come to the end of our list yet. There are still two other people who might possibly have been in the house at the given moment. Every patient, before Mr. Amberiotis, was actually seen to leave the house with the exception of one—a young American gentleman. He left the waiting room at about twenty minutes to twelve, but no one actually saw him leave the house. We must therefore count him as a possibility. The other possibility is a certain Mr. Frank Carter (not a patient) who came to the house at a little after twelve with the intention of seeing Mr. Morley. Nobody saw him leave, either. Those, my good Georges, are the facts; what do you think of them?”

“At what time was the murder committed, sir?”

“If the murder was committed by Mr. Amberiotis, it was committed at any time between twelve and five-and-twenty past. If by somebody else, it was committed after twenty-five minutes past twelve, as otherwise Mr. Amberiotis would have noticed the corpse.”

He looked encouragingly at George.

“Now, my good Georges, what have you to say about the matter?”

George pondered. He said:

“It strikes me, sir—”

“Yes, Georges?”

“You will have to find another dentist to attend to your teeth in future, sir.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“You surpass yourself, Georges. That aspect of the matter had not as yet occurred to me!”

Looking gratified, George left the room.

Hercule Poirot remained sipping his chocolate and going over the facts he had just outlined. He felt satisfied that they were as he had stated them. Within that circle of persons was the hand that had actually done the deed—no matter whose the inspiration had been.

Then his eyebrows shot up as he realized that the list was incomplete. He had left out one name.

And no one must be left out—not even the most unlikely person.

There had been one other person in the house at the time of the murder.

He wrote down:

"Mr. Barnes."

X

George announced:

"A lady to speak to you on the telephone, sir."

A week ago, Poirot had guessed wrongly the identity of a visitor. This time his guess was right.

He recognized her voice at once.

"M. Hercule Poirot?"

"Speaking."

"This is Jane Olivera—Mr. Alistair Blunt's niece."

"Yes, Miss Olivera."

"Could you come to the Gothic House, please? There is something I feel you ought to know."

"Certainly. What time would be convenient?"

"At six thirty, please."

"I will be there."

For a moment the autocratic note wavered:

"I—I hope I am not interrupting your work?"

"Not at all. I was expecting you to call me."

He put down the receiver quickly. He moved away from it smiling. He wondered what excuse Jane Olivera had found for summoning him.

On arrival at the Gothic House he was shown straight into the big library overlooking the river. Alistair Blunt was sitting at the writing table playing absentmindedly with a paper knife. He had the slightly harassed look of a man whose womenfolk have been too much for him.

Jane Olivera was standing by the mantelpiece. A plump middle-aged woman was speaking fretfully as Poirot entered—“and I really think my feelings should be considered in the matter, Alistair.”

“Yes, Julia, of course, of course.”

Alistair Blunt spoke soothingly as he rose to greet Poirot.

“And if you’re going to talk horrors I shall leave the room,” added the good lady.

“I should, mother,” said Jane Olivera.

Mrs. Olivera swept from the room without condescending to take any notice of Poirot.

Alistair Blunt said:

“It’s very good of you to come, M. Poirot. You’ve met Miss Olivera, I think? It was she who sent for you—”

Jane said abruptly:

“It’s about this missing woman that the papers are full of. Miss Something Seale.”

“Sainsbury Seale? Yes?”

Jane turned once more to Poirot.

“It’s such a pompous name, that’s why I remember. Shall I tell him, or will you, Uncle Alistair?”

“My dear, it’s your story.”

Jane turned once more to Poirot.

“It mayn’t be important in the least—but I thought you ought to know.”

“Yes?”

“It was the last time Uncle Alistair went to the dentist’s—I don’t mean the other day—I mean about three months ago. I went with him to Queen Charlotte Street in the Rolls and it was to take me on to some friends in Regent’s Park and come back for him. We stopped at 58, and Uncle got out, and just as he did, a woman came out of 58—a middle-aged woman with fussy hair and rather arty clothes. She made a beeline for Uncle and said (Jane Olivera’s voice rose to an affected squeak): ‘Oh, Mr. Blunt, you don’t remember me, I’m sure!’ Well, of course, I could see by Uncle’s face that he didn’t remember her in the slightest—”

Alistair Blunt sighed.

“I never do. People are always saying it—”

“He put on his special face,” went on Jane. “I know it well. Kind of polite and make-believe. It wouldn’t deceive a baby. He said in a most unconvincing voice: ‘Oh—er—of course.’ The terrible woman went on: ‘I was a great friend of your wife’s, you know!’”

“They usually say that, too,” said Alistair Blunt in a voice of even deeper gloom.

He smiled rather ruefully.

“It always ends the same way! A subscription to something or other. I got off this time with five pounds to a Zenana Mission or something. Cheap!”

“Had she really known your wife?”

“Well, her being interested in Zenana Missions made me think that, if so, it would have been in India. We were there about ten years ago. But, of course, she couldn’t have been a great friend or I’d have known about it. Probably met her once at a reception.”

Jane Olivera said:

“I don’t believe she’d ever met Aunt Rebecca at all. I think it was just an excuse to speak to you.”

Alistair Blunt said tolerantly:

“Well, that’s quite possible.”

Jane said:

“I mean, I think it’s queer the way she tried to scrape an acquaintance with you, Uncle.”

Alistair Blunt said with the same tolerance:

“She just wanted a subscription.”

Poirot said:

“She did not try to follow it up in any way?”

Blunt shook his head.

“I never thought of her again. I’d even forgotten her name till Jane spotted it in the paper.”

Jane said a little unconvincingly:

“Well, I thought M. Poirot ought to be told!”

Poirot said politely:

“Thank you, Mademoiselle.”

He added:

“I must not keep you, Mr. Blunt. You are a busy man.”

Jane said quickly:

“I’ll come down with you.”

Under his moustaches, Hercule Poirot smiled to himself.

On the ground floor, Jane paused abruptly. She said:

“Come in here.”

They went into a small room off the hall.

She turned to face him.

“What did you mean on the telephone when you said that you had been expecting me to call you?”

Poirot smiled. He spread out his hands.

“Just that, Mademoiselle. I was expecting a call from you—and the call came.”

“You mean that you knew I’d ring up about this Sainsbury Seale woman.”

Poirot shook his head.

“That was only the pretext. You could have found something else if necessary.”

Jane said:

“Why the hell should I call you up?”

“Why should you deliver this titbit of information about Miss Sainsbury Seale to me instead of giving it to Scotland Yard? That would have been the natural thing to do.”

“All right, Mr. Know All, how much exactly do you know?”

“I know that you are interested in me since you heard that I paid a visit to the Holborn Palace Hotel the other day.”

She went so white that it startled him. He had not believed that that deep tan could change to such a greenish hue.

He went on, quietly and steadily:

“You got me to come here today because you wanted to pump me—that is the expression, is it not?—yes, to pump me on the subject of Mr. Howard Raikes.”

Jane Olivera said:

“Who’s he, anyway?”

It was not a very successful parry.

Poirot said:

“You do not need to pump me, Mademoiselle. I will tell you what I know—or rather what I guessed. That first day that we came here, Inspector Japp and I, you were startled to see us—alarmed. You thought something had happened to your uncle. Why?”

“Well, he’s the kind of man things might happen to. He had a bomb by post one day—after the Herjoslovakian Loan. And he gets lots of threatening letters.”

Poirot went on:

“Chief Inspector Japp told you that a certain dentist, Mr. Morley, had been shot. You may recollect your answer. You said: ‘But that’s absurd.’”

Jane bit her lip. She said:

“Did I? That was rather absurd of me, wasn’t it?”

"It was a curious remark, Mademoiselle. It revealed that you knew of the existence of Mr. Morley, that you had rather expected something to happen —not to happen to him—but possibly to happen in his house."

"You do like telling yourself stories, don't you?"

Poirot paid no attention.

"You had expected—or rather you had feared—that something might happen at Mr. Morley's house. You had feared that that something would have happened to your uncle. But if so, you must know something that we did not know. I reflected on the people who had been in Mr. Morley's house that day, and I seized at once on the one person who might possibly have a connection with you—which was that young American, Mr. Howard Raikes."

"It's just like a serial, isn't it? What's the next thrilling instalment?"

"I went to see Mr. Howard Raikes. He is a dangerous and attractive young man—"

Poirot paused expressively.

Jane said meditatively:

"He is, isn't he?" She smiled. "All right! You win! I was scared stiff."

She leaned forward.

"I'm going to tell you things, M. Poirot. You're not the kind one can just string along. I'd rather tell you than have you snooping around finding out. I love that man, Howard Raikes. I'm just crazy about him. My mother brought me over here just to get me away from him. Partly that and partly because she hopes Uncle Alistair might get fond enough of me to leave me his money when he dies."

She went on:

"Mother is his niece by marriage. Her mother was Rebecca Arnholt's sister. He's my great-uncle-in-law. Only he hasn't got any near relatives of his own, so mother doesn't see why we shouldn't be his residuary legatees. She cadges off him pretty freely too.

"You see, I'm being frank with you, M. Poirot. That's the kind of people we are. Actually we've got plenty of money ourselves—an indecent amount according to Howard's ideas—but we're not in Uncle Alistair's class."

She paused. She struck with one hand fiercely on the arm of her chair.

"How can I make you understand? Everything I've been brought up to believe in, Howard abominates and wants to do away with. And sometimes, you know, I feel like he does. I'm fond of Uncle Alistair, but he gets on my nerves sometimes. He's so stodgy—so British—so cautious and conservative. I feel sometimes that he and his kind ought to be swept away, that they are blocking progress—that without them we'd get things done!"

"You are a convert to Mr. Raikes' ideas?"

"I am—and I'm not. Howard is—is wilder than most of his crowd. There are people, you know, who—who agree with Howard up to a point. They would be willing to—to try things—if Uncle Alistair and his crowd would agree. But they never will! They just sit back and shake their heads and say: 'We could never risk that.' And 'It wouldn't be sound economically.' And 'We've got to consider our responsibility.' And 'Look at history.' But I think that one mustn't look at history. That's looking back. One must look forward all the time."

Poirot said gently:

"It is an attractive vision."

Jane looked at him scornfully.

"You say that too!"

“Perhaps because I am old. Their old men have dreams—only dreams, you see.”

He paused and then asked in a matter-of-fact voice:

“Why did Mr. Howard Raikes make that appointment in Queen Charlotte Street?”

“Because I wanted him to meet Uncle Alistair and I couldn’t see otherwise how to manage it. He’d been so bitter about Uncle Alistair—so full of—well, hate really, that I felt if he could only see him—see what a nice kindly unassuming person he was—that—that he would feel differently … I couldn’t arrange a meeting here because of mother—she would have spoilt everything.”

Poirot said:

“But after having made that arrangement, you were—afraid.”

Her eyes grew wide and dark. She said:

“Yes. Because—because—sometimes Howard gets carried away. He—he—”

Hercule Poirot said:

“He wants to take a short cut. To exterminate—”

Jane Olivera cried: “Don’t!”

SEVEN, EIGHT, LAY THEM STRAIGHT

I

Time went on. It was over a month since Mr. Morley’s death, and there was still no news of Miss Sainsbury Seale.

Japp became increasingly wrathful on the subject.

“Dash it all, Poirot, the woman’s got to be somewhere.”

“Indubitably, mon cher.”

“Either she’d dead or alive. If she’s dead, where’s her body? Say, for instance, she committed suicide—”

“Another suicide?”

“Don’t let’s get back to that. You still say Morley was murdered—I say it was suicide.”

“You haven’t traced the pistol?”

“No, it’s a foreign make.”

“That is suggestive, is it not?”

“Not in the way you mean. Morley had been abroad. He went on cruises, he and his sister. Everybody in the British Isles goes on cruises. He may have picked it up abroad. They like to feel life’s dangerous.”

He paused and said:

“Don’t sidetrack me. I was saying that if—only if, mind you—that blasted woman committed suicide, if she’d drowned herself for instance, the body would have come ashore by now. If she was murdered, the same thing.”

“Not if a weight was attached to her body and it was put into the Thames.”

“From a cellar in Limehouse, I suppose! You’re talking like a thriller by a lady novelist.”

“I know—I know. I blush when I say these things!”

“And she was done to death by an international gang of crooks, I suppose?”

Poirot sighed. He said:

“I have been told lately that there really are such things.”

“Who told you so?”

“Mr. Reginald Barnes of Castlegarden Road, Ealing.”

“Well, he might know,” said Japp dubiously. “He dealt with aliens when he was at the Home Office.”

“And you do not agree?”

“It isn’t my branch—oh yes, there are such things—but they’re rather futile as a rule.”

There was a momentary silence as Poirot twirled his moustache.

Japp said:

“We’ve got one or two additional bits of information. She came home from India on the same boat as Amberiotis. But she was second class and he was first, so I don’t suppose there’s anything in that, although one of the waiters at the Savoy thinks she lunched there with him about a week or so before he died.”

“So there may have been a connection between them?”

“There may be—but I can’t feel it’s likely. I can’t see a Missionary lady being mixed up in any funny business.”

“Was Amberiotis mixed up in any ‘funny business,’ as you term it?”

“Yes, he was. He was in close touch with some of our Central European friends. Espionage racket.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes. Oh, he wasn’t doing any of the dirty work himself. We wouldn’t have been able to touch him. Organizing and receiving reports—that was his lay.”

Japp paused and then went on:

“But that doesn’t help us with the Sainsbury Seale. She wouldn’t have been in on that racket.”

“She had lived in India, remember. There was a lot of unrest there last year.”

“Amberiotis and the excellent Miss Sainsbury Seale—I can’t feel that they were teammates.”

“Did you know that Miss Sainsbury Seale was a close friend of the late Mrs. Alistair Blunt?”

“Who says so? I don’t believe it. Not in the same class.”

“She said so.”

“Who’d she say that to?”

“Mr. Alistair Blunt.”

“Oh! That sort of thing. He must be used to that lay. Do you mean that Amberiotis was using her that way? It wouldn’t work. Blunt would get rid of her with a subscription. He wouldn’t ask her down for a weekend or anything of that kind. He’s not so unsophisticated as that.”

This was so palpably true that Poirot could only agree. After a minute or two, Japp went on with his summing up of the Sainsbury Seale situation.

“I suppose her body might have been lowered into a tank of acid by a mad scientist—that’s another solution they’re very fond of in books! But take my word for it, these things are all my eye and Betty Martin. If the woman is dead, her body has just been quietly buried somewhere.”

“But where?”

“Exactly. She disappeared in London. Nobody’s got a garden there—not a proper one. A lonely chicken farm, that’s what we want!”

A garden! Poirot’s mind flashed suddenly to that neat prim garden in Ealing with its formal beds. How fantastic if a dead woman should be buried there! He told himself not to be absurd.

“And if she isn’t dead,” went on Japp, “where is she? Over a month now, description published in the Press, circulated all over England—”

“And nobody has seen her?”

“Oh yes, practically everybody has seen her! You’ve no idea how many middle-aged faded-looking women wearing olive green cardigan suits there are. She’s been seen on Yorkshire moors, and in Liverpool hotels, in guest houses in Devon and on the beach at Ramsgate! My men have spent their time patiently investigating all these reports—and one and all they’ve led nowhere, except to getting us in wrong with a number of perfectly respectable middle-aged ladies.”

Poirot clicked his tongue sympathetically.

“And yet,” went on Japp, “she’s a real person all right. I mean, sometimes you come across a dummy, so to speak—someone who just comes to a place and poses as a Miss Spinks—when all the time there isn’t a Miss Spinks. But this woman’s genuine—she’s got a past, a background! We know all about her from her childhood upwards! She’s led a perfectly normal, reasonable life—and suddenly, hey presto—vanish!”

“There must be a reason,” said Poirot.

“She didn’t shoot Morley, if that’s what you mean. Amberiotis saw him alive after she left—and we’ve checked up on her movements after she left Queen Charlotte Street that morning.”

Poirot said impatiently:

“I am not suggesting for a moment that she shot Morley. Of course she did not. But all the same—”

Japp said:

“If you are right about Morley, then it’s far more likely that he told her something which, although she doesn’t suspect it, gives a clue to his murderer. In that case, she might have been deliberately got out of the way.”

Poirot said:

“All this involves an organization, some big concern quite out of proportion to the death of a quiet dentist in Queen Charlotte Street.”

“Don’t you believe everything Reginald Barnes tells you! He’s a funny old bird—got spies and communists on the brain.”

Japp got up and Poirot said:

“Let me know if you have news.”

When Japp had gone out, Poirot sat frowning down at the table in front of him.

He had definitely the feeling of waiting for something. What was it?

He remembered how he had sat before, jotting down various unrelated facts and a series of names. A bird had flown past the window with a twig in its mouth.

He, too, had been collecting twigs. Five, six, picking up sticks …

He had the sticks—quite a number of them now. They were all there, neatly pigeonholed in his orderly mind—but he had not as yet attempted to set them in order. That was the next step—lay them straight.

What was holding him up? He knew the answer. He was waiting for something.

Something inevitable, foreordained, the next link in the chain. When it came—then—then he could go on….

II

It was late evening a week later when the summons came. Japp's voice was brusque over the telephone.

"That you, Poirot? We've found her. You'd better come round. King Leopold Mansions. Battersea Park. Number 45."

A quarter of an hour later a taxi deposited Poirot outside King Leopold Mansions.

It was a big block of mansion flats looking out over Battersea Park. Number 45 was on the second floor. Japp himself opened the door.

His face was set in grim lines.

"Come in," he said. "It's not particularly pleasant, but I expect you'll want to see for yourself."

Poirot said—but it was hardly a question:

"Dead?"

"What you might describe as very dead!"

Poirot cocked his head at a familiar sound coming from a door on his right.

"That's the porter," said Japp. "Being sick in the scullery sink! I had to get him up here to see if he could identify her."

He led the way down the passage and Poirot followed him. His nose wrinkled.

“Not nice,” said Japp. “But what can you expect? She’s been dead well over a month.”

The room they went into was a small lumber and box room. In the middle of it was a big metal chest of the kind used for storing furs. The lid was open.

Poirot stepped forward and looked inside.

He saw the foot first, with the shabby shoe on it and the ornate buckle. His first sight of Miss Sainsbury Seale had been, he remembered, a shoe buckle.

His gaze travelled up, over the green wool coat and skirt till it reached the head.

He made an inarticulate noise.

“I know,” said Japp. “It’s pretty horrible.”

The face had been battered out of all recognizable shape. Add to that the natural process of decomposition, and it was no wonder that both men looked a shade pea green as they turned away.

“Oh well,” said Japp. “It’s all in a day’s work—our day’s work. No doubt about it, ours is a lousy job sometimes. There’s a spot of brandy in the other room. You’d better have some.”

The living room was smartly furnished in an up-to-date style—a good deal of chromium and some large square-looking easy chairs upholstered in a pale fawn geometric fabric.

Poirot found the decanter and helped himself to some brandy. As he finished drinking, he said:

“It was not pretty, that! Now tell me, my friend, all about it.”

Japp said:

“This flat belongs to a Mrs. Albert Chapman. Mrs. Chapman is, I gather, a well-upholstered smart blonde of forty-odd. Pays her bills, fond of an occasional game of bridge with her neighbours but keeps herself to herself more or less. No children. Mr. Chapman is a commercial traveller.

“Sainsbury Seale came here on the evening of our interview with her. About seven fifteen. So she probably came straight here from the Glengowrie Court. She’d been here once before, so the porter says. You see, all perfectly clear and aboveboard—nice friendly call. The porter took Miss Sainsbury Seale up in the lift to this flat. The last he saw of her was standing on the mat pressing the bell.”

Poirot commented:

“He has taken his time to remember this!”

“He’s had gastric trouble, it seems, been away in hospital while another man took on temporarily for him. It wasn’t until about a week ago that he happened to notice in an old paper the description of a ‘wanted woman’ and he said to his wife, ‘Sounds quite like that old cup of tea who came to see Mrs. Chapman on the second floor. She had on a green wool dress and buckles on her shoes.’ And after about another hour he registered again—‘Believe she had a name, too, something like that. Blimey, it was—Miss Something or other Seale!’

“After that,” continued Japp, “it took him about four days to overcome his natural distrust of getting mixed up with the police and come along with his information.

“We didn’t really think it would lead to anything. You’ve no idea how many of these false alarms we’ve had. However, I sent Sergeant Beddoes along—he’s a bright young fellow. A bit too much of this high-class education but he can’t help that. It’s fashionable now.

“Well, Beddoes got a hunch at once that we were on to something at last. For one thing this Mrs. Chapman hadn’t been seen about for over a month.

She’d gone away without leaving any address. That was a bit odd. In fact everything he could learn about Mr. and Mrs. Chapman seemed odd.

“He found out the porter hadn’t seen Miss Sainsbury Seale leave again. That in itself wasn’t unusual. She might easily have come down the stairs and gone out without his seeing her. But then the porter told him that Mrs. Chapman had gone away rather suddenly. There was just a big printed notice outside the door the next morning:

NO MILK. TELL NELLIE I AM CALLED AWAY.

“Nellie was the daily maid who did for her. Mrs. Chapman had gone away suddenly once or twice before, so the girl didn’t think it odd, but what was odd was the fact that she hadn’t rung for the porter to take her luggage down or get her a taxi.

“Anyway, Beddoes decided to get into the flat. We got a search warrant and a pass key from the manager. Found nothing of interest except in the bathroom. There had been some hasty clearing up done there. There was a trace of blood on the linoleum—in the corners where it had been missed when the floor was washed over. After that, it was just a question of finding the body. Mrs. Chapman couldn’t have left with any luggage with her or the porter would have known. Therefore the body must still be in the flat. We soon spotted that fur chest—airtight, you know—just the place. Keys were in the dressing table drawer.

“We opened it up—and there was the missing lady! Mistletoe Bough up-to-date.”

Poirot asked:

“What about Mrs. Chapman?”

“What indeed? Who is Sylvia (her name’s Sylvia, by the way), what is she? One thing is certain. Sylvia, or Sylvia’s friends, murdered the lady and put her in the box.”

Poirot nodded.

He asked:

“But why was her face battered in? It is not nice, that.”

“I’ll say it isn’t nice! As to why—well, one can only guess. Sheer vindictiveness, perhaps. Or it may have been with the idea of concealing the woman’s identity.”

“But it did not conceal her identity.”

“No, because not only had we got a pretty good description of what Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was wearing when she disappeared, but her handbag had been stuffed into the fur box too and inside the handbag there was actually an old letter addressed to her at her hotel in Russell Square.”

Poirot sat up. He said:

“But that—that does not make the common sense!”

“It certainly doesn’t. I suppose it was a slip.”

“Yes—perhaps—a slip. But—”

He got up.

“You have been over the flat?”

“Pretty well. There’s nothing illuminating.”

“I should like to see Mrs. Chapman’s bedroom.”

“Come along then.”

The bedroom showed no signs of a hasty departure. It was neat and tidy. The bed had not been slept in, but was turned down ready for the night. There was a thick coating of dust everywhere.

Japp said:

"No finger-prints, so far as we can see. There are some on the kitchen things, but I expect they'll turn out to be the maid's."

"That means that the whole place was dusted very carefully after the murder?"

"Yes."

Poirot's eyes swept slowly round the room. Like the sitting room it was furnished in the modern style—and furnished, so he thought, by someone with a moderate income. The articles in it were expensive but not ultra expensive. They were showy but not first-class. The colour scheme was rose pink. He looked into the built-in wardrobe and handled the clothes—smart clothes but again not of first-class quality. His eyes fell to the shoes—they were largely of the sandal variety popular at the moment, some had exaggerated cork soles. He balanced one in his hand, registered the fact that Mrs. Chapman had taken a 5 in shoes and put it down again. In another cupboard he found a pile of furs, shoved in a heap.

Japp said:

"Came out of the fur chest."

Poirot nodded.

He was handling a grey squirrel coat. He remarked appreciatively: "First-class skins."

He went into the bathroom.

There was a lavish display of cosmetics. Poirot looked at them with interest. Powder, rouge, vanishing cream, skin food, two bottles of hair application.

Japp said:

"Not one of our natural platinum blondes, I gather."

Poirot murmured:

“At forty, mon ami, the hair of most women has begun to go grey but Mrs. Chapman was not one to yield to nature.”

“She’s probably gone henna red by now for a change.”

“I wonder.”

Japp said:

“There’s something worrying you, Poirot. What is it?”

Poirot said:

“But yes, I am worried. I am very seriously worried. There is here, you see, for me an insoluble problem.”

Resolutely, he went once more into the box room….

He took hold of the shoe on the dead woman’s foot. It resisted and came off with difficulty.

He examined the buckle. It had been clumsily sewn on by hand.

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said:

“It is that I am dreaming!”

Japp said curiously:

“What are you trying to do—make the thing more difficult?”

“Exactly that.”

Japp said:

“One patent leather shoe, complete with buckle. What’s wrong with that?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Nothing—absolutely nothing. But all the same—I do not understand.”

III

Mrs. Merton of No. 82, King Leopold Mansions had been designated by the porter as Mrs. Chapman’s closest friend in the Mansions.

It was, therefore, to No. 82 that Japp and Poirot betook themselves next.

Mrs. Merton was a loquacious lady, with snapping black eyes, and an elaborate coiffure.

It needed no pressure to make her talk. She was only too ready to rise to a dramatic situation.

“Sylvia Chapman—well, of course, I don’t know her really well—not intimately, so to speak. We had a few bridge evenings occasionally and we went to the pictures together, and of course shopping sometimes. But oh, do tell me—she isn’t dead, is she?”

Japp reassured her.

“Well, I’m sure I’m thankful to hear it! But the postman just now was all agog about a body having been found in one of the flats—but then one really can’t believe half one hears, can one? I never do.”

Japp asked a further question.

“No, I haven’t heard anything of Mrs. Chapman—not since we had spoken about going to see the new Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire the following week, and she said nothing about going away then.”

Mrs. Merton had never heard a Miss Sainsbury Seale mentioned. Mrs. Chapman had never spoken of anyone of that name.

“And yet, you know, the name is familiar to me, distinctly familiar. I seem to have seen it somewhere quite lately.”

Japp said drily:

“It’s been in all the papers for some weeks—”

“Of course—some missing person, wasn’t it? And you thought Mrs. Chapman might have known her? No, I’m sure I’ve never heard Sylvia mention that name.”

“Can you tell me anything about Mr. Chapman, Mrs. Merton?”

A rather curious expression came over Mrs. Merton’s face. She said:

“He was a commercial traveller, I believe, so Mrs. Chapman told me. He travelled abroad for his firm—armaments, I believe. He went all over Europe.”

“Did you ever meet him?”

“No, never. He was at home so seldom, and when he was at home he and Mrs. Chapman didn’t want to bother with outsiders. Very naturally.”

“Do you know if Mrs. Chapman had any near relations or friends?”

“I don’t know about friends. I don’t think she had any near relations. She never spoke of any.”

“Was she ever in India?”

“Not that I know of.”

Mrs. Merton paused, and then broke out:

“But please tell me—why are you asking all these questions? I quite understand that you come from Scotland Yard and all that, but there must be some special reason?”

“Well, Mrs. Merton, you are bound to know some time. As a matter of fact, a dead body has been found in Mrs. Chapman’s flat.”

“Oh—?” Mrs. Merton looked for a moment like the dog whose eyes were as big as saucers.

“A dead body! It wasn’t Mr. Chapman, was it? Or perhaps some foreigner?”

Japp said:

“It wasn’t a man at all—it was a woman.”

“A woman.” Mrs. Merton seemed even more surprised.

Poirot said gently:

“Why should you think it was a man?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It seemed more likely somehow.”

“But why? Was it because Mrs. Chapman was in the habit of receiving gentleman visitors?”

“Oh no—oh no indeed.” Mrs. Merton was indignant. “I never meant anything of that kind. Sylvia Chapman wasn’t in the least that kind of woman—not at all! It was just that, with Mr. Chapman—I mean—”

She came to a stop.

Poirot said:

“I think, Madame, that you know a little more than you have told us.”

Mrs. Merton said uncertainly:

“I don’t know, I’m sure—what I ought to do! I mean, I don’t exactly want to betray a confidence and of course I never have repeated what Sylvia told me—except just to one or two intimates whom I knew were really safe—”

Mrs. Merton leaned forward and lowered her voice:

“It just—slipped out, as it were, one day. When we were seeing a film—about the Secret Service and Mrs. Chapman said you could see that whoever had written it didn’t know much about their subject, and then it came out—only she swore me to secrecy. Mr. Chapman was in the Secret

Service, I mean. That was the real reason he had to go abroad so much. The armament firm was only a blind. And it was terribly worrying for Mrs. Chapman because she couldn't write to him or get letters from him while he was away. And, of course, it was terribly dangerous!"

IV

As they went down the stairs again to No. 42, Japp ejaculated with feeling: "Shades of Phillips Oppenheim, Valentine Williams and William le Queux, I think I'm going mad!"

That smart young man, Sergeant Beddoes, was waiting for them.

He said respectfully:

"Haven't been able to get anything helpful from the maid, sir. Mrs. Chapman changed maids pretty often, it seems. This one only worked for her for a month or two. She says Mrs. Chapman was a nice lady, fond of the radio and pleasant spoken. Girl was of the opinion the husband was a gay deceiver but that Mrs. Chapman didn't suspect it. She got letters from abroad sometimes, some from Germany, two from America, one from Italy and one from Russia. The girl's young man collects stamps, and Mrs. Chapman used to give them to her off the letters."

"Anything among Mrs. Chapman's papers?"

"Absolutely nothing, sir. She didn't keep much. A few bills and receipted accounts—all local. Some old theatre programmes, one or two cookery recipes cut out of the papers, and a pamphlet about Zenana Missions."

"And we can guess who brought that here. She doesn't sound like a murderess, does she? And yet that's what it seems to be. She's bound to be an accomplice anyway. No strange men seen about that evening?"

"The porter doesn't remember any—but then I don't suppose he would by now, and anyway it's a big block of flats—people always going in and out. He can only fix the date of Miss Sainsbury Seale's visit because he was taken off to the hospital the next day and was actually feeling rather bad that evening."

"Anybody in the other flats hear anything out of the way?"

The younger man shook his head.

"I've inquired at the flat above this and the one below. Nobody can remember hearing anything unusual. Both of them had their radios on, I gather."

The divisional surgeon came out of the bathroom where he had been washing his hands.

"Most unsavoury corpse," he said cheerfully. "Send her along when you're ready and I'll get down to brass tacks."

"No idea of the cause of death, doctor?"

"Impossible to say until I've done the autopsy. Those face injuries were definitely inflicted after death, I should say. But I shall know better when I've got her at the mortuary. Middle-aged woman, quite healthy—grey hair at the roots but tinted blonde. There may be distinguishing marks on the body—if there isn't, it may be a job to identify her—oh, you know who she is, splendid? What? Missing woman there's been all the fuss about? Well, you know, I never read the papers. Just do the crosswords."

Japp said bitterly:

"And that's publicity for you!" as the doctor went out.

Poirot was hovering over the desk. He picked up a small brown address book.

The indefatigable Beddoes said:

"Nothing of special interest there—most hairdressers, dressmakers, etc. I've noted down any private names and addresses."

Poirot opened the book at the letter D.

He read:

Dr. Davis, 17, Prince Albert Road,

Drake and Pomponetti, Fishmongers.

And below it:

Dentist. Mr. Morley, 58, Queen Charlotte Street.

There was a green light in Poirot’s eyes. He said:

“There will be no difficulty, I imagine, in positively identifying the body.”

Japp looked at him curiously. He said:

“Surely—you don’t imagine—?”

Poirot said with vehemence:

“I want to be sure.”

V

Miss Morley had moved to the country. She was living in a small country cottage near Hertford.

The Grenadier greeted Poirot amicably. Since her brother’s death her face had perhaps grown slightly grimmer, her carriage more upright, her general attitude towards life more unyielding. She resented bitterly the slur cast upon her brother’s professional name by the findings of the inquest.

Poirot, she had reason to believe, shared the view that the verdict of the Coroner’s inquest was untrue. Hence the Grenadier unbent a little.

She answered his questions readily enough and with competence. All Mr. Morley’s professional papers had been carefully filed by Miss Nevill and had been handed over by her to Mr. Morley’s successor. Some of the patients had transferred themselves to Mr. Reilly, others had accepted the new partner, others again had gone to other dentists elsewhere.

Miss Morley, after she had given what information she could, said:

“So you have found that woman who was Henry’s patient—Miss Sainsbury Seale—and she was murdered too.”

The “too” was a little defiant. She stressed the word.

Poirot said:

“Your brother never mentioned Miss Sainsbury Seale particularly to you?”

“No, I don’t remember his doing so. He would tell me if he had had a particularly trying patient, or if one of his patients had said something amusing he would pass it on to me, but we didn’t usually talk about his work much. He was glad to forget it when the day was over. He was very tired sometimes.”

“Do you remember hearing of a Mrs. Chapman amongst your brother’s patients?”

“Chapman? No, I don’t think so. Miss Nevill is really the person to help you over all this.”

“I am anxious to get in touch with her. Where is she now?”

“She has taken a post with a dentist in Ramsgate, I believe.”

“She has not married that young man Frank Carter yet?”

“No. I rather hope that will never come off. I don’t like that young man, M. Poirot. I really don’t. There is something wrong about him. I still feel that he hasn’t really any proper moral sense.”

Poirot said:

"Do you think it is possible that he could have shot your brother?"

Miss Morley said slowly:

"I do feel perhaps that he would be capable of it—he has a very uncontrollable temper. But I don't really see that he had any motive—nor opportunity for that matter. You see, it wasn't as though Henry had succeeded in persuading Gladys to give him up. She was sticking to him in the most faithful way."

"Could he have been bribed, do you think?"

"Bribed? To kill my brother? What an extraordinary idea!"

A nice-looking dark-haired girl brought in the tea at this moment. As she closed the door behind her again, Poirot said:

"That girl was with you in London, was she not?"

"Agnes? Yes, she was house-parlourmaid. I let the cook go—she didn't want to come to the country anyway—and Agnes does everything for me. She is turning into quite a nice little cook."

Poirot nodded.

He knew very accurately the domestic arrangements of 58, Queen Charlotte Street. They had been thoroughly gone into at the time of the tragedy. Mr. Morley and his sister had occupied the two top floors of the house as a maisonette. The basement had been shut up altogether except for a narrow passage leading from the area to the back yard where a wire cage ran up to the top floor with the tradesmen's deliveries and where a speaking tube was installed. Therefore the only entrance to the house was by the front door which it was Alfred's business to answer. This had enabled the police to be sure that no outsider could have entered the house on that particular morning.

Both cook and house-parlourmaid had been with the Morleys for some years and bore good characters. So, although it was theoretically possible that one or the other of them might have crept down to the second floor and shot her master, the possibility had never been taken seriously into account. Neither of the two had appeared unduly flustered or upset at being questioned, and there certainly seemed no possible reason for connecting either of them with his death.

Nevertheless, as Agnes handed Poirot his hat and stick on leaving, she asked him with an unusually nervous abruptness:

“Does—does anyone know anything more about the master’s death, sir?”

Poirot turned to look at her. He said:

“Nothing fresh has come to light.”

“They’re still quite sure as he did shoot himself because he’d made a mistake with that drug?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

Agnes pleated her apron. Her face was averted. She said rather indistinctly:

“The—the mistress doesn’t think so.”

“And you agree with her, perhaps?”

“Me? Oh, I don’t know nothing, sir. I only—I only wanted to be sure.”

Hercule Poirot said in his most gentle voice:

“It would be a relief to you to feel beyond any possible doubt that it was suicide?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” Agnes agreed quickly, “it would indeed.”

“For a special reason, perhaps?”

Her startled eyes met his. She shrank back a little.

“I—I don’t know anything about it, sir. I only just asked.”

“But why did she ask?” Hercule Poirot demanded of himself, as he walked down the path to the gate.

He felt sure that there was an answer to that question. But as yet he could not guess what it was.

All the same, he felt a step nearer.

VI

When Poirot returned to his flat he was surprised to find an unexpected visitor waiting for him.

A bald head was visible above the back of a chair, and the small neat figure of Mr. Barnes rose to his feet.

With eyes that twinkled as usual, he made a dry little apology.

He had come, he explained, to return M. Hercule Poirot’s visit.

Poirot professed himself delighted to see Mr. Barnes.

George was instructed to bring some coffee unless his visitor preferred tea or whisky and soda?

“Coffee will be admirable,” said Mr. Barnes. “I imagine that your manservant prepares it well. Most English servants do not.”

Presently, after a few interchanges of polite remarks, Mr. Barnes gave a little cough and said:

“I will be frank with you, M. Poirot. It was sheer curiosity that brought me here. You, I imagined, would be well posted in all the details of this rather curious case. I see by the papers that the missing Miss Sainsbury Seale has been found. That an inquest was held and adjourned for further evidence. Cause of death was stated to have been an overdose of medinal.”

“That is quite correct,” said Poirot.

There was a pause and then Poirot asked:

“Have you ever heard of Albert Chapman, Mr. Barnes?”

“Ah, the husband of the lady in whose flat Miss Sainsbury Seale came to die? Rather an elusive person, it would seem.”

“But hardly nonexistent?”

“Oh no,” said Mr. Barnes. “He exists. Oh yes, he exists—or did exist. I had heard he was dead. But you can’t trust these rumours.”

“Who was he, Mr. Barnes?”

“I don’t suppose they’ll say at the inquest. Not if they can help it. They’ll trot out the armaments firm traveller story.”

“He was in the Secret Service then?”

“Of course he was. But he had no business to tell his wife so—no business at all. In fact he ought not to have continued in the Service after his marriage. It isn’t usually done—not, that is, when you’re one of the really hush-hush people.”

“And Albert Chapman was?”

“Yes. Q.X.912. That’s what he was known as. Using a name is most irregular. Oh, I don’t mean that Q.X.912 was specially important—or anything of that kind. But he was useful because he was an insignificant kind of chap—the kind whose face isn’t easily remembered. He was used a lot as a messenger up and down Europe. You know the sort of thing. One dignified letter sent via our Ambassador in Ruritania—one unofficial ditto containing the dirt per Q.X.912—that is to say: Mr. Albert Chapman.”

“Then he knew a lot of useful information?”

“Probably didn’t know a thing,” said Mr. Barnes cheerfully. “His job was just hopping in and out of trains and boats and aero-planes and having the right story to explain why he was going where he was going!”

“And you heard he was dead?”

“That’s what I heard,” said Mr. Barnes. “But you can’t believe all you hear. I never do.”

Looking at Mr. Barnes intently, Poirot asked:

“What do you think has happened to his wife?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Mr. Barnes. He looked, wide-eyed at Poirot. “Can you?”

Poirot said:

“I had an idea—” He stopped.

He said slowly:

“It is very confusing.”

Mr. Barnes murmured sympathetically: “Anything worrying you in particular?”

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

“Yes. The evidence of my own eyes….”

VII

Japp came into Poirot’s sitting room and slammed down his bowler hat with such force that the table rocked.

He said:

“What the devil made you think of it?”

“My good Japp, I do not know what you are talking about.”

Japp said slowly and forcefully:

“What gave you the idea that the body wasn’t Miss Sainsbury Seale’s body?”

Poirot looked worried. He said:

“It was the face that worried me. Why smash up a dead woman’s face?”

Japp said:

“My word, I hope old Morley’s somewhere where he can know about it. It’s just possible, you know, that he was put out of the way on purpose—so that he couldn’t give evidence.”

“It would certainly be better if he could have given evidence himself.”

“Leatheran will be all right. Morley’s successor. He’s a thoroughly capable man with a good manner and the evidence is unmistakable.”

The evening papers came out with a sensation the next day. The dead body found in the Battersea flat, believed to be that of Miss Sainsbury Seale, was positively identified as that of Mrs. Albert Chapman.

Mr. Leatheran, of 58, Queen Charlotte Street, unhesitatingly pronounced it to be Mrs. Chapman on the evidence of the teeth and jaw, full particulars of which were recorded in the late Mr. Morley’s professional chart.

Miss Sainsbury Seale’s clothes had been found on the body and Miss Sainsbury Seale’s handbag with the body—but where was Miss Sainsbury Seale herself?

NINE, TEN, A GOOD FAT HEN

I

As they came away from the inquest Japp said jubilantly to Poirot:

“A smart piece of work, that. Gave ’em a sensation!”

Poirot nodded.

“You tumbled to it first,” said Japp, “but, you know, I wasn’t happy about that body myself. After all, you don’t go smashing a dead person’s face and head about for nothing. It’s messy, unpleasant work, and it was pretty plain there must be some reason for it. And there’s only one reason there could be—to confuse the identity.” He added generously: “But I shouldn’t have tumbled so quickly to the fact that it actually was the other woman.”

Poirot said with a smile:

“And yet, my friend, the actual descriptions of the women were not unlike as regards fundamentals. Mrs. Chapman was a smart, good-looking woman, well made up and fashionably turned out. Miss Sainsbury Seale was dowdy and innocent of lipstick or rouge. But the essentials were the same. Both were women of forty odd. Both were roughly about the same height and build. Both had hair turning grey which they touched up to make it appear golden.”

“Yes, of course, when you put it like that. One thing we’ve got to admit—the fair Mabelle put it over on both of us, good and proper. I’d have sworn she was the genuine article.”

“But, my friend, she was the genuine article. We know all about her past life.”

“We didn’t know she was capable of murder—and that’s what it looks like now. Sylvia didn’t murder Mabelle. Mabelle murdered Sylvia.”

Hercule Poirot shook his head in a worried fashion. He still found it difficult to reconcile Mabelle Sainsbury Seale with murder. Yet in his ears he heard the small, ironic voice of Mr. Barnes:

“Look among the respectable people….”

Mabelle Sainsbury Seale had been eminently respectable.

Japp said with emphasis:

“I’m going to get to the bottom of this case, Poirot. That woman isn’t going to put it over on me.”

II

The following day, Japp rang up. His voice held a curious note.

He said:

“Poirot, do you want to hear a piece of news? It’s napoo, my lad. Napoo!”

“Pardon?—the line is perhaps not very clear. I did not quite catch—”

“It’s off, my boy. O.F.F. Call it a day! Sit down and twiddle our thumbs!”

There was no mistaking the bitterness now. Poirot was startled.

“What is off?”

“The whole ruddy blinking thing! The hue and cry! The publicity! The whole bag of tricks!”

“But I still do not understand.”

“Well, listen. Listen carefully, because I can’t mention names very well. You know our inquiry? You know we’re combing the country for a performing fish?”

“Yes, yes, perfectly. I comprehend now.”

“Well, that’s been called off. Hushed up—kept mum. Now do you understand?”

“Yes, yes. But why?”

“Orders from the ruddy Foreign Office.”

“Is not that very extraordinary?”

“Well, it does happen now and again.”

“Why should they be so forbearing to Miss—to the performing fish?”

“They’re not. They don’t care tuppence about her. It’s the publicity—if she’s brought to trial too much might come out about Mrs. A. C. The corpse. That’s the hush-hush side! I can only suppose that the ruddy husband—Mr. A. C.—Get me?”

“Yes, yes.”

“That he’s somewhere abroad in a ticklish spot and they don’t want to queer his pitch.”

“Tchah!”

“What did you say?”

“I made, mon ami, an exclamation of annoyance!”

“Oh! that was it. I thought you’d caught cold. Annoyance is right! I could use a stronger word. Letting that dame get away with it makes me see red.”

Poirot said very softly:

“She will not get away with it.”

“Our hands are tied, I tell you!”

“Yours may be—mine are not!”

“Good old Poirot! Then you are going on with it?”

“Mais oui—to the death.”

“Well, don’t let it be your death, old boy! If this business goes on as it has begun someone will probably send you a poisoned tarantula by post!”

As he replaced the receiver, Poirot said to himself:

“Now, why did I use that melodramatic phrase—‘to the death?’ Vraiment, it is absurd!”

III

The letter came by evening post. It was typewritten except for the signature.

Dear M. Poirot (it ran),

I should be greatly obliged if you would call upon me some time tomorrow. I may have a commission for you. I suggest twelve thirty, at my house in Chelsea. If this is inconvenient to you, perhaps you would telephone my secretary? I apologize for giving you such short notice.

Yours sincerely,
Alistair Blunt.

Poirot smoothed out the letter and read it a second time. At that moment the telephone rang.

Hercule Poirot occasionally indulged in the fancy that he knew by the ring of his telephone bell what kind of message was impending.

On this occasion he was at once quite sure that the call was significant. It was not a wrong number—not one of his friends.

He got up and took down the receiver. He said in his polite, foreign voice:

“’Allo?”

An impersonal voice said: “What number are you, please?”

“This is Whitehall 7272.”

There was a pause, a click, and then a voice spoke. It was a woman’s voice.

“M. Poirot?”

“Yes.”

“M. Hercule Poirot?”

“Yes.”

“M. Poirot, you have either already received—or will shortly receive, a letter.”

“Who is speaking?”

“It is not necessary that you should know.”

“Very well. I have received, Madame, eight letters and three bills by the evening post.”

“Then you know which letter I mean. You will be wise, M. Poirot, to refuse the commission you have been offered.”

“That, Madame, is a matter I shall decide myself.”

The voice said coldly:

“I am warning you, M. Poirot. Your interference will no longer be tolerated. Keep out of this business.”

“And if I do not keep out of it?”

“Then we shall take steps to see that your interference is no longer to be feared….”

"That is a threat, Madame!"

"We are only asking you to be sensible … It is for your own good."

"You are very magnanimous!"

"You cannot alter the course of events and what has been arranged. So keep out of what doesn't concern you! Do you understand?"

"Oh yes, I understand. But I consider that Mr. Morley's death is my concern."

The woman's voice said sharply:

"Morley's death was only an incident. He interfered with our plans."

"He was a human being, Madame, and he died before his time."

"He was of no importance."

Poirot's voice was dangerous as he said very quietly:

"There you are wrong…."

"It was his own fault. He refused to be sensible."

"I, too, refuse to be sensible."

"Then you are a fool."

There was a click the other end as the receiver was replaced.

Poirot said, "Allo?" then put down his receiver in turn. He did not trouble to ask the Exchange to trace the number. He was fairly sure that the call had been put through from a public telephone box.

What intrigued and puzzled him was the fact that he thought he had heard the voice somewhere before. He racked his brains, trying to bring the elusive memory back. Could it be the voice of Miss Sainsbury Seale?

As he remembered it, Mabelle Sainsbury Seale's voice had been high-pitched and somewhat affected, with rather overemphasized diction. This voice was not at all like that, and yet—perhaps it might be Miss Sainsbury Seale with her voice disguised. After all, she had been an actress in her time. She could alter her voice, probably, easily enough. In actual timbre, the voice was not unlike what he remembered.

But he was not satisfied with that explanation. No, it was some other person that the voice brought back to him. It was not a voice he knew well—but he was still quite sure that he had heard it once, if not twice, before.

Why, he wondered, bother to ring up and threaten him? Could these people actually believe that threats would deter him? Apparently they did. It was poor psychology!

IV

There was some sensational news in the morning papers. The Prime Minister had been shot at when leaving 10, Downing Street with a friend yesterday evening. Fortunately the bullet had gone wide. The man, an Indian, had been taken into custody.

After reading this, Poirot took a taxi to Scotland Yard where he was shown up to Japp's room. The latter greeted him heartily.

"Ah, so the news has brought you along. Have any of the papers mentioned who 'the friend' was with the P.M.?"

"No, who was it?"

"Alistair Blunt."

"Really?"

"And," went on Japp, "we've every reason to believe that the bullet was meant for Blunt and not for the P.M. That is, unless the man was an even more thundering bad shot than he is already!"

"Who did it?"

“Some crazy Hindu student. Half-baked, as usual. But he was put up to it. It wasn’t all his own idea.”

Japp added:

“Quite a sound bit of work getting him. There’s usually a small group of people, you know, watching No. 10. When the shot was fired, a young American grabbed hold of a little man with a beard. He held on to him like grim death and yelled to the police that he’d got the man. Meanwhile the Indian was quietly hooking it—but one of our people nabbed him all right.”

“Who was the American?” asked Poirot curiously.

“Young fellow by the name of Raikes. Why—” He stopped short, staring at Poirot. “What’s the matter?”

Poirot said:

“Howard Raikes, staying at the Holborn Palace Hotel?”

“That’s right. Who—why, of course! I thought the name seemed familiar. He’s the patient who ran away that morning when Morley shot himself….”

He paused. He said slowly:

“Rum—how that old business keeps cropping up. You’ve still got your ideas about it, haven’t you, Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot replied gravely:

“Yes. I still have my ideas….”

V

At the Gothic House, Poirot was received by a secretary, a tall, limp young man with an accomplished social manner.

He was pleasantly apologetic.

“I am so sorry, M. Poirot—and so is Mr. Blunt. He has been called to Downing Street. The result of this—er—incident last night. I rang your flat, but unfortunately you had already left.”

The young man went on rapidly:

“Mr. Blunt commissioned me to ask you if it would be possible for you to spend the weekend with him at his house in Kent. Exsham, you know. If so, he would call for you in the car tomorrow evening.”

Poirot hesitated.

The young man said persuasively:

“Mr. Blunt is really most anxious to see you.”

Hercule Poirot bowed his head.

He said: “Thank you. I accept.”

“Oh, that’s splendid. Mr. Blunt will be delighted. If he calls for you about a quarter to six, will that—Oh, good morning, Mrs. Olivera—”

Jane Olivera’s mother had just entered. She was very smartly dressed, with a hat clinging to an eyebrow in the midst of a very soignée coiffure.

“Oh! Mr. Selby, did Mr. Blunt give you any instructions about those garden chairs? I meant to talk to him about them last night, because I knew we’d be going down this weekend and—”

Mrs. Olivera took in Poirot and paused.

“Do you know Mrs. Olivera, M. Poirot?”

“I have already had the pleasure of meeting Madame.”

Poirot bowed.

Mrs. Olivera said vaguely:

"Oh? How do you do. Of course, Mr. Selby, I know that Alistair is a very busy man and that these small domestic matters mayn't seem to him important—"

"It's quite all right, Mrs. Olivera," said the efficient Mr. Selby. "He told me about it and I rang up Messrs Deevers about them."

"Well, now, that's a real load off my mind. Now, Mr. Selby, can you tell me …"

Mrs. Olivera clacked on. She was, thought Poirot, rather like a hen. A big, fat hen! Mrs. Olivera, still clacking, moved majestically after her bust towards the door.

" … And if you're quite sure that there will only be ourselves this weekend—"

Mr. Selby coughed.

"Er—M. Poirot is also coming down for the weekend."

Mrs. Olivera stopped. She turned round and surveyed Poirot with visible distaste.

"Is that really so?"

"Mr. Blunt has been kind enough to invite me," said Poirot.

"Well, I wonder—why, if that isn't queer of Alistair. You'll excuse me, M. Poirot, but Mr. Blunt particularly told me that he wanted a quiet, family weekend!"

Selby said firmly:

"Mr. Blunt is particularly anxious that M. Poirot should come."

"Oh really? He didn't mention it to me."

The door opened. Jane stood there. She said impatiently:

“Mother, aren’t you coming? Our lunch appointment is at one fifteen!”

“I’m coming, Jane. Don’t be impatient.”

“Well, get a move on, for goodness sake—Hallo, M. Poirot.”

She was suddenly very still—her petulance frozen. Her eyes more wary.

Mrs. Olivera said in a cold voice:

“M. Poirot is coming down to Exsham for the weekend.”

“Oh—I see.”

Jane Olivera stood back to let her mother pass her. On the point of following her, she whirled back again.

“M. Poirot!”

Her voice was imperious.

Poirot crossed the room to her.

She said in a low voice: “You’re coming down to Exsham? Why?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“It is a kind thought of your uncle’s.”

Jane said:

“But he can’t know … He can’t … When did he ask you? Oh, there’s no need—”

“Jane!”

Her mother was calling from the hall.

Jane said in a low, urgent tone:

“Stay away. Please don’t come.”

She went out. Poirot heard the sounds of altercation. Heard Mrs. Olivera’s high, complaining, clucking voice. “I really will not tolerate your rudeness, Jane … I shall take steps to see that you do not interfere—”

The secretary said:

“Then at a little before six tomorrow, M. Poirot?”

Poirot nodded assent mechanically. He was standing like a man who has seen a ghost. But it was his ears, not his eyes, that had given him the shock.

Two of the sentences that had drifted in through the open door were almost identical with those he had heard last night through the telephone, and he knew why the voice had been faintly familiar.

As he walked out into the sunshine he shook his head blankly.

Mrs. Olivera?

But it was impossible! It could not have been Mrs. Olivera who had spoken over the ’phone!

That empty-headed society woman—selfish, brainless, grasping, self-centred? What had he called her to himself just now?

“That good fat hen? C’est ridicule!” said Hercule Poirot.

His ears, he decided, must have deceived him. And yet—

VI

The Rolls called punctually for Poirot at a little before six.

Alistair Blunt and his secretary were the only occupants. Mrs. Olivera and Jane had gone down in another car earlier, it seemed.

The drive was uneventful. Blunt talked a little, mostly of his garden and of a recent horticultural show.

Poirot congratulated him on his escape from death, at which Blunt demurred. He said:

“Oh, that! Don’t think the fellow was shooting at me particularly. Anyway, the poor chap hadn’t the first idea of how to aim! Just one of these half-crazed students. There’s no harm in them really. They just get worked up and fancy a pot shot at the P.M. will alter the course of history. It’s pathetic, really.”

“There have been other attempts on your life, have there not?”

“Sounds quite melodramatic,” said Blunt, with a slight twinkle. “Someone sent me a bomb by post not long ago. It wasn’t a very efficient bomb. You know, these fellows who want to take on the management of the world—what sort of an efficient business do they think they could make of it, when they can’t even devise an effectual bomb?”

He shook his head.

“It’s always the same thing—long-haired woolly idealists—without one practical bit of knowledge in their heads. I’m not a clever chap—never have been—but I can just read and write and do arithmetic. D’you understand what I mean by that?”

“I think so, but explain to me further.”

“Well, if I read something that is written down in English I can understand what it means—I am not talking of abstruse stuff, formulae or philosophy—just plain businesslike English—most people can’t! If I want to write down something I can write down what I mean—I’ve discovered that quite a lot of people can’t do that either! And, as I say, I can do plain arithmetic. If Jones has eight bananas and Brown takes ten away from him, how many will Jones have left? That’s the kind of sum people like to pretend has a simple answer. They won’t admit, first that Brown can’t do it—and second that there won’t be an answer in plus bananas!”

“They prefer the answer to be a conjuring trick?”

“Exactly. Politicians are just as bad. But I’ve always held out for plain common sense. You can’t beat it, you know, in the end.”

He added with a slightly self-conscious laugh:

“But I mustn’t talk shop. Bad habit. Besides, I like to leave business matters behind when I get away from London. I’ve been looking forward, M. Poirot, to hearing a few of your adventures. I read a lot of thrillers and detective stories, you know. Do you think any of them are true to life?”

The conversation dwelt for the rest of the journey on the more spectacular cases of Hercule Poirot. Alistair Blunt displayed himself as vivid as any schoolboy for details.

This pleasant atmosphere sustained a chill on arrival at Exsham, where behind her massive bust Mrs. Olivera radiated a freezing disapproval. She ignored Poirot as far as possible, addressing herself exclusively to her host and to Mr. Selby.

The latter showed Poirot to his room.

The house was a charming one, not very big, and furnished with the same quiet good taste that Poirot had noticed in London. Everything was costly but simple. The vast wealth that owned it was only indicated by the smoothness with which this apparent simplicity was produced. The service was admirable—the cooking English, not Continental—the wines at dinner stirred Poirot to a passion of appreciation. They had a perfect clear soup, a grilled sole, saddle of lamb with tiny young garden peas and strawberries and cream.

Poirot was so enjoying these creature comforts that the continued frigid demeanour of Mrs. Olivera and the brusque rudeness of her daughter hardly attracted his attention. Jane, for some reason, was regarding him with definite hostility. Hazily, towards the end of the dinner, Poirot wondered why!

Looking down the table with mild curiosity, Blunt asked:

“Helen not dining with us tonight?”

Julia Olivera’s lips drew themselves in with a taut line. She said:

“Dear Helen has been overtiring herself, I think, in the garden. I suggested it would be far better for her to go to bed and rest than to bother to dress herself up and come here. She quite saw my point.”

“Oh, I see.” Blunt looked vague and a little puzzled. “I thought it made a bit of a change for her at weekends.”

“Helen is such a simple soul. She likes turning in early,” said Mrs. Olivera firmly.

When Poirot joined the ladies in the drawing room, Blunt having remained behind for a few minutes’ conversation with his secretary, he heard Jane Olivera say to her mother:

“Uncle Alistair didn’t like the cool way you’d shelved Helen Montressor, Mother.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Olivera robustly. “Alistair is too good-natured. Poor relations are all very well—very kind of him to let her have the cottage rent free, but to think he has to have her up to the house every weekend for dinner is absurd! She’s only a second cousin or something. I don’t think Alistair ought to be imposed upon!”

“I think she’s proud in her way,” said Jane. “She does an awful lot in the garden.”

“That shows a proper spirit,” said Mrs. Olivera comfortably. “The Scotch are very independent and one respects them for it.”

She settled herself comfortably on the sofa and, still not taking any notice of Poirot, added:

“Just bring me the Low Down Review, dear. There’s something about Lois Van Schuyler in it and that Moroccan guide of hers.”

Alistair Blunt appeared in the doorway. He said:

“Now M. Poirot, come into my room.”

Alistair Blunt’s own sanctum was a low, long room at the back of the house, with windows opening upon the garden. It was comfortable, with deep armchairs and settees and just enough pleasant untidiness to make it livable.

(Needless to say, Hercule Poirot would have preferred a greater symmetry!)

After offering his guest a cigarette and lighting his own pipe, Alistair Blunt came to the point quite simply and directly.

He said:

“There’s a good deal that I’m not satisfied about. I’m referring, of course, to this Sainsbury Seale woman. For reasons of their own—reasons no doubt which are perfectly justified—the authorities have called off the hunt. I don’t know exactly who Albert Chapman is or what he’s doing—but whatever it is, it’s something pretty vital and it’s the sort of business that might land him in a tight spot. I don’t know the ins and outs of it, but the P.M. did just mention that they can’t afford any publicity whatever about this case and that the sooner it fades out of the public’s memory the better.

“That’s quite O.K. That’s the official view, and they know what’s necessary. So the police have got their hands tied.”

He leaned forward in his chair.

“But I want to know the truth, M. Poirot. And you’re the man to find it out for me. You aren’t hampered by officialdom.”

“What do you want me to do, M. Blunt?”

“I want you to find this woman—Sainsbury Seale.”

“Alive or dead?”

Alistair Blunt’s eyebrows rose.

“You think it’s possible that she is dead?”

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute or two, then he said, speaking slowly and with weight:

“If you want my opinion—but it is only an opinion, remember—then, yes, I think she is dead….”

“Why do you think so?”

Hercule Poirot smiled slightly.

He said:

“It would not make sense to you if I said it was because of a pair of unworn stockings in a drawer.”

Alistair Blunt stared at him curiously.

“You’re an odd man, M. Poirot.”

“I am very odd. That is to say, I am methodical, orderly and logical—and I do not like distorting facts to support a theory—that, I find—is unusual!”

Alistair Blunt said:

“I’ve been turning the whole thing over in my mind—it takes me a little time always to think a thing out. And the whole business is deuced odd! I mean—that dentist chap shooting himself, and then this Chapman woman packed away in her own fur chest with her face smashed in. It’s nasty! It’s damned nasty! I can’t help feeling that there’s something behind it all.”

Poirot nodded.

Blunt said:

"And you know—the more I think of it—I'm quite sure that woman never knew my wife. It was just a pretext to speak to me. But why? What good did it do her? I mean—bar a small subscription—and even that was made out to the society, not to her personally. And yet I do feel—that—that it was engineered—just meeting me on the steps of the house. It was all so pat. So suspiciously well-timed! But why? That's what I keep asking myself—why?"

"It is indeed the word—why? I too ask myself—and I cannot see it—no, I cannot see it."

"You've no ideas at all on the subject?"

Poirot waved an exasperated hand.

"My ideas are childish in the extreme. I tell myself, it was perhaps a ruse to indicate you to someone—to point you out. But that again is absurd—you are quite a well-known man—and anyway how much more simple to say 'See, that is he—the man who entered now by that door.'"

"And anyway," said Blunt, "why should anyone want to point me out?"

"Mr. Blunt, think back once more on your time that morning in the dentist's chair. Did nothing that Morley said strike an unusual note? Is there nothing at all that you can remember which might help as a clue?"

Alistair Blunt frowned in an effort of memory. Then he shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I can't think of anything."

"You're quite sure he didn't mention this woman—this Miss Sainsbury Seale?"

"No."

"Or the other woman—Mrs. Chapman?"

"No—no—we didn't speak of people at all. We mentioned roses, gardens needing rain, holidays—nothing else."

"And no one came into the room while you were there?"

"Let me see—no, I don't think so. On other occasions I seem to remember a young woman being there—fair-haired girl. But she wasn't there this time. Oh, another dentist fellow came in, I remember—the fellow with an Irish accent."

"What did he say or do?"

"Just asked Morley some question and went out again. Morley was a bit short with him, I fancy. He was only there a minute or so."

"And there is nothing else you can remember? Nothing at all?"

"No. He was absolutely normal."

Hercule Poirot said thoughtfully:

"I, too, found him absolutely normal."

There was a long pause. Then Poirot said:

"Do you happen to remember, Monsieur, a young man who was in the waiting room downstairs with you that morning?"

Alistair Blunt frowned.

"Let me see—yes, there was a young man—rather restless he was. I don't remember him particularly, though. Why?"

"Would you know him again if you saw him?"

Blunt shook his head.

"I hardly glanced at him."

"He didn't try to enter into conversation with you at all?"

"No."

Blunt looked with frank curiosity at the other.

“What’s the point? Who is this young man?”

“His name is Howard Raikes.”

Poirot watched keenly for any reaction, but he saw none.

“Ought I to know his name? Have I met him elsewhere?”

“I do not think you have met him. He is a friend of your niece, Miss Olivera’s.”

“Oh, one of Jane’s friends.”

“Her mother, I gather, does not approve of the friendship.”

Alistair Blunt said absently:

“I don’t suppose that will cut any ice with Jane.”

“So seriously does her mother regard the friendship that I gather she brought her daughter over from the States on purpose to get her away from this young man.”

“Oh!” Blunt’s face registered comprehension. “It’s that fellow, is it?”

“Aha, you become more interested now.”

“He’s a most undesirable young fellow in every way, I believe. Mixed up in a lot of subversive activities.”

“I understand from Miss Olivera that he made an appointment that morning in Queen Charlotte Street, solely in order to get a look at you.”

“To try and get me to approve of him?”

“Well—no—I understand the idea was that he should be induced to approve of you.”

“Well, of all the damned cheek!”

Poirot concealed a smile.

“It appears you are everything that he most disapproves of.”

“He’s certainly the kind of young man I disapprove of! Spends his time tub-thumping and talking hot air, instead of doing a decent job of work!”

Poirot was silent for a minute, then he said:

“Will you forgive me if I ask you an impertinent and very personal question?”

“Fire ahead.”

“In the event of your death, what are your testamentary dispositions?”

Blunt stared. He said sharply:

“Why do you want to know that?”

“Because, it is just possible,” he shrugged his shoulders—“that it might be relevant to this case.”

“Nonsense!”

“Perhaps. But perhaps not.”

Alistair Blunt said coldly:

“I think you are being unduly melodramatic, M. Poirot. Nobody has been trying to murder me—or anything like that!”

“A bomb on your breakfast table—a shot in the street—”

“Oh those! Any man who deals in the world’s finance in a big way is liable to that kind of attention from some crazy fanatic!”

"It might possibly be a case of someone who is not a fanatic and not crazy."

Blunt stared.

"What are you driving at?"

"In plain language, I want to know who benefits by your death."

Blunt grinned.

"Chiefly the St. Edward's Hospital, the Cancer Hospital, and the Royal Institute for the Blind."

"Ah!"

"In addition, I have left a sum of money to my niece by marriage, Mrs. Julia Olivera; an equivalent sum, but in trust, to her daughter, Jane Olivera, and also a substantial provision for my only surviving relative, a second cousin, Helen Montressor, who was left very badly off and who occupies a small cottage on the estate here."

He paused and then said:

"This, M. Poirot, is strictly in confidence."

"Naturally, Monsieur, naturally."

Alistair Blunt added sarcastically:

"I suppose you do not suggest, M. Poirot, that either Julia or Jane Olivera or my cousin Helen Montressor, are planning to murder me for my money?"

"I suggest nothing—nothing at all."

Blunt's slight irritation subsided. He said:

"And you'll take on that other commission for me?"

"The finding of Miss Sainsbury Seale? Yes, I will."

Alistair Blunt said heartily:

“Good man.”

VII

In leaving the room Poirot almost cannoned into a tall figure outside the door.

He said: “I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle.”

Jane Olivera drew apart a little.

She said. “Do you know what I think of you, M. Poirot?”

“Eh bien—Mademoiselle—”

She did not give time to finish. The question, indeed, had but a rhetorical value. All that it meant was that Jane Olivera was about to answer it herself.

“You’re a spy, that’s what you are! A miserable, low, snooping spy, nosing round and making trouble!”

“I assure you, Mademoiselle—”

“I know just what you’re after! And I know now just what lies you tell! Why don’t you admit it straight out? Well, I’ll tell you this—you won’t find out anything—anything at all! There’s nothing to find out! No one’s going to harm a hair on my precious uncle’s head. He’s safe enough. He’ll always be safe. Safe and smug and prosperous—and full of platitudes! He’s just a stodgy John Bull, that’s what he is—without an ounce of imagination or vision.”

She paused, then, her agreeable, husky voice deepening, she said venomously: “I loathe the sight of you—you bloody little bourgeois detective!”

She swept away from him in a whirl of expensive model drapery.

Hercule Poirot remained, his eyes very wide open, his eyebrows raised and his hand thoughtfully caressing his moustaches.

The epithet bourgeois was, he admitted, well-applied to him. His outlook on life was essentially bourgeois, and always had been, but the employment of it as an epithet of contempt by the exquisitely turned out Jane Olivera gave him, as he expressed it to himself, furiously to think.

He went, still thinking, into the drawing room.

Mrs. Olivera was playing patience.

She looked up as Poirot entered, surveyed him with the cold look she might have bestowed upon a black beetle and murmured distantly:

“Red knave on black queen.”

Chilled, Poirot retreated. He reflected mournfully:

“Alas, it would seem that nobody loves me!”

He strolled out of the window into the garden. It was an enchanting evening with a smell of night-scented stocks in the air. Poirot sniffed happily and strolled along a path that ran between two herbaceous borders.

He turned a corner and two dimly-seen figures sprang apart.

It would seem that he had interrupted a pair of lovers.

Poirot hastily turned and retraced his steps.

Even out here, it would seem, his presence was de trop.

He passed Alistair Blunt’s window and Alistair Blunt was dictating to Mr. Selby.

There seemed definitely only one place for Hercule Poirot.

He went up to his bedroom.

He pondered for some time on various fantastic aspects of the situation.

Had he or had he not made a mistake in believing the voice on the telephone to be that of Mrs. Olivera? Surely the idea was absurd!

He recalled the melodramatic revelations of quiet little Mr. Barnes. He speculated on the mysterious whereabouts of Mr. Q.X.912, alias Albert Chapman. He remembered, with a spasm of annoyance, the anxious look in the eyes of the maidservant, Agnes—

It was always the same way—people would keep things back! Usually quite unimportant things, but until they were cleared out of the way, impossible to pursue a straight path.

At the moment the path was anything but straight!

And the most unaccountable obstacle in the way of clear thinking and orderly progress was what he described to himself as the contradictory and impossible problem of Miss Sainsbury Seale. For, if the facts that Hercule Poirot had observed were true facts—then nothing whatever made sense!

Hercule Poirot said to himself, with astonishment in the thought:

“Is it possible that I am growing old?”

ELEVEN, TWELVE, MEN MUST DELVE

I

After passing a troubled night, Hercule Poirot was up and about early on the next day. The weather was perfect and he retraced his steps of last night.

The herbaceous borders were in full beauty and though Poirot himself leaned to a more orderly type of flower arrangement—a neat arrangement of beds of scarlet geraniums such as are seen at Ostend—he nevertheless realized that here was the perfection of the English garden spirit.

He pursued his way through a rose garden, where the neat layout of the beds delighted him—and through the winding ways of an alpine rock garden, coming at last to the walled kitchen gardens.

Here he observed a sturdy woman clad in a tweed coat and skirt, black browed, with short cropped black hair who was talking in a slow, emphatic Scots voice to what was evidently the head gardener. The head gardener, Poirot observed, did not appear to be enjoying the conversation.

A sarcastic inflection made itself heard in Miss Helen Montressor’s voice, and Poirot escaped nimbly down a side path.

A gardener who had been, Poirot shrewdly suspected, resting on his spade, began digging with fervour. Poirot approached nearer. The man, a young fellow, dug with ardour, his back to Poirot who paused to observe him.

“Good morning,” said Poirot amiably.

A muttered “Morning, sir,” was the response, but the man did not stop working.

Poirot was a little surprised. In his experience a gardener, though anxious to appear zealously at work as you approached, was usually only too willing to pause and pass the time of day when directly addressed.

It seemed, he thought, a little unnatural. He stood there for some minutes, watching the toiling figure. Was there, or was there not, something a little familiar about the turn of those shoulders? Or could it be, thought Hercule Poirot, that he was getting into a habit of thinking that both voices and shoulders were familiar when they were really nothing of the kind? Was he, as he had feared last night, growing old?

He passed thoughtfully onward out of the walled garden and paused to regard a rising slope of shrubbery outside.

Presently, like some fantastic moon, a round object rose gently over the top of the kitchen garden wall. It was the egg-shaped head of Hercule Poirot, and the eyes of Hercule Poirot regarded with a good deal of interest the face of the young gardener who had now stopped digging and was passing a sleeve across his wet face.

“Very curious and very interesting,” murmured Hercule Poirot as he discreetly lowered his head once more.

He emerged from the shrubbery and brushed off some twigs and leaves that were spoiling the neatness of his apparel.

Yes, indeed, very curious and interesting that Frank Carter, who had a secretarial job in the country, should be working as a gardener in the employment of Alistair Blunt.

Reflecting on these points, Hercule Poirot heard a gong in the distance and retraced his steps towards the house.

On the way there he encountered his host talking to Miss Montressor who had just emerged from the kitchen garden by the farther door.

Her voice rose clear and distinct:

“It’s verra kind of you, Alistairr, but I would preferr not to accept any invitations this week while your Amerrican relations are with you!”

Blunt said:

“Julia’s rather a tactless woman, but she doesn’t mean—”

Miss Montressor said calmly:

“In my opinion her manner to me is verra insolent, and I will not put up with insolence—from American women or any others!”

Miss Montressor moved away, Poirot came up to find Alistair Blunt looking as sheepish as most men look who are having trouble with their female relations. He said ruefully:

“Women really are the devil! Good morning, M. Poirot. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

They turned towards the house and Blunt said with a sigh: “I do miss my wife!”

In the dining room, he remarked to the redoubtable Julia:

“I’m afraid, Julia, you’ve rather hurt Helen’s feelings.”

Mrs. Olivera said grimly:

“The Scotch are always touchy.”

Alistair Blunt looked unhappy.

Hercule Poirot said:

“You have a young gardener, I noticed, whom I think you must have taken on recently.”

“I daresay,” said Blunt. “Yes, Burton, my third gardener, left about three weeks ago, and we took this fellow on instead.”

“Do you remember where he came from?”

“I really don’t. MacAlister engaged him. Somebody or other asked me to give him a trial, I think. Recommended him warmly. I’m rather surprised, because MacAlister says he isn’t much good. He wants to sack him again.”

“What is his name?”

“Dunning—Sunbury—something like that.”

“Would it be a great impertinence to ask what you pay him?”

“Not at all. Two pounds fifteen, I think it is.”

“Not more?”

“Certainly not more—might be a bit less.”

“Now that,” said Poirot, “is very curious.”

Alistair Blunt looked at him inquiringly.

But Jane Olivera, rustling the paper, distracted the conversation.

“A lot of people seem to be out for your blood, Uncle Alistair!”

“Oh, you’re reading the debate in the House. That’s all right. Only Archerton—he’s always tilting at windmills. And he’s got the most crazy ideas of finance. If we let him have his way, England would be bankrupt in a week.”

Jane said:

“Don’t you ever want to try anything new?”

“Not unless it’s an improvement to the old, my dear.”

“But you’d never think it would be. You’d always say, ‘This would never work’—without even trying.”

“Experimentalists can do a lot of harm.”

“Yes, but how can you be satisfied with things as they are? All the waste and the inequality and the unfairness. Something must be done about it!”

“We get along pretty well in this country, Jane, all things considered.”

Jane said passionately:

“What’s needed is a new heaven and a new earth! And you sit there eating kidneys!”

She got up and went out by the french window into the garden.

Alistair looked mildly surprised and a little uncomfortable.

He said: “Jane has changed a lot lately. Where does she get all these ideas?”

“Take no notice of what Jane says,” said Mrs. Olivera. “Jane’s a very silly girl. You know what girls are—they go to these queer parties in studios where the young men have funny ties and they come home and talk a lot of nonsense.”

“Yes, but Jane was always rather a hard-boiled young woman.”

“It’s just a fashion, Alistair, these things are in the air!”

Alistair Blunt said:

“Yes, they’re in the air all right.”

He looked a little worried.

Mrs. Olivera rose and Poirot opened the door for her. She swept out frowning to herself.

Alistair Blunt said suddenly:

“I don’t like it, you know! Everybody’s talking this sort of stuff! And it doesn’t mean anything! It’s all hot air! I find myself up against it the whole time—a new heaven and a new earth. What does it mean? They can’t tell you themselves! They’re just drunk on words.”

He smiled suddenly, rather ruefully.

“I’m one of the last of the Old Guard, you know.”

Poirot said curiously:

“If you were—removed, what would happen?”

“Removed! What a way of putting it!” His face grew suddenly grave. “I’ll tell you. A lot of damned fools would try a lot of very costly experiments. And that would be the end of stability—of common sense, of solvency. In fact, of this England of ours as we know it …”

Poirot nodded his head. He was essentially in sympathy with the banker. He, too, approved of solvency. And he began to realize with a new meaning just exactly what Alistair Blunt stood for. Mr. Barnes had told him, but he had hardly taken it in then. Quite suddenly, he was afraid….

II

“I’ve finished my letters,” said Blunt, appearing later in the morning. “Now, M. Poirot, I’m going to show you my garden.”

The two men went out together and Blunt talked eagerly of his hobby.

The rock garden, with its rare alpine plants, was his greatest joy and they spent some time there while Blunt pointed out certain minute and rare species.

Hercule Poirot, his feet encased in his best patent leather shoes, listened patiently, shifting his weight tenderly from one foot to the other and wincing slightly as the heat of the sun caused the illusion that his feet were gigantic puddings!

His host strolled on, pointing out various plants in the wide border. Bees were humming and from near at hand came the monotonous clicking of a pair of shears trimming a laurel hedge.

It was all very drowsy and peaceful.

Blunt paused at the end of the border, looking back. The clip of the shears was quite close by, though the clipper was concealed from view.

“Look at the vista down from here, Poirot. The Sweet Williams are particularly fine this year. I don’t know when I’ve seen them so good—and those are Russell lupins. Marvellous colours.”

Crack! The shot broke the peace of the morning. Something sang angrily through the air. Alistair Blunt turned bewildered to where a faint thread of smoke was rising from the middle of the laurels.

There was a sudden outcry of angry voices, the laurels heaved as two men struggled together. A high-pitched American voice sang out resolutely:

“I’ve got you, you damned scoundrel! Drop that gun!”

Two men struggled out into the open. The young gardener who had dug so industriously that morning was writhing in the powerful grip of a man nearly a head taller.

Poirot recognized the latter at once. He had already guessed from the voice.

Frank Carter snarled:

“Let go of me! It wasn’t me, I tell you! I never did.”

Howard Raikes said:

“Oh, no? Just shooting at the birds, I suppose!”

He stopped—looking at the newcomers.

“Mr. Alistair Blunt? This guy here has just taken a potshot at you. I caught him right in the act.”

Frank Carter cried out:

“It’s a lie! I was clipping the hedge. I heard a shot and the gun fell right here at my feet. I picked it up—that’s only natural, that is, and then this bloke jumped on me.”

Howard Raikes said grimly:

“The gun was in your hand and it had just been fired!”

With a final gesture, he tossed the pistol to Poirot.

“Let’s see what the dick’s got to say about it! Lucky I got hold of you in time. I guess there are several more shots in that automatic of yours.”

Poirot murmured:

“Precisely.”

Blunt was frowning angrily. He said sharply:

“Now then Dunnon—Dunbury—what’s your name?”

Hercule Poirot interrupted. He said:

“This man’s name is Frank Carter.”

Carter turned on him furiously.

“You’ve had it in for me all along! You came spying on me that Sunday. I tell you, it’s not true. I never shot at him.”

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“Then, in that case, who did?”

He added:

“There is no one else here but ourselves, you see.”

III

Jane Olivera came running along the path. Her hair streamlined back behind her. Her eyes were wide with fear. She gasped: “Howard?”

Howard Raikes said lightly:

“Hallo, Jane. I’ve just been saving your uncle’s life.”

“Oh!” She stopped. “You have?”

“Your arrival certainly seems to have been very opportune, Mr.—er—” Blunt hesitated.

“This is Howard Raikes, Uncle Alistair. He’s a friend of mine.”

Blunt looked at Raikes—he smiled.

“Oh!” he said. “So you are Jane’s young man! I must thank you.”

With a puffing noise as of a steam engine at high pressure Julia Olivera appeared on the scene. She panted out:

“I heard a shot. Is Alistair—Why—” She stared blankly at Howard Raikes. “You? Why, why, how dare you?”

Jane said in an icy voice:

“Howard has just saved Uncle Alistair’s life, mother.”

“What? I—I—”

“This man tried to shoot Uncle Alistair and Howard grabbed him and took the pistol away from him.”

Frank Carter said violently:

“You’re bloody liars, all of you.”

Mrs. Olivera, her jaw dropping, said blankly:

“Oh!” It took her a minute or two to readjust her poise. She turned first to Blunt.

“My dear Alistair! How awful! Thank God you’re safe. But it must have been a frightful shock. I—I feel quite faint myself. I wonder—do you think I could have just a little brandy?”

Blunt said quickly:

“Of course. Come back to the house.”

She took his arm, leaning on it heavily.

Blunt looked over his shoulder at Poirot and Howard Raikes.

“Can you bring that fellow along?” he asked. “We’ll ring up the police and hand him over.”

Frank Carter opened his mouth, but no words came. He was dead white, and his knees were wilting. Howard Raikes hauled him along with an unsympathetic hand.

“Come on, you,” he said.

Frank Carter murmured hoarsely and unconvincingly:

“It’s all a lie….”

Howard Raikes looked at Poirot.

“You’ve got precious little to say for yourself for a high-toned sleuth! Why don’t you throw your weight about a bit?”

“I am reflecting, Mr. Raikes.”

“I guess you’ll need to reflect! I should say you’ll lose your job over this! It isn’t thanks to you that Alistair Blunt is still alive at this minute.”

"This is your second good deed of the kind, is it not, Mr. Raikes?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"It was only yesterday, was it not, that you caught and held the man whom you believed to have shot at Mr. Blunt and the Prime Minister?"

Howard Raikes said:

"Er—yes. I seem to be making a kind of habit of it."

"But there is a difference," Hercule Poirot pointed out. "Yesterday, the man you caught and held was not the man who fired the shot in question. You made a mistake."

Frank Carter said sullenly:

"He's made a mistake now."

"Quiet, you," said Raikes.

Hercule Poirot murmured to himself:

"I wonder…."

IV

Dressing for dinner, adjusting his tie to an exact symmetry, Hercule Poirot frowned at his reflection in the mirror.

He was dissatisfied—but he would have been at a loss to explain why. For the case, as he owned to himself, was so very clear. Frank Carter had indeed been caught red-handed.

It was not as though he had any particular belief in, or liking for, Frank Carter. Carter, he thought dispassionately, was definitely what the English call a "wrong 'un." He was an unpleasant young bully of the kind that appeals to women, so that they are reluctant to believe the worst, however plain the evidence.

And Carter’s whole story was weak in the extreme. This tale of having been approached by agents of the “Secret Service”—and offered a plummy job. To take the post of gardener and report on the conversations and actions of the other gardeners. It was a story that was disproved easily enough—there was no foundation for it.

A particularly weak invention—the kind of thing, Poirot reflected, that a man like Carter would invent.

And on Carter’s side, there was nothing at all to be said. He could offer no explanation, except that somebody else must have shot off the revolver. He kept repeating that. It was a frame-up.

No, there was nothing to be said for Carter except, perhaps, that it seemed an odd coincidence that Howard Raikes should have been present two days running at the moment when a bullet had just missed Alistair Blunt.

But presumably there wasn’t anything in that. Raikes certainly hadn’t fired the shot in Downing Street. And his presence down here was fully accounted for—he had come down to be near his girl. No, there was nothing definitely improbable in his story.

It had turned out, of course, very fortunately for Howard Raikes. When a man has just saved you from a bullet, you cannot forbid him the house. The least you can do is to show friendliness and extend hospitality. Mrs. Olivera didn’t like it, obviously, but even she saw that there was nothing to be done about it.

Jane’s undesirable young man had got his foot in and he meant to keep it there!

Poirot watched him speculatively during the evening.

He was playing his part with a good deal of astuteness. He did not air any subversive views, he kept off politics. He told amusing stories of his hitchhikes and tramps in wild places.

"He is no longer the wolf," thought Poirot. "No, he has put on the sheep's clothing. But underneath? I wonder…."

As Poirot was preparing for bed that night, there was a rap on the door. Poirot called, "Come in," and Howard Raikes entered.

He laughed at Poirot's expression.

"Surprised to see me? I've had my eye on you all evening. I didn't like the way you were looking. Kind of thoughtful."

"Why should that worry you, my friend?"

"I don't know why, but it did. I thought maybe that you were finding certain things just a bit hard to swallow."

"Eh bien? And if so?"

"Well, I decided that I'd best come clean. About yesterday, I mean. That was a fake show all right! You see, I was watching his lordship come out of 10, Downing Street and I saw Ram Lal fire at him. I know Ram Lal. He's a nice kid. A bit excitable but he feels the wrongs of India very keenly. Well, there was no harm done, that precious pair of stuffed shirts weren't harmed—the bullet had missed 'em both by miles—so I decided to put up a show and hope the Indian kid would get clear. I grabbed hold of a shabby little guy just by me and called out that I'd got the villain and hoped Ram Lal was beating it all right. But the dicks were too smart. They were on to him in a flash. That's just how it was. See?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"And today?"

"That's different. There weren't any Ram Lals about today. Carter was the only man on the spot. He fired that pistol all right! It was still in his hand when I jumped on him. He was going to try a second shot, I expect."

Poirot said:

"You were very anxious to preserve the safety of M. Blunt?"

Raikes grinned—an engaging grin.

"A bit odd, you think, after all I've said? Oh, I admit it. I think Blunt is a guy who ought to be shot—for the sake of Progress and Humanity—I don't mean personally—he's a nice enough old boy in his British way. I think that, and yet when I saw someone taking a potshot at him I leap in and interfere. That shows you how illogical the human animal is. It's crazy, isn't it?"

"The gap between theory and practice is a wide one."

"I'll say it is!" Mr. Raikes got up from the bed where he had been sitting.

His smile was easy and confiding.

"I just thought," he said, "that I'd come along and explain the thing to you."

He went out shutting the door carefully behind him.

V

"Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man: and preserve me from the wicked man," sang Mrs. Olivera in a firm voice, slightly off the note.

There was a relentlessness about her enunciation of the sentiment which made Hercule Poirot deduce that Mr. Howard Raikes was the wicked man immediately in her mind.

Hercule Poirot had accompanied his host and the family to the morning service in the village church.

Howard Raikes had said with a faint sneer: "So you always go to church, Mr. Blunt?"

And Alistair had murmured vaguely something about it being expected of you in the country—can't let the parson down, you know—which typically

English sentiment had merely bewildered the young man, and had made Hercule Poirot smile comprehendingly.

Mrs. Olivera had tactfully accompanied her host and commanded Jane to do likewise.

“They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent,” sang the choir boys in shrill treble, “adder’s poison is under their lips.”

The tenors and basses demanded with gusto:

“Keep me, O Lord, from the hands of the ungodly. Preserve me from the wicked men who are purposed to overthrow my goings.”

Hercule Poirot essayed in a hesitant baritone.

“The proud have laid a snare for me,” he sang, “and spread a net with cords: yea, and set traps in my way….”

His mouth remained open.

He saw it—saw clearly the trap into which he had so nearly fallen!

Like a man in a trance Hercule Poirot remained, mouth open, staring into space. He remained there as the congregation seated themselves with a rustle; until Jane Olivera tugged at his arm and murmured a sharp, “Sit down.”

Hercule Poirot sat down. An aged clergyman with a beard intoned: “Here beginneth the fifteenth chapter of the First Book of Samuel,” and began to read.

But Poirot heard nothing of the smiting of the Amalekites.

A snare cunningly laid—a net with cords—a pit open at his feet—dug carefully so that he should fall into it.

He was in a daze—a glorious daze where isolated facts spun wildly round before settling neatly into their appointed places.

It was like a kaleidoscope—shoe buckles, 10-inch stockings, a damaged face, the low tastes in literature of Alfred the page boy, the activities of Mr. Amberiotis, and the part played by the late Mr. Morley, all rose up and whirled and settled themselves down into a coherent pattern.

For the first time, Hercule Poirot was looking at the case the right way up.

"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft and stubborness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord he hath also rejected thee from being king. Here endeth the first lesson," quavered the aged clergyman all in one breath.

As one in a dream, Hercule Poirot rose to praise the Lord in the Te Deum.

THIRTEEN, FOURTEEN, MAIDS ARE COURTING

I

“M. Reilly, is it not?”

The young Irishman started as the voice spoke at his elbow.

He turned.

Standing next to him at the counter of the Shipping Co. was a small man with large moustaches and an egg-shaped head.

“You do not remember me, perhaps?”

“You do yourself an injustice, M. Poirot. You’re not a man that’s easily forgotten.”

He turned back to speak to the clerk behind the counter who was waiting.

The voice at his elbow murmured:

“You are going abroad for a holiday?”

“It’s not a holiday I’m taking. And you yourself, M. Poirot? You’re not turning your back on this country, I hope?”

“Sometimes,” said Hercule Poirot, “I return for a short while to my own country—Belgium.”

“I’m going farther than that,” said Reilly. “It’s America for me.” He added: “And I don’t think I’ll be coming back, either.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Reilly. You are, then, abandoning your practice in Queen Charlotte Street.”

"If you'd say it was abandoning me, you'd be nearer the mark."

"Indeed? That is very sad."

"It doesn't worry me. When I think of the debts I shall leave behind me unpaid, I'm a happy man."

He grinned engagingly.

"It's not I who'll be shooting myself because of money troubles. Leave them behind you, I say, and start afresh. I've got my qualifications and they're good ones if I say so myself."

Poirot murmured:

"I saw Miss Morley the other day."

"Was that a pleasure to you? I'd say it was not. A more sour-faced woman never lived. I've often wondered what she'd be like drunk—but that's what no one will ever know."

Poirot said:

"Did you agree with the verdict of the Coroner's Court on your partner's death?"

"I did not," said Reilly emphatically.

"You don't think he made a mistake in the injection?"

Reilly said:

"If Morley injected that Greek with the amount that they say he did, he was either drunk or else he meant to kill the man. And I've never seen Morley drink."

"So you think it was deliberate?"

"I'd not like to be saying that. It's a grave accusation to be making. Truly now, I don't believe it."

"There must be some explanation."

"There must indeed—but I've not thought of it yet."

Poirot said:

"When did you last actually see Mr. Morley alive?"

"Let me see now. It's a long time after to be asking me a thing like that. It would be the night before—about a quarter to seven."

"You didn't see him on the actual day of the murder?"

Reilly shook his head.

"You are sure?" Poirot persisted.

"Oh, I'd not say that. But I don't remember—"

"You did not, for instance, go up to his room about eleven thirty five when he had a patient there?"

"You're right now. I did. There was a technical question I had to ask him about some instruments I was ordering. They'd rung me up about it. But I was only there for a minute, so it slipped my memory. He had a patient there at the time."

Poirot nodded. He said:

"There is another question I always meant to ask you. Your patient, Mr. Raikes, cancelled his appointment by walking out. What did you do during that half hour's leisure?"

"What I always do when I have any leisure. Mixed myself a drink. And as I've been telling you, I put through a telephone call and ran up to see Morley for a minute."

Poirot said:

“And I also understand that you had no patient from half past twelve to one after Mr. Barnes left. When did he leave, by the way?”

“Oh! Just after half past twelve.”

“And what did you do then?”

“The same as before. Mixed myself another drink!”

“And went up to see Morley again?”

Mr. Reilly smiled.

“Are you meaning did I go up and shoot him? I’ve told you already, long ago, that I did not. But you’ve only my word for it.”

Poirot said:

“What did you think of the house-parlourmaid, Agnes?”

Reilly stared:

“Now that’s a funny question to be asking.”

“But I should like to know.”

“I’ll answer you. I didn’t think about her. Georgina kept a strict eye on the maids—and quite right too. The girl never looked my way once—which was bad taste on her part.”

“I have a feeling,” said Hercule Poirot, “that that girl knows something.”

He looked inquiringly at Mr. Reilly. The latter smiled and shook his head.

“Don’t ask me,” he said. “I know nothing about it. I can’t help you at all.”

He gathered up the tickets which were lying in front of him and went off with a nod and a smile.

Poirot explained to a disillusioned clerk that he would not make up his mind about that cruise to the Northern Capitals after all.

II

Poirot paid another visit to Hampstead. Mrs. Adams was a little surprised, perhaps, to see him. Though he had been vouched for, so to speak, by a Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard, she nevertheless regarded him as a “quaint little foreigner” and had not taken his pretentions very seriously. She was, however, very willing to talk.

After the first sensational announcement about the identity of the victim, the finding of the inquest had received very little publicity. It had been a case of mistaken identity—the body of Mrs. Chapman had been mistaken for that of Miss Sainsbury Seale. That was all that the public knew. The fact that Miss Sainsbury Seale had been probably the last person to see the unfortunate Mrs. Chapman alive was not stressed. There had been no hint in the Press that Miss Sainsbury Seale might possibly be wanted by the police on a criminal charge.

Mrs. Adams had been very relieved when she knew that it was not her friend’s body which had been discovered so dramatically. She appeared to have no idea that any suspicion might attach to Mabelle Sainsbury Seale.

“But it is so extraordinary that she has disappeared like this. I feel sure, M. Poirot, that it must be loss of memory.”

Poirot said that it was very probable. He had known cases of the kind.

“Yes—I remember a friend of one of my cousins. She’d had a lot of nursing and worry, and it brought it on. Amnesia, I think they called it.”

Poirot said that he believed that that was the technical term.

He paused and then asked if Mrs. Adams had ever heard Miss Sainsbury Seale speak of a Mrs. Albert Chapman?

No, Mrs. Adams never remembered her friend mentioning anyone of that name. But then, of course, it wasn't likely that Miss Sainsbury Seale should happen to mention everyone with whom she was acquainted. Who was this Mrs. Chapman? Had the police any idea who could have murdered her?

"It is still a mystery, Madame." Poirot shook his head and then asked if it was Mrs. Adams who had recommended Mr. Morley as a dentist to Miss Sainsbury Seale.

Mrs. Adams replied in the negative. She herself went to a Mr. French in Harley Street, and if Mabelle had asked her about a dentist she would have sent her to him.

Possibly, Poirot thought, it might have been this Mrs. Chapman who recommended Miss Sainsbury Seale to go to Mr. Morley.

Mrs. Adams agreed that it might have been. Didn't they know at the dentist's?

But Poirot had already asked Miss Nevill that question and Miss Nevill had not known or had not remembered. She recollected Mrs. Chapman, but did not think the latter had ever mentioned a Miss Sainsbury Seale—the name being an odd one, she would have remembered it had she heard it then.

Poirot persevered with his questions.

Mrs. Adams had known Miss Sainsbury Seale first in India, had she not? Mrs. Adams agreed.

Did Mrs. Adams know if Miss Sainsbury Seale had met Mr. or Mrs. Alistair Blunt at any time out there?

"Oh, I don't think so, M. Poirot. You mean the big banker? They were out some years ago staying with the Viceroy, but I'm sure if Mabelle had met them at all, she would have talked about it or mentioned them."

"I'm afraid," added Mrs. Adams, with a faint smile, "one does usually mention the important people. We're all such snobs at heart."

"She never did mention the Blunts—Mrs. Blunt in particular?"

"Never."

"If she had been a close friend of Mrs. Blunt's probably you would have known?"

"Oh yes. I don't believe she knew anyone like that. Mabelle's friends were all very ordinary people—like us."

"That, Madame, I cannot allow," said Poirot gallantly.

Mrs. Adams went on talking of Mabelle Sainsbury Seale as one talks of a friend who has recently died. She recalled all Mabelle's good works, her kindnesses, her indefatigable work for the mission, her zeal, her earnestness.

Hercule Poirot listened. As Japp had said, Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was a real person. She had lived in Calcutta and taught elocution and worked amongst the native population. She had been respectable, well-meaning, a little fussy and stupid perhaps, but also what is termed a woman with a heart of gold.

And Mrs. Adams' voice ran on: "She was so much in earnest over everything, M. Poirot. And she found people so apathetic—so hard to rouse. It was very difficult to get subscriptions out of people—worse every year, with the income tax rising and the cost of living and everything. She said to me once: 'When one knows what money can do—the wonderful good you can accomplish with it—well, really sometimes, Alice, I feel I would commit a crime to get it.' That shows, doesn't it, M. Poirot, how strongly she felt?"

"She said that, did she?" said Poirot thoughtfully.

He asked, casually, when Miss Sainsbury Seale had enunciated this particular statement, and learned that it had been about three months ago.

He left the house and walked away lost in thought.

He was considering the character of Mabelle Sainsbury Seale.

A nice woman—an earnest and kindly woman—a respectable, decent type of woman. It was amongst that type of person that Mr. Barnes had suggested a potential criminal could be found.

She had travelled back on the same boat from India as Mr. Amberiotis. There seemed reason to believe that she had lunched with him at the Savoy.

She had accosted and claimed acquaintance with Alistair Blunt and laid claim to an intimacy with his wife.

She had twice visited King Leopold Mansions where, later, a dead body had been found dressed in her clothes and with her handbag conveniently identifying it.

A little too convenient, that!

She had left the Glengowrie Court Hotel suddenly after an interview with the police.

Could the theory that Hercule Poirot believed to be true account for and explain all those facts?

He thought it could.

III

These meditations had occupied Hercule Poirot on his homeward way until reaching Regent’s Park. He decided to traverse a part of the Park before taking a taxi on. By experience, he knew to a nicety the moment when his smart patent leather shoes began to press painfully on his feet.

It was a lovely summer’s day and Poirot looked indulgently on courting nursemaids and their swains, laughing and giggling while their chubby charges profited by nurse’s inattention.

Dogs barked and romped.

Little boys sailed boats.

And under nearly every tree was a couple sitting close together….

“Ah! Jeunesse, Jeunesse,” murmured Hercule Poirot, pleasurably affected by the sight.

They were chic, these little London girls. They wore their tawdry clothes with an air.

Their figures, however, he considered lamentably deficient. Where were the rich curves, the voluptuous lines that had formerly delighted the eye of an admirer?

He, Hercule Poirot, remembered women … One woman, in particular—what a sumptuous creature—Bird of Paradise—a Venus …

What woman was there amongst these pretty chits nowadays, who could hold a candle to Countess Vera Rossakoff? A genuine Russian aristocrat, an aristocrat to her fingertips! And also, he remembered, a most accomplished thief … One of those natural geniuses …

With a sigh, Poirot wrenched his thoughts away from the flamboyant creature of his dreams.

It was not only, he noted, the little nursemaids and their like who were being wooed under the trees of Regent’s Park.

That was a Schiaparelli creation there, under that lime tree, with the young man who bent his head so close to hers, who was pleading so earnestly.

One must not yield too soon! He hoped the girl understood that. The pleasure of the chase must be extended as long as possible….

His beneficent eye still on them, he became suddenly aware of a familiarity in those two figures.

So Jane Olivera had come to Regent's Park to meet her young American revolutionary?

His face grew suddenly sad and rather stern.

After only a brief hesitation he crossed the grass to them. Sweeping off his hat with a flourish, he said:

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle."

Jane Olivera, he thought, was not entirely displeased to see him.

Howard Raikes, on the other hand, was a good deal annoyed at the interruption.

He growled: "Oh, so it's you again!"

"Good afternoon, M. Poirot," said Jane. "How unexpectedly you always pop up, don't you?"

"Kind of a Jack in the Box," said Raikes, still eyeing Poirot with a considerable coldness.

"I do not intrude?" Poirot asked anxiously.

Jane Olivera said kindly:

"Not at all."

Howard Raikes said nothing.

"It is a pleasant spot you have found here," said Poirot.

"It was," said Mr. Raikes.

Jane said:

“Be quiet, Howard. You need to learn manners!”

Howard Raikes snorted and asked:

“What’s the good of manners?”

“You’ll find they kind of help you along,” said Jane. “I haven’t got any myself, but that doesn’t matter so much. To begin with I’m rich, and I’m moderately good-looking, and I’ve got a lot of influential friends—and none of those unfortunate disabilities they talk about so freely in the advertisements nowadays. I can get along all right without manners.”

Raikes said:

“I’m not in the mood for small talk, Jane. I guess I’ll take myself off.”

He got up, nodded curtly to Poirot and strode away.

Jane Olivera stared after him, her chin cupped in her palm.

Poirot said with a sigh:

“Alas, the proverb is true. When you are courting, two is company, is it not, three is none?”

Jane said:

“Courting? What a word!”

“But yes, it is the right word, is it not? For a young man who pays attention to a young lady before asking her hand in marriage? They say, do they not, a courting couple?”

“Your friends seem to say some very funny things.”

Hercule Poirot chanted softly:

“Thirteen, fourteen, maids are courting. See, all around us they are doing it.”

Jane said sharply:

“Yes—I’m just one of the crowd, I suppose….”

She turned suddenly to Poirot.

“I want to apologize to you. I made a mistake the other day. I thought you had wormed your way in and come down to Exsham just to spy on Howard. But afterwards Uncle Alistair told me that he had definitely asked you because he wanted you to clear up this business of that missing woman—Sainsbury Seale. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely.”

“So I’m sorry for what I said to you that evening. But it did look like it, you know. I mean—as though you were just following Howard and spying on us both.”

“Even if it were true, Mademoiselle—I was an excellent witness to the fact that Mr. Raikes bravely saved your uncle’s life by springing on his assailant and preventing him from firing another shot.”

“You’ve got a funny way of saying things, M. Poirot. I never know whether you’re serious or not.”

Poirot said gravely:

“At the moment I am very serious, Miss Olivera.”

Jane said with a slight break in her voice:

“Why do you look at me like that? As though—as though you were sorry for me?”

“Perhaps because I am sorry, Mademoiselle, for the things that I shall have to do so soon….”

“Well, then—don’t do them!”

“Alas, Mademoiselle, but I must….”

She stared at him for a minute or two, then she said:

“Have you—found that woman?”

Poirot said:

“Let us say—that I know where she is.”

“Is she dead?”

“I have not said so.”

“She’s alive, then?”

“I have not said that either.”

Jane looked at him with irritation. She exclaimed:

“Well, she’s got to be one or the other, hasn’t she?”

“Actually, it’s not quite so simple.”

“I believe you just like making things difficult!”

“It has been said of me,” admitted Hercule Poirot.

Jane shivered. She said:

“Isn’t it funny? It’s a lovely warm day—and yet I suddenly feel cold….”

“Perhaps you had better walk on, Mademoiselle.”

Jane rose to her feet. She stood a minute irresolute. She said abruptly:

“Howard wants me to marry him. At once. Without letting anyone know. He says—he says it’s the only way I’ll ever do it—that I’m weak—” She broke off, then with one hand she gripped Poirot's arm with surprising strength. "What shall I do about it, M. Poirot?"

"Why ask me to advise you? There are those who are nearer!"

"Mother? She'd scream the house down at the bare idea! Uncle Alistair? He'd be cautious and prosy. Plenty of time, my dear. Got to make quite sure, you know. Bit of an odd fish—this young man of yours. No sense in rushing things—"

"Your friends?" suggested Poirot.

"I haven't got any friends. Only a silly crowd I drink and dance and talk inane catchwords with! Howard's the only real person I've ever come up against."

"Still—why ask me, Miss Olivera?"

Jane said:

"Because you've got a queer look on your face—as though you were sorry about something—as though you knew something that—that—was—coming. …"

She stopped.

"Well?" she demanded. "What do you say?"

Hercule Poirot slowly shook his head.

IV

When Poirot reached home, George said:

"Chief Inspector Japp is here, sir."

Japp grinned in a rueful way as Poirot came into the room.

“Here I am, old boy. Come round to say: ‘Aren’t you a marvel? How do you do it? What makes you think of these things?’”

“All this meaning—? But pardon, you will have some refreshment? A sirop? Or perhaps the whisky?”

“The whisky is good enough for me.”

A few minutes later he raised his glass, observing:

“Here’s to Hercule Poirot who is always right!”

“No, no, mon ami.”

“Here we had a lovely case of suicide. H.P. says it’s murder—wants it to be murder—and dash it all, it is murder!”

“Ah? So you agree at last?”

“Well, nobody can say I’m pigheaded. I don’t fly in the face of evidence. The trouble was there wasn’t any evidence before.”

“But there is now?”

“Yes, and I’ve come round to make the amend honourable, as you call it, and present the titbit to you on toast, as it were.”

“I am all agog, my good Japp.”

“All right. Here goes. The pistol that Frank Carter tried to shoot Blunt with on Saturday is a twin pistol to the one that killed Morley!”

Poirot stared: “But this is extraordinary!”

“Yes, it makes it look rather black for Master Frank.”

“It is not conclusive.”

"No, but it's enough to make us reconsider the suicide verdict. They're a foreign make of pistol and rather an uncommon one at that!"

Hercule Poirot stared. His eyebrows looked like crescent moons. He said at last:

"Frank Carter? No—surely not!"

Japp breathed a sigh of exasperation.

"What's the matter with you, Poirot? First you will have it that Morley was murdered and that it wasn't suicide. Then when I come and tell you we're inclined to come round to your views you hem and ha and don't seem to like it."

"You really believe that Morley was murdered by Frank Carter?"

"It fits. Carter had got a grudge against Morley—that we knew all along. He came to Queen Charlotte Street that morning—and he pretended afterwards that he had come along to tell his young woman he'd got a job—but we've now discovered that he hadn't got the job then. He didn't get it till later in the day. He admits that now. So there's lie No. 1. He can't account for where he was at twenty-five past twelve onwards. Says he was walking in the Marylebone Road, but the first thing he can prove is having a drink in a pub at five past one. And the barman says he was in a regular state—his hand shaking and his face as white as a sheet!"

Hercule Poirot sighed and shook his head. He murmured:

"It does not accord with my ideas."

"What are these ideas of yours?"

"It is very disturbing what you tell me. Very disturbing indeed. Because, you see, if you are right …"

The door opened softly and George murmured deferentially:

"Excuse me, sir, but …"

He got no further. Miss Gladys Nevill thrust him aside and came agitatedly into the room. She was crying.

"Oh, M. Poirot—"

"Here, I'll be off," said Japp hurriedly.

He left the room precipitately.

Gladys Nevill paid his back the tribute of a venomous look.

"That's the man—that horrid Inspector from Scotland Yard—it's he who has trumped up a whole case against poor Frank."

"Now, now, you must not agitate yourself."

"But he has. First they pretend that he tried to murder this Mr. Blunt and not content with that they've accused him of murdering poor Mr. Morley."

Hercule Poirot coughed. He said:

"I was down there, you know, at Exsham, when the shot was fired at Mr. Blunt."

Gladys Nevill said with a somewhat confusing use of pronouns:

"But even if Frank did—did do a foolish thing like that—and he's one of those Imperial Shirts, you know—they march with banners and have a ridiculous salute, and of course I suppose Mr. Blunt's wife was a very notorious Jewess, and they just work up these poor young men—quite harmless ones like Frank—until they think they are doing something wonderful and patriotic."

"Is that Mr. Carter's defence?" asked Hercule Poirot.

"Oh no. Frank just swears he didn't do anything and had never seen the pistol before. I haven't spoken to him, of course—they wouldn't let me—but he's got a solicitor acting for him and he told me what Frank had said. Frank just says it's all a frame-up."

Poirot murmured:

“And the solicitor is of opinion that his client had better think of a more plausible story?”

“Lawyers are so difficult. They won’t say anything straight out. But it’s the murder charge I’m worrying about. Oh! M. Poirot, I’m sure Frank couldn’t have killed Mr. Morley. I mean really—he hadn’t any reason to.”

“Is it true,” said Poirot, “that when he came round that morning he had not yet got a job of any kind?”

“Well, really, M. Poirot, I don’t see what difference that makes. Whether he got the job in the morning or the afternoon can’t matter.”

Poirot said:

“But his story was that he came to tell you about his good luck. Now, it seems, he had as yet had no luck. Why, then, did he come?”

“Well, M. Poirot, the poor boy was dispirited and upset, and to tell the truth I believe he’d been drinking a little. Poor Frank has rather a weak head—and the drink upset him and so he felt like—like making a row, and he came round to Queen Charlotte Street to have it out with Mr. Morley, because, you see, Frank is awfully sensitive and it had upset him a lot to feel that Mr. Morley disapproved of him, and was what he called poisoning my mind.”

“So he conceived the idea of making a scene in business hours?”

“Well—yes—I suppose that was his idea. Of course it was very wrong of Frank to think of such a thing.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at the tearful blonde young woman in front of him. He said:

“Did you know that Frank Carter had a pistol—or a pair of pistols?”

“Oh no, M. Poirot. I swear I didn’t. And I don’t believe it’s true, either.”

Poirot shook his head slowly in a perplexed manner.

“Oh! M. Poirot, do help us. If I could only feel that you were on our side—”

Poirot said:

“I do not take sides. I am on the side only of the truth.”

V

After he had got rid of the girl, Poirot rang up Scotland Yard. Japp had not yet returned but Detective Sergeant Beddoes was obliging and informative.

The police had not as yet found any evidence to prove Frank Carter’s possession of the pistol before the assault at Exsham.

Poirot hung up the receiver thoughtfully. It was a point in Carter’s favour. But so far it was the only one.

He had also learned from Beddoes a few more details as to the statement Frank Carter had made about his employment as gardener at Exsham. He stuck to his story of a Secret Service job. He had been given money in advance and some testimonials as to his gardening abilities and been told to apply to Mr. MacAlister, the head gardener, for the post.

His instructions were to listen to the other gardeners’ conversations and sound them as to their “red” tendencies, and to pretend to be a bit of a “red” himself. He had been interviewed and instructed in his task by a woman who had told him that she was known as Q.H.56, and that he had been recommended to her as a strong anti-communist. She had interviewed him in a dim light and he did not think he would know her again. She was a red-haired lady with a lot of makeup on.

Poirot groaned. The Phillips Oppenheim touch seemed to be reappearing.

He was tempted to consult Mr. Barnes on the subject.

According to Mr. Barnes these things happened.

The last post brought him something which disturbed him more still.

A cheap envelope in an unformed handwriting, postmarked Hertfordshire.

Poirot opened it and read:

Dear Sir,—

Hoping as you will forgive me for troubling you, but I am very worried and do not know what to do. I do not want to be mixed up with the police in any way. I know that perhaps I ought to have told something I know before, but as they said the master had shot himself it was all right I thought and I wouldn’t have liked to get Miss Nevill’s young man into trouble and never thought really for one moment as he had done it but now I see he has been took up for shooting at a gentleman in the country and so perhaps he isn’t quite all there and I ought to say but I thought I would write to you, you being a friend of the mistress and asking me so particular the other day if there was anything and of course I wish now I had told you then. But I do hope it won’t mean getting mixed up with the police because I shouldn’t like that and my mother wouldn’t like it either. She has always been most particular.

Yours respectfully
Agnes Fletcher.

Poirot murmured:

“I always knew it was something to do with some man. I guessed the wrong man, that is all.”

FIFTEEN, SIXTEEN, MAIDS IN THE KITCHEN

I

The interview with Agnes Fletcher took place in Hertford, in a somewhat derelict teashop, for Agnes had been anxious not to tell her story under Miss Morley's critical eye.

The first quarter of an hour was taken up listening to exactly how particular Agnes' mother had always been. Also how Agnes' father, though a proprietor of licensed premises, had never once had any friction with the police, closing time being strictly observed to the second, and indeed Agnes' father and mother were universally respected and looked up to in Little Darlingham, Gloucestershire, and none of Mrs. Fletcher's family of six (two having died in infancy) had ever occasioned their parents the least anxiety. And if Agnes, now, were to get mixed up with the police in any way, Mum and Dad would probably die of it, because as she'd been saying, they'd always held their heads high, and never had no trouble of any kind with the police.

After this had been repeated, da capo, and with various embellishments, several times, Agnes drew a little nearer to the subject of the interview.

"I wouldn't like to say anything to Miss Morley, sir, because it might be, you see, that she'd say as how I ought to have said something before, but me and cook, we talked it over and we didn't see as it was any business of ours, because we'd read quite clear and plain in the paper as how the master had made a mistake in the drug he was giving and that he'd shot himself and the pistol was in his hands and everything, so it did seem quite clear, didn't it, sir?"

"When did you begin to feel differently?" Poirot hoped to get a little nearer the promised revelation by an encouraging but not too direct question.

Agnes replied promptly.

“Seeing it in the paper about that Frank Carter—Miss Nevill’s young man as was. When I read as he’d shot at that gentleman where he was gardener, well, I thought, it looks as if he might be queer in the head, because I do know there’s people it takes like that, think they’re being persecuted, or something, and that they’re ringed round by enemies, and in the end it’s dangerous to keep them at home and they have to be took away to the asylum. And I thought that maybe that Frank Carter was like that, because I did remember that he used to go on about Mr. Morley and say as Mr. Morley was against him and trying to separate him from Miss Nevill, but of course she wouldn’t hear a word against him, and quite right too we thought—Emma and me, because you couldn’t deny as Mr. Carter was very nice-looking and quite the gentleman. But, of course, neither of us thought he’d really done anything to Mr. Morley. We just thought it was a bit queer if you know what I mean.”

Poirot said patiently:

“What was queer?”

“It was that morning, sir, the morning Mr. Morley shot himself. I’d been wondering if I dared run down and get the post. The postman had come but that Alfred hadn’t brought up the letters, which he wouldn’t do, not unless there was some for Miss Morley or Mr. Morley, but if it was just for Emma and me he wouldn’t bother to bring them up till lunch time.

“So I went out on the landing and I looked down over the stairs. Miss Morley didn’t like us going down to the hall, not during the master’s business hours, but I thought maybe as I’d see Alfred taking in a patient to the master and I’d call down to him as he came back.”

Agnes gasped, took a deep breath and went on: “And it was then I saw him—that Frank Carter, I mean. Halfway up the stairs he was—our stairs, I mean, above the master’s floor. And he was standing there waiting and looking down—and I’ve come to feel more and more as though there was something queer about it. He seemed to be listening very intent, if you know what I mean?”

“What time was this?”

"It must have been getting on for half past twelve, sir. And just as I was thinking: There now, it's Frank Carter, and Miss Nevill's away for the day and won't he be disappointed, and I was wondering if I ought to run down and tell him because it looked as though that lump of an Alfred had forgot, otherwise I thought he wouldn't have been waiting for her. And just as I was hesitating, Mr. Carter, he seemed to make up his mind, and he slipped down the stairs very quick and went along the passage towards the master's surgery, and I thought to myself, the master won't like that, and I wondered if there was going to be a row, but just then Emma called me, said whatever was I up to? and I went up again and then, afterwards, I heard the master had shot himself and, of course, it was so awful it just drove everything out of my head. But later, when that Police Inspector had gone I said to Emma, I said, I didn't say anything about Mr. Carter having been up with the master this morning, and she said was he? and I told her, and she said well, perhaps I ought to tell, but anyway I said I'd better wait a bit, and she agreed, because neither of us didn't want to get Frank Carter into trouble if we could help. And then, when it came to the inquest and it come out that the master had made that mistake in a drug and really had got the wind up and shot himself, quite natural-like—well, then, of course, there was no call to say anything. But reading that piece in the paper two days ago—Oh! it did give me a turn! And I said to myself, 'If he's one of those loonies that thinks they're persecuted and goes round shooting people, well, then maybe he did shoot the master after all!'"

Her eyes, anxious and scared, looked hopefully at Hercule Poirot. He put as much reassurance into his voice as he could.

"You may be sure that you have done absolutely the right thing in telling me, Agnes," he said.

"Well, I must say, sir, it does take a load off my mind. You see, I've kept saying to myself as perhaps I ought to tell. And then, you see, I thought of getting mixed up with the police and what mother would say. She's always been so particular about us all…."

"Yes, yes," said Hercule Poirot hastily.

He had had, he felt, as much of Agnes' mother as he could stand for one afternoon.

II

Poirot called at Scotland Yard and asked for Japp. When he was taken up to the Chief Inspector's room: "I want to see Carter," said Hercule Poirot.

Japp shot him a quick, sideways glance.

He said:

"What's the big idea?"

"You are unwilling?"

Japp shrugged his shoulders. He said:

"Oh, I shan't make objections. No good if I did. Who's the Home Secretary's little pet? You are. Who's got half the Cabinet in his pocket? You have. Hushing up their scandals for them."

Poirot's mind flew for a moment to that case that he had named the Case of the Augean Stables. He murmured, not without complacence:

"It was ingenious, yes? You must admit it. Well imagined, let us say."

"Nobody but you would ever have thought of such a thing! Sometimes, Poirot, I think you haven't any scruples at all!"

Poirot's face became suddenly grave. He said:

"That is not true."

"Oh, all right, Poirot, I didn't mean it. But you're so pleased sometimes with your damned ingenuity. What do you want to see Carter for? To ask him whether he really murdered Morley?"

To Japp's surprise, Poirot nodded his head emphatically.

“Yes, my friend, that is exactly the reason.”

“And I suppose you think he’ll tell you if he did?”

Japp laughed as he spoke. But Hercule Poirot remained grave. He said:

“He might tell me—yes.”

Japp looked at him curiously. He said:

“You know, I’ve known you a long time—twenty years? Something like that. But I still don’t always catch on to what you’re driving at. I know you’ve got a bee in your bonnet about young Frank Carter. For some reason or other, you don’t want him to be guilty—”

Hercule Poirot shook his head energetically.

“No, no, there you are wrong. It is the other way about—”

“I thought perhaps it was on account of that girl of his—the blonde piece. You’re a sentimental old buzzard in some ways—”

Poirot was immediately indignant.

“It is not I who am sentimental! That is an English failing! It is in England that they weep over young sweethearts and dying mothers and devoted children. Me, I am logical. If Frank Carter is a killer, then I am certainly not sentimental enough to wish to unite him in marriage to a nice but commonplace girl who, if he is hanged, will forget him in a year or two and find someone else!”

“Then why don’t you want to believe he is guilty?”

“I do want to believe he is guilty.”

“I suppose you mean that you’ve got hold of something which more or less conclusively proves him to be innocent? Why hold it up, then? You ought to play fair with us, Poirot.”

“I am playing fair with you. Presently, very shortly, I will give you the name and address of a witness who will be invaluable to you for the prosecution. Her evidence ought to clinch the case against him.”

“But then—Oh! You’ve got me all tangled up. Why are you so anxious to see him.”

“To satisfy myself,” said Hercule Poirot.

And he would say no more.

III

Frank Carter, haggard, white-faced, still feebly inclined to bluster, looked on his unexpected visitor with unconcealed disfavour. He said rudely:

“So it’s you, you ruddy little foreigner? What do you want?”

“I want to see you and talk to you.”

“Well, you see me all right. But I won’t talk. Not without my lawyer. That’s right, isn’t it? You can’t go against that. I’ve got the right to have my solicitor present before I say a word.”

“Certainly you have. You can send for him if you like—but I should prefer that you did not.”

“I daresay. Think you’re going to trap me into making some damaging admissions, eh?”

“We are quite alone, remember.”

“That’s a bit unusual, isn’t it? Got your police pals listening in, no doubt.”

“You are wrong. This is a private interview between you and me.”

Frank Carter laughed. He looked cunning and unpleasant. He said:

“Come off it! You don’t take me in with that old gag.”

“Do you remember a girl called Agnes Fletcher?”

“Never heard of her.”

“I think you will remember her, though you may never have taken much notice of her. She was house-parlourmaid at 58, Queen Charlotte Street.”

“Well, what of it?”

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

“On the morning of the day that Mr. Morley was shot, this girl Agnes happened to look over the banisters from the top floor. She saw you on the stairs—waiting and listening. Presently she saw you go along to Mr. Morley’s room. The time was then twenty-six minutes or thereabouts past twelve.”

Frank Carter trembled violently. Sweat came out on his brow. His eyes, more furtive than ever, went wildly from side to side. He shouted angrily:

“It’s a lie! It’s a damned lie! You’ve paid her—the police have paid her—to say she saw me.”

“At that time,” said Hercule Poirot, “by your own account, you had left the house and were walking in the Marylebone Road.”

“So I was. That girl’s lying. She couldn’t have seen me. It’s a dirty plot. If it’s true, why didn’t she say so before?”

Hercule Poirot said quietly:

“She did mention it at the time to her friend and colleague the cook. They were worried and puzzled and didn’t know what to do. When a verdict of suicide was brought in they were much relieved and decided that it wasn’t necessary for them to say anything.”

“I don’t believe a word of it! They’re in it together, that’s all. A couple of dirty, lying little …”

He tailed off into furious profanity.

Hercule Poirot waited.

When Carter's voice at last ceased, Poirot spoke again, still in the same calm, measured voice.

"Anger and foolish abuse will not help you. These girls are going to tell their story and it is going to be believed. Because, you see, they are telling the truth. The girl, Agnes Fletcher, did see you. You were there, on the stairs, at that time. You had not left the house. And you did go into Mr. Morley's room."

He paused and then asked quietly:

"What happened then?"

"It's a lie, I tell you!"

Hercule Poirot felt very tired—very old. He did not like Frank Carter. He disliked him very much. In his opinion Frank Carter was a bully, a liar, a swindler—altogether the type of young man the world could well do without. He, Hercule Poirot, had only to stand back and let this young man persist in his lies and the world would be rid of one of its more unpleasant inhabitants….

Hercule Poirot said:

"I suggest you tell me the truth…."

He realized the issue very clearly. Frank Carter was stupid—but he wasn't so stupid as not to see that to persist in his denial was his best and safest course. Let him once admit that he had gone into that room at twenty-six minutes past twelve and he was taking a step into grave danger. For after that, any story he told would have a good chance of being considered a lie.

Let him persist in his denial, then. If so, Hercule Poirot's duty would be over. Frank Carter would in all probability be hanged for the murder of Henry Morley—and it might be, justly hanged.

Hercule Poirot had only to get up and go.

Frank Carter said again:

“It’s a lie!”

There was a pause. Hercule Poirot did not get up and go. He would have liked to do so—very much. Nevertheless, he remained.

He leaned forward. He said—and his voice held all the compelling power of his powerful personality—

“I am not lying to you. I ask you to believe me. If you did not kill Morley your only hope is to tell me the exact truth of what happened that morning.”

The mean, treacherous face looking at him wavered, became uncertain. Frank Carter pulled at his lip. His eyes went from side to side, terrified, frankly animal eyes.

It was touch and go now….

Then suddenly, overborne by the strength of the personality confronting him, Frank Carter surrendered.

He said hoarsely:

“All right then—I’ll tell you. God curse you if you let me down now! I did go in … I went up the stairs and waited till I could be sure of getting him alone. Waited there, up above Morley’s landing. Then a gent came out and went down—fat gent. I was just making up my mind to go—when another gent came out of Morley’s room and went down too. I knew I’d got to be quick. I went along and nipped into his room without knocking. I was all set to have it out with him. Mucking about, putting my girl against me—damn him—”

He stopped.

“Yes?” said Hercule Poirot: and his voice was still urgent—compelling—

Carter’s voice croaked uncertainly.

“And he was lying there—dead. It’s true! I swear it’s true! Lying just as they said at the inquest. I couldn’t believe it at first. I stooped over him. But he was dead all right. His hand was stone cold and I saw the bullet hole in his head with a hard black crust of blood round it….”

At the memory of it, sweat broke out on his forehead again.

“I saw then I was in a jam. They’d go and say I’d done it. I hadn’t touched anything except his hand and the door handle. I wiped that with my handkerchief, both sides, as I went out, and I stole downstairs as quickly as I could. There was nobody in the hall and I let myself out and legged it away as fast as I could. No wonder I felt queer.”

He paused. His scared eyes went to Poirot.

“That’s the truth. I swear that’s the truth … He was dead already. You’ve got to believe me!”

Poirot got up. He said—and his voice was tired and sad—“I believe you.”

He moved towards the door.

Frank Carter cried out:

“They’ll hang me—they’ll hang me for a cert if they know I was in there.”

Poirot said:

“By telling the truth you have saved yourself from being hanged.”

“I don’t see it. They’ll say—”

Poirot interrupted him.

“Your story has confirmed what I knew to be the truth. You can leave it now to me.”

He went out.

He was not at all happy.

IV

He reached Mr. Barnes' House at Ealing at 6:45. He remembered that Mr. Barnes had called that a good time of day.

Mr. Barnes was at work in his garden.

He said by way of greeting:

"We need rain, M. Poirot—need it badly."

He looked thoughtfully at his guest. He said:

"You don't look very well, M. Poirot?"

"Sometimes," said Hercule Poirot, "I do not like the things I have to do."

Mr. Barnes nodded his head sympathetically.

He said:

"I know."

Hercule Poirot looked vaguely round at the neat arrangement of the small beds. He murmured:

"It is well-planned, this garden. Everything is to scale. It is small but exact."

Mr. Barnes said:

"When you have only a small place you've got to make the most of it. You can't afford to make mistakes in the planning."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

Barnes went on:

“I see you’ve got your man?”

“Frank Carter?”

“Yes. I’m rather surprised, really.”

“You did not think that it was, so to speak, a private murder?”

“No. Frankly I didn’t. What with Amberiotis and Alistair Blunt—I made sure that it was one of these Espionage or Counter-Espionage mix-ups.”

“That is the view you expounded to me at our first meeting.”

“I know. I was quite sure of it at the time.”

Poirot said slowly:

“But you were wrong.”

“Yes. Don’t rub it in. The trouble is, one goes by one’s own experience. I’ve been mixed-up in that sort of thing so much I suppose I’m inclined to see it everywhere.”

Poirot said:

“You have observed in your time a conjurer offer a card, have you not? What is called—forcing a card?”

“Yes, of course.”

“That is what was done here. Every time that one thinks of a private reason for Morley’s death, hey presto—the card is forced on one. Amberiotis, Alistair Blunt, the unsettled state of politics—of the country—” He shrugged his shoulders. “As for you, Mr. Barnes, you did more to mislead me than anybody.”

“Oh, I say, Poirot, I’m sorry. I suppose that’s true.”

"You were in a position to know, you see. So your words carried weight."

"Well—I believed what I said. That's the only apology I can make."

He paused and sighed.

"And all the time, it was a purely private motive?"

"Exactly. It has taken me a long time to see the reason for the murder—although I had one very definite piece of luck."

"What was that?"

"A fragment of conversation. Really a very illuminating fragment if only I had had the sense to realize its significance at the time."

Mr. Barnes scratched his nose thoughtfully with the trowel. A small piece of earth adhered to the side of his nose.

"Being rather cryptic, aren't you?" he asked genially.

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He said:

"I am, perhaps, aggrieved that you were not more frank with me."

"I?"

"Yes."

"My dear fellow—I never had the least idea of Carter's guilt. As far as I knew, he'd left the house long before Morley was killed. I suppose now they've found he didn't leave when he said he did?"

Poirot said:

"Carter was in the house at twenty-six minutes past twelve. He actually saw the murderer."

"Then Carter didn't—"

“Carter saw the murderer, I tell you!”

Mr. Barnes said:

“Did he recognize him?”

Slowly Hercule Poirot shook his head.

SEVENTEEN, EIGHTEEN, MAIDS IN WAITING

I

On the following day Hercule Poirot spent some hours with a theatrical agent of his acquaintance. In the afternoon he went to Oxford. On the day after that he drove down to the country—it was late when he returned.

He had telephoned before he left to make an appointment with Mr. Alistair Blunt for that same evening.

It was half past nine when he reached the Gothic House.

Alistair Blunt was alone in his library when Poirot was shown in.

He looked an eager question at his visitor as he shook hands.

He said:

“Well?”

Slowly, Hercule Poirot nodded his head.

Blunt looked at him in almost incredulous appreciation.

“Have you found her?”

“Yes. Yes, I have found her.”

He sat down. And he sighed.

Alistair Blunt said:

“You are tired?”

“Yes. I am tired. And it is not pretty—what I have to tell you.”

Blunt said:

“Is she dead?”

“That depends,” said Hercule Poirot slowly, “on how you like to look at it.”

Blunt frowned.

He said:

“My dear man, a person must be dead or alive. Miss Sainsbury Seale must be one or the other!”

“Ah, but who is Miss Sainsbury Seale?”

Alistair Blunt said:

“You don’t mean that—that there isn’t any such person?”

“Oh no, no. There was such a person. She lived in Calcutta. She taught elocution. She busied herself with good works. She came to England in the Maharanah—the same boat in which Mr. Amberiotis travelled. Although they were not in the same class, he helped her over something—some fuss about her luggage. He was, it would seem, a kindly man in little ways. And sometimes, M. Blunt, kindness is repaid in an unexpected fashion. It was so, you know, with M. Amberiotis. He chanced to meet the lady again in the streets of London. He was feeling expansive, he good-naturedly invited her to lunch with him at the Savoy. An unexpected treat for her. And an unexpected windfall for M. Amberiotis! For his kindness was not premeditated—he had no idea that this faded, middle-aged lady was going to present him with the equivalent of a gold mine. But nevertheless, that is what she did, though she never suspected the fact herself.

“She was never, you see, of the first order of intelligence. A good, well-meaning soul, but the brain, I should say, of a hen.”

Blunt said:

“Then it wasn’t she who killed the Chapman woman?”

Poirot said slowly:

“It is difficult to know just how to present the matter. I shall begin, I think, where the matter began for me. With a shoe!”

Blunt said blankly:

“With a shoe?”

Hercule Poirot nodded.

“Yes, a buckled shoe. I came out from my séance at the dentist’s and as I stood on the steps of 58, Queen Charlotte Street, a taxi stopped outside, the door opened and a woman’s foot prepared to descend. I am a man who notices a woman’s foot and ankle. It was a well-shaped foot, with a good ankle and an expensive stocking, but I did not like the shoe. It was a new, shining patent leather shoe with a large ornate buckle. Not chic—not at all chic!

“And whilst I was observing this, the rest of the lady came into sight—and frankly it was a disappointment—a middle-aged lady without charm and badly dressed.”

“Miss Sainsbury Seale?”

“Precisely. As she descended a contretemps occurred—she caught the buckle of her shoe in the door and it was wrenched off. I picked it up and returned it to her. That was all. The incident was closed.

“Later, on that same day, I went with Chief Inspector Japp to interview the lady. (She had not as yet sewn on the buckle, by the way.)

“On that same evening, Miss Sainsbury Seale walked out of her hotel and vanished. That, shall we say, is the end of Part One.

“Part Two began when Chief Inspector Japp summoned me to King Leopold Mansions. There was a fur chest in a flat there, and in that fur chest there had been found a body. I went into the room, I walked up to the chest—and the first thing I saw was a shabby buckled shoe!”

"Well?"

"You have not appreciated the point. It was a shabby shoe—a well-worn shoe. But you see, Miss Sainsbury Seale had come to King Leopold Mansions on the evening of that same day—the day of Mr. Morley's murder. In the morning the shoes were new shoes—in the evening they were old shoes. One does not wear out a pair of shoes in a day, you comprehend."

Alistair Blunt said without much interest:

"She could have two pairs of shoes, I suppose?"

"Ah, but that was not so. For Japp and I had gone up to her room at the Glengowrie Court and had looked at all her possessions—and there was no pair of buckled shoes there. She might have had an old pair of shoes, yes. She might have changed into them after a tiring day to go out in the evening, yes? But if so, the other pair would have been at the hotel. It was curious, you will admit?"

"I can't see that it is important."

"No, not important. Not at all important. But one does not like things that one cannot explain. I stood by the fur chest and I looked at the shoe—the buckle had recently been sewn on by hand. I will confess that I then had a moment of doubt—of myself. Yes, I said to myself, Hercule Poirot, you were a little light-headed perhaps this morning. You saw the world through rosy spectacles. Even the old shoes looked like new ones to you?"

"Perhaps that was the explanation?"

"But no, it was not. My eyes do not deceive me! To continue, I studied the dead body of this woman and I did not like what I saw. Why had the face been wantonly, deliberately smashed and rendered unrecognizable?"

Alistair Blunt moved restlessly. He said:

"Must we go over that again? We know—"

Hercule Poirot said firmly:

“It is necessary. I have to take you over the steps that led me at last to the truth. I said to myself: ‘Something is wrong here. Here is a dead woman in the clothes of Miss Sainsbury Seale (except, perhaps, the shoes?) and with the handbag of Miss Sainsbury Seale—but why is her face unrecognizable? Is it, perhaps, because the face is not the face of Miss Sainsbury Seale?’ And immediately I begin to put together what I have heard of the appearance of the other woman—the woman to whom the flat belongs, and I ask myself—Might it not perhaps be this other woman who lies dead here? I go then and look at the other woman’s bedroom. I try to picture to myself what sort of woman she is. In superficial appearance, very different to the other. Smart, showily dressed, very much made up. But in essentials, not unlike. Hair, build, age … But there is one difference. Mrs. Albert Chapman took a five in shoes. Miss Sainsbury Seale, I knew, took a 10-inch stocking—that is to say she would take at least a 6 in shoes. Mrs. Chapman, then, had smaller feet than Miss Sainsbury Seale. I went back to the body. If my half-formed idea was right, and the body was that of Mrs. Chapman wearing Miss Sainsbury Seale’s clothes, then the shoes should be too big. I took hold of one. But it was not loose. It fitted tightly. That looked as though it were the body of Miss Sainsbury Seale after all! But in that case, why was the face disfigured? Her identity was already proved by the handbag, which could easily have been removed, but which had not been removed.

“It was a puzzle—a tangle. In desperation I seized on Mrs. Chapman’s address book—a dentist was the only person who could prove definitely who the dead woman was—or was not. By coincidence, Mrs. Chapman’s dentist was Mr. Morley. Morley was dead, but identification was still possible. You know the result. The body was identified in the Coroner’s Court by Mr. Morley’s successor as that of Mrs. Albert Chapman.”

Blunt was fidgeting with some impatience, but Poirot took no notice. He went on:

“I was left now with a psychological problem. What sort of a woman was Mabelle Sainsbury Seale? There were two answers to that question. The first was the obvious one borne out by her whole life in India and by the testimony of her personal friends. That depicted her as an earnest, conscientious, slightly stupid woman. Was there another Miss Sainsbury Seale? Apparently there was. There was a woman who had lunched with a well-known foreign agent, who had accosted you in the street and claimed to be a close friend of your wife's (a statement that was almost certainly untrue), a woman who had left a man's house very shortly before a murder had been committed, a woman who had visited another woman on the evening when in all probability that other woman had been murdered, and who had since disappeared although she must be aware that the police force of England was looking for her. Were all these actions compatible with the character which her friends gave her? It would seem that they were not. Therefore, if Miss Sainsbury Seale were not the good, amiable creature she seemed, then it would appear that she was quite possibly a cold-blooded murderess or almost certainly an accomplice after the fact.

"I had one more criterion—my own personal impression. I had talked to Mabelle Sainsbury Seale myself. How had she struck me? And that, M. Blunt, was the most difficult question to answer of all. Everything that she said, her way of talking, her manner, her gestures, all were perfectly in accord with her given character. But they were equally in accord with a clever actress playing a part. And, after all, Mabelle Sainsbury Seale had started life as an actress.

"I had been much impressed by a conversation I had had with Mr. Barnes of Ealing who had also been a patient at 58, Queen Charlotte Street on that particular day. His theory, expressed very forcibly, was that the deaths of Morley and of Amberiotis were only incidental, so to speak—that the intended victim was you."

Alistair Blunt said:

"Oh, come now—that's a bit far-fetched."

"Is it, M. Blunt? Is it not true that at this moment there are various groups of people to whom it is vital that you should be—removed, shall we say? Shall be no longer capable of exerting your influence?"

Blunt said:

“Oh yes, that’s true enough. But why mix up this business of Morley’s death with that?”

Poirot said:

“Because there is a certain—how shall I put it?—lavishness about the case—Expense is no object—human life is no object. Yes, there is a recklessness, a lavishness—that points to a big crime!”

“You don’t think Morley shot himself because of a mistake?”

“I never thought so—not for a minute. No, Morley was murdered, Amberiotis was murdered, an unrecognizable woman was murdered—Why? For some big stake. Barnes’ theory was that somebody had tried to bribe Morley or his partner to put you out of the way.”

Alistair Blunt said sharply:

“Nonsense!”

“Ah, but is it nonsense? Say one wishes to put someone out of the way. Yes, but that someone is forewarned, forearmed, difficult of access. To kill that person it is necessary to be able to approach him without awakening his suspicions—and where would a man be less suspicious than in a dentist’s chair?”

“Well, that’s true, I suppose. I never thought of it like that.”

“It is true. And once I realized it I had my first vague glimmering of the truth.”

“So you accepted Barnes’ theory? Who is Barnes, by the way?”

“Barnes was Reilly’s twelve o’clock patient. He is retired from the Home Office and lives in Ealing. An insignificant little man. But you are wrong when you say I accepted his theory. I did not. I only accepted the principle of it.”

“What do you mean?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“All along, all the way through, I have been led astray—sometimes unwittingly, sometimes deliberately and for a purpose. All along it was presented to me, forced upon me, that this was what you might call a public crime. That is to say, that you, M. Blunt, were the focus of it all, in your public character. You, the banker, you the controller of finance, you, the upholder of conservative tradition!

“But every public character has a private life also. That was my mistake, I forgot the private life. There existed private reasons for killing Morley—Frank Carter’s for instance.

“There could also exist private reasons for killing you … You had relations who would inherit money when you died. You had people who loved and hated you—as a man—not as a public figure.

“And so I came to the supreme instance of what I call ‘the forced card.’ The purported attack upon you by Frank Carter. If that attack was genuine—then it was a political crime. But was there any other explanation? There could be. There was a second man in the shrubbery. The man who rushed up and seized Carter. A man who could easily have fired that shot and then tossed the pistol to Carter’s feet so that the latter would almost inevitably pick it up and be found with it in his hand….

“I considered the problem of Howard Raikes. Raikes had been at Queen Charlotte Street that morning of Morley’s death. Raikes was a bitter enemy of all that you stood for and were. Yes, but Raikes was something more. Raikes was the man who might marry your niece, and with you dead, your niece would inherit a very handsome income, even though you had prudently arranged that she could not touch the principal.

“Was the whole thing, after all, a private crime—a crime for private gain, for private satisfaction? Why had I thought it a public crime? Because, not once, but many times, that idea had been suggested to me, had been forced upon me like a forced card. …

“It was then, when that idea occurred to me, that I had my first glimmering of the truth. I was in church at the time and singing a verse of a psalm. It spoke of a snare laid with cords….

“A snare? Laid for me? Yes, it could be … But in that case who had laid it? There was only one person who could have laid it … And that did not make sense—or did it? Had I been looking at the case upside down? Money no object? Exactly! Reckless disregard of human life? Yes again. For the stakes for which the guilty person was playing were enormous. …

“But if this new, strange idea of mine were right, it must explain everything. It must explain, for instance, the mystery of the dual nature of Miss Sainsbury Seale. It must solve the riddle of the buckled shoe. And it must answer the question: Where is Miss Sainsbury Seale now?

“Eh bien—it did all that and more. It showed me that Miss Sainsbury Seale was the beginning and middle and end of the case. No wonder it had seemed to me that there were two Mabelle Sainsbury Seales. There were two Mabelle Sainsbury Seales. There was the good, stupid, amiable woman who was vouched for so confidently by her friends. And there was the other—the woman who was mixed-up with two murders and who told lies and who vanished mysteriously.

“Remember, the porter at King Leopold Mansions said that Miss Sainsbury Seale had been there once before….

“In my reconstruction of the case, that first time was the only time. She never left King Leopold Mansions. The other Miss Sainsbury Seale took her place. That other Mabelle Sainsbury Seale, dressed in clothes of the same type and wearing a new pair of shoes with buckles because the others were too large for her, went to the Russell Square Hotel at a busy time of day, packed up the dead woman’s clothes, paid the bill and left. She went to the Glengowrie Court Hotel. None of the real Miss Sainsbury Seale’s friends saw her after that time, remember. She played the part of Mabelle Sainsbury Seale there for over a week. She wore Mabelle Sainsbury Seale’s clothes, she talked in Mabelle Sainsbury Seale’s voice, but she had to buy a smaller pair of evening shoes, too. And then—she vanished, her last appearance being when she was seen reentering King Leopold Mansions on the evening of the day Morley was killed.”

“Are you trying to say,” demanded Alistair Blunt, “that it was Mabelle Sainsbury Seale’s dead body in that flat, after all.”

“Of course it was! It was a very clever double bluff—the smashed face was meant to raise a question of the woman’s identity!”

“But the dental evidence?”

“Ah! Now we come to it. It was not the dentist himself who gave evidence. Morley was dead. He couldn’t give evidence as to his own work. He would have known who the dead woman was. It was the charts that were put in as evidence—and the charts were faked. Both women were his patients, remember. All that had to be done was to relabel the charts, exchanging the names.”

Hercule Poirot added:

“And now you see what I meant when you asked me if the woman was dead and I replied, ‘That depends.’ For when you say ‘Miss Sainsbury Seale’—which woman do you mean? The woman who disappeared from the Glengowrie Court Hotel or the real Mabelle Sainsbury Seale.”

Alistair Blunt said:

“I know, M. Poirot, that you have a great reputation. Therefore I accept that you must have some grounds for this extraordinary assumption—for it is an assumption, nothing more. But all I can see is the fantastic improbability of the whole thing. You are saying, are you not, that Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was deliberately murdered and that Morley was also murdered to prevent his identifying her dead body. But why? That’s what I want to know. Here’s this woman—a perfectly harmless, middle-aged woman—with plenty of friends and apparently no enemies. Why on earth all this elaborate plot to get rid of her?”

“Why? Yes, that is the question. Why? As you say, Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was a perfectly harmless creature who wouldn’t hurt a fly! Why, then, was she deliberately and brutally murdered? Well, I will tell you what I think.”

“Yes?”

Hercule Poirot leaned forward. He said:

“It is my belief that Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was murdered because she happened to have too good a memory for faces.”

“What do you mean?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“We have separated the dual personality. There is the harmless lady from India. But there is one incident that falls between the two roles. Which Miss Sainsbury Seale was it who spoke to you on the doorstep of Mr. Morley’s house? She claimed, you will remember, to be ‘a great friend of your wife’s.’ Now that claim was adjudged by her friends and by the light of ordinary probability to be untrue. So we can say: ‘That was a lie. The real Miss Sainsbury Seale does not tell lies.’ So it was a lie uttered by the impostor for a purpose of her own.”

Alistair Blunt nodded.

“Yes, that reasoning is quite clear. Though I still don’t know what the purpose was.”

Poirot said:

“Ah, pardon—but let us first look at it the other way round. It was the real Miss Sainsbury Seale. She does not tell lies. So the story must be true.”

“I suppose you can look at it that way—but it seems very unlikely—”

“Of course it is unlikely! But taking that second hypothesis as fact—the story is true. Therefore Miss Sainsbury Seale did know your wife. She knew her well. Therefore—your wife must have been the type of person

Miss Sainsbury Seale would have known well. Someone in her own station of life. An Anglo-Indian—a missionary—or, to go back farther still—an actress—Therefore—not Rebecca Arnholt!

"Now, M. Blunt, do you see what I meant when I talked of a private and a public life? You are the great banker. But you are also a man who married a rich wife. And before you married her you were only a junior partner in the firm—not very long down from Oxford.

"You comprehend—I began to look at the case the right way up. Expense no object? Naturally not—to you. Reckless of human life—that, too, since for a long time you have been virtually a dictator and to a dictator his own life becomes unduly important and those of others unimportant."

Alistair Blunt said:

"What are you suggesting, M. Poirot?"

Poirot said quietly:

"I am suggesting, M. Blunt, that when you married Rebecca Arnholt, you were married already. That, dazzled by the vista, not so much of wealth, as of power, you suppressed that fact and deliberately committed bigamy. That your real wife acquiesced in the situation."

"And who was this real wife?"

"Mrs. Albert Chapman was the name she went under at King Leopold Mansions—a handy spot, not five minutes' walk from your house on the Chelsea Embankment. You borrowed the name of a real secret agent, realizing that it would give support to her hints of a husband engaged in intelligence work. Your scheme succeeded perfectly. No suspicion was ever aroused. Nevertheless, the fact remained, you had never been legally married to Rebecca Arnholt and you were guilty of bigamy. You never dreamt of danger after so many years. It came out of the blue—in the form of a tiresome woman who remembered you after nearly twenty years, as her friend's husband. Chance brought her back to this country, chance let her meet you in Queen Charlotte Street—it was chance that your niece was with you and heard what she said to you. Otherwise I might never have guessed.”

“I told you about that myself, my dear Poirot.”

“No, it was your niece who insisted on telling me and you could not very well protest too violently in case it might arouse suspicions. And after that meeting, one more evil chance (from your point of view) occurred. Mabelle Sainsbury Seale met Amberiotis, went to lunch with him and babbled to him of this meeting with a friend’s husband—‘after all these years!’—‘Looked older, of course, but had hardly changed!’ That, I admit, is pure guesswork on my part but I believe it is what happened. I do not think that Mabelle Sainsbury Seale realized for a moment that the Mr. Blunt her friend had married was the shadowy figure behind the finance of the world. The name, after all, is not an uncommon one. But Amberiotis, remember, in addition to his espionage activities, was a blackmailer. Blackmailers have an uncanny nose for a secret. Amberiotis wondered. Easy to find out just who the Mr. Blunt was. And then, I have no doubt, he wrote to you or telephoned … Oh, yes—a gold mine for Amberiotis.”

Poirot paused. He went on:

“There is only one effectual method of dealing with a really efficient and experienced blackmailer. Silence him.

“It was not a case, as I had had erroneously suggested to me, of ‘Blunt must go.’ It was, on the contrary, ‘Amberiotis must go.’ But the answer was the same! The easiest way to get at a man is when he is off his guard, and when is a man more off his guard than in the dentist’s chair?”

Poirot paused again. A faint smile came to his lips. He said:

“The truth about the case was mentioned very early. The page boy, Alfred, was reading a crime story called Death at Eleven Forty-Five. We should have taken that as an omen. For, of course, that is just about the time when Morley was killed. You shot him just as you were leaving. Then you pressed his buzzer, turned on the taps of the wash basin and left the room. You timed it so that you came down the stairs just as Alfred was taking the false Mabelle Sainsbury Seale to the lift. You actually opened the front door, perhaps you passed out, but as the lift doors shut and the lift went up you slipped inside again and went up the stairs.

“I know, from my own visits, just what Alfred did when he took up a patient. He knocked on the door, opened it, and stood back to let the patient pass in. Inside the water was running—inference, Morley was washing his hands as usual. But Alfred couldn’t actually see him.

“As soon as Alfred had gone down again in the lift, you slipped along into the surgery. Together you and your accomplice lifted the body and carried it into the adjoining office. Then a quick hunt through the files, and the charts of Mrs. Chapman and Miss Sainsbury Seale were cleverly falsified. You put on a white linen coat, perhaps your wife applied a trace of makeup. But nothing much was needed. It was Amberiotis’ first visit to Morley. He had never met you. And your photograph seldom appears in the papers. Besides, why should he have suspicions? A blackmailer does not fear his dentist. Miss Sainsbury Seale goes down and Alfred shows her out. The buzzer goes and Amberiotis is taken up. He finds the dentist washing his hands behind the door in approved fashion. He is conducted to the chair. He indicates the painful tooth. You talk the accustomed patter. You explain it will be best to freeze the gum. The procaine and adrenalin are there. You inject a big enough dose to kill. And incidentally he will not feel any lack of skill in your dentistry!

“Completely unsuspicious, Amberiotis leaves. You bring out Morley’s body and arrange it on the floor, dragging it slightly on the carpet now that you have to manage it single-handed. You wipe the pistol and put it in his hand—wipe the door handle so that your prints shall not be the last. The instruments you used have all been passed into the sterilizer. You leave the room, go down the stairs and slip out of the front door at a suitable moment. That is your only moment of danger.

“It should all have passed off so well! Two people who threatened your safety—both dead. A third person also dead—but that, from your point of view, was unavoidable. And all so easily explained. Morley’s suicide explained by the mistake he had made over Amberiotis. The two deaths cancel out. One of these regrettable accidents.

“But alas for you, I am on the scene. I have doubts. I make objections. All is not going as easily as you hoped. So there must be a second line of defences. There must be, if necessary, a scapegoat. You have already informed yourself minutely, of Morley’s household. There is this man, Frank Carter, he will do. So your accomplice arranges that he shall be engaged in a mysterious fashion as gardener. If, later, he tells such a ridiculous story no one will believe it. In due course, the body in the fur chest will come to light. At first it will be thought to be that of Miss Sainsbury Seale, then the dental evidence will be taken. Big sensation! It may seem a needless complication, but it was necessary. You do not want the police force of England to be looking for a missing Mrs. Albert Chapman. No, let Mrs. Chapman be dead—and let it be Mabelle Sainsbury Seale for whom the police look. Since they can never find her. Besides, through your influence, you can arrange to have the case dropped.

“You did do that, but since it was necessary that you should know just what I was doing, you sent for me and urged me to find the missing woman for you. And you continued, steadily, to ‘force a card’ upon me. Your accomplice rang me up with a melodramatic warning—the same idea—espionage—the public aspect. She is a clever actress, this wife of yours, but to disguise one’s voice the natural tendency is to imitate another voice. Your wife imitated the intonation of Mrs. Olivera. That puzzled me, I may say, a good deal.

“Then I was taken down to Exsham—the final performance was staged. How easy to arrange a loaded pistol amongst laurels so that a man, clipping them, shall unwittingly cause it to go off. The pistol falls at his feet. Startled, he picks it up. What more do you want? He is caught red-handed—with a ridiculous story and with a pistol which is a twin to the one with which Morley was shot.

“And all a snare for the feet of Hercule Poirot.”

Alistair Blunt stirred a little in his chair. His face was grave and a little sad. He said:

“Don’t misunderstand me, M. Poirot. How much do you guess? And how much do you actually know?”

Poirot said:

“I have a certificate of the marriage—at a registry office near Oxford—of Martin Alistair Blunt and Gerda Grant. Frank Carter saw two men leave Morley’s surgery just after twenty-five past twelve. The first was a fat man—Amberiotis. The second was, of course, you. Frank Carter did not recognize you. He only saw you from above.”

“How fair of you to mention that!”

“He went into the surgery and found Morley’s body. The hands were cold and there was dried blood round the wound. That meant that Morley had been dead some time. Therefore the dentist who attended to Amberiotis could not have been Morley and must have been Morley’s murderer.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. Helen Montressor was arrested this afternoon.”

Alistair Blunt gave one sharp movement. Then he sat very still. He said:

“That—rather tears it.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Yes. The real Helen Montressor, your distant cousin, died in Canada seven years ago. You suppressed that fact, and took advantage of it.”

A smile came to Alistair Blunt’s lips. He spoke naturally and with a kind of boyish enjoyment.

“Gerda got a kick out of it all, you know. I’d like to make you understand. You’re such a clever fellow. I married her without letting my people know. She was acting in repertory at the time. My people were the straitlaced kind, and I was going into the firm. We agreed to keep it dark. She went on acting. Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was in the company too. She knew about us. Then she went abroad with a touring company. Gerda heard of her once or twice from India. Then she stopped writing. Mabelle got mixed up with some Hindu. She was always a stupid, credulous girl.

“I wish I could make you understand about my meeting with Rebecca and my marriage. Gerda understood. The only way I can put it is that it was like Royalty. I had the chance of marrying a Queen and playing the part of Prince Consort or even King. I looked on my marriage to Gerda as morganatic. I loved her. I didn’t want to get rid of her. And the whole thing worked splendidly. I liked Rebecca immensely. She was a woman with a first-class financial brain and mine was just as good. We were good at team work. It was supremely exciting. She was an excellent companion and I think I made her happy. I was genuinely sorry when she died. The queer thing was that Gerda and I grew to enjoy the secret thrill of our meetings. We had all sorts of ingenious devices. She was an actress by nature. She had a repertoire of seven or eight characters—Mrs. Albert Chapman was only one of them. She was an American widow in Paris. I met her there when I went over on business. And she used to go to Norway with painting things as an artist. I went there for the fishing. And then, later, I passed her off as my cousin. Helen Montressor. It was great fun for us both, and it kept romance alive, I suppose. We could have married officially after Rebecca died—but we didn’t want to. Gerda would have found it hard to live my official life and, of course, something from the past might have been raked up, but I think the real reason we went on more or less the same was that we enjoyed the secrecy of it. We should have found open domesticity dull.”

Blunt paused. He said, and his voice changed and hardened:

“And then that damned fool of a woman messed up everything. Recognizing me—after all those years! And she told Amberiotis. You see—you must see—that something had to be done! It wasn’t only myself—not only the selfish point of view. If I was ruined and disgraced—the country, my country was hit as well. For I’ve done something for England, M. Poirot. I’ve held it firm and kept it solvent. It’s free from Dictators—from Fascism and from Communism. I don’t really care for money as money. I do like power—I like to rule—but I don’t want to tyrannize. We are democratic in England—truly democratic. We can grumble and say what we think and laugh at our politicians. We’re free. I care for all that—it’s been my lifework. But if I went—well, you know what would probably happen. I’m needed, M. Poirot. And a damned double-crossing, blackmailing rogue of a Greek was going to destroy my life work.

Something had to be done. Gerda saw it, too. We were sorry about the Sainsbury Seale woman—but it was no good. We'd got to silence her. She couldn't be trusted to hold her tongue. Gerda went to see her, asked her to tea, told her to ask for Mrs. Chapman, said she was staying in Mr. Chapman's flat. Mabelle Sainsbury Seale came, quite unsuspecting. She never knew anything—the medinal was in the tea—it's quite painless. You just sleep and don't wake up. The face business was done afterwards—rather sickening, but we felt it was necessary. Mrs. Chapman was to exit for good. I had given my 'cousin' Helen a cottage to live in. We decided that after a while we would get married. But first we had to get Amberiotis out of the way. It worked beautifully. He hadn't a suspicion that I wasn't a real dentist. I did my stuff with the hand pricks rather well. I didn't risk the drill. Of course, after the injection he couldn't feel what I was doing. Probably just as well!"

Poirot asked:

"The pistols?"

"Actually they belonged to a secretary I once had in America. He bought them abroad somewhere. When he left he forgot to take them."

There was a pause. Then Alistair Blunt asked:

"Is there anything else you want to know?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"What about Morley?"

Alistair Blunt said simply:

"I was sorry about Morley."

Hercule Poirot said:

"Yes, I see…."

There was a long pause, then Blunt said:

“Well, M. Poirot, what about it?”

Poirot said:

“Helen Montressor is arrested already.”

“And now it’s my turn?”

“That was my meaning, yes.”

Blunt said gently:

“But you are not happy about it, eh?”

“No, I am not at all happy.”

Alistair Blunt said:

“I’ve killed three people. So presumably I ought to be hanged. But you’ve heard my defence.”

“Which is—exactly?”

“That I believe, with all my heart and soul, that I am necessary to the continued peace and well-being of this country.”

Hercule Poirot allowed:

“That may be—yes.”

“You agree, don’t you?”

“I agree, yes. You stand for all the things that to my mind are important. For sanity and balance and stability and honest dealing.”

Alistair Blunt said quietly:

“Thanks.”

He added:

“Well, what about it?”

“You suggest that I—retire from the case?”

“Yes.”

“And your wife?”

“I’ve got a good deal of pull. Mistaken identity, that’s the line to take.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then,” said Alistair Blunt simply, “I’m for it.”

He went on:

“It’s in your hands, Poirot. It’s up to you. But I tell you this—and it’s not just self-preservation—I’m needed in the world. And do you know why? Because I’m an honest man. And because I’ve got common sense—and no particular axe of my own to grind.”

Poirot nodded. Strangely enough, he believed all that.

He said:

“Yes, that is one side. You are the right man in the right place. You have sanity, judgement, balance. But there is the other side. Three human beings who are dead.”

“Yes, but think of them! Mabelle Sainsbury Seale—you said yourself—a woman with the brains of a hen! Amberiotis—a crook and a blackmailer!”

“And Morley?”

“I’ve told you before. I’m sorry about Morley. But after all—he was a decent fellow and a good dentist—but there are other dentists.”

"Yes," said Poirot, "there are other dentists. And Frank Carter? You would have let him die, too, without regret?"

Blunt said:

"I don't waste any pity on him. He's no good. An utter rotter."

Poirot said:

"But a human being…."

"Oh well, we're all human beings…."

"Yes, we are all human beings. That is what you have not remembered. You have said that Mabelle Sainsbury Seale was a foolish human being and Amberiotis an evil one, and Frank Carter a wastrel—and Morley—Morley was only a dentist and there are other dentists. That is where you and I, M. Blunt, do not see alike. For to me the lives of those four people are just as important as your life."

"You're wrong."

"No, I am not wrong. You are a man of great natural honesty and rectitude. You took one step aside—and outwardly it has not affected you. Publicly you have continued the same, upright, trustworthy, honest. But within you the love of power grew to over-whelming heights. So you sacrificed four human lives and thought them of no account."

"Don't you realize, Poirot, that the safety and happiness of the whole nation depends on me?"

"I am not concerned with nations, Monsieur. I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them."

He got up.

"So that's your answer," said Alistair Blunt.

Hercule Poirot said in a tired voice:

“Yes—that is my answer….”

He went to the door and opened it. Two men came in.

II

Hercule Poirot went down to where a girl was waiting.

Jane Olivera, her face white and strained, stood against the mantelpiece. Beside her was Howard Raikes.

She said:

“Well?”

Poirot said gently:

“It is all over.”

Raikes said harshly:

“What do you mean?”

Poirot said:

“Mr. Alistair Blunt has been arrested for murder.”

Raikes said:

“I thought he’d buy you off….”

Jane said:

“No. I never thought that.”

Poirot sighed. He said:

“The world is yours. The New Heaven and the New Earth. In your new world, my children, let there be freedom and let there be pity … That is all I ask.”

NINETEEN, TWENTY, MY PLATE’S EMPTY

Hercule Poirot walked home along the deserted streets.

An unobtrusive figure joined him.

“Well?” said Mr. Barnes.

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

Barnes said:

“What line did he take?”

“He admitted everything and pleaded justification. He said that this country needed him.”

“So it does,” said Mr. Barnes.

He added after a minute or two:

“Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, then—”

“We may be wrong,” said Hercule Poirot.

“I never thought of that,” said Mr. Barnes. “So we may.”

They walked on for a little way, then Barnes asked curiously:

“What are you thinking about?”

Hercule Poirot quoted:

“Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.”

“Hm—I see—” said Mr. Barnes. “Saul—after the Amalekites. Yes, you could think of it that way.”

They walked on a little farther, then Barnes said:

“I take the tube here. Good night, Poirot.” He paused, then said awkwardly: “You know—there’s something I’d like to tell you.”

“Yes, mon ami?”

“Feel I owe it to you. Led you astray unintentionally. Fact of the matter is, Albert Chapman, Q.X.912.”

“Yes?”

“I’m Albert Chapman. That’s partly why I was interested. I knew, you see, that I’d never had a wife.”

He hurried away, chuckling.

Poirot stood stock still. Then his eyes opened, his eyebrows rose.

He said to himself:

“Nineteen, twenty, my plate’s empty—”

And went home.

Evil Under The Sun (1941)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

When Captain Roger Angmering built himself a house in the year 1782 on the island off Leathercombe Bay, it was thought the height of eccentricity on his part. A man of good family such as he was should have had a decorous mansion set in wide meadows with, perhaps, a running stream and good pasture.

But Captain Roger Angmering had only one great love, the sea. So he built his house—a sturdy house too, as it needed to be, on the little windswept gull-haunted promontory—cut off from land at each high tide.

He did not marry, the sea was his first and last spouse, and at his death the house and island went to a distant cousin. That cousin and his descendants thought little of the bequest. Their own acres dwindled, and their heirs grew steadily poorer.

In 1922 when the great cult of the Seaside for Holidays was finally established and the coast of Devon and Cornwall was no longer thought too hot in the summer, Arthur Angmering found his vast inconvenient late Georgian house unsaleable, but he got a good price for the odd bit of property acquired by the seafaring Captain Roger.

The sturdy house was added to and embellished. A concrete causeway was laid down from the mainland to the island. "Walks" and "Nooks" were cut and devised all round the island. There were two tennis courts, sun terraces leading down to a little bay embellished with rafts and diving boards. The Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers' Island, Leathercombe Bay, came triumphantly into being. And from June till September (with a short season at Easter) the Jolly Roger Hotel was usually packed to the attics. It was enlarged and improved in 1934 by the addition of a cocktail bar, a bigger dining room and some extra bathrooms. The prices went up.

People said:

"Ever been to Leathercombe Bay? Awfully jolly hotel there, on a sort of island. Very comfortable and no trippers or charabancs. Good cooking and all that. You ought to go."

And people did go.

II

There was one very important person (in his own estimation at least) staying at the Jolly Roger. Hercule Poirot, resplendent in a white duck suit, with a panama hat tilted over his eyes, his moustaches magnificently befurled, lay back in an improved type of deck chair and surveyed the bathing beach. A series of terraces led down to it from the hotel. On the beach itself were floats, lilos, rubber and canvas boats, balls and rubber toys. There was a long springboard and three rafts at varying distances from the shore.

Of the bathers, some were in the sea, some were lying stretched out in the sun, and some were anointing themselves carefully with oil.

On the terrace immediately above, the nonbathers sat and commented on the weather, the scene in front of them, the news in the morning papers and any other subject that appealed to them.

On Poirot's left a ceaseless flow of conversation poured in a gentle monotone from the lips of Mrs. Gardener while at the same time her needles clacked as she knitted vigorously. Beyond her, her husband, Odell C. Gardener, lay in a hammock chair, his hat tilted forward over his nose, and occasionally uttered a brief statement when called upon to do so.

On Poirot's right, Miss Brewster, a tough athletic woman with grizzled hair and a pleasant weather-beaten face, made gruff comments. The result sounded rather like a sheepdog whose short stentorian barks interrupted the ceaseless yapping of a Pomeranian.

Mrs. Gardener was saying:

"And so I said to Mr. Gardener, why, I said, sightseeing is all very well, and I do like to do a place thoroughly. But, after all, I said, we've done England pretty well and all I want now is to get to some quiet spot by the seaside and just relax. That's what I said, wasn't it, Odell? Just relax. I feel I must relax, I said. That's so, isn't it, Odell?"

Mr. Gardener, from behind his hat, murmured:

"Yes, darling."

Mrs. Gardener pursued the theme.

"And so, when I mentioned it to Mr. Kelso, at Cook's—He's arranged all our itinerary for us and been most helpful in every way. I don't really know what we'd have done without him!—well, as I say, when I mentioned it to him, Mr. Kelso said that we couldn't do better than come here. A most picturesque spot, he said, quite out of the world, and at the same time very comfortable and most exclusive in every way. And, of course, Mr. Gardener, he chipped in there and said what about the sanitary arrangements? Because, if you'll believe me, M. Poirot, a sister of Mr. Gardener's went to stay at a guesthouse once, very exclusive they said it was, and in the heart of the moors, but would you believe me, nothing but an earth closet! So naturally that made Mr. Gardener suspicious of these out-of-the-world places, didn't it, Odell?"

"Why, yes, darling," said Gardener.

"But Mr. Kelso reassured us at once. The sanitation, he said, was absolutely the latest word, and the cooking was excellent. And I'm sure that's so. And what I like about it is, it's intime, if you know what I mean. Being a small place we all talk to each other and everybody knows everybody. If there is a fault about the British it is that they're inclined to be a bit standoffish until they've known you a couple of years. After that nobody could be nicer. Mr. Kelso said that interesting people came here, and I see he was right. There's you, M. Poirot and Miss Darnley. Oh! I was just tickled to death when I found out who you were, wasn't I, Odell?"

"You were, darling."

"Ha!" said Miss Brewster, breaking in explosively. "What a thrill, eh, M. Poirot?"

Hercule Poirot raised his hands in deprecation. But it was no more than a polite gesture. Mrs. Gardener flowed smoothly on.

"You see, M. Poirot, I'd heard a lot about you from Cornelia Robson who was at Badenhof. Mr. Gardener and I were at Badenhof in May. And of course Cornelia told us all about that business in Egypt when Linnet Ridgeway was killed. She said you were wonderful and I've always been simply crazy to meet you, haven't I, Odell?"

"Yes, darling."

"And then Miss Darnley, too. I get a lot of my things at Rose Mond's and of course she is Rose Mond, isn't she? I think her clothes are ever so clever. Such a marvellous line. That dress I had on last night was one of hers. She's just a lovely woman in every way, I think."

From beyond Miss Brewster, Major Barry, who had been sitting with protuberant eyes glued to the bathers, grunted out:

"Distinguished lookin' gal!"

Mrs. Gardener clacked her needles.

"I've just got to confess one thing, M. Poirot. It gave me a kind of a turn meeting you here—not that I wasn't just thrilled to meet you, because I was. Mr. Gardener knows that. But it just came to me that you might be here—well, professionally. You know what I mean? Well, I'm just terribly sensitive, as Mr. Gardener will tell you, and I just couldn't bear it if I was to be mixed up in crime of any kind. You see—"

Mr. Gardener cleared his throat. He said:

"You see, M. Poirot, Mrs. Gardener is very sensitive."

The hands of Hercule Poirot shot into the air.

“But let me assure you, Madame, that I am here simply in the same way that you are here yourselves—to enjoy myself—to spend the holiday. I do not think of crime even.”

Miss Brewster said again, giving her short gruff bark:

“No bodies on Smugglers’ Island.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Ah! but that, it is not strictly true.” He pointed downward. “Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just—bodies!”

Major Barry said appreciatively:

“Good-looking fillies, some of ’em. Bit on the thin side, perhaps.”

Poirot cried:

“Yes, but what appeal is there? What mystery? I, I am old, of the old school, When I was young, one saw barely the ankle. The glimpse of a foamy petticoat, how alluring! The gentle swelling of the calf—a knee—a beribboned garter—”

“Naughty, naughty!” said Major Barry hoarsely.

“Much more sensible—the things we wear nowadays,” said Miss Brewster.

“Why, yes, M. Poirot,” said Mrs. Gardener. “I do think, you know, that our girls and boys nowadays lead a much more natural healthy life. They just romp about together and they—well, they—” Mrs. Gardener blushed slightly for she had a nice mind—“they think nothing of it, if you know what I mean?”

“I do know,” said Hercule Poirot. “It is deplorable!”

“Deplorable?” squeaked Mrs. Gardener.

“To remove all the romance—all the mystery! Today everything is standardized!” He waved a hand towards the recumbent figures. “That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris.”

“M. Poirot!” Mrs. Gardener was scandalized.

“Bodies—arranged on slabs—like butcher’s meat!”

“But M. Poirot, isn’t that too far-fetched for words?”

Hercule Poirot admitted:

“It may be, yes.”

“All the same,” Mrs. Gardener knitted with energy, “I’m inclined to agree with you on one point. These girls that lie out like that in the sun will grow hair on their legs and arms. I’ve said so to Irene—that’s my daughter, M. Poirot. Irene, I said to her, if you lie out like that in the sun, you’ll have hair all over you, hair on your arms and hair on your legs and hair on your bosom, and what will you look like then? I said to her. Didn’t I, Odell?”

“Yes, darling,” said Mr. Gardener.

Everyone was silent, perhaps making a mental picture of Irene when the worst had happened.

Mrs. Gardener rolled up her knitting and said:

“I wonder now—”

Mr. Gardener said:

“Yes, darling?”

He struggled out of the hammock chair and took Mrs. Gardener’s knitting and her book. He asked:

“What about joining us for a drink, Miss Brewster?”

“Not just now, thanks.”

The Gardeners went up to the hotel.

Miss Brewster said:

“American husbands are wonderful!”

III

Mrs. Gardener’s place was taken by the Reverend Stephen Lane.

Mr. Lane was a tall vigorous clergyman of fifty odd. His face was tanned and his dark grey flannel trousers were holidayfied and disreputable.

He said with enthusiasm:

“Marvellous country! I’ve been from Leathercombe Bay to Harford and back over the cliffs.”

“Warm work walking today,” said Major Barry who never walked.

“Good exercise,” said Miss Brewster. “I haven’t been for my row yet. Nothing like rowing for your stomach muscles.”

The eyes of Hercule Poirot dropped somewhat ruefully to a certain protuberance in his middle.

Miss Brewster, noting the glance, said kindly:

“You’d soon get that off, M. Poirot, if you took a rowing boat out every day.”

“Merci, Mademoiselle. I detest boats!”

“You mean small boats?”

“Boats of all sizes!” He closed his eyes and shuddered. “The movement of the sea, it is not pleasant.”

"Bless the man, the sea is as calm as a mill pond today."

Poirot replied with conviction:

"There is no such thing as a really calm sea. Always, always, there is motion."

"If you ask me," said Major Barry, "seasickness is nine-tenths nerves."

"There," said the clergyman, smiling a little, "speaks the good sailor—eh, Major?"

"Only been ill once—and that was crossing the Channel! Don't think about it, that's my motto."

"Seasickness is really a very odd thing," mused Miss Brewster. "Why should some people be subject to it and not others? It seems so unfair. And nothing to do with one's ordinary health. Quite sickly people are good sailors. Someone told me once it was something to do with one's spine. Then there's the way some people can't stand heights. I'm not very good myself, but Mrs. Redfern is far worse. The other day, on the cliff path to Harford, she turned quite giddy and simply clung to me. She told me she once got stuck halfway down that outside staircase on Milan Cathedral. She'd gone up without thinking but coming down did for her."

"She'd better not go down the ladder to Pixy Cove, then," observed Lane.

Miss Brewster made a face.

"I funk that myself. It's all right for the young. The Cowan boys and the young Mastermans, they run up and down and enjoy it."

Lane said.

"Here comes Mrs. Redfern now, coming up from her bathe."

Miss Brewster remarked:

"M. Poirot ought to approve of her. She's no sunbather."

Young Mrs. Redfern had taken off her rubber cap and was shaking out her hair. She was an ash blonde and her skin was of that dead fairness that goes with that colouring. Her legs and arms were very white.

With a hoarse chuckle, Major Barry said:

“Looks a bit uncooked among the others, doesn’t she?”

Wrapping herself in a long bathrobe Christine Redfern came up the beach and mounted the steps towards them.

She had a fair serious face, pretty in a negative way and small dainty hands and feet.

She smiled at them and dropped down beside them, tucking her bath wrap round her.

Miss Brewster said:

“You have earned M. Poirot’s good opinion. He doesn’t like the suntanning crowd. Says they’re like joints of butcher’s meat, or words to that effect.”

Christine Redfern smiled ruefully. She said:

“I wish I could sunbathe! But I don’t go brown. I only blister and get the most frightful freckles all over my arms.”

“Better than getting hair all over them like Mrs. Gardener’s Irene,” said Miss Brewster. In answer to Christine’s inquiring glance she went on: “Mrs. Gardener’s been in grand form this morning. Absolutely nonstop. ‘Isn’t that so, Odell?’ ‘Yes, darling.’” She paused and then said: “I wish, though, M. Poirot, that you’d played up to her a bit. Why didn’t you? Why didn’t you tell her that you were down here investigating a particularly gruesome murder, and that the murderer, a homicidal maniac, was certainly to be found among the guests of the hotel?”

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said:

“I very much fear she would have believed me.”

Major Barry gave a wheezy chuckle. He said:

“She certainly would.”

Emily Brewster said:

“No, I don’t believe even Mrs. Gardener would have believed in a crime staged here. This isn’t the sort of place you’d get a body!”

Hercule Poirot stirred a little in his chair. He protested. He said:

“But why not, Mademoiselle? Why should there not be what you call a ‘body’ here on Smugglers’ Island?”

Emily Brewster said:

“I don’t know. I suppose some places are more unlikely than others. This isn’t the kind of spot—” She broke off, finding it difficult to explain her meaning.

“It is romantic, yes,” agreed Hercule Poirot. “It is peaceful. The sun shines. The sea is blue. But you forget, Miss Brewster, there is evil everywhere under the sun.”

The clergyman stirred in his chair. He leaned forward. His intensely blue eyes lighted up.

Miss Brewster shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh! of course I realize that, but all the same—”

“But all the same this still seems to you an unlikely setting for crime? You forget one thing, Mademoiselle.”

“Human nature, I suppose?”

“That, yes. That, always. But that was not what I was going to say. I was going to point out to you that here everyone is on holiday.”

Emily Brewster turned a puzzled face to him.

“I don’t understand.”

Hercule Poirot beamed kindly at her. He made dabs in the air with an emphatic forefinger.

“Let us say, you have an enemy. If you seek him out in his flat, in his office, in the street—eh bien, you must have a reason—you must account for yourself. But here at the seaside it is necessary for no one to account for himself. You are at Leathercombe Bay, why? Parbleu! it is August—one goes to the seaside in August—one is on one’s holiday. It is quite natural, you see, for you to be here and for Mr. Lane to be here and for Major Barry to be here and for Mrs. Redfern and her husband to be here. Because it is the custom in England to go to the seaside in August.”

“Well,” admitted Miss Brewster, “that’s certainly a very ingenious idea. But what about the Gardeners? They’re American.”

Poirot smiled.

“Even Mrs. Gardener, as she told us, feels the need to relax. Also, since she is ‘doing’ England, she must certainly spend a fortnight at the seaside—as a good tourist, if nothing else. She enjoys watching people.”

Mrs. Redfern murmured:

“You like watching the people too, I think?”

“Madame, I will confess it. I do.”

She said thoughtfully: “You see—a good deal.”

IV

There was a pause. Stephen Lane cleared his throat and said with a trace of self-consciousness.

"I was interested, M. Poirot, in something you said just now. You said that there was evil done everywhere under the sun. It was almost a quotation from Ecclesiastes." He paused and then quoted himself: "Yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live." His face lit up with an almost fanatical light. "I was glad to hear you say that. Nowadays, no one believes in evil. It is considered, at most, a mere negation of good. Evil, people say, is done by those who know no better—who are undeveloped—who are to be pitied rather than blamed. But M. Poirot, evil is real! It is a fact! I believe in Evil like I believe in Good. It exists! It is powerful! It walks the earth!"

He stopped. His breath was coming fast. He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and looked suddenly apologetic.

"I'm sorry. I got carried away."

Poirot said calmly:

"I understand your meaning. Up to a point I agree with you. Evil does walk the earth and can be recognized as such."

Major Barry cleared his throat.

"Talking of that sort of thing, some of these fakir fellers in India—"

Major Barry had been long enough at the Jolly Roger for everyone to be on their guard against his fatal tendency to embark on long Indian stories. Both Miss Brewster and Mrs. Redfern burst into speech.

"That's your husband swimming in now, isn't it, Mrs. Redfern? How magnificent his crawl stroke is. He's an awfully good swimmer."

At the same moment Mrs. Redfern said:

"Oh look! What a lovely little boat that is out there with the red sails. It's Mr. Blatt's, isn't it?"

The sailing boat with the red sails was just crossing the end of the bay.

Major Barry grunted:

“Fanciful idea, red sails,” but the menace of the story about the fakir was avoided.

Hercule Poirot looked with appreciation at the young man who had just swum to shore. Patrick Redfern was a good specimen of humanity. Lean, bronzed with broad shoulders and narrow thighs, there was about him a kind of infectious enjoyment and gaiety—a native simplicity that endeared him to all women and most men.

He stood there shaking the water from him and raising a hand in gay salutation to his wife.

She waved back calling out:

“Come up here, Pat.”

“I’m coming.”

He went a little way along the beach to retrieve the towel he had left there.

It was then that a woman came down past them from the hotel to the beach.

Her arrival had all the importance of a stage entrance.

Moreover, she walked as though she knew it. There was no self-consciousness apparent. It would seem that she was too used to the invariable effect her presence produced.

She was tall and slender. She wore a simple backless white bathing dress and every inch of her exposed body was tanned a beautiful even shade of bronze. She was as perfect as a statue. Her hair was a rich flaming auburn curling richly and intimately into her neck. Her face had that slight hardness which is seen when thirty years have come and gone, but the whole effect of her was one of youth—of superb and triumphant vitality. There was a Chinese immobility about her face, and an upward slant of the dark blue eyes. On her head she wore a fantastic Chinese hat of jade green cardboard.

There was that about her which made every other woman on the beach seem faded and insignificant. And with equal inevitability, the eye of every male present was drawn and riveted on her.

The eyes of Hercule Poirot opened, his moustache quivered appreciatively, Major Barry sat up and his protuberant eyes bulged even farther with excitement; on Poirot's left the Reverend Stephen Lane drew in his breath with a little hiss and his figure stiffened.

Major Barry said in a hoarse whisper:

"Arlena Stuart (that's who she was before she married Marshall)—I saw her in Come and Go before she left the stage. Something worth looking at, eh?"

Christine Redfern said slowly and her voice was cold: "She's handsome—yes. I think—she looks rather a beast!"

Emily Brewster said abruptly:

"You talked about evil just now, M. Poirot. Now to my mind that woman's a personification of evil! She's a bad lot through and through. I happen to know a good deal about her."

Major Barry said reminiscently:

"I remember a gal out in Simla. She had red hair too. Wife of a subaltern. Did she set the place by the ears? I'll say she did! Men went mad about her! All the women, of course, would have liked to gouge her eyes out! She upset the apple cart in more homes than one."

He chuckled reminiscently.

"Husband was a nice quiet fellow. Worshipped the ground she walked on. Never saw a thing—or made out he didn't."

Stephen Lane said in a low voice full of intense feeling:

"Such women are a menace—a menace to—"

He stopped.

Arlena Stuart had come to the water’s edge. Two young men, little more than boys, had sprung up and come eagerly towards her. She stood smiling at them.

Her eyes slid past them to where Patrick Redfern was coming along the beach.

It was, Hercule Poirot thought, like watching the needle of a compass. Patrick Redfern was deflected, his feet changed their direction. The needle, do what it will, must obey the law of magnetism and turn to the north. Patrick Redfern’s feet brought him to Arlena Stuart.

She stood smiling at him. Then she moved slowly along the beach by the side of the waves. Patrick Redfern went with her. She stretched herself out by a rock. Redfern dropped to the shingle beside her.

Abruptly, Christine Redfern got up and went into the hotel.

V

There was an uncomfortable little silence after she had left.

Then Emily Brewster said:

“It’s rather too bad. She’s a nice little thing. They’ve only been married a year or two.”

“Gal I was speaking of,” said Major Barry, “the one in Simla. She upset a couple of really happy marriages. Seemed a pity, what?”

“There’s a type of woman,” said Miss Brewster, “who likes smashing up homes.” She added after a minute or two, “Patrick Redfern’s a fool!”

Hercule Poirot said nothing. He was gazing down the beach, but he was not looking at Patrick Redfern and Arlena Stuart.

Miss Brewster said:

“Well, I’d better go and get hold of my boat.”

She left them.

Major Barry turned his boiled gooseberry eyes with mild curiosity on Poirot.

“Well, Poirot,” he said. “What are you thinking about? You’ve not opened your mouth. What do you think of the siren? Pretty hot?”

Poirot said:

“C’est possible.”

“Now then, you old dog. I know you Frenchmen!”

Poirot said coldly:

“I am not a Frenchman!”

“Well, don’t tell me you haven’t got an eye for a pretty girl! What do you think of her, eh?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“She is not young.”

“What does that matter? A woman’s as old as she looks! Her looks are all right.”

Hercule Poirot nodded. He said:

“Yes, she is beautiful. But it is not beauty that counts in the end. It is not beauty that makes every head (except one) turn on the beach to look at her.”

“It’s IT, my boy,” said the Major. “That’s what it is—IT.”

Then he said with sudden curiosity.

“What are you looking at so steadily?”

Hercule Poirot replied: “I am looking at the exception. At the one man who did not look up when she passed.”

Major Barry followed his gaze to where it rested on a man of about forty, fair-haired and suntanned. He had a quiet pleasant face and was sitting on the beach smoking a pipe and reading The Times.

“Oh, that!” said Major Barry. “That’s the husband, my boy. That’s Marshall.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Yes, I know.”

Major Barry chuckled. He himself was a bachelor. He was accustomed to think of The Husband in three lights only—as “the Obstacle,” “the Inconvenience” or “the Safeguard.”

He said:

“Seems a nice fellow. Quiet. Wonder if my Times has come?”

He got up and went up towards the hotel.

Poirot’s glance shifted slowly to the face of Stephen Lane.

Stephen Lane was watching Arlena Marshall and Patrick Redfern. He turned suddenly to Poirot. There was a stern fanatical light in his eyes.

He said:

“That woman is evil through and through. Do you doubt it?”

Poirot said slowly:

“It is difficult to be sure.”

Stephen Lane said:

“But, man alive, don’t you feel it in the air? All round you? The presence of Evil.”

Slowly, Hercule Poirot nodded his head.

Two

When Rosamund Darnley came and sat down by him, Hercule Poirot made no attempt to disguise his pleasure.

As he has since admitted, he admired Rosamund Darnley as much as any woman he had ever met. He liked her distinction, the graceful lines of her figure, the alert proud carriage of her head. He liked the neat sleek waves of her dark hair and the ironic quality of her smile.

She was wearing a dress of some navy blue material with touches of white. It looked very simple owing to the expensive severity of its line. Rosamund Darnley as Rose Mond Ltd was one of London's best-known dressmakers.

She said:

"I don't think I like this place. I'm wondering why I came here!"

"You have been here before, have you not?"

"Yes, two years ago, at Easter. There weren't so many people then."

Hercule Poirot looked at her. He said gently:

"Something has occurred to worry you. That is right, is it not?"

She nodded. Her foot swung to and fro. She stared down at it. She said:

"I've met a ghost. That's what it is."

"A ghost, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes."

"The ghost of what? Or of whom?"

"Oh, the ghost of myself."

Poirot asked gently:

“Was it a painful ghost?”

“Unexpectedly painful. It took me back, you know….”

She paused, musing. Then she said.

“Imagine my childhood. No, you can’t! You’re not English!”

Poirot asked:

“Was it a very English childhood?”

“Oh, incredibly so! The country—a big shabby house—horses, dogs—walks in the rain—wood fires—apples in the orchard—lack of money—old tweeds—evening dresses that went on from year to year—a neglected garden—with Michaelmas daisies coming out like great banners in the autumn….”

Poirot asked gently:

“And you want to go back?”

Rosamund Darnley shook her head. She said:

“One can’t go back, can one? That—never. But I’d like to have gone on—a different way.”

Poirot said:

“I wonder.”

Rosamund Darnley laughed.

“So do I, really!”

Poirot said:

"When I was young (and that, Mademoiselle, is indeed a long time ago) there was a game entitled, 'If not yourself, who would you be?' One wrote the answer in young ladies' albums. They had gold edges and were bound in blue leather. The answer? Mademoiselle, is not really very easy to find."

Rosamund said:

"No—I suppose not. It would be a big risk. One wouldn't like to take on being Mussolini or Princess Elizabeth. As for one's friends, one knows too much about them. I remember once meeting a charming husband and wife. They were so courteous and delightful to one another and seemed on such good terms after years of marriage that I envied the woman. I'd have changed places with her willingly. Somebody told me afterwards that in private they'd never spoken to each other for eleven years!"

She laughed.

"That shows, doesn't it, that you never know?"

After a moment or two Poirot said:

"Many people, Mademoiselle, must envy you."

Rosamund Darnley said coolly:

"Oh, yes. Naturally."

She thought about it, her lips curved upward in their ironic smile.

"Yes, I'm really the perfect type of the successful woman! I enjoy the artistic satisfaction of the successful creative artist (I really do like designing clothes) and the financial satisfaction of the successful business woman. I'm very well off, I've a good figure, a passable face, and a not too malicious tongue."

She paused. Her smiled widened.

"Of course—I haven't got a husband! I've failed there, haven't I, M. Poirot?"

Poirot said gallantly:

“Mademoiselle, if you are not married, it is because none of my sex have been sufficiently eloquent. It is from choice, not necessity, that you remain single.”

Rosamund Darnley said:

“And yet, like all men, I’m sure you believe in your heart that no woman is content unless she is married and has children.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“To marry and have children, that is the common lot of women. Only one woman in a hundred—more, in a thousand, can make for herself a name and a position as you have done.”

Rosamund grinned at him.

“And yet, all the same, I’m nothing but a wretched old maid! That’s what I feel today, at any rate. I’d be happier with twopence a year and a big silent brute of a husband and a brood of brats running after me. That’s true, isn’t it?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Since you say so, then, yes, Mademoiselle.”

Rosamund laughed, her equilibrium suddenly restored. She took out a cigarette and lit it.

She said:

“You certainly know how to deal with women, M. Poirot. I now feel like taking the opposite point of view and arguing with you in favour of careers for women. Of course I’m damned well-off as I am—and I know it!”

“Then everything in the garden—or shall we say at the seaside? is lovely, Mademoiselle.”

“Quite right.”

Poirot, in his turn, extracted his cigarette case and lit one of those tiny cigarettes which it was his affection to smoke.

Regarding the ascending haze with a quizzical eye, he murmured:

“So Mr.—no, Captain Marshall is an old friend of yours, Mademoiselle?”

Rosamund sat up. She said:

“Now how do you know that? Oh, I suppose Ken told you.”

Poirot shook his head.

“Nobody has told me anything. After all, Mademoiselle, I am a detective. It was the obvious conclusion to draw.”

Rosamund Darnley said: “I don’t see it.”

“But consider!” The little man’s hands were eloquent. “You have been here a week. You are lively, gay, without a care. Today, suddenly, you speak of ghosts, of old times. What has happened? For several days there have been no new arrivals until last night when Captain Marshall and his wife and daughter arrive. Today the change! It is obvious!”

Rosamund Darnley said:

“Well, it’s true enough. Kenneth Marshall and I were more or less children together. The Marshalls lived next door to us. Ken was always nice to me—although condescending, of course, since he was four years older. I’ve not seen anything of him for a long time. It must be—fifteen years at least.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“A long time.”

Rosamund nodded.

There was a pause and then Hercule Poirot said:

“He is sympathetic, yes?”

Rosamund said warmly:

“Ken’s a dear. One of the best. Frightfully quiet and reserved. I’d say his only fault is a penchant for making unfortunate marriages.”

Poirot said in a tone of great understanding: “Ah—”

Rosamund Darnley went on.

“Kenneth’s a fool—an utter fool where women are concerned! Do you remember the Martingdale case?”

Poirot frowned.

“Martingdale? Martingdale? Arsenic, was it not?”

“Yes. Seventeen or eighteen years ago. The woman was tried for the murder of her husband.”

“And he was proved to have been an arsenic eater and she was acquitted?”

“That’s right. Well, after her acquittal, Ken married her. That’s the sort of damn silly thing he does.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“But if she was innocent?”

Rosamund Darnley said impatiently:

“Oh, I dare say she was innocent. Nobody really knows! But there are plenty of women to marry in the world without going out of your way to marry one who’s stood her trial for murder.”

Poirot said nothing. Perhaps he knew that if he kept silence Rosamund Darnley would go on. She did so.

"He was very young, of course, only just twenty-one. He was crazy about her. She died when Linda was born—a year after their marriage. I believe Ken was terribly cut up by her death. Afterwards he racketed around a lot—trying to forget, I suppose."

She paused.

"And then came this business of Arlena Stuart. She was in Revue at the time. There was the Codrington divorce case. Lady Codrington divorced Codrington, citing Arlena Stuart. They say Lord Codrington was absolutely infatuated with her. It was understood they were to be married as soon as the decree was made absolute. Actually, when it came to it, he didn't marry her. Turned her down flat. I believe she actually sued him for breach of promise. Anyway, the thing made a big stir at the time. The next thing that happens is that Ken goes and marries her. The fool—the complete fool!"

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"A man might be excused such a folly—she is beautiful, Mademoiselle."

"Yes, there's no doubt of that. There was another scandal about three years ago. Old Sir Roger Erskine left her every penny of his money. I should have thought that would have opened Ken's eyes if anything would."

"And did it not?"

Rosamund Darnley shrugged her shoulders.

"I tell you I've seen nothing of him for years. People say, though, that he took it with absolute equanimity. Why, I should like to know? Has he got an absolutely blind belief in her?"

"There might be other reasons."

"Yes. Pride! Keeping a stiff upper lip! I don't know what he really feels about her. Nobody does."

“And she? What does she feel about him?”

Rosamund stared at him.

She said:

“She? She’s the world’s first gold digger. And a man-eater as well! If anything personable in trousers comes within a hundred yards of her, it’s fresh sport for Arlena! She’s that kind.”

Poirot nodded his head slowly in complete agreement.

“Yes,” he said. “That is true what you say… Her eyes look for one thing only—men.”

Rosamund said:

“She’s got her eye on Patrick Redfern now. He’s a good-looking man—and rather the simple kind—you know, fond of his wife, and not a philanderer. That’s the kind that’s meat and drink to Arlena. I like little Mrs. Redfern—she’s nice looking in her fair washed-out way—but I don’t think she’ll stand a dog’s chance against that man-eating tiger, Arlena.”

Poirot said:

“No, it is as you say.”

He looked distressed.

Rosamund said:

“Christine Redfern was a school teacher, I believe. She’s the kind that thinks that mind has a pull over matter. She’s got a rude shock coming to her.”

Poirot shook his head vexedly.

Rosamund got up. She said:

“It’s a shame, you know.” She added vaguely: “Somebody ought to do something about it.”

II

Linda Marshall was examining her face dispassionately in her bedroom mirror. She disliked her face very much. At this minute it seemed to her to be mostly bones and freckles. She noted with distaste her heavy bush of soft brown hair (mouse, she called it in her own mind), her greenish-grey eyes, her high cheekbones and the long aggressive line of the chin. Her mouth and teeth weren’t perhaps quite so bad—but what were teeth after all? And was that a spot coming on the side of her nose?

She decided with relief that it wasn’t a spot. She thought to herself:

“It’s awful to be sixteen—simply awful.”

One didn’t, somehow, know where one was. Linda was as awkward as a young colt and as prickly as a hedgehog. She was conscious the whole time of her ungainliness and of the fact that she was neither one thing nor the other. It hadn’t been so bad at school. But now she had left school. Nobody seemed to know quite what she was going to do next. Her father talked vaguely of sending her to Paris next winter. Linda didn’t want to go to Paris—but then she didn’t want to be at home either. She’d never realized properly, somehow, until now, how very much she disliked Arlena.

Linda’s young face grew tense, her green eyes hardened.

Arlena…

She thought to herself:

“She’s a beast—a beast….”

Stepmothers! It was rotten to have a stepmother, everybody said so. And it was true! Not that Arlena was unkind to her. Most of the time she hardly noticed the girl. But when she did, there was a contemptuous amusement in her glance, in her words. The finished grace and poise of Arlena’s movements emphasized Linda’s own adolescent clumsiness. With Arlena about, one felt, shamingly, just how immature and crude one was.

But it wasn’t that only. No, it wasn’t only that.

Linda groped haltingly in the recess of her mind. She wasn’t very good at sorting out her emotions and labelling them. It was something that Arlena did to people—to the house—

“She’s bad,” thought Linda with decision. “She’s quite, quite bad.”

But you couldn’t even leave it at that. You couldn’t just elevate your nose with a sniff of moral superiority and dismiss her from your mind.

It was something she did to people. Father, now, Father was quite different….

She puzzled over it. Father coming down to take her out from school. Father taking her once for a cruise. And Father at home—with Arlena there. All—all sort of bottled up and not—and not there.

Linda thought:

“And it’ll go on like this. Day after day—month after month. I can’t bear it.”

Life stretched before her—endless—in a series of days darkened and poisoned by Arlena’s presence. She was childish enough still to have little sense of proportion. A year, to Linda, seemed like an eternity.

A big dark burning wave of hatred against Arlena surged up in her mind. She thought:

“I’d like to kill her. Oh! I wish she’d die….”

She looked out above the mirror on to the sea below.

This place was really rather fun. Or it could be fun. All those beaches and coves and queer little paths. Lots to explore. And places where one could go off by oneself and muck about. There were caves, too, so the Cowan boys had told her.

Linda thought:

“If only Arlena would go away, I could enjoy myself.”

Her mind went back to the evening of their arrival. It had been exciting coming from the mainland. The tide had been up over the causeway. They had come in a boat. The hotel had looked exciting, unusual. And then on the terrace a tall dark woman had jumped up and said:

“Why, Kenneth!”

And her father, looking frightfully surprised, had exclaimed:

“Rosamund!”

Linda considered Rosamund Darnley severely and critically in the manner of youth.

She decided that she approved of Rosamund. Rosamund, she thought, was sensible. And her hair grew nicely—as though it fitted her—most people’s hair didn’t fit them. And her clothes were nice. And she had a kind of funny amused face—as though it were amused at herself, not at you. Rosamund had been nice to her, Linda. She hadn’t been gushing or said things. (Under the term of “saying things” Linda grouped a mass of miscellaneous dislikes.) And Rosamund hadn’t looked as though she thought Linda a fool. In fact she’d treated Linda as though she was a real human being. Linda so seldom felt like a real human being that she was deeply grateful when anyone appeared to consider her one.

Father, too, had seemed pleased to see Miss Darnley.

Funny—he’d looked quite different, all of a sudden. He’d looked—he’d looked—Linda puzzled it out—why, young, that was it! He’d laughed—a queer boyish laugh. Now Linda came to think of it, she’d very seldom heard him laugh.

She felt puzzled. It was as though she'd got a glimpse of quite a different person. She thought:

"I wonder what Father was like when he was my age…?"

But that was too difficult. She gave it up.

An idea flashed across her mind.

What fun it would have been if they'd come here and found Miss Darnley here—just she and Father.

A vista opened out just for a minute. Father, boyish and laughing, Miss Darnley, herself—and all the fun one could have on the island—bathing—caves—

The blackness shut down again.

Arlena. One couldn't enjoy oneself with Arlena about. Why not? Well, she, Linda, couldn't anyway. You couldn't be happy when there was a person there you—hated. Yes, hated. She hated Arlena.

Very slowly again that black burning wave of hatred rose up again.

Linda's face went very white. Her lips parted a little. The pupils of her eyes contracted. And her fingers stiffened and clenched themselves….

III

Kenneth Marshall tapped on his wife's door. When her voice answered, he opened the door and went in.

Arlena was just putting the finishing touches to her toilet. She was dressed in glittering green and looked a little like a mermaid. She was standing in front of the glass applying mascara to her eyelashes. She said:

"Oh, it's you, Ken."

"Yes. I wondered if you were ready."

“Just a minute.”

Kenneth Marshall strolled to the window. He looked out on the sea. His face, as usual, displayed no emotion of any kind. It was pleasant and ordinary.

Turning round, he said:

“Arlena?”

“Yes?”

“You’ve met Redfern before, I gather?”

Arlena said easily:

“Oh yes, darling. At a cocktail party somewhere. I thought he was rather a pet.”

“So I gather. Did you know that he and his wife were coming down here?”

Arlena opened her eyes very wide.

“Oh no, darling. It was the greatest surprise!”

Kenneth Marshall said quietly:

“I thought, perhaps, that that was what put the idea of this place into your head. You were very keen we should come here.”

Arlena put down the mascara. She turned towards him. She smiled—a soft seductive smile. She said:

“Somebody told me about this place. I think it was the Rylands. They said it was simply too marvellous—so unspoilt! Don’t you like it?”

Kenneth Marshall said:

“I’m not sure.”

“Oh, darling, but you adore bathing and lazing about. I’m sure you’ll simply adore it here.”

“I can see that you mean to enjoy yourself.”

Her eyes widened a little. She looked at him uncertainly.

Kenneth Marshall said:

“I suppose the truth of it is that you told young Redfern that you were coming here?”

Arlena said:

“Kenneth darling, you’re not going to be horrid, are you?”

Kenneth Marshall said:

“Look here, Arlena. I know what you’re like. They’re rather a nice young couple. That boy’s fond of his wife, really. Must you upset the whole blinking show?”

Arlena said:

“It’s so unfair blaming me. I haven’t done anything—anything at all. I can’t help it if—”

He prompted her.

“If what?”

Her eyelids fluttered.

“Well, of course. I know people do go crazy about me. But it’s not my doing. They just get like that.”

“So you do admit that young Redfern is crazy about you?”

Arlena murmured:

"It's really rather stupid of him."

She moved a step towards her husband.

"But you know, don't you, Ken, that I don't really care for anyone but you?"

She looked up at him through her darkened lashes.

It was a marvellous look—a look that few men could have resisted.

Kenneth Marshall looked down at her gravely. His face was composed. His voice quiet. He said:

"I think I know you pretty well, Arlena…."

IV

When you came out of the hotel on the south side the terraces and the bathing beach were immediately below you. There was also a path that led off round the cliff on the southwest side of the island. A little way along it, a few steps led down to a series of recesses cut into the cliff and labelled on the hotel map of the island as Sunny Ledge. Here cut out of the cliff were niches with seats in them.

To one of these, immediately after dinner, came Patrick Redfern and his wife. It was a lovely clear night with a bright moon.

The Redferns sat down. For a while they were silent

At last Patrick Redfern said:

"It's a glorious evening, isn't it, Christine?"

"Yes."

Something in her voice may have made him uneasy. He sat without looking at her.

Christine Redfern asked in her quiet voice:

“Did you know that woman was going to be here?”

He turned sharply. He said:

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do.”

“Look here, Christine. I don’t know what has come over you—”

She interrupted. Her voice held feeling now. It trembled.

“Over me? It’s what has come over you!”

“Nothing’s come over me.”

“Oh! Patrick! it has! You insisted so on coming here. You were quite vehement. I wanted to go to Tintagel again where—where we had our honeymoon. You were bent on coming here.”

“Well, why not? It’s a fascinating spot.”

“Perhaps. But you wanted to come here because she was going to be here.”

“She? Who is she?”

“Mrs. Marshall. You—you’re infatuated with her.”

“For God’s sake, Christine, don’t make a fool of yourself. It’s not like you to be jealous.”

His bluster was a little uncertain. He exaggerated it.

She said:

“We’ve been so happy.”

“Happy? Of course we’ve been happy! We are happy. But we shan’t go on being happy if I can’t even speak to another woman without you kicking up a row.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Yes, it is. In marriage one has got to have—well—friendships with other people. This suspicious attitude is all wrong. I—I can’t speak to a pretty woman without your jumping to the conclusion that I’m in love with her—”

He stopped. He shrugged his shoulders.

Christine Redfern said:

“You are in love with her….”

“Oh, don’t be a fool, Christine! I’ve—I’ve barely spoken to her.”

“That’s not true.”

“Don’t for goodness” sake get into the habit of being jealous of every pretty woman we come across.”

Christine Redfern said:

“She’s not just any pretty woman! She’s—she’s different! She’s a bad lot! Yes, she is. She’ll do you harm, Patrick, please, give it up. Let’s go away from here.”

Patrick Redfern stuck out his chin mutinously. He looked, somehow, very young as he said defiantly:

“Don’t be ridiculous, Christine. And—and don’t let’s quarrel about it.”

“I don’t want to quarrel.”

“Then behave like a reasonable human being. Come on, let’s go back to the hotel.”

He got up. There was a pause, then Christine Redfern got up too.

She said:

“Very well….”

In the recess adjoining, on the seat there, Hercule Poirot sat and shook his head sorrowfully.

Some people might have scrupulously removed themselves from earshot of a private conversation. But not Hercule Poirot. He had no scruples of that kind.

“Besides,” as he explained to his friend Hastings at a later date, “it was a question of murder.”

Hastings said, staring:

“But the murder hadn’t happened, then.”

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said:

“But already, mon cher, it was very clearly indicated.”

“Then why didn’t you stop it?”

And Hercule Poirot, with a sigh, said as he had said once before in Egypt, that if a person is determined to commit murder it is not easy to prevent them. He does not blame himself for what happened. It was, according to him, inevitable.

Three

Rosamund Darnley and Kenneth Marshall sat on the short springy turf of the cliff overlooking Gull Cove. This was on the east side of the island. People came here in the morning sometimes to bathe when they wanted to be peaceful.

Rosamund said:

“It’s nice to get away from people.”

Marshall murmured inaudibly:

“M—m, yes.”

He rolled over, sniffing at the short turf.

“Smells good. Remember the downs at Shipley?”

“Rather.”

“Pretty good, those days.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve not changed much, Rosamund.”

“Yes, I have. I’ve changed enormously.”

“You’ve been very successful and you’re rich and all that, but you’re the same old Rosamund.”

Rosamund murmured:

“I wish I were.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. It’s a pity, isn’t it, Kenneth, that we can’t keep the nice natures and high ideals that we had when we were young?”

“I don’t know that your nature was ever particularly nice, my child. You used to get into the most frightful rages. You half-choked me once when you flew at me in a temper.”

Rosamund laughed. She said:

“Do you remember the day that we took Toby down to get water rats?”

They spent some minutes in recalling old adventures.

Then there came a pause.

Rosamund’s fingers played with the clasp of her bag. She said at last:

“Kenneth?”

“Um.” His reply was indistinct. He was still lying on his face on the turf.

“If I say something to you that is probably outrageously impertinent will you never speak to me again?”

He rolled over and sat up.

“I don’t think,” he said seriously, “that I would ever regard anything you said as impertinent. You see, you belong.”

She nodded in acceptance of all that last phrase meant. She concealed only the pleasure it gave her.

“Kenneth, why don’t you get a divorce from your wife?”

His face altered. It hardened—the happy expression died out of it. He took a pipe from his pocket and began filling it.

Rosamund said:

"I'm sorry if I've offended you."

He said quietly:

"You haven't offended me."

"Well then, why don't you?"

"You don't understand, my dear girl."

"Are you—so frightfully fond of her?"

"It's not just a question of that. You see, I married her."

"I know. But she's—pretty notorious."

He considered that for a moment, ramming in the tobacco carefully.

"Is she? I suppose she is."

"You could divorce her, Ken."

"My dear girl, you've got no business to say a thing like that. Just because men lose their heads about her a bit isn't to say that she loses hers."

Rosamund bit off a rejoinder. Then she said:

"You could fix it so that she divorced you—if you prefer it that way."

"I dare say I could."

"You ought to, Ken. Really, I mean it. There's the child."

"Linda?"

"Yes, Linda."

"What's Linda to do with it?"

"Arlena's not good for Linda. She isn't really. Linda, I think, feels things a good deal."

Kenneth Marshall applied a match to his pipe. Between puffs he said:

"Yes—there's something in that. I suppose Arlena and Linda aren't very good for each other. Not the right thing for a girl perhaps. It's a bit worrying."

Rosamund said:

"I like Linda—very much. There's something—fine about her."

Kenneth said:

"She's like her mother. She takes things hard like Ruth did."

Rosamund said:

"Then don't you think—really—that you ought to get rid of Arlena?"

"Fix up a divorce?"

"Yes. People are doing that all the time."

Kenneth Marshall said with sudden vehemence:

"Yes, and that's just what I hate."

"Hate?" She was startled.

"Yes. Sort of attitude to life there is nowadays. If you take on a thing and don't like it, then you get yourself out of it as quick as possible! Dash it all, there's got to be such a thing as good faith. If you marry a woman and engage yourself to look after her, well it's up to you to do it. It's your show. You've taken it on. I'm sick of quick marriage and easy divorce. Arlena's my wife, that's all there is to it."

Rosamund leaned forward. She said in a low voice:

“So it’s like that with you? ‘Till death do us part?’”

Kenneth Marshall nodded his head.

He said:

“That’s just it.”

Rosamund said:

“I see.”

II

Mr. Horace Blatt, returning to Leathercombe Bay down a narrow twisting lane, nearly ran down Mrs. Redfern at a corner.

As she flattened herself into the hedge, Mr. Blatt brought his Sunbeam to a halt by applying the brakes vigorously.

“Hullo-ullo-ullo,” said Mr. Blatt cheerfully.

He was a large man with a red face and a fringe of reddish hair round a shining bald spot.

It was Mr. Blatt’s apparent ambition to be the life and soul of any place he happened to be in. The Jolly Roger Hotel, in his opinion, given somewhat loudly, needed brightening up. He was puzzled at the way people seemed to melt and disappear when he himself arrived on the scene.

“Nearly made you into strawberry jam, didn’t I?” said Mr. Blatt gaily.

Christine Redfern said:

“Yes, you did.”

“Jump in,” said Mr. Blatt.

“Oh, thanks—I think I’ll walk.”

“Nonsense,” said Mr. Blatt. “What’s a car for?”

Yielding to necessity Christine Redfern got in.

Mr. Blatt restarted the engine which had stopped owing to the suddenness with which he had previously pulled up.

Mr. Blatt inquired:

“And what are you doing walking about all alone? That’s all wrong, a nice looking girl like you.”

Christine said hurriedly:

“Oh! I like being alone.”

Mr. Blatt gave her a terrific dig with his elbow, nearly sending the car into the hedge at the same time.

“Girls always say that,” he said. “They don’t mean it. You know, that place, the Jolly Roger, wants a bit of livening up. Nothing jolly about it. No life in it. Of course there’s a good amount of duds staying there. A lot of kids, to begin with and a lot of old fogeys too. There’s that old Anglo-Indian bore and that athletic parson and those yapping Americans and that foreigner with the moustache—makes me laugh that moustache of his! I should say he’s a hairdresser, something of that sort.”

Christine shook her head.

“Oh no, he’s a detective.”

Mr. Blatt nearly let the car go into the hedge again.

“A detective? D’you mean he’s in disguise?”

Christine smiled faintly.

She said:

“Oh no, he really is like that. He’s Hercule Poirot. You must have heard of him.”

Mr. Blatt said:

“Didn’t catch his name properly. Oh yes, I’ve heard of him. But I thought he was dead. Dash it, he ought to be dead. What’s he after down here?”

“He’s not after anything—he’s just on a holiday.”

“Well, I suppose that might be so,” Mr. Blatt seemed doubtful about it. “Looks a bit of a bounder, doesn’t he?”

“Well,” said Christine and hesitated. “Perhaps a little peculiar.”

“What I say is,” said Mr. Blatt, “what’s wrong with Scotland Yard? Buy British every time for me.”

He reached the bottom of the hill and with a triumphant fanfare of the horn ran the car into the Jolly Roger’s garage which was situated, for tidal reasons, on the mainland opposite the hotel.

III

Linda Marshall was in the small shop which catered for the wants of visitors to Leathercombe Bay. One side of it was devoted to shelves on which were books which could be borrowed for the sum of twopence. The newest of them was ten years old, some were twenty years old and others older still.

Linda took first one and then another doubtfully from the shelf and glanced into it. She decided that she couldn’t possibly read The Four Feathers or Vice Versa. She took out a small squat volume in brown calf.

The time passed….

With a start Linda shoved the book back in the shelf as Christine Redfern’s voice said:

“What are you reading, Linda?”

Linda said hurriedly:

“Nothing. I’m looking for a book.”

She pulled out The Marriage of William Ashe at random and advanced to the counter fumbling for twopence.

Christine said:

“Mr. Blatt just drove me home—after nearly running over me first. I really felt I couldn’t walk all across the causeway with him, so I said I had to buy some things.”

Linda said:

“He’s awful, isn’t he? Always saying how rich he is and making the most terrible jokes.”

Christine said:

“Poor man. One really feels rather sorry for him.”

Linda didn’t agree. She didn’t see anything to be sorry for in Mr. Blatt. She was young and ruthless.

She walked with Christine Redfern out of the shop and down towards the causeway.

She was busy with her own thoughts. She liked Christine Redfern. She and Rosamund Darnley were the only bearable people on the island in Linda’s opinion. Neither of them talked much to her for one thing. Now, as they walked, Christine didn’t say anything. That, Linda thought, was sensible. If you hadn’t anything worth saying why go chattering all the time?

She lost herself in her own perplexities.

She said suddenly:

“Mrs. Redfern, have you ever felt that everything’s so awful—so terrible—that you’ll—oh, burst…?”

The words were almost comic, but Linda’s face, drawn and anxious, was not. Christine Redfern, looking at her at first vaguely, with scarcely comprehending eyes, certainly saw nothing to laugh at….

She caught her breath sharply.

She said:

“Yes—yes—I have felt—just that….”

IV

Mr. Blatt said:

“So you’re the famous sleuth, eh?”

They were in the cocktail bar, a favourite haunt of Mr. Blatt’s.

Hercule Poirot acknowledged the remark with his usual lack of modesty.

Mr. Blatt went on.

“And what are you doing down here—on a job?”

“No, no. I repose myself. I take the holiday.”

Mr. Blatt winked.

“You’d say that anyway, wouldn’t you?”

Poirot replied:

“Not necessarily.”

Horace Blatt said:

"Oh! Come now. As a matter of fact you'd be safe enough with me. I don't repeat all I hear! Learnt to keep my mouth shut years ago. Shouldn't have got on the way I have if I hadn't known how to do that. But you know what most people are—yap, yap, yap about everything they hear! Now you can't afford that in your trade! That's why you've got to keep it up that you're here holiday-making and nothing else."

Poirot asked:

"And why should you suppose the contrary?"

Mr. Blatt closed one eye.

He said:

"I'm a man of the world. I know the cut of a fellow's jib. A man like you would be at Deauville or Le Touquet or down at Juan les Pins. That's your —what's the phrase?—spiritual home."

Poirot sighed. He looked out of the window. Rain was falling and mist encircled the island. He said:

"It is possible that you are right! There, at least, in wet weather there are the distractions."

"Good old Casino!" said Mr. Blatt. "You know, I've had to work pretty hard most of my life. No time for holidays or kickshaws. I meant to make good and I have made good. Now I can do what I please. My money's as good as any man's. I've seen a bit of life in the last few years, I can tell you."

Poirot murmured:

"Ah, yes?"

"Don't know why I came to this place," Mr. Blatt continued.

Poirot observed:

"I, too, wondered?"

"Eh, what's that?"

Poirot waved an eloquent hand.

"I, too, am not without observation. I should have expected you most certainly to choose Deauville or Biarritz."

"Instead of which, we're both here, eh?"

Mr. Blatt gave a hoarse chuckle.

"Don't really know why I came here," he mused. "I think, you know, it sounded romantic. Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers' Island. That kind of address tickles you up, you know. Makes you think of when you were a boy. Pirates, smuggling, all that."

He laughed, rather self-consciously.

"I used to sail quite a bit as a boy. Not this part of the world. Off the East coast. Funny how a taste for that sort of thing never quite leaves you. I could have a tip-top yacht if I liked, but somehow I don't really fancy it. I like mucking about in that little yawl of mine. Redfern's keen on sailing, too. He's been out with me once or twice. Can't get hold of him now—always hanging round that red-haired wife of Marshall's."

He paused, then lowering his voice, he went on:

"Mostly a dried up lot of sticks in this hotel! Mrs. Marshall's about the only lively spot! I should think Marshall's got his hands full looking after her. All sorts of stories about her in her stage days—and after! Men go crazy about her. You'll see, there'll be a spot of trouble one of these days."

Poirot asked: "What kind of trouble?"

Horace Blatt replied:

"That depends. I'd say, looking at Marshall, that he's a man with a funny kind of temper. As a matter of fact, I know he is. Heard something about him. I’ve met that quiet sort. Never know where you are with that kind. Redfern had better look out—”

He broke off, as the subject of his words came into the bar. He went on speaking loudly and self-consciously.

“And, as I say, sailing round this coast is good fun. Hullo, Redfern, have one with me? What’ll you have? Dry Martini? Right. What about you, M. Poirot?”

Poirot shook his head.

Patrick Redfern sat down and said:

“Sailing? It’s the best fun in the world. Wish I could do more of it. Used to spend most of my time as a boy in a sailing dinghy round this coast.”

Poirot said:

“Then you know this part of the world well?”

“Rather! I knew this place before there was a hotel on it. There were just a few fishermen’s cottages at Leathercombe Bay and a tumbledown old house, all shut up, on the island.”

“There was a house here?”

“Oh, yes, but it hadn’t been lived in for years. Was practically falling down. There used to be all sorts of stories of secret passages from the house to Pixy’s Cave. We were always looking for that secret passage, I remember.”

Horace Blatt spilt his drink. He cursed, mopped himself and asked:

“What is this Pixy’s Cave?”

Patrick said:

“Oh, don’t you know it? It’s on Pixy Cove. You can’t find the entrance to it easily. It’s among a lot of piled up boulders at one end. Just a long thin crack. You can just squeeze through it. Inside it widens out into quite a big cave. You can imagine what fun it was to a boy! An old fisherman showed it to me. Nowadays, even the fishermen don't know about it. I asked one the other day why the place was called Pixy Cove and he couldn't tell me."

Hercule Poirot said:

"But I still do not understand. What is this pixy?"

Patrick Redfern said:

"Oh! that's typically Devonshire. There's the pixy's cave at Sheepstor on the Moor. You're supposed to leave a pin, you know, as a present for the pixy. A pixy is a kind of moor spirit."

Hercule Poirot said:

"Ah! but it is interesting, that."

Patrick Redfern went on.

"There's a lot of pixy lore on Dartmoor still. There are tors that are said to pixy-ridden, and I expect that farmers coming home after a thick night still complain of being pixy-led."

Horace Blatt said:

"You mean when they've had a couple?"

Patrick Redfern said with a smile:

"That's certainly the commonsense explanation!"

Blatt looked at his watch. He said:

"I'm going in to dinner. On the whole, Redfern, pirates are my favourites, not pixies."

Patrick Redfern said with a laugh as the other went out:

“Faith, I’d like to see the old boy pixy-led himself!”

Poirot observed meditatively:

“For a hard-bitten business man, M. Blatt seems to have a very romantic imagination.”

Patrick Redfern said:

“That’s because he’s only half-educated. Or so my wife says. Look at what he reads! Nothing but thrillers or Wild West stories.”

Poirot said:

“You mean that he has still the mentality of a boy?”

“Well, don’t you think so, sir?”

“Me, I have not seen very much of him.”

“I haven’t either. I’ve been out sailing with him once or twice—but he doesn’t really like having anyone with him. He prefers to be on his own.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“That is indeed curious. It is singularly unlike his practice on land.”

Redfern laughed. He said:

“I know. We all have a bit of trouble keeping out of his way. He’d like to turn this place into a cross between Margate and Le Touquet.”

Poirot said nothing for a minute or two. He was studying the laughing face of his companion very attentively. He said suddenly and unexpectedly:

“I think, M. Redfern, that you enjoy living.”

Patrick stared at him, surprised.

“Indeed I do. Why not?”

“Why not indeed,” agreed Poirot. “I make you my felicitation on the fact.”

Smiling a little, Patrick Redfern said:

“Thank you, sir.”

“That is why, as an older man, a very much older man, I venture to offer you a piece of advice.”

“Yes, sir?”

“A very wise friend of mine in the Police Force said to me years ago: ‘Hercule, my friend, if you would know tranquillity, avoid women.’”

Patrick Redfern said:

“I’m afraid it’s a bit late for that, sir. I’m married, you know.”

“I do know. Your wife is a very charming, a very accomplished woman. She is, I think, very fond of you.”

Patrick Redfern said sharply:

“I’m very fond of her.”

“Ah,” said Hercule Poirot, “I am delighted to hear it.”

Patrick’s brow was suddenly like thunder.

“Look here, M. Poirot, what are you getting at?”

“Les Femmes.” Poirot leaned back and closed his eyes. “I know something of them. They are capable of complicating life unbearably. And the English, they conduct their affairs indescribably. If it was necessary for you to come here, M. Redfern, why, in the name of heaven, did you bring your wife?”

Patrick Redfern said angrily:

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Hercule Poirot said calmly:

“You know perfectly. I am not so foolish as to argue with an infatuated man. I utter only the word of caution.”

“You’ve been listening to these damned scandalmongers. Mrs. Gardener, the Brewster woman—nothing to do but to clack their tongues all day. Just because a woman’s good-looking—they’re down on her like a sack of coals.”

Hercule Poirot got up. He murmured:

“Are you really as young as all that?”

Shaking his head, he left the bar. Patrick Redfern stared angrily after him.

V

Hercule Poirot paused in the hall on his way from the dining room. The doors were open—a breath of soft night air came in.

The rain had stopped and the mist had dispersed. It was a fine night again.

Hercule Poirot found Mrs. Redfern in her favourite seat on the cliff ledge. He stopped by her and said:

“This seat is damp. You should not sit here. You will catch the chill.”

“No, I shan’t. And what does it matter anyway.”

“Tscha, tscha, you are not a child! You are an educated woman. You must look at things sensibly.”

She said coldly:

“I can assure you I never take cold.”

Poirot said:

“It has been a wet day. The wind blew, the rain came down, and the mist was everywhere so that one could not see through it. Eh bien, what is it like now? The mists have rolled away, the sky is clear and up above the stars shine. That is like life, Madame.”

Christine said in a low fierce voice:

“Do you know what I am most sick of in this place?”

“What, Madame?”

“Pity.”

She brought the word out like the flick of a whip.

She went on:

“Do you think I don’t know? That I can’t see? All the time people are saying: ‘Poor Mrs. Redfern—that poor little woman.’ And anyway I’m not little, I’m tall. They say little because they are sorry for me. And I can’t bear it!”

Cautiously, Hercule Poirot spread his handkerchief on the seat and sat down. He said thoughtfully:

“There is something in that.”

“That woman—” said Christine and stopped.

Poirot said gravely:

“Will you allow me to tell you something, Madame? Something that is as true as the stars above us? The Arlena Stuarts—or Arlena Marshalls—of this world—do not count.”

Christine Redfern said:

“Nonsense.”

“I assure you, it is true. Their Empire is of the moment and for the moment. To count—really and truly to count—a woman must have goodness or brains.”

Christine said scornfully:

“Do you think men care for goodness or brains?”

Poirot said gravely:

“Fundamentally, yes.”

Christine laughed shortly.

“I don’t agree with you.”

Poirot said:

“Your husband loves you, Madame. I know it.”

“You can’t know it.”

“Yes, yes. I know it. I have seen him looking at you.”

Suddenly she broke down. She wept stormily and bitterly against Poirot’s accommodating shoulder.

She said:

“I can’t bear it … I can’t bear it….”

Poirot patted her arm. He said soothingly:

“Patience—only patience.”

She sat up and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. She said in a stifled voice:

"It's all right. I'm better now. Leave me. I'd—I'd rather be alone."

He obeyed and left her sitting there while he himself followed the winding path down to the hotel.

He was nearly there when he heard the murmur of voices.

He turned a little aside from the path. There was a gap in the bushes.

He saw Arlena Marshall and Patrick Redfern beside her. He heard the man's voice, with the throb in it of emotion.

"I'm crazy about you—crazy—you've driven me mad… You do care a little—you do care?"

He saw Arlena Marshall's face—it was, he thought, like a sleek happy cat—it was animal, not human. She said softly:

"Of course, Patrick darling, I adore you. You know that…."

For once Hercule Poirot cut his eavesdropping short. He went back to the path and on down to the hotel.

A figure joined him suddenly. It was Captain Marshall.

Marshall said:

"Remarkable night, what? After that foul day." He looked up at the sky. "Looks as though we should have fine weather tomorrow."

Four

The morning of the 25th of August dawned bright and cloudless. It was a morning to tempt even an inveterate sluggard to rise early.

Several people rose early that morning at the Jolly Roger.

It was eight o’clock when Linda, sitting at her dressing table, turned a little thick calf-bound volume face downwards, sprawling it open and looked at her own face in the mirror.

Her lips were set tight together and the pupils of her eyes contracted.

She said below her breath:

“I’ll do it….”

She slipped out of her pyjamas and into her bathing dress. Over it she flung on a bathrobe and laced espadrilles on her feet.

She went out of her room and along the passage. At the end of it a door on to the balcony led to an outside staircase leading directly down to the rocks below the hotel. There was a small iron ladder clamped on to the rocks leading down into the water which was used by many of the hotel guests for a before-breakfast dip as taking up less time than going down to the main bathing beach.

As Linda started down from the balcony she met her father coming up. He said:

“You’re up early. Going to have a dip?”

Linda nodded.

They passed each other.

Instead of going on down the rocks, however, Linda skirted round the hotel to the left until she came to the path down to the causeway connecting the hotel with the mainland. The tide was high and the causeway under water, but the boat that took hotel guests across was tied to a little jetty. The man in charge of it was absent at the moment. Linda got in, untied it and rowed herself across.

She tied up the boat on the other side, walked up the slope, past the hotel garage and along until she reached the general shop.

The woman had just taken down the shutters and was engaged in sweeping out the floor. She looked amazed at the sight of Linda.

"Well, Miss, you are up early."

Linda put her hand in the pocket of her bath wrap and brought out some money. She proceeded to make her purchases.

II

Christine Redfern was standing in Linda's room when the girl returned.

"Oh, there you are," Christine exclaimed. "I thought you couldn't be really up yet."

Linda said:

"No, I've been bathing."

Noticing the parcel in her hand, Christine said with surprise:

"The post has come early today."

Linda flushed. With her habitual nervous clumsiness the parcel slipped from her hand. The flimsy string broke and some of the contents rolled over the floor.

Christine exclaimed:

"What have you been buying candles for?"

But to Linda's relief she did not wait for an answer, but went on, as she helped to pick the things up from the floor.

"I came in to ask whether you would like to come with me to Gull Cove this morning. I want to sketch there."

Linda accepted with alacrity.

In the last few days she had accompanied Christine Redfern more than once on sketching expeditions. Christine was a most indifferent artist, but it is possible that she found the excuse of painting a help to her pride since her husband now spent most of his time with Arlena Marshall.

Linda Marshall had been increasingly morose and bad tempered. She liked being with Christine who, intent on her work, spoke very little. It was, Linda felt, nearly as good as being by oneself, and in a curious way she craved for company of some kind. There was a subtle kind of sympathy between her and the elder woman, probably based on the fact of their mutual dislike of the same person.

Christine said:

"I'm playing tennis at twelve, so we'd better start fairly early. Half past ten?"

"Right. I'll be ready. Meet you in the hall."

III

Rosamund Darnley, strolling out of the dining room after a very late breakfast, was cannoned into by Linda as the latter came tearing down the stairs.

"Oh! sorry, Miss Darnley."

Rosamund said: "Lovely morning, isn't it? One can hardly believe it after yesterday."

"I know. I'm going with Mrs. Redfern to Gull Cove. I said I'd meet her at half past ten. I thought I was late."

"No, it's only twenty-five past."

"Oh! good."

She was panting a little and Rosamund looked at her curiously.

"You're not feverish, are you, Linda?"

The girls' eyes were very bright and she had a vivid patch of colour in each cheek.

"Oh! no. I'm never feverish."

Rosamund smiled and said:

"It's such a lovely day I got up for breakfast. Usually I have it in bed. But today I came down and faced eggs and bacon like a man."

"I know—it's heavenly after yesterday. Gull Cove is nice in the morning. I shall put a lot of oil on and get really brown."

Rosamund said:

"Yes, Gull Cove is nice in the morning. And it's more peaceful than the beach here."

Linda said, rather shyly:

"Come too."

Rosamund shook her head.

She said:

"Not this morning. I've other fish to fry."

Christine Redfern came down the stairs.

She was wearing beach pyjamas of a loose floppy pattern with long sleeves and wide legs. They were made of some green material with a yellow design. Rosamund’s tongue itched to tell her that yellow and green were the most unbecoming colours possible for her fair, slightly anaemic complexion. It always annoyed Rosamund when people had no clothes sense.

She thought: “If I dressed that girl, I’d soon make her husband sit up and take notice. However much of a fool Arlena is, she does know how to dress. This wretched girl looks just like a wilting lettuce.”

Aloud she said:

“Have a nice time. I’m going to Sunny Ledge with a book.”

IV

Hercule Poirot breakfasted in his room as usual off coffee and rolls.

The beauty of the morning, however, tempted him to leave the hotel earlier than usual. It was ten o’clock, at least half an hour before his usual appearance, when he descended to the bathing beach. The beach itself was empty save for one person.

That person was Arlena Marshall.

Clad in her white bathing dress, the green Chinese hat on her head, she was trying to launch a white wooden float. Poirot came gallantly to the rescue, completely immersing a pair of white suède shoes in doing so.

She thanked him with one of those sideways glances of hers.

Just as she was pushing off, she called him.

“M. Poirot?”

Poirot leaped to the water’s edge.

“Madame.”

Arlena Marshall said:

“Do something for me, will you?”

“Anything.”

She smiled at him. She murmured:

“Don’t tell any one where I am.” She made her glance appealing. “Every one will follow me about so. I just want for once to be alone.”

She paddled off vigorously.

Poirot walked up the beach. He murmured to himself:

“Ah ça, jamais! That, par exemple, I do not believe.”

He doubted if Arlena Stuart, to give her her stage name, had ever wanted to be alone in her life.

Hercule Poirot, that man of the world, knew better. Arlena Marshall was doubtless keeping a rendezvous, and Poirot had a very good idea with whom.

Or thought he had, but there he found himself proved wrong.

For just as she floated rounded the point of the bay and disappeared out of sight, Patrick Redfern closely followed by Kenneth Marshall, came striding down the beach from the hotel.

Marshall nodded to Poirot, “’Morning, Poirot. Seen my wife anywhere about?”

Poirot’s answer was diplomatic.

“Has Madame then risen so early?”

Marshall said:

“She’s not in her room.” He looked up at the sky. “Lovely day. I shall have a bathe right away. Got a lot of typing to do this morning.”

Patrick Redfern, less openly, was looking up and down the beach. He sat down near Poirot and prepared to wait for the arrival of his lady.

Poirot said:

“And Madame Redfern? Has she too risen early?”

Patrick Redfern said:

“Christine? Oh, she’s going off sketching. She’s rather keen on art just now.”

He spoke impatiently, his mind clearly elsewhere. As time passed he displayed his impatience for Arlena’s arrival only too crudely. At every footstep he turned an eager head to see who it was coming down from the hotel.

Disappointment followed disappointment.

First Mr. and Mrs. Gardener complete with knitting and book and then Miss Brewster arrived.

Mrs. Gardener, industrious as ever, settled herself in her chair, and began to knit vigorously and talk at the same time.

“Well. M. Poirot. The beach seems very deserted this morning. Where is everybody?”

Poirot replied that the Mastermans and the Cowans, two families with young people in them, had gone off on an all-day sailing excursion.

“Why that certainly does make all the difference, not having them about laughing and calling out. And only one person bathing, Captain Marshall.”

Marshall had just finished his swim. He came up the beach swinging his towel.

“Pretty good in the sea this morning,” he said. “Unfortunately I’ve got a lot of work to do. Must go and get on with it.”

“Why, if that isn’t too bad, Captain Marshall. On a beautiful day like this, too. My, wasn’t yesterday too terrible? I said to Mr. Gardener that if the weather was going to continue like that we’d just have to leave. It’s the melancholy, you know, with the mist right up around the island. Gives you a kind of ghostly feeling, but then I’ve always been very susceptible to atmosphere ever since I was a child. Sometimes, you know, I’d feel I just had to scream and scream. And that, of course, was very trying to my parents. But my mother was a lovely woman and she said to my father, ‘Sinclair, if the child feels like that, we must let her do it. Screaming is her way of expressing herself.’ And of course, my father agreed. He was devoted to my mother and just did everything she said. They were a perfectly lovely couple, as I’m sure Mr. Gardener will agree. They were a very remarkable couple, weren’t they, Odell?”

“Yes, darling,” said Mr. Gardener.

“And where’s your girl this morning, Captain Marshall?”

“Linda? I don’t know. I expect she’s mooning round the island somewhere.”

“You know, Captain Marshall, that girl looks kind of peaky to me. She needs feeding up and very very sympathetic treatment.”

Kenneth Marshall said curtly:

“Linda’s all right.”

He went up to the hotel.

Patrick Redfern did not go into the water. He sat about, frankly looking up towards the hotel. He was beginning to look a shade sulky.

Miss Brewster was brisk and cheerful when she arrived.

The conversation was much as it had been on a previous morning. Gentle yapping from Mrs. Gardener and short staccato barks from Miss Brewster.

She remarked at last: “Beach seems a bit empty. Everyone off on excursions?”

Mrs. Gardener said:

“I was saying to Mr. Gardener only this morning that we simply must make an excursion to Dartmoor. It’s quite near and the associations are all so romantic. And I’d like to see that convict prison—Princetown, isn’t it? I think we’d better fix up right away and go there tomorrow, Odell.”

Mr. Gardener said:

“Yes, darling.”

Hercule Poirot said to Miss Brewster.

“You are going to bathe, Mademoiselle?”

“Oh I’ve had my morning dip before breakfast. Somebody nearly brained me with a bottle, too. Chucked it out of one of the hotel windows.”

“Now that’s a very dangerous thing to do,” said Mrs. Gardener. “I had a very dear friend who got concussion by a toothpaste tin falling on him in the street—thrown out of a thirty-fifth storey window it was. A most dangerous thing to do. He got very substantial damages.” She began to hunt among her skeins of wool. “Why, Odell, I don’t believe I’ve got that second shade of purple wool. It’s in the second drawer of the bureau in our bedroom or it might be the third.”

“Yes, darling.”

Mr. Gardener rose obediently and departed on his search.

Mrs. Gardener went on:

"Sometimes, you know, I do think that maybe we're going a little too far nowadays. What with all our great discoveries and all the electrical waves there must be in the atmosphere, I do think it leads to a great deal of mental unrest, and I just feel that maybe the time has come for a new message to humanity. I don't know, M. Poirot, if you've ever interested yourself in the prophecies from the Pyramids."

"I have not," said Poirot.

"Well, I do assure you that they're very, very interesting. What with Moscow being exactly a thousand miles due north of—now what was it?—would it be Nineveh?—but anyway you take a circle and it just shows the most surprising things—and one can just see that there must have been special guidance, and that those ancient Egyptians couldn't have thought of what they did all by themselves. And when you've gone into the theory of the numbers and their repetition, why it's all just so clear that I can't see how anyone can doubt the truth of it for a moment."

Mrs. Gardener paused triumphantly but neither Poirot nor Miss Emily Brewster felt moved to argue the point.

Poirot studied his white suède shoes ruefully.

Emily Brewster said:

"You been paddling with your shoes on, M. Poirot?"

Poirot murmured:

"Alas! I was precipitate."

Emily Brewster lowered her voice. She said:

"Where's our vamp this morning? She's late."

Mrs. Gardener, raising her eyes from her knitting to study Patrick Redfern, murmured:

“He looks just like a thundercloud. Oh dear, I do feel the whole thing is such a pity. I wonder what Captain Marshall thinks about it all. He’s such a nice quiet man—very British and unassuming. You just never know what he’s thinking about things.”

Patrick Redfern rose and began to pace up and down the beach.

Mrs. Gardener murmured:

“Just like a tiger.”

Three pairs of eyes watched his pacing. Their scrutiny seemed to make Patrick Redfern uncomfortable. He looked more than sulky now. He looked in a flaming temper.

In the stillness a faint chime from the mainland came to their ears.

Emily Brewster murmured:

“Wind’s from the east again. That’s a good sign when you can hear the church clock strike.”

Nobody said any more until Mr. Gardener returned with a skein of brilliant magenta wool.

“Why, Odell, what a long time you have been?”

“Sorry darling, but you see it wasn’t in your bureau at all. I found it on your wardrobe shelf.”

“Why, isn’t that too extraordinary? I could have declared I put it in that bureau drawer. I do think it’s fortunate that I’ve never had to give evidence in a court case. I’d just worry myself to death in case I wasn’t remembering a thing just right.”

Mr. Gardener said:

“Mrs. Gardener is very conscientious.”

V

It was some five minutes later that Patrick Redfern said:

“Going for your row this morning, Miss Brewster? Mind if I come with you?”

Miss Brewster said heartily:

“Delighted.”

“Let’s row right round the island,” proposed Redfern.

Miss Brewster consulted her watch.

“Shall we have time? Oh yes, it’s not half past eleven yet. Come on, then, let’s start.”

They went down the beach together.

Patrick Redfern took first turn at the oars. He rowed with a powerful stroke. The boat leapt forward.

Emily Brewster said approvingly:

“Good. We’ll see if you can keep that up.”

He laughed into her eyes. His spirits had improved.

“I shall probably have a fine crop of blisters by the time we get back.” He threw up his head, tossing back his black hair. “God, it’s a marvellous day! If you do get a real summer’s day in England there’s nothing to beat it.”

Emily Brewster said gruffly:

“Can’t beat England anyway in my opinion. Only place in the world to live in.”

“I’m with you.”

They rounded the point of the bay to the west and rowed under the cliffs. Patrick Redfern looked up.

“Any one on Sunny Ledge this morning? Yes, there’s a sunshade. Who is it, I wonder?”

Emily Brewster said:

“It’s Miss Darnley, I think. She’s got one of those Japanese affairs.”

They rowed up the coast. On their left was the open sea.

Emily Brewster said:

“We ought to have gone the other way round. This way we’ve got the current against us.”

“There’s very little current. I’ve swum out here and not noticed it. Anyway we couldn’t go the other way, the causeway wouldn’t be covered.”

“Depends on the tide, of course. But they always say that bathing from Pixy Cove is dangerous if you swim out too far.”

Patrick was rowing vigorously still. At the same time he was scanning the cliffs attentively.

Emily Brewster thought suddenly:

“He’s looking for the Marshall woman. That’s why he wanted to come with me. She hasn’t shown up this morning and he’s wondering what she’s up to. Probably she’s done it on purpose. Just a move in the game—to make him keener.”

They rounded the jutting point of rock to the south of the little bay named Pixy’s Cove. It was quite a small cove, with rocks dotted fantastically about the beach. It faced nearly northwest and the cliff overhung it a good deal. It was a favourite place for picnic teas. In the morning, when the sun was off, it was not popular and there was seldom anyone there.

On this occasion, however, there was a figure on the beach.

Patrick Redfern's stroke checked and recovered.

He said in a would-be casual tone:

"Hullo, who's that?"

Miss Brewster said dryly:

"It looks like Mrs. Marshall."

Patrick Redfern said, as though struck by the idea.

"So it does."

He altered his course, rowing inshore.

Emily Brewster protested.

"We don't want to land here, do we?"

Patrick Redfern said quickly:

"Oh, plenty of time."

His eyes looked into hers—something in them, a naïve pleading look rather like that of an importunate dog, silenced Emily Brewster. She thought to herself:

"Poor boy, he's got it badly. Oh well, it can't be helped. He'll get over it in time."

The boat was fast approaching the beach.

Arlena Marshall was lying face downwards on the shingle, her arms outstretched. The white float was drawn up nearby.

Something was puzzling Emily Brewster. It was as though she was looking at something she knew quite well but which was in one respect quite wrong.

It was a minute or two before it came to her.

Arlena Marshall's attitude was the attitude of a sunbather. So had she lain many a time on the beach by the hotel, her bronzed body outstretched and the green cardboard hat protecting her head and neck.

But there was no sun on Pixy's Beach and there would be none for some hours yet. The overhanging cliff protected the beach from the sun in the morning. A vague feeling of apprehension came over Emily Brewster.

The boat grounded on the shingle. Patrick Redfern called:

"Hullo, Arlena."

And then Emily Brewster's foreboding took definite shape. For the recumbent figure did not move or answer.

Emily saw Patrick Redfern's face change. He jumped out of the boat and she followed him. They dragged the boat ashore then set off up the beach to where that white figure lay so still and unresponsive near the bottom of the cliff.

Patrick Redfern got there first but Emily Brewster was close behind him.

She saw, as one sees in a dream, the bronzed limbs, the white backless bathing dress—the red curl of hair escaping under the jade green hat—saw something else too—the curious unnatural angle of the outspread arms. Felt, in that minute, that this body had not lain down but had been thrown….

She heard Patrick's voice—a mere frightened whisper. He knelt down beside that still form—touched the hand—the arm….

He said in a low shuddering whisper:

"My God, she's dead…."

And then, as he lifted the hat a little, peered at the neck:

“Oh, God, she’s been strangled…murdered.”

VI

It was one of those moments when time stands still.

With an odd feeling of unreality Emily Brewster heard herself saying:

“We musn’t touch anything… Not until the police come.”

Redfern’s answer came mechanically.

“No—no—of course not.” And then in a deep agonized whisper. “Who? Who? Who could have done that to Arlena. She can’t have—have been murdered. It can’t be true!”

Emily Brewster shook her head, not knowing quite what to answer.

She heard him draw in his breath—heard the low controlled rage in his voice as he said:

“My God, if I get my hands on the foul fiend who did this.”

Emily Brewster shivered. Her imagination pictured a lurking murderer behind one of the boulders. Then she heard her voice saying:

“Whoever did it wouldn’t be hanging about. We must get the police. Perhaps—” she hesitated—“one of us ought to stay with—with the body.”

Patrick Redfern said:

“I’ll stay.”

Emily Brewster drew a little sigh of relief. She was not the kind of woman who would ever admit to feeling fear, but she was secretly thankful not to have to remain on that beach alone with the faint possibility of a homicidal maniac lingering close at hand.

She said:

“Good. I’ll be as quick as I can. I’ll go in the boat. Can’t face that ladder. There’s a constable at Leathercombe Bay.”

Patrick Redfern murmured mechanically:

“Yes—yes, whatever you think best.”

As she rowed vigorously away from the shore, Emily Brewster saw Patrick drop down beside the dead woman and bury his head in his hands. There was something so forlorn about his attitude that she felt an unwilling sympathy. He looked like a dog watching by its dead master. Nevertheless her robust common sense was saying to her:

“Best thing that could have happened for him and his wife—and for Marshall and the child—but I don’t suppose he can see it that way, poor devil.”

Emily Brewster was a woman who could always rise to an emergency.

Five

Inspector Colgate stood back by the cliff waiting for the police-surgeon to finish with Arlena's body. Patrick Redfern and Emily Brewster stood a little to one side.

Dr. Neasden rose from his knees with a quick deft movement.

He said:

“Strangled—and by a pretty powerful pair of hands. She doesn't seem to have put up much of a struggle. Taken by surprise. H'm—well—nasty business.”

Emily Brewster had taken one look and then quickly averted her eyes from the dead woman's face. That horrible purple convulsed countenance.

Inspector Colgate asked:

“What about time of death?”

Neasden said irritably:

“Can't say definitely without knowing more about her. Lots of factors to take into account. Let's see, it's quarter to one now. What time was it when you found her?”

Patrick Redfern, to whom the question was addressed, said vaguely:

“Some time before twelve. I don't know exactly.”

Emily Brewster said:

“It was exactly a quarter to twelve when we found she was dead.”

“Ah, and you came here in the boat. What time was it when you caught sight of her lying here?”

Emily Brewster considered.

“I should say we rounded the point about five or six minutes earlier.” She turned to Redfern. “Do you agree?”

He said vaguely:

“Yes—yes—about that, I should think.”

Neasden asked the Inspector in a low voice:

“This the husband? Oh! I see, my mistake. Thought it might be. He seems rather done in over it.”

He raised his voice officially.

“Let’s put it at twenty minutes to twelve. She cannot have been killed very long before that. Say between then and eleven—quarter to eleven at the earliest outside limit.”

The Inspector shut his notebook with a snap.

“Thanks,” he said. “That ought to help us considerably. Puts it within very narrow limits—less than an hour all told.”

He turned to Miss Brewster.

“Now then, I think it’s all clear so far. You’re Miss Emily Brewster and this is Mr. Patrick Redfern, both staying at the Jolly Roger Hotel. You identify this lady as a fellow guest of yours at the hotel—the wife of a Captain Marshall?”

Emily Brewster nodded.

“Then, I think,” said Inspector Colgate, “that we’ll adjourn to the hotel.”

He beckoned to a constable.

“Hawkes, you stay here and don’t allow anyone on to this cove. I’ll be sending Phillips along later.”

II

“Upon my soul!” said Colonel Weston. “This is a surprise finding you here!”

Hercule Poirot replied to the Chief Constable’s greeting in a suitable manner. He murmured:

“Ah, yes, many years have passed since that affair at St. Loo.”

“I haven’t forgotten it, though,” said Weston. “Biggest surprise of my life. The thing I’ve never got over, though, is the way you got round me about that funeral business. Absolutely unorthodox, the whole thing. Fantastic!”

“Tout de même, mon Colonel,” said Poirot. “It produced the goods, did it not?”

“Er—well, possibly. I dare say we should have got there by more orthodox methods.”

“It is possible,” agreed Poirot diplomatically.

“And here you are in the thick of another murder,” said the Chief Constable. “Any ideas about this one?”

Poirot said slowly:

“Nothing definite—but it is interesting.”

“Going to give us a hand?”

“You would permit it, yes?”

“My dear fellow, delighted to have you. Don’t know enough yet to decide whether it’s a case for Scotland Yard or not. Offhand it looks as though our murderer must be pretty well within a limited radius. On the other hand, all these people are strangers down here. To find out about them and their motives you’ve got to go to London.”

Poirot said:

“Yes, that is true.”

“First of all,” said Weston, “we’ve got to find out who last saw the dead woman alive. Chambermaid took her her breakfast at nine. Girl in the bureau downstairs saw her pass through the lounge and go out about ten.”

“My friend,” said Poirot, “I suspect that I am the man you want.”

“You saw her this morning? What time?”

“At five minutes past ten. I assisted her to launch her float from the bathing beach.”

“And she went off on it?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see which direction she took?”

“She paddled round that point there to the right.”

“In the direction of Pixy’s Cove, that is?”

“Yes.”

“And the time then was—?”

“I should say she actually left the beach at a quarter past ten.”

Weston considered.

“That fits in well enough. How long should you say that it would take her to paddle round to the Cove?”

“Ah me, I am not an expert. I do not go in boats or expose myself on floats. Perhaps half an hour?”

“That’s about what I think,” said the Colonel. “She wouldn’t be hurrying, I presume. Well, if she arrived there at a quarter to eleven, that fits in well enough.”

“At what time does your doctor suggest she died?”

“Oh, Neasden doesn’t commit himself. He’s a cautious chap. A quarter to eleven is his earliest outside limit.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“There is one other point that I must mention. As she left, Mrs. Marshall asked me not to say I had seen her.”

Weston stared.

He said:

“H’m, that’s rather suggestive, isn’t it?”

Poirot murmured.

“Yes. I thought so myself.”

Weston tugged at his moustache. He said:

“Look here, Poirot. You’re a man of the world. What sort of a woman was Mrs. Marshall?”

A faint smile came to Poirot’s lips.

He asked:

“Have you not already heard?”

The Chief Constable said dryly:

“I know what the women say of her. They would. How much truth is there in it? Was she having an affair with this fellow Redfern?”

“I should say undoubtedly yes.”

“He followed her down here, eh?”

“There is reason to suppose so.”

“And the husband? Did he know about it? What did he feel?”

Poirot said slowly:

“It is not easy to know what Captain Marshall feels or thinks. He is a man who does not display his emotions.”

Weston said sharply:

“But he might have ’em, all the same.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“Oh yes, he might have them.”

III

The Chief Constable was being as tactful as it was in his nature to be with Mrs. Castle.

Mrs. Castle was the owner and proprietress of the Jolly Roger Hotel. She was a woman of forty odd with a large bust, rather violent henna red hair, and an almost offensively refined manner of speech.

She was saying:

“That such a thing should happen in my hotel! Ay am sure it has always been the quayettest place imaginable! The people who come here are such naice people. No rowdiness—if you know what ay mean. Not like the big hotels in St. Loo.”

“Quite so, Mrs. Castle,” said Colonel Weston. “But accidents happen in the best regulated—er households.”

“Ay’m sure Inspector Colgate will bear me out,” said Mrs. Castle, sending an appealing glance towards the Inspector who was sitting looking very official. “As to the laycensing laws, ay am most particular. There has never been any irregularity!”

“Quite, quite,” said Weston. “We’re not blaming you in any way, Mrs. Castle.”

“But it does so reflect upon an establishment,” said Mrs. Castle, her large bust heaving. “When ay think of the noisy gaping crowds. Of course no one but hotel guests are allowed upon the island—but all the same they will no doubt come and point from the shore.”

She shuddered.

Inspector Colgate saw his chance to turn the conversation to good account.

He said:

“In regard to that point you’ve just raised. Access to the island. How do you keep people off?”

“Ay am most particular about it.”

“Yes, but what measures do you take? What keeps ’em off? Holiday crowds in summer time swarm everywhere like flies.”

Mrs. Castle shrugged slightly again.

She said:

“That is the fault of the charabancs. Ay have seen eighteen at one time parked by the quay at Leathercombe Bay. Eighteen!”

“Just so. How do you stop them coming here?”

“There are notices. And then, of course, at high tide, we are cut off.”

“Yes, but at low tide?”

Mrs. Castle explained. At the island end of the causeway there was a gate. This said “Jolly Roger Hotel. Private. No entry except to Hotel.” The rocks rose sheer out of the sea on either side there and could not be climbed.

“Anyone could take a boat, though, I suppose, and row round and land on one of the coves? You couldn’t stop them doing that. There’s a right of access to the foreshore. You can’t stop people being on the beach between low and high watermark.”

But this, it seemed, very seldom happened. Boats could be obtained at Leathercombe Bay harbour, but from there it was a long row to the island, and there was also a strong current just outside Leathercombe Bay harbour.

There were notices, too, on both Gull Cove and Pixy Cove by the ladder. She added that George or William were always on the look out at the bathing beach proper which was the nearest to the mainland.

“Who are George and William?”

“George attends to the bathing beach. He sees to the costumes and the floats. William is the gardener. He keeps the paths and marks the tennis courts and all that.”

Colonel Weston said impatiently:

“Well, that seems clear enough. That’s not to say that nobody could have come from outside, but anyone who did so took a risk—the risk of being noticed. We’ll have a word with George and William presently.”

Mrs. Castle said:

"Ay do not care for trippers—a very noisy crowd, and they frequently leave orange peel and cigarette boxes on the causeway and down by the rocks, but all the same ay never thought one of them would turn out to be a murderer. Oh dear! it really is too terrible for words. A lady like Mrs. Marshall murdered and what's so horrible, actually—er—strangled…."

Mrs. Castle could hardly bring herself to say the word. She brought it out with the utmost reluctance.

Inspector Colgate said soothingly:

"Yes, it's a nasty business."

"And the newspapers. My hotel in the newspapers!"

Colgate said, with a faint grin.

"Oh well, it's advertisement, in a way."

Mrs. Castle drew herself up. Her bust heaved and whalebone creaked. She said icily:

"That is not the kind of advertisement ay care about, Mr. Colgate."

Colonel Weston broke in. He said:

"Now then, Mrs. Castle, you've got a list of the guests staying here, as I asked you?"

"Yes, sir."

Colonel Weston pored over the hotel register. He looked over to Poirot who made the fourth member of the group assembled in the manageress's office.

"This is where you'll probably be able to help us presently."

He read down the names.

"What about servants?"

Mrs. Castle produced a second list.

“There are four chambermaids, the head waiter and three under him and Henry in the bar. William does the boots and shoes. Then there’s the cook and two under her.”

“What about the waiters?”

“Well, sir, Albert, the Mater Dotel, came to me from the Vincent at Plymouth. He was there for some years. The three under him have been here for three years—one of them four. They are very naise lads and most respectable. Henry has been here since the hotel opened. He is quite an institution.”

Weston nodded. He said to Colgate:

“Seems all right. You’ll check up on them, of course. Thank you, Mrs. Castle.”

“That will be all you require?”

“For the moment, yes.”

Mrs. Castle creaked out of the room.

Weston said:

“First thing to do is to talk with Captain Marshall.

IV

Kenneth Marshall sat quietly answering the questions put to him. Apart from a slight hardening of his features he was quite calm. Seen here, with the sunlight falling on him from the window, you realized that he was a handsome man. Those straight features, the steady blue eyes, the firm mouth. His voice was low and pleasant.

Colonel Weston was saying:

“I quite understand, Captain Marshall, what a terrible shock this must be to you. But you realize that I am anxious to get the fullest information as soon as possible.”

Marshall nodded.

He said:

“I quite understand. Carry on.”

“Mrs. Marshall was your second wife?”

“Yes.”

“And you have been married how long?”

“Just over four years.”

“And her name before she was married?”

“Helen Stuart. Her acting name was Arlena Stuart.”

“She was an actress?”

“She appeared in Revue and musical shows.”

“Did she give up the stage on her marriage?”

“No. She continued to appear. She actually retired only about a year and a half ago.”

“Was there any special reason for her retirement?”

Kenneth Marshall appeared to consider.

“No,” he said. “She simply said that she was tired of it all.”

“It was not—er—in obedience to your special wish?”

Marshall raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, no.”

“You were quite content for her to continue acting after your marriage?”

Marshall smiled very faintly.

“I should have preferred her to give it up—that, yes. But I made no fuss about it.”

“It caused no point of dissension between you?”

“Certainly not. My wife was free to please herself.”

“And—the marriage was a happy one?”

“Kenneth Marshall said coldly:

“Certainly.”

Colonel Weston paused a minute. Then he said:

“Captain Marshall, have you any idea who could possibly have killed your wife?”

The answer came without the least hesitation.

“None whatever.”

“Had she any enemies?”

“Possibly.”

“Ah?”

The other went on quickly. He said:

"Don't misunderstand me, sir. My wife was an actress. She was also a very good-looking woman. In both capacities she aroused a certain amount of jealousy and envy. There were fusses over parts—there was rivalry from other women—there was a good deal, shall we say, of general envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness! But that is not to say that there was anyone who was capable of deliberately murdering her."

Hercule Poirot spoke for the first time. He said:

"What you really mean, Monsieur, is that her enemies were mostly or entirely, women?"

Kenneth Marshall looked across at him.

"Yes," he said. "That is so."

The Chief Constable said:

"You know of no man who had a grudge against her?"

"No."

"Was she previously acquainted with anyone in this hotel?"

"I believe she had met Mr. Redfern before—at some cocktail party. Nobody else to my knowledge."

Weston paused. He seemed to deliberate as to whether to pursue the subject. Then he decided against that course. He said:

"We now come to this morning. When was the last time you saw your wife?"

Marshall paused a minute, then he said:

"I looked in on my way down to breakfast—"

"Excuse me, you occupied separate rooms?"

“Yes.”

“And what time was that?”

“It must have been about nine o’clock.”

“What was she doing?”

“She was opening her letters.”

“Did she say anything?”

“Nothing of any particular interest. Just good morning—and that it was a nice day—that sort of thing.”

“What was her manner? Unusual at all?”

“No, perfectly normal.”

“She did not seem excited, or depressed, or upset in any way?”

“I certainly didn’t notice it.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Did she mention at all what were the contents of her letters?”

Again a faint smile appeared on Marshall’s lips. He said:

“As far as I can remember, she said they were all bills.”

“Your wife breakfasted in bed?”

“Yes.”

“Did she always do that?”

“Invariably.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“What time did she usually come downstairs?”

“Oh! between ten and eleven—usually nearer eleven.”

Poirot went on:

“If she was to descend at ten o’clock exactly, that would be rather surprising?”

“Yes. She wasn’t often down as early as that.”

“But she was this morning. Why do you think that was, Captain Marshall?”

Marshall said unemotionally:

“Haven’t the least idea. Might have been the weather—extra fine day and all that.”

“You missed her?”

Kenneth Marshall shifted a little in his chair. He said:

“Looked in on her again after breakfast. Room was empty. I was a bit surprised.”

“And then you came down on the beach and asked me if I had seen her?”

“Er—yes.” He added with a faint emphasis in his voice. “And you said you hadn’t….”

The innocent eyes of Hercule Poirot did not falter. Gently he caressed his large and flamboyant moustache.

Weston asked:

“Had you any special reason for wanting to find your wife this morning?”

Marshall shifted his glance amiably to the Chief Constable.

He said:

“No, just wondered where she was, that’s all.”

Weston paused. He moved his chair slightly. His voice fell into a different key. He said:

“Just now, Captain Marshall, you mentioned that your wife had a previous acquaintance with Mr. Patrick Redfern. How well did your wife know Mr. Redfern?”

Kenneth Marshall said:

“Mind if I smoke?” He felt through his pockets. “Dash! I’ve mislaid my pipe somewhere.”

Poirot offered him a cigarette which he accepted. Lighting it, he said:

“You were asking about Redfern. My wife told me she had come across him at some cocktail party or other.”

“He was, then, just a casual acquaintance?”

“I believe so.”

“Since then—” the Chief Constable paused. “I understand that that acquaintanceship has ripened into something rather closer.”

Marshall said sharply:

“You understand that, do you? Who told you so?”

“It is the common gossip of the hotel.”

For a moment Marshall’s eyes went to Hercule Poirot. They dwelt on him with a kind of cold anger. He said:

“Hotel gossip is usually a tissue of lies!”

“Possibly. But I gather that Mr. Redfern and your wife gave some grounds for the gossip.”

“What grounds?”

“They were constantly in each other’s company.”

“Is that all?”

“You do not deny that that was so?”

“May have been. I really didn’t notice.”

“You did not—excuse me, Captain Marshall—object to your wife’s friendship with Mr. Redfern?”

“I wasn’t in the habit of criticizing my wife’s conduct.”

“You did not protest or object in any way?”

“Certainly not.”

“Not even though it was becoming a subject of scandal and an estrangement was growing up between Mr. Redfern and his wife?”

Kenneth Marshall said coldly:

“I mind my own business and I expect other people to mind theirs. I don’t listen to gossip and tittle-tattle.”

“You won’t deny that Mr. Redfern admired your wife?”

“He probably did. Most men did. She was a very beautiful woman.”

“But you yourself were persuaded that there was nothing serious in the affair?”

“I never thought about it, I tell you.”

“And suppose we have a witness who can testify that they were on terms of the greatest intimacy?”

Again those blue eyes went to Hercule Poirot. Again an expression of dislike showed on that usually impassive face.

Marshall said:

“If you want to listen to these tales, listen to ’em. My wife’s dead and can’t defend herself.”

“You mean that you, personally, don’t believe them?”

For the first time a faint dew of sweat was observable on Marshall’s brow. He said:

“I don’t propose to believe anything of the kind.”

He went on:

“Aren’t you getting a good way from the essentials of this business? What I believe or don’t believe is surely not relevant to the plain fact of murder?”

Hercule Poirot answered before either of the others could speak. He said:

“You do not comprehend, Captain Marshall. There is no such thing as a plain fact of murder. Murder springs, nine times out of ten, out of the character and circumstances of the murdered person. Because the victim was the kind of person he or she was, therefore was he or she murdered! Until we can understand fully and completely exactly what kind of a person Arlena Marshall was, we shall not be able to see clearly exactly the kind of person who murdered her. From that springs the necessity of our questions.”

Marshall turned to the Chief Constable. He said:

“That your view, too?”

Weston boggled a little. He said:

"Well, up to a point—that is to say—"

Marshall gave a short laugh. He said:

"Thought you wouldn't agree. This character stuff is M. Poirot's specialty, I believe."

Poirot said, smiling:

"You can at least congratulate yourself on having done nothing to assist me!"

"What do you mean?"

"What have you told us about your wife? Exactly nothing at all. You have told us only what everyone could see for themselves. That she was beautiful and admired. Nothing more."

Kenneth Marshall shrugged his shoulders. He said simply:

"You're crazy."

He looked towards the Chief Constable and said with emphasis:

"Anything else, sir, that you'd like me to tell you?"

"Yes, Captain Marshall, your own movements this morning, please."

Kenneth Marshall nodded. He had clearly expected this.

He said:

"I breakfasted downstairs about nine o'clock as usual and read the paper. As I told you I went up to my wife's room afterwards and found she had gone out. I came down to the beach, saw M. Poirot and asked if he had seen her. Then I had a quick bathe and went up to the hotel again. It was then, let me see, about twenty to eleven—yes, just about that. I saw the clock in the lounge. It was just after twenty minutes to. I went up to my room, but the chambermaid hadn't quite finished it. I asked her to finish as quickly as she could. I had some letters to type which I wanted to get off by the post. I went downstairs again and had a word or two with Henry in the bar. I went up again to my room at ten minutes to eleven. There I typed my letters. I typed until ten minutes to twelve. I then changed into tennis kit as I had a date to play tennis at twelve. We'd booked the court the day before."

"Who was we?"

"Mrs. Redfern, Miss Darnley, Mr. Gardener and myself. I came down at twelve o'clock and went up to the court. Miss Darnley was there and Mr. Gardener. Mrs. Redfern arrived a few minutes later. We played tennis for an hour. Just as we came into the hotel afterwards I—I—got the news."

"Thank you, Captain Marshall. Just as a matter of form, is there anyone who can corroborate the fact that you were typing in your room between—er—ten minutes to eleven and ten minutes to twelve?"

Kenneth Marshall said with a faint smile:

"Have you got some idea that I killed my own wife? Let me see now. The chambermaid was about doing the rooms. She must have heard the typewriter going. And then there are the letters themselves. With all this upset I haven't posted them. I should imagine they are as good evidence as anything."

He took three letters from his pocket. They were addressed, but not stamped. He said:

"Their contents, by the way, are strictly confidential. But when it's a case of murder, one is forced to trust in the discretion of the police. They contain lists of figures and various financial statements. I think you will find that if you put one of your men on to type them out, he won't do it in much under an hour."

He paused.

"Satisfied, I hope?"

Weston said smoothly.

“It is no question of suspicion. Everyone on the island will be asked to account for his or her movements between a quarter to eleven and twenty minutes to twelve this morning.”

Kenneth Marshall said:

“Quite.”

Weston said:

“One more thing, Captain Marshall. Do you know anything about the way your wife was likely to have disposed of any property she had?”

“You mean a will? I don’t think she ever made a will.”

“But you are not sure?”

“Her solicitors are Barkett, Markett & Applegood, Bedford Square. They saw to all her contracts, etc. But I’m fairly certain she never made a will. She said once that doing a thing like that would give her the shivers.”

“In that case, if she has died intestate, you, as her husband, succeed to her property.”

“Yes, I suppose I do.”

“Had she any near relatives?”

“I don’t think so. If she had, she never mentioned them. I know that her father and mother died when she was a child and she had no brothers or sisters.”

“In any case, I suppose, she had nothing very much to leave?”

Kenneth Marshall said coldly:

“On the contrary. Only two years ago, Sir Robert Erskine, who was an old friend of hers, died and left her most of his fortune. It amounted, I think, to about fifty thousand pounds.”

Inspector Colgate looked up. An alertness came into his glance. Up to now he had been silent. Now he asked:

“Then actually, Captain Marshall, your wife was a rich woman?”

Kenneth Marshall shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose she was really.”

“And you still say she did not make a will?”

“You can ask the solicitors. But I’m pretty certain she didn’t. As I tell you, she thought it unlucky.”

There was a pause then Marshall added:

“Is there anything further?”

Weston shook his head.

“Don’t think so—eh Colgate? No. Once more, Captain Marshall, let me offer you all my sympathy in your loss.”

Marshall blinked. He said jerkily:

“Oh—thanks.”

He went out.

V

The three men looked at each other.

Weston said:

“Cool customer. Not giving anything away, is he? What do you make of him, Colgate?”

The Inspector shook his head.

“It’s difficult to tell. He’s not the kind that shows anything. That sort makes a bad impression in the witness-box, and yet it’s a bit unfair on them really. Sometimes they’re as cut up as anything and yet can’t show it. That kind of manner made the jury bring in a verdict of Guilty against Wallace. It wasn’t the evidence. They just couldn’t believe that a man could lose his wife and talk and act so coolly about it.”

Weston turned to Poirot.

“What do you think, Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot raised his hands.

He said:

“What can one say? He is the closed box—the fastened oyster. He has chosen his rôle. He has heard nothing, he has seen nothing, he knows nothing!”

“We’ve got a choice of motives,” said Colgate. “There’s jealousy and there’s the money motive. Of course, in a way, a husband’s the obvious suspect. One naturally thinks of him first. If he knew his missus was carrying on with the other chap—”

Poirot interrupted.

He said:

“I think he knew that.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Listen, my friend. Last night I had been talking with Mrs. Redfern on Sunny Ledge. I came down from there to the hotel and on my way I saw those two together—Mrs. Marshall and Patrick Redfern. And a moment or two after I met Captain Marshall. His face was very stiff. It says nothing—but nothing at all! It is almost too blank, if you understand me. Oh! he knew all right."

Colgate grunted doubtfully.

He said:

"Oh well, if you think so—"

"I am sure of it! But even then, what does that tell us? What did Kenneth Marshall feel about his wife?"

Colonel Weston said:

"Takes her death coolly enough."

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

Inspector Colgate said:

"Sometimes these quiet ones are the most violent underneath, so to speak. It's all bottled up. He may have been madly fond of her—and madly jealous. But he's not the kind to show it."

Poirot said slowly:

"That is possible—yes. He is a very interesting character this Captain Marshall. I interest myself in him greatly. And in his alibi."

"Alibi by typewriter," said Weston with a short bark of a laugh. "What have you got to say about that, Colgate?"

Inspector Colgate screwed up his eyes. He said:

"Well, you know, sir, I rather fancy that alibi. It's not too good, if you know what I mean. It's—well, it's natural. And if we find the chambermaid was about, and did hear the typewriter going, well then, it seems to me that it’s all right and that we’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“H’m,” said Colonel Weston. “Where are you going to look?”

VI

For a minute or two the three men pondered the question.

Inspector Colgate spoke first. He said:

“It boils down to this—was it an outsider, or a guest at the hotel? I’m not eliminating the servants entirely, mind, but I don’t expect for a minute that we’ll find any of them had a hand in it. No, it’s a hotel guest, or it’s someone from right outside. We’ve got to look at it this way. First of all—motive. There’s gain. The only person to gain by her death was the lady’s husband, it seems. What other motives are there? First and foremost—jealousy. It seems to me—just looking at it—that if ever you’ve got a crime passionnel—(he bowed to Poirot) this is one.”

Poirot murmured as he looked up at the ceiling:

“There are so many passions.”

Inspector Colgate went on:

“Her husband wouldn’t allow that she had any enemies—real enemies, that is, but I don’t believe for a minute that that’s so! I should say that a lady like her would—well, would make some pretty bad enemies—eh, sir, what do you say?”

Poirot responded. He said:

“Mais oui, that is so. Arlena Marshall would make enemies. But in my opinion, the enemy theory is not tenable, for you see, Inspector, Arlena Marshall’s enemies would, I think, as I said just now, always be women.”

Colonel Weston grunted and said:

"Something in that. It's the women who've got their knife into her here all right."

Poirot went on.

"It seems to be hardly possible that this crime was committed by a woman. What does the medical evidence say?"

Weston grunted again. He said:

"Neasden's pretty confident that she was strangled by a man. Big hands—powerful grip. It's just possible, of course, that an unusually athletic woman might have done it—but it's damned unlikely."

Poirot nodded.

"Exactly. Arsenic in a cup of tea—a box of poisoned chocolates—a knife—even a pistol—but strangulation—no! It is a man we have to look for."

"And immediately," he went on, "it becomes more difficult. There are two people here in this hotel who have a motive for wishing Arlena Marshall out of the way—but both of them are women."

Colonel Weston asked:

"Redfern's wife is one of them, I suppose?"

"Yes. Mrs. Redfern might have made up her mind to kill Arlena Stuart. She had, let us say, ample cause. I think, too, that it would be possible for Mrs. Redfern to commit a murder. But not this kind of murder. For all her unhappiness and jealousy, she is not, I should say, a woman of strong passions. In love, she would be devoted and loyal—not passionate. As I said just now—arsenic in the teacup, possibly—strangulation, no. I am sure, also, that she is physically incapable of committing this crime, her hands and feet are small, below the average."

Weston nodded. He said:

"This isn't a woman's crime. No, a man did this."

Inspector Colgate coughed.

“Let me put forward a solution, sir. Say that prior to meeting this Mr. Redfern the lady had had another affair with someone—call him X. She turns X down for Mr. Redfern. X is mad with rage and jealousy. He follows her down here, stays somewhere in the neighbourhood, comes over to the island, does her in. It’s a possibility!”

Weston said:

“It’s possible, all right. And if it’s true, it ought to be easy to prove. Did he come on foot or in a boat? The latter seems more likely. If so, he must have hired a boat somewhere. You’d better make inquiries.”

He looked across at Poirot.

“What do you think of Colgate’s suggestion?”

Poirot said slowly:

“It leaves, somehow, too much to chance. And besides—somewhere the picture is not true. I cannot, you see, imagine this man…the man who is mad with rage and jealousy.”

Colgate said:

“People did go potty about her, though, sir. Look at Redfern.”

“Yes, yes… But all the same—”

Colgate looked at him questioningly.

Poirot shook his head.

He said, frowning:

“Somewhere, there is something that we have missed….”

Six

Colonel Weston was poring over the hotel register.

He read aloud:

“Major and Mrs. Cowan,

Miss Pamela Cowan,

Master Robert Cowan,

Master Evan Cowan,

Rydal’s Mount, Leatherhead.

Mr. and Mrs. Masterman,

Mr. Edward Masterman,

Miss Jennifer Masterman,

Mr. Roy Masterman,

Master Frederick Masterman,

5 Marlborough Avenue, London, N.W.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardener,

New York.

Mr. and Mrs. Redfern,

Crossgates, Seldon, Princes Risborough.

Major Barry,

18 Cardon St., St. James, London, S.W.1.

Mr. Horace Blatt,

5 Pickersgill Street, London, E.C.2.

M. Hercule Poirot,

Whitehaven Mansions, London, W.1.

Miss Rosamund Darnley,

8 Cardigan Court, W.1.

Miss Emily Brewster,

Southgates, Sunbury-on-Thames.

Rev. Stephen Lane,

London.

Captain and Mrs. Marshall,

Miss Linda Marshall,

73 Upcott Mansions, London, S.W.7.”

He stopped.

Inspector Colgate said:

“I think, sir, that we can wash out the first two entries. Mrs. Castle tells me that the Mastermans and the Cowans come here regularly every summer with their children. This morning they went off on an all-day excursion sailing, taking lunch with them. They left just after nine o’clock. A man called Andrew Baston took them. We can check up from him, but I think we can put them right out of it.”

Weston nodded.

“I agree. Let’s eliminate everyone we can. Can you give us a pointer on any of the rest of them, Poirot?”

Poirot said:

“Superficially, that is easy. The Gardeners are a middle-aged married couple, pleasant, travelled. All the talking is done by the lady. The husband is acquiescent. He plays tennis and golf and has a form of dry humour that is attractive when one gets him to oneself.”

“Sounds quite O.K.”

“Next—the Redferns. Mr. Redfern is young, attractive to women, a magnificent swimmer, a good tennis player and accomplished dancer. His wife I have already spoken of to you. She is quiet, pretty in a washed-out way. She is, I think, devoted to her husband. She has something that Arlena Marshall did not have.”

“What is that?”

“Brains.”

Inspector Colgate sighed. He said:

“Brains don’t count for much when it comes to an infatuation, sir.”

“Perhaps not. And yet I do truly believe that in spite of his infatuation for Mrs. Marshall, Patrick Redfern really cares for his wife.”

“That may be, sir. It wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened.”

Poirot murmured.

“That is the pity of it! It is always the thing women find hardest to believe.”

He went on:

“Major Barry. Retired Indian Army. An admirer of women. A teller of long and boring stories.”

Inspector Colgate sighed.

“You needn’t go on. I’ve met a few, sir.”

“Mr. Horace Blatt. He is, apparently, a rich man. He talks a good deal—about Mr. Blatt. He wants to be everybody’s friend. It is sad. For nobody likes him very much. And there is something else. Mr. Blatt last night asked me a good many questions. Mr. Blatt was uneasy. Yes, there is something not quite right about Mr. Blatt.”

He paused and went on with a change of voice:

“Next comes Miss Rosamund Darnley. Her business name is Rose Mond Ltd. She is a celebrated dressmaker. What can I say of her? She has brains and charm and chic. She is very pleasing to look at.” He paused and added. “And she is a very old friend of Captain Marshall’s.”

Weston sat up in his chair.

“Oh, she is, is she?”

“Yes. They had not met for some years.”

Weston asked:

“Did she know he was going to be down here?”

“She says not.”

Poirot paused and then went on.

“Who comes next? Miss Brewster. I find her just a little alarming.” He shook his head. “She has a voice like a man’s. She is gruff and what you call hearty. She rows boats and has a handicap of four at golf.” He paused. “I think, though, that she has a good heart.”

Weston said:

“That leaves only the Reverend Stephen Lane. Who’s the Reverend Stephen Lane?”

“I can only tell you one thing. He is a man who is in a condition of great nervous tension. Also he is, I think, a fanatic.”

Inspector Colgate said:

“Oh, that kind of person.”

Weston said:

“And that’s the lot!” He looked at Poirot. “You seem very lost in thought, my friend?”

Poirot said:

“Yes. Because, you see, when Mrs. Marshall went off this morning and asked me not to tell anyone I had seen her, I jumped at once in my own mind to a certain conclusion. I thought that her friendship with Patrick Redfern had made trouble between her and her husband. I thought that she was going to meet Patrick Redfern somewhere, and that she did not want her husband to know where she was.”

He paused.

“But that, you see, was where I was wrong. Because, although her husband appeared almost immediately on the beach and asked if I had seen her, Patrick Redfern arrived also—and was most patently and obviously looking for her! And therefore, my friends, I am asking myself, who was it that Arlena Marshall went off to meet?”

Inspector Colgate said:

“That fits in with my idea. A man from London or somewhere.”

Hercule Poirot shook his head. He said:

"But, my friend, according to your theory, Arlena Marshall had broken with this mythical man. Why, then, should she take such trouble and pains to meet him?"

Inspector Colgate shook his head. He said:

"Who do you think it was?"

"That is just what I cannot imagine. We have just read through the list of hotel guests. They are all middle-aged—dull. Which of them would Arlena Marshall prefer to Patrick Redfern? No, that is impossible. And yet, all the same, she did go to meet someone—and that someone was not Patrick Redfern."

Weston murmured:

"You don't think she just went off by herself?"

Poirot shook his head.

"Mon cher," he said. "It is very evident that you never met the dead woman. Somebody once wrote a learned treatise on the difference that solitary confinement would mean to Beau Brummel or to a man like Newton. Arlena Marshall, my dear friend, would practically not exist in solitude. She only lived in the light of a man's admiration. No, Arlena Marshall went to meet someone this morning. Who was it?"

II

Colonel Weston sighed, shook his head and said:

"Well, we can go into theories later. Got to get through these interviews now. Got to get it down in black and white where everyone was. I suppose we'd better see the Marshall girl now. She might be able to tell us something useful."

Linda Marshall came into the room clumsily, knocking against the doorpost. She was breathing quickly and the pupils of her eyes were dilated.

She looked like a startled young colt. Colonel Weston felt a kindly impulse towards her.

He thought:

“Poor kid—she’s nothing but a kid after all. This must have been a pretty bad shock to her.”

He drew up a chair and said in a reassuring voice.

“Sorry to put you through this, Miss—Linda, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Linda.”

Her voice had that indrawn breathy quality that is often characteristic of schoolgirls. Her hands rested helplessly on the table in front of him—pathetic hands, big and red, with large bones and long wrists. Weston thought:

“A kid oughtn’t to be mixed up in this sort of thing.”

He said reassuringly.

“There’s nothing very alarming about all this. We just want you to tell us anything you know that might be useful, that’s all.”

Linda said:

“You mean—about Arlena?”

“Yes. Did you see her this morning at all?”

The girl shook her head.

“No. Arlena always gets down rather late. She has breakfast in bed.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“And you, Mademoiselle?”

“Oh, I get up. Breakfast in bed’s so stuffy.”

Weston said:

“Will you tell us what you did this morning?”

“Well, I had a bathe first and then breakfast, and then I went with Mrs. Redfern to Gull Cove.”

Weston said:

“What time did you and Mrs. Redfern start?”

“She said she’d be waiting for me in the hall at half-past ten. I was afraid I was going to be late, but it was all right. We started off at about three minutes to the half hour.”

Poirot said:

“And what did you do at Gull Cove?”

“Oh, I oiled myself and sunbathed and Mrs. Redfern sketched. Then, later, I went into the sea and Christine went back to the hotel to get changed for tennis.”

Weston said, keeping his voice quite casual:

“Do you remember what time that was?”

“When Mrs. Redfern went back to the hotel? Quarter to twelve.”

“Sure of that time—quarter to twelve?”

Linda, opening her eyes wide, said:

“Oh yes. I looked at my watch.”

“The watch you have on now?”

Linda glanced down at her wrist.

“Yes.”

Weston said:

“Mind if I see?”

She held our her wrist. He compared the watch with his own and with the hotel clock on the wall.

He said, smiling:

“Correct to a second. And after that you had a bathe?”

“Yes.”

“And you got back to the hotel—when?”

“Just about one o’clock. And—and then—I heard—about Arlena….”

Her voice changed.

Colonel Weston said:

“Did you—er—get on with your stepmother all right?”

She looked at him for a minute without replying. Then she said:

“Oh yes.”

Poirot asked:

“Did you like her, Mademoiselle?”

Linda said again:

“Oh yes.” She added: “Arlena was quite kind to me.”

Weston said with rather uneasy facetiousness.

“Not the cruel stepmother, eh?”

Linda shook her head without smiling.

Weston said:

“That’s good. That’s good. Sometimes, you know, there’s a bit of difficulty in families—jealousy—all that. Girl and her father great pals and then she resents it a bit when he’s all wrapped up in the new wife. You didn’t feel like that, eh?”

Linda stared at him. She said with obvious sincerity:

“Oh no.”

Weston said:

“I suppose your father was—er—very wrapped up in her?”

Linda said simply:

“I don’t know.”

Weston went on:

“All sorts of difficulties, as I say, arise in families. Quarrels—rows—that sort of thing. If husband and wife get ratty with each other, that’s a bit awkward for a daughter too. Anything of that sort?”

Linda said clearly:

“Do you mean, did Father and Arlena quarrel?”

“Well—yes.”

Weston thought to himself:

“Rotten business—questioning a child about her father. Why is one a policeman? Damn it all, it’s got to be done, though.”

Linda said positively:

“Oh no.” She added: “Father doesn’t quarrel with people. He’s not like that at all.”

Weston said:

“Now, Miss Linda, I want you to think very carefully. Have you any idea at all who might have killed your stepmother? Is there anything you’ve ever heard or anything you know that could help us on that point?”

Linda was silent a minute. She seemed to be giving the question a serious unhurried consideration. She said at last.

“No, I don’t know who could have wanted to kill Arlena.” She added: “Except, of course, Mrs. Redfern.”

Weston said:

“You think Mrs. Redfern wanted to kill her? Why?”

Linda said:

“Because her husband was in love with Arlena. But I don’t think she would really want to kill her. I mean she’d just feel that she wished she was dead—and that isn’t the same thing at all, is it?”

Poirot said gently:

“No, it is not at all the same.”

Linda nodded. A queer sort of spasm passed across her face. She said:

“And anyway, Mrs. Redfern could never do a thing like that—kill anybody. She isn’t—she isn’t violent, if you know what I mean.”

Weston and Poirot nodded. The latter said:

"I know exactly what you mean, my child, and I agree with you. Mrs. Redfern is not of those who, as your saying goes, 'sees red.' She would not be"—he leaned back half closing his eyes, picking his words with care—"shaken by a storm of feeling—seeing life narrowing in front of her—seeing a hated face—a hated white neck—feeling her hands clench—longing to feel them press into flesh—"

He stopped.

Linda moved jerkily back from the table. She said in a trembling voice:

"Can I go now? Is that all?"

Colonel Weston said:

"Yes, yes, that's all. Thank you, Miss Linda."

He got up to open the door for her. Then came back to the table and lit a cigarette.

"Phew," he said. "Not a nice job, ours. I can tell you I felt a bit of a cad questioning that child about the relations between her father and her stepmother. More or less inviting a daughter to put a rope round her father's neck. All the same, it had to be done. Murder is murder. And she's the person most likely to know the truth of things. I'm rather thankful, though, that she'd nothing to tell us in that line."

Poirot said:

"Yes, I thought you were."

Weston said with an embarrassed cough:

"By the way, Poirot, you went a bit far, I thought at the end. All that hands sinking into flesh business! Not quite the sort of idea to put into a kid's head."

Hercule Poirot looked at him with thoughtful eyes. He said:

“So you thought I put ideas into her head?”

“Well, didn’t you? Come now.”

Poirot shook his head.

Weston sheered away from the point. He said:

“On the whole we got very little useful stuff out of her. Except a more or less complete alibi for the Redfern woman. If they were together from half past ten to a quarter to twelve that lets Christine Redfern out of it. Exit the jealous wife suspect.”

Poirot said:

“There are better reasons than that for leaving Mrs. Redfern out of it. It would, I am convinced, be physically impossible and mentally impossible for her to strangle anyone. She is cold rather than warm blooded, capable of deep devotion and unswerving constancy, but not of hot-blooded passion or rage. Moreover, her hands are far too small and delicate.”

Colgate said:

“I agree with M. Poirot. She’s out of it. Dr. Neasden says it was a full-sized pair of hands that throttled that dame.”

Weston said:

“Well, I suppose we’d better see the Redferns next. I expect he’s recovered a bit from the shock now.”

III

Patrick Redfern had recovered full composure by now. He looked pale and haggard and suddenly very young, but his manner was quite composed.

“You are Mr. Patrick Redfern of Crossgates, Seldon, Princes Risborough?”

“Yes.”

“How long had you known Mrs. Marshall?”

Patrick Redfern hesitated, then said:

“Three months.”

Weston went on:

“Captain Marshall has told us that you and she met casually at a cocktail party. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s how it came about.”

Weston said:

“Captain Marshall has implied that until you both met down here you did not know each other well. Is that the truth, Mr. Redfern?”

Again Patrick Redfern hesitated a minute. Then he said:

“Well—not exactly. As a matter of fact I saw a fair amount of her one way and another.”

“Without Captain Marshall’s knowledge?”

Redfern flushed slightly. He said:

“I don’t know whether he knew about it or not.”

Hercule Poirot spoke. He murmured:

“And was it also without your wife’s knowledge, Mr. Redfern?”

“I believe I mentioned to my wife that I had met the famous Arlena Stuart.”

Poirot persisted.

“But she did not know how often you were seeing her?”

“Well, perhaps not.”

Weston said:

“Did you and Mrs. Marshall arrange to meet down here?”

Redfern was silent a minute or two. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh well,” he said, “I suppose it’s bound to come out now. It’s no good my fencing with you. I was crazy about the woman—mad—infatuated—anything you like. She wanted me to come down here. I demurred a bit and then I agreed. I—I—well, I would have agreed to do any mortal thing she liked. She had that kind of effect on people.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“You paint a very clear picture of her. She was the eternal Circe. Just that!”

Patrick Redfern said bitterly:

“She turned men into swine all right!” He went on: “I’m being frank with you, gentlemen. I’m not going to hide anything. What’s the use? As I say, I was infatuated with her. Whether she cared for me or not, I don’t know. She pretended to, but I think she was one of those women who lose interest in a man once they’ve got him body and soul. She knew she’d got me all right. This morning, when I found her there on the beach, dead, it was as though”—he paused—“as though something had hit me straight between the eyes. I was dazed—knocked out!”

Poirot leaned forward. “And now?”

Patrick Redfern met his eyes squarely.

He said:

“I’ve told you the truth. What I want to ask is this—how much of it has got to be made public? It’s not as though it could have any bearing on her death. And if it all comes out, it’s going to be pretty rough on my wife.”

“Oh, I know,” he went on quickly. “You think I haven’t thought much about her up to now? Perhaps that’s true. But, though I may sound the worst kind of hypocrite, the real truth is that I care for my wife—care for her very deeply. The other”—he twitched his shoulders—“it was a madness—the kind of idiotic fool thing men do—but Christine is different. She’s real. Badly as I’ve treated her, I’ve known all along, deep down, that she was the person who really counted.” He paused—sighed—and said rather pathetically: “I wish I could make you believe that.”

Hercule Poirot leant forward. He said:

“But I do believe it. Yes, yes, I do believe it!”

Patrick Redfern looked at him gratefully. He said:

“Thank you.”

Colonel Weston cleared his throat. He said:

“You may take it, Mr. Redfern, that we shall not go into irrelevancies. If your infatuation for Mrs. Marshall played no part in the murder then there will be no point in dragging it into the case. But what you don’t seem to realize is that that—er—intimacy—may have a very direct bearing on the murder. It might establish, you understand, a motive for the crime.”

Patrick Redfern said:

“Motive?”

Weston said:

“Yes, Mr. Redfern, motive! Captain Marshall, perhaps, was unaware of the affair. Suppose that he suddenly found out?”

Redfern said:

“Oh God! You mean he got wise and—and killed her?”

The Chief Constable said rather dryly:

"That solution had not occurred to you?"

Redfern shook his head. He said:

"No—funny. I never thought of it. You see, Marshall's such a quiet chap. I—oh, it doesn't seem likely."

Weston asked:

"What was Mrs. Marshall's attitude to her husband in all this? Was she—well, uneasy—in case it should come to his ears? Or was she indifferent?"

Redfern said slowly:

"She was—a bit nervous. She didn't want him to suspect anything."

"Did she seem afraid of him?"

"Afraid. No, I wouldn't say that."

Poirot murmured:

"Excuse me, M. Redfern, there was not, at any time, the question of a divorce?"

Patrick Redfern shook his head decisively.

"Oh no, there was no question of anything like that. There was Christine, you see. And Arlena, I am sure, never thought of such a thing. She was perfectly satisfied married to Marshall. He's—well, rather a big bug in his way—" He smiled suddenly. "County—all that sort of thing, and quite well off. She never thought of me as a possible husband. No, I was just one of a succession of poor mutts—just something to pass the time with. I knew that all along, and yet, queerly enough, it didn't alter my feeling towards her…."

His voice trailed off. He sat there thinking.

Weston recalled him to the needs of the moment.

"Now, Mr. Redfern, had you any particular appointment with Mrs. Marshall this morning?"

Patrick Redfern looked slightly puzzled.

He said:

"Not a particular appointment, no. We usually met every morning on the beach. We used to paddle about on floats."

"Were you surprised not to find Mrs. Marshall there this morning?"

"Yes, I was. Very surprised. I couldn't understand it at all."

"What did you think?"

"Well, I didn't know what to think. I mean, all the time I thought she would be coming."

"If she were keeping an appointment elsewhere you had no idea with whom that appointment might be?"

Patrick Redfern merely stared and shook his head.

"When you had a rendezvous with Mrs. Marshall, where did you meet?"

"Well, sometimes I'd meet her in the afternoon down at Gull Cove. You see the sun is off Gull Cove in the afternoon and so there aren't usually many people there. We met there once or twice."

"Never on the other cove?" Pixy Cove?"

"No. You see Pixy Cove faces west and people go round there in boats or on floats in the afternoon. We never tried to meet in the morning. It would have been too noticeable. In the afternoon people go and have a sleep or mouch around and nobody knows much where any one else is."

Weston nodded:

Patrick Redfern went on:

“After dinner, of course, on the fine nights, we used to go off for a stroll together to different parts of the island.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“Ah, yes!” and Patrick Redfern shot him an inquiring glance.

Weston said:

“Then you can give us no help whatsoever as to the cause that took Mrs. Marshall to Pixy Cove this morning?”

Redfern shook his head. He said, and his voice sounded honestly bewildered:

“I haven’t the faintest idea! It wasn’t like Arlena.”

Weston said:

“Had she any friends down here staying in the neighbourhood?”

“Not that I know of. Oh, I’m sure she hadn’t.”

“Now, Mr. Redfern, I want you to think very carefully. You knew Mrs. Marshall in London. You must be acquainted with various members of her circle. Is there anyone you know of who could have had a grudge against her? Someone, for instance, whom you may have supplanted in her fancy?”

Patrick Redfern thought for some minutes. Then he shook his head.

“Honestly,” he said. “I can’t think of anyone.”

Colonel Weston drummed with his fingers on the table.

He said at last:

"Well, that's that. We seem to be left with three possibilities. That of an unknown killer—some monomaniac—who happened to be in the neighbourhood—and that's a pretty tall order—"

Redfern said, interrupting:

"And yet surely, it's by far the most likely explanation."

Weston shook his head. He said:

"This isn't one of the 'lonely copse' murders. This cove place was pretty inaccessible. Either the man would have to come up from the causeway past the hotel, over the top of the island and down by that ladder contraption, or else he came there by boat. Either way is unlikely for a casual killing."

Patrick Redfern said:

"You said there were three possibilities."

"Um—yes," said the Chief Constable. "That's to say, there were two people on this island who had a motive for killing her. Her husband, for one, and your wife for another."

Redfern stared at him. He looked dumbfounded. He said:

"My wife? Christine? D'you mean that Christine had anything to do with this?"

He got up and stood there stammering slightly in his incoherent haste to get the words out.

"You're mad—quite mad—Christine? Why, it's impossible. It's laughable!"

Weston said:

"All the same, Mr. Redfern, jealousy is a very powerful motive. Women who are jealous lose control of themselves completely."

Redfern said earnestly.

“Not Christine. She’s—oh she’s not like that. She was unhappy, yes. But she’s not the kind of person to—Oh, there’s no violence in her.”

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Violence. The same word that Linda Marshall had used. As before, he agreed with the sentiment.

“Besides,” went on Redfern confidently. “It would be absurd. Arlena was twice as strong physically as Christine. I doubt if Christine could strangle a kitten—certainly not a strong wiry creature like Arlena. And then Christine could never have got down that ladder to the beach. She has no head for that sort of thing. And—oh, the whole thing is fantastic!”

Colonel Weston scratched his ear tentatively.

“Well,” he said. “Put like that it doesn’t seem likely. I grant you that. But motive’s the first thing we’ve got to look for.” He added: “Motive and opportunity.”

IV

When Redfern had left the room, the Chief Constable observed with a slight smile:

“Didn’t think it necessary to tell the fellow his wife had got an alibi. Wanted to hear what he’d have to say to the idea. Shook him up a bit, didn’t it?”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“The arguments he advanced were quite as strong as any alibi.”

“Yes. Oh! she didn’t do it! She couldn’t have done it—physically impossible as you said. Marshall could have done it—but apparently he didn’t.”

Inspector Colgate coughed. He said:

“Excuse me, sir, I’ve been thinking about that alibi. It’s possible, you know, if he’d thought this thing out, that those letters were got ready beforehand.”

Weston said:

“That’s a good idea. We must look into—”

He broke off as Christine Redfern entered the room.

She was, as always, calm and a little precise in manner. She was wearing a white tennis frock and a pale blue pullover. It accentuated her fair, rather anaemic prettiness. Yet, Hercule Poirot thought to himself, it was neither a silly face nor a weak one. It had plenty of resolution, courage and good sense. He nodded appreciatively.

Colonel Weston thought:

“Nice little woman. Bit wishy-washy, perhaps. A lot too good for that philandering young ass of a husband of hers. Oh well, the boy’s young. Women usually make a fool of you once!”

He said:

“Sit down, Mrs. Redfern. We’ve got to go through a certain amount of routine, you see. Asking everybody for an account of their movements this morning. Just for our records.”

Christine Redfern nodded.

She said in her quiet precise voice.

“Oh yes, I quite understand. Where do you want me to begin?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“As early as possible, Madame. What did you do when you first got up this morning?”

Christine said:

“Let me see. On my way down to breakfast I went into Linda Marshall’s room and fixed up with her to go to Gull Cove this morning. We agreed to meet in the lounge at half past ten."

Poirot asked:

"You did not bathe before breakfast, Madame?"

"No. I very seldom do." She smiled. "I like the sea well warmed before I get into it. I'm rather a chilly person."

"But your husband bathes then?"

"Oh, yes. Nearly always."

"And Mrs. Marshall, she also?"

A change came over Christine's voice. It became cold and almost acrid.

She said:

"Oh no, Mrs. Marshall was the sort of person who never made an appearance before the middle of the morning."

With an air of confusion, Hercule Poirot said:

"Pardon, Madame, I interrupted you. You were saying that you went to Miss Linda Marshall's room. What time was that?"

"Let me see—half past eight—no, a little later."

"And was Miss Marshall up then?"

"Oh yes, she had been out."

"Out?"

"Yes, she said she'd been bathing."

There was a faint—a very faint note of embarrassment in Christine's voice. It puzzled Hercule Poirot.

Weston said:

“And then?”

“Then I went down to breakfast.”

“And after breakfast?”

“I went upstairs, collected my sketching box and sketching book and we started out.”

“You and Miss Linda Marshall?”

“Yes.”

“What time was that?”

“I think it was just on half past ten.”

“And what did you do?”

“We went to Gull Cove. You know, the cove on the east side of the island. We settled ourselves there. I did a sketch and Linda sunbathed.”

“What time did you leave the cove?”

“At a quarter to twelve. I was playing tennis at twelve and had to change.”

“You had your watch with you?”

“No, as a matter of fact I hadn’t. I asked Linda the time.”

“I see. And then?”

“I packed up my sketching things and went back to the hotel.”

Poirot said:

“And Mademoiselle Linda?”

“Linda?” Oh, Linda went into the sea.”

Poirot said:

“Were you far from the sea where you were sitting?”

“Well, we were well above high-water mark. Just under the cliff—so that I could be a little in the shade and Linda in the sun.”

Poirot said:

“Did Linda Marshall actually enter the sea before you left the beach?”

Christine frowned a little in the effort to remember. She said:

“Let me see. She ran down the beach—I fastened my box—Yes, I heard her splashing in the waves as I was on the path up the cliff.”

“You are sure of that, Madame? That she really entered the sea?”

“Oh yes.”

She stared at him in surprise.

Colonel Weston also stared at him.

Then he said:

“Go on, Mrs. Redfern.”

“I went back to the hotel, changed, and went to the tennis courts where I met the others.”

“Who were?”

“Captain Marshall, Mr. Gardener and Miss Darnley. We played two sets. We were just going in again when the news came about—about Mrs. Marshall.”

Hercule Poirot leant forward. He said:

“And what did you think, Madame, when you heard that news?”

“What did I think?”

Her face showed a faint distaste for the question.

“Yes.”

Christine Redfern said slowly:

“It was—a horrible thing to happen.”

“Ah, yes, your fastidiousness was revolted. I understand that. But what did it mean to you—personally?”

She gave him a quick look—a look of appeal. He responded to it. He said in a matter-of-fact voice.

“I am appealing to you, Madame, as a woman of intelligence with plenty of good sense and judgment. You had doubtless during your stay here formed an opinion of Mrs. Marshall, of the kind of woman she was?”

Christine said cautiously:

“I suppose one always does that more or less when one is staying in hotels.”

“Certainly, it is the natural thing to do. So I ask you, Madame, were you really very surprised at the manner of her death?”

Christine said slowly:

“I think I see what you mean. No, I was not, perhaps, surprised. Shocked, yes. But she was the kind of woman—”

Poirot finished the sentence for her.

“She was the kind of woman to whom such a thing might happen… Yes, Madame, that is the truest and most significant thing that has been said in this room this morning. Laying all—er (he stressed it carefully) personal feeling aside, what did you really think of the late Mrs. Marshall?”

Christine Redfern said calmly:

“Is it really worthwhile going into all that now?”

“I think it might be, yes.”

“Well, what shall I say?” Her fair skin was suddenly suffused with colour. The careful poise of her manner was relaxed. For a short space the natural raw woman looked out. “She’s the kind of woman that to my mind is absolutely worthless! She did nothing to justify her existence. She had no mind—no brains. She thought of nothing but men and clothes and admiration. Useless, a parasite! She was attractive to men, I suppose—Oh, of course, she was. And she lived for that kind of life. And so, I suppose, I wasn’t really surprised at her coming to a sticky end. She was the sort of woman who would be mixed up with everything sordid—blackmail—jealousy—violence—every kind of crude emotion. She—she appealed to the worst in people.”

She stopped, panting a little. Her rather short top lip lifted itself in a kind of fastidious disgust. It occurred to Colonel Weston that you could not have found a more complete contrast to Arlena Stuart than Christine Redfern. It also occurred to him that if you were married to Christine Redfern, the atmosphere might be so rarefied that the Arlena Stuarts of this world would hold a particular attraction for you.

And then, immediately following on these thoughts, a single word out of the words she had spoken fastened on his attention with particular intensity.

He leaned forward and said:

“Mrs. Redfern, why, in speaking of her, did you mention the word blackmail?”

Seven

Christine stared at him, not seeming at once to take in what he meant. She answered almost mechanically.

“I suppose—because she was being blackmailed. She was the sort of person who would be.”

Colonel Weston said earnestly:

“But—do you know she was being blackmailed?”

A faint colour rose in the girl’s cheeks. She said rather awkwardly:

“As a matter of fact I do happen to know it. I—I overheard something.”

“Will you explain, Mrs. Redfern?”

Flushing still more, Christine Redfern said:

“I—I didn’t mean to overhear. It was an accident. It was two—no, three nights ago. We were playing bridge.” She turned towards Poirot. “You remember? My husband and I, M. Poirot and Miss Darnley. I was dummy. It was very stuffy in the card room, and I slipped out of the window for a breath of fresh air. I went down towards the beach and I suddenly heard voices. One—it was Arlena Marshall’s—I knew it at once—said: ‘It’s no good pressing me. I can’t get any more money now. My husband will suspect something.” And then a man’s voice said: ‘I’m not taking any excuses. You’ve got to cough up.’ And then Arlena Marshall said: ‘You blackmailing brute!’ And the man said: ‘Brute or not, you’ll pay up, my lady.’”

Christine paused.

“I’d turned back and a minute after Arlena Marshall rushed past me. She looked—well, frightfully upset.”

Weston said:

“And the man? Do you know who he was?”

Christine Redfern shook her head.

She said:

“He was keeping his voice low. I barely heard what he said.”

“It didn’t suggest the voice to you of anyone you knew?”

She thought again, but once more shook her head. She said:

“No, I don’t know. It was gruff and low. It—oh, it might have been anybody’s.”

Colonel Weston said:

“Thank you, Mrs. Redfern.”

II

When the door had closed behind Christine Redfern Inspector Colgate said:

“Now we are getting somewhere!”

Weston said:

“You think so, eh?”

“Well, it’s suggestive, sir, you can’t get away from it. Somebody in this hotel was blackmailing the lady.”

Poirot murmured:

“But it is not the wicked blackmailer who lies dead. It is the victim.”

“That’s a bit of a setback, I agree,” said the Inspector. “Blackmailers aren’t in the habit of bumping off their victims. But what it does give us is this, it suggests a reason for Mrs. Marshall’s curious behaviour this morning. She’d got a rendezvous with this fellow who was blackmailing her, and she didn’t want either her husband or Redfern to know about it.”

“It certainly explains that point,” agreed Poirot.

Inspector Colgate went on:

“And think of the place chosen. The very spot for the purpose. The lady goes off in her float. That’s natural enough. It’s what she does every day. She goes round to Pixy Cove where no one ever goes in the morning and which will be a nice quiet place for an interview.”

Poirot said:

“But yes, I too was struck by that point. It is as you say, an ideal spot for a rendezvous. It is deserted, it is only accessible from the land side by descending a vertical steel ladder which is not everybody’s money, bien entendu. Moreover most of the beach is invisible from above because of the overhanging cliff. And it has another advantage. Mr. Redfern told me of that one day. There is a cave on it, the entrance to which is not easy to find but where anyone could wait unseen.”

Weston said:

“Of course, the Pixy’s Cave—remember hearing about it.”

Inspector Colgate said:

“Haven’t heard it spoken of for years, though. We’d better have a look inside it. Never know, we might find a pointer of some kind.”

Weston said:

“Yes, you’re right, Colgate, we’ve got the solution to part one of the puzzle. Why did Mrs. Marshall go to Pixy’s Cove? We want the other half of that solution, though. Who did she go there to meet? Presumably someone staying in this hotel. None of them fitted as a lover—but a blackmailer’s a different proposition.”

He drew the register towards him.

“Excluding the waiters, boots, etc., whom I don’t think likely, we’ve got the following. The American—Gardener, Major Barry, Mr. Horace Blatt, and the Reverend Stephen Lane.”

Inspector Colgate said:

“We can narrow it down a bit, sir. We might almost rule out the American, I think. He was on the beach all the morning. That’s so, isn’t it, M. Poirot?”

Poirot replied:

“He was absent for a short time when he fetched a skein of wool for his wife.”

Colgate said:

“Oh well, we needn’t count that.”

Weston said:

“And what about the other three?”

“Major Barry went out at ten o’clock this morning. He returned at one thirty. Mr. Lane was earlier still. He breakfasted at eight. Said he was going for a tramp. Mr. Blatt went off for a sail at nine thirty same as he does most days. Neither of them are back yet.”

“A sail, eh?” Colonel Weston’s voice was thoughtful.

Inspector Colgate’s voice was responsive. He said:

“Might fit in rather well, sir.”

Weston said:

“Well, we’ll have a word with this Major bloke—and let me see, who else is there? Rosamund Darnley. And there’s the Brewster woman who found the body with Redfern. What’s she like, Colgate?”

“Oh, a sensible party, sir. No nonsense about her.”

“She didn’t express any opinions on the death?”

The Inspector shook his head.

“I don’t think she’ll have anything more to tell us, sir, but we’ll have to make sure. Then there are the Americans.”

Colonel Weston nodded. He said: “Let’s have ’em all in and get it over as soon as possible. Never know, might learn something. About the blackmailing stunt if about nothing else.”

III

Mr. and Mrs. Gardener came into the presence of authority together.

Mrs. Gardener explained immediately.

“I hope you’ll understand how it is, Colonel Weston (that is the name, I think?).” Reassured on this point she went on: “But this has been a very bad shock to me and Mr. Gardener is always very, very careful of my health—”

Mr. Gardener here interpolated:

“Mrs. Gardener,” he said, “is very sensitive.”

“—and he said to me, ‘Why, Carrie,’ he said, ‘naturally I’m coming right along with you.’ It’s not that we haven’t the highest admiration for British police methods because we have. I’ve been told that British police procedure is most refined and delicate, and I’ve never doubted it, and certainly when I once had a bracelet missing at the Savoy Hotel nothing could have been more lovely and sympathetic than the young man who came to see me about it, and, of course, I hadn’t really lost the bracelet at all, but just mislaid it; that’s the worst of rushing about so much, it makes you kind of forgetful where you put things—” Mrs. Gardener paused, inhaled gently and started off again. “And what I say is, and I know Mr. Gardener agrees with me, that we’re only too anxious to do anything to help the British police in every way. So go right ahead and ask me anything at all you want to know—”

Colonel Weston opened his mouth to comply with this invitation, but had momentarily to postpone speech while Mrs. Gardener went on.

“That’s what I said, Odell, isn’t it? And that’s so, isn’t it?”

“Yes, darling,” said Mr. Gardener.

Colonel Weston spoke hastily.

“I understand, Mrs. Gardener, that you and your husband were on the beach all the morning?”

For once Mr. Gardener was able to get in first.

“That’s so,” he said.

“Why, certainly we were,” said Mrs. Gardener. “And a lovely peaceful morning it was, just like any other morning if you get me, perhaps even more so, and not the slightest idea in our minds of what was happening round the corner on that lonely beach.”

“Did you see Mrs. Marshall at all today?”

“We did not. And I said to Odell, why wherever can Mrs. Marshall have got to this morning? I said. And first her husband coming looking for her and then that good-looking young man, Mr. Redfern, and so impatient he was, just sitting there on the beach scowling at everyone and everything. And I said to myself why, when he has that nice pretty little wife of his own, must he go running after that dreadful woman? Because that’s just what I felt she was. I always felt that about her, didn’t I, Odell?”

“Yes, darling.”

"However that nice Captain Marshall came to marry such a woman I just cannot imagine and with that nice young daughter growing up, and it's so important for girls to have the right influence. Mrs. Marshall was not at all the right person—no breeding at all—and I should say a very animal nature. Now if Captain Marshall had had any sense he'd have married Miss Darnley, who's a very very charming woman and a very distinguished one. I must say I admire the way she's gone straight ahead and built up a first-class business as she has. It takes brains to do a thing like that—and you've only got to look at Rosamund Darnley to see she's just frantic with brains. She could plan and carry out any moral thing she liked. I just admire that woman more than I can say. And I said to Mr. Gardener the other day that any one could see she was very much in love with Captain Marshall—crazy about him was what I said, didn't I, Odell?"

"Yes, darling."

"It seems they knew each other as children, and why now, who knows, it may all come right after all with that woman out of the way. I'm not a narrow-minded woman, Colonel Weston, and it isn't that I disapprove of the stage as such—why, quite a lot of my best friends are actresses—but I've said to Mr. Gardener all along that there was something evil about that woman. And you see, I've been proved right."

She paused triumphantly.

The lips of Hercule Poirot quivered in a little smile. His eyes met for a minute the shrewd grey eyes of Mr. Gardener.

Colonel Weston said rather desperately:

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Gardener. I suppose there's nothing that either of you has noticed since you've been here that might have a bearing upon the case?"

"Why no, I don't think so." Mr. Gardener spoke with a slow drawl. "Mrs. Marshall was around with young Redfern most of the time—but everybody can tell you that."

"What about her husband? Did he mind, do you think?"

Mr. Gardener said cautiously:

"Captain Marshall is a very reserved man."

Mrs. Gardener confirmed this by saying:

"Why, yes, he is a real Britisher!"

IV

On the slightly apoplectic countenance of Major Barry various emotions seemed contending for mastery. He was endeavouring to look properly horrified but could not subdue a kind of shamefaced gusto.

He was saying in his hoarse, slightly wheezy voice:

"Glad to help you any way I can. 'Course I don't know anythin' about it—nothin' at all. Not acquainted with the parties. But I've knocked about a bit in my time. Lived a lot in the East, you know. And I can tell you that after being in an Indian hill station what you don't know about human nature isn't worth knowin'."

He paused, took a breath and was off again.

"Matter of fact this business reminds me of a case in Simla. Fellow called Robinson, or was it Falconer? Anyway he was in the East Wilts, or was it the North Surreys? Can't remember now, and anyway it doesn't matter. Quiet chap, you know, great reader—mild as milk you'd have said. Went for his wife one evening in their bungalow. Got her by the throat. She'd been carryin' on with some feller or other and he'd got wise to it. By Jove, he nearly did for her! It was touch and go. Surprised us all! Didn't think he had it in him."

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"And you see there an analogy to the death of Mrs. Marshall?"

“Well, what I mean to say—strangled, you know. Same idea. Feller suddenly sees red!”

Poirot said:

“You think that Captain Marshall felt like that?”

“Oh, look here, I never said that.” Major Barry’s face went even redder. “Never said anything about Marshall. Thoroughly nice chap. Wouldn’t say a word against him for the world.”

Poirot murmured:

“Ah, pardon, but you did refer to the natural reactions of a husband.”

Major Barry said:

“Well, I mean to say, I should think she’d been pretty hot stuff. Eh? Got young Redfern on a string all right. And there were probably others before him. But the funny thing is, you know, that husbands are a dense lot. Amazin’. I’ve been surprised by it again and again. They see a feller sweet on their wife but they don’t see that she’s sweet on him! Remember a case like that in Poona. Very pretty woman, Jove, she led her husband a dance—”

Colonel Weston stirred a little restively. He said:

“Yes, yes, Major Barry. For the moment we’ve just got to establish the facts. You don’t know of anything personally—that you’ve seen or noticed that might help us in this case?”

“Well, really, Weston, I can’t say I do. Saw her and young Redfern one afternoon on Gull Cove”—here he winked knowingly and gave a deep hoarse chuckle—“very pretty it was, too. But it’s not evidence of that kind you’re wanting. Ha, ha!”

“You did not see Mrs. Marshall at all this morning?”

“Didn’t see anybody this morning. Went over to St. Loo. Just my luck. Sort of place here where nothin’ happens for months and when it does you miss it!”

The Major’s voice held a ghoulish regret.

Colonel Weston prompted him.

“You went to St. Loo, you say?”

“Yes, wanted to do some telephonin’. No telephone here and that post office place at Leathercombe Bay isn’t very private.”

“Were your telephone calls of a very private nature?”

The Major winked again cheerfully.

“Well, they were and they weren’t. Wanted to get through to a pal of mine and get him to put somethin’ on a horse. Couldn’t get through to him, worse luck.”

“Where did you telephone from?”

“Call box in the G.P.O. at St. Loo. Then on the way back I got lost—these confounded lanes—twistin’ and turnin’ all over the place. Must have wasted an hour over that at least. Damned confusing part of the world. I only got back half an hour ago.”

Colonel Weston said:

“Speak to anyone or meet anyone in St. Loo?”

Major Barry said with a chuckle:

“Wantin’ me to prove an alibi? Can’t think of anythin’ useful. Saw about fifty thousand people in St. Loo—but that’s not to say they’ll remember seein’ me.”

The Chief Constable said:

“We have to ask these things, you know.”

“Right you are. Call on me at any time. Glad to help you. Very fetchin’ woman, the deceased. Like to help you catch the feller who did it. The Lonely Beach Murder—bet you that’s what the papers will call it. Reminds me of the time—”

It was Inspector Colgate who firmly nipped this latest reminiscence in the bud and manoeuvred the garrulous Major out of the door.

Coming back he said:

“Difficult to check up on anything in St. Loo. It’s the middle of the holiday season.”

The Chief Constable said:

“Yes, we can’t take him off the list. Not that I seriously believe he’s implicated. Dozens of old bores like him going about. Remember one or two of them in my army days. Still—he’s a possibility. I leave all that to you, Colgate. Check what time he took the car out—petrol—all that. It’s humanly possible that he parked the car somewhere in a lonely spot, walked back here and went to the cove. But it doesn’t seem feasible to me. He’d have run too much risk of being seen.”

Colgate nodded.

He said:

“Of course there are a good many charabancs here today. Fine day. They start arriving round about half past eleven. High tide was at seven. Low tide would be about one o’clock. People would be spread out over the sands and the causeway.”

Weston said:

“Yes. But he’d have to come up from the causeway past the hotel.”

“Not right past it. He could branch off on the path that leads up over the top of the island.”

Weston said doubtfully:

“I’m not saying that he mightn’t have done it without being seen. Practically all the hotel guests were on the bathing beach except for Mrs. Redfern and the Marshall girl who were down in Gull Cove, and the beginning of that path would only be overlooked by a few rooms of the hotel and there are plenty of chances against anyone looking out of those windows just at that moment. For the matter of that, I dare say it’s possible for a man to walk up to the hotel, through the lounge and out again without anyone happening to see him. But what I say is, he couldn’t count on no one seeing him.”

Colgate said:

“He could have gone round to the cove by boat.”

Weston nodded. He said:

“That’s much sounder. If he’d had a boat handy in one of the coves nearby, he could have left the car, rowed or sailed to Pixy Cove, done the murder, rowed back, picked up the car and arrived back with this tale about having been to St. Loo and lost his way—a story that he’d know would be pretty hard to disprove.”

“You’re right, sir.”

The Chief Constable said:

“Well, I leave it to you, Colgate. Comb the neighbourhood thoroughly. You know what to do. We’d better see Miss Brewster now.”

V

Emily Brewster was not able to add anything of material value to what they already knew.

Weston said after she had repeated her story:

“And there’s nothing you know of that could help us in any way?”

Emily Brewster said shortly:

“Afraid not. It’s a distressing business. However, I expect you’ll soon get to the bottom of it.”

Weston said:

“I hope so, I’m sure.”

Emily Brewster said dryly:

“Ought not to be difficult.”

“Now what do you mean by that, Miss Brewster?”

“Sorry. Wasn’t attempting to teach you your business. All I meant was that with a woman of that kind it ought to be easy enough.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“That is your opinion?”

Emily Brewster snapped out:

“Of course. De mortuis nil nisi bonum and all that, but you can’t get away from facts. That woman was a bad lot through and through. You’ve only got to hunt round a bit in her unsavoury past.”

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“You did not like her?”

“I know a bit too much about her.” In answer to the inquiring looks she went on: “My first cousin married one of the Erskines. You’ve probably heard that that woman induced old Sir Robert when he was in his dotage to leave most of his fortune to her away from his own family."

Colonel Weston said:

"And the family—er—resented that?"

"Naturally. His association with her was a scandal anyway, and on top of that, to leave her a sum like fifty thousand pounds shows just the kind of woman she was. I dare say I sound hard, but in my opinion the Arlena Stuarts of this world deserve very little sympathy. I know of something else too—a young fellow who lost his head about her completely—he'd always been a bit wild, naturally his association with her pushed him over the edge. He did something rather fishy with some shares—solely to get money to spend on her—and only just managed to escape prosecution. That woman contaminated everyone she met. Look at the way she was ruining young Redfern. No, I'm afraid I can't have any regret for her death—though of course it would have been better if she'd drowned herself, or fallen over a cliff. Strangling is rather unpleasant."

"And you think the murderer was someone out of her past?"

"Yes, I do."

"Someone who came from the mainland with no one seeing him?"

"Why should any one see him? We were all on the beach. I gather the Marshall child and Christine Redfern were down on Gull Cove out of the way. Captain Marshall was in his room in the hotel. Then who on earth was there to see him except possibly Miss Darnley."

"Where was Miss Darnley?"

"Sitting up on the cutting at the top of the cliff. Sunny Ledge it's called. We saw her there, Mr. Redfern and I, when we were rowing round the island."

Colonel Weston said:

"You may be right, Miss Brewster."

Emily Brewster said positively:

“I’m sure I’m right. When a woman’s neither more nor less than a nasty mess, then she herself will provide the best possible clue. Don’t you agree with me, M. Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot looked up. His eyes met her confident grey ones. He said:

“Oh, yes—I agree with that which you have just this minute said. Arlena Marshall herself is the best, the only clue, to her own death.”

Miss Brewster said sharply:

“Well, then!”

She stood there, an erect sturdy figure, her cool self-confident glance going from one man to the other.

Colonel Weston said:

“You may be sure, Miss Brewster, that any clue there may be in Mrs. Marshall’s past life will not be overlooked.”

Emily Brewster went out.

VI

Inspector Colgate shifted his position at the table. He said in a thoughtful voice:

“She’s a determined one, she is. And she’d got her knife into the dead lady, proper, she had.”

He stopped a minute and said reflectively:

“It’s a pity in a way that she’s got a cast-iron alibi for the whole morning. Did you notice her hands, sir? As big as a man’s. And she’s a hefty woman—as strong and stronger than many a man, I’d say….”

He paused again. His glance at Poirot was almost pleading.

“And you say she never left the beach this morning, M. Poirot?”

Slowly Poirot shook his head. He said:

“My dear Inspector, she came down to the beach before Mrs. Marshall could have reached Pixy Cove and she was within my sight until she set off with Mr. Redfern in the boat.”

Inspector Colgate said gloomily:

“Then that washes her out.”

He seemed upset about it.

VII

As always, Hercule Poirot felt a keen sense of pleasure at the sight of Rosamund Darnley.

Even to a bare police inquiry into the ugly facts of murder she brought a distinction of her own.

She sat down opposite Colonel Weston and turned a grave and intelligent face to him.

She said:

“You want my name and address? Rosamund Anne Darnley. I carry on a dressmaking business under the name of Rose Mond Ltd at 622 Brook Street.”

“Thank you, Miss Darnley. Now can you tell us anything that may help us?”

“I don’t really think I can.”

“Your own movements—”

“I had breakfast about nine thirty. Then I went up to my room and collected some books and my sunshade and went out to Sunny Ledge. That must have been about twenty-five past ten. I came back to the hotel about ten minutes to twelve, went up and got my tennis racquet and went out to the tennis courts, where I played tennis until lunchtime.”

“You were in the cliff recess, called by the hotel Sunny Ledge, from about half past ten until ten minutes to twelve?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see Mrs. Marshall at all this morning?”

“No.”

“Did you see her from the cliff as she paddled her float round to Pixy Cove?”

“No, she must have gone by before I got there.”

“Did you notice anyone on a float or in a boat at all this morning?”

“No, I don’t think I did. You see, I was reading. Of course I looked up from my book from time to time, but as it happened the sea was quite bare each time I did so.”

“You didn’t even notice Mr. Redfern and Miss Brewster when they went round?”

“No.”

“You were, I think, acquainted with Mr. Marshall?”

“Captain Marshall is an old family friend. His family and mine lived next door to each other. I had not seen him, however, for a good many years—it must be something like twelve years.”

“And Mrs. Marshall?”

"I'd never exchanged half a dozen words with her until I met her here."

"Were Captain and Mrs. Marshall, as far as you knew, on good terms with each other?"

"On perfectly good terms, I should say."

"Was Captain Marshall very devoted to his wife?"

Rosamund said:

"He may have been. I can't really tell you anything about that. Captain Marshall is rather old-fashioned—he hasn't got the modern habit of shouting matrimonial woes upon the housetop."

"Did you like Mrs. Marshall, Miss Darnley?"

"No."

The monosyllable came quietly and evenly. It sounded what it was—a simple statement of fact.

"Why was that?"

A half smile came to Rosamund's lips. She said:

"Surely you've discovered that Arlena Marshall was not popular with her own sex? She was bored to death with women and showed it. Nevertheless I should like to have had the dressing of her. She had a great gift for clothes. Her clothes were always just right and she wore them well. I should like to have had her as a client."

"She spent a good deal on clothes?"

"She must have done. But then she had money of her own and of course Captain Marshall is quite well off."

"Did you ever hear or did it ever occur to you that Mrs. Marshall was being blackmailed, Miss Darnley?"

A look of intense astonishment came over Rosamund Darnley’s expressive face.

She said:

“Blackmailed? Arlena?”

“The idea seems to surprise you.”

“Well, yes, it does rather. It seems so incongruous.”

“But surely it is possible?”

“Everything’s possible, isn’t it? The world soon teaches one that. But I wondered what any one could blackmail Arlena about?”

“There are certain things, I suppose, that Mrs. Marshall might be anxious should not come to her husband’s ears?”

“We-ll, yes.”

She explained the doubt in her voice by saying with a half smile:

“I sound sceptical, but then, you see, Arlena was rather notorious in her conduct. She never made much of a pose of respectability.”

“You think, then, that her husband was aware of her—intimacies with other people?”

There was a pause. Rosamund was frowning. She spoke at last in a slow, reluctant voice. She said:

“You know, I don’t really know what to think. I’ve always assumed that Kenneth Marshall accepted his wife, quite frankly, for what she was. That he had no illusions about her. But it may not be so.”

“He may have believed in her absolutely?”

Rosamund said with semi-exasperation:

“Men are such fools. And Kenneth Marshall is unworldly under his sophisticated manner. He may have believed in her blindly. He may have thought she was just—admired.”

“And you know of no one—that is, you have heard of no one who was likely to have had a grudge against Mrs. Marshall?”

Rosamund Darnley smiled. She said:

“Only resentful wives. And I presume, since she was strangled, that it was a man who killed her.”

“Yes.”

Rosamund said thoughtfully:

“No, I can’t think of any one. But then I probably shouldn’t know. You’ll have to ask someone in her own intimate set.”

“Thank you, Miss Darnley.”

Rosamund turned a little in her chair. She said:

“Hasn’t M. Poirot any questions to ask?”

Her faintly ironic smile flashed out at him.

Hercule Poirot smiled and shook his head.

He said:

“I can think of nothing.”

Rosamund Darnley got up and went out.

Eight

They were standing in the bedroom that had been Arlena Marshall’s.

Two big bay windows gave on to a balcony that overlooked the bathing beach and the sea beyond. Sunshine poured into the room, flashing over the bewildering array of bottles and jars on Arlena’s dressing table.

Here there was every kind of cosmetic and unguent known to beauty parlours. Amongst this panoply of woman’s affairs three men moved purposefully. Inspector Colgate went about shutting and opening drawers.

Presently he gave a grunt. He had come upon a packet of folded letters. He and Weston ran through them together.

Hercule Poirot had moved to the wardrobe. He opened the door of the hanging cupboard and looked at the multiplicity of gowns and sports suits that hung there. He opened the other side. Foamy lingerie lay in piles. On a wide shelf were hats. Two more beach cardboard hats in lacquer red and pale yellow—a Big Hawaiian straw hat—another of drooping dark-blue linen and three or four little absurdities for which, no doubt, several guiness had been paid apiece—a kind of beret in dark blue—a tuft, no more, of black velvet—a pale grey turban.

Hercule Poirot stood scanning them—a faintly indulgent smile came to his lips. He murmured:

“Les femmes!”

Colonel Weston was refolding the letters.

“Three from young Redfern,” he said. “Damned young ass. He’ll learn not to write letters to women in a few more years. Women always keep letters and then swear they’ve burnt them. There’s one other letter here. Same line of country.”

He held it out and Poirot took it.

Darling Arlena,—God, I feel blue. To be going out to China—and perhaps not seeing you again for years and years. I didn't know any man could go on feeling crazy about a woman like I feel about you. Thanks for the cheque. They won't prosecute now. It was a near shave, though, and all because I wanted to make big money for you. Can you forgive me? I wanted to set diamonds in your ears—your lovely ears—and clasp great milk-white pearls round your throat, only they say pearls are no good nowadays. A fabulous emerald, then? Yes, that's the thing. A great emerald, cool and green and full of hidden fire. Don't forget me—but you won't, I know. You're mine—always.

Goodbye—goodbye—goodbye.

J.N.

Inspector Colgate said:

"Might be worth while to find out if J.N. really did go to China. Otherwise—well, he might be the person we're looking for. Crazy about the woman, idealizing her, suddenly finding out he'd been played for a sucker. It sounds to me as though this is the boy Miss Brewster mentioned. Yes, I think this might be useful."

Hercule Poirot nodded. He said: "Yes, that letter is important. I find it very important."

He turned round and stared at the room—at the bottles on the dressing table—at the open wardrobe and at a big Pierrot doll that lolled insolently on the bed.

They went into Kenneth Marshall's room.

It was next door to his wife's but with no communicating door and no balcony. It faced the same way and had two windows, but it was much smaller. Between the two windows a gilt mirror hung on the wall. In the corner beyond the right-hand window was the dressing table. On it were two ivory brushes, a clothes brush and a bottle of hair lotion. In the corner by the left-hand window was a writing table. An open typewriter stood on it and papers were ranged in a stack beside it.

Colgate went through them rapidly.

He said:

“All seems straightforward enough. Ah, here’s the letter he mentioned this morning. Dated the 24th—that’s yesterday. And here’s the envelope postmarked Leathercombe Bay this morning. Seems all square. Now we’ll have an idea if he could have prepared that answer of his beforehand.

He sat down.

Colonel Weston said:

“We’ll leave you to it, for a moment. We’ll just glance through the rest of the rooms. Everyone’s been kept out of this corridor until now, and they’re getting a bit restive about it.”

They went next into Linda Marshall’s room. It faced east, looking out over the rocks down to the sea below.

Weston gave a glance round. He murmured:

“Don’t suppose there’s anything to see here. But it’s possible Marshall might have put something in his daughter’s room that he didn’t want us to find. Not likely, though. It isn’t as though there had been a weapon or anything to get rid of.”

He went out again.

Hercule Poirot stayed behind. He found something that interested him in the grate. Something had been burnt there recently. He knelt down, working patiently. He laid out his finds on a sheet of paper. A large irregular blob of candle grease—some fragments of green paper or cardboard, possibly a pull-off calendar for with it was an unburnt fragment bearing a large figure 5 and a scrap of printing…noble deeds… There was also an ordinary pin and some burnt animal matter which might have been hair.

Poirot arranged them neatly in a row and stared at them.

He murmured:

“Do noble deeds, not dream them all day long. C’est possible. But what is one to make of this collection? C’est fantastique!”

And then he picked up the pin and his eyes grew sharp and green.

He murmured:

“Pour l’amour de Dieu! Is it possible?”

Hercule Poirot got up from where he had been kneeling by the grate.

Slowly he looked round the room and this time there was an entirely new expression on his face. It was grave and almost stern.

To the left of the mantelpiece there were some shelves with a row of books. Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully along the titles.

A Bible, a battered copy of Shakespeare’s plays, The Marriage of William Ashe, by Mrs. Humphry Ward. The Young Stepmother, by Charlotte Yonge. The Shropshire Lad. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral. Bernard Shaw’s St. Joan. Gone With the Wind, by Margaret Mitchell. The Burning Court, by Dickson Carr.

Poirot took out two books. The Young Stepmother and William Ashe, and glanced inside at the blurred stamp affixed to the title page. As he was about to replace them, his eye caught sight of a book that had been shoved behind the other books. It was a small dumpy volume bound in brown calf.

He took it out and opened it. Very slowly he nodded his head.

He murmured:

“So I was right… Yes, I was right. But for the other—is that possible too? No, it is not possible, unless…”

He stayed there, motionless, stroking his moustaches whilst his mind ranged busily over the problem.

He said again, softly:

“Unless—”

II

Colonel Weston looked in at the door.

“Hullo, Poirot, still there?”

“I arrive. I arrive,” cried Poirot.

He hurried out into the corridor.

The room next to Linda’s was that of the Redferns.

Poirot looked into it, noting automatically the trace of two different individualities—a neatness and tidiness which he associated with Christine, and a picturesque disorder which was characteristic of Patrick. Apart from these sidelights on personality the room did not interest him.

Next to it again was Rosamund Darnley’s room, and here he lingered for a moment in the sheer pleasure of the owner’s personality.

He noted the few books that lay on the table next to the bed, the expensive simplicity of the toilet set on the dressing table. And there came gently to his nostrils the elusive expensive perfume that Rosamund Darnley used.

Next to Rosamund Darnley’s room at the northern end of the corridor was an open window leading to a balcony from which an outside stair led down to the rocks below.

Weston said:

“That’s the way people go down to bathe before breakfast—that is, if they bathe off the rocks as most of them do.”

Interest came into Hercule Poirot's eyes. He stepped outside and looked down.

Below, a path led to steps cut zigzag leading down the rocks to the sea. There was also a path that led round the hotel to the left. He said:

"One could go down these stairs, go to the left round the hotel and join the main path up from the causeway."

Weston nodded. He amplified Poirot's statement.

"One could go right across the island without going through the hotel at all." He added: "But one might still be seen from a window."

"What window?"

"Two of the public bathrooms look out that way—north—and the staff bathroom, and the cloakrooms on the ground floor. Also the billiard room."

Poirot nodded. He said:

"And all the former have frosted glass windows, and one does not play billiards on a fine morning."

"Exactly."

Weston paused and said:

"If he did it, that's the way he went."

"You mean Captain Marshall?"

"Yes. Blackmail, or no blackmail. I still feel it points to him. And his manner—well, his manner is unfortunate."

Hercule Poirot said dryly:

"Perhaps—but a manner does not make a murderer!"

Weston said:

“Then you think he’s out of it?”

Poirot shook his head. He said:

“No, I would not say that.”

Weston said:

“We’ll see what Colgate can make out of the typewriting alibi. In the meantime I’ve got the chambermaid of this floor waiting to be interviewed. A good deal may depend on her evidence.”

The chambermaid was a woman of thirty, brisk, efficient and intelligent. Her answers came readily.

Captain Marshall had come up to his room not long after ten-thirty. She was then finishing the room. He had asked her to be as quick as possible. She had not seen him come back but she had heard the sound of the typewriter a little later. She put it at about five minutes to eleven. She was then in Mr. and Mrs. Redfern’s room. After she had done that she moved on to Miss Darnley’s room at the end of the corridor. She could not hear the typewriter from there. She went to Miss Darnley’s room, as near as she could say, at just after eleven o’clock. She remembered hearing Leathercombe Church strike the hour as she went in. At a quarter past eleven she had gone downstairs for her eleven o’clock cup of tea and “snack.” Afterwards she had gone to do the rooms in the other wing of the hotel. In answer to the Chief Constable’s question she explained that she had done the rooms in this corridor in the following order:

Miss Linda Marshall’s, the two public bathrooms, Mrs. Marshall’s room and private bath, Captain Marshall’s room. Mr. and Mrs. Redfern’s room and private bath, Miss Darnley’s room and private bath. Captain Marshall’s and Miss Marshall’s rooms had no adjoining bathrooms.

During the time she was in Miss Darnley’s room and bathroom she had not heard any one pass the door or go out by the staircase to the rocks, but it was quite likely she wouldn’t have heard if any one went quietly.

Weston then directed his questions to the subject of Mrs. Marshall.

No, Mrs. Marshall wasn’t one for rising early as a rule. She, Gladys Narracott, had been surprised to find the door open and Mrs. Marshall gone down at just after ten. Something quite unusual, that was.

“Did Mrs. Marshall always have her breakfast in bed?”

“Oh yes, sir, always. Not very much of it either. Just tea and orange juice and one piece of toast. Slimming like so many ladies.”

No, she hadn’t noticed anything unusual in Mrs. Marshall’s manner that morning. She’d seemed quite as usual.

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“What did you think of Mrs. Marshall, Mademoiselle?”

Gladys Narracott stared at him. She said:

“Well, that’s hardly for me to say, is it, sir?”

“But yes, it is for you to say. We are anxious—very anxious—to hear your impression.”

Gladys gave a slightly uneasy glance towards the Chief Constable, who endeavoured to make his face sympathetic and approving, though actually he felt slightly embarrassed by his foreign colleague’s methods of approach. He said:

“Er—yes, certainly. Go ahead.”

For the first time Gladys Narracott’s brisk efficiency deserted her. Her fingers fumbled with her print dress. She said:

“Well, Mrs. Marshall—she wasn’t exactly a lady, as you might say. What I mean is she was more like an actress.”

Colonel Weston said:

“She was an actress.”

“Yes, sir, that’s what I’m saying. She just went on exactly as she felt like it. She didn’t—well, she didn’t trouble to be polite if she wasn’t feeling polite. And she’d be all smiles one minute and then, if she couldn’t find something or the bell wasn’t answered at once or her laundry wasn’t back, well, be downright rude and nasty about it. None of us you might say liked her. But her clothes were beautiful, and, of course, she was a very handsome lady, so it was only natural she should be admired.”

Colonel Weston said:

“I am sorry to have to ask you what I am going to ask you, but it is a very vital matter. Can you tell me how things were between her and her husband?”

Gladys Narracott hesitated a minute.

She said:

“You don’t—it wasn’t—you don’t think as he did it?”

Hercule Poirot said quickly:

“Do you?”

“Oh! I wouldn’t like to think so. He’s such a nice gentleman, Captain Marshall. He couldn’t do a thing like that—I’m sure he couldn’t.”

“But you are not very sure—I hear it in your voice.”

Gladys Narracott said reluctantly:

“You do read such things in the papers! When there’s jealousy. If there’s been goings on—and, of course, everyone’s been talking about it—about her and Mr. Redfern, I mean. And Mrs. Redfern such a nice quiet lady! It does seem a shame! And Mr. Redfern’s a nice gentleman too, but it seems men can’t help themselves when it’s a lady like Mrs. Marshall—one who’s used to having her own way. Wives have to put up with a lot, I’m sure.” She sighed and paused. “But if Captain Marshall found out about it—”

Colonel Weston said sharply:

“Well?”

Gladys Narracott said slowly:

“I did think sometimes that Mrs. Marshall was frightened of her husband knowing.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It wasn’t anything definite, sir. It was only I felt—that sometimes she was—afraid of him. He was a very quiet gentleman but he wasn’t—he wasn’t easy.”

Weston said:

“But you’ve nothing definite to go on? Nothing either of them ever said to each other.”

Slowly Gladys Narracott shook her head.

Weston sighed. He went on.

“Now, as to letters received by Mrs. Marshall this morning. Can you tell us anything about those?”

“There were about six or seven, sir. I couldn’t say exactly.”

“Did you take them up to her?”

“Yes, sir. I got them from the office as usual and put them on her breakfast tray.”

“Do you remember anything about the look of them?”

The girl shook her head.

“They were just ordinary-looking letters. Some of them were bills and circulars, I think, because they were torn up on the tray.”

“What happened to them?”

“They went into the dustbin, sir. One of the police gentlemen is going through that now.”

Weston nodded.

“And the contents of the wastepaper baskets, where are they?”

“They’ll be in the dustbin too.”

Weston said: “H’m—well, I think that is all at present.” He looked inquiringly at Poirot.

Poirot leaned forward.

“When you did Miss Linda Marshall’s room this morning, did you do the fireplace?”

“There wasn’t anything to do, sir. There had been no fire lit.”

“And there was nothing in the fireplace itself?”

“No sir, it was perfectly all right.”

“What time did you do her room?”

“About a quarter past nine, sir, when she’d gone down to breakfast.”

“Did she come up to her room after breakfast, do you know?”

“Yes, sir. She came up about a quarter to ten.”

“Did she stay in her room?”

"I think so, sir. She came out, hurrying rather, just before half past ten."

"You didn't go into her room again?"

"No, sir. I had finished with it."

Poirot nodded. He said:

"There is another thing I want to know. What people bathed before breakfast this morning?"

"I couldn't say about the other wing and the floor above. Only about this one."

"That is all I want to know."

"Well, sir, Captain Marshall and Mr. Redfern were the only ones this morning, I think. They always go down for an early dip."

"Did you see them?"

"No, sir, but their wet bathing things were hanging over the balcony rail as usual."

"Miss Linda Marshall did not bathe this morning?"

"No, sir. All her bathing dresses were quite dry."

"Ah," said Poirot. "That is what I wanted to know."

Gladys Narracott volunteered:

"She does most mornings, sir."

"And the other three, Miss Darnley, Mrs. Redfern and Mrs. Marshall?"

"Mrs. Marshall never, sir. Miss Darnley has once or twice, I think. Mrs. Redfern doesn't often bathe before breakfast—only when it's very hot, but she didn't this morning."

Again Poirot nodded. Then he asked:

“I wonder if you have noticed whether a bottle is missing from any of the rooms you look after in this wing?”

“A bottle, sir? What kind of a bottle?”

“Unfortunately I do not know. But have you noticed—or would you be likely to notice—if one had gone?”

Gladys said frankly:

“I shouldn’t from Mrs. Marshall’s room, sir, and that’s a fact. She has ever so many.”

“And the other rooms?”

“Well, I’m not sure about Miss Darnley. She has a good many creams and lotions. But from the other rooms, yes, I would, sir. I mean if I were to look special. If I were noticing, so to speak.”

“But you haven’t actually noticed?”

“No, because I wasn’t looking special, as I say.”

“Perhaps you would go and look now, then.”

“Certainly, sir.”

She left the room, her print dress rustling. Weston looked at Poirot. He said: “What’s all this?”

Poirot murmured:

“My orderly mind, that is vexed by trifles! Miss Brewster, this morning, was bathing off the rocks before breakfast, and she says that a bottle was thrown from above and nearly hit her. Eh bien, I want to know who threw that bottle and why?”

“My dear man, any one may have chucked a bottle away.”

“Not at all. To begin with, it could only have been thrown from a window on the east side of the hotel—that is, one of the windows of the rooms we have just examined. Now I ask you, if you have an empty bottle on your dressing table or in your bathroom what do you do with it? I will tell you, you drop it into the wastepaper basket. You do not take the trouble to go out on your balcony and hurl it into the sea! For one thing you might hit someone, for another it would be too much trouble. No, you would only do that if you did not want anyone to see that particular bottle.”

Weston stared at him.

Weston said:

“I know that Chief Inspector Japp, whom I met over a case not long ago, always says you have a damned tortuous mind. You’re not going to tell me now that Arlena Marshall wasn’t strangled at all, but poisoned out of some mysterious bottle with a mysterious drug?”

“No, no, I do not think there was poison in that bottle.”

“Then what was there?”

“I do not know at all. That’s why I am interested.”

Gladys Narracott came back. She was a little breathless. She said:

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t find anything missing. I’m sure there’s nothing gone from Captain Marshall’s room, or Miss Linda Marshall’s room, or Mr. and Mrs. Redfern’s room, and I’m pretty sure there’s nothing gone from Miss Darnley’s either. But I couldn’t say about Mrs. Marshall’s. As I say, she’s got such a lot.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

He said:

“No matter. We will leave it.”

Gladys Narracott said:

“Is there anything more, sir?”

She looked from one to the other of them.

Weston said:

“Don’t think so. Thank you.”

Poirot said:

“I thank you, no. You are sure, are you not, that there is nothing—nothing at all, that you have forgotten to tell us?”

“About Mrs. Marshall, sir?”

“About anything at all. Anything unusual, out of the way, unexplained, slightly peculiar, rather curious—enfin, something that has made you say to yourself or to one of your colleagues: ‘That’s funny!’?”

Gladys said doubtfully:

“Well, not the sort of thing that you would mean, sir.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Never mind what I mean. You do not know what I mean. It is true, then, that you have said to yourself or to a colleague today, ‘that is funny!’?”

He brought out the three words with ironic detachment.

Gladys said:

“It was nothing really. Just a bath being run. And I did pass the remark to Elsie, downstairs, that it was funny somebody having a bath round about twelve o’clock.”

“Whose bath, who had a bath?”

“That I couldn’t say, sir. We heard it going down the waste from this wing, that’s all, and that’s when I said what I did to Elsie.”

“You’re sure it was a bath? Not one of the handbasins?”

“Oh! quite sure, sir. You can’t mistake bathwater running away.”

Poirot displaying no further desire to keep her, Gladys Narracott was permitted to depart.

Weston said:

“You don’t think this bath question is important, do you, Poirot? I mean, there’s no point to it. No bloodstains or anything like that to wash off. That’s the—” He hesitated.

Poirot cut in:

“That, you would say, is the advantage of strangulation! No bloodstains, no weapon—nothing to get rid of or conceal! Nothing is needed but physical strength—and the soul of a killer!”

His voice was so fierce, so charged with feeling, that Weston recoiled a little.

Hercule Poirot smiled at him apologetically.

“No one,” he said, “the bath is probably of no importance. Anyone may have had a bath. Mrs. Redfern before she went to play tennis, Captain Marshall, Miss Darnley. As I say, anyone. There is nothing in that.”

A police constable knocked at the door, and put in his head.

“It’s Miss Darnley, sir. She says she’d like to see you again for a minute. There’s something she forgot to tell you, she says.”

Weston said:

“We’re coming down—now.”

III

The first person they saw was Colgate. His face was gloomy.

“Just a minute, sir.”

Weston and Poirot followed him into Mrs. Castle’s office.

Colgate said:

“I’ve been checking up with Heald on this typewriting business. Not a doubt of it, it couldn’t be done under an hour. Longer, if you had to stop and think here and there. That seems to me pretty well to settle it. And look at this letter.”

He held it out.

“My dear Marshall—Sorry to worry you on your holiday but an entirely unforseen situation has arisen over the Burley and Tender contracts…”

“Etcetera, etcetera,” said Colgate. “Dated the 24th—that’s yesterday. Envelope postmarked yesterday evening E.C.1. and Leathercombe Bay this morning. Same typewriter used on envelope and in letter. And by the contents it was clearly impossible for Marshall to prepare his answer beforehand. The figures arise out of the ones in the letter—the whole thing is quite intricate.”

“H’m,” said Weston gloomily. “That seems to let Marshall out. We’ll have to look elsewhere.” He added: “I’ve got to see Miss Darnley again. She’s waiting now.”

Rosamund came in crisply. Her smile held an apologetic nuance.

She said:

“I’m frightfully sorry. Probably it isn’t worth bothering about. But one does forget things so.”

“Yes, Miss Darnley?”

The Chief Constable indicated a chair.

She shook her shapely black head.

“Oh, it isn’t worth sitting down. It’s simply this. I told you that I spent the morning lying out on Sunny Ledge. That isn’t quite accurate. I forgot that once during the morning I went back to the hotel and out again.”

“What time was that, Miss Darnley?”

“It must have been about a quarter past eleven.”

“You went back to the hotel, you said?”

“Yes, I’d forgotten my glare glasses. At first I thought I wouldn’t bother and then my eyes got tired and I decided to go in and get them.”

“You went straight to your room and out again?”

“Yes. At least, as a matter of fact, I just looked in on Ken—Captain Marshall. I heard his machine going and I thought it was so stupid of him to stay indoors typing on such a lovely day. I thought I’d tell him to come out.”

“And what did Captain Marshall say?”

Rosamund smiled rather shamefacedly.

“Well, when I opened the door he was typing so vigorously, and frowning and looking so concentrated, that I just went away quietly. I don’t think he even saw me come in.”

“And that was—at what time, Miss Darnley?”

“Just about twenty past eleven. I noticed the clock in the hall as I went out again.”

IV

"And that puts the lid on it finally," said Inspector Colgate. "The chambermaid heard him typing up till five minutes to eleven. Miss Darnley saw him at twenty minutes past, and the woman was dead at a quarter to twelve. He says he spent that hour typing in his room, and it seems quite clear that he was typing in his room. That washes Captain Marshall right out."

He stopped, then looking at Poirot with some curiosity, he asked:

"M. Poirot's looking very serious over something."

Poirot said thoughtfully:

"I was wondering why Miss Darnley suddenly volunteered this extra evidence."

Inspector Colgate cocked his head alertly.

"Think there's something fishy about it? That it isn't just a question of 'forgetting?'"

He considered for a minute or two, then he said slowly:

"Look here, sir, let's look at it this way. Supposing Miss Darnley wasn't on Sunny Ledge this morning as she says. That story's a lie. Now suppose that after telling us her story, she finds that somebody saw her somewhere else or alternatively that someone went to the Ledge and didn't find her there. Then she thinks up this story quick and comes and tells it to us to account for her absence. You'll notice that she was careful to say Captain Marshall didn't see her when she looked into his room."

Poirot murmured:

"Yes, I noticed that."

Weston said incredulously:

"Are you suggesting that Miss Darnley's mixed up in this? Nonsense, seems absurd to me. Why should she be?"

Inspector Colgate coughed.

He said:

“You’ll remember what the American lady, Mrs. Gardener, said. She sort of hinted that Miss Darnley was sweet on Captain Marshall. There’d be a motive there, sir.”

Weston said impatiently:

“Arlena Marshall wasn’t killed by a woman. It’s a man we’ve got to look for. We’ve got to stick to the men in the case.”

Inspector Colgate sighed. He said:

“Yes, that’s true, sir. We always come back to that, don’t we?”

Weston went on:

“Better put a constable on to timing one or two things. From the hotel across the island to the top of the ladder. Let him do it running and walking. Same thing with the ladder itself. And somebody had better check the time it takes to go on a float from the bathing beach to the cove.”

Inspector Colgate nodded.

“I’ll attend to all that, sir,” he said confidently.

The Chief Constable said:

“Think I’ll go along to the cove now. See if Phillips has found anything. Then there’s that Pixy’s Cave we’ve been hearing about. Ought to see if there are any traces of a man waiting in there. Eh, Poirot? What do you think?”

“By all means. It is a possibility.”

Weston said:

"If somebody from outside had nipped over to the island that would be a good hiding place—if he knew about it. I suppose the locals know?"

Colgate said:

"Don't believe the younger generation would. You see, ever since this hotel was started the coves have been private property. Fishermen don't go there, or picnic parties. And the hotel people aren't local. Mrs. Castle's a Londoner."

Weston said:

"We might take Redfern with us. He told us about it. What about you, M. Poirot?"

Hercule Poirot hesitated. He said, his foreign intonation very pronounced:

"Me, I am like Miss Brewster and Mrs. Redfern, I do not like to descend perpendicular ladders."

Weston said: "You can go round by boat."

Again Hercule Poirot sighed.

"My stomach, it is not happy on the sea."

"Nonsense, man, it's a beautiful day. Calm as a mill pond. You can't let us down, you know."

Hercule Poirot hardly looked like responding to this British adjuration. But at that moment, Mrs. Castle poked her ladylike face and elaborate coiffure round the door.

"Ay'm sure ay hope ay am not intruding," she said. "But Mr. Lane, the clergyman, you know, has just returned. Ay thought you might like to know."

"Ah yes, thanks, Mrs. Castle. We'll see him right away."

Mrs. Castle came a little farther into the room. She said:

“Ay don’t know if it is worth mentioning, but ay have heard that the smallest incident should not be ignored—”

“Yes, yes?” said Weston impatiently.

“It is only that there was a lady and gentleman here about one o’clock. Came over from the mainland. For luncheon. They were informed that there had been an accident and that under the circumstances no luncheons could be served.”

“Any idea who they were?”

“Ay couldn’t say at all. Naturally no name was given. They expressed disappointment and a certain amount of curiosity as to the nature of the accident. Ay couldn’t tell them anything, of course. Ay should say, myself, they were summer visitors of the better class.”

Weston said brusquely:

“Ah well, thank you for telling us. Probably not important but quite right—er—to remember everything.”

“Naturally,” said Mrs. Castle, “ay wish to do my Duty!”

“Quite, quite. Ask Mr. Lane to come here.”

V

Stephen Lane strode into the room with his usual vigour.

Weston said:

“I’m the Chief Constable of the County, Mr. Lane. I suppose you’ve been told what has occurred here?”

“Yes—oh yes—I heard as soon as I got here. Terrible… Terrible…” His thin frame quivered. He said in a low voice: “All along—ever since I arrived here—I have been conscious—very conscious—of the forces of evil close at hand.”

His eyes, burning eager eyes, went to Hercule Poirot.

He said:

“You remember, M. Poirot? Our conversation some days ago? About the reality of evil?”

Weston was studying the tall, gaunt figure in some perplexity. He found it difficult to make this man out. Lane’s eyes came back to him. The clergyman said with a slight smile:

“I dare say that seems fantastic to you, sir. We have left off believing in evil in these days. We have abolished Hell fire! We no longer believe in the Devil! But Satan and Satan’s emissaries were never more powerful than they are today!”

Weston said:

“Er—er—yes, perhaps. That, Mr. Lane, is your province. Mine is more prosaic—to clear up a case of murder.”

Stephen Lane said:

“An awful word. Murder! One of the earliest sins known on earth—the ruthless shedding of an innocent brother’s blood…” He paused, his eyes half closed. Then, in a more ordinary voice he said:

“In what way can I help you?”

“First of all, Mr. Lane, will you tell me your own movements today?”

“Willingly. I started off early on one of my usual tramps. I am fond of walking. I have roamed over a good deal of the countryside round here. Today I went to St. Petrock-in-the-Combe. That is about seven miles from here—a very pleasant walk along winding lanes, up and down the Devon hills and valleys. I took some lunch with me and ate it in a spinney. I visited the church—it has some fragments—only fragments alas, of early glass—also a very interesting painted screen.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lane. Did you meet anyone on your walk?”

“Not to speak to. A cart passed me once and a couple of boys on bicycles and some cows. However,” he smiled, “if you want proof of my statement, I wrote my name in the book at the church. You will find it there.”

“You did not see anyone at the church itself—the Vicar, or the verger?”

Stephen Lane shook his head. He said:

“No, there was no one about and I was the only visitor. St. Petrock is a very remote spot. The village itself lies on the far side of it about half a mile farther on.”

Colonel Weston said pleasantly:

“You mustn’t think we’re—er—doubting what you say. Just a matter of checking up on everybody. Just routine, you know, routine. Have to stick to routine in cases of this kind.”

Stephen Lane said gently:

“Oh yes, I quite understand.”

Weston went on:

“Now the next point. Is there anything you know that would assist us at all? Anything about the dead woman? Anything that could give us a pointer as to who murdered her? Anything you heard or saw?”

Stephen Lane said:

“I heard nothing. All I can tell you is this: that I knew instinctively as soon as I saw her that Arlena Marshall was a focus of evil. She was Evil! Evil personified! Woman can be man’s help and inspiration in life—she can also be man’s downfall. She can drag a man down to the level of the beast. The dead woman was just such a woman. She appealed to everything base in a man’s nature. She was a woman such as Jezebel and Aholibah. Now—she has been struck down in the middle of her wickedness!”

Hercule Poirot stirred. He said:

“Not struck down—strangled! Strangled, Mr. Lane, by a pair of human hands.”

The clergyman’s own hands trembled. The fingers writhed and twitched. He said, and his voice came low and choked:

“That’s horrible—horrible—Must you put it like that?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“It is the simple truth. Have you any idea, Mr. Lane, whose hands those were?”

The other shook his head. He said: “I know nothing—nothing….”

Weston got up. He said, after a glance at Colgate to which the latter replied by an almost imperceptible nod, “Well, we must get on to the Cove.”

Lane said:

“Is that where—it happened?”

Weston nodded.

Lane said:

“Can—can I come with you?”

About to return a curt negative, Weston was forestalled by Poirot.

“But certainly,” said Poirot. “Accompany me there in a boat, Mr. Lane. We start immediately.”

Nine

For the second time that morning Patrick Redfern was rowing a boat into Pixy Cove. The other occupants of the boat were Hercule Poirot, very pale with a hand to his stomach, and Stephen Lane. Colonel Weston had taken the land route. Having been delayed on the way he arrived on the beach at the same time as the boat grounded. A police constable and a plainclothes sergeant were on the beach already. Weston was questioning the latter as the three from the boat walked up and joined him.

Sergeant Phillips said:

“I think I’ve been over every inch of the beach, sir.”

“Good, what did you find?”

“It’s all together here, sir, if you’d like to come and see.”

A small collection of objects was laid out neatly on a rock. There was a pair of scissors, an empty Gold Flake packet, five patent bottle tops, a number of used matches, three pieces of string, one or two fragments of newspaper, a fragment of a smashed pipe, four buttons, the drumstick bone of a chicken and an empty bottle of sunbathing oil.

Weston looked down appraisingly on the objects.

“H’m,” he said. “Rather moderate for a beach nowadays! Most people seem to confuse a beach with a public rubbish dump! Empty bottle’s been here some time by the way the label’s blurred—so have most of the other things, I should say. The scissors are new, though. Bright and shining. They weren’t out in yesterday’s rain! Where were they?”

“Close by the bottom of the ladder, sir. Also this bit of pipe.”

“H’m, probably dropped by someone going up or down. Nothing to say who they belong to?”

“No, sir. Quite an ordinary pair of nail scissors. Pipe’s a good quality brier—expensive.”

Poirot murmured thoughtfully:

“Captain Marshall told us, I think, that he had mislaid his pipe.”

Weston said:

“Marshall’s out of the picture. Anyway, he’s not the only person who smokes a pipe.”

Hercule Poirot was watching Stephen Lane as the latter’s hand went to his pocket and away again. He said pleasantly:

“You also smoke a pipe, do you not, Mr. Lane?”

The clergyman started. He looked at Poirot.

He said:

“Yes. Oh yes. My pipe is an old friend and companion.” Putting his hand into his pocket again he drew out a pipe, filled it with tobacco and lighted it.

Hercule Poirot moved away to where Redfern was standing, his eyes blank.

He said in a low voice:

“I’m glad—they’ve taken her away….”

Stephen Lane asked:

“Where was she found?”

The Sergeant said cheerfully:

“Just about where you’re standing, sir.”

Lane moved swiftly aside. He stared at the spot he had just vacated.

The Sergeant went on:

“Place where the float was drawn up agrees with putting the time she arrived here at 10:45. That’s going by the tide. It’s turned now.”

“Photography all done?” asked Weston.

“Yes, sir.”

Weston turned to Redfern.

“Now then, man, where’s the entrance to this cave of yours?”

Patrick Redfern was still staring down at the beach where Lane had been standing. It was as though he was seeing that sprawling body that was no longer there.

Weston’s words recalled him to himself.

He said: “It’s over here.”

He led the way to where a great mass of tumbled-down rocks were massed picturesquely against the cliff side. He went straight to where two big rocks, side by side, showed a straight narrow cleft between them. He said:

“The entrance is here.”

Weston said:

“Here? Doesn’t look as though a man could squeeze through.”

“It’s deceptive, you’ll find, sir. It can just be done.”

Weston inserted himself gingerly into the cleft. It was not as narrow as it looked. Inside, the space widened and proved to be a fairly roomy recess with room to stand upright and to move about.

Hercule Poirot and Stephen Lane joined the Chief Constable. The other stayed outside. Light filtered in through the opening, but Weston had also got a powerful torch which he played freely over the interior.

He observed:

“Handy place. You’d never suspect it from the outside.”

He played the torch carefully over the floor.

Hercule Poirot was delicately sniffing the air.

Noticing this, Weston said:

“Air quite fresh, not fishy or seaweedy, but of course this place is well above high water mark.”

But to Poirot’s sensitive nose, the air was more than fresh. It was delicately scented. He knew two people who used that elusive perfume….

“Weston’s torch came to rest. He said:

“Don’t see anything out of the way in here.”

Poirot’s eyes rose to a ledge a little way above his head. He murmured:

“One might perhaps see that there is nothing up there?”

Weston said: “If there’s anything up there it would have to be deliberately put there. Still, we’d better have a look.”

Poirot said to Lane:

“You are, I think, the tallest of us, Monsieur. Could we venture to ask you to make sure there is nothing resting on that ledge?”

Lane stretched up, but he could not quite reach to the back of the shelf. Then, seeing a crevice in the rock, he inserted a toe in it and pulled himself up by one hand.

He said:

“Hullo, there’s a box up here.”

In a minute or two they were out in the sunshine examining the clergyman’s find.

Weston said:

“Careful, don’t handle it more than you can help. May be fingerprints.”

It was a dark-green tin box and bore the word Sandwiches on it.

Sergeant Phillips said:

“Left from some picnic or other, I suppose.”

He opened the lid with his handkerchief.

Inside were small tin containers marked salt, pepper, mustard and two larger square tins evidently for sandwiches. Sergeant Phillips lifted the lid of the salt container. It was full to the brim. He raised the next one, commenting:

“H’m, got salt in the pepper one too.”

The mustard compartment also contained salt.

His face suddenly alert, the police sergeant opened one of the bigger square tins. That, too, contained the same white crystalline powder.

Very gingerly, Sergeant Phillips dipped a finger in and applied it to his tongue.

His face changed. He said—and his voice was excited:

“This isn’t salt, sir. Not by a long way! Bitter taste! Seems to me it’s some kind of drug.”

II

“The third angle,” said Colonel Weston with a groan.

They were back at the hotel again.

The Chief Constable went on:

“If by any chance there’s a dope gang mixed up in this, it opens up several possibilities. First of all, the dead woman may have been in with the gang herself. Think that’s likely?”

Hercule Poirot said cautiously:

“It is possible.”

“She may have been a drug addict?”

Poirot shook his head.

He said:

“I should doubt that. She had steady nerves, radiant health, there were no marks of hypodermic injections (not that that proves anything. Some people sniff the stuff). No, I do not think she took drugs.”

“In that case,” said Weston, “she may have run into the business accidentally, and she was deliberately silenced by the people running the show. We’ll know presently just what the stuff is. I’ve sent it to Neasden. If we’re on to some dope ring, they’re not the people to stick at trifles—”

He broke off as the door opened and Mr. Horace Blatt came briskly into the room.

Mr. Blatt was looking hot. He was wiping the perspiration from his forehead. His big hearty voice billowed out and filled the small room.

“Just this minute got back and heard the news! You the Chief Constable? They told me you were in here. My name’s Blatt—Horace Blatt. Any way I can help you? Don’t suppose so. I’ve been out in my boat since early this morning. Missed the whole blinking show. The one day that something does happen in this out-of-the-way spot, I’m not there. Just like life, that, isn’t it? Hullo, Poirot, didn’t see you at first. So you’re in on this? Oh well, I suppose you would be. Sherlock Holmes v. the local police, is that it? Ha, ha! Lestrade—all that stuff. I'll enjoy seeing you do a bit of fancy sleuthing."

Mr. Blatt came to anchor in a chair, pulled out a cigarette case and offered it to Colonel Weston, who shook his head.

He said, with a slight smile:

"I'm an inveterate pipe smoker."

"Same here. I smoke cigarettes as well—but nothing beats a pipe."

Colonel Weston said with suddenly geniality:

"Then light up, man."

Blatt shook his head.

"Not got my pipe on me at the moment. But put me wise about all this. All I've heard so far is that Mrs. Marshall was found murdered on one of the beaches here."

"On Pixy Cove," said Colonel Weston, watching him.

But Mr. Blatt merely asked excitedly:

"And she was strangled?"

"Yes, Mr. Blatt."

"Nasty—very nasty. Mind you, she asked for it! Hot stuff—trés moustarde—eh, M. Poirot? Any idea who did it, or mustn't I ask that?"

With a faint smile Colonel Weston said:

"Well, you know, it's we who are supposed to ask the questions."

Mr. Blatt waved his cigarette.

“Sorry—sorry—my mistake. Go ahead.”

“You went out sailing this morning. At what time?”

“Left here at a quarter to ten.”

“Was any one with you?”

“Not a soul. All on my little lonesome.”

“And where did you go?”

“Along the coast in the direction of Plymouth. Took lunch with me. Not much wind so I didn’t actually get very far.”

After another question or two, Weston asked:

“Now about the Marshalls? Do you know anything that might help us?”

“Well, I’ve given you my opinion. Crime passionnel! All I can tell you is, it wasn’t me! The fair Arlena had no use for me. Nothing doing in that quarter. She had her own blue-eyed boy! And if you ask me, Marshall was getting wise to it.”

“Have you any evidence for that?”

“Saw him give young Redfern a dirty look once or twice. Dark horse, Marshall. Looks very meek and mild and as though he were half asleep all the time—but that’s not his reputation in the City. I’ve heard a thing or two about him. Nearly had up for assault once. Mind you, the fellow in question had put up a pretty dirty deal. Marshall had trusted him and the fellow had let him down cold. Particularly dirty business, I believe. Marshall went for him and half-killed him. Fellow didn’t prosecute—too afraid of what might come out. I give you that for what it’s worth.”

“So you think it possible,” said Poirot, “that Captain Marshall strangled his wife?”

"Not at all. Never said anything of the sort. Just letting you know that he's the sort of fellow who could go berserk on occasions."

Poirot said:

"Mr. Blatt, there is reason to believe that Mrs. Marshall went this morning to Pixy Cove to meet someone. Have you any idea who that someone might be?"

Mr. Blatt winked.

"It's not a guess. It's a certainty. Redfern!"

"It was not Mr. Redfern."

Mr. Blatt seemed taken aback. He said hesitatingly:

"Then I don't know… No, I can't imagine…."

He went on, regaining a little of his aplomb:

"As I said before, it wasn't me! No such luck! Let me see, couldn't have been Gardener—his wife keeps far too sharp an eye on him! That old ass Barry? Rot! And it would hardly be the parson. Although, mind you, I've seen his Reverence watching her a good bit. All holy disapproval, but perhaps an eye for the contours all the same! Eh? Lot of hypocrites, most parsons. Did you read that case last month? Parson and the churchwarden's daughter! Bit of an eye-opener."

Mr. Blatt chuckled.

Colonel Weston said coldly:

"There is nothing you can think of that might help us?"

The other shook his head.

"No. Can't think of a thing." He added: "This will make a bit of a stir, I imagine. The Press will be on to it like hot cakes. There won't be quite so much of this high-toned exclusiveness about the Jolly Roger in future. Jolly Roger indeed. Precious little jollity about it.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“You have not enjoyed your stay here?”

Mr. Blatt’s red face got slightly redder. He said:

“Well, no, I haven’t. The sailing’s all right and the scenery and the service and the food—but there’s no matiness in the place, you know what I mean! What I say is, my money’s as good as another man’s. We’re all here to enjoy ourselves. Then why not get together and do it? All these cliques and people sitting by themselves and giving you frosty good mornings—and good evenings—and yes, very pleasant weather. No joy de viver. Lot of stuck-up dummies!”

Mr. Blatt paused—by now very red indeed.

He wiped his forehead once more and said apologetically:

“Don’t pay any attention to me. I get all worked up.”

III

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“And what do we think of Mr. Blatt?”

Colonel Weston grinned and said:

“What do you think of him? You’ve seen more of him than I have.”

Poirot said softly:

“There are many of your English idioms that describe him. The rough diamond! The self-made man! The social climber! He is, as you choose to look at it, pathetic, ludicrous, blatant! It is a matter of opinion. But I think, too, that he is something else.”

"And what is that?"

Hercule Poirot, his eyes raised to the ceiling, murmured:

"I think that he is—nervous!"

IV

Inspector Colgate said:

"I've got those times worked out. From the hotel to the ladder down to Pixy Cove three minutes. That's walking till you are out of sight of the hotel and then running like hell."

Weston raised his eyebrows. He said:

"That's quicker than I thought."

"Down ladder to beach one minute and three quarters. Up same two minutes. That's P.C. Flint. He's a bit of an athlete. Walking and taking the ladder in the normal way, the whole business takes close on a quarter of an hour."

Weston nodded. He said:

"There's another thing we must go into, the pipe question."

Colgate said:

"Blatt smokes a pipe, so does Marshall, so does the parson. Redfern smokes cigarettes, the American prefers a cigar. Major Barry doesn't smoke at all. There's one pipe in Marshall's room, two in Blatt's, and one in the parson's. Chambermaid says Marshall has two pipes. The other chambermaid isn't a very bright girl. Doesn't know how many pipes the other two have. Says vaguely she's noticed two or three about in their rooms."

Weston nodded.

"Anything else?"

"I've checked up on the staff. They all seem quite O.K. Henry, in the bar, checks Marshall's statement about seeing him at ten to eleven. William, the beach attendant, was down repairing the ladder on the rocks by the hotel most of the morning. He seems all right. George marked the tennis court and then bedded out some plants round by the dining room. Neither of them would have seen anyone who came across the causeway to the island."

"When was the causeway uncovered?"

"Round about 9:30, sir."

Weston pulled at his moustache.

"It's possible somebody did come that way. We've got a new angle, Colgate."

He told of the discovery of the sandwich box in the cave.

V

There was a tap on the door.

"Come in," said Weston.

It was Captain Marshall.

He said:

"Can you tell me what arrangements I can make about the funeral?"

"I think we shall manage the inquest for the day after tomorrow, Captain Marshall."

"Thank you."

Inspector Colgate said:

"Excuse me, sir, allow me to return you these."

He handed over the three letters.

Kenneth Marshall smiled rather sardonically.

He said:

“Has the police department been testing the speed of my typing? I hope my character is cleared.”

Colonel Weston said pleasantly.

“Yes, Captain Marshall, I think we can give you a clean bill of health. Those sheets take fully an hour to type. Moreover you were heard typing them by the chambermaid up till five minutes to eleven and you were seen by another witness at twenty minutes past.”

Captain Marshall murmured:

“Really? That all seems very satisfactory!”

“Yes. Miss Darnley came to your room at twenty minutes past eleven. You were so busy typing that you did not observe her entry.”

Kenneth Marshall’s face took on an impassive expression. He said:

“Does Miss Darnley say that?” He paused. “As a matter of fact she is wrong. I did see her, though she may not be aware of the fact. I saw her in the mirror.”

Poirot murmured:

“But you did not interrupt your typing?”

Marshall said shortly:

“No. I wanted to get finished.”

He paused a minute, then, in an abrupt voice, he said:

“Nothing more I can do for you?”

“No, thank you, Captain Marshall.”

Kenneth Marshall nodded and went out.

Weston said with a sigh:

“There goes our most hopeful suspect—cleared! Hullo, here’s Neasden.”

The doctor came in with a trace of excitement in his manner. He said:

“That’s a nice little death lot you sent me along.”

“What is it?”

“What is it? Diamorphine Hydrochloride. Stuff that’s usually called Heroin.”

Inspector Colgate whistled. He said:

“Now we’re getting places, all right! Depend upon it, this dope stunt is at the bottom of the whole business.”

Ten

The little crowd of people flocked out of the Red Bull. The brief inquest was over—adjourned for a fortnight.

Rosamund Darnley joined Captain Marshall. She said in a low voice:

“That wasn’t so bad, was it, Ken?”

He did not answer at once. Perhaps he was conscious of the staring eyes of the villagers, the fingers that nearly pointed to him and only just did not quite do so!

“That’s ’im, my dear.” “See, that’s ’er ’usband.” “That be the ’usband.” “Look, there ’e goes….”

The murmurs were not loud enough to reach his ears, but he was none the less sensitive to them. This was the modern-day pillory. The Press he had already encountered—self-confident, persuasive young men, adept at battering down his wall of silence of “Nothing to say” that he had endeavoured to erect. Even the curt monosyllables that he had uttered, thinking that they at least could not lead to misapprehension, had reappeared in his morning’s papers in a totally different guise. “Asked whether he agreed that the mystery of his wife’s death could only be explained on the assumption that a homicidal murderer had found his way on to the island, Captain Marshall declared that—” and so on and so forth.

Cameras had clicked ceaselessly. Now, at this minute, the well-known sound caught his ear. He half-turned—a smiling young man was nodding cheerfully, his purpose accomplished.

Rosamund murmured:

“Captain Marshall and a friend leaving the Red Bull after the inquest.”

Marshall winced.

Rosamund said:

“It’s no use, Ken! You’ve got to face it! I don’t mean just the fact of Arlena’s death—I mean all the attendant beastliness. The staring eyes and gossiping tongues, the fatuous interviews in the papers—and the best way to meet it is to find it funny! Come out with all the old inane cliches and curl a sardonic lip at them.”

He said:

“Is that your way?”

“Yes.” She paused. “It isn’t yours, I know. Protective colouring is your line. Remain rigidly nonactive and fade into the background! But you can’t do that here—you’ve no background to fade into. You stand out clear for all to see—like a striped tiger against a white backcloth. The husband of the murdered woman!”

“For God’s sake, Rosamund—”

She said gently:

“My dear, I’m trying to be good for you!”

They walked for a few steps in silence. Then Marshall said in a different voice:

“I know you are. I’m not really ungrateful, Rosamund.”

They had progressed beyond the limits of the village. Eyes followed them but there was no one very near. Rosamund Darnley’s voice dropped as she repeated a variant of her first remark.

“It didn’t really go so badly, did it?”

He was silent for a moment, then he said:

“I don’t know.”

“What do the police think?”

“They’re noncommittal.”

After a minute Rosamund said:

“That little man—Poirot—is he really taking an active interest!”

Kenneth Marshall said:

“Seemed to be sitting in the Chief Constable’s pocket all right the other day.”

“I know—but is he doing anything?”

“How the hell should I know, Rosamund?”

She said thoughtfully:

“He’s pretty old. Probably more or less ga ga.”

“Perhaps.”

They came to the causeway. Opposite them, serene in the sun, lay the island.

Rosamund said suddenly:

“Sometimes—things seem unreal. I can’t believe, this minute, that it ever happened….”

Marshall said slowly:

“I think I know what you mean. Nature is so regardless! One ant the less—that’s all it is in Nature!”

Rosamund said:

“Yes—and that’s the proper way to look at it really.”

He gave her one very quick glance. Then he said in a low voice:

“Don’t worry, my dear. It’s all right. It’s all right.”

II

Linda came down to the causeway to meet them. She moved with the spasmodic jerkiness of a nervous colt. Her young face was marred by deep black shadows under her eyes. Her lips were dry and rough.

She said breathlessly:

“What happened—what—what did they say?”

Her father said abruptly:

“Inquest adjourned for a fortnight.”

“That means they—they haven’t decided?”

“Yes. More evidence is needed.”

“But—but what do they think?”

Marshall smiled a little in spite of himself.

“Oh, my dear child—who knows? And whom do you mean by they? The coroner, the jury, the police, the newspaper reporters, the fishing folk of Leathercombe Bay?”

Linda said slowly:

“I suppose I mean—the police.”

Marshall said dryly:

“Whatever the police think, they’re not giving it away at present.”

His lips closed tightly after the sentence. He went into the hotel.

As Rosamund Darnley was about to follow suit, Linda said:

“Rosamund!”

Rosamund turned. The mute appeal in the girl’s unhappy face touched her. She linked her arm through Linda’s and together they walked away from the hotel, taking the path that led to the extreme end of the island.

Rosamund said gently:

“Try not to mind so much, Linda. I know it’s all very terrible and a shock and all that, but it’s no use brooding over these things. And it can be only the—horror of it, that is worrying you. You weren’t in the least fond of Arlena, you know.”

She felt the tremor that ran through the girl’s body as Linda answered:

“No, I wasn’t fond of her….”

Rosamund went on:

“Sorrow for a person is different—one can’t put that behind one. But one can get over shock and horror by just not letting your mind dwell on it all the time.”

Linda said sharply:

“You don’t understand.”

“I think I do, my dear.”

Linda shook her head.

“No, you don’t. You don’t understand in the least—and Christine doesn’t understand either! Both of you have been nice to me, but you can’t understand what I’m feeling. You just think it’s morbid—that I’m dwelling on it all when I needn’t.”

She paused.

"But it isn't that at all. If you knew what I know—"

Rosamund stopped dead. Her body did not tremble—on the contrary it stiffened. She stood for a minute or two, then she disengaged her arm from Linda's.

She said:

"What is it that you know, Linda?"

The girl gazed at her. Then she shook her head.

She muttered:

"Nothing."

Rosamund caught her by the arm. The grip hurt and Linda winced slightly.

Rosamund said:

"Be careful, Linda. Be damned careful."

Linda had gone dead white.

She said:

"I am very careful—all the time."

Rosamund said urgently:

"Listen, Linda, what I said a minute or two ago applies just the same—only a hundred times more so. Put the whole business out of your mind. Never think about it. Forget—forget… You can if you try! Arlena is dead and nothing can bring her back to life… Forget everything and live in the future. And above all, hold your tongue."

Linda shrank a little. She said:

"You—you seem to know all about it?"

Rosamund said energetically:

“I don’t know anything! In my opinion a wandering maniac got on to the island and killed Arlena. That’s much the most probable solution. I’m fairly sure that the police will have to accept that in the end. That’s what must have happened! That’s what did happen!”

Linda said:

“If Father—”

Rosamund interrupted her.

“Don’t talk about it.”

Linda said:

“I’ve got to say one thing. My mother—”

“Well, what about her?”

“She—she was tried for murder, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.”

Linda said slowly:

“And then Father married her. That looks, doesn’t it, as though Father didn’t really think murder was very wrong—not always, that is.”

Rosamund said sharply:

“Don’t say things like that—even to me! The police haven’t got anything against your father. He’s got an alibi—an alibi that they can’t break. He’s perfectly safe.”

Linda whispered:

“Did they think at first that Father—?”

Rosamund cried:

“I don’t know what they thought! But they know now that he couldn’t have done it. Do you understand? He couldn’t have done it.”

She spoke with authority, her eyes commanded Linda’s acquiescence. The girl uttered a long fluttering sigh.

Rosamund said:

“You’ll be able to leave here soon. You’ll forget everything—everything!”

Linda said with sudden unexpected violence.

“I shall never forget.”

She turned abruptly and ran back to the hotel. Rosamund stared after her.

III

“There is something I want to know, Madame?”

Christine Redfern glanced up at Poirot in a slightly abstracted manner. She said:

“Yes?”

Hercule Poirot took very little notice of her abstraction. He had noted the way her eyes followed her husband’s figure where he was pacing up and down on the terrace outside the bar, but for the moment he had no interest in purely conjugal problems. He wanted information.

He said:

“Yes, Madame. It was a phrase—a chance phrase of yours the other day which roused my attention.”

Christine, her eyes still on Patrick, said:

“Yes? What did I say?”

“It was in answer to a question from the Chief Constable. You described how you went into Miss Linda Marshall’s room on the morning of the crime and how you found her absent from it and how she returned there, and it was then that the Chief Constable asked you where she had been.”

Christine said rather impatiently:

“And I said she had been bathing? Is that it?”

“Ah, but you did not say quite that. You did not say ‘she had been bathing.’ Your words were, ‘she said she had been bathing.’”

Christine said:

“It’s the same thing, surely.”

“No, it is not the same! The form of your answer suggests a certain attitude of mind on your part. Linda Marshall came into the room—she was wearing a bathing wrap and yet—for some reason—you did not at once assume she had been bathing. That is shown by your words, ‘she said she had been bathing.’ What was there about her appearance—was it her manner, or something that she was wearing or something she said—that led you to feel surprised when she said she had been bathing?”

Christine’s attention left Patrick and focused itself entirely on Poirot. She was interested. She said:

“That’s clever of you. It’s quite true, now I remember… I was, just faintly, surprised when Linda said she had been bathing.”

“But why, Madame, why?”

“Yes, why? That’s just what I’m trying to remember. Oh yes, I think it was the parcel in her hand.”

“She had a parcel?”

"Yes."

"You do not know what was in it?"

"Oh yes, I do. The string broke. It was loosely done up in the way they do in the village. It was candles—they were scattered on the floor. I helped her to pick them up."

"Ah," said Poirot. "Candles."

Christine stared at him. She said:

"You seem excited, M. Poirot."

Poirot asked:

"Did Linda say why she had bought candles?"

Christine reflected.

"No, I don't think she did. I suppose it was to read by at night—perhaps the electric light wasn't good."

"On the contrary, Madame, there was a bedside electric lamp in perfect order."

Christine said:

"Then I don't know what she wanted them for."

Poirot said:

"What was her manner—when the string broke and the candles fell out of the parcel?"

Christine said slowly:

"She was—upset—embarrassed."

Poirot nodded his head. Then he asked:

“Did you notice a calendar in her room?”

“A calendar? What kind of a calendar?”

Poirot said:

“Possibly a green calendar—with tear-off leaves.”

Christine screwed up her eyes in an effort of memory.

“A green calendar—rather a bright green. Yes, I have seen a calendar like that—but I can’t remember where. It may have been in Linda’s room, but I can’t be sure.”

“But you have definitely seen such a thing.”

“Yes.”

Again Poirot nodded.

Christine said rather sharply:

“What are you hinting at, M. Poirot? What is the meaning of all this?”

For answer Poirot produced a small volume bound in faded brown calf. He said:

“Have you ever seen this before?”

“Why—I think—I’m not sure—yes, Linda was looking into it in the village lending library the other day. But she shut it up and thrust it back quickly when I came up to her. It made me wonder what it was.”

Silently Poirot displayed the title.

A History of Witchcraft, Sorcery and of the Compounding of Untraceable Poisons.

Christine said:

“I don’t understand. What does all this mean?”

Poirot said gravely.

“It may mean, Madame, a good deal.”

She looked at him inquiringly, but he did not go on. Instead he asked:

“One more question, Madame, did you take a bath that morning before you went out to play tennis?”

Christine stared again.

“A bath? No. I would have had no time and, anyway, I didn’t want a bath—not before tennis. I might have had one after.”

“Did you use your bathroom at all when you came in?”

“I sponged my face and hands, that’s all.”

“You did not turn on the bath at all?”

“No, I’m sure I didn’t.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“It is of no importance.”

IV

Hercule Poirot stood by the table where Mrs. Gardener was wrestling with a jig-saw. She looked up and jumped.

“Why, M. Poirot, how very quietly you came up beside me! I never heard you. Have you just come back from the inquest? You know, the very thought of that inquest makes me so nervous, I don’t know what to do. That’s why I’m doing this puzzle. I just felt I couldn’t sit outside on the beach as usual. As Mr. Gardener knows, when my nerves are all upset, there's nothing like one of these puzzles for calming me. There now, where does this white piece fit in? It must be part of the fur rug, but I don't seem to see…."

Gently Poirot's hand took the piece from her. He said:

"It fits, Madame, here. It is part of the cat."

"It can't be. It's a black cat."

"A black cat, yes, but you see the tip of the black cat's tail happens to be white."

"Why, so it does! How clever of you! But I do think the people who make puzzles are kind of mean. They just go out of their way to deceive you."

She fitted in another piece and then resumed.

"You know, M. Poirot, I've been watching you this last day or two. I just wanted to watch you detecting if you know what I mean—not that it doesn't sound rather heartless put like that, as though it were all a game—and a poor creature killed. Oh dear, every time I think of it I get the shivers! I told Mr. Gardener this morning I'd just got to get away from here, and now the inquest's over he thinks we'll be able to leave tomorrow, and that's a blessing, I'm sure. But about detecting, I would so like to know your methods—you know, I'd feel privileged if you'd just explain it to me."

Hercule Poirot said:

"It is a little like your puzzle, Madame. One assembles the pieces. It is like a mosaic—many colours and patterns—and every strange-shaped little piece must be fitted into its own place."

"Now isn't that interesting? Why, I'm sure you explain it just too beautifully."

Poirot went on:

“And sometimes it is like that piece of your puzzle just now. One arranges very methodically the pieces of the puzzle—one sorts the colours—and then perhaps a piece of one colour that should fit in with—say, the fur rug, fits in instead in a black cat’s tail.”

“Why, if that doesn’t sound too fascinating! And are there a great many pieces, M. Poirot?”

“Yes, Madame. Almost everyone here in this hotel has given me a piece for my puzzle. You amongst them.”

“Me?” Mrs. Gardener’s tone was shrill.

“Yes, a remark of yours, Madame, was exceedingly helpful. I might say it was illuminating.”

“Well, if that isn’t too lovely! Can’t you tell me some more, M. Poirot?”

“Ah! Madame, I reserve the explanations for the last chapter.”

Mrs. Gardener murmured:

“If that isn’t just too bad!”

V

Hercule Poirot tapped gently on the door of Captain Marshall’s room. Inside there was the sound of a typewriter.

A curt “Come in” came from the room and Poirot entered.

Captain Marshall’s back was turned to him. He was sitting typing at the table between the windows. He did not turn his head but his eyes met Poirot’s in the mirror that hung on the wall directly in front of him. He said irritably:

“Well, M. Poirot, what is it?”

Poirot said quickly:

“A thousand apologies for intruding. You are busy?”

Marshall said shortly: “I am rather.”

Poirot said:

“It is one little question that I would like to ask you.”

Marshall said:

“My God, I’m sick of answering questions. I’ve answered the police questions. I don’t feel called upon to answer yours.”

Poirot said:

“Mine is a very simple one. Only this. On the morning of your wife’s death, did you have a bath after you finished typing and before you went out to play tennis?”

“A bath? No, of course I didn’t! I’d had a bathe only an hour earlier!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Thank you. That is all.”

“But look here. Oh—” the other paused irresolutely.

Poirot withdrew, gently closing the door.

Kenneth Marshall said:

“The fellow’s crazy!”

VI

Just outside the bar Poirot encountered Mr. Gardener. He was carrying two cocktails and was clearly on his way to where Mrs. Gardener was ensconced with her jig-saw.

He smiled at Poirot in genial fashion.

“Care to join us, M. Poirot?”

Poirot shook his head. He said:

“What did you think of the inquest, Mr. Gardener?”

Mr. Gardener lowered his voice. He said:

“Seemed kind of indeterminate to me. Your police, I gather, have got something up their sleeves.”

“It is possible,” said Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Gardener lowered his voice still further.

“I shall be glad to get Mrs. Gardener away. She’s a very, very sensitive woman, and this affair has got on her nerves. She’s very highly strung.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Will you permit me, Mr. Gardener, to ask you one question?”

“Why, certainly, M. Poirot. Delighted to assist in any way I can.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“You are a man of the world—a man, I think, of considerable acumen. What, frankly, was your opinion of the late Mrs. Marshall?”

Mr. Gardener’s eyebrows rose in surprise. He glanced cautiously round and lowered his voice.

“Well, M. Poirot, I’ve heard a few things that have been kind of going around, if you get me, especially among the women.” Poirot nodded. “But if you ask me I’ll tell you my candid opinion and that is that that woman was pretty much of a darned fool!”

Hercule Poirot said thoughtfully:

"Now that is very interesting."

VII

Rosamund Darnley said: "So it's my turn, is it?"

"Pardon?"

She laughed.

"The other day the Chief Constable held this inquisition. You sat by. Today, I think, you are conducting your own unofficial inquiry. I've been watching you. First Mrs. Redfern, then I caught a glimpse of you through the lounge window where Mrs. Gardener is doing her hateful jig-saw puzzle. Now it's my turn."

Hercule Poirot sat down beside her. They were on Sunny Ledge. Below them the sea showed a deep-glowing green. Farther out it was a pale dazzling blue.

Poirot said:

"You are very intelligent, Mademoiselle. I have thought so ever since I arrived here. It would be a pleasure to discuss this business with you."

Rosamund Darnley said softly:

"You want to know what I think about the whole thing?"

"It would be most interesting."

Rosamund said:

"I think it's really very simple. The clue is in the woman's past."

"The past? Not the present?"

"Oh! not necessarily the very remote past. I look at it like this. Arlena Marshall was attractive, fatally attractive, to men. It's possible, I think, that she also tired of them rather quickly. Amongst her—followers, shall we say—was one who resented that. Oh, don't misunderstand me, it won't be someone who sticks out a mile. Probably some tepid little man, vain and sensitive—the kind of man who broods. I think he followed her down here, waited his opportunity and killed her."

"You mean that he was an outsider, that he came from the mainland?"

"Yes. He probably hid in that cave until he got his chance."

Poirot shook his head. He said:

"Would she go there to meet such a man as you describe? No, she would laugh and not go."

Rosamund said:

"She mayn't have known she was going to meet him. He may have sent her a message in some other person's name."

Poirot murmured:

"That is possible."

Then he said:

"But you forget one thing, Mademoiselle. A man bent on murder could not risk coming in broad daylight across the causeway and past the hotel. Someone might have seen him."

"They might have—but I don't think that it's certain. I think it's quite possible that he could have come without anyone noticing him at all."

"It would be possible, yes, that I grant you. But the point is that he could not count on that possibility."

Rosamund said:

“Aren’t you forgetting something? The weather.”

“The weather?”

“Yes. The day of the murder was a glorious day, but the day before, remember, there was rain and thick mist. Anyone could come on to the island then without being seen. He had only to go down to the beach and spend the night in the cave. That mist, M. Poirot, is important.”

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully for a minute or two. He said:

“You know, there is a good deal in what you have just said.”

Rosamund flushed. She said:

“That’s my theory, for what it is worth. Now tell me yours.”

“Ah,” said Hercule Poirot. He stared down at the sea.

“Eh bien, Mademoiselle. I am a very simple person. I always incline to the belief that the most likely person committed the crime. At the very beginning it seemed to me that one person was very clearly indicated.”

Rosamund’s voice hardened a little. She said:

“Go on.”

Hercule Poirot went on.

“But you see, there is what you call a snag in the way! It seems that it was impossible for that person to have committed the crime.”

He heard the quick expulsion of her breath. She said rather breathlessly:

“Well?”

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what do we do about it? That is my problem." He paused and then went on. "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

She faced him, alert and vigilant. But the question that came was an unexpected one.

"When you came in to change for tennis that morning, did you have a bath?"

Rosamund stared at him.

"A bath? What do you mean?"

"That is what I mean. A bath! The receptacle of porcelain, one turns the taps and fills it, one gets in, one gets out and ghoosh—ghoosh—ghoosh, the water goes down the waste pipe!"

"M. Poirot, are you quite mad?"

"No, I am extremely sane."

"Well, anyway, I didn't take a bath."

"Ha!" said Poirot. "So nobody took a bath. That is extremely interesting."

"But why should anyone take a bath?"

Hercule Poirot said: "Why, indeed?"

Rosamund said with some exasperation:

"I suppose this is the Sherlock Holmes touch!"

Hercule Poirot smiled.

Then he sniffed the air delicately.

“Will you permit me to be impertinent, Mademoiselle?”

“I’m sure you couldn’t be impertinent, M. Poirot.”

“That is very kind of you. Then may I venture to say that the scent you use is delicious—it has a nuance—a delicate elusive charm.” He waved his hands, and then added in a practical voice, “Gabrielle, No. 8, I think?”

“How clever you are. Yes, I always use it.”

“So did the late Mrs. Marshall. It is chic, eh? And very expensive?”

Rosamund shrugged her shoulders with a faint smile.

Poirot said:

“You sat here where we are now, Mademoiselle, on the morning of the crime. You were seen here, or at least your sunshade was seen by Miss Brewster and Mr. Redfern as they passed on the sea. During the morning, Mademoiselle, are you sure you did not happen to go down to Pixy Cove and enter the cave there—the famous Pixy’s Cave?”

Rosamund turned her head and stared at him.

She said in a quiet level voice:

“Are you asking me if I killed Arlena Marshall?”

“No, I am asking you if you went into the Pixy’s Cave?”

“I don’t even know where it is. Why should I go into it? For what reason?”

“On the day of the crime, Mademoiselle, somebody had been in that cave who used Gabrielle No 8.”

Rosamund said sharply:

“You’ve just said yourself, M. Poirot, that Arlena Marshall used Gabrielle No. 8. She was on the beach there that day. Presumably she went into the cave.”

“Why should she go into the cave? It is dark there and narrow and very uncomfortable.”

Rosamund said impatiently:

“Don’t ask me for reasons. Since she was actually at the cove she was by far the most likely person. I’ve told you already I never left this place the whole morning.”

“Except for the time when you went into the hotel to Captain Marshall’s room.” Poirot reminded her.

“Yes, of course. I’d forgotten that.”

Poirot said:

“And you were wrong, Mademoiselle, when you thought that Captain Marshall did not see you.”

Rosamund said incredulously:

“Kenneth did see me? Did—did he say so?”

Poirot nodded.

“He saw you, Mademoiselle, in the mirror that hangs over the table.”

Rosamund caught her breath. She said:

“Oh! I see.”

Poirot was no longer looking out to sea. He was looking at Rosamund Darnley’s hands as they lay folded in her lap. They were well-shaped hands, beautifully moulded with very long fingers.

Rosamund, shooting a quick look at him, followed the direction of his eyes. She said sharply:

“What are you looking at my hands for? Do you think—do you think—?”

Poirot said:

“Do I think—what, Mademoiselle?”

Rosamund Darnley said:

“Nothing.”

VIII

It was perhaps an hour later that Hercule Poirot came to the top of the path leading to Gull Cove. There was someone sitting on the beach. A slight figure in a red shirt and dark blue shorts.

Poirot descended the path, stepping carefully in his tight smart shoes.

Linda Marshall turned her head sharply. He thought that she shrank a little.

Her eyes, as he came and lowered himself gingerly to the shingle beside her, rested on him with the suspicion and alertness of a trapped animal. He realized, with a pang, how young and vulnerable she was.

She said:

“What is it? What do you want?”

Hercule Poirot did not answer for a minute or two. Then he said:

“The other day you told the Chief Constable that you were fond of your stepmother and that she was kind to you.”

“Well?”

“That was not true, was it, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, it was.”

Poirot said:

“She may not have been actively unkind—that I will grant. But you were not fond of her—Oh no—I think you disliked her very much. That was very plain to see.”

Linda said:

“Perhaps I didn’t like her very much. But one can’t say that when a person is dead. It wouldn’t be decent.”

Poirot sighed. He said:

“They taught you that at your school?”

“More or less, I suppose.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“When a person has been murdered, it is more important to be truthful than to be decent.”

Linda said:

“I suppose you would say a thing like that.”

“I would say it and I do say it. It is my business, you see, to find out who killed Arlena Marshall.”

Linda muttered:

“I want to forget it all. It’s so horrible.”

Poirot said gently:

“But you can’t forget, can you?”

Linda said:

“I suppose some beastly madman killed her.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“No, I do not think it was quite like that.”

Linda caught her breath. She said:

“You sound—as though you knew?”

Poirot said:

“Perhaps I do know.” He paused and went on: “Will you trust me, my child, to do the best I can for you in your bitter trouble?”

Linda sprang up. She said:

“I haven’t any trouble. There is nothing you can do for me. I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Poirot said, watching her:

“I am talking about candles….”

He saw the terror leap into her eyes. She cried:

“I won’t listen to you. I won’t listen.”

She ran across the beach, swift as a young gazelle and went flying up the zigzag path.

Poirot shook his head. He looked grave and troubled.

Eleven

Inspector Colgate was reporting to the Chief Constable.

"I've got on to one thing, sir, and something pretty sensational. It's about Mrs. Marshall's money. I've been into it with her lawyers. I'd say it's a bit of a shock to them. I've got proof of the blackmail story. You remember she was left fifty thousand pounds by old Erskine? Well, all that's left of that is about fifteen thousand."

The Chief Constable whistled.

"Whew, what's become of the rest?"

"That's the interesting point, sir. She's sold out stuff from time to time, and each time she's handled it in cash or negotiable securities—that's to say she's handed out money to someone that she didn't want traced. Blackmail all right."

The Chief Constable nodded.

"Certainly looks like it. And the blackmailer is here in this hotel. That means it must be one of those three men. Got anything fresh on any of them?"

"Can't say I've got anything definite, sir. Major Barry's a retired Army man, as he says. Lives in a small flat, has a pension and a small income from stocks. But he's paid in pretty considerable sums into his account in the last year."

"That sounds promising. What's his explanation?"

"Says they're betting gains. It's perfectly true that he goes to all the large race meetings. Places his bets on the course too, doesn't run an account."

The Chief Constable nodded.

“Hard to disprove that,” he said. “But it’s suggestive.”

Colgate went on.

“Next, the Reverend Stephen Lane. He’s bona fide all right—had a living at St. Helen’s, Whiteridge, Surrey—resigned his living just over a year ago owing to ill health. His ill health amounted to his going into a nursing home for mental patients. He was there for over a year.”

“Interesting,” said Weston.

“Yes, sir. I tried to get as much as I could out of the doctor in charge but you know what these medicos are—it’s difficult to pin them down to anything you can get hold of. But as far as I can make out, his reverence’s trouble was an obsession about the devil—especially the devil in the guise of a woman—scarlet woman—whore of Babylon.”

“H’m,” said Weston. “There have been precedents for murder there.”

“Yes, sir. It seems to me that Stephen Lane is at least a possibility. The late Mrs. Marshall was a pretty good example of what a clergyman would call a Scarlet Woman—hair and goings on and all. Seems to me it’s not impossible he may have felt it his appointed task to dispose of her. That is if he is really batty.”

“Nothing to fit in with the blackmail theory?”

“No, sir, I think we can wash him out as far as that’s concerned. Has some private means of his own, but not very much, and no sudden increase lately.”

“What about his story of his movements on the day of the crime?”

“Can’t get any confirmation of them. Nobody remembers meeting a parson in the lanes. As to the book at the church, the last entry was three days before and nobody had looked at it for about a fortnight. He could have quite easily gone over the day before, say, or even a couple of days before, and dated his entry the 25th.”

Weston nodded. He said:

“And the third man?”

“Horace Blatt? It’s my opinion, sir, that there’s definitely something fishy there. Pays income tax on a sum far exceeding what he makes out of his hardware business. And mind you, he’s a slippery customer. He could probably cook up a reasonable statement—he gambles a bit on the Stock Exchange, and he’s in with one or two shady deals. Oh, yes, there may be plausible explanations, but there’s no getting away from it that he’s been making pretty big sums from unexplained sources for some years now.”

“In fact,” said Weston, “the idea is that Mr. Horace Blatt is a successful blackmailer by profession?”

“Either that, sir, or it’s dope. I saw Chief Inspector Ridgeway who’s in charge of the dope business, and he was no end keen. Seems there’s been a good bit of heroin coming in lately. They’re on to the small distributors, and they know more or less who’s running it the other end, but it’s the way it’s coming into the country that’s baffled them so far.”

Weston said:

“If the Marshall woman’s death is the result of her getting mixed-up, innocently or otherwise, with the dope-running stunt, then we’d better hand the whole thing over to Scotland Yard. It’s their pigeon. Eh? What do you say?”

Inspector Colgate said rather regretfully:

“I’m afraid you’re right, sir. If it’s dope, then it’s a case for the Yard.”

Weston said after a moment or two’s thought:

“It really seems the most likely explanation.”

Colgate nodded gloomily.

“Yes, it does. Marshall’s right out of it—though I did get some information that might have been useful if his alibi hadn’t been so good. Seems his firm is very near the rocks. Not his fault or his partner’s, just the general result of the crisis last year and the general state of trade and finance. And as far as he knew, he’d come into fifty thousand pounds if his wife died. And fifty thousand would have been a very useful sum.”

He sighed.

“Seems a pity when a man’s got two perfectly good motives for murder, that he can be proved to have had nothing to do with it!”

Weston smiled.

“Cheer up, Colgate. There’s still a chance we may distinguish ourselves. There’s the blackmail angle still and there’s the batty parson, but, personally, I think the dope solution is far the most likely.” He added: “And if it was one of the dope gang who put her out we’ll have been instrumental in helping Scotland Yard to solve the dope problem. In fact, take it all round, one way or another, we’ve done pretty well.”

An unwilling smile showed on Colgate’s face.

He said:

“Well, that’s the lot, sir. By the way, I checked up on the writer of that letter we found in her room. The one signed J.N. Nothing doing. He’s in China safe enough. Same chap as Miss Brewster was telling us about. Bit of a young scallywag. I’ve checked up on the rest of Mrs. Marshall’s friends. No leads there. Everything there is to get, we’ve got, sir.”

Weston said:

“So now it’s up to us.” He paused and then added: “Seen anything of our Belgian colleague? Does he know all you’ve told me?”

Colgate said with a grin:

“He’s a queer little cuss, isn’t he? D’you know what he asked me day before yesterday? He wanted particulars of any cases of strangulation in the last three years.”

Colonel Weston sat up.

“He did, did he? Now I wonder—” he paused a minute. “When did you say the Reverend Stephen Lane went into that mental home?”

“A year ago last Easter, sir.”

Colonel Weston was thinking deeply. He said:

“There was a case—body of a young woman found somewhere near Bagshot. Going to meet her husband somewhere and never turned up. And there was what the papers called the Lonely Copse Mystery. Both in Surrey if I remember rightly.”

His eyes met those of his Inspector. Colgate said:

“Surrey? My word, sir, it fits, doesn’t it? I wonder….”

II

Hercule Poirot sat on the turf on the summit of the island.

A little to his left was the beginning of the steel ladder that led down to Pixy Cove. There were several rough boulders near the head of the ladder, he noted, forming easy concealment for anyone who proposed to descend to the beach below. Of the beach itself little could be seen from the top owing to the overhang of the cliff.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head gravely.

The pieces of his jig-saw were fitting into position.

Mentally he went over those pieces, considering each as a detached item.

A morning on the bathing beach some few days before Arlena Marshall’s death.

One, two, three, four, five separate remarks uttered on that morning.

The evening of a bridge game. He, Patrick Redfern and Rosamund Darnley had been at the table. Christine had wandered out while dummy and had overheard a certain conversation. Who else had been in the lounge at that time? Who had been absent?

The evening before the crime. The conversation he had had with Christine on the cliff and the scene he had witnessed on his way back to the hotel.

Gabrielle No. 8.

A pair of scissors.

A broken pipe stem.

A bottle thrown from a window.

A green calendar.

A packet of candles.

A mirror and a typewriter.

A skein of magenta wool.

A girl’s wristwatch.

Bathwater rushing down the waste pipe.

Each of these unrelated facts must fit into its appointed place. There must be no loose ends.

And then, with each concrete fact fitted into position, on to the next stop: his own belief in the presence of evil on the island.

Evil…

He looked down at a typewritten paper in his hands.

Nellie Parsons—found strangled in a lonely copse near Chobham. No clue to her murderer ever discovered.

Nellie Parsons?

Alice Corrigan.

He read very carefully the details of Alice Corrigan’s death.

III

To Hercule Poirot, sitting on the ledge overlooking the sea, came Inspector Colgate.

Poirot liked Inspector Colgate. He liked his rugged face, his shrewd eyes, and his slow unhurried manner.

Inspector Colgate sat down. He said, glancing down at the typewritten sheets in Poirot’s hand:

“Done anything with those cases, sir?”

“I have studied them—yes.”

Colgate got up, he walked along and peered into the next niche. He came back, saying:

“One can’t be too careful. Don’t want to be overheard.”

Poirot said:

“You are wise.”

Colgate said:

"I don't mind telling you, M. Poirot, that I've been interested in those cases myself—though perhaps I shouldn't have thought about them if you hadn't asked for them." He paused: "I've been interested in one case in particular."

"Alice Corrigan?"

"Alice Corrigan." He paused. "I've been on to the Surrey police about that case—wanted to get all the ins and outs of it."

"Tell me, my friend. I am interested—very interested."

"I thought you might be. Alice Corrigan was found strangled in Caesar's Grove on Blackridge Heath—not ten miles from Marley Copse where Nellie Parsons was found—and both those places are within twelve miles of Whiteridge where Mr. Lane was vicar."

Poirot said:

"Tell me more about the death of Alice Corrigan."

Colgate said:

"The Surrey police didn't at first connect her death with that of Nellie Parsons. That's because they'd pitched on the husband as the guilty party. Don't quite know why except that he was a bit of what the Press calls a 'mystery man'—not much known about him—who he was or where he came from. She'd married him against her people's wishes, she'd a bit of money of her own—and she'd insured her life in his favour—all that was enough to raise suspicion, as I think you'll agree, sir?"

Poirot nodded.

"But when it came down to brass tacks the husband was washed right out of the picture. The body was discovered by one of these women hikers—hefty young women in shorts. She was an absolutely competent and reliable witness—games mistress at a school in Lancashire. She noted the time when she found the body—it was exactly four-fifteen—and gave it as her opinion that the woman had been dead quite a short time—not more than ten minutes. That fitted in well enough with the police surgeon’s view when he examined the body at 5:45. She left everything as it was and tramped across country to Bagshot police station where she reported the death. Now from three o’clock to four-ten, Edward Corrigan was in the train coming down from London where he’d gone up for the day on business. Four other people were in the carriage with him. From the station he took the local bus, two of his fellow passengers travelling by it also. He got off at the Pine Ridge Café where he’d arranged to meet his wife for tea. Time then was four twenty-five. He ordered tea for them both, but said not to bring it till she came. Then he walked about outside waiting for her. When, by five o’clock she hadn’t turned up, he was getting alarmed—thought she might have sprained her ankle. The arrangement was that she was to walk across the moors from the village where they were staying to the Pine Ridge Café and go home by bus. Caesar’s Grove is not far from the café, and it’s thought that as she was ahead of time she sat down there to admire the view for a bit before going on, and that some tramp or madman came upon her there and caught her unawares. Once the husband was proved to be out of it, naturally they connected up her death with that of Nellie Parsons—that rather flighty servant girl who was found strangled in Marley Copse. They decided that the same man was responsible for both crimes, but they never caught him—and what’s more they never came near to catching him! Drew a blank everywhere.”

He paused and then he said slowly:

“And now—here’s a third woman strangled—and a certain gentleman we won’t name right on the spot.”

He stopped.

His small shrewd eyes came round to Poirot. He waited hopefully.

Poirot’s lips moved. Inspector Colgate leaned forward.

Poirot was murmuring:

“—so difficult to know which pieces are part of the fur rug and which are the cat’s tail.”

“I beg pardon, sir?” said Inspector Colgate, startled.

Poirot said quickly:

“I apologize. I was following a train of thought of my own.”

“What’s this about a fur rug and a cat?”

“Nothing—nothing at all.” He paused. “Tell me, Inspector Colgate, if you suspected someone of telling lies—many, many lies but you had no proof, what would you do?”

Inspector Colgate considered.

“It’s difficult, that is. But it’s my opinion that if anyone tells enough lies, they’re bound to trip up in the end.”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, that is very true. You see, it is only in my mind that certain statements are lies. I think that they are lies, but I cannot know that they are lies. But one might perhaps make a test—a test of one little not very noticeable lie. And if that were proved to be a lie—why then, one would know that all the rest were lies, too!”

Inspector Colgate looked at him curiously.

“Your mind works a funny way, doesn’t it, sir? But I dare say it comes out all right in the end. If you’ll excuse me asking, what put you on to asking about strangulation cases in general?”

Poirot said slowly:

“You have a word in your language—slick. This crime seemed to me a very slick crime! It made me wonder if, perhaps, it was not a first attempt.”

Inspector Colgate said:

“I see.”

Poirot went on:

“I said to myself, let us examine past crimes of a similar kind and if there is a crime that closely resembles this one—eh bien, we shall have there a very valuable clue.”

“You mean using the same method of death, sir?”

“No, no, I mean more than that. The death of Nellie Parsons for instance tells me nothing. But the death of Alice Corrigan—tell me, Inspector Colgate, do you not notice one striking form of similarity in this crime?”

Inspector Colgate turned the problem over in his mind. He said at last.

“No, sir, I can’t say that I do really. Unless it’s that in each case the husband has got a cast-iron alibi.”

Poirot said softly:

“Ah, so you have noticed that?”

IV

“Ha, Poirot. Glad to see you. Come in. Just the man I want.”

Hercule Poirot responded to the invitation.

The Chief Constable pushed over a box of cigarettes, took one himself and lighted it. Between puffs he said:

“I’ve decided, more or less, on a course of action. But I’d like your opinion on it before I act decisively.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Tell me, my friend.”

Weston said:

“I’ve decided to call in Scotland Yard and hand the case over to them. In my opinion, although there have been grounds for suspicion against one or two people, the whole case hinges on dope smuggling. It seems clear to me that that place, Pixy’s Cave, was a definite rendezvous for the stuff.”

Poirot nodded.

“I agree.”

“Good man. And I’m pretty certain who our dope smuggler is. Horace Blatt.”

Again Poirot assented. He said:

“That, too, is indicated.”

“I see our minds have both worked the same way. Blatt used to go sailing in that boat of his. Sometimes he’d invite people to go with him, but most of the time he went out alone. He had some rather conspicuous red sails on that boat, but we’ve found that he had some white sails as well stowed away. I think he sailed out on a good day to an appointed spot, and was met by another boat—sailing boat or motor yacht—something of the kind and the stuff was handed over. Then Blatt would run ashore into Pixy Cove at a suitable time of day—”

Hercule Poirot smiled:

“Yes, yes, at half past one. The hour of the British lunch when everyone is quite sure to be in the dining room. The island is private. It is not a place where outsiders come for picnics. People take their tea sometimes from the hotel to Pixy Cove in the afternoon when the sun is on it, or if they want a picnic they would go somewhere far afield, many miles away.”

The Chief Constable nodded.

“Quite,” he said. “Therefore, Blatt ran ashore there and stowed the stuff on that ledge in the cave. Somebody else was to pick it up there in due course.”

Poirot murmured:

"There was a couple, you remember, who came to the island for lunch on the day of the murder? That would be a way of getting the stuff. Some summer visitors from a hotel on the Moor or at St. Loo come over to Smugglers' Island. They announce that they will have lunch. They walk round the island first. How easy to descend to the beach, pick up the sandwich box, place it, no doubt, in Madame's bathing bag which she carries—and return for lunch to the hotel—a little late, perhaps, say at ten minutes to two, having enjoyed their walk whilst everyone else was in the dining room."

Weston said:

"Yes, it all sounds practicable enough. Now these dope organizations are pretty ruthless. If any one blundered in and got wise to things they wouldn't make any bones about silencing that person. It seems to me that that is the right explanation of Arlena Marshall's death. It's possible that on that morning Blatt was actually at the cove stowing the stuff away. His accomplices were to come for it that very day. Arlena arrives on her float and sees him going into the cave with the box. She asks him about it and he kills her then and there and sheers off in his boat as quick as possible."

Poirot said:

"You think definitely that Blatt is the murderer?"

"It seems the most probable solution. Of course it's possible that Arlena might have got on to the truth earlier, said something to Blatt about it, and some other member of the gang fixed a fake appointment with her and did her in. As I say, I think the best course is to hand the case over to Scotland Yard. They've a far better chance than we have of proving Blatt's connection with the gang."

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Weston said:

"You think that's the wise thing to do—eh?"

Poirot was thoughtful. He said at last: “It may be.”

“Dash it all, Poirot, have you got something up your sleeve, or haven’t you?”

Poirot said gravely:

“If I have, I am not sure that I can prove it.”

Weston said:

“Of course, I know that you and Colgate have other ideas. Seems a bit fantastic to me, but I’m bound to admit there may be something in it. But even if you’re right. I still think it’s a case for the Yard. We’ll give them the facts and they can work in with the Surrey police. What I feel is that it isn’t really a case for us. It’s not sufficiently localized.”

He paused.

“What do you think, Poirot? What do you feel ought to be done about it?”

Poirot seemed lost in thought. At last he said:

“I know what I should like to do.”

“Yes, man.”

Poirot murmured:

“I should like to go for a picnic.”

Colonel Weston stared at him.

Twelve

“A picnic, M. Poirot?”

Emily Brewster stared at him as though he were out of his senses.

Poirot said engagingly:

“It sounds to you, does it not, very outrageous? But indeed it seems to me a most admirable idea. We need something of the every day, the usual, to restore life to the normal. I am most anxious to see something of Dartmoor, the weather is good. It will—how shall I say, it will cheer everybody up! So aid me in this matter. Persuade everyone.”

The idea met with unexpected success. Everyone was at first dubious and then grudgingly admitted it might not be such a bad idea after all.

It was not suggested that Captain Marshall should be asked. He had himself announced that he had to go to Plymouth that day. Mr. Blatt was of the party, enthusiastically so. He was determined to be the life and soul of it. Besides him there was Emily Brewster, the Redferns, Stephen Lane, the Gardeners, who were persuaded to delay their departure by one day, Rosamund Darnley and Linda.

Poirot had been eloquent to Rosamund and had dwelt on the advantage it would be to Linda to have something to take her out of herself. To this Rosamund agreed. She said:

“You’re quite right. The shock has been very bad for a child of that age. It has made her terribly jumpy.”

“That is only natural, Mademoiselle. But at any age one soon forgets. Persuade her to come. You can, I know.”

Major Barry had refused firmly. He said he didn’t like picnics. “Lots of baskets to carry,” he said. “And darned uncomfortable. Eating my food at a table’s good enough for me.”

The party assembled at ten o’clock. Three cars had been ordered. Mr. Blatt was loud and cheerful, imitating a tourist guide.

“This way, ladies and gentlemen—this way for Dartmoor. Heather and bilberries, Devonshire cream and convicts. Bring your wives, gentlemen, or bring the other thing! Everyone welcome! Scenery guaranteed. Walk up. Walk up.”

At the last minute Rosamund Darnley came down looking concerned. She said:

“Linda’s not coming. She says she’s got a frightful headache.”

Poirot cried:

“But it will do her good to come. Persuade her, Mademoiselle.”

Rosamund said firmly:

“It’s no good. She’s absolutely determined. I’ve given her some aspirin and she’s gone to bed.”

She hesitated and said:

“I think, perhaps, I won’t go, either.

“Can’t allow that, dear lady, can’t allow that,” cried Mr. Blatt, seizing her facetiously by the arm. “La haute Mode must grace the occasion. No refusals! I’ve taken you into custody, ha, ha. Sentenced to Dartmoor.”

He led her firmly to the first car. Rosamund threw a black look at Hercule Poirot.

“I’ll stay with Linda,” said Christine Redfern. “I don’t mind a bit.”

Patrick said: “Oh, come on, Christine.”

And Poirot said:

"No, no, you must come, Madame. With a headache one is better alone. Come, let us start."

The three cars drove off. They went first to the real Pixy's Cave on Sheepstor, and had a good deal of fun looking for the entrance and at last finding it, aided by a picture postcard.

It was precarious going on the big boulders and Hercule Poirot did not attempt it. He watched indulgently while Christine Redfern sprang lightly from stone to stone and observed that her husband was never far from her. Rosamund Darnley and Emily Brewster had joined in the search though the latter slipped once and gave a slight twist to her ankle. Stephen Lane was indefatigable, his long lean figure turning and twisting among the boulders. Mr. Blatt contented himself with going a little way and shouting encouragement, also taking photographs of the searchers.

The Gardeners and Poirot remained staidly sitting by the wayside whilst Mrs. Gardener's voice upraised itself in a pleasant even-toned monologue, punctuated now and then by the obedient "Yes, darlings" of her spouse.

"—and what I always have felt, M. Poirot, and Mr. Gardener agrees with me, is that snapshots can be very annoying. Unless, that is to say, they are taken among friends. That Mr. Blatt has just no sensitiveness of any kind. He just comes right up to everyone and talks away and takes pictures of you and, as I said to Mr. Gardener, that really is very ill-bred. That's what I said, Odell, wasn't it?"

"Yes, darling."

"That group he took of us all sitting on the beach. Well, that's all very well, but he should have asked first. As it was, Miss Brewster was just getting up from the beach, and it certainly makes her look a very peculiar shape."

"I'll say it does," said Mr. Gardener with a grin.

"And there's Mr. Blatt giving round copies to everybody without so much as asking first. He gave one to you, M. Poirot, I noticed."

Poirot nodded. He said:

“I value that group very much.”

Mrs. Gardener went on:

“And look at his behaviour today—so loud and noisy and common. Why, it just makes me shudder. You ought to have arranged to leave that man at home, M. Poirot.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“Alas, Madame, that would have been difficult.”

“I should say it would. That man just pushes his way in anywhere. He’s just not sensitive at all.”

At this moment the discovery of the Pixy’s Cave was hailed from below with loud cries.

The party now drove on, under Hercule Poirot’s directions, to a spot where a short walk from the car down a hillside of heather led to a delightful spot by a small river.

A narrow plank bridge crossed the river and Poirot and her husband induced Mrs. Gardener to cross it to where a delightful heathery spot free from prickly furze looked an ideal spot for a picnic lunch.

Talking volubly about her sensations when crossing on a plank bridge Mrs. Gardener sank down. Suddenly there was a slight outcry.

The others had run across the bridge lightly enough, but Emily Brewster was standing in the middle of the plank, her eyes shut, swaying to and fro.

Poirot and Patrick Redfern rushed to the rescue.

Emily Brewster was gruff and ashamed.

"Thanks, thanks. Sorry. Never was good at crossing running water. Get giddy. Stupid, very."

Lunch was spread out and the picnic began.

All the people concerned were secretly surprised to find how much they enjoyed this interlude. It was, perhaps, because it afforded an escape from an atmosphere of suspicion and dread. Here, with the trickling of the water, the soft peaty smell in the air and the warm colouring of bracken and heather, a world of murder and police inquiries and suspicion seemed blotted out as though it had never existed. Even Mr. Blatt forgot to be the life and soul of the party. After lunch he went to sleep a little distance away and subdued snores testified to his blissful unconsciousness.

It was quite a grateful party of people who packed up the picnic baskets and congratulated Hercule Poirot on his good idea.

The sun was sinking as they returned along the narrow winding lanes. From the top of the hill above Leathercombe Bay they had a brief glimpse of the island with the white hotel on it.

It looked peaceful and innocent in the setting sun.

Mrs. Gardener, not loquacious for once, sighed and said:

"I really do thank you, M. Poirot. I feel so calm. It's just wonderful."

II

Major Barry came out to greet them on arrival.

"Hullo," he said. "Had a good day?"

Mrs. Gardener said:

"Indeed we did. The moors were just too lovely for anything. So English and old world. And the air delicious and invigorating. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for being so lazy as to stay behind."

The Major chuckled.

“I’m too old for that kind of thing—sitting on a patch of bog and eating sandwiches.”

A chambermaid had come out of the hotel. She was a little out of breath. She hesitated for a moment then came swiftly up to Christine Redfern.

Hercule Poirot recognized her as Glady’s Narracott. Her voice came quick and uneven.

“Excuse me, Madam, but I’m worried about the young lady. About Miss Marshall. I took her up some tea just now and I couldn’t get her to wake, and she looks so—so queer somehow.”

Christine looked round helplessly. Poirot was at her side in a moment. His hand under her elbow he said quietly:

“We will go up and see.”

They hurried up the stairs and along the passage to Linda’s room.

One glance at her was enough to tell them both that something was very wrong. She was an odd colour and her breathing was hardly perceptible.

Poirot’s hand went to her pulse. At the same time he noticed an envelope stuck up against the lamp on the bedside table. It was addressed to himself.

Captain Marshall came quickly into the room. He said:

“What’s this about Linda? What’s the matter with her?”

A small frightened sob came from Christine Redfern.

Hercule Poirot turned from the bed. He said to Marshall:

“Get a doctor—as quick as you possibly can. But I’m afraid—very much afraid—it may be too late.”

He took the letter with his name on it and ripped open the envelope. Inside were a few lines of writing in Linda's prim schoolgirl hand.

I think this is the best way out. Ask Father to try and forgive me. I killed Arlena. I thought I should be glad—but I'm not. I am very sorry for everything.

III

They were assembled in the lounge—Marshall, the Redferns, Rosamund Darnley and Hercule Poirot.

They sat there silent—waiting….

The door opened and Dr. Neasden came in. He said curtly:

"I've done all I can. She may pull through—but I'm bound to tell you that there's not much hope."

He paused. Marshall, his face stiff, his eyes a cold frosty blue, asked:

"How did she get hold of the stuff?"

Neasden opened the door again and beckoned.

The chambermaid came into the room. She had been crying:

Neasden said:

"Just tell us again what you saw."

Sniffing, the girl said:

"I never thought—I never thought for a minute there was anything wrong—though the young lady did seem rather strange about it." A slight gesture of impatience from the doctor started her off again. "She was in the other lady's room. Mrs. Redfern's. Your room, Madam. Over at the washstand, and she took up a little bottle. She did give a bit of a jump when I came in, and I thought it was queer her taking things from your room, but then, of course, it might be something she'd lent you. She just said: 'Oh, this is what I'm looking for—' and went out."

Christine said almost in a whisper.

"My sleeping tablets."

The doctor said brusquely:

"How did she know about them?"

Christine said:

"I gave her one. The night after it happened. She told me she couldn't sleep. She—I remember her saying—'Will one be enough?'—and I said, Oh yes, they were very strong—that I'd been cautioned never to take more than two at most." Neasden nodded: "She made pretty sure," he said. "Took six of them."

Christine sobbed again.

"Oh dear, I feel it's my fault. I should have kept them locked up."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"It might have been wiser, Mrs. Redfern."

Christine said despairingly:

"She's dying—and it's my fault…."

Kenneth Marshall stirred in his chair. He said:

"No, you can't blame yourself. Linda knew what she was doing. She took them deliberately. Perhaps—perhaps it was best."

He looked down at the crumpled note in his hand—the note that Poirot had silently handed to him.

Rosamund Darnley cried out.

“I don’t believe it. I don’t believe Linda killed her. Surely it’s impossible—on the evidence!”

Christine said eagerly:

“Yes, she can’t have done it! She must have got overwrought and imagined it all.”

The door opened and Colonel Weston came in. He said:

“What’s all this I hear?”

Dr. Neasden took the note from Marshall’s hand and handed it to the Chief Constable. The latter read it. He exclaimed incredulously:

“What? But this is nonsense—absolute nonsense! It’s impossible.” He repeated with assurance. “Impossible! Isn’t it, Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot moved for the first time. He said in a slow sad voice:

“No, I’m afraid it is not impossible.”

Christine Redfern said:

“But I was with her, M. Poirot. I was with her up to a quarter to twelve. I told the police so.”

Poirot said:

“Your evidence gave her an alibi—yes. But what was your evidence based on? It was based on Linda Marshall’s own wristwatch. You do not know of your own knowledge that it was a quarter to twelve when you left her—you only know that she told you so. You said yourself the time seemed to have gone very fast.”

She stared at him, stricken.

He said:

“Now, think, Madame, when you left the beach, did you walk back to the hotel fast or slow?”

“I—well, fairly slowly, I think.”

“Do you remember much about that walk back?”

“Not very much, I’m afraid. I—I was thinking.”

Poirot said:

“I am sorry to ask you this, but will you tell just what you were thinking about during that walk?”

Christine flushed.

“I suppose—if it is necessary… I was considering the question of—of leaving here. Just going away without telling my husband. I—I was very unhappy just then, you see.”

Patrick Redfern cried:

“Oh, Christine! I know… I know….”

Poirot’s precise voice cut in.

“Exactly. You were concerned over taking a step of some importance. You were, I should say, deaf and blind to your surroundings. You probably walked very slowly and occasionally stopped for some minutes whilst you puzzled things out.”

Christine nodded.

“How clever you are. It was just like that. I woke up from a kind of dream just outside the hotel and hurried in thinking I should be very late, but when I saw the clock in the lounge I realized I had plenty of time.”

Hercule Poirot said again:

“Exactly.”

He turned to Marshall.

“I must now describe to you certain things I found in your daughter’s room after the murder. In the grate was a large blob of melted wax, some burnt hair, fragments of cardboard and paper and an ordinary household pin. The paper and the cardboard might not be relevant, but the other three things were suggestive—particularly when I found tucked away in the bookshelf a volume from the local library here dealing with witchcraft and magic. It opened very easily at a certain page. On that page were described various methods of causing death by moulding in was a figure supposed to represent the victim. This was then slowly roasted till it melted away—or alternatively you would pierce the wax figure to the heart with a pin. Death of the victim would ensue. I later heard from Mrs. Redfern that Linda Marshall had been out early that morning and had bought a packet of candles, and had seemed embarrassed when her purchase was revealed. I had no doubt what had happened after that. Linda had made a crude figure of the candle wax—possibly adorning it with a snip of Arlena’s red hair to give the magic force—had then stabbed it to the heart with a pin and finally melted the figure away by lighting strips of cardboard under it.

“It was crude, childish, superstitious, but it revealed one thing: the desire to kill.

“Was there any possibility that there had been more than a desire? Could Linda Marshall have actually killed her stepmother?

“At first sight it seemed as though she had a perfect alibi—but in actuality, as I have just pointed out, the time evidence was supplied by Linda herself. She could easily have declared the time to be a quarter of an hour later than it really was.

“It was quite possible once Mrs. Redfern had left the beach for Linda to follow her up and then strike across the narrow neck of land to the ladder, hurry down it, meet her stepmother there, strangle her and return up the ladder before the boat containing Miss Brewster and Patrick Redfern came in sight. She could then return to Gull Cove, take her bathe and return to the hotel at her leisure.

“But that entailed two things. She must have definite knowledge that Arlena Marshall would be at Pixy Cove and she must be physically capable of the deed.

“Well, the first was quite possible—if Linda Marshall had written a note to Arlena herself in someone else’s name. As to the second, Linda has very large strong hands. They are as large as a man’s. As to the strength, she is at the age when one is prone to be mentally unbalanced. Mental derangement often is accompanied by unusual strength. There was one other small point. Linda Marshall’s mother had actually been accused and tried for murder.”

Kenneth Marshall lifted his head. He said fiercely: “She was also acquitted.”

“She was acquitted,” Poirot agreed.

Marshall said:

“And I’ll tell you this, M. Poirot. Ruth—my wife—was innocent. That I know with complete and absolute certainty. In the intimacy of our life I could not have been deceived. She was an innocent victim of circumstances.”

He paused.

“And I don’t believe that Linda killed Arlena. It’s ridiculous—absurd!”

Poirot said:

“Do you believe that letter, then, to be a forgery?”

Marshall held out his hand for it and Weston gave it to him. Marshall studied it attentively. Then he shook his head.

“No,” he said unwillingly. “I believe Linda did write this.”

Poirot said:

“Then if she wrote it, there are only two explanations. Either she wrote it in all good faith, knowing herself to be the murderess or—or, I say—she wrote it deliberately to shield someone else, someone whom she feared was suspected.”

Kenneth Marshall said:

“You mean me?”

“It is possible, is it not?”

Marshall considered for a moment or two, then he said quietly:

“No, I think that idea is absurd. Linda may have realized that I was regarded with suspicion at first. But she knew definitely by now that that was over and done with—that the police had accepted my alibi and turned their attention elsewhere.”

Poirot said:

“And supposing that it was not so much that she thought that you were suspected as that she knew you were guilty.”

Marshall stared at him. He gave a short laugh.

“That’s absurd.”

Poirot said:

“I wonder. There are, you know, several possibilities about Mrs. Marshall’s death. There is the theory that she was being blackmailed, that she went that morning to meet the blackmailer and that the blackmailer killed her. There is the theory that Pixy Cove and Cave were being used for drug running, and that she was killed because she accidentally learned something about that. There is a third possibility—that she was killed by a religious maniac. And there is a fourth possibility—you stood to gain a lot of money by your wife’s death, Captain Marshall?”

"I've just told you—"

"Yes, yes—I agree that it is impossible that you could have killed your wife—if you were acting alone. But supposing someone helped you?"

"What the devil do you mean?"

The quiet man was roused at last. He half rose from his chair. His voice was menacing. There was a hard angry light in his eyes.

Poirot said:

"I mean that this is not a crime that was committed single-handed. Two people were in it. It is quite true that you could not have typed that letter and at the same time gone to the cove—but there would have been time for you to have jotted down that letter in shorthand—and for someone else to have typed it in your room while you yourself were absent on your murderous errand."

Hercule Poirot looked towards Rosamund Darnley. He said:

"Miss Darnley states that she left Sunny Ledge at ten minutes past eleven and saw you typing in your room. But just about that time Mr. Gardener went up to the hotel to fetch a skein of wool for his wife. He did not meet Miss Darnley or see her. That is rather remarkable. It looks as though either Miss Darnley never left Sunny Ledge, or else she had left it much earlier and was in your room typing industriously. Another point, you stated that when Miss Darnley looked into your room at a quarter past eleven you saw her in the mirror. But on the day of the murder your typewriter and papers were all on the writing desk across the corner of the room, whereas the mirror was between the windows. So that statement was a deliberate lie. Later, you moved your typewriter to the table under the mirror so as to substantiate your story—but it was too late. I was aware that both you and Miss Darnley had lied."

Rosamund Darnley spoke. Her voice was low and clear.

She said:

“How devilishly ingenious you are!”

Hercule Poirot said, raising his voice:

“But not so devilish and so ingenious as the man who killed Arlena Marshall! Think back for a moment. Who did I think—who did everybody think—that Arlena Marshall had gone to meet that morning? We all jumped to the same conclusion. Patrick Redfern. It was not to meet a blackmailer that she went. Her face alone would have told me that. Oh no, it was a lover she was going to meet—or thought she was going to meet.

“Yes, I was quite sure of that. Arlena Marshall was going to meet Patrick Redfern. But a minute later Patrick Redfern appeared on the beach and was obviously looking for her. So what then?”

Patrick Redfern said with subdued anger:

“Some devil used my name.”

Poirot said:

“You were very obviously upset and surprised by her nonappearance. Almost too obviously, perhaps. It is my theory, Mr. Redfern, that she went to Pixy Cove to meet you, and that she did meet you, and that you killed her there as you had planned to do.”

Patrick Redfern stared. He said in his high good-humoured Irish voice:

“Is it daft you are? I was with you on the beach until I went round in the boat with Miss Brewster and found her dead.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“You killed her after Miss Brewster had gone off in the boat to fetch the police. Arlena Marshall was not dead when you got to the beach. She was waiting hidden in the cave until the coast could be clear.”

“But the body! Miss Brewster and I both saw the body.”

“A body—yes. But not a dead body. The live body of the woman who helped you, her arms and legs stained with tan, her face hidden by a green cardboard hat. Christine, your wife (or possibly not your wife—but still your partner), helping you to commit this crime as she helped you to commit that crime in the past when she “discovered” the body of Alice Corrigan at least twenty minutes before Alice Corrigan died—killed by her husband Edward Corrigan—you!”

Christine spoke. Her voice was sharp—cold. She said:

“Be careful, Patrick, don’t lose your temper.”

Poirot said:

“You will be interested to hear that both you and your wife Christine were easily recognized and picked out by the Surrey police from a group of people photographed here. They identified you both at once as Edward Corrigan and Christine Deverill, the young woman who found the body.”

Patrick Redfern had risen. His handsome face was transformed, suffused with blood, blind with rage. It was the face of a killer—of a tiger. He yelled:

“You damned interfering murdering lousy little worm!”

He hurled himself forward, his fingers stretching and curling, his voice raving curses, as he fastened his fingers round Hercule Poirot’s throat….

Thirteen

Poirot said reflectively:

“It was on a morning when we were sitting out here that we talked of suntanned bodies lying like meat upon a slab, and it was then that I reflected how little difference there was between one body and another. If one looked closely and appraisingly—yes—but to the casual glance? One moderately well-made young woman is very like another. Two brown legs, two brown arms, a little piece of bathing suit in between—just a body lying out in the sun. When a woman walks, when she speaks, laughs, turns her head, moves a hand—then, yes then, there is personality—individuality. But in the sun ritual—no.

“It was that day that we spoke of evil—evil under the sun as Mr. Lane put it. Mr. Lane is a very sensitive person—evil affects him—he perceives its presence—but though he is a good recording instrument, he did not really know exactly where the evil was. To him, evil was focused in the person of Arlena Marshall, and practically everyone present agreed with him.

“But to my mind, though evil was present, it was not centralized in Arlena Marshall at all. It was connected with her, yes—but in a totally different way. I saw her, first, last and all the time, as an eternal and predestined victim. Because she was beautiful, because she had glamour, because men turned their heads to look at her, it was assumed that she was the type of woman who wrecked lives and destroyed souls. But I saw her very differently. It was not she who fatally attracted men—it was men who fatally attracted her. She was the type of woman whom men care for easily and of whom they as easily tire. And everything that I was told or found out about her strengthened my conviction on this point. The first thing that was mentioned about her was how the man in whose divorce case she had been cited refused to marry her. It was then that Captain Marshall, one of those incurably chivalrous men, stepped in and asked her to marry him. To a shy retiring man of Captain Marshall’s type, a public ordeal of any kind would be the worst torture—hence his love and pity for his first wife who was publicly accused and tried for a murder she had not committed. He married her and found himself amply justified in his estimate of her character. After her death another beautiful woman, perhaps something of the same type (since Linda has red hair which she probably inherited from her mother), is held up to public ignominy. Again Marshall performs a rescue act. But this time he finds little to sustain his infatuation. Arlena is stupid, unworthy of his sympathy and protection, mindless. Nevertheless, I think he always had a fairly true vision of her. Long after he ceased to love her and was irked by her presence, he remained sorry for her. She was to him like a child who cannot get farther than a certain page in the book of life.

"I saw in Arlena Marshall with her passion for men, a predestined prey for an unscrupulous man of a certain type. In Patrick Redfern, with his good looks, his easy assurance, his undeniable charm for women, I recognized at once that type. The adventurer who makes his living, one way or another, out of women. Looking on from my place on the beach I was quite certain that Arlena was Patrick's victim, not the other way about. And I associated that focus of evil with Patrick Redfern, not with Arlena Marshall.

"Arlena had recently come into a large sum of money, left her by an elderly admirer who had not had time to grow tired of her. She was the type of woman who is invariably defrauded of money by some man or other. Miss Brewster mentioned a young man who had been 'ruined' by Arlena, but a letter from him which was found in her room, though it expressed a wish (which cost nothing) to cover her with jewels, in actual fact acknowledged a cheque from her by means of which he hoped to escape prosecution. A clear case of a young waster sponging on her. I have no doubt that Patrick Redfern found it easy to induce her to hand him large sums from time to time 'for investment.' He probably dazzled her with stories of great opportunities—how he would make her fortune and his own. Unprotected women, living alone, are easy prey to that type of man—and he usually escapes scot free with the booty. If, however, there is a husband, or a brother, or a father about, things are apt to take an unpleasant turn for the swindler. Once Captain Marshall was to find out what had happened to his wife's fortune, Patrick Redfern might expect short shrift.

"That did not worry him, however, because he contemplated quite calmly doing away with her when he judged it necessary—encouraged by having already got away with one murder—that of a young woman whom he had married in the name of Corrigan and whom he had persuaded to insure her life for a large sum.

“In his plans he was aided and abetted by the woman who down here passed as his wife and to whom he was genuinely attached. A young woman as unlike the type of his victims as could well be imagined—cool, calm, passionless, but steadfastly loyal to him and an actress of no mean ability. From the time of her arrival here Christine Redfern played a part, the part of the ‘poor little wife’—frail, helpless, intellectual rather than athletic. Think of the points she made one after another. Her tendency to blister in the sun and her consequent white skin, her giddiness at heights—stories of getting stuck on Milan Cathedral, etc. An emphasis on her frailty and delicacy—nearly every one spoke of her as a ‘little woman.’ She was actually as tall as Arlena Marshall, but with very small hands and feet. She spoke of herself as a former school-teacher, and thereby emphasized an impression of book learning and lack of athletic prowess. Actually, it is quite true that she had worked in a school, but the position she held there was that of games mistress, and she was an extremely active young woman who could climb like a cat and run like an athlete.

“The crime itself was perfectly planned and timed. It was, as I mentioned before, a very slick crime. The timing was a work of genius.

“First of all there were certain preliminary scenes—one played on the cliff ledge when they knew me to be occupying the next recess—a conventional jealous wife dialogue between her and her husband. Later she played the same part in a scene with me. At the time I remember a vague feeling of having read all this in a book. It did not seem real. Because, of course, it was not real. Then came the day of the crime. It was a fine day—an essential. Redfern’s first act was to slip out very early—by the balcony door which he unlocked from the inside (if found open it would only be thought someone had gone for an early bathe). Under his bathing wrap he concealed a green Chinese hat, the duplicate of the one Arlena was in the habit of wearing. He slipped across the island, down the ladder and stowed it away in an appointed place behind some rocks. Part I.

“On the previous evening he had arranged a rendezvous with Arlena. They were exercising a good deal of caution about meeting as Arlena was slightly afraid of her husband. She agreed to go round to Pixy Cove early. Nobody went there in the morning. Redfern was to join her there, taking a chance to slip away unobtrusively. If she heard anyone descending the ladder or a boat came in sight she was to slip inside the Pixy’s Cave, the secret of which he had told her, and wait there until the coast was clear. Part II.

“In the meantime Christine went to Linda’s room at a time when she judged Linda would have gone for her early morning dip. She would then alter Linda’s watch, putting it on twenty minutes. There was, of course, a risk that Linda might notice her watch was wrong, but it did not much matter if she did. Christine’s real alibi was the size of her hands which made it a physical impossibility for her to have committed the crime. Nevertheless, an additional alibi would be desirable. Then in Linda’s room she noticed the book on witchcraft and magic, open at a certain page. She read it, and when Linda came in and dropped a parcel of candles she realized what was in Linda’s mind. It opened up some new ideas to her. The original idea of the guilty pair had been to cast a reasonable amount of suspicion on Kenneth Marshall, hence the abstracted pipe, a fragment of which was to be planted on the Cove underneath the ladder.

“On Linda’s return Christine easily arranged an outing together to Gull Cove. She then returned to her own room, took out from a locked suitcase a bottle of artificial suntan, applied it carefully and threw the empty bottle out of the window where it narrowly escaped hitting Emily Brewster who was bathing. Part II successfully accomplished.

“Christine then dressed herself in a white bathing suit, and over it a pair of beach trousers and coat with long floppy sleeves which effectually concealed her newly-browned arms and legs.

“At 10:15 Arlena departed for her rendezvous, a minute or two later Patrick Redfern came down and registered surprise, annoyance etc. Christine’s task was easy enough. Keeping her own watch concealed she asked Linda at twenty-five past eleven what time it was. Linda looked at her watch and replied that it was a quarter to twelve. She then starts down to the sea and Christine packs up her sketching things. As soon as Linda’s back is turned

Christine picks up the girl’s watch which she has necessarily discarded before going into the sea and alters it back to the correct time. Then she hurries up the cliff path, runs across the narrow neck of land to the top of the ladder, strips off her pyjamas and shoves them and her sketching box behind a rock and swarms rapidly down the ladder in her best gymnastic fashion.

“Arlena is on the beach below wondering why Patrick is so long in coming. She sees or hears someone on the ladder, takes a cautious observation, and to her annoyance sees that inconvenient person—the wife! She hurries along the beach and into the Pixy’s Cave.

“Christine takes the hat from its hiding place, a false red curl pinned underneath the brim at the back, and disposes herself in a sprawling attitude with the hat and curl shielding her face and neck. The timing is perfect. A minute or two later the boat containing Patrick and Emily Brewster comes round the point. Remember it is Patrick who bends down and examines the body, Patrick who is stunned—shocked—broken down by the death of his lady love! His witness has been carefully chosen. Miss Brewster has not got a good head, she will not attempt to go up the ladder. She will leave the Cove by boat, Patrick naturally being the one to remain with the body—‘in case the murderer may still be about.’ Miss Brewster rows off to fetch the police. Christine, as soon as the boat has disappeared, springs up, cuts the hat into pieces with the scissors Patrick has carefully brought, stuffs them into her bathing-suit and swarms up the ladder in double quick time, slips into her beach-pyjamas and runs back to the hotel. Just time to have a quick bath, washing off the brown suntan application, and into her tennis dress. One other thing she does. She burns the pieces of the green cardboard hat and the hair in Linda’s grate, adding a leaf of a calendar so that it may be associated with the cardboard. Not a Hat but a Calendar has been burnt. As she suspected, Linda has been experimenting in magic—the blob of wax and the pin shows that.

“Then, down to the tennis court, arriving the last, but showing no signs of flurry or haste.

“And, meanwhile, Patrick has gone to the cave. Arlena has seen nothing and heard very little—a boat—voices—she has prudently remained hidden.

But now it is Patrick calling.

"'All clear, darling,' and she comes out, and his hands fasten round her neck—and that is the end of poor foolish beautiful Arlena Marshall…."

His voice died away.

For a moment there was silence, then Rosamund Darnley said with a little shiver:

"Yes, you make one see it all. But that's the story from the other side. You haven't told us how you came to get at the truth?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"I told you once that I had a very simple mind. Always, from the beginning, it seemed to me that the most likely person had killed Arlena Marshall. And the most likely person was Patrick Redfern. He was the type, par excellence—the type of man who exploits women like her—and the type of the killer—the kind of man who will take a woman's savings and cut her throat into the bargain. Who was Arlena going to meet that morning? By the evidence of her face, her smile, her manner, her words to me—Patrick Redfern. And therefore, in the very nature of things, it should be Patrick who killed her.

"But at once I came up, as I told you, against impossibility. Patrick Redfern could not have killed her since he was on the beach and in Miss Brewster's company until the actual discovery of the body. So I looked about for other solutions—and there were several. She could have been killed by her husband—with Miss Darnley's connivance. (They too had both lied as to one point which looked suspicious.) She could have been killed as a result of her having stumbled on the secret of the dope smuggling. She could have been killed, as I said, by a religious maniac, and she could have been killed by her stepdaughter. The latter seemed to me at one time to be the real solution. Linda's manner in her very first interview with the police was significant. An interview that I had with her later assured me of one point. Linda considered herself guilty."

"You mean she imagined that she had actually killed Arlena?"

Rosamund's voice was incredulous.

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"Yes. Remember—she is really little more than a child. She read that book on witchcraft and she half-believed it. She hated Arlena. She deliberately made the wax doll, cast her spell, pierced it to the heart, melted it away—and that very day Arlena dies. Older and wiser people than Linda have believed fervently in magic. Naturally, she believed that it was all true—that by using magic she had killed her stepmother."

Rosamund cried:

"Oh, poor child, poor child. And I thought—I imagined—something quite different—that she knew something which would—"

Rosamund stopped. Poirot said:

"I know what it was you thought. Actually your manner frightened Linda still further. She believed that her action had really brought about Arlena's death and that you knew it. Christine Redfern worked on her too, introducing the idea of the sleeping tablets to her mind, showing her the way to a speedy and painless expiation of her crime. You see, once Captain Marshall was proved to have an alibi, it was vital for a new suspect to be found. Neither she nor her husband knew about the dope smuggling. They fixed on Linda to be the scapegoat."

Rosamund said:

"What a devil!"

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, you are right. A cold-blooded and cruel woman. For me, I was in great difficulty. Was Linda guilty only of the childish attempt at witchcraft, or had her hate carried her still further—to the actual act? I tried to get her to confess to me. But it was no good. At that moment I was in grave uncertainty. The Chief Constable was inclined to accept the dope smuggling explanation. I couldn't let it go at that. I went over the facts again very carefully. I had, you see, a collection of jig-saw puzzle pieces, isolated happenings—plain facts. The whole must fit into a complete and harmonious pattern. There were the scissors found on the beach—a bottle thrown from a window—a bath that no one would admit to having taken—all perfectly harmless occurrences in themselves, but rendered significant by the fact that no one would admit to them. Therefore, they must be of significance. Nothing about them fitted in with the theories of either Captain Marshall's or Linda's, or of a dope gang's being responsible. And yet they must have meaning. I went back again to my first solution—that Patrick Redfern had committed the murder. Was there anything in support of that? Yes, the fact that a very large sum of money was missing from Arlena's account. Who had got that money? Patrick Redfern of course. She was the type of woman easily swindled by a handsome young man—but she was not at all the type of woman to be blackmailed. She was far too transparent, not good enough at keeping a secret. The blackmailer story had never rung true to my mind. And yet there had been that conversation overheard—ah, but overheard by whom? Patrick Redfern's wife. It was her story—unsupported by any outside evidence. Why was it invented? The answer came to me like lightning. To account for the absence of Arlena's money!

"Patrick and Christine Redfern. The two of them were in it together. Christine hadn't got the physical strength to strangle her or the mental makeup. No, it was Patrick who had done it—but that was impossible! Every minute of his time was accounted for until the body was found.

"Body—the word stirred something in my mind—bodies lying on the beach—all alike. Patrick Redfern and Emily Brewster had got to the Cove and seen a body lying there. A body—suppose it was not Arlena's body but somebody else's? The face was hidden by the great Chinese hat.

"But there was only one dead body—Arlena's. Then, could it be—a live body—someone pretending to be dead? Could it be Arlena herself, inspired by Patrick to play some kind of a joke. I shook my head—no, too risky. A live body—whose? Was there any woman who would help Redfern? Of course—his wife. But she was a white-skinned delicate creature. Ah yes, but suntan can be applied out of bottles—bottles—I had one of my jig-saw pieces. Yes, and afterwards, of course, a bath—to wash that telltale stain off before she went out to play tennis. And the scissors? Why, to cut up that duplicate cardboard hat—an unwieldy thing that must be got out of the way, and in the haste the scissors were left behind—the one thing that the pair of murderers forgot.

“But where was Arlena all the time? That again was perfectly clear. Either Rosamund Darnley or Arlena Marshall had been in the Pixy’s Cave, the scent they both used told me that. It was certainly not Rosamund Darnley. Then it was Arlena, hiding till the coast should clear.

“When Emily Brewster went off in the boat, Patrick had the beach to himself and full opportunity to commit the crime. Arlena Marshall was killed after a quarter to twelve, but the medical evidence was only concerned with the earliest possible time the crime could have been committed. That Arlena was dead at a quarter to twelve was what was told to the doctor, not what he told the police.

“Two more points had to be settled. Linda Marshall’s evidence gave Christine Redfern an alibi. Yes, but that evidence depended on Linda Marshall’s wristwatch. All that was needed was to prove that Christine had had two opportunities of tampering with the watch. I found those easily enough. She had been alone in Linda’s room that morning—and there was an indirect proof. Linda was heard to say that she was ‘afraid she was going to be late,’ but when she got down it was only twenty-five past ten by the lounge clock. The second opportunity was easy—she could alter the watch back again as soon as Linda turned her back and went down to bathe.

“Then there was the question of the ladder. Christine had always declared she had no head for heights. Another carefully prepared lie.

“I had my mosaic now—each piece beautifully fitted into its place. But, unfortunately, I had no definite proof. It was all in my mind.

“It was then that an idea came to me. There was an assurance—a slickness about the crime. I had no doubt that in the future Patrick Redfern would repeat his crime. What about the past? It was remotely possible that this was not his first killing. The method employed, strangulation, was in harmony with his nature—a killer for pleasure as well as for profit. If he was already a murderer I was sure that he would have used the same means. I asked Inspector Colgate for a list of women victims of strangulation. The result filled me with joy. The death of Nellie Parson found strangled in a lonely copse might or might not be Patrick Redfern's work—it might merely have suggested choice of locality to him, but in Alice Corrigan's death I found exactly what I was looking for. In essence the same method. Juggling with time—a murder committed not, as is the usual way, before it is supposed to have happened, but afterwards. A body supposedly discovered at a quarter past four. A husband with an alibi up to twenty-five past four.

"What really happened? It was said that Edward Corrigan arrived at the Pine Ridge, found his wife not there, and went out and walked up and down. Actually, of course, he ran full speed to the rendezvous, Caesar's Grove (which you will remember was quite nearby), killed her and returned to the café. The girl hiker who reported the crime was a most respectable young lady, games mistress in a well-known girls' school. Apparently she had no connection with Edward Corrigan. She had to walk some way to report the death. The police surgeon only examined the body at a quarter to six. As in this case the time of death was accepted without question.

"I made one final test. I must know definitely if Mrs. Redfern was a liar. I arranged our little excursion to Dartmoor. If anyone has a bad head for heights, they are never comfortable crossing a narrow bridge over running water. Miss Brewster, a genuine sufferer, showed giddiness. But Christine Redfern, unconcerned, ran across without a qualm. It was a small point, but it was a definite test. If she had told one unnecessary lie—then all the other lies were possible. In the meantime Colgate had got the photograph identified by the Surrey Police. I played my hand in the only way I thought likely to succeed. Having lulled Patrick Redfern into security, I turned on him and did my utmost to make him lose his self-control. The knowledge that he had been identified with Corrigan caused him to lose his head completely."

Hercule Poirot stroked his throat reminiscently.

"What I did," he said with importance, "was exceedingly dangerous—but I do not regret it. I succeeded! I did not suffer in vain."

There was a moment's silence. Then Mrs. Gardener gave a deep sigh.

"Why, M. Poirot," she said. "It's just been too wonderful—hearing just exactly how you got your results. It's every bit as fascinating as a lecture on criminology—in fact it is a lecture on criminology. And to think my magenta wool and that sunbathing conversation actually had something to do with it? That really makes me too excited for words, and I'm sure Mr. Gardener feels the same, don't you, Odell?"

"Yes, darling," said Mr. Gardener.

Hercule Poirot said:

"Mr. Gardener too was of assistance to me. I wanted the opinion of a sensible man about Mrs. Marshall. I asked Mr. Gardener what he thought of her."

"Is that so," said Mrs. Gardener. "And what did you say about her, Odell?"

Mr. Gardener coughed. He said:

"Well, darling, I never did think very much of her, you know."

"That's the kind of thing men always say to their wives," said Mrs. Gardener. "And if you ask me, even M. Poirot here is what I should call a shade on the indulgent side about her, calling her a natural victim and all that. Of course it's true that she wasn't a cultured woman at all, and as Captain Marshall isn't here I don't mind saying that she always did seem to me kind of dumb. I said so to Mr. Gardener, didn't I, Odell?"

"Yes, darling," said Mr. Gardener.

II

Linda Marshall sat with Hercule Poirot on Gull Cove.

She said:

“Of course I’m glad I didn’t die after all. But you know, M. Poirot, it’s just the same as if I’d killed her, isn’t it? I meant to.”

Hercule Poirot said energetically:

“It is not at all the same thing. The wish to kill and the action of killing are two different things. If in your bedroom instead of a little wax figure you had had your stepmother bound and helpless and a dagger in your hand instead of a pin, you would not have pushed it into her heart! Something within you would have said ‘no.’ It is the same with me. I enrage myself at an imbecile. I say, ‘I would like to kick him.’ Instead, I kick the table. I say, ‘This table, it is the imbecile, I kick him so.’ And then, if I have not hurt my toe too much, I feel much better and the table it is not usually damaged. But if the imbecile himself was there I should not kick him. To make the wax figures and stick in the pins, it is silly, yes, it is childish, yes—but it does something useful too. You took the hate out of yourself and put it into that little figure. And with the pin and the fire you destroyed—not your stepmother—but the hate you bore her. Afterwards, even before you heard of her death, you felt cleansed, did you not—you felt lighter—happier?”

Linda nodded. She said:

“How did you know? That’s just how I did feel.”

Poirot said:

“Then do not repeat to yourself the imbecilities. Just make up your mind not to hate your next stepmother.”

Linda said startled:

“Do you think I’m going to have another? Oh, I see, you mean Rosamund. I don’t mind her.” She hesitated a minute. “She’s sensible.”

It was not the adjective that Poirot himself would have selected for Rosamund Darnley, but he realized that it was Linda’s idea of high praise.

III

Kenneth Marshall said:

"Rosamund, did you get some extraordinary idea into your head that I'd killed Arlena."

Rosamund looked rather shamefaced. She said:

"I suppose I was a damned fool."

"Of course you were."

"Yes, but Ken, you are such an oyster. I never knew what you really felt about Arlena. I didn't know if you accepted her as she was and were just frightfully decent about her, or whether you—well, just believed in her blindly. And I thought if it was that, and you suddenly found out that she was letting you down you might go mad with rage. I've heard stories about you. You're always very quiet but you're rather frightening sometimes."

"So you thought I just took her by the throat and throttled the life out of her?"

"Well—yes—that's just exactly what I did think. And your alibi seemed a bit on the light side. That's when I suddenly decided to take a hand, and made up that silly story about seeing you typing in your room. And when I heard that you said you'd seen me look in—well, that made me quite sure you'd done it. That, and Linda's queerness."

Kenneth Marshall said with a sigh:

"Don't you realize that I said I'd seen you in the mirror in order to back up your story. I—I thought you needed it corroborated."

Rosamund stared at him.

"You don't mean you thought that I killed your wife?"

Kenneth Marshall shifted uneasily. He mumbled:

"Dash it all, Rosamund, don't you remember how you nearly killed that boy about that dog once? How you hung on to his throat and wouldn't let go."

"But that was years ago."

"Yes, I know—"

Rosamund said sharply:

"What earthly motive do you think I had to kill Arlena?"

His glance shifted. He mumbled something again.

Rosamund cried:

"Ken, you mass of conceit! You thought I killed her out of altruism on your behalf, did you? Or—did you think I killed her because I wanted you myself?"

"Not at all," said Kenneth Marshall indignantly. "But you know what you said that day—about Linda and everything—and—and you seemed to care what happened to me."

Rosamund said:

"I've always cared about that."

"I believe you have. You know, Rosamund—I can't usually talk about things—I'm not good at talking—but I'd like to get this clear. I didn't care for Arlena—only just a little at first—and living with her day after day was a pretty nerve-racking business. In fact it was absolute hell, but I was awfully sorry for her. She was such a damned fool—crazy about men—she just couldn't help it—and they always let her down and treated her rottenly. I simply felt I couldn't be the one to give her the final push. I'd married her and it was up to me to look after her as best I could. I think she knew that and was grateful to me really. She was—she was a pathetic sort of creature really."

Rosamund said gently:

"It's all right, Ken. I understand now."

Without looking at her Kenneth Marshall carefully filled a pipe. He mumbled:

"You're—pretty good at understanding, Rosamund."

A faint smile curved Rosamund's ironic mouth. She said:

"Are you going to ask me to marry you now, Ken, or are you determined to wait six months?"

Kenneth Marshall's pipe dropped from his lips and crashed on the rocks below.

He said:

"Damn, that's the second pipe I've lost down here. And I haven't got another with me. How the devil did you know I'd fixed six months as the proper time?"

"I suppose because it is the proper time. But I'd rather have something definite now, please. Because in the intervening months you may come across some other persecuted female and rush to the rescue in chivalrous fashion again."

He laughed.

"You're going to be the persecuted female this time, Rosamund. You're going to give up that damned dress-making business of yours and we're going to live in the country."

"Don't you know that I make a very handsome income out of my business? Don't you realize that it's my business—that I created it and worked it up, and that I'm proud of it! And you've got the damned nerve to come along and say, 'Give it all up, dear.'"

"I've got the damned nerve to say it, yes."

“And you think I care enough for you to do it?”

“If you don’t,” said Kenneth Marshall, “you’d be no good to me.”

Rosamund said softly:

“Oh, my dear, I’ve wanted to live in the country with you all my life. Now—it’s going to come true….”

Five Little Pigs (1942)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Introduction

CARLA LEMARCHANT

Hercule Poirot looked with interest and appreciation at the young woman who was being ushered into the room.

There had been nothing distinctive in the letter she had written. It had been a mere request for an appointment, with no hint of what lay behind that request. It had been brief and businesslike. Only the firmness of the handwriting had indicated that Carla Lemarchant was a young woman.

And now here she was in the flesh—a tall, slender young woman in the early twenties. The kind of young woman that one definitely looked at twice. Her clothes were good, an expensive well-cut coat and skirt and luxurious furs. Her head was well poised on her shoulders, she had a square brow, a sensitively cut nose and a determined chin. She looked very much alive. It was her aliveness, more than her beauty, which struck the predominant note.

Before her entrance, Hercule Poirot had been feeling old—now he felt rejuvenated—alive—keen!

As he came forward to greet her, he was aware of her dark grey eyes studying him attentively. She was very earnest in that scrutiny.

She sat down and accepted the cigarette that he offered her. After it was lit she sat for a minute or two smoking, still looking at him with that earnest, thoughtful gaze.

Poirot said gently:

“Yes, it has to be decided, does it not?”

She started. “I beg your pardon?”

Her voice was attractive, with a faint, agreeable huskiness in it.

"You are making up your mind, are you not, whether I am a mere mountebank, or the man you need?"

She smiled. She said:

"Well, yes—something of that kind. You see, Mr. Poirot, you—you don't look exactly the way I pictured you."

"And I am old, am I not? Older than you imagined?"

"Yes, that too." She hesitated. "I'm being frank, you see. I want—I've got to have—the best."

"Rest assured," said Hercule Poirot. "I am the best!"

Carla said: "You're not modest…All the same, I'm inclined to take you at your word."

Poirot said placidly:

"One does not, you know, employ merely the muscles. I do not need to bend and measure the footprints and pick up the cigarette ends and examine the bent blades of grass. It is enough for me to sit back in my chair and think. It is this"—he tapped his egg-shaped head—"this that functions!"

"I know," said Carla Lemarchant. "That's why I've come to you. I want you, you see, to do something fantastic!"

"That," said Hercule Poirot, "promises well!"

He looked at her in encouragement.

Carla Lemarchant drew a deep breath.

"My name," she said, "isn't Carla. It's Caroline. The same as my mother's. I was called after her." She paused. "And though I've always gone by the name of Lemarchant—my real name is Crale."

Hercule Poirot’s forehead creased a moment perplexedly. He murmured: “Crale—I seem to remember….”

She said:

“My father was a painter—rather a well-known painter. Some people say he was a great painter. I think he was.”

Hercule Poirot said: “Amyas Crale?”

“Yes.” She paused, then she went on: “And my mother, Caroline Crale, was tried for murdering him!”

“Aha,” said Hercule Poirot. “I remember now—but only vaguely. I was abroad at the time. It was a long time ago.”

“Sixteen years,” said the girl.

Her face was very white now and her eyes two burning lights.

She said:

“Do you understand? She was tried and convicted…She wasn’t hanged because they felt that there were extenuating circumstances—so the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. But she died only a year after the trial. You see? It’s all over—done—finished with….”

Poirot said quietly: “And so?”

The girl called Carla Lemarchant pressed her hands together. She spoke slowly and haltingly but with an odd, pointed emphasis.

She said:

“You’ve got to understand—exactly—where I come in. I was five years old at the time it—happened. Too young to know anything about it. I remember my mother and my father, of course, and I remember leaving home suddenly—being taken to the country. I remember the pigs and a nice fat farmer’s wife—and everybody being very kind—and I remember, quite clearly, the funny way they used to look at me—everybody—a sort of furtive look. I knew, of course, children do, that there was something wrong—but I didn't know what.

"And then I went on a ship—it was exciting—it went on for days, and then I was in Canada and Uncle Simon met me, and I lived in Montreal with him and with Aunt Louise, and when I asked about Mummy and Daddy they said they'd be coming soon. And then—and then I think I forgot—only I sort of knew that they were dead without remembering anyone actually telling me so. Because by that time, you see, I didn't think about them any more. I was very happy, you know. Uncle Simon and Aunt Louise were sweet to me, and I went to school and had a lot of friends, and I'd quite forgotten that I'd ever had another name, not Lemarchant. Aunt Louise, you see, told me that that was my name in Canada and that seemed quite sensible to me at the time—it was just my Canadian name—but as I say I forgot in the end that I'd ever had any other."

She flung up her defiant chin. She said:

"Look at me. You'd say—wouldn't you? if you met me: 'There goes a girl who's got nothing to worry about!' I'm well off, I've got splendid health, I'm sufficiently good to look at, I can enjoy life. At twenty, there wasn't a girl anywhere I'd have changed places with.

"But already, you know, I'd begun to ask questions. About my own mother and father. Who they were and what they did? I'd have been bound to find out in the end—

"As it was, they told me the truth. When I was twenty-one. They had to then, because for one thing I came into my own money. And then, you see, there was the letter. The letter my mother left for me when she died."

Her expression changed, dimmed. Her eyes were no longer two burning points, they were dark dim pools. She said:

"That's when I learnt the truth. That my mother had been convicted of murder. It was—rather horrible."

She paused.

“There’s something else I must tell you. I was engaged to be married. They said we must wait—that we couldn’t be married until I was twenty-one. When I knew, I understood why.”

Poirot stirred and spoke for the first time. He said:

“And what was your fiancé’s reaction?”

“John? John didn’t care. He said it made no difference—not to him. He and I were John and Carla—and the past didn’t matter.”

She leaned forward.

“We’re still engaged. But all the same, you know, it does matter. It matters to me. And it matters to John too…It isn’t the past that matters to us—it’s the future.” She clenched her hands. “We want children, you see. We both want children. And we don’t want to watch our children growing up and be afraid.”

Poirot said:

“Do you not realize that amongst every one’s ancestors there has been violence and evil?”

“You don’t understand. That’s so, of course. But then, one doesn’t usually know about it. We do. It’s very near to us. And sometimes—I’ve seen John just look at me. Such a quick glance—just a flash. Supposing we were married and we’d quarrelled—and I saw him look at me and—and wonder?”

Hercule Poirot said: “How was your father killed?”

Carla’s voice came clear and firm.

“He was poisoned.”

Hercule Poirot said: “I see.”

There was a silence.

Then the girl said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice:

“Thank goodness you’re sensible. You see that it does matter—and what it involves. You don’t try and patch it up and trot out consoling phrases.”

“I understand very well,” said Poirot. “What I do not understand is what you want of me?”

Carla Lemarchant said simply:

“I want to marry John! And I mean to marry John! And I want to have at least two girls and two boys. And you’re going to make that possible!”

“You mean—you want me to talk to your fiancé? Ah no, it is idiocy what I say there! It is something quite different that you are suggesting. Tell me what is in your mind.”

“Listen, Mr. Poirot. Get this—and get it clearly. I’m hiring you to investigate a case of murder.”

“Do you mean—?”

“Yes, I do mean. A case of murder is a case of murder whether it happened yesterday or sixteen years ago.”

“But my dear young lady—”

“Wait, Mr. Poirot. You haven’t got it all yet. There’s a very important point.”

“Yes?”

“My mother was innocent,” said Carla Lemarchant.

Hercule Poirot rubbed his nose. He murmured:

“Well, naturally—I comprehend that—”

"It isn't sentiment. There's her letter. She left it for me before she died. It was to be given to me when I was twenty-one. She left it for that one reason—that I should be quite sure. That's all that was in it. That she hadn't done it—that she was innocent—that I could be sure of that always."

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at the young vital face staring so earnestly at him. He said slowly:

"Tout de même—"

Carla smiled.

"No, mother wasn't like that! You're thinking that it might be a lie—a sentimental lie?" She leaned forward earnestly. "Listen, Mr. Poirot, there are some things that children know quite well. I can remember my mother—a patchy remembrance, of course, but I remember quite well the sort of person she was. She didn't tell lies—kind lies. If a thing was going to hurt she always told you so. Dentists, or thorns in your finger—all that sort of thing. Truth was a—a natural impulse to her. I wasn't, I don't think, especially fond of her—but I trusted her. I still trust her! If she says she didn't kill my father then she didn't kill him! She wasn't the sort of person who would solemnly write down a lie when she knew she was dying."

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Hercule Poirot bowed his head.

Carla went on.

"That's why it's all right for me marrying John. I know it's all right. But he doesn't. He feels that naturally I would think my mother was innocent. It's got to be cleared up, Mr. Poirot. And you're going to do it!"

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

"Granted that what you say is true, mademoiselle, sixteen years have gone by!"

Carla Lemarchant said: "Oh! of course it's going to be difficult! Nobody but you could do it!"

Hercule Poirot’s eyes twinkled slightly. He said:

“You give me the best butter—hein?”

Carla said:

“I’ve heard about you. The things you’ve done. The way you have done them. It’s psychology that interests you, isn’t it? Well, that doesn’t change with time. The tangible things are gone—the cigarette end and the footprints and the bent blades of grass. You can’t look for those any more. But you can go over all the facts of the case, and perhaps talk to the people who were there at the time—they’re all alive still—and then—and then, as you said just now, you can lie back in your chair and think. And you’ll know what really happened….”

Hercule Poirot rose to his feet. One hand caressed his moustache. He said:

“Mademoiselle, I am honoured! I will justify your faith in me. I will investigate your case of murder. I will search back into the events of sixteen years ago and I will find out the truth.”

Carla got up. Her eyes were shining. But she only said:

“Good.”

Hercule Poirot shook an eloquent forefinger.

“One little moment. I have said I will find out the truth. I do not, you understand, have the bias. I do not accept your assurance of your mother’s innocence. If she was guilty—eh bien, what then?”

Carla’s proud head went back. She said:

“I’m her daughter. I want the truth!”

Hercule Poirot said:

“En avant, then. Though it is not that, that I should say. On the contrary. En arrière….”

BOOK ONE

One

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENCE

“Do I remember the Crale case?” asked Sir Montague Depleach. “Certainly I do. Remember it very well. Most attractive woman. But unbalanced, of course. No self-control.”

He glanced sideways at Poirot.

“What makes you ask me about it?”

“I am interested.”

“Not really tactful of you, my dear man,” said Depleach, showing his teeth in his sudden famous “wolf’s smile,” which had been reputed to have such a terrifying effect upon witnesses. “Not one of my successes, you know. I didn’t get her off.”

“I know that.”

Sir Montague shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“Of course I hadn’t quite as much experience then as I have now. All the same I think I did all that could humanly be done. One can’t do much without cooperation. We did get it commuted to penal servitude. Provocation, you know. Lots of respectable wives and mothers got up a petition. There was a lot of sympathy for her.”

He leaned back stretching out his long legs. His face took on a judicial, appraising look.

“If she’d shot him, you know, or even knifed him—I’d have gone all out for manslaughter. But poison—no, you can’t play tricks with that. It’s tricky—very tricky.”

"What was the defence?" asked Hercule Poirot.

He knew because he had already read the newspaper files, but he saw no harm in playing the complete ignorant to Sir Montague.

"Oh, suicide. Only thing you could go for. But it didn't go down well. Crale simply wasn't that kind of man! You never met him, I suppose? No? Well, he was a great blustering, vivid sort of chap. Great womanizer, beer drinker—all the rest of it. Went in for the lusts of the flesh and enjoyed them. You can't persuade a jury that a man like that is going to sit down and quietly do away with himself. It just doesn't fit. No, I was afraid I was up against a losing proposition from the first. And she wouldn't play up! I knew we'd lost as soon as she went into the box. No fight in her at all. But there it is—if you don't put your client into the box, the jury draw their own conclusions."

Poirot said:

"Is that what you meant when you said just now that one cannot do much without cooperation?"

"Absolutely, my dear fellow. We're not magicians, you know. Half the battle is the impression the accused makes on the jury. I've known juries time and again bring in verdicts dead against the judge's summing up. ''E did it, all right'—that's the point of view. Or 'He never did a thing like that—don't tell me!' Caroline Crale didn't even try to put up a fight."

"Why was that?"

Sir Montague shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't ask me. Of course, she was fond of the fellow. Broke her all up when she came to and realized what she'd done. Don't believe she ever rallied from the shock."

"So in your opinion she was guilty?"

Depleach looked rather startled. He said:

"Er—well, I thought we were taking that for granted."

"Did she ever admit to you that she was guilty?"

Depleach looked shocked.

"Of course not—of course not. We have our code, you know. Innocence is always—er—assumed. If you're so interested it's a pity you can't get hold of old Mayhew. Mayhews were the solicitors who briefed me. Old Mayhew could have told you more than I can. But there—he's joined the great majority. There's young George Mayhew, of course, but he was only a boy at the time. It's a long time ago, you know."

"Yes, I know. It is fortunate for me that you remember so much. You have a remarkable memory."

Depleach looked pleased. He murmured:

"Oh well, one remembers the main headings, you know. Especially when it's a capital charge. And, of course, the Crale case got a lot of publicity from the press. Lot of sex interest and all that. The girl in the case was pretty striking. Hard-boiled piece of goods, I thought."

"You will forgive me if I seem too insistent," said Poirot, "but I repeat once more, you had no doubt of Caroline Crale's guilt?"

Depleach shrugged his shoulders. He said:

"Frankly—as man to man—I don't think there's much doubt about it. Oh yes, she did it all right."

"What was the evidence against her?"

"Very damning indeed. First of all there was motive. She and Crale had led a kind of cat and dog life for years—interminable rows. He was always getting mixed up with some woman or other. Couldn't help it. He was that kind of man. She stood it pretty well on the whole. Made allowances for him on the score of temperament—and the man really was a first-class painter, you know. His stuff's gone up enormously in price—enormously.

Don’t care for that style of painting myself—ugly forceful stuff, but it’s good—no doubt of that.

“Well, as I say, there had been trouble about women from time to time. Mrs. Crale wasn’t the meek kind who suffers in silence. There were rows all right. But he always came back to her in the end. These affairs of his blew over. But this final affair was rather different. It was a girl, you see—and quite a young girl. She was only twenty.

“Elsa Greer, that was her name. She was the only daughter of some Yorkshire manufacturer. She’d got money and determination, and she knew what she wanted. What she wanted was Amyas Crale. She got him to paint her—he didn’t paint regular Society portraits, ‘Mrs. Blinkety Blank in satin and pearls,’ but he painted figures. I don’t know that most women would have cared to be painted by him—he didn’t spare them! But he painted the Greer girl, and he ended by falling for her good and proper. He was getting on for forty, you know, and he’d been married a good many years. He was just ripe for making a fool of himself over some chit of a girl. Elsa Greer was the girl. He was crazy about her, and his idea was to get a divorce from his wife and marry Elsa.

“Caroline Crale wasn’t standing for that. She threatened him. She was overheard by two people to say that if he didn’t give the girl up she’d kill him. And she meant it all right! The day before it happened, they’d been having tea with a neighbour. He was by way of dabbling in herbs and home-brewed medicines. Amongst his patent brews was one of coniine—spotted hemlock. There was some talk about it and its deadly properties.

“The next day he noticed that half the contents of the bottle had gone. Got the wind up about it. They found an almost empty bottle of it in Mrs. Crale’s room, hidden away at the bottom of a drawer.”

Hercule Poirot moved uncomfortably. He said:

“Somebody else might have put it there.”

“Oh! She admitted to the police she’d taken it. Very unwise, of course, but she didn’t have a solicitor to advise her at that stage. When they asked her about it, she admitted quite frankly that she had taken it."

"For what reason?"

"She made out that she'd taken it with the idea of doing herself in. She couldn't explain how the bottle came to be empty—nor how it was that there were only her fingerprints on it. That part of it was pretty damaging. She contended, you see, that Amyas Crale had committed suicide. But if he'd taken the coniine from the bottle she'd hidden in her room, his fingerprints would have been on the bottle as well as hers."

"It was given him in beer, was it not?"

"Yes. She got out the bottle from the refrigerator and took it down herself to where he was painting in the garden. She poured it out and gave it to him and watched him drink it. Every one went up to lunch and left him—he often didn't come in to meals. Afterwards she and the governess found him there dead. Her story was that the beer she gave him was all right. Our theory was that he suddenly felt so worried and remorseful that he slipped the poison in himself. All poppycock—he wasn't that kind of man! And the fingerprint evidence was the most damning of all."

"They found her fingerprints on the bottle?"

"No, they didn't—they found only his—and they were phoney ones. She was alone with the body, you see, while the governess went to call up a doctor. And what she must have done was to wipe the bottle and glass and then press his fingers on them. She wanted to pretend, you see, that she'd never even handled the stuff. Well, that didn't work. Old Rudolph, who was prosecuting, had a lot of fun with that—proved quite definitely by demonstration in court that a man couldn't hold a bottle with his fingers in that position! Of course we did our best to prove that he could—that his hands would take up a contorted attitude when he was dying—but frankly our stuff wasn't very convincing."

Hercule Poirot said:

"The coniine in the bottle must have been put there before she took it down to the garden."

"There was no coniine in the bottle at all. Only in the glass."

He paused—his large handsome face suddenly altered—he turned his head sharply. "Hallo," he said. "Now then, Poirot, what are you driving at?"

Poirot said:

"If Caroline Crale was innocent, how did that coniine get into the beer? The defence said at the time that Amyas Crale himself put it there. But you say to me that that was in the highest degree unlikely—and for my part I agree with you. He was not that kind of man. Then, if Caroline Crale did not do it, someone else did."

Depleach said with almost a splutter:

"Oh, damn it all, man, you can't flog a dead horse. It's all over and done with years ago. Of course she did it. You'd know that well enough if you'd seen her at the time. It was written all over her! I even fancy that the verdict was a relief to her. She wasn't frightened. No nerves at all. Just wanted to get through the trial and have it over. A very brave woman, really…."

"And yet," said Hercule Poirot, "when she died she left a letter to be given to her daughter in which she swore solemnly that she was innocent."

"I dare say she did," said Sir Montague Depleach. "You or I would have done the same in her place."

"Her daughter says she was not that kind of woman."

"The daughter says—pah! What does she know about it? My dear Poirot, the daughter was a mere infant at the time of the trial. What was she—four—five? They changed her name and sent her out of England somewhere to some relatives. What can she know or remember?"

"Children know people very well sometimes."

“Maybe they do. But that doesn’t follow in this case. Naturally the girl wants to believe her mother didn’t do it. Let her believe it. It doesn’t do any harm.”

“But unfortunately she demands proof.”

“Proof that Caroline Crale didn’t kill her husband?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” said Depleach. “She won’t get it.”

“You think not?”

The famous K.C. looked thoughtfully at his companion.

“I’ve always thought you were an honest man, Poirot. What are you doing? Trying to make money by playing on a girl’s natural affections?”

“You do not know the girl. She is an unusual girl. A girl of great force of character.”

“Yes, I should imagine the daughter of Amyas and Caroline Crale might be that. What does she want?”

“She wants the truth.”

“Hm—I’m afraid she’ll find the truth unpalatable. Honestly, Poirot, I don’t think there’s any doubt about it. She killed him.”

“You will forgive me, my friend, but I must satisfy myself on that point.”

“Well, I don’t know what more you can do. You can read up the newspaper accounts of the trial. Humphrey Rudolph appeared for the Crown. He’s dead—let me see, who was his junior? Young Fogg, I think. Yes, Fogg. You can have a chat with him. And then there are the people who were there at the time. Don’t suppose they’ll enjoy your butting in and raking the whole thing up, but I dare say you’ll get what you want out of them. You’re a plausible devil.”

"Ah yes, the people concerned. That is very important. You remember, perhaps, who they were?"

Depleach considered.

"Let me see—it's a long time ago. There were only five people who were really in it, so to speak—I'm not counting the servants—a couple of faithful old things, scared-looking creatures—they didn't know anything about anything. No one could suspect them."

"There are five people, you say. Tell me about them."

"Well, there was Philip Blake. He was Crale's greatest friend—had known him all his life. He was staying in the house at the time. He's alive. I see him now and again on the links. Lives at St. George's Hill. Stockbroker. Plays the markets and gets away with it. Successful man, running to fat a bit."

"Yes. And who next?"

"Then there was Blake's elder brother. Country squire—stay at home sort of chap."

A jingle ran through Poirot's head. He repressed it. He must not always be thinking of nursery rhymes. It seemed an obsession with him lately. And yet the jingle persisted.

"This little pig went to market, this little pig stayed at home…."

He murmured:

"He stayed at home—yes?"

"He's the fellow I was telling you about—messed about with drugs—and herbs—bit of a chemist. His hobby. What was his name now? Literary sort of name—I've got it. Meredith. Meredith Blake. Don't know whether he's alive or not."

"And who next?"

"Next? Well, there's the cause of all the trouble. The girl in the case. Elsa Greer."

"This little pig ate roast beef," murmured Poirot.

Depleach stared at him.

"They've fed her meat all right," he said. "She's been a go-getter. She's had three husbands since then. In and out of the divorce court as easy as you please. And every time she makes a change, it's for the better. Lady Dittisham—that's who she is now. Open any Tatler and you're sure to find her."

"And the other two?"

"There was the governess woman. I don't remember her name. Nice capable woman. Thompson—Jones—something like that. And there was the child. Caroline Crale's half sister. She must have been about fifteen. She's made rather a name for herself. Digs up things and goes trekking to the back of beyond. Warren—that's her name. Angela Warren. Rather an alarming young woman nowadays. I met her the other day."

"She is not, then, the little pig who cried Wee Wee Wee…?"

Sir Montague Depleach looked at him rather oddly. He said drily:

"She's had something to cry Wee-Wee about in her life! She's disfigured, you know. Got a bad scar down one side of her face. She—Oh well, you'll hear all about it, I dare say."

Poirot stood up. He said:

"I thank you. You have been very kind. If Mrs. Crale did not kill her husband—"

Depleach interrupted him:

"But she did, old boy, she did. Take my word for it."

Poirot continued without taking any notice of the interruption.

“Then it seems logical to suppose that one of these five people must have done so.”

“One of them could have done it, I suppose,” said Depleach, doubtfully. “But I don’t see why any of them should. No reason at all! In fact, I’m quite sure none of them did do it. Do get this bee out of your bonnet, old boy!”

But Hercule Poirot only smiled and shook his head.

Two

COUNSEL FOR THE PROSECUTION

"Guilty as Hell," said Mr. Fogg succinctly.

Hercule Poirot looked meditatively at the thin clear-cut face of the barrister.

Quentin Fogg, K.C. was a very different type from Montague Depleach. Depleach had force, magnetism, an overbearing and slightly bullying personality. He got his effects by a rapid and dramatic change of manner. Handsome, urbane, charming one minute—then an almost magical transformation, lips back, snarling smile—out for your blood.

Quentin Fogg was thin, pale, singularly lacking in what is called personality. His questions were quiet and unemotional—but steadily persistent. If Depleach was like a rapier, Fogg was like an auger. He bored steadily. He had never reached spectacular fame, but he was known as a first-class man on law. He usually won his cases.

Hercule Poirot eyed him meditatively.

"So that," he said, "was how it struck you?"

Fogg nodded. He said:

"You should have seen her in the box. Old Humpie Rudolph (he was leading, you know) simply made mincement of her. Mincemeat!"

He paused and then said unexpectedly:

"On the whole, you know, it was rather too much of a good thing."

"I am not sure," said Hercule Poirot, "that I quite understand you?"

Fogg drew his delicately marked brows together. His sensitive hand stroked his bare upper lip. He said:

"How shall I put it? It's a very English point of view. 'Shooting the sitting bird' describes it best. Is that intelligible to you?"

"It is, as you say, a very English point of view, but I think I understand you. In the Central Criminal Court, as on the playing fields of Eton, and in the hunting country, the Englishman likes the victim to have a sporting chance."

"That's it, exactly. Well, in this case, the accused didn't have a chance. Humpie Rudolph did as he liked with her. It started with her examination by Depleach. She stood up there, you know—as docile as a little girl at a party, answering Depleach's questions with the answers she'd learnt off by heart. Quite docile, word perfect—and absolutely unconvincing! She'd been told what to say and she said it. It wasn't Depleach's fault. That old mountebank played his part perfectly—but in any scene that needs two actors, one alone can't carry it. She didn't play up to him. It made the worst possible effect on the jury. And then old Humpie got up. I expect you've seen him? He's a great loss. Hitching his gown up, swaying back on his feet—and then—straight off the mark!

"As I tell you, he made mincemeat of her! Led up to this and that—and she fell into the pitfall every time. He got her to admit the absurdities of her own statements, he got her to contradict herself, she floundered in deeper and deeper. And then he wound up with his usual stuff. Very compelling—very convinced: 'I suggest to you, Mrs. Crale, that this story of yours about stealing coniine in order to commit suicide is a tissue of falsehood. I suggest that you took it in order to administer it to your husband who was about to leave you for another woman, and that you did deliberately administer it to him.' And she looked at him—such a pretty creature—graceful, delicate—and she said: 'Oh, no—no, I didn't.' It was the flattest thing you ever heard—the most unconvincing. I saw old Depleach squirm in his seat. He knew it was all up then."

Fogg paused a minute—then he went on:

"And yet—I don't know. In some ways it was the cleverest thing she could have done! It appealed to chivalry—to that queer chivalry closely allied to blood sports which makes most foreigners think us such almighty humbugs!

The jury felt—the whole court felt—that she hadn’t got a chance. She couldn’t even fight for herself. She certainly couldn’t put up any kind of a show against a great big clever brute like old Humpie. That weak, unconvincing: ‘Oh no—no, I didn’t,’ it was pathetic—simply pathetic. She was done for!

“Yes, in a way, it was the best thing she could have done. The jury were only out just over half an hour. They brought her in: Guilty with a recommendation to mercy.

“Actually, you know, she made a good contrast to the other woman in the case. The girl. The jury were unsympathetic to her from the start. She never turned a hair. Very good looking, hard-boiled, modern. To the women in the court she stood for a type—type of the homebreaker. Homes weren’t safe when girls like that were wandering abroad. Girls damn full of sex and contemptuous of the rights of wives and mothers. She didn’t spare herself, I will say. She was honest. Admirably honest. She’d fallen in love with Amyas Crale and he with her, and she’d no scruples at all about taking him away from his wife and child.

“I admired her in a way. She had guts. Depleach put in some nasty stuff in cross-examination and she stood up well to it. But the court was unsympathetic. And the judge didn’t like her. Old Avis, it was. Been a bit of a rip himself when young—but he’s very hot on morality when he’s presiding in his robes. His summing up against Caroline Crale was mildness itself. He couldn’t deny the facts but he threw out pretty strong hints as to provocation and all that.”

Hercule Poirot asked:

“He did not support the suicide theory of the defence?”

Fogg shook his head.

“That never really had a leg to stand upon. Mind you, I don’t say Depleach didn’t do his best with it. He was magnificent. He painted a most moving picture of a great-hearted, pleasure-loving, temperamental man, suddenly overtaken by a passion for a lovely young girl, conscience stricken, yet unable to resist. Then his recoil, his disgust with himself, his remorse for the way he was treating his wife and child and his sudden decision to end it all! The honourable way out. I can tell you, it was a most moving performance; Depleach's voice brought tears to your eyes. You saw the poor wretch torn by his passions and his essential decency. The effect was terrific. Only—when it was all over—and the spell was broken, you couldn't quite square that mythical figure with Amyas Crale. Everybody knew too much about Crale. He wasn't at all that kind of man. And Depleach hadn't been able to get hold of any evidence to show that he was. I should say Crale came as near as possible to being a man without even a rudimentary conscience. He was a ruthless, selfish, good-tempered happy egoist. Any ethics he had would have applied to painting. He wouldn't, I'm convinced, have painted a sloppy, bad picture—no matter what the inducement. But for the rest, he was a full-blooded man and he loved life—he had a zest for it. Suicide? Not he!"

"Not, perhaps, a very good defence to have chosen?"

Fogg shrugged his thin shoulders. He said:

"What else was there? Couldn't sit back and plead that there was no case for the jury—that the prosecution had got to prove their case against the accused. There was a great deal too much proof. She'd handled the poison—admitted pinching it, in fact. There was means, motive, opportunity—everything."

"One might have attempted to show that these things were artificially arranged?"

Fog said bluntly:

"She admitted most of them. And, in any case, it's too farfetched. You're implying, I presume, that somebody else murdered him and fixed it up to look as though she had done it."

"You think that quite untenable?"

Fogg said slowly:

“I’m afraid I do. You’re suggesting the mysterious X. Where do we look for him?”

Poirot said:

“Obviously in a close circle. There were five people, were there not, who could have been concerned?”

“Five? Let me see. There was the old duffer who messed about with his herb brewing. A dangerous hobby—but an amiable creature. Vague sort of person. Don’t see him as X. There was the girl—she might have polished off Caroline, but certainly not Amyas. Then there was the stockbroker—Crale’s best friend. That’s popular in detective stories, but I don’t believe in it in real life. There’s no one else—oh yes, the kid sister, but one doesn’t seriously consider her. That’s four.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“You forget the governess.”

“Yes, that’s true. Wretched people, governesses, one never does remember them. I do recall her dimly though. Middle-aged, plain, competent. I suppose a psychologist would say that she had a guilty passion for Crale and therefore killed him. The repressed spinster! It’s no good—I just don’t believe it. As far as my dim remembrance goes she wasn’t the neurotic type.”

“It is a long time ago.”

“Fifteen or sixteen years, I suppose. Yes, quite that. You can’t expect my memories of the case to be very acute.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“But on the contrary, you remember it amazingly well. That astounds me. You can see it, can you not? When you talk the picture is there before your eyes.”

Fogg said slowly:

"Yes, you're right—I do see it—quite plainly."

Poirot said:

"It would interest me, my friend, very much, if you would tell me why?"

"Why?" Fogg considered the question. His thin intellectual face was alert—interested. "Yes, now why?"

Poirot asked:

"What do you see so plainly? The witnesses? The counsel? The judge? The accused standing in the dock?"

Fogg said quietly:

"That's the reason, of course! You've put your finger on it. I shall always see her…Funny thing, romance. She had the quality of it. I don't know if she was really beautiful…She wasn't very young—tired looking—circles under her eyes. But it all centered round her. The interest—the drama. And yet, half the time, she wasn't there. She'd gone away somewhere, quite far away—just left her body there, quiescent, attentive, with the little polite smile on her lips. She was all half tones, you know, lights and shades. And yet, with it all, she was more alive than the other—that girl with the perfect body, and the beautiful face, and the crude young strength. I admired Elsa Greer because she had guts, because she could fight, because she stood up to her tormentors and never quailed! But I admired Caroline Crale because she didn't fight, because she retreated into her world of half lights and shadows. She was never defeated because she never gave battle."

He paused:

"I'm only sure of one thing. She loved the man she killed. Loved him so much that half of her died with him…."

Mr. Fogg, K.C., paused and polished his glasses.

"Dear me," he said. "I seem to be saying some very strange things! I was quite a young man at the time, you know. Just an ambitious youngster.

These things make an impression. But all the same I’m sure that Caroline Crale was a very remarkable woman. I shall never forget her. No—I shall never forget her….”

Three

THE YOUNG SOLICITOR

George Mayhew was cautious and non-committal.

He remembered the case, of course, but not at all clearly. His father had been in charge—he himself had been only nineteen at the time.

Yes, the case had made a great stir. Because of Crale being such a well-known man. His pictures were very fine—very fine indeed. Two of them were in the Tate. Not that that meant anything.

Mr. Poirot would excuse him, but he didn't see quite what Mr. Poirot's interest was in the matter. Oh, the daughter! Really? Indeed? Canada? He had always heard it was New Zealand.

George Mayhew became less rigid. He unbent.

A shocking thing in a girl's life. He had the deepest sympathy for her. Really it would have been better if she had never learned the truth. Still, it was no use saying that now.

She wanted to know? Yes, but what was there to know? There were the reports of the trial, of course. He himself didn't really know anything.

No, he was afraid there wasn't much doubt as to Mrs. Crale's being guilty. There was a certain amount of excuse for her. These artists—difficult people to live with. With Crale, he understood, it had always been some woman or other.

And she herself had probably been the possessive type of woman. Unable to accept facts. Nowadays she'd simply have divorced him and got over it. He added cautiously:

"Let me see—er—Lady Dittisham, I believe, was the girl in the case."

Poirot said that he believed that that was so.

“The newspapers bring it up from time to time,” said Mayhew. “She’s been in the divorce court a good deal. She’s a very rich woman, as I expect you know. She was married to that explorer fellow before Dittisham. She’s always more or less in the public eye. The kind of woman who likes notoriety, I should imagine.”

“Or possibly a hero worshipper,” suggested Poirot.

The idea was upsetting to George Mayhew. He accepted it dubiously.

“Well, possibly—yes, I suppose that might be so.”

He seemed to be turning the idea over in his mind.

Poirot said:

“Had your firm acted for Mrs. Crale for a long period of years?”

George Mayhew shook his head.

“On the contrary. Jonathan and Jonathan were the Crale solicitors. Under the circumstances, however, Mr. Jonathan felt that he could not very well act for Mrs. Crale, and he arranged with us—with my father—to take over her case. You would do well, I think, Mr. Poirot, to arrange a meeting with old Mr. Jonathan. He has retired from active work—he is over seventy—but he knew the Crale family intimately, and he could tell you far more than I can. Indeed, I myself can tell you nothing at all. I was a boy at the time. I don’t think I was even in court.”

Poirot rose and George Mayhew, rising too, added:

“You might like to have a word with Edmunds, our managing clerk. He was with the firm then and took a great interest in the case.”

Edmunds was a man of slow speech. His eyes gleamed with legal caution. He took his time in sizing up Poirot before he let himself be betrayed into speech. He said:

“Ay, I mind the Crale case.”

He added severely: “It was a disgraceful business.”

His shrewd eyes rested appraisingly on Hercule Poirot.

He said:

“It’s a long time since to be raking things up again.”

“A court verdict is not always an ending.”

Edmunds’s square head nodded slowly.

“I’d not say that you weren’t in the right of it there.”

Hercule Poirot went on: “Mrs. Crale left a daughter.”

“Ay, I mind there was a child. Sent abroad to relatives, was she not?”

Poirot went on:

“That daughter believes firmly in her mother’s innocence.”

The huge bushy eyebrows of Mr. Edmunds rose.

“That’s the way of it, is it?”

Poirot asked:

“Is there anything you can tell me to support that belief?”

Edmunds reflected. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

“I could not conscientiously say there was. I admired Mrs. Crale. Whatever else she was, she was a lady! Not like the other. A hussy—no more, no less. Bold as brass! Jumped-up trash—that’s what she was—and showed it! Mrs. Crale was quality.”

“But none the less a murderess?”

Edmunds frowned. He said, with more spontaneity than he had yet shown:

“That’s what I used to ask myself, day after day. Sitting there in the dock so calm and gentle. ‘I’ll not believe it,’ I used to say to myself. But, if you take my meaning, Mr. Poirot, there wasn’t anything else to believe. That hemlock didn’t get into Mr. Crale’s beer by accident. It was put there. And if Mrs. Crale didn’t put it there, who did?”

“That is the question,” said Poirot. “Who did?”

Again those shrewd old eyes searched his face.

“So that’s your idea?” said Mr. Edmunds.

“What do you think yourself?”

There was a pause before the officer answered. Then he said:

“There was nothing that pointed that way—nothing at all.”

Poirot said:

“You were in court during the hearing of the case?”

“Every day.”

“You heard the witnesses give evidence?”

“I did.”

“Did anything strike you about them—any abnormality, any insincerity?”

Edmunds said bluntly:

“Was one of them lying, do you mean? Had one of them a reason to wish Mr. Crale dead? If you’ll excuse me, Mr. Poirot, that’s a very melodramatic idea.”

“At least consider it,” Poirot urged.

He watched the shrewd face, the screwed-up, thoughtful eyes. Slowly, regretfully, Edmunds shook his head.

“That Miss Greer,” he said, “she was bitter enough, and vindictive! I’d say she overstepped the mark in a good deal she said, but it was Mr. Crale alive she wanted. He was no use to her dead. She wanted Mrs. Crale hanged all right—but that was because death had snatched her man away from her. Like a baulked tigress she was! But, as I say, it was Mr. Crale alive she’d wanted. Mr. Philip Blake, he was against Mrs. Crale too. Prejudiced. Got his knife into her whenever he could. But I’d say he was honest according to his lights. He’d been Mr. Crale’s great friend. His brother, Mr. Meredith Blake—a bad witness he was—vague, hesitating—never seemed sure of his answers. I’ve seen many witnesses like that. Look as though they’re lying when all the time they’re telling the truth. Didn’t want to say anything more than he could help, Mr. Meredith Blake didn’t. Counsel got all the more out of him on that account. One of these quiet gentlemen who get easily flustered. The governess now, she stood up well to them. Didn’t waste words and answered pat and to the point. You couldn’t have told, listening to her, which side she was on. Got all her wits about her, she had. The brisk kind.” He paused. “Knew a lot more than she ever let on about the whole thing, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“I, too, should not wonder,” said Hercule Poirot.

He looked sharply at the wrinkled, shrewd face of Mr. Alfred Edmunds. It was quite bland and impassive. But Hercule Poirot wondered if he had been vouchsafed a hint.

Four

THE OLD SOLICITOR

Mr. Caleb Jonathan lived in Essex. After a courteous exchange of letters, Poirot received an invitation, almost royal in its character, to dine and sleep. The old gentleman was decidedly a character. After the insipidity of young George Mayhew, Mr. Jonathan was like a glass of his own vintage port.

He had his own methods of approach to a subject, and it was not until well on towards midnight, when sipping a glass of fragrant old brandy, that Mr. Jonathan really unbent. In oriental fashion he had appreciated Hercule Poirot's courteous refusal to rush him in any way. Now, in his own good time, he was willing to elaborate the theme of the Crale family.

"Our firm, of course, has known many generations of the Crales. I knew Amyas Crale and his father, Richard Crale, and I can remember Enoch Crale—the grandfather. Country squires, all of them, thought more of horses than human beings. They rode straight, liked women, and had no truck with ideas. They distrusted ideas. But Richard Crale's wife was cram full of ideas—more ideas than sense. She was poetical and musical—she played the harp, you know. She enjoyed poor health and looked very picturesque on her sofa. She was an admirer of Kingsley. That's why she called her son Amyas. His father scoffed at the name—but he gave in.

"Amyas Crale profited by his mixed inheritance. He got his artistic trend from his weakly mother, and his driving power and ruthless egoism from his father. All the Crales were egoists. They never by any chance saw any point of view but their own."

Tapping with a delicate finger on the arm of his chair, the old man shot a shrewd glance at Poirot.

"Correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Poirot, but I think you are interested in—character, shall we say?"

Poirot replied.

“That, to me, is the principal interest of all my cases.”

“I can conceive of it. To get under the skin, as it were, of your criminal. How interesting. How absorbing. Our firm, of course, have never had a criminal practice. We should not have been competent to act for Mrs. Crale, even if taste had allowed. Mayhews, however, were a very adequate firm. They briefed Depleach—they didn’t perhaps show much imagination there—still, he was very expensive and, of course, exceedingly dramatic! What they hadn’t the wits to see was that Caroline would never play up in the way he wanted her to. She wasn’t a dramatic woman.”

“What was she?” asked Poirot. “It is that that I am chiefly anxious to know.”

“Yes, yes—of course. How did she come to do what she did? That is the really vital question. I knew her, you know, before she married. Caroline Spalding, she was. A turbulent unhappy creature. Very alive. Her mother was left a widow early in life and Caroline was devoted to her mother. Then the mother married again—there was another child. Yes—yes, very sad, very painful. These young, ardent, adolescent jealousies.”

“She was jealous?”

“Passionately so. There was a regrettable incident. Poor child, she blamed herself bitterly afterwards. But you know, Mr. Poirot, these things happen. There is an inability to put on the brakes. It comes—it comes with maturity.”

Poirot said:

“What happened?”

“She struck the child—the baby—flung a paperweight at her. The child lost the sight of one eye and was permanently disfigured.”

Mr. Jonathan sighed. He said:

“You can imagine the effect a simple question on that point had at the trial.”

He shook his head:

“It gave the impression that Caroline Crale was a woman of ungovernable temper. That was not true. No, that was not true.”

He paused and then resumed:

“Caroline Spalding came often to stay at Alderbury. She rode well, and was keen. Richard Crale was fond of her. She waited on Mrs. Crale and was deft and gentle—Mrs. Crale also liked her. The girl was not happy at home. She was happy at Alderbury. Diana Crale, Amyas’s sister, and she were by way of being friends. Philip and Meredith Blake, boys from the adjoining estate, were frequently at Alderbury. Philip was always a nasty, money-grubbing little brute. I must confess I have always had a distaste for him. But I am told that he tells a very good story and that he has the reputation of being a staunch friend. Meredith was what my contemporaries used to call Namby Pamby. Liked botany and butterflies and observing birds and beasts. Nature study they call it nowadays. Ah, dear—all the young people were a disappointment to their parents. None of them ran true to type—huntin’, shootin’, fishin’. Meredith preferred watching birds and animals to shooting or hunting them, Philip definitely preferred town to country and went into the business of moneymaking. Diana married a fellow who wasn’t a gentleman—one of the temporary officers in the war. And Amyas, strong, handsome, virile Amyas, blossomed into being a painter, of all things in the world. It’s my opinion that Richard Crale died of the shock.

“And in due course Amyas married Caroline Spalding. They’d always fought and sparred, but it was a love match all right. They were both crazy about each other. And they continued to care. But Amyas was like all the Crales, a ruthless egoist. He loved Caroline but he never once considered her in any way. He did as he pleased. It’s my opinion that he was as fond of her as he could be of anybody—but she came a long way behind his art. That came first. And I should say at no time did his art give place to a woman. He had affairs with women—they stimulated him—but he left them high and dry when he’d finished with them. He wasn’t a sentimental man, nor a romantic one. And he wasn’t entirely a sensualist either. The only woman he cared a button for was his own wife. And because she knew that she put up with a lot. He was a very fine painter, you know. She realized that, and respected it. He chased off in his amorous pursuits and came back again—usually with a picture to show for it.

“It might have gone on like that if it hadn’t come to Elsa Greer. Elsa Greer—”

Mr. Jonathan shook his head.

Poirot said: “What of Elsa Greer?”

Mr. Jonathan said unexpectedly:

“Poor child. Poor child.”

Poirot said: “So you feel like that about her?”

Jonathan said:

“Maybe it is because I am an old man, but I find, Mr. Poirot, that there is something about the defencelessness of youth that moves me to tears. Youth is so vulnerable. It is so ruthless—so sure. So generous and so demanding.”

Getting up, he crossed to the bookcase. Taking out a volume he opened it, turned the pages, and then read out:

“‘If that thy bent of love be honourable,

The purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow

By one that I’ll procure to come to thee,

Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite,

And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay,

And follow thee my lord throughout the world.’”

“There speaks love allied to youth, in Juliet’s words. No reticence, no holding back, no so-called maiden modesty. It is the courage, the insistence, the ruthless force of youth. Shakespeare knew youth. Juliet singles out Romeo. Desdemona claims Othello. They have no doubts, the young, no fear, no pride.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“So to you Elsa Greer spoke in the words of Juliet?”

“Yes. She was a spoiled child of fortune—young, lovely, rich. She found her mate and claimed him—no young Romeo, a married, middle-aged painter. Elsa Greer had no code to restrain her, she had the code of modernity. ‘Take what you want—we shall only live once!’”

He sighed, leaned back, and again tapped gently on the arm of his chair.

“A predatory Juliet. Young, ruthless, but horribly vulnerable! Staking everything on the one audacious throw. And seemingly she won…and then—at the last moment—death steps in—and the living, ardent, joyous Elsa died also. There was left only a vindictive, cold, hard woman, hating with all her soul the woman whose hand had done this thing.”

His voice changed:

“Dear, dear. Pray forgive this little lapse into melodrama. A crude young woman—with a crude outlook on life. Not, I think, an interesting character. Rose white youth, passionate, pale, etc. Take that away and what remains? Only a somewhat mediocre young woman seeking for another life-sized hero to put on an empty pedestal.”

Poirot said:

“If Amyas Crale had not been a famous painter—”

Mr. Jonathan agreed quickly. He said:

“Quite—quite. You have taken the point admirably. The Elsas of this world are hero worshippers. A man must have done something, must be somebody…Caroline Crale, now, could have recognized quality in a bank clerk or an insurance agent! Caroline loved Amyas Crale the man, not Amyas Crale the painter. Caroline Crale was not crude—Elsa Greer was.”

He added:

“But she was young and beautiful and to my mind infinitely pathetic.”

Hercule Poirot went to bed thoughtful. He was fascinated by the problem of personality.

To Edmunds, the clerk, Elsa Greer was a hussy, no more, no less.

To old Mr. Jonathan she was the eternal Juliet.

And Caroline Crale?

Each person had seen her differently. Montague Depleach had despised her as a defeatist—a quitter. To young Fogg she had represented Romance. Edmunds saw her simply as a “lady.” Mr. Jonathan had called her a stormy, turbulent creature.

How would he, Hercule Poirot, have seen her?

On the answer to that question depended, he felt, the success of his quest.

So far, not one of the people he had seen had doubted that whatever else she was, Caroline Crale was also a murderess.

Five

THE POLICE SUPERINTENDENT

Ex-Superintendent Hale pulled thoughtfully at his pipe.

He said:

“This is a funny fancy of yours, Mr. Poirot.”

“It is, perhaps, a little unusual,” Poirot agreed cautiously.

“You see,” said Hale, “it’s all such a long time ago.”

Hercule Poirot foresaw that he was going to get a little tired of that particular phrase. He said mildly:

“That adds to the difficulty, of course.”

“Raking up the past,” mused the other. “If there were an object in it, now….”

“There is an object.”

“What is it?”

“One can enjoy the pursuit of truth for its own sake. I do. And you must not forget the young lady.”

Hale nodded.

“Yes, I see her side of it. But—you’ll excuse me, Mr. Poirot—you’re an ingenious man. You could cook her up a tale.”

Poirot replied:

“You do not know the young lady.”

"Oh, come now—a man of your experience!"

Poirot drew himself up.

"I may be, mon cher, an artistic and competent liar—you seem to think so. But it is not my idea of ethical conduct. I have my standards."

"Sorry, Mr. Poirot. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But it would be all in a good cause, so to speak."

"Oh I wonder, would it really?"

Hale said slowly:

"It's tough luck on a happy innocent girl who's just going to get married to find that her mother was a murderess. If I were you I'd go to her and say that, after all, suicide was what it was. Say the case was mishandled by Depleach. Say that there's no doubt in your mind that Crale poisoned himself!"

"But there is every doubt in my mind! I do not believe for one minute that Crale poisoned himself. Do you consider it even reasonably possible yourself?"

Slowly Hale shook his head.

"You see? No, it is the truth I must have—not a plausible—or not very plausible—lie."

Hale turned and looked at Poirot. His square rather red face grew a little redder and even appeared to get a little squarer. He said:

"You talk about the truth. I'd like to make it plain to you that we think we got the truth in the Crale case."

Poirot said quickly:

"That pronouncement from you means a great deal. I know you for what you are, an honest and capable man. Now tell me this, was there no doubt at any time in your mind as to the guilt of Mrs. Crale?”

The Superintendent’s answer came promptly.

“No doubt at all, Mr. Poirot. The circumstances pointed to her straight away, and every single fact that we uncovered supported that view.”

“You can give me an outline of the evidence against her?”

“I can. When I received your letter I looked up the case.” He picked up a small notebook. “I’ve jotted down all the salient facts here.”

“Thank you, my friend. I am all eagerness to hear.”

Hale cleared his throat. A slight official intonation made itself heard in his voice.

He said:

“At two forty-five on the afternoon of September 18th, Inspector Conway was rung up by Dr. Andrew Faussett. Dr. Faussett stated that Mr. Amyas Crale of Alderbury had died suddenly and that in consequence of the circumstances of that death and also of a statement made to him by a Mr. Blake, a guest staying in the house, he considered that it was a case for the police.

“Inspector Conway, in company with a sergeant and the police surgeon, came over to Alderbury straight away. Dr. Faussett was there and took him to where the body of Mr. Crale had not been disturbed.

“Mr. Crale had been painting in a small enclosed garden, known as the Battery garden, from the fact that it overlooked the sea, and had some miniature cannon placed in embattlements. It was situated at about four minutes’ walk from the house. Mr. Crale had not come up to the house for lunch as he wanted to get certain effects of light on the stone—and the sun would have been wrong for this later. He had, therefore, remained alone in the Battery garden, painting. This was stated not to be an unusual occurrence. Mr. Crale took very little notice of meal times. Sometimes a sandwich would be sent down to him, but more often he preferred to remain undisturbed. The last people to see him alive were Miss Elsa Greer (staying in the house) and Mr. Meredith Blake (a near neighbour). These two went up together to the house and went with the rest of the household in to lunch. After lunch, coffee was served on the terrace. Mrs. Crale finished drinking her coffee and then observed that she would ‘go down and see how Amyas was getting on.’ Miss Cecilia Williams, governess, got up and accompanied her. She was looking for a pullover belonging to her pupil, Miss Angela Warren, sister of Mrs. Crale, which the latter had mislaid and she thought it possible it might have been left down on the beach.

“These two started off together. The path led downwards, through some woods, until it emerged at the door leading into the Battery garden. You could either go into the Battery garden or you could continue on the same path, which led down to the seashore.

“Miss Williams continued on down and Mrs. Crale went into the Battery garden. Almost at once, however, Mrs. Crale screamed and Miss Williams hurried back. Mr. Crale was reclining on a seat and he was dead.

“At Mrs. Crale’s urgent request Miss Williams left the Battery garden and hurried up to the house to telephone for a doctor. On her way, however, she met Mr. Meredith Blake and entrusted her errand to him, herself returning to Mrs. Crale whom she felt might be in need of someone. Dr. Faussett arrived on the scene a quarter of an hour later. He saw at once that Mr. Crale had been dead for some time—he placed the probable time of death at between one and two o’clock. There was nothing to show what had caused death. There was no sign of any wound and Mr. Crale’s attitude was a perfectly natural one. Nevertheless Dr. Faussett, who was well acquainted with Mr. Crale’s state of health, and who knew positively that there was no disease or weakness of any kind, was inclined to take a grave view of the situation. It was at this point that Mr. Philip Blake made a certain statement to Dr. Faussett.”

Superintendent Hale paused, drew a deep breath and passed, as it were, to Chapter Two.

“Subsequently Mr. Blake repeated this statement to Inspector Conway. It was to this effect. He had that morning received a telephone message from his brother, Mr. Meredith Blake (who lived at Handcross Manor, a mile and a half away). Mr. Meredith Blake was an amateur chemist—or perhaps herbalist would describe it best. On entering his laboratory that morning, Mr. Meredith Blake had been startled to note that a bottle containing a preparation of hemlock, which had been quite full the day before, was now nearly empty. Worried and alarmed by this fact he had rung up his brother to ask his advice as to what he should do about it. Mr. Philip Blake had urged his brother to come over to Alderbury at once and they would talk the matter over. He himself walked part way to meet his brother and they had come up to the house together. They had come to no decision as to what course to adopt and had left the matter in order to consult again after lunch.

“As a result of further inquiries, Inspector Conway ascertained the following facts: On the preceding afternoon five people had walked over from Alderbury to tea at Handcross Manor. There were Mr. and Mrs. Crale, Miss Angela Warren, Miss Elsa Greer and Mr. Philip Blake. During the time spent there, Mr. Meredith Blake had given quite a dissertation on his hobby and had taken the party into his little laboratory and ‘shown them round.’ In the course of this tour, he had mentioned certain specific drugs—one of which was coniine, the active principle of the spotted hemlock. He had explained its properties, had lamented the fact that it had now disappeared from the Pharmacopœia and boasted that he had known small doses of it to be very efficacious in whooping cough and asthma. Later he had mentioned its lethal properties and had actually read to his guests some passage from a Greek author describing its effects.”

Superintendent Hale paused, refilled his pipe and passed on to Chapter Three.

“Colonel Frere, the Chief Constable, put the case into my hands. The result of the autopsy put the matter beyond any doubt. Coniine, I understand, leaves no definite postmortem appearances, but the doctors knew what to look for, and an ample amount of the drug was recovered. The doctor was of the opinion that it had been administered two or three hours before death. In front of Mr. Crale, on the table, there had been an empty glass and an empty beer bottle. The dregs of both were analysed. There was no coniine in the bottle, but there was in the glass. I made inquiries and learned that although a case of beer and glasses were kept in a small summerhouse in the Battery garden in case Mr. Crale should feel thirsty when painting, on this particular morning Mrs. Crale had brought down from the house a bottle of freshly iced beer. Mr. Crale was busy painting when she arrived and Miss Greer was posing for him, sitting on one of the battlements.

"Mrs. Crale opened the beer, poured it out and put the glass into her husband's hand as he was standing before the easel. He tossed it off in one draught—a habit of his, I learned. Then he made a grimace, set down the glass on the table, and said: 'Everything tastes foul to me today!' Miss Greer upon that laughed and said, 'Liver!' Mr. Crale said: 'Well, at any rate it was cold.'"

Hale paused. Poirot said:

"At what time did this take place?"

"At about a quarter past eleven. Mr. Crale continued to paint. According to Miss Greer, he later complained of stiffness in the limbs and grumbled that he must have got a touch of rheumatism. But he was the type of man who hates to admit to illness of any kind, and he undoubtedly tried not to admit that he was feeling ill. His irritable demand that he should be left alone and the others go up to lunch was quite characteristic of the man, I should say."

Poirot nodded.

Hale continued.

"So Crale was left alone in the Battery garden. No doubt he dropped down on the seat and relaxed as soon as he was alone. Muscular paralysis would then set in. No help was at hand, and death supervened."

Again Poirot nodded.

Hale said:

“Well, I proceeded according to routine. There wasn’t much difficulty in getting down to the facts. On the preceding day there had been a set-to between Mrs. Crale and Miss Greer. The latter had pretty insolently described some change in the arrangement of the furniture ‘when I am living here.’ Mrs. Crale took her up, and said, ‘What do you mean? When you are living here.’ Miss Greer replied: ‘Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean, Caroline. You’re just like an ostrich that buries its head in the sand. You know perfectly well that Amyas and I care for each other and are going to be married.’ Mrs. Crale said: ‘I know nothing of the kind.’ Miss Greer then said: ‘Well, you know it now.’ Whereupon, it seems, Mrs. Crale turned to her husband who had just come into the room and said: ‘Is it true, Amyas, that you are going to marry Elsa?’”

Poirot said with interest:

“And what did Mr. Crale say to that?”

“Apparently he turned on Miss Greer and shouted at her: ‘What the devil do you mean by blurting that out? Haven’t you got the sense to hold your tongue?’

“Miss Greer said: ‘I think Caroline ought to recognize the truth.’

“Mrs. Crale said to her husband: ‘Is it true, Amyas?’

“He wouldn’t look at her, it seems, turned his face away and mumbled something.

“She said: ‘Speak out. I’ve got to know.’ Whereupon he said:

“‘Oh, it’s true enough—but I don’t want to discuss it now.’

“Then he flounced out of the room again and Miss Greer said:

“‘You see!’ and went on—with something about its being no good for Mrs. Crale to adopt a dog-in-the-manger attitude about it. They must all behave like rational people. She herself hoped that Caroline and Amyas would always remain good friends.”

“And what did Mrs. Crale say to that?” asked Poirot curiously.

“According to the witnesses she laughed. She said: ‘Over my dead body, Elsa.’ She went to the door and Miss Greer called after her: ‘What do you mean?’ Mrs. Crale looked back and said: ‘I’ll kill Amyas before I give him up to you.’”

Hale paused.

“Pretty damning—eh?”

“Yes.” Poirot seemed thoughtful. “Who overheard this scene?”

“Miss Williams was in the room and Philip Blake. Very awkward for them.”

“Their accounts of the scene agree?”

“Near enough—you never got two witnesses to remember a thing exactly alike. You know that just as well as I do, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot nodded. He said thoughtfully:

“Yes, it will be interesting to see—” He stopped with the sentence unfinished.

Hale went on: “I instituted a search of the house. In Mrs. Crale’s bedroom I found in a bottom drawer, tucked away underneath some winter stockings, a small bottle labelled jasmine scent. It was empty. I fingerprinted it. The only prints on it were those of Mrs. Crale. On analysis it was found to contain faint traces of oil of jasmine, and a strong solution of coniine hydrobromide.

“I cautioned Mrs. Crale and showed her the bottle. She replied readily. She had, she said, been in a very unhappy state of mind. After listening to Mr. Meredith Blake’s description of the drug she had slipped back to the laboratory, had emptied out a bottle of jasmine scent which was in her bag and had filled the bottle up with coniine solution. I asked her why she had done this and she said: ‘I don’t want to speak of certain things more than I can help, but I had received a bad shock. My husband was proposing to leave me for another woman. If that was so, I didn’t want to live. That is why I took it.’”

Hale paused.

Poirot said: “After all—it is likely enough.”

“Perhaps, Mr. Poirot. But it doesn’t square with what she was overheard to say. And then there was a further scene on the following morning. Mr. Philip Blake overheard a portion of it. Miss Greer overheard a different portion of it. It took place in the library between Mr. and Mrs. Crale. Mr. Blake was in the hall and caught a fragment or two. Miss Greer was sitting outside near the open library window and heard a good deal more.”

“And what did they hear?”

“Mr. Blake heard Mrs. Crale say: ‘You and your women. I’d like to kill you. Some day I will kill you.’”

“No mention of suicide?”

“Exactly. None at all. No words like ‘If you do this thing, I’ll kill myself.’ Miss Greer’s evidence was much the same. According to her, Mr. Crale said: ‘Do try and be reasonable about this, Caroline. I’m fond of you and will always wish you well—you and the child. But I’m going to marry Elsa. We’ve always agreed to leave each other free.’ Mrs. Crale answered to that: ‘Very well, don’t say I haven’t warned you.’ He said: ‘What do you mean?’ And she said: ‘I mean that I love you and I’m not going to lose you. I’d rather kill you than let you go to that girl.’”

Poirot made a slight gesture.

“It occurs to me,” he murmured, “that Miss Greer was singularly unwise to raise this issue. Mrs. Crale could easily have refused her husband a divorce.”

“We had some evidence bearing on that point,” said Hale. “Mrs. Crale, it seems, confided partly in Mr. Meredith Blake. He was an old and trusted friend. He was very distressed and managed to get a word with Mr. Crale about it. This, I may say, was on the preceding afternoon. Mr. Blake remonstrated delicately with his friend, said how distressed he would be if the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Crale was to break up so disastrously. He also stressed the point that Miss Greer was a very young girl and that it was a very serious thing to drag a young girl through the divorce court. To this Mr. Crale replied, with a chuckle (callous sort of brute he must have been): ‘That isn’t Elsa’s idea at all. She isn’t going to appear. We shall fix it up in the usual way.’”

Poirot said: “Therefore even more imprudent of Miss Greer to have broken out the way she did.”

Superintendent Hale said:

“Oh, you know what women are! Have to get at each other’s throats. It must have been a difficult situation anyhow. I can’t understand Mr. Crale allowing it to happen. According to Mr. Meredith Blake he wanted to finish his picture. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes, my friend, I think it does.”

“It doesn’t to me. The man was asking for trouble!”

“He was probaby seriously annoyed with his young woman for breaking out the way she did.”

“Oh, he was. Meredith Blake said so. If he had to finish the picture I don’t see why he couldn’t have taken some photographs and worked from them. I know a chap—does watercolours of places—he does that.”

Poirot shook his head.

“No—I can understand Crale the artist. You must realize, my friend, that at that moment, probably, his picture was all that mattered to Crale. However much he wanted to marry the girl, the picture came first. That’s why he hoped to get through her visit without its coming to an open issue. The girl, of course, didn’t see it that way. With women, love always comes first.”

“Don’t I know it?” said Superintendent Hale with feeling.

“Men,” continued Poirot, “and especially artists—are different.”

“Art!” said the Superintendent with scorn. “All this talk about Art! I never have understood it and I never shall! You should have seen that picture Crale was painting. All lopsided. He’d made the girl look as though she’d got toothache, and the battlements were all cock-eyed. Unpleasant looking, the whole thing. I couldn’t get it out of my mind for a long time afterwards. I even dreamt about it. And what’s more it affected my eyesight—I began to see battlements and walls and things all out of drawing. Yes, and women too!”

Poirot smiled. He said:

“Although you do not know it, you are paying a tribute to the greatness of Amyas Crale’s art.”

“Nonsense. Why can’t a painter paint something nice and cheerful to look at? Why go out of your way to look for ugliness?”

“Some of us, mon cher, see beauty in curious places.”

“The girl was a good looker, all right,” said Hale. “Lots of makeup and next to no clothes on. It isn’t decent the way these girls go about. And that was sixteen years ago, mind you. Nowadays one wouldn’t think anything of it. But then—well, it shocked me. Trousers and one of those canvas shirts, open at the neck—and not another thing, I should say!”

“You seem to remember these points very well,” murmured Poirot slyly.

Superintendent Hale blushed. “I’m just passing on the impression I got,” he said austerely.

“Quite—quite,” said Poirot soothingly. He went on:

“So it would seem that the principal witnesses against Mrs. Crale were Philip Blake and Elsa Greer?”

"Yes. Vehement, they were, both of them. But the governess was called by the prosecution too, and what she said carried more weight than the other two. She was on Mrs. Crale's side entirely, you see. Up in arms for her. But she was an honest woman and gave her evidence truthfully without trying to minimize it in any way."

"And Meredith Blake?"

"He was very distressed by the whole thing, poor gentleman. As well he might be! Blamed himself for his drug brewing—and the coroner blamed him for it too. Coniine and AE Salts comes under Schedule I of the Poisons Acts. He came in for some pretty sharp censure. He was a friend of both parties, and it hit him very hard—besides being the kind of county gentleman who shrinks from notoriety and being in the public eye."

"Did not Mrs. Crale's young sister give evidence?"

"No. It wasn't necessary. She wasn't there when Mrs. Crale threatened her husband, and there was nothing she could tell us that we couldn't get from someone else equally well. She saw Mrs. Crale go to the refrigerator and get the iced beer out and, of course, the Defence could have subpœnaed her to say that Mrs. Crale took it straight down without tampering with it in any way. But that point wasn't relevant because we never claimed that the coniine was in the beer bottle."

"How did she manage to put it in the glass with those two looking on?"

"Well, first of all, they weren't looking on. That is to say, Mr. Crale was painting—looking at his canvas and at the sitter. And Miss Greer was posed, sitting with her back almost to where Mrs. Crale was standing, and her eyes looking over Mr. Crale's shoulder."

Poirot nodded.

"As I say neither of the two was looking at Mrs. Crale. She had the stuff in one of those pipette things—one used to fill fountain pens with them. We found it crushed to splinters on the path up to the house."

Poirot murmured:

“You have an answer to everything.”

“Well, come now, Mr. Poirot! Without prejudice. She threatens to kill him. She takes the stuff from the laboratory. The empty bottle is found in her room and nobody has handled it but her. She deliberately takes down iced beer to him—a funny thing, anyway, when you realize that they weren’t on speaking terms—”

“A very curious thing. I had already remarked on it.”

“Yes. Bit of a give away. Why was she so amiable all of a sudden? He complains of the taste of the stuff—and coniine has a nasty taste. She arranges to find the body and she sends the other woman off to telephone. Why? So that she can wipe that bottle and glass and then press his fingers on it. After that she can pipe up and say that it was remorse and that he committed suicide. A likely story.”

“It was certainly not very well imagined.”

“No. If you ask me she didn’t take the trouble to think. She was so eaten up with hate and jealousy. All she thought of was doing him in. And then, when it’s over, when she sees him there dead—well, then, I should say, she suddenly comes to herself and realizes that what she’s done is murder—and that you get hanged for murder. And desperately she goes baldheaded for the only thing she can think of—which is suicide.”

Poirot said:

“It is very sound what you say there—yes. Her mind might work that way.”

“In a way it was a premeditated crime and in a way it wasn’t,” said Hale. “I don’t believe she really thought it out, you know. Just went on with it blindly.”

Poirot murmured:

“I wonder….”

Hale looked at him curiously. He said:

“Have I convinced you, Mr. Poirot, that it was a straightforward case?”

“Almost. Not quite. There are one or two peculiar points…!”

“Can you suggest an alternative solution—that will hold water?”

Poirot said:

“What were the movements of the other people on that morning?”

“We went into them, I can assure you. We checked up on everybody. Nobody had what you could call an alibi—you can’t have with poisoning. Why, there’s nothing to prevent a would-be murderer from handing his victim some poison in a capsule the day before, telling him it’s a specific cure for indigestion and he must take it before lunch—and then going away to the other end of England.”

“But you don’t think that happened in this case?”

“Mr. Crale didn’t suffer from indigestion. And in any case I can’t see that kind of thing happening. It’s true that Mr. Meredith Blake was given to recommending quack nostrums of his own concocting, but I don’t see Mr. Crale trying any of them. And if he did he’d probably talk and joke about it. Besides, why should Mr. Meredith Blake want to kill Mr. Crale? Everything goes to show that he was on very good terms with him. They all were. Mr. Philip Blake was his best friend. Miss Greer was in love with him. Miss Williams disapproved of him, I imagine, very strongly—but moral disapprobation doesn’t lead to poisoning. Little Miss Warren scrapped with him a lot, she was at a tiresome age—just off to school, I believe, but he was quite fond of her and she of him. She was treated, you know, with particular tenderness and consideration in that house. You may have heard why. She was badly injured when she was a child—injured by Mrs. Crale in a kind of maniacal fit of rage. That rather shows, doesn’t it, that she was a pretty uncontrolled sort of person? To go for a child—and maim her for life!”

"It might show," said Poirot thoughtfully, "that Angela Warren had good reason to bear a grudge against Caroline Crale."

"Perhaps—but not against Amyas Crale. And anyway Mrs. Crale was devoted to her young sister—gave her a home when her parents died, and, as I say, treated her with special affection—spoiled her badly, so they say. The girl was obviously fond of Mrs. Crale. She was kept away from the trial and sheltered from it all as far as possible—Mrs. Crale was very insistent about that, I believe. But the girl was terribly upset and longed to be taken to see her sister in prison. Caroline Crale wouldn't agree. She said that sort of thing might injure a girl's mentality for life. She arranged for her to go to school abroad."

He added:

"Miss Warren's turned out a very distinguished woman. Traveller to weird places. Lectures at the Royal Geographical—all that sort of thing."

"And no one remembers the trial?"

"Well, it's a different name for one thing. They hadn't even the same maiden name. They had the same mother but different fathers. Mrs. Crale's name was Spalding."

"This Miss Williams, was she the child's governess, or Angela Warren's?"

"Angela's. There was a nurse for the child—but she used to do a few little lessons with Miss Williams every day, I believe."

"Where was the child at the time?"

"She'd gone with the nurse to pay a visit to her grandmother. A Lady Tressillian. A widow lady who'd lost her own two little girls and who was devoted to this kid."

Poirot nodded. "I see."

Hale continued:

"As to the movements of the other people on the day of the murder, I can give them to you.

"Miss Greer sat on the terrace near the library window after breakfast. There, as I say, she overheard the quarrel between Crale and his wife. After that she accompanied Crale down to the Battery and sat for him until lunch time with a couple of breaks to ease her muscles.

"Philip Blake was in the house after breakfast, and overheard part of the quarrel. After Crale and Miss Greer went off, he read the paper until his brother telephoned him. Thereupon he went down to the shore to meet his brother. They walked together up the path again past the Battery garden. Miss Greer had just gone up to the house to fetch a pullover as she felt chilly and Mrs. Crale was with her husband discussing arrangements for Angela's departure to school."

"Ah, an amicable interview."

"Well, no, not amicable. Crale was fairly shouting at her, I understand. Annoyed at being bothered with domestic details. I suppose she wanted to get things straightened up if there was going to be a break."

Poirot nodded.

Hale went on:

"The two brothers exchanged a few words with Amyas Crale. Then Miss Greer reappeared and took up her position, and Crale picked up his brush again, obviously wanting to get rid of them. They took the hint and went up to the house. It was when they were at the Battery, by the way, that Amyas Crale complained all the beer down there was hot and his wife promised to send him down some iced beer."

"Aha!"

"Exactly—Aha! Sweet as sugar she was about it. They went up to the house and sat on the terrace outside. Mrs. Crale and Angela Warren brought them out beer there.

“Later, Angela Warren went down to bathe and Philip Blake went with her.

“Meredith Blake went down to a clearing with a seat just above the Battery garden. He could just see Miss Greer as she posed on the battlements and could hear her voice and Crale’s as they talked. He sat there and thought over the coniine business. He was still very worried about it and didn’t know quite what to do. Elsa Greer saw him and waved her hand to him. When the bell went for lunch he came down to the Battery and Elsa Greer and he went back to the house together. He noticed then that Crale was looking, as he put it, very queer, but he didn’t really think anything of it at the time. Crale was the kind of man who is never ill—and so one didn’t imagine he would be. On the other hand, he did have moods of fury and despondency according as to whether his painting was not going as he liked it. On those occasions one left him alone and said as little as possible to him. That’s what these two did on this occasion.

“As to the others, the servants were busy with housework and cooking lunch. Miss Williams was in the schoolroom part of the morning correcting some exercise books. Afterwards she took some household mending to the terrace. Angela Warren spent most of the morning wandering about the garden, climbing trees and eating things—you know what a girl of fifteen is! Plums, sour apples, hard pears, etc. After she came back to the house and, as I say, went down with Philip Blake to the beach and had a bathe before lunch.”

Superintendent Hale paused:

“Now then,” he said belligerently, “do you find anything phoney about that?”

Poirot said: “Nothing at all.”

“Well, then!”

The two words expressed volumes.

“But all the same,” said Hercule Poirot. “I am going to satisfy myself. I—”

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to visit these five people—and from each one I am going to get his or her own story.”

Superintendent Hale sighed with a deep melancholy.

He said:

“Man, you’re nuts! None of their stories are going to agree! Don’t you grasp that elementary fact? No two people remember a thing in the same order anyway. And after all this time! Why, you’ll hear five accounts of five separate murders!”

“That,” said Poirot, “is what I am counting upon. It will be very instructive.”

Six

THIS LITTLE PIG WENT TO MARKET…

Philip Blake was recognizably like the description given of him by Montague Depleach. A prosperous, shrewd, jovial-looking man—slightly running to fat.

Hercule Poirot had timed his appointment for half past six on a Saturday afternoon. Philip Blake had just finished his eighteen holes, and he had been on his game—winning a fiver from his opponent. He was in the mood to be friendly and expansive.

Hercule Poirot explained himself and his errand. On this occasion at least he showed no undue passion for unsullied truth. It was a question, Blake gathered, of a series of books dealing with famous crimes.

Philip Blake frowned. He said:

“Good Lord, why make up these things?”

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He was at his most foreign today. He was out to be despised but patronized.

He murmured:

“It is the public. They eat it up—yes, eat it up.”

“Ghouls,” said Philip Blake.

But he said it good-humouredly—not with the fastidiousness and the distaste that a more sensitive man might have displayed.

Hercule Poirot said with a shrug of the shoulders:

“It is human nature. You and I, Mr. Blake, who know the world, have no illusions about our fellow human beings. Not bad people, most of them, but certainly not to be idealized.”

Blake said heartily:

“I’ve parted with my illusions long ago.”

“Instead, you tell a very good story, so I have been told.”

“Ah!” Blake’s eyes twinkled. “Heard this one?”

Poirot’s laugh came at the right place. It was not an edifying story, but it was funny.

Philip Blake lay back in his chair, his muscles relaxed, his eyes creased with good humour.

Hercule Poirot thought suddenly that he looked rather like a contented pig.

A pig. This little pig went to market….

What was he like, this man, this Philip Blake? A man, it would seem, without cares. Prosperous, contented. No remorseful thoughts, no uneasy twinges of conscience from the past, no haunting memories here. No, a well-fed pig who had gone to market—and fetched the full market price….

But once, perhaps, there had been more to Philip Blake. He must have been, when young, a handsome man. Eyes always a shade too small, a fraction too near together, perhaps—but otherwise a well made, well set up young man. How old was he now? At a guess between fifty and sixty. Nearing forty, then, at the time of Crale’s death. Less stultified, then, less sunk in the gratifications of the minute. Asking more of life, perhaps, and receiving less….

Poirot murmured as a mere catch-phrase:

“You comprehend my position.”

“No, really, you know, I’m hanged if I do.” The stockbroker sat upright again, his glance was once more shrewd. “Why you? You’re not a writer?”

“Not precisely—no. Actually I am a detective.”

The modesty of this remark had probably not been equalled before in Poirot’s conversation.

“Of course you are. We all know that. The famous Hercule Poirot!”

But his tone held a subtly mocking note. Intrinsically, Philip Blake was too much of an Englishman to take the pretensions of a foreigner seriously.

To his cronies he would have said:

“Quaint little mountebank. Oh well, I expect his stuff goes down with the women all right.”

And although that derisive patronizing attitude was exactly the one which Hercule Poirot had aimed at inducing, nevertheless he found himself annoyed by it.

This man, this successful man of affairs, was unimpressed by Hercule Poirot! It was a scandal.

“I am gratified,” said Poirot untruly, “that I am so well known to you. My success, let me tell you, has been founded on the psychology—the eternal why? of human behaviour. That, Mr. Blake, is what interests the world in crime today. It used to be romance. Famous crimes were retold from one angle only—the love story connected with them. Nowadays it is very different. People read with interest that Dr. Crippen murdered his wife because she was a big bouncing woman and he was little and insignificant and therefore she made him feel inferior. They read of some famous woman criminal that she killed because she’d been snubbed by her father when she was three years old. It is, as I say, the why of crime that interests nowadays.”

Philip Blake said, with a slight yawn:

“The why of most crimes is obvious enough, I should say. Usually money.”

Poirot cried:

“Ah, but my dear sir, the why must never be obvious. That is the whole point!”

“And that’s where you come in?”

“And that, as you say, is where I come in! It is proposed to rewrite the stories of certain bygone crimes—from the psychological angle. Psychology in crime, it is my speciality. I have accepted the commission.”

Philip Blake grinned.

“Pretty lucrative, I suppose?”

“I hope so—I certainly hope so.”

“Congratulations. Now, perhaps, you’ll tell me where I come in?”

“Most certainly. The Crale case, Monsieur.”

Phillip Blake did not look startled. But he looked thoughtful. He said:

“Yes, of course, the Crale case….”

Hercule Poirot said anxiously:

“It is not displeasing to you, Mr. Blake?”

“Oh, as to that.” Philip Blake shrugged his shoulders. “It’s no use resenting a thing that you’ve no power to stop. The trial of Caroline Crale is public property. Anyone can go ahead and write it up. It’s no use my objecting. In a way—I don’t mind telling you—I do dislike it a good deal. Amyas Crale was one of my best friends. I’m sorry the whole unsavoury business has to be raked up again. But these things happen.”

“You are a philosopher, Mr. Blake.”

“No, no. I just know enough not to start kicking against the pricks. I dare say you’ll do it less offensively than many others.”

“I hope, at least, to write with delicacy and good taste,” said Poirot.

Philip Blake gave a loud guffaw but without any real amusement. “Makes me chuckle to hear you say that.”

“I assure you, Mr. Blake, I am really interested. It is not just a matter of money with me. I genuinely want to recreate the past, to feel and see the events that took place, to see behind the obvious and to visualize the thoughts and feelings of the actors in the drama.”

Philip Blake said:

“I don’t know that there was much subtlety about it. It was a pretty obvious business. Crude female jealousy, that was all there was to it.”

“It would interest me enormously, Mr. Blake, if I could have your own reactions to the affair.”

Philip Blake said with sudden heat, his face deepening in colour.

“Reactions! Reactions! Don’t speak so pedantically. I didn’t just stand there and react! You don’t seem to understand that my friend—my friend, I tell you, had been killed—poisoned! And that if I’d acted quicker I could have saved him.”

“How do you make that out, Mr. Blake?”

“Like this. I take it that you’ve already read up the facts of the case?” Poirot nodded. “Very well. Now on that morning my brother Meredith called me up. He was in a pretty good stew. One of his Hell brews was missing—and it was a fairly deadly Hell brew. What did I do? I told him to come along and we’d talk it over. Decide what was best to be done. ‘Decide what was best.’ It beats me now how I could have been such a hesitating fool! I ought to have realized that there was no time to lose. I ought to have gone to Amyas straight away and warned him. I ought to have said: ‘Caroline’s pinched one of Meredith’s patent poisons, and you and Elsa had better look out for yourselves.’”

Blake got up. He strode up and down in his excitement.

“Good God, man. Do you suppose I haven’t gone over it in my mind again and again? I knew. I had the chance to save him—and I dallied about—waiting for Meredith! Why hadn’t I the sense to realize that Caroline wasn’t going to have any qualms or hesitancies. She’d taken that stuff to use—and, by God, she’d used it at the very first opportunity. She wouldn’t wait till Meredith discovered his loss. I knew—of course I knew—that Amyas was in deadly danger—and I did nothing!”

“I think you reproach yourself unduly, Monsieur. You had not much time—”

The other interrupted him:

“Time? I had plenty of time. Any amount of courses open to me. I could have gone to Amyas, as I say—but there was the chance, of course, that he wouldn’t believe me. Amyas wasn’t the sort of man who’d believe easily in his own danger. He’d have scoffed at the notion. And he never thoroughly understood the sort of devil Caroline was. But I could have gone to her. I could have said: ‘I know what you’re up to. I know what you’re planning to do. But if Amyas or Elsa die of coniine poisoning, you’ll be hanged by your neck!’ That would have stopped her. Or I might have rung up the police. Oh! there were things that could have been done—and instead, I let myself be influenced by Meredith’s slow, cautious methods. ‘We must be sure—talk it over—make quite certain who could have taken it…’ Damned old fool—never made a quick decision in his life! A good thing for him he was the eldest son and has an estate to live on. If he’d ever tried to make money he’d have lost every penny he had.”

Poirot asked:

“You had no doubt yourself who had taken the poison?”

“Of course not. I knew at once it must be Caroline. You see, I knew Caroline very well.”

Poirot said:

“That is very interesting. I want to know, Mr. Blake, what kind of a woman Caroline Crale was?”

Philip Blake said sharply:

“She wasn’t the injured innocent people thought she was at the time of the trial!”

“What was she, then?”

Blake sat down again. He said seriously:

“Would you really like to know?”

“I would like to know very much indeed.”

“Caroline was a rotter. She was a rotter through and through. Mind you, she had charm. She had that kind of sweetness of manner that deceives people utterly. She had a frail, helpless look about her that appealed to people’s chivalry. Sometimes, when I’ve read a bit of history, I think Mary Queen of Scots must have been a bit like her. Always sweet and unfortunate and magnetic—and actually a cold calculating woman, a scheming woman who planned the murder of Darnley and got away with it. Caroline was like that—a cold, calculating planner. And she had a wicked temper.

“I don’t know whether they’ve told you—it isn’t a vital point of the trial, but it shows her up—what she did to her baby sister? She was jealous, you know. Her mother had married again, and all the notice and affection went to little Angela. Caroline couldn’t stand that. She tried to kill the baby with a crowbar—smash its head in. Luckily the blow wasn’t fatal. But it was a pretty ghastly thing to do.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Well, that was the real Caroline. She had to be first. That was the thing she simply could not stand—not being first. And there was a cold, egotistical devil in her that was capable of being stirred to murderous lengths.

"She appeared impulsive, you know, but she was really calculating. When she stayed at Alderbury as a girl, she gave us all the once over and made her plans. She'd no money of her own. I was never in the running—a younger son with his way to make. (Funny, that, I could probably buy up Meredith and Crale, if he'd lived, nowadays!) She considered Meredith for a bit, but she finally fixed on Amyas. Amyas would have Alderbury, and though he wouldn't have much money with it, she realized that his talent as a painter was something quite out of the way. She gambled on his being not only a genius but a financial success as well.

"And she won. Recognition came to Amyas early. He wasn't a fashionable painter exactly—but his genius was recognized and his pictures were bought. Have you seen any of his paintings? There's one here. Come and look at it."

He led the way into the dining room and pointed to the left-hand wall.

"There you are. That's Amyas."

Poirot looked in silence. It came to him with fresh amazement that a man could so imbue a conventional subject with his own particular magic. A vase of roses on a polished mahogany table. That hoary old set piece. How then did Amyas Crale contrive to make his roses flame and burn with a riotous almost obscene life. The polished wood of the table trembled and took on sentient life. How explain the excitement the picture roused? For it was exciting. The proportions of the table would have distressed Superintendent Hale, he would have complained that no known roses were precisely of that shape or colour. And afterwards he would have gone about wondering vaguely why the roses he saw were unsatisfactory, and round mahogany tables would have annoyed him for no known reason.

Poirot gave a little sigh.

He murmured:

"Yes—it is all there."

Blake led the way back. He mumbled:

“Never have understood anything about art myself. Don’t know why I like looking at that thing so much, but I do. It’s—oh, damn it all, it’s good.”

Poirot nodded emphatically.

Blake offered his guest a cigarette and lit one himself. He said:

“And that’s the man—the man who painted those roses—the man who painted the ‘Woman with a Cocktail Shaker’—the man who painted that amazing painful ‘Nativity,’ that’s the man who was cut short in his prime, deprived of his vivid forceful life all because of a vindictive mean-natured woman!”

He paused:

“You’ll say that I’m bitter—that I’m unduly prejudiced against Caroline. She had charm—I’ve felt it. But I knew—I always knew—the real woman behind. And that woman, Mr. Poirot, was evil. She was cruel and malignant and a grabber!”

“And yet it has been told me that Mrs. Crale put up with many hard things in her married life?”

“Yes, and didn’t she let everybody know about it! Always the martyr! Poor old Amyas. His married life was one long hell—or rather it would have been if it hadn’t been for his exceptional quality. His art, you see—he always had that. It was an escape. When he was painting he didn’t care, he shook off Caroline and her nagging and all the ceaseless rows and quarrels. They were endless, you know. Not a week passed without a thundering row over one thing or another. She enjoyed it. Having rows stimulated her, I believe. It was an outlet. She could say all the hard bitter stinging things she wanted to say. She’d positively purr after one of those set-tos—go off looking as sleek and well-fed as a cat. But it took it out of him. He wanted peace—rest—a quiet life. Of course a man like that ought never to marry—he isn’t out for domesticity. A man like Crale should have affairs but no binding ties. They’re bound to chafe him.”

“He confided in you?”

“Well—he knew that I was a pretty devoted pal. He let me see things. He didn’t complain. He wasn’t that kind of man. Sometimes he’d say, ‘Damn all women.’ Or he’d say, ‘Never get married, old boy. Wait for hell till after this life.’”

“You knew about his attachment to Miss Greer?”

“Oh yes—at least I saw it coming on. He told me he’d met a marvellous girl. She was different, he said, from anything or anyone he’d ever met before. Not that I paid much attention to that. Amyas was always meeting one woman or other who was ‘different.’ Usually a month later he’d stare at you if you mentioned them, and wonder who you were talking about! But this Elsa Greer really was different. I realized that when I came down to Alderbury to stay. She’d got him, you know, hooked him good and proper. The poor mutt fairly ate out of her hand.”

“You did not like Elsa Greer either?”

“No, I didn’t like her. She was definitely a predatory creature. She, too, wanted to own Crale body and soul. But I think, all the same, that she’d have been better for him than Caroline. She might conceivably have let him alone once she was sure of him. Or she might have got tired of him and moved on to someone else. The best thing for Amyas would have been to be quite free of female entanglements.”

“But that, it would seem, was not to his taste?”

Philip Blake said with a sigh:

“The damned fool was always getting himself involved with some woman or other. And yet, in a way, women really meant very little to him. The only two women who really made any impression on him at all in his life were Caroline and Elsa.”

Poirot said:

“Was he fond of the child?”

“Angela? Oh! we all liked Angela. She was such a sport. She was always game for anything. What a life she led that wretched governess of hers. Yes, Amyas liked Angela all right—but sometimes she went too far and then he used to get really mad with her—and then Caroline would step in—Caro was always on Angela’s side and that would finish Amyas altogether. He hated it when Caro sided with Angela against him. There was a bit of jealousy all round, you know. Amyas was jealous of the way Caro always put Angela first and would do anything for her. And Angela was jealous of Amyas and rebelled against his overbearing ways. It was his decision that she should go to school that autumn, and she was furious about it. Not, I think, because she didn’t like the idea of school, she really rather wanted to go, I believe—but it was Amyas’s high-handed way of settling it all offhand that infuriated her. She played all sorts of tricks on him in revenge. Once she put ten slugs in his bed. On the whole, I think Amyas was right. It was time she got some discipline. Miss Williams was very efficient, but even she confessed that Angela was getting too much for her.”

He paused. Poirot said:

“When I asked if Amyas was fond of the child—I referred to his own child, his daughter?”

“Oh, you mean little Carla? Yes, she was a great pet. He enjoyed playing with her when he was in the mood. But his affection for her wouldn’t have deterred him from marrying Elsa, if that’s what you mean. He hadn’t that kind of feeling for her.”

“Was Caroline Crale very devoted to the child?” A kind of spasm contorted Philip’s face. He said:

“I can’t say that she wasn’t a good mother. No, I can’t say that. It’s the one thing—”

“Yes, Mr. Blake?”

Philip said slowly and painfully:

"It's the one thing I really—regret—in this affair. The thought of that child. Such a tragic background to her young life. They sent her abroad to Amyas's cousin and her husband. I hope—I sincerely hope—they managed to keep the truth from her."

Poirot shook his head. He said:

"The truth, Mr. Blake, has a habit of making itself known. Even after many years."

The stockbroker murmured: "I wonder."

Poirot went on:

"In the interests of truth, Mr. Blake, I am going to ask you to do something."

"What is it?"

"I am going to beg that you will write me out an exact account of what happened on those days at Alderbury. That is to say, I am going to ask you to write me out a full account of the murder and its attendant circumstances."

"But, my dear fellow, after all this time? I should be hopelessly inaccurate."

"Not necessarily."

"Surely."

"No, for one thing, with the passage of time, the mind retains a hold on essentials and rejects superficial matters."

"Ho! You mean a mere broad outline?"

"Not at all. I mean a detailed conscientious account of each event as it occurred, and every conversation you can remember."

"And supposing I remember them wrong?"

"You can give the wording at least to the best of your reflection. There may be gaps, but that cannot be helped."

Blake looked at him curiously.

"But what's the idea? The police files will give you the whole thing far more accurately."

"No, Mr. Blake. We are speaking now from the psychological point of view. I do not want bare facts. I want your own selections of facts. Time and your memory are responsible for that selection. There may have been things done, words spoken, that I should seek for in vain in the police files. Things and words that you never mentioned because, maybe, you judged them irrelevant, or because you preferred not to repeat them."

Blake said sharply:

"Is this account of mine for publication?"

"Certainly not. It is for my eye only. To assist me to draw my own deductions."

"And you won't quote from it without my consent?"

"Certainly not."

"Hm," said Philip Blake. "I'm a very busy man, Mr. Poirot."

"I appreciate that there will be time and trouble involved. I should be happy to agree to a—reasonable fee."

There was a moment's pause. Then Philip Blake said suddenly:

"No, if I do it—I'll do it for nothing."

"And you will do it?"

Philip said warningly:

“Remember, I can’t vouch for the accuracy of my memory.”

“That is perfectly understood.”

“Then I think,” said Philip Blake, “that I should like to do it. I feel I owe it—in a way—to Amyas Crale.”

Seven

THIS LITTLE PIG STAYED AT HOME

Hercule Poirot was not a man to neglect details.

His advance towards Meredith Blake was carefully thought out. Meredith Blake was, he already felt sure, a very different proposition from Philip Blake. Rush tactics would not succeed here. The assault must be leisurely.

Hercule Poirot knew that there was only one way to penetrate the stronghold. He must approach Meredith Blake with the proper credentials. Those credentials must be social, not professional. Fortunately, in the course of his career, Hercule Poirot had made friends in many counties. Devonshire was no exception. He sat down to review what resources he had in Devonshire. As a result he discovered two people who were acquaintances or friends of Mr. Meredith Blake. He descended upon him therefore armed with two letters, one from Lady Mary Lytton-Gore, a gentle widow lady of restricted means, the most retiring of creatures; and the other from a retired Admiral, whose family had been settled in the county for four generations.

Meredith Blake received Poirot in a state of some perplexity.

As he had often felt lately, things were not what they used to be. Dash it all, private detectives used to be private detectives—fellows you got to guard wedding presents at country receptions, fellows you went to—rather shamefacedly—when there was some dirty business afoot and you'd got to get the hang of it.

But here was Lady Mary Lytton-Gore writing: "Hercule Poirot is a very old and valued friend of mine. Please do all you can to help him, won't you?" And Mary Lytton-Gore wasn't—no, decidedly she wasn't—the sort of woman you associate with private detectives and all that they stand for. And Admiral Cronshaw wrote: "Very good chap—absolutely sound. Grateful if you will do what you can for him. Most entertaining fellow, can tell you lots of good stories.”

And now here was the man himself. Really a most impossible person—the wrong clothes—button boots!—an incredible moustache! Not his—Meredith Blake’s—kind of fellow at all. Didn’t look as though he’d ever hunted or shot—or even played a decent game. A foreigner.

Slightly amused, Hercule Poirot read accurately these thoughts passing through the other’s head.

He had felt his own interest rising considerably as the train brought him into the West Country. He would see now, with his own eyes, the actual place where these long past events happened.

It was here, at Handcross Manor, that two young brothers had lived and gone over to Alderbury and joked and played tennis and fraternized with a young Amyas Crale and a girl called Caroline. It was from here that Meredith had started out to Alderbury on that fatal morning. That had been sixteen years ago. Hercule Poirot looked with interest at the man who was confronting him with somewhat uneasy politeness.

Very much what he had expected. Meredith Blake resembled superficially every other English country gentleman of straitened means and outdoor tastes.

A shabby old coat of Harris tweed, a weather-beaten, pleasant, middle-aged face with somewhat faded blue eyes, a weak mouth, half hidden by a rather straggly moustache. Poirot found Meredith Blake a great contrast to his brother. He had a hesitating manner, his mental processes were obviously leisurely. It was as though his tempo had slowed down with the years just as his brother’s had been accelerated.

As Poirot had already guessed, he was a man whom you could not hurry. The leisurely life of the English countryside was in his bones.

He looked, the detective thought, a good deal older than his brother, though, from what Mr. Jonathan had said, it would seem that only a couple of years separated them.

Hercule Poirot prided himself on knowing how to handle an “old school tie.” It was no moment for trying to seem English. No, one must be a foreigner—frankly a foreigner—and be magnanimously forgiven for the fact. “Of course, these foreigners don’t quite know the ropes. Will shake hands at breakfast. Still, a decent fellow really….”

Poirot set about creating this impression of himself. The two men talked, cautiously, of Lady Mary Lytton-Gore and of Admiral Cronshaw. Other names were mentioned. Fortunately Poirot knew someone’s cousin and had met somebody else’s sister-in-law. He could see a kind of warmth dawning in the Squire’s eye. The fellow seemed to know the right people.

Gracefully, insidiously, Poirot slid into the purpose of his visit. He was quick to counteract the inevitable recoil. This book was, alas! going to be written. Miss Crale—Miss Lemarchant, as she was now called—was anxious for him to exercise a judicious editorship. The facts, unfortunately, were public property. But much could be done in their presentation to avoid wounding susceptibilities. Poirot murmured that before now he had been able to use discreet influence to avoid certain purple passages in a book of memoirs.

Meredith Blake flushed angrily. His hand shook a little as he filled a pipe. He said, a slight stammer in his voice:

“It’s—it’s g-ghoulish the way they dig these things up. S-sixteen years ago. Why can’t they let it be?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“I agree with you. But what will you? There is a demand for such things. And anyone is at liberty to reconstruct a proved crime and to comment on it.”

“Seems disgraceful to me.”

Poirot murmured:

“Alas—we do not live in a delicate age…You would be surprised, Mr. Blake, if you knew the unpleasant publications I had succeeded in—shall we say—softening. I am anxious to do all I can to save Miss Crale’s feeling in the matter.”

Meredith Blake murmured: “Little Carla! That child! A grown-up woman. One can hardly believe it.”

“I know. Time flies swiftly, does it not?”

Meredith Blake sighed. He said: “Too quickly.”

Poirot said:

“As you will have seen in the letter I handed you from Miss Crale, she is very anxious to know everything possible about the sad events of the past.”

Meredith Blake said with a touch of irritation:

“Why? Why rake up everything again? How much better to let it all be forgotten.”

“You say that, Mr. Blake, because you know all the past too well. Miss Crale, remember, knows nothing. That is to say she knows only the story as she has learnt it from the official accounts.”

Meredith Blake winced. He said:

“Yes, I forgot. Poor child. What a detestable position for her. The shock of learning the truth. And then—those soulless, callous reports of the trial.”

“The truth,” said Hercule Poirot, “can never be done justice to in a mere legal recital. It is the things that are left out that are the things that matter. The emotions, the feelings—the characters of the actors in the drama. The extenuating circumstances—”

He paused and the other man spoke eagerly like an actor who had received his cue.

“Extenuating circumstances! That’s just it. If ever there were extenuating circumstances, there were in this case. Amyas Crale was an old friend—his family and mine had been friends for generations, but one has to admit that his conduct was, frankly, outrageous. He was an artist, of course, and presumably that explains it. But there it is—he allowed a most extraordinary set of affairs to arise. The position was one that no ordinary decent man could have contemplated for a moment.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I am interested that you should say that. It had puzzled me, that situation. Not so does a well-bred man, a man of the world, go about his affairs.”

Blake’s thin, hesitating face had lit up with animation. He said:

“Yes, but the whole point is that Amyas never was an ordinary man! He was a painter, you see, and with him painting came first—really sometimes in the most extraordinary way! I don’t understand these so-called artistic people myself—never have. I understood Crale a little because, of course, I’d known him all my life. His people were the same sort as my people. And in many ways Crale ran true to type—it was only where art came in that he didn’t conform to the usual standards. He wasn’t, you see, an amateur in any way. He was first-class—really first-class. Some people say he’s a genius. They may be right. But as a result, he was always what I should describe as unbalanced. When he was painting a picture—nothing else mattered, nothing could be allowed to get in the way. He was like a man in a dream. Completely obsessed by what he was doing. Not till the canvas was finished did he come out of this absorption and start to pick up the threads of ordinary life again.”

He looked questioningly at Poirot and the latter nodded.

“You understand, I see. Well, that explains, I think, why this particular situation arose. He was in love with this girl. He wanted to marry her. He was prepared to leave his wife and child for her. But he’d started painting her down here, and he wanted to finish that picture. Nothing else mattered to him. He didn’t see anything else. And the fact that the situation was a perfectly impossible one for the two women concerned, doesn't seem to have occurred to him."

"Did either of them understand his point of view?"

"Oh yes—in a way. Elsa did, I suppose. She was terrifically enthusiastic about his painting. But it was a difficult position for her—naturally. And as for Caroline—"

He stopped. Poirot said:

"For Caroline—yes, indeed."

Meredith Blake said, speaking with a little difficulty:

"Caroline—I had always—well, I had always been very fond of Caroline. There was a time when—when I hoped to marry her. But that was soon nipped in the bud. Still, I remained, if I may say so, devoted to—to her service."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. That slightly old-fashioned phrase expressed, he felt, the man before him very typically. Meredith Blake was the kind of man who would devote himself readily to a romantic and honourable devotion. He would serve his lady faithfully and without hope of reward. Yes, it was all very much in character.

He said, carefully weighing the words:

"You must have resented this—attitude—on her behalf?"

"I did. Oh, I did. I—I actually remonstrated with Crale on the subject."

"When was this?"

"Actually the day before—before it all happened. They came over to tea here, you know. I got Crale aside and I—I put it to him. I even said, I remember, that it wasn't fair on either of them."

"Ah, you said that?"

“Yes. I didn’t think—you see, that he realized.”

“Possibly not.”

“I said to him that it was putting Caroline in a perfectly unendurable position. If he meant to marry this girl, he ought not to have her staying in the house and—well—more or less flaunt her in Caroline’s face. It was, I said, an unendurable insult.”

Poirot asked curiously: “What did he answer?”

Meredith Blake replied with distaste:

“He said: ‘Caroline must lump it.’”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“Not,” he said, “a very sympathetic reply.”

“I thought it abominable. I lost my temper. I said that no doubt, not caring for his wife, he didn’t mind how much he made her suffer, but what, I said, about the girl? Hadn’t he realized it was a pretty rotten position for her? His reply to that was that Elsa must lump it too!

“Then he went on: ‘You don’t seem to understand, Meredith, that this thing I’m painting is the best thing I’ve done. It’s good, I tell you. And a couple of jealous quarrelling women aren’t going to upset it—no, by hell, they’re not.’

“It was hopeless talking to him. I said he seemed to have taken leave of all ordinary decency. Painting, I said, wasn’t everything. He interrupted there. He said: ‘Ah, but it is to me.’

“I was still very angry. I said it was perfectly disgraceful the way he had always treated Caroline. She had had a miserable life with him. He said he knew that and he was sorry about it. Sorry! He said: ‘I know, Merry, you don’t believe that—but it’s the truth. I’ve given Caroline the hell of a life and she’s been a saint about it. But she did know, I think, what she might be letting herself in for. I told her candidly the sort of damnable egoistic, loose-living kind of chap I was.’

“I put it to him then very strongly that he ought not to break up his married life. There was the child to be considered and everything. I said that I could understand that a girl like Elsa could bowl a man over, but that even for her sake he ought to break off the whole thing. She was very young. She was going into this baldheaded, but she might regret it bitterly afterwards. I said couldn’t he pull himself together, make a clean break and go back to his wife?”

“And what did he say?”

Blake said: “He just looked—embarrassed. He patted me on the shoulder and said: ‘You’re a good chap, Merry. But you’re too sentimental. You wait till the picture’s finished and you’ll admit that I was right.’

“I said: ‘Damn your picture.’ And he grinned and said all the neurotic women in England couldn’t do that. Then I said that it would have been more decent to have kept the whole thing from Caroline until after the picture was finished. He said that that wasn’t his fault. It was Elsa who had insisted on spilling the beans. I said, Why? And he said that she had had some idea that it wasn’t straight otherwise. She wanted everything to be clear and above board. Well, of course, in a way, one could understand that and respect the girl for it. However badly she was behaving, she did at least want to be honest.”

“A lot of additional pain and grief is caused by honesty,” remarked Hercule Poirot.

Meredith Blake looked at him doubtfully. He did not quite like the sentiment. He sighed:

“It was a—a most unhappy time for us all.”

“The only person who does not seem to have been affected by it was Amyas Crale,” said Poirot.

"And why? Because he was a rank egoist. I remember him now. Grinning at me as he went off saying: 'Don't worry, Merry. Everything's going to pan out all right!'"

"The incurable optimist," murmured Poirot.

Meredith Blake said:

"He was the kind of man who didn't take women seriously. I could have told him that Caroline was desperate."

"Did she tell you so?"

"Not in so many words. But I shall always see her face as it was that afternoon. White and strained with a kind of desperate gaiety. She talked and laughed a lot. But her eyes—there was a kind of anguished grief in them that was the most moving thing I have ever known. Such a gentle creature, too."

Hercule Poirot looked at him for a minute or two without speaking. Clearly the man in front of him felt no incongruity in speaking thus of a woman who on the day after had deliberately killed her husband.

Meredith Blake went on. He had by now quite overcome his first suspicious hostility. Hercule Poirot had the gift of listening. To men such as Meredith Blake, the reliving of the past has a definite attraction. He spoke now almost more to himself than to his guest.

"I ought to have suspected something, I suppose. It was Caroline who turned the conversation to—to my little hobby. It was, I must confess, an enthusiasm of mine. The old English herbalists, you know, are a very interesting study. There are so many plants that were formerly used in medicine and which have now disappeared from the official Pharmacopœia. And it's astonishing, really, how a simple decoction of something or other will really work wonders. No need for doctors half the time. The French understand these things—some of their tisanes are first rate." He was well away now on his hobby.

“Dandelion tea, for instance; marvellous stuff. And a decoction of hips—I saw the other day somewhere that that’s coming into fashion with the medical profession again. Oh yes, I must confess, I got a lot of pleasure out of my brews. Gathering the plants at the right time, drying them—macerating them—all the rest of it. I’ve even dropped to superstition sometimes and gathered my roots at the full of the moon or whatever it was the ancients advised. On that day I gave my guests, I remember, a special disquisition on the spotted hemlock. It flowers biennially. You gather the fruits when they’re ripening, just before they turn yellow. Coniine, you know, is a drug that’s dropped out—I don’t believe there’s any official preparation of it in the last Pharmacopœia—but I’ve proved the usefulness of it in whooping cough—and in asthma too, for that matter—”

“You talked of all this in your laboratory?”

“Yes, I showed them round—explained the various drugs to them—valerian and the way it attracts cats—one sniff at that was enough for them! Then they asked about deadly nightshade and I told them about belladonna and atropine. They were very much interested.”

“They? What is comprised in that word?”

Meredith Blake looked faintly surprised as though he had forgotten that his listener had no first-hand knowledge of the scene.

“Oh, the whole party. Let me see, Philip was there and Amyas, and Caroline, of course. Angela. And Elsa Greer.”

“That was all?”

“Yes—I think so. Yes, I am sure of it,” Blake looked at him curiously. “Who else should there be?”

“I thought perhaps the governess—”

“Oh, I see. No, she wasn’t there that afternoon. I believe I’ve forgotten her name now. Nice women. Took her duties very seriously. Angela worried her a good deal I think.”

“Why was that?”

“Well, she was a nice kid, but she was inclined to run wild. Always up to something or other. Put a slug or something down Amyas’s back one day when he was hard at work painting. He went up in smoke. Cursed her up and down dale. It was after that that he insisted on this school idea.”

“Sending her to school?”

“Yes. I don’t mean he wasn’t fond of her, but he found her a bit of a nuisance sometimes. And I think—I’ve always thought—”

“Yes?”

“That he was a bit jealous. Caroline, you see, was a slave to Angela. In a way, perhaps, Angela came first with her—and Amyas didn’t like that. There was a reason for it of course. I won’t go into that, but—”

Poirot interrupted.

“The reason being that Caroline Crale reproached herself for an action that had disfigured the girl?”

Blake exclaimed: “Oh, you know that? I wasn’t going to mention it. All over and done with. But yes, that was the cause of her attitude I think. She always seemed to feel that there was nothing too much she could do—to make up, as it were.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He asked:

“And Angela? Did she bear a grudge against her half sister?”

“Oh no, don’t run away with that idea. Angela was devoted to Caroline. She never gave that old business a thought, I’m sure. It was just Caroline who couldn’t forgive herself.”

“Did Angela take kindly to the idea of boarding school?”

“No, she didn’t. She was furious with Amyas. Caroline took her side, but Amyas had absolutely made his mind up about it. In spite of a hot temper, Amyas was an easy man in most respects, but when he really got his back up, everyone had to give in. Both Caroline and Angela knuckled under.”

“She was to go to school—when?”

“The autumn term—they were getting her kit together, I remember. I suppose, if it hadn’t been for the tragedy, she would have gone off a few days later. There was some talk of her packing on the morning of that day.”

Poirot said: “And the governess?”

“What do you mean—the governess?”

“How did she like the idea? It deprived her of a job, did it not?”

“Yes—well, I suppose it did in a way. Little Carla used to do a few lessons, but of course she was only—what? Six or thereabouts. She had a nurse. They wouldn’t have kept Miss Williams on for her. Yes, that’s the name—Williams. Funny how things come back to you when you talk them over.”

“Yes, indeed. You are back now, are you not, in the past? You relive the scenes—the words that people said, their gestures—the expressions on their faces?”

Meredith Blake said slowly:

“In a way—yes…But there are gaps, you know…Great chunks missed out. I remember, for instance, the shock it was to me when I first learned that Amyas was going to leave Caroline—but I can’t remember whether it was he who told me or Elsa. I do remember arguing with Elsa on the subject—trying to show her, I mean, that it was a pretty rotten thing to do. And she only laughed at me in that cool way of hers and said I was old fashioned. Well, I dare say I am old fashioned, but I still think I was right. Amyas had a wife and child—he ought to have stuck to them.”

“But Miss Greer thought that point of view out of date?”

"Yes. Mind you, sixteen years ago, divorce wasn't looked on quite so much as a matter of course as it is now. But Elsa was the kind of girl who went in for being modern. Her point of view was that when two people weren't happy together it was better to make a break. She said that Amyas and Caroline never stopped having rows and that it was far better for the child that she shouldn't be brought up in an atmosphere of disharmony."

"And her argument did not impress you?"

Meredith Blake said slowly:

"I felt, all the time, that she didn't really know what she was talking about. She was rattling these things off—things she'd read in books or heard from her friends—it was like a parrot. She was—it's a queer thing to say—pathetic somehow. So young and so self-confident." He paused. "There is something about youth, Mr. Poirot, that is—that can be—terribly moving."

Hercule Poirot said, looking at him with some interest: "I know what you mean…."

Blake went on, speaking more to himself than to Poirot.

"That's partly, I think, why I tackled Crale. He was nearly twenty years older than the girl. It didn't seem fair."

Poirot murmured:

"Alas—how seldom one makes any effect. When a person has determined on a certain course—it is not easy to turn them from it."

Meredith Blake said:

"That is true enough." His tone was a shade bitter. "I certainly did no good by my interference. But then, I am not a very convincing person. I never have been."

Poirot threw him a quick glance. He read into that slight acerbity of tone the dissatisfaction of a sensitive man with his own lack of personality. And he acknowledged to himself the truth of what Blake had just said. Meredith

Blake was not the man to persuade anyone into or out of any course. His well-meaning attempts would always be set aside—indulgently usually, without anger, but definitely set aside. They would not carry weight. He was essentially an ineffective man.

Poirot said, with an appearance of changing a painful subject: “You still have your laboratory of medicines and cordials, yes?”

“No.”

The word came sharply—with an almost anguished rapidity Meridith Blake said, his face flushing:

“I abandoned the whole thing—dismantled it. I couldn’t go on with it—how could I?—after what had happened. The whole thing, you see, might have been said to be my fault.”

“No, no, Mr. Blake, you are too sensitive.”

“But don’t you see? If I hadn’t collected those damned drugs? If I hadn’t laid stress on them—boasted about them—forced them on those people’s notice that afternoon? But I never thought—I never dreamed—how could I—”

“How indeed.”

“But I went bumbling on about them. Pleased with my little bit of knowledge. Blind, conceited fool. I pointed out that damned coniine. I even, fool that I was, took them back into the library and read them out that passage from the Phaedo describing Socrates’ death. A beautiful piece of writing—I’ve always admired it. But it’s haunted me ever since.”

Poirot said:

“Did they find any fingerprints on the coniine bottle?”

“Hers.”

“Caroline Crale’s?”

"Yes."

"Not yours?"

"No. I didn't handle the bottle, you see. Only pointed to it."

"But at the same time, surely, you had handled it?"

"Oh, of course, but I gave the bottles a periodic dusting from time to time—I never allowed the servants in there, of course—and I had done that about four or five days previously."

"You kept the room locked up?"

"Invariably."

"When did Caroline Crale take the coniine from the bottle?"

Meredith Blake replied reluctantly:

"She was the last to leave the room. I called her, I remember, and she came hurrying out. Her cheeks were just a little pink—and her eyes wide and excited. Oh, God, I can see her now."

Poirot said: "Did you have any conversation with her at all that afternoon? I mean by that, did you discuss the situation as between her and her husband at all?"

Blake said slowly in a low voice:

"Not directly. She was looking as I've told you—very upset. I said to her at a moment when we were more or less by ourselves: 'Is anything the matter, my dear?' she said: 'Everything's the matter…' I wish you could have heard the desperation in her voice. Those words were the absolute literal truth. There's no getting away from it—Amyas Crale was Caroline's whole world. She said, 'Everything's gone—finished. I'm finished, Meredith.' And then she laughed and turned to the others and was suddenly wildly and very unnaturally gay."

Hercule Poirot nodded his head slowly. He looked very like a china mandarin. He said:

“Yes—I see—it was like that….”

Meredith Blake pounded suddenly with his fist. His voice rose. It was almost a shout.

“And I’ll tell you this Mr. Poirot—when Caroline Crale said at the trial that she took the stuff for herself, I’ll swear she was speaking the truth! There was no thought in her mind of murder at that time. I swear there wasn’t. That came later.”

Hercule Poirot asked:

“Are you sure that it did come later?”

Blake stared. He said:

“I beg your pardon? I don’t quite understand—”

Poirot said:

“I ask you whether you are sure that the thought of murder ever did come? Are you perfectly convinced in your own mind that Caroline Crale did deliberately commit murder?”

Meredith Blake’s breath came unevenly. He said: “But if not—if not—are you suggesting an—well, accident of some kind?”

“Not necessarily.”

“That’s a very extraordinary thing to say.”

“Is it? You have called Caroline Crale a gentle creature. Do gentle creatures commit murder?”

“She was a gentle creature—but all the same—well, there were very violent quarrels, you know.”

"Not such a gentle creature, then?"

"But she was—Oh, how difficult these things are to explain."

"I am trying to understand."

"Caroline had a quick tongue—a vehement way of speaking. She might say 'I hate you. I wish you were dead.' But it wouldn't mean—it wouldn't entail—action."

"So in your opinion, it was highly uncharacteristic of Mrs. Crale to commit murder?"

"You have the most extraordinary ways of putting things, Mr. Poirot. I can only say that—yes—it does seem to me uncharacteristic of her. I can only explain it by realizing that the provocation was extreme. She adored her husband. Under those circumstances a woman might—well—kill."

Poirot nodded. "Yes, I agree…."

"I was dumbfounded at first. I didn't feel it could be true. And it wasn't true—if you know what I mean—it wasn't the real Caroline who did that."

"But you are quite sure that—in the legal sense—Caroline Crale did do it?"

Again Meredith Blake stared at him.

"My dear man—if she didn't—"

"Well, if she didn't?"

"I can't imagine any alternative solution. Accident? Surely impossible."

"Quite impossible, I should say."

"And I can't believe in the suicide theory. It had to be brought forward, but it was quite unconvincing to anyone who knew Crale."

"Quite."

“So what remains?” asked Meredith Blake.

Poirot said coolly: “There remains the possibility of Amyas Crale having been killed by somebody else.”

“But that’s absurd!”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it. Who would have wanted to kill him? Who could have killed him?”

“You are more likely to know than I am.”

“But you don’t seriously believe—”

“Perhaps not. It interests me to examine the possibility. Give it your serious consideration. Tell me what you think.”

Meredith stared at him for a minute or two. Then he lowered his eyes. After a minute or two he shook his head. He said:

“I can’t imagine any possible alternative. I should like to do so. If there were any reason for suspecting anybody else I would readily believe Caroline innocent. I don’t want to think she did it. I couldn’t believe it at first. But who else is there? Who else was there. Philip? Crale’s best friend. Elsa? Ridiculous. Myself? Do I look like a murderer? A respectable governess? A couple of old faithful servants? Perhaps you’d suggest that the child Angela did it? No, Mr. Poirot, there’s no alternative. Nobody could have killed Amyas Crale but his wife. But he drove her to it. And so, in a way, it was suicide after all, I suppose.”

“Meaning that he died by the result of his own actions, though not by his own hand?”

“Yes, it’s a fanciful point of view, perhaps. But—well—cause and effect, you know.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Have you ever reflected, Mr. Blake, that the reason for murder is nearly always to be found by a study of the person murdered?”

“I hadn’t exactly—yes, I suppose I see what you mean.”

Poirot said:

“Until you know exactly what sort of a person the victim was, you cannot begin to see the circumstances of a crime clearly.”

He added:

“That is what I am seeking for—and what you and your brother have helped to give me—a reconstruction of the man Amyas Crale.”

Meredith Blake passed the main point of the remark over. His attention had been attracted by a single word. He said quickly:

“Philip?”

“Yes.”

“You have talked with him also?”

“Certainly.”

Meredith Blake said sharply:

“You should have come to me first.”

Smiling a little, Poirot made a courteous gesture.

“According to the laws of primogenitude, that is so,” he said. “I am aware that you are the elder. But you comprehend that as your brother lives near London, it was easier to visit him first.”

Meredith Blake was still frowning. He pulled uneasily at his lip. He repeated:

“You should have come to me first.”

This time, Poirot did not answer. He waited. And presently Meredith Blake went on:

“Philip,” he said, “is prejudiced.”

“Yes?”

“As a matter of fact he’s a mass of prejudices—always has been.” He shot a quick uneasy glance at Poirot. “He’ll have tried to put you against Caroline.”

“Does that matter, so long—after?”

Meredith Blake gave a sharp sigh.

“I know. I forget that it’s so long ago—that it’s all over. Caroline is beyond being harmed. But all the same I shouldn’t like you to get a false impression.”

“And you think your brother might give me a false impression?”

“Frankly, I do. You see, there was always a certain—how shall I put it?—antagonism between him and Caroline.”

“Why?”

The question seemed to irritate Blake. He said:

“Why? How should I know why? These things are so. Philip always crabbed her whenever he could. He was annoyed, I think, when Amyas married her. He never went near them for over a year. And yet Amyas was almost his best friend. That was the reason really, I suppose. He didn’t feel that any woman was good enough. And he probably felt that Caroline’s influence would spoil their friendship.”

“And did it?”

“No, of course it didn’t. Amyas was always just as fond of Philip—right up to the end. Used to twit him with being a money grabber and with growing a corporation and being a Philistine generally. Philip didn’t care. He just used to grin and say it was a good thing Amyas had one respectable friend.”

“How did your brother react to the Elsa Greer affair?”

“Do you know, I find it rather difficult to say. His attitude wasn’t really easy to define. He was annoyed, I think, with Amyas for making a fool of himself over the girl. He said more than once that it wouldn’t work and that Amyas would live to regret it. At the same time I have a feeling—yes, very definitely I have a feeling that he was just faintly pleased at seeing Caroline let down.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose. He said:

“He really felt like that?”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me. I wouldn’t go further than to say that I believe that feeling was at the back of his mind. I don’t know that he ever quite realized himself that that is what he felt. Philip and I have nothing much in common, but there is a link, you know, between people of the same blood. One brother often knows what the other brother is thinking.”

“And after the tragedy?”

Meredith Blake shook his head. A spasm of pain crossed his face. He said:

“Poor Phil. He was terribly cut up. Just broken up by it. He’d always been devoted to Amyas, you see. There was an element of hero worship about it, I think. Amyas Crale and I are the same age. Philip was two years younger. And he looked up to Amyas always. Yes—it was a great blow to him. He was—he was terribly bitter against Caroline.”

“He, at least, had no doubts, then?”

Meredith Blake said:

“None of us had any doubts….”

There was a silence. Then Blake said with the irritable plaintiveness of a weak man:

“It was all over—forgotten—and now you come—raking it all up….”

“Not I. Caroline Crale.”

Meredith stared at him: “Caroline? What do you mean?”

Poirot said, watching him:

“Caroline Crale the second.”

Meredith’s face relaxed.

“Ah yes, the child. Little Carla. I—I misunderstood you for a moment.”

“You thought I meant the original Caroline Crale? You thought that it was she who would not—how shall I say it—rest easy in her grave?”

Meredith Blake shivered.

“Don’t, man.”

“You know that she wrote to her daughter—the last words she ever wrote—that she was innocent?”

Meredith stared at him. He said—and his voice sounded utterly incredulous:

“Caroline wrote that?”

“Yes.”

Poirot paused and said:

“It surprises you?”

“It would surprise you if you’d seen her in court. Poor, hunted, defenceless creature. Not even struggling.”

“A defeatist?”

“No, no. She wasn’t that. It was, I think, the knowledge that she’d killed the man she loved—or I thought it was that.”

“You are not so sure now?”

“To write a thing like that—solemnly—when she was dying.”

Poirot suggested:

“A pious lie, perhaps.”

“Perhaps.” But Meredith was dubious. “That’s not—that’s not like Caroline….”

Hercule Poirot nodded. Carla Lemarchant had said that. Carla had only a child’s obstinate memory. But Meredith Blake had known Caroline well. It was the first confirmation Poirot had got that Carla’s belief was to be depended upon.

Meredith Blake looked up at him. He said slowly:

“If—if Caroline was innocent—why, the whole thing’s madness! I don’t see—any other possible solution….”

He turned sharply on Poirot.

“And you? What do you think?”

There was a silence.

“As yet,” said Poirot at last, “I think nothing. I collect only the impressions. What Caroline Crale was like. What Amyas Crale was like. What the other people who were there at the time were like. What happened exactly on those two days. That is what I need. To go over the facts laboriously one by one. Your brother is going to help me there. He is sending me an account of the events as he remembers them.”

Meredith Blake said sharply:

“You won’t get much from that. Philip’s a busy man. Things slip his memory once they’re past and done with. Probably he’ll remember things all wrong.”

“There will be gaps, of course. I realize that.”

“I tell you what—” Meredith paused abruptly, then went on, reddening a little as he spoke. “If you like, I—I could do the same. I mean, it would be a kind of check, wouldn’t it?”

Hercule Poirot said warmly:

“It would be most valuable. An idea of the first excellence!”

“Right. I will. I’ve got some old diaries somewhere. Mind you,” he laughed awkwardly. “I’m not much of a hand at literary language. Even my spelling’s not too good. You—you won’t expect too much?”

“Ah, it is not the style I demand. Just a plain recital of everything you can remember. What every one said, how they looked—just what happened. Never mind if it doesn’t seem relevant. It all helps with the atmosphere, so to speak.”

“Yes, I can see that. It must be difficult visualizing people and places you have never seen.”

Poirot nodded.

“There is another thing I wanted to ask you. Alderbury is the adjoining property to this, is it not? Would it be possible to go there—to see with my own eyes where the tragedy occurred?”

Meredith Blake said slowly:

“I can take you over there right away. But, of course, it is a good deal changed.”

"It has not been built over?"

"No, thank goodness—not quite so bad as that. But it's a kind of hostel now—it was bought by some society. Hordes of young people come down to it in the summer, and of course all the rooms have been cut up and partitioned into cubicles, and the grounds have been altered a good deal."

"You must reconstruct it for me by your explanations."

"I'll do my best. I wish you could have seen it in the old days. It was one of the loveliest properties I know."

He led the way out through the window and began walking down a slope of lawn.

"Who was responsible for selling it?"

"The executors on behalf of the child. Everything Crale had came to her. He hadn't made a will, so I imagine that it would be divided automatically between his wife and the child. Caroline's will left what she had to the child also."

"Nothing to her half sister?"

"Angela had a certain amount of money of her own left her by her father."

Poirot nodded. "I see."

Then he uttered an exclamation:

"But where is it that you take me? This is the seashore ahead of us!"

"Ah, I must explain our geography to you. You'll see for yourself in a minute. There's a creek, you see, Camel Creek, they call it, runs inland—looks almost like a river mouth, but it isn't—it's just sea. To get to Alderbury by land you have to go right inland and round the creek, but the shortest way from one house to the other is to row across this narrow bit of the creek. Alderbury is just opposite—there, you can see the house through the trees."

They had come out on a little beach. Opposite them was a wooded headland and a white house could just be distinguished high up amongst the trees.

Two boats were drawn up on the beach. Meredith Blake, with Poirot’s somewhat awkward assistance, dragged one of them down to the water and presently they were rowing across to the other side.

“We always went this way in the old days,” Meredith explained. “Unless, of course, there was a storm or it was raining, and then we’d take the car. But it’s nearly three miles if you go round that way.”

He ran the boat neatly alongside a stone quay on the other side. He cast a disparaging eye on a collection of wooden huts and some concrete terraces.

“All new, this. Used to be a boathouse—tumbledown old place—and nothing else. And one walked along the shore and bathed off those rocks over there.”

He assisted his guest to alight, made fast the boat, and led the way up a steep path.

“Don’t suppose we’ll meet anyone,” he said over his shoulder. “Nobody here in April—except for Easter. Doesn’t matter if we do. I’m on good terms with my neighbours. Sun’s glorious today. Might be summer. It was a wonderful day then. More like July than September. Brilliant sun—but a chilly little wind.”

The path came out of the trees and skirted an outcrop of rock. Meredith pointed up with his hand.

“That’s what they called the Battery. We’re more or less underneath it now—skirting round it.”

They plunged into trees again and then the path took another sharp turn and they emerged by a door set in a high wall. The path itself continued to zigzag upwards, but Meredith opened the door and the two men passed through it.

For a moment Poirot was dazzled coming in from the shade outside. The Battery was an artificially cleared plateau with battlements set with cannon. It gave one the impression of overhanging the sea. There were trees above it and behind it, but on the sea side there was nothing but the dazzling blue water below.

“Attractive spot,” said Meredith. He nodded contemptuously towards a kind of pavilion set back against the back wall. “That wasn’t there, of course—only an old tumbledown shed where Amyas kept his painting muck and some bottled beer and a few deck chairs. It wasn’t concreted then, either. There used to be a bench and a table—painted iron ones. That was all. Still—it hasn’t changed much.”

His voice held an unsteady note.

Poirot said: “And it was here that it happened?”

Meredith nodded.

“The bench was there—up against the shed. He was sprawled on that. He used to sprawl there sometimes when he was painting—just fling himself down and stare and stare—and then suddenly up he’d jump and start laying the paint on the canvas like mad.”

He paused.

“That’s why, you know, he looked—almost natural. As though he might be asleep—just have dropped off. But his eyes were open—and he’d—just stiffened up. Stuff sort of paralyses you, you know. There isn’t any pain… I’ve—I’ve always been glad of that….”

Poirot asked a thing that he already knew.

“Who found him?”

“She did. Caroline. After lunch. I and Elsa, I suppose, were the last ones to see him alive. It must have been coming on then. He—looked queer. I’d rather not talk about it. I’ll write it to you. Easier that way.”

He turned abruptly and went out of the Battery. Poirot followed him without speaking.

The two men went on up the zigzag path. At a higher level than the Battery there was another small plateau. It was overshadowed with trees and there was a bench there and a table.

Meredith said:

“They haven’t changed this much. But the bench used not to be Ye Olde Rustic. It was just a painted iron business. A bit hard for sitting, but a lovely view.”

Poirot agreed. Through a framework of trees one looked down over the Battery to the creek mouth.

“I sat up here part of the morning,” Meredith explained. “Trees weren’t quite so overgrown then. One could see the battlements of the Battery quite plainly. That’s where Elsa was posing, you know. Sitting on one with her head twisted round.”

He gave a slight twitch of his shoulders.

“Trees grow faster than one thinks,” he muttered. “Oh well, suppose I’m getting old. Come on up to the house.”

They continued to follow the path till it emerged near the house. It had been a fine old house, Georgian in style. It had been added to and on a green lawn near it were set some fifty little wooden bathing hutches.

“Young men sleep there, girls in the house,” Meredith explained. “I don’t suppose there’s anything you want to see here. All the rooms have been cut about. Used to be a little conservatory tacked on here. These people have built a loggia. Oh well—I suppose they enjoy their holidays. Can’t keep everything as it used to be—more’s the pity.”

He turned away abruptly.

“We’ll go down another way. It—it all comes back to me, you know. Ghosts. Ghosts everywhere.”

They returned to the quay by a somewhat longer and more rambling route. Neither of them spoke. Poirot respected his companion’s mood.

When they reached Handcross Manor once more, Meredith Blake said abruptly:

“I bought that picture, you know. The one that Amyas was painting. I just couldn’t stand the idea of its being sold for—well—publicity value—a lot of dirty-minded brutes gaping at it. It was a fine piece of work. Amyas said it was the best thing he’d ever done. I shouldn’t be surprised if he was right. It was practically finished. He only wanted to work on it another day or so. Would—would you care to see it?”

Hercule Poirot said quickly: “Yes, indeed.”

Blake led the way across the hall and took a key from his pocket. He unlocked a door and they went into a fair-sized, dusty smelling room. It was closely shuttered. Blake went across to the windows and opened the wooden shutters. Then, with a little difficulty, he flung up a window and a breath of fragrant spring air came wafting into the room.

Meredith said: “That’s better.”

He stood by the window inhaling the air and Poirot joined him. There was no need to ask what the room had been. The shelves were empty but there were marks upon them where bottles had stood. Against one wall was some derelict chemical apparatus and a sink. The room was thick in dust.

Meredith Blake was looking out of the window. He said:

“How easily it all comes back. Standing here, smelling the jasmine—and talking—talking—like the damned fool I was—about my precious potions and distillations!”

Absently, Poirot stretched a hand through the window. He pulled off a spray of jasmine leaves just breaking from their woody stem.

Meredith Blake moved resolutely across the floor. On the wall was a picture covered with a dust sheet. He jerked the dust sheet away.

Poirot caught his breath. He had seen so far, four pictures of Amyas Crale's: two at the Tate, one at a London dealer's, one, the still life of roses. But now he was looking at what the artist himself had called his best picture, and Poirot realized at once what a superb artist the man had been.

The painting had an old superficial smoothness. At first sight it might have been a poster, so seemingly crude were its contrasts. A girl, a girl in a canary-yellow shirt and dark-blue slacks, sitting on a grey wall in full sunlight against a background of violent blue sea. Just the kind of subject for a poster.

But the first appearance was deceptive; there was a subtle distortion—an amazing brilliance and clarity in the light. And the girl—

Yes, here was life. All there was, all there could be of life, of youth, of sheer blazing vitality. The face was alive and the eyes….

So much life! Such passionate youth! That, then, was what Amyas Crale had seen in Elsa Greer, which had made him blind and deaf to the gentle creature, his wife. Elsa was life. Elsa was youth.

A superb, slim, straight creature, arrogant, her head turned, her eyes insolent with triumph. Looking at you, watching you—waiting….

Hercule Poirot spread out his hands. He said:

"It is a great—yes, it is great—"

Meredith Blake said, a catch in his voice:

"She was so young—"

Poirot nodded. He thought to himself.

"What do most people mean when they say that? So young. Something innocent, something appealing, something helpless. But youth is not that! Youth is crude, youth is strong, youth is powerful—yes, and cruel! And one thing more—youth is vulnerable."

He followed his host to the door. His interest was quickened now in Elsa Greer whom he was to visit next. What would the years have done to that passionate, triumphant crude child?

He looked back at the picture.

Those eyes. Watching him…watching him…Telling him something….

Supposing he couldn't understand what they were telling him? Would the real woman be able to tell him? Or were those eyes saying something that the real woman did not know?

Such arrogance, such triumphant anticipation.

And then Death had stepped in and taken the prey out of those eager, clutching young hands….

And the light had gone out of those passionately anticipating eyes. What were the eyes of Elsa Greer like now?

He went out of the room with one last look.

He thought: "She was too much alive."

He felt—a little—frightened….

Eight

THIS LITTLE PIG HAD ROAST BEEF

The house in Brook Street had Darwin tulips in the window boxes. Inside the hall a great vase of white lilac sent eddies of perfume towards the open front door.

A middle-aged butler relieved Poirot of his hat and stick. A footman appeared to take them and the butler murmured deferentially:

“Will you come this way, sir?”

Poirot followed him along the hall and down three steps. A door was opened, the butler pronounced his name with every syllable correct.

Then the door closed behind him and a tall thin man got up from a chair by the fire and came towards him.

Lord Dittisham was a man just under forty. He was not only a Peer of the Realm, he was a poet. Two of his fantastical poetic dramas had been staged at vast expense and had had a succès d’estime. His forehead was rather prominent, his chin was eager, and his eyes and his mouth unexpectedly beautiful.

He said:

“Sit down, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot sat down and accepted a cigarette from his host. Lord Dittisham shut the box, struck a match and held it for Poirot to light his cigarette, then he himself sat down and looked thoughtfully at his visitor.

Then he said:

“It is my wife you have come to see, I know.”

Poirot answered:

“Lady Dittisham was so kind as to give me an appointment.”

“Yes.”

There was a pause. Poirot hazarded:

“You do not, I hope, object, Lord Dittisham?”

The thin dreamy face was transformed by a sudden quick smile.

“The objections of husbands, Mr. Poirot, are never taken seriously in these days.”

“Then you do object?”

“No. I cannot say that. But I am, I must confess it, a little fearful of the effect upon my wife. Let me be quite frank. A great many years ago, when my wife was only a young girl, she passed through a terrible ordeal. She has, I hope, recovered from the shock. I have come to believe that she has forgotten it. Now you appear and necessarily your questions will reawaken these old memories.”

“It is regrettable,” said Hercule Poirot politely.

“I do not know quite what the result will be.”

“I can only assure you, Lord Dittisham, that I shall be as discreet as possible, and do all I can not to distress Lady Dittisham. She is, no doubt, of a delicate and nervous temperament.”

Then, suddenly and surprisingly, the other laughed. He said:

“Elsa? Elsa’s as strong as a horse!”

“Then—” Poirot paused diplomatically. The situation intrigued him.

Lord Dittisham said:

“My wife is equal to any amount of shocks. I wonder if you know her reason for seeing you?”

Poirot replied placidly: “Curiosity?”

A kind of respect showed in the other man’s eyes.

“Ah, you realize that?”

Poirot said:

“It is inevitable. Women will always see a private detective! Men will tell him to go to the devil.”

“Some women might tell him to go to the devil too.”

“After they have seen him—not before.”

“Perhaps.” Lord Dittisham paused. “What is the idea behind this book?”

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“One resurrects the old tunes, the old stage turns, the old costumes. One resurrects, too, the old murders.”

“Faugh!” said Lord Dittisham.

“Faugh! If you like. But you will not alter human nature by saying Faugh. Murder is a drama. The desire for drama is very strong in the human race.”

Lord Dittisham murmured:

“I know—I know….”

“So you see,” said Poirot, “the book will be written. It is my part to make sure that there shall be no gross misstatements, no tampering with the known facts.”

“The facts are public property I should have thought.”

"Yes. But not the interpretation of them."

Dittisham said sharply:

"Just what do you mean by that, Mr. Poirot?"

"My dear Lord Dittisham, there are many ways of regarding, for instance, a historical fact. Take an example: many books have been written on your Mary Queen of Scots, representing her as a martyr, as an unprincipled and wanton woman, as a rather simpleminded saint, as a murderess and an intriguer, or again as a victim of circumstance and fate! One can take one's choice."

"And in this case? Crale was killed by his wife—that is, of course, undisputed. At the trial my wife came in for some, in my opinion, undeserved calumny. She had to be smuggled out of court afterwards. Public opinion was very hostile to her."

"The English," said Poirot, "are a very moral people."

Lord Dittisham said: "Confound them, they are!"

He added—looking at Poirot: "And you?"

"Me," said Poirot. "I lead a very moral life. That is not quite the same thing as having moral ideas."

Lord Dittisham said:

"I've wondered sometimes what this Mrs. Crale was really like. All this injured wife business—I've a feeling there was something behind that."

"Your wife might know," agreed Poirot.

"My wife," said Lord Dittisham, "has never mentioned the case once."

Poirot looked at him with quickened interest. He said:

"Ah, I begin to see—"

The other said sharply:

“What do you see?”

Poirot replied with a bow:

“The creative imagination of the poet….”

Lord Dittisham rose and rang the bell. He said brusquely:

“My wife will be waiting for you.”

The door opened.

“You rang, my lord?”

“Take Mr. Poirot up to her ladyship.”

Up two flights of stairs, feet sinking into soft pile carpets. Subdued flood lighting. Money, money everywhere. Of taste, not so much. There had been a sombre austerity in Lord Dittisham’s room. But here, in the house, there was only a solid lavishness. The best. Not necessarily the showiest, or the most startling. Merely “expense no object,” allied to a lack of imagination.

Poirot said to himself: “Roast beef? Yes, roast beef!”

It was not a large room into which he was shown. The big drawing room was on the first floor. This was the personal sitting room of the mistress of the house and the mistress of the house was standing against the mantelpiece as Poirot was announced and shown in.

A phrase leapt into his startled mind and refused to be driven out.

She died young….

That was his thought as he looked at Elsa Dittisham who had been Elsa Greer.

He would never have recognized her from the picture Meredith Blake had shown him. That had been, above all, a picture of youth, a picture of vitality. Here there was no youth—there might never have been youth. And yet he realized, as he had not realized from Crale's picture, that Elsa was beautiful. Yes, it was a very beautiful woman who came forward to meet him. And certainly not old. After all, what was she? Not more than thirty-six now if she had been twenty at the time of the tragedy. Her black hair was perfectly arranged round her shapely head, her features were almost classic, her makeup was exquisite.

He felt a strange pang. It was, perhaps, the fault of old Mr. Jonathan, speaking of Juliet…No Juliet here—unless perhaps one could imagine Juliet a survivor—living on, deprived of Romeo…Was it not an essential part of Juliet's makeup that she should die young?

Elsa Greer had been left alive….

She was greeting him in a level rather monotonous voice.

"I am so interested, Mr. Poirot. Sit down and tell me what you want me to do?"

He thought:

"But she isn't interested. Nothing interests her."

Big grey eyes—like dead lakes.

Poirot became, as was his way, a little obviously foreign.

He exclaimed:

"I am confused, madame, veritably I am confused."

"Oh no, why?"

"Because I realize that this—this reconstruction of a past drama must be excessively painful to you!"

She looked amused. Yes, it was amusement. Quite genuine amusement.

She said:

“I suppose my husband put that idea into your head? He saw you when you arrived. Of course he doesn’t understand in the least. He never has. I’m not at all the sensitive sort of person he imagines I am.”

The amusement was still in her voice. She said:

“My father, you know, was a mill hand. He worked his way up and made a fortune. You don’t do that if you’re thin-skinned. I’m the same.”

Poirot thought to himself: Yes, that is true. A thin-skinned person would not have come to stay in Caroline Crale’s house.

Lady Dittisham said:

“What is it you want me to do?”

“You are sure, madame, that to go over the past would not be painful to you?”

She considered a minute, and it struck Poirot suddenly that Lady Dittisham was a very frank woman. She might lie from necessity but never from choice.

Elsa Dittisham said slowly:

“No, not painful. In a way, I wish it were.”

“Why?”

She said impatiently:

“It’s so stupid never to feel anything….”

And Hercule Poirot thought:

"Yes, Elsa Greer is dead…."

Aloud he said:

"At all events, Lady Dittisham, it makes my task very much easier."

She said cheerfully:

"What do you want to know?"

"Have you a good memory, madame?"

"Reasonably good, I think."

"And you are sure it will not pain you to go over those days in detail?"

"It won't pain me at all. Things can only pain you when they are happening."

"It is so with some people, I know."

Lady Dittisham said:

"That's what Edward—my husband—can't understand. He thinks the trial and all that was a terrible ordeal for me."

"Was it not?"

Elsa Dittisham said:

"No, I enjoyed it." There was a reflective satisfied quality in her voice. She went on: "God, how that old brute Depleach went for me. He's a devil, if you like. I enjoyed fighting him. He didn't get me down."

She looked at Poirot with a smile.

"I hope I'm not upsetting your illusions. A girl of twenty, I ought to have been prostrated, I suppose—agonized with shame or something. I wasn't. I didn't care what they said to me. I only wanted one thing."

“What?”

“To get her hanged, of course,” said Elsa Dittisham.

He noticed her hands—beautiful hands but with long curving nails. Predatory hands.

She said:

“You’re thinking me vindictive? So I am vindictive—to anyone who has injured me. That woman was to my mind the lowest kind of woman there is. She knew that Amyas cared for me—that he was going to leave her and she killed him so that I shouldn’t have him.”

She looked across at Poirot.

“Don’t you think that’s pretty mean?”

“You do not understand or sympathize with jealousy?”

“No, I don’t think I do. If you’ve lost, you’ve lost. If you can’t keep your husband, let him go with a good grace. It’s possessiveness I don’t understand.”

“You might have understood it if you had ever married him.”

“I don’t think so. We weren’t—” She smiled suddenly at Poirot. Her smile was, he felt, a little frightening. It was so far removed from any real feeling. “I’d like you to get this right,” she said. “Don’t think that Amyas Crale seduced an innocent young girl. It wasn’t like that at all! Of the two of us, I was responsible. I met him at a party and I fell for him—I knew I’d got to have him—”

A travesty—a grotesque travesty but—

And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay

And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world….

"Although he was married?"

"Trespassers will be prosecuted? It takes more than a printed notice to keep you from reality. If he was unhappy with his wife and could be happy with me, then why not? We've only one life to live."

"But it has been said he was happy with his wife."

Elsa shook her head.

"No. They quarrelled like cat and dog. She nagged at him. She was—oh, she was a horrible woman!"

She got up and lit a cigarette. She said with a little smile:

"Probably I'm unfair to her. But I really do think she was rather hateful."

Poirot said slowly: "It was a great tragedy."

"Yes, it was a great tragedy." She turned on him suddenly, into the dead monotonous weariness of her face something came quiveringly alive.

"It killed me, do you understand? It killed me. Ever since there's been nothing—nothing at all." Her voice dropped. "Emptiness!" She waved her hands impatiently. "Like a stuffed fish in a glass case!"

"Did Amyas Crale mean so much to you?"

She nodded. It was a queer confiding little nod—oddly pathetic. She said:

"I think I've always had a single-track mind." She mused sombrely. "I suppose—really—one ought to put a knife into oneself—like Juliet. But—but to do that is to acknowledge that you're done for—that life's beaten you."

"And instead?"

"There ought to be everything—just the same—once one has got over it. I did get over it. It didn't mean anything to me any more. I thought I'd go on to the next thing.”

Yes, the next thing. Poirot saw her plainly trying so hard to fulfil that crude determination. Saw her beautiful and rich, seductive to men, seeking with greedy predatory hands to fill up a life that was empty. Hero worship—a marriage to a famous aviator—then an explorer, that big giant of a man, Arnold Stevenson—possibly not unlike Amyas Crale physically—a reversion to the creative arts: Dittisham!

Elsa Dittisham said:

“I’ve never been a hypocrite! There’s a Spanish proverb I’ve always liked. Take what you want and pay for it, says God. Well, I’ve done that. I’ve taken what I wanted—but I’ve always been willing to pay the price.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“What you do not understand is that there are things that cannot be bought.”

She stared at him. She said:

“I don’t mean just money.”

Poirot said:

“No, no, I understand what you mean. But it is not everything in life that has its ticket, so much. There are things that are not for sale.”

“Nonsense!”

He smiled very faintly. In her voice was the arrogance of the successful mill hand who had risen to riches.

Hercule Poirot felt a sudden wave of pity. He looked at the ageless, smooth face, the weary eyes, and he remembered the girl whom Amyas Crale had painted….

Elsa Dittisham said:

“Tell me all about this book. What is the purpose of it? Whose idea is it?”

“Oh! my dear lady, what other purpose is there but to serve up yesterday’s sensation with today’s sauce.”

“But you’re not a writer?”

“No, I am an expert on crime.”

“You mean they consult you on crime books?”

“Not always. In this case, I have a commission.”

“From whom?”

“I am—what do you say—vetting this publication on behalf of an interested party.”

“What party?”

“Miss Carla Lemarchant.”

“Who is she?”

“She is the daughter of Amyas and Caroline Crale.”

Elsa stared for a minute. Then she said:

“Oh, of course, there was a child. I remember. I suppose she’s grown up now?”

“Yes, she is twenty-one.”

“What is she like?”

“She is tall and dark and, I think, beautiful. And she has courage and personality.”

Elsa said thoughtfully:

“I should like to see her.”

“She might not care to see you.”

Elsa looked surprised.

“Why? Oh, I see. But what nonsense! She can’t possibly remember anything about it. She can’t have been more than six.”

“She knows that her mother was tried for her father’s murder.”

“And she thinks it’s my fault?”

“It is a possible interpretation.”

Elsa shrugged her shoulders. She said:

“How stupid! If Caroline had behaved like a reasonable human being—”

“So you take no responsibility?”

“Why should I? I’ve nothing to be ashamed of. I loved him. I would have made him happy.” She looked across at Poirot. Her face broke up—suddenly, incredibly, he saw the girl of the picture. She said: “If I could make you see. If you could see it from my side. If you knew—”

Poirot leaned forward.

“But that is what I want. See, Mr. Philip Blake who was there at the time, he is writing me a meticulous account of everything that happened. Mr. Meredith Blake the same. Now if you—”

Elsa Dittisham took a deep breath. She said contemptuously:

“Those two! Philip was always stupid. Meredith used to trot round after Caroline—but he was quite a dear. But you won’t have any real idea from their accounts.”

He watched her, saw the animation rising in her eyes, saw a living woman take shape from a dead one. She said quickly and almost fiercely:

“Would you like the truth? Oh, not for publication. But just for yourself—”

“I will undertake not to publish without your consent.”

“I’d like to write down the truth…” She was silent a minute or two, thinking. He saw the smooth hardness of her cheeks falter and take on a younger curve, he saw life ebbing into her as the past claimed her again.

“To go back—to write it all down…To show you what she was—”

Her eyes flashed. Her breast heaved passionately.

“She killed him. She killed Amyas. Amyas who wanted to live—who enjoyed living. Hate oughtn’t to be stronger than love—but her hate was. And my hate for her is—I hate her—I hate her—I hate her….”

She came across to him. She stooped, her hand clutched at his sleeve. She said urgently:

“You must understand—you must—how we felt about each other. Amyas and I, I mean. There’s something—I’ll show you.”

She whirled across the room. She was unlocking a little desk, pulling out a drawer concealed inside a pigeon hole.

Then she was back. In her hand was a creased letter, the ink faded. She thrust it on him and Poirot had a sudden poignant memory of a child he had known who had thrust on him one of her treasures—a special shell picked up on the seashore and zealously guarded. Just so had that child stood back and watched him. Proud, afraid, keenly critical of his reception of her treasure.

He unfolded the faded sheets.

Elsa—you wonderful child! There never was anything as beautiful. And yet I’m afraid—I’m too old—a middle-aged, ugly tempered devil with no stability in me. Don’t trust me, don’t believe in me—I’m no good—apart from my work. The best of me is in that. There, don’t say you haven’t been warned.

Hell, my lovely—I’m going to have you all the same. I’d go to the devil for you and you know it. And I’ll paint a picture of you that will make the fat-headed world hold its sides and gasp! I’m crazy about you—I can’t sleep—I can’t eat. Elsa—Elsa—Elsa—I’m yours for ever—yours till death. Amyas.

Sixteen years ago. Faded ink, crumbling paper. But the words still alive—still vibrating….

He looked across at the woman to whom they had been written.

But it was no longer a woman at whom he looked.

It was a young girl in love.

He thought again of Juliet….

Nine

THIS LITTLE PIG HAD NONE

"May I ask why, Mr. Poirot?"

Hercule Poirot considered his answer to the question. He was aware of a pair of very shrewd grey eyes watching him out of the small wizened face.

He had climbed to the top floor of the bare building and knocked on the door of No. 584 Gillespie Buildings, which had come into existence to provide what were called "flatlets" for working women.

Here, in a small cubic space, existed Miss Cecilia Williams, in a room that was bedroom, sitting room, dining room, and, by judicious use of the gas ring, kitchen—a kind of cubby hole attached to it contined a quarter-length bath and the usual offices.

Meagre though these surroundings might be, Miss Williams had contrived to impress upon them her stamp of personality.

The walls were distempered an ascetic pale grey, and various reproductions hung upon them. Dante meeting Beatrice on a bridge—and that picture once described by a child as a "blind girl sitting on an orange and called, I don't know why, 'Hope.'" There were also two water colours of Venice and a sepia copy of Botticelli's "Primavera." On the top of the low chest of drawers were a large quantity of faded photographs, mostly, by their style of hairdressing, dating from twenty to thirty years ago.

The square of carpet was threadbare, the furniture battered and of poor quality. It was clear to Hercule Poirot that Cecilia Williams lived very near the bone. There was no roast beef here. This was the little pig that had none.

Clear, incisive and insistent, the voice of Miss Williams repeated its demand.

“You want my recollections of the Crale case? May I ask why?”

It had been said of Hercule Poirot by some of his friends and associates, at moments when he has maddened them most, that he prefers lies to truth and will go out of his way to gain his ends by means of elaborate false statements, rather than trust to the simple truth.

But in this case his decision was quickly made. Hercule Poirot did not come of that class of Belgian or French children who have had an English governess, but he reacted as simply and inevitably as various small boys who had been asked in their time: “Did you brush your teeth this morning, Harold (or Richard or Anthony)?” They considered fleetingly the possibility of a lie and instantly rejected it, replying miserably, “No, Miss Williams.”

For Miss Williams had what every successful child educator must have, that mysterious quality—authority! When Miss Williams said “Go up and wash your hands, Joan,” or “I expect you to read this chapter on the Elizabethan poets and be able to answer my questions on it,” she was invariably obeyed. It had never entered Miss Williams’ head that she would not be obeyed.

So in this case Hercule Poirot proffered no specious explanation of a book to be written on bygone crimes. Instead he narrated simply the circumstances in which Carla Lemarchant had sought him out.

The small, elderly lady in the neat shabby dress listened attentively.

She said:

“It interests me very much to have news of that child—to know how she has turned out.”

“She is a very charming and attractive young woman, with plenty of courage and a mind of her own.”

“Good,” said Miss Williams briefly.

“And she is, I may say, a very persistent person. She is not a person whom it is easy to refuse or put off.”

The ex-governess nodded thoughtfully. She asked:

“Is she artistic?”

“I think not.”

Miss Williams said drily:

“That’s one thing to be thankful for!”

The tone of the remark left Miss Williams’ views as to artists in no doubt whatever.

She added:

“From your account of her I should imagine that she takes after her mother rather than after her father.”

“Very possibly. That you can tell me when you have seen her. You would like to see her?”

“I should like to see her very much indeed. It is always interesting to see how a child you have known has developed.”

“She was, I suppose, very young when you last saw her?”

“She was five and a half. A very charming child—a little over-quiet, perhaps. Thoughtful. Given to playing her own little games and not inviting outside cooperation. Natural and unspoilt.”

Poirot said:

“It was fortunate she was so young.”

“Yes, indeed. Had she been older the shock of the tragedy might have had a very bad effect.”

“Nevertheless,” said Poirot, “one feels that there was a handicap—however little the child understood or was allowed to know, there would have been an atmosphere of mystery and evasion and an abrupt uprooting. These things are not good for a child."

Miss Williams replied thoughtfully:

"They may have been less harmful than you think."

Poirot said:

"Before we leave the subject of Carla Lemarchant—little Carla Crale that was, there is something I would like to ask you. If anyone can explain it, I think you can."

"Yes?"

Her voice was inquiring, noncommital.

Poirot waved his hands in an effort to express his meaning.

"There is a something—a nuance I cannot define—but it seems to me always that the child, when I mention her, is not given her full representational value. When I mention her, the response comes always with a vague surprise, as though the person to whom I speak had forgotten altogether that there was a child. Now surely, Mademoiselle, that is not natural? A child, under these circumstances, is a person of importance, not in herself, but as a pivotal point. Amyas Crale may have had reasons for abandoning his wife—or for not abandoning her. But in the usual breakup of a marriage the child forms a very important point. But here the child seems to count for very little. That seems to me—strange."

Miss Williams said quickly:

"You have put your finger on a vital point, Mr. Poirot. You are quite right. And that is partly why I said what I did just now—that Carla's transportation to different surroundings might have been in some respects a good thing for her. When she was older, you see, she might have suffered from a certain lack in her home life."

She leaned forward and spoke slowly and carefully.

“Naturally, in the course of my work, I have seen a good many aspects of the parent and child problem. Many children, most children, I should say, suffer from overattention on the part of their parents. There is too much love, too much watching over the child. It is uneasily conscious of this brooding, and seeks to free itself, to get away and be unobserved. With an only child that is particularly the case, and of course mothers are the worst offenders. The result on the marriage is often unfortunate. The husband resents coming second, seeks consolation—or rather flattery and attention—elsewhere, and a divorce results sooner or later. The best thing for a child, I am convinced, is to have what I should term healthy neglect on the part of both its parents. This happens naturally enough in the case of a large family of children and very little money. They are overlooked because the mother has literally no time to occupy herself with them. They realize quite well that she is fond of them, but they are not worried by too many manifestations of the fact.

“But there is another aspect. One does occasionally find a husband and wife who are so all-sufficient to each other, so wrapped up in each other, that the child of the marriage hardly seems very real to either of them. And in those circumstances I think a child comes to resent that fact, to feel defrauded and left out in the cold. You understand that I am not speaking of neglect in any way. Mrs. Crale, for instance, was what is termed an excellent mother, always careful of Carla’s welfare, of her health—playing with her at the right times and always kind and gay. But for all that, Mrs. Crale was really completely wrapped up in her husband. She existed, one might say, only in him and for him.” Miss Williams paused a minute and then said quietly: “That, I think, is the justification for what she eventually did.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“You mean that they were more like lovers than like husband and wife?”

Miss Williams, with a slight frown of distaste for foreign phraseology, said:

“You could certainly put it that way.”

“He was devoted to her as she was to him?”

“They were a devoted couple. But he, of course, was a man.”

Miss Williams contrived to put into that last word a wholly Victorian significance.

“Men—” said Miss Williams, and stopped.

As a rich property owner says “Bolsheviks”—as an earnest Communist says “Capitalists!”—as a good housewife says “Blackbeetles”—so did Miss Williams say “Men!”

From her spinster’s, governess’s life, there rose up a blast of fierce feminism. Nobody hearing her speak could doubt that to Miss Williams Men were the Enemy!

Poirot said: “You hold no brief for men?”

She answered drily:

“Men have the best of this world. I hope that it will not always be so.”

Hercule Poirot eyed her speculatively. He could quite easily visualize Miss Williams methodically and efficiently padlocking herself to a railing, and later hunger striking with resolute endurance. Leaving the general for the particular, he said:

“You did not like Amyas Crale?”

“I certainly did not like Mr. Crale. Nor did I approve of him. If I were his wife I should have left him. There are things that no woman should put up with.”

“But Mrs. Crale did put up with them?”

“Yes.”

“You thought she was wrong?”

“Yes, I do. A woman should have a certain respect for herself and not submit to humiliation.”

“Did you ever say anything of that kind to Mrs. Crale?”

“Certainly not. It was not my place to do so. I was engaged to educate Angela, not to offer unasked advice to Mrs. Crale. To do so would have been most impertinent.”

“You liked Mrs. Crale?”

“I was very fond of Mrs. Crale.” The efficient voice softened, held warmth and feeling. “Very fond of her and very sorry for her.”

“And your pupil—Angela Warren?”

“She was a most interesting girl—one of the most interesting pupils I have had. A really good brain. Undisciplined, quick-tempered, most difficult to manage in many ways, but really a very fine character.”

She paused and then went on:

“I always hoped that she would accomplish something worth while. And she has! You have read her book—on the Sahara? And she excavated those very interesting tombs in the Fayum! Yes, I am proud of Angela. I was not at Alderbury very long—two years and a half—but I always cherish the belief that I helped to stimulate her mind and encourage her taste for archaeology.”

Poirot murmured: “I understand that it was decided to continue her education by sending her to school. You must have resented that decision.”

“Not at all, Mr. Poirot. I thoroughly concurred with it.”

She paused and went:

“Let me make the matter clear to you. Angela was a dear girl—really a very dear girl—warm-hearted and impulsive—but she was also what I call a difficult girl. That is, she was at a difficult age. There is always a moment where a girl feels unsure of herself—neither child nor woman. At one minute Angela would be sensible and mature—quite grown up, in fact—but a minute later she would relapse into being a hoydenish child—playing mischievous tricks and being rude and losing her temper. Girls, you know, feel difficult at that age—they are terribly sensitive. Everything that is said to them they resent. They are annoyed at being treated like a child and then they suddenly feel shy at being treated like adults. Angela was in that state. She had fits of temper, would suddenly resent teasing and flare out—and then she would be sulky for days at a time, sitting about and frowning—then again she would be in wild spirits, climbing trees, rushing about with the garden boys, refusing to submit to any kind of authority."

Miss Williams paused and went on:

"When a girl gets to that stage, school is very helpful. She needs the stimulation of other minds—that, and the wholesome discipline of a community, help her to become a reasonable member of society. Angela's home conditions were not what I would have called ideal. Mrs. Crale spoiled her, for one thing. Angela had only to appeal to her and Mrs. Crale always backed her up. The result was that Angela considered she had first claim upon her sister's time and attention, and it was in these moods of hers that she used to clash with Mr. Crale. Mr. Crale naturally thought that he should come first—and intended to do so. He was really very fond of the girl—they were good companions and used to spar together quite amiably, but there were times when Mr. Crale used suddenly to resent Mrs. Crale's preoccupation with Angela. Like all men, he was a spoilt child; he expected everybody to make a fuss of him. Then he and Angela used to have a real set-to—and very often Mrs. Crale would take Angela's side. Then he would be furious. On the other hand, if she supported him, Angela would be furious. It was on these occasions that Angela used to revert to childish ways and play some spiteful trick on him. He had a habit of tossing off his drinks and she once put a lot of salt into his drink. The whole thing, of course, acted as an emetic, and he was inarticulate with fury. But what really brought things to a head was when she put a lot of slugs into his bed. He had a queer aversion for slugs. He lost his temper completely and said that the girl had got to be sent away to school. He wasn't going to put up with all this petty nonsense any more. Angela was terribly upset—though actually she had once or twice expressed a wish herself to go to a boarding school—but she chose to make a huge grievance of it. Mrs. Crale didn't want her to go but allowed herself to be persuaded—largely owing, I think, to what I said to her on the subject. I pointed out to her that it would be greatly to Angela's advantage, and that I thought it would really be a great benefit to the girl. So it was settled that she should go to Helston—a very fine school on the south coast—in the autumn term. But Mrs. Crale was still unhappy about it all those holidays. And Angela kept up a grudge against Mr. Crale whenever she remembered. It wasn't really serious, you understand, Mr. Poirot, but it made a kind of undercurrent that summer to—well—to everything else that was going on."

Poirot said: "Meaning—Elsa Greer?"

Miss Williams said sharply:

"Exactly." And shut her lips very tight after the word.

"What was your opinion of Elsa Greer?"

"I had no opinion of her at all. A thoroughly unprincipled young woman."

"She was very young."

"Old enough to know better. I can see no excuse for her—none at all."

"She fell in love with him, I suppose—"

Miss Williams interrupted with a snort.

"Fell in love with him indeed. I should hope, Mr. Poirot, that whatever our feelings, we can keep them in decent control. And we can certainly control our actions. That girl had absolutely no morals of any kind. It meant nothing to her that Mr. Crale was a married man. She was absolutely shameless about it all—cool and determined. Possibly she may have been badly brought up—but that's the only excuse I can find for her."

"Mr. Crale's death must have been a terrible shock to her."

"Oh, it was. And she herself was entirely to blame for it. I don't go as far as condoning murder, but all the same, Mr. Poirot, if ever a woman was driven to breaking point, that woman was Caroline Crale. I tell you frankly, there were moments when I would have liked to murder them both myself. Flaunting the girl in his wife's face, listening to her having to put up with the girl's insolence—and she was insolent, Mr. Poirot. Oh no, Amyas Crale deserved what he got. No man should treat his wife as he did and not be punished for it. His death was a just retribution."

Hercule Poirot said: "You feel strongly…."

The small woman looked at him with those indomitable grey eyes. She said:

"I feel very strongly about the marriage tie. Unless it is respected and upheld, a country degenerates. Mrs. Crale was a devoted and faithful wife. Her husband deliberately flouted her and introduced his mistress into her home. As I say, he deserved what he got. He goaded her past endurance and I, for one, do not blame her for what she did."

Poirot said slowly: "He acted very badly—that I admit—but he was a great artist, remember."

Miss Williams gave a terrific snort.

"Oh yes, I know. That's always the excuse nowadays. An artist! An excuse for every kind of loose living, for drunkenness, for brawling, for infidelity. And what kind of an artist was Mr. Crale, when all is said and done? It may be the fashion to admire his pictures for a few years. But they won't last. Why, he couldn't even draw! His perspective was terrible! Even his anatomy was quite incorrect. I know something of what I am talking about, Mr. Poirot. I studied painting for a time, as a girl, in Florence, and to anyone who knows and appreciates the great masters, these daubs of Mr. Crale's are really ludicrous. Just splashing a few colours about on the canvas—no construction—no careful drawing. No," she shook her head, "don't ask me to admire Mr. Crale's painting."

"Two of them are in the Tate Gallery," Poirot reminded her.

Miss Williams sniffed.

“Possibly. So is one of Mr. Epstein’s statues, I believe.”

Poirot perceived that, according to Miss Williams, the last word had been said. He abandoned the subject of art.

He said:

“You were with Mrs. Crale when she found the body?”

“Yes. She and I went down from the house together after lunch. Angela had left her pullover on the beach after bathing, or else in the boat. She was always very careless about her things. I parted from Mrs. Crale at the door of the Battery garden, but she called me back almost at once. I believe Mr. Crale had been dead over an hour. He was sprawled on the bench near his easel.”

“Was she terribly upset at the discovery?”

“What exactly do you mean by that, Mr. Poirot?”

“I am asking you what your impressions were at the time.”

“Oh, I see. Yes, she seemed to me quite dazed. She sent me off to telephone for the doctor. After all, we couldn’t be absolutely sure he was dead—it might have been a cataleptic seizure.”

“Did she suggest such a possibility?”

“I don’t remember.”

“And you went and telephoned?”

Miss William’s tone was dry and brusque.

“I had gone half up the path when I met Mr. Meredith Blake. I entrusted my errand to him and returned to Mrs. Crale. I thought, you see, she might have collapsed—and men are no good in a matter of that kind.”

“And had she collapsed?”

Miss Williams said drily:

“Mrs. Crale was quite in command of herself. She was quite different from Miss Greer, who made a hysterical and very unpleasant scene.”

“What kind of a scene?”

“She tried to attack Mrs. Crale.”

“You mean she realized that Mrs. Crale was responsible for Mr. Crale’s death?”

Miss Williams considered for a moment or two.

“No, she could hardly be sure of that. That—er—terrible suspicion had not yet arisen. Miss Greer just screamed out: ‘It’s all your doing, Caroline. You killed him. It’s all your fault.’ She did not actually say ‘You’ve poisoned him,’ but I think there is no doubt that she thought so.”

“And Mrs. Crale?”

Miss Williams moved restlessly.

“Must we be hypocritical, Mr. Poirot? I cannot tell you what Mrs. Crale really felt or thought at that moment. Whether it was horror at what she had done—”

“Did it seem like that?”

“N-no, n-no, I can’t say it did. Stunned, yes—and, I think, frightened. Yes, I am sure, frightened. But that is natural enough.”

Hercule Poirot said in a dissatisfied tone:

“Yes, perhaps that is natural enough…What view did she adopt officially as to her husband’s death?”

“Suicide. She said, very definitely from the first, that it must be suicide.”

“Did she say the same when she was talking to you privately, or did she put forward any other theory.”

“No. She—she—took pains to impress upon me that it must be suicide.”

Miss Williams sounded embarrassed.

“And what did you say to that?”

“Really, Mr. Poirot, does it matter what I said?”

“Yes, I think it does.”

“I don’t see why—”

But as though his expectant silence hypnotized her, she said reluctantly:

“I think I said: ‘Certainly, Mrs. Crale. It must have been suicide.’”

“Did you believe your own words?”

Miss Williams raised her head. She said firmly:

“No, I did not. But please understand, Mr. Poirot, that I was entirely on Mrs. Crale’s side, if you like to put it that way. My sympathies were with her, not with the police.”

“You would have liked to have seen her acquitted?”

Miss Williams said defiantly:

“Yes, I would.”

Poirot said:

“Then you are in sympathy with her daughter’s feelings?”

“I have every sympathy with Carla.”

“Would you have any objection to writing out for me a detailed account of the tragedy?”

“You mean for her to read?”

“Yes.”

Miss Williams said slowly:

“No, I have no objection. She is quite determined to go into the matter, is she?”

“Yes. I dare say it would have been preferable if the truth had been kept from her—”

Miss Williams interrupted him:

“No. It is always better to face the truth. It is no use evading unhappiness by tampering with facts. Carla has had a shock learning the truth—now she wants to know exactly how the tragedy came about. That seems to me the right attitude for a brave young woman to take. Once she knows all about it she will be able to forget it again and go on with the business of living her own life.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Poirot.

“I’m quite sure I’m right.”

“But you see, there is more to it than that. She not only wants to know—she wants to prove her mother innocent.”

Miss Williams said: “Poor child.”

“That is what you say, is it?”

Miss Williams said:

"I see now why you said that it might be better if she had never known. All the same, I think it is best as it is. To wish to find her mother innocent is a natural hope—and hard though the actual revelation may be, I think from what you say of her that Carla is brave enough to learn the truth and not flinch from it."

"You are sure it is the truth?"

"I don't understand you?"

"You see no loophole for believing that Mrs. Crale was innocent?"

"I don't think that possibility has ever been seriously considered."

"And yet she herself clung to the theory of suicide?"

Miss Williams said drily:

"The poor woman had to say something."

"Do you know that when Mrs. Crale was dying she left a letter for her daughter in which she solemnly swears that she is innocent?"

Miss Williams stared.

"That was very wrong of her," she said sharply.

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do. Oh, I dare say you are a sentimentalist like most men—"

Poirot interrupted indignantly:

"I am not a sentimentalist."

"But there is such a thing as false sentiment. Why write that, a lie, at such a solemn moment? To spare your child pain? Yes, many women would do that. But I should not have thought it of Mrs. Crale. She was a brave woman and a truthful woman. I should have thought it far more like her to have told her daughter not to judge.”

Poirot said with slight exasperation:

“You will not even consider then the possibility that what Caroline Crale wrote was the truth?”

“Certainly not!”

“And yet you profess to have loved her?”

“I did love her. I had a great affection and deep sympathy for her.”

“Well, then—”

Miss Williams looked at him in a very odd way.

“You don’t understand, Mr. Poirot. It doesn’t matter my saying this now—so long afterwards. You see, I happen to know that Caroline Crale was guilty!”

“What?”

“It’s true. Whether I did right in withholding what I knew at the time I cannot be sure—but I did withhold it. But you must take it from me, quite definitely, that I know Caroline Crale was guilty….”

Ten

THIS LITTLE PIG CRIED “WEE WEE WEE”

Angela Warren’s flat overlooked Regent’s Park. Here, on this spring day, a soft air wafted in through the open window and one might have had the illusion that one was in the country if it had not been for the steady menacing roar of the traffic passing below.

Poirot turned from the window as the door opened and Angela Warren came into the room.

It was not the first time he had seen her. He had availed himself of the opportunity to attend a lecture she had given at the Royal Geographical. It had been, he considered, an excellent lecture. Dry, perhaps, from the view of popular appeal. Miss Warren had an excellent delivery, she neither paused nor hesitated for a word. She did not repeat herself. The tones of her voice were clear and not unmelodious. She made no concessions to romantic appeal or love of adventure. There was very little human interest in the lecture. It was an admirable recital of concise facts, adequately illustrated by excellent slides, and with intelligent deductions from the facts recited. Dry, precise, clear, lucid, highly technical.

The soul of Hercule Poirot approved. Here, he considered, was an orderly mind.

Now that he saw her at close quarters he realized that Angela Warren might easily have been a very handsome woman. Her features were regular, though severe. She had finely marked dark brows, clear intelligent brown eyes, a fine pale skin. She had very square shoulders and a slightly mannish walk.

There was certainly about her no suggestion of the little pig who cries “Wee Wee.” But on the right cheek, disfiguring and puckering the skin, was that healed scar. The right eye was slightly distorted, the corner pulled downwards by it but no one would have realized that the sight of that eye was destroyed. It seemed to Hercule Poirot almost certain that she had lived with her disability so long that she was now completely unconscious of it. And it occurred to him that of the five people in whom he had become interested as a result of his investigations, those who might have been said to start with the fullest advantages were not those who had actually wrested the most success and happiness from life. Elsa, who might have been said to start with all advantages—youth, beauty, riches—had done worst. She was like a flower overtaken by untimely frost—still in bud—but without life. Cecilia Williams, to outward appearances, had no assets of which to boast. Nevertheless, to Poirot's eye, there was no despondency there and no sense of failure. Miss Williams's life had been interesting to her—she was still interested in people and events. She had that enormous mental and moral advantage of a strict Victorian upbringing denied to us in these days—she had done her duty in that station of life to which it had pleased God to call her, and that assurance encased her in an armour impregnable to the slings and darts of envy, discontent and regret. She had her memories, her small pleasures, made possible by stringent economies, and sufficient health and vigour to enable her still to be interested in life.

Now, in Angela Warren—that young creature handicapped by disfigurement and its consequent humiliation, Poirot believed he saw a spirit strengthened by its necessary fight for confidence and assurance. The undisciplined schoolgirl had given place to a vital and forceful woman, a woman of considerable mental power and gifted with abundant energy to accomplish ambitious purposes. She was a woman, Poirot felt sure, both happy and successful. Her life was full and vivid and eminently enjoyable.

She was not, incidentally, the type of woman that Poirot really liked. Though admiring the clear-cut precision of her mind, she had just a sufficient nuance of the femme formidable about her to alarm him as a mere man. His taste had always been for the flamboyant and extravagant.

With Angela Warren it was easy to come to the point of his visit. There was no subterfuge. He merely recounted Carla Lemarchant's interview with him.

Angela Warren's severe face lighted up appreciatively.

"Little Carla? She is over here? I would like to see her so much."

"You have not kept in touch with her?"

"Hardly as much as I should have done. I was a schoolgirl at the time she went to Canada, and I realized, of course, that in a year or two she would have forgotten us. Of late years, an occasional present at Christmas has been the only link between us. I imagined that she would, by now, be completely immersed in the Canadian atmosphere and that her future would lie over there. Better so, in the circumstances."

Poirot said: "One might think so, certainly. A change of name—a change of scene. A new life. But it was not to be so easy as that."

And he then told of Carla's engagement, the discovery she had made upon coming of age and her motives in coming to England.

Angela Warren listened quietly, her disfigured cheek resting on one hand. She betrayed no emotion during the recital, but as Poirot finished, she said quietly:

"Good for Carla."

Poirot was startled. It was the first time that he had met with this reaction. He said:

"You approve, Miss Warren?"

"Certainly. I wish her every success. Anything I can do to help, I will. I feel guilty, you know, that I haven't attempted anything myself."

"Then you think that there is a possibility that she is right in her views."

Angela Warren said sharply:

"Of course she's right. Caroline didn't do it. I've always known that."

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"You surprise me very much indeed, mademoiselle. Everybody else I have spoken to—"

She cut in sharply:

"You mustn't go by that. I've no doubt that the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming. My own conviction is based on knowledge—knowledge of my sister. I just know quite simply and definitely that Caro couldn't have killed anyone."

"Can one say that with certainty of any human creature?"

"Probably not in most cases. I agree that the human animal is full of curious surprises. But in Caroline's case there were special reasons—reasons which I have a better chance of appreciating than anyone else could."

She touched her damaged cheek.

"You see this? You've probably heard about it?" Poirot nodded. "Caroline did that. That's why I'm sure—I know—that she didn't do murder."

"It would not be a convincing argument to most people."

"No, it would be the opposite. It was actually used in that way, I believe. As evidence that Caroline had a violent and ungovernable temper! Because she had injured me as a baby, learned men argued that she would be equally capable of poisoning an unfaithful husband."

Poirot said:

"I, at least, appreciated the difference. A sudden fit of ungovernable rage does not lead you to first abstract a poison and then use it deliberately on the following day."

Angela Warren waved an impatient hand.

"That's not what I mean at all. I must try and make it plain to you. Supposing that you are a person normally affectionate and of kindly disposition—but that you are also liable to intense jealousy. And supposing that during the years of your life when control is most difficult, you do, in a fit of rage, come near to committing what is, in effect, murder. Think of the awful shock, the horror, the remorse that seizes upon you. To a sensitive person, like Caroline, that horror and remorse will never quite leave you. It never left her. I don't suppose I was consciously aware of it at the time, but looking back I recognize it perfectly. Caro was haunted, continually haunted, by the fact that she had injured me. That knowledge never left her in peace. It coloured all her actions. It explained her attitude to me. Nothing was too good for me. In her eyes, I must always come first. Half the quarrels she had with Amyas were on my account. I was inclined to be jealous of him and played all kinds of tricks on him. I pinched cat stuff to put in his drink, and once I put a hedgehog in his bed. But Caroline was always on my side."

Miss Warren paused, then she went on:

"It was very bad for me, of course. I got horribly spoilt. But that's neither here nor there. We're discussing the effect on Caroline. The result of that impulse to violence was a life-long abhorrence of any further act of the same kind. Caro was always watching herself, always in fear that something of that kind might happen again. And she took her own ways of guarding against it. One of these ways was a great extravagance of language. She felt (and I think, psychologically quite truly) that if she were violent enough in speech she would have no temptation to violence in action. She found by experience that the method worked. That's why I've heard Caro say things like 'I'd like to cut so and so in pieces and boil him slowly in oil.' And she'd say to me, or to Amyas, 'If you go on annoying me I shall murder you.' In the same way she quarrelled easily and violently. She recognized, I think, the impulse to violence that there was in her nature, and she deliberately gave it an outlet that way. She and Amyas used to have the most fantastic and lurid quarrels."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"Yes, there was evidence of that. They quarrelled like cat and dog, it was said."

Angela Warren said:

"Exactly. That's what is so stupid and misleading about evidence. Of course Caro and Amyas quarrelled! Of course they said bitter and outrageous and cruel things to each other! What nobody appreciates is that they enjoyed quarrelling. But they did! Amyas enjoyed it too. They were that kind of couple. They both of them liked drama and emotional scenes. Most men don't. They like peace. But Amyas was an artist. He liked shouting and threatening and generally being outrageous. It was like letting off steam to him. He was the kind of man who when he loses his collar stud bellows the house down. It sounds very odd, I know, but living that way with continual rows and makingsup was Amyas's and Caroline's idea of fun!"

She made an impatient gesture.

"If they'd only not hustled me away and let me give evidence, I'd have told them that." Then she shrugged her shoulders. "But I don't suppose they would have believed me. And anyway then it wouldn't have been as clear in my mind as it is now. It was the kind of thing I knew but hadn't thought about and certainly had never dreamed of putting into words."

She looked across at Poirot.

"You do see what I mean?"

He nodded vigorously.

"I see perfectly—and I realize the absolute rightness of what you have said. There are people to whom agreement is monotony. They require the stimulant of dissension to create drama in their lives."

"Exactly."

"May I ask you, Miss Warren, what were your own feelings at the time?"

Angela Warren sighed.

"Mostly bewilderment and helplessness, I think. It seemed a fantastic nightmare. Caroline was arrested very soon—about three days afterwards, I think. I can still remember my indignation, my dumb fury—and, of course, my childish faith that it was just a silly mistake, that it would be all right. Caro was chiefly perturbed about me—she wanted me kept right away from it all as far as possible. She got Miss Williams to take me away to some relations almost at once. The police had no objection. And then, when it was decided that my evidence would not be needed, arrangements were made for me to go to school abroad.

“I hated going, of course. But it was explained to me that Caro had me terribly on her mind and that the only way I could help her was by going.”

She paused. Then she said:

“So I went to Munich. I was there when—when the verdict was given. They never let me go to see Caro. Caro wouldn’t have it. That’s the only time, I think, when she failed in understanding.”

“You cannot be sure of that, Miss Warren. To visit someone dearly loved in a prison might make a terrible impression on a young sensitive girl.”

“Possibly.”

Angela Warren got up. She said:

“After the verdict, when she had been condemned, my sister wrote me a letter. I have never shown it to anyone. I think I ought to show it to you now. It may help you to understand the kind of person Caroline was. If you like you may take it to show to Carla also.”

She went to the door, then turning back she said:

“Come with me. There is a portrait of Caroline in my room.”

For a second time, Poirot stood gazing up at a portrait.

As a painting, Caroline Crale’s portrait was mediocre. But Poirot looked at it with interest—it was not its artistic value that interested him.

He saw a long oval face, a gracious line of jaw and a sweet, slightly timid expression. It was a face uncertain of itself, emotional, with a withdrawn hidden beauty. It lacked the forcefulness and vitality of her daughter's face—that energy and joy of life Carla Lemarchant had doubtless inherited from her father. This was a less positive creature. Yet, looking at the painted face, Hercule Poirot understood why an imaginative man like Quentin Fogg had not been able to forget her.

Angela Warren stood at his side again—a letter in her hand.

She said quietly:

"Now that you have seen what she was like—read her letter."

He unfolded it carefully and read what Caroline Crale had written sixteen years ago.

My darling little Angela,

You will hear bad news and you will grieve, but what I want to impress upon you is that it is all all right. I have never told you lies and I don't now when I say that I am actually happy—that I feel an essential rightness and a peace that I have never known before. It's all right, darling, it's all right. Don't look back and regret and grieve for me—go on with your life and succeed. You can, I know. It's all, all right, darling, and I'm going to Amyas. I haven't the least doubt that we shall be together. I couldn't have lived without him…Do this one thing for me—be happy. I've told you—I'm happy. One has to pay one's debts. It's lovely to feel peaceful.

Your loving sister,
Caro

Hercule Poirot read it through twice. Then he handed it back. He said:

"That is a very beautiful letter, mademoiselle—and a very remarkable one. A very remarkable one."

"Caroline," said Angela Warren, "was a very remarkable person."

"Yes, an unusual mind…You take it that this letter indicates innocence?"

“Of course it does!”

“It does not say so explicitly.”

“Because Caro would know that I’d never dream of her being guilty!”

“Perhaps—perhaps…But it might be taken another way. In the sense that she was guilty and that in expiating her crime she will find peace.”

It fitted in, he thought, with the description of her in court. And he experienced in this moment the strongest doubts he had yet felt of the course to which he had committed himself. Everything so far had pointed unswervingly to Caroline Crale’s guilt. Now, even her own words testified against her.

On the other side was only the unshaken conviction of Angela Warren. Angela had known her well, undoubtedly, but might not her certainty be the fanatical loyalty of an adolescent girl, up in arms for a dearly loved sister?

As though she had read his thoughts Angela Warren said:

“No, Mr. Poirot—I know Caroline wasn’t guilty.”

Poirot said briskly:

“The Bon Dieu knows I do not want to shake you on that point. But let us be practical. You say your sister was not guilty. Very well, then, what really happened?”

Angela nodded thoughtfully. She said:

“That is difficult, I agree. I suppose that, as Caroline said, Amyas committed suicide.”

“Is that likely from what you know of his character?”

“Very unlikely.”

“But you do not say, as in the first case, that you know it is impossible?”

"No, because, as I said just now, most people do do impossible things—that is to say things that seem out of character. But I presume, if you know them intimately, it wouldn't be out of character."

"You knew your brother-in-law well?"

"Yes, but not like I knew Caro. It seems to me quite fantastic that Amyas should have killed himself—but I suppose he could have done so. In fact, he must have done so."

"You cannot see any other explanation?"

Angela accepted the suggestion calmly, but not without a certain stirring of interest.

"Oh, I see what you mean…I've never really considered that possibility. You mean one of the other people killed him? That it was a deliberate cold-blooded murder…."

"It might have been, might it not?"

"Yes, it might have been…But it certainly seems very unlikely."

"More unlikely than suicide?"

"That's difficult to say…On the face of it, there was no reason for suspecting anybody else. There isn't now when I look back…."

"All the same, let us consider the possibility. Who of those intimately concerned would you say was—shall we say—the most likely person?"

"Let me think. Well, I didn't kill him. And the Elsa creature certainly didn't. She was mad with rage when he died. Who else was there? Meredith Blake? He was always very devoted to Caroline, quite a tame cat about the house. I suppose that might give him a motive in a way. In a book he might have wanted to get Amyas out of the way so that he himself could marry Caroline. But he could have achieved that just as well by letting Amyas go off with Elsa and then in due time consoling Caroline. Besides I really can't see Meredith as a murderer. Too mild and too cautious. Who else was there?”

Poirot suggested: “Miss Williams? Philip Blake?”

Angela’s grave face relaxed into a smile for a minute.

“Miss Williams? One can’t really make oneself believe that one’s governess could commit a murder! Miss Williams was always so unyielding and so full of rectitude.”

She paused a minute and then went on:

“She was devoted to Caroline, of course. Would have done anything for her. And she hated Amyas. She was a great feminist and disliked men. Is that enough for murder? Surely not.”

“It would hardly seem so,” agreed Poirot.

Angela went on:

“Philip Blake?” She was silent for some few moments. Then she said quietly: “I think, you know, if we’re just talking of likelihoods, he’s the most likely person.”

Poirot said:

“You interest me very much, Miss Warren. May I ask why you say that?”

“Nothing at all definite. But from what I remember of him, I should say he was a person of rather limited imagination.”

“And a limited imagination predisposes you to murder?”

“It might lead you to take a crude way of settling your difficulties. Men of that type get a certain satisfaction from action of some kind or other. Murder is a very crude business, don’t you think so?”

"Yes—I think you are right…It is definitely a point of view, that. But all the same, Miss Warren, there must be more to it than that. What motive could Philip Blake possibly have had?"

Angela Warren did not answer at once. She stood frowning down at the floor.

Hercule Poirot said:

"He was Amyas Crale's best friend, was he not?"

She nodded.

"But there is something in your mind, Miss Warren. Something that you have not yet told me. Were the two men rivals, perhaps, over the girl—over Elsa?"

Angela Warren shook her head.

"Oh, no, not Philip."

"What is there then?"

Angela Warren said slowly:

"Do you know the way that things suddenly come back to you—after years perhaps. I'll explain what I mean. Somebody told me a story once, when I was eleven. I saw no point in that story whatsoever. It didn't worry me—it just passed straight over my head. I don't believe I ever, as they say, thought of it again. But about two years ago, sitting in the stalls at a revue, that story came back to me, and I was so surprised that I actually said aloud, 'Oh, now I see the point of that silly story about the rice pudding.' And yet there had been no direct allusion on the same lines—only some fun sailing rather near the wind."

Poirot said: "I understand what you mean, mademoiselle."

"Then you will understand what I am going to tell you. I was once staying at a hotel. As I walked along a passage, one of the bedroom doors opened and a woman I knew came out. It was not her bedroom—and she registered the fact plainly on her face when she saw me.

“And I knew then the meaning of the expression I had once seen on Caroline’s face when at Alderbury she came out of Philip Blake’s room one night.”

She leant forward, stopping Poirot’s words.

“I had no idea at the time, you understand. I knew things—girls of the age I was usually do—but I didn’t connect them with reality. Caroline coming out of Philip Blake’s bedroom was just Caroline coming out of Philip Blake’s bedroom to me. It might have been Miss William’s room or my room. But what I did notice was the expression on her face—a queer expression that I didn’t know and couldn’t understand. I didn’t understand it until, as I have told you, the night in Paris when I saw that same expression on another woman’s face.”

Poirot said slowly:

“But what you tell me, Miss Warren, is sufficiently astonishing. From Philip Blake himself I got the impression that he disliked your sister and always had done so.”

Angela said:

“I know. I can’t explain it but there it is.”

Poirot nodded slowly. Already, in his interview with Philip Blake, he had felt vaguely that something did not ring true. That overdone animosity against Caroline—it had not, somehow, been natural.

And the words and phrases from his conversation with Meredith Blake came back to him. “Very upset when Amyas married—did not go near them for over a year….”

Had Philip, then, always been in love with Caroline? And had his love, when she chose Amyas, turned to bitterness and hate?

Yes, Philip had been too vehement—too biased. Poirot visualized him thoughtfully—the cheerful prosperous man with his golf and his comfortable house. What had Philip Blake really felt sixteen years ago.

Angela Warren was speaking.

“I don’t understand it. You see, I’ve no experience in love affairs—they haven’t come my way. I’ve told you this for what it’s worth in case—in case it might have a bearing on what happened.”

BOOK TWO

Narrative of Philip Blake

(Covering letter received with manuscript)

Dear Mr. Poirot,

I am fulfilling my promise and herewith find enclosed an account of the events relating to the death of Amyas Crale. After such a lapse of time I am bound to point out that my memories may not be strictly accurate, but I have put down what occurred to the best of my recollection.

Yours truly,
Philip Blake

Notes on Progress of Events Leading up to Murder of Amyas Crale on Sept., 19….

My friendship with deceased dates back to a very early period. His home and mine were next door to each other in the country, and our families were friends. Amyas Crale was a little over two years older than I was. We played together as boys, in the holidays, though we were not at the same school.

From the point of view of my long knowledge of the man I feel myself particularly qualified to testify as to his character and general outlook on life. And I will say this straight away—to anyone who knew Amyas Crale well—the notion of his committing suicide is quite ridiculous. Crale would never have taken his own life. He was far too fond of living! The contention of the defence at the trial that Crale was obsessed by conscience, and took poison in a fit of remorse, is utterly absurd to anyone who knew the man. Crale, I should say, had very little conscience, and certainly not a morbid one. Moreover, he and his wife were on bad terms, and I don't think he would have had any scruples about breaking up what was, to him, a very unsatisfactory married life. He was prepared to look after her financial welfare and that of the child of the marriage, and I am sure would have done so generously. He was a very generous man—and altogether a warmhearted and lovable person. Not only was he a great painter, but he was a man whose friends were devoted to him. As far as I know he had no enemies.

I had also known Caroline Crale for many years. I knew her before her marriage, when she used to come and stay at Alderbury. She was then a somewhat neurotic girl, subject to uncontrollable outbursts of temper, not without attraction, but unquestionably a difficult person to live with.

She showed her devotion to Amyas almost immediately. He, I do not think, was really very much in love with her. But they were frequently thrown together—she was, as I say, attractive, and they eventually became engaged. Amyas Crale's best friends were rather apprehensive about the marriage, as they felt that Caroline was quite unsuited to him.

This caused a certain amount of strain in the first few years between Crale's wife and Crale's friends, but Amyas was a loyal friend and was not disposed to give up his old friends at the bidding of his wife. After a few years, he and I were on the same old terms and I was a frequent visitor at Alderbury. I may add that I stood godfather to the little girl, Carla. This proves, I think, that Amyas considered me his best friend, and it gives me authority to speak for a man who can no longer speak for himself.

To come to the actual events of which I have been asked to write, I arrived down at Alderbury (so I see by an old diary) five days before the crime. That is, on Sept. 13th. I was conscious at once of a certain tension in the atmosphere. There was also staying in the house Miss Elsa Greer whom Amyas was painting at the time.

It was the first time I had seen Miss Greer in the flesh, but I had been aware of her existence for some time. Amyas had raved about her to me a month previously. He had met, he said, a marvellous girl. He talked about her so enthusiastically that I said to him jokingly: “Be careful, old boy, or you'll be losing your head again.” He told me not to be a bloody fool. He was painting the girl; he'd no personal interest in her. I said: “Tell that to the marines! I've heard you say that before.” He said: “This time it's different;” to which I answered somewhat cynically: “It always is!” Amyas then looked quite worried and anxious. He said: “You don't understand. She's just a girl. Not much more than a child.” He added that she had very modern views and was absolutely free from old-fashioned prejudices. He said: “She’s honest and natural and absolutely fearless!”

I thought to myself, though I didn’t say so, that Amyas had certainly got it badly this time. A few weeks later I heard comments from other people. It was said that the “Greer girl was absolutely infatuated.” Somebody else said that it was a bit thick of Amyas considering how young the girl was, whereupon somebody else sniggered and said that Elsa Greer knew her way about all right. Further remarks were that the girl was rolling in money and had always got everything she wanted, and also that “she was the one who was making most of the running.” There was a question as to what Crale’s wife thought about it—and the significant reply that she must be used to that sort of thing by now, to which someone demurred by saying they’d heard that she was jealous as hell and led Crale such an impossible life that any man would be justified in having a fling from time to time.

I mention all this because I think it is important that the state of affairs before I got down there should be fully realized.

I was interested to see the girl—she was remarkably good-looking and very attractive—and I was, I must admit, maliciously amused to note that Caroline was cutting up very rough indeed.

Amyas Crale himself was less light-hearted than usual. Though to anyone who did not know him well, his manner would have appeared much as usual, I who knew him so intimately noted at once various signs of strain, uncertain temper, fits of moody abstraction, general irritability of manner.

Although he was always inclined to be moody when painting, the picture he was at work upon did not account entirely for the strain he showed. He was pleased to see me and said as soon as we were alone: “Thank goodness you’ve turned up, Phil. Living in a house with four women is enough to send any man clean off his chump. Between them all they’ll send me into a lunatic asylum.”

It was certainly an uncomfortable atmosphere. Caroline, as I said, was obviously cutting up rough about the whole thing. In a polite, well-bred way, she was ruder to Elsa than one would believe possible—without a single actually offensive word. Elsa herself was openly and flagrantly rude to Caroline. She was top dog and she knew it—and no scruples of good breeding restrained her from overt bad manners. The result was that Crale spent most of his time scrapping with the girl Angela when he wasn't painting. They were usually on affectionate terms, though they teased and fought a good deal. But on this occasion there was an edge in everything Amyas said or did, and the two of them really lost their tempers with each other. The fourth member of the party was the governess. "A sour-faced hag," Amyas called her. "She hates me like poison. Sits there with her lips set together, disapproving of me without stopping."

It was then that he said:

"God damn all women! If a man is to have any peace he must steer clear of women!"

"You oughtn't to have married," I said. "You're the sort of man who ought to have kept clear of domestic ties."

He replied that it was too late to talk about that now. He added that no doubt Caroline would be only too glad to get rid of him. That was the first indication I had that something unusual was in the wind.

I said: "What's all this? Is this business with the lovely Elsa serious then?" He said with a sort of groan:

"She is lovely, isn't she? Sometimes I wish I'd never seen her."

I said: "Look here, old boy, you must take a hold on yourself. You don't want to get tied up with any more women." He looked at me and laughed. He said: "It's all very well for you to talk. I can't let women alone—simply can't do it—and if I could, they wouldn't let me alone!" Then he shrugged those great shoulders of his, grinned at me and said: "Oh well, it will all pan out in the end, I expect. And you must admit the picture is good?"

He was referring to the portrait he was doing of Elsa, and although I had very little technical knowledge of painting, even I could see that it was going to be a work of especial power.

Whilst he was painting, Amyas was a different man. Although he would growl, groan, frown, swear extravagantly, and sometimes hurl his brushes away, he was really intensely happy.

It was only when he came back to the house for meals that the hostile atmosphere between the women got him down. That hostility came to a head on Sept. 17th. We had had an embarrassing lunch. Elsa had been particularly—really, I think insolent is the only word for it! She had ignored Caroline pointedly, persistently addressing the conversation to Amyas as though he and she were alone in the room. Caroline had talked lightly and gaily to the rest of us, cleverly contriving so that several perfectly innocent-sounding remarks should have a sting. She hadn't got Elsa Greer's scornful honesty—with Caroline every thing was oblique, suggested rather than said.

Things came to a head after lunch in the drawing room just as we were finishing coffee. I had commented on a carved head in highly polished beechwood—a very curious thing, and Caroline said: "That is the work of a young Norwegian sculptor. Amyas and I admire his work very much. We hope to go and see him next summer." That calm assumption of possession was too much for Elsa. She was never one to let a challenge pass. She waited a minute or two and then she spoke in her clear, rather overemphasized voice. She said: "This would be a lovely room if it was properly fixed. It's got far too much furniture in it. When I'm living here I shall take all the rubbish out and just leave one or two good pieces. And I shall have copper-coloured curtains, I think—so that the setting sun will just catch them through that big western window." She turned to me and said. "Don't you think that would be rather lovely?"

I didn't have time to answer. Caroline spoke, and her voice was soft and silky and what I can only describe as dangerous. She said:

"Are you thinking of buying this place, Elsa?"

Elsa said: "It won't be necessary for me to buy it."

Caroline said: “What do you mean?” And there was no softness in her voice now. It was hard and metallic. Elsa laughed. She said: “Must we pretend? Come now, Caroline, you know very well what I mean!”

Caroline said: “I’ve no idea.”

Elsa said to that: “Don’t be such an ostrich. It’s no good pretending you don’t see and know all about it. Amyas and I care for each other. This isn’t your home. It’s his. And after we’re married I shall live here with him!”

Caroline said: “I think you’re crazy.”

Elsa said: “Oh no, I’m not, my dear, and you know it. It would be much simpler if we were honest with each other. Amyas and I love each other—you’ve seen that clearly enough. There’s only one decent thing for you to do. You’ve got to give him his freedom.”

Caroline said: “I don’t believe a word of what you are saying.”

But her voice was unconvincing. Elsa had got under her guard all right.

And at that minute Amyas Crale came into the room and Elsa said with a laugh:

“If you don’t believe me, ask him.”

And Caroline said: “I will.”

She didn’t pause at all. She said:

“Amyas, Elsa says you want to marry her. Is this true?”

Poor Amyas. I felt sorry for him. It makes a man feel a fool to have a scene of that kind forced upon him. He went crimson and started blustering. He turned on Elsa and asked her why the devil she couldn’t have held her tongue?

Caroline said: “Then it is true?”

He didn’t say anything, just stood there passing his finger round inside the neck of his shirt. He used to do that as a kid when he got into a jam of any kind. He said—and he tried to make the words sound dignified and authoritative—and of course couldn’t manage it, poor devil:

“I don’t want to discuss it.”

Caroline said: “But we’re going to discuss it!”

Elsa chipped in and said:

“I think it’s only fair to Caroline that she should be told.”

Caroline said, very quietly:

“Is it true, Amyas?”

He looked a bit ashamed of himself. Men do when women pin them down in a corner.

She said:

“Answer me, please. I’ve got to know.”

He flung up his head then—rather the way a bull does in the bullring. He snapped out:

“It’s true enough—but I don’t want to discuss it now.”

And he turned and strode out of the room. I went after him. I didn’t want to be left with the women. I caught up with him on the terrace. He was swearing. I never knew a man swear more heartily. Then he raved:

“Why couldn’t she hold her tongue? Why the devil couldn’t she hold her tongue? Now the fat’s in the fire. And I’ve got to finish that picture—do you hear, Phil? It’s the best thing I’ve done. The best thing I’ve ever done in my life. And a couple of damn’ fool women want to muck it up between them!”

Then he calmed down a little and said women had no sense of proportion.

I couldn’t help smiling a little. I said:

“Well, dash it all, old boy, you have brought this on yourself.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said, and groaned. Then he added: “But you must admit, Phil, that a man couldn’t be blamed for losing his head about her. Even Caroline ought to understand that.”

I asked him what would happen if Caroline got her back up and refused to give him a divorce.

But by now he had gone off into a fit of abstraction. I repeated the remark and he said absently:

“Caroline would never be vindictive. You don’t understand, old boy.”

“There’s the child,” I pointed out.

He took me by the arm.

“Phil, old boy, you mean well—but don’t go on croaking like a raven. I can manage my affairs. Everything will turn out all right. You’ll see if it doesn’t.”

That was Amyas all over—an absolutely unjustified optimist. He said now, cheerfully:

“To hell with the whole pack of them!”

I don’t know whether we would have said anything more, but a few minutes later Caroline swept out on the terrace. She’d got a hat on, a queer, flopping, dark-brown hat, rather attractive.

She said in an absolutely ordinary, everyday voice:

“Take off that paint-stained coat, Amyas. We’re going over to Meredith’s to tea—don’t you remember?”

He stared, stammered a bit as he said:

"Oh, I'd forgotten. Yes, of c-c-course we are."

She said:

"Then go and try and make yourself look less like a rag-and-bone man."

Although her voice was quite natural, she didn't look at him. She moved over towards a bed of dahlias and began picking off some of the overblown flowers.

Amyas turned round slowly and went into the house.

Caroline talked to me. She talked a good deal. About the chances of the weather lasting. And whether there might be mackerel about, and if so Amyas and Angela and I might like to go fishing. She was really amazing. I've got to hand it to her.

But I think, myself, that that showed the sort of woman she was. She had enormous strength of will and complete command over herself. I don't know whether she'd made up her mind to kill him then—but I shouldn't be surprised. And she was capable of making her plans carefully and unemotionally, with an absolutely clear and ruthless mind.

Caroline Crale was a very dangerous woman. I ought to have realized then that she wasn't prepared to take this thing lying down. But like a fool I thought that she had made up her mind to accept the inevitable—or else possibly she thought that if she carried on exactly as usual Amyas might change his mind.

Presently the others came out. Elsa looking defiant—but at the same time triumphant. Caroline took no notice of her. Angela really saved the situation. She came out arguing with Miss Williams that she wasn't going to change her skirt for anyone. It was quite all right—good enough for darling old Meredith anyway—he never noticed anything.

We got off at last. Caroline walked with Angela. And I walked with Amyas. And Elsa walked by herself—smiling.

I didn’t admire her myself—too violent a type—but I have to admit that she looked incredibly beautiful that afternoon. Women do when they’ve got what they want.

I can’t remember the events of that afternoon clearly at all. It’s all blurred. I remember old Merry coming out to meet us. I think we walked round the garden first. I remember having a long discussion with Angela about the training of terriers for ratting. She ate an incredible lot of apples, and tried to persuade me to do so too.

When we got back to the house, tea was going on under the big cedar tree. Merry, I remember, was looking very upset. I suppose either Caroline or Amyas had told him something. He was looking doubtfully at Caroline, and then he stared at Elsa. The old boy looked thoroughly worried. Of course Caroline liked to have Meredith on a string more or less, the devoted, platonic friend who would never, never go too far. She was that kind of woman.

After tea Meredith had a hurried word with me. He said:

“Look here, Phil, Amyas can’t do this thing!”

I said:

“Make no mistake, he’s going to do it.”

“He can’t leave his wife and child and go off with this girl. He’s years older than she is. She can’t be more than eighteen.”

I said to him that Miss Greer was a fully sophisticated twenty.

He said: “Anyway, that’s under age. She can’t know what she’s doing.”

Poor old Meredith. Always the chivalrous pukka sahib. I said:

“Don’t worry, old boy. She knows what she’s doing, and she likes it!”

That’s all we had the chance of saying. I thought to myself that probably Merry felt disturbed at the thought of Caroline being a deserted wife. Once the divorce was through she might expect her faithful Dobbin to marry her. I had an idea that hopeless devotion was really far more in his line. I must confess that that side of it amused me.

Curiously enough I remember very little about our visit to Meredith’s stink room. He enjoyed showing people his hobby. Personally I always found it very boring. I suppose I was in there with the rest of them when he gave a dissertation on the efficacy of coniine, but I don’t remember it. And I didn’t see Caroline pinch the stuff. As I’ve said, she was a very adroit woman. I do remember Meredith reading aloud the passage from Plato describing Socrates’ death. Very boring I thought it. Classics always did bore me.

There’s nothing much more I can remember about that day. Amyas and Angela had a first-class row, I know, and the rest of us rather welcomed it. It avoided other difficulties. Angela rushed off to bed with a final vituperative outburst. She said A, she’d pay him out. B, she wished he were dead. C, she hoped he’d die of leprosy, it would serve him right. D, she wished a sausage would stick to his nose, like in the fairy story, and never come off. When she’d gone we all laughed, we couldn’t help it, it was such a funny mixture.

Caroline went up to bed immediately afterwards. Miss Williams disappeared after her pupil. Amyas and Elsa went off together into the garden. It was clear that I wasn’t wanted. I went for a stroll by myself. It was a lovely night.

I came down late the following morning. There was no one in the dining room. Funny the things you do remember. I remember the taste of the kidneys and bacon I ate quite well. They were very good kidneys. Devilled.

Afterwards I wandered out looking for everybody. I went outside, didn’t see anybody, smoked a cigarette, encountered Miss Williams running about looking for Angela, who had played truant as usual when she ought to have been mending a torn frock. I went back into the hall and realized that Amyas and Caroline were having a set-to in the library. They were talking very loud. I heard her say:

“You and your women! I’d like to kill you. Some day I will kill you.” Amyas said: “Don’t be a fool, Caroline.” And she said: “I mean it, Amyas.”

Well, I didn’t want to overhear any more. I went out again. I wandered along the terrace the other way and came across Elsa.

She was sitting on one of the long seats. The seat was directly under the library window, and the window was open. I should imagine that there wasn’t much she had missed of what was going on inside. When she saw me she got up as cool as a cucumber and came towards me. She was smiling. She took my arm and said:

“Isn’t it a lovely morning?”

It was a lovely morning for her all right! Rather a cruel girl. No, I think merely honest and lacking in imagination. What she wanted herself was the only thing that she could see.

We’d been standing on the terrace talking for about five minutes, when I heard the library door bang and Amyas Crale came out. He was very red in the face.

He caught hold of Elsa unceremoniously by the shoulder.

He said: “Come on, time for you to sit. I want to get on with that picture.”

She said: “All right. I’ll just go up and get a pullover. There’s a chilly wind.”

She went into the house.

I wondered if Amyas would say anything to me, but he didn’t say much. Just: “These women!”

I said: “Cheer up, old boy.”

Then we neither of us said anything till Elsa came out of the house again.

They went off together down to the Battery garden. I went into the house. Caroline was standing in the hall. I don’t think she even noticed me. It was a way of hers at times. She’d seem to go right away—to get inside herself as it were. She just murmured something. Not to me—to herself. I just caught the words:

“It’s too cruel….”

That’s what she said. Then she walked past me and upstairs, still without seeming to see me—just like a person intent on some inner vision. I think myself (I’ve no authority for saying this, you understand) that she went up to get the stuff, and that it was then she decided to do what she did do.

And just at that moment the telephone rang. In some houses one would wait for the servants to answer it, but I was so often at Alderbury that I acted more or less as one of the family. I picked up the receiver.

It was my brother Meredith’s voice that answered. He was very upset. He explained that he had been into his laboratory and that the coniine bottle was half-empty.

I don’t need to go again over all the things I know now I ought to have done. The thing was so startling and I was foolish enough to be taken aback. Meredith was dithering a good bit at the other end. I heard someone on the stairs, and I just told him sharply to come over at once.

I myself went down to meet him. In case you don’t know the lay of the land, the shortest way from one estate to the other was by rowing across a small creek. I went down the path to where the boats were kept by a small jetty. To do so I passed under the wall of the Battery garden. I could hear Elsa and Amyas talking as he painted. They sounded very cheerful and carefree. Amyas said it was an amazingly hot day (so it was, very hot for September), and Elsa said that sitting where she was, poised on the battlements, there was a cold wind blowing in from the sea. And then she said: “I’m horribly stiff from posing. Can’t I have a rest, darling?” And I heard Amyas cry out: “Not on your life. Stick it. You’re a tough girl. And this is going good, I tell you.” I heard Elsa say, “Brute” and laugh, as I went out of earshot.

Meredith was just rowing himself across from the other side. I waited for him. He tied up the boat and came up the steps. He was looking very white and worried. He said to me:

“Your head’s better than mine, Philip. What ought I to do? That stuff’s dangerous.”

I said: “Are you absolutely sure about this?” Meredith, you see, was always a rather vague kind of chap. Perhaps that’s why I didn’t take it as seriously as I ought to have done. And he said he was quite sure. The bottle had been full yesterday afternoon.

I said: “And you’ve absolutely no idea who pinched it?”

He said none whatever and asked me what I thought. Could it have been one of the servants? I said I supposed it might have been, but it seemed unlikely to me. He always kept the door locked, didn’t he? Always, he said, and then began a rigmarole about having found the window a few inches open at the bottom. Someone might have got in that way.

“A chance burglar?” I asked sceptically. “It seems to me, Meredith, that there are some very nasty possibilities.”

He said what did I really think? And I said, if he was sure he wasn’t making a mistake, that probably Caroline had taken it to poison Elsa with—or that alternatively Elsa had taken it to get Caroline out of the way and straighten the path of true love.

Meredith twittered a bit. He said it was absurd and melodramatic and couldn’t be true. I said: “Well, the stuff’s gone. What’s your explanation?” He hadn’t any, of course. Actually thought just as I did, but didn’t want to face the fact.

He said again: “What are we to do?”

I said, damned fool that I was: “We must think it over carefully. Either you’d better announce your loss, straight out when everybody’s there, or else you’d better get Caroline alone and tax her with it. If you’re convinced she’s nothing to do with it, adopt the same tactics for Elsa.” He said: “A girl like that! She couldn’t have taken it.” I said I wouldn’t put it past her.

We were walking up to the house as we talked. After that last remark of mine neither of us spoke for some few seconds. We were rounding the Battery garden again and I heard Caroline’s voice.

I thought perhaps a three-handed row was going on, but actually it was Angela that they were discussing. Caroline was protesting. She said: “It’s very hard on the girl.” And Amyas made some impatient rejoinder. Then the door to the garden opened just as we came abreast of it. Amyas looked a little taken aback at seeing us. Caroline was just coming out. She said: “Hallo, Meredith. We’ve been discussing the question of Angela’s going to school. I’m not at all sure it’s the right thing for her.” Amyas said: “Don’t fuss about the girl. She’ll be all right. Good riddance.”

Just then Elsa came running down the path from the house. She had some sort of scarlet jumper in her hand. Amyas growled:

“Come along. Get back into the pose. I don’t want to waste time.”

He went back to where his easel was standing. I noticed that he staggered a bit and I wondered if he had been drinking. A man might easily be excused for doing so with all the fuss and the scenes.

He grumbled.

“The beer here is red hot. Why can’t we keep some ice down here?”

And Caroline Crale said:

“I’ll send you down some beer just off the ice.”

Amyas grunted out:

“Thanks.”

Then Caroline shut the door of the Battery garden and came up with us to the house. We sat down on the terrace and she went into the house. About five minutes later Angela came along with a couple of bottles of beer and some glasses. It was a hot day and we were glad to see it. As we were drinking it Caroline passed us. She was carrying another bottle and said she would take it down to Amyas. Meredith said he'd go, but she was quite firm that she'd go herself. I thought—fool that I was—that it was just her jealousy. She couldn't stand those two being alone down there. That was what had taken her down there once already with the weak pretext of arguing about Angela's departure.

She went off down that zigzag path—and Meredith and I watched her go. We'd still not decided anything, and now Angela clamoured that I should come bathing with her. It seemed impossible to get Meredith alone. I just said to him: "After lunch." And he nodded.

Then I went off bathing with Angela. We had a good swim—across the creek and back, and then we lay out on the rocks sunbathing. Angela was a bit taciturn and that suited me. I made up my mind that directly after lunch I'd take Caroline aside and accuse her point-blank of having stolen the stuff. No use letting Meredith do it—he'd be too weak. No, I'd tax her with it outright. After that she'd have to give it back, or even if she didn't she wouldn't dare use it. I was pretty sure it must be her on thinking things over. Elsa was far too sensible and hard-boiled a young woman to risk tampering with poisons. She had a hard head and would take care of her own skin. Caroline was made of more dangerous stuff—unbalanced, carried away by impulses and definitely neurotic. And still, you know, at the back of my mind was the feeling that Meredith might have made a mistake. Or some servant might have been poking about in there and split the stuff and then not dared to own up. You see, poison seems such a melodramatic thing—you can't believe in it.

Not till it happens.

It was quite late when I looked at my watch, and Angela and I fairly raced up to lunch. They were just sitting down—all but Amyas, who had remained down in the Battery painting. Quite a normal thing for him to do—and privately I thought him very wise to elect to do it today. Lunch was likely to have been an awkward meal.

We had coffee on the terrace. I wish I could remember better how Caroline looked and acted. She didn't seem excited in any way. Quiet and rather sad is my impression. What a devil that woman was!

For it is a devilish thing to do, to poison a man in cold blood. If there had been a revolver about and she caught it up and shot him—well, that might have been understandable. But this cold, deliberate, vindictive poisoning…. And so calm and collected.

She got up and said she'd take his coffee to him in the most natural way possible. And yet she knew—she must have known—that by now she'd find him dead. Miss Williams went with her. I don't remember if that was at Caroline's suggestion or not. I rather think it was.

The two women went off together. Meredith strolled away shortly afterwards. I was just making an excuse to go after him, when he came running up the path again. His face was grey. He gasped out:

"We must get a doctor—quick—Amyas—"

I sprang up.

"Is he ill—dying?"

Meredith said:

"I'm afraid he's dead…."

We'd forgotten Elsa for the minute. But she let out a sudden cry. It was like the wail of a banshee.

She cried:

"Dead? Dead?…" And then she ran. I didn't know anyone could move like that—like a deer—like a stricken thing. And like an avenging Fury, too.

Meredith panted out:

"Go after her. I'll telephone. Go after her. You don't know what she'll do."

I did go after her—and it’s as well I did. She might quite easily have killed Caroline. I’ve never seen such grief and such frenzied hate. All the veneer of refinement and education was stripped off. You could see her father and her father’s mother and father had been millhands. Deprived of her lover, she was just elemental woman. She’d have clawed Caroline’s face, torn her hair, hurled her over the parapet if she could. She thought for some reason or other that Caroline had knifed him. She’d got it all wrong—naturally.

I held her off, and then Miss Williams took charge. She was good, I must say. She got Elsa to control herself in under a minute—told her she’d got to be quiet and that we couldn’t have this noise and violence going on. She was a tartar, that woman. But she did the trick. Elsa was quiet—just stood there gasping and trembling.

As for Caroline, so far as I am concerned, the mask was right off. She stood there perfectly quiet—you might have said dazed. But she wasn’t dazed. It was her eyes gave her away. They were watchful—fully aware and quietly watchful. She’d begun, I suppose, to be afraid….

I went up to her and spoke to her. I said it quite low. I don’t think either of the two women overheard.

I said:

“You damned murderess, you’ve killed my best friend.”

She shrank back. She said:

“No—oh no—he—he did it himself….”

I looked her full in the eyes. I said:

“You can tell that story—to the police.”

She did—and they didn’t believe her.

End of Philip Blake’s Statement.

Narrative of Meredith Blake

Dear Mr. Poirot,

As I promised you, I have set down in writing an account of all I can remember relating to the tragic events that happened sixteen years ago. First of all I would like to say that I have thought over carefully all you said to me at our recent meeting. And on reflection I am more convinced than I was before that it is in the highest degree unlikely that Caroline Crale poisoned her husband. It always seemed incongruous, but the absence of any other explanation and her own attitude led me to follow, sheep-like, the opinion of other people and to say with them—that if she didn't do it, what explanation could there be?

Since seeing you I have reflected very carefully on the alternative solution presented at the time and brought forward by the defence at the trial. That is, that Amyas Crale took his own life. Although from what I knew of him that solution seemed quite fantastic at the time, I now see fit to modify my opinion. To begin with, and highly significant, is the fact that Caroline believed it. If we are now to take it that that charming and gentle lady was unjustly convicted, then her own frequently reiterated belief must carry great weight. She knew Amyas better than anyone else. If she thought suicide possible, then suicide must have been possible in spite of the scepticism of his friends.

I will advance the theory, therefore, that there was in Amyas Crale some core of conscience, some undercurrent of remorse and even despair at the excesses to which his temperament led him, of which only his wife was aware. This, I think, is a not impossible supposition. He may have shown that side of himself only to her. Though it is inconsistent with anything I ever heard him say, yet it is nevertheless a truth that in most men there is some unsuspected and inconsistent streak which often comes as a surprise to people who have known them intimately. A respected and austere man is discovered to have had a coarser side to his life hidden. A vulgar moneymaker has, perhaps, a secret appreciation of some delicate work of art. Hard and ruthless people have been convicted of unsuspected hidden kindnesses. Generous and jovial men have been shown to have a mean and cruel side to them.

So it may be that in Amyas Crale there ran a strain of morbid self-accusation, and that the more he blustered out his egoism and his right to do as he pleased, the more strongly that secret conscience of his worked. It is improbable, on the face of it, but I now believe that it must have been so. And I repeat again, Caroline herself held steadfastly to that view. That, I repeat, is significant!

And now to examine facts, or rather my memory of facts, in the light of that new belief.

I think that I might with relevance include here a conversation I held with Caroline some weeks before the actual tragedy. It was during Elsa Greer's first visit to Alderbury.

Caroline, as I have told you, was aware of my deep affection and friendship for her. I was, therefore, the person in whom she could most easily confide. She had not been looking very happy. Nevertheless I was surprised when she suddenly asked me one day whether I thought Amyas really cared very much for this girl he had brought down.

I said: "He's interested in painting her. You know what Amyas is."

She shook her head and said:

"No, he's in love with her."

"Well—perhaps a little."

"A great deal, I think."

I said: "She is unusually attractive, I admit. And we both know that Amyas is susceptible. But you must know by now, my dear, that Amyas really only cares for one person—and that is you. He has these infatuations—but they don't last. You are the one person to him, and though he behaves badly, it does not really affect his feeling for you."

Caroline said: “That is what I always used to think.”

“Believe me, Caro,” I said. “It is so.”

She said: “But this time, Merry, I’m afraid. That girl is so—so terribly sincere. She’s so young—and so intense. I’ve a feeling that this time—it’s serious.”

I said: “But the very fact that she is so young and, as you say, so sincere, will protect her. On the whole, women are fair game to Amyas, but in the case of a girl like this it will be different.”

She said: “Yes, that’s what I’m afraid of—it will be different.”

And she went on. “I’m thirty-four, you know, Merry. And we’ve been married ten years. In looks I can’t hold a candle to this Elsa child, and I know it.”

I said: “But you know, Caroline, you know—that Amyas is really devoted to you?”

She said to that: “Does one ever know with men?” And then she laughed a little ruefully and said: “I’m a very primitive woman, Merry. I’d like to take a hatchet to that girl.”

I told her that the child probably didn’t understand in the least what she was doing. She had a great admiration and hero worship for Amyas, and she probably didn’t realize at all that Amyas was falling in love with her.

Caroline just said to me:

“Dear Merry!” and began to talk about the garden. I hoped that she was not going to worry any more about the matter.

Shortly afterwards, Elsa went back to London. Amyas was away too for several weeks. I had really forgotten all about the business. And then I heard that Elsa was back again at Alderbury in order that Amyas might finish the picture.

I was a little disturbed by the news. But Caroline, when I saw her, was not in a communicative mood. She seemed quite her usual self—not worried or upset in any way. I imagined that everything was all right.

That’s why it was such a shock to me to learn how far the thing had gone.

I have told you of my conversations with Crale and with Elsa. I had no opportunity of talking to Caroline. We were only able to exchange those few words about which I have already told you.

I can see her face now, the wide dark eyes and the restrained emotion. I can still hear her voice as she said:

“Everything’s finished….”

I can’t describe to you the infinite desolation she conveyed in those words. They were a literal statement of truth. With Amyas’s defection, everything was finished for her. That, I am convinced, was why she took the coniine. It was a way out. A way suggested to her by my stupid dissertation on the drug. And the passage I read from the Phaedo gives a gracious picture of death.

Here is my present belief. She took the coniine, resolved to end her own life when Amyas left her. He may have seen her take it—or he may have discovered that she had it later.

That discovery acted upon him with terrific force. He was horrified at what his actions had led her to contemplate. But notwithstanding his horror and remorse, he still felt himself incapable of giving up Elsa. I can understand that. Anyone who had fallen in love with her would find it almost impossible to tear himself away.

He could not envisage life without Elsa. He realized that Caroline could not live without him. He decided there was only one way out—to use the coniine himself.

And the manner in which he did it might be characteristic of the man, I think. His painting was the dearest thing in life to him. He chose to die literally with his brush in his hand. And the last thing his eyes would see was the face of the girl he loved so desperately. He might have thought, too, that his death would be the best thing for her….

I admit that this theory leaves certain curious facts unexplained. Why, for instance, were only Caroline's fingerprints found on the empty coniine bottle. I suggest that after Amyas had handled it, all prints got smudged or rubbed off by the soft piles of stuffs that were lying over the bottle and that, after his death, Caroline handled it to see if anyone had touched it. Surely that is possible and plausible? As to the evidence about the fingerprints on the beer bottle, the witnesses for the defence were of opinion that a man's hand might be distorted after taking poison and so could manage to grasp a beer bottle in a wholly unnatural way.

One other thing remains to be explained. Caroline's own attitude throughout the trial. But I think I have now seen the cause for that. It was she who actually took the poison from my laboratory. It was her determination to do away with herself that impelled her husband to take his own life instead. Surely it is not unreasonable to suppose that in a morbid excess of responsibility she considered herself responsible for his death—that she persuaded herself that she was guilty of murder—though not the kind of murder of which she was being accused?

I think all that could be so. And if that is the case, then surely it will be easy for you to persuade little Carla of the fact? And she can marry her young man and rest contented that the only thing of which her mother was guilty was an impulse (no more) to take her own life.

All this, alas, is not what you asked me for—which was an account of the happenings as I remember them. Let me now repair that omission. I have already told you fully what happened on the day preceding Amyas's death. We now come to the day itself.

I had slept very badly—worried by the disastrous turn of events for my friends. After a long wakeful period whilst I vainly tried to think of something helpful I could do to avert the catastrophe, I fell into a heavy sleep about six a.m. The bringing of my early tea did not awaken me, and I finally woke up heavy-headed and unrefreshed about half past nine. It was shortly after that that I thought I heard movements in the room below me, which was the room I used as a laboratory.

I may say here that actually the sounds were probably caused by a cat getting in. I found the window sash raised a little way as it had carelessly been left from the day before. It was just wide enough to admit the passage of a cat. I merely mention the sounds to explain how I came to enter the laboratory.

I went in there as soon as I had dressed, and looking along the shelves I noticed that the bottle containing the preparation of coniine was slightly out of line with the rest. Having had my eye drawn to it in this way, I was startled to see that a considerable quantity of it had gone. The bottle had been nearly full the day before—now it was nearly empty.

I shut and locked the window and went out, locking the door behind me. I was considerably upset and also bewildered. When startled, my mental processes are, I am afraid, somewhat slow.

I was first disturbed, then apprehensive, and finally definitely alarmed. I questioned the household, and they all denied having entered the laboratory at all. I thought things over a little while longer, and then decided to ring up my brother and get his advice.

Philip was quicker than I was. He saw the seriousness of my discovery, and urged me to come over at once and consult with him.

I went out, encountering Miss Williams, who had come across from the other side to look for a truant pupil. I assured her that I had not seen Angela and that she had not been to the house.

I think that Miss Williams noticed there was something amiss. She looked at me rather curiously. I had no intention, however, of telling her what had happened. I suggested she should try the kitchen garden—Angela had a favourite apple tree there—and I myself hurried down to the shore and rowed myself across to the Alderbury side.

My brother was already there waiting for me.

We walked up to the house together by the way you and I went the other day. Having seen the topography you can understand that in passing underneath the wall of the Battery garden we were bound to overhear anything being said inside it.

Beyond the fact that Caroline and Amyas were engaged in a disagreement of some kind, I did not pay much attention to what was said.

Certainly I overheard no threat of any kind uttered by Caroline. The subject of discussion was Angela, and I presume Caroline was pleading for a respite from the fiat of school. Amyas, however, was adamant, shouting out irritably that it was all settled, he'd see to her packing.

The door of the Battery opened just as we drew abreast of it, and Caroline came out. She looked disturbed—but not unduly so. She smiled rather absently at me, and said they had been discussing Angela. Elsa came down the path at that minute, and as Amyas clearly wanted to get on with the sitting without interruption from us, we went on up the path.

Philip blamed himself severely afterwards for the fact that we did not take immediate action. But I myself cannot see it the same way. We had no earthly right to assume that such a thing as murder was being contemplated. (Moreover I now believe that it was not contemplated.) It was clear that we should have to adopt some course of action, but I still maintain that we were right to talk the matter over carefully first. It was necessary to find the right thing to do—and once or twice I found myself wondering if I had not after all made a mistake. Had the bottle really been full the day before as I thought? I am not one of those people (like my brother Philip) who can be cock-sure of everything. One's memory does play tricks on one. How often, for instance, one is convinced one has put an article in a certain place, later to find that you have put it somewhere quite different. The more I tried to recall the state of the bottle on the preceding afternoon, the more uncertain and doubtful I became. This was very annoying to Philip, who began completely to lose patience with me.

We were not able to continue our discussion at the time, and tacitly agreed to postpone it until after lunch. (I may say that I was always free to drop in for lunch at Alderbury if I chose.)

Later, Angela and Caroline brought us beer. I asked Angela what she had been up to playing truant, and told her Miss Williams was on the warpath, and she said she had been bathing—and added that she didn't see why she should have to mend her horrible old skirt when she was going to have all new things to go to school with.

Since there seemed no chance of further talk with Philip alone, and since I was really anxious to think things out by myself, I wandered off down the path towards the Battery. Just above the Battery, as I showed you, there is a clearing in the trees where there used to be an old bench. I sat there smoking and thinking, and watching Elsa as she sat posing for Amyas.

I shall always think of her as she was that day. Rigid in the pose, with her yellow shirt and dark-blue trousers and a red pullover slung round her shoulders for warmth.

Her face was so alight with life and health and radiance. And that gay voice of hers reciting plans for the future.

This sounds as though I was eavesdropping, but that is not so. I was perfectly visible to Elsa. Both she and Amyas knew I was there. She waved her hand at me and called up that Amyas was a perfect bear that morning—he wouldn't let her rest. She was stiff and aching all over.

Amyas growled out that she wasn't as stiff as he was. He was stiff all over—muscular rheumatism. Elsa said mockingly: "Poor old man!" And he said she'd be taking on a creaking invalid.

It shocked me, you know, their lighthearted acquiescence in their future together whilst they were causing so much suffering. And yet I couldn't hold it against her. She was so young, so confident, so very much in love. And she didn't really know what she was doing. She didn't understand suffering. She just assumed with the naïve confidence of a child that Caroline would be "all right," that "she'd soon get over it." She saw nothing, you see, but herself and Amyas—happy together. She'd already told me my point of view was old-fashioned. She had no doubts, no qualms—no pity either. But can one expect pity from radiant youth? It is an older, wiser emotion.

They didn’t talk very much, of course. No painter wants to be chattering when he is working. Perhaps every ten minutes or so Elsa would make an observation and Amyas would grunt a reply. Once she said:

“I think you’re right about Spain. That’s the first place we’ll go to. And you must take me to see a bullfight. It must be wonderful. Only I’d like the bull to kill the man—not the other way about. I understand how Roman women felt when they saw a man die. Men aren’t much, but animals are splendid.”

I suppose she was rather like an animal herself—young and primitive and with nothing yet of man’s sad experience and doubtful wisdom. I don’t believe Elsa had begun to think—she only felt. But she was very much alive—more alive than any person I have ever known….

That was the last time I saw her radiant and assured—on top of the world. Fey is the word for it, isn’t it?

The bell sounded for lunch, and I got up and went down the path and in at the Battery door, and Elsa joined me. It was dazzlingly bright there coming in out of the shady trees. I could hardly see. Amyas was sprawled back on the seat, his arms flung out. He was staring at the picture. I’ve so often seen him like that. How was I to know that already the poison was working, stiffening him as he sat?

He so hated and resented illness. He would never own to it. I dare say he thought he had got a touch of the sun—the symptoms are much the same—but he’d be the last person to complain about it.

Elsa said:

“He won’t come up to lunch.”

Privately I thought he was wise. I said:

“So long, then.”

He moved his eyes from the picture until they rested on me. There was a queer—how shall I describe it—it looked like malevolence. A kind of malevolent glare.

Naturally I didn’t understand it then—if his picture wasn’t going as he liked he often looked quite murderous. I thought that was what it was. He made a sort of grunting sound.

Neither Elsa nor I saw anything unusual in him—just artistic temperament.

So we left him there and she and I went up to the house laughing and talking. If she’d known, poor child, that she’d never see him alive again… Oh, well, thank God she didn’t. She was able to be happy a little longer.

Caroline was quite normal at lunch—a little preoccupied; nothing more. And doesn’t that show that she had nothing to do with it? She couldn’t have been such an actress.

She and the governess went down afterwards and found him. I met Miss Williams as she came up. She told me to telephone a doctor and went back to Caroline.

That poor child—Elsa, I mean! She had that frantic unrestrained grief that a child has. They can’t believe that life can do these things to them. Caroline was quite calm. Yes, she was quite calm. She was able, of course, to control herself better than Elsa. She didn’t seem remorseful—then. Just said he must have done it himself. And we couldn’t believe that. Elsa burst out and accused her to her face.

Of course she may have realized, already, that she herself would be suspected. Yes, that probably explains her manner.

Philip was quite convinced that she had done it.

The governess was a great help and standby. She made Elsa lie down and gave her a sedative, and she kept Angela out of the way when the police came. Yes, she was a tower of strength, that woman.

The whole thing became a nightmare. The police searching the house and asking questions, and then the reporters, swarming about the place like flies and clicking cameras and wanting interviews with members of the family.

A nightmare, the whole thing….

It’s a nightmare, after all these years. Please God, once you’ve convinced little Carla what really happened, we can forget it all and never remember it again.

Amyas must have committed suicide—however unlikely it seems.

End of Meredith Blake’s Narrative.

Narrative of Lady Dittisham

I have set down here the full story of my meeting with Amyas Crale, up to the time of his tragic death.

I saw him first at a studio party. He was standing, I remember, by a window, and I saw him as I came in at the door. I asked who he was. Someone said: “That’s Crale, the painter.” I said at once that I’d like to meet him.

We talked on that occasion for perhaps ten minutes. When anyone makes the impression on you that Amyas Crale made on me, it’s hopeless to attempt to describe them. If I say that when I saw Amyas Crale, everybody else seemed to grow very small and fade away, that expresses it as well as anything can.

Immediately after that meeting I went to look at as many of his pictures as I could. He had a show on in Bond Street at the moment, and there was one of his pictures in Manchester and one in Leeds and two in public galleries in London. I went to see them all. Then I met him again. I said: “I’ve been to see all your pictures. I think they’re wonderful.”

He just looked amused. He said:

“Who said you were any judge of painting? I don’t believe you know anything about it.”

I said: “Perhaps not. But they are marvellous, all the same.”

He grinned at me and said: “Don’t be a gushing little fool.”

I said: “I’m not. I want you to paint me.”

Crale said: “If you’ve any sense at all, you’ll realize that I don’t paint portraits of pretty women.”

I said: “It needn’t be a portrait and I’m not a pretty woman.”

He looked at me then as though he’d begun to see me. He said: “No, perhaps you’re not.”

I said: “Will you paint me then?”

He studied me for some time with his head on one side. Then he said: “You’re a strange child, aren’t you?”

I said: “I’m quite rich, you know. I can afford to pay well for it.”

He said: “Why are you so anxious for me to paint you?”

I said: “Because I want it!”

He said: “Is that a reason?”

And I said: “Yes, I always get what I want.”

He said then: “Oh, my poor child, how young you are!”

I said: “Will you paint me?”

He took me by the shoulders and turned me towards the light and looked me over. Then he stood away from me a little. I stood quite still, waiting.

He said: “I’ve sometimes wanted to paint a flight of impossibly-coloured Australian Maccaws alighting on St. Paul’s Cathedral. If I painted you against a nice traditional bit of outdoor landscape, I believe I’d get exactly the same result.”

I said: “Then you will paint me?”

He said: “You’re one of the loveliest, crudest, most flamboyant bits of exotic colouring I’ve ever seen. I’ll paint you!”

I said: “Then that’s settled.”

He went on: “But I’ll warn you, Elsa Greer. If I do paint you, I shall probably make love to you.”

I said: “I hope you will….”

I said it quite steadily and quietly. I heard him catch his breath, and I saw the look that came into his eyes.

You see, it was as sudden as all that.

A day or two later we met again. He told me that he wanted me to come down to Devonshire—he’d got the very place there that he wanted for a background. He said:

“I’m married, you know. And I’m very fond of my wife.”

I said if he was fond of her she must be very nice.

He said she was extremely nice. “In fact,” he said, “she’s quite adorable—and I adore her. So put that in your pipe, young Elsa, and smoke it.”

I told him that I quite understood.

He began the picture a week later. Caroline Crale welcomed me very pleasantly. She didn’t like me much—but, after all, why should she? Amyas was very circumspect. He never said a word to me that his wife couldn’t have overheard, and I was quite polite and formal to him. Underneath, though, we both knew.

After ten days he told me I was to go back to London.

I said: “The picture isn’t finished.”

He said: “It’s barely begun. The truth is, I can’t paint you, Elsa.”

I said: “Why?”

He said: “You know well enough why, Elsa. And that’s why you’ve got to clear out. I can’t think about the painting—I can’t think about anything but you.”

We were in the Battery garden. It was a hot sunny day. There were birds and humming bees. It ought to have been very happy and peaceful. But it didn't feel like that. It felt—somehow—tragic. As though—as though what was going to happen was already mirrored there.

I knew it would be no good my going back to London, but I said: "Very well, I'll go if you say so."

Amyas said: "Good girl."

So I went. I didn't write to him.

He held out for ten days and then he came. He was so thin and haggard and miserable that it shocked me.

He said: "I warned you, Elsa. Don't say I didn't warn you."

I said: "I've been waiting for you. I knew you'd come."

He gave a sort of groan and said: "There are things that are too strong for any man. I can't eat or sleep or rest for wanting you."

I said I knew that and that it was the same with me, and had been from the first moment I'd seen him. It was Fate and it was no use struggling against it.

He said: "You haven't struggled much, have you, Elsa?" And I said I hadn't struggled at all.

He said he wished I wasn't so young, and I said that didn't matter. I suppose I might say that for the next few weeks we were very happy. But happiness isn't quite the word. It was something deeper and more frightening than that.

We were made for each other and we'd found each other—and we both knew we'd got to be together always.

But something else happened, too. The unfinished picture began to haunt Amyas. He said to me: "Damned funny, I couldn't paint you before—you yourself got in the way of it. But I want to paint you, Elsa. I want to paint you so that that picture will be the finest thing I've ever done. I'm itching and aching now to get at my brushes to see you sitting there on that hoary old chestnut of a battlement wall with the conventional blue sea and the decorous English trees—and you—you—sitting there like a discordant shriek of triumph."

He said: "And I've got to paint you that way! And I can't be fussed and bothered while I'm doing it. When the picture's finished I'll tell Caroline the truth and we'll get the whole messy business cleared up."

I said: "Will Caroline make a fuss about divorcing you?"

He said he didn't think so. But you never knew with women.

I said I was sorry if she was going to be upset, but after all, I said, these things did happen.

He said: "Very nice and reasonable, Elsa. But Caroline isn't reasonable, never has been reasonable, and certainly isn't going to feel reasonable. She loves me, you know."

I said I understood that, but if she loved him, she'd put his happiness first, and at any rate she wouldn't want to keep him if he wanted to be free.

He said: "Life can't really be solved by admirable maxims out of modern literature. Nature's red in tooth and claw, remember."

I said: "Surely we are all civilized people nowadays?" and Amyas laughed. He said: "Civilized people my foot! Caroline would probably like to take a hatchet to you. She might do it too. Don't you realize, Elsa, that she's going to suffer—suffer? Don't you know what suffering means?"

I said: "Then don't tell her."

He said: "No. The break's got to come. You've got to belong to me properly, Elsa. Before all the world. Openly mine."

I said: "Suppose she won't divorce you?"

He said: “I’m not afraid of that.”

I said: “What are you afraid of then?”

And then he said slowly: “I don’t know….”

You see, he knew Caroline. I didn’t.

If I’d had any idea….

We went down again to Alderbury. Things were difficult this time. Caroline had got suspicious. I didn’t like it—I didn’t like it—I didn’t like it a bit. I’ve always hated deceit and concealment. I thought we ought to tell her. Amyas wouldn’t hear of it.

The funny part of it was that he didn’t really care at all. In spite of being fond of Caroline and not wanting to hurt her, he just didn’t care about the honesty or dishonesty of it all. He was painting with a kind of frenzy, and nothing else mattered. I hadn’t seen him in one of his working spells before. I realized now what a really great genius he was. It was natural for him to be so carried away that all the ordinary decencies didn’t matter. But it was different for me. I was in a horrible position. Caroline resented me—and quite rightly. The only thing to put the position quite straight was to be honest and tell her the truth.

But all Amyas would say was that he wasn’t going to be bothered with scenes and fusses until he’d finished the picture. I said there probably wouldn’t be a scene. Caroline would have too much dignity and pride for that.

I said: “I want to be honest about it all. We’ve got to be honest!”

Amyas said: “To hell with honesty. I’m painting a picture, damn it.”

I did see his point of view, but he wouldn’t see mine.

And in the end I broke down. Caroline had been talking of some plan she and Amyas were going to carry out next autumn. She talked about it quite confidently. And I suddenly felt it was too abominable, what we were doing

—letting her go on like this—and perhaps, too, I was angry, because she was really being very unpleasant to me in a clever sort of way that one couldn’t take hold of.

And so I came out with the truth. In a way, I still think I was right. Though, of course, I wouldn’t have done it if I’d had the faintest idea what was to come of it.

The clash came right away. Amyas was furious with me, but he had to admit that what I had said was true.

I didn’t understand Caroline at all. We all went over to Meredith Blake’s to tea, and Caroline played up marvellously—talking and laughing. Like a fool, I thought she was taking it well. It was awkward my not being able to leave the house, but Amyas would have gone up in smoke if I had. I thought perhaps Caroline would go. It would have made it much easier for us if she had.

I didn’t see her take the coniine. I want to be honest so I think that it’s just possible that she may have taken it as she said she did, with the idea of suicide in her mind.

But I don’t really think so. I think she was one of those intensely jealous and possessive women who won’t let go of anything that they think belongs to them. Amyas was her property. I think she was quite prepared to kill him rather than to let him go—completely and finally—to another woman. I think she made up her mind, right away, to kill him. And I think that Meredith’s happening to discuss coniine so freely just gave her the means to do what she’d already made up her mind to do. She was a very bitter and revengeful woman—vindictive. Amyas knew all along that she was dangerous. I didn’t.

The next morning she had a final showdown with Amyas. I heard most of it from the outside on the terrace. He was splendid—very patient and calm. He implored her to be reasonable. He said he was very fond of her and the child and always would be. He’d do everything he could do to assure their future. Then he hardened up and said: “But understand this. I’m damned well going to marry Elsa—and nothing shall stop me. You and I always agreed to leave each other free. These things happen."

Caroline said to him: "Do as you please. I've warned you."

Her voice was very quiet, but there was a queer note in it.

Amyas said: "What do you mean, Caroline?"

She said: "You're mine and I don't mean to let you go. Sooner than let you go to that girl I'll kill you…."

Just at that minute, Philip Blake came along the terrace. I got up and went to meet him. I didn't want him to overhear.

Presently Amyas came out and said it was time to get on with the picture. We went down together to the Battery. He didn't say much. Just said that Caroline was cutting up rough—but for God's sake not to talk about it. He wanted to concentrate on what he was doing. Another day, he said, would about finish the picture.

He said: "And it'll be the best thing I've ever done, Elsa, even if it is paid for in blood and tears."

A little later I went up to the house to get a pullover. There was a chilly wind blowing. When I came back again Caroline was there. I suppose she had come down to make one last appeal. Philip and Meredith Blake were there too.

It was then that Amyas said he was thirsty and wanted a drink. He said there was beer but it wasn't iced.

Caroline said she'd send him down some iced beer. She said it quite naturally in an almost friendly tone. She was an actress, that woman. She must have known then what she meant to do.

She brought it down about ten minutes later. Amyas was painting. She poured it out and set the glass down beside him. Neither of us were watching her. Amyas was intent on what he was doing and I had to keep the pose.

Amyas drank it down the way he always drank beer, just pouring it down his throat in one draught. Then he made a face and said it tasted foul—but at any rate it was cold.

And even then, when he said that, no suspicion entered my head, I just laughed and said: “Liver.”

When she’d seen him drink it Caroline went away.

It must have been about forty minutes later that Amyas complained of stiffness and pains. He said he thought he must have got a touch of muscular rheumatism. Amyas was always intolerant of any ailment and he didn’t like being fussed over. After saying that he turned it off with a light: “Old age, I suppose. You’ve taken on a creaking old man, Elsa.” I played up to him. But I noticed that his legs moved stiffly and queerly and that he grimaced once or twice. I never dreamt that it wasn’t rheumatism. Presently he drew the bench along and sat sprawled on that, occasionally stretching up to put a touch of paint here and there on the canvas. He used to do that sometimes when he was painting. Just sit staring at me and then the canvas. Sometimes he’d do it for half an hour at a time. So I didn’t think it specially queer.

We heard the bell go for lunch, and he said he wasn’t coming up. He’d stay where he was and he didn’t want anything. That wasn’t unusual either, and it would be easier for him than facing Caroline at the table.

He was talking in rather a queer way—grunting out his words. But he sometimes did that when he was dissatisfied with the progress of the picture.

Meredith Blake came in to fetch me. He spoke to Amyas, but Amyas only grunted at him.

We went up to the house together and left him there. We left him there—to die alone. I’d never seen much illness—I didn’t know much about it—I thought Amyas was just in a painter's mood. If I'd known—if I'd realized—perhaps a doctor could have saved him…Oh God, why didn't I—it's no good thinking of that now. I was a blind fool. A blind, stupid fool.

There isn't much more to tell.

Caroline and the governess went down there after lunch. Meredith followed them. Presently he came running up. He told us Amyas was dead.

Then I knew! Knew, I mean, that it was Caroline. I still didn't think of poison. I thought she'd gone down that minute and either shot him or stabbed him.

I wanted to get at her—to kill her….

How could she do it? How could she? He was so alive, so full of life and vigour. To put all that out—to make him limp and cold. Just so that I shouldn't have him.

Horrible woman….

Horrible, scornful, cruel, vindictive woman….

I hate her. I still hate her.

They didn't even hang her.

They ought to have hanged her….

Even hanging was too good for her….

I hate her…I hate her…I hate her….

End of Lady Dittisham's Narrative.

Narrative of Cecilia Williams

Dear Mr. Poirot,

I am sending you an account of those events in September, 19…actually witnessed by myself.

I have been absolutely frank and have kept nothing back. You may show it to Carla Crale. It may pain her, but I have always been a believer in truth. Palliatives are harmful. One must have the courage to face reality. Without that courage, life is meaningless. The people who do us most harm are the people who shield us from reality.

Believe me, yours sincerely,
Cecilia Williams

My name is Cecilia Williams. I was engaged by Mrs. Crale as governess to her half sister Angela Warren, in 19…I was then forty-eight.

I took up my duties at Alderbury, a very beautiful estate in south Devon which had belonged to Mr. Crale's family for many generations. I knew that Mr. Crale was a well-known painter, but I did not meet him until I took up residence at Alderbury.

The household consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Crale, Angela Warren (then a girl of thirteen), and three servants, all of whom had been with the family many years.

I found my pupil an interesting and promising character. She had very marked abilities and it was a pleasure to teach her. She was somewhat wild and undisciplined, but these faults arose mainly through high spirits, and I have always preferred my girls to show spirit. An excess of vitality can be trained and guided into paths of real usefulness and achievement.

On the whole, I found Angela amenable to discipline. She had been somewhat spoiled—mainly by Mrs. Crale, who was far too indulgent where she was concerned. Mr. Crale's influence was, I considered, unwise. He indulged her absurdly one day, and was unnecessarily peremptory on another occasion. He was very much a man of moods—possibly owing to what is styled the artistic temperament.

I have never seen, myself, why the possession of artistic ability should be supposed to excuse a man from a decent exercise of self-control. I did not myself admire Mr. Crale's paintings. The drawing seemed to me faulty and the colouring exaggerated, but naturally I was not called upon to express any opinion on these matters.

I soon formed a deep attachment to Mrs. Crale. I admired her character and her fortitude in the difficulties of her life. Mr. Crale was not a faithful husband, and I think that that fact was the source of much pain to her. A stronger-minded woman would have left him, but Mrs. Crale never seemed to contemplate such a course. She endured his infidelities and forgave him for them—but I may say that she did not take them meekly. She remonstrated—and with spirit!

It was said at the trial that they led a cat and dog life. I would not go as far as that—Mrs. Crale had too much dignity for that term to apply, but they did have quarrels. And I consider that that was only natural under the circumstances.

I had been with Mrs. Crale just over two years when Miss Elsa Greer appeared upon the scene. She arrived down at Alderbury in the summer of 19…Mrs. Crale had not met her previously. She was Mr. Crale's friend, and she was said to be there for the purpose of having her portrait painted.

It was apparent at once that Mr. Crale was infatuated with this girl and that the girl herself was doing nothing to discourage him. She behaved, in my opinion, quite outrageously, being abominably rude to Mrs. Crale, and openly flirting with Mr. Crale.

Naturally Mrs. Crale said nothing to me, but I could see that she was disturbed and unhappy, and I did everything in my power to distract her mind and lighten her burden. Miss Greer sat every day to Mr. Crale, but I noticed that the picture was not getting on very fast. They had, no doubt, other things to talk about!

My pupil, I am thankful to say, noticed very little of what was going on. Angela was in some ways young for her age. Though her intellect was well developed, she was not at all what I may term precocious. She seemed to have no wish to read undesirable books, and showed no signs of morbid curiosity such as girls often do at her age.

She, therefore, saw nothing undesirable in the friendship between Mr. Crale and Miss Greer. Nevertheless she disliked Miss Greer and thought her stupid. Here she was quite right. Miss Greer had had, I presume, a proper education, but she never opened a book and was quite unfamiliar with current literary allusions. Moreover she could not sustain a discussion on any intellectual subject.

She was entirely taken up with her personal appearance, her clothes, and men.

Angela, I think, did not even realize that her sister was unhappy. She was not at that time a very perceptive person. She spent a lot of time in hoydenish pastimes, such as tree climbing and wild feats of bicycling. She was also a passionate reader and showed excellent taste in what she liked and disliked.

Mrs. Crale was always careful to conceal any signs of unhappiness from Angela, and exerted herself to appear bright and cheerful when the girl was about.

Miss Greer went back to London—at which, I can tell you, we were all very pleased! The servants disliked her as much as I did. She was the kind of person who gives a lot of unnecessary trouble and forgets to say thank you.

Mr. Crale went away shortly afterwards, and of course I knew that he had gone after the girl. I was very sorry for Mrs. Crale. She felt these things very keenly. I felt extremely bitter towards Mr. Crale. When a man has a charming, gracious, intelligent wife, he’s no business to treat her badly.

However, she and I both hoped the affair would soon be over. Not that we mentioned the subject to each other—we did not—but she knew quite well how I felt about it.

Unfortunately, after some weeks, the pair of them reappeared. It seemed the sittings were to be resumed.

Mr. Crale was now painting with absolute frenzy. He seemed less preoccupied with the girl than with his picture of her. Nevertheless I realized that this was not the usual kind of thing we had gone through before. This girl had got her claws into him and she meant business. He was just like wax in her hands.

The thing came to a head on the day before he died—that is on Sept. 17. Miss Greer's manner had been unbearably insolent the last few days. She was feeling sure of herself and she wanted to assert her importance. Mrs. Crale behaved like a true gentlewoman. She was icily polite, but she showed the other clearly what she thought of her.

On this day, Sept. 17, as we were sitting in the drawing room after lunch, Miss Greer came out with an amazing remark as to how she was going to redecorate the room when she was living at Alderbury.

Naturally Mrs. Crale couldn't let that pass. She challenged her, and Miss Greer had the impudence to say, before us all, that she was going to marry Mr. Crale. She actually talked about marrying a married man—and she said it to his wife!

I was very, very angry with Mr. Crale. How dared he let this girl insult his wife in her own drawing room? If he wanted to run away with the girl, he should have gone off with her, not brought her into his wife's house and backed her up in her insolence.

In spite of what she must have felt, Mrs. Crale did not lose her dignity. Her husband came in just then, and she immediately demanded confirmation from him.

He was, not unnaturally, annoyed with Miss Greer for her unconsidered forcing of the situation. Apart from anything else, it made him appear at a disadvantage, and men do not like appearing at a disadvantage. It upsets their vanity.

He stood there, a great giant of a man, looking as sheepish and foolish as a naughty schoolboy. It was his wife who carried off the honours of the situation. He had to mutter foolishly that it was true, but that he hadn’t meant her to learn it like this.

I have never seen anything like the look of scorn she gave him. She went out of the room with her head held high. She was a beautiful woman—much more beautiful than that flamboyant girl—and she walked like an Empress.

I hoped, with all my heart, that Amyas Crale would be punished for the cruelty he had displayed and for the indignity he had put upon a long-suffering and noble woman.

For the first time, I tried to say something of what I felt to Mrs. Crale, but she stopped me.

She said:

“We must try and behave as usual. It’s the best way. We’re all going over to Meredith Blake’s to tea.”

I said to her then:

“I think you are wonderful, Mrs. Crale.”

She said:

“You don’t know….”

Then, as she was going out of the room, she came back and kissed me. She said:

“You’re such a comfort to me.”

She went to her room then and I think she cried. I saw her when they all started off. She was wearing a big-brimmed hat that shaded her face—a hat she very seldom wore.

Mr. Crale was uneasy, but was trying to brazen things out. Mr. Philip Blake was trying to behave as usual. That Miss Greer was looking like a cat who has got at the cream jug. All self-satisfaction and purrs!

They all started off. They got back about six. I did not see Mrs. Crale again alone that evening. She was very quiet and composed at dinner, and she went to bed early. I don't think that anyone knew how she was suffering.

The evening was taken up with a kind of running quarrel between Mr. Crale and Angela. They brought up the old school question again. He was irritable and on edge, and she was unusually trying. The whole matter was settled and her outfit had been bought, and there was no sense in starting up an argument again, but she suddenly chose to make a grievance of it. I have no doubt she sensed the tension in the air and that it reacted on her as much as on everybody else. I am afraid I was too preoccupied with my own thoughts to try and check her as I should have done. It all ended with her flinging a paperweight at Mr. Crale and dashing out of the room.

I went after her and told her sharply that I was ashamed of her behaving like a baby, but she was still very uncontrolled, and I thought it best to leave her alone.

I hesitated as to whether to go to Mrs. Crale's room, but I decided in the end that it would, perhaps, annoy her. I wish since that I had overcome my diffidence and insisted on her talking to me. If she had done so, it might possibly have made a difference. She had no one, you see, in whom she could confide. Although I admire self-control, I must regretfully admit that sometimes it can be carried too far. A natural outlet to the feelings is better.

I met Mr. Crale as I went along to my room. He said good night, but I did not answer.

The next morning was, I remember, a beautiful day. One felt when waking that surely with such peace all around even a man must come to his senses.

I went into Angela's room before going down to breakfast, but she was already up and out. I picked up a torn skirt which she had left lying on the floor and took it down with me for her to mend after breakfast.

She had, however, obtained bread and marmalade from the kitchen and gone out. After I had had my own breakfast I went in search of her. I mention this to explain why I was not more with Mrs. Crale on that morning as perhaps I should have been. At the time, however, I felt it was my duty to look for Angela. She was very naughty and obstinate about mending her clothes, and I had no intention of allowing her to defy me in the matter.

Her bathing dress was missing and I accordingly went down to the beach. There was no sign of her in the water or on the rocks, so I conceived it possible that she had gone over to Mr. Meredith Blake’s. She and he were great friends. I accordingly rowed myself across and resumed my search. I did not find her and eventually returned. Mrs. Crale, Mr. Blake and Mr. Philip Blake were on the terrace.

It was very hot that morning if one was out of the wind, and the house and terrace were sheltered. Mrs. Crale suggested they might like some iced beer.

There was a little conservatory which had been built on to the house in Victorian days. Mrs. Crale disliked it, and it was not used for plants, but it had been made into a kind of bar, with various bottles of gin, vermouth, lemonade, ginger beer, etc., on shelves, and a small refrigerator which was filled with ice every morning and in which some beer and ginger beer was always kept.

Mrs. Crale went there to get the beer and I went with her. Angela was at the refrigerator and was just taking out a bottle of beer.

Mrs. Crale went in ahead of me. She said:

“I want a bottle of beer to take down to Amyas.”

It is so difficult now to know whether I ought to have suspected anything. Her voice, I feel almost convinced, was perfectly normal. But I must admit that at that moment I was intent, not on her, but on Angela. Angela was by the refrigerator and I was glad to see that she looked red and rather guilty.

I was rather sharp with her, and to my surprise she was quite meek. I asked her where she had been, and she said she had been bathing. I said: “I didn’t see you on the beach.” And she laughed. Then I asked her where her jersey was, and she said she must have left it down on the beach.

I mention these details to explain why I let Mrs. Crale take the beer down to the Battery garden.

The rest of the morning is quite blank in my mind. Angela fetched her needlebook and mended her skirt without any more fuss. I rather think that I mended some of the household linen. Mr. Crale did not come up for lunch. I was glad that he had at least that much decency.

After lunch, Mrs. Crale said she was going down to the Battery. I wanted to retrieve Angela’s jersey from the beach. We started down together. She went into the Battery—I was going on when her cry called me back. As I told you when you came to see me, she asked me to go up and telephone. On the way up I met Mr. Meredith Blake and then went back to Mrs. Crale.

That was my story as I told it at the inquest and later at the trial.

What I am about to write down I have never told to any living soul. I was not asked any question to which I returned an untrue answer. Nevertheless I was guilty of withholding certain facts—I do not repent of that. I would do it again. I am fully aware that in revealing this I may be laying myself open to censure, but I do not think that after this lapse of time anyone will take the matter very seriously—especially since Caroline Crale was convicted without my evidence.

This, then, is what happened.

I met Mr. Meredith Blake as I said, and I ran down the path again as quickly as I could. I was wearing sandshoes and I have always been light on my feet. I came to the open Battery door, and this is what I saw.

Mrs. Crale was busily polishing the beer bottle on the table with her handkerchief. Having done so, she took her dead husband’s hand and pressed the fingers of it on the beer bottle. All the time she was listening and on the alert. It was the fear I saw on her face that told me the truth.

I knew then, beyond any possible doubt, that Caroline Crale had poisoned her husband. And I, for one, do not blame her. He drove her to a point beyond human endurance, and he brought his fate upon himself.

I never mentioned the incident to Mrs. Crale and she never knew that I had seen it.

Caroline Crale's daughter must not bolster up her life with a lie. However much it may pain her to know the truth, truth is the only thing that matters.

Tell her, from me, that her mother is not to be judged. She was driven beyond what a loving woman can endure. It is for her daughter to understand and forgive.

End of Cecilia Williams's Narrative.

Narrative of Angela Warren

Dear Mr. Poirot,

I am keeping my promise to you and have written down all I can remember of that terrible time sixteen years ago. But it was not until I started that I realized how very little I did remember. Until the thing actually happened, you see, there is nothing to fix anything by.

I've just a vague memory of summer days—and isolated incidents, but I couldn't say for certain what summer they happened even! Amyas's death was just a thunderclap coming out of the blue. I'd had no warning of it, and I seem to have missed everything that led up to it.

I've been trying to think whether that was to be expected or not. Are most girls of fifteen as blind and deaf and obtuse as I seem to have been? Perhaps they are. I was quick, I think, to gauge people's moods, but I never bothered my head about what caused those moods.

Besides, just at that time, I'd suddenly begun to discover the intoxication of words. Things that I read, scraps of poetry—of Shakespeare—would echo in my head. I remember now walking along the kitchen garden path repeating to myself in a kind of ecstatic delirium "under the glassy green translucent wave"…It was just so lovely I had to say it over and over again.

And mixed up with these new discoveries and excitements there were all the things I'd liked doing ever since I could remember. Swimming and climbing trees and eating fruit and playing tricks on the stable boy and feeding the horses.

Caroline and Amyas I took for granted. They were the central figures in my world, but I never thought about them or about their affairs or what they thought and felt.

I didn't notice Elsa Greer's coming particularly. I thought she was stupid and I didn't even think she was good-looking. I accepted her as someone rich but tiresome, whom Amyas was painting.

Actually, the very first intimation I had of the whole thing was what I overheard from the terrace where I had escaped after lunch one day—Elsa said she was going to marry Amyas! It struck me as just ridiculous. I remember tackling Amyas about it. In the garden at Handcross it was. I said to him:

“Why does Elsa say she’s going to marry you? She couldn’t. People can’t have two wives—it’s bigamy and they go to prison.”

Amyas got very angry and said: “How the devil did you hear that?”

I said I’d heard it through the library window.

He was angrier than ever then, and said it was high time I went to school and got out of the habit of eavesdropping.

I still remember the resentment I felt when he said that. Because it was so unfair. Absolutely and utterly unfair.

I stammered out angrily that I hadn’t been listening—and anyhow, I said, why did Elsa say a silly thing like that?

Amyas said it was just a joke.

That ought to have satisfied me. It did—almost. But not quite.

I said to Elsa when we were on the way back: “I asked Amyas what you meant when you said you were going to marry him, and he said it was just a joke.”

I felt that ought to snub her. But she only smiled.

I didn’t like that smile of hers. I went up to Caroline’s room. It was when she was dressing for dinner. I asked her then outright if it were possible for Amyas to marry Elsa.

I remember Caroline’s answer as though I heard it now. She must have spoken with great emphasis.

“Amyas will only marry Elsa after I am dead,” she said.

That reassured me completely. Death seemed ages away from us all. Nevertheless, I was still very sore with Amyas about what he had said in the afternoon, and I went for him violently all through dinner, and I remember we had a real flaming row, and I rushed out of the room and went up to bed and howled myself to sleep.

I don’t remember much about the afternoon at Meredith Blake’s, although I do remember his reading aloud the passage from the Phaedo describing Socrates’ death. I had never heard it before. I thought it was the loveliest, most beautiful thing I had ever heard. I remember that—but I don’t remember when it was. As far as I can recall now, it might have been any time that summer.

I don’t remember anything that happened the next morning either, though I have thought and thought. I’ve a vague feeling that I must have bathed, and I think I remember being made to mend something.

But it’s all very vague and dim till the time when Meredith came panting up the path from the terrace, and his face was all grey and queer. I remember a coffee cup falling off the table and being broken—Elsa did that. And I remember her running—suddenly running for all she was worth down the path—and the awful look there was on her face.

I kept saying to myself: “Amyas is dead.” But it just didn’t seem real.

I remember Dr. Faussett coming and his grave face. Miss Williams was busy looking after Caroline. I wandered about rather forlornly, getting in people’s way. I had a nasty sick feeling. They wouldn’t let me go down and see Amyas. But by and by the police came and wrote down things in notebooks, and presently they brought his body up on a stretcher covered with a cloth.

Miss Williams took me into Caroline's room later. Caroline was on the sofa. She looked very white and ill.

She kissed me and said she wanted me to go away as soon as I could, and it was all horrible, but I wasn't to worry or think about it any more than I could help. I was to join Carla at Lady Tressillian's because this house was to be kept as empty as possible.

I clung to Caroline and said I didn't want to go away. I wanted to stay with her. She said she knew I did, but it was better for me to go away and would take a lot of worry off her mind. And Miss Williams chipped in and said:

"The best way you can help your sister, Angela, is to do what she wants you to do without making a fuss about it."

So I said I would do whatever Caroline wished. And Caroline said: "That's my darling Angela." And she hugged me and said there was nothing to worry about, and to talk about it and think about it all as little as possible.

I had to go down and talk to a Police Superintendent. He was very kind, asked me when I had last seen Amyas and a lot of other questions which seemed to me quite pointless at the time, but which, of course, I see the point of now. He satisfied himself that there was nothing that I could tell him which he hadn't already heard from the others. So he told Miss Williams that he saw no objection to my going over to Ferriby Grange to Lady Tressillian's.

I went there, and Lady Tressillian was very kind to me. But of course I soon had to know the truth. They arrested Caroline almost at once. I was so horrified and dumbfounded that I became quite ill.

I heard afterwards that Caroline was terribly worried about me. It was at her insistence that I was sent out of England before the trial came on. But that I have told you already.

As you see, what I have to put down is pitiably meagre. Since talking to you I have gone over the little I remember painstakingly, racking my memory for details of this or that person's expression or reaction. I can remember nothing consistent with guilt. Elsa’s frenzy. Meredith’s grey worried face. Philip’s grief and fury—they all seem natural enough. I suppose, though, someone could have been playing a part?

I only know this, Caroline did not do it.

I am quite certain on this point, and always shall be, but I have no evidence to offer except my own intimate knowledge of her character.

End of Angela Warren’s Narrative.

BOOK THREE

One

CONCLUSIONS

Carla Lemarchant looked up. Her eyes were full of fatigue and pain. She pushed back the hair from her forehead in a tired gesture.

She said:

“It’s so bewildering all this.” She touched the pile of manuscripts. “Because the angle’s different every time! Everybody sees my mother differently. But the facts are the same. Everyone agrees on the facts.”

“It has discouraged you, reading them?”

“Yes. Hasn’t it discouraged you?”

“No, I have found those documents very valuable—very informative.”

Poirot spoke slowly and reflectively.

Carla said:

“I wish I’d never read them!”

Poirot looked across at her.

“Ah—so it makes you feel that way?”

Carla said bitterly:

“They all think she did it—all of them except Aunt Angela and what she thinks doesn’t count. She hasn’t got any reason for it. She’s just one of those loyal people who’ll stick to a thing through thick and thin. She just goes on saying: “Caroline couldn’t have done it.”

“It strikes you like that?”

"How else should it strike me? I've realized, you know, that if my mother didn't do it, then one of these five people must have done it. I've even had theories as to why."

"Ah! That is interesting. Tell me."

"Oh, they were only theories. Philip Blake, for instance. He's a stockbroker, he was my father's best friend—probably my father trusted him. And artists are usually careless about money matters. Perhaps Philip Blake was in a jam and used my father's money. He may have got my father to sign something. Then the whole thing may have been on the point of coming out—and only my father's death could have saved him. That's one of the things I thought of."

"Not badly imagined at all. What else?"

"Well, there's Elsa. Philip Blake says here she had her head screwed on too well to meddle with poison, but I don't think that's true at all. Supposing my mother had gone to her and told her that she wouldn't divorce my father—that nothing would induce her to divorce him. You may say what you like, but I think Elsa had a bourgeois mind—she wanted to be respectably married. I think that then Elsa would have been perfectly capable of pinching the stuff—she had just as good a chance that afternoon—and might have tried to get my mother out of the way by poisoning her. I think that would be quite like Elsa. And then, possibly, by some awful accident, Amyas got the stuff instead of Caroline."

"Again it is not badly imagined. What else?"

Carla said slowly:

"Well, I thought—perhaps—Meredith!"

"Ah—Meredith Blake?"

"Yes. You see, he sounds to me just the sort of person who would do a murder. I mean, he was the slow dithering one the others laughed at, and underneath, perhaps, he resented that. Then my father married the girl he wanted to marry. And my father was successful and rich. And he did make all those poisons! Perhaps he really made them because he liked the idea of being able to kill someone one day. He had to call attention to the stuff being taken, so as to divert suspicion from himself. But he himself was far the most likely person to have taken it. He might, even, have liked getting Caroline hanged—because she turned him down long ago. I think, you know, it's rather fishy what he says in his account of it all—how people do things that aren't characteristic of them. Supposing he meant himself when he wrote that?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"You are at least right in this—not to take what has been written down as necessarily a true narrative. What has been written may have been written deliberately to mislead."

"Oh, I know. I've kept that in mind."

"Any other ideas?"

Carla said slowly:

"I wondered—before I'd read this—about Miss Williams. She lost her job, you see, when Angela went to school. And if Amyas had died suddenly, Angela probably wouldn't have gone after all. I mean if it passed off as a natural death—which it easily might have done, I suppose, if Meredith hadn't missed the coniine. I read up coniine, and it hasn't got any distinctive postmortem appearances. It might have been thought to be sunstroke. I know that just losing a job doesn't sound a very adequate motive for murder. But murders have been committed again and again for what seem ridiculously inadequate motives. Tiny sums of money sometimes. And a middle-aged, perhaps rather incompetent governess might have got the wind up and just seen no future ahead of her.

"As I say, that's what I thought before I read this. But Miss Williams doesn't sound like that at all. She doesn't sound in the least incompetent—"

"Not at all. She is still a very efficient and intelligent woman."

"I know. One can see that. And she sounds absolutely trustworthy too. That's what has upset me really. Oh, you know—you understand. You don't mind, of course. All along you've made it clear it was the truth you wanted. I suppose now we've got the truth! Miss Williams is quite right. One must accept truth. It's no good basing your life on a lie because it's what you want to believe. All right then—I can take it! My mother wasn't innocent! She wrote me that letter because she was weak and unhappy and wanted to spare me. I don't judge her. Perhaps I should feel like that too. I don't know what prison does to you. And I don't blame her either—if she felt so desperately about my father, I suppose she couldn't help herself. But I don't blame my father altogether either. I understand—just a little—how he felt. So alive—and so full of wanting everything…He couldn't help it—he was made that way. And he was a great painter. I think that excuses a lot."

She turned her flushed excited face to Hecule Poirot with her chin raised defiantly.

Hercule Poirot said:

"So—you are satisfied?"

"Satisfied?" said Carla Lemarchant. Her voice broke on the word.

Poirot leant forward and patted her paternally on the shoulder.

"Listen," he said. "You give up the fight at the moment when it is most worth fighting. At the moment when I, Hercule Poirot, have a very good idea of what really happened."

Carla stared at him. She said:

"Miss Williams loved my mother. She saw her—with her own eyes—faking that suicide evidence. If you believe what she says—"

Hercule Poirot got up. He said:

"Mademoiselle, because Cecilia Williams says she saw your mother faking Amyas Crale's fingerprints on the beer bottle—on the beer bottle, mind—

that is the only thing I need to tell me definitely, once for all, that your mother did not kill your father.”

He nodded his head several times and went out of the room, leaving Carla staring after him.

Two

POIROT ASKS FIVE QUESTIONS

I

“Well, Mr. Poirot?”

Philip Blake’s tone was impatient.

Poirot said:

“I have to thank you for your admirable and lucid account of the Crale tragedy.”

Philip Blake looked rather self-conscious.

“Very kind of you,” he murmured. “Really surprising how much I remembered when I got down to it.”

Poirot said:

“It was an admirably clear narrative, but there were certain omissions, were there not?”

“Omissions” Philip Blake frowned.

Hercule Poirot said:

“Your narrative, shall we say, was not entirely frank.” His tone hardened. “I have been informed, Mr. Blake, that on at least one night during the summer, Mrs. Crale was seen coming out of your room at a somewhat compromising hour.”

There was a silence broken only by Philip Blake’s heavy breathing. He said at last: “Who told you that?”

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“It is no matter who told me. That I know, that is the point.”

Again there was a silence; then Philip Blake made up his mind. He said:

“By accident, it seems, you have stumbled upon a purely private matter. I admit that it does not square with what I have written down. Nevertheless, it squares better than you might think. I am forced now to tell you the truth.

“I did entertain a feeling of animosity toward Caroline Crale. At the same time I was always strongly attracted by her. Perhaps the latter fact induced the former. I resented the power she had over me and tried to stifle the attraction she had for me by constantly dwelling on her worst points. I never liked her, if you understand. But it would have been easy at any moment for me to make love to her. I had been in love with her as a boy and she had taken no notice of me. I did not find that easy to forgive.

“My opportunity came when Amyas lost his head so completely over the Greer girl. Quite without meaning to I found myself telling Caroline I loved her. She said quite calmly: “Yes, I have always known that.” The insolence of the woman!

“Of course I knew that she didn’t love me, but I saw that she was disturbed and disillusioned by Amyas’s present infatuation. That is a mood when a woman can very easily be won. She agreed to come to me that night. And she came.”

Blake paused. He found now a difficulty in getting the words out.

“She came to my room. And then, with my arms round her, she told me quite coolly that it was no good! After all, she said, she was a one-man woman. She was Amyas Crale’s, for better or worse. She agreed that she had treated me very badly, but said she couldn’t help it. She asked me to forgive her.

“And she left me. She left me! Do you wonder, Mr. Poirot, that my hatred of her was heightened a hundredfold? Do you wonder that I have never forgiven her? For the insult she did me—as well as for the fact that she killed the friend I loved better than anyone in the world!”

Trembling violently, Philip Blake exclaimed:

“I don’t want to speak of it, do you hear? You’ve got your answer. Now go! And never mention the matter to me again!”

II

“I want to know, Mr. Blake, the order in which your guests left the laboratory that day?”

Meredith Blake protested.

“But, my dear Mr. Poirot. After sixteen years! How can I possibly remember? I’ve told you that Caroline came out last.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes—at least—I think so….”

“Let us go there now. We must be quite sure, you see.”

Still protesting, Meredith Blake led the way. He unlocked the door and swung back the shutters. Poirot spoke to him authoritatively.

“Now then, my friend. You have showed your visitors your interesting preparations of herbs. Shut your eyes now and think—”

Meredith Blake did so obediently. Poirot drew a handkerchief from his pocket and gently passed it to and fro. Blake murmured, his nostrils twitching slightly:

“Yes, yes—extraordinary how things come back to one. Caroline, I remember, had on a pale coffee-coloured dress. Phil was looking bored… He always thought my hobby was quite idiotic.”

Poirot said:

"Reflect now, you are about to leave the room. You are going to the library where you are going to read the passage about the death of Socrates. Who leaves the room first—do you?"

"Elsa and I—yes. She passed through the door first. I was close behind her. We were talking. I stood there waiting for the others to come so that I could lock the door again. Philip—yes, Philip came out next. And Angela—she was asking him what bulls and bears were. They went on through the hall. Amyas followed them. I stood there waiting still—for Caroline, of course."

"So you are quite sure Caroline stayed behind. Did you see what she was doing?"

Blake shook his head.

"No, I had my back to the room, you see. I was talking to Elsa—boring her, I expect—telling her how certain plants must be gathered at the full of the moon according to old superstition. And then Caroline came out—hurrying a little—and I locked the door."

He stopped and looked at Poirot, who was replacing a handkerchief in his pocket. Meredith Blake sniffled disgustedly and thought: "Why, the fellow actually uses scent!"

Aloud he said:

"I am quite sure of it. That was the order. Elsa, myself, Philip, Angela and Caroline. Does that help you at all?"

Poirot said:

"It all fits in. Listen. I want to arrange a meeting here. It will not, I think, be difficult…."

III

"Well?"

Elsa Dittisham said it almost eagerly—like a child.

“I want to ask you a question, madame.”

“Yes?”

Poirot said:

“After it was all over—the trial, I mean—did Meredith Blake ask you to marry him?”

Elsa stared. She looked contemptuous—almost bored.

“Yes—he did. Why?”

“Were you surprised?”

“Was I? I don’t remember.”

“What did you say?”

Elsa laughed. She said:

“What do you think I said? After Amyas—Meredith? It would have been ridiculous! It was stupid of him. He always was rather stupid.”

She smiled suddenly.

“He wanted, you know, to protect me—to ‘look after me’—that’s how he put it! He thought like everybody else that the Assizes had been a terrible ordeal for me. And the reporters! And the booing crowds! And all the mud that was slung at me.”

She brooded a minute. Then said:

“Poor old Meredith! Such an ass!” And laughed again.

IV

Once again Hercule Poirot encountered the shrewd penetrating glance of Miss Williams, and once again felt the years falling away and himself a meek and apprehensive little boy.

There was, he explained, a question he wished to ask.

Miss Williams intimated her willingness to hear what the question was.

Poirot said slowly, picking his words carefully:

“Angela Warren was injured as a very young child. In my notes I find two references to that fact. In one of them it is stated that Mrs. Crale threw a paperweight at the child. In the other that she attacked the baby with a crowbar. Which of those versions is the right one?”

Miss Williams replied briskly:

“I never heard anything about a crowbar. The paperweight is the correct story.”

“Who was your own informant?”

“Angela herself. She volunteered the information quite early.”

“What did she say exactly?”

“She touched her cheek and said: ‘Caroline did this when I was a baby. She threw a paperweight at me. Never refer to it, will you, because it upsets her dreadfully.’”

“Did Mrs. Crale herself ever mention the matter to you?”

“Only obliquely. She assumed that I knew the story. I remember her saying once: ‘I know you think I spoil Angela, but you see, I always feel there is nothing I can do to make up to her for what I did.’ And on another occasion she said: ‘To know you have permanently injured another human being is the heaviest burden anyone could have to bear.’”

“Thank you, Miss Williams. That is all I wanted to know.”

Cecilia Williams said sharply:

"I don't understand you, Mr. Poirot. You showed Carla my account of the tragedy?"

Poirot nodded.

"And yet you are still—" She stopped.

Poirot said:

"Reflect a minute. If you were to pass a fishmonger's and saw twelve fish laid out on his slab, you would think they were all real fish, would you not? But one of them might be stuffed fish."

Miss Williams replied with spirit:

"Most unlikely and anyway—"

"Ah, unlikely, yes, but not impossible—because a friend of mine once took down a stuffed fish (it was his trade, you comprehend) to compare it with the real thing! And if you saw a bowl of zinnias in a drawing room in December you would say that they were false—but they might be real ones flown home from Baghdad."

"What is the meaning of all this nonsense?" demanded Miss Williams.

"It is to show you that it is the eyes of the mind with which one really sees…."

V

Poirot slowed up a little as he approached the big block of flats overlooking Regent's Park.

Really, when he came to think of it, he did not want to ask Angela Warren any questions at all. The only question he did want to ask her could wait….

No, it was really only his insatiable passion for symmetry that was bringing him here. Five people—there should be five questions! It was neater so. It rounded off the thing better.

Ah well—he would think of something.

Angela Warren greeted him with something closely approaching eagerness. She said:

“Have you found out anything? Have you got anywhere?”

Slowly Poirot nodded his head in his best China mandarin manner. He said:

“At last I make progress.”

“Philip Blake?” It was halfway between statement and a question.

“Mademoiselle, I do not wish to say anything at present. The moment has not yet come. What I will ask of you is to be so good as to come down to Handcross Manor. The others have consented.”

She said with a slight frown:

“What do you propose to do? Reconstruct something that happened sixteen years ago?”

“See it, perhaps, from a clearer angle. You will come?”

Angela Warren said slowly:

“Oh, yes, I’ll come. It will be interesting to see all those people again. I shall see them now, perhaps, from a clearer angle (as you put it) than I did then.”

“And you will bring with you the letter that you showed me?”

Angela Warren frowned.

“That letter is my own. I showed it to you for a good and sufficient reason, but I have no intention of allowing it to be read by strange and unsympathetic persons.”

“But you will allow yourself to be guided by me in this matter?”

“I will do nothing of the kind. I will bring the letter with me, but I shall use my own judgement which I venture to think is quite as good as yours.”

Poirot spread out his hands in a gesture of resignation. He got up to go. He said:

“You permit that I ask one little question?”

“What is it?”

“At the time of the tragedy, you had lately read, had you not, Somerset Maugham’s The Moon and Sixpence?”

Angela stared at him. Then she said:

“I believe—why, yes, that is quite true.” She looked at him with frank curiosity. “How did you know?”

“I want to show you, mademoiselle, that even in a small unimportant matter, I am something of a magician. There are things I know without having to be told.”

Three

RECONSTRUCTION

The afternoon sun shone into the laboratory at Handcross Manor. Some easy chairs and a settee had been brought into the room, but they served more to emphasize its forlorn aspect than to furnish it.

Slightly embarrassed, pulling at his moustache, Meredith Blake talked to Carla in a desultory way. He broke off once to say: “My dear, you are very like your mother—and yet unlike her, too.”

Carla asked: “How am I like her and how unlike?”

“You have her colouring and her way of moving, but you are—how shall I put it—more positive than she ever was.”

Philip Blake, a scowl creasing over his forehead, looked out of the window and drummed impatiently on the pane. He said:

“What’s the sense of all this? A perfectly fine Saturday afternoon—”

Hercule Poirot hastened to pour oil on troubled waters.

“Ah, I apologize—it is, I know, unpardonable to disarrange the golf. Mais voyons, Mr. Blake, this is the daughter of your best friend. You will stretch a point for her, will you not?”

The butler announced: “Miss Warren.”

Meredith went to welcome her. He said: “It’s good of you to spare the time, Angela. You’re busy, I know.”

He led her over to the window.

Carla said: “Hallo, Aunt Angela. I read your article in The Times this morning. It’s nice to have a distinguished relative.” She indicated the tall, square-jawed young man with the steady grey eyes. “This is John Rattery. He and I—hope—to be married.”

Angela Warren said: “Oh!—I didn’t know….”

Meredith went to greet the next arrival.

“Well, Miss Williams, it’s a good many years since we met.”

Thin, frail and indomitable, the elderly governess advanced up the room. Her eyes rested thoughtfully on Poirot for a minute, then they went to the tall, square-shouldered figure in the well-cut tweeds.

Angela Warren came forward to meet her and said with a smile: “I feel like a schoolgirl again.”

“I’m very proud of you, my dear,” said Miss Williams. “You’ve done me credit. This is Carla, I suppose? She won’t remember me. She was too young….”

Philip Blake said fretfully: “What is all this? Nobody told me—”

Hercule Poirot said: “I call it—me—an excursion into the past. Shall we not all sit down? Then we shall be ready when the last guest arrives. And when she is here we can proceed to our business—to lay the ghosts.”

Philip Blake exclaimed: “What tomfoolery is this? You’re not going to hold a séance, are you?”

“No, no. We are only going to discuss some events that happened long ago—to discuss them and, perhaps, to see more clearly the course of them. As to the ghosts, they will not materialize, but who is to say they are not here, in this room, although we cannot see them. Who is to say that Amyas and Caroline Crale are not here—listening?”

Philip Blake said: “Absurd nonsense—” and broke off as the door opened again and the butler announced Lady Dittisham.

Elsa Dittisham came in with that faint, bored insolence that was a characteristic of her. She gave Meredith a slight smile, stared coldly at Angela and Philip, and went over to a chair by the window a little apart from the others. She loosened the rich pale furs round her neck and let them fall back. She looked for a minute or two about the room, then at Carla, and the girl stared back, thoughtfully appraising the woman who had wrought the havoc in her parents' lives. There was no animosity in her young earnest face, only curiosity.

Elsa said: "I am sorry if I am late, Mr. Poirot."

"It was very good of you to come, madame."

Cecilia Williams snorted ever so slightly. Elsa met the animosity in her eyes with a complete lack of interest. She said:

"I wouldn't have known you, Angela. How long is it? Sixteen years?"

Hercule Poirot seized his opportunity.

"Yes, it is sixteen years since the events of which we are to speak, but let me first tell you why we are here."

And in a few simple words he outlined Carla's appeal to him and his acceptance of the task.

He went on quickly, ignoring the gathering storm visible on Philip's face, and the shocked distaste on Meredith's.

"I accepted that commision—I set to work to find out—the truth."

Carla Lemarchant, in the big grandfather chair, heard Poirot's words dimly, from a distance.

With her hand shielding her eyes she studied five faces, surreptitiously. Could she see any of these people committing murder? The exotic Elsa, the red-faced Philip, dear, nice, kind Mr. Meredith Blake, that grim tartar of a governess, the cool, competent Angela Warren?

Could she—if she tried hard—visualize one of them killing someone? Yes, perhaps—but it wouldn't be the right kind of murder. She could picture Philip Blake, in an outburst of fury, strangling some women—yes, she could picture that…And she could picture Meredith Blake, threatening a burglar with a revolver—and letting it off by accident. And she could picture Angela Warren, also firing a revolver, but not by accident. With no personal feeling in the matter—the safety of the expedition depended on it! And Elsa, in some fantastic castle, saying from her couch of oriental silks: "Throw the wretch over the battlements!" All wild fancies—and not even in the wildest flight of fancy could she imagine little Miss Williams killing anybody at all! Another fantastic picture: "Did you ever kill anybody, Miss Williams?" "Go on with your arithmetic, Carla, and don't ask silly questions. To kill anybody is very wicked."

Carla thought: "I must be ill—and I must stop this. Listen, you fool, listen to that little man who says he knows."

Hercule Poirot was talking.

"That was my task—to put myself in reverse gear, as it were, and go back through the years and discover what really happened."

Philip Blake said: "We all know what happened. To pretend anything else is a swindle—that's what it is, a bare-faced swindle. You're getting money out of this girl on false pretences."

Poirot did not allow himself to be angered. He said:

"You say, we all know what happened. You speak without reflection. The accepted version of certain facts is not necessarily the true one. On the face of it, for instance, you, Mr. Blake, disliked Caroline Crale. That is the accepted version of your attitude. But anyone with the least flair for psychology can perceive at once that the exact opposite was the truth. You were always violently attracted towards Caroline Crale. You resented the fact, and tried to conquer it by steadfastly telling yourself her defects and reiterating your dislike. In the same way, Mr. Meredith Blake had a tradition of devotion to Caroline Crale lasting over many years. In his story of the tragedy he represents himself as resenting Amyas Crale's conduct on her account, but you have only to read carefully between the lines and you will see that the devotion of a lifetime had worn itself thin and that it was the young, beautiful Elsa Greer that was occupying his mind and thoughts."

There was a splutter from Meredith, and Lady Dittisham smiled.

Poirot went on.

"I mention these matters only as illustrations, though they have their bearing on what happened. Very well, then, I start on my backward journey—to learn everything I can about the tragedy. I will tell you how I set about it. I talked to the Counsel who defended Caroline Crale, to the Junior Counsel for the Crown, to the old solicitor who had known the Crale family intimately, to the lawyer's clerk who had been in court during the trial, to the police officer in charge of the case—and I came finally to the five eyewitnesses who had been upon the scene. And from all of these I put together a picture—a composite picture of a woman. And I learned these facts:

"That at no time did Caroline Crale protest her innocence (except in that one letter written to her daughter).

"That Caroline Crale showed no fear in the dock, that she showed, in fact, hardly any interest, that she adopted throughout a thoroughly defeatist attitude. That in prison she was quiet and serene. That in a letter she wrote to her sister immediately after the verdict, she expressed herself as acquiescent in the fate that had overtaken her. And in the opinion of everyone I talked to (with one notable exception) Caroline Crale was guilty."

Philip Blake nodded his head. "Of course she was!"

Hercule Poirot said:

"But it was not my part to accept the verdict of others. I had to examine the evidence for myself. To examine the facts and to satisfy myself that the psychology of the case accorded itself with them. To do this I went over the police files carefully, and I also succeeded in getting five people who were on the spot to write me out their own accounts of the tragedy. These accounts were very valuable for they contained certain matter which the police files could not give me—that is to say: A, certain conversations and incidents which, from the police point of view, were not relevant; B, the opinions of the people themselves as to what Caroline Crale was thinking and feeling (not admissible legally as evidence); C, certain facts which had been deliberately withheld from the police.

“I was in a position now to judge the case for myself. There seems no doubt whatever that Caroline Crale had ample motive for the crime. She loved her husband, he had publicly admitted that he was about to leave her for another woman, and by her own admission she was a jealous woman.

“To come from motives to means, an empty scent bottle that had contained coniine was found in her bureau drawer. There were no fingerprints upon it but hers. When asked about it by the police, she admitted taking it from this room we are in now. The coniine bottle here also had her fingerprints upon it. I questioned Mr. Meredith Blake as to the order in which the five people left this room on that day—for it seemed to me hardly conceivable that anyone should be able to help themselves to the poison whilst five people were in the room. The people left the room in this order—Elsa Greer, Meredith Blake, Angela Warren and Philip Blake, Amyas Crale, and lastly Caroline Crale. Moreover, Mr. Meredith Blake has his back to the room whilst he was waiting for Mrs. Crale to come out, so that it was impossible for him to see what she was doing. She had, that is to say, the opportunity. I am therefore satisfied that she did take the coniine. There is indirect confirmation of it. Mr. Meredith Blake said to me the other day: “I can remember standing here and smelling the jasmine through the open window.” But the month was September, and the jasmine creeper outside that window would have finished flowering. It is the ordinary jasmine which blooms in June and July. But the scent bottle found in her room and which contained the dregs of coniine had originally contained jasmine scent. I take it as certain, then, that Mrs. Crale decided to steal the coniine, and surreptitiously emptied out the scent from a bottle she had in her bag.

“I tested that a second time the other day when I asked Mr. Blake to shut his eyes and try and remember the order of leaving the room. A whiff of jasmine scent stimulated his memory immediately. We are all more influenced by smell than we know.

“So we come to the morning of the fatal day. So far the facts are not in dispute. Miss Greer’s sudden revealing of the fact that she and Mr. Crale contemplate marriage, Amyas Crale’s confirmation of that, and Caroline Crale’s deep distress. None of these things depend on the evidence of one witness only.

“On the following morning there is a scene between husband and wife in the library. The first thing that is overheard is Caroline Crale saying: “You and your women!” in a bitter voice, and finally going on to say, “Some day I’ll kill you.” Philip Blake overheard this from the hall. And Miss Greer overheard it from the terrace outside.

“She then heard Mr. Crale ask his wife to be reasonable. And she heard Mrs. Crale say: “Sooner than let you go to that girl—I’ll kill you.” Soon after this Amyas Crale comes out and brusquely tells Elsa Greer to come down and pose for him. She gets a pullover and accompanies him.

“There is nothing so far that seems psychologically incorrect. Every one has behaved as they might be expected to behave. But we come now to something that is incongruous.

“Meredith Blake discovers his loss, telephones his brother; they meet down at the landing stage and they come up past the Battery garden, where Caroline Crale is having a discussion with her husband on the subject of Angela’s going to school. Now that does strike me as very odd. Husband and wife have a terrific scene, ending in a distinct threat on Caroline’s part, and yet, twenty minutes or so later, she goes down and starts a trivial domestic argument.”

Poirot turned to Meredith Blake.

“You speak in your narrative of certain words you overheard Crale say. These were: ‘It’s all settled—I’ll see to her packing.’ That is right?”

Meredith Blake said: “It was something like that—yes.”

Poirot turned to Philip Blake.

“Is your recollection the same?”

The latter frowned.

“I didn’t remember it till you say so—but I do remember now. Something was said about packing!”

“Said by Mr. Crale—not Mrs. Crale?”

“Amyas said it. All I heard Caroline say was something about its being very hard on the girl. Anyway, what does all this matter? We all know Angela was off to school in a day or two.”

Poirot said: “You do not see the force of my objection. Why should Amyas Crale pack for the girl? It is absurd, that! There was Mrs. Crale, there was Miss Williams, there was a housemaid. It is a woman’s job to pack—not a man’s.”

Philip Blake said impatiently:

“What does it matter? It’s nothing to do with the crime.”

“You think not? For me, it was the first point that struck me as suggestive. And it is immediately followed by another. Mrs. Crale, a desperate woman, broken-hearted, who has threatened her husband a short while before and who is certainly contemplating either suicide or murder, now offers in the most amicable manner to bring her husband down some iced beer.”

Meredith Blake said slowly: “That isn’t odd if she was contemplating murder. Then, surely, it is just what she would do. Dissimulate!”

“You think so? She has decided to poison her husband, she has already got the poison. Her husband keeps a supply of beer down in the Battery garden. Surely if she has any intelligence at all, she will put the poison in one of those bottles at a moment when there is no one about.”

Meredith Blake objected.

“She couldn’t have done that. Somebody else might have drunk it.”

“Yes, Elsa Greer. Do you tell me that having made up her mind to murder her husband, Caroline Crale would have scruples against killing the girl too?

“But let us not argue the point. Let us confine ourselves to facts. Caroline Crale says she will send her husband down some iced beer. She goes up to the house, fetches a bottle from the conservatory where it was kept and takes it down to him. She pours it out and gives it to him.

“Amyas Crale drinks it off and says: ‘Everything tastes foul today.’

“Mrs. Crale goes up again to the house. She has lunch and appears much as usual. It has been said of her that she looks a little worried and preoccupied. That does not help us—for there is no criterion of behaviour for a murderer. There are calm murderers and excited murderers.

“After lunch she goes down again to the Battery. She discovers her husband dead and does, shall we say, the obviously expected things. She registers emotion and she sends the governess to telephone for a doctor. We now come to a fact which has previously not been known.” He looked at Miss Williams. “You do not object?”

Miss Williams was rather pale. She said: “I did not pledge you to secrecy.”

Quietly, but with telling effect, Poirot recounted what the governess had seen.

Elsa Dittisham moved her position. She stared at the drab little woman in the big chair. She said incredibly:

“You actually saw her do that?”

Philip Blake sprang up.

“But that settles it!” he shouted. “That settles it once and for all.”

Hercule Poirot looked at him mildly. He said: “Not necessarily.”

Angela Warren said sharply: “I don’t believe it.” There was a quick hostile glint in the glance she shot at the little governess.

Meredith Blake was pulling at his moustache, his face dismayed. Alone, Miss Williams remained undisturbed. She sat very upright and there was a spot of colour in each cheek.

She said: “That is what I saw.”

Poirot said slowly: “There is, of course, only your word for it….”

“There is only my word for it.” The indomitable grey eyes met his. “I am not accustomed, Mr. Poirot, to having my word doubted.”

Hercule Poirot bowed his head. He said:

“I do not doubt your word, Miss Williams. What you saw took place exactly as you say it did—and because of what you saw I realized that Caroline Crale was not guilty—could not possibly be guilty.”

For the first time, that tall, anxious-faced young man, John Rattery, spoke. He said: “I’d be interested to know why you say that, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot turned to him.

“Certainly. I will tell you. What did Miss Williams see—she saw Caroline Crale very carefully and anxiously wiping off fingerprints and subsequently imposing her dead husband’s fingerprints on the beer bottle. On the beer bottle, mark. But the coniine was in the glass—not in the bottle. The police found no traces of coniine in the bottle. There had never been any coniine in the bottle. And Caroline Crale didn’t know that.

“She who is supposed to have poisoned her husband didn’t know how he had been poisoned. She thought the poison was in the bottle.”

Meredith objected: “But why—”

Poirot interrupted him in a flash.

“Yes—why? Why did Caroline Crale try so desperately to establish the theory of suicide? The answer is—must be—quite simple. Because she knew who had poisoned him and she was willing to do anything—endure anything—rather than let that person be suspected.

“There is not far to go now. Who could that person be? Would she have shielded Philip Blake? Or Meredith? Or Elsa Greer? Or Cecilia Williams? No, there is only one person whom she would be willing to protect at all costs.”

He paused: “Miss Warren, if you have brought your sister’s last letter with you, I should like to read it aloud.”

Angela Warren said: “No.”

“But, Miss Warren—”

Angela got up. Her voice rang out, cold as steel.

“I realize very well what you are suggesting. You are saying, are you not, that I killed Amyas Crale and that my sister knew it. I deny that allegation utterly.”

Poirot said: “The letter….”

“That letter was meant for my eyes alone.”

Poirot looked to where the two youngest people in the room stood together.

Carla Lemarchant said: “Please, Aunt Angela, won’t you do as Mr. Poirot asks?”

Angela Warren said bitterly: “Really, Carla! Have you no sense of decency? She was your mother—you—”

Carla’s voice rang out clear and fierce.

“Yes, she was my mother. That’s why I’ve a right to ask you. I’m speaking for her. I want that letter read.”

Slowly, Angela Warren took out the letter from her bag and handed it to Poirot. She said bitterly:

“I wish I had never shown it to you.”

Turning away from them she stood looking out of the window.

As Hercule Poirot read aloud Caroline Crale’s last letter, the shadows were deepening in the corners of the room. Carla had a sudden feeling of someone in the room, gathering shape, listening, breathing, waiting. She thought: “She’s here—my mother’s here. Caroline—Caroline Crale is here in this room!”

Hercule Poirot’s voice ceased. He said:

“You will all agree, I think, that that is a very remarkable letter. A beautiful letter, too, but certainly remarkable. For there is one striking omission in it—it contains no protestation of innocence.”

Angela Warren said without turning her head: “That was unnecessary.”

“Yes, Miss Warren, it was unnecessary. Caroline Crale had no need to tell her sister that she was innocent—because she thought her sister knew that fact already—knew it for the best of all reasons. All Caroline Crale was concerned about was to comfort and reassure and to avert the possibility of a confession from Angela. She reiterates again and again—It’s all right, darling, it’s all right.”

Angela Warren said: “Can’t you understand? She wanted me to be happy, that’s all.”

“Yes, she wanted you to be happy, that is abundantly clear. It is her one preoccupation. She has a child, but it is not that child of whom she is thinking—that is to come later. No, it is her sister who occupies her mind to the exclusion of everything else. Her sister must be reassured, must be encouraged to live her life, to be happy and successful. And so that the burden of acceptance may not be too great, Caroline includes that one very significant phrase: ‘One must pay one’s debts.’

“That one phrase explains everything. It refers explicitly to the burden that Caroline has carried for so many years ever since, in a fit of uncontrolled adolescent rage, she hurled a paperweight at her baby sister and injured that sister for life. Now, at last, she has the opportunity to pay the debt she owes. And if it is any consolation, I will say to you all that I earnestly believe that in the payment of that debt, Caroline Crale did achieve a peace and serenity greater than any she had ever known. Because of her belief that she was paying that debt, the ordeal of trial and condemnation could not touch her. It is a strange thing to say of a condemned murderess—but she had everything to make her happy. Yes, more than you imagine, as I will show you presently.

“See how, by this explanation, everything falls into its place where Caroline’s own reactions are concerned. Look at the series of events from her point of view. To begin with, on the preceding evening, an event occurs which reminds her forcibly of her own undisciplined girlhood. Angela throws a paperweight at Amyas Crale. That, remember, is what she herself did many years ago. Angela shouts out that she wishes Amyas was dead. Then, on the next morning, Caroline comes into the little conservatory and finds Angela tampering with the beer. Remember Miss Williams’s words: ‘Angela was there. She looked guilty…’ Guilty of playing truant, was what Miss Williams meant, but to Caroline, Angela’s guilty face, as she was caught unawares, would have a different meaning. Remember that on at least one occasion before Angela had put things in Amyas’s drink. It was an idea which might readily occur to her.

“Caroline takes the bottle that Angela gives her and goes down with it to the Battery. And there she pours it out and gives it to Amyas, and he makes a face as he tosses it off and utters those significant words: ‘Everything tastes foul today.’

“Caroline has no suspicions then—but after lunch she goes down to the Battery and finds her husband dead—and she has no doubt at all but that he has been poisoned. She had not done it. Who, then, has? And the whole thing comes over her with a rush—Angela’s threats, Angela’s face stooping over the beer and caught unawares—guilty—guilty—guilty. Why has the child done it? As a revenge on Amyas, perhaps not meaning to kill, just to make him ill or sick? Or has she done it for her, Caroline's sake? Has she realized and resented Amyas's desertion of her sister? Caroline remembers—oh, so well—her own undisciplined violent emotions at Angela's age. And only one thought springs to her mind. How can she protect Angela? Angela handled that bottle—Angela's fingerprints will be on it. She quickly wipes it and polishes it. If only everybody can be got to believe it is suicide. If Amyas's fingerprints are the only ones found. She tries to fit his dead fingers round the bottle—working desperately—listening for someone to come….

"Once take that assumption as true, and everything from then on fits in. Her anxiety about Angela all along, her insistence on getting her away, keeping her out of touch with what was going on. Her fear of Angela's being questioned unduly by the police. Finally, her overwhelming anxiety to get Angela out of England before the trial comes on. Because she is always terrified that Angela might break down and confess."

Four

TRUTH

Slowly, Angela Warren swung round. Her eyes, hard and contemptuous, ranged over the faces turned towards her.

She said:

“You’re blind fools—all of you. Don’t you know that if I had done it I would have confessed! I’d never have let Caroline suffer for what I’d done. Never!”

Poirot said:

“But you did tamper with the beer.”

“I? Tamper with the beer?”

Poirot turned to Meredith Blake.

“Listen, monsieur. In your account here of what happened, you describe having heard sounds in this room, which is below your bedroom, on the morning of the crime.”

Blake nodded.

“But it was only a cat.”

“How do you know it was a cat?”

“I—I can’t remember. But it was a cat. I am quite sure it was a cat. The window was open just wide enough for a cat to get through.”

“But it was not fixed in that position. The sash moves freely. It could have been pushed up and a human being could have got in and out.”

“Yes, but I know it was a cat.”

“You did not see a cat?”

Blake said perplexedly and slowly:

“No, I did not see it—” He paused, frowning. “And yet I know.”

“I will tell you why you know presently. In the meantime I put this point to you. Someone could have come up to the house that morning, have got into your laboratory, taken something from the shelf and gone again without your seeing them. Now if that someone had come over from Alderbury it could not have been Philip Blake, nor Elsa Greer, nor Amyas Crale nor Caroline Crale. We know quite well what all those four were doing. That leaves Angela Warren and Miss Williams. Miss Williams was over here—you actually met her as you went out. She told you then that she was looking for Angela. Angela had gone bathing early, but Miss Williams did not see her in the water, nor anywhere on the rocks. She could swim across to this side easily—in fact she did so later in the morning when she was bathing with Philip Blake. I suggest that she swam across here, came up to the house, got in through the window, and took something from the shelf.”

Angela Warren said: “I did nothing of the kind—not—at least—”

“Ah!” Poirot gave a yelp of triumph. “You have remembered. You told me, did you not, that to play a malicious joke on Amyas Crale you pinched some of what you called ‘the cat stuff’—that is how you put it—”

Meredith Blake said sharply:

“Valerian! Of course.”

“Exactly. That is what made you sure in your mind that it was a cat who had been in the room. Your nose is very sensitive. You smelled the faint, unpleasant odour of valerian without knowing, perhaps, that you did so—but it suggested to your subconscious mind ‘Cat.’ Cats love valerian and will go anywhere for it. Valerian is particularly nasty to taste, and it was your account of it the day before which made mischievous Miss Angela plan to put some in her brother-in-law’s beer, which she knew he always tossed down his throat in a draught.”

Angela Warren said wonderingly: “Was it really that day? I remember taking it perfectly. Yes, and I remember getting out the beer and Caroline coming in and nearly catching me! Of course I remember…But I’ve never connected it with that particular day.”

“Of course not—because there was no connection in your mind. The two events were entirely dissimilar to you. One was on a par with other mischievous pranks—the other was a bombshell of tragedy arriving without warning and succeeding in banishing all lesser incidents from your mind. But me, I noticed when you spoke of it that you said: ‘I pinched, etc., etc., to put it in Amyas’s drink.’ You did not say you had actually done so.”

“No, because I never did. Caroline came in just when I was unscrewing the bottle. Oh!” It was a cry. “And Caroline thought—she thought it was me—!”

She stopped. She looked round. She said quietly in her usual cool tones: “I suppose you all think so, too.”

She paused and then said: “I didn’t kill Amyas. Not as the result of a malicious joke nor in any other way. If I had I would never have kept silence.”

Miss Williams said sharply:

“Of course you wouldn’t, my dear.” She looked at Hercule Poirot. “Nobody but a fool would think so.”

Hercule Poirot said mildly:

“I am not a fool and I do not think so. I know quite well who killed Amyas Crale.”

He paused.

“There is always a danger of accepting facts as proved which are really nothing of the kind. Let us take the situation at Alderbury. A very old situation. Two women and one man. We have taken it for granted that Amyas Crale proposed to leave his wife for the other woman. But I suggest to you now that he never intended to do anything of the kind.

“He had had infatuations for women before. They obsessed him while they lasted, but they were soon over. The women he had fallen in love with were usually women of a certain experience—they did not expect too much of him. But this time the woman did. She was not, you see, a woman at all. She was a girl, and in Caroline Crale’s words, she was terribly sincere…She may have been hard-boiled and sophisticated in speech, but in love she was frighteningly single-minded. Because she herself had a deep and overmastering passion for Amyas Crale she assumed that he had the same for her. She assumed without any question that their passion was for life. She assumed without asking him that he was going to leave his wife.

“But why, you will say, did Amyas Crale not undeceive her? And my answer is—the picture. He wanted to finish his picture.

“To some people that sounds incredible—but not to anybody who knows about artists. And we have already accepted that explanation in principle. That conversation between Crale and Meredith Blake is more intelligible now. Crale is embarrassed—pats Blake on the back, assures him optimistically the whole thing is going to pan out all right. To Amyas Crale, you see, everything is simple. He is painting a picture, slightly encumbered by what he describes as a couple of jealous, neurotic women—but neither of them is going to be allowed to interfere with what to him is the most important thing in life.

“If he were to tell Elsa the truth it would be all up with the picture. Perhaps in the first flush of his feelings for her he did talk about leaving Caroline. Men do say these things when they are in love. Perhaps he merely let it be assumed, as he is letting it be assumed now. He doesn’t care what Elsa assumes. Let her think what she likes. Anything to keep her quiet for another day or two.

“Then—he will tell her the truth—that things between them are over. He has never been a man to be troubled with scruples.

“He did, I think, make an effort not to get embroiled with Elsa to begin with. He warned her what kind of a man he was—but she would not take warning. She rushed on her Fate. And to a man like Crale women were fair game. If you had asked him he would have said easily that Elsa was young—she’d soon get over it. That was the way Amyas Crale’s mind worked.

“His wife was actually the only person he cared about at all. He wasn’t worrying much about her. She’d only got to put up with things for a few days longer. He was furious with Elsa for blurting out things to Caroline, but he still optimistically thought it would be ‘all right.’ Caroline would forgive him as she had done so often before, and Elsa—Elsa would just have to ‘lump it.’ So simple are the problems of life to a man like Amyas Crale.

“But I think that that last evening he became really worried. About Caroline, not about Elsa. Perhaps he went to her room and she refused to speak with him. At any rate, after a restless night, he took her aside after breakfast and blurted out the truth. He had been infatuated with Elsa, but it was all over. Once he’d finished the picture he’d never see her again.

“And it was in answer to that that Caroline Crale cried out indignantly: ‘You and your women!’ That phrase, you see, put Elsa in a class with others—those others who had gone their way. And she added indignantly: ‘Some day I’ll kill you.’

“She was angry, revolted by his callousness and by his cruelty to the girl. When Philip Blake saw her in the hall and heard her murmur to herself, ‘It’s too cruel!’ it was of Elsa she was thinking.

“As for Crale, he came out of the library, found Elsa with Philip Blake, and brusquely ordered her down to go on with the sitting. What he did not know was that Elsa Greer had been sitting just outside the library window and had overheard everything. And the account she gave later of that conversation was not the true one. There is only her word for it, remember.

“Imagine the shock it must have been to her to hear the truth, brutally spoken!

“On the previous afternoon Meredith Blake has told us that whilst he was waiting for Caroline to leave this room he was standing in the doorway with his back to the room. He was talking to Elsa Greer. That means that she would have been facing him and that she could see exactly what Caroline was doing over his shoulder—and that she was the only person who could do so.

“She saw Caroline take that poison. She said nothing, but she remembered it as she sat outside the library window.

“When Amyas Crale came out she made the excuse of wanting a pullover, and went up to Caroline Crale’s room to look for that poison. Women know where other women are likely to hide things. She found it, and being careful not to obliterate any fingerprints or to leave her own, she drew off the fluid into a fountain-pen filler.

“Then she came down again and went off with Crale to the Battery garden. And presently, no doubt, she poured him out some beer and he tossed it down in his usual way.

“Meanwhile, Caroline Crale was seriously disturbed. When she saw Elsa come up to the house (this time really to fetch a pullover), Caroline slipped quickly down to the Battery garden and tackled her husband. What he is doing is shameful! She won’t stand for it! It’s unbelievably cruel and hard on the girl! Amyas, irritable at being interrupted, says it’s all settled—when the picture is done he’ll send the girl packing! ‘It’s all settled—I’ll send her packing. I tell you.’

“And then they hear the footsteps of the two Blakes, and Caroline comes out and, slightly embarrassed, murmurs something about Angela and school and having a lot to do, and by a natural association of ideas the two men judge the conversation they have overheard refers to Angela, and ‘I’ll send her packing’ becomes ‘I’ll see to her packing.’

“And Elsa, pullover in hand, comes down the path, cool and smiling, and takes up the pose once more.

“She has counted, no doubt, upon Caroline’s being suspected and the coniine bottle being found in her room. But Caroline now plays into her hands completely. She brings down some iced beer and pours it out for her husband.

“Amyas tosses it off, making a face and says: ‘Everything tastes foul today.’

“Do you not see how significant that remark is? Everything tastes foul? Then there has been something else before that beer that has tasted unpleasant and the taste of which is still in his mouth. And one other point. Philip Blake speaks of Crale’s staggering a little and wonders ‘if he has been drinking.’ But that slight stagger was the first sign of the coniine working, and that means that it had already been administered to him some time before Caroline brought him the iced bottle of beer.

“And so Elsa Greer sat on the grey wall and posed and, since she must keep him from suspecting until it was too late, she talked to Amyas Crale brightly and naturally. Presently she saw Meredith on the bench above and waved her hand to him and acted her part even more thoroughly for his behalf.

“And Amyas Crale, a man who detested illness and refused to give in to it, painted doggedly on till his limbs failed and his speech thickened, and he sprawled there on that bench, helpless, but with his mind still clear.

“The bell sounded from the house and Meredith left the bench to come down to the Battery. I think in that brief moment Elsa left her place and ran across to the table and dropped the last few drops of the poison into the beer glass that held that last innocent drink. (She got rid of the dropper on the path up to the house—crushing it to powder.) Then she met Meredith in the doorway.

“There is a glare there coming in out of the shadows. Meredith did not see very clearly—only his friend sprawled in a familiar position and saw his eyes turn from the picture in what he described as a malevolent glare.

“How much did Amyas know or guess? How much his conscious mind knew we cannot tell, but his hand and his eye were faithful.”

Hercule Poirot gestured towards the picture on the wall.

“I should have known when I first saw that picture. For it is a very remarkable picture. It is the picture of a murderess painted by her victim—it is the picture of a girl watching her lover die….”

Five

AFTERMATH

In the silence that followed—a horrified, appalled silence, the sunset slowly flickered away, the last gleam left the window where it had rested on the dark head and pale furs of the woman sitting there.

Elsa Dittisham moved and spoke. She said:

“Take them away, Meredith. Leave me with Mr. Poirot.”

She sat there motionless until the door shut behind them. Then she said: “You are very clever, aren’t you?”

Poirot did not answer.

She said: “What do you expect me to do? Confess?”

He shook his head.

Elsa said:

“Because I shall do nothing of the kind! And I shall admit nothing. But what we say here, together, does not matter. Because it is only a question of your word against mine.”

“Exactly.”

“I want to know what you are going to do?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I shall do everything I can to induce the authorities to grant a posthumous free pardon to Caroline Crale.”

Elsa laughed. She said: “How absurd! To be given a free pardon for something you didn’t do.” Then she said: “What about me?”

“I shall lay my conclusion before the necessary people. If they decide there is the possibility of making out a case against you then they may act. I will tell you in my opinion there is not sufficient evidence—there are only inferences, not facts. Moreover, they will not be anxious to proceed against anyone in your position unless there is ample justification for such a course.”

Elsa said:

“I shouldn’t care. If I were standing in the dock, fighting for my life—there might be something in that—something alive—exciting. I might—enjoy it.”

“Your husband would not.”

She stared at him.

“Do you think I care in the least what my husband would feel?”

“No, I do not. I do not think you have ever in your life cared about what any other person would feel. If you had, you might be happier.”

She said sharply:

“Why are you sorry for me?”

“Because, my child, you have so much to learn.”

“What have I got to learn?”

“All the grown-up emotions—pity, sympathy, understanding. The only things you know—have ever known—are love and hate.”

Elsa said:

“I saw Caroline take the coniine. I thought she meant to kill herself. That would have simplified things. And then, the next morning, I found out. He told her that he didn’t care a button about me—he had cared, but it was all over. Once he’d finished the picture he’d send me packing. She’d nothing to worry about, he said.

“And she—was sorry for me…Do you understand what that did to me? I found the stuff and I gave it to him and I sat there watching him die. I’ve never felt so alive, so exultant, so full of power. I watched him die….”

She flung out her hands.

“I didn’t understand that I was killing myself—not him. Afterwards I saw her caught in a trap—and that was no good either. I couldn’t hurt her—she didn’t care—she escaped from it all—half the time she wasn’t there. She and Amyas both escaped—they went somewhere where I couldn’t get at them. But they didn’t die. I died.”

Elsa Dittisham got up. She went across to the door. She said again:

“I died….”

In the hall she passed two young people whose life together was just beginning.

The chauffeur held open the door of the car. Lady Dittisham got in and the chauffeur wrapped the fur rug round her knees.

The Hollow (1946)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

At six thirteen a.m. on a Friday morning Lucy Angkatell's big blue eyes opened upon another day and, as always, she was at once wide awake and began immediately to deal with the problems conjured up by her incredibly active mind. Feeling urgently the need of consultation and conversation, and selecting for the purpose her young cousin, Midge Hardcastle, who had arrived at The Hollow the night before, Lady Angkatell slipped quickly out of bed, threw a négligée round her still graceful shoulders, and went along the passage to Midge's room. Since she was a woman of disconcertingly rapid thought processes, Lady Angkatell, as was her invariable custom, commenced the conversation in her own mind, supplying Midge's answers out of her own fertile imagination.

The conversation was in full swing when Lady Angkatell flung open Midge's door.

"—And so, darling, you really must agree that the weekend is going to present difficulties!"

"Eh? Hwah!" Midge grunted inarticulately, aroused thus abruptly from a satisfying and deep sleep.

Lady Angkatell crossed to the window, opening the shutters and jerking up the blind with a brisk movement, letting in the pale light of a September dawn.

"Birds!" she observed, peering with kindly pleasure through the pane. "So sweet."

"What?"

"Well, at any rate, the weather isn't going to present difficulties. It looks as though it has set in fine. That's something. Because if a lot of discordant personalities are boxed up indoors, I'm sure you will agree with me that it makes it ten times worse. Round games perhaps, and that would be like last year when I shall never forgive myself about poor Gerda. I said to Henry afterwards it was most thoughtless of me—and one has to have her, of course, because it would be so rude to ask John without her, but it really does make things difficult—and the worst of it is that she is so nice—really it seems odd sometimes that anyone so nice as Gerda is should be so devoid of any kind of intelligence, and if that is what they mean by the law of compensation I don't really think it is at all fair."

"What are you talking about, Lucy?"

"The weekend, darling. The people who are coming tomorrow. I have been thinking about it all night and I have been dreadfully bothered about it. So it really is a relief to talk it over with you, Midge. You are always so sensible and practical."

"Lucy," said Midge sternly. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Not exactly, darling. I never do, you know."

"It's quarter past six."

"Yes, dear," said Lady Angkatell, with no signs of contrition.

Midge gazed sternly at her. How maddening, how absolutely impossible Lucy was! Really, thought Midge, I don't know why we put up with her!

Yet even as she voiced the thought to herself, she was aware of the answer. Lucy Angkatell was smiling, and as Midge looked at her, she felt the extraordinary pervasive charm that Lucy had wielded all her life and that even now, at over sixty, had not failed her. Because of it, people all over the world, foreign potentates, ADCs, Government officials, had endured inconvenience, annoyance and bewilderment. It was the childlike pleasure and delight in her own doings that disarmed and nullified criticism. Lucy had but to open those wide blue eyes and stretch out those fragile hands, and murmur, "Oh! but I'm so sorry…" and resentment immediately vanished.

"Darling," said Lady Angkatell, "I'm so sorry. You should have told me!"

“I’m telling you now—but it’s too late! I’m thoroughly awake.”

“What a shame! But you will help me, won’t you?”

“About the weekend? Why? What’s wrong with it?”

Lady Angkatell sat down on the edge of the bed. It was not, Midge thought, like anyone else sitting on your bed. It was as insubstantial as though a fairy had poised itself there for a minute.

Lady Angkatell stretched out fluttering white hands in a lovely, helpless gesture.

“All the wrong people coming—the wrong people to be together, I mean—not in themselves. They’re all charming really.”

“Who is coming?”

Midge pushed thick wiry black hair back from her square forehead with a sturdy brown arm. Nothing insubstantial or fairylike about her.

“Well, John and Gerda. That’s all right by itself. I mean, John is delightful—most attractive. And as for poor Gerda—well, I mean, we must all be very kind. Very, very kind.”

Moved by an obscure instinct of defence, Midge said:

“Oh, come now, she’s not as bad as that.”

“Oh, darling, she’s pathetic. Those eyes. And she never seems to understand a single word one says.”

“She doesn’t,” said Midge. “Not what you say—but I don’t know that I blame her. Your mind, Lucy, goes so fast, that to keep pace with it your conversation takes the most amazing leaps. All the connecting links are left out.”

“Just like a monkey,” said Lady Angkatell vaguely.

"But who else is coming besides the Christows? Henrietta, I suppose?"

Lady Angkatell's face brightened.

"Yes—and I really do feel that she will be a tower of strength. She always is. Henrietta, you know, is really kind—kind all through, not just on top. She will help a lot with poor Gerda. She was simply wonderful last year. That was the time we played limericks, or word-making, or quotations—or one of those things, and we had all finished and were reading them out when we suddenly discovered that poor dear Gerda hadn't even begun. She wasn't even sure what the game was. It was dreadful, wasn't it, Midge?"

"Why anyone ever comes to stay with the Angkatells, I don't know," said Midge. "What with the brainwork, and the round games, and your peculiar style of conversation, Lucy."

"Yes, darling, we must be trying—and it must always be hateful for Gerda, and I often think that if she had any spirit she would stay away—but however, there it was, and the poor dear looked so bewildered and—well—mortified, you know. And John looked so dreadfully impatient. And I simply couldn't think of how to make things all right again—and it was then that I felt so grateful to Henrietta. She turned right round to Gerda and asked about the pullover she was wearing—really a dreadful affair in faded lettuce green—too depressing and jumble sale, darling—and Gerda brightened up at once, it seems that she had knitted it herself, and Henrietta asked her for the pattern, and Gerda looked so happy and proud. And that is what I mean about Henrietta. She can always do that sort of thing. It's a kind of knack."

"She takes trouble," said Midge slowly.

"Yes, and she knows what to say."

"Ah," said Midge. "But it goes further than saying. Do you know, Lucy, that Henrietta actually knitted that pullover?"

"Oh, my dear." Lady Angkatell looked grave. "And wore it?"

“And wore it. Henrietta carries things through.”

“And was it very dreadful?”

“No. On Henrietta it looked very nice.”

“Well, of course it would. That’s just the difference between Henrietta and Gerda. Everything Henrietta does she does well and it turns out right. She’s clever about nearly everything, as well as in her own line. I must say, Midge, that if anyone carries us through this weekend, it will be Henrietta. She will be nice to Gerda and she will amuse Henry, and she’ll keep John in a good temper and I’m sure she’ll be most helpful with David.”

“David Angkatell?”

“Yes. He’s just down from Oxford—or perhaps Cambridge. Boys of that age are so difficult—especially when they are intellectual. David is very intellectual. One wishes that they could put off being intellectual until they were rather older. As it is, they always glower at one so and bite their nails and seem to have so many spots and sometimes an Adam’s apple as well. And they either won’t speak at all, or else are very loud and contradictory. Still, as I say, I am trusting to Henrietta. She is very tactful and asks the right kind of questions, and being a sculptress they respect her, especially as she doesn’t just carve animals or children’s heads but does advanced things like that curious affair in metal and plaster that she exhibited at the New Artists last year. It looked rather like a Heath Robinson stepladder. It was called Ascending Thought—or something like that. It is the kind of thing that would impress a boy like David…I thought myself it was just silly.”

“Dear Lucy!”

“But some of Henrietta’s things I think are quite lovely. That Weeping Ash tree figure, for instance.”

“Henrietta has a touch of real genius, I think. And she is a very lovely and satisfying person as well,” said Midge.

Lady Angkatell got up and drifted over to the window again. She played absentmindedly with the blind cord.

“Why acorns, I wonder?” she murmured.

“Acorns?”

“On the blind cord. Like pineapples on gates. I mean, there must be a reason. Because it might just as easily be a fircone or a pear, but it’s always an acorn. Mast, they call it in crosswords—you know, for pigs. So curious, I always think.”

“Don’t ramble off, Lucy. You came in here to talk about the weekend and I can’t see why you were so anxious about it. If you manage to keep off round games, and try to be coherent when you’re talking to Gerda, and put Henrietta on to tame intellectual David, where is the difficulty?”

“Well, for one thing, darling, Edward is coming.”

“Oh, Edward.” Midge was silent for a moment after saying the name.

Then she asked quietly:

“What on earth made you ask Edward for this weekend?”

“I didn’t, Midge. That’s just it. He asked himself. Wired to know if we could have him. You know what Edward is. How sensitive. If I’d wired back ‘No,’ he’d probably never have asked himself again. He’s like that.”

Midge nodded her head slowly.

Yes, she thought, Edward was like that. For an instant she saw his face clearly, that very dearly loved face. A face with something of Lucy’s insubstantial charm; gentle, diffident, ironic….

“Dear Edward,” said Lucy, echoing the thought in Midge’s mind.

She went on impatiently:

"If only Henrietta would make up her mind to marry him. She is really fond of him, I know she is. If they had been here some weekend without the Christows…As it is, John Christow has always the most unfortunate effect on Edward. John, if you know what I mean, becomes so much more so and Edward becomes so much less so. You understand?"

Again Midge nodded.

"And I can't put the Christows off because this weekend was arranged long ago, but I do feel, Midge, that it is all going to be difficult, with David glowering and biting his nails, and with trying to keep Gerda from feeling out of it, and with John being so positive and dear Edward so negative—"

"The ingredients of the pudding are not promising," murmured Midge.

Lucy smiled at her.

"Sometimes," she said meditatively, "things arrange themselves quite simply. I've asked the Crime man to lunch on Sunday. It will make a distraction, don't you think so?"

"Crime man?"

"Like an egg," said Lady Angkatell. "He was in Baghdad, solving something, when Henry was High Commissioner. Or perhaps it was afterwards? We had him to lunch with some other Duty people. He had on a white duck suit, I remember, and a pink flower in his buttonhole, and black patent leather shoes. I don't remember much about it because I never think it's very interesting who killed who. I mean, once they are dead it doesn't seem to matter why, and to make a fuss about it all seems so silly…."

"But have you any crimes down here, Lucy?"

"Oh, no, darling. He's in one of those funny new cottages—you know, beams that bump your head and a lot of very good plumbing and quite the wrong kind of garden. London people like that sort of thing. There's an actress in the other, I believe. They don't live in them all the time like we do. Still," Lady Angkatell moved vaguely across the room, "I dare say it pleases them. Midge, darling, it's sweet of you to have been so helpful."

"I don't think I have been so very helpful."

"Oh, haven't you?" Lucy Angkatell looked surprised. "Well, have a nice sleep now and don't get up to breakfast, and when you do get up, do be as rude as ever you like."

"Rude?" Midge looked surprised. "Why! Oh!" she laughed. "I see! Penetrating of you, Lucy. Perhaps I'll take you at your word."

Lady Angkatell smiled and went out. As she passed the open bathroom door and saw the kettle and gas ring, an idea came to her.

People were fond of tea, she knew—and Midge wouldn't be called for hours. She would make Midge some tea. She put the kettle on and then went on down the passage.

She paused at her husband's door and turned the handle, but Sir Henry Angkatell, that able administrator, knew his Lucy. He was extremely fond of her, but he liked his morning sleep undisturbed. The door was locked.

Lady Angkatell went on into her own room. She would have liked to have consulted Henry, but later would do. She stood by her open window, looked out for a moment or two, then she yawned. She got into bed, laid her head on the pillow and in two minutes was sleeping like a child.

In the bathroom the kettle came to the boil and went on boiling….

"Another kettle gone, Mr. Gudgeon," said Simmons, the housemaid.

Gudgeon, the butler, shook his grey head.

He took the burnt-out kettle from Simmons and, going into the pantry, produced another kettle from the bottom of the plate cupboard where he had a stock of half a dozen.

"There you are, Miss Simmons. Her ladyship will never know."

“Does her ladyship often do this sort of thing?” asked Simmons.

Gudgeon sighed.

“Her ladyship,” he said, “is at once kindhearted and very forgetful, if you know what I mean. But in this house,” he continued, “I see to it that everything possible is done to spare her ladyship annoyance or worry.”

Two

Henrietta Savernake rolled up a little strip of clay and patted it into place. She was building up the clay head of a girl with swift practised skill.

In her ears, but penetrating only to the edge of her understanding, was the thin whine of a slightly common voice:

“And I do think, Miss Savernake, that I was quite right! ‘Really,’ I said, ‘if that’s the line you’re going to take!’ Because I do think, Miss Savernake, that a girl owes it to herself to make a stand about these sort of things—if you know what I mean. ‘I’m not accustomed,’ I said, ‘to having things like that said to me, and I can only say that you must have a very nasty imagination!’ One does hate unpleasantness, but I do think I was right to make a stand, don’t you, Miss Savernake?”

“Oh, absolutely,” said Henrietta with a fervour in her voice which might have led someone who knew her well to suspect that she had not been listening very closely.

“‘And if your wife says things of that kind,’ I said, ‘well, I’m sure I can’t help it!’ I don’t know how it is, Miss Savernake, but it seems to be trouble wherever I go, and I’m sure it’s not my fault. I mean, men are so susceptible, aren’t they?” The model gave a coquettish little giggle.

“Frightfully,” said Henrietta, her eyes half-closed.

“Lovely,” she was thinking. “Lovely that plane just below the eyelid—and the other plane coming up to meet it. That angle by the jaw’s wrong…I must scrape off there and build up again. It’s tricky.”

Aloud she said in her warm, sympathetic voice:

“It must have been most difficult for you.”

“I do think jealousy’s so unfair, Miss Savernake, and so narrow, if you know what I mean. It’s just envy, if I may say so, because someone’s better-looking and younger than they are.”

Henrietta, working on the jaw, said absently: “Yes, of course.”

She had learned the trick, years ago, of shutting her mind into watertight compartments. She could play a game of bridge, conduct an intelligent conversation, write a clearly constructed letter, all without giving more than a fraction of her essential mind to the task. She was now completely intent on seeing the head of Nausicaa build itself up under her fingers, and the thin, spiteful stream of chatter issuing from those very lovely childish lips penetrated not at all into the deeper recesses of her mind. She kept the conversation going without effort. She was used to models who wanted to talk. Not so much the professional ones—it was the amateurs who, uneasy at their forced inactivity of limb, made up for it by bursting into garrulous self-revelation. So an inconspicuous part of Henrietta listened and replied, and, very far and remote, the real Henrietta commented, “Common mean spiteful little piece—but what eyes…Lovely lovely lovely eyes….”

Whilst she was busy on the eyes, let the girl talk. She would ask her to keep silent when she got to the mouth. Funny when you came to think of it, that that thin stream of spite should come out through those perfect curves.

“Oh, damn,” thought Henrietta with sudden frenzy, “I’m ruining that eyebrow arch! What the hell’s the matter with it? I’ve overemphasized the bone—it’s sharp, not thick….”

She stood back again frowning from the clay to the flesh and blood sitting on the platform.

Doris Saunders went on:

“‘Well,’ I said, ‘I really don’t see why your husband shouldn’t give me a present if he likes, and I don’t think,’ I said, ‘you ought to make insinuations of that kind.’ It was ever such a nice bracelet, Miss Savernake, reely quite lovely—and of course I daresay the poor fellow couldn’t reely afford it, but I do think it was nice of him, and I certainly wasn’t going to give it back!”

“No, no,” murmured Henrietta.

“And it’s not as though there was anything between us—anything nasty, I mean—there was nothing of that kind.”

“No,” said Henrietta, “I’m sure there wouldn’t be….”

Her brow cleared. For the next half hour she worked in a kind of fury. Clay smeared itself on her forehead, clung to her hair, as she pushed an impatient hand through it. Her eyes had a blind intense ferocity. It was coming…She was getting it….

Now, in a few hours, she would be out of her agony—the agony that had been growing upon her for the last ten days.

Nausicaa—she had been Nausicaa, she had got up with Nausicaa and had breakfast with Nausicaa and gone out with Nausicaa. She had tramped the streets in a nervous excitable restlessness, unable to fix her mind on anything but a beautiful blind face somewhere just beyond her mind’s eye—hovering there just not able to be clearly seen. She had interviewed models, hesitated over Greek types, felt profoundly dissatisfied….

She wanted something—something to give her the start—something that would bring her own already partially realized vision alive. She had walked long distances, getting physically tired out and welcoming the fact. And driving her, harrying her, was that urgent incessant longing—to see—

There was a blind look in her own eyes as she walked. She saw nothing of what was around her. She was straining—straining the whole time to make that face come nearer…She felt sick, ill, miserable….

And then, suddenly, her vision had cleared and with normal human eyes she had seen opposite her in the bus which she had boarded absentmindedly and with no interest in its destination—she had seen—yes, Nausicaa! A foreshortened childish face, half-parted lips and eyes—lovely vacant, blind eyes.

The girl rang the bell and got out. Henrietta followed her.

She was now quite calm and businesslike. She had got what she wanted—the agony of baffled search was over.

“Excuse me speaking to you. I’m a professional sculptor and to put it frankly, your head is just what I have been looking for.”

She was friendly, charming and compelling as she knew how to be when she wanted something.

Doris Saunders had been doubtful, alarmed, flattered.

“Well, I don’t know, I’m sure. If it’s just the head. Of course, I’ve never done that sort of thing!”

Suitable hesitations, delicate financial inquiry.

“Of course I should insist on your accepting the proper professional fee.”

And so here was Nausicaa, sitting on the platform, enjoying the idea of her attractions, being immortalized (though not liking very much the examples of Henrietta’s work which she could see in the studio!) and enjoying also the revelation of her personality to a listener whose sympathy and attention seemed to be so complete.

On the table beside the model were her spectacles…the spectacles that she put on as seldom as possible owing to vanity, preferring to feel her way almost blindly sometimes, since she admitted to Henrietta that without them she was so shortsighted that she could hardly see a yard in front of her.

Henrietta had nodded comprehendingly. She understood now the physical reason for that blank and lovely stare.

Time went on. Henrietta suddenly laid down her modelling tools and stretched her arms widely.

“All right,” she said, “I’ve finished. I hope you’re not too tired?”

“Oh, no, thank you, Miss Savernake. It’s been very interesting, I’m sure. Do you mean, it’s really done—so soon?”

Henrietta laughed.

“Oh, no, it’s not actually finished. I shall have to work on it quite a bit. But it’s finished as far as you’re concerned. I’ve got what I wanted—built up the planes.”

The girl came down slowly from the platform. She put on her spectacles and at once the blind innocence and vague confiding charm of the face vanished. There remained now an easy, cheap prettiness.

She came to stand by Henrietta and looked at the clay model.

“Oh,” she said doubtfully, disappointment in her voice. “It’s not very like me, is it?”

Henrietta smiled.

“Oh, no, it’s not a portrait.”

There was, indeed, hardly a likeness at all. It was the setting of the eyes—the line of the cheekbones—that Henrietta had seen as the essential keynote of her conception of Nausicaa. This was not Doris Saunders, it was a blind girl about whom a poem could be made. The lips were parted as Doris’s were parted, but they were not Doris’s lips. They were lips that would speak another language and would utter thoughts that were not Doris’s thoughts—

None of the features were clearly defined. It was Nausicaa remembered, not seen….

“Well,” said Miss Saunders doubtfully, “I suppose it’ll look better when you’ve got on with it a bit…And you really don’t want me anymore?”

“No, thank you,” said Henrietta (“And thank God I don’t!” said her inner mind). “You’ve been simply splendid. I’m very grateful.”

She got rid of Doris expertly and returned to make herself some black coffee. She was tired—she was horribly tired. But happy—happy and at peace.

“Thank goodness,” she thought, “now I can be a human being again.”

And at once her thoughts went to John.

“John,” she thought. Warmth crept into her cheeks, a sudden quick lifting of the heart made her spirits soar.

“Tomorrow,” she thought, “I’m going to The Hollow…I shall see John….”

She sat quite still, sprawled back on the divan, drinking down the hot, strong liquid. She drank three cups of it. She felt vitality surging back.

It was nice, she thought, to be a human being again…and not that other thing. Nice to have stopped feeling restless and miserable and driven. Nice to be able to stop walking about the streets unhappily, looking for something, and feeling irritable and impatient because, really, you didn’t know what you were looking for! Now, thank goodness, there would be only hard work—and who minded hard work?

She put down the empty cup and got up and strolled back to Nausicaa. She looked at it for some time, and slowly a little frown crept between her brows.

It wasn’t—it wasn’t quite—

What was it that was wrong?…

Blind eyes.

Blind eyes that were more beautiful than any eyes that could see…Blind eyes that tore at your heart because they were blind…Had she got that or hadn’t she?

She’d got it, yes—but she’d got something else as well. Something that she hadn’t meant or thought about…The structure was all right—yes, surely. But where did it come from—that faint, insidious suggestion?….

The suggestion, somewhere, of a common spiteful mind.

She hadn’t been listening, not really listening. Yet somehow, in through her ears and out at her fingers, it had worked its way into the clay.

And she wouldn’t, she knew she wouldn’t, be able to get it out again….

Henrietta turned away sharply. Perhaps it was fancy. Yes, surely it was fancy. She would feel quite differently about it in the morning. She thought with dismay:

“How vulnerable one is….”

She walked, frowning, up to the end of the studio. She stopped in front of her figure of The Worshipper.

That was all right—a lovely bit of pearwood, graining just right. She’d saved it up for ages, hoarding it.

She looked at it critically. Yes, it was good. No doubt about that. The best thing she had done for a long time—it was for the International Group. Yes, quite a worthy exhibit.

She’d got it all right: the humility, the strength in the neck muscles, the bowed shoulders, the slightly upraised face—a featureless face, since worship drives out personality.

Yes, submission, adoration—and that final devotion that is beyond, not this side, idolatry….

Henrietta sighed. If only, she thought, John had not been so angry.

It had startled her, that anger. It had told her something about him that he did not, she thought, know himself.

He had said flatly: “You can’t exhibit that!”

And she had said, as flatly: “I shall.”

She went slowly back to Nausicaa. There was nothing there, she thought, that she couldn’t put right. She sprayed it and wrapped it up in the damp cloths. It would have to stand over until Monday or Tuesday. There was no hurry now. The urgency had gone—all the essential planes were there. It only needed patience.

Ahead of her were three happy days with Lucy and Henry and Midge—and John!

She yawned, stretched herself like a cat stretches itself with relish and abandon, pulling out each muscle to its fullest extent. She knew suddenly how very tired she was.

She had a hot bath and went to bed. She lay on her back staring at a star or two through the skylight. Then from there her eyes went to the one light always left on, the small bulb that illuminated the glass mask that had been one of her earliest bits of work. Rather an obvious piece, she thought now. Conventional in its suggestion.

Lucky, thought Henrietta, that one outgrew oneself….

And now, sleep! The strong black coffee that she had drunk did not bring wakefulness in its train unless she wished it to do so. Long ago she had taught herself the essential rhythm that could bring oblivion at call.

You took thoughts, choosing them out of your store, and then, not dwelling on them, you let them slip through the fingers of your mind, never clutching at them, never dwelling on them, no concentration…just letting them drift gently past.

Outside in the Mews a car was being revved up—somewhere there was hoarse shouting and laughing. She took the sounds into the stream of her semiconsciousness.

The car, she thought, was a tiger roaring…yellow and black…striped like the striped leaves—leaves and shadows—a hot jungle…and then down the river—a wide tropical river…to the sea and the liner starting…and hoarse voices calling good-bye—and John beside her on the deck…she and John starting—blue sea and down into the dining saloon—smiling at him across the table—like dinner at the Maison Dorée—poor John, so angry!…out into the night air—and the car, the feeling of sliding in the gears—effortless, smooth, racing out of London…up over Shovel Down…the trees…tree worship…The Hollow…Lucy…John…John…Ridgeway's Disease…dear John….

Passing into unconsciousness now, into a happy beatitude.

And then some sharp discomfort, some haunting sense of guilt pulling her back. Something she ought to have done. Something that she had shirked.

Nausicaa?

Slowly, unwillingly, Henrietta got out of bed. She switched on the lights, went across to the stand and unwrapped the cloths.

She took a deep breath.

Not Nausicaa—Doris Saunders!

A pang went through Henrietta. She was pleading with herself: "I can get it right—I can get it right…."

"Stupid," she said to herself. "You know quite well what you've got to do."

Because if she didn't do it now, at once—tomorrow she wouldn't have the courage. It was like destroying your flesh and blood. It hurt—yes, it hurt.

Perhaps, thought Henrietta, cats feel like this when one of their kittens has something wrong with it and they kill it.

She took a quick, sharp breath, then she seized the clay, twisting it off the armature, carrying it, a large heavy lump, to dump it in the clay bin.

She stood there breathing deeply, looking down at her clay-smeared hands, still feeling the wrench to her physical and mental self. She cleaned the clay off her hands slowly.

She went back to bed feeling a curious emptiness, yet a sense of peace.

Nausicaa, she thought sadly, would not come again. She had been born, had been contaminated and had died.

“Queer,” thought Henrietta, “how things can seep into you without your knowing it.”

She hadn’t been listening—not really listening—and yet knowledge of Doris’s cheap, spiteful little mind had seeped into her mind and had, unconsciously, influenced her hands.

And now the thing that had been Nausicaa—Doris—was only clay—just the raw material that would, soon, be fashioned into something else.

Henrietta thought dreamily: “Is that, then, what death is? Is what we call personality just the shaping of it—the impress of somebody’s thought? Whose thought? God’s?”

That was the idea, wasn’t it, of Peer Gynt? Back into the Button Moulder’s ladle.

“Where am I myself, the whole man, the true man? Where am I with God’s mark upon my brow?”

Did John feel like that? He had been so tired the other night—so disheartened. Ridgeway’s Disease…Not one of those books told you who Ridgeway was! Stupid, she thought, she would like to know…Ridgeway’s Disease.

Three

John Christow sat in his consulting room, seeing his last patient but one for that morning. His eyes, sympathetic and encouraging, watched her as she described—explained—went into details. Now and then he nodded his head, understandingly. He asked questions, gave directions. A gentle glow pervaded the sufferer. Dr. Christow was really wonderful! He was so interested—so truly concerned. Even talking to him made one feel stronger.

John Christow drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to write. Better give her a laxative, he supposed. That new American proprietary—nicely put up in cellophane and attractively coated in an unusual shade of salmon pink. Very expensive, too, and difficult to get—not every chemist stocked it. She'd probably have to go to that little place in Wardour Street. That would be all to the good—probably buck her up no end for a month or two, then he'd have to think of something else. There was nothing he could do for her. Poor physique and nothing to be done about it! Nothing to get your teeth into. Not like old mother Crabtree….

A boring morning. Profitable financially—but nothing else. God, he was tired! Tired of sickly women and their ailments. Palliation, alleviation—nothing to it but that. Sometimes he wondered if it was worth it. But always then he remembered St. Christopher's, and the long row of beds in the Margaret Russell Ward, and Mrs. Crabtree grinning up at him with her toothless smile.

He and she understood each other! She was a fighter, not like that limp slug of a woman in the next bed. She was on his side, she wanted to live—though God knew why, considering the slum she lived in, with a husband who drank and a brood of unruly children, and she herself obliged to work day in day out, scrubbing endless floors of endless offices. Hard unremitting drudgery and few pleasures! But she wanted to live—she enjoyed life—just as he, John Christow, enjoyed life! It wasn't the circumstances of life they enjoyed, it was life itself—the zest of existence. Curious—a thing one couldn't explain. He thought to himself that he must talk to Henrietta about that.

He got up to accompany his patient to the door. His hand took hers in a warm clasp, friendly, encouraging. His voice was encouraging too, full of interest and sympathy. She went away revived, almost happy. Dr. Christow took such an interest!

As the door closed behind her, John Christow forgot her, he had really been hardly aware of her existence even when she had been there. He had just done his stuff. It was all automatic. Yet, though it had hardly ruffled the surface of his mind, he had given out strength. His had been the automatic response of the healer and he felt the sag of depleted energy.

“God,” he thought again, “I’m tired.”

Only one more patient to see and then the clear space of the weekend. His mind dwelt on it gratefully. Golden leaves tinged with red and brown, the soft moist smell of autumn—the road down through the woods—the wood fires, Lucy, most unique and delightful of creatures—with her curious, elusive will-o’-the-wisp mind. He’d rather have Henry and Lucy than any host and hostess in England. And The Hollow was the most delightful house he knew. On Sunday he’d walk through the woods with Henrietta—up on to the crest of the hill and along the ridge. Walking with Henrietta he’d forget that there were any sick people in the world. Thank goodness, he thought, there’s never anything the matter with Henrietta.

And then with a sudden, quick twist of humour:

“She’d never let on to me if there were!”

One more patient to see. He must press the bell on his desk. Yet, unaccountably, he delayed. Already he was late. Lunch would be ready upstairs in the dining room. Gerda and the children would be waiting. He must get on.

Yet he sat there motionless. He was so tired—so very tired.

It had been growing on him lately, this tiredness. It was at the root of the constantly increasing irritability which he was aware of but could not check. Poor Gerda, he thought, she has a lot to put up with. If only she was not so submissive—so ready to admit herself in the wrong when, half the time, it was he who was to blame! There were days when everything that Gerda said or did conspired to irritate him, and mainly, he thought ruefully, it was her virtues that irritated him. It was her patience, her unselfishness, her subordination of her wishes to his, that aroused his ill-humour. And she never resented his quick bursts of temper, never stuck to her own opinion in preference to his, never attempted to strike out a line of her own.

(Well, he thought, that's why you married her, isn't it? What are you complaining about? After that summer at San Miguel…)

Curious, when you came to think of it, that the very qualities that irritated him in Gerda were the qualities he wanted so badly to find in Henrietta. What irritated him in Henrietta (no, that was the wrong word—it was anger, not irritation, that she inspired)—what angered him there was Henrietta's unswerving rectitude where he was concerned. It was so at variance to her attitude to the world in general. He had said to her once:

"I think you are the greatest liar I know."

"Perhaps."

"You are always willing to say anything to people if only it pleases them."

"That always seems to me more important."

"More important than speaking the truth?"

"Much more."

"Then why in God's name can't you lie a little more to me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, John, but I can't."

"You must know so often what I want you to say."

Come now, he mustn't start thinking of Henrietta. He'd be seeing her this very afternoon. The thing to do now was to get on with things! Ring the bell and see this last damned woman. Another sickly creature! One-tenth genuine ailment and nine-tenths hypochondria! Well, why shouldn't she enjoy ill health if she cared to pay for it? It balanced the Mrs. Crabtrees of this world.

But still he sat there motionless.

He was tired—he was so very tired. It seemed to him that he had been tired for a very long time. There was something he wanted—wanted badly.

And there shot into his mind the thought: "I want to go home."

It astonished him. Where had that thought come from? And what did it mean? Home? He had never had a home. His parents had been Anglo-Indians, he had been brought up, bandied about from aunt to uncle, one set of holidays with each. The first permanent home he had had, he supposed, was this house in Harley Street.

Did he think of this house as home? He shook his head. He knew that he didn't.

But his medical curiosity was aroused. What had he meant by that phrase that had flashed out suddenly in his mind?

I want to go home.

There must be something—some image.

He half-closed his eyes—there must be some background.

And very clearly, before his mind's eye, he saw the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea, the palms, the cactus and the prickly pear; he smelt the hot summer dust, and remembered the cool feeling of the water after lying on the beach in the sun. San Miguel!

He was startled—a little disturbed. He hadn't thought of San Miguel for years. He certainly didn't want to go back there. All that belonged to a past chapter in his life.

That was twelve—fourteen—fifteen years ago. And he'd done the right thing! His judgment had been absolutely right! He'd been madly in love with Veronica but it wouldn't have done. Veronica would have swallowed him body and soul. She was the complete egoist and she had made no bones about admitting it! Veronica had grabbed most things that she wanted, but she hadn't been able to grab him! He'd escaped. He had, he supposed, treated her badly from the conventional point of view. In plain words, he had jilted her! But the truth was that he intended to live his own life, and that was a thing that Veronica would not have allowed him to do. She intended to live her life and carry John along as an extra.

She had been astonished when he had refused to come with her to Hollywood.

She had said disdainfully:

"If you really want to be a doctor you can take a degree over there, I suppose, but it's quite unnecessary. You've got enough to live on, and I shall be making heaps of money."

And he had replied vehemently:

"But I'm keen on my profession. I'm going to work with Radley."

His voice—a young enthusiastic voice—was quite awed.

Veronica sniffed.

"That funny snuffy old man?"

"That funny snuffy old man," John had said angrily, "has done some of the most valuable research work on Pratt's Disease—"

She had interrupted: Who cared for Pratt's Disease? California, she said, was an enchanting climate. And it was fun to see the world. She added: "I shall hate it without you. I want you, John—I need you."

And then he had put forward the, to Veronica, amazing suggestion that she should turn down the Hollywood offer and marry him and settle down in London.

She was amused and quite firm. She was going to Hollywood, and she loved John, and John must marry her and come too. She had had no doubts of her beauty and of her power.

He had seen that there was only one thing to be done and he had done it. He had written to her breaking off the engagement.

He had suffered a good deal, but he had had no doubts as to the wisdom of the course he had taken. He'd come back to London and started work with Radley, and a year later he had married Gerda, who was as unlike Veronica in every way as it was possible to be….

The door opened and his secretary, Beryl Collins, came in.

"You've still got Mrs. Forrester to see."

He said shortly: "I know."

"I thought you might have forgotten."

She crossed the room and went out at the farther door. Christow's eyes followed her calm withdrawal. A plain girl, Beryl, but damned efficient. He'd had her six years. She never made a mistake, she was never flurried or worried or hurried. She had black hair and a muddy complexion and a determined chin. Through strong glasses, her clear grey eyes surveyed him and the rest of the universe with the same dispassionate attention.

He had wanted a plain secretary with no nonsense about her, and he had got a plain secretary with no nonsense about her, but sometimes, illogically, John Christow felt aggrieved! By all the rules of stage and fiction, Beryl should have been hopelessly devoted to her employer. But he had always known that he cut no ice with Beryl. There was no devotion, no self-abnegation—Beryl regarded him as a definitely fallible human being. She remained unimpressed by his personality, uninfluenced by his charm. He doubted sometimes whether she even liked him.

He had heard her once speaking to a friend on the telephone.

“No,” she had been saying, “I don’t really think he is much more selfish than he was. Perhaps rather more thoughtless and inconsiderate.”

He had known that she was speaking of him, and for quite twenty-four hours he had been annoyed about it.

Although Gerda’s indiscriminate enthusiasm irritated him, Beryl’s cool appraisal irritated him too. In fact, he thought, nearly everything irritates me….

Something wrong there. Overwork? Perhaps. No, that was the excuse. This growing impatience, this irritable tiredness, it had some deeper significance. He thought: “This won’t do. I can’t go on this way. What’s the matter with me? If I could get away….”

There it was again—the blind idea rushing up to meet the formulated idea of escape.

I want to go home….

Damn it all, 404 Harley Street was his home!

And Mrs. Forrester was sitting in the waiting room. A tiresome woman, a woman with too much money and too much spare time to think about her ailments.

Someone had once said to him: “You must get very tired of these rich patients always fancying themselves ill. It must be so satisfactory to get to the poor, who only come when there is something really the matter with them!” He had grinned. Funny the things people believed about the Poor with a capital P. They should have seen old Mrs. Pearstock, on five different clinics, up every week, taking away bottles of medicine, liniments for her back, linctus for her cough, aperients, digestive mixtures. “Fourteen years

I’ve ’ad the brown medicine, Doctor, and it’s the only thing does me any good. That young doctor last week writes me down a white medicine. No good at all! It stands to reason, doesn’t it, Doctor? I mean, I’ve ’ad me brown medicine for fourteen years, and if I don’t ’ave me liquid paraffin and them brown pills….”

He could hear the whining voice now—excellent physique, sound as a bell—even all the physic she took couldn’t really do her any harm!

They were the same, sisters under the skin, Mrs. Pearstock from Tottenham and Mrs. Forrester of Park Lane Court. You listened and you wrote scratches with your pen on a piece of stiff expensive notepaper, or on a hospital card as the case might be….

God, he was tired of the whole business….

Blue sea, the faint sweet smell of mimosa, hot dust….

Fifteen years ago. All that was over and done with—yes, done with, thank heaven. He’d had the courage to break off the whole business.

Courage? said a little imp somewhere. Is that what you call it?

Well, he’d done the sensible thing, hadn’t he? It had been a wrench. Damn it all, it had hurt like hell! But he’d gone through with it, cut loose, come home, and married Gerda.

He’d got a plain secretary and he’d married a plain wife. That was what he wanted, wasn’t it? He’d had enough of beauty, hadn’t he? He’d seen what someone like Veronica could do with her beauty—seen the effect it had on every male within range. After Veronica, he’d wanted safety. Safety and peace and devotion and the quiet, enduring things of life. He’d wanted, in fact, Gerda! He’d wanted someone who’d take her ideas of life from him, who would accept his decisions and who wouldn’t have, for one moment, any ideas of her own….

Who was it who had said that the real tragedy of life was that you got what you wanted?

Angrily he pressed the buzzer on his desk.

He’d deal with Mrs. Forrester.

It took him a quarter of an hour to deal with Mrs. Forrester. Once again it was easy money. Once again he listened, asked questions, reassured, sympathized, infused something of his own healing energy. Once more he wrote out a prescription for an expensive proprietary.

The sickly neurotic woman who had trailed into the room left it with a firmer step, with colour in her cheeks, with a feeling that life might possibly after all be worthwhile.

John Christow leant back in his chair. He was free now—free to go upstairs to join Gerda and the children—free from the preoccupations of illness and suffering for a whole weekend.

But he felt still that strange disinclination to move, that new queer lassitude of the will.

He was tired—tired—tired.

Four

In the dining room of the flat above the consulting room Gerda Christow was staring at a joint of mutton.

Should she or should she not send it back to the kitchen to be kept warm?

If John was going to be much longer it would be cold—congealed, and that would be dreadful.

But on the other hand the last patient had gone, John would be up in a moment, if she sent it back there would be delay—John was so impatient. “But surely you knew I was just coming…” There would be that tone of suppressed exasperation in his voice that she knew and dreaded. Besides, it would get overcooked, dried up—John hated overcooked meat.

But on the other hand he disliked cold food very much indeed.

At any rate the dish was nice and hot.

Her mind oscillated to and fro, and her sense of misery and anxiety deepened.

The whole world had shrunk to a leg of mutton getting cold on a dish.

On the other side of the table her son Terence, aged twelve, said:

“Boracic salts burn with a green flame, sodium salts are yellow.”

Gerda looked distractedly across the table at his square, freckled face. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Did you know that, Mother?”

“Know what, dear?”

“About salts.”

Gerda’s eye flew distractedly to the salt cellar. Yes, salt and pepper were on the table. That was all right. Last week Lewis had forgotten them and that had annoyed John. There was always something….

“It’s one of the chemical tests,” said Terence in a dreamy voice. “Jolly interesting. I think.”

Zena, aged nine, with a pretty, vacuous face, whimpered:

“I want my dinner. Can’t we start, Mother?”

“In a minute, dear, we must wait for Father.”

“We could start,” said Terence. “Father wouldn’t mind. You know how fast he eats.”

Gerda shook her head.

Carve the mutton? But she never could remember which was the right side to plunge the knife in. Of course, perhaps Lewis had put it the right way on the dish—but sometimes she didn’t—and John was always annoyed if it was done the wrong way. And, Gerda reflected desperately, it always was the wrong way when she did it. Oh, dear, how cold the gravy was getting—a skin was forming on the top of it—and surely he would be coming now.

Her mind went round and round unhappily…like a trapped animal.

Sitting back in his consulting room chair, tapping with one hand on the table in front of him, conscious that upstairs lunch must be ready, John Christow was nevertheless unable to force himself to get up.

San Miguel…blue sea…smell of mimosa…a scarlet tritoma upright against green leaves…the hot sun…the dust…that desperation of love and suffering….

He thought: “Oh, God, not that. Never that again! That’s over….”

He wished suddenly that he had never known Veronica, never married Gerda, never met Henrietta….

Mrs. Crabtree, he thought, was worth the lot of them. That had been a bad afternoon last week. He'd been so pleased with the reactions. She could stand .005 by now. And then had come that alarming rise in toxicity and the DL reaction had been negative instead of positive.

The old bean had lain there, blue, gasping for breath—peering up at him with malicious, indomitable eyes.

"Making a bit of a guinea pig out of me, ain't you, dearie? Experimenting—that kinder thing."

"We want to get you well," he had said, smiling down at her.

"Up to your tricks, yer mean!" She had grinned suddenly. "I don't mind, bless yer. You carry on, Doctor! Someone's got to be first, that's it, ain't it? 'Ad me 'air permed, I did, when I was a kid. It wasn't 'alf a difficult business then. Looked like a nigger, I did. Couldn't get a comb through it. But there—I enjoyed the fun. You can 'ave yer fun with me. I can stand it."

"Feel pretty bad, don't you?" His hand was on her pulse. Vitality passed from him to the panting old woman on the bed.

"Orful, I feel. You're about right! 'Asn't gone according to plan—that's it, isn't it? Never you mind. Don't you lose 'eart. I can stand a lot, I can!"

John Christow said appreciatively:

"You're fine. I wish all my patients were like you."

"I wanter get well—that's why! I wanter get well. Mum, she lived to be eighty-eight—and old Grandma was ninety when she popped off. We're long-livers in our family, we are."

He had come away miserable, racked with doubt and uncertainty. He'd been so sure he was on the right track. Where had he gone wrong? How diminish the toxicity and keep up the hormone content and at the same time neutralize the pantratin?….

He’d been too cocksure—he’d taken it for granted that he’d circumvented all the snags.

And it was then, on the steps of St. Christopher’s, that a sudden desperate weariness had overcome him—a hatred of all this long, slow, wearisome clinical work, and he’d thought of Henrietta, thought of her suddenly not as herself, but of her beauty and her freshness, her health and her radiant vitality—and the faint smell of primroses that clung about her hair.

And he had gone to Henrietta straight away, sending a curt telephone message home about being called away. He had strode into the studio and taken Henrietta in his arms, holding her to him with a fierceness that was new in their relationship.

There had been a quick, startled wonder in her eyes. She had freed herself from his arms and had made him coffee. And as she moved about the studio she had thrown out desultory questions. Had he come, she asked, straight from the hospital?

He didn’t want to talk about the hospital. He wanted to make love to Henrietta and forget that the hospital and Mrs. Crabtree and Ridgeway’s Disease and all the rest of the caboodle existed.

But, at first unwillingly, then more fluently, he answered her questions. And presently he was striding up and down, pouring out a spate of technical explanations and surmises. Once or twice he paused, trying to simplify—to explain:

“You see, you have to get a reaction—”

Henrietta said quickly:

“Yes, yes, the DL reaction has to be positive. I understand that. Go on.”

He said sharply, “How do you know about the DL reaction?”

“I got a book—”

“What book? Whose?”

She motioned towards the small book table. He snorted.

“Scobell? Scobell’s no good. He’s fundamentally unsound. Look here, if you want to read—don’t—”

She interrupted him.

“I only want to understand some of the terms you use—enough so as to understand you without making you stop to explain everything the whole time. Go on. I’m following you all right.”

“Well,” he said doubtfully, “remember Scobell’s unsound.” He went on talking. He talked for two hours and a half. Reviewing the setbacks, analysing the possibilities, outlining possible theories. He was hardly conscious of Henrietta’s presence. And yet, more than once, as he hesitated, her quick intelligence took him a step on the way, seeing, almost before he did, what he was hesitating to advance. He was interested now, and his belief in himself was creeping back. He had been right—the main theory was correct—and there were ways, more ways than one, of combating the toxic symptoms.

And then, suddenly, he was tired out. He’d got it all clear now. He’d get on to it tomorrow morning. He’d ring up Neill, tell him to combine the two solutions and try that. Yes, try that. By God, he wasn’t going to be beaten!

“I’m tired,” he said abruptly. “My God, I’m tired.”

And he had flung himself down and slept—slept like the dead.

He had awoken to find Henrietta smiling at him in the morning light and making tea and he had smiled back at her.

“Not at all according to plan,” he said.

“Does it matter?”

“No. No. You are rather a nice person, Henrietta.” His eye went to the bookcase. “If you’re interested in this sort of thing, I’ll get you the proper stuff to read.”

“I’m not interested in this sort of thing. I’m interested in you, John.”

“You can’t read Scobell.” He took up the offending volume. “The man’s a charlatan.”

And she had laughed. He could not understand why his strictures on Scobell amused her so.

But that was what, every now and then, startled him about Henrietta. The sudden revelation, disconcerting to him, that she was able to laugh at him.

He wasn’t used to it. Gerda took him in deadly earnest. And Veronica had never thought about anything but herself. But Henrietta had a trick of throwing her head back, of looking at him through half-closed eyes, with a sudden tender half-mocking little smile, as though she were saying: “Let me have a good look at this funny person called John…Let me get a long way away and look at him….”

It was, he thought, very much the same as the way she screwed up her eyes to look at her work—or a picture. It was—damn it all—it was detached. He didn’t want Henrietta to be detached. He wanted Henrietta to think only of him, never to let her mind stray away from him.

(“Just what you object to in Gerda, in fact,” said his private imp, bobbing up again.)

The truth of it was that he was completely illogical. He didn’t know what he wanted.

(“I want to go home.” What an absurd, what a ridiculous phrase. It didn’t mean anything.)

In an hour or so at any rate he’d be driving out of London—forgetting about sick people with their faint sour “wrong” smell…sniffing wood smoke and pines and soft wet autumn leaves…The very motion of the car would be soothing—that smooth, effortless increase of speed.

But it wouldn’t, he reflected suddenly, be at all like that because owing to a slightly strained wrist, Gerda would have to drive, and Gerda, God help her, had never been able to begin to drive a car! Every time she changed gear he would be silent, grinding his teeth together, managing not to say anything because he knew, by bitter experience, that when he did say anything Gerda became immediately worse. Curious that no one had ever been able to teach Gerda to change gear—not even Henrietta. He’d turned her over to Henrietta, thinking that Henrietta’s enthusiasm might do better than his own irritability.

For Henrietta loved cars. She spoke of cars with the lyrical intensity that other people gave to spring, or the first snowdrop.

“Isn’t he a beauty, John? Doesn’t he just purr along?” (For Henrietta’s cars were always masculine.) “He’ll do Bale Hill in third—not straining at all—quite effortlessly. Listen to the even way he ticks over.”

Until he had burst out suddenly and furiously:

“Don’t you think, Henrietta, you could pay some attention to me and forget the damned car for a minute or two!”

He was always ashamed of these outbursts.

He never knew when they would come upon him out of a blue sky.

It was the same thing over her work. He realized that her work was good. He admired it—and hated it—at the same time.

The most furious quarrel he had had with her had arisen over that.

Gerda had said to him one day:

“Henrietta has asked me to sit for her.”

“What?” His astonishment had not, if he came to think of it, been flattering. “You?”

“Yes, I’m going over to the studio tomorrow.”

“What on earth does she want you for?”

Yes, he hadn’t been very polite about it. But luckily Gerda hadn’t realized that fact. She had looked pleased about it. He suspected Henrietta of one of those insincere kindnesses of hers—Gerda, perhaps, had hinted that she would like to be modelled. Something of that kind.

Then, about ten days later, Gerda had shown him triumphantly a small plaster statuette.

It was a pretty thing—technically skillful like all Henrietta’s work. It idealized Gerda—and Gerda herself was clearly pleased about it.

“I really think it’s rather charming, John.”

“Is that Henrietta’s work? It means nothing—nothing at all. I don’t see how she came to do a thing like that.”

“It’s different, of course, from her abstract work—but I think it’s good, John, I really do.”

He had said no more—after all, he didn’t want to spoil Gerda’s pleasure. But he tackled Henrietta about it at the first opportunity.

“What did you want to make that silly thing of Gerda for? It’s unworthy of you. After all, you usually turn out decent stuff.”

Henrietta said slowly:

“I didn’t think it was bad. Gerda seemed quite pleased.”

“Gerda was delighted. She would be. Gerda doesn’t know art from a coloured photograph.”

“It wasn’t bad art, John. It was just a portrait statuette—quite harmless and not at all pretentious.”

“You don’t usually waste your time doing that kind of stuff—”

He broke off, staring at a wooden figure about five feet high.

“Hallo, what’s this?”

“It’s for the International Group. Pearwood. The Worshipper.”

She watched him. He stared and then—suddenly, his neck swelled and he turned on her furiously.

“So that’s what you wanted Gerda for? How dare you?”

“I wondered if you’d see….”

“See it? Of course I see it. It’s here.” He placed a finger on the broad heavy neck muscles.

Henrietta nodded.

“Yes, it’s the neck and shoulders I wanted—and that heavy forward slant—the submission—that bowed look. It’s wonderful!”

“Wonderful? Look here, Henrietta, I won’t have it. You’re to leave Gerda alone.”

“Gerda won’t know. Nobody will know. You know Gerda would never recognize herself here—nobody else would either. And it isn’t Gerda. It isn’t anybody.”

“I recognized it, didn’t I?”

“You’re different, John. You—see things.”

“It’s the damned cheek of it! I won’t have it, Henrietta! I won’t have it. Can’t you see that it was an indefensible thing to do?”

“Was it?”

“Don’t you know it was? Can’t you feel it was? Where’s your usual sensitiveness?”

Henrietta said slowly:

“You don’t understand, John. I don’t think I could ever make you understand…You don’t know what it is to want something—to look at it day after day—that line of the neck—those muscles—the angle where the head goes forward—that heaviness round the jaw. I’ve been looking at them, wanting them—every time I saw Gerda…In the end I just had to have them!”

“Unscrupulous!”

“Yes, I suppose just that. But when you want things, in that way, you just have to take them.”

“You mean you don’t care a damn about anybody else. You don’t care about Gerda—”

“Don’t be stupid, John. That’s why I made that statuette thing. To please Gerda and make her happy. I’m not inhuman!”

“Inhuman is exactly what you are.”

“Do you think—honestly—that Gerda would ever recognize herself in this?”

John looked at it unwillingly. For the first time his anger and resentment became subordinated to his interest. A strange submissive figure, a figure offering up worship to an unseen deity—the face raised—blind, dumb, devoted—terribly strong, terribly fanatical…He said:

“That’s rather a terrifying thing that you have made, Henrietta!”

Henrietta shivered slightly.

She said, “Yes—I thought that….”

John said sharply:

“What’s she looking at—who is it? There in front of her?”

Henrietta hesitated. She said, and her voice had a queer note in it:

“I don’t know. But I think—she might be looking at you, John.”

Five

I

In the dining room the child Terry made another scientific statement.

“Lead salts are more soluble in cold water than hot. If you add potassium iodide you get a yellow precipitate of lead iodide.”

He looked expectantly at his mother but without any real hope. Parents, in the opinion of young Terence, were sadly disappointing.

“Did you know that, Mother—”

“I don’t know anything about chemistry, dear.”

“You could read about it in a book,” said Terence.

It was a simple statement of fact, but there was a certain wistfulness behind it.

Gerda did not hear the wistfulness. She was caught in the trap of her anxious misery. Round and round and round. She had been miserable ever since she woke up this morning and realized that at last this long-dreaded weekend with the Angkatells was upon her. Staying at The Hollow was always a nightmare to her. She always felt bewildered and forlorn. Lucy Angkatell with her sentences that were never finished, her swift inconsequences, and her obvious attempts at kindliness, was the figure she dreaded most. But the others were nearly as bad. For Gerda it was two days of sheer martyrdom—to be endured for John’s sake.

For John that morning as he stretched himself had remarked in tones of unmitigated pleasure:

“Splendid to think we’ll be getting into the country this weekend. It will do you good, Gerda, just what you need.”

She had smiled mechanically and had said with unselfish fortitude: “It will be delightful.”

Her unhappy eyes had wandered round the bedroom. The wallpaper, cream striped with a black mark just by the wardrobe, the mahogany dressing table with the glass that swung too far forward, the cheerful bright blue carpet, the watercolours of the Lake District. All dear familiar things and she would not see them again until Monday.

Instead, tomorrow a housemaid who rustled would come into the strange bedroom and put down a little dainty tray of early tea by the bed and pull up the blinds, and would then rearrange and fold Gerda’s clothes—a thing which made Gerda feel hot and uncomfortable all over. She would lie miserably, enduring these things, trying to comfort herself by thinking, “Only one morning more.” Like being at school and counting the days.

Gerda had not been happy at school. At school there had been even less reassurance than elsewhere. Home had been better. But even home had not been very good. For they had all, of course, been quicker and cleverer than she was. Their comments, quick, impatient, not quite unkind, had whistled about her ears like a hailstorm. “Oh, do be quick, Gerda.” “Butterfingers, give it to me!” “Oh don’t let Gerda do it, she’ll be ages.” “Gerda never takes in anything….”

Hadn’t they seen, all of them, that that was the way to make her slower and stupider still? She’d got worse and worse, more clumsy with her fingers, more slow-witted, more inclined to stare vacantly at what was said to her.

Until, suddenly, she had reached the point where she had found a way out. Almost accidentally, really, she found her weapon of defence.

She had grown slower still, her puzzled stare had become even blanker. But now, when they said impatiently: “Oh, Gerda, how stupid you are, don’t you understand that?” she had been able, behind her blank expression, to hug herself a little in her secret knowledge…For she wasn’t as stupid as they thought. Often, when she pretended not to understand, she did understand. And often, deliberately, she slowed down in her task of whatever it was, smiling to herself when someone’s impatient fingers snatched it away from her.

For, warm and delightful, was a secret knowledge of superiority. She began to be, quite often, a little amused. Yes, it was amusing to know more than they thought you knew. To be able to do a thing, but not let anybody know that you could do it.

And it had the advantage, suddenly discovered, that people often did things for you. That, of course, saved you a lot of trouble. And, in the end, if people got into the habit of doing things for you, you didn’t have to do them at all, and then people didn’t know that you did them badly. And so, slowly, you came round again almost to where you started. To feeling that you could hold your own on equal terms with the world at large.

(But that wouldn’t, Gerda feared, hold good with the Angkatells; the Angkatells were always so far ahead that you didn’t feel even in the same street with them. How she hated the Angkatells! It was good for John—John liked it there. He came home less tired—and sometimes less irritable.)

Dear John, she thought. John was wonderful. Everyone thought so. Such a clever doctor, so terribly kind to his patients. Wearing himself out—and the interest he took in his hospital patients—all that side of his work that didn’t pay at all. John was so disinterested—so truly noble.

She had always known, from the very first, that John was brilliant and was going to get to the top of the tree. And he had chosen her, when he might have married somebody far more brilliant. He had not minded her being slow and rather stupid and not very pretty. “I’ll look after you,” he had said. Nicely, rather masterfully. “Don’t worry about things, Gerda, I’ll take care of you….”

Just what a man ought to be. Wonderful to think John should have chosen her.

He had said with that sudden, very attractive, half-pleading smile of his: “I like my own way, you know, Gerda.”

Well, that was all right. She had always tried to give in to him in everything. Even lately when he had been so difficult and nervy—when nothing seemed to please him. When, somehow, nothing she did was right. One couldn't blame him. He was so busy, so unselfish—

Oh, dear, that mutton! She ought to have sent it back. Still no sign of John. Why couldn't she, sometimes, decide right? Again those dark waves of misery swept over her. The mutton! This awful weekend with the Angkatells. She felt a sharp pain through both temples. Oh, dear, now she was going to have one of her headaches. And it did so annoy John when she had headaches. He never would give her anything for them, when surely it would be so easy, being a doctor. Instead he always said: "Don't think about it. No use poisoning yourself with drugs. Take a brisk walk."

The mutton! Staring at it, Gerda felt the words repeating themselves in her aching head, "The mutton, the MUTTON, THE MUTTON…."

Tears of self-pity sprang to her eyes. "Why," she thought, "does nothing ever go right for me?"

Terence looked across at the table at his mother and then at the joint. He thought: "Why can't we have our dinner? How stupid grown-up people are. They haven't any sense!"

Aloud he said in a careful voice:

"Nicholson Minor and I are going to make nitroglycerine in his father's shrubbery. They live at Streatham."

"Are you, dear? That will be very nice," said Gerda.

There was still time. If she rang the bell and told Lewis to take the joint down now—

Terence looked at her with faint curiosity. He had felt instinctively that the manufacture of nitroglycerine was not the kind of occupation that would be encouraged by parents. With base opportunism he had selected a moment when he felt tolerably certain that he had a good chance of getting away with his statement. And his judgement had been justified. If, by any chance, there should be a fuss—if, that is, the properties of nitroglycerine should manifest themselves too evidently, he would be able to say in an injured voice, “I told Mother.”

All the same, he felt vaguely disappointed.

“Even Mother,” he thought, “ought to know about nitroglycerine.”

He sighed. There swept over him that intense sense of loneliness that only childhood can feel. His father was too impatient to listen, his mother was too inattentive. Zena was only a silly kid.

Pages of interesting chemical tests. And who cared about them? Nobody!

Bang! Gerda started. It was the door of John’s consulting room. It was John running upstairs.

John Christow burst into the room, bringing with him his own particular atmosphere of intense energy. He was good-humoured, hungry, impatient.

“God,” he exclaimed as he sat down and energetically sharpened the carving knife against the steel. “How I hate sick people!”

“Oh, John.” Gerda was quickly reproachful. “Don’t say things like that. They’ll think you mean it.”

She gestured slightly with her head towards the children.

“I do mean it,” said John Christow. “Nobody ought to be ill.”

“Father’s joking,” said Gerda quickly to Terence.

Terence examined his father with the dispassionate attention he gave to everything.

“I don’t think he is,” he said.

“If you hated sick people, you wouldn’t be a doctor, dear,” said Gerda, laughing gently.

“That’s exactly the reason,” said John Christow. “No doctors like sickness. Good God, this meat’s stone cold. Why on earth didn’t you have it sent down to keep hot?”

“Well, dear, I didn’t know. You see, I thought you were just coming—”

John Christow pressed the bell, a long, irritated push. Lewis came promptly.

“Take this down and tell Cook to warm it up.”

He spoke curtly.

“Yes, sir.” Lewis, slightly impertinent, managed to convey in the two innocuous words exactly her opinion of a mistress who sat at the dining table watching a joint of meat grow cold.

Gerda went on rather incoherently:

“I’m so sorry, dear, it’s all my fault, but first, you see, I thought you were coming, and then I thought, well, if I did send it back….”

John interrupted her impatiently.

“Oh, what does it matter? It isn’t important. Not worth making a song and dance about.”

Then he asked:

“Is the car here?”

“I think so. Collie ordered it.”

“Then we can get away as soon as lunch is over.”

Across Albert Bridge, he thought, and then over Clapham Common—the shortcut by the Crystal Palace—Croydon—Purley Way, then avoid the main road—take that right-hand fork up Metherly Hill—along Haverston Ridge—get suddenly right of the suburban belt, through Cormerton, and then up Shovel Down—trees golden red—woodland below one everywhere—the soft autumn smell, and down over the crest of the hill.

Lucy and Henry…Henrietta….

He hadn't seen Henrietta for four days. When he had last seen her, he'd been angry. She'd had that look in her eyes. Not abstracted, not inattentive—he couldn't quite describe it—that look of seeing something—something that wasn't there—something (and that was the crux of it) something that wasn't John Christow!

He said to himself: "I know she's a sculptor. I know her work's good. But damn it all, can't she put it aside sometimes? Can't she sometimes think of me—and nothing else?"

He was unfair. He knew he was unfair. Henrietta seldom talked of her work—was indeed less obsessed by it than most artists he knew. It was only on very rare occasions that her absorption with some inner vision spoiled the completeness of her interest in him. But it always roused his furious anger.

Once he had said, his voice sharp and hard: "Would you give all this up if I asked you to?"

"All—what?" Her warm voice held surprise.

"All—this." He waved a comprehensive hand round the studio.

And immediately he thought to himself: "Fool! Why did you ask her that?" And again: "Let her say: 'Of course.' Let her lie to me! If she'll only say: 'Of course I will.' It doesn't matter if she means it or not! But let her say it. I must have peace."

Instead she had said nothing for some time. Her eyes had gone dreamy and abstracted. She had frowned a little.

Then she had said slowly:

“I suppose so. If it was necessary.”

“Necessary? What do you mean by necessary?”

“I don’t really know what I mean by it, John. Necessary, as an amputation might be necessary.”

“Nothing short of a surgical operation, in fact!”

“You are angry. What did you want me to say?”

“You know well enough. One word would have done. Yes. Why couldn’t you say it? You say enough things to people to please them, without caring whether they’re true or not. Why not to me? For God’s sake, why not to me?”

And still very slowly she had answered:

“I don’t know…really, I don’t know, John. I can’t—that’s all. I can’t.”

He had walked up and down for a minute or two. Then he said:

“You will drive me mad, Henrietta. I never feel that I have any influence over you at all.”

“Why should you want to have?”

“I don’t know. I do.”

He threw himself down on a chair.

“I want to come first.”

“You do, John.”

“No. If I were dead, the first thing you’d do, with the tears streaming down your face, would be to start modelling some damned mourning woman or some figure of grief.”

"I wonder. I believe—yes, perhaps I would. It's rather horrible."

She had sat there looking at him with dismayed eyes.

II

The pudding was burnt. Christow raised his eyebrows over it and Gerda hurried into apologies.

"I'm sorry, dear. I can't think why that should happen. It's my fault. Give me the top and you take the underneath."

The pudding was burnt because he, John Christow, had stayed sitting in his consulting room for a quarter of an hour after he need, thinking about Henrietta and Mrs. Crabtree and letting ridiculous nostalgic feelings about San Miguel sweep over him. The fault was his. It was idiotic of Gerda to try and take the blame, maddening of her to try and eat the burnt part herself. Why did she always have to make a martyr of herself? Why did Terence stare at him in that slow, interested way? Why, oh why, did Zena have to sniff so continually? Why were they all so damned irritating?

His wrath fell on Zena.

"Why on earth don't you blow your nose?"

"She's got a little cold, I think, dear."

"No, she hasn't. You're always thinking they have colds! She's all right."

Gerda sighed. She had never been able to understand why a doctor, who spent his time treating the ailments of others, could be so indifferent to the health of his own family. He always ridiculed any suggestions of illness.

"I sneezed eight times before lunch," said Zena importantly.

"Heat sneeze!" said John.

"It's not hot," said Terence. "The thermometer in the hall is 55."

John got up. “Have we finished? Good, let’s get on. Ready to start, Gerda?”

“In a minute, John. I’ve just a few things to put in.”

“Surely you could have done that before. What have you been doing all the morning?”

He went out of the dining room fuming. Gerda had hurried off into her bedroom. Her anxiety to be quick would make her much slower. But why couldn’t she have been ready? His own suitcase was packed and in the hall. Why on earth—

Zena was advancing on him, clasping some rather sticky cards.

“Can I tell your fortune, Daddy? I know how. I’ve told Mother’s and Terry’s and Lewis’s and Jane’s and Cook’s.”

“All right.”

He wondered how long Gerda was going to be. He wanted to get away from this horrible house and this horrible street and this city full of ailing, sniffing, diseased people. He wanted to get to woods and wet leaves—and the graceful aloofness of Lucy Angkatell, who always gave you the impression she hadn’t even got a body.

Zena was importantly dealing out cards.

“That’s you in the middle, Father, the King of Hearts. The person whose fortune’s told is always the King of Hearts. And then I deal the others face down. Two on the left of you and two on the right of you and one over your head—that has power over you, and one under your feet—you have power over it. And this one—covers you!

“Now.” Zena drew a deep breath. “We turn them over. On the right of you is the Queen of Diamonds—quite close.”

“Henrietta,” he thought, momentarily diverted and amused by Zena’s solemnity.

“And the next one is the knave of clubs—he’s some quiet young man.

“On the left of you is the eight of spades—that’s a secret enemy. Have you got a secret enemy, Father?”

“Not that I know of.”

“And beyond is the Queen of Spades—that’s a much older lady.”

“Lady Angkatell,” he said.

“Now this is what’s over your head and has power over you—the Queen of Hearts.”

“Veronica,” he thought. “Veronica!” And then, “What a fool I am! Veronica doesn’t mean a thing to me now.”

“And this is under your feet and you have power over it—the Queen of Clubs.”

Gerda hurried into the room.

“I’m quite ready now, John.”

“Oh, wait, Mother, wait, I’m telling Daddy’s fortune. Just the last card, Daddy—the most important of all. The one that covers you.”

Zena’s small sticky fingers turned it over. She gave a gasp.

“Oh—it’s the Ace of Spades! That’s usually a death—but—”

“Your mother,” said John, “is going to run over someone on the way out of London. Come on, Gerda. Good-bye, you two. Try and behave.”

Six

I

Midge Hardcastle came downstairs about eleven on Saturday morning. She had had breakfast in bed and had read a book and dozed a little and then got up.

It was nice lazing this way. About time she had a holiday! No doubt about it, Madame Alfrege's got on your nerves.

She came out of the front door into the pleasant autumn sunshine. Sir Henry Angkatell was sitting on a rustic seat reading The Times. He looked up and smiled. He was fond of Midge.

“Hallo, my dear.”

“Am I very late?”

“You haven't missed lunch,” said Sir Henry, smiling.

Midge sat down beside him and said with a sigh:

“It's nice being here.”

“You're looking rather peaked.”

“Oh, I'm all right. How delightful to be somewhere where no fat women are trying to get into clothes several sizes too small for them!”

“Must be dreadful!” Sir Henry paused and then said, glancing down at his wristwatch: “Edward's arriving by the 12:15.”

“Is he?” Midge paused, then said: “I haven't seen Edward for a long time.”

“He's just the same,” said Sir Henry. “Hardly ever comes up from Ainswick.”

“Ainswick,” thought Midge. “Ainswick!” Her heart gave a sick pang. Those lovely days at Ainswick. Visits looked forward to for months! “I’m going to Ainswick.” Lying awake for nights beforehand thinking about it. And at last—the day! The little country station at which the train—the big London express—had to stop if you gave notice to the guard! The Daimler waiting outside. The drive—the final turn in through the gate and up through the woods till you came out into the open and there the house was—big and white and welcoming. Old Uncle Geoffrey in his patchwork tweed coat.

“Now then, youngsters—enjoy yourselves.” And they had enjoyed themselves. Henrietta over from Ireland. Edward, home from Eton. She herself, from the Northcountry grimness of a manufacturing town. How like heaven it had been.

But always centring about Edward. Edward, tall and gentle and diffident and always kind. But never, of course, noticing her very much because Henrietta was there.

Edward, always so retiring, so very much of a visitor so that she had been startled one day when Tremlet, the head gardener, had said:

“The place will be Mr. Edward’s some day.”

“But why, Tremlet? He’s not Uncle Geoffrey’s son.”

“He’s the heir, Miss Midge. Entailed, that’s what they call it. Miss Lucy, she’s Mr. Geoffrey’s only child, but she can’t inherit because she’s a female, and Mr. Henry, as she married, he’s only a second cousin. Not so near as Mr. Edward.”

And now Edward lived at Ainswick. Lived there alone and very seldom came away. Midge wondered, sometimes, if Lucy minded. Lucy always looked as though she never minded about anything.

Yet Ainswick had been her home, and Edward was only her first cousin once removed, and over twenty years younger than she was. Her father, old Geoffrey Angkatell, had been a great “character” in the country. He had had considerable wealth as well, most of which had come to Lucy, so that

Edward was a comparatively poor man, with enough to keep the place up, but not much over when that was done.

Not that Edward had expensive tastes. He had been in the diplomatic service for a time, but when he inherited Ainswick he had resigned and come to live on his property. He was of a bookish turn of mind, collected first editions, and occasionally wrote rather hesitating ironical little articles for obscure reviews. He had asked his second cousin, Henrietta Savernake, three times to marry him.

Midge sat in the autumn sunshine thinking of these things. She could not make up her mind whether she was glad she was going to see Edward or not. It was not as though she were what is called "getting over it." One simply did not get over anyone like Edward. Edward of Ainswick was just as real to her as Edward rising to greet her from a restaurant table in London. She had loved Edward ever since she could remember….

Sir Henry's voice recalled her.

"How do you think Lucy is looking?"

"Very well. She's just the same as ever." Midge smiled a little. "More so."

"Ye—es." Sir Henry drew on his pipe. He said unexpectedly:

"Sometimes, you know, Midge, I get worried about Lucy."

"Worried?" Midge looked at him in surprise. "Why?"

Sir Henry shook his head.

"Lucy," he said, "doesn't realize that there are things that she can't do."

Midge stared. He went on:

"She gets away with things. She always has." He smiled. "She's flouted the traditions of Government House—she's played merry hell with precedence at dinner parties (and that, Midge, is a black crime!). She's put deadly enemies next to each other at the dinner table, and run riot over the colour question! And instead of raising one big almighty row and setting everyone at loggerheads and bringing disgrace on the British Raj—I'm damned if she hasn't got away with it! That trick of hers—smiling at people and looking as though she couldn't help it! Servants are the same—she gives them any amount of trouble and they adore her."

"I know what you mean," said Midge thoughtfully. "Things that you wouldn't stand from anyone else, you feel are all right if Lucy does them. What is it, I wonder? Charm? Magnetism?"

Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders.

"She's always been the same from a girl—only sometimes I feel it's growing on her. I mean that she doesn't realize that there are limits. Why, I really believe, Midge," he said, amused, "that Lucy would feel she could get away with murder!"

II

Henrietta got the Delage out from the garage in the Mews and, after a wholly technical conversation with her friend Albert, who looked after the Delage's health, she started off.

"Running a treat, miss," said Albert.

Henrietta smiled. She shot away down the Mews, savouring the unfailing pleasure she always felt when setting off in the car alone. She much preferred to be alone when driving. In that way she could realize to the full the intimate personal enjoyment that driving a car brought to her.

She enjoyed her own skill in traffic, she enjoyed nosing out new shortcuts out of London. She had routes of her own and when driving in London itself had as intimate a knowledge of its streets as any taxi driver.

She took now her own newly discovered way southwest, turning and twisting through intricate mazes of suburban streets.

When she came finally to the long ridge of Shovel Down it was half past twelve. Henrietta had always loved the view from that particular place. She paused now just at the point where the road began to descend. All around and below her were trees, trees whose leaves were turning from gold to brown. It was a world incredibly golden and splendid in the strong autumn sunlight.

Henrietta thought: “I love autumn. It’s so much richer than spring.”

And suddenly one of those moments of intense happiness came to her—a sense of the loveliness of the world—of her own intense enjoyment of that world.

She thought: “I shall never be as happy again as I am now—never.”

She stayed there a minute, gazing out over that golden world that seemed to swim and dissolve into itself, hazy and blurred with its own beauty.

Then she came down over the crest of the hill, down through the woods, down the long steep road to The Hollow.

III

When Henrietta drove in, Midge was sitting on the low wall of the terrace, and waved to her cheerfully. Henrietta was pleased to see Midge, whom she liked.

Lady Angkatell came out of the house and said:

“Oh, there you are, Henrietta. When you’ve taken your car into the stables and given it a bran mash, lunch will be ready.”

“What a penetrating remark of Lucy’s,” said Henrietta as she drove round the house, Midge accompanying her on the step. “You know, I always prided myself on having completely escaped the horsy taint of my Irish forebears. When you’ve been brought up amongst people who talk nothing but horse, you go all superior about not caring for them. And now Lucy has just shown me that I treat my car exactly like a horse. It’s quite true. I do.”

"I know," said Midge. "Lucy is quite devastating. She told me this morning that I was to be as rude as I liked whilst I was here."

Henrietta considered this for a moment and then nodded.

"Of course," she said. "The shop!"

"Yes. When one has to spend every day of one's life in a damnable little box being polite to rude women, calling them Madam, pulling frocks over their heads, smiling and swallowing their damned cheek whatever they like to say to one—well, one does want to cuss! You know, Henrietta, I always wonder why people think it's so humiliating to go "into service" and that it's grand and independent to be in a shop. One puts up with far more insolence in a shop than Gudgeon or Simmons or any decent domestic does."

"It must be foul, darling. I wish you weren't so grand and proud and insistent on earning your own living."

"Anyway, Lucy's an angel. I shall be gloriously rude to everyone this weekend."

"Who's here?" said Henrietta as she got out of the car.

"The Christows are coming." Midge paused and then went on, "Edward's just arrived."

"Edward? How nice. I haven't seen Edward for ages. Anybody else?"

"David Angkatell. That, according to Lucy, is where you are going to come in useful. You're going to stop him biting his nails."

"It sounds very unlike me," said Henrietta. "I hate interfering with people, and I wouldn't dream of checking their personal habits. What did Lucy really say?"

"It amounted to that! He's got an Adam's apple, too!"

“I’m not expected to do anything about that, am I?” asked Henrietta, alarmed.

“And you’re to be kind to Gerda.”

“How I should hate Lucy if I were Gerda!”

“And someone who solves crimes is coming to lunch tomorrow.”

“We’re not going to play the Murder Game, are we?”

“I don’t think so. I think it is just neighbourly hospitality.”

Midge’s voice changed a little.

“Here’s Edward coming out to meet us.”

“Dear Edward,” thought Henrietta with a sudden rush of warm affection.

Edward Angkatell was very tall and thin. He was smiling now as he came towards the two young women.

“Hallo, Henrietta, I haven’t seen you for over a year.”

“Hallo, Edward.”

How nice Edward was! That gentle smile of his, the little creases at the corners of his eyes. And all his nice knobbly bones. “I believe it’s his bones I like so much,” thought Henrietta. The warmth of her affection for Edward startled her. She had forgotten that she liked Edward so much.

IV

After lunch Edward said: “Come for a walk, Henrietta.”

It was Edward’s kind of walk—a stroll.

They went up behind the house, taking a path that zigzagged up through the trees. Like the woods at Ainswick, thought Henrietta. Dear Ainswick, what fun they had had there! She began to talk to Edward about Ainswick. They revived old memories.

“Do you remember our squirrel? The one with the broken paw. And we kept it in a cage and it got well?”

“Of course. It had a ridiculous name—what was it now?”

“Cholmondeley-Marjoribanks!”

“That’s it.”

The both laughed.

“And old Mrs. Bondy, the housekeeper—she always said it would go up the chimney one day.”

“And we were so indignant.”

“And then it did.”

“She made it,” said Henrietta positively. “She put the thought into the squirrel’s head.”

She went on:

“Is it all the same, Edward? Or is it changed? I always imagine it just the same.”

“Why don’t you come and see, Henrietta? It’s a long long time since you’ve been there.”

“I know.”

Why, she thought, had she let so long a time go by? One got busy—interested—tangled up with people….

“You know you’re always welcome there at any time.”

"How sweet you are, Edward!"

Dear Edward, she thought, with his nice bones.

He said presently:

"I'm glad you're fond of Ainswick, Henrietta."

She said dreamily: "Ainswick is the loveliest place in the world."

A long-legged girl, with a mane of untidy brown hair…a happy girl with no idea at all of the things that life was going to do to her…a girl who loved trees….

To have been so happy and not to have known it! "If I could go back," she thought.

And aloud she said suddenly:

"Is Ygdrasil still there?"

"It was struck by lightning."

"Oh, no, not Ygdrasil!"

She was distressed. Ygdrasil—her own special name for the big oak tree. If the gods could strike down Ygdrasil, then nothing was safe! Better not go back.

"Do you remember your special sign, the Ygdrasil sign?"

"The funny tree like no tree that ever was I used to draw on bits of paper? I still do, Edward! On blotters, and on telephone books, and on bridge scores. I doodle it all the time. Give me a pencil."

He handed her a pencil and notebook, and laughing, she drew the ridiculous tree.

image

“Yes,” he said, “that’s Ygdrasil.”

They had come almost to the top of the path. Henrietta sat on a fallen tree trunk. Edward sat down beside her.

She looked down through the trees.

“It’s a little like Ainswick here—a kind of pocket Ainswick. I’ve sometimes wondered—Edward, do you think that that is why Lucy and Henry came here?”

“It’s possible.”

“One never knows,” said Henrietta slowly, “what goes on in Lucy’s head.” Then she asked: “What have you been doing with yourself, Edward, since I saw you last?”

“Nothing, Henrietta.”

“That sounds very peaceful.”

“I’ve never been very good at—doing things.”

She threw him a quick glance. There had been something in his tone. But he was smiling at her quietly.

And again she felt that rush of deep affection.

“Perhaps,” she said, “you are wise.”

“Wise?”

“Not to do things.”

Edward said slowly, “That’s an odd thing for you to say, Henrietta. You, who’ve been so successful.”

“Do you think of me as successful? How funny.”

“But you are, my dear. You’re an artist. You must be proud of yourself; you can’t help being.”

“I know,” said Henrietta. “A lot of people say that to me. They don’t understand—they don’t understand the first thing about it. You don’t, Edward. Sculpture isn’t a thing you set out to do and succeed in. It’s a thing that gets at you, that nags at you—and haunts you—so that you’ve got, sooner or later, to make terms with it. And then, for a bit, you get some peace—until the whole thing starts over again.”

“Do you want to be peaceful, Henrietta?”

“Sometimes I think I want to be peaceful more than anything in the world, Edward!”

“You could be peaceful at Ainswick. I think you could be happy there. Even—even if you had to put up with me. What about it, Henrietta? Won’t you come to Ainswick and make it your home? It’s always been there, you know, waiting for you.”

Henrietta turned her head slowly. She said in a low voice: “I wish I wasn’t so dreadfully fond of you, Edward. It makes it so very much harder to go on saying No.”

“It is No, then?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said No before—but this time—well, I thought it might be different. You’ve been happy this afternoon, Henrietta. You can’t deny that.”

“I’ve been very happy.”

“Your face even—it’s younger than it was this morning.”

“I know.”

“We’ve been happy together, talking about Ainswick, thinking about Ainswick. Don’t you see what that means, Henrietta?”

“It’s you who don’t see what it means, Edward! We’ve been living all this afternoon in the past.”

“The past is sometimes a very good place to live.”

“One can’t go back. That’s the one thing one can’t do—go back.”

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he said in a quiet, pleasant and quite unemotional voice:

“What you really mean is that you won’t marry me because of John Christow?”

Henrietta did not answer, and Edward went on:

“That’s it, isn’t it? If there were no John Christow in the world you would marry me.”

Henrietta said harshly, “I can’t imagine a world in which there was no John Christow! That’s what you’ve got to understand.”

“If it’s like that, why on earth doesn’t the fellow get a divorce from his wife and then you could marry?”

“John doesn’t want to get a divorce from his wife. And I don’t know that I should want to marry John if he did. It isn’t—it isn’t in the least like you think.”

Edward said in a thoughtful, considering way:

“John Christow. There are too many John Christows in this world.”

“You’re wrong,” said Henrietta. “There are very few people like John.”

“If that’s so—it’s a good thing! At least, that’s what I think!”

He got up. “We’d better go back again.”

Seven

As they got into the car and Lewis shut the front door of the Harley Street house, Gerda felt the pang of exile go through her. That shut door was so final. She was barred out—this awful weekend was upon her. And there were things, quite a lot of things, that she ought to have done before leaving. Had she turned off that tap in the bathroom? And that note for the laundry—she'd put it—where had she put it? Would the children be all right with Mademoiselle? Mademoiselle was so—so—Would Terence, for instance, ever do anything that Mademoiselle told him to? French governesses never seemed to have any authority.

She got into the driving seat, still bowed down by misery, and nervously pressed the starter. She pressed it again and again. John said: "The car will start better, Gerda, if you switch on the engine."

"Oh, dear, how stupid of me." She shot a quick, alarmed glance at him. If John was going to become annoyed straightaway—But to her relief he was smiling.

"That's because," thought Gerda, with one of her flashes of acumen, "he's so pleased to be going to the Angkatells."

Poor John, he worked so hard! His life was so unselfish, so completely devoted to others. No wonder he looked forward to this long weekend. And, her mind harking back to the conversation at lunch, she said, as she let in the clutch rather too suddenly so that the car leapt forward from the kerb:

"You know, John, you really shouldn't make jokes about hating sick people. It's wonderful of you to make light of all you do, and I understand. But the children don't. Terry, in particular, has such a very literal mind."

"There are times," said John Christow, "when Terry seems to me almost human—not like Zena! How long do girls go on being a mass of affectation?"

Gerda gave a little quiet sweet laugh. John, she knew, was teasing her. She stuck to her point. Gerda had an adhesive mind.

“I really think, John, that it’s good for children to realize the unselfishness and devotion of a doctor’s life.”

“Oh God!” said Christow.

Gerda was momentarily deflected. The traffic lights she was approaching had been green for a long time. They were almost sure, she thought, to change before she got to them. She began to slow down. Still green.

John Christow forgot his resolutions of keeping silent about Gerda’s driving and said, “What are you stopping for?”

“I thought the lights might change—”

She pressed her foot on the accelerator, the car moved forward a little, just beyond the lights, then, unable to pick up, the engine stalled. The lights changed.

The cross traffic hooted angrily.

John said, but quite pleasantly:

“You really are the worst driver in the world, Gerda!”

“I always find traffic lights so worrying. One doesn’t know just when they are going to change.”

John cast a quick sideways look at Gerda’s anxious unhappy face.

“Everything worries Gerda,” he thought, and tried to imagine what it must feel like to live in that state. But since he was not a man of much imagination, he could not picture it at all.

“You see,” Gerda stuck to her point, “I’ve always impressed on the children just what a doctor’s life is—the self-sacrifice, the dedication of oneself to helping pain and suffering—the desire to serve others. It’s such a noble life

—and I'm so proud of the way you give your time and energy and never spare yourself—"

John Christow interrupted her.

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you that I like doctoring—that it's a pleasure, not a sacrifice!—Don't you realize that the damned thing's interesting!"

But no, he thought, Gerda would never realize a thing like that! If he told her about Mrs. Crabtree and the Margaret Russell Ward she would only see him as a kind of angelic helper of the Poor with a capital P.

"Drowning in treacle," he said under his breath.

"What?" Gerda leaned towards him.

He shook his head.

If he were to tell Gerda that he was trying to "find a cure for cancer," she would respond—she could understand a plain sentimental statement. But she would never understand the peculiar fascination of the intricacies of Ridgeway's Disease—he doubted if he could even make her understand what Ridgeway's Disease actually was. ("Particularly," he thought with a grin, "as we're not really quite sure ourselves! We don't really know why the cortex degenerates!")

But it occurred to him suddenly that Terence, child though he was, might be interested in Ridgeway's Disease. He had liked the way that Terence had eyed him appraisingly before stating: "I think Father does mean it."

Terence had been out of favour the last few days for breaking the Cona coffee machine—some nonsense about trying to make ammonia. Ammonia? Funny kid, why should he want to make ammonia? Interesting in a way.

Gerda was relieved at John's silence. She could cope with driving better if she were not distracted by conversation. Besides, if John was absorbed in thought, he was not so likely to notice that jarring noise of her occasional forced changes of gear. (She never changed down if she could help it.)

There were times, Gerda knew, when she changed gear quite well (though never with confidence), but it never happened if John were in the car. Her nervous determination to do it right this time was almost disastrous, her hand fumbled, she accelerated too much or not enough, and then she pushed the gear lever quickly and clumsily so that it shrieked in protest.

“Stroke it in, Gerda, stroke it in,” Henrietta had pleaded once, years ago. Henrietta had demonstrated. “Can’t you feel the way it wants to go—it wants to slide in—keep your hand flat till you get the feeling of it—don’t just push it anywhere—feel it.”

But Gerda had never been able to feel anything about a gear lever. If she was pushing it more or less in the proper direction it ought to go in! Cars ought to be made so that you didn’t have that horrible grinding noise.

On the whole, thought Gerda, as she began the ascent of Mersham Hill, this drive wasn’t going too badly. John was still absorbed in thought—and he hadn’t noticed rather a bad crashing of gears in Croydon. Optimistically, as the car gained speed, she changed up into third, and immediately the car slackened. John, as it were, woke up.

“What on earth’s the point of changing up just when you’re coming to a steep bit?”

Gerda set her jaw. Not very much farther now. Not that she wanted to get there. No, indeed, she’d much rather drive on for hours and hours, even if John did lose his temper with her!

But now they were driving along Shovel Down—flaming autumn woods all round them.

“Wonderful to get out of London into this,” exclaimed John. “Think of it, Gerda, most afternoons we’re stuck in that dingy drawing room having tea—sometimes with the light on.”

The image of the somewhat dark drawing room of the flat rose up before Gerda’s eyes with the tantalizing delight of a mirage. Oh, if only she could be sitting there now.

“The country looks lovely,” she said heroically.

Down the steep hill—no escape now. That vague hope that something, she didn’t know what, might intervene to save her from the nightmare, was unrealized. They were there.

She was a little comforted as she drove in to see Henrietta sitting on a wall with Midge and a tall thin man. She felt a certain reliance on Henrietta, who would sometimes unexpectedly come to the rescue if things were getting very bad.

John was glad to see Henrietta too. It seemed to him exactly the fitting journey’s end to that lovely panorama of autumn, to drop down from the hilltop and find Henrietta waiting for him.

She had on the green tweed coat and the skirt he liked her in and which he thought suited her so much better than London clothes. Her long legs were stuck out in front of her, ending in well-polished brown brogues.

They exchanged a quick smile—a brief recognition of the fact that each was glad of the other’s presence. John didn’t want to talk to Henrietta now. He just enjoyed feeling that she was there—knowing that without her the weekend would be barren and empty.

Lady Angkatell came out from the house and greeted them. Her conscience made her more effusive to Gerda than she would have been normally to any guest.

“But how very nice to see you, Gerda! It’s been such a long time. And John!”

The idea was clearly that Gerda was the eagerly awaited guest, and John the mere adjunct. It failed miserably of its object, making Gerda stiff and uncomfortable.

Lucy said: “You know Edward? Edward Angkatell?”

John nodded to Edward and said: “No, I don’t think so.”

The afternoon sun lighted up the gold of John’s hair and the blue of his eyes. So might a Viking look who had just come ashore on a conquering mission. His voice, warm and resonant, charmed the ear, and the magnetism of his whole personality took charge of the scene.

That warmth and that objectiveness did no damage to Lucy. It set off, indeed, that curious elfin elusiveness of hers. It was Edward who seemed, suddenly, by contrast with the other man, bloodless—a shadowy figure, stooping a little.

Henrietta suggested to Gerda that they should go and look at the kitchen garden.

“Lucy is sure to insist on showing us the rock garden and the autumn border,” she said as she led the way. “But I always think kitchen gardens are nice and peaceful. One can sit on the cucumber frames, or go inside a greenhouse if it’s cold, and nobody bothers one and sometimes there’s something to eat.”

They found, indeed, some late peas, which Henrietta ate raw, but which Gerda did not much care for. She was glad to have got away from Lucy Angkatell, whom she had found more alarming than ever.

She began to talk to Henrietta with something like animation. The questions Henrietta asked always seemed to be questions to which Gerda knew the answers. After ten minutes Gerda felt very much better and began to think that perhaps the weekend wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Zena was going to dancing class now and had just had a new frock. Gerda described it at length. Also she had found a very nice new leathercraft shop. Henrietta asked whether it would be difficult to make herself a handbag. Gerda must show her.

It was really very easy, she thought, to make Gerda look happy, and what an enormous difference it made to her when she did look happy!

“She only wants to be allowed to curl up and purr,” thought Henrietta.

They sat happily on the corner of the cucumber frames where the sun, now low in the sky, gave an illusion of a summer day.

Then a silence fell. Gerda’s face lost its expression of placidity. Her shoulders drooped. She sat there, the picture of misery. She jumped when Henrietta spoke.

“Why do you come,” said Henrietta, “if you hate it so much?”

Gerda hurried into speech.

“Oh, I don’t! I mean, I don’t know why you should think—”

She paused, then went on:

“It is really delightful to get out of London, and Lady Angkatell is so very kind.”

“Lucy? She’s not a bit kind.”

Gerda looked faintly shocked.

“Oh, but she is. She’s so very nice to me always.”

“Lucy has got good manners and she can be gracious. But she is rather a cruel person. I think really because she isn’t quite human—she doesn’t know what it’s like to feel and think like ordinary people. And you are hating being here, Gerda! You know you are. And why should you come if you feel like that?”

“Well, you see, John likes it—”

“Oh, John likes it all right. But you could let him come by himself?”

"He wouldn't like that. He wouldn't enjoy it without me. John is so unselfish. He thinks it is good for me to get out into the country."

"The country is all right," said Henrietta. "But there's no need to throw in the Angkatells."

"I—I don't want you to feel that I'm ungrateful."

"My dear Gerda, why should you like us? I always have thought the Angkatells were an odious family. We all like getting together and talking an extraordinary language of our own. I don't wonder outside people want to murder us."

Then she added:

"I expect it's about teatime. Let's go back."

She was watching Gerda's face as the latter got up and started to walk towards the house.

"It's interesting," thought Henrietta, one portion of whose mind was always detached, "to see exactly what a female Christian martyr's face looked like before she went into the arena."

As they left the walled kitchen garden, they heard shots, and Henrietta remarked: "Sounds as though the massacre of the Angkatells has begun!"

It turned out to be Sir Henry and Edward discussing firearms and illustrating their discussion by firing revolvers. Henry Angkatell's hobby was firearms and he had quite a collection of them.

He had brought out several revolvers and some target cards, and he and Edward were firing at them.

"Hallo, Henrietta, want to try if you could kill a burglar?"

Henrietta took the revolver from him.

"That's right—yes, so, aim like this."

Bang!

“Missed him,” said Sir Henry.

“You try, Gerda.”

“Oh, I don’t think I—”

“Come on, Mrs. Christow. It’s quite simple.”

Gerda fired the revolver, flinching, and shutting her eyes. The bullet went even wider than Henrietta’s had done.

“Oh, I want to do it,” said Midge, strolling up.

“It’s more difficult than you’d think,” she remarked after a couple of shots. “But it’s rather fun.”

Lucy came out from the house. Behind her came a tall, sulky young man with an Adam’s apple.

“Here’s David,” she announced.

She took the revolver from Midge, as her husband greeted David Angkatell, reloaded it, and without a word put three holes close to the centre of the target.

“Well done, Lucy,” exclaimed Midge. “I didn’t know shooting was one of your accomplishments.”

“Lucy,” said Sir Henry gravely, “always kills her man!”

Then he added reminiscently, “Came in useful once. Do you remember, my dear, those thugs that set upon us that day on the Asian side of the Bosphorus? I was rolling about with two of them on top of me feeling for my throat.”

“And what did Lucy do?” asked Midge.

“Fired two shots in the mêlée. I didn’t even know she had the pistol with her. Got one bad man through the leg and the other in the shoulder. Nearest escape in the world I’ve ever had. I can’t think how she didn’t hit me.”

Lady Angkatell smiled at him.

“I think one always has to take some risk,” she said gently. “And one should do it quickly and not think too much about it.”

“An admirable sentiment, my dear,” said Sir Henry. “But I have always felt slightly aggrieved that I was the risk you took!”

Eight

I

After tea John said to Henrietta, “Come for a walk,” and Lady Angkatell said that she must show Gerda the rock garden though of course it was quite the wrong time of year.

Walking with John, thought Henrietta, was as unlike walking with Edward as anything could be.

With Edward one seldom did more than potter. Edward, she thought, was a born potterer. Walking with John, it was all she could do to keep up, and by the time they got up to Shovel Down she said breathlessly: “It’s not a marathon, John!”

He slowed down and laughed.

“Am I walking you off your feet?”

“I can do it—but is there any need? We haven’t got a train to catch. Why do you have this ferocious energy? Are you running away from yourself?”

He stopped dead. “Why do you say that?”

Henrietta looked at him curiously.

“I didn’t mean anything particular by it.”

John went on again, but walking more slowly.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “I’m tired. I’m very tired.”

She heard the lassitude in his voice.

“How’s the Crabtree?”

“It’s early days to say, but I think, Henrietta, that I’ve got the hang of things. If I’m right”—his footsteps began to quicken—“a lot of our ideas will be revolutionized—we’ll have to reconsider the whole question of hormone secretion—”

“You mean that there will be a cure for Ridgeway’s Disease? That people won’t die?”

“That, incidentally.”

What odd people doctors were, thought Henrietta. Incidentally!

“Scientifically, it opens up all sorts of possibilities!”

He drew a deep breath. “But it’s good to get down here—good to get some air into your lungs—good to see you.” He gave her one of his sudden quick smiles. “And it will do Gerda good.”

“Gerda, of course, simply loves coming to The Hollow!”

“Of course she does. By the way, have I met Edward Angkatell before?”

“You’ve met him twice,” said Henrietta dryly.

“I couldn’t remember. He’s one of those vague, indefinite people.”

“Edward’s a dear. I’ve always been very fond of him.”

“Well, don’t let’s waste time on Edward! None of these people count.”

Henrietta said in a low voice:

“Sometimes, John—I’m afraid for you!”

“Afraid for me—what do you mean?”

He turned an astonished face upon her.

“You are so oblivious—so—yes, blind.”

“Blind?”

“You don’t know—you don’t see—you’re curiously insensitive! You don’t know what other people are feeling and thinking.”

“I should have said just the opposite.”

“You see what you’re looking at, yes. You’re—you’re like a searchlight. A powerful beam turned on to the one spot where your interest is, and behind it and each side of it, darkness!”

“Henrietta, my dear, what is all this?”

“It’s dangerous, John. You assume that everyone likes you, that they mean well to you. People like Lucy, for instance.”

“Doesn’t Lucy like me?” he said, surprised. “I’ve always been extremely fond of her.”

“And so you assume that she likes you. But I’m not sure. And Gerda and Edward—oh, and Midge and Henry. How do you know what they feel towards you?”

“And Henrietta? Do I know how she feels?” He caught her hand for a moment. “At least—I’m sure of you.”

She took her hand away.

“You can be sure of no one in this world, John.”

His face had grown grave.

“No, I won’t believe that. I’m sure of you and I’m sure of myself. At least—” His face changed.

“What is it, John?”

“Do you know what I found myself saying today? Something quite ridiculous. ‘I want to go home.’ That’s what I said and I hadn’t the least idea what I meant by it.”

Henrietta said slowly: “You must have had some picture in your mind.”

He said sharply: “Nothing. Nothing at all!”

II

At dinner that night, Henrietta was put next to David, and from the end of the table Lucy’s delicate eyebrows telegraphed not a command—Lucy never commanded—but an appeal.

Sir Henry was doing his best with Gerda and succeeding quite well. John, his face amused, was following the leaps and bounds of Lucy’s discursive mind. Midge talked in rather a stilted way to Edward, who seemed more absentminded than usual.

David was glowering and crumbling his bread with a nervous hand.

David had come to The Hollow in a spirit of considerable unwillingness. Until now, he had never met either Sir Henry or Lady Angkatell, and disapproving of the Empire generally, he was prepared to disapprove of these relatives of his. Edward, whom he did not know, he despised as a dilettante. The remaining four guests he examined with a critical eye. Relations, he thought, were pretty awful, and one was expected to talk to people, a thing which he hated doing.

Midge and Henrietta he discounted as empty-headed. This Dr. Christow was just one of these Harley Street charlatans—all manner and social success—his wife obviously did not count.

David shifted his neck in his collar and wished fervently that all these people could know how little he thought of them! They were really all quite negligible.

When he had repeated that three times to himself he felt rather better. He still glowered but he was able to leave his bread alone.

Henrietta, though responding loyally to the eyebrows, had some difficulty in making headway. David's curt rejoinders were snubbing in the extreme. In the end she had recourse to a method she had employed before with the tongue-tied young.

She made, deliberately, a dogmatic and quite unjustifiable pronouncement on a modern composer, knowing that David had much technical and musical knowledge.

To her amusement the plan worked. David drew himself up from his slouching position where he had been more or less reclining on his spine. His voice was no longer low and mumbling. He stopped crumbling his bread.

"That," he said in loud, clear tones, fixing a cold eye on Henrietta, "shows that you don't know the first thing about the subject!"

From then on until the end of dinner he lectured her in clear and biting accents, and Henrietta subsided into the proper meekness of one instructed.

Lucy Angkatell sent a benignant glance down the table, and Midge grinned to herself.

"So clever of you, darling," muttered Lady Angkatell as she slipped an arm through Henrietta's on the way to the drawing room. "What an awful thought it is that if people had less in their heads they would know better what to do with their hands! Do you think Hearts or Bridge or Rummy or something terribly terribly simple like Animal Grab?"

"I think David would be rather insulted by Animal Grab."

"Perhaps you are right. Bridge, then. I am sure he will feel that Bridge is rather worthless, and then he can have a nice glow of contempt for us."

They made up two tables. Henrietta played with Gerda against John and Edward. It was not her idea of the best grouping. She had wanted to segregate Gerda from Lucy and if possible from John also—but John had shown determination. And Edward had then forestalled Midge.

The atmosphere was not, Henrietta thought, quite comfortable, but she did not quite know from whence the discomfort arose. Anyway, if the cards gave them anything like a break, she intended that Gerda should win. Gerda was not really a bad Bridge player—away from John she was quite average—but she was a nervous player with bad judgment and with no real knowledge of the value of her hand. John was a good, if slightly overconfident player. Edward was a very good player indeed.

The evening wore on, and at Henrietta's table they were still playing the same rubber. The scores rose above the line on either side. A curious tensity had come into the play of which only one person was unaware.

To Gerda this was just a rubber of Bridge which she happened for once to be quite enjoying. She felt indeed a pleasurable excitement. Difficult decisions had been unexpectedly eased by Henrietta's overcalling her own bids and playing the hand.

Those moments when John, unable to refrain from that critical attitude which did more to undermine Gerda's self-confidence than he could possibly have imagined, exclaimed: "Why on earth did you lead that club, Gerda?" were countered almost immediately by Henrietta's swift, "Nonsense, John, of course she had to lead the club! It was the only possible thing to do."

Finally, with a sigh, Henrietta drew the score towards her.

"Game and rubber, but I don't think we shall make much out of it, Gerda."

John said: "A lucky finesse," in a cheerful voice.

Henrietta looked up sharply. She knew his tone. She met his eyes and her own dropped.

She got up and went to the mantelpiece, and John followed her. He said conversationally: "You don't always look deliberately into people's hands, do you?"

Henrietta said calmly: “Perhaps I was a little obvious. How despicable it is to want to win at games!”

“You wanted Gerda to win the rubber, you mean. In your desire to give pleasure to people, you don’t draw the line at cheating.”

“How horribly you put things! And you are always quite right.”

“Your wishes seemed to be shared by my partner.”

So he had noticed, thought Henrietta. She had wondered herself, if she had been mistaken. Edward was so skilful—there was nothing you could have taken hold of. A failure, once, to call the game. A lead that had been sound and obvious—but when a less obvious lead would have assured success.

It worried Henrietta. Edward, she knew, would never play his cards in order that she, Henrietta, might win. He was far too imbued with English sportsmanship for that. No, she thought, it was just one more success for John Christow that he was unable to endure.

She felt suddenly keyed up, alert. She didn’t like this party of Lucy’s.

And then dramatically, unexpectedly—with the unreality of a stage entrance, Veronica Cray came through the window.

The french windows had been pushed to, not closed, for the evening was warm. Veronica pushed them wide, came through them and stood there framed against the night, smiling, a little rueful, wholly charming, waiting just that infinitesimal moment before speaking so that she might be sure of her audience.

“You must forgive me—bursting in upon you this way. I’m your neighbour, Lady Angkatell—from that ridiculous cottage Dovecotes—and the most frightful catastrophe has occurred!”

Her smile broadened—became more humorous.

“Not a match! Not a single match in the house! And Saturday evening. So stupid of me. But what could I do? I came along here to beg help from my only neighbour within miles.”

Nobody spoke for a moment, for Veronica had rather that effect. She was lovely—not quietly lovely, not even dazzlingly lovely—but so efficiently lovely that it made you gasp! The waves of pale shimmering hair, the curving mouth—the platinum foxes that swathed her shoulders and the long sweep of white velvet underneath them.

She was looking from one to the other of them, humorous, charming!

“And I smoke,” she said, “like a chimney! And my lighter won’t work! And besides there’s breakfast—gas stoves—” She thrust out her hands. “I do feel such a complete fool.”

Lucy came forward, gracious, faintly amused.

“Why, of course—” she began, but Veronica Cray interrupted.

She was looking at John Christow. An expression of utter amazement, of incredulous delight, was spreading over her face. She took a step towards him, hands outstretched.

“Why, surely—John! It’s John Christow! Now isn’t that too extraordinary? I haven’t seen you for years and years and years! And suddenly—to find you here!”

She had his hands in hers by now. She was all warmth and simple eagerness. She half-turned her head to Lady Angkatell.

“This is just the most wonderful surprise. John’s an old old friend of mine. Why, John’s the first man I ever loved! I was crazy about you, John.”

She was half laughing now—a woman moved by the ridiculous remembrance of first love.

“I always thought John was just wonderful!”

Sir Henry, courteous and polished, had moved forward to her.

She must have a drink. He manoeuvred glasses. Lady Angkatell said:

“Midge, dear, ring the bell.”

When Gudgeon came, Lucy said:

“A box of matches, Gudgeon—at least, has Cook got plenty?”

“A new dozen came in today, m’lady.”

“Then bring in half a dozen, Gudgeon.”

“Oh, no, Lady Angkatell—just one!”

Veronica protested, laughing. She had her drink now and was smiling round at everyone. John Christow said:

“This is my wife, Veronica.”

“Oh, but how lovely to meet you.” Veronica beamed upon Gerda’s air of bewilderment.

Gudgeon brought in the matches, stacked on a silver salver.

Lady Angkatell indicated Veronica Cray with a gesture and he brought the salver to her.

“Oh, dear Lady Angkatell, not all these!”

Lucy’s gesture was negligently royal.

“It’s so tiresome only having one of a thing. We can spare them quite easily.”

Sir Henry was saying pleasantly:

“And how do you like living at Dovecotes?”

"I adore it. It's wonderful here, near London, and yet one feels so beautifully isolated."

Veronica put down her glass. She drew the platinum foxes a little closer round her. She smiled on them all.

"Thank you so much! You've been so kind." The words floated between Sir Henry, Lady Angkatell, and for some reason, Edward. "I shall now carry home the spoils. John," she gave him an artless, friendly smile, "you must see me safely back, because I want dreadfully to hear all you've been doing in the years and years since I've seen you. It makes me feel, of course, dreadfully old."

She moved to the window, and John Christow followed her. She flung a last brilliant smile at them all.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry to have bothered you in this stupid way. Thank you so much, Lady Angkatell."

She went out with John. Sir Henry stood by the window looking after them.

"Quite a fine warm night," he said.

Lady Angkatell yawned.

"Oh, dear," she murmured, "we must go to bed. Henry, we must go and see one of her pictures. I'm sure, from tonight, she must give a lovely performance."

They went upstairs. Midge, saying goodnight, asked Lucy:

"A lovely performance?"

"Didn't you think so, darling?"

"I gather, Lucy, that you think it's just possible she may have some matches in Dovecotes all the time."

“Dozens of boxes, I expect, darling. But we mustn’t be uncharitable. And it was a lovely performance!”

Doors were shutting all down the corridor, voices were murmuring goodnights. Sir Henry said: “I’ll leave the window for Christow.” His own door shut.

Henrietta said to Gerda: “What fun actresses are. They make such marvellous entrances and exits!” She yawned and added: “I’m frightfully sleepy.”

Veronica Cray moved swiftly along the narrow path through the chestnut woods.

She came out from the woods to the open space by the swimming pool. There was a small pavilion here where the Angkatells sat on days that were sunny but when there was a cold wind.

Veronica Cray stood still. She turned and faced John Christow.

Then she laughed. With her hand she gestured towards the leaf-strewn surface of the swimming pool.

“Not quite like the Mediterranean, is it, John?” she said.

He knew then what he had been waiting for—knew that in all those fifteen years of separation from Veronica she had still been with him. The blue sea, the scent of mimosa, the hot dust—pushed down, thrust out of sight, but never really forgotten. They all meant one thing—Veronica. He was a young man of twenty-four, desperately and agonizingly in love, and this time he was not going to run away.

Nine

John Christow came out from the chestnut woods on to the green slope by the house. There was a moon and the house basked in the moonlight with a strange innocence in its curtained windows. He looked down at the wristwatch he wore.

It was three o'clock. He drew a deep breath and his face was anxious. He was no longer, even remotely, a young man of twenty-four in love. He was a shrewd, practical man of just on forty, and his mind was clear and levelheaded.

He'd been a fool, of course, a complete damned fool, but he didn't regret that! For he was, he now realized, completely master of himself. It was as though, for years, he had dragged a weight upon his leg—and now the weight was gone. He was free.

He was free and himself, John Christow—and he knew that to John Christow, successful Harley Street specialist, Veronica Cray meant nothing whatsoever. All that had been in the past—and because that conflict had never been resolved, because he had always suffered humiliatingly from the fear that he had, in plain language, "run away," so Veronica's image had never completely left him. She had come to him tonight out of a dream, and he had accepted the dream, and now, thank God, he was delivered from it forever. He was back in the present—and it was 3 a.m., and it was just possible that he had mucked up things rather badly.

He'd been with Veronica for three hours. She had sailed in like a frigate, and cut him out of the circle and carried him off as her prize, and he wondered now what on earth everybody had thought about it.

What, for instance, would Gerda think?

And Henrietta? (But he didn't care quite so much about Henrietta. He could, he felt, at a pinch explain to Henrietta. He could never explain to Gerda.)

And he didn’t, definitely he didn’t want to lose anything.

All his life he had been a man who took a justifiable number of risks. Risks with patients, risks with treatment, risks with investments. Never a fantastic risk—only the kind of risk that was just beyond the margin of safety.

If Gerda guessed—if Gerda had the least suspicion….

But would she have? How much did he really know about Gerda? Normally, Gerda would believe white was black if he told her so. But over a thing like this….

What had he looked like when he followed Veronica’s tall, triumphant figure out of that window? What had he shown in his face? Had they seen a boy’s dazed, lovesick face? Or had they only observed a man doing a polite duty? He didn’t know. He hadn’t the least idea.

But he was afraid—afraid for the ease and order and safety of his life. He’d been mad—quite mad, he thought with exasperation—and then took comfort in that very thought. Nobody would believe, surely, he could have been as mad as that?

Everybody was in bed and sleep, that was clear. The french window of the drawing room stood half open, left for his return. He looked up again at the innocent, sleeping house. It looked, somehow, too innocent.

Suddenly he started. He had heard, or he had imagined he heard, the faint closing of a door.

He turned his head sharply. If someone had come down to the pool, following him there. If someone had waited and followed him back that someone could have taken a higher path and so gained entrance to the house again by the side garden door, and the soft closing of the garden door would have made just the sound that he had heard.

He looked up sharply at the windows. Was that curtain moving, had it been pushed aside for someone to look out, and then allowed to fall? Henrietta’s room.

Henrietta! Not Henrietta, his heart cried in a sudden panic. I can’t lose Henrietta!

He wanted suddenly to fling up a handful of pebbles at her window, to cry out to her.

“Come out, my dear love. Come out to me now and walk with me up through the woods to Shovel Down and there listen—listen to everything that I now know about myself and that you must know, too, if you do not know it already.”

He wanted to say to Henrietta:

“I am starting again. A new life begins from today. The things that crippled and hindered me from living have fallen away. You were right this afternoon when you asked me if I was running away from myself. That is what I have been doing for years. Because I never knew whether it was strength or weakness that took me away from Veronica. I have been afraid of myself, afraid of life, afraid of you.”

If he were to wake Henrietta and make her come out with him now—up through the woods to where they could watch, together, the sun come up over the rim of the world.

“You’re mad,” he said to himself. He shivered. It was cold now, late September after all. “What the devil is the matter with you?” he asked himself. “You’ve behaved quite insanely enough for one night. If you get away with it as it is, you’re damned lucky!” What on earth would Gerda think if he stayed out all night and came home with the milk?

What, for the matter of that, would the Angkatells think?

But that did not worry him for a moment. The Angkatells took Greenwich time, as it were, from Lucy Angkatell. And to Lucy Angkatell, the unusual always appeared perfectly reasonable.

But Gerda, unfortunately, was not an Angkatell.

Gerda would have to be dealt with, and he’d better go in and deal with Gerda as soon as possible.

Supposing it had been Gerda who had followed him tonight?

No good saying people didn’t do such things. As a doctor, he knew only too well what people, high-minded, sensitive, fastidious, honourable people, constantly did. They listened at doors, and opened letters and spied and snooped—not because for one moment they approved of such conduct, but because before the sheer necessity of human anguish they were rendered desperate.

Poor devils, he thought, poor suffering human devils. John Christow knew a good deal about human suffering. He had not very much pity for weakness, but he had for suffering, for it was, he knew, the strong who suffer.

If Gerda knew—

Nonsense, he said to himself, why should she? She’s gone up to bed and she’s fast asleep. She’s no imagination, never has had.

He went in through the french windows, switched on a lamp, closed and locked the windows. Then, switching off the light, he left the room, found the switch in the hall, went quickly and lightly up the stairs. A second switch turned off the hall light. He stood for a moment by the bedroom door, his hand on the doorknob, then he turned it and went in.

The room was dark and he could hear Gerda’s even breathing. She stirred as he came in and closed the door. Her voice came to him, blurred and indistinct with sleep.

“Is that you, John?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you very late? What time is it?”

He said easily:

“I’ve no idea. Sorry I woke you up. I had to go in with the woman and have a drink.”

He made his voice sound bored and sleepy.

Gerda murmured: “Oh? Goodnight, John.”

There was a rustle as she turned over in bed.

It was all right! As usual, he’d been lucky. As usual—just for a moment it sobered him, the thought of how often his luck had held! Time and again there had been a moment when he’d held his breath and said, “If this goes wrong.” And it hadn’t gone wrong! But some day, surely, his luck would change.

He undressed quickly and got into bed. Funny that kid’s fortune. “And this one is over your head and has power over you…” Veronica! And she had had power over him all right.

“But not anymore, my girl,” he thought with a kind of savage satisfaction. “All that’s over. I’m quit of you now!”

Ten

It was ten o'clock the next morning when John came down. Breakfast was on the sideboard. Gerda had had her breakfast sent up to her in bed and had been rather perturbed since perhaps she might be "giving trouble."

Nonsense, John had said. People like the Angkatells who still managed to have butlers and servants might just as well give them something to do.

He felt very kindly towards Gerda this morning. All that nervous irritation that had so fretted him of late seemed to have died down and disappeared.

Sir Henry and Edward had gone out shooting, Lady Angkatell told him. She herself was busy with a gardening basket and gardening gloves. He stayed talking to her for a while until Gudgeon approached him with a letter on a salver.

"This has just come by hand, sir."

He took it with slightly raised eyebrows.

Veronica!

He strolled into the library, tearing it open.

Please come over this morning. I must see you.

Veronica.

Imperious as ever, he thought. He'd a good mind not to go. Then he thought he might as well and get it over. He'd go at once.

He took the path opposite the library window, passed by the swimming pool which was a kind of nucleus with paths radiating from it in every direction, one up the hill to the woods proper, one from the flower walk above the house, one from the farm and the one that led on to the lane which he took now. A few yards up the lane was the cottage called Dovecotes.

Veronica was waiting for him. She spoke from the window of the pretentious half-timbered building.

“Come inside, John. It’s cold this morning.”

There was a fire lit in the sitting room, which was furnished in off-white with pale cyclamen cushions.

Looking at her this morning with an appraising eye, he saw the differences there were from the girl he remembered, as he had not been able to see them last night.

Strictly speaking, he thought, she was more beautiful now than then. She understood her beauty better, and she cared for it and enhanced it in every way. Her hair, which had been deep golden, was now a silvery platinum colour. Her eyebrows were different, giving much more poignancy to her expression.

Hers had never been a mindless beauty. Veronica, he remembered, had qualified as one of our “intellectual actresses.” She had a university degree and had views on Strindberg and on Shakespeare.

He was struck now with what had only been dimly apparent to him in the past—that she was a woman whose egoism was quite abnormal. Veronica was accustomed to getting her own way, and beneath the smooth beautiful contours of flesh he seemed to sense an ugly iron determination.

“I sent for you,” said Veronica, as she handed him a box of cigarettes, “because we’ve got to talk. We’ve got to make arrangements. For our future, I mean.”

He took a cigarette and lighted it. Then he said quite pleasantly:

“But have we a future?”

She gave him a sharp glance.

“What do you mean, John? Of course we have got a future. We’ve wasted fifteen years. There’s no need to waste any more time.”

He sat down.

"I'm sorry, Veronica. But I'm afraid you've got all this taped out wrong. I've—enjoyed meeting you again very much. But your life and mine don't touch anywhere. They are quite divergent."

"Nonsense, John. I love you and you love me. We've always loved each other. You were incredibly obstinate in the past! But never mind that now. Our lives needn't clash. I don't mean to go back to the States. When I've finished this picture I'm working on now, I'm going to play a straight play on the London stage. I've got a wonderful play—Elderton's written it for me. It will be a terrific success."

"I'm sure it will," he said politely.

"And you can go on being a doctor." Her voice was kind and condescending. "You're quite well-known, they tell me."

"My dear girl, I'm married. I've got children."

"I'm married myself at the moment," said Veronica. "But all these things are easily arranged. A good lawyer can fix up everything." She smiled at him dazzlingly. "I always did mean to marry you, darling. I can't think why I have this terrible passion for you, but there it is!"

"I'm sorry, Veronica, but no good lawyer is going to fix up anything. Your life and mine have nothing to do with each other."

"Not after last night?"

"You're not a child, Veronica. You've had a couple of husbands, and by all accounts several lovers. What does last night mean actually? Nothing at all, and you know it."

"Oh, my dear John." She was still amused, indulgent. "If you'd seen your face—there in that stuffy drawing room! You might have been in San Miguel again."

John sighed. He said:

"I was in San Miguel. Try to understand, Veronica. You came to me out of the past. Last night, I, too, was in the past, but today—today's different. I'm a man fifteen years older. A man you don't even know—and whom I daresay you wouldn't like much if you did know."

"You prefer your wife and children to me?"

She was genuinely amazed.

"Odd as it may seem to you, I do."

"Nonsense, John, you love me."

"I'm sorry, Veronica."

She said incredulously:

"You don't love me?"

"It's better to be quite clear about these things. You are an extraordinarily beautiful woman, Veronica, but I don't love you."

She sat so still that she might have been a waxwork. That stillness of hers made him just a little uneasy.

When she spoke it was with such venom that he recoiled.

"Who is she?"

"She? Who do you mean?"

"That woman by the mantelpiece last night?"

Henrietta! he thought. How the devil did she get on to Henrietta? Aloud he said:

"Who are you talking about? Midge Hardcastle?"

"Midge? That's the square, dark girl, isn't it? No, I don't mean her. And I don't mean your wife. I mean that insolent devil who was leaning against the mantelpiece! It's because of her that you're turning me down! Oh, don't pretend to be so moral about your wife and children. It's that other woman."

She got up and came towards him.

"Don't you understand, John, that ever since I came back to England, eighteen months ago, I've been thinking about you? Why do you imagine I took this idiotic place here? Simply because I found out that you often came down for weekends with the Angkatells!"

"So last night was all planned, Veronica?"

"You belong to me, John. You always have!"

"I don't belong to anyone, Veronica. Hasn't life taught you even now that you can't own other human beings body and soul? I loved you when I was a young man. I wanted you to share my life. You wouldn't do it!"

"My life and career were much more important than yours. Anyone can be a doctor!"

He lost his temper a little.

"Are you quite as wonderful as you think you are?"

"You mean that I haven't got to the top of the tree. I shall! I shall!"

John Christow looked at her with a sudden, quite dispassionate interest.

"I don't believe, you know, that you will. There's a lack in you, Veronica. You're all grab and snatch—no real generosity—I think that's it."

Veronica got up. She said in a quiet voice:

"You turned me down fifteen years ago. You've turned me down again today. I'll make you sorry for this."

John got up and went to the door.

“I’m sorry, Veronica, if I’ve hurt you. You’re very lovely, my dear, and I once loved you very much. Can’t we leave it at that?”

“Good-bye, John. We’re not leaving it at that. You’ll find that out all right. I think—I think I hate you more than I believed I could hate anyone.”

He shrugged his shoulders:

“I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

John walked back slowly through the wood. When he got to the swimming pool he sat down on the bench there. He had no regrets for his treatment of Veronica. Veronica, he thought dispassionately, was a nasty bit of work. She always had been a nasty bit of work, and the best thing he had ever done was to get clear of her in time. God alone knew what would have happened to him by now if he hadn’t!

As it was, he had that extraordinary sensation of starting a new life, unfettered and unhampered by the past. He must have been extremely difficult to live with for the last year or two. Poor Gerda, he thought, with her unselfishness and her continual anxiety to please him. He would be kinder in future.

And perhaps now he would be able to stop trying to bully Henrietta. Not that one could really bully Henrietta—she wasn’t made that way. Storms broke over her and she stood there, meditative, her eyes looking at you from very far away.

He thought: “I shall go to Henrietta and tell her.”

He looked up sharply, disturbed by some small unexpected sound. There had been shots in the woods higher up, and there had been the usual small noises of woodlands, birds, and the faint melancholy dropping of leaves. But this was another noise—a very faint businesslike click.

And suddenly, John was acutely conscious of danger. How long had he been sitting here? Half an hour? An hour? There was someone watching him. Someone—

And that click was—of course it was—

He turned sharply, a man very quick in his reactions. But he was not quick enough. His eyes widened in surprise, but there was no time for him to make a sound.

The shot rang out and he fell, awkwardly, sprawled out by the edge of the swimming pool.

A dark stain welled up slowly on his left side and trickled slowly on to the concrete of the pool edge; and from there dripped red into the blue water.

Eleven

I

Hercule Poirot flicked a last speck of dust from his shoes. He had dressed carefully for his luncheon party and he was satisfied with the result.

He knew well enough the kind of clothes that were worn in the country on a Sunday in England, but he did not choose to conform to English ideas. He preferred his own standards of urban smartness. He was not an English country gentleman. He was Hercule Poirot!

He did not, he confessed it to himself, really like the country. The weekend cottage—so many of his friends had extolled it—he had allowed himself to succumb, and had purchased Resthaven, though the only thing he had liked about it was its shape, which was quite square like a box. The surrounding landscape he did not care for though it was, he knew, supposed to be a beauty spot. It was, however, too wildly asymmetrical to appeal to him. He did not care much for trees at any time—they had that untidy habit of shedding their leaves. He could endure poplars and he approved of a monkey puzzle—but this riot of beech and oak left him unmoved. Such a landscape was best enjoyed from a car on a fine afternoon. You exclaimed, “Quel beau paysage!” and drove back to a good hotel.

The best thing about Resthaven, he considered, was the small vegetable garden neatly laid out in rows by his Belgian gardener Victor. Meanwhile Françoise, Victor’s wife, devoted herself with tenderness to the care of her employer’s stomach.

Hercule Poirot passed through the gate, sighed, glanced down once more at his shining black shoes, adjusted his pale grey Homburg hat, and looked up and down the road.

He shivered slightly at the aspect of Dovecotes. Dovecotes and Resthaven had been erected by rival builders, both of whom had acquired a small piece of land. Further enterprise on their part had been swiftly curtailed by a

National Trust for preserving the beauties of the countryside. The two houses remained representative of two schools of thought. Resthaven was a box with a roof, severely modern and a little dull. Dovecotes was a riot of half-timbering and Olde Worlde packed into as small a space as possible.

Hercule Poirot debated within himself as to how he should approach The Hollow. There was, he knew, a little higher up the lane, a small gate and a path. This, the unofficial way, would save a half-mile détour by the road. Nevertheless Hercule Poirot, a stickler for etiquette, decided to take the longer way round and approach the house correctly by the front entrance.

This was his first visit to Sir Henry and Lady Angkatell. One should not, he considered, take shortcuts uninvited, especially when one was the guest of people of social importance. He was, it must be admitted, pleased by their invitation.

“Je suis un peu snob,” he murmured to himself.

He had retained an agreeable impression of the Angkatells from the time in Baghdad, particularly of Lady Angkatell. “Une originale!” he thought to himself.

His estimation of the time required for walking to The Hollow by road was accurate. It was exactly one minute to one when he rang the front doorbell. He was glad to have arrived and felt slightly tired. He was not fond of walking.

The door was opened by the magnificent Gudgeon, of whom Poirot approved. His reception, however, was not quite as he had hoped. “Her ladyship is in the pavilion by the swimming pool, sir. Will you come this way?”

The passion of the English for sitting out of doors irritated Hercule Poirot. Though one had to put up with this whimsy in the height of summer, surely, Poirot thought, one should be safe from it by the end of September! The day was mild, certainly, but it had, as autumn days always had, a certain dampness. How infinitely pleasanter to have been ushered into a comfortable drawing room with, perhaps, a small fire in the grate. But no, here he was being led out through french windows across a slope of lawn, past a rockery and then through a small gate and along a narrow track between closely planted young chestnuts.

It was the habit of the Angkatells to invite guests for one o'clock, and on fine days they had cocktails and sherry in the small pavilion by the swimming pool. Lunch itself was scheduled for one thirty, by which time the most unpunctual of guests should have managed to arrive, which permitted Lady Angkatell's excellent cook to embark on soufflés and such accurately timed delicacies without too much trepidation.

To Hercule Poirot, the plan did not commend itself.

"In a little minute," he thought, "I shall be almost back where I started."

With an increasing awareness of his feet in his shoes, he followed Gudgeon's tall figure.

It was at that moment from just ahead of him that he heard a little cry. It increased, somehow, his dissatisfaction. It was incongruous, in some way unfitting. He did not classify it, nor indeed think about it. When he thought about it afterwards he was hard put to it to remember just what emotions it had seemed to convey. Dismay? Surprise? Horror? He could only say that it suggested, very definitely, the unexpected.

Gudgeon stepped out from the chestnuts. He was moving to one side, deferentially, to allow Poirot to pass and at the same time clearing his throat preparatory to murmuring, "M. Poirot, my lady" in the proper subdued and respectful tones when his suppleness became suddenly rigid. He gasped. It was an unbutlerlike noise.

Hercule Poirot stepped out on to the open space surrounding the swimming pool, and immediately he, too, stiffened, but with annoyance.

It was too much—it was really too much! He had not suspected such cheapness of the Angkatells. The long walk by the road, the disappointment at the house—and now this! The misplaced sense of humour of the English!

He was annoyed and he was bored—oh, how he was bored. Death was not, to him, amusing. And here they had arranged for him, by way of a joke, a set piece.

For what he was looking at was a highly artificial murder scene. By the side of the pool was the body, artistically arranged with an outflung arm and even some red paint dripping gently over the edge of the concrete into the pool. It was a spectacular body, that of a handsome fair-haired man. Standing over the body, revolver in hand, was a woman, a short, powerfully built, middle-aged woman with a curiously blank expression.

And there were three other actors. On the far side of the pool was a tall young woman whose hair matched the autumn leaves in its rich brown; she had a basket in her hand full of dahlia heads. A little farther off was a man, a tall, inconspicuous man in a shooting coat, carrying a gun. And immediately on his left, with a basket of eggs in her hand, was his hostess, Lady Angkatell.

It was clear to Hercule Poirot that several different paths converged here at the swimming pool and that these people had each arrived by a different path.

It was all very mathematical and artificial.

He sighed. Enfin, what did they expect him to do? Was he to pretend to believe in this “crime?” Was he to register dismay—alarm? Or was he to bow, to congratulate his hostess: “Ah, but it is very charming, what you arrange for me here?”

Really, the whole thing was very stupid—not spirituel at all! Was it not Queen Victoria who had said: “We are not amused?” He felt very inclined to say the same: “I, Hercule Poirot, am not amused.”

Lady Angkatell had walked towards the body. He followed, conscious of Gudgeon, still breathing hard, behind him. “He is not in the secret, that one,” Hercule Poirot thought to himself. From the other side of the pool, the other two people joined them. They were all quite close now, looking down on that spectacular sprawling figure by the pool’s edge.

And suddenly, with a terrific shock, with that feeling as of blurring on a cinematograph screen before the picture comes into focus, Hercule Poirot realized that this artificially set scene had a point of reality.

For what he was looking down at was, if not a dead, at least a dying man.

It was not red paint dripping off the edge of the concrete, it was blood. This man had been shot, and shot a very short time ago.

He darted a quick glance at the woman who stood there, revolver in hand. Her face was quite blank, without feeling of any kind. She looked dazed and rather stupid.

"Curious," he thought.

Had she, he wondered, drained herself of all emotion, all feeling, in the firing of the shot? Was she now all passion spent, nothing but an exhausted shell? It might be so, he thought.

Then he looked down on the shot man, and he started. For the dying man's eyes were open. They were intensely blue eyes and they held an expression that Poirot could not read but which he described to himself as a kind of intense awareness.

And suddenly, or so it felt to Poirot, there seemed to be in all this group of people only one person who was really alive—the man who was at the point of death.

Poirot had never received so strong an impression of vivid and intense vitality. The others were pale shadowy figures, actors in a remote drama, but this man was real.

John Christow opened his mouth and spoke. His voice was strong, unsurprised and urgent.

"Henrietta—" he said.

Then his eyelids dropped, his head jerked sideways.

Hercule Poirot knelt down, made sure, then rose to his feet, mechanically dusting the knees of his trousers.

“Yes,” he said. “He is dead.”

II

The picture broke up, wavered, refocused itself. There were individual reactions now—trivial happenings. Poirot was conscious of himself as a kind of magnified eyes and ears—recording. Just that, recording.

He was aware of Lady Angkatell’s hand relaxing its grip on her basket and Gudgeon springing forward, quickly taking it from her.

“Allow me, my lady.”

Mechanically, quite naturally, Lady Angkatell murmured:

“Thank you, Gudgeon.”

And then, hesitantly, she said:

“Gerda—”

The woman holding the revolver stirred for the first time. She looked round at them all. When she spoke, her voice held what seemed to be pure bewilderment.

“John’s dead,” she said. “John’s dead.”

With a kind of swift authority, the tall young woman with the leaf-brown hair came swiftly to her.

“Give that to me, Gerda,” she said.

And dexterously, before Poirot could protest or intervene, she had taken the revolver out of Gerda Christow’s hand.

Poirot took a quick step forward.

“You should not do that, Mademoiselle—”

The young woman started nervously at the sound of his voice. The revolver slipped through her fingers. She was standing by the edge of the pool and the revolver fell with a splash into the water.

Her mouth opened and she uttered an “Oh” of consternation, turning her head to look at Poirot apologetically.

“What a fool I am,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Poirot did not speak for a moment. He was staring into a pair of clear hazel eyes. They met his quite steadily and he wondered if his momentary suspicion had been unjust.

He said quietly:

“Things should be handled as little as possible. Everything must be left exactly as it is for the police to see.”

There was a little stir then—very faint, just a ripple of uneasiness.

Lady Angkatell murmured distastefully: “Of course. I suppose—yes, the police—”

In a quite, pleasant voice, tinged with fastidious repulsion, the man in the shooting coat said: “I’m afraid, Lucy, it’s inevitable.”

Into that moment of silence and realization there came the sound of footsteps and voices, assured, brisk footsteps and cheerful, incongruous voices.

Along the path from the house came Sir Henry Angkatell and Midge Hardcastle, talking and laughing together.

At the sight of the group round the pool, Sir Henry stopped short, and exclaimed in astonishment:

“What’s the matter? What’s happened?”

His wife answered: “Gerda has—” She broke off sharply. “I mean—John is —”

Gerda said in her flat, bewildered voice:

“John has been shot. He’s dead.”

They all looked away from her, embarrassed.

Then Lady Angkatell said quickly:

“My dear, I think you’d better go and—and lie down. Perhaps we had better all go back to the house? Henry, you and M. Poirot can stay here and—and wait for the police.”

“That will be the best plan, I think,” said Sir Henry. He turned to Gudgeon. “Will you ring up the police station, Gudgeon? Just state exactly what has occurred. When the police arrive, bring them straight out here.”

Gudgeon bent his head a little and said: “Yes, Sir Henry.” He was looking a little white about the gills, but he was still the perfect servant.

The tall young woman said: “Come, Gerda,” and putting her hand through the other woman’s arm, she led her unresistingly away and along the path towards the house. Gerda walked as though in a dream. Gudgeon stood back a little to let them pass, and then followed carrying the basket of eggs.

Sir Henry turned sharply to his wife. “Now, Lucy, what is all this? What happened exactly?”

Lady Angkatell stretched out vague hands, a lovely helpless gesture. Hercule Poirot felt the charm of it and the appeal.

“My dear, I hardly know. I was down by the hens. I heard a shot that seemed very near, but I didn’t really think anything about it. After all,” she appealed to them all, “one doesn’t! And then I came up the path to the pool and there was John lying there and Gerda standing over him with the revolver. Henrietta and Edward arrived almost at the same moment—from over there.”

She nodded towards the farther side of the pool, where two paths ran into the woods.

Hercule Poirot cleared his throat.

“Who are they, this John and this Gerda? If I may know,” he added apologetically.

“Oh, of course.” Lady Angkatell turned to him in quick apology. “One forgets—but then one doesn’t exactly introduce people—not when somebody has just been killed. John is John Christow, Dr. Christow. Gerda Christow is his wife.”

“And the lady who went with Mrs. Christow to the house?”

“My cousin, Henrietta Savernake.”

There was a movement, a very faint movement from the man on Poirot’s left.

“Henrietta Savernake,” thought Poirot, “and he does not like that she should say it—but it is, after all, inevitable that I should know….”

(“Henrietta!” the dying man had said. He had said it in a very curious way. A way that reminded Poirot of something—of some incident…now, what was it? No matter, it would come to him.)

Lady Angkatell was going on, determined now on fulfilling her social duties.

“And this is another cousin of ours, Edward Angkatell. And Miss Hardcastle.”

Poirot acknowledged the introductions with polite bows. Midge felt suddenly that she wanted to laugh hysterically; she controlled herself with an effort.

“And now, my dear,” said Sir Henry, “I think that, as you suggested, you had better go back to the house. I will have a word or two here with M.

Poirot."

Lady Angkatell looked thoughtfully at them.

"I do hope," she said, "that Gerda is lying down. Was that the right thing to suggest? I really couldn't think what to say. I mean, one has no precedent. What does one say to a woman who has just killed her husband?"

She looked at them as though hoping that some authoritative answer might be given to her question.

Then she went along the path towards the house. Midge followed her. Edward brought up the rear.

Poirot was left with his host.

Sir Henry cleared his throat. He seemed a little uncertain what to say.

"Christow," he observed at last, "was a very able fellow—a very able fellow."

Poirot's eyes rested once more on the dead man. He still had the curious impression that the dead man was more alive than the living.

He wondered what gave him that impression.

He responded politely to Sir Henry.

"Such a tragedy as this is very unfortunate," he said.

"This sort of thing is more your line than mine," said Sir Henry. "I don't think I have ever been at close quarters with a murder before. I hope I've done the right thing so far?"

"The procedure has been quite correct," said Poirot. "You have summoned the police, and until they arrive and take charge there is nothing for us to do—except to make sure that nobody disturbs the body or tampers with the evidence."

As he said the last word he looked down into the pool where he could see the revolver lying on the concrete bottom, slightly distorted by the blue water.

The evidence, he thought, had perhaps already been tampered with before he, Hercule Poirot, had been able to prevent it.

But no—that had been an accident.

Sir Henry murmured distastefully:

“Think we’ve got to stand about? A bit chilly. It would be all right, I should think, if we went inside the pavilion?”

Poirot, who had been conscious of damp feet and a disposition to shiver, acquiesced gladly. The pavilion was at the side of the pool farthest from the house, and through its open door they commanded a view of the pool and the body and the path to the house along which the police would come.

The pavilion was luxuriously furnished with comfortable settees and gay native rugs. On a painted iron table a tray was set with glasses and a decanter of sherry.

“I’d offer you a drink,” said Sir Henry, “but I suppose I’d better not touch anything until the police come—not, I should imagine, that there’s anything to interest them in here. Still, it is better to be on the safe side. Gudgeon hadn’t brought out the cocktails yet, I see. He was waiting for you to arrive.”

The two sat down rather gingerly in two wicker chairs near the door so that they could watch the path from the house.

A constraint settled over them. It was an occasion on which it was difficult to make small talk.

Poirot glanced round the pavilion, noting anything that struck him as unusual. An expensive cape of platinum fox had been flung carelessly across the back of one of the chairs. He wondered whose it was. Its rather ostentatious magnificence did not harmonize with any of the people he had seen up to now. He could not, for instance, imagine it round Lady Angkatell’s shoulders.

It worried him. It breathed a mixture of opulence and self-advertisement—and those characteristics were lacking in anyone he had seen so far.

“I suppose we can smoke,” said Sir Henry, offering his case to Poirot.

Before taking the cigarette, Poirot sniffed the air.

French perfume—an expensive French perfume.

Only a trace of it lingered, but it was there, and again the scent was not the scent that associated itself in his mind with any of the occupants of The Hollow.

As he leaned forward to light his cigarette at Sir Henry’s lighter, Poirot’s glance fell on a little pile of matchboxes—six of them—stacked on a small table near one of the settees.

It was a detail that struck him as definitely odd.

Twelve

I

"Half past two," said Lady Angkatell.

She was in the drawing room, with Midge and Edward. From behind the closed door of Sir Henry's study came the murmur of voices. Hercule Poirot, Sir Henry and Inspector Grange were in there.

Lady Angkatell sighed:

"You know, Midge, I still feel one ought to do something about lunch. It seems, of course, quite heartless to sit down round the table as though nothing had happened. But after all, M. Poirot was asked to lunch—and he is probably hungry. And it can't be upsetting to him that poor John Christow has been killed like it is to us. And I must say that though I really do not feel like eating myself, Henry and Edward must be extremely hungry after being out shooting all the morning."

Edward Angkatell said: "Don't worry on my account, Lucy, dear."

"You are always considerate, Edward. And then there is David—I noticed that he ate a great deal at dinner last night. Intellectual people always seem to need a good deal of food. Where is David, by the way?"

"He went up to his room," said Midge, "after he had heard what had happened."

"Yes—well, that was rather tactful of him. I daresay it made him feel awkward. Of course, say what you like, a murder is an awkward thing—it upsets the servants and puts the general routine out—we were having ducks for lunch—fortunately they are quite nice eaten cold. What does one do about Gerda, do you think? Something on a tray? A little strong soup, perhaps?"

"Really," thought Midge, "Lucy is inhuman!" And then with a qualm she reflected that it was perhaps because Lucy was too human that it shocked one so! Wasn't it the plain unvarnished truth that all catastrophes were hedged round with these little trivial wonderings and surmises? Lucy merely gave utterance to the thoughts which most people did not acknowledge. One did remember the servants, and worry about meals. And one did, even, feel hungry. She felt hungry herself at this very moment! Hungry, she thought, and at the same time, rather sick. A curious mixture.

And there was, undoubtedly, just plain awkward embarrassment in not knowing how to react to a quiet, commonplace woman whom one had referred to, only yesterday, as "poor Gerda" and who was now, presumably, shortly to be standing in the dock accused of murder.

"These things happen to other people," thought Midge. "They can't happen to us."

She looked across the room at Edward. "They oughtn't," she thought, "to happen to people like Edward. People who are so very unviolent." She took comfort in looking at Edward. Edward, so quiet, so reasonable, so kind and calm.

Gudgeon entered, inclined himself confidentially and spoke in a suitably muted voice.

"I have placed sandwiches and some coffee in the dining room, my lady."

"Oh, thank you, Gudgeon!"

"Really," said Lady Angkatell as Gudgeon left the room. "Gudgeon is wonderful: I don't know what I should do without Gudgeon. He always knows the right thing to do. Some really substantial sandwiches are as good as lunch—and nothing heartless about them, if you know what I mean!"

"Oh, Lucy, don't."

Midge suddenly felt warm tears running down her cheek. Lady Angkatell looked surprised, murmured:

“Poor darling. It’s all been too much for you.”

Edward crossed to the sofa and sat down by Midge. He put his arm round her.

“Don’t worry, little Midge,” he said.

Midge buried her face on his shoulder and sobbed there comfortably. She remembered how nice Edward had been to her when her rabbit had died at Ainswick one Easter holidays.

Edward said gently: “It’s been a shock. Can I get her some brandy, Lucy?”

“On the sideboard in the dining room. I don’t think—”

She broke off as Henrietta came into the room. Midge sat up. She felt Edward stiffen and sit very still.

What, thought Midge, does Henrietta feel? She felt almost reluctant to look at her cousin—but there was nothing to see. Henrietta looked, if anything, belligerent. She had come in with her chin up, her colour high, and with a certain swiftness.

“Oh, there you are, Henrietta,” cried Lady Angkatell. “I have been wondering. The police are with Henry and M. Poirot. What have you given Gerda? Brandy? Or tea and aspirin?”

“I gave her some brandy—and a hot-water bottle.”

“Quite right,” said Lady Angkatell approvingly. “That’s what they tell you in First Aid classes—the hot-water bottle, I mean, for shock—not the brandy; there is a reaction nowadays against stimulants. But I think that is only a fashion. We always gave brandy for shock when I was a girl at Ainswick. Though, really, I suppose, it can’t be exactly shock with Gerda. I don’t know really what one would feel if one had killed one’s husband—it’s the sort of thing one just can’t begin to imagine—but it wouldn’t exactly give one a shock. I mean, there wouldn’t be any element of surprise.”

Henrietta’s voice, icy cold, cut into the placid atmosphere.

She said: “Why are you all so sure that Gerda killed John?”

There was a moment’s pause—and Midge felt a curious shifting in the atmosphere. There was confusion, strain and, finally, a kind of slow watchfulness.

Then Lady Angkatell said, her voice quite devoid of any inflection:

“It seemed—self-evident. What else do you suggest?”

“Isn’t it possible that Gerda came along to the pool, that she found John lying there, and that she had just picked up the revolver when—when we came upon the scene?”

Again there was that silence. Then Lady Angkatell asked:

“Is that what Gerda says?”

“Yes.”

It was not a simple assent. It had force behind it. It came out like a revolver shot.

Lady Angkatell raised her eyebrows, then she said with apparent irrelevancy:

“There are sandwiches and coffee in the dining room.”

She broke off with a little gasp as Gerda Christow came through the open door. She said hurriedly and apologetically:

“I—I really didn’t feel I could lie down any longer. One is—one is so terribly restless.”

Lady Angkatell cried:

“You must sit down—you must sit down at once.”

She displaced Midge from the sofa, settled Gerda there, put a cushion at her back.

“You poor dear,” said Lady Angkatell.

She spoke with emphasis, but the words seemed quite meaningless.

Edward walked to the window and stood there looking out.

Gerda pushed back the untidy hair from her forehead. She spoke in a worried, bewildered tone.

“I—I really am only just beginning to realize it. You know I haven’t been able to feel—I still can’t feel—that it’s real—that John—is dead.” She began to shake a little. “Who can have killed him? Who can possibly have killed him?”

Lady Angkatell drew a deep breath—then she turned her head sharply. Sir Henry’s door had opened. He came in accompanied by Inspector Grange, who was a large, heavily built man with a down-drooping, pessimistic moustache.

“This is my wife—Inspector Grange.”

Grange bowed and said:

“I was wondering, Lady Angkatell, if I could have a few words with Mrs. Christow—”

He broke off as Lady Angkatell indicated the figure on the sofa.

“Mrs. Christow?”

Gerda said eagerly:

“Yes, I am Mrs. Christow.”

“I don’t want to distress you, Mrs. Christow, but I would like to ask you a few questions. You can, of course, have your solicitor present if you prefer it—”

Sir Henry put in:

“It is sometimes wiser, Gerda—”

She interrupted:

“A solicitor? Why a solicitor? Why should a solicitor know anything about John’s death?”

Inspector Grange coughed. Sir Henry seemed about to speak. Henrietta put in:

“The inspector only wants to know just what happened this morning.”

Gerda turned to him. She spoke in a wondering voice:

“It seems all like a bad dream—not real. I—I haven’t been able to cry or anything. One just doesn’t feel anything at all.”

Grange said soothingly:

“That’s the shock, Mrs. Christow.”

“Yes, yes—I suppose it is. But you see it was all so sudden. I went out from the house and along the path to the swimming pool—”

“At what time, Mrs. Christow?”

“It was just before one o’clock—about two minutes to one. I know because I looked at that clock. And when I got there—there was John, lying there—and blood on the edge of the concrete.”

“Did you hear a shot, Mrs. Christow?”

“Yes,—no—I don’t know. I knew Sir Henry and Mr. Angkatell were out shooting. I—I just saw John—”

“Yes, Mrs. Christow?”

“John—and blood—and a revolver. I picked up the revolver—”

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why did you pick up the revolver, Mrs. Christow?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“You shouldn’t have touched it, you know.”

“Shouldn’t I?” Gerda was vague, her face vacant. “But I did. I held it in my hands.”

She looked down now at her hands as though she was, in fancy, seeing the revolver lying in them.

She turned sharply to the inspector. Her voice was suddenly sharp—anguished.

“Who could have killed John? Nobody could have wanted to kill him. He was—he was the best of men. So kind, so unselfish—he did everything for other people. Everybody loved him, Inspector. He was a wonderful doctor. The best and kindest of husbands. It must have been an accident—it must—it must!”

She flung out a hand to the room.

“Ask anyone, Inspector. Nobody could have wanted to kill John, could they?”

She appealed to them all.

Inspector Grange closed up his notebook.

“Thank you, Mrs. Christow,” he said in an unemotional voice. “That will be all for the present.”

Hercule Poirot and Inspector Grange went together through the chestnut woods to the swimming pool. The thing that had been John Christow but which was now “the body” had been photographed and measured and written about and examined by the police surgeon, and had now been taken away to the mortuary. The swimming pool, Poirot thought, looked curiously innocent. Everything about today, he thought, had been strangely fluid. Except John Christow—he had not been fluid. Even in death he had been purposeful and objective. The swimming pool was not now preeminently a swimming pool, it was the place where John Christow’s body had lain and where his lifeblood had welled away over concrete into artificially blue water.

Artificial—for a moment Poirot grasped at the word. Yes, there had been something artificial about it all. As though—

A man in a bathing suit came up to the inspector.

“Here’s the revolver, sir,” he said.

Grange took the dripping object gingerly.

“No hope of fingerprints now,” he remarked, “but luckily it doesn’t matter in this case. Mrs. Christow was actually holding the revolver when you arrived, wasn’t she, M. Poirot?”

“Yes.”

“Identification of the revolver is the next thing,” said Grange. “I should imagine Sir Henry will be able to do that for us. She got it from his study, I should say.”

He cast a glance round the pool.

“Now, let’s have that again to be quite clear. The path below the pool comes up from the farm and that’s the way Lady Angkatell came. The other two, Mr. Edward Angkatell and Miss Savernake, came down from the woods—but not together. He came by the left-hand path, and she by the right-hand one which leads out of the long flower walk above the house. But they were both standing on the far side of the pool when you arrived?"

"Yes."

"And this path here, beside the pavilion, leads on to Podder's Lane. Right—we'll go along it."

As they walked, Grange spoke, without excitement, just with knowledge and quiet pessimism.

"Never like these cases much," he said. "Had one last year—down near Ashridge. Retired military man, he was—distinguished career. Wife was the nice quiet, old-fashioned kind, sixty-five, grey hair—rather pretty hair with a wave in it. Did a lot of gardening. One day she goes up to his room, gets out his service revolver, and walks out into the garden and shoots him. Just like that! A good deal behind it, of course, that one had to dig out. Sometimes they think up some fool story about a tramp! We pretend to accept it, of course, keep things quiet whilst we're making inquiries, but we know what's what."

"You mean," said Poirot, "that you have decided that Mrs. Christow shot her husband."

Grange gave him a look of surprise.

"Well, don't you think so?"

Poirot said slowly: "It could all have happened as she said."

Inspector Grange shrugged his shoulders.

"It could have—yes. But it's a thin story. And they all think she killed him! They know something we don't." He looked curiously at his companion. "You thought she'd done it all right, didn't you, when you arrived on the scene?"

Poirot half-closed his eyes. Coming along the path…Gudgeon stepping…Gerda Christow standing over her husband with the revolver in her hand and that blank look on her face. Yes, as Grange had said, he had thought she had done it…had thought, at least, that that was the impression he was meant to have.

Yes, but that was not the same thing.

A scene staged—set to deceive.

Had Gerda Christow looked like a woman who had just shot her husband? That was what Inspector Grange wanted to know.

And with a sudden shock of surprise, Hercule Poirot realized that in all his long experience of deeds of violence he had never actually come face to face with a woman who had just killed her husband. What would a woman look like in such circumstances? Triumphant, horrified, satisfied, dazed, incredulous, empty?

Any one of these things, he thought.

Inspector Grange was talking. Poirot caught the end of his speech.

"—Once you get all the facts behind the case, and you can usually get all that from the servants."

"Mrs. Christow is going back to London?"

"Yes. There's a couple of kids there. Have to let her go. Of course, we keep a sharp eye on her, but she won't know that. She thinks she's got away with it all right. Looks rather a stupid kind of woman to me…."

Did Gerda Christow realize, Poirot wondered, what the police thought—and what the Angkatells thought? She had looked as though she did not realize anything at all. She had looked like a woman whose reactions were slow and who was completely dazed and heartbroken by her husband's death.

They had come out into the lane.

Poirot stopped by his gate. Grange said:

“This your little place? Nice and snug. Well, good-bye for the present, M. Poirot. Thanks for your cooperation. I’ll drop in some time and give you the lowdown on how we’re getting on.”

His eye travelled up the lane.

“Who’s your neighbour? That’s not where our new celebrity hangs out, is it?”

“Miss Veronica Cray, the actress, comes there for weekends, I believe.”

“Of course. Dovecotes. I liked her in Lady Rides on Tiger, but she’s a bit highbrow for my taste. Give me Hedy Lamarr.”

He turned away.

“Well, I must get back to the job. So long, M. Poirot.”

II

“You recognize this, Sir Henry?”

Inspector Grange laid the revolver on the desk in front of Sir Henry and looked at him expectantly.

“I can handle it?” Sir Henry’s hand hesitated over the revolver as he asked the question.

Grange nodded. “It’s been in the pool. Destroyed whatever fingerprints there were on it. A pity, if I may say so, that Miss Savernake let it slip out of her hand.”

“Yes, yes—but of course it was a very tense moment for all of us. Women are apt to get flustered and—er—drop things.”

Again Inspector Grange nodded. He said:

“Miss Savernake seems a cool, capable young lady on the whole.”

The words were devoid of emphasis, yet something in them made Sir Henry look up sharply. Grange went on:

“Now, do you recognize it, sir?”

Sir Henry picked up the revolver and examined it. He noted the number and compared it with a list in a small leather-bound book. Then, closing the book with a sigh, he said:

“Yes, Inspector, this comes from my collection here.”

“When did you see it last?”

“Yesterday afternoon. We were doing some shooting in the garden with a target, and this was one of the firearms we were using.”

“Who actually fired this revolver on that occasion?”

“I think everybody had at least one shot with it.”

“Including Mrs. Christow?”

“Including Mrs. Christow.”

“And after you had finished shooting?”

“I put the revolver away in its usual place. Here.”

He pulled out the drawer of a big bureau. It was half-full of guns.

“You’ve got a big collection of firearms, Sir Henry.”

“It’s been a hobby of mine for many years.”

Inspector Grange’s eyes rested thoughtfully on the ex-Governor of the Hollowene Islands. A good-looking, distinguished man, the kind of man he would be quite pleased to serve under himself—in fact, a man he would much prefer to his own present Chief Constable. Inspector Grange did not think much of the Chief Constable of Wealdshire—a fussy despot and a tuft-hunter. He brought his mind back to the job in hand.

“The revolver was not, of course, loaded when you put it away, Sir Henry?”

“Certainly not.”

“And you keep your ammunition—where?”

“Here.” Sir Henry took a key from a pigeonhole and unlocked one of the lower drawers of the desk.

“Simple enough,” thought Grange. The Christow woman had seen where it was kept. She’d only got to come along and help herself. Jealousy, he thought, plays the dickens with women. He’d lay ten to one it was jealousy. The thing would come clear enough when he’d finished the routine here and got on to the Harley Street end. But you’d got to do things in their proper order.

He got up and said:

“Well, thank you, Sir Henry. I’ll let you know about the inquest.”

Thirteen

They had the cold ducks for supper. After the ducks there was a caramel custard which, Lady Angkatell said, showed just the right feeling on the part of Mrs. Medway.

Cooking, she said, really gave great scope to delicacy of feeling.

“We are only, as she knows, moderately fond of caramel custard. There would be something very gross, just after the death of a friend, in eating one’s favourite pudding. But caramel custard is so easy—slippery if you know what I mean—and then one leaves a little on one’s plate.”

She sighed and said that she hoped they had done right in letting Gerda go back to London.

“But quite correct of Henry to go with her.”

For Sir Henry had insisted on driving Gerda to Harley Street.

“She will come back here for the inquest, of course,” went on Lady Angkatell, meditatively eating caramel custard. “But naturally she wanted to break it to the children—they might see it in the papers and only a Frenchwoman in the house—one knows how excitable—a crise de nerfs, possibly. But Henry will deal with her, and I really think Gerda will be quite all right. She will probably send for some relations—sisters perhaps. Gerda is the sort of person who is sure to have sisters—three or four, I should think, probably living at Tunbridge Wells.”

“What extraordinary things you do say, Lucy,” said Midge.

“Well, darling, Torquay if you prefer it—no, not Torquay. They would be at least sixty-five if they were living at Torquay. Eastbourne, perhaps, or St. Leonards.”

Lady Angkatell looked at the last spoonful of caramel custard, seemed to condole with it, and laid it down very gently uneaten.

David, who only liked savouries, looked down gloomily at his empty plate.

Lady Angkatell got up.

“I think we shall all want to go to bed early tonight,” she said. “So much has happened, hasn’t it? One has no idea from reading about these things in the paper how tiring they are. I feel, you know, as though I had walked about fifteen miles. Instead of actually having done nothing but sit down—but that is tiring, too, because one does not like to read a book or a newspaper, it looks so heartless. Though I think perhaps the leading article in The Observer would have been all right—but not the News of the World. Don’t you agree with me, David? I like to know what the young people think, it keeps one from losing touch.”

David said in a gruff voice that he never read the News of the World.

“I always do,” said Lady Angkatell. “We pretend we get it for the servants, but Gudgeon is very understanding and never takes it out until after tea. It is a most interesting paper, all about women who put their heads in gas ovens—an incredible number of them!”

“What will they do in the houses of the future which are all electric?” asked Edward Angkatell with a faint smile.

“I suppose they will just have to decide to make the best of things—so much more sensible.”

“I disagree with you, sir,” said David, “about the houses of the future being all electric. There can be communal heating laid on from a central supply. Every working-class house should be completely laboursaving.”

Edward Angkatell said hastily that he was afraid that was a subject he was not very well up in. David’s lip curled with scorn.

Gudgeon brought in coffee on a tray, moving a little slower than usual to convey a sense of mourning.

“Oh, Gudgeon,” said Lady Angkatell, “about those eggs. I meant to write the date in pencil on them as usual. Will you ask Mrs. Medway to see to it?”

“I think you will find, my lady, that everything has been attended to quite satisfactorily.” He cleared his throat. “I have seen to things myself.”

“Oh, thank you, Gudgeon.”

As Gudgeon went out she murmured: “Really, Gudgeon is wonderful. The servants are all being marvellous. And one does so sympathize with them having the police here—it must be dreadful for them. By the way, are there any left?”

“Police, do you mean?” asked Midge.

“Yes. Don’t they usually leave one standing in the hall? Or perhaps he’s watching the front door from the shrubbery outside.”

“Why should he watch the front door?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure. They do in books. And then somebody else is murdered in the night.”

“Oh, Lucy, don’t,” said Midge.

Lady Angkatell looked at her curiously.

“Darling, I am so sorry. Stupid of me. And of course nobody else could be murdered. Gerda’s gone home—I mean—Oh, Henrietta dear, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

But Henrietta did not answer. She was standing by the round table staring down at the bridge score she had kept last night.

She said, rousing herself, “Sorry, Lucy, what did you say?”

“I wondered if there were any police left over.”

"Like remnants in a sale? I don't think so. They've all gone back to the police station, to write out what we said in proper police language."

"What are you looking at, Henrietta?"

"Nothing."

Henrietta moved across to the mantelpiece.

"What do you think Veronica Cray is doing tonight?" she asked.

A look of dismay crossed Lady Angkatell's face.

"My dear! You don't think she might come over here again? She must have heard by now."

"Yes," said Henrietta thoughtfully. "I suppose she's heard."

"Which reminds me," said Lady Angkatell. "I really must telephone to the Careys. We can't have them coming to lunch tomorrow just as though nothing had happened."

She left the room.

David, hating his relations, murmured that he wanted to look up something in the Encyclopædia Britannica. The library, he thought, would be a peaceful place.

Henrietta went to the french windows, opened them, and passed through. After a moment's hesitation Edward followed her.

He found her standing outside looking up at the sky. She said:

"Not so warm as last night, is it?"

In his pleasant voice, Edward said: "No, distinctly chilly."

She was standing looking up at the house. Her eyes were running along the windows. Then she turned and looked towards the woods. He had no clue to what was in her mind.

He made a movement towards the open window.

“Better come in. It’s cold.”

She shook her head.

“I’m going for a stroll. To the swimming pool.”

“Oh, my dear.” He took a quick step towards her. “I’ll come with you.”

“No, thank you, Edward.” Her voice cut sharply through the chill of the air. “I want to be alone with my dead.”

“Henrietta! My dear—I haven’t said anything. But you do know how—how sorry I am.”

“Sorry? That John Christow is dead?”

There was still the brittle sharpness in her tone.

“I meant—sorry for you, Henrietta. I know it must have been a—a great shock.”

“Shock? Oh, but I’m very tough, Edward. I can stand shocks. Was it a shock to you? What did you feel when you saw him lying there? Glad, I suppose. You didn’t like John Christow.”

Edward murmured: “He and I—hadn’t much in common.”

“How nicely you put things! In such a restrained way. But as a matter of fact you did have one thing in common. Me! You were both fond of me, weren’t you? Only that didn’t make a bond between you—quite the opposite.”

The moon came fitfully through a cloud and he was startled as he suddenly saw her face looking at him. Unconsciously he always saw Henrietta as a projection of the Henrietta he had known at Ainswick. She was always to him a laughing girl, with dancing eyes full of eager expectation. The woman he saw now seemed to him a stranger, with eyes that were brilliant but cold and which seemed to look at him inimically.

He said earnestly:

“Henrietta, dearest, do believe this—that I do sympathize with you—in—in your grief, your loss.”

“Is it grief?”

The question startled him. She seemed to be asking it, not of him, but of herself.

She said in a low voice:

“So quick—it can happen so quickly. One moment living, breathing, and the next—dead—gone—emptiness. Oh, the emptiness! And here we are, all of us, eating caramel custard and calling ourselves alive—and John, who was more alive than any of us, is dead. I say the word, you know, over and over again to myself. Dead—dead—dead—dead—dead. And soon it hasn’t got any meaning—not any meaning at all. It’s just a funny little word like the breaking off a rotten branch. Dead—dead—dead—dead. It’s like a tom-tom, isn’t it, beating in the jungle. Dead—dead—dead—dead—dead—”

“Henrietta, stop! For God’s sake, stop!”

She looked at him curiously.

“Didn’t you know I’d feel like this? What did you think? That I’d sit gently crying into a nice little pocket handkerchief while you held my hand? That it would all be a great shock but that presently I’d begin to get over it? And that you’d comfort me very nicely? You are nice, Edward. You’re very nice, but you’re so—so inadequate.”

He drew back. His face stiffened. He said in a dry voice:

“Yes, I’ve always known that.”

She went on fiercely:

“What do you think it’s been like all the evening, sitting round, with John dead and nobody caring but me and Gerda! With you glad, and David embarrassed and Midge distressed and Lucy delicately enjoying the News of the World come from print into real life! Can’t you see how like a fantastic nightmare it all is?”

Edward said nothing. He stepped back a pace, into shadows.

Looking at him, Henrietta said:

“Tonight—nothing seems real to me, nobody is real—but John!”

Edward said quietly: “I know…I am not very real.”

“What a brute I am, Edward. But I can’t help it. I can’t help resenting that John, who was so alive, is dead.”

“And that I who am half-dead, am alive.”

“I didn’t mean that, Edward.”

“I think you did, Henrietta. I think, perhaps, you are right.”

But she was saying, thoughtfully, harking back to an earlier thought:

“But it is not grief. Perhaps I cannot feel grief. Perhaps I never shall. And yet—I would like to grieve for John.”

Her words seemed to him fantastic. Yet he was even more startled when she added suddenly, in an almost businesslike voice:

“I must go to the swimming pool.”

She glided away through the trees.

Walking stiffly, Edward went through the open window.

Midge looked up as Edward came through the window with unseeing eyes. His face was grey and pinched. It looked bloodless.

He did not hear the little gasp that Midge stifled immediately.

Almost mechanically he walked to a chair and sat down. Aware of something expected of him, he said:

“It’s cold.”

“Are you very cold, Edward? Shall we—shall I—light a fire?”

“What?”

Midge took a box of matches from the mantelpiece. She knelt down and set a match to the fire. She looked cautiously sideways at Edward. He was quite oblivious, she thought, of everything.

She said: “A fire is nice. It warms one.”

“How cold he looks,” she thought. “But it can’t be as cold as that outside? It’s Henrietta! What has she said to him?”

“Bring your chair nearer, Edward. Come close to the fire.”

“What?”

“Oh, it was nothing. Just the fire.”

She was talking to him now loudly and slowly, as though to a deaf person.

And suddenly, so suddenly that her heart turned over with relief, Edward, the real Edward, was there again. Smiling at her gently:

“Have you been talking to me, Midge? I’m sorry. I’m afraid I was thinking—thinking of something.”

“Oh, it was nothing. Just the fire.”

The sticks were crackling and some fircones were burning with a bright, clean flame. Edward looked at them. He said:

“It’s a nice fire.”

He stretched out his long, thin hands to the blaze, aware of relief from tension.

Midge said: “We always had fircones at Ainswick.”

“I still do. A basket of them is brought every day and put by the grate.”

Edward at Ainswick. Midge half-closed her eyes, picturing it. He would sit, she thought, in the library, on the west side of the house. There was a magnolia that almost covered one window and which filled the room with a golden green light in the afternoons. Through the other window you looked out on the lawn and a tall Wellingtonia stood up like a sentinel. And to the right was the big copper beech.

Oh, Ainswick—Ainswick.

She could smell the soft air that drifted in from the magnolia which would still, in September, have some great white sweet-smelling waxy flowers on it. And the pinecones on the fire. And a faintly musty smell from the kind of book that Edward was sure to be reading. He would be sitting in the saddleback chair, and occasionally, perhaps, his eyes would go from the book to the fire, and he would think, just for a minute, of Henrietta.

Midge stirred and asked:

“Where is Henrietta?”

“She went to the swimming pool.”

Midge stared. “Why?”

Her voice, abrupt and deep, roused Edward a little.

“My dear Midge, surely you knew—oh, well—guessed. She knew Christow pretty well.”

“Oh, of course one knew that. But I don’t see why she should go mooning off to where he was shot. That’s not at all like Henrietta. She’s never melodramatic.”

“Do any of us know what anyone else is like? Henrietta, for instance.”

Midge frowned. She said:

“After all, Edward, you and I have known Henrietta all our lives.”

“She has changed.”

“Not really. I don’t think one changes.”

“Henrietta has changed.”

Midge looked at him curiously.

“More than we have, you and I?”

“Oh, I have stood still, I know that well enough. And you—”

His eyes, suddenly focusing, looked at her where she knelt by the fender. It was as though he was looking at her from a long way away, taking in the square chin, the dark eyes, the resolute mouth. He said:

“I wish I saw you more often, Midge, my dear.”

She smiled up at him. She said:

“I know. It isn’t easy, these days, to keep in touch.”

There was a sound outside and Edward got up.

“Lucy was right,” he said. “It has been a tiring day—one’s first introduction to murder. I shall go to bed. Good night.”

He had left the room when Henrietta came through the window.

Midge turned on her.

“What have you done to Edward?”

“Edward?” Henrietta was vague. Her forehead was puckered. She seemed to be thinking of something a long way away.

“Yes, Edward. He came in looking dreadful—so cold and grey.”

“If you care about Edward so much, Midge, why don’t you do something about him?”

“Do something? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Stand on a chair and shout! Draw attention to yourself. Don’t you know that’s the only hope with a man like Edward?”

“Edward will never care about anyone but you, Henrietta. He never has.”

“Then it’s very unintelligent of him.” She threw a quick glance at Midge’s white face. “I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry. But I hate Edward tonight.”

“Hate Edward? You can’t.”

“Oh, yes, I can! You don’t know—”

“What?”

Henrietta said slowly:

“He reminds me of such a lot of things I would like to forget.”

“What things?”

“Well, Ainswick, for instance.”

“Ainswick? You want to forget Ainswick?”

Midge’s tone was incredulous.

“Yes, yes, yes! I was happy there. I can’t stand, just now, being reminded of happiness. Don’t you understand? A time when one didn’t know what was coming. When one said confidently, everything is going to be lovely! Some people are wise—they never expect to be happy. I did.”

She said abruptly:

“I shall never go back to Ainswick.”

Midge said slowly:

“I wonder.”

Fourteen

Midge woke up abruptly on Monday morning.

For a moment she lay there bemused, her eyes going confusedly towards the door, for she half-expected Lady Angkatell to appear. What was it Lucy had said when she came drifting in that first morning?

A difficult weekend? She had been worried—had thought that something unpleasant might happen.

Yes, and something unpleasant had happened—something that was lying now upon Midge's heart and spirits like a thick black cloud. Something that she didn't want to think about—didn't want to remember. Something, surely, that frightened her. Something to do with Edward.

Memory came with a rush. One ugly stark word—Murder!

"Oh, no," thought Midge, "it can't be true. It's a dream I've been having. John Christow, murdered, shot—lying there by the pool. Blood and blue water—like a jacket of a detective story. Fantastic, unreal. The sort of thing that doesn't happen to oneself. If we were at Ainswick now. It couldn't have happened at Ainswick."

The black weight moved from her forehead. It settled in the pit of her stomach, making her feel slightly sick.

It was not a dream. It was a real happening—a News of the World happening—and she and Edward and Lucy and Henry and Henrietta were all mixed up with it.

Unfair—surely unfair—since it was nothing to do with them if Gerda had shot her husband.

Midge stirred uneasily.

Quiet, stupid, slightly pathetic Gerda—you couldn't associate Gerda with melodrama—with violence.

Gerda, surely, couldn't shoot anybody.

Again that inward uneasiness rose. No, no, one mustn't think like that. Because who else could have shot John? And Gerda had been standing there by his body with the revolver in her hand. The revolver she had taken from Henry's study.

Gerda had said that she had found John dead and picked up the revolver. Well, what else could she say? She'd have to say something, poor thing.

All very well for Henrietta to defend her—to say that Gerda's story was perfectly possible. Henrietta hadn't considered the impossible alternatives.

Henrietta had been very odd last night.

But that, of course, had been the shock of John Christow's death.

Poor Henrietta—who had cared so terribly for John.

But she would get over it in time—one got over everything. And then she would marry Edward and live at Ainswick—and Edward would be happy at last.

Henrietta had always loved Edward very dearly. It was only the aggressive, dominant personality of John Christow that had come in the way. He had made Edward look so—so pale by comparison.

It struck Midge when she came down to breakfast that morning that already Edward's personality, freed from John Christow's dominance, had begun to assert itself. He seemed more sure of himself, less hesitant and retiring.

He was talking pleasantly to the glowering and unresponsive David.

"You must come more often to Ainswick, David. I'd like you to feel at home there and to get to know all about the place."

Helping himself to marmalade, David said coldly:

“These big estates are completely farcical. They should be split up.”

“That won’t happen in my time, I hope,” said Edward, smiling. “My tenants are a contented lot.”

“They shouldn’t be,” said David. “Nobody should be contented.”

“If apes had been content with tails—” murmured Lady Angkatell from where she was standing by the sideboard looking vaguely at a dish of kidneys. “That’s a poem I learnt in the nursery, but I simply can’t remember how it goes on. I must have a talk with you, David, and learn all the new ideas. As far as I can see, one must hate everybody, but at the same time give them free medical attention and a lot of extra education (poor things, all those helpless little children herded into schoolhouses every day)—and cod-liver oil forced down babies’ throats whether they like it or not—such nasty-smelling stuff.”

Lucy, Midge thought, was behaving very much as usual.

And Gudgeon, when she passed him in the hall, also looked just as usual. Life at The Hollow seemed to have resumed its normal course. With the departure of Gerda, the whole business seemed like a dream.

Then there was a scrunch of wheels on the gravel outside, and Sir Henry drew up in his car. He had stayed the night at his club and driven down early.

“Well, dear,” said Lucy, “was everything all right?”

“Yes. The secretary was there—competent sort of girl. She took charge of things. There’s a sister, it seems. The secretary telegraphed to her.”

“I knew there would be,” said Lady Angkatell. “At Tunbridge Wells?”

“Bexhill, I think,” said Sir Henry, looking puzzled.

“I daresay”—Lucy considered Bexhill. “Yes—quite probably.”

Gudgeon approached.

“Inspector Grange telephoned, Sir Henry. The inquest will be at eleven o’clock on Wednesday.”

Sir Henry nodded. Lady Angkatell said:

“Midge, you’d better ring up your shop.”

Midge went slowly to the telephone.

Her life had always been so entirely normal and commonplace that she felt she lacked the phraseology to explain to her employers that after four days’ holiday she was unable to return to work owing to the fact that she was mixed up in a murder case.

It did not sound credible. It did not even feel credible.

And Madame Alfrege was not a very easy person to explain things to at any time.

Midge set her chin resolutely and picked up the receiver.

It was all just as unpleasant as she had imagined it would be. The raucous voice of the vitriolic little Jewess came angrily over the wires.

“What wath that, Mith Hardcathle? A death? A funeral? Do you not know very well I am shorthanded? Do you think I am going to stand for these excutheth? Oh, yeth, you are having a good time, I darethay!”

Midge interrupted, speaking sharply and distinctly.

“The poleeth? The poleeth, you thay?” It was almost a scream. “You are mixed up with the poleeth?”

Setting her teeth, Midge continued to explain. Strange how sordid that woman at the other end made the whole thing seem. A vulgar police case. What alchemy there was in human beings!

Edward opened the door and came in, then seeing that Midge was telephoning, he was about to go out. She stopped him.

“Do stay, Edward. Please. Oh, I want you to.”

The presence of Edward in the room gave her strength—counteracted the poison.

She took her hand from where she had laid it over the mouthpiece.

“What? Yes. I am sorry, Madame. But after all, it is hardly my fault—”

The ugly raucous voice was screaming angrily.

“Who are thethe friendth of yourth? What thort of people are they to have the poleeth there and a man shot? I’ve a good mind not to have you back at all! I can’t have the tone of my ethtablishment lowered.”

Midge made a few submissive noncommittal replies. She replaced the receiver at last, with a sigh of relief. She felt sick and shaken.

“It’s the place I work,” she explained. “I had to let them know that I wouldn’t be back until Thursday because of the inquest and the—the police.”

“I hope they were decent about it? What is it like, this dress shop of yours? Is the woman who runs it pleasant and sympathetic to work for?”

“I should hardly describe her as that! She’s a Whitechapel Jewess with dyed hair and a voice like a corncrake.”

“But my dear Midge—”

Edward’s face of consternation almost made Midge laugh. He was so concerned.

“But my dear child—you can’t put up with that sort of thing. If you must have a job, you must take one where the surroundings are harmonious and where you like the people you are working with.”

Midge looked at him for a moment without answering.

How explain, she thought, to a person like Edward? What did Edward know of the labour market, of jobs?

And suddenly a tide of bitterness rose in her. Lucy, Henry, Edward—yes, even Henrietta—they were all divided from her by an impassable gulf—the gulf that separates the leisured from the working.

They had no conception of the difficulties of getting a job, and once you had got it, of keeping it! One might say, perhaps, that there was no need, actually, for her to earn her living. Lucy and Henry would gladly give her a home—they would with equal gladness have made her an allowance. Edward would also willingly have done the latter.

But something in Midge rebelled against the acceptance of ease offered her by her well-to-do relations. To come on rare occasions and sink into the well-ordered luxury of Lucy’s life was delightful. She could revel in that. But some sturdy independence of spirit held her back from accepting that life as a gift. The same feeling had prevented her from starting a business on her own with money borrowed from relations and friends. She had seen too much of that.

She would borrow no money—use no influence. She had found a job for herself at four pounds a week, and if she had actually been given the job because Madame Alfrege hoped that Midge would bring her “smart” friends to buy, Madame Alfrege was disappointed. Midge discouraged any such notion sternly on the part of her friends.

She had no particular illusions about working. She disliked the shop, she disliked Madame Alfrege, she disliked the eternal subservience to ill-tempered and impolite customers, but she doubted very much whether she could obtain any other job which she would like better since she had none of the necessary qualifications.

Edward’s assumption that a wide range of choice was open to her was simply unbearably irritating this morning. What right had Edward to live in a world so divorced from reality?

They were Angkatells, all of them. And she—was only half an Angkatell! And sometimes, like this morning, she did not feel like an Angkatell at all! She was all her father's daughter.

She thought of her father with the usual pang of love and compunction, a grey-haired, middle-aged man with a tired face. A man who had struggled for years running a small family business that was bound, for all his care and efforts, to go slowly down the hill. It was not incapacity on his part—it was the march of progress.

Strangely enough, it was not to her brilliant Angkatell mother but to her quiet, tired father that Midge's devotion had always been given. Each time, when she came back from those visits to Ainswick, which were the wild delight of her life, she would answer the faint deprecating questions in her father's tired face by flinging her arms round his neck and saying: "I'm glad to be home—I'm glad to be home."

Her mother had died when Midge was thirteen. Sometimes Midge realized that she knew very little about her mother. She had been vague, charming, gay. Had she regretted her marriage, the marriage that had taken her outside the circle of the Angkatell clan? Midge had no idea. Her father had grown greyer and quieter after his wife's death. His struggles against the extinction of his business had grown more unavailing. He had died quietly and inconspicuously when Midge was eighteen.

Midge had stayed with various Angkatell relations, had accepted presents from the Angkatells, had had good times with the Angkatells, but she had refused to be financially dependent on their goodwill. And much as she loved them, there were times, such as these, when she felt suddenly and violently divergent from them.

She thought with rancour: "They don't know anything!"

Edward, sensitive as always, was looking at her with a puzzled face. He asked gently:

"I've upset you? Why?"

Lucy drifted into the room. She was in the middle of one of her conversations.

"—you see, one doesn't really know whether she'd prefer the White Hart to us or not?"

Midge looked at her blankly—then at Edward.

"It's no use looking at Edward," said Lady Angkatell. "Edward simply wouldn't know; you, Midge, are always so practical."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Lucy."

Lucy looked surprised.

"The inquest, darling. Gerda has to come down for it. Should she stay here? Or go to the White Hart? The associations here are painful, of course—but then at the White Hart there will be people who will stare and quantities of reporters. Wednesday, you know, at eleven, or is it eleven thirty?" A smile lit up Lady Angkatell's face. "I have never been to an inquest! I thought my grey—and a hat, of course, like church—but not gloves.

"You know," went on Lady Angkatell, crossing the room and picking up the telephone receiver and gazing down at it earnestly, "I don't believe I've got any gloves except gardening gloves nowadays! And of course lots of long evening ones put away from the Government House days. Gloves are rather stupid, don't you think so?"

"The only use is to avoid fingerprints in crimes," said Edward, smiling.

"Now, it's very interesting that you should say that, Edward—very interesting. What am I doing with this thing?" Lady Angkatell looked at the telephone receiver with faint distaste.

"Were you going to ring up someone?"

"I don't think so." Lady Angkatell shook her head vaguely and put the receiver back on its stand very gingerly.

She looked from Edward to Midge.

“I don’t think, Edward, that you ought to upset Midge. Midge minds sudden deaths more than we do.”

“My dear Lucy,” exclaimed Edward. “I was only worrying about this place where Midge works. It sounds all wrong to me.”

“Edward thinks I ought to have a delightful sympathetic employer who would appreciate me,” said Midge dryly.

“Dear Edward,” said Lucy with complete appreciation.

She smiled at Midge and went out again.

“Seriously, Midge,” said Edward, “I am worried.”

She interrupted him:

“The damned woman pays me four pounds a week. That’s all that matters.”

She brushed past him and went out into the garden.

Sir Henry was sitting in his usual place on the low wall, but Midge turned away and walked up towards the flower walk.

Her relations were charming, but she had no use for their charm this morning.

David Angkatell was sitting on the seat at the top of the path.

There was no overdone charm about David, and Midge made straight for him and sat down by him, noting with malicious pleasure his look of dismay.

How extraordinarily difficult it was, thought David, to get away from people.

He had been driven from his bedroom by the brisk incursion of housemaids, purposeful with mops and dusters.

The library (and the Encyclopædia Britannica) had not been the sanctuary he had hoped optimistically it might be. Twice Lady Angkatell had drifted in and out, addressing him kindly with remarks to which there seemed no possible intelligent reply.

He had come out here to brood upon his position. The mere weekend to which he had unwillingly committed himself had now lengthened out owing to the exigencies connected with sudden and violent death.

David, who preferred the contemplation of an Academic past or the earnest discussion of a Left Wing future, had no aptitude for dealing with a violent and realistic present. As he had told Lady Angkatell, he did not read the News of the World. But now the News of the World seemed to have come to The Hollow.

Murder! David shuddered distastefully. What would his friends think? How did one, so to speak, take murder? What was one’s attitude? Bored? Disgusted? Lightly amused?

Trying to settle these problems in his mind, he was by no means pleased to be disturbed by Midge. He looked at her uneasily as she sat beside him.

He was rather startled by the defiant stare with which she returned his look. A disagreeable girl of no intellectual value.

She said, “How do you like your relations?”

David shrugged his shoulders. He said:

“Does one really think about relations?”

Midge said:

“Does one really think about anything?”

Doubtless, David thought, she didn’t. He said almost graciously:

“I was analysing my reactions to murder.”

“It is certainly odd,” said Midge, “to be in one.”

David sighed and said:

“Wearisome.” That was quite the best attitude. “All the clichés that one thought only existed in the pages of detective fiction!”

“You must be sorry you came,” said Midge.

David sighed.

“Yes, I might have been staying with a friend of mine in London.” He added, “He keeps a Left Wing bookshop.”

“I expect it’s more comfortable here,” said Midge.

“Does one really care about being comfortable?” David asked scornfully.

“There are times,” said Midge, “when I feel I don’t care about anything else.”

“The pampered attitude to life,” said David. “If you were a worker—”

Midge interrupted him.

“I am a worker. That’s just why being comfortable is so attractive. Box beds, down pillows—early-morning tea softly deposited beside the bed—a porcelain bath with lashings of hot water—and delicious bath salts. The kind of easy chair you really sink into….”

Midge paused in her catalogue.

“The workers,” said David, “should have all these things.”

But he was a little doubtful about the softly deposited early-morning tea, which sounded impossibly sybaritic for an earnestly organized world.

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” said Midge heartily.

Fifteen

Hercule Poirot, enjoying a mid-morning cup of chocolate, was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. He got up and lifted the receiver.

“’Allo?”

“M. Poirot?”

“Lady Angkatell?”

“How nice of you to know my voice! Am I disturbing you?”

“But not at all. You are, I hope, none the worse for the distressing events of yesterday?”

“No, indeed. Distressing, as you say, but one feels, I find, quite detached. I rang you up to know if you could possibly come over—an imposition, I know, but I am really in great distress.”

“But certainly, Lady Angkatell. Did you mean now?”

“Well, yes, I did mean now. As quickly as you can. That’s very sweet of you.”

“Not at all. I will come by the woods, then?”

“Oh, of course—the shortest way. Thank you so much, dear M. Poirot.”

Pausing only to brush a few specks of dust off the lapels of his coat and to slip on a thin overcoat, Poirot crossed the lane and hurried along the path through the chestnuts. The swimming pool was deserted—the police had finished their work and gone. It looked innocent and peaceful in the soft misty autumn light.

Poirot took a quick look into the pavilion. The platinum fox cape, he noted, had been removed. But the six boxes of matches still stood upon the table by the settee. He wondered more than ever about those matches.

“It is not a place to keep matches—here in the damp. One box, for convenience, perhaps—but not six.”

He frowned down on the painted iron table. The tray of glasses had been removed. Someone had scrawled with a pencil on the table—a rough design of a nightmarish tree. It pained Hercule Poirot. It offended his tidy mind.

He clicked his tongue, shook his head, and hurried on towards the house, wondering at the reason for this urgent summons.

Lady Angkatell was waiting for him at the french windows and swept him into the empty drawing room.

“It was nice of you to come, M. Poirot.”

She clasped his hand warmly.

“Madame, I am at your service.”

Lady Angkatell’s hands floated out expressively. Her wide, beautiful eyes opened.

“You see, it’s all so difficult. The inspector person is interviewing—no, questioning—taking a statement—what is the term they use?—Gudgeon. And really our whole life here depends on Gudgeon, and one does so sympathize with him. Because naturally it is terrible for him to be questioned by the police—even Inspector Grange, who I do feel is really nice and probably a family man—boys, I think, and he helps them with Meccano in the evenings—and a wife who has everything spotless but a little overcrowded….”

Hercule Poirot blinked as Lady Angkatell developed her imaginary sketch of Inspector Grange’s home life.

“By the way his moustache droops,” went on Lady Angkatell, “I think that a home that is too spotless might be sometimes depressing—like soap on hospital nurses’ faces. Quite a shine! But that is more in the country where things lag behind—in London nursing homes they have lots of powder and really vivid lipstick. But I was saying, M. Poirot, that you really must come to lunch properly when all this ridiculous business is over."

"You are very kind."

"I do not mind the police myself," said Lady Angkatell. "I really find it all quite interesting. 'Do let me help you in any way I can,' I said to Inspector Grange. He seems rather a bewildered sort of person, but methodical.

"Motive seems so important to policemen," she went on. "Talking of hospital nurses just now, I believe that John Christow—a nurse with red hair and an upturned nose—quite attractive. But of course it was a long time ago and the police might not be interested. One doesn't really know how much poor Gerda had to put up with. She is the loyal type, don't you think? Or possibly she believes what is told her. I think if one has not a great deal of intelligence, it is wise to do that."

Quite suddenly, Lady Angkatell flung open the study door and ushered Poirot in, crying brightly, "Here is M. Poirot." She swept round him and out, shutting the door. Inspector Grange and Gudgeon were sitting by the desk. A young man with a notebook was in a corner. Gudgeon rose respectfully to his feet.

Poirot hastened into apologies.

"I retire immediately. I assure you I had no idea that Lady Angkatell—"

"No, no, you wouldn't have." Grange's moustache looked more pessimistic than ever this morning. "Perhaps," thought Poirot, fascinated by Lady Angkatell's recent sketch of Grange, "there has been too much cleaning or perhaps a Benares brass table has been purchased so that the good inspector he really cannot have space to move."

Angrily he dismissed these thoughts. Inspector Grange's clean but overcrowded home, his wife, his boys and their addiction to Meccano were all figments of Lady Angkatell's busy brain.

But the vividness with which they assumed concrete reality interested him. It was quite an accomplishment.

“Sit down, M. Poirot,” said Grange. “There’s something I want to ask you about, and I’ve nearly finished here.”

He turned his attention back to Gudgeon, who deferentially and almost under protest resumed his seat and turned an expressionless face towards his interlocutor.

“And that’s all you can remember?”

“Yes, sir. Everything, sir, was very much as usual. There was no unpleasantness of any kind.”

“There’s a fur cape thing—out in that summerhouse by the pool. Which of the ladies did it belong to?”

“Are you referring, sir, to a cape of platinum fox? I noticed it yesterday when I took out the glasses to the pavilion. But it is not the property of anyone in this house, sir.”

“Whose is it, then?”

“It might possibly belong to Miss Cray, sir. Miss Veronica Cray, the motion picture actress. She was wearing something of the kind.”

“When?”

“When she was here the night before last, sir.”

“You didn’t mention her as having been a guest here?”

“She was not a guest, sir. Miss Cray lives at Dovecotes, the—er—cottage up the lane, and she came over after dinner, having run out of matches, to borrow some.”

“Did she take away six boxes?” asked Poirot.

Gudgeon turned to him.

“That is correct, sir. Her ladyship, after having inquired if we had plenty, insisted on Miss Cray’s taking half a dozen boxes.”

“Which she left in the pavilion,” said Poirot.

“Yes, sir, I observed them there yesterday morning.”

“There is not much that that man does not observe,” remarked Poirot as Gudgeon departed, closing the door softly and deferentially behind him.

Inspector Grange merely remarked that servants were the devil!

“However,” he said with a little renewed cheerfulness, “there’s always the kitchenmaid. Kitchenmaids talk—not like these stuck-up upper servants.

“I’ve put a man on to make inquiries at Harley Street,” he went on. “And I shall be there myself later in the day. We ought to get something there. Daresay, you know, that wife of Christow’s had a good bit to put up with. Some of these fashionable doctors and their lady patients—well, you’d be surprised! And I gather from Lady Angkatell that there was some trouble over a hospital nurse. Of course, she was very vague about it.”

“Yes,” Poirot agreed. “She would be vague.”

A skilfully built-up picture…John Christow and amorous intrigues with hospital nurses…the opportunities of a doctor’s life…plenty of reasons for Gerda Christow’s jealousy which had culminated at last in murder.

Yes, a skilfully suggested picture, drawing attention to a Harley Street background—away from The Hollow—away from the moment when Henrietta Savernake, stepping forward, had taken the revolver from Gerda Christow’s unresisting hand…Away from that other moment when John Christow, dying, had said “Henrietta.”

Suddenly opening his eyes, which had been half-closed, Hercule Poirot demanded with irresistible curiosity:

“Do your boys play with Meccano?”

“Eh, what?” Inspector Grange came back from a frowning reverie to stare at Poirot. “Why, what on earth? As a matter of fact, they’re a bit young—but I was thinking of giving Teddy a Meccano set for Christmas. What made you ask?”

Poirot shook his head.

What made Lady Angkatell dangerous, he thought, was the fact that those intuitive, wild guesses of hers might be often right. With a careless (seemingly careless?) word she built up a picture—and if part of the picture was right, wouldn’t you, in spite of yourself, believe in the other half of the picture?….

Inspector Grange was speaking.

“There’s a point I want to put to you, M. Poirot. This Miss Cray, the actress—she traipses over here borrowing matches. If she wanted to borrow matches, why didn’t she come to your place, only a step or two away? Why come about half a mile?”

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“There might be reasons. Snob reasons, shall we say? My little cottage, it is small, unimportant. I am only a weekender, but Sir Henry and Lady Angkatell are important—they live here—they are what is called in the country. This Miss Veronica Cray, she may have wanted to get to know them—and after all, this was a way.”

Inspector Grange got up.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s perfectly possible, of course, but one doesn’t want to overlook anything. Still, I’ve no doubt that everything’s going to be plain sailing. Sir Henry has identified the gun as one of his collection. It seems they were actually practising with it the afternoon before. All Mrs. Christow had to do was to go into the study and get it from where she’d seen Sir Henry put it and the ammunition away. It’s all quite simple.”

“Yes,” Poirot murmured. “It seems all quite simple.”

Just so, he thought, would a woman like Gerda Christow commit a crime. Without subterfuge or complexity—driven suddenly to violence by the bitter anguish of a narrow but deeply loving nature.

And yet surely—surely, she would have had some sense of self-preservation. Or had she acted in that blindness—that darkness of the spirit—when reason is entirely laid aside?

He recalled her blank, dazed face.

He did not know—he simply did not know.

But he felt that he ought to know.

Sixteen

Gerda Christow pulled the black dress up over her head and let it fall on a chair.

Her eyes were piteous with uncertainty.

She said: “I don’t know—I really don’t know. Nothing seems to matter.”

“I know, dear, I know.” Mrs. Patterson was kind but firm. She knew exactly how to treat people who had had a bereavement. “Elsie is wonderful in a crisis,” her family said of her.

At the present moment she was sitting in her sister Gerda’s bedroom in Harley Street being wonderful. Elsie Patterson was tall and spare with an energetic manner. She was looking now at Gerda with a mixture of irritation and compassion.

Poor dear Gerda—tragic for her to lose her husband in such an awful way. And really, even now, she didn’t seem to take in the—well, the implications, properly. Of course, Mrs. Patterson reflected, Gerda always was terribly slow. And there was shock, too, to take into account.

She said in a brisk voice: “I think I should decide on that black marocain at twelve guineas.”

One always did have to make up Gerda’s mind for her.

Gerda stood motionless, her brow puckered. She said hesitantly:

“I don’t really know if John liked mourning. I think I once heard him say he didn’t.”

“John,” she thought. “If only John were here to tell me what to do.”

But John would never be there again. Never—never—never…Mutton getting cold—congealing on the table…the bang of the consulting room door, John running up two steps at a time, always in a hurry, so vital, so alive….

Alive.

Lying on his back by the swimming pool…the slow drip of blood over the edge…the feel of the revolver in her hand….

A nightmare, a bad dream, presently she would wake up and none of it would be true.

Her sister’s crisp voice came cutting through her nebulous thoughts.

“You must have something black for the inquest. It would look most odd if you turned up in bright blue.”

Gerda said: “That awful inquest!” and half-shut her eyes.

“Terrible for you, darling,” said Elsie Patterson quickly. “But after it is all over you will come straight down to us and we shall take great care of you.”

The nebulous blur of Gerda Christow’s thoughts hardened. She said, and her voice was frightened, almost panic-stricken:

“What am I going to do without John?”

Elsie Patterson knew the answer to that one. “You’ve got your children. You’ve got to live for them.”

Zena, sobbing and crying, “My Daddy’s dead!” Throwing herself on her bed. Terry, pale, inquiring, shedding no tears.

An accident with a revolver, she had told them—poor Daddy has had an accident.

Beryl Collins (so thoughtful of her) had confiscated the morning papers so that the children should not see them. She had warned the servants too. Really, Beryl had been most kind and thoughtful.

Terence coming to his mother in the dim drawing room, his lips pursed close together, his face almost greenish in its odd pallor.

“Why was Father shot?”

“An accident, dear. I—I can’t talk about it.”

“It wasn’t an accident. Why do you say what isn’t true? Father was killed. It was murder. The paper says so.”

“Terry, how did you get hold of a paper? I told Miss Collins—”

He had nodded—queer repeated nods like a very old man.

“I went out and bought one, of course. I knew there must be something in them that you weren’t telling us, or else why did Miss Collins hide them?”

It was never any good hiding truth from Terence. That queer, detached, scientific curiosity of his had always to be satisfied.

“Why was he killed, Mother?”

She had broken down then, becoming hysterical.

“Don’t ask me about it—don’t talk about it—I can’t talk about it…it’s all too dreadful.”

“But they’ll find out, won’t they? I mean, they have to find out. It’s necessary.”

So reasonable, so detached. It made Gerda want to scream and laugh and cry. She thought: “He doesn’t care—he can’t care—he just goes on asking questions. Why, he hasn’t cried, even.”

Terence had gone away, evading his Aunt Elsie’s ministrations, a lonely little boy with a stiff, pinched face. He had always felt alone. But it hadn’t mattered until today.

Today, he thought, was different. If only there was someone who would answer questions reasonably and intelligently.

Tomorrow, Tuesday, he and Nicholson Minor were going to make nitroglycerine. He had been looking forward to it with a thrill. The thrill had gone. He didn’t care if he never made nitroglycerine.

Terence felt almost shocked at himself. Not to care any more about scientific experiment. But when a chap’s father had been murdered…He thought: “My father—murdered.”

And something stirred—took root—grew…a slow anger.

Beryl Collins tapped on the bedroom door and came in. She was pale, composed, efficient. She said:

“Inspector Grange is here.” And as Gerda gasped and looked at her piteously, Beryl went on quickly: “He said there was no need for him to worry you. He’ll have a word with you before he goes, but it is just routine questions about Dr. Christow’s practice and I can tell him everything he wants to know.”

“Oh thank you, Collie.”

Beryl made a rapid exit and Gerda sighed out:

“Collie is such a help. She’s so practical.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Patterson. “An excellent secretary, I’m sure. Very plain, poor girl, isn’t she? Oh, well, I always think that’s just as well. Especially with an attractive man like John.”

Gerda flamed out at her:

“What do you mean, Elsie? John would never—he never—you talk as though John would have flirted or something horrid if he had had a pretty secretary. John wasn’t like that at all.”

“Of course not, darling,” said Mrs. Patterson. “But after all, one knows what men are like!”

In the consulting room Inspector Grange faced the cool, belligerent glance of Beryl Collins. It was belligerent, he noted that. Well, perhaps that was only natural.

“Plain bit of goods,” he thought. “Nothing between her and the doctor, I shouldn’t think. She may have been sweet on him, though. It works that way sometimes.”

But not this time, he came to the conclusion, when he leaned back in his chair a quarter of an hour later. Beryl Collins’s answers to his questions had been models of clearness. She replied promptly, and obviously had every detail of the doctor’s practice at her fingertips. He shifted his ground and began to probe gently into the relations existing between John Christow and his wife.

They had been, Beryl said, on excellent terms.

“I suppose they quarrelled every now and then like most married couples?” The inspector sounded easy and confidential.

“I do not remember any quarrels. Mrs. Christow was quite devoted to her husband—really quite slavishly so.”

There was a faint edge of contempt in her voice. Inspector Grange heard it.

“Bit of a feminist, this girl,” he thought.

Aloud he said:

“Didn’t stand up for herself at all?”

“No. Everything revolved round Dr. Christow.”

“Tyrannical, eh?”

Beryl considered.

"No, I wouldn't say that. But he was what I should call a very selfish man. He took it for granted that Mrs. Christow would always fall in with his ideas."

"Any difficulties with patients—women, I mean? You needn't think about being frank, Miss Collins. One knows doctors have their difficulties in that line."

"Oh, that sort of thing!" Beryl's voice was scornful. "Dr. Christow was quite equal to dealing with any difficulties in that line. He had an excellent manner with patients." She added, "He was really a wonderful doctor."

There was an almost grudging admiration in her voice.

Grange said: "Was he tangled up with any woman? Don't be loyal, Miss Collins, it's important that we should know."

"Yes, I can appreciate that. Not to my knowledge."

A little too brusque, he thought. She doesn't know, but perhaps she guesses.

He said sharply, "What about Miss Henrietta Savernake?"

Beryl's lips closed tightly.

"She was a close friend of the family's."

"No—trouble between Dr. and Mrs. Christow on her account?"

"Certainly not."

The answer was emphatic. (Overemphatic?)

The inspector shifted his ground.

"What about Miss Veronica Cray?"

"Veronica Cray?"

There was pure astonishment in Beryl’s voice.

“She was a friend of Dr. Christow’s, was she not?”

“I never heard of her. At least, I seem to know the name—”

“The motion picture actress.”

Beryl’s brow cleared.

“Of course! I wondered why the name was familiar. But I didn’t even know that Dr. Christow knew her.”

She seemed so positive on the point that the inspector abandoned it at once. He went on to question her about Dr. Christow’s manner on the preceding Saturday. And here, for the first time, the confidence of Beryl’s replies wavered. She said slowly:

“His manner wasn’t quite as usual.”

“What was the difference?”

“He seemed distrait. There was quite a long gap before he rang for his last patient—and yet normally he was always in a hurry to get through when he was going away. I thought—yes, I definitely thought he had something on his mind.”

But she could not be more definite.

Inspector Grange was not very satisfied with his investigations. He’d come nowhere near establishing motive—and motive had to be established before there was a case to go to the Public Prosecutor.

He was quite certain in his own mind that Gerda Christow had shot her husband. He suspected jealousy as the motive—but so far he had found nothing to go on. Sergeant Coombes had been working on the maids but they all told the same story. Mrs. Christow worshipped the ground her husband walked on.

Whatever happened, he thought, must have happened down at The Hollow. And remembering The Hollow he felt a vague disquietude. They were an odd lot down there.

The telephone on the desk rang and Miss Collins picked up the receiver.

She said: “It’s for you, Inspector,” and passed the instrument to him.

“Hallo, Grange here. What’s that?” Beryl heard the alteration in his tone and looked at him curiously. The wooden-looking face was impassive as ever. He was grunting—listening.

“Yes…yes, I’ve got that. That’s absolutely certain, is it? No margin of error. Yes…yes…yes, I’ll be down. I’ve about finished here. Yes.”

He put the receiver back and sat for a moment motionless. Beryl looked at him curiously.

He pulled himself together and asked in a voice that was quite different from the voice of his previous questions:

“You’ve no ideas of your own, I suppose, Miss Collins, about this matter?”

“You mean—”

“I mean no ideas as to who it was killed Dr. Christow?”

She said flatly:

“I’ve absolutely no idea at all, Inspector.”

Grange said slowly:

“When the body was found, Mrs. Christow was standing beside it with the revolver in her hand—”

He left it purposely as an unfinished sentence.

Her reaction came promptly. Not heated, cool and judicial.

"If you think Mrs. Christow killed her husband, I am quite sure you are wrong. Mrs. Christow is not at all a violent woman. She is very meek and submissive, and she was entirely under the doctor's thumb. It seems to me quite ridiculous that anyone could imagine for a moment that she shot him, however much appearances may be against her."

"Then if she didn't, who did?" he asked sharply.

Beryl said slowly, "I've no idea."

The inspector moved to the door. Beryl asked:

"Do you want to see Mrs. Christow before you go?"

"No—yes, perhaps I'd better."

Again Beryl wondered; this was not the same man who had been questioning her before the telephone rang. What news had he got that had altered him so much?

Gerda came into the room nervously. She looked unhappy and bewildered. She said in a low, shaky voice:

"Have you found out any more about who killed John?"

"Not yet, Mrs. Christow."

"It's so impossible—so absolutely impossible."

"But it happened, Mrs. Christow."

She nodded, looking down, screwing a handkerchief into a little ball.

He said quietly:

"Had your husband any enemies, Mrs. Christow?"

"John? Oh, no. He was wonderful. Everyone adored him."

"You can't think of anyone who had a grudge against him"—he paused—"or against you?"

"Against me?" She seemed amazed. "Oh, no, Inspector."

Inspector Grange sighed.

"What about Miss Veronica Cray?"

"Veronica Cray? Oh, you mean the one who came that night to borrow matches?"

"Yes, that's the one. You knew her?"

Gerda shook her head.

"I'd never seen her before. John knew her years ago—or so she said."

"I suppose she might have had a grudge against him that you didn't know about."

Gerda said with dignity:

"I don't believe anybody could have had a grudge against John. He was the kindest and most unselfish—oh, and one of the noblest men."

"H'm," said the inspector. "Yes. Quite so. Well, good morning, Mrs. Christow. You understand about the inquest? Eleven o'clock Wednesday in Market Depleach. It will be very simple—nothing to upset you—probably be adjourned for a week so that we can make further inquiries."

"Oh, I see. Thank you."

She stood there staring after him. He wondered whether, even now, she had grasped the fact that she was the principal suspect.

He hailed a taxi—justifiable expense in view of the piece of information he had just been given over the telephone. Just where that piece of information was leading him, he did not know. On the face of it, it seemed completely irrelevant—crazy. It simply did not make sense. Yet in some way he could not yet see, it must make sense.

The only inference to be drawn from it was that the case was not quite the simple, straightforward one that he had hitherto assumed it to be.

Seventeen

Sir Henry stared curiously at Inspector Grange.

He said slowly: “I’m not quite sure that I understand you, Inspector.”

“It’s quite simple, Sir Henry. I’m asking you to check over your collection of firearms. I presume they are catalogued and indexed?”

“Naturally. But I have already identified the revolver as part of my collection.”

“It isn’t quite so simple as that, Sir Henry.” Grange paused a moment. His instincts were always against giving out any information, but his hand was being forced in this particular instance. Sir Henry was a person of importance. He would doubtless comply with the request that was being made to him, but he would also require a reason. The inspector decided that he had got to give him the reason.

He said quietly:

“Dr. Christow was not shot with the revolver you identified this morning.”

Sir Henry’s eyebrows rose.

“Remarkable!” he said.

Grange felt vaguely comforted. Remarkable was exactly what he felt himself. He was grateful to Sir Henry for saying so, and equally grateful for his not saying any more. It was as far as they could go at the moment. The thing was remarkable—and beyond that simply did not make sense.

Sir Henry asked:

“Have you any reason to believe that the weapon from which the fatal shot was fired comes from my collection?”

“No reason at all. But I have got to make sure, shall we say, that it doesn’t.”

Sir Henry nodded his head in confirmation.

“I appreciate your point. Well, we will get to work. It will take a little time.”

He opened the desk and took out a leather-bound volume.

As he opened it he repeated:

“It will take a little time to check up—”

Grange’s attention was held by something in his voice. He looked up sharply. Sir Henry’s shoulders sagged a little—he seemed suddenly an older and more tired man.

Inspector Grange frowned.

He thought: “Devil if I know what to make of these people down here.”

“Ah—”

Grange spun round. His eyes noted the time by the clock, thirty minutes—twenty minutes—since Sir Henry had said, “It will take a little time.”

Grange said sharply:

“Yes, sir?”

“A .38 Smith and Wesson is missing. It was in a brown leather holster and was at the end of the rack in this drawer.”

“Ah!” The inspector kept his voice calm, but he was excited. “And when, sir, to your certain knowledge, did you last see it in its proper place?”

Sir Henry reflected for a moment or two.

“That is not very easy to say, Inspector. I last had this drawer open about a week ago and I think—I am almost certain—that if the revolver had been missing then I should have noticed the gap. But I should not like to swear definitely that I saw it there."

Inspector Grange nodded his head.

"Thank you, sir, I quite understand. Well, I must be getting on with things."

He left the room, a busy, purposeful man.

Sir Henry stood motionless for a while after the inspector had gone, then he went out slowly through the french windows on to the terrace. His wife was busy with a gardening basket and gloves. She was pruning some rare shrubs with a pair of secateurs.

She waved to him brightly.

"What did the inspector want? I hope he is not going to worry the servants again. You know, Henry, they don't like it. They can't see it as amusing or as a novelty like we do."

"Do we see it like that?"

His tone attracted her attention. She smiled up at him sweetly.

"How tired you look, Henry. Must you let all this worry you so much?"

"Murder is worrying, Lucy."

Lady Angkatell considered a moment, absently clipping off some branches, then her face clouded over.

"Oh, dear—that is the worst of secateurs, they are so fascinating—one can't stop and one always clips off more than one means. What was it you were saying—something about murder being worrying? But really, Henry, I have never seen why. I mean, if one has to die, it may be cancer, or tuberculosis in one of those dreadful bright sanatoriums, or a stroke—horrid, with one's face all on one side—or else one is shot or stabbed or strangled perhaps. But the whole thing comes to the same in the end. There one is, I mean, dead! Out of it all. And all the worry over. And the relations have all the difficulties—money quarrels and whether to wear black or not—and who was to have Aunt Selina's writing desk—things like that!"

Sir Henry sat down on the stone coping. He said:

"This is all going to be more upsetting than we thought, Lucy."

"Well, darling, we shall have to bear it. And when it's all over we might go away somewhere. Let's not bother about present troubles but look forward to the future. I really am happy about that. I've been wondering whether it would be nice to go to Ainswick for Christmas—or leave it until Easter. What do you think?"

"Plenty of time to make plans for Christmas."

"Yes, but I like to see things in my mind. Easter, perhaps…yes." Lucy smiled happily. "She will certainly have got over it by then."

"Who?" Sir Henry was startled.

Lady Angkatell said calmly:

"Henrietta. I think if they were to have the wedding in October—October of next year, I mean, then we could go and stop for that Christmas. I've been thinking, Henry—"

"I wish you wouldn't, my dear. You think too much."

"You know the barn? It will make a perfect studio. And Henrietta will need a studio. She has real talent, you know. Edward, I am sure, will be immensely proud of her. Two boys and a girl would be nice—or two boys and two girls."

"Lucy—Lucy! How you run on."

"But, darling," Lady Angkatell opened wide, beautiful eyes. "Edward will never marry anyone but Henrietta. He is very, very obstinate. Rather like my father in that way. He gets an idea in his head! So of course Henrietta must marry him—and she will now that John Christow is out of the way. He was really the greatest misfortune that could possibly have happened to her.”

“Poor devil!”

“Why? Oh, you mean because he’s dead? Oh, well, everyone has to die sometime. I never worry over people dying….”

He looked at her curiously.

“I always thought you liked Christow, Lucy?”

“I found him amusing. And he had charm. But I never think one ought to attach too much importance to anybody.”

And gently, with a smiling face, Lady Angkatell clipped remorselessly at a Viburnum Carlesii.

Eighteen

Hercule Poirot looked out of his window and saw Henrietta Savernake walking up the path to the front door. She was wearing the same green tweeds that she had worn on the day of the tragedy. There was a spaniel with her.

He hastened to the front door and opened it. She stood smiling at him.

“Can I come in and see your house? I like looking at people’s houses. I’m just taking the dog for a walk.”

“But most certainly. How English it is to take the dog for a walk!”

“I know,” said Henrietta. “I thought of that. Do you know that nice poem: ‘The days passed slowly one by one. I fed the ducks, reproved my wife, played Handel’s Largo on the fife and took the dog a run.’”

Again she smiled, a brilliant, insubstantial smile.

Poirot ushered her into his sitting room. She looked round its neat and prim arrangement and nodded her head.

“Nice,” she said, “two of everything. How you would hate my studio.”

“Why should I hate it?”

“Oh, a lot of clay sticking to things—and here and there just one thing that I happen to like and which would be ruined if there were two of them.”

“But I can understand that, Mademoiselle. You are an artist.”

“Aren’t you an artist, too, M. Poirot?”

Poirot put his head on one side.

“It is a question, that. But on the whole I would say, no. I have known crimes that were artistic—they were, you understand, supreme exercises of imagination. But the solving of them—no, it is not the creative power that is needed. What is required is a passion for the truth.”

“A passion for the truth,” said Henrietta meditatively. “Yes, I can see how dangerous that might make you. Would the truth satisfy you?”

He looked at her curiously.

“What do you mean, Miss Savernake?”

“I can understand that you would want to know. But would knowledge be enough? Would you have to go a step further and translate knowledge into action?”

He was interested in her approach.

“You are suggesting that if I knew the truth about Dr. Christow’s death—I might be satisfied to keep that knowledge to myself. Do you know the truth about his death?”

Henrietta shrugged her shoulders.

“The obvious answer seems to be Gerda. How cynical it is that a wife or a husband is always the first suspect.”

“But you do not agree?”

“I always like to keep an open mind.”

Poirot said quietly:

“Why did you come here, Miss Savernake?”

“I must admit that I haven’t your passion for truth, M. Poirot. Taking the dog for a walk was such a nice English countryside excuse. But of course the Angkatells haven’t got a dog—as you may have noticed the other day.”

“The fact had not escaped me.”

“So I borrowed the gardener’s spaniel. I am not, you must understand, M. Poirot, very truthful.”

Again that brilliant brittle smile flashed out. He wondered why he should suddenly find it unendurably moving. He said quietly:

“No, but you have integrity.”

“Why on earth do you say that?”

She was startled—almost, he thought, dismayed.

“Because I believe it to be true.”

“Integrity,” Henrietta repeated thoughtfully. “I wonder what that word really means.”

She sat very still, staring down at the carpet, then she raised her head and looked at him steadily.

“Don’t you want to know why I did come?”

“You find a difficulty, perhaps, in putting it into words.”

“Yes, I think I do. The inquest, M. Poirot, is tomorrow. One has to make up one’s mind just how much—”

She broke off. Getting up, she wandered across to the mantelpiece, displaced one or two of the ornaments and moved a vase of Michaelmas daisies from its position in the middle of a table to the extreme corner of the mantelpiece. She stepped back, eyeing the arrangement with her head on one side.

“How do you like that, M. Poirot?”

“Not at all, Mademoiselle.”

"I thought you wouldn't." She laughed, moved everything quickly and deftly back to its original position. "Well, if one wants to say a thing one has to say it! You are, somehow, the sort of person one can talk to. Here goes. Is it necessary, do you think, that the police should know that I was John Christow's mistress?"

Her voice was quite dry and unemotional. She was looking, not at him, but at the wall over his head. With one forefinger she was following the curve of the jar that held the purple flowers. He had an idea that in the touch of that finger was her emotional outlet.

Hercule Poirot said precisely and also without emotion:

"I see. You were lovers?"

"If you prefer to put it like that."

He looked at her curiously.

"It was not how you put it, Mademoiselle."

"No."

"Why not?"

Henrietta shrugged her shoulders. She came and sat down by him on the sofa. She said slowly:

"One likes to describe things as—as accurately as possible."

His interest in Henrietta Savernake grew stronger. He said:

"You had been Dr. Christow's mistress—for how long?"

"About six months."

"The police will have, I gather, no difficulty in discovering the fact?"

Henrietta considered.

“I imagine not. That is, if they are looking for something of that kind.”

“Oh, they will be looking, I can assure you of that.”

“Yes, I rather thought they would.” She paused, stretched out her fingers on her knee and looked at them, then gave him a swift, friendly glance. “Well, M. Poirot, what does one do? Go to Inspector Grange and say—what does one say to a moustache like that? It’s such a domestic, family moustache.”

Poirot’s hand crawled upwards to his own proudly borne adornment.

“Whereas mine, Mademoiselle?”

“Your moustache, M. Poirot, is an artistic triumph. It has no associations with anything but itself. It is, I am sure, unique.”

“Absolutely.”

“And it is probably the reason why I am talking to you as I am. Granted that the police have to know the truth about John and myself, will it necessarily have to be made public?”

“That depends,” said Poirot. “If the police think it had no bearing on the case, they will be quite discreet. You—are very anxious on this point?”

Henrietta nodded. She stared down at her fingers for a moment or two, then suddenly lifted her head and spoke. Her voice was no longer dry and light.

“Why should things be made worse than they are for poor Gerda? She adored John and he’s dead. She’s lost him. Why should she have to bear an added burden?”

“It is for her that you mind?”

“Do you think that is hypocritical? I suppose you’re thinking that if I cared at all about Gerda’s peace of mind, I would never have become John’s mistress. But you don’t understand—it was not like that. I did not break up his married life. I was only one—of a procession.”

"Ah, it was like that?"

She turned on him sharply.

"No, no, no! Not what you are thinking. That's what I mind most of all! The false idea that everybody will have of what John was like. That's why I'm here talking to you—because I've got a vague, foggy hope that I can make you understand. Understand, I mean, the sort of person John was. I can see so well what will happen—the headlines in the papers—A Doctor's Love Life—Gerda, myself, Veronica Cray. John wasn't like that—he wasn't, actually, a man who thought much about women. It wasn't women who mattered to him most, it was his work. It was in his work that his interest and excitement—yes, and his sense of adventure—really lay. If John had been taken unawares at any moment and asked to name the woman who was most in his mind, do you know who he would have said?—Mrs. Crabtree."

"Mrs. Crabtree?" Poirot was surprised. "Who, then, is this Mrs. Crabtree?"

There was something between tears and laughter in Henrietta's voice as she went on:

"She's an old woman—ugly, dirty, wrinkled, quite indomitable. John thought the world of her. She's a patient in St. Christopher's Hospital. She's got Ridgeway's Disease. That's a disease that's very rare, but if you get it you're bound to die—there just isn't any cure. But John was finding a cure—I can't explain technically—it was all very complicated—some question of hormone secretions. He'd been making experiments and Mrs. Crabtree was his prize patient—you see, she's got guts, she wants to live—and she was fond of John. She and he were fighting on the same side. Ridgeway's Disease and Mrs. Crabtree is what has been uppermost in John's mind for months—night and day—nothing else really counted. That's what being the kind of doctor John was really means—not all the Harley Street stuff and the rich, fat women, that's only a sideline. It's the intense scientific curiosity and the achievement. I—oh, I wish I could make you understand."

Her hands flew out in a curiously despairing gesture, and Hercule Poirot thought how very lovely and sensitive those hands were.

He said:

“You seem to understand very well.”

“Oh, yes, I understood. John used to come and talk, do you see? Not quite to me—partly, I think, to himself. He got things clear that way. Sometimes he was almost despairing—he couldn’t see how to overcome the heightened toxicity—and then he’d get an idea for varying the treatment. I can’t explain to you what it was like—it was like, yes, a battle. You can’t imagine the—the fury of it and the concentration—and yes, sometimes the agony. And sometimes the sheer tiredness….”

She was silent for a minute or two, her eyes dark with remembrance.

Poirot said curiously:

“You must have a certain technical knowledge yourself?”

She shook her head.

“Not really. Only enough to understand what John was talking about. I got books and read about it.”

She was silent again, her face softened, her lips half-parted. She was, he thought, remembering.

With a sigh, her mind came back to the present. She looked at him wistfully.

“If I could only make you see—”

“But you have, Mademoiselle.”

“Really?”

“Yes. One recognizes authenticity when one hears it.”

“Thank you. But it won’t be so easy to explain to Inspector Grange.”

“Probably not. He will concentrate on the personal angle.”

Henrietta said vehemently:

“And that was so unimportant—so completely unimportant.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose slowly. She answered his unspoken protest.

“But it was! You see—after a while—I got between John and what he was thinking of. I affected him, as a woman. He couldn’t concentrate as he wanted to concentrate—because of me. He began to be afraid that he was beginning to love me—he didn’t want to love anyone. He—he made love to me because he didn’t want to think about me too much. He wanted it to be light, easy, just an affair like other affairs that he had had.”

“And you—” Poirot was watching her closely. “You were content to have it—like that.”

Henrietta got up. She said, and once more it was her dry voice:

“No, I wasn’t—content. After all, one is human….”

Poirot waited a minute then he said:

“Then why, Mademoiselle—”

“Why?” She whirled round on him. “I wanted John to be satisfied, I wanted John to have what he wanted. I wanted him to be able to go on with the thing he cared about—his work. If he didn’t want to be hurt—to be vulnerable again—why—why, that was all right by me.”

Poirot rubbed his nose.

“Just now, Miss Savernake, you mentioned Veronica Cray. Was she also a friend of John Christow’s?”

“Until last Saturday night, he hadn’t seen her for fifteen years.”

“He knew her fifteen years ago?”

"They were engaged to be married." Henrietta came back and sat down. "I see I've got to make it all clearer. John loved Veronica desperately. Veronica was, and is, a bitch of the first water. She's the supreme egoist. Her terms were that John was to chuck everything he cared about and become Miss Veronica Cray's little tame husband. John broke up the whole thing—quite rightly. But he suffered like hell. His one idea was to marry someone as unlike Veronica as possible. He married Gerda, whom you might describe inelegantly as a first-class chump. That was all very nice and safe, but as anyone could have told him the day came when being married to a chump irritated him. He had various affairs—none of them important. Gerda, of course, never knew about them. But I think, myself, that for fifteen years there has been something wrong with John—something connected with Veronica. He never really got over her. And then, last Saturday, he met her again."

After a long pause, Poirot recited dreamily:

"He went out with her that night to see her home and returned to The Hollow at 3 a.m."

"How do you know?"

"A housemaid had the toothache."

Henrietta said irrelevantly, "Lucy has far too many servants."

"But you yourself knew that, Mademoiselle."

"Yes."

"How did you know?"

Again there was an infinitesimal pause. Then Henrietta replied slowly:

"I was looking out of my window and saw him come back to the house."

"The toothache, Mademoiselle?"

She smiled at him.

"Quite another kind of ache, M. Poirot."

She got up and moved towards the door, and Poirot said:

"I will walk back with you, Mademoiselle."

They crossed the lane and went through the gate into the chestnut plantation.

Henrietta said:

"We need not go past the pool. We can go up to the left and along the top path to the flower walk."

A track led steeply uphill towards the woods. After a while they came to a broader path at right angles across the hillside above the chestnut trees. Presently they came to a bench and Henrietta sat down, Poirot beside her. The woods were above and behind them, and below were the closely planted chestnut groves. Just in front of the seat a curving path led downwards, to where just a glimmer of blue water could be seen.

Poirot watched Henrietta without speaking. Her face had relaxed, the tension had gone. It looked rounder and younger. He realized what she must have looked like as a young girl.

He said very gently at last:

"Of what are you thinking, Mademoiselle?"

"Of Ainswick."

"What is Ainswick?"

"Ainswick? It's a place." Almost dreamily, she described Ainswick to him. The white, graceful house, the big magnolia growing up it, the whole set in an amphitheatre of wooded hills.

"It was your home?"

"Not really. I lived in Ireland. It was where we came, all of us, for holidays. Edward and Midge and myself. It was Lucy's home actually. It belonged to her father. After his death it came to Edward."

"Not to Sir Henry? But it is he who has the title."

"Oh, that's a KCB," she explained. "Henry was only a distant cousin."

"And after Edward Angkatell, to whom does it go, this Ainswick?"

"How odd, I've never really thought. If Edward doesn't marry—" She paused. A shadow passed over her face. Hercule Poirot wondered exactly what thought was passing through her mind.

"I suppose," said Henrietta slowly, "it will go to David. So that's why—"

"Why what?"

"Why Lucy asked him here…David and Ainswick?" She shook her head. "They don't fit somehow."

Poirot pointed to the path in front of them.

"It is by that path, Mademoiselle, that you went down to the swimming pool yesterday?"

She gave a quick shiver.

"No, by the one nearer the house. It was Edward who came this way." She turned on him suddenly. "Must we talk about it any more? I hate the swimming pool. I even hate The Hollow."

Poirot murmured:

"I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood;

Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,

The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood

And Echo there, whatever is ask’d her, answers ‘Death.’”

Henrietta turned an astonished face on him.

“Tennyson,” said Hercule Poirot, nodding his head proudly. “The poetry of your Lord Tennyson.”

Henrietta was repeating:

“And Echo there, whatever is ask’d her…” She went on, almost to herself, “But of course—I see—that’s what it is—Echo!”

“How do you mean, Echo?”

“This place—The Hollow itself! I almost saw it before—on Saturday when Edward and I walked up to the ridge. An echo of Ainswick. And that’s what we are, we Angkatells. Echoes! We’re not real—not real as John was real.” She turned to Poirot. “I wish you had known him, M. Poirot. We’re all shadows compared to John. John was really alive.”

“I knew that even when he was dying, Mademoiselle.”

“I know. One felt it…And John is dead, and we, the echoes, are alive…It’s like, you know, a very bad joke.”

The youth had gone from her face again. Her lips were twisted, bitter with sudden pain.

When Poirot spoke, asking a question, she did not, for a moment, take in what he was saying.

“I am sorry. What did you say, M. Poirot?”

“I was asking whether your aunt, Lady Angkatell, liked Dr. Christow?”

“Lucy? She is a cousin, by the way, not an aunt. Yes, she liked him very much.”

"And your—also a cousin?—Mr. Edward Angkatell—did he like Dr. Christow?"

Her voice was, he thought, a little constrained, as she replied:

"Not particularly—but then he hardly knew him."

"And your—yet another cousin? Mr. David Angkatell?"

Henrietta smiled.

"David, I think, hates all of us. He spends his time immured in the library reading the Encyclopædia Britannica."

"Ah, a serious temperament."

"I am sorry for David. He has had a difficult home life. His mother was unbalanced—an invalid. Now his only way of protecting himself is to try to feel superior to everyone. It's all right as long as it works, but now and then it breaks down and the vulnerable David peeps through."

"Did he feel himself superior to Dr. Christow?"

"He tried to—but I don't think it came off. I suspect that John Christow was just the kind of man that David would like to be. He disliked John in consequence."

Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Yes—self-assurance, confidence, virility—all the intensive male qualities. It is interesting—very interesting."

Henrietta did not answer.

Through the chestnuts, down by the pool, Hercule Poirot saw a man stooping, searching for something, or so it seemed.

He murmured: "I wonder—"

"I beg your pardon?"

Poirot said: "That is one of Inspector Grange's men. He seems to be looking for something."

"Clues, I suppose. Don't policemen look for clues? Cigarette ash, footprints, burnt matches."

Her voice held a kind of bitter mockery. Poirot answered seriously.

"Yes, they look for these things—and sometimes they find them. But the real clues, Miss Savernake, in a case like this, usually lie in the personal relationships of the people concerned."

"I don't think I understand you."

"Little things," said Poirot, his head thrown back, his eyes half-closed. "Not cigarette ash, or a rubber heel mark—but a gesture, a look, an unexpected action…."

Henrietta turned her head sharply to look at him. He felt her eyes, but he did not turn his head. She said:

"Are you thinking of—anything in particular?"

"I was thinking of how you stepped forward and took the revolver out of Mrs. Christow's hand then dropped it in the pool."

He felt the slight start she gave. But her voice was quite normal and calm.

"Gerda, M. Poirot, is rather a clumsy person. In the shock of the moment, and if the revolver had had another cartridge in it, she might have fired it and—and hurt someone."

"But it was rather clumsy of you, was it not, to drop it in the pool?"

"Well, I had had a shock too." She paused. "What are you suggesting, M. Poirot?"

Poirot sat up, turned his head, and spoke in a brisk, matter-of-fact way.

“If there were fingerprints on that revolver, that is to say, fingerprints made before Mrs. Christow handled it, it would be interesting to know whose they were—and that we shall never know now.”

Henrietta said quietly but steadily:

“Meaning that you think they were mine. You are suggesting that I shot John and then left the revolver beside him so that Gerda could come along and pick it up and be left holding the baby. That is what you are suggesting, isn’t it? But surely, if I did that, you will give me credit for enough intelligence to have wiped off my own fingerprints first!”

“But surely you are intelligent enough to see, Mademoiselle, that if you had done so and if the revolver had had no fingerprints on it but Mrs. Christow’s, that would have been very remarkable! For you were all shooting with that revolver the day before. Gerda Christow would hardly have wiped the revolver clean of fingerprints before using it—why should she?”

Henrietta said slowly:

“So you think I killed John?”

“When Dr. Christow was dying, he said: ‘Henrietta.’”

“And you think that that was an accusation? It was not.”

“What was it then?”

Henrietta stretched out her foot and traced a pattern with the toe. She said in a low voice:

“Aren’t you forgetting—what I told you not very long ago? I mean—the terms we were on?”

“Ah, yes—he was your lover—and so, as he is dying, he says: ‘Henrietta.’ That is very touching.”

She turned blazing eyes upon him.

“Must you sneer?”

“I am not sneering. But I do not like being lied to—and that, I think, is what you are trying to do.”

Henrietta said quietly:

“I have told you that I am not very truthful—but when John said: ‘Henrietta’ he was not accusing me of having murdered him. Can’t you understand that people of my kind, who make things, are quite incapable of taking life? I don’t kill people, M. Poirot. I couldn’t kill anyone. That’s the plain stark truth. You suspect me simply because my name was murmured by a dying man who hardly knew what he was saying.”

“Dr. Christow knew perfectly what he was saying. His voice was as alive and conscious as that of a doctor doing a vital operation who says sharply and urgently: ‘Nurse, the forceps, please.’”

“But—” She seemed at a loss, taken aback. Hercule Poirot went on rapidly:

“And it is not just on account of what Dr. Christow said when he was dying. I do not believe for one moment that you are capable of premeditated murder—that, no. But you might have fired that shot in a sudden moment of fierce resentment—and if so—if so, Mademoiselle, you have the creative imagination and ability to cover your tracks.”

Henrietta got up. She stood for a moment, pale and shaken, looking at him. She said with a sudden, rueful smile:

“And I thought you liked me.”

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said sadly:

“That is what is so unfortunate for me. I do.”

Nineteen

I

When Henrietta had left him, Poirot sat on until he saw below him Inspector Grange walk past the pool with a resolute, easy stride and take the path on past the pavilion.

The inspector was walking in a purposeful way.

He must be going, therefore, either to Resthaven or to Dovecotes. Poirot wondered which.

He got up and retraced his steps along the way he had come. If Inspector Grange was coming to see him, he was interested to hear what the inspector had to say.

But when he got back to Resthaven there was no sign of a visitor. Poirot looked thoughtfully up the lane in the direction of Dovecotes. Veronica Cray had not, he knew, gone back to London.

He found his curiosity rising about Veronica Cray. The pale, shining fox furs, the heaped boxes of matches, that sudden imperfectly explained invasion on the Saturday night, and finally Henrietta Savernake’s revelations about John Christow and Veronica.

It was, he thought, an interesting pattern. Yes, that was how he saw it: a pattern.

A design of intermingled emotions and the clash of personalities. A strange involved design, with dark threads of hate and desire running through it.

Had Gerda Christow shot her husband? Or was it not quite so simple as that?

He thought of his conversation with Henrietta and decided that it was not so simple.

Henrietta had jumped to the conclusion that he suspected her of the murder, but actually he had not gone nearly as far as that in his mind. No further indeed than the belief that Henrietta knew something. Knew something or was concealing something—which?

He shook his head, dissatisfied.

The scene by the pool. A set scene. A stage scene.

Staged by whom? Staged for whom?

The answer to the second question was, he strongly suspected, Hercule Poirot. He had thought so at the time. But he had thought then that it was an impertinence—a joke.

It was still an impertinence—but not a joke.

And the answer to the first question?

He shook his head. He did not know. He had not the least idea.

But he half-closed his eyes and conjured them up—all of them—seeing them clearly in his mind's eye. Sir Henry, upright, responsible, trusted administrator of Empire. Lady Angkatell, shadowy, elusive, unexpectedly and bewilderingly charming, with that deadly power of inconsequent suggestion. Henrietta Savernake, who had loved John Christow better than she loved herself. The gentle and negative Edward Angkatell. The dark, positive girl called Midge Hardcastle. The dazed, bewildered face of Gerda Christow clasping a revolver in her hand. The offended adolescent personality of David Angkatell.

There they all were, caught and held in the meshes of the law. Bound together for a little while in the relentless aftermath of sudden and violent death. Each of them had their own tragedy and meaning, their own story.

And somewhere in that interplay of characters and emotions lay the truth.

To Hercule Poirot there was only one thing more fascinating than the study of human beings, and that was the pursuit of truth.

He meant to know the truth of John Christow's death.

II

"But of course, Inspector," said Veronica. "I'm only too anxious to help you."

"Thank you, Miss Cray."

Veronica Cray was not, somehow, at all what the inspector had imagined.

He had been prepared for glamour, for artificiality, even possibly for heroics. He would not have been at all surprised if she had put on an act of some kind.

In fact, she was, he shrewdly suspected, putting on an act. But it was not the kind of act he had expected.

There was no overdone feminine charm—glamour was not stressed.

Instead he felt that he was sitting opposite to an exceedingly good-looking and expensively dressed woman who was also a good businesswoman. Veronica Cray, he thought, was no fool.

"We just want a clear statement, Miss Cray. You came over to The Hollow on Saturday evening?"

"Yes, I'd run out of matches. One forgets how important these things are in the country."

"You went all the way to The Hollow? Why not to your next-door neighbour, M. Poirot?"

She smiled—a superb, confident camera smile.

"I didn't know who my next-door neighbour was—otherwise I should have. I just thought he was some little foreigner and I thought, you know, he might become a bore—living so near."

“Yes,” thought Grange, “quite plausible.” She’d worked that one out ready for the occasion.

“You got your matches,” he said. “And you recognized an old friend in Dr. Christow, I understand?”

She nodded.

“Poor John. Yes, I hadn’t seen him for fifteen years.”

“Really?” There was polite disbelief in the inspector’s tone.

“Really.” Her tone was firmly assertive.

“You were pleased to see him?”

“Very pleased. It’s always delightful, don’t you think, Inspector, to come across an old friend?”

“It can be on some occasions.”

Veronica Cray went on without waiting for further questioning:

“John saw me home. You’ll want to know if he said anything that could have a bearing on the tragedy, and I’ve been thinking over our conversation very carefully—but really there wasn’t a pointer of any kind.”

“What did you talk about, Miss Cray?”

“Old days. ‘Do you remember this, that and the other?’” She smiled pensively. “We had known each other in the South of France. John had really changed very little—older, of course, and more assured. I gather he was quite well-known in his profession. He didn’t talk about his personal life at all. I just got the impression that his married life wasn’t perhaps frightfully happy—but it was only the vaguest impression. I suppose his wife, poor thing, was one of those dim, jealous women—probably always making a fuss about his better-looking lady patients.”

“No,” said Grange. “She doesn’t really seem to have been that way.”

Veronica said quickly:

“You mean—it was all underneath? Yes—yes, I can see that that would be far more dangerous.”

“I see you think Mrs. Christow shot him, Miss Cray?”

“I oughtn’t to have said that. One mustn’t comment—is that it—before a trial? I’m extremely sorry, Inspector. It was just that my maid told me she’d been found actually standing over the body with the revolver still in her hand. You know how in these quiet country places everything gets so exaggerated and servants do pass things on.”

“Servants can be very useful sometimes, Miss Cray.”

“Yes, I suppose you get a lot of your information that way?”

Grange went on stolidly:

“It’s a question, of course, of who had a motive—”

He paused. Veronica said with a faint, rueful smile:

“And a wife is always the first suspect? How cynical! But there’s usually what’s called ‘the other woman.’ I suppose she might be considered to have a motive too?”

“You think there was another woman in Dr. Christow’s life?”

“Well—yes, I did rather imagine there might be. One just gets an impression, you know.”

“Impressions can be very helpful sometimes,” said Grange.

“I rather imagined—from what he said—that that sculptress woman was, well, a very close friend. But I expect you know all about that already?”

“We have to look into all these things, of course.”

Inspector Grange's voice was strictly noncommittal, but he saw, without appearing to see, a quick, spiteful flash of satisfaction in those large blue eyes.

He said, making the question very official:

"Dr. Christow saw you home, you say. What time was it when you said good night to him?"

"Do you know, I really can't remember! We talked for some time, I do know that. It must have been quite late."

"He came in?"

"Yes, I gave him a drink."

"I see. I imagined your conversation might have taken place in the—er—pavilion by the swimming pool."

He saw her eyelids flicker. There was hardly a moment's hesitation before she said:

"You really are a detective, aren't you? Yes, we sat there and smoked and talked for some time. How did you know?"

Her face bore the pleased, eager expression of a child asking to be shown a clever trick.

"You left your furs behind there, Miss Cray." He added just without emphasis: "And the matches."

"Yes, of course I did."

"Dr. Christow returned to The Hollow at 3 a.m.," announced the inspector, again without emphasis.

"Was it really as late as that?" Veronica sounded quite amazed.

"Yes, it was, Miss Cray."

“Of course, we had so much to talk over—not having seen each other for so many years.”

“Are you sure it was quite so long since you had seen Dr. Christow?”

“I’ve just told you I hadn’t seen him for fifteen years.”

“Are you quite sure you’re not making a mistake? I’ve got the impression you might have been seeing quite a lot of him.”

“What on earth makes you think that?”

“Well, this note for one thing.” Inspector Grange took out a letter from his pocket, glanced down at it, cleared his throat and read:

Please come over this morning. I must see you.

Veronica.

“Ye-es.” She smiled. “It is a little peremptory, perhaps. I’m afraid Hollywood makes one—well, rather arrogant.”

“Dr. Christow came over to your house the following morning in answer to that summons. You had a quarrel. Would you care to tell me, Miss Cray, what that quarrel was about?”

The inspector had unmasked his batteries. He was quick to seize the flash of anger, the ill-tempered tightening of the lips. She snapped out:

“We didn’t quarrel.”

“Oh, yes, you did, Miss Cray. Your last words were: ‘I think I hate you more than I believed I could hate anyone.’”

She was silent now. He could feel her thinking—thinking quickly and warily. Some women might have rushed into speech. But Veronica Cray was too clever for that.

She shrugged her shoulders and said lightly:

“I see. More servants’ tales. My little maid has rather a lively imagination. There are different ways of saying things, you know. I can assure you that I wasn’t being melodramatic. It was really a mildly flirtatious remark. We had been sparring together.”

“The words were not intended to be taken seriously?”

“Certainly not. And I can assure you, Inspector, that it was fifteen years since I had last seen John Christow. You can verify that for yourself.”

She was poised again, detached, sure of herself.

Grange did not argue or pursue the subject. He got up.

“That’s all for the moment, Miss Cray,” he said pleasantly.

He went out of Dovecotes and down the lane, and turned in at the gate of Resthaven.

III

Hercule Poirot stared at the inspector in the utmost surprise. He repeated incredulously:

“The revolver that Gerda Christow was holding and which was subsequently dropped into the pool was not the revolver that fired the fatal shot? But that is extraordinary.”

“Exactly, M. Poirot. Put bluntly, it just doesn’t make sense.”

Poirot murmured softly:

“No, it does not make sense. But all the same, Inspector, it has got to make sense, eh?”

The inspector sighed heavily: “That’s just it, M. Poirot. We’ve got to find some way that it does make sense—but at the moment I can’t see it. The truth is that we shan’t get much further until we’ve found the gun that was used. It came from Sir Henry’s collection all right—at least, there’s one missing—and that means that the whole thing is still tied up with The Hollow.”

“Yes,” murmured Poirot. “It is still tied up with The Hollow.”

“It seemed a simple, straightforward business,” went on the inspector. “Well, it isn’t so simple or so straightforward.”

“No,” said Poirot, “it is not simple.”

“We’ve got to admit the possibility that the thing was a frame-up—that’s to say that it was all set to implicate Gerda Christow. But if that was so, why not leave the right revolver lying by the body for her to pick up?”

“She might not have picked it up.”

“That’s true, but even if she didn’t, so long as nobody else’s fingerprints were on the gun—that’s to say if it was wiped after use—she would probably have been suspected all right. And that’s what the murderer wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Was it?”

Grange stared.

“Well, if you’d done a murder, you’d want to plant it good and quick on someone else, wouldn’t you? That would be a murderer’s normal reaction.”

“Ye-es,” said Poirot. “But then perhaps we have here a rather unusual type of murderer. It is possible that that is the solution of our problem.”

“What is the solution?”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“An unusual type of murderer.”

Inspector Grange stared at him curiously. He said:

"But then—what was the murderer's idea? What was he or she getting at?"

Poirot spread out his hands with a sigh.

"I have no idea—I have no idea at all. But it seems to me—dimly—"

"Yes?"

"That the murderer is someone who wanted to kill John Christow but who did not want to implicate Gerda Christow."

"H'h! Actually, we suspected her right away."

"Ah, yes, but it was only a matter of time before the facts about the gun came to light, and that was bound to give a new angle. In the interval the murderer has had time—" Poirot came to a full stop.

"Time to do what?"

"Ah, mom ami, there you have me. Again I have to say I do not know."

Inspector Grange took a turn or two up and down the room. Then he stopped and came to a stand in front of Poirot.

"I've come to you this afternoon, M. Poirot, for two reasons. One is because I know—it's pretty well known in the Force—that you're a man of wide experience who's done some very tricky work on this type of problem. That's reason number one. But there's another reason. You were there. You were an eyewitness. You saw what happened."

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, I saw what happened—but the eyes, Inspector Grange, are very unreliable witnesses."

"What do you mean, M. Poirot?"

"The eyes see, sometimes, what they are meant to see."

“You think that it was planned out beforehand?”

“I suspect it. It was exactly, you understand, like a stage scene. What I saw was clear enough. A man who had just been shot and the woman who had shot him holding in her hand the gun she had just used. That is what I saw, and already we know that in one particular the picture is wrong. That gun had not been used to shoot John Christow.”

“Hm!” The inspector pulled his drooping moustache firmly downwards. “What you are getting at is that some of the other particulars of the picture may be wrong too?”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“There were three other people present—three people who had apparently just arrived on the scene. But that may not be true either. The pool is surrounded by a thick grove of young chestnuts. From the pool five paths lead away, one to the house, one up to the woods, one up to the flower walk, one down from the pool to the farm and one to the lane here.

“Of those three people, each one came along a different path, Edward Angkatell from the woods above, Lady Angkatell up from the farm, and Henrietta Savernake from the flower border above the house. Those three arrived upon the scene of the crime almost simultaneously, and a few minutes after Gerda Christow.

“But one of those three, Inspector, could have been at the pool before Gerda Christow arrived, could have shot John Christow, and could have retreated up or down one of the paths and then, turning around, could have arrived at the same time as the others.”

Inspector Grange said:

“Yes, it’s possible.”

“And another possibility, not envisaged at the time. Someone could have come along the path from the lane, could have shot John Christow, and could have gone back the same way, unseen.”

Grange said: “You’re dead right. There are two other possible suspects besides Gerda Christow. We’ve got the same motive—jealousy. It’s definitely a crime passionel. There were two other women mixed up with John Christow.”

He paused and said:

“Christow went over to see Veronica Cray that morning. They had a row. She told him that she’d make him sorry for what he’d done, and she said she hated him more than she believed she could hate anyone.”

“Interesting,” murmured Poirot.

“She’s straight from Hollywood—and by what I read in the papers they do a bit of shooting each other out there sometimes. She could have come along to get her furs, which she’d left in the pavilion the night before. They could have met—the whole thing could have flared up—she fired at him—and then, hearing someone coming, she could have dodged back the way she came.”

He paused a moment and added irritably:

“And now we come to the part where it all goes haywire. That damned gun! Unless,” his eyes brightened, “she shot him with her own gun and dropped one that she’d pinched from Sir Henry’s study so as to throw suspicion on the crowd at The Hollow. She mightn’t know about our being able to identify the gun used from the marks on the rifling.”

“How many people do know that, I wonder?”

“I put the point to Sir Henry. He said he thought quite a lot of people would know—on account of all the detective stories that are written. Quoted a new one, The Clue of the Dripping Fountain, which he said John Christow himself had been reading on Saturday and which emphasized that particular point.”

“But Veronica Cray would have had to have got the gun somehow from Sir Henry’s study.”

“Yes, it would mean premeditation.” The inspector took another tug at his moustache, then he looked at Poirot. “But you’ve hinted yourself at another possibility, M. Poirot. There’s Miss Savernake. And here’s where your eyewitness stuff, or rather I should say, earwitness stuff, comes in again. Dr. Christow said: ‘Henrietta’ when he was dying. You heard him—they all heard him, though Mr. Angkatell doesn’t seem to have caught what he said.”

“Edward Angkatell did not hear? That is interesting.”

“But the others did. Miss Savernake herself says he tried to speak to her. Lady Angkatell says he opened his eyes, saw Miss Savernake, and said: ‘Henrietta.’ She doesn’t, I think, attach any importance to it.”

Poirot smiled. “No—she would not attach importance to it.”

“Now, M. Poirot, what about you? You were there—you saw—you heard. Was Dr. Christow trying to tell you all that it was Henrietta who had shot him? In short, was that word an accusation?”

Poirot said slowly:

“I did not think so at the time.”

“But now, M. Poirot? What do you think now?”

Poirot sighed. Then he said slowly:

“It may have been so. I cannot say more than that. It is an impression only for which you are asking me, and when the moment is past there is a temptation to read into things a meaning which was not there at the time.”

Grange said hastily:

“Of course, this is all off the record. What M. Poirot thought isn’t evidence—I know that. It’s only a pointer I’m trying to get.”

“Oh, I understand you very well—and an impression from an eyewitness can be a very useful thing. But I am humiliated to have to say that my impressions are valueless. I was under the misconception, induced by the visual evidence, that Mrs. Christow had just shot her husband; so that when Dr. Christow opened his eyes and said ‘Henrietta’ I never thought of it as being an accusation. It is tempting now, looking back, to read into that scene something that was not there.”

“I know what you mean,” said Grange. “But it seems to me that since ‘Henrietta’ was the last word Christow spoke, it must have meant one of two things. It was either an accusation of murder or else it was—well, purely emotional. She’s the woman he’s in love with and he’s dying. Now, bearing everything in mind, which of the two did it sound like to you?”

Poirot sighed, stirred, closed his eyes, opened them again, stretched out his hands in acute vexation. He said:

“His voice was urgent—that is all I can say—urgent. It seemed to me neither accusing nor emotional—but urgent, yes! And of one thing I am sure. He was in full possession of his faculties. He spoke—yes, he spoke like a doctor—a doctor who has, say, a sudden surgical emergency on his hands—a patient who is bleeding to death, perhaps.” Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “That is the best I can do for you.”

“Medical, eh?” said the inspector. “Well, yes, that is a third way of looking at it. He was shot, he suspected he was dying, he wanted something done for him quickly. And if, as Lady Angkatell says, Miss Savernake was the first person he saw when his eyes opened, then he would appeal to her. It’s not very satisfactory, though.”

“Nothing about this case is satisfactory,” said Poirot with some bitterness.

A murder scene, set and staged to deceive Hercule Poirot—and which had deceived him! No, it was not satisfactory.

Inspector Grange was looking out of the window.

“Hallo,” he said, “here’s Clark, my sergeant. Looks as though he’s got something. He’s been working on the servants—the friendly touch. He’s a nice looking chap, got a way with women.”

Sergeant Clark came in a little breathlessly. He was clearly pleased with himself, though subduing the fact under a respectful official manner.

“Thought I’d better come and report, sir, since I knew where you’d gone.”

He hesitated, shooting a doubtful glance at Poirot, whose exotic foreign appearance did not commend itself to his sense of official reticence.

“Out with it, my lad,” said Grange. “Never mind M. Poirot here. He’s forgotten more about this game than you’ll know for many years to come.”

“Yes, sir. It’s this way, sir. I got something out of the kitchen maid—”

Grange interrupted. He turned to Poirot triumphantly.

“What did I tell you? There’s always hope where there’s a kitchen maid. Heaven help us when domestic staffs are so reduced that nobody keeps a kitchen maid any more. Kitchen maids talk, kitchen maids babble. They’re so kept down and in their place by the cook and the upper servants that it’s only human nature to talk about what they know to someone who wants to hear it. Go on, Clark.”

“This is what the girl says, sir. That on Sunday afternoon she saw Gudgeon, the butler, walking across the hall with a revolver in his hand.”

“Gudgeon?”

“Yes, sir.” Clark referred to a notebook. “These are her own words. ‘I don’t know what to do, but I think I ought to say what I saw that day. I saw Mr. Gudgeon, he was standing in the hall with a revolver in his hand. Mr. Gudgeon looked very peculiar indeed.’

“I don’t suppose,” said Clark, breaking off, “that the part about looking peculiar means anything. She probably put that in out of her head. But I thought you ought to know about it at once, sir.”

Inspector Grange rose, with the satisfaction of a man who sees a task ahead of him which he is well-fitted to perform.

“Gudgeon?” he said. “I’ll have a word with Mr. Gudgeon right away.”

Twenty

Sitting once more in Sir Henry’s study, Inspector Grange stared at the impassive face of the man in front of him.

So far, the honours lay with Gudgeon.

“I am very sorry, sir,” he repeated. “I suppose I ought to have mentioned the occurrence, but it had slipped my memory.”

He looked apologetically from the inspector to Sir Henry.

“It was about 5:30 if I remember rightly, sir. I was crossing the hall to see if there were any letters for the post when I noticed a revolver lying on the hall table. I presumed it was from the master’s collection, so I picked it up and brought it in here. There was a gap on the shelf by the mantelpiece where it had come from, so I replaced it where it belonged.”

“Point it out to me,” said Grange.

Gudgeon rose and went to the shelf in question, the inspector close behind him.

“It was this one, sir.” Gudgeon’s finger indicated a small Mauser pistol at the end of the row.

It was a .25—quite a small weapon. It was certainly not the gun that had killed John Christow.

Grange, with his eyes on Gudgeon’s face, said:

“That’s an automatic pistol, not a revolver.”

Gudgeon coughed.

“Indeed, sir? I’m afraid that I am not at all well-up in firearms. I may have used the term revolver rather loosely, sir.”

“But you are quite sure that that is the gun you found in the hall and brought in here?”

“Oh, yes, sir, there can be no possible doubt about that.”

Grange stopped him as he was about to stretch out a hand.

“Don’t touch it, please. I must examine it for fingerprints and to see if it is loaded.”

“I don’t think it is loaded, sir. None of Sir Henry’s collection is kept loaded. And, as for fingerprints, I polished it over with my handkerchief before replacing it, sir, so there will only be my fingerprints on it.”

“Why did you do that?” asked Grange sharply.

But Gudgeon’s apologetic smile did not waver.

“I fancied it might be dusty, sir.”

The door opened and Lady Angkatell came in. She smiled at the inspector.

“How nice to see you, Inspector Grange! What is all this about a revolver and Gudgeon? That child in the kitchen is in floods of tears. Mrs. Medway has been bullying her—but of course the girl was quite right to say what she saw if she thought she ought to do so. I always find right and wrong so bewildering myself—easy, you know, if right is unpleasant and wrong is agreeable, because then one knows where one is—but confusing when it is the other way about—and I think, don’t you, Inspector, that everyone must do what they think right themselves. What have you been telling them about that pistol, Gudgeon?”

Gudgeon said with respectful emphasis:

“The pistol was in the hall, my lady, on the centre table. I have no idea where it came from. I brought it in here and put it away in its proper place. That is what I have just told the inspector and he quite understands.”

Lady Angkatell shook her head. She said gently:

“You really shouldn’t have said that, Gudgeon. I’ll talk to the inspector myself.”

Gudgeon made a slight movement, and Lady Angkatell said very charmingly:

“I do appreciate your motives, Gudgeon. I know how you always try to save us trouble and annoyance.” She added in gentle dismissal: “That will be all now.”

Gudgeon hesitated, threw a fleeting glance towards Sir Henry and then at the inspector, then bowed and moved towards the door.

Grange made a motion as though to stop him, but for some reason he was not able to define to himself, he let his arm fall again. Gudgeon went out and closed the door.

Lady Angkatell dropped into a chair and smiled at the two men. She said conversationally:

“You know, I really do think that was very charming of Gudgeon. Quite feudal, if you know what I mean. Yes, feudal is the right word.”

Grange said stiffly:

“Am I to understand, Lady Angkatell, that you yourself have some further knowledge about the matter?”

“Of course. Gudgeon didn’t find it in the hall at all. He found it when he took the eggs out.”

“The eggs?” Inspector Grange stared at her.

“Out of the basket,” said Lady Angkatell.

She seemed to think that everything was now quite clear. Sir Henry said gently:

“You must tell us a little more, my dear. Inspector Grange and I are still at sea.”

“Oh.” Lady Angkatell set herself to be explicit. “The pistol, you see, was in the basket, under the eggs.”

“What basket and what eggs, Lady Angkatell?”

“The basket I took down to the farm. The pistol was in it, and then I put the eggs in on top of the pistol and forgot all about it. And when we found poor John Christow dead by the pool, it was such a shock I let go of the basket and Gudgeon just caught it in time (because of the eggs, I mean. If I’d dropped it they would have been broken). And he brought it back to the house. And later I asked him about writing the date on the eggs—a thing I always do—otherwise one eats the fresher eggs sometimes before the older ones—and he said all that had been attended to—and now that I remember, he was rather emphatic about it. And that is what I mean by being feudal. He found the pistol and put it back in here—I suppose really because there were police in the house. Servants are always so worried by police, I find. Very nice and loyal—but also quite stupid, because of course, Inspector, it’s the truth you want to hear, isn’t it?”

And Lady Angkatell finished up by giving the inspector a beaming smile.

“The truth is what I mean to get,” said Grange rather grimly.

Lady Angkatell sighed.

“It all seems such a fuss, doesn’t it?” she said. “I mean, all this hounding people down. I don’t suppose whoever it was who shot John Christow really meant to shoot him—not seriously, I mean. If it was Gerda, I’m sure she didn’t. In fact, I’m really surprised that she didn’t miss—it’s the sort of thing that one would expect of Gerda. And she’s really a very nice kind creature. And if you go and put her in prison and hang her, what on earth is going to happen to the children? If she did shoot John, she’s probably dreadfully sorry about it now. It’s bad enough for children to have a father who’s been murdered—but it will make it infinitely worse for them to have their mother hanged for it. Sometimes I don’t think you policemen think of these things.”

“We are not contemplating arresting anyone at present, Lady Angkatell.”

“Well, that’s sensible at any rate. But I have thought all along, Inspector Grange, that you were a very sensible sort of man.”

Again that charming, almost dazzling smile.

Inspector Grange blinked a little. He could not help it, but he came firmly to the point at issue.

“As you said just now, Lady Angkatell, it’s the truth I want to get at. You took the pistol from here—which gun was it, by the way?”

Lady Angkatell nodded her head towards the shelf by the mantelpiece. “The second from the end. The Mauser .25.” Something in the crisp, technical way she spoke jarred on Grange. He had not, somehow, expected Lady Angkatell, whom up to now he had labelled in his own mind as “vague” and “just a bit batty,” to describe a firearm with such technical precision.

“You took the pistol from here and put it in your basket. Why?”

“I knew you’d ask me that,” said Lady Angkatell. Her tone, unexpectedly, was almost triumphant. “And of course there must be some reason. Don’t you think so, Henry?” She turned to her husband. “Don’t you think I must have had a reason for taking a pistol out that morning?”

“I should certainly have thought so, my dear,” said Sir Henry stiffly.

“One does things,” said Lady Angkatell, gazing thoughtfully in front of her, “and then one doesn’t remember why one has done them. But I think, you know, Inspector, that there always is a reason if one can only get at it. I must have had some idea in my head when I put the Mauser into my egg basket.” She appealed to him. “What do you think it can have been?”

Grange stared at her. She displayed no embarrassment—just a childlike eagerness. It beat him. He had never yet met anyone like Lucy Angkatell, and just for the moment he didn’t know what to do about it.

“My wife,” said Sir Henry, “is extremely absentminded, Inspector.”

“So it seems, sir,” said Grange. He did not say it very nicely.

“Why do you think I took that pistol?” Lady Angkatell asked him confidentially.

“I have no idea, Lady Angkatell.”

“I came in here,” mused Lady Angkatell. “I had been talking to Simmons about the pillowcases—and I remember dimly crossing over to the fireplace—and thinking we must get a new poker—the curate, not the rector—”

Inspector Grange stared. He felt his head going round.

“And I remember picking up the Mauser—it was a nice handy little gun, I’ve always liked it—and dropping it into the basket—I’d just got the basket from the flower room. But there were so many things in my head—Simmons, you know, and the bindweed in the Michaelmas daisies—and hoping Mrs. Medway would make a really rich Nigger in his Shirt—”

“A nigger in his shirt?” Inspector Grange had to break in.

“Chocolate, you know, and eggs—and then covered with whipped cream. Just the sort of sweet a foreigner would like for lunch.”

Inspector Grange spoke fiercely and brusquely, feeling like a man who brushes away fine spiders’ webs which are impairing his vision.

“Did you load the pistol?”

He had hoped to startle her—perhaps even to frighten her a little, but Lady Angkatell only considered the question with a kind of desperate thoughtfulness.

“Now did I? That’s so stupid. I can’t remember. But I should think I must have, don’t you, Inspector? I mean, what’s the good of a pistol without ammunition? I wish I could remember exactly what was in my head at the time.”

“My dear Lucy,” said Sir Henry. “What goes on or does not go on in your head has been the despair of everyone who knows you well for years.”

She flashed him a very sweet smile.

“I am trying to remember, Henry dear. One does such curious things. I picked up the telephone receiver the other morning and found myself looking down at it quite bewildered. I couldn’t imagine what I wanted with it.”

“Presumably you were going to ring someone up,” said the inspector coldly.

“No, funnily enough, I wasn’t. I remembered afterwards—I’d been wondering why Mrs. Mears, the gardener’s wife, held her baby in such an odd way, and I picked up the telephone receiver to try, you know, just how one would hold a baby, and of course I realized that it had looked odd because Mrs. Mears was left-handed and had its head the other way round.”

She looked triumphantly from one to the other of the two men.

“Well,” thought the inspector, “I suppose it’s possible that there are people like this.”

But he did not feel very sure about it.

The whole thing, he realized, might be a tissue of lies. The kitchen maid, for instance, had distinctly stated that it was a revolver Gudgeon had been holding. Still, you couldn’t set much store by that. The girl knew nothing of firearms. She had heard a revolver talked about in connection with the crime, and revolver or pistol would be all one to her.

Both Gudgeon and Lady Angkatell had specified the Mauser pistol—but there was nothing to prove their statement. It might actually have been the missing revolver that Gudgeon had been handling and he might have returned it, not to the study, but to Lady Angkatell herself. The servants all seemed absolutely besotted about the damned woman.

Supposing it was actually she who had shot John Christow? (But why should she? He couldn't see why.) Would they still back her up and tell lies for her? He had an uncomfortable feeling that that was just what they would do.

And now this fantastic story of hers about not being able to remember—surely she could think up something better than that. And looking so natural about it—not in the least embarrassed or apprehensive. Damn it all, she gave you the impression that she was speaking the literal truth.

He got up.

"When you remember a little more, perhaps you'll tell me, Lady Angkatell," he said dryly.

She answered: "Of course I will, Inspector. Things come to one quite suddenly sometimes."

Grange went out of the study. In the hall he put a finger round the inside of a collar and drew a deep breath.

He felt all tangled up in the thistledown. What he needed was his oldest and foulest pipe, a pint of ale and a good steak and chips. Something plain and objective.

Twenty-one

In the study Lady Angkatell flitted about touching things here and there with a vague forefinger. Sir Henry sat back in his chair watching her. He said at last:

“Why did you take the pistol, Lucy?”

Lady Angkatell came back and sank down gracefully into a chair.

“I’m not really quite sure, Henry. I suppose I had some vague ideas of an accident.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. All those roots of trees, you know,” said Lady Angkatell vaguely, “sticking out—so easy, just to trip over one. One might have had a few shots at the target and left one shot in the magazine—careless, of course—but then people are careless. I’ve always thought, you know, that accident would be the simplest way to do a thing of that kind. One would be dreadfully sorry, of course, and blame oneself….”

Her voice died away. Her husband sat very still without taking his eyes off her face. He spoke again in the same quiet, careful voice.

“Who was to have had—the accident?”

Lucy turned her head a little, looking at him in surprise.

“John Christow, of course.”

“Good God, Lucy—” He broke off.

She said earnestly:

“Oh, Henry, I’ve been so dreadfully worried. About Ainswick.”

"I see. It's Ainswick. You've always cared too much about Ainswick, Lucy. Sometimes I think it's the only thing you do care for."

"Edward and David are the last—the last of the Angkatells. And David won't do, Henry. He'll never marry—because of his mother and all that. He'll get the place when Edward dies, and he won't marry, and you and I will be dead long before he's even middle-aged. He'll be the last of the Angkatells and the whole thing will die out."

"Does it matter so much, Lucy?"

"Of course it matters! Ainswick!"

"You should have been a boy, Lucy."

But he smiled a little—for he could not imagine Lucy being anything but feminine.

"It all depends on Edward's marrying—and Edward's so obstinate—that long head of his, like my father's. I hoped he'd get over Henrietta and marry some nice girl—but I see now that that's hopeless. Then I thought that Henrietta's affair with John would run the usual course. John's affairs were never, I imagine, very permanent. But I saw him looking at her the other evening. He really cared about her. If only John were out of the way I felt that Henrietta would marry Edward. She's not the kind of person to cherish a memory and live in the past. So, you see, it all came to that—get rid of John Christow."

"Lucy. You didn't—What did you do, Lucy?"

Lady Angkatell got up again. She took two dead flowers out of a vase.

"Darling," she said. "You don't imagine for a moment, do you, that I shot John Christow? I did have that silly idea about an accident. But then, you know, I remembered that we'd asked John Christow here—it's not as though he proposed himself. One can't ask someone to be your guest and then arrange accidents. Even Arabs are most particular about hospitality. So don't worry, will you, Henry?"

She stood looking at him with a brilliant, affectionate smile. He said heavily:

“I always worry about you, Lucy.”

“There’s no need, darling. And you see, everything has actually turned out all right. John has been got rid of without our doing anything about it. It reminds me,” said Lady Angkatell reminiscently, “of that man in Bombay who was so frightfully rude to me. He was run over by a tram three days later.”

She unbolted the french windows and went out into the garden.

Sir Henry sat still, watching her tall, slender figure wander down the path. He looked old and tired, and his face was the face of a man who lives at close quarters with fear.

In the kitchen a tearful Doris Emmott was wilting under the stern reproof of Mr. Gudgeon. Mrs. Medway and Miss Simmons acted as a kind of Greek chorus.

“Putting yourself forward and jumping to conclusions in a way only an inexperienced girl would do.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Medway.

“If you see me with a pistol in my hand, the proper thing to do is to come to me and say: ‘Mr. Gudgeon, will you be so kind as to give me an explanation?’”

“Or you could have come to me,” put in Mrs. Medway. “I’m always willing to tell a young girl what doesn’t know the world what she ought to think.”

“What you should not have done,” said Gudgeon severely, “is to go babbling off to a policeman—and only a sergeant at that! Never get mixed up with the police more than you can help. It’s painful enough having them in the house at all.”

“Inexpressibly painful,” murmured Miss Simmons.

“Such a thing never happened to me before.”

“We all know,” went on Gudgeon, “what her ladyship is like. Nothing her ladyship does would ever surprise me—but the police don’t know her ladyship the way we do, and it’s not to be thought of that her ladyship should be worried with silly questions and suspicions just because she wanders about with firearms. It’s the sort of thing she would do, but the police have the kind of mind that just sees murder and nasty things like that. Her ladyship is the kind of absentminded lady who wouldn’t hurt a fly, but there’s no denying that she puts things in funny places. I shall never forget,” added Gudgeon with feeling, “when she brought back a live lobster and put it in the card tray in the hall. Thought I was seeing things!”

“That must have been before my time,” said Simmons with curiosity.

Mrs. Medway checked these revelations with a glance at the erring Doris.

“Some other time,” she said. “Now then, Doris, we’ve only been speaking to you for your own good. It’s common to be mixed up with the police, and don’t you forget it. You can get on with the vegetables now, and be more careful with the runner beans than you were last night.”

Doris sniffed.

“Yes, Mrs. Medway,” she said, and shuffled over to the sink.

Mrs. Medway said forebodingly:

“I don’t feel as I’m going to have a light hand with my pastry. That nasty inquest tomorrow. Gives me a turn every time I think of it. A thing like that—happening to us.”

Twenty-two

The latch of the gate clicked and Poirot looked out of the window in time to see the visitor who was coming up the path to the front door. He knew at once who she was. He wondered very much what brought Veronica Cray to see him.

She brought a delicious faint scent into the room with her, a scent that Poirot recognized. She wore tweeds and brogues as Henrietta had done—but she was, he decided, very different from Henrietta.

“M. Poirot.” Her tone was delightful, a little thrilled. “I’ve only just discovered who my neighbour is. And I’ve always wanted to know you so much.”

He took her outstretched hands, bowed over them.

“Enchanted, Madame.”

She accepted the homage smilingly, refused his offer of tea, coffee or cocktail.

“No, I’ve just come to talk to you. To talk seriously. I’m worried.”

“You are worried? I am sorry to hear that.”

Veronica sat down and sighed.

“It’s about John Christow’s death. The inquest’s tomorrow. You know that?”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

“And the whole thing has really been so extraordinary—”

She broke off.

“Most people really wouldn’t believe it. But you would, I think, because you know something about human nature.”

“I know a little about human nature,” admitted Poirot.

“Inspector Grange came to see me. He’d got it into his head that I’d quarrelled with John—which is true in a way though not in the way he meant. I told him that I hadn’t seen John for fifteen years—and he simply didn’t believe me. But it’s true, M. Poirot.”

Poirot said: “Since it is true, it can easily be proved, so why worry?”

She returned his smile in the friendliest fashion.

“The real truth is that I simply haven’t dared to tell the inspector what actually happened on Saturday evening. It’s so absolutely fantastic that he certainly wouldn’t believe it. But I felt I must tell someone. That’s why I have come to you.”

Poirot said quietly: “I am flattered.”

That fact, he noted, she took for granted. She was a woman, he thought, who was very sure of the effect she was producing. So sure that she might, occasionally, make a mistake.

“John and I were engaged to be married fifteen years ago. He was very much in love with me—so much so that it rather alarmed me sometimes. He wanted me to give up acting—to give up having any mind or life of my own. He was so possessive and masterful that I felt I couldn’t go through with it, and I broke off the engagement. I’m afraid he took that very hard.”

Poirot clicked a discreet and sympathetic tongue.

“I didn’t see him again until last Saturday night. He walked home with me. I told the inspector that we talked about old times—that’s true in a way. But there was far more than that.”

“Yes?”

“John went mad—quite mad. He wanted to leave his wife and children, he wanted me to get a divorce from my husband and marry him. He said he’d never forgotten me—that the moment he saw me time stood still.”

She closed her eyes, she swallowed. Under her makeup her face was very pale.

She opened her eyes again and smiled almost timidly at Poirot.

“Can you believe that a—a feeling like that is possible?” she asked.

“I think it is possible, yes,” said Poirot.

“Never to forget—to go on waiting—planning—hoping. To determine with all one’s heart and mind to get what one wants in the end. There are men like that, M. Poirot.”

“Yes—and women.”

She gave him a hard stare.

“I’m talking about men—about John Christow. Well, that’s how it was. I protested at first, laughed, refused to take him seriously. Then I told him he was mad. It was quite late when he went back to the house. We’d argued and argued. He was still—just as determined.”

She swallowed again.

“That’s why I sent him a note the next morning. I couldn’t leave things like that. I had to make him realize that what he wanted was—impossible.”

“It was impossible?”

“Of course it was impossible! He came over. He wouldn’t listen to what I had to say. He was just as insistent. I told him that it was no good, that I didn’t love him, that I hated him…” She paused, breathing hard. “I had to be brutal about it. So we parted in anger…And now—he’s dead.”

He saw her hands creep together, saw the twisted fingers and the knuckles stand out. They were large, rather cruel hands.

The strong emotion that she was feeling communicated itself to him. It was not sorrow, not grief—no, it was anger. The anger, he thought, of a baffled egoist.

“Well, M. Poirot?” Her voice was controlled and smooth again. “What am I to do? Tell the story, or keep it to myself? It’s what happened—but it takes a bit of believing.”

Poirot looked at her, a long, considering gaze.

He did not think that Veronica Cray was telling the truth, and yet there was an undeniable undercurrent of sincerity. It happened, he thought, but it did not happen like that.

And suddenly he got it. It was a true story, inverted. It was she who had been unable to forget John Christow. It was she who had been baffled and repulsed. And now, unable to bear in silence the furious anger of a tigress deprived of what she considered her legitimate prey, she had invented a version of the truth that should satisfy her wounded pride and feed a little the aching hunger for a man who had gone beyond the reach of her clutching hands. Impossible to admit that she, Veronica Cray, could not have what she wanted! So she had changed it all round.

Poirot drew a deep breath and spoke.

“If all this had any bearing on John Christow’s death, you would have to speak out, but if it has not—and I cannot see why it should have—then I think you are quite justified in keeping it to yourself.”

He wondered if she was disappointed. He had a fancy that in her present mood she would like to hurl her story into the printed page of a newspaper. She had come to him—why? To try out her story? To test his reactions? Or to use him—to induce him to pass the story on?

If his mild response disappointed her, she did not show it. She got up and gave him one of those long, well-manicured hands.

“Thank you, M. Poirot. What you say seems eminently sensible. I’m so glad I came to you. I—I felt I wanted somebody to know.”

“I shall respect your confidence, Madame.”

When she had gone, he opened the windows a little. Scents affected him. He did not like Veronica’s scent. It was expensive but cloying, overpowering like her personality.

He wondered, as he flapped the curtains, whether Veronica Cray had killed John Christow.

She would have been willing to kill him—he believed that. She would have enjoyed pressing the trigger—would have enjoyed seeing him stagger and fall.

But behind that vindictive anger was something cold and shrewd, something that appraised chances, a cool, calculating intelligence. However much Veronica Cray wished to kill John Christow, he doubted whether she would have taken the risk.

Twenty-three

The inquest was over. It had been the merest formality of an affair, and though warned of this beforehand, yet nearly everyone had a resentful sense of anticlimax.

Adjourned for a fortnight at the request of the police.

Gerda had driven down with Mrs. Patterson from London in a hired Daimler. She had on a black dress and an unbecoming hat, and looked nervous and bewildered.

Preparatory to stepping back into the Daimler, she paused as Lady Angkatell came up to her.

“How are you, Gerda dear? Not sleeping too badly, I hope. I think it went off as well as we could hope for, don’t you? So sorry we haven’t got you with us at The Hollow, but I quite understand how distressing that would be.”

Mrs. Patterson said in her bright voice, glancing reproachfully at her sister for not introducing her properly:

“This was Miss Collins’s idea—to drive straight down and back. Expensive, of course, but we thought it was worth it.”

“Oh, I do so agree with you.”

Mrs. Patterson lowered her voice.

“I am taking Gerda and the children straight down to Bexhill. What she needs is rest and quiet. The reporters! You’ve no idea! Simply swarming round Harley Street.”

A young man snapped off a camera, and Elsie Patterson pushed her sister into the car and they drove off.

The others had a momentary view of Gerda’s face beneath the unbecoming hat brim. It was vacant, lost—she looked for the moment like a half-witted child.

Midge Hardcastle muttered under her breath: “Poor devil.”

Edward said irritably:

“What did everybody see in Christow? That wretched woman looks completely heartbroken.”

“She was absolutely wrapped up in him,” said Midge.

“But why? He was a selfish sort of fellow, good company in a way, but—” He broke off. Then he asked: “What did you think of him, Midge?”

“I?” Midge reflected. She said at last, rather surprised at her own words: “I think I respected him.”

“Respected him? For what?”

“Well, he knew his job.”

“You’re thinking of him as a doctor?”

“Yes.”

There was no time for more.

Henrietta was driving Midge back to London in her car. Edward was returning to lunch at The Hollow and going up by the afternoon train with David. He said vaguely to Midge: “You must come out and lunch one day,” and Midge said that that would be very nice but that she couldn’t take more than an hour off. Edward gave her his charming smile and said:

“Oh, it’s a special occasion. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

Then he moved towards Henrietta. “I’ll ring you up, Henrietta.”

“Yes, do, Edward. But I may be out a good deal.”

“Out?”

She gave him a quick, mocking smile.

“Drowning my sorrow. You don’t expect me to sit at home and mope, do you?”

He said slowly: “I don’t understand you nowadays, Henrietta. You are quite different.”

Her face softened. She said unexpectedly: “Darling Edward,” and gave his arm a quick squeeze.

Then she turned to Lucy Angkatell. “I can come back if I want to, can’t I, Lucy?”

Lady Angkatell said: “Of course, darling. And anyway there will be the inquest again in a fortnight.”

Henrietta went to where she had parked the car in the market square. Her suitcases and Midge’s were already inside.

They got in and drove off.

The car climbed the long hill and came out on the road over the ridge. Below them the brown and golden leaves shivered a little in the chill of a grey autumn day.

Midge said suddenly: “I’m glad to get away—even from Lucy. Darling as she is, she gives me the creeps sometimes.”

Henrietta was looking intently into the small driving mirror.

She said rather inattentively:

“Lucy has to give the coloratura touch—even to murder.”

“You know, I’d never thought about murder before.”

“Why should you? It isn’t a thing one thinks about. It’s a six-letter word in a crossword, or a pleasant entertainment between the covers of a book. But the real thing—”

She paused. Midge finished:

“Is real. That is what startles one.”

Henrietta said:

“It needn’t be startling to you. You are outside it. Perhaps the only one of us who is.”

Midge said:

“We’re all outside it now. We’ve got away.”

Henrietta murmured: “Have we?”

She was looking in the driving mirror again. Suddenly she put her foot down on the accelerator. The car responded. She glanced at the speedometer. They were doing over fifty. Presently the needle reached sixty.

Midge looked sideways at Henrietta’s profile. It was not like Henrietta to drive recklessly. She liked speed, but the winding road hardly justified the pace they were going. There was a grim smile hovering round Henrietta’s mouth.

She said: “Look over your shoulder, Midge. See that car way back there?”

“Yes?”

“It’s a Ventnor 10.”

“Is it?” Midge was not particularly interested.

“They’re useful little cars, low petrol consumption, keep the road well, but they’re not fast.”

“No?”

Curious, thought Midge, how fascinated Henrietta always was by cars and their performance.

“As I say, they’re not fast—but that car, Midge, has managed to keep its distance although we’ve been going over sixty.”

Midge turned a startled face to her.

“Do you mean that—”

Henrietta nodded. “The police, I believe, have special engines in very ordinary-looking cars.”

Midge said:

“You mean they’re still keeping an eye on us all?”

“It seems rather obvious.”

Midge shivered.

“Henrietta, can you understand the meaning of this second gun business?”

“No, it lets Gerda out. But beyond that it just doesn’t seem to add up to anything.”

“But, if it was one of Henry’s guns—”

“We don’t know that it was. It hasn’t been found yet, remember.”

“No, that’s true. It could be someone outside altogether. Do you know who I’d like to think killed John, Henrietta? That woman.”

“Veronica Cray?”

“Yes.”

Henrietta said nothing. She drove on with her eyes fixed sternly on the road ahead of her.

“Don’t you think it’s possible?” persisted Midge.

“Possible, yes,” said Henrietta slowly.

“Then you don’t think—”

“It’s no good thinking a thing because you want to think it. It’s the perfect solution—letting all of us out!”

“Us? But—”

“We’re in it—all of us. Even you, Midge darling—though they’d be hard put to it to find a motive for your shooting John. Of course I’d like it to be Veronica. Nothing would please me better than to see her giving a lovely performance, as Lucy would put it, in the dock!”

Midge shot a quick look at her.

“Tell me, Henrietta, does it all make you feel vindictive?”

“You mean”—Henrietta paused a moment—“because I loved John?”

“Yes.”

As she spoke, Midge realized with a slight sense of shock that this was the first time the bald fact had been put into words. It had been accepted by them all, by Lucy and Henry, by Midge, by Edward even, that Henrietta loved John Christow, but nobody had ever so much as hinted at the fact in words before.

There was a pause whilst Henrietta seemed to be thinking. Then she said in a thoughtful voice:

“I can’t explain to you what I feel. Perhaps I don’t know myself.”

They were driving now over Albert Bridge.

Henrietta said:

“You’d better come to the studio, Midge. We’ll have tea, and I’ll drive you to your digs afterwards.”

Here in London the short afternoon light was already fading. They drew up at the studio door and Henrietta put her key into the door. She went in and switched on the light.

“It’s chilly,” she said. “We’d better light the gas fire. Oh, bother—I meant to get some matches on the way.”

“Won’t a lighter do?”

“Mine’s no good, and anyway it’s difficult to light a gas fire with one. Make yourself at home. There’s an old blind man stands on the corner. I usually get my matches off him. I shan’t be a minute or two.”

Left alone in the studio, Midge wandered round looking at Henrietta’s work. It gave her an eerie feeling to be sharing the empty studio with these creations of wood and bronze.

There was a bronze head with high cheekbones and a tin hat, possibly a Red Army soldier, and there was an airy structure of twisted ribbonlike aluminium which intrigued her a good deal. There was a vast static frog in pinkish granite, and at the end of the studio she came to an almost life-sized wooden figure.

She was staring at it when Henrietta’s key turned in the door and Henrietta herself came in slightly breathless.

Midge turned.

“What’s this, Henrietta? It’s rather frightening.”

“That? That’s The Worshipper. It’s going to the International Group.”

Midge repeated, staring at it:

“It’s frightening.”

Kneeling to light the gas fire, Henrietta said over her shoulder:

“It’s interesting your saying that. Why do you find it frightening?”

“I think—because it hasn’t any face.”

“How right you are, Midge.”

“It’s very good, Henrietta.”

Henrietta said lightly:

“It’s a nice bit of pearwood.”

She rose from her knees. She tossed her big satchel bag and her furs on to the divan, and threw down a couple of boxes of matches on the table.

Midge was struck by the expression on her face—it had a sudden quite inexplicable exultation.

“Now for tea,” said Henrietta, and in her voice was the same warm jubilation that Midge had already glimpsed in her face.

It struck an almost jarring note—but Midge forgot it in a train of thought aroused by the sight of the two boxes of matches.

“You remember those matches Veronica Cray took away with her?”

“When Lucy insisted on foisting a whole half-dozen on her? Yes.”

“Did anyone ever find out whether she had matches in her cottage all the time?”

“I expect the police did. They’re very thorough.”

A faintly triumphant smile was curving Henrietta’s lips. Midge felt puzzled and almost repelled.

She thought: “Can Henrietta really have cared for John? Can she? Surely not.”

And a faint desolate chill struck through her as she reflected:

“Edward will not have to wait very long….”

Ungenerous of her not to let that thought bring warmth. She wanted Edward to be happy, didn’t she? It wasn’t as though she could have Edward herself. To Edward she would be always “little Midge.” Never more than that. Never a woman to be loved.

Edward, unfortunately, was the faithful kind. Well, the faithful kind usually got what they wanted in the end.

Edward and Henrietta at Ainswick…that was the proper ending to the story. Edward and Henrietta living happy ever afterwards.

She could see it all very clearly.

“Cheer up, Midge,” said Henrietta. “You mustn’t let murder get you down. Shall we go out later and have a spot of dinner together?”

But Midge said quickly that she must get back to her rooms. She had things to do—letters to write. In fact, she’d better go as soon as she’d finished her cup of tea.

“All right. I’ll drive you there.”

“I could get a taxi.”

“Nonsense. Let’s use the car, as it’s there.”

They went out into damp evening air. As they drove past the end of the Mews Henrietta pointed out a car drawn in to the side.

“A Ventnor 10. Our shadow. You’ll see. He’ll follow us.”

“How beastly it all is!”

“Do you think so? I don’t really mind.”

Henrietta dropped Midge at her rooms and came back to the Mews and put her car away in the garage.

Then she let herself into the studio once more.

For some minutes she stood abstractedly drumming with her fingers on the mantelpiece. Then she sighed and murmured to herself:

“Well—to work. Better not waste time.”

She threw off her tweeds and got into her overall.

An hour and a half later she drew back and studied what she had done. There were dabs of clay on her cheek and her hair was dishevelled, but she nodded approval at the model on the stand.

It was the rough similitude of a horse. The clay had been slapped on in great irregular lumps. It was the kind of horse that would have given the colonel of a cavalry regiment apoplexy, so unlike was it to any flesh and blood horse that had ever been foaled. It would also have distressed Henrietta’s Irish hunting forebears. Nevertheless it was a horse—a horse conceived in the abstract.

Henrietta wondered what Inspector Grange would think of it if he ever saw it, and her mouth widened a little in amusement as she pictured his face.

Twenty-four

Edward Angkatell stood hesitantly in the swirl of foot traffic in Shaftesbury Avenue. He was nerving himself to enter the establishment which bore the gold-lettered sign: “Madame Alfrege.”

Some obscure instinct had prevented him from merely ringing up and asking Midge to come out and lunch. That fragment of telephone conversation at The Hollow had disturbed him—more, had shocked him. There had been in Midge’s voice a submission, a subservience that had outraged all his feelings.

For Midge, the free, the cheerful, the outspoken, to have to adopt that attitude. To have to submit, as she clearly was submitting, to rudeness and insolence on the other end of the wire. It was all wrong—the whole thing was wrong! And then, when he had shown his concern, she had met him point-blank with the unpalatable truth that one had to keep one’s job, that jobs weren’t easy to get, and that the holding down of jobs entailed more unpleasantness than the mere performing of a stipulated task.

Up till then Edward had vaguely accepted the fact that a great many young women had “jobs” nowadays. If he had thought about it at all, he had thought that on the whole they had jobs because they liked jobs—that it flattered their sense of independence and gave them an interest of their own in life.

The fact that a working day of nine to six, with an hour off for lunch, cut a girl off from most of the pleasures and relaxations of a leisured class had simply not occurred to Edward. That Midge, unless she sacrificed her lunch hour, could not drop into a picture gallery, that she could not go to an afternoon concert, drive out of town on a fine summer’s day, lunch in a leisurely way at a distant restaurant, but had instead to relegate her excursions into the country to Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and to snatch her lunch in a crowded Lyons or a snack bar, was a new and unwelcome discovery. He was very fond of Midge. Little Midge—that was how he thought of her. Arriving shy and wide-eyed at Ainswick for the holidays, tongue-tied at first, then opening up into enthusiasm and affection.

Edward's tendency to live exclusively in the past, and to accept the present dubiously as something yet untested, had delayed his recognition of Midge as a wage-earning adult.

It was on that evening at The Hollow when he had come in cold and shivering from that strange, upsetting clash with Henrietta, and when Midge had knelt to build up the fire, that he had been first aware of a Midge who was not an affectionate child but a woman. It had been an upsetting vision—he had felt for a moment that he had lost something—something that was a precious part of Ainswick. And he had said impulsively, speaking out of that suddenly aroused feeling, "I wish I saw more of you, little Midge…."

Standing outside in the moonlight, speaking to a Henrietta who was no longer startingly the familiar Henrietta he had loved for so long—he had known sudden panic. And he had come in to a further disturbance of the set pattern which was his life. Little Midge was also a part of Ainswick—and this was no longer little Midge, but a courageous and sad-eyed adult whom he did not know.

Ever since then he had been troubled in his mind, and had indulged in a good deal of self-reproach for the unthinking way in which he had never bothered about Midge's happiness or comfort. The idea of her uncongenial job at Madame Alfrege's had worried him more and more, and he had determined at last to see for himself just what this dress shop of hers was like.

Edward peered suspiciously into the show window at a little black dress with a narrow gold belt, some rakish-looking, skimpy jumper suits, and an evening gown of rather tawdry coloured lace.

Edward knew nothing about women's clothes except by instinct, but had a shrewd idea that all these exhibits were somehow of a meretricious order. No, he thought, this place was not worthy of her. Someone—Lady Angkatell, perhaps—must do something about it.

Overcoming his shyness with an effort, Edward straightened his slightly stooping shoulders and walked in.

He was instantly paralysed with embarrassment. Two platinum blonde little minxes with shrill voices were examining dresses in a showcase, with a dark saleswoman in attendance. At the back of the shop a small woman with a thick nose, henna red hair and a disagreeable voice was arguing with a stout and bewildered customer over some alterations to an evening gown. From an adjacent cubicle a woman's fretful voice was raised.

"Frightful—perfectly frightful—can't you bring me anything decent to try?"

In response he heard the soft murmur of Midge's voice—a deferential, persuasive voice.

"This wine model is really very smart. And I think it would suit you. If you'd just slip it on—"

"I'm not going to waste my time trying on things that I can see are no good. Do take a little trouble. I've told you I don't want reds. If you'd listen to what you are told—"

The colour surged up into Edward's neck. He hoped Midge would throw the dress in the odious woman's face. Instead she murmured:

"I'll have another look. You wouldn't care for green I suppose, Madam? Or this peach?"

"Dreadful—perfectly dreadful! No, I won't see anything more. Sheer waste of time—"

But now Madame Alfrege, detaching herself from the stout customer, had come down to Edward and was looking at him inquiringly.

He pulled himself together.

"Is—could I speak—is Miss Hardcastle here?"

Madame Alfrege’s eyebrows went up, but she took in the Savile Row cut of Edward’s clothes, and she produced a smile whose graciousness was rather more unpleasant than her bad temper would have been.

From inside the cubicle the fretful voice rose sharply.

“Do be careful! How clumsy you are. You’ve torn my hairnet.”

And Midge, her voice unsteady:

“I’m very sorry, Madam.”

“Stupid clumsiness.” (The voice appeared muffled.) “No, I’ll do it myself. My belt, please.”

“Miss Hardcastle will be free in a minute,” said Madame Alfrege. Her smile was now a leer.

A sandy-haired, bad-tempered-looking woman emerged from the cubicle carrying several parcels and went out into the street. Midge, in a severe black dress, opened the door for her. She looked pale and unhappy.

“I’ve come to take you out to lunch,” said Edward without preamble.

Midge gave a harried glance up at the clock.

“I don’t get off until quarter past one,” she began.

It was ten past one.

Madame Alfrege said graciously:

“You can go off now if you like, Miss Hardcastle, as your friend has called for you.”

Midge murmured: “Oh thank you, Madame Alfrege,” and to Edward: “I’ll be ready in a minute,” and disappeared into the back of the shop.

Edward, who had winced under the impact of Madame Alfrege's heavy emphasis on "friend," stood helplessly waiting.

Madame Alfrege was just about to enter into arch conversation with him when the door opened and an opulent-looking woman with a Pekinese came in, and Madame Alfrege's business instincts took her forward to the newcomer.

Midge reappeared with her coat on, and taking her by the elbow, Edward steered her out of the shop into the street.

"My God," he said, "is that the sort of thing you have to put up with? I heard that damned woman talking to you behind the curtain. How can you stick it, Midge? Why didn't you throw the damned frocks at her head?"

"I'd soon lose my job if I did things like that."

"But don't you want to fling things at a woman of that kind?"

Midge drew a deep breath.

"Of course I do. And there are times, especially at the end of a hot week during the summer sales, when I am afraid that one day I shall let go and just tell everyone exactly where they get off—instead of 'Yes, Madam,' 'No, Madam'—'I'll see if we have anything else, Madam.'"

"Midge, dear little Midge, you can't put up with all this!"

Midge laughed a little shakily.

"Don't be upset, Edward. Why on earth did you have to come here? Why not ring up?"

"I wanted to see for myself. I've been worried." He paused and then broke out, "Why, Lucy wouldn't talk to a scullery maid the way that woman talked to you. It's all wrong that you should have to put up with insolence and rudeness. Good God, Midge, I'd like to take you right out of it all down to Ainswick. I'd like to hail a taxi, bundle you into it, and take you down to Ainswick now by the 2:15."

Midge stopped. Her assumed nonchalance fell from her. She had had a long tiring morning with trying customers, and Madame at her most bullying. She turned on Edward with a sudden flare of resentment.

“Well, then, why don’t you? There are plenty of taxis!”

He stared at her, taken aback by her sudden fury. She went on, her anger flaming up:

“Why do you have to come along and say these things? You don’t mean them. Do you think it makes it any easier after I’ve had the hell of a morning to be reminded that there are places like Ainswick? Do you think I’m grateful to you for standing there and babbling about how much you’d like to take me out of it all? All very sweet and insincere. You don’t really mean a word of it. Don’t you know that I’d sell my soul to catch the 2:15 to Ainswick and get away from everything? I can’t bear even to think of Ainswick, do you understand? You mean well, Edward, but you’re cruel! Saying things—just saying things….”

They faced each other, seriously incommoding the lunchtime crowd in Shaftesbury Avenue. Yet they were conscious of nothing but each other. Edward was staring at her like a man suddenly aroused from sleep.

He said: “All right then, damn it. You’re coming to Ainswick by the 2:15!”

He raised his stick and hailed a passing taxi. It drew into the kerb. Edward opened the door, and Midge, slightly dazed, got in. Edward said: “Paddington Station” to the driver and followed her in.

They sat in silence. Midge’s lips were set together. Her eyes were defiant and mutinous. Edward stared straight ahead of him.

As they waited for the traffic lights in Oxford Street, Midge said disagreeably:

“I seem to have called your bluff.”

Edward said shortly:

"It wasn't bluff."

The taxi started forward again with a jerk.

It was not until the taxi turned left in Edgware Road into Cambridge Terrace that Edward suddenly regained his normal attitude to life.

He said: "We can't catch the 2:15," and tapping on the glass he said to the driver: "Go to the Berkeley."

Midge said coldly: "Why can't we catch the 2:15? It's only twenty-five past one now."

Edward smiled at her.

"You haven't got any luggage, little Midge. No nightgowns or toothbrushes or country shoes. There's a 4:15, you know. We'll have some lunch now and talk things over."

Midge sighed.

"That's so like you, Edward. To remember the practical side. Impulse doesn't carry you very far, does it? Oh, well, it was a nice dream while it lasted."

She slipped her hand into his and gave him her old smile.

"I'm sorry I stood on the pavement and abused you like a fish-wife," she said. "But you know, Edward, you were irritating."

"Yes," he said. "I must have been."

They went into the Berkeley happily side by side. They got a table by the window and Edward ordered an excellent lunch.

As they finished their chicken, Midge sighed and said: "I ought to hurry back to the shop. My time's up."

"You're going to take decent time over your lunch today, even if I have to go back and buy half the clothes in the shop!"

"Dear Edward, you are really rather sweet."

They ate Crêpes Suzette, and then the waiter brought them coffee. Edward stirred his sugar in with his spoon.

He said gently:

"You really do love Ainswick, don't you?"

"Must we talk about Ainswick? I've survived not catching the 2:15—and I quite realize that there isn't any question of the 4:15—but don't rub it in."

Edward smiled. "No, I'm not proposing that we catch the 4:15. But I am suggesting that you come to Ainswick, Midge. I'm suggesting that you come there for good—that is, if you can put up with me."

She stared at him over the rim of her coffee cup—put it down with a hand that she managed to keep steady.

"What do you really mean, Edward?"

"I'm suggesting that you should marry me, Midge. I don't suppose that I'm a very romantic proposition. I'm a dull dog, I know that, and not much good at anything. I just read books and potter around. But although I'm not a very exciting person, we've known each other a long time and I think that Ainswick itself would—well, would compensate. I think you'd be happy at Ainswick, Midge. Will you come?"

Midge swallowed once or twice, then she said:

"But I thought—Henrietta—" and stopped.

Edward said, his voice level and unemotional:

"Yes, I've asked Henrietta to marry me three times. Each time she has refused. Henrietta knows what she doesn't want."

There was a silence, and then Edward said:

“Well, Midge dear, what about it?”

Midge looked up at him. There was a catch in her voice. She said:

“It seems so extraordinary—to be offered heaven on a plate as it were, at the Berkeley!”

His face lighted up. He laid his hand over hers for a brief moment.

“Heaven on a plate,” he said. “So you feel like that about Ainswick. Oh, Midge, I’m glad.”

They sat there happily. Edward paid the bill and added an enormous tip. The people in the restaurant were thinning out. Midge said with an effort:

“We’ll have to go. I suppose I’d better go back to Madame Alfrege. After all, she’s counting on me. I can’t just walk out.”

“No, I suppose you’ll have to go back and resign or hand in your notice or whatever you call it. You’re not to go on working there, though. I won’t have it. But first I thought we’d better go to one of those shops in Bond Street where they sell rings.”

“Rings?”

“It’s usual, isn’t it?”

Midge laughed.

In the dimmed lighting of the jeweller’s shop, Midge and Edward bent over trays of sparkling engagement rings, whilst a discreet salesman watched them benignantly.

Edward said, pushing away a velvet-covered tray:

“Not emeralds.”

Henrietta in green tweeds—Henrietta in an evening dress like Chinese jade….

No, not emeralds.

Midge pushed away the tiny stabbing pain at her heart.

“Choose for me,” she said to Edward.

He bent over the tray before them. He picked out a ring with a single diamond. Not a very large stone, but a stone of beautiful colour and fire.

“I’d like this.”

Midge nodded. She loved this display of Edward’s unerring and fastidious taste. She slipped it on her finger as Edward and the shopman drew aside.

Edward wrote out a cheque for three hundred and forty-two pounds and came back to Midge smiling.

He said: “Let’s go and be rude to Madame Alfrege.”

Twenty-five

“But, darling, I am so delighted!”

Lady Angkatell stretched out a fragile hand to Edward and touched Midge softly with the other.

“You did quite right, Edward, to make her leave that horrid shop and bring her right down here. She’ll stay here, of course, and be married from here. St. George’s, you know, three miles by the road, though only a mile through the woods, but then one doesn’t go to a wedding through woods. And I suppose it will have to be the vicar—poor man, he has such dreadful colds in the head every autumn. The curate, now, has one of those high Anglican voices, and the whole thing would be far more impressive—and more religious, too, if you know what I mean. It is so hard to keep one’s mind reverent when somebody is saying things through their noses.”

It was, Midge decided, a very Lucyish reception. It made her want to both laugh and cry.

“I’d love to be married from here, Lucy,” she said.

“Then that’s settled, darling. Off-white satin, I think, and an ivory prayer book—not a bouquet. Bridesmaids?”

“No. I don’t want a fuss. Just a very quiet wedding.”

“I know what you mean, darling, and I think perhaps you are right. With an autumn wedding it’s nearly always chrysanthemums—such an uninspiring flower, I always think. And unless one takes a lot of time to choose them carefully bridesmaids never match properly, and there’s nearly always one terribly plain one who ruins the whole effect—but one has to have her because she’s usually the bridegroom’s sister. But of course—” Lady Angkatell beamed, “Edward hasn’t got any sisters.”

“That seems to be one point in my favour,” said Edward, smiling.

“But children are really the worst at weddings,” went on Lady Angkatell, happily pursuing her own train of thought. “Everyone says: ‘How sweet!’ but, my dear, the anxiety! They step on the train, or else they howl for Nannie, and quite often they’re sick. I always wonder how a girl can go up the aisle in a proper frame of mind, while she’s so uncertain about what is happening behind her.”

“There needn’t be anything behind me,” said Midge cheerfully. “Not even a train. I can be married in a coat and skirt.”

“Oh, no, Midge, that’s so like a widow. No, off-white satin and not from Madame Alfrege’s.”

“Certainly not from Madame Alfrege’s,” said Edward.

“I shall take you to Mireille,” said Lady Angkatell.

“My dear Lucy, I can’t possibly afford Mireille.”

“Nonsense, Midge. Henry and I are going to give you your trousseau. And Henry, of course, will give you away. I do hope the band of his trousers won’t be too tight. It’s nearly two years since he last went to a wedding. And I shall wear—”

Lady Angkatell paused and closed her eyes.

“Yes, Lucy?”

“Hydrangea blue,” announced Lady Angkatell in a rapt voice. “I suppose, Edward, you will have one of your own friends for best man, otherwise, of course, there is David. I cannot help feeling it would be frightfully good for David. It would give him poise, you know, and he would feel we all liked him. That, I am sure, is very important with David. It must be disheartening, you know, to feel you are clever and intellectual and yet nobody likes you any the better for it! But of course it would be rather a risk. He would probably lose the ring, or drop it at the last minute. I expect it would worry Edward too much. But it would be nice in a way to keep it to the same people we’ve had here for the murder.”

Lady Angkatell uttered the last few words in the most conversational of tones.

“Lady Angkatell has been entertaining a few friends for a murder this autumn,” Midge could not help saying.

“Yes,” said Lucy meditatively. “I suppose it did sound like that. A party for the shooting. You know, when you come to think of it, that’s just what it has been!”

Midge gave a faint shiver and said:

“Well, at any rate, it’s over now.”

“It’s not exactly over—the inquest was only adjourned. And that nice Inspector Grange has got men all over the place simply crashing through the chestnut woods and startling all the pheasants, and springing up like jacks in the box in the most unlikely places.”

“What are they looking for?” asked Edward. “The revolver that Christow was shot with?”

“I imagine that must be it. They even came to the house with a search warrant. The inspector was most apologetic about it, quite shy, but of course I told him we should be delighted. It was really most interesting. They looked absolutely everywhere. I followed them round, you know, and I suggested one or two places which even they hadn’t thought of. But they didn’t find anything. It was most disappointing. Poor Inspector Grange, he is growing quite thin and he pulls and pulls at that moustache of his. His wife ought to give him specially nourishing meals with all this worry he is having—but I have a vague idea that she must be one of those women who care more about having the linoleum really well polished than in cooking a tasty little meal. Which reminds me, I must go and see Mrs. Medway. Funny how servants cannot bear the police. Her cheese soufflé last night was quite uneatable. Soufflés and pastry always show if one is off balance. If it weren’t for Gudgeon keeping them all together I really believe half the servants would leave. Why don’t you two go and have a nice walk and help the police look for the revolver?”

Hercule Poirot sat on the bench overlooking the chestnut groves above the pool. He had no sense of trespassing since Lady Angkatell had very sweetly begged him to wander where he would at any time. It was Lady Angkatell's sweetness which Hercule Poirot was considering at this moment.

From time to time he heard the cracking of twigs in the woods above or caught sight of a figure moving through the chestnut groves below him.

Presently Henrietta came along the path from the direction of the lane. She stopped for a moment when she saw Poirot, then she came and sat down by him.

"Good morning, M. Poirot. I have just been to call upon you. But you were out. You look very Olympian. Are you presiding over the hunt? The inspector seems very active. What are they looking for, the revolver?"

"Yes, Miss Savernake."

"Will they find it, do you think?"

"I think so. Quite soon now, I should say."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Have you an idea, then, where it is?"

"No. But I think it will be found soon. It is time for it to be found."

"You do say odd things, M. Poirot!"

"Odd things happen here. You have come back very soon from London, Mademoiselle."

Her face hardened. She gave a short, bitter laugh.

"The murderer returns to the scene of the crime? That is the old superstition, isn't it? So you do think that I—did it! You don't believe me when I tell you that I wouldn't—that I couldn't kill anybody?"

Poirot did not answer at once. At last he said thoughtfully:

“It has seemed to me from the beginning that either this crime was very simple—so simple that it was difficult to believe its simplicity (and simplicity, Mademoiselle, can be strangely baffling) or else it was extremely complex. That is to say, we were contending against a mind capable of intricate and ingenious inventions, so that every time we seemed to be heading for the truth, we were actually being led on a trail that twisted away from the truth and led us to a point which—ended in nothingness. This apparent futility, this continual barrenness, is not real—it is artificial, it is planned. A very subtle and ingenious mind is plotting against us the whole time—and succeeding.”

“Well?” said Henrietta. “What has that to do with me?”

“The mind that is plotting against us is a creative mind, Mademoiselle.”

“I see—that’s where I come in?”

She was silent, her lips set together bitterly. From her jacket pocket she had taken a pencil and now she was idly drawing the outline of a fantastic tree on the white painted wood of the bench, frowning as she did so.

Poirot watched her. Something stirred in his mind—standing in Lady Angkatell’s drawing room on the afternoon of the crime, looking down at a pile of bridge markers, standing by a painted iron table in the pavilion the next morning, and a question that he had put to Gudgeon.

He said:

“That is what you drew on your bridge marker—a tree.”

“Yes.” Henrietta seemed suddenly aware of what she was doing. “Ygdrasil, M. Poirot.” She laughed.

“Why do you call it Ygdrasil?”

She explained the origin of Ygdrasil.

"And so, when you 'doodle' (that is the word, is it not?) it is always Ygdrasil you draw?"

"Yes. Doodling is a funny thing, isn't it?"

"Here on the seat—on the bridge marker on Saturday evening—in the pavilion on Sunday morning…."

The hand that held the pencil stiffened and stopped. She said in a tone of careless amusement:

"In the pavilion?"

"Yes, on the round iron table there."

"Oh, that must have been on—on Saturday afternoon."

"It was not on Saturday afternoon. When Gudgeon brought the glasses out to the pavilion about twelve o'clock on Sunday morning, there was nothing drawn on the table. I asked him and he is quite definite about that."

"Then it must have been"—she hesitated for just a moment—"of course, on Sunday afternoon."

But still smiling pleasantly, Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"I think not. Grange's men were at the pool all Sunday afternoon, photographing the body, getting the revolver out of the water. They did not leave until dusk. They would have seen anyone go into the pavilion."

Henrietta said slowly:

"I remember now. I went along there quite late in the evening—after dinner."

Poirot's voice came sharply:

"People do not 'doodle' in the dark, Miss Savernake. Are you telling me that you went into the pavilion at night and stood by a table and drew a tree without being able to see what you were drawing?”

Henrietta said calmly: “I am telling you the truth. Naturally you don’t believe it. You have your own ideas. What is your idea, by the way?”

“I am suggesting that you were in the pavilion on Sunday morning after twelve o’clock when Gudgeon brought the glasses out. That you stood by that table watching someone, or waiting for someone, and unconsciously took out a pencil and drew Ygdrasil without being fully aware of what you were doing.”

“I was not in the pavilion on Sunday morning. I sat out on the terrace for a while, then I got the gardening basket and went up to the dahlia border and cut off heads and tied up some of the Michaelmas daisies that were untidy. Then just on one o’clock I went along to the pool. I’ve been through it all with Inspector Grange. I never came near the pool until one o’clock, just after John had been shot.”

“That,” said Hercule Poirot, “is your story. But Ygdrasil, Mademoiselle, testifies against you.”

“I was in the pavilion and I shot John, that’s what you mean?”

“You were there and you shot Dr. Christow, or you were there and you saw who shot Dr. Christow—or someone else was there who knew about Ygdrasil and deliberately drew it on the table to put suspicion on you.”

Henrietta got up. She turned on him with her chin lifted.

“You still think that I shot John Christow. You think that you can prove I shot him. Well, I will tell you this. You will never prove it. Never!”

“You think that you are cleverer than I am?”

“You will never prove it,” said Henrietta, and, turning, she walked away down the winding path that led to the swimming pool.

Twenty-six

Grange came in to Resthaven to drink a cup of tea with Hercule Poirot. The tea was exactly what he had had apprehensions it might be—extremely weak and China tea at that.

“These foreigners,” thought Grange, “don’t know how to make tea. You can’t teach ’em.” But he did not mind much. He was in a condition of pessimism when one more thing that was unsatisfactory actually afforded him a kind of grim satisfaction.

He said: “The adjourned inquest’s the day after tomorrow and where have we got? Nowhere at all. What the hell, that gun must be somewhere! It’s this damned country—miles of woods. It would take an army to search them properly. Talk of a needle in a haystack. It may be anywhere. The fact is, we’ve got to face up to it—we may never find that gun.”

“You will find it,” said Poirot confidently.

“Well, it won’t be for want of trying!”

“You will find it, sooner or later. And I should say sooner. Another cup of tea?”

“I don’t mind if I do—no, no hot water.”

“Is it not too strong?”

“Oh, no, it’s not too strong.” The inspector was conscious of understatement.

Gloomily he sipped at the pale, straw-coloured beverage.

“This case is making a monkey of me, M. Poirot—a monkey of me! I can’t get the hang of these people. They seem helpful—but everything they tell you seems to lead you away on a wild-goose chase.”

“Away?” said Poirot. A startled look came into his eyes. “Yes, I see. Away….”

The inspector was now developing his grievance.

“Take the gun now. Christow was shot—according to the medical evidence—only a minute or two before your arrival. Lady Angkatell had that egg basket, Miss Savernake had a gardening basket full of dead flower heads, and Edward Angkatell was wearing a loose shooting coat with large pockets stuffed with cartridges. Any one of them could have carried the revolver away with them. It wasn’t hidden anywhere near the pool—my men have raked the place, so that’s definitely out.”

Poirot nodded. Grange went on:

“Gerda Christow was framed—but who by? That’s where every clue I follow seems to vanish into thin air.”

“Their stories of how they spent the morning are satisfactory?”

“The stories are all right. Miss Savernake was gardening. Lady Angkatell was collecting eggs. Edward Angkatell and Sir Henry were shooting and separated at the end of the morning—Sir Henry coming back to the house and Edward Angkatell coming down here through the woods. The young fellow was up in his bedroom reading. (Funny place to read on a nice day, but he’s the indoor, bookish kind.) Miss Hardcastle took a book down to the orchard. All sounds very natural and likely, and there’s no means of checking up on it. Gudgeon took a tray of glasses out to the pavilion about twelve o’clock. He can’t say where any of the house party were or what they were doing. In a way, you know, there’s something against almost all of them.”

“Really?”

“Of course the most obvious person is Veronica Cray. She had quarrelled with Christow, she hated his guts, she’s quite likely to have shot him—but I can’t find the least iota of proof that she did shoot him. No evidence as to her having had any opportunity to pinch the revolvers from Sir Henry’s collection. No one who saw her going to or from the pool that day. And the missing revolver definitely isn't in her possession now."

"Ah, you have made sure of that?"

"What do you think? The evidence would have justified a search warrant but there was no need. She was quite gracious about it. It's not anywhere in that tin-pot bungalow. After the inquest was adjourned we made a show of letting up on Miss Cray and Miss Savernake, and we've had a tail on them to see where they went and what they'd do. We've had a man on at the film studios watching Veronica—no sign of her trying to ditch the gun there."

"And Henrietta Savernake?"

"Nothing there either. She went straight back to Chelsea and we've kept an eye on her ever since. The revolver isn't in her studio or in her possession. She was quite pleasant about the search—seemed amused. Some of her fancy stuff gave our man quite a turn. He said it beat him why people wanted to do that kind of thing—statues all lumps and swellings, bits of brass and aluminum twisted into fancy shapes, horses that you wouldn't know were horses."

Poirot stirred a little.

"Horses, you say?"

"Well, a horse. If you'd call it a horse! If people want to model a horse, why don't they go and look at a horse!"

"A horse," repeated Poirot.

Grange turned his head.

"What is there about that that interests you so, M. Poirot? I don't get it."

"Association—a point of the psychology."

"Word association? Horse and cart? Rocking horse? Clothes horse. No, I don't get it. Anyway, after a day or two, Miss Savernake packs up and comes down here again. You know that?”

“Yes, I have talked with her and I have seen her walking in the woods.”

“Restless, yes. Well, she was having an affair with the doctor all right, and his saying: ‘Henrietta’ as he died is pretty near to an accusation. But it’s not quite near enough, M. Poirot.”

“No,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “it is not near enough.”

Grange said heavily:

“There’s something in the atmosphere here—it gets you all tangled up! It’s as though they all knew something. Lady Angkatell now—she’s never been able to put out a decent reason why she took out a gun with her that day. It’s a crazy thing to do—sometimes I think she is crazy.”

Poirot shook his head very gently.

“No,” he said, “she is not crazy.”

“Then there’s Edward Angkatell. I thought I was getting something on him. Lady Angkatell said—no, hinted—that he’d been in love with Miss Savernake for years. Well, that gives him a motive. And now I find it’s the other girl—Miss Hardcastle—that he’s engaged to. So bang goes the case against him.”

Poirot gave a sympathetic murmur.

“Then there’s the young fellow,” pursued the inspector. “Lady Angkatell let slip something about him. His mother, it seems, died in an asylum—persecution mania—thought everybody was conspiring to kill her. Well, you can see what that might mean. If the boy had inherited that particular strain of insanity, he might have got ideas into his head about Dr. Christow—might have fancied the doctor was planning to certify him. Not that Christow was that kind of doctor. Nervous affections of the alimentary canal and diseases of the super—super something. That was Christow’s line. But if the boy was a bit touched, he might imagine Christow was here to keep him under observation. He’s got an extraordinary manner, that young fellow, nervous as a cat.”

Grange sat unhappily for a moment or two.

“You see what I mean? All vague suspicions, leading nowhere.”

Poirot stirred again. He murmured softly:

“Away—not towards. From, not to. Nowhere instead of somewhere… Yes, of course, that must be it.”

Grange stared at him. He said:

“They’re queer, all these Angkatells. I’d swear, sometimes, that they know all about it.”

Poirot said quietly:

“They do.”

“You mean, they know, all of them, who did it?” the inspector asked incredulously.

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, they know. I have thought so for some time. I am quite sure now.”

“I see.” The inspector’s face was grim. “And they’re hiding it up between them? Well, I’ll beat them yet. I’m going to find that gun.”

It was, Poirot reflected, quite the inspector’s theme song.

Grange went on with rancour:

“I’d give anything to get even with them.”

“With—”

"All of them! Muddling me up! Suggesting things! Hinting! Helping my men—helping them! All gossamer and spiders' webs, nothing tangible. What I want is a good solid fact!"

Hercule Poirot had been staring out of the window for some moments. His eye had been attracted by an irregularity in the symmetry of his domain.

He said now:

"You want a solid fact? Eh bien, unless I am much mistaken, there is a solid fact in the hedge by my gate."

They went down the garden path. Grange went down on his knees, coaxed the twigs apart till he disclosed more fully the thing that had been thrust between them. He drew a deep sigh as something black and steel was revealed.

He said: "It's a revolver all right."

Just for a moment his eye rested doubtfully on Poirot.

"No, no, my friend," said Poirot. "I did not shoot Dr. Christow and I did not put the revolver in my own hedge."

"Of course you didn't, M. Poirot! Sorry! Well, we've got it. Looks like the one missing from Sir Henry's study. We can verify that as soon as we get the number. Then we'll see if it was the gun that shot Christow. Easy does it now."

With infinite care and the use of a silk handkerchief he eased the gun out of the hedge.

"To give us a break, we want fingerprints. I've a feeling, you know, that our luck's changed at last."

"Let me know."

"Of course I will, M. Poirot. I'll ring you up."

Poirot received two telephone calls. The first came through that same evening. The inspector was jubilant.

“That you, M. Poirot? Well, here’s the dope. It’s the gun all right. The gun missing from Sir Henry’s collection and the gun that shot John Christow! That’s definite. And there are a good set of prints on it. Thumb, first finger, part of middle finger. Didn’t I tell you our luck had changed?”

“You have identified the fingerprints?”

“Not yet. They’re certainly not Mrs. Christow’s. We took hers. They look more like a man’s than a woman’s for size. Tomorrow I’m going along to The Hollow to speak my little piece and get a sample from everyone. And then, M. Poirot, we shall know where we are!”

“I hope so, I am sure,” said Poirot politely.

The second telephone call came through on the following day and the voice that spoke was no longer jubilant. In tones of unmitigated gloom, Grange said:

“Want to hear the latest? Those fingerprints aren’t the prints of anybody connected with the case! No, sir! They’re not Edward Angkatell’s, nor David’s, nor Sir Henry’s! They’re not Gerda Christow’s, nor the Savernake’s, nor our Veronica’s, nor her ladyship’s, nor the little dark girl’s! They’re not even the kitchen maid’s—let alone any of the other servants’!”

Poirot made consoling noises. The sad voice of Inspector Grange went on:

“So it looks as though, after all, it was an outside job. Someone, that is to say, who had a down on Dr. Christow and who we don’t know anything about. Someone invisible and inaudible who pinched the guns from the study, and who went away after the shooting by the path to the lane. Someone who put the gun in your hedge and then vanished into thin air!”

“Would you like my fingerprints, my friend?”

“I don’t mind if I do! It strikes me, M. Poirot, that you were on the spot, and that taking it all round you’re far and away the most suspicious character in the case!”

Twenty-seven

I

The coroner cleared his throat and looked expectantly at the foreman of the jury.

The latter looked down at the piece of paper he held in his hand. His Adam's apple wagged up and down excitedly. He read out in a careful voice:

"We find that the deceased came to his death by wilful murder by some person or persons unknown."

Poirot nodded his head quietly in his corner by the wall. There could be no other possible verdict.

Outside the Angkatells stopped a moment to talk to Gerda and her sister. Gerda was wearing the same black clothes. Her face had the same dazed, unhappy expression. This time there was no Daimler. The train service, Elsie Patterson explained, was really very good. A fast train to Waterloo and they could easily catch the 1:20 to Bexhill.

Lady Angkatell, clasping Gerda's hand, murmured:

"You must keep in touch with us, my dear. A little lunch, perhaps, one day in London? I expect you come up to do shopping occasionally."

"I—I don't know," said Gerda.

Elsie Patterson said:

"We must hurry, dear, our train," and Gerda turned away with an expression of relief.

Midge said:

"Poor Gerda. The only thing John's death has done for her is to set her free from your terrifying hospitality, Lucy."

"How unkind you are, Midge. Nobody could say I didn't try."

"You are much worse when you try, Lucy."

"Well, it's very nice to think it's all over, isn't it?" said Lady Angkatell, beaming at them. "Except, of course, for poor Inspector Grange. I do feel so sorry for him. Would it cheer him up, do you think, if we asked him back to lunch? As a friend, I mean."

"I should let well alone, Lucy," said Sir Henry.

"Perhaps you are right," said Lady Angkatell meditatively. "And anyway it isn't the right kind of lunch today. Partridges au Choux—and that delicious Soufflé Surprise that Mrs. Medway makes so well. Not at all Inspector Grange's kind of lunch. A really good steak, a little underdone, and a good old-fashioned apple tart with no nonsense about it—or perhaps apple dumplings—that's what I should order for Inspector Grange."

"Your instincts about food are always very sound, Lucy. I think we had better get home to those partridges. They sound delicious."

"Well, I thought we ought to have some celebration. It's wonderful, isn't it, how everything always seems to turn out for the best?"

"Ye-es."

"I know what you're thinking, Henry, but don't worry. I shall attend to it this afternoon."

"What are you up to now, Lucy?"

Lady Angkatell smiled at him.

"It's quite all right, darling. Just tucking in a loose end."

Sir Henry looked at her doubtfully.

When they reached The Hollow, Gudgeon came out to open the door of the car.

“Everything went off very satisfactorily, Gudgeon,” said Lady Angkatell. “Please tell Mrs. Medway and the others. I know how unpleasant it has been for you all, and I should like to tell you now how much Sir Henry and I have appreciated the loyalty you have all shown.”

“We have been deeply concerned for you, my lady,” said Gudgeon.

“Very sweet of Gudgeon,” said Lucy as she went into the drawing room, “but really quite wasted. I have really almost enjoyed it all—so different, you know, from what one is accustomed to. Don’t you feel, David, that an experience like this has broadened your mind? It must be so different from Cambridge.”

“I am at Oxford,” said David coldly.

Lady Angkatell said vaguely: “The dear Boat Race. So English, don’t you think?” and went towards the telephone.

She picked up the receiver and, holding it in her hand, she went on:

“I do hope, David, that you will come and stay with us again. It’s so difficult, isn’t it, to get to know people when there is a murder? And quite impossible to have any really intellectual conversation.”

“Thank you,” said David. “But when I come down I am going to Athens—to the British School.”

Lady Angkatell turned to her husband.

“Who’s got the Embassy now? Oh, of course. Hope-Remmington. No, I don’t think David would like them. Those girls of theirs are so terribly hearty. They play hockey and cricket and the funny game where you catch the thing in a net.”

She broke off, looking down at the telephone receiver.

“Now, what am I doing with this thing?”

“Perhaps you were going to ring someone up,” said Edward.

“I don’t think so.” She replaced it. “Do you like telephones, David?”

It was the sort of question, David reflected irritably, that she would ask; one to which there could be no intelligent answer. He replied coldly that he supposed they were useful.

“You mean,” said Lady Angkatell, “like mincing machines? Or elastic bands? All the same, one wouldn’t—”

She broke off as Gudgeon appeared in the doorway to announce lunch.

“But you like partridges,” said Lady Angkatell to David anxiously.

David admitted that he liked partridges.

“Sometimes I think Lucy really is a bit touched,” said Midge as she and Edward strolled away from the house and up towards the woods.

The partridges and the Soufflé Surprise had been excellent, and with the inquest over a weight had lifted from the atmosphere.

Edward said thoughtfully:

“I always think Lucy has a brilliant mind that expresses itself like a missing word competition. To mix metaphors—the hammer jumps from nail to nail and never fails to hit each one squarely on the head.”

“All the same,” Midge said soberly, “Lucy frightens me sometimes.” She added, with a tiny shiver: “This place has frightened me lately.”

“The Hollow?”

Edward turned an astonished face to her.

“It always reminds me a little of Ainswick,” he said. “It’s not, of course, the real thing—”

Midge interrupted:

“That’s just it, Edward. I’m frightened of things that aren’t the real thing. You don’t know, you see, what’s behind them. It’s like—oh, it’s like a mask.”

“You mustn’t be fanciful, little Midge.”

It was the old tone, the indulgent tone he had used years ago. She had liked it then, but now it disturbed her. She struggled to make her meaning clear—to show him that behind what he called fancy, was some shape of dimly apprehended reality.

“I got away from it in London, but now that I’m back here it all comes over me again. I feel that everyone knows who killed John Christow. That the only person who doesn’t know—is me.”

Edward said irritably:

“Must we think and talk about John Christow? He’s dead. Dead and gone.”

Midge murmured:

“He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone.

At his head a grass green turf,

At his heels a stone.”

She put her hand on Edward’s arm. “Who did kill him, Edward? We thought it was Gerda—but it wasn’t Gerda. Then who was it? Tell me what you think? Was it someone we’ve never heard of?”

He said irritably:

"All this speculation seems to me quite unprofitable. If the police can't find out, or can't get sufficient evidence, then the whole thing will have to be allowed to drop—and we shall be rid of it."

"Yes—but it's the not knowing."

"Why should we want to know? What has John Christow to do with us?"

With us, she thought, with Edward and me? Nothing! Comforting thought—she and Edward, linked, a dual entity. And yet—and yet—John Christow, for all that he had been laid in his grave and the words of the burial service read over him, was not buried deep enough. He is dead and gone, lady—But John Christow was not dead and gone—for all that Edward wished him to be. John Christow was still here at The Hollow.

Edward said: "Where are we going?"

Something in his tone surprised her. She said:

"Let's walk up on to the top of the ridge. Shall we?"

"If you like."

For some reason he was unwilling. She wondered why. It was usually his favourite walk. He and Henrietta used nearly always—Her thought snapped and broke off. He and Henrietta! She said: "Have you been this way yet this autumn?"

He said stiffly:

"Henrietta and I walked up here that first afternoon." They went on in silence.

They came at last to the top and sat on the fallen tree.

Midge thought: "He and Henrietta sat here, perhaps."

She turned the ring on her finger round and round. The diamond flashed coldly at her. ("Not emeralds," he had said.)

She said with a slight effort:

“It will be lovely to be at Ainswick again for Christmas.”

He did not seem to hear her. He had gone far away.

She thought: “He is thinking of Henrietta and of John Christow.”

Sitting here he had said something to Henrietta or she had said something to him. Henrietta might know what she didn’t want, but he belonged to Henrietta still. He always would, Midge thought, belong to Henrietta….

Pain swooped down upon her. The happy bubble world in which she had lived for the last week quivered and broke.

She thought: “I can’t live like that—with Henrietta always there in his mind. I can’t face it. I can’t bear it.”

The wind sighed through the trees—the leaves were falling fast now—there was hardly any golden left, only brown.

She said: “Edward!”

The urgency of her voice aroused him. He turned his head.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, Edward.” Her lips were trembling but she forced her voice to be quiet and self-controlled. “I’ve got to tell you. It’s no use. I can’t marry you. It wouldn’t work, Edward.”

He said: “But, Midge—surely Ainswick—”

She interrupted:

“I can’t marry you just for Ainswick, Edward. You—you must see that.”

He sighed then, a long gentle sigh. It was like an echo of the dead leaves slipping gently off the branches of the trees.

"I see what you mean," he said. "Yes, I suppose you are right."

"It was dear of you to ask me, dear and sweet. But it wouldn't do, Edward. It wouldn't work."

She had had a faint hope, perhaps, that he would argue with her, that he would try to persuade her, but he seemed, quite simply, to feel just as she did about it. Here, with the ghost of Henrietta close beside him, he too, apparently, saw that it couldn't work.

"No," he said, echoing her words, "it wouldn't work."

She slipped the ring off her finger and held it out to him.

She would always love Edward and Edward would always love Henrietta and life was just plain unadulterated hell.

She said with a little catch in her voice:

"It's a lovely ring, Edward."

"I wish you'd keep it, Midge. I'd like you to have it."

She shook her head.

"I couldn't do that."

He said with a faint, humorous twist of the lips:

"I shan't give it to anyone else, you know."

It was all quite friendly. He didn't know—he would never know—just what she was feeling. Heaven on a plate—and the plate was broken and heaven had slipped between her fingers or had, perhaps, never been there.

II

That afternoon, Poirot received his third visitor.

He had been visited by Henrietta Savernake and Veronica Cray. This time it was Lady Angkatell. She came floating up the path with her usual appearance of insubstantiality.

He opened the door and she stood smiling at him.

“I have come to see you,” she announced.

So might a fairy confer a favour on a mere mortal.

“I am enchanted, Madame.”

He led the way into the sitting room. She sat down on the sofa and once more she smiled.

Hercule Poirot thought: “She is old—her hair is grey—there are lines in her face. Yet she has magic—she will always have magic….”

Lady Angkatell said softly:

“I want you to do something for me.”

“Yes, Lady Angkatell?”

“To begin with, I must talk to you—about John Christow.”

“About Dr. Christow?”

“Yes. It seems to me that the only thing to do is to put a full stop to the whole thing. You understand what I mean, don’t you?”

“I am not sure that I do know what you mean, Lady Angkatell.”

She gave him her lovely dazzling smile again and she put one long white hand on his sleeve.

“Dear M. Poirot, you know perfectly. The police will have to hunt about for the owner of those fingerprints and they won’t find him, and they’ll have, in the end, to let the whole thing drop. But I'm afraid, you know, that you won't let it drop."

"No, I shall not let it drop," said Hercule Poirot.

"That is just what I thought. And that is why I came. It's the truth you want, isn't it?"

"Certainly I want the truth."

"I see I haven't explained myself very well. I'm trying to find out just why you won't let things drop. It isn't because of your prestige—or because you want to hang a murderer (such an unpleasant kind of death, I've always thought—so mediæval). It's just, I think, that you want to know. You do see what I mean, don't you? If you were to know the truth—if you were to be told the truth, I think—I think perhaps that might satisfy you? Would it satisfy you, M. Poirot?"

"You are offering to tell me the truth, Lady Angkatell?"

She nodded.

"You yourself know the truth, then?"

Her eyes opened very wide.

"Oh, yes, I've known for a long time. I'd like to tell you. And then we could agree that—well, that it was all over and done with."

She smiled at him.

"Is it a bargain, M. Poirot?"

It was quite an effort for Hercule Poirot to say:

"No, Madame, it is not a bargain."

He wanted—he wanted, very badly, to let the whole thing drop, simply because Lady Angkatell asked him to do so.

Lady Angkatell sat very still for a moment. Then she raised her eyebrows.

“I wonder,” she said. “I wonder if you really know what you are doing.”

Twenty-eight

Midge, lying dry-eyed and awake in the darkness, turned restlessly on her pillows. She heard a door unlatch, a footstep in the corridor outside passing her door. It was Edward's door and Edward's step. She switched on the lamp by her bed and looked at the clock that stood by the lamp on the table. It was ten minutes to three.

Edward passing her door and going down the stairs at this hour in the morning. It was odd.

They had all gone to bed early, at half past ten. She herself had not slept, had lain there with burning eyelids and with a dry, aching misery racking her feverishly.

She had heard the clock strike downstairs—had heard owls hoot outside her bedroom window. Had felt that depression that reaches its nadir at 2 a.m. Had thought to herself: "I can't bear it—I can't bear it. Tomorrow coming—another day. Day after day to be got through."

Banished by her own act from Ainswick—from all the loveliness and dearness of Ainswick which might have been her very own possession.

But better banishment, better loneliness, better a drab and uninteresting life, than life with Edward and Henrietta's ghost. Until that day in the wood she had not known her own capacity for bitter jealousy.

And after all, Edward had never told her that he loved her. Affection, kindliness, he had never pretended to more than that. She had accepted the limitation, and not until she had realized what it would mean to live at close quarters with an Edward whose mind and heart had Henrietta as a permanent guest, did she know that for her Edward's affection was not enough.

Edward walking past her door, down the front stairs. It was odd—very odd. Where was he going?

Uneasiness grew upon her. It was all part and parcel of the uneasiness that The Hollow gave her nowadays. What was Edward doing downstairs in the small hours of the morning? Had he gone out?

Inactivity at last became too much for her. She got up, slipped on her dressing gown, and, taking a torch, she opened her door and came out into the passage.

It was quite dark, no light had been switched on. Midge turned to the left and came to the head of the staircase. Below all was dark too. She ran down the stairs and after a moment's hesitation switched on the light in the hall. Everything was silent. The front door was closed and locked. She tried the side door but that, too, was locked.

Edward, then, had not gone out. Where could he be?

And suddenly she raised her head and sniffed.

A whiff, a very faint whiff of gas.

The baize door to the kitchen quarters was just ajar. She went through it—a faint light was shining from the open kitchen door. The smell of gas was much stronger.

Midge ran along the passage and into the kitchen. Edward was lying on the floor with his head inside the gas oven, which was turned full on.

Midge was a quick, practical girl. Her first act was to swing open the shutters. She could not unlatch the window, and, winding a glass cloth round her arm, she smashed it. Then, holding her breath, she stooped down and tugged and pulled Edward out of the gas oven and switched off the taps.

He was unconscious and breathing queerly, but she knew that he could not have been unconscious long. He could only just have gone under. The wind sweeping through from the window to the open door was fast dispelling the gas fumes. Midge dragged Edward to a spot near the window where the air would have full play. She sat down and gathered him into her strong young arms.

She said his name, first softly, then with increasing desperation. “Edward, Edward, Edward….”

He stirred, groaned, opened his eyes and looked up at her. He said very faintly: “Gas oven,” and his eyes went round to the gas stove.

“I know, darling, but why—why?”

He was shivering now, his hands were cold and lifeless. He said: “Midge?” There was a kind of wondering surprise and pleasure in his voice.

She said: “I heard you pass my door. I didn’t know…I came down.”

He sighed, a very long sigh as though from very far away. “Best way out,” he said. And then, inexplicably until she remembered Lucy’s conversation on the night of the tragedy, “News of the World.”

“But, Edward, why, why?”

He looked up at her, and the blank, cold darkness of his stare frightened her.

“Because I know I’ve never been any good. Always a failure. Always ineffectual. It’s men like Christow who do things. They get there and women admire them. I’m nothing—I’m not even quite alive. I inherited Ainswick and I’ve enough to live on—otherwise I’d have gone under. No good at a career—never much good as a writer. Henrietta didn’t want me. No one wanted me. That day—at the Berkeley—I thought—but it was the same story. You couldn’t care either, Midge. Even for Ainswick you couldn’t put up with me. So I thought better get out altogether.”

Her words came with a rush. “Darling, darling, you don’t understand. It was because of Henrietta—because I thought you still loved Henrietta so much.”

“Henrietta?” He murmured it vaguely, as though speaking of someone infinitely remote. “Yes, I loved her very much.”

And from even farther away she heard him murmur:

“It’s so cold.”

“Edward—my darling.”

Her arms closed round him firmly. He smiled at her, murmuring:

“You’re so warm, Midge—you’re so warm.”

Yes, she thought, that was what despair was. A cold thing—a thing of infinite coldness and loneliness. She’d never understood until now that despair was a cold thing. She had thought of it as something hot and passionate, something violent, a hot-blooded desperation. But that was not so. This was despair—this utter outer darkness of coldness and loneliness. And the sin of despair, that priests talked of, was a cold sin, the sin of cutting oneself off from all warm and living human contacts.

Edward said again: “You’re so warm, Midge.” And suddenly with a glad, proud confidence she thought: “But that’s what he wants—that’s what I can give him!” They were all cold, the Angkatells. Even Henrietta had something in her of the will-o’-the-wisp, of the elusive fairy coldness in the Angkatell blood. Let Edward love Henrietta as an intangible and unpossessable dream. It was warmth, permanence, stability that was his real need. It was daily companionship and love and laughter at Ainswick.

She thought: “What Edward needs is someone to light a fire on his heart—and I am the person to do that.”

Edward looked up. He saw Midge’s face bending over him, the warm colouring of the skin, the generous mouth, the steady eyes and the dark hair that lay back from her forehead like two wings.

He saw Henrietta always as a projection from the past. In the grown woman he sought and wanted only to see the seventeen-year-old girl he had first loved. But now, looking up at Midge, he had a queer sense of seeing a continuous Midge. He saw the school-girl with her winged hair springing back into two pigtails, he saw its dark waves framing her face now, and he saw exactly how those wings would look when the hair was not dark any longer but grey.

“Midge,” he thought, “is real. The only real thing I have ever known…” He felt the warmth of her, and the strength—dark, positive, alive, real! “Midge,” he thought, “is the rock on which I can build my life.”

He said: “Darling Midge, I love you so, never leave me again.”

She bent down to him and he felt the warmth of her lips on his, felt her love enveloping him, shielding him, and happiness flowered in that cold desert where he had lived alone so long.

Suddenly Midge said with a shaky laugh:

“Look, Edward, a blackbeetle has come out to look at us. Isn’t he a nice blackbeetle? I never thought I could like a blackbeetle so much!”

She added dreamily: “How odd life is. Here we are sitting on the floor in a kitchen that still smells of gas all amongst the black-beetles, and feeling that it’s heaven.”

He murmured dreamily: “I could stay here forever.”

“We’d better go and get some sleep. It’s four o’clock. How on earth are we to explain that broken window to Lucy?” Fortunately, Midge reflected, Lucy was an extraordinarily easy person to explain things to!

Taking a leaf out of Lucy’s own book, Midge went into her room at six o’clock. She made a bald statement of fact.

“Edward went down and put his head in the gas oven in the night,” she said. “Fortunately I heard him, and went down after him. I broke the window because I couldn’t get it open quickly.”

Lucy, Midge had to admit, was wonderful.

She smiled sweetly with no sign of surprise.

“Dear Midge,” she said, “you are always so practical. I’m sure you will always be the greatest comfort to Edward.”

After Midge had gone, Lady Angkatell lay thinking. Then she got up and went into her husband’s room, which for once was unlocked.

“Henry.”

“My dear Lucy! It’s not cockcrow yet.”

“No, but listen, Henry, this is really important. We must have electricity installed to cook by and get rid of that gas stove.”

“Why, it’s quite satisfactory, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes, dear. But it’s the sort of thing that gives people ideas, and everybody mightn’t be as practical as dear Midge.”

She flitted elusively away. Sir Henry turned over with a grunt. Presently he awoke with a start just as he was dozing off. “Did I dream it,” he murmured, “or did Lucy come in and start talking about gas stoves?”

Outside in the passage, Lady Angkatell went into the bathroom and put a kettle on the gas ring. Sometimes, she knew, people liked an early cup of tea. Fired with self-approval, she returned to bed and lay back on her pillows, pleased with life and with herself.

Edward and Midge at Ainswick—the inquest over. She would go and talk to M. Poirot again. A nice little man….

Suddenly another idea flashed into her head. She sat upright in bed. “I wonder now,” she speculated, “if she has thought of that.”

She got out of bed and drifted along the passage to Henrietta’s room, beginning her remarks as usual long before she was within earshot.

“—and it suddenly came to me, dear, that you might have overlooked that.”

Henrietta murmured sleepily: “For heaven’s sake, Lucy, the birds aren’t up yet!”

“Oh, I know, dear, it is rather early, but it seems to have been a very disturbed night—Edward and the gas stove and Midge and the kitchen window—and thinking of what to say to M. Poirot and everything—”

“I’m sorry, Lucy, but everything you say sounds like complete gibberish. Can’t it wait?”

“It was only the holster, dear. I thought, you know, that you might not have thought about the holster.”

“Holster?” Henrietta sat up in bed. She was suddenly wide awake. “What’s this about a holster?”

“That revolver of Henry’s was in a holster, you know. And the holster hasn’t been found. And of course nobody may think of it—but on the other hand somebody might—”

Henrietta swung herself out of bed. She said:

“One always forgets something—that’s what they say! And it’s true!”

Lady Angkatell went back to her room.

She got into bed and quickly went fast asleep.

The kettle on the gas ring boiled and went on boiling.

Twenty-nine

Gerda rolled over to the side of the bed and sat up.

Her head felt a little better now but she was still glad that she hadn't gone with the others on the picnic. It was peaceful and almost comforting to be alone in the house for a bit.

Elsie, of course, had been very kind—very kind—especially at first. To begin with, Gerda had been urged to stay in bed for breakfast, trays had been brought up to her. Everybody urged her to sit in the most comfortable armchair, to put her feet up, not to do anything at all strenuous.

They were all so sorry for her about John. She had stayed cowering gratefully in that protective dim haze. She hadn't wanted to think, or to feel, or to remember.

But now, every day, she felt it coming nearer—she'd have to start living again, to decide what to do, where to live. Already Elsie was showing a shade of impatience in her manner. "Oh, Gerda, don't be so slow!"

It was all the same as it had been—long ago, before John came and took her away. They all thought her slow and stupid. There was nobody to say, as John had said: "I'll look after you."

Her head ached and Gerda thought: "I'll make myself some tea."

She went down to the kitchen and put the kettle on. It was nearly boiling when she heard a ring at the front door.

The maids had been given the day out. Gerda went to the door and opened it. She was astonished to see Henrietta's rakish-looking car drawn up to the kerb and Henrietta herself standing on the doorstep.

"Why, Henrietta!" she exclaimed. She fell back a step or two. "Come in. I'm afraid my sister and the children are out but—"

Henrietta cut her short. “Good, I’m glad. I wanted to get you alone. Listen, Gerda, what did you do with the holster?”

Gerda stopped. Her eyes looked suddenly vacant and uncomprehending. She said: “Holster?”

Then she opened a door on the right of the hall.

“You’d better come in here. I’m afraid it’s rather dusty. You see, we haven’t had much time this morning.”

Henrietta interrupted again urgently.

She said: “Listen, Gerda, you’ve got to tell me. Apart from the holster everything’s all right—absolutely watertight. There’s nothing to connect you with the business. I found the revolver where you’d shoved it into that thicket by the pool. I hid it in a place where you couldn’t possibly have put it—and there are fingerprints on it which they’ll never identify. So there’s only the holster. I must know what you did with that?”

She paused, praying desperately that Gerda would react quickly.

She had no idea why she had this vital sense of urgency, but it was there. Her car had not been followed—she had made sure of that. She had started on the London road, had filled up at a garage and had mentioned that she was on her way to London. Then, a little farther on, she had swung across country until she had reached a main road leading south to the coast.

Gerda was still staring at her. The trouble with Gerda, thought Henrietta, was that she was so slow.

“If you’ve still got it, Gerda, you must give it to me. I’ll get rid of it somehow. It’s the only possible thing, you see, that can connect you now with John’s death. Have you got it?”

There was a pause and then Gerda slowly nodded her head.

“Didn’t you know it was madness to keep it?” Henrietta could hardly conceal her impatience.

“I forgot about it. It was up in my room.”

She added: “When the police came up to Harley Street I cut it in pieces and put it in the bag with my leather work.”

Henrietta said: “That was clever of you.”

Gerda said: “I’m not quite so stupid as everybody thinks.” She put her hand up to her throat. She said: “John—John!” Her voice broke.

Henrietta said: “I know, my dear, I know.”

Gerda said: “But you can’t know…John wasn’t—he wasn’t—” She stood there, dumb and strangely pathetic. She raised her eyes suddenly to Henrietta’s face. “It was all a lie—everything! All the things I thought he was. I saw his face when he followed that woman out that evening. Veronica Cray. I knew he’d cared for her, of course, years ago before he married me, but I thought it was all over.”

Henrietta said gently:

“But it was all over.”

Gerda shook her head.

“No. She came there and pretended that she hadn’t seen John for years—but I saw John’s face. He went out with her. I went up to bed. I lay there trying to read—I tried to read that detective story that John was reading. And John didn’t come. And at last I went out….”

Her eyes seemed to be turning inwards, seeing the scene.

“It was moonlight. I went along the path to the swimming pool. There was a light in the pavilion. They were there—John and that woman.”

Henrietta made a faint sound.

Gerda’s face had changed. It had none of its usual slightly vacant amiability. It was remorseless, implacable.

"I'd trusted John. I'd believed in him—as though he were God. I thought he was the noblest man in the world. I thought he was everything that was fine and noble. And it was all a lie! I was left with nothing at all. I—I'd worshipped John!"

Henrietta was gazing at her fascinated. For here, before her eyes, was what she had guessed at and brought to life, carving it out of wood. Here was The Worshipper. Blind devotion thrown back on itself, disillusioned, dangerous.

Gerda said: "I couldn't bear it! I had to kill him! I had to—you do see that, Henrietta?"

She said it quite conversationally, in an almost friendly tone.

"And I knew I must be careful because the police are very clever. But then I'm not really as stupid as people think! If you're very slow and just stare, people think you don't take things in—and sometimes, underneath, you're laughing at them! I knew I could kill John and nobody would know because I'd read in that detective story about the police being able to tell which gun a bullet has been fired from. Sir Henry had shown me how to load and fire a revolver that afternoon. I'd take two revolvers. I'd shoot John with one and then hide it, and let people find me holding the other, and first they'd think I'd shot him and then they'd find he couldn't have been killed with that revolver and so they'd say I hadn't done it after all!"

She nodded her head triumphantly.

"But I forgot about the leather thing. It was in the drawer in my bedroom. What do you call it, a holster? Surely the police won't bother about that now!"

"They might," said Henrietta. "You'd better give it to me, and I'll take it away with me. Once it's out of your hands, you're quite safe."

She sat down. She felt suddenly unutterably weary.

Gerda said: "You don't look well. I was just making tea."

She went out of the room. Presently she came back with a tray. On it was a teapot, milk jug and two cups. The milk jug had slopped over because it was over-full. Gerda put the tray down and poured out a cup of tea and handed it to Henrietta.

“Oh, dear,” she said, dismayed, “I don’t believe the kettle can have been boiling.”

“It’s quite all right,” said Henrietta. “Go and get that holster, Gerda.”

Gerda hesitated and then went out of the room. Henrietta leant forward and put her arms on the table and her head down on them. She was so tired, so dreadfully tired. But now it was nearly done. Gerda would be safe, as John had wanted her to be safe.

She sat up, pushed the hair off her forehead and drew the teacup towards her. Then at a sound in the doorway she looked up. Gerda had been quite quick for once.

But it was Hercule Poirot who stood in the doorway.

“The front door was open,” he remarked as he advanced to the table, “so I took the liberty of walking in.”

“You!” said Henrietta. “How did you get here?”

“When you left The Hollow so suddenly, naturally I knew where you would go. I hired a very fast car and came straight here.”

“I see.” Henrietta sighed. “You would.”

“You should not drink that tea,” said Poirot, taking the cup from her and replacing it on the tray. “Tea that has not been made with boiling water is not good to drink.”

“Does a little thing like boiling water really matter?”

Poirot said gently: “Everything matters.”

There was a sound behind him and Gerda came into the room. She had a workbag in her hands. Her eyes went from Poirot's face to Henrietta's.

Henrietta said quickly:

"I'm afraid, Gerda, I'm rather a suspicious character. M. Poirot seems to have been shadowing me. He thinks that I killed John—but he can't prove it."

She spoke slowly and deliberately. So long as Gerda did not give herself away.

Gerda said vaguely: "I'm so sorry. Will you have some tea, M. Poirot?"

"No, thank you, Madame."

Gerda sat down behind the tray. She began to talk in her apologetic, conversational way.

"I'm so sorry that everybody is out. My sister and the children have all gone for a picnic. I didn't feel very well, so they left me behind."

"I am sorry, Madame."

Gerda lifted a teacup and drank.

"It is all so very worrying. Everything is so worrying. You see, John always arranged everything and now John is gone…" Her voice tailed off. "Now John is gone."

Her gaze, piteous, bewildered, went from one to the other.

"I don't know what to do without John. John looked after me. He took care of me. Now he is gone, everything is gone. And the children—they ask me questions and I can't answer them properly. I don't know what to say to Terry. He keeps saying: 'Why was Father killed?' Some day, of course, he will find out why. Terry always has to know. What puzzles me is that he always asks why, not who!"

Gerda leaned back in her chair. Her lips were very blue.

She said stiffly:

“I feel—not very well—if John—John—”

Poirot came round the table to her and eased her sideways down in the chair. Her head dropped forward. He bent and lifted her eyelid. Then he straightened up.

“An easy and comparatively painless death.”

Henrietta stared at him.

“Heart? No.” Her mind leaped forward. “Something in the tea. Something she put there herself. She chose that way out?”

Poirot shook his head gently.

“Oh, no, it was meant for you. It was in your teacup.”

“For me?” Henrietta’s voice was incredulous. “But I was trying to help her.”

“That did not matter. Have you not seen a dog caught in a trap—it sets its teeth into anyone who touches it. She saw only that you knew her secret and so you, too, must die.”

Henrietta said slowly:

“And you made me put the cup back on the tray—you meant—you meant her—”

Poirot interrupted her quietly:

“No, no, Mademoiselle. I did not know that there was anything in your teacup. I only knew that there might be. And when the cup was on the tray it was an even chance if she drank from that or the other—if you call it chance. I say myself that an end such as this is merciful. For her—and for two innocent children."

He said gently to Henrietta: "You are very tired, are you not?"

She nodded. She asked him: "When did you guess?"

"I do not know exactly. The scene was set; I felt that from the first. But I did not realize for a long time that it was set by Gerda Christow—that her attitude was stagey because she was, actually, acting a part. I was puzzled by the simplicity and at the same time the complexity. I recognized fairly soon that it was your ingenuity that I was fighting against, and that you were being aided and abetted by your relations as soon as they understood what you wanted done!" He paused and added: "Why did you want it done?"

"Because John asked me to! That's what he meant when he said 'Henrietta.' It was all there in that one word. He was asking me to protect Gerda. You see, he loved Gerda. I think he loved Gerda much better than he ever knew he did. Better than Veronica Cray. Better than me. Gerda belonged to him, and John liked things that belonged to him. He knew that if anyone could protect Gerda from the consequences of what she'd done, I could. And he knew that I would do anything he wanted, because I loved him."

"And you started at once," said Poirot grimly.

"Yes, the first thing I could think of was to get the revolver away from her and drop it in the pool. That would obscure the fingerprint business. When I discovered later that he had been shot with a different gun, I went out to look for it, and naturally found it at once because I knew just the sort of place Gerda would have put it. I was only a minute or two ahead of Inspector Grange's men."

She paused and then went on: "I kept it with me in that satchel bag of mine until I could take it up to London. Then I hid it in the studio until I could bring it back, and put it where the police would not find it."

"The clay horse," murmured Poirot.

“How did you know? Yes, I put it in a sponge bag and wired the armature round it, and then slapped up the clay model round it. After all, the police couldn’t very well destroy an artist’s masterpiece, could they? What made you know where it was?”

“The fact that you chose to model a horse. The horse of Troy was the unconscious association in your mind. But the fingerprints—how did you manage the fingerprints?”

“An old blind man who sells matches in the street. He didn’t know what it was I asked him to hold for a moment while I got some money out!”

Poirot looked at her for a moment.

“C’est formidable!” he murmured. “You are one of the best antagonists, Mademoiselle, that I have ever had.”

“It’s been dreadfully tiring always trying to keep one move ahead of you!”

“I know. I began to realize the truth as soon as I saw that the pattern was always designed not to implicate any one person but to implicate everyone—other than Gerda Christow. Every indication always pointed away from her. You deliberately planted Ygdrasil to catch my attention and bring yourself under suspicion. Lady Angkatell, who knew perfectly what you were doing, amused herself by leading poor Inspector Grange in one direction after another. David, Edward, herself.

“Yes, there is only one thing to do if you want to clear a person from suspicion who is actually guilty. You must suggest guilt elsewhere but never localize it. That is why every clue looked promising and then petered out and ended in nothing.”

Henrietta looked at the figure huddled pathetically in the chair. She said: “Poor Gerda.”

“Is that what you have felt all along?”

"I think so. Gerda loved John terribly, but she didn't want to love him for what he was. She built up a pedestal for him and attributed every splendid and noble and unselfish characteristic to him. And if you cast down an idol, there's nothing left." She paused and then went on: "But John was something much finer than an idol on a pedestal. He was a real, living, vital human being. He was generous and warm and alive, and he was a great doctor—yes, a great doctor. And he's dead, and the world has lost a very great man. And I have lost the only man I shall ever love."

Poirot put his hand gently on her shoulder. He said:

"But you are one of those who can live with a sword in their hearts—who can go on and smile—"

Henrietta looked up at him. Her lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"That's a little melodramatic, isn't it?"

"It is because I am a foreigner and I like to use fine words."

Henrietta said suddenly:

"You have been very kind to me."

"That is because I have admired you always very much."

"M. Poirot, what are we going to do? About Gerda, I mean."

Poirot drew the raffia workbag towards him. He turned out its contents, scraps of brown suède and other coloured leathers. There were some pieces of thick shiny brown leather. Poirot fitted them together.

"The holster. I take this. And poor Madame Christow, she was overwrought, her husband's death was too much for her. It will be brought in that she took her life whilst of unsound mind—"

Henrietta said slowly:

"And no one will ever know what really happened?"

"I think one person will know. Dr. Christow's son. I think that one day he will come to me and ask me for the truth."

"But you won't tell him," cried Henrietta.

"Yes. I shall tell him."

"Oh, no!"

"You do not understand. To you it is unbearable that anyone should be hurt. But to some minds there is something more unbearable still—not to know. You heard the poor woman just a little while ago say: 'Terry always has to know.' To the scientific mind, truth comes first. Truth, however bitter, can be accepted, and woven into a design for living."

Henrietta got up.

"Do you want me here, or had I better go?"

"It would be better if you went, I think."

She nodded. Then she said, more to herself than to him:

"Where shall I go? What shall I do—without John?"

"You are speaking like Gerda Christow. You will know where to go and what to do."

"Shall I? I'm so tired, M. Poirot, so tired."

He said gently:

"Go, my child. Your place is with the living. I will stay here with the dead."

Thirty

As she drove towards London, the two phrases echoed through Henrietta's mind. "What shall I do? Where shall I go?"

For the last few weeks she had been strung up, excited, never relaxing for a moment. She had had a task to perform—a task laid on her by John. But now that was over—she had failed—or succeeded? One could look at it either way. But however one looked at it, the task was over. And she experienced the terrible weariness of the reaction.

Her mind went back to the words she had spoken to Edward that night on the terrace—the night of John's death—the night when she had gone along to the pool and into the pavilion and had deliberately, by the light of a match, drawn Ygdrasil upon the iron table. Purposeful, planning—not yet able to sit down and mourn—mourn for her dead. "I should like," she had said to Edward, "to grieve for John."

But she had not dared to relax then—not dared to let sorrow take command over her.

But now she could grieve. Now she had all the time there was.

She said under her breath: "John…John."

Bitterness and black rebellion broke over her.

She thought: "I wish I'd drunk that cup of tea."

Driving the car soothed her, gave her strength for the moment. But soon she would be in London. Soon she would put the car in the garage and go along to the empty studio. Empty since John would never sit there again bullying her, being angry with her, loving her more than he wanted to love her, telling her eagerly about Ridgeway's Disease—about his triumphs and despairs, about Mrs. Crabtree and St. Christopher's.

And suddenly, with a lifting of the dark pall that lay over her mind, she thought:

“Of course. That’s where I will go. To St. Christopher’s.”

Lying in her narrow hospital bed, old Mrs. Crabtree peered up at her visitor out of rheumy, twinkling eyes.

She was exactly as John had described her, and Henrietta felt a sudden warmth, a lifting of the spirit. This was real—this would last! Here, for a little space, she had found John again.

“The pore doctor. Orful, ain’t it?” Mrs. Crabtree was saying. There was relish in her voice as well as regret, for Mrs. Crabtree loved life; and sudden deaths, particularly murders or deaths in childbed, were the richest parts of the tapestry of life. “Getting ’imself bumped off like that! Turned my stomach right over, it did, when I ’eard. I read all about it in the papers. Sister let me ’ave all she could get ’old of. Reely nice about it, she was. There was pictures and everythink. That swimming pool and all. ’Is wife leaving the inquest, pore thing, and that Lady Angkatell what the swimming pool belonged to. Lots of pictures. Real mystery the ’ole thing, weren’t it?”

Henrietta was not repelled by her ghoulish enjoyment. She liked it because she knew that John himself would have liked it. If he had to die he would much prefer old Mrs. Crabtree to get a kick out of it, than to sniff and shed tears.

“All I ’ope is that they catch ’ooever done it and ’ang ’im,” continued Mrs. Crabtree vindictively. “They don’t ’ave ’angings in public like they used to once—more’s the pity. I’ve always thought I’d like to go to an ’anging. And I’d go double quick, if you understand me, to see ’ooever killed the doctor ’anged! Real wicked, ’e must ’ave been. Why, the doctor was one in a thousand. Ever so clever, ’e was! And a nice way with ’im! Got you laughing whether you wanted to or not. The things ’e used to say sometimes! I’d ’ave done anythink for the doctor, I would!”

“Yes,” said Henrietta, “he was a very clever man. He was a great man.”

“Think the world of ’im in the ’orspital, they do! All them nurses. And ’is patients! Always felt you were going to get well when ’e’d been along.”

“So you are going to get well,” said Henrietta.

The little shrewd eyes clouded for a moment.

“I’m not so sure about that, ducks. I’ve got that mealy-mouthed young fellow with the spectacles now. Quite different to Dr. Christow. Never a laugh! ’E was a one, Dr. Christow was—always up to his jokes! Given me some norful times, ’e ’as, with this treatment of ’is. ‘I carn’t stand anymore of in, Doctor,’ I’d say to him, and ‘Yes, you can, Mrs. Crabtree,’ ’e’d say to me. ‘You’re tough, you are. You can take it. Going to make medical ’istory, you and I are.’ And he’d jolly you along like. Do anything for the doctor, I would ’ave! Expected a lot of you, ’e did, but you felt you couldn’t let him down, if you know what I mean.”

“I know,” said Henrietta.

The little sharp eyes peered at her.

“Excuse me, dearie, you’re not the doctor’s wife by any chance?”

“No,” said Henrietta, “I’m just a friend.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Crabtree.

Henrietta thought that she did see.

“What made you come along if you don’t mind me asking?”

“The doctor used to talk to me a lot about you—and about his new treatment. I wanted to see how you were.”

“I’m slipping back—that’s what I’m doing.”

Henrietta cried:

“But you mustn’t slip back! You’ve got to get well.”

Mrs. Crabtree grinned.

“I don’t want to peg out, don’t you think it!”

“Well, fight then! Dr. Christow said you were a fighter.”

“Did ’e now?” Mrs. Crabtree lay still a minute, then she said slowly:

“Ooever shot ’im it’s a wicked shame! There aren’t many of ’is sort.”

We shall not see his like again. The words passed through Henrietta’s mind. Mrs. Crabtree was regarding her keenly.

“Keep your pecker up, dearie,” she said. She added: “’E ’ad a nice funeral, I ’ope.”

“He had a lovely funeral,” said Henrietta obligingly.

“Ar! I wish I could of gorn to it!”

Mrs. Crabtree sighed.

“Be going to me own funeral next, I expect.”

“No,” cried Henrietta. “You mustn’t let go. You said just now that Dr. Christow told you that you and he were going to make medical history. Well, you’ve got to carry on by yourself. The treatment’s just the same. You’ve got to have the guts for two—you’ve got to make medical history by yourself—for him.”

Mrs. Crabtree looked at her for a moment or two.

“Sounds a bit grand! I’ll do my best, ducks. Carn’t say more than that.”

Henrietta got up and took her hand.

“Good-bye. I’ll come and see you again if I may.”

“Yes, do. It’ll do me good to talk about the doctor a bit.” The bawdy twinkle came into her eye again. “Proper man in every kind of way, Dr. Christow.”

“Yes,” said Henrietta. “He was.”

The old woman said:

“Don’t fret, ducks—what’s gorn’s gorn. You can’t ’ave it back.”

Mrs. Crabtree and Hercule Poirot, Henrietta thought, expressed the same idea in different language.

She drove back to Chelsea, put away the car in the garage and walked slowly to the studio.

“Now,” she thought, “it has come. The moment I have been dreading—the moment when I am alone.

“Now I can put it off no longer. Now grief is here with me.”

What had she said to Edward? “I should like to grieve for John.”

She dropped down on a chair and pushed back the hair from her face.

Alone—empty—destitute. This awful emptiness.

The tears pricked at her eyes, flowed slowly down her cheeks.

Grief, she thought, grief for John. Oh, John—John.

Remembering, remembering—his voice, sharp with pain:

“If I were dead, the first thing you’d do, with the tears streaming down your face, would be to start modelling some damn’ mourning woman or some figure of grief.”

She stirred uneasily. Why had that thought come into her head?

Grief—Grief…A veiled figure—its outline barely perceptible—its head cowled.

Alabaster.

She could see the lines of it—tall, elongated, its sorrow hidden, revealed only by the long, mournful lines of the drapery.

Sorrow, emerging from clear, transparent alabaster.

“If I were dead….”

And suddenly bitterness came over her full tide!

She thought: “That’s what I am! John was right. I cannot love—I cannot mourn—not with the whole of me.

“It’s Midge, it’s people like Midge who are the salt of the earth.”

Midge and Edward at Ainswick.

That was reality—strength—warmth.

“But I,” she thought, “am not a whole person. I belong not to myself, but to something outside me. I cannot grieve for my dead. Instead I must take my grief and make it into a figure of alabaster….”

Exhibit No. 58. “Grief.” Alabaster. Miss Henrietta Savernake….

She said under her breath:

“John, forgive me, forgive me, for what I can’t help doing.”

The Labours Of Hercules (1947)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Foreword

Hercule Poirot's flat was essentially modern in its furnishings. It gleamed with chromium. Its easy chairs, though comfortably padded, were square and uncompromising in outline.

On one of these chairs sat Hercule Poirot, neatly—in the middle of the chair. Opposite him, in another chair, sat Dr. Burton, Fellow of All Souls, sipping appreciatively at a glass of Poirot's Château Mouton Rothschild. There was no neatness about Dr. Burton. He was plump, untidy, and beneath his thatch of white hair beamed a rubicund and benign countenance. He had a deep wheezy chuckle and the habit of covering himself and everything round him with tobacco ash. In vain did Poirot surround him with ashtrays.

Dr. Burton was asking a question.

"Tell me," he said. "Why Hercule?"

"You mean, my Christian name?"

"Hardly a Christian name," the other demurred. "Definitely pagan. But why? That's what I want to know. Father's fancy? Mother's whim? Family reasons? If I remember rightly—though my memory isn't what it was—you had a brother called Achille, did you not?"

Poirot's mind raced back over the details of Achille Poirot's career. Had all that really happened?

"Only for a short space of time," he replied.

Dr. Burton passed tactfully from the subject of Achille Poirot.

“People should be more careful how they name their children,” he ruminated. “I’ve got godchildren. I know. Blanche, one of ’em is called—dark as a gypsy! Then there’s Deirdre, Deirdre of the Sorrows—she’s turned out merry as a grig. As for young Patience, she might as well have been named Impatience and be done with it! And Diana—well, Diana—” the old classical scholar shuddered. “Weighs twelve stone now—and she’s only fifteen! They say it’s puppy fat—but it doesn’t look that way to me. Diana! They wanted to call her Helen, but I did put my foot down there. Knowing what her father and mother looked like! And her grandmother for that matter! I tried hard for Martha or Dorcas or something sensible—but it was no good—waste of breath. Rum people, parents. . . .”

He began to wheeze gently—his small fat face crinkled up.

Poirot looked at him inquiringly.

“Thinking of an imaginary conversation. Your mother and the late Mrs. Holmes, sitting sewing little garments or knitting: ‘Achille, Hercule, Sherlock, Mycroft. . . .’ ”

Poirot failed to share his friend’s amusement.

“What I understand you to mean is, that in physical appearance I do not resemble a Hercules?”

Dr. Burton’s eyes swept over Hercule Poirot, over his small neat person attired in striped trousers, correct black jacket and natty bow tie, swept up from his patent leather shoes to his egg-shaped head and the immense moustache that adorned his upper lip.

“Frankly, Poirot,” said Dr. Burton, “you don’t! I gather,” he added, “that you’ve never had much time to study the Classics?”

“That is so.”

“Pity. Pity. You’ve missed a lot. Everyone should be made to study the Classics if I had my way.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Eh bien, I have got on very well without them.”

“Got on! Got on! It’s not a question of getting on. That’s the wrong view altogether. The Classics aren’t a ladder leading to quick success like a modern correspondence course! It’s not a man’s working hours that are important—it’s his leisure hours. That’s the mistake we all make. Take yourself now, you’re getting on, you’ll be wanting to get out of things, to take things easy—what are you going to do then with your leisure hours?”

Poirot was ready with his reply.

“I am going to attend—seriously—to the cultivation of vegetable marrows.”

Dr. Burton was taken aback.

“Vegetable marrows? What d’yer mean? Those great swollen green things that taste of water?”

“Ah,” Poirot spoke enthusiastically. “But that is the whole point of it. They need not taste of water.”

“Oh! I know—sprinkle ’em with cheese, or minced onion or white sauce.”

“No, no—you are in error. It is my idea that the actual flavour of the marrow itself can be improved. It can be given,” he screwed up his eyes, “a bouquet—”

“Good God, man, it’s not a claret.” The word bouquet reminded Dr. Burton of the glass at his elbow. He sipped and savoured. “Very good wine, this. Very sound. Yes.” His head nodded in approbation. “But this vegetable marrow business—you’re not serious? You don’t mean”—he spoke in lively horror—“that you’re actually going to stoop”—his hands descended in sympathetic horror on his own plump stomach—“stoop, and fork dung on the things, and feed ’em with strands of wool dipped in water and all the rest of it?”

“You seem,” Poirot said, “to be well acquainted with the culture of the marrow?”

“Seen gardeners doing it when I’ve been staying in the country. But seriously, Poirot, what a hobby! Compare that to”—his voice sank to an appreciative purr—“an easy chair in front of a wood fire in a long, low room lined with books—must be a long room—not a square one. Books all round one. A glass of port—and a book open in your hand. Time rolls back as you read:” he quoted sonorously:

Fig1.eps

He translated:

“ ‘By skill again, the pilot on the wine-dark sea straightens

The swift ship buffeted by the winds.’

Of course you can never really get the spirit of the original.”

For the moment, in his enthusiasm, he had forgotten Poirot. And Poirot, watching him, felt suddenly a doubt—an uncomfortable twinge. Was there, here, something that he had missed? Some richness of the spirit? Sadness crept over him. Yes, he should have become acquainted with the Classics . . . Long ago . . . Now, alas, it was too late. . . .

Dr. Burton interrupted his melancholy.

“Do you mean that you really are thinking of retiring?”

“Yes.”

The other chuckled.

“You won’t!”

“But I assure you—”

“You won’t be able to do it, man. You’re too interested in your work.”

"No—indeed—I make all the arrangements. A few more cases—specially selected ones—not, you understand, everything that presents itself—just problems that have a personal appeal."

Dr. Burton grinned.

"That's the way of it. Just a case or two, just one case more—and so on. The Prima Donna's farewell performance won't be in it with yours, Poirot!"

He chuckled and rose slowly to his feet, an amiable white-haired gnome.

"Yours aren't the Labors of Hercules," he said. "Yours are labors of love. You'll see if I'm not right. Bet you that in twelve months' time you'll still be here, and vegetable marrows will still be"—he shuddered—"merely marrows."

Taking leave of his host, Dr. Burton left the severe rectangular room.

He passes out of these pages not to return to them. We are concerned only with what he left behind him, which was an Idea.

For after his departure Hercule Poirot sat down again slowly like a man in a dream and murmured:

"The Labors of Hercules . . . Mais oui, c'est une idée, ça. . . ."

• • •

The following day saw Hercule Poirot perusing a large calf-bound volume and other slimmer works, with occasional harried glances at various typewritten slips of paper.

His secretary, Miss Lemon, had been detailed to collect information on the subject of Hercules and to place same before him.

Without interest (hers not the type to wonder why!) but with perfect efficiency, Miss Lemon had fulfilled her task.

Hercule Poirot was plunged head first into a bewildering sea of classical lore with particular reference to “Hercules, a celebrated hero who, after death, was ranked among the gods, and received divine honours.”

So far, so good—but thereafter it was far from plain sailing. For two hours Poirot read diligently, making notes, frowning, consulting his slips of paper and his other books of reference. Finally he sank back in his chair and shook his head. His mood of the previous evening was dispelled. What people!

Take this Hercules—this hero! Hero, indeed! What was he but a large muscular creature of low intelligence and criminal tendencies! Poirot was reminded of one Adolfe Durand, a butcher, who had been tried at Lyon in 1895—a creature of oxlike strength who had killed several children. The defence had been epilepsy—from which he undoubtedly suffered—though whether grand mal or petit mal had been an argument of several days’ discussion. This ancient Hercules probably suffered from grand mal. No, Poirot shook his head, if that was the Greeks’ idea of a hero, then measured by modern standards it certainly would not do. The whole classical pattern shocked him. These gods and goddesses—they seemed to have as many different aliases as a modern criminal. Indeed they seemed to be definitely criminal types. Drink, debauchery, incest, rape, loot, homicide and chicanery—enough to keep a juge d’Instruction constantly busy. No decent family life. No order, no method. Even in their crimes, no order or method!

“Hercules indeed!” said Hercule Poirot, rising to his feet, disillusioned.

He looked round him with approval. A square room, with good square modern furniture—even a piece of good modern sculpture representing one cube placed on another cube and above it a geometrical arrangement of copper wire. And in the midst of this shining and orderly room, himself. He looked at himself in the glass. Here, then, was a modern Hercules—very distinct from that unpleasant sketch of a naked figure with bulging muscles, brandishing a club. Instead, a small compact figure attired in correct urban wear with a moustache—such a moustache as Hercules never dreamed of cultivating—a moustache magnificent yet sophisticated.

Yet there was between this Hercule Poirot and the Hercules of Classical lore one point of resemblance. Both of them, undoubtedly, had been instrumental in ridding the world of certain pests . . . Each of them could be described as a benefactor to the Society he lived in. . . .

What had Dr. Burton said last night as he left: “Yours are not the Labors of Hercules. . . .”

Ah, but there he was wrong, the old fossil. There should be, once again, the Labors of Hercules—a modern Hercules. An ingenious and amusing conceit! In the period before his final retirement he would accept twelve cases, no more, no less. And those twelve cases should be selected with special reference to the twelve Labors of ancient Hercules. Yes, that would not only be amusing, it would be artistic, it would be spiritual.

Poirot picked up the Classical Dictionary and immersed himself once more in Classical lore. He did not intend to follow his prototype too closely. There should be no women, no shirt of Nessus . . . The Labors and the Labors only.

The first Labor, then, would be that of the Nemean Lion.

“The Nemean Lion,” he repeated, trying it over on his tongue.

Naturally he did not expect a case to present itself actually involving a flesh and blood lion. It would be too much of a coincidence should he be approached by the Directors of the Zoological Gardens to solve a problem for them involving a real lion.

No, here symbolism must be involved. The first case must concern some celebrated public figure, it must be sensational and of the first importance! Some master criminal—or alternately someone who was a lion in the public eye. Some well-known writer, or politician, or painter—or even Royalty?

He liked the idea of Royalty. . . .

He would not be in a hurry. He would wait—wait for that case of high importance that should be the first of his self-imposed Labors.

One

THE NEMEAN LION

“Anything of interest this morning, Miss Lemon?” he asked as he entered the room the following morning.

He trusted Miss Lemon. She was a woman without imagination, but she had an instinct. Anything that she mentioned as worth consideration usually was worth consideration. She was a born secretary.

“Nothing much, M. Poirot. There is just one letter that I thought might interest you. I have put it on the top of the pile.”

“And what is that?” He took an interested step forward.

“It’s from a man who wants you to investigate the disappearance of his wife’s Pekinese dog.”

Poirot paused with his foot still in the air. He threw a glance of deep reproach at Miss Lemon. She did not notice it. She had begun to type. She typed with the speed and precision of a quick-firing tank.

Poirot was shaken; shaken and embittered. Miss Lemon, the efficient Miss Lemon, had let him down! A Pekinese dog. A Pekinese dog! And after the dream he had had last night. He had been leaving Buckingham Palace after being personally thanked when his valet had come in with his morning chocolate!

Words trembled on his lips—witty caustic words. He did not utter them because Miss Lemon, owing to the speed and efficiency of her typing, would not have heard them.

With a grunt of disgust he picked up the topmost letter from the little pile on the side of his desk.

Yes, it was exactly as Miss Lemon had said. A city address—a curt businesslike unrefined demand. The subject—the kidnapping of a Pekinese dog. One of those bulging-eyed, overpampered pets of a rich woman. Hercule Poirot's lip curled as he read it.

Nothing unusual about this. Nothing out of the way or—But yes, yes, in one small detail, Miss Lemon was right. In one small detail there was something unusual.

Hercule Poirot sat down. He read the letter slowly and carefully. It was not the kind of case he wanted, it was not the kind of case he had promised himself. It was not in any sense an important case, it was supremely unimportant. It was not—and here was the crux of his objection—it was not a proper Labor of Hercules.

But unfortunately he was curious. . . .

Yes, he was curious. . . .

He raised his voice so as to be heard by Miss Lemon above the noise of her typing.

"Ring up this Sir Joseph Hoggin," he ordered, "and make an appointment for me to see him at his office as he suggests."

As usual, Miss Lemon had been right.

• • •

"I'm a plain man, Mr. Poirot," said Sir Joseph Hoggin.

Hercule Poirot made a noncommittal gesture with his right hand. It expressed (if you chose to take it so) admiration for the solid worth of Sir Joseph's career and an appreciation of his modesty in so describing himself. It could also have conveyed a graceful deprecation of the statement. In any case it gave no clue to the thought then uppermost in Hercule Poirot's mind, which was that Sir Joseph certainly was (using the term in its more colloquial sense) a very plain man indeed. Hercule Poirot's eyes rested critically on the swelling jowl, the small pig eyes, the bulbous nose and the close-lipped mouth. The whole general effect reminded him of someone or something—but for the moment he could not recollect who or what it was. A memory stirred dimly. A long time ago . . . in Belgium . . . something, surely, to do with soap. . . .

Sir Joseph was continuing.

"No frills about me. I don't beat about the bush. Most people, Mr. Poirot, would let this business go. Write it off as a bad debt and forget about it. But that's not Joseph Hoggin's way. I'm a rich man—and in a manner of speaking two hundred pounds is neither here nor there to me—"

Poirot interpolated swiftly:

"I congratulate you."

"Eh?"

Sir Joseph paused a minute. His small eyes narrowed themselves still more. He said sharply:

"That's not to say that I'm in the habit of throwing my money about. What I want I pay for. But I pay the market price—no more."

Hercule Poirot said:

"You realize that my fees are high?"

"Yes, yes. But this," Sir Joseph looked at him cunningly, "is a very small matter."

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders. He said:

"I do not bargain. I am an expert. For the services of an expert you have to pay."

Sir Joseph said frankly:

“I know you’re a tip-top man at this sort of thing. I made inquiries and I was told that you were the best man available. I mean to get to the bottom of this business and I don’t grudge the expense. That’s why I got you to come here.”

“You were fortunate,” said Hercule Poirot.

Sir Joseph said “Eh?” again.

“Exceedingly fortunate,” said Hercule Poirot firmly. “I am, I may say so without undue modesty, at the apex of my career. Very shortly I intend to retire—to live in the country, to travel occasionally to see the world—also, it may be, to cultivate my garden—with particular attention to improving the strain of vegetable marrows. Magnificent vegetables—but they lack flavour. That, however, is not the point. I wished merely to explain that before retiring I had imposed upon myself a certain task. I have decided to accept twelve cases—no more, no less. A self-imposed ‘Labors of Hercules’ if I may so describe it. Your case, Sir Joseph, is the first of the twelve. I was attracted to it,” he sighed, “by its striking unimportance.”

“Importance?” said Sir Joseph.

“Unimportance was what I said. I have been called in for varying causes—to investigate murders, unexplained deaths, robberies, thefts of jewellery. This is the first time that I have been asked to turn my talents to elucidate the kidnapping of a Pekinese dog.”

Sir Joseph grunted. He said:

“You surprise me! I should have said you’d have had no end of women pestering you about their pet dogs.”

“That, certainly. But it is the first time that I am summoned by the husband in the case.”

Sir Joseph’s little eyes narrowed appreciatively.

He said:

“I begin to see why they recommended you to me. You’re a shrewd fellow, Mr. Poirot.”

Poirot murmured:

“If you will now tell me the facts of the case. The dog disappeared, when?”

“Exactly a week ago.”

“And your wife is by now quite frantic, I presume?”

Sir Joseph stared. He said:

“You don’t understand. The dog has been returned.”

“Returned? Then, permit me to ask, where do I enter the matter?”

Sir Joseph went crimson in the face.

“Because I’m damned if I’ll be swindled! Now then, Mr. Poirot, I’m going to tell you the whole thing. The dog was stolen a week ago—nipped in Kensington Gardens where he was out with my wife’s companion. The next day my wife got a demand for two hundred pounds. I ask you—two hundred pounds! For a damned yapping little brute that’s always getting under your feet anyway!”

Poirot murmured:

“You did not approve of paying such a sum, naturally?”

“Of course I didn’t—or wouldn’t have if I’d known anything about it! Milly (my wife) knew that well enough. She didn’t say anything to me. Just sent off the money—in one pound notes as stipulated—to the address given.”

“And the dog was returned?”

“Yes. That evening the bell rang and there was the little brute sitting on the doorstep. And not a soul to be seen.”

“Perfectly. Continue.”

“Then, of course, Milly confessed what she’d done and I lost my temper a bit. However, I calmed down after a while—after all, the thing was done and you can’t expect a woman to behave with any sense—and I daresay I should have let the whole thing go if it hadn’t been for meeting old Samuelson at the Club.”

“Yes?”

“Damn it all, this thing must be a positive racket! Exactly the same thing had happened to him. Three hundred pounds they’d rooked his wife of! Well, that was a bit too much. I decided the thing had got to be stopped. I sent for you.”

“But surely, Sir Joseph, the proper thing (and a very much more inexpensive thing) would have been to send for the police?”

Sir Joseph rubbed his nose.

He said:

“Are you married, Mr. Poirot?”

“Alas,” said Poirot, “I have not that felicity.”

“H’m,” said Sir Joseph. “Don’t know about felicity, but if you were, you’d know that women are funny creatures. My wife went into hysterics at the mere mention of the police—she’d got it into her head that something would happen to her precious Shan Tung if I went to them. She wouldn’t hear of the idea—and I may say she doesn’t take very kindly to the idea of your being called in. But I stood firm there and at last she gave way. But, mind you, she doesn’t like it.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“The position is, I perceive, a delicate one. It would be as well, perhaps, if I were to interview Madame your wife and gain further particulars from her whilst at the same time reassuring her as to the future safety of her dog?”

Sir Joseph nodded and rose to his feet. He said:

“I’ll take you along in the car right away.”

II

In a large, hot, ornately furnished drawing room two women were sitting.

As Sir Joseph and Hercule Poirot entered, a small Pekinese dog rushed forward, barking furiously, and circling dangerously round Poirot’s ankles.

“Shan—Shan, come here. Come here to mother, lovey—Pick him up, Miss Carnaby.”

The second woman hurried forward and Hercule Poirot murmured:

“A veritable lion, indeed.”

Rather breathlessly Shan Tung’s captor agreed.

“Yes, indeed, he’s such a good watch dog. He’s not frightened of anything or any one. There’s a lovely boy, then.”

Having performed the necessary introduction, Sir Joseph said:

“Well, Mr. Poirot, I’ll leave you to get on with it,” and with a short nod he left the room.

Lady Hoggin was a stout, petulant-looking woman with dyed henna red hair. Her companion, the fluttering Miss Carnaby, was a plump, amiable-looking creature between forty and fifty. She treated Lady Hoggin with great deference and was clearly frightened to death of her.

Poirot said:

"Now tell me, Lady Hoggin, the full circumstances of this abominable crime."

Lady Hoggin flushed.

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, Mr. Poirot. For it was a crime. Pekinese are terribly sensitive—just as sensitive as children. Poor Shan Tung might have died of fright if of nothing else."

Miss Carnaby chimed in breathlessly:

"Yes, it was wicked—wicked!"

"Please tell me the facts."

"Well, it was like this. Shan Tung was out for his walk in the Park with Miss Carnaby—"

"Oh dear me, yes, it was all my fault," chimed in the companion. "How could I have been so stupid—so careless—"

Lady Hoggin said acidly:

"I don't want to reproach you, Miss Carnaby, but I do think you might have been more alert."

Poirot transferred his gaze to the companion.

"What happened?"

Miss Carnaby burst into voluble and slightly flustered speech.

"Well, it was the most extraordinary thing! We had just been along the flower walk—Shan Tung was on the lead, of course—he'd had his little run on the grass—and I was just about to turn and go home when my attention was caught by a baby in a pram—such a lovely baby—it smiled at me—lovely rosy cheeks and such curls. I couldn't just resist speaking to the nurse in charge and asking how old it was—seventeen months, she said—and I'm sure I was only speaking to her for about a minute or two, and then suddenly I looked down and Shan wasn't there any more. The lead had been cut right through—"

Lady Hoggin said:

"If you'd been paying proper attention to your duties, nobody could have sneaked up and cut that lead."

Miss Carnaby seemed inclined to burst into tears. Poirot said hastily:

"And what happened next?"

"Well, of course I looked everywhere. And called! And I asked the Park attendant if he'd seen a man carrying a Pekinese dog but he hadn't noticed anything of the kind—and I didn't know what to do—and I went on searching, but at last, of course, I had to come home—"

Miss Carnaby stopped dead. Poirot could imagine the scene that followed well enough. He asked:

"And then you received a letter?"

Lady Hoggin took up the tale.

"By the first post the following morning. It said that if I wanted to see Shan Tung alive I was to send £200 in one pound notes in an unregistered packet to Captain Curtis, 38 Bloomsbury Road Square. It said that if the money were marked or the police informed then—then—Shan Tung's ears and tail would be—cut off!"

Miss Carnaby began to sniff.

"So awful," she murmured. "How people can be such fiends!"

Lady Hoggin went on:

"It said that if I sent the money at once, Shan Tung would be returned the same evening alive and well, but that if—if afterwards I went to the police, it would be Shan Tung who would suffer for it—"

Miss Carnaby murmured tearfully:

“Oh dear, I’m so afraid that even now—of course, M. Poirot isn’t exactly the police—”

Lady Hoggin said anxiously:

“So you see, Mr. Poirot, you will have to be very careful.”

Hercule Poirot was quick to allay her anxiety.

“But I, I am not of the police. My inquiries, they will be conducted very discreetly, very quietly. You can be assured, Lady Hoggin, that Shan Tung will be perfectly safe. That I will guarantee.”

Both ladies seemed relieved by the magic word. Poirot went on: “You have here the letter?”

Lady Hoggin shook her head.

“No, I was instructed to enclose it with the money.”

“And you did so?”

“Yes.”

“H’m, that is a pity.”

Miss Carnaby said brightly:

“But I have the dog lead still. Shall I get it?”

She left the room. Hercule Poirot profited by her absence to ask a few pertinent questions.

“Amy Carnaby? Oh! she’s quite all right. A good soul, though foolish, of course. I have had several companions and they have all been complete fools. But Amy was devoted to Shan Tung and she was terribly upset over the whole thing—as well she might be—hanging over perambulators and neglecting my little sweetheart! These old maids are all the same, idiotic over babies! No, I'm quite sure she had nothing whatever to do with it."

"It does not seem likely," Poirot agreed. "But as the dog disappeared when in her charge one must make quite certain of her honesty. She has been with you long?"

"Nearly a year. I had excellent references with her. She was with old Lady Hartingfield until she died—ten years, I believe. After that she looked after an invalid sister for a while. She really is an excellent creature—but a complete fool, as I said."

Amy Carnaby returned at this minute, slightly more out of breath, and produced the cut dog lead which she handed to Poirot with the utmost solemnity, looking at him with hopeful expectancy.

Poirot surveyed it carefully.

"Mais oui," he said. "This has undoubtedly been cut."

The two women waited expectantly. He said:

"I will keep this."

Solemnly he put it in his pocket. The two women breathed a sigh of relief. He had clearly done what was expected of him.

III

It was the habit of Hercule Poirot to leave nothing untested.

Though on the face of it it seemed unlikely that Miss Carnaby was anything but the foolish and rather muddle-headed woman that she appeared to be, Poirot nevertheless managed to interview a somewhat forbidding lady who was the niece of the late Lady Hartingfield.

"Amy Carnaby?" said Miss Maltravers. "Of course, remember her perfectly. She was a good soul and suited Aunt Julia down to the ground. Devoted to dogs and excellent at reading aloud. Tactful, too, never contradicted an invalid. What’s happened to her? Not in distress of any kind, I hope. I gave her a reference about a year ago to some woman—name began with H—”

Poirot explained hastily that Miss Carnaby was still in her post. There had been, he said, a little trouble over a lost dog.

“Amy Carnaby is devoted to dogs. My aunt had a Pekinese. She left it to Miss Carnaby when she died and Miss Carnaby was devoted to it. I believe she was quite heartbroken when it died. Oh yes, she’s a good soul. Not, of course, precisely intellectual.”

Hercule Poirot agreed that Miss Carnaby could not, perhaps, be described as intellectual.

His next proceeding was to discover the Park Keeper to whom Miss Carnaby had spoken on the fateful afternoon. This he did without much difficulty. The man remembered the incident in question.

“Middle-aged lady, rather stout—in a regular state she was—lost her Pekinese dog. I knew her well by sight—brings the dog along most afternoons. I saw her come in with it. She was in a rare taking when she lost it. Came running to me to know if I’d seen any one with a Pekinese dog! Well, I ask you! I can tell you, the Gardens is full of dogs—every kind—terriers, Pekes, German sausage-dogs—even them Borzois—all kinds we have. Not likely as I’d notice one Peke more than another.”

Hercule Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully.

He went to 38 Bloomsbury Road Square.

Nos. 38, 39 and 40 were incorporated together as the Balaclava Private Hotel. Poirot walked up the steps and pushed open the door. He was greeted inside by gloom and a smell of cooking cabbage with a reminiscence of breakfast kippers. On his left was a mahogany table with a sad-looking chrysanthemum plant on it. Above the table was a big baize-covered rack into which letters were stuck. Poirot stared at the board thoughtfully for some minutes. He pushed open a door on his right. It led into a kind of lounge with small tables and some so-called easy chairs covered with a depressing pattern of cretonne. Three old ladies and one fierce-looking old gentleman raised their heads and gazed at the intruder with deadly venom. Hercule Poirot blushed and withdrew.

He walked farther along the passage and came to a staircase. On his right a passage branched at right angles to what was evidently the dining room.

A little way along this passage was a door marked “Office.”

On this Poirot tapped. Receiving no response, he opened the door and looked in. There was a large desk in the room covered with papers but there was no one to be seen. He withdrew, closing the door again. He penetrated to the dining room.

A sad-looking girl in a dirty apron was shuffling about with a basket of knives and forks with which she was laying the tables.

Hercule Poirot said apologetically:

“Excuse me, but could I see the Manageress?”

The girl looked at him with lacklustre eyes.

She said:

“I don’t know, I’m sure.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“There is no one in the office.”

“Well, I don’t know where she’d be, I’m sure.”

“Perhaps,” Hercule Poirot said, patient and persistent, “you could find out?”

The girl sighed. Dreary as her day’s round was, it had now been made additionally so by this new burden laid upon her. She said sadly:

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

Poirot thanked her and removed himself once more to the hall, not daring to face the malevolent glare of the occupants of the lounge. He was staring up at the baize-covered letter rack when a rustle and a strong smell of Devonshire violets proclaimed the arrival of the Manageress.

Mrs. Harte was full of graciousness. She exclaimed:

“So sorry I was not in my office. You were requiring rooms?”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“Not precisely. I was wondering if a friend of mine had been staying here lately. A Captain Curtis.”

“Curtis,” exclaimed Mrs. Harte. “Captain Curtis? Now where have I heard that name?”

Poirot did not help her. She shook her head vexedly.

He said:

“You have not, then, had a Captain Curtis staying here?”

“Well, not lately, certainly. And yet, you know, the name is certainly familiar to me. Can you describe your friend at all?”

“That,” said Hercule Poirot, “would be difficult.” He went on: “I suppose it sometimes happens that letters arrive for people when in actual fact no one of that name is staying here?”

“That does happen, of course.”

“What do you do with such letters?”

“Well, we keep them for a time. You see, it probably means that the person in question will arrive shortly. Of course, if letters or parcels are a long time here unclaimed, they are returned to the post office.”

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

He said:

“I comprehend.” He added: “It is like this, you see. I wrote a letter to my friend here.”

Mrs. Harte’s face cleared.

“That explains it. I must have noticed the name on an envelope. But really we have so many ex-Army gentlemen staying here or passing through—Let me see now.”

She peered up at the board.

Hercule Poirot said:

“It is not there now.”

“It must have been returned to the postman, I suppose. I am so sorry. Nothing important, I hope?”

“No, no, it was of no importance.”

As he moved towards the door, Mrs. Harte, enveloped in her pungent odour of violets, pursued him.

“If your friend should come—”

“It is most unlikely. I must have made a mistake. . . .”

“Our terms,” said Mrs. Harte, “are very moderate. Coffee after dinner is included. I would like you to see one or two of our bed-sitting rooms. . . .”

With difficulty Hercule Poirot escaped.

IV

The drawing room of Mrs. Samuelson was larger, more lavishly furnished, and enjoyed an even more stifling amount of central heating than that of Lady Hoggin. Hercule Poirot picked his way giddily amongst gilded console tables and large groups of statuary.

Mrs. Samuelson was taller than Lady Hoggin and her hair was dyed with peroxide. Her Pekinese was called Nanki Poo. His bulging eyes surveyed Hercule Poirot with arrogance. Miss Keble, Mrs. Samuelson's companion, was thin and scraggy where Miss Carnaby had been plump, but she also was voluble and slightly breathless. She, too, had been blamed for Nanki Poo's disappearance.

"But really, Mr. Poirot, it was the most amazing thing. It all happened in a second. Outside Harrods it was. A nurse there asked me the time—"

Poirot interrupted her.

"A nurse? A hospital nurse?"

"No, no—a children's nurse. Such a sweet baby it was, too! A dear little mite. Such lovely rosy cheeks. They say children don't look healthy in London, but I'm sure—"

"Ellen," said Mrs. Samuelson.

Miss Keble blushed, stammered, and subsided into silence.

Mrs. Samuelson said acidly:

"And while Miss Keble was bending over a perambulator that had nothing to do with her, this audacious villain cut Nanki Poo's lead and made off with him."

Miss Keble murmured tearfully:

"It all happened in a second. I looked round and the darling boy was gone—there was just the dangling lead in my hand. Perhaps you'd like to see the lead, Mr. Poirot?"

“By no means,” said Poirot hastily. He had no wish to make a collection of cut dog leads. “I understand,” he went on, “that shortly afterwards you received a letter?”

The story followed the same course exactly—the letter—the threats of violence to Nanki Poo’s ears and tail. Only two things were different—the sum of money demanded—£300—and the address to which it was to be sent: this time it was to Commander Blackleigh, Harrington Hotel, 76 Clonmel Gardens, Kensington.

Mrs. Samuelson went on:

“When Nanki Poo was safely back again, I went to the place myself, Mr. Poirot. After all, three hundred pounds is three hundred pounds.”

“Certainly it is.”

“The very first thing I saw was my letter enclosing the money in a kind of rack in the hall. Whilst I was waiting for the proprietress I slipped it into my bag. Unfortunately—”

Poirot said: “Unfortunately, when you opened it it contained only blank sheets of paper.”

“How did you know?” Mrs. Samuelson turned on him with awe.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Obviously, chère Madame, the thief would take care to recover the money before he returned the dog. He would then replace the notes with blank paper and return the letter to the rack in case its absence should be noticed.”

“No such person as Commander Blackleigh had ever stayed there.”

Poirot smiled.

“And of course, my husband was extremely annoyed about the whole thing. In fact, he was livid—absolutely livid!”

Poirot murmured cautiously:

“You did not—er—consult him before dispatching the money?”

“Certainly not,” said Mrs. Samuelson with decision.

Poirot looked a question. The lady explained.

“I wouldn’t have risked it for a moment. Men are so extraordinary when it’s a question of money. Jacob would have insisted on going to the police. I couldn’t risk that. My poor darling Nanki Poo. Anything might have happened to him! Of course, I had to tell my husband afterwards, because I had to explain why I was overdrawn at the Bank.”

Poirot murmured:

“Quite so—quite so.”

“And I have really never seen him so angry. Men,” said Mrs. Samuelson, rearranging her handsome diamond bracelet and turning her rings on her fingers, “think of nothing but money.”

V

Hercule Poirot went up in the lift to Sir Joseph Hoggin’s office. He sent in his card and was told that Sir Joseph was engaged at the moment but would see him presently. A haughty blonde sailed out of Sir Joseph’s room at last with her hands full of papers. She gave the quaint little man a disdainful glance in passing.

Sir Joseph was seated behind his immense mahogany desk. There was a trace of lipstick on his chin.

“Well, Mr. Poirot? Sit down. Got any news for me?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“The whole affair is of a pleasing simplicity. In each case the money was sent to one of those boarding houses or private hotels where there is no porter or hall attendant and where a large number of guests are always coming and going, including a fairly large preponderance of ex-Service men. Nothing would be easier than for any one to walk in, abstract a letter from the rack, either take it away, or else remove the money and replace it with blank paper. Therefore, in every case, the trail ends abruptly in a blank wall."

"You mean you've no idea who the fellow is?"

"I have certain ideas, yes. It will take a few days to follow them up."

Sir Joseph looked at him curiously.

"Good work. Then, when you have got anything to report—"

"I will report to you at your house."

Sir Joseph said:

"If you get to the bottom of this business, it will be a pretty good piece of work."

Hercule Poirot said:

"There is no question of failure. Hercule Poirot does not fail."

Sir Joseph Hoggin looked at the little man and grinned.

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?" he demanded.

"Entirely with reason."

"Oh well." Sir Joseph Hoggin leaned back in his chair. "Pride goes before a fall, you know."

VI

Hercule Poirot, sitting in front of his electric radiator (and feeling a quiet satisfaction in its neat geometrical pattern) was giving instructions to his valet and general factotum.

“You understand, Georges?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

“More probably a flat or maisonette. And it will definitely be within certain limits. South of the Park, east of Kensington Church, west of Knightsbridge Barracks and north of Fulham Road.”

“I understand perfectly, sir.”

Poirot murmured.

“A curious little case. There is evidence here of a very definite talent for organization. And there is, of course, the surprising invisibility of the star performer—the Nemean Lion himself, if I may so style him. Yes, an interesting little case. I could wish that I felt more attracted to my client—but he bears an unfortunate resemblance to a soap manufacturer of Liège who poisoned his wife in order to marry a blonde secretary. One of my early successes.”

Georges shook his head. He said gravely:

“These blondes, sir, they’re responsible for a lot of trouble.”

VII

It was three days later when the invaluable Georges said:

“This is the address, sir.”

Hercule Poirot took the piece of paper handed to him.

“Excellent, my good Georges. And what day of the week?”

“Thursdays, sir.”

“Thursdays. And today, most fortunately, is a Thursday. So there need be no delay.”

Twenty minutes later Hercule Poirot was climbing the stairs of an obscure block of flats tucked away in a little street leading off a more fashionable one. No. 10 Rosholm Mansions was on the third and top floor and there was no lift. Poirot toiled upwards round and round the narrow corkscrew staircase.

He paused to regain his breath on the top landing and from behind the door of No. 10 a new sound broke the silence—the sharp bark of a dog.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head with a slight smile. He pressed the bell of No. 10.

The barking redoubled—footsteps came to the door, it was opened. . . .

Miss Amy Carnaby fell back, her hand went to her ample breast.

“You permit that I enter?” said Hercule Poirot, and entered without waiting for the reply.

There was a sitting room door open on the right and he walked in. Behind him Miss Carnaby followed as though in a dream.

The room was very small and much overcrowded. Amongst the furniture a human being could be discovered, an elderly woman lying on a sofa drawn up to the gas fire. As Poirot came in, a Pekinese dog jumped off the sofa and came forward uttering a few sharp suspicious barks.

“Aha,” said Poirot. “The chief actor! I salute you, my little friend.”

He bent forward, extending his hand. The dog sniffed at it, his intelligent eyes fixed on the man’s face.

Miss Carnaby muttered faintly:

“So you know?”

Hercule Poirot nodded.

“Yes, I know.” He looked at the woman on the sofa. “Your sister, I think?”

Miss Carnaby said mechanically: “Yes, Emily, this—this is Mr. Poirot.”

Emily Carnaby gave a gasp. She said: “Oh!”

Amy Carnaby said:

“Augustus. . . .”

The Pekinese looked towards her—his tail moved—then he resumed his scrutiny of Poirot’s hand. Again his tail moved faintly.

Gently, Poirot picked the little dog up and sat down with Augustus on his knee. He said:

“So I have captured the Nemean Lion. My task is completed.”

Amy Carnaby said in a hard dry voice:

“Do you really know everything?”

Poirot nodded.

“I think so. You organized this business—with Augustus to help you. You took your employer’s dog out for his usual walk, brought him here and went on to the Park with Augustus. The Park Keeper saw you with a Pekinese as usual. The nurse girl, if we had ever found her, would also have agreed that you had a Pekinese with you when you spoke to her. Then, while you were talking, you cut the lead and Augustus, trained by you, slipped off at once and made a beeline back home. A few minutes later you gave the alarm that the dog had been stolen.”

There was a pause. Then Miss Carnaby drew herself up with a certain pathetic dignity. She said:

“Yes. It is all quite true. I—I have nothing to say.”

The invalid woman on the sofa began to cry softly.

Poirot said:

“Nothing at all, Mademoiselle?”

Miss Carnaby said:

“Nothing. I have been a thief—and now I am found out.”

Poirot murmured:

“You have nothing to say—in your own defence?”

A spot of red showed suddenly in Amy Carnaby’s white cheeks. She said:

“I—I don’t regret what I did. I think that you are a kind man, Mr. Poirot, and that possibly you might understand. You see, I’ve been so terribly afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes, it’s difficult for a gentleman to understand, I expect. But you see, I’m not a clever woman at all, and I’ve no training and I’m getting older—and I’m so terrified for the future. I’ve not been able to save anything—how could I with Emily to be cared for?—and as I get older and more incompetent there won’t be any one who wants me. They’ll want somebody young and brisk. I’ve—I’ve known so many people like I am—nobody wants you and you live in one room and you can’t have a fire or any warmth and not very much to eat, and at last you can’t even pay the rent of your room . . . There are Institutions, of course, but it’s not very easy to get into them unless you have influential friends, and I haven’t. There are a good many others situated like I am—poor companions—untrained useless women with nothing to look forward to but a deadly fear. . . .”

Her voice shook. She said:

“And so—some of us—got together and—and I thought of this. It was really having Augustus that put it into my mind. You see, to most people, one Pekinese is very much like another. (Just as we think the Chinese are.) Really, of course, it's ridiculous. No one who knew could mistake Augustus for Nanki Poo or Shan Tung or any of the other Pekes. He's far more intelligent for one thing, and he's much handsomer, but, as I say, to most people a Peke is just a Peke. Augustus put it into my head—that, combined with the fact that so many rich women have Pekinese dogs."

Poirot said with a faint smile:

"It must have been a profitable—racket! How many are there in the—the gang? Or perhaps I had better ask how often operations have been successfully carried out?"

Miss Carnaby said simply:

"Shan Tung was the sixteenth."

Hercule Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"I congratulate you. Your organization must have been indeed excellent."

Emily Carnaby said:

"Amy was always good at organization. Our father—he was the Vicar of Kellington in Essex—always said that Amy had quite a genius for planning. She always made all the arrangements for the Socials and the Bazaars and all that."

Poirot said with a little bow:

"I agree. As a criminal, Mademoiselle, you are quite in the first rank."

Amy Carnaby cried:

"A criminal. Oh dear, I suppose I am. But—but it never felt like that."

"How did it feel?"

“Of course, you are quite right. It was breaking the law. But you see—how can I explain it? Nearly all these women who employ us are so very rude and unpleasant. Lady Hoggin, for instance, doesn’t mind what she says to me. She said her tonic tasted unpleasant the other day and practically accused me of tampering with it. All that sort of thing.” Miss Carnaby flushed. “It’s really very unpleasant. And not being able to say anything or answer back makes it rankle more, if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” said Hercule Poirot.

“And then seeing money frittered away so wastefully—that is upsetting. And Sir Joseph, occasionally he used to describe a coup he had made in the City—sometimes something that seemed to me (of course, I know I’ve only got a woman’s brain and don’t understand finance) downright dishonest. Well, you know, M. Poirot, it all—it all unsettled me, and I felt that to take a little money away from these people who really wouldn’t miss it and hadn’t been too scrupulous in acquiring it—well, really it hardly seemed wrong at all.”

Poirot murmured:

“A modern Robin Hood! Tell me, Miss Carnaby, did you ever have to carry out the threats you used in your letters?”

“Threats?”

“Were you ever compelled to mutilate the animals in the way you specified?”

Miss Carnaby regarded him in horror.

“Of course, I would never have dreamed of doing such a thing! That was just—just an artistic touch.”

“Very artistic. It worked.”

“Well, of course I knew it would. I know how I should have felt about Augustus, and of course I had to make sure these women never told their husbands until afterwards. The plan worked beautifully every time. In nine cases out of ten the companion was given the letter with the money to post. We usually steamed it open, took out the notes, and replaced them with paper. Once or twice the woman posted it herself. Then, of course, the companion had to go to the hotel and take the letter out of the rack. But that was quite easy, too."

"And the nursemaid touch? Was it always a nursemaid?"

"Well, you see, M. Poirot, old maids are known to be foolishly sentimental about babies. So it seemed quite natural that they should be absorbed over a baby and not notice anything."

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said:

"Your psychology is excellent, your organization is first class, and you are also a very fine actress. Your performance the other day when I interviewed Lady Hoggin was irreproachable. Never think of yourself disparagingly, Miss Carnaby. You may be what is termed an untrained woman but there is nothing wrong with your brains or with your courage."

Miss Carnaby said with a faint smile:

"And yet I have been found out, M. Poirot."

"Only by me. That was inevitable! When I had interviewed Mrs. Samuelson I realized that the kidnapping of Shan Tung was one of a series. I had already learned that you had once been left a Pekinese dog and had an invalid sister. I had only to ask my invaluable servant to look for a small flat within a certain radius occupied by an invalid lady who had a Pekinese dog and a sister who visited her once a week on her day out. It was simple."

Amy Carnaby drew herself up. She said:

"You have been very kind. It emboldens me to ask you a favour. I cannot, I know, escape the penalty for what I have done. I shall be sent to prison, I suppose. But if you could, M. Poirot, avert some of the publicity. So distressing for Emily—and for those few who knew us in the old days. I could not, I suppose, go to prison under a false name? Or is that a very wrong thing to ask?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I think I can do more than that. But first of all I must make one thing quite clear. This ramp has got to stop. There must be no more disappearing dogs. All that is finished!”

“Yes! Oh yes!”

“And the money you extracted from Lady Hoggin must be returned.”

Amy Carnaby crossed the room, opened the drawer of a bureau and returned with a packet of notes which she handed to Poirot.

“I was going to pay it into the pool today.”

Poirot took the notes and counted them. He got up.

“I think it possible, Miss Carnaby, that I may be able to persuade Sir Joseph not to prosecute.”

“Oh, M. Poirot!”

Amy Carnaby clasped her hands. Emily gave a cry of joy. Augustus barked and wagged his tail.

“As for you, mon ami,” said Poirot addressing him. “There is one thing that I wish you would give me. It is your mantle of invisibility that I need. In all these cases nobody for a moment suspected that there was a second dog involved. Augustus possessed the lion’s skin of invisibility.”

“Of course, M. Poirot, according to the legend, Pekinese were lions once. And they still have the hearts of lions!”

“Augustus is, I suppose, the dog that was left to you by Lady Hartingfield and who is reported to have died? Were you never afraid of him coming home alone through the traffic?”

“Oh no, M. Poirot, Augustus is very clever about traffic. I have trained him most carefully. He has even grasped the principle of One Way Streets.”

“In that case,” said Hercule Poirot, “he is superior to most human beings!”

VIII

Sir Joseph received Hercule Poirot in his study. He said:

“Well, Mr. Poirot? Made your boast good?”

“Let me first ask you a question,” said Poirot as he seated himself. “I know who the criminal is and I think it possible that I can produce sufficient evidence to convict this person. But in that case I doubt if you will ever recover your money.”

“Not get back my money?”

Sir Joseph turned purple.

Hercule Poirot went on:

“But I am not a policeman. I am acting in this case solely in your interests. I could, I think, recover your money intact, if no proceedings were taken.”

“Eh?” said Sir Joseph. “That needs a bit of thinking about.”

“It is entirely for you to decide. Strictly speaking, I suppose you ought to prosecute in the public interest. Most people would say so.”

“I dare say they would,” said Sir Joseph sharply. “It wouldn’t be their money that had gone west. If there’s one thing I hate it’s to be swindled. Nobody’s ever swindled me and got away with it.”

“Well then, what do you decide?”

Sir Joseph hit the table with his fist.

"I'll have the brass! Nobody's going to say they got away with two hundred pounds of my money."

Hercule Poirot rose, crossed to the writing table, wrote out a cheque for two hundred pounds and handed it to the other man.

Sir Joseph said in a weak voice:

"Well, I'm damned! Who the devil is this fellow?"

Poirot shook his head.

"If you accept the money, there must be no questions asked."

Sir Joseph folded up the cheque and put it in his pocket.

"That's a pity. But the money's the thing. And what do I owe you, Mr. Poirot?"

"My fees will not be high. This was, as I said, a very unimportant matter." He paused—and added, "Nowadays nearly all my cases are murder cases. . . ."

Sir Joseph started slightly.

"Must be interesting?" he said.

"Sometimes. Curiously enough, you recall to me one of my earlier cases in Belgium, many years ago—the chief protagonist was very like you in appearance. He was a wealthy soap manufacturer. He poisoned his wife in order to be free to marry his secretary . . . Yes—the resemblance is very remarkable. . . ."

A faint sound came from Sir Joseph's lips—they had gone a queer blue colour. All the ruddy hue had faded from his cheeks. His eyes, starting out of his head, stared at Poirot. He slipped down a little in his chair.

Then, with a shaking hand, he fumbled in his pocket. He drew out the cheque and tore it into pieces.

“That’s washed out—see? Consider it as your fee.”

“Oh but, Sir Joseph, my fee would not have been as large as that.”

“That’s all right. You keep it.”

“I shall send it to a deserving charity.”

“Send it anywhere you damn well like.”

Poirot leaned forward. He said:

“I think I need hardly point out, Sir Joseph, that in your position, you would do well to be exceedingly careful.”

Sir Joseph said, his voice almost inaudible:

“You needn’t worry. I shall be careful all right.”

Hercule Poirot left the house. As he went down the steps he said to himself:

“So—I was right.”

IX

Lady Hoggin said to her husband:

“Funny, this tonic tastes quite different. It hasn’t got that bitter taste any more. I wonder why?”

Sir Joseph growled:

“Chemist. Careless fellows. Make things up differently different times.”

Lady Hoggin said doubtfully:

“I suppose that must be it.”

“Of course it is. What else could it be?”

“Has the man found out anything about Shan Tung?”

“Yes. He got me my money back all right.”

“Who was it?”

“He didn’t say. Very close fellow, Hercule Poirot. But you needn’t worry.”

“He’s a funny little man, isn’t he?”

Sir Joseph gave a slight shiver and threw a sideways glance upwards as though he felt the invisible presence of Hercule Poirot behind his right shoulder. He had an idea that he would always feel it there.

He said:

“He’s a damned clever little devil!”

And he thought to himself:

“Greta can go hang! I’m not going to risk my neck for any damned platinum blonde!”

X

“Oh!”

Amy Carnaby gazed down incredulously at the cheque for two hundred pounds. She cried:

“Emily! Emily! Listen to this.

‘Dear Miss Carnaby,

Allow me to enclose a contribution to your very deserving Fund before it is finally wound up.

Yours very truly,

Hercule Poirot.’ ”

“Amy,” said Emily Carnaby, “you’ve been incredibly lucky. Think where you might be now.”

“Wormwood Scrubbs—or is it Holloway?” murmured Amy Carnaby. “But that’s all over now—isn’t it, Augustus? No more walks to the Park with mother or mother’s friends and a little pair of scissors.”

A far away wistfulness came into her eyes. She sighed.

“Dear Augustus! It seems a pity. He’s so clever . . . One can teach him anything. . . .”

Two

THE LERNEAN HYDRA

Hercule Poirot looked encouragingly at the man seated opposite him.

Dr. Charles Oldfield was a man of perhaps forty. He had fair hair slightly grey at the temples and blue eyes that held a worried expression. He stooped a little and his manner was a trifle hesitant. Moreover, he seemed to find difficulty in coming to the point.

He said, stammering slightly:

"I've come to you, M. Poirot, with rather an odd request. And now that I'm here, I'm inclined to funk the whole thing. Because, as I see very well now, it's the sort of thing that no one can possibly do anything about."

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"As to that, you must let me judge."

Oldfield muttered:

"I don't know why I thought that perhaps—"

He broke off.

Hercule Poirot finished the sentence.

"That perhaps I could help you? Eh bien, perhaps I can. Tell me your problem."

Oldfield straightened himself. Poirot noted anew how haggard the man looked.

Oldfield said, and his voice had a note of hopelessness in it:

“You see, it isn’t any good going to the police . . . They can’t do anything. And yet—every day it’s getting worse and worse. I—I don’t know what to do. . . .”

“What is getting worse?”

“The rumours . . . Oh, it’s quite simple, M. Poirot. Just a little over a year ago, my wife died. She had been an invalid for some years. They are saying, everyone is saying, that I killed her—that I poisoned her!”

“Aha,” said Poirot. “And did you poison her?”

“M. Poirot!” Dr. Oldfield sprang to his feet.

“Calm yourself,” said Hercule Poirot. “And sit down again. We will take it, then, that you did not poison your wife. But your practice, I imagine, is situated in a country district—”

“Yes. Market Loughborough—in Berkshire. I have always realized that it was the kind of place where people gossiped a good deal, but I never imagined that it could reach the lengths it has done.” He drew his chair a little forward. “M. Poirot, you have no idea of what I have gone through. At first I had no inkling of what was going on. I did notice that people seemed less friendly, that there was a tendency to avoid me—but I put it down to—to the fact of my recent bereavement. Then it became more marked. In the street, even, people will cross the road to avoid speaking to me. My practice is falling off. Wherever I go I am conscious of lowered voices, of unfriendly eyes that watch me whilst malicious tongues whisper their deadly poison. I have had one or two letters—vile things.”

He paused—and then went on:

“And—and I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t know how to fight this—this vile network of lies and suspicion. How can one refute what is never said openly to your face? I am powerless—trapped—and slowly and mercilessly being destroyed.”

Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully. He said:

“Yes. Rumour is indeed the nine-headed Hydra of Lernea which cannot be exterminated because as fast as one head is cropped off two grow in its place.”

Dr. Oldfield said: “That’s just it. There’s nothing I can do—nothing! I came to you as a last resort—but I don’t suppose for a minute that there is anything you can do either.”

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“I am not so sure. Your problem interests me, Doctor Oldfield. I should like to try my hand at destroying the many-headed monster. First of all, tell me a little more about the circumstances which gave rise to this malicious gossip. Your wife died, you say, just over a year ago. What was the cause of death?”

“Gastric ulcer.”

“Was there an autopsy?”

“No. She had been suffering from gastric trouble over a considerable period.”

Poirot nodded.

“And the symptoms of gastric inflammation and of arsenical poisoning are closely alike—a fact which everybody knows nowadays. Within the last ten years there have been at least four sensational murder cases in each of which the victim has been buried without suspicion with a certificate of gastric disorder. Was your wife older or younger than yourself?”

“She was five years older.”

“How long had you been married?”

“Fifteen years.”

“Did she leave any property?”

“Yes. She was a fairly well-to-do woman. She left, roughly, about thirty thousand pounds.”

“A very useful sum. It was left to you?”

“Yes.”

“Were you and your wife on good terms?”

“Certainly.”

“No quarrels? No scenes?”

“Well—” Charles Oldfield hesitated. “My wife was what might be termed a difficult woman. She was an invalid and very concerned over her health and inclined, therefore, to be fretful and difficult to please. There were days when nothing I could do was right.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“Ah yes, I know the type. She would complain, possibly, that she was neglected, unappreciated—that her husband was tired of her and would be glad when she was dead.”

Oldfield’s face registered the truth of Poirot’s surmise. He said with a wry smile:

“You’ve got it exactly!”

Poirot went on:

“Did she have a hospital nurse to attend on her? Or a companion? Or a devoted maid?”

“A nurse-companion. A very sensible and competent woman. I really don’t think she would talk.”

“Even the sensible and the competent have been given tongues by le bon Dieu—and they do not always employ their tongues wisely. I have no doubt that the nurse-companion talked, that the servants talked, that everyone talked! You have all the materials there for the starting of a very enjoyable village scandal. Now I will ask you one more thing. Who is the lady?”

“I don’t understand.” Dr. Oldfield flushed angrily.

Poirot said gently:

“I think you do. I am asking you who the lady is with whom your name has been coupled.”

Dr. Oldfield rose to his feet. His face was stiff and cold. He said:

“There is no ‘lady in the case.’ I’m sorry, M. Poirot, to have taken up so much of your time.”

He went towards the door.

Hercule Poirot said:

“I regret it also. Your case interests me. I would like to have helped you. But I cannot do anything unless I am told the whole truth.”

“I have told you the truth.”

“No. . . .”

Dr. Oldfield stopped. He wheeled round.

“Why do you insist that there is a woman concerned in this?”

“Mon cher docteur! Do you not think I know the female mentality? The village gossip, it is based always, always on the relations of the sexes. If a man poisons his wife in order to travel to the North Pole or to enjoy the peace of a bachelor existence—it would not interest his fellow villagers for a minute! It is because they are convinced that the murder has been committed in order that the man may marry another woman that the talk grows and spreads. That is elemental psychology.”

Oldfield said irritably:

“I’m not responsible for what a pack of damned gossiping busybodies think!”

“Of course you are not.”

Poirot went on:

“So you might as well come back and sit down and give me the answer to the question I asked you just now.”

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Oldfield came back and resumed his seat.

He said, colouring up to his eyebrows:

“I suppose it’s possible that they’ve been saying things about Miss Moncrieffe. Jean Moncrieffe is my dispenser, a very fine girl indeed.”

“How long has she worked for you?”

“For three years.”

“Did your wife like her?”

“Er—well, no, not exactly.”

“She was jealous?”

“It was absurd!”

Poirot smiled.

He said:

"The jealousy of wives is proverbial. But I will tell you something. In my experience jealousy, however far-fetched and extravagant it may seem, is nearly always based on reality. There is a saying, is there not, that the customer is always right? Well, the same is true of the jealous husband or wife. However little concrete evidence there may be, fundamentally they are always right."

Dr. Oldfield said robustly:

"Nonsense. I've never said anything to Jean Moncrieffe that my wife couldn't have overheard."

"That, perhaps. But it does not alter the truth of what I said." Hercule Poirot leaned forward. His voice was urgent, compelling. "Doctor Oldfield, I am going to do my utmost in this case. But I must have from you the most absolute frankness without regard to conventional appearances or to your own feelings. It is true, is it not, that you had ceased to care for your wife for some time before she died?"

Oldfield was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

"This business is killing me. I must have hope. Somehow or other I feel that you will be able to do something for me. I will be honest with you, M. Poirot. I did not care deeply for my wife. I made her, I think, a good husband, but I was never really in love with her."

"And this girl, Jean?"

The perspiration came out in a fine dew on the doctor's forehead. He said:

"I—I should have asked her to marry me before now if it weren't for all this scandal and talk."

Poirot sat back in his chair. He said:

"Now at last we have come to the true facts! Eh bien, Doctor Oldfield, I will take up your case. But remember this—it is the truth that I shall seek out."

Oldfield said bitterly:

"It isn't the truth that's going to hurt me!"

He hesitated and said:

"You know, I've contemplated the possibility of an action for slander! If I could pin any one down to a definite accusation—surely then I should be vindicated? At least, sometimes I think so . . . At other times I think it would only make things worse—give bigger publicity to the whole thing and have people saying: 'It mayn't have been proved but there's no smoke without fire.' "

He looked at Poirot.

"Tell me, honestly, is there any way out of this nightmare?"

"There is always a way," said Hercule Poirot.

II

"We are going into the country, Georges," said Hercule Poirot to his valet.

"Indeed, sir?" said the imperturbable George.

"And the purpose of our journey is to destroy a monster with nine heads."

"Really, sir? Something after the style of the Loch Ness Monster?"

"Less tangible than that. I did not refer to a flesh and blood animal, Georges."

"I misunderstood you, sir."

"It would be easier if it were one. There is nothing so intangible, so difficult to pin down, as the source of a rumour."

"Oh yes, indeed, sir. It's difficult to know how a thing starts sometimes."

“Exactly.”

Hercule Poirot did not put up at Dr. Oldfield’s house. He went instead to the local inn. The morning after his arrival, he had his first interview with Jean Moncrieffe.

She was a tall girl with copper-coloured hair and steady blue eyes. She had about her a watchful look, as of one who is upon her guard.

She said:

“So Doctor Oldfield did go to you . . . I knew he was thinking about it.”

There was a lack of enthusiasm in her tone.

Poirot said:

“And you did not approve?”

Her eyes met his. She said coldly:

“What can you do?”

Poirot said quietly:

“There might be a way of tackling the situation.”

“What way?” She threw the words at him scornfully. “Do you mean go round to all the whispering old women and say ‘Really, please, you must stop talking like this. It’s so bad for poor Doctor Oldfield.’ And they’d answer you and say: ‘Of course, I have never believed the story!’ That’s the worst of the whole thing—they don’t say: ‘My dear, has it ever occurred to you that perhaps Mrs. Oldfield’s death wasn’t quite what it seemed?’ No, they say: ‘My dear, of course I don’t believe that story about Doctor Oldfield and his wife. I’m sure he wouldn’t do such a thing, though it’s true that he did neglect her just a little perhaps, and I don’t think, really, it’s quite wise to have quite a young girl as his dispenser—of course, I’m not saying for a minute that there was anything wrong between them. Oh no, I’m sure it was quite all right . . . ’ ” She stopped. Her face was flushed and her breath came rather fast.

Hercule Poirot said:

“You seem to know very well just what is being said.”

Her mouth closed sharply. She said bitterly:

“I know all right!”

“And what is your own solution?”

Jean Moncrieffe said:

“The best thing for him to do is to sell his practice and start again somewhere else.”

“Don’t you think the story might follow him?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“He must risk that.”

Poirot was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“Are you going to marry Doctor Oldfield, Miss Moncrieffe?”

She displayed no surprise at the question. She said shortly:

“He hasn’t asked me to marry him.”

“Why not?”

Her blue eyes met his and flickered for a second. Then she said:

“Because I’ve choked him off.”

“Ah, what a blessing to find someone who can be frank!”

“I will be as frank as you please. When I realized that people were saying that Charles had got rid of his wife in order to marry me, it seemed to me that if we did marry it would just put the lid on things. I hoped that if there appeared to be no question of marriage between us, the silly scandal might die down.”

“But it hasn’t?”

“No it hasn’t.”

“Surely,” said Hercule Poirot, “that is a little odd?”

Jean said bitterly:

“They haven’t got much to amuse them down here.”

Poirot asked:

“Do you want to marry Charles Oldfield?”

The girl answered coolly enough.

“Yes, I do. I wanted to almost as soon as I met him.”

“Then his wife’s death was very convenient for you?”

Jean Moncrieffe said:

“Mrs. Oldfield was a singularly unpleasant woman. Frankly, I was delighted when she died.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “You are certainly frank!”

She gave the same scornful smile.

Poirot said:

“I have a suggestion to make.”

“Yes?”

“Drastic means are required here. I suggest that somebody—possibly yourself—might write to the Home Office.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“I mean that the best way of disposing of this story once and for all is to get the body exhumed and an autopsy performed.”

She took a step back from him. Her lips opened, then shut again. Poirot watched her.

“Well, Mademoiselle?” he said at last.

Jean Moncrieffe said quietly:

“I don’t agree with you.”

“But why not? Surely a verdict of death from natural causes would silence all tongues?”

“If you got that verdict, yes.”

“Do you know what you are suggesting, Mademoiselle?”

Jean Moncrieffe said impatiently:

“I know what I’m talking about. You’re thinking of arsenic poisoning—you could prove that she was not poisoned by arsenic. But there are other poisons—the vegetable alkaloids. After a year, I doubt if you’d find any traces of them even if they had been used. And I know what these official analyst people are like. They might return a noncommittal verdict saying that there was nothing to show what caused death—and then the tongues would wag faster than ever!”

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“Who in your opinion is the most inveterate talker in the village?”

The girl considered. She said at last:

“I really think old Miss Leatheran is the worst cat of the lot.”

“Ah! Would it be possible for you to introduce me to Miss Leatheran—in a casual manner if possible?”

“Nothing could be easier. All the old tabbies are prowling about doing their shopping at this time of the morning. We’ve only got to walk down the main street.”

As Jean had said, there was no difficulty about the procedure. Outside the post office, Jean stopped and spoke to a tall, thin middle-aged woman with a long nose and sharp inquisitive eyes.

“Good morning, Miss Leatheran.”

“Good morning, Jean. Such a lovely day, is it not?”

The sharp eyes ranged inquisitively over Jean Moncrieffe’s companion. Jean said:

“Let me introduce M. Poirot, who is staying down here for a few days.”

III

Nibbling delicately at a scone and balancing a cup of tea on his knee, Hercule Poirot allowed himself to become confidential with his hostess. Miss Leatheran had been kind enough to ask him to tea and had thereupon made it her business to find out exactly what this exotic little foreigner was doing in their midst.

For some time he parried her thrusts with dexterity—thereby whetting her appetite. Then, when he judged the moment ripe, he leant forward:

“Ah, Miss Leatheran,” he said. “I can see that you are too clever for me! You have guessed my secret. I am down here at the request of the Home Office. But please,” he lowered his voice, “keep this information to yourself.”

“Of course—of course—” Miss Leatheran was flustered—thrilled to the core. “The Home Office—you don’t mean—not poor Mrs. Oldfield?”

Poirot nodded his head slowly several times.

“We-ell!” Miss Leatheran breathed into that one word a whole gamut of pleasurable emotion.

Poirot said:

“It is a delicate matter, you understand. I have been ordered to report whether there is or is not a sufficient case for exhumation.”

Miss Leatheran exclaimed:

“You are going to dig the poor thing up. How terrible!”

If she had said “how splendid” instead of “how terrible” the words would have suited her tone of voice better.

“What is your own opinion, Miss Leatheran?”

“Well, of course, M. Poirot, there has been a lot of talk. But I never listen to talk. There is always so much unreliable gossip going about. There is no doubt that Doctor Oldfield has been very odd in his manner ever since it happened, but as I have said repeatedly we surely need not put that down to a guilty conscience. It might be just grief. Not, of course, that he and his wife were on really affectionate terms. That I do know—on first-hand authority. Nurse Harrison, who was with Mrs. Oldfield for three or four years up to the time of her death, has admitted that much. And I have always felt, you know, that Nurse Harrison had her suspicions—not that she ever said anything, but one can tell, can’t one, from a person’s manner?”

Poirot said sadly:

“One has so little to go upon.”

“Yes, I know, but of course, M. Poirot, if the body is exhumed then you will know.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “then we will know.”

“There have been cases like it before, of course,” said Miss Leatheran, her nose twitching with pleasurable excitement. “Armstrong, for instance, and that other man—I can’t remember his name—and then Crippen, of course. I’ve always wondered if Ethel Le Neve was in it with him or not. Of course, Jean Moncrieffe is a very nice girl, I’m sure . . . I wouldn’t like to say she led him on exactly—but men do get rather silly about girls, don’t they? And, of course, they were thrown very much together!”

Poirot did not speak. He looked at her with an innocent expression of inquiry calculated to produce a further spate of conversation. Inwardly he amused himself by counting the number of times the words “of course” occurred.

“And, of course, with a postmortem and all that, so much would be bound to come out, wouldn’t it? Servants and all that. Servants always know so much, don’t they? And, of course, it’s quite impossible to keep them from gossiping, isn’t it? The Oldfields’ Beatrice was dismissed almost immediately after the funeral—and I’ve always thought that was odd—especially with the difficulty of getting maids nowadays. It looks as though Dr. Oldfield was afraid she might know something.”

“It certainly seems as though there were grounds for an inquiry,” said Poirot solemnly.

Miss Leatheran gave a little shiver of reluctance.

“One does so shrink from the idea,” she said. “Our dear quiet little village—dragged into the newspapers—all the publicity!”

“It appals you?” asked Poirot.

“It does a little. I’m old-fashioned, you know.”

“And, as you say, it is probably nothing but gossip!”

"Well—I wouldn't like conscientiously to say that. You know, I do think it's so true—the saying that there's no smoke without fire."

"I myself was thinking exactly the same thing," said Poirot.

He rose.

"I can trust your discretion, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh, of course! I shall not say a word to anybody."

Poirot smiled and took his leave.

On the doorstep he said to the little maid who handed him his hat and coat:

"I am down here to inquire into the circumstances of Mrs. Oldfield's death, but I shall be obliged if you will keep that strictly to yourself."

Miss Leatheran's Gladys nearly fell backward into the umbrella stand. She breathed excitedly:

"Oh, sir, then the doctor did do her in?"

"You've thought so for some time, haven't you?"

"Well, sir, it wasn't me. It was Beatrice. She was up there when Mrs. Oldfield died."

"And she thought there had been"—Poirot selected the melodramatic words deliberately—" 'foul play?' "

Gladys nodded excitedly.

"Yes, she did. And she said so did Nurse that was up there, Nurse Harrison. Ever so fond of Mrs. Oldfield Nurse was, and ever so distressed when she died, and Beatrice always said as how Nurse Harrison knew something about it because she turned right round against the doctor afterwards and she wouldn't of done that unless there was something wrong, would she?"

"Where is Nurse Harrison now?"

"She looks after old Miss Bristow—down at the end of the village. You can't miss it. It's got pillars and a porch."

IV

It was a very short time afterwards that Hercule Poirot found himself sitting opposite to the woman who certainly must know more about the circumstances that had given rise to the rumours than anyone else.

Nurse Harrison was still a handsome woman nearing forty. She had the calm serene features of a Madonna with big sympathetic dark eyes. She listened to him patiently and attentively. Then she said slowly:

"Yes, I know that there are these unpleasant stories going about. I have done what I could to stop them, but it's hopeless. People like the excitement, you know."

Poirot said:

"But there must have been something to give rise to these rumours?"

He noted that her expression of distress deepened. But she merely shook her head perplexedly.

"Perhaps," Poirot suggested, "Doctor Oldfield and his wife did not get on well together and it was that that started the rumour?"

Nurse Harrison shook her head decidedly.

"Oh no, Doctor Oldfield was always extremely kind and patient with his wife."

"He was really very fond of her?"

She hesitated.

“No—I would not quite say that. Mrs. Oldfield was a very difficult woman, not easy to please and making constant demands for sympathy and attention which were not always justified.”

“You mean,” said Poirot, “that she exaggerated her condition?”

The nurse nodded.

“Yes—her bad health was largely a matter of her own imagination.”

“And yet,” said Poirot gravely, “she died. . . .”

“Oh, I know—I know. . . .”

He watched her for a minute or two; her troubled perplexity—her palpable uncertainty.

He said: “I think—I am sure—that you do know what first gave rise to all these stories.”

Nurse Harrison flushed.

She said:

“Well—I could, perhaps, make a guess. I believe it was the maid, Beatrice, who started all these rumours and I think I know what put it into her head.”

“Yes?”

Nurse Harrison said rather incoherently:

“You see, it was something I happened to overhear—a scrap of conversation between Doctor Oldfield and Miss Moncrieffe—and I’m pretty certain Beatrice overheard it too, only I don’t suppose she’d ever admit it.”

“What was this conversation?”

Nurse Harrison paused for a minute as though to test the accuracy of her own memory, then she said:

“It was about three weeks before the last attack that killed Mrs. Oldfield. They were in the dining room. I was coming down the stairs when I heard Jean Moncrieffe say:

“ ‘How much longer will it be? I can’t bear to wait much longer.’

“And the doctor answered her:

“ ‘Not much longer now, darling, I swear it.’ And she said again:

“ ‘I can’t bear this waiting. You do think it will be all right, don’t you?’ And he said: ‘Of course. Nothing can go wrong. This time next year we’ll be married.’ ”

She paused.

“That was the very first inkling I’d had, M. Poirot, that there was anything between the doctor and Miss Moncrieffe. Of course I knew he admired her and that they were very good friends, but nothing more. I went back up the stairs again—it had given me quite a shock—but I did notice that the kitchen door was open and I’ve thought since that Beatrice must have been listening. And you can see, can’t you, that the way they were talking could be taken two ways? It might just mean that the doctor knew his wife was very ill and couldn’t live much longer—and I’ve no doubt that that was the way he meant it—but to any one like Beatrice it might sound differently—it might look as though the doctor and Jean Moncrieffe were—well—were definitely planning to do away with Mrs. Oldfield.”

“But you don’t think so, yourself?”

“No—no, of course not. . . .”

Poirot looked at her searchingly. He said:

“Nurse Harrison, is there something more that you know? Something that you haven’t told me?”

She flushed and said violently:

“No. No. Certainly not. What could there be?”

“I do not know. But I thought that there might be—something?”

She shook her head. The old troubled look had come back.

Hercule Poirot said: “It is possible that the Home Office may order an exhumation of Mrs. Oldfield’s body!”

“Oh no!” Nurse Harrison was horrified. “What a horrible thing!”

“You think it would be a pity?”

“I think it would be dreadful! Think of the talk it would create! It would be terrible—quite terrible for poor Doctor Oldfield.”

“You don’t think that it might really be a good thing for him?”

“How do you mean?”

Poirot said: “If he is innocent—his innocence will be proved.”

He broke off. He watched the thought take root in Nurse Harrison’s mind, saw her frown perplexedly, and then saw her brow clear.

She took a deep breath and looked at him.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said simply. “Of course, it is the only thing to be done.”

There were a series of thumps on the floor overhead. Nurse Harrison jumped up.

“It’s my old lady, Miss Bristow. She’s woken up from her rest. I must go and get her comfortable before her tea is brought to her and I go out for my walk. Yes, M. Poirot, I think you are quite right. An autopsy will settle the business once and for all. It will scotch the whole thing and all these dreadful rumours against poor Doctor Oldfield will die down.”

She shook hands and hurried out of the room.

V

Hercule Poirot walked along to the post office and put through a call to London.

The voice at the other end was petulant.

“Must you go nosing out these things, my dear Poirot? Are you sure it’s a case for us? You know what these country town rumours usually amount to—just nothing at all.”

“This,” said Hercule Poirot, “is a special case.”

“Oh well—if you say so. You have such a tiresome habit of being right. But if it’s all a mare’s nest we shan’t be pleased with you, you know.”

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself. He murmured:

“No, I shall be the one who is pleased.”

“What’s that you say? Can’t hear.”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

He rang off.

Emerging into the post office he leaned across the counter. He said in his most engaging tones:

“Can you by any chance tell me, Madame, where the maid who was formerly with Dr. Oldfield—Beatrice her Christian name was—now resides?”

“Beatrice King? She’s had two places since then. She’s with Mrs. Marley over the Bank now.”

Poirot thanked her, bought two postcards, a book of stamps and a piece of local pottery. During the purchase, he contrived to bring the death of the late Mrs. Oldfield into the conversation. He was quick to note the peculiar furtive expression that stole across the postmistress’s face. She said:

“Very sudden, wasn’t it? It’s made a lot of talk as you may have heard.”

A gleam of interest came into her eyes as she asked:

“Maybe that’s what you’d be wanting to see Beatrice King for? We all thought it odd the way she was got out of there all of a sudden. Somebody thought she knew something—and maybe she did. She’s dropped some pretty broad hints.”

Beatrice King was a short rather sly-looking girl with adenoids. She presented an appearance of stolid stupidity but her eyes were more intelligent than her manner would have led one to expect. It seemed, however, that there was nothing to be got out of Beatrice King. She repeated:

“I don’t know nothing about anything . . . It’s not for me to say what went on up there . . . I don’t know what you mean by overhearing a conversation betwen the Doctor and Miss Moncrieffe. I’m not one to go listening to doors, and you’ve no right to say I did. I don’t know nothing.”

Poirot said:

“Have you ever heard of poisoning by arsenic?”

A flicker of quick furtive interest came into the girl’s sullen face.

She said:

“So that’s what it was in the medicine bottle?”

“What medicine bottle?”

Beatrice said:

“One of the bottles of medicine what that Miss Moncrieffe made up for the Missus. Nurse was all upset—I could see that. Tasted it, she did, and smelt it, and then poured it away down the sink and filled up the bottle with plain water from the tap. It was white medicine like water, anyway. And once, when Miss Moncrieffe took up a pot of tea to the Missus, Nurse brought it down again and made it fresh—said it hadn’t been made with boiling water but that was just my eye, that was! I thought it was just the sort of fussing way nurses have at the time—but I dunno—it may have been more than that.”

Poirot nodded. He said:

“Did you like Miss Moncrieffe, Beatrice?”

“I didn’t mind her . . . A bit standoffish. Of course, I always knew as she was sweet on the doctor. You’d only to see the way she looked at him.”

Again Poirot nodded his head. He went back to the inn.

There he gave certain instructions to George.

VI

Dr. Alan Garcia, the Home Office Analyst, rubbed his hands and twinkled at Hercule Poirot. He said:

“Well, this suits you, M. Poirot, I suppose? The man who’s always right.”

Poirot said:

“You are too kind.”

“What put you on to it? Gossip?”

“As you say—Enter Rumour, painted full of tongues.”

The following day Poirot once more took a train to Market Loughborough.

Market Loughborough was buzzing like a beehive. It had buzzed mildly ever since the exhumation proceedings.

Now that the findings of the autopsy had leaked out, excitement had reached fever heat.

Poirot had been at the inn for about an hour and had just finished a hearty lunch of steak and kidney pudding washed down by beer when word was brought to him that a lady was waiting to see him.

It was Nurse Harrison. Her face was white and haggard.

She came straight to Poirot.

“Is this true? Is this really true, M. Poirot?”

He put her gently into a chair.

“Yes. More than sufficient arsenic to cause death has been found.”

Nurse Harrison cried:

“I never thought—I never for one moment thought—” and burst into tears.

Poirot said gently:

“The truth had to come out, you know.”

She sobbed.

“Will they hang him?”

Poirot said:

“A lot has to be proved still. Opportunity—access to poison—the vehicle in which it was administered.”

“But supposing, M. Poirot, that he had nothing to do with it—nothing at all.”

“In that case,” Poirot shrugged his shoulders, “he will be acquitted.”

Nurse Harrison said slowly:

“There is something—something that, I suppose, I ought to have told you before—but I didn’t think that there was really anything in it. It was just queer.”

“I knew there was something,” said Poirot. “You had better tell it to me now.”

“It isn’t much. It’s just that one day when I went down to the dispensary for something, Jean Moncrieffe was doing something rather—odd.”

“Yes?”

“It sounds so silly. It’s only that she was filling up her powder compact—a pink enamel one—”

“Yes?”

“But she wasn’t filling it up with powder—with face powder, I mean. She was tipping something into it from one of the bottles out of the poison cupboard. When she saw me she started and shut up the compact and whipped it into her bag—and put back the bottle quickly into the cupboard so that I couldn’t see what it was. I daresay it doesn’t mean anything—but now that I know that Mrs. Oldfield really was poisoned—” She broke off.

Poirot said: “You will excuse me?”

He went out and telephoned to Detective Sergeant Grey of the Berkshire Police.

Hercule Poirot came back and he and Nurse Harrison sat in silence.

Poirot was seeing the face of a girl with red hair and hearing a clear hard voice say: “I don’t agree.” Jean Moncrieffe had not wanted an autopsy. She had given a plausible enough excuse, but the fact remained. A competent girl—efficient—resolute. In love with a man who was tied to a complaining invalid wife, who might easily live for years since, according to Nurse Harrison, she had very little the matter with her.

Hercule Poirot sighed.

Nurse Harrison said:

“What are you thinking of?”

Poirot answered:

“The pity of things. . . .”

Nurse Harrison said:

“I don’t believe for a minute he knew anything about it.”

Poirot said:

“No. I am sure he did not.”

The door opened and Detective Sergeant Grey came in. He had something in his hand, wrapped in a silk handkerchief. He unwrapped it and set it carefully down. It was a bright rose pink enamel compact.

Nurse Harrison said:

“That’s the one I saw.”

Grey said:

“Found it pushed right to the back of Miss Moncrieffe’s bureau drawer. Inside a handkerchief sachet. As far as I can see there are no fingerprints on it, but I’ll be careful.”

With the handkerchief over his hand he pressed the spring. The case flew open. Grey said:

“This stuff isn’t face powder.”

He dipped a finger and tasted it gingerly on the tip of his tongue.

“No particular taste.”

Poirot said:

“White arsenic does not taste.”

Grey said:

“It will be analysed at once.” He looked at Nurse Harrison. “You can swear to this being the same case?”

“Yes. I’m positive. That’s the case I saw Miss Moncrieffe with in the dispensary about a week before Mrs. Oldfield’s death.”

Sergeant Grey sighed. He looked at Poirot and nodded. The latter rang the bell.

“Send my servant here, please.”

George, the perfect valet, discreet, unobtrusive, entered and looked inquiringly at his master.

Hercule Poirot said:

“You have identified this powder compact, Miss Harrison, as one you saw in the possession of Miss Moncrieffe over a year ago. Would you be surprised to learn that this particular case was sold by Messrs Woolworth only a few weeks ago and that, moreover, it is of a pattern and colour that has only been manufactured for the last three months?”

Nurse Harrison gasped. She stared at Poirot, her eyes round and dark. Poirot said:

“Have you seen this compact before, Georges?”

George stepped forward:

"Yes, sir. I observed this person, Nurse Harrison, purchase it at Woolworth's on Friday the 18th. Pursuant to your instructions I followed this lady whenever she went out. She took a bus over to Darnington on the day I have mentioned and purchased this compact. She took it home with her. Later, the same day, she came to the house in which Miss Moncrieffe lodges. Acting as by your instructions, I was already in the house. I observed her go into Miss Moncrieffe's bedroom and hide this in the back of the bureau drawer. I had a good view through the crack of the door. She then left the house believing herself unobserved. I may say that no one locks their front doors down here and it was dusk."

Poirot said to Nurse Harrison, and his voice was hard and venomous:

"Can you explain these facts, Nurse Harrison? I think not. There was no arsenic in that box when it left Messrs Woolworth, but there was when it left Miss Bristow's house." He added softly, "It was unwise of you to keep a supply of arsenic in your possession."

Nurse Harrison buried her face in her hands. She said in a low dull voice:

"It's true—it's all true . . . I killed her. And all for nothing—nothing . . . I was mad."

VII

Jean Moncrieffe said:

"I must ask you to forgive me, M. Poirot. I have been so angry with you—so terribly angry with you. It seemed to me that you were making everything so much worse."

Poirot said with a smile:

"So I was to begin with. It is like in the old legend of the Lernean Hydra. Every time a head was cut off, two heads grew in its place. So, to begin with, the rumours grew and multiplied. But you see my task, like that of my namesake Hercules, was to reach the first—the original head. Who had started this rumour? It did not take me long to discover that the originator of the story was Nurse Harrison. I went to see her. She appeared to be a very nice woman—intelligent and sympathetic. But almost at once she made a bad mistake—she repeated to me a conversation which she had overheard taking place between you and the doctor, and that conversation, you see, was all wrong. It was psychologically most unlikely. If you and the doctor had planned together to kill Mrs. Oldfield, you are both of you far too intelligent and level-headed to hold such a conversation in a room with an open door, easily overheard by someone on the stairs or someone in the kitchen. Moreover, the words attributed to you did not fit in at all with your mental makeup. They were the words of a much older woman and of one of a quite different type. They were words such as would be imagined by Nurse Harrison as being used by herself in like circumstances.

"I had, up to then, regarded the whole matter as fairly simple. Nurse Harrison, I realized, was a fairly young and still handsome woman—she had been thrown closely with Doctor Oldfield for nearly three years—the doctor had been very fond of her and grateful to her for her tact and sympathy. She had formed the impression that if Mrs. Oldfield died, the doctor would probably ask her to marry him. Instead of that, after Mrs. Oldfield's death, she learns that Doctor Oldfield is in love with you. Straightaway, driven by anger and jealousy, she starts spreading the rumour that Doctor Oldfield has poisoned his wife.

"That, as I say, was how I had visualized the position at first. It was a case of a jealous woman and a lying rumour. But the old trite phrase 'no smoke without fire' recurred to me significantly. I wondered if Nurse Harrison had done more than spread a rumour. Certain things she said rang strangely. She told me that Mrs. Oldfield's illness was largely imaginary—that she did not really suffer much pain. But the doctor himself had been in no doubt about the reality of his wife's suffering. He had not been surprised by her death. He had called in another doctor shortly before her death and the other doctor had realized the gravity of her condition. Tentatively I brought forward the suggestion of exhumation . . . Nurse Harrison was at first frightened out of her wits by the idea. Then, almost at once, her jealousy and hatred took command of her. Let them find arsenic—no suspicion would attach to her. It would be the doctor and Jean Moncrieffe who would suffer.

“There was only one hope. To make Nurse Harrison overreach herself. If there were a chance that Jean Moncrieffe would escape, I fancied that Nurse Harrison would strain every nerve to involve her in the crime. I gave instructions to my faithful Georges—the most unobtrusive of men whom she did not know by sight. He was to follow her closely. And so—all ended well.”

Jean Moncrieffe said:

“You’ve been wonderful.”

Dr. Oldfield chimed in. He said:

“Yes, indeed. I can never thank you enough. What a blind fool I was!”

Poirot asked curiously:

“Were you as blind, Mademoiselle?”

Jean Moncrieffe said slowly:

“I have been terribly worried. You see, the arsenic in the poison cupboard didn’t tally. . . .”

Oldfield cried:

“Jean—you didn’t think—?”

“No, no—not you. What I did think was that Mrs. Oldfield had somehow or other got hold of it—and that she was taking it so as to make herself ill and get sympathy and that she had inadvertently taken too much. But I was afraid that if there was an autopsy and arsenic was found, they would never consider that theory and would leap to the conclusion that you’d done it. That’s why I never said anything about the missing arsenic. I even cooked the poison book! But the last person I would ever have suspected was Nurse Harrison.”

Oldfield said:

“I too. She was such a gentle womanly creature. Like a Madonna.”

Poirot said sadly:

“Yes, she would have made, probably, a good wife and mother . . . Her emotions were just a little too strong for her.” He sighed and murmured once more under his breath:

“The pity of it.”

Then he smiled at the happy-looking middle-aged man and the eager-faced girl opposite him. He said to himself:

“These two have come out of its shadow into the sun . . . and I—I have performed the second Labor of Hercules.”

Three

THE ARCADIAN DEER

Hercule Poirot stamped his feet, seeking to warm them. He blew upon his fingers. Flakes of snow melted and dripped from the corners of his moustache.

There was a knock at the door and a chambermaid appeared. She was a slow-breathing thickset country girl and she stared with a good deal of curiosity at Hercule Poirot. It was possible that she had not seen anything quite like him before.

She asked: “Did you ring?”

“I did. Will you be so good as to light a fire?”

She went out and came back again immediately with paper and sticks. She knelt down in front of the big Victorian grate and began to lay a fire.

Hercule Poirot continued to stamp his feet, swing his arms and blow on his fingers.

He was annoyed. His car—an expensive Messarro Gratz—had not behaved with that mechanical perfection which he expected of a car. His chauffeur, a young man who enjoyed a handsome salary, had not succeeded in putting things right. The car had staged a final refusal in a secondary road a mile and a half from anywhere with a fall of snow beginning. Hercule Poirot, wearing his usual smart patent leather shoes, had been forced to walk that mile and a half to reach the riverside village of Hartly Dene—a village which, though showing every sign of animation in summertime, was completely moribund in winter. The Black Swan had registered something like dismay at the arrival of a guest. The landlord had been almost eloquent as he pointed out that the local garage could supply a car in which the gentleman could continue his journey.

Hercule Poirot repudiated the suggestion. His Latin thrift was offended. Hire a car? He already had a car—a large car—an expensive car. In that car and no other he proposed to continue his journey back to town. And in any case, even if repairs to it could be quickly effected, he was not going on in this snow until next morning. He demanded a room, a fire and a meal. Sighing, the landlord showed him to the room, sent the maid to supply the fire and then retired to discuss with his wife the problem of the meal.

An hour later, his feet stretched out towards the comforting blaze, Hercule Poirot reflected leniently on the dinner he had just eaten. True, the steak had been both tough and full of gristle, the brussels sprouts had been large, pale, and definitely watery, the potatoes had had hearts of stone. Nor was there much to be said for the portion of stewed apple and custard which had followed. The cheese had been hard, and the biscuits soft. Nevertheless, thought Hercule Poirot, looking graciously at the leaping flames, and sipping delicately at a cup of liquid mud euphemistically called coffee, it was better to be full than empty, and after tramping snowbound lanes in patent leather shoes, to sit in front of a fire was Paradise!

There was a knock on the door and the chambermaid appeared.

“Please, sir, the man from the garage is here and would like to see you.”

Hercule Poirot replied amiably:

“Let him mount.”

The girl giggled and retired. Poirot reflected kindly that her account of him to her friends would provide entertainment for many winter days to come.

There was another knock—a different knock—and Poirot called:

“Come in.”

He looked up with approval at the young man who entered and stood there looking ill at ease, twisting his cap in his hands.

Here, he thought, was one of the handsomest specimens of humanity he had ever seen, a simple young man with the outward semblance of a Greek god.

The young man said in a low husky voice:

“About the car, sir, we’ve brought it in. And we’ve got at the trouble. It’s a matter of an hour’s work or so.”

Poirot said:

“What is wrong with it?”

The young man plunged eagerly into technical details. Poirot nodded his head gently, but he was not listening. Perfect physique was a thing he admired greatly. There were, he considered, too many rats in spectacles about. He said to himself approvingly: “Yes, a Greek god—a young shepherd in Arcady.”

The young man stopped abruptly. It was then that Hercule Poirot’s brows knitted themselves for a second. His first reaction had been æsthetic, his second mental. His eyes narrowed themselves curiously, as he looked up.

He said:

“I comprehend. Yes, I comprehend.” He paused and then added: “My chauffeur, he has already told me that which you have just said.”

He saw the flush that came to the other’s cheek, saw the fingers grip the cap nervously.

The young man stammered:

“Yes—er—yes, sir. I know.”

Hercule Poirot went on smoothly:

"But you thought that you would also come and tell me yourself?"

"Er—yes, sir, I thought I'd better."

"That," said Hercule Poirot, "was very conscientious of you. Thank you."

There was a faint but unmistakable note of dismissal in the last words but he did not expect the other to go and he was right. The young man did not move.

His fingers moved convulsively, crushing the tweed cap, and he said in a still lower embarrassed voice:

"Er—excuse me, sir—but it's true, isn't it, that you're the detective gentleman—you're Mr. Hercules Pwarrit?" He said the name very carefully.

Poirot said: "That is so."

Red crept up the young man's face. He said:

"I read a piece about you in the paper."

"Yes?"

The boy was now scarlet. There was distress in his eyes—distress and appeal. Hercule Poirot came to his aid. He said gently:

"Yes? What is it you want to ask me?"

The words came with a rush now.

"I'm afraid you may think it's awful cheek of me, sir. But your coming here by chance like this—well, it's too good to be missed. Having read about you and the clever things you've done. Anyway, I said as after all I might as well ask you. There's no harm in asking, is there?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head. He said:

"You want my help in some way?"

The other nodded. He said, his voice husky and embarrassed:

“It’s—it’s about a young lady. If—if you could find her for me.”

“Find her? Has she disappeared, then?”

“That’s right, sir.”

Hercule Poirot sat up in his chair. He said sharply:

“I could help you, perhaps, yes. But the proper people for you to go to are the police. It is their job and they have far more resources at their disposal than I have.”

The boy shuffled his feet. He said awkwardly:

“I couldn’t do that, sir. It’s not like that at all. It’s all rather peculiar, so to speak.”

Hercule Poirot stared at him. Then he indicated a chair.

“Eh bien, then, sit down—what is your name?”

“Williamson, sir, Ted Williamson.”

“Sit down, Ted. And tell me all about it.”

“Thank you sir.” He drew forward the chair and sat down carefully on the edge of it. His eyes had still that appealing doglike look.

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“Tell me.”

Ted Williamson drew a deep breath.

“Well, you see, sir, it was like this. I never saw her but the once. And I don’t know her right name nor anything. But it’s queer like, the whole thing, and my letter coming back and everything.”

"Start," said Hercule Poirot, "at the beginning. Do not hurry yourself. Just tell me everything that occurred."

"Yes, sir. Well, perhaps you know Grasslawn, sir, that big house down by the river past the bridge?"

"I know nothing at all."

"Belongs to Sir George Sanderfield, it does. He uses it in the summertime for weekends and parties—rather a gay lot he has down as a rule. Actresses and that. Well, it was last June—and the wireless was out of order and they sent me up to see to it."

Poirot nodded.

"So I went along. The gentleman was out on the river with his guests and the cook was out and his manservant had gone along to serve the drinks and all that on the launch. There was only this girl in the house—she was the lady's maid to one of the guests. She let me in and showed me where the set was, and stayed there while I was working on it. And so we got to talking and all that . . . Nita her name was, so she told me, and she was lady's maid to a Russian dancer who was staying there."

"What nationality was she, English?"

"No, sir, she'd be French, I think. She'd a funny sort of accent. But she spoke English all right. She—she was friendly and after a bit I asked her if she could come out that night and go to the pictures, but she said her lady would be needing her. But then she said as how she could get off early in the afternoon because as how they wasn't going to be back off the river till late. So the long and the short of it was that I took the afternoon off without asking (and nearly got the sack for it too) and we went for a walk along by the river."

He paused. A little smile hovered on his lips. His eyes were dreamy. Poirot said gently:

"And she was pretty, yes?"

"She was just the loveliest thing you ever saw. Her hair was like gold—it went up each side like wings—and she had a gay kind of way of tripping along. I—I—well, I fell for her right away, sir. I'm not pretending anything else."

Poirot nodded. The young man went on:

"She said as how her lady would be coming down again in a fortnight and we fixed up to meet again then." He paused. "But she never came. I waited for her at the spot she'd said, but not a sign of her, and at last I made bold to go up to the house and ask for her. The Russian lady was staying there all right and her maid too, they said. Sent for her, they did, but when she came, why, it wasn't Nita at all! Just a dark catty-looking girl—a bold lot if there ever was one. Marie, they called her. "You want to see me?" she says, simpering all over. She must have seen I was took aback. I said was she the Russian lady's maid and something about her not being the one I'd seen before, and then she laughed and said that the last maid had been sent away sudden. "Sent away?" I said. "What for?" She sort of shrugged her shoulders and stretched out her hands. "How should I know?" she said. "I was not
there."

"Well, sir, it took me aback. At the moment I couldn't think of anything to say. But afterwards I plucked up the courage and I got to see this Marie again and asked her to get me Nita's address. I didn't let on to her that I didn't even know Nita's last name. I promised her a present if she did what I asked—she was the kind as wouldn't do anything for you for nothing. Well, she got it all right for me—an address in North London, it was, and I wrote to Nita there—but the letter came back after a bit—sent back through the post office with no longer at this address scrawled on it."

Ted Williamson stopped. His eyes, those deep blue steady eyes, looked across at Poirot. He said:

"You see how it is, sir? It's not a case for the police. But I want to find her. And I don't know how to set about it. If—if you could find her for me." His colour deepened. "I've—I've a bit put by. I could manage five pounds—or even ten."

Poirot said gently:

“We need not discuss the financial side for the moment. First reflect on this point—this girl, this Nita—she knew your name and where you worked?”

“Oh yes, sir.”

“She could have communicated with you if she had wanted to?”

Ted said more slowly:

“Yes, sir.”

“Then do you not think—perhaps—”

Ted Williamson interrupted him.

“What you’re meaning, sir, is that I fell for her but she didn’t fall for me? Maybe that’s true in a way . . . But she liked me—she did like me—it wasn’t just a bit of fun to her . . . And I’ve been thinking, sir, as there might be a reason for all this. You see, sir, it was a funny crowd she was mixed up in. She might be in a bit of trouble, if you know what I mean.”

“You mean she might have been going to have a child? Your child?”

“Not mine, sir.” Ted flushed. “There wasn’t nothing wrong between us.”

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully. He murmured:

“And if what you suggest is true—you still want to find her?”

The colour surged up in Ted Williamson’s face. He said:

“Yes, I do, and that’s flat! I want to marry her if she’ll have me. And that’s no matter what kind of a jam she’s in! If you’ll only try and find her for me, sir?”

Hercule Poirot smiled. He said, murmuring to himself:

“ ‘Hair like wings of gold.’ Yes, I think this is the third Labor of Hercules . . . If I remember rightly, that happened in Arcady. . . .”

II

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at the sheet of paper on which Ted Williamson had laboriously inscribed a name and address.

Miss Valetta, 17 Upper Renfrew Lane, N15.

He wondered if he would learn anything at that address. Somehow he fancied not. But it was the only help Ted could give him.

No. 17 Upper Renfrew Lane was a dingy but respectable street. A stout woman with bleary eyes opened the door to Poirot’s knock.

“Miss Valetta?”

“Gone away a long time ago, she has.”

Poirot advanced a step into the doorway just as the door was about to close.

“You can give me, perhaps, her address?”

“Couldn’t say, I’m sure. She didn’t leave one.”

“When did she go away?”

“Last summer it was.”

“Can you tell me exactly when?”

A gentle clicking noise came from Poirot’s right hand where two half crowns jostled each other in friendly fashion.

The bleary-eyed woman softened in an almost magical manner. She became graciousness itself.

“Well, I’m sure I’d like to help you, sir. Let me see now. August, no, before that—July—yes, July it must have been. About the first week in July. Went off in a hurry, she did. Back to Italy, I believe.”

“She was an Italian, then?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“And she was at one time lady’s maid to a Russian dancer, was she not?”

“That’s right. Madame Semoulina or some such name. Danced at the Thespian in this Bally everyone’s so wild about. One of the stars, she was.”

Poirot said:

“Do you know why Miss Valetta left her post?”

The woman hesitated a moment before saying:

“I couldn’t say, I’m sure.”

“She was dismissed, was she not?”

“Well—I believe there was a bit of a dustup! But mind you, Miss Valetta didn’t let on much about it. She wasn’t one to give things away. But she looked wild about it. Wicked temper she had—real Eyetalian—her black eyes all snapping and looking as if she’d like to put a knife into you. I wouldn’t have crossed her when she was in one of her moods!”

“And you are quite sure you do not know Miss Valetta’s present address?”

The half crowns clinked again encouragingly.

The answer rang true enough.

“I wish I did, sir. I’d be only too glad to tell you. But there—she went off in a hurry and there it is!”

Poirot said to himself thoughtfully:

“Yes, there it is. . . .”

III

Ambrose Vandel, diverted from his enthusiastic account of the décor he was designing for a forthcoming ballet, supplied information easily enough.

“Sanderfield? George Sanderfield? Nasty fellow. Rolling in money but they say he’s a crook. Dark horse! Affair with a dancer? But of course, my dear—he had an affair with Katrina. Katrina Samoushenka. You must have seen her? Oh, my dear—too delicious. Lovely technique. The Swan of Tuolela—you must have seen that? My décor! And that other thing of Debussy or is it Mannine ‘La Biche au Bois?’ She danced it with Michael Novgin. He’s so marvellous, isn’t he?”

“And she was a friend of Sir George Sanderfield?”

“Yes, she used to weekend with him at his house on the river. Marvellous parties I believe he gives.”

“Would it be possible, mon cher, for you to introduce me to Mademoiselle Samoushenka?”

“But, my dear, she isn’t here any longer. She went to Paris or somewhere quite suddenly. You know, they do say that she was a Bolshevik spy or something—not that I believed it myself—you know people love saying things like that. Katrina always pretended that she was a White Russian—her father was a Prince or a Grand Duke—the usual thing! It goes down so much better.” Vandel paused and returned to the absorbing subject of himself. “Now as I was saying, if you want to get the spirit of Bathsheba you’ve got to steep yourself in the Semitic tradition. I express it by—”

He continued happily.

IV

The interview that Hercule Poirot managed to arrange with Sir George Sanderfield did not start too auspiciously.

The “dark horse,” as Ambrose Vandel had called him, was slightly ill at ease. Sir George was a short square man with dark coarse hair and a roll of fat in his neck.

He said:

“Well, M. Poirot, what can I do for you? Er—we haven’t met before, I think?”

“No, we have not met.”

“Well, what is it? I confess, I’m quite curious.”

“Oh, it is very simple—a mere matter of information.”

The other gave an uneasy laugh.

“Want me to give you some inside dope, eh? Didn’t know you were interested in finance.”

“It is not a matter of les affaires. It is a question of a certain lady.”

“Oh, a woman.” Sir George Sanderfield leant back in his armchair. He seemed to relax. His voice held an easier note.

Poirot said:

“You were acquainted, I think, with Mademoiselle Katrina Samoushenka?”

Sanderfield laughed.

“Yes. An enchanting creature. Pity she’s left London.”

“Why did she leave London?”

"My dear fellow, I don't know. Row with the management, I believe. She was temperamental, you know—very Russian in her moods. I'm sorry that I can't help you but I haven't the least idea where she is now. I haven't kept up with her at all."

There was a note of dismissal in his voice as he rose to his feet.

Poirot said:

"But is not Mademoiselle Samoushenka that I am anxious to trace."

"Isn't it?"

"No, it is a question of her maid."

"Her maid?" Sanderfield stared at him.

Poirot said:

"Do you—perhaps—remember her maid?"

All Sanderfield's uneasiness had returned. He said awkwardly:

"Good Lord, no, how should I? I remember she had one, of course . . . Bit of a bad lot, too, I should say. Sneaking, prying sort of girl. If I were you I shouldn't put any faith in a word that girl says. She's the kind of girl who's a born liar."

Poirot murmured:

"So actually, you remember quite a lot about her?"

Sanderfield said hastily:

"Just an impression, that's all . . . Don't even remember her name. Let me see, Marie something or other—no, I'm afraid I can't help you to get hold of her. Sorry."

Poirot said gently:

“I have already got the name of Marie Hellin from the Thespian Theatre—and her address. But I am speaking, Sir George, of the maid who was with Mademoiselle Samoushenka before Marie Hellin. I am speaking of Nita Valetta.”

Sanderfield stared. He said:

“Don’t remember her at all. Marie’s the only one I remember. Little dark girl with a nasty look in her eye.”

Poirot said:

“The girl I mean was at your house Grasslawn last June.”

Sanderfield said sulkily:

“Well, all I can say is I don’t remember her. Don’t believe she had a maid with her. I think you’re making a mistake.”

Hercule Poirot shook his head. He did not think he was making a mistake.

V

Marie Hellin looked swiftly at Poirot out of small intelligent eyes and as swiftly looked away again. She said in smooth, even tones:

“But I remember perfectly, Monsieur. I was engaged by Madame Samoushenka the last week in June. Her former maid had departed in a hurry.”

“Did you ever hear why that maid left?”

“She went—suddenly—that is all I know! It may have been illness—something of that kind. Madame did not say.”

Poirot said:

“Did you find your mistress easy to get on with?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“She had great moods. She wept and laughed in turns. Sometimes she was so despondent she would not speak or eat. Sometimes she was wildly gay. They are like that, these dancers. It is temperament.”

“And Sir George?”

The girl looked up alertly. An unpleasant gleam came into her eyes.

“Ah, Sir George Sanderfield? You would like to know about him? Perhaps it is that that you really want to know? The other was only an excuse, eh? Ah, Sir George, I could tell you some curious things about him, I could tell you—”

Poirot interrupted:

“It is not necessary.”

She stared at him, her mouth open. Angry disappointment showed in her eyes.

VI

“I always say you know everything, Alexis Pavlovitch.”

Hercule Poirot murmured the words with his most flattering intonation.

He was reflecting to himself that his third Labor of Hercules had necessitated more travelling and more interviews than could have been imagined possible. This little matter of a missing lady’s maid was proving one of the longest and most difficult problems he had ever tackled. Every clue, when examined, led exactly nowhere.

It had brought him this evening to the Samovar Restaurant in Paris whose proprietor, Count Alexis Pavlovitch, prided himself on knowing everything that went on in the artistic world.

He nodded now complacently:

"Yes, yes, my friend, I know—I always know. You ask me where she is gone—the little Samoushenka, the exquisite dancer? Ah! she was the real thing, that little one." He kissed his fingertips. "What fire—what abandon! She would have gone far—she would have been the Première Ballerina of her day—and then suddenly it all ends—she creeps away—to the end of the world—and soon, ah! so soon, they forget her."

"Where is she then?" demanded Poirot.

"In Switzerland. At Vagray les Alpes. It is there that they go, those who have the little dry cough and who grow thinner and thinner. She will die, yes, she will die! She has a fatalistic nature. She will surely die."

Poirot coughed to break the tragic spell. He wanted information.

"You do not, by chance, remember a maid she had? A maid called Nita Valetta?"

"Valetta? Valetta? I remember seeing a maid once—at the station when I was seeing Katrina off to London. She was an Italian from Pisa, was she not? Yes, I am sure she was an Italian who came from Pisa."

Hercule Poirot groaned.

"In that case," he said, "I must now journey to Pisa."

VII

Hercule Poirot stood in the Campo Santo at Pisa and looked down on a grave.

So it was here that his quest had come to an end—here by this humble mound of earth. Underneath it lay the joyous creature who had stirred the heart and imagination of a simple English mechanic.

Was this perhaps the best end to that sudden strange romance? Now the girl would live always in the young man's memory as he had seen her for those few enchanted hours of a June afternoon. The clash of opposing nationalities, of different standards, the pain of disillusionment, all that was ruled out for ever.

Hercule Poirot shook his head sadly. His mind went back to his conversation with the Valetta family. The mother, with her broad peasant face, the upright grief-stricken father, the dark hard-lipped sister.

“It was sudden, Signor, it was very sudden. Though for many years she had had pains on and off . . . The doctor gave us no choice—he said there must be an operation immediately for the appendicitis. He took her off to the hospital then and there . . . Si, si, it was under the anæsthetic she died. She never recovered consciousness.”

The mother sniffed, murmuring:

“Bianca was always such a clever girl. It is terrible that she should have died so young. . . .”

Hercule Poirot repeated to himself:

“She died young. . . .”

That was the message he must take back to the young man who had asked his help so confidingly.

“She is not for you, my friend. She died young.”

His quest had ended—here where the leaning Tower was silhouetted against the sky and the first spring flowers were showing pale and creamy with their promise of life and joy to come.

Was it the stirring of spring that made him feel so rebelliously disinclined to accept this final verdict? Or was it something else? Something stirring at the back of his brain—words—a phrase—a name? Did not the whole thing finish too neatly—dovetail too obviously?

Hercule Poirot sighed. He must take one more journey to put things beyond any possible doubt. He must go to Vagray les Alpes.

VIII

Here, he thought, really was the world’s end. This shelf of snow—these scattered huts and shelters in each of which lay a motionless human being fighting an insidious death.

So he came at last to Katrina Samoushenka. When he saw her, lying there with hollow cheeks in each of which was a vivid red stain, and long thin emaciated hands stretched out on the coverlet, a memory stirred in him. He had not remembered her name, but he had seen her dance—had been carried away and fascinated by the supreme art that can make you forget art.

He remembered Michael Novgin, the Hunter, leaping and twirling in that outrageous and fantastic forest that the brain of Ambrose Vandel had conceived. And he remembered the lovely flying Hind, eternally pursued, eternally desirable—a golden beautiful creature with horns on her head and twinkling bronze feet. He remembered her final collapse, shot and wounded, and Michael Novgin standing bewildered, with the body of the slain deer in his arms.

Katrina Samoushenka was looking at him with faint curiosity. She said:

“I have never seen you before, have I? What is it you want of me?”

Hercule Poirot made her a little bow.

“First, Madame, I wish to thank you—for your art which made for me once an evening of beauty.”

She smiled faintly.

“But also I am here on a matter of business. I have been looking, Madame, for a long time for a certain maid of yours—her name was Nita.”

“Nita?”

She stared at him. Her eyes were large and startled. She said:

“What do you know about—Nita?”

“I will tell you.”

He told her of the evening when his car had broken down and of Ted Williamson standing there twisting his cap between his fingers and stammering out his love and his pain. She listened with close attention.

She said when he had finished:

“It is touching, that—yes, it is touching. . . .”

Hercule Poirot nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “It is a tale of Arcady, is it not? What can you tell me, Madame, of this girl?”

Katrina Samoushenka sighed.

“I had a maid—Juanita. She was lovely, yes—gay, light of heart. It happened to her what happens so often to those the gods favour. She died young.”

They had been Poirot’s own words—final words—irrevocable words—Now he heard them again—and yet he persisted. He asked:

“She is dead?”

“Yes, she is dead.”

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute, then he said:

“There is one thing I do not quite understand. I asked Sir George Sanderfield about this maid of yours and he seemed afraid. Why was that?”

There was a faint expression of disgust on the dancer’s face.

“You just said a maid of mine. He thought you meant Marie—the girl who came to me after Juanita left. She tried to blackmail him, I believe, over something that she found out about him. She was an odious girl—inquisitive, always prying into letters and locked drawers.”

Poirot murmured:

“Then that explains that.”

He paused a minute, then he went on, still persistent:

“Juanita’s other name was Valetta and she died of an operation for appendicitis in Pisa. Is that correct?”

He noted the hesitation, hardly perceptible but nevertheless there, before the dancer bowed her head.

“Yes, that is right. . . .”

Poirot said meditatively:

“And yet—there is still a little point—her people spoke of her, not as Juanita but as Bianca.”

Katrina shrugged her thin shoulders. She said: “Bianca—Juanita, does it matter? I suppose her real name was Bianca but she thought the name of Juanita was more romantic and so chose to call herself by it.”

“Ah, you think that?” He paused and then, his voice changing, he said: “For me, there is another explanation.”

“What is it?”

Poirot leaned forward. He said:

“The girl that Ted Williamson saw had hair that he described as being like wings of gold.”

He leaned still a little further forward. His finger just touched the two springing waves of Katrina’s hair.

“Wings of gold, horns of gold? It is as you look at it, it is whether one sees you as devil or as angel! You might be either. Or are they perhaps only the golden horns of the stricken deer?”

Katrina murmured:

“The stricken deer . . .” and her voice was the voice of one without hope.

Poirot said:

“All along Ted Williamson’s description has worried me—it brought something to my mind—that something was you, dancing on your twinkling bronze feet through the forest. Shall I tell you what I think, Mademoiselle? I think there was a week when you had no maid, when you went down alone to Grasslawn, for Bianca Valetta had returned to Italy and you had not yet engaged a new maid. Already you were feeling the illness which has since overtaken you, and you stayed in the house one day when the others went on an all day excursion on the river. There was a ring at the door and you went to it and you saw—shall I tell you what you saw? You saw a young man who was as simple as a child and as handsome as a god! And you invented for him a girl—not Juanita—but Incognita—and for a few hours you walked with him in
Arcady. . . .”

There was a long pause. Then Katrina said in a low hoarse voice:

“In one thing at least I have told you the truth. I have given you the right end to the story. Nita will die young.”

“Ah non!” Hercule Poirot was transformed. He struck his hand on the table. He was suddenly prosaic, mundane, practical.

He said:

“It is quite unnecessary! You need not die. You can fight for your life, can you not, as well as another?”

She shook her head—sadly, hopelessly—

“What life is there for me?”

“Not the life of the stage, bien entendu! But think, there is another life. Come now, Mademoiselle, be honest, was your father really a Prince or a

Grand Duke, or even a General?”

She laughed suddenly. She said:

“He drove a lorry in Leningrad!”

“Very good! And why should you not be the wife of a garage hand in a country village? And have children as beautiful as gods, and with feet, perhaps, that will dance as you once danced.”

Katrina caught her breath.

“But the whole idea is fantastic!”

“Nevertheless,” said Hercule Poirot with great self-satisfaction, “I believe it is going to come true!”

Four

THE ERYMANTHIAN BOAR

The accomplishment of the third Labor of Hercules having brought him to Switzerland, Hercule Poirot decided that being there, he might take advantage of the fact and visit certain places which were up to now unknown to him.

He passed an agreeable couple of days at Chamonix, lingered a day or two at Montreux and then went on to Andermatt, a spot which he had heard various friends praise highly.

Andermatt, however, affected him unpleasantly. It was at the end of a valley with towering snow-peaked mountains shutting it in. He felt, unreasonably, that it was difficult to breathe.

“Impossible to remain here,” said Hercule Poirot to himself. It was at that moment that he caught sight of a funicular railway. “Decidedly, I must mount.”

The funicular, he discovered, ascended first to Les Avines, then to Caurouchet and finally to Rochers Neiges, ten thousand feet above sea level.

Poirot did not propose mounting as high as all that. Les Avines, he thought, would be quite sufficiently his affair.

But here he reckoned without that element of chance which plays so large a part in life. The funicular had started when the conductor approached Poirot and demanded his ticket. After he had inspected it and punched it with a fearsome pair of clippers, he returned it with a bow. At the same time Poirot felt a small wad of paper pressed into his hand with the ticket.

The eyebrows of Hercule Poirot rose a little on his forehead. Presently, unostentatiously, without hurrying himself, he smoothed out the wad of paper. It proved to be a hurriedly scribbled note written in pencil.

Impossible (it ran) to mistake those moustaches! I salute you, my dear colleague. If you are willing, you can be of great assistance to me. You have doubtless read of the affaire Salley? The killer—Marrascaud—is believed to have a rendezvous with some members of his gang at Rochers Neiges—of all places in the world! Of course the whole thing may be a blague—but our information is reliable—there is always someone who squeals, is there not? So keep your eyes open, my friend. Get in touch with Inspector Drouet who is on the spot. He is a sound man—but he cannot pretend to the brilliance of Hercule Poirot. It is important, my friend, that Marrascaud should be taken—and taken alive. He is not a man—he is a wild boar—one of the most dangerous killers alive today. I did not risk speaking to you at Andermatt as I might have been observed and you will have a freer hand if you are thought to be a mere tourist. Good hunting! Your old friend—Lementeuil.

Thoughtfully, Hercule Poirot caressed his moustaches. Yes, indeed, impossible to mistake the moustaches of Hercule Poirot. Now what was all this? He had read in the papers the details of l’affaire Salley—the cold-blooded murder of a well-known Parisian bookmaker. The identity of the murderer was known. Marrascaud was a member of a well-known racecourse gang. He had been suspected of many other killings—but this time his guilt was proved up to the hilt. He had got away, out of France it was thought, and the police in every country in Europe were on the look out for him.

So Marrascaud was said to have a rendezvous at Rochers Neiges. . . .

Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly. He was puzzled. For Rochers Neiges was above the snow line. There was a hotel there, but it communicated with the world only by the funicular, standing as it did on a long narrow ledge overhanging the valley. The hotel opened in June, but there was seldom any one there until July and August. It was a place ill-supplied with entrances and exits—if a man were tracked there, he was caught in a trap. It seemed a fantastic place to choose as the rendezvous of a gang of criminals.

And yet, if Lementeuil said his information was reliable, then Lementeuil was probably right. Hercule Poirot respected the Swiss Commissionaire of Police. He knew him as a sound and dependable man.

Some reason unknown was bringing Marrascaud to this meeting place far above civilization.

Hercule Poirot sighed. To hunt down a ruthless killer was not his idea of a pleasant holiday. Brain work from an armchair, he reflected, was more in his line. Not to ensnare a wild boar upon a mountainside.

A wild boar—that was the term Lementeuil had used. It was certainly an odd coincidence. . . .

He murmured to himself: “The fourth Labor of Hercules. The Erymanthian Boar?”

Quietly, without ostentation, he took careful stock of his fellow passengers.

On the seat opposite him was an American tourist. The pattern of his clothes, of his overcoat, the grip he carried, down to his hopeful friendliness and his naïve absorption in the scenery, even the guide book in his hand, all gave him away and proclaimed him a small town American seeing Europe for the first time. In another minute or two, Poirot judged, he would break into speech. His wistful doglike expression could not be mistaken.

On the other side of the carriage a tall, rather distinguished-looking man with greyish hair and a big curved nose was reading a German book. He had the strong mobile fingers of a musician or a surgeon.

Farther away still were three men all of the same type. Men with bowed legs and an indescribable suggestion of horsiness about them. They were playing cards. Presently, perhaps, they would suggest a stranger cutting in on the game. At first the stranger would win. Afterwards, the luck would run the other way.

Nothing very unusual about the three men. The only thing that was unusual was the place where they were.

One might have seen them in any train on the way to a race meeting—or on an unimportant liner. But in an almost empty funicular—no!

There was one other occupant of the carriage—a woman. She was tall and dark. It was a beautiful face—a face that might have expressed a whole gamut of emotion—but which instead was frozen into a strange inexpressiveness. She looked at no one, staring out at the valley below.

Presently, as Poirot had expected, the American began to talk. His name, he said, was Schwartz. It was his first visit to Europe. The scenery, he said, was just grand. He'd been very deeply impressed by the Castle of Chillon. He didn't think much of Paris as a city—overrated—he'd been to the Folies Bergères and the Louvre and Nôtre Dame—and he'd noticed that none of these restaurants and cafés could play hot jazz properly. The Champs Elysées, he thought, was pretty good, and he liked the fountains especially when they were floodlit.

Nobody got out at Les Avines or at Caurouchet. It was clear that everyone in the funicular was going up to Rochers Neiges.

Mr. Schwartz explained his own reasons. He had always wished, he said, to be high up among snow mountains. Ten thousand feet was pretty good—he'd heard that you couldn't boil an egg properly when you were as high up as that.

In the innocent friendliness of his heart, Mr. Schwartz endeavoured to draw the tall, grey-haired man on the other side of the carriage into the conversation, but the latter merely stared at him coldly over his pince-nez and returned to the perusal of his book.

Mr. Schwartz then offered to exchange places with the dark lady—she would get a better view, he explained.

It was doubtful whether she understood English. Anyway, she merely shook her head and shrank closer into the fur collar of her coat.

Mr. Schwartz murmured to Poirot:

“Seems kind of wrong to see a woman travelling about alone with no one to see to things for her. A woman needs a lot of looking after when she’s travelling.”

Remembering certain American women he had met on the Continent, Hercule Poirot agreed.

Mr. Schwartz sighed. He found the world unfriendly. And surely, his brown eyes said expressively, there’s no harm in a little friendliness all round?

II

To be received by a hotel manager correctly garbed in frock coat and patent leather shoes seemed somehow ludicrous in this out of the world, or rather above-the-world, spot.

The manager was a big handsome man, with an important manner. He was very apologetic.

So early in the season . . . the hot-water system was out of order . . . things were hardly in running order . . . Naturally, he would do everything he could . . . Not a full staff yet . . . He was quite confused by the unexpected number of visitors.

It all came rolling out with professional urbanity and yet it seemed to Poirot that behind the urbane façade he caught a glimpse of some poignant anxiety. This man, for all his easy manner, was not at ease. He was worried about something.

Lunch was served in a long room overlooking the valley far below. The solitary waiter, addressed as Gustave, was skilful and adroit. He darted here and there, advising on the menu, whipping out his wine list. The three horsy men sat at a table together. They laughed and talked in French, their voices rising.

Good old Joseph!—What about the little Denise, mon vieux?—Do you remember that sacré pig of a horse that let us all down at Auteuil?

It was all very hearty, very much in character—and incongruously out of place!

The woman with the beautiful face sat alone at a table in the corner. She looked at no one.

Afterwards, as Poirot was sitting in the lounge, the manager came to him and was confidential.

Monsieur must not judge the hotel too hardly. It was out of the season. No one came here till the end of July. That lady, Monsieur had noticed her, perhaps? She came at this time every year. Her husband had been killed climbing three years ago. It was very sad. They had been very devoted. She came here always before the season commenced—so as to be quiet. It was a sacred pilgrimage. The elderly gentleman was a famous doctor, Dr. Karl Lutz, from Vienna. He had come here, so he said, for quiet and repose.

“It is peaceful, yes,” agreed Hercule Poirot. “And ces Messieurs there?” He indicated the three horsy men. “Do they also seek repose, do you think?”

The manager shrugged his shoulders. Again there appeared in his eyes that worried look. He said vaguely:

“Ah, the tourists, they wish always a new experience . . . The altitude—that alone is a new sensation.”

It was not, Poirot thought, a very pleasant sensation. He was conscious of his own rapidly beating heart. The lines of a nursery rhyme ran idiotically through his mind. “Up above the world so high, Like a tea tray in the sky.”

Schwartz came into the lounge. His eyes brightened when he saw Poirot. He came over to him at once.

"I've been talking to that doctor. He speaks English after a fashion. He's a Jew—been turned out of Austria by the Nazis. Say, I guess those people are just crazy! This Doctor Lutz was quite a big man, I gather—nerve specialist—psychoanalysis—that kind of stuff."

His eyes went to where the tall woman was looking out of a window at remorseless mountains. He lowered his voice.

"I got her name from the waiter. She's a Madame Grandier. Her husband was killed climbing. That's why she comes here. I sort of feel, don't you, that we ought to do something about it—try to take her out of herself?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"If I were you I should not attempt it."

But the friendliness of Mr. Schwartz was indefatigable.

Poirot saw him make his overtures, saw the remorseless way in which they were rebuffed. The two stood together for a minute silhouetted against the light. The woman was taller than Schwartz. Her head was thrown back and her expression was cold and forbidding.

He did not hear what she said, but Schwartz came back looking crestfallen.

"Nothing doing," he said. He added wistfully: "Seems to me that as we're all human beings together there's no reason we shouldn't be friendly to one another. Don't you agree, Mr.—You know, I don't know your name?"

"My name," said Poirot, "is Poirier." He added: "I am a silk merchant from Lyons."

"I'd like to give you my card, M. Poirier, and if ever you come to Fountain Springs you'll be sure of a welcome."

Poirot accepted the card, clapped his hand to his own pocket, murmured:

"Alas, I have not a card on me at the moment. . . ."

That night, when he went to bed, Poirot read through Lementeuil’s letter carefully, before replacing it, neatly folded, in his wallet. As he got into bed he said to himself:

“It is curious—I wonder if. . . .”

III

Gustave the waiter brought Hercule Poirot his breakfast of coffee and rolls. He was apologetic over the coffee.

“Monsieur comprehends, does he not, that at this altitude it is impossible to have the coffee really hot? Lamentably, it boils too soon.”

Poirot murmured:

“One must accept these vagaries of Nature’s with fortitude.”

Gustave murmured:

“Monsieur is a philosopher.”

He went to the door, but instead of leaving the room, he took one quick look outside, then shut the door again and returned to the bedside. He said:

“M. Hercule Poirot? I am Drouet, Inspector of Police.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “I had already suspected as much.”

Drouet lowered his voice.

“M. Poirot, something very grave has occurred. There has been an accident to the funicular!”

“An accident?” Poirot sat up. “What kind of an accident?”

“Nobody has been injured. It happened in the night. It was occasioned, perhaps, by natural causes—a small avalanche that swept down boulders and rocks. But it is possible that there was human agency at work. One does not know. In any case the result is that it will take many days to repair and that in the meantime we are cut off up here. So early in the season, when the snow is still heavy, it is impossible to communicate with the valley below."

Hercule Poirot sat up in bed. He said softly:

"That is very interesting."

The Inspector nodded.

"Yes," he said. "It shows that our commissaire's information was correct. Marrascaud has a rendezvous here, and he has made sure that that rendezvous shall not be interrupted."

Hercule Poirot cried impatiently:

"But it is fantastic!"

"I agree." Inspector Drouet threw up his hands. "It does not make the commonsense—but there it is. This Marrascaud, you know, is a fantastic creature! Myself," he nodded, "I think he is mad."

Poirot said:

"A madman and a murderer!"

Drouet said drily:

"It is not amusing. I agree."

Poirot said slowly:

"But if he has a rendezvous here, on this ledge of snow high above the world, then it also follows that Marrascaud himself is here already, since communications are now cut."

Drouet said quietly:

"I know."

Both men were silent for a minute or two. Then Poirot asked:

“Dr. Lutz? Can he be Marrascaud?”

Drouet shook his head.

“I do not think so. There is a real Dr. Lutz—I have seen his pictures in the papers—a distinguished and well-known man. This man resembles these photographs closely.”

Poirot murmured:

“If Marrascaud is an artist in disguise, he might play the part successfully.”

“Yes, but is he? I never heard of him as an expert in disguise. He has not the guile and cunning of a serpent. He is a wild boar, ferocious, terrible, who charges in blind fury.”

Poirot said:

“All the same. . . .”

Drouet agreed quickly.

“Ah yes, he is a fugitive from justice. Therefore he is forced to dissemble. So he may—in fact he must be—more or less disguised.”

“You have his description?”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“Roughly only. The official Bertillon photograph and measurements were to have been sent up to me today. I know only that he is a man of thirty odd, of a little over medium height and of dark complexion. No distinguishing marks.”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“That could apply to anybody. What about the American, Schwartz?”

"I was going to ask you that. You have spoken with him, and you have lived, I think, much with the English and the Americans. To a casual glance he appears to be the normal travelling American. His passport is in order. It is perhaps strange that he should elect to come here—but Americans when travelling are quite incalculable. What do you think yourself?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head in perplexity.

He said:

"On the surface, at any rate, he appears to be a harmless slightly over-friendly, man. He might be a bore, but it seems difficult to regard him as a danger." He went on: "But there are three more visitors here."

The Inspector nodded, his face suddenly eager.

"Yes, and they are the type we are looking for. I'll take my oath, M. Poirot, that those three men are at any rate members of Marrascaud's gang. They're racecourse toughs if I ever saw them! and one of the three may be Marrascaud himself."

Hercule Poirot reflected. He recalled the three faces.

One was a broad face with overhanging brows and a fat jowl—a hoggish, bestial face. One was lean and thin with a sharp narrow face and cold eyes. The third man was a pasty-faced fellow with a slight dandiacal air.

Yes, one of the three might well be Marrascaud, but if so, the question came insistently, why? Why should Marrascaud, and two members of his gang journey together and ascend into a rattrap on a mountain side? A meeting surely could be arranged in safer and less fantastic surroundings—in a café—in a railway station—in a crowded cinema—in a public park—somewhere where there were exits in plenty—not here far above the world in a wilderness of snow.

Something of this he tried to convey to Inspector Drouet and the latter agreed readily enough.

"But yes, it is fantastic, it does not make sense."

"If it is a rendezvous, why do they travel together? No, indeed, it does not make sense."

Drouet said, his face worried:

"In that case, we have to examine a second supposition. These three men are members of Marrascaud's gang and they have come here to meet Marrascaud himself. Who then is Marrascaud?"

Poirot asked:

"What about the staff of the hotel?"

Drouet shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no staff to speak of. There is an old woman who cooks, there is her old husband Jacques—they have been here for fifty years I should think. There is the waiter whose place I have taken, that is all."

Poirot said:

"The manager, he knows of course who you are?"

"Naturally. It needed his cooperation."

"Has it struck you," said Hercule Poirot, "that he looks worried?"

The remark seemed to strike Drouet. He said thoughtfully:

"Yes, that is true."

"It may be that it is merely the anxiety of being involved in police proceedings."

"But you think it may be more than that? You think that he may—know something?"

“It occurred to me, that is all.”

Drouet said sombrely: “I wonder.”

He paused and then went on:

“Could one get it out of him, do you think?”

Poirot shook his head doubtfully. He said:

“It would be better, I think, not to let him know of our suspicions. Keep your eye on him, that is all.”

Drouet nodded. He turned towards the door.

“You’ve no suggestions, M. Poirot? I—I know your reputation. We have heard of you in this country of ours.”

Poirot said perplexedly:

“For the moment I can suggest nothing. It is the reason which escapes me—the reason for a rendezvous in this place. In fact, the reason for a rendezvous at all?”

“Money,” said Drouet succinctly.

“He was robbed, then, as well as murdered, this poor fellow Salley?”

“Yes, he had a very large sum of money on him which has disappeared.”

“And the rendezvous is for the purpose of sharing out, you think?”

“It is the most obvious idea.”

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“Yes, but why here?” He went on slowly: “The worst place possible for a rendezvous of criminals. But it is a place, this, where one might come to meet a woman. . . .”

Drouet took a step forward eagerly.

He said excitedly:

“You think—?”

“I think,” said Poirot, “that Madame Grandier is a very beautiful woman. I think that anyone might well mount ten thousand feet for her sake—that is, if she had suggested such a thing.”

“You know,” said Drouet, “that’s interesting. I never thought of her in connection with the case. After all, she’s been to this place several years running.”

Poirot said gently:

“Yes—and therefore her presence would not cause comment. It would be a reason, would it not, why Rochers Neiges should have been the spot selected?”

Drouet said excitedly:

“You’ve had an idea, M. Poirot. I’ll look into that angle.”

IV

The day passed without incident. Fortunately the hotel was well provisioned. The manager explained that there need be no anxiety. Supplies were assured.

Hercule Poirot endeavoured to get into conversation with Dr. Karl Lutz and was rebuffed. The doctor intimated plainly that psychology was his professional preoccupation and that he was not going to discuss it with amateurs. He sat in a corner reading a large German tome on the subconscious and making copious notes and annotations.

Hercule Poirot went outside and wandered aimlessly round to the kitchen premises. There he entered into conversation with the old man Jacques, who was surly and suspicious. His wife, the cook, was more forthcoming.

Fortunately, she explained to Poirot, there was a large reserve of tinned food—but she herself thought little of food in tins. It was wickedly expensive and what nourishment could there be in it? The good God had never intended people to live out of tins.

The conversation came round to the subject of the hotel staff. Early in July the chambermaids and the extra waiters arrived. But for the next three weeks, there would be nobody or next to nobody. Mostly people who came up and had lunch and then went back again. She and Jacques and one waiter could manage that easily.

Poirot asked:

"There was already a waiter here before Gustave came, was there not?"

"But yes, indeed, a poor kind of a waiter. No skill, no experience. No class at all."

"How long was he here before Gustave replaced him?"

"A few days only—the inside of a week. Naturally he was dismissed. We were not surprised. It was bound to come."

Poirot murmured:

"He did not complain unduly?"

"Ah no, he went quietly enough. After all, what could he expect? This is a hotel of good class. One must have proper service here."

Poirot nodded. He asked:

"Where did he go?"

"That Robert, you mean?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Doubtless back to the obscure café he came from."

"He went down in the funicular?"

She looked at him curiously.

“Naturally, Monsieur. What other way is there to go?”

Poirot asked:

“Did anyone see him go?”

They both stared at him.

“Ah! do you think it likely that one goes to see off an animal like that—that one gives him the grand farewell? One has one’s own affairs to occupy one.”

“Precisely,” said Hercule Poirot.

He walked slowly away, staring up as he did so at the building above him. A large hotel—with only one wing open at present. In the other wings were many rooms, closed and shuttered where no one was likely to enter. . . .

He came round the corner of the hotel and nearly ran into one of the three card-playing men. It was the one with the pasty face and pale eyes. The eyes looked at Poirot without expression. Only the lips curled back a little showing the teeth like a vicious horse.

Poirot passed him and went on. There was a figure ahead of him—the tall graceful figure of Madame Grandier.

He hastened his pace a little and caught her up. He said:

“This accident to the funicular, it is distressing. I hope, Madame, that it has not inconvenienced you?”

She said:

“It is a matter of indifference to me.”

Her voice was very deep—a full contralto. She did not look at Poirot. She swerved aside and went into the hotel by a small side door.

V

Hercule Poirot went to bed early. He was awakened some time after midnight.

Someone was fumbling with the lock of the door.

He sat up, putting on the light. At the same moment the lock yielded to manipulation and the door swung open. Three men stood there, the three card-playing men. They were, Poirot thought, slightly drunk. Their faces were foolish and yet malevolent. He saw the gleam of a razor blade.

The big thickset man advanced. He spoke in a growling voice.

“Sacred pig of a detective! Bah!”

He burst into a torrent of profanity. The three of them advanced purposefully on the defenceless man in the bed.

“We’ll carve him up, boys. Eh, little horses? We’ll slash Monsieur Detective’s face open for him. He won’t be the first one tonight.”

They came on, steady, purposeful—the razor blades flashed. . . .

And then, startling in its crisp transatlantic tones, a voice said:

“Stick ’em up.”

They swerved round. Schwartz, dressed in a peculiarly vivid set of striped pyjamas stood in the doorway. In his hand he held an automatic.”

“Stick ’em up, guys. I’m pretty good at shooting.”

He pressed the trigger—and a bullet sang past the big man’s ear and buried itself in the woodwork of the window.

Three pairs of hands were raised rapidly.

Schwartz said: “Can I trouble you, M. Poirier?”

Hercule Poirot was out of bed in a flash. He collected the gleaming weapons and passed his hands over the three men’s bodies to make sure that they were not armed.

Schwartz said:

“Now then, march! There’s a big cupboard just along the corridor. No window in it. Just the thing.”

He marched them into it and turned the key on them. He swung round to Poirot, his voice breaking with pleasurable emotion.

“If that doesn’t just show? Do you know, M. Poirier, there were folks in Fountain Springs who laughed at me because I said I was going to take a gun abroad with me. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ they asked. ‘Into the jungle?’ Well, sir, I’d say the laugh is with me. Did you ever see such an ugly bunch of toughs?”

Poirot said:

“My dear Mr. Schwartz, you appeared in the nick of time. It might have been a drama on the stage! I am very much in your debt.”

“That’s nothing. Where do we go from here? We ought to turn these boys over to the police and that’s just what we can’t do! It’s a knotty problem. Maybe we’d better consult the manager.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Ah, the manager. I think first we will consult the waiter—Gustave—alias Inspector Drouet. But yes—the waiter Gustave is really a detective.”

Schwartz stared at him.

“So that’s why they did it!”

“That is why who did what?”

“This bunch of crooks got to you second on the list. They’d already carved up Gustave.”

“What?”

“Come with me. The doc’s busy on him now.”

Drouet’s room was a small one on the top floor. Dr. Lutz, in a dressing-gown, was busy bandaging the injured man’s face.

He turned his head as they entered.

“Ah! It is you, Mr. Schwartz? A nasty business, this. What butchers! What inhuman monsters!”

Drouet lay still, moaning faintly.

Schwartz asked: “Is he in danger?”

“He will not die if that is what you mean. But he must not speak—there must be no excitement. I have dressed the wounds—there will be no risk of septicæmia.”

The three men left the room together. Schwartz said to Poirot:

“Did you say Gustave was a police officer?”

Hercule Poirot nodded.

“But what was he doing up at Rochers Neiges?”

“He was engaged in tracking down a very dangerous criminal.”

In a few words Poirot explained the situation.

Dr. Lutz said:

“Marrascaud? I read about the case in the paper. I should much like to meet that man. There is some deep abnormality there! I should like to know the particulars of his childhood.”

“For myself,” said Hercule Poirot. “I should like to know exactly where he is at this minute.”

Schwartz said:

“Isn’t he one of the three we locked in the cupboard?”

Poirot said in a dissatisfied voice:

“It is possible—yes, but me, I am not sure . . . I have an idea—”

He broke off, staring down at the carpet. It was of a light buff colour and there were marks on it of a deep rusty brown.

Hercule Poirot said:

“Footsteps—footsteps that have trodden, I think, in blood and they lead from the unused wing of the hotel. Come—we must be quick!”

They followed him, through a swing door and along a dim, dusty corridor. They turned the corner of it, still following the marks on the carpet until the tracks led them to a half-open doorway.

Poirot pushed the door open and entered.

He uttered a sharp, horrified exclamation.

The room was a bedroom. The bed had been slept in and there was a tray of food on the table.

In the middle of the floor lay the body of a man. He was of just over middle height and he had been attacked with savage and unbelievable ferocity. There were a dozen wounds on his arms and chest and his head and face had been battered almost to a pulp.

Schwartz gave a half-stifled exclamation and turned away looking as though he might be sick.

Dr. Lutz uttered a horrified exclamation in German.

Schwartz said faintly:

“Who is this guy? Does anyone know?”

“I fancy,” said Poirot, “that he was known here as Robert, a rather unskilful waiter. . . .”

Lutz had gone nearer, bending over the body. He pointed with a finger.

There was a paper pinned to the dead man’s breast. It had some words scrawled on it in ink.

Marrascaud will kill no more—nor will he rob his friends!

Schwartz ejaculated:

“Marrascaud? So this is Marrascaud! But what brought him up here to this out of the way spot? And why do you say his name is Robert?”

Poirot said:

“He was here masquerading as a waiter—and by all accounts he was a very bad waiter. So bad that no one was surprised when he was given the sack. He left—presumably to return to Andermatt. But nobody saw him go.”

Lutz said in his slow rumbling voice:

“So—and what do you think happened?”

Poirot replied:

“I think we have here the explanation of a certain worried expression on the hotel manager’s face. Marrascaud must have offered him a big bribe to allow him to remain hidden in the unused part of the hotel. . . .”

He added thoughtfully: “But the manager was not happy about it. Oh no, he was not happy at all.”

“And Marrascaud continued to live in this unused wing with no one but the manager knowing about it?”

“So it seems. It would be quite possible, you know.”

Dr. Lutz said:

“And why was he killed? And who killed him?”

Schwartz cried:

“That’s easy. He was to share out the money with his gang. He didn’t. He double-crossed them. He came here, to this out of the way place, to lie low for a while. He thought it was the last place in the world they’d ever think of. He was wrong. Somehow or other they got wise to it and followed him.” He touched the dead body with the tip of his shoe. “And they settled his account—like this.”

Hercule Poirot murmured:

“Yes, it was not quite the kind of rendezvous we thought.”

Dr. Lutz said irritably:

“These hows and whys may be very interesting, but I am concerned with our present position. Here we have a dead man. I have a sick man on my hands and a limited amount of medical supplies. And we are cut off from the world! For how long?”

Schwartz added:

“And we’ve got three murderers locked in a cupboard! It’s what I’d call kind of an interesting situation.”

Dr. Lutz said:

“What do we do?”

Poirot said:

“First, we get hold of the manager. He is not a criminal, that one, only a man who was greedy for money. He is a coward, too. He will do everything we tell him. My good friend Jacques, or his wife, will perhaps provide some cord. Our three miscreants must be placed where we can guard them in safety until the day when help comes. I think that Mr. Schwartz’s automatic will be effective in carrying out any plans we may make.”

Dr. Lutz said:

“And I? What do I do?”

“You, doctor,” said Poirot gravely, “will do all you can for your patient. The rest of us will employ ceaseless vigilance—and wait. There is nothing else we can do.”

VI

It was three days later that a little party of men appeared in front of the hotel in the early hours of the morning.

It was Hercule Poirot who opened the front door to them with a flourish.

“Welcome, mon vieux.”

Monsieur Lementeuil, Commissaire of Police, seized Poirot by both hands.

“Ah, my friend, with what emotion I greet you! What stupendous events—what emotions you have passed through! And we below, our anxiety, our fears—knowing nothing—fearing everything. No wireless—no means of communication. To heliograph, that was indeed a stroke of genius on your part.”

“No, no,” Poirot endeavoured to look modest. “After all, when the inventions of man fail, one falls back upon nature. There is always the sun in the sky.”

The little party filed into the hotel. Lementeuil said:

“We are not expected?” His smile was somewhat grim.

Poirot smiled also. He said:

“But no! It is believed that the funicular is not nearly repaired yet.”

Lementeuil said with emotion:

“Ah, this is a great day. There is no doubt, you think? It is really Marrascaud?”

“It is Marrascaud all right. Come with me.”

They went up the stairs. A door opened and Schwartz came out in his dressing gown. He stared when he saw the men.

“I heard voices,” he explained. “Why, what’s this?”

Hercule Poirot said grandiloquently:

“Help has come! Accompany us, monsieur. This is a great moment.”

He started up the next flight of stairs.

Schwartz said:

“Are you going up to Drouet? How is he, by the way?”

“Dr. Lutz reported him going on well last night.”

They came to the door of Drouet’s room. Poirot flung it open. He announced:

“Here is your wild boar, gentlemen. Take him alive and see to it that he does not cheat the guillotine.”

The man in the bed, his face still bandaged, started up. But the police officers had him by the arms before he could move.

Schwartz cried bewildered:

“But that’s Gustave the waiter—that’s Inspector Drouet.”

“It is Gustave, yes—but it is not Drouet. Drouet was the first waiter, the waiter Robert who was imprisoned in the unused part of the hotel and whom Marrascaud killed the same night as the attack was made on me.”

VII

Over breakfast, Poirot explained gently to the bewildered American.

“You comprehend, there are certain things one knows—knows quite certainly in the course of one’s profession. One knows, for instance, the difference between a detective and a murderer! Gustave was no waiter—that I suspected at once—but equally he was not a policeman. I have dealt with policemen all my life and I know. He could pass as a detective to an outsider—but not to a man who was a policeman himself.

“And so, at once, I was suspicious. That evening, I did not drink my coffee. I poured it away. And I was wise. Late that evening a man came into my room, came in with the easy confidence of one who knows that the man whose room he is searching is drugged. He looked through my affairs and he found the letter in my wallet—where I had left it for him to find! The next morning Gustave comes into my room with my coffee. He greets me by name and acts his part with complete assurance. But he is anxious—horribly anxious—for somehow or other the police have got on his track! They have learnt where he is and that is for him a terrible disaster. It upsets all his plans. He is caught up here like a rat in a trap.”

Schwartz said:

“The damn fool thing was ever to come here! Why did he?”

Poirot said gravely:

"It is not so foolish as you think. He had need, urgent need, of a retired spot, away from the world, where he could meet a certain person, and where a certain happening could take place."

"What person?"

"Dr. Lutz."

"Dr. Lutz? Is he a crook too?"

"Dr. Lutz is really Dr. Lutz—but he is not a nerve specialist—not a psychoanalyst. He is a surgeon, my friend, a surgeon who specializes in facial surgery. That is why he was to meet Marrascaud here. He is poor now, turned out of his country. He was offered a huge fee to meet a man here and change that man's appearance by means of his surgical skill. He may have guessed that that man was a criminal, but if so, he shut his eyes to the fact. Realize this, they dared not risk a nursing home in some foreign country. No, up here, where no one ever comes so early in the season except for an odd visit, where the manager is a man in need of money who can be bribed, was an ideal spot.

"But, as I say, matters went wrong. Marrascaud was betrayed. The three men, his bodyguard, who were to meet him here and look after him had not yet arrived, but Marrascaud acts at once. The police officer who is pretending to be a waiter is kidnapped and Marrascaud takes his place. The gang arrange for the funicular to be wrecked. It is a matter of time. The following evening Drouet is killed and a paper is pinned on the dead body. It is hoped that by the time that communications are established with the world Drouet's body may have been buried as that of Marrascaud. Dr. Lutz performs his operation without delay. But one man must be silenced—Hercule Poirot. So the gang are sent to attack me. Thanks to you, my friend—"

Hercule Poirot bowed gracefully to Schwartz who said:

"So you're really Hercule Poirot?"

"Precisely."

“And you were never fooled by that body for a minute? You knew all along that it wasn’t Marrascaud?”

“Certainly.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

Hercule Poirot’s face was suddenly stern.

“Because I wanted to be quite sure of handing the real Marrascaud over to the police.”

He murmured below his breath:

“To capture alive the wild boar of Erymanthea. . . .”

Five

THE AUGEAN STABLES

“The situation is an extremely delicate one, M. Poirot.”

A faint smile flitted across Hercule Poirot’s lips. He almost replied:

“It always is!”

Instead, he composed his face and put on what might be described as a bedside manner of extreme discretion.

Sir George Conway proceeded weightily. Phrases fell easily from his lips—the extreme delicacy of the Government’s position—the interests of the public—the solidarity of the Party—the necessity of presenting a united front—the power of the Press—the welfare of the Country. . . .

It all sounded well—and meant nothing. Hercule Poirot felt that familiar aching of the jaw when one longs to yawn and politeness forbids. He had felt the same sometimes when reading the parliamentary debates. But on those occasions there had been no need to restrain his yawns.

He steeled himself to endure patiently. He felt, at the same time, a sympathy for Sir George Conway. The man obviously wanted to tell him something—and as obviously had lost the art of simple narration. Words had become to him a means of obscuring facts—not of revealing them. He was an adept in the art of the useful phrase—that is to say the phrase that falls soothingly on the ear and is quite empty of meaning.

The words rolled on—poor Sir George became quite red in the face. He shot a desperate glance at the other man sitting at the head of the table, and the other man responded.

Edward Ferrier said:

“All right, George. I’ll tell him.”

Hercule Poirot shifted his gaze from the Home Secretary to the Prime Minister. He felt a keen interest in Edward Ferrier—an interest aroused by a chance phrase from an old man of eighty-two. Professor Fergus MacLeod, after disposing of a chemical difficulty in the conviction of a murderer, had touched for a moment on politics. On the retirement of the famous and beloved John Hammett (now Lord Cornworthy) his son-in-law, Edward Ferrier, had been asked to form a Cabinet. As politicians go he was a young man—under fifty. Professor MacLeod had said: “Ferrier was once one of my students. He’s a sound man.”

That was all, but to Hercule Poirot it represented a good deal. If MacLeod called a man sound it was a testimonial to character compared with which no popular or press enthusiasm counted at all.

It coincided, it was true, with the popular estimate. Edward Ferrier was considered sound—just that—not brilliant, not great, not a particularly eloquent orator, not a man of deep learning. He was a sound man—a man bred in the tradition—a man who had married John Hammett’s daughter—who had been John Hammett’s right-hand man and who could be trusted to carry on the government of the country in the John Hammett tradition.

For John Hammett was particularly dear to the people and Press of England. He represented every quality which was dear to Englishmen. People said of him: “One does feel that Hammett’s honest.” Anecdotes were told of his simple home life, of his fondness for gardening. Corresponding to Baldwin’s pipe and Chamberlain’s umbrella, there was John Hammett’s raincoat. He always carried it—a weather-worn garment. It stood as a symbol—of the English climate, of the prudent forethought of the English race, of their attachment to old possessions. Moreover, in his bluff British way, John Hammett was an orator. His speeches, quietly and earnestly delivered, contained those simple sentimental clichés which are so deeply rooted in the English heart. Foreigners sometimes criticize them as being both hypocritical and unbearably noble. John Hammett did not in the least mind being noble—in a sporting, public school, deprecating fashion.

Moreover, he was a man of fine presence, tall, upstanding, with fair colouring and very bright blue eyes. His mother had been a Dane and he himself had been for many years First Lord of the Admiralty, which gave rise to his nickname of "the Viking." When at last ill-health forced him to give up the reins of office, deep uneasiness was felt. Who would succeed him? The brilliant Lord Charles Delafield? (Too brilliant—England didn't need brilliance.) Evan Whittler? (Clever—but perhaps a little unscrupulous.) John Potter? (The sort of man who might fancy himself as Dictator—and we didn't want any dictators in this country, thank you very much.) So a sigh of relief went up when the quiet Edward Ferrier assumed office. Ferrier was all right. He had been trained by the Old Man, he had married the Old Man's daughter. In the classic British phrase, Ferrier would "carry on."

Hercule Poirot studied the quiet dark-faced man with the low pleasant voice. Lean and dark and tired-looking.

Edward Ferrier was saying:

"Perhaps, M. Poirot, you are acquainted with a weekly periodical called the X-ray News?"

"I have glanced at it," admitted Poirot, blushing slightly.

The Prime Minister said:

"Then you know more or less of what it consists. Semilibellous matter. Snappy paragraphs hinting at sensational secret history. Some of them true, some of them harmless—but all served up in a spicy manner. Occasionally —"

He paused and then said, his voice altering a little:

"Occasionally something more."

Hercule Poirot did not speak. Ferrier went on:

"For two weeks now there have been hints of impending disclosures of a first-class scandal in 'the highest political circles.' 'Astonishing revelations of corruption and jobbery.' "

Hercule Poirot said, shrugging his shoulders:

"A common trick. When the actual revelations come they usually disappoint the cravers after sensation badly."

Ferrier said drily: "These will not disappoint them."

Hercule Poirot asked:

"You know then, what these revelations are going to be?"

"With a fair amount of accuracy."

Edward Ferrier paused a minute, then he began speaking. Carefully, methodically, he outlined the story.

It was not an edifying story. Accusations of shameless chicanery, of share juggling, of a gross misuse of Party Funds. The charges were levelled against the late Prime Minister, John Hammett. They showed him to be a dishonest rascal, a gigantic confidence trickster, who had used his position to amass for himself a vast private fortune.

The Prime Minister's quiet voice stopped at last. The Home Secretary groaned. He spluttered out:

"It's monstrous—monstrous! This fellow, Perry, who edits the rag, ought to be shot!"

Hercule Poirot said:

"These so-called revelations are to appear in the X-ray News?"

"Yes."

"What steps do you propose to take about them?"

Ferrier said slowly:

“They constitute a private attack on John Hammett. It is open to him to sue the paper for libel.”

“Will he do that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Ferrier said:

“It is probable that there is nothing the X-ray News would like better. The publicity given them would be enormous. Their defence would be fair comment and that the statements complained of were true. The whole business would be exhaustively held up to view in a blaze of limelight.”

“Still, if the case went against them, the damages would be extremely heavy.”

Ferrier said slowly: “It might not go against them.”

“Why?”

Sir George said primly: “I really think that—”

But Edward Ferrier was already speaking.

“Because what they intend to print is—the truth.”

A groan burst from Sir George Conway, outraged at such un-Parliamentary frankness. He cried out:

“Edward, my dear fellow. We don’t admit, surely—”

The ghost of a smile passed over Edward Ferrier’s tired face. He said:

“Unfortunately, George, there are times when the stark truth has got to be told. This is one of them.”

Sir George exclaimed:

“You understand, M. Poirot, all this is strictly in confidence. Not one word—”

Ferrier interrupted him. He said:

“M. Poirot understands that.” He went on slowly, “What he may not understand is this: the whole future of the People’s Party is at stake. John Hammett, M. Poirot, was the People’s Party. He stood for what it represents to the people of England—he stood for Decency and Honesty. No one has ever thought us brilliant. We have muddled and blundered. But we have stood for the tradition of doing one’s best—and we have stood, too, for fundamental honesty. Our disaster is this—that the man who was our figurehead, the Honest Man of the People, par excellence—turns out to have been one of the worst crooks of this generation.”

Another groan burst from Sir George.

Poirot asked:

“You knew nothing of all this?”

Again the smile flashed across the weary face. Ferrier said:

“You may not believe me, M. Poirot, but like everyone else, I was completely deceived. I never understood my wife’s curious attitude of reserve towards her father. I understand it now. She knew his essential character.”

He paused and then said:

“When the truth began to leak out, I was horrified, incredulous. We insisted on my father-in-law’s resignation on the grounds of ill-health and we set to work to—to clean up the mess, shall I say?”

Sir George groaned.

“The Augean Stables!”

Poirot started.

Ferrier said:

“It will prove, I fear, too Herculean a task for us. Once the facts become public, there will be a wave of reaction all over the country. The Government will fall. There will be a General Election and in all probability Everhard and his party will be returned to power. You know Everhard’s policy.”

Sir George spluttered.

“A firebrand—a complete firebrand.”

Ferrier said gravely:

“Everhard has ability—but he is reckless, belligerent and utterly tactless. His supporters are inept and vacillating—it would be practically a Dictatorship.”

Hercule Poirot nodded.

Sir George bleated out:

“If only the whole thing can be hushed up. . . .”

Slowly, the Premier shook his head. It was a movement of defeat.

Poirot said:

“You do not believe that it can be hushed up?”

Ferrier said:

"I sent for you, M. Poirot, as a last hope. In my opinion this business is too big, too many people know about it, for it to be successfully concealed. The only two methods open to us which are, to put it bluntly, the use of force, or the adoption of bribery—cannot really hope to succeed. The Home Secretary compared our troubles with the cleansing of the Augean Stables. It needs, M. Poirot, the violence of a river in spate, the disruption of the great natural forces in Nature—nothing less, in fact, than a miracle."

"It needs, in fact, a Hercules," said Poirot, nodding his head with a pleased expression.

He added: "My name, remember, is Hercule. . . ."

Edward Ferrier said:

"Can you perform miracles, M. Poirot?"

"It is why you sent for me, is it not? Because you thought that I might?"

"That is true . . . I realized that if salvation was to be achieved, it could only come through some fantastic and completely unorthodox suggestion."

He paused a minute, then he said:

"But perhaps, M. Poirot, you take an ethical view of the situation? John Hammett was a crook, the legend of John Hammett must be exploded. Can one build an honest house on dishonest foundations? I do not know. But I do know that I want to try." He smiled with a sudden sharp bitterness. "The politician wants to remain in office—as usual from the highest motives."

Hercule Poirot rose. He said:

"Monsieur, my experience in the police force has not, perhaps, allowed me to think very highly of politicians. If John Hammett were in office—I would not lift a finger—no, not a little finger. But I know something about you. I have been told, by a man who is really great, one of the greatest scientists and brains of the day, that you are—a sound man. I will do what I can."

He bowed and left the room.

Sir George burst out:

“Well, of all the damned cheek—”

But Edward Ferrier still smiling said:

“It was a compliment.”

II

On his way downstairs, Hercule Poirot was intercepted by a tall, fair-haired woman. She said:

“Please come into my sitting room, M. Poirot.”

He bowed and followed her.

She shut the door, motioned him to a chair, and offered him a cigarette. She sat down opposite him. She said quietly:

“You have just seen my husband—and he has told you—about my father.”

Poirot looked at her with attention. He saw a tall woman, still handsome, with character and intelligence in her face. Mrs. Ferrier was a popular figure. As the wife of the Prime Minister she naturally came in for a good share of the limelight. As the daughter of her father, her popularity was even greater. Dagmar Ferrier represented the popular ideal of English womanhood.

She was a devoted wife, a fond mother, she shared her husband’s love of country life. She interested herself in just those aspects of public life which were generally felt to be proper spheres of womanly activity. She dressed well, but never in an ostentatiously fashionable manner. She devoted much of her time and activity to large-scale charities, she had inaugurated special schemes for the relief of the wives of unemployed men. She was looked up to by the whole nation and was a most valuable asset to the Party.

Hercule Poirot said:

“You must be terribly worried, Madame.”

“Oh I am—you don’t know how much. For years I have been dreading—something.”

Poirot said:

“You had no idea of what was going on actually?”

She shook her head.

“No—not in the least. I only knew that my father was not—was not what everyone thought him. I realized, from the time that I was a child, that he was a—a humbug.”

Her voice was deep and bitter. She said:

“It is through marrying me that Edward—that Edward will lose everything.”

Poirot said in a quiet voice:

“Have you any enemies, Madame?”

She looked up at him, surprised.

“Enemies? I don’t think so.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“I think you have. . . .”

He went on:

“Have you courage, Madame? There is a great campaign afoot—against your husband—and against yourself. You must prepare to defend yourself.”

She cried:

“But it doesn’t matter about me. Only about Edward!”

Poirot said: “The one includes the other. Remember, Madame, you are Cæsar’s wife.”

He saw her colour ebb. She leaned forward. She said:

“What is it you are trying to tell me?”

III

Percy Perry, editor of the X-ray News, sat behind his desk smoking.

He was a small man with a face like a weasel.

He was saying in a soft, oily voice:

“We’ll give ’em the dirt, all right. Lovely—lovely! Oh boy!”

His second-in-command, a thin, spectacled youth, said uneasily:

“You’re not nervous?”

“Expecting strong-arm stuff? Not them. Haven’t got the nerve. Wouldn’t do them any good, either. Not the way we’ve got it farmed out—in this country and on the Continent and America.”

The other said:

“They must be in a pretty good stew. Won’t they do anything?”

“They’ll send someone to talk pretty—”

A buzzer sounded. Percy Perry picked up a receiver. He said: “Who do you say? Right, send him up.”

He put the receiver down—grinned.

“They’ve got that high-toned Belgian dick on to it. He’s coming up now to do his stuff. Wants to know if we’ll play ball.”

Hercule Poirot came in. He was immaculately dressed—a white camelia in his buttonhole.

Percy Perry said:

“Pleased to meet you, M. Poirot. On your way to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot? No? My mistake.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I am flattered. One hopes to present a good appearance. It is even more important,” his eyes roamed innocently over the editor’s face and somewhat slovenly attire, “when one has few natural advantages.”

Perry said shortly:

“What do you want to see me about?”

Poirot leaned forward, tapped him on the knee, and said with a beaming smile:

“Blackmail.”

“What the devil do you mean, blackmail?”

“I have heard—the little bird has told me—that on occasions you have been on the point of publishing certain very damaging statements in your so spirituel paper—then, there has been a pleasant little increase in your bank balance—and after all, those statements have not been published.”

Poirot leaned back and nodded his head in a satisfied sort of way.

“Do you realize that what you’re suggesting amounts to slander?”

Poirot smiled confidently.

“I am sure you will not take offence.”

“I do take offence! As to blackmail there is no evidence of my ever having blackmailed anybody.”

“No, no, I am quite sure of that. You misunderstand me. I was not threatening you. I was leading up to a simple question. How much?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Percy Perry.

“A matter of National importance, M. Perry.”

They exchanged a significant glance.

Percy Perry said:

“I’m a reformer, M. Poirot. I want to see politics cleaned up. I’m opposed to corruption. Do you know what the state of politics is in this country? The Augean Stables, no more, no less.”

“Tiens!” said Hercule Poirot. “You, too, use that phrase.”

“And what is needed,” went on the editor, “to cleanse those stables is the great purifying flood of Public Opinion.”

Hercule Poirot got up. He said:

“I applaud your sentiments.”

He added:

“It is a pity that you do not feel in need of money.”

Percy Perry said hurriedly:

“Here, wait a sec—I didn’t say that exactly. . . .”

But Hercule Poirot had gone through the door.

His excuse for later events is that he does not like blackmailers.

IV

Everitt Dashwood, the cheery young man on the staff of The Branch, clapped Hercule Poirot affectionately on the back.

He said: “There’s dirt and dirt, my boy. My dirt’s clean dirt—that’s all.”

“I was not suggesting that you were on a par with Percy Perry.”

“Damned little bloodsucker. He’s a blot on our profession. We’d all down him if we could.”

“It happens,” said Hercule Poirot, “that I am engaged at the moment on a little matter of clearing up a political scandal.”

“Cleaning out the Augean Stables, eh?” said Dashwood. “Too much for you, my boy. Only hope is to divert the Thames and wash away the Houses of Parliament.”

“You are cynical,” said Hercule Poirot, shaking his head.

“I know the world, that’s all.”

Poirot said: “You, I think, are just the man I seek. You have a reckless disposition, you are the good sport, you like something that is out of the usual.”

“And granting all that?”

“I have a little scheme to put into action. If my ideas are right, there is a sensational plot to unmask. That, my friend, shall be a scoop for your paper.”

“Can do,” said Dashwood cheerfully.

“It will concern a scurrilous plot against a woman.”

“Better and better. Sex stuff always goes.”

“Then sit down and listen.”

V

People were talking.

In the Goose and Feathers at Little Wimplington.

“Well, I don’t believe it. John Hammett, he was always an honest man, he was. Not like some of these political folk.”

“That’s what they say about all swindlers before they’re found out.”

“Thousands, they say he made, out of that Palestine Oil business. Just a crook deal, it was.”

“Whole lot of ’em tarred with the same brush. Dirty crooks, every one of ’em.”

“You wouldn’t find Everhard doing that. He’s one of the old school.”

“Eh, but I can’t believe as John Hammett was a wrong ’un. You can’t believe all these papers say.”

“Ferrier’s wife was ’is daughter. Have you seen what it says about her?”

They pored over a much thumbed copy of the X-ray News:

Caesar’s wife? We hear that a certain highly placed political lady was seen in very strange surroundings the other day. Complete with her gigolo. Oh Dagmar, Dagmar, how could you be so naughty?

A rustic voice said slowly:

“Mrs. Ferrier’s not that kind. Gigolo? That’s one of these dago skunks.”

Another voice said:

“You never can tell with women. The whole bunch of ’em wrong ’uns if you ask me.”

VI

People were talking.

“But, darling, I believe it’s absolutely true. Naomi had it from Paul and he had it from Andy. She’s absolutely depraved.”

“But she was always so terribly dowdy and proper and opening bazaars.”

“Just camouflage, darling. They say she’s a nymphomaniac. Well, I mean! it’s all in the X-ray News. Oh, not right out, but you can read between the lines. I don’t know how they get hold of these things.”

“What do you think of all this political scandal touch? They say her father embezzled the Party funds.”

VII

People were talking.

“I don’t like to think of it, and that’s a fact, Mrs. Rogers. I mean, I always thought Mrs. Ferrier was a really nice woman.”

“Do you think all these awful things are true?”

“As I say, I don’t like to think it of her. Why, she opened a Bazaar in Pelchester only last June. I was as near to her as I am to that sofa. And she had such a pleasant smile.”

“Yes, but what I say is there’s no smoke without fire.”

“Well, of course that’s true. Oh dear, it seems as though you can’t believe in any one!”

VIII

Edward Ferrier, his face white and strained, said to Poirot:

“These attacks on my wife! They’re scurrilous—absolutely scurrilous! I’m bringing an action against that vile rag.”

Hercule Poirot said: “I do not advise you to do so.”

“But these damned lies have got to be stopped.”

“Are you sure they are lies?”

“God damn you, yes!”

Poirot said, his head held a little on one side:

“What does your wife say?”

For a moment Ferrier looked taken aback.

“She says it is best to take no notice . . . But I can’t do that—everybody is talking.”

Hercule Poirot said: “Yes, everybody is talking.”

IX

And then came the small bald announcement in all the papers.

Mrs. Ferrier has had a slight nervous breakdown. She has gone to Scotland to recuperate.

Conjectures, rumours—positive information that Mrs. Ferrier was not in Scotland, had never been to Scotland.

Stories, scandalous stories, of where Mrs. Ferrier really was. . . .

And again, people talking.

“I tell you Andy saw her. At that frightful place! She was drunk or doped and with an awful Argentine gigolo—Ramon. You know!”

More talking.

Mrs. Ferrier had gone off with an Argentine dancer. She had been seen in Paris, doped. She had been taking drugs for years. She drank like a fish.

Slowly the righteous mind of England, at first unbelieving, had hardened against Mrs. Ferrier. Seemed as though there must be something in it! That wasn’t the sort of woman to be the Prime Minister’s wife. “A Jezebel, that’s what she is, nothing better than a Jezebel!”

And then came the camera records.

Mrs. Ferrier, photographed in Paris—lying back in a night club, her arm twined familiarly over the shoulder of a dark, olive-skinned vicious-looking young man.

Other snapshots—half-naked on a beach—her head on the lounge lizard’s shoulder.

And underneath:

“Mrs. Ferrier has a good time . . .”

Two days later an action for libel was brought against the X-ray News.

X

The case for the prosecution was opened by Sir Mortimer Inglewood, K.C. He was dignified and full of righteous indignation. Mrs. Ferrier was the victim of an infamous plot—a plot only to be equalled by the famous case of the Queen’s Necklace familiar to readers of Alexandre Dumas. That plot had been engineered to lower Queen Marie Antoinette in the eyes of the populace. This plot, also, had been engineered to discredit a noble and virtuous lady who was in this country in the position of Cæsar’s wife. Sir Mortimer spoke with bitter disparagement of Fascists and Communists both of whom sought to undermine Democracy by every unfair machination

known. He then proceeded to call
witnesses.

The first was the Bishop of Northumbria.

Dr. Henderson, the Bishop of Northumbria was one of the best-known figures in the English church, a man of great saintliness and integrity of character. He was broadminded, tolerant, and a fine preacher. He was loved and revered by all who knew him.

He went into the box and swore that between the dates mentioned Mrs. Edward Ferrier had been staying in the Palace with himself and his wife. Worn out by her activities in good works, she had been recommended a thorough rest. Her visit had been kept a secret so as to obviate any worry from the Press.

An eminent doctor followed the Bishop and deposed to having ordered Mrs. Ferrier rest and complete absence from worry.

A local general practitioner gave evidence to the effect that he had attended Mrs. Ferrier at the Palace.

The next witness called was Thelma Andersen.

A thrill went round the Court when she entered the witness-box. Everyone realized at once what a strong resemblance the woman bore to Mrs. Edward Ferrier.

“Your name is Thelma Andersen?”

“Yes.”

“You are a Danish subject?”

“Yes. Copenhagen is my home.”

“And you formerly worked at a café there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please tell us in your own words what happened on the 18th March last.”

“There is a gentleman who comes to my table there—an English gentleman. He tells me he works for an English paper—the X-ray News.”

“You are sure he mentioned that name—X-ray News?”

“Yes, I am sure—because, you see, I think at first it must be a medical paper. But no, it seems not so. Then he tells me there is an English film actress who wants to find a ‘stand-in,’ and that I am just the type. I do not go to the pictures much, and I do not recognize the name he says, but he tells me, yes, she is very famous, and that she has not been well and so she wants someone to appear as her in public places, and for that she will pay very much money.”

“How much money did this gentleman offer you?”

“Five hundred pounds in English money. I do not at first believe—I think it is some trick, but he pays me at once half the money. So then, I give in my notice where I work.”

The tale went on. She had been taken to Paris, supplied with smart clothes, and had been provided with an “escort.” “A very nice Argentinian gentleman—very respectful, very polite.”

It was clear that the woman had thoroughly enjoyed herself. She had flown over to London and had been taken there to certain “nightclubs” by her olive-skinned cavalier. She had been photographed in Paris with him. Some of the places to which she had gone were not, she admitted, quite nice . . . Indeed, they were not respectable! And some of the photographs taken, they too, had not been very nice. But these things, they had told her, were necessary for “advertisement”—and Señor Ramon himself had always been most respectful.

In answer to questioning she declared that the name of Mrs. Ferrier had never been mentioned and that she had had no idea that it was that lady she was supposed to be understudying. She had meant no harm. She identified certain photographs which were shown to her as having been taken of her in Paris and on the Riviera.

There was the hallmark of absolute honesty about Thelma Andersen. She was quite clearly a pleasant, but slightly stupid woman. Her distress at the whole thing, now that she understood it, was patent to everyone.

The defence was unconvincing. A frenzied denial of having had any dealings with the woman Andersen. The photos in question had been brought to the London office and had been believed to be genuine. Sir Mortimer's closing speech roused enthusiasm. He described the whole thing as a dastardly political plot, formed to discredit the Prime Minister and his wife. All sympathy would be extended to the unfortunate Mrs. Ferrier.

The verdict, a foregone conclusion, was given amidst unparalleled scenes. Damages were assessed at an enormous figure. As Mrs. Ferrier and her husband and father left the court they were greeted by the appreciative roars of a vast crowd.

XI

Edward Ferrier grasped Poirot warmly by the hand.

He said:

"I thank you, M. Poirot, a thousand times. Well, that finishes the X-ray News. Dirty little rag. They're wiped out completely. Serves them right for cooking up such a scurrilous plot. Against Dagmar, too, the kindliest creature in the world. Thank goodness you managed to expose the whole thing for the wicked ramp it was . . . What put you on to the idea that they might be using a double?"

"It is not a new idea," Poirot reminded him. "It was employed successfully in the case of Jeanne de la Motte when she impersonated Marie Antoinette."

"I know. I must re-read The Queen's Necklace. But how did you actually find the woman they were employing?"

"I looked for her in Denmark, and I found her there."

"But why Denmark?"

"Because Mrs. Ferrier's grandmother was a Dane, and she herself is a markedly Danish type. And there were other reasons."

"The resemblance is certainly striking. What a devilish idea! I wonder how the little rat came to think of it?"

Poirot smiled.

"But he did not."

He tapped himself on the chest.

"I thought of it!"

Edward Ferrier stared.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

Poirot said:

"We must go back to an older story than that of The Queen's Necklace—to the cleansing of the Augean Stables. What Hercules used was a river—that is to say one of the great forces of Nature. Modernize that! What is a great force of Nature? Sex, is it not? It is the sex angle that sells stories, that makes news. Give people scandal allied to sex and it appeals far more than any mere political chicanery or fraud.

"Eh bien, that was my task! First to put my own hands in the mud like Hercules to build up a dam that should turn the course of that river. A journalistic friend of mine aided me. He searched Denmark until he found a suitable person to attempt the impersonation. He approached her, casually mentioned the X-ray News to her, hoping she would remember it. She did.

"And so, what happened? Mud—a great deal of mud! Cæsar's wife is bespattered with it. Far more interesting to everybody than any political scandal. And the result—the “dénouement? Why, Reaction! Virtue vindicated! The pure woman cleared! A great tide of Romance and Sentiment sweeping through the Augean Stables.

“If all the newspapers in the country publish the news of John Hammett’s defalcations now, no one will believe it. It will be put down as another political plot to discredit the Government.”

Edward Ferrier took a deep breath. For a moment Hercule Poirot came nearer to being physically assaulted than at any other time in his career.

“My wife! You dared to use her—”

Fortunately, perhaps, Mrs. Ferrier herself entered the room at this moment.

“Well,” she said. “That went off very well.”

“Dagmar, did you—know all along?”

“Of course, dear,” said Dagmar Ferrier.

And she smiled, the gentle, maternal smile of a devoted wife.

“And you never told me!”

“But, Edward, you would never have let M. Poirot do it.”

“Indeed I would not!”

Dagmar smiled.

“That’s what we thought.”

“We?”

“I and M. Poirot.”

She smiled at Hercule Poirot and at her husband.

She added:

“I had a very restful time with the dear Bishop—I feel full of energy now. They want me to christen the new battleship at Liverpool next month—I think it would be a popular thing to do.”

Six

THE STYMPHALEAN BIRDS

Harold Waring noticed them first walking up the path from the lake. He was sitting outside the hotel on the terrace. The day was fine, the lake was blue, and the sun shone. Harold was smoking a pipe and feeling that the world was a pretty good place.

His political career was shaping well. An undersecretaryship at the age of thirty was something to be justly proud of. It had been reported that the Prime Minister had said to someone that “young Waring would go far.” Harold was, not unnaturally, elated. Life presented itself to him in rosy colours. He was young, sufficiently good-looking, in first-class condition, and quite unencumbered with romantic ties.

He had decided to take a holiday in Herzoslovakia so as to get right off the beaten track and have a real rest from everyone and everything. The hotel at Lake Stempka, though small, was comfortable and not overcrowded. The few people there were mostly foreigners. So far the only other English people were an elderly woman, Mrs. Rice, and her married daughter, Mrs. Clayton. Harold liked them both. Elsie Clayton was pretty in a rather old-fashioned style. She made up very little, if at all, and was gentle and rather shy. Mrs. Rice was what is called a woman of character. She was tall, with a deep voice and a masterful manner, but she had a sense of humour and was good company. Her life was clearly bound up in that of her daughter.

Harold had spent some pleasant hours in the company of mother and daughter, but they did not attempt to monopolize him and relations remained friendly and unexacting between them.

The other people in the hotel had not aroused Harold's notice. Usually they were hikers, or members of a motor-coach tour. They stayed a night or two and then went on. He had hardly noticed any one else—until this afternoon.

They came up the path from the lake very slowly and it just happened that at the moment when Harold's attention was attracted to them, a cloud came over the sun. He shivered a little.

Then he stared. Surely there was something odd about these two women? They had long, curved noses, like birds, and their faces, which were curiously alike, were quite immobile. Over their shoulders they wore loose cloaks that flapped in the wind like the wings of two big birds.

Harold thought to himself.

"They are like birds—" he added almost without volition, "birds of ill omen."

The women came straight up on the terrace and passed close by him. They were not young—perhaps nearer fifty than forty, and the resemblance between them was so close that they were obviously sisters. Their expression was forbidding. As they passed Harold the eyes of both of them rested on him for a minute. It was a curious, appraising glance—almost inhuman.

Harold's impression of evil grew stronger. He noticed the hand of one of the two sisters, a long clawlike hand . . . Although the sun had come out, he shivered once again. He thought:

"Horrible creatures. Like birds of prey. . . ."

He was distracted from these imaginings by the emergence of Mrs. Rice from the hotel. He jumped up and drew forward a chair. With a word of thanks she sat down and, as usual, began to knit vigorously.

Harold asked:

"Did you see those two women who just went into the hotel?"

“With cloaks on? Yes, I passed them.”

“Extraordinary creatures, didn’t you think?”

“Well—yes, perhaps they are rather odd. They only arrived yesterday, I think. Very alike—they must be twins.”

Harold said:

“I may be fanciful, but I distinctly felt there was something evil about them.”

“How curious. I must look at them more closely and see if I agree with you.”

She added: “We’ll find out from the concierge who they are. Not English, I imagine?”

“Oh no.”

Mrs. Rice glanced at her watch. She said:

“Teatime. I wonder if you’d mind going in and ringing the bell, Mr. Waring?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Rice.”

He did so and then as he returned to his seat he asked:

“Where’s your daughter this afternoon?”

“Elsie? We went for a walk together. Part of the way round the lake and then back through the pinewoods. It really was lovely.”

A waiter came out and received orders for tea. Mrs. Rice went on, her needles flying vigorously:

“Elsie had a letter from her husband. She mayn’t come down to tea.”

"Her husband?" Harold was surprised. "Do you know, I always thought she was a widow."

Mrs. Rice shot him a sharp glance. She said drily:

"Oh no, Elsie isn't a widow." She added with emphasis: "Unfortunately!"

Harold was startled.

Mrs. Rice, nodding her head grimly, said:

"Drink is responsible for a lot of unhappiness, Mr. Waring."

"Does he drink?"

"Yes. And a good many other things as well. He's insanely jealous and has a singularly violent temper." She sighed. "It's a difficult world, Mr. Waring. I'm devoted to Elsie, she's my only child—and to see her unhappy isn't an easy thing to bear."

Harold said with real emotion:

"She's such a gentle creature."

"A little too gentle, perhaps."

"You mean—"

Mrs. Rice said slowly:

"A happy creature is more arrogant. Elsie's gentleness comes, I think, from a sense of defeat. Life has been too much for her."

Harold said with some slight hesitation:

"How—did she come to marry this husband of hers?"

Mrs. Rice answered:

“Philip Clayton was a very attractive person. He had (still has) great charm, he had a certain amount of money—and there was no one to advise us of his real character. I had been a widow for many years. Two women, living alone, are not the best judges of a man’s character.”

Harold said thoughtfully:

“No, that’s true.”

He felt a wave of indignation and pity sweep over him. Elsie Clayton could not be more than twenty-five at the most. He recalled the clear friendliness of her blue eyes, the soft droop of her mouth. He realized, suddenly, that his interest in her went a little beyond friendship.

And she was tied to a brute. . . .

II

That evening, Harold joined mother and daughter after dinner. Elsie Clayton was wearing a soft dull pink dress. Her eyelids, he noticed, were red. She had been crying.

Mrs. Rice said briskly:

“I’ve found out who your two harpies are, Mr. Waring. Polish ladies—of very good family, so the concierge says.”

Harold looked across the room to where the Polish ladies were sitting. Elsie said with interest:

“Those two women over there? With the henna-dyed hair? They look rather horrible somehow—I don’t know why.”

Harold said triumphantly:

“That’s just what I thought.”

Mrs. Rice said with a laugh:

“I think you are both being absurd. You can’t possibly tell what people are like just by looking at them.”

Elsie laughed.

She said:

“I suppose one can’t. All the same I think they’re vultures!”

“Picking out dead men’s eyes!” said Harold.

“Oh, don’t,” cried Elsie.

Harold said quickly:

“Sorry.”

Mrs. Rice said with a smile:

“Anyway they’re not likely to cross our path.”

Elsie said:

“We haven’t got any guilty secrets!”

“Perhaps Mr. Waring has,” said Mrs. Rice with a twinkle.

Harold laughed, throwing his head back.

He said:

“Not a secret in the world. My life’s an open book.”

And it flashed across his mind:

“What fools people are who leave the straight path. A clear conscience—that’s all one needs in life. With that you can face the world and tell everyone who interferes with you to go to the devil!”

He felt suddenly very much alive—very strong—very much master of his fate!

III

Harold Waring, like many other Englishmen, was a bad linguist. His French was halting and decidedly British in intonation. Of German and Italian he knew nothing.

Up to now, these linguistic disabilities had not worried him. In most hotels on the Continent, he had always found, everyone spoke English, so why worry?

But in this out-of-the-way spot, where the native language was a form of Slovak and even the concierge only spoke German it was sometimes galling to Harold when one of his two women friends acted as interpreter for him. Mrs. Rice, who was fond of languages, could even speak a little Slovak.

Harold determined that he would set about learning German. He decided to buy some textbooks and spend a couple of hours each morning in mastering the language.

The morning was fine and after writing some letters, Harold looked at his watch and saw that there was still time for an hour's stroll before lunch. He went down towards the lake and then turned aside into the pine woods. He had walked there for perhaps five minutes when he heard an unmistakable sound. Somewhere not far away a woman was sobbing her heart out.

Harold paused a minute, then he went in the direction of the sound. The woman was Elsie Clayton and she was sitting on a fallen tree with her face buried in her hands and her shoulders quivering with the violence of her grief.

Harold hesitated a minute, then he came up to her. He said gently:

"Mrs. Clayton—Elsie?"

She started violently and looked up at him. Harold sat down beside her.

He said with real sympathy:

“Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?”

She shook her head.

“No—no—you’re very kind. But there’s nothing that anyone can do for me.”

Harold said rather diffidently:

“Is it to do with—your husband?”

She nodded. Then she wiped her eyes and took out her powder compact, struggling to regain command of herself. She said in a quavering voice:

“I didn’t want Mother to worry. She’s so upset when she sees me unhappy. So I came out here to have a good cry. It’s silly, I know. Crying doesn’t help. But—sometimes—one just feels that life is quite unbearable.”

Harold said:

“I’m terribly sorry.”

She threw him a grateful glance. Then she said hurriedly:

“It’s my own fault, of course. I married Philip of my own free will. It—it’s turned out badly, I’ve only myself to blame.”

Harold said:

“It’s very plucky of you to put it like that.”

Elsie shook her head.

“No, I’m not plucky. I’m not brave at all. I’m an awful coward. That’s partly the trouble with Philip. I’m terrified of him—absolutely terrified—when he gets in one of his rages.”

Harold said with feeling:

“You ought to leave him!”

“I daren’t. He—he wouldn’t let me.”

“Nonsense! What about a divorce?”

She shook her head slowly.

“I’ve no grounds.” She straightened her shoulders. “No, I’ve got to carry on. I spend a fair amount of time with Mother, you know. Philip doesn’t mind that. Especially when we go somewhere off the beaten track like this.” She added, the colour rising in her cheeks, “You see, part of the trouble is that he’s insanely jealous. If—if I so much as speak to another man he makes the most frightful scenes.”

Harold’s indignation rose. He had heard many women complain of the jealousy of a husband, and whilst professing sympathy, had been secretly of the opinion that the husband was amply justified. But Elsie Clayton was not one of those women. She had never thrown him so much as a flirtatious glance.

Elsie drew away from him with a slight shiver. She glanced up at the sky.

“The sun’s gone in. It’s quite cold. We’d better get back to the hotel. It must be nearly lunch time.”

They got up and turned in the direction of the hotel. They had walked for perhaps a minute when they overtook a figure going in the same direction. They recognized her by the flapping cloak she wore. It was one of the Polish sisters.

They passed her, Harold bowing slightly. She made no response but her eyes rested on them both for a minute and there was a certain appraising quality in the glance which made Harold feel suddenly hot. He wondered if the woman had seen him sitting by Elsie on the tree trunk. If so, she probably thought. . . .

Well, she looked as though she thought . . . A wave of indignation overwhelmed him! What foul minds some women had!

Odd that the sun had gone in and that they should both have shivered—perhaps just at the moment that that woman was watching them. . . .

Somehow, Harold felt a little uneasy.

IV

That evening, Harold went to his room a little after ten. The English maid had arrived and he had received a number of letters, some of which needed immediate answers.

He got into his pyjamas and a dressing gown and sat down at the desk to deal with his correspondence. He had written three letters and was just starting on the fourth when the door was suddenly flung open and Elsie Clayton staggered into the room.

Harold jumped up, startled. Elsie had pushed the door to behind her and was standing clutching at the chest of drawers. Her breath was coming in great gasps, her face was the colour of chalk. She looked frightened to death.

She gasped out: “It’s my husband! He arrived unexpectedly. I—I think he’ll kill me. He’s mad—quite mad. I came to you. Don’t—don’t let him find me.”

She took a step or two forward, swaying so much that she almost fell. Harold put out an arm to support her.

As he did so, the door was flung open and a man stood in the doorway. He was of medium height with thick eyebrows and a sleek, dark head. In his hand he carried a heavy car spanner. His voice rose high and shook with rage. He almost screamed the words.

“So that Polish woman was right! You are carrying on with this fellow!”

Elsie cried:

“No, no, Philip. It’s not true. You’re wrong.”

Harold thrust the girl swiftly behind him, as Philip Clayton advanced on them both. The latter cried:

“Wrong, am I? When I find you here in his room? You she-devil, I’ll kill you for this.”

With a swift, sideways movement he dodged Harold’s arm. Elsie, with a cry, ran round the other side of Harold, who swung round to fend the other off.

But Philip Clayton had only one idea, to get at his wife. He swerved round again. Elsie, terrified, rushed out of the room. Philip Clayton dashed after her, and Harold, with not a moment’s hesitation, followed him.

Elsie had darted back into her own bedroom at the end of the corridor. Harold could hear the sound of the key turning in the lock, but it did not turn in time. Before the lock could catch Philip Clayton wrenched the door open. He disappeared into the room and Harold heard Elsie’s frightened cry. In another minute Harold burst in after them.

Elsie was standing at bay against the curtains of the window. As Harold entered Philip Clayton rushed at her brandishing the spanner. She gave a terrified cry, then snatching up a heavy paper-weight from the desk beside her, she flung it at him.

Clayton went down like a log. Elsie screamed. Harold stopped petrified in the doorway. The girl fell on her knees beside her husband. He lay quite still where he had fallen.

Outside in the passage, there was the sound of the bolt of one of the doors being drawn back. Elsie jumped up and ran to Harold.

“Please—please—” Her voice was low and breathless. “Go back to your room. They’ll come—they’ll find you here.”

Harold nodded. He took in the situation like lightning. For the moment, Philip Clayton was hors de combat. But Elsie's scream might have been heard. If he were found in her room it could only cause embarrassment and misunderstanding. Both for her sake and his own there must be no scandal.

As noislessly as possible, he sprinted down the passage and back into his room. Just as he reached it, he heard the sound of an opening door.

He sat in his room for nearly half an hour, waiting. He dared not go out. Sooner or later, he felt sure, Elsie would come.

There was a light tap on his door. Harold jumped up to open it.

It was not Elsie who came in but her mother and Harold was aghast at her appearance. She looked suddenly years older. Her grey hair was dishevelled and there were deep black circles under her eyes.

He sprang up and helped her to a chair. She sat down, her breath coming painfully. Harold said quickly:

"You look all in, Mrs. Rice. Can I get you something?"

She shook her head.

"No. Never mind me. I'm all right, really. It's only the shock. Mr. Waring, a terrible thing has happened."

Harold asked:

"Is Clayton seriously injured?"

She caught her breath.

"Worse than that. He's dead . . ."

V

The room spun round.

A feeling as of icy water trickling down his spine rendered Harold incapable of speech for a moment or two.

He repeated dully:

“Dead?”

Mrs. Rice nodded.

She said, and her voice had the flat level tones of complete exhaustion:

“The corner of that marble paperweight caught him right on the temple and he fell back with his head on the iron fender. I don’t know which it was that killed him—but he is certainly dead. I have seen death often enough to know.”

Disaster—that was the word that rang insistently in Harold’s brain. Disaster, disaster, disaster. . . .

He said vehemently:

“It was an accident . . . I saw it happen.”

Mrs. Rice said sharply:

“Of course it was an accident. I know that. But—but—is anyone else going to think so? I’m—frankly, I’m frightened, Harold! This isn’t England.”

Harold said slowly:

“I can confirm Elsie’s story.”

Mrs. Rice said:

“Yes, and she can confirm yours. That—that is just it!”

Harold’s brain, naturally a keen and cautious one, saw her point. He reviewed the whole thing and appreciated the weakness of their position.

He and Elsie had spent a good deal of their time together. Then there was the fact that they had been seen together in the pinewoods by one of the Polish women under rather compromising circumstances. The Polish ladies apparently spoke no English, but they might nevertheless understand it a little. The woman might have known the meaning of words like “jealousy” and “husband” if she had chanced to overhear their conversation. Anyway it was clear that it was something she had said to Clayton that had aroused his jealousy. And now—his death. When Clayton had died, he, Harold, had been in Elsie Clayton’s room. There was nothing to show that he had not deliberately assaulted Philip Clayton with the paperweight. Nothing to show that the jealous husband had not actually found them together. There was only his word and Elsie’s. Would they be believed?

A cold fear gripped him.

He did not imagine—no, he really did not imagine—that either he or Elsie was in danger of being condemned to death for a murder they had not committed. Surely, in any case, it could be only a charge of manslaughter brought against them. (Did they have manslaughter in these foreign countries?) But even if they were acquitted of blame there would have to be an inquiry—it would be reported in all the papers. An English man and woman accused—jealous husband—rising politician. Yes, it would mean the end of his political career. It would never survive a scandal like that.

He said on an impulse:

“Can’t we get rid of the body somehow? Plant it somewhere?”

Mrs. Rice’s astonished and scornful look made him blush. She said incisively:

“My dear Harold, this isn’t a detective story! To attempt a thing like that would be quite crazy.”

“I suppose it would.” He groaned. “What can we do? My God, what can we do?”

Mrs. Rice shook her head despairingly. She was frowning, her mind working painfully.

Harold demanded:

“Isn’t there anything we can do? Anything to avoid this frightful disaster?”

There, it was out—disaster! Terrible—unforeseen—utterly damning.

They stared at each other. Mrs. Rice said hoarsely:

“Elsie—my little girl. I’d do anything . . . It will kill her if she has to go through a thing like this.” And she added: “You too, your career—everything.”

Harold managed to say:

“Never mind me.”

But he did not really mean it.

Mrs. Rice went on bitterly:

“And all so unfair—so utterly untrue! It’s not as though there had ever been anything between you. I know that well enough.”

Harold suggested, catching at a straw:

“You’ll be able to say that at least—that it was all perfectly all right.”

Mrs. Rice said bitterly:

“Yes, if they believe me. But you know what these people out here are like!”

Harold agreed gloomily. To the Continental mind, there would undoubtedly be a guilty connection between himself and Elsie, and all Mrs. Rice’s denials would be taken as a mother lying herself black in the face for her daughter.

Harold said gloomily:

“Yes, we’re not in England, worse luck.”

“Ah!” Mrs. Rice lifted her head. “That’s true . . . It’s not England. I wonder now if something could be done—”

“Yes?” Harold looked at her eagerly.

Mrs. Rice said abruptly:

“How much money have you got?”

“Not much with me.” He added, “I could wire for money, of course.”

Mrs. Rice said grimly:

“We may need a good deal. But I think it’s worth trying.”

Harold felt a faint lifting of despair. He said:

“What is your idea?”

Mrs. Rice spoke decisively.

“We haven’t a chance of concealing the death ourselves, but I do think there’s just a chance of hushing it up officially!”

“You really think so?” Harold was hopeful but slightly incredulous.

“Yes, for one thing the manager of the hotel will be on our side. He’d much rather have the thing hushed up. It’s my opinion that in these out of the way curious little Balkan countries you can bribe anyone and everyone—and the police are probably more corrupt than anyone else!”

Harold said slowly:

“Do you know, I believe you’re right.”

Mrs. Rice went on:

“Fortunately, I don’t think anyone in the hotel heard anything.”

“Who has the room next to Elsie’s on the other side from yours?”

“The two Polish ladies. They didn’t hear anything. They’d have come out into the passage if they had. Philip arrived late, nobody saw him but the night porter. Do you know, Harold, I believe it will be possible to hush the whole thing up—and get Philip’s death certified as due to natural causes! It’s just a question of bribing high enough—and finding the right man—probably the Chief of Police!”

Harold smiled faintly. He said:

“It’s rather Comic Opera, isn’t it? Well, after all, we can but try.”

VI

Mrs. Rice was energy personified. First the manager was summoned. Harold remained in his room, keeping out of it. He and Mrs. Rice had agreed that the story told had better be that of a quarrel between husband and wife. Elsie’s youth and prettiness would command more sympathy.

On the following morning various police officials arrived and were shown up to Mrs. Rice’s bedroom. They left at midday. Harold had wired for money but otherwise had taken no part in the proceedings—indeed he would have been unable to do so since none of these official personages spoke English.

At twelve o’clock Mrs. Rice came to his room. She looked white and tired, but the relief on her face told its own story. She said simply:

“It’s worked!”

“Thank heaven! You’ve been really marvellous! It seems incredible!”

Mrs. Rice said thoughtfully:

"By the ease with which it went, you might almost think it was quite normal. They practically held out their hands right away. It's—it's rather disgusting, really!"

Harold said dryly:

"This isn't the moment to quarrel with the corruption of the public services. How much?"

"The tariff's rather high."

She read out a list of figures.

"The Chief of Police.

The Commissaire.

The Agent.

The Doctor.

The Hotel Manager.

The Night Porter."

Harold's comment was merely:

"The night porter doesn't get much, does he? I suppose it's mostly a question of gold lace."

Mrs. Rice explained:

"The manager stipulated that the death should not have taken place in his hotel at all. The official story will be that Philip had a heart attack in the train. He went along the corridor for air—you know how they always leave those doors open—and he fell out on the line. It's wonderful what the police can do when they try!"

"Well," said Harold. "Thank God our police force isn't like that."

And in a British and superior mood he went down to lunch.

VII

After lunch Harold usually joined Mrs. Rice and her daughter for coffee. He decided to make no change in his usual behaviour.

This was the first time he had seen Elsie since the night before. She was very pale and was obviously still suffering from shock, but she made a gallant endeavour to behave as usual, uttering small commonplaces about the weather and the scenery.

They commented on a new guest who had just arrived, trying to guess his nationality. Harold thought a moustache like that must be French—Elsie said German—and Mrs. Rice thought he might be Spanish.

There was no one else but themselves on the terrace with the exception of the two Polish ladies who were sitting at the extreme end, both doing fancywork.

As always when he saw them, Harold felt a queer shiver of apprehension pass over him. Those still faces, those curved beaks of noses, those long clawlike hands. . . .

A page boy approached and told Mrs. Rice she was wanted. She rose and followed him. At the entrance to the hotel they saw her encounter a police official in full uniform.

Elsie caught her breath.

“You don’t think—anything’s gone wrong?”

Harold reassured her quickly.

“Oh, no, no, nothing of that kind.”

But he himself knew a sudden pang of fear.

He said:

"Your mother's been wonderful!"

"I know. Mother is a great fighter. She'll never sit down under defeat." Elsie shivered. "But it is all horrible, isn't it?"

"Now, don't dwell on it. It's all over and done with."

Elsie said in a low voice:

"I can't forget that—that it was I who killed him."

Harold said urgently:

"Don't think of it that way. It was an accident. You know that really."

Her face grew a little happier. Harold added:

"And anyway it's past. The past is the past. Try never to think of it again."

Mrs. Rice came back. By the expression on her face they saw that all was well.

"It gave me quite a fright," she said almost gaily. "But it was only a formality about some papers. Everything's all right, my children. We're out of the shadow. I think we might order ourselves a liqueur on the strength of it."

The liqueur was ordered and came. They raised their glasses.

Mrs. Rice said: "To the Future!"

Harold smiled at Elsie and said:

"To your happiness!"

She smiled back at him and said as she lifted her glass:

"And to you—to your success! I'm sure you're going to be a very great man."

With the reaction from fear they felt gay, almost light-headed. The shadow had lifted! All was well. . . .

From the far end of the terrace the two birdlike women rose. They rolled up their work carefully. They came across the stone flags.

With little bows they sat down by Mrs. Rice. One of them began to speak. The other one let her eyes rest on Elsie and Harold. There was a little smile on her lips. It was not, Harold thought, a nice smile. . . .

He looked over at Mrs. Rice. She was listening to the Polish woman and though he couldn't understand a word, the expression on Mrs. Rice's face was clear enough. All the old anguish and despair came back. She listened and occasionally spoke a brief word.

Presently the two sisters rose, and with stiff little bows went into the hotel.

Harold leaned forward. He said hoarsely:

"What is it?"

Mrs. Rice answered him in the quiet hopeless tones of despair.

"Those women are going to blackmail us. They heard everything last night. And now we've tried to hush it up, it makes the whole thing a thousand times worse . . ."

VIII

Harold Waring was down by the lake. He had been walking feverishly for over an hour, trying by sheer physical energy to still the clamour of despair that had attacked him.

He came at last to the spot where he had first noticed the two grim women who held his life and Elsie's in their evil talons. He said aloud:

"Curse them! Damn them for a pair of devilish bloodsucking harpies!"

A slight cough made him spin round. He found himself facing the luxuriantly moustached stranger who had just come out from the shade of the trees.

Harold found it difficult to know what to say. This little man must have almost certainly overheard what he had just said.

Harold, at a loss, said somewhat ridiculously:

“Oh—er—good afternoon.”

In perfect English the other replied:

“But for you, I fear, it is not a good afternoon?”

“Well—er—I—” Harold was in difficulties again.

The little man said:

“You are, I think, in trouble, Monsieur? Can I be of any assistance to you?”

“Oh no thanks, no thanks! Just blowing off steam, you know.”

The other said gently:

“But I think, you know, that I could help you. I am correct, am I not, in connecting your troubles with two ladies who were sitting on the terrace just now?”

Harold stared at him.

“Do you know anything about them?” He added: “Who are you, anyway?”

As though confessing to royal birth the little man said modestly:

“I am Hercule Poirot. Shall we walk a little way into the wood and you shall tell me your story? As I say, I think I can aid you.”

To this day, Harold is not quite certain what made him suddenly pour out the whole story to a man to whom he had only spoken a few minutes before. Perhaps it was overstrain. Anyway, it happened. He told Hercule Poirot the whole story.

The latter listened in silence. Once or twice he nodded his head gravely. When Harold came to a stop the other spoke dreamily.

“The Stymphalean Birds, with iron beaks, who feed on human flesh and who dwell by the Stymphalean Lake . . . Yes, it accords very well.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Harold staring.

Perhaps, he thought, this curious-looking little man was mad!

Hercule Poirot smiled.

“I reflect, that is all. I have my own way of looking at things, you understand. Now as to this business of yours. You are very unpleasantly placed.”

Harold said impatiently:

“I don’t need you to tell me that!”

Hercule Poirot went on:

“It is a serious business, blackmail. These harpies will force you to pay—and pay—and pay again! And if you defy them, well, what happens?”

Harold said bitterly:

“The whole thing comes out. My career’s ruined, and a wretched girl who’s never done anyone any harm will be put through hell, and God knows what the end of it all will be!”

“Therefore,” said Hercule Poirot, “something must be done!”

Harold said baldly: “What?”

Hercule Poirot leaned back, half-closing his eyes. He said (and again a doubt about his sanity crossed Harold's mind):

"It is the moment for the castanets of bronze."

Harold said:

"Are you quite mad?"

The other shook his head. He said:

"Mais non! I strive only to follow the example of my great predecessor, Hercules. Have a few hours' patience, my friend. By tomorrow I may be able to deliver you from your persecutors."

IX

Harold Waring came down the following morning to find Hercule Poirot sitting alone on the terrace. In spite of himself Harold had been impressed by Hercule Poirot's promises.

He came up to him now and asked anxiously:

"Well?"

Hercule Poirot beamed upon him.

"It is well."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything has settled itself satisfactorily."

"But what has happened?"

Hercule Poirot replied dreamily:

"I have employed the castanets of bronze. Or, in modern parlance, I have caused metal wires to hum—in short I have employed the telegraph! Your

Stymphalean Birds, Monsieur, have been removed to where they will be unable to exercise their ingenuity for some time to come.”

“They were wanted by the police? They have been arrested?”

“Precisely.”

Harold drew a deep breath.

“How marvellous! I never thought of that.” He got up. “I must find Mrs. Rice and Elsie and tell them.”

“They know.”

“Oh good.” Harold sat down again. “Tell me just what—”

He broke off.

Coming up the path from the lake were two figures with flapping cloaks and profiles like birds.

He exclaimed:

“I thought you said they had been taken away!”

Hercule Poirot followed his glance.

“Oh, those ladies? They are very harmless; Polish ladies of good family, as the porter told you. Their appearance is, perhaps, not very pleasing but that is all.”

“But I don’t understand!”

“No, you do not understand! It is the other ladies who were wanted by the police—the resourceful Mrs. Rice and the lachrymose Mrs. Clayton! It is they who are well-known birds of prey. Those two, they make their living by blackmail, mon cher.”

Harold had a sensation of the world spinning round him. He said faintly:

"But the man—the man who was killed?"

"No one was killed. There was no man!"

"But I saw him!"

"Oh no. The tall deep-voiced Mrs. Rice is a very successful male impersonator. It was she who played the part of the husband—without her grey wig and suitably made up for the part."

He leaned forward and tapped the other on the knee.

"You must not go through life being too credulous, my friend. The police of a country are not so easily bribed—they are probably not to be bribed at all—certainly not when it is a question of murder! These women trade on the average Englishman's ignorance of foreign languages. Because she speaks French or German, it is always this Mrs. Rice who interviews the manager and takes charge of the affair. The police arrive and go to her room, yes! But what actually passes? You do not know. Perhaps she says she has lost a brooch—something of that kind. Any excuse to arrange for the police to come so that you shall see them. For the rest, what actually happens? You wire for money, a lot of money, and you hand it over to Mrs. Rice who is in charge of all the negotiations! And that is that! But they are greedy, these birds of prey. They have seen that you have taken an unreasonable aversion to these two unfortunate Polish ladies. The ladies in question come and hold a perfectly innocent conversation with Mrs. Rice and she cannot resist repeating the game. She knows you cannot understand what is being said.

"So you will have to send for more money which Mrs. Rice will pretend to distribute to a fresh set of people."

Harold drew a deep breath. He said:

"And Elsie—Elsie?"

Hercule Poirot averted his eyes.

“She played her part very well. She always does. A most accomplished little actress. Everything is very pure—very innocent. She appeals, not to sex, but to chivalry.”

Hercule Poirot added dreamily:

“That is always successful with Englishmen.”

Harold Waring drew a deep breath. He said crisply:

“I’m going to set to work and learn every European language there is! Nobody’s going to make a fool of me a second time!”

Seven

THE CRETAN BULL

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at his visitor.

He saw a pale face with a determined looking chin, eyes that were more grey than blue, and hair that was of that real blue-black shade so seldom seen—the hyacinthine locks of ancient Greece.

He noted the well-cut, but also well-worn, country tweeds, the shabby handbag, and the unconscious arrogance of manner that lay behind the girl's obvious nervousness. He thought to himself:

"Ah yes, she is 'the County'—but no money! And it must be something quite out of the way that would bring her to me."

Diana Maberly said, and her voice shook a little:

"I—I don't know whether you can help me or not, M. Poirot. It's—it's a very extraordinary position."

Poirot said:

"But yes? Tell me?"

Diana Maberly said:

"I've come to you because I don't know what to do! I don't even know if there is anything to do!"

"Will you let me be the judge of that?"

The colour surged suddenly into the girl’s face. She said rapidly and breathlessly:

“I’ve come to you because the man I’ve been engaged to for over a year has broken off our engagement.”

She stopped and eyed him defiantly.

“You must think,” she said, “that I’m completely mental.”

Slowly, Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“On the contrary, Mademoiselle, I have no doubt whatever but that you are extremely intelligent. It is certainly not my métier in life to patch up the lovers’ quarrels, and I know very well that you are quite aware of that. It is, therefore, that there is something unusual about the breaking of this engagement. That is so, is it not?”

The girl nodded. She said in a clear, precise voice:

“Hugh broke off our engagement because he thinks he is going mad. He thinks people who are mad should not marry.”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose a little.

“And do you not agree?”

“I don’t know . . . What is being mad, after all? Everyone is a little mad.”

“It has been said so,” Poirot agreed cautiously.

“It’s only when you begin thinking you’re a poached egg or something that they have to shut you up.”

“And your fiancé has not reached that stage?”

Diana Maberly said:

"I can't see that there's anything wrong with Hugh at all. He's, oh, he's the sanest person I know. Sound—dependable—"

"Then why does he think he is going mad?"

Poirot paused a moment before going on.

"Is there, perhaps, madness in his family?"

Reluctantly Diana jerked her head in assent. She said:

"His grandfather was mental, I believe—and some great-aunt or other. But what I say is, that every family has got someone queer in it. You know, a bit half-witted or extra clever or something!"

Her eyes were appealing.

Hercule Poirot shook his head sadly. He said:

"I am very sorry for you, Mademoiselle."

Her chin shot out. She cried:

"I don't want you to be sorry for me! I want you to do something!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know—but there's something wrong."

"Will you tell me, Mademoiselle, all about your fiancé?"

Diana spoke rapidly:

"His name is Hugh Chandler. He's twenty-four. His father is Admiral Chandler. They live at Lyde Manor. It's been in the Chandler family since the time of Elizabeth. Hugh's the only son. He went into the Navy—all the Chandlers are sailors—it's a sort of tradition—ever since Sir Gilbert Chandler sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh in fifteen-something-or-other. Hugh went into the Navy as a matter of course. His father wouldn't have heard of anything else. And yet—and yet, it was his father who insisted on getting him out of it!"

"When was that?"

"Nearly a year ago. Quite suddenly."

"Was Hugh Chandler happy in his profession?"

"Absolutely."

"There was no scandal of any kind?"

"About Hugh? Absolutely nothing. He was getting on splendidly. He—he couldn't understand his father."

"What reason did Admiral Chandler himself give?"

Diana said slowly:

"He never really gave a reason. Oh! he said it was necessary Hugh should learn to manage the estate—but—but that was only a pretext. Even George Frobisher realized that."

"Who is George Frobisher?"

"Colonel Frobisher. He's Admiral Chandler's oldest friend and Hugh's godfather. He spends most of his time down at the Manor."

"And what did Colonel Frobisher think of Admiral Chandler's determination that his son should leave the Navy?"

"He was dumbfounded. He couldn't understand it at all. Nobody could."

"Not even Hugh Chandler himself?"

Diana did not answer at once. Poirot waited a minute, then he went on:

“At the time, perhaps, he, too, was astonished. But now? Has he said nothing—nothing at all?”

Diana murmured reluctantly:

“He said—about a week ago—that—that his father was right—that it was the only thing to be done.”

“Did you ask him why?”

“Of course. But he wouldn’t tell me.”

Hercule Poirot reflected for a minute or two. Then he said:

“Have there been any unusual occurrences in your part of the world? Starting, perhaps, about a year ago? Something that has given rise to a lot of local talk and surmise?”

She flashed out: “I don’t know what you mean!”

Poirot said quietly, but with authority in his voice:

“You had better tell me.”

“There wasn’t anything—nothing of the kind you mean.”

“Of what kind then?”

“I think you’re simply odious! Queer things often happen on farms. It’s revenge—or the village idiot or somebody.”

“What happened?”

She said reluctantly:

“There was a fuss about some sheep . . . Their throats were cut. Oh! it was horrid! But they all belonged to one farmer and he’s a very hard man. The police thought it was some kind of spite against him.”

“But they didn’t catch the person who had done it?”

“No.”

She added fiercely. “But if you think—”

Poirot held up his hand. He said:

“You do not know in the least what I think. Tell me this, has your fiancé consulted a doctor?”

“No, I’m sure he hasn’t.”

“Wouldn’t that be the simplest thing for him to do?”

Diana said slowly:

“He won’t. He—he hates doctors.”

“And his father?”

“I don’t think the Admiral believes much in doctors either. Says they’re a lot of humbug merchants.”

“How does the Admiral seem himself? Is he well? Happy?”

Diana said in a low voice:

“He’s aged terribly in—in—”

“In the last year?”

“Yes. He’s a wreck—a sort of shadow of what he used to be.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he said:

“Did he approve of his son’s engagement?”

“Oh yes. You see, my people’s land adjoins his. We’ve been there for generations. He was frightfully pleased when Hugh and I fixed it up.”

“And now? What does he say to your engagement being broken off?”

The girl’s voice shook a little. She said:

“I met him yesterday morning. He was looking ghastly. He took my hand in both of his. He said: ‘It’s hard on you, my girl. But the boy’s doing the right thing—the only thing he can do.’ ”

“And so,” said Hercule Poirot, “you came to me?”

She nodded. She asked: “Can you do anything?”

Hercule Poirot replied:

“I do not know. But I can at least come down and see for myself.”

II

It was Hugh Chandler’s magnificent physique that impressed Hercule Poirot more than anything else. Tall, magnificently proportioned, with a terrific chest and shoulders, and a tawny head of hair. There was a tremendous air of strength and virility about him.

On their arrival at Diana’s house, she had at once rung up Admiral Chandler, and they had forthwith gone over to Lyde Manor where they had found tea waiting on the long terrace. And with the tea, three men. There was Admiral Chandler, white haired, looking older than his years, his shoulders bowed as though by an overheavy burden, and his eyes dark and brooding. A contrast to him was his friend Colonel Frobisher, a dried-up, tough, little man with reddish hair turning grey at the temples. A restless, irascible, snappy, little man, rather like a terrier—but the possessor of a pair of extremely shrewd eyes. He had a habit of drawing down his brows over his eyes and lowering his head, thrusting it forward, whilst those same shrewd little eyes studied you piercingly. The third man was Hugh.

“Fine specimen, eh?” said Colonel Frobisher.

He spoke in a low voice, having noted Poirot's close scrutiny of the young man.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head. He and Frobisher were sitting close together. The other three had their chairs on the far side of the tea table and were chatting together in an animated but slightly artificial manner.

Poirot murmured: "Yes, he is magnificent—magnificent. He is the young Bull—yes, one might say the Bull dedicated to Poseidon . . . A perfect specimen of healthy manhood."

"Looks fit enough, doesn't he?"

Frobisher sighed. His shrewd little eyes stole sideways, considering Hercule Poirot. Presently he said:

"I know who you are, you know."

"Ah that, it is no secret!"

Poirot waved a royal hand. He was not incognito, the gesture seemed to say. He was travelling as Himself.

After a minute or two Frobisher asked: "Did the girl get you down—over this business?"

"The business—?"

"The business of young Hugh . . . Yes, I see you know all about it. But I can't quite see why she went to you . . . Shouldn't have thought this sort of thing was in your line—meantersay it's more a medical show."

"All kinds of things are in my line . . . You would be surprised."

"I mean I can't see quite what she expected you could do."

"Miss Maberly," said Poirot, "is a fighter."

Colonel Frobisher nodded a warm assent.

"Yes, she's a fighter all right. She's a fine kid. She won't give up. All the same, you know, there are some things that you can't fight. . . ."

His face looked suddenly old and tired.

Poirot dropped his voice still lower. He murmured discreetly:

"There is—insanity, I understand, in the family?"

Frobisher nodded.

"Only crops up now and again," he murmured. "Skips a generation or two. Hugh's grandfather was the last."

Poirot threw a quick glance in the direction of the other three. Diana was holding the conversation well, laughing and bantering Hugh. You would have said that the three of them had not a care in the world.

"What form did the madness take?" Poirot asked softly.

"The old boy became pretty violent in the end. He was perfectly all right up to thirty—normal as could be. Then he began to go a bit queer. It was some time before people noticed it. Then a lot of rumours began going around. People started talking properly. Things happened that were hushed up. But —well," he raised his shoulders, "ended up as mad as a hatter, poor devil! Homicidal! Had to be certified."

He paused for a moment and then added:

"He lived to be quite an old man, I believe . . . That's what Hugh is afraid of, of course. That's why he doesn't want to see a doctor. He's afraid of being shut up and living shut up for years. Can't say I blame him. I'd feel the same."

"And Admiral Chandler, how does he feel?"

"It's broken him up completely," Frobisher spoke shortly.

"He is very fond of his son?"

“Wrapped up in the boy. You see, his wife was drowned in a boating accident when the boy was only ten years old. Since then he’s lived for nothing but the child.”

“Was he very devoted to his wife?”

“Worshipped her. Everybody worshipped her. She was—she was one of the loveliest women I’ve ever known.” He paused a moment and then said jerkily, “Care to see her portrait?”

“I should like to see it very much.”

Frobisher pushed back his chair and rose. Aloud he said:

“Going to show M. Poirot one or two things, Charles. He’s a bit of a connoisseur.”

The Admiral raised a vague hand. Frobisher tramped along the terrace and Poirot followed him. For a moment Diana’s face dropped its mask of gaiety and looked an agonized question. Hugh, too, raised his head, and looked steadily at the small man with the big black moustache.

Poirot followed Frobisher into the house. It was so dim at first coming in out of the sunlight that he could hardly distinguish one article from another. But he realized that the house was full of old and beautiful things.

Colonel Frobisher led the way to the Picture Gallery. On the panelled walls hung portraits of dead and gone Chandlers. Faces stern and gay, men in court dress or in Naval uniform. Women in satin and pearls.

Finally Frobisher stopped under a portrait at the end of the gallery.

“Painted by Orpen,” he said gruffly.

They stood looking up at a tall woman, her hand on a greyhound’s collar. A woman with auburn hair and an expression of radiant vitality.

“Boy’s the spitting image of her,” said Frobisher. “Don’t you think so?”

“In some things, yes.”

“He hasn’t got her delicacy—her femininity, of course. He’s a masculine edition—but in all the essential things—” He broke off. “Pity he inherited from the Chandlers the one thing he could well have done without. . . .”

They were silent. There was melancholy in the air all around them—as though dead and gone Chandlers sighed for the taint that lay in their blood and which, remorselessly, from time to time, they passed on. . . .

Hercule Poirot turned his head to look at his companion. George Frobisher was still gazing up at the beautiful woman on the wall above him. And Poirot said softly:

“You knew her well. . . .”

Frobisher spoke jerkily.

“We were boy and girl together. I went off as a subaltern to India when she was sixteen . . . When I got back—she was married to Charles Chandler.”

“You knew him well also?”

“Charles is one of my oldest friends. He’s my best friend—always has been.”

“Did you see much of them—after the marriage?”

“Used to spend most of my leaves here. Like a second home to me, this place. Charles and Caroline always kept my room here—ready and waiting . . .” He squared his shoulders, suddenly thrust his head forward pugnaciously. “That’s why I’m here now—to stand by in case I’m wanted. If Charles needs me—I’m here.”

Again the shadow of tragedy crept over them.

“And what do you think—about all this?” Poirot asked.

Frobisher stood stiffly. His brows came down over his eyes.

“What I think is, the least said the better. And to be frank, I don’t see what you’re doing in this business, M. Poirot. I don’t see why Diana roped you in and got you down here.”

“You are aware that Diana Maberly’s engagement to Hugh Chandler has been broken off?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“And you know the reason for it?”

Frobisher replied stiffly:

“I don’t know anything about that. Young people manage these things between them. Not my business to butt in.”

Poirot said:

“Hugh Chandler told Diana that it was not right that they should marry, because he was going out of his mind.”

He saw the beads of perspiration break out on Frobisher’s forehead. He said:

“Have we got to talk about the damned thing? What do you think you can do? Hugh’s done the right thing, poor devil. It’s not his fault, it’s heredity—germ plasm—brain cells . . . But once he knew, well, what else could he do but break the engagement? It’s one of those things that just has to be done.”

“If I could be convinced of that—”

“You can take it from me.”

“But you have told me nothing.”

“I tell you I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why did Admiral Chandler force his son to leave the Navy?”

"Because it was the only thing to be done."

"Why?"

Frobisher shook an obstinate head.

Poirot murmured softly:

"Was it to do with some sheep being killed?"

The other man said angrily:

"So you've heard about that?"

"Diana told me."

"That girl had far better keep her mouth shut."

"She did not think it was conclusive."

"She doesn't know."

"What doesn't she know?"

Unwillingly, jerkily, angrily, Frobisher spoke:

"Oh well, if you must have it . . . Chandler heard a noise that night. Thought it might be someone got in the house. Went out to investigate. Light in the boy's room. Chandler went in. Hugh asleep on bed—dead asleep—in his clothes. Blood on the clothes. Basin in the room full of blood. His father couldn't wake him. Next morning heard about sheep being found with their throats cut. Questioned Hugh. Boy didn't know anything about it. Didn't remember going out—and his shoes found by the side door caked in mud. Couldn't explain the blood in the basin. Couldn't explain anything. Poor devil didn't know, you understand.

"Charles came to me, talked it over. What was the best thing to be done? Then it happened again—three nights later. After that—well, you can see for yourself. The boy had got to leave the service. If he was here, under

Charles' eye, Charles could watch over him. Couldn't afford to have a scandal in the Navy. Yes, it was the only thing to be done."

Poirot asked: "And since then?"

Frobisher said fiercely, "I'm not answering any more questions. Don't you think Hugh knows his own business best?"

Hercule Poirot did not answer. He was always loath to admit that anyone could know better than Hercule Poirot.

III

As they came into the hall, they met Admiral Chandler coming in. He stood for a moment, a dark figure silhouetted against the bright light outside.

He said in a low, gruff voice:

"Oh there you both are. M. Poirot, I would like a word with you. Come into my study."

Frobisher went out through the open door, and Poirot followed the Admiral. He had rather the feeling of having been summoned to the quarterdeck to give an account of himself.

The Admiral motioned Poirot to take one of the big easy chairs and himself sat down in the other. Poirot, whilst with Frobisher, had been impressed by the other's restlessness, nervousness and irritability—all the signs of intense mental strain. With Admiral Chandler he felt a sense of hopelessness, of quiet, deep despair. . . .

With a deep sigh, Chandler said: "I can't help being sorry Diana has brought you into this . . . Poor child, I know how hard it is for her. But—well—it is our own private tragedy, and I think you will understand, M. Poirot, that we don't want outsiders."

"I can understand your feeling, certainly."

“Diana, poor child, can’t believe it . . . I couldn’t at first. Probably wouldn’t believe it now if I didn’t know—”

He paused.

“Know what?”

“That it’s in the blood. The taint, I mean.”

“And yet you agreed to the engagement?”

Admiral Chandler flushed.

“You mean, I should have put my foot down then? But at the time I’d no idea. Hugh takes after his mother—nothing about him to remind you of the Chandlers. I hoped he’d taken after her in every way. From his childhood upwards, there’s never been a trace of abnormality about him until now. I couldn’t know that—dash it all, there’s a trace of insanity in nearly every old family!”

Poirot said softly: “You have not consulted a doctor?”

Chandler roared: “No, and I’m not going to! The boy’s safe enough here with me to look after him. They shan’t shut him up between four walls like a wild beast. . . .”

“He is safe here, you say. But are others safe?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Poirot did not reply. He looked steadily into Admiral Chandler’s sad, dark eyes.

The Admiral said bitterly:

“Each man to his trade. You’re looking for a criminal! My boy’s not a criminal, M. Poirot.”

“Not yet.”

“What do you mean by ‘not yet?’ ”

“These things increase . . . Those sheep—”

“Who told you about the sheep?”

“Diana Maberly. And also your friend Colonel Frobisher.”

“George would have done better to keep his mouth shut.”

“He is a very old friend of yours is he not?”

“My best friend,” the Admiral said gruffly.

“And he was a friend of—your wife’s too?”

Chandler smiled.

“Yes. George was in love with Caroline, I believe. When she was very young. He’s never married. I believe that’s the reason. Ah well, I was the lucky one—or so I thought. I carried her off—only to lose her.”

He sighed and his shoulders sagged.

Poirot said: “Colonel Frobisher was with you when your wife was—drowned?”

Chandler nodded.

“Yes, he was with us down in Cornwall when it happened. She and I were out in the boat together—he happened to stay at home that day. I’ve never understood how that boat came to capsize . . . Must have sprung a sudden leak. We were right out in the bay—strong tide running. I held her up as long as I could . . .” His voice broke. “Her body was washed up two days later. Thank the Lord we hadn’t taken little Hugh out with us! At least, that’s what I thought at the time. Now—well—better for Hugh, poor devil, perhaps, if he had been with us. If it had all been finished and done for then. . . .”

Again there came that deep, hopeless sigh.

“We’re the last of the Chandlers, M. Poirot. There will be no more Chandlers at Lyde after we’re gone. When Hugh got engaged to Diana, I hoped—well, it’s no good talking of that. Thank God, they didn’t marry. That’s all I can say!”

IV

Hercule Poirot sat on a seat in the rose garden. Beside him sat Hugh Chandler. Diana Maberly had just left them.

The young man turned a handsome, tortured face towards his companion.

He said:

“You’ve got to make her understand, M. Poirot.”

He paused for a minute and then went on:

“You see, Di’s a fighter. She won’t give in. She won’t accept what she’s darned well got to accept. She—she will go on believing that I’m—sane.”

“While you yourself are quite certain that you are—pardon me—insane?”

The young man winced. He said:

“I’m not actually hopelessly off my head yet—but it’s getting worse. Diana doesn’t know, bless her. She’s only seen me when I am—all right.”

“And when you are—all wrong, what happens?”

Hugh Chandler took a long breath. Then he said:

“For one thing—I dream. And when I dream, I am mad. Last night, for instance—I wasn’t a man any longer. I was first of all a bull—a mad bull—racing about in blazing sunlight—tasting dust and blood in my mouth—dust and blood . . . And then I was a dog—a great slavering dog. I had hydrophobia—children scattered and fled as I came—men tried to shoot me

—someone set down a great bowl of water for me and I couldn't drink. I couldn't drink. . . ."

He paused. "I woke up. And I knew it was true. I went over to the washstand. My mouth was parched—horribly parched—and dry. I was thirsty. But I couldn't drink, M. Poirot . . . I couldn't swallow . . . Oh, my God, I wasn't able to drink. . . ."

Hercule Poirot made a gentle murmur. Hugh Chandler went on. His hands were clenched on his knees. His face was thrust forward, his eyes were half closed as though he saw something coming towards him.

"And there are things that aren't dreams. Things that I see when I'm wide awake. Spectres, frightful shapes. They leer at me. And sometimes I'm able to fly, to leave my bed, and fly through the air, to ride the winds—and fiends bear me company!"

"Tcha, tcha," said Hercule Poirot.

It was a gentle, deprecating little noise.

Hugh Chandler turned to him.

"Oh, there isn't any doubt. It's in my blood. It's my family heritage. I can't escape. Thank God I found it out in time! Before I'd married Diana. Suppose we'd had a child and handed on this frightful thing to him!"

He laid a hand on Poirot's arm.

"You must make her understand. You must tell her. She's got to forget. She's got to. There will be someone else someday. There's young Steve Graham—he's crazy about her and he's an awfully good chap. She'd be happy with him—and safe. I want her—to be happy. Graham's hard up, of course, and so are her people, but when I'm gone they'll be all right."

Hercule's voice interrupted him.

"Why will they be 'all right' when you are gone?"

Hugh Chandler smiled. It was a gentle, lovable smile. He said:

“There’s my mother’s money. She was an heiress, you know. It came to me. I’ve left it all to Diana.”

Hercule Poirot sat back in his chair. He said: “Ah!”

Then he said:

“But you may live to be quite an old man, Mr. Chandler.”

Hugh Chandler shook his head. He said sharply:

“No, M. Poirot. I am not going to live to be an old man.”

Then he drew back with a sudden shudder.

“My God! Look!” He stared over Poirot’s shoulder. “There—standing by you . . . it’s a skeleton—its bones are shaking. It’s calling to me—beckoning—”

His eyes, the pupils widely dilated, stared into the sunshine. He leaned suddenly sideways as though collapsing.

Then, turning to Poirot, he said in an almost childlike voice:

“You didn’t see—anything?”

Slowly, Hercule Poirot shook his head.

Hugh Chandler said hoarsely:

“I don’t mind this so much—seeing things. It’s the blood I’m frightened of. The blood in my room—on my clothes . . . We had a parrot. One morning it was there in my room with its throat cut—and I was lying on the bed with the razor in my hand wet with its blood!”

He leant closer to Poirot.

“Even just lately things have been killed,” he whispered. “All around—in the village—out on the downs. Sheep, young lambs—a collie dog. Father locks me in at night, but sometimes—sometimes—the door’s open in the morning. I must have a key hidden somewhere but I don’t know where I’ve hidden it. I don’t know. It isn’t I who do these things—it’s someone else who comes into me—who takes possession of me—who turns me from a man into a raving monster who wants blood and who can’t drink water. . . .”

Suddenly he buried his face in his hands.

After a minute or two, Poirot asked:

“I still do not understand why you have not seen a doctor?”

Hugh Chandler shook his head. He said:

“Don’t you really understand? Physically I’m strong. I’m as strong as a bull. I might live for years—years—shut up between four walls! That I can’t face! It would be better to go out altogether . . . There are ways, you know. An accident, cleaning a gun . . . that sort of thing. Diana will understand . . . I’d rather take my own way out!”

He looked defiantly at Poirot, but Poirot did not respond to the challenge. Instead he asked mildly:

“What do you eat and drink?”

Hugh Chandler flung his head back. He roared with laughter.

“Nightmares after indigestion? Is that your idea?”

Poirot merely repeated gently:

“What do you eat and drink?”

“Just what everybody else eats and drinks.”

“No special medicine? Cachets? Pills?”

"Good Lord, no. Do you really think patent pills would cure my trouble?" He quoted derisively: " 'Canst thou then minister to a mind diseased?' "

Hercule Poirot said drily:

"I am trying to. Does anyone in this house suffer with eye trouble?"

Hugh Chandler stared at him. He said:

"Father's eyes give him a good deal of trouble. He has to go to an oculist fairly often."

"Ah!" Poirot meditated for a moment or two. Then he said:

"Colonel Frobisher, I suppose, has spent much of his life in India?"

"Yes, he was in the Indian Army. He's very keen on India—talks about it a lot—native traditions—and all that."

Poirot murmured "Ah!" again.

Then he remarked:

"I see that you have cut your chin."

Hugh put his hand up.

"Yes, quite a nasty gash. Father startled me one day when I was shaving. I'm a bit nervy these days, you know. And I've had a bit of a rash over my chin and neck. Makes shaving difficult."

Poirot said:

"You should use a soothing cream."

"Oh, I do. Uncle George gave me one."

He gave a sudden laugh.

“We’re talking like a woman’s beauty parlour. Lotions, soothing creams, patent pills, eye trouble. What does it all amount to? What are you getting at, M. Poirot?”

Poirot said quietly:

“I am trying to do the best I can for Diana Maberly.”

Hugh’s mood changed. His face sobered. He laid a hand on Poirot’s arm.

“Yes, do what you can for her. Tell her she’s got to forget. Tell her that it’s no good hoping . . . Tell her some of the things I’ve told you . . . Tell her—oh, tell her for God’s sake to keep away from me! That’s the only thing she can do for me now. Keep away—and try to forget!”

V

“Have you courage, Mademoiselle? Great courage? You will need it.”

Diana cried sharply:

“Then it’s true. It’s true? He is mad?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I am not an alienist, Mademoiselle. It is not I who can say, ‘This man is mad. This man is sane.’ ”

She came closer to him.

“Admiral Chandler thinks Hugh is mad. George Frobisher thinks he is mad. Hugh himself thinks he is mad—”

Poirot was watching her.

“And you, Mademoiselle?”

“I? I say he isn’t mad! That’s why—”

She stopped.

“That is why you came to me?”

“Yes. I couldn’t have had any other reason for coming to you, could I?”

“That,” said Hercule Poirot, “is exactly what I have been asking myself, Mademoiselle!”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Who is Stephen Graham?”

She stared.

“Stephen Graham? Oh, he’s—he’s just someone.”

She caught him by the arm.

“What’s in your mind? What are you thinking about? You just stand there—behind that great moustache of yours—blinking your eyes in the sunlight, and you don’t tell me anything. You’re making me afraid—horribly afraid. Why are you making me afraid?”

“Perhaps,” said Poirot, “because I am afraid myself.”

The deep grey eyes opened wide, stared up at him. She said in a whisper:

“What are you afraid of?”

Hercule Poirot sighed—a deep sigh. He said:

“It is much easier to catch a murderer than it is to prevent a murder.”

She cried out: “Murder? Don’t use that word.”

“Nevertheless,” said Hercule Poirot, “I do use it.”

He altered his tone, speaking quickly and authoritatively.

“Mademoiselle, it is necessary that both you and I should pass the night at Lyde Manor. I look to you to arrange the matter. You can do that?”

“I—yes—I suppose so. But why—?”

“Because there is no time to lose. You have told me that you have courage. Prove that courage now. Do what I ask and make no questions about it.”

She nodded without a word and turned away.

Poirot followed her into the house after the lapse of a moment or two. He heard her voice in the library and the voices of three men. He passed up the broad staircase. There was no one on the upper floor.

He found Hugh Chandler’s room easily enough. In the corner of the room was a fitted washbasin with hot and cold water. Over it, on a glass shelf, were various tubes and pots and bottles.

Hercule Poirot went quickly and dexterously to work. . . .

What he had to do did not take him long. He was downstairs again in the hall when Diana came out of the library, looking flushed and rebellious.

“It’s all right,” she said.

Admiral Chandler drew Poirot into the library and closed the door. He said: “Look here, M. Poirot. I don’t like this.”

“What don’t you like, Admiral Chandler?”

“Diana has been insisting that you and she should both spend the night here. I don’t want to be inhospitable—”

“It is not a question of hospitality.”

“As I say, I don’t like being inhospitable—but frankly, I don’t like it, M. Poirot. I—I don’t want it. And I don’t understand the reason for it. What good can it possibly do?”

"Shall we say that it is an experiment I am trying?"

"What kind of an experiment?"

"That, you will pardon me, is my business. . . ."

"Now look here, M. Poirot, I didn't ask you to come here in the first place —"

Poirot interrupted.

"Believe me, Admiral Chandler, I quite understand and appreciate your point of view. I am here simply and solely because of the obstinacy of a girl in love. You have told me certain things. Colonel Frobisher has told me certain things. Hugh himself has told me certain things. Now—I want to see for myself."

"Yes, but see what? I tell you, there's nothing to see! I lock Hugh into his room every night and that's that."

"And yet—sometimes—he tells me that the door is not locked in the morning?"

"What's that?"

"Have you not found the door unlocked yourself?"

Chandler was frowning.

"I always imagined George had unlocked—what do you mean?"

"Where do you leave the key—in the lock?"

"No, I lay it on the chest outside. I, or George, or Withers, the valet, take it from there in the morning. We've told Withers it's because Hugh walks in his sleep . . . I daresay he knows more—but he's a faithful fellow, been with me for years."

"Is there another key?"

“Not that I know of.”

“One could have been made.”

“But who—”

“Your son thinks that he himself has one hidden somewhere, although he is unaware of it in his waking state.”

Colonel Frobisher, speaking from the far end of the room, said:

“I don’t like it, Charles . . . The girl—”

Admiral Chandler said quickly: “Just what I was thinking. The girl mustn’t come back with you. Come back yourself, if you like.”

Poirot said: “Why don’t you want Miss Maberly here tonight?”

Frobisher said in a low voice:

“It’s too risky. In these cases—”

He stopped.

Poirot said: “Hugh is devoted to her. . . .”

Chandler cried: “That’s just why! Damn it all, man, everything’s topsy-turvy where a madman’s concerned. Hugh knows that himself. Diana mustn’t come here.”

“As to that,” said Poirot, “Diana must decide for herself.”

He went out of the library. Diana was waiting outside in the car. She called out, “We’ll get what we want for the night and be back in time for dinner.”

As they drove down the long drive, Poirot repeated to her the conversation he had just held with the Admiral and Colonel Frobisher. She laughed scornfully.

"Do they think Hugh would hurt me?"

By way of reply, Poirot asked her if she would mind stopping at the chemist's in the village. He had forgotten, he said, to pack a toothbrush.

The chemist's shop was in the middle of the peaceful village street. Diana waited outside in the car. It struck her that Hercule Poirot was a long time choosing a toothbrush. . . .

VI

In the big bedroom with the heavy Elizabethan, oak furniture, Hercule Poirot sat and waited. There was nothing to do but wait. All his arrangements were made.

It was towards early morning that the summons came.

At the sound of footsteps outside, Poirot drew back the bolt and opened the door. There were two men in the passage outside—two middle-aged men who looked older than their years. The Admiral was stern-faced and grim, Colonel Frobisher twitched and trembled.

Chandler said simply:

"Will you come with us, M. Poirot?"

There was a huddled figure lying outside Diana Maberly's bedroom door. The light fell on a rumpled, tawny head. Hugh Chandler lay there breathing stertorously. He was in his dressing gown and slippers. In his right hand was a sharply curved, shining knife. Not all of it was shining—here and there it was obscured by red glistening patches.

Hercule Poirot exclaimed softly:

"Mon Dieu!"

Frobisher said sharply:

"She's all right. He hasn't touched her." He raised his voice and called: "Diana! It's us! Let us in!"

Poirot heard the Admiral groan and mutter under his breath:

"My boy. My poor boy."

There was a sound of bolts being drawn. The door opened and Diana stood there. Her face was dead white.

She faltered out:

"What's happened? There was someone—trying to get in—I heard them—feeling the door—the handle—scratching on the panels—Oh! it was awful . . . like an animal. . . ."

Frobisher said sharply:

"Thank God your door was locked!"

"M. Poirot told me to lock it."

Poirot said:

"Lift him up and bring him inside."

The two men stooped and raised the unconscious man. Diana caught her breath with a little gasp as they passed her.

"Hugh? Is it Hugh? What's that—on his hands?"

Hugh Chandler's hands were sticky and wet with a brownish, red stain.

Diana breathed: "Is that blood?"

Poirot looked inquiringly at the two men. The Admiral nodded. He said:

"Not human, thank God! A cat! I found it downstairs in the hall. Throat cut. Afterwards he must have come up here—"

“Here?” Diana’s voice was low with horror. “To me?”

The man on the chair stirred—muttered. They watched him, fascinated. Hugh Chandler sat up. He blinked.

“Hallo,” his voice was dazed—hoarse. “What’s happened? Why am I—?”

He stopped. He was staring at the knife which he held still clasped in his hand.

He said in a slow, thick voice:

“What have I done?”

His eyes went from one to the other. They rested at last on Diana shrinking back against the wall. He said quietly:

“Did I attack Diana?”

His father shook his head. Hugh said:

“Tell me what has happened? I’ve got to know!”

They told him—told him unwillingly—haltingly. His quiet perseverance drew it out of them.

Outside the window the sun was coming up. Hercule Poirot drew a curtain aside. The radiance of the dawn came into the room.

Hugh Chandler’s face was composed, his voice was steady.

He said:

“I see.”

Then he got up. He smiled and stretched himself. His voice was quite natural as he said:

“Beautiful morning, what? Think I’ll go out in the woods and try to get a rabbit.”

He went out of the room and left them staring after him.

Then the Admiral started forward. Frobisher caught him by the arm.

“No, Charles, no. It’s the best way—for him, poor devil, if for nobody else.”

Diana had thrown herself sobbing on the bed.

Admiral Chandler said, his voice coming unevenly:

“You’re right, George—you’re right, I know. The boy’s got guts. . . .”

Frobisher said, and his voice, too, was broken:

“He’s a man . . .”

There was a moment’s silence and then Chandler said:

“Damn it, where’s that cursed foreigner?”

VII

In the gun room, Hugh Chandler had lifted his gun from the rack and was in the act of loading it when Hercule Poirot’s hand fell on his shoulder.

Hercule Poirot’s voice said one word and said it with a strange authority. He said:

“No!”

Hugh Chandler stared at him. He said in a thick, angry voice: “Take your hands off me. Don’t interfere. There’s going to be an accident, I tell you. It’s the only way out.”

Again Hercule Poirot repeated that one word:

“No.”

“Don’t you realize that if it hadn’t been for the accident of her door being locked, I would have cut Diana’s throat—Diana’s!—with that knife?”

“I realize nothing of the kind. You would not have killed Miss Maberly.”

“I killed that cat, didn’t I?”

“No, you did not kill the cat. You did not kill the parrot. You did not kill the sheep.”

Hugh stared at him. He demanded:

“Are you mad, or am I?”

Hercule Poirot replied:

“Neither of us is mad.”

It was at that moment that Admiral Chandler and Colonel Frobisher came in. Behind them came Diana.

Hugh Chandler said in a weak, dazed voice:

“This chap says I’m not mad. . . .”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I am happy to tell you that you are entirely and completely sane.”

Hugh laughed. It was a laugh such as a lunatic might popularly be supposed to give.

“That’s damned funny! It’s sane, is it, to cut the throats of sheep and other animals? I was sane, was I, when I killed that parrot? And the cat tonight?”

“I tell you you did not kill the sheep—or the parrot—or the cat.”

“Then who did?”

“Someone who has had at heart the sole object of proving you insane. On each occasion you were given a heavy soporific and a blood-stained knife or razor was planted by you. It was someone else whose bloody hands were washed in your basin.”

“But why?”

“In order that you should do what you were just about to do when I stopped you.”

Hugh stared. Poirot turned to Colonel Frobisher.

“Colonel Frobisher, you lived for many years in India. Did you never come across cases where persons were deliberately driven mad by the administration of drugs?”

Colonel Frobisher’s face lit up. He said:

“Never came across a case myself, but I’ve heard of them often enough. Datura poisoning. It ends by driving a person insane.”

“Exactly. Well, the active principle of the datura is very closely allied to, if it is not actually, the alkaloid atropine—which is also obtained from belladonna or deadly nightshade. Belladonna preparations are fairly common and atropine sulphate itself is prescribed freely for eye treatments. By duplicating a prescription and getting it made up in different places a large quantity of the poison could be obtained without arousing suspicion. The alkaloid could be extracted from it and then introduced into, say—a soothing shaving cream. Applied externally it would cause a rash, this would soon lead to abrasions in shaving and thus the drug would be continually entering the system. It would produce certain symptoms—dryness of the mouth and throat, difficulty in swallowing, hallucinations, double vision—all the symptoms, in fact, which Mr. Chandler has experienced.”

He turned to the young man.

"And to remove the last doubt from my mind, I will tell you that that is not a supposition but a fact. Your shaving cream was heavily impregnated with atropine sulphate. I took a sample and had it tested."

White, shaking, Hugh asked:

"Who did it? Why?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"That is what I have been studying ever since I arrived here. I have been looking for a motive for murder. Diana Maberly gained financially by your death, but I did not consider her seriously—"

Hugh Chandler flashed out:

"I should hope not!"

"I envisaged another possible motive. The eternal triangle; two men and a woman. Colonel Frobisher had been in love with your mother, Admiral Chandler married her."

Admiral Chandler cried out:

"George? George! I won't believe it."

Hugh said in an incredulous voice:

"Do you mean that hatred could go on—to a son?"

Hercule Poirot said:

"Under certain circumstances, yes."

Frobisher cried out:

"It's a damned lie! Don't believe him, Charles."

Chandler shrank away from him. He muttered to himself:

“The datura . . . India—yes, I see . . . And we’d never suspect poison—not with madness in the family already. . . .”

“Mais oui!” Hercule Poirot’s voice rose high and shrill. “Madness in the family. A madman—bent on revenge—cunning—as madmen are, concealing his madness for years.” He whirled round on Frobisher. “Mon Dieu, you must have known, you must have suspected, that Hugh was your son? Why did you never tell him so?”

Frobisher stammered, gulped.

“I didn’t know. I couldn’t be sure . . . You see, Caroline came to me once—she was frightened of something—in great trouble. I don’t know, I never have known, what it was all about. She—I—we lost our heads. Afterwards I went away at once—it was the only thing to be done, we both knew we’d got to play the game. I—well, I wondered, but I couldn’t be sure. Caroline never said anything that led me to think Hugh was my son. And then when this—this streak of madness appeared, it settled things definitely, I thought.”

Poirot said:

“Yes, it settled things! You could not see the way the boy has of thrusting out his face and bringing down his brows—a trick he inherited from you. But Charles Chandler saw it. Saw it years ago—and learnt the truth from his wife. I think she was afraid of him—he’d begun to show her the mad streak—that was what drove her into your arms—you whom she had always loved. Charles Chandler planned his revenge. His wife died in a boating accident. He and she were out in the boat alone and he knows how that accident came about. Then he settled down to feed his concentrated hatred against the boy who bore his name but who was not his son. Your Indian stories put the idea of datura poisoning into his head. Hugh should be slowly driven mad. Driven to the stage where he would take his own life in despair. The blood lust was Admiral Chandler’s, not Hugh’s. It was Charles Chandler who was driven to cut the throats of sheep in lonely fields. But it was Hugh who was to pay the penalty!

“Do you know when I suspected? When Admiral Chandler was so averse to his son seeing a doctor. For Hugh to object was natural enough. But the father! There might be treatment which would save his son—there were a hundred reasons why he should seek to have a doctor’s opinion. But no, a doctor must not be allowed to see Hugh Chandler—in case a doctor should discover that Hugh was sane!”

Hugh said very quietly:

“Sane . . . I am sane?”

He took a step towards Diana. Frobisher said in a gruff voice:

“You’re sane enough. There’s no taint in our family.”

Diana said:

“Hugh . . .”

Admiral Chandler picked up Hugh’s gun. He said:

“All a lot of nonsense! Think I’ll go and see if I can get a rabbit—”

Frobisher started forward, but the hand of Hercule Poirot restrained him. Poirot said:

“You said yourself—just now—that it was the best way. . . .”

Hugh and Diana had gone from the room.

The two men, the Englishman and the Belgian, watched the last of the Chandlers cross the Park and go up into the woods.

Presently, they heard a shot. . . .

Eight

THE HORSES OF DIOMEDES

The telephone rang.

“Hallo, Poirot, is that you?”

Hercule Poirot recognized the voice as that of young Dr. Stoddart. He liked Michael Stoddart, liked the shy friendliness of his grin, was amused by his naïve interest in crime, and respected him as a hardworking and shrewd man in his chosen profession.

“I don’t like bothering you—” the voice went on and hesitated.

“But something is bothering you?” suggested Hercule Poirot acutely.

“Exactly.” Michael Stoddart’s voice sounded relieved. “Hit it in one!”

“Eh bien, what can I do for you, my friend?”

Stoddart sounded diffident. He stammered a little when he answered.

“I suppose it would be awful c-c-cheek if I asked you to come round at this time of night . . . B-b-but I’m in a bit of a j-j-jam.”

“Certainly I will come. To your house?”

“No—as a matter of fact I’m at the Mews that runs along behind. Conningby Mews. The number is 17. Could you really come? I’d be no end grateful.”

“I arrive immediately,” replied Hercule Poirot.

II

Hercule Poirot walked along the dark Mews looking up at the numbers. It was past one o'clock in the morning and for the most part the Mews appeared to have gone to bed, though there were still lights in one or two windows.

As he reached 17, its door opened and Dr. Stoddart stood looking out.

"Good man!" he said. "Come up, will you?"

A small ladderlike stairway led to the upper floor. Here, on the right, was a fairly big room, furnished with divans, rugs, triangular silver cushions and large numbers of bottles and glasses.

Everything was more or less in confusion, cigarette ends were everywhere and there were many broken glasses.

"Ha!" said Hercule Poirot. "Mon cher Watson, I deduce that there has been here a party!"

"There's been a party all right," said Stoddart grimly. "Some party, I should say!"

"You did not, then, attend it yourself?"

"No, I'm here strictly in my professional capacity."

"What happened?"

Stoddart said:

"This place belongs to a woman called Patience Grace—Mrs. Patience Grace."

"It sounds," said Poirot, "a charming old-world name."

"There's nothing charming or old-world about Mrs. Grace. She's good-looking in a tough sort of way. She's got through a couple of husbands, and now she’s got a boyfriend whom she suspects of trying to run out on her. They started this party on drink and they finished it on dope—cocaine, to be exact. Cocaine is stuff that starts off making you feel just grand and with everything in the garden lovely. It peps you up and you feel you can do twice as much as you usually do. Take too much of it and you get violent mental excitement, delusions and delirium. Mrs. Grace had a violent quarrel with her boyfriend, an unpleasant person by the name of Hawker. Result, he walked out on her then and there, and she leaned out of the window and took a potshot at him with a brand-new revolver that someone had been fool enough to give her.”

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“Did she hit him?”

“Not she! Bullet went several yards wide, I should say. What she did hit was a miserable loafer who was creeping along the Mews looking in the dustbins. Got him through the fleshy part of the arm. He raised Hell, of course, and the crowd hustled him in here quick, got the wind up with all the blood that was spilling out of him and came round and got me.”

“Yes?”

“I patched him up all right. It wasn’t serious. Then one or two of the men got busy on him and in the end he consented to accept a couple of five pound notes and say no more about it. Suited him all right, poor devil. Marvellous stroke of luck.”

“And you?”

“I had a bit more work to do. Mrs. Grace herself was in raving hysterics by that time. I gave her a shot of something and packed her off to bed. There was another girl who’d more or less passed out—quite young she was, and I attended to her too. By that time everyone was slinking off as fast as they could leave.”

He paused.

“And then,” said Poirot, “you had time to think over the situation.”

“Exactly,” said Stoddart. “If it was an ordinary drunken binge, well, that would be the end of it. But dope’s different.”

“You are quite sure of your facts?”

“Oh, absolutely. No mistaking it. It’s cocaine all right. I found some in a lacquer box—they snuff it up, you know. Question is, where does it come from? I remembered that you’d been talking the other day about a big, new wave of drug taking and the increase of drug addicts.”

Hercule Poirot nodded. He said:

“The police will be interested in this party tonight.”

Michael Stoddart said unhappily:

“That’s just it. . . .”

Poirot looked at him with suddenly awakened interest. He said:

“But you—you are not very anxious that the police should be interested?”

Michael Stoddart mumbled:

“Innocent people get mixed up in things . . . hard lines on them.”

“Is it Mrs. Patience Grace for whom you are so solicitous?”

“Good Lord, no. She’s as hard-boiled as they make them!”

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“It is, then, the other one—the girl?”

Dr. Stoddart said:

"Of course, she's hard-boiled, too, in a way. I mean, she'd describe herself as hard-boiled. But she's really just very young—a bit wild and all that—but it's just kid foolishness. She gets mixed up in a racket like this because she thinks it's smart or modern or something like that."

A faint smile came to Poirot's lips. He said softly:

"This girl, you have met her before tonight?"

Michael Stoddart nodded. He looked very young and embarrassed.

"Ran across her in Mertonshire. At the Hunt Ball. Her father's a retired General—blood and thunder, shoot 'em down—pukka Sahib—all that sort of thing. There are four daughters and they are all a bit wild—driven to it with a father like that, I should say. And it's a bad part of the county where they live—armaments works nearby and a lot of money—none of the old-fashioned country feeling—a rich crowd and most of them pretty vicious. The girls have got in with a bad set."

Hercule Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for some minutes. Then he said:

"I perceive now why you desired my presence. You want me to take the affair in hand?"

"Would you? I feel I ought to do something about it—but I confess I'd like to keep Sheila Grant out of the limelight if I could."

"That can be managed, I fancy. I should like to see the young lady."

"Come along."

He led the way out of the room. A voice called fretfully from a door opposite.

"Doctor—for God's sake, doctor, I'm going crazy."

Stoddart went into the room. Poirot followed. It was a bedroom in a complete state of chaos—powder spilled on the floor—pots and jars everywhere, clothes flung about. On the bed was a woman with unnaturally blonde hair and a vacant, vicious face. She called out:

"I've got insects crawling all over me . . . I have. I swear I have. I'm going mad . . . For God's sake, give me a shot of something."

Dr. Stoddart stood by the bed, his tone was soothing—professional.

Hercule Poirot went quietly out of the room. There was another door opposite him. He opened that.

It was a tiny room—a mere slip of a room—plainly furnished. On the bed a slim, girlish figure lay motionless.

Hercule Poirot tiptoed to the side of the bed and looked down upon the girl.

Dark hair, a long, pale face—and—yes, young—very young. . . .

A gleam of white showed between the girl's lids. Her eyes opened, startled, frightened eyes. She stared, sat up, tossing her head in an effort to throw back the thick mane of blue-black hair. She looked like a frightened filly—she shrank away a little—as a wild animal shrinks when it is suspicious of a stranger who offers it food.

She said—and her voice was young and thin and abrupt:

"Who the hell are you?"

"Do not be afraid, Mademoiselle."

"Where's Dr. Stoddart?"

That young man came into the room at that minute. The girl said with a note of relief in her voice:

"Oh! there you are! Who's this?"

"This is a friend of mine, Sheila. How are you feeling now?"

The girl said:

“Awful. Lousy . . . Why did I take that foul stuff?”

Stoddart said drily:

“I shouldn’t do it again, if I were you.”

“I—I shan’t.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“Who gave it to you?”

Her eyes widened, her upper lip twitched a little. She said:

“It was here—at the party. We all tried it. It—it was wonderful at first.”

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“But who brought it here?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know . . . It might have been Tony—Tony Hawker. But I don’t really know anything about it.”

Poirot said gently:

“Is it the first time you have taken cocaine, Mademoiselle?”

She nodded.

“You’d better make it the last,” said Stoddart brusquely.

“Yes—I suppose so—but it was rather marvellous.”

“Now look here, Sheila Grant,” said Stoddart. “I’m a doctor and I know what I’m talking about. Once start this drug-taking racket and you’ll land yourself in unbelievable misery. I’ve seen some and I know. Drugs ruin people, body and soul. Drink’s a gentle little picnic compared to drugs. Cut it right out from this minute. Believe me, it isn’t funny! What do you think your father would say to tonight’s business?”

“Father?” Sheila Grant’s voice rose. “Father?” She began to laugh. “I can just see Father’s face! He mustn’t know about it. He’d have seven fits!”

“And quite right too,” said Stoddart.

“Doctor—doctor—” the long wail of Mrs. Grace’s voice came from the other room.

Stoddart muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath and went out of the room.

Sheila Grant stared at Poirot again. She was puzzled. She said:

“Who are you really? You weren’t at the party.”

“No, I was not at the party. I am a friend of Dr. Stoddart’s.”

“You’re a doctor, too? You don’t look like a doctor.”

“My name,” said Poirot, contriving as usual to make the simple statement sound like the curtain of the first act of a play, “my name is Hercule Poirot. . . .”

The statement did not fail of its effect. Occasionally Poirot was distressed to find that a callous younger generation had never heard of him.

But it was evident that Sheila Grant had heard of him. She was flabbergasted—dumbfounded. She stared and stared. . . .

III

It has been said, with or without justification for the statement, that everyone has an aunt in Torquay.

It has also been said that everyone has at least a second cousin in Mertonshire. Mertonshire is a reasonable distance from London, it has hunting, shooting and fishing, it has several very picturesque but slightly self-conscious villages, it has a good system of railways and a new arterial road facilitates motoring to and from the metropolis. Servants object to it less than they do to other, more rural, portions of the British Isles. As a result, it is practically impossible to live in Mertonshire unless you have an income that runs into four figures, and what with income tax and one thing and another, five figures is better.

Hercule Poirot, being a foreigner, had no second cousins in the country, but he had acquired by now a large circle of friends and he had no difficulty in getting himself invited for a visit in that part of the world. He had, moreover, selected as hostess a dear lady whose chief delight was exercising her tongue on the subject of her neighbours—the only drawback being that Poirot had to submit to hearing a great deal about people in whom he had no interest whatever, before coming to the subject of the people he was interested in.

“The Grants? Oh yes, there are four of them. Four girls. I don’t wonder the poor General can’t control them. What can a man do with four girls?” Lady Carmichael’s hands flew up eloquently. Poirot said: “What indeed?” and the lady continued:

“Used to be a great disciplinarian in his regiment, so he told me. But those girls defeat him. Not like when I was young. Old Colonel Sandys was such a martinet, I remember, that his poor daughters—”

(Long excursion into the trials of the Sandys girls and other friends of Lady Carmichael’s youth.)

“Mind you,” said Lady Carmichael, reverting to her first theme. “I don’t say there’s anything really wrong about those girls. Just high spirits—and getting in with an undesirable set. It’s not what it used to be down here. The oddest people come here. There’s no what you might call ‘county’ left. It’s all money, money, money nowadays. And you do hear the oddest stories! Who did you say? Anthony Hawker? Oh yes, I know him. What I call a very unpleasant young man. But apparently rolling in money. He comes down here to hunt—and he gives parties—very lavish parties—and rather peculiar parties, too, if one is to believe all one is told—not that I ever do, because I do think people are so ill-natured. They always believe the worst. You know, it's become quite a fashion to say a person drinks or takes drugs. Somebody said to me the other day that young girls were natural inebriates, and I really don't think that was a nice thing to say at all. And if anyone's at all peculiar or vague in their manner, everyone says 'drugs' and that's unfair, too. They say it about Mrs. Larkin and though I don't care for the woman, I do really think it's nothing more than absentmindedness. She's a great friend of your Anthony Hawker, and that's why, if you ask me, she's so down on the Grant girls—says they're man-eaters! I dare say they do run after men a bit, but why not? It's natural, after all. And they're good-looking pieces, every one of them."

Poirot interjected a question.

"Mrs. Larkin? My dear man, it's no good asking me who she is? Who's anybody nowadays? They say she rides well and she's obviously well off. Husband was something in the city. He's dead, not divorced. She's not been here very long, came here just after the Grants did. I've always thought she —"

Old Lady Carmichael stopped. Her mouth opened, her eyes bulged. Leaning forward she struck Poirot a sharp blow across the knuckles with a paper cutter she was holding. Disregarding his wince of pain she exclaimed excitedly:

"Why of course! So that's why you're down here! You nasty, deceitful creature, I insist on your telling me all about it."

"But what is it I am to tell you all about?"

Lady Carmichael aimed another playful blow which Poirot avoided deftly.

"Don't be an oyster, Hercule Poirot! I can see your moustaches quivering. Of course, it's crime brings you down here—and you're just pumping me shamelessly! Now let me see, can it be murder? Who's died lately? Only old Louisa Gilmore and she was eighty-five and had dropsy too. Can't be her. Poor Leo Staverton broke his neck in the hunting field and he's all done up in plaster—that can't be it. Perhaps it isn't murder. What a pity! I can't remember any special jewel robberies lately . . . Perhaps it's just a criminal you're tracking down . . . Is it Beryl Larkin? Did she poison her husband? Perhaps it's remorse that makes her so vague."

"Madame, Madame," cried Hercule Poirot. "You go too fast."

"Nonsense. You're up to something, Hercule Poirot."

"Are you acquainted with the classics, Madame?"

"What have the classics got to do with it?"

"They have this to do with it. I emulate my great predecessor Hercules. One of the Labors of Hercules was the taming of the wild horses of Diomedes."

"Don't tell me you came down here to train horses—at your age—and always wearing patent-leather shoes! You don't look to me as though you'd ever been on a horse in your life!"

"The horses, Madame, are symbolic. They were the wild horses who ate human flesh."

"How very unpleasant of them. I always do think these ancient Greeks and Romans are very unpleasant. I can't think why clergymen are so fond of quoting from the classics—for one thing one never understands what they mean and it always seems to me that the whole subject matter of the classics is very unsuitable for clergymen. So much incest, and all those statues with nothing on—not that I mind that myself but you know what clergymen are—quite upset if girls come to church with no stockings on—let me see, where was I?"

"I am not quite sure."

"I suppose, you wretch, you just won't tell me if Mrs. Larkin murdered her husband? Or perhaps Anthony Hawker is the Brighton trunk murderer?"

She looked at him hopefully, but Hercule Poirot's face remained impassive.

“It might be forgery,” speculated Lady Carmichael. “I did see Mrs. Larkin in the bank the other morning and she’d just cashed a fifty pound cheque to self—it seemed to me at the time a lot of money to want in cash. Oh no, that’s the wrong way round—if she was a forger she would be paying it in, wouldn’t she? Hercule Poirot, if you sit there looking like an owl and saying nothing, I shall throw something at you.”

“You must have a little patience,” said Hercule Poirot.

IV

Ashley Lodge, the residence of General Grant, was not a large house. It was situated on the side of a hill, had good stables, and a straggling, rather neglected garden.

Inside, it was what a house agent would have described as “fully furnished.” Cross-legged Buddhas leered down from convenient niches, brass Benares trays and tables encumbered the floor space. Processional elephants garnished the mantelpieces and more tortured brasswork adorned the walls.

In the midst of this Anglo-Indian home from home, General Grant was ensconced in a large, shabby armchair with his leg, swathed in bandages, reposing on another chair.

“Gout,” he explained. “Ever had the gout, Mr.—er—Poirot? Makes a feller damned bad tempered! All my father’s fault. Drank port all his life—so did my grandfather. It’s played the deuce with me. Have a drink? Ring that bell, will you, for that feller of mine?”

A turbaned servant appeared. General Grant addressed him as Abdul and ordered him to bring the whisky and soda. When it came he poured out such a generous portion that Poirot was moved to protest.

“Can’t join you, I’m afraid, Mr. Poirot.” The General eyed the tantalus sadly. “My doctor wallah says it’s poison to me to touch the stuff. Don’t suppose he knows for a minute. Ignorant chaps doctors. Spoilsports. Enjoy knocking a man off his food and drink and putting him on some pap like steamed fish. Steamed fish—pah!”

In his indignation the General incautiously moved his bad foot and uttered a yelp of agony at the twinge that ensued.

He apologized for his language.

“Like a bear with a sore head, that’s what I am. My girls give me a wide berth when I’ve got an attack of gout. Don’t know that I blame them. You’ve met one of ’em, I hear.”

“I have had that pleasure, yes. You have several daughters, have you not?”

“Four,” said the General gloomily. “Not a boy amongst ’em. Four blinking girls. Bit of a thought, these days.”

“They are all four very charming, I hear?”

“Not too bad—not too bad. Mind you, I never know what they’re up to. You can’t control girls nowadays. Lax times—too much laxity everywhere. What can a man do? Can’t lock ’em up, can I?”

“They are popular in the neighbourhood, I gather.”

“Some of the old cats don’t like ’em,” said General Grant. “A good deal of mutton dressed as lamb round here. A man’s got to be careful. One of these blue-eyed widows nearly caught me—used to come round here purring like a kitten. ‘Poor General Grant—you must have had such an interesting life.’ ” The General winked and placed one finger against his nose. “A little bit too obvious, Mr. Poirot. Oh well, take it all round, I suppose it’s not a bad part of the world. A bit go ahead and noisy for my taste. I liked the country when it was the country—not all this motoring and jazz and that blasted, eternal radio. I won’t have one here and the girls know it. A man’s got a right to a little peace in his own home.”

Gently Poirot led the conversation round to Anthony Hawker.

“Hawker? Hawker? Don’t know him. Yes, I do, though. Nasty looking fellow with his eyes too close together. Never trust a man who can’t look you in the face.”

“He is a friend, is he not, of your daughter Sheila’s?”

“Sheila? Wasn’t aware of it. Girls never tell me anything.” The bushy eyebrows came down over the nose—the piercing, blue eyes looked out of the red face straight into Hercule Poirot’s. “Look here, Mr. Poirot, what’s all this about? Mind telling me what you’ve come to see me about?”

Poirot said slowly:

“That would be difficult—perhaps I hardly know myself. I would say only this: your daughter Sheila—perhaps all your daughters—have made some undesirable friends.”

“Got into a bad set, have they? I was a bit afraid of that. One hears a word dropped here and there.” He looked pathetically at Poirot. “But what am I to do, Mr. Poirot? What am I to do?”

Poirot shook his head perplexedly.

General Grant went on:

“What’s wrong with the bunch they’re running with?”

Poirot replied by another question.

“Have you noticed, General Grant, that any of your daughters have been moody, excited, then depressed—nervy—uncertain in their tempers?”

“Damme, sir, you’re talking like a patent medicine. No, I haven’t noticed anything of the kind.”

“That is fortunate,” said Poirot gravely.

“What the devil is the meaning of all this, sir?”

“Drugs!”

“WHAT!”

The word came in a roar.

Poirot said:

“An attempt is being made to induce your daughter Sheila to become a drug addict. The cocaine habit is very quickly formed. A week or two will suffice. Once the habit is formed, an addict will pay anything, do anything, to get a further supply of the drug. You can realize what a rich haul the person who peddles that drug can make.”

He listened in silence to the spluttering, wrathful blasphemies that poured from the old man’s lips. Then, as the fires died down, with a final choice description of exactly what he, the General, would do to the blinkety blinkety son of a blank when he got hold of him, Hercule Poirot said:

“We have first, as your so admirable Mrs. Beeton says, to catch the hare. Once we have caught our drug pedlar, I will turn him over to you with the greatest pleasure, General.”

He got up, tripped over a heavily carved, small table, regained his balance with a clutch at the General, murmured:

“A thousand pardons, and may I beg of you, General—you understand, beg of you—to say nothing whatever about all this to your daughters.”

“What? I’ll have the truth out of them, that’s what I’ll have!”

“That is exactly what you will not have. All you will get is a lie.”

“But damme, sir—”

“I assure you, General Grant, you must hold your tongue. That is vital—you understand? Vital!”

“Oh well, have it your own way,” growled the old soldier.

He was mastered but not convinced.

Hercule Poirot picked his way carefully through the Benares brass and went out.

V

Mrs. Larkin’s room was full of people.

Mrs. Larkin herself was mixing cocktails at a side table. She was a tall woman with pale auburn hair rolled into the back of her neck. Her eyes were greenish-grey with big, black pupils. She moved easily, with a kind of sinister grace. She looked as though she were in the early thirties. Only a close scrutiny revealed the lines at the corners of the eyes and hinted that she was ten years older than her looks.

Hercule Poirot had been brought here by a brisk, middle-aged woman, a friend of Lady Carmichael’s. He found himself given a cocktail and further directed to take one to a girl sitting in the window. The girl was small and fair—her face was pink and white and suspiciously angelic. Her eyes, Hercule Poirot noticed at once, were alert and suspicious.

He said:

“To your continued good health, Mademoiselle.”

She nodded and drank. Then she said abruptly:

“You know my sister.”

“Your sister? Ah, you are then one of the Miss Grants?”

“I’m Pam Grant.”

“And where is your sister today?”

“She’s out hunting. Ought to be back soon.”

“I met your sister in London.”

"I know."

"She told you?"

Pam Grant nodded. She said abruptly:

"Was Sheila in a jam?"

"So she did not tell you everything?"

The girl shook her head. She asked:

"Was Tony Hawker there?"

Before Poirot could answer, the door opened and Hawker and Sheila Grant came in. They were in hunting kit and Sheila had a streak of mud on her cheek.

"Hullo, people, we've come in for a drink. Tony's flask is dry."

Poirot murmured:

"Talk of the angels—"

Pam Grant snapped:

"Devils, you mean."

Poirot said sharply:

"Is it like that?"

Beryl Larkin had come forward. She said:

"Here you are, Tony. Tell me about the run? Did you draw Gelert's Copse?"

She drew him away skilfully to a sofa near the fireplace. Poirot saw him turn his head and glance at Sheila before he went.

Sheila had seen Poirot. She hesitated a minute, then came over to the two in the window. She said abruptly:

“So it was you who came to the house yesterday?”

“Did your father tell you?”

She shook her head.

“Abdul described you. I—guessed.”

Pam exclaimed: “You went to see Father?”

Poirot said:

“Ah—yes. We have—some mutual friends.”

Pam said sharply:

“I don’t believe it.”

“What do you not believe? That your father and I could have a mutual friend?”

The girl flushed.

“Don’t be stupid. I meant—that wasn’t really your reason—”

She turned on her sister.

“Why don’t you say something, Sheila?”

Sheila started. She said:

“It wasn’t—it wasn’t anything to do with Tony Hawker?”

“Why should it be?” asked Poirot.

Sheila flushed and went back across the room to the others.

Pam said with sudden vehemence but in a lowered voice:

“I don’t like Tony Hawker. There—there’s something sinister about him—and about her—Mrs. Larkin, I mean. Look at them now.”

Poirot followed her glance.

Hawker’s head was close to that of his hostess. He appeared to be soothing her. Her voice rose for a minute.

“—but I can’t wait. I want it now!”

Poirot said with a little smile:

“Les femmes—whatever it is—they always want it now, do they not?”

But Pam Grant did not respond. Her face was cast down. She was nervously pleating and repleating her tweed skirt.

Poirot murmured conversationally:

“You are quite a different type from your sister, Mademoiselle.”

She flung her head up, impatient of banalities. She said:

“M. Poirot. What’s the stuff Tony’s been giving Sheila? What is it that’s been making her—different?”

He looked straight at her. He asked:

“Have you ever taken cocaine, Miss Grant?”

She shook her head.

“Oh no! So that’s it? Cocaine? But isn’t that very dangerous?”

Sheila Grant had come over to them, a fresh drink in her hand. She said:

“What’s dangerous?”

Poirot said:

“We are talking of the effects of drug taking. Of the slow death of the mind and spirit—the destroying of all that is true and good in a human being.”

Sheila Grant caught her breath. The drink in her hand swayed and spilled on the floor. Poirot went on:

“Dr. Stoddart has, I think, made clear to you just what that death in life entails. It is so easily done—so hard to undo. The person who deliberately profits from the degradation and misery of other people is a vampire preying on flesh and blood.”

He turned away. Behind him he heard Pam Grant’s voice say: “Sheila!” and caught a whisper—a faint whisper—from Sheila Grant. It was so low he hardly heard it.

“The flask . . .”

Hercule Poirot said goodbye to Mrs. Larkin and went out into the hall. On the hall table was a hunting flask lying with a crop and a hat. Poirot picked it up. There were initials on it: A.H.

Poirot murmured to himself:

“Tony’s flask is empty?”

He shook it gently. There was no sound of liquor. He unscrewed the top.

Tony Hawker’s flask was not empty. It was full—of white powder. . . .

VI

Hercule Poirot stood on the terrace of Lady Carmichael’s house and pleaded with a girl.

He said:

"You are very young, Mademoiselle. It is my belief that you have not known, not really known, what it is you and your sisters have been doing. You have been feeding, like the mares of Diomedes, on human flesh."

Sheila shuddered and gave a sob. She said:

"It sounds horrible, put like that. And yet it's true! I never realized it until that evening in London when Dr. Stoddart talked to me. He was so grave—so sincere. I saw then what an awful thing it was I had been doing . . . Before that I thought it was—Oh! rather like drink after hours—something people would pay to get, but not something that really mattered very much!"

Poirot said:

"And now?"

Sheila Grant said:

"I'll do anything you say. I—I'll talk to the others," she added . . . "I don't suppose Dr. Stoddart will ever speak to me again. . . ."

"On the contrary," said Poirot. "Both Dr. Stoddart and I are prepared to help you in every way in our power to start afresh. You can trust us. But one thing must be done. There is one person who must be destroyed—destroyed utterly, and only you and your sisters can destroy him. It is your evidence and your evidence alone that will convict him."

"You mean—my father?"

"Not your father, Mademoiselle. Did I not tell you that Hercule Poirot knows everything? Your photograph was easily recognized in official quarters. You are Sheila Kelly—a persistent young shoplifter who was sent to a reformatory some years ago. When you came out of that reformatory, you were approached by the man who calls himself General Grant and offered this post—the post of a 'daughter.' There would be plenty of money, plenty of fun, a good time. All you had to do was to introduce the 'snuff' to your friends, always pretending that someone else had given it to you. Your ‘sisters’ were in the same case as yourself.”

He paused and said:

“Come now, Mademoiselle—this man must be exposed and sentenced. After that—”

“Yes, afterwards?”

Poirot coughed. He said with a smile:

“You shall be dedicated to the service of the Gods. . . .”

VII

Michael Stoddart stared at Poirot in amazement. He said:

“General Grant? General Grant?”

“Precisely, mon cher. The whole mise en scène, you know, was what you would call ‘very bogus.’ The Buddhas, the Benares brass, the Indian servant! And the gout, too! It is out of date, the gout. It is old, old gentlemen who have the gout—not the fathers of young ladies of nineteen.

“Moreover I made quite certain. As I go out, I stumble, I clutch at the gouty foot. So perturbed is the gentleman by what I have been saying that he did not even notice. Oh yes, he is very, very bogus, that General! Tout de même, it is a smart idea. The retired Anglo-Indian General, the well-known comic figure with a liver and a choleric temper, he settles down—not amongst other retired Anglo-Indian Army officers—oh no, he goes to a milieu far too expensive for the usual retired Army man. There are rich people there, people from London, an excellent field to market the goods. And who would suspect four lively, attractive, young girls? If anything comes out, they will be considered as victims—that for a certainty!”

“What was your idea exactly when you went to see the old devil? Did you want to put the wind up him?”

“Yes. I wanted to see what would happen. I had not long to wait. The girls had their orders. Anthony Hawker, actually one of their victims, was to be the scapegoat. Sheila was to tell me about the flask in the hall. She nearly could not bring herself to do so—but the other girl rapped out an angry ‘Sheila’ at her and she just faltered it out.”

Michael Stoddart got up and paced up and down. He said:

“You know, I’m not going to lose sight of that girl. I’ve got a pretty sound theory about those adolescent criminal tendencies. If you look into the home life, you nearly always find—”

Poirot interrupted him.

He said:

“Mon cher, I have the deepest respect for your science. I have no doubt that your theories will work admirably where Miss Sheila Kelly is concerned.”

“The others, too.”

“The others, perhaps. It may be. The only one I am sure about is the little Sheila. You will tame her, not a doubt of it! In truth, she eats out of your hand already. . . .”

Flushing, Michael Stoddart said:

“What nonsense you talk, Poirot.”

Nine

THE GIRDLE OF HYPPOLITA

One thing leads to another, as Hercule Poirot is fond of saying without much originality.

He adds that this was never more clearly evidenced than in the case of the stolen Rubens.

He was never much interested in the Rubens. For one thing Rubens is not a painter he admires, and then the circumstances of the theft were quite ordinary. He took it up to oblige Alexander Simpson who was by way of being a friend of his and for a certain private reason of his own not unconnected with the classics!

After the theft, Alexander Simpson sent for Poirot and poured out all his woes. The Rubens was a recent discovery, a hitherto unknown masterpiece, but there was no doubt of its authenticity. It had been placed on display at Simpson's Galleries and it had been stolen in broad daylight. It was at the time when the unemployed were pursuing their tactics of lying down on street crossings and penetrating into the Ritz. A small body of them had entered Simpson's Galleries and lain down with the slogan displayed of "Art is a Luxury. Feed the Hungry." The police had been sent for, everyone had crowded round in eager curiosity, and it was not till the demonstrators had been forcibly removed by the arm of the law that it was noticed that the new Rubens had been neatly cut out of its frame and removed also!

"It was quite a small picture, you see," explained Mr. Simpson. "A man could put it under his arm and walk out while everyone was looking at those miserable idiots of unemployed."

The men in question, it was discovered, had been paid for their innocent part in the robbery. They were to demonstrate at Simpson’s Galleries. But they had known nothing of the reason until afterwards.

Hercule Poirot thought that it was an amusing trick but did not see what he could do about it. The police, he pointed out, could be trusted to deal with a straightforward robbery.

Alexander Simpson said:

“Listen to me, Poirot. I know who stole the picture and where it is going.”

According to the owner of Simpson’s Galleries it had been stolen by a gang of international crooks on behalf of a certain millionaire who was not above acquiring works of art at a surprisingly low price—and no questions asked! The Rubens, said Simpson, would be smuggled over to France where it would pass into the millionaire’s possession. The English and French police were on the alert, nevertheless Simpson was of the opinion that they would fail. “And once it has passed into this dirty dog’s possession, it’s going to be more difficult. Rich men have to be treated with respect. That’s where you come in. The situation’s going to be delicate. You’re the man for that.”

Finally, without enthusiasm, Hercule Poirot was induced to accept the task. He agreed to depart for France immediately. He was not very interested in his quest, but because of it, he was introduced to the case of the Missing Schoolgirl which interested him very much indeed.

He first heard of it from Chief Inspector Japp who dropped in to see him just as Poirot was expressing approval of his valet’s packing.

“Ha,” said Japp. “Going to France, aren’t you?”

Poirot said:

“Mon cher, you are incredibly well informed at Scotland Yard.”

Japp chuckled. He said:

“We have our spies! Simpson’s got you on to this Rubens business. Doesn’t trust us, it seems! Well, that’s neither here nor there, but what I want you to do is something quite different. As you’re going to Paris anyway, I thought you might as well kill two birds with one stone. Detective Inspector Hearn’s over there cooperating with the Frenchies—you know Hearn? Good chap—but perhaps not very imaginative. I’d like your opinion on the business.”

“What is this matter of which you speak?”

“Child’s disappeared. It’ll be in the papers this evening. Looks as though she’s been kidnapped. Daughter of a Canon down at Cranchester. King, her name is, Winnie King.”

He proceeded with the story.

Winnie had been on her way to Paris, to join that select and high-class establishment for English and American girls—Miss Pope’s. Winnie had come up from Cranchester by the early train—had been seen across London by a member of Elder Sisters Ltd who undertook such work as seeing girls from one station to another, had been delivered at Victoria to Miss Burshaw, Miss Pope’s second-in-command, and had then, in company with eighteen other girls, left Victoria by the boat train. Nineteen girls had crossed the channel, had passed through the customs at Calais, had got into the Paris train, had lunched in the restaurant car. But when, on the outskirts of Paris, Miss Burshaw had counted heads, it was discovered that only eighteen girls could be found!

“Aha,” Poirot nodded. “Did the train stop anywhere?”

“It stopped at Amiens, but at that time the girls were in the restaurant car and they all say positively that Winnie was with them then. They lost her, so to speak, on the return journey to their compartments. That is to say, she did not enter her own compartment with the other five girls who were in it. They did not suspect anything was wrong, merely thought she was in one of the two other reserved carriages.”

Poirot nodded.

“So she was last seen—when exactly?”

“About ten minutes after the train left Amiens.” Japp coughed modestly. “She was last seen—er—entering the Toilette.”

Poirot murmured:

“Very natural.” He went on: “There is nothing else?”

“Yes, one thing.” Japp’s face was grim. “Her hat was found by the side of the line—at a spot approximately fourteen miles from Amiens.”

“But no body?”

“No body.”

Poirot asked:

“What do you yourself think?”

“Difficult to know what to think! As there’s no sign of her body—she can’t have fallen off the train.”

“Did the train stop at all after leaving Amiens?”

“No. It slowed up once—for a signal, but it didn’t stop, and I doubt if it slowed up enough for anyone to have jumped off without injury. You’re thinking that the kid got a panic and tried to run away? It was her first term and she might have been homesick, that’s true enough, but all the same she was fifteen and a half—a sensible age, and she’d been in quite good spirits all the journey, chattering away and all that.”

Poirot asked:

“Was the train searched?”

"Oh yes, they went right through it before it arrived at the Nord station. The girl wasn't on the train, that's quite certain."

Japp added in an exasperated manner:

"She just disappeared—into thin air! It doesn't make sense, M. Poirot. It's crazy!"

"What kind of a girl was she?"

"Ordinary, normal type as far as I can make out."

"I mean—what did she look like?"

"I've got a snap of her here. She's not exactly a budding beauty."

He proffered the snapshot to Poirot who studied it in silence.

It represented a lanky girl with her hair in two limp plaits. It was not a posed photograph, the subject had clearly been caught unawares. She was in the act of eating an apple, her lips were parted, showing slightly protruding teeth confined by a dentist's plate. She wore spectacles.

Japp said:

"Plain-looking kid—but then they are plain at that age! Was at my dentist's yesterday. Saw a picture in the Sketch of Marcia Gaunt, this season's beauty. I remember her at fifteen when I was down at the Castle over their burglary business. Spotty, awkward, teeth sticking out, hair all lank and anyhow. They grow into beauties overnight—I don't know how they do it! It's like a miracle."

Poirot smiled.

"Women," he said, "are a miraculous sex! What about the child's family? Have they anything helpful to say?"

Japp shook his head.

"Nothing that's any help. Mother's an invalid. Poor old Canon King is absolutely bowled over. He swears that the girl was frightfully keen to go to Paris—had been looking forward to it. Wanted to study painting and music—that sort of thing. Miss Pope's girls go in for Art with a capital A. As you probably know, Miss Pope's is a very well-known establishment. Lots of society girls go there. She's strict—quite a dragon—and very expensive—and extremely particular whom she takes."

Poirot sighed.

"I know the type. And Miss Burshaw who took the girls over from England?"

"Not exactly frantic with brains. Terrified that Miss Pope will say it's her fault."

Poirot said thoughtfully:

"There is no young man in the case?"

Japp gesticulated towards the snapshot.

"Does she look like it?"

"No, she does not. But notwithstanding her appearance, she may have a romantic heart. Fifteen is not so young."

"Well," said Japp. "If a romantic heart spirited her off that train, I'll take to reading lady novelists."

He looked hopefully at Poirot.

"Nothing strikes you—eh?"

Poirot shook his head slowly. He said:

"They did not, by any chance, find her shoes also by the side of the line?"

"Shoes? No. Why shoes?"

Poirot murmured:

“Just an idea. . . .”

II

Hercule Poirot was just going down to his taxi when the telephone rang. He took off the receiver.

“Yes?”

Japp’s voice spoke.

“Glad I’ve just caught you. It’s all off, old man. Found a message at the Yard when I got back. The girl’s turned up. At the side of the main road fifteen miles from Amiens. She’s dazed and they can’t get any coherent story from her, doctor says she’s been doped—However, she’s all right. Nothing wrong with her.”

Poirot said slowly:

“So you have, then, no need of my services?”

“Afraid not! In fact—sorrrry you have been trrrroubled.”

Japp laughed at his witticism and rang off.

Hercule Poirot did not laugh. He put back the receiver slowly. His face was worried.

III

Detective Inspector Hearn looked at Poirot curiously.

He said:

“I’d no idea you’d be so interested, sir.”

Poirot said:

“You had word from Chief Inspector Japp that I might consult with you over this matter?”

Hearn nodded.

“He said you were coming over on some business, and that you’d give us a hand with this puzzle. But I didn’t expect you now it’s all cleared up. I thought you’d be busy on your own job.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“My own business can wait. It is this affair here that interests me. You called it a puzzle, and you say it is now ended. But the puzzle is still there, it seems.”

“Well, sir, we’ve got the child back. And she’s not hurt. That’s the main thing.”

“But it does not solve the problem of how you got her back, does it? What does she herself say? A doctor saw her, did he not? What did he say?”

“Said she’d been doped. She was still hazy with it. Apparently, she can’t remember anything much after starting off from Cranchester. All later events seem to have been wiped out. Doctor thinks she might just possibly have had slight concussion. There’s a bruise on the back of her head. Says that would account for a complete blackout of memory.”

Poirot said:

“Which is very convenient for—someone!”

Inspector Hearn said in a doubtful voice:

“You don’t think she is shamming, sir?”

“Do you?”

“No, I’m sure she isn’t. She’s a nice kid—a bit young for her age.”

“No, she is not shamming.” Poirot shook his head. “But I would like to know how she got off that train. I want to know who is responsible—and why?”

“As to why, I should say it was an attempt at kidnapping, sir. They meant to hold her to ransom.”

“But they didn’t!”

“Lost their nerve with the hue and cry—and planted her by the road quick.”

Poirot inquired sceptically:

“And what ransom were they likely to get from a Canon of Cranchester Cathedral? English Church dignitaries are not millionaires.”

Detective Inspector Hearn said cheerfully:

“Made a botch of the whole thing, sir, in my opinion.”

“Ah, that’s your opinion.”

Hearn said, his face flushing slightly:

“What’s yours, sir?”

“I want to know how she was spirited off that train.”

The policeman’s face clouded over.

“That’s a real mystery, that is. One minute she was there, sitting in the dining car, chatting to the other girls. Five minutes later she’s vanished—hey presto—like a conjuring trick.”

“Precisely, like a conjuring trick! Who else was there in the coach of the train where Miss Pope’s reserved compartments were?”

Inspector Hearn nodded.

"That's a good point, sir. That's important. It's particularly important because it was the last coach on the train and as soon as all the people were back from the restaurant car, the doors between the coaches were locked—actually so as to prevent people crowding along to the restaurant car and demanding tea before they'd had time to clear up lunch and get ready. Winnie King came back to the coach with the others—the school had three reserved compartments there."

"And in the other compartments of the coach?"

Hearn pulled out his notebook.

"Miss Jordan and Miss Butters—two middle-aged spinsters going to Switzerland. Nothing wrong with them, highly respectable, well known in Hampshire where they come from. Two French commercial travellers, one from Lyons, one from Paris. Both respectable middle-aged men. A young man, James Elliot, and his wife—flashy piece of goods she was. He's got a bad reputation, suspected by the police of being mixed up in some questionable transactions—but has never touched kidnapping. Anyway, his compartment was searched and there was nothing in his hand luggage to show that he was mixed up in this. Don't see how he could have been. Only other person was an American lady, Mrs. Van Suyder, travelling to Paris. Nothing known about her. Looks O.K. That's the lot."

Hercule Poirot said:

"And it is quite definite that the train did not stop after it left Amiens?"

"Absolutely. It slowed down once, but not enough to let anyone jump off—not without damaging themselves pretty severely and risking being killed."

Hercule Poirot murmured:

"That is what makes the problem so peculiarly interesting. The schoolgirl vanishes into thin air just outside Amiens. She reappears from thin air just outside Amiens. Where has she been in the meantime?"

Inspector Hearn shook his head.

“It sounds mad, put like that. Oh! by the way, they told me you were asking something about shoes—the girl’s shoes. She had her shoes on all right when she was found, but there was a pair of shoes on the line, a signalman found them. Took ’em home with him as they seemed in good condition. Stout black walking shoes.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. He looked gratified.

Inspector Hearn said curiously:

“I don’t get the meaning of the shoes, sir? Do they mean anything?”

“They confirm a theory,” said Hercule Poirot. “A theory of how the conjuring trick was done.”

IV

Miss Pope’s establishment was, like many other establishments of the same kind, situated in Neuilly. Hercule Poirot, staring up at its respectable façade, was suddenly submerged by a flow of girls emerging from its portals.

He counted twenty-five of them, all dressed alike in dark blue coats and skirts with uncomfortable-looking British hats of dark blue velour on their heads, round which was tied the distinctive purple and gold of Miss Pope’s choice. They were of ages varying from fourteen to eighteen, thick and slim, fair and dark, awkward and graceful. At the end, walking with one of the younger girls, was a grey-haired, fussy looking woman whom Poirot judged to be Miss Burshaw.

Poirot stood looking after them a minute, then he rang the bell and asked for Miss Pope.

Miss Lavinia Pope was a very different person from her second-in-command, Miss Burshaw. Miss Pope had personality. Miss Pope was awe inspiring. Even should Miss Pope unbend graciously to parents, she would still retain that obvious superiority to the rest of the world which is such a powerful asset to a schoolmistress.

Her grey hair was dressed with distinction, her costume was severe but chic. She was competent and omniscient.

The room in which she received Poirot was the room of a woman of culture. It had graceful furniture, flowers, some framed, signed photographs of those of Miss Pope's pupils who were of note in the world—many of them in their presentation gowns and feathers. On the walls hung reproductions of the world's artistic masterpieces and some good watercolour sketches. The whole place was clean and polished to the last degree. No speck of dust, one felt, would have the temerity to deposit itself in such a shrine.

Miss Pope received Poirot with the competence of one whose judgement seldom fails.

"M. Hercule Poirot? I know your name, of course. I suppose you have come about this very unfortunate affair of Winnie King. A most distressing incident."

Miss Pope did not look distressed. She took disaster as it should be taken, dealing with it competently and thereby reducing it almost to insignificance.

"Such a thing," said Miss Pope, "has never occurred before."

"And never will again!" her manner seemed to say.

Hercule Poirot said:

"It was the girl's first term, here, was it not?"

"It was."

"You had a preliminary interview with Winnie—and with her parents?"

"Not recently. Two years ago, I was staying near Cranchester—with the Bishop, as a matter of fact—"

Miss Pope's manner said:

("Mark this, please. I am the kind of person who stays with Bishops!")

“While I was there I made the acquaintance of Canon and Mrs. King. Mrs. King, alas, is an invalid. I met Winnie then. A very well brought up girl, with a decided taste for art. I told Mrs. King that I should be happy to receive her here in a year or two—when her general studies were completed. We specialize here, M. Poirot, in Art and Music. The girls are taken to the Opera, to the Comédie Française, they attend lectures at the Louvre. The very best masters come here to instruct them in music, singing, and painting. The broader culture, that is our aim.”

Miss Pope remembered suddenly that Poirot was not a parent and added abruptly:

“What can I do for you, M. Poirot?”

“I would be glad to know what is the present position regarding Winnie?”

“Canon King has come over to Amiens and is taking Winnie back with him. The wisest thing to do after the shock the child has sustained.”

She went on:

“We do not take delicate girls here. We have no special facilities for looking after invalids. I told the Canon that in my opinion he would do well to take the child home with him.”

Hercule Poirot asked bluntly:

“What in your opinion actually occurred, Miss Pope?”

“I have not the slightest idea, M. Poirot. The whole thing, as reported to me, sounds quite incredible. I really cannot see that the member of my staff who was in charge of the girls was in any way to blame—except that she might, perhaps, have discovered the girl’s absence sooner.”

Poirot said:

“You have received a visit, perhaps, from the police?”

A faint shiver passed over Miss Pope’s aristocratic form. She said glacially:

"A Monsieur Lefarge of the Préfecture called to see me, to see if I could throw any light upon the situation. Naturally I was unable to do so. He then demanded to inspect Winnie's trunk which had, of course, arrived here with those of the other girls. I told him that that had already been called for by another member of the police. Their departments, I fancy, must overlap. I got a telephone call, shortly afterwards, insisting that I had not turned over all Winnie's possessions to them. I was extremely short with them over that. One must not submit to being bullied by officialdom."

Poirot drew a long breath. He said:

"You have a spirited nature. I admire you for it, Mademoiselle. I presume that Winnie's trunk had been unpacked on arrival?"

Miss Pope looked a little put out of countenance.

"Routine," she said. "We live strictly by routine. The girls trunks are unpacked on arrival and their things put away in the way I expect them to be kept. Winnie's things were unpacked with those of the other girls. Naturally, they were afterwards repacked, so that her trunk was handed over exactly as it had arrived."

Poirot said: "Exactly?"

He strolled over to the wall.

"Surely this is a picture of the famous Cranchester Bridge with the Cathedral showing in the distance."

"You are quite right, M. Poirot. Winnie had evidently painted that to bring to me as a surprise. It was in her trunk with a wrapper round it and 'For Miss Pope from Winnie' written on it. Very charming of the child."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "And what do you think of it—as a painting?"

He himself had seen many pictures of Cranchester Bridge. It was a subject that could always be found represented at the Academy each year—sometimes as an oil painting—sometimes in the watercolour room. He had seen it painted well, painted in a mediocre fashion, painted boringly. But he had never seen it quite as crudely represented as in the present example.

Miss Pope was smiling indulgently.

She said:

“One must not discourage one’s girls, M. Poirot. Winnie will be stimulated to do better work, of course.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“It would have been more natural, would it not, for her to do a watercolour?”

“Yes. I did not know she was attempting to paint in oils.”

“Ah,” said Hercule Poirot. “You will permit me, Mademoiselle?”

He unhooked the picture and took it to the window. He examined it, then, looking up, he said:

“I am going to ask you, Mademoiselle, to give me this picture.”

“Well, really, M. Poirot—”

“You cannot pretend that you are very attached to it. The painting is abominable.”

“Oh, it has no artistic merit, I agree. But it is a pupil’s work and—”

“I assure you, Mademoiselle, that it is a most unsuitable picture to have hanging upon your wall.”

“I don’t know why you should say that, M. Poirot.”

“I will prove it to you in a moment.”

He took a bottle, a sponge and some rags from his pocket. He said:

“First I am going to tell you a little story, Mademoiselle. It has a resemblance to the story of the Ugly Duckling that turned into a Swan.”

He was working busily as he talked. The odour of turpentine filled the room.

“You do not perhaps go much to theatrical revues?”

“No, indeed, they seem to me so trivial. . . .”

“Trivial, yes, but sometimes instructive. I have seen a clever revue artist change her personality in the most miraculous way. In one sketch she is a cabaret star, exquisite and glamorous. Ten minutes later, she is an undersized, anæmic child with adenoids, dressed in a gym tunic—ten minutes later still, she is a ragged gypsy telling fortunes by a caravan.”

“Very possible, no doubt, but I do not see—”

“But I am showing you how the conjuring trick was worked on the train. Winnie, the schoolgirl, with her fair plaits, her spectacles, her disfiguring dental plate—goes into the Toilette. She emerges a quarter of an hour later as—to use the words of Detective Inspector Hearn—‘a flashy piece of goods.’ Sheer silk stockings, high heeled shoes—a mink coat to cover a school uniform, a daring little piece of velvet called a hat perched on her curls—and a face—oh yes, a face. Rouge, powder, lipstick, mascara! What is the real face of that quick change artiste really like? Probably only the good God knows! But you, Mademoiselle, you yourself, you have often seen how the awkward schoolgirl changes almost miraculously into the attractive and well-groomed débutante.”

Miss Pope gasped.

“Do you mean that Winnie King disguised herself as—”

“Not Winnie King—no. Winnie was kidnapped on the way across London. Our quick change artiste took her place. Miss Burshaw had never seen Winnie King—how was she to know that the schoolgirl with the lank plaits and the brace on her teeth was not Winnie King at all? So far, so good, but the impostor could not afford actually to arrive here, since you were acquainted with the real Winnie. So hey presto, Winnie disappears in the Toilette and emerges as wife to a man called Jim Elliot whose passport includes a wife! The fair plaits, the spectacles, the lisle thread stockings, the dental plate—all that can go into a small space. But the thick unglamorous shoes and the hat—that very unyielding British hat—have to be disposed of elsewhere—they go out of the window. Later, the real Winnie is brought across the channel—no one is looking for a sick, half-doped child being brought from England to France—and is quietly deposited from a car by the side of the main road. If she has been doped all along with scopolamine, she will remember very little of what has occurred."

Miss Pope was staring at Poirot. She demanded:

"But why? What would be the reason of such a senseless masquerade?"

Poirot replied gravely:

"Winnie's luggage! These people wanted to smuggle something from England into France—something that every Customs man was on the lookout for—in fact, stolen goods. But what place is safer than a schoolgirl's trunk? You are well-known, Miss Pope, your establishment is justly famous. At the Gare du Nord the trunks of Mesdemoiselles the little Pensionnaires are passed en bloc. It is the well-known English school of Miss Pope! And then, after the kidnapping, what more natural than to send and collect the child's luggage—ostensibly from the Préfecture?"

Hercule Poirot smiled.

"But fortunately, there was the school routine of unpacking trunks on arrival—and a present for you from Winnie—but not the same present that Winnie packed at Cranchester."

He came towards her.

"You have given this picture to me. Observe now, you must admit that it is not suitable for your select school!"

He held out the canvas.

As though by magic Cranchester Bridge had disappeared. Instead was a classical scene in rich, dim colourings.

Poirot said softly:

“The Girdle of Hyppolita. Hyppolita gives her girdle to Hercules—painted by Rubens. A great work of art—mais tout de même not quite suitable for your drawing room.”

Miss Pope blushed slightly.

Hyppolita’s hand was on her girdle—she was wearing nothing else . . . Hercules had a lion skin thrown lightly over one shoulder. The flesh of Rubens is rich, voluptuous flesh. . . .

Miss Pope said, regaining her poise:

“A fine work of art . . . All the same—as you say—after all, one must consider the susceptibilities of parents. Some of them are inclined to be narrow . . . if you know what I mean. . . .”

V

It was just as Poirot was leaving the house that the onslaught took place. He was surrounded, hemmed-in, overwhelmed by a crowd of girls, thick, thin, dark and fair.

“Mon Dieu!” he murmured. “Here indeed is the attack by the Amazons!”

A tall fair girl was crying out:

“A rumour has gone round—”

They surged closer. Hercule Poirot was surrounded. He disappeared in a wave of young, vigorous femininity.

Twenty-five voices arose, pitched in various keys but all uttering the same momentous phrase.

“M. Poirot, will you write your name in my autograph book . . . ?”

Ten

THE FLOCK OF GERYON

“I really do apologize for intruding like this, M. Poirot.”

Miss Carnaby clasped her hands fervently round her handbag and leaned forward, peering anxiously into Poirot’s face. As usual, she sounded breathless.

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

She said anxiously:

“You do remember me, don’t you?”

Hercule Poirot’s eyes twinkled. He said:

“I remember you as one of the most successful criminals I have ever encountered!”

“Oh dear me, M. Poirot, must you really say such things? You were so kind to me. Emily and I often talk about you, and if we see anything about you in the paper we cut it out at once and paste it in a book. As for Augustus, we have taught him a new trick. We say, ‘Die for Sherlock Holmes, die for Mr. Fortune, die for Sir Henry Merrivale, and then die for M. Hercule Poirot’ and he goes down and lies like a log—lies absolutely still without moving until we say the word!”

“I am gratified,” said Poirot. “And how is ce cher Auguste?”

Miss Carnaby clasped her hands and became eloquent in praise of her Pekinese.

“Oh, M. Poirot, he’s cleverer than ever. He knows everything. Do you know, the other day I was just admiring a baby in a pram and suddenly I felt a tug and there was Augustus trying his hardest to bite through his lead. Wasn’t that clever?”

Poirot’s eyes twinkled. He said:

“It looks to me as though Augustus shared these criminal tendencies we were speaking of just now!”

Miss Carnaby did not laugh. Instead, her nice plump face grew worried and sad. She said in a kind of gasp:

“Oh, M. Poirot, I’m so worried.”

Poirot said kindly:

“What is it?”

“Do you know, M. Poirot, I’m afraid—I really am afraid—that I must be a hardened criminal—if I may use such a term. Ideas come to me!”

“What kind of ideas?”

“The most extraordinary ideas! For instance, yesterday, a really most practical scheme for robbing a post office came into my head. I wasn’t thinking about it—it just came! And another very ingenious way for evading custom duties . . . I feel convinced—quite convinced—that it would work.”

“It probably would,” said Poirot drily. “That is the danger of your ideas.”

“It has worried me, M. Poirot, very much. Having been brought up with strict principles, as I have been, it is most disturbing that such lawless—such really wicked—ideas should come to me. The trouble is partly, I think, that I have a good deal of leisure time now. I have left Lady Hoggin and I am engaged by an old lady to read to her and write her letters every day. The letters are soon done and the moment I begin reading she goes to sleep, so I am left just sitting there—with an idle mind—and we all know the use the devil has for idleness.”

“Tcha, tcha,” said Poirot.

“Recently I have read a book—a very modern book, translated from the German. It throws a most interesting light on criminal tendencies. One must, so I understand, sublimate one’s impulses! That, really, is why I came to you.”

“Yes?” said Poirot.

“You see, M. Poirot. I think that it is really not so much wickedness as a craving for excitement! My life has unfortunately been very humdrum. The —er—campaign of the Pekinese dogs, I sometimes feel, was the only time I really lived. Very reprehensible, of course, but, as my book says, one must not turn one’s back on the truth. I came to you, M. Poirot, because I hoped it might be possible to—to sublimate that craving for excitement by employing it, if I may put it that way, on the side of the angels.”

“Aha,” said Poirot. “It is then as a colleague that you present yourself?”

Miss Carnaby blushed.

“It is very presumptuous of me, I know. But you were so kind—”

She stopped. Her eyes, faded blue eyes, had something in them of the pleading of a dog who hopes against hope that you will take him for a walk.

“It is an idea,” said Hercule Poirot slowly.

“I am, of course, not at all clever,” explained Miss Carnaby. “But my powers of—of dissimulation are good. They have to be—otherwise one would be discharged from the post of companion immediately. And I have always found that to appear even stupider than one is, occasionally has good results.”

Hercule Poirot laughed. He said:

“You enchant me, Mademoiselle.”

“Oh dear, M. Poirot, what a very kind man you are. Then you do encourage me to hope? As it happens, I have just received a small legacy—a very small one, but it enables my sister and myself to keep and feed ourselves in a frugal manner so that I am not absolutely dependent on what I earn.”

“I must consider,” said Poirot, “where your talents may best be employed. You have no idea yourself, I suppose?”

“You know, you must really be a thought reader, M. Poirot. I have been anxious lately about a friend of mine. I was going to consult you. Of course you may say it is all an old maid’s fancy—just imagination. One is prone, perhaps, to exaggerate, and to see design where there may be only coincidence.”

“I do not think you would exaggerate, Miss Carnaby. Tell me what is on your mind.”

“Well, I have a friend, a very dear friend, though I have not seen very much of her of late years. Her name is Emmeline Clegg. She married a man in the North of England and he died a few years ago leaving her very comfortably off. She was unhappy and lonely after his death and I am afraid she is in some ways a rather foolish and perhaps credulous woman. Religion, M. Poirot, can be a great help and sustenance—but by that I mean orthodox religion.”

“You refer to the Greek Church?” asked Poirot.

Miss Carnaby looked shocked.

“Oh no, indeed. Church of England. And though I do not approve of Roman Catholics, they are at least recognized. And the Wesleyans and Congregationalists—they are all well-known respectable bodies. What I am talking about are these odd sects. They just spring up. They have a kind of emotional appeal but sometimes I have very grave doubts as to whether there is any true religious feeling behind them at all.”

“You think your friend is being victimized by a sect of this kind?”

“I do. Oh! I certainly do. The Flock of the Shepherd, they call themselves. Their headquarters is in Devonshire—a very lovely estate by the sea. The adherents go there for what they term a Retreat. That is a period of a fortnight—with religious services and rituals. And there are three big Festivals in the year, the Coming of the Pasture, the Full Pasture, and the Reaping of the Pasture.”

“Which last is stupid,” said Poirot. “Because one does not reap pasture.”

“The whole thing is stupid,” said Miss Carnaby with warmth. “The whole sect centres round the head of the movement, the Great Shepherd, he is called. A Dr. Andersen. A very handsome-looking man, I believe, with a presence.”

“Which is attractive to the women, yes?”

“I am afraid so,” Miss Carnaby sighed. “My father was a very handsome man. Sometimes, it was most awkward in the parish. The rivalry in embroidering vestments—and the division of church work. . . .”

She shook her head reminiscently.

“Are the members of the Great Flock mostly women?”

“At least three quarters of them, I gather. What men there are, are mostly cranks! It is upon the women that the success of the movement depends and—and on the funds they supply.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. “Now we come to it. Frankly, you think the whole thing is a ramp?”

“Frankly, M. Poirot, I do. And another thing worries me. I happen to know that my poor friend is so bound up in this religion that she has recently made a will leaving all her property to the movement.”

Poirot said sharply:

“Was that—suggested to her?”

“In all fairness, no. It was entirely her own idea. The Great Shepherd had shown her a new way of life—so all that she had was to go on her death to the Great Cause. What really worries me is—”

“Yes—go on—”

“Several wealthy women have been among the devotees. In the last year three of them, no less, have died.”

“Leaving all their money to this sect?”

“Yes.”

“Their relations have made no protest? I should have thought it likely that there might have been litigation.”

“You see, M. Poirot, it is usually lonely women who belong to this gathering. People who have no very near relations or friends.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Miss Carnaby hurried on:

“Of course I’ve no right to suggest anything at all. From what I have been able to find out, there was nothing wrong about any of these deaths. One, I believe, was pneumonia following influenza and another was attributed to gastric ulcer. There were absolutely no suspicious circumstances, if you know what I mean, and the deaths did not take place at Green Hills Sanctuary, but at their own homes. I’ve no doubt it is quite all right, but all the same I—well—I shouldn’t like anything to happen to Emmie.”

She clasped her hands, her eyes appealed to Poirot.

Poirot himself was silent for some minutes. When he spoke there was a change in his voice. It was grave and deep.

He said:

"Will you give me, or will you find out for me, the names and addresses of these members of the sect who have recently died?"

"Yes indeed, M. Poirot."

Poirot said slowly:

"Mademoiselle, I think you are a woman of great courage and determination. You have good histrionic powers. Would you be willing to undertake a piece of work that may be attended with considerable danger?"

"I should like nothing better," said the adventurous Miss Carnaby.

Poirot said warningly:

"If there is a risk at all, it will be a grave one. You comprehend—either this is a mare's nest or it is serious. To find out which it is, it will be necessary for you yourself to become a member of the Great Flock. I would suggest that you exaggerate the amount of the legacy that you recently inherited. You are now a well-to-do woman with no very definite aim in life. You argue with your friend Emmeline about this religion she has adopted—assure her that it is all nonsense. She is eager to convert you. You allow yourself to be persuaded to go down to Green Hills Sanctuary. And there you fall a victim to the persuasive powers and magnetic influence of Dr. Andersen. I think I can safely leave that part to you?"

Miss Carnaby smiled modestly. She murmured:

"I think I can manage that all right!"

II

"Well, my friend, what have you got for me?"

Chief Inspector Japp looked thoughtfully at the little man who asked the question. He said ruefully:

"Not at all what I'd like to have, Poirot. I hate these long-haired, religious cranks like poison. Filling up women with a lot of mumbo jumbo. But this fellow’s being careful. There’s nothing one can get hold of. All sounds a bit batty but harmless.”

“Have you learned anything about this Dr. Andersen?”

“I’ve looked up his past history. He was a promising chemist and got chucked out of some German University. Seems his mother was Jewish. He was always keen on the study of Oriental Myths and Religions, spent all his spare time on that and has written various articles on the subject—some of the articles sound pretty crazy to me.”

“So it is possible that he is a genuine fanatic?”

“I’m bound to say it seems quite likely!”

“What about those names and addresses I gave you?”

“Nothing doing there. Miss Everitt died of ulcerative colitis. Doctor quite positive there was no hanky-panky. Mrs. Lloyd died of bronchopneumonia. Lady Western died of tuberculosis. Had suffered from it many years ago—before she even met this bunch. Miss Lee died of typhoid—attributed to some salad she ate somewhere in the north of England. Three of them got ill and died in their own homes, and Mrs. Lloyd died in a hotel in the south of France. As far as those deaths go, there’s nothing to connect them with the Great Flock or with Andersen’s place down in Devonshire. Must be pure coincidence. All absolutely O.K. and according to Cocker.”

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said:

“And yet, mon cher, I have a feeling that this is the tenth Labor of Hercules, and that this Dr. Andersen is the Monster Geryon whom it is my mission to destroy.”

Japp looked at him anxiously.

“Look here, Poirot, you haven’t been reading any queer literature yourself lately, have you?”

Poirot said with dignity:

“My remarks are, as always, apt, sound, and to the point.”

“You might start a new religion yourself,” said Japp, “with the creed: ‘There is no one so clever as Hercule Poirot, Amen, D.C. Repeat ad lib.’!”

III

“It is the peace here that I find so wonderful,” said Miss Carnaby, breathing heavily and ecstatically.

“I told you so, Amy,” said Emmeline Clegg.

The two friends were sitting on the slope of a hillside overlooking a deep and lovely blue sea. The grass was vivid green, the earth and the cliffs a deep, glowing red. The little estate now known as Green Hills Sanctuary was a promontory comprising about six acres. Only a narrow neck of land joined it to the mainland so that it was almost an island.

Mrs. Clegg murmured sentimentally:

“The red land—the land of glow and promise—where threefold destiny is to be accomplished.”

Miss Carnaby sighed deeply and said:

“I thought the Master put it all so beautifully at the service last night.”

“Wait,” said her friend, “for the festival tonight. The Full Growth of the Pasture!”

“I’m looking forward to it,” said Miss Carnaby.

“You will find it a wonderful spiritual experience,” her friend promised her.

Miss Carnaby had arrived at Green Hills Sanctuary a week previously. Her attitude on arrival had been: “Now what’s all this nonsense? Really, Emmie, a sensible woman like you—etc., etc.”

At a preliminary interview with Dr. Andersen, she had conscientiously made her position quite clear.

“I don’t want to feel that I am here under false pretences, Dr. Andersen. My father was a clergyman of the Church of England and I have never wavered in my faith. I don’t hold with heathen doctrines.”

The big, golden-haired man had smiled at her—a very sweet and understanding smile. He had looked indulgently at the plump, rather belligerent figure sitting so squarely in her chair.

“Dear Miss Carnaby,” he said. “You are Mrs. Clegg’s friend, and as such welcome. And believe me, our doctrines are not heathen. Here all religions are welcomed, and all honoured equally.”

“Then they shouldn’t be,” said the staunch daughter of the late Reverend Thomas Carnaby.

Leaning back in his chair, the Master murmured in his rich voice: “In my Father’s House are many mansions . . . Remember that, Miss Carnaby.”

As they left the presence, Miss Carnaby murmured to her friend: “He really is a very handsome man.”

“Yes,” said Emmeline Clegg. “And so wonderfully spiritual.”

Miss Carnaby agreed. It was true—she had felt it—an aura of unworldliness—of spirituality. . . .

She took a grip upon herself. She was not here to fall a prey to the fascination, spiritual or otherwise, of the Great Shepherd. She conjured up a vision of Hercule Poirot. He seemed very far away, and curiously mundane. . . .

“Amy,” said Miss Carnaby to herself. “Take a grip upon yourself. Remember what you are here for. . . .”

But as the days went on, she found herself surrendering only too easily to the spell of Green Hills. The peace, the simplicity, the delicious though simple food, the beauty of the services with their chants of Love and Worship, the simple moving words of the Master, appealing to all that was best and highest in humanity—here all the strife and ugliness of the world was shut out. Here was only Peace and Love. . . .

And tonight was the great summer Festival, the Festival of the Full Pasture. And at it, she, Amy Carnaby, was to become initiated—to become one of the Flock.

The Festival took place in the white, glittering, concrete building, called by the Initiates the Sacred Fold. Here the devotees assembled just before the setting of the sun. They wore sheepskin cloaks and had sandals on their feet. Their arms were bare. In the centre of the Fold on a raised platform stood Dr. Andersen. The big man, golden-haired and blue-eyed, with his fair beard and his handsome profile had never seemed more compelling. He was dressed in a green robe and carried a shepherd's crook of gold.

He raised this aloft and a deathly silence fell on the assembly.

"Where are my sheep?"

The answer came from the crowd.

"We are here, O Shepherd."

"Lift up your hearts with joy and thanksgiving. This is the Feast of Joy."

"The Feast of Joy and we are joyful."

"There shall be no more sorrow for you, no more pain. All is joy!"

"All is joy . . ."

"How many heads has the Shepherd?"

"Three heads, a head of gold, a head of silver, a head of sounding brass."

"How many bodies have the Sheep?"

“Three bodies, a body of flesh, a body of corruption, and a body of light.”

“How shall you be sealed in the Flock?”

“By the Sacrament of Blood.”

“Are you prepared for that Sacrament?”

“We are.”

“Bind your eyes and hold forth your right arm.”

The crowd obediently bound their eyes with the green scarves provided for the purpose. Miss Carnaby, like the rest, held her arm out in front of her.

The Great Shepherd moved along the lines of his Flock. There were little cries, moans of either pain or ecstasy.

Miss Carnaby, to herself, said fiercely:

“Most blasphemous, the whole thing! This kind of religious hysteria is to be deplored. I shall remain absolutely calm and observe the reactions of other people. I will not be carried away—I will not. . . .”

The Great Shepherd had come to her. She felt her arm taken, held, there was a sharp, stinging pain like the prick of a needle. The Shepherd’s voice murmured:

“The Sacrament of Blood that brings joy . . .”

He passed on.

Presently there came a command.

“Unveil and enjoy the pleasures of the spirit!”

The sun was just sinking. Miss Carnaby looked round her. At one with the others, she moved slowly out of the Fold. She felt suddenly uplifted, happy. She sank down on a soft, grassy bank. Why had she ever thought she was a lonely, unwanted, middle-aged woman? Life was wonderful—she herself was wonderful! She had the power of thought—of dreaming. There was nothing that she could not accomplish!

A great rush of exhilaration surged through her. She observed her fellow devotees round her—they seemed suddenly to have grown to an immense stature.

“Like trees walking . . .” said Miss Carnaby to herself reverently.

She lifted her hand. It was a purposeful gesture—with it she could command the earth. Cæsar, Napoleon, Hitler—poor, miserable, little fellows! They knew nothing of what she, Amy Carnaby, could do! Tomorrow she would arrange for world peace, for International Brotherhood. There should be no more Wars—no more Poverty—no more Disease. She, Amy Carnaby, would design a New World.

But there need be no hurry. Time was infinite . . . Minute succeeded minute, hour succeeded hour! Miss Carnaby’s limbs felt heavy, but her mind was delightfully free. It could roam at will over the whole universe. She slept—but even as she slept she dreamt . . . Great spaces . . . vast buildings . . . a new and wonderful world. . . .

Gradually the world shrank, Miss Carnaby yawned. She moved her stiff limbs. What had happened since yesterday? Last night she had dreamt. . . .

There was a moon. By it, Miss Carnaby could just distinguish the figures on her watch. To her stupefaction the hands pointed to a quarter to ten. The sun, as she knew, had set at eight-ten. Only an hour and thirty-five minutes ago? Impossible. And yet—

“Very remarkable,” said Miss Carnaby to herself.

IV

Hercule Poirot said:

“You must obey my instructions very carefully. You understand?”

"Oh yes, M. Poirot. You may rely on me."

"You have spoken of your intention to benefit the cult?"

"Yes, M. Poirot. I spoke to the Master—excuse me, to Dr. Andersen myself. I told him very emotionally what a wonderful revelation the whole thing had been—how I had come to scoff and remained to believe. I—really it seemed quite natural to say all these things. Dr. Andersen, you know, has a lot of magnetic charm."

"So I perceive," said Hercule Poirot drily.

"His manner was most convincing. One really feels he doesn't care about money at all. 'Give what you can,' he said smiling in that wonderful way of his, 'if you can give nothing, it does not matter. You are one of the Flock just the same.' 'Oh, Dr. Andersen,' I said, 'I am not so badly off as that. I have just inherited a considerable amount of money from a distant relative and though I cannot actually touch any of the money until the legal formalities are all complied with, there is one thing I want to do at once.' And then I explained that I was making a will and that I wanted to leave all I had to the Brotherhood. I explained that I had no near relatives."

"And he graciously accepted the bequest?"

"He was very detached about it. Said it would be many long years before I passed over, that he could tell I was cut out for a long life of joy and spiritual fulfilment. He really speaks most movingly."

"So it would seem."

Poirot's tone was dry. He went on:

"You mentioned your health?"

"Yes, M. Poirot. I told him that I had had lung trouble, and that it had recurred more than once, but that a final treatment in a Sanatorium some years ago had, I hoped, quite cured me."

"Excellent!"

"Though why it is necessary for me to say that I am consumptive when my lungs are as sound as a bell I really cannot see."

"Be assured it is necessary. You mentioned your friend?"

"Yes. I told him (strictly in confidence) that dear Emmeline, besides the fortune she had inherited from her husband, would inherit an even larger sum shortly from an aunt who was deeply attached to her."

"Eh bien, that ought to keep Mrs. Clegg safe for the time being!"

"Oh, M. Poirot, do you really think there is anything wrong?"

"That is what I am going to endeavour to find out. Have you met a Mr. Cole down at the Sanctuary?"

"There was a Mr. Cole there last time I went down. A most peculiar man. He wears grass-green shorts and eats nothing but cabbage. He is a very ardent believer."

"Eh bien, all progresses well—I make you my compliments on the work you have done—all is now set for the Autumn Festival."

V

"Miss Carnaby—just a moment."

Mr. Cole clutched at Miss Carnaby, his eyes bright and feverish.

"I have had a Vision—a most remarkable Vision. I really must tell you about it."

Miss Carnaby sighed. She was rather afraid of Mr. Cole and his Visions. There were moments when she was decidedly of the opinion that Mr. Cole was mad.

And she found these Visions of his sometimes very embarrassing. They recalled to her certain outspoken passages in that very modern German book on the Subconscious Mind which she had read before coming down to Devon.

Mr. Cole, his eyes glistening, his lips twitching, began to talk excitedly.

“I had been meditating—reflecting on the Fullness of Life, on the Supreme Joy of Oneness—and then, you know, my eyes were opened and I saw—”

Miss Carnaby braced herself and hoped that what Mr. Cole had seen would not be what he had seen the last time—which had been, apparently, a Ritual Marriage in ancient Sumeria between a god and goddess.

“I saw”—Mr. Cole leant towards her, breathing hard, his eyes looking (yes, really they did) quite mad—“the Prophet Elijah descending from Heaven in his fiery chariot.”

Miss Carnaby breathed a sigh of relief. Elijah was much better, she didn’t mind Elijah.

“Below,” went on Mr. Cole, “were the altars of Baal—hundreds and hundreds of them. A Voice cried to me: ‘Look, write and testify that which you shall see—’ ”

He stopped and Miss Carnaby murmured politely: “Yes?”

“On the altars were the sacrifices, bound there, helpless, waiting for the knife. Virgins—hundreds of virgins—young beautiful, naked virgins—”

Mr. Cole smacked his lips, Miss Carnaby blushed.

“Then came the ravens, the ravens of Odin, flying from the North. They met the ravens of Elijah—together they circled in the sky—they swooped, they plucked out the eyes of the victims—there was wailing and gnashing of teeth—and the Voice cried: ‘Behold a Sacrifice—for on this day shall Jehovah and Odin sign blood brotherhood!’ Then the Priests fell upon their victims, they raised their knives—they mutilated their victims—”

Desperately Miss Carnaby broke away from her tormentor who was now slavering at the mouth in a kind of sadistic fervour:

“Excuse me one moment.”

She hastily accosted Lipscomb, the man who occupied the Lodge which gave admission to Green Hills and who providentially happened to be passing.

“I wonder,” she said, “if you have found a brooch of mine. I must have dropped it somewhere about the grounds.”

Lipscomb, who was a man immune from the general sweetness and light of Green Hills, merely growled that he hadn’t seen any brooch. It wasn’t his work to go about looking for things. He tried to shake off Miss Carnaby but she accompanied him, babbling about her brooch, till she had put a safe distance between herself and the fervour of Mr. Cole.

At that moment, the Master himself came out of the Great Fold and, emboldened by his benignant smile, Miss Carnaby ventured to speak her mind to him.

Did he think that Mr. Cole was quite—was quite—

The Master laid a hand on her shoulder.

“You must cast out Fear,” he said. “Perfect Love casteth out Fear. . . .”

“But I think Mr. Cole is mad. Those Visions he has—”

“As yet,” said the Master, “he sees Imperfectly . . . through the Glass of his own Carnal Nature. But the day will come when he shall see Spiritually—Face to Face.”

Miss Carnaby was abashed. Of course, put like that—She rallied to make a smaller protest.

“And really,” she said, “need Lipscomb be so abominably rude?”

Again the Master gave his Heavenly Smile.

“Lipscomb,” he said, “is a faithful watchdog. He is a crude—a primitive soul—but faithful—utterly faithful.”

He strode on. Miss Carnaby saw him meet Mr. Cole, pause, put a hand on Mr. Cole’s shoulder. She hoped that the Master’s influence might alter the scope of future visions.

In any case, it was only a week now to the Autumn Festival.

VI

On the afternoon preceding the Festival, Miss Carnaby met Hercule Poirot in a small teashop in the sleepy little town of Newton Woodbury.

Miss Carnaby was flushed and even more breathless than usual. She sat sipping tea and crumbling a rock bun between her fingers.

Poirot asked several questions to which she replied monosyllabically.

Then he said:

“How many will there be at the Festival?”

“I think a hundred and twenty. Emmeline is there, of course, and Mr. Cole—really he has been very odd lately. He has visions. He described some of them to me—really most peculiar—I hope, I do hope, he is not insane. Then there will be quite a lot of new members—nearly twenty.”

“Good. You know what you have to do?”

There was a moment’s pause before Miss Carnaby said in a rather odd voice:

“I know what you told me, M. Poirot. . . .”

“Très bien!”

Then Amy Carnaby said clearly and distinctly:

“But I am not going to do it.”

Hercule Poirot stared at her. Miss Carnaby rose to her feet. Her voice came fast and hysterical.

"You sent me here to spy on Dr. Andersen. You suspected him of all sorts of things. But he is a wonderful man—a great Teacher. I believe in him heart and soul! And I am not going to do your spying work any more, M. Poirot! I am one of the Sheep of the Shepherd. The Master has a new message for the World and from now on, I belong to him body and soul. And I'll pay for my own tea, please."

With which slight anticlimax Miss Carnaby plonked down one and threepence and rushed out of the teashop.

"Nom d'un nom d'un nom," said Hercule Poirot.

The waitress had to ask him twice before he realized that she was presenting the bill. He met the interested stare of a surly looking man at the next table, flushed, paid the check and got up and went out.

He was thinking furiously.

VII

Once again the Sheep were assembled in the Great Fold. The Ritual Questions and Answers had been chanted.

"Are you prepared for the Sacrament?"

"We are."

"Bind your eyes and hold out your right arm."

The Great Shepherd, magnificent in his green robe, moved along the waiting lines. The cabbage-eating, vision-seeing Mr. Cole, next to Miss Carnaby, gave a gulp of painful ecstasy as the needle pierced his flesh.

The Great Shepherd stood by Miss Carnaby. His hands touched her arm. . . .

"No, you don't. None of that . . ."

Words incredible—unprecedented. A scuffle, a roar of anger. Green veils were torn from eyes—to see an unbelievable sight—the Great Shepherd struggling in the grasp of the sheep-skinned Mr. Cole aided by another devotee.

In rapid professional tones, the erstwhile Mr. Cole was saying:

"—and I have here a warrant for your arrest. I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence at your trial."

There were other figures now at the door of the Sheep Fold—blue uniformed figures.

Someone cried: "It's the police. They're taking the Master away. They're taking the Master. . . ."

Everyone was shocked—horrified . . . to them the Great Shepherd was a martyr; suffering, as all great teachers suffer, from the ignorance and persecution of the outside world. . . .

Meanwhile Detective Inspector Cole was carefully packing up the hypodermic syringe that had fallen from the Great Shepherd's hand.

VIII

"My brave colleague!"

Poirot shook Miss Carnaby warmly by the hand and introduced her to Chief Inspector Japp.

"First class work, Miss Carnaby," said Chief Inspector Japp. "We couldn't have done it without you and that's a fact."

"Oh dear!" Miss Carnaby was flattered. "It's so kind of you to say so. And I'm afraid, you know, that I've really enjoyed it all. The excitement, you know, and playing my part. I got quite carried away sometimes. I really felt I was one of those foolish women."

“That’s where your success lay,” said Japp. “You were the genuine article. Nothing less would have taken that gentleman in! He’s a pretty astute scoundrel.”

Miss Carnaby turned to Poirot.

“That was a terrible moment in the teashop. I didn’t know what to do. I just had to act on the spur of the moment.”

“You were magnificent,” said Poirot warmly. “For a moment I thought that either you or I had taken leave of our senses. I thought for one little minute that you meant it.”

“It was such a shock,” said Miss Carnaby. “Just when we had been talking confidentially. I saw in the glass that Lipscomb, who keeps the Lodge of the Sanctuary, was sitting at the table behind me. I don’t know now if it was an accident or if he had actually followed me. As I say, I had to do the best I could on the spur of the minute and trust that you would understand.”

Poirot smiled.

“I did understand. There was only one person sitting near enough to overhear anything we said and as soon as I left the teashop I arranged to have him followed when he came out. When he went straight back to the Sanctuary I understood that I could rely on you and that you would not let me down—but I was afraid because it increased the danger for you.”

“Was—was there really danger? What was there in the syringe?”

Japp said:

“Will you explain, or shall I?”

Poirot said gravely:

“Mademoiselle, this Dr. Andersen had perfected a scheme of exploitation and murder—scientific murder. Most of his life has been spent in bacteriological research. Under a different name he has a chemical laboratory in Sheffield. There he makes cultures of various bacilli. It was his practice, at the Festivals, to inject into his followers a small but sufficient dose of Cannabis Indica—which is also known by the names of Hashish or Bhang. This gives delusions of grandeur and pleasurable enjoyment. It bound his devotees to him. These were the Spiritual Joys that he promised them."

"Most remarkable," said Miss Carnaby. "Really a most remarkable sensation."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"That was his general stock in trade—a dominating personality, the power of creating mass hysteria and the reactions produced by this drug. But he had a second aim in view.

"Lonely women, in their gratitude and fervour, made wills leaving their money to the Cult. One by one, these women died. They died in their own homes and apparently of natural causes. Without being too technical I will try to explain. It is possible to make intensified cultures of certain bacteria. The bacillus Coli Communis, for instance, the cause of ulcerative colitis. Typhoid bacilli can be introduced into the system. So can the Pneumococcus. There is also what is termed Old Tuberculin which is harmless to a healthy person but which stimulates any old tubercular lesion into activity. You perceive the cleverness of the man? These deaths would occur in different parts of the country, with different doctors attending them and without any risk of arousing suspicion. He had also, I gather, cultivated a substance which had the power of delaying but intensifying the action of the chosen bacillus."

"He's a devil, if there ever was one!" said Chief Inspector Japp.

Poirot went on:

"By my orders, you told him that you were a tuberculous subject. There was Old Tuberculin in the syringe when Cole arrested him. Since you were a healthy person it would not have harmed you, which is why I made you lay stress on your tubercular trouble. I was terrified that even now he might choose some other germ, but I respected your courage and I had to let you take the risk."

"Oh, that's all right," said Miss Carnaby brightly. "I don't mind taking risks. I'm only frightened of bulls in fields and things like that. But have you enough evidence to convict this dreadful person?"

Japp grinned.

"Plenty of evidence," he said. "We've got his laboratory and his cultures and the whole layout!"

Poirot said:

"It is possible, I think, that he has committed a long line of murders. I may say that it was not because his mother was a Jewess that he was dismissed from that German University. That merely made a convenient tale to account for his arrival here and to gain sympathy for him. Actually, I fancy, he is of pure Aryan blood."

Miss Carnaby sighed.

"Qu'est ce qu'il y a?" asked Poirot.

"I was thinking," said Miss Carnaby, "of a marvellous dream I had at the First Festival—hashish, I suppose. I arranged the whole world so beautifully! No wars, no poverty, no ill health, no ugliness. . . ."

"It must have been a fine dream," said Japp enviously.

Miss Carnaby jumped up. She said:

"I must get home. Emily has been so anxious. And dear Augustus has been missing me terribly, I hear."

Hercule Poirot said with a smile:

"He was afraid, perhaps, that like him, you were going to die for Hercule Poirot!"

Eleven

THE APPLES OF THE HESPERIDES

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully into the face of the man behind the big mahogany desk. He noted the generous brow, the mean mouth, the rapacious line of the jaw and the piercing, visionary eyes. He understood from looking at the man why Emery Power had become the great financial force that he was.

And his eyes falling to the long delicate hands, exquisitely shaped, that lay on the desk, he understood, too, why Emery Power had attained renown as a great collector. He was known on both sides of the Atlantic as a connoisseur of works of art. His passion for the artistic went hand in hand with an equal passion for the historic. It was not enough for him that a thing should be beautiful—he demanded also that it should have a tradition behind it.

Emery Power was speaking. His voice was quiet—a small, distinct voice that was more effective than any mere volume of sound could have been.

“You do not, I know, take many cases nowadays. But I think you will take this one.”

“It is, then, an affair of great moment?”

Emery Power said:

“It is of moment to me.”

Poirot remained in an enquiring attitude, his head slightly on one side. He looked like a meditative robin.

The other went on:

“It concerns the recovery of a work of art. To be exact, a gold chased goblet, dating from the Renaissance. It is said to be the goblet used by Pope Alexander VI—Roderigo Borgia. He sometimes presented it to a favoured guest to drink from. That guest, M. Poirot, usually died.”

“A pretty history,” Poirot murmured.

“Its career has always been associated with violence. It has been stolen more than once. Murder has been done to gain possession of it. A trail of bloodshed has followed it through the ages.”

“On account of its intrinsic value or for other reasons?”

“Its intrinsic value is certainly considerable. The workmanship is exquisite (it is said to have been made by Benvenuto Cellini). The design represents a tree round which a jewelled serpent is coiled and the apples on the tree are formed of very beautiful emeralds.”

Poirot murmured with an apparent quickening of interest:

“Apples?”

“The emeralds are particularly fine, so are the rubies in the serpent, but of course the real value of the cup is its historical associations. It was put up for sale by the Marchese di San Veratrino in 1929. Collectors bid against each other and I secured it finally for a sum equalling (at the then rate of exchange) thirty thousand pounds.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows. He murmured:

“Indeed a princely sum! The Marchese di San Veratrino was fortunate.”

Emery Power said:

“When I really want a thing, I am willing to pay for it, M. Poirot.”

Hercule Poirot said softly:

“You have no doubt heard the Spanish proverb: ‘Take what you want—and pay for it, says God.’ ”

For a moment the financier frowned—a swift light of anger showed in his eyes. He said coldly:

“You are by way of being a philosopher, M. Poirot.”

“I have arrived at the age of reflection, Monsieur.”

“Doubtless. But it is not reflection that will restore my goblet to me.”

“You think not?”

“I fancy action will be necessary.”

Hercule Poirot nodded placidly.

“A lot of people make the same mistake. But I demand your pardon, Mr. Power, we have digressed from the matter in hand. You were saying that you had bought the cup from the Marchese di San Veratrino?”

“Exactly. What I have now to tell you is that it was stolen before it actually came into my possession.”

“How did that happen?”

“The Marchese’s Palace was broken into on the night of the sale and eight or ten pieces of considerable value were stolen, including the goblet.”

“What was done in the matter?”

Power shrugged his shoulders.

“The police, of course, took the matter in hand. The robbery was recognized to be the work of a well-known international gang of thieves. Two of their number, a Frenchman called Dublay and an Italian called Riccovetti, were caught and tried—some of the stolen goods were found in their possession.”

“But not the Borgia goblet?”

“But not the Borgia goblet. There were, as far as the police could ascertain, three men actually engaged in the robbery—the two I have just mentioned and a third, an Irishman named Patrick Casey. This last was an expert cat burglar. It was he who is said to have actually stolen the things. Dublay was the brains of the group and planned their coups; Riccovetti drove the car and waited below for the goods to be lowered down to him.”

“And the stolen goods? Were they split up into three parts?”

“Possibly. On the other hand, the articles that were recovered were those of least value. It seems possible that the more noteworthy and spectacular pieces had been hastily smuggled out of the country.”

“What about the third man, Casey? Was he never brought to justice?”

“Not in the sense you mean. He was not a very young man. His muscles were stiffer than formerly. Two weeks later he fell from the fifth floor of a building and was killed instantly.”

“Where was this?”

“In Paris. He was attempting to rob the house of the millionaire banker, Duvauglier.”

“And the goblet has never been seen since?”

“Exactly.”

“It has never been offered for sale?”

“I am quite sure it has not. I may say that not only the police, but also private inquiry agents, have been on the lookout for it.”

“What about the money you had paid over?”

“The Marchese, a very punctilious person, offered to refund it to me as the cup had been stolen from his house.”

“But you did not accept?”

“No.”

“Why was that?”

“Shall we say because I preferred to keep the matter in my own hands?”

“You mean that if you had accepted the Marchese’s offer, the goblet, if recovered, would be his property, whereas now it is legally yours?”

“Exactly.”

“What was there behind that attitude of yours?”

Emery Power said with a smile:

“You appreciate that point, I see. Well, M. Poirot, it is quite simple. I thought I knew who was actually in possession of the goblet.”

“Very interesting. And who was it?”

“Sir Reuben Rosenthal. He was not only a fellow collector but he was at the time a personal enemy. We had been rivals in several business deals—and on the whole I had come out the better. Our animosity culminated in this rivalry over the Borgia Goblet. Each of us was determined to possess it. It was more or less a point of honour. Our appointed representatives bid against each other at the sale.”

“And your representative’s final bid secured the treasure?”

“Not precisely. I took the precaution of having a second agent—ostensibly the representative of a Paris dealer. Neither of us, you understand, would have been willing to yield to the other, but to allow a third party to acquire the cup, with the possibility of approaching that third party quietly afterwards—that was a very different matter.”

“In fact, une petite déception.”

“Exactly.”

“Which was successful—and immediately afterwards Sir Reuben discovered how he had been tricked?”

Power smiled.

It was a revealing smile.

Poirot said: “I see the position now. You believed that Sir Reuben, determined not to be beaten, deliberately commissioned the theft?”

Emery Power raised a hand.

“Oh no, no! It would not be so crude as that. It amounted to this—shortly afterwards Sir Reuben would have purchased a Renaissance goblet, provenance unspecified.”

“The description of which would have been circulated by the police?”

“The goblet would not have been placed openly on view.”

“You think it would have been sufficient for Sir Reuben to know that he possessed it?”

“Yes. Moreover, if I had accepted the Marchese’s offer—it would have been possible for Sir Reuben to conclude a private arrangement with him later, thus allowing the goblet to pass legally into his possession.”

He paused a minute and then said:

“But my retaining the legal ownership, there were still possibilities left open to me of recovering my property.”

“You mean,” said Poirot bluntly, “that you could arrange for it to be stolen from Sir Reuben.”

“Not stolen, M. Poirot. I should have been merely recovering my own property.”

“But I gather that you were not successful?”

“For a very good reason. Rosenthal has never had the goblet in his possession!”

“How do you know?”

“Recently there has been a merger of oil interests. Rosenthal’s interests and mine now coincide. We are allies and not enemies. I spoke to him frankly on the subject and he at once assured me that the cup had never been in his possession.”

“And you believe him?”

“Yes.”

Poirot said thoughtfully:

“Then for nearly ten years you have been, as they say in this country, barking up the mistaken tree?”

The financier said bitterly:

“Yes, that is exactly what I have been doing!”

“And now—it is all to start again from the beginning?”

The other nodded.

“And that is where I come in? I am the dog that you set upon the cold scent—a very cold scent.”

Emery Power said drily:

“If the affair were easy it would not have been necessary for me to send for you. Of course, if you think it impossible—”

He had found the right word. Hercule Poirot drew himself up. He said coldly:

“I do not recognize the word impossible, Monsieur! I ask myself only—is this affair sufficiently interesting for me to undertake?”

Emery Power smiled again. He said:

“It has this interest—you may name your own fee.”

The small man looked at the big man. He said softly:

“Do you then desire this work of art so much? Surely not!”

Emery Power said:

“Put it that I, like yourself, do not accept defeat.”

Hercule Poirot bowed his head. He said:

“Yes—put that way—I understand. . . .”

II

Inspector Wagstaffe was interested.

“The Veratrino cup? Yes, I remember all about it. I was in charge of the business this end. I speak a bit of Italiano, you know, and I went over and had a powwow with the Macaronis. It’s never turned up from that day to this. Funny thing, that.”

“What is your explanation? A private sale?”

Wagstaffe shook his head.

“I doubt it. Of course it’s remotely possible . . . No, my explanation is a good deal simpler. The stuff was cached—and the only man who knew where it was is dead.”

“You mean Casey?”

"Yes. He may have cached it somewhere in Italy, or he may have succeeded in smuggling it out of the country. But he hid it and wherever he hid it, there it still is."

Hercule Poirot sighed.

"It is a romantic theory. Pearls stuffed into plaster casts—what is the story—the Bust of Napoleon, is it not? But in this case it is not jewels—it is a large, solid gold cup. Not so easy to hide that, one would think."

Wagstaffe said vaguely:

"Oh, I don't know. It could be done, I suppose. Under the floorboards—something of that kind."

"Has Casey a house of his own?"

"Yes—in Liverpool." He grinned. "It wasn't under the floorboards there. We made sure of that."

"What about his family?"

"Wife was a decent sort of woman—tubercular. Worried to death by her husband's way of life. She was religious—a devout Catholic—but couldn't make up her mind to leave him. She died a couple of years ago. Daughter took after her—she became a nun. The son was different—a chip off the old block. Last I heard of him he was doing time in America."

Hercule Poirot wrote in his little notebook. America. He said: "It is possible that Casey's son may have known the hiding place?"

"Don't believe he did. It would have come into the fences' hands by now."

"The cup might have been melted down."

"It might. Quite possible, I should say. But I don't know—its supreme value is to collectors—and there's a lot of funny business goes on with collectors—you'd be surprised! Sometimes," said Wagstaffe virtuously, "I think collectors haven't any morals at all."

“Ah! Would you be surprised if Sir Reuben Rosenthal, for instance, were engaged in what you describe as ‘funny business?’ ”

Wagstaffe grinned.

“I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s not supposed to be very scrupulous where works of art are concerned.”

“What about the other members of the gang?”

“Riccovetti and Dublay both got stiff sentences. I should imagine they’ll be coming out about now.”

“Dublay is a Frenchman, is he not?”

“Yes, he was the brains of the gang.”

“Were there other members of it?”

“There was a girl—Red Kate she used to be called. Took a job as lady’s maid and found out all about a crib—where stuff was kept and so on. She went to Australia, I believe, after the gang broke up.”

“Anyone else?”

“Chap called Yougouian was suspected of being in with them. He’s a dealer. Headquarters in Stamboul but he has a shop in Paris. Nothing proved against him—but he’s a slippery customer.”

Poirot sighed. He looked at his little notebook. In it was written: America, Australia, Italy, France, Turkey. . . .

He murmured:

“I’ll put a girdle round the earth—”

“Pardon?” said Inspector Wagstaffe.

“I was observing,” said Hercule Poirot, “that a world tour seems indicated.”

III

It was the habit of Hercule Poirot to discuss his cases with his capable valet, George. That is to say, Hercule Poirot would let drop certain observations to which George would reply with the worldly wisdom which he had acquired in the course of his career as a gentleman's gentleman.

"If you were faced, Georges," said Poirot, "with the necessity of conducting investigations in five different parts of the globe, how would you set about it?"

"Well, sir, air travel is very quick, though some say as it upsets the stomach. I couldn't say myself."

"One asks oneself," said Hercule Poirot, "what would Hercules have done?"

"You mean the bicycle chap, sir?"

"Or," pursued Hercule Poirot, "one simply asks, what did he do? And the answer, Georges, is that he travelled energetically. But he was forced in the end to obtain information—as some say—from Prometheus—others from Nereus."

"Indeed, sir?" said George. "I never heard of either of those gentlemen. Are they travel agencies, sir?"

Hercule Poirot, enjoying the sound of his own voice, went on:

"My client, Emery Power, understands only one thing—action! But it is useless to dispense energy by unnecessary action. There is a golden rule in life, Georges, never do anything yourself that others can do for you.

"Especially," added Hercule Poirot, rising and going to the bookshelf, "when expense is no object!"

He took from the shelf a file labelled with the letter D and opened it at the words "Detective Agencies—Reliable."

“The modern Prometheus,” he murmured. “Be so obliging, Georges, as to copy out for me certain names and addresses. Messrs Hankerton, New York. Messrs Laden and Bosher, Sydney. Signor Giovanni Mezzi, Rome. M. Nahum, Stamboul. Messrs Roget et Franconard, Paris.”

He paused while George finished this. Then he said:

“And now be so kind as to look up the trains for Liverpool.”

“Yes, sir, you are going to Liverpool, sir?”

“I am afraid so. It is possible, Georges, that I may have to go even further. But not just yet.”

IV

It was three months later that Hercule Poirot stood on a rocky point and surveyed the Atlantic Ocean. Gulls rose and swooped down again with long melancholy cries. The air was soft and damp.

Hercule Poirot had the feeling, not uncommon in those who come to Inishgowlen for the first time, that he had reached the end of the world. He had never in his life imagined anything so remote, so desolate, so abandoned. It had beauty, a melancholy, haunted beauty, the beauty of a remote and incredible past. Here, in the west of Ireland, the Romans had never marched, tramp, tramp, tramp: had never fortified a camp: had never built a well-ordered, sensible, useful road. It was a land where common sense and an orderly way of life were unknown.

Hercule Poirot looked down at the tips of his patent-leather shoes and sighed. He felt forlorn and very much alone. The standards by which he lived were here not appreciated.

His eyes swept slowly up and down the desolate coast line, then once more out to sea. Somewhere out there, so tradition had it, were the Isles of the Blest, the Land of Youth. . . .

He murmured to himself:

"The Apple Tree, the Singing and the Gold . . ."

And suddenly, Hercule Poirot was himself again—the spell was broken, he was once more in harmony with his patent-leather shoes and natty, dark grey gent's suiting.

Not very far away he had heard the toll of a bell. He understood that bell. It was a sound he had been familiar with from early youth.

He set off briskly along the cliff. In about ten minutes he came in sight of the building on the cliff. A high wall surrounded it and a great wooden door studded with nails was set in the wall. Hercule Poirot came to this door and knocked. There was a vast iron knocker. Then he cautiously pulled at a rusty chain and a shrill little bell tinkled briskly inside the door.

A small panel in the door was pushed aside and showed a face. It was a suspicious face, framed in starched white. There was a distinct moustache on the upper lip, but the voice was the voice of a woman, it was the voice of what Hercule Poirot called a femme formidable.

It demanded his business.

"Is this the Convent of St. Mary and All Angels?"

The formidable woman said with asperity:

"And what else would it be?"

Hercule Poirot did not attempt to answer that. He said to the dragon:

"I would like to see the Mother Superior."

The dragon was unwilling, but in the end she yielded. Bars were drawn back, the door opened and Hercule Poirot was conducted to a small bare room where visitors to the Convent were received.

Presently a nun glided in, her rosary swinging at her waist.

Hercule Poirot was a Catholic by birth. He understood the atmosphere in which he found himself.

“I apologize for troubling you, ma mère,” he said, “but you have here, I think, a religieuse who was, in the world, Kate Casey.”

The Mother Superior bowed her head. She said:

“That is so. Sister Mary Ursula in religion.”

Hercule Poirot said: “There is a certain wrong that needs righting. I believe that Sister Mary Ursula could help me. She has information that might be invaluable.”

The Mother Superior shook her head. Her face was placid, her voice calm and remote. She said:

“Sister Mary Ursula cannot help you.”

“But I assure you—”

He broke off. The Mother Superior said:

“Sister Mary Ursula died two months ago.”

V

In the saloon bar of Jimmy Donovan’s Hotel, Hercule Poirot sat uncomfortably against the wall. The hotel did not come up to his ideas of what a hotel should be. His bed was broken—so were two of the window panes in his room—thereby admitting that night air which Hercule Poirot distrusted so much. The hot water brought him had been tepid and the meal he had eaten was producing curious and painful sensations in his inside.

There were five men in the bar and they were all talking politics. For the most part Hercule Poirot could not understand what they said. In any case, he did not much care.

Presently he found one of the men sitting beside him. This was a man of slightly different class to the others. He had the stamp of the seedy townsman upon him.

He said with immense dignity:

“I tell you, sir. I tell you—Pegeen’s Pride hasn’t got a chance, not a chance . . . bound to finish right down the course—right down the course. You take my tip . . . everybody ought to take my tip. Know who I am, shir, do you know, I shay? Atlas, thatsh who I am—Atlas of the Dublin Sun . . . been tipping winnersh all the season . . . Didn’t I give Larry’s Girl? Twenty-five to one—twenty-five to one. Follow Atlas and you can’t go wrong.”

Hercule Poirot regarded him with a strange reverence. He said, and his voice trembled:

“Mon Dieu, it is an omen!”

VI

It was some hours later. The moon showed from time to time, peeping out coquettishly from behind the clouds. Poirot and his new friend had walked some miles. The former was limping. The idea crossed his mind that there were, after all, other shoes—more suitable to country walking than patent leather. Actually George had respectfully conveyed as much. “A nice pair of brogues,” was what George had said.

Hercule Poirot had not cared for the idea. He liked his feet to look neat and well-shod. But now, tramping along this stony path, he realized that there were other shoes. . . .

His companion said suddenly:

“Is it the way the Priest would be after me for this? I’ll not have a mortal sin upon my conscience.”

Hercule Poirot said: “You are only restoring to Cæsar the things which are Cæsar’s.”

They had come to the wall of the Convent. Atlas prepared to do his part.

A groan burst from him and he exclaimed in low, poignant tones that he was destroyed entirely!

Hercule Poirot spoke with authority.

“Be quiet. It is not the weight of the world that you have to support—only the weight of Hercule Poirot.”

VII

Atlas was turning over two new five pound notes.

He said hopefully:

“Maybe I’ll not remember in the morning the way I earned this. I’m after worrying that Father O’Reilly will be after me.”

“Forget everything, my friend. Tomorrow the world is yours.”

Atlas murmured:

“And what’ll I put it on? There’s Working Lad, he’s a grand horse, a lovely horse he is! And there’s Sheila Boyne. 7 to 1 I’d get on her.”

He paused:

“Was it my fancy now or did I hear you mention the name of a heathen god? Hercules, you said, and glory be to God, there’s a Hercules running in the three-thirty tomorrow.”

“My friend,” said Hercule Poirot, “put your money on that horse. I tell you this, Hercules cannot fail.”

And it is certainly true that on the following day Mr. Rosslyn’s Hercules very unexpectedly won the Boynan Stakes, starting price 60 to 1.

VIII

Deftly Hercule Poirot unwrapped the neatly done-up parcel. First the brown paper, then the wadding, lastly the tissue paper.

On the desk in front of Emery Power he placed a gleaming golden cup. Chased on it was a tree bearing apples of green emeralds.

The financier drew a deep breath. He said:

“I congratulate you, M. Poirot.”

Hercule Poirot bowed.

Emery Power stretched out a hand. He touched the rim of the goblet, drawing his finger round it. He said in a deep voice:

“Mine!”

Hercule Poirot agreed.

“Yours!”

The other gave a sigh. He leaned back in his chair. He said in a businesslike voice:

“Where did you find it?”

Hercule Poirot said:

“I found it on an altar.”

Emery Power stared.

Poirot went on:

“Casey’s daughter was a nun. She was about to take her final vows at the time of her father’s death. She was an ignorant but devout girl. The cup was hidden in her father’s house in Liverpool. She took it to the Convent wanting, I think, to atone for her father’s sins. She gave it to be used to the glory of God. I do not think that the nuns themselves ever realized its value.

They took it, probably, for a family heirloom. In their eyes it was a chalice and they used it as such.”

Emery Power said:

“An extraordinary story!” He added: “What made you think of going there?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps—a process of elimination. And then there was the extraordinary fact that no one had ever tried to dispose of the cup. That looked, you see, as though it were in a place where ordinary material values did not apply. I remembered that Patrick Casey’s daughter was a nun.”

Power said heartily:

“Well, as I said before, I congratulate you. Let me know your fee and I’ll write you a cheque.”

Hercule Poirot said:

“There is no fee.”

The other stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you ever read fairy stories when you were a child? The King in them would say: ‘Ask of me what you will?’ ”

“So you are asking something?”

“Yes, but not money. Merely a simple request.”

“Well, what is it? Do you want a tip for the markets?”

“That would be only money in another form. My request is much simpler than that.”

“What is it?”

Hercule Poirot laid his hands on the cup.

“Send this back to the Convent.”

There was a pause. Then Emery Power said:

“Are you quite mad?”

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“No, I am not mad. See, I will show you something.”

He picked up the goblet. With his fingernail, he pressed hard into the open jaws of the snake that was coiled round the tree. Inside the cup a tiny portion of the gold chased interior slid aside leaving an aperture into the hollow handle.

Poirot said:

“You see? This was the drinking cup of the Borgia Pope. Through this little hole the poison passed into the drink. You have said yourself that the history of this cup is evil. Violence and blood and evil passions have accompanied its possession. Evil will perhaps come to you in your turn.”

“Superstition!”

“Possibly. But why were you so anxious to possess this thing? Not for its beauty. Not for its value. You have a hundred—a thousand perhaps—beautiful and rare things. You wanted it to sustain your pride. You were determined not to be beaten. Eh bien, you are not beaten. You win! The goblet is in your possession. But now, why not make a great—a supreme gesture? Send it back to where it has dwelt in peace for nearly ten years. Let the evil of it be purified there. It belonged to the Church once—let it return to the Church. Let it stand once more on the altar, purified and absolved as we hope that the souls of men shall be also purified and absolved from their sins.”

He leaned forward.

“Let me describe for you the place where I found it—the Garden of Peace, looking out over the Western Sea towards a forgotten Paradise of Youth and Eternal Beauty.”

He spoke on, describing in simple words the remote charm of Inishgowlen.

Emery Power sat back, one hand over his eyes. He said at last:

“I was born on the west coast of Ireland. I left there as a boy to go to America.”

Poirot said gently:

“I heard that.”

The financier sat up. His eyes were shrewd again. He said, and there was a faint smile on his lips:

“You are a strange man, M. Poirot. You shall have your way. Take the goblet to the Convent as a gift in my name. A pretty costly gift. Thirty thousand pounds—and what shall I get in exchange?”

Poirot said gravely:

“The nuns will say Masses for your soul.”

The rich man’s smile widened—a rapacious, hungry smile. He said:

“So, after all, it may be an investment! Perhaps, the best one I ever made. . . .”

IX

In the little parlour of the Convent, Hercule Poirot told his story and restored the chalice to the Mother Superior.

She murmured:

“Tell him we thank him and we will pray for him.”

Hercule Poirot said gently:

“He needs your prayers.”

“Is he then an unhappy man?”

Poirot said:

“So unhappy that he has forgotten what happiness means. So unhappy that he does not know he is unhappy.”

The nun said softly:

“Ah, a rich man. . . .”

Hercule Poirot said nothing—for he knew there was nothing to say. . . .

Twelve

THE CAPTURE OF CERBERUS

Hercule Poirot, swaying to and fro in the tube train, thrown now against one body, now against another, thought to himself that there were too many people in the world! Certainly there were too many people in the Underground world of London at this particular moment (6:30 p.m.) of the evening. Heat, noise, crowd, contiguity—the unwelcome pressure of hands, arms, bodies, shoulders! Hemmed in and pressed around by strangers—and on the whole (he thought distastefully) a plain and uninteresting lot of strangers! Humanity seen thus en masse was not attractive. How seldom did one see a face sparkling with intelligence, how seldom a femme bien mise! What was this passion that attacked women for knitting under the most unpropitious conditions? A woman did not look her best knitting; the absorption, the glassy eyes, the restless, busy fingers! One needed the agility of a wild cat, and the will-power of a Napoleon to manage to knit in a crowded tube, but women managed it! If they succeeded in obtaining a seat, out came a miserable little strip of shrimp pink and click, click went the pins!

No repose, thought Poirot, no feminine grace! His elderly soul revolted from the stress and hurry of the modern world. All these young women who surrounded him—so alike, so devoid of charm, so lacking in rich, alluring femininity! He demanded a more flamboyant appeal. Ah! to see a femme du monde, chic, sympathetic, spirituelle—a woman with ample curves, a woman ridiculously and extravagantly dressed! Once there had been such women. But now—now—

The train stopped at a station; people surged out, forcing Poirot back on to the points of knitting pins; surged in, squeezing him into even more sardinelike proximity with his fellow passengers. The train started off again, with a jerk, Poirot was thrown against a stout woman with knobbly parcels, said “Pardon!” bounced off again into a long angular man whose attaché case caught him in the small of the back. He said “Pardon!” again. He felt his moustaches becoming limp and uncurled. Quel enfer! Fortunately the next station was his!

It was also the station of what seemed to be about a hundred and fifty other people, since it happened to be Piccadilly Circus. Like a great tidal wave they flowed out on to the platform. Presently Poirot was again jammed tightly on an escalator being carried upwards towards the surface of the earth.

Up, thought Poirot, from the Infernal Regions . . . How exquisitely painful was a suitcase rammed into one’s knees from behind on an ascending escalator!

At that moment, a voice cried his name. Startled, he raised his eyes. On the opposite escalator, the one descending, his unbelieving eyes saw a vision from the past. A woman of full and flamboyant form; her luxuriant henna red hair crowned with a small plastron of straw to which was attached a positive platoon of brilliantly feathered little birds. Exotic-looking furs dripped from her shoulders.

Her crimson mouth opened wide, her rich, foreign voice echoed resoundingly. She had good lungs.

“It is!” she screamed. “But it is! Mon cher Hercule Poirot! We must meet again! I insist!”

But Fate itself is not more inexorable than the behaviour of two escalators moving in an inverse direction. Steadily, remorselessly, Hercule Poirot was borne upward, and the Countess Vera Rossakoff was borne downwards.

Twisting himself sideways, leaning over the balustrade, Poirot cried despairingly:

“Chère Madame—where can I find you?”

Her reply came to him faintly from the depths. It was unexpected, yet seemed at the moment strangely apposite.

“In Hell . . .”

Hercule Poirot blinked. He blinked again. Suddenly he rocked on his feet. Unawares he had reached the top—and had neglected to step off properly. The crowd spread out round him. A little to one side a dense crowd was pressing on to the downward escalator. Should he join them? Had that been the Countess’s meaning? No doubt that travelling in the bowels of the earth at the rush hour was Hell. If that had been the Countess’s meaning, he could not agree with her more. . . .

Resolutely Poirot crossed over, sandwiched himself into the descending crowd and was borne back into the depths. At the foot of the escalator no sign of the Countess. Poirot was left with a choice of blue, amber, etc. lights to follow.

Was the Countess patronizing the Bakerloo or the Piccadilly line? Poirot visited each platform in turn. He was swept about amongst surging crowds boarding or leaving trains, but nowhere did he espy the flamboyant Russian figure, the Countess Vera Rossakoff.

Weary, battered, and infinitely chagrined, Hercule Poirot once more ascended to ground level and stepped out into the hubbub of Piccadilly Circus. He reached home in a mood of pleasurable excitement.

It is the misfortune of small precise men to hanker after large and flamboyant women. Poirot had never been able to rid himself of the fatal fascination the Countess held for him. Though it was something like twenty years since he had seen her last the magic still held. Granted that her makeup now resembled a scene-painter’s sunset, with the woman under the makeup well hidden from sight, to Hercule Poirot she still represented the sumptuous and the alluring. The little bourgeois was still thrilled by the aristocrat. The memory of the adroit way she stole jewellery roused the old admiration. He remembered the magnificent aplomb with which she had admitted the fact when taxed with it. A woman in a thousand—in a million! And he had met her again—and lost her!

"In Hell," she had said. Surely his ears had not deceived him? She had said that?

But what had she meant by it? Had she meant London's Underground Railways? Or were her words to be taken in a religious sense? Surely, even if her own way of life made Hell the most plausible destination for her after this life, surely—surely her Russian courtesy would not suggest that Hercule Poirot was necessarily bound for the same place?

No, she must have meant something quite different. She must have meant—Hercule Poirot was brought up short against bewilderment. What an intriguing, what an unpredictable woman! A lesser woman might have shrieked "The Ritz" or "Claridge's." But Vera Rossakoff had cried poignantly and impossibly: "Hell!"

Poirot sighed. But he was not defeated. In his perplexity he took the simplest and most straightforward course on the following morning, he asked his secretary, Miss Lemon.

Miss Lemon was unbelievably ugly and incredibly efficient. To her Poirot was nobody in particular—he was merely her employer. She gave him excellent service. Her private thoughts and dreams were concentrated on a new filing system which she was slowly perfecting in the recesses of her mind.

"Miss Lemon, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course, M. Poirot." Miss Lemon took her fingers off the typewriter keys and waited attentively.

"If a friend asked you to meet her—or him—in Hell, what would you do?"

Miss Lemon, as usual, did not pause. She knew, as the saying goes, all the answers.

"It would be advisable, I think, to ring up for a table," she said.

Hercule Poirot stared at her in a stupefied fashion.

He said, staccato, “You—would—ring—up—for—a table?”

Miss Lemon nodded and drew the telephone towards her.

“Tonight?” she asked, and taking assent for granted since he did not speak, she dialled briskly.

“Temple Bar 14578? Is that Hell? Will you please reserve a table for two. M. Hercule Poirot. Eleven o’clock.”

She replaced the receiver and her fingers hovered over the keys of her typewriter. A slight—a very slight look of impatience was discernible upon her face. She had done her part, the look seemed to say, surely her employer could now leave her to get on with what she was doing?

But Hercule Poirot required explanations.

“What is it, then, this Hell?” he demanded.

Miss Lemon looked slightly surprised.

“Oh didn’t you know, M. Poirot? It’s a nightclub—quite new and very much the rage at present—run by some Russian woman, I believe. I can fix up for you to become a member before this evening quite easily.”

Whereupon, having wasted (as she made obvious) quite time enough, Miss Lemon broke into a perfect fusillade of efficient typing.

At eleven that evening Hercule Poirot passed through a doorway over which a Neon sign discreetly showed one letter at a time. A gentleman in red tails received him and took from him his coat.

A gesture directed him to a flight of wide shallow stairs leading downwards. On each step a phrase was written. The first one ran:

“I meant well . . .”

The second:

"Wipe the slate clean and start afresh . . ."

The third:

"I can give it up any time I like . . ."

"The good intentions that pave the way to Hell," Hercule Poirot murmured appreciatively. "C'est bien imaginé, ça!"

He descended the stairs. At the foot was a tank of water with scarlet lilies. Spanning it was a bridge shaped like a boat. Poirot crossed by it.

On his left in a kind of marble grotto sat the largest and ugliest and blackest dog Poirot had ever seen! It sat up very straight and gaunt and immovable. It was perhaps, he thought, (and hoped!) not real. But at that moment the dog turned its ferocious and ugly head and from the depths of its black body a low, rumbling growl was emitted. It was a terrifying sound.

And then Poirot noticed a decorative basket of small round dog biscuits. They were labelled, "A sop for Cerberus!"

It was on them that the dog's eyes were fixed. Once again the low, rumbling growl was heard. Hastily Poirot picked up a biscuit and tossed it towards the great hound.

A cavernous red mouth yawned; then came a snap as the powerful jaws closed again. Cerberus had accepted his sop! Poirot moved on through an open doorway.

The room was not a big one. It was dotted with little tables, a space of dancing floor in the middle. It was lighted with small red lamps, there were frescoes on the walls, and at the far end was a vast grill at which officiated chefs dressed as devils with tails and horns.

All this Poirot took in before, with all the impulsiveness of her Russian nature, Countess Vera Rossakoff, resplendent in scarlet evening dress, bore down upon him with outstretched hands.

“Ah, you have come! My dear—my very dear friend! what a joy to see you again! After such years—so many—how many?—No, we will not say how many! To me it seems but as yesterday. You have not changed—not in the least have you changed!”

“Nor you, chère amie,” Poirot exclaimed, bowing over her hand.

Nevertheless he was fully conscious now that twenty years is twenty years. Countess Rossakoff might not uncharitably have been described as a ruin. But she was at least a spectacular ruin. The exuberance, the full-blooded enjoyment of life was still there, and she knew, none better, how to flatter a man.

She drew Poirot with her to a table at which two other people were sitting.

“My friend, my celebrated friend, M. Hercule Poirot,” she announced. “He who is the terror of evildoers! I was once afraid of him myself, but now I lead a life of the extreme, the most virtuous dullness. Is it not so?”

The tall thin elderly man to whom she spoke said, “Never say dull, Countess.”

“The Professor Liskeard,” the Countess announced. “He who knows everything about the past and who gave me the valuable hints for the decorations here.”

The Archæologist shuddered slightly.

“If I’d known what you meant to do!” he murmured. “The result is so appalling.”

Poirot observed the frescoes more closely. On the wall facing him Orpheus and his jazz band played, while Eurydice looked hopefully towards the grill. On the opposite wall Osiris and Isis seemed to be throwing an Egyptian underworld boating party. On the third wall some bright young people were enjoying mixed bathing in a state of Nature.

"The Country of the Young," explained the Countess and added in the same breath, completing her introductions: "And this is my little Alice."

Poirot bowed to the second occupant of the table, a severe-looking girl in a check coat and skirt. She wore horn-rimmed glasses.

"She is very, very clever," said Countess Rossakoff. "She has a degree and she is a psychologist and she knows all the reasons why lunatics are lunatics! It is not, as you might think, because they are mad! No, there are all sorts of other reasons! I find that very peculiar."

The girl called Alice smiled kindly but a little disdainfully. She asked the Professor in a firm voice if he would like to dance. He appeared flattered but dubious.

"My dear young lady, I fear I only waltz."

"This is a waltz," said Alice patiently.

They got up and danced. They did not dance well.

The Countess Rossakoff sighed. Following out a train of thought of her own, she murmured, "And yet she is not really bad-looking. . . ."

"She does not make the most of herself," said Poirot judicially.

"Frankly," cried the Countess, "I cannot understand the young people of nowadays. They do not try any more to please—always, in my youth, I tried—the colours that suited me—a little padding in the frocks—the corset laced tight round the waist—the hair, perhaps, a more interesting shade—"

She pushed back the heavy Titian tresses from her forehead—it was undeniable that she, at least, was still trying and trying hard!

"To be content with what Nature has given you, that—that is stupid! It is also arrogant! The little Alice she writes pages of long words about Sex, but how often, I ask you, does a man suggest to her that they should go to Brighton for the weekend? It is all long words and work, and the welfare of the workers, and the future of the world. It is very worthy, but I ask you, is it gay? And look, I ask you, how drab these young people have made the world! It is all regulations and prohibitions! Not so when I was young."

"That reminds me, how is your son, Madame?" At the last moment he substituted "son," for "little boy," remembering that twenty years had passed.

The Countess's face lit up with enthusiastic motherhood.

"The beloved angel! So big now, such shoulders, so handsome! He is in America. He builds there—bridges, banks, hotels, department stores, railways, anything the Americans want!"

Poirot looked slightly puzzled.

"He is then an engineer? Or an architect?"

"What does it matter?" demanded the Countess. "He is adorable! He is wrapped up in iron girders, and machinery, and things called stresses. The kind of thing that I have never understood in the least. But we adore each other—always we adore each other! And so for his sake I adore the little Alice. But yes, they are engaged. They meet on a plane or a boat or a train, and they fall in love, all in the midst of talking about the welfare of the workers. And when she comes to London she comes to see me and I take her to my heart." The Countess clasped her arms across her vast bosom, "And I say—'You and Niki love each other—so I too love you—but if you love him why do you leave him in America?' And she talks about her 'job' and the book she is writing, and her career, and frankly I do not understand, but I have always said: 'One must be tolerant.' " She added all in one breath, "And what do you think, cher ami, of all this that I have imagined here?"

"It is very well imagined," said Poirot, looking round him approvingly. "It is chic!"

The place was full and it had about it that unmistakable air of success which cannot be counterfeited. There were languid couples in full evening dress, Bohemians in corduroy trousers, stout gentlemen in business suits. The band, dressed as devils, dispensed hot music. No doubt about it, Hell had caught on.

“We have all kinds here,” said the Countess. “That is as it should be, is it not? The gates of Hell are open to all?”

“Except, possibly, to the poor?” Poirot suggested.

The Countess laughed. “Are we not told that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Naturally, then, he should have priority in Hell.”

The Professor and Alice were returning to the table. The Countess got up.

“I must speak to Aristide.”

She exchanged some words with the head waiter, a lean Mephistopheles, then went round from table to table, speaking to the guests.

The Professor, wiping his forehead and sipping a glass of wine, remarked:

“She is a personality, is she not? People feel it.”

He excused himself as he went over to speak to someone at another table. Poirot, left alone with the severe Alice, felt slightly embarrassed as he met the cold blue of her eyes. He recognized that she was actually quite good-looking, but he found her distinctly alarming.

“I do not yet know your last name,” he murmured.

“Cunningham. Dr. Alice Cunningham. You have known Vera in past days, I understand?”

“Twenty years ago it must be.”

“I find her a very interesting study,” said Dr. Alice Cunningham. “Naturally I am interested in her as the mother of the man I am going to marry, but I am interested in her from the professional standpoint as well.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. I am writing a book on criminal psychology. I find the night life of this place very illuminating. We have several criminal types who come here regularly. I have discussed their early life with some of them. Of course you know all about Vera’s criminal tendencies—I mean that she steals?”

“Why, yes—I know that,” said Poirot, slightly taken aback.

“I call it the Magpie complex myself. She takes, you know, always glittering things. Never money. Always jewels. I find that as a child she was petted and indulged but very much shielded. Life was unendurably dull for her—dull and safe. Her nature demanded drama—it craved for punishment. That is at the root of her indulgence in theft. She wants the importance, the notoriety of being punished!”

Poirot objected, “Her life can surely not have been safe and dull as a member of the ancien régime in Russia during the revolution?”

A look of faint amusement showed in Miss Cunningham’s pale blue eyes.

“Ah,” she said. “A member of the ancien régime? She has told you that?”

“She is undeniably an aristocrat,” said Poirot staunchly, fighting back certain uneasy memories of the wildly varying accounts of her early life told him by the Countess herself.

“One believes what one wishes to believe,” remarked Miss Cunningham, casting a professional eye on him.

Poirot felt alarmed. In a moment, he felt, he would be told what was his complex. He decided to carry the war into the enemy’s camp. He enjoyed the Countess Rossakoff’s society partly because of her aristocratic provenance, and he was not going to have his enjoyment spoiled by a spectacled little girl with boiled gooseberry eyes and a degree in psychology!

“Do you know what I find astonishing?” he asked.

Alice Cunningham did not admit in so many words that she did not know. She contented herself with looking bored but indulgent.

Poirot went on:

“It amazes me that you—who are young, and who could look pretty if you took the trouble—well, it amazes me that you do not take the trouble! You wear the heavy coat and skirt with the big pockets as though you were going to play the game of golf. But it is not here the golf links, it is the underground cellar with the temperature of 71 Fahrenheit, and your nose it is hot and shines, but you do not powder it, and the lipstick you put it on your mouth without interest, without emphasizing the curve of the lips! You are a woman, but you do not draw attention to the fact of being a woman. And I say to you ‘Why not?’ It is a pity!”

For a moment he had the satisfaction of seeing Alice Cunningham look human. He even saw a spark of anger in her eyes. Then she regained her attitude of smiling contempt.

“My dear M. Poirot,” she began, “I’m afraid you’re out of touch with the modern ideology. It is fundamentals that matter—not the trappings.”

She looked up as a dark and very beautiful young man came towards them.

“This is a most interesting type,” she murmured with zest. “Paul Varesco! Lives on women and has strange depraved cravings! I want him to tell me more about a nursery governess who looked after him when he was three years old.”

A moment or two later she was dancing with the young man. He danced divinely. As they drifted near Poirot’s table, Poirot heard her say: “And after the summer at Bognor she gave you a toy crane? A crane—yes, that’s very suggestive.”

For a moment Poirot allowed himself to toy with the speculation that Miss Cunningham’s interest in criminal types might lead one day to her mutilated body being found in a lonely wood. He did not like Alice Cunningham, but he was honest enough to realize that the reason for his dislike was the fact that she was so palpably unimpressed by Hercule Poirot! His vanity suffered!

Then he saw something that momentarily put Alice Cunningham out of his head. At a table on the opposite side of the floor sat a fair-haired young man. He wore evening dress, his whole demeanour was that of one who lives a life of ease and pleasure. Opposite him sat the right kind of expensive girl. He was gazing at her in a fatuous and foolish manner. Any one seeing them might have murmured: “The idle rich!” Nevertheless Poirot knew very well that the young man was neither rich nor idle. He was, in fact, Detective Inspector Charles Stevens, and it seemed probable to Poirot that Detective Inspector Charles Stevens was here on business. . . .

II

On the following morning Poirot paid a visit to Scotland Yard to his old friend Chief Inspector Japp.

Japp’s reception of his tentative inquiries was unexpected.

“You old fox!” said Japp affectionately. “How you get on to these things beats me!”

“But I assure you I know nothing—nothing at all! It is just idle curiosity.”

Japp said that Poirot could tell that to the Marines!

“You want to know all about this place Hell? Well, on the surface it’s just another of these things. It’s caught on! They must be making a lot of money, though of course the expenses are pretty high. There’s a Russian woman ostensibly running it, calls herself the Countess Something or other—”

“I am acquainted with Countess Rossakoff,” said Poirot coldly. “We are old friends.”

“But she’s just a dummy,” Japp went on. “She didn’t put up the money. It might be the headwaiter chap, Aristide Papopolous—he’s got an interest in it—but we don't believe it's really his show either. In fact we don't know whose show it is!"

"And Inspector Stevens goes there to find out?"

"Oh, you saw Stevens, did you? Lucky young dog landing a job like that at the taxpayer's expense! A fat lot he's found out so far!"

"What do you suspect there is to find out?"

"Dope! Drug racket on a large scale. And the dope's being paid for not in money, but in precious stones."

"Aha?"

"This is how it goes. Lady Blank—or the Countess of Whatnot—finds it hard to get hold of cash—and in any case doesn't want to draw large sums out of the Bank. But she's got jewels—family heirlooms sometimes! They're taken along to a place for 'cleaning' or 'resetting'—there the stones are taken out of their settings and replaced with paste. The unset stones are sold over here or on the Continent. It's all plain sailing—there's been no robbery, no hue and cry after them. Say sooner or later it's discovered that a certain tiara or necklace is a fake? Lady Blank is all innocence and dismay—can't imagine how or when the substitution can have taken place—necklace has never been out of her possession! Sends the poor, perspiring police off on wild-goose chases after dismissed maids, or doubtful butlers, or suspicious window-cleaners.

"But we're not quite so dumb as these social birds think! We had several cases come up one after another—and we found a common factor—all the women showed signs of dope—nerves, irritability—twitching, pupils of eyes dilated, etcetera. Question was: Where were they getting the dope from and who was running the racket?"

"And the answer, you think, is this place Hell?"

"We believe it's the headquarters of the whole racket. We've discovered where the work on the jewellery is done—a place called Golconda Ltd—respectable enough on the surface, high-class imitation jewellery. There's a nasty bit of work called Paul Varesco—ah, I see you know him?"

"I have seen him—in Hell."

"That's where I'd like to see him—in the real place! He's as bad as they make 'em—but women—even decent women—eat out of his hand! He's got some kind of connection with Golconda Ltd and I'm pretty sure he's the man behind Hell. It's ideal for his purpose—everyone goes there, society women, professional crooks—it's the perfect meeting place."

"You think the exchange—jewels for dope—takes place there?"

"Yes. We know the Golconda side of it—we want the other—the dope side. We want to know who's supplying the stuff and where it's coming from."

"And so far you have no idea?"

"I think it's the Russian woman—but we've no evidence. A few weeks ago we thought we were getting somewhere. Varesco went to the Golconda place, picked up some stones there and went straight from there to Hell. Stevens was watching him, but he didn't actually see him pass the stuff. When Varesco left we picked him up—the stones weren't on him. We raided the club, rounded up everybody! Result, no stones, no dope!"

"A fiasco, in fact?"

Japp winced. "You're telling me! Might have got in a bit of a jam, but luckily in the round up we got Peverel (you know, the Battersea murderer). Pure luck, he was supposed to have got away to Scotland. One of our smart sergeants spotted him from his photos. So all's well that ends well—kudos for us—terrific boost for the club—it's been more packed than ever since!"

Poirot said:

“But it does not advance the dope inquiry. There is, perhaps, a place of concealment on the premises?”

“Must be. But we couldn’t find it. Went over the place with a toothcomb. And between you and me, there’s been an unofficial search as well—” he winked. “Strictly on the Q.T. Spot of breaking and entering. Not a success, our ‘unofficial’ man nearly got torn to pieces by that ruddy great dog! It sleeps on the premises.”

“Aha, Cerberus?”

“Yes. Silly name for a dog—to call it after a packet of salt.”

“Cerberus,” murmured Poirot thoughtfully.

“Suppose you try your hand at it, Poirot,” suggested Japp. “It’s a pretty problem and worth doing. I hate the drug racket, destroys people body and soul. That really is Hell if you like!”

Poirot murmured meditatively: “It would round off things—yes. Do you know what the twelfth Labor of Hercules was?”

“No idea.”

“The Capture of Cerberus. It is appropriate, is it not?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, old man, but remember: ‘Dog eats Man’ is news.” And Japp leaned back roaring with laughter.

III

“I wish to speak to you with the utmost seriousness,” said Poirot.

The hour was early, the Club as yet nearly empty. The Countess and Poirot sat at a small table near the doorway.

“But I do not feel serious,” she protested. “La petite Alice, she is always serious and, entre nous, I find it very boring. My poor Niki, what fun will he have? None.”

“I entertain for you much affection,” continued Poirot steadily. “And I do not want to see you in what is called the jam.”

“But it is absurd what you say there! I am on top of the world, the money it rolls in!”

“You own this place?”

The Countess’s eye became slightly evasive.

“Certainly,” she replied.

“But you have a partner?”

“Who told you that?” asked the Countess sharply.

“Is your partner Paul Varesco?”

“Oh! Paul Varesco! What an idea!”

“He has a bad—a criminal record. Do you realize that you have criminals frequenting this place?”

The Countess burst out laughing.

“There speaks the bon bourgeois! Naturally I realize! Do you not see that that is half the attraction of this place? These young people from Mayfair—they get tired of seeing their own kind round them in the West End. They come here, they see the criminals; the thief, the blackmailer, the confidence trickster—perhaps, even, the murderer—the man who will be in the Sunday papers next week! It is exciting, that—they think they are seeing life! So does the prosperous man who all the week sells the knickers, the stockings, the corsets! What a change from his respectable life and his respectable friends! And then, a further thrill—there at a table, stroking his moustache, is the Inspector from Scotland Yard—an Inspector in tails!”

“So you knew that?” said Poirot softly.

Her eyes met his and she smiled.

“Mon cher ami, I am not so simple as you seem to suppose!”

“Do you also deal in drugs here?”

“Ah, ça no!” The Countess spoke sharply. “That would be an abomination!”

Poirot looked at her for a moment or two, then he sighed.

“I believe you,” he said. “But in that case it is all the more necessary that you tell me who really owns this place.”

“I own it,” she snapped.

“On paper, yes. But there is someone behind you.”

“Do you know, mon ami, I find you altogether too curious? Is he not much too curious, Dou dou?”

Her voice dropped to a coo as she spoke the last words and she threw the duck bone from her plate to the big black hound who caught it with a ferocious snap of the jaws.

“What is it that you call that animal,” asked Poirot, diverted.

“C’est mon petit Dou dou!”

“But it is ridiculous, a name like that!”

“But he is adorable! He is a police dog! He can do anything—anything—Wait!”

She rose, looked round her, and suddenly snatched up a plate with a large succulent steak which had just been deposited before a diner at a nearby table. She crossed to the marble niche and put the plate down in front of the dog, at the same time uttering a few words in Russian.

Cerberus gazed in front of him. The steak might not have existed.

"You see? And it is not just a matter of minutes! No, he will remain like that for hours if need be!"

Then she murmured a word and like lightning Cerberus bent his long neck and the steak disappeared as though by magic.

Vera Rossakoff flung her arms round the dog's neck and embraced him passionately, rising on tiptoe to do so.

"See how gentle he can be!" she cried. "For me, for Alice, for his friends—they can do what they like! But one has but to give him the word and Presto! I can assure you he would tear a—police inspector, for instance—into little pieces! Yes, into little pieces!"

She burst out laughing.

"I would have but to say the word—"

Poirot interrupted hastily. He mistrusted the Countess's sense of humour. Inspector Stevens might be in real danger.

"Professor Liskeard wants to speak to you."

The professor was standing reproachfully at her elbow.

"You took my steak," he complained. "Why did you take my steak? It was a good steak!"

IV

"Thursday night, old man," said Japp. "That's when the balloon goes up. It's Andrews' pigeon, of course—Narcotic Squad—but he'll be delighted to have you horn in. No, thanks, I won't have any of your fancy sirops. I have to take care of my stomach. Is that whisky I see over there? That's more the ticket!"

Setting his glass down, he went on:

"We've solved the problem, I think. There's another way out at the Club—and we've found it!"

"Where?"

"Behind the grill. Part of it swings round."

"But surely you would see—"

"No, old boy. When the raid started, the lights went out—switched off at the main—and it took us a minute or two to get them turned on again. Nobody got out the front way because it was being watched, but it's clear now that somebody could have nipped out by the secret way with the doings. We've been examining the house behind the Club—and that's how we tumbled to the trick."

"And you propose to do—what?"

Japp winked.

"Let it go according to plan—the police appear, the lights go out—and somebody's waiting on the other side of that secret door to see who comes through. This time we've got 'em!"

"Why Thursday?"

Again Japp winked.

"We've got the Golconda pretty well taped now. There will be stuff going out of there on Thursday. Lady Carrington's emeralds."

"You permit," said Poirot, "that I too make one or two little arrangements?"

V

Sitting at his usual small table near the entrance on Thursday night Poirot studied his surroundings. As usual Hell was going with a swing!

The Countess was even more flamboyantly made up than usual if that was possible. She was being very Russian tonight, clapping her hands and screaming with laughter. Paul Varesco had arrived. Sometimes he wore faultless evening dress, sometimes, as tonight, he chose to present himself in a kind of apache getup, tightly-buttoned coat, scarf round the neck. He looked vicious and attractive. Detaching himself from a stout, middle-aged woman plastered with diamonds, he leaned over Alice Cunningham who was sitting at a table writing busily in a little notebook and asked her to dance. The stout woman scowled at Alice and looked at Varesco with adoring eyes.

There was no adoration in Miss Cunningham's eyes. They gleamed with pure scientific interest, and Poirot caught fragments of their conversation as they danced past him. She had progressed beyond the nursery governess and was now seeking information about the matron at Paul's preparatory school.

When the music stopped, she sat down by Poirot looking happy and excited.

"Most interesting," she said. "Varesco will be one of the most important cases in my book. The symbolism is unmistakable. Trouble about the vests for instance—for vest read hair shirt with all its associations—and the whole thing becomes quite plain. You may say that he's a definitely criminal type but a cure can be effected—"

"That she can reform a rake," said Poirot, "has always been one of woman's dearest illusions!"

Alice Cunningham looked at him coldly.

"There is nothing personal about this, M. Poirot."

"There never is," said Poirot. "It is always pure disinterested altruism—but the object of it is usually an attractive member of the opposite sex. Are you interested, for instance, in where I went to school, or what was the attitude of the matron to me?"

"You are not a criminal type," said Miss Cunningham.

"Do you know a criminal type when you see one?"

"Certainly I do."

Professor Liskeard joined them. He sat down by Poirot.

"Are you talking about criminals? You should study the criminal code of Hammurabi, M. Poirot. 1800 b.c. most interesting. The man who is caught stealing during a fire shall be thrown into the fire."

He stared pleasurably ahead of him towards the electric grill.

"And there are older, Summerian laws. If a wife hateth her husband and saith unto him, 'Thou art not my husband,' they shall throw her into the river. Cheaper and easier than the divorce court. But if a husband says that to his wife he only has to pay her a certain measure of silver. Nobody throws him in the river."

"The same old story," said Alice Cunningham. "One law for the man and one for the woman."

"Women, of course, have a greater appreciation of monetary value," said the Professor thoughtfully. "You know," he added, "I like this place. I come here most evenings. I don't have to pay. The Countess arranged that—very nice of her—in consideration of my having advised her about the decorations, she says. Not that they're anything to do with me really—I'd no idea what she was asking me questions for—and naturally she and the artist have got everything quite wrong. I hope nobody will ever know I had the remotest connection with the dreadful things. I should never live it down. But she's a wonderful woman—rather like a Babylonian, I always think. The Babylonians were good women of business, you know—"

The Professor's words were drowned in a sudden chorus. The word "Police" was heard—women rose to their feet, there was a babel of sound. The lights went out and so did the electric grill.

As an undertone to the turmoil the Professor’s voice went on tranquilly reciting various excerpts from the laws of Hammurabi.

When the lights went on again Hercule Poirot was halfway up the wide, shallow steps. The police officers by the door saluted him, and he passed out into the street and strolled to the corner. Just round the corner, pressed against the wall was a small and odoriferous man with a red nose. He spoke in an anxious, husky whisper.

“I’m ’ere, guv’nor. Time for me to do my stuff?”

“Yes. Go on.”

“There’s a nawful lot of coppers about!”

“That is all right. They’ve been told about you.”

“I ’ope they won’t interfere, that’s all?”

“They will not interfere. You’re sure you can accomplish what you have set out to do? The animal in question is both large and fierce.”

“ ’E won’t be fierce to me,” said the little man confidently. “Not with what I’ve got ’ere! Any dog’ll follow me to Hell for it!”

“In this case,” murmured Hercule Poirot, “he has to follow you out of Hell!”

VI

In the small hours of the morning the telephone rang. Poirot picked up the receiver.

Japp’s voice said:

“You asked me to ring you.”

“Yes, indeed. Eh bien?”

“No dope—we got the emeralds.”

“Where?”

“In Professor Liskeard’s pocket.”

“Professor Liskeard?”

“Surprises you, too? Frankly I don’t know what to think! He looked as astonished as a baby, stared at them, said he hadn’t the faintest idea how they got in his pocket, and dammit I believe he was speaking the truth! Varesco could have slipped them into his pocket easily enough in the black out. I can’t see a man like old Liskeard being mixed up in this sort of business. He belongs to all these high-falutin’ societies, why he’s even connected with the British Museum! The only thing he ever spends money on is books, and musty old secondhand books at that. No, he doesn’t fit. I’m beginning to think we’re wrong about the whole thing—there never has been any dope in that Club.”

“Oh, yes there has, my friend, it was there tonight. Tell me, did no one come out through your secret way?”

“Yes, Prince Henry of Scandenberg and his equerry—he only arrived in England yesterday. Vitamian Evans, the Cabinet Minister (devil of a job being a Labor Minister, you have to be so careful! Nobody minds a Tory politician spending money on riotous living because the taxpayers think it’s his own money—but when it’s a Labor man the public feel it’s their money he’s spending! And so it is in a manner of speaking.) Lady Beatrice Viner was the last—she’s getting married the day after tomorrow to the priggish young Duke of Leominster. I don’t believe any of that lot were mixed up in this.”

“You believe rightly. Nevertheless, the dope was in the Club and someone took it out of the Club.”

“Who did?”

“I did, mon ami,” said Poirot softly.

He replaced the receiver, cutting off Japp's spluttering noises, as a bell trilled out. He went and opened the front door. The Countess Rossakoff sailed in.

"If it were not that we are, alas, too old, how compromising this would be!" she exclaimed. "You see, I have come as you told me to do in your note. There is, I think, a policeman behind me, but he can stay in the street. And now, my friend, what is it?"

Poirot gallantly relieved her of her fox furs.

"Why did you put those emeralds in Professor Liskeard's pocket?" he demanded. "Ce n'est pas gentille, ce que vous avez fait là!"

The Countess's eyes opened wide.

"Naturally, it was in your pocket I meant to put the emeralds!"

"Oh, in my pocket?"

"Certainly. I cross hurriedly to the table where you usually sit—but the lights they are out and I suppose by inadvertence I put them in the Professor's pocket."

"And why did you wish to put stolen emeralds in my pocket?"

"It seemed to me—I had to think quickly, you understand—the best thing to do!"

"Really, Vera, you are impayable!"

"But, dear friend, consider! The police arrive, the lights go out (our little private arrangement for the patrons who must not be embarrassed) and a hand takes my bag off the table. I snatch it back, but I feel through the velvet something hard inside. I slip my hand in, I find what I know by touch to be jewels and I comprehend at once who has put them there!"

"Oh you do?"

"Of course I do! It is that salaud! It is that lizard, that monster, that double-faced, double-crossing, squirming adder of a pig's son, Paul Varesco."

"The man who is your partner in Hell?"

"Yes, yes, it is he who owns the place, who puts up the money. Until now I do not betray him—I can keep faith, me! But now that he double-crosses me, that he tries to embroil me with the police—ah! now I will spit his name out—yes, spit it out!"

"Calm yourself," said Poirot, "and come with me into the next room."

He opened the door. It was a small room and seemed for a moment to be completely filled with DOG. Cerberus had looked outsize even in the spacious premises of Hell. In the tiny dining room of Poirot's service flat there seemed nothing else but Cerberus in the room. There was also, however, the small and odoriferous man.

"We've turned up here according to plan, guv'nor," said the little man in a husky voice.

"Dou dou!" screamed the Countess. "My angel Dou dou!"

Cerberus beat the floor with his tail—but he did not move.

"Let me introduce you to Mr. William Higgs," shouted Poirot, above the thunder of Cerberus's tail. "A master in his profession. During the brouhaha tonight," went on Poirot, "Mr. Higgs induced Cerberus to follow him up out of Hell."

"You induced him?" The Countess stared incredulously at the small ratlike figure. "But how? How?"

Mr. Higgs dropped his eyes bashfully.

" 'Ardly like to say afore a lady. But there's things no dogs won't resist. Follow me anywhere a dog will if I want 'im to. Of course you understand it won't work the same way with bitches—no, that's different, that is."

The Countess Rossakoff turned on Poirot.

“But why? Why?”

Poirot said slowly:

“A dog trained for the purpose will carry an article in his mouth until he is commanded to loose it. He will carry it if needs be for hours. Will you now tell your dog to drop what he holds?”

Vera Rossakoff stared, turned, and uttered two crisp words.

The great jaws of Cerberus opened. Then, it was really alarming, Cerberus’s tongue seemed to drop out of his mouth. . . .

Poirot stepped forward. He picked up a small package encased in pink, spongebag rubber. He unwrapped it. Inside it was a packet of white powder.

“What is it?” the Countess demanded sharply.

Poirot said softly:

“Cocaine. Such a small quantity, it would seem—but enough to be worth thousands of pounds to those willing to pay for it . . . Enough to bring ruin and misery to several hundred people. . . .”

She caught her breath. She cried out:

“And you think that I—but it is not so! I swear to you it is not so! In the past I have amused myself with the jewels, the bibelots, the little curiosities—it all helps one to live, you understand. And what I feel is, why not? Why should one person own a thing more than another?”

“Just what I feel about dogs,” Mr. Higgs chimed in.

“You have no sense of right or wrong,” said Poirot sadly to the Countess.

She went on:

“But drugs—that no! For there one causes misery, pain, degeneration! I had no idea—no faintest idea—that my so charming, so innocent, so delightful little Hell was being used for that purpose!”

“I agree with you about dope,” said Mr. Higgs. “Doping of greyhounds—that’s dirty, that is! I wouldn’t never have nothing to do with anything like that, and I never ’ave ’ad!”

“But you say you believe me, my friend,” implored the Countess.

“But of course I believe you! Have I not taken time and trouble to convict the real organizer of the dope racket. Have I not performed the twelfth Labor of Hercules and brought Cerberus up from Hell to prove my case? For I tell you this, I do not like to see my friends framed—yes, framed—for it was you who were intended to take the rap if things went wrong! It was in your handbag the emeralds would have been found and if any one had been clever enough (like me) to suspect a hiding place in the mouth of a savage dog—eh bien, he is your dog, is he not? Even if he has accepted la petite Alice to the point of obeying her orders also! Yes, you may well open your eyes! From the first I did not like that young lady with her scientific jargon and her coat and skirt with the big pockets. Yes, pockets. Unnatural that any woman should be so disdainful of her appearance! And what does she say to me—that it is fundamentals that count! Aha! what is fundamental is pockets. Pockets in which she can carry drugs and take away jewels—a little exchange easily made whilst she is dancing with her accomplice whom she pretends to regard as a psychological case. Ah, but what a cover! No one suspects the earnest, the scientific psychologist with a medical degree and spectacles. She can smuggle in drugs, and induce her rich patients to form the habit, and put up the money for a nightclub and arrange that it shall be run by someone with—shall we say, a little weakness in her past! But she despises Hercule Poirot, she thinks she can deceive him with her talk of nursery governesses and vests! Eh bien, I am ready for her. The lights go off. Quickly I rise from my table and go to stand by Cerberus. In the darkness I hear her come. She opens his mouth and forces in the package, and I—delicately, unfelt by her, I snip with a tiny pair of scissors a little piece from her sleeve.”

Dramatically he produced a sliver of material.

“You observe—the identical checked tweed—and I will give it to Japp to fit it back where it belongs—and make the arrest—and say how clever once more has been Scotland Yard.”

The Countess Rossakoff stared at him in stupefaction. Suddenly she let out a wail like a foghorn.

“But my Niki—my Niki. This will be terrible for him—” She paused. “Or do you think not?”

“There are a lot of other girls in America,” said Hercule Poirot.

“And but for you his mother would be in prison—in prison—with her hair cut off—sitting in a cell—and smelling of disinfectant! Ah, but you are wonderful—wonderful.”

Surging forward she clasped Poirot in her arms and embraced him with Slavonic fervour. Mr. Higgs looked on appreciatively. The dog Cerberus beat his tail upon the floor.

Into the midst of this scene of rejoicing came the trill of a bell.

“Japp!” exclaimed Poirot, disengaging himself from the Countess’s arms.

“It would be better, perhaps, if I went into the other room,” said the Countess.

She slipped through the connecting door. Poirot started towards the door to the hall.

“Guv’nor,” wheezed Mr. Higgs anxiously, “better look at yourself in the glass, ’adn’t you?”

Poirot did so and recoiled. Lipstick and mascara ornamented his face in a fantastic medley.

“If that’s Mr. Japp from Scotland Yard, ’e’d think the worst—sure to,” said Mr. Higgs.

He added, as the bell pealed again, and Poirot strove feverishly to remove crimson grease from the points of his moustache: “What do yer want me to do—’ook it too? What about this ’ere ’Ell ’Ound?”

“If I remember rightly,” said Hercule Poirot, “Cerberus returned to Hell.”

“Just as you like,” said Mr. Higgs. “As a matter of fact I’ve taken a kind of fancy to ’im . . . Still, ’e’s not the kind I’d like to pinch—not permanent—too noticeable, if you know what I mean. And think what he’d cost me in shin of beef or ’orseflesh! Eats as much as a young lion, I expect.”

“From the Nemean Lion to the Capture of Cerberus,” murmured Poirot. “It is complete.”

VII

A week later Miss Lemon brought a bill to her employer.

“Excuse me, M. Poirot. Is it in order for me to pay this? Leonora, Florist. Red Roses. Eleven pounds, eight shillings and sixpence. Sent to Countess Vera Rossakoff, Hell, 13 End St, WC1.”

As the hue of red roses, so were the cheeks of Hercule Poirot. He blushed, blushed to the eyeballs.

“Perfectly in order, Miss Lemon. A little—er, tribute—to—to an occasion. The Countess’s son has just become engaged in America—to the daughter of his employer, a steel magnate. Red roses are—I seem to remember, her favourite flower.”

“Quite,” said Miss Lemon. “They’re very expensive this time of year.”

Hercule Poirot drew himself up.

“There are moments,” he said, “when one does not economize.”

Humming a little tune, he went out of the door. His step was light, almost sprightly. Miss Lemon stared after him. Her filing system was forgotten. All her feminine instincts were aroused.

“Good gracious,” she murmured. “I wonder . . . Really—at his age! . . . Surely not. . . .”

Taken At The Flood (1948)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Prologue

I

In every club there is a club bore. The Coronation Club was no exception, and the fact that an air raid was in progress made no difference to normal procedure.

Major Porter, late Indian Army, rustled his newspaper and cleared his throat. Every one avoided his eye, but it was no use.

“I see they’ve got the announcement of Gordon Cloade’s death in the Times,” he said. “Discreetly put, of course. On Oct. 5th, result of enemy action. No address given. As a matter of fact it was just round the corner from my little place. One of those big houses on top of Campden Hill. I can tell you it shook me up a bit. I’m a Warden, you know. Cloade had only just got back from the States. He’d been over on that Government Purchase business. Got married while he was over there. A young widow—young enough to be his daughter. Mrs. Underhay. As a matter of fact I knew her first husband out in Nigeria.”

Major Porter paused. Nobody displayed any interest or asked him to continue. Newspapers were held up sedulously in front of faces, but it took more than that to discourage Major Porter. He always had long histories to relate, mostly about people whom nobody knew.

“Interesting,” said Major Porter, firmly, his eyes fixed absently on a pair of extremely pointed patent-leather shoes—a type of foot-wear of which he profoundly disapproved. “As I said, I’m a Warden. Funny business this blast. Never know what it’s going to do. Blew the basement in and ripped off the roof. First floor practically wasn’t touched. Six people in the house. Three servants: married couple and a housemaid, Gordon Cloade, his wife and the wife’s brother. They were all down in the basement except the wife’s brother—ex-Commando fellow—he preferred his own comfortable bedroom on the first floor—and by Jove, he escaped with a few bruises.

The three servants were all killed by blast—Gordon Cloade must have been worth well over a million."

Again Major Porter paused. His eyes had travelled up from the patent-leather shoes—striped trousers—black coat—egg-shaped head and colossal moustaches. Foreign, of course! That explained the shoes. "Really," thought Major Porter, "what's the club coming to? Can't get away from foreigners even here." This separate train of thought ran alongside his narrative.

The fact that the foreigner in question appeared to be giving him full attention did not abate Major Porter's prejudice in the slightest.

"She can't be more than about twenty-five," he went on. "And a widow for the second time. Or at any rate—that's what she thinks…."

He paused, hoping for curiosity—for comment. Not getting it, he nevertheless went doggedly on:

"Matter of fact I've got my own ideas about that. Queer business. As I told you, I knew her first husband, Underhay. Nice fellow—district commissioner in Nigeria at one time. Absolutely dead keen on his job—first-class chap. He married this girl in Cape Town. She was out there with some touring company. Very down on her luck, and pretty and helpless and all that. Listened to poor old Underhay raving about his district and the great wide-open spaces—and breathed out, 'Wasn't it wonderful?' and how she wanted 'to get away from everything.' Well, she married him and got away from it. He was very much in love, poor fellow—but the thing didn't tick over from the first. She hated the bush and was terrified of the natives and was bored to death. Her idea of life was to go round to the local and meet the theatrical crowd and talk shop. Solitude à deux in the jungle wasn't at all her cup of tea. Mind you, I never met her myself—I heard all this from poor old Underhay. It hit him pretty hard. He did the decent thing, sent her home and agreed to give her a divorce. It was just after that I met him. He was all on edge and in the mood when a man's got to talk. He was a funny old-fashioned kind of chap in some ways—an R.C., and he didn't care for divorce. He said to me, 'There are other ways of giving a woman her freedom.' 'Now, look here, old boy,' I said, 'don't go doing anything foolish. No woman in the world is worth putting a bullet through your head.'

"He said that that wasn't his idea at all. 'But I'm a lonely man,' he said. 'Got no relations to bother about me. If a report of my death gets back that will make Rosaleen a widow, which is what she wants.' 'And what about you?' I said. 'Well,' he said, 'maybe a Mr. Enoch Arden will turn up somewhere a thousand miles or so away and start life anew.' 'Might be awkward for her some day,' I warned him. 'Oh, no,' he says, 'I'd play the game. Robert Underhay would be dead all right.'

"Well, I didn't think any more of it, but six months later I heard that Underhay had died of fever up in the bush somewhere. His natives were a trustworthy lot and they came back with a good circumstantial tale and a few last words scrawled in Underhay's writing saying they'd done all they could for him, and he was afraid he was pegging out, and praising up his headman. That man was devoted to him and so were all the others. Whatever he told them to swear to, they would swear to. So there it is… Maybe Underhay's buried up country in the midst of equatorial Africa but maybe he isn't—and if he isn't Mrs. Gordon Cloade may get a shock one day. And serve her right, I say. I never met her, but I know the sound of a little gold digger! She broke up poor old Underhay all right. It's an interesting story."

Major Porter looked round rather wistfully for confirmation of this assertion. He met two bored and fishy stares, the half-averted gaze of young Mr. Mellon and the polite attention of M. Hercule Poirot.

Then the newspaper rustled and a grey-haired man with a singularly impassive face rose quietly from his armchair by the fire and went out.

Major Porter's jaw dropped, and young Mr. Mellon gave a faint whistle.

"Now you've done it!" he remarked. "Know who that was?"

"God bless my soul," said Major Porter in some agitation. "Of course. I don't know him intimately but we are acquainted…Jeremy Cloade, isn't it, Gordon Cloade's brother? Upon my word, how extremely unfortunate! If I'd had any idea—"

"He's a solicitor," said young Mr. Mellon. "Bet he sues you for slander or defamation of character or something."

For young Mr. Mellon enjoyed creating alarm and despondency in such places as it was not forbidden by the Defence of the Realm Act.

Major Porter continued to repeat in an agitated manner:

"Most unfortunate. Most unfortunate!"

"It will be all over Warmsley Heath by this evening," said Mr. Mellon. "That's where all the Cloades hang out. They'll sit up late discussing what action to take."

But at that moment the All Clear sounded, and young Mr. Mellon stopped being malicious, and tenderly piloted his friend Hercule Poirot out into the street.

"Terrible atmosphere, these clubs," he said. "The most crashing collection of old bores. Porter's easily the worst, though. His description of the Indian rope trick takes three-quarters of an hour, and he knows everybody whose mother ever passed through Poona!"

This was in the autumn of 1944. It was in late spring, 1946, that Hercule Poirot received a visit.

II

Hercule Poirot was sitting at his neat writing desk on a pleasant May morning when his manservant George approached him and murmured deferentially:

"There is a lady, sir, asking to see you."

"What kind of a lady?" Poirot asked cautiously.

He always enjoyed the meticulous accuracy of George's descriptions.

"She would be aged between forty and fifty, I should say, sir. Untidy and somewhat artistic in appearance. Good walking shoes, brogues. A tweed coat and skirt—but a lace blouse. Some questionable Egyptian beads and a blue chiffon scarf."

Poirot shuddered slightly.

"I do not think," he said, "that I wish to see her."

"Shall I tell her, sir, that you are indisposed?"

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

"You have already, I gather, told her that I am engaged on important business and cannot be disturbed?"

George coughed again.

"She said, sir, that she had come up from the country specially, and did not mind how long she waited."

Poirot sighed.

"One should never struggle against the inevitable," he said. "If a middle-aged lady wearing sham Egyptian beads has made up her mind to see the famous Hercule Poirot, and has come up from the country to do so, nothing will deflect her. She will sit there in the hall till she gets her way. Show her in, George."

George retreated, returning presently to announce formally:

"Mrs. Cloade."

The figure in the worn tweeds and the floating scarf came in with a beaming face. She advanced to Poirot with an outstretched hand, all her bead necklaces swinging and clinking.

“M. Poirot,” she said, “I have come to you under spirit guidance.”

Poirot blinked slightly.

“Indeed, Madame. Perhaps you will take a seat and tell me—”

He got no further.

“Both ways, M. Poirot. With the automatic writing and with the ouija board. It was the night before last. Madame Elvary (a wonderful woman she is) and I were using the board. We got the same initials repeatedly. H.P. H.P. H.P. Of course I did not get the true significance at once. It takes, you know, a little time. One cannot, on this earthly plane, see clearly. I racked my brains thinking of someone with those initials. I knew it must connect up with the last séance—really a most poignant one, but it was some time before I got it. And then I bought a copy of Picture Post (Spirit guidance again, you see, because usually I buy the New Statesman) and there you were—a picture of you, and described, and on account of what you had done. It is wonderful, don’t you think, M. Poirot, how everything has a purpose? Clearly, you are the person appointed by the Guides to elucidate this matter.”

Poirot surveyed her thoughtfully. Strangely enough the thing that really caught his attention was that she had remarkably shrewd light-blue eyes. They gave point, as it were, to her rambling method of approach.

“And what, Mrs.—Cloade—is that right?” He frowned. “I seem to have heard the name some time ago—”

She nodded vehemently.

“My poor brother-in-law—Gordon. Immensely rich and often mentioned in the press. He was killed in the Blitz over a year ago—a great blow to all of us. My husband is his younger brother. He is a doctor. Dr. Lionel Cloade… Of course,” she added, lowering her voice, “he has no idea that I am consulting you. He would not approve. Doctors, I find, have a very materialistic outlook. The spiritual seems to be strangely hidden from them.

They pin their faith on Science—but what I say is…what is Science—what can it do?”

There seemed, to Hercule Poirot, to be no answer to the question other than a meticulous and painstaking description embracing Pasteur, Lister, Humphry Davy’s safety lamp—the convenience of electricity in the home and several hundred other kindred items. But that, naturally, was not the answer Mrs. Lionel Cloade wanted. In actual fact her question, like so many questions, was not really a question at all. It was a mere rhetorical gesture.

Hercule Poirot contented himself with inquiring in a practical manner:

“In what way do you believe I can help you, Mrs. Cloade?”

“Do you believe in the reality of the spirit world, M. Poirot?”

“I am a good Catholic,” said Poirot cautiously.

Mrs. Cloade waved aside the Catholic faith with a smile of pity.

“Blind! The Church is blind—prejudiced, foolish—not welcoming the reality and beauty of the world that lies behind this one.”

“At twelve o’clock,” said Hercule Poirot, “I have an important appointment.”

It was a well-timed remark. Mrs. Cloade leaned forward.

“I must come to the point at once. Would it be possible for you, M. Poirot, to find a missing person?”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“It might be possible—yes,” he replied cautiously. “But the police, my dear Mrs. Cloade, could do so a great deal more easily than I could. They have all the necessary machinery.”

Mrs. Cloade waved away the police as she had waved away the Catholic Church.

“No, M. Poirot—it is to you I have been guided—by those beyond the veil. Now listen. My brother Gordon married some weeks before his death, a young widow—a Mrs. Underhay. Her first husband (poor child, such a grief to her) was reported dead in Africa. A mysterious country—Africa.”

“A mysterious continent,” Poirot corrected her. “Possibly. What part—”

She swept on.

“Central Africa. The home of voodoo, of the zombie—”

“The zombie is in the West Indies.”

Mrs. Cloade swept on:

“—of black magic—of strange and secret practices—a country where a man could disappear and never be heard of again.”

“Possibly, possibly,” said Poirot. “But the same is true of Piccadilly Circus.”

Mrs. Cloade waved away Piccadilly Circus.

“Twice lately, M. Poirot, a communication has come through from a spirit who gives his name as Robert. The message was the same each time. Not dead…We were puzzled, we knew no Robert. Asking for further guidance we got this. ‘R.U. R.U. R.U.—then Tell R. Tell R.’ ‘Tell Robert?’ we asked. ‘No, from Robert. R.U.’ ‘What does the U. stand for?’ Then, M. Poirot, the most significant answer came. ‘Little Boy Blue. Little Boy Blue. Ha ha ha!’ You see?”

“No,” said Poirot, “I do not.”

She looked at him pityingly.

“The nursery rhyme Little Boy Blue. ‘Under the Haycock fast asleep’—Underhay—you see?”

Poirot nodded. He forbore to ask why, if the name Robert could be spelt out, the name Underhay could not have been treated the same way, and why it had been necessary to resort to a kind of cheap Secret service spy jargon.

“And my sister-in-law’s name is Rosaleen,” finished Mrs. Cloade triumphantly. “You see? Confusing all these Rs. But the meaning is quite plain. ‘Tell Rosaleen that Robert Underhay is not dead.’”

“Aha, and did you tell her?”

Mrs. Cloade looked slightly taken aback.

“Er—well—no. You see, I mean—well, people are so sceptical. Rosaleen, I am sure, would be so. And then, poor child, it might upset her—wondering, you know, where he was—and what he was doing.”

“Besides projecting his voice through the ether? Quite so. A curious method, surely, of announcing his safety?”

“Ah, M. Poirot, you are not an initiate. And how do we know what the circumstances are? Poor Captain Underhay (or is it Major Underhay) may be a prisoner somewhere in the dark interior of Africa. But if he could be found, M. Poirot. If he could be restored to his dear young Rosaleen. Think of her happiness! Oh, M. Poirot, I have been sent to you—surely, surely you will not refuse the behest of the spiritual world.”

Poirot looked at her reflectively.

“My fees,” he said softly, “are very expensive. I may say enormously expensive! And the task you suggest would not be easy.”

“Oh dear—but surely—it is most unfortunate. I and my husband are very badly off—very badly off indeed. Actually my own plight is worse than my dear husband knows. I bought some shares—under spirit guidance—and so far they have proved very disappointing—in fact, quite alarming. They have gone right down and are now, I gather, practically unsaleable.”

She looked at him with dismayed blue eyes.

“I have not dared to tell my husband. I simply tell you in order to explain how I am situated. But surely, dear M. Poirot, to reunite a young husband and wife—it is such a noble mission—”

“Nobility, chère Madame, will not pay steamer and railway and air travel fares. Nor will it cover the cost of long telegrams and cables, and the interrogations of witnesses.”

“But if he is found—if Captain Underhay is found alive and well—then—well, I think I may safely say that, once that was accomplished, there—there would be no difficulty about—er—reimbursing you.”

“Ah, he is rich, then, this Captain Underhay?”

“No. Well, no…But I can assure you—I can give you my word—that—that the money situation will not present difficulties.”

Slowly Poirot shook his head.

“I am sorry, Madame. The answer is No.”

He had a little difficulty in getting her to accept that answer.

When she had finally gone away, he stood lost in thought, frowning to himself. He remembered now why the name of Cloade was familiar to him. The conversation at the club the day of the air raid came back to him. The booming boring voice of Major Porter, going on and on, telling a story to which nobody wanted to listen.

He remembered the rustle of a newspaper and Major Porter’s suddenly dropped jaw and expression of consternation.

But what worried him was trying to make up his mind about the eager middle-aged lady who had just left him. The glib spiritualistic patter, the vagueness, the floating scarves, the chains and amulets jingling round her neck—and finally, slightly at variance with all this, that sudden shrewd glint in a pair of pale-blue eyes.

“Just why exactly did she come to me?” he said to himself. “And what, I wonder, has been going on in”—he looked down at the card on his desk—“Warmsley Vale?”

III

It was exactly five days later that he saw a small paragraph in an evening paper—it referred to the death of a man called Enoch Arden—at Warmsley Vale, a small old-world village about three miles from the popular Warmsley Heath Golf Course.

Hercule Poirot said to himself again:

“I wonder what has been going on in Warmsley Vale….”

BOOK I

One

I

Warmsley Heath consists of a golf course, two hotels, some very expensive modern villas giving on to the golf course, a row of what were, before the war, luxury shops, and a railway station.

Emerging from the railway station, a main road roars its way to London on your left—to your right a small path across a field is signposted

Footpath to Warmsley Vale.

Warmsley Vale, tucked away amongst wooded hills, is as unlike Warmsley Heath as well can be. It is in essence a microscopic old-fashioned market town now degenerated into a village. It has a main street of Georgian houses, several pubs, a few unfashionable shops and a general air of being a hundred and fifty instead of twenty-eight miles from London.

Its occupants one and all unite in despising the mushroom growth of Warmsley Heath.

On the outskirts are some charming houses with pleasant old-world gardens. It was to one of these houses, the White House, that Lynn Marchmont returned in the early spring of 1946 when she was demobbed from the Wrens.

On her third morning she looked out of her bedroom window, across the untidy lawn to the elms in the meadow beyond, and sniffed the air happily. It was a gentle grey morning with a smell of soft wet earth. The kind of smell that she had been missing for the past two years and a half.

Wonderful to be home again, wonderful to be here in her own little bedroom which she had thought of so often and so nostalgically whilst she had been overseas. Wonderful to be out of uniform, to be able to get into a tweed skirt and a jumper—even if the moths had been rather too industrious during the war years!

It was good to be out of the Wrens and a free woman again, although she had really enjoyed her overseas service very much. The work had been reasonably interesting, there had been parties, plenty of fun, but there had also been the irksomeness of routine and the feeling of being herded together with her companions which had sometimes made her feel desperately anxious to escape.

It was then, during the long scorching summer out East, that she had thought so longingly of Warmsley Vale and the shabby cool pleasant house, and of dear Mums.

Lynn both loved her mother and was irritated by her. Far away from home, she had loved her still and had forgotten the irritation, or remembered it only with an additional homesick pang. Darling Mums, so completely maddening! What she would not have given to have heard Mums enunciate one cliché in her sweet complaining voice. Oh, to be at home again and never, never to have to leave home again!

And now here she was, out of the service, free, and back at the White House. She had been back three days. And already a curious dissatisfied restlessness was creeping over her. It was all the same—almost too much all the same—the house and Mums and Rowley and the farm and the family. The thing that was different and that ought not to be different was herself….

“Darling…” Mrs. Marchmont’s thin cry came up the stairs. “Shall I bring my girl a nice tray in bed?”

Lynn called out sharply:

“Of course not. I’m coming down.”

“And why,” she thought, “has Mums got to say ‘my girl.’ It’s so silly!”

She ran downstairs and entered the dining room. It was not a very good breakfast. Already Lynn was realizing the undue proportion of time and interest taken by the search for food. Except for a rather unreliable woman who came four mornings a week, Mrs. Marchmont was alone in the house, struggling with cooking and cleaning. She had been nearly forty when Lynn was born and her health was not good. Also Lynn realized with some dismay how their financial position had changed. The small but adequate fixed income which had kept them going comfortably before the war was now almost halved by taxation. Rates, expenses, wages had all gone up.

“Oh! brave new world,” thought Lynn grimly. Her eyes rested lightly on the columns of the daily paper.

“Ex-W.A.A.F. seeks post where initiative and drive will be appreciated.” “Former W.R.E.N. seeks post where organizing ability and authority are needed.”

Enterprise, initiative, command, those were the commodities offered. But what was wanted? People who could cook and clean, or write decent shorthand. Plodding people who knew a routine and could give good service.

Well, it didn’t affect her. Her way ahead lay clear. Marriage to her cousin Rowley Cloade. They had got engaged seven years ago, just before the outbreak of war. Almost as long as she could remember, she had meant to marry Rowley. His choice of a farming life had been acquiesced in readily by her. A good life—not exciting perhaps, and with plenty of hard work, but they both loved the open air and the care of animals.

Not that their prospects were quite what they had been—Uncle Gordon had always promised….

Mrs. Marchmont’s voice broke in plaintively apposite:

“It’s been the most dreadful blow to us all, Lynn darling, as I wrote you. Gordon had only been in England two days. We hadn’t even seen him. If only he hadn’t stayed in London. If he’d come straight down here.”

II

“Yes, if only….”

Far away, Lynn had been shocked and grieved by the news of her uncle’s death, but the true significance of it was only now beginning to come home to her.

For as long as she could remember, her life, all their lives, had been dominated by Gordon Cloade. The rich, childless man had taken all his relatives completely under his wing.

Even Rowley…Rowley and his friend Johnnie Vavasour had started in partnership on the farm. Their capital was small, but they had been full of hope and energy. And Gordon Cloade had approved.

To her he had said more.

“You can’t get anywhere in farming without capital. But the first thing to find out is whether these boys have really got the will and the energy to make a go of it. If I set them up now, I wouldn’t know that—maybe for years. If they’ve got the right stuff in them, if I’m satisfied that their side of it is all right, well then, Lynn, you needn’t worry. I’ll finance them on the proper scale. So don’t think badly of your prospects, my girl. You’re just the wife Rowley needs. But keep what I’ve told you under your hat.”

Well, she had done that, but Rowley himself had sensed his uncle’s benevolent interest. It was up to him to prove to the old boy that Rowley and Johnnie were a good investment for money.

Yes, they had all depended on Gordon Cloade. Not that any of the family had been spongers or idlers. Jeremy Cloade was senior partner in a firm of solicitors, Lionel Cloade was in practice as a doctor.

But behind the workaday life was the comforting assurance of money in the background. There was never any need to stint or to save. The future was assured. Gordon Cloade, a childless widower, would see to that. He had told them all, more than once, that that was so.

His widowed sister, Adela Marchmont, had stayed on at the White House when she might, perhaps, have moved into a smaller, more labour-saving house. Lynn went to first-class schools. If the war had not come, she would have been able to take any kind of expensive training she had pleased. Cheques from Uncle Gordon flowed in with comfortable regularity to provide little luxuries.

Everything had been so settled, so secure. And then had come Gordon Cloade’s wholly unexpected marriage.

“Of course, darling,” Adela went on, “we were all flabbergasted. If there was one thing that seemed quite certain, it was that Gordon would never marry again. It wasn’t, you see, as though he hadn’t got plenty of family ties.”

Yes, thought Lynn, plenty of family. Sometimes, possibly, rather too much family?

“He was so kind always,” went on Mrs. Marchmont. “Though perhaps just a weeny bit tyrannical on occasions. He never liked the habit of dining off a polished table. Always insisted on my sticking to the old-fashioned tablecloths. In fact, he sent me the most beautiful Venetian lace ones when he was in Italy.”

“It certainly paid to fall in with his wishes,” said Lynn dryly. She added with some curiosity, “How did he meet this—second wife? You never told me in your letters.”

“Oh, my dear, on some boat or plane or other. Coming from South America to New York, I believe. After all those years! And after all those secretaries and typists and housekeepers and everything.”

Lynn smiled. Ever since she could remember, Gordon Cloade’s secretaries, housekeepers, and office staff had been subjected to the closest scrutiny and suspicion.

She asked curiously, “She’s good-looking, I suppose?”

“Well, dear,” said Adela, “I think myself she has rather a silly face.”

“You’re not a man, Mums!”

"Of course," Mrs. Marchmont went on, "the poor girl was blitzed and had shock from blast and was really frightfully ill and all that, and it's my opinion she's never really quite recovered. She's a mass of nerves, if you know what I mean. And really, sometimes, she looks quite half-witted. I don't feel she could ever have made much of a companion for poor Gordon.

Lynn smiled. She doubted whether Gordon Cloade had chosen to marry a woman years younger than himself for her intellectual companionship.

"And then, dear," Mrs. Marchmont lowered her voice, "I hate to say it, but of course she's not a lady!"

"What an expression, Mums! What does that matter nowadays?"

"It still matters in the country, dear," said Adela placidly. "I simply mean that she isn't exactly one of us!"

"Poor little devil!"

"Really, Lynn, I don't know what you mean. We have all been most careful to be kind and polite and to welcome her amongst us for Gordon's sake."

"She's at Furrowbank, then?" Lynn asked curiously.

"Yes, naturally. Where else was there for her to go when she came out of the nursing home? The doctors said she must be out of London. She's at Furrowbank with her brother."

"What's he like?" Lynn asked.

"A dreadful young man!" Mrs. Marchmont paused, and then added with a good deal of intensity: "Rude."

A momentary flicker of sympathy crossed Lynn's mind. She thought: "I bet I'd be rude in his place!"

She asked: "What's his name?"

"Hunter. David Hunter. Irish, I believe. Of course they are not people one has ever heard of. She was a widow—a Mrs. Underhay. One doesn't wish to be uncharitable, but one can't help asking oneself—what kind of a widow would be likely to be travelling about from South America in wartime? One can't help feeling, you know, that she was just looking for a rich husband."

"In which case, she didn't look in vain," remarked Lynn.

Mrs. Marchmont sighed.

"It seems so extraordinary. Gordon was such a shrewd man always. And it wasn't, I mean, that women hadn't tried. That last secretary but one, for instance. Really quite blatant. She was very efficient, I believe, but he had to get rid of her."

Lynn said vaguely: "I suppose there's always a Waterloo."

"Sixty-two," said Mrs. Marchmont. "A very dangerous age. And a war, I imagine, is unsettling. But I can't tell you what a shock it was when we got his letter from New York."

"What did it say exactly?"

"He wrote to Frances—I really can't think why. Perhaps he imagined that owing to her upbringing she might be more sympathetic. He said that we'd probably be surprised to hear that he was married. It had all been rather sudden, but he was sure we should all soon grow very fond of Rosaleen (such a very theatrical name, don't you think, dear? I mean definitely rather bogus). She had had a very sad life, he said, and had gone through a lot although she was so young. Really it was wonderful the plucky way she had stood up to life."

"Quite a well-known gambit," murmured Lynn.

"Oh, I know. I do agree. One has heard it so many times. But one would really think that Gordon with all his experience—still, there it is. She has the most enormous eyes—dark blue and what they call put in with a smutty finger."

"Attractive?"

"Oh, yes, she is certainly very pretty. It's not the kind of prettiness I admire."

"It never is," said Lynn with a wry smile.

"No, dear. Really, men—but well, there's no accounting for men! Even the most well-balanced of them do the most incredibly foolish things! Gordon's letter went on to say that we mustn't think for a moment that this would mean any loosening of old ties. He still considered us all his special responsibility."

"But he didn't," said Lynn, "make a will after his marriage?"

Mrs. Marchmont shook her head.

"The last will he made was in 1940. I don't know any details, but he gave us to understand at the time that we were all taken care of by it if anything should happen to him. That will, of course, was revoked by his marriage. I suppose he would have made a new will when he got home—but there just wasn't time. He was killed practically the day after he landed in this country."

"And so she—Rosaleen—gets everything?"

"Yes. The old will was invalidated by his marriage."

Lynn was silent. She was not more mercenary than most, but she would not have been human if she had not resented the new state of affairs. It was not, she felt, at all what Gordon Cloade himself would have envisaged. The bulk of his fortune he might have left to his young wife, but certain provisions he would certainly have made for the family he had encouraged to depend upon him. Again and again he had urged them not to save, not to make provision for the future. She had heard him say to Jeremy, "You'll be a rich man when I die." To her mother he had often said, "Don't worry, Adela. I'll always look after Lynn—you know that, and I'd hate you to leave this house—it's your home. Send all the bills for repairs to me." Rowley he had encouraged to take up farming. Antony, Jeremy's son, he had insisted should go into the Guards and he had always made him a handsome allowance. Lionel Cloade had been encouraged to follow up certain lines of medical research that were not immediately profitable and to let his practice run down.

Lynn's thoughts were broken into. Dramatically, and with a trembling lip, Mrs. Marchmont produced a sheaf of bills.

"And look at all these," she wailed. "What am I to do? What on earth am I to do, Lynn? The bank manager wrote me only this morning that I'm overdrawn. I don't see how I can be. I've been so careful. But it seems my investments just aren't producing what they used to. Increased taxation he says. And all these yellow things, War Damage Insurance or something—one has to pay them whether one wants to or not."

Lynn took the bills and glanced through them. There were no records of extravagance amongst them. They were for slates replaced on the roof, the mending of fences, replacement of a worn-out kitchen boiler—a new main water pipe. They amounted to a considerable sum.

Mrs. Marchmont said piteously:

"I suppose I ought to move from here. But where could I go? There isn't a small house anywhere—there just isn't such a thing. Oh, I don't want to worry you with all this, Lynn. Not just as soon as you've come home. But I don't know what to do. I really don't."

Lynn looked at her mother. She was over sixty. She had never been a very strong woman. During the war she had taken in evacuees from London, had cooked and cleaned for them, had worked with the W.V.S., made jam, helped with school meals. She had worked fourteen hours a day in contrast to a pleasant easy life before the war. She was now, as Lynn saw, very near a breakdown. Tired out and frightened of the future.

A slow quiet anger rose in Lynn. She said slowly:

"Couldn't this Rosaleen—help?"

Mrs. Marchmont flushed.

“We’ve no right to anything—anything at all.”

Lynn demurred.

“I think you’ve a moral right. Uncle Gordon always helped.”

Mrs. Marchmont shook her head. She said:

“It wouldn’t be very nice, dear, to ask favours—not of someone one doesn’t like very much. And anyway that brother of hers would never let her give away a penny!”

And she added, heroism giving place to pure female cattiness: “If he really is her brother, that is to say!”

Two

Frances Cloade looked thoughtfully across the dinner table at her husband.

Frances was forty-eight. She was one of those lean greyhound women who look well in tweeds. There was a rather arrogant ravaged beauty about her face which had no makeup except a little carelessly applied lipstick. Jeremy Cloade was a spare grey-haired man of sixty-three, with a dry expressionless face.

It was, this evening, even more expressionless than usual.

His wife registered the fact with a swift flashing glance.

A fifteen-year-old girl shuffled round the table, handing the dishes. Her agonized gaze was fixed on Frances. If Frances frowned, she nearly dropped something, a look of approval set her beaming.

It was noted enviously in Warmsley Vale that if any one had servants it would be Frances Cloade. She did not bribe them with extravagant wages, and she was exacting as to performance—but her warm approval of endeavour and her infectious energy and drive made of domestic service something creative and personal. She had been so used to being waited on all her life that she took it for granted without self-consciousness, and she had the same appreciation of a good cook or a good parlourmaid as she would have had for a good pianist.

Frances Cloade had been the only daughter of Lord Edward Trenton, who had trained his horses in the neighbourhood of Warmsley Heath. Lord Edward’s final bankruptcy was realized by those in the know to be a merciful escape from worse things. There had been rumours of horses that had signally failed to stay at unexpected moments, other rumours of inquiries by the Stewards of the Jockey Club. But Lord Edward had escaped with his reputation only lightly tarnished and had reached an arrangement with his creditors which permitted him to live exceedingly comfortably in the South of France. And for these unexpected blessings he had to thank the shrewdness and special exertions of his solicitor, Jeremy Cloade. Cloade had done a good deal more than a solicitor usually does for a client, and had even advanced guarantees of his own. He had made it clear that he had a deep admiration for Frances Trenton, and in due course, when her father's affairs had been satisfactorily wound up, Frances became Mrs. Jeremy Cloade.

What she had felt about it no one had ever known. All that could be said was that she had kept her side of the bargain admirably. She had been an efficient and loyal wife to Jeremy, a careful mother to his son, had forwarded Jeremy's interests in every way and had never once suggested by word or deed that the match was anything but a freewill impulse on her part.

In response the Cloade family had an enormous respect and admiration for Frances. They were proud of her, they deferred to her judgment—but they never felt really quite intimate with her.

What Jeremy Cloade thought of his marriage nobody knew, because nobody ever did know what Jeremy Cloade thought or felt. "A dry stick" was what people said about Jeremy. His reputation both as a man and a lawyer was very high. Cloade, Brunskill and Cloade never touched any questionable legal business. They were not supposed to be brilliant but were considered very sound. The firm prospered and the Jeremy Cloades lived in a handsome Georgian house just off the Market Place with a big old-fashioned walled garden behind it where the pear trees in spring showed a sea of white blossom.

It was to a room overlooking the garden at the back of the house that the husband and wife went when they rose from the dinner table. Edna, the fifteen-year-old, brought in coffee, breathing excitedly and adenoidally.

Frances poured a little coffee into the cup. It was strong and hot. She said to Edna, crisply and approvingly:

"Excellent, Edna."

Edna went crimson with pleasure and went out marvelling nevertheless at what some people liked. Coffee, in Edna's opinion, ought to be a pale cream colour, ever so sweet, with lots of milk!

In the room overlooking the garden, the Cloades drank their coffee, black and without sugar. They had talked in a desultory way during dinner, of acquaintances met, of Lynn's return, of the prospects of farming in the near future, but now, alone together, they were silent.

Frances leaned back in her chair, watching her husband. He was quite oblivious of her regard. His right hand stroked his upper lip. Although Jeremy Cloade did not know it himself the gesture was a characteristic one and coincided with inner perturbation. Frances had not observed it very often. Once when Antony, their son, had been seriously ill as a child; once when waiting for a jury to consider their verdict; at the outbreak of war, waiting to hear the irrevocable words over the wireless; on the eve of Antony's departure after embarkation leave.

Frances thought a little while before she spoke. Their married life had been happy, but never intimate in so far as the spoken word went. She had respected Jeremy's reserves and he hers. Even when the telegram had come announcing Antony's death on active service, they had neither of them broken down.

He had opened it, then he had looked up at her. She had said, "Is it—?"

He had bowed his head, then crossed and put the telegram into her outstretched hand.

They had stood there quite silently for a while. Then Jeremy had said: "I wish I could help you, my dear." And she had answered, her voice steady, her tears unshed, conscious only of the terrible emptiness and aching: "It's just as bad for you." He had patted her shoulder: "Yes," he said. "Yes…" Then he had moved towards the door, walking a little awry, yet stiffly, suddenly an old man…saying as he did so, "There's nothing to be said—nothing to be said…."

She had been grateful to him, passionately grateful, for understanding so well, and had been torn with pity for him, seeing him suddenly turn into an old man. With the loss of her boy, something had hardened in her—some ordinary common kindness had dried up. She was more efficient, more energetic than ever—people became sometimes a little afraid of her ruthless common sense….

Jeremy Cloade’s finger moved along his upper lip again—irresolutely, searching. And crisply, across the room, Frances spoke.

“Is anything the matter, Jeremy?”

He started. His coffee cup almost slipped from his hand. He recovered himself, put it firmly down on the tray. Then he looked across at her.

“What do you mean, Frances?”

“I’m asking you if anything is the matter?”

“What should be the matter?”

“It would be foolish to guess. I would rather you told me.”

She spoke without emotion in a businesslike way.

He said unconvincingly:

“There is nothing the matter—”

She did not answer. She merely waited inquiringly. His denial, it seemed, she put aside as negligible. He looked at her uncertainly.

And just for a moment the imperturbable mask of his grey face slipped, and she caught a glimpse of such turbulent agony that she almost exclaimed aloud. It was only for a moment but she didn’t doubt what she had seen.

She said quietly and unemotionally:

“I think you had better tell me—”

He sighed—a deep unhappy sigh.

“You will have to know, of course,” he said, “sooner or later.”

And he added what was to her a very astonishing phrase.

“I’m afraid you’ve made a bad bargain, Frances.”

She went right past an implication she did not understand to attack hard facts.

“What is it,” she said; “money?”

She did not know why she put money first. There had been no special signs of financial stringency other than were natural to the times. They were short staffed at the office with more business than they could cope with, but that was the same everywhere and in the last month they had got back some of their people released from the Army. It might just as easily have been illness that he was concealing—his colour had been bad lately, and he had been overworked and overtired. But nevertheless Frances’ instinct went towards money, and it seemed she was right.

Her husband nodded.

“I see.” She was silent a moment, thinking. She herself did not really care about money at all—but she knew that Jeremy was quite incapable of realizing that. Money meant to him a four-square world—stability—obligations—a definite place and status in life.

Money to her was a toy tossed into one’s lap to play with. She had been born and bred in an atmosphere of financial instability. There had been wonderful times when the horses had done what was expected of them. There had been difficult times when the tradesmen wouldn’t give credit and Lord Edward had been forced to ignominious straits to avoid the bailiffs on the front doorstep. Once they had lived on dry bread for a week and sent all the servants away. They had had the bailiffs in the house for three weeks once when Frances was a child. She had found the bum in question very agreeable to play with and full of stories of his own little girl.

If one had no money one simply scrounged, or went abroad, or lived on one's friends and relations for a bit. Or somebody tided you over with a loan….

But looking across at her husband Frances realized that in the Cloade world you didn't do that kind of thing. You didn't beg or borrow or live on other people. (And conversely you didn't expect them to beg or borrow or live off you!)

Frances felt terribly sorry for Jeremy and a little guilty about being so unperturbed herself. She took refuge in practicality.

"Shall we have to sell up everything? Is the firm going smash?"

Jeremy Cloade winced, and she realized she had been too matter-of-fact.

"My dear," she said gently, "do tell me. I can't go on guessing."

Cloade said stiffly, "We went through rather a bad crisis two years ago. Young Williams, you remember, absconded. We had some difficulty getting straight again. Then there were certain complications arising out of the position in the Far East after Singapore—"

She interrupted him.

"Never mind the whys—they are so unimportant. You were in a jam. And you haven't been able to snap out of it?"

He said, "I relied on Gordon. Gordon would have put things straight."

She gave a quick impatient sigh.

"Of course. I don't want to blame the poor man—after all, it's only human nature to lose your head about a pretty woman. And why on earth shouldn't he marry again if he wanted to? But it was unfortunate his being killed in that air raid before he'd settled anything or made a proper will or adjusted his affairs. The truth is that one never believes for a minute, no matter what danger you're in, that you yourself are going to be killed. The bomb is always going to hit the other person!"

“Apart from his loss, and I was very fond of Gordon—and proud of him too,” said Gordon Cloade’s elder brother, “his death was a catastrophe for me. It came at a moment—”

He stopped.

“Shall we be bankrupt?” Frances asked with intelligent interest.

Jeremy Cloade looked at her almost despairingly. Though she did not realize it, he could have coped much better with tears and alarm. This cool detached practical interest defeated him utterly.

He said harshly, “It’s a good deal worse than that….”

He watched her as she sat quite still, thinking over that. He said to himself, “In another minute I shall have to tell her. She’ll know what I am…She’ll have to know. Perhaps she won’t believe it at first.”

Frances Cloade sighed and sat up straight in her big armchair.

“I see,” she said. “Embezzlement. Or if that isn’t the right word, that kind of thing…like young Williams.”

“Yes, but this time—you don’t understand—I’m responsible. I’ve used trust funds that were committed to my charge. So far, I’ve covered my tracks—”

“But now it’s all going to come out?”

“Unless I can get the necessary money—quickly.”

The shame he felt was the worst he had known in his life. How would she take it?

At the moment she was taking it very calmly. But then, he thought, Frances would never make a scene. Never reproach or upbraid.

Her hand to her cheek, she was frowning.

“It’s so stupid,” she said, “that I haven’t got any money of my own at all….”

He said stiffly, “There is your marriage settlement, but—”

She said absently, “But I suppose that’s gone too.”

He was silent. Then he said with difficulty, in his dry voice: “I’m sorry, Frances. More sorry than I can say. You made a bad bargain.”

She looked up sharply.

“You said that before. What do you mean by that?”

Jeremy said stiffly:

“When you were good enough to marry me, you had the right to expect—well, integrity—and a life free from sordid anxieties.”

She was looking at him with complete astonishment.

“Really, Jeremy! What on earth do you think I married you for?”

He smiled slightly.

“You have always been a most loyal and devoted wife, my dear. But I can hardly flatter myself that you would have accepted me in—er—different circumstances.”

She stared at him and suddenly burst out laughing.

“You funny old stick! What a wonderful novelettish mind you must have behind that legal façade! Do you really think that I married you as the price of saving Father from the wolves—or the Stewards of the Jockey Club, et cetera?”

“You were very fond of your father, Frances.”

“I was devoted to Daddy! He was terribly attractive and the greatest fun to live with! But I always knew he was a bad hat. And if you think that I’d sell myself to the family solicitor in order to save him from getting what was always coming to him, then you’ve never understood the first thing about me. Never!”

She stared at him. Extraordinary, she thought, to have been married to someone for over twenty years and not have known what was going on in their minds. But how could one know when it was a mind so different from one’s own? A romantic mind, of course, well camouflaged, but essentially romantic. She thought: “All those old Stanley Weymans in his bedroom. I might have known from them! The poor idiotic darling!”

Aloud she said:

“I married you because I was in love with you, of course.”

“In love with me? But what could you see in me?”

“If you ask me that, Jeremy, I really don’t know. You were such a change, so different from all Father’s crowd. You never talked about horses for one thing. You’ve no idea how sick I was of horses—and what the odds were likely to be for the Newmarket Cup! You came to dinner one night—do you remember?—and I sat next to you and asked you what bimetallism was, and you told me—really told me! It took the whole of dinner—six courses—we were in funds at the moment and had a French chef!”

“It must have been extremely boring,” said Jeremy.

“It was fascinating! Nobody had ever treated me seriously before. And you were so polite and yet never seemed to look at me or think I was nice or good-looking or anything. It put me on my mettle. I swore I’d make you notice me.”

Jeremy Cloade said grimly…“I noticed you all right. I went home that evening and didn’t sleep a wink. You had a blue dress with cornflowers….”

There was silence for a moment or two, then Jeremy cleared his throat.

“Er—all that is a long time ago….”

She came quickly to the rescue of his embarrassment.

“And we’re now a middle-aged married couple in difficulties, looking for the best way out.”

“After what you’ve just told me, Frances, it makes it a thousand times worse that this—this disgrace—”

She interrupted him.

“Let us please get things clear. You are being apologetic because you’ve fallen foul of the law. You may be prosecuted—go to prison.” (He winced.) “I don’t want that to happen. I’ll fight like anything to stop it, but don’t credit me with moral indignation. We’re not a moral family, remember. Father, in spite of his attractiveness, was a bit of a crook. And there was Charles—my cousin. They hushed it up and he wasn’t prosecuted, and they hustled him off to the Colonies. And there was my cousin Gerald—he forged a cheque at Oxford. But he went to fight and got a posthumous V.C. for complete bravery and devotion to his men and superhuman endurance. What I’m trying to say is people are like that—not quite bad or quite good. I don’t suppose I’m particularly straight myself—I have been because there hasn’t been any temptation to be otherwise. But what I have got is plenty of courage and” (she smiled at him) “I’m loyal!”

“My dear!” He got up and came over to her. He stopped and put his lips to her hair.

“And now,” said Lord Edward Trenton’s daughter, smiling up at him, “what are we going to do? Raise money somehow?”

Jeremy’s face stiffened.

“I don’t see how.”

“A mortgage on this house. Oh, I see,” she was quick, “that’s been done. I’m stupid. Of course you’ve done all the obvious things. It’s a question then of a touch? Who can we touch? I suppose there's only one possibility. Gordon's widow—the dark Rosaleen!"

Jeremy shook his head dubiously.

"It would have to be a large sum…And it can't come out of capital. The money's only in trust for her for her life."

"I hadn't realized that. I thought she had it absolutely. What happens when she dies?"

"It comes to Gordon's next of kin. That is to say it is divided between myself, Lionel, Adela, and Maurice's son, Rowley."

"It comes to us…" said Frances slowly.

Something seemed to pass through the room—a cold air—the shadow of a thought….

Frances said: "You didn't tell me that…I thought she got it for keeps—that she could leave it to any one she liked?"

"No. By the statute relating to intestacy of 1925…."

It is doubtful whether Frances listened to his explanation. She said when his voice stopped:

"It hardly matters to us personally. We'll be dead and buried, long before she's middle-aged. How old is she? Twenty-five—twenty-six? She'll probably live to be seventy."

Jeremy Cloade said doubtfully:

"We might ask her for a loan—putting it on family grounds? She may be a generous-minded girl—really we know so little of her—"

Frances said: "At any rate we have been reasonably nice to her—not catty like Adela. She might respond."

Her husband said warningly:

“There must be no hint of—er—real urgency.”

Frances said impatiently: “Of course not! The trouble is that it’s not the girl herself we shall have to deal with. She’s completely under the thumb of that brother of hers.”

“A very unattractive young man,” said Jeremy Cloade.

Frances’ sudden smile flashed out.

“Oh, no,” she said. “He’s attractive. Most attractive. Rather unscrupulous, too, I should imagine. But then as far as that goes, I’m unscrupulous too!”

Her smile hardened. She looked up at her husband.

“We’re not going to be beaten, Jeremy,” she said. “There’s bound to be some way…if I have to rob a bank!”

Three

"Money!" said Lynn.

Rowley Cloade nodded. He was a big square young man with a brick-red skin, thoughtful blue eyes and very fair hair. He had a slowness that seemed more purposeful than ingrained. He used deliberation as others use quickness of repartee.

"Yes," he said, "everything seems to boil down to money these days."

"But I thought farmers had done so well during the war?"

"Oh, yes—but that doesn't do you any permanent good. In a year we'll be back where we were—with wages up, workers unwilling, everybody dissatisfied and nobody knowing where they are. Unless, of course, you can farm in a really big way. Old Gordon knew. That was where he was preparing to come in."

"And now—" Lynn asked.

Rowley grinned.

"And now Mrs. Gordon goes to London and spends a couple of thousand on a nice mink coat."

"It's—it's wicked!"

"Oh, no—" He paused and said: "I'd rather like to give you a mink coat, Lynn—"

"What's she like, Rowley?" She wanted to get a contemporary judgment.

"You'll see her tonight. At Uncle Lionel's and Aunt Kathie's party."

"Yes, I know. But I want you to tell me. Mums says she's half-witted?"

Rowley considered.

“Well—I shouldn’t say intellect was her strong point. But I think really she only seems half-witted because she’s being so frightfully careful.”

“Careful? Careful about what?”

“Oh, just careful. Mainly, I imagine, about her accent—she’s got quite a brogue, you know, or else about the right fork, and any literary allusions that might be flying around.”

“Then she really is—quite—well, uneducated?”

Rowley grinned.

“Oh, she’s not a lady, if that’s what you mean. She’s got lovely eyes, and a very good complexion—and I suppose old Gordon fell for that, with her extraordinary air of being quite unsophisticated. I don’t think it’s put on—though of course you never know. She just stands around looking dumb and letting David run her.”

“David?”

“That’s the brother. I should say there’s nothing much about sharp practice he doesn’t know!” Rowley added: “He doesn’t like any of us much.”

“Why should he?” said Lynn sharply, and added as he looked at her, slightly surprised, “I mean you don’t like him.”

“I certainly don’t. You won’t either. He’s not our sort.”

“You don’t know who I like, Rowley, or who I don’t! I’ve seen a lot of the world in the last three years. I—I think my outlook has broadened.”

“You’ve seen more of the world than I have, that’s true.”

He said it quietly—but Lynn looked up sharply.

There had been something—behind those even tones.

He returned her glance squarely, his face unemotional. It had never, Lynn remembered, been easy to know exactly what Rowley was thinking.

What a queer topsy-turvy world it was, thought Lynn. It used to be the man who went to the wars, the woman who stayed at home. But here the positions were reversed.

Of the two young men, Rowley and Johnnie, one had had perforce to stay on the farm. They had tossed for it and Johnnie Vavasour had been the one to go. He had been killed almost at once—in Norway. All through the years of war Rowley had never been more than a mile or two from home.

And she, Lynn, had been to Egypt, to North Africa, to Sicily. She had been under fire more than once.

Here was Lynn Home-from-the-wars, and here was Rowley Stay-at-home.

She wondered, suddenly, if he minded….

She gave a nervous little half laugh. "Things seem sometimes a bit upside down, don't they?"

"Oh, I don't know." Rowley stared vacantly out over the countryside. "Depends."

"Rowley," she hesitated, "did you mind—I mean—Johnnie—"

His cold level gaze threw her back on herself.

"Let's leave Johnnie out of it! The war's over—and I've been lucky."

"Lucky, you mean"—she paused doubtfully—"not to have had to—to go?"

"Wonderful luck, don't you think so?" She didn't know quite how to take that. His voice was smooth with hard edges. He added with a smile, "But, of course, you service girls will find it hard to settle down at home."

She said irritably, "Oh, don't be stupid, Rowley."

(But why be irritable? Why—unless, because his words touched a raw nerve of truth somewhere.)

“Oh well,” said Rowley. “I suppose we might as well consider getting married. Unless you’ve changed your mind?”

“Of course I haven’t changed my mind. Why should I?”

He said vaguely:

“One never knows.”

“You mean you think I’m”—Lynn paused—“different?”

“Not particularly.”

“Perhaps you’ve changed your mind?”

“Oh, no, I’ve not changed. Very little change down on the farm, you know.”

“All right, then,” said Lynn—conscious, somehow, of anticlimax, “let’s get married. Whenever you like.”

“June or thereabouts?”

“Yes.”

They were silent. It was settled. In spite of herself, Lynn felt terribly depressed. Yet Rowley was Rowley—just as he always had been. Affectionate, unemotional, painstakingly given to understatement.

They loved each other. They had always loved each other. They had never talked about their love very much—so why should they begin now?

They would get married in June and live at Long Willows (a nice name, she had always thought) and she would never go away again. Go away, that is to say, in the sense that the words now held for her. The excitement of gangplanks being pulled up, the racing of a ship’s screw, the thrill as an aeroplane became airborne and soared up and over the earth beneath.

Watching a strange coastline take form and shape. The smell of hot dust, and paraffin, and garlic—the clatter and gabble of foreign tongues. Strange flowers, red poinsettias rising proudly from a dusty garden…Packing, unpacking—where next?

All that was over. The war was over. Lynn Marchmont had come home. Home is the sailor, home from the sea…But I'm not the same Lynn who went away, she thought.

She looked up and saw Rowley watching her….

Four

Aunt Kathie's parties were always much the same. They had a rather breathless amateurish quality about them characteristic of the hostess. Dr. Cloade had an air of holding irritability in check with difficulty. He was invariably courteous to his guests—but they were conscious of his courtesy being an effort.

In appearance Lionel Cloade was not unlike his brother Jeremy. He was spare and grey-haired—but he had not the lawyer's imperturbability. His manner was brusque and impatient—and his nervous irritability had affronted many of his patients and blinded them to his actual skill and kindliness. His real interests lay in research and his hobby was the use of medicinal herbs throughout history. He had a precise intellect and found it hard to be patient with his wife's vagaries.

Though Lynn and Rowley always called Mrs. Jeremy Cloade "Frances," Mrs. Lionel Cloade was invariably "Aunt Kathie." They were fond of her but found her rather ridiculous.

This "party," arranged ostensibly to celebrate Lynn's homecoming, was merely a family affair.

Aunt Kathie greeted her niece affectionately:

"So nice and brown you look, my dear. Egypt, I suppose. Did you read the book on the Pyramid prophecies I sent you? So interesting. Really explains everything, don't you think?"

Lynn was saved from replying by the entrance of Mrs. Gordon Cloade and her brother David.

"This is my niece, Lynn Marchmont, Rosaleen."

Lynn looked at Gordon Cloade's widow with decorously veiled curiosity.

Yes, she was lovely, this girl who had married old Gordon Cloade for his money. And it was true what Rowley had said, that she had an air of innocence. Black hair, set in loose waves, Irish blue eyes put in with the smutty finger—half-parted lips.

The rest of her was predominantly expensive. Dress, jewels, manicured hands, fur cape. Quite a good figure, but she didn't, really, know how to wear expensive clothes. Didn't wear them as Lynn Marchmont could have worn them, given half a chance! (But you never will have a chance, said a voice in her brain.)

"How do you do," said Rosaleen Cloade.

She turned hesitatingly to the man behind her.

She said: "This—this is my brother."

"How do you do," said David Hunter.

He was a thin young man with dark hair and dark eyes. His face was unhappy and defiant and slightly insolent.

Lynn saw at once why all the Cloades disliked him so much. She had met men of that stamp abroad. Men who were reckless and slightly dangerous. Men whom you couldn't depend upon. Men who made their own laws and flouted the universe. Men who were worth their weight in gold in a push—and who drove their C.O.s to distraction out of the firing line!

Lynn said conversationally to Rosaleen:

"And how do you like living at Furrowbank?"

"I think it's a wonderful house," said Rosaleen.

David Hunter gave a faint sneering laugh.

"Poor old Gordon did himself well," he said. "No expense spared."

It was literally the truth. When Gordon had decided to settle down in Warmsley Vale—or rather had decided to spend a small portion of his busy life there, he had chosen to build. He was too much of an individualist to care for a house that was impregnated with other people's history.

He had employed a young modern architect and given him a free hand. Half Warmsley Vale thought Furrowbank a dreadful house, disliking its white squareness, its built-in furnishing, its sliding doors, and glass tables and chairs. The only part of it they really admired wholeheartedly were the bathrooms.

There had been awe in Rosaleen's, "It's a wonderful house." David's laugh made her flush.

"You're the returned Wren, aren't you?" said David to Lynn.

"Yes."

His eyes swept over her appraisingly—and for some reason she flushed.

Aunt Katherine appeared again suddenly. She had a trick of seeming to materialize out of space. Perhaps she had caught the trick of it from many of the spiritualistic séances she attended.

"Supper," she said, rather breathlessly, and added, parentheticaly, "I think it's better than calling it dinner. People don't expect so much. Everything's very difficult, isn't it? Mary Lewis tells me she slips the fishman ten shillings every other week. I think that's immoral."

Dr. Lionel Cloade was giving his irritable nervous laugh as he talked to Frances Cloade. "Oh, come, Frances," he said. "You can't expect me to believe you really think that—let's go in."

They went into the shabby and rather ugly dining room. Jeremy and Frances, Lionel and Katherine, Adela, Lynn and Rowley. A family party of Cloades—with two outsiders. For Rosaleen Cloade, though she bore the name, had not become a Cloade as Frances and Katherine had done.

She was the stranger, ill at ease, nervous. And David—David was the outlaw. By necessity, but also by choice. Lynn was thinking these things as she took her place at the table.

There were waves in the air of feeling—a strong electrical current of—what was it? Hate? Could it really be hate?

Something at any rate—destructive.

Lynn thought suddenly, “But that’s what’s the matter everywhere. I’ve noticed it ever since I got home. It’s the aftermath war has left. Ill will. Ill feeling. It’s everywhere. On railways and buses and in shops and amongst workers and clerks and even agricultural labourers. And I suppose worse in mines and factories. Ill will. But here it’s more than that. Here it’s particular. It’s meant!”

And she thought, shocked: “Do we hate them so much? These strangers who have taken what we think is ours?”

And then—“No, not yet. We might—but not yet. No, it’s they who hate us.”

It seemed to her so overwhelming a discovery that she sat silent thinking about it and forgetting to talk to David Hunter who was sitting beside her.

Presently he said: “Thinking out something?”

His voice was quite pleasant, slightly amused, but she felt conscience stricken. He might think that she was going out of her way to be ill-mannered.

She said, “I’m sorry. I was having thoughts about the state of the world.”

David said coolly, “How extremely unoriginal!”

“Yes, is is rather. We are all so earnest nowadays. And it doesn’t seem to do much good either.”

“It is usually more practical to wish to do harm. We’ve thought up one or two rather practical gadgets in that line during the last few years—including that pièce de résistance, the Atom Bomb."

"That was what I was thinking about—oh, I don't mean the Atom Bomb. I meant ill will. Definite practical ill will."

David said calmly:

"Ill will certainly—but I rather take issue to the word practical. They were more practical about it in the Middle Ages."

"How do you mean?"

"Black magic generally. Ill wishing. Wax figures. Spells at the turn of the moon. Killing off your neighbour's cattle. Killing off your neighbour himself."

"You don't really believe there was such a thing as black magic?" asked Lynn incredulously.

"Perhaps not. But at any rate people did try hard. Nowadays, well—" He shrugged his shoulders. "With all the ill will in the world you and your family can't do much about Rosaleen and myself, can you?"

Lynn's head went back with a jerk. Suddenly she was enjoying herself.

"It's a little late in the day for that," she said politely.

David Hunter laughed. He, too, sounded as though he were enjoying himself.

"Meaning we've got away with the booty? Yes, we're sitting pretty all right."

"And you get a kick out of it!"

"Out of having a lot of money? I'll say we do."

"I didn't mean only the money. I meant out of us."

“Out of having scored off you? Well, perhaps. You’d all have been pretty smug and complacent about the old boy’s cash. Looked upon it as practically in your pockets already.”

Lynn said:

“You must remember that we’d been taught to think so for years. Taught not to save, not to think of the future—encouraged to go ahead with all sorts of schemes and projects.”

(Rowley, she thought, Rowley and the farm.)

“Only one thing, in fact, that you hadn’t learnt,” said David pleasantly.

“What’s that?”

“That nothing’s safe.”

“Lynn,” cried Aunt Katherine, leaning forward from the head of the table, “one of Mrs. Lester’s controls is a fourth-dynasty priest. He’s told us such wonderful things. You and I, Lynn, must have a long talk. Egypt, I feel, must have affected you physically.”

Dr. Cloade said sharply:

“Lynn’s had better things to do than play about with all this superstitious tomfoolery.”

“You are so biased, Lionel,” said his wife.

Lynn smiled at her aunt—then sat silent with the refrain of the words David had spoken swimming in her brain.

“Nothing’s safe….”

There were people who lived in such a world—people to whom everything was dangerous. David Hunter was such a person…It was not the world that Lynn had been brought up in—but it was a world that held attractions for her nevertheless.

David said presently in the same low amused voice:

“Are we still on speaking terms?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Good. And do you still grudge Rosaleen and myself our ill-gotten access to wealth?”

“Yes,” said Lynn with spirit.

“Splendid. What are you going to do about it?”

“Buy some wax and practise black magic!”

He laughed.

“Oh, no, you won’t do that. You aren’t one of those who rely on old outmoded methods. Your methods will be modern and probably very efficient. But you won’t win.”

“What makes you think there is going to be a fight? Haven’t we all accepted the inevitable?”

“You all behave beautifully. It is very amusing.”

“Why,” said Lynn, in a low tone, “do you hate us?”

Something flickered in those dark unfathomable eyes.

“I couldn’t possibly make you understand.”

“I think you could,” said Lynn.

David was silent for a moment or two, then he asked in a light conversational tone:

“Why are you going to marry Rowley Cloade? He’s an oaf.”

She said sharply:

“You know nothing about it—or about him. You couldn’t begin to know!”

Without any air of changing the conversation David asked:

“What do you think of Rosaleen?”

“She’s very lovely.”

“What else?”

“She doesn’t seem to be enjoying herself.”

“Quite right,” said David, “Rosaleen’s rather stupid. She’s scared. She always has been rather scared. She drifts into things and then doesn’t know what it’s all about. Shall I tell you about Rosaleen?”

“If you like,” said Lynn politely.

“I do like. She started by being stagestruck and drifted on to the stage. She wasn’t any good, of course. She got into a third-rate touring company that was going out to South Africa. She liked the sound of South Africa. The company got stranded in Cape Town. Then she drifted into marriage with a Government official from Nigeria. She didn’t like Nigeria—and I don’t think she liked her husband much. If he’d been a hearty sort of fellow who drank and beat her, it would have been all right. But he was rather an intellectual man who kept a large library in the wilds and who liked to talk metaphysics. So she drifted back to Cape Town again. The fellow behaved very well and gave her an adequate allowance. He might have given her a divorce, but again he might not for he was a Catholic; but anyway he rather fortunately died of fever, and Rosaleen got a small pension. Then the war started and she drifted on to a boat for South America. She didn’t like South America very much, so she drifted on to another boat and there she met Gordon Cloade and told him all about her sad life. So they got married in New York and lived happily for a fortnight, and a little later he was killed by a bomb and she was left a large house, a lot of expensive jewellery, and an immense income.”

“It’s nice that the story has such a happy ending,” said Lynn.

“Yes,” said David Hunter. “Possessing no intellect at all, Rosaleen has always been a lucky girl—which is just as well. Gordon Cloade was a strong old man. He was sixty-two. He might easily have lived for twenty years. He might have lived even longer. That wouldn’t have been much fun for Rosaleen, would it? She was twenty-four when she married him. She’s only twenty-six now.”

“She looks even younger,” said Lynn.

David looked across the table. Rosaleen Cloade was crumbling her bread. She looked like a nervous child.

“Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “She does. Complete absence of thought, I suppose.”

“Poor thing,” said Lynn suddenly.

David frowned.

“Why the pity?” he said sharply. “I’ll look after Rosaleen.”

“I expect you will.”

He scowled.

“Any one who tries to do down Rosaleen has got me to deal with! And I know a good many ways of making war—some of them not strictly orthodox.”

“Am I going to hear your life history now?” asked Lynn coldly.

“A very abridged edition.” He smiled. “When the war broke out I saw no reason why I should fight for England. I’m Irish. But like all the Irish, I like fighting. The Commandos had an irresistible fascination for me. I had some fun but unfortunately I got knocked out with a bad leg wound. Then I went to Canada and did a job of training fellows there. I was at a loose end when I got Rosaleen’s wire from New York saying she was getting married! She didn’t actually announce that there would be pickings, but I’m quite sharp at reading between the lines. I flew there, tacked myself on to the happy pair and came back with them to London. And now”—he smiled insolently at her—“Home is the sailor, home from the sea. That’s you! And the Hunter home from the Hill. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” said Lynn.

She got up with the others. As they went into the drawing-room, Rowley said to her: “You seemed to be getting on quite well with David Hunter. What were you talking about?”

“Nothing particular,” said Lynn.

Five

“David, when are we going back to London? When are we going to America?”

Across the breakfast table, David Hunter gave Rosaleen a quick surprised glance.

“There’s no hurry, is there? What’s wrong with this place?”

He gave a swift appreciative glance round the room where they were breakfasting. Furrowbank was built on the side of a hill and from the windows one had an unbroken panorama of sleepy English countryside. On the slope of the lawn thousands of daffodils had been planted. They were nearly over now, but a sheet of golden bloom still remained.

Crumbling the toast on her plate, Rosaleen murmured:

“You said we’d go to America—soon. As soon as it could be managed.”

“Yes—but actually it isn’t managed so easily. There’s priority. Neither you nor I have any business reasons to put forward. Things are always difficult after a war.”

He felt faintly irritated with himself as he spoke. The reasons he advanced, though genuine enough, had the sound of excuses. He wondered if they sounded that way to the girl who sat opposite him. And why was she suddenly so keen to go to America?

Rosaleen murmured: “You said we’d only be here for a short time. You didn’t say we were going to live here.”

“What’s wrong with Warmsley Vale—and Furrowbank? Come now?”

“Nothing. It’s them—all of them!”

“The Cloades?”

“Yes.”

“That’s just what I get a kick out of,” said David. “I like seeing their smug faces eaten up with envy and malice. Don’t grudge me my fun, Rosaleen.”

She said in a low troubled voice:

“I wish you didn’t feel like that. I don’t like it.”

“Have some spirit, girl. We’ve been pushed around enough, you and I. The Cloades have lived soft—soft. Lived on big brother Gordon. Little fleas on a big flea. I hate their kind—I always have.”

She said, shocked:

“I don’t like hating people. It’s wicked.”

“Don’t you think they hate you? Have they been kind to you—friendly?”

She said doubtfully:

“They haven’t been unkind. They haven’t done me any harm.”

“But they’d like to, babyface. They’d like to.” He laughed recklessly. “If they weren’t so careful of their own skins, you’d be found with a knife in your back one fine morning.”

She shivered.

“Don’t say such dreadful things.”

“Well—perhaps not a knife. Strychnine in the soup.”

She stared at him, her mouth tremulous.

“You’re joking….”

He became serious again.

“Don’t worry, Rosaleen. I’ll look after you. They’ve got me to deal with.”

She said, stumbling over the words, “If it’s true what you say—about their hating us—hating me—why don’t we go to London? We’d be safe there—away from them all.”

“The country’s good for you, my girl. You know it makes you ill being in London.”

“That was when the bombs were there—the bombs.” She shivered, closed her eyes. “I’ll never forget—never….”

“Yes, you will.” He took her gently by the shoulders, shook her slightly. “Snap out of it, Rosaleen. You were badly shocked, but it’s over now. There are no more bombs. Don’t think about it. Don’t remember. The doctor said country air and a country life for a long time to come. That’s why I want to keep you away from London.”

“Is that really why? Is it, David? I thought—perhaps—”

“What did you think?”

Rosaleen said slowly:

“I thought perhaps it was because of her you wanted to be here….”

“Her?”

“You know the one I mean. The girl the other night. The one who was in the Wrens.”

His face was suddenly black and stern.

“Lynn? Lynn Marchmont.”

“She means something to you, David.”

“Lynn Marchmont? She’s Rowley’s girl. Good old stay-at-home Rowley. That bovine slow-witted good-looking ox.”

"I watched you talking to her the other night."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Rosaleen."

"And you've seen her since, haven't you?"

"I met her near the farm the other morning when I was out riding."

"And you'll meet her again."

"Of course I'll always be meeting her! This is a tiny place. You can't go two steps without falling over a Cloade. But if you think I've fallen for Lynn Marchmont, you're wrong. She's a proud stuck-up unpleasant girl without a civil tongue in her head. I wish old Rowley joy of her. No, Rosaleen, my girl, she's not my type."

She said doubtfully, "Are you sure, David?"

"Of course I'm sure."

She said half-timidly:

"I know you don't like my laying out the cards…But they come true, they do indeed. There was a girl bringing trouble and sorrow—a girl would come from over the sea. There was a dark stranger, too, coming into our lives, and bringing danger with him. There was the death card, and—"

"You and your dark strangers!" David laughed. "What a mass of superstition you are. Don't have any dealings with a dark stranger, that's my advice to you."

He strolled out of the house laughing, but when he was away from the house, his face clouded over and he frowned to himself, murmuring:

"Bad luck to you, Lynn. Coming home from abroad and upsetting the apple cart."

For he realized that at this very moment he was deliberately making a course on which he might hope to meet the girl he had just apostrophized so savagely.

Rosaleen watched him stroll away across the garden and out through the small gate that gave on to a public footpath across the fields. Then she went up to her bedroom and looked through the clothes in her wardrobe. She always enjoyed touching and feeling her new mink coat. To think she should own a coat like that—she could never quite get over the wonder of it. She was in her bedroom when the parlourmaid came up to tell her that Mrs. Marchmont had called.

Adela was sitting in the drawing room with her lips set tightly together and her heart beating at twice its usual speed. She had been steeling herself for several days to make an appeal to Rosaleen but true to her nature had procrastinated. She had also been bewildered by finding that Lynn's attitude had unaccountably changed and that she was now rigidly opposed to her mother seeking relief from her anxieties by asking Gordon's widow for a loan.

However another letter from the bank manager that morning had driven Mrs. Marchmont into positive action. She could delay no longer. Lynn had gone out early, and Mrs. Marchmont had caught sight of David Hunter walking along the footpath—so the coast was clear. She particularly wanted to get Rosaleen alone, without David, rightly judging that Rosaleen alone would be a far easier proposition.

Nevertheless she felt dreadfully nervous as she waited in the sunny drawing room, though she felt slightly better when Rosaleen came in with what Mrs. Marchmont always thought of as her "half-witted look" more than usually marked.

"I wonder," thought Adela to herself, "if the blast did it or if she was always like that?"

"Rosaleen stammered.

"Oh, g-g-ood morning. Is there anything? Do sit down."

“Such a lovely morning,” said Mrs. Marchmont brightly. “All my early tulips are out. Are yours?”

The girl stared at her vacantly.

“I don’t know.”

What was one to do, thought Adela, with someone who didn’t talk gardening or dogs—those standbys of rural conversation?

Aloud she said, unable to help the tinge of acidity that crept into her tone:

“Of course you have so many gardeners—they attend to all that.”

“I believe we’re shorthanded. Old Mullard wants two more men, he says. But there seems a terrible shortage still of labour.”

The words came out with a kind of glib parrotlike delivery—rather like a child who repeats what it has heard a grown-up person say.

Yes, she was like a child. Was that, Adela wondered, her charm? Was that what had attracted that hard-headed shrewd business man, Gordon Cloade, and blinded him to her stupidity and her lack of breeding? After all, it couldn’t only be looks. Plenty of good-looking women had angled unsuccessfully to attract him.

But childishness, to a man of sixty-two, might be an attraction. Was it, could it be, real—or was it a pose—a pose that had paid and so had become second nature?

Rosaleen was saying, “David’s out, I’m afraid…” and the words recalled Mrs. Marchmont to herself. David might return. Now was her chance and she must not neglect it. The words stuck in her throat but she got them out.

“I wonder—if you would help me?”

“Help you?”

Rosaleen looked surprised, uncomprehending.

"I—things are very difficult—you see, Gordon's death has made a great difference to us all."

"You silly idiot," she thought. "Must you go on gaping at me like that? You know what I mean! You must know what I mean. After all, you've been poor yourself…."

She hated Rosaleen at that moment. Hated her because she, Adela Marchmont, was sitting here whining for money. She thought, "I can't do it—I can't do it after all."

In one brief instant all the long hours of thought and worry and vague planning flashed again across her brain.

Sell the house—(But move where? There weren't any small houses on the market—certainly not any cheap houses). Take paying guests—(But you couldn't get staff—and she simply couldn't—she just couldn't deal with all the cooking and housework involved. If Lynn helped—but Lynn was going to marry Rowley). Live with Rowley and Lynn herself? (No, she'd never do that!) Get a job. What job? Who wanted an untrained elderly tired-out woman?

She heard her voice, belligerent because she despised herself.

"I mean money," she said.

"Money?" said Rosaleen.

She sounded ingenuously surprised, as though money was the last thing she expected to be mentioned.

Adela went on doggedly, tumbling the words out:

"I'm overdrawn at the bank, and I owe bills—repairs to the house—and the rates haven't been paid yet. You see, everything's halved—my income, I mean. I suppose it's taxation. Gordon, you see, used to help. With the house, I mean. He did all the repairs and the roof and painting and things like that. And an allowance as well. He paid it into the bank every quarter.

He always said not to worry and of course I never did. I mean, it was all right when he was alive, but now—"

She stopped. She was ashamed—but at the same time relieved. After all, the worst was over. If the girl refused, she refused, and that was that.

Rosaleen was looking very uncomfortable.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I didn't know. I never thought…I—well, of course, I'll ask David…."

Grimly gripping the sides of her chair, Adela said, desperately:

"Couldn't you give me a cheque—now…."

"Yes—yes, I suppose I could." Rosaleen, looking startled, got up, went to the desk. She hunted in various pigeonholes and finally produced a chequebook. "Shall I—how much?"

"Would—would five hundred pounds—" Adela broke off.

"Five hundred pounds," Rosaleen wrote obediently.

A load slipped off Adela's back. After all, it had been easy! She was dismayed as it occurred to her that it was less gratitude that she felt than a faint scorn for the easiness of her victory! Rosaleen was surely strangely simple.

The girl rose from the writing desk and came across to her. She held out the cheque awkwardly. The embarrassment seemed now entirely on her side.

"I hope this is all right. I'm really so sorry—"

Adela took the cheque. The unformed childish hand straggled across the pink paper. Mrs. Marchmont. Five hundred pounds £500. Rosaleen Cloade.

"It's very good of you, Rosaleen. Thank you."

"Oh please—I mean—I ought to have thought—"

“Very good of you, my dear.”

With the cheque in her handbag Adela Marchmont felt a different woman. The girl had really been very sweet about it. It would be embarrassing to prolong the interview. She said goodbye and departed. She passed David in the drive, said “Good morning” pleasantly, and hurried on.

Six

“What was the Marchmont woman doing here?” demanded David as soon as he got in.

“Oh, David. She wanted money dreadfully badly. I’d never thought—”

“And you gave it her, I suppose.”

He looked at her in half-humorous despair.

“You’re not to be trusted alone, Rosaleen.”

“Oh, David, I couldn’t refuse. After all—”

“After all—what? How much?”

In a small voice Rosaleen murmured, “Five hundred pounds.”

To her relief David laughed.

“A mere fleabite!”

“Oh, David, it’s a lot of money.”

“Not to us nowadays, Rosaleen. You never really seem to grasp that you’re a very rich woman. All the same if she asked five hundred she’d have gone away perfectly satisfied with two-fifty. You must learn the language of borrowing!”

She murmured, “I’m sorry, David.”

“My dear girl! After all, it’s your money.”

“It isn’t. Not really.”

“Now don’t begin that all over again. Gordon Cloade died before he had time to make a will. That’s what’s called the luck of the game. We win, you and I. The others—lose.”

“It doesn’t seem—right.”

“Come now, my lovely sister Rosaleen, aren’t you enjoying all this? A big house, servants—jewellery? Isn’t it a dream come true? Isn’t it? Glory be to God, sometimes I think I’ll wake up and find it is a dream.”

She laughed with him, and watching her narrowly, he was satisfied. He knew how to deal with his Rosaleen. It was inconvenient, he thought, that she should have a conscience, but there it was.

“It’s quite true, David, it is like a dream—or like something on the pictures. I do enjoy it all. I do really.”

“But what we have we hold,” he warned her. “No more gifts to the Cloades, Rosaleen. Every one of them has got far more money than either you or I ever had.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“Where was Lynn this morning?” he asked.

“I think she’d gone to Long Willows.”

To Long Willows—to see Rowley—the oaf—the clodhopper! His good humour vanished. Set on marrying the fellow, was she?

Moodily he strolled out of the house, up through massed azaleas and out through the small gate on the top of the hill. From there the footpath dipped down the hill and past Rowley’s farm.

As David stood there, he saw Lynn Marchmont coming up from the farm. He hesitated for a minute, then set his jaw pugnaciously and strolled down the hill to meet her. They met by a stile just halfway up the hill.

“Good morning,” said David. “When’s the wedding?”

"You've asked that before," she retorted. "You know well enough. It's in June."

"You're going through with it?"

"I don't know what you mean, David."

"Oh, yes, you do." He gave a contemptuous laugh. "Rowley. What's Rowley?"

"A better man than you—touch him if you dare," she said lightly.

"I've no doubt he's a better man than me—but I do dare. I'd dare anything for you, Lynn."

She was silent for a moment or two. She said at last:

"What you don't understand is that I love Rowley."

"I wonder."

She said vehemently:

"I do, I tell you. I do."

David looked at her searchingly.

"We all see pictures of ourselves—of ourselves as we want to be. You see yourself in love with Rowley, settling down with Rowley, living here contented with Rowley, never wanting to get away. But that's not the real you, is it, Lynn?"

"Oh, what is the real me? What's the real you, if it comes to that? What do you want?"

"I'd have said I wanted safety, peace after storm, ease after troubled seas. But I don't know. Sometimes I suspect, Lynn, that both you and I want—trouble." He added moodily, "I wish you'd never turned up here. I was remarkably happy until you came."

“Aren’t you happy now?”

He looked at her. She felt excitement rising in her. Her breath became faster. Never had she felt so strongly David’s queer moody attraction. He shot out a hand, grasped her shoulder, swung her round….

Then as suddenly she felt his grasp slacken. He was staring over her shoulder up the hill. She twisted her head to see what it was that had caught his attention.

A woman was just going through the small gate above Furrowbank. David said sharply: “Who’s that?”

Lynn said:

“It looks like Frances.”

“Frances?” He frowned. “What does Frances want? My dear Lynn! Only those who want something drop in to see Rosaleen. Your mother has already dropped in this morning.”

“Mother?” Lynn drew back. She frowned. “What did she want?”

“Don’t you know? Money!”

“Money?” Lynn stiffened.

“She got it all right,” said David. He was smiling now the cool cruel smile that fitted his face so well.

They had been near a moment or two ago, now they were miles apart, divided by a sharp antagonism.

Lynn cried out, “Oh, no, no, no!”

He mimicked her.

“Yes, yes, yes!”

"I don't believe it! How much?"

"Five hundred pounds."

She drew her breath in sharply.

David said musingly:

"I wonder how much Frances is going to ask for? Really it's hardly safe to leave Rosaleen alone for five minutes! The poor girl doesn't know how to say No."

"Have there been—who else?"

David smiled mockingly.

"Aunt Kathie had incurred certain debts—oh, nothing much, a mere two hundred and fifty covered them—but she was afraid it might get to the doctor's ears! Since they had been occasioned by payments to mediums, he might not have been sympathetic. She didn't know, of course," added David, "that the doctor himself had applied for a loan."

Lynn said in a low voice, "What you must think of us—what you must think of us!" Then, taking him by surprise, she turned and ran helter-skelter down the hill to the farm.

He frowned as he watched her go. She had gone to Rowley, flown there as a homing pigeon flies, and the fact disturbed him more than he cared to acknowledge.

He looked up the hill again and frowned.

"No, Frances," he said under his breath. "I think not. You've chosen a bad day," and he strode purposefully up the hill.

He went through the gate and down through the azaleas—crossed the lawn, and came quietly in through the window of the drawing room just as Frances Cloade was saying:

"—I wish I could make it all clearer. But you see, Rosaleen, it really is frightfully difficult to explain—"

A voice from behind her said:

"Is it?"

Frances Cloade turned sharply. Unlike Adela Marchmont she had not deliberately tried to find Rosaleen alone. The sum needed was sufficiently large to make it unlikely that Rosaleen would hand it over without consulting her brother. Actually, Frances would far rather have discussed the matter with David and Rosaleen together, than have David feel that she had tried to get money out of Rosaleen during his absence from the house.

She had not heard him come through the window, absorbed as she was in the presentation of a plausible case. The interruption startled her, and she realized also that David Hunter was, for some reason, in a particularly ugly mood.

"Oh, David," she said easily, "I'm glad you've come. I've just been telling Rosaleen. Gordon's death has left Jeremy in no end of a hole, and I'm wondering if she could possibly come to the rescue. It's like this—"

Her tongue flowed on swiftly—the large sum involved—Gordon's backing—promised verbally—Government restrictions—mortgages—

A certain admiration stirred in the darkness of David's mind. What a damned good liar the woman was! Plausible, the whole story. But not the truth. No, he'd take his oath on that. Not the truth! What, he wondered, was the truth? Jeremy been getting himself into Queer Street? It must be something pretty desperate, if he was allowing Frances to come and try this stunt. She was a proud woman, too—

He said, "Ten thousand?"

Rosaleen murmured in an awed voice:

"That's a lot of money."

Frances said swiftly:

“Oh, I know it is. I wouldn’t come to you if it wasn’t such a difficult sum to raise. But Jeremy would never have gone into the deal if it hadn’t been for Gordon’s backing. It’s so dreadfully unfortunate that Gordon should have died so suddenly—”

“Leaving you all out in the cold?” David’s voice was unpleasant. “After a sheltered life under his wing.”

There was a faint flash in Frances’ eyes as she said:

“You put things so picturesquely!”

“Rosaleen can’t touch the capital, you know. Only the income. And she pays about nineteen and six in the pound income tax.”

“Oh, I know. Taxation’s dreadful these days. But it could be managed, couldn’t it? We’d repay—”

He interrupted:

“It could be managed. But it won’t be!”

Frances turned swiftly to Rosaleen.

“Rosaleen, you’re such a generous—”

David’s voice cut across her speech.

“What do you Cloades think Rosaleen is—a milch cow? All of you at her—hinting, asking, begging. And behind her back? Sneering at her, patronizing her, hating her, wishing her dead—”

“That’s not true,” Frances cried.

“Isn’t it? I tell you I’m sick of you all! She’s sick of you all. You’ll get no money out of us, so you can stop coming and whining for it? Understand?”

His face was black with fury.

Frances stood up. Her face was wooden and expressionless. She drew on a washleather glove absently, yet with attention, as though it was a significant action.

“You make your meaning quite plain, David,” she said.

Rosaleen murmured:

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry….”

Frances paid no attention to her. Rosaleen might not have been in the room. She took a step towards the window and paused, facing David.

“You have said that I resent Rosaleen. That is not true. I have not resented Rosaleen—but I do resent—you!”

“What do you mean?”

He scowled at her.

“Women must live. Rosaleen married a very rich man, years older than herself. Why not? But you! You must live on your sister, live on the fat of the land, live softly—on her.”

“I stand between her and harpies.”

They stood looking at each other. He was aware of her anger and the thought flashed across him that Frances Cloade was a dangerous enemy, one who could be both unscrupulous and reckless.

When she opened her mouth to speak, he even felt a moment’s apprehension. But what she said was singularly noncommittal.

“I shall remember what you have said, David.”

Passing him, she went out of the window.

He wondered why he felt so strongly that the words had been a threat.

Rosaleen was crying.

“Oh, David, David—you oughtn’t to have been saying those things to her. She’s the one of them that’s been the nicest to me.”

He said furiously: “Shut up, you little fool. Do you want them to trample all over you and bleed you of every penny?”

“But the money—if—if it isn’t rightfully mine—”

She quailed before his glance.

“I—I didn’t mean that, David.”

“I should hope not.”

Conscience, he thought, was the devil!

He hadn’t reckoned with the item of Rosaleen’s conscience. It was going to make things awkward in the future.

The future? He frowned as he looked at her and let his thoughts race ahead. Rosaleen’s future…His own…He’d always known what he wanted…he knew now…But Rosaleen? What future was there for Rosaleen?

As his face darkened—she cried out—suddenly shivering:

“Oh! Someone’s walking over my grave.”

He said, looking at her curiously:

“So you realize it may come to that?”

“What do you mean, David?”

“I mean that five—six—seven people have every intention to hurry you into your grave before you’re due there!”

“You don’t mean—murder—” Her voice was horrified. “You think these people would do murder—not nice people like the Cloades.”

“I’m not sure that it isn’t just nice people like the Cloades who do do murder. But they won’t succeed in murdering you while I’m here to look after you. They’d have to get me out of the way first. But if they did get me out of the way—well—look out for yourself!”

“David—don’t say such awful things.”

“Listen,” he gripped her arm. “If ever I’m not here, look after yourself, Rosaleen. Life isn’t safe, remember—it’s dangerous, damned dangerous. And I’ve an idea it’s specially dangerous for you.”

Seven

I

"Rowley, can you let me have five hundred pounds?"

Rowley stared at Lynn. She stood there, out of breath from running, her face pale, her mouth set.

He sat soothingly and rather as he would speak to a horse:

"There, there, ease up, old girl. What's all this about?"

"I want five hundred pounds."

"I could do with it myself, for that matter."

"But Rowley, this is serious. Can't you lend me five hundred pounds?"

"I'm overdrawn as it is. That new tractor—"

"Yes, yes—" She pushed aside the farming details. "But you could raise money somehow—if you had to, couldn't you?"

"What do you want it for, Lynn? Are you in some kind of a hole?"

"I want it for him—" She jerked her head backwards towards the big square house on the hill.

"Hunter? Why on earth—"

"It's Mums. She's been borrowing from him. She's—she's in a bit of a jam about money."

"Yes, I expect she is." Rowley sounded sympathetic. "Damned hard lines on her. I wish I could help a bit—but I can't."

"I can't stand her borrowing money from David!"

"Hold hard, old girl. It's Rosaleen who actually has to fork out the cash. And after all, why not?"

"Why not? You say, 'Why not,' Rowley?"

"I don't see why Rosaleen shouldn't come to the rescue once in a while. Old Gordon put us all in a spot by pegging out without a will. If the position is put clearly to Rosaleen she must see herself that a spot of help all round is indicated."

"You haven't borrowed from her?"

"No—well—that's different. I can't very well go and ask a woman for money. Sort of thing you don't like doing."

"Can't you see that I don't like being—being beholden to David Hunter?"

"But you're not. It isn't his money."

"That's just what it is, actually. Rosaleen's completely under his thumb."

"Oh, I dare say. But it isn't his legally."

"And you won't, you can't—lend me some money?"

"Now look here, Lynn—if you were in some real jam—blackmail or debts—I might be able to sell land or stock—but it would be a pretty desperate proceeding. I'm only just keeping my head above water as it is. And what with not knowing what this damned Government is going to do next—hampered at every turn—snowed under with forms, up to midnight trying to fill them in sometimes—it's too much for one man."

Lynn said bitterly:

"Oh, I know! If only Johnnie hadn't been killed—"

He shouted out:

"Leave Johnnie out of it! Don't talk about that!"

She stared at him, astonished. His face was red and congested. He seemed beside himself with rage.

Lynn turned away and went slowly back to the White House.

II

"Can't you give it back, Mums?"

"Really, Lynn darling! I went straight to the bank with it. And then I paid Arthurs and Bodgham and Knebworth. Knebworth was getting quite abusive. Oh, my dear, the relief! I haven't been able to sleep for nights and nights. Really, Rosaleen was most understanding and nice about it."

Lynn said bitterly:

"And I suppose you'll go to her again and again now."

"I hope it won't be necessary, dear. I shall try to be very economical, you know that. But of course everything is so expensive nowadays. And it gets worse and worse."

"Yes, and we shall get worse and worse. Going on cadging."

Adela flushed.

"I don't think that's a nice way of putting it, Lynn. As I explained to Rosaleen, we had always depended on Gordon."

"We shouldn't have. That's what's wrong, we shouldn't have," Lynn added, "He's right to despise us."

"Who despises us?"

"That odious David Hunter."

"Really," said Mrs. Marchmont with dignity, "I don't see that it can matter in the least what David Hunter thinks. Fortunately he wasn't at Furrowbank this morning—otherwise I dare say he would have influenced that girl. She's completely under his thumb, of course."

Lynn shifted from one foot to the other.

"What did you mean, Mums, when you said—that first morning I was home—'If he is her brother?'"

"Oh, that." Mrs. Marchmont looked slightly embarrassed. "Well, there's been a certain amount of gossip, you know."

Lynn merely waited inquiringly. Mrs. Marchmont coughed.

"That type of young woman—the adventuress type (of course poor Gordon was completely taken in)—they've usually got a—well, a young man of their own in the background. Suppose she says to Gordon she's got a brother—wires to him in Canada or wherever he was. This man turns up. How is Gordon to know whether he's her brother or not? Poor Gordon, absolutely infatuated no doubt, and believing everything she said. And so her 'brother' comes with them to England—poor Gordon quite unsuspecting."

Lynn said fiercely:

"I don't believe it. I don't believe it!"

Mrs. Marchmont raised her eyebrows.

"Really, my dear—"

"He's not like that. And she—she isn't either. She's a fool perhaps, but she's sweet—yes, she's really sweet. It's just people's foul minds. I don't believe it, I tell you."

Mrs. Marchmont said with dignity:

"There's really no need to shout."

Eight

I

It was a week later that the 5:20 train drew into Warmsley Heath Station and a tall bronzed man with a knapsack got out.

On the opposite platform a cluster of golfers were waiting for the up train. The tall bearded man with the knapsack gave up his ticket and passed out of the station. He stood uncertainly for a minute or two—then he saw the signpost: Footpath to Warmsley Vale—and directed his steps that way with brisk determination.

II

At Long Willows Rowley Cloade had just finished making himself a cup of tea when a shadow falling across the kitchen table made him look up.

If for just a moment he thought the girl standing just inside the door was Lynn, his disappointment turned to surprise when he saw it was Rosaleen Cloade.

She was wearing a frock of some peasant material in bright broad stripes of orange and green—the artificial simplicity of which had run into more money than Rowley could ever have imagined possible.

Up to now he had always seen her dressed in expensive and somewhat towny clothes which she wore with an artificial air—much, he had thought, as a mannequin might display dresses that did not belong to her but to the firm who employed her.

This afternoon in the broad peasant stripes of gay colour, he seemed to see a new Rosaleen Cloade. Her Irish origin was more noticeable, the dark curling hair and the lovely blue eyes put in with the smutty finger. Her voice, too, had a softer Irish sound instead of the careful rather mincing tones in which she usually spoke.

"It's such a lovely afternoon," she said. "So I came for a walk."

She added:

"David's gone to London."

She said it almost guiltily, then flushed and took a cigarette case out of her bag. She offered one to Rowley, who shook his head, then looked round for a match to light Rosaleen's cigarette. But she was flicking unsuccessfully at an expensive-looking small gold lighter. Rowley took it from her and with one sharp movement it lit. As she bent her head towards him to light her cigarette he noticed how long and dark the lashes were that lay on her cheek and he thought to himself:

"Old Gordon knew what he was doing…."

Rosaleen stepped back a pace and said admiringly:

"That's a lovely little heifer you've got in the top field."

Astonished by her interest, Rowley began to talk to her about the farm. Her interest surprised him, but it was obviously genuine and not put on, and to his surprise he found that she was quite knowledgeable on farm matters. Butter-making and dairy produce she spoke of with familiarity.

"Why, you might be a farmer's wife, Rosaleen," he said smiling.

The animation went out of her face.

She said:

"We had a farm—in Ireland—before I came over here—before—"

"Before you went on the stage?"

She said wistfully and a trifle, it seemed to him, guiltily:

"It's not so very long ago…I remember it all very well." She added with a flash of spirit, "I could milk your cows for you, Rowley, now."

This was quite a new Rosaleen. Would David Hunter have approved these casual references to a farming past? Rowley thought not. Old Irish landed gentry, that was the impression David tried to put over. Rosaleen's version, he thought, was nearer the truth. Primitive farm life, then the lure of the stage, the touring company to South Africa, marriage—isolation in Central Africa—escape—hiatus—and finally marriage to a millionaire in New York….

Yes, Rosaleen Hunter had travelled a long way since milking a Kerry cow. Yet looking at her, he found it hard to believe that she had ever started. Her face had that innocent, slightly half-witted expression, the face of one who has no history. And she looked so young—much younger than her twenty-six years.

There was something appealing about her, she had the same pathetic quality as the little calves he had driven to the butcher that morning. He looked at her as he had looked at them. Poor little devils, he had thought, a pity that they had to be killed….

A look of alarm came into Rosaleen's eyes. She asked uneasily: "What are you thinking of, Rowley?"

"Would you like to see over the farm and the dairy?"

"Oh, indeed, I would."

Amused by her interest he took her all over the farm. But when he finally suggested making her a cup of tea, an alarmed expression came into her eyes.

"Oh, no—thank you, Rowley—I'd best be getting home." She looked down at her watch. "Oh! how late it is! David will be back by the 5:20 train. He'll wonder where I am. I—I must hurry." She added shyly: "I have enjoyed myself, Rowley."

And that, he thought, was true. She had enjoyed herself. She had been able to be natural—to be her own raw unsophisticated self. She was afraid of her brother David, that was clear. David was the brains of the family. Well, for once, she’d had an afternoon out—yes, that was it, an afternoon out just like a servant! The rich Mrs. Gordon Cloade!

He smiled grimly as he stood by the gate watching her hurrying up the hill towards Furrowbank. Just before she reached the stile a man came over it—Rowley wondered if it was David but it was a bigger, heavier man. Rosaleen drew back to let him pass, then skipped lightly over the stile, her pace accentuating almost to a run.

Yes, she’d had an afternoon off—and he, Rowley, had wasted over an hour of valuable time! Well, perhaps it hadn’t been wasted. Rosaleen, he thought, had seemed to like him. That might come in useful. A pretty thing—yes, and the calves this morning had been pretty…poor little devils.

Standing there, lost in thought, he was startled by a voice, and raised his head sharply.

A big man in a broad felt hat with a pack slung across his shoulders was standing on the footpath at the other side of the gate.

“Is this the way to Warmsley Vale?”

As Rowley stared he repeated his question. With an effort Rowley recalled his thoughts and answered:

“Yes, keep right along the path—across that next field. Turn to the left when you get to the road and about three minutes takes you right into the village.”

In the self-same words he had answered that particular question several hundred times. People took the footpath on leaving the station, followed it up over the hill, and lost faith in it as they came down the other side and saw no sign of their destination, for Blackwell Copse masked Warmsley Vale from sight. It was tucked away in a hollow there with only the tip of its church tower showing.

The next question was not quite so usual, but Rowley answered it without much thought.

“The Stag or the Bells and Motley. The Stag for choice. They’re both equally good—or bad. I should think you’d get a room all right.”

The question made him look more attentively at his interlocutor. Nowadays people usually booked a room beforehand at any place they were going to….

The man was tall, with a bronzed face, a beard, and very blue eyes. He was about forty and not ill-looking in a tough and rather daredevil style. It was not, perhaps, a wholly pleasant face.

Come from overseas somewhere, thought Rowley. Was there or was there not a faint Colonial twang in his accent? Curious, in some way, the face was not unfamiliar….

Where had he seen that face, or a face very like it, before?

Whilst he was puzzling unsuccessfully over that problem, the stranger startled him by asking:

“Can you tell me if there’s a house called Furrowbank near here?”

Rowley answered slowly:

“Why, yes. Up there on the hill. You must have passed close by it—that is, if you’ve come along the footpath from the station.”

“Yes—that’s what I did.” He turned, staring up the hill. “So that was it—that big white new-looking house.”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“A big place to run,” said the man. “Must cost a lot to keep up?”

A devil of a lot, thought Rowley. And our money…A stirring of anger made him forget for the moment where he was….

With a start he came back to himself to see the stranger staring up the hill with a curious speculative look in his eyes.

“Who lives there?” he said. “Is it—a Mrs. Cloade?”

“That’s right,” said Rowley. “Mrs. Gordon Cloade.”

The stranger raised his eyebrows. He seemed gently amused.

“Oh,” he said, “Mrs. Gordon Cloade. Very nice for her!”

Then he gave a short nod.

“Thanks, pal,” he said, and shifting the pack he carried he strode on towards Warmsley Vale.

Rowley turned slowly back into the farmyard. His mind was still puzzling over something.

Where the devil had he seen that fellow before?

III

About nine-thirty that night, Rowley pushed aside a heap of forms that had been littering the kitchen table and got up. He looked absentmindedly at the photograph of Lynn that stood on the mantelpiece, then frowning, he went out of the house.

Ten minutes later he pushed open the door of the Stag Saloon Bar. Beatrice Lippincott, behind the bar counter, smiled welcome at him. Mr. Rowley Cloade, she thought, was a fine figure of a man. Over a pint of bitter Rowley exchanged the usual observations with the company present, unfavourable comment was made upon the Government, the weather, and sundry particular crops.

Presently, moving up a little, Rowley was able to address Beatrice in a quiet voice:

“Got a stranger staying here? Big man? Slouch hat?”

“That’s right, Mr. Rowley. Came along about six o’clock. That the one you mean?”

Rowley nodded.

“He passed my place. Asked his way.”

“That’s right. Seems a stranger.”

“I wondered,” said Rowley, “who he was.”

He looked at Beatrice and smiled. Beatrice smiled back.

“That’s easy, Mr. Rowley, if you’d like to know.”

She dipped under the bar and out to return with a fat leather volume wherein were registered the arrivals.

She opened it at the page showing the most recent entries. The last of these ran as follows:

Enoch Arden. Cape Town. British.

Nine

I

It was a fine morning. The birds were singing, and Rosaleen, coming down to breakfast in her expensive peasant dress, felt happy.

The doubts and fears that had lately oppressed her seemed to have faded away. David was in a good temper, laughing and teasing her. His visit to London on the previous day had been satisfactory. Breakfast was well cooked and well served. They had just finished it when the post arrived.

There were seven or eight letters for Rosaleen. Bills, charitable appeals, some local invitations—nothing of any special interest.

David laid aside a couple of small bills and opened the third envelope. The enclosure, like the outside of the envelope, was written in printed characters.

Dear Mr. Hunter,

I think it is best to approach you rather than your sister, Mrs. Cloade,” in case the contents of this letter might come as somewhat of a shock to her. Briefly, I have news of Captain Robert Underhay, which she may be glad to hear. I am staying at the Stag and if you will call there this evening, I shall be pleased to go into the matter with you.

Yours faithfully,
Enoch Arden

A strangled sound came from David’s throat. Rosaleen looked up smiling, then her face changed to an expression of alarm.

“David—David—what is it?”

Mutely he held out the letter to her. She took it and read it.

“But—David—I don’t understand—what does it mean?”

“You can read, can’t you?”

She glanced up at him timorously.

“David—does it mean—what are we going to do?”

He was frowning—planning rapidly in his quick far-seeing mind.

“It’s all right, Rosaleen, no need to be worried. I’ll deal with it—”

“But does it mean that—”

“Don’t worry, my dear girl. Leave it to me. Listen, this is what you’ve got to do. Pack a bag at once and go up to London. Go to the flat—and stay there until you hear from me? Understand?”

“Yes. Yes, of course I understand, but David—”

“Just do as I say, Rosaleen.” He smiled at her. He was kindly, reassuring. “Go and pack. I’ll drive you to the station. You can catch the 10:32. Tell the porter at the flats that you don’t want to see any one. If any one calls and asks for you, he’s to say you’re out of town. Give him a quid. Understand? He’s not to let any one up to see you except me.”

“Oh.” Her hands went up to her cheeks. She looked at him with scared lovely eyes.

“It’s all right, Rosaleen—but it’s tricky. You’re not much hand at the tricky stuff. That’s my lookout. I want you out of the way so that I’ve got a free hand, that’s all.”

“Can’t I stay here, David?”

“No, of course you can’t, Rosaleen. Do have some sense. I’ve got to have a free hand to deal with this fellow whoever he is—”

“Do you think that it’s—that it’s—”

He said with emphasis:

“I don’t think anything at the moment. The first thing is to get you out of the way. Then I can find out where we stand. Go on—there’s a good girl, don’t argue.”

She turned and went out of the room.

David frowned down at the letter in his hand.

Very noncommittal—polite—well phrased—might mean anything. It might be genuine solicitude in an awkward situation. Might be a veiled threat. He conned its phrases over and over—“I have news of Captain Robert Underhay”…“Best to approach you”…“I shall be pleased to go into the matter with you…” “Mrs. Cloade.” Damn it all, he didn’t like those inverted commas—Mrs. Cloade…”

He looked at the signature. Enoch Arden. Something stirred in his mind—some poetical memory…a line of verse.

II

When David strode into the hall of the Stag that evening, there was, as was usual, no one about. A door at the left was marked Coffee Room, a door on the right was marked Lounge. A door farther along was marked repressively “For Resident Guests Only.” A passage on the right led along to the bar, from whence a faint hum of voices could be heard. A small glass-encased box was labelled Office and had a pushbell placed conveniently on the side of its sliding window.

Sometimes, as David knew by experience, you had to ring four or five times before any one condescended to come and attend to you. Except for the short period of meal times, the hall of the Stag was as deserted as Robinson Crusoe’s island.

This time, David’s third ring of the bell brought Miss Beatrice Lippincott along the passage from the bar, her hand patting her golden pompadour of hair into place. She slipped into the glass box and greeted him with a gracious smile.

"Good evening, Mr. Hunter. Rather cold weather for the time of year, isn't it?"

"Yes—I suppose it is. Have you got a Mr. Arden staying here?"

"Let me see now," said Miss Lippincott, making rather a parade of not knowing exactly, a proceeding she always adopted as tending to increase the importance of the Stag. "Oh, yes. Mr. Enoch Arden. No. 5. On the first floor. You can't miss it, Mr. Hunter. Up the stairs, and don't go along the gallery but round to the left and down three steps."

Following these complicated directions, David tapped on the door of No. 5 and a voice said Come in.

He went in, closing the door behind him.

III

Coming out of the office, Beatrice Lippincott called, "Lily." An adenoidal girl with a giggle and pale boiled-gooseberry eyes responded to the summons.

"Can you manage for a bit, Lily? I've got to see about some linen."

Lily said, "Oh, yes, Miss Lippincott," gave a giggle and added, sighing gustily: "I do think Mr. Hunter's ever so good-looking, don't you?"

"Ah, I've seen a lot of his type in the war," said Miss Lippincott, with a world-weary air. "Young pilots and suchlike from the fighter station. Never could be sure about their cheques. Often had such a way with them that you'd cash the things against your better judgment. But, of course, I'm funny that way, Lily, what I like is class. Give me class every time. What I say is a gentleman's a gentleman even if he does drive a tractor." With which enigmatic pronouncement Beatrice left Lily and went up the stairs.

IV

Inside room No. 5, David Hunter paused inside the door and looked at the man who had signed himself Enoch Arden.

Fortyish, knocked about a bit, a suggestion of having come down in the world—on the whole a difficult customer. Such was David's summing up. Apart from that, not easy to fathom. A dark horse.

Arden said:

"Hallo—you Hunter? Good. Sit down. What'll you have? Whisky?"

He'd made himself comfortable, David noted that. A modest array of bottles—a fire burning in the grate on this chilly spring evening. Clothes not English cut, but worn as an Englishman wears clothes. The man was the right age, too….

"Thanks," David said, "I'll have a spot of whisky."

"Say When."

"When. Not too much soda."

They were a little like dogs, manoeuvring for position—circling round each other, backs stiff, hackles up, ready to be friendly or ready to snarl and snap.

"Cheerio," said Arden.

"Cheerio."

They set their glasses down, relaxed a little. Round One was over.

The man who called himself Enoch Arden said:

"You were surprised to get my letter?"

"Frankly," said David, "I don't understand it at all."

"N-no—n-no—well, perhaps not."

David said:

“I understand you knew my sister’s first husband—Robert Underhay.”

“Yes, I knew Robert very well.” Arden was smiling, blowing clouds of smoke idly up in the air. “As well, perhaps, as any one could know him. You never met him, did you, Hunter?”

“No.”

“Oh, perhaps that’s as well.”

“What do you mean by that?” David asked sharply.

Arden said easily:

“My dear fellow, it makes everything much simpler—that’s all. I apologize for asking you to come here, but I did think it was best to keep”—he paused—“Rosaleen out of it all. No need to give her unnecessary pain.”

“Do you mind coming to the point?”

“Of course, of course. Well now, did you ever suspect—how shall we say—that there was anything—well—fishy—about Underhay’s death?”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Well, Underhay had rather peculiar ideas, you know. It may have been chivalry—it may just possibly have been for quite a different reason—but let’s say that, at a particular moment some years ago, there were certain advantages to Underhay in being considered dead. He was good at managing natives—always had been. No trouble to him to get a probable story circulated with any amount of corroborative detail. All Underhay had to do was to turn up about a thousand miles away—with a new name.”

“It seems a most fantastic supposition to me,” said David.

“Does it? Does it really?” Arden smiled. He leaned forward, tapped David on the knee. “Suppose it’s true, Hunter? Eh? Suppose it’s true?”

“I should require very definite proof of it.”

“Would you? Well, of course, there’s no superdefinite proof. Underhay himself could turn up here—in Warmsley Vale. How’d you like that for proof?”

“It would at least be conclusive,” said David dryly.

“Oh, yes, conclusive—but just a little embarrassing—for Mrs. Gordon Cloade, I mean. Because then, of course, she wouldn’t be Mrs. Gordon Cloade. Awkward. You must admit, just a little bit awkward?”

“My sister,” said David, “remarried in perfectly good faith.”

“Of course she did, my dear fellow. Of course she did. I’m not disputing that for a second. Any judge would say the same. No actual blame could attach to her.”

“Judge?” said David sharply.

The other said as though apologetically:

“I was thinking of bigamy.”

“Just what are you driving at?” asked David savagely.

“Now don’t get excited, old boy. We just want to put our heads together and see what’s best to be done—best for your sister, that’s to say. Nobody wants a lot of dirty publicity. Underhay—well, Underhay was always a chivalrous kind of chap.” Arden paused. “He still is….”

“Is?” asked David sharply.

“That’s what I said.”

“You say Robert Underhay is alive. Where is he now?”

Arden leaned forward—his voice became confidential.

"Do you really want to know, Hunter? Wouldn't it be better if you didn't know? Put it that, as far as you know, and as far as Rosaleen knows, Underhay died in Africa. Very good, and if Underhay is alive, he doesn't know his wife has married again, he hasn't the least idea of it. Because, of course, if he did know he would have come forward…Rosaleen, you see, has inherited a good deal of money from her second husband—well, then, of course she isn't entitled to any of that money…Underhay is a man with a very sensitive sense of honour. He wouldn't like her inheriting money under false pretences." He paused. "But of course it's possible that Underhay doesn't know anything about her second marriage. He's in a bad way, poor fellow—in a very bad way."

"What do you mean by in a bad way?"

Arden shook his head solemnly.

"Broken down in health. He needs medical attention—special treatments—all unfortunately rather expensive."

The last word dropped delicately as though into a category of its own. It was the word for which David Hunter had been unconsciously waiting.

He said:

"Expensive?"

"Yes—unfortunately everything costs money. Underhay, poor devil, is practically destitute." He added: "He's got practically nothing but what he stands up in…."

Just for a moment David's eyes wandered round the room. He noted the pack slung on a chair. There was no suitcase to be seen.

"I wonder," said David, and his voice was not pleasant, "if Robert Underhay is quite the chivalrous gentleman you make him out to be."

"He was once," the other assured him. "But life, you know, is inclined to make a fellow cynical." He paused and added softly: "Gordon Cloade was really an incredibly wealthy fellow. The spectacle of too much wealth arouses one’s baser instincts.”

David Hunter got up.

“I’ve got an answer for you. Go to the devil.”

Unperturbed, Arden said, smiling:

“Yes, I thought you’d say that.”

“You’re a damned blackmailer, neither more nor less. I’ve a good mind to call your bluff.”

“Publish and be damned? An admirable sentiment. But you wouldn’t like it if I did ‘publish.’ Not that I shall. If you won’t buy, I’ve another market.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Cloades. Suppose I go to them. ‘Excuse me, but would you be interested to learn that the late Robert Underhay is very much alive?’ Why, man, they’ll jump at it!”

David said scornfully:

“You won’t get anything out of them. They’re broke, every one of them.”

“Ah, but there’s such a thing as a working arrangement. So much in cash on the day it’s proved that Underhay is alive, that Mrs. Gordon Cloade is still Mrs. Robert Underhay and that consequently Gordon Cloade’s will, made before his marriage, is good in law….”

For some few minutes David sat silent, then he asked bluntly:

“How much?”

The answer came as bluntly:

“Twenty thousand.”

“Out of the question! My sister can’t touch the capital, she’s only got a life interest.”

“Ten thousand, then. She can raise that, easily. There’s jewellery, isn’t there?”

David sat silent, then he said unexpectedly:

“All right.”

For a moment the other man seemed at a loss. It was as though the ease of his victory surprised him.

“No cheques,” he said. “To be paid in notes!”

“You’ll have to give us time—to get hold of the money.”

“I’ll give you forty-eight hours.”

“Make it next Tuesday.”

“All right. You’ll bring the money here.” He added before David could speak, “I’m not meeting you at a lonely copse—or a deserted river bank, so don’t you think so. You’ll bring the money here—to the Stag—at nine o’clock next Tuesday evening.”

“Suspicious sort of chap, aren’t you?”

“I know my way about. And I know your kind.”

“As you said, then.”

David went out of the room and down the stairs. His face was black with rage.

Beatrice Lippincott came out of the room marked No. 4. There was a communicating door between 4 and 5, though the fact could hardly be noted by an occupant in 5 since a wardrobe stood upright in front of it.

Miss Lippincott’s cheeks were pink and her eyes bright with pleasurable excitement. She smoothed back her pompadour of hair with an agitated hand.

Ten

Shepherd’s Court, Mayfair, was a large block of luxury service flats. Unharmed by the ravages of enemy action, they had nevertheless been unable to keep up quite their prewar standard of ease. There was service still, although not very good service. Where there had been two uniformed porters there was now only one. The restaurant still served meals, but except for breakfast, meals were not sent up to the apartments.

The flat rented by Mrs. Gordon Cloade was on the third floor. It consisted of a sitting room with a built-in cocktail bar, two bedrooms with built-in cupboards, and a superbly appointed bathroom, gleaming with tiles and chromium.

In the sitting room David Hunter was striding up and down whilst Rosaleen sat on a big square-ended settee watching him. She looked pale and frightened.

“Blackmail!” he muttered. “Blackmail! My God, am I the kind of man to let myself be blackmailed?”

She shook her head, bewildered, troubled.

“If I knew,” David was saying. “If I only knew!”

From Rosaleen there came a small miserable sob.

He went on:

“It’s this working in the dark—working blindfold—” He wheeled round suddenly. “You took those emeralds round to Bond Street to old Greatorex?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

Rosaleen’s voice was stricken as she said:

“Four thousand. Four thousand pounds. He said if I didn’t sell them they ought to be reinsured.”

“Yes—precious stones have doubled in value. Oh well, we can raise the money. But if we do, it’s only the beginning—it means being bled to death—bled, Rosaleen, bled white!”

She cried:

“Oh, let’s leave England—let’s get away—couldn’t we go to Ireland—America—somewhere?”

He turned and looked at her.

“You’re not a fighter, are you, Rosaleen? Cut and run is your motto.”

She wailed: “We’re wrong—all this has been wrong—very wicked.”

“Don’t turn pious on me just now! I can’t stand it. We were sitting pretty, Rosaleen. For the first time in my life I was sitting pretty—and I’m not going to let it all go, do you hear? If only it wasn’t this cursed fighting in the dark. You understand, don’t you, that the whole thing may be bluff—nothing but bluff? Underhay’s probably safely buried in Africa as we’ve always thought he was.”

She shivered.

“Don’t, David. You make me afraid.”

He looked at her, saw the panic in her face, and at once his manner changed. He came over to her, sat down, took her cold hands in his.

“You’re not to worry,” he said. “Leave it all to me—and do as I tell you. You can manage that, can’t you? Just do exactly as I tell you.”

“I always do, David.”

He laughed. “Yes, you always do. We’ll snap out of this, never you fear. I’ll find a way of scotching Mr. Enoch Arden.”

“Wasn’t there a poem, David—something about a man coming back—”

“Yes.” He cut her short. “That’s just what worries me…But I’ll get to the bottom of things, never you fear.”

She said:

“It’s Tuesday night you—take him the money?”

He nodded.

“Five thousand. I’ll tell him I can’t raise the rest all at once. But I must stop him going to the Cloades. I think that was only a threat, but I can’t be sure.”

He stopped, his eyes became dreamy, far away. Behind them his mind worked, considering and rejecting possibilities.

Then he laughed. It was a gay reckless laugh. There were men, now dead, who would have recognized it….

It was the laugh of a man going into action on a hazardous and dangerous enterprise. There was enjoyment in it and defiance.

“I can trust you, Rosaleen,” he said. “Thank goodness I can trust you absolutely!”

“Trust me?” She raised her big inquiring eyes. “To do what?”

He smiled again.

“To do exactly as you are told. That’s the secret, Rosaleen, of a successful operation.”

He laughed:

“Operation Enoch Arden.”

Eleven

Rowley opened the big mauve envelope with some surprise. Who on earth, he wondered, could be writing to him, using that kind of stationery—and how did they manage to get it, anyway? These fancy lines had surely gone right out during the war.

“Dear Mr. Rowley,” he read,

“I hope you won’t think I’m taking a liberty in writing to you this way, but if you’ll excuse me, I do think there are things going on that you ought to know about.”

He noted the underlining with a puzzled look.

“Arising out of our conversation the other evening when you came in asking about a certain person. If you could call in at the Stag I’d be very glad to tell you all about it. We’ve all of us felt down here what a wicked shame it was about your Uncle dying and his money going the way it did.

“Hoping you won’t be angry with me, but I really do think you ought to know what’s going on.

“Yours ever,
“Beatrice Lippincott.”

Rowley stared down at this missive, his mind afire with speculation. What on earth was all this about? Good old Bee. He’d known Beatrice all his life. Bought tobacco from her father’s shop and passed the time of day with her behind the counter. She’d been a good-looking girl. He remembered as a child hearing rumours about her during an absence of hers from Warmsley Vale. She’d been away about a year and everybody said she’d gone away to have an illegitimate baby. Perhaps she had, perhaps she hadn’t. But she was certainly highly respectable and refined nowadays. Plenty of backchat and giggles, but an almost painful propriety.

Rowley glanced up at the clock. He'd go along to the Stag right away. To hell with all those forms. He wanted to know what it was that Beatrice was so anxious to tell him.

It was a little after eight when he pushed open the door of the saloon bar. There were the usual greetings, nods of the head, "Evening, sir." Rowley edged up to the bar and asked for a Guinness. Beatrice beamed upon him.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Rowley."

"Evening, Beatrice. Thanks for your note."

She gave him a quick glance.

"I'll be with you in a minute, Mr. Rowley."

He nodded—and drank his half pint meditatively whilst he watched Beatrice finish serving out. She called over her shoulder and presently the girl Lily came in to relieve her. Beatrice murmured, "If you'll come with me, Mr. Rowley?"

She led him along a passage and in through a door marked Private. Inside it was very small and overfurnished with plush armchairs, a blaring radio, a lot of china ornaments and a rather battered-looking pierrot doll thrown across the back of a chair.

Beatrice Lippincott turned off the radio and indicated a plush armchair.

"I'm ever so glad you came up, Mr. Rowley, and I hope you didn't mind my writing to you—but I've been turning it over in my mind all over the weekend—and as I said I really felt you ought to know what's going on."

She was looking happy and important, clearly pleased with herself.

Rowley asked with mild curiosity:

"What is going on?"

“Well, Mr. Rowley, you know the gentleman who’s staying here—Mr. Arden, the one you came and asked about.”

“Yes?”

“It was the very next evening. Mr. Hunter came along and asked for him.”

“Mr. Hunter?”

Rowley sat up interestedly.

“Yes, Mr. Rowley. No. 5, I said, and Mr. Hunter nodded and went straight up. I was surprised I must say, for this Mr. Arden hadn’t said he knew any one in Warmsley Vale and I’d kind of taken it for granted he was a stranger here and didn’t know any one in the place. Very out of temper Mr. Hunter looked, as though something had happened to upset him but of course I didn’t make anything of it then.”

She paused for breath. Rowley said nothing, just listened. He never hurried people. If they liked to take their time it suited him.

Beatrice continued with dignity:

“It was just a little later I had occasion to go up to No. 4 to see to the towels and the bed linen. That’s next door to No. 5, and as it happens there’s a communicating door—not that you’d know it from No. 5 because the big wardrobe there stands right across it, so that you wouldn’t know there was a door. Of course it’s always kept shut but as it happened this time it was just a bit open—though who opened it I’ve no idea, I’m sure!”

Again Rowley said nothing, but just nodded his head.

Beatrice, he thought, had opened it. She had been curious and had gone up deliberately to No. 4 to find out what she could.

“And so you see, Mr. Rowley, I couldn’t help hearing what was going on. Really, you could have knocked me over with a feather—”

A pretty substantial feather, thought Rowley, would be needed.

He listened, with an impassive, almost bovine face, to Beatrice’s succinct account of the conversation she had overheard. When she had finished, she waited expectantly.

It was fully a couple of minutes before Rowley came out of his trance. Then he got up.

“Thanks, Beatrice,” he said. “Thanks a lot.”

And with that he went straight out of the room. Beatrice felt somewhat deflated. She really did think, she said to herself, that Mr. Rowley might have said something.

Twelve

When Rowley left the Stag his steps turned automatically in the direction of home, but after walking a few hundred yards, he pulled up short and retraced his steps.

His mind took things in slowly and his first astonishment over Beatrice's revelations was only now beginning to give way to a true appreciation of the significance. If her version of what she had overheard was correct, and he had no doubt that in substance it was so, then a situation had arisen which concerned every member of the Cloade family closely. The person most fitted to deal with this was clearly Rowley's Uncle Jeremy. As a solicitor, Jeremy Cloade would know what use could best be made of this surprising information, and exactly what steps to take.

Though Rowley would have liked to take action himself, he realized rather grudgingly that it would be far better to lay the matter before a shrewd and experienced lawyer. The sooner Jeremy was in possession of this information the better, and accordingly Rowley bent his footsteps straight to Jeremy's house in the High Street.

The little maid who opened the door informed him that Mr. and Mrs. Cloade were still at the dinner table. She would have shown him in there, but Rowley negatived this and said he would wait in Jeremy's study till they had finished. He did not particularly want to include Frances in the colloquy. Indeed the fewer people who knew about it the better, until they should have determined on a definite course of action.

He wandered restlessly up and down Jeremy's study. On the flat-topped desk was a tin dispatch box labelled Sir William Jessamy Deceased. The shelves held a collection of legal tomes. There was an old photograph of Frances in evening dress and one of her father, Lord Edward Trenton, in riding kit. On the desk was the picture of a young man in uniform—Jeremy's son Antony, killed in the war.

Rowley winced and turned away. He sat down in a chair and stared at Lord Edward Trenton instead.

In the dining room Frances said to her husband:

“I wonder what Rowley wants?”

Jeremy said wearily:

“Probably fallen foul of some Government regulation. No farmer understands more than a quarter of these forms they have to fill up. Rowley’s a conscientious fellow. He gets worried.”

“He’s nice,” said Frances, “but terribly slow. I have a feeling, you know, that things aren’t going too well between him and Lynn.”

Jeremy murmured vacantly:

“Lynn—oh, yes, of course. Forgive me, I—I don’t seem able to concentrate. The strain—”

Frances said swiftly:

“Don’t think about it. It’s going to be all right, I tell you.”

“You frighten me sometimes, Frances. You’re so terribly reckless. You don’t realize—”

“I realize everything. I’m not afraid. Really, you know, Jeremy, I’m rather enjoying myself—”

“That, my dear,” said Jeremy, “is just what causes me such anxiety.”

She smiled.

“Come,” she said. “You mustn’t keep that bucolic young man waiting too long. Go and help him to fill up form eleven hundred and ninety-nine, or whatever it is.”

But as they came out of the dining room the front door banged shut. Edna came to tell them that Mr. Rowley had said he wouldn’t wait and that it was nothing that really mattered.

Thirteen

On that particular Tuesday afternoon, Lynn Marchmont had gone for a long walk. Conscious of a growing restlessness and dissatisfaction with herself, she felt the need for thinking things out.

She had not seen Rowley for some days. After their somewhat stormy parting on the morning she had asked him to lend her five hundred pounds they had met as usual. Lynn realized that her demand had been unreasonable and that Rowley had been well within his rights in turning it down. Nevertheless reasonableness has never been a quality that appeals to lovers. Outwardly things were the same between her and Rowley, inwardly she was not so sure. The last few days she had found unbearably monotonous, yet hardly liked to acknowledge to herself that David Hunter's sudden departure to London with his sister might have something to do with their monotony. David, she admitted ruefully, was an exciting person….

As for her relations, at the moment she found them all unbearably trying. Her mother was in the best of spirits and had annoyed Lynn at lunch that day by announcing that she was going to try and find a second gardener. "Old Tom really can't keep up with things here."

"But, darling, we can't afford it," Lynn had exclaimed.

"Nonsense, I really think, Lynn, that Gordon would be terribly upset if he could see how the garden has gone down. He was so particular always about the border, and the grass being kept mown, and the paths in good order—and just look at it now. I feel Gordon would want it put in order again."

"Even if we have to borrow money from his widow to do it."

"I told you, Lynn, Rosaleen couldn't have been nicer about it. I really think she quite saw my point of view. I have a nice balance at the bank after paying all the bills. And I really think a second gardener would be an economy. Think of the extra vegetables we could grow."

“We could buy a lot of extra vegetables for a good deal less than another three pounds a week.”

“I think we could get someone for less than that, dear. There are men coming out of the Services now who want jobs. The paper says so.”

Lynn said dryly: “I doubt if you’ll find them in Warmsley Vale—or in Warmsley Heath.”

But although the matter was left like that, the tendency of her mother to count on Rosaleen as a regular source of support haunted Lynn. It revived the memory of David’s sneering words.

So, feeling disgruntled and out of temper, she set out to walk her black mood off.

Her temper was not improved by a meeting with Aunt Kathie outside the post office. Aunt Kathie was in good spirits.

“I think, Lynn dear, that we shall soon have good news.”

“What on earth do you mean, Aunt Kathie?”

Mrs. Cloade nodded and smiled and looked wise.

“I’ve had the most astonishing communications—really astonishing. A simple happy end to all our troubles. I had one setback, but since then I’ve got the message to Try try try again. If at first you don’t succeed, etc…I’m not going to betray any secrets, Lynn dear, and the last thing I should want to do would be to raise false hopes prematurely, but I have the strongest belief that things will very soon be quite all right. And quite time, too. I am really very worried about your uncle. He worked far too hard during the war. He really needs to retire and devote himself to his specialized studies—but of course he can’t do that without an adequate income. And sometimes he has such queer nervous fits, I am really very worried about him. He is really quite odd.”

Lynn nodded thoughtfully. The change in Lionel Cloade had not escaped her notice, nor his curious alternation of moods. She suspected that he occasionally had recourse to drugs to stimulate himself, and she wondered whether he were not to a certain extent an addict. It would account for his extreme nervous irritability. She wondered how much Aunt Kathie knew or guessed. Aunt Kathie, thought Lynn, was not such a fool as she looked.

Going down the High Street, she caught a glimpse of her Uncle Jeremy letting himself into his front door. He looked, Lynn thought, very much older just in these last three weeks.

She quickened her pace. She wanted to get out of Warmsley Vale, up on to the hills and open spaces. Setting out at a brisk pace she soon felt better. She would go for a good tramp of six or seven miles—and really think things out. Always, all her life, she had been a resolute clearheaded person. She had known what she wanted and what she didn't want. Never, until now, had she been content just to drift along….

Yes, that was just what it was! Drifting along! An aimless, formless method of living. Ever since she had come out of the Service. A wave of nostalgia swept over her for those war days. Days when duties were clearly defined, when life was planned and orderly—when the weight of individual decisions had been lifted from her. But even as she formulated the idea, she was horrified at herself. Was that really and truly what people were secretly feeling everywhere? Was that what, ultimately, war did to you? It was not the physical dangers—the mines at sea, the bombs from the air, the crisp ping of a rifle bullet as you drove over a desert track. No, it was the spiritual danger of learning how much easier life was if you ceased to think…She, Lynn Marchmont, was no longer the clearheaded resolute intelligent girl who had joined up. Her intelligence had been specialized, directed in well-defined channels. Now mistress of herself and her life once more, she was appalled at the disinclination of her mind to seize and grapple with her own personal problems.

With a sudden wry smile, Lynn thought to herself: Odd if it's really that newspaper character "the housewife" who has come into her own through war conditions. The women who, hindered by innumerable "shall nots," were not helped by any definite "shalls." Women who had to plan and think and improvise, who had to use every inch of the ingenuity they had been given, and to develop an ingenuity that they didn't know they had got! They alone, thought Lynn now, could stand upright without a crutch, responsible for themselves and others. And she, Lynn Marchmont, well educated, clever, having done a job that needed brains and close application, was now rudderless, devoid of resolution—yes, hateful word: drifting….

The people who had stayed at home; Rowley, for instance.

But at once Lynn's mind dropped from vague generalities to the immediate personal. Herself and Rowley. That was the problem, the real problem—the only problem. Did she really want to marry Rowley?

Slowly the shadows lengthened to twilight and dusk. Lynn sat motionless, her chin cupped in her hands on the outskirts of a small copse on the hillside, looking down over the valley. She had lost count of time, but she knew that she was strangely reluctant to go home to the White House. Below her, away to the left, was Long Willows. Long Willows, her home if she married Rowley.

If! It came back to that—if—if—if!

A bird flew out of the wood with a startled cry like the cry of an angry child. A billow of smoke from a train went eddying up in the sky forming as it did so a giant question mark:

???

Shall I marry Rowley? Do I want to marry Rowley? Did I ever want to marry Rowley? Could I bear not to marry Rowley?

The train puffed away up the valley, the smoke quivered and dispersed. But the question mark did not fade from Lynn's mind.

She had loved Rowley before she went away. "But I've come home changed," she thought. "I'm not the same Lynn."

A line of poetry floated into her mind.

"Life and the world and mine own self are changed…."

And Rowley? Rowley hadn't changed.

Yes, that was it. Rowley hadn't changed. Rowley was where she had left him four years ago.

Did she want to marry Rowley? If not, what did she want?

Twigs cracked in the copse behind her and a man's voice cursed as he pushed his way through.

She cried out, "David!"

"Lynn!" He looked amazed as he came crashing through the undergrowth. "What in the name of fortune are you doing here?"

He had been running and was slightly out of breath.

"I don't know. Just thinking—sitting and thinking." She laughed uncertainly. "I suppose—it's getting very late."

"Haven't you any idea of the time?"

She looked down vaguely at her wristwatch.

"It's stopped again. I disorganize watches."

"More than watches!" David said. "It's the electricity in you. The vitality. The life."

He came up to her, and vaguely disturbed, she rose quickly to her feet.

"It's getting quite dark. I must hurry home. What time is it, David?"

"Quarter past nine. I must run like a hare. I simply must catch the 9:20 train to London."

"I didn't know you had come back here!"

“I had to get some things from Furrowbank. But I must catch this train. Rosaleen’s alone in the flat—and she gets the jitters if she’s alone at night in London.”

“In a service flat?” Lynn’s voice was scornful.

David said sharply:

“Fear isn’t logical. When you’ve suffered from blast—”

Lynn was suddenly ashamed—contrite. She said:

“I’m sorry. I’d forgotten.”

With sudden bitterness David cried out:

“Yes, it’s soon forgotten—all of it. Back to safety! Back to tameness! Back to where we were when the whole bloody show started! Creep into our rotten little holes and play safe again. You, too, Lynn—you’re just the same as the rest of them!”

She cried, “I’m not. I’m not, David. I was just thinking—now—”

“Of me?”

His quickness startled her. His arm was round her, holding him to her. He kissed her with hot angry lips.

“Rowley Cloade?” he said, “that oaf? By God, Lynn, you belong to me.”

Then as suddenly as he had taken her, he released her, almost thrusting her away from him.

“I’ll miss the train.”

He ran headlong down the hillside.

“David…”

He turned his head, calling back:

“I’ll ring you when I get to London….”

She watched him running through the gathering gloom, light and athletic and full of natural grace.

Then, shaken, her heart strangely stirred, her mind chaotic, she walked slowly homeward.

She hesitated a little before going in. She shrank from her mother’s affectionate welcome, her questions….

Her mother who had borrowed five hundred pounds from people whom she despised.

“We’ve no right to despise Rosaleen and David,” thought Lynn as she went very softly upstairs. “We’re just the same. We’d do anything—anything for money.”

She stood in her bedroom, looking curiously at her face in the mirror. It was, she thought, the face of a stranger….

And then, sharply, anger shook her.

“If Rowley really loved me,” she thought, “he’d have got that five hundred pounds for me somehow. He would—he would. He wouldn’t let me be humiliated by having to take it from David—David….”

David had said he would ring her when he got to London.

She went downstairs, walking in a dream.

Dreams, she thought, could be very dangerous things….

Fourteen

“Oh, there you are, Lynn.” Adela’s voice was brisk and relieved. “I didn’t hear you come in, darling. Have you been in long?”

“Oh, yes, ages. I was upstairs.”

“I wish you’d tell me when you come in, Lynn. I’m always nervous when you’re out alone after dark.”

“Really, Mums, don’t you think I can look after myself?”

“Well, there have been dreadful things in the papers lately. All these discharged soldiers—they attack girls.”

“I expect the girls ask for it.”

She smiled—rather a twisted smile.

Yes, girls did ask for danger…Who, after all, really wanted to be safe…?

“Lynn, darling, are you listening?”

Lynn brought her mind back with a jerk.

Her mother had been talking.

“What did you say, Mums?”

“I was talking about your bridesmaids, dear. I suppose they’ll be able to produce the coupons all right. It’s very lucky for you having all your demob ones. I’m really terribly sorry for girls who get married nowadays on just their ordinary coupons. I mean they just can’t have anything new at all. Not outside, I mean. What with the state all one’s undies are in nowadays one just has to go for them. Yes, Lynn, you really are lucky.”

“Oh, very lucky.”

She was walking round the room—prowling, picking up things, putting them down.

“Must you be so terribly restless, dear? You make me feel quite jumpy!”

“Sorry, Mums.”

“There’s nothing the matter, is there?”

“What should be the matter?” asked Lynn sharply.

“Well, don’t jump down my throat, darling. Now about bridesmaids. I really think you ought to ask the Macrae girl. Her mother was my closest friend, remember, and I do think she’ll be hurt if—”

“I loathe Joan Macrae and always have.”

“I know, darling, but does that really matter? Marjorie will, I’m sure, feel hurt—”

“Really, Mums, it’s my wedding, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I know, Lynn, but—”

“If there is a wedding at all!”

She hadn’t meant to say that. The words slipped out without her having planned them. She would have caught them back, but it was too late. Mrs. Marchmont was staring at her daughter in alarm.

“Lynn, darling, what do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing, Mums.”

“You and Rowley haven’t quarrelled?”

“No, of course not. Don’t fuss, Mums, everything’s all right.”

But Adela was looking at her daughter in real alarm, sensitive to the turmoil behind Lynn’s frowning exterior.

“I’ve always felt you’d be so safe married to Rowley,” she said piteously.

“Who wants to be safe?” Lynn asked scornfully. She turned sharply. “Was that the telephone?”

“No. Why? Are you expecting a call?”

Lynn shook her head. Humiliating to be waiting for the telephone to ring. He had said he would ring her tonight. He must. “You’re mad,” she told herself. “Mad.”

Why did this man attract her so? The memory of his dark unhappy face rose up before her eyes. She tried to banish it, tried to replace it by Rowley’s broad good-looking countenance. His slow smile, his affectionate glance. But did Rowley, she thought, really care about her? Surely if he’d really cared, he’d have understood that day when she came to him and begged for five hundred pounds. He’d have understood instead of being so maddeningly reasonable and matter-of-fact. Marry Rowley, live on the farm, never go away again, never see foreign skies, smell exotic smells—never again be free….

Sharply the telephone rang. Lynn took a deep breath, walked across the hall and picked up the receiver.

With the shock of a blow, Aunt Kathie’s voice came thinly through the wire.

“Lynn? Is that you? Oh, I’m so glad. I’m afraid, you know, I’ve made rather a muddle—about the meeting at the Institute—”

The thin fluttering voice went on. Lynn listened, interpolated comments, uttered reassurances, received thanks.

“Such a comfort, dear Lynn, you are always so kind and so practical. I really can’t imagine how I get things so muddled up.”

Lynn couldn’t imagine either. Aunt Kathie’s capacity for muddling the simplest issues amounted practically to genius.

“But I always do say,” finished Aunt Kathie, “that everything goes wrong at once. Our telephone is out of order and I’ve had to go out to a call box, and now I’m here I hadn’t got twopence, only halfpennies—and I had to go and ask—”

It petered out at last. Lynn hung up and went back to the drawing-room. Adela Marchmont, alert, asked: “Was that—” and paused.

Lynn said quickly: “Aunt Kathie.”

“What did she want?”

“Oh, just one of her usual muddles.”

Lynn sat down again with a book, glancing up at the clock. Yes—it had been too early. She couldn’t expect her call yet. At five minutes past eleven the telephone rang again. She went slowly out to it. This time she wouldn’t expect—it was probably Aunt Kathie again….

But no. “Warmsley Vale 34? Can Miss Lynn Marchmont take a personal call from London?”

Her heart missed a beat.

“This is Miss Lynn Marchmont speaking.”

“Hold on, please.”

She waited—confused noises—then silence. The telephone service was getting worse and worse. She waited. Finally she depressed the receiver angrily. Another woman’s voice, indifferent, cold, spoke, was uninterested. “Hang up, please. You’ll be called later.”

She hung up, went back towards the drawing room, the bell rang again as she had her hand on the door. She hurried back to the telephone.

“Hallo?”

A man’s voice said: “Warmsley Vale 34? Personal call from London for Miss Lynn Marchmont.”

“Speaking.”

“Just a minute please.” Then, faintly, “Speak up, London, you’re through….”

And then, suddenly, David’s voice:

“Lynn, is that you?”

“David!”

“I had to speak to you.”

“Yes….”

“Look here, Lynn, I think I’d better clear out—”

“What do you mean?”

“Clear out of England altogether. Oh, it’s easy enough. I’ve pretended it wasn’t to Rosaleen—simply because I didn’t want to leave Warmsley Vale. But what’s the good of it all? You and I—it wouldn’t work. You’re a fine girl, Lynn—and as for me, I’m a bit of a crook, always have been. And don’t flatter yourself that I’d go straight for your sake. I might mean to—but it wouldn’t work. No, you’d better marry the plodding Rowley. He’ll never give you a day’s anxiety as long as you live. I should give you hell.”

She stood there, holding the receiver, saying nothing.

“Lynn, are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“What is there to say?”

“Lynn?”

“Well…?”

Strange how clearly she could feel over all that distance, his excitement, the urgency of his mood….

He cursed softly, said explosively, “Oh, to hell with everything!” and rang off.

Mrs. Marchmont, coming out of the drawing room, said, “Was that—?”

“A wrong number,” said Lynn and went quickly up the stairs.

Fifteen

It was the custom at the Stag for guests to be called at whatever hour they named by the simple process of a loud bang on the door and the shouted information that it was “Eight-thirty, sir,” or “Eight o’clock” whatever the case might be. Early tea was produced if expressly stipulated for, and was deposited with a rattle of crockery on the mat outside the door.

On this particular Wednesday morning, young Gladys went through the usual formula outside No. 5, yelling out, “Eight-fifteen, sir,” and crashing down the tray with a bang that slopped the milk out of the jug. She then went on her way, calling more people and proceeding to her other duties.

It was ten o’clock before she took in the fact that No. 5’s tea was still on the mat.

She beat a few heavy raps on the door, got no reply and therupon walked in.

No. 5 was not the kind of gentleman who overslept himself, and she had just remembered that there was a convenient flat roof outside the window. It was just possible, thought Gladys, that No. 5 had done a bunk without paying his bill.

But the man registered as Enoch Arden had not done a bunk. He was lying on his face in the middle of the room and without any knowledge of medicine, Gladys had no doubt whatever that he was dead.

Gladys threw back her head and screamed, then rushed out of the room and down the stairs, still screaming.

“Ow, Miss Lippincott—Miss Lippincott—ow—”

Beatrice Lippincott was in her private room having a cut hand bandaged by Dr. Lionel Cloade—the latter dropped the bandage and turned irritably as the girl burst in.

“Ow, Miss!”

The doctor snapped:

“What is it? What is it?”

“What’s the matter, Gladys?” asked Beatrice.

“It’s the gentleman in No. 5, Miss. He’s lying there on the floor, dead.”

The doctor stared at the girl and then at Miss Lippincott: the latter stared at Gladys and then at the doctor.

Finally, Dr. Cloade said uncertainly:

“Nonsense.”

“Dead as a doornail,” said Gladys, and added with a certain relish: “’Is ’ead’s bashed in!”

The doctor looked towards Miss Lippincott.

“Perhaps I’d better—”

“Yes, please, Dr. Cloade. But really—I hardly think—it seems so impossible.”

They trooped upstairs, Gladys leading the way. Dr. Cloade took one look, knelt down and bent over the recumbent figure.

He looked up at Beatrice. His manner had changed. It was abrupt, authoritative.

“You’d better telephone through to the police station,” he said.

Beatrice Lippincott went out, Gladys followed her.

Gladys said in an awed whisper:

“Ow, Miss, do you think it’s murder?”

Beatrice smoothed back her golden pompadour with an agitated hand.

“You hold your tongue, Gladys,” she said sharply. “Saying a thing’s murder before you know it’s murder is libel and you might be had up in court for it. It’ll do the Stag no good to have a lot of gossip going about.” She added, as a gracious concession: “You can go and make yourself a nice cup of tea. I dare say you need it.”

“Yes, indeed, Miss, I do. My inside’s fair turning over! I’ll bring you along a cup, too!”

To which Beatrice did not say No.

Sixteen

Superintendent Spence looked thoughtfully across his table at Beatrice Lippincott, who was sitting with her lips compressed tightly together.

“Thank you, Miss Lippincott,” he said. “That’s all you can remember? I’ll have it typed out for you to read and then if you wouldn’t mind signing it—”

“Oh, dear—I shan’t have to give evidence in a police court, I do hope.”

Superintendent Spence smiled appeasingly.

“Oh, we hope it mayn’t come to that,” he said mendaciously.

“It may be suicide,” Beatrice suggested hopefully.

Superintendent Spence forbore to say that a suicide does not usually cave in the back of his skull with a pair of steel fire tongs. Instead, he replied in the same easy manner:

“Never any good jumping to conclusions. Thank you, Miss Lippincott. Very good of you to come forward with this statement so promptly.”

When she had been ushered out, he ran over her statement in his mind. He knew all about Beatrice Lippincott, had a very good idea of how far her accuracy was to be depended upon. So much for a conversation genuinely overhead and remembered. A little extra embroidery for excitement’s sake. A little extra still because murder had been done in bedroom No. 5. But take extras away and what remained was ugly and suggestive.

Superintendent Spence looked at the table in front of him. There was a wristwatch with a smashed glass, a small gold lighter with initials on it, a lipstick in a gilt holder, and a pair of heavy steel fire tongs, the heavy head of which was stained a rusty brown.

Sergeant Graves looked in and said that Mr. Rowley Cloade was waiting. Spence nodded and the Sergeant showed Rowley in.

Just as he knew all about Beatrice Lippincott, so the Superintendent knew all about Rowley Cloade. If Rowley had come to the police station, it was because Rowley had got something to say and that something would be solid, reliable and unimaginative. It would, in fact, be worth hearing. At the same time, Rowley being a deliberate type of person, it would take some time to say. And you couldn't hurry the Rowley Cloade type. If you did, they became rattled, repeated themselves, and generally took twice as long….

"Good morning, Mr. Cloade. Pleased to see you. Can you throw any light on this problem of ours? The man who was killed at the Stag."

Rather to Spence's surprise, Rowley began with a question. He asked abruptly:

"Have you identified the fellow?"

"No," said Spence slowly. "I wouldn't say we had. He signed the register Enoch Arden. There's nothing in his possession to show he was Enoch Arden."

Rowley frowned.

"Isn't that—rather odd?"

It was exceedingly odd, but Superintendent Spence did not propose to discuss with Rowley Cloade just how odd he thought it was. Instead he said pleasantly: "Come now, Mr. Cloade, I'm the one who asks the questions. You went to see the dead man last night. Why?"

"You know Beatrice Lippincott, Superintendent? At the Stag."

"Yes, of course. And," said the Superintendent, taking what he hoped would be a short cut, "I've heard her story. She came to me with it."

Rowley looked relieved.

"Good. I was afraid she mightn't want to be mixed up with a police matter. These people are funny that way sometimes." The Superintendent nodded. "Well, then, Beatrice told me what she'd overheard and it seemed to me—I don't know if it does to you—decidedly fishy. What I mean is—we're, well, we're interested parties."

Again the Superintendent nodded. He had taken a keen local interest in Gordon Cloade's death and in common with general local opinion he considered that Gordon's family had been badly treated. He endorsed the common opinion that Mrs. Gordon Cloade "wasn't a lady," and that Mrs. Gordon Cloade's brother was one of those young firebrand Commandos who, though they had had their uses in time of war, were to be looked at askance in peacetime.

"I don't suppose I need explain to you, Superintendent, that if Mrs. Gordon's first husband is still alive, it will make a big difference to us as a family. This story of Beatrice's was the first intimation I had that such a state of affairs might exist. I'd never dreamed of such a thing. Thought she was definitely a widow. And I may say it shook me up a lot. Took me a bit of time to realize it, as you might say. You know, I had to let it soak in."

Spence nodded again. He could see Rowley slowly ruminating the matter, turning it over and over in his mind.

"First of all I thought I'd better get my uncle on to it—the lawyer one."

"Mr. Jeremy Cloade?"

"Yes, so I went along there. Must have been some time after eight. They were still at dinner and I sat down in old Jeremy's study to wait for him, and I went on turning things over in my mind."

"Yes?"

"And finally I came to the conclusion that I'd do a bit more myself before getting my uncle on to it. Lawyers, Superintendent, are all the same, I've found. Very slow, very cautious, and have to be absolutely sure of their facts before they'll move in a matter. The information I'd got had come to me in a rather hole-and-corner manner—and I wondered if old Jeremy might hem and haw a bit about acting on it. I decided I'd go along to the Stag and see this Johnnie for myself."

"And you did so?"

"Yes. I went right back to the Stag—"

"At what time was this?"

Rowley pondered.

"Lemme see, I must have got to Jeremy's about twenty past eight or thereabouts—five minutes—well, I wouldn't like to say exactly, Spence—after half-past eight—perhaps about twenty to nine?"

"Yes, Mr. Cloade?"

"I knew where the bloke was—Bee had mentioned the number of his room—so I went right up and knocked at the door and he said, 'Come in,' and I went in."

Rowley paused.

"Somehow I don't think I handled the business very well. I thought when I went in that I was the one who was on top. But the fellow must have been rather a clever fellow. I couldn't pin him down to anything definite. I thought he'd be frightened when I hinted he'd been doing a spot of blackmail, but it just seemed to amuse him. He asked me—damned cheek—if I was in the market too? 'You can't play your dirty game with me,' I said. 'I've nothing to hide.' And he said rather nastily that that wasn't his meaning. The point was, he said, that he'd got something to sell and was I a buyer? 'What do you mean?' I said. He said: 'How much will you—or the family generally—pay me for the definite proof that Robert Underhay, reported dead in Africa, is really alive and kicking?' I asked him why the devil we should pay anything at all? And he laughed and said, 'Because I've got a client coming this evening who certainly will pay a very substantial sum for proof positive that Robert Underhay is dead.' Then—

well, then, I'm afraid I rather lost my temper and told him that my family weren't used to doing that kind of dirty business. If Underhay was really alive, I said, the fact ought to be quite easy to establish. Upon that I was just stalking out when he laughed and said in what was really rather a queer tone, 'I don't think you'll prove it without my cooperation.' Funny sort of way he said that."

"And then?"

"Well, frankly, I went home rather disturbed. Felt, you know, that I'd messed things up. Rather wished I'd left it to old Jeremy to tackle after all. I mean, dash it all, a lawyer's used to dealing with slippery customers."

"What time did you leave the Stag?"

"I've no idea. Wait a sec. Must have been just before nine because I heard the pips for the news as I was going along the village—through one of the windows."

"Did Arden say who it was he was expecting? The 'client?'"

"No. I took it for granted it was David Hunter. Who else could it be?"

"He didn't seem in any way alarmed by the prospect?"

"I tell you the fellow was thoroughly pleased with himself and on top of the world!"

Spence indicated with a slight gesture the heavy steel tongs.

"Did you notice these in the grate, Mr. Cloade?"

"Those? No—I don't think so. The fire wasn't lit." He frowned, trying to visualize the scene. "There were fire irons in the grate, I'm sure, but I can't say I noticed what they were." He added, "Was that what—"

Spence nodded.

"Smashed his skull in."

Rowley frowned.

“Funny. Hunter’s a lightly built chap—Arden was a big man—powerful.”

The Superintendent said in a colourless voice:

“The medical evidence is that he was struck down from behind and that the blows delivered with the head of the tongs were struck from above.”

Rowley said thoughtfully:

“Of course he was a cocksure sort of a bloke—but all the same I wouldn’t have turned my back with a fellow in the room whom I was trying to bleed white and who’d done some pretty tough fighting in the war. Arden can’t have been a very cautious sort of chap.”

“If he had been cautious very likely he’d be alive now,” said the Superintendent dryly.

“I wish to God he was,” said Rowley fervently. “As it is I feel I’ve mucked things up thoroughly. If only I hadn’t got on my high horse and stalked off, I might have got something useful out of him. I ought to have pretended that we were in the market, but the thing’s so damned silly. I mean, who are we to bid against Rosaleen and David? They’ve got the cash. None of us could raise five hundred pounds between us.”

The Superintendent picked up the gold lighter.

“Seen this before?”

A crease appeared between Rowley’s brows. He said slowly:

“I’ve seen it somewhere, yes, but I can’t remember where. Not very long ago. No—I can’t remember.”

Spence did not give the lighter into Rowley’s outstretched hand. He put it down and picked up the lipstick, unsheathing it from its case.

“And this?”

Rowley grinned.

"Really, that's not in my line, Superintendent."

Thoughtfully, Spence smeared a little on the back of his hand. He put his head on one side, studying it appreciatively.

"Brunette colouring, I should say," he remarked.

"Funny things you policemen know," said Rowley. He got up. "And you don't—definitely do not—know who the dead man was?"

"Have you any idea yourself, Mr. Cloade?"

"I only wondered," said Rowley slowly. "I mean—this fellow was our only clue to Underhay. Now that he's dead—well, looking for Underhay is going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"There'll be publicity, Mr. Cloade," said Spence. "Remember that in due course a lot of this will appear in the press. If Underhay is alive and comes to read about it—well, he may come forward."

"Yes," said Rowley doubtfully. "He may."

"But you don't think so?"

"I think," said Rowley Cloade, "that Round One has gone to David Hunter."

"I wonder," said Spence. As Rowley went out, Spence picked up the gold lighter and looked at the initials D.H. on it. "Expensive bit of work," he said to Sergeant Graves. "Not mass produced. Quite easily identified. Greatorex or one of those Bond Street places. Have it seen to!"

"Yes, sir."

Then the Superintendent looked at the wristwatch—the glass was smashed and the hands pointed to ten minutes past nine.

He looked at the Sergeant.

“Got the report on this, Graves?”

“Yes, sir. Mainspring’s broken.”

“And the mechanism of the hands?”

“Quite all right, sir.”

“What, in your opinion, Graves, does the watch tell us?”

Graves murmured warily, “Seems as though it might give us the time the crime was committed.”

“Ah,” said Spence, “when you’ve been as long in the Force as I have, you’ll be a leetle suspicious of anything so convenient as a smashed watch. It can be genuine—but it’s a well-known hoary old trick. Turn the hands of a watch to a time that suits you—smash it—and out with some virtuous alibi. But you don’t catch an old bird that way. I’m keeping a very open mind on the subject of the time this crime was committed. Medical evidence is: between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m.”

Sergeant Graves cleared his throat.

“Edwards, second gardener at Furrowbank, says he saw David Hunter coming out of a side door there about 7:30. The maids didn’t know he was down here. They thought he was up in London with Mrs. Gordon. Shows he was in the neighbourhood all right.”

“Yes,” said Spence. “I’ll be interested to hear Hunter’s own account of his doings.”

“Seems like a clear case, sir,” said Graves, looking at the initials on the lighter.

“H’m,” said the Superintendent. “There’s still this to account for.”

He indicated the lipstick.

“It had rolled under the chest of drawers, sir. Might have been there some time.”

“I’ve checked up,” said Spence. “The last time a woman occupied that room was three weeks ago. I know service isn’t up to much nowadays—but I still think they run a mop under the furniture once in three weeks. The Stag is kept pretty clean and tidy on the whole.”

“There’s been no suggestion of a woman being mixed up with Arden.”

“I know,” said the Superintendent. “That’s why that lipstick is what I call the unknown quantity.”

Sergeant Graves refrained from saying “Cherchez la femme.” He had a very good French accent and he knew better than to irritate Superintendent Spence by drawing attention to it. Sergeant Graves was a tactful young man.

Seventeen

Superintendent Spence looked up at Shepherd’s Court, Mayfair, before stepping inside its agreeable portal. Situated modestly in the vicinity of Shepherd Market, it was discreet, expensive and inconspicuous.

Inside, Spence’s feet sunk into soft pile carpet, there was a velvet-covered settee and a jardinière full of flowering plants. A small automatic lift faced him, with a flight of stairs at one side of it. On the right of the hall was a door marked Office. Spence pushed it open and went through. He found himself in a small room with a counter, behind which was a table and a typewriter, and two chairs. One was drawn up to the table, the other, a more decorative one, was set at an angle to the window. There was no one visible.

Spying a bell inset on the mahogany counter, Spence pressed it. When nothing happened, he pressed it again. A minute or so later a door in the far wall was opened and a resplendent person in uniform appeared. His appearance was that of a foreign General or possibly Field Marshal, but his speech was of London and uneducated London at that.

“Yes, sir?”

“Mrs. Gordon Cloade.”

“Third floor, sir. Shall I ring through first?”

“She’s here, is she?” said Spence. “I had an idea she might be in the country.”

“No, sir, she’s been here since Saturday last.”

“And Mr. David Hunter?”

“Mr. Hunter’s been here, too.”

“He’s not been away?”

“No, sir.”

“Was he here last night?”

“Now then,” said the Field Marshal, suddenly becoming aggressive. “What’s all this about? Want to know every one’s life history?”

Silently Spence displayed his warrant card. The Field Marshal was immediately deflated and became cooperative.

“Sorry, I’m sure,” he said. “Couldn’t tell, could I?”

“Now then, was Mr. Hunter here last night?”

“Yes, sir, he was. At least to the best of my belief he was. That is, he didn’t say he was going away.”

“Would you know if he was away?”

“Well, generally speaking, no. I don’t suppose I should. Gentlemen and ladies usually say if they’re not going to be here. Leave word about letters or what they want said if any one rings up.”

“Do telephone calls go through this office?”

“No, most of the flats have their own lines. One or two prefer not to have a telephone and then we send up word on the house phone and the people come down and speak from the box in the hall.”

“But Mrs. Cloade’s flat has its own phone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And as far as you know they were both here last night?”

“That’s right.”

“What about meals?”

“There’s a restaurant, but Mrs. Cloade and Mr. Hunter don’t very often use it. They usually go out to dinner.”

“Breakfast?”

“That’s served in the flats.”

“Can you find out if breakfast was served this morning to them?”

“Yes, sir. I can find out from room service.”

Spence nodded. “I’m going up now. Let me know about that when I come down.”

“Very good, sir.”

Spence entered the lift and pressed the button for the third floor. There were only two flats on each landing. Spence pushed the bell of No. 9.

David Hunter opened it. He did not know the Superintendent by sight and he spoke brusquely.

“Well, what is it?”

“Mr. Hunter?”

“Yes.”

“Superintendent Spence of the Oastshire County Police. Can I have a word with you?”

“I apologize, Superintendent.” He grinned. “I thought you were a tout. Come in.”

He led the way into a modern and charming room. Rosaleen Cloade was standing by the window and turned at their entrance.

“Superintendent Spence, Rosaleen,” said Hunter. “Sit down, Superintendent. Have a drink?”

"No, thank you, Mr. Hunter."

Rosaleen had inclined her head slightly. She sat now, her back to the window, her hands clasped tightly on her lap.

"Smoke?" David proferred cigarettes.

"Thanks." Spence took a cigarette, waited…watched David slide a hand into a pocket, slide it out, frown, look round and pick up a box of matches. He struck one and lit the Superintendent's cigarette.

"Thank you, sir."

"Well," said David, easily, as he lit his own cigarette. "What's wrong at Warmsley Vale? Has our cook been dealing in the black market? She provides us with wonderful food, and I've always wondered if there was some sinister story behind it."

"It's rather more serious than that," said the Superintendent. "A man died at the Stag Inn last night. Perhaps you saw it in the papers?"

David shook his head.

"No, I didn't notice it. What about him?"

"He didn't only die. He was killed. His head was stove in as a matter of fact."

A half-choked exclamation came from Rosaleen. David said quickly:

"Please, Superintendent, don't enlarge on any details. My sister is delicate. She can't help it, but if you mention blood and horrors she'll probably faint."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the Superintendent. "But there wasn't any blood to speak of. It was murder right enough, though."

He paused. David's eyebrows went up. He said gently:

“You interest me. Where do we come in?”

“We hoped you might be able to tell us something about this man, Mr. Hunter.”

“I?”

“You called to see him on Saturday evening last. His name—or the name he was registered under—was Enoch Arden.”

“Yes, of course. I remember now.”

David spoke quietly, without embarrassment.

“Well, Mr. Hunter?”

“Well, Superintendent, I’m afraid I can’t help you. I know next to nothing about the man.”

“Was his name really Enoch Arden?”

“I should very much doubt it.”

“Why did you go to see him?”

“Just one of the usual hard-luck stories. He mentioned certain places, war experiences, people—” David shrugged his shoulders. “Just a touch, I’m afraid. The whole thing rather bogus.”

“Did you give him any money, sir?”

There was a fractional pause and then David said:

“Just a fiver—for luck. He’d been in the war all right.”

“He mentioned certain names that you—knew?”

“Yes.”

“Was one of those names Captain Robert Underhay?”

Now at last he got his effect. David stiffened. Behind him, Rosaleen gave a little frightened gasp.

“What makes you think that, Superintendent?” David asked at last. His eyes were cautious, probing.

“Information received,” said the Superintendent stolidly.

There was a short silence. The Superintendent was aware of David’s eyes, studying him, sizing him up, striving to know…He himself waited quietly.

“Any idea who Robert Underhay was, Superintendent?” David asked.

“Suppose you tell me, sir.”

“Robert Underhay was my sister’s first husband. He died in Africa some years ago.”

“Quite sure of that, Mr. Hunter?” Spence asked quickly.

“Quite sure. That’s so, isn’t it, Rosaleen?” He turned to her.

“Oh, yes.” She spoke quickly and breathlessly. “Robert died of fever—blackwater fever. It was very sad.”

“Sometimes stories get about that aren’t quite true, Mrs. Cloade.”

She said nothing. She was looking not at him, but at her brother. Then, after a moment, she said:

“Robert’s dead.”

“From information in my possession,” said the Superintendent, “I understand that this man, Enoch Arden, claimed to be a friend of the late Robert Underhay and at the same time informed you, Mr. Hunter, that Robert Underhay was alive.”

David shook his head.

“Nonsense,” he said. “Absolute nonsense.”

“You state definitely that the name of Robert Underhay was not mentioned?”

“Oh,” David smiled charmingly, “it was mentioned. This poor fellow had known Underhay.”

“There was no question of—blackmail, Mr. Hunter?”

“Blackmail? I don’t understand you, Superintendent.”

“Don’t you really, Mr. Hunter? By the way, just as a matter of form, where were you last night—between, shall we say, seven and eleven?”

“Just as a matter of form, Superintendent, suppose I refuse to answer?”

“Aren’t you behaving rather childishly, Mr. Hunter?”

“I don’t think so. I dislike—I always have disliked, being bullied.”

The Superintendent thought that was probably true.

He’d known witnesses of the David Hunter type before. Witnesses who were obstructive for the sake of being obstructive, and not in the least because they had anything to hide. The mere fact of being asked to account for their comings and goings seemed to raise a black pride and sullenness in them. They would make it a point to give the law all the trouble they could.

Superintendent Spence, though he prided himself on being a fair-minded man, had nevertheless come to Shepherd’s Court with a very strong conviction that David Hunter was a murderer.

Now, for the first time, he was not so sure. The very puerility of David’s defiance awoke doubts in him.

Spence looked at Rosaleen Cloade. She responded at once.

“David, why don’t you tell him?”

“That’s right, Mrs. Cloade. We only want to clear things up—”

David broke in savagely:

“You’ll stop bullying my sister, do you hear? What is it to you where I may have been, here, or at Warmsley Vale or in Timbuctoo?”

Spence said warningly:

“You’ll be subpoenaed for the inquest, Mr. Hunter, and there you’ll have to answer questions.”

“I’ll wait for the inquest, then! And now, Superintendent, will you get to hell out of here?”

“Very good, sir.” The Superintendent rose, imperturbable. “But I’ve something to ask Mrs. Cloade first.”

“I don’t want my sister worried.”

“Quite so. But I want her to look at the body and tell me if she can identify it. I’m within my rights there. It’ll have to be done sooner or later. Why not let her come down with me now and get it over? The late Mr. Arden was heard by a witness to say that he knew Robert Underhay—ergo he may have known Mrs. Underhay—and therefore Mrs. Underhay may know him. If his name isn’t Enoch Arden, we could do with knowing what it really is.”

Rather unexpectedly Rosaleen Cloade got up.

“I’ll come, of course,” she said.

Spence expected a fresh outburst from David, but to his surprise the other grinned.

“Good for you, Rosaleen,” he said. “I’ll confess, I’m curious myself. After all, you may be able to put a name to the fellow.”

Spence said to her:

“You didn’t see him yourself in Warmsley Vale?”

She shook her head.

“I’ve been in London since Saturday last.”

“And Arden arrived on Friday night—yes.”

Rosaleen asked: “Do you want me to come now?”

She asked the question with something of the submissiveness of a little girl. In spite of himself the Superintendent was favourably impressed. There was a docility, a willingness about her which he had not expected.

“That would be very nice of you, Mrs. Cloade,” he said. “The sooner we can get certain facts definitely established the better. I haven’t got a police car here, I’m afraid.”

David crossed to the telephone.

“I’ll ring up the Daimler Hire. It’s beyond the legal limit—but I expect you can square that, Superintendent.”

“I think that can be arranged, Mr. Hunter.”

He got up. “I’ll be waiting for you downstairs.”

He went down in the lift and pushed open the office door once more.

The Field Marshal was awaiting him.

“Well?”

“Both beds slept in last night, sir. Baths and towels used. Breakfast was served to them in the flat at nine-thirty.”

“And you don’t know what time Mr. Hunter came in yesterday evening?”

“I can’t tell you anything further, I’m afraid, sir!”

Well, that was that, Spence thought. He wondered if there was anything behind David’s refusal to speak except pure childlike defiance. He must realize that a charge of murder was hovering over him. Surely he must see that the sooner he told his story the better. Never a good thing to antagonize the police. But antagonizing the police, he thought ruefully, was just what David Hunter would enjoy doing.

They talked very little on the way down. When they arrived at the mortuary Rosaleen Cloade was very pale. Her hands were shaking. David looked concerned for her. He spoke to her as though she was a small child.

“It’ll be only a minute or two, mavourneen. It’s nothing at all, nothing at all now. Don’t get worked up. You go in with the Superintendent and I’ll wait for you. And there’s nothing at all to mind about. Peaceful he’ll look and just as though he were asleep.”

She gave him a little nod of the head and stretched out her hand. He gave it a little squeeze.

“Be a brave girl now, alanna.”

As she followed the Superintendent she said in her soft voice: “You must think I’m a terrible coward, Superintendent. But when they’ve been all dead in the house—all dead but you—that awful night in London—”

He said gently: “I understand, Mrs. Cloade. I know you went through a bad experience in the Blitz when your husband was killed. Really, it will be only a minute or two.”

At a sign from Spence the sheet was turned back. Rosaleen Cloade stood looking down at the man who had called himself Enoch Arden. Spence, unobtrusively standing to one side, was actually watching her closely.

She looked at the dead man curiously and as though wondering—she gave no start, no sign of emotion or recognition, just looked long and wonderingly at him. Then, very quietly, in an almost matter-of-fact way, she made the sign of the cross.

“God rest his soul,” she said. “I’ve never seen that man in my life. I don’t know who he is.”

Spence thought to himself:

“Either you’re one of the finest actresses I’ve ever known or else you’re speaking the truth.”

Later, Spence rang up Rowley Cloade.

“I’ve had the widow down,” he said. “She says definitely that he’s not Robert Underlay and that she’s never seen him before. So that settles that!”

There was a pause. Then Rowley said slowly:

“Does it settle it?”

“I think a jury would believe her—in the absence of evidence to the contrary, of course.”

“Ye-es,” said Rowley and rang off.

Then, frowning, he picked up not the local telephone directory, but the London one. His forefingers ran methodically down the letter P. Presently he found what he wanted.

BOOK II

One

I

Hercule Poirot carefully folded the last of the newspapers he had sent George out to purchase. The information they gave was somewhat meagre. Medical evidence was given that the man’s skull was fractured by a series of heavy blows. The inquest had been adjourned for a fortnight. Anybody who could give information about a man named Enoch Arden believed to have lately arrived from Cape Town was asked to communicate with the Chief Constable of Oastshire.

Poirot laid the papers in a neat pile and gave himself up to meditation. He was interested. He might, perhaps, have passed the first small paragraph by without interest if it had not been for the recent visit of Mrs. Lionel Cloade. But that visit had recalled to him very clearly the incidents of that day at the club during that air raid. He remembered, very distinctly, Major Porter’s voice saying, “Maybe a Mr. Enoch Arden will turn up somewhere a thousand miles away and start life anew.” He wanted now, rather badly, to know more about this man called Enoch Arden who had died by violence at Warmsley Vale.

He remembered that he was slightly acquainted with Superintendent Spence of the Oastshire police and he also remembered that young Mellon lived not very far from Warmsley Heath, and that young Mellon knew Jeremy Cloade.

It was while he was meditating a telephone call to young Mellon that George came in and announced that a Mr. Rowland Cloade would like to see him.

“Aha,” said Hercule Poirot with satisfaction. “Show him in.”

A good-looking worried young man was shown in, and seemed rather at a loss how to begin.

“Well, Mr. Cloade,” said Poirot helpfully, “and what can I do for you?”

Rowley Cloade was eyeing Poirot rather doubtfully. The flamboyant moustaches, the sartorial elegance, the white spats and the pointed patent-leather shoes all filled this insular young man with distinct misgivings.

Poirot realized this perfectly well, and was somewhat amused.

Rowley Cloade began rather heavily:

“I’m afraid I’ll have to explain who I am and all that. You won’t know my name—”

Poirot interrupted him:

“But yes, I know your name perfectly. Your aunt, you see, came to see me last week.”

“My aunt?” Rowley’s jaw dropped. He stared at Poirot with the utmost astonishment. This so clearly was news to him, that Poirot put aside his first surmise which was that the two visits were connected. For a moment it seemed to him a remarkable coincidence that two members of the Cloade family should choose to consult him within such a short period of time, but a second later he realized that there was no coincidence—merely a natural sequence proceeding from one initial cause.

Aloud he said:

“I assume that Mrs. Lionel Cloade is your aunt.”

If anything Rowley looked rather more astonished than before.

He said with the utmost incredulity:

“Aunt Kathie? Surely—don’t you mean—Mrs. Jeremy Cloade?”

Poirot shook his head.

“But what on earth could Aunt Kathie—”

Poirot murmured discreetly:

“She was directed to me, I understand, by spirit guidance.”

“Oh Lord!” said Rowley. He looked relieved and amused. He said, as though reassuring Poirot, “She’s quite harmless, you know.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot.

“What do you mean?”

“Is anybody—ever—quite harmless?”

Rowley stared. Poirot sighed.

“You have come to me to ask me something?—Yes?” he prompted gently.

The worried look came back to Rowley’s face.

“It’s rather a long story, I’m afraid—”

Poirot was afraid of it, too. He had a very shrewd idea that Rowley Cloade was not the sort of person to come to the point quickly. He leaned back and half-closed his eyes as Rowley began:

“My uncle, you see, was Gordon Cloade—”

“I know all about Gordon Cloade,” said Poirot, helpfully.

“Good. Then I needn’t explain. He married a few weeks before his death—a young widow called Underhay. Since his death she has been living at Warmsley Vale—she and a brother of hers. We all understood that her first husband had died of fever in Africa. But now it seems as though that mightn’t be so.”

“Ah,” Poirot sat up. “And what has led you to that surmise?”

Rowley described the advent of Mr. Enoch Arden in Warmsley Vale. “Perhaps you have seen in the papers—”

“Yes, I have seen.” Poirot was again helpful.

Rowley went on. He described his first impression of the man Arden, his visit to the Stag, the letter he had received from Beatrice Lippincott and finally the conversation that Beatrice had overheard.

“Of course,” Rowley said, “one can’t be sure just what she did hear. She may have exaggerated it all a bit—or even got it wrong.”

“Has she told her story to the police?”

Rowley nodded. “I told her she’d better.”

“I don’t quite see—pardon me—why you come to me, Mr. Cloade? Do you want me to investigate this—murder? For it is murder, I assume.”

“Lord, no,” said Rowley. “I don’t want anything of that kind. That’s a police job. He was bumped off all right. No, what I’m after is this. I want you to find out who the fellow was.”

Poirot’s eyes narrowed.

“Who do you think he was, Mr. Cloade?”

“Well, I mean—Enoch Arden isn’t a name. Dash it all, it’s a quotation. Tennyson. I went and mugged it up. Fellow who comes back and finds out his wife has married another fellow.”

“So you think,” said Poirot quietly, “that Enoch Arden was Robert Underhay himself?”

Rowley said slowly:

“Well, he might have been—I mean, about the right age and appearance and all that. Of course I’ve gone over it all with Beatrice again and again. She can’t naturally remember exactly what they both said. The chap said Robert Underhay had come down in the world and was in bad health and needed money. Well, he might have been talking about himself, mightn’t he? He seems to have said something about it wouldn’t suit David Hunter’s book if

Underhay turned up in Warmsley Vale—sounding a bit as though he was there under an assumed name."

"What evidence of identification was there at the inquest?"

Rowley shook his head.

"Nothing definite. Only the Stag people saying he was the man who'd come there and registered as Enoch Arden."

"What about his papers?"

"He hadn't any."

"What?" Poirot sat up in surprise. "No papers of any kind?"

"Nothing at all. Some spare socks and a shirt and a toothbrush, etc.—but no papers."

"No passport? No letters? Not even a ration card?"

"Nothing at all."

"That," said Poirot, "is very interesting. Yes, very interesting."

Rowley went on: "David Hunter, that's Rosaleen Cloade's brother, had called to see him the evening after he arrived. His story to the police is that he'd had a letter from the chap saying he had been a friend of Robert Underhay's and was down and out. At his sister's request he went to the Stag and saw the fellow and gave him a fiver. That's his story and you bet he means to stick to it! Of course the police are keeping dark about what Beatrice heard."

"David Hunter says he had no previous acquaintance with the man?"

"That's what he says. Anyway, I gather Hunter never met Underhay."

"And what about Rosaleen Cloade?"

"The police asked her to look at the body in case she knew the man. She told them that he was a complete stranger to her."

"Eh bien," said Poirot. "Then that answers your question!"

"Does it?" said Rowley bluntly. "I think not. If the dead man is Underhay then Rosaleen was never my uncle's wife and she's not entitled to a penny of his money. Do you think she would recognize him under those circumstances?"

"You don't trust her?"

"I don't trust either of them.

"Surely there are plenty of people who could say for certain that the dead man is or is not Underhay?"

"It doesn't seem to be so easy. That's what I want you to do. Find someone who knows Underhay. Apparently he has no living relations in this country—and he was always an unsociable lonely sort of chap. I suppose there must be old servants—friends—someone—but the war's broken up everything and shifted people round. I wouldn't know how to begin to tackle the job—anyway I haven't the time. I'm a farmer—and I'm shorthanded."

"Why me?" said Hercule Poirot.

Rowley looked embarrassed.

A faint twinkle came into Poirot's eye.

"Spirit guidance?" he murmured.

"Good Lord, no," said Rowley horrified. "Matter of fact," he hesitated, "I heard a fellow I know talk about you—said you were a wizard at these sort of things. I don't know about your fees—expensive, I expect—we're rather a stony-broke lot, but I dare say we could cough it up amongst the lot of us. That is, if you'll take it on."

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

“Yes, I think perhaps I can help you.”

His memory, a very precise and definite memory, went back. The club bore, the rustling newspapers, the monotonous voice.

The name—he had heard the name—it would come back to him presently. If not, he could always ask Mellon…No, he had got it. Porter. Major Porter.

Hercule Poirot rose to his feet.

“Will you come back here this afternoon, Mr. Cloade?”

“Well—I don’t know. Yes, I suppose I could. But surely you can’t do anything in that short time?”

He looked at Poirot with awe and incredulity. Poirot would have been less than human if he could have resisted the temptation to show off. With memories of a brilliant predecessor in his mind, he said solemnly:

“I have my methods, Mr. Cloade.”

It was clearly the right thing to say. Rowley’s expression became respectful in the extreme.

“Yes—of course—really—I don’t know how you people do these things.”

Poirot did not enlighten him. When Rowley had gone, he sat down and wrote a short note. Giving it to George he instructed him to take it to the Coronation Club and wait for an answer.

The answer was highly satisfactory. Major Porter presented his compliments to M. Hercule Poirot and would be happy to see him and his friend at 79 Edgeway Street, Campden Hill, that afternoon at five o’clock.

II

At four-thirty Rowley Cloade reappeared.

"Any luck, M. Poirot?"

"But yes, Mr. Cloade, we go now to see an old friend of Captain Robert Underhay's."

"What?" Rowley's mouth fell open. He stared at Poirot with the amazement a small boy shows when a conjurer produces rabbits out of a hat. "But it's incredible! I don't understand how you can do these things—why, it's only a few hours."

Poirot waved a deprecating hand and tried to look modest. He had no intention of revealing the simplicity with which his conjuring trick had been done. His vanity was pleased to impress this simple Rowley.

The two men went out together, and hailing a taxi they drove to Campden Hill.

III

Major Porter had the first floor of a small shabby house. They were admitted by a cheerful blowsy-looking woman who took them up. It was a square room with bookshelves round it and some rather bad sporting prints. There were two rugs on the floor—good rugs with lovely dim colour but very worn. Poirot noticed that the centre of the floor was covered with a new heavy varnish whereas the varnish round the edge was old and rubbed. He realized then that there had been other better rugs until recently—rugs that were worth good money in these days. He looked up at the man standing erect by the fireplace in his well-cut shabby suit. Poirot guessed that for Major Porter, retired Army officer, life was lived very near the bone. Taxation and increased cost of living struck hardest at the old war-horses. Some things, he guessed, Major Porter would cling to until the end. His club subscription, for instance.

Major Porter was speaking jerkily.

"'Fraid I don't remember meeting you, M. Poirot. At the club, you say? Couple of years ago? Know your name of course."

“This,” said Poirot, “is Mr. Rowland Cloade.”

Major Porter jerked his head in honour of the introduction.

“How d’ye do?” he said. “’Fraid I can’t ask you to have a glass of sherry. Matter of fact my wine merchant has lost his stock in the Blitz. Got some gin. Filthy stuff, I always think. Or what about some beer?”

They accepted beer. Major Porter produced a cigarette case. “Smoke?” Poirot accepted a cigarette. The Major struck a match and lighted Poirot’s cigarette.

“You don’t, I know,” said the Major to Rowley: “Mind if I light my pipe?” He did so with a good deal of sucking and blowing.

“Now then,” he said when all these preliminaries had been accomplished. “What’s all this about?”

He looked from one to the other of them.

Poirot said: “You may have read in the paper of the death of a man at Warmsley Vale?”

Porter shook his head.

“May have. Don’t think so.”

“His name was Arden. Enoch Arden?”

Porter still shook his head.

“He was found at the Stag Inn with the back of his head smashed in.”

Porter frowned.

“Let me see—yes, did see something about it, I believe—some days ago.”

“Yes. I have here a photograph—it is a press photograph and not very clear, I’m afraid! What we should like to know, Major Porter, is whether you have ever seen this man before?”

He handed over the best reproduction of the dead man’s face he had been able to find.

Major Porter took it and frowned at it.

“Wait a sec.” The Major took out his spectacles, adjusted them on his nose and studied the photograph more closely—then he gave a sudden start.

“God bless my soul!” he said. “Well, I’m damned!”

“You know the man, Major?”

“Of course I know him. It’s Underhay—Robert Underhay.”

“You’re sure of that?” There was triumph in Rowley’s voice.

“Of course I’m sure. Robert Underhay! I’d swear to it anywhere.”

Two

The telephone rang and Lynn went to answer it.

Rowley's voice spoke.

"Lynn?"

"Rowley?"

Her voice sounded depressed. He said:

"What are you up to? I never see you these days."

"Oh, well—it's all chores—you know. Running round with a basket, waiting for fish and queueing up for a bit of quite disgusting cake. All that sort of thing. Home life."

"I want to see you. I've got something to tell you."

"What sort of thing?"

He gave a chuckle.

"Good news. Meet me by Rolland Copse. We're ploughing up there."

Good news? Lynn put the receiver down. What to Rowley Cloade would be good news? Finance? Had he sold that young bull at a better price than he had hoped to get?

No, she thought, it must be more than that. As she walked up the field to Rolland Copse, Rowley left the tractor and came to meet her.

"Hallo, Lynn."

"Why, Rowley—you look—different, somehow?"

He laughed.

"I should think I do. Our luck's turned, Lynn!"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember old Jeremy mentioning a chap called Hercule Poirot?"

"Hercule Poirot?" Lynn frowned. "Yes, I do remember something—"

"Quite a long time ago. When the war was on. They were in that mausoleum of a club of his and there was an air raid."

"Well?" Lynn demanded impatiently.

"Fellow has the wrong clothes and all that. French chap—or Belgian. Queer fellow but he's the goods all right."

Lynn knit her brows.

"Wasn't he—a detective?"

"That's right. Well, you know, this fellow who was done in at the Stag. I didn't tell you but an idea was getting around that he might just possibly be Rosaleen Cloade's first husband."

Lynn laughed.

"Simply because he called himself Enoch Arden? What an absurd idea!"

"Not so absurd, my girl. Old Spence got Rosaleen down to have a look at him. And she swore quite firmly that he wasn't her husband."

"So that finished it?"

"It might have," said Rowley. "But for me!"

"For you? What did you do?"

"I went to this fellow Hercule Poirot. I told him we wanted another opinion. Could he rustle up someone who had actually known Robert Underhay? My word, but he’s absolutely wizard that chap! Just like rabbits out of a hat. He produced a fellow who was Underhay’s best friend in a few hours. Old boy called Porter.” Rowley stopped. Then he chuckled again with that note of excitement that had surprised and startled Lynn. “Now keep this under your hat, Lynn. The Super swore me to secrecy—but I’d like you to know. The dead man is Robert Underhay.”

“What?” Lynn took a step back. She stared at Rowley blankly.

“Robert Underhay himself. Porter hadn’t the least doubt. So you see, Lynn”—Rowley’s voice rose excitedly—“we’ve won! After all, we’ve won! We’ve beaten those damned crooks!”

“What damned crooks?”

“Hunter and his sister. They’re licked—out of it. Rosaleen doesn’t get Gordon’s money. We get it. It’s ours! Gordon’s will that he made before he married Rosaleen holds good and that divides it amongst us. I get a fourth share. See? If her first husband was alive when she married Gordon, she was never married to Gordon at all!”

“Are you—are you sure of what you’re saying?”

He stared at her, for the first time he looked faintly puzzled.

“Of course I’m sure! It’s elementary. Everything’s all right now. It’s the same as Gordon meant it to be. Everything’s the same as if that precious pair had never butted in.”

Everything’s the same…But you couldn’t, Lynn thought, wash out like that something that had happened. You couldn’t pretend that it had never been. She said slowly:

“What will they do?”

“Eh?” She saw that until that moment Rowley had hardly considered that question. “I don’t know. Go back where they came from, I suppose. I think, you know—” She could see him slowly following it out. “Yes, I think we ought to do something for her. I mean, she married Gordon in all good faith. I gather she really believed her first husband was dead. It’s not her fault. Yes, we must do something about her—give her a decent allowance. Make it up between us all.”

“You like her, don’t you?” said Lynn.

“Well, yes.” He considered. “I do in a way. She’s a nice kid. She knows a cow when she sees it.”

“I don’t,” said Lynn.

“Oh, you’ll learn,” said Rowley kindly.

“And what about—David?” asked Lynn.

Rowley scowled.

“To hell with David! It was never his money anyway. He just came along and sponged on his sister.”

“No, Rowley, it wasn’t like that—it wasn’t. He’s not a sponger. He’s—an adventurer, perhaps—”

“And a ruddy murderer!”

She said breathlessly:

“What do you mean?”

“Well, who do you think killed Underhay?”

She cried:

“I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it!”

“Of course he killed Underhay! Who else could have done it? He was down here that day. Came down by the five thirty. I was meeting some stuff at the station and caught sight of him in the distance.”

Lynn said sharply:

“He went back to London that evening.”

“After having killed Underhay,” said Rowley triumphantly.

“You oughtn’t to say things like that, Rowley. What time was Underhay killed?”

“Well—I don’t know exactly.” Rowley slowed up—considered. “Don’t suppose we shall know until the inquest tomorrow. Some time between nine and ten, I imagine.”

“David caught the nine-twenty train back to London.”

“Look here, Lynn, how do you know?”

“I—I met him—he was running for it.”

“How do you know he ever caught it?”

“Because he telephoned me from London later.”

Rowley scowled angrily.

“What the hell should he telephone you for? Look here, Lynn, I’m damned if I—”

“Oh, what does it matter, Rowley? Anyway, it shows he caught that train.”

“Plenty of time to have killed Underhay and then run for the train.”

“Not if he was killed after nine o’clock.”

“Well, he may have been killed just before nine.”

But his voice was a little doubtful.

Lynn half-closed her eyes. Was that the truth of it? When, breathless, swearing, David had emerged from the copse, had it been a murderer fresh from his crime who had taken her in his arms? She remembered his curious excitement—the recklessness of his mood. Was that the way that murder would affect him? It might. She had to admit it. Were David and murder so far removed from each other? Would he kill a man who had never done him any harm—a ghost from the past? A man whose only crime was to stand between Rosaleen and a big inheritance—between David and the enjoyment of Rosaleen's money.

She murmured:

"Why should he kill Underhay?"

"My God, Lynn, can you ask? I've just told you! Underhay's being alive means that we get Gordon's money! Anyway, Underhay was blackmailing him."

Ah, that fell more into the pattern. David might kill a blackmailer—in fact, wasn't it just the way he would deal with a blackmailer? Yes, it all fell into pattern. David's haste, his excitement—his fierce, almost angry, lovemaking. And, later, his renouncement of her. "I'd better clear out…" Yes, it fitted.

From a long way away, she heard Rowley's voice asking:

"What's the matter, Lynn? Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, for heaven's sake, don't look so glum." He turned, looking down the hillside to Long Willows. "Thank goodness, we can have the place smartened up a bit now—get some labour-saving gadgets put in—make it right for you. I don't want you to pig it, Lynn."

That was to be her home—that house. Her home with Rowley….

And one morning at eight o’clock, David would swing by the neck until he was dead….

Three

With a pale determined face and watchful eyes, David had his hands on Rosaleen’s shoulders.

“It will be all right, I’m telling you, it will be all right. But you must keep your head and do exactly as I tell you.”

“And if they take you away? You said that! You did say that they might take you away.”

“It’s a possibility, yes. But it won’t be for long. Not if you keep your head.”

“I’ll do what you tell me, David.”

“There’s the girl! All you have to do, Rosaleen, is to stick to your story. Hold to it that the dead man is not your husband, Robert Underhay.”

“They’ll trap me into saying things I don’t mean.”

“No—they won’t. It’s all right, I tell you.”

“No, it’s wrong—it’s been wrong all along. Taking money that doesn’t belong to us. I lie awake nights thinking of it, David. Taking what doesn’t belong to us. God is punishing us for our wickedness.”

He looked at her, frowning. She was cracking—yes, definitely she was cracking. There had always been that religious streak. Her conscience had never been quite stilled. Now, unless he was extremely lucky, she’d break down completely. Well, there was only one thing to be done.

“Listen, Rosaleen,” he said gently. “Do you want me to be hanged?”

Her eyes widened in horror.

“Oh, David, you wouldn’t—they couldn’t—”

"There's only one person who can hang me—that's you. If you once admit, by look or sign or word, that the dead man might be Underhay, you put the rope round my neck! Do you understand that?"

Yes, that had got home. She gazed at him with wide, horrified eyes.

"I'm so stupid, David."

"No, you're not. In any case you haven't got to be clever. You'll have to swear solemnly that the dead man is not your husband. You can do that?"

She nodded.

"Look stupid if you like. Look as if you don't understand quite what they're asking you. That will do no harm. But stand firm on the points I've gone over with you. Gaythorne will look after you. He's a very able criminal lawyer—that's why I've got him. He'll be at the inquest and he'll protect you from any heckling. But even to him stick to your story. For God's sake don't try to be clever or think you can help me by some line of your own."

"I'll do it, David. I'll do exactly what you tell me."

"Good girl. When it's all over we'll go away—to the South of France—to America. In the meantime, take care of your health. Don't lie awake at nights fretting and working yourself up. Take those sleepings things Dr. Cloade prescribed for you—bromide or something. Take one every night, cheer up, and remember there's a good time coming!

"Now—" he looked at his watch. "It's time to go to the inquest. It's called for eleven."

He looked round the long beautiful drawing room. Beauty, comfort, wealth…He'd enjoyed it all. A fine house, Furrowbank. Perhaps this was Goodbye….

He'd got himself into a jam—that was certain. But even now he didn't regret. And for the future—well, he'd go on taking chances. "And we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures."

He looked at Rosaleen. She was watching him with large appealing eyes and intuitively he knew what she wanted.

“I didn’t kill him, Rosaleen,” he said gently. “I swear it to you by every saint in your calendar!”

Four

The Inquest was held in the Cornmarket.

The coroner, Mr. Pebmarsh, was a small fussy man with glasses and a considerable sense of his own importance.

Beside him sat the large bulk of Superintendent Spence. In an unobtrusive seat was a small foreign-looking man with a large black moustache. The Cloade family: the Jeremy Cloades, the Lionel Cloades, Rowley Cloade, Mrs. Marchmont and Lynn—they were all there. Major Porter sat by himself, fidgeting and ill at ease. David and Rosaleen arrived last. They sat by themselves.

The coroner cleared his throat and glancing round the jury of nine local worthies, started proceedings.

Constable Peacock—

Sergeant Vane….

Dr. Lionel Cloade….

“You were attending a patient professionally at the Stag, when Gladys Aitkin came to you. What did she say?”

“She informed me that the occupant of No. 5 was lying on the floor dead.”

“In consequence you went up to No. 5?”

“I did.”

“Will you describe what you found there?”

Dr. Cloade described. Body of a man…face downwards…head injuries…back of skull…fire tongs.

“You were of opinion, that the injuries were inflicted with the tongs in question?”

“Some of them unquestionably were.”

“And that several blows had been struck?”

“Yes. I did not make a detailed examination as I considered that the police should be called before the body was touched or its position altered.”

“Very proper. The man was dead?”

“Yes. He had been dead for some hours.”

“How long in your opinion had he been dead?”

“I should hesitate to be very definite about that. At least eleven hours—quite possibly thirteen or fourteen—let us say between 7:30 and 10:30 p.m. the preceding evening.”

“Thank you, Dr. Cloade.”

Then came the police surgeon—giving a full and technical description of the wounds. There was an abrasion and swelling on the lower jaw and five or six blows had been struck on the base of the skull, some of which had been delivered after death.

“It was an assault of great savagery?”

“Exactly.”

“Would great strength have been needed to inflict these blows?”

“N-no, not exactly strength. The tongs, grasped by the pincers end, could be easily swung without much exertion. The heavy steel ball which forms the head of the tongs makes them a formidable weapon. Quite a delicate person could have inflicted the injuries if, that is to say, they were struck in a frenzy of excitement.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Details as to the condition of the body followed—well nourished, healthy, age about forty-five. No signs of illness or disease—heart, lungs, etc., all good.

Beatrice Lippincott gave evidence of the arrival of the deceased. He had registered as Enoch Arden, Cape Town.

“Did deceased produce a ration book?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you ask him for one?”

“Not at first. I did not know how long he was staying.”

“But you did eventually ask him?”

“Yes, sir. He arrived on the Friday and on Saturday I said if he was staying more than five days would he please let me have his ration book.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He said he would give it to me.”

“But he did not actually do so?”

“No.”

“He did not say that he had lost it? Or had not got one?”

“Oh, no. He just said, ‘I’ll look it out and bring it along.’”

“Miss Lippincott, did you, on the night of Saturday, overhear a certain conversation?”

With a good deal of elaborate explanation as to the necessity she was under of visiting No. 4, Beatrice Lippincott told her tale. The coroner guided her astutely.

“Thank you. Did you mention this conversation you had overheard to anybody?”

“Yes, I told Mr. Rowley Cloade.”

“Why did you tell Mr. Cloade?”

“I thought he ought to know.” Beatrice flushed.

A tall thin man (Mr. Gaythorne) rose and asked permission to put a question.

“In the course of the conversation between the deceased and Mr. David Hunter did the deceased at any time mention definitely that he himself was Robert Underhay?”

“No—no—he didn’t.”

“In fact he spoke of ‘Robert Underhay’ as though Robert Underhay was quite another person?”

“Yes—yes, he did.”

“Thank you, Mr. Coroner, that was all I wanted to get clear.”

Beatrice Lippincott stood down and Rowley Cloade was called.

He confirmed that Beatrice had repeated the story to him and then gave his account of his interview with the deceased.

“His last words to you were, ‘I don’t think you’ll prove that without my cooperation?’ ‘That’—being the fact that Robert Underhay was still alive.”

“That’s what he said, yes. And he laughed.”

“He laughed, did he? What did you take those words to mean?”

"Well—I just thought he was trying to get me to make him an offer, but afterwards I got thinking—"

"Yes, Mr. Cloade—but what you thought afterwards is hardly relevant. Shall we put it that as a result of that interview you set about trying to find some person who was acquainted with the late Robert Underhay? And that, with certain help, you were successful."

Rowley nodded.

"That's right."

"What time was it when you left the deceased?"

"As nearly as I can tell it was five minutes to nine."

"What made you fix on that time?"

"As I went along the street I heard the nine o'clock chimes through an open window."

"Did the deceased mention at what time he was expecting this client?"

"He said 'At any minute.'"

"He did not mention any name?"

"No."

"David Hunter!"

There was just a faint soft buzz as the inhabitants of Warmsley Vale craned their necks to look at the tall thin bitter-looking young man who stood defiantly facing the coroner.

The preliminaries went rapidly. The coroner continued:

"You went to see the deceased on Saturday evening?"

"Yes. I received a letter from him asking for assistance and stating he had known my sister's first husband in Africa."

"You have got that letter?"

"No, I don't keep letters."

"You have heard the account given by Beatrice Lippincott of your conversation with the deceased. Is that a true account?"

"Quite untrue. The deceased spoke of knowing my late brother-in-law, complained of his own bad luck and of having come down in the world, and begged for some financial assistance which, as is usual, he was quite confident of being able to repay."

"Did he tell you that Robert Underhay was still alive?"

David smiled:

"Certainly not. He said, 'If Robert were still alive I know he would help me.'"

"That is quite different from what Beatrice Lippincott tells us."

"Eavesdroppers," said David, "usually hear only a portion of what goes on and frequently get the whole thing wrong owing to supplying the missing details from their own fertile imaginations."

Beatrice flounced angrily and exclaimed, "Well, I never—" The coroner said repressively, "Silence, please."

"Now, Mr. Hunter, did you visit the deceased again on the night of Tuesday —"

"No, I did not."

"You have heard Mr. Rowley Cloade say that the deceased expected a visitor?"

“He may have expected a visitor. If so, I was not that visitor. I’d given him a fiver before. I thought that was quite enough for him. There was no proof that he’d ever known Robert Underhay. My sister, since she inherited a large income from her husband, has been the target of every begging letter writer and every sponger in the neighbourhood.”

Quietly he let his eyes pass over the assembled Cloades.

“Mr. Hunter, will you tell us where you were on the evening of Tuesday?”

“Find out!” said David.

“Mr. Hunter!” The coroner rapped the table. “That is a most foolish and ill-advised thing to say.”

“Why should I tell you where I was, and what I was doing? Time enough for that when you accuse me of murdering the man.”

“If you persist in that attitude it may come to that sooner than you think. Do you recognize this, Mr. Hunter?”

Leaning forward, David took the gold cigarette lighter into his hand. His face was puzzled. Handing it back, he said slowly: “Yes, it’s mine.”

“When did you have it last?”

“I missed it—” He paused.

“Yes, Mr. Hunter?” The coroner’s voice was suave.

Gaythorne fidgeted, seemed about to speak. But David was too quick for him.

“I had it last Friday—Friday morning. I don’t remember seeing it since.”

Mr. Gaythorne rose.

“With your permission, Mr. Coroner. You visited the deceased Saturday evening. Might you not have left the lighter there then?”

“I might have, I suppose,” David said slowly. “I certainly don’t remember seeing it after Friday—” He added: “Where was it found?”

The coroner said:

“We shall go into that later. You can stand down now, Mr. Hunter.”

David moved slowly back to his seat. He bent his head and whispered to Rosaleen Cloade.

“Major Porter.”

Hemming and hawing a little, Major Porter took the stand. He stood there, an erect soldierly figure, as though on parade. Only the way he moistened his lips showed the intense nervousness from which he was suffering.

“You are George Douglas Porter, late Major of the Royal African Rifles?”

“Yes.”

“How well did you know Robert Underhay?”

In a parade-ground voice Major Porter barked out places and dates.

“You have viewed the body of the deceased?”

“Yes.”

“Can you identify that body?”

“Yes. It is the body of Robert Underhay.”

A buzz of excitement went round the court.

“You state that positively and without the least doubt?”

“I do.”

“There is no possibility of your being mistaken?”

“None.”

“Thank you, Major Porter. Mrs. Gordon Cloade.”

Rosaleen rose. She passed Major Porter. He looked at her with some curiosity. She did not even glance at him.

“Mrs. Cloade, you were taken by the police to see the body of the deceased?”

She shivered.

“Yes.”

“You stated definitely that it was the body of a man completely unknown to you?”

“Yes.”

“In view of the statement just made by Major Porter would you like to withdraw or amend your own statement?”

“No.”

“You still assert definitely that the body was not that of your husband, Robert Underhay?”

“It was not my husband’s body. It was a man I had never seen in my life.”

“Come now, Mrs. Cloade, Major Porter has definitely recognized it as the body of his friend Robert Underhay.”

Rosaleen said expressionlessly:

“Major Porter is mistaken.”

“You are not under oath in this court, Mrs. Cloade. But it is likely that you will be under oath in another court shortly. Are you prepared then to swear that the body is not that of Robert Underhay but of an unknown stranger?”

“I am prepared to swear that it is not the body of my husband but of a man quite unknown to me.”

Her voice was clear and unfaltering. Her eyes met the coroner unshrinkingly.

He murmured: “You can stand down.”

Then, removing his pince-nez, he addressed the jury.

They were there to discover how this man came to his death. As to that, there could be little question. There could be no idea of accident or suicide. Nor could there be any suggestion of manslaughter. There remained only one verdict—wilful murder. As to the identity of the dead man, that was not clearly established.

They had heard one witness, a man of upright character and probity whose word could be relied upon, say that the body was that of a former friend of his, Robert Underhay. On the other hand Robert Underhay’s death from fever in Africa had been established apparently to the satisfaction of the local authorities and no question had then been raised. In contradiction of Major Porter’s statement, Robert Underhay’s widow, now Mrs. Gordon Cloade, stated positively that the body was not that of Robert Underhay. These were diametrically opposite statements. Passing from the question of identity they would have to decide if there was any evidence to show whose hand had murdered the deceased. They might think that the evidence pointed to a certain person, but a good deal of evidence was needed before a case could be made out—evidence and motive and opportunity. The person must have been seen by someone in the vicinity of the crime at the appropriate time. If there was not such evidence the best verdict was that of Wilful Murder without sufficient evidence to show by whose hand. Such a verdict would leave the police free to pursue the necessary inquiries.

He then dismissed them to consider their verdict.

They took three quarters of an hour.

They returned a verdict of Wilful Murder against David Hunter.

Five

"I was afraid they'd do it," said the coroner apologetically. "Local prejudice! Feeling rather than logic."

The coroner, the Chief Constable, Superintendent Spence and Hercule Poirot were all in consultation together after the inquest.

"You did your best," said the Chief Constable.

"It's premature, to say the least of it," said Spence frowning. "And it hampers us. Do you know M. Hercule Poirot? He was instrumental in bringing Porter forward."

The coroner said graciously:

"I have heard of you, M. Poirot," and Poirot made an unsuccessful attempt to look modest.

"M. Poirot's interested in the case," said Spence with a grin.

"Truly, that is so," said Poirot. "I was in it, as you might say, before there was a case."

And in answer to their interested glances he told of the queer little scene in the club when he had first heard a mention of Robert Underhay's name.

"That's an additional point in Porter's evidence when the case comes to trial," said the Chief Constable thoughtfully. "Underhay actually planned a pretended death—and spoke of using the name of Enoch Arden."

The Chief Constable murmured: "Ah, but will that be admissible as evidence? Words spoken by a man who is now dead?"

"It may not be admissible as evidence," said Poirot thoughtfully. "But it raises a very interesting and suggestive line of thought."

“What we want,” said Spence, “is not suggestion, but a few concrete facts. Someone who actually saw David Hunter at the Stag or near it on Tuesday evening.”

“It ought to be easy,” said the Chief Constable, frowning.

“If it was abroad in my country it would be easy enough,” said Poirot. “There would be a little café where someone takes the evening coffee—but in provincial England!” He threw up his hands.

The Superintendent nodded.

“Some of the folks are in the pubs, and will stay in the pubs till closing time, and the rest of the population are inside their houses listening to the nine o’clock news. If you ever go along the main street here between eight thirty and ten it’s completely deserted. Not a soul.”

“He counted on that?” suggested the Chief Constable.

“Maybe,” said Spence. His expression was not a happy one.

Presently the Chief Constable and the coroner departed. Spence and Poirot were left together.

“You do not like the case, no?” asked Poirot sympathetically.

“That young man worries me,” said Spence. “He’s the kind that you never know where you are with them. When they’re most innocent of a business, they act as though they were guilty. And when they’re guilty—why, you’d take your oath they were angels of light!”

“You think he is guilty?” asked Poirot.

“Don’t you?” Spence countered.

Poirot spread out his hands.

“I should be interested to know,” he said, “just exactly how much you have against him?”

"You don't mean legally? You mean in the way of probability?"

Poirot nodded.

"There's the lighter," said Spence.

"Where did you find it?"

"Under the body."

"Fingerprints on it?"

"None."

"Ah," said Poirot.

"Yes," said Spence. "I don't like that too much myself. Then the dead man's watch has stopped at 9:10. That fits in with the medical evidence quite nicely—and with Rowley Cloade's evidence that Underhay was expecting his client at any minute—presumably that client was almost due."

Poirot nodded.

"Yes—it is all very neat."

"And the thing you can't get away from, to my mind, M. Poirot, is that he's the only person (he and his sister, that is to say) who has the ghost or shadow of a motive. Either David Hunter killed Underhay—or else Underhay was killed by some outsider who followed him here for some reason that we know nothing about—and that seems wildly improbable."

"Oh, I agree, I agree."

"You see, there's no one in Warmsley Vale who could possibly have a motive—unless by a coincidence someone is living here (other than the Hunters) who had a connection with Underhay in the past. I never rule out coincidence, but there hasn't been a hint or suggestion of anything of the kind. The man was a stranger to every one but that brother and sister."

Poirot nodded.

“To the Cloade family Robert Underhay would be the apple of their eye to be kept alive by every possible precaution. Robert Underhay, alive and kicking, means the certainty of a large fortune divided amongst them.”

“Again, mon ami, I agree with you enthusiastically. Robert Underhay, alive and kicking, is what the Cloade family needs.”

“So back we come—Rosaleen and David Hunter are the only two people who have a motive. Rosaleen Cloade was in London. But David, we know, was in Warmsley Vale that day. He arrived at 5:30 at Warmsley Heath station.”

“So now we have Motive, written very big and the fact that at 5:30 and onward to some unspecified time, he was on the spot.”

“Exactly. Now take Beatrice Lippincott’s story. I believe that story. She overheard what she says she overheard, though she may have gingered it up a little, as is only human.”

“Only human as you say.”

“Apart from knowing the girl, I believe her because she couldn’t have invented some of the things. She’d never heard of Robert Underhay before, for instance. So I believe her story of what passed between the two men and not David Hunter’s.”

“I, too,” said Poirot. “She strikes me as a singularly truthful witness.”

“We’ve confirmation that her story is true. What do you suppose the brother and sister went off to London for?”

“That is one of the things that has interested me most.”

“Well, the money position’s like this. Rosaleen Cloade has only a life interest in Gordon Cloade’s estate. She can’t touch the capital—except, I believe, for about a thousand pounds. But jewellery, etc., is hers. The first thing she did on going to town was to take some of the most valuable pieces round to Bond Street and sell them. She wanted a large sum of cash quickly—in other words she had to pay a blackmailer."

"You call that evidence against David Hunter?"

"Don't you?"

Poirot shook his head.

"Evidence that there was blackmail, yes. Evidence of intent to commit murder, no. You cannot have it both ways, mon cher. Either that young man was going to pay up, or else he was planning to kill. You have produced evidence that he was planning to pay."

"Yes—yes, perhaps that is so. But he may have changed his mind."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I know his type," said the Superintendent thoughtfully. "It's a type that's done well during the war. Any amount of physical courage. Audacity and a reckless disregard of personal safety. The sort that will face any odds. It's the kind that is likely to win the V.C.—though, mind you, it's often a posthumous one. Yes, in wartime, a man like that is a hero. But in peace—well, in peace such men usually end up in prison. They like excitement and they can't run straight, and they don't give a damn for society—and finally they've no regard for human life."

Poirot nodded.

"I tell you," the Superintendent repeated, "I know the type."

There was some few minutes of silence.

"Eh bien," said Poirot at last. "We agree that we have here the type of a killer. But that is all. It takes us no further."

Spence looked at him with curiosity.

"You're taking a great interest in this business, M. Poirot?"

“Yes.”

“Why, if I may ask?”

“Frankly,” Poirot spread out his hands, “I do not quite know. Perhaps it is because when two years ago, I am sitting very sick in my stomach (for I did not like air raids, and I am not very brave though I endeavour to put up the good appearance) when, as I say, I am sitting with a sick feeling here,” Poirot clasped his stomach expressively, “in the smoking room of my friend’s club, there, droning away, is the club bore, the good Major Porter, recounting a long history to which nobody listens; but me, I listen, because I am wishful to distract myself from the bombs, and because the facts he is relating seem to me interesting and suggestive. And I think to myself that it is possible that some day something may come of the situation he recounts. And now something has come of it.”

“The unexpected has happened, eh?”

“On the contrary,” Poirot corrected him. “It is the expected that has happened—which in itself is sufficiently remarkable.”

“You expected murder?” Spence asked sceptically.

“No, no, no! But a wife remarries. Possibility that first husband is still alive? He is alive. He may turn up? He does turn up! There may be blackmail. There is blackmail! Possibility, therefore, that blackmailer may be silenced? Ma foi, he is silenced!”

“Well,” said Spence, eyeing Poirot rather doubtfully. “I suppose these things run pretty close to type. It’s a common sort of crime—blackmail resulting in murder.”

“Not interesting, you would say? Usually, no. But this case is interesting, because, you see,” said Poirot placidly, “it is all wrong.”

“All wrong? What do you mean by all wrong?”

“None of it is, how shall I put it, the right shape?”

Spence stared. “Chief Inspector Japp,” he remarked, “always said you have a tortuous mind. Give me an instance of what you call wrong?”

“Well, the dead man, for instance, he is all wrong.”

Spence shook his head.

“You do not feel that?” Poirot asked. “Oh, well, perhaps I am fanciful. Then take this point. Underhay arrives at the Stag. He writes to David Hunter. Hunter receives that letter the next morning—at breakfast time?”

“Yes, that’s so. He admits receiving a letter from Arden then.”

“That was the first intimation, was it not, of the arrival of Underhay in Warmsley Vale? What is the first thing he does—bundles his sister off to London!”

“That’s quite understandable,” said Spence. “He wants a clear hand to deal with things his own way. He may have been afraid the woman would have been weak. He’s the leading spirit, remember. Mrs. Cloade is entirely under his thumb.”

“Oh, yes, that shows itself plainly. So he sends her to London and calls on this Enoch Arden. We have a pretty clear account of their conversation from Beatrice Lippincott, and the thing that sticks out, a mile, as you say, is that David Hunter was not sure whether the man he was talking to was Robert Underhay or not. He suspected it, but he didn’t know.”

“But there’s nothing odd about that, M. Poirot. Rosaleen Hunter married Underhay in Cape Town and went with him straight to Nigeria. Hunter and Underhay never met. Therefore though, as you say, Hunter suspected that Arden was Underhay, he couldn’t know it for a fact—because he had never met the man.”

Poirot looked at Superintendent Spence thoughtfully.

“So there is nothing there that strikes you as—peculiar?” he asked.

"I know what you're driving at. Why didn't Underhay say straight out that he was Underhay? Well, I think that's understandable, too. Respectable people who are doing something crooked like to preserve appearances. They like to put things in such a way that it keeps them in the clear—if you know what I mean. No—I don't think that that is so very remarkable. You've got to allow for human nature."

"Yes," said Poirot. "Human nature. That, I think, is perhaps the real answer as to why I am interested in this case. I was looking round the Coroner's Court, looking at all the people, looking particularly at the Cloades—so many of them, all bound by a common interest, all so different in their characters, in their thoughts and feelings. All of them dependent for many years on the strong man, the power in the family, on Gordon Cloade! I do not mean, perhaps, directly dependent. They had all their independent means of existence. But they had come, they must have come, consciously or unconsciously, to lean on him. And what happens—I will ask you this, Superintendent—What happens to the ivy when the oak round which it clings is struck down?"

"That's hardly a question in my line," said Spence.

"You think not? I think it is. Character, mon cher, does not stand still. It can gather strength. It can also deteriorate. What a person really is, is only apparent when the test comes—that is, the moment when you stand or fall on your own feet."

"I don't really know what you are getting at, M. Poirot." Spence looked bewildered. "Anyway, the Cloades are all right now. Or will be, once the legal formalities are through."

That, Poirot reminded him, might take some time. "There is still Mrs. Gordon Cloade's evidence to shake. After all, a woman should know her own husband when she sees him?"

He put his head a little on one side and gazed inquiringly at the big Superintendent.

“Isn’t it worth while to a woman not to recognize her husband if the income of a couple of million pounds depends on it?” asked the Superintendent cynically. “Besides, if he wasn’t Robert Underhay, why was he killed?”

“That,” murmured Poirot, “is indeed the question.”

Six

Poirot left the police station frowning to himself. His steps grew slower as he walked. In the market square he paused, looking about him. There was Dr. Cloade’s house with its worn brass plate, and a little way along was the post office. On the other side was Jeremy Cloade’s house. In front of Poirot, set back a little, was the Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption, a small modest affair, a shrinking violet compared to the aggressiveness of St. Mary’s which stood arrogantly in the middle of the square facing the Cornmarket, and proclaiming the dominance of the Protestant religion.

Moved by an impulse Poirot went through the gate and along the path to the door of the Roman Catholic building. He removed his hat, genuflected in front of the altar and knelt down behind one of the chairs. His prayers were interrupted by the sound of stifled heartbroken sobs.

He turned his head. Across the aisle a woman in a dark dress was kneeling, her head buried in her hands. Presently she got up and, still sobbing under her breath, went towards the door. Poirot, his eyes wide with interest, got up and followed her. He had recognized Rosaleen Cloade.

She stood in the porch, fighting for control, and there Poirot spoke to her, very gently:

“Madame, can I help you?”

She showed no signs of surprise, but answered with the simplicity of an unhappy child.

“No,” she said. “No one can help me.”

“You are in very bad trouble. That is it, is it not?”

She said: “They’ve taken David away…I’m all alone. They say he killed—But he didn’t! He didn’t!”

She looked at Poirot and said: “You were there today? At the inquest. I saw you!”

“Yes. If I can help you, Madame, I shall be very glad to do so.”

“I’m frightened. David said I’d be safe as long as he was there to look after me. But now they’ve taken him away—I’m afraid. He said—they all wanted me dead. That’s a dreadful thing to say. But perhaps it’s true.”

“Let me help you, Madame.”

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “No one can help me. I can’t go to confession, even. I’ve got to bear the weight of my wickedness all alone. I’m cut off from the mercy of God.”

“Nobody,” said Hercule Poirot, “is cut off from the mercy of God. You know that well, my child.”

Again she looked at him—a wild unhappy look.

“I’d have to confess my sins—to confess. If I could confess—”

“Can’t you confess? You came to the church for that, did you not?”

“I came to get comfort—comfort. But what comfort is there for me? I’m a sinner.”

“We are all sinners.”

“But you’d have to repent—I’d have to say—to tell—” Her hands went up to her face. “Oh, the lies I’ve told—the lies I’ve told.”

“You told a lie about your husband? About Robert Underhay? It was Robert Underhay who was killed here, wasn’t it?”

She turned sharply on him. Her eyes were suspicious, wary. She cried out sharply:

"I tell you it was not my husband. It wasn't the least like him!"

"The dead man was not in the least like your husband?"

"No," she said defiantly.

"Tell me," said Poirot, "what was your husband like?"

Her eyes stared at him. Then her face hardened into alarm. Her eyes grew dark with fear.

She cried out:

"I'll not talk to you any more!"

Going swiftly past him, she ran down the path and passed through the gate out into the market square.

Poirot did not try and follow her. Instead he nodded his head with a good deal of satisfaction.

"Ah," he said. "So that is that!"

He walked slowly out into the square.

After a momentary hesitation he followed the High Street until he came to the Stag, which was the last building before the open country.

In the doorway of the Stag he met Rowley Cloade and Lynn Marchmont.

Poirot looked at the girl with interest. A handsome girl, he thought, and intelligent also. Not the type he himself admired. He preferred something softer, more feminine. Lynn Marchmont, he thought, was essentially a modern type—though one might, with equal accuracy, call it an Elizabethan type. Women who thought for themselves, who were free in language, and who admired enterprise and audacity in men.

"We're very grateful to you, M. Poirot," said Rowley. "By Jove, it really was quite like a conjuring trick."

Which was exactly what it had been, Poirot reflected! Asked a question to which you knew the answer, there was no difficulty whatsoever in performing a trick with the requisite frills. He quite appreciated that to the simple Rowley, the production of Major Porter out of the blue, so to speak, had been as breathtaking as any number of rabbits produced from the conjurer’s hat.

“How you go about these things beats me,” said Rowley.

Poirot did not enlighten him. He was, after all, only human. The conjurer does not tell his audience how the trick was done.

“Anyway, Lynn and I are no end grateful,” Rowley went on.

Lynn Marchmont, Poirot thought, was not looking particularly grateful. There were lines of strain round her eyes, her fingers had a nervous trick of twining and intertwining themselves.

“It’s going to make a lot of difference to our future married life,” said Rowley.

Lynn said sharply:

“How do you know? There are all sorts of formalities and things, I’m sure.”

“You are getting married, when?” asked Poirot politely.

“June.”

“And you have been engaged since when?”

“Nearly six years,” said Rowley. “Lynn’s just come out of the Wrens.”

“And is it forbidden to marry in the Wrens, yes?”

Lynn said briefly:

“I’ve been overseas.”

Poirot noticed Rowley’s swift frown. He said shortly:

“Come on, Lynn. We must get going. I expect M. Poirot wants to get back to town.”

Poirot said smilingly:

“But I’m not going back to town.”

“What?”

Rowley stopped dead, giving a queer wooden effect.

“I am staying here, at the Stag, for a short while.”

“But—but why?”

“C’est un beau paysage,” Poirot said placidly.

Rowley said uncertainly:

“Yes, of course…But aren’t you—well, I mean, busy?”

“I have made my economies,” said Poirot, smiling. “I do not need to occupy myself unduly. No, I can enjoy my leisure and spend my time where the fancy takes me. And my fancy inclines to Warmsley Vale.”

He saw Lynn Marchmont raise her head and gaze at him intently. Rowley, he thought, was slightly annoyed.

“I suppose you play golf?” he said. “There’s a much better hotel at Warmsley Heath. This is a very one-horse sort of place.”

“My interests,” said Poirot, “lie entirely in Warmsley Vale.”

Lynn said:

“Come along, Rowley.”

Half reluctantly, Rowley followed her. At the door, Lynn paused and then came swiftly back. She spoke to Poirot in a quiet low voice.

“They arrested David Hunter after the inquest. Do you—do you think they were right?”

“They had no alternative, Mademoiselle, after the verdict.”

“I mean—do you think he did it?”

“Do you?” said Poirot.

But Rowley was back at her side. Her face hardened to a poker smoothness. She said:

“Goodbye, M. Poirot. I—I hope we meet again.”

“Now, I wonder,” said Poirot to himself.

Presently, after arranging with Beatrice Lippincott about a room, he went out again. His steps led him to Dr. Lionel Cloade’s house.

“Oh!” said Aunt Kathie, who opened the door, taking a step or two backwards. “M. Poirot!”

“At your service, Madame.” Poirot bowed. “I came to pay my respects.”

“Well, that’s very nice of you, I’m sure. Yes—well—I suppose you’d better come in. Sit down—I’ll move Madame Blavatsky—and perhaps a cup of tea—only the cake is terribly stale. I meant to go to Peacocks for some, they do have Swiss roll sometimes on a Wednesday—but an inquest puts one’s household routine out, don’t you think so?”

Poirot said that he thought that was entirely understandable.

He had fancied that Rowley Cloade was annoyed by the announcement of his stay in Warmsley Vale. Aunt Kathie’s manner, without any doubt, was far from welcoming. She was looking at him with something not far from dismay. She said, leaning forward and speaking in a hoarse conspiratorial whisper:

“You won’t tell my husband, will you, that I came and consulted you about—well, about we know what?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“I mean—of course I’d no idea at the time—that Robert Underhay, poor man, so tragic—was actually in Warmsley Vale. That seems to me still a most extraordinary coincidence!”

“It would have been simpler,” agreed Poirot, “if the Ouija board had directed you straight to the Stag.”

Aunt Kathie cheered up a little at the mention of the Ouija board.

“The way things come about in the spirit world seem quite incalculable,” she said. “But I do feel, M. Poirot, that there is a purpose in it all. Don’t you feel that in life? That there is always a purpose?”

“Yes, indeed, Madame. Even that I should sit here, now, in your drawing room, there is a purpose in that.”

“Oh, is there?” Mrs. Cloade looked rather taken aback. “Is there, really? Yes, I suppose so…You’re on your way back to London, of course?”

“Not at present. I stay for a few days at the Stag.”

“At the Stag? Oh—at the Stag! But that’s where—oh, M. Poirot, do you think you are wise?”

“I have been guided to the Stag,” said Poirot solemnly.

“Guided? What do you mean?”

“Guided by you.”

"Oh, but I never meant—I mean, I had no idea. It's all so dreadful, don't you think so?"

Poirot shook his head sadly, and said:

"I have been talking to Mr. Rowley Cloade and Miss Marchmont. They are getting married, I hear, quite soon?"

Aunt Kathie was immediately diverted.

"Dear Lynn, she is such a sweet girl—and so very good at figures. Now, I have no head for figures—no head at all. Having Lynn home is an absolute blessing. If I get in a terrible muddle she always straightens things out for me. Dear girl, I do hope she will be happy. Rowley, of course, is a splendid person, but possibly—well, a little dull. I mean dull to a girl who has seen as much of the world as Lynn has. Rowley, you see, has been here on his farm all through the war—oh, quite rightly, of course—I mean the Government wanted him to—that side of it is quite all right—not white feathers or things like that as they did in the Boer War—but what I mean is, it's made him rather limited in his ideas."

"Six years' engagement is a good test of affection."

"Oh, it is! But I think these girls, when they come home, they get rather restless—and if there is someone else about—someone, perhaps, who has led an adventurous life—"

"Such as David Hunter?"

"There isn't anything between them," Aunt Kathie said anxiously. "Nothing at all. I'm quite sure of that! It would have been dreadful if there had been, wouldn't there, with his turning out a murderer? His own brother-in-law, too! Oh, no, M. Poirot, please don't run away with the idea that there's any kind of an understanding between Lynn and David. Really, they seemed to quarrel more than anything else every time they met. What I felt is that—oh, dear, I think that's my husband coming. You will remember, won't you, M. Poirot, not a word about our first meeting? My poor dear husband gets so annoyed if he thinks that—oh, Lionel dear, here is M. Poirot who so cleverly brought that Major Porter down to see the body.”

Dr. Cloade looked tired and haggard. His eyes, pale blue, with pin-point pupils, wandered vaguely round the room.

“How do you do, M. Poirot; on your way back to town?”

“Mon Dieu, another who packs me back to London!” thought Poirot.

Aloud he said patiently:

“No, I remain at the Stag for a day or so.”

“The Stag?” Lionel Cloade frowned. “Oh? Police want to keep you here for a bit?”

“No. It is my own choice.”

“Indeed?” The doctor suddenly flashed a quick intelligent look. “So you’re not satisfied?”

“Why should you think that, Dr. Cloade?”

“Come, man, it’s true, isn’t it?” Twittering about tea, Mrs. Cloade left the room. The doctor went on: “You’ve a feeling, haven’t you, that something’s wrong?”

Poirot was startled.

“It is odd that you should say that. Do you, then, feel that yourself?”

Cloade hesitated.

“N-n-o. Hardly that…perhaps it’s just a feeling of unreality. In books the blackmailer gets slugged. Does he in real life? Apparently the answer is Yes. But it seems unnatural.”

“Was there anything unsatisfactory about the medical aspect of the case? I ask unofficially, of course.”

Dr. Cloade said thoughtfully:

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Yes—there is something. I can see there is something.”

When he wished, Poirot’s voice could assume an almost hypnotic quality. Dr. Cloade frowned a little, then he said hesitatingly:

“I’ve no experience, of course, of police cases. And anyway medical evidence isn’t the hard-and-fast, cast-iron business that laymen or novelists seem to think. We’re fallible—medical science is fallible. What’s diagnosis? A guess, based on a very little knowledge, and some indefinite clues which point in more than one direction. I’m pretty sound, perhaps, at diagnosing measles because, at my time of life, I’ve seen hundreds of cases of measles and I know an extraordinary wide variation of signs and symptoms. You hardly ever get what a text book tells you is a ‘typical case’ of measles. But I’ve known some queer things in my time—I’ve seen a woman practically on the operating table ready for her appendix to be whipped out—and paratyphoid diagnosed just in time! I’ve seen a child with skin trouble pronounced as a case of serious vitamin deficiency by an earnest and conscientious young doctor—and the local vet, comes along and mentions to the mother that the cat the child is hugging has got ringworm and that the child has caught it!

“Doctors, like every one else, are victims of the preconceived idea. Here’s a man, obviously murdered, lying with a bloodstained pair of fire tongs beside him. It would be nonsense to say he was hit with anything else, and yet, speaking out of complete inexperience of people with their heads smashed in, I’d have suspected something rather different—something not so smooth and round—something—oh, I don’t know, something with a more cutting edge—a brick, something like that.”

“You did not say so at the inquest?”

"No—because I don't really know. Jenkins, the police surgeon, was satisfied, and he's the fellow who counts. But there's the preconceived idea—weapon lying beside the body. Could the wound have been inflicted with that? Yes, it could. But if you were shown the wound and asked what made it—well, I don't know whether you'd say it, because it really doesn't make sense—I mean if you had two fellows, one hitting him with a brick and one with the tongs—" The doctor stopped, shook his head in a dissatisfied way. "Doesn't make sense, does it?" he said to Poirot.

"Could he have fallen on some sharp object?"

Dr. Cloade shook his head.

"He was lying face down in the middle of the floor—on a good thick old-fashioned Axminster carpet."

He broke off as his wife entered the room.

"Here's Kathie with the catlap," he remarked.

Aunt Kathie was balancing a tray covered with crockery, half a loaf of bread and some depressing-looking jam in the bottom of a 2-lb. pot.

"I think the kettle was boiling," she remarked doubtfully as she raised the lid of the teapot and peered inside.

Dr. Cloade snorted again and muttered: "Catlap," with which explosive word he left the room.

"Poor Lionel, his nerves are in a terrible state since the war. He worked much too hard. So many doctors away. He gave himself no rest. Out morning, noon, and night. I wonder he didn't break down completely. Of course he looked forward to retiring as soon as peace came. That was all fixed up with Gordon. His hobby, you know, is botany with special reference to medicinal herbs in the Middle Ages. He's writing a book on it. He was looking forward to a quiet life and doing the necessary research. But then, when Gordon died like that—well, you know what things are, M. Poirot, nowadays. Taxation and everything. He can't afford to retire and it's made him very bitter. And really it does seem unfair. Gordon’s dying like that, without a will—well, it really quite shook my faith. I mean, I really couldn’t see the purpose in that. It seemed, I couldn’t help feeling, a mistake.”

She sighed, then cheered up a little.

“But I get some lovely reassurances from the other side. ‘Courage and patience and a way will be found.’ And really, when that nice Major Porter stood up today and said in such a firm manly way that the poor murdered man was Robert Underhay—well, I saw that a way had been found! It’s wonderful, isn’t it, M. Poirot, how things do turn out for the best?”

“Even murder,” said Hercule Poirot.

Seven

Poirot entered the Stag in a thoughtful mood, and shivering slightly for there was a sharp east wind. The hall was deserted. He pushed open the door of the lounge on the right. It smelt of stale smoke and the fire was nearly out. Poirot tiptoed along to the door at the end of the hall labelled “Residents Only.” Here there was a good fire, but in a large armchair, comfortably toasting her toes, was a monumental old lady who glared at Poirot with such ferocity that he beat an apologetic retreat.

He stood for a moment in the hall looking from the glass-enclosed empty office to the door labelled in firm old-fashioned style COFFEE ROOM. By experience of country hotels Poirot knew well that the only time coffee was served there was somewhat grudgingly for breakfast and that even then a good deal of watery hot milk was its principal component. Small cups of a treacly and muddy liquid called Black Coffee were served not in the COFFEE ROOM but in the Lounge. The Windsor Soup, Vienna Steak and Potatoes, and Steamed Pudding which comprised Dinner would be obtainable in the COFFEE ROOM at seven sharp. Until then a deep peace brooded over the residential area of the Stag.

Poirot went thoughtfully up the staircase. Instead of turning to the left where his own room, No. 11, was situated, he turned to the right and stopped before the door of No. 5. He looked round him. Silence and emptiness. He opened the door and went in.

The police had done with the room. It had clearly been freshly cleaned and scrubbed. There was no carpet on the floor. Presumably the “old-fashioned Axminster” had gone to the cleaners. The blankets were folded on the bed in a neat pile.

Closing the door behind him, Poirot wandered round the room. It was clean and strangely barren of human interest. Poirot took in its furnishings—a writing table, a chest of drawers of good old-fashioned mahogany, an upright wardrobe of the same (the one presumably that masked the door into No. 4), a large brass double bed, a basin with hot and cold water—

tribute to modernity and the servant shortage—a large but rather uncomfortable armchair, two small chairs, an old-fashioned Victorian grate with a poker and a pierced shovel belonging to the same set as the fire tongs; a heavy marble mantelpiece and a solid marble fire curb with squared corners.

It was at these last that Poirot bent and looked. Moistening his finger he rubbed it along the right-hand corner and then inspected the result. His finger was slightly black. He repeated the performance with another finger on the left-hand corner of the curb. This time his finger was quite clean.

“Yes,” said Poirot thoughtfully to himself. “Yes.”

He looked at the fitted washbasin. Then he strolled to the window. It looked out over some leads—the roof of a garage, he fancied, and then to a small back alley. An easy way to come and go unseen from room No. 5. But then it was equally easy to walk upstairs to No. 5 unseen. He had just done it himself.

Quietly, Poirot withdrew, shutting the door noiselessly behind him. He went along to his own room. It was decidedly chilly. He went downstairs again, hesitated, and then, driven by the chill of the evening, boldly entered the Residents Only, drew up a second armchair to the fire and sat down.

The monumental old lady was even more formidable seen close at hand. She had iron-grey hair, a flourishing moustache and, when presently she spoke, a deep and awe-inspiring voice.

“This Lounge,” she said, “is Reserved for Persons staying in the hotel.”

“I am staying in the hotel,” replied Hercule Poirot.

The old lady meditated for a moment or two before returning to the attack. Then she said accusingly:

“You’re a foreigner.”

“Yes,” replied Hercule Poirot.

“In my opinion,” said the old lady, “you should all Go Back.”

“Go back where?” inquired Poirot.

“To where you came from,” said the old lady firmly.

She added as a kind of rider, sotto voce: “Foreigners!” and snorted.

“That,” said Poirot mildly, “would be difficult.”

“Nonsense,” said the old lady. “That’s what we fought the war for, isn’t it? So that people could go back to their proper places and stay there.”

Poirot did not enter into a controversy. He had already learnt that every single individual had a different version of the theme, “What did we fight the war for?”

A somewhat hostile silence reigned.

“I don’t know what things are coming to,” said the old lady. “I really don’t. Every year I come and stay in this place. My husband died here sixteen years ago. He’s buried here. I come every year for a month.”

“A pious pilgrimage,” said Poirot politely.

“And every year things get worse and worse. No service! Food uneatable! Vienna steaks indeed! A steak’s either rump or fillet steak—not chopped-up horse!”

Poirot shook his head sadly.

“One good thing—they’ve shut down the aerodrome,” said the old lady. “Disgraceful it was, all those young airmen coming in here with those dreadful girls. Girls, indeed! I don’t know what their mothers are thinking of nowadays. Letting them gad about as they do. I blame the Government. Sending the mothers to work in factories. Only let ’em off if they’ve got young children. Young children, stuff and nonsense! Any one can look after a baby! A baby doesn’t go running round after soldiers. Girls from fourteen to eighteen, they’re the ones that need looking after! Need their mothers. It takes a mother to know just what a girl is up to. Soldiers! Airmen! That’s all they think about. Americans! Niggers! Polish riffraff!”

Indignation at this point made the old lady cough. When she had recovered, she went on, working herself into a pleasurable frenzy and using Poirot as a target for her spleen.

“Why do they have barbed wire round their camps? To keep the soldiers from getting at the girls? No, to keep the girls from getting at the soldiers! Man-mad, that’s what they are! Look at the way they dress. Trousers! Some poor fools wear shorts—they wouldn’t if they knew what they looked like from behind!”

“I agree with you, Madame, indeed I agree with you.”

“What do they wear on their heads? Proper hats? No, a twisted-up bit of stuff, and faces covered with paint and powder. Filthy stuff, all over their mouths. Not only red nails—but red toe-nails!”

The old lady paused explosively and looked at Poirot expectantly. He sighed and shook his head.

“Even in church,” said the old lady. “No hats. Sometimes not even those silly scarves. Just that ugly crimped, permanently waved hair. Hair? Nobody knows what hair is nowadays. I could sit on my hair when I was young.”

Poirot stole a glance at the iron-grey bands. It seemed impossible that this fierce old woman could ever have been young!

“Put her head in here the other night, one of them did,” the old lady went on. “Tied up in an orange scarf and painted and powdered. I looked at her. I just LOOKED at her! She soon went away!

“She wasn’t a Resident,” went on the old lady. “No one of her type staying here, I’m glad to say! So what was she doing coming out of a man’s bedroom? Disgusting, I call it. I spoke about it to that Lippincott girl—but she’s just as bad as any of them—go a mile for anything that wears trousers.”

Some faint interest stirred in Poirot’s mind.

“Coming out of a man’s bedroom?” he queried.

The old lady fell upon the topic with zest.

“That’s what I said. Saw her with my own eyes. No. 5.”

“What day was that, Madame?”

“The day before there was all that fuss about a man being murdered. Disgraceful that such a thing could happen here! This used to be a very decent old-fashioned type of place. But now—”

“And what hour of the day was this?”

“Day? It wasn’t day at all. Evening. Late evening, too. Perfectly disgraceful. Past ten o’clock. I go up to bed at a quarter-past ten. Out she comes from No. 5 as bold as brass, stares at me, then dodges back inside again, laughing and talking with the man there.”

“You heard him speak?”

“Aren’t I telling you so? She dodges back inside and he calls out, ‘Oh, go on, get out of here. I’m fed up.’ That’s nice way for a man to talk to a girl. But they ask for it! Hussies!”

Poirot said, “You did not report this to the police?”

She fixed him with a basilisk stare and totteringly rose out of her chair. Standing over him and glaring down on him, she said:

“I have never had anything to do with the police. The police indeed! I, in a police court?”

Quiverering with rage and with one last malevolent glance at Poirot she left the room.

Poirot sat for a few minutes thoughtfully caressing his moustache, then he went in search of Beatrice Lippincott.

“Oh, yes, M. Poirot, you mean old Mrs. Leadbetter? Canon Leadbetter’s widow. She comes here every year, but of course between ourselves she is rather a trial. She’s really frightfully rude to people sometimes, and she doesn’t seem to understand that things are different nowadays. She’s nearly eighty, of course.”

“But she is clear in her mind? She knows what she is saying?”

“Oh, yes. She’s quite a sharp old lady—rather too much so sometimes.”

“Do you know who a young woman was who visited the murdered man on Tuesday night?”

Beatrice looked astonished.

“I don’t remember a young woman coming to visit him at any time. What was she like?”

“She was wearing an orange scarf round her head and I should fancy a good deal of makeup. She was in No. 5 talking to Arden at a quarter past ten on Tuesday night.”

“Really, M. Poirot, I’ve no idea whatsoever.”

Thoughtfully Poirot went along in search of Superintendent Spence.

Spence listened to Poirot’s story in silence. Then he leaned back in his chair and nodded his head slowly.

“Funny, isn’t it?” he said. “How often you come back to the same old formula. Cherchez la femme.”

The Superintendent’s French accent was not as good as Sergeant Graves’, but he was proud of it. He got up and went across the room. He came back holding something in his hand. It was a lipstick in a gilt cardboard case.

“We had this indication all along that there might be a woman mixed up in it,” he said.

Poirot took the lipstick and smeared a little delicately on the back of his hand. “Good quality,” he said. “A dark cherry red—worn by a brunette probably.”

“Yes. It was found on the floor of No. 5. It had rolled under the chest of drawers and of course just possibly it might have been there some time. No fingerprints on it. Nowadays, of course, there isn’t the range of lipsticks there used to be—just a few standard makes.”

“And you have no doubt made your inquiries?”

Spence smiled.

“Yes,” he said; “as you put it, we have made our inquiries. Rosaleen Cloade uses this type of lipstick. So does Lynn Marchmont. Frances Cloade uses a more subdued colour. Mrs. Lionel Cloade doesn’t use lipstick at all. Mrs. Marchmont uses a pale mauve shade. Beatrice Lippincott doesn’t appear to use anything as expensive as this—nor does the chambermaid, Gladys.”

He paused.

“You have been thorough,” said Poirot.

“Not thorough enough. It looks now as though an outsider is mixed up in it—some woman, perhaps, that Underhay knew in Warmsley Vale.”

“And who was with him at a quarter past ten on Tuesday evening?”

“Yes,” said Spence. He added with a sigh, “This lets David Hunter out.”

“It does?”

"Yes. His lordship has consented to make a statement at last. After his solicitor had been along to make him see reason. Here's his account of his own movements."

Poirot read a neat typed memorandum.

Left London 4:16 train for Warmsley Heath. Arrived there 5:30. Walked to Furrowbank by footpath.

"His reason for coming down," the Superintendent broke in, "was, according to him, to get certain things he'd left behind, letters and papers, a chequebook, and to see if some shirts had come back from the laundry—which, of course, they hadn't! My word, laundry's a problem nowadays. Four ruddy weeks since they've been to our place—not a clean towel left in our house, and the wife washes all my things herself now."

After this very human interpolation the Superintendent returned to the itinerary of David's movements.

"Left Furrowbank at 7:25 and states he went for a walk as he had missed the 7:20 train and there would be no train until the 9:20."

"In what direction did he go for a walk?" asked Poirot.

The Superintendent consulted his notes.

"Says by Downe Copse, Bats Hill and Long Ridge."

"In fact, a complete circular tour round the White House!"

"My word, you pick up local geography quickly, M. Poirot!"

Poirot smiled and shook his head.

"No, I did not know the places you named. I was making a guess."

"Oh, you were, were you?" The Superintendent cocked his head on one side.

“Then, according to him, when he was up on Long Ridge, he realized he was cutting it rather fine and fairly hared it for Warmsley Heath station, going across country. He caught the train by the skin of his teeth, arrived at Victoria 10:45, walked to Shepherd’s Court, arriving there at eleven o’clock, which latter statement is confirmed by Mrs. Gordon Cloade.”

“And what confirmation have you of the rest of it?”

“Remarkably little—but there is some. Rowley Cloade and others saw him arrive at Warmsley Heath. The maids at Furrowbank were out (he had his own key of course) so they didn’t see him, but they found a cigarette stump in the library which I gather intrigued them and also found a good deal of confusion in the linen cupboard. Then one of the gardeners was there working late—shutting up greenhouses or something and he caught sight of him. Miss Marchmont met him up by Mardon Wood—when he was running for the train.”

“Did any one see him catch the train?”

“No—but he telephoned from London to Miss Marchmont as soon as he got back—at 11:05.”

“That is checked?”

“Yes, we’d already put through an inquiry about calls from that number. There was a Toll call out at 11:04 to Warmsley Vale 34. That’s the Marchmonts’ number.”

“Very, very interesting,” murmured Poirot.

But Spence was going on painstakingly and methodically.

“Rowley Cloade left Arden at five minutes to nine. He’s quite definite it wasn’t earlier. About 9:10 Lynn Marchmont sees Hunter up at Mardon Wood. Granted he’s run all the way from the Stag, would he have had time to meet Arden, quarrel with him, kill him and get to Mardon Wood? We’re going into it and I don’t think it can be done. However, now we’re starting again. Far from Arden being killed at nine o’clock, he was alive at ten minutes past ten—that is unless your old lady is dreaming. He was either killed by the woman who dropped the lipstick, the woman in the orange scarf—or by somebody who came in after that woman left. And whoever did it, deliberately put the hands of the watch back to nine-ten."

"Which if David Hunter had not happened to meet Lynn Marchmont in a very unlikely place would have been remarkably awkward for him?" said Poirot.

"Yes, it would. The 9:20 is the last train up from Warmsley Heath. It was growing dark. There are always golfers going back by it. Nobody would have noticed Hunter—indeed the station people don't know him by sight. And he didn't take a taxi at the other end. So we'd only have his sister's word for it that he arrived back at Shepherd's Court when he said he did."

Poirot was silent and Spence asked:

"What are you thinking about, M. Poirot?"

Poirot said, "A long walk round the White House. A meeting in Mardon Woods. A telephone call later…And Lynn Marchmont is engaged to Rowley Cloade…I should like very much to know what was said over that telephone call."

"It's the human interest that's getting you?"

"Yes," said Poirot. "It is always the human interest."

Eight

It was getting late, but there was still one more call that Poirot wanted to make. He went along to Jeremy Cloade's house.

There he was shown into Jeremy Cloade's study by a small, intelligent-looking maid.

Left alone, Poirot gazed interestedly round him. All very legal and dry as dust, he thought, even in his home. There was a large portrait of Gordon Cloade on the desk. Another faded one of Lord Edward Trenton on a horse, and Poirot was examining the latter when Jeremy Cloade came in.

"Ah, pardon." Poirot put the photo frame down in some confusion.

"My wife's father," said Jeremy, a faint self-congratulatory note in his voice. "And one of his best horses, Chestnut Trenton. Ran second in the Derby in 1924. Are you interested in racing?"

"Alas, no."

"Runs away with a lot of money," said Jeremy dryly. "Lord Edward came a crash over it—had to go and live abroad. Yes, an expensive sport."

But there was still the note of pride in his voice.

He himself, Poirot judged, would as soon throw his money in the street as invest it in horseflesh, but he had a secret admiration and respect for those who did.

Cloade went on:

"What can I do for you, M. Poirot? As a family, I feel we owe you a debt of gratitude—for finding Major Porter to give evidence of identification."

"The family seems very jubilant about it," said Poirot.

“Ah,” said Jeremy dryly. “Rather premature to rejoice. Lot of water’s got to pass under the bridge yet. After all, Underhay’s death was accepted in Africa. Takes years to upset a thing of this kind—and Rosaleen’s evidence was very positive—very positive indeed. She made a good impression you know.”

It seemed almost as though Jeremy Cloade was unwilling to bank upon any improvement in his prospects.

“I wouldn’t like to give a ruling one way or the other,” he said. “Couldn’t say how a case would go.”

Then, pushing aside some papers with a fretful, almost weary gesture, he said:

“But you wanted to see me?”

“I was going to ask you, Mr. Cloade, if you are really quite certain your brother did not leave a will? A will made subsequent to his marriage, I mean?”

Jeremy looked surprised.

“I don’t think there’s ever been any idea of such a thing. He certainly didn’t make one before leaving New York.”

“He might have made one during the two days he was in London.”

“Gone to a lawyer there?”

“Or written one out himself.”

“And got it witnessed? Witnessed by whom?”

“There were three servants in the house,” Poirot reminded him. “Three servants who died the same night he did.”

“H’m—yes—but if by any chance he did do what you suggest, well, the will was destroyed too.”

"That is just the point. Lately a great many documents believed to have perished completely have actually been deciphered by a new process. Incinerated inside home safes, for instance, but not so destroyed that they cannot be read."

"Well, really, M. Poirot, that is a most remarkable idea of yours…Most remarkable. But I don't think—no, I really don't believe there is anything in it…So far as I know there was no safe in the house in Sheffield Terrace. Gordon kept all valuable papers, etc., at his office—and there was certainly no will there."

"But one might make inquiries?" Poirot was persistent. "From the A.R.P. officials, for instance? You would authorize me to do that?"

"Oh, certainly—certainly. Very kind of you to offer to undertake such a thing. But I haven't any belief whatever, I'm afraid, in your success. Still—well, it is an offchance, I suppose. You—you'll be going back to London at once, then?"

Poirot's eyes narrowed. Jeremy's tone had been unmistakably eager. Going back to London…Did they all want him out of the way?

Before he could answer, the door opened and Frances Cloade came in.

Poirot was struck by two things. First, by the fact that she looked shockingly ill. Secondly, by her very strong resemblance to the photograph of her father.

"M. Hercule Poirot has come to see us, my dear," said Jeremy rather unnecessarily.

She shook hands with him and Jeremy Cloade immediately outlined to her Poirot's suggestion about a will.

Frances looked doubtful.

"It seems a very outside chance."

"M. Poirot is going up to London and will very kindly make inquiries."

“Major Porter, I understand, was an Air Raid Warden in that district,” said Poirot.

A curious expression passed over Mrs. Cloade’s face. She said:

“Who is Major Porter?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“A retired Army officer, living on his pension.”

“He really was in Africa?”

Poirot looked at her curiously.

“Certainly, Madame. Why not?”

She said almost absently, “I don’t know. He puzzled me.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cloade,” said Poirot. “I can understand that.”

She looked sharply at him. An expression almost of fear came into her eyes.

Turning to her husband she said:

“Jeremy, I feel very much distressed about Rosaleen. She is all alone at Furrowbank and she must be frightfully upset over David’s arrest. Would you object if I asked her to come here and stay?”

“Do you really think that is advisable, my dear?” Jeremy sounded doubtful.

“Oh—advisable? I don’t know! But one is human. She is such a helpless creature.”

“I rather doubt if she will accept.”

“I can at any rate make the offer.”

The lawyer said quietly: “Do so if it will make you feel happier.”

"Happier!"

The word came out with a strange bitterness. Then she gave a quick doubtful glance at Poirot.

Poirot murmured formally:

"I will take my leave now."

She followed him out into the hall.

"You are going up to London?"

"I shall go up tomorrow, but for twenty-four hours at most. And then I return to the Stag—where you will find me, Madame, if you want me."

She demanded sharply:

"Why should I want you?"

Poirot did not reply to the question, merely said:

"I shall be at the Stag."

Later that night out of the darkness Frances Cloade spoke to her husband.

"I don't believe that man is going to London for the reason he said. I don't believe all that about Gordon's having made a will. Do you believe it, Jeremy?"

A hopeless, rather tired voice answered her:

"No, Frances. No—he's going for some other reason."

"What reason?"

"I've no idea."

Frances said, “What are we going to do, Jeremy? What are we going to do?”

Presently he answered:

“I think, Frances, there’s only one thing to be done—”

Nine

Armed with the necessary credentials from Jeremy Cloade, Poirot had got the answers to his questions. They were very definite. The house was a total wreck. The site had been cleared only quite recently in preparation for rebuilding. There had been no survivors except for David Hunter and Mrs. Cloade. There had been three servants in the house: Frederick Game, Elizabeth Game and Eileen Corrigan. All three had been killed instantly. Gordon Cloade had been brought out alive, but had died on the way to hospital without recovering consciousness. Poirot took the names and addresses of the three servants' next of kin. "It is possible," he said, "that they may have spoken to their friends something in the way of gossip or comment that might give me a pointer to some information I badly need."

The official to whom he was speaking looked sceptical. The Games had come from Dorset, Eileen Corrigan from County Cork.

Poirot next bent his steps towards Major Porter's rooms. He remembered Porter's statement that he himself was a Warden and he wondered whether he had happened to be on duty on that particular night and whether he had seen anything of the incident in Sheffield Terrace.

He had, besides, other reasons for wanting a word with Major Porter.

As he turned the corner of Edgeway Street he was startled to see a policeman in uniform standing outside the particular house for which he was making. There was a ring of small boys and other people standing staring at the house. Poirot's heart sank as he interpreted the signs.

The constable intercepted Poirot's advance.

"Can't go in here, sir," he said.

"What has happened?"

"You don't live in the house, do you, sir?" Poirot shook his head. "Who was it you were wishing to see?"

“I wished to see a Major Porter.”

“You a friend of his, sir?”

“No, I should not describe myself as a friend. What has happened?”

“Gentleman has shot himself, I understand. Ah, here’s the Inspector.”

The door had opened and two figures came out. One was the local Inspector, the other Poirot recognized as Sergeant Graves from Warmsley Vale. The latter recognized him and promptly made himself known to the Inspector.

“Better come inside,” said the latter.

The three men reentered the house.

“They telephoned through to Warmsley Vale,” Graves explained. “And Superintendent Spence sent me up.”

“Suicide?”

The Inspector answered:

“Yes. Seems a clear case. Don’t know whether having to give evidence at the inquest preyed upon his mind. People are funny that way sometimes, but I gather he’s been depressed lately. Financial difficulties and one thing and another. Shot himself with his own revolver.”

Poirot asked: “Is it permitted that I go up?”

“If you like, M. Poirot. Take M. Poirot up, Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir.”

Graves led the way up to the first-floor room. It was much as Poirot remembered it: the dim colours of the old rugs, the books. Major Porter was in the big armchair. His attitude was almost natural, just the head slumped forward. His right arm hung down at his side—below it, on the rug, lay the revolver. There was still a very faint smell of acrid gunpowder in the air.

“About a couple of hours ago, they think,” said Graves. “Nobody heard the shot. The woman of the house was out shopping.”

Poirot was frowning, looking down on the quiet figure with the small scorched wound in the right temple.

“Any idea why he should do it, M. Poirot?” asked Graves.

He was respectful to Poirot because he had seen the Superintendent being respectful—though his private opinion was that Poirot was one of these frightful old dugouts.

Poirot replied absently:

“Yes—yes, there was a very good reason. That is not the difficulty.”

His glance shifted to a small table at Major Porter’s left hand. There was a big solid glass ashtray on it, with a pipe and a box of matches. Nothing there. His eye roamed round the room. Then he crossed to an open rolltop desk.

It was very tidy. Papers neatly pigeon-holed. A small leather blotter in the centre, a pen tray with a pen and two pencils, a box of paper clips and a book of stamps. All very neat and orderly. An ordinary life and an orderly death—of course—that was it—that was what was missing!

He said to Graves:

“Didn’t he leave any note—any letter for the coroner?”

Graves shook his head.

“No, he didn’t—sort of thing one would have expected an ex-Army man to do.”

“Yes, that is very curious.”

Punctilious in life, Major Porter had not been punctilious in death. It was all wrong, Poirot thought, that Porter had left no note.

“Bit of a blow for the Cloades this,” said Graves. “It will set them back. They’ll have to hunt about for someone else who knew Underhay intimately.”

He fidgeted slightly. “Anything more you want to see, M. Poirot?”

Poirot shook his head and followed Graves from the room.

On the stairs they met the landlady. She was clearly enjoying her own state of agitation and started a voluble discourse at once. Graves adroitly detached himself and left Poirot to receive the full spate.

“Can’t seem to catch my breath properly. ’Eart, that’s what it is. Angina Pectoria, my mother died of—fell down dead as she was crossing the Caledonian Market. Nearly dropped down myself when I found him—oh, it did give me a turn! Never suspected anything of the kind, though ’e ’ad been low in ’is spirits for a long time. Worried over money, I think, and didn’t eat enough to keep himself alive. Not that he’d ever accept a bite from us. And then yesterday he ’ad to go down to a place in Oastshire—Warmsley Vale—to give evidence in an inquest. Preyed on his mind, that did. He come back looking awful. Tramped about all last night. Up and down—up and down. A murdered gentleman it was and a friend of his, by all accounts. Poor dear, it did upset him. Up and down—up and down. And when I was out doing my bit of shopping—and ’aving to queue ever so long for the fish, I went up to see if he’d like a nice cuppa tea—and there he was, poor gentleman, the revolver dropped out of his hand, leaning back in his chair. Gave me an awful turn it did. ’Ad to ’ave the police in and everything. What’s the world coming to, that’s what I say?”

Poirot said slowly:

“The world is becoming a difficult place to live in—except for the strong.”

Ten

It was past eight o'clock when Poirot got back to the Stag. He found a note from Frances Cloade asking him to come and see her. He went out at once.

She was waiting for him in the drawing room. He had not seen that room before. The open windows gave on a walled garden with pear trees in bloom. There were bowls of tulips on the tables. The old furniture shone with beeswax and elbow grease and the brass of the fender and coal scuttle were brightly gleaming.

It was, Poirot thought, a very beautiful room.

"You said I should want you, M. Poirot. You were quite right. There is something that must be told—and I think you are the best person to tell it to."

"It is always easier, Madame, to tell a thing to someone who already has a very good idea of what it is."

"You think you know what I am going to say?"

Poirot nodded.

"Since when—"

She left the question unfinished, but he replied promptly:

"Since the moment when I saw the photograph of your father. The features of your family are very strongly marked. One could not doubt that you and he were of the same family. The resemblance was equally strong in the man who came here calling himself Enoch Arden."

She sighed—a deep unhappy sigh.

"Yes—yes, you're right—although poor Charles had a beard. He was my second cousin, M. Poirot, somewhat the black sheep of the family. I never knew him very well but we played together as children—and now I've brought him to his death—an ugly sordid death—"

She was silent for a moment or two. Poirot said gently:

"You will tell me—"

She roused herself.

"Yes, the story has got to be told. We were desperate for money—that's where it begins. My husband—my husband was in serious trouble—the worst kind of trouble. Disgrace, perhaps imprisonment lay ahead of him—still lies ahead of him for that matter. Now understand this, M. Poirot, the plan I made and carried out was my plan; my husband had nothing to do with it. It wasn't his sort of plan in any case—it would have been far too risky. But I've never minded taking risks. And I've always been, I suppose, rather unscrupulous. First of all, let me say, I applied to Rosaleen Cloade for a loan. I don't know whether, left to herself, she would have given it to me or not. But her brother stepped in. He was in an ugly mood and he was, or so I thought, unnecessarily insulting. When I thought of this scheme I had no scruples at all about putting it into operation.

"To explain matters, I must tell you that my husband had repeated to me last year a rather interesting piece of information which he had heard at his club. You were there, I believe, so I needn't repeat it in detail. But it opened up the possibility that Rosaleen's first husband might not be dead—and of course in that case she would have no right at all to any of Gordon's money. It was, of course, only a vague possibility, but it was there at the back of our minds, a sort of outside chance that might possibly come true. And it flashed into my mind that something could be done by using that possibility. Charles, my cousin, was in this country, down on his luck. He's been in prison, I'm afraid, and he wasn't a scrupulous person, but he did well in the war. I put the proposition before him. It was, of course, blackmail, neither more nor less. But we thought that we had a good chance of getting away with it. At worst, I thought, David Hunter would refuse to play. I didn't think that he would go to the police about it—people like him aren't fond of the police."

Her voice hardened.

“Our scheme went well. David fell for it better than we hoped. Charles, of course, could not definitely pose as ‘Robert Underhay.’ Rosaleen could give that away in a moment. But fortunately she went up to London and that left Charles a chance of at least suggesting that he might be Robert Underhay. Well, as I say, David appeared to be falling for the scheme. He was to bring the money on Tuesday evening at nine o’clock. Instead—”

Her voice faltered.

“We should have known that David was—a dangerous person. Charles is dead—murdered—and but for me he would be alive. I sent him to his death.”

After a little she went on in a dry voice:

“You can imagine what I have felt like ever since.”

“Nevertheless,” said Poirot, “you were quick enough to see a further development of the scheme? It was you who induced Major Porter to identify your cousin as ‘Robert Underhay?’”

But at once she broke out vehemently:

“No, I swear to you, no. Not that! No one was more astonished… Astonished? We were dumbfounded! when this Major Porter came down and gave evidence that Charles—Charles!—was Robert Underhay. I couldn’t understand it—I still can’t understand it!”

“But someone went to Major Porter. Someone persuaded him or bribed him—to identify the dead man as Underhay?”

Frances said decisively:

“It was not I. And it was not Jeremy. Neither of us would do such a thing. Oh, I dare say that sounds absurd to you! You think that because I was ready to blackmail, that I would stoop just as easily to fraud. But in my mind the two things are worlds apart. You must understand that I felt—

indeed I still feel—that we have a right to a portion of Gordon's money. What I had failed to get by fair means I was prepared to get by foul. But deliberately to swindle Rosaleen out of everything, by manufacturing evidence that she was not Gordon's wife at all—oh, no, indeed, M. Poirot, I would not do a thing like that. Please, please, believe me."

"I will at least admit," said Poirot slowly, "that every one has their own particular sins. Yes, I will believe that."

Then he looked at her sharply.

"Do you know, Mrs. Cloade, that Major Porter shot himself this afternoon?"

She shrank back, her eyes wide and horrified.

"Oh, no, M. Poirot—no!"

"Yes, Madame. Major Porter, you see, was au fond an honest man. Financially he was in very low water, and when temptation came he, like many other men, failed to resist it. It may have seemed to him, he can have made himself feel, that his lie was almost morally justified. He was already deeply prejudiced in his mind against the woman his friend Underhay had married. He considered that she had treated his friend disgracefully. And now this heartless little gold digger had married a millionaire and had got away with her second husband's fortune to the detriment of his own flesh and blood. It must have seemed tempting to him to put a spoke in her wheel—no more than she deserved. And merely by identifying a dead man he himself would be made secure for the future. When the Cloades got their rights, he would get his cut…Yes—I can see the temptation…But like many men of his type he lacked imagination. He was unhappy, very unhappy, at the inquest. One could see that. In the near future he would have to repeat his lie upon oath. Not only that; a man was now arrested, charged with murder—and the identity of the dead man supplied a very potent motive for that charge.

"He went back home and faced things squarely. He took the way out that seemed best to him."

“He shot himself?”

“Yes.”

Frances murmured: “He didn’t say who—who—”

Slowly Poirot shook his head.

“He had his code. There was no reference whatever as to who had instigated him to commit perjury.”

He watched her closely. Was there an instant flash of relief, of relaxed tension? Yes, but that might be natural enough in any case….

She got up and walked to the window. She said:

“So we are back where we were.”

Poirot wondered what was passing in her mind.

Eleven

Superintendent Spence, the following morning, used almost Frances' words:

"So we're back where we started," he said with a sigh. "We've got to find who this fellow Enoch Arden really was."

"I can tell you that, Superintendent," said Poirot. "His name was Charles Trenton."

"Charles Trenton!" The Superintendent whistled. "H'm! One of the Trentons—I suppose she put him up to it—Mrs. Jeremy, I mean…However, we shan't be able to prove her connection with it. Charles Trenton? I seem to remember—"

Poirot nodded.

"Yes. He has a record."

"Thought so. Swindling hotels if I remember rightly. Used to arrive at the Ritz, go out and buy a Rolls, subject to a morning's trial, go round in the Rolls to all the most expensive shops and buy stuff—and I can tell you a man who's got his Rolls outside waiting to take his purchases back to the Ritz doesn't get his cheques queried! Besides, he had the manner and the breeding. He'd stay a week or so and then, just when suspicions began to arise, he'd quietly disappear, selling the various items cheap to the pals he'd picked up. Charles Trenton. H'm—" He looked at Poirot. "You find out things, don't you?"

"How does your case progress against David Hunter?"

"We shall have to let him go. There was a woman there that night with Arden. It doesn't only depend on that old tartar's word. Jimmy Pierce was going home, got pushed out of the Load of Hay—he gets quarrelsome after a glass or two. He saw a woman come out of the Stag and go into the telephone box outside the post office—that was just after ten. Said it wasn't any one he knew, thought it was someone staying at the Stag. ‘A tart from London,’ is what he called her.”

“He was not very near her?”

“No, right across the street. Who the devil was she, M. Poirot?”

“Did he say how she was dressed?”

“Tweed coat, he said, orange scarf round her head. Trousers and a lot of makeup. Fits with the old lady’s description.”

“Yes, it fits.” Poirot was frowning.

Spence asked:

“Well, who was she, where did she come from, where did she go? You know our train service. The 9:20’s the last train up to London—and the 10:03 the other way. Did that woman hang about all night and go up on the 6:18 in the morning? Had she got a car? Did she hitch-hike? We’ve sent out all over the place—but no results.”

“What about the 6:18?”

“It’s always crowded—mostly men, though. I think they’d have noticed a woman—that type of woman, that’s to say. I suppose she might have come and left by car, but a car’s noticed in Warmsley Vale nowadays. We’re off the main road, you see.”

“No cars noticed out that night?”

“Only Dr. Cloade’s. He was out on a case—over Middlingham way. You’d think someone would have noticed a strange woman in a car.”

“It need not have been a stranger,” Poirot said slowly. “A man slightly drunk and a hundred yards away might not recognize a local person whom he did not know very well. Someone, perhaps, dressed in a different way from their usual way.”

Spence looked at him questioningly.

“Would this young Pierce recognize, for instance, Lynn Marchmont? She has been away for some years.”

“Lynn Marchmont was at the White House with her mother at that time,” said Spence.

“Are you sure?”

“Mrs. Lionel Cloade—that’s the scatty one, the doctor’s wife—says she telephoned to her there at ten minutes past ten. Rosaleen Cloade was in London. Mrs. Jeremy—well, I’ve never seen her in slacks and she doesn’t use much makeup. Anyway, she isn’t young.”

“Oh, mon cher. Poirot leaned forward. “On a dim night, with feeble street lights, can one tell youth or age under a mask of makeup?”

“Look here, Poirot,” said Spence, “what are you getting at?”

Poirot leaned back and half-closed his eyes.

“Slacks, a tweed coat, an orange scarf enveloping the head, a great deal of makeup, a dropped lipstick. It is suggestive.”

“Think you’re the oracle at Delphi,” growled the Superintendent. “Not that I know what the oracle at Delphi was—sort of thing young Graves gives himself airs about knowing—doesn’t help his police work any. Any more cryptic pronnouncements, M. Poirot?”

“I told you,” said Poirot, “that this case was the wrong shape. As an instance I said to you that the dead man was all wrong. So he was, as Underhay. Underhay was clearly an eccentric, chivalrous individual, old-fashioned and reactionary. The man at the Stag was a blackmailer; he was neither chivalrous, old-fashioned, nor reactionary, nor was he particularly eccentric—therefore he was not Underhay. He could not be Underhay, for people do not change. The interesting thing was that Porter said he was Underhay.”

“Leading you to Mrs. Jeremy?”

“The likeness led me to Mrs. Jeremy. A very distinctive cast of countenance, the Trenton profile. To permit myself a little play on words, as Charles Trenton the dead man is the right shape. But there are still questions to which we require answers. Why did David Hunter permit himself to be blackmailed so readily? Is he the kind of man who lets himself be blackmailed? One would say very decidedly, no. So he too acts out of character. Then there is Rosaleen Cloade. Her whole behaviour is incomprehensible—but there is one thing I should like to know very much. Why is she afraid? Why does she think that something will happen to her now that her brother is no longer there to protect her? Someone—or something has given her that fear. And it is not that she fears losing her fortune—no, it is more than that. It is for her life that she is afraid….”

“Good Lord, M. Poirot, you don’t think—”

“Let us remember, Spence, that as you said just now, we are back where we started. That is to say, the Cloade family are back where they started. Robert Underhay died in Africa. And Rosaleen Cloade’s life stands between them and the enjoyment of Gordon Cloade’s money—”

“Do you honestly think that one of them would do that?”

“I think this. Rosaleen Cloade is twenty-six, and though mentally somewhat unstable, physically she is strong and healthy. She may live to be seventy, she may live longer still. Forty-four years, let us say. Don’t you think, Superintendent, that forty-four years may be too long for someone to contemplate?”

Twelve

When Poirot left the police station he was almost at once accosted by Aunt Kathie. She had several shopping bags with her and came up to him with a breathless eagerness of manner.

“So terrible about poor Major Porter,” she said. “I can’t help feeling that his outlook on life must have been very materialistic. Army life, you know. Very narrowing, and though he had spent a good deal of his life in India, I’m afraid he never took advantage of the spiritual opportunities. It would be all pukka and chota hazri and tiffin and pigsticking—the narrow Army round. To think that he might have sat as a chela at the feet of some guru! Ah, the missed opportunities, M. Poirot, how sad they are!”

Aunt Kathie shook her head and relaxed her grip on one of the shopping bags. A depressed-looking bit of cod slipped out and slithered into the gutter. Poirot retrieved it and in her agitation Aunt Kathie let a second bag slip, whereupon a tin of golden syrup began a gay career rolling along the High Street.

“Thank you so much, M. Poirot.” Aunt Kathie grasped the cod. He ran after the golden syrup. “Oh, thank you—so clumsy of me—but really I have been so upset. That unfortunate man—yes, it is sticky, but really I don’t like to use your clean handkerchief. Well, it’s very kind of you—as I was saying, in life we are in death—and in death we are in life—I should never be surprised to see the astral body of any of my dear friends who have passed over. One might, you know, just pass them in the street. Why—only the other night I—”

“You permit?” Poirot rammed the cod firmly into the depths of the bag. “You were saying—yes?”

“Astral bodies,” said Aunt Kathie. “I asked, you know, for twopence—because I only had halfpennies. But I thought at the time the face was familiar—only I couldn’t place it. I still can’t—but I think now it must be someone who has Passed Over—perhaps some time ago—so that my remembrance was very uncertain. It is wonderful the way people are sent to one in one's need—even if it's only a matter of pennies for telephones. Oh, dear, quite a queue at Peacocks—they must have got either trifle or Swiss roll! I hope I'm not too late!"

Mrs. Lionel Cloade plunged across the road and joined herself to the tail end of a queue of grim-faced women outside the confectioner's shop.

Poirot went on down the High Street. He did not turn in at the Stag. Instead he bent his steps towards the White House.

He wanted very much to have a talk with Lynn Marchmont, and he suspected that Lynn Marchmont would not be averse to having a talk with him.

It was a lovely morning—one of those summer mornings in spring that have a freshness denied to a real summer's day.

Poirot turned off from the main road. He saw the footpath leading up past Long Willows to the hillside above Furrowbank. Charles Trenton had come that way from the station on the Friday before his death. On his way down the hill, he had met Rosaleen Cloade coming up. He had not recognized her, which was not surprising since he was not Robert Underhay, and she, naturally, had not recognized him for the same reason. But she had sworn when shown the body that she had not even glanced at the face of the man she had passed on the footpath? If so, what had she been thinking about? Had she, by any chance, been thinking of Rowley Cloade?

Poirot turned along the small side road which led to the White House. The garden of the White House was looking very lovely. It held many flowering shrubs, lilacs and laburnums, and in the centre of the lawn was a big old gnarled apple tree. Under it, stretched out in a deck chair, was Lynn Marchmont.

She jumped nervously when Poirot, in a formal voice, wished her "Good morning!"

“You did startle me, M. Poirot. I didn’t hear you coming across the grass. So you are still here—in Warmsley Vale?”

“I am still here—yes.”

“Why?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“It is a pleasant out-of-the-world spot where one can relax. I relax.”

“I’m glad you are here,” said Lynn.

“You do not say to me like the rest of your family, “When do you go back to London, M. Poirot?” and wait anxiously for the answer.”

“Do they want you to go back to London?”

“It would seem so.”

“I don’t.”

“No—I realize that. Why, Mademoiselle?”

“Because it means that you’re not satisfied. Not satisfied, I mean, that David Hunter did it.”

“And you want him so much—to be innocent?”

He saw a faint flush creep up under her bronzed skin.

“Naturally, I don’t want to see a man hanged for what he didn’t do.”

“Naturally—oh, yes!”

“And the police are simply prejudiced against him because he’s got their backs up. That’s the worst of David—he likes antagonizing people.”

"The police are not so prejudiced as you think, Miss Marchmont. The prejudice against him was in the minds of the jury. They refused to follow the coroner's guidance. They gave a verdict against him and so the police had to arrest him. But I may tell you that they are very far from satisfied with the case against him."

She said eagerly:

"Then they may let him go?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Who do they think did do it, M. Poirot?"

Poirot said slowly: "There was a woman at the Stag that night."

Lynn cried:

"I don't understand anything. When we thought the man was Robert Underhay it all seemed so simple. Why did Major Porter say it was Underhay if it wasn't? Why did he shoot himself? We're back now where we started."

"You are the third person to use that phrase!"

"Am I?" She looked startled. "What are you doing, M. Poirot?"

"Talking to people. That is what I do. Just talk to people."

"But you don't ask them things about the murder?"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, I just—what shall we say—pick up gossip."

"Does that help?"

"Sometimes it does. You would be surprised how much I know of the everyday life of Warmsley Vale in the last few weeks. I know who walked where, and who they met, and sometimes what they said. For instance, I know that the man Arden took the footpath to the village passing by Furrowbank and asking the way of Mr. Rowley Cloade, and that he had a pack on his back and no luggage. I know that Rosaleen Cloade had spent over an hour at the farm with Rowley Cloade and that she had been happy there, unlike her usual self."

"Yes," said Lynn, "Rowley told me that. He said she was like someone having an afternoon out."

"Aha, he said that?" Poirot paused and went on, "Yes, I know a lot of the comings and goings. And I have heard a lot about people's difficulties—yours and your mother's, for example."

"There's no secret about any of us," said Lynn. "We've all tried to cadge money off Rosaleen. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"I did not say so."

"Well, it's true! And I suppose you've heard things about me and Rowley and David."

"But you are going to marry Rowley Cloade?"

"Am I? I wish I knew…That's what I was trying to decide that day—when David burst out of the wood. It was like a great question mark in my brain. Shall I? Shall I? Even the train in the valley seemed to be asking the same thing. The smoke made a fine question mark in the sky."

Poirot's face took on a curious expression. Lynn misunderstood it. She cried out:

"Oh, don't you see, M. Poirot, it's all so difficult. It isn't a question of David at all. It's me! I've changed. I've been away for three—four years. Now I've come back I'm not the same person who went away. That's the tragedy everywhere. People coming home changed, having to readjust themselves. You can't go away and lead a different kind of life and not change!"

"You are wrong," said Poirot. "The tragedy of life is that people do not change."

She stared at him, shaking her head. He insisted:

"But yes. It is so. Why did you go away in the first place?"

"Why? I went into the Wrens. I went on service."

"Yes, yes, but why did you join the Wrens in the first place? You were engaged to be married. You were in love with Rowley Cloade. You could have worked, could you not, as a land girl, here in Warmsley Vale?"

"I could have, I suppose, but I wanted—"

"You wanted to get away. You wanted to go abroad, to see life. You wanted, perhaps, to get away from Rowley Cloade…And now you are restless, you still want—to get away! Oh, no, Mademoiselle, people do not change!"

"When I was out East, I longed for home," Lynn cried defensively.

"Yes, yes, where you are not, there you will want to be! That will always be so, perhaps, with you. You make a picture to yourself, you see, a picture of Lynn Marchmont coming home…But the picture does not come true, because the Lynn Marchmont whom you imagine is not the real Lynn Marchmont. She is the Lynn Marchmont you would like to be."

Lynn asked bitterly:

"So, according to you, I shall never be satisfied anywhere?"

"I do not say that. But I do say that, when you went away, you were dissatisfied with your engagement, and that now you have come back, you are still dissatisfied with your engagement."

Lynn broke off a leaf and chewed it meditatively.

"You're rather a devil at knowing things, aren't you, M. Poirot?"

"It is my métier," said Poirot modestly. "There is a further truth, I think, that you have not yet recognized."

Lynn said sharply:

"You mean David, don't you? You think I am in love with David?"

"That is for you to say," murmured Poirot discreetly.

"And I—don't know! There's something in David that I'm afraid of—but there's something that draws me, too…" She was silent a moment and then went on: "I was talking yesterday to his Brigadier. He came down here when he heard David was arrested to see what he could do. He's been telling me about David, how incredibly daring he was. He said David was one of the bravest people he'd ever had under him. And yet, you know, M. Poirot, in spite of all he said and his praise, I had the feeling that he wasn't sure, not absolutely sure that David hadn't done this!"

"And are you not sure, either?"

Lynn gave a crooked, rather pathetic smile.

"No—you see, I've never trusted David. Can you love someone you don't trust?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I've always been unfair to David—because I didn't trust him. I've believed quite a lot of the beastly local gossip—hints that David wasn't David Hunter at all—but just a boy friend of Rosaleen's. I was ashamed when I met the Brigadier and he talked to me about having known David as a boy in Ireland."

"C'est épatant," murmured Poirot, "how people can get hold of the wrong end of a stick!"

"What do you mean?"

“Just what I say. Tell me, did Mrs. Cloade—the doctor’s wife, I mean—did she ring up on the night of the murder?”

“Aunt Kathie? Yes, she did.”

“What about?”

“Some incredible muddle she had got into over some accounts.”

“Did she speak from her own house?”

“Why no, actually her telephone was out of order. She had to go out to a call box.”

“At ten minutes past ten?”

“Thereabouts. Our clocks never keep particularly good time.”

“Thereabouts,” said Poirot thoughtfully. He went on delicately:

“That was not the only telephone call you had that evening?”

“No.” Lynn spoke shortly.

“David Hunter rang you up from London?”

“Yes.” She flared out suddenly, “I suppose you want to know what he said?”

“Oh, indeed I should not presume—”

“You’re welcome to know! He said he was going away—clearing out of my life. He said he was no good to me and that he never would run straight—not even for my sake.”

“And since that was probably true you did not like it,” said Poirot.

“I hope he will go away—that is, if he gets acquitted all right…I hope they’ll both go away to America or somewhere. Then, perhaps, we shall be able to stop thinking about them—we'll learn to stand on our own feet. We'll stop feeling ill will."

"Ill will?"

"Yes. I felt it first one night at Aunt Kathie's. She gave a sort of party. Perhaps it was because I was just back from abroad and rather on edge—but I seemed to feel it in the air eddying all round us. Ill will to her—to Rosaleen. Don't you see, we were wishing her dead—all of us! Wishing her dead…And that's awful, to wish that someone who's never done you any harm—may die—"

"Her death, of course, is the only thing that can do you any practical good." Poirot spoke in a brisk and practical tone.

"You mean do us good financially? Her mere being here has done us harm in all the ways that matter! Envying a person, resenting them, cadging off them—it isn't good for one. Now, there she is, at Furrowbank, all alone. She looks like a ghost—she looks scared to death—she looks—oh! she looks as though she's going off her head. And she won't let us help! Not one of us. We've all tried. Mums asked her to come and stay with us, Aunt Frances asked her there. Even Aunt Kathie went along and offered to be with her at Furrowbank. But she won't have anything to do with us now and I don't blame her. She wouldn't even see Brigadier Conroy. I think she's ill, ill with worry and fright and misery. And we're doing nothing about it because she won't let us."

"Have you tried? You, yourself?"

"Yes," said Lynn. "I went up there yesterday. I said, was there anything I could do? She looked at me—" Suddenly she broke off and shivered. "I think she hates me. She said, 'You, least of all.' David told her, I think, to stop on at Furrowbank, and she always does what David tells her. Rowley took her up eggs and butter from Long Willows. I think he's the only one of us she likes. She thanked him and said he'd always been kind. Rowley, of course, is kind."

“There are people,” said Poirot, “for whom one has great sympathy—great pity, people who have too heavy a burden to bear. For Rosaleen Cloade I have great pity. If I could, I would help her. Even now, if she would listen—”

With sudden resolution he got to his feet.

“Come, Mademoiselle,” he said, “let us go up to Furrowbank.”

“You want me to come with you?”

“If you are prepared to be generous and understanding—”

Lynn cried:

“I am—indeed I am—”

Thirteen

It took them only about five minutes to reach Furrowbank. The drive wound up an incline through carefully massed banks of rhododendrons. No trouble or expense had been spared by Gordon Cloade to make Furrowbank a showplace.

The parlourmaid who answered the front door looked surprised to see them and a little doubtful as to whether they could see Mrs. Cloade. Madam, she said, wasn't up yet. However, she ushered them into the drawing room and went upstairs with Poirot's message.

Poirot looked round him. He was contrasting this room with Frances Cloade's drawing room—the latter such an intimate room, so characteristic of its mistress. The drawing room at Furrowbank was strictly impersonal—speaking only of wealth tempered by good taste. Gordon Cloade had seen to the latter—everything in the room was of good quality and of artistic merit, but there was no sign of any selectiveness, no clue to the personal tastes of the room's mistress. Rosaleen, it seemed, had not stamped upon the place any individuality of her own.

She had lived in Furrowbank as a foreign visitor might live at the Ritz or at the Savoy.

"I wonder," thought Poirot, "if the other—"

Lynn broke the chain of his thought by asking him of what he was thinking, and why he looked so grim.

"The wages of sin, Mademoiselle, are said to be death. But sometimes the wages of sin seem to be luxury. Is that any more endurable, I wonder? To be cut off from one's own home life. To catch, perhaps, a single glimpse of it when the way back to it is barred—"

He broke off. The parlourmaid, her superior manner laid aside, a mere frightened middle-aged woman, came running into the room, stammering and choking with words she could hardly get out.

“Oh Miss Marchmont! Oh, sir, the mistress—upstairs—she’s very bad—she doesn’t speak and I can’t rouse her and her hand’s so cold.”

Sharply, Poirot turned and ran out of the room. Lynn and the maid came behind him. He raced up to the first floor. The parlourmaid indicated the open door facing the head of the stairs.

It was a large beautiful bedroom, the sun pouring in through the open windows on to pale beautiful rugs.

In the big carved bedstead Rosaleen was lying—apparently asleep. Her long dark lashes lay on her cheeks, her head turned naturally into the pillow. There was a crumpled-up handkerchief in one hand. She looked like a sad child who had cried itself to sleep.

Poirot picked up her hand and felt for the pulse. The hand was ice-cold and told him what he already guessed.

He said quietly to Lynn:

“She has been dead some time. She died in her sleep.”

“Oh, sir—oh—what shall we do?” The parlourmaid burst out crying.

“Who was her doctor?”

“Uncle Lionel,” said Lynn.

Poirot said to the parlourmaid: “Go and telephone to Dr. Cloade.” She went out of the room, still sobbing. Poirot moved here and there about the room. A small white cardboard box beside the bed bore a label, “One powder to be taken at bedtime.” Using his handkerchief, he pushed the box open. There were three powders left. He moved across to the mantelpiece, then to the writing-table. The chair in front of it was pushed aside, the blotter was open. A sheet of paper was there, with words scrawled in an unformed childish hand.

"I don't know what to do…I can't go on…I've been so wicked. I must tell someone and get peace…I didn't mean to be so wicked to begin with. I didn't know all that was going to come of it. I must write down—"

The words sprawled off in a dash. The pen lay where it had been flung down. Poirot stood looking down at those written words. Lynn still stood by the bed looking down at the dead girl.

Then the door was pushed violently open and David Hunter strode breathlessly into the room.

"David," Lynn started forward. "Have they released you? I'm so glad—"

He brushed her words aside, as he brushed her aside, thrusting her almost roughly out of the way as he bent over the still white figure.

"Rosa! Rosaleen…" He touched her hand, then he swung round on Lynn, his face blazing with anger. His words came high and deliberate!

"So you've killed her, have you? You've got rid of her at last! You got rid of me, sent me to gaol on a trumped-up charge, and then, amongst you all, you put her out of the way! All of you? Or just one of you? I don't care which it is! You killed her! You wanted the damned money—now you've got it! Her death gives it to you! You'll all be out of Queer Street now. You'll all be rich—a lot of dirty murdering thieves, that's what you are! You weren't able to touch her so long as I was by. I knew how to protect my sister—she was never one to be able to protect herself. But when she was alone here, you saw your chance and you took it." He paused, swayed slightly, and said in a low quivering voice, "Murderers."

Lynn cried out:

"No, David. No, you're wrong. None of us would kill her. We wouldn't do such a thing."

"One of you killed her, Lynn Marchmont. And you know that as well as I do!"

"I swear we didn't, David. I swear we did nothing of the kind."

The wildness of his gaze softened a little.

"Maybe it wasn't you, Lynn—"

"It wasn't, David, I swear it wasn't—"

Hercule Poirot moved forward a step and coughed. David swung round on him.

"I think," said Poirot, "that your assumptions are a little overdramatic. Why jump to the conclusion that your sister was murdered?"

"You say she wasn't murdered? Do you call this"—he indicated the figure on the bed—"a natural death? Rosaleen suffered from nerves, yes, but she had no organic weakness. Her heart was sound enough."

"Last night," said Poirot, "before she went to bed, she sat writing here—"

David strode past him, bent over the sheet of paper.

"Do not touch it," Poirot warned him.

David drew back his hand, and read the words as he stood motionless.

He turned his head sharply and looked searchingly at Poirot.

"Are you suggesting suicide? Why should Rosaleen commit suicide?"

The voice that answered the question was not Poirot's. Superintendent Spence's quiet Oastshire voice spoke from the open doorway:

"Supposing that last Tuesday night Mrs. Cloade wasn't in London, but in Warmsley Vale? Suppose she went to see the man who had been blackmailing her? Suppose that in a nervous frenzy she killed him?"

David swung round on him. His eyes were hard and angry.

“My sister was in London on Tuesday night. She was there in the flat when I got in at eleven o’clock.”

“Yes,” said Spence, “that’s your story, Mr. Hunter. And I dare say you’ll stick to it. But I’m not obliged to believe that story. And in any case, isn’t it a little late”—he gestured towards the bed—“the case will never come to court now.”

Fourteen

“He won’t admit it,” said Spence. “But I think he knows she did it.” Sitting in his room at the police station he looked across the table at Poirot. “Funny how it was his alibi we were so careful about checking. We never gave much thought to hers. And yet there’s no corroboration at all for her being in the flat in London that night. We’ve only got his word that she was there. We knew all along that only two people had a motive for doing away with Arden—David Hunter and Rosaleen Cloade. I went bald-headed for him and passed her by. Fact is, she seemed such a gentle thing—even a bit half-witted—but I dare say that partly explains it. Very likely David Hunter hustled her up to London for just that reason. He may have realized that she’d lose her head, and he may have known that she’s the kind who gets dangerous when they panic. Another funny thing: I’ve often seen her going about in an orange linen frock—it was a favourite colour of hers. Orange scarves—a striped orange frock, an orange beret. And yet, even when old Mrs. Leadbetter described a young woman with her head tied up in an orange scarf I still didn’t tumble to it that it must have been Mrs. Gordon herself. I still think the girl wasn’t quite all there—wasn’t wholly responsible. The way you describe her as haunting the R.C. church here sounds as though she was half off her head with remorse and a sense of guilt.”

“She had a sense of guilt, yes,” said Poirot.

Spence said thoughtfully, “She must have attacked Arden in a kind of frenzy. I don’t suppose he had the least idea of what was coming to him. He wouldn’t be on his guard with a slip of a girl like that.” He ruminated for a moment or two in silence, then he remarked, “There’s still one thing I’m not quite clear about. Who got at Porter? You say it wasn’t Mrs. Jeremy? Bet you it was all the same!”

“No,” said Poirot. “It was not Mrs. Jeremy. She assured me of that and I believe her. I have been stupid over that. I should have known who it was. Major Porter himself told me.”

“He told you?”

“Oh, indirectly, of course. He did not know that he had done so.”

“Well, who was it?”

Poirot put his head a little on one side.

“Is it permitted, first, that I ask you two questions?”

The Superintendent looked surprised.

“Ask anything you like.”

“Those sleeping powders in a box by Rosaleen Cloade’s bed. What were they?”

The Superintendent looked more surprised.

“Those? Oh, they were quite harmless. Bromide. Soothing to the nerves. She took one every night. We analysed them, of course. They were quite all right.”

“Who prescribed them?”

“Dr. Cloade.”

“When did he prescribe them?”

“Oh, some time ago.”

“What poison was it that killed her?”

“Well, we haven’t actually got the report yet, but I don’t think there’s much doubt about it. Morphia and a pretty hefty dose of it.”

“Was any morphia found in her possession?”

Spence looked curiously at the other man.

“No. What are you getting at, M. Poirot?”

“I will pass now to my second question,” said Poirot evasively. “David Hunter put through a call from London to Lynn Marchmont at 11:5 on that Tuesday night. You say you checked up on calls. That was the only outgoing call from the flat in Shepherd’s Court. Were there any incoming calls?”

“One. At 10:15. Also from Warmsley Vale. It was put through from a public call box.”

“I see.” Poirot was silent for a moment or two.

“What’s the big idea, M. Poirot?”

“That call was answered? The operator, I mean, got a response from the London number.”

“I see what you mean,” said Spence slowly. “There must have been someone in the flat. It couldn’t be David Hunter—he was in the train on his way back. It looks, then, as if it must have been Rosaleen Cloade. And if so, Rosaleen Cloade couldn’t have been at the Stag a few minutes earlier. What you’re getting at, M. Poirot, is that the woman in the orange scarf, wasn’t Rosaleen Cloade. And if so, it wasn’t Rosaleen Cloade who killed Arden. But then why did she commit suicide?”

“The answer to that,” said Poirot, “is very simple. She did not commit suicide. Rosaleen Cloade was killed!”

“What?”

“She was deliberately and cold-bloodedly murdered.”

“But who killed Arden? We’ve eliminated David—”

“It was not David.”

“And now you eliminate Rosaleen? But dash it all, those two were the only ones with a shadow of a motive!”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “Motive. It was that which has led us astray. If A has a motive for killing C and B has a motive for killing D—well, it does not seem to make sense, does it, that A should kill D and B should kill C?”

Spence groaned. “Go easy, M. Poirot, go easy. I don’t even begin to understand what you are talking about with your A’s and B’s and C’s.”

“It is complicated,” said Poirot, “it is very complicated. Because, you see, you have here two different kinds of crime—and consequently you have, you must have, two different murderers. Enter First Murderer, and enter Second Murderer.”

“Don’t quote Shakespeare,” groaned Spence. “This isn’t Elizabethan Drama.”

“But yes, it is very Shakespearean—there are here all the emotions—the human emotions—in which Shakespeare would have revelled—the jealousies, the hates—the swift passionate actions. And here, too, is successful opportunism. ‘There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at its flood leads on to fortune…’ Someone acted on that, Superintendent. To seize opportunity and turn it to one’s own ends—that has been triumphantly accomplished—under your nose so to speak!”

Spence rubbed his nose irritably.

“Talk sense, M. Poirot,” he pleaded. “If it’s possible, just say what you mean.”

“I will be very clear—clear as crystal. We have here, have we not, three deaths? You agree to that, do you not? Three people are dead.”

Spence looked at him curiously.

“I should certainly say so…You’re not going to make me believe that one of the three is still alive?”

“No, no,” said Poirot. “They are dead. But how did they die? How, that is to say, would you classify their deaths?”

"Well, as to that, M. Poirot, you know my views. One murder, and two suicides. But according to you the last suicide isn't a suicide. It's another murder."

"According to me," said Poirot, "there has been one suicide, one accident and one murder."

"Accident? Do you mean Mrs. Cloade poisoned herself by accident? Or do you mean Major Porter's shooting himself was an accident?"

"No," said Poirot. "The accident was the death of Charles Trenton—otherwise Enoch Arden."

"Accident!" The Superintendent exploded. "Accident? You say that a particularly brutal murder, where a man's head is stove in by repeated blows, is an accident!"

Quite unmoved by the Superintendent's vigour, Poirot replied calmly:

"When I say an accident, I mean that there was no intent to kill."

"No intent to kill—when a man's head is battered in! Do you mean that he was attacked by a lunatic?"

"I think that that is very near the truth—though not quite in the sense you mean it."

"Mrs. Gordon was the only batty woman in this case. I've seen her looking very queer sometimes. Of course, Mrs. Lionel Cloade is a bit bats in the belfry—but she'd never be violent. Mrs. Jeremy has got her head screwed on the right way if any one has. By the way, you say that it was not Mrs. Jeremy who bribed Porter?"

"No. I know who it was. As I say, it was Porter himself who gave it away. One simple little remark—ah, I could kick myself, as you say, all round the town, for not noticing it at the time."

"And then your anonymous A B C lunatic murdered Rosaleen Cloade?" Spence's voice was more and more sceptical.

Poirot shook his head vigorously.

“By no means. This is where the First Murderer exits and Second Murderer enters. Quite a different type of crime this, no heat, and no passion. Cold deliberate murder and I intend Superintendent Spence, to see that her murderer is hanged for that murder.”

He got up as he spoke and moved towards the door.

“Hi!” cried Spence. “You’ve got to give me a few names. You can’t leave it like this.”

“In a very little while—yes, I will tell you. But there is something for which I wait—to be exact, a letter from across the sea.”

“Don’t talk like a ruddy fortune-teller! Hi—Poirot.”

But Poirot had slipped away.

He went straight across the square and rang the bell of Dr. Cloade’s house. Mrs. Cloade came to the door and gave her usual gasp at seeing Poirot. He wasted no time.

“Madame, I must speak to you.”

“Oh, of course—do come in—I’m afraid I haven’t had much time to dust, but—”

“I want to ask you something. How long has your husband been a morphia addict?”

Aunt Kathie immediately burst into tears.

“Oh dear, oh dear—I did so hope nobody would ever know—it began in the war. He was so dreadfully overtired and had such dreadful neuralgia. And since then he’s been trying to lessen the dose—he has indeed. But that’s what makes him so dreadfully irritable sometimes—”

“That is one of the reasons why he has needed money, is it not?”

“I suppose so. Oh, dear, M. Poirot. He has promised to go for a cure—”

“Calm yourself, Madame, and answer me one more little question. On the night when you telephoned to Lynn Marchmont, you went out to the call box outside the post office, did you not? Did you meet anybody in the square that night?”

“Oh, no, M. Poirot, not a soul.”

“But I understood you had to borrow twopence because you had only halfpennies.”

“Oh, yes. I had to ask a woman who came out of the box. She gave me two pennies for one halfpenny—”

“What did she look like, this woman?”

“Well, rather actressy, if you know what I mean. An orange scarf round her head. The funny thing was that I’m almost sure I’d met her somewhere. Her face seemed very familiar. She must, I think, have been someone who had passed over. And yet, you know, I couldn’t remember where and how I had known her.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cloade,” said Hercule Poirot.

Fifteen

Lynn came out of the house and glanced up at the sky.

The sun was getting low, there was no red in the sky but a rather unnatural glow of light. A still evening with a breathless feel about it. There would be, she thought, a storm later.

Well, the time had come now. She couldn't put things off any longer. She must go to Long Willows and tell Rowley. She owed him that at least—to tell him herself. Not to choose the easy way of the written word.

Her mind was made up—quite made up—she told herself and yet she felt a curious reluctance. She looked round her and thought: "It's goodbye to all this—to my own world—my own way of life."

For she had no illusions. Life with David was a gamble—an adventure that was as likely to turn out badly as to turn out well. He himself had warned her….

The night of the murder, over the telephone.

And now, a few hours ago, he had said:

"I meant to go out of your life. I was a fool—to think I could leave you behind me. We'll go to London and be married by special licence—oh, yes, I'm not going to give you the chance of shilly-shallying about. You've got roots here, roots that hold you down. I've got to pull you up by the roots." He had added: "We'll break it to Rowley when you're actually Mrs. David Hunter. Poor devil, it's the best way to break it to him."

But to that she did not agree, though she had not said so at the time. No, she must tell Rowley herself.

It was to Rowley she was going now!

The storm was just starting as Lynn tapped at the door of Long Willows. Rowley opened it and looked astonished to see her.

“Hallo, Lynn, why didn’t you ring up and say you were coming? I might have been out.”

“I want to talk to you, Rowley.”

He stood aside to let her pass and followed her into the big kitchen. The remains of his supper were on the table.

“I’m planning to get an Aga or an Esse put in here,” he said. “Easier for you. And a new sink—steel—”

She interrupted. “Don’t make plans, Rowley.”

“You mean because that poor kid isn’t buried yet? I suppose it does seem rather heartless. But she never struck me as a particularly happy person. Sickly, I suppose. Never got over that damned air raid. Anyway, there it is. She’s dead and in her grave and oh the difference to me—or rather to us—”

Lynn caught her breath.

“No, Rowley. There isn’t any ‘us.’ That’s what I came to tell you.”

He stared at her. She said quietly, hating herself, but steadfast in her purpose:

“I’m going to marry David Hunter, Rowley.”

She did not know quite what she expected—protests, perhaps an angry outburst—but she certainly did not expect Rowley to take it as he did.

He stared at her for a minute or two, then he went across and poked at the stove, turning at last in an almost absentminded manner.

“Well,” he said, “let’s get it clear. You’re going to marry David Hunter. Why?”

“Because I love him.”

“You love me.”

“No. I did love you—when I went away. But it’s been four years and I’ve—I’ve changed. We’ve both changed.”

“You’re wrong…” he said quietly. “I haven’t changed.”

“Well, perhaps you haven’t changed so much.”

“I haven’t changed at all. I haven’t had much chance to change. I’ve just gone plodding on here. I haven’t dropped from parachutes or swarmed up cliffs by night or wound an arm round a man in the darkness and stabbed him—”

“Rowley—”

“I haven’t been to the war. I haven’t fought. I don’t know what war is! I’ve led a nice safe life here, down on the farm. Lucky Rowley! But as a husband, you’d be ashamed of me!”

“No, Rowley—oh, no! It isn’t that at all.”

“But I tell you it is!” He came nearer to her. The blood was welling up in his neck, the veins of his forehead were starting out. That look in his eyes—she had seen it once as she passed a bull in a field. Tossing its head, stamping its foot, slowly lowering its head with the great horns. Goaded to a dull fury, a blind rage….

“Be quiet, Lynn, you’ll listen to me for a change. I’ve missed what I ought to have had. I’ve missed my chance of fighting for my country. I’ve seen my best friend go and be killed. I’ve seen my girl—my girl—dress up in uniform and go overseas. I’ve been Just the Man She Left Behind Her. My life’s been hell—don’t you understand, Lynn? It’s been hell. And then you came back—and since then it’s been worse hell. Ever since that night at Aunt Kathie’s when I saw you looking at David Hunter across the table. But he’s not going to have you, do you hear? If you’re not for me, then no one shall have you. What do you think I am?”

“Rowley—”

She had risen, was retreating a step at a time. She was terrified. This man was not a man any longer, he was a brute beast.

“I’ve killed two people,” said Rowley Cloade. “Do you think I shall stick at killing a third?”

“Rowley—”

He was upon her now, his hands round her throat….

“I can’t bear any more, Lynn—”

The hands tightened round her neck, the room whirled, blackness, spinning blackness, suffocation—everything going dark….

And then, suddenly a cough. A prim, slightly artificial cough.

Rowley paused, his hands relaxed, fell to his sides. Lynn, released, sank in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Just inside the door, Hercule Poirot stood apologetically coughing.

“I hope,” he said, “that I do not intrude? I knocked. Yes, indeed, I knocked, but no one answered…I suppose you were busy?”

For a moment the air was tense, electric. Rowley stared. It looked for a moment as though he might fling himself on Hercule Poirot, but finally he turned away. He said in a flat empty voice:

“You turned up—just in the nick of time.”

Sixteen

Into an atmosphere quivering with danger Hercule Poirot brought his own atmosphere of deliberate anticlimax.

“The kettle, it is boiling?” he inquired.

Rowley said heavily—stupidly—“Yes, it’s boiling.”

“Then you will, perhaps, make some coffee? Or some tea if it is easier.”

Like an automaton Rowley obeyed.

Hercule Poirot took a large clean handkerchief from his pocket; he soaked it in cold water, wrung it out and came to Lynn.

“There, Mademoiselle, if you fasten that round your throat—so. Yes, I have the safety pin. There, that will at once ease the pain.”

Croaking hoarsely, Lynn thanked him. The kitchen of Long Willows, Poirot fussing about—it all had for her the quality of a nightmare. She felt horribly ill, and her throat was paining her badly. She staggered to her feet and Poirot guided her gently to a chair and put her into it.

“There,” he said, and over his shoulder:

“The coffee?” he demanded.

“It’s ready,” said Rowley.

He brought it. Poirot poured out a cup and took it to Lynn.

“Look here,” said Rowley, “I don’t think you understand. I tried to strangle Lynn.”

“Tscha, tscha,” said Poirot in a vexed voice. He seemed to be deploring a lapse of bad taste on Rowley’s part.

“Two deaths I’ve got on my conscience,” said Rowley. “Hers would have been the third—if you hadn’t arrived.”

“Let us drink up our coffee,” said Poirot, “and not talk of deaths. It is not agreeable for Mademoiselle Lynn.”

“My God!” said Rowley. He stared at Poirot.

Lynn sipped her coffee with difficulty. It was hot and strong. Presently she felt her throat less painful, and the stimulant began to act.

“There, that is better, yes?” said Poirot.

She nodded.

“Now we can talk,” said Poirot. “When I say that, I mean, really, that I shall talk.”

“How much do you know?” said Rowley heavily. “Do you know that I killed Charles Trenton?”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “I have known that for some time.”

The door burst open. It was David Hunter.

“Lynn,” he cried. “You never told me—”

He stopped, puzzled, his eyes going from one to the other.

“What’s the matter with your throat?”

“Another cup,” said Poirot. Rowley took one from the dresser. Poirot received it, filled it with coffee and handed it to David. Once more, Poirot dominated the situation.

“Sit down,” he said to David. “We will sit here and drink coffee, and you shall all three listen to Hercule Poirot while he gives you a lecture on crime.”

He looked round on them and nodded his head.

Lynn thought:

“This is some fantastic nightmare. It isn’t real!”

They were all, it seemed, under the sway of this absurd little man with the big moustaches. They sat there, obediently—Rowley the killer; she, his victim; David, the man who loved her—all holding cups of coffee, listening to this little man who in some strange way dominated them all.

“What causes crime?” Hercule Poirot demanded rhetorically. “It is a question, that. What stimulus is needed? What inbred predisposition does there have to be? Is every one capable of crime—of some crime? And what happens—that is what I have asked myself from the beginning, what happens when people who have been protected from real life—from its assaults and ravages—are suddenly deprived of that protection?”

“I am speaking, you see, of the Cloades. There is only one Cloade here, and so I can speak very freely. From the beginning the problem has fascinated me. Here is a whole family who circumstances have prevented from ever having to stand on their own feet. Though each one of the family had a life of his or her own, a profession, yet really they have never escaped from the shadow of a beneficent protection. They have had, always, freedom from fear. They have lived in security—and a security which was unnatural and artificial. Gordon Cloade was always there behind them.

“What I say to you is this, there is no telling what a human character is, until the test comes. To most of us the test comes early in life. A man is confronted quite soon with the necessity to stand on his own feet, to face dangers and difficulties and to take his own line of dealing with them. It may be the straight way, it may be the crooked way—whichever it is, a man usually learns early just what he is made of.

“But the Cloades had no opportunity of knowing their own weaknesses until the time when they were suddenly shorn of protection and were forced, quite unprepared, to face difficulty. One thing, and one thing only, stood between them and the resumption of security, the life of Rosaleen

Cloade. I am quite certain in my own mind that every single one of the Cloades thought at one time or another, ‘If Rosaleen was to die—’”

Lynn shivered. Poirot paused, letting the words sink in, then went on:

“The thought of death, her death, passed through every mind—of that I am certain. Did the further thought of murder pass through also? And did the thought, in one particular instance, go beyond thinking and become action.”

Without a change of voice he turned to Rowley:

“Did you think of killing her?”

“Yes,” said Rowley. “It was the day she came to the farm. There was no one else there. I thought then—I could kill her quite easily. She looked pathetic—and very pretty—like the calves I’d sent to market. You can see how pathetic they are—but you send them off just the same. I wondered, really, that she wasn’t afraid…She would have been, if she’d known what was in my mind…Yes, it was in my mind when I took the lighter from her to light her cigarette.”

“She left it behind, I suppose. That’s how you got hold of it.”

Rowley nodded.

“I don’t know why I didn’t kill her,” he said wonderingly. “I thought of it. One could have faked it up as an accident, or something.”

“It was not your type of crime,” said Poirot. “That is the answer. The man you did kill, you killed in a rage—and you did not really mean to kill him, I fancy?”

“Good Lord, no. I hit him on the jaw. He went over backwards and hit his head on that marble fender. I couldn’t believe it when I found he was dead.”

Then suddenly he shot a startled glance at Poirot:

“How did you know that?”

"I think," said Poirot, "that I have reconstructed your actions fairly accurately. You shall tell me if I am wrong. You went to the Stag, did you not, and Beatrice Lippincott told you about the conversation she had overheard? Thereupon you went, as you have said, to your uncle's, Jeremy Cloade, to get his opinion as a solicitor upon the position. Now something happened there, something that made you change your mind about consulting him. I think I know what that something was. You saw a photograph—"

Rowley nodded.

"Yes, it was on the desk. I suddenly realized the likeness. I realized too why the fellow's face had seemed so familiar. I tumbled to it that Jeremy and Frances were getting some relation of hers to put up a stunt and get money out of Rosaleen. It made me see red. I went headlong back to the Stag and up to No. 5 and accused the fellow of being a fraud. He laughed and admitted it—said David Hunter was going to come across all right with the money that very evening. I just saw red when I realized that my own family was, as I saw it, double-crossing me. I called him a swine and hit him. He went down as I said."

There was a pause. Poirot said: "And then?"

"It was the lighter," said Rowley slowly. "It fell out of my pocket. I'd been carrying it about meaning to give it back to Rosaleen when I saw her. It fell down on the body, and I saw the initials, D.H. It was David's, not hers.

"Ever since that party at Aunt Kathie's I'd realized—well, never mind all that. I've sometimes thought I'm going mad—perhaps I am a bit mad. First Johnnie going—and then the war—I—I can't talk about things but sometimes I'd feel blind with rage—and now Lynn—and this fellow. I dragged the dead man into the middle of the room and turned him over on his face. Then I picked up those heavy steel tongs—well, I won't go into details. I wiped off fingerprints, cleaned up the marble curb—then I deliberately put the hands of the wristwatch at ten minutes past nine and smashed it. I took away his ration book and his papers—I thought his identity might be traced through them. Then I got out. It seemed to me that with Beatrice’s story of what she’d overheard, David would be for it all right.”

“And then,” said Poirot, “you came to me. It was a pretty little comedy that you played there, was it not, asking me to produce some witnesses that knew Underhay? It was already clear to me that Jeremy Cloade had repeated to his family the story that Major Porter had told. For nearly two years all the family had cherished a secret hope that Underhay might turn up. That wish influenced Mrs. Lionel Cloade in her manipulation of the Ouija board—unconsciously, but it was a very revealing accident.

“Eh bien, I perform my ‘conjuring trick.’ I flatter myself that I impress you and really it is I who am the complete mug. Yes and there in Major Porter’s room, he says, after he offers me a cigarette, he says to you, ‘You don’t, do you?’

“How did he know that you did not smoke? He is supposed only that moment to have met you. Imbecile that I am, I should have seen the truth then—that already you and Major Porter, you had made your little arrangement together! No wonder he was nervous that morning. Yes, I am to be the mug, I am to bring Major Porter down to identify the body. But I do not go on being the mug for ever—no, I am not the mug now, am I?”

He looked round angrily and then went on:

“But then, Major Porter went back on that arrangement. He does not care to be a witness upon oath in a murder trial, and the strength of the case against David Hunter depends very largely upon the identity of the dead man. So Major Porter backs out.”

“He wrote to me he wouldn’t go through with it,” said Rowley thickly. “The damned fool. Didn’t he see we’d gone too far to stop? I came up to try to drive some sense into him. I was too late. He’d said he’d rather shoot himself than perjure himself when it was a question of murder. The front door wasn’t locked—I went up and found him.

“I can’t tell you what I felt like. It was as though I was a murderer twice over. If only he’d waited—if he’d only let me talk to him.”

“There was a note there?” Poirot asked. “You took it away?”

“Yes—I was in for things now. Might as well go the whole hog. The note was to the coroner. It simply said that he’d given perjured evidence at the inquest. The dead man was not Robert Underhay. I took the note away and destroyed it.”

Rowley struck his fist on the table. “It was like a bad dream—a horrible nightmare! I’d begun this thing and I’d got to go on with it. I wanted the money to get Lynn—and I wanted Hunter to hang. And then—I couldn’t understand it—the case against him broke down. Some story about a woman—a woman who was with Arden later. I couldn’t understand, I still can’t understand. What woman? How could a woman be in there talking to Arden after he was dead?”

“There was no woman,” said Poirot.

“But, M. Poirot,” Lynn croaked. “That old lady. She saw her. She heard her.”

“Aha,” said Poirot. “But what did she see? And what did she hear? She saw someone in trousers, with a light tweed coat. She saw a head completely enveloped in an orange scarf arranged turban-wise and a face covered with makeup and a lipsticked mouth. She saw that in a dim light. And what did she hear? She saw the ‘hussy’ draw back into No. 5 and from within the room she heard a man’s voice saying, ‘Get out of here, my girl.’ Eh bien, it was a man she saw and a man she heard! But it was a very ingenious idea, Mr. Hunter,” Poirot added, turning placidly to David.

“What do you mean?” David asked sharply.

“It is now to you that I will tell a story. You come along to the Stag at nine o’clock or thereabouts. You come not to murder, but to pay. What do you find? You find the man who had been blackmailing you lying on the floor, murdered in a particularly brutal manner. You can think fast, Mr. Hunter, and you realize at once that you are in imminent danger. You have not been seen entering the Stag by any one as far as you know and your first idea is to clear out as soon as possible, catch the 9:20 train back to London and swear hard that you have not been near Warmsley Vale. To catch the train your only chance is to run across country. In doing so you run unexpectedly into Miss Marchmont and you also realize that you cannot catch the train. You see the smoke of it in the valley. She too, although you do not know it, has seen the smoke, but she has not consciously realized that it indicates that you cannot catch the train, and when you tell her that the time is nine-fifteen she accepts your statement without any doubt.

“To impress on her mind that you do catch the train, you invent a very ingenious scheme. In fact, you now have to plan an entirely new scheme to divert suspicion from yourself.

“You go back to Furrowbank, letting yourself in quietly with your key and you help yourself to a scarf of your sister’s, you take one of her lipsticks, and you also proceed to make up your face in a highly theatrical manner.

“You return to the Stag at a suitable time, impress your personality on the old lady who sits in the Residents Only room and whose peculiarities are common gossip at the Stag. Then you go up to No. 5. When you hear her coming to bed, you come out into the passage, then withdraw hurriedly inside again, and proceed to say loudly, ‘You’d better get out of here, my girl.’”

Poirot paused.

“A very ingenious performance,” he observed.

“Is that true, David?” cried Lynn. “Is it true?”

David was grinning broadly.

“I think a good deal of myself as a female impersonator. Lord, you should have seen that old gorgon’s face!”

“But how could you be here at ten o’clock and yet telephone to me from London at eleven?” demanded Lynn perplexedly.

David Hunter bowed to Poirot.

"All explanations by Hercule Poirot," he remarked. "The man who knows everything. How did I do it?"

"Very simply," said Poirot. "You rang up your sister at the flat from the public call box and gave her certain precise instructions. At eleven-four exactly she put through a toll call to Warmsley Vale 34. When Miss Marchmont came to the phone the operator verified the number, then saying no doubt 'A call from London,' or 'Go ahead London,' something of that kind?"

Lynn nodded.

"Rosaleen Cloade then replaced the receiver. You," Poirot turned to David, "carefully noting the time, dialled 34, got it, pressed Button A, said 'London wants you' in a slightly disguised voice and then spoke. The lapse of a minute or two would be nothing strange in a telephone call these days, and would only strike Miss Marchmont as a reconnection."

Lynn said quietly:

"So that's why you rang me up, David?"

Something in her tone, quiet as it was, made David look at her sharply.

He turned to Poirot and made a gesture of surrender.

"No doubt about it. You do know everything! To tell the truth I was scared stiff. I had to think up something. After I'd rung Lynn, I walked five miles to Dasleby and went up to London by the early milk train. Slipped into the flat in time to rumple the bed and have breakfast with Rosaleen. It never entered my head that the police would think she'd done it.

"And of course I hadn't the remotest idea who had killed him! I simply couldn't imagine who could have wanted to kill him. Absolutely nobody had a motive as far as I could see, except for myself and Rosaleen."

"That," said Poirot, "has been the great difficulty. Motive. You and your sister had a motive for killing Arden. Every member of the Cloade family had a motive for killing Rosaleen.”

David said sharply:

“She was killed, then? It wasn’t suicide?”

“No. It was a carefully premeditated well-thought-out crime. Morphia was substituted for bromide in one of her sleeping-powders—one towards the bottom of the box.”

“In the powders.” David frowned. “You don’t mean—you can’t mean Lionel Cloade?”

“Oh, no,” said Poirot. “You see, practically any of the Cloades could have substituted the morphia. Aunt Kathie could have tampered with the powders before they left the surgery. Rowley here came up to Furrowbank with butter and eggs for Rosaleen. Mrs. Marchmont came there. So did Mrs. Jeremy Cloade. Even Lynn Marchmont came. And one and all they had a motive.”

“Lynn didn’t have a motive,” cried David.

“We all had motives,” said Lynn. “That’s what you mean?”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “That is what has made the case difficult. David Hunter and Rosaleen Cloade had a motive for killing Arden—but they did not kill him. All of you Cloades had a motive for killing Rosaleen Cloade and yet none of you killed her. This case is, always has been, the wrong way round. Rosaleen Cloade was killed by the person who had most to lose by her death.” He turned his head slightly. “You killed her, Mr. Hunter….”

“I?” David cried. “Why on earth should I kill my own sister?”

“You killed her because she wasn’t your sister. Rosaleen Cloade died by enemy action in London nearly two years ago. The woman you killed was a young Irish housemaid, Eileen Corrigan, whose photograph I received from Ireland today.”

He drew it from his pocket as he spoke. With lightning swiftness David snatched it from him, leapt to the door, jumped through it, and banging it behind him, was gone. With a roar of anger Rowley charged headlong after him.

Poirot and Lynn were left alone.

Lynn cried out, “It’s not true. It can’t be true.”

“Oh, yes, it is true. You saw half the truth once when you fancied David Hunter was not her brother. Put it the other way and it all falls into shape. This Rosaleen was a Catholic (Underhay’s wife was not a Catholic), troubled by conscience, wildly devoted to David. Imagine his feelings on that night of the Blitz, his sister dead, Gordon Cloade dying—all that new life of ease and money snatched away from him, and then he sees this girl, very much the same age, the only survivor except for himself, blasted and unconscious. Already no doubt he has made love to her and he has no doubt he can make her do what he wants.

“He had a way with woman,” Poirot added dryly, without looking at Lynn who flushed.

“He is an opportunist, he snatches his chance of fortune. He identifies her as his sister. She returns to consciousness to find him at her bedside. He persuades and cajoles her into accepting the role.

“But imagine their consternation when the first blackmailing letter arrives. All along I have said to myself, ‘Is Hunter really the type of man to let himself be blackmailed so easily?’ It seemed, too, that he was actually uncertain whether the man blackmailing him was Underhay or not. But how could he be uncertain? Rosaleen Cloade could tell him at once if the man were her husband or not. Why hurry her up to London before she has a chance to catch a glimpse of the man? Because—there could only be one reason—because he could not risk the man getting a glimpse of her. If the man was Underhay, he must not discover that Rosaleen Cloade was not Rosaleen Cloade at all. No, there was only one thing to be done. Pay up enough to keep the blackmailer quiet, and then—do a flit—go off to America.

"And then, unexpectedly, the blackmailing stranger is murdered—and Major Porter identifies him as Underhay. Never in his life has David Hunter been in a tighter place! Worse still, the girl herself is beginning to crack. Her conscience is becoming increasingly active. She is showing signs of mental breakdown. Sooner or later she will confess, give the whole thing away, render him liable to criminal prosecution. Moreover, he finds her demands on him increasingly irksome. He has fallen in love with you. So he decides to cut his losses. Eileen must die. He substitutes morphia for one of the powders prescribed for her by Dr. Cloade, urges her on to take them every night, suggests to her fears of the Cloade family. David Hunter will not be suspected since the death of his sister means that her money passes back to the Cloades.

"That was his trump card: lack of motive. As I told you—this case was always the wrong way round."

The door opened and Superintendent Spence came in.

Poirot said sharply, "Eh bien?"

Spence said, "It's all right. We've got him."

Lynn said in a low voice:

"Did he—say anything?"

"Said he'd had a good run for his money—"

"Funny," added the Superintendent, "how they always talk at the wrong moment…We cautioned him, of course. But he said, 'Cut it out, man. I'm a gambler—but I know when I've lost the last throw.'"

Poirot murmured:

"'There is a tide in the affairs of men

Which, taken at its flood, leads on to fortune….'

"Yes, the tide sweeps in—but it also ebbs—and may carry you out to sea."

Seventeen

It was a Sunday morning when Rowley Cloade, answering a knock at the farm door, found Lynn waiting outside.

He stepped back a pace.

“Lynn!”

“Can I come in, Rowley?”

He stood back a little. She passed him and went into the kitchen. She had been at church and was wearing a hat. Slowly, with an almost ritual air, she raised her hands, took off the hat and laid it down on the windowsill.

“I’ve come home, Rowley.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Just that. I’ve come home. This is home—here, with you. I’ve been a fool not to know it before—not to know journey’s end when I saw it. Don’t you understand, Rowley, I’ve come home!”

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Lynn. I—I tried to kill you.”

“I know.” Lynn gave a grimace and put her fingers gingerly to her throat. “Actually, it was just when I thought you had killed me, that I began to realize what a really thundering fool I’d been making of myself!”

“I don’t understand,” said Rowley.

“Oh, don’t be stupid. I always wanted to marry you, didn’t I? And then I got out of touch with you—you seemed to me so tame—so meek—I felt life would be so safe with you—so dull. I fell for David because he was dangerous and attractive—and, to be honest, because he knows women much too well. But none of that was real. When you caught hold of me by the throat and said if I wasn’t for you, no one should have me—well—I knew then that I was your woman! Unfortunately it seemed that I was going to know it—just too late…Luckily Hercule Poirot walked in and saved the situation. And I am your woman, Rowley!”

Rowley shook his head.

“It’s impossible, Lynn. I’ve killed two men—murdered them—”

“Rubbish,” cried Lynn. “Don’t be pigheaded and melodramatic. If you have a row with a hulking big man and hit him and he falls down and hits his head on a fender—that isn’t murder. It’s not even legally murder.”

“It’s manslaughter. You go to prison for it.”

“Possibly. If so, I shall be on the step when you come out.”

“And there’s Porter. I’m morally responsible for his death.”

“No, you’re not. He was a fully adult responsible man—he could have turned down your proposition. One can’t blame any one else for the things one decides to do with one’s eyes open. You suggested dishonesty to him, he accepted it and then repented and took a quick way out. He was just a weak character.”

Rowley shook his head obstinately.

“It’s no good, old girl. You can’t marry a gaolbird.”

“I don’t think you’re going to gaol. A policeman would have been round for you before now if so.”

Rowley stared.

“But damn it all, manslaughter—bribing Porter—”

“What makes you think the police know anything about all that or ever will?”

“That fellow Poirot knows.”

"He isn't the police. I'll tell you what the police think. They think David Hunter killed Arden as well as Rosaleen, now they know he was in Warmsley Vale that evening. They won't charge him with it because it isn't necessary—and besides, I believe you can't be arrested twice on the same charge. But as long as they think he did it, they won't look for any one else."

"But that chap Poirot—"

"He told the Superintendent it was an accident, and I gather the Superintendent just laughed at him. If you ask me I think Poirot will say nothing to any one. He's rather a dear—"

"No, Lynn. I can't let you risk it. Apart from anything else I—well, I mean, can I trust myself? What I mean is, it wouldn't be safe for you."

"Perhaps not…But you see, Rowley, I do love you—and you've had such a hell of a time—and I've never, really, cared very much for being safe—"

The Under Dog And Other Stories (1951)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE UNDER DOG

"The Under Dog" was first published in the USA in Mystery Magazine, 1 April 1926, then in London Magazine, October 1926.

Lily Margrave smoothed her gloves out on her knee with a nervous gesture, and darted a glance at the occupant of the big chair opposite her.

She had heard of M. Hercule Poirot, the well-known investigator, but this was the first time she had seen him in the flesh.

The comic, almost ridiculous, aspect that he presented disturbed her conception of him. Could this funny little man, with the egg-shaped head and the enormous moustaches, really do the wonderful things that were claimed for him? His occupation at the moment struck her as particularly childish. He was piling small blocks of coloured wood one upon the other, and seemed far more interested in the result than in the story she was telling.

At her sudden silence, however, he looked sharply across at her.

"Mademoiselle, continue, I pray of you. It is not that I do not attend; I attend very carefully, I assure you."

He began once more to pile the little blocks of wood one upon the other, while the girl's voice took up the tale again. It was a gruesome tale, a tale of violence and tragedy, but the voice was so calm and unemotional, the recital was so concise that something of the savour of humanity seemed to have been left out of it.

She stopped at last.

"I hope," she said anxiously, "that I have made everything clear."

Poirot nodded his head several times in emphatic assent. Then he swept his hand across the wooden blocks, scattering them over the table, and, leaning back in his chair, his fingertips pressed together and his eyes on the ceiling, he began to recapitulate.

"Sir Reuben Astwell was murdered ten days ago. On Wednesday, the day before yesterday, his nephew, Charles Leverson, was arrested by the police. The facts against him as far as you know are:—you will correct me if I am wrong, Mademoiselle—Sir Reuben was sitting up late writing in his own special sanctum, the Tower room. Mr. Leverson came in late, letting himself in with a latch-key. He was overheard quarrelling with his uncle by the butler, whose room is directly below the Tower room. The quarrel ended with a sudden thud as of a chair being thrown over and a half-smothered cry.

"The butler was alarmed, and thought of getting up to see what was the matter, but as a few seconds later he heard Mr. Leverson leave the room gaily whistling a tune, he thought nothing more of it. On the following morning, however, a housemaid discovered Sir Reuben dead by his desk. He had been struck down by some heavy instrument. The butler, I gather, did not at once tell his story to the police. That was natural, I think, eh, Mademoiselle?"

The sudden question made Lily Margrave start.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"One looks for humanity in these matters, does one not?" said the little man. "As you recited the story to me—so admirably, so concisely—you made of the actors in the drama machines—puppets. But me, I look always for human nature. I say to myself, this butler, this—what did you say his name was?"

"His name is Parsons."

"This Parsons, then, he will have the characteristics of his class, he will object very strongly to the police, he will tell them as little as possible. Above all, he will say nothing that might seem to incriminate a member of the household. A house-breaker, a burglar, he will cling to that idea with all the strength of extreme obstinacy. Yes, the loyalties of the servant class are an interesting study."

He leaned back beaming.

"In the meantime," he went on, "everyone in the household has told his or her tale, Mr. Leverson among the rest, and his tale was that he had come in late and gone up to bed without seeing his uncle."

"That is what he said."

"And no one saw reason to doubt that tale," mused Poirot, "except, of course, Parsons. Then there comes down an inspector from Scotland Yard, Inspector Miller you said, did you not? I know him, I have come across him once or twice in the past. He is what they call the sharp man, the ferret, the weasel.

"Yes, I know him! And the sharp Inspector Miller, he sees what the local inspector has not seen, that Parsons is ill at ease and uncomfortable, and knows something that he has not told. Eh bien, he makes short work of Parsons. By now it has been clearly proved that no one broke into the house that night, that the murderer must be looked for inside the house and not outside. And Parsons is unhappy and frightened, and feels very relieved to have his secret knowledge drawn out of him.

"He has done his best to avoid scandal, but there are limits; and so Inspector Miller listens to Parsons' story, and asks a question or two, and then makes some private investigations of his own. The case he builds up is very strong —very strong.

"Blood-stained fingers rested on the corner of the chest in the Tower room, and the fingerprints were those of Charles Leverson. The housemaid told him she emptied a basin of bloodstained water in Mr. Leverson's room the morning after the crime. He explained to her that he had cut his finger, and he had a little cut there, oh yes, but such a very little cut! The cuff of his evening shirt had been washed, but they found bloodstains in the sleeve of his coat. He was hard pressed for money, and he inherited money at Sir Reuben’s death. Oh, yes, a very strong case, Mademoiselle.” He paused.

“And yet you come to me today.”

Lily Margrave shrugged her slender shoulders.

“As I told you, M. Poirot, Lady Astwell sent me.”

“You would not have come of your own accord, eh?”

The little man glanced at her shrewdly. The girl did not answer.

“You do not reply to my question.”

Lily Margrave began smoothing her gloves again.

“It is rather difficult for me, M. Poirot. I have my loyalty to Lady Astwell to consider. Strictly speaking, I am only her paid companion, but she has treated me more as though I were a daughter or a niece. She has been extraordinarily kind and, whatever her faults, I should not like to appear to criticize her actions, or—well, to prejudice you against taking up the case.”

“Impossible to prejudice Hercule Poirot, cela ne ce fait pas,” declared the little man cheerily. “I perceive that you think Lady Astwell has in her bonnet the buzzing bee. Come now, is it not so?”

“If I must say—”

“Speak, Mademoiselle.”

“I think the whole thing is simply silly.”

“It strikes you like that, eh?”

“I don’t want to say anything against Lady Astwell—”

“I comprehend,” murmured Poirot gently. “I comprehend perfectly.” His eyes invited her to go on.

“She really is a very good sort, and frightfully kind, but she isn’t—how can I put it? She isn’t an educated woman. You know she was an actress when Sir Reuben married her, and she has all sorts of prejudices and superstitions. If she says a thing, it must be so, and she simply won’t listen to reason. The inspector was not very tactful with her, and it put her back up. She says it is nonsense to suspect Mr. Leverson and just the sort of stupid, pigheaded mistake the police would make, and that, of course, dear Charles did not do it.”

“But she has no reasons, eh?”

“None whatever.”

“Ha! Is that so? Really, now.”

“I told her,” said Lily, “that it would be no good coming to you with a mere statement like that and nothing to go on.”

“You told her that,” said Poirot, “did you really? That is interesting.”

His eyes swept over Lily Margrave in a quick comprehensive survey, taking in the details of her neat black suit, the touch of white at her throat and the smart little black hat. He saw the elegance of her, the pretty face with its slightly pointed chin, and the dark-blue, long-lashed eyes. Insensibly his attitude changed; he was interested now, not so much in the case as in the girl sitting opposite him.

“Lady Astwell is, I should imagine, Mademoiselle, just a trifle inclined to be unbalanced and hysterical?”

Lily Margrave nodded eagerly.

“That describes her exactly. She is, as I told you, very kind, but it is impossible to argue with her or to make her see things logically.”

“Possibly she suspects someone on her own account,” suggested Poirot, “someone quite absurd.”

“That is exactly what she does do,” cried Lily. “She has taken a great dislike to Sir Reuben’s secretary, poor man. She says she knows he did it, and yet it has been proved quite conclusively that poor Owen Trefusis cannot possibly have done it.”

“And she has no reasons?”

“Of course not; it is all intuition with her.”

Lily Margrave’s voice was very scornful.

“I perceive, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, smiling, “that you do not believe in intuition?”

“I think it is nonsense,” replied Lily.

Poirot leaned back in his chair.

“Les femmes,” he murmured, “they like to think that it is a special weapon that the good God has given them, and for every once that it shows them the truth, at least nine times it leads them astray.”

“I know,” said Lily, “but I have told you what Lady Astwell is like. You simply cannot argue with her.”

“So you, Mademoiselle, being wise and discreet, came along to me as you were bidden, and have managed to put me au courant of the situation.”

Something in the tone of his voice made the girl look up sharply.

“Of course, I know,” said Lily apologetically, “how very valuable your time is.”

“You are too flattering, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, “but indeed—yes, it is true, at this present time I have many cases of moment on hand.”

“I was afraid that might be so,” said Lily, rising. “I will tell Lady Astwell —”

But Poirot did not rise also. Instead he lay back in his chair and looked steadily up at the girl.

“You are in haste to be gone, Mademoiselle? Sit down one more little moment, I pray of you.”

He saw the colour flood into her face and ebb out again. She sat down once more slowly and unwillingly.

“Mademoiselle is quick and decisive,” said Poirot. “She must make allowances for an old man like myself, who comes to his decisions slowly. You mistook me, Mademoiselle. I did not say that I would not go down to Lady Astwell.”

“You will come, then?”

The girl’s tone was flat. She did not look at Poirot, but down at the ground, and so was unaware of the keen scrutiny with which he regarded her.

“Tell Lady Astwell, Mademoiselle, that I am entirely at her service. I will be at—Mon Repos, is it not?—this afternoon.”

He rose. The girl followed suit.

“I—I will tell her. It is very good of you to come, M. Poirot. I am afraid, though, you will find you have been brought on a wild goose chase.”

“Very likely, but—who knows?”

He saw her out with punctilious courtesy to the door. Then he returned to the sitting room, frowning, deep in thought. Once or twice he nodded his head, then he opened the door and called to his valet.

“My good George, prepare me, I pray of you, a little valise. I go down to the country this afternoon.”

“Very good, sir,” said George.

He was an extremely English-looking person. Tall, cadaverous and unemotional.

“A young girl is a very interesting phenomenon, George,” said Poirot, as he dropped once more into his armchair and lighted a tiny cigarette. “Especially, you understand, when she has brains. To ask someone to do a thing and at the same time to put them against doing it, that is a delicate operation. It requires finesse. She was very adroit—oh, very adroit—but Hercule Poirot, my good George, is of a cleverness quite exceptional.”

“I have heard you say so, sir.”

“It is not the secretary she has in mind,” mused Poirot. “Lady Astwell’s accusation of him she treats with contempt. Just the same she is anxious that no one should disturb the sleeping dogs. I, my good George, I go to disturb them, I go to make the dog fight! There is a drama there, at Mon Repos. A human drama, and it excites me. She was adroit, the little one, but not adroit enough. I wonder—I wonder what I shall find there?”

Into the dramatic pause which succeeded these words George’s voice broke apologetically:

“Shall I pack dress clothes, sir?”

Poirot looked at him sadly.

“Always the concentration, the attention to your own job. You are very good for me, George.”

When the 4:55 drew up at Abbots Cross station, there descended from it M. Hercule Poirot, very neatly and foppishly attired, his moustaches waxed to a stiff point. He gave up his ticket, passed through the barrier, and was accosted by a tall chauffeur.

“M. Poirot?”

The little man beamed upon him.

“That is my name.”

“This way, sir, if you please.”

He held open the door of the big Rolls-Royce.

The house was a bare three minutes from the station. The chauffeur descended once more and opened the door of the car, and Poirot stepped out. The butler was already holding the front door open.

Poirot gave the outside of the house a swift appraising glance before passing through the open door. It was a big, solidly built red-brick mansion, with no pretensions to beauty, but with an air of solid comfort.

Poirot stepped into the hall. The butler relieved him deftly of his hat and overcoat, then murmured with that deferential undertone only to be achieved by the best servants:

“Her ladyship is expecting you, sir.”

Poirot followed the butler up the soft-carpeted stairs. This, without doubt, was Parsons, a very well-trained servant, with a manner suitably devoid of emotion. At the top of the staircase he turned to the right along a corridor. He passed through a door into a little anteroom, from which two more doors led. He threw open the left-hand one of these, and announced:

“M. Poirot, m’lady.”

The room was not a very large one, and it was crowded with furniture and knickknacks. A woman, dressed in black, got up from a sofa and came quickly towards Poirot.

“M. Poirot,” she said with outstretched hand. Her eye ran rapidly over the dandified figure. She paused a minute, ignoring the little man’s bow over her hand, and his murmured “Madame,” and then, releasing his hand after a sudden vigorous pressure, she exclaimed:

“I believe in small men! They are the clever ones.”

“Inspector Miller,” murmured Poirot, “is, I think, a tall man?”

“He is a bumptious idiot,” said Lady Astwell. “Sit down here by me, will you, M. Poirot?”

She indicated the sofa and went on:

“Lily did her best to put me off sending for you, but I have not come to my time of life without knowing my own mind.”

“A rare accomplishment,” said Poirot, as he followed her to the settee.

Lady Astwell settled herself comfortably among the cushions and turned so as to face him.

“Lily is a dear girl,” said Lady Astwell, “but she thinks she knows everything, and as often as not in my experience those sort of people are wrong. I am not clever, M. Poirot, I never have been, but I am right where many a more stupid person is wrong. I believe in guidance. Now do you want me to tell you who is the murderer, or do you not? A woman knows, M. Poirot.”

“Does Miss Margrave know?”

“What did she tell you?” asked Lady Astwell sharply.

“She gave me the facts of the case.”

“The facts? Oh, of course they are dead against Charles, but I tell you, M. Poirot, he didn’t do it. I know he didn’t!” She bent upon him an earnestness that was almost disconcerting.

“You are very positive, Lady Astwell?”

“Trefusis killed my husband, M. Poirot. I am sure of it.”

“Why?”

“Why should he kill him, do you mean, or why am I sure? I tell you I know it! I am funny about those things. I make up my mind at once, and I stick to it.”

“Did Mr. Trefusis benefit in any way by Sir Reuben’s death?”

“Never left him a penny,” returned Lady Astwell promptly. “Now that shows you dear Reuben couldn’t have liked or trusted him.”

“Had he been with Sir Reuben long, then?”

“Close on nine years.”

“That is a long time,” said Poirot softly, “a very long time to remain in the employment of one man. Yes, Mr. Trefusis, he must have known his employer well.”

Lady Astwell stared at him.

“What are you driving at? I don’t see what that has to do with it.”

“I was following out a little idea of my own,” said Poirot. “A little idea, not interesting, perhaps, but original, on the effects of service.”

Lady Astwell still stared.

“You are very clever, aren’t you?” she said in rather a doubtful tone. “Everybody says so.”

Hercule Poirot laughed.

“Perhaps you shall pay me that compliment, too, Madame, one of these days. But let us return to the motive. Tell me now of your household, of the people who were here in the house on the day of the tragedy.”

“There was Charles, of course.”

“He was your husband’s nephew, I understand, not yours.”

“Yes, Charles was the only son of Reuben’s sister. She married a comparatively rich man, but one of those crashes came—they do, in the city—and he died, and his wife, too, and Charles came to live with us. He was twenty-three at the time, and going to be a barrister. But when the trouble came, Reuben took him into his office."

"He was industrious, M. Charles?"

"I like a man who is quick on the uptake," said Lady Astwell with a nod of approval. "No, that's just the trouble, Charles was not industrious. He was always having rows with his uncle over some muddle or other that he had made. Not that poor Reuben was an easy man to get on with. Many's the time I've told him he had forgotten what it was to be young himself. He was very different in those days, M. Poirot."

Lady Astwell heaved a sigh of reminiscence.

"Changes must come, Madame," said Poirot. "It is the law."

"Still," said Lady Astwell, "he was never really rude to me. At least if he was, he was always sorry afterwards—poor dear Reuben."

"He was difficult, eh?" said Poirot.

"I could always manage him," said Lady Astwell with the air of a successful lion tamer. "But it was rather awkward sometimes when he would lose his temper with the servants. There are ways of doing that, and Reuben's was not the right way."

"How exactly did Sir Reuben leave his money, Lady Astwell?"

"Half to me and half to Charles," replied Lady Astwell promptly. "The lawyers don't put it simply like that, but that's what it amounts to."

Poirot nodded his head.

"I see—I see," he murmured. "Now, Lady Astwell, I will demand of you that you will describe to me the household. There was yourself, and Sir Reuben's nephew, Mr. Charles Leverson, and the secretary, Mr. Owen Trefusis, and there was Miss Lily Margrave. Perhaps you will tell me something of that young lady."

“You want to know about Lily?”

“Yes, she had been with you long?”

“About a year. I have had a lot of secretary-companions you know, but somehow or other they all got on my nerves. Lily was different. She was tactful and full of common sense and besides she looks so nice. I do like to have a pretty face about me, M. Poirot. I am a funny kind of person; I take likes and dislikes straight away. As soon as I saw that girl, I said to myself: ‘She’ll do.’ ”

“Did she come to you through friends, Lady Astwell?”

“I think she answered an advertisement. Yes—that was it.”

“You know something of her people, of where she comes from?”

“Her father and mother are out in India, I believe. I don’t really know much about them, but you can see at a glance that Lily is a lady, can’t you, M. Poirot?”

“Oh, perfectly, perfectly.”

“Of course,” went on Lady Astwell, “I am not a lady myself. I know it, and the servants know it, but there is nothing mean-spirited about me. I can appreciate the real thing when I see it, and no one could be nicer than Lily has been to me. I look upon that girl almost as a daughter, M. Poirot, indeed I do.”

Poirot’s right hand strayed out and straightened one or two of the objects lying on a table near him.

“Did Sir Reuben share this feeling?” he asked.

His eyes were on the knickknacks, but doubtless he noted the pause before Lady Astwell’s answer came.

“With a man it’s different. Of course they—they got on very well.”

“Thank you, Madame,” said Poirot. He was smiling to himself.

“And these were the only people in the house that night?” he asked. “Excepting, of course, the servants.”

“Oh, there was Victor.”

“Victor?”

“Yes, my husband’s brother, you know, and his partner.”

“He lived with you?”

“No, he had just arrived on a visit. He has been out in West Africa for the past few years.”

“West Africa,” murmured Poirot.

He had learned that Lady Astwell could be trusted to develop a subject herself if sufficient time was given her.

“They say it’s a wonderful country, but I think it’s the kind of place that has a very bad effect upon a man. They drink too much, and they get uncontrolled. None of the Astwells has a good temper, and Victor’s, since he came back from Africa, has been simply too shocking. He has frightened me once or twice.”

“Did he frighten Miss Margrave, I wonder?” murmured Poirot gently.

“Lily? Oh, I don’t think he has seen much of Lily.”

Poirot made a note or two in a diminutive notebook; then he put the pencil back in its loop and returned the notebook to his pocket.

“I thank you, Lady Astwell. I will now, if I may, interview Parsons.”

“Will you have him up here?”

Lady Astwell's hand moved towards the bell. Poirot arrested the gesture quickly.

"No, no, a thousand times no. I will descend to him."

"If you think it is better—"

Lady Astwell was clearly disappointed at not being able to participate in the forthcoming scene. Poirot adopted an air of secrecy.

"It is essential," he said mysteriously, and left Lady Astwell duly impressed.

He found Parsons in the butler's pantry, polishing silver. Poirot opened the proceedings with one of his funny little bows.

"I must explain myself," he said. "I am a detective agent."

"Yes, sir," said Parsons, "we gathered as much."

His tone was respectful but aloof.

"Lady Astwell sent for me," continued Poirot. "She is not satisfied; no, she is not satisfied at all."

"I have heard her ladyship say so on several occasions," said Parsons.

"In fact," said Poirot, "I recount to you the things you already know? Eh? Let us then not waste time on these bagatelles. Take me, if you will be so good, to your bedroom and tell me exactly what it was you heard there on the night of the murder."

The butler's room was on the ground floor, adjoining the servants' hall. It had barred windows, and the strong-room was in one corner of it. Parsons indicated the narrow bed.

"I had retired, sir, at eleven o'clock. Miss Margrave had gone to bed, and Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben in the Tower room."

"Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben? Ah, proceed."

"The Tower room, sir, is directly over this. If people are talking in it one can hear the murmur of voices, but naturally not anything that is said. I must have fallen asleep about half past eleven. It was just twelve o'clock when I was awakened by the sound of the front door being slammed to and knew Mr. Leverson had returned. Presently I heard footsteps overhead, and a minute or two later Mr. Leverson's voice talking to Sir Reuben.

"It was my fancy at the time, sir, that Mr. Leverson was—I should not exactly like to say drunk, but inclined to be a little indiscreet and noisy. He was shouting at his uncle at the top of his voice. I caught a word or two here or there, but not enough to understand what it was all about, and then there was a sharp cry and a heavy thud."

There was a pause, and Parsons repeated the last words.

"A heavy thud," he said impressively.

"If I mistake not, it is a dull thud in most works of romance," murmured Poirot.

"Maybe, sir," said Parsons severely. "It was a heavy thud I heard."

"A thousand pardons," said Poirot.

"Do not mention it, sir. After the thud, in the silence, I heard Mr. Leverson's voice as plain as plain can be, raised high. 'My God,' he said, 'my God,' just like that, sir."

Parsons, from his first reluctance to tell the tale, had now progressed to a thorough enjoyment of it. He fancied himself mightily as a narrator. Poirot played up to him.

"Mon Dieu," he murmured. "What emotion you must have experienced!"

"Yes, indeed, sir," said Parsons, "as you say, sir. Not that I thought very much of it at the time. But it did occur to me to wonder if anything was amiss, and whether I had better go up and see. I went to turn the electric light on, and was unfortunate enough to knock over a chair.

"I opened the door, and went through the servants' hall, and opened the other door which gives on a passage. The back stairs lead up from there, and as I stood at the bottom of them, hesitating, I heard Mr. Leverson's voice from up above, speaking hearty and cheery-like. 'No harm done, luckily,' he says. 'Good night,' and I heard him move off along the passage to his own room, whistling.

"Of course I went back to bed at once. Just something knocked over, that's all I thought it was. I ask you, sir, was I to think Sir Reuben was murdered, with Mr. Leverson saying good night and all?"

"You are sure it was Mr. Leverson's voice you heard?"

Parsons looked at the little Belgian pityingly, and Poirot saw clearly enough that, right or wrong, Parsons' mind was made up on this point.

"Is there anything further you would like to ask me, sir?"

"There is one thing," said Poirot, "do you like Mr. Leverson?"

"I—I beg your pardon, sir?"

"It is a simple question. Do you like Mr. Leverson?"

Parsons, from being startled at first, now seemed embarrassed.

"The general opinion in the servants' hall, sir," he said, and paused.

"By all means," said Poirot, "put it that way if it pleases you."

"The opinion is, sir, that Mr. Leverson is an open-handed young gentleman, but not, if I may say so, particularly intelligent, sir."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Do you know, Parsons, that without having seen him, that is also precisely my opinion of Mr. Leverson."

“Indeed, sir.”

“What is your opinion—I beg your pardon—the opinion of the servants’ hall of the secretary?”

“He is a very quiet, patient gentleman, sir. Anxious to give no trouble.”

“Vraiment,” said Poirot.

The butler coughed.

“Her ladyship, sir,” he murmured, “is apt to be a little hasty in her judgments.”

“Then, in the opinion of the servants’ hall, Mr. Leverson committed the crime?”

“We none of us wish to think it was Mr. Leverson,” said Parsons. “We—well, plainly, we didn’t think he had it in him, sir.”

“But he has a somewhat violent temper, has he not?” asked Poirot.

Parsons came nearer to him.

“If you are asking me who had the most violent temper in the house—”

Poirot held up a hand.

“Ah! But that is not the question I should ask,” he said softly. “My question would be, who has the best temper?” Parsons stared at him openmouthed.

Poirot wasted no further time on him. With an amiable little bow—he was always amiable—he left the room and wandered out into the big square hall of Mon Repos. There he stood a minute or two in thought, then, at a slight sound that came to him, cocked his head on one side in the manner of a perky robin, and finally, with noiseless steps, crossed to one of the doors that led out of the hall.

He stood in the doorway, looking into the room; a small room furnished as a library. At a big desk at the farther end of it sat a thin, pale young man busily writing. He had a receding chin, and wore pince-nez.

Poirot watched him for some minutes, and then he broke the silence by giving a completely artificial and theatrical cough.

“Ahem!” coughed M. Hercule Poirot.

The young man at the desk stopped writing and turned his head. He did not appear unduly startled, but an expression of perplexity gathered on his face as he eyed Poirot.

The latter came forward with a little bow.

“I have the honour of speaking to M. Trefusis, yes? Ah! My name is Poirot, Hercule Poirot. You may perhaps have heard of me.”

“Oh—er—yes, certainly,” said the young man.

Poirot eyed him attentively.

Owen Trefusis was about thirty-three years of age, and the detective saw at once why nobody was inclined to treat Lady Astwell’s accusation seriously. Mr. Owen Trefusis was a prim, proper young man, disarmingly meek, the type of man who can be, and is, systematically bullied. One could feel quite sure that he would never display resentment.

“Lady Astwell sent for you, of course,” said the secretary. “She mentioned that she was going to do so. Is there any way in which I can help you?”

His manner was polite without being effusive. Poirot accepted a chair, and murmured gently:

“Has Lady Astwell said anything to you of her beliefs and suspicions?”

Owen Trefusis smiled a little.

“As far as that goes,” he said, “I believe she suspects me. It is absurd, but there it is. She has hardly spoken a civil word to me since Sir Reuben’s death, and she shrinks against the wall as I pass by.”

His manner was perfectly natural, and there was more amusement than resentment in his voice. Poirot nodded with an air of engaging frankness.

“Between ourselves,” he explained, “she said the same thing to me. I did not argue with her—me, I have made it a rule never to argue with very positive ladies. You comprehend, it is a waste of time.”

“Oh, quite.”

“I say, yes, Madame—oh, perfectly, Madame—précisément, Madame. They mean nothing, those words, but they soothe all the same. I make my investigations, for though it seems almost impossible that anyone except M. Leverson could have committed the crime, yet—well, the impossible has happened before now.”

“I understand your position perfectly,” said the secretary. “Please regard me as entirely at your service.”

“Bon,” said Poirot. “We understand one another. Now recount to me the events of that evening. Better start with dinner.”

“Leverson was not at dinner, as you doubtless know,” said the secretary. “He had a serious disagreement with his uncle, and went off to dine at the golf club. Sir Reuben was in a very bad temper in consequence.”

“Not too amiable, ce Monsieur, eh?” hinted Poirot delicately.

Trefusis laughed.

“Oh! He was a Tartar! I haven’t worked with him for nine years without knowing most of his little ways. He was an extraordinarily difficult man, M. Poirot. He would get into childish fits of rage and abuse anybody who came near him.

“I was used to it by that time. I got into the habit of paying absolutely no attention to anything he said. He was not bad-hearted really, but he could be most foolish and exasperating in his manner. The great thing was never to answer him back.”

“Were other people as wise as you were in that respect?”

Trefusis shrugged his shoulders.

“Lady Astwell enjoyed a good row,” he said. “She was not in the least afraid of Sir Reuben, and she always stood up to him and gave him as good as she got. They always made it up afterwards, and Sir Reuben was really devoted to her.”

“Did they quarrel that night?”

The secretary looked at him sideways, hesitated a minute, then he said:

“I believe so; what made you ask?”

“An idea, that is all.”

“I don’t know, of course,” explained the secretary, “but things looked as though they were working up that way.”

Poirot did not pursue the topic.

“Who else was at dinner?”

“Miss Margrave, Mr. Victor Astwell, and myself.”

“And afterwards?”

“We went into the drawing room. Sir Reuben did not accompany us. About ten minutes later he came in and hauled me over the coals for some trifling matter about a letter. I went up with him to the Tower room and set the thing straight; then Mr. Victor Astwell came in and said he had something he wished to talk to his brother about, so I went downstairs and joined the two ladies.

"About a quarter of an hour later I heard Sir Reuben's bell ringing violently, and Parsons came to say I was to go up to Sir Reuben at once. As I entered the room, Mr. Victor Astwell was coming out. He nearly knocked me over. Something had evidently happened to upset him. He has a very violent temper. I really believe he didn't see me."

"Did Sir Reuben make any comment on the matter?"

"He said: 'Victor is a lunatic; he will do for somebody some day when he is in one of these rages.' "

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Have you any idea what the trouble was about?"

"I couldn't say at all."

Poirot turned his head very slowly and looked at the secretary. Those last words had been uttered too hastily. He formed the conviction that Trefusis could have said more had he wished to do so. But once again Poirot did not press the question.

"And then? Proceed, I pray of you."

"I worked with Sir Reuben for about an hour and a half. At eleven o'clock Lady Astwell came in, and Sir Reuben told me I could go to bed."

"And you went?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea how long she stayed with him?"

"None at all. Her room is on the first floor, and mine is on the second, so I would not hear her go to bed."

"I see."

Poirot nodded his head once or twice and sprang to his feet.

"And now, Monsieur, take me to the Tower room."

He followed the secretary up the broad stairs to the first landing. Here Trefusis led him along the corridor, and through a baize door at the end of it, which gave on the servants’ staircase and on a short passage that ended in a door. They passed through this door and found themselves on the scene of the crime.

It was a lofty room twice as high as any of the others, and was roughly about thirty feet square. Swords and assagais adorned the walls, and many native curious were arranged about on tables. At the far end, in the embrasure of the window, was a large writing table. Poirot crossed straight to it.

“It was here Sir Reuben was found?”

Trefusis nodded.

“He was struck from behind, I understand?”

Again the secretary nodded.

“The crime was committed with one of these native clubs,” he explained. “A tremendously heavy thing. Death must have been practically instantaneous.”

“That strengthens the conviction that the crime was not premeditated. A sharp quarrel, and a weapon snatched up almost unconsciously.”

“Yes, it does not look well for poor Leverson.”

“And the body was found fallen forward on the desk?”

“No, it had slipped sideways to the ground.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “that is curious.”

“Why curious?” asked the secretary.

“Because of this.”

Poirot pointed to a round irregular stain on the polished surface of the writing table.

“That is a bloodstain, mon ami.”

“It may have spattered there,” suggested Trefusis, “or it may have been made later, when they moved the body.”

“Very possibly, very possibly,” said the little man. “There is only the one door to this room?”

“There is a staircase here.”

Trefusis pulled aside a velvet curtain in the corner of the room nearest the door, where a small spiral staircase lead upwards.

“This place was originally built by an astronomer. The stairs led up to the tower where the telescope was fixed. Sir Reuben had the place fitted up as a bedroom, and sometimes slept there if he was working very late.”

Poirot went nimbly up the stairs. The circular room upstairs was plainly furnished, with a camp-bed, a chair and dressing table. Poirot satisfied himself that there was no other exit, and then came down again to where Trefusis stood waiting for him.

“Did you hear Mr. Leverson come in?” he asked.

Trefusis shook his head.

“I was fast asleep by that time.”

Poirot nodded. He looked slowly round the room.

“Eh bien!” he said at last. “I do not think there is anything further here, unless—perhaps you would be so kind as to draw the curtains.”

Obediently Trefusis pulled the heavy black curtains across the window at the far end of the room. Poirot switched on the light—which was masked by a big alabaster bowl hanging from the ceiling.

“There was a desk light?” he asked.

For reply the secretary clicked on a powerful green-shaded hand lamp, which stood on the writing table. Poirot switched the other light off, then on, then off again.

“C’est bien! I have finished here.”

“Dinner is at half past seven,” murmured the secretary.

“I thank you, M. Trefusis, for your many amiabilities.”

“Not at all.”

Poirot went thoughtfully along the corridor to the room appointed for him. The inscrutable George was there laying out his master’s things.

“My good George,” he said presently, “I shall, I hope, meet at dinner a certain gentleman who begins to intrigue me greatly. A man who has come home from the tropics, George. With a tropical temper—so it is said. A man whom Parsons tries to tell me about, and whom Lily Margrave does not mention. The late Sir Reuben had a temper of his own, George. Supposing such a man to come into contact with a man whose temper was worse than his own—how do you say it? The fur would jump about, eh?”

“ ‘Would fly’ is the correct expression, sir, and it is not always the case, sir, not by a long way.”

“No?”

“No, sir. There was my Aunt Jemima, sir, a most shrewish tongue she had, bullied a poor sister of hers who lived with her, something shocking she did. Nearly worried the life out of her. But if anyone came along who stood up to her, well, it was a very different thing. It was meekness she couldn’t bear.”

“Ha!” said Poirot, “it is suggestive—that.”

George coughed apologetically.

"Is there anything I can do in any way," he inquired delicately, "to—er—assist you, sir?"

"Certainly," said Poirot promptly. "You can find out for me what colour evening dress Miss Lily Margrave wore that night, and which housemaid attends her."

George received these commands with his usual stolidity.

"Very good, sir, I will have the information for you in the morning."

Poirot rose from his seat and stood gazing into the fire.

"You are very useful to me, George," he murmured. "Do you know, I shall not forget your Aunt Jemima?"

Poirot did not, after all, see Victor Astwell that night. A telephone message came from him that he was detained in London.

"He attends to the affairs of your late husband's business, eh?" asked Poirot of Lady Astwell.

"Victor is a partner," she explained. "He went out to Africa to look into some mining concessions for the firm. It was mining, wasn't it, Lily?"

"Yes, Lady Astwell."

"Gold mines, I think, or was it copper or tin? You ought to know, Lily, you were always asking Reuben questions about it all. Oh, do be careful, dear, you will have that vase over!"

"It is dreadfully hot in here with the fire," said the girl. "Shall I—shall I open the window a little?"

"If you like, dear," said Lady Astwell placidly.

Poirot watched while the girl went across to the window and opened it. She stood there a minute or two breathing in the cool night air. When she returned and sat down in her seat, Poirot said to her politely:

“So Mademoiselle is interested in mines?”

“Oh, not really,” said the girl indifferently. “I listened to Sir Reuben, but I don’t know anything about the subject.”

“You pretended very well, then,” said Lady Astwell. “Poor Reuben actually thought you had some ulterior motive in asking all those questions.”

The little detective’s eyes had not moved from the fire, into which he was steadily staring, but nevertheless, he did not miss the quick flush of vexation on Lily Margrave’s face. Tactfully he changed the conversation. When the hour for good nights came, Poirot said to his hostess:

“May I have just two little words with you, Madame?”

Lily Margrave vanished discreetly. Lady Astwell looked inquiringly at the detective.

“You were the last person to see Sir Reuben alive that night?”

She nodded. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hastily held a black-edged handkerchief to them.

“Ah, do not distress yourself, I beg of you do not distress yourself.”

“It’s all very well, M. Poirot, but I can’t help it.”

“I am a triple imbecile thus to vex you.”

“No, no, go on. What were you going to say?”

“It was about eleven o’clock, I fancy, when you went into the Tower room, and Sir Reuben dismissed Mr. Trefusis. Is that right?”

“It must have been about then.”

“How long were you with him?”

"It was just a quarter to twelve when I got up to my room; I remember glancing at the clock."

"Lady Astwell, will you tell me what your conversation with your husband was about?"

Lady Astwell sank down on the sofa and broke down completely. Her sobs were vigorous.

"We—qua—qua—quarrelled," she moaned.

"What about?" Poirot's voice was coaxing, almost tender.

"L-l-lots of things. It b-b-began with L-Lily. Reuben took a dislike to her—for no reason, and said he had caught her interfering with his papers. He wanted to send her away, and I said she was a dear girl, and I would not have it. And then he s-s-started shouting me down, and I wouldn't have that, so I just told him what I thought of him.

"Not that I really meant it, M. Poirot. He said he had taken me out of the gutter to marry me, and I said—ah, but what does it all matter now? I shall never forgive myself. You know how it is, M. Poirot, I always did say a good row clears the air, and how was I to know someone was going to murder him that very night? Poor old Reuben."

Poirot had listened sympathetically to all this outburst.

"I have caused you suffering," he said. "I apologize. Let us now be very businesslike—very practical, very exact. You still cling to your idea that Mr. Trefusis murdered your husband?"

Lady Astwell drew herself up.

"A woman's instinct, M. Poirot," she said solemnly, "never lies."

"Exactly, exactly," said Poirot. "But when did he do it?"

"When? After I left him, of course."

"You left Sir Reuben at a quarter to twelve. At five minutes to twelve Mr. Leverson came in. In that ten minutes you say the secretary came along from his bedroom and murdered him?"

"It is perfectly possible."

"So many things are possible," said Poirot. "It could be done in ten minutes. Oh, yes! But was it?"

"Of course he says he was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell, "but who is to know if he was or not?"

"Nobody saw him about," Poirot reminded her.

"Everybody was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell triumphantly. "Of course nobody saw him."

"I wonder," said Poirot to himself.

A short pause.

"Eh bien, Lady Astwell, I wish you good night."

George deposited a tray of early-morning coffee by his master's bedside.

"Miss Margrave, sir, wore a dress of light green chiffon on the night in question."

"Thank you, George, you are most reliable."

"The third housemaid looks after Miss Margrave, sir. Her name is Gladys."

"Thank you, George. You are invaluable."

"Not at all, sir."

"It is a fine morning," said Poirot, looking out of the window, "and no one is likely to be astir very early. I think, my good George, that we shall have the Tower room to ourselves if we proceed there to make a little experiment.”

“You need me, sir?”

“The experiment,” said Poirot, “will not be painful.”

The curtains were still drawn in the Tower room when they arrived there. George was about to pull them, when Poirot restrained him.

“We will leave the room as it is. Just turn on the desk lamp.”

The valet obeyed.

“Now, my good George, sit down in that chair. Dispose yourself as though you were writing. Très bien. Me, I seize a club, I steal up behind you, so, and I hit you on the back of the head.”

“Yes, sir,” said George.

“Ah!” said Poirot, “but when I hit you, do not continue to write. You comprehend I cannot be exact. I cannot hit you with the same force with which the assassin hit Sir Reuben. When it comes to that point, we must do the make-believe. I hit you on the head, and you collapse, so. The arms well relaxed, the body limp. Permit me to arrange you. But no, do not flex your muscles.”

He heaved a sigh of exasperation.

“You press admirably the trousers, George,” he said, “but the imagination you possess it not. Get up and let me take your place.”

Poirot in his turn sat down at the writing table.

“I write,” he declared, “I write busily. You steal up behind me, you hit me on the head with the club. Crash! The pen slips from my fingers, I drop forward, but not very far forward, for the chair is low, and the desk is high, and, moreover, my arms support me. Have the goodness, George, to go back to the door, stand there, and tell me what you see.”

“Ahem!”

“Yes, George?” encouragingly.

“I see you, sir, sitting at the desk.”

“Sitting at the desk?”

“It is a little difficult to see plainly, sir,” explained George, “being such a long way away, sir, and the lamp being so heavily shaded. If I might turn on this light, sir?”

His hand reached out to the switch.

“Not at all,” said Poirot sharply. “We shall do very well as we are. Here am I bending over the desk, there are you standing by the door. Advance now, George, advance, and put your hand on my shoulder.”

George obeyed.

“Lean on me a little, George, to steady yourself on your feet, as it were. Ah! Voilà.”

Hercule Poirot’s limp body slid artistically sideways.

“I collapse—so!” he observed. “Yes, it is very well imagined. There is now something most important that must be done.”

“Indeed, sir?” said the valet.

“Yes, it is necessary that I should breakfast well.”

The little man laughed heartily at his own joke.

“The stomach, George; it must not be ignored.”

George maintained a disapproving silence. Poirot went downstairs chuckling happily to himself. He was pleased at the way things were shaping. After breakfast he made the acquaintance of Gladys, the third housemaid. He was very interested in what she could tell him of the crime. She was sympathetic towards Charles, although she had no doubt of his guilt.

“Poor young gentleman, sir, it seems hard, it does, him not being quite himself at the time.”

“He and Miss Margrave should have got on well together,” suggested Poirot, “as the only two young people in the house.”

Gladys shook her head.

“Very stand-offish Miss Lily was with him. She wouldn’t have no carryings-on, and she made it plain.”

“He was fond of her, was he?”

“Oh, only in passing, so to speak; no harm in it, sir. Mr. Victor Astwell, now he is properly gone on Miss Lily.”

She giggled.

“Ah vraiment!”

Gladys giggled again.

“Sweet on her straightaway he was. Miss Lily is just like a lily, isn’t she, sir? So tall and such a lovely shade of gold hair.”

“She should wear a green evening frock,” mused Poirot. “There is a certain shade of green—”

“She has one, sir,” said Gladys. “Of course, she can’t wear it now, being in mourning, but she had it on the very night Sir Reuben died.”

“It should be a light green, not a dark green,” said Poirot.

“It is a light green, sir. If you wait a minute I’ll show it to you. Miss Lily has just gone out with the dogs.”

Poirot nodded. He knew that as well as Gladys did. In fact, it was only after seeing Lily safely off the premises that he had gone in search of the housemaid. Gladys hurried away, and returned a few minutes later with a green evening dress on a hanger.

“Exquis!” murmured Poirot, holding up hands of admiration. “Permit me to take it to the light a minute.”

He took the dress from Gladys, turned his back on her and hurried to the window. He bent over it, then held it out at arm’s length.

“It is perfect,” he declared. “Perfectly ravishing. A thousand thanks for showing it to me.”

“Not at all, sir,” said Gladys. “We all know that Frenchmen are interested in ladies’ dresses.”

“You are too kind,” murmured Poirot.

He watched her hurry away again with the dress. Then he looked down at his two hands and smiled. In the right hand was a tiny pair of nail scissors, in the left was a neatly clipped fragment of green chiffon.

“And now,” he murmured, “to be heroic.”

He returned to his own apartment and summoned George.

“On the dressing table, my good George, you will perceive a gold scarf pin.”

“Yes, sir.”

“On the washstand is a solution of carbolic. Immerse, I pray you, the point of the pin in the carbolic.”

George did as he was bid. He had long ago ceased to wonder at the vagaries of his master.

“I have done that, sir.”

“Très bien! Now approach. I tender to you my first finger; insert the point of the pin in it.”

“Excuse me, sir, you want me to prick you, sir?”

“But yes, you have guessed correctly. You must draw blood, you understand, but not too much.”

George took hold of his master’s finger. Poirot shut his eyes and leaned back. The valet stabbed at the finger with the scarf pin, and Poirot uttered a shrill yell.

“Je vous remercie, George,” he said. “What you have done is ample.”

Taking a small piece of green chiffon from his pocket, he dabbed his finger with it gingerly.

“The operation has succeeded to a miracle,” he remarked, gazing at the result. “You have no curiosity, George? Now, that is admirable!”

The valet had just taken a discreet look out of the window.

“Excuse me, sir,” he murmured, “a gentleman has driven up in a large car.”

“Ah! Ah!” said Poirot. He rose briskly to his feet. “The elusive Mr. Victor Astwell. I go down to make his acquaintance.”

Poirot was destined to hear Mr. Victor Astwell some time before he saw him. A loud voice rang out from the hall.

“Mind what you are doing, you damned idiot! That case has got glass in it. Curse you, Parsons, get out of the way! Put it down, you fool!”

Poirot skipped nimbly down the stairs. Victor Astwell was a big man. Poirot bowed to him politely.

“Who the devil are you?” roared the big man.

Poirot bowed again.

"My name is Hercule Poirot."

"Lord!" said Victor Astwell. "So Nancy sent for you, after all, did she?"

He put a hand on Poirot's shoulder and steered him into the library.

"So you are the fellow they make such a fuss about," he remarked, looking him up and down. "Sorry for my language just now. That chauffeur of mine is a damned ass, and Parsons always does get on my nerves, blithering old idiot.

"I don't suffer fools gladly, you know," he said, half-apologetically, "but by all accounts you are not a fool, eh, M. Poirot?"

He laughed breezily.

"Those who have thought so have been sadly mistaken," said Poirot placidly.

"Is that so? Well, so Nancy has carted you down here—got a bee in her bonnet about the secretary. There is nothing in that; Trefusis is as mild as milk—drinks milk, too, I believe. The fellow is a teetotaller. Rather a waste of your time isn't it?"

"If one has an opportunity to observe human nature, time is never wasted," said Poirot quietly.

"Human nature, eh?"

Victor Astwell stared at him, then he flung himself down in a chair.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, you can tell me what your quarrel with your brother was about that evening."

Victor Astwell shook his head.

"Nothing to do with the case," he said decisively.

“One can never be sure,” said Poirot.

“It had nothing to do with Charles Leverson.”

“Lady Astwell thinks that Charles had nothing to do with the murder.”

“Oh, Nancy!”

“Parsons assumes that it was M. Charles Leverson who came in that night, but he didn’t see him. Remember nobody saw him.”

“It’s very simple. Reuben had been pitching into young Charles—not without good reason, I must say. Later on he tried to bully me. I told him a few home truths and, just to annoy him, I made up my mind to back the boy. I meant to see him that night, so as to tell him how the land lay. When I went up to my room I didn’t go to bed. Instead, I left the door ajar and sat on a chair smoking. My room is on the second floor, M. Poirot, and Charles’s room is next to it.”

“Pardon my interrupting you—Mr. Trefusis, he, too, sleeps on that floor?”

Astwell nodded.

“Yes, his room is just beyond mine.”

“Nearer the stairs?”

“No, the other way.”

A curious light came into Poirot’s face, but the other didn’t notice it and went on:

“As I say, I waited up for Charles. I heard the front door slam, as I thought, about five minutes to twelve, but there was no sign of Charles for about ten minutes. When he did come up the stairs I saw that it was no good tackling him that night.”

He lifted his elbow significantly.

"I see," murmured Poirot.

"Poor devil couldn't walk straight," said Astwell. "He was looking pretty ghastly, too. I put it down to his condition at the time. Of course, now, I realize that he had come straight from committing the crime."

Poirot interposed a quick question.

"You heard nothing from the Tower room?"

"No, but you must remember that I was right at the other end of the building. The walls are thick, and I don't believe you would even hear a pistol shot fired from there."

Poirot nodded.

"I asked if he would like some help getting to bed," continued Astwell. "But he said he was all right and went into his room and banged the door. I undressed and went to bed."

Poirot was staring thoughtfully at the carpet.

"You realize, M. Astwell," he said at last, "that your evidence is very important?"

"I suppose so, at least—what do you mean?"

"Your evidence that ten minutes elapsed between the slamming of the front door and Leverson's appearance upstairs. He himself says, so I understand, that he came into the house and went straight up to bed. But there is more than that. Lady Astwell's accusation of the secretary is fantastic, I admit, yet up to now it has not been proved impossible. But your evidence creates an alibi."

"How is that?"

"Lady Astwell says that she left her husband at a quarter to twelve, while the secretary had gone to bed at eleven o'clock. The only time he could have committed the crime was between a quarter to twelve and Charles

Leverson's return. Now, if, as you say, you sat with your door open, he could not have come out of his room without your seeing him."

"That is so," agreed the other.

"There is no other staircase?"

"No, to get down to the Tower room he would have had to pass my door, and he didn't, I am quite sure of that. And, anyway, M. Poirot, as I said just now, the man is as meek as a parson, I assure you."

"But yes, but yes," said Poirot soothingly, "I understand all that." He paused. "And you will not tell me the subject of your quarrel with Sir Reuben?"

The other's face turned a dark red.

"You'll get nothing out of me."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"I can always be discreet," he murmured, "where a lady is concerned."

Victor Astwell sprang to his feet.

"Damn you, how did you—what do you mean?"

"I was thinking," said Poirot, "of Miss Lily Margrave."

Victor Astwell stood undecided for a minute or two, then his colour subsided, and he sat down again.

"You are too clever for me, M. Poirot. Yes, it was Lily we quarrelled about. Reuben had his knife into her; he had ferreted out something or other about the girl—false references, something of that kind. I don't believe a word of it myself.

"And then he went further than he had any right to go, talked about her stealing down at night and getting out of the house to meet some fellow or other. My God! I gave it to him; I told him that better men than he had been killed for saying less. That shut him up. Reuben was inclined to be a bit afraid of me when I got going.”

“I hardly wonder at it,” murmured Poirot politely.

“I think a lot of Lily Margrave,” said Victor in another tone. “A nice girl through and through.”

Poirot did not answer. He was staring in front of him, seemingly lost in abstraction. He came out of his brown study with a jerk.

“I must, I think, promenade myself a little. There is a hotel here, yes?”

“Two,” said Victor Astwell, “the Golf Hotel up by the links and the Mitre down by the station.”

“I thank you,” said Poirot. “Yes, certainly I must promenade myself a little.”

The Golf Hotel, as befits its name, stands on the golf links almost adjoining the club house. It was to this hostelry that Poirot repaired first in the course of that “promenade” which he had advertised himself as being about to take. The little man had his own way of doing things. Three minutes after he had entered the Golf Hotel he was in private consultation with Miss Langdon, the manageress.

“I regret to incommode you in any way, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, “but you see I am a detective.”

Simplicity always appealed to him. In this case the method proved efficacious at once.

“A detective!” exclaimed Miss Langdon, looking at him doubtfully.

“Not from Scotland Yard,” Poirot assured her. “In fact—you may have noticed it? I am not an Englishman. No, I make the private inquiries into the death of Sir Reuben Astwell.”

“You don’t say, now!” Miss Langdon goggled at him expectantly.

“Precisely,” said Poirot beaming. “Only to someone of discretion like yourself would I reveal the fact. I think, Mademoiselle, you may be able to aid me. Can you tell me of any gentleman staying here on the night of the murder who was absent from the hotel that evening and returned to it about twelve or half past?”

Miss Langdon’s eyes opened wider than ever.

“You don’t think—?” she breathed.

“That you had the murderer here? No, but I have reason to believe that a guest staying here promenaded himself in the direction of Mon Repos that night, and if so he may have seen something which, though conveying no meaning to him, might be very useful to me.”

The manageress nodded her head sapiently, with an air of one thoroughly well up in the annals of detective logic.

“I understand perfectly. Now, let me see; who did we have staying here?”

She frowned, evidently running over the names in her mind, and helping her memory by occasionally checking them off on her fingertips.

“Captain Swann, Mr. Elkins, Major Blyunt, old Mr. Benson. No, really, sir, I don’t believe anyone went out that evening.”

“You would have noticed if they had done so, eh?”

“Oh, yes, sir, it is not very usual, you see. I mean gentlemen go out to dinner and all that, but they don’t go out after dinner, because—well, there is nowhere to go to, is there?”

The attractions of Abbots Cross were golf and nothing but golf.

“That is so,” agreed Poirot. “Then, as far as you remember, Mademoiselle, nobody from here was out that night?”

“Captain England and his wife were out to dinner.”

Poirot shook his head.

“That is not the kind of thing I mean. I will try the other hotel; the Mitre, is it not?”

“Oh, the Mitre,” said Miss Langdon. “Of course, anyone might have gone out walking from there.”

The disparagement of her tone, though vague, was evident, and Poirot beat a tactful retreat.

Ten minutes later he was repeating the scene, this time with Miss Cole, the brusque manageress of the Mitre, a less pretentious hotel with lower prices, situated close to the station.

“There was one gentleman out late that night, came in about half past twelve, as far as I can remember. Quite a habit of his it was, to go out for a walk at that time of the evening. He had done it once or twice before. Let me see now, what was his name? Just for the moment I can’t remember it.”

She pulled a large ledger towards her and began turning over the pages.

“Nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-second. Ah, here we are. Naylor, Captain Humphrey Naylor.”

“He had stayed here before? You know him well?”

“Once before,” said Miss Cole, “about a fortnight earlier. He went out then in the evening, I remember.”

“He came to play golf, eh?”

“I suppose so,” said Miss Cole, “that’s what most of the gentlemen come for.”

“Very true,” said Poirot. “Well, Mademoiselle, I thank you infinitely, and I wish you good day.”

He went back to Mon Repos with a very thoughtful face. Once or twice he drew something from his pocket and looked at it.

“It must be done,” he murmured to himself, “and soon, as soon as I can make the opportunity.”

His first proceeding on reentering the house was to ask Parsons where Miss Margrave might be found. He was told that she was in the small study dealing with Lady Astwell’s correspondence, and the information seemed to afford Poirot satisfaction.

He found the little study without difficulty. Lily Margrave was seated at a desk by the window, writing. But for her the room was empty. Poirot carefully shut the door behind him and came towards the girl.

“I may have a little minute of your time, Mademoiselle, you will be so kind?”

“Certainly.”

Lily Margrave put the papers aside and turned towards him.

“What can I do for you?”

“On the evening of the tragedy, Mademoiselle, I understand that when Lady Astwell went to her husband you went straight up to bed. Is that so?”

Lily Margrave nodded.

“You did not come down again, by any chance?”

The girl shook her head.

“I think you said, Mademoiselle, that you had not at any time that evening been in the Tower room?”

“I don’t remember saying so, but as a matter of fact that is quite true. I was not in the Tower room that evening.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

“Curious,” he murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“Very curious,” murmured Hercule Poirot again. “How do you account, then, for this?”

He drew from his pocket a little scrap of stained green chiffon and held it up for the girl’s inspection.

Her expression did not change, but he felt rather than heard the sharp intake of breath.

“I don’t understand, M. Poirot.”

“You wore, I understand, a green chiffon dress that evening, Mademoiselle. This—” he tapped the scrap in his fingers—“was torn from it.”

“And you found it in the Tower room?” asked the girl sharply. “Whereabouts?”

Hercule Poirot looked at the ceiling.

“For the moment shall we just say—in the Tower room?”

For the first time, a look of fear sprang into the girl’s eyes. She began to speak, then checked herself. Poirot watched her small white hands clenching themselves on the edge of the desk.

“I wonder if I did go into the Tower room that evening?” she mused. “Before dinner, I mean. I don’t think so. I am almost sure I didn’t. If that scrap has been in the Tower room all this time, it seems to me a very extraordinary thing the police did not find it right away.”

“The police,” said the little man, “do not think of things that Hercule Poirot thinks of.”

“I may have run in there for a minute just before dinner,” mused Lily Margrave, “or it may have been the night before. I wore the same dress then. Yes, I am almost sure it was the night before.”

“I think not,” said Poirot evenly.

“Why?”

He only shook his head slowly from side to side.

“What do you mean?” whispered the girl.

She was leaning forward, staring at him, all the colour ebbing out of her face.

“You do not notice, Mademoiselle, that this fragment is stained? There is no doubt about it, that stain is human blood.”

“You mean—”

“I mean, Mademoiselle, that you were in the Tower room after the crime was committed, not before. I think you will do well to tell me the whole truth, lest worse should befall you.”

He stood up now, a stern little figure of a man, his forefinger pointed accusingly at the girl.

“How did you find out?” gasped Lily.

“No matter, Mademoiselle. I tell you Hercule Poirot knows. I know all about Captain Humphrey Naylor, and that you went down to meet him that night.”

Lily suddenly put her head down on her arms and burst into tears. Immediately Poirot relinquished his accusing attitude.

“There, there, my little one,” he said, patting the girl on the shoulder. “Do not distress yourself. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot; once realize that and all your troubles will be at an end. And now you will tell me the whole story, will you not? You will tell old Papa Poirot?”

“It is not what you think, it isn’t, indeed. Humphrey—my brother—never touched a hair of his head.”

“Your brother, eh?” said Poirot. “So that is how the land lies. Well, if you wish to save him from suspicion, you must tell me the whole story now, without reservation.”

Lily sat up again, pushing back the hair from her forehead. After a minute or two, she began to speak in a low, clear voice.

“I will tell you the truth, M. Poirot. I can see now that it would be absurd to do anything else. My real name is Lily Naylor, and Humphrey is my only brother. Some years ago, when he was out in Africa, he discovered a gold mine, or rather, I should say, discovered the presence of gold. I can’t tell you this part of it properly, because I don’t understand the technical details, but what it amounted to was this:

“The thing seemed likely to be a very big undertaking, and Humphrey came home with letters to Sir Reuben Astwell in the hopes of getting him interested in the matter. I don’t understand the rights of it even now, but I gather that Sir Reuben sent out an expert to report, and that he subsequently told my brother that the expert’s report was unfavourable and that he, Humphrey, had made a great mistake. My brother went back to Africa on an expedition into the interior and was lost sight of. It was assumed that he and the expedition had perished.

“It was soon after that that a company was formed to exploit the Mpala Gold Fields. When my brother got back to England he at once jumped to the conclusion that these gold fields were identical with those he had discovered. Sir Reuben Astwell had apparently nothing to do with this company, and they had seemingly discovered the place on their own. But my brother was not satisfied; he was convinced that Sir Reuben had deliberately swindled him.

"He became more and more violent and unhappy about the matter. We two are alone in the world, M. Poirot, and as it was necessary then for me to go out and earn my own living, I conceived the idea of taking a post in this household and trying to find out if any connection existed between Sir Reuben and the Mpala Gold Fields. For obvious reasons I concealed my real name, and I'll admit frankly that I used a forged reference.

"There were many applicants for the post, most of them with better qualifications than mine, so—well, M. Poirot, I wrote a beautiful letter from the Duchess of Perthshire, who I knew had gone to America. I thought a duchess would have a great effect upon Lady Astwell, and I was quite right. She engaged me on the spot.

"Since then I have been that hateful thing, a spy, and until lately with no success. Sir Reuben is not a man to give away his business secrets, but when Victor Astwell came back from Africa he was less guarded in his talk, and I began to believe that, after all, Humphrey had not been mistaken. My brother came down here about a fortnight before the murder, and I crept out of the house to meet him secretly at night. I told him the things Victor Astwell had said, and he became very excited and assured me I was definitely on the right track.

"But after that things began to go wrong; someone must have seen me stealing out of the house and have reported the matter to Sir Reuben. He became suspicious and hunted up my references, and soon discovered the fact that they were forged. The crisis came on the day of the murder. I think he thought I was after his wife's jewels. Whatever his suspicions were, he had no intention of allowing me to remain any longer at Mon Repos, though he agreed not to prosecute me on account of the references. Lady Astwell took my part throughout and stood up valiantly to Sir Reuben."

She paused. Poirot's face was very grave.

"And now, Mademoiselle," he said, "we come to the night of the murder."

Lily swallowed hard and nodded her head.

“To begin with, M. Poirot, I must tell you that my brother had come down again, and that I had arranged to creep out and meet him once more. I went up to my room, as I have said, but I did not go to bed. Instead, I waited till I thought everyone was asleep, and then stole downstairs again and out by the side door. I met Humphrey and acquainted him in a few hurried words with what had occurred. I told him that I believed the papers he wanted were in Sir Reuben’s safe in the Tower room, and we agreed as a last desperate adventure to try and get hold of them that night.

“I was to go in first and see that the way was clear. I heard the church clock strike twelve as I went in by the side door. I was half-way up the stairs leading to the Tower room, when I heard a thud of something falling, and a voice cried out, ‘My God!’ A minute or two afterwards the door of the Tower room opened, and Charles Leverson came out. I could see his face quite clearly in the moonlight, but I was crouching some way below him on the stairs where it was dark, and he did not see me at all.

“He stood there a moment swaying on his feet and looking ghastly. He seemed to be listening; then with an effort he seemed to pull himself together and, opening the door into the Tower room, called out something about there being no harm done. His voice was quite jaunty and debonair, but his face gave the lie to it. He waited a minute more, and then slowly went on upstairs and out of sight.

“When he had gone I waited a minute or two and then crept to the Tower room door. I had a feeling that something tragic had happened. The main light was out, but the desk lamp was on, and by its light I saw Sir Reuben lying on the floor by the desk. I don’t know how I managed it, but I nerved myself at last to go over and kneel down by him. I saw at once that he was dead, struck down from behind, and also that he couldn’t have been dead long; I touched his hand and it was still quite warm. It was just horrible, M. Poirot. Horrible!”

She shuddered again at the remembrance.

“And then?” said Poirot, looking at her keenly.

Lily Margrave nodded.

"Yes, M. Poirot, I know what you are thinking. Why didn't I give the alarm and raise the house? I should have done so, I know, but it came over me in a flash, as I knelt there, that my quarrel with Sir Reuben, my stealing out to meet Humphrey, the fact that I was being sent away on the morrow, made a fatal sequence. They would say that I had let Humphrey in, and that Humphrey had killed Sir Reuben out of revenge. If I said that I had seen Charles Leverson leaving the room, no one would believe me.

"It was terrible, M. Poirot! I knelt there, and thought and thought, and the more I thought the more my nerve failed me. Presently I noticed Sir Reuben's keys which had dropped from his pocket as he fell. Among them was the key of the safe, the combination word I already knew, since Lady Astwell had mentioned it once in my hearing. I went over to that safe, M. Poirot, unlocked it and rummaged through the papers I found there.

"In the end I found what I was looking for. Humphrey had been perfectly right. Sir Reuben was behind the Mpala Gold Fields, and he had deliberately swindled Humphrey. That made it all the worse. It gave a perfectly definite motive for Humphrey having committed the crime. I put the papers back in the safe, left the key in the door of it, and went straight upstairs to my room. In the morning I pretended to be surprised and horror-stricken, like everyone else, when the housemaid discovered the body."

She stopped and looked piteously across at Poirot.

"You do believe me, M. Poirot. Oh, do say you believe me!"

"I believe you, Mademoiselle," said Poirot; "you have explained many things that puzzled me. Your absolute certainty, for one thing, that Charles Leverson had committed the crime, and at the same time your persistent efforts to keep me from coming down here."

Lily nodded.

"I was afraid of you," she admitted frankly. "Lady Astwell could not know, as I did, that Charles was guilty, and I couldn't say anything. I hoped against hope that you would refuse to take the case."

"But for that obvious anxiety on your part, I might have done so," said Poirot drily.

Lily looked at him swiftly, her lips trembled a little.

"And now, M. Poirot, what—what are you going to do?"

"As far as you are concerned, Mademoiselle, nothing. I believe your story, and I accept it. The next step is to go to London and see Inspector Miller."

"And then?" asked Lily.

"And then," said Poirot, "we shall see."

Outside the door of the study he looked once more at the little square of stained green chiffon which he held in his hand.

"Amazing," he murmured to himself complacently, "the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot."

Detective-Inspector Miller was not particularly fond of M. Hercule Poirot. He did not belong to that small band of inspectors at the Yard who welcomed the little Belgian's cooperation. He was wont to say that Hercule Poirot was much overrated. In this case he felt pretty sure of himself, and greeted Poirot with high good humour in consequence.

"Acting for Lady Astwell, are you? Well, you have taken up a mare's nest in that case."

"There is, then, no possible doubt about the matter?"

Miller winked. "Never was a clearer case, short of catching a murderer absolutely red-handed."

"M. Leverson has made a statement, I understand?"

"He had better have kept his mouth shut," said the detective. "He repeats over and over again that he went straight up to his room and never went near his uncle. That's a fool story on the face of it."

“It is certainly against the weight of evidence,” murmured Poirot. “How does he strike you, this young M. Leverson?”

“Darned young fool.”

“A weak character, eh?”

The inspector nodded.

“One would hardly think a young man of that type would have the—how do you say it—the bowels to commit such a crime.”

“On the face of it, no,” agreed the inspector. “But, bless you, I have come across the same thing many times. Get a weak, dissipated young man into a corner, fill him up with a drop too much to drink, and for a limited amount of time you can turn him into a fire-eater. A weak man in a corner is more dangerous than a strong man.”

“That is true, yes; that is true what you say.”

Miller unbent a little further.

“Of course, it is all right for you, M. Poirot,” he said. “You get your fees just the same, and naturally you have to make a pretence of examining the evidence to satisfy her ladyship. I can understand all that.”

“You understand such interesting things,” murmured Poirot, and took his leave.

His next call was upon the solicitor representing Charles Leverson. Mr. Mayhew was a thin, dry, cautious gentleman. He received Poirot with reserve. Poirot, however, had his own ways of inducing confidence. In ten minutes’ time the two were talking together amicably.

“You will understand,” said Poirot, “I am acting in this case solely on behalf of Mr. Leverson. That is Lady Astwell’s wish. She is convinced that he is not guilty.”

“Yes, yes, quite so,” said Mr. Mayhew without enthusiasm.

Poirot’s eyes twinkled. “You do not perhaps attach much importance to the opinions of Lady Astwell?” he suggested.

“She might be just as sure of his guilt tomorrow,” said the lawyer drily.

“Her intuitions are not evidence certainly,” agreed Poirot, “and on the face of it the case looks very black against this poor young man.”

“It is a pity he said what he did to the police,” said the lawyer; “it will be no good his sticking to that story.”

“Has he stuck to it with you?” inquired Poirot.

Mayhew nodded. “It never varies an iota. He repeats it like a parrot.”

“And that is what destroys your faith in him,” mused the other. “Ah, don’t deny it,” he added quickly, holding up an arresting hand. “I see it only too plainly. In your heart you believe him guilty. But listen now to me, to me, Hercule Poirot. I present to you a case.

“This young man comes home, he has drunk the cocktail, the cocktail, and again the cocktail, also without doubt the English whisky and soda many times. He is full of, what you call it? the courage Dutch, and in that mood he let himself into the house with his latchkey, and he goes with unsteady steps up to the Tower room. He looks in at the door and sees in the dim light his uncle, apparently bending over the desk.

“M. Leverson is full, as we have said, of the courage Dutch. He lets himself go, he tells his uncle just what he thinks of him. He defies him, he insults him, and the more his uncle does not answer back, the more he is encouraged to go on, to repeat himself, to say the same thing over and over again, and each time more loudly. But at last the continued silence of his uncle awakens an apprehension. He goes nearer to him, he lays his hand on his uncle’s shoulder, and his uncle’s figure crumples under his touch and sinks in a heap to the ground.

“He is sobered then, this M. Leverson. The chair falls with a crash, and he bends over Sir Reuben. He realizes what has happened, he looks at his hand covered with something warm and red. He is in a panic then, he would give anything on earth to recall the cry which has just sprung from his lips, echoing through the house. Mechanically he picks up the chair, then he hastens out through the door and listens. He fancies he hears a sound, and immediately, automatically, he pretends to be speaking to his uncle through the open door.

"The sound is not repeated. He is convinced he has been mistaken in thinking he heard one. Now all is silence, he creeps up to his room, and at once it occurs to him how much better it will be if he pretends never to have been near his uncle that night. So he tells his story. Parsons at that time, remember, has said nothing of what he heard. When he does do so, it is too late for M. Leverson to change. He is stupid, and he is obstinate, he sticks to his story. Tell me, Monsieur, is that not possible?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, "I suppose in the way you put it that it is possible."

Poirot rose to his feet.

"You have the privilege of seeing M. Leverson," he said. "Put to him the story I have told you, and ask him if it is not true."

Outside the lawyer's office, Poirot hailed a taxi.

"Three-four-eight Harley Street," he murmured to the driver.

Poirot's departure for London had taken Lady Astwell by surprise, for the little man had not made any mention of what he proposed doing. On his return, after an absence of twenty-four hours, he was informed by Parsons that Lady Astwell would like to see him as soon as possible. Poirot found the lady in her own boudoir. She was lying down on the divan, her head propped up by cushions, and she looked startlingly ill and haggard; far more so than she had done on the day Poirot arrived.

"So you have come back, M. Poirot?"

"I have returned, Madame."

“You went to London?”

Poirot nodded.

“You didn’t tell me you were going,” said Lady Astwell sharply.

“A thousand apologies, Madame, I am in error, I should have done so. La prochaine fois—”

“You will do exactly the same,” interrupted Lady Astwell with a shrewd touch of humour. “Do things first and tell people afterwards, that is your motto right enough.”

“Perhaps it has also been Madame’s motto?” His eyes twinkled.

“Now and then, perhaps,” admitted the other. “What did you go up to London for, M. Poirot? You can tell me now, I suppose?”

“I had an interview with the good Inspector Miller, and also with the excellent Mr. Mayhew.”

Lady Astwell’s eyes searched his face.

“And you think, now—?” she said slowly.

Poirot’s eyes were fixed on her steadily.

“That there is a possibility of Charles Leverson’s innocence,” he said gravely.

“Ah!” Lady Astwell half-sprung up, sending two cushions rolling to the ground. “I was right, then, I was right!”

“I said a possibility, Madame, that is all.”

Something in his tone seemed to strike her. She raised herself on one elbow and regarded him piercingly.

“Can I do anything?” she asked.

"Yes," he nodded his head, "you can tell me, Lady Astwell, why you suspect Owen Trefusis."

"I have told you I know—that's all."

"Unfortunately, that is not enough," said Poirot drily. "Cast your mind back to the fatal evening, Madame. Remember each detail, each tiny happening. What did you notice or observe about the secretary? I, Hercule Poirot, tell you there must have been something."

Lady Astwell shook her head.

"I hardly noticed him at all that evening," she said, "and I certainly was not thinking of him."

"Your mind was taken up by something else?"

"Yes."

"With your husband's animus against Miss Lily Margrave?"

"That's right," said Lady Astwell, nodding her head; "you seem to know all about it, M. Poirot."

"Me, I know everything," declared the little man with an absurdly grandiose air.

"I am fond of Lily, M. Poirot; you have seen that for yourself. Reuben began kicking up a rumpus about some reference or other of hers. Mind you, I don't say she hadn't cheated about it. She had. But, bless you, I have done many worse things than that in the old days. You have got to be up to all sorts of tricks to get round theatrical managers. There is nothing I wouldn't have written, or said, or done, in my time.

"Lily wanted this job, and she put in a lot of slick work that was not quite—well, quite the thing, you know. Men are so stupid about that sort of thing; Lily really might have been a bank clerk absconding with millions for the fuss he made about it. I was terribly worried all the evening, because, although I could usually get round Reuben in the end, he was terribly pigheaded at times, poor darling. So of course I hadn't time to go noticing secretaries, not that one does notice Mr. Trefusis much, anyway. He is just there and that's all there is to it."

"I have noticed that fact about M. Trefusis," said Poirot. "His is not a personality that stands forth, that shines, that hits you cr-r-rack."

"No," said Lady Astwell, "he is not like Victor."

"M. Victor Astwell is, I should say, explosive."

"That is a splendid word for him," said Lady Astwell. "He explodes all over the house, like one of those thingimyjig firework things."

"A somewhat quick temper, I should imagine?" suggested Poirot.

"Oh, he's a perfect devil when roused," said Lady Astwell, "but bless you, I'm not afraid of him. All bark and no bite to Victor."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"And you can tell me nothing about the secretary that evening?" he murmured gently.

"I tell you, M. Poirot, I know. It's intuition. A woman's intuition—"

"Will not hang a man," said Poirot, "and what is more to the point, it will not save a man from being hanged. Lady Astwell, if you sincerely believe that M. Leverson is innocent, and that your suspicions of the secretary are well-founded, will you consent to a little experiment?"

"What kind of an experiment?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously.

"Will you permit yourself to be put into a condition of hypnosis?"

"Whatever for?"

Poirot leaned forward.

“If I were to tell you, Madame, that your intuition is based on certain facts recorded subconsciously, you would probably be sceptical. I will only say, then, that this experiment I propose may be of great importance to that unfortunate young man, Charles Leverson. You will not refuse?”

“Who is going to put me into a trance?” demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously. “You?”

“A friend of mine, Lady Astwell, arrives, if I mistake not, at this very minute. I hear the wheels of the car outside.”

“Who is he?”

“A Dr. Cazalet of Harley Street.”

“Is he—all right?” asked Lady Astwell apprehensively.

“He is not a quack, Madame, if that is what you mean. You can trust yourself in his hands quite safely.”

“Well,” said Lady Astwell with a sigh, “I think it is all bunkum, but you can try if you like. Nobody is going to say that I stood in your way.”

“A thousand thanks, Madame.”

Poirot hurried from the room. In a few minutes he returned ushering in a cheerful, round-faced little man, with spectacles, who was very upsetting to Lady Astwell’s conception of what a hypnotist should look like. Poirot introduced them.

“Well,” said Lady Astwell good-humouredly, “how do we start this tomfoolery?”

“Quite simple, Lady Astwell, quite simple,” said the little doctor. “Just lean back, so—that’s right, that’s right. No need to be uneasy.”

“I am not in the least uneasy,” said Lady Astwell. “I should like to see anyone hypnotizing me against my will.”

Dr. Cazalet smiled broadly.

“Yes, but if you consent, it won’t be against your will, will it?” he said cheerfully. “That’s right. Turn off that other light, will you, M. Poirot? Just let yourself go to sleep, Lady Astwell.”

He shifted his position a little.

“It’s getting late. You are sleepy—very sleepy. Your eyelids are heavy, they are closing—closing—closing. Soon you will be asleep. . . .”

His voice droned on, low, soothing, and monotonous. Presently he leaned forward and gently lifted Lady Astwell’s right eyelid. Then he turned to Poirot, nodding in a satisfied manner.

“That’s all right,” he said in a low voice. “Shall I go ahead?”

“If you please.”

The doctor spoke out sharply and authoritatively: “You are asleep, Lady Astwell, but you hear me, and you can answer my questions.”

Without stirring or raising an eyelid, the motionless figure on the sofa replied in a low, monotonous voice:

“I hear you. I can answer your questions.”

“Lady Astwell, I want you to go back to the evening on which your husband was murdered. You remember that evening?”

“Yes.”

“You are at the dinner table. Describe to me what you saw and felt.”

The prone figure stirred a little restlessly.

“I am in great distress. I am worried about Lily.”

“We know that; tell us what you saw.”

“Victor is eating all the salted almonds; he is greedy. Tomorrow I shall tell Parsons not to put the dish on that side of the table.”

“Go on, Lady Astwell.”

“Reuben is in a bad humour tonight. I don’t think it is altogether about Lily. It is something to do with business. Victor looks at him in a queer way.”

“Tell us about Mr. Trefusis, Lady Astwell.”

“His left shirt cuff is frayed. He puts a lot of grease on his hair. I wish men didn’t, it ruins the covers in the drawing room.”

Cazalet looked at Poirot; the other made a motion with his head.

“It is after dinner, Lady Astwell, you are having coffee. Describe the scene to me.”

“The coffee is good tonight. It varies. Cook is very unreliable over her coffee. Lily keeps looking out of the window, I don’t know why. Now Reuben comes into the room; he is in one of his worst moods tonight, and bursts out with a perfect flood of abuse to poor Mr. Trefusis. Mr. Trefusis has his hand round the paper knife, the big one with the sharp blade like a knife. How hard he is grasping it; his knuckles are quite white. Look, he has dug it so hard in the table that the point snaps. He holds it just as you would hold a dagger you were going to stick into someone. There, they have gone out together now. Lily has got her green evening dress on; she looks so pretty in green, just like a lily. I must have the covers cleaned next week.”

“Just a minute, Lady Astwell.”

The doctor leaned across to Poirot.

“We have got it, I think,” he murmured; “that action with the paper knife, that’s what convinced her that the secretary did the thing.”

“Let us go on to the Tower room now.”

The doctor nodded, and began once more to question Lady Astwell in his high, decisive voice.

“It is later in the evening; you are in the Tower room with your husband. You and he have had a terrible scene together, have you not?”

Again the figure stirred uneasily.

“Yes—terrible—terrible. We said dreadful things—both of us.”

“Never mind that now. You can see the room clearly, the curtains were drawn, the lights were on.”

“Not the middle light, only the desk light.”

“You are leaving your husband now, you are saying good night to him.”

“No, I was too angry.”

“It is the last time you will see him; very soon he will be murdered. Do you know who murdered him, Lady Astwell?”

“Yes. Mr. Trefusis.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of the bulge—the bulge in the curtain.”

“There was a bulge in the curtain?”

“Yes.”

“You saw it?”

“Yes. I almost touched it.”

“Was there a man concealed there—Mr. Trefusis?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

For the first time the monotonous answering voice hesitated and lost confidence.

“I—I—because of the paper knife.”

Poirot and the doctor again interchanged swift glances.

“I don’t understand you, Lady Astwell. There was a bulge in the curtain, you say? Someone concealed there? You didn’t see that person?”

“No.”

“You thought it was Mr. Trefusis because of the way he held the paper knife earlier?”

“Yes.”

“But Mr. Trefusis had gone to bed, had he not?”

“Yes—yes, that’s right, he had gone away to his room.”

“So he couldn’t have been behind the curtain in the window?”

“No—no, of course not, he wasn’t there.”

“He had said good night to your husband some time before, hadn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t see him again?”

“No.”

She was stirring now, throwing herself about, moaning faintly.

“She is coming out,” said the doctor. “Well, I think we have got all we can, eh?”

Poirot nodded. The doctor leaned over Lady Astwell.

“You are waking,” he murmured softly. “You are waking now. In another minute you will open your eyes.”

The two men waited, and presently Lady Astwell sat upright and stared at them both.

“Have I been having a nap?”

“That’s it, Lady Astwell, just a little sleep,” said the doctor.

She looked at him.

“Some of your hocus-pocus, eh?”

“You don’t feel any the worse, I hope,” he asked.

Lady Astwell yawned.

“I feel rather tired and done up.”

The doctor rose.

“I will ask them to send you up some coffee,” he said, “and we will leave you for the present.”

“Did I—say anything?” Lady Astwell called after them as they reached the door.

Poirot smiled back at her.

“Nothing of great importance, Madame. You informed us that the drawing room covers needed cleaning.”

“So they do,” said Lady Astwell. “You needn’t have put me into a trance to get me to tell you that.” She laughed good-humouredly. “Anything more?”

“Do you remember M. Trefusis picking up a paper knife in the drawing room that night?” asked Poirot.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” said Lady Astwell. “He may have done so.”

“Does a bulge in the curtain convey anything to you?”

Lady Astwell frowned.

“I seem to remember,” she said slowly. “No—it’s gone, and yet—”

“Do not distress yourself, Lady Astwell,” said Poirot quickly; “it is of no importance—of no importance whatever.”

The doctor went with Poirot to the latter’s room.

“Well,” said Cazalet, “I think this explains things pretty clearly. No doubt when Sir Reuben was dressing down the secretary, the latter grabbed tight hold on a paper knife, and had to exercise a good deal of self-control to prevent himself answering back. Lady Astwell’s conscious mind was wholly taken up with the problem of Lily Margrave, but her subconscious mind noticed and misconstrued the action.

“It implanted in her the firm conviction that Trefusis murdered Sir Reuben. Now we come to the bulge in the curtain. That is interesting. I take it from what you have told me of the Tower room that the desk was right in the window. There are curtains across that window, of course?”

“Yes, mon ami, black velvet curtains.”

“And there is room in the embrasure of the window for anyone to remain concealed behind them?”

“There would be just room, I think.”

“Then there seems at least a possibility,” said the doctor slowly, “that someone was concealed in the room, but if so it could not be the secretary, since they both saw him leave the room. It could not be Victor Astwell, for Trefusis met him going out, and it could not be Lily Margrave. Whoever it was must have been concealed there before Sir Reuben entered the room that evening. You have told me pretty well how the land lies. Now what about Captain Naylor? Could it have been he who was concealed there?”

“It is always possible,” admitted Poirot. “He certainly dined at the hotel, but how soon he went out afterwards is difficult to fix exactly. He returned about half past twelve.”

“Then it might have been he,” said the doctor, “and if so, he committed the crime. He had the motive, and there was a weapon near at hand. You don’t seem satisfied with the idea, though?”

“Me, I have other ideas,” confessed Poirot. “Tell me now, M. le Docteur, supposing for one minute that Lady Astwell herself had committed this crime, would she necessarily betray the fact in the hypnotic state?”

The doctor whistled.

“So that’s what you are getting at? Lady Astwell is the criminal, eh? Of course—it is possible; I never thought of it till this minute. She was the last to be with him, and no one saw him alive afterwards. As to your question, I should be inclined to say—no. Lady Astwell would go into the hypnotic state with a strong mental reservation to say nothing of her own part in the crime. She would answer my questions truthfully, but she would be dumb on that one point. Yet I should hardly have expected her to be so insistent on Mr. Trefusis’s guilt.”

“I comprehend,” said Poirot. “But I have not said that I believe Lady Astwell to be the criminal. It is a suggestion, that is all.”

“It is an interesting case,” said the doctor after a minute or two. “Granting Charles Leverson is innocent, there are so many possibilities, Humphrey Naylor, Lady Astwell, and even Lily Margrave.”

“There is another you have not mentioned,” said Poirot quietly, “Victor Astwell. According to his own story, he sat in his room with the door open waiting for Charles Leverson’s return, but we have only his own words for it, you comprehend?”

"He is the bad-tempered fellow, isn't he?" asked the doctor. "The one you told me about?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

The doctor rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be getting back to town. You will let me know how things shape, won't you?"

After the doctor had left, Poirot pulled the bell for George.

"A cup of tisane, George. My nerves are much disturbed."

"Certainly, sir," said George. "I will prepare it immediately."

Ten minutes later he brought a steaming cup to his master. Poirot inhaled the noxious fumes with pleasure. As he sipped it, he soliloquized aloud.

"The chase is different all over the world. To catch the fox you ride hard with the dogs. You shout, you run, it is a matter of speed. I have not shot the stag myself, but I understand that to do so you crawl for many long, long hours upon your stomach. My friend Hastings has recounted the affair to me. Our method here, my good George, must be neither of these. Let us reflect upon the household cat. For many long, weary hours, he watches the mousehole, he makes no movement, he betrays no energy, but—he does not go away."

He sighed and put the empty cup down on its saucer.

"I told you to pack for a few days. Tomorrow, my good George, you will go to London and bring down what is necessary for a fortnight."

"Very good, sir," said George. As usual he displayed no emotion.

The apparently permanent presence of Hercule Poirot at Mon Repos was disquieting to many people. Victor Astwell remonstrated with his sister-in-law about it.

"It's all very well, Nancy. You don't know what fellows of that kind are like. He has found jolly comfortable quarters here, and he is evidently going to settle down comfortably for about a month, charging you several guineas a day all the while."

Lady Astwell's reply was to the effect that she could manage her own affairs without interference.

Lily Margrave tried earnestly to conceal her perturbation. At the time, she had felt sure that Poirot believed her story. Now she was not so certain.

Poirot did not play an entirely quiescent game. On the fifth day of his sojourn he brought down a small thumbograph album to dinner. As a method of getting the thumbprints of the household, it seemed a rather clumsy device, yet not perhaps so clumsy as it seemed, since no one could afford to refuse their thumbprints. Only after the little man had retired to bed did Victor Astwell state his views.

"You see what it means, Nancy. He is out after one of us."

"Don't be absurd, Victor."

"Well, what other meaning could that blinking little book of his have?"

"M. Poirot knows what he is doing," said Lady Astwell complacently, and looked with some meaning at Owen Trefusis.

On another occasion, Poirot introduced the game of tracing footprints on a sheet of paper. The following morning, going with his soft cat-like tread into the library, the detective startled Owen Trefusis, who leaped from his chair as though he had been shot.

"You must really excuse me, M. Poirot," he said primly, "but you have us on the jump."

"Indeed, how is that?" demanded the little man innocently.

"I will admit," said the secretary, "that I thought the case against Charles Leverson utterly overwhelming. You apparently do not find it so."

Poirot was standing looking out of the window. He turned suddenly to the other.

“I shall tell you something, M. Trefusis—in confidence.”

“Yes?”

Poirot seemed in no hurry to begin. He waited a minute, hesitating. When he did speak, the opening words were coincident with the opening and shutting of the front door. For a man saying something in confidence, he spoke rather loudly, his voice drowning the sound of a footstep in the hall outside.

“I shall tell you this in confidence, Mr. Trefusis. There is new evidence. It goes to prove that when Charles Leverson entered the Tower room that night, Sir Reuben was already dead.”

The secretary stared at him.

“But what evidence? Why have we not heard of it?”

“You will hear,” said the little man mysteriously. “In the meantime, you and I alone know the secret.”

He skipped nimbly out of the room, and almost collided with Victor Astwell in the hall outside.

“You have just come in, eh, monsieur?”

Astwell nodded.

“Beastly day outside,” he said breathing hard, “cold and blowy.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “I shall not promenade myself today—me, I am like a cat, I sit by the fire and keep myself warm.”

“Ça marche, George,” he said that evening to the faithful valet, rubbing his hands as he spoke, “they are on the tenterhooks—the jump! It is hard, George, to play the game of the cat, the waiting game, but it answers, yes, it answers wonderfully. Tomorrow we make a further effect.”

On the following day, Trefusis was obliged to go up to town. He went up by the same train as Victor Astwell. No sooner had they left the house than Poirot was galvanized into a fever of activity.

“Come, George, let us hurry to work. If the housemaid should approach these rooms, you must delay her. Speak to her sweet nothings, George, and keep her in the corridor.”

He went first to the secretary’s room, and began a thorough search. Not a drawer or a shelf was left uninspected. Then he replaced everything hurriedly, and declared his quest finished. George, on guard in the doorway, gave way to a deferential cough.

“If you will excuse me, sir?”

“Yes, my good George?”

“The shoes, sir. The two pairs of brown shoes were on the second shelf, and the patent leather ones were on the shelf underneath. In replacing them you have reversed the order.”

“Marvellous!” cried Poirot, holding up his hands. “But let us not distress ourselves over that. It is of no importance, I assure you, George. Never will M. Trefusis notice such a trifling matter.”

“As you think, sir,” said George.

“It is your business to notice such things,” said Poirot encouragingly as he clapped the other on the shoulder. “It reflects credit upon you.”

The valet did not reply, and when, later in the day, the proceeding was repeated in the room of Victor Astwell, he made no comment on the fact that Mr. Astwell’s underclothing was not returned to its drawers strictly according to plan. Yet, in the second case at least, events proved the valet to be right and Poirot wrong. Victor Astwell came storming into the drawing room that evening.

“Now, look here, you blasted little Belgian jackanapes, what do you mean by searching my room? What the devil do you think you are going to find there? I won’t have it, do you hear? That’s what comes of having a ferreting little spy in the house.”

Poirot’s hands spread themselves out eloquently as his words tumbled one over the other. He offered a hundred apologies, a thousand, a million. He had been maladroit, officious, he was confused. He had taken an unwarranted liberty. In the end the infuriated gentleman was forced to subside, still growling.

And again that evening, sipping his tisane, Poirot murmured to George:

“It marches, my good George, yes—it marches.”

“Friday,” observed Hercule Poirot thoughtfully, “is my lucky day.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“You are not superstitious, perhaps, my good George?”

“I prefer not to sit down thirteen at table, sir, and I am adverse to passing under ladders. I have no superstitions about a Friday, sir.”

“That is well,” said Poirot, “for, see you, today we make our Waterloo.”

“Really, sir.”

“You have such enthusiasm, my good George, you do not even ask what I propose to do.”

“And what is that, sir?”

“Today, George, I make a final thorough search of the Tower room.”

True enough, after breakfast, Poirot, with the permission of Lady Astwell, went to the scene of the crime. There, at various times of the morning, members of the household saw him crawling about on all fours, examining minutely the black velvet curtains and standing on high chairs to examine the picture frames on the wall. Lady Astwell for the first time displayed uneasiness.

“I have to admit it,” she said. “He is getting on my nerves at last. He has something up his sleeve, and I don’t know what it is. And the way he is crawling about on the floor up there like a dog makes me downright shivery. What is he looking for, I’d like to know? Lily, my dear, I wish you would go up and see what he is up to now. No, on the whole, I’d rather you stayed with me.”

“Shall I go, Lady Astwell?” asked the secretary, rising from the desk.

“If you would, Mr. Trefusis.”

Owen Trefusis left the room and mounted the stairs to the Tower room. At first glance, he thought the room was empty, there was certainly no sign of Hercule Poirot there. He was just returning to go down again when a sound caught his ears; he then saw the little man halfway down the spiral staircase that led to the bedroom above.

He was on his hands and knees; in his left hand was a little pocket lens, and through this he was examining minutely something on the woodwork beside the stair carpet.

As the secretary watched him, he uttered a sudden grunt, and slipped the lens into his pocket. He then rose to his feet, holding something between his finger and thumb. At that moment he became aware of the secretary’s presence.

“Ah, hah! M. Trefusis, I didn’t hear you enter.”

He was in that moment a different man. Triumph and exultation beamed all over his face. Trefusis stared at him in surprise.

“What is the matter, M. Poirot? You look very pleased.”

The little man puffed out his chest.

“Yes, indeed. See you I have at last found that which I have been looking for from the beginning. I have here between my finger and thumb the one thing necessary to convict the criminal.”

“Then,” the secretary raised his eyebrows, “it was not Charles Leverson?”

“It was not Charles Leverson,” said Poirot. “Until this moment, though I know the criminal, I am not sure of his name, but at last all is clear.”

He stepped down the stairs and tapped the secretary on the shoulder.

“I am obliged to go to London immediately. Speak to Lady Astwell for me. Will you request of her that everyone should be assembled in the Tower room this evening at nine o’clock? I shall be there then, and I shall reveal the truth. Ah, me, but I am well content.”

And breaking into a fantastic little dance, he skipped from the Tower room. Trefusis was left staring after him.

A few minutes later Poirot appeared in the library, demanding if anyone could supply him with a little cardboard box.

“Unfortunately, I have not such a thing with me,” he explained, “and there is something of great value that it is necessary for me to put inside.”

From one of the drawers in the desk Trefusis produced a small box, and Poirot professed himself highly delighted with it.

He hurried upstairs with his treasure trove; meeting George on the landing, he handed the box to him.

“There is something of great importance inside,” he explained. “Place it, my good George, in the second drawer of my dressing table, beside the jewel case that contains my pearl studs.”

“Very good, sir,” said George.

“Do not break it,” said Poirot. “Be very careful. Inside that box is something that will hang a criminal.”

“You don’t say, sir,” said George.

Poirot hurried down the stairs again and, seizing his hat, departed from the house at a brisk run.

His return was more unostentatious. The faithful George, according to orders, admitted him by the side door.

“They are all in the Tower room?” inquired Poirot.

“Yes, sir.”

There was a murmured interchange of a few words, and then Poirot mounted with the triumphant step of the victor to that room where the murder had taken place less than a month ago. His eyes swept around the room. They were all there, Lady Astwell, Victor Astwell, Lily Margrave, the secretary, and Parsons, the butler. The latter was hovering by the door uncertainly.

“George, sir, said I should be needed here,” said Parsons as Poirot made his appearance. “I don’t know if that is right, sir?”

“Quite right,” said Poirot. “Remain, I pray of you.”

He advanced to the middle of the room.

“This has been a case of great interest,” he said in a slow, reflective voice. “It is interesting because anyone might have murdered Sir Reuben Astwell. Who inherits his money? Charles Leverson and Lady Astwell. Who was with him last that night? Lady Astwell. Who quarrelled with him violently? Again Lady Astwell.”

“What are you talking about?” cried Lady Astwell. “I don’t understand, I —”

“But someone else quarrelled with Sir Reuben,” continued Poirot in a pensive voice. “Someone else left him that night white with rage. Supposing Lady Astwell left her husband alive at a quarter to twelve that night, there would be ten minutes before Mr. Charles Leverson returned, ten minutes in which it would be possible for someone from the second floor to steal down and do the deed, and then return to his room again.”

Victor Astwell sprang up with a cry.

“What the hell—?” He stopped, choking with rage.

“In a rage, Mr. Astwell, you once killed a man in West Africa.”

“I don’t believe it,” cried Lily Margrave.

She came forward, her hands clenched, two bright spots of colour in her cheeks.

“I don’t believe it,” repeated the girl. She came close to Victor Astwell’s side.

“It’s true, Lily,” said Astwell, “but there are things this man doesn’t know. The fellow I killed was a witchdoctor who had just massacred fifteen children. I consider that I was justified.”

Lily came up to Poirot.

“M. Poirot,” she said earnestly, “you are wrong. Because a man has a sharp temper, because he breaks out and says all kinds of things, that is not any reason why he should do a murder. I know—I know, I tell you—that Mr. Astwell is incapable of such a thing.”

Poirot looked at her, a very curious smile on his face. Then he took her hand in his and patted it gently.

“You see, Mademoiselle,” he said gently, “you also have your intuitions. So you believe in Mr. Astwell, do you?”

Lily spoke quietly.

“Mr. Astwell is a good man,” she said, “and he is honest. He had nothing to do with the inside work of the Mpala Gold Fields. He is good through and through, and—I have promised to marry him.”

Victor Astwell came to her side and took her other hand.

“Before God, M. Poirot,” he said, “I didn’t kill my brother.”

“I know you did not,” said Poirot.

His eyes swept around the room.

“Listen, my friends. In a hypnotic trance, Lady Astwell mentioned having seen a bulge in the curtain that night.”

Everyone’s eyes swept to the window.

“You mean there was a burglar concealed there?” exclaimed Victor Astwell. “What a splendid solution!”

“Ah,” said Poirot gently. “But it was not that curtain.”

He wheeled around and pointed to the curtain that masked the little staircase.

“Sir Reuben used the bedroom the night prior to the crime. He breakfasted in bed, and he had Mr. Trefusis up there to give him instructions. I don’t know what it was that Mr. Trefusis left in that bedroom, but there was something. When he said good night to Sir Reuben and Lady Astwell, he remembered this thing and ran up the stairs to fetch it. I don’t think either the husband or wife noticed him, for they had already begun a violent discussion. They were in the middle of this quarrel when Mr. Trefusis came down the stairs again.

“The things they were saying to each other were of so intimate and personal a nature that Mr. Trefusis was placed in a very awkward position. It was clear to him that they imagined he had left the room some time ago. Fearing to arouse Sir Reuben’s anger against himself, he decided to remain where he was and slip out later. He stayed there behind the curtain, and as Lady

Astwell left the room she subconsciously noticed the outline of his form there.

“When Lady Astwell had left the room, Trefusis tried to steal out unobserved, but Sir Reuben happened to turn his head, and became aware of the secretary’s presence. Already in a bad temper, Sir Reuben hurled abuse at his secretary, and accused him of deliberately eavesdropping and spying.

“Messieurs and Mesdames, I am a student of psychology. All through this case I have looked, not for the bad-tempered man or woman, for bad temper is its own safety valve. He who can bark does not bite. No, I have looked for the good-tempered man, for the man who is patient and self-controlled, for the man who for nine years has played the part of the under dog. There is no strain so great as that which has endured for years, there is no resentment like that which accumulates slowly.

“For nine years Sir Reuben has bullied and browbeaten his secretary, and for nine years that man has endured in silence. But there comes a day when at last the strain reaches its breaking point. Something snaps! It was so that night. Sir Reuben sat down at his desk again, but the secretary, instead of turning humbly and meekly to the door, picks up the heavy wooden club, and strikes down the man who had bullied him once too often.”

He turned to Trefusis, who was staring at him as though turned to stone.

“It was so simple, your alibi. Mr. Astwell thought you were in your room, but no one saw you go there. You were just stealing out after striking down Sir Reuben when you heard a sound, and you hastened back to cover, behind the curtain. You were behind there when Charles Leverson entered the room, you were there when Lily Margrave came. It was not till long after that that you crept up through a silent house to your bedroom. Do you deny it?”

Trefusis began to stammer.

“I—I never—”

“Ah! Let us finish this. For two weeks now I have played the comedy. I have showed you the net closing slowly around you. The fingerprints, footprints, the search of your room with the things artistically replaced. I have struck terror into you with all of this; you have lain awake at night fearing and wondering; did you leave a fingerprint in the room or a footprint somewhere?

“Again and again you have gone over the events of that night wondering what you have done or left undone, and so I brought you to the state where you made a slip. I saw the fear leap into your eyes today when I picked up something from the stairs where you had stood hidden that night. Then I made a great parade, the little box, the entrusting of it to George, and I go out.”

Poirot turned towards the door.

“George?”

“I am here, sir.”

The valet came forward.

“Will you tell these ladies and gentlemen what my instructions were?”

“I was to remain concealed in the wardrobe in your room, sir, having placed the cardboard box where you told me to. At half past three this afternoon, sir, Mr. Trefusis entered the room; he went to the drawer and took out the box in question.”

“And in that box,” continued Poirot, “was a common pin. Me, I speak always the truth. I did pick up something on the stairs this morning. That is your English saying, is it not? ‘See a pin and pick it up, all the day you’ll have good luck.’ Me, I have had good luck, I have found the murderer.”

He turned to the secretary.

“You see?” he said gently. “You betrayed yourself.”

Suddenly Trefusis broke down. He sank into a chair sobbing, his face buried in his hands.

“I was mad,” he groaned. “I was mad. But, oh, my God, he badgered and bullied me beyond bearing. For years I had hated and loathed him.”

“I knew!” cried Lady Astwell.

She sprang forward, her face irradiated with savage triumph.

“I knew that man had done it.”

She stood there, savage and triumphant.

“And you were right,” said Poirot. “One may call things by different names, but the fact remains. Your ‘intuition,’ Lady Astwell, proved correct. I felicitate you.”

Two

THE PLYMOUTH EXPRESS

I

Alec Simpson, RN, stepped from the platform at Newton Abbot into a first-class compartment of the Plymouth Express. A porter followed him with a heavy suitcase. He was about to swing it up to the rack, but the young sailor stopped him.

“No—leave it on the seat. I’ll put it up later. Here you are.”

“Thank you, sir.” The porter, generously tipped, withdrew.

Doors banged; a stentorian voice shouted: “Plymouth only. Change for Torquay. Plymouth next stop.” Then a whistle blew, and the train drew slowly out of the station.

Lieutenant Simpson had the carriage to himself. The December air was chilly, and he pulled up the window. Then he sniffed vaguely, and frowned. What a smell there was! Reminded him of that time in hospital, and the operation on his leg. Yes, chloroform; that was it!

He let the window down again, changing his seat to one with its back to the engine. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it. For a little time he sat inactive, looking out into the night and smoking.

At last he roused himself, and opening the suitcase, took out some papers and magazines, then closed the suitcase again and endeavoured to shove it under the opposite seat—without success. Some obstacle resisted it. He shoved harder with rising impatience, but it still stuck out halfway into the carriage.

“Why the devil won’t it go in?” he muttered, and hauling it out completely, he stooped down and peered under the seat. . . .

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication cord.

II

“Mon ami,” said Poirot, “you have, I know, been deeply interested in this mystery of the Plymouth Express. Read this.”

I picked up the note he flicked across the table to me. It was brief and to the point.

Dear Sir,

I shall be obliged if you will call upon me at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,

Ebenezer Halliday

The connection was not clear to my mind, and I looked inquiringly at Poirot.

For answer he took up the newspaper and read aloud: “ ‘A sensational discovery was made last night. A young naval officer returning to Plymouth found under the seat of his compartment the body of a woman, stabbed through the heart. The officer at once pulled the communication cord, and the train was brought to a standstill. The woman, who was about thirty years of age, and richly dressed, has not yet been identified.’

“And later we have this: ‘The woman found dead in the Plymouth Express has been identified as the Honourable Mrs. Rupert Carrington.’ You see now, my friend? Or if you do not I will add this—Mrs. Rupert Carrington was, before her marriage, Flossie Halliday, daughter of old man Halliday, the steel king of America.”

“And he has sent for you? Splendid!”

“I did him a little service in the past—an affair of bearer bonds. And once, when I was in Paris for a royal visit, I had Mademoiselle Flossie pointed out to me. La jolie petite pensionnaire! She had the joli dot too! It caused trouble. She nearly made a bad affair.”

“How was that?”

“A certain Count de la Rochefour. Un bien mauvais sujet! A bad hat, as you would say. An adventurer pure and simple, who knew how to appeal to a romantic young girl. Luckily her father got wind of it in time. He took her back to America in haste. I heard of her marriage some years later, but I know nothing of her husband.”

“H’m,” I said. “The Honourable Rupert Carrington is no beauty, by all accounts. He’d pretty well run through his own money on the turf, and I should imagine old man Halliday’s dollars came along in the nick of time. I should say that for a good-looking, well-mannered, utterly unscrupulous young scoundrel, it would be hard to find his mate!”

“Ah, the poor little lady! Elle n’est pas bien tombée!”

“I fancy he made it pretty obvious at once that it was her money, and not she, that had attacted him. I believe they drifted apart almost at once. I have heard rumours lately that there was to be a definite legal separation.”

“Old man Halliday is no fool. He would tie up her money pretty tight.”

“I dare say. Anyway, I know as a fact that the Honourable Rupert is said to be extremely hard up.”

“Aha! I wonder—”

“You wonder what?”

“My good friend, do not jump down my throat like that. You are interested, I see. Suppose you accompany me to see Mr. Halliday. There is a taxi stand at the corner.”

III

A few minutes sufficed to whirl us to the superb house in Park Lane rented by the American magnate. We were shown into the library, and almost immediately we were joined by a large stout man, with piercing eyes and an aggressive chin.

“M. Poirot?” said Mr. Halliday. “I guess I don’t need to tell you what I want you for. You’ve read the papers, and I’m never one to let the grass grow under my feet. I happened to hear you were in London, and I remembered the good work you did over those bombs. Never forget a name. I’ve the pick of Scotland Yard, but I’ll have my own man as well. Money no object. All the dollars were made for my little girl—and now she’s gone, I’ll spend my last cent to catch the damned scoundrel that did it! See? So it’s up to you to deliver the goods.”

Poirot bowed.

“I accept, monsieur, all the more willingly that I saw your daughter in Paris several times. And now I will ask you to tell me the circumstances of her journey to Plymouth and any other details that seem to you to bear upon the case.”

“Well, to begin with,” responded Halliday, “she wasn’t going to Plymouth. She was going to join a house party at Avonmead Court, the Duchess of Swansea’s place. She left London by the twelve-fourteen from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at two-fifty. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at all. The twelve-fourteen does a non-stop run to Bristol, afterwards stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter and Newton Abbot. My daughter travelled alone in her carriage, which was reserved as far as Bristol, her maid being in a third-class carriage in the next coach.”

Poirot nodded, and Mr. Halliday went on: “The party at Avonmead Court was to be a very gay one, with several balls, and in consequence my daughter had with her nearly all her jewels—amounting in value, perhaps, to about a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Un moment,” interrupted Poirot. “Who had charge of the jewels? Your daughter, or the maid?”

“My daughter always took charge of them herself, carrying them in a small blue morocco case.”

“Continue, monsieur.”

“At Bristol the maid, Jane Mason, collected her mistress’s dressing bag and wraps, which were with her, and came to the door of Flossie’s compartment. To her intense surprise, my daughter told her that she was not getting out at Bristol, but was going on farther. She directed Mason to get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom. She could have tea in the refreshment room, but she was to wait at the station for her mistress, who would return to Bristol by an up-train in the course of the afternoon. The maid, although very much astonished, did as she was told. She put the luggage in the cloakroom and had some tea. But up-train after up-train came in, and her mistress did not appear. After the arrival of the last train, she left the luggage where it was, and went to a hotel near the station for the night. This morning she read of the tragedy, and returned to town by the first available train.”

“Is there nothing to account for your daughter’s sudden change of plan?”

“Well there is this: According to Jane Mason, at Bristol, Flossie was no longer alone in her carriage. There was a man in it who stood looking out of the farther window so that she could not see his face.”

“The train was a corridor one, of course?”

“Yes.”

“Which side was the corridor?”

“On the platform side. My daughter was standing in the corridor as she talked to Mason.”

“And there is no doubt in your mind—excuse me!” He got up, and carefully straightened the inkstand which was a little askew. “Je vous demande pardon,” he continued, re-seating himself. “It affects my nerves to see anything crooked. Strange, is it not? I was saying, monsieur, that there is no doubt in your mind as to this probably unexpected meeting being the cause of your daughter’s sudden change of plan?”

“It seems the only reasonable supposition.”

“You have no idea as to who the gentleman in question might be?”

The millionaire hesitated for a moment, and then replied: “No—I do not know at all.”

“Now—as to the discovery of the body?”

“It was discovered by a young naval officer who at once gave the alarm. There was a doctor on the train. He examined the body. She had been first chloroformed, and then stabbed. He gave it as his opinion that she had been dead about four hours, so it must have been done not long after leaving Bristol—probably between there and Weston, possibly between Weston and Taunton.”

“And the jewel case?”

“The jewel case, M. Poirot, was missing.”

“One thing more, monsieur. Your daughter’s fortune—to whom does it pass at her death?”

“Flossie made a will soon after her marriage, leaving everything to her husband.” He hesitated for a minute, and then went on: “I may as well tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that I regard my son-in-law as an unprincipled scoundrel, and that, by my advice, my daughter was on the eve of freeing herself from him by legal means—no difficult matter. I settled her money upon her in such a way that he could not touch it during her lifetime, but although they have lived entirely apart for some years, she had frequently acceded to his demands for money, rather than face an open scandal. However, I was determined to put an end to this. At last Flossie agreed, and my lawyers were instructed to take proceedings.”

“And where is Monsieur Carrington?”

"In town. I believe he was away in the country yesterday, but he returned last night."

Poirot considered a little while. Then he said: "I think that is all, monsieur."

"You would like to see the maid, Jane Mason?"

"If you please."

Halliday rang the bell, and gave a short order to the footman.

A few minutes later Jane Mason entered the room, a respectable, hard-featured woman, as emotionless in the face of tragedy as only a good servant can be.

"You will permit me to put a few questions? Your mistress, she was quite as usual before starting yesterday morning? Not excited or flurried?"

"Oh no, sir!"

"But at Bristol she was quite different?"

"Yes, sir, regular upset—so nervous she didn't seem to know what she was saying."

"What did she say exactly?"

"Well, sir, as near as I can remember, she said: 'Mason, I've got to alter my plans. Something has happened—I mean, I'm not getting out here after all. I must go on. Get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom; then have some tea, and wait for me in the station.'

" 'Wait for you here, ma'am?' I asked.

" 'Yes, yes. Don't leave the station. I shall return by a later train. I don't know when. It mayn't be until quite late.'

" 'Very well, ma'am,' I says. It wasn't my place to ask questions, but I thought it very strange."

“It was unlike your mistress, eh?”

“Very unlike her, sir.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, sir, I thought it was to do with the gentleman in the carriage. She didn’t speak to him, but she turned round once or twice as though to ask him if she was doing right.”

“But you didn’t see the gentleman’s face?”

“No, sir; he stood with his back to me all the time.”

“Can you describe him at all?”

“He had on a light fawn overcoat, and a travelling-cap. He was tall and slender, like and the back of his head was dark.”

“You didn’t know him?”

“Oh no, I don’t think so, sir.”

“It was not your master, Mr. Carrington, by any chance?”

Mason looked rather startled.

“Oh, I don’t think so, sir!”

“But you are not sure?”

“It was about the master’s build, sir—but I never thought of it being him. We so seldom saw him . . . I couldn’t say it wasn’t him!”

Poirot picked up a pin from the carpet, and frowned at it severely; then he continued: “Would it be possible for the man to have entered the train at Bristol before you reached the carriage?”

Mason considered.

"Yes, sir, I think it would. My compartment was very crowded, and it was some minutes before I could get out—and then there was a very large crowd on the platform, and that delayed me too. But he'd only have had a minute or two to speak to the mistress, that way. I took it for granted that he'd come along the corridor."

"That is more probable, certainly."

He paused, still frowning.

"You know how the mistress was dressed, sir?"

"The papers give a few details, but I would like you to confirm them."

"She was wearing a white fox fur toque, sir, with a white spotted veil, and a blue frieze coat and skirt—the shade of blue they call electric."

"H'm, rather striking."

"Yes," remarked Mr. Halliday. "Inspector Japp is in hopes that that may help us to fix the spot where the crime took place. Anyone who saw her would remember her."

"Précisément!—Thank you, mademoiselle."

The maid left the room.

"Well!" Poirot got up briskly. "That is all I can do here—except, monsieur, that I would ask you to tell me everything, but everything!"

"I have done so."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. I must decline the case."

"Why?"

“Because you have not been frank with me.”

“I assure you—”

“No, you are keeping something back.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then Halliday drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to my friend.

“I guess that’s what you’re after, Monsieur Poirot—though how you know about it fairly gets my goat!”

Poirot smiled, and unfolded the paper. It was a letter written in thin sloping handwriting. Poirot read it aloud.

“Chère Madame,

It is with infinite pleasure that I look forward to the felicity of meeting you again. After your so amiable reply to my letter, I can hardly restrain my impatience. I have never forgotten those days in Paris. It is most cruel that you should be leaving London tomorrow. However, before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think, I shall have the joy of beholding once more the lady whose image has ever reigned supreme in my heart.

Believe, chère madame, all the assurances of my most devoted and unaltered sentiments—

Armand de la Rochefour.”

Poirot handed the letter back to Halliday with a bow.

“I fancy, monsieur, that you did not know that your daughter intended renewing her acquaintance with the Count de la Rochefour?”

“It came as a thunderbolt to me! I found this letter in my daughter’s handbag. As you probably know, Monsieur Poirot, this so-called count is an adventurer of the worst type.”

Poirot nodded.

"But I want to know how you knew of the existence of this letter?"

My friend smiled. "Monsieur, I did not. But to track footmarks and recognize cigarette ash is not sufficient for a detective. He must also be a good psychologist! I knew that you disliked and mistrusted your son-in-law. He benefits by your daughter's death; the maid's description of the mysterious man bears a sufficient resemblance to him. Yet you are not keen on his track! Why? Surely because your suspicions lie in another direction. Therefore you were keeping something back."

"You're right, Monsieur Poirot. I was sure of Rupert's guilt until I found this letter. It unsettled me horribly."

"Yes. The Count says 'Before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think.' Obviously he would not want to wait until you should get wind of his reappearance. Was it he who travelled down from London by the twelve-fourteen, and came along the corridor to your daughter's compartment? The Count de la Rochefour is also, if I remember rightly, tall and dark!"

The millionaire nodded.

"Well, monsieur, I will wish you good day. Scotland Yard has, I presume, a list of the jewels?"

"Yes, I believe Inspector Japp is here now if you would like to see him."

IV

Japp was an old friend of ours, and greeted Poirot with a sort of affectionate contempt.

"And how are you, monsieur? No bad feeling between us, though we have got our different ways of looking at things. How are the 'little grey cells,' eh? Going strong?"

Poirot beamed upon him. "They function, my good Japp; assuredly they do!"

"Then that's all right. Think it was the Honourable Rupert, or a crook? We're keeping an eye on all the regular places, of course. We shall know if the shiners are disposed of, and of course whoever did it isn't going to keep them to admire their sparkle. Not likely! I'm trying to find out where Rupert Carrington was yesterday. Seems a bit of a mystery about it. I've got a man watching him."

"A great precaution, but perhaps a day late," suggested Poirot gently.

"You always will have your joke, Monsieur Poirot. Well, I'm off to Paddington. Bristol, Weston, Taunton, that's my beat. So long."

"You will come round and see me this evening, and tell me the result?"

"Sure thing, if I'm back."

"The good inspector believes in matter in motion," murmured Poirot as our friend departed. "He travels; he measures footprints; he collects mud and cigarette ash! He is extremely busy! He is zealous beyond words! And if I mentioned psychology to him, do you know what he would do, my friend? He would smile! He would say to himself: 'Poor old Poirot! He ages! He grows senile!' Japp is the 'younger generation knocking on the door.' And ma foi! They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is open!"

"And what are you going to do?"

"As we have carte blanche, I shall expend threepence in ringing up the Ritz—where you may have noticed our Count is staying. After that, as my feet are a little damp, and I have sneezed twice, I shall return to my rooms and make myself a tisane over the spirit lamp!"

V

I did not see Poirot again until the following morning. I found him placidly finishing his breakfast.

"Well?" I inquired eagerly. "What has happened?"

“Nothing.”

“But Japp?”

“I have not seen him.”

“The Count?”

“He left the Ritz the day before yesterday.”

“The day of the murder?”

“Yes.”

“Then that settles it! Rupert Carrington is cleared.”

“Because the Count de la Rochefour has left the Ritz? You go too fast, my friend.”

“Anyway, he must be followed, arrested! But what could be his motive?”

“One hundred thousand dollars’ worth of jewellery is a very good motive for anyone. No, the question to my mind is: why kill her? Why not simply steal the jewels? She would not prosecute.”

“Why not?”

“Because she is a woman, mon ami. She once loved this man. Therefore she would suffer her loss in silence. And the Count, who is an extremely good psychologist where women are concerned—hence his successes—would know that perfectly well! On the other hand, if Rupert Carrington killed her, why take the jewels which would incriminate him fatally?”

“As a blind.”

“Perhaps you are right, my friend. Ah, here is Japp! I recognize his knock.”

The inspector was beaming good-humouredly.

“Morning, Poirot. Only just got back. I’ve done some good work! And you?”

“Me, I have arranged my ideas,” replied Poirot placidly.

Japp laughed heartily.

“Old chap’s getting on in years,” he observed beneath his breath to me. “That won’t do for us young folk,” he said aloud.

“Quel dommage?” Poirot inquired.

“Well, do you want to hear what I’ve done?”

“You permit me to make a guess? You have found the knife with which the crime was committed, by the side of the line between Weston and Taunton, and you have interviewed the paperboy who spoke to Mrs. Carrington at Weston!”

Japp’s jaw fell. “How on earth did you know? Don’t tell me it was those almighty ‘little grey cells’ of yours!”

“I am glad you admit for once that they are all mighty! Tell me, did she give the paperboy a shilling for himself?”

“No, it was half a crown!” Japp had recovered his temper, and grinned. “Pretty extravagant, these rich Americans!”

“And in consequence the boy did not forget her?”

“Not he. Half-crowns don’t come his way every day. She hailed him and bought two magazines. One had a picture of a girl in blue on the cover. ‘That’ll match me,’ she said. Oh, he remembered her perfectly. Well, that was enough for me. By the doctor’s evidence, the crime must have been committed before Taunton. I guessed they’d throw the knife away at once, and I walked down the line looking for it; and sure enough, there it was. I made inquiries at Taunton about our man, but of course it’s a big station, and it wasn’t likely they’d notice him. He probably got back to London by a later train.”

Poirot nodded. “Very likely.”

“But I found another bit of news when I got back. They’re passing the jewels, all right! That large emerald was pawned last night—by one of the regular lot. Who do you think it was?”

“I don’t know—except that he was a short man.”

Japp stared. “Well, you’re right there. He’s short enough. It was Red Narky.”

“Who is Red Narky?” I asked.

“A particularly sharp jewel thief, sir. And not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman—Gracie Kidd; but she doesn’t seem to be in it this time—unless she’s got off to Holland with the rest of the swag.”

“You’ve arrested Narky?”

“Sure thing. But mind you, it’s the other man we want—the man who went down with Mrs. Carrington in the train. He was the one who planned the job, right enough. But Narky won’t squeal on a pal.”

I noticed Poirot’s eyes had become very green.

“I think,” he said gently, “that I can find Narky’s pal for you, all right.”

“One of your little ideas, eh?” Japp eyed Poirot sharply. “Wonderful how you manage to deliver the goods sometimes, at your age and all. Devil’s own luck, of course.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” murmured my friend. “Hastings, my hat. And the brush. So! My galoshes, if it still rains! We must not undo the good work of that tisane. Au revoir, Japp!”

“Good luck to you, Poirot.”

Poirot hailed the first taxi we met, and directed the driver to Park Lane.

When we drew up before Halliday's house, he skipped out nimbly, paid the driver and rang the bell. To the footman who opened the door he made a request in a low voice, and we were immediately taken upstairs. We went up to the top of the house, and were shown into a small neat bedroom.

Poirot's eyes roved round the room and fastened themselves on a small black trunk. He knelt in front of it, scrutinized the labels on it, and took a small twist of wire from his pocket.

"Ask Mr. Halliday if he will be so kind as to mount to me here," he said over his shoulder to the footman.

The man departed, and Poirot gently coaxed the lock of the trunk with a practised hand. In a few minutes the lock gave, and he raised the lid of the trunk. Swiftly he began rummaging among the clothes it contained, flinging them out on the floor.

There was a heavy step on the stairs, and Halliday entered the room.

"What in hell are you doing here?" he demanded, staring.

"I was looking, monsieur, for this." Poirot withdrew from the trunk a coat and skirt of bright blue frieze, and a small toque of white fox fur.

"What are you doing with my trunk?" I turned to see that the maid, Jane Mason, had entered the room.

"If you will just shut the door, Hastings. Thank you. Yes, and stand with your back against it. Now, Mr. Halliday, let me introduce you to Gracie Kidd, otherwise Jane Mason, who will shortly rejoin her accomplice, Red Narky, under the kind escort of Inspector Japp."

VI

Poirot waved a deprecating hand. "It was of the most simple!" He helped himself to more caviar.

"It was the maid's insistence on the clothes that her mistress was wearing that first struck me. Why was she so anxious that our attention should be directed to them? I reflected that we had only the maid's word for the mysterious man in the carriage at Bristol. As far as the doctor's evidence went, Mrs. Carrington might easily have been murdered before reaching Bristol. But if so, then the maid must be an accomplice. And if she were an accomplice, she would not wish this point to rest on her evidence alone. The clothes Mrs. Carrington was wearing were of a striking nature. A maid usually has a good deal of choice as to what her mistress shall wear. Now if, after Bristol, anyone saw a lady in a bright blue coat and skirt, and a fur toque, he will be quite ready to swear he had seen Mrs. Carrington.

"I began to reconstruct. The maid would provide herself with duplicate clothes. She and her accomplice chloroform and stab Mrs. Carrington between London and Bristol, probably taking advantage of a tunnel. Her body is rolled under the seat; and the maid takes her place. At Weston she must make herself noticed. How? In all probability, a newspaper boy will be selected. She will insure his remembering her by giving him a large tip. She also drew his attention to the colour of her dress by a remark about one of the magazines. After leaving Weston, she throws the knife out of the window to mark the place where the crime presumably occurred, and changes her clothes, or buttons a long mackintosh over them. At Taunton she leaves the train and returns to Bristol as soon as possible, where her accomplice has duly left the luggage in the cloakroom. He hands over the ticket and himself returns to London. She waits on the platform, carrying out her role, goes to a hotel for the night and returns to town in the morning, exactly as she said.

"When Japp returned from his expedition, he confirmed all my deductions. He also told me that a well-known crook was passing the jewels. I knew that whoever it was would be the exact opposite of the man Jane Mason described. When I heard that it was Red Narky, who always worked with Gracie Kidd—well, I knew just where to find her."

"And the Count?"

"The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that he had nothing to do with it. That gentleman is much too careful of his own skin to risk murder. It would be out of keeping with his character."

“Well, Monsieur Poirot,” said Halliday, “I owe you a big debt. And the cheque I write after lunch won’t go near to settling it.”

Poirot smiled modestly, and murmured to me: “The good Japp, he shall get the official credit, all right, but though he has got his Gracie Kidd, I think that I, as the Americans say, have got his goat!”

Three

THE AFFAIR AT THE VICTORY BALL

I

Pure chance led my friend Hercule Poirot, formerly chief of the Belgian force, to be connected with the Styles Case. His success brought him notoriety, and he decided to devote himself to the solving of problems in crime. Having been wounded on the Somme and invalided out of the Army, I finally took up my quarters with him in London. Since I have a firsthand knowledge of most of his cases, it has been suggested to me that I select some of the most interesting and place them on record. In doing so, I feel that I cannot do better than begin with that strange tangle which aroused such widespread public interest at the time. I refer to the affair at the Victory Ball.

Although perhaps it is not so fully demonstrative of Poirot's peculiar methods as some of the more obscure cases, its sensational features, the well-known people involved, and the tremendous publicity given it by the press, make it stand out as a cause célèbre and I have long felt that it is only fitting that Poirot's connection with the solution should be given to the world.

It was a fine morning in spring, and we were sitting in Poirot's rooms. My little friend, neat and dapper as ever, his egg-shaped head tilted on one side, was delicately applying a new pomade to his moustache. A certain harmless vanity was a characteristic of Poirot's and fell into line with his general love of order and method. The Daily Newsmonger, which I had been reading, had slipped to the floor, and I was deep in a brown study when Poirot's voice recalled me.

"Of what are you thinking so deeply, mon ami?"

“To tell you the truth,” I replied, “I was puzzling over this unaccountable affair at the Victory Ball. The papers are full of it.” I tapped the sheet with my finger as I spoke.

“Yes?”

“The more one reads of it, the more shrouded in mystery the whole thing becomes!” I warmed to my subject. “Who killed Lord Cronshaw? Was Coco Courtenay’s death on the same night a mere coincidence? Was it an accident? Or did she deliberately take an overdose of cocaine?” I stopped, and then added dramatically: “These are the questions I ask myself.”

Poirot, somewhat to my annoyance, did not play up. He was peering into the glass, and merely murmured: “Decidedly, this new pomade, it is a marvel for the moustaches!” Catching my eye, however, he added hastily: “Quite so—and how do you reply to your questions?”

But before I could answer, the door opened, and our landlady announced Inspector Japp.

The Scotland Yard man was an old friend of ours and we greeted him warmly.

“Ah, my good Japp,” cried Poirot, “and what brings you to see us?”

“Well, Monsieur Poirot,” said Japp, seating himself and nodding to me, “I’m on a case that strikes me as being very much in your line, and I came along to know whether you’d care to have a finger in the pie?”

Poirot had a good opinion of Japp’s abilities, though deploring his lamentable lack of method, but I, for my part, considered that the detective’s highest talent lay in the gentle art of seeking favours under the guise of conferring them!

“It’s the Victory Ball,” said Japp persuasively. “Come, now, you’d like to have a hand in that.”

Poirot smiled at me.

“My friend Hastings would, at all events. He was just holding forth on the subject, n’est-ce pas, mon ami?”

“Well, sir,” said Japp condescendingly, “you shall be in it too. I can tell you, it’s something of a feather in your cap to have inside knowledge of a case like this. Well, here’s to business. You know the main facts of the case, I suppose, Monsieur Poirot?”

“From the papers only—and the imagination of the journalist is sometimes misleading. Recount the whole story to me.”

Japp crossed his legs comfortably and began.

“As all the world and his wife knows, on Tuesday last a grand Victory Ball was held. Every twopenny-halfpenny hop calls itself that nowadays, but this was the real thing, held at the Colossus Hall, and all London at it—including your Lord Cronshaw and his party.”

“His dossier?” interrupted Poirot. “I should say his bioscope—no, how do you call it—biograph?”

“Viscount Cronshaw was fifth viscount, twenty-five years of age, rich, unmarried, and very fond of the theatrical world. There were rumours of his being engaged to Miss Courtenay of the Albany Theatre, who was known to her friends as ‘Coco’ and who was, by all accounts, a very fascinating young lady.”

“Good. Continuez!”

“Lord Cronshaw’s party consisted of six people: he himself, his uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, a pretty American widow, Mrs. Mallaby, a young actor, Chris Davidson, his wife, and last but not least, Miss Coco Courtenay. It was a fancy dress ball, as you know, and the Cronshaw party represented the old Italian Comedy—whatever that may be.”

“The Commedia dell’ Arte,” murmured Poirot. “I know.”

“Anyway, the costumes were copied from a set of china figures forming part of Eustace Beltane’s collection. Lord Cronshaw was Harlequin; Beltane was Punchinello; Mrs. Mallaby matched him as Pulcinella; the Davidsons were Pierrot and Pierette; and Miss Courtenay, of course, was Columbine. Now, quite early in the evening it was apparent that there was something wrong. Lord Cronshaw was moody and strange in his manner. When the party met together for supper in a small private room engaged by the host, everyone noticed that he and Miss Courtenay were no longer on speaking terms. She had obviously been crying, and seemed on the verge of hysterics. The meal was an uncomfortable one, and as they all left the supper room, she turned to Chris Davidson and requested him audibly to take her home, as she was ‘sick of the ball.’ The young actor hesitated, glancing at Lord Cronshaw, and finally drew them both back to the supper room.

“But all his efforts to secure a reconciliation were unavailing, and he accordingly got a taxi and escorted the now weeping Miss Courtenay back to her flat. Although obviously very much upset, she did not confide in him, merely reiterating again and again that she would ‘make old Cronch sorry for this!’ That is the only hint we have that her death might not have been accidental, and it’s precious little to go upon. By the time Davidson had quieted her down somewhat, it was too late to return to the Colossus Hall, and Davidson accordingly went straight home to his flat in Chelsea, where his wife arrived shortly afterwards, bearing the news of the terrible tragedy that had occurred after his departure.

“Lord Cronshaw, it seems, became more and more moody as the ball went on. He kept away from his party, and they hardly saw him during the rest of the evening. It was about one-thirty a.m., just before the grand cotillion when everyone was to unmask, that Captain Digby, a brother officer who knew his disguise, noticed him standing in a box gazing down on the scene.

“ ‘Hullo, Cronch!’ he called. ‘Come down and be sociable! What are you moping about up there for like a boiled owl? Come along; there’s a good old rag coming on now.’

“ ‘Right!’ responded Cronshaw. ‘Wait for me, or I’ll never find you in the crowd.’

"He turned and left the box as he spoke. Captain Digby, who had Mrs. Davidson with him, waited. The minutes passed, but Lord Cronshaw did not appear. Finally Digby grew impatient.

" 'Does the fellow think we're going to wait all night for him?' he exclaimed.

"At that moment Mrs. Mallaby joined them, and they explained the situation.

" 'Say, now,' cried the pretty widow vivaciously, 'he's like a bear with a sore head tonight. Let's go right away and rout him out.'

"The search commenced, but met with no success until it occurred to Mrs. Mallaby that he might possibly be found in the room where they had supped an hour earlier. They made their way there. What a sight met their eyes! There was Harlequin, sure enough, but stretched on the ground with a table-knife in his heart!"

Japp stopped, and Poirot nodded, and said with the relish of the specialist: "Une belle affaire! And there was no clue as to the perpetrator of the deed? But how should there be!"

"Well," continued the inspector, "you know the rest. The tragedy was a double one. Next day there were headlines in all the papers, and a brief statement to the effect that Miss Courtenay, the popular actress, had been discovered dead in her bed, and that her death was due to an overdose of cocaine. Now, was it accident or suicide? Her maid, who was called upon to give evidence, admitted that Miss Courtenay was a confirmed taker of the drug, and a verdict of accidental death was returned. Nevertheless we can't leave the possibility of suicide out of account. Her death is particularly unfortunate, since it leaves us no clue now to the cause of the quarrel the preceding night. By the way, a small enamel box was found on the dead man. It had Coco written across it in diamonds, and was half full of cocaine. It was identified by Miss Courtenay's maid as belonging to her mistress, who nearly always carried it about with her, since it contained her supply of the drug to which she was fast becoming a slave."

“Was Lord Cronshaw himself addicted to the drug?”

“Very far from it. He held unusually strong views on the subject of dope.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“But since the box was in his possession, he knew that Miss Courtenay took it. Suggestive, that, is it not, my good Japp?”

“Ah!” said Japp rather vaguely.

I smiled.

“Well,” said Japp, “that’s the case. What do you think of it?”

“You found no clue of any kind that has not been reported?”

“Yes, there was this.” Japp took a small object from his pocket and handed it over to Poirot. It was a small pompon of emerald green silk, with some ragged threads hanging from it, as though it had been wrenched violently away.

“We found it in the dead man’s hand, which was tightly clenched over it,” explained the inspector.

Poirot handed it back without any comment and asked: “Had Lord Cronshaw any enemies?”

“None that anyone knows of. He seemed a popular young fellow.”

“Who benefits by his death?”

“His uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, comes into the title and estates. There are one or two suspicious facts against him. Several people declare that they heard a violent altercation going on in the little supper room, and that Eustace Beltane was one of the disputants. You see, the table-knife being snatched up off the table would fit in with the murder being done in the heat of a quarrel.”

“What does Mr. Beltane say about the matter?”

“Declares one of the waiters was the worse for liquor, and that he was giving him a dressing down. Also that it was nearer to one than half past. You see, Captain Digby’s evidence fixes the time pretty accurately. Only about ten minutes elapsed between his speaking to Cronshaw and the finding of the body.”

“And in any case I suppose Mr. Beltane, as Punchinello, was wearing a hump and a ruffle?”

“I don’t know the exact details of the costumes,” said Japp, looking curiously at Poirot. “And anyway, I don’t quite see what that has got to do with it?”

“No?” There was a hint of mockery in Poirot’s smile. He continued quietly, his eyes shining with the green light I had learned to recognize so well: “There was a curtain in this little supper room, was there not?”

“Yes, but—”

“With a space behind it sufficient to conceal a man?”

“Yes—in fact, there’s a small recess, but how you knew about it—you haven’t been to the place, have you, Monsieur Poirot?”

“No, my good Japp, I supplied the curtain from my brain. Without it, the drama is not reasonable. And always one must be reasonable. But tell me, did they not send for a doctor?”

“At once, of course. But there was nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous.”

Poirot nodded rather impatiently.

“Yes, yes, I understand. This doctor, now, he gave evidence at the inquest?”

“Yes.”

“Did he say nothing of any unusual symptom—was there nothing about the appearance of the body which struck him as being abnormal?”

Japp stared hard at the little man.

“Yes, Monsieur Poirot. I don’t know what you’re getting at, but he did mention that there was a tension and stiffness about the limbs which he was quite at a loss to account for.”

“Aha!” said Poirot. “Aha! Mon Dieu! Japp, that gives one to think, does it not?”

I saw that it had certainly not given Japp to think.

“If you’re thinking of poison, monsieur, who on earth would poison a man first and then stick a knife into him?”

“In truth that would be ridiculous,” agreed Poirot placidly.

“Now is there anything you want to see, monsieur? If you’d like to examine the room where the body was found—”

Poirot waved his hand.

“Not in the least. You have told me the only thing that interests me—Lord Cronshaw’s views on the subject of drug taking.”

“Then there’s nothing you want to see?”

“Just one thing.”

“What is that?”

“The set of china figures from which the costumes were copied.”

Japp stared.

“Well, you’re a funny one!”

"You can manage that for me?"

"Come round to Berkeley Square now if you like. Mr. Beltane—or His Lordship, as I should say now—won't object."

II

We set off at once in a taxi. The new Lord Cronshaw was not at home, but at Japp's request we were shown into the "china room," where the gems of the collection were kept. Japp looked round him rather helplessly.

"I don't see how you'll ever find the ones you want, monsieur."

But Poirot had already drawn a chair in front of the mantelpiece and was hopping up upon it like a nimble robin. Above the mirror, on a small shelf to themselves, stood six china figures. Poirot examined them minutely, making a few comments to us as he did so.

"Les voilà! The old Italian Comedy. Three pairs! Harlequin and Columbine, Pierrot and Pierrette—very dainty in white and green—and Punchinello and Pulcinella in mauve and yellow. Very elaborate, the costume of Punchinello—ruffles and frills, a hump, a high hat. Yes, as I thought, very elaborate."

He replaced the figures carefully, and jumped down.

Japp looked unsatisfied, but as Poirot had clearly no intention of explaining anything, the detective put the best face he could upon the matter. As we were preparing to leave, the master of the house came in, and Japp performed the necessary introductions.

The sixth Viscount Cronshaw was a man of about fifty, suave in manner, with a handsome, dissolute face. Evidently an elderly roué, with the languid manner of a poseur. I took an instant dislike to him. He greeted us graciously enough, declaring he had heard great accounts of Poirot's skill, and placing himself at our disposal in every way.

"The police are doing all they can, I know," Poirot said.

“But I much fear the mystery of my nephew’s death will never be cleared up. The whole thing seems utterly mysterious.”

Poirot was watching him keenly. “Your nephew had no enemies that you know of?”

“None whatever. I am sure of that.” He paused, and then went on: “If there are any questions you would like to ask—”

“Only one.” Poirot’s voice was serious. “The costumes—they were reproduced exactly from your figurines?”

“To the smallest detail.”

“Thank you, milor’. That is all I wanted to be sure of. I wish you good day.”

“And what next?” inquired Japp as we hurried down the street. “I’ve got to report at the Yard, you know.”

“Bien! I will not detain you. I have one other little matter to attend to, and then—”

“Yes?”

“The case will be complete.”

“What? You don’t mean it! You know who killed Lord Cronshaw?”

“Parfaitement.”

“Who was it? Eustace Beltane?”

“Ah, mon ami, you know my little weakness! Always I have a desire to keep the threads in my own hands up to the last minute. But have no fear. I will reveal all when the time comes. I want no credit—the affair shall be yours, on the condition that you permit me to play out the dénouement my own way.”

“That’s fair enough,” said Japp. “That is, if the dénouement ever comes! But I say, you are an oyster, aren’t you?” Poirot smiled. “Well, so long. I’m off to the Yard.”

He strode off down the steet, and Poirot hailed a passing taxi.

“Where are we going now?” I asked in lively curiosity.

“To Chelsea to see the Davidsons.”

He gave the address to the driver.

“What do you think of the new Lord Cronshaw?” I asked.

“What says my good friend Hastings?”

“I distrust him instinctively.”

“You think he is the ‘wicked uncle’ of the storybooks, eh?”

“Don’t you?”

“Me, I think he was most amiable towards us,” said Poirot noncommittally.

“Because he had his reasons!”

Poirot looked at me, shook his head sadly, and murmured something that sounded like: “No method.”

III

The Davidsons lived on the third floor of a block of “mansion” flats. Mr. Davidson was out, we were told, but Mrs. Davidson was at home. We were ushered into a long, low room with garish Oriental hangings. The air felt close and oppressive, and there was an overpowering fragrance of joss sticks. Mrs. Davidson came to us almost immediately, a small, fair creature whose fragility would have seemed pathetic and appealing had it not been for the rather shrewd and calculating gleam in her light blue eyes.

Poirot explained our connection with the case, and she shook her head sadly.

“Poor Cronch—and poor Coco too! We were both so fond of her, and her death has been a terrible grief to us. What is it you want to ask me? Must I really go over all that dreadful evening again?”

“Oh, madame, believe me, I would not harass your feelings unnecessarily. Indeed, Inspector Japp has told me all that is needful. I only wish to see the costume you wore at the ball that night.”

The lady looked somewhat surprised, and Poirot continued smoothly: “You comprehend, madame, that I work on the system of my country. There we always ‘reconstruct’ the crime. It is possible that I may have an actual représentation, and if so, you understand, the costumes would be important.”

Mrs. Davidson still looked a bit doubtful.

“I’ve heard of reconstructing a crime, of course,” she said. “But I didn’t know you were so particular about details. But I’ll fetch the dress now.”

She left the room and returned almost immediately with a dainty wisp of white satin and green. Poirot took it from her and examined it, handing it back with a bow.

“Merci, madame! I see you have had the misfortune to lose one of your green pompons, the one on the shoulder here.”

“Yes, it got torn off at the ball. I picked it up and gave it to poor Lord Cronshaw to keep for me.”

“That was after supper?”

“Yes.”

“Not long before the tragedy, perhaps?”

A faint look of alarm came into Mrs. Davidson’s pale eyes, and she replied quickly: “Oh no—long before that. Quite soon after supper, in fact.”

“I see. Well, that is all. I will not derange you further. Bonjour, madame.”

“Well,” I said as we emerged from the building, “that explains the mystery of the green pompon.”

“I wonder.”

“Why, what do you mean?”

“You saw me examine the dress, Hastings?”

“Yes?”

“Eh bien, the pompon that was missing had not been wrenched off, as the lady said. On the contrary, it had been cut off, my friend, cut off with scissors. The threads were all quite even.”

“Dear me!” I exclaimed. “This becomes more and more involved.”

“On the contrary,” replied Poirot placidly, “it becomes more and more simple.”

“Poirot,” I cried, “one day I shall murder you! Your habit of finding everything perfectly simple is aggravating to the last degree!”

“But when I explain, mon ami, is it not always perfectly simple?”

“Yes; that is the annoying part of it! I feel then that I could have done it myself.”

“And so you could, Hastings, so you could. If you would but take the trouble of arranging your ideas! Without method—”

“Yes, yes,” I said hastily, for I knew Poirot’s eloquence when started on his favourite theme only too well. “Tell me, what do we do next? Are you really going to reconstruct the crime?”

"Hardly that. Shall we say that the drama is over, but that I propose to add a —harlequinade?"

IV

The following Tuesday was fixed upon by Poirot as the day for this mysterious performance. The preparations greatly intrigued me. A white screen was erected at one side of the room, flanked by heavy curtains at either side. A man with some lighting apparatus arrived next, and finally a group of members of the theatrical profession, who disappeared into Poirot's bedroom, which had been rigged up as a temporary dressing room.

Shortly before eight, Japp arrived, in no very cheerful mood. I gathered that the official detective hardly approved of Poirot's plan.

"Bit melodramatic, like all his ideas. But there, it can do no harm, and as he says, it might save us a good bit of trouble. He's been very smart over the case. I was on the same scent myself, of course—" I felt instinctively that Japp was straining the truth here— "but there, I promised to let him play the thing out his own way. Ah! Here is the crowd."

His Lordship arrived first, escorting Mrs. Mallaby, whom I had not as yet seen. She was a pretty, dark-haired woman, and appeared perceptibly nervous. The Davidsons followed. Chris Davidson also I saw for the first time. He was handsome enough in a rather obvious style, tall and dark, with the easy grace of the actor.

Poirot had arranged seats for the party facing the screen. This was illuminated by a bright light. Poirot switched out the other lights so that the room was in darkness except for the screen. Poirot's voice rose out of the gloom.

"Messieurs, mesdames, a word of explanation. Six figures in turn will pass across the screen. They are familiar to you. Pierrot and his Pierrette; Punchinello the buffoon, and elegant Pulcinella; beautiful Columbine, lightly dancing, Harlequin, the sprite, invisible to man!"

With these words of introduction, the show began. In turn each figure that Poirot had mentioned bounded before the screen, stayed there a moment poised, and then vanished. The lights went up, and a sigh of relief went round. Everyone had been nervous, fearing they knew not what. It seemed to me that the proceedings had gone singularly flat. If the criminal was among us, and Poirot expected him to break down at the mere sight of a familiar figure the device had failed signally—as it was almost bound to do. Poirot, however, appeared not a whit discomposed. He stepped forward, beaming.

“Now, messieurs and mesdames, will you be so good as to tell me, one at a time, what it is that we have just seen? Will you begin, milor’?”

The gentleman looked rather puzzled. “I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.”

“Just tell me what we have been seeing.”

“I—er—well, I should say we have seen six figures passing in front of a screen and dressed to represent the personages in the old Italian Comedy, or —er—ourselves the other night.”

“Never mind the other night, milor’,” broke in Poirot. “The first part of your speech was what I wanted. Madame, you agree with Milor’ Cronshaw?”

He had turned as he spoke to Mrs. Mallaby.

“I—er—yes, of course.”

“You agree that you have seen six figures representing the Italian Comedy?”

“Why, certainly.”

“Monsieur Davidson? You too?”

“Yes.”

“Madame?”

“Yes.”

“Hastings? Japp? Yes? You are all in accord?”

He looked around upon us; his face grew rather pale, and his eyes were green as any cat’s.

“And yet—you are all wrong! Your eyes have lied to you—as they lied to you on the night of the Victory Ball. To ‘see’ things with your eyes, as they say, is not always to see the truth. One must see with the eyes of the mind; one must employ the little cells of grey! Know, then, that tonight and on the night of the Victory Ball, you saw not six figures but five! See!”

The lights went out again. A figure bounded in front of the screen—Pierrot!

“Who is that?” demanded Poirot. “Is it Pierrot?”

“Yes,” we all cried.

“Look again!”

With a swift movement the man divested himself of his loose Pierrot garb. There in the limelight stood glittering Harlequin! At the same moment there was a cry and an overturned chair.

“Curse you,” snarled Davidson’s voice. “Curse you! How did you guess?”

Then came the clink of handcuffs and Japp’s calm official voice. “I arrest you, Christopher Davidson—charge of murdering Viscount Cronshaw—anything you say will be used in evidence against you.”

V

It was a quarter of an hour later. A recherché little supper had appeared; and Poirot, beaming all over his face, was dispensing hospitality and answering our eager questions.

“It was all very simple. The circumstances in which the green pompon was found suggested at once that it had been torn from the costume of the murderer. I dismissed Pierrette from my mind (since it takes considerable strength to drive a table-knife home) and fixed upon Pierrot as the criminal. But Pierrot left the ball nearly two hours before the murder was committed. So he must either have returned to the ball later to kill Lord Cronshaw, or—eh bien, he must have killed him before he left! Was that impossible? Who had seen Lord Cronshaw after supper that evening? Only Mrs. Davidson, whose statement, I suspected, was a deliberate fabrication uttered with the object of accounting for the missing pompon, which, of course, she cut from her own dress to replace the one missing on her husband's costume. But then, Harlequin, who was seen in the box at one-thirty, must have been an impersonation. For a moment, earlier, I had considered the possibility of Mr. Beltane being the guilty party. But with his elaborate costume, it was clearly impossible that he could have doubled the roles of Punchinello and Harlequin. On the other hand, to Davidson, a young man of about the same height as the murdered man and an actor by profession, the thing was simplicity itself.

"But one thing worried me. Surely a doctor could not fail to perceive the difference between a man who had been dead two hours and one who had been dead ten minutes! Eh bien, the doctor did perceive it! But he was not taken to the body and asked, "How long has this man been dead?" On the contrary, he was informed that the man had been seen alive ten minutes ago, and so he merely commented at the inquest on the abnormal stiffening of the limbs for which he was quite unable to account!

"All was now marching famously for my theory. Davidson had killed Lord Cronshaw immediately after supper, when, as you remember, he was seen to draw him back into the supper room. Then he departed with Miss Courtenay, left her at the door of her flat (instead of going in and trying to pacify her as he affirmed) and returned posthaste to the Colossus—but as Harlequin, not Pierrot—a simple transformation effected by removing his outer costume."

VI

The uncle of the dead man leaned forward, his eyes perplexed.

“But if so, he must have come to the ball prepared to kill his victim. What earthly motive could he have had? The motive, that’s what I can’t get.”

“Ah! There we come to the second tragedy—that of Miss Courtenay. There was one simple point which everyone overlooked. Miss Courtenay died of cocaine poisoning—but her supply of the drug was in the enamel box which was found on Lord Cronshaw’s body. Where, then, did she obtain the dose which killed her? Only one person could have supplied her with it—Davidson. And that explains everything. It accounts for her friendship with the Davidsons and her demand that Davidson should escort her home. Lord Cronshaw, who was almost fanatically opposed to drug-taking, discovered that she was addicted to cocaine, and suspected that Davidson supplied her with it. Davidson doubtless denied this, but Lord Cronshaw determined to get the truth from Miss Courtenay at the ball. He could forgive the wretched girl, but he would certainly have no mercy on the man who made a living by trafficking in drugs. Exposure and ruin confronted Davidson. He went to the ball determined that Cronshaw’s silence must be obtained at any cost.”

“Was Coco’s death an accident, then?”

“I suspect that it was an accident cleverly engineered by Davidson. She was furiously angry with Cronshaw, first for his reproaches, and secondly for taking her cocaine from her. Davidson supplied her with more, and probably suggested her augmenting the dose as a defiance to ‘old Cronch!’ ”

“One other thing,” I said. “The recess and the curtain? How did you know about them?”

“Why, mon ami, that was the most simple of all. Waiters had been in and out of that little room, so, obviously, the body could not have been lying where it was found on the floor. There must be some place in the room where it could be hidden. I deduced a curtain and a recess behind it. Davidson dragged the body there, and later, after drawing attention to himself in the box, he dragged it out again before finally leaving the Hall. It was one of his best moves. He is a clever fellow!”

But in Poirot’s green eyes I read unmistakably the unspoken remark: “But not quite so clever as Hercule Poirot!”

Four

THE MARKET BASING MYSTERY

I

After all, there’s nothing like the country, is there?” said Inspector Japp, breathing in heavily through his nose and out through his mouth in the most approved fashion.

Poirot and I applauded the sentiment heartily. It had been the Scotland Yard inspector’s idea that we should all go for the weekend to the little country town of Market Basing. When off duty, Japp was an ardent botanist, and discoursed upon minute flowers possessed of unbelievably lengthy Latin names (somewhat strangely pronounced) with an enthusiasm even greater than that he gave to his cases.

“Nobody knows us, and we know nobody,” explained Japp. “That’s the idea.”

This was not to prove quite the case, however, for the local constable happened to have been transferred from a village fifteen miles away where a case of arsenical poisoning had brought him into contact with the Scotland Yard man. However, his delighted recognition of the great man only enhanced Japp’s sense of well-being, and as we sat down to breakfast on Sunday morning in the parlour of the village inn, with the sun shining, and tendrils of honeysuckle thrusting themselves in at the window, we were all in the best of spirits. The bacon and eggs were excellent, the coffee not so good, but passable and boiling hot.

“This is the life,” said Japp. “When I retire, I shall have a little place in the country. Far from crime, like this!”

“Le crime, il est partout,” remarked Poirot, helping himself to a neat square of bread, and frowning at a sparrow which had balanced itself impertinently on the windowsill.

I quoted lightly:

“That rabbit has a pleasant face,

His private life is a disgrace

I really could not tell to you

The awful things that rabbits do.”

“Lord,” said Japp, stretching himself backward, “I believe I could manage another egg, and perhaps a rasher or two of bacon. What do you say, Captain?”

“I’m with you,” I returned heartily. “What about you, Poirot?”

Poirot shook his head.

“One must not so replenish the stomach that the brain refuses to function,” he remarked.

“I’ll risk replenishing the stomach a bit more,” laughed Japp. “I take a large size in stomachs; and by the way, you’re getting stout yourself, M. Poirot. Here, miss, eggs and bacon twice.”

At that moment, however, an imposing form blocked the doorway. It was Constable Pollard.

“I hope you’ll excuse me troubling the inspector, gentlemen, but I’d be glad of his advice.”

“I’m on holiday,” said Japp hastily. “No work for me. What is the case?”

“Gentleman up at Leigh House—shot himself—through the head.”

“Well, they will do it,” said Japp prosaically. “Debt, or a woman, I suppose. Sorry I can’t help you, Pollard.”

“The point is,” said the constable, “that he can’t have shot himself. Leastways, that’s what Dr. Giles says.”

Japp put down his cup.

“Can’t have shot himself? What do you mean?”

“That’s what Dr. Giles says,” repeated Pollard. “He says it’s plumb impossible. He’s puzzled to death, the door being locked on the inside and the windows bolted; but he sticks to it that the man couldn’t have committed suicide.”

That settled it. The further supply of bacon and eggs was waved aside, and a few minutes later we were all walking as fast as we could in the direction of Leigh House, Japp eagerly questioning the constable.

The name of the deceased was Walter Protheroe; he was a man of middle age and something of a recluse. He had come to Market Basing eight years ago and rented Leigh House, a rambling, dilapidated old mansion fast falling into ruin. He lived in a corner of it, his wants attended to by a housekeeper whom he had brought with him. Miss Clegg was her name, and she was a very superior woman and highly thought of in the village. Just lately Mr. Protheroe had had visitors staying with him, a Mr. and Mrs. Parker from London. This morning, unable to get a reply when she went to call her master, and finding the door locked, Miss Clegg became alarmed, and telephoned for the police and the doctor. Constable Pollard and Dr. Giles had arrived at the same moment. Their united efforts had succeeded in breaking down the oak door of his bedroom.

Mr. Protheroe was lying on the floor, shot through the head, and the pistol was clasped in his right hand. It looked a clear case of suicide.

After examining the body, however, Dr. Giles became clearly perplexed, and finally he drew the constable aside, and communicated his perplexities to him; whereupon Pollard had at once thought of Japp. Leaving the doctor in charge, he had hurried down to the inn.

By the time the constable's recital was over, we had arrived at Leigh House, a big, desolate house surrounded by an unkempt, weed-ridden garden. The front door was open, and we passed at once into the hall and from there into a small morning room whence proceeded the sound of voices. Four people were in the room: a somewhat flashily dressed man with a shifty, unpleasant face to whom I took an immediate dislike; a woman of much the same type, though handsome in a coarse fashion; another woman dressed in neat black who stood apart from the rest, and whom I took to be the housekeeper; and a tall man dressed in sporting tweeds, with a clever, capable face, and who was clearly in command of the situation.

"Dr. Giles," said the constable, "this is Detective-Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard, and his two friends."

The doctor greeted us and made us known to Mr. and Mrs. Parker. Then we accompanied them upstairs. Pollard, in obedience to a sign from Japp, remained below, as it were on guard over the household. The doctor led us upstairs and along a passage. A door was open at the end; splinters hung from the hinges, and the door itself had crashed to the floor inside the room.

We went in. The body was still lying on the floor. Mr. Protheroe had been a man of middle age, bearded, with hair grey at the temples. Japp went and knelt by the body.

"Why couldn't you leave it as you found it?" he grumbled.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"We thought it a clear case of suicide."

"H'm!" said Japp. "Bullet entered the head behind the left ear."

"Exactly," said the doctor. "Clearly impossible for him to have fired it himself. He'd have had to twist his hand right round his head. It couldn't have been done."

"Yet you found the pistol clasped in his hand? Where is it, by the way?"

The doctor nodded to the table.

“But it wasn’t clasped in his hand,” he said. “It was inside the hand, but the fingers weren’t closed over it.”

“Put there afterwards,” said Japp; “that’s clear enough.” He was examining the weapon. “One cartridge fired. We’ll test it for fingerprints, but I doubt if we’ll find any but yours, Dr. Giles. How long has he been dead?”

“Some time last night. I can’t give the time to an hour or so, as those wonderful doctors in detective stories do. Roughly, he’s been dead about twelve hours.”

So far, Poirot had not made a move of any kind. He had remained by my side, watching Japp at work and listening to his questions. Only, from time to time, he had sniffed the air very delicately, and as if puzzled. I too had sniffed, but could detect nothing to arouse interest. The air seemed perfectly fresh and devoid of odour. And yet, from time to time, Poirot continued to sniff it dubiously, as though his keener nose detected something I had missed.

Now, as Japp moved away from the body, Poirot knelt down by it. He took no interest in the wound. I thought at first that he was examining the fingers of the hand that had held the pistol, but in a minute I saw that it was a handkerchief carried in the coat-sleeve that interested him. Mr. Protheroe was dressed in a dark grey lounge-suit. Finally Poirot got up from his knees, but his eyes still strayed back to the handkerchief as though puzzled.

Japp called to him to come and help to lift the door. Seizing my opportunity, I too knelt down, and taking the handkerchief from the sleeve, scrutinized it minutely. It was a perfectly plain handkerchief of white cambric; there was no mark or stain on it of any kind. I replaced it, shaking my head and confessing myself baffled.

The others had raised the door. I realized that they were hunting for the key. They looked in vain.

“That settles it,” said Japp. “The window’s shut and bolted. The murderer left by the door, locking it and taking the key with him. He thought it would be accepted that Protheroe had locked himself in and shot himself, and that the absence of the key would not be noticed. You agree, M. Poirot?”

“I agree, yes; but it would have been simpler and better to slip the key back inside the room under the door. Then it would look as though it had fallen from the lock.”

“Ah, well, you can’t expect everybody to have the bright ideas that you have. You’d have been a holy terror if you’d taken to crime. Any remarks to make, M. Poirot?”

Poirot, it seemed to me, was somewhat at a loss. He looked round the room and remarked mildly and almost apologetically: “He smoked a lot, this monsieur.”

True enough, the grate was filled with cigarette stubs, as was an ashtray that stood on a small table near the big armchair.

“He must have got through about twenty cigarettes last night,” remarked Japp. Stooping down, he examined the contents of the grate carefully, then transferred his attention to the ashtray. “They’re all the same kind,” he announced, “and smoked by the same man. There’s nothing there, M. Poirot.”

“I did not suggest that there was,” murmured my friend.

“Ha,” cried Japp, “what’s this?” He pounced on something bright and glittering that lay on the floor near the dead man. “A broken cuff-link. I wonder who this belongs to. Dr. Giles, I’d be obliged if you’d go down and send up the housekeeper.”

“What about the Parkers? He’s very anxious to leave the house—says he’s got urgent business in London.”

“I dare say. It’ll have to get on without him. By the way things are going, it’s likely that there’ll be some urgent business down here for him to attend to! Send up the housekeeper, and don’t let either of the Parkers give you and Pollard the slip. Did any of the household come in here this morning?”

The doctor reflected.

“No, they stood outside in the corridor while Pollard and I came in.”

“Sure of that?”

“Absolutely certain.”

The doctor departed on his mission.

“Good man, that,” said Japp approvingly. “Some of these sporting doctors are first-class fellows. Well, I wonder who shot this chap. It looks like one of the three in the house. I hardly suspect the housekeeper. She’s had eight years to shoot him in if she wanted to. I wonder who these Parkers are? They’re not a prepossessing-looking couple.”

Miss Clegg appeared at this juncture. She was a thin, gaunt woman with neat grey hair parted in the middle, very staid and calm in manner. Nevertheless there was an air of efficiency about her which commanded respect. In answer to Japp’s questions, she explained that she had been with the dead man for fourteen years. He had been a generous and considerate master. She had never seen Mr. and Mrs. Parker until three days ago, when they arrived unexpectedly to stay. She was of the opinion that they had asked themselves—the master had certainly not seemed pleased to see them. The cuff-links which Japp showed her had not belonged to Mr. Protheroe—she was sure of that. Questioned about the pistol, she said that she believed her master had a weapon of that kind. He kept it locked up. She had seen it once some years ago, but could not say whether this was the same one. She had heard no shot last night, but that was not surprising, as it was a big, rambling house, and her rooms and those prepared for the Parkers were at the other end of the building. She did not know what time Mr. Protheroe had gone to bed—he was still up when she retired at half past nine. It was not his habit to go at once to bed when he went to his room. Usually he would sit up half the night, reading and smoking. He was a great smoker.

Then Poirot interposed a question:

“Did your master sleep with his window open or shut, as a rule?”

Miss Clegg considered.

“It was usually open, at any rate at the top.”

“Yet now it is closed. Can you explain that?”

“No, unless he felt a draught and shut it.”

Japp asked her a few more questions and then dismissed her. Next he interviewed the Parkers separately. Mrs. Parker was inclined to be hysterical and tearful; Mr. Parker was full of bluster and abuse. He denied that the cuff-link was his, but as his wife had previously recognized it, this hardly improved matters for him; and as he had also denied ever having been in Protheroe’s room, Japp considered that he had sufficient evidence to apply for a warrant.

Leaving Pollard in charge, Japp bustled back to the village and got into telephonic communication with headquarters. Poirot and I strolled back to the inn.

“You’re unusually quiet,” I said. “Doesn’t the case interest you?”

“Au contraire, it interests me enormously. But it puzzles me also.”

“The motive is obscure,” I said thoughtfully, “but I’m certain that Parker’s a bad lot. The case against him seems pretty clear but for the lack of motive, and that may come out later.”

“Nothing struck you as being especially significant, although overlooked by Japp?”

I looked at him curiously.

“What have you got up your sleeve, Poirot?”

“What did the dead man have up his sleeve?”

“Oh, that handkerchief!”

“Exactly, that handkerchief.”

“A sailor carries his handkerchief in his sleeve,” I said thoughtfully.

“An excellent point, Hastings, though not the one I had in mind.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, over and over again I go back to the smell of cigarette smoke.”

“I didn’t smell any,” I cried wonderingly.

“No more did I, cher ami.”

I looked earnestly at him. It is so difficult to know when Poirot is pulling one’s leg, but he seemed thoroughly in earnest and was frowning to himself.

II

The inquest took place two days later. In the meantime other evidence had come to light. A tramp had admitted that he had climbed over the wall into the Leigh House garden, where he often slept in a shed that was left unlocked. He declared that at twelve o’clock he had heard two men quarrelling loudly in a room on the first floor. One was demanding a sum of money; the other was angrily refusing. Concealed behind a bush, he had seen the two men as they passed and repassed the lighted window. One he knew well as being Mr. Protheroe, the owner of the house; the other he identified positively as Mr. Parker.

It was clear now that the Parkers had come to Leigh House to blackmail Protheroe, and when later it was discovered that the dead man’s real name was Wendover, and that he had been a lieutenant in the Navy and had been concerned in the blowing up of the first-class cruiser Merrythought, in 1910, the case seemed to be rapidly clearing. It was supposed that Parker, cognizant of the part Wendover had played, had tracked him down and demanded hush money which the other refused to pay. In the course of the quarrel, Wendover drew his revolver, and Parker snatched it from him and shot him, subsequently endeavouring to give it the appearance of suicide.

Parker was committed for trial, reserving his defence. We had attended the police-court proceedings. As we left, Poirot nodded his head.

“It must be so,” he murmured to himself. “Yes, it must be so. I will delay no longer.”

He went into the post office, and wrote off a note which he despatched by special messenger. I did not see to whom it was addressed. Then we returned to the inn where we had stayed on that memorable weekend.

Poirot was restless, going to and from the window.

“I await a visitor,” he explained. “It cannot be—surely it cannot be that I am mistaken? No, here she is.”

To my utter astonishment, in another minute Miss Clegg walked into the room. She was less calm than usual, and was breathing hard as though she had been running. I saw the fear in her eyes as she looked at Poirot.

“Sit down, mademoiselle,” he said kindly. “I guessed rightly, did I not?”

For answer she burst into tears.

“Why did you do it?” asked Poirot gently. “Why?”

“I loved him so,” she answered. “I was nursemaid to him when he was a little boy. Oh, be merciful to me!”

“I will do all I can. But you understand that I cannot permit an innocent man to hang—even though he is an unpleasing scoundrel.”

She sat up and said in a low voice: “Perhaps in the end I could not have, either. Do whatever must be done.”

Then, rising, she hurried from the room.

“Did she shoot him?” I asked utterly bewildered.

Poirot smiled and shook his head.

“He shot himself. Do you remember that he carried his handkerchief in his right sleeve? That showed me that he was left-handed. Fearing exposure, after his stormy interview with Mr. Parker, he shot himself. In the morning Miss Clegg came to call him as usual and found him lying dead. As she has just told us, she had known him from a little boy upward, and was filled with fury against the Parkers, who had driven him to this shameful death. She regarded them as murderers, and then suddenly she saw a chance of making them suffer for the deed they had inspired. She alone knew that he was left-handed. She changed the pistol to his right hand, closed and bolted the window, dropped the bit of cuff-link she had picked up in one of the downstairs rooms, and went out, locking the door and removing the key.”

“Poirot,” I said, in a burst of enthusiasm, “you are magnificent. All that from the one little clue of the handkerchief.”

“And the cigarette smoke. If the window had been closed, and all those cigarettes smoked, the room ought to have been full of stale tobacco. Instead, it was perfectly fresh, so I deduced at once that the window must have been open all night, and only closed in the morning, and that gave me a very interesting line of speculation. I could conceive of no circumstances under which a murderer could want to shut the window. It would be to his advantage to leave it open, and pretend that the murderer had escaped that way, if the theory of suicide did not go down. Of course, the tramp’s evidence, when I heard it, confirmed my suspicions. He could never have overheard that conversation unless the window had been open.”

“Splendid!” I said heartily. “Now, what about some tea?”

“Spoken like a true Englishman,” said Poirot with a sigh. “I suppose it is not likely that I could obtain here a glass of sirop?”

Five

THE LEMESURIER INHERITANCE

I

In company with Poirot, I have investigated many strange cases, but none, I think, to compare with that extraordinary series of events which held our interest over a period of many years, and which culminated in the ultimate problem brought to Poirot to solve. Our attention was first drawn to the family history of the Lemesuriers one evening during the war. Poirot and I had but recently come together again, renewing the old days of our acquaintanceship in Belgium. He had been handling some little matter for the War Office—disposing of it to their entire satisfaction; and we had been dining at the Carlton with a Brass Hat who paid Poirot heavy compliments in the intervals of the meal. The Brass Hat had to rush away to keep an appointment with someone, and we finished our coffee in a leisurely fashion before following his example.

As we were leaving the room, I was hailed by a voice which struck a familiar note, and turned to see Captain Vincent Lemesurier, a young fellow whom I had known in France. He was with an older man whose likeness to him proclaimed him to be of the same family. Such proved to be the case, and he was introduced to us as Mr. Hugo Lemesurier, uncle of my young friend.

I did not really know Captain Lemesurier at all intimately, but he was a pleasant young fellow, somewhat dreamy in manner, and I remembered hearing that he belonged to an old and exclusive family with a property in Northumberland which dated from before the Reformation. Poirot and I were not in a hurry, and at the younger man's invitation, we sat down at the table with our two newfound friends, and chattered pleasantly enough on various matters. The elder Lemesurier was a man of about forty, with a touch of the scholar in his stooping shoulders; he was engaged at the moment upon some chemical research work for the Government, it appeared.

Our conversation was interrupted by a tall dark young man who strode up to the table, evidently labouring under some agitation of mind.

“Thank goodness I’ve found you both!” he exclaimed.

“What’s the matter, Roger?”

“Your guv’nor, Vincent. Bad fall. Young horse.” The rest trailed off, as he drew the other aside.

In a few minutes our two friends had hurriedly taken leave of us. Vincent Lemesurier’s father had had a serious accident while trying a young horse, and was not expected to live until morning. Vincent had gone deadly white, and appeared almost stunned by the news. In a way, I was surprised—for from the few words he had let fall on the subject while in France, I had gathered that he and his father were not on particularly friendly terms, and so his display of filial feeling now rather astonished me.

The dark young man, who had been introduced to us as a cousin, Mr. Roger Lemesurier, remained behind, and we three strolled out together.

“Rather a curious business, this,” observed the young man. “It would interest M. Poirot, perhaps. I’ve heard of you, you know, M. Poirot—from Higginson.” (Higginson was our Brass Hat friend.) “He says you’re a whale on psychology.”

“I study the psychology, yes,” admitted my friend cautiously.

“Did you see my cousin’s face? He was absolutely bowled over, wasn’t he? Do you know why? A good old-fashioned family curse! Would you care to hear about it?”

“It would be most kind of you to recount it to me.”

Roger Lemesurier looked at his watch.

"Lots of time. I'm meeting them at King's Cross. Well, M. Poirot, the Lemesuriers are an old family. Way back in medieval times, a Lemesurier became suspicious of his wife. He found the lady in a compromising situation. She swore that she was innocent, but old Baron Hugo didn't listen. She had one child, a son—and he swore that the boy was no child of his and should never inherit. I forget what he did—some pleasing medieval fancy like walling up the mother and son alive; anyway, he killed them both, and she died protesting her innocence and solemnly cursing the Lemesuriers forever. No first-born son of a Lemesurier should ever inherit—so the curse ran. Well, time passed, and the lady's innocence was established beyond doubt. I believe that Hugo wore a hair shirt and ended up his days on his knees in a monk's cell. But the curious thing is that from that day to this, no first-born son ever has succeeded to the estate. It's gone to brothers, to nephews, to second sons—never to the eldest son. Vincent's father was the second of five sons, the eldest of whom died in infancy. Of course, all through the war, Vincent has been convinced that whoever else was doomed, he certainly was. But strangely enough, his two younger brothers have been killed, and he himself has remained unscathed."

"An interesting family history," said Poirot thoughtfully. "But now his father is dying, and he, as the eldest son, succeeds?"

"Exactly. A curse has gone rusty—unable to stand the strain of modern life."

Poirot shook his head, as though deprecating the other's jesting tone. Roger Lemesurier looked at his watch again, and declared that he must be off.

The sequel to the story came on the morrow, when we learned of the tragic death of Captain Vincent Lemesurier. He had been travelling north by the Scotch mail-train, and during the night must have opened the door of the compartment and jumped out on the line. The shock of his father's accident coming on top of the shell-shock was deemed to have caused temporary mental aberration. The curious superstition prevalent in the Lemesurier family was mentioned, in connection with the new heir, his father's brother, Ronald Lemesurier, whose only son had died on the Somme.

I suppose our accidental meeting with young Vincent on the last evening of his life quickened our interest in anything that pertained to the Lemesurier family, for we noted with some interest two years later the death of Ronald Lemesurier, who had been a confirmed invalid at the time of his succession to the family estates. His brother John succeeded him, a hale, hearty man with a boy at Eton.

Certainly an evil destiny overshadowed the Lemesuriers. On his very next holiday the boy managed to shoot himself fatally. His father's death, which occurred quite suddenly after being stung by a wasp, gave the estate over to the youngest brother of the five—Hugo, whom we remembered meeting on the fatal night at the Carlton.

Beyond commenting on the extraordinary series of misfortunes which befell the Lemesuriers, we had taken no personal interest in the matter, but the time was now close at hand when we were to take a more active part.

II

One morning "Mrs. Lemesurier" was announced. She was a tall, active woman, possibly about thirty years of age, who conveyed by her demeanour a great deal of determination and strong common sense. She spoke with a faint transatlantic accent.

"M. Poirot? I am pleased to meet you. My husband, Hugo Lemesurier, met you once many years ago, but you will hardly remember the fact."

"I recollect it perfectly, madame. It was at the Carlton."

"That's quite wonderful of you. M. Poirot, I'm very worried."

"What about, Madame?"

"My elder boy—I've two boys, you know. Ronald's eight, and Gerald's six."

"Proceed, madame: why should you be worried about little Ronald?"

"M. Poirot, within the last six months he has had three narrow escapes from death: once from drowning—when we were all down at Cornwall this summer; once when he fell from the nursery window; and once from ptomaine poisoning."

Perhaps Poirot's face expressed rather too eloquently what he thought, for Mrs. Lemesurier hurried on with hardly a moment's pause: "Of course I know you think I'm just a silly fool of a woman, making mountains out of molehills."

"No, indeed, madame. Any mother might be excused for being upset at such occurrences, but I hardly see where I can be of any assistance to you. I am not le bon Dieu to control the waves; for the nursery window I should suggest some iron bars; and for the food—what can equal a mother's care?"

"But why should these things happen to Ronald and not to Gerald?"

"The chance, madame—le hasard!"

"You think so?"

"What do you think, madame—you and your husband?"

A shadow crossed Mrs. Lemesurier's face.

"It's no good going to Hugo—he won't listen. As perhaps you may have heard, there's supposed to be a curse on the family—no eldest son can succeed. Hugo believes in it. He's wrapped up in the family history, and he's superstitious to the last degree. When I go to him with my fears, he just says it's the curse, and we can't escape it. But I'm from the States, M. Poirot, and over there we don't believe much in curses. We like them as belonging to a real high-toned old family—it gives a sort of cachet, don't you know. I was just a musical comedy actress in a small part when Hugo met me—and I thought his family curse was just too lovely for words. That kind of thing's all right for telling round the fire on a winter's evening, but when it comes to one's own children—I just adore my children, M. Poirot. I'd do anything for them."

“So you decline to believe in the family legend, madame?”

“Can a legend saw through an ivy stem?”

“What is that you are saying, madame?” cried Poirot, an expression of great astonishment on his face.

“I said, can a legend—or a ghost, if you like to call it that—saw through an ivy stem? I’m not saying anything about Cornwall. Any boy might go out too far and get into difficulties—though Ronald could swim when he was four years old. But the ivy’s different. Both the boys were very naughty. They’d discovered they could climb up and down by the ivy. They were always doing it. One day—Gerald was away at the time—Ronald did it once too often, and the ivy gave way and he fell. Fortunately he didn’t damage himself seriously. But I went out and examined the ivy: it was cut through, M. Poirot—deliberately cut through.”

“It is very serious what you are telling me there, madame. You say your younger boy was away from home at the moment?”

“Yes.”

“And at the time of the ptomaine poisoning, was he still away?”

“No, they were both there.”

“Curious,” murmured Poirot. “Now, madame, who are the inmates of your establishment?”

“Miss Saunders, the children’s governess, and John Gardiner, my husband’s secretary—”

Mrs. Lemesurier paused, as though slightly embarrassed.

“And who else, madame?”

“Major Roger Lemesurier, whom you also met on that night, I believe, stays with us a good deal.”

“Ah, yes—he is a cousin is he not?”

“A distant cousin. He does not belong to our branch of the family. Still, I suppose now he is my husband’s nearest relative. He is a dear fellow, and we are all very fond of him. The boys are devoted to him.”

“It was not he who taught them to climb up the ivy?”

“It might have been. He incites them to mischief often enough.”

“Madame, I apologize for what I said to you earlier. The danger is real, and I believe that I can be of assistance. I propose that you should invite us both to stay with you. Your husband will not object?”

“Oh no. But he will believe it to be all of no use. It makes me furious the way he just sits around and expects the boy to die.”

“Calm yourself, madame. Let us make our arrangements methodically.”

III

Our arrangements were duly made, and the following day saw us flying northward. Poirot was sunk in a reverie. He came out of it, to remark abruptly: “It was from a train such as this that Vincent Lemesurier fell?”

He put a slight accent on the “fell.”

“You don’t suspect foul play there, surely?” I asked.

“Has it struck you, Hastings, that some of the Lemesurier deaths were, shall we say, capable of being arranged? Take that of Vincent, for instance. Then the Eton boy—an accident with a gun is always ambiguous. Supposing this child had fallen from the nursery window and been dashed to death—what more natural and unsuspicious? But why only the one child, Hastings? Who profits by the death of the elder child? His younger brother, a child of seven! Absurd!”

“They mean to do away with the other later,” I suggested, though with the vaguest ideas as to who “they” were.

Poirot shook his head as though dissatisfied.

“Ptomaine poisoning,” he mused. “Atropine will produce much the same symptoms. Yes, there is need for our presence.”

Mrs. Lemesurier welcomed us enthusiastically. Then she took us to her husband’s study and left us with him. He had changed a good deal since I saw him last. His shoulders stooped more than ever, and his face had a curious pale grey tinge. He listened while Poirot explained our presence in the house.

“How exactly like Sadie’s practical common sense!” he said at last. “Remain by all means, M. Poirot, and I thank you for coming; but—what is written, is written. The way of the transgressor is hard. We Lemesuriers know—none of us can escape the doom.”

Poirot mentioned the sawn-through ivy, but Hugo seemed very little impressed.

“Doubtless some careless gardener—yes, yes, there may be an instrument, but the purpose behind is plain; and I will tell you this, M. Poirot, it cannot be long delayed.”

Poirot looked at him attentively.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I myself am doomed. I went to a doctor last year. I am suffering from an incurable disease—the end cannot be much longer delayed; but before I die, Ronald will be taken. Gerald will inherit.”

“And if anything were to happen to your second son also?”

“Nothing will happen to him; he is not threatened.”

“But if it did?” persisted Poirot.

“My cousin Roger is the next heir.”

We were interrupted. A tall man with a good figure and crispy curling auburn hair entered with a sheaf of papers.

“Never mind about those now, Gardiner,” said Hugo Lemesurier, then he added: “My secretary, Mr. Gardiner.”

The secretary bowed, uttered a few pleasant words and then went out. In spite of his good looks, there was something repellent about the man. I said so to Poirot shortly afterward when we were walking round the beautiful old grounds together, and rather to my surprise, he agreed.

“Yes, yes, Hastings, you are right. I do not like him. He is too good-looking. He would be one for the soft job always. Ah, here are the children.”

Mrs. Lemesurier was advancing towards us, her two children beside her. They were fine-looking boys, the younger dark like his mother, the elder with auburn curls. They shook hands prettily enough, and were soon absolutely devoted to Poirot. We were next introduced to Miss Saunders, a nondescript female, who completed the party.

IV

For some days we had a pleasant, easy existence—ever vigilant, but without result. The boys led a happy normal life and nothing seemed to be amiss. On the fourth day after our arrival Major Roger Lemesurier came down to stay. He was little changed, still carefree and debonair as of old, with the same habit of treating all things lightly. He was evidently a great favourite with the boys, who greeted his arrival with shrieks of delight and immediately dragged him off to play wild Indians in the garden. I noticed that Poirot followed them unobtrusively.

V

On the following day we were all invited to tea, boys included, with Lady Claygate, whose place adjoined that of the Lemesuriers. Mrs. Lemesurier suggested that we also should come, but seemed rather relieved when Poirot refused and declared he would much prefer to remain at home.

Once everyone had started, Poirot got to work. He reminded me of an intelligent terrier. I believe that there was no corner of the house that he left unsearched; yet it was all done so quietly and methodically that no attention was directed to his movements. Clearly, at the end, he remained unsatisfied. We had tea on the terrace with Miss Saunders, who had not been included in the party.

“The boys will enjoy it,” she murmured in her faded way, “though I hope they will behave nicely, and not damage the flower-beds, or go near the bees—”

Poirot paused in the very act of drinking. He looked like a man who has seen a ghost.

“Bees?” he demanded in a voice of thunder.

“Yes, M. Poirot, bees. Three hives. Lady Claygate is very proud of her bees—”

“Bees?” cried Poirot again. Then he sprang from the table and walked up and down the terrace with his hands to his head. I could not imagine why the little man should be so agitated at the mere mention of bees.

At that moment we heard the car returning. Poirot was on the doorstep as the party alighted.

“Ronald’s been stung,” cried Gerald excitedly.

“It’s nothing,” said Mrs. Lemesurier. “It hasn’t even swollen. We put ammonia on it.”

“Let me see, my little man,” said Poirot. “Where was it?”

“Here, on the side of my neck,” said Ronald importantly. “But it doesn’t hurt. Father said: ‘Keep still—there’s a bee on you.’ And I kept still, and he took it off, but it stung me first, though it didn’t really hurt, only like a pin, and I didn’t cry, because I’m so big and going to school next year.”

Poirot examined the child’s neck, then drew away again. He took me by the arm and murmured:

“Tonight, mon ami, tonight we have a little affair on! Say nothing—to anyone.”

He refused to be more communicative, and I went through the evening devoured by curiosity. He retired early and I followed his example. As we went upstairs, he caught me by the arm and delivered his instructions:

“Do not undress. Wait a sufficient time, extinguish your light and join me here.”

I obeyed, and found him waiting for me when the time came. He enjoined silence on me with a gesture, and we crept quietly along the nursery wing. Ronald occupied a small room of his own. We entered it and took up our position in the darkest corner. The child’s breathing sounded heavy and undisturbed.

“Surely he is sleeping very heavily?” I whispered.

Poirot nodded.

“Drugged,” he murmured.

“Why?”

“So that he should not cry out at—”

“At what?” I asked, as Poirot paused.

“At the prick of the hypodermic needle, mon ami! Hush, let us speak no more—not that I expect anything to happen for some time.”

VI

But in this Poirot was wrong. Hardly ten minutes had elapsed before the door opened softly, and someone entered the room. I heard a sound of quick hurried breathing. Footsteps moved to the bed, and then there was a sudden click. The light of a little electric lantern fell on the sleeping child—the holder of it was still invisible in the shadow. The figure laid down the lantern. With the right hand it brought forth a syringe; with the left it touched the boy's neck—

Poirot and I sprang at the same minute. The lantern rolled to the floor, and we struggled with the intruder in the dark. His strength was extraordinary. At last we overcame him.

"The light, Hastings, I must see his face—though I fear I know only too well whose face it will be."

So did I, I thought as I groped for the lantern. For a moment I had suspected the secretary, egged on by my secret dislike of the man, but I felt assured by now that the man who stood to gain by the death of his two childish cousins was the monster we were tracking.

My foot struck against the lantern. I picked it up and switched on the light. It shone full on the face of—Hugo Lemesurier, the boy's father!

The lantern almost dropped from my hand.

"Impossible," I murmured hoarsely. "Impossible!"

VII

Lemesurier was unconscious. Poirot and I between us carried him to his room and laid him on the bed. Poirot bent and gently extricated something from his right hand. He showed it to me. It was a hypodermic syringe. I shuddered.

"What is in it? Poison?"

"Formic acid, I fancy."

"Formic acid?"

"Yes. Probably obtained by distilling ants. He was a chemist, you remember. Death would have been attributed to the bee sting."

“My God,” I muttered. “His own son! And you expected this?”

Poirot nodded gravely.

“Yes. He is insane, of course. I imagine that the family history has become a mania with him. His intense longing to succeed to the estate led him to commit the long series of crimes. Possibly the idea occurred to him first when travelling north that night with Vincent. He couldn’t bear the prediction to be falsified. Ronald’s son was already dead, and Ronald himself was a dying man—they are a weakly lot. He arranged the accident to the gun, and—which I did not suspect until now—contrived the death of his brother John by this same method of injecting formic acid into the jugular vein. His ambition was realized then, and he became the master of the family acres. But his triumph was short-lived—he found that he was suffering from an incurable disease. And he had the madman’s fixed idea—the eldest son of a Lemesurier could not inherit. I suspect that the bathing accident was due to him—he encouraged the child to go out too far. That failing, he sawed through the ivy, and afterwards poisoned the child’s food.”

“Diabolical!” I murmured with a shiver. “And so cleverly planned!”

“Yes, mon ami, there is nothing more amazing than the extraordinary sanity of the insane! Unless it is the extraordinary eccentricity of the sane! I imagine that it is only lately that he has completely gone over the borderline, there was method in his madness to begin with.”

“And to think that I suspected Roger—that splendid fellow.”

“It was the natural assumption, mon ami. We knew that he also travelled north with Vincent that night. We knew, too, that he was the next heir after Hugo and Hugo’s children. But our assumption was not borne out by the facts. The ivy was sawn through when only little Ronald was at home—but it would be to Roger’s interest that both children should perish. In the same way, it was only Ronald’s food that was poisoned. And today when they came home and I found that there was only his father’s word for it that Ronald had been stung, I remembered the other death from a wasp sting—and I knew!”

VIII

Hugo Lemesurier died a few months later in the private asylum to which he was removed. His widow was remarried a year later to Mr. John Gardiner, the auburn-haired secretary. Ronald inherited the broad acres of his father, and continues to flourish.

“Well, well,” I remarked to Poirot. “Another illusion gone. You have disposed very successfully of the curse of the Lemesuriers.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot very thoughtfully. “I wonder very much indeed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mon ami, I will answer you with one significant word—red!”

“Blood?” I queried, dropping my voice to an awe-stricken whisper.

“Always you have the imagination melodramatic, Hastings! I refer to something much more prosaic—the colour of little Ronald Lemesurier’s hair.”

Six

THE CORNISH MYSTERY

I

Mrs. Pengelley," announced our landlady, and withdrew discreetly.

Many unlikely people came to consult Poirot, but to my mind, the woman who stood nervously just inside the door, fingering her feather neck-piece, was the most unlikely of all. She was so extraordinarily commonplace—a thin, faded woman of about fifty, dressed in a braided coat and skirt, some gold jewellery at her neck, and with her grey hair surmounted by a singularly unbecoming hat. In a country town you pass a hundred Mrs. Pengelleys in the street every day.

Poirot came forward and greeted her pleasantly, perceiving her obvious embarrassment.

"Madame! Take a chair, I beg of you. My colleague, Captain Hastings."

The lady sat down, murmuring uncertainly: "You are M. Poirot, the detective?"

"At your service, madame."

But our guest was still tongue-tied. She sighed, twisted her fingers, and grew steadily redder and redder.

"There is something I can do for you, eh, madame?"

"Well, I thought—that is—you see—"

"Proceed, madame, I beg of you—proceed."

Mrs. Pengelley, thus encouraged, took a grip on herself.

"It's this way, M. Poirot—I don't want to have anything to do with the police. No, I wouldn't go to the police for anything! But all the same, I'm sorely troubled about something. And yet I don't know if I ought—" She stopped abruptly.

"Me, I have nothing to do with the police. My investigations are strictly private."

Mrs. Pengelley caught at the word.

"Private—that's what I want. I don't want any talk or fuss, or things in the papers. Wicked it is, the way they write things, until the family could never hold up their heads again. And it isn't as though I was even sure—it's just a dreadful idea that's come to me, and put it out of my head I can't." She paused for breath. "And all the time I may be wickedly wronging poor Edward. It's a terrible thought for any wife to have. But you do read of such dreadful things nowadays."

"Permit me—it is of your husband you speak?"

"Yes."

"And you suspect him of—what?"

"I don't like even to say it, M. Poirot. But you do read of such things happening—and the poor souls suspecting nothing."

I was beginning to despair of the lady's ever coming to the point, but Poirot's patience was equal to the demand made upon it.

"Speak without fear, madame. Think what joy will be yours if we are able to prove your suspicions unfounded."

"That's true—anything's better than this wearing uncertainty. Oh, M. Poirot, I'm dreadfully afraid I'm being poisoned."

"What makes you think so?"

Mrs. Pengelley, her reticence leaving her, plunged into a full recital more suited to the ears of her medical attendant.

“Pain and sickness after food, eh?” said Poirot thoughtfully. “You have a doctor attending you, madame? What does he say?”

“He says it’s acute gastritis, M. Poirot. But I can see that he’s puzzled and uneasy, and he’s always altering the medicine, but nothing does any good.”

“You have spoken of your—fears, to him?”

“No, indeed, M. Poirot. It might get about in the town. And perhaps it is gastritis. All the same, it’s very odd that whenever Edward is away for the weekend, I’m quite all right again. Even Freda notices that—my niece, M. Poirot. And then there’s that bottle of weed killer, never used, the gardener says, and yet it’s half-empty.”

She looked appealingly at Poirot. He smiled reassuringly at her, and reached for a pencil and notebook.

“Let us be businesslike, madame. Now, then, you and your husband reside—where?”

“Polgarwith, a small market town in Cornwall.”

“You have lived there long?”

“Fourteen years.”

“And your household consists of you and your husband. Any children?”

“No.”

“But a niece, I think you said?”

“Yes, Freda Stanton, the child of my husband’s only sister. She has lived with us for the last eight years—that is, until a week ago.”

“Oh, and what happened a week ago?”

“Things hadn’t been very pleasant for some time; I don’t know what had come over Freda. She was so rude and impertinent, and her temper something shocking, and in the end she flared up one day, and out she walked and took rooms of her own in the town. I’ve not seen her since. Better leave her to come to her senses, so Mr. Radnor says.”

“Who is Mr. Radnor?”

Some of Mrs. Pengelley’s initial embarrassment returned.

“Oh, he’s—he’s just a friend. Very pleasant young fellow.”

“Anything between him and your niece?”

“Nothing whatever,” said Mrs. Pengelley emphatically.

Poirot shifted his ground.

“You and your husband are, I presume, in comfortable circumstances?”

“Yes, we’re very nicely off.”

“The money, is it yours or your husband’s?”

“Oh, it’s all Edward’s. I’ve nothing of my own.”

“You see, madame, to be businesslike, we must be brutal. We must seek for a motive. Your husband, he would not poison you just pour passer le temps! Do you know of any reason why he should wish you out of the way?”

“There’s the yellow-haired hussy who works for him,” said Mrs. Pengelley, with a flash of temper. “My husband’s a dentist, M. Poirot, and nothing would do but he must have a smart girl, as he said, with bobbed hair and a white overall, to make his appointments and mix his fillings for him. It’s come to my ears that there have been fine goings-on, though of course he swears it’s all right.”

“This bottle of weed killer, madame, who ordered it?”

“My husband—about a year ago.”

“Your niece, now, has she any money of her own?”

“About fifty pounds a year, I should say. She’d be glad enough to come back and keep house for Edward if I left him.”

“You have contemplated leaving him, then?”

“I don’t intend to let him have it all his own way. Women aren’t the downtrodden slaves they were in the old days, M. Poirot.”

“I congratulate you on your independent spirit, madame; but let us be practical. You return to Polgarwith today?”

“Yes, I came up by an excursion. Six this morning the train started, and the train goes back at five this afternoon.”

“Bien! I have nothing of great moment on hand. I can devote myself to your little affair. Tomorrow I shall be in Polgarwith. Shall we say that Hastings, here, is a distant relative of yours, the son of your second cousin? Me, I am his eccentric foreign friend. In the meantime, eat only what is prepared by your own hands, or under your eye. You have a maid whom you trust?”

“Jessie is a very good girl, I am sure.”

“Till tomorrow then, madame, and be of good courage.”

II

Poirot bowed the lady out, and returned thoughtfully to his chair. His absorption was not so great, however, that he failed to see two minute strands of feather scarf wrenched off by the lady’s agitated fingers. He collected them carefully and consigned them to the wastepaper basket.

“What do you make of the case, Hastings?”

“A nasty business, I should say.”

"Yes, if what the lady suspects be true. But is it? Woe betide any husband who orders a bottle of weed killer nowadays. If his wife suffers from gastritis, and is inclined to be of a hysterical temperament, the fat is in the fire."

"You think that is all there is to it?"

"Ah—voilà—I do not know, Hastings. But the case interests me—it interests me enormously. For, you see, it has positively no new features. Hence the hysterical theory, and yet Mrs. Pengelley did not strike me as being a hysterical woman. Yes, if I mistake not, we have here a very poignant human drama. Tell me, Hastings, what do you consider Mrs. Pengelley's feelings towards her husband to be?"

"Loyalty struggling with fear," I suggested.

"Yet, ordinarily, a woman will accuse anyone in the world—but not her husband. She will stick to her belief in him through thick and thin."

"The 'other woman' complicates the matter."

"Yes, affection may turn to hate, under the stimulus of jealousy. But hate would take her to the police—not to me. She would want an outcry—a scandal. No, no, let us exercise our little grey cells. Why did she come to me? To have her suspicions proved wrong? Or—to have them proved right? Ah, we have here something I do not understand—an unknown factor. Is she a superb actress, our Mrs. Pengelley? No, she was genuine, I would swear that she was genuine, and therefore I am interested. Look up the trains to Polgarwith, I pray you."

III

The best train of the day was the one-fifty from Paddington which reached Polgarwith just after seven o'clock. The journey was uneventful, and I had to rouse myself from a pleasant nap to alight upon the platform of the bleak little station. We took our bags to the Duchy Hotel, and after a light meal, Poirot suggested our stepping round to pay an after-dinner call on my so-called cousin.

The Pengelleys' house stood a little way back from the road with an old-fashioned cottage garden in front. The smell of stocks and mignonette came sweetly wafted on the evening breeze. It seemed impossible to associate thoughts of violence with this Old World charm. Poirot rang and knocked. As the summons was not answered, he rang again. This time, after a little pause, the door was opened by a dishevelled-looking servant. Her eyes were red, and she was sniffing violently.

"We wish to see Mrs. Pengelley," explained Poirot. "May we enter?"

The maid stared. Then, with unusual directness, she answered: "Haven't you heard, then? She's dead. Died this evening—about half an hour ago."

We stood staring at her, stunned.

"What did she die of?" I asked at last.

"There's some as could tell." She gave a quick glance over her shoulder. "If it wasn't that somebody ought to be in the house with the missus, I'd pack my box and go tonight. But I'll not leave her dead with no one to watch by her. It's not my place to say anything, and I'm not going to say anything—but everybody knows. It's all over the town. And if Mr. Radnor don't write to the 'Ome Secretary, someone else will. The doctor may say what he likes. Didn't I see the master with my own eyes a-lifting down of the weed killer from the shelf this very evening? And didn't he jump when he turned round and saw me watching of him? And the missus' gruel there on the table, all ready to take to her? Not another bit of food passes my lips while I am in this house! Not if I dies for it."

"Where does the doctor live who attended your mistress?"

"Dr. Adams. Round the corner in High Street. The second house."

Poirot turned away abruptly. He was very pale.

"For a girl who was not going to say anything, that girl said a lot," I remarked dryly.

Poirot struck his clenched hand into his palm.

“An imbecile, a criminal imbecile, that is what I have been, Hastings. I have boasted of my little grey cells, and now I have lost a human life, a life that came to me to be saved. Never did I dream that anything would happen so soon. May the good God forgive me, but I never believed anything would happen at all. Her story seemed to me artificial. Here we are at the doctor’s. Let us see what he can tell us.”

IV

Dr. Adams was the typical genial red-faced country doctor of fiction. He received us politely enough, but at a hint of our errand, his red face became purple.

“Damned nonsense! Damned nonsense, every word of it! Wasn’t I in attendance on the case? Gastritis—gastritis pure and simple. This town’s a hotbed of gossip—a lot of scandal-mongering old women get together and invent God knows what. They read these scurrilous rags of newspapers, and nothing will suit them but that someone in their town shall get poisoned too. They see a bottle of weed killer on a shelf—and hey presto!—away goes their imagination with the bit between his teeth. I know Edward Pengelley—he wouldn’t poison his grandmother’s dog. And why should he poison his wife? Tell me that?”

“There is one thing, M. le Docteur, that perhaps you do not know.”

And, very briefly, Poirot outlined the main facts of Mrs. Pengelley’s visit to him. No one could have been more astonished than Dr. Adams. His eyes almost started out of his head.

“God bless my soul!” he ejaculated. “The poor woman must have been mad. Why didn’t she speak to me? That was the proper thing to do.”

“And have her fears ridiculed?”

“Not at all, not at all. I hope I’ve got an open mind.”

Poirot looked at him and smiled. The physician was evidently more perturbed than he cared to admit. As we left the house, Poirot broke into a laugh.

“He is as obstinate as a pig, that one. He has said it is gastritis; therefore it is gastritis! All the same, he has the mind uneasy.”

“What’s our next step?”

“A return to the inn, and a night of horror upon one of your English provincial beds, mon ami. It is a thing to make pity, the cheap English bed!”

“And tomorrow?”

“Rien à faire. We must return to town and await developments.”

“That’s very tame,” I said, disappointed. “Suppose there are none?”

“There will be! I promise you that. Our old doctor may give as many certificates as he pleases. He cannot stop several hundred tongues from wagging. And they will wag to some purpose, I can tell you that!”

Our train for town left at eleven the following morning. Before we started for the station, Poirot expressed a wish to see Miss Freda Stanton, the niece mentioned to us by the dead woman. We found the house where she was lodging easily enough. With her was a tall, dark young man whom she introduced in some confusion as Mr. Jacob Radnor.

Miss Freda Stanton was an extremely pretty girl of the old Cornish type—dark hair and eyes and rosy cheeks. There was a flash in those same dark eyes which told of a temper that it would not be wise to provoke.

“Poor Auntie,” she said, when Poirot had introduced himself, and explained his business. “It’s terribly sad. I’ve been wishing all the morning that I’d been kinder and more patient.”

“You stood a great deal, Freda,” interrupted Radnor.

“Yes, Jacob, but I’ve got a sharp temper, I know. After all, it was only silliness on Auntie’s part. I ought to have just laughed and not minded. Of course, it’s all nonsense her thinking that Uncle was poisoning her. She was worse after any food he gave her—but I’m sure it was only from thinking about it. She made up her mind she would be, and then she was.”

“What was the actual cause of your disagreement, mademoiselle?”

Miss Stanton hesitated, looking at Radnor. That young gentleman was quick to take the hint.

“I must be getting along, Freda. See you this evening. Good-bye, gentlemen; you’re on your way to the station, I suppose?”

Poirot replied that we were, and Radnor departed.

“You are affianced, is it not so?” demanded Poirot, with a sly smile.

Freda Stanton blushed and admitted that such was the case.

“And that was really the whole trouble with Auntie,” she added.

“She did not approve of the match for you?”

“Oh, it wasn’t that so much. But you see, she—” The girl came to a stop.

“Yes?” encouraged Poirot gently.

“It seems rather a horrid thing to say about her—now she’s dead. But you’ll never understand unless I tell you. Auntie was absolutely infatuated with Jacob.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, wasn’t it absurd? She was over fifty, and he’s not quite thirty! But there it was. She was silly about him! I had to tell her at last that it was me he was after—and she carried on dreadfully. She wouldn’t believe a word of it, and was so rude and insulting that it’s no wonder I lost my temper. I talked it over with Jacob, and we agreed that the best thing to do was for me to clear out for a bit till she came to her senses. Poor Auntie—I suppose she was in a queer state altogether."

"It would certainly seem so. Thank you, mademoiselle, for making things so clear to me."

V

A little to my surprise, Radnor was waiting for us in the street below.

"I can guess pretty well what Freda has been telling you," he remarked. "It was a most unfortunate thing to happen, and very awkward for me, as you can imagine. I need hardly say that it was none of my doing. I was pleased at first, because I imagined the old woman was helping on things with Freda. The whole thing was absurd—but extremely unpleasant."

"When are you and Miss Stanton going to be married?"

"Soon, I hope. Now, M. Poirot, I'm going to be candid with you. I know a bit more than Freda does. She believes her uncle to be innocent. I'm not so sure. But I can tell you one thing: I'm going to keep my mouth shut about what I do know. Let sleeping dogs lie. I don't want my wife's uncle tried and hanged for murder."

"Why do you tell me all this?"

"Because I've heard of you, and I know you're a clever man. It's quite possible that you might ferret out a case against him. But I put it to you—what good is that? The poor woman is past help, and she'd have been the last person to want a scandal—why, she'd turn in her grave at the mere thought of it."

"You are probably right there. You want me to—hush it up, then?"

"That's my idea. I'll admit frankly that I'm selfish about it. I've got my way to make—and I'm building up a good little business as a tailor and outfitter."

"Most of us are selfish, Mr. Radnor. Not all of us admit it so freely. I will do what you ask—but I tell you frankly you will not succeed in hushing it up."

"Why not?"

Poirot held up a finger. It was market day, and we were passing the market—a busy hum came from within.

"The voice of the people—that is why, Mr. Radnor. Ah, we must run, or we shall miss our train."

VI

"Very interesting, is it not, Hastings?" said Poirot, as the train steamed out of the station.

He had taken out a small comb from his pocket, also a microscopic mirror, and was carefully arranging his moustache, the symmetry of which had become slightly impaired during our brisk run.

"You seem to find it so," I replied. "To me, it is all rather sordid and unpleasant. There's hardly any mystery about it."

"I agree with you; there is no mystery whatever."

"I suppose we can accept the girl's rather extraordinary story of her aunt's infatuation? That seemed the only fishy part to me. She was such a nice, respectable woman."

"There is nothing extraordinary about that—it is completely ordinary. If you read the papers carefully, you will find that often a nice respectable woman of that age leaves a husband she has lived with for twenty years, and sometimes a whole family of children as well, in order to link her life with that of a young man considerably her junior. You admire les femmes, Hastings; you prostrate yourself before all of them who are good-looking and have the good taste to smile upon you; but psychologically you know nothing whatever about them. In the autumn of a woman's life, there comes always one mad moment when she longs for romance, for adventure—

before it is too late. It comes none the less surely to a woman because she is the wife of a respectable dentist in a country town!”

“And you think—”

“That a clever man might take advantage of such a moment.”

“I shouldn’t call Pengelley so clever,” I mused. “He’s got the whole town by the ears. And yet I suppose you’re right. The only two men who know anything, Radnor and the doctor, both want to hush it up. He’s managed that somehow. I wish we’d seen the fellow.”

“You can indulge your wish. Return by the next train and invent an aching molar.”

I looked at him keenly.

“I wish I knew what you considered so interesting about the case.”

“My interest is very aptly summed up by a remark of yours, Hastings. After interviewing the maid, you observed that for someone who was not going to say a word, she had said a good deal.”

“Oh!” I said doubtfully; then I harped back to my original criticism: “I wonder why you made no attempt to see Pengelley?”

“Mom ami, I give him just three months. Then I shall see him for as long as I please—in the dock.”

VII

For once I thought Poirot’s prognostications were going to be proved wrong. The time went by, and nothing transpired as to our Cornish case. Other matters occupied us, and I had nearly forgotten the Pengelley tragedy when it was suddenly recalled to me by a short paragraph in the paper which stated that an order to exhume the body of Mrs. Pengelley had been obtained from the Home Secretary.

A few days later, and “The Cornish Mystery” was the topic of every paper. It seemed that gossip had never entirely died down, and when the engagement of the widower to Miss Marks, his secretary, was announced, the tongues burst out again louder than ever. Finally a petition was sent to the Home Secretary; the body was exhumed; large quantities of arsenic were discovered; and Mr. Pengelley was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife.

Poirot and I attended the preliminary proceedings. The evidence was much as might have been expected. Dr. Adams admitted that the symptoms of arsenical poisoning might easily be mistaken for those of gastritis. The Home Office expert gave his evidence; the maid Jessie poured out a flood of voluble information, most of which was rejected, but which certainly strengthened the case against the prisoner. Freda Stanton gave evidence as to her aunt’s being worse whenever she ate food prepared by her husband. Jacob Radnor told how he had dropped in unexpectedly on the day of Mrs. Pengelley’s death, and found Pengelley replacing the bottle of weed killer on the pantry shelf, Mrs. Pengelley’s gruel being on the table close by. Then Miss Marks, the fair-haired secretary, was called, and wept and went into hysterics and admitted that there had been “passages” between her and her employer, and that he had promised to marry her in the event of anything happening to his wife. Pengelley reserved his defence and was sent for trial.

VIII

Jacob Radnor walked back with us to our lodgings.

“You see, Mr. Radnor,” said Poirot, “I was right. The voice of the people spoke—and with no uncertain voice. There was to be no hushing up of this case.”

“You were quite right,” sighed Radnor. “Do you see any chance of his getting off?”

“Well, he has reserved his defence. He may have something—up the sleeves, as you English say. Come in with us, will you not?”

Radnor accepted the invitation. I ordered two whiskies and sodas and a cup of chocolate. The last order caused consternation, and I much doubted whether it would ever put in an appearance.

“Of course,” continued Poirot, “I have a good deal of experience in matters of this kind. And I see only one loophole of escape for our friend.”

“What is it?”

“That you should sign this paper.”

With the suddenness of a conjuror, he produced a sheet of paper covered with writing.

“What is it?”

“A confession that you murdered Mrs. Pengelley.”

There was a moment’s pause; then Radnor laughed.

“You must be mad!”

“No, no, my friend, I am not mad. You came here; you started a little business; you were short of money. Mr. Pengelley was a man very well-to-do. You met his niece; she was inclined to smile upon you. But the small allowance that Pengelley might have given her upon her marriage was not enough for you. You must get rid of both the uncle and the aunt; then the money would come to her, since she was the only relative. How cleverly you set about it! You made love to that plain middle-aged woman until she was your slave. You implanted in her doubts of her husband. She discovered first that he was deceiving her—then, under your guidance, that he was trying to poison her. You were often at the house; you had opportunities to introduce the arsenic into her food. But you were careful never to do so when her husband was away. Being a woman, she did not keep her suspicions to herself. She talked to her niece; doubtless she talked to other women friends. Your only difficulty was keeping up separate relations with the two women, and even that was not so difficult as it looked. You explained to the aunt that, to allay the suspicions of her husband, you had to pretend to pay court to the niece. And the younger lady needed little convincing—she would never seriously consider her aunt as a rival.

"But then Mrs. Pengelley made up her mind, without saying anything to you, to consult me. If she could be really assured, beyond any possible doubt, that her husband was trying to poison her, she would feel justified in leaving him, and linking her life with yours—which is what she imagined you wanted her to do. But that did not suit your book at all. You did not want a detective prying around. A favourable minute occurs. You are in the house when Mr. Pengelley is getting some gruel for his wife, and you introduce the fatal dose. The rest is easy. Apparently anxious to hush matters up, you secretly foment them. But you reckoned without Hercule Poirot, my intelligent young friend."

Radnor was deadly pale, but he still endeavoured to carry off matters with a high hand.

"Very interesting and ingenious, but why tell me all this?"

"Because, monsieur, I represent—not the law, but Mrs. Pengelley. For her sake, I give you a chance of escape. Sign this paper, and you shall have twenty-four hours' start—twenty-four hours before I place it in the hands of the police."

Radnor hesitated.

"You can't prove anything."

"Can't I? I am Hercule Poirot. Look out of the window, monsieur. There are two men in the street. They have orders not to lose sight of you."

Radnor strode across to the window and pulled aside the blind, then shrank back with an oath.

"You see, monsieur? Sign—it is your best chance."

"What guarantee have I—"

"That I shall keep faith? The word of Hercule Poirot. You will sign? Good. Hastings, be so kind as to pull that left-hand blind halfway up. That is the signal that Mr. Radnor may leave unmolested."

White, muttering oaths, Radnor hurried from the room. Poirot nodded gently.

"A coward! I always knew it."

"It seems to me, Poirot, that you've acted in a criminal manner," I cried angrily. "You always preach against sentiment. And here you are letting a dangerous criminal escape out of sheer sentimentality."

"That was not sentiment—that was business," replied Poirot. "Do you not see, my friend, that we have no shadow of proof against him? Shall I get up and say to twelve stolid Cornishmen that I, Hercule Poirot, know? They would laugh at me. The only chance was to frighten him and get a confession that way. Those two loafers that I noticed outside came in very useful. Pull down the blind again, will you, Hastings. Not that there was any reason for raising it. It was part of our mise en scène.

"Well, well, we must keep our word. Twenty-four hours, did I say? So much longer for poor Mr. Pengelley—and it is not more than he deserves; for mark you, he deceived his wife. I am very strong on the family life, as you know. Ah, well, twenty-four hours—and then? I have great faith in Scotland Yard. They will get him, mon ami; they will get him."

Seven

THE KING OF CLUBS

I

Truth,” I observed, laying aside the Daily Newsmonger, “is stranger than fiction!”

The remark was not, perhaps, an original one. It appeared to incense my friend. Tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, the little man carefully flicked an imaginary fleck of dust from his carefully creased trousers, and observed: “How profound! What a thinker is my friend Hastings!”

Without displaying any annoyance at this quite uncalled-for gibe, I tapped the sheet I had laid aside.

“You’ve read this morning’s paper?”

“I have. And after reading it, I folded it anew symmetrically. I did not cast it on the floor as you have done, with your so lamentable absence of order and method.”

(That is the worst of Poirot. Order and Method are his gods. He goes so far as to attribute all his success to them.)

“Then you saw the account of the murder of Henry Reedburn, the impresario? It was that which prompted my remark. Not only is truth stranger than fiction—it is more dramatic. Think of that solid middle-class English family, the Oglanders. Father and mother, son and daughter, typical of thousands of families all over this country. The men of the family go to the city every day; the women look after the house. Their lives are perfectly peaceful, and utterly monotonous. Last night they were sitting in their neat suburban drawing room at Daisymead, Streatham, playing bridge. Suddenly, without any warning, the french window bursts open, and a woman staggers into the room. Her grey satin frock is marked with a crimson stain. She utters one word, “Murder!” before she sinks to the ground insensible. It is possible that they recognize her from her pictures as Valerie Saintclair, the famous dancer who has lately taken London by storm!”

“Is this your eloquence, or that of the Daily Newsmonger?” inquired Poirot.

“The Daily Newsmonger was in a hurry to go to press, and contented itself with bare facts. But the dramatic possibilities of the story struck me at once.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. “Wherever there is human nature, there is drama. But—it is not always just where you think it is. Remember that. Still, I too am interested in the case, since it is likely that I shall be connected with it.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. A gentleman rang me up this morning, and made an appointment with me on behalf of Prince Paul of Maurania.”

“But what has that to do with it?”

“You do not read your pretty little English scandal-papers. The ones with the funny stories, and ‘a little mouse has heard—’ or ‘a little bird would like to know—’ See here.”

I followed his short stubby finger along the paragraph: “—whether the foreign prince and the famous dancer are really affinities! And if the lady likes her new diamond ring!”

“And now to resume your so dramatic narrative,” said Poirot. “Mademoiselle Saintclair had just fainted on the drawing room carpet at Daisymead, you remember.”

I shrugged. “As a result of Mademoiselle’s first murmured words when she came round, the two male Oglanders stepped out, one to fetch a doctor to attend to the lady, who was evidently suffering terribly from shock, and the other to the police station—whence after telling his story, he accompanied the police to Mon Désir, Mr. Reedburn's magnificent villa, which is situated at no great distance from Daisymead. There they found the great man, who by the way suffers from a somewhat unsavoury reputation, lying in the library with the back of his head cracked open like an eggshell."

"I have cramped your style," said Poirot kindly. "Forgive me, I pray . . . Ah, here is M. le Prince!"

Our distinguished visitor was announced under the title of Count Feodor. He was a strange-looking youth, tall, eager, with a weak chin, the famous Mauranberg mouth, and the dark fiery eyes of a fanatic.

"M. Poirot?"

My friend bowed.

"Monsieur, I am in terrible trouble, greater than I can well express—"

Poirot waved his hand. "I comprehend your anxiety. Mademoiselle Saintclair is a very dear friend, is it not so?"

The prince replied simply: "I hope to make her my wife."

Poirot sat up in his chair, and his eyes opened.

The prince continued: "I should not be the first of my family to make a morganatic marriage. My brother Alexander has also defied the Emperor. We are living now in more enlightened days, free from the old caste-prejudice. Besides, Mademoiselle Saintclair, in actual fact, is quite my equal in rank. You have heard hints as to her history?"

"There are many romantic stories of her origin—not an uncommon thing with famous dancers. I have heard that she is the daughter of an Irish charwoman, also the story which makes her mother a Russian grand duchess."

“The first story is, of course, nonsense,” said the young man. “But the second is true. Valerie, though bound to secrecy, has let me guess as much. Besides, she proves it unconsciously in a thousand ways. I believe in heredity, M. Poirot.”

“I too believe in heredity,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “I have seen some strange things in connection with it—moi qui vous parle . . . But to business, M. le Prince. What do you want of me? What do you fear? I may speak freely, may I not? Is there anything to connect Mademoiselle Saintclair with the crime? She knew Reedburn of course?”

“Yes. He professed to be in love with her.”

“And she?”

“She would have nothing to say to him.”

Poirot looked at him keenly. “Had she any reason to fear him?”

The young man hesitated. “There was an incident. You know Zara, the clairvoyant?”

“No.”

“She is wonderful. You should consult her some time. Valerie and I went to see her last week. She read the cards for us. She spoke to Valerie of trouble—of gathering clouds; then she turned up the last card—the covering card, they call it. It was the king of clubs. She said to Valerie: ‘Beware. There is a man who holds you in his power. You fear him—you are in great danger through him. You know whom I mean?’ Valerie was white to the lips. She nodded and said: ‘Yes, yes, I know.’ Shortly afterwards we left. Zara’s last words to Valerie were: ‘Beware of the king of clubs. Danger threatens you!’ I questioned Valerie. She would tell me nothing—assured me that all was well. But now, after last night, I am more sure than ever that in the king of clubs Valerie saw Reedburn, and that he was the man she feared.”

The Prince paused abruptly. “Now you understand my agitation when I opened the paper this morning. Supposing Valerie, in a fit of madness—oh, it is impossible!”

Poirot rose from his seat, and patted the young man kindly on the shoulder. “Do not distress yourself, I beg of you. Leave it in my hands.”

“You will go to Streatham? I gather she is still there, at Daisymead—prostrated by the shock.”

“I will go at once.”

“I have arranged matters—through the embassy. You will be allowed access everywhere.”

“Then we will depart—Hastings, you will accompany me? Au revoir, M. le Prince.”

II

Mon Désir was an exceptionally fine villa, thoroughly modern and comfortable. A short carriage-drive led up to it from the road, and beautiful gardens extended behind the house for some acres.

On mentioning Prince Paul’s name, the butler who answered the door at once took us to the scene of the tragedy. The library was a magnificent room, running from back to front of the whole building, with a window at either end, one giving on the front carriage-drive, and the other on the garden. It was in the recess of the latter that the body had lain. It had been removed not long before, the police having concluded their examination.

“That is annoying,” I murmured to Poirot. “Who knows what clues they may have destroyed?”

My little friend smiled. “Eh—Eh! How often must I tell you that clues come from within? In the little grey cells of the brain lies the solution of every mystery.”

He turned to the butler. “I suppose, except for the removal of the body, the room has not been touched?”

“No, sir. It’s just as it was when the police came up last night.”

“These curtains, now. I see they pull right across the window recess. They are the same in the other window. Were they drawn last night?”

“Yes, sir, I draw them every night.”

“Then Reedburn must have drawn them back himself?”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Did you know your master expected a visitor last night?”

“He did not say so, sir. But he gave orders he was not to be disturbed after dinner. You see, sir, there is a door leading out of the library on to the terrace at the side of the house. He could have admitted anyone that way.”

“Was he in the habit of doing that?”

The butler coughed discreetly. “I believe so, sir.”

Poirot strode to the door in question. It was unlocked. He stepped through it on to the terrace which joined the drive on the right; on the left it led up to a red brick wall.

“The fruit garden, sir. There is a door leading into it farther along, but it was always locked at six o’clock.”

Poirot nodded, and reentered the library, the butler following.

“Did you hear nothing of last night’s events?”

“Well, sir, we heard voices in the library, a little before nine. But that wasn’t unusual, especially being a lady’s voice. But of course, once we were all in the servants’ hall, right the other side, we didn’t hear anything at all. And then, about eleven o’clock, the police came.”

“How many voices did you hear?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. I only noticed the lady’s.”

“Ah!”

“I beg pardon, sir, but Dr. Ryan is still in the house, if you would care to see him.”

We jumped at the suggestion, and in a few minutes the doctor, a cheery, middle-aged man, joined us, and gave Poirot all the information he required. Reedburn had been lying near the window, his head by the marble window seat. There were two wounds, one between the eyes, and the other, the fatal one, on the back of the head.

“He was lying on his back?”

“Yes. There is the mark.” He pointed to a small dark stain on the floor.

“Could not the blow on the back of the head have been caused by his striking the floor?”

“Impossible. Whatever the weapon was, it penetrated some distance into the skull.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully in front of him. In the embrasure of each window was a carved marble seat, the arms being fashioned in the form of a lion’s head. A light came into Poirot’s eyes. “Supposing he had fallen backwards on this projecting lion’s head, and slipped from there to the ground. Would not that cause a wound such as you describe?”

“Yes, it would. But the angle at which he was lying makes that theory impossible. And besides there could not fail to be traces of blood on the marble of the seat.”

“Unless they were washed away?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “That is hardly likely. It would be to no one’s advantage to give an accident the appearance of murder.”

“Quite so,” acquiesced Poirot. “Could either of the blows have been struck by a woman, do you think?”

“Oh, quite out of the question, I should say. You are thinking of Mademoiselle Saintclair, I suppose?”

“I think of no one in particular until I am sure,” said Poirot gently.

He turned his attention to the open french window, and the doctor continued:

“It is through here that Mademoiselle Saintclair fled. You can just catch a glimpse of Daisymead between the trees. Of course, there are many houses nearer to the front of the house on the road, but as it happens, Daisymead, though some distance away, is the only house visible this side.”

“Thank you for your amiability, Doctor,” said Poirot. “Come, Hastings, we will follow the footsteps of Mademoiselle.”

III

Poirot led the way down through the garden, out through an iron gate, across a short stretch of green and in through the garden gate of Daisymead, which was an unpretentious little house in about half an acre of ground. There was a small flight of steps leading up to a french window. Poirot nodded in their direction.

“That is the way Mademoiselle Saintclair went. For us, who have not her urgency to plead, it will be better to go round to the front door.”

A maid admitted us and took us into the drawing room, then went in search of Mrs. Oglander. The room had evidently not been touched since the night before. The ashes were still in the grate, and the bridge table was still in the centre of the room, with a dummy exposed, and the hands thrown down. The place was somewhat overloaded with gimcrack ornaments, and a good many family portraits of surpassing ugliness adorned the walls.

Poirot gazed at them more leniently than I did, and straightened one or two that were hanging a shade askew. “La famille, it is a strong tie, is it not? Sentiment, it takes the place of beauty.”

I agreed, my eyes being fixed on a family group comprising a gentleman with whiskers, a lady with a high “front” of hair, a solid, thick-set boy, and two little girls tied up with a good many unnecessary bows of ribbon. I took this to be the Oglander family in earlier days, and studied it with interest.

The door opened, and a young woman came in. Her dark hair was neatly arranged, and she wore a drab-coloured sportscoat and a tweed skirt.

She looked at us inquiringly. Poirot stepped forward. “Miss Oglander? I regret to derange you—especially after all you have been through. The whole affair must have been most disturbing.”

“It has been rather upsetting,” admitted the young lady cautiously. I began to think that the elements of drama were wasted on Miss Oglander, that her lack of imagination rose superior to any tragedy. I was confirmed in this belief as she continued: “I must apologize for the state this room is in. Servants get so foolishly excited.”

“It was here that you were sitting last night, n’est-ce pas?”

“Yes, we were playing bridge after supper, when—”

“Excuse me—how long had you been playing?”

“Well—” Miss Oglander considered. “I really can’t say. I suppose it must have been about ten o’clock. We had had several rubbers, I know.”

“And you yourself were sitting—where?”

“Facing the window. I was playing with my mother and had gone one no trump. Suddenly, without any warning, the window burst open, and Miss Saintclair staggered into the room.”

“You recognized her?”

“I had a vague idea her face was familiar.”

“She is still here, is she not?”

“Yes, but she refuses to see anyone. She is still quite prostrated.”

“I think she will see me. Will you tell her that I am here at the express request of Prince Paul of Maurania?”

I fancied that the mention of a royal prince rather shook Miss Oglander’s imperturbable calm. But she left the room on her errand without any further remark, and returned almost immediately to say that Mademoiselle Saintclair would see us in her room.

We followed her upstairs, and into a fair-sized light bedroom. On a couch by the window a woman was lying who turned her head as we entered. The contrast between the two women struck me at once, the more so as in actual features and colouring they were not unalike—but oh, the difference! Not a look, not a gesture of Valerie Saintclair’s but expressed drama. She seemed to exhale an atmosphere of romance. A scarlet flannel dressing gown covered her feet—a homely garment in all conscience; but the charm of her personality invested it with an exotic flavour, and it seemed an Eastern robe of glowing colour.

Her large dark eyes fastened themselves on Poirot.

“You come from Paul?” Her voice matched her appearance—it was full and languid.

“Yes, mademoiselle. I am here to serve him—and you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything that happened last night. But everything!”

She smiled rather wearily.

“Do you think I should lie? I am not stupid. I see well enough that there can be no concealment. He held a secret of mine, that man who is dead. He threatened me with it. For Paul’s sake, I endeavoured to make terms with him. I could not risk losing Paul . . . Now that he is dead, I am safe. But for all that, I did not kill him.”

Poirot shook his head with a smile. “It is not necessary to tell me that, mademoiselle. Now recount to me what happened last night.”

“I offered him money. He appeared to be willing to treat with me. He appointed last night at nine o’clock. I was to go to Mon Désir. I knew the place; I had been there before. I was to go round to the side door into the library, so that the servants should not see me.”

“Excuse me, mademoiselle, but were you not afraid to trust yourself alone there at night?”

Was it my fancy, or was there a momentary pause before she answered?

“Perhaps I was. But you see, there was no one I could ask to go with me. And I was desperate. Reedburn admitted me to the library. Oh, that man! I am glad he is dead! He played with me, as a cat does with a mouse. He taunted me. I begged and implored him on my knees. I offered him every jewel I have. All in vain! Then he named his own terms. Perhaps you can guess what they were. I refused. I told him what I thought of him. I raved at him. He remained calmly smiling. And then, as I fell to silence at last, there was a sound—from behind the curtain in the window . . . He heard it too. He strode to the curtains and flung them wide apart. There was a man there, hiding—a dreadful-looking man, a sort of tramp. He struck at Mr. Reedburn—then he struck again, and he went down. The tramp clutched at me with his bloodstained hand. I tore myself free, slipped through the window, and ran for my life. Then I perceived the lights in this house, and made for them. The blinds were up, and I saw some people playing bridge. I almost fell into the room. I just managed to gasp out ‘Murder!’ and then everything went black—”

“Thank you, mademoiselle. It must have been a great shock to your nervous system. As to this tramp, could you describe him? Do you remember what he was wearing?”

"No—it was all so quick. But I should know the man anywhere. His face is burnt in on my brain."

"Just one more question, mademoiselle. The curtains of the other window, the one giving on the drive, were they drawn?"

For the first time a puzzled expression crept over the dancer's face. She seemed to be trying to remember.

"Eh bien, mademoiselle?"

"I think—I am almost sure—yes, quite sure! They were not drawn."

"That is curious, since the other ones were. No matter. It is, I dare say, of no great importance. You are remaining here long, mademoiselle?"

"The doctor thinks I shall be fit to return to town tomorrow." She looked round the room. Miss Oglander had gone out. "These people, they are very kind—but they are not of my world. I shock them! And to me—well, I am not fond of the bourgeoisie!"

A faint note of bitterness underlay her words.

Poirot nodded. "I understand. I hope I have not fatigued you unduly with my questions?"

"Not at all, monsieur. I am only too anxious Paul should know all as soon as possible."

"Then I will wish you good day, mademoiselle."

As Poirot was leaving the room, he paused, and pounced on a pair of patent-leather slippers. "Yours, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, monsieur. They have just been cleaned and brought up."

"Ah!" said Poirot, as we descended the stairs. "It seems that the domestics are not too excited to clean shoes, though they forget a grate. Well, mon ami, at first there appeared to be one or two points of interest, but I fear, I very much fear, that we must regard the case as finished. It all seems straightforward enough.”

“And the murderer?”

“Hercule Poirot does not hunt down tramps,” replied my friend grandiloquently.

IV

Miss Oglander met us in the hall. “If you will wait in the drawing room a minute, Mamma would like to speak to you.”

The room was still untouched, and Poirot idly gathered up the cards, shuffling them with his tiny, fastidiously groomed hands.

“Do you know what I think, my friend?”

“No?” I said eagerly.

“I think that Miss Oglander made a mistake in going one no trump. She should have gone three spades.”

“Poirot! You are the limit.”

“Mon Dieu, I cannot always be talking blood and thunder!”

Suddenly he stiffened: “Hastings—Hastings. See! The king of clubs is missing from the pack!”

“Zara!” I cried.

“Eh?” he did not seem to understand my allusion. Mechanically he stacked the cards and put them away in their cases. His face was very grave.

“Hastings,” he said at last, “I, Hercule Poirot, have come near to making a big mistake—a very big mistake.”

I gazed at him, impressed, but utterly uncomprehending.

“We must begin again, Hastings. Yes, we must begin again. But this time we shall not err.”

He was interrupted by the entrance of a handsome middle-aged lady. She carried some household books in her hand. Poirot bowed to her.

“Do I understand, sir, that you are a friend of—er—Miss Saintclair’s?”

“I come from a friend of hers, madame.”

“Oh, I see. I thought perhaps—”

Poirot suddenly waved brusquely at the window.

“Your blinds were not pulled down last night?”

“No—I suppose that is why Miss Saintclair saw the light so plainly.”

“There was moonlight last night. I wonder that you did not see Mademoiselle Saintclair from your seat here facing the windows?”

“I suppose we were engrossed with our game. Nothing like this has ever happened before to us.”

“I can quite believe that, madame. And I will put your mind at rest. Mademoiselle Saintclair is leaving tomorrow.”

“Oh!” The good lady’s face cleared.

“And I will wish you good morning, madame.”

A servant was cleaning the steps as we went out of the front door. Poirot addressed her.

“Was it you who cleaned the shoes of the young lady upstairs?”

The maid shook her head. “No, sir. I don’t think they’ve been cleaned.”

"Who cleaned them, then?" I inquired of Poirot, as we walked down the road.

"Nobody. They did not need cleaning."

"I grant that walking on the road or path on a fine night would not soil them. But surely after going through the long grass of the garden, they would have been soiled and stained."

"Yes," said Poirot with a curious smile. "In that case, I agree, they would have been stained."

"But—"

"Have patience a little half hour, my friend. We are going back to Mon Désir."

V

The butler looked surprised at our reappearance, but offered no objection to our returning to the library.

"Hi, that's the wrong window, Poirot," I cried as he made for the one overlooking the carriage-drive.

"I think not, my friend. See here." He pointed to the marble lion's head. On it was a faint discoloured smear. He shifted his finger and pointed to a similar stain on the polished floor.

"Someone struck Reedburn a blow with his clenched fist between the eyes. He fell backward on this projecting bit of marble, then slipped to the floor. Afterwards, he was dragged across the floor to the other window, and laid there instead, but not quite at the same angle, as the Doctor's evidence told us."

"But why? It seems utterly unnecessary."

"On the contrary, it was essential. Also, it is the key to the murderer's identity—though, by the way, he had no intention of killing Reedburn, and so it is hardly permissible to call him a murderer. He must be a very strong man!"

"Because of having dragged the body across the floor?"

"Not altogether. It has been an interesting case. I nearly made an imbecile of myself, though."

"Do you mean to say it is over, that you know everything?"

"Yes."

A remembrance smote me. "No," I cried. "There is one thing you do not know!"

"And that?"

"You do not know where the missing king of clubs is!"

"Eh? Oh, that is droll! That is very droll, my friend."

"Why?"

"Because it is in my pocket!" He drew it forth with a flourish.

"Oh!" I said, rather crestfallen. "Where did you find it? Here?"

"There was nothing sensational about it. It had simply not been taken out with the other cards. It was in the box."

"H'm! All the same, it gave you an idea, didn't it?"

"Yes, my friend. I present my respects to His Majesty."

"And to Madame Zara!"

"Ah, yes—to the lady also."

"Well, what are we going to do now?"

“We are going to return to town. But I must have a few words with a certain lady at Daisymead first.”

The same little maid opened the door to us.

“They’re all at lunch now, sir—unless it’s Miss Saintclair you want to see, and she’s resting.”

“It will do if I can see Mrs. Oglander for a few minutes. Will you tell her?”

We were led into the drawing room to wait. I had a glimpse of the family in the dining room as we passed, now reinforced by the presence of two heavy, solid-looking men, one with a moustache, the other with a beard also.

In a few minutes Mrs. Oglander came into the room, looking inquiringly at Poirot, who bowed.

“Madame, we, in our country, have a great tenderness, a great respect for the mother. The mère de famille, she is everything!”

Mrs. Oglander looked rather astonished at this opening.

“It is for that reason that I have come—to allay a mother’s anxiety. The murderer of Mr. Reedburn will not be discovered. Have no fear. I, Hercule Poirot, tell you so. I am right, am I not? Or is it a wife that I must reassure?”

There was a moment’s pause. Mrs. Oglander seemed searching Poirot with her eyes. At last she said quietly: “I don’t know how you know—but yes, you are right.”

Poirot nodded gravely. “That is all, madame. But do not be uneasy. Your English policemen have not the eyes of Hercule Poirot.” He tapped the family portrait on the wall with his fingernail.

“You had another daughter once. She is dead, madame?”

Again there was a pause, as she searched him with her eyes. Then she answered: “Yes, she is dead.”

“Ah!” said Poirot briskly. “Well, we must return to town. You permit that I return the king of clubs to the pack? It was your only slip. You understand, to have played bridge for an hour or so, with only fifty-one cards—well, no one who knows anything of the game would credit it for a minute! Bonjour!”

“And now, my friend,” said Poirot as we stepped towards the station, “you see it all!”

“I see nothing! Who killed Reedburn?”

“John Oglander, Junior. I was not quite sure if it was the father or the son, but I fixed on the son as being the stronger and younger of the two. It had to be one of them, because of the window.”

“Why?”

“There were four exits from the library—two doors, two windows; but evidently only one would do. Three exits gave on the front, directly or indirectly. The tragedy had to occur in the back window in order to make it appear that Valerie Saintclair came to Daisymead by chance. Really, of course, she fainted, and John Oglander carried her across over his shoulders. That is why I said he must be a strong man.”

“Did they go there together, then?”

“Yes. You remember Valerie’s hesitation when I asked her if she was not afraid to go alone? John Oglander went with her—which didn’t improve Reedburn’s temper, I fancy. They quarrelled, and it was probably some insult levelled at Valerie that made Oglander hit him. The rest, you know.”

“But why the bridge?”

“Bridge presupposes four players. A simple thing like that carries a lot of conviction. Who would have supposed that there had been only three people in that room all the evening?”

I was still puzzled.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand. What have the Oglanders to do with the dancer Valerie Saintclair?”

“Ah, that I wonder you did not see. And yet you looked long enough at that picture on the wall—longer than I did. Mrs. Oglander’s other daughter may be dead to her family, but the world knows her as Valerie Saintclair!”

“What?”

“Did you not see the resemblance the moment you saw the two sisters together?”

“No,” I confessed. “I only thought how extraordinarily dissimilar they were.”

“That is because your mind is so open to external romantic impressions, my dear Hastings. The features are almost identical. So is the colouring. The interesting thing is that Valerie is ashamed of her family, and her family is ashamed of her. Nevertheless, in a moment of peril, she turned to her brother for help, and when things went wrong, they all hung together in a remarkable way. Family strength is a marvellous thing. They can all act, that family. That is where Valerie gets her histrionic talent from. I, like Prince Paul, believe in heredity! They deceived me! But for a lucky accident, and test question to Mrs. Oglander by which I got her to contradict her daughter’s account of how they were sitting, the Oglander family would have put a defeat on Hercule Poirot.”

“What shall you tell the Prince?”

“That Valerie could not possibly have committed the crime, and that I doubt if that tramp will ever be found. Also, to convey my compliments to Zara. A curious coincidence, that! I think I shall call this little affair the Adventure of the King of Clubs. What do you think, my friend?”

Eight

THE SUBMARINE PLANS

I

A note had been brought by special messenger. Poirot read it, and a gleam of excitement and interest came into his eyes as he did so. He dismissed the man with a few curt words and then turned to me.

"Pack a bag with all haste, my friend. We're going down to Sharples."

I started at the mention of the famous country place of Lord Alloway. Head of the newly formed Ministry of Defence, Lord Alloway was a prominent member of the Cabinet. As Sir Ralph Curtis, head of a great engineering firm, he had made his mark in the House of Commons, and he was now freely spoken of as the coming man, and the one most likely to be asked to form a ministry should the rumours as to Mr. David MacAdam's health prove well founded.

A big Rolls-Royce car was waiting for us below, and as we glided off into the darkness, I plied Poirot with questions.

"What on earth can they want us for at this time of night?" I demanded. It was past eleven.

Poirot shook his head. "Something of the most urgent, without doubt."

"I remember," I said, "that some years ago there was some rather ugly scandal about Ralph Curtis, as he then was—some jugglery with shares, I believe. In the end, he was completely exonerated; but perhaps something of the kind has arisen again?"

"It would hardly be necessary for him to send for me in the middle of the night, my friend."

I was forced to agree, and the remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Once out of London, the powerful car forged rapidly ahead, and we arrived at Sharples in a little under the hour.

A pontifical butler conducted us at once to a small study where Lord Alloway was awaiting us. He sprang up to greet us—a tall, spare man who seemed actually to radiate power and vitality.

“M. Poirot, I am delighted to see you. It is the second time the government has demanded your services. I remember only too well what you did for us during the war, when the Prime Minister was kidnapped in that astounding fashion. Your masterly deductions—and may I add, your discretion?—saved the situation.”

Poirot’s eyes twinkled a little.

“Do I gather then, milor’, that this is another case for—discretion?”

“Most emphatically. Sir Harry and I—oh, let me introduce you—Admiral Sir Harry Weardale, our First Sea Lord—M. Poirot and—let me see, Captain—”

“Hastings,” I supplied.

“I’ve often heard of you, M. Poirot,” said Sir Harry, shaking hands. “This is a most unaccountable business, and if you can solve it, we’ll be extremely grateful to you.”

I liked the First Sea Lord immediately, a square, bluff sailor of the good old-fashioned type.

Poirot looked inquiringly at them both, and Alloway took up the tale.

“Of course, you understand that all this is in confidence, M. Poirot. We have had a most serious loss. The plans of the new Z type of submarine have been stolen.”

“When was that?”

“Tonight—less than three hours ago. You can appreciate perhaps, M. Poirot, the magnitude of the disaster. It is essential that the loss should not be made public. I will give you the facts as briefly as possible. My guests over the weekend were the Admiral, here, his wife and son, and Mrs. Conrad, a lady well known in London society. The ladies retired to bed early—about ten o’clock; so did Mr. Leonard Weardale. Sir Harry is down here partly for the purpose of discussing the construction of this new type of submarine with me. Accordingly, I asked Mr. Fitzroy, my secretary, to get out the plans from the safe in the corner there, and to arrange them ready for me, as well as various other documents that bore upon the subject in hand. While he was doing this, the Admiral and I strolled up and down the terrace, smoking cigars and enjoying the warm June air. We finished our smoke and our chat, and decided to get down to business. Just as we turned at the far end of the terrace, I fancied I saw a shadow slip out of the french window here, cross the terrace, and disappear. I paid very little attention, however. I knew Fitzroy to be in this room, and it never entered my head that anything might be amiss. There, of course, I am to blame. Well, we retraced our steps along the terrace and entered this room by the window just as Fitzroy entered it from the hall.

“ ‘Got everything out we are likely to need, Fitzroy?’ I asked.

“ ‘I think so, Lord Alloway. The papers are all on your desk,’ he answered. And then he wished us both good night.

“ ‘Just wait a minute,’ I said, going to the desk. ‘I may want something I haven’t mentioned.’

“I looked quickly through the papers that were lying there.”

“ ‘You’ve forgotten the most important of the lot, Fitzroy,’ I said. ‘The actual plans of the submarine!’

“ ‘The plans are right on top, Lord Alloway.’

“ ‘Oh no, they’re not,’ I said, turning over the papers.

“ ‘But I put them there not a minute ago!’

“ ‘Well, they’re not here now,’ I said.

“Fitzroy advanced with a bewildered expression on his face. The thing seemed incredible. We turned over the papers on the desk; we hunted through the safe; but at last we had to make up our minds to it that the papers were gone—and gone within the short space of about three minutes while Fitzroy was absent from the room.”

“Why did he leave the room?” asked Poirot quickly.

“Just what I asked him,” exclaimed Sir Harry.

“It appears,” said Lord Alloway, “that just when he had finished arranging the papers on my desk, he was startled by hearing a woman scream. He dashed out into the hall. On the stairs he discovered Mrs. Conrad’s French maid. The girl looked very white and upset, and declared that she had seen a ghost—a tall figure dressed all in white that moved without a sound. Fitzroy laughed at her fears and told her, in more or less polite language, not to be a fool. Then he returned to this room just as we entered from the window.”

“It all seems very clear,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “The only question is, was the maid an accomplice? Did she scream by arrangement with her confederate lurking outside, or was he merely waiting there in the hope of an opportunity presenting itself? It was a man, I suppose—not a woman you saw?”

“I can’t tell you, M. Poirot. It was just a—shadow.”

The admiral gave such a peculiar snort that it could not fail to attract attention.

“M. l’Amiral has something to say, I think,” said Poirot quietly, with a slight smile. “You saw this shadow, Sir Harry?”

“No, I didn’t,” returned the other. “And neither did Alloway. The branch of a tree flapped, or something, and then afterwards, when we discovered the theft, he leaped to the conclusion that he had seen someone pass across the terrace. His imagination played a trick on him; that's all."

"I am not usually credited with having much imagination," said Lord Alloway with a slight smile.

"Nonsense, we've all got imagination. We can all work ourselves up to believe that we've seen more than we have. I've had a lifetime of experience at sea, and I'll back my eyes against those of any landsman. I was looking right down the terrace, and I'd have seen the same if there was anything to see."

He was quite excited over the matter. Poirot rose and stepped quickly to the window.

"You permit?" he asked. "We must settle this point if possible."

He went out upon the terrace, and we followed him. He had taken an electric torch from his pocket, and was playing the light along the edge of the grass that bordered the terrace.

"Where did he cross the terrace, milor'?" he asked.

"About opposite the window, I should say."

Poirot continued to play the torch for some minutes longer, walking the entire length of the terrace and back. Then he shut it off and straightened himself up.

"Sir Harry is right—and you are wrong, milor'," he said quietly. "It rained heavily earlier this evening. Anyone who passed over that grass could not avoid leaving footmarks. But there are none—none at all."

His eyes went from one man's face to the other's. Lord Alloway looked bewildered and unconvinced; the Admiral expressed a noisy gratification.

"Knew I couldn't be wrong," he declared. "Trust my eyes anywhere."

He was such a picture of an honest old sea-dog that I could not help smiling.

“So that brings us to the people in the house,” said Poirot smoothly. “Let us come inside again. Now, milor’, while Mr. Fitzroy was speaking to the maid on the stairs, could anyone have seized the opportunity to enter the study from the hall?”

Lord Alloway shook his head.

“Quite impossible—they would have had to pass him in order to do so.”

“And Mr. Fitzroy himself—you are sure of him, eh?”

Lord Alloway flushed.

“Absolutely, M. Poirot. I will answer confidently for my secretary. It is quite impossible that he should be concerned in the matter in any way.”

“Everything seems to be impossible,” remarked Poirot rather drily. “Possibly the plans attached to themselves a little pair of wings, and flew away—comme ça!” He blew his lips out like a comical cherub.

“The whole thing is impossible,” declared Lord Alloway impatiently. “But I beg, M. Poirot, that you will not dream of suspecting Fitzroy. Consider for one moment—had he wished to take the plans, what could have been easier for him than to take a tracing of them without going to the trouble of stealing them?”

“There, milor’,” said Poirot with approval, “you make a remark bien juste—I see that you have a mind orderly and methodical. L’Angleterre is happy in possessing you.”

Lord Alloway looked rather embarrassed by this sudden burst of praise. Poirot returned to the matter in hand.

“The room in which you had been sitting all the evening—”

“The drawing room? Yes?”

“That also has a window on the terrace, since I remember your saying you went out that way. Would it not be possible for someone to come out by the drawing room window and in by this one while Mr. Fitzroy was out of the room, and return the same way?”

“But we’d have seen them,” objected the Admiral.

“Not if you had your backs turned, walking the other way.”

“Fitzroy was only out of the room a few minutes, the time it would take us to walk to the end and back.”

“No matter—it is a possibility—in fact, the only one as things stand.”

“But there was no one in the drawing room when we went out,” said the Admiral.

“They may have come there afterwards.”

“You mean,” said Lord Alloway slowly, “that when Fitzroy heard the maid scream and went out, someone was already concealed in the drawing room, and that they darted in and out through the windows, and only left the drawing room when Fitzroy had returned to this room?”

“The methodical mind again,” said Poirot, bowing.

“You express the matter perfectly.”

“One of the servants, perhaps?”

“Or a guest. It was Mrs. Conrad’s maid who screamed. What exactly can you tell me of Mrs. Conrad?”

Lord Alloway considered for a minute.

“I told you that she is a lady well known in society. That is true in the sense that she gives large parties, and goes everywhere. But very little is known as to where she really comes from, and what her past life has been. She is a lady who frequents diplomatic and Foreign Office circles as much as possible. The Secret Service is inclined to ask—why?”

“I see,” said Poirot. “And she was asked here this weekend—”

“So that—shall we say?—we might observe her at close quarters.”

“Parfaitement! It is possible that she has turned the tables on you rather neatly.”

Lord Alloway looked discomfited, and Poirot continued: “Tell me, milor’, was any reference made in her hearing to the subjects you and the Admiral were going to discuss together?”

“Yes,” admitted the other. “Sir Harry said: ‘And now for our submarine! To work!’ or something of that sort. The others had left the room, but she had come back for a book.”

“I see,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Milor’, it is very late—but this is an urgent affair. I would like to question the members of this house party at once if it is possible.”

“It can be managed, of course,” said Lord Alloway. “The awkward thing is, we don’t want to let it get about more than can be helped. Of course, Lady Juliet Weardale and young Leonard are all right—but Mrs. Conrad, if she is not guilty, is rather a different proposition. Perhaps you could just state that an important paper is missing, without specifying what it is, or going into any of the circumstances of the disappearance?”

“Exactly what I was about to propose myself,” said Poirot, beaming. “In fact, in all three cases. Monsieur the Admiral will pardon me, but even the best of wives—”

“No offence,” said Sir Harry. “All women talk, bless ’em! I wish Juliet would talk a little more and play bridge a little less. But women are like that nowadays, never happy unless they’re dancing or gambling. I’ll get Juliet and Leonard up, shall I, Alloway?”

“Thank you. I’ll call the French maid. M. Poirot will want to see her, and she can rouse her mistress. I’ll attend to it now. In the meantime, I’ll send Fitzroy along.”

II

Mr. Fitzroy was a pale, thin young man with pince-nez and a frigid expression. His statement was practically word for word what Lord Alloway had already told us.

“What is your own theory, Mr. Fitzroy?”

Mr. Fitzroy shrugged his shoulders.

“Undoubtedly someone who knew the hang of things was waiting his chance outside. He could see what went on through the window, and he slipped in when I left the room. It’s a pity Lord Alloway didn’t give chase then and there when he saw the fellow leave.”

Poirot did not undeceive him. Instead he asked: “Do you believe the story of the French maid—that she had seen a ghost?”

“Well, hardly, M. Poirot!”

“I mean—that she really thought so?”

“Oh, as to that, I can’t say. She certainly seemed rather upset. She had her hands to her head.”

“Aha!” cried Poirot with the air of one who has made a discovery. “Is that so indeed—and she was without doubt a pretty girl?”

“I didn’t notice particularly,” said Mr. Fitzroy in a repressive voice.

“You did not see her mistress, I suppose?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. She was in the gallery at the top of the steps and was calling her—‘Léonie!’ Then she saw me—and of course retired.”

"Upstairs," said Poirot, frowning.

"Of course, I realize that all this is very unpleasant for me—or rather would have been, if Lord Alloway had not chanced to see the man actually leaving. In any case, I should be glad if you would make a point of searching my room—and myself."

"You really wish that?"

"Certainly I do."

What Poirot would have replied I do not know, but at that moment Lord Alloway reappeared and informed us that the two ladies and Mr. Leonard Weardale were in the drawing room.

The women were in becoming negligees. Mrs. Conrad was a beautiful woman of thirty-five, with golden hair and a slight tendency to embonpoint. Lady Juliet Weardale must have been forty, tall and dark, very thin, still beautiful, with exquisite hands and feet, and a restless, haggard manner. Her son was rather an effeminate-looking young man, as great a contrast to his bluff, hearty father as could well be imagined.

Poirot gave forth the little rigmarole we had agreed upon, and then explained that he was anxious to know if anyone had heard or seen anything that night which might assist us.

Turning to Mrs. Conrad first, he asked her if she would be so kind as to inform him exactly what her movements had been.

"Let me see . . . I went upstairs. I rang for my maid. Then, as she did not put in an appearance, I came out and called her. I could hear her talking on the stairs. After she had brushed my hair, I sent her away—she was in a very curious nervous state. I read awhile and then went to bed."

"And you, Lady Juliet?"

"I went straight upstairs and to bed. I was very tired."

"What about your book, dear?" asked Mrs. Conrad with a sweet smile.

“My book?” Lady Juliet flushed.

“Yes, you know, when I sent Léonie away, you were coming up the stairs. You had been down to the drawing room for a book, you said.”

“Oh yes, I did go down. I—I forgot.”

Lady Juliet clasped her hands nervously together.

“Did you hear Mrs. Conrad’s maid scream, milady?”

“No—no, I didn’t.”

“How curious—because you must have been in the drawing room at the time.”

“I heard nothing,” said Lady Juliet in a firmer voice.

Poirot turned to young Leonard.

“Monsieur?”

“Nothing doing. I went straight upstairs and turned in.”

Poirot stroked his chin.

“Alas, I fear there is nothing to help me here. Mesdames and monsieur, I regret—I regret infinitely to have deranged you from your slumbers for so little. Accept my apologies, I pray of you.”

Gesticulating and apologizing, he marshalled them out. He returned with the French maid, a pretty, impudent-looking girl. Alloway and Weardale had gone out with the ladies.

“Now, mademoiselle,” said Poirot in a brisk tone, “let us have the truth. Recount to me no histories. Why did you scream on the stairs?”

“Ah, monsieur, I saw a tall figure—all in white—”

Poirot arrested her with an energetic shake of his forefinger.

“Did I not say, recount to me no histories? I will make a guess. He kissed you, did he not? M. Leonard Weardale, I mean?”

“Eh bien, monsieur, and after all, what is a kiss?”

“Under the circumstances, it is most natural,” replied Poirot gallantly. “I myself, or Hastings here—but tell me just what occurred.”

“He came up behind me, and caught me. I was startled, and I screamed. If I had known, I would not have screamed—but he came upon me like a cat. Then came M. le secrétaire. M. Leonard flew up the stairs. And what could I say? Especially to a jeune homme comme ça—tellement comme il faut? Ma foi, I invent a ghost.”

“And all is explained,” cried Poirot genially. “You then mounted to the chamber of Madame your mistress. Which is her room, by the way?”

“It is at the end, monsieur. That way.”

“Directly over the study, then. Bien, mademoiselle, I will detain you no longer. And la prochaine fois, do not scream.”

Handing her out, he came back to me with a smile.

“An interesting case, is it not, Hastings? I begin to have a few little ideas. Et vous?”

“What was Leonard Weardale doing on the stairs? I don’t like that young man, Poirot. He’s a thorough young rake, I should say.”

“I agree with you, mon ami.”

“Fitzroy seems an honest fellow.”

“Lord Alloway is certainly insistent on that point.”

“And yet there is something in his manner—”

"That is almost too good to be true? I felt it myself. On the other hand, our friend Mrs. Conrad is certainly no good at all."

"And her room is over the study," I said musingly, and keeping a sharp eye on Poirot.

He shook his head with a slight smile.

"No, mon ami, I cannot bring myself seriously to believe that that immaculate lady swarmed down the chimney, or let herself down from the balcony."

As he spoke, the door opened, and to my great surprise, Lady Juliet Weardale flitted in.

"M. Poirot," she said somewhat breathlessly, "can I speak to you alone?"

"Milady, Captain Hastings is as my other self. You can speak before him as though he were a thing of no account, not there at all. Be seated, I pray you."

She sat down, still keeping her eyes fixed on Poirot.

"What I have to say is—rather difficult. You are in charge of this case. If the—papers were to be returned, would that end the matter? I mean, could it be done without questions being asked?"

Poirot stared hard at her.

"Let me understand you, madame. They are to be placed in my hand—is that right? And I am to return them to Lord Alloway on the condition that he asks no questions as to where I got them?"

She bowed her head. "That is what I mean. But I must be sure there will be no—publicity."

"I do not think Lord Alloway is particularly anxious for publicity," said Poirot grimly.

“You accept then?” she cried eagerly in response.

“A little moment, milady. It depends on how soon you can place those papers in my hands.”

“Almost immediately.”

Poirot glanced up at the clock.

“How soon, exactly?”

“Say—ten minutes,” she whispered.

“I accept, milady.”

She hurried from the room. I pursed my mouth up for a whistle.

“Can you sum up the situation for me, Hastings?”

“Bridge,” I replied succinctly.

“Ah, you remember the careless words of Monsieur the Admiral! What a memory! I felicitate you, Hastings.”

We said no more, for Lord Alloway came in, and looked inquiringly at Poirot.

“Have you any further ideas, M. Poirot? I am afraid the answers to your questions have been rather disappointing.”

“Not at all, milor’. They have been quite sufficiently illuminating. It will be unnecessary for me to stay here any longer, and so, with your permission, I will return at once to London.”

Lord Alloway seemed dumbfounded.

“But—but what have you discovered? Do you know who took the plans?”

“Yes, milor’, I do. Tell me—in the case of the papers being returned to you anonymously, you would prosecute no further inquiry?”

Lord Alloway stared at him.

“Do you mean on payment of a sum of money?”

“No, milor’, returned unconditionally.”

“Of course, the recovery of the plans is the great thing,” said Lord Alloway slowly. He looked puzzled and uncomprehending.

“Then I should seriously recommend you to adopt that course. Only you, the Admiral, and your secretary know of the loss. Only they need know of the restitution. And you may count on me to support you in every way—lay the mystery on my shoulders. You asked me to restore the papers—I have done so. You know no more.” He rose and held out his hand. “Milor’, I am glad to have met you. I have faith in you—and your devotion to England. You will guide her destinies with a strong, sure hand.”

“M. Poirot—I swear to you that I will do my best. It may be a fault, or it may be a virtue—but I believe in myself.”

“So does every great man. Me, I am the same!” said Poirot grandiloquently.

III

The car came round to the door in a few minutes, and Lord Alloway bade us farewell on the steps with renewed cordiality.

“That is a great man, Hastings,” said Poirot as we drove off. “He has brains, resource, power. He is the strong man that England needs to guide her through these difficult days of reconstruction.”

“I’m quite ready to agree with all you say, Poirot—but what about Lady Juliet? Is she to return the papers straight to Alloway? What will she think when she finds you have gone off without a word?”

“Hastings, I will ask you a little question. Why, when she was talking with me, did she not hand me the plans then and there?”

“She hadn’t got them with her.”

“Perfectly. How long would it take her to fetch them from her room? Or from any hiding place in the house? You need not answer. I will tell you. Probably about two minutes and a half! Yet she asks for ten minutes. Why? Clearly she has to obtain them from some other person, and to reason or argue with that person before they give them up. Now, what person could that be? Not Mrs. Conrad, clearly, but a member of her own family, her husband or son. Which is it likely to be? Leonard Weardale said he went straight to bed. We know that to be untrue. Supposing his mother went to his room and found it empty; supposing she came down filled with a nameless dread—he is no beauty that son of hers! She does not find him, but later she hears him deny that he ever left his room. She leaps to the conclusion that he is the thief. Hence her interview with me.

“But, mon ami, we know something that Lady Juliet does not. We know that her son could not have been in the study, because he was on the stairs, making love to the pretty French maid. Although she does not know it, Leonard Weardale has an alibi.”

“Well, then, who did steal the papers? We seem to have eliminated everybody—Lady Juliet, her son, Mrs. Conrad, the French maid—”

“Exactly. Use your little grey cells, my friend. The solution stares you in the face.”

I shook my head blankly.

“But yes! If you would only persevere! See, then, Fitzroy goes out of the study; he leaves the papers on the desk. A few minutes later Lord Alloway enters the room, goes to the desk, and the papers are gone. Only two things are possible: either Fitzroy did not leave the papers on the desk, but put them in his pocket—and that is not reasonable, because, as Alloway pointed out, he could have taken a tracing at his own convenience any time—or else the papers were still on the desk when Lord Alloway went to it—in which case they went into his pocket.”

“Lord Alloway the thief,” I said, dumbfounded. “But why? Why?”

“Did you not tell me of some scandal in the past? He was exonerated, you said. But suppose, after all, it had been true? In English public life there must be no scandal. If this were raked up and proved against him now—good-bye to his political career. We will suppose that he was being blackmailed, and the price asked was the submarine plans.”

“But the man’s a black traitor!” I cried.

“Oh no, he is not. He is clever and resourceful. Supposing, my friend, that he copied those plans, making—for he is a clever engineer—a slight alteration in each part which will render them quite impracticable. He hands the faked plans to the enemy’s agent—Mrs. Conrad, I fancy; but in order that no suspicion of their genuineness may arise, the plans must seem to be stolen. He does his best to throw no suspicion on anyone in the house, by pretending to see a man leaving the window. But there he ran up against the obstinacy of the Admiral. So his next anxiety is that no suspicion shall fall on Fitzroy.”

“This is all guesswork on your part, Poirot,” I objected.

“It is psychology, mon ami. A man who had handed over the real plans would not be overscrupulous as to who was likely to fall under suspicion. And why was he so anxious that no details of the robbery should be given to Mrs. Conrad? Because he had handed over the faked plans earlier in the evening, and did not want her to know that the theft could only have taken place later.”

“I wonder if you are right,” I said.

“Of course I am right. I spoke to Alloway as one great man to another—and he understood perfectly. You will see.”

IV

One thing is quite certain. On the day when Lord Alloway became Prime Minister, a cheque and a signed photograph arrived; on the photograph were the words: “To my discreet friend, Hercule Poirot—from Alloway.”

I believe that the Z type of submarine is causing great exultation in naval circles. They say it will revolutionize modern naval warfare. I have heard that a certain foreign power essayed to construct something of the same kind and the result was a dismal failure. But I still consider that Poirot was guessing. He will do it once too often one of these days.

Nine

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CLAPHAM COOK

I

At the time that I was sharing rooms with my friend Hercule Poirot, it was my custom to read aloud to him the headlines in the morning newspaper, the Daily Blare.

The Daily Blare was a paper that made the most of any opportunity for sensationalism. Robberies and murders did not lurk obscurely in its back pages. Instead they hit you in the eye in large type on the front page.

ABSCONDING BANK CLERK DISAPPEARS WITH FIFTY THOUSAND POUNDS’ WORTH OF NEGOTIABLE SECURITIES, I read.

HUSBAND PUTS HIS HEAD IN GAS-OVEN. UNHAPPY HOME LIFE. MISSING TYPIST. PRETTY GIRL OF TWENTY-ONE. WHERE IS EDNA FIELD?

“There you are, Poirot, plenty to choose from. An absconding bank clerk, a mysterious suicide, a missing typist—which will you have?”

My friend was in a placid mood. He quietly shook his head.

“I am not greatly attracted to any of them, mon ami. Today I feel inclined for the life of ease. It would have to be a very interesting problem to tempt me from my chair. See you, I have affairs of importance of my own to attend to.”

“Such as?”

“My wardrobe, Hastings. If I mistake not, there is on my new grey suit the spot of grease—only the unique spot, but it is sufficient to trouble me. Then there is my winter overcoat—I must lay him aside in the powder of Keatings. And I think—yes, I think—the moment is ripe for the trimmings of my moustaches—and afterwards I must apply the pomade."

"Well," I said, strolling to the window, "I doubt if you'll be able to carry out this delirious programme. That was a ring at the bell. You have a client."

"Unless the affair is one of national importance, I touch it not," declared Poirot with dignity.

A moment later our privacy was invaded by a stout red-faced lady who panted audibly as a result of her rapid ascent of the stairs.

"You're M. Poirot?" she demanded, as she sank into a chair.

"I am Hercule Poirot, yes, madame."

"You're not a bit like what I thought you'd be," said the lady, eyeing him with some disfavour. "Did you pay for the bit in the paper saying what a clever detective you were, or did they put it in themselves?"

"Madame!" said Poirot, drawing himself up.

"I'm sorry, I'm sure, but you know what these papers are nowadays. You begin reading a nice article: 'What a bride said to her plain unmarried friend,' and it's all about a simple thing you buy at the chemist's and shampoo your hair with. Nothing but puff. But no offence taken, I hope? I'll tell you what I want you to do for me. I want you to find my cook."

Poirot stared at her; for once his ready tongue failed him. I turned aside to hide the broadening smile I could not control.

"It's all this wicked dole," continued the lady. "Putting ideas into servants' heads, wanting to be typists and what nots. Stop the dole, that's what I say. I'd like to know what my servants have to complain of—afternoon and evening off a week, alternate Sundays, washing put out, same food as we have—and never a bit of margarine in the house, nothing but the very best butter."

She paused for want of breath and Poirot seized his opportunity. He spoke in his haughtiest manner, rising to his feet as he did so.

“I fear you are making a mistake, madame. I am not holding an inquiry into the conditions of domestic service. I am a private detective.”

“I know that,” said our visitor. “Didn’t I tell you I wanted you to find my cook for me? Walked out of the house on Wednesday, without so much as a word to me, and never came back.”

“I am sorry, madame, but I do not touch this particular kind of business. I wish you good morning.”

Our visitor snorted with indignation.

“That’s it, is it, my fine fellow? Too proud, eh? Only deal with Government secrets and countesses’ jewels? Let me tell you a servant’s every bit as important as a tiara to a woman in my position. We can’t all be fine ladies going out in our motors with our diamonds and our pearls. A good cook’s a good cook—and when you lose her, it’s as much to you as her pearls are to some fine lady.”

For a moment or two it appeared to be a toss up between Poirot’s dignity and his sense of humour. Finally he laughed and sat down again.

“Madame, you are in the right, and I am in the wrong. Your remarks are just and intelligent. This case will be a novelty. Never yet have I hunted a missing domestic. Truly here is the problem of national importance that I was demanding of fate just before your arrival. En avant! You say this jewel of a cook went out on Wednesday and did not return. That is the day before yesterday.”

“Yes, it was her day out.”

“But probably, madame, she has met with some accident. Have you inquired at any of the hospitals?”

“That’s exactly what I thought yesterday, but this morning, if you please, she sent for her box. And not so much as a line to me! If I’d been at home, I’d not have let it go—treating me like that! But I’d just stepped out to the butcher.”

“Will you describe her to me?”

“She was middle-aged, stout, black hair turning grey—most respectable. She’d been ten years in her last place. Eliza Dunn, her name was.”

“And you had had—no disagreement with her on the Wednesday?”

“None whatsoever. That’s what makes it all so queer.”

“How many servants do you keep, madame?”

“Two. The house-parlourmaid, Annie, is a very nice girl. A bit forgetful and her head full of young men, but a good servant if you keep her up to her work.”

“Did she and the cook get on well together?”

“They had their ups and downs, of course—but on the whole, very well.”

“And the girl can throw no light on the mystery?”

“She says not—but you know what servants are—they all hang together.”

“Well, well, we must look into this. Where did you say you resided, madame?”

“At Clapham; 88 Prince Albert Road.”

“Bien, madame, I will wish you good morning, and you may count upon seeing me at your residence during the course of the day.”

Mrs. Todd, for such was our new friend’s name, then took her departure. Poirot looked at me somewhat ruefully.

“Well, well, Hastings, this is a novel affair that we have here. The Disappearance of the Clapham Cook! Never, never, must our friend Inspector Japp get to hear of this!”

He then proceeded to heat an iron and carefully removed the grease spot from his grey suit by means of a piece of blotting paper. His moustaches he regretfully postponed to another day, and we set out for Clapham.

Prince Albert Road proved to be a street of small prim houses, all exactly alike, with neat lace curtains veiling the windows, and well-polished brass knockers on the doors.

We rang the bell at No. 88, and the door was opened by a neat maid with a pretty face. Mrs. Todd came out in the hall to greet us.

“Don’t go, Annie,” she cried. “This gentleman’s a detective and he’ll want to ask you some questions.”

Annie’s face displayed a struggle between alarm and a pleasurable excitement.

“I thank you, madame,” said Poirot bowing. “I would like to question your maid now—and to see her alone, if I may.”

We were shown into a small drawing room, and when Mrs. Todd, with obvious reluctance, had left the room, Poirot commenced his cross-examination.

“Voyons, Mademoiselle Annie, all that you shall tell us will be of the greatest importance. You alone can shed any light on the case. Without your assistance I can do nothing.”

The alarm vanished from the girl’s face and the pleasurable excitement became more strongly marked.

“I’m sure, sir,” she said, “I’ll tell you anything I can.”

“That is good.” Poirot beamed approval on her. “Now, first of all what is your own idea? You are a girl of remarkable intelligence. That can be seen at once! What is your own explanation of Eliza’s disappearance?”

Thus encouraged, Annie fairly flowed into excited speech.

“White slavers, sir, I’ve said so all along! Cook was always warning me against them. ‘Don’t you sniff no scent, or eat any sweets—no matter how gentlemanly the fellow!’ Those were her words to me. And now they’ve got her! I’m sure of it. As likely as not, she’s been shipped to Turkey or one of them Eastern places where I’ve heard they like them fat!”

Poirot preserved an admirable gravity.

“But in that case—and it is indeed an idea!—would she have sent for her trunk?”

“Well, I don’t know, sir. She’d want her things—even in those foreign places.”

“Who came for the trunk—a man?”

“It was Carter Paterson, sir.”

“Did you pack it?”

“No, sir, it was already packed and corded.”

“Ah! That’s interesting. That shows that when she left the house on Wednesday, she had already determined not to return. You see that, do you not?”

“Yes, sir.” Annie looked slightly taken aback. “I hadn’t thought of that. But it might still have been white slavers, mightn’t it, sir?” she added wistfully.

“Undoubtedly!” said Poirot gravely. He went on: “Did you both occupy the same bedroom?”

“No, sir, we had separate rooms.”

“And had Eliza expressed any dissatisfaction with her present post to you at all? Were you both happy here?”

“She’d never mentioned leaving. The place is all right—” The girl hesitated.

“Speak freely,” said Poirot kindly. “I shall not tell your mistress.”

“Well, of course, sir, she’s a caution, Missus is. But the food’s good. Plenty of it, and no stinting. Something hot for supper, good outings, and as much frying-fat as you like. And anyway, if Eliza did want to make a change, she’d never have gone off this way, I’m sure. She’d have stayed her month. Why, Missus could have a month’s wages out of her for doing this!”

“And the work, it is not too hard?”

“Well, she’s particular—always poking round in corners and looking for dust. And then there’s the lodger, or paying guest as he’s always called. But that’s only breakfast and dinner, same as Master. They’re out all day in the City.”

“You like your master?”

“He’s all right—very quiet and a bit on the stingy side.”

“You can’t remember, I suppose, the last thing Eliza said before she went out?”

“Yes, I can. ‘If there’s any stewed peaches over from the dining room,’ she says, ‘we’ll have them for supper, and a bit of bacon and some fried potatoes.’ Mad over stewed peaches, she was. I shouldn’t wonder if they didn’t get her that way.”

“Was Wednesday her regular day out?”

“Yes, she had Wednesdays and I had Thursdays.”

Poirot asked a few more questions, then declared himself satisfied. Annie departed, and Mrs. Todd hurried in, her face alight with curiosity. She had, I felt certain, bitterly resented her exclusion from the room during our conversation with Annie. Poirot, however, was careful to soothe her feelings tactfully.

“It is difficult,” he explained, “for a woman of exceptional intelligence such as yourself, madame, to bear patiently the roundabout methods we poor detectives are forced to use. To have patience with stupidity is difficult for the quick-witted.”

Having thus charmed away any little resentment on Mrs. Todd’s part, he brought the conversation round to her husband and elicited the information that he worked with a firm in the City and would not be home until after six.

“Doubtless he is very disturbed and worried by this unaccountable business, eh? It is not so?”

“He’s never worried,” declared Mrs. Todd. “ ‘Well, well, get another, my dear.’ That’s all he said! He’s so calm that it drives me to distraction sometimes. ‘An ungrateful woman,’ he said. ‘We are well rid of her.’ ”

“What about the other inmates of the house, madame?”

“You mean Mr. Simpson, our paying guest? Well, as long as he gets his breakfast and his evening meal all right, he doesn’t worry.”

“What is his profession, madame?”

“He works in a bank.” She mentioned its name, and I started slightly, remembering my perusal of the Daily Blare.

“A young man?”

“Twenty-eight, I believe. Nice quiet young fellow.”

“I should like to have a few words with him, and also with your husband, if I may. I will return for that purpose this evening. I venture to suggest that you should repose yourself a little, madame, you look fatigued.”

"I should just think I am! First the worry about Eliza, and then I was at the sales practically all yesterday, and you know what that is, M. Poirot, and what with one thing and another and a lot to do in the house, because of course Annie can't do it all—and very likely she'll give notice anyway, being unsettled in this way—well, what with it all, I'm tired out!"

Poirot murmured sympathetically, and we took our leave.

"It's a curious coincidence," I said, "but that absconding clerk, Davis, was from the same bank as Simpson. Can there be any connection, do you think?"

Poirot smiled.

"At the one end, a defaulting clerk, at the other a vanishing cook. It is hard to see any relation between the two, unless possibly Davis visited Simpson, fell in love with the cook, and persuaded her to accompany him on his flight!"

I laughed. But Poirot remained grave.

"He might have done worse," he said reprovingly. "Remember, Hastings, if you are going into exile, a good cook may be of more comfort than a pretty face!" He paused for a moment and then went on. "It is a curious case, full of contradictory features. I am interested—yes, I am distinctly interested."

II

That evening we returned to 88 Prince Albert Road and interviewed both Todd and Simpson. The former was a melancholy lantern-jawed man of forty-odd.

"Oh! Yes, yes," he said vaguely. "Eliza. Yes. A good cook, I believe. And economical. I make a strong point of economy."

"Can you imagine any reason for her leaving you so suddenly?"

"Oh, well," said Mr. Todd vaguely. "Servants, you know. My wife worries too much. Worn out from always worrying. The whole problem's quite simple really. ‘Get another, my dear,’ I say. ‘Get another.’ That’s all there is to it. No good crying over spilt milk.”

Mr. Simpson was equally unhelpful. He was a quiet inconspicuous young man with spectacles.

“I must have seen her, I suppose,” he said. “Elderly woman, wasn’t she? Of course, it’s the other one I see always, Annie. Nice girl. Very obliging.”

“Were those two on good terms with each other?”

Mr. Simpson said he couldn’t say, he was sure. He supposed so.

“Well, we get nothing of interest there, mon ami,” said Poirot as we left the house. Our departure had been delayed by a burst of vociferous repetition from Mrs. Todd, who repeated everything she had said that morning at rather greater length.

“Are you disappointed?” I asked. “Did you expect to hear something?”

Poirot shook his head.

“There was a possibility, of course,” he said. “But I hardly thought it likely.”

The next development was a letter which Poirot received on the following morning. He read it, turned purple with indignation, and handed it to me.

Mrs. Todd regrets that after all she will not avail herself of Mr. Poirot’s services. After talking the matter over with her husband she sees that it is foolish to call in a detective about a purely domestic affair. Mrs. Todd encloses a guinea for consultation fee.

III

“Aha!” cried Poirot angrily. “And they think to get rid of Hercule Poirot like that! As a favour—a great favour—I consent to investigate their miserable little twopenny-halfpenny affair—and they dismiss me comme ça! Here, I mistake not, is the hand of Mr. Todd. But I say no!—thirty-six times no! I will spend my own guineas, thirty-six hundred of them if need be, but I will get to the bottom of this matter!”

“Yes,” I said. “But how?”

Poirot calmed down a little.

“D’abord,” he said, “we will advertise in the papers. Let me see—yes—something like this: ‘If Eliza Dunn will communicate with this address, she will hear of something to her advantage.’ Put it in all the papers you can think of, Hastings. Then I will make some little inquiries of my own. Go, go—all must be done as quickly as possible!”

I did not see him again until the evening, when he condescended to tell me what he had been doing.

“I have made inquiries at the firm of Mr. Todd. He was not absent on Wednesday, and he bears a good character—so much for him. Then Simpson, on Thursday he was ill and did not come to the bank, but he was there on Wednesday. He was moderately friendly with Davis. Nothing out of the common. There does not seem to be anything there. No. We must place our reliance on the advertisement.”

The advertisement duly appeared in all the principal daily papers. By Poirot’s orders it was to be continued every day for a week. His eagerness over this uninteresting matter of a defaulting cook was extraordinary, but I realized that he considered it a point of honour to persevere until he finally succeeded. Several extremely interesting cases were brought to him about this time, but he declined them all. Every morning he would rush at his letters, scrutinize them earnestly and then lay them down with a sigh.

But our patience was rewarded at last. On the Wednesday following Mrs. Todd’s visit, our landlady informed us that a person of the name of Eliza Dunn had called.

“Enfin!” cried Poirot. “But make her mount then! At once. Immediately.”

Thus admonished, our landlady hurried out and returned a moment or two later, ushering in Miss Dunn. Our quarry was much as described: tall, stout, and eminently respectable.

“I came in answer to the advertisement,” she explained. “I thought there must be some muddle or other, and that perhaps you didn’t know I’d already got my legacy.”

Poirot was studying her attentively. He drew forward a chair with a flourish.

“The truth of the matter is,” he explained, “that your late mistress, Mrs. Todd, was much concerned about you. She feared some accident might have befallen you.”

Eliza Dunn seemed very much surprised.

“Didn’t she get my letter then?”

“She got no word of any kind.” He paused, and then said persuasively: “Recount to me the whole story, will you not?”

Eliza Dunn needed no encouragement. She plunged at once into a lengthy narrative.

“I was just coming home on Wednesday night and had nearly got to the house, when a gentleman stopped me. A tall gentleman he was, with a beard and a big hat. ‘Miss Eliza Dunn?’ he said. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve been inquiring for you at No. 88,’ he said. ‘They told me I might meet you coming along here. Miss Dunn, I have come from Australia specially to find you. Do you happen to know the maiden name of your maternal grandmother?’ ‘Jane Emmott,’ I said. ‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘Now, Miss Dunn, although you may never have heard of the fact, your grandmother had a great friend, Eliza Leech. This friend went to Australia where she married a very wealthy settler. Her two children died in infancy, and she inherited all her husband’s property. She died a few months ago, and by her will you inherit a house in this country and a considerable sum of money.’

“You could have knocked me down with a feather,” continued Miss Dunn. “For a minute, I was suspicious, and he must have seen it, for he smiled. ‘Quite right to be on your guard, Miss Dunn,’ he said. ‘Here are my credentials.’ He handed me a letter from some lawyers in Melbourne, Hurst and Crotchet, and a card. He was Mr. Crotchet. ‘There are one or two conditions,’ he said. ‘Our client was a little eccentric, you know. The bequest is conditional on your taking possession of the house (it is in Cumberland) before twelve o’clock tomorrow. The other condition is of no importance—it is merely a stipulation that you should not be in domestic service.’ My face fell. ‘Oh, Mr. Crotchet,’ I said. ‘I’m a cook. Didn’t they tell you at the house?’ ‘Dear, dear,’ he said. ‘I had no idea of such a thing. I thought you might possibly be a companion or governess there. This is very unfortunate—very unfortunate indeed.’

“ ‘Shall I have to lose all the money?’ I said, anxious like. He thought for a minute or two. ‘There are always ways of getting round the law, Miss Dunn,’ he said at last. ‘We as lawyers know that. The way out here is for you to have left your employment this afternoon.’ ‘But my month?’ I said. ‘My dear Miss Dunn,’ he said with a smile. ‘You can leave an employer any minute by forfeiting a month’s wages. Your mistress will understand in view of the circumstances. The difficulty is time! It is imperative that you should catch the 11.05 from King’s Cross to the north. I can advance you ten pounds or so for the fare, and you can write a note at the station to your employer. I will take it to her myself and explain the whole circumstances.’ I agreed, of course, and an hour later I was in the train, so flustered that I didn’t know whether I was on my head or heels. Indeed by the time I got to Carlisle, I was half inclined to think the whole thing was one of those confidence tricks you read about. But I went to the address he had given me—solicitors they were, and it was all right. A nice little house, and an income of three hundred a year. These lawyers knew very little, they’d just got a letter from a gentleman in London instructing them to hand over the house to me and £150 for the first six months. Mr. Crotchet sent up my things to me, but there was no word from Missus. I supposed she was angry and grudged me my bit of luck. She kept back my box too, and sent my clothes in paper parcels. But there, of course if she never had my letter, she might think it a bit cool of me.”

Poirot had listened attentively to this long history. Now he nodded his head as though completely satisfied.

“Thank you, mademoiselle. There had been, as you say, a little muddle. Permit me to recompense you for your trouble.” He handed her an envelope. “You return to Cumberland immediately? A little word in your ear. Do not forget how to cook. It is always useful to have something to fall back upon in case things go wrong.”

“Credulous,” he murmured, as our visitor departed, “but perhaps not more than most of her class.” His face grew grave. “Come, Hastings, there is no time to be lost. Get a taxi while I write a note to Japp.”

Poirot was waiting on the doorstep when I returned with the taxi.

“Where are we going?” I asked anxiously.

“First, to despatch this note by special messenger.”

This was done, and reentering the taxi Poirot gave the address to the driver.

“Eighty-eight Prince Albert Road, Clapham.”

“So we are going there?”

“Mais oui. Though frankly I fear we shall be too late. Our bird will have flown, Hastings.”

“Who is our bird?”

Poirot smiled.

“The inconspicuous Mr. Simpson.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“Oh, come now, Hastings, do not tell me that all is not clear to you now!”

“The cook was got out of the way, I realize that,” I said, slightly piqued. “But why? Why should Simpson wish to get her out of the house? Did she know something about him?”

“Nothing whatever.”

“Well, then—”

“But he wanted something that she had.”

“Money? The Australian legacy?”

“No, my friend—something quite different.” He paused a moment and then said gravely: “A battered tin trunk. . . .”

I looked sideways at him. His statement seemed so fantastic that I suspected him of pulling my leg, but he was perfectly grave and serious.

“Surely he could buy a trunk if he wanted one,” I cried.

“He did not want a new trunk. He wanted a trunk of pedigree. A trunk of assured respectability.”

“Look here, Poirot,” I cried, “this really is a bit thick. You’re pulling my leg.”

He looked at me.

“You lack the brains and the imagination of Mr. Simpson, Hastings. See here: On Wednesday evening, Simpson decoys away the cook. A printed card and a printed sheet of notepaper are simple matters to obtain, and he is willing to pay £150 and a year’s house rent to assure the success of his plan. Miss Dunn does not recognize him—the beard and the hat and the slight colonial accent completely deceive her. That is the end of Wednesday—except for the trifling fact that Simpson has helped himself to fifty thousand pounds’ worth of negotiable securities.”

“Simpson—but it was Davis—”

"If you will kindly permit me to continue, Hastings! Simpson knows that the theft will be discovered on Thursday afternoon. He does not go to the bank on Thursday, but he lies in wait for Davis when he comes out to lunch. Perhaps he admits the theft and tells Davis he will return the securities to him—anyhow he succeeds in getting Davis to come to Clapham with him. It is the maid's day out, and Mrs. Todd was at the sales, so there is no one in the house. When the theft is discovered and Davis is missing, the implication will be overwhelming. Davis is the thief! Mr. Simpson will be perfectly safe, and can return to work on the morrow like the honest clerk they think him."

"And Davis?"

Poirot made an expressive gesture, and slowly shook his head.

"It seems too cold-blooded to be believed, and yet what other explanation can there be, mon ami. The one difficulty for a murderer is the disposal of the body—and Simpson had planned that out beforehand. I was struck at once by the fact that although Eliza Dunn obviously meant to return that night when she went out (witness her remark about the stewed peaches) yet her trunk was all ready packed when they came for it. It was Simpson who sent word to Carter Paterson to call on Friday and it was Simpson who corded up the box on Thursday afternoon. What suspicion could possibly arise? A maid leaves and sends for her box, it is labelled and addressed ready in her name, probably to a railway station within easy reach of London. On Saturday afternoon, Simpson, in his Australian disguise, claims it, he affixes a new label and address and redespatches it somewhere else, again 'to be left till called for.' When the authorities get suspicious, for excellent reasons, and open it, all that can be elicited will be that a bearded colonial despatched it from some junction near London. There will be nothing to connect it with 88 Prince Albert Road. Ah! Here we are."

Poirot's prognostications had been correct. Simpson had left days previously. But he was not to escape the consequences of his crime. By the aid of wireless, he was discovered on the Olympia, en route to America.

A tin trunk, addressed to Mr. Henry Wintergreen, attracted the attention of railway officials at Glasgow. It was opened and found to contain the body of the unfortunate Davis.

Mrs. Todd’s cheque for a guinea was never cashed. Instead Poirot had it framed and hung on the wall of our sitting room.

“It is to me a little reminder, Hastings. Never to despise the trivial—the undignified. A disappearing domestic at one end—a cold-blooded murder at the other. To me, one of the most interesting of my cases.”

Mrs. McGinty's Dead (1952)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

Hercule Poirot came out of the Vieille Grand’mère restaurant into Soho. He turned up the collar of his overcoat through prudence, rather than necessity, since the night was not cold. “But at my age, one takes no risks,” Poirot was wont to declare.

His eyes held a reflective sleepy pleasure. The Escargots de la Vieille Grand’mère had been delicious. A real find, this dingy little restaurant. Meditatively, like a well-fed dog, Hercule Poirot curled his tongue round his lips. Drawing his handkerchief from his pocket, he dabbed his luxuriant moustaches.

Yes, he had dined well . . . And now what?

A taxi, passing him, slowed down invitingly. Poirot hesitated for a moment, but made no sign. Why take a taxi? He would in any case reach home too early to go to bed.

“Alas,” murmured Poirot to his moustaches, “that one can only eat three times a day. . . .”

For afternoon tea was a meal to which he had never become acclimatized. “If one partakes of the five o’clock, one does not,” he explained, “approach the dinner with the proper quality of expectant gastric juices. And the dinner, let us remember, is the supreme meal of the day!”

Not for him, either, the mid-morning coffee. No, chocolate and croissants for breakfast, Déjeuner at twelve-thirty if possible but certainly not later than one o’clock, and finally the climax: Le Dîner!

These were the peak periods of Hercule Poirot’s day. Always a man who had taken his stomach seriously, he was reaping his reward in old age. Eating was now not only a physical pleasure, it was also an intellectual research. For in between meals he spent quite a lot of time searching out and marking down possible sources of new and delicious food. La Vieille Grand'mère was the result of one of these quests and La Vieille Grand'mère had just received the seal of Hercule Poirot's gastronomic approval.

But now, unfortunately, there was the evening to put in.

Hercule Poirot sighed.

"If only," he thought, "ce cher Hastings were available. . . ."

He dwelt with pleasure on his remembrances of his old friend.

"My first friend in this country—and still to me the dearest friend I have. True, often and often did he enrage me. But do I remember that now? No. I remember only his incredulous wonder, his openmouthed appreciation of my talents—the ease with which I misled him without uttering an untrue word, his bafflement, his stupendous astonishment when he at last perceived the truth that had been clear to me all along. Ce cher, cher ami! It is my weakness, it has always been my weakness, to desire to show off. That weakness, Hastings could never understand. But indeed it is very necessary for a man of my abilities to admire himself—and for that one needs stimulation from outside. I cannot, truly I cannot, sit in a chair all day reflecting how truly admirable I am. One needs the human touch. One needs—as they say nowadays—the stooge."

Hercule Poirot sighed. He turned into Shaftesbury Avenue.

Should he cross it and go on to Leicester Square and spend the evening at a cinema? Frowning slightly, he shook his head. The cinema, more often than not, enraged him by the looseness of its plots—the lack of logical continuity in the argument—even the photography which, raved over by some, to Hercule Poirot seemed often no more than the portrayal of scenes and objects so as to make them appear totally different from what they were in reality.

Everything, Hercule Poirot decided, was too artistic nowadays. Nowhere was there the love of order and method that he himself prized so highly. And seldom was there any appreciation of subtlety. Scenes of violence and crude brutality were the fashion, and as a former police officer, Poirot was bored by brutality. In his early days, he had seen plenty of crude brutality. It had been more the rule than the exception. He found it fatiguing, and unintelligent.

"The truth is," Poirot reflected as he turned his steps homeward, "I am not in tune with the modern world. And I am, in a superior way, a slave as other men are slaves. My work has enslaved me just as their work enslaves them. When the hour of leisure arrives, they have nothing with which to fill their leisure. The retired financier takes up golf, the little merchant puts bulbs in his garden, me, I eat. But there it is, I come round to it again. One can only eat three times a day. And in between are the gaps."

He passed a newspaper seller and scanned the bill.

"Result of McGinty Trial. Verdict."

It stirred no interest in him. He recalled vaguely a small paragraph in the papers. It had not been an interesting murder. Some wretched old woman knocked on the head for a few pounds. All part of the senseless crude brutality of these days.

Poirot turned into the courtyard of his block of flats. As always his heart swelled in approval. He was proud of his home. A splendid symmetrical building. The lift took him up to the third floor where he had a large luxury flat with impeccable chromium fittings, square armchairs, and severely rectangular ornaments. There could truly be said not to be a curve in the place.

As he opened the door with his latchkey and stepped into the square, white lobby, his manservant, George, stepped softly to meet him.

"Good evening, sir. There is a—gentleman waiting to see you."

He relieved Poirot deftly of his overcoat.

"Indeed?" Poirot was aware of that very slight pause before the word gentleman. As a social snob, George was an expert.

“What is his name?”

“A Mr. Spence, sir.”

“Spence.” The name, for the moment, meant nothing to Poirot. Yet he knew that it should do so.

Pausing for a moment before the mirror to adjust his moustaches to a state of perfection, Poirot opened the door of the sitting room and entered. The man sitting in one of the big square armchairs got up.

“Hallo, M. Poirot, hope you remember me. It’s a long time . . . Superintendent Spence.”

“But of course.” Poirot shook him warmly by the hand.

Superintendent Spence of the Kilchester Police. A very interesting case that had been . . . As Spence had said, a long time ago now. . . .

Poirot pressed his guest with refreshments. A grenadine? Crème de Menthe? Benedictine? Crème de Cacao? . . .

At this moment George entered with a tray on which was a whisky bottle and a siphon. “Or beer if you prefer it, sir?” he murmured to the visitor.

Superintendent Spence’s large red face lightened.

“Beer for me,” he said.

Poirot was left to wonder once more at the accomplishments of George. He himself had had no idea that there was beer in the flat and it seemed incomprehensible to him that it could be preferred to a sweet liqueur.

When Spence had his foaming tankard, Poirot poured himself out a tiny glass of gleaming green crème de menthe.

“But it is charming of you to look me up,” he said. “Charming. You have come up from—?”

"Kilchester. I'll be retired in about six months. Actually, I was due for retirement eighteen months ago. They asked me to stop on and I did."

"You were wise," said Poirot with feeling. "You were very wise. . . ."

"Was I? I wonder. I'm not so sure."

"Yes, yes, you were wise," Poirot insisted. "The long hours of ennui, you have no conception of them."

"Oh, I'll have plenty to do when I retire. Moved into a new house last year, we did. Quite a bit of garden and shamefully neglected. I haven't been able to get down to it properly yet."

"Ah yes, you are one of those who garden. Me, once I decided to live in the country and grow vegetable marrows. It did not succeed. I have not the temperament."

"You should have seen one of my marrows last year," said Spence with enthusiasm. "Colossal! And my roses. I'm keen on roses. I'm going to have —"

He broke off.

"That's not what I came to talk about."

"No, no, you came to see an old acquaintance—it was kind. I appreciate it."

"There's more to it than that, I'm afraid, M. Poirot. I'll be honest. I want something."

Poirot murmured delicately:

"There is a mortgage, possibly, on your house? You would like a loan—"

Spence interrupted in a horrified voice:

"Oh, good Lord, it's not money! Nothing of that kind."

Poirot waved his hands in graceful apology.

“I demand your pardon.”

“I’ll tell you straight out—it’s damned cheek what I’ve come for. If you send me away with a flea in my ear I shan’t be surprised.”

“There will be no flea,” said Poirot. “But continue.”

“It’s the McGinty case. You’ve read about it, perhaps?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Not with attention. Mrs. McGinty—an old woman in a shop or a house. She is dead, yes. How did she die?”

Spence stared at him.

“Lord!” he said. “That takes me back. Extraordinary. And I never thought of it until now.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. Just a game. Child’s game. We used to play it when we were kids. A lot of us in a row. Question and answer all down the line. ‘Mrs. McGinty’s dead!’ ‘How did she die?’ ‘Down on one knee just like I.’ And then the next question, ‘Mrs. McGinty’s dead.’ ‘How did she die?’ ‘Holding her hand out just like I.’ And there we’d be, all kneeling and our right arms held out stiff. And then you got it! ‘Mrs. McGinty’s dead.’ ‘How did she die?’ ‘Like THIS!’ Smack, the top of the row would fall sideways and down we all went like a pack of ninepins!” Spence laughed uproariously at the remembrance. “Takes me back, it does!”

Poirot waited politely. This was one of the moments when, even after half a lifetime in the country, he found the English incomprehensible. He himself had played at Cache Cache in his childhood, but he felt no desire to talk about it or even to think about it.

When Spence had overcome his own amusement, Poirot repeated with some slight weariness, “How did she die?”

The laughter was wiped off Spence’s face. He was suddenly himself again.

“She was hit on the back of her head with some sharp, heavy implement. Her savings, about thirty pounds in cash, were taken after her room had been ransacked. She lived alone in a small cottage except for a lodger. Man of the name of Bentley. James Bentley.”

“Ah yes, Bentley.”

“The place wasn’t broken into. No signs of any tampering with the windows or locks. Bentley was hard up, had lost his job, and owed two months’ rent. The money was found hidden under a loose stone at the back of the cottage. Bentley’s coat sleeve had blood on it and hair—same blood group and the right hair. According to his first statement he was never near the body—so it couldn’t have come there by accident.”

“Who found her?”

“The baker called with bread. It was the day he got paid. James Bentley opened the door to him and said he’d knocked at Mrs. McGinty’s bedroom door, but couldn’t get an answer. The baker suggested she might have been taken bad. They got the woman from next door to go up and see. Mrs. McGinty wasn’t in the bedroom, and hadn’t slept in the bed, but the room had been ransacked and the floorboards had been prised up. Then they thought of looking in the parlour. She was there, lying on the floor, and the neighbour fairly screamed her head off. Then they got the police, of course.”

“And Bentley was eventually arrested and tried?”

“Yes. The case came on at the Assizes. Yesterday. Open and shut case. The jury were only out twenty minutes this morning. Verdict: Guilty. Condemned to death.”

Poirot nodded.

“And then, after the verdict, you got in a train and came to London and came here to see me. Why?”

Superintendent Spence was looking into his beer glass. He ran his finger slowly round and round the rim.

“Because,” he said, “I don’t think he did it. . . .”

Two

There was a moment or two of silence.

"You came to me—"

Poirot did not finish the sentence.

Superintendent Spence looked up. The colour in his face was deeper than it had been. It was a typical countryman's face, unexpressive, self-contained, with shrewd but honest eyes. It was the face of a man with definite standards who would never be bothered by doubts of himself or by doubts of what constituted right and wrong.

"I've been a long time in the Force," he said. "I've had a good deal of experience of this, that and the other. I can judge a man as well as any other could do. I've had cases of murder during my service—some of them straightforward enough, some of them not so straightforward. One case you know of, M. Poirot—"

Poirot nodded.

"Tricky, that was. But for you, we mightn't have seen clear. But we did see clear—and there wasn't any doubt. The same with the others you don't know about. There was Whistler, he got his—and deserved it. There were those chaps who shot old Guterman. There was Verall and his arsenic. Tranter got off—but he did it all right. Mrs. Courtland—she was lucky—her husband was a nasty perverted bit of work, and the jury acquitted her accordingly. Not justice—just sentiment. You've got to allow for that happening now and again. Sometimes there isn't enough evidence—sometimes there's sentiment, sometimes a murderer manages to put it across the jury—that last doesn't happen often, but it can happen. Sometimes it's a clever bit of work by defending counsel—or a prosecuting counsel takes the wrong tack. Oh yes, I've seen a lot of things like that. But—but—"

Spence wagged a heavy forefinger.

“I haven’t seen—not in my experience—an innocent man hanged for something he didn’t do. It’s a thing, M. Poirot, that I don’t want to see.

“Not,” added Spence, “in this country!”

Poirot gazed back at him.

“And you think you are going to see it now. But why—”

Spence interrupted him.

“I know some of the things you’re going to say. I’ll answer them without you having to ask them. I was put on this case. I was put on to get evidence of what happened. I went into the whole business very carefully. I got the facts, all the facts I could. All those facts pointed one way—pointed to one person. When I’d got all the facts I took them to my superior officer. After that it was out of my hands. The case went to the Public Prosecutor and it was up to him. He decided to prosecute—he couldn’t have done anything else—not on the evidence. And so James Bentley was arrested and committed for trial, and was duly tried and has been found guilty. They couldn’t have found him anything else, not on the evidence. And evidence is what a jury have to consider. Didn’t have any qualms about it either, I should say. No, I should say they were all quite satisfied he was guilty.”

“But you—are not?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Superintendent Spence sighed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully with his big hand.

“I don’t know. What I mean is, I can’t give a reason—a concrete reason. To the jury I dare say he looked like a murderer—to me he didn’t—and I know a lot more about murderers than they do.”

"Yes, yes, you are an expert."

"For one thing, you know, he wasn't cocky. Not cocky at all. And in my experience they usually are. Always so damned pleased with themselves. Always think they're stringing you along. Always sure they've been so clever about the whole thing. And even when they're in the dock and must know they're for it, they're still in a queer sort of way getting a kick out of it all. They're in the limelight. They're the central figure. Playing the star part—perhaps for the first time in their lives. They're—well—you know—cocky!"

Spence brought out the word with an air of finality.

"You'll understand what I mean by that, M. Poirot."

"I understand very well. And this James Bentley—he was not like that?"

"No. He was—well, just scared stiff. Scared stiff from the start. And to some people that would square in with his being guilty. But not to me."

"No, I agree with you. What is he like, this James Bentley?"

"Thirty-three, medium height, sallow complexion, wears glasses—"

Poirot arrested the flow.

"No, I do not mean his physical characteristics. What sort of a personality?"

"Oh—that." Superintendent Spence considered. "Unprepossessing sort of fellow. Nervous manner. Can't look you straight in the face. Has a sly sideways way of peering at you. Worst possible sort of manner for a jury. Sometimes cringing and sometimes truculent. Blusters in an inefficient kind of way."

He paused and added in a conversational tone:

"Really a shy kind of chap. Had a cousin rather like that. If anything's awkward they go and tell some silly lie that hasn't a chance of being believed."

"He does not sound attractive, your James Bentley."

"Oh, he isn't. Nobody could like him. But I don't want to see him hanged for all that."

"And you think he will be hanged?"

"I don't see why not. His counsel may lodge an appeal—but if so it will be on very flimsy grounds—a technicality of some kind, and I don't see that it will have a chance of success."

"Did he have a good counsel?"

"Young Graybrook was allotted to him under the Poor Persons' Defence Act. I'd say he was thoroughly conscientious and put up the best show he could."

"So the man had a fair trial and was condemned by a jury of his fellow men."

"That's right. A good average jury. Seven men, five women—all decent reasonable souls. Judge was old Stanisdale. Scrupulously fair—no bias."

"So—according to the law of the land—James Bentley has nothing to complain of?"

"If he's hanged for something he didn't do, he's got something to complain of!"

"A very just observation."

"And the case against him was my case—I collected the facts and put them together—and it's on that case and those facts that he's been condemned. And I don't like it, M. Poirot, I don't like it."

Hercule Poirot looked for a long time at the red agitated face of Superintendent Spence.

"Eh bien," he said. "What do you suggest?"

Spence looked acutely embarrassed.

“I expect you’ve got a pretty good idea of what’s coming. The Bentley case is closed. I’m on another case already—embezzlement. Got to go up to Scotland tonight. I’m not a free man.”

“And I—am?”

Spence nodded in a shamefaced sort of way.

“You’ve got it. Awful cheek, you’ll think. But I can’t think of anything else—of any other way. I did all I could at the time, I examined every possibility I could. And I didn’t get anywhere. I don’t believe I ever would get anywhere. But who knows, it may be different for you. You look at things in—if you’ll pardon me for saying so—in a funny sort of way. Maybe that’s the way you’ve got to look at them in this case. Because if James Bentley didn’t kill her, then somebody else did. She didn’t chop the back of her head in herself. You may be able to find something that I missed. There’s no reason why you should do anything about this business. It’s infernal cheek my even suggesting such a thing. But there it is. I came to you because it was the only thing I could think of. But if you don’t want to put yourself out—and why should you—”

Poirot interrupted him.

“Oh, but indeed there are reasons. I have leisure—too much leisure. And you have intrigued me—yes, you have intrigued me very much. It is a challenge—to the little grey cells of my brain. And then, I have a regard for you. I see you, in your garden in six months’ time, planting, perhaps, the rose bushes—and as you plant them it is not with the happiness you should be feeling, because behind everything there is an unpleasantness in your brain, a recollection that you try to push away, and I would not have you feel that, my friend. And finally—” Poirot sat upright and nodded his head vigorously, “there is the principle of the thing. If a man has not committed murder, he should not be hanged.” He paused and then added, “But supposing that after all, he did kill her?”

“In that case I’d be only too thankful to be convinced of it.”

"And two heads are better than one? Voilà, everything is settled. I precipitate myself upon the business. There is, that is clear, no time to be lost. Already the scent is cold. Mrs. McGinty was killed—when?"

"Last November, 22nd."

"Then let us at once get down to the brass tacks."

"I've got my notes on the case which I'll pass over to you."

"Good. For the moment, we need only the bare outline. If James Bentley did not kill Mrs. McGinty, who did?"

Spence shrugged his shoulders and said heavily:

"There's nobody, so far as I can see."

"But that answer we do not accept. Now, since for every murder there must be a motive, what, in the case of Mrs. McGinty, could the motive be? Envy, revenge, jealousy, fear, money? Let us take the last and the simplest? Who profited by her death?"

"Nobody very much. She had two hundred pounds in the Savings Bank. Her niece gets that."

"Two hundred pounds is not very much—but in certain circumstances it could be enough. So let us consider the niece. I apologize, my friend, for treading in your footsteps. You too, I know, must have considered all this. But I have to go over with you the ground already traversed."

Spence nodded his large head.

"We considered the niece, of course. She's thirty-eight, married. Husband is employed in the building and decorating trade—a painter. He's got a good character, steady employment, sharp sort of fellow, no fool. She's a pleasant young woman, a bit talkative, seemed fond of her aunt in a mild sort of way. Neither of them had any urgent need for two hundred pounds, though quite pleased to have it, I dare say."

“What about the cottage? Do they get that?”

“It was rented. Of course, under the Rent Restriction Act the landlord couldn’t get the old woman out. But now she’s dead, I don’t think the niece could have taken over—anyway she and her husband didn’t want to. They’ve got a small modern council house of their own of which they are extremely proud.” Spence sighed. “I went into the niece and her husband pretty closely—they seemed the best bet, as you’ll understand. But I couldn’t get hold of anything.”

“Bien. Now let us talk about Mrs. McGinty herself. Describe her to me—and not only in physical terms, if you please.”

Spence grinned.

“Don’t want a police description? Well, she was sixty-four. Widow. Husband had been employed in the drapery department of Hodges in Kilchester. He died about seven years ago. Pneumonia. Since then, Mrs. McGinty has been going out daily to various houses round about. Domestic chores. Broadhinny’s a small village which has lately become residential. One or two retired people, one of the partners in an engineering works, a doctor, that sort of thing. There’s quite a good bus and train service to Kilchester, and Cullenquay which, as I expect you know, is quite a large summer resort, is only eight miles away, but Broadhinny itself is still quite pretty and rural—about a quarter of a mile off the main Drymouth and Kilchester road.”

Poirot nodded.

“Mrs. McGinty’s cottage was one of four that form the village proper. There is the post office and village shop, and agricultural labourers live in the others.”

“And she took in a lodger?”

“Yes. Before her husband died, it used to be summer visitors, but after his death she just took one regular. James Bentley had been there for some months.”

“So we come to—James Bentley?”

“Bentley’s last job was with a house agent’s in Kilchester. Before that, he lived with his mother in Cullenquay. She was an invalid and he looked after her and never went out much. Then she died, and an annuity she had died with her. He sold the little house and found a job. Well-educated man, but no special qualifications or aptitudes, and, as I say, an unprepossessing manner. Didn’t find it easy to get anything. Anyway, they took him on at Breather & Scuttle’s. Rather a second-rate firm. I don’t think he was particularly efficient or successful. They cut down staff and he was the one to go. He couldn’t get another job, and his money ran out. He usually paid Mrs. McGinty every month for his room. She gave him breakfast and supper and charged him three pounds a week—quite reasonable, all things considered. He was two months behind in paying her, and he was nearly at the end of his resources. He hadn’t got another job and she was pressing him for what he owed her.”

“And he knew that she had thirty pounds in the house? Why did she have thirty pounds in the house, by the way, since she had a Savings Bank account?”

“Because she didn’t trust the Government. Said they’d got two hundred pounds of her money, but they wouldn’t get any more. She’d keep that where she could lay her hands on it any minute. She said that to one or two people. It was under a loose board in her bedroom floor—a very obvious place. James Bentley admitted he knew it was there.”

“Very obliging of him. And did niece and husband know that too?”

“Oh yes.”

“Then we have now arrived back at my first question to you. How did Mrs. McGinty die?”

“She died on the night of November 22nd. Police surgeon put the time of death as being between 7 and 10 p.m. She’d had her supper—a kipper and bread and margarine, and according to all accounts, she usually had that about half past six. If she adhered to that on the night in question, then by the evidence of digestion she was killed about eight thirty or nine o’clock. James Bentley, by his own account, was out walking that evening from seven fifteen to about nine. He went out and walked most evenings after dark. According to his own story he came in at about nine o’clock (he had his own key) and went straight upstairs to his room. Mrs. McGinty had had washbasins fixed in the bedrooms because of summer visitors. He read for about half an hour and then went to bed. He heard and noticed nothing out of the way. Next morning he came downstairs and looked into the kitchen, but there was no one there and no signs of breakfast being prepared. He says he hesitated a bit and then knocked on Mrs. McGinty’s door, but got no reply.

“He thought she must have overslept, but didn’t like to go on knocking. Then the baker came and James Bentley went up and knocked again, and after that, as I told you, the baker went next door and fetched in a Mrs. Elliot, who eventually found the body and went off the deep end. Mrs. McGinty was lying on the parlour floor. She’d been hit on the back of the head with something rather in the nature of a meat chopper with a very sharp edge. She’d been killed instantaneously. Drawers were pulled open and things strewn about, and the loose board in the floor in her bedroom had been prised up and the cache was empty. All the windows were closed and shuttered on the inside. No signs of anything being tampered with or of being broken into from outside.”

“Therefore,” said Poirot, “either James Bentley must have killed her, or else she must have admitted her killer herself whilst Bentley was out?”

“Exactly. It wasn’t any holdup or burglar. Now who would she be likely to let in? One of the neighbours, or her niece, or her niece’s husband. It boils down to that. We eliminated the neighbours. Niece and her husband were at the pictures that night. It is possible—just possible, that one or other of them left the cinema unobserved, bicycled three miles, killed the old woman, hid the money outside the house, and got back into the cinema unnoticed. We looked into that possibility, but we didn’t find any confirmation of it. And why hide the money outside McGinty’s house if so? Difficult place to pick it up later. Why not somewhere along the three miles back? No, the only reason for hiding it where it was hidden—”

Poirot finished the sentence for him.

“Would be because you were living in that house, but didn’t want to hide it in your room or anywhere inside. In fact: James Bentley.”

“That’s right. Everywhere, every time, you came up against Bentley. Finally there was the blood on his cuff.”

“How did he account for that?”

“Said he remembered brushing up against a butcher’s shop the previous day. Baloney! It wasn’t animal blood.”

“And he stuck to that story?”

“Not likely. At the trial he told a completely different tale. You see, there was a hair on the cuff as well—a bloodstained hair, and the hair was identical with Mrs. McGinty’s hair. That had got to be explained away. He admitted then that he had gone into the room the night before when he came back from his walk. He’d gone in, he said, after knocking, and found her there, on the floor, dead. He’d bent over and touched her, he said, to make sure. And then he’d lost his head. He’d always been very much affected by the sight of blood, he said. He went to his room in a state of collapse and more or less fainted. In the morning he couldn’t bring himself to admit he knew what had happened.”

“A very fishy story,” commented Poirot.

“Yes, indeed. And yet, you know,” said Spence thoughtfully, “it might well be true. It’s not the sort of thing that an ordinary man—or a jury—can believe. But I’ve come across people like that. I don’t mean the collapse story. I mean people who are confronted by a demand for responsible action and who simply can’t face up to it. Shy people. He goes in, say, and finds her. He knows that he ought to do something—get the police—go to a neighbour—do the right thing whatever it is. And he funks it. He thinks ‘I don’t need to know anything about it. I needn’t have come in here tonight. I’ll go to bed just as if I hadn’t come in here at all . . .’ Behind it, of course, there’s fear—fear that he may be suspected of having a hand in it. He thinks he’ll keep himself out of it as long as possible, and so the silly juggins goes and puts himself into it—up to his neck.”

Spence paused.

“It could have been that way.”

“It could,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“Or again, it may have been just the best story his counsel could think up for him. But I don’t know. The waitress in the café in Kilchester where he usually had lunch said that he always chose a table where he could look into a wall or a corner and not see people. He was that kind of a chap—just a bit screwy. But not screwy enough to be a killer. He’d no persecution complex or anything of that kind.”

Spence looked hopefully at Poirot—but Poirot did not respond—he was frowning.

The two men sat silent for a while.

Three

At last Poirot roused himself with a sigh.

“Eh bien,” he said. “We have exhausted the motive of money. Let us pass to other theories. Had Mrs. McGinty an enemy? Was she afraid of anyone?”

“No evidence of it.”

“What did her neighbours have to say?”

“Not very much. They wouldn’t to the police, perhaps, but I don’t think they were holding anything back. She kept herself to herself, they said. But that’s regarded as natural enough. Our villages, you know, M. Poirot, aren’t friendly. Evacuees found that during the war. Mrs. McGinty passed the time of day with the neighbours but they weren’t intimate.”

“How long had she lived there?”

“Matter of eighteen or twenty years, I think.”

“And the forty years before that?”

“There’s no mystery about her. Farmer’s daughter from North Devon. She and her husband lived near Ilfracombe for a time, and then moved to Kilchester. Had a cottage the other side of it—but found it damp, so they moved to Broadhinny. Husband seems to have been a quiet, decent man, delicate—didn’t go to the pub much. All very respectable and above board. No mysteries anywhere, nothing to hide.”

“And yet she was killed?”

“And yet she was killed.”

“The niece didn’t know of anyone who had a grudge against her aunt?”

“She says not.”

Poirot rubbed his nose in an exasperated fashion.

“You comprehend, my dear friend, it would be so much easier if Mrs. McGinty was not Mrs. McGinty, so to speak. If she could be what is called a Mystery Woman—a woman with a past.”

“Well, she wasn’t,” said Spence stolidly. “She was just Mrs. McGinty, a more or less uneducated woman, who let rooms and went out charring. Thousands of them all over England.”

“But they do not all get murdered.”

“No. I grant you that.”

“So why should Mrs. McGinty get murdered? The obvious answer we do not accept. What remains? A shadowy and improbable niece. An even more shadowy and improbable stranger. Facts? Let us stick to facts. What are the facts? An elderly charwoman is murdered. A shy and uncouth young man is arrested and convicted of the murder. Why was James Bentley arrested?”

Spence stared.

“The evidence against him. I’ve told you—”

“Yes. Evidence. But tell me, my Spence, was it real evidence or was it contrived?”

“Contrived?”

“Yes. Granted the premise that James Bentley is innocent, two possibilities remain. The evidence was manufactured, deliberately, to throw suspicion upon him. Or else he was just the unfortunate victim of circumstances.”

Spence considered.

“Yes. I see what you’re driving at.”

"There is nothing to show that the former was the case. But again there is nothing to show that it was not so. The money was taken and hidden outside the house in a place easily found. To have actually hidden it in his room would have been a little too much for the police to swallow. The murder was committed at a time when Bentley was taking a lonely walk, as he often did. Did the bloodstain come on his sleeve as he said it did at his trial, or was that, too, contrived? Did someone brush against him in the darkness and smear tell-tale evidence on his sleeve?"

"I think that's going a bit far, M. Poirot."

"Perhaps, perhaps. But we have got to go far. I think that in this case we have got to go so far that the imagination cannot as yet see the path clearly . . . For, you see, mon cher Spence, if Mrs. McGinty is just an ordinary charwoman—it is the murderer who must be extraordinary. Yes—that follows clearly. It is in the murderer and not the murdered that the interest of this case lies. That is not the case in most crimes. Usually it is in the personality of the murdered person that the crux of the situation lies. It is the silent dead in whom I am usually interested. Their hates, their loves, their actions. And when you really know the murdered victim, then the victim speaks, and those dead lips utter a name—the name you want to know."

Spence looked rather uncomfortable.

"Those foreigners!" he seemed to be saying to himself.

"But here," continued Poirot, "it is the opposite. Here we guess at a veiled personality—a figure still hidden in darkness. How did Mrs. McGinty die? Why did she die? The answer is not to be found in studying the life of Mrs. McGinty. The answer is to be found in the personality of the murderer. You agree with me there?"

"I suppose so," said Superintendent Spence cautiously.

"Someone who wanted—what? To strike down Mrs. McGinty? Or to strike down James Bentley?"

The Superintendent gave a doubtful “H’m!”

“Yes—yes, that is one of the first points to be decided. Who is the real victim? Who was intended to be the victim?”

Spence said incredulously: “You really think someone would bump off a perfectly inoffensive old woman in order to get someone else hanged for murder?”

“One cannot make an omelette, they say, without breaking eggs. Mrs. McGinty, then, may be the egg, and James Bentley is the omelette. So let me hear, now, what you know of James Bentley.”

“Nothing much. Father was a doctor—died when Bentley was nine years old. He went to one of the smaller public schools, unfit for the Army, had a weak chest, was in one of the Ministries during the war and lived with a possessive mother.”

“Well,” said Poirot, “there are certain possibilities there . . . More than there are in the life history of Mrs. McGinty.”

“Do you seriously believe what you are suggesting?”

“No, I do not believe anything as yet. But I say that there are two distinct lines of research, and that we have to decide, very soon, which is the right one to follow.”

“How are you going to set about things, M. Poirot? Is there anything I can do?”

“First, I should like an interview with James Bentley.”

“That can be arranged. I’ll get on to his solicitors.”

“After that and subject, of course, to the result, if any—I am not hopeful—of that interview, I shall go to Broadhinny. There, aided by your notes, I shall, as quickly as possible, go over that same ground where you have passed before me.”

"In case I've missed anything," said Spence with a wry smile.

"In case, I would prefer to say, that some circumstance should strike me in a different light to the one in which it struck you. Human reactions vary and so does human experience. The resemblance of a rich financier to a soap boiler whom I had known in Liège once brought about a most satisfactory result. But no need to go into that. What I should like to do is to eliminate one or other of the trails I indicated just now. And to eliminate the Mrs. McGinty trail—trail No. 1—will obviously be quicker and easier than to attack trail No. 2. Where, now, can I stay in Broadhinny? Is there an inn of moderate comfort?"

"There's the Three Ducks—but it doesn't put people up. There's the Lamb in Cullavon three miles away—or there is a kind of a Guest House in Broadhinny itself. It's not really a Guest House, just a rather decrepit country house where the young couple who own it take in paying guests. I don't think," said Spence dubiously, "that it's very comfortable."

Hercule Poirot closed his eyes in agony.

"If I suffer, I suffer," he said. "It has to be."

"I don't know what you'll go there as," continued Spence doubtfully as he eyed Poirot. "You might be some kind of an opera singer. Voice broken down. Got to rest. That might do."

"I shall go," said Hercule Poirot, speaking with accents of royal blood, "as myself."

Spence received this pronouncement with pursed lips.

"D'you think that's advisable?"

"I think it is essential! But yes, essential. Consider, cher ami, it is time we are up against. What do we know? Nothing. So the hope, the best hope, is to go pretending that I know a great deal. I am Hercule Poirot. I am the great, the unique Hercule Poirot. And I, Hercule Poirot, am not satisfied about the verdict in the McGinty case. I, Hercule Poirot, have a very shrewd suspicion of what really happened. There is a circumstance that I, alone, estimate at its true value. You see?”

“And then?”

“And then, having made my effect, I observe the reactions. For there should be reactions. Very definitely, there should be reactions.”

Superintendent Spence looked uneasily at the little man.

“Look here, M. Poirot,” he said. “Don’t go sticking out your neck. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“But if it does, you would be proved right beyond the shadow of doubt, is it not so?”

“I don’t want it proved the hard way,” said Superintendent Spence.

Four

With great distaste, Hercule Poirot looked round the room in which he stood. It was a room of gracious proportions but there its attraction ended. Poirot made an eloquent grimace as he drew a suspicious finger along the top of a book case. As he had suspected—dust! He sat down gingerly on a sofa and its broken springs sagged depressingly under him. The two faded armchairs were, as he knew, little better. A large fierce-looking dog whom Poirot suspected of having mange growled from his position on a moderately comfortable fourth chair.

The room was large, and had a faded Morris wallpaper. Steel engravings of unpleasant subjects hung crookedly on the walls with one or two good oil paintings. The chair covers were both faded and dirty, the carpet had holes in it and had never been of a pleasant design. A good deal of miscellaneous bric-à-brac was scattered haphazard here and there. Tables rocked dangerously owing to absence of castors. One window was open, and no power on earth could, apparently, shut it again. The door, temporarily shut, was not likely to remain so. The latch did not hold, and with every gust of wind it burst open and whirling gusts of cold wind eddied round the room.

“I suffer,” said Hercule Poirot to himself in acute self-pity. “Yes, I suffer.”

The door burst open and the wind and Mrs. Summerhayes came in together. She looked round the room, shouted “What?” to someone in the distance and went out again.

Mrs. Summerhayes had red hair and an attractively freckled face and was usually in a distracted state of putting things down, or else looking for them.

Hercule Poirot sprang to his feet and shut the door.

A moment or two later it opened again and Mrs. Summerhayes reappeared. This time she was carrying a large enamel basin and a knife.

A man’s voice from some way away called out:

“Maureen, that cat’s been sick again. What shall I do?”

Mrs. Summerhayes called: “I’m coming, darling. Hold everything.”

She dropped the basin and the knife and went out again.

Poirot got up again and shut the door. He said:

“Decidedly, I suffer.”

A car drove up, the large dog leaped from the chair and raised its voice in a crescendo of barking. He jumped on a small table by the window and the table collapsed with a crash.

“Enfin,” said Hercule Poirot. “C’est insupportable!”

The door burst open, the wind surged round the room, the dog rushed out, still barking. Maureen’s voice came, upraised loud and clear.

“Johnnie, why the hell did you leave the back door open! Those bloody hens are in the larder.”

“And for this,” said Hercule Poirot with feeling, “I pay seven guineas a week!”

The door banged to with a crash. Through the window came the loud squawking of irate hens.

Then the door opened again and Maureen Summerhayes came in and fell upon the basin with a cry of joy.

“Couldn’t think where I’d left it. Would you mind frightfully, Mr. Er—hum—I mean, would it bother you if I sliced the beans in here? The smell in the kitchen is too frightful.”

“Madame, I should be enchanted.”

It was not, perhaps, the exact phrase, but it was near enough. It was the first time in twenty-four hours that Poirot had seen any chance of a conversation of more than six seconds' duration.

Mrs. Summerhayes flung herself down in a chair and began slicing beans with frenzied energy and considerable awkwardness.

"I do hope," she said, "that you're not too frightfully uncomfortable? If there's anything you want altered, do say so."

Poirot had already come to the opinion that the only thing in Long Meadows he could even tolerate was his hostess.

"You are too kind, madame," he replied politely. "I only wish it were within my powers to provide you with suitable domestics."

"Domestics!" Mrs. Summerhayes gave a squeal. "What a hope! Can't even get hold of a daily. Our really good one was murdered. Just my luck."

"That would be Mrs. McGinty," said Poirot quickly.

"Mrs. McGinty it was. God, how I miss that woman! Of course it was all a big thrill at the time. First murder we've ever had right in the family, so to speak, but as I told Johnnie, it was a downright bit of bad luck for us. Without McGinty I just can't cope."

"You were attached to her?"

"My dear man, she was reliable. She came. Monday afternoons and Thursday mornings—just like a clock. Now I have that Burp woman from up by the station. Five children and a husband. Naturally she's never here. Either the husband's taken queer, or the old mother, or the children have some foul disease or other. With old McGinty, at least it was only she herself who came over queer, and I must say she hardly ever did."

"And you found her always reliable and honest? You had trust in her?"

"Oh, she'd never pinch anything—not even food. Of course she snooped a bit. Had a look at one's letters and all that. But one expects that sort of thing. I mean they must live such awfully drab lives, mustn’t they?”

“Had Mrs. McGinty had a drab life?”

“Ghastly, I expect,” said Mrs. Summerhayes vaguely. “Always on your knees scrubbing. And then piles of other people’s washing-up waiting for you on the sink when you arrive in the morning. If I had to face that every day, I’d be positively relieved to be murdered. I really would.”

The face of Major Summerhayes appeared at the window. Mrs. Summerhayes sprang up, upsetting the beans, and rushed across to the window, which she opened to the fullest extent.

“That damned dog’s eaten the hens’ food again, Maureen.”

“Oh damn, now he’ll be sick!”

“Look here,” John Summerhayes displayed a colander full of greenery, “is this enough spinach?”

“Of course not.”

“Seems a colossal amount to me.”

“It’ll be about a teaspoonful when it’s cooked. Don’t you know by now what spinach is like?”

“Oh Lord!”

“Has the fish come?”

“Not a sign of it.”

“Hell, we’ll have to open a tin of something. You might do that, Johnnie. One of the ones in the corner cupboard. That one we thought was a bit bulged. I expect it’s quite all right really.”

“What about the spinach?”

"I'll get that."

She leaped through the window, and husband and wife moved away together.

"Nom d'un nom d'un nom!" said Hercule Poirot. He crossed the room and closed the window as nearly as he could. The voice of Major Summerhayes came to him borne on the wind.

"What about this new fellow, Maureen? Looks a bit peculiar to me. What's his name again?"

"I couldn't remember it just now when I was talking to him. Had to say Mr. Er-um. Poirot—that's what it is. He's French."

"You know, Maureen, I seem to have seen that name somewhere."

"Home Perm, perhaps. He looks like a hairdresser." Poirot winced.

"N-no. Perhaps it's pickles. I don't know. I'm sure it's familiar. Better get the first seven guineas out of him, quick."

The voices died away.

Hercule Poirot picked up the beans from the floor where they had scattered far and wide. Just as he finished doing so, Mrs. Summerhayes came in again through the door.

He presented them to her politely:

"Voici, madame."

"Oh, thanks awfully. I say, these beans look a bit black. We store them, you know, in crocks, salted down. But these seem to have gone wrong. I'm afraid they won't be very nice."

"I, too, fear that . . . You permit that I shut the door? There is a decided draught."

“Oh yes, do. I’m afraid I always leave doors open.”

“So I have noticed.”

“Anyway, that door never stays shut. This house is practically falling to pieces. Johnnie’s father and mother lived here and they were badly off, poor dears, and they never did a thing to it. And then when we came home from India to live here, we couldn’t afford to do anything either. It’s fun for the children in the holidays, though, lots of room to run wild in, and the garden and everything. Having paying guests here just enables us to keep going, though I must say we’ve had a few rude shocks.”

“Am I your only guest at present?”

“We’ve got an old lady upstairs. Took to her bed the day she came and has been there ever since. Nothing the matter with her that I can see. But there she is, and I carry up four trays a day. Nothing wrong with her appetite. Anyway, she’s going tomorrow to some niece or other.”

Mrs. Summerhayes paused for a moment before resuming in a slightly artificial voice.

“The fishman will be here in a minute. I wonder if you’d mind—er—forking out the first week’s rent. You are staying a week, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps longer.”

“Sorry to bother you. But I’ve not got any cash in the house and you know what these people are like—always dunning you.”

“Pray do not apologize, madame.” Poirot took out seven pound notes and added seven shillings. Mrs. Summerhayes gathered the money up with avidity.

“Thanks a lot.”

“I should, perhaps, madame, tell you a little more about myself. I am Hercule Poirot.”

The revelation left Mrs. Summerhayes unmoved.

“What a lovely name,” she said kindly. “Greek, isn’t it?”

“I am, as you may know,” said Poirot, “a detective.” He tapped his chest. “Perhaps the most famous detective there is.”

Mrs. Summerhayes screamed with amusement.

“I see you’re a great practical joker, M. Poirot. What are you detecting? Cigarette ash and footprints?”

“I am investigating the murder of Mrs. McGinty,” said Poirot. “And I do not joke.”

“Ouch,” said Mrs. Summerhayes, “I’ve cut my hand.”

She raised a finger and inspected it.

Then she stared at Poirot.

“Look here,” she said. “Do you mean it? What I mean is, it’s all over, all that. They arrested that poor half-wit who lodged there and he’s been tried and convicted and everything. He’s probably been hanged by now.”

“No, madame,” said Poirot. “He has not been hanged—yet. And it is not ‘over’—the case of Mrs. McGinty. I will remind you of the line from one of your poets. ‘A question is never settled until it is settled—right.’ ”

“Oo,” said Mrs. Summerhayes, her attention diverted from Poirot to the basin in her lap. “I’m bleeding over the beans. Not too good as we’ve got to have them for lunch. Still it won’t matter really because they’ll go into boiling water. Things are always all right if you boil them, aren’t they? Even tins.”

“I think,” said Hercule Poirot quietly, “that I shall not be in for lunch.”

Five

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Burch.

She had said that three times already. Her natural distrust of foreign-looking gentlemen with black moustaches, wearing large fur-lined coats was not to be easily overcome.

“Very unpleasant, it’s been,” she went on. “Having poor auntie murdered and the police and all that. Tramping round everywhere, and ferreting about, and asking questions. With the neighbours all agog. I didn’t feel at first we’d ever live it down. And my husband’s mother’s been downright nasty about it. Nothing of that kind ever happened in her family, she kept saying. And ‘poor Joe’ and all that. What about poor me? She was my aunt, wasn’t she? But really I did think it was all over now.”

“And supposing that James Bentley is innocent, after all?”

“Nonsense,” snapped Mrs. Burch. “Of course he isn’t innocent. He did it all right. I never did like the looks of him. Wandering about muttering to himself. Said to auntie, I did: ‘You oughtn’t to have a man like that in the house. Might go off his head,’ I said. But she said he was quiet and obliging and didn’t give trouble. No drinking, she said, and he didn’t even smoke. Well, she knows better now, poor soul.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at her. She was a big, plump woman with a healthy colour and a good-humoured mouth. The small house was neat and clean and smelt of furniture polish and Brasso. A faint appetizing smell came from the direction of the kitchen.

A good wife who kept her house clean and took the trouble to cook for her man. He approved. She was prejudiced and obstinate but, after all, why not? Most decidedly, she was not the kind of woman one could imagine using a meat chopper on her aunt, or conniving at her husband’s doing so. Spence had not thought her that kind of woman, and rather reluctantly, Hercule

Poirot agreed with him. Spence had gone into the financial background of the Burches and had found no motive there for murder, and Spence was a very thorough man.

He sighed, and persevered with his task, which was the breaking down of Mrs. Burch's suspicion of foreigners. He led the conversation away from murder and focused on the victim of it. He asked questions about "poor auntie," her health, her habits, her preferences in food and drink, her politics, her late husband, her attitude to life, to sex, to sin, to religion, to children, to animals.

Whether any of this irrelevant matter would be of use, he had no idea. He was looking through a haystack to find a needle. But, incidentally, he was learning something about Bessie Burch.

Bessie did not really know very much about her aunt. It had been a family tie, honoured as such, but without intimacy. Now and again, once a month or so, she and Joe had gone over on a Sunday to have midday dinner with auntie, and more rarely, auntie had come over to see them. They had exchanged presents at Christmas. They'd known that auntie had a little something put by, and that they'd get it when she died.

"But that's not to say we were needing it," Mrs. Burch explained with rising colour. "We've got something put by ourselves. And we buried her beautiful. A real nice funeral it was. Flowers and everything."

Auntie had been fond of knitting. She didn't like dogs, they messed up a place, but she used to have a cat—a ginger. It strayed away and she hadn't had one since, but the woman at the post office had been going to give her a kitten. Kept her house very neat and didn't like litter. Kept brass a treat and washed down the kitchen floor every day. She made quite a nice thing of going out to work. One shilling and tenpence an hour—two shillings from Holmeleigh, that was Mr. Carpenter's of the Works' house. Rolling in money, the Carpenters were. Tried to get auntie to come more days in the week, but auntie wouldn't disappoint her other ladies because she'd gone to them before she went to Mr. Carpenter's, and it wouldn't have been right.

Poirot mentioned Mrs. Summerhayes at Long Meadows.

Oh yes, auntie went to her—two days a week. They'd come back from India where they'd had a lot of native servants and Mrs. Summerhayes didn't know a thing about a house. They tried to market-garden, but they didn't know anything about that, either. When the children came home for the holidays, the house was just pandemonium. But Mrs. Summerhayes was a nice lady and auntie liked her.

So the portrait grew. Mrs. McGinty knitted, and scrubbed floors and polished brass, she liked cats and didn't like dogs. She liked children, but not very much. She kept herself to herself.

She attended church on Sunday, but didn't take part in any church activities. Sometimes, but rarely, she went to the pictures. She didn't hold with goings on—and had given up working for an artist and his wife when she discovered they weren't properly married. She didn't read books, but she enjoyed the Sunday paper and she liked old magazines when her ladies gave them to her. Although she didn't go much to the pictures, she was interested in hearing about film stars and their doings. She wasn't interested in politics, but voted Conservative like her husband had always done. Never spent much on clothes, but got quite a lot given her from her ladies, and was of a saving disposition.

Mrs. McGinty was, in fact, very much the Mrs. McGinty that Poirot had imagined she would be. And Bessie Burch, her niece, was the Bessie Burch of Superintendent Spence's notes.

Before Poirot took his leave, Joe Burch came home for the lunch hour. A small, shrewd man, less easy to be sure about than his wife. There was a faint nervousness in his manner. He showed less signs of suspicion and hostility than his wife. Indeed he seemed anxious to appear cooperative. And that, Poirot reflected, was very faintly out of character. For why should Joe Burch be anxious to placate an importunate foreign stranger? The reason could only be that the stranger had brought with him a letter from Superintendent Spence of the County Police.

So Joe Burch was anxious to stand in well with the police? Was it that he couldn't afford, as his wife could, to be critical of the police?

A man, perhaps, with an uneasy conscience. Why was that conscience uneasy? There could be so many reasons—none of them connected with Mrs. McGinty's death. Or was it that, somehow or other, the cinema alibi had been cleverly faked, and that it was Joe Burch who had knocked on the door of the cottage, had been admitted by auntie and who had struck down the unsuspecting old woman? He would pull out the drawers and ransack the rooms to give the appearance of robbery, he might hide the money outside, cunningly, to incriminate James Bentley, the money that was in the Savings Bank was what he was after. Two hundred pounds coming to his wife which, for some reason unknown, he badly needed. The weapon, Poirot remembered, had never been found. Why had that not also been found on the scene of the crime? Any moron knew enough to wear gloves or rub off fingerprints. Why then had the weapon, which must have been a heavy one with a sharp edge, been removed? Was it because it could easily be identified as belonging to the Burch ménage? Was that same weapon, washed and polished, here in the house now? Something in the nature of a meat chopper, the police surgeon had said—but not, it seemed, actually a meat chopper. Something, perhaps a little unusual . . . a little out of the ordinary, easily identified. The police had hunted for it, but not found it. They had searched woods, dragged ponds. There was nothing missing from Mrs. McGinty's kitchen, and nobody could say that James Bentley had had anything of that kind in his possession. They had never traced any purchase of a meat chopper or any such implement to him. A small, but negative point in his favour. Ignored in the weight of other evidence. But still a point . . .

Poirot cast a swift glance round the rather overcrowded little sitting room in which he was sitting.

Was the weapon here, somewhere, in this house? Was that why Joe Burch was uneasy and conciliatory?

Poirot did not know. He did not really think so. But he was not absolutely sure. . . .

Six

I

In the offices of Messrs Breather & Scuttle, Poirot was shown, after some demur, into the room of Mr. Scuttle himself.

Mr. Scuttle was a brisk, bustling man, with a hearty manner.

“Good morning. Good morning.” He rubbed his hands. “Now, what can we do for you?”

His professional eye shot over Poirot, trying to place him, making, as it were, a series of marginal notes.

Foreign. Good quality clothes. Probably rich. Restaurant proprietor? Hotel manager? Films?

“I hope not to trespass on your time unduly. I wanted to talk to you about your former employee, James Bentley.”

Mr. Scuttle’s expressive eyebrows shot up an inch and dropped.

“James Bentley. James Bentley?” He shot out a question. “Press?”

“No.”

“And you wouldn’t be police?”

“No. At least—not of this country.”

“Not of this country.” Mr. Scuttle filed this away rapidly as though for future reference. “What’s it all about?”

Poirot, never hindered by a pedantic regard for truth, launched out into speech.

“I am opening a further inquiry into James Bentley’s case—at the request of certain relatives of his.”

“Didn’t know he had any. Anyway, he’s been found guilty, you know, and condemned to death.”

“But not yet executed.”

“While there’s life, there’s hope, eh?” Mr. Scuttle shook his head. “Should doubt it, though. Evidence was strong. Who are these relations of his?”

“I can only tell you this, they are both rich and powerful. Immensely rich.”

“You surprise me.” Mr. Scuttle was unable to help thawing slightly. The words “immensely rich” had an attractive and hypnotic quality. “Yes, you really do surprise me.”

“Bentley’s mother, the late Mrs. Bentley,” explained Poirot, “cut herself and her son off completely from her family.”

“One of these family feuds, eh? Well, well. And young Bentley without a farthing to bless himself with. Pity these relations didn’t come to the rescue before.”

“They have only just become aware of the facts,” explained Poirot. “They have engaged me to come with all speed to this country and do everything possible.”

Mr. Scuttle leaned back, relaxing his business manner.

“Don’t know what you can do. I suppose there’s insanity? A bit late in the day—but if you got hold of the big medicos. Of course I’m not up in these things myself.”

Poirot leaned forward.

“Monsieur, James Bentley worked here. You can tell me about him.”

“Precious little to tell—precious little. He was one of our junior clerks. Nothing against him. Seemed a perfectly decent young fellow, quite conscientious and all that. But no idea of salesmanship. He just couldn’t put a project over. That’s no good in this job. If a client comes to us with a house he wants to sell, we’re there to sell it for him. And if a client wants a house, we find him one. If it’s a house in a lonely place with no amenities, we stress its antiquity, call it a period piece—and don’t mention the plumbing! And if the house looks straight into the gasworks, we talk about amenities and facilities and don’t mention the view. Hustle your client into it—that’s what you’re here to do. All sorts of little tricks there are. ‘We advise you, madam, to make an immediate offer. There’s a Member of Parliament who’s very keen on it—very keen indeed. Going out to see it again this afternoon.’ They fall for that every time—a Member of Parliament is always a good touch. Can’t think why! No member ever lives away from his constituency. It’s just the good solid sound of it.” He laughed suddenly, displayed gleaming dentures. “Psychology—that’s what it is—just psychology.”

Poirot leapt at the word.

“Psychology. How right you are. I see that you are a judge of men.”

“Not too bad. Not too bad,” said Mr. Scuttle modestly.

“So I ask you again what was your impression of James Bentley? Between ourselves—strictly between ourselves—you think he killed the old woman?”

Scuttle stared.

“Of course.”

“And you think, too, that it was a likely thing for him to do—psychologically speaking?”

"Well—if you put it like that—no, not really. Shouldn't have thought he had the guts. Tell you what, if you ask me, he was barmy. Put it that way, and it works. Always a bit soft in the head, and what with being out of a job and worrying and all that, he just went right over the edge."

"You had no special reason for discharging him?"

Scuttle shook his head.

"Bad time of year. Staff hadn't enough to do. We sacked the one who was least competent. That was Bentley. Always would be, I expect. Gave him a good reference and all that. He didn't get another job, though. No pep. Made a bad impression on people."

It always came back to that, Poirot thought, as he left the office. James Bentley made a bad impression on people. He took comfort in considering various murderers he had known whom most people had found full of charm.

II

"Excuse me, do you mind if I sit down here and talk to you for a moment?"

Poirot, ensconced at a small table in the Blue Cat, looked up from the menu he was studying with a start. It was rather dark in the Blue Cat, which specialized in an old-world effect of oak and leaded panes, but the young woman who had just sat down opposite to him stood out brightly from her dark background.

She had determinedly golden hair, and was wearing an electric blue jumper suit. Moreover, Hercule Poirot was conscious of having noticed her somewhere only a short time previously.

She went on:

"I couldn't help, you see, hearing something of what you were saying to Mr. Scuttle."

Poirot nodded. He had realized that the partitions in the offices of Breather & Scuttle were made for convenience rather than privacy. That had not worried him, since it was chiefly publicity that he desired.

“You were typing,” he said, “to the right of the back window.”

She nodded. Her teeth shone white in an acquiescing smile. A very healthy young woman, with a full buxom figure that Poirot approved. About thirty-three or four, he judged, and by nature dark-haired, but not one to be dictated to by nature.

“About Mr. Bentley,” she said.

“What about Mr. Bentley?”

“Is he going to appeal? Does it mean that there’s new evidence? Oh, I’m so glad. I couldn’t—I just couldn’t believe he did it.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“So you never thought he did it,” he said slowly.

“Well, not at first. I thought it must be a mistake. But then the evidence—” She stopped.

“Yes, the evidence,” said Poirot.

“There just didn’t seem anyone else who could have done it. I thought perhaps he’d gone a little mad.”

“Did he ever seem to you a little—what shall I say—queer?”

“Oh no. Not queer in that way. He was just shy and awkward as anyone might be. The truth was, he didn’t make the best of himself. He hadn’t confidence in himself.”

Poirot looked at her. She certainly had confidence in herself. Possibly she had enough confidence for two.

"You liked him?" he asked.

She flushed.

"Yes, I did. Amy—that's the other girl in the office—used to laugh at him and call him a drip, but I liked him very much. He was gentle and polite—and he knew a lot really. Things out of books, I mean."

"Ah yes, things out of books."

"He missed his mother. She'd been ill for years, you know. At least, not really ill, but not strong, and he'd done everything for her."

Poirot nodded. He knew those mothers.

"And of course she'd looked after him, too. I mean taken care of his health and his chest in winter and what he ate and all that."

Again he nodded. He asked:

"You and he were friends?"

"I don't know—not exactly. We used to talk sometimes. But after he left here, he—I—I didn't see much of him. I wrote to him once in a friendly way, but he didn't answer."

Poirot said gently:

"But you like him?"

She said rather defiantly:

"Yes, I do. . . ."

"That is excellent," said Poirot.

His mind switched back to the day of his interview with the condemned prisoner . . . He saw James Bentley clearly. The mouse-coloured hair, the thin awkward body, the hands with their big knuckles and wrists, the

Adam’s apple in the lean neck. He saw the furtive, embarrassed—almost sly glance. Not straightforward, not a man whose word could be trusted—a secretive, sly deceitful fellow with an ungracious, muttering way of talking . . . That was the impression James Bentley would give to most superficial observers. It was the impression he had given in the dock. The sort of fellow who would tell lies, and steal money, and hit an old woman over the head. . . .

But on Superintendent Spence, who knew men, he had not made that impression. Nor on Hercule Poirot . . . And now here was this girl.

“What is your name, mademoiselle?” he asked.

“Maude Williams. Is there anything I could do—to help?”

“I think there is. There are people who believe, Miss Williams, that James Bentley is innocent. They are working to prove that fact. I am the person charged with that investigation, and I may tell you that I have already made considerable progress—yes, considerable progress.”

He uttered that lie without a blush. To his mind it was a very necessary lie. Someone, somewhere, had got to be made uneasy. Maude Williams would talk, and talk was like a stone in a pond, it made a ripple that went on spreading outwards.

He said: “You tell me that you and James Bentley talked together. He told you about his mother and his home life. Did he ever mention anyone with whom he, or perhaps his mother, was on bad terms?”

Maude Williams reflected.

“No—not what you’d call bad terms. His mother didn’t like young women much, I gather.”

“Mothers of devoted sons never like young women. No, I mean more than that. Some family feud, some enmity. Someone with a grudge?”

She shook her head.

"He never mentioned anything of that kind."

"Did he ever speak of his landlady, Mrs. McGinty?"

She shivered slightly.

"Not by name. He said once that she gave him kippers much too often—and once he said his landlady was upset because she had lost her cat."

"Did he ever—you must be honest, please—mention that he knew where she kept her money?"

Some of the colour went out of the girl's face, but she threw up her chin defiantly.

"Actually, he did. We were talking about people being distrustful of banks—and he said his old landlady kept her spare money under a floorboard. He said: 'I could help myself any day to it when she's out.' Not quite as a joke, he didn't joke, more as though he were really worried by her carelessness."

"Ah," said Poirot. "That is good. From my point of view, I mean. When James Bentley thinks of stealing, it presents itself to him as an action that is done behind someone's back. He might have said, you see, 'Some day someone will knock her on the head for it.'"

"But either way, he wouldn't be meaning it."

"Oh no. But talk, however light, however idle, gives away, inevitably, the sort of person you are. The wise criminal would never open his mouth, but criminals are seldom wise and usually vain and they talk a good deal—and so most criminals are caught."

Maude Williams said abruptly:

"But someone must have killed the old woman."

"Naturally."

"Who did? Do you know? Have you any idea?"

"Yes," said Hercule Poirot mendaciously. "I think I have a very good idea. But we are only at the beginning of the road."

The girl glanced at her watch.

"I must get back. We're only supposed to take half an hour. One-horse place, Kilchester—I've always had jobs in London before. You'll let me know if there's anything I can do—really do, I mean?"

Poirot took out one of his cards. On it he wrote Long Meadows and the telephone number.

"That is where I am staying."

His name, he noted with chagrin, made no particular impression on her. The younger generation, he could not but feel, were singularly lacking in knowledge of notable celebrities.

III

Hercule Poirot caught a bus back to Broadhinny feeling slightly more cheerful. At any rate there was one person who shared his belief in James Bentley's innocence. Bentley was not so friendless as he had made himself out to be.

His mind went back again to Bentley in prison. What a dispiriting interview it had been. There had been no hope aroused, hardly a stirring of interest.

"Thank you," Bentley had said dully, "but I don't suppose there is anything anyone can do."

No, he was sure he had not got any enemies.

"When people barely notice you're alive, you're not likely to have any enemies."

"Your mother? Did she have an enemy?"

"Certainly not. Everyone liked and respected her."

There was a faint indignation in his tone.

“What about your friends?”

And James Bentley had said, or rather muttered, “I haven’t any friends. . . .”

But that had not been quite true. For Maude Williams was a friend.

“What a wonderful dispensation it is of Nature’s,” thought Hercule Poirot, “that every man, however superficially unattractive, should be some woman’s choice.”

For all Miss Williams’s sexy appearance, he had a shrewd suspicion that she was really the maternal type.

She had the qualities that James Bentley lacked, the energy, the drive, the refusal to be beaten, the determination to succeed.

He sighed.

What monstrous lies he had told that day! Never mind—they were necessary.

“For somewhere,” said Poirot to himself, indulging in an absolute riot of mixed metaphors, “there is in the hay a needle, and among the sleeping dogs there is one on whom I shall put my foot, and by shooting the arrows into the air, one will come down and hit a glasshouse!”

Seven

I

The cottage where Mrs. McGinty had lived was only a few steps from the bus stop. Two children were playing on the doorstep. One was eating a rather wormy-looking apple and the other was shouting and beating on the door with a tin tray. They appeared quite happy. Poirot added to the noise by beating hard on the door himself.

A woman looked round the corner of the house. She had on a coloured overall and her hair was untidy.

“Stop it, Ernie,” she said.

“Sha’n’t,” said Ernie and continued.

Poirot deserted the doorstep and made for the corner of the house.

“Can’t do anything with children, can you?” the woman said.

Poirot thought you could, but forbore to say so.

He was beckoned round to the back door.

“I keep the front bolted up, sir. Come in, won’t you?”

Poirot passed through a very dirty scullery into an almost more dirty kitchen.

“She wasn’t killed here,” said the woman. “In the parlour.”

Poirot blinked slightly.

“That’s what you’re down about, isn’t it? You’re the foreign gentleman from up at Summerhayes?”

“So you know all about me?” said Poirot. He beamed. “Yes, indeed, Mrs. —”

“Kiddle. My husband’s a plasterer. Moved in four months ago, we did. Been living with Bert’s mother before . . . Some folks said: ‘You’d never go into a house where there’s been a murder, surely?’—but what I said was, a house is a house, and better than a back sitting-room and sleeping on two chairs. Awful, this ’ousing shortage, isn’t it? And anyway we’ve never been troubled ’ere. Always say they walk if they’ve been murdered, but she doesn’t! Like to see where it happened?”

Feeling like a tourist being taken on a conducted tour, Poirot assented.

Mrs. Kiddle led him into a small room overburdened with a heavy Jacobean suite. Unlike the rest of the house, it showed no signs of ever having been occupied.

“Down on the floor she was and the back of her head split open. Didn’t half give Mrs. Elliot a turn. She’s the one what found her—she and Larkin who comes from the Co-op with the bread. But the money was took from upstairs. Come along up and I’ll show you where.”

Mrs. Kiddle led the way up the staircase and into a bedroom which contained a large chest of drawers, a big brass bed, some chairs, and a fine assembly of baby clothes, wet and dry.

“Right here it was,” said Mrs. Kiddle proudly.

Poirot looked round him. Hard to visualize that this rampant stronghold of haphazard fecundity was once the well-scrubbed domain of an elderly woman who was house-proud. Here Mrs. McGinty had lived and slept.

“I suppose this isn’t her furniture?”

“Oh no. Her niece over in Cullavon took away all that.”

There was nothing left here of Mrs. McGinty. The Kiddles had come and conquered. Life was stronger than death.

From downstairs the loud fierce wail of a baby arose.

"That's the baby woken up," said Mrs. Kiddle unnecessarily.

She plunged down the stairs and Poirot followed her.

There was nothing here for him.

He went next door.

II

"Yes, sir, it was me found her."

Mrs. Elliot was dramatic. A neat house, this, neat and prim. The only drama in it was Mrs. Elliot's, a tall gaunt dark-haired woman, recounting her one moment of glorious living.

"Larkin, the baker, he came and knocked at the door. 'It's Mrs. McGinty,' he said, 'we can't make her hear. Seems she might have been taken bad.' And indeed I thought she might. She wasn't a young woman, not by any means. And palpitations she'd had, to my certain knowledge. I thought she might have had a stroke. So I hurried over, seeing as there were only the two men, and naturally they wouldn't like to go into the bedroom."

Poirot accepted this piece of propriety with an assenting murmur.

"Hurried up the stairs, I did. He was on the landing, pale as death he was. Not that I ever thought at the time—well, of course, then I didn't know what had happened. I knocked on the door loud and there wasn't any answer, so I turned the handle and I went in. The whole place messed about—and the board in the floor up. 'It's robbery,' I said. 'But where's the poor soul herself?' And then we thought to look in the sitting-room. And there she was . . . Down on the floor with her poor head stove in. Murder! I saw at once what it was—murder! Couldn't be anything else! Robbery and murder! Here in Broadhinny. I screamed and I screamed! Quite a job they had with me. Come over all faint, I did. They had to go and get me brandy from the Three Ducks. And even then I was all of a shiver for hours and hours. ‘Don’t you take on so, mother,’ that’s what the sergeant said to me when he came. ‘Don’t you take on so. You go home and make yourself a nice cup of tea.’ And so I did. And when Elliot came home, ‘Why, whatever’s happened?’ he says, staring at me. Still all of a tremble I was. Always was sensitive from a child.”

Poirot dexterously interrupted this thrilling personal narrative.

“Yes, yes, one can see that. And when was the last time you had seen poor Mrs. McGinty?”

“Must have been the day before, when she’d stepped out into the back garden to pick a bit of mint. I was just feeding the chickens.”

“Did she say anything to you?”

“Just good afternoon and were they laying any better.”

“And that’s the last time you saw her? You didn’t see her on the day she died?”

“No. I saw Him though.” Mrs. Elliot lowered her voice. “About eleven o’clock in the morning. Just walking along the road. Shuffling his feet the way he always did.”

Poirot waited, but it seemed that there was nothing to add.

He asked:

“Were you surprised when the police arrested him?”

“Well, I was and I wasn’t. Mind you, I’d always thought he was a bit daft. And no doubt about it, these daft ones do turn nasty, sometimes. My uncle had a feeble-minded boy, and he could go very nasty sometimes—as he grew up, that was. Didn’t know his strength. Yes, that Bentley was daft all right, and I shouldn’t be surprised if they don’t hang him when it comes to it, but sends him to the asylum instead. Why, look at the place he hid the money. No one would hide money in a place like that unless he wanted it to be found. Just silly and simple like, that's what he was."

"Unless he wanted it found," murmured Poirot. "You did not, by any chance, miss a chopper—or an axe?"

"No, sir, I did not. The police asked me that. Asked all of us in the cottages here. It's a mystery still what he killed her with."

III

Hercule Poirot walked towards the post office.

The murderer had wanted the money found, but he had not wanted the weapon to be found. For the money would point to James Bentley and the weapon would point to—whom?

He shook his head. He had visited the other two cottages. They had been less exuberant than Mrs. Kiddle and less dramatic than Mrs. Elliot. They had said in effect that Mrs. McGinty was a very respectable woman who kept herself to herself, that she had a niece over at Cullavon, that nobody but the said niece ever came to see her, that nobody, so far as they knew, disliked her or bore a grudge against her, that was it true that there was a petition being got up for James Bentley and would they be asked to sign it?

"I get nowhere—nowhere," said Poirot to himself. "There is nothing—no little gleam. I can well understand the despair of Superintendent Spence. But it should be different for me. Superintendent Spence, he is a good and painstaking police officer, but me, I am Hercule Poirot. For me, there should be illumination!"

One of his patent leather shoes slopped into a puddle and he winced.

He was the great, the unique Hercule Poirot, but he was also a very old man and his shoes were tight.

He entered the post office.

The right-hand side was given to the business of His Majesty's mails. The left-hand side displayed a rich assortment of varied merchandise, comprising sweets, groceries, toys, hardware, stationery, birthday cards, knitting wool and children's underclothes.

Poirot proceeded to a leisurely purchase of stamps.

The woman who bustled forward to attend to him was middle-aged with sharp, bright eyes.

"Here," said Poirot to himself, "is undoubtedly the brains of the village of Broadhinny."

Her name, not inappropriately, was Mrs. Sweetiman.

"And twelve pennies," said Mrs. Sweetiman, deftly extracting them from a large book. "That's four and tenpence altogether. Will there be anything more, sir?"

She fixed a bright eager glance at him. Through the door at the back a girl's head showed listening avidly. She had untidy hair and a cold in the head.

"I am by way of being a stranger in these parts," said Poirot solemnly.

"That's right, sir," agreed Mrs. Sweetiman. "Come down from London, haven't you?"

"I expect you know my business here as well as I do," said Poirot with a slight smile.

"Oh no, sir, I've really no idea," said Mrs. Sweetiman in a wholly perfunctory manner.

"Mrs. McGinty," said Poirot.

Mrs. Sweetiman shook her head.

"That was a sad business—a shocking business."

“I expect you knew her well?”

“Oh I did. As well as anyone in Broadhinny, I should say. She’d always pass the time of day with me when she came in here for any little thing. Yes, it was a terrible tragedy. And not settled yet, or so I’ve heard people say.”

“There is a doubt—in some quarters—as to James Bentley’s guilt.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Sweetiman, “it wouldn’t be the first time the police got hold of the wrong man—though I wouldn’t say they had in this case. Not that I should have thought it of him really. A shy, awkward sort of fellow, but not dangerous or so you’d think. But there, you never know, do you?”

Poirot hazarded a request for notepaper.

“Of course, sir. Just come across the other side, will you?”

Mrs. Sweetiman bustled round to take her place behind the left-hand counter.

“What’s difficult to imagine is, who it could have been if it wasn’t Mr. Bentley,” she remarked as she stretched up to a top shelf for notepaper and envelopes. “We do get some nasty tramps along here sometimes, and it’s possible one of these might have found a window unfastened and got in that way. But he wouldn’t go leaving the money behind him, would he? Not after doing murder to get it—and pound notes anyway, nothing with numbers or marked. Here you are, sir, that’s a nice blue Bond, and envelopes to match.”

Poirot made his purchase.

“Mrs. McGinty never spoke of being nervous of anyone, or afraid, did she?” he asked.

“Not to me, she didn’t. She wasn’t a nervous woman. She’d stay late sometimes at Mr. Carpenter’s—that’s Holmeleigh at the top of the hill. They often have people to dinner and stopping with them, and Mrs.

McGinty would go there in the evening sometimes to help wash up, and she'd come down the hill in the dark, and that's more than I'd like to do. Very dark it is—coming down that hill."

"Do you know her niece at all—Mrs. Burch?"

"I know her just to speak to. She and her husband come over sometimes."

"They inherited a little money when Mrs. McGinty died."

The piercing dark eyes looked at him severely.

"Well, that's natural enough, isn't it, sir? You can't take it with you, and it's only right your own flesh and blood should get it."

"Oh yes, oh yes, I am entirely in agreement. Was Mrs. McGinty fond of her niece?"

"Very fond of her, I think, sir. In a quiet way."

"And her niece's husband?"

An evasive look appeared in Mrs. Sweetiman's face.

"As far as I know."

"When did you see Mrs. McGinty last?"

Mrs. Sweetiman considered, casting her mind back.

"Now let me see, when was it, Edna?" Edna, in the doorway, sniffed unhelpfully. "Was it the day she died? No, it was the day before—or the day before that again? Yes, it was a Monday. That's right. She was killed on the Wednesday. Yes, it was Monday. She came in to buy a bottle of ink."

"She wanted a bottle of ink?"

"Expect she wanted to write a letter," said Mrs. Sweetiman brightly.

"That seems probable. And she was quite her usual self, then? She did not seem different in any way?"

"N-no, I don't think so."

The sniffing Edna shuffled through the door into the shop and suddenly joined in the conversation.

"She was different," she asserted. "Pleased about something—well—not quite pleased—excited."

"Perhaps you're right," said Mrs. Sweetiman. "Not that I noticed it at the time. But now that you say so—sort of spry, she was."

"Do you remember anything she said on that day?"

"I wouldn't ordinarily. But what with her being murdered and the police and everything, it makes things stand out. She didn't say anything about James Bentley, that I'm quite sure. Talked about the Carpenters a bit and Mrs. Upward—places where she worked, you know."

"Oh yes, I was going to ask you whom exactly she worked for here."

Mrs. Sweetiman replied promptly:

"Mondays and Thursdays she went to Mrs. Summerhayes at Long Meadow. That's where you are staying, isn't it?"

"Yes," Poirot sighed, "I suppose there is not anywhere else to stay?"

"Not right in Broadhinny, there isn't. I suppose you aren't very comfortable at Long Meadows? Mrs. Summerhayes is a nice lady but she doesn't know the first thing about a house. These ladies don't who come back from foreign parts. Terrible mess there always was there to clean up, or so Mrs. McGinty used to say. Yes, Monday afternoons and Thursday mornings Mrs. Summerhayes, then Tuesday mornings Dr. Rendell's and afternoons Mrs. Upward at Laburnums. Wednesday was Mrs. Wetherby at Hunter's Close and Friday Mrs. Selkirk—Mrs. Carpenter she is now. Mrs. Upward's an elderly lady who lives with her son. They've got a maid, but she's getting on, and Mrs. McGinty used to go once a week to give things a good turn out. Mr. and Mrs. Wetherby never seem to keep any help long—she's rather an invalid. Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter have a beautiful home and do a lot of entertaining. They're all very nice people."

It was with this final pronouncement on the population of Broadhinny that Poirot went out into the street again.

He walked slowly up the hill towards Long Meadows. He hoped devoutly that the contents of the bulged tin and the bloodstained beans had been duly eaten for lunch and had not been saved for a supper treat for him. But possibly there were other doubtful tins. Life at Long Meadows certainly had its dangers.

It had been, on the whole, a disappointing day.

What had he learned?

That James Bentley had a friend. That neither he nor Mrs. McGinty had had any enemies. That Mrs. McGinty had looked excited two days before her death and had bought a bottle of ink—

Poirot stopped dead . . . Was that a fact, a tiny fact at last?

He had asked idly, what Mrs. McGinty should want with a bottle of ink, and Mrs. Sweetiman had replied, quite seriously, that she supposed she wanted to write a letter.

There was significance there—a significance that had nearly escaped him because to him, as to most people, writing a letter was a common everyday occurrence.

But it was not so to Mrs. McGinty. Writing a letter was to Mrs. McGinty such an uncommon occurrence that she had to go out and buy a bottle of ink if she wanted to do so.

Mrs. McGinty, then, hardly ever wrote letters. Mrs. Sweetiman, who was the postmistress, was thoroughly cognisant of the fact. But Mrs. McGinty had written a letter two days before her death. To whom had she written and why?

It might be quite unimportant. She might have written to her niece—to an absent friend. Absurd to lay such stress on a simple thing like a bottle of ink.

But it was all he had got and he was going to follow it up.

A bottle of ink . . .

Eight

I

“A letter?” Bessie Burch shook her head. “No, I didn’t get any letter from auntie. What should she write to me about?”

Poirot suggested: “There might have been something she wanted to tell you.”

“Auntie wasn’t much of a one for writing. She was getting on for seventy, you know, and when she was young they didn’t get much schooling.”

“But she could read and write?”

“Oh, of course. Not much of a one for reading, though she liked her News of the World and her Sunday Comet. But writing came a bit difficult always. If she’d anything to let me know about, like putting us off from coming to see her, or saying she couldn’t come to us, she’d usually ring up Mr. Benson, the chemist next door, and he’d send the message in. Very obliging that way, he is. You see, we’re in the area, so it only costs twopence. There’s a call box at the post office in Broadhinny.”

Poirot nodded. He appreciated the fact that twopence was better than twopence ha’penny. He already had a picture of Mrs. McGinty as the spare and saving kind. She had been, he thought, very fond of money.

He persisted gently:

“But your aunt did write to you sometimes, I suppose?”

“Well, there were cards at Christmas.”

“And perhaps she had friends in other parts of England to whom she wrote?”

"I don't know about that. There was her sister-in-law, but she died two years ago and there was a Mrs. Birdlip—but she's dead too."

"So, if she wrote to someone, it would be most likely in answer to a letter she had received?"

Again Bessie Burch looked doubtful.

"I don't know who'd be writing to her, I'm sure . . . Of course," her face brightened, "there's always the Government."

Poirot agreed that in these days, communications from what Bessie loosely referred to as "the Government" were the rule, rather than the exception.

"And a lot of fandangle it usually is," said Mrs. Burch. "Forms to fill in, and a lot of impertinent questions as shouldn't be asked of any decent body."

"So Mrs. McGinty might have got some Government communication that she had to answer?"

"If she had, she'd have brought it along to Joe, so as he could help her with it. Those sort of things fussed her and she always brought them to Joe."

"Can you remember if there were any letters among her personal possessions?"

"I couldn't say rightly. I don't remember anything. But then the police took over at first. It wasn't for quite a while they let me pack her things and take them away."

"What happened to those things?"

"That chest over there is hers—good solid mahogany, and there's a wardrobe upstairs, and some good kitchen stuff. The rest we sold because we'd no room for them."

"I meant her own personal things." He added: "Such things as brushes and combs, photographs, toilet things, clothes. . . ."

"Oh, them. Well, tell you the truth, I packed them in a suitcase and it's still upstairs. Didn't rightly know what to do with them. Thought I'd take the clothes to the jumble sale at Christmas, but I forgot. Didn't seem nice to take them to one of those nasty second-hand clothes people."

"I wonder—might I see the contents of that suitcase?"

"Welcome, I'm sure. Though I don't think you'll find anything to help you. The police went through it all, you know."

"Oh I know. But, all the same—"

Mrs. Burch led him briskly into a minute back bedroom, used, Poirot judged, mainly for home dressmaking. She pulled out a suitcase from under the bed and said:

"Well, here you are, and you'll excuse me stopping, but I've got the stew to see to."

Poirot gratefully excused her, and heard her thumping downstairs again. He drew the suitcase towards him and opened it.

A waft of mothballs came out to greet him.

With a feeling of pity, he lifted out the contents, so eloquent in their revelation of a woman who was dead. A rather worn long black coat. Two woollen jumpers. A coat and skirt. Stockings. No underwear (presumably Bessie Burch had taken those for her own wear). Two pairs of shoes wrapped up in newspaper. A brush and comb, worn but clean. An old dented silver-backed mirror. A photograph in a leather frame of a wedding pair dressed in the style of thirty years ago—a picture of Mrs. McGinty and her husband presumably. Two picture post-cards of Margate. A china dog. A recipe torn out of a paper for making vegetable marrow jam. Another piece dealing with "Flying Saucers" on a sensational note. A third clipping dealt with Mother Shipton's prophecies. There was also a Bible and a Prayer Book.

There were no handbags, or gloves. Presumably Bessie Burch had taken these, or given them away. The clothes here, Poirot judged, would have been too small for the buxom Bessie. Mrs. McGinty had been a thin, spare woman.

He unwrapped one of the pairs of shoes. They were of quite good quality and not much worn. Decidedly on the small side for Bessie Burch.

He was just about to wrap them up neatly again when his eye was caught by the heading on the piece of newspaper.

It was the Sunday Comet and the date was November 19th.

Mrs. McGinty had been killed on November 22nd.

This then was the paper she had bought on the Sunday preceding her death. It had been lying in her room and Bessie Burch had used it in due course to wrap up her aunt's things.

Sunday, November 19th. And on Monday Mrs. McGinty had gone into the post office to buy a bottle of ink. . . .

Could that be because of something she had seen in Sunday's newspaper?

He unwrapped the other pair of shoes. They were wrapped in the News of the World of the same date.

He smoothed out both papers and took them over to a chair where he sat down to read them. And at once he made a discovery. On one page of the Sunday Comet, something had been cut out. It was a rectangular piece out of the middle page. The space was too big for any of the clippings he had found.

He looked through both newspapers, but could find nothing else of interest. He wrapped them round the shoes again and packed the suitcase tidily.

Then he went downstairs.

Mrs. Burch was busy in the kitchen.

"Don't suppose you found anything?" she said.

"Alas, no." He added in a casual voice: "You do not remember if there was a cutting from a newspaper in your aunt's purse or in her handbag, was there?"

"Can't remember any. Perhaps the police took it."

But the police had not taken it. That Poirot knew from his study of Spence's notes. The contents of the dead woman's handbag had been listed, no newspaper cutting was among them.

"Eh bien," said Hercule Poirot to himself. "The next step is easy. It will be either the washout—or else, at last, I advance."

II

Sitting very still, with the dusty files of newspaper in front of him, Poirot told himself that his recognition of the significance of the bottle of ink had not played him false.

The Sunday Comet was given to romantic dramatizations of past events.

The paper at which Poirot was looking was the Sunday Comet of Sunday, November 19th.

At the top of the middle page were these words in big type:

WOMEN VICTIMS OF
BYGONE TRAGEDIES
WHERE ARE THESE
WOMEN NOW?

Below the caption were four very blurred reproductions of photographs clearly taken many years ago.

The subjects of them did not look tragic. They looked, actually, rather ridiculous, since nearly all of them were dressed in the style of a bygone day, and nothing is more ridiculous than the fashions of yesterday—though in another thirty years or so their charm may have reappeared, or at any rate be once more apparent.

Under each photo was a name.

Eva Kane, the “other woman” in the famous Craig Case.

Janice Courtland, the “tragic wife” whose husband was a fiend in human form.

Little Lily Gamboll, tragic child product of our overcrowded age.

Vera Blake, unsuspecting wife of a killer.

And then came the question in bold type again:

WHERE ARE THESE
WOMEN NOW?

Poirot blinked and set himself to read meticulously the somewhat romantic prose which gave the life stories of these dim and blurry heroines.

The name of Eva Kane he remembered, for the Craig Case had been a very celebrated one. Alfred Craig had been Town Clerk of Parminster, a conscientious, rather nondescript little man, correct and pleasant in his behaviour. He had had the misfortune to marry a tiresome and temperamental wife. Mrs. Craig ran him into debt, bullied him, nagged him, and suffered from nervous maladies that unkind friends said were entirely imaginary. Eva Kane was the young nursery governess in the house. She was nineteen, pretty, helpless and rather simple. She fell desperately in love with Craig and he with her. Then one day the neighbours heard that Mrs. Craig had been “ordered abroad” for her health. That had been Craig’s story. He took her up to London, the first stage of the journey, by car late one evening, and “saw her off” to the South of France. Then he returned to Parminster and at intervals mentioned how his wife’s health was no better by her accounts of it in letters. Eva Kane remained behind to housekeep for him, and tongues soon started wagging. Finally, Craig received news of his wife’s death abroad. He went away and returned a week later, with an account of the funeral.

In some ways, Craig was a simple man. He made the mistake of mentioning where his wife had died, a moderately well-known resort on the French Riviera. It only remained for someone who had a relative or friend living there to write to them, discover that there had been no death or funeral of anyone of that name and, after a period of rank gossip, to communicate with the police.

Subsequent events can be briefly summarized.

Mrs. Craig had not left for the Riviera. She had been cut in neat pieces and buried in the Craig cellar. And the autopsy of the remains showed poisoning by a vegetable alkaloid.

Craig was arrested and sent for trial. Eva Kane was originally charged as an accessory, but the charge was dropped, since it appeared clear that she had throughout been completely ignorant of what had occurred. Craig in the end made a full confession and was sentenced and executed.

Eva Kane, who was expecting a child, left Parminster and, in the words of the Sunday Comet:

Kindly relatives in the New World offered her a home. Changing her name, the pitiful young girl, seduced in her trusting youth by a cold-blooded murderer, left these shores for ever, to begin a new life and to keep for ever locked in her heart and concealed from her daughter the name of her father.

“My daughter shall grow up happy and innocent. Her life shall not be tainted by the cruel past. That I have sworn. My tragic memories shall remain mine alone.”

Poor frail trusting Eva Kane. To learn, so young, the villainy and infamy of man. Where is she now? Is there, in some Mid-western town, an elderly woman, quiet and respected by her neighbours, who has, perhaps, sad eyes . . . And does a young woman, happy and cheerful, with children, perhaps, of her own, come and see “Momma,” telling her of all the little rubs and grievances of daily life—with no idea of what past sufferings her mother has endured?

“Oh la la!” said Hercule Poirot. And passed on to the next Tragic Victim.

Janice Courtland, the “tragic wife,” had certainly been unfortunate in her husband. His peculiar practices referred to in such a guarded way as to rouse instant curiosity, had been suffered by her for eight years. Eight years of martyrdom, the Sunday Comet said firmly. Then Janice made a friend. An idealistic and unworldly young man who, horrified by a scene between husband and wife that he had witnessed by accident, had thereupon assaulted the husband with such vigour that the latter had crashed in his skull on a sharply-edged marble fire surround. The jury had found that provocation had been intense, that the young idealist had had no intention of killing, and a sentence of five years for manslaughter was given.

The suffering Janice, horrified by all the publicity the case had brought her, had gone abroad “to forget.”

Has she forgotten? asked the Sunday Comet. We hope so. Somewhere, perhaps, is a happy wife and mother to whom those years of nightmare suffering silently endured, seem now only like a dream. . . .

“Well, well,” said Hercule Poirot and passed on to Lily Gamboll, the tragic child product of our overcrowded age.

Lily Gamboll had, it seemed, been removed from her overcrowded home. An aunt had assumed responsibility for Lily’s life. Lily had wanted to go to the pictures, aunt had said “No.” Lily Gamboll had picked up the meat chopper which was lying conveniently on the table and had aimed a blow at her aunt with it. The aunt, though autocratic, was small and frail. The blow killed her. Lily was a well-developed and muscular child for her twelve years. An approved school had opened its doors and Lily had disappeared from the everyday scene.

By now she is a woman, free again to take her place in our civilization. Her conduct, during her years of confinement and probation, is said to have been exemplary. Does not this show that it is not the child, but the system, that we must blame? Brought up in ignorance, little Lily was the victim of her environment.

Now, having atoned for her tragic lapse, she lives somewhere, happily, we hope, a good citizen and a good wife and mother. Poor little Lily Gamboll.

Poirot shook his head. A child of twelve who took a swing at her aunt with a meat chopper and hit her hard enough to kill her was not, in his opinion, a nice child. His sympathies were, in this case, with the aunt.

He passed on to Vera Blake.

Vera Blake was clearly one of those women with whom everything goes wrong. She had first taken up with a boyfriend who turned out to be a gangster wanted by the police for killing a bank watchman. She had then married a respectable tradesman who turned out to be a receiver of stolen goods. Her two children had likewise, in due course, attracted the attention of the police. They went with Mamma to department stores and did a pretty line in shoplifting. Finally, however, a "good man" had appeared on the scene. He had offered tragic Vera a home in the Dominions. She and her children should leave this effete country.

From henceforward a New Life awaited them. At last, after long years of repeated blows from Fate, Vera's troubles are over.

"I wonder," said Poirot sceptically. "Very possibly she will find she has married a confidence trickster who works the liners!"

He leant back and studied the four photographs. Eva Kane with tousled curly hair over her ears and an enormous hat, held a bunch of roses up to her ear like a telephone receiver. Janice Courtland had a cloche hat pushed down over her ears and a waist round her hips. Lily Gamboll was a plain child with an adenoidal appearance of open mouth, hard breathing and thick spectacles. Vera Blake was so tragically black and white that no features showed.

For some reason Mrs. McGinty had torn out this feature, photographs and all. Why? Just to keep because the stories interested her? He thought not.

Mrs. McGinty had kept very few things during her sixty-odd years of life. Poirot knew that from the police reports of her belongings.

She had torn this out on the Sunday and on the Monday she had bought a bottle of ink and the inference was that she, who never wrote letters, was about to write a letter. If it had been a business letter, she would probably have asked Joe Burch to help her. So it had not been business. It had been—what?

Poirot's eyes looked over the four photographs once again.

Where, the Sunday Comet asked, are these women now?

One of them, Poirot thought, might have been in Broadhinny last November.

III

It was not until the following day that Poirot found himself tête-à-tête with Miss Pamela Horsefall.

Miss Horsefall couldn't give him long, because she had to rush away to Sheffield, she explained.

Miss Horsefall was tall, manly-looking, a hard drinker and smoker, and it would seem, looking at her, highly improbable that it was her pen which had dropped such treacly sentiment in the Sunday Comet. Nevertheless it was so.

"Cough it up, cough it up," said Miss Horsefall impatiently to Poirot. "I've got to be going."

"It is about your article in the Sunday Comet. Last November. The series about Tragic Women."

"Oh, that series. Pretty lousy, weren't they?"

Poirot did not express an opinion on that point. He said:

“I refer in particular to the article on Women Associated with Crime that appeared on November 19th. It concerned Eva Kane, Vera Blake, Janice Courtland and Lily Gamboll.”

Miss Horsefall grinned.

“Where are these tragic women now? I remember.”

“I suppose you sometimes get letters after the appearance of these articles?”

“You bet I do! Some people seem to have nothing better to do than write letters. Somebody ‘once saw the murderer Craig walking down the street.’ Somebody would like to tell me ‘the story of her life, far more tragic than anything I could ever imagine.’”

“Did you get a letter after the appearance of that article from a Mrs. McGinty of Broadhinny?”

“My dear man, how on earth should I know? I get buckets of letters. How should I remember one particular name?”

“I thought you might remember,” said Poirot, “because a few days later Mrs. McGinty was murdered.”

“Now you’re talking.” Miss Horsefall forgot to be impatient to get to Sheffield, and sat down astride a chair. “McGinty— McGinty . . . I do remember the name. Conked on the head by her lodger. Not a very exciting crime from the point of view of the public. No sex appeal about it. You say the woman wrote to me?”

“She wrote to the Sunday Comet, I think.”

“Same thing. It would come on to me. And with the murder—and her name being in the news—surely I should remember—” she stopped. “Look here—it wasn’t from Broadhinny. It was from Broadway.”

“So you do remember?”

"Well, I'm not sure . . . But the name . . . Comic name, isn't it? McGinty! Yes—atrocious writing and quite illiterate. If I'd only realized . . . But I'm sure it came from Broadway."

Poirot said: "You say yourself the writing was bad. Broadway and Broadhinny—they could look alike."

"Yes—might be so. After all, one wouldn't be likely to know these queer rural names. McGinty—yes. I do remember definitely. Perhaps the murder fixed the name for me."

"Can you remember what she said in her letter?"

"Something about a photograph. She knew where there was a photograph like in the paper—and would we pay her anything for it and how much?"

"And you answered?"

"My dear man, we don't want anything of that kind. We sent back the standard reply. Polite thanks but nothing doing. But as we sent it to Broadway—I don't suppose she'd ever get it."

"She knew where there was a photograph. . . ."

Into Poirot's mind there came back a remembrance. Maureen Summerhayes' careless voice saying, "Of course she snooped round a bit."

Mrs. McGinty had snooped. She was honest, but she liked to know about things. And people kept things—foolish, meaningless things from the past. Kept them for sentimental reasons, or just overlooked them and didn't remember they were there.

Mrs. McGinty had seen an old photograph and later she had recognized it reproduced in the Sunday Comet. And she had wondered if there was any money in it. . . .

He rose briskly. "Thank you, Miss Horsefall. You will pardon me, but those notes on the cases that you wrote, were they accurate? I notice, for instance, that the year of the Craig trial is given wrongly—it was actually a year later than you say. And in the Courtland case, the husband’s name was Herbert, I seem to remember, not Hubert. Lily Gamboll’s aunt lived in Buckinghamshire, not Berkshire.”

Miss Horsefall waved a cigarette.

“My dear man. No point in accuracy. Whole thing was a romantic farrago from beginning to end. I just mugged up the facts a bit and then let fly with a lot of hou ha.”

“What I am trying to say is that even the characters of your heroines are not, perhaps, quite as represented.”

Pamela let out a neighing sound like a horse.

“’Course they weren’t. What do you think? I’ve no doubt that Eva Kane was a thorough little bitch, and not an injured innocent at all. And as for the Courtland woman, why did she suffer in silence for eight years with a sadistic pervert? Because he was rolling in money, and the romantic boyfriend hadn’t any.”

“And the tragic child, Lily Gamboll?”

“I wouldn’t care to have her gambolling about me with a meat chopper.”

Poirot ticked off on his fingers.

“They left the country—they went to the New World—abroad—‘to the Dominions’—‘to start a New Life.’ And there is nothing to show, is there, that they did not, subsequently, come back to this country?”

“Not a thing,” agreed Miss Horsefall. “And now—I really must fly—”

Later that night Poirot rang up Spence.

“I’ve been wondering about you, Poirot. Have you got anything? Anything at all?”

“I have made my inquiries,” said Poirot grimly.

“Yes?”

“And the result of them is this: The people who live in Broadhinny are all very nice people.”

“What do you mean by that, M. Poirot?”

“Oh, my friend, consider. ‘Very nice people.’ That has been, before now, a motive for murder.”

Nine

I

“All very nice people,” murmured Poirot as he turned in at the gate of Crossways, near the station.

A brass plate in the doorpost announced that Dr. Rendell, M.D., lived there.

Dr. Rendell was a large cheerful man of forty. He greeted his guest with definite empressement.

“Our quiet little village is honoured,” he said, “by the presence of the great Hercule Poirot.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. He was gratified. “You have, then, heard of me?”

“Of course we have heard of you. Who hasn’t?”

The answer to that would have been damaging to Poirot’s self-esteem. He merely said politely: “I am fortunate to find you at home.”

It was not particularly fortunate. It was, on the contrary, astute timing. But Dr. Rendell replied heartily:

“Yes. Just caught me. Surgery in a quarter of an hour. Now what can I do for you? I’m devoured with curiosity to know what you’re doing down here. A rest cure? Or have we crime in our midst?”

“In the past tense—not the present.”

“Past? I don’t remember—”

“Mrs. McGinty.”

"Of course. Of course. I was forgetting. But don't say you're concerned with that—at this late date?"

"If I may mention this to you in confidence, I am employed by the defence. Fresh evidence on which to lodge an appeal."

Dr. Rendell said sharply: "But what fresh evidence can there be?"

"That, alas, I am not at liberty to state—"

"Oh, quite—please forgive me."

"But I have come across certain things which are, I may say—very curious—very—how shall I put it?—suggestive? I came to you, Dr. Rendell, because I understand that Mrs. McGinty occasionally was employed here."

"Oh yes, yes—she was—What about a drink? Sherry? Whisky? You prefer sherry? So do I." He brought two glasses and, sitting down by Poirot, he went on: "She used to come once a week to do extra cleaning. I've got a very good housekeeper—excellent—but the brasses—and scrubbing the kitchen floor—well, my Mrs. Scott can't get down on her knees very well. Mrs. McGinty was an excellent worker."

"Do you think that she was a truthful person?"

"Truthful? Well, that's an odd question. I don't think I could say—no opportunity of knowing. As far as I know she was quite truthful."

"If then she made a statement to anyone, you think that statement would probably be true?"

Dr. Rendell looked faintly disturbed.

"Oh, I wouldn't like to go as far as that. I really know so little about her. I could ask Mrs. Scott. She'd know better."

"No, no. It would be better not to do that."

“You’re arousing my curiosity,” said Dr. Rendell genially. “What was it she was going around saying? Something a bit libellous, was it? Slanderous, I suppose I mean.”

Poirot merely shook his head. He said: “You understand, all this is extremely hush hush at present. I am only at the very commencement of my investigation.”

Dr. Rendell said rather drily:

“You’ll have to hurry a bit, won’t you?”

“You are right. The time at my disposal is short.”

“I must say you surprise me . . . We’ve all been quite sure down here that Bentley did it. There didn’t seem any doubt possible.”

“It seemed an ordinary sordid crime—not very interesting. That is what you would say?”

“Yes—yes, that sums it up very fairly.”

“You knew James Bentley?”

“He came to see me professionally once or twice. He was nervous about his own health. Coddled by his mother, I fancy. One sees that so often. We’ve another case in point here.”

“Ah, indeed?”

“Yes. Mrs. Upward. Laura Upward. Dotes upon that son of hers. She keeps him well-tied to her apronstrings. He’s a clever fellow—not quite as clever as he thinks himself, between you and me—but still definitely talented. By way of being a budding playwright is our Robin.”

“They have been here long?”

“Three or four years. Nobody has been in Broadhinny very long. The original village was only a handful of cottages, grouped round Long

Meadows. You’re staying there, I understand?”

“I am,” said Poirot without undue elation.

Dr. Rendell appeared amused.

“Guest House indeed,” he said. “What that young woman knows about running a Guest House is just nothing at all. She’s lived in India all her married life with servants running round all over the place. I bet you’re uncomfortable. Nobody ever stays long. As for poor old Summerhayes, he’ll never make anything of this market gardening stunt he’s trying to run. Nice fellow—but not an idea of the commercial life—and the commercial life it’s got to be nowadays if you want to keep your head above water. Don’t run away with the idea that I heal the sick. I’m just a glorified form filler and signer of certificates. I like the Summerhayes, though. She’s a charming creature, and though Summerhayes has a devilish temper and is inclined to be moody, he’s one of the old gang. Out of the top drawer all right. You should have known old Colonel Summerhayes, a regular tartar, proud as the devil.”

“That was Major Summerhayes’ father?”

“Yes. There wasn’t much money when the old boy died and of course there have been death duties to cripple these people, but they’re determined to stick to the old place. One doesn’t know whether to admire them, or whether to say ‘Silly fools.’”

He looked at his watch.

“I must not keep you,” said Poirot.

“I’ve got a few minutes still. Besides, I’d like you to meet my wife. I can’t think where she is. She was immensely interested to hear you were down here. We’re both very crime-minded. Read a lot about it.”

“Criminology, fiction, or the Sunday papers?” asked Poirot smiling.

“All three.”

“Do you descend as low as the Sunday Comet?”

Rendell laughed.

“What would Sunday be without it?”

“They had some interesting articles about five months ago. One in particular about women who had been involved in murder cases and the tragedy of their lives.”

“Yes, I remember the one you mean. All a lot of hooey, though.”

“Ah, you think that?”

“Well of course the Craig case I only know from reading about it, but one of the others—Courtland case, I can tell you that woman was no tragic innocent. Regular vicious bit of goods. I know because an uncle of mine attended the husband. He was certainly no beauty, but his wife wasn’t much better. She got hold of that young greenhorn and egged him on to murder. Then he goes to prison for manslaughter and she goes off, a rich widow, and marries someone else.”

“The Sunday Comet did not mention that. Do you remember whom she married?”

Rendell shook his head.

“Don’t think I ever heard the name, but someone told me that she’d done pretty well for herself.”

“One wondered in reading the article where those four women were now,” mused Poirot.

“I know. One may have met one of them at a party last week. I bet they all keep their past pretty dark. You’d certainly never recognize any of ’em from those photographs. My word, they looked a plain lot.”

The clock chimed and Poirot rose to his feet. “I must detain you no longer. You have been most kind.”

"Not much help, I'm afraid. The mere man barely knows what his charlady looks like. But half a second, you must meet the wife. She'd never forgive me."

He preceded Poirot out into the hall, calling loudly:

"Shelagh—Shelagh—"

A faint answer came from upstairs.

"Come down here. I've got something for you."

A thin fair-haired pale woman ran lightly down the stairs.

"Here's M. Hercule Poirot, Shelagh. What do you think of that?"

"Oh," Mrs. Rendell appeared to be startled out of speaking. Her very pale blue eyes stared at Poirot apprehensively.

"Madame," said Poirot, bowing over her head in his most foreign manner.

"We heard that you were here," said Shelagh Rendell. "But we didn't know—" She broke off. Her light eyes went quickly to her husband's face.

"It is from him she takes the Greenwich time," said Poirot to himself.

He uttered a few florid phrases and took his leave.

An impression remained with him of a genial Dr. Rendell and a tongue-tied, apprehensive Mrs. Rendell.

So much for the Rendells, where Mrs. McGinty had gone to work on Tuesday mornings.

II

Hunter's Close was a solidly built Victorian house approached by a long untidy drive overgrown with weeds. It had not originally been considered a big house, but was now big enough to be inconvenient domestically.

Poirot inquired of the foreign young woman who opened the door for Mrs. Wetherby.

She stared at him and then said: “I do not know. Please to come. Miss Henderson perhaps?”

She left him standing in the hall. It was in an estate agent’s phrase “fully furnished”—with a good many curios from various parts of the world. Nothing looked very clean or well dusted.

Presently the foreign girl reappeared. She said: “Please to come,” and showed him into a chilly little room with a large desk. On the mantelpiece was a big and rather evil-looking copper coffee pot with an enormous hooked spout like a large hooked nose.

The door opened behind Poirot and a girl came into the room.

“My mother is lying down,” she said. “Can I do anything for you?”

“You are Miss Wetherby?”

“Henderson. Mr. Wetherby is my stepfather.”

She was a plain girl of about thirty, large and awkward. She had watchful eyes.

“I was anxious to hear what you could tell me about Mrs. McGinty who used to work here.”

She stared at him.

“Mrs. McGinty? But she’s dead.”

“I know that,” said Poirot gently. “Nevertheless, I would like to hear about her.”

“Oh. Is it for insurance or something?”

“Not for insurance. It is a question of fresh evidence.”

“Fresh evidence. You mean—her death?”

“I am engaged,” said Poirot, “by the solicitors for the defence to make an inquiry on James Bentley’s behalf.”

Staring at him, she asked: “But didn’t he do it?”

“The jury thought he did. But juries have been known to make a mistake.”

“Then it was really someone else who killed her?”

“It may have been.”

She asked abruptly: “Who?”

“That,” said Poirot softly, “is the question.”

“I don’t understand at all.”

“No? But you can tell me something about Mrs. McGinty, can’t you?”

She said rather reluctantly:

“I suppose so . . . What do you want to know?”

“Well—to begin with—what did you think of her?”

“Why—nothing in particular. She was just like anybody else.”

“Talkative or silent? Curious or reserved? Pleasant or morose? A nice woman, or—not a very nice woman?”

Miss Henderson reflected.

“She worked well—but she talked a lot. Sometimes she said rather funny things . . . I didn’t—really—like her very much.”

The door opened and the foreign help said:

“Miss Deirdre, your mother say: please to bring.”

“My mother wants me to take this gentleman upstairs to her?”

“Yes please, thank you.”

Deirdre Henderson looked at Poirot doubtfully.

“Will you come up to my mother?”

“But certainly.”

Deirdre led the way across the hall and up the stairs. She said inconsequently: “One does get so very tired of foreigners.”

Since her mind was clearly running on her domestic help and not on the visitor, Poirot did not take offence. He reflected that Deirdre Henderson seemed a rather simple young woman—simple to the point of gaucheness.

The room upstairs was crowded with knickknacks. It was the room of a woman who had travelled a good deal and who had been determined wherever she went to have a souvenir of the place. Most of the souvenirs were clearly made for the delight and exploitation of tourists. There were too many sofas and tables and chairs in the room, too little air and too many draperies—and in the midst of it all was Mrs. Wetherby.

Mrs. Wetherby seemed a small woman—a pathetic small woman in a large room. That was the effect. But she was not really quite so small as she had decided to appear. The “poor little me” type can achieve its result quite well, even if really of medium height.

She was reclining very comfortably on a sofa and near her were books and some knitting and a glass of orange juice and a box of chocolates. She said brightly:

“You must forgive me not getting up, but the doctor does so insist on my resting every day, and everyone scolds me if I don’t do what I’m told.”

Poirot took her extended hand and bowed over it with the proper murmur of homage.

Behind him, uncompromising, Deirdre said: “He wants to know about Mrs. McGinty.”

The delicate hand that had lain passively in his tightened and he was reminded for a moment of the talon of a bird. Not really a piece of delicate Dresden china—a scratchy predatory claw . . .

Laughing slightly, Mrs. Wetherby said:

“How ridiculous you are, Deirdre darling. Who is Mrs. McGinty?”

“Oh, Mummy—you do remember really. She worked for us. You know, the one who was murdered.”

Mrs. Wetherby closed her eyes, and shivered.

“Don’t, darling. It was all so horrid. I felt nervous for weeks afterwards. Poor old woman, but so stupid to keep money under the floor. She ought to have put it in the bank. Of course I remember all that—I’d just forgotten her name.”

Deirdre said stolidly:

“He wants to know about her.”

“Now do sit down, M. Poirot. I’m quite devoured by curiosity. Mrs. Rendell just rang up and she said we had a very famous criminologist down here, and she described you. And then, when that idiot Frieda described a visitor, I felt sure it must be you, and I sent down word for you to come up. Now tell me, what is all this?”

“It is as your daughter says, I want to know about Mrs. McGinty. She worked here. She came to you, I understand, on Wednesdays. And it was on a Wednesday she died. So she had been here that day, had she not?”

“I suppose so. Yes, I suppose so. I can’t really tell now. It’s so long ago.”

"Yes. Several months. And she did not say anything that day—anything special?"

"That class of person always talks a lot," said Mrs. Wetherby with distaste. "One doesn't really listen. And anyway, she couldn't tell she was going to be robbed and killed that night, could she?"

"There is cause and effect," said Poirot.

Mrs. Wetherby wrinkled her forehead.

"I don't see what you mean."

"Perhaps I do not see myself—not yet. One works through darkness towards light . . . Do you take in the Sunday papers, Mrs. Wetherby?"

Her blue eyes opened very wide.

"Oh yes. Of course. We have the Observer and the Sunday Times. Why?"

"I wondered. Mrs. McGinty took the Sunday Comet and the News of the World."

He paused but nobody said anything. Mrs. Wetherby sighed and half closed her eyes. She said:

"It was all very upsetting. That horrible lodger of hers. I don't think really he can have been quite right in the head. Apparently he was quite an educated man, too. That makes it worse, doesn't it?"

"Does it?"

"Oh yes—I do think so. Such a brutal crime. A meat chopper. Ugh!"

"The police never found the weapon," said Poirot.

"I expect he threw it in a pond or something."

"They dragged the ponds," said Deirdre. "I saw them."

“Darling,” her mother sighed, “don’t be morbid. You know how I hate thinking of things like that. My head.”

Fiercely the girl turned on Poirot.

“You mustn’t go on about it,” she said. “It’s bad for her. She’s frightfully sensitive. She can’t even read detective stories.”

“My apologies,” said Poirot. He rose to his feet. “I have only one excuse. A man is to be hanged in three weeks’ time. If he did not do it—”

Mrs. Wetherby raised herself on her elbow. Her voice was shrill.

“But of course he did it,” she cried. “Of course he did.”

Poirot shook his head.

“I am not so sure.”

He left the room quickly. As he went down the stairs, the girl came after him. She caught up with him in the hall.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“What I said, mademoiselle.”

“Yes, but—” She stopped.

Poirot said nothing.

Deirdre Henderson said slowly:

“You’ve upset my mother. She hates things like that—robberies and murders and—and violence.”

“It must, then, have been a great shock to her when a woman who had actually worked here was killed.”

“Oh yes—oh yes, it was.”

“She was prostrated—yes?”

“She wouldn’t hear anything about it . . . We—I—we try to—to spare her things. All the beastliness.”

“What about the war?”

“Luckily we never had any bombs near here.”

“What was your part in the war, mademoiselle?”

“Oh, I did VAD work in Kilchester. And some driving for the WVS I couldn’t have left home, of course. Mother needed me. As it was, she minded my being out so much. It was all very difficult. And then servants—naturally mother’s never done any housework—she’s not strong enough. And it was so difficult to get anyone at all. That’s why Mrs. McGinty was such a blessing. That’s when she began coming to us. She was a splendid worker. But of course nothing—anywhere—is like it used to be.”

“And do you mind that so much, mademoiselle?”

“I? Oh no.” She seemed surprised. “But it’s different for mother. She—she lives in the past a lot.”

“Some people do,” said Poirot. His visual memory conjured up the room he had been in a short time before. There had been a bureau drawer half pulled out. A drawer full of odds and ends—a silk pincushion, a broken fan, a silver coffee pot—some old magazines. The drawer had been too full to shut. He said softly: “And they keep things—memories of old days—the dance programme, the fan, the photographs of bygone friends, even the menu cards and the theatre programmes because, looking at these things, old memories revive.”

“I suppose that’s it,” said Deirdre. “I can’t understand it myself. I never keep anything.”

“You look forwards, not back?”

Deirdre said slowly:

"I don't know that I look anywhere . . . I mean, today's usually enough, isn't it?"

The front door opened and a tall, spare, elderly man came into the hall. He stopped dead as he saw Poirot.

He glanced at Deirdre and his eyebrows rose in interrogation.

"This is my stepfather," said Deirdre. "I—I don't know your name?"

"I am Hercule Poirot," said Poirot with his usual embarrassed air of announcing a royal title.

Mr. Wetherby seemed unimpressed.

He said, "Ah," and turned to hang up his coat.

Deirdre said:

"He came to ask about Mrs. McGinty."

Mr. Wetherby remained still for a second, then he finished his adjustment of the coat on the peg.

"That seems to me rather remarkable," he said. "The woman met her death some months ago and, although she worked here, we have no information concerning her or her family. If we had done we should already have given it to the police."

There was finality in his tone. He glanced at his watch.

"Lunch, I presume, will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

"I'm afraid it may be rather late today."

Mr. Wetherby's eyebrows rose again.

"Indeed? Why, may I ask?"

“Frieda has been rather busy.”

“My dear Deirdre, I hate to remind you, but the task of running the household devolves on you. I should appreciate a little more punctuality.”

Poirot opened the front door and let himself out. He glanced over his shoulder.

There was cold dislike in the gaze that Mr. Wetherby gave his stepdaughter. There was something very like hate in the eyes that looked back at him.

Ten

Poirot left his third call until after luncheon. Luncheon was under-stewed oxtail, watery potatoes, and what Maureen hoped optimistically might turn out to be pancakes. They were very peculiar.

Poirot walked slowly up the hill. Presently, on his right, he would come to Laburnums, two cottages knocked into one and remodelled to modern taste. Here lived Mrs. Upward and that promising young playwright, Robin Upward.

Poirot paused a moment at the gate to pass a hand over his moustaches. As he did so a car came twisting slowly down the hill and an apple core directed with force struck him on the cheek.

Startled, Poirot let out a yelp of protest. The car halted and a head came through the window.

“I’m so sorry. Did I hit you?”

Poirot paused in the act of replying. He looked at the rather noble face, the massive brow, the untidy billows of grey hair and a chord of memory stirred. The apple core, too, assisted his memory.

“But surely,” he exclaimed, “it is Mrs. Oliver.”

It was indeed that celebrated detective story writer.

Exclaiming, “Why, it’s M. Poirot,” the authoress attempted to extract herself from the car. It was a small car and Mrs. Oliver was a large woman. Poirot hastened to assist.

Murmuring in an explanatory voice, “Stiff after the long drive,” Mrs. Oliver suddenly arrived out on the road, rather in the manner of a volcanic eruption.

Large quantities of apples came, too, and rolled merrily down the hill.

“Bag’s burst,” explained Mrs. Oliver.

She brushed a few stray pieces of half-consumed apple from the jutting shelf of her bust and then shook herself rather like a large Newfoundland dog. The last apple, concealed in the recesses of her person, joined its brothers and sisters.

“Pity the bag burst,” said Mrs. Oliver. “They were Cox’s. Still I suppose there will be lots of apples down here in the country. Or aren’t there? Perhaps they all get sent away. Things are so odd nowadays, I find. Well, how are you, M. Poirot? You don’t live here, do you? No, I’m sure you don’t. Then I suppose it’s murder? Not my hostess, I hope?”

“Who is your hostess?”

“In there,” said Mrs. Oliver, nodding her head. “That’s to say if that’s a house called Laburnums, halfway down the hill on the left side after you pass the church. Yes, that must be it. What’s she like?”

“You do not know her?”

“No, I’ve come down professionally, so to speak. A book of mine is being dramatized—by Robin Upward. We’re supposed to sort of get together over it.”

“My felicitations, madame.”

“It’s not like that at all,” said Mrs. Oliver. “So far it’s pure agony. Why I ever let myself in for it I don’t know. My books bring me in quite enough money—that is to say the bloodsuckers take most of it, and if I made more, they’d take more, so I don’t overstrain myself. But you’ve no idea of the agony of having your characters taken and made to say things that they never would have said, and do things that they never would have done. And if you protest, all they say is that it’s ‘good theatre.’ That’s all Robin Upward thinks of. Everyone says he’s very clever. If he’s so clever I don’t see why he doesn’t write a play of his own and leave my poor unfortunate

Finn alone. He’s not even a Finn any longer. He’s become a member of the Norwegian Resistance Movement.” She ran her hands through her hair. “What have I done with my hat?”

Poirot looked into the car.

“I think, madame, that you must have been sitting on it.”

“It does look like it,” agreed Mrs. Oliver, surveying the wreckage. “Oh well,” she continued cheerfully, “I never liked it much. But I thought I might have to go to church on Sunday, and although the Archbishop has said one needn’t, I still think that the more old-fashioned clergy expect one to wear a hat. But tell me about your murder or whatever it is. Do you remember our murder?”

“Very well indeed.”

“Rather fun, wasn’t it? Not the actual murder—I didn’t like that at all. But afterwards. Who is it this time?”

“Not so picturesque a person as Mr. Shaitana. An elderly charwoman who was robbed and murdered five months ago. You may have read about it. Mrs. McGinty. A young man was convicted and sentenced to death—”

“And he didn’t do it, but you know who did, and you’re going to prove it,” said Mrs. Oliver rapidly. “Splendid.”

“You go too fast,” said Poirot with a sigh. “I do not yet know who did it—and from there it will be a long way to prove it.”

“Men are so slow,” said Mrs. Oliver disparagingly. “I’ll soon tell you who did it. Someone down here, I suppose? Give me a day or two to look round, and I’ll spot the murderer. A woman’s intuition—that’s what you need. I was quite right over the Shaitana case, wasn’t I?”

Poirot gallantly forbode to remind Mrs. Oliver of her rapid changes of suspicion on that occasion.

“You men,” said Mrs. Oliver indulgently. “Now if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard—”

She left this well-worn theme hanging in the air as a voice hailed them from the door of the cottage.

“Hallo,” said the voice, an agreeable light tenor. “Is that Mrs. Oliver?”

“Here I am,” called Mrs. Oliver. To Poirot she murmured: “Don’t worry. I’ll be very discreet.”

“No, no, madame. I do not want you to be discreet. On the contrary.”

Robin Upward came down the path and through the gate. He was bareheaded and wore very old grey flannel trousers and a disreputable sports coat. But for a tendency to embonpoint, he would have been good looking.

“Ariadne, my precious!” he exclaimed and embraced her warmly.

He stood away, his hands on her shoulders.

“My dear, I’ve had the most marvellous idea for the second act.”

“Have you?” said Mrs. Oliver without enthusiasm. “This is M. Hercule Poirot.”

“Splendid,” said Robin. “Have you got any luggage?”

“Yes, it’s in the back.”

Robin hauled out a couple of suitcases.

“Such a bore,” he said. “We’ve no proper servants. Only old Janet. And we have to spare her all the time. That’s such a nuisance don’t you think? How heavy your cases are. Have you got bombs in them?”

He staggered up the path, calling out over his shoulder:

“Come in and have a drink.”

“He means you,” said Mrs. Oliver, removing her handbag, a book, and a pair of old shoes from the front seat. “Did you actually say just now that you wanted me to be indiscreet?”

“The more indiscreet the better.”

“I shouldn’t tackle it that way myself,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but it’s your murder. I’ll help all I can.”

Robin reappeared at the front door.

“Come in, come in,” he called. “We’ll see about the car later. Madre is dying to meet you.”

Mrs. Oliver swept up the path and Hercule Poirot followed her.

The interior of Laburnums was charming. Poirot guessed that a very large sum of money had been spent on it, but the result was an expensive and charming simplicity. Each small piece of cottage oak was a genuine piece.

In a wheeled chair by the fireplace of the living room Laura Upward smiled a welcome. She was a vigorous looking woman of sixty-odd, with iron-grey hair and a determined chin.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Mrs. Oliver,” she said. “I expect you hate people talking to you about your books, but they’ve been an enormous solace to me for years—and especially since I’ve been such a cripple.”

“That’s very nice of you,” said Mrs. Oliver, looking uncomfortable and twisting her hands in a schoolgirlish way. “Oh, this is M. Poirot, an old friend of mine. We met by chance just outside here. Actually I hit him with an apple core. Like William Tell—only the other way about.”

“How d’you do, M. Poirot. Robin.”

“Yes, Madre?”

"Get some drinks. Where are the cigarettes?"

"On that table."

Mrs. Upward asked: "Are you a writer, too, M. Poirot?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Oliver. "He's a detective. You know. The Sherlock Holmes kind—deerstalkers and violins and all that. And he's come here to solve a murder."

There was a faint tinkle of broken glass. Mrs. Upward said sharply: "Robin, do be careful." To Poirot she said: "That's very interesting, M. Poirot."

"So Maureen Summerhayes was right," exclaimed Robin. "She told me some long rigmarole about having a detective on the premises. She seemed to think it was frightfully funny. But it's really quite serious, isn't it?"

"Of course it's serious," said Mrs. Oliver. "You've got a criminal in your midst."

"Yes, but look here, who's been murdered? Or is it someone that's been dug up and it's all frightfully hush hush?"

"It is not hush hush," said Poirot. "The murder, you know about it already."

"Mrs. Mc—something—a charwoman—last autumn," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Oh!" Robin Upward sounded disappointed. "But that's all over."

"It's not over at all," said Mrs. Oliver. "They arrested the wrong man, and he'll be hanged if M. Poirot doesn't find the real murderer in time. It's all frightfully exciting."

Robin apportioned the drinks.

"White Lady for you, Madre."

"Thank you, my dear boy."

Poirot frowned slightly. Robin handed drinks to Mrs. Oliver and to him.

“Well,” said Robin, “here’s to crime.”

He drank.

“She used to work here,” he said.

“Mrs. McGinty?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

“Yes. Didn’t she, Madre?”

“When you say work here, she came one day a week.”

“And odd afternoons sometimes.”

“What was she like?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

“Terribly respectable,” said Robin. “And maddeningly tidy. She had a ghastly way of tidying up everything and putting things into drawers so that you simply couldn’t guess where they were.”

Mrs. Upward said with a certain grim humour:

“If somebody didn’t tidy things away at least one day a week, you soon wouldn’t be able to move in this small house.”

“I know, Madre, I know. But unless things are left where I put them, I simply can’t work at all. My notes get all disarranged.”

“It’s annoying to be as helpless as I am,” said Mrs. Upward. “We have a faithful old maid, but it’s all she can manage just to do a little simple cooking.”

“What is it?” asked Mrs. Oliver. “Arthritis?”

“Some form of it. I shall have to have a permanent nurse-companion soon, I’m afraid. Such a bore. I like being independent.”

"Now, darling," said Robin. "Don't work yourself up."

He patted her arm.

She smiled at him with sudden tenderness.

"Robin's as good as a daughter to me," she said. "He does everything—and thinks of everything. No one could be more considerate."

They smiled at each other.

Hercule Poirot rose.

"Alas," he said. "I must go. I have another call to make and then a train to catch. Madame, I thank you for your hospitality. Mr. Upward, I wish all success to the play."

"And all success to you with your murder," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Is this really serious, M. Poirot?" asked Robin Upward. "Or is it a terrific hoax?"

"Of course it isn't a hoax," said Mrs. Oliver. "It's deadly serious. He won't tell me who the murderer is, but he knows, don't you?"

"No, no, madame," Poirot's protest was just sufficiently unconvincing. "I told you that as yet, no, I do not know."

"That's what you said, but I think you do know really . . . But you're so frightly secretive, aren't you?"

Mrs. Upward said sharply:

"Is this really true? It's not a joke?"

"It is not a joke, madame," said Poirot.

He bowed and departed.

As he went down the path he heard Robin Upward's clear tenor voice:

"But Ariadne, darling," he said, "it's all very well, but with that moustache and everything, how can one take him seriously? Do you really mean he's good?"

Poirot smiled to himself. Good indeed!

About to cross the narrow lane, he jumped back just in time.

The Summerhayes' station wagon, lurching and bumping, came racing past him. Summerhayes was driving.

"Sorry," he called. "Got to catch train." And faintly from the distance: "Covent Garden . . ."

Poirot also intended to take a train—the local train to Kilchester, where he had arranged a conference with Superintendent Spence.

He had time, before catching it, for just one last call.

He went to the top of the hill and through gates and up a well-kept drive to a modern house of frosted concrete with a square roof and a good deal of window. This was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter. Guy Carpenter was a partner in the big Carpenter Engineering Works—a very rich man who had recently taken to politics. He and his wife had only been married a short time.

The Carpenters' front door was not opened by foreign help, or an aged faithful. An imperturbable manservant opened the door and was loath to admit Hercule Poirot. In his view Hercule Poirot was the kind of caller who is left outside. He clearly suspected that Hercule Poirot had come to sell something.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter are not at home."

"Perhaps, then, I might wait?"

"I couldn't say when they will be in."

He closed the door.

Poirot did not go down the drive. Instead he walked round the corner of the house and almost collided with a tall young woman in a mink coat.

“Hallo,” she said. “What the hell do you want?”

Poirot raised his hat with gallantry.

“I was hoping,” he said, “that I could see Mr. or Mrs. Carpenter. Have I the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Carpenter?”

“I’m Mrs. Carpenter.”

She spoke ungraciously, but there was a faint suggestion of appeasement behind her manner.

“My name is Hercule Poirot.”

Nothing registered. Not only was the great, the unique name unknown to her, but he thought that she did not even identify him as Maureen Summerhayes’ latest guest. Here, then, the local grape vine did not operate. A small but significant fact, perhaps.

“Yes?”

“I demand to see either Mr. or Mrs. Carpenter, but you, madame, will be the best for my purpose. For what I have to ask is of domestic matters.”

“We’ve got a Hoover,” said Mrs. Carpenter suspiciously.

Poirot laughed.

“No, no, you misunderstand. It is only a few questions that I ask about a domestic matter.”

“Oh, you mean one of these domestic questionnaires. I do think it’s absolutely idiotic—” She broke off. “Perhaps you’d better come inside.”

Poirot smiled faintly. She had just stopped herself from uttering a derogatory comment. With her husband’s political activities, caution in criticizing Government activities was indicated.

She led the way through the hall and into a good-sized room giving on to a carefully tended garden. It was a very new-looking room, a large brocaded suite of sofa and two wing chairs, three or four reproductions of Chippendale chairs, a bureau, a writing desk. No expense had been spared, the best firms had been employed, and there was absolutely no sign of individual taste. The bride, Poirot thought, had been what? Indifferent? Careful?

He looked at her appraisingly as she turned. An expensive and good-looking young woman. Platinum blonde hair, carefully applied makeup, but something more—wide cornflower blue eyes—eyes with a wide frozen stare in them—beautiful drowned eyes.

She said—graciously now, but concealing boredom:

“Do sit down.”

He sat. He said:

“You are most amiable, madame. These questions now that I wish to ask you. They relate to a Mrs. McGinty who died—was killed that is to say—last November.”

“Mrs. McGinty? I don’t know what you mean?”

She was glaring at him. Her eyes hard and suspicious.

“You remember Mrs. McGinty?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know anything about her.”

“You remember her murder? Or is murder so common here that you do not even notice it?”

"Oh, the murder? Yes, of course. I'd forgotten what the old woman's name was."

"Although she worked for you in this house?"

"She didn't. I wasn't living here then. Mr. Carpenter and I were only married three months ago."

"But she did work for you. On Friday mornings, I think it was. You were then Mrs. Selkirk and you lived in Rose Cottage."

She said sulkily:

"If you know the answers to everything I don't see why you need to ask questions. Anyway, what's it all about?"

"I am making an investigation into the circumstances of the murder."

"Why? What on earth for? Anyway, why come to me?"

"You might know something—that would help me."

"I don't know anything at all. Why should I? She was only a stupid old charwoman. She kept her money under the floor and somebody robbed and murdered her for it. It was quite disgusting—beastly, the whole thing. Like things you read in the Sunday papers."

Poirot took that up quickly.

"Like the Sunday papers, yes. Like the Sunday Comet. You read, perhaps, the Sunday Comet?"

She jumped up, and made her way, blunderingly, towards the opened French windows. So uncertainly did she go that she actually collided with the window frame. Poirot was reminded of a beautiful big moth, fluttering blindly against a lamp shade.

She called: "Guy—Guy!"

A man’s voice a little way away answered:

“Eve?”

“Come here quickly.”

A tall man of about thirty-five came into sight. He quickened his pace and came across the terrace to the window. Eve Carpenter said vehemently:

“There’s a man here—a foreigner. He’s asking me all sorts of questions about that horrid murder last year. Some old charwoman—you remember? I hate things like that. You know I do.”

Guy Carpenter frowned and came into the drawing room through the window. He had a long face like a horse, he was pale and looked rather supercilious. His manner was pompous.

Hercule Poirot found him unattractive.

“May I ask what all this is about?” he asked. “Have you been annoying my wife?”

Hercule Poirot spread out his hands.

“The last thing I should wish is to annoy so charming a lady. I hoped only that, the deceased woman having worked for her, she might be able to aid me in the investigations I am making.”

“But—what are these investigations?”

“Yes, ask him that,” urged his wife.

“A fresh inquiry is being made into the circumstances of Mrs. McGinty’s death.”

“Nonsense—the case is over.”

“No, no, there you are in error. It is not over.”

“A fresh inquiry, you say?” Guy Carpenter frowned. He said suspiciously: “By the police? Nonsense—you’re nothing to do with the police.”

“That is correct. I am working independently of the police.”

“It’s the Press,” Eve Carpenter broke in. “Some horrid Sunday newspaper. He said so.”

A gleam of caution came into Guy Carpenter’s eye. In his position he was not anxious to antagonize the Press. He said, more amicably:

“My wife is very sensitive. Murders and things like that upset her. I’m sure it can’t be necessary for you to bother her. She hardly knew this woman.”

Eve said vehemently:

“She was only a stupid old charwoman. I told him so.”

She added:

“And she was a frightful liar, too.”

“Ah, that is interesting.” Poirot turned a beaming face from one to the other of them. “So she told lies. That may give us a very valuable lead.”

“I don’t see how,” said Eve sulkily.

“The establishment of motive,” said Poirot. “That is the line I am following up.”

“She was robbed of her savings,” said Carpenter sharply. “That was the motive of the crime.”

“Ah,” said Poirot softly. “But was it?”

He rose like an actor who had just spoken a telling line.

“I regret if I have caused madame any pain,” he said politely. “These affairs are always rather unpleasant.”

“The whole business was distressing,” said Carpenter quickly. “Naturally my wife didn’t like being reminded of it. I’m sorry we can’t help you with any information.”

“Oh, but you have.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Poirot said softly:

“Mrs. McGinty told lies. A valuable fact. What lies, exactly, did she tell, madame?”

He waited politely for Eve Carpenter to speak. She said at last:

“Oh, nothing particular. I mean—I can’t remember.”

Conscious perhaps, that both men were looking at her expectantly, she said:

“Stupid things—about people. Things that couldn’t be true.”

Still there was a silence, then Poirot said:

“I see—she had a dangerous tongue.”

Eve Carpenter made a quick movement.

“Oh no—I didn’t mean as much as that. She was just a gossip, that was all.”

“Just a gossip,” said Poirot softly.

He made a gesture of farewell.

Guy Carpenter accompanied him out into the hall.

“This paper of yours—this Sunday paper—which is it?”

“The paper I mentioned to madame,” replied Poirot carefully, “was the Sunday Comet.”

He paused. Guy Carpenter repeated thoughtfully:

“The Sunday Comet. I don’t very often see that, I’m afraid.”

“It has interesting articles sometimes. And interesting illustrations . . .”

Before the pause could be too long, he bowed, and said quickly:

“Au revoir, Mr. Carpenter. I am sorry if I have—disturbed you.”

Outside the gate, he looked back at the house.

“I wonder,” he said. “Yes, I wonder. . . .”

Eleven

Superintendent Spence sat opposite Hercule Poirot and sighed.

"I'm not saying you haven't got anything, M. Poirot," he said slowly. "Personally, I think you have. But it's thin. It's terribly thin!"

Poirot nodded.

"By itself it will not do. There must be more."

"My sergeant or I ought to have spotted that newspaper."

"No, no, you cannot blame yourself. The crime was so obvious. Robbery with violence. The room all pulled about, the money missing. Why should there be significance to you in a torn newspaper amongst the other confusion."

Spence repeated obstinately:

"I should have got that. And the bottle of ink—"

"I heard of that by the merest chance."

"Yet it meant something to you—why?"

"Only because of that chance phrase about writing a letter. You and I, Spence, we write so many letters—to us it is such a matter of course."

Superintendent Spence sighed. Then he laid out on the table four photographs.

"These are the photos you asked me to get—the original photos that the Sunday Comet used. At any rate they're a little clearer than the reproductions. But upon my word, they're not much to go upon. Old, faded —and with women the hairdo makes a difference. There's nothing definite in any of them to go upon like ears or a profile. That cloche hat and that arty hair and the roses! Doesn't give you a chance."

"You agree with me that we can discard Vera Blake?"

"I should think so. If Vera Blake was in Broadhinny, everyone would know it—telling the sad story of her life seems to have been her speciality."

"What can you tell me about the others?"

"I've got what I could for you in the time. Eva Kane left the country after Craig was sentenced. And I can tell you the name she took. It was Hope. Symbolic, perhaps?"

Poirot murmured:

"Yes, yes—the romantic approach. 'Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead.' A line from one of your poets. I dare say she thought of that. Was her name Evelyn, by the way?"

"Yes, I believe it was. But Eva was what she was known as always. And by the way, M. Poirot, now that we're on the subject, the police opinion of Eva Kane doesn't quite square with this article here. Very far from it."

Poirot smiled.

"What the police think—it is not evidence. But it is usually a very sound guide. What did the police think of Eva Kane?"

"That she was by no means the innocent victim that the public thought her. I was quite a young chap at the time and remember hearing it discussed by my old Chief and Inspector Traill who was in charge of the case. Traill believed (no evidence, mind you) that the pretty little idea of putting Mrs. Craig out of the way was all Eva Kane's idea—and that she not only thought of it, but she did it. Craig came home one day and found his little friend had taken a short cut. She thought it would all pass off as natural death, I dare say. But Craig knew better. He got the wind up and disposed of the body in the cellar and elaborated the plan of having Mrs. Craig die abroad. Then, when the whole thing came out, he was frantic in his assertions that he'd done it alone, that Eva Kane had known nothing about it. Well," Superintendent Spence shrugged his shoulders, "nobody could prove anything else. The stuff was in the house. Either of them could have used it. Pretty Eva Kane was all innocence and horror. Very well she did it, too: a clever little actress. Inspector Traill had his doubts—but there was nothing to go upon. I'm giving you that for what it's worth, M. Poirot. It's not evidence."

"But it suggests the possibility that one, at least, of these 'tragic women' was something more than a tragic woman—that she was a murderess and that, if the incentive was strong enough, she might murder again . . . And now the next one, Janice Courtland, what can you tell me about her?"

"I've looked up the files. A nasty bit of goods. If we hanged Edith Thompson we certainly ought to have hanged Janice Courtland. An unpleasant pair, she and her husband, nothing to choose between them, and she worked on that young man until she had him all up in arms. But all the time, mark you, there was a rich man in the background, and it was to marry him she wanted her husband out of the way."

"Did she marry him?"

Spence shook his head.

"No idea."

"She went abroad—and then?"

Spence shook his head.

"She was a free woman. She'd not been charged with anything. Whether she married, or what happened to her, we don't know."

"One might meet her at a cocktail party any day," said Poirot, thinking of Dr. Rendell's remark.

"Exactly."

Poirot shifted his gaze to the last photograph.

“And the child? Lily Gamboll?”

“Too young to be charged with murder. She was sent to an approved school. Good record there. Was taught shorthand and typing and was found a job under probation. Did well. Last heard of in Ireland. I think we could wash her out, you know, M. Poirot, same as Vera Blake. After all, she’d made good, and people don’t hold it against a kid of twelve for doing something in a fit of temper. What about washing her out?”

“I might,” said Poirot, “if it were not for the chopper. It is undeniable that Lily Gamboll used a chopper on her aunt, and the unknown killer of Mrs. McGinty used something that was said to be like a chopper.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Now, M. Poirot, let’s have your side of things. Nobody’s tried to do you in, I’m glad to see.”

“N-no,” said Poirot, with a momentary hesitation.

“I don’t mind telling you I’ve had the wind up about you once or twice since that evening in London. Now what are the possibilities amongst the residents of Broadhinny?”

Poirot opened his little notebook.

“Eva Kane, if she is still alive, would be now approaching sixty. Her daughter, of whose adult life our Sunday Comet paints such a touching picture, would be now in the thirties. Lily Gamboll would also be about that age. Janice Courtland would now be not far short of fifty.”

Spence nodded agreement.

“So we come to the residents of Broadhinny, with especial reference to those for whom Mrs. McGinty worked.”

“That last is a fair assumption, I think.”

“Yes, it is complicated by the fact that Mrs. McGinty did occasional odd work here and there, but we will assume for the time being that she saw whatever she did see, presumably a photograph, at one of her regular ‘houses.’”

“Agreed.”

“Then as far as age goes, that gives us as possibles—first the Wetherbys where Mrs. McGinty worked on the day of her death. Mrs. Wetherby is the right age for Eva Kane and she has a daughter of the right age to be Eva Kane’s daughter—a daughter said to be by a previous marriage.”

“And as regards the photograph?”

“Mon cher, no positive identification from that is possible. Too much time has passed, too much water, as you say, has flowed from the waterworks. One can but say this: Mrs. Wetherby has been, decidedly, a pretty woman. She has all the mannerisms of one. She seems much too fragile and helpless to do murder, but then that was, I understand, the popular belief about Eva Kane. How much actual physical strength would have been needed to kill Mrs. McGinty is difficult to say without knowing exactly what weapon was used, its handle, the ease with which it could be swung, the sharpness of its cutting edge, etcetera.”

“Yes, yes. Why we never managed to find that—but go on.”

“The only other remarks I have to make about the Wetherby household are that Mr. Wetherby could make himself, and I fancy does make himself, very unpleasant if he likes. The daughter is fanatically devoted to her mother. She hates her stepfather. I do not remark on these facts. I present them, only for consideration. Daughter might kill to prevent mother’s past coming to stepfather’s ears. Mother might kill for same reason. Father might kill to prevent ‘scandal’ coming out. More murders have been committed for respectability than one would believe possible! The Wetherbys are ‘nice people.’ ”

Spence nodded.

"If—I say if—there is anything in this Sunday Comet business, then the Wetherbys are clearly the best bet," he said.

"Exactly. The only other person in Broadhinny who would fit in age with Eva Kane is Mrs. Upward. There are two arguments against Mrs. Upward, as Eva Kane, having killed Mrs. McGinty. First, she suffers from arthritis, and spends most of her time in a wheeled chair—"

"In a book," said Spence enviously, "that wheeled chair business would be phoney, but in real life it's probably all according to Cocker."

"Secondly," continued Poirot, "Mrs. Upward seems of a dogmatic and forceful disposition, more inclined to bully than to coax, which does not agree with the accounts of our young Eva. On the other hand, people's characters do develop and self-assertiveness is a quality that often comes with age."

"That's true enough," conceded Spence. "Mrs. Upward—not impossible but unlikely. Now the other possibilities. Janice Courtland?"

"Can, I think, be ruled out. There is no one in Broadhinny the right age."

"Unless one of the younger women is Janice Courtland with her face lifted. Don't mind me—just my little joke."

"There are three women of thirty-odd. There is Deirdre Henderson. There is Dr. Rendell's wife, and there is Mrs. Guy Carpenter. That is to say, any one of these could be Lily Gamboll or alternatively Eva Kane's daughter as far as age goes."

"And as far as possibility goes?"

Poirot sighed.

"Eva Kane's daughter may be tall or short, dark or fair—we have no guide to what she looks like. We have considered Deirdre Henderson in that role. Now for the other two. First of all I will tell you this: Mrs. Rendell is afraid of something."

“Afraid of you?”

“I think so.”

“That might be significant,” said Spence slowly. “You’re suggesting that Mrs. Rendell might be Eva Kane’s daughter or Lily Gamboll. Is she fair or dark?”

“Fair.”

“Lily Gamboll was a fair-haired child.”

“Mrs. Carpenter is also fair-haired. A most expensively made-up young woman. Whether she is actually good-looking or not, she has very remarkable eyes. Lovely wide-open dark-blue eyes.”

“Now, Poirot—” Spence shook his head at his friend.

“Do you know what she looked like as she ran out of the room to call her husband? I was reminded of a lovely fluttering moth. She blundered into the furniture and stretched her hands out like a blind thing.”

Spence looked at him indulgently.

“Romantic, that’s what you are, M. Poirot,” he said. “You and your lovely fluttering moths and wide-open blue eyes.”

“Not at all,” said Poirot. “My friend Hastings, he was romantic and sentimental, me never! Me, I am severely practical. What I am telling you is that if a girl’s claims to beauty depend principally on the loveliness of her eyes, then, no matter how shortsighted she is, she will take off her spectacles and learn to feel her way round even if outlines are blurred and distance hard to judge.”

And gently, with his forefinger, he tapped the photograph of the child Lily Gamboll in the thick disfiguring spectacles.

“So that’s what you think? Lily Gamboll?”

"No, I speak only of what might be. At the time Mrs. McGinty died Mrs. Carpenter was not yet Mrs. Carpenter. She was a young war widow, very badly off, living in a labourer's cottage. She was engaged to be married to the rich man of the neighbourhood—a man with political ambitions and a great sense of his own importance. If Guy Carpenter had found out that he was about to marry, say, a child of low origin who had obtained notoriety by hitting her aunt on the head with a chopper, or alternatively the daughter of Craig, one of the most notorious criminals of the century—prominently placed in your Chamber of Horrors—well, one asks would he have gone through with it? You say perhaps, if he loved the girl, yes! But he is not quite that kind of man. I would put him down as selfish, ambitious, and a man very nice in the manner of his reputation. I think that if young Mrs. Selkirk, as she was then, was anxious to achieve the match she would have been very very anxious that no hint of an unfortunate nature got to her fiancé's ears."

"I see, you think it's her, do you?"

"I tell you again, mon cher, I do not know. I examine only possibilities. Mrs. Carpenter was on her guard against me, watchful, alarmed."

"That looks bad."

"Yes, yes, but it is all very difficult. Once I stayed with some friends in the country and they went out to do the shooting. You know the way it goes? One walks with the dogs and the guns, and the dogs, they put up the game—it flies out of the woods, up into the air and you go bang bang. That is like us. It is not only one bird we put up, perhaps, there are other birds in the covert. Birds, perhaps, with which we have nothing to do. But the birds themselves do not know that. We must make very sure, cher ami, which is our bird. During Mrs. Carpenter's widowhood, there may have been indiscretions—no worse than that, but still inconvenient. Certainly there must be some reason why she says to me quickly that Mrs. McGinty was a liar!"

Superintendent Spence rubbed his nose.

"Let's get this clear, Poirot. What do you really think?"

“What I think does not matter. I must know. And as yet, the dogs have only just gone into the covert.”

Spence murmured: “If we could get anything at all definite. One really suspicious circumstance. As it is, it’s all theory and rather far-fetched theory at that. The whole thing’s thin, you know, as I said. Does anyone really murder for the reasons we’ve been considering?”

“That depends,” said Poirot. “It depends on a lot of family circumstances we do not know. But the passion for respectability is very strong. These are not artists or Bohemians. Very nice people live in Broadhinny. My postmistress said so. And nice people like to preserve their niceness. Years of happy married life, maybe, no suspicion that you were once a notorious figure in one of the most sensational murder trials, no suspicion that your child is the child of a famous murderer. One might say ‘I would rather die than have my husband know!’ Or ‘I would rather die than have my daughter discover who she is!’ And then you would go on to reflect that it would be better, perhaps, if Mrs. McGinty died. . . .”

Spence said quietly:

“So you think it’s the Wetherbys.”

“No. They fit the best, perhaps, but that is all. In actual character, Mrs. Upward is a more likely killer than Mrs. Wetherby. She has determination and willpower and she fairly dotes on her son. To prevent his learning of what happened before she married his father and settled down to respectable married bliss, I think she might go far.”

“Would it upset him so much?”

“Personally I do not think so. Young Robin has a modern sceptical point of view, is thoroughly selfish, and in any case is less devoted, I should say, to his mother than she to him. He is not another James Bentley.”

“Granting Mrs. Upward was Eva Kane, her son Robin wouldn’t kill Mrs. McGinty to prevent the fact coming out?”

"Not for a moment, I should say. He would probably capitalize on it. Use the fact for publicity for his plays! I can't see Robin Upward committing a murder for respectability, or devotion, or in fact for anything but a good solid gain to Robin Upward."

Spence sighed. He said: "It's a wide field. We may be able to get something on the past history of these people. But it will take time. The war has complicated things. Records destroyed—endless opportunities for people who want to cover their traces doing so by means of other people's identity cards, etc., especially after 'incidents' when nobody could know which corpse was which! If we could concentrate on just one lot, but you've got so many possibles, M. Poirot."

"We may be able to cut them down soon."

Poirot left the superintendent's office with less cheerfulness in his heart than he had shown in his manner. He was obsessed as Spence was, by the urge of time. If only he could have time. . . .

And farther back still was the one teasing doubt—was the edifice he and Spence had built up really sound? Supposing, after all, that James Bentley was guilty . . .

He did not give in to that doubt, but it worried him.

Again and again he had gone over in his mind the interview he had had with James Bentley. He thought of it now whilst he waited on the platform at Kilchester for his train to come in. It had been market day and the platform was crowded. More crowds were coming in through the barriers.

Poirot leaned forward to look. Yes, the train was coming at last. Before he could right himself he felt a sudden hard purposeful shove in the small of his back. It was so violent and so unexpected that he was taken completely unawares. In another second he would have fallen on the line under the incoming train, but a man beside him on the platform caught hold of him in the nick of time, pulling him back.

“Why, whatever came over you?” he demanded. He was a big burly Army sergeant. “Taken queer? Man, you were nearly under the train.”

“I thank you. I thank you a thousand times.” Already the crowd was milling round them, boarding the train, others leaving it.

“All right now? I’ll help you in.”

Shaken, Poirot subsided on to a seat.

Useless to say “I was pushed,” but he had been pushed. Up till that very evening he had gone about consciously on his guard, on the alert for danger. But after talking with Spence, after Spence’s bantering inquiry as to whether any attempt on his life had been made, he had insensibly regarded the danger as over or unlikely to materialize.

But how wrong he had been! Amongst those he had interviewed in Broadhinny one interview had achieved a result. Somebody had been afraid. Somebody had sought to put an end to his dangerous resuscitation of a closed case.

From a call-box in the station at Broadhinny, Poirot rang up Superintendent Spence.

“It is you, mon ami? Attend, I pray. I have news for you. Splendid news. Somebody has tried to kill me. . . .”

He listened with satisfaction to the flow of remarks from the other end.

“No, I am not hurt. But it was a very near thing . . . Yes, under a train. No, I did not see who did it. But be assured, my friend, I shall find out. We know now—that we are on the right track.”

Twelve

I

The man who was testing the electric meter passed the time of day with Guy Carpenter's superior manservant, who was watching him.

"Electricity's going to operate on a new basis," he explained. "Graded flat rate according to occupancy."

The superior butler remarked sceptically:

"What you mean is it's going to cost more like everything else."

"That depends. Fair shares for all, that's what I say. Did you go in to the meeting at Kilchester last night?"

"No."

"Your boss, Mr. Carpenter, spoke very well, they say. Think he'll get in?"

"It was a near shave last time, I believe."

"Yes. A hundred and twenty-five majority, something like that. Do you drive him in to these meetings, or does he drive himself?"

"Usually drives himself. Likes driving. He's got a Rolls Bentley."

"Does himself well. Mrs. Carpenter drive too?"

"Yes. Drives a lot too fast, in my opinion."

"Women usually do. Was she at the meeting last night too? Or isn't she interested in politics?"

The superior butler grinned.

"Pretends she is, anyway. However, she didn't stick it out last night. Had a headache or something and left in the middle of the speeches."

"Ah!" The electrician peered into the fuse boxes. "Nearly done now," he remarked. He put a few more desultory questions as he collected his tools and prepared to depart.

He walked briskly down the drive, but round the corner from the gateway he stopped and made an entry in his pocket book.

"C. Drove home alone last night. Reached home 10:30 (approx.). Could have been at Kilchester Central Station time indicated. Mrs. C. left meeting early. Got home only ten minutes before C. Said to have come home by train."

It was the second entry in the electrician's book. The first ran:

"Dr. R. Called out on case last night. Direction of Kilchester. Could have been at Kilchester Central Station at time indicated. Mrs. R. alone all evening in house(?) After taking coffee in, Mrs. Scott, housekeeper, did not see her again that night. Has small car of her own."

II

At Laburnums, collaboration was in process.

Robin Upward was saying earnestly:

"You do see, don't you, what a wonderful line that is? And if we really get a feeling of sex antagonism between the chap and the girl it'll pep the whole thing up enormously!"

Sadly, Mrs. Oliver ran her hands through her windswept grey hair, causing it to look as though swept not by wind but by a tornado.

"You do see what I mean, don't you, Ariadne darling?"

"Oh, I see what you mean," said Mrs. Oliver gloomily.

"But the main thing is for you to feel really happy about it."

Nobody but a really determined self-deceiver could have thought that Mrs. Oliver looked happy.

Robin continued blithely:

"What I feel is, here's that wonderful young man, parachuted down—"

Mrs. Oliver interrupted:

"He's sixty."

"Oh no!"

"He is."

"I don't see him like that. Thirty-five—not a day older."

"But I've been writing books about him for thirty years, and he was at least thirty-five in the first one."

"But, darling, if he's sixty, you can't have the tension between him and the girl—what's her name? Ingrid. I mean, it would make him just a nasty old man!"

"It certainly would."

"So you see, he must be thirty-five," said Robin triumphantly.

"Then he can't be Sven Hjerson. Just make him a Norwegian young man who's in the Resistance Movement."

"But darling Ariadne, the whole point of the play is Sven Hjerson. You've got an enormous public who simply adore Sven Hjerson, and who'll flock to see Sven Hjerson. He's box office, darling!"

"But people who read my books know what he's like! You can't invent an entirely new young man in the Norwegian Resistance Movement and just call him Sven Hjerson.”

“Ariadne darling, I did explain all that. It’s not a book, darling, it’s a play. And we’ve just got to have glamour! And if we get this tension, this antagonism between Sven Hjerson and this—what’s-her-name?—Karen—you know, all against each other and yet really frightfully attracted—”

“Sven Hjerson never cared for women,” said Mrs. Oliver coldly.

“But you can’t have him a pansy, darling. Not for this sort of play. I mean it’s not green bay trees or anything like that. It’s thrills and murders and clean open-air fun.”

The mention of open air had its effect.

“I think I’m going out,” said Mrs. Oliver abruptly. “I need air. I need air badly.”

“Shall I come with you?” asked Robin tenderly.

“No, I’d rather go alone.”

“Just as you like, darling. Perhaps you’re right. I’d better go and whip up an egg nog for Madre. The poor sweet is feeling just a teeny weeny bit left out of things. She does like attention, you know. And you’ll think about that scene in the cellar, won’t you? The whole thing is coming really wonderfully well. It’s going to be the most tremendous success. I know it is!”

Mrs. Oliver sighed.

“But the main thing,” continued Robin, “is for you to feel happy about it!”

Casting a cold look at him, Mrs. Oliver threw a showy military cape which she had once bought in Italy about her ample shoulders and went out into Broadhinny.

She would forget her troubles, she decided, by turning her mind to the elucidation of real crime. Hercule Poirot needed help. She would take a look at the inhabitants of Broadhinny, exercise her woman's intuition which had never failed, and tell Poirot who the murderer was. Then he would only have to get the necessary evidence.

Mrs. Oliver started her quest by going down the hill to the post office and buying two pounds of apples. During the purchase, she entered into amicable conversation with Mrs. Sweetiman.

Having agreed that the weather was very warm for the time of year, Mrs. Oliver remarked that she was staying with Mrs. Upward at Laburnums.

"Yes, I know. You'll be the lady from London that writes the murder books? Three of them I've got here now in Penguins."

Mrs. Oliver cast a glance over the Penguin display. It was slightly overlaid by children's waders.

"The Affair of the Second Goldfish," she mused, "that's quite a good one. The Cat it was Who Died—that's where I made a blowpipe a foot long and it's really six feet. Ridiculous that a blowpipe should be that size, but someone wrote from a museum to tell me so. Sometimes I think there are people who only read books in the hope of finding mistakes in them. What's the other one of them? Oh! Death of a Débutante—that's frightful tripe! I made sulphonal soluble in water and it isn't, and the whole thing is wildly impossible from start to finish. At least eight people die before Sven Hjerson gets his brainwave."

"Very popular they are," said Mrs. Sweetiman, unmoved by this interesting self-criticism. "You wouldn't believe! I've never read any myself, because I don't really get time for reading."

"You had a murder of your own down here, didn't you?" said Mrs. Oliver.

"Yes, last November that was. Almost next door here, as you might say."

"I hear there's a detective down here, looking into it?"

"Ah, you mean the little foreign gentleman up at Long Meadows? He was in here only yesterday and—"

Mrs. Sweetiman broke off as another customer entered for stamps.

She bustled round to the post office side.

"Good morning, Miss Henderson. Warm for the time of year today."

"Yes, it is."

Mrs. Oliver stared hard at the tall girl's back. She had a Sealyham with her on a lead.

"Means the fruit blossom will get nipped later!" said Mrs. Sweetiman, with gloomy relish. "How's Mrs. Wetherby keeping?"

"Fairly well, thank you. She hasn't been out much. There's been such an east wind lately."

"There's a very good picture on at Kilchester this week, Miss Henderson. You ought to go."

"I thought of going last night, but I couldn't really bother."

"It's Betty Grable next week—I'm out of 5s. books of stamps. Will two 2s. 6d. ones do you?"

As the girl went out, Mrs. Oliver said:

"Mrs. Wetherby's an invalid, isn't she?"

"That's as may be," Mrs. Sweetiman replied rather acidly. "There's some of us as hasn't the time to lay by."

"I do so agree with you," said Mrs. Oliver. "I tell Mrs. Upward that if she'd only make more of an effort to use her legs it would be better for her."

Mrs. Sweetiman looked amused.

“She gets about when she wants to—or so I’ve heard.”

“Does she now?”

Mrs. Oliver considered the source of information.

“Janet?” she hazarded.

“Janet Groom grumbles a bit,” said Mrs. Sweetiman. “And you can hardly wonder, can you? Miss Groom’s not so young herself and she has the rheumatism cruel bad when the wind’s in the east. But archititis, it’s called, when it’s the gentry has it, and invalid chairs and what not. Ah well, I wouldn’t risk losing the use of my legs, I wouldn’t. But there, nowadays even if you’ve got a chilblain you run to the doctor with it so as to get your money’s worth out of the National Health. Too much of this health business we’ve got. Never did you any good thinking how bad you feel.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She picked up her apples and went out in pursuit of Deirdre Henderson. This was not difficult, since the Sealyham was old and fat and was enjoying a leisurely examination of tufts of grass and pleasant smells.

Dogs, Mrs. Oliver considered, were always a means of introduction.

“What a darling!” she exclaimed.

The big young woman with the plain face looked gratified.

“He is rather attractive,” she said. “Aren’t you, Ben?”

Ben looked up, gave a slight wiggle of his sausage-like body, resumed his nasal inspection of a tuft of thistles, approved it and proceeded to register approval in the usual manner.

“Does he fight?” asked Mrs. Oliver. “Sealyhams do very often.”

“Yes, he’s an awful fighter. That’s why I keep him on the lead.”

“I thought so.”

Both women considered the Sealyham.

Then Deirdre Henderson said with a kind of rush:

“You’re—you’re Ariadne Oliver, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’m staying with the Upwards.”

“I know. Robin told us you were coming. I must tell you how much I enjoy your books.”

Mrs. Oliver, as usual, went purple with embarrassment.

“Oh,” she murmured unhappily. “I’m very glad,” she added gloomily.

“I haven’t read as many of them as I’d like to, because we get books sent down from the Times Book Club and Mother doesn’t like detective stories. She’s frightfully sensitive and they keep her awake at night. But I adore them.”

“You’ve had a real crime down here, haven’t you?” said Mrs. Oliver. “Which house was it? One of these cottages?”

“That one there.”

Deirdre Henderson spoke in a rather choked voice.

Mrs. Oliver directed her gaze on Mrs. McGinty’s former dwelling, the front doorstep of which was at present occupied by two unpleasant little Kiddles who were happily torturing a cat. As Mrs. Oliver stepped forward to remonstrate, the cat escaped by a firm use of its claws.

The eldest Kiddle, who had been severely scratched, set up a howl.

“Serves you right,” said Mrs. Oliver, adding to Deirdre Henderson: “It doesn’t look like a house where there’s been a murder, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Both women seemed to be in accord about that.

Mrs. Oliver continued:

“An old charwoman, wasn’t it, and somebody robbed her?”

“Her lodger. She had some money—under the floor.”

“I see.”

Deirdre Henderson said suddenly:

“But perhaps it wasn’t him after all. There’s a funny little man down here—a foreigner. His name’s Hercule Poirot—”

“Hercule Poirot? Oh yes, I know all about him.”

“Is he really a detective?”

“My dear, he’s frightfully celebrated. And terribly clever.”

“Then perhaps he’ll find out that he didn’t do it after all.”

“Who?”

“The—the lodger. James Bentley. Oh, I do hope he’ll get off.”

“Do you? Why?”

“Because I don’t want it to be him. I never wanted it to be him.”

Mrs. Oliver looked at her curiously, startled by the passion in her voice.

“Did you know him?”

“No,” said Deirdre slowly, “I didn’t know him. But once Ben got his foot caught in a trap and he helped me to get him free. And we talked a little. . .

.”

“What was he like?”

“He was dreadfully lonely. His mother had just died. He was frightfully fond of his mother.”

“And you are very fond of yours?” said Mrs. Oliver acutely.

“Yes. That made me understand. Understand what he felt, I mean. Mother and I—we’ve just got each other, you see.”

“I thought Robin told me that you had a stepfather.”

Deirdre said bitterly: “Oh yes, I’ve got a stepfather.”

Mrs. Oliver said vaguely: “It’s not the same thing, is it, as one’s own father. Do you remember your own father?”

“No, he died before I was born. Mother married Mr. Wetherby when I was four years old. I—I’ve always hated him. And Mother—” She paused before saying: “Mother’s had a very sad life. She’s had no sympathy or understanding. My stepfather is a most unfeeling man, hard and cold.”

Mrs. Oliver nodded, and then murmured:

“This James Bentley doesn’t sound at all like a criminal.”

“I never thought the police would arrest him. I’m sure it must have been some tramp. There are horrid tramps along this road sometimes. It must have been one of them.”

Mrs. Oliver said consolingly:

“Perhaps Hercule Poirot will find out the truth.”

“Yes, perhaps—”

She turned off abruptly into the gateway of Hunter’s Close.

Mrs. Oliver looked after her for a moment or two, then drew a small notebook from her handbag. In it she wrote: “Not Deirdre Henderson,” and underlined the not so firmly that the pencil broke.

III

Halfway up the hill she met Robin Upward coming down it with a handsome platinum-haired young woman.

Robin introduced them.

“This is the wonderful Ariadne Oliver, Eve,” he said. “My dear, I don’t know how she does it. Looks so benevolent, too, doesn’t she? Not at all as though she wallowed in crime. This is Eve Carpenter. Her husband is going to be our next Member. The present one, Sir George Cartwright, is quite gaga, poor old man. He jumps out at young girls from behind doors.”

“Robin, you mustn’t invent such terrible lies. You’ll discredit the Party.”

“Well, why should I care? It isn’t my Party. I’m a Liberal. That’s the only Party it’s possible to belong to nowadays, really small and select, and without a chance of getting in. I adore lost causes.”

He added to Mrs. Oliver:

“Eve wants us to come in for drinks this evening. A sort of party for you, Ariadne. You know, meet the lion. We’re all terribly terribly thrilled to have you here. Can’t you put the scene of your next murder in Broadhinny?”

“Oh do, Mrs. Oliver,” said Eve Carpenter.

“You can easily get Sven Hjerson down here,” said Robin. “He can be like Hercule Poirot, staying at the Summerhayes’ Guest House. We’re just going there now because I told Eve, Hercule Poirot is just as much a celebrity in his line as you are in yours, and she says she was rather rude to him yesterday, so she’s going to ask him to the party too. But seriously, dear, do make your next murder happen in Broadhinny. We’d all be so thrilled.”

“Oh do, Mrs. Oliver. It would be such fun,” said Eve Carpenter.

“Who shall we have as murderer and who as victim,” asked Robin.

“Who’s your present charwoman?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

“Oh my dear, not that kind of murder. So dull. No, I think Eve here would make rather a nice victim. Strangled, perhaps, with her own nylon stockings. No, that’s been done.”

“I think you’d better be murdered, Robin,” said Eve. “The coming playwright, stabbed in country cottage.”

“We haven’t settled on a murderer yet,” said Robin. “What about my Mamma? Using her wheeled chair so that there wouldn’t be footprints. I think that would be lovely.”

“She wouldn’t want to stab you, though, Robin.”

Robin considered.

“No, perhaps not. As a matter of fact I was considering her strangling you. She wouldn’t mind doing that half as much.”

“But I want you to be the victim. And the person who kills you can be Deirdre Henderson. The repressed plain girl whom nobody notices.”

“There you are, Ariadne,” said Robin. “The whole plot of your next novel presented to you. All you’ll have to do is work in a few false clues, and—of course—do the actual writing. Oh, goodness, what terrible dogs Maureen does have.”

They had turned in at the gate of Long Meadows, and two Irish wolfhounds had rushed forward, barking.

Maureen Summerhayes came out into the stableyard with a bucket in her hand.

“Down, Flyn. Come here, Cormic. Hallo. I’m just cleaning out Piggy’s stable.”

“We know that, darling,” said Robin. “We can smell you from here. How’s Piggy getting along?”

“We had a terrible fright about him yesterday. He was lying down and he didn’t want his breakfast. Johnnie and I read up all the diseases in the Pig Book and couldn’t sleep for worrying about him, but this morning he was frightfully well and gay and absolutely charged Johnnie when Johnnie came in with his food. Knocked him flat, as a matter of fact. Johnnie had to go and have a bath.”

“What exciting lives you and Johnnie lead,” said Robin.

Eve said: “Will you and Johnnie come in and have drinks with us this evening, Maureen?”

“Love to.”

“To meet Mrs. Oliver,” said Robin, “but actually you can meet her now. This is she.”

“Are you really?” said Maureen. “How thrilling. You and Robin are doing a play together, aren’t you?”

“It’s coming along splendidly,” said Robin. “By the way, Ariadne, I had a brainwave after you went out this morning. About casting.”

“Oh, casting,” said Mrs. Oliver in a relieved voice.

“I know just the right person to play Eric. Cecil Leech—he’s playing in the Little Rep at Cullenquay. We’ll run over and see the show one evening.”

“We want your P.G.,” said Eve to Maureen. “Is he about? I want to ask him tonight, too.”

“We’ll bring him along,” said Maureen.

“I think I’d better ask him myself. As a matter of fact I was a bit rude to him yesterday.”

“Oh! Well, he’s somewhere about,” said Maureen vaguely. “In the garden, I think—Cormic—Flyn—those damned dogs—” She dropped the bucket with a clatter and ran in the direction of the duck pond, whence a furious quacking had arisen.

Thirteen

Mrs. Oliver, glass in hand, approached Hercule Poirot towards the end of the Carpenters' party. Up till that moment they had each of them been the centre of an admiring circle. Now that a good deal of gin had been consumed, and the party was going well, there was a tendency for old friends to get together and retail local scandal, and the two outsiders were able to talk to each other.

"Come out on the terrace," said Mrs. Oliver, in a conspirator's whisper.

At the same time she pressed into his hand a small piece of paper.

Together they stepped out through the French windows and walked along the terrace. Poirot unfolded the piece of paper.

"Dr. Rendell," he read.

He looked questioningly at Mrs. Oliver. Mrs. Oliver nodded vigorously, a large plume of grey hair falling across her face as she did so.

"He's the murderer," said Mrs. Oliver.

"You think so? Why?"

"I just know it," said Mrs. Oliver. "He's the type. Hearty and genial, and all that."

"Perhaps."

Poirot sounded unconvinced.

"But what would you say was his motive?"

"Unprofessional conduct," said Mrs. Oliver. "And Mrs. McGinty knew about it. But whatever the reason was, you can be quite sure it was him.

I've looked at all the others, and he's the one."

In reply, Poirot remarked conversationally:

"Last night somebody tried to push me on to the railway line at Kilchester station."

"Good gracious. To kill you, do you mean?"

"I have no doubt that was the idea."

"And Dr. Rendell was out on a case, I know he was."

"I understand—yes—that Dr. Rendell was out on a case."

"Then that settles it," said Mrs. Oliver with satisfaction.

"Not quite," said Poirot. "Both Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter were in Kilchester last night and came home separately. Mrs. Rendell may have sat at home all the evening listening to her wireless or she may not—no one can say. Miss Henderson often goes to the pictures in Kilchester."

"She didn't last night. She was at home. She told me so."

"You cannot believe all you are told," said Poirot reprovingly. "Families hang together. The foreign maid, Frieda, on the other hand, was at the pictures last night, so she cannot tell us who was or was not at home at Hunter's Close! You see, it is not so easy to narrow things down."

"I can probably vouch for our lot," said Mrs. Oliver. "What time did you say this happened?"

"At nine thirty-five exactly."

"Then at any rate Laburnums has got a clean bill of health. From eight o'clock to half past ten, Robin, his mother, and I were playing poker patience."

“I thought possibly that you and he were closeted together doing the collaboration?”

“Leaving Mamma to leap on a motor bicycle concealed in the shrubbery?” Mrs. Oliver laughed. “No, Mamma was under our eye.” She sighed as sadder thoughts came to her. “Collaboration,” she said bitterly. “The whole thing’s a nightmare! How would you like to see a big black moustache stuck on to Superintendent Battle and be told it was you.”

Poirot blinked a little.

“But it is a nightmare, that suggestion!”

“Now you know what I suffer.”

“I, too, suffer,” said Poirot. “The cooking of Madame Summerhayes, it is beyond description. It is not cooking at all. And the draughts, the cold winds, the upset stomachs of the cats, the long hairs of the dogs, the broken legs of the chairs, the terrible, terrible bed in which I sleep”—he shut his eyes in remembrance of agonies—“the tepid water in the bathroom, the holes in the stair carpet, and the coffee—words cannot describe to you the fluid which they serve to you as coffee. It is an affront to the stomach.”

“Dear me,” said Mrs. Oliver. “And yet, you know, she’s awfully nice.”

“Mrs. Summerhayes? She is charming. She is quite charming. That makes it much more difficult.”

“Here she comes now,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Maureen Summerhayes was approaching them.

There was an ecstatic look on her freckled face. She carried a glass in her hand. She smiled at them both with affection.

“I think I’m a bit tiddly,” she announced. “Such lots of lovely gin. I do like parties! We don’t often have one in Broadhinny. It’s because of you both being so celebrated. I wish I could write books. The trouble with me is, I can’t do anything properly.”

“You are a good wife and mother, madame,” said Poirot primly.

Maureen’s eyes opened. Attractive hazel eyes in a small freckled face. Mrs. Oliver wondered how old she was. Not much more than thirty, she guessed.

“Am I?” said Maureen. “I wonder. I love them all terribly, but is that enough?”

Poirot coughed.

“If you will not think me presumptuous, madame. A wife who truly loves her husband should take great care of his stomach. It is important, the stomach.”

Maureen looked slightly affronted.

“Johnnie’s got a wonderful stomach,” she said indignantly. “Absolutely flat. Practically not a stomach at all.”

“I was referring to what is put inside it.”

“You mean my cooking,” said Maureen. “I never think it matters much what one eats.”

Poirot groaned.

“Or what one wears,” said Maureen dreamily. “Or what one does. I don’t think things matter—not really.”

She was silent for a moment or two, her eyes alcoholically hazy, as though she was looking into the far distance.

“There was a woman writing in the paper the other day,” she said suddenly. “A really stupid letter. Asking what was best to do—to let your child be adopted by someone who could give it every advantage—every advantage, that’s what she said—and she meant a good education, and clothes and comfortable surroundings—or whether to keep it when you couldn’t give it advantages of any kind. I think that’s stupid—really stupid. If you can just give a child enough to eat—that’s all that matters.”

She stared down into her empty glass as though it were a crystal.

“I ought to know,” she said. “I was an adopted child. My mother parted with me and I had every advantage, as they call it. And it’s always hurt—always—always—to know that you weren’t really wanted, that your mother could let you go.”

“It was a sacrifice for your good, perhaps,” said Poirot.

Her clear eyes met his.

“I don’t think that’s ever true. It’s the way they put it to themselves. But what it boils down to is that they can, really, get on without you . . . And it hurts. I wouldn’t give up my children—not for all the advantages in the world!”

“I think you’re quite right,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“And I, too, agree,” said Poirot.

“Then that’s all right,” said Maureen cheerfully. “What are we arguing about?”

Robin, who had come along the terrace to join them, said:

“Yes, what are you arguing about?”

“Adoption,” said Maureen. “I don’t like being adopted, do you?”

“Well, it’s much better than being an orphan, don’t you think so, darling? I think we ought to go now, don’t you, Ariadne?”

The guests left in a body. Dr. Rendell had already had to hurry away. They walked down the hill together talking gaily with that extra hilarity that a series of cocktails induces.

When they reached the gate of Laburnums, Robin insisted that they should all come in.

“Just to tell Madre all about the party. So boring for her, poor sweet, not to have been able to go because her leg was playing her up. But she so hates being left out of things.”

They surged in cheerfully and Mrs. Upward seemed pleased to see them.

“Who else was there?” she asked. “The Wetherbys?”

“No, Mrs. Wetherby didn’t feel well enough, and that dim Henderson girl wouldn’t come without her.”

“She’s really rather pathetic, isn’t she?” said Shelagh Rendell.

“I think almost pathological, don’t you?” said Robin.

“It’s that mother of hers,” said Maureen. “Some mothers really do almost eat their young, don’t they?”

She flushed suddenly as she met Mrs. Upward’s quizzical eye.

“Do I devour you, Robin?” Mrs. Upward asked.

“Madre! Of course not!”

To cover her confusion Maureen hastily plunged into an account of her breeding experiences with Irish wolfhounds. The conversation became technical.

Mrs. Upward said decisively:

“You can’t get away from heredity—in people as well as dogs.”

Shelagh Rendell murmured:

“Don’t you think it’s environment?”

Mrs. Upward cut her short.

"No, my dear, I don't. Environment can give a veneer—no more. It's what's bred in people that counts."

Hercule Poirot's eyes rested curiously on Shelagh Rendell's flushed face. She said with what seemed unnecessary passion:

"But that's cruel—unfair."

Mrs. Upward said: "Life is unfair."

The slow lazy voice of Johnnie Summerhayes joined in.

"I agree with Mrs. Upward. Breeding tells. That's been my creed always."

Mrs. Oliver said questioningly: "You mean things are handed down. Unto the third or fourth generation—"

Maureen Summerhayes said suddenly in her sweet high voice:

"But that quotation goes on: 'And show mercy unto thousands.'"

Once again everybody seemed a little embarrassed, perhaps at the serious note that had crept into the conversation.

They made a diversion by attacking Poirot.

"Tell us all about Mrs. McGinty, M. Poirot. Why didn't the dreary lodger kill her?"

"He used to mutter, you know," said Robin. "Walking about in the lanes. I've often met him. And really, definitely, he looked frightfully queer."

"You must have some reason for thinking he didn't kill her, M. Poirot. Do tell us."

Poirot smiled at them. He twirled his moustache.

"If he didn't kill her, who did?"

"Yes, who did?"

Mrs. Upward said drily: "Don't embarrass the man. He probably suspects one of us."

"One of us? Oo!"

In the clamour Poirot's eyes met those of Mrs. Upward. They were amused and—something else—challenging?

"He suspects one of us," said Robin delightedly. "Now then, Maureen," he assumed the manner of a bullying K.C., "Where were you on the night of the—what night was it?"

"November 22nd," said Poirot.

"On the night of the 22nd?"

"Gracious, I don't know," said Maureen.

"Nobody could know after all this time," said Mrs. Rendell.

"Well, I can," said Robin. "Because I was broadcasting that night. I drove to Coalport to give a talk on Some Aspects of the Theatre. I remember because I discussed Galsworthy's charwoman in the Silver Box at great length and the next day Mrs. McGinty was killed and I wondered if the charwoman in the play had been like her."

"That's right," said Shelagh Rendell suddenly. "And I remember now because you said your mother would be all alone because it was Janet's night off, and I came down here after dinner to keep her company. Only unfortunately I couldn't make her hear."

"Let me think," said Mrs. Upward. "Oh! Yes, of course. I'd gone to bed with a headache and my bedroom faces the back garden."

"And next day," said Shelagh, "when I heard Mrs. McGinty had been killed, I thought, 'Oo! I might have passed the murderer in the dark'—because at first we all thought it must have been some tramp who broke in."

“Well, I still don’t remember what I was doing,” said Maureen. “But I do remember the next morning. It was the baker told us. ‘Old Mrs. McGinty’s been done in,’ he said. And there I was, wondering why she hadn’t turned up as usual.”

She gave a shiver.

“It’s horrible really, isn’t it?” she said.

Mrs. Upward was still watching Poirot.

He thought to himself: “She is a very intelligent woman—and a ruthless one. Also selfish. In whatever she did, she would have no qualms and no remorse. . . .”

A thin voice was speaking—urging, querulous.

“Haven’t you got any clues, M. Poirot?”

It was Shelagh Rendell.

Johnnie Summerhayes’ long dark face lit up enthusiastically.

“That’s it, clues,” he said. “That’s what I like in detective stories. Clues that mean everything to the detective—and nothing to you—until the end when you fairly kick yourself. Can’t you give us one little clue, M. Poirot?”

Laughing, pleading faces turned to him. A game to them all (or perhaps not to one of them?). But murder wasn’t a game—murder was dangerous. You never knew.

With a sudden brusque movement, Poirot pulled out four photographs from his pocket.

“You want a clue?” he said. “Voilà!”

And with a dramatic gesture he tossed them down on the table.

They clustered round, bending over, and uttering ejaculations.

"Look!"

"What frightful frumps!"

"Just look at the roses. 'Rowses, rowses, all the way!' "

"My dear, that hat!"

"What a frightful child!"

"But who are they?"

"Aren't fashions ridiculous?"

"That woman must really have been rather good-looking once."

"But why are they clues?"

"Who are they?"

Poirot looked slowly round at the circle of faces.

He saw nothing other than he might have expected to see.

"You do not recognize any of them?"

"Recognize?"

"You do not, shall I say, remember having seen any of those photographs before? But yes—Mrs. Upward? You recognize something, do you not?"

Mrs. Upward hesitated.

"Yes—I think—"

"Which one?"

Her forefinger went out and rested on the spectacled childlike face of Lily Gamboll.

"You have seen that photograph—when?"

"Quite recently . . . Now where—no, I can't remember. But I'm sure I've seen a photograph just like that."

She sat frowning, her brows drawn together.

She came out of her abstraction as Mrs. Rendell came to her.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Upward. I do hope you'll come to tea with me one day if you feel up to it."

"Thank you, my dear. If Robin pushes me up the hill."

"Of course, Madre. I've developed the most tremendous muscles pushing that chair. Do you remember the day we went to the Wetherbys and it was so muddy—"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Upward suddenly.

"What is it, Madre?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Getting you up the hill again. First the chair skidded and then I skidded. I thought we'd never get home."

Laughing, they took their leave and trooped out.

Alcohol, Poirot thought, certainly loosens the tongue.

Had he been wise or foolish to display those photographs? Had that gesture also been the result of alcohol?

He wasn't sure.

But, murmuring an excuse, he turned back.

He pushed open the gate and walked up to the house. Through the open window on his left he heard the murmur of two voices. They were the voices of Robin and Mrs. Oliver. Very little of Mrs. Oliver and a good deal of Robin.

Poirot pushed the door open and went through the right-hand door into the room he had left a few moments before. Mrs. Upward was sitting before the fire. There was a rather grim look on her face. She had been so deeply in thought that his entry startled her.

At the sound of the apologetic little cough he gave, she looked up sharply, with a start.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s you. You startled me.”

“I am sorry, madame. Did you think it was someone else? Who did you think it was?”

She did not answer that, merely said:

“Did you leave something behind?”

“What I feared I had left was danger.”

“Danger?”

“Danger, perhaps, to you. Because you recognized one of those photographs just now.”

“I wouldn’t say recognized. All old photographs look exactly alike.”

“Listen, madame. Mrs. McGinty also, or so I believe, recognized one of those photographs. And Mrs. McGinty is dead.”

With an unexpected glint of humour in her eye, Mrs. Upward said:

“Mrs. McGinty’s dead. How did she die? Sticking her neck out just like I. Is that what you mean?”

"Yes. If you know anything—anything at all, tell it to me now. It will be safer so."

"My dear man, it's not nearly so simple as that. I'm not at all sure that I do know anything—certainly nothing as definite as a fact. Vague recollections are very tricky things. One would have to have some idea of how and where and when, if you follow what I mean."

"But it seems to me that you already have that idea."

"There is more to it than that. There are various factors to be taken into consideration. Now it's no good your rushing me, M. Poirot. I'm not the kind of person who rushes into decisions. I've a mind of my own, and I take time to make it up. When I come to a decision, I act. But not till I'm ready."

"You are in many ways a secretive woman, madame."

"Perhaps—up to a point. Knowledge is power. Power must only be used for the right ends. You will excuse my saying that you don't perhaps appreciate the pattern of our English country life."

"In other words you say to me, 'You are only a damned foreigner.'"

Mrs. Upward smiled slightly.

"I shouldn't be as rude as that."

"If you do not want to talk to me, there is Superintendent Spence."

"My dear M. Poirot. Not the police. Not at this stage."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have warned you," he said.

For he was sure that by now Mrs. Upward remembered quite well exactly when and where she had seen the photograph of Lily Gamboll.

Fourteen

I

“Decidedly,” said Hercule Poirot to himself the following morning, “the spring is here.”

His apprehensions of the night before seemed singularly groundless.

Mrs. Upward was a sensible woman who could take good care of herself.

Nevertheless in some curious way, she intrigued him. He did not at all understand her reactions. Clearly she did not want him to. She had recognized the photograph of Lily Gamboll and she was determined to play a lone hand.

Poirot, pacing a garden path while he pursued these reflections, was startled by a voice behind him.

“M. Poirot.”

Mrs. Rendell had come up so quietly that he had not heard her. Since yesterday he had felt extremely nervous.

“Pardon, madame. You made me jump.”

Mrs. Rendell smiled mechanically. If he were nervous, Mrs. Rendell, he thought, was even more so. There was a twitching in one of her eyelids and her hands worked restlessly together.

“I—I hope I’m not interrupting you. Perhaps you’re busy.”

“But no, I am not busy. The day is fine. I enjoy the feeling of spring. It is good to be outdoors. In the house of Mrs. Summerhayes there is always, but always, the current of air.”

“The current—”

“What in England you call a draught.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose there is.”

“The windows, they will not shut and the doors they fly open all the time.”

“It’s rather a ramshackle house. And of course, the Summerhayes are so badly off they can’t afford to do much to it. I’d let it go if I were them. I know it’s been in their family for hundreds of years, but nowadays you just can’t cling on to things for sentiment’s sake.”

“No, we are not sentimental nowadays.”

There was a silence. Out of the corner of his eye, Poirot watched those nervous white hands. He waited for her to take the initiative. When she did speak it was abruptly.

“I suppose,” she said, “that when you are, well, investigating a thing, you’d always have to have a pretext?”

Poirot considered the question. Though he did not look at her, he was perfectly aware of her eager sideways glance fixed on him.

“As you say, madame,” he replied non-committally. “It is a convenience.”

“To explain your being there, and—and asking things.”

“It might be expedient.”

“Why—why are you really here in Broadhinny, M. Poirot?”

He turned a mild surprised gaze on her.

“But, my dear lady, I told you—to inquire into the death of Mrs. McGinty.”

Mrs. Rendell said sharply:

“I know that’s what you say. But it’s ridiculous.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

“Is it?”

“Of course it is. Nobody believes it.”

“And yet I assure you, it is a simple fact.”

Her pale blue eyes blinked and she looked away.

“You won’t tell me.”

“Tell you—what, madame?”

She changed the subject abruptly again, it seemed.

“I wanted to ask you—about anonymous letters.”

“Yes,” said Poirot encouragingly as she stopped.

“They’re really always lies, aren’t they?”

“They are sometimes lies,” said Poirot cautiously.

“Usually,” she persisted.

“I don’t know that I would go as far as saying that.”

Shelagh Rendell said vehemently:

“They’re cowardly, treacherous, mean things!”

“All that, yes, I would agree.”

“And you wouldn’t ever believe what was said in one, would you?”

“That is a very difficult question,” said Poirot gravely.

“I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t believe anything of that kind.”

She added vehemently:

“I know why you’re down here. And it isn’t true, I tell you, it isn’t true.”

She turned sharply and walked away.

Hercule Poirot raised his eyebrows in an interested fashion.

“And now what?” he demanded of himself. “Am I being taken up the garden walk? Or is this the bird of a different colour?”

It was all, he felt, very confusing.

Mrs. Rendell professed to believe that he was down here for a reason other than that of inquiring into Mrs. McGinty’s death. She had suggested that that was only a pretext.

Did she really believe that? Or was she, as he had just said to himself, leading him up the garden walk?

What had anonymous letters got to do with it?

Was Mrs. Rendell the original of the photograph that Mrs. Upward had said she had “seen recently?”

In other words, was Mrs. Rendell Lily Gamboll? Lily Gamboll, a rehabilitated member of society, had been last heard of in Eire. Had Dr. Rendell met and married his wife there, in ignorance of her history? Lily Gamboll had been trained as a stenographer. Her path and the doctor’s might easily have crossed.

Poirot shook his head and sighed.

It was all perfectly possible. But he had to be sure.

A chilly wind sprang up suddenly and the sun went in.

Poirot shivered and retraced his steps to the house.

Yes, he had to be sure. If he could find the actual weapon of the murder—

And at that moment, with a strange feeling of certainty—he saw it.

II

Afterwards he wondered whether, subconsciously, he had seen and noted it much earlier. It had stood there, presumably, ever since he had come to Long Meadows. . . .

There on the littered top of the bookcase near the window.

He thought: “Why did I never notice that before?”

He picked it up, weighed it in his hands, examined it, balanced it, raised it to strike—

Maureen came in through the door with her usual rush, two dogs accompanying her. Her voice, light and friendly, said:

“Hallo, are you playing with the sugar cutter?”

“Is that what it is? A sugar cutter?”

“Yes. A sugar cutter—or a sugar hammer—I don’t know what exactly is the right term. It’s rather fun, isn’t it? So childish with the little bird on top.”

Poirot turned the implement carefully in his hands. Made of much ornamented brass, it was shaped like an adze, heavy, with a sharp cutting edge. It was studded here and there with coloured stones, pale blue and red. On top of it was a frivolous little bird with turquoise eyes.

“Lovely thing for killing anyone, wouldn’t it be?” said Maureen conversationally.

She took it from him and aimed a murderous blow at a point in space.

“Frightfully easy,” she said. “What’s that bit in the Idylls of the King? ‘ “Mark’s way,” he said, and clove him to the brain.’ I should think you could cleave anyone to the brain with this all right, don’t you?”

Poirot looked at her. Her freckled face was serene and cheerful.

She said:

“I’ve told Johnnie what’s coming to him if I get fed up with him. I call it the wife’s best friend!”

She laughed, put the sugar hammer down and turned towards the door.

“What did I come in here for?” she mused. “I can’t remember . . . Bother! I’d better go and see if that pudding needs more water in the saucepan.”

Poirot’s voice stopped her before she got to the door.

“You brought this back with you from India, perhaps?”

“Oh no,” said Maureen. “I got it at the B. and B. at Christmas.”

“B. and B.?” Poirot was puzzled.

“Bring and Buy,” explained Maureen glibly. “At the Vicarage. You bring things you don’t want, and you buy something. Something not too frightful if you can find it. Of course there’s practically never anything you really want. I got this and that coffee pot. I like the coffee pot’s nose and I liked the little bird on the hammer.”

The coffee pot was a small one of beaten copper. It had a big curving spout that struck a familiar note to Poirot.

“I think they come from Baghdad,” said Maureen. “At least I think that’s what the Wetherbys said. Or it may have been Persia.”

“It was from the Wetherbys” house, then, that these came?”

“Yes. They’ve got a most frightful lot of junk. I must go. That pudding.”

She went out. The door banged. Poirot picked up the sugar cutter again and took it to the window.

On the cutting edge were faint, very faint, discolorations.

Poirot nodded his head.

He hesitated for a moment, then he carried the sugar hammer out of the room and up to his bedroom. There he packed it carefully in a box, did the whole thing up neatly in paper and string, and going downstairs again, left the house.

He did not think that anyone would notice the disappearance of the sugar cutter. It was not a tidy household.

III

At Laburnums, collaboration was pursuing its difficult course.

“But I really don’t feel it’s right making him a vegetarian, darling,” Robin was objecting. “Too faddy. And definitely not glamorous.”

“I can’t help it,” said Mrs. Oliver obstinately. “He’s always been a vegetarian. He takes round a little machine for grating raw carrots and turnips.”

“But, Ariadne, precious, why?”

“How do I know?” said Mrs. Oliver crossly. “How do I know why I ever thought of the revolting man? I must have been mad! Why a Finn when I know nothing about Finland? Why a vegetarian? Why all the idiotic manerisms he’s got? These things just happen. You try something—and people seem to like it—and then you go on—and before you know where you are, you’ve got someone like that maddening Sven Hjerson tied to you for life. And people even write and say how fond you must be of him. Fond of him? If I met that bony, gangling, vegetable-eating Finn in real life, I’d do a better murder than any I’ve ever invented.”

Robin Upward gazed at her with reverence.

“You know, Ariadne, that might be rather a marvellous idea. A real Sven Hjerson—and you murder him. You might make a Swan Song book of it—to be published after your death.”

“No fear!” said Mrs. Oliver. “What about the money? Any money to be made out of murders I want now.”

“Yes. Yes. There I couldn’t agree with you more.”

The harassed playwright strode up and down.

“This Ingrid creature is getting rather tiresome,” he said. “And after the cellar scene which is really going to be marvellous, I don’t quite see how we’re going to prevent the next scene from being rather an anticlimax.”

Mrs. Oliver was silent. Scenes, she felt, were Robin Upward’s headache.

Robin shot a dissatisfied glance at her.

That morning, in one of her frequent changes of mood, Mrs. Oliver had disliked her windswept coiffure. With a brush dipped in water she had plastered her grey locks close to her skull. With her high forehead, her massive glasses, and her stern air, she was reminding Robin more and more of a schoolteacher who had awed his early youth. He found it more and more difficult to address her as darling, and even flinched at “Ariadne.”

He said fretfully:

“You know, I don’t feel a bit in the mood today. All that gin yesterday, perhaps. Let’s scrap work and go into the question of casting. If we can get Denis Callory, of course it will be too marvellous, but he’s tied up in films at the moment. And Jean Bellews for Ingrid would be just right—and she wants to play it which is so nice. Eric—as I say, I’ve had a brainwave for Eric. We’ll go over to the Little Rep tonight, shall we? And you’ll tell me what you think of Cecil for the part.”

Mrs. Oliver agreed hopefully to this project and Robin went off to telephone.

“There,” he said returning. “That’s all fixed.”

IV

The fine morning had not lived up to its promise. Clouds had gathered and the day was oppressive with a threat of rain. As Poirot walked through the dense shrubberies to the front door of Hunter’s Close, he decided that he would not like to live in this hollow valley at the foot of the hill. The house itself was closed in by trees and its walls suffocated in ivy. It needed, he thought, the woodman’s axe.

(The axe? The sugar cutter?)

He rang the bell and after getting no response, rang it again.

It was Deirdre Henderson who opened the door to him. She seemed surprised.

“Oh,” she said, “it’s you.”

“May I come in and speak to you?”

“I—well, yes, I suppose so.”

She led him into the small dark sitting room where he had waited before. On the mantelpiece he recognized the big brother of the small coffee pot on Maureen’s shelf. Its vast hooked nose seemed to dominate the small Western room with a hint of Eastern ferocity.

“I’m afraid,” said Deirdre in an apologetic tone, “that we’re rather upset today. Our help, the German girl—she’s going. She’s only been here a month. Actually it seems she just took this post to get over to this country because there was someone she wanted to marry. And now they’ve fixed it up, and she’s going straight off tonight.”

Poirot clicked his tongue.

“Most inconsiderate.”

"It is, isn't it? My stepfather says it isn't legal. But even if it isn't legal, if she just goes off and gets married, I don't see what one can do about it. We shouldn't even have known she was going if I hadn't found her packing her clothes. She would just have walked out of the house without a word."

"It is, alas, not an age of consideration."

"No," said Deirdre dully. "I suppose it's not."

She rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand.

"I'm tired," she said. "I'm very tired."

"Yes," said Poirot gently. "I think you may be very tired."

"What was it you wanted, M. Poirot?"

"I wanted to ask you about a sugar hammer."

"A sugar hammer?"

Her face was blank, uncomprehending.

"An instrument of brass, with a bird on it, and inlaid with blue and red and green stones." Poirot enunciated the description carefully.

"Oh yes, I know."

Her voice showed no interest or animation.

"I understand it came from this house?"

"Yes. My mother bought it in the bazaar at Baghdad. It's one of the things we took to the Vicarage sale."

"The Bring and Buy sale, that is right?"

"Yes. We have a lot of them here. It's difficult to get people to give money, but there's usually something you can rake up and send."

“So it was here, in this house, until Christmas, and then you sent it to the Bring and Buy sale? Is that right?”

Deirdre frowned.

“Not the Christmas Bring and Buy. It was the one before. The Harvest Festival one.”

“The Harvest Festival—that would be—when? October? September?”

“The end of September.”

It was very quiet in the little room. Poirot looked at the girl and she looked back at him. Her face was mild, expressionless, uninterested. Behind the blank wall of her apathy, he tried to guess what was going on. Nothing, perhaps. Perhaps she was, as she had said, just tired. . . .

He said, quietly, urgently:

“You are quite sure it was the Harvest Festival Sale? Not the Christmas one?”

“Quite sure.”

Her eyes were steady, unblinking.

Hercule Poirot waited. He continued to wait. . . .

But what he was waiting for did not come.

He said formally:

“I must not keep you any longer, mademoiselle.”

She went with him to the front door.

Presently he was walking down the drive again.

Two divergent statements—statements that could not possibly be reconciled.

Who was right? Maureen Summerhayes or Deirdre Henderson?

If the sugar cutter had been used as he believed it had been used, the point was vital. The Harvest Festival had been the end of September. Between then and Christmas, on November 22nd, Mrs. McGinty had been killed. Whose property had the sugar cutter been at the time?

He went to the post office. Mrs. Sweetiman was always helpful and she did her best. She'd been to both sales, she said. She always went. You picked up many a nice bit there. She helped, too, to arrange things beforehand. Though most people brought things with them and didn't send them beforehand.

A brass hammer, rather like an axe, with coloured stones and a little bird? No, she couldn't rightly remember. There was such a lot of things, and so much confusion and some things snatched up at once. Well, perhaps she did remember something like that—priced at five shillings it had been, and with a copper coffee pot, but the pot had got a hole in the bottom—you couldn't use it, only for ornament. But she couldn't remember when it was—some time ago. Might have been Christmas, might have been before. She hadn't been noticing. . . .

She accepted Poirot's parcel. Registered? Yes.

She copied down the address; he noticed just a sharp flicker of interest in her keen black eyes as she handed him the receipt.

Hercule Poirot walked slowly up the hill, wondering to himself.

Of the two, Maureen Summerhayes, scatterbrained, cheerful, inaccurate, was the more likely to be wrong. Harvest or Christmas, it would be all one to her.

Deirdre Henderson, slow, awkward, was far more likely to be accurate in her identification of times and dates.

Yet there remained that irking question.

Why, after his questions, hadn’t she asked him why he wanted to know? Surely a natural, an almost inevitable, question?

But Deirdre Henderson hadn’t asked it.

Fifteen

I

“Someone rang you up,” called Maureen from the kitchen as Poirot entered the house.

“Rang me up? Who was that?”

He was slightly surprised.

“Don’t know, but I jotted the number down on my ration book.”

“Thank you, Madame.”

He went into the dining room and over to the desk. Amongst the litter of papers he found the ration book lying near the telephone and the words—Kilchester 350.

Raising the receiver of the telephone, he dialled the number.

Immediately a woman’s voice said:

“Breather and Scuttle.”

Poirot made a quick guess.

“Can I speak to Miss Maude Williams?”

There was a moment’s interval and then a contralto voice said:

“Miss Williams speaking.”

“This is Hercule Poirot. I think you rang me.”

"Yes—yes, I did. It's about the property you were asking me about the other day."

"The property?" For a moment Poirot was puzzled. Then he realized that Maude's conversation was being overheard. Probably she had telephoned him before when she was alone in the office.

"I understand you, I think. It is the affair of James Bentley and Mrs. McGinty's murder."

"That's right. Can we do anything in the matter for you?"

"You want to help. You are not private where you are?"

"That's right."

"I understand. Listen carefully. You really want to help James Bentley?"

"Yes."

"Would you resign your present post?"

There was no hesitation.

"Yes."

"Would you be willing to take a domestic post? Possibly with not very congenial people?"

"Yes."

"Could you get away at once? By tomorrow, for instance?"

"Oh yes, M. Poirot. I think that could be managed."

"You understand what I want you to do. You would be a domestic help—to live in. You can cook?"

A faint amusement tinged the voice.

“Very well.”

“Bon Dieu, what a rarity! Now listen, I am coming into Kilchester at once. I will meet you in the same café where I met you before, at lunch time.”

“Yes, certainly.”

Poirot rang off.

“An admirable young woman,” he reflected. “Quick-witted, knows her own mind—perhaps, even, she can cook. . . .”

With some difficulty he disinterred the local telephone directory from under a treatise on pigkeeping and looked up the Wetherbys’ number.

The voice that answered him was that of Mrs. Wetherby.

“ ’Allo? ’Allo? It is M. Poirot—you remember, Madame—”

“I don’t think I—”

“M. Hercule Poirot.”

“Oh yes—of course—do forgive me. Rather a domestic upset today—”

“It is for that reason exactly I rang you up. I am desolated to learn of your difficulties.”

“So ungrateful—these foreign girls. Her fare paid over here, and everything. I do so hate ingratitude.”

“Yes, yes. I do indeed sympathize. It is monstrous—that is why I hasten to tell you that I have, perhaps, a solution. By the merest chance I know of a young woman wanting a domestic post. Not, I fear, fully trained.”

“Oh, there’s no such thing as training nowadays. Will she cook—so many of them won’t cook.”

“Yes—yes—she cooks. Shall I then send her to you—at least on trial? Her name is Maude Williams.”

“Oh, please do, M. Poirot. It’s most kind of you. Anything would be better than nothing. My husband is so particular and gets so annoyed with dear Deirdre when the household doesn’t go smoothly. One can’t expect men to understand how difficult everything is nowadays—I—”

There was an interruption. Mrs. Wetherby spoke to someone entering the room, and though she had placed her hand over the receiver Poirot could hear her slightly muffled words.

“It’s that little detective man—knows of someone to come in to replace Frieda. No, not foreign—English, thank goodness. Very kind of him, really, he seems quite concerned about me. Oh, darling, don’t make objections. What does it matter? You know the absurd way Roger goes on. Well, I think it’s very kind—and I don’t suppose she’s too awful.”

The asides over, Mrs. Wetherby spoke with the utmost graciousness.

“Thank you very much, M. Poirot. We are most grateful.”

Poirot replaced the receiver and glanced at his watch.

He went to the kitchen.

“Madame, I shall not be in to lunch. I have to go to Kilchester.”

“Thank goodness,” said Maureen. “I didn’t get to that pudding in time. It had boiled dry. I think it’s really all right—just a little scorched perhaps. In case it tasted rather nasty I thought I would open a bottle of those raspberries I put up last summer. They seem to have a bit of mould on top but they say nowadays that that doesn’t matter. It’s really rather good for you—practically penicillin.”

Poirot left the house, glad that scorched pudding and near-penicillin were not to be his portion today. Better—far better—eat macaroni and custard and plums at the Blue Cat than the improvisations of Maureen Summerhayes.

II

At Laburnums a little friction had arisen.

“Of course, Robin, you never seem to remember anything when you are working on a play.”

Robin was contrite.

“Madre, I am most terribly sorry. I’d forgotten all about it’s being Janet’s night out.”

“It doesn’t matter at all,” said Mrs. Upward coldly.

“Of course it matters. I’ll ring up the Rep and tell them we’ll go tomorrow night instead.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ve arranged to go tonight and you’ll go.”

“But really—”

“That’s settled.”

“Shall I ask Janet to go out another night?”

“Certainly not. She hates to have her plans disarranged.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t really mind. Not if I put it to her—”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, Robin. Please don’t go upsetting Janet. And don’t go on about it. I don’t care to feel I’m a tiresome old woman spoiling other people’s pleasure.”

“Madre—sweetest—”

“That’s enough—you go and enjoy yourselves. I know who I’ll ask to keep me company.”

“Who?”

“That’s my secret,” said Mrs. Upward, her good humour restored. “Now stop fussing, Robin.”

“I’ll ring up Shelagh Rendell—”

“I’ll do my own ringing up, thank you. It’s all settled. Make the coffee before you go, and leave it by me in the percolator ready to switch on. Oh, and you might as well put out an extra cup—in case I have a visitor.”

Sixteen

Sitting at lunch in the Blue Cat, Poirot finished outlining his instructions to Maude Williams.

“So you understand what it is you have to look for?”

Maude Williams nodded.

“You have arranged matters with your office?”

She laughed.

“My auntie’s dangerously ill! I sent myself a telegram.”

“Good. I have one more thing to say. Somewhere, in that village, we have a murderer at large. That is not a very safe thing to have.”

“Warning me?”

“Yes.”

“I can take care of myself,” said Maude Williams.

“That,” said Hercule Poirot, “might be classed under the heading of Famous Last Words.”

She laughed again, a frank amused laugh. One or two heads at near tables turned around to look at her.

Poirot found himself appraising her carefully. A strong, confident young woman, full of vitality, keyed up and eager to attempt a dangerous task. Why? He thought again of James Bentley, his gentle defeated voice, his lifeless apathy. Nature was indeed curious and interesting.

Maude said:

“You’re asking me to do it, aren’t you? Why suddenly try to put me off?”

“Because if one offers a mission, one must be exact about what it involves.”

“I don’t think I’m in any danger,” said Maude confidently.

“I do not think so at the moment. You are unknown in Broadhinny?”

Maude considered.

“Ye-es. Yes, I should say so.”

“You have been there?”

“Once or twice—for the firm, of course—only once recently—that was about five months ago.”

“Who did you see? Where did you go?”

“I went to see an old lady—Mrs. Carstairs—or Carlisle—I can’t remember her name for sure. She was buying a small property near here, and I went over to see her with some papers and some queries and a surveyor’s report which we’d got for her. She was staying at that Guest House sort of place where you are.”

“Long Meadows?”

“That was it. Uncomfortable-looking house with a lot of dogs.”

Poirot nodded.

“Did you see Mrs. Summerhayes, or Major Summerhayes?”

“I saw Mrs. Summerhayes, I suppose it was. She took me up to the bedroom. The old pussy was in bed.”

“Would Mrs. Summerhayes remember you?”

“Don’t suppose so. Even if she did, it wouldn’t matter, would it? After all, one changes one’s job quite often these days. But I don’t suppose she even looked at me. Her sort don’t.”

There was a faint bitterness in Maude Williams’ voice.

“Did you see anyone else in Broadhinny?”

Maude said rather awkwardly:

“Well, I saw Mr. Bentley.”

“Ah, you saw Mr. Bentley. By accident.”

Maude wriggled a little in her chair.

“No, as a matter of fact, I’d sent him a p.c. Telling him I was coming that day. Asked him if he’d meet me as a matter of fact. Not that there was anywhere to go. Dead little hole. No café or cinema or anything. ’S a matter of fact we just talked in the bus stop. While I was waiting for my bus back.”

“That was before the death of Mrs. McGinty?”

“Oh yes. But not much before, though. Because it was only a few days later that it was in all the newspapers.”

“Did Mr. Bentley speak to you at all of his landlady?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And you spoke to no one else in Broadhinny?”

“Well—only Mr. Robin Upward. I’ve heard him talk on the wireless. I saw him coming out of his cottage and I recognized him from his pictures and I did ask him for his autograph.”

“And he gave it to you?”

"Oh yes, he was ever so nice about it. I hadn't my book with me, but I'd got an odd sheet of notepaper, and he whipped out his fountain pen and wrote it at once."

"Do you know any of the other people in Broadhinny by sight?"

"Well, I know the Carpenters, of course. They're in Kilchester a lot. Lovely car they've got, and she wears lovely clothes. She opened a Bazaar about a month ago. They say he's going to be our next M.P."

Poirot nodded. Then he took from his pocket the envelope that he always carried about with him. He spread the four photographs on the table.

"Do you recognize any of—what's the matter?"

"It was Mr. Scuttle. Just going out of the door. I hope he didn't see you with me. It might seem a bit odd. People are talking about you, you know. Saying you've been sent over from Paris—from the Sooretay or some name like that."

"I am Belgian, not French, but no matter."

"What's this about these photographs?" She bent over, studying them closely. "Rather on the old-fashioned side, aren't they?"

"The oldest is thirty years ago."

"Awfully silly, old-fashioned clothes look. Makes the women look such fools."

"Have you seen any of them before?"

"D'you mean do I recognize any of the women, or do you mean have I seen the pictures?"

"Either."

"I've an idea I've seen that one." Her finger rested against Janice Courtland in her cloche hat. "In some paper or other, but I can't remember when. That kid looks a bit familiar, too. But I can’t remember when I saw them; some time ago.”

“All those photographs appeared in the Sunday Comet on the Sunday before Mrs. McGinty died.”

Maude looked at him sharply.

“And they’ve got something to do with it? That’s why you want me to—”

She did not finish the sentence.

“Yes,” said Hercule Poirot. “That is why.”

He took something else from his pocket and showed it to her. It was the cutting from the Sunday Comet.

“You had better read that,” he said.

She read it carefully. Her bright golden head bent over the flimsy bit of newsprint.

Then she looked up.

“So that’s who they are? And reading this has given you ideas?”

“You could not express it more justly.”

“But all the same I don’t see—” She was silent a moment, thinking. Poirot did not speak. However pleased he might be with his own ideas, he was always ready to hear other people’s ideas too.

“You think one or other of these people is in Broadhinny?”

“It might be, might it not?”

“Of course. Anyone may be anywhere . . .” She went on, placing her finger on Eva Kane’s pretty simpering face: “She’d be quite old now—about Mrs. Upward’s age.”

“About that.”

“What I was thinking was—the sort of woman she was—there must be several people who’d have it in for her.”

“That is a point of view,” said Poirot slowly. “Yes, it is a point of view.” He added: “You remember the Craig case?”

“Who doesn’t?” said Maude Williams. “Why, he’s in Madame Tussaud’s! I was only a kid at the time, but the newspapers are always bringing him up and comparing the case with other cases. I don’t suppose it will ever be forgotten, do you?”

Poirot raised his head sharply.

He wondered what brought that sudden note of bitterness into her voice.

Seventeen

Feeling completely bewildered, Mrs. Oliver was endeavouring to cower in the corner of a very minute theatrical dressing room. Not being the figure to cower, she only succeeded in bulging. Bright young men, removing grease paint with towels, surrounded her and at intervals pressed warm beer upon her.

Mrs. Upward, her good humour completely restored, had speeded their departure with good wishes, Robin had been assiduous in making all arrangements for her comfort before departure, running back a couple of times after they were in the car to see that all was as it should be.

On the last occasion he came back grinning.

“Madre was just ringing off on the telephone, and the wicked old thing still won’t tell me who she was ringing up. But I bet I know.”

“I know, too,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Well, who do you say?”

“Hercule Poirot.”

“Yes, that’s my guess, too. She’s going to pump him, Madre does like having her little secrets, doesn’t she? Now darling, about the play tonight. It’s very important that you tell me honestly just what you think of Cecil—and whether he’s your idea of Eric. . . .”

Needless to say, Cecil Leech had not been at all Mrs. Oliver’s idea of Eric. Nobody, indeed, could have been more unlike. The play itself she had enjoyed, but the ordeal of “going round afterwards” was fraught with its usual terrors.

Robin, of course, was in his element. He had Cecil (at least Mrs. Oliver supposed it was Cecil) pinned against the wall and was talking nineteen to the dozen. Mrs. Oliver had been terrified of Cecil and much preferred somebody called Michael who was talking to her kindly at the moment. Michael, at least, did not expect her to reciprocate, in fact Michael seemed to prefer a monologue. Somebody called Peter made occasional incursions on the conversation, but on the whole it resolved itself into a stream of faintly amusing malice by Michael.

"—too sweet of Robin," he was saying. "We've been urging him to come and see the show. But of course he's completely under that terrible woman's thumb, isn't he? Dancing attendance. And really Robin is brilliant, don't you think so? Quite quite brilliant. He shouldn't be sacrificed on a Matriarchal altar. Women can be awful, can't they? You know what she did to poor Alex Roscoff? All over him for nearly a year and then discovered that he wasn't a Russian émigré at all. Of course he had been telling her some very tall stories, but quite amusing, and we all knew it wasn't true, but after all why should one care?—and then when she found out he was just a little East End tailor's son, she dropped him, my dear. I mean, I do hate a snob, don't you? Really Alex was thankful to get away from her. He said she could be quite frightening sometimes—a little queer in the head, he thought. Her rages! Robin dear, we're talking about your wonderful Madre. Such a shame she couldn't come tonight. But it's marvellous to have Mrs. Oliver. All those delicious murders."

An elderly man with a deep bass voice grasped Mrs. Oliver's hand and held it in a hot, sticky grasp.

"How can I ever thank you?" he said in tones of deep melancholy. "You've saved my life—saved my life many a time."

Then they all came out into the fresh night air and went across to the Pony's Head, where there were more drinks and more stage conversation.

By the time Mrs. Oliver and Robin were driving homeward, Mrs. Oliver was quite exhausted. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Robin, on the other hand, talked without stopping.

"—and you do think that might be an idea, don't you?" he finally ended.

“What?”

Mrs. Oliver jerked open her eyes.

She had been lost in a nostalgic dream of home. Walls covered with exotic birds and foliage. A deal table, her typewriter, black coffee, apples everywhere . . . What bliss, what glorious and solitary bliss! What a mistake for an author to emerge from her secret fastness. Authors were shy, unsociable creatures, atoning for their lack of social aptitude by inventing their own companions and conversations.

“I’m afraid you’re tired,” said Robin.

“Not really. The truth is I’m not very good with people.”

“I adore people, don’t you?” said Robin happily.

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver firmly.

“But you must. Look at all the people in your books.”

“That’s different. I think trees are much nicer than people, more restful.”

“I need people,” said Robin, stating an obvious fact. “They stimulate me.”

He drew up at the gate of Laburnums.

“You go in,” he said. “I’ll put the car away.”

Mrs. Oliver extracted herself with the usual difficulty and walked up the path.

“The door’s not locked,” Robin called.

It wasn’t. Mrs. Oliver pushed it open and entered. There were no lights on, and that struck her as rather ungracious on the hostess’s part. Or was it perhaps economy? Rich people were so often economical. There was a smell of scent in the hall, something rather exotic and expensive. For a moment Mrs. Oliver wondered if she were in the right house, then she found the light switch and pressed it down.

The light sprang up in the low oak-beamed square hall. The door into the sitting room was ajar and she caught sight of a foot and leg. Mrs. Upward, after all, had not gone to bed. She must have fallen asleep in her chair, and since no lights were on, she must have been asleep a long time.

Mrs. Oliver went to the door and switched on the lights in the sitting room.

“We’re back—” she began and then stopped.

Her hand went up to her throat. She felt a tight knot there, a desire to scream that she could not put into operation.

Her voice came out in a whisper:

“Robin—Robin. . . .”

It was some time before she heard him coming up the path, whistling, and then she turned quickly and ran to meet him in the hall.

“Don’t go in there—don’t go in. Your mother—she—she’s dead—I think—she’s been killed. . . .”

Eighteen

I

“Quite a neat bit of work,” said Superintendent Spence.

His red countryman’s face was angry. He looked across to where Hercule Poirot sat gravely listening.

“Neat and ugly,” he said. “She was strangled,” he went on. “Silk scarf—one of her own silk scarves, one she’d been wearing that day—just passed around the neck and the ends crossed—and pulled. Neat, quick, efficient. The thugs did it that way in India. The victim doesn’t struggle or cry out—pressure on the carotid artery.”

“Special knowledge?”

“Could be—need not. If you were thinking of doing it, you could read up the subject. There’s no practical difficulty. “Specially with the victim quite unsuspicious—and she was unsuspicious.”

Poirot nodded.

“Someone she knew.”

“Yes. They had coffee together—a cup opposite her and one opposite the—guest. Prints had been wiped off the guest’s cup very carefully but lipstick is more difficult—there were still faint traces of lipstick.”

“A woman, then?”

“You expected a woman, didn’t you?”

“Oh yes. Yes, that was indicated.”

Spence went on:

"Mrs. Upward recognized one of those photographs—the photograph of Lily Gamboll. So it ties up with the McGinty murder."

"Yes," said Poirot. "It ties up with the McGinty murder."

He remembered Mrs. Upward's slightly amused expression as she had said:

"Mrs. McGinty's dead. How did she die?

Sticking her neck out, just like I."

Spence was going on:

"She took an opportunity that seemed good to her—her son and Mrs. Oliver were going off to the theatre. She rang up the person concerned and asked that person to come and see her. Is that how you figure it out? She was playing detective."

"Something like that. Curiosity. She kept her knowledge to herself, but she wanted to find out more. She didn't in the least realize what she was doing might be dangerous." Poirot sighed. "So many people think of murder as a game. It is not a game. I told her so. But she would not listen."

"No, we know that. Well, that fits in fairly well. When young Robin started off with Mrs. Oliver and ran back into the house his mother had just finished telephoning to someone. She wouldn't say who to. Played it mysterious. Robin and Mrs. Oliver thought it might be you."

"I wish it had been," said Hercule Poirot. "You have no idea to whom it was that she telephoned?"

"None whatever. It's all automatic round here, you know."

"The maid couldn't help you in any way?"

"No. She came in about half past ten—she has a key to the back door. She went straight into her own room which leads off the kitchen and went to bed. The house was dark and she assumed that Mrs. Upward had gone to bed and that the others had not yet returned."

Spence added:

“She’s deaf and pretty crotchety as well. Takes very little notice of what goes on—and I imagine does as little work as she can with as much grumbling as possible.”

“Not really an old faithful?”

“Oh no! She’s only been with the Upwards a couple of years.”

A constable put his head round the door.

“There’s a young lady to see you, sir,” he said. “Says there’s something perhaps you ought to know. About last night.”

“About last night? Send her in.”

Deirdre Henderson came in. She looked pale and strained and, as usual, rather awkward.

“I thought perhaps I’d better come,” she said. “If I’m not interrupting you or anything,” she added apologetically.

“Not at all, Miss Henderson.”

Spence rose and pushed forward a chair. She sat down on it squarely in an ungainly schoolgirlish sort of way.

“Something about last night?” said Spence encouragingly. “About Mrs. Upward, you mean?”

“Yes, it’s true, isn’t it, that she was murdered? I mean the post said so and the baker. Mother said of course it couldn’t be true—” She stopped.

“I’m afraid your mother isn’t quite right there. It’s true enough. Now, you wanted to make a—to tell us something?”

Deirdre nodded.

"Yes," she said. "You see, I was there."

A difference crept into Spence's manner. It was, perhaps, even more gentle, but an official hardness underlay it.

"You were there," he said. "At Laburnums. At what time?"

"I don't know exactly," said Deirdre. "Between half past eight and nine, I suppose. Probably nearly nine. After dinner, anyway. You see, she telephoned to me."

"Mrs. Upward telephoned to you?"

"Yes. She said Robin and Mrs. Oliver were going to the theatre in Cullenquay and that she would be all alone and would I come along and have coffee with her."

"And you went?"

"Yes."

"And you—had coffee with her?"

Deirdre shook her head.

"No, I got there—and I knocked. But there wasn't any answer. So I opened the door and went into the hall. It was quite dark and I'd seen from outside that there was no light in the sitting room. So I was puzzled. I called 'Mrs. Upward' once or twice but there was no answer. So I thought there must be some mistake."

"What mistake did you think there could have been?"

"I thought perhaps she'd gone to the theatre with them after all."

"Without letting you know?"

"That did seem queer."

“You couldn’t think of any other explanation?”

“Well, I thought perhaps Frieda might have bungled the original message. She does get things wrong sometimes. She’s a foreigner. She was excited herself last night because she was leaving.”

“What did you do, Miss Henderson?”

“I just went away.”

“Back home?”

“Yes—that is, I went for a walk first. It was quite fine.”

Spence was silent for a moment or two, looking at her. He was looking, Poirot noticed, at her mouth.

Presently he roused himself and said briskly:

“Well, thank you, Miss Henderson. You were quite right to come and tell us this. We’re much obliged to you.”

He got up and shook hands with her.

“I thought I ought to,” said Deirdre. “Mother didn’t want me to.”

“Didn’t she now?”

“But I thought I’d better.”

“Quite right.”

He showed her out and came back.

He sat down, drummed on the table and looked at Poirot.

“No lipstick,” he said. “Or is that only this morning?”

“No, it is not only this morning. She never uses it.”

"That's odd, nowadays, isn't it?"

"She is rather an odd kind of girl—undeveloped."

"And no scent, either, as far as I could smell. That Mrs. Oliver says there was a distinct smell of scent—expensive scent, she says—in the house last night. Robin Upward confirms that. It wasn't any scent his mother uses."

"This girl would not use scent, I think," said Poirot.

"I shouldn't think so either," said Spence. "Looks rather like the hockey captain from an old-fashioned girls' school—but she must be every bit of thirty, I should say."

"Quite that."

"Arrested development, would you say?"

Poirot considered. Then he said it was not quite so simple as that.

"It doesn't fit," said Spence frowning. "No lipstick, no scent. And since she's got a perfectly good mother, and Lily Gamboll's mother was done in in a drunken brawl in Cardiff when Lily Gamboll was nine years old, I don't see how she can be Lily Gamboll. But—Mrs. Upward telephoned her to come there last night—you can't get away from that." He rubbed his nose. "It isn't straightforward going."

"What about the medical evidence?"

"Not much help there. All the police surgeon will say definitely is that she was probably dead by half past nine."

"So she may have been dead when Deirdre Henderson came to Laburnums?"

"Probably was if the girl is speaking the truth. Either she is speaking the truth—or else she's a deep one. Mother didn't want her to come to us, she said. Anything there?"

Poirot considered.

“Not particularly. It is what mother would say. She is the type, you comprehend, that avoids unpleasantness.”

Spence sighed.

“So we’ve got Deirdre Henderson—on the spot. Or else someone who came there before Deirdre Henderson. A woman. A woman who used lipstick and expensive scent.”

Poirot murmured: “You will inquire—”

Spence broke in.

“I’m inquiring! Just tactfully for the moment. We don’t want to alarm anyone. What was Eve Carpenter doing last night? What was Shelagh Rendell doing last night? Ten to one they were just sitting at home. Carpenter, I know, had a political meeting.”

“Eve,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “The fashions in names change, do they not? Hardly ever, nowadays, do you hear of an Eva. It has gone out. But Eve, it is popular.”

“She can afford expensive scent,” said Spence, pursuing his own train of thought.

He sighed.

“We’ve got to get at more of her background. It’s so convenient to be a war widow. You can turn up anywhere looking pathetic and mourning some brave young airman. Nobody likes to ask you questions.

He turned to another subject.

“That sugar hammer or what-not you sent along—I think you’ve hit the bull’s-eye. It’s the weapon used in the McGinty murder. Doctor agrees it’s exactly suitable for the type of blow. And there has been blood on it. It was washed, of course—but they don’t realize nowadays that a microscopic amount of blood will give a reaction with the latest reagents. Yes, it’s human blood all right. And that again ties up with the Wetherbys and the Henderson girl. Or doesn’t it?”

“Deirdre Henderson was quite definite that the sugar hammer went to the Harvest Festival Bring and Buy.”

“And Mrs. Summerhayes was equally positive it was the Christmas one?”

“Mrs. Summerhayes is never positive about anything,” said Poirot gloomily. “She is a charming person, but she has no order or method in her composition. But I will tell you this—I who have lived at Long Meadows—the doors and the windows they are always open. Anyone—anyone at all, could come and take something away and later come and put it back and neither Major Summerhayes nor Mrs. Summerhayes would notice. If it is not there one day, she thinks that her husband has taken it to joint a rabbit or to chop wood—and he, he would think she had taken it to chop dogmeat. In that house nobody uses the right implements—they just seize what is at hand and leave it in the wrong place. And nobody remembers anything. If I were to live like that I should be in a continual state of anxiety—but they—they do not seem to mind.”

Spence sighed.

“Well—there’s one good thing about all this—they won’t execute James Bentley until this business is all cleared up. We’ve forwarded a letter to the Home Secretary’s office. It gives us what we’ve been wanting—time.”

“I think,” said Poirot, “that I would like to see Bentley again—now that we know a little more.”

II

There was little change in James Bentley. He was, perhaps, rather thinner, his hands were more restless—otherwise he was the same quiet, hopeless creature.

Hercule Poirot spoke carefully. There had been some fresh evidence. The police were reopening the case. There was, therefore, hope. . . .

But James Bentley was not attracted by hope.

He said:

“It will be all no good. What more can they find out?”

“Your friends,” said Hercule Poirot, “are working very hard.”

“My friends?” He shrugged his shoulders. “I have no friends.”

“You should not say that. You have, at the very least, two friends.”

“Two friends? I should like to know who they are.”

His tone expressed no wish for the information, merely a weary disbelief.

“First, there is Superintendent Spence—”

“Spence? Spence? The police superintendent who worked up the case against me? That’s almost funny.”

“It is not funny. It is fortunate. Spence is a very shrewd and conscientious police officer. He likes to be very sure that he has got the right man.”

“He’s sure enough of that.”

“Oddly enough, he is not. That is why, as I said, he is your friend.”

“That kind of a friend!”

Hercule Poirot waited. Even James Bentley, he thought, must have some human attributes. Even James Bentley could not be completely devoid of ordinary human curiosity.

And true enough, presently James Bentley said:

"Well, who's the other?"

"The other is Maude Williams."

Bentley did not appear to react.

"Maude Williams? Who is she?"

"She worked in the office of Breather & Scuttle."

"Oh—that Miss Williams."

"Précisément, that Miss Williams."

"But what's it got to do with her?"

There were moments when Hercule Poirot found the personality of James Bentley so irritating that he heartily wished that he could believe Bentley guilty of Mrs. McGinty's murder. Unfortunately the more Bentley annoyed him, the more he came round to Spence's way of thinking. He found it more and more difficult to envisage Bentley's murdering anybody. James Bentley's attitude to murder would have been, Poirot felt sure, that it wouldn't be much good anyway. If cockiness, as Spence insisted, was a characteristic of murderers, Bentley was certainly no murderer.

Containing himself, Poirot said:

"Miss Williams interests herself in this affair. She is convinced you are innocent."

"I don't see what she can know about it."

"She knows you."

James Bentley blinked. He said, grudgingly:

"I suppose she does, in a way, but not well."

“You worked together in the office, did you not? You had, sometimes, meals together?”

“Well—yes—once or twice. The Blue Cat Café, it’s very convenient—just across the street.”

“Did you never go for walks with her?”

“As a matter of fact we did, once. We walked up on the downs.”

Hercule Poirot exploded.

“Ma foi, is it a crime that I seek to drag from you? To keep the company with a pretty girl, is it not natural? Is it not enjoyable? Can you not be pleased with yourself about it?”

“I don’t see why,” said James Bentley.

“At your age it is natural and right to enjoy the company of girls.”

“I don’t know many girls.”

“Ça se voit! But you should be ashamed of that, not smug! You knew Miss Williams. You had worked with her and talked with her and sometimes had meals with her, and once went for a walk on the downs. And when I mention her, you do not even remember her name!”

James Bentley flushed.

“Well, you see—I’ve never had much to do with girls. And she isn’t quite what you’d call a lady, is she? Oh very nice—and all that—but I can’t help feeling that Mother would have thought her common.”

“It is what you think that matters.”

Again James Bentley flushed.

“Her hair,” he said. “And the kind of clothes she wears—Mother, of course, was old-fashioned—”

He broke off.

“But you found Miss Williams—what shall I say— sympathetic?”

“She was always very kind,” said James Bentley slowly. “But she didn’t—really—understand. Her mother died when she was only a child, you see.”

“And then you lost your job,” said Poirot. “You couldn’t get another. Miss Williams met you once at Broadhinny, I understand?”

James Bentley looked distressed.

“Yes—yes. She was coming over there on business and she sent me a postcard. Asked me to meet her. I can’t think why. It isn’t as if I knew her at all well.”

“But you did meet her?”

“Yes. I didn’t want to be rude.”

“And you took her to the pictures or a meal?”

James Bentley looked scandalized.

“Oh no. Nothing of that kind. We—er—just talked whilst she was waiting for her bus.”

“Ah, how amusing that must have been for the poor girl!”

James Bentley said sharply:

“I hadn’t got any money. You must remember that. I hadn’t any money at all.”

“Of course. It was a few days before Mrs. McGinty was killed, wasn’t it?”

James Bentley nodded. He said unexpectedly:

“Yes, it was on the Monday. She was killed on Wednesday.”

“I’m going to ask you something else, Mr. Bentley. Mrs. McGinty took the Sunday Comet?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Did you ever see her Sunday Comet?”

“She used to offer it sometimes, but I didn’t often accept. Mother didn’t care for that kind of paper.”

“So you didn’t see that week’s Sunday Comet?”

“No.”

“And Mrs. McGinty didn’t speak about it, or about anything in it?”

“Oh yes, she did,” said James Bentley unexpectedly. “She was full of it!”

“Ah la la. So she was full of it. And what did she say? Be careful. This is important.”

“I don’t remember very well now. It was all about some old murder case. Craig, I think it was—no, perhaps it wasn’t Craig. Anyway, she said somebody connected with the case was living in Broadhinny now. Full of it, she was. I couldn’t see why it mattered to her.”

“Did she say who it was—in Broadhinny?”

James Bentley said vaguely:

“I think it was that woman whose son writes plays.”

“She mentioned her by name?”

“No—I—really it’s so long ago—”

“I implore you—try to think. You want to be free again, do you not?”

“Free?” Bentley sounded surprised.

“Yes, free.”

“I—yes—I suppose I do—”

“Then think! What did Mrs. McGinty say?”

“Well—something like—‘so pleased with herself as she is and so proud. Not so much to be proud of if all’s known.’ And then, ‘You’d never think it was the same woman to look at the photograph.’ But of course it had been taken years ago.”

“But what made you sure that it was Mrs. Upward of whom she was speaking?”

“I really don’t know . . . I just formed the impression. She had been speaking of Mrs. Upward—and then I lost interest and didn’t listen, and afterwards—well, now I come to think of it, I don’t really know who she was speaking about. She talked a lot you know.”

Poirot sighed.

He said: “I do not think myself that it was Mrs. Upward of whom she spoke. I think it was somebody else. It is preposterous to reflect that if you are hanged it will be because you do not pay proper attention to the people with whom you converse . . . Did Mrs. McGinty speak much to you of the houses where she worked, or the ladies of those houses?”

“Yes, in a way—but it’s no good asking me. You don’t seem to realize, M. Poirot, that I had my own life to think of at the time. I was in very serious anxiety.”

“Not in so much serious anxiety as you are now! Did Mrs. McGinty speak of Mrs. Carpenter—Mrs. Selkirk she was then—or of Mrs. Rendell?”

“Carpenter has that new house at the top of the hill and a big car, hasn’t he? He was engaged to Mrs. Selkirk—Mrs. McGinty was always very down on Mrs. Selkirk. I don’t know why. ‘Jumped up,’ that’s what she used to call her. I don’t know what she meant by it.”

“And the Rendells?”

“He’s the doctor, isn’t he? I don’t remember her saying anything particular about them.”

“And the Wetherbys?”

“I do remember what she said about them. ‘No patience with her fusses and her fancies,’ that’s what she said. And about him, ‘Never a word, good or bad, out of him.’” He paused. “She said—it was an unhappy house.”

Hercule Poirot looked up. For a second James Bentley’s voice had held something that Poirot had not heard in it before. He was not repeating obediently what he could recall. His mind, for a very brief space, had moved out of its apathy. James Bentley was thinking of Hunter’s Close, of the life that went on there, of whether or not it was an unhappy house. James Bentley was thinking objectively.

Poirot said softly:

“You knew them? The mother? The father? The daughter?”

“Not really. It was the dog. A Sealyham. It got caught in a trap. She couldn’t get it undone. I helped her.”

There was again something new in Bentley’s tone. “I helped her,” he had said, and in those words was a faint echo of pride.

Poirot remembered what Mrs. Oliver had told him of her conversation with Deirdre Henderson.

He said gently:

“You talked together?”

“Yes. She—her mother suffered a lot, she told me. She was very fond of her mother.”

“And you told her about yours?”

“Yes,” said James Bentley simply.

Poirot said nothing. He waited.

“Life is very cruel,” said James Bentley. “Very unfair. Some people never seem to get any happiness.”

“It is possible,” said Hercule Poirot.

“I don’t think she had had much. Miss Wetherby.”

“Henderson.”

“Oh yes. She told me she had a stepfather.”

“Deirdre Henderson,” said Poirot. “Deirdre of the Sorrows. A pretty name—but not a pretty girl, I understand?”

James Bentley flushed.

“I thought,” he said, “she was rather good-looking. . . .”

Nineteen

“Now just you listen to me,” said Mrs. Sweetiman.

Edna sniffed. She had been listening to Mrs. Sweetiman for some time. It had been a hopeless conversation, going round in circles. Mrs. Sweetiman had said the same thing several times, varying the phraseology a little, but even that not much. Edna had sniffed and occasionally blubbered and had reiterated her own two contributions to the discussion: first, that she couldn’t ever! Second, that Dad would skin her alive, he would.

“That’s as may be,” said Mrs. Sweetiman, “but murder’s murder, and what you saw you saw, and you can’t get away from it.”

Edna sniffed.

“And what you did ought to do—”

Mrs. Sweetiman broke off and attended to Mrs. Wetherby, who had come in for some knitting pins and another ounce of wool.

“Haven’t seen you about for some time, ma’am,” said Mrs. Sweetiman brightly.

“No, I’ve been very far from well lately,” said Mrs. Wetherby. “My heart, you know.” She sighed deeply. “I have to lie up a great deal.”

“I heard as you’ve got some help at last,” said Mrs. Sweetiman. “You’ll want dark needles for this light wool.”

“Yes. Quite capable as far as she goes, and cooks not at all badly. But her manners! And her appearance! Dyed hair and the most unsuitable tight jumpers.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Sweetiman. “Girls aren’t trained proper to service nowadays. My mother, she started at thirteen and she got up at a quarter to five every morning. Head housemaid she was when she finished, and three maids under her. And she trained them proper, too. But there's none of that nowadays—girls aren't trained nowadays, they're just educated, like Edna."

Both women looked at Edna, who leant against the post office counter, sniffing and sucking a peppermint, and looking particularly vacant. As an example of education, she hardly did the educational system credit.

"Terrible about Mrs. Upward, wasn't it?" continued Mrs. Sweetiman conversationally, as Mrs. Wetherby sorted through various coloured needles.

"Dreadful," said Mrs. Wetherby. "They hardly dared tell me. And when they did, I had the most frightful palpitations. I'm so sensitive."

"Shock to all of us, it was," said Mrs. Sweetiman. "As for young Mr. Upward, he took on something terrible. Had her hands full with him, the authoress lady did, until the doctor came and gave him a seddytiff or something. He's gone up to Long Meadows now as a paying guest, felt he couldn't stay in the cottage—and I don't know as I blame him. Janet Groom, she's gone home to her niece and the police have got the key. The lady what writes the murder books has gone back to London, but she'll come down for the inquest."

Mrs. Sweetiman imparted all this information with relish. She prided herself on being well-informed. Mrs. Wetherby, whose desire for knitting needles had perhaps been prompted by a desire to know what was going on, paid for her purchase.

"It's most upsetting," she said. "It makes the whole village so dangerous. There must be a maniac about. When I think that my own dear daughter was out that night, that she herself might have been attacked, perhaps killed." Mrs. Wetherby closed both eyes and swayed on her feet. Mrs. Sweetiman watched her with interest, but without alarm. Mrs. Wetherby opened her eyes again, and said with dignity:

"This place should be patrolled. No young people should go about after dark. And all doors should be locked and bolted. You know that up at Long

Meadows, Mrs. Summerhayes never locks any of her doors. Not even at night. She leaves the back door and the drawing room window open so that the dogs and cats can get in and out. I myself consider that is absolute madness, but she says they've always done it and that if burglars want to get in, they always can."

"Reckon there wouldn't be much for a burglar to take up at Long Meadows," said Mrs. Sweetiman.

Mrs. Wetherby shook her head sadly and departed with her purchase.

Mrs. Sweetiman and Edna resumed their argument.

"It's no good your setting yourself up to know best," said Mrs. Sweetiman. "Right's right and murder's murder. Tell the truth and shame the devil. That's what I say."

"Dad would skin me alive, he would, for sure," said Edna.

"I'd talk to your Dad," said Mrs. Sweetiman.

"I couldn't ever," said Edna.

"Mrs. Upward's dead," said Mrs. Sweetiman. "And you saw something the police don't know about. You're employed in the post office, aren't you? You're a Government servant. You've got to do your duty. You've got to go along to Bert Hayling—"

Edna's sobs burst out anew.

"Not to Bert, I couldn't. However could I go to Bert? It'd be all over the place."

Mrs. Sweetiman said rather hesitantly:

"There's that foreign gentleman—"

"Not a foreigner, I couldn't. Not a foreigner."

“No, maybe you’re right there.”

A car drew up outside the post office with a squealing of brakes.

Mrs. Sweetiman’s face lit up.

“That’s Major Summerhayes, that is. You tell it all to him and he’ll advise you what to do.”

“I couldn’t ever,” said Edna, but with less conviction.

Johnnie Summerhayes came into the post office, staggering under the burden of three cardboard boxes.

“Good morning, Mrs. Sweetiman,” he said cheerfully. “Hope these aren’t overweight?”

Mrs. Sweetiman attended to the parcels in her official capacity. As Summerhayes was licking the stamps, she spoke.

“Excuse me, sir, I’d like your advice about something.”

“Yes, Mrs. Sweetiman?”

“Seeing as you belong here, sir, and will know best what to do.”

Summerhayes nodded. He was always curiously touched by the lingering feudal spirit of English villages. The villagers knew little of him personally, but because his father and his grandfather and many great-great-grandfathers had lived at Long Meadows, they regarded it as natural that he should advise and direct them when asked so to do.

“It’s about Edna here,” said Mrs. Sweetiman.

Edna sniffed.

Johnnie Summerhayes looked at Edna doubtfully. Never, he thought, had he seen a more unprepossessing girl. Exactly like a skinned rabbit. Seemed half-witted too. Surely she couldn’t be in what was known officially as "trouble." But no, Mrs. Sweetiman would not have come to him for advice in that case.

"Well," he said kindly, "what's the difficulty?"

"It's about the murder, sir. The night of the murder. Edna saw something."

Johnnie Summerhayes transferred his quick dark gaze from Edna to Mrs. Sweetiman and back again to Edna.

"What did you see, Edna?" he said.

Edna began to sob. Mrs. Sweetiman took over.

"Of course we've been hearing this and that. Some's rumour and some's true. But it's said definite as that there were a lady there that night who drank coffee with Mrs. Upward. That's so, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"I know as that's true, because we had it from Bert Hayling."

Albert Hayling was the local constable whom Summerhayes knew well. A slow-speaking man with a sense of his own importance.

"I see," said Summerhayes.

"But they don't know, do they, who the lady is? Well, Edna here saw her."

Johnnie Summerhayes looked at Edna. He pursed his lips as though to whistle.

"You saw her, did you, Edna? Going in—or coming out?"

"Going in," said Edna. A faint sense of importance loosened her tongue. "Across the road I was, under the trees. Just by the turn of the lane where it's dark. I saw her. She went in at the gate and up to the door and she stood there a bit, and then—and then she went in."

Johnnie Summerhayes' brow cleared.

"That's all right," he said. "It was Miss Henderson. The police know all about that. She went and told them."

Edna shook her head.

"It wasn't Miss Henderson," she said.

"It wasn't—then who was it?"

"I dunno. I didn't see her face. Had her back to me, she had, going up the path and standing there. But it wasn't Miss Henderson."

"But how do you know it wasn't Miss Henderson if you didn't see her face?"

"Because she had fair hair. Miss Henderson's is dark."

Johnnie Summerhayes looked disbelieving.

"It was a very dark night. You'd hardly be able to see the colour of anyone's hair."

"But I did, though. That light was on over the porch. Left like that, it was, because Mr. Robin and the detective lady had gone out together to the theatre. And she was standing right under it. A dark coat she had on, and no hat, and her hair was shining fair as could be. I saw it."

Johnnie gave a slow whistle. His eyes were serious now.

"What time was it?" he asked.

Edna sniffed.

"I don't rightly know."

"You know about what time," said Mrs. Sweetiman.

"It wasn't nine o'clock. I'd have heard the church. And it was after half past eight."

"Between half past eight and nine. How long did she stop?"

"I dunno, sir. Because I didn't wait no longer. And I didn't hear nothing. No groans or cries or nothing like that."

Edna sounded slightly aggrieved.

But there would have been no groans and no cries. Johnnie Summerhayes knew that. He said gravely:

"Well, there's only one thing to be done. The police have got to hear about this."

Edna burst into long sniffling sobs.

"Dad'll skin me alive," she whimpered. "He will, for sure."

She cast an imploring look at Mrs. Sweetiman and bolted into the back room. Mrs. Sweetiman took over with competence.

"It's like this, sir," she said in answer to Summerhayes' inquiring glance. "Edna's been behaving very foolish like. Very strict her Dad is, maybe a bit over strict, but it's hard to say what's best nowadays. There's a nice young fellow over to Cullavon and he and Edna have been going together nice and steady, and her Dad was quite pleased about it, but Reg he's on the slow side, and you know what girls are. Edna's taken up lately with Charlie Masters."

"Masters? One of Farmer Cole's men, isn't he?"

"That's right, sir. Farm labourer. And a married man with two children. Always after the girls, he is, and a bad fellow in every way. Edna hasn't got any sense, and her Dad, he put a stop to it. Quite right. So, you see, Edna was going into Cullavon that night to go to the pictures with Reg—at least that's what she told her Dad. But really she went out to meet this Masters. Waited for him, she did, at the turn of the lane where it seems they used to meet. Well, he didn't come. Maybe his wife kept him at home, or maybe he's after another girl, but there it is. Edna waited but at last she gave up. But it's awkward for her, as you can see, explaining what she was doing there, when she ought to have taken the bus into Cullavon."

Johnnie Summerhayes nodded. Suppressing an irrelevant feeling of wonder that the unprepossessing Edna could have sufficient sex appeal to attract the attention of two men, he dealt with the practical aspect of the situation.

"She doesn't want to go to Bert Hayling about it," he said with quick comprehension.

"That's right, sir."

Summerhayes reflected rapidly.

"I'm afraid the police have got to know," he said gently.

"That's what I told her, sir," said Mrs. Sweetiman.

"But they will probably be quite tactful about—er—the circumstances. Possibly she mayn't have to give evidence. And what she tells them, they'll keep to themselves. I could ring up Spence and ask him to come over here—no, better still, I'll take young Edna into Kilchester with me in my car. If she goes to the police station there, nobody here need know anything about it. I'll just ring them up first and warn them we're coming."

And so, after a brief telephone call, the sniffing Edna, buttoned firmly into her coat and encouraged by a pat on the back from Mrs. Sweetiman, stepped into the station wagon and was driven rapidly away in the direction of Kilchester.

Twenty

Hercule Poirot was in Superintendent Spence’s office in Kilchester. He was leaning back in a chair, his eyes closed and the tips of his fingers just touching each other in front of him.

The superintendent received some reports, gave instructions to a sergeant, and finally looked across at the other man.

“Getting a brainwave, M. Poirot?” he demanded.

“I reflect,” said Poirot. “I review.”

“I forgot to ask you. Did you get anything useful from James Bentley when you saw him?”

Poirot shook his head. He frowned.

It was indeed of James Bentley he had been thinking.

It was annoying, thought Poirot with exasperation, that on a case such as this where he had offered his services without reward, solely out of friendship and respect for an upright police officer, that the victim of circumstances should so lack any romantic appeal. A lovely young girl, now, bewildered and innocent, or a fine upstanding young man, also bewildered, but whose “head is bloody but unbowed,” thought Poirot, who had been reading a good deal of English poetry in an anthology lately. Instead, he had James Bentley, a pathological case if there ever was one, a self-centred creature who had never thought much of anyone but himself. A man ungrateful for the efforts that were being made to save him—almost, one might say, uninterested in them.

Really, thought Poirot, one might as well let him be hanged since he does not seem to care. . . .

No, he would not go quite as far as that.

Superintendent Spence's voice broke into these reflections.

"Our interview," said Poirot, "was, if I might say so, singularly unproductive. Anything useful that Bentley might have remembered he did not remember—what he did remember is so vague and uncertain that one cannot build upon it. But at any rate it seems fairly certain that Mrs. McGinty was excited by the article in the Sunday Comet and spoke about it to Bentley with special reference to 'someone connected with the case,' living in Broadhinny."

"With which case?" asked Superintendent Spence sharply.

"Our friend could not be sure," said Poirot. "He said, rather doubtfully, the Craig case—but the Craig case being the only one he had ever heard of, it would, presumably, be the only one he could remember. But the 'someone' was a woman. He even quoted Mrs. McGinty's words. Someone who had 'not so much to be proud of if all's known.' "

"Proud?"

"Mais oui," Poirot nodded his appreciation. "A suggestive word, is it not?"

"No clue as to who the proud lady was?"

"Bentley suggested Mrs. Upward—but as far as I can see for no real reason!"

Spence shook his head.

"Probably because she was a proud masterful sort of woman—outstandingly so, I should say. But it couldn't have been Mrs. Upward, because Mrs. Upward's dead, and dead for the same reason as Mrs. McGinty died—because she recognized a photograph."

Poirot said sadly: "I warned her."

Spence murmured irritably:

"Lily Gamboll! So far as age goes, there are only two possibilities, Mrs. Rendell and Mrs. Carpenter. I don't count the Henderson girl—she's got a background."

"And the others have not?"

Spence sighed.

"You know what things are nowadays. The war stirred up everyone and everything. The approved school where Lily Gamboll was, and all its records, were destroyed by a direct hit. Then take people. It's the hardest thing in the world to check on people. Take Broadhinny—the only people in Broadhinny we know anything about are the Summerhayes family, who have been there for three hundred years, and Guy Carpenter, who's one of the engineering Carpenters. All the others are—what shall I say—fluid? Dr. Rendell's on the Medical Register and we know where he trained and where he's practised, but we don't know his home background. His wife came from near Dublin. Eve Selkirk, as she was before she married Guy Carpenter, was a pretty young war widow. Anyone can be a pretty young war widow. Take the Wetherbys—they seem to have floated round the world, here, there and everywhere. Why? Is there a reason? Did he embezzle from a bank? Or did they occasion a scandal? I don't say we can't dig up about people. We can—but it takes time. The people themselves won't help you."

"Because they have something to conceal—but it need not be murder," said Poirot.

"Exactly. It may be trouble with the law, or it may be a humble origin, or it may be common or garden scandal. But whatever it is, they've taken a lot of pains to cover up—and that makes it difficult to uncover."

"But not impossible."

"Oh no. Not impossible. It just takes time. As I say, if Lily Gamboll is in Broadhinny, she's either Eve Carpenter or Shelagh Rendell. I've questioned them—just routine—that's the way I put it. They say they were both at home—alone. Mrs. Carpenter was the wide-eyed innocent, Mrs. Rendell was nervous—but then she's a nervous type, you can't go by that."

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "She is a nervous type."

He was thinking of Mrs. Rendell in the garden at Long Meadows. Mrs. Rendell had received an anonymous letter, or so she said. He wondered, as he had wondered before, about that statement.

Spence went on:

"And we have to be careful—because even if one of them is guilty, the other is innocent."

"And Guy Carpenter is a prospective Member of Parliament and an important local figure."

"That wouldn't help him if he was guilty of murder or accessory to it," said Spence grimly.

"I know that. But you have, have you not, to be sure?"

"That's right. Anyway, you'll agree, won't you, that it lies between the two of them?"

Poirot sighed.

"No—no—I would not say that. There are other possibilities."

"Such as?"

Poirot was silent for a moment, then he said in a different, almost casual tone of voice:

"Why do people keep photographs?"

"Why? Goodness knows! Why do people keep all sorts of things—junk—trash, bits and pieces. They do—that's all there is to it!"

“Up to a point I agree with you. Some people keep things. Some people throw everything away as soon as they have done with it. That, yes, it is a matter of temperament. But I speak now especially of photographs. Why do people keep, in particular, photographs?”

“As I say, because they just don’t throw things away. Or else because it reminds them—”

Poirot pounced on the words.

“Exactly. It reminds them. Now again we ask—why? Why does a woman keep a photograph of herself when young? And I say that the first reason is, essentially, vanity. She has been a pretty girl and she keeps a photograph of herself to remind her of what a pretty girl she was. It encourages her when her mirror tells her unpalatable things. She says, perhaps, to a friend, ‘That was me when I was eighteen . . .’ and she sighs . . . You agree?”

“Yes—yes, I should say that’s true enough.”

“Then that is reason No. 1. Vanity. Now reason No. 2. Sentiment.”

“That’s the same thing?”

“No, no, not quite. Because this leads you to preserve not only your own photograph but that of someone else . . . A picture of your married daughter—when she was a child sitting on a hearthrug with tulle round her.”

“I’ve seen some of those,” Spence grinned.

“Yes. Very embarrassing to the subject sometimes, but mothers like to do it. And sons and daughters often keep pictures of their mothers, especially, say, if their mother died young. ‘That was my mother as a girl.’ ”

“I’m beginning to see what you’re driving at, Poirot.”

“And there is possibly, a third category. Not vanity, not sentiment, not love—perhaps hate—what do you say?”

“Hate?”

"Yes. To keep a desire for revenge alive. Someone who has injured you—you might keep a photograph to remind you, might you not?"

"But surely that doesn't apply in this case?"

"Does it not?"

"What are you thinking of?"

Poirot murmured:

"Newspaper reports are often inaccurate. The Sunday Comet stated that Eva Kane was employed by the Craigs as a nursery governess. Was that actually the case?"

"Yes, it was. But we're working on the assumption that it's Lily Gamboll we're looking for."

Poirot sat up suddenly very straight in his chair. He wagged an imperative forefinger at Spence.

"Look. Look at the photograph of Lily Gamboll. She is not pretty—no! Frankly, with those teeth and those spectacles she is hideously ugly. Then nobody has kept that photograph for the first of our reasons. No woman would keep that photo out of vanity. If Eve Carpenter or Shelagh Rendell, who are both good-looking women, especially Eve Carpenter, had this photograph of themselves, they would tear it in pieces quickly in case somebody should see it!"

"Well, there is something in that."

"So reason No. 1 is out. Now take sentiment. Did anybody love Lily Gamboll at that age? The whole point of Lily Gamboll is that they did not. She was an unwanted and unloved child. The person who liked her best was her aunt, and her aunt died under the chopper. So it was not sentiment that kept this picture. And revenge? Nobody hated her either. Her murdered aunt was a lonely woman without a husband and with no close friends. Nobody had hate for the little slum child—only pity."

“Look here, M. Poirot, what you’re saying is that nobody would have kept that photo.”

“Exactly—that is the result of my reflections.”

“But somebody did. Because Mrs. Upward had seen it.”

“Had she?”

“Dash it all. It was you who told me. She said so herself.”

“Yes, she said so,” said Poirot. “But the late Mrs. Upward was, in some ways, a secretive woman. She liked to manage things her own way. I showed the photographs, and she recognized one of them. But then, for some reason, she wanted to keep the identification to herself. She wanted, let us say, to deal with a certain situation in the way she fancied. And so, being very quick-witted, she deliberately pointed to the wrong picture. Thereby keeping her knowledge to herself.”

“But why?”

“Because, as I say, she wanted to play a lone hand.”

“It wouldn’t be blackmail? She was an extremely wealthy woman, you know, widow of a North Country manufacturer.”

“Oh no, not blackmail. More likely beneficence. We’ll say that she quite liked the person in question, and that she didn’t want to give their secret away. But nevertheless she was curious. She intended to have a private talk with that person. And whilst doing so, to make up her mind whether or not that person had had anything to do with the death of Mrs. McGinty. Something like that.”

“Then that leaves the other three photos in?”

“Precisely. Mrs. Upward meant to get in touch with the person in question at the first opportunity. That came when her son and Mrs. Oliver went over to the Repertory Theatre at Cullenquay.”

“And she telephoned to Deirdre Henderson. That puts Deirdre Henderson right back in the picture. And her mother!”

Superintendent Spence shook his head sadly at Poirot.

“You do like to make it difficult, don’t you, M. Poirot?” he said.

Twenty-one

Mrs. Wetherby walked back home from the post office with a gait surprisingly spry in one habitually reported to be an invalid.

Only when she had entered the front door did she once more shuffle feebly into the drawing room and collapse on the sofa.

The bell was within reach of her hand and she rang it.

Since nothing happened she rang it again, this time keeping her finger on it for some time.

In due course Maude Williams appeared. She was wearing a flowered overall and had a duster in her hand.

“Did you ring, madam?”

“I rang twice. When I ring I expect someone to come at once. I might be dangerously ill.”

“I’m sorry, madam. I was upstairs.”

“I know you were. You were in my room. I heard you overhead. And you were pulling the drawers in and out. I can’t think why. It’s no part of your job to go prying into my things.”

“I wasn’t prying. I was putting some of the things you left lying about away tidily.”

“Nonsense. All you people snoop. And I won’t have it. I’m feeling very faint. Is Miss Deirdre in?”

“She took the dog for a walk.”

“How stupid. She might know I would need her. Bring me an egg beaten up in milk and a little brandy. The brandy is on the sideboard in the dining room.”

“There are only just the three eggs for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Then someone will have to go without. Hurry, will you? Don’t stand there looking at me. And you’re wearing far too much makeup. It isn’t suitable.”

There was a bark in the hall and Deirdre and her Sealyham came in as Maude went out.

“I heard your voice,” said Deirdre breathlessly. “What have you been saying to her?”

“Nothing.”

“She looked like thunder.”

“I put her in her place. Impertinent girl.”

“Oh, Mummy darling, must you? It’s so difficult to get anyone. And she does cook well.”

“I suppose it’s of no importance that she’s insolent to me! Oh well, I shan’t be with you much longer.” Mrs. Wetherby rolled up her eyes and took some fluttering breaths. “I walked too far,” she murmured.

“You oughtn’t to have gone out, darling. Why didn’t you tell me you were going?”

“I thought some air would do me good. It’s so stuffy. It doesn’t matter. One doesn’t really want to live—not if one’s only a trouble to people.”

“You’re not a trouble, darling. I’d die without you.”

“You’re a good girl—but I can see how I weary you and get on your nerves.”

“You don’t—you don’t,” said Deirdre passionately.

Mrs. Wetherby sighed and let her eyelids fall.

“I—can’t talk much,” she murmured. “I must just lie still.”

“I’ll hurry up Maude with the eggnog.”

Deirdre ran out of the room. In her hurry she caught her elbow on a table and a bronze god bumped to the ground.

“So clumsy,” murmured Mrs. Wetherby to herself, wincing.

The door opened and Mr. Wetherby came in. He stood there for a moment. Mrs. Wetherby opened her eyes.

“Oh, it’s you, Roger?”

“I wondered what all the noise was in here. It’s impossible to read quietly in this house.”

“It was just Deirdre, dear. She came in with the dog.”

Mr. Wetherby stooped and picked up the bronze monstrosity from the floor.

“Surely Deirdre’s old enough not to knock things down the whole time.”

“She’s just rather awkward.”

“Well, it’s absurd to be awkward at her age. And can’t she keep that dog from barking?”

“I’ll speak to her, Roger.”

“If she makes her home here, she must consider our wishes and not behave as though the house belonged to her.”

“Perhaps you’d rather she went away,” murmured Mrs. Wetherby. Through half-closed eyes she watched her husband.

“No, of course not. Of course not. Naturally her home is with us. I only ask for a little more good sense and good manners.” He added: “You’ve been out, Edith?”

“Yes. I just went down to the post office.”

“No fresh news about poor Mrs. Upward?”

“The police still don’t know who it was.”

“They seem to be quite hopeless. Any motive? Who gets her money?”

“The son, I suppose.”

“Yes—yes, then it really seems as though it must have been one of these tramps. You should tell this girl she’s got to be careful about keeping the front door locked. And only to open it on the chain when it gets near dusk. These men are very daring and brutal nowadays.”

“Nothing seems to have been taken from Mrs. Upward’s.”

“Odd.”

“Not like Mrs. McGinty,” said Mrs. Wetherby.

“Mrs. McGinty? Oh! the charwoman. What’s Mrs. McGinty got to do with Mrs. Upward?”

“She did work for her, Roger.”

“Don’t be silly, Edith.”

Mrs. Wetherby closed her eyes again. As Mr. Wetherby went out of the room she smiled to herself.

She opened her eyes with a start to find Maude standing over her, holding a glass.

“Your egg nog, madam,” said Maude.

Her voice was loud and clear. It echoed too resonantly in the deadened house.

Mrs. Wetherby looked up with a vague feeling of alarm.

How tall and unbending the girl was. She stood over Mrs. Wetherby like—“like a figure of doom,” Mrs. Wetherby thought to herself—and then wondered why such extraordinary words had come into her head.

She raised herself on her elbow and took the glass.

“Thank you, Maude,” she said.

Maude turned and went out of the room.

Mrs. Wetherby still felt vaguely upset.

Twenty-two

I

Hercule Poirot took a hired car back to Broadhinny.

He was tired because he had been thinking. Thinking was always exhausting. And his thinking had not been entirely satisfactory. It was as though a pattern, perfectly visible, was woven into a piece of material and yet, although he was holding the piece of material, he could not see what the pattern was.

But it was all there. That was the point. It was all there. Only it was one of those patterns, self-coloured and subtle, that are not easy to perceive.

A little way out of Kilchester his car encountered the Summerhayes' station wagon coming in the opposite direction. Johnnie was driving and he had a passenger. Poirot hardly noticed them. He was still absorbed in thought.

When he got back to Long Meadows, he went into the drawing room. He removed a colander full of spinach from the most comfortable chair in the room and sat down. From overhead came the faint drumming of a typewriter. It was Robin Upward, struggling with a play. Three versions he had already torn up, so he told Poirot. Somehow, he couldn't concentrate.

Robin might feel his mother's death quite sincerely, but he remained Robin Upward, chiefly interested in himself.

"Madre," he said solemnly, "would have wished me to go on with my work."

Hercule Poirot had heard many people say much the same thing. It was one of the most convenient assumptions, this knowledge of what the dead would wish. The bereaved had never any doubt about their dear ones' wishes and those wishes usually squared with their own inclinations.

In this case it was probably true. Mrs. Upward had had great faith in Robin's work and had been extremely proud of him.

Poirot leaned back and closed his eyes.

He thought of Mrs. Upward. He considered what Mrs. Upward had really been like. He remembered a phrase that he had once heard used by a police officer.

"We'll take him apart and see what makes him tick."

What had made Mrs. Upward tick?

There was a crash, and Maureen Summerhayes came in. Her hair was flapping madly.

"I can't think what's happened to Johnnie," she said. "He just went down to the post office with those special orders. He ought to have been back hours ago. I want him to fix the henhouse door."

A true gentleman, Poirot feared, would have gallantly offered to fix the henhouse door himself. Poirot did not. He wanted to go on thinking about two murders and about the character of Mrs. Upward.

"And I can't find that Ministry of Agriculture form," continued Maureen. "I've looked everywhere."

"The spinach is on the sofa," Poirot offered helpfully.

Maureen was not worried about spinach.

"The form came last week," she mused. "And I must have put it somewhere. Perhaps it was when I was darning that pullover of Johnnie's."

She swept over to the bureau and started pulling out the drawers. Most of the contents she swept on to the floor ruthlessly. It was agony to Hercule Poirot to watch her.

Suddenly she uttered a cry of triumph.

“Got it!”

Delightedly she rushed from the room.

Hercule Poirot sighed and resumed meditation.

To arrange, with order and precision—

He frowned. The untidy heap of objects on the floor by the bureau distracted his mind. What a way to look for things!

Order and method. That was the thing. Order and method.

Though he had turned sideways in his chair, he could still see the confusion on the floor. Sewing things, a pile of socks, letters, knitting wool, magazines, sealing wax, photographs, a pullover—

It was insupportable!

Poirot rose, went across to the bureau and with quick deft movements began to return the objects to the open drawers.

The pullover, the socks, the knitting wool. Then, in the next drawer, the sealing wax, the photographs, the letters.

The telephone rang.

The sharpness of the bell made him jump.

He went across to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

“ ’Allo, ’allo, ’allo,” he said.

The voice that spoke to him was the voice of Superintendent Spence.

“Ah! it’s you, M. Poirot. Just the man I want.”

Spence’s voice was almost unrecognizable. A very worried man had given place to a confident one.

“Filling me up with a lot of fandangle about the wrong photograph,” he said with reproachful indulgence. “We’ve got some new evidence. Girl at the post office in Broadhinny. Major Summerhayes just brought her in. It seems she was standing practically opposite the cottage that night and she saw a woman go in. Some time after eight thirty and before nine o’clock. And it wasn’t Deirdre Henderson. It was a woman with fair hair. That puts us right back where we were—it’s definitely between the two of them—Eve Carpenter and Shelagh Rendell. The only question is—which?”

Poirot opened his mouth but did not speak. Carefully, deliberately, he replaced the receiver on the stand.

He stood there staring unseeingly in front of him.

The telephone rang again.

“ ’Allo! ’Allo! ’Allo!”

“Can I speak to M. Poirot, please?”

“Hercule Poirot speaking.”

“Thought so. Maude Williams here. Post office in a quarter of an hour?”

“I will be there.”

He replaced the receiver.

He looked down at his feet. Should he change his shoes? His feet ached a little. Ah well—no matter.

Resolutely Poirot clapped on his hat and left the house.

On his way down the hill he was hailed by one of Superintendent Spence’s men just emerging from Laburnums.

“Morning, M. Poirot.”

Poirot responded politely. He noticed that Sergeant Fletcher was looking excited.

"The Super sent me over to have a thorough check up," he explained. "You know—any little thing we might have missed. Never know, do you? We'd been over the desk, of course, but the Super got the idea there might be a secret drawer—must have been reading spy stuff. Well, there wasn't a secret drawer. But after that I got on to the books. Sometimes people slip a letter into a book they're reading. You know?"

Poirot said that he knew. "And you found something?" he asked politely.

"Not a letter or anything of that sort, no. But I found something interesting—at least I think it's interesting. Look here."

He unwrapped from a piece of newspaper an old and rather decrepit book.

"In one of the bookshelves it was. Old book, published years ago. But look here." He opened it and showed the flyleaf. Pencilled across it were the words: Evelyn Hope.

"Interesting, don't you think? That's the name, in case you don't remember—"

"The name that Eva Kane took when she left England. I do remember," said Poirot.

"Looks as though when Mrs. McGinty spotted one of those photos here in Broadhinny, it was our Mrs. Upward. Makes it kind of complicated, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Poirot with feeling. "I can assure you that when you go back to Superintendent Spence with this piece of information he will pull out his hair by the roots—yes, assuredly by the roots."

"I hope it won't be as bad as that," said Sergeant Fletcher.

Poirot did not reply. He went on down the hill. He had ceased to think. Nothing anywhere made sense.

He went into the post office. Maude Williams was there looking at knitting patterns. Poirot did not speak to her. He went to the stamp counter. When Maude had made her purchase, Mrs. Sweetiman came over to him and he bought some stamps. Maude went out of the shop.

Mrs. Sweetiman seemed preoccupied and not talkative. Poirot was able to follow Maude out fairly quickly. He caught her up a short distance along the road and fell into step beside her.

Mrs. Sweetiman, looking out of the post office window, exclaimed to herself disapprovingly. “Those foreigners! All the same, every manjack of ’em. Old enough to be her grandfather, he is!”

II

“Eh bien,” said Poirot, “you have something to tell me?”

“I don’t know that it’s important. There was somebody trying to get in at the window of Mrs. Wetherby’s room.”

“When?”

“This morning. She’d gone out, and the girl was out with the dog. Old frozen fish was shut up in his study as usual. I’d have been in the kitchen normally—it faces the other way like the study—but actually it seemed a good opportunity to—you understand?”

Poirot nodded.

“So I nipped upstairs and into Her Acidity’s bedroom. There was a ladder against the window and a man was fumbling with the window catch. She’s had everything locked and barred since the murder. Never a bit of fresh air. When the man saw me he scuttled down and made off. The ladder was the gardener’s—he’d been cutting back the ivy and had gone to have his elevenses.”

“Who was the man? Can you describe him?”

“I only got the merest glimpse. By the time I got to the window he was down the ladder and gone, and when I first saw him he was against the sun, so I couldn’t see his face.”

“You are sure it was a man?”

Maude considered.

“Dressed as a man—an old felt hat on. It might have been a woman, of course. . . .”

“It is interesting,” said Poirot. “It is very interesting . . . Nothing else?”

“Not yet. The junk that old woman keeps! Must be dotty! She came in without me hearing this morning and bawled me out for snooping. I shall be murdering her next. If anyone asks to be murdered that woman does. A really nasty bit of goods.”

Poirot murmured softly:

“Evelyn Hope . . .”

“What’s that?” She spun round on him.

“So you know that name?”

“Why—yes . . . It’s the name Eva Whatsername took when she went to Australia. It—it was in the paper—the Sunday Comet.”

“The Sunday Comet said many things, but it did not say that. The police found the name written in a book in Mrs. Upward’s house.”

Maude exclaimed:

“Then it was her—and she didn’t die out there . . . Michael was right.”

“Michael?”

Maude said abruptly:

"I can't stop. I'll be late serving lunch. I've got it all in the oven, but it will be getting dried up."

She started off at a run. Poirot stood looking after her.

At the post office window, Mrs. Sweetiman, her nose glued to the pane, wondered if that old foreigner had been making suggestions of a certain character. . . .

III

Back at Long Meadows, Poirot removed his shoes, and put on a pair of bedroom slippers. They were not chic, not in his opinion comme il faut—but there must be relief.

He sat down on the easy chair again and began once more to think. He had by now a lot to think about.

There were things he had missed—little things.

The pattern was all there. It only needed cohesion.

Maureen, glass in hand, talking in a dreamy voice—asking a question . . . Mrs. Oliver's account of her evening at the Rep. Cecil? Michael? He was almost sure that she had mentioned a Michael—Eva Kane, nursery governess to the Craigs—

Evelyn Hope. . . .

Of course! Evelyn Hope!

Twenty-three

I

Eve Carpenter came into the Summerhayes' house in the casual way that most people did, using any door or window that was convenient.

She was looking for Hercule Poirot and when she found him she did not beat about the bush.

"Look here," she said. "You're a detective, and you're supposed to be good. All right, I'll hire you."

"Suppose I am not for hire. Mon Dieu, I am not a taxicab!"

"You're a private detective and private detectives get paid, don't they?"

"It is the custom."

"Well, that's what I'm saying. I'll pay you. I'll pay you well."

"For what? What do you want me to do?"

Eve Carpenter said sharply:

"Protect me against the police. They're crazy. They seem to think I killed the Upward woman. And they're nosing round, asking me all sorts of questions—ferreting out things. I don't like it. It's driving me mental."

Poirot looked at her. Something of what she said was true. She looked many years older than when he had first seen her a few weeks ago. Circles under her eyes spoke of sleepless nights. There were lines from her mouth to her chin, and her hand, when she lit a cigarette, shook badly.

"You've got to stop it," she said. "You've got to."

“Madame, what can I do?”

“Fend them off somehow or other. Damned cheek! If Guy was a man he’d stop all this. He wouldn’t let them persecute me.”

“And—he does nothing?”

She said sullenly:

“I’ve not told him. He just talks pompously about giving the police all the assistance possible. It’s all right for him. He was at some ghastly political meeting that night.”

“And you?”

“I was just sitting at home. Listening to the radio actually.”

“But, if you can prove that—”

“How can I prove it? I offered the Crofts a fabulous sum to say they’d been in and out and seen me there—the damned swine refused.”

“That was a very unwise move on your part.”

“I don’t see why. It would have settled the business.”

“You have probably convinced your servants that you did commit the murder.”

“Well—I’d paid Croft anyway for—”

“For what?”

“Nothing.”

“Remember—you want my help.”

“Oh! It was nothing that matters. But Croft took the message from her.”

“From Mrs. Upward?”

“Yes. Asking me to go down and see her that night.”

“And you say you didn’t go?”

“Why should I go? Damned dreary old woman. Why should I go and hold her hand? I never dreamed of going for a moment.”

“When did this message come?”

“When I was out. I don’t know exactly when—between five and six, I think. Croft took it.”

“And you gave him money to forget he had taken that message. Why?”

“Don’t be idiotic. I didn’t want to get mixed up in it all.”

“And then you offer him money to give you an alibi? What do you suppose he and his wife think?”

“Who cares what they think?”

“A jury may care,” said Poirot gravely.

She stared at him.

“You’re not serious?”

“I am serious.”

“They’d listen to servants—and not to me?”

Poirot looked at her.

Such crass rudeness and stupidity! Antagonizing the people who might have been helpful. A shortsighted stupid policy. Shortsighted—

Such lovely wide blue eyes.

He said quietly:

“Why don’t you wear glasses, madame? You need them.”

“What? Oh, I do sometimes. I did as a child.”

“And you had then a plate for your teeth.”

She stared.

“I did, as a matter of fact. Why all this?”

“The ugly duckling becomes a swan?”

“I was certainly ugly enough.”

“Did your mother think so?”

She said sharply:

“I don’t remember my mother. What the hell are we talking about anyway? Will you take on the job?”

“I regret I cannot.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because in this affair I act for James Bentley.”

“James Bentley? Oh, you mean that half-wit who killed the charwoman. What’s he got to do with the Upwards?”

“Perhaps—nothing.”

“Well, then! Is it a question of money? How much?”

“That is your great mistake, madame. You think always in terms of money. You have money and you think that only money counts.”

“I haven’t always had money,” said Eve Carpenter.

“No,” said Poirot. “I thought not.” He nodded his head gently. “That explains a good deal. It excuses some things. . . .”

II

Eve Carpenter went out the way she had come, blundering a little in the light as Poirot remembered her doing before.

Poirot said softly to himself: “Evelyn Hope . . .”

So Mrs. Upward had rung up both Deirdre Henderson and Evelyn Carpenter. Perhaps she had rung up someone else. Perhaps—

With a crash Maureen came in.

“It’s my scissors now. Sorry lunch is late. I’ve got three pairs and I can’t find one of them.”

She rushed over to the bureau and the process with which Poirot was well-acquainted was repeated. This time, the objective was attained rather sooner. With a cry of joy, Maureen departed.

Almost automatically, Poirot stepped over and began to replace the things in the drawer. Sealing wax, notepaper, a work basket, photographs—

Photographs . . .

He stood staring at the photograph he held in his hand.

Footsteps rushed back along the passage.

Poirot could move quickly in spite of his age. He had dropped the photograph on the sofa, put a cushion on it, and had himself sat on the cushion, by the time that Maureen reentered.

“Where the hell’ve I put a colander full of spinach—”

“But it is there, madame.”

He indicated the colander as it reposed beside him on the sofa.

“So that’s where I left it.” She snatched it up. “Everything’s behind today . . .” Her glance took in Hercule Poirot sitting bolt upright.

“What on earth do you want to sit there for? Even on a cushion, it’s the most uncomfortable seat in the room. All the springs are broken.”

“I know, madame. But I am—I am admiring that picture on the wall.”

Maureen glanced up at the oil painting of a naval officer complete with telescope.

“Yes—it’s good. About the only good thing in the house. We’re not sure that it isn’t a Gainsborough.” She sighed. “Johnnie won’t sell it, though. It’s his great-great and I think a few more greats, grandfather and he went down with his ship or did something frightfully gallant. Johnnie’s terribly proud of it.”

“Yes,” said Poirot gently. “Yes, he has something to be proud about, your husband!”

III

It was three o’clock when Poirot arrived at Dr. Rendell’s house.

He had eaten rabbit stew and spinach and hard potatoes and a rather peculiar pudding, not scorched this time. Instead, “The water got in,” Maureen had explained. He had drunk half a cup of muddy coffee. He did not feel well.

The door was opened by the elderly housekeeper Mrs. Scott, and he asked for Mrs. Rendell.

She was in the drawing room with the radio on and started up when he was announced.

He had the same impression of her that he had had the first time he saw her. Wary, on her guard, frightened of him, or frightened of what he represented.

She seemed paler and more shadowy than she had done. He was almost certain that she was thinner.

“I want to ask you a question, madame.”

“A question? Oh? Oh yes?”

“Did Mrs. Upward telephone to you on the day of her death?”

She stared at him. She nodded.

“At what time?”

“Mrs. Scott took the message. It was about six o’clock, I think.”

“What was the message? To ask you to go there that evening?”

“Yes. She said that Mrs. Oliver and Robin were going into Kilchester and she would be all alone as it was Janet’s night out. Could I come down and keep her company.”

“Was any time suggested?”

“Nine o’clock or after.”

“And you went?”

“I meant to. I really meant to. But I don’t know how it was, I fell fast asleep after dinner that night. It was after ten when I woke up. I thought it was too late.”

“You did not tell the police about Mrs. Upward’s call?”

Her eyes widened. They had a rather innocent childlike stare.

“Ought I to have done? Since I didn’t go, I thought it didn’t matter. Perhaps, even, I felt rather guilty. If I’d gone, she might have been alive now.” She caught her breath suddenly. “Oh, I hope it wasn’t like that.”

“Not quite like that,” said Poirot.

He paused and then said:

“What are you afraid of, madame?”

She caught her breath sharply.

“Afraid? I’m not afraid.”

“But you are.”

“What nonsense. What—what should I be afraid of?”

Poirot paused for a moment before speaking.

“I thought perhaps you might be afraid of me. . . .”

She didn’t answer. But her eyes widened. Slowly, defiantly, she shook her head.

Twenty-four

I

"This way to Bedlam," said Spence.

"It is not as bad as that," said Poirot soothingly.

"That's what you say. Every single bit of information that comes in makes things more difficult. Now you tell me that Mrs. Upward rang up three women. Asked them to come that evening. Why three? Didn't she know herself which of them was Lily Gamboll? Or isn't it a case of Lily Gamboll at all? Take that book with the name of Evelyn Hope in it. It suggests, doesn't it, that Mrs. Upward and Eva Kane are one and the same."

"Which agrees exactly with James Bentley's impression of what Mrs. McGinty said to him."

"I thought he wasn't sure."

"He was not sure. It would be impossible for James Bentley to be sure of anything. He did not listen properly to what Mrs. McGinty was saying. Nevertheless, if James Bentley had an impression that Mrs. McGinty was talking about Mrs. Upward, it may very well be true. Impressions often are."

"Our latest information from Australia (it was Australia she went to, by the way, not America) seems to be to the effect that the 'Mrs. Hope' in question died out there twenty years ago."

"I have already been told that," said Poirot.

"You always know everything, don't you, Poirot?"

Poirot took no notice of this gibe. He said:

“At the one end we have ‘Mrs. Hope’ deceased in Australia—and at the other?”

“At the other end we have Mrs. Upward, the widow of a rich North Country manufacturer. She lived with him near Leeds, and had a son. Soon after the son’s birth, her husband died. The boy was inclined to be tubercular and since her husband’s death she lived mostly abroad.”

“And when does this saga begin?”

“The saga begins four years after Eva Kane left England. Upward met his wife somewhere abroad and brought her home after the marriage.”

“So actually Mrs. Upward could be Eva Kane. What was her maiden name?”

“Hargraves, I understand. But what’s in a name?”

“What indeed. Eva Kane, or Evelyn Hope, may have died in Australia—but she may have arranged a convenient decease and resuscitated herself as Hargraves and made a wealthy match.”

“It’s all a long time ago,” said Spence. “But supposing that it’s true. Supposing she kept a picture of herself and supposing that Mrs. McGinty saw it—then one can only assume that she killed Mrs. McGinty.”

“That could be, could it not? Robin Upward was broadcasting that night. Mrs. Rendell mentions going to the cottage that evening, remember, and not being able to make herself heard. According to Mrs. Sweetiman, Janet Groom told her that Mrs. Upward was not really as crippled as she made out.”

“That’s all very well, Poirot, but the fact remains that she herself was killed—after recognizing a photograph. Now you want to make out that the two deaths are not connected.”

“No, no. I do not say that. They are connected all right.”

“I give it up.”

“Evelyn Hope. There is the key to the problem.”

“Evelyn Carpenter? Is that your idea? Not Lily Gamboll—but Eva Kane’s daughter! But surely she wouldn’t kill her own mother.”

“No, no. This is not matricide.”

“What an irritating devil you are, Poirot. You’ll be saying next that Eva Kane and Lily Gamboll, and Janice Courtland and Vera Blake are all living in Broadhinny. All four suspects.”

“We have more than four. Eva Kane was the Craigs’ nursery governess, remember.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Where there is a nursery governess, there must be children— or at least a child. What happened to the Craig children?”

“There was a girl and a boy, I believe. Some relative took them.”

“So there are two more people to take into account. Two people who might have kept a photograph for the third reason I mentioned—revenge.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Spence.

Poirot sighed.

“It has to be considered, all the same. I think I know the truth—though there is one fact that baffles me utterly.”

“I’m glad something baffles you,” said Spence.

“Confirm one thing for me, mon cher Spence. Eva Kane left the country before Craig’s execution, that is right?”

“Quite right.”

“And she was, at that time, expecting a child?”

"Quite right."

"Bon Dieu, how stupid I have been," said Hercule Poirot. "The whole thing is simple, is it not?"

It was after that remark that there was very nearly a third murder—the murder of Hercule Poirot by Superintendent Spence in Kilchester Police Headquarters.

II

"I want," said Hercule Poirot, "a personal call. To Mrs. Ariadne Oliver."

A personal call to Mrs. Oliver was not achieved without difficulties. Mrs. Oliver was working and could not be disturbed. Poirot, however, disregarded all denials. Presently he heard the authoress's voice.

It was cross and rather breathless.

"Well, what is it?" said Mrs. Oliver. "Have you got to ring me up just now? I've thought of a most wonderful idea for a murder in a draper's shop. You know, the old-fashioned kind that sells combinations and funny vests with long sleeves."

"I do not know," said Poirot. "And anyway what I have to say to you is far more important."

"It couldn't be," said Mrs. Oliver. "Not to me, I mean. Unless I get a rough sketch of my idea jotted down, it will go!"

Hercule Poirot paid no attention to this creative agony. He asked sharp imperative questions to which Mrs. Oliver replied somewhat vaguely.

"Yes—yes—it's a little Repertory Theatre—I don't know its name . . . Well, one of them was Cecil Something, and the one I was talking to was Michael."

"Admirable. That is all I need to know."

"But why Cecil and Michael?"

"Return to the combinations and the long-sleeved vests, madame."

"I can't think why you don't arrest Dr. Rendell," said Mrs. Oliver. "I would, if I were the Head of Scotland Yard."

"Very possibly. I wish you luck with the murder in the draper's shop."

"The whole idea has gone now," said Mrs. Oliver. "You've ruined it."

Poirot apologized handsomely.

He put down the receiver and smiled at Spence.

"We go now—or at least I will go—to interview a young actor whose Christian name is Michael and who plays the less important parts in the Cullenquay Repertory Theatre. I pray only that he is the right Michael."

"Why on earth—"

Poirot dexterously averted the rising wrath of Superintendent Spence.

"Do you know, cher ami, what is a secret de Polichinelle?"

"Is this a French lesson?" demanded the superintendent wrathfully.

"A secret de Polichinelle is a secret that everyone can know. For this reason the people who do not know it never hear about it—for if everyone thinks you know a thing, nobody tells you."

"How I manage to keep my hands off you I don't know," said Superintendent Spence.

Twenty-five

The inquest was over—a verdict had been returned of murder by a person or persons unknown.

After the inquest, at the invitation of Hercule Poirot, those who had attended it came to Long Meadows.

Working diligently, Poirot had induced some semblance of order in the long drawing room. Chairs had been arranged in a neat semicircle, Maureen's dogs had been excluded with difficulty, and Hercule Poirot, a self-appointed lecturer, took up his position at the end of the room and initiated proceedings with a slightly self-conscious clearing of the throat.

"Messieurs et Mesdames—"

He paused. His next words were unexpected and seemed almost farcical.

"Mrs. McGinty's dead. How did she die?

Down on her knees just like I.

Mrs. McGinty's dead. How did she die?

Holding her hand out just like I.

Mrs. McGinty's dead. How did she die?

Like this . . ."

Seeing their expressions, he went on:

"No, I am not mad. Because I repeat to you the childish rhyme of a childish game, it does not mean that I am in my second childhood. Some of you may have played that game as children. Mrs. Upward had played it. Indeed she repeated it to me—with a difference. She said: 'Mrs. McGinty's dead. How did she die? Sticking her neck out just like I.’ That is what she said—and that is what she did. She stuck her neck out—and so she also, like Mrs. McGinty, died. . . .

“For our purpose we must go back to the beginning—to Mrs. McGinty—down on her knees scrubbing other people’s houses, Mrs. McGinty was killed, and a man, James Bentley, was arrested, tried and convicted. For certain reasons, Superintendent Spence, the officer in charge of the case, was not convinced of Bentley’s guilt, strong though the evidence was. I agreed with him. I came down here to answer a question. ‘How did Mrs. McGinty die? Why did she die?’

“I will not make you the long and complicated histories. I will say only that as simple a thing as a bottle of ink gave me a clue. In the Sunday Comet, read by Mrs. McGinty on the Sunday before her death, four photographs were published. You know all about those photographs by now, so I will only say that Mrs. McGinty recognized one of those photographs as a photograph she had seen in one of the houses where she worked.

“She spoke of this to James Bentley though he attached no importance to the matter at the time, nor indeed afterwards. Actually he barely listened. But he had the impression that Mrs. McGinty had seen the photograph in Mrs. Upward’s house and that when she referred to a woman who need not be so proud if all was known, she was referring to Mrs. Upward. We cannot depend on that statement of his, but she certainly used that phrase about pride and there is no doubt that Mrs. Upward was a proud and imperious woman.

“As you all know—some of you were present and the others will have heard—I produced those four photographs at Mrs. Upward’s house. I caught a flicker of surprise and recognition in Mrs. Upward’s expression and taxed her with it. She had to admit it. She said that she ‘had seen one of the photographs somewhere but she couldn’t remember where.’ When asked which photograph, she pointed to a photograph of the child Lily Gamboll. But that, let me tell you, was not the truth. For reasons of her own, Mrs. Upward wanted to keep her recognition to herself. She pointed to the wrong photograph to put me off.

"But one person was not deceived—the murderer. One person knew which photograph Mrs. Upward had recognized. And here I will not beat to and fro about the bush—the photograph in question was that of Eva Kane—a woman who was accomplice, victim or possibly leading spirit in the famous Craig Murder Case.

"On the next evening Mrs. Upward was killed. She was killed for the same reason that Mrs. McGinty was killed. Mrs. McGinty stuck her hand out, Mrs. Upward stuck her neck out—the result was the same.

"Now before Mrs. Upward died, three women received telephone calls. Mrs. Carpenter, Mrs. Rendell, and Miss Henderson. All three calls were a message from Mrs. Upward asking the person in question to come and see her that evening. It was her servant's night out and her son and Mrs. Oliver were going into Cullenquay. It would seem, therefore, that she wanted a private conversation with each of these three women.

"Now why three women? Did Mrs. Upward know where she had seen the photograph of Eva Kane? Or did she know she had seen it but could not remember where? Had these three women anything in common? Nothing, it would seem, but their age. They were all, roughly, in the neighbourhood of thirty.

"You have, perhaps, read the article in the Sunday Comet. There is a truly sentimental picture in it of Eva Kane's daughter in years to come. The women asked by Mrs. Upward to come and see her were all of the right age to be Eva Kane's daughter.

"So it would seem that living in Broadhinny was a young woman who was the daughter of the celebrated murderer Craig and of his mistress Eva Kane, and it would also seem that that young woman would go to any lengths to prevent that fact being known. Would go, indeed, to the length of twice committing murder. For when Mrs. Upward was found dead, there were two coffee cups on the table, both used, and on the visitor's cup faint traces of lipstick.

"Now let us go back to the three women who received telephone messages. Mrs. Carpenter got the message but says she did not go to Laburnums that night. Mrs. Rendell meant to go, but fell asleep in her chair. Miss Henderson did go to Laburnums but the house was dark and she could not make anyone hear and she came away again.

"That is the story these three woman tell—but there is conflicting evidence. There is that second coffee cup with lipstick on it, and an outside witness, the girl Edna, states positively that she saw a fair-haired woman go in to the house. There is also the evidence of scent—an expensive and exotic scent which Mrs. Carpenter uses alone of those concerned."

There was an interruption. Eve Carpenter cried out:

"It's a lie. It's a wicked cruel lie. It wasn't me! I never went there! I never went near the place. Guy, can't you do something about these lies?"

Guy Carpenter was white with anger.

"Let me inform you, M. Poirot, that there is a law of slander and all these people present are witnesses."

"Is it slander to say that your wife uses a certain scent—and also, let me tell you, a certain lipstick?"

"It's ridiculous," cried Eve. "Absolutely ridiculous! Anyone could go splashing my scent about."

Unexpectedly Poirot beamed on her.

"Mais oui, exactly! Anyone could. An obvious, not very subtle thing to do. Clumsy and crude. So clumsy that, as far as I was concerned, it defeated its object. It did more. It gave me, as the phrase goes, ideas. Yes, it gave me ideas.

"Scent—and traces of lipstick on a cup. But it is so easy to remove lipstick from a cup—I assure you every trace can be wiped off quite easily. Or the cups themselves could be removed and washed. Why not? There was no one in the house. But that was not done. I asked myself why? And the answer seemed to be a deliberate stress on femininity, an underlining of the fact that it was a woman's murder. I reflected on the telephone calls to those three women—all of them had been messages. In no case had the recipient herself spoken to Mrs. Upward. So perhaps it was not Mrs. Upward who had telephoned. It was someone who was anxious to involve a woman—any woman—in the crime. Again I asked why? And there can only be one answer—that it was not a woman who killed Mrs. Upward—but a man."

He looked round on his audience. They were all very still. Only two people responded.

Eve Carpenter said with a sigh: "Now you're talking sense!"

Mrs. Oliver, nodding her head vigorously, said: "Of course."

"So I have arrived at this point—a man killed Mrs. Upward and a man killed Mrs. McGinty! What man? The reason for the murder must still be the same—it all hinges on a photograph. In whose possession was that photograph? That is the first question. And why was it kept?"

"Well, that is perhaps not so difficult. Say that it was kept originally for sentimental reasons. Once Mrs. McGinty is—removed, the photograph need not be destroyed. But after the second murder, it is different. This time the photograph has definitely been connected with the murder. The photograph is now a dangerous thing to keep. Therefore you will all agree, it is sure to be destroyed."

He looked round at the heads that nodded agreement.

"But, for all that, the photograph was not destroyed! No, it was not destroyed! I know that—because I found it. I found it a few days ago. I found it in this house. In the drawer of the bureau that you see standing against the wall. I have it here."

He held out the faded photograph of a simpering girl with roses.

"Yes," said Poirot. "It is Eva Kane. And on the back of it are written two words in pencil. Shall I tell you what they are? 'My mother . . .' "

His eyes, grave and accusing, rested on Maureen Summerhayes. She pushed back the hair from her face and stared at him with wide bewildered eyes.

"I don't understand. I never—"

"No, Mrs. Summerhayes, you do not understand. There can be only two reasons for keeping this photograph after the second murder. The first of them is an innocent sentimentality. You had no feeling of guilt and so you could keep the photograph. You told us yourself, at Mrs. Carpenter's house one day, that you were an adopted child. I doubt whether you have ever known what your real mother's name was. But somebody else knew. Somebody who has all the pride of family—a pride that makes him cling to his ancestral home, a pride in his ancestors and his lineage. That man would rather die than have the world—and his children—know that Maureen Summerhayes is the daughter of the murderer Craig and of Eva Kane. That man, I have said, would rather die. But that would not help, would it? So instead let us say that we have here a man who is prepared to kill."

Johnnie Summerhayes got up from his seat. His voice, when he spoke, was quiet, almost friendly.

"Rather a lot of nonsense you're talkin," aren't you? Enjoying yourself spouting out a lot of theories? Theories, that's all they are! Saying things about my wife—"

His anger broke suddenly in a furious tide.

"You damned filthy swine—"

The swiftness of his rush across the floor took the room unawares. Poirot skipped back nimbly and Superintendent Spence was suddenly between Poirot and Summerhayes.

"Now, now, Major Summerhayes, take it easy—take it easy—"

Summerhayes recovered himself, shrugged, said:

"Sorry. Ridiculous really! After all—anyone can stick a photograph in a drawer."

"Precisely," said Poirot. "And the interesting thing about this photograph is that it has no fingerprints on it."

He paused, then nodded his head gently.

"But it should have had," he said. "If Mrs. Summerhayes kept it, she would have kept it innocently, and so her fingerprints should have been on it."

Maureen exclaimed:

"I think you're mad. I've never seen that photograph in my life—except at Mrs. Upward's that day."

"It is fortunate for you," said Poirot, "that I know that you are speaking the truth. The photograph was put into that drawer only a few minutes before I found it there. Twice that morning the contents of that drawer were tumbled on to the ground, twice I replaced them; the first time the photograph was not in the drawer, the second time it was. It had been placed there during that interval—and I know by whom."

A new note crept into his voice. He was no longer a ridiculous little man with an absurd moustache and dyed hair, he was a hunter very close to his quarry.

"The crimes were committed by a man—they were committed for the simplest of all reasons—for money. In Mrs. Upward's house there was a book found and on the flyleaf of that book is written Evelyn Hope. Hope was the name Eva Kane took when she left England. If her real name was Evelyn then in all probability she gave the name of Evelyn to her child when it was born. But Evelyn is a man's name as well as a woman's. Why had we assumed that Eva Kane's child was a girl? Roughly because the Sunday Comet said so! But actually the Sunday Comet had not said so in so many words, it had assumed it because of a romantic interview with Eva Kane. But Eva Kane left England before her child was born—so nobody could say what the sex of the child would be.

“That is where I let myself be misled. By the romantic inaccuracy of the Press.

“Evelyn Hope, Eva Kane’s son, comes to England. He is talented and he attracts the attention of a very rich woman who knows nothing about his origin—only the romantic story he chooses to tell her. (A very pretty little story it was—all about a tragic young ballerina dying of tuberculosis in Paris!)

“She is a lonely woman who has recently lost her own son. The talented young playwright takes her name by deed poll.

“But your real name is Evelyn Hope, isn’t it, Mr. Upward?”

Robin Upward cried out shrilly:

“Of course it isn’t! I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You really cannot hope to deny it. There are people who know you under that name. The name Evelyn Hope, written in the book, is in your handwriting—the same handwriting as the words ‘my mother’ on the back of this photograph. Mrs. McGinty saw the photograph and the writing on it when she was tidying your things away. She spoke to you about it after reading the Sunday Comet. Mrs. McGinty assumed that it was a photograph of Mrs. Upward when young, since she had no idea Mrs. Upward was not your real mother. But you knew that if once she mentioned the matter so that it came to Mrs. Upward’s ears, it would be the end. Mrs. Upward had quite fanatical views on the subject of heredity. She would not tolerate for a moment an adopted son who was the son of a famous murderer. Nor would she forgive your lies on the subject.

“So Mrs. McGinty had at all costs to be silenced. You promised her a little present, perhaps, for being discreet. You called on her the next evening on your way to broadcast—and you killed her! Like this . . .”

With a sudden movement, Poirot seized the sugar hammer from the shelf and whirled it round and down as though to bring it crashing down on Robin’s head.

So menacing was the gesture that several of the circle cried out.

Robin Upward screamed. A high terrified scream.

He yelled: “Don’t . . . don’t . . . It was an accident. I swear it was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill her. I lost my head. I swear I did.”

“You washed off the blood and put the sugar hammer back in this room where you had found it. But there are new scientific methods of determining blood stains—and of bringing up latent fingerprints.”

“I tell you I never meant to kill her . . . It was all a mistake . . . And anyway it isn’t my fault . . . I’m not responsible. It’s in my blood. I can’t help it. You can’t hang me for something that isn’t my fault. . . .”

Under his breath Spence muttered: “Can’t we? You see if we don’t!”

Aloud he spoke in a grave official voice:

“I must warn you, Mr. Upward, that anything you say . . .”

Twenty-six

"I really don't see, M. Poirot, how ever you came to suspect Robin Upward."

Poirot looked complacently at the faces turned towards him.

He always enjoyed explanations.

"I ought to have suspected him much sooner. The clue, such a simple clue, was the sentence uttered by Mrs. Summerhayes at the cocktail party that day. She said to Robin Upward: 'I don't like being adopted, do you?' Those were the revealing two words. Do you? They meant—they could only mean—that Mrs. Upward was not Robin's own mother.

"Mrs. Upward was morbidly anxious herself that no one should know that Robin was not her own son. She had probably heard too many ribald comments on brilliant young men who live with and upon elderly women. And very few people did know—only the small theatrical coterie where she had first come across Robin. She had few intimate friends in this country, having lived abroad so long, and she chose in any case to come and settle down here far away from her own Yorkshire. Even when she met friends of the old days, she did not enlighten them when they assumed that this Robin was the same Robin they had known as a little boy.

"But from the very first something had struck me as not quite natural in the household at Laburnums. Robin's attitude to Mrs. Upward was not that of either a spoiled child, or of a devoted son. It was the attitude of a protégé to a patron. The rather fanciful title of Madre had a theatrical touch. And Mrs. Upward, though she was clearly very fond of Robin, nevertheless unconsciously treated him as a prized possession that she had bought and paid for.

"So there is Robin Upward, comfortably established, with 'Madre's' purse to back his ventures, and then into his assured world comes Mrs. McGinty who has recognized the photograph that he keeps in a drawer—the photograph with 'my mother' written on the back of it. His mother, who he has told Mrs. Upward was a talented young ballet dancer who died of tuberculosis! Mrs. McGinty, of course, thinks that the photograph is of Mrs. Upward when young, since she assumes as a matter of course that Mrs. Upward is Robin's own mother. I do not think that actual blackmail ever entered Mrs. McGinty's mind, but she did hope, perhaps, for a 'nice little present,' as a reward for holding her tongue about a piece of bygone gossip which would not have been pleasant for a 'proud' woman like Mrs. Upward.

"But Robin Upward was taking no chances. He purloins the sugar hammer, laughingly referred to as a perfect weapon for murder by Mrs. Summerhayes, and on the following evening, he stops at Mrs. McGinty's cottage on his way to broadcast. She takes him into the parlour, quite unsuspicious, and he kills her. He knows where she keeps her savings—everyone in Broadhinny seems to know—and he fakes a burglary, hiding the money outside the house. Bentley is suspected and arrested. Everything is now safe for clever Robin Upward.

"But then, suddenly, I produce four photographs, and Mrs. Upward recognizes the one of Eva Kane as being identical with a photograph of Robin's ballerina mother! She needs a little time to think things out. Murder is involved. Can it be possible that Robin—? No, she refuses to believe it.

"What action she would have taken in the end we do not know. But Robin was taking no chances. He plans the whole mise en scène. The visit to the Rep on Janet's night out, the telephone calls, the coffee cup carefully smeared with lipstick taken from Eve Carpenter's bag, he even buys a bottle of her distinctive perfume. The whole thing was a theatrical scene setting with prepared props. Whilst Mrs. Oliver waited in the car, Robin ran back twice into the house. The murder was a matter of seconds. After that there was only the swift distribution of the 'props.' And with Mrs. Upward dead, he inherited a large fortune by the terms of her will, and no suspicion could attach to him since it would seem quite certain that a woman had committed the crime. With three women visiting the cottage that night, one of them was almost sure to be suspected. And that, indeed, was so.

“But Robin, like all criminals, was careless and overconfident. Not only was there a book in the cottage with his original name scribbled in it, but he also kept, for purposes of his own, the fatal photograph. It would have been much safer for him if he had destroyed it, but he clung to the belief that he could use it to incriminate someone else at the right moment.

“He probably thought then of Mrs. Summerhayes. That may be the reason he moved out of the cottage and into Long Meadows. After all, the sugar hammer was hers, and Mrs. Summerhayes was, he knew, an adopted child and might find it hard to prove she was not Eva Kane’s daughter.

“However, when Deirdre Henderson admitted having been on the scene of the crime, he conceived the idea of planting the photograph amongst her possessions. He tried to do so, using a ladder that the gardener had left against the window. But Mrs. Wetherby was nervous and had insisted on all the windows being kept locked, so Robin did not succeed in his purpose. He came straight back here and put the photograph in a drawer which, unfortunately for him, I had searched only a short time before.

“I knew, therefore, that the photograph had been planted, and I knew by whom—by the only person in the house—that person who was typing industriously over my head.

“Since the name Evelyn Hope had been written on the flyleaf of the book from the cottage, Evelyn Hope must be either Mrs. Upward—or Robin Upward. . . .

“The name Evelyn had led me astray—I had connected it with Mrs. Carpenter since her name was Eve. But Evelyn was a man’s name as well as a woman’s.

“I remembered the conversation Mrs. Oliver had told me about at the Little Rep in Cullenquay. The young actor who had been talking to her was the person I wanted to confirm my theory—the theory that Robin was not Mrs. Upward’s own son. For by the way he had talked, it seemed clear that he knew the real facts. And his story of Mrs. Upward’s swift retribution on a young man who had deceived her as to his origins was suggestive.

"The truth is that I ought to have seen the whole thing very much sooner. I was handicapped by a serious error. I believed that I had been deliberately pushed with the intention of sending me on to a railway line—and that the person who had done so was the murderer of Mrs. McGinty. Now Robin Upward was practically the only person in Broadhinny who could not have been at Kilchester station at that time."

There was a sudden chuckle from Johnnie Summerhayes.

"Probably some old woman with a basket. They do shove."

Poirot said:

"Actually, Robin Upward was far too conceited to fear me at all. It is a characteristic of murderers. Fortunately, perhaps. For in this case there was very little evidence."

Mrs. Oliver stirred.

"Do you mean to say," she demanded incredulously, "that Robin murdered his mother whilst I sat outside in the car, and that I hadn't the least idea of it? There wouldn't have been time!"

"Oh yes, there would. People's ideas of time are usually ludicrously wrong. Just notice sometime how swiftly a stage can be reset. In this case it was mostly a matter of props."

"Good theatre," murmured Mrs. Oliver mechanically.

"Yes, it was preeminently a theatrical murder. All very much contrived."

"And I sat there in the car—and hadn't the least idea!"

"I am afraid," murmured Poirot, "that your woman's intuition was taking a day off. . . ."

Twenty-seven

“I’m not going back to Breather & Scuttle,” said Maude Williams. “They’re a lousy firm anyway.”

“And they have served their purpose.”

“What do you mean by that, M. Poirot?”

“Why did you come to this part of the world?”

“I suppose being Mr. Knowall, you think you know?”

“I have a little idea.”

“And what is this famous idea.”

Poirot was looking meditatively at Maude’s hair.

“I have been very discreet,” he said. “It has been assumed that the woman who went into Mrs. Upward’s house, the fair-haired woman that Edna saw, was Mrs. Carpenter, and that she has denied being there simply out of fright. Since it was Robin Upward who killed Mrs. Upward, her presence has no more significance than that of Miss Henderson. But all the same I do not think she was there. I think Miss Williams, that the woman Edna saw was you.”

“Why me?”

Her voice was hard.

Poirot countered with another question.

“Why were you so interested in Broadhinny? Why, when you went over there, did you ask Robin Upward for an autograph—you are not the autograph-hunting type. What did you know about the Upwards? Why did you come to this part of the world in the first place? How did you know that Eva Kane died in Australia and the name she took when she left England?"

"Good at guessing, aren't you? Well, I've nothing to hide, not really."

She opened her handbag. From a worn notecase she pulled out a small newspaper cutting frayed with age. It showed the face that Poirot by now knew so well, the simpering face of Eva Kane.

Written across it were the words, She killed my mother.

Poirot handed it back to her.

"Yes, I thought so. Your real name is Craig?"

Maude nodded.

"I was brought up by some cousins—very decent they were. But I was old enough when it all happened not to forget. I used to think about it a good deal. About her. She was a nasty bit of goods all right—children know! My father was just—weak. And besotted by her. But he took the rap. For something, I've always believed, that she did. Oh yes, I know he's an accessory after the fact—but it's not quite the same thing, is it? I always meant to find out what had become of her. When I was grown up, I got detectives on to it. They traced her to Australia and finally reported that she was dead. She'd left a son—Evelyn Hope he called himself.

"Well, that seemed to close the account. But then I got pally with a young actor chap. He mentioned someone called Evelyn Hope who'd come from Australia, but who now called himself Robin Upward and who wrote plays. I was interested. One night Robin Upward was pointed out to me—and he was with his mother. So I thought that, after all, Eva Kane wasn't dead. Instead, she was queening it about with a packet of money.

"I got myself a job down here. I was curious—and a bit more than curious. All right, I'll admit it, I thought I'd like to get even with her in some way . . . When you brought up all this business about James Bentley, I jumped to the conclusion that it was Mrs. Upward who'd killed Mrs. McGinty. Eva

Kane up to her tricks again. I happened to hear from Michael West that Robin Upward and Mrs. Oliver were coming over to this show at the Cullenquay Rep. I decided to go to Broadhinny and beard the woman. I meant—I don't quite know what I meant. I'm telling you everything—I took a little pistol I had in the war with me. To frighten her? Or more? Honestly, I don't know. . . .

"Well, I got there. There was no sound in the house. The door was unlocked. I went in. You know how I found her. Sitting there dead, her face all purple and swollen. All the things I'd been thinking seemed silly and melodramatic. I knew that I'd never, really, want to kill anyone when it came to it . . . But I did realize that it might be awkward to explain what I'd been doing in the house. It was a cold night and I'd got gloves on, so I knew I hadn't left any fingerprints, and I didn't think for a moment anyone had seen me. That's all." She paused and added abruptly: "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," said Hercule Poirot. "I wish you good luck in life, that is all."

Epilogue

Hercule Poirot and Superintendent Spence were celebrating at the La Vieille Grand'mère.

As coffee was served Spence leaned back in his chair and gave a deep sigh of repletion.

"Not at all bad grub here," he said approvingly. "A bit Frenchified, perhaps, but after all where can you get a decent steak and chips nowadays?"

"I had been dining here on the evening you first came to me," said Poirot reminiscently.

"Ah, a lot of water under the bridge since then. I've got to hand it to you, M. Poirot. You did the trick all right." A slight smile creased his wooden countenance. "Lucky that young man didn't realize how very little evidence we'd really got. Why, a clever counsel would have made mincemeat of it! But he lost his head completely, and gave the show away. Spilt the beans and incriminated himself up to the hilt. Lucky for us!"

"It was not entirely luck," said Poirot reprovingly. "I played him, as you play the big fish! He thinks I take the evidence against Mrs. Summerhayes seriously—when it is not so, he suffers the reaction and goes to pieces. And besides, he is a coward. I whirl the sugar hammer and he thinks I mean to hit him. Acute fear always produces the truth."

"Lucky you didn't suffer from Major Summerhayes' reaction," said Spence with a grin. "Got a temper, he has, and quick on his feet. I only got between you just in time. Has he forgiven you yet?"

"Oh yes, we are the firmest friends. And I have given Mrs. Summerhayes a cookery book and I have also taught her personally how to make an omelette. Bon Dieu, what I suffered in that house!"

He closed his eyes.

"Complicated business, the whole thing," ruminated Spence, uninterested in Poirot's agonized memories. "Just shows how true the old saying is that everyone's got something to hide. Mrs. Carpenter, now, had a narrow squeak of being arrested for murder. If ever a woman acted guilty, she did, and all for what?"

"Eh bien, what?" asked Poirot curiously.

"Just the usual business of a rather unsavoury past. She had been a taxi dancer—and a bright girl with plenty of men friends! She wasn't a war widow when she came and settled down in Broadhinny. Only what they call nowadays an 'unofficial wife.' Well, of course all that wouldn't do for a stuffed shirt like Guy Carpenter, so she'd spun him a very different sort of tale. And she was frantic lest the whole thing would come out once we started poking round into people's origins."

He sipped his coffee, and then gave a low chuckle.

"Then take the Wetherbys. Sinister sort of house. Hate and malice. Awkward frustrated sort of girl. And what's behind that? Nothing sinister. Just money! Plain £.s.d."

"As simple as that!"

"The girl has the money—quite a lot of it. Left her by an aunt. So mother keeps tight hold of her in case she should want to marry. And stepfather loathes her because she has the dibs and pays the bills. I gather he himself has been a failure at anything he's tried. A mean cuss—and as for Mrs. W., she's pure poison dissolved in sugar."

"I agree with you." Poirot nodded his head in a satisfied fashion. "It is fortunate that the girl has money. It makes her marriage to James Bentley much more easy to arrange."

Superintendent Spence looked surprised.

“Going to marry James Bentley? Deirdre Henderson? Who says so?”

“I say so,” said Poirot. “I occupy myself with the affair. I have, now that our little problem is over, too much time on my hands. I shall employ myself in forwarding this marriage. As yet, the two concerned have no idea of such a thing. But they are attracted. Left to themselves, nothing would happen—but they have to reckon with Hercule Poirot. You will see! The affair will march.”

Spence grinned.

“Don’t mind sticking your fingers in other people’s pies, do you?”

“Mon cher, that does not come well from you,” said Poirot reproachfully.

“Well, you’ve got me there. All the same, James Bentley is a poor stick.”

“Certainly he is a poor stick! At the moment he is positively aggrieved because he is not going to be hanged.”

“He ought to be down on his knees with gratitude to you,” said Spence.

“Say, rather, to you. But apparently he does not think so.”

“Queer cuss.”

“As you say, and yet at least two women have been prepared to take an interest in him. Nature is very unexpected.”

“I thought it was Maude Williams you were going to pair off with him.”

“He shall make his choice,” said Poirot. “He shall—how do you say it?—award the apple. But I think that it is Deirdre Henderson that he will choose. Maude Williams has too much energy and vitality. With her he would retire even farther into his shell.”

“Can’t think why either of them should want him!”

“The ways of nature are indeed inscrutable.”

"All the same, you'll have your work cut out. First bringing him up to the scratch—and then prising the girl loose from poison puss mother—she'll fight you tooth and claw!"

"Success is on the side of the big battalions."

"On the side of the big moustaches, I suppose you mean."

Spence roared. Poirot stroked his moustache complacently and suggested a brandy.

"I don't mind if I do, M. Poirot."

Poirot gave the order.

"Ah," said Spence, "I knew there was something else I had to tell you. You remember the Rendells?"

"Naturally."

"Well, when we were checking up on him, something rather odd came to light. It seems that when his first wife died in Leeds where his practice was at that time, the police there got some rather nasty anonymous letters about him. Saying, in effect, that he'd poisoned her. Of course people do say that sort of thing. She'd been attended by an outside doctor, reputable man, and he seemed to think her death was quite aboveboard. There was nothing to go upon except the fact that they'd mutually insured their lives in each other's favour, and people do do that . . . Nothing for us to go upon, as I say, and yet—I wonder? What do you think?"

Poirot remembered Mrs. Rendell's frightened air. Her mention of anonymous letters, and her insistence that she did not believe anything they said. He remembered, too, her certainty that his inquiry about Mrs. McGinty was only a pretext.

He said, "I should imagine that it was not only the police who got anonymous letters."

"Sent them to her, too?"

"I think so. When I appeared in Broadhinny, she thought I was on her husband's track, and that the McGinty business was a pretext. Yes—and he thought so, too . . . That explains it! It was Dr. Rendell who tried to push me under the train that night!"

"Think he'll have a shot at doing this wife in, too?"

"I think she would be wise not to insure her life in his favour," said Poirot drily. "But if he believes we have an eye on him he will probably be prudent."

"We'll do what we can. We'll keep an eye on our genial doctor, and make it clear we're doing so."

Poirot raised his brandy glass.

"To Mrs. Oliver," he said.

"What put her into your head suddenly?"

"Woman's intuition," said Poirot.

There was silence for a moment, then Spence said slowly: "Robin Upward is coming up for trial next week. You know, Poirot, I can't help feeling doubtful—"

Poirot interrupted him with horror.

"Mon Dieu! You are not now doubtful about Robin Upward's guilt, are you? Do not say you want to start over again."

Superintendent Spence grinned reassuringly.

"Good Lord, no. He's a murderer all right!" He added: "Cocky enough for anything!"

After The Funeral (1953)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

I

Old Lanscombe moved totteringly from room to room, pulling up the blinds. Now and then he peered with screwed-up rheumy eyes through the windows.

Soon they would be coming back from the funeral. He shuffled along a little faster. There were so many windows.

Enderby Hall was a vast Victorian house built in the Gothic style. In every room the curtains were of rich faded brocade or velvet. Some of the walls were still hung with faded silk. In the green drawing room, the old butler glanced up at the portrait above the mantelpiece of old Cornelius Abernethie for whom Enderby Hall had been built. Cornelius Abernethie's brown beard stuck forward aggressively, his hand rested on a terrestrial globe, whether by desire of the sitter, or as a symbolic conceit on the part of the artist, no one could tell.

A very forceful-looking gentleman, so old Lanscombe had always thought, and was glad that he himself had never known him personally. Mr. Richard had been his gentleman. A good master, Mr. Richard. And taken very sudden, he'd been, though of course the doctor had been attending him for some little time. Ah, but the master had never recovered from the shock of young Mr. Mortimer's death. The old man shook his head as he hurried through a connecting door into the White Boudoir. Terrible, that had been, a real catastrophe. Such a fine upstanding young gentleman, so strong and healthy. You'd never have thought such a thing likely to happen to him. Pitiful, it had been, quite pitiful. And Mr. Gordon killed in the war. One thing on top of another. That was the way things went nowadays. Too much for the master, it had been. And yet he'd seemed almost himself a week ago.

The third blind in the White Boudoir refused to go up as it should. It went up a little way and stuck. The springs were weak—that's what it was—very old, these blinds were, like everything else in the house. And you couldn't get these old things mended nowadays. Too old-fashioned, that’s what they’d say, shaking their heads in that silly superior way—as if the old things weren’t a great deal better than the new ones! He could tell them that! Gimcrack, half the new stuff was—came to pieces in your hands. The material wasn’t good, or the craftsmanship either. Oh yes, he could tell them.

Couldn’t do anything about this blind unless he got the steps. He didn’t like climbing up the steps much, these days, made him come over giddy. Anyway, he’d leave the blind for now. It didn’t matter, since the White Boudoir didn’t face the front of the house where it would be seen as the cars came back from the funeral—and it wasn’t as though the room was ever used nowadays. It was a lady’s room, this, and there hadn’t been a lady at Enderby for a long time now. A pity Mr. Mortimer hadn’t married. Always going off to Norway for fishing and to Scotland for shooting and to Switzerland for those winter sports, instead of marrying some nice young lady and settling down at home with children running about the house. It was a long time since there had been any children in the house.

And Lanscombe’s mind went ranging back to a time that stood out clearly and distinctly—much more distinctly than the last twenty years or so, which were all blurred and confused and he couldn’t really remember who had come and gone or indeed what they looked like. But he could remember the old days well enough.

More like a father to those young brothers and sisters of his, Mr. Richard had been. Twenty-four when his father had died, and he’d pitched in right away to the business, going off every day as punctual as clockwork, and keeping the house running and everything as lavish as it could be. A very happy household with all those young ladies and gentlemen growing up. Fights and quarrels now and again, of course, and those governesses had had a bad time of it! Poor-spirited creatures, governesses, Lanscombe had always despised them. Very spirited the young ladies had been. Miss Geraldine in particular. Miss Cora, too, although she was so much younger. And now Mr. Leo was dead, and Miss Laura gone too. And Mr. Timothy such a sad invalid. And Miss Geraldine dying somewhere abroad. And Mr. Gordon killed in the war. Although he was the eldest, Mr. Richard himself turned out the strongest of the lot. Outlived them all, he had—at least not quite because Mr. Timothy was still alive and little Miss Cora who'd married that unpleasant artist chap. Twenty-five years since he'd seen her and she'd been a pretty young girl when she went off with that chap, and now he'd hardly have known her, grown so stout—and so arty-crafty in her dress! A Frenchman her husband had been, or nearly a Frenchman—and no good ever came of marrying one of them! But Miss Cora had always been a bit—well simple like you'd call it if she'd lived in a village. Always one of them in a family.

She'd remembered him all right. "Why, it's Lanscombe!" she'd said and seemed ever so pleased to see him. Ah, they'd all been fond of him in the old days and when there was a dinner party they'd crept down to the pantry and he'd given them jelly and Charlotte Russe when it came out of the dining room. They'd all known old Lanscombe, and now there was hardly anyone who remembered. Just the younger lot whom he could never keep clear in his mind and who just thought of him as a butler who'd been there a long time. A lot of strangers, he had thought, when they all arrived for the funeral—and a seedy lot of strangers at that!

Not Mrs. Leo—she was different. She and Mr. Leo had come here off and on ever since Mr. Leo married. She was a nice lady, Mrs. Leo—a real lady. Wore proper clothes and did her hair well and looked what she was. And the master had always been fond of her. A pity that she and Mr. Leo had never had any children….

Lanscombe roused himself; what was he doing standing here and dreaming about old days with so much to be done? The blinds were all attended to on the ground floor now, and he'd told Janet to go upstairs and do the bedrooms. He and Janet and the cook had gone to the funeral service in the church but instead of going on to the Crematorium they'd driven back to the house to get the blinds up and the lunch ready. Cold lunch, of course, it had to be. Ham and chicken and tongue and salad. With cold lemon soufflé and apple tart to follow. Hot soup first—and he'd better go along and see that Marjorie had got it on ready to serve, for they'd be back in a minute or two now for certain.

Lanscombe broke into a shuffling trot across the room. His gaze, abstracted and uncurious, just swept up to the picture over this mantelpiece—the companion portrait to the one in the green drawing room. It was a nice painting of white satin and pearls. The human being round whom they were draped and clasped was not nearly so impressive. Meek features, a rosebud mouth, hair parted in the middle. A woman both modest and unassuming. The only thing really worthy of note about Mrs. Cornelius Abernethie had been her name— Coralie.

For over sixty years after their original appearance, Coral Cornplasters and the allied "Coral" foot preparations still held their own. Whether there had ever been anything outstanding about Coral Cornplasters nobody could say —but they had appealed to the public fancy. On a foundation of Coral Cornplasters there had arisen this neo-Gothic palace, its acres of gardens, and the money that had paid out an income to seven sons and daughters and had allowed Richard Abernethie to die three days ago a very rich man.

II

Looking into the kitchen with a word of admonition, Lanscombe was snapped at by Marjorie, the cook. Marjorie was young, only twenty-seven, and was a constant irritation to Lanscombe as being so far removed from what his conception of a proper cook should be. She had no dignity and no proper appreciation of his, Lanscombe's, position. She frequently called the house "a proper old mausoleum" and complained of the immense area of the kitchen, scullery and larder, saying that it was a "day's walk to get round them all." She had been at Enderby two years and only stayed because in the first place the money was good, and in the second because Mr. Abernethie had really appreciated her cooking. She cooked very well. Janet, who stood by the kitchen table, refreshing herself with a cup of tea, was an elderly housemaid who, although enjoying frequent acid disputes with Lanscombe, was nevertheless usually in alliance with him against the younger generation as represented by Marjorie. The fourth person in the kitchen was Mrs. Jacks, who "came in" to lend assistance where it was wanted and who had much enjoyed the funeral.

"Beautiful it was," she said with a decorous sniff as she replenished her cup. "Nineteen cars and the church quite full and the Canon read the service beautiful, I thought. A nice fine day for it, too. Ah, poor dear Mr. Abernethie, there's not many like him left in the world. Respected by all, he was."

There was the note of a horn and the sound of a car coming up the drive, and Mrs. Jacks put down her cup and exclaimed: "Here they are."

Marjorie turned up the gas under her large saucepan of creamy chicken soup. The large kitchen range of the days of Victorian grandeur stood cold and unused, like an altar to the past.

The cars drove up one after the other and the people issuing from them in their black clothes moved rather uncertainly across the hall and into the big green drawing room. In the big steel grate a fire was burning, tribute to the first chill of the autumn days and calculated to counteract the further chill of standing about at a funeral.

Lanscombe entered the room, offering glasses of sherry on a silver tray.

Mr. Entwhistle, senior partner of the old and respected firm of Bollard, Entwhistle, Entwhistle and Bollard, stood with his back to the fireplace warming himself. He accepted a glass of sherry, and surveyed the company with his shrewd lawyer's gaze. Not all of them were personally known to him, and he was under the necessity of sorting them out, so to speak. Introductions before the departure for the funeral had been hushed and perfunctory.

Appraising old Lanscombe first, Mr. Entwhistle thought to himself, "Getting very shaky, poor old chap—going on for ninety I shouldn't wonder. Well, he'll have that nice little annuity. Nothing for him to worry about. Faithful soul. No such thing as old-fashioned service nowadays. Household helps and babysitters, God help us all! A sad world. Just as well, perhaps, poor Richard didn't last his full time. He hadn't much to live for."

To Mr. Entwhistle, who was seventy-two, Richard Abernethie's death at sixty-eight was definitely that of a man dead before his time. Mr. Entwhistle had retired from active business two years ago, but as executor of Richard

Abernethie’s will and in respect of one of his oldest clients who was also a personal friend, he had made the journey to the North.

Reflecting in his own mind on the provisions of the will, he mentally appraised the family.

Mrs. Leo, Helen, he knew well, of course. A very charming woman for whom he had both liking and respect. His eyes dwelt approvingly on her now as she stood near one of the windows. Black suited her. She had kept her figure well. He liked the clear cut features, the springing line of grey hair back from her temples and the eyes that had once been likened to cornflowers and which were still quite vividly blue.

How old was Helen now? About fifty-one or-two, he supposed. Strange that she had never married again after Leo’s death. An attractive woman. Ah, but they had been very devoted, those two.

His eyes went on to Mrs. Timothy. He had never known her very well. Black didn’t suit her—country tweeds were her wear. A big sensible capable-looking woman. She’d always been a good devoted wife to Timothy. Looking after his health, fussing over him—fussing over him a bit too much, probably. Was there really anything the matter with Timothy? Just a hypochondriac, Mr. Entwhistle suspected. Richard Abernethie had suspected so, too. “Weak chest, of course, when he was a boy,” he had said. “But blest if I think there’s much wrong with him now.” Oh well, everybody had to have some hobby. Timothy’s hobby was the all absorbing one of his own health. Was Mrs. Tim taken in? Probably not—but women never admitted that sort of thing. Timothy must be quite comfortably off. He’d never been a spendthrift. However, the extra would not come amiss—not in these days of taxation. He’d probably had to retrench his scale of living a good deal since the war.

Mr. Entwhistle transferred his attention to George Crossfield, Laura’s son. Dubious sort of fellow Laura had married. Nobody had ever known much about him. A stockbroker he had called himself. Young George was in a solicitor’s office—not a very reputable firm. Good-looking young fellow—but something a little shifty about him. He couldn’t have too much to live on. Laura had been a complete fool over her investments. She’d left next to nothing when she died five years ago. A handsome romantic girl she'd been, but no money sense.

Mr. Entwhistle's eyes went on from George Crossfield. Which of the two girls was which? Ah yes, that was Rosamund, Geraldine's daughter, looking at the wax flowers on the malachite table. Pretty girl, beautiful, in fact—rather a silly face. On the stage. Repertory companies or some nonsense like that. Had married an actor, too. Good-looking fellow. "And knows he is," thought Mr. Entwhistle, who was prejudiced against the stage as a profession. "Wonder what sort of a background he has and where he comes from."

He looked disapprovingly at Michael Shane with his fair hair and his haggard charm.

Now Susan, Gordon's daughter, would do much better on the stage than Rosamund. More personality. A little too much personality for everyday life, perhaps. She was quite near him and Mr. Entwhistle studied her covertly. Dark hair, hazel—almost golden—eyes, a sulky attractive mouth. Beside her was the husband she had just married—a chemist's assistant, he understood. Really, a chemist's assistant! In Mr. Entwhistle's creed girls did not marry young men who served behind a counter. But now of course, they married anybody! The young man, who had a pale nondescript face and sandy hair, seemed very ill at ease. Mr. Entwhistle wondered why, but decided charitably that it was the strain of meeting so many of his wife's relations.

Last in his survey Mr. Entwhistle came to Cora Lansquenet. There was a certain justice in that, for Cora had decidedly been an afterthought in the family. Richard's youngest sister, she had been born when her mother was just on fifty, and that meek woman had not survived her tenth pregnancy (three children had died in infancy). Poor little Cora! All her life, Cora had been rather an embarrassment, growing up tall and gawky, and given to blurting out remarks that had always better have remained unsaid. All her elder brothers and sisters had been very kind to Cora, atoning for her deficiencies and covering her social mistakes. It had never really occurred to anyone that Cora would marry. She had not been a very attractive girl, and her rather obvious advances to visiting young men had usually caused the latter to retreat in some alarm. And then, Mr. Entwhistle mused, there had come the Lansquenet business—Pierre Lansquenet, half French, whom she had come across in an Art school where she had been having very correct lessons in painting flowers in watercolours. But somehow she had got into the Life class and there she had met Pierre Lansquenet and had come home and announced her intention of marrying him. Richard Abernethie had put his foot down—he hadn't liked what he saw of Pierre Lansquenet and suspected that the young man was really in search of a rich wife. But whilst he was making a few researches into Lansquenet's antecedents, Cora had bolted with the fellow and married him out of hand. They had spent most of their married life in Brittany and Cornwall and other painters' conventional haunts. Lansquenet had been a very bad painter and not, by all accounts, a very nice man, but Cora had remained devoted to him and had never forgiven her family for their attitude to him. Richard had generously made his young sister an allowance and on that they had, so Mr. Entwhistle believed, lived. He doubted if Lansquenet had ever earned any money at all. He must have been dead now twelve years or more, thought Mr. Entwhistle. And now here was his widow, rather cushion-like in shape and dressed in wispy artistic black with festoons of jet beads, back in the home of her girlhood, moving about and touching things and exclaiming with pleasure when she recalled some childish memory. She made very little pretence of grief at her brother's death. But then, Mr. Entwhistle reflected, Cora had never pretended.

Reentering the room Lanscombe murmured in muted tones suitable to the occasion:

"Luncheon is served."

Two

After the delicious chicken soup, and plenty of cold viands accompanied by an excellent Chablis, the funeral atmosphere lightened. Nobody had really felt any deep grief for Richard Abernethie's death since none of them had had any close ties with him. Their behaviour had been suitably decorous and subdued (with the exception of the uninhibited Cora who was clearly enjoying herself) but it was now felt that the decencies had been observed and that normal conversation could be resumed. Mr. Entwhistle encouraged this attitude. He was experienced in funerals and knew exactly how to set correct funeral timing.

After the meal was over, Lanscombe indicated the library for coffee. This was his feeling for niceties. The time had come when business—in other words, The Will—would be discussed. The library had the proper atmosphere for that, with its bookshelves and its heavy red velvet curtains. He served coffee to them there and then withdrew, closing the door.

After a few desultory remarks, everyone began to look tentatively at Mr. Entwhistle. He responded promptly after glancing at his watch.

“I have to catch the 3:30 train,” he began.

Others, it seemed, also had to catch that train.

“As you know,” said Mr. Entwhistle, “I am the executor of Richard Abernethie's will—”

He was interrupted.

“I didn't know,” said Cora Lansquenet brightly. “Are you? Did he leave me anything?”

Not for the first time, Mr. Entwhistle felt that Cora was too apt to speak out of turn.

Bending a repressive glance at her he continued:

“Up to a year ago, Richard Abernethie’s will was very simple. Subject to certain legacies he left everything to his son Mortimer.”

“Poor Mortimer,” said Cora. “I do think all this infantile paralysis is dreadful.”

“Mortimer’s death, coming so suddenly and tragically, was a great blow to Richard. It took him some months to rally from it. I pointed out to him that it might be advisable for him to make new testamentary dispositions.”

Maude Abernethie asked in her deep voice:

“What would have happened if he hadn’t made a new will? Would it—would it all have gone to Timothy—as the next of kin, I mean?”

Mr. Entwhistle opened his mouth to give a disquisition on the subject of next of kin, thought better of it, and said crisply:

“On my advice, Richard decided to make a new will. First of all, however, he decided to get better acquainted with the younger generation.”

“He had us upon appro,” said Susan with a sudden rich laugh. “First George and then Greg and me, and then Rosamund and Michael.”

Gregory Banks said sharply, his thin face flushing:

“I don’t think you ought to put it like that, Susan. On appro, indeed!”

“But that was what it was, wasn’t it, Mr. Entwhistle?”

“Did he leave me anything?” repeated Cora.

Mr. Entwhistle coughed and spoke rather coldly:

“I propose to send you all copies of the will. I can read it to you in full now if you like but its legal phraseology may seem to you rather obscure. Briefly it amounts to this: After certain small bequests and a substantial legacy to Lanscombe to purchase an annuity, the bulk of the estate—a very considerable one—is to be divided into six equal portions. Four of these, after all duties are paid, are to go to Richard's brother Timothy, his nephew George Crossfield, his niece Susan Banks, and his niece Rosamund Shane. The other two portions are to be held upon trust and the income from them paid to Mrs. Helen Abernethie, the widow of his brother Leo; and to his sister Mrs. Cora Lansquenet, during their lifetime. The capital after their death to be divided between the other four beneficiaries or their issue."

"That's very nice!" said Cora Lansquenet with real appreciation. "An income! How much?"

"I—er—can't say exactly at present. Death duties, of course, will be heavy and—"

"Can't you give me any idea?"

Mr. Entwhistle realized that Cora must be appeased.

"Possibly somewhere in the neighbourhood of three to four thousand a year."

"Goody!" said Cora. "I shall go to Capri."

Helen Abernethie said softly:

"How very kind and generous of Richard. I do appreciate his affection towards me."

"He was very fond of you," said Mr. Entwhistle. "Leo was his favourite brother and your visits to him were always much appreciated after Leo died."

Helen said regretfully:

"I wish I had realized how ill he was—I came up to see him not long before he died, but although I knew he had been ill, I did not think it was serious."

"It was always serious," said Mr. Entwhistle. "But he did not want it talked about and I do not believe that anybody expected the end to come as soon as it did. The doctor was quite surprised, I know."

"'Suddenly, at his residence' that's what it said in the paper," said Cora, nodding her head. "I wondered then."

"It was a shock to all of us," said Maude Abernethie. "It upset poor Timothy dreadfully. So sudden, he kept saying. So sudden."

"Still, it's been hushed up very nicely, hasn't it?" said Cora.

Everybody stared at her and she seemed a little flustered.

"I think you're all quite right," she said hurriedly. "Quite right. I mean—it can't do any good—making it public. Very unpleasant for everybody. It should be kept strictly in the family."

The faces turned towards her looked even more blank.

Mr. Entwhistle leaned forward:

"Really, Cora, I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you mean."

Cora Lansquenet looked round at the family in wide-eyed surprise. She tilted her head on one side with a birdlike movement.

"But he was murdered, wasn't he?" she said.

Three

I

Travelling to London in the corner of a first-class carriage Mr. Entwhistle gave himself up to somewhat uneasy thought over that extraordinary remark made by Cora Lansquenet. Of course Cora was a rather unbalanced and excessively stupid woman, and she had been noted, even as a girl, for the embarrassing manner in which she had blurted out unwelcome truths. At least, he didn't mean truths—that was quite the wrong word to use. Awkward statements—that was a much better term.

In his mind he went back over the immediate sequence to that unfortunate remark. The combined stare of many startled and disapproving eyes had roused Cora to a sense of the enormity of what she had said.

Maude had exclaimed, "Really, Cora!" George had said, "My dear Aunt Cora." Somebody else had said, "What do you mean?"

And at once Cora Lansquenet, abashed, and convicted of enormity, had burst into fluttering phrases.

"Oh I'm sorry—I didn't mean—oh, of course, it was very stupid of me, but I did think from what he said—Oh, of course I know it's quite all right, but his death was so sudden—please forget that I said anything at all—I didn't mean to be so stupid—I know I'm always saying the wrong thing."

And then the momentary upset had died down and there had been a practical discussion about the disposition of the late Richard Abernethie's personal effects. The house and its contents, Mr. Entwhistle supplemented, would be put up for sale.

Cora's unfortunate gaffe had been forgotten. After all, Cora had always been, if not subnormal, at any rate embarrassingly näive. She had never had any idea of what should or should not be said. At nineteen it had not mattered so much. The mannerisms of an enfant terrible can persist to then, but an enfant terrible of nearly fifty is decidedly disconcerting. To blurt out unwelcome truths—

Mr. Entwhistle's train of thought came to an abrupt check. It was the second time that that disturbing word had occurred. Truths. And why was it so disturbing? Because, of course, that had always been at the bottom of the embarrassment that Cora's outspoken comments had caused. It was because her näive statements had been either true or had contained some grain of truth that they had been so embarrassing!

Although in the plump woman of forty-nine, Mr. Entwhistle had been able to see little resemblance to the gawky girl of earlier days, certain of Cora's mannerisms had persisted—the slight birdlike twist of the head as she brought out a particularly outrageous remark—a kind of air of pleased expectancy. In just such a way had Cora once commented on the figure of the kitchen maid. "Mollie can hardly get near the kitchen table, her stomach sticks out so. It's only been like that the last month or two. I wonder why she's getting so fat?"

Cora had been quickly hushed. The Abernethie household was Victorian in tone. The kitchen maid had disappeared from the premises the next day, and after due inquiry the second gardener had been ordered to make an honest woman of her and had been presented with a cottage in which to do so.

Far-off memories—but they had their point….

Mr. Entwhistle examined his uneasiness more closely. What was there in Cora's ridiculous remarks that had remained to tease his subconscious in this manner? Presently he isolated two phrases. "I did think from what he said—" and "his death was so sudden…."

Mr. Entwhistle examined that last remark first. Yes, Richard's death could, in a fashion, be considered sudden. Mr. Entwhistle had discussed Richard's health both with Richard himself and with his doctor. The latter had indicated plainly that a long life could not be expected. If Mr. Abernethie took reasonable care of himself he might live two or even three years. Perhaps longer—but that was unlikely. In any case the doctor had anticipated no collapse in the near future.

Well, the doctor had been wrong—but doctors, as they were the first to admit themselves, could never be sure about the individual reaction of a patient to disease. Cases given up, unexpectedly recovered. Patients on the way to recovery relapsed and died. So much depended on the vitality of the patient. On his own inner urge to live

And Richard Abernethie, though a strong and vigorous man, had had no great incentive to live.

For six months previously his only surviving son, Mortimer, had contracted infantile paralysis and had died within a week. His death had been a shock greatly augmented by the fact that he had been such a particularly strong and vital young man. A keen sportsman, he was also a good athlete and was one of those people of whom it was said that he had never had a day's illness in his life. He was on the point of becoming engaged to a very charming girl and his father's hopes for the future were centred in this dearly loved and thoroughly satisfactory son of his.

Instead had come tragedy. And besides the sense of personal loss, the future had held little to stir Richard Abernethie's interest. One son had died in infancy, the second without issue. He had no grandchildren. There was, in fact, no one of the Abernethie name to come after him, and he was the holder of a vast fortune with wide business interests which he himself still controlled to a certain extent. Who was to succeed to that fortune and to the control of those interests?

That this had worried Richard deeply, Entwhistle knew. His only surviving brother was very much of an invalid. There remained the younger generation. It had been in Richard's mind, the lawyer thought, though his friend had not actually said so, to choose one definite successor, though minor legacies would probably have been made. Anyway, as Entwhistle knew, within the last six months Richard Abernethie had invited to stay with him, in succession, his nephew George, his niece Susan and her husband, his niece Rosamund and her husband, and his sister-in-law, Mrs. Leo Abernethie. It was amongst the first three, so the lawyer thought, that Abernethie had looked for his successor. Helen Abernethie, he thought, had been asked out of personal affection and even possibly as someone to consult, for Richard had always held a high opinion of her good sense and practical judgement. Mr. Entwhistle also remembered that sometime during that six months period Richard had paid a short visit to his brother Timothy.

The net result had been the will which the lawyer now carried in his briefcase. An equable distribution of property. The only conclusion that could be drawn, therefore, was that he had been disappointed both in his nephew, and in his nieces or perhaps in his nieces' husbands.

As far as Mr. Entwhistle knew, he had not invited his sister, Cora Lansquenet, to visit him—and that brought the lawyer back to that first disturbing phrase that Cora had let slip so incoherently— "but I did think from what he said—"

What had Richard Abernethie said? And when had he said it? If Cora had not been to Enderby, then Richard Abernethie must have visited her at the artistic village in Berkshire where she had a cottage. Or was it something that Richard had said in a letter?

Mr. Entwhistle frowned. Cora, of course, was a very stupid woman. She could easily have misinterpreted a phrase, and twisted its meaning. But he did wonder what the phrase could have been….

There was enough uneasiness in him to make him consider the possibility of approaching Mrs. Lansquenet on the subject. Not too soon. Better not make it seem of importance. But he would like to know just what it was that Richard Abernethie had said to her which had led her to pipe up so briskly with that outrageous question:

"But he was murdered, wasn't he?"

II

In a third-class carriage, farther along the train, Gregory Banks said to his wife:

"That aunt of yours must be completely bats!"

"Aunt Cora?" Susan was vague. "Oh, yes, I believe she was always a bit simple or something."

George Crossfield, sitting opposite, said sharply:

"She really ought to be stopped from going about saying things like that. It might put ideas into people's heads."

Rosamund Shane, intent on outlining the cupid's bow of her mouth with lipstick, murmured vaguely:

"I don't suppose anyone would pay any attention to what a frump like that says. The most peculiar clothes and lashings and lashings of jet—"

"Well, I think it ought to be stopped," said George.

"All right, darling," laughed Rosamund, putting away her lipstick and contemplating her image with satisfaction in the mirror. "You stop it."

Her husband said unexpectedly:

"I think George is right. It's so easy to set people talking."

"Well, would it matter?" Rosamund contemplated the question. The cupid's bow lifted at the corners in a smile. "It might really be rather fun."

"Fun?" Four voices spoke.

"Having a murder in the family," said Rosamund. "Thrilling, you know!"

It occurred to that nervous and unhappy young man Gregory Banks that Susan's cousin, setting aside her attractive exterior, might have some faint points of resemblance to her Aunt Cora. Her next words rather confirmed his impression.

"If he was murdered," said Rosamund, "who do you think did it?"

Her gaze travelled thoughtfully round the carriage.

“His death has been awfully convenient for all of us,” she said thoughtfully. “Michael and I are absolutely on our beam ends. Mick’s had a really good part offered to him in the Sandbourne show if he can afford to wait for it. Now we’ll be in clover. We’ll be able to back our own show if we want to. As a matter of fact there’s a play with a simply wonderful part—”

Nobody listened to Rosamund’s ecstatic disquisition. Their attention had shifted to their own immediate future.

“Touch and go,” thought George to himself. “Now I can put that money back and nobody will ever know… But it’s been a near shave.”

Gregory closed his eyes as he lay back against the seat. Escape from bondage.

Susan said in her clear rather hard voice, “I’m very sorry, of course, for poor old Uncle Richard. But then he was very old, and Mortimer had died, and he’d nothing to live for and it would have been awful for him to go on as an invalid year after year. Much better for him to pop off suddenly like this with no fuss.”

Her hard confident young eyes softened as they watched her husband’s absorbed face. She adored Greg. She sensed vaguely that Greg cared for her less than she cared for him—but that only strengthened her passion. Greg was hers, she’d do anything for him. Anything at all….

III

Maude Abernethie, changing her dress for dinner at Enderby (for she was staying the night), wondered if she ought to have offered to stay longer to help Helen out with the sorting and clearing of the house. There would be all Richard’s personal things… There might be letters… All important papers, she supposed, had already been taken possession of by Mr. Entwhistle. And it really was necessary for her to get back to Timothy as soon as possible. He fretted so when she was not there to look after him. She hoped he would be pleased about the will and not annoyed. He had expected, she knew, that most of Richard’s fortune would come to him. After all, he was the only surviving Abernethie. Richard could surely have trusted him to look after the younger generation. Yes, she was afraid Timothy would be annoyed… And that was so bad for his digestion. And really, when he was annoyed, Timothy could become quite unreasonable. There were times when he seemed to lose his sense of proportion… She wondered if she ought to speak to Dr. Barton about it… Those sleeping pills—Timothy had been taking far too many of them lately—he got so angry when she wanted to keep the bottle for him. But they could be dangerous—Dr. Barton had said so—you could get drowsy and forget you'd taken them—and then take more. And then anything might happen! There certainly weren't as many left in the bottle as there ought to be… Timothy was really very naughty about medicines. He wouldn't listen to her… He was very difficult sometimes.

She sighed—then brightened. Things were going to be much easier now. The garden, for instance—

IV

Helen Abernethie sat by the fire in the green drawing room waiting for Maude to come down to dinner.

She looked round her, remembering old days here with Leo and the others. It had been a happy house. But a house like this needed people. It needed children and servants and big meals and plenty of roaring fires in winter. It had been a sad house when it had been lived in by one old man who had lost his son….

Who would buy it, she wondered? Would it be turned into an hotel, or an institute, or perhaps one of those hostels for young people? That was what happened to these vast houses nowadays. No one would buy them to live in. It would be pulled down, perhaps, and the whole estate built over. It made her sad to think of that, but she pushed the sadness aside resolutely. It did one no good to dwell on the past. This house, and happy days here, and Richard, and Leo, all that was good, but it was over. She had her own interests… And now, with the income Richard had left her, she would be able to keep on the villa in Cyprus and do all the things she had planned to do.

How worried she had been lately over money—taxation—all those investments going wrong… Now, thanks to Richard's money, all that was over….

Poor Richard. To die in his sleep like that had been really a great mercy… Suddenly on the 22nd—she supposed that that was what had put the idea into Cora's head. Really Cora was outrageous! She always had been. Helen remembered meeting her once abroad, soon after her marriage to Pierre Lansquenet. She had been particularly foolish and fatuous that day, twisting her head sideways, and making dogmatic statements about painting, and particularly about her husband's painting, which must have been most uncomfortable for him. No man could like his wife appearing such a fool. And Cora was a fool! Oh, well, poor thing, she couldn't help it, and that husband of hers hadn't treated her too well.

Helen's gaze rested absently on a bouquet of wax flowers that stood on a round malachite table. Cora had been sitting beside it when they had all been sitting round waiting to start for the church. She had been full of reminiscences and delighted recognitions of various things and was clearly so pleased at being back in her old home that she had completely lost sight of the reason for which they were assembled.

"But perhaps," thought Helen, "she was just less of a hypocrite than the rest of us…."

Cora had never been one for observing the conventions. Look at the way she had plumped out that question: "But he was murdered, wasn't he?"

The faces all round, startled, shocked, staring at her! Such a variety of expressions there must have been on those faces….

And suddenly, seeing the picture clearly in her mind, Helen frowned… There was something wrong with that picture….

Something…?

Somebody…?

Was it an expression on someone’s face? Was that it? Something that—how could she put it?—ought not to have been there…?

She didn’t know…she couldn’t place it…but there had been something—somewhere—wrong.

V

Meanwhile, in the buffet at Swindon, a lady in wispy mourning and festoons of jet was eating bath buns and drinking tea and looking forward to the future. She had no premonitions of disaster. She was happy.

These cross-country journeys were certainly tiring. It would have been easier to get back to Lytchett St. Mary via London—and not so very much more expensive. Ah, but expense didn’t matter now. Still, she would have had to travel with the family—probably having to talk all the way. Too much of an effort.

No, better to go home cross-country. These bath buns were really excellent. Extraordinary how hungry a funeral made you feel. The soup at Enderby had been delicious—and so was the cold soufflé.

How smug people were—and what hypocrites! All those faces—when she’d said that about murder! The way they’d all looked at her!

Well, it had been the right thing to say. She nodded her head in satisfied approval of herself. Yes, it had been the right thing to do.

She glanced up at the clock. Five minutes before her train went. She drank up her tea. Not very good tea. She made a grimace.

For a moment or two she sat dreaming. Dreaming of the future unfolding before her… She smiled like a happy child.

She was really going to enjoy herself at last… She went out to the small branch line train busily making plans.

Four

I

Mr. Entwhistle passed a very restless night. He felt so tired and so unwell in the morning that he did not get up.

His sister, who kept house for him, brought up his breakfast on a tray and explained to him severely how wrong he had been to go gadding off to the North of England at his age and in his frail state of health.

Mr. Entwhistle contented himself with saying that Richard Abernethie had been a very old friend.

“Funerals!” said his sister with deep disapproval. “Funerals are absolutely fatal for a man of your age! You’ll be taken off as suddenly as your precious Mr. Abernethie was if you don’t take more care of yourself.”

The word “suddenly” made Mr. Entwhistle wince. It also silenced him. He did not argue.

He was well aware of what had made him flinch at the word suddenly.

Cora Lansquenet! What she had suggested was definitely quite impossible, but all the same he would like to find out exactly why she had suggested it. Yes, he would go down to Lytchett St. Mary and see her. He could pretend that it was business connected with probate, that he needed her signature. No need to let her guess that he had paid any attention to her silly remark. But he would go down and see her—and he would do it soon.

He finished his breakfast and lay back on his pillows and read The Times. He found The Times very soothing.

It was about a quarter to six that evening when his telephone rang.

He picked it up. The voice at the other end of the wire was that of Mr. James Parrott, the present second partner of Bollard, Entwhistle, Entwhistle and Bollard.

“Look here, Entwhistle,” said Mr. Parrott, “I’ve just been rung up by the police from a place called Lytchett St. Mary.”

“Lytchett St. Mary?”

“Yes. It seems—” Mr. Parrott paused a moment. He seemed embarrassed. “It’s about a Mrs. Cora Lansquenet. Wasn’t she one of the heirs of the Abernethie estate?”

“Yes, of course. I saw her at the funeral yesterday.”

“Oh? She was at the funeral, was she?”

“Yes. What about her?”

“Well,” Mr. Parrott sounded apologetic. “She’s—it’s really most extraordinary—she’s been well—murdered.”

Mr. Parrott said the last word with the uttermost deprecation. It was not the sort of word, he suggested, that ought to mean anything to the firm of Bollard, Entwhistle, Entwhistle and Bollard.

“Murdered?”

“Yes—yes—I’m afraid so. Well, I mean, there’s no doubt about it.”

“How did the police get on to us?”

“Her companion, or housekeeper, or whatever she is—a Miss Gilchrist. The police asked for the name of her nearest relative or her solicitors. And this Miss Gilchrist seemed rather doubtful about relatives and their addresses, but she knew about us. So they got through at once.”

“What makes them think she was murdered?” demanded Mr. Entwhistle.

Mr. Parrott sounded apologetic again.

“Oh well, it seems there can’t be any doubt about that— I mean it was a hatchet or something of that kind—a very violent sort of crime.”

“Robbery?”

“That’s the idea. A window was smashed and there are some trinkets missing and drawers pulled out and all that, but the police seem to think there might be something—well—phony about it.”

“What time did it happen?”

“Some time between two and four thirty this afternoon.”

“Where was the housekeeper?”

“Changing library books in Reading. She got back about five o’clock and found Mrs. Lansquenet dead. The police want to know if we’ve any idea of who could have been likely to attack her. I said,” Mr. Parrott’s voice sounded outraged, “that I thought it was a most unlikely thing to happen.”

“Yes, of course.”

“It must be some half-witted local oaf—who thought there might be something to steal and then lost his head and attacked her. That must be it—eh, don’t you think so, Entwhistle?”

“Yes, yes…” Mr. Entwhistle spoke absentmindedly.

Parrott was right, he told himself. That was what must have happened….

But uncomfortably he heard Cora’s voice saying brightly:

“He was murdered, wasn’t he?”

Such a fool, Cora. Always had been. Rushing in where angels fear to tread… Blurting out unpleasant truths….

Truths!

That blasted word again….

II

Mr. Entwhistle and Inspector Morton looked at each other appraisingly.

In his neat precise manner Mr. Entwhistle had placed at the Inspector’s disposal all the relevant facts about Cora Lansquenet. Her upbringing, her marriage, her widowhood, her financial position, her relatives.

“Mr. Timothy Abernethie is her only surviving brother and her next of kin, but he is a recluse and an invalid, and is quite unable to leave home. He has empowered me to act for him and to make all such arrangements as may be necessary.”

The Inspector nodded. It was a relief for him to have this shrewd elderly solicitor to deal with. Moreover he hoped that the lawyer might be able to give him some assistance in solving what was beginning to look like a rather puzzling problem.

He said:

“I understand from Miss Gilchrist that Mrs. Lansquenet had been North, to the funeral of an elder brother, on the day before her death?”

“That is so, Inspector. I myself was there.”

“There was nothing unusual in her manner—nothing strange—or apprehensive?”

Mr. Entwhistle raised his eyebrows in well-simulated surprise.

“Is it customary for there to be something strange in the manner of a person who is shortly to be murdered?” he asked.

The Inspector smiled rather ruefully.

“I’m not thinking of her being ‘fey’ or having a premonition. No, I’m just hunting around for something—well, something out of the ordinary.”

“I don’t think I quite understand you, Inspector,” said Mr. Entwhistle.

“It’s not a very easy case to understand, Mr. Entwhistle. Say someone watched the Gilchrist woman come out of the house at about two o’clock and go along to the village and the bus stop. This someone then deliberately takes the hatchet that was lying by the woodshed, smashes the kitchen window with it, gets into the house, goes upstairs, attacks Mrs. Lansquenet with the hatchet—and attacks her savagely. Six or eight blows were struck.” Mr. Entwhistle flinched—“Oh, yes, quite a brutal crime. Then the intruder pulls out a few drawers, scoops up a few trinkets—worth perhaps a tenner in all, and clears off.”

“She was in bed?”

“Yes. It seems she returned late from the North the night before, exhausted and very excited. She’d come into some legacy as I understand?”

“Yes.”

“She slept very badly and woke with a terrible headache. She had several cups of tea and took some dope for her head and then told Miss Gilchrist not to disturb her till lunchtime. She felt no better and decided to take two sleeping pills. She then sent Miss Gilchrist into Reading by the bus to change some library books. She’d have been drowsy, if not already asleep, when this man broke in. He could have taken what he wanted by means of threats, or he could easily have gagged her. A hatchet, deliberately taken up with him from outside, seems excessive.”

“He may just have meant to threaten her with it,” Mr. Entwhistle suggested. “If she showed fight then—”

“According to the medical evidence there is no sign that she did. Everything seems to show that she was lying on her side sleeping peacefully when she was attacked.”

Mr. Entwhistle shifted uneasily in his chair.

"One does hear of these brutal and rather senseless murders," he pointed out.

"Oh yes, yes, that's probably what it will turn out to be. There's an alert out, of course, for any suspicious character. Nobody local is concerned, we're pretty sure of that. The locals are all accounted for satisfactorily. Most people are at work at that time of day. Of course her cottage is up a lane outside the village proper. Anyone could get there easily without being seen. There's a maze of lanes all round the village. It was a fine morning and there has been no rain for some days, so there aren't any distinctive car tracks to go by—in case anyone came by car."

"You think someone came by car?" Mr. Entwhistle asked sharply.

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. All I'm saying is there are curious features about the case. These, for instance—" He shoved across his desk a handful of things—a trefoil-shaped brooch with small pearls, a brooch set with amethysts, a small string of pearls, and a garnet bracelet.

"Those are the things that were taken from her jewel box. They were found just outside the house shoved into a bush."

"Yes—yes, that is rather curious. Perhaps if her assailant was frightened at what he had done—"

"Quite. But he would probably then have left them upstairs in her room… Of course a panic may have come over him between the bedroom and the front gate."

Mr. Entwhistle said quietly:

"Or they may, as you are suggesting, have only been taken as a blind."

"Yes, several possibilities…Of course this Gilchrist woman may have done it. Two women living alone together—you never know what quarrels or resentments or passions may have been aroused. Oh yes, we're taking that possibility into consideration as well. But it doesn't seem very likely. From all accounts they were on quite amicable terms.” He paused before going on. “According to you, nobody stands to gain by Mrs. Lansquenet’s death?”

The lawyer shifted uneasily.

“I didn’t quite say that.”

Inspector Morton looked up sharply.

“I thought you said that Mrs. Lansquenet’s source of income was an allowance made to her by her brother and that as far as you knew she had no property or means of her own.”

“That is so. Her husband died a bankrupt, and from what I knew of her as a girl and since, I should be surprised if she had ever saved or accumulated any money.

“The cottage itself is rented, not her own, and the few sticks of furniture aren’t anything to write home about, even in these days. Some spurious ‘cottage oak’ and some arty painted stuff. Whoever she’s left them to won’t gain much—if she’s made a will, that is to say.”

Mr. Entwhistle shook his head.

“I know nothing about her will. I had not seen her for many years, you must understand.”

“Then, what exactly did you mean just now? You had something in mind, I think?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. I wished to be strictly accurate.”

“Were you referring to the legacy you mentioned? The one that her brother left her? Had she the power to dispose of that by will?”

“No, not in the sense you mean. She had no power to dispose of the capital. Now that she is dead, it will be divided amongst the five other beneficiaries of Richard Abernethie’s will. That is what I meant. All five of them will benefit automatically by her death.”

The Inspector looked disappointed.

“Oh, I thought we were on to something. Well, there certainly seems no motive there for anyone to come and swipe her with a hatchet. Looks as though it’s some chap with a screw loose—one of these adolescent criminals, perhaps—a lot of them about. And then he lost his nerve and bushed the trinkets and ran… Yes, it must be that. Unless it’s the highly respectable Miss Gilchrist, and I must say that seems unlikely.”

“When did she find the body?”

“Not until just about five o’clock. She came back from Reading by the 4:50 bus. She arrived back at the cottage, let herself in by the front door, and went into the kitchen and put the kettle on for tea. There was no sound from Mrs. Lansquenet’s room, but Miss Gilchrist assumed that she was still sleeping. Then Miss Gilchrist noticed the kitchen window; the glass was all over the floor. Even then, she thought at first it might have been done by a boy with a ball or a catapult. She went upstairs and peeped very gently into Mrs. Lansquenet’s room to see if she were asleep or if she was ready for some tea. Then of course, she let loose, shrieked, and rushed down the lane to the nearest neighbour. Her story seems perfectly consistent and there was no trace of blood in her room or in the bathroom, or on her clothes. No. I don’t think Miss Gilchrist had anything to do with it. The doctor got there at half past five. He puts the time of death not later than four thirty—and probably much nearer two o’clock, so it looks as though whoever it was, was hanging round waiting for Miss Gilchrist to leave the cottage.”

The lawyer’s face twitched slightly. Inspector Morton went on: “You’ll be going to see Miss Gilchrist, I suppose?”

“I thought of doing so.”

“I should be glad if you would. She’s told us, I think, everything that she can, but you never know. Sometimes, in conversation, some point or other may crop up. She’s a trifle old maidish—but quite a sensible, practical woman—and she’s really been most helpful and efficient.”

He paused and then said:

"The body's at the mortuary. If you would like to see it—"

Mr. Entwhistle assented, though with no enthusiasm.

Some few minutes later he stood looking down at the mortal remains of Cora Lansquenet. She had been savagely attacked and the henna dyed fringe was clotted and stiffened with blood. Mr. Entwhistle's lips tightened and he looked away queasily.

Poor little Cora. How eager she had been the day before yesterday to know whether her brother had left her anything. What rosy anticipations she must have had of the future. What a lot of silly things she could have done—and enjoyed doing—with the money.

Poor Cora… How short a time those anticipations had lasted.

No one had gained by her death—not even the brutal assailant who had thrust away those trinkets as he fled. Five people had a few thousands more of capital—but the capital they had already received was probably more than sufficient for them. No, there could be no motive there.

Funny that murder should have been running in Cora's mind the very day before she herself was murdered.

"He was murdered, wasn't he?"

Such a ridiculous thing to say. Ridiculous! Quite ridiculous! Much too ridiculous to mention to Inspector Morton.

Of course, after he had seen Miss Gilchrist….

Supposing that Miss Gilchrist, although it was unlikely, could throw any light on what Richard had said to Cora.

"I thought from what he said—" What had Richard said?

"I must see Miss Gilchrist at once," said Mr. Entwhistle to himself.

III

Miss Gilchrist was a spare faded-looking woman with short, irongrey hair. She had one of those indeterminate faces that women around fifty so often acquire.

She greeted Mr. Entwhistle warmly.

“I’m so glad you have come, Mr. Entwhistle. I really know so little about Mrs. Lansquenet’s family, and of course I’ve never, never had anything to do with a murder before. It’s too dreadful!”

Mr. Entwhistle felt quite sure that Miss Gilchrist had never before had anything to do with murder. Indeed, her reaction to it was very much that of his partner.

“One reads about them, of course,” said Miss Gilchrist, relegating crimes to their proper sphere. “And even that I’m not very fond of doing. So sordid, most of them.”

Following her into the sitting room Mr. Entwhistle was looking sharply about him. There was a strong smell of oil paint. The cottage was overcrowded, less by furniture, which was much as Inspector Morton had described it, than by pictures. The walls were covered with pictures, mostly very dark and dirty oil paintings. But there were watercolour sketches as well, and one or two still lifes. Smaller pictures were stacked on the window seat.

“Mrs. Lansquenet used to buy them at sales,” Miss Gilchrist explained. “It was a great interest to her, poor dear. She went to all the sales round about. Pictures go so cheap, nowadays, a mere song. She never paid more than a pound for any of them, sometimes only a few shillings, and there was a wonderful chance, she always said, of picking up something worthwhile. She used to say that this was an Italian Primitive that might be worth a lot of money.”

Mr. Entwhistle looked at the Italian Primitive pointed out to him dubiously. Cora, he reflected, had never really known anything about pictures. He’d eat his hat if any of these daubs were worth a five pound note!

"Of course," said Miss Gilchrist, noticing his expression, and quick to sense his reaction, "I don't know much myself, though my father was a painter—not a very successful one, I'm afraid. But I used to do watercolours myself as a girl and I heard a lot of talk about painting and that made it nice for Mrs. Lansquenet to have someone she could talk to about painting and who'd understand. Poor dear soul, she cared so much about artistic things."

"You were fond of her?"

A foolish question, he told himself. Could she possibly answer "no"? Cora, he thought, must have been a tiresome woman to live with.

"Oh yes," said Miss Gilchrist. "We got on very well together. In some ways, you know, Mrs. Lansquenet was just like a child. She said anything that came into her head. I don't know that her judgement was always very good—"

One does not say of the dead—"She was a thoroughly silly woman"—Mr. Entwhistle said, "She was not in any sense an intellectual woman."

"No—no—perhaps not. But she was very shrewd, Mr. Entwhistle. Really very shrewd. It quite surprised me sometimes—how she managed to hit the nail on the head."

Mr. Entwhistle looked at Miss Gilchrist with more interest. He thought that she was no fool herself.

"You were with Mrs. Lansquenet for some years, I think?"

"Three and a half."

"You—er—acted as companion and also did the—er—well—looked after the house?"

It was evident that he had touched on a delicate subject. Miss Gilchrist flushed a little.

"Oh yes, indeed. I did most of the cooking— I quite enjoy cooking—and did some dusting and light housework. None of the rough, of course." Miss

Gilchrist's tone expressed a firm principle. Mr. Entwhistle, who had no idea what "the rough" was, made a soothing murmur.

"Mrs. Panter from the village came in for that. Twice a week regularly. You see, Mr. Entwhistle, I could not have contemplated being in any way a servant. When my little tea shop failed—such a disaster—it was the war, you know. A delightful place. I called it the Willow Tree and all the china was blue willow pattern—sweetly pretty—and the cakes really good—I've always had a hand with cakes and scones. Yes, I was doing really well and then the war came and supplies were cut down and the whole thing went bankrupt—a war casualty, that is what I always say, and I try to think of it like that. I lost the little money my father left me that I had invested in it, and of course I had to look round for something to do. I'd never been trained for anything. So I went to one lady but it didn't answer at all—she was so rude and overbearing—and then I did some office work—but I didn't like that at all, and then I came to Mrs. Lansquenet and we suited each other from the start—her husband being an artist and everything." Miss Gilchrist came to a breathless stop and added mournfully: "But how I loved my dear, dear little tea shop. Such nice people used to come to it!"

Looking at Miss Gilchrist, Mr. Entwhistle felt a sudden stab of recognition—a composite picture of hundreds of ladylike figures approaching him in numerous Bay Trees, Ginger Cats, Blue Parrots, Willow Trees and Cosy Corners, all chastely encased in blue or pink or orange overalls and taking orders for pots of china tea and cakes. Miss Gilchrist had a Spiritual Home—a ladylike tea shop of Ye Olde Worlde variety with a suitable genteel clientèle. There must, he thought, be large numbers of Miss Gilchrists all over the country, all looking much alike with mild patient faces and obstinate upper lips and slightly wispy grey hair.

Miss Gilchrist went on:

"But really I must not talk about myself. The police have been very kind and considerate. Very kind indeed. An Inspector Morton came over from headquarters and he was most understanding. He even arranged for me to go and spend the night at Mrs. Lake's down the lane but I said 'No.' I felt it my duty to stay here with all Mrs. Lansquenet's nice things in the house. They took the—the—" Miss Gilchrist gulped a little—"the body away, of course, and locked up the room, and the Inspector told me there would be a constable on duty in the kitchen all night—because of the broken window—it has been reglazed this morning, I am glad to say—where was I? Oh yes, so I said I should be quite all right in my own room, though I must confess I did pull the chest of drawers across the door and put a big jug of water on the windowsill. One never knows—and if by any chance it was a maniac—one does hear of such things….”

Here Miss Gilchrist ran down. Mr. Entwhistle said quickly:

“I am in possession of all the main facts. Inspector Morton gave them to me. But if it would not distress you too much to give me your own account—?”

“Of course, Mr. Entwhistle. I know just what you feel. The police are so impersonal, are they not? Rightly so, of course.”

“Mrs. Lansquenet got back from the funeral the night before last,” Mr. Entwhistle prompted.

“Yes, her train didn’t get in until quite late. I had ordered a taxi to meet it as she told me to. She was very tired, poor dear—as was only natural—but on the whole she was in quite good spirits.”

“Yes, yes. Did she talk about the funeral at all?”

“Just a little. I gave her a cup of hot milk—she didn’t want anything else—and she told me that the church had been quite full and lots and lots of flowers—oh! and she said that she was sorry not to have seen her other brother—Timothy—was it?”

“Yes, Timothy.”

“She said it was over twenty years since she had seen him and that she hoped he would have been there, but she quite realized he would have thought it better not to come under the circumstances, but that his wife was there and that she’d never been able to stand Maude—oh dear, I do beg your pardon, Mr. Entwhistle—it just slipped out—I never meant—”

“Not at all. Not at all,” said Mr. Entwhistle encouragingly. “I am no relation, you know. And I believe that Cora and her sister-in-law never hit it off very well.”

“Well, she almost said as much. ‘I always knew Maude would grow into one of those bossy interfering women,’ is what she said. And then she was very tired and said she’d go to bed at once— I’d got her hot-water bottle in all ready—and she went up.”

“She said nothing else that you can remember specially?”

“She had no premonition, Mr. Entwhistle, if that is what you mean. I’m sure of that. She was really, you know, in remarkably good spirits—apart from tiredness and the—the sad occasion. She asked me how I’d like to go to Capri. To Capri! Of course I said it would be too wonderful—it’s a thing I’d never dreamed I’d ever do—and she said, ‘We’ll go!’ Just like that. I gathered—of course it wasn’t actually mentioned—that her brother had left her an annuity or something of the kind.”

Mr. Entwhistle nodded.

“Poor dear. Well, I’m glad she had the pleasure of planning—at all events.” Miss Gilchrist sighed and murmured wistfully, “I don’t suppose I shall ever go to Capri now….”

“And the next morning?” Mr. Entwhistle prompted, oblivious of Miss Gilchrist’s disappointments.

“The next morning Mrs. Lansquenet wasn’t at all well. Really, she looked dreadful. She’d hardly slept at all, she told me. Nightmares. ‘It’s because you were overtired yesterday,’ I told her, and she said maybe it was. She had her breakfast in bed, and she didn’t get up all the morning, but at lunchtime she told me that she still hadn’t been able to sleep. ‘I feel so restless,’ she said. ‘I keep thinking of things and wondering.’ And then she said she’d take some sleeping tablets and try and get a good sleep in the afternoon. And she wanted me to go over by bus to Reading and change her two library books, because she’d finished them both on the train journey and she hadn’t got anything to read. Usually two books lasted her nearly a week. So I went off just after two and that—and that—was the last time—” Miss Gilchrist began to sniff. “She must have been asleep, you know. She wouldn’t have heard anything and the Inspector assures me that she didn’t suffer… He thinks the first blow killed her. Oh dear, it makes me quite sick even to think of it!”

“Please, please. I’ve no wish to take you any further over what happened. All I wanted was to hear what you could tell me about Mrs. Lansquenet before the tragedy.”

“Very natural, I’m sure. Do tell her relations that apart from having such a bad night she was really very happy and looking forward to the future.”

Mr. Entwhistle paused before asking his next question. He wanted to be careful not to lead the witness.

“She did not mention any of her relations in particular?”

“No, no, I don’t think so.” Miss Gilchrist considered. “Except what she said about being sorry not to see her brother Timothy.”

“She did not speak at all about her brother’s decease? The—er—cause of it? Anything like that?”

“No.”

There was no sign of alertness in Miss Gilchrist’s face. Mr. Entwhistle felt certain there would have been if Cora had plumped out her verdict of murder.

“He’d been ill for some time, I think,” said Miss Gilchrist vaguely, “though I must say I was surprised to hear it. He looked so very vigorous.”

Mr. Entwhistle said quickly:

“You saw him—when?”

“When he came down here to see Mrs. Lansquenet. Let me see—that was about three weeks ago.”

“Did he stay here?”

“Oh—no—just came for luncheon. It was quite a surprise. Mrs. Lansquenet hadn’t expected him. I gather there had been some family disagreement. She hadn’t seen him for years, she told me.”

“Yes, that is so.”

“It quite upset her—seeing him again—and probably realizing how ill he was—”

“She knew he was ill?”

“Oh yes, I remember quite well. Because I wondered—only in my own mind, you understand—if perhaps Mr. Abernethie might be suffering from softening of the brain. An aunt of mine—”

Mr. Entwhistle deftly sidetracked the aunt.

“Something Mrs. Lansquenet said caused you to think of softening of the brain?”

“Yes. Mrs. Lansquenet said something like ‘Poor Richard. Mortimer’s death must have aged him a lot. He sounds quite senile. All these fancies about persecution and that someone is poisoning him. Old people get like that.’ And of course, as I knew, that is only too true. This aunt that I was telling you about—was convinced the servants were trying to poison her in her food and at last would eat only boiled eggs—because, she said, you couldn’t get inside a boiled egg to poison it. We humoured her, but if it had been nowadays I don’t know what we should have done. With eggs so scarce and mostly foreign at that, so that boiling is always risky.”

Mr. Entwhistle listened to the saga of Miss Gilchrist’s aunt with deaf ears. He was very much disturbed.

He said at last, when Miss Gilchrist had twittered into silence:

“I suppose Mrs. Lansquenet didn’t take all this too seriously?”

“Oh no, Mr. Entwhistle, she quite understood.”

Mr. Entwhistle found that remark disturbing too, though not quite in the sense in which Miss Gilchrist had used it.

Had Cora Lansquenet understood? Not then, perhaps, but later. Had she understood only too well?

Mr. Entwhistle knew that there had been no senility about Richard Abernethie. Richard had been in full possession of his faculties. He was not the man to have persecution mania in any form. He was, as he always had been, a hardheaded businessman—and his illness made no difference in that respect.

It seemed extraordinary that he should have spoken to his sister in the terms that he had. But perhaps Cora, with her odd childlike shrewdness, had read between the lines, and had crossed the t’s and dotted the i’s of what Richard Abernethie had actually said.

In most ways, thought Mr. Entwhistle, Cora had been a complete fool. She had no judgement, no balance, and a crude childish point of view, but she had also the child’s uncanny knack of sometimes hitting the nail on the head in a way that seemed quite startling.

Mr. Entwhistle left it at that. Miss Gilchrist, he thought, knew no more than she had told him. He asked whether she knew if Cora Lansquenet had left a will. Miss Gilchrist replied promptly that Mrs. Lansquenet’s will was at the Bank.

With that and after making certain further arrangements he took his leave. He insisted on Miss Gilchrist’s accepting a small sum in cash to defray present expenses and told her he would communicate with her again, and in the meantime he would be grateful if she would stay on at the cottage while she was looking about for a new post. That would be, Miss Gilchrist said, a great convenience and really she was not at all nervous.

He was unable to escape without being shown round the cottage by Miss Gilchrist, and introduced to various pictures by the late Pierre Lansquenet which were crowded into the small dining room and which made Mr. Entwhistle flinch—they were mostly nudes executed with a singular lack of draughtsmanship but with much fidelity to detail. He was also made to admire various small oil sketches of picturesque fishing ports done by Cora herself.

“Polperro,” said Miss Gilchrist proudly. “We were there last year and Mrs. Lansquenet was delighted with its picturesqueness.”

Mr. Entwhistle, viewing Polperro from the southwest, from the northwest, and presumably from the several other points of the compass, agreed that Mrs. Lansquenet had certainly been enthusiastic.

“Mrs. Lansquenet promised to leave me her sketches,” said Miss Gilchrist wistfully. “I admired them so much. One can really see the waves breaking in this one, can’t one? Even if she forgot, I might perhaps have just one as a souvenir, do you think?”

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” said Mr. Entwhistle graciously.

He made a few further arrangements and then left to interview the Bank Manager and to have a further consultation with Inspector Morton.

Five

I

“Worn out, that’s what you are,” said Miss Entwhistle in the indignant and bullying tones adopted by devoted sisters towards brothers for whom they keep house. “You shouldn’t do it, at your age. What’s it all got to do with you, I’d like to know? You’ve retired, haven’t you?”

Mr. Entwhistle said mildly that Richard Abernethie had been one of his oldest friends.

“I dare say. But Richard Abernethie’s dead, isn’t he? So I see no reason for you to go mixing yourself up in things that are no concern of yours and catching your death of cold in these nasty draughty railway trains. And murder, too! I can’t see why they sent for you at all.”

“They communicated with me because there was a letter in the cottage signed by me, telling Cora the arrangements for the funeral.”

“Funerals! One funeral after another, and that reminds me. Another of these precious Abernethies has been ringing you up— Timothy, I think he said. From somewhere in Yorkshire—and that’s about a funeral, too! Said he’d ring again later.”

A personal call for Mr. Entwhistle came through that evening. Taking it, he heard Maude Abernethie’s voice at the other end.

“Thank goodness I’ve got hold of you at last! Timothy has been in the most terrible state. This news about Cora has upset him dreadfully.”

“Quite understandable,” said Mr. Entwhistle.

“What did you say?”

“I said it was quite understandable.”

“I suppose so.” Maude sounded more than doubtful. “Do you mean to say it was really murder?”

(“It was murder, wasn’t it?” Cora had said. But this time there was no hesitation about the answer.)

“Yes, it was murder,” said Mr. Entwhistle.

“And with a hatchet, so the papers say?”

“Yes.”

“It seems quite incredible to me,” said Maude, “that Timothy’s sister—his own sister—can have been murdered with a hatchet!”

It seemed no less incredible to Mr. Entwhistle. Timothy’s life was so remote from violence that even his relations, one felt, ought to be equally exempt.

“I’m afraid one has to face the fact,” said Mr. Entwhistle mildly.

“I am really very worried about Timothy. It’s so bad for him, all this! I’ve got him to bed now but he insists on my persuading you to come up and see him. He wants to know a hundred things—whether there will be an inquest, and who ought to attend, and how soon after that the funeral can take place, and where, and what funds there are, and if Cora expressed any wishes about being cremated or what, and if she left a will—”

Mr. Entwhistle interrupted before the catalogue got too long.

“There is a will, yes. She left Timothy her executor.”

“Oh dear, I’m afraid Timothy can’t undertake anything—”

“The firm will attend to all the necessary business. The will’s very simple. She left her own sketches and an amethyst brooch to her companion, Miss Gilchrist, and everything else to Susan.”

“To Susan? Now I wonder why Susan? I don’t believe she ever saw Susan—not since she was a baby anyway.”

"I imagine that it was because Susan was reported to have made a marriage not wholly pleasing to the family."

Maude snorted.

"Even Gregory is a great deal better than Pierre Lansquenet ever was! Of course marrying a man who serves in a shop would have been unheard of in my day—but a chemist's shop is much better than a haberdasher's—and at least Gregory seems quite respectable." She paused and added: "Does this mean that Susan gets the income Richard left to Cora?"

"Oh no. The capital of that will be divided according to the instructions of Richard's will. No, poor Cora had only a few hundred pounds and the furniture of her cottage to leave. When outstanding debts are paid and the furniture sold I doubt if the whole thing will amount to more than at most five hundred pounds." He went on: "There will have to be an inquest, of course. That is fixed for next Thursday. If Timothy is agreeable, we'll send down young Lloyd to watch the proceedings on behalf of the family." He added apologetically: "I'm afraid it may attract some notoriety owing to the —er—circumstances."

"How very unpleasant! Have they caught the wretch who did it?"

"Not yet."

"One of these dreadful half-baked young men who go about the country roving and murdering, I suppose. The police are so incompetent."

"No, no," said Mr. Entwhistle. "The police are by no means incompetent. Don't imagine that, for a moment."

"Well, it all seems to me quite extraordinary. And so bad for Timothy. I suppose you couldn't possibly come down here, Mr. Entwhistle? I should be most grateful if you could. I think Timothy's mind might be set at rest if you were here to reassure him."

Mr. Entwhistle was silent for a moment. The invitation was not unwelcome.

"There is something in what you say," he admitted. "And I shall need Timothy's signature as executor to certain documents. Yes, I think it might be quite a good thing."

"That is splendid. I am so relieved. Tomorrow? And you'll stay the night? The best train is the 11:20 from St. Pancras."

"It will have to be an afternoon train, I'm afraid. I have," said Mr. Entwhistle, "other business in the morning…."

II

George Crossfield greeted Mr. Entwhistle heartily but with, perhaps, just a shade of surprise.

Mr. Entwhistle said, in an explanatory way, although it really explained nothing:

"I've just come up from Lytchett St. Mary."

"Then it really was Aunt Cora? I read about it in the papers and I just couldn't believe it. I thought it must be someone of the same name."

"Lansquenet is not a common name."

"No, of course it isn't. I suppose there is a natural aversion to believing that anyone of one's own family can be murdered. Sounds to me rather like that case last month on Dartmoor."

"Does it?"

"Yes. Same circumstances. Cottage in a lonely position. Two elderly women living together. Amount of cash taken really quite pitifully inadequate one would think."

"The value of money is always relative," said Mr. Entwhistle. "It is the need that counts."

"Yes—yes, I suppose you're right."

"If you need ten pounds desperately—then fifteen is more than adequate. And inversely so. If your need is for a hundred pounds, forty-five would be worse than useless. And if it's thousands you need, then hundreds are not enough."

George said with a sudden flicker of the eyes: "I'd say any money came in useful these days. Everyone's hard up."

"But not desperate," Mr. Entwhistle pointed out. "It's the desperation that counts."

"Are you thinking of something in particular?"

"Oh no, not at all." He paused then went on: "It will be a little time before the estate is settled; would it be convenient for you to have an advance?"

"As a matter of fact, I was going to raise the subject. However, I saw the Bank this morning and referred them to you and they were quite obliging about an overdraft."

Again there came that flicker in George's eyes, and Mr. Entwhistle, from the depths of his experience, recognized it. George, he felt certain, had been, if not desperate, then in very sore straits for money. He knew at that moment, what he had felt subconsciously all along, that in money matters he would not trust George. He wondered if old Richard Abernethie, who also had had great experience in judging men, had felt that. Mr. Entwhistle was also sure that after Mortimer's death, Abernethie had formed the intention of making George his heir. George was not an Abernethie, but he was the only male of the younger generation. He was the natural successor to Mortimer. Richard Abernethie had sent for George, had had him staying in the house for some days. It seemed probable that at the end of the visit the older man had not found George satisfactory. Had he felt instinctively, as Mr. Entwhistle felt, that George was not straight? George's father, so the family had thought, had been a poor choice on Laura's part. A stockbroker who had had other rather mysterious activities. George took after his father rather than after the Abernethies.

Perhaps misinterpreting the old lawyer’s silence, George said with an uneasy laugh:

“Truth is, I’ve not been very lucky with my investments lately. I took a bit of a risk and it didn’t come off. More or less cleaned me out. But I’ll be able to recoup myself now. All one needs is a bit of capital. Ardens Consolidated are pretty good, don’t you think?”

Mr. Entwhistle neither agreed nor dissented. He was wondering if by any chance George had been speculating with money that belonged to clients and not with his own? If George had been in danger of criminal prosecution—

Mr. Entwhistle said precisely:

“I tried to reach you the day after the funeral, but I suppose you weren’t in the office.”

“Did you? They never told me. As a matter of fact, I thought I was entitled to a day off after the good news!”

“The good news?”

George reddened.

“Oh look here, I didn’t mean Uncle Richard’s death. But knowing you’ve come into money does give one a bit of a kick. One feels one must celebrate. As a matter of fact I went to Hurst Park. Backed two winners. It never rains but it pours! If your luck’s in, it’s in! Only a matter of fifty quid, but it all helps.”

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Entwhistle. “It all helps. And there will now be an additional sum coming to you as a result of your Aunt Cora’s death.”

George looked concerned.

“Poor old girl,” he said. “It does seem rotten luck, doesn’t it? Probably just when she was all set to enjoy herself.”

“Let us hope the police will find the person responsible for her death,” said Mr. Entwhistle.

“I expect they’ll get him all right. They’re good, our police. They round up all the undesirables in the neighbourhood and go through ’em with a tooth comb—make them account for their actions at the time it happened.”

“Not so easy if a little time has elapsed,” said Mr. Entwhistle. He gave a wintry little smile that indicated he was about to make a joke. “I myself was in Hatchard’s bookshop at 3:30 on the day in question. Should I remember that if I were questioned by the police in ten days’ time? I very much doubt it. And you, George, you were at Hurst Park. Would you remember which day you went to the races in—say—a month’s time?”

“Oh I could fix it by the funeral—the day after.”

“True—true. And then you backed a couple of winners. Another aid to memory. One seldom forgets the names of a horse on which one has won money. Which were they, by the way?”

“Let me see. Gaymarck and Frogg II. Yes, I shan’t forget them in a hurry.”

Mr. Entwhistle gave his dry little cackle of laughter and took his leave.

III

“It’s lovely to see you, of course,” said Rosamund without any marked enthusiasm. “But it’s frightfully early in the morning.”

She yawned heavily.

“It’s eleven o’clock,” said Mr. Entwhistle.

Rosamund yawned again. She said apologetically:

“We had the hell of a party last night. Far too much to drink. Michael’s got a terrible hangover still.”

Michael appeared at this moment, also yawning. He had a cup of black coffee in his hand and was wearing a very smart dressing gown. He looked haggard and attractive—and his smile had the usual charm. Rosamund was wearing a black skirt, a rather dirty yellow pullover, and nothing else as far as Mr. Entwhistle could judge.

The precise and fastidious lawyer did not approve at all of the young Shanes' way of living. The rather ramshackle flat on the first floor of a Chelsea house—the bottles and glasses and cigarette ends that lay about in profusion—the stale air, and the general air of dust and dishevelment.

In the midst of this discouraging setting Rosamund and Michael bloomed with their wonderful good looks. They were certainly a very handsome couple and they seemed, Mr. Entwhistle thought, very fond of each other. Rosamund was certainly adoringly fond of Michael.

"Darling," she said. "Do you think just a teeny sip of champagne? Just to pull us together and toast the future. Oh, Mr. Entwhistle, it really is the most marvellous luck Uncle Richard leaving us all that lovely money just now—"

Mr. Entwhistle noted the quick, almost scowling, frown that Michael gave, but Rosamund went on serenely:

"Because there's the most wonderful chance of a play. Michael's got an option on it. It's a most wonderful part for him and even a small part for me, too. It's about one of these young criminals, you know, they are really saints—it's absolutely full of the latest modern ideas."

"So it would seem," said Mr. Entwhistle stiffly.

"He robs, you know, and he kills, and he's hounded by the police and by society—and then in the end, he does a miracle."

Mr. Entwhistle sat in outraged silence. Pernicious nonsense these young fools talked! And wrote.

Not that Michael Shane was talking much. There was still a faint scowl on his face.

“Mr. Entwhistle doesn’t want to hear all our rhapsodies, Rosamund,” he said. “Shut up for a bit and let him tell us why he’s come to see us.”

“There are just one or two little matters to straighten out,” said Mr. Entwhistle. “I have just come back from Lytchett St. Mary.”

“Then it was Aunt Cora who was murdered? We saw it in the paper. And I said it must be because it’s a very uncommon name. Poor old Aunt Cora. I was looking at her at the funeral that day and thinking what a frump she was and that really one might as well be dead if one looked like that—and now she is dead. They absolutely wouldn’t believe it last night when I told them that that murder with the hatchet in the paper was actually my aunt! They just laughed, didn’t they, Michael?”

Michael Shane did not reply and Rosamund with every appearance of enjoyment said:

“Two murders one after another. It’s almost too much, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be a fool, Rosamund, your Uncle Richard wasn’t murdered.”

“Well, Cora thought he was.”

Mr. Entwhistle intervened to ask:

“You came back to London after the funeral, didn’t you?”

“Yes, we came by the same train as you did.”

“Of course… Of course. I ask because I tried to get hold of you,” he shot a quick glance at the telephone—“on the following day—several times in fact, and couldn’t get an answer.”

“Oh dear—I’m so sorry. What were we doing that day? The day before yesterday. We were here until about twelve, weren’t we? And then you went round to try and get hold of Rosenheim and you went on to lunch with

Oscar and I went out to see if I could get some nylons and round the shops. I was to meet Janet but we missed each other. Yes, I had a lovely afternoon shopping—and then we dined at the Castile. We got back here about ten o'clock, I suppose."

"About that," said Michael. He was looking thoughtfully at Mr. Entwhistle. "What did you want to get hold of us for, sir?"

"Oh! Just some points that had arisen about Richard Abernethie's estate—papers to sign—all that."

Rosamund asked: "Do we get the money now, or not for ages?"

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Entwhistle, "that the law is prone to delays."

"But we can get an advance, can't we?" Rosamund looked alarmed. "Michael said we could. Actually it's terribly important. Because of the play."

Michael said pleasantly:

"Oh, there's no real hurry. It's just a question of deciding whether or not to take up the option."

"It will be quite easy to advance you some money," said Mr. Entwhistle. "As much as you need."

"Then that's all right." Rosamund gave a sigh of relief. She added as an afterthought: "Did Aunt Cora leave any money?"

"A little. She left it to your Cousin Susan."

"Why Susan, I should like to know! Is it much?"

"A few hundred pounds and some furniture."

"Nice furniture?"

"No," said Mr. Entwhistle.

Rosamund lost interest. “It’s all very odd, isn’t it?” she said. “There was Cora, after the funeral, suddenly coming out with ‘He was murdered!’ and then, the very next day, she goes and gets herself murdered? I mean, it is odd, isn’t it?”

There was a moment’s rather uncomfortable silence before Mr. Entwhistle said quietly:

“Yes, it is indeed very odd….”

IV

Mr. Entwhistle studied Susan Banks as she leant forward across the table talking in her animated manner.

None of the loveliness of Rosamund here. But it was an attractive face and its attraction lay, Mr. Entwhistle decided, in its vitality. The curves of the mouth were rich and full. It was a woman’s mouth and her body was very decidedly a woman’s—emphatically so. Yet in many ways Susan reminded him of her uncle, Richard Abernethie. The shape of her head, the line of her jaw, the deep-set reflective eyes. She had the same kind of dominant personality that Richard had had, the same driving energy, the same foresightedness and forthright judgement. Of the three members of the younger generation she alone seemed to be made of the metal that had raised up the vast Abernethie fortunes. Had Richard recognized in this niece a kindred spirit to his own? Mr. Entwhistle thought he must have done. Richard had always had a keen appreciation of character. Here, surely, were exactly the qualities of which he was in search. And yet, in his will, Richard Abernethie had made no distinction in her favour. Distrustful, as Mr. Entwhistle believed, of George, passing over that lovely dimwit, Rosamund—could he not have found in Susan what he was seeking—an heir of his own mettle?

If not, the cause must be—yes, it followed logically—the husband….

Mr. Entwhistle’s eyes slid gently over Susan’s shoulder to where Gregory Banks stood absently whittling at a pencil.

A thin, pale, nondescript young man with reddish sandy hair. So overshadowed by Susan's colourful personality that it was difficult to realize what he himself was really like. Nothing to take hold of in the fellow—quite pleasant, ready to be agreeable—a "yes" man, as the modern term went. And yet that did not seem to describe him satisfactorily. There was something vaguely disquieting about the unobtrusiveness of Gregory Banks. He had been an unsuitable match—yet Susan had insisted on marrying him—had overborne all opposition—why? What had she seen in him?

And now, six months after the marriage—"She's crazy about the fellow," Mr. Entwhistle said to himself. He knew the signs. A large number of wives with matrimonial troubles had passed through the office of Bollard, Entwhistle, Entwhistle and Bollard. Wives madly devoted to unsatisfactory and often what appeared quite unprepossessing husbands, wives contemptuous of, and bored by, apparently attractive and impeccable husbands. What any woman saw in some particular man was beyond the comprehension of the average intelligent male. It just was so. A woman who could be intelligent about everything else in the world could be a complete fool when it came to some particular man. Susan, thought Mr. Entwhistle, was one of those women. For her the world revolved around Greg. And that had its dangers in more ways than one.

Susan was talking with emphasis and indignation.

"—because it is disgraceful. You remember that woman who was murdered in Yorkshire last year? Nobody was ever arrested. And the old woman in the sweet shop who was killed with a crowbar. They detained some man, and then they let him go!"

"There has to be evidence, my dear," said Mr. Entwhistle.

Susan paid no attention.

"And that other case—a retired nurse—that was a hatchet or an axe—just like Aunt Cora."

“Dear me, you appear to have made quite a study of these crimes, Susan,” said Mr. Entwhistle mildly.

“Naturally one remembers these things—and when someone in one’s own family is killed—and in very much the same way—well, it shows that there must be a lot of these sorts of people going round the countryside, breaking into places and attacking lonely women—and that the police just don’t bother!”

Mr. Entwhistle shook his head.

“Don’t belittle the police, Susan. They are a very shrewd and patient body of men—persistent, too.

Just because it isn’t still mentioned in the newspapers doesn’t mean that a case is closed. Far from it.”

“And yet there are hundreds of unsolved crimes every year.”

“Hundreds?” Mr. Entwhistle looked dubious. “A certain number, yes. But there are many occasions when the police know who has committed a crime but where the evidence is insufficient for a prosecution.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Susan. “I believe if you knew definitely who committed a crime you could always get the evidence.”

“I wonder now.” Mr. Entwhistle sounded thoughtful. “I very much wonder….”

“Have they any idea at all—in Aunt Cora’s case—of who it might be?”

“That I couldn’t say. Not as far as I know. But they would hardly confide in me—and it’s early days yet—the murder took place only the day before yesterday, remember.”

“It’s definitely got to be a certain kind of person,” Susan mused. “A brutal, perhaps slightly half-witted type—a discharged soldier or a gaol bird. I mean, using a hatchet like that.”

Looking slightly quizzical, Mr. Entwhistle raised his eyebrows and murmured:

“Lizzie Borden with an axe

Gave her father fifty whacks.

When she saw what she had done

She gave her mother fifty-one.”

“Oh,” Susan flushed angrily, “Cora hadn’t got any relations living with her—unless you mean the companion. And anyway Lizzie Borden was acquitted. Nobody knows for certain she killed her father and stepmother.”

“The rhyme is quite definitely libellous,” Mr. Entwhistle agreed.

“You mean the companion did do it? Did Cora leave her anything?”

“An amethyst brooch of no great value and some sketches of fishing villages of sentimental value only.”

“One has to have a motive for murder—unless one is half-witted.”

Mr. Entwhistle gave a little chuckle.

“As far as one can see, the only person who had a motive is you, my dear Susan.”

“What’s that?” Greg moved forward suddenly. He was like a sleeper coming awake. An ugly light showed in his eyes. He was suddenly no longer a negligible feature in the background. “What’s Sue got to do with it? What do you mean—saying things like that?”

Susan said sharply:

“Shut up, Greg. Mr. Entwhistle doesn’t mean anything—”

“Just my little joke,” said Mr. Entwhistle apologetically. “Not in the best taste, I’m afraid. Cora left her estate, such as it was, to you, Susan. But to a young lady who has just inherited several hundred thousand pounds, an estate, amounting at the most to a few hundreds, can hardly be said to represent a motive for murder.”

“She left her money to me?” Susan sounded surprised. “How extraordinary. She didn’t even know me! Why did she do it, do you think?”

“I think she had heard rumours that there had been a little difficulty—er—over your marriage.” Greg, back again at sharpening his pencil, scowled. “There had been a certain amount of trouble over her own marriage—and I think she experienced a fellow feeling.”

Susan asked with a certain amount of interest:

“She married an artist, didn’t she, whom none of the family liked? Was he a good artist?”

Mr. Entwhistle shook his head very decidedly.

“Are there any of his paintings in the cottage?”

“Yes.”

Then I shall judge for myself,” said Susan.

Mr. Entwhistle smiled at the resolute tilt of Susan’s chin.

“So be it. Doubtless I am an old fogey and hopelessly old-fashioned in matters of art, but I really don’t think you will dispute my verdict.”

“I suppose I ought to go down there, anyway? And look over what there is. Is there anybody there now?”

“I have arranged with Miss Gilchrist to remain there until further notice.”

Greg said: “She must have a pretty good nerve—to stay in a cottage where a murder’s been committed.”

"Miss Gilchrist is quite a sensible woman, I should say. Besides," added the lawyer drily, "I don't think she has anywhere else to go until she gets another situation."

"So Aunt Cora's death left her high and dry? Did she—were she and Aunt Cora—on intimate terms—?"

Mr. Entwhistle looked at her rather curiously, wondering just what exactly was in her mind.

"Moderately so, I imagine," he said. "She never treated Miss Gilchrist as a servant."

"Treated her a damned sight worse, I dare say," said Susan. "These wretched so called 'ladies' are the ones who get it taken out of them nowadays. I'll try and find her a decent post somewhere. It won't be difficult. Anyone who's willing to do a bit of housework and cook is worth their weight in gold—she does cook, doesn't she?"

"Oh yes. I gather it is something she called, er 'the rough' that she objected to. I'm afraid I don't quite know what 'the rough' is."

Susan appeared to be a good deal amused.

Mr. Entwhistle, glancing at his watch, said:

"Your aunt left Timothy her executor."

"Timothy," said Susan with scorn. "Uncle Timothy is practically a myth. Nobody ever sees him."

"Quite." Mr. Entwhistle glanced at his watch. "I am travelling up to see him this afternoon. I will acquaint him with your decision to go down to the cottage."

"It will only take me a day or two, I imagine. I don't want to be long away from London. I've got various schemes in hand. I'm going into business."

Mr. Entwhistle looked round him at the cramped sitting room of the tiny flat. Greg and Susan were evidently hard up. Her father, he knew, had run through most of his money. He had left his daughter badly off.

"What are your plans for the future, if I may ask?"

"I've got my eye on some premises in Cardigan Street. I suppose, if necessary, you can advance me some money? I may have to pay a deposit."

"That can be managed," said Mr. Entwhistle. "I rang you up the day after the funeral several times—but could get no answer. I thought perhaps you might care for an advance. I wondered whether you might perhaps have gone out of Town."

"Oh no," said Susan quickly. "We were in all day. Both of us. We didn't go out at all."

Greg said gently: "You know Susan, I think our telephone must have been out of order that day. You remember how I couldn't get through to Hard and Co. in the afternoon. I meant to report it, but it was all right the next morning."

"Telephones," said Mr. Entwhistle, "can be very unreliable sometimes."

Susan said suddenly:

"How did Aunt Cora know about our marriage? It was at a Registry Office and we didn't tell anyone until afterwards!"

"I fancy Richard may have told her about it. She remade her will about three weeks ago (it was formerly in favour of the Theosophical Society)—just about the time he had been down to see her."

Susan looked startled.

"Did Uncle Richard go down to see her? I'd no idea of that?"

"I hadn't any idea of it myself," said Mr. Entwhistle.

“So that was when—”

“When what?”

“Nothing,” said Susan.

Six

I

“Very good of you to come along,” said Maude gruffly, as she greeted Mr. Entwhistle on the platform of Bayham Compton station. “I can assure you that both Timothy and I much appreciate it. Of course the truth is that Richard’s death was the worst thing possible for Timothy.”

Mr. Entwhistle had not yet considered his friend’s death from this particular angle. But it was, he saw, the only angle from which Mrs. Timothy Abernethie was likely to regard it.

As they proceeded towards the exit, Maude developed the theme.

“To begin with, it was a shock—Timothy was really very attached to Richard. And then unfortunately it put the idea of death into Timothy’s head. Being such an invalid has made him rather nervous about himself. He realized that he was the only one of the brothers left alive—and he started saying that he’d be the next to go—and that it wouldn’t be long now—all very morbid talk, as I told him.”

They emerged from the station and Maude led the way to a dilapidated car of almost fabulous antiquity.

“Sorry about our old rattletrap,” she said. “We’ve wanted a new car for years, but really we couldn’t afford it. This has had a new engine twice—and these old cars really stand up to a lot of hard work.

“I hope it will start,” she added. “Sometimes one has to wind it.”

She pressed the starter several times but only a meaningless whirr resulted. Mr. Entwhistle, who had never wound a car in his life, felt rather apprehensive, but Maude herself descended, inserted the starting handle and with a vigorous couple of turns woke the motor to life. It was fortunate, Mr. Entwhistle reflected, that Maude was such a powerfully built woman.

"That's that," she said. "The old brute's been playing me up lately. Did it when I was coming back after the funeral. Had to walk a couple of miles to the nearest garage and they weren't good for much—just a village affair. I had to put up at the local inn while they tinkered at it. Of course that upset Timothy, too. I had to phone through to him and tell him I couldn't be back till the next day. Fussed him terribly. One tries to keep things from him as much as possible—but some things one can't do anything about—Cora's murder, for instance. I had to send for Dr. Barton to give him a sedative. Things like murder are too much for a man in Timothy's state of health. I gather Cora was always a fool."

Mr. Entwhistle digested this remark in silence. The inference was not quite clear to him.

"I don't think I'd seen Cora since our marriage," said Maude. "I didn't like to say to Timothy at the time: 'Your youngest sister's batty,' not just like that. But it's what I thought. There she was saying the most extraordinary things! One didn't know whether to resent them or whether to laugh. I suppose the truth is she lived in a kind of imaginary world of her own—full of melodrama and fantastic ideas about other people. Well, poor soul, she's paid for it now. She didn't have any protégés, did she?"

"Protégés? What do you mean?"

"I just wondered. Some young cadging artist, or musician—or something of that kind. Someone she might have let in that day, and who killed her for her loose cash. Perhaps an adolescent—they're so queer at that age sometimes—especially if they're the neurotic arty type. I mean, it seems so odd to break in and murder her in the middle of the afternoon. If you break into a house surely you'd do it at night."

"There would have been two women there then."

"Oh yes, the companion. But really I can't believe that anyone would deliberately wait until she was out of the way and then break in and attack Cora. What for? He can't have expected she'd have any cash or stuff to speak of, and there must have been times when both the women were out and the house was empty. That would have been much safer. It seems so stupid to go and commit a murder unless it's absolutely necessary."

"And Cora's murder, you feel, was unnecessary?"

"It all seems so stupid."

Should murder make sense? Mr. Entwhistle wondered. Academically the answer was yes. But many pointless crimes were on record. It depended, Mr. Entwhistle reflected, on the mentality of the murderer.

What did he really know about murderers and their mental processes? Very little. His firm had never had a criminal practice. He was no student of criminology himself. Murderers, as far as he could judge, seemed to be of all sorts and kinds. Some had had overweening vanity, some had had a lust for power, some, like Seddon, had been mean and avaricious, others, like Smith and Rowse, had had an incredible fascination for women; some, like Armstrong, had been pleasant fellows to meet. Edith Thompson had lived in a world of violent unreality, Nurse Waddington had put her elderly patients out of the way with businesslike cheerfulness.

Maude's voice broke into his meditations.

"If I could only keep the newspapers from Timothy! But he will insist on reading them—and then, of course, it upsets him. You do understand, don't you, Mr. Entwhistle, that there can be no question of Timothy's attending the inquest? If necessary, Dr. Barton can write out a certificate or whatever it is."

"You can set your mind at rest about that."

"Thank goodness!"

They turned in through the gates of Stansfield Grange, and up a neglected drive. It had been an attractive small property once—but had now a doleful and neglected appearance. Maude sighed as she said:

"We had to let this go to seed during the war. Both gardeners called up. And now we've only got one old man—and he's not much good. Wages have gone up so terribly. I must say it's a blessing to realize that we'll be able to spend a little money on the place now. We're both so fond of it. I was really afraid that we might have to sell it… Not that I suggested anything of the kind to Timothy. It would have upset him—dreadfully."

They drew up before the portico of a very old Georgian house which badly needed a coat of paint.

"No servants," said Maude bitterly, as she led the way in. "Just a couple of women who come in. We had a resident maid until a month ago—slightly hunchbacked and terribly adenoidal and in many ways not too bright, but she was there which was such a comfort—and quite good at plain cooking. And would you believe it, she gave notice and went to a fool of a woman who keeps six Pekinese dogs (it's a larger house than this and more work) because she was 'so fond of little doggies,' she said. Dogs, indeed! Being sick and making messes all the time I've no doubt! Really, these girls are mental! So there we are, and if I have to go out any afternoon, Timothy is left quite alone in the house and if anything should happen, how could he get help? Though I do leave the telephone close by his chair so that if he felt faint he could dial Dr. Barton immediately."

Maude led the way into the drawing room where tea was laid ready by the fireplace, and establishing Mr. Entwhistle there, disappeared, presumably to the back regions. She returned in a few minutes' time with a teapot and silver kettle, and proceeded to minister to Mr. Entwhistle's needs. It was a good tea with homemade cake and fresh buns. Mr. Entwhistle murmured:

"What about Timothy?" and Maude explained briskly that she had taken Timothy his tray before she set out for the station.

"And now," said Maude, "he will have had his little nap and it will be the best time for him to see you. Do try and not let him excite himself too much."

Mr. Entwhistle assured her that he would exercise every precaution.

Studying her in the flickering firelight, he was seized by a feeling of compassion. This big, stalwart matter-of-fact woman, so healthy, so vigorous, so full of common sense, and yet so strangely, almost pitifully, vulnerable in one spot. Her love for her husband was maternal love, Mr. Entwhistle decided. Maude Abernethie had borne no child and she was a woman built for motherhood. Her invalid husband had become her child, to be shielded, guarded, watched over. And perhaps, being the stronger character of the two, she had unconsciously imposed on him a state of invalidism greater than might otherwise have been the case.

"Poor Mrs. Tim," thought Mr. Entwhistle to himself.

II

"Good of you to come, Entwhistle."

Timothy raised himself up in his chair as he held out a hand. He was a big man with a marked resemblance to his brother Richard. But what was strength in Richard, in Timothy was weakness. The mouth was irresolute, the chin very slightly receding, the eyes less deep-set. Lines of peevish irritability showed on his forehead.

His invalid status was emphasized by the rug across his knees and a positive pharmacopoeia of little bottles and boxes, on a table at his right hand.

"I mustn't exert myself," he said warningly. "Doctor's forbidden it. Keeps telling me not to worry! Worry! If he'd had a murder in his family he'd do a bit of worrying, I bet! It's too much for a man—first Richard's death—then hearing all about his funeral and his will—what a will!—and on top of that poor little Cora killed with a hatchet. Hatchet! ugh! This country's full of gangsters nowadays—thugs—left over from the war! Going about killing defenceless women. Nobody's got the guts to put these things down—to take a strong hand. What's the country coming to, I'd like to know? What's the damned country coming to?"

Mr. Entwhistle was familiar with this gambit. It was a question almost invariably asked sooner or later by his clients for the last twenty years and he had his routine for answering it. The noncommittal words he uttered could have been classified under the heading of soothing noises.

“It all began with that damned Labour Government,” said Timothy. “Sending the whole country to blazes. And the Government we’ve got now is no better. Mealy-mouthed, milk-and-water socialists! Look at the state we’re in! Can’t get a decent gardener, can’t get servants—poor Maude here has to work herself to a shadow messing about in the kitchen (by the way, I think a custard pudding would go well with the sole tonight, my dear—and perhaps a little clear soup first?). I’ve got to keep my strength up— Doctor Barton said so—let me see, where was I? Oh yes, Cora. It’s a shock, I can tell you, to a man when he hears his sister—his own sister—has been murdered! Why, I had palpitations for twenty minutes! You’ll have to attend to everything for me, Entwhistle. I can’t go to the inquest or be bothered by business of any kind connected with Cora’s estate. I want to forget the whole thing. What happened, by the way, to Cora’s share of Richard’s money? Comes to me, I suppose?”

Murmuring something about clearing away tea, Maude left the room.

Timothy lay back in his chair and said:

“Good thing to get rid of the women. Now we can talk business without any silly interruptions.”

“The sum left in trust for Cora,” said Mr. Entwhistle, “goes equally to you and the nieces and nephew.”

“But look here,” Timothy’s cheeks assumed a purplish hue of indignation. “Surely I’m her next of kin? Only surviving brother.”

Mr. Entwhistle explained with some care the exact provisions of Richard Abernethie’s will, reminding Timothy gently that he had had a copy sent him.

“Don’t expect me to understand all that legal jargon, do you?” said Timothy ungratefully. “You lawyers! Matter of fact, I couldn’t believe it when Maude came home and told me the gist of it. Thought she’d got it wrong.

Women are never clear headed. Best woman in the world, Maude—but women don't understand finance. I don't believe Maude even realizes that if Richard hadn't died when he did, we might have had to clear out of here. Fact!"

"Surely if you had applied to Richard—"

Timothy gave a short bark of harsh laughter.

"That's not my style. Our father left us all a perfectly reasonable share of his money—that is, if we didn't want to go into the family concern. I didn't. I've a soul above cornplasters, Entwhistle! Richard took my attitude a bit hard. Well, what with taxes, depreciation of income, one thing and another—it hasn't been easy to keep things going. I've had to realize a good deal of capital. Best thing to do these days. I did hint once to Richard that this place was getting a bit hard to run. He took the attitude that we'd be much better off in a smaller place altogether. Easier for Maude, he said, more labour saving—labour saving, what a term! Oh no, I wouldn't have asked Richard for help. But I can tell you, Entwhistle, that the worry affected my health most unfavourably. A man in my state of health oughtn't to have to worry. Then Richard died and though of course naturally I was cut up about it—my brother and all that— I couldn't help feeling relieved about future prospects. Yes, it's all plain sailing now—and a great relief. Get the house painted—get a couple of really good men on the garden—you can get them at a price. Restock the rose garden completely. And—where was I—"

"Detailing your future plans."

"Yes, yes—but I mustn't bother you with all that. What did hurt me—and hurt me cruelly—were the terms of Richard's will."

"Indeed?" Mr. Entwhistle looked inquiring. "They were not—as you expected?"

"I should say they weren't! Naturally, after Mortimer's death, I assumed that Richard would leave everything to me."

"Ah—did he—ever—indicate that to you?"

“He never said so—not in so many words. Reticent sort of chap, Richard. But he asked himself here—not long after Mortimer’s death. Wanted to talk over family affairs generally. We discussed young George—and the girls and their husbands. Wanted to know my views—not that I could tell him much. I’m an invalid and I don’t get about, and Maudie and I live out of the world. Rotten silly marriages both of those girls made, if you ask me. Well, I ask you, Entwhistle, naturally I thought he was consulting me as the head of the family after he was gone and naturally I thought the control of the money would be mine. Richard could surely trust me to do the right thing by the younger generation. And to look after poor old Cora. Dash it all, Entwhistle, I’m an Abernethie—the last Abernethie. Full control should have been left in my hands.”

In his excitement Timothy had kicked aside his rug and had sat up in his chair. There were no signs of weakness or fragility about him. He looked, Mr. Entwhistle thought, a perfectly healthy man, even if a slightly excitable one. Moreover the old lawyer realized very clearly that Timothy Abernethie had probably always been secretly jealous of his brother Richard. They had been sufficiently alike for Timothy to resent his brother’s strength of character and firm grasp of affairs. When Richard had died, Timothy had exulted in the prospect of succeeding at this late date to the power to control the destinies of others.

Richard Abernethie had not given him that power. Had he thought of doing so and then decided against it?

A sudden squalling of cats in the garden brought Timothy up out of his chair. Rushing to the window he threw up the sash, bawled out, “Stop it, you!” and picking up a large book hurled it out at the marauders.

“Beastly cats,” he grumbled, returning to his visitor. “Ruin the flower beds and I can’t stand that damned yowling.”

He sat down again and asked:

“Have a drink, Entwhistle?”

“Not quite so soon. Maude has just given me an excellent tea.”

Timothy grunted.

“Capable woman. Maude. But she does too much. Even has to muck about with the inside of that old car of ours—she’s quite a mechanic in her way, you know.”

“I hear she had a breakdown coming back from the funeral?”

“Yes. Car conked out. She had the sense to telephone through about it, in case I should be anxious, but that ass of a daily woman of ours wrote down the message in a way that didn’t make sense. I was out getting a bit of fresh air—I’m advised by the doctor to take what exercise I can if I feel like it—I got back from my walk to find scrawled on a bit of paper: ‘Madame’s sorry car gone wrong got to stay night.’ Naturally I thought she was still at Enderby. Put a call through and found Maude had left that morning. Might have had the breakdown anywhere! Pretty kettle of fish! Fool of a daily woman only left me a lumpy macaroni cheese for supper. I had to go down to the kitchen and warm it up myself—and make myself a cup of tea—to say nothing of stoking the boiler. I might have had a heart attack—but does that class of woman care? Not she! With any decent feelings she’d have come back that evening and looked after me properly. No loyalty any more in the lower classes—”

He brooded sadly.

“I don’t know how much Maude told you about the funeral and the relatives,” said Mr. Entwhistle. “Cora produced rather an awkward moment. Said brightly that Richard had been murdered, hadn’t he? Perhaps Maude told you.”

Timothy chuckled easily.

“Oh yes, I heard about that. Everybody looked down their noses and pretended to be shocked. Just the sort of thing Cora would say! You know how she always managed to put her foot in it when she was a girl, Entwhistle? Said something at our wedding that upset Maude, I remember. Maude never cared for her very much. Yes, Maude rang me up that evening after the funeral to know if I was all right and if Mrs. Jones had come in to give me my evening meal and then she told me it had all gone off very well, and I said 'What about the will?' and she tried to hedge a bit, but of course I had the truth out of her. I couldn't believe it, and I said she must have made a mistake, but she stuck to it. It hurt me, Entwhistle—it really wounded me, if you know what I mean. If you ask me, it was just spite on Richard's part. I know one shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but, upon my word—"

Timothy continued on this theme for some time.

Then Maude came back into the room and said firmly:

"I think, dear, Mr. Entwhistle has been with you quite long enough. You really must rest. If you have settled everything—"

"Oh, we've settled things. I leave it all to you, Entwhistle. Let me know when they catch the fellow—if they ever do. I've no faith in the police nowadays—the Chief Constables aren't the right type. You'll see to the—er—interment—won't you? We shan't be able to come, I'm afraid. But order an expensive wreath—and there must be a proper stone put up in due course—she'll be buried locally, I suppose? No point in bringing her North and I've no idea where Lansquenet is buried, somewhere in France I believe. I don't know what one puts on a stone when it's murder… Can't very well say 'entered into rest' or anything like that. One will have to choose a text—something appropriate. R.I.P.? No, that's only for Catholics."

"O Lord, thou has seen my wrong. Judge thou my case," murmured Mr. Entwhistle.

The startled glance Timothy bent on him made Mr. Entwhistle smile faintly.

"From Lamentations," he said. "It seems appropriate if somewhat melodramatic. However, it will be some time before the question of the Memorial stone comes up. The—er—ground has to settle, you know. Now don't worry about anything. We will deal with things and keep you fully informed."

Mr. Entwhistle left for London by the breakfast train on the following morning.

When he got home, after a little hesitation, he rang up a friend of his.

Seven

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your invitation.”

Mr. Entwhistle pressed his host’s hand warmly.

Hercule Poirot gestured hospitably to a chair by the fire.

Mr. Entwhistle sighed as he sat down.

On one side of the room a table was laid for two.

“I returned from the country this morning,” he said.

“And you have a matter on which you wish to consult me?”

“Yes. It’s a long rambling story, I’m afraid.”

“Then we will not have it until after we have dined. Georges?”

The efficient Georges materialized with some pâté de foie gras accompanied by hot toast in a napkin.

“We will have our pâté by the fire,” said Poirot. “Afterwards we will move to the table.”

It was an hour and a half later that Mr. Entwhistle stretched himself comfortably out in his chair and sighed a contented sigh.

“You certainly know how to do yourself well, Poirot. Trust a Frenchman.”

“I am a Belgian. But the rest of your remark applies. At my age the chief pleasure, almost the only pleasure that still remains, is the pleasure of the table. Mercifully I have an excellent stomach.”

“Ah,” murmured Mr. Entwhistle.

They had dined off sole veronique, followed by escalope de veau milanaise, proceeding to poire flambée with ice cream.

They had drunk a Pouilly Fuissé followed by a Corton, and a very good port now reposed at Mr. Entwhistle's elbow. Poirot, who did not care for port, was sipping Crème de Cacao.

"I don't know," murmured Mr. Entwhistle reminiscently, "how you manage to get hold of an escalope like that! It melted in the mouth!"

"I have a friend who is a Continental butcher. For him I solve a small domestic problem. He is appreciative—and ever since then he is most sympathetic to me in the matters of the stomach."

"A domestic problem," Mr. Entwhistle sighed. "I wish you had not reminded me… This is such a perfect moment…."

"Prolong it, my friend. We will have presently the demitasse and the fine brandy, and then, when digestion is peacefully under way, then you shall tell why you need my advice."

The clock struck the half hour after nine before Mr. Entwhistle stirred in his chair. The psychological moment had come. He no longer felt reluctant to bring forth his perplexities—he was eager to do so.

"I don't know," he said, "whether I'm making the most colossal fool of myself. In any case I don't see that there's anything that can possibly be done. But I'd like to put the facts before you, and I'd like to know what you think."

He paused for a moment or two, then in his dry meticulous way, he told his story. His trained legal brain enabled him to put the facts clearly, to leave nothing out, and to add nothing extraneous. It was a clear succinct account, and as such appreciated by the little elderly man with the egg-shaped head who sat listening to him.

When he had finished there was a pause. Mr. Entwhistle was prepared to answer questions, but for some few moments no question came. Hercule

Poirot was reviewing the evidence.

He said at last:

“It seems very clear. You have in your mind the suspicion that your friend, Richard Abernethie, may have been murdered? That suspicion, or assumption, rests on the basis of one thing only—the words spoken by Cora Lansquenet at Richard Abernethie’s funeral. Take those away—and there is nothing left. The fact that she herself was murdered the day afterwards may be the purest coincidence. It is true that Richard Abernethie died suddenly, but he was attended by a reputable doctor who knew him well, and that doctor had no suspicions and gave a death certificate. Was Richard buried or cremated?”

“Cremated—according to his own request.”

“Yes, that is the law. And it means that a second doctor signed the certificate—but there would be no difficulty about that. So we come back to the essential point, what Cora Lansquenet said. You were there and you heard her. She said: ‘But he was murdered, wasn’t he?’”

“Yes.”

“And the real point is—that you believe she was speaking the truth.”

The lawyer hesitated for a moment, then he said:

“Yes, I do.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Entwhistle repeated the word, slightly puzzled.

“But yes, why? Is it because, already, deep down, you had an uneasiness about the manner of Richard’s death?”

The lawyer shook his head. “No, no, not in the least.”

“Then it is because of her—of Cora herself. You knew her well?”

"I had not seen her for—oh—over twenty years."

"Would you have known her if you had met her in the street?"

Mr. Entwhistle reflected.

"I might have passed her by in the street without recognizing her. She was a thin slip of a girl when I saw her last and she had turned into a stout, shabby, middle-aged woman. But I think that the moment I spoke to her face to face I should have recognized her. She wore her hair in the same way, a bang cut straight across the forehead, and she had a trick of peering up at you through her fringe like a rather shy animal, and she had a very characteristic, abrupt way of talking, and a way of putting her head on one side and then coming out with something quite outrageous. She had character, you see, and character is always highly individual."

"She was, in fact, the same Cora you had known years ago. And she still said outrageous things! The things, the outrageous things, she had said in the past—were they usually—justified?"

"That was always the awkward thing about Cora. When truth would have been better left unspoken, she spoke it."

"And that characteristic remained unchanged. Richard Abernethie was murdered—so Cora at once mentioned the fact."

Mr. Entwhistle stirred.

"You think he was murdered?"

"Oh, no, no, my friend, we cannot go so fast. We agree on this—Cora thought he had been murdered. She was quite sure he had been murdered. It was, to her, more a certainty than a surmise. And so, we come to this, she must have had some reason for the belief. We agree, by your knowledge of her, that it was not just a bit of mischief making. Now tell me—when she said what she did, there was, at once, a kind of chorus of protest—that is right?"

“Quite right.”

“And she then became confused, abashed, and retreated from the position—saying—as far as you can remember, something like ‘But I thought—from what he told me—’”

The lawyer nodded.

“I wish I could remember more clearly. But I am fairly sure of that. She used the words ‘he told me’ or ‘he said—’”

“And the matter was then smoothed over and everyone spoke of something else. You can remember, looking back, no special expression on anyone’s face? Anything that remains in your memory as—shall we say—unusual?”

“No.”

“And the very next day, Cora is killed—and you ask yourself: ‘Can it be cause and effect?’”

The lawyer stirred.

“I suppose that seems to you quite fantastic?”

“Not at all,” said Poirot. “Given that the original assumption is correct, it is logical. The perfect murder, the murder of Richard Abernethie, has been committed, all has gone off smoothly—and suddenly it appears that there is one person who has a knowledge of the truth! Clearly that person must be silenced as quickly as possible.”

“Then you do think that—it was murder?”

Poirot said gravely:

“I think, mon cher, exactly as you thought—that there is a case for investigation. Have you taken any steps? You have spoken of these matters to the police?”

“No.” Mr. Entwhistle shook his head. “It did not seem to me that any good purpose could be achieved. My position is that I represent the family. If Richard Abernethie was murdered, there seems only one method by which it could be done.”

“By poison?”

“Exactly. And the body has been cremated. There is now no evidence available. But I decided that I, myself, must be satisfied on the point. That is why, Poirot, I have come to you.”

“Who was in the house at the time of his death?”

“An old butler who has been with him for years, a cook and a housemaid. It would seem, perhaps, as though it must necessarily be one of them—”

“Ah! do not try to pull the wool upon my eyes. This Cora, she knows Richard Abernethie was killed, yet she acquiesces in the hushing up. She says, ‘I think you are all quite right.’ Therefore it must be one of the family who is concerned, someone whom the victim himself might prefer not to have openly accused. Otherwise, since Cora was fond of her brother, she would not agree to let the sleeping murderer lie. You agree to that, yes?”

“It was the way I reasoned—yes,” confessed Mr. Entwhistle. “Though how any of the family could possibly—”

Poirot cut him short.

“Where poison is concerned there are all sorts of possibilities. It must, presumably, have been a narcotic of some sort if he died in his sleep and if there were no suspicious appearances. Possibly he was already having some narcotic administered to him.”

“In any case,” said Mr. Entwhistle, “the how hardly matters. We shall never be able to prove anything.”

“In the case of Richard Abernethie, no. But the murder of Cora Lansquenet is different. Once we know ‘who’ then evidence ought to be possible to get." He added with a sharp glance, "You have, perhaps, already done something."

"Very little. My purpose was mainly, I think, elimination. It is distasteful to me to think that one of the Abernethie family is a murderer. I still can't quite believe it. I hoped that by a few apparently idle questions I could exonerate certain members of the family beyond question. Perhaps, who knows, all of them? In which case, Cora would have been wrong in her assumption and her own death could be ascribed to some casual prowler who broke in. After all, the issue is very simple. What were the members of the Abernethie family doing on the afternoon that Cora Lansquenet was killed?"

"Eh bien," said Poirot, "what were they doing?"

"George Crossfield was at Hurst Park races. Rosamund Shane was out shopping in London. Her husband—for one must include husbands—"

"Assuredly."

"Her husband was fixing up a deal about an option on a play, Susan and Gregory Banks were at home all day, Timothy Abernethie, who is an invalid, was at his home in Yorkshire, and his wife was driving herself home from Enderby."

He stopped.

Hercule Poirot looked at him and nodded comprehendingly.

"Yes, that is what they say. And is it all true?"

"I simply don't know, Poirot. Some of the statements are capable of proof or disproof—but it would be difficult to do so without showing one's hand pretty plainly. In fact to do so would be tantamount to an accusation. I will simply tell you certain conclusions of my own. George may have been at Hurst Park races, but I do not think he was. He was rash enough to boast that he had backed a couple of winners. It is my experience that so many offenders against the law ruin their own case by saying too much. I asked him the name of the winners, and he gave the names of two horses without any apparent hesitation. Both of them, I found, had been heavily tipped on the day in question and one had duly won. The other, though an odds on favourite, had unaccountably failed even to get a place."

"Interesting. Had this George any urgent need for money at the time of his uncle's death?"

"It is my impression that his need was very urgent. I have no evidence for saying so, but I strongly suspect that he has been speculating with his clients' funds and that he was in danger of prosecution. It is only my impression but I have some experience in these matters. Defaulting solicitors, I regret to say, are not entirely uncommon. I can only tell you that I would not have cared to entrust my own funds to George, and I suspect that Richard Abernethie, a very shrewd judge of men, was dissatisfied with his nephew and placed no reliance on him.

"His mother," the lawyer continued, "was a good-looking rather foolish girl and she married a man of what I should call dubious character." He sighed. "The Abernethie girls were not good choosers."

He paused and then went on:

"As for Rosamund, she is a lovely nitwit. I really cannot see her smashing Cora's head in with a hatchet! Her husband, Michael Shane, is something of a dark horse—he's a man with ambition and also a man of overweening vanity I should say. But really I know very little about him. I have no reason to suspect him of a brutal crime or of a carefully planned poisoning, but until I know that he really was doing what he says he was doing I cannot rule him out."

"But you have no doubts about the wife?"

"No—no—there is a certain rather startling callousness…but no, I really cannot envisage the hatchet. She is a fragile-looking creature."

"And beautiful!" said Poirot with a faint cynical smile. "And the other niece?"

“Susan? She is a very different type from Rosamund—a girl of remarkable ability, I should say. She and her husband were at home together that day. I said (falsely) that I had tried to get them on the telephone on the afternoon in question. Greg said very quickly that the telephone had been out of order all day. He had tried to get someone and failed.”

“So again it is not conclusive… You cannot eliminate as you hoped to do… What is the husband like?”

“I find him hard to make out. He has a somewhat unpleasing personality though one cannot say exactly why he makes this impression. As for Susan—”

“Yes?”

“Susan reminds me of her uncle. She has the vigour, the drive, the mental capacity of Richard Abernethie. It may be my fancy that she lacks some of the kindliness and the warmth of my old friend.”

“Women are never kind,” remarked Poirot. “Though they can sometimes be tender. She loves her husband?”

“Devotedly, I should say. But really, Poirot, I can’t believe— I won’t believe for one moment that Susan—”

“You prefer George?” said Poirot. “It is natural! As for me, I am not so sentimental about beautiful young ladies. Now tell me about your visit to the older generation?”

Mr. Entwhistle described his visit to Timothy and Maude at some length. Poirot summarized the result.

“So Mrs. Abernethie is a good mechanic. She knows all about the inside of a car. And Mr. Abernethie is not the invalid he likes to think himself. He goes out for walks and is, according to you, capable of vigorous action. He is also a bit of an egomaniac and he resented his brother’s success and superior character.”

“He spoke very affectionately of Cora.”

“And ridiculed her silly remark after the funeral. What of the sixth beneficiary?”

“Helen? Mrs. Leo? I do not suspect her for a moment. In any case, her innocence will be easy to prove. She was at Enderby. With three servants in the house.”

“Eh bien, my friend,” said Poirot. “Let us be practical. What do you want me to do?”

“I want to know the truth, Poirot.”

“Yes. Yes, I should feel the same in your place.”

“And you’re the man to find it out for me. I know you don’t take cases anymore, but I ask you to take this one. This is a matter of business. I will be responsible for your fees. Come now, money is always useful.”

Poirot grinned.

“Not if it all goes in the taxes! But I will admit, your problem interests me! Because it is not easy… It is all so nebulous… One thing, my friend, had better be done by you. After that, I will occupy myself of everything. But I think it will be best if you yourself seek out the doctor who attended Mr. Richard Abernethie. You know him?”

“Slightly.”

“What is he like?”

“Middle-aged G.P. Quite competent. On very friendly terms with Richard. A thoroughly good fellow.”

“Then seek him out. He will speak more freely to you than to me. Ask him about Mr. Abernethie’s illness. Find out what medicines Mr. Abernethie was taking at the time of his death and before. Find out if Richard Abernethie ever said anything to his doctor about fancying himself being poisoned. By the way, this Miss Gilchrist is sure that he used the term poisoned in talking to his sister?"

Mr. Entwhistle reflected.

"It was the word she used—but she is the type of witness who often changes the actual words used, because she is convinced she is keeping to the sense of them. If Richard had said he was afraid someone wanted to kill him, Miss Gilchrist might have assumed poison because she connected his fears with those of an aunt of hers who thought her food was being tampered with. I can take up the point with her again some time."

"Yes. Or I will do so." He paused and then said in a different voice: "Has it occurred to you, my friend, that your Miss Gilchrist may be in some danger herself?"

Mr. Entwhistle looked surprised.

"I can't say that it had."

"But, yes. Cora voiced her suspicions on the day of the funeral. The question in the murderer's mind will be, did she voice them to anybody when she first heard of Richard's death? And the most likely person for her to have spoken to about them will be Miss Gilchrist. I think, mon cher, that she had better not remain alone in that cottage."

"I believe Susan is going down."

"Ah, so Mrs. Banks is going down?"

"She wants to look through Cora's things."

"I see… I see… Well, my friend, do what I have asked of you. You might also prepare Mrs. Abernethie—Mrs. Leo Abernethie, for the possibility that I may arrive in the house. We will see. From now on I occupy myself of everything."

And Poirot twirled his moustaches with enormous energy.

Eight

I

Mr. Entwhistle looked at Dr. Larraby thoughtfully.

He had had a lifetime of experience in summing people up. There had been frequent occasions on which it had been necessary to tackle a difficult situation or a delicate subject. Mr. Entwhistle was an adept by now in the art of how exactly to make the proper approach. How would it be best to tackle Dr. Larraby on what was certainly a very difficult subject and one which the doctor might very well resent as reflecting upon his own professional skill?

Frankness, Mr. Entwhistle thought—or at least a modified frankness. To say that suspicions had arisen because of a haphazard suggestion thrown out by a silly woman would be ill-advised. Dr. Larraby had not known Cora.

Mr. Entwhistle cleared his throat and plunged bravely.

“I want to consult you on a very delicate matter,” he said. “You may be offended, but I sincerely hope not. You are a sensible man and you will realize, I’m sure, that a—er—preposterous suggestion is best dealt with by finding a reasonable answer and not by condemning it out of hand. It concerns my client, the late Mr. Abernethie. I’ll ask you my question flat out. Are you certain, absolutely certain, that he died what is termed a natural death?”

Dr. Larraby’s good-humoured, rubicund middle-aged face turned in astonishment on his questioner.

“What on earth—Of course he did. I gave a certificate, didn’t I? If I hadn’t been satisfied—”

Mr. Entwhistle cut in adroitly:

"Naturally, naturally. I assure you that I am not assuming anything to the contrary. But I would be glad to have your positive assurance—in face of the—er—rumours that are flying around."

"Rumours? What rumours?"

"One doesn't know quite how these things start," said Mr. Entwhistle mendaciously. "But my feeling is that they should be stopped—authoritatively, if possible."

"Abernethie was a sick man. He was suffering from a disease that would have proved fatal within, I should say, at the earliest, two years. It might have come much sooner. His son's death had weakened his will to live, and his powers of resistance. I admit that I did not expect his death to come so soon, or indeed so suddenly, but there are precedents—plenty of precedents. Any medical man who predicts exactly when a patient will die, or exactly how long he will live, is bound to make a fool of himself. The human factor is always incalculable. The weak have often unexpected powers of resistance, the strong sometimes succumb."

"I understand all that. I am not doubting your diagnosis. Mr. Abernethie was, shall we say (rather melodramatically, I'm afraid) under sentence of death. All I'm asking you is, is it quite possible that a man, knowing or suspecting that he is doomed, might of his own accord shorten that period of life? Or that someone else might do it for him?"

Dr. Larraby frowned.

"Suicide, you mean? Abernethie wasn't a suicidal type."

"I see. You can assure me, medically speaking, that such a suggestion is impossible."

The doctor stirred uneasily.

"I wouldn't use the word impossible. After his son's death life no longer held the interest for Abernethie that it had done. I certainly don't feel that suicide is likely—but I can't say that it's impossible."

“You are speaking from the psychological angle. When I say medically, I really meant: do the circumstances of his death make such a suggestion impossible?”

“No, oh no. No, I can’t say that. He died in his sleep, as people often do. There was no reason to suspect suicide, no evidence of his state of mind. If one were to demand an autopsy every time a man who is seriously ill died in his sleep—”

The doctor’s face was getting redder and redder. Mr. Entwhistle hastened to interpose.

“Of course. Of course. But if there had been evidence—evidence of which you yourself were not aware? If, for instance, he had said something to someone—”

“Indicating that he was contemplating suicide? Did he? I must say it surprises me.”

“But if it were so—my case is purely hypothetical—could you rule out the possibility?”

Dr. Larraby said slowly:

“No—not—I could not do that. But I say again. I should be very much surprised.”

Mr. Entwhistle hastened to follow up his advantage.

“If, then, we assume that his death was not natural—all this is purely hypothetical—what could have caused it? What kind of a drug, I mean?”

“Several. Some kind of a narcotic would be indicated. There was no sign of cyanosis, the attitude was quite peaceful.”

“He had sleeping draughts or pills? Something of that kind.”

“Yes. I had prescribed Slumberyl—a very safe and dependable hypnotic. He did not take it every night. And he only had a small bottle of tablets at a time. Three or even four times the prescribed dose would not have caused death. In fact, I remember seeing the bottle on his washstand after his death still nearly full."

"What else had you prescribed for him?"

"Various things—a medicine containing a small quantity of morphia to be taken when he had an attack of pain. Some vitamin capsules. An indigestion mixture."

Mr. Entwhistle interrupted.

"Vitamin capsules? I think I was once prescribed a course of those. Small round capsules of gelatine."

"Yes. Containing adexoline."

"Could anything else have been introduced into—say—one of those capsules?"

"Something lethal, you mean?" The doctor was looking more and more surprised. "But surely no man would ever—look here, Entwhistle, what are you getting at? My God, man, are you suggesting murder?"

"I don't quite know what I'm suggesting…I just want to know what would be possible."

"But what evidence have you for even suggesting such a thing?"

"I haven't any evidence," said Mr. Entwhistle in a tired voice. "Mr. Abernethie is dead—and the person to whom he spoke is also dead. The whole thing is rumour—vague, unsatisfactory rumour, and I want to scotch it if I can. If you tell me that no one could possibly have poisoned Abernethie in any way whatsoever, I'll be delighted! It would be a big weight off my mind, I can assure you."

Dr. Larraby got up and walked up and down.

"I can't tell you what you want me to tell you," he said at last. "I wish I could. Of course it could have been done. Anybody could have extracted the oil from a capsule and replaced it with—say—pure nicotine or half a dozen other things. Or something could have been put in his food or drink? Isn't that more likely?"

"Possibly. But you see, there were only the servants in the house when he died—and I don't think it was any of them—in fact I'm quite sure it wasn't. So I'm looking for some delayed action possibility. There's no drug, I suppose, that you can administer and then the person dies weeks later?"

"A convenient idea—but untenable, I'm afraid," said the doctor drily. "I know you're a reasonable person, Entwhistle, but who is making this suggestion? It seems to me wildly farfetched."

"Abernethie never said anything to you? Never hinted that one of his relations might be wanting him out of the way?"

The doctor looked at him curiously.

"No, he never said anything to me. Are you sure, Entwhistle, that somebody hasn't been—well, playing up the sensational? Some hysterical subjects can give an appearance of being quite reasonable and normal, you know."

"I hope it was like that. It might well be."

"Let me understand. Someone claims that Abernethie told her—it was a woman, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, it was a woman."

"—told her someone was trying to kill him?"

Cornered, Mr. Entwhistle reluctantly told the tale of Cora's remark at the funeral. Dr. Larraby's face lightened.

"My dear fellow. I shouldn't pay any attention! The explanation is quite simple. The woman's at a certain time of life—craving for sensation, unbalanced, unreliable—might say anything. They do, you know!"

Mr. Entwhistle resented the doctor's easy assumption. He himself had had to deal with plenty of sensation-hunting and hysterical women.

"You may be quite right," he said, rising. "Unfortunately we can't tackle her on the subject, as she's been murdered herself."

"What's that—murdered?" Dr. Larraby looked as though he had grave suspicions of Mr. Entwhistle's own stability of mind.

"You've probably read about it in the paper. Mrs. Lansquenet at Lytchett St. Mary in Berkshire."

"Of course—I'd no idea she was a relation of Richard Abernethie's!" Dr. Larraby was looking quite shaken.

Feeling that he had revenged himself for the doctor's professional superiority, and unhappily conscious that his own suspicions had not been assuaged as a result of the visit, Mr. Entwhistle took his leave.

II

Back at Enderby, Mr. Entwhistle decided to talk to Lanscombe.

He started by asking the old butler what his plans were.

"Mrs. Leo has asked me to stay on here until the house is sold, sir, and I'm sure I shall be very pleased to oblige her. We are all very fond of Mrs. Leo." He sighed. "I feel it very much, sir, if you will excuse me mentioning it, that the house has to be sold. I've known it for so very many years, and seen all the young ladies and gentlemen grow up in it. I always thought that Mr. Mortimer would come here after his father and perhaps bring up a family here, too. It was arranged, sir, that I should go to the North Lodge when I got past doing my work here. A very nice little place, the North Lodge—and I looked forward to having it very spick and span. But I suppose that's all over now."

"I'm afraid so, Lanscombe. The estate will have to be sold together. But with your legacy—"

"Oh I'm not complaining, sir, and I'm very sensible of Mr. Abernethie's generosity. I'm well provided for, but it's not so easy to find a little place to buy nowadays and though my married niece has asked me to make my home with them, well, it won't be quite the same thing as living on the estate."

"I know," said Mr. Entwhistle. "It's a hard new world for us old fellows. I wish I'd seen more of my old friend before he went. How did he seem those last few months?"

"Well, he wasn't himself, sir, not since Mr. Mortimer's death."

"No, it broke him up. And then he was a sick man—sick men have strange fancies sometimes. I imagine Mr. Abernethie suffered from that sort of thing in his last days. He spoke of enemies sometimes, of somebody wishing to do him harm—perhaps? He may even have thought his food was being tampered with?"

Old Lanscombe looked surprised—surprised and offended.

"I cannot recall anything of that kind, sir."

Entwhistle looked at him keenly.

"You're a very loyal servant, Lanscombe, I know that. But such fancies on Mr. Abernethie's part would be quite—er—unimportant—a natural symptom in some—er diseases."

"Indeed, sir? I can only say Mr. Abernethie never said anything like that to me, or in my hearing."

Mr. Entwhistle slid gently to another subject.

"He had some of his family down to stay with him, didn't he, before he died. His nephew and his two nieces and their husbands?"

"Yes, sir, that is so."

"Was he satisfied with those visits? Or was he disappointed?

Lanscombe's eyes became remote, his old back stiffened.

"I really could not say, sir."

"I think you could, you know," said Mr. Entwhistle gently. "It's not your place to say anything of that kind—that's what you really mean. But there are times when one has to do violence to one's senses of what is fitting. I was one of your master's oldest friends. I cared for him very much. So did you. That's why I'm asking you for your opinion as a man, not as a butler."

Lanscombe was silent for a moment, then he said in a colourless voice:

"Is there anything—wrong, sir?"

Mr. Entwhistle replied truthfully.

"I don't know," he said. "I hope not. I would like to make sure. Have you felt yourself that something was—wrong?"

"Only since the funeral, sir. And I couldn't say exactly what it is. But Mrs. Leo and Mrs. Timothy, too, they didn't seem quite themselves that evening after the others had gone."

"You know the contents of the will?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Leo thought I would like to know. It seemed to me, if I may permit myself to comment, a very fair will."

"Yes, it was a fair will. Equal benefits. But it is not, I think, the will that Mr. Abernethie originally intended to make after his son died. Will you answer now the question that I asked you just now?"

"As a matter of personal opinion—"

"Yes, yes, that is understood."

"The master, sir, was very much disappointed after Mr. George had been here… He had hoped, I think, that Mr. George might resemble Mr. Mortimer. Mr. George, if I may say so, did not come up to standard. Miss

Laura’s husband was always considered unsatisfactory, and I’m afraid Mr. George took after him.” Lanscombe paused and then went on, “Then the young ladies came with their husbands. Miss Susan he took to at once—a very spirited and handsome young lady, but it’s my opinion he couldn’t abide her husband. Young ladies make funny choices nowadays, sir.”

“And the other couple?”

“I couldn’t say much about that. A very pleasant and good-looking young pair. I think the master enjoyed having them here—but I don’t think—” The old man hesitated.

“Yes, Lanscombe?”

“Well, the master had never been much struck with the stage. He said to me one day, ‘I can’t understand why anyone gets stage-struck. It’s a foolish kind of life. Seems to deprive people of what little sense they have. I don’t know what it does to your moral sense. You certainly lose your sense of proportion.’ Of course he wasn’t referring directly—”

“No, no, I quite understand. Now after these visits, Mr. Abernethie himself went away—first to his brother, and afterwards to his sister Mrs. Lansquenet.”

“That I did not know, sir. I mean he mentioned to me that he was going to Mr. Timothy and afterwards to Something St. Mary.”

“That is right. Can you remember anything he said on his return in regard to those visits?”

Lanscombe reflected.

“I really don’t know—nothing direct. He was glad to be back. Travelling and staying in strange houses tired him very much—that I do remember his saying.”

“Nothing else? Nothing about either of them?”

Lanscombe frowned.

"The master used to—well, to murmur, if you get my meaning—speaking to me and yet more to himself—hardly noticing I was there—because he knew me so well."

"Knew you and trusted you, yes."

"But my recollection is very vague as to what he said—something about he couldn't think what he'd done with his money—that was Mr. Timothy, I take it. And then he said something about, 'Women can be fools in ninety-nine different ways but be pretty shrewd in the hundredth.' Oh yes, and he said, 'You can only say what you really think to someone of your own generation. They don't think you're fancying things as the younger ones do.' And later he said—but I don't know in what connection—'It's not very nice to have to set traps for people, but I don't see what else I can do.' But I think it possible, sir, that he may have been thinking of the second gardener—a question of the peaches being taken."

But Mr. Entwhistle did not think that it was the second gardener who had been in Richard Abernethie's mind. After a few more questions he let Lanscombe go and reflected on what he had learned. Nothing, really—nothing, that is, that he had not deduced before. Yet there were suggestive points. It was not his sister-in-law, Maude, but his sister Cora of whom he had been thinking when he made the remark about women who were fools and yet shrewd. And it was to her that he had confided his "fancies." And he had spoken of setting a trap. For whom?

III

Mr. Entwhistle had meditated a good deal over how much he should tell Helen. In the end he decided he should take her wholly into his confidence.

First he thanked her for sorting out Richard's things and for making various household arrangements. The house had been advertised for sale and there were one or two prospective buyers who would shortly be coming to look over it.

"Private buyers?"

"I'm afraid not. The Y.W.C.A. are considering it, and there is a young people's club, and the Trustees of the Jefferson Trust are looking for a suitable place to house their Collection."

"It seems sad that the house will not be lived in, but of course it is not a practicable proposition nowadays."

"I am going to ask you if it would be possible for you to remain here until the house is sold. Or would it be a great inconvenience?"

"No—actually it would suit me very well. I don't want to go to Cyprus until May, and I much prefer being here than being in London as I had planned. I love this house, you know; Leo loved it, and we were always happy when we were here together."

"There is another reason why I should be grateful if you would stay on. There is a friend of mine, a man called Hercule Poirot—"

Helen said sharply: "Hercule Poirot? Then you think—"

"You know of him?"

"Yes. Some friends of mine—but I imagined that he was dead long ago."

"He is very much alive. Not young, of course."

"No, he could hardly be young."

She spoke mechanically. Her face was white and strained. She said with an effort:

"You think—that Cora was right? That Richard was—murdered?"

Mr. Entwhistle unburdened himself. It was a pleasure to unburden himself to Helen with her clear calm mind.

When he had finished she said:

“One ought to feel it’s fantastic—but one doesn’t. Maude and I, that night after the funeral—it was in both our minds, I’m sure. Saying to ourselves what a silly woman Cora was—and yet being uneasy. And then—Cora was killed—and I told myself it was just coincidence—and of course it may be—but oh! if one can only be sure. It’s all so difficult.”

“Yes, it’s difficult. But Poirot is a man of great originality and he has something really approaching genius. He understands perfectly what we need—assurance that the whole thing is a mare’s nest.”

“And suppose it isn’t?”

“What makes you say that?” asked Mr. Entwhistle sharply.

“I don’t know. I’ve been uneasy… Not just about what Cora said that day—something else. Something that I felt at the time to be wrong.”

“Wrong? In what way?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know.”

“You mean it was something about one of the people in the room?”

“Yes—yes—something of that kind. But I don’t know who or what… Oh that sounds absurd—”

“Not at all. It is interesting—very interesting. You are not a fool, Helen. If you noticed something, that something has significance.”

“Yes, but I can’t remember what it was. The more I think—”

“Don’t think. That is the wrong way to bring anything back. Let it go. Sooner or later it will flash into your mind. And when it does—let me know—at once.”

“I will.”

Nine

Miss Gilchrist pulled her black hat down firmly on her head and tucked in a wisp of grey hair. The inquest was set for twelve o’clock and it was not quite twenty past eleven. Her grey coat and skirt looked quite nice, she thought, and she had bought herself a black blouse. She wished she could have been all in black, but that would have been far beyond her means. She looked round the small neat bedroom and at the walls hung with representations of Brixham Harbour, Cockington Forge, Anstey’s Cove, Kyance Cove, Polflexan Harbour, Babbacombe Bay, etc., all signed in a dashing way, Cora Lansquenet. Her eyes rested with particular fondness on Polflexan Harbour. On the chest of drawers a faded photograph carefully framed represented the Willow Tree tea shop. Miss Gilchrist looked at it lovingly and sighed.

She was disturbed from her reverie by the sound of the doorbell below.

“Dear me,” murmured Miss Gilchrist, “I wonder who—”

She went out of her room and down the rather rickety stairs. The bell sounded again and there was a sharp knock.

For some reason Miss Gilchrist felt nervous. For a moment or two her steps slowed up, then she went rather unwillingly to the door, adjuring herself not to be so silly.

A young woman dressed smartly in black and carrying a small suitcase was standing on the step. She noticed the alarmed look on Miss Gilchrist’s face and said quickly:

“Miss Gilchrist? I am Mrs. Lansquenet’s niece—Susan Banks.”

“Oh dear, yes, of course. I didn’t know. Do come in, Mrs. Banks. Mind the hallstand—it sticks out a little. In here, yes. I didn’t know you were coming down for the inquest. I’d have had something ready—some coffee or something.”

Susan Banks said briskly:

“I don’t want anything. I’m so sorry if I startled you.”

“Well, you know you did, in a way. It’s very silly of me. I’m not usually nervous. In fact I told the lawyer that I wasn’t nervous, and that I wouldn’t be nervous staying on here alone, and really I’m not nervous. Only—perhaps it’s just the inquest and—and thinking of things, but I have been jumpy all this morning, just about half an hour ago the bell rang and I could hardly bring myself to open the door—which was really very stupid and so unlikely that a murderer would come back—and why should he?—and actually it was only a nun, collecting for an orphanage—and I was so relieved I gave her two shillings although I’m not a Roman Catholic and indeed have no sympathy with the Roman Church and all these monks and nuns although I believe the Little Sisters of the Poor really do good work. But do please sit down, Mrs.— Mrs.—”

“Banks.”

“Yes, of course, Banks. Did you come down by train?”

“No, I drove down. The lane seemed so narrow I ran the car on a little way and found a sort of old quarry I backed it into.”

“This lane is very narrow, but there’s hardly ever any traffic along here. It’s rather a lonely road.”

Miss Gilchrist gave a little shiver as she said those last words.

Susan Banks was looking round the room.

“Poor old Aunt Cora,” she said. “She left what she had to me, you know.”

“Yes, I know. Mr. Entwhistle told me. I expect you’ll be glad of the furniture. You’re newly married, I understand, and furnishing is such an expense nowadays. Mrs. Lansquenet had some very nice things.”

Susan did not agree. Cora had had no taste for the antique. The contents varied between “modernistic” pieces and the “arty” type.

"I shan't want any of the furniture," she said. "I've got my own, you know. I shall put it up for auction. Unless—is there any of it you would like? I'd be very glad…."

She stopped, a little embarrassed. But Miss Gilchrist was not at all embarrassed. She beamed.

"Now really, that's very kind of you, Mrs. Banks—yes, very kind indeed. I really do appreciate it. But actually, you know, I have my own things. I put them in store in case—some day—I should need them. There are some pictures my father left too. I had a small tea shop at one time, you know—but then the war came—it was all very unfortunate. But I didn't sell up everything, because I did hope to have my own little home again one day, so I put the best things in store with my father's pictures and some relics of our old home. But I would like very much, if you really wouldn't mind, to have that little painted tea table of dear Mrs. Lansquenet's. Such a pretty thing and we always had tea on it."

Susan, looking with a slight shudder at a small green table painted with large purple clematis, said quickly that she would be delighted for Miss Gilchrist to have it.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Banks. I feel a little greedy. I've got all her beautiful pictures, you know, and a lovely amethyst brooch, but I feel that perhaps I ought to give that back to you."

"No, no, indeed."

"You'll want to go through her things? After the inquest, perhaps?"

"I thought I'd stay here a couple of days, go through things, and clear everything up."

"Sleep here, you mean?"

"Yes. Is there any difficulty?"

“Oh no, Mrs. Banks, of course not. I’ll put fresh sheets on my bed, and I can doss down here on the couch quite well.”

“But there’s Aunt Cora’s room, isn’t there? I can sleep in that.”

“You—you wouldn’t mind?”

“You mean because she was murdered there? Oh no, I wouldn’t mind. I’m very tough, Miss Gilchrist. It’s been—I mean—It’s all right again?”

Miss Gilchrist understood the question.

“Oh yes, Mrs. Banks. All the blankets sent away to the cleaners and Mrs. Panter and I scrubbed the whole room out thoroughly. And there are plenty of spare blankets. But come up and see for yourself.”

She led the way upstairs and Susan followed her.

The room where Cora Lansquenet had died was clean and fresh and curiously devoid of any sinister atmosphere. Like the sitting room it contained a mixture of modern utility and elaborately painted furniture. It represented Cora’s cheerful tasteless personality. Over the mantelpiece an oil painting showed a buxom young woman about to enter her bath.

Susan gave a slight shudder as she looked at it and Miss Gilchrist said:

“That was painted by Mrs. Lansquenet’s husband. There are a lot more of his pictures in the dining room downstairs.”

“How terrible.”

“Well, I don’t care very much for that style of painting myself—but Mrs. Lansquenet was very proud of her husband as an artist and thought that his work was sadly unappreciated.”

“Where are Aunt Cora’s own pictures?”

“In my room. Would you like to see them?”

Miss Gilchrist displayed her treasures proudly.

Susan remarked that Aunt Cora seemed to have been fond of seacoast resorts.

“Oh yes. You see, she lived for many years with Mr. Lansquenet at a small fishing village in Brittany. Fishing boats are always so picturesque, are they not?”

“Obviously,” Susan murmured. A whole series of picture postcards could, she thought, have been made from Cora Lansquenet’s paintings which were faithful to detail and very highly coloured. They gave rise to the suspicion that they might actually have been painted from picture postcards.

But when she hazarded this opinion Miss Gilchrist was indignant. Mrs. Lansquenet always painted from Nature! Indeed, once she had had a touch of the sun from reluctance to leave a subject when the light was just right.

“Mrs. Lansquenet was a real artist,” said Miss Gilchrist reproachfully.

She glanced at her watch and Susan said quickly:

“Yes, we ought to start for the inquest. Is it far? Shall I get the car?”

It was only five minutes’ walk, Miss Gilchrist assured her. So they set out together on foot. Mr. Entwhistle, who had come down by train, met them and shepherded them into the Village Hall.

There seemed to be a large number of strangers present. The inquest was not sensational. There was evidence of the identification of the deceased. Medical evidence as to the nature of the wounds that had killed her. There were no signs of a struggle. Deceased was probably under a narcotic at the time she was attacked and would have been taken quite unawares. Death was unlikely to have occurred later than four thirty. Between two and four thirty was the nearest approximation. Miss Gilchrist testified to finding the body. A police constable and Inspector Morton gave their evidence. The Coroner summed up briefly. The jury made no bones about the verdict. “Murder by some person or persons unknown.”

It was over. They came out again into the sunlight. Half a dozen cameras clicked. Mr. Entwhistle shepherded Susan and Miss Gilchrist into the King’s Arms, where he had taken the precaution to arrange for lunch to be served in a private room behind the bar.

“Not a very good lunch,” he said apologetically.

But the lunch was not at all bad. Miss Gilchrist sniffed a little and murmured that “it was all so dreadful,” but cheered up and tackled the Irish stew with appetite after Mr. Entwhistle had insisted on her drinking a glass of sherry. He said to Susan:

“I’d no idea you were coming down today, Susan. We could have come together.”

“I know I said I wouldn’t. But it seemed rather mean for none of the family to be there. I rang up George but he said he was very busy and couldn’t possibly make it, and Rosamund had an audition and Uncle Timothy, of course, is a crock. So it had to be me.”

“Your husband didn’t come with you?”

“Greg had to settle up with his tiresome shop.”

Seeing a startled look in Miss Gilchrist’s eye, Susan said: “My husband works in a chemist’s shop.”

A husband in retail trade did not quite square with Miss Gilchrist’s impression of Susan’s smartness, but she said valiantly: “Oh yes, just like Keats.”

“Greg’s no poet,” said Susan.

She added:

“We’ve got great plans for the future—a double-barrelled establishment—Cosmetics and Beauty parlour and a laboratory for special preparations.”

"That will be much nicer," said Miss Gilchrist approvingly. "Something like Elizabeth Arden who is really a Countess, so I have been told—or is that Helena Rubenstein? In any case," she added kindly, "a pharmacist's is not in the least like an ordinary shop—a draper, for instance, or a grocer."

"You kept a tea shop, you said, didn't you?"

"Yes, indeed," Miss Gilchrist's face lit up. That the Willow Tree had ever been "trade" in the sense that a shop was trade, would never have occurred to her. To keep a tea shop was in her mind the essence of gentility. She started telling Susan about the Willow Tree.

Mr. Entwhistle, who had heard about it before, let his mind drift to other matters. When Susan had spoken to him twice without his answering he hurriedly apologized.

"Forgive me, my dear, I was thinking, as a matter of fact, about your Uncle Timothy. I am a little worried."

"About Uncle Timothy? I shouldn't be. I don't believe really there's anything the matter with him. He's just a hypochondriac."

"Yes—yes, you may be right. I confess it was not his health that was worrying me. It's Mrs. Timothy. Apparently she's fallen downstairs and twisted her ankle. She's laid up and your uncle is in a terrible state."

"Because he'll have to look after her instead of the other way about? Do him a lot of good," said Susan.

"Yes—yes, I dare say. But will your poor aunt get any looking after? That is really the question. With no servants in the house?"

"Life is really hell for elderly people," said Susan. "They live in a kind of Georgian Manor house, don't they?"

Mr. Entwhistle nodded.

They came rather warily out of the King's Arms, but the Press seemed to have dispersed.

A couple of reporters were lying in wait for Susan by the cottage door. Shepherded by Mr. Entwhistle she said a few necessary and noncommittal words. Then she and Miss Gilchrist went into the cottage and Mr. Entwhistle returned to the King’s Arms where he had booked a room. The funeral was to be on the following day.

“My car’s still in the quarry,” said Susan. “I’d forgotten about it. I’ll drive it along to the village later.”

Miss Gilchrist said anxiously:

“Not too late. You won’t go out after dark, will you?”

Susan looked at her and laughed.

“You don’t think there’s a murderer still hanging about, do you?”

“No—no, I suppose not.” Miss Gilchrist looked embarrassed.

“But it’s exactly what she does think, thought Susan. “How amazing!”

Miss Gilchrist had vanished towards the kitchen.

“I’m sure you’d like tea early. In about half an hour, do you think, Mrs. Banks?”

Susan thought that tea at half past three was overdoing it, but she was charitable enough to realize that “a nice cup of tea” was Miss Gilchrist’s idea of restoration for the nerves and she had her own reasons for wishing to please Miss Gilchrist, so she said:

“Whenever you like, Miss Gilchrist.”

A happy clatter of kitchen implements began and Susan went into the sitting room. She had only been there a few minutes when the bell sounded and was succeeded by a very precise little rat-tat-tat.

Susan came out into the hall and Miss Gilchrist appeared at the kitchen door wearing an apron and wiping floury hands on it.

“Oh dear, who do you think that can be?”

“More reporters, I expect,” said Susan.

“Oh dear, how annoying for you, Mrs. Banks.”

“Oh well, never mind, I’ll attend to it.”

“I was just going to make a few scones for tea.”

Susan went towards the front door and Miss Gilchrist hovered uncertainly. Susan wondered whether she thought a man with a hatchet was waiting outside.

The visitor, however, proved to be an elderly gentleman who raised his hat when Susan opened the door and said, beaming at her in avuncular style:

“Mrs. Banks, I think?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Guthrie—Alexander Guthrie. I was a friend—a very old friend, of Mrs. Lansquenet’s. You, I think, are her niece, formerly Miss Susan Abernethie?”

“That’s quite right.”

“Then since we know who we are, I may come in?”

“Of course.”

Mr. Guthrie wiped his feet carefully on the mat, stepped inside, divested himself of his overcoat, laid it down with his hat on a small oak chest and followed Susan into the sitting room.

“This is a melancholy occasion,” said Mr. Guthrie, to whom melancholy did not seem to come naturally, his own inclination being to beam. “Yes, a very melancholy occasion. I was in this part of the world and I felt the least I could do was to attend the inquest—and of course the funeral. Poor Cora—

poor foolish Cora. I have known her, my dear Mrs. Banks, since the early days of her marriage. A high-spirited girl—and she took art very seriously—took Pierre Lansquenet seriously, too—as an artist, I mean. All things considered he didn't make her too bad a husband. He strayed, if you know what I mean, yes, he strayed—but fortunately Cora took it as part of the artistic temperament. He was an artist and therefore immoral! In fact, I'm not sure she didn't go further: he was immoral and therefore he must be an artist! No kind of sense in artistic matters, poor Cora—though in other ways, mind you, Cora had a lot of sense—yes, a surprising lot of sense."

"That's what everybody seems to say," said Susan. "I didn't really know her."

"No, no, cut herself off from her family because they didn't appreciate her precious Pierre. She was never a pretty girl—but she had something. She was good company! You never knew what she'd say next and you never knew if her näiveté was genuine or whether she was doing it deliberately. She made us all laugh a good deal. The eternal child—that's what we always felt about her. And really the last time I saw her (I have seen her from time to time since Pierre died) she struck me as still behaving very much like a child."

Susan offered Mr. Guthrie a cigarette, but the old gentleman shook his head.

"No thank you, my dear. I don't smoke. You must wonder why I've come? To tell you the truth I was feeling rather conscience-stricken. I promised Cora to come and see her some weeks ago. I usually called upon her once a year, and just lately she'd taken up the hobby of buying pictures at local sales, and wanted me to look at some of them. My profession is that of art critic, you know. Of course most of Cora's purchases were horrible daubs, but take it all in all, it isn't such a bad speculation. Pictures go for next to nothing at these country sales and the frames alone are worth more than you pay for the picture. Naturally any important sale is attended by dealers and one isn't likely to get hold of masterpieces. But only the other day, a small Cuyp was knocked down for a few pounds at a farmhouse sale. The history of it was quite interesting. It had been given to an old nurse by the family she had served faithfully for many years—they had no idea of its value. Old nurse gave it to a farmer nephew who liked the horse in it but thought it was a dirty old thing! Yes, yes, these things sometimes happen, and Cora was convinced that she had an eye for pictures. She hadn't of course. Wanted me to come and look at a Rembrandt she had picked up last year. A Rembrandt! Not even a respectable copy of one! But she had got hold of a quite nice Bartolozzi engraving—damp spotted unfortunately. I sold it for her for thirty pounds and of course that spurred her on. She wrote to me with great gusto about an Italian Primitive she had bought at some sale and I promised I'd come along and see it."

"That's it over there, I expect," said Susan, gesturing to the wall behind him.

Mr. Guthrie got up, put on a pair of spectacles, and went over to study the picture.

"Poor dear Cora," he said at last.

"There are a lot more," said Susan.

Mr. Guthrie proceeded to a leisurely inspection of the art treasures acquired by the hopeful Mrs. Lansquenet. Occasionally he said, "Tchk, Tchk," occasionally he sighed.

Finally he removed his spectacles.

"Dirt," he said, "is a wonderful thing, Mrs. Banks! It gives a patina of romance to the most horrible examples of the painter's art. I'm afraid that Bartolozzi was beginner's luck. Poor Cora. Still, it gave her an interest in life. I am really thankful that I did not have to disillusion her."

"There are some pictures in the dining room," said Susan, "but I think they are all her husband's work."

Mr. Guthrie shuddered slightly and held up a protesting hand.

"Do not force me to look at those again. Life classes have much to answer for! I always tried to spare Cora's feelings. A devoted wife—a very devoted wife. Well, dear Mrs. Banks, I must not take up more of your time."

“Oh, do stay and have some tea. I think it’s nearly ready.”

“That is very kind of you.” Mr. Guthrie sat down again promptly.

“I’ll just go and see.”

In the kitchen, Miss Gilchrist was just lifting a last batch of scones from the oven. The tea tray stood ready and the kettle was just gently rattling its lid.

“There’s a Mr. Guthrie here, and I’ve asked him to stay for tea.”

“Mr. Guthrie? Oh, yes, he was a great friend of dear Mrs. Lansquenet’s. He’s the celebrated art critic. How fortunate; I’ve made a nice lot of scones and that’s some homemade strawberry jam, and I just whipped up some little drop cakes. I’ll just make the tea—I’ve warmed the pot. Oh, please, Mrs. Banks, don’t carry that heavy tray. I can manage everything.”

However, Susan took in the tray and Miss Gilchrist followed with teapot and kettle, greeted Mr. Guthrie, and they set to.

“Hot scones, that is a treat,” said Mr. Guthrie, “and what delicious jam! Really, the stuff one buys nowadays.”

Miss Gilchrist was flushed and delighted. The little cakes were excellent and so were the scones, and everyone did justice to them. The ghost of the Willow Tree hung over the party. Here, it was clear, Miss Gilchrist was in her element.

“Well, thank you, perhaps I will,” said Mr. Guthrie as he accepted the last cake, pressed upon him by Miss Gilchrist. “I do feel rather guilty, though—enjoying my tea here, where poor Cora was so brutally murdered.”

Miss Gilchrist displayed an unexpected Victorian reaction to this.

“Oh, but Mrs. Lansquenet would have wished you to take a good tea. You’ve got to keep your strength up.”

“Yes, yes, perhaps you are right. The fact is, you know, that one cannot really bring oneself to believe that someone you knew—actually knew—

can have been murdered!”

“I agree,” said Susan. “It just seems—fantastic.”

“And certainly not by some casual tramp who broke in and attacked her. I can imagine, you know, reasons why Cora might have been murdered—”

Susan said quickly, “Can you? What reasons?”

“Well, she wasn’t discreet,” said Mr. Guthrie. “Cora was never discreet. And she enjoyed—how shall I put it—showing how sharp she could be? Like a child who’s got hold of somebody’s secret. If Cora got hold of a secret she’d want to talk about it. Even if she promised not to, she’d still do it. She wouldn’t be able to help herself.”

Susan did not speak. Miss Gilchrist did not either. She looked worried. Mr. Guthrie went on:

“Yes, a little dose of arsenic in a cup of tea—that would not have surprised me, or a box of chocolates by post. But sordid robbery and assault—that seems highly incongruous. I may be wrong but I should have thought she had very little to take that would be worth a burglar’s while. She didn’t keep much money in the house, did she?”

Miss Gilchrist said, “Very little.”

Mr. Guthrie sighed and rose to his feet.

“Ah! well, there’s a lot of lawlessness about since the war. Times have changed.”

Thanking them for the tea he took a polite farewell of the two women. Miss Gilchrist saw him out and helped him on with his overcoat. From the window of the sitting room, Susan watched him trot briskly down the front path to the gate.

Miss Gilchrist came back into the room with a small parcel in her hand.

"The postman must have been while we were at the inquest. He pushed it through the letter box and it had fallen in the corner behind the door. Now I wonder—why, of course, it must be wedding cake."

Happily Miss Gilchrist ripped off the paper. Inside was a small white box tied with silver ribbon.

"It is!" She pulled off the ribbon, inside was a modest wedge of rich cake with almond paste and white icing. "How nice! Now who—" She consulted the card attached. "John and Mary. Now who can that be? How silly to put no surname."

Susan, rousing herself from contemplation, said vaguely:

"It's quite difficult sometimes with people just using Christian names. I got a postcard the other day signed Joan. I counted up I knew eight Joans—and with telephoning so much, one often doesn't know their handwriting."

Miss Gilchrist was happily going over the possible Johns and Marys of her acquaintance.

"It might be Dorothy's daughter—her name was Mary, but I hadn't heard of an engagement, still less of a marriage. Then there's little John Banfield—I suppose he's grown up and old enough to be married—or the Enfield girl—no, her name was Margaret. No address or anything. Oh well, I dare say it will come to me…."

She picked up the tray and went out to the kitchen.

Susan roused herself and said:

"Well— I suppose I'd better go and put the car somewhere."

Ten

Susan retrieved the car from the quarry where she had left it and drove it into the village. There was a petrol pump but no garage and she was advised to take it to the King’s Arms. They had room for it there and she left it by a big Daimler which was preparing to go out. It was chauffeur driven and inside it, very much muffled up, was an elderly foreign gentleman with a large moustache.

The boy to whom Susan was talking about the car was staring at her with such rapt attention that he did not seem to be taking in half of what she said.

Finally he said in an awe-stricken voice:

“You’re her niece, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“You’re the victim’s niece,” the boy repeated with relish.

“Oh—yes—yes, I am.”

“Ar! Wondered where I’d seen you before.”

“Ghoul,” thought Susan as she retraced her steps to the cottage.

Miss Gilchrist greeted her with:

“Oh, you’re safely back,” in tones of relief which further annoyed her. Miss Gilchrist added anxiously:

“You can eat spaghetti, can’t you? I thought for tonight—”

“Oh yes, anything. I don’t want much.”

“I really flatter myself that I can make a very tasty spaghetti au gratin.”

The boast was not an idle one. Miss Gilchrist, Susan reflected, was really an excellent cook. Susan offered to help wash up but Miss Gilchrist, though clearly gratified by the offer, assured Susan that there was very little to do.

She came in a little while after with coffee. The coffee was less excellent, being decidedly weak. Miss Gilchrist offered Susan a piece of the wedding cake which Susan refused.

“It’s really very good cake,” Miss Gilchrist insisted, tasting it. She had settled to her own satisfaction that it must have been sent by someone whom she alluded to as “dear Ellen’s daughter who I know was engaged to be married but I can’t remember her name.”

Susan let Miss Gilchrist chirrup away into silence before starting her own subject of conversation. This moment, after supper, sitting before the fire, was a companionable one.

She said at last:

“My Uncle Richard came down here before he died, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did.”

“When was that exactly?”

“Let me see—it must have been one, two—nearly three weeks before his death was announced.”

“Did he seem—ill?”

“Well, no, I wouldn’t say he seemed exactly ill. He had a very hearty vigorous manner. Mrs. Lansquenet was very surprised to see him. She said, ‘Well, really, Richard, after all these years!’ and he said, ‘I came to see for myself exactly how things are with you.’ And Mrs. Lansquenet said, ‘I’m all right.’ I think, you know, she was a teeny bit offended by his turning up so casually—after the long break. Anyway Mr. Abernethie said, ‘No use keeping up old grievances. You and I and Timothy are the only ones left—and nobody can talk to Timothy except about his own health.’ And he said, ‘Pierre seems to have made you happy, so it seems I was in the wrong. There, will that content you?’ Very nicely he said it. A handsome man, though elderly, of course.”

“How long was he here?”

“He stayed for lunch. Beef olives, I made. Fortunately it was the day the butcher called.”

Miss Gilchrist’s memory seemed to be almost wholly culinary.

“They seemed to be getting on well together?”

“Oh, yes.”

Susan paused and then said:

“Was Aunt Cora surprised when—he died?”

“Oh yes, it was quite sudden, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was sudden… I mean—she was surprised. He hadn’t given her any indication how ill he was.”

“Oh—I see what you mean.” Miss Gilchrist paused a moment. “No, no, I think perhaps you are right. She did say that he had got very old— I think she said senile….”

“But you didn’t think he was senile?”

“Well, not to look at. But I didn’t talk to him much, naturally I left them alone together.”

Susan looked at Miss Gilchrist speculatively. Was Miss Gilchrist the kind of woman who listened at doors? She was honest, Susan felt sure, she wouldn’t ever pilfer, or cheat over the housekeeping, or open letters. But inquisitiveness can drape itself in a mantle of rectitude. Miss Gilchrist might have found it necessary to garden near an open window, or to dust the hall… That would be within the permitted lengths. And then, of course, she could not have helped hearing something….

“You didn’t hear any of their conversation?” Susan asked.

Too abrupt. Miss Gilchrist flushed angrily.

“No, indeed, Mrs. Banks. It has never been my custom to listen at doors!”

That means she does, thought Susan, otherwise she’d just say “No.”

Aloud she said: “I’m so sorry, Miss Gilchrist. I didn’t mean it that way. But sometimes, in these small flimsily built cottages, one simply can’t help overhearing nearly everything that goes on, and now that they are both dead, it’s really rather important to the family to know just what was said at that meeting between them.”

The cottage was anything but flimsily built—it dated from a sturdier era of building, but Miss Gilchrist accepted the bait, and rose to the suggestion held out.

“Of course what you say is quite true, Mrs. Banks—this is a very small place and I do appreciate that you would want to know what passed between them, but really I’m afraid I can’t help very much. I think they were talking about Mr. Abernethie’s health—and certain—well, fancies he had. He didn’t look it, but he must have been a sick man and as is so often the case, he put his illhealth down to outside agencies. A common symptom, I believe. My aunt—”

Miss Gilchrist described her aunt.

Susan, like Mr. Entwhistle, sidetracked the aunt.

“Yes,” she said. “That is just what we thought. My uncle’s servants were all very attached to him and naturally they are upset by his thinking—” She paused.

“Oh, of course! Servants are very touchy about anything of that kind. I remember that my aunt—”

Again Susan interrupted.

“It was the servants he suspected, I suppose? Of poisoning him, I mean?”

“I don’t know… I—really—”

Susan noted her confusion.

“It wasn’t the servants. Was it one particular person?”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Banks. Really I don’t know—”

But her eye avoided Susan’s. Susan thought to herself that Miss Gilchrist knew more than she was willing to admit.

It was possible that Miss Gilchrist knew a good deal….

Deciding not to press the point for the moment, Susan said:

“What are your own plans for the future, Miss Gilchrist?”

“Well, really, I was going to speak to you about that, Mrs. Banks. I told Mr. Entwhistle I would be willing to stay on until everything here was cleared up.”

“I know. I’m very grateful.”

“And I wanted to ask you how long that was likely to be, because, of course, I must start looking about for another post.”

Susan considered.

“There’s really not very much to be done here. In a couple of days I can get things sorted out and notify the auctioneer.”

“You have decided to sell up everything, then?”

“Yes. I don’t suppose there will be any difficulty in letting the cottage?”

“Oh, no—people will queue up for it, I’m sure. There are so few cottages to rent. One nearly always has to buy.”

“So it’s all very simple, you see.” Susan hesitated a moment before saying, “I wanted to tell you—that I hope you’ll accept three months’ salary.”

“That’s very generous of you, I’m sure, Mrs. Banks. I do appreciate it. And you would be prepared to—I mean I could ask you—if necessary—to—to recommend me? To say that I had been with a relation of yours and that I had—proved satisfactory?”

“Oh, of course.”

“I don’t know whether I ought to ask it.” Miss Gilchrist’s hands began to shake and she tried to steady her voice. “But would it be possible not to—to mention the circumstances—or even the name?”

Susan stared.

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s because you haven’t thought, Mrs. Banks. It’s murder. A murder that’s been in the papers and that everybody has read about. Don’t you see? People might think, ‘Two women living together, and one of them is killed—and perhaps the companion did it.’ Don’t you see, Mrs. Banks? I’m sure that if I was looking for someone, I’d—well, I’d think twice before engaging myself—if you understand what I mean. Because one never knows! It’s been worrying me dreadfully, Mrs. Banks; I’ve been lying awake at night thinking that perhaps I’ll never get another job—not of this kind. And what else is there that I can do?”

The question came out with unconscious pathos. Susan felt suddenly stricken. She realized the desperation of this pleasant-spoken commonplace woman who was dependent for existence on the fears and whims of employers. And there was a lot of truth in what Miss Gilchrist had said. You wouldn’t, if you could help it, engage a woman to share domestic intimacy who had figured, however innocently, in a murder case.

Susan said: “But if they find the man who did it—”

“Oh then, of course, it will be quite all right. But will they find him? I don’t think, myself, the police have the least idea. And if he’s not caught—well, that leaves me as—as not quite the most likely person, but as a person who could have done it.”

Susan nodded thoughtfully. It was true that Miss Gilchrist did not benefit from Cora Lansquenet’s death—but who was to know that? And besides, there were so many tales—ugly tales—of animosity arising between women who lived together—strange pathological motives for sudden violence. Someone who had not known them might imagine that Cora Lansquenet and Miss Gilchrist had lived on those terms….

Susan spoke with her usual decision.

“Don’t worry, Miss Gilchrist,” she said, speaking briskly and cheerfully. “I’m sure I can find you a post amongst my friends. There won’t be the least difficulty.”

“I’m afraid,” said Miss Gilchrist, regaining some of her customary manner, “that I couldn’t undertake any really rough work. Just a little plain cooking and housework—”

The telephone rang and Miss Gilchrist jumped.

“Dear me, I wonder who that can be.”

“I expect it’s my husband,” said Susan, jumping up. “He said he’d ring me tonight.”

She went to the telephone.

“Yes?—yes, this is Mrs. Banks speaking personally…” There was a pause and then her voice changed. It became soft and warm. “Hallo, darling—yes, it’s me… Oh, quite well… Murder by someone unknown…the usual thing… Only Mr. Entwhistle…What?…it’s difficult to say, but I think so… Yes, just as we thought… Absolutely according to plan… I shall sell the stuff. There’s nothing we’d want… Not for a day or two… Absolutely frightful… Don’t fuss. I know what I’m doing… Greg, you didn’t… You were careful to… No, it’s nothing. Nothing at all. Goodnight, darling.”

She rang off. The nearness of Miss Gilchrist had hampered her a little. Miss Gilchrist could probably hear from the kitchen, where she had tactfully retired, exactly what went on. There were things she had wanted to ask Greg, but she hadn’t liked to.

She stood by the telephone, frowning abstractedly. Then suddenly an idea came to her.

“Of course,” she murmured. “Just the thing.”

Lifting the receiver she asked for Trunk Enquiry.

Some quarter of an hour later a weary voice from the exchange was saying:

“I’m afraid there’s no reply.”

“Please go on ringing them.”

Susan spoke autocratically. She listened to the far-off buzzing of a telephone bell. Then, suddenly it was interrupted and a man’s voice, peevish and slightly indignant, said:

“Yes, yes, what is it?”

“Uncle Timothy?”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you.”

“Uncle Timothy? I’m Susan Banks.”

“Susan who?”

“Banks. Formerly Abernethie. Your niece Susan.”

"Oh, you're Susan, are you? What's the matter? What are you ringing up for at this time of night?"

"It's quite early still."

"It isn't. I was in bed."

"You must go to bed very early. How's Aunt Maude?"

"Is that all you rang up to ask? Your aunt's in a good deal of pain and she can't do a thing. Not a thing. She's helpless. We're in a nice mess, I can tell you. That fool of a doctor says he can't even get a nurse. He wanted to cart Maude off to hospital. I stood out against that. He's trying to get hold of someone for us. I can't do anything— I daren't even try. There's a fool from the village staying in the house tonight—but she's murmuring about getting back to her husband. Don't know what we're going to do."

"That's what I rang up about. Would you like Miss Gilchrist?"

"Who's she? Never heard of her."

"Aunt Cora's companion. She's very nice and capable."

"Can she cook?"

"Yes, she cooks very well, and she could look after Aunt Maude."

"That's all very well, but when could she come? Here I am, all on my own, with only these idiots of village women popping in and out at odd hours, and it's not good for me. My heart's playing me up."

"I'll arrange for her to get off to you as soon as possible. The day after tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Well, thanks very much," said the voice rather grudgingly. "You're a good girl, Susan—er—thank you."

Susan rang off and went into the kitchen.

"Would you be willing to go up to Yorkshire and look after my aunt? She fell and broke her ankle and my uncle is quite useless. He's a bit of a pest but Aunt Maude is a very good sort. They have help in from the village, but you could cook and look after Aunt Maude."

Miss Gilchrist dropped the coffee pot in her agitation.

"Oh, thank you, thank you—that really is kind. I think I can say of myself that I am really good in the sickroom, and I'm sure I can manage your uncle and cook him nice little meals. It's really very kind of you, Mrs. Banks, and I do appreciate it."

Eleven

I

Susan lay in bed and waited for sleep to come. It had been a long day and she was tired. She had been quite sure that she would go to sleep at once. She never had any difficulty in going to sleep. And yet here she lay, hour after hour, wide awake, her mind racing.

She had said she did not mind sleeping in this room, in this bed. This bed where Cora Abernethie—

No, no she must put all that out of her mind. She had always prided herself on having no nerves. Why think of that afternoon less than a week ago? Think ahead—the future. Her future and Greg's. Those premises in Cardigan Street—just what they wanted. The business on the ground floor and a charming flat upstairs. The room out at the back a laboratory for Greg. For purposes of income tax it would be an excellent setup. Greg would get calm and well again. There would be no more of those alarming brainstorms. The times when he looked at her without seeming to know who she was. Once or twice she'd been quite frightened… And old Mr. Cole—he'd hinted—threatened: "If this happens again…" And it might have happened again—it would have happened again. If Uncle Richard hadn't died just when he did….

Uncle Richard—but really why look at it like that? He'd nothing to live for. Old and tired and ill. His son dead. It was a mercy really. To die in his sleep quietly like that. Quietly…in his sleep… If only she could sleep. It was so stupid lying awake hour after hour…hearing the furniture creak, and the rustling of trees and bushes outside the window and the occasional queer melancholy hoot—an owl, she supposed. How sinister the country was, somehow. So different from the big noisy indifferent town. One felt so safe there—surrounded by people—never alone. Whereas here….

Houses where a murder had been committed were sometimes haunted. Perhaps this cottage would come to be known as the haunted cottage.

Haunted by the spirit of Cora Lansquenet… Aunt Cora. Odd, really, how ever since she had arrived she had felt as though Aunt Cora were quite close to her…within reach. All nerves and fancy. Cora Lansquenet was dead, tomorrow she would be buried. There was no one in the cottage except Susan herself and Miss Gilchrist. Then why did she feel that there was someone in this room, someone close beside her….

She had lain on this bed when the hatchet fell… Lying there trustingly asleep… Knowing nothing till the hatchet fell… And now she wouldn't let Susan sleep….

The furniture creaked again…was that a stealthy step? Susan switched on the light. Nothing. Nerves, nothing but nerves. Relax…close your eyes….

Surely that was a groan—a groan or a faint moan… Someone in pain—someone dying….

"I mustn't imagine things, I mustn't, I mustn't," Susan whispered to herself.

Death was the end—there was no existence after death. Under no circumstances could anyone come back. Or was she reliving a scene from the past—a dying woman groaning….

There it was again…stronger…someone groaning in acute pain….

But—this was real. Once again Susan switched on the light, sat up in bed and listened. The groans were real groans and she was hearing them through the wall. They came from the room next door.

Susan jumped out of bed, flung on a dressing gown and crossed to the door. She went out on to the landing, tapped for a moment on Miss Gilchrist's door and then went in. Miss Gilchrist's light was on. She was sitting up in bed. She looked ghastly. Her face was distorted with pain.

"Miss Gilchrist, what's the matter? Are you ill?"

"Yes. I don't know what—I—" she tried to get out of bed, was seized with a fit of vomiting and then collapsed back on the pillows.

She murmured: “Please—ring up doctor. Must have eaten something….”

“I’ll get you some bicarbonate. We can get the doctor in the morning if you’re no better.”

Miss Gilchrist shook her head.

“No, get the doctor now. I— I feel dreadful.”

“Do you know his number? Or shall I look in the book?”

Miss Gilchrist gave her the number. She was interrupted by another fit of retching.

Susan’s call was answered by a sleepy male voice.

“Who? Gilchrist? In Mead’s Lane. Yes, I know. I’ll be right along.”

He was as good as his word. Ten minutes later Susan heard his car draw up outside and she went to open the door to him.

She explained the case and she took him upstairs. “I think,” she said, “she must have eaten something that disagreed with her. But she seems pretty bad.”

The doctor had had the air of one keeping his temper in leash and who has had some experience of being called out unnecessarily on more than one occasion. But as soon as he examined the moaning woman his manner changed. He gave various curt orders to Susan and presently came down and telephoned. Then he joined Susan in the sitting room.

“I’ve sent for an ambulance. Must get her into hospital.”

“She’s really bad then?”

“Yes. I’ve given her a shot of morphia to ease the pain. But it looks—” He broke off. “What’s she eaten?”

“We had macaroni au gratin for supper and a custard pudding. Coffee afterwards.”

“You have the same things?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re all right? No pain or discomfort?”

“No.”

“She’s taken nothing else? No tinned fish? Or sausages?”

“No. We had lunch at the King’s Arms—after the inquest.”

“Yes, of course. You’re Mrs. Lansquenet’s niece?”

“Yes.”

“That was a nasty business. Hope they catch the man who did it.”

“Yes, indeed.”

The ambulance came. Miss Gilchrist was taken away and the doctor went with her. He told Susan he would ring her up in the morning. When he had left she went upstairs to bed.

This time she fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

II

The funeral was well-attended. Most of the village had turned out. Susan and Mr. Entwhistle were the only mourners, but various wreaths had been sent by the other members of the family. Mr. Entwhistle asked where Miss Gilchrist was, and Susan explained the circumstances in a hurried whisper. Mr. Entwhistle raised his eyebrows.

“Rather an odd occurrence?”

“Oh, she’s better this morning. They rang up from the hospital. People do get these bilious turns. Some make more fuss than others.”

Mr. Entwhistle said no more. He was returning to London immediately after the funeral.

Susan went back to the cottage. She found some eggs and made herself an omelette. Then she went up to Cora’s room and started to sort through the dead woman’s things.

She was interrupted by the arrival of the doctor.

The doctor was looking worried. He replied to Susan’s inquiry by saying that Miss Gilchrist was much better.

“She’ll be out and around in a couple of days,” he said. “But it was lucky I got called in so promptly. Otherwise—it might have been a near thing.”

Susan stared. “Was she really so bad?”

“Mrs. Banks, will you tell me again exactly what Miss Gilchrist had to eat and drink yesterday. Everything.”

Susan reflected and gave a meticulous account. The doctor shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“There must have been something she had and you didn’t?”

“I don’t think so… Cakes, scones, jam, tea—and then supper. No, I can’t remember anything.”

The doctor rubbed his nose. He walked up and down the room.

“Was it definitely something she ate? Definitely food poisoning?”

The doctor threw her a sharp glance. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

“It was arsenic,” he said.

“Arsenic?” Susan started. “You mean somebody gave her arsenic?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Could she have taken it herself? Deliberately, I mean?”

“Suicide? She says not and she should know. Besides, if she wanted to commit suicide she wouldn’t be likely to choose arsenic. There are sleeping pills in this house. She could have taken an overdose of them.”

“Could the arsenic have got into something by accident?”

“That’s what I’m wondering. It seems very unlikely, but such things have been known. But if you and she ate the same things—”

Susan nodded. She said, “It all seems impossible—” then she gave a sudden gasp. “Why, of course, the wedding cake!”

“What’s that? Wedding cake?”

Susan explained. The doctor listened with close attention.

“Odd. And you say she wasn’t sure who sent it? Any of it left? Or is the box it came in lying around?”

“I don’t know. I’ll look.”

They searched together and finally found the white cardboard box with a few crumbs of cake still in it lying on the kitchen dresser. The doctor packed it away with some care.

“I’ll take charge of this. Any idea where the wrapping paper it came in might be?”

Here they were not successful and Susan said that it had probably gone into the Ideal boiler.

“You won’t be leaving here just yet, Mrs. Banks?”

His tone was genial, but it made Susan feel a little uncomfortable.

“No, I have to go through my aunt’s things. I shall be here for a few days.”

“Good. You understand the police will probably want to ask some questions. You don’t know of anyone who—well, might have had it in for Miss Gilchrist?”

Susan shook her head.

“I don’t really know much about her. She was with my aunt for some years—that’s all I know.”

“Quite, quite. Always seemed a pleasant unassuming woman—quite ordinary. Not the kind, you’d say, to have enemies or anything melodramatic of that kind. Wedding cake through the post. Sounds like some jealous woman—but who’d be jealous of Miss Gilchrist? Doesn’t seem to fit.”

“No.”

“Well, I must be on my way. I don’t know what’s happening to us in quiet little Lytchett St. Mary. First a brutal murder and now attempted poisoning through the post. Odd, the one following the other.”

He went down the path to his car. The cottage felt stuffy and Susan left the door standing open as she went slowly upstairs to resume her task.

Cora Lansquenet had not been a tidy or methodical woman. Her drawers held a miscellaneous assortment of things. There were toilet accessories and letters and old handkerchiefs and paint brushes mixed up together in one drawer. There were a few old letters and bills thrust in amongst a bulging drawer of underclothes. In another drawer under some woollen jumpers was a cardboard box holding two false fringes. There was another drawer full of old photographs and sketching books. Susan lingered over a group taken evidently at some French place many years ago and which showed a younger, thinner Cora clinging to the arm of a tall lanky man with a straggling beard dressed in what seemed to be a velveteen coat and whom Susan took to be the late Pierre Lansquenet.

The photographs interested Susan, but she laid them aside, sorted all the papers she had found into a heap and began to go through them methodically. About a quarter way through she came to a letter. She read it through twice and was still staring at it when a voice speaking behind her caused her to give a cry of alarm.

“And what may you have got hold of there, Susan? Hallo, what’s the matter?”

Susan reddened with annoyance. Her cry of alarm had been quite involuntary and she felt ashamed and anxious to explain.

“George? How you startled me!”

Her cousin smiled lazily.

“So it seems.”

“How did you get here?”

“Well, the door downstairs was open, so I walked in. There seemed to be nobody about on the ground floor, so I came up here. If you mean how did I get to this part of the world, I started down this morning to come to the funeral.”

“I didn’t see you there?”

“The old bus played me up. The petrol feed seemed choked. I tinkered with it for some time and finally it seemed to clear itself. I was too late for the funeral by then, but I thought I might as well come on down. I knew you were here.”

He paused, and then went on:

“I rang you up, as a matter of fact, and Greg told me you’d come down to take possession, as it were. I thought I might give you a hand.”

Susan said, “Aren’t you needed in the office? Or can you take days off whenever you like?”

“A funeral has always been a recognized excuse for absenteeism. And this funeral is indubitably genuine. Besides, a murder always fascinates people. Anyway, I shan’t be going much to the office in future—not now that I’m a man of means. I shall have better things to do.”

He paused and grinned, “Same as Greg,” he said.

Susan looked at George thoughtfully. She had never seen much of this cousin of hers and when they did meet she had always found him rather difficult to make out.

She asked, “Why did you really come down here, George?”

“I’m not sure it wasn’t to do a little detective work. I’ve been thinking a good deal about the last funeral we attended. Aunt Cora certainly threw a spanner into the works that day. I’ve wondered whether it was sheer irresponsibility and auntly joie de vivre that prompted her words, or whether she really had something to go upon. What actually is in that letter that you were reading so attentively when I came in?”

Susan said slowly, “It’s a letter that Uncle Richard wrote to Cora after he’d been down here to see her.”

How very black George’s eyes were. She’d thought of them as brown but they were black, and there was something curiously impenetrable about black eyes. They concealed the thoughts that lay behind them.

George drawled slowly. “Anything interesting in it?”

“No, not exactly….”

“Can I see?”

She hesitated for a moment, then put the letter into his outstretched hand.

He read it, skimming over the contents in a low monotone.

"Glad to have seen you again after all these years…looking very well…had a good journey home and arrived back not too tired…."

His voice changed suddenly, sharpened:

"Please don't say anything to anyone about what I told you. It may be a mistake. Your loving brother, Richard."

He looked up at Susan. "What does that mean?"

"It might mean anything… It might be just about his health. Or it might be some gossip about a mutual friend."

"Oh yes, it might be a lot of things. It isn't conclusive—but it's suggestive… What did he tell Cora? Does anyone know what he told her?"

"Miss Gilchrist might know," said Susan thoughtfully. "I think she listened."

"Oh, yes, the companion help. Where is she, by the way?"

"In hospital, suffering from arsenic poisoning."

George stared.

"You don't mean it?"

"I do. Someone sent her some poisoned wedding cake."

George sat down on one of the bedroom chairs and whistled.

"It looks," he said, "as though Uncle Richard was not mistaken."

III

On the following morning Inspector Morton called at the cottage.

He was a quiet middle-aged man with a soft country burr in his voice. His manner was quiet and unhurried, but his eyes were shrewd.

“You realize what this is about, Mrs. Banks?” he said. “Dr. Proctor has already told you about Miss Gilchrist. The few crumbs of wedding cake that he took from here have been analysed to show traces of arsenic.”

“So someone deliberately wanted to poison her?”

“That’s what it looks like. Miss Gilchrist herself doesn’t seem able to help us. She keeps repeating that it’s impossible—that nobody would do such a thing. But somebody did. You can’t throw any light on the matter?”

Susan shook her head.

“I’m simply dumbfounded,” she said. “Can’t you find out anything from the postmark? Or the handwriting?”

“You’ve forgotten—the wrapping paper was presumably burnt. And there’s a little doubt whether it came through the post at all. Young Andrews, the driver of the postal van, doesn’t seem able to remember delivering it. He’s got a big round, and he can’t be sure—but there it is—there’s a doubt about it.”

“But—what’s the alternative?”

“The alternative, Mrs. Banks, is that an old piece of brown paper was used that already had Miss Gilchrist’s name and address on it and a cancelled stamp, and that the package was pushed through the letter box or deposited inside the door by hand to create the impression that it had come by post.”

He added dispassionately:

“It’s quite a clever idea, you know, to choose wedding cake. Lonely middle-aged women are sentimental about wedding cake, pleased at having been remembered. A box of sweets, or something of that kind might have awakened suspicion.”

Susan said slowly:

“Miss Gilchrist speculated a good deal about who could have sent it, but she wasn’t at all suspicious—as you say, she was pleased and yes—

flattered.”

She added: “Was there enough poison in it to—kill?”

“That’s difficult to say until we get the quantitative analysis. It rather depends on whether Miss Gilchrist ate the whole of the wedge. She seems to think that she didn’t. Can you remember?”

“No—no, I’m not sure. She offered me some and I refused and then she ate some and said it was a very good cake, but I don’t remember if she finished it or not.”

“I’d like to go upstairs if you don’t mind, Mrs. Banks.”

“Of course.”

She followed him up to Miss Gilchrist’s room. She said apologetically:

“I’m afraid it’s in a rather disgusting state. But I didn’t have time to do anything about it with my aunt’s funeral and everything, and then after Dr. Proctor came I thought perhaps I ought to leave it as it was.”

“That was very intelligent of you, Mrs. Banks. It’s not everyone who would have been so intelligent.”

He went to the bed and slipping his hand under the pillow raised it carefully. A slow smile spread over his face.

“There you are,” he said.

A piece of wedding cake lay on the sheet looking somewhat the worse for wear.

“How extraordinary,” said Susan.

“Oh no, it’s not. Perhaps your generation doesn’t do it. Young ladies nowadays mayn’t set so much store on getting married. But it’s an old custom. Put a piece of wedding cake under your pillow and you’ll dream of your future husband.”

“But surely Miss Gilchrist—”

“She didn’t want to tell us about it because she felt foolish doing such a thing at her age. But I had a notion that’s what it might be.” His face sobered. “And if it hadn’t been for an old maid’s foolishness, Miss Gilchrist mightn’t be alive today.”

“But who could have possibly wanted to kill her?”

His eyes met hers, a curious speculative look in them that made Susan feel uncomfortable.

“You don’t know?” he asked.

“No—of course I don’t.”

“It seems then as though we shall have to find out,” said Inspector Morton.

Twelve

Two elderly men sat together in a room whose furnishings were of the most modern kind. There were no curves in the room. Everything was square. Almost the only exception was Hercule Poirot himself who was full of curves. His stomach was pleasantly rounded, his head resembled an egg in shape, and his moustaches curved upwards in a flamboyant flourish.

He was sipping a glass of sirop and looking thoughtfully at Mr. Goby.

Mr. Goby was small and spare and shrunken. He had always been refreshingly nondescript in appearance and he was now so nondescript as practically not to be there at all. He was not looking at Poirot because Mr. Goby never looked at anybody.

Such remarks as he was now making seemed to be addressed to the left-hand corner of the chromium-plated fireplace curb.

Mr. Goby was famous for the acquiring of information. Very few people knew about him and very few employed his services—but those few were usually extremely rich. They had to be, for Mr. Goby was very expensive. His speciality was the acquiring of information quickly. At the flick of Mr. Goby’s double-jointed thumb, hundreds of patient questioning plodding men and women, old and young, of all apparent stations in life, were despatched to question, and probe, and achieve results.

Mr. Goby had now practically retired from business. But he occasionally “obliged” a few old patrons. Hercule Poirot was one of these.

“I’ve got what I could for you,” Mr. Goby told the fire curb in a soft confidential whisper. “I sent the boys out. They do what they can—good lads—good lads all of them, but not what they used to be in the old days. They don’t come that way nowadays. Not willing to learn, that’s what it is. Think they know everything after they’ve only been a couple of years on the job. And they work to time. Shocking the way they work to time.”

He shook his head sadly and shifted his gaze to an electric plug socket.

“It’s the Government,” he told it. “And all this education racket. It gives them ideas. They come back and tell us what they think. They can’t think, most of them, anyway. All they know is things out of books. That’s no good in our business. Bring in the answers—that’s all that’s needed—no thinking.”

Mr. Goby flung himself back in his chair and winked at a lampshade.

“Mustn’t crab the Government, though! Don’t know really what we’d do without it. I can tell you that nowadays you can walk in most anywhere with a notebook and pencil, dressed right, and speaking B.B.C., and ask people all the most intimate details of their daily lives and all their back history, and what they had for dinner on November 23rd because that was a test day for middleclass incomes—or whatever it happens to be (making it a grade above to butter them up!)—ask ’em any mortal thing you can; and nine times out of ten they’ll come across pat, and even the tenth time though they may cut up rough, they won’t doubt for a minute that you’re what you say you are—and that the Government really wants to know—for some completely unfathomable reason! I can tell you, M. Poirot,” said Mr. Goby, still talking to the lampshade, “that it’s the best line we’ve ever had; much better than reading the electric meter or tracing a fault in the telephone—yes, or than calling as nuns, or the Girl Guides or Boy Scouts asking for subscriptions—though we use all those too. Yes, Government snooping is God’s gift to investigators and long may it continue!”

Poirot did not speak. Mr. Goby had grown a little garrulous with advancing years, but he would come to the point in his own good time.

“Ar,” said Mr. Goby, and took out a very scrubby little notebook. He licked his finger and flicked over the pages. “Here we are. Mr. George Crossfield. We’ll take him first. Just the plain facts. You won’t want to know how I got them. He’s been in Queer Street for quite a while now. Horses, mostly, and gambling—he’s not a great one for women. Goes over to France now and then, and Monte too. Spends a lot of time at the Casino. Too downy to cash cheques there, but gets hold of a lot more money than his travelling allowance would account for. I didn’t go into that, because it wasn’t what you want to know. But he's not scrupulous about evading the law—and being a lawyer he knows how to do it. Some reason to believe he's been using trust funds entrusted to him to invest. Plunging pretty wildly of late—on the Stock Exchange and on the gee-gees! Bad judgement and bad luck. Been off his feed badly for three months. Worried, bad-tempered and irritable in the office. But since his uncle's death that's all changed. He's like the breakfast eggs (if we had 'em). Sunny side up!

"Now, as to particular information asked for. Statement that he was at Hurst Park races on the day in question almost certainly untrue. Almost invariably places bets with one or other of two bookies on the course. They didn't see him that day. Possible that he left Paddington by train for destination unknown. Taxi driver who took fare to Paddington made doubtful identification of his photograph. But I wouldn't bank on it. He's a very common type—nothing outstanding about him. No success with porters, etc., at Paddington. Certainly didn't arrive at Cholsey station—which is nearest for Lytchett St. Mary. Small station, strangers noticeable. Could have got out at Reading and taken bus. Buses there crowded, frequent and several routes go within a mile or so of Lytchett St. Mary as well as the bus service that goes right into the village. He wouldn't take that—not if he meant business. All in all, he's a downy card. Wasn't seen in Lytchett St. Mary but he needn't have been. Other ways of approach than through the village. Was in the OUDS at Oxford, by the way. If he went to the cottage that day he mayn't have looked quite like the usual George Crossfield. I'll keep him in my book, shall I? There's a black market angle I'd like to play up."

"You may keep him in," said Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Goby licked his finger and turned another page of his notebook.

"Mr. Michael Shane. He's thought quite a lot of in the profession. Has an even better idea of himself than other people have. Wants to star and wants to star quickly. Fond of money and doing himself well. Very attractive to women. They fall for him right and left. He's partial to them himself—but business comes first, as you might say. He's been running around with Sorrel Dainton who was playing the lead in the last show he was in. He only had a minor part but made quite a hit in it, and Miss Dainton's husband doesn’t like him. His wife doesn’t know about him and Miss Dainton. Doesn’t know much about anything, it seems. Not much of an actress I gather, but easy on the eye. Crazy about her husband. Some rumour of a bust-up likely between them not long ago, but that seems out now. Out since Mr. Richard Abernethie’s death.”

Mr. Goby emphasised the last point by nodding his head at a cushion on the sofa.

“On the day in question, Mr. Shane says he was meeting a Mr. Rosenheim and a Mr. Oscar Lewis to fix up some stage business. He didn’t meet them. Sent them a wire to say he was terribly sorry he couldn’t make it. What he did do was to go to the Emeraldo Car people, who hire out ‘drive yourself ’ cars. He hired a car about twelve o’clock and drove away in it. He returned it about six in the evening. According to the speedometer it had been driven just about the right number of miles for what we’re after. No confirmation from Lytchett St. Mary. No strange car seems to have been observed there that day. Lots of places it could be left unnoticed a mile or so away. And there’s even a disused quarry a few hundred yards down the lane from the cottage. Three market towns within walking distance where you can park in side streets, without the police bothering about you. All right, we keep Mr. Shane in?”

“Most certainly.”

“Now Mrs. Shane.” Mr. Goby rubbed his nose and told his left cuff about Mrs. Shane. “She says she was shopping. Just shopping…” Mr. Goby raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Women who are shopping—just scatty, that’s what they are. And she’d heard she’d come into money the day before. Naturally there’d be no holding her. She has one or two charge accounts but they’re overdrawn and they’ve been pressing her for payment and she didn’t put any more on the sheet. It’s quite on the cards that she went in here and there and everywhere, trying on clothes, looking at jewellery, pricing this, that, and the other—and as likely as not, not buying anything! She’s easy to approach—I’ll say that. I had one of my young ladies who’s knowledgeable on the theatrical line to do a hook up. Stopped by her table in a restaurant and exclaimed the way they do: ‘Darling, I haven’t seen you since Way Down Under. You were wonderful in that! Have you seen Hubert lately?’

That was the producer and Mrs. Shane was a bit of a flop in the play—but that makes it go all the better. They're chatting theatrical stuff at once, and my girl throws the right names about, and then she says, 'I believe I caught a glimpse of you at so and so, on so and so,' giving the day—and most ladies fall for it and say, 'Oh no, I was—' whatever it may be. But not Mrs. Shane. Just looks vacant and says, 'Oh, I dare say.' What can you do with a lady like that?" Mr. Goby shook his head severely at the radiator.

"Nothing," said Hercule Poirot with feeling. "Do I not have cause to know it? Never shall I forget the killing of Lord Edgware. I was nearly defeated—yes, I, Hercule Poirot—by the extremely simple cunning of a vacant brain. The very simple-minded have often the genius to commit an uncomplicated crime and then leave it alone. Let us hope that our murderer—if there is a murderer in this affair—is intelligent and superior and thoroughly pleased with himself and unable to resist painting the lily. Enfin—but continue."

Once more Mr. Goby applied himself to his little book.

"Mr. and Mrs. Banks—who said they were at home all day. She wasn't, anyway! Went round to the garage, got out her car, and drove off in it about 1 o'clock. Destination unknown. Back about five. Can't tell about mileage because she's had it out every day since and it's been nobody's business to check.

"As to Mr. Banks, we've dug up something curious. To begin with, I'll mention that on the day in question we don't know what he did. He didn't go to work. Seems he'd already asked for a couple of days off on account of the funeral. And since then he's chucked his job—with no consideration for the firm. Nice, well-established pharmacy it is. They're not too keen on Master Banks. Seems he used to get into rather queer excitable states.

"Well, as I say, we don't know what he was doing on the day of Mrs. L.'s death. He didn't go with his wife. It could be that he stopped in their little flat all day. There's no porter there, and nobody knows whether tenants are in or out. But his back history is interesting. Up till about four months ago—just before he met his wife, he was in a Mental Home. Not certified—just what they call a mental breakdown. Seems he made some slip up in dispensing a medicine. (He was working with a Mayfair firm then.) The woman recovered, and the firm were all over themselves apologizing, and there was no prosecution. After all, these accidental slips do occur, and most decent people are sorry for a poor young chap who's done it—so long as there's no permanent harm done, that is. The firm didn't sack him, but he resigned—said it had shaken his nerve. But afterwards, it seems, he got into a very low state and told the doctor he was obsessed by guilt—that it had all been deliberate—the woman had been overbearing and rude to him when she came into the shop, had complained that her last prescription had been badly made up—and that he had resented this and had deliberately added a near lethal dose of some drug or other. He said, 'She had to be punished for daring to speak to me like that!' And then wept and said he was too wicked to live and a lot of things like that. The medicos have a long word for that sort of thing—guilt complex or something—and don't believe it was deliberate at all, just carelessness, but that he wanted to make it important and serious."

"Ça se peut," said Hercule Poirot.

"Pardon? Anyway, he went into this Sanatorium and they treated him and discharged him as cured, and he met Miss Abernethie as she was then. And he got a job in this respectable but rather obscure little chemist's shop. Told them he'd been out of England for a year and a half, and gave them his former reference from some shop in Eastbourne. Nothing against him in that shop, but a fellow dispenser said he had a very queer temper and was odd in his manner sometimes. There's a story about a customer saying once as a joke, 'Wish you'd sell me something to poison my wife, ha ha!' And Banks says to him, very soft and quiet: 'I could… It would cost you two hundred pounds.' The man felt uneasy and laughed it off. May have been all a joke, but it doesn't seem to me that Banks is the joking kind."

"Mon ami," said Hercule Poirot. "It really amazes me how you get your information! Medical and highly confidential most of it!"

Mr. Goby's eyes swivelled right round the room and he murmured, looking expectantly at the door, that there were ways….

"Now we come to the country department. Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Abernethie. Very nice place they've got, but sadly needing money spent on it. Very straitened they seem to be, very straitened. Taxation and unfortunate investments. Mr. Abernethie enjoys ill health and the emphasis is on the enjoyment. Complains a lot and has everyone running and fetching and carrying. Eats hearty meals, and seems quite strong physically if he likes to make the effort. There's no one in the house after the daily woman goes and no one's allowed into Mr. Abernethie's room unless he rings the bell. He was in a very bad temper the morning of the day after the funeral. Swore at Mrs. Jones. Ate only a little of his breakfast and said he wouldn't have any lunch—he'd had a bad night. He said the supper she had left out for him was unfit to eat and a good deal more. He was alone in the house and unseen by anybody from 9:30 that morning until the following morning."

"And Mrs. Abernethie?"

"She started off from Enderby by car at the time you mentioned. Arrived on foot at a small local garage in a place called Cathstone and explained her car had broken down a couple of miles away.

"A mechanic drove her out to it, made an investigation and said they'd have to tow it in and it would be a long job—couldn't promise to finish it that day. The lady was very put out, but went to a small inn, arranged to stay the night, and asked for some sandwiches as she said she'd like to see something of the countryside—it's on the edge of the moorland country. She didn't come back to the inn till quite late that evening. My informant said he didn't wonder. It's a sordid little place!"

"And the times?"

"She got the sandwiches at eleven. If she'd walked to the main road, a mile, she could have hitchhiked into Wallcaster and caught a special South Coast express which stops at Reading West. I won't go into details of buses etcetera. It could just have been done if you could make the—er—attack fairly late in the afternoon."

"I understand the doctor stretched the time limit to possibly 4:30."

"Mind you," said Mr. Goby, "I shouldn't say it was likely. She seems to be a nice lady, liked by everybody. She's devoted to her husband, treats him like a child.”

“Yes, yes, the maternal complex.”

“She’s strong and hefty, chops the wood and often hauls in great baskets of logs. Pretty good with the inside of a car, too.”

“I was coming to that. What exactly was wrong with the car?”

“Do you want the exact details, M. Poirot?”

“Heaven forbid. I have no mechanical knowledge.”

“It was a difficult thing to spot. And also to put right. And it could have been done maliciously by someone without very much trouble. By someone who was familiar with the insides of a car.”

“C’est magnifique!” said Poirot with bitter enthusiasm. “All so convenient, all so possible. Bon dieu, can we eliminate nobody? And Mrs. Leo Abernethie?”

“She’s a very nice lady, too. Mr. Abernethie deceased was very fond of her. She came there to stay about a fortnight before he died.”

“After he had been to Lytchett St. Mary to see his sister?”

“No, just before. Her income is a good deal reduced since the war. She gave up her house in England and took a small flat in London. She has a villa in Cyprus and spends part of the year there. She has a young nephew whom she is helping to educate, and there seems to be one or two young artists whom she helps financially from time to time.”

“St. Helen of the blameless life,” said Poirot, shutting his eyes. “And it was quite impossible for her to have left Enderby that day without the servants knowing? Say that is so, I implore you!”

Mr. Goby brought his glance across to rest apologetically on Poirot’s polished patent leather shoe, the nearest he had come to a direct encounter, and murmured:

“I’m afraid I can’t say that, M. Poirot. Mrs. Abernethie went to London to fetch some extra clothes and belongings as she had agreed with Mr. Entwhistle to stay on and see to things.”

“Il ne manquait ça!” said Poirot with strong feeling.

Thirteen

When the card of Inspector Morton of the Berkshire County Police was brought to Hercule Poirot, his eyebrows went up.

“Show him in, Georges, show him in. And bring—what is it that the police prefer?”

“I would suggest beer, sir.”

“How horrible! But how British. Bring beer, then.”

Inspector Morton came straight to the point.

“I had to come to London,” he said. “And I got hold of your address, M. Poirot. I was interested to see you at the inquest on Thursday.”

“So you saw me there?”

“Yes. I was surprised—and, as I say, interested. You won’t remember me but I remember you very well. In that Pangbourne Case.”

“Ah, you were connected with that?”

“Only in a very junior capacity. It’s a long time ago but I’ve never forgotten you.”

“And you recognized me at once the other day?”

“That wasn’t difficult, sir.” Inspector Morton repressed a slight smile. “Your appearance is—rather unusual.”

His gaze took in Poirot’s sartorial perfection and rested finally on the curving moustaches.

“You stick out in a country place,” he said.

"It is possible, it is possible," said Poirot with complacency.

"It interested me why you should be there. That sort of crime—robbery—assault—doesn't usually interest you."

"Was it the usual ordinary brutal type of crime?"

"That's what I've been wondering."

"You have wondered from the beginning, have you not?"

"Yes, M. Poirot. There were some unusual features. Since then we've worked along the routine lines. Pulled in one or two people for questioning, but everyone has been able to account quite satisfactorily for his time that afternoon. It wasn't what you'd call an 'ordinary' crime, M. Poirot—we're quite sure of that. The Chief Constable agrees. It was done by someone who wished to make it appear that way. It could have been the Gilchrist woman, but there doesn't seem to be any motive—and there wasn't any emotional background, Mrs. Lansquenet was perhaps a bit mental—or 'simple,' if you like to put it that way, but it was a household of mistress and dogsbody with no feverish feminine friendship about it. There are dozens of Miss Gilchrists about, and they're not usually the murdering type."

He paused.

"So it looks as though we'd have to look farther afield. I came to ask if you could help us at all. Something must have brought you down there, M. Poirot."

"Yes, yes, something did. An excellent Daimler car. But not only that."

"You had—information?"

"Hardly in your sense of the word. Nothing that could be used as evidence."

"But something that could be—a pointer?"

"Yes."

“You see, M. Poirot, there have been developments.”

Meticulously, in detail, he told of the poisoned wedge of wedding cake.

Poirot took a deep, hissing breath.

“Ingenious—yes, ingenious… I warned Mr. Entwhistle to look after Miss Gilchrist. An attack on her was always a possibility. But I must confess that I did not expect poison. I anticipated a repetition of the hatchet motif. I merely thought that it would be inadvisable for her to walk alone in unfrequented lanes after dark.”

“But why did you anticipate an attack on her? I think, M. Poirot, you ought to tell me that.”

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

“Yes, I will tell you. Mr. Entwhistle will not tell you, because he is a lawyer and lawyers do not like to speak of suppositions, or inferences made from the character of a dead woman, or from a few irresponsible words. But he will not be averse to my telling you—no, he will be relieved. He does not wish to appear foolish or fanciful, but he wants you to know what may—only may—be the facts.”

Poirot paused as Georges entered with a tall glass of beer.

“Some refreshment, Inspector. No, no, I insist.”

“Won’t you join me?”

“I do not drink the beer. But I will myself have a glass of sirop de cassis—the English they do not care for it, I have noticed.”

Inspector Morton looked gratefully at his beer.

Poirot, sipping delicately from his glass of dark purple fluid, said:

“It begins, all this, at a funeral. Or rather, to be exact, after the funeral.”

Graphically, with many gestures, he set forth the story as Mr. Entwhistle had told it to him, but with such embellishments as his exuberant nature suggested. One almost felt that Hercule Poirot himself had been an eyewitness of the scene.

Inspector Morton had an excellent clear-cut brain. He seized at once on what were, for his purposes, the salient points.

“This Mr. Abernethie may have been poisoned?”

“It is a possibility.”

“And the body has been cremated and there is no evidence?”

“Exactly.”

Inspector Morton ruminated.

“Interesting. There’s nothing in it for us. Nothing, that is, to make Richard Abernethie’s death worth investigating. It would be a waste of time.”

“Yes.”

“But there are the people—the people who were there—the people who heard Cora Lansquenet say what she did, and one of whom may have thought that she might say it again and with more detail.”

“As she undoubtedly would have. There are, Inspector, as you say, the people. And now you see why I was at the inquest, why I interested myself in the case—because it is, always, people in whom I interest myself.”

“Then the attack on Miss Gilchrist—”

“Was always indicated. Richard Abernethie had been down to the cottage. He had talked to Cora. He had, perhaps, actually mentioned a name. The only person who might possibly have known or overheard something was Miss Gilchrist. After Cora is silenced, the murderer might continue to be anxious. Does the other woman know something—anything? Of course, if the murderer is wise he will let well alone, but murderers, Inspector, are seldom wise. Fortunately for us. They brood, they feel uncertain, they desire to make sure—quite sure. They are pleased with their own cleverness. And so, in the end, they protrude their necks, as you say."

Inspector Morton smiled faintly.

Poirot went on:

"This attempt to silence Miss Gilchrist, already it is a mistake. For now there are two occasions about which you make inquiry. There is the handwriting on the wedding label also. It is a pity the wrapping paper was burnt."

"Yes, I could have been certain, then, whether it came by post or whether it didn't."

"You have reason for thinking the latter, you say?"

"It's only what the postman thinks—he's not sure. If the parcel had gone through a village post office, it's ten to one the postmistress would have noticed it, but nowadays the mail is delivered by van from Market Keynes and of course the young chap does quite a round and delivers a lot of things. He thinks it was letters only and no parcel at the cottage—but he isn't sure. As a matter of fact he's having a bit of girl trouble and he can't think about anything else. I've tested his memory and he isn't reliable in any way. If he did deliver it, it seems to me odd that the parcel shouldn't have been noticed until after this Mr.—whatshisname—Guthrie—"

"Ah, Mr. Guthrie."

Inspector Morton smiled.

"Yes, M. Poirot. We're checking up on him. After all, it would be easy, wouldn't it, to come along with a plausible tale of having been a friend of Mrs. Lansquenet's. Mrs. Banks wasn't to know if he was or he wasn't. He could have dropped that little parcel, you know. It's easy to make a thing look as though it's been through the post. Lamp black a little smudged, makes quite a good postmark cancellation mark over a stamp."

He paused and then added:

“And there are other possibilities.”

Poirot nodded.

“You think—?”

“Mr. George Crossfield was down in that part of the world—but not until the next day. Meant to attend the funeral, but had a little engine trouble on the way. Know anything about him, M. Poirot?”

“A little. But not as much as I would like to know.”

“Like that, is it? Quite a little bunch interested in the late Mr. Abernethie’s will, I understand. I hope it doesn’t mean going after all of them.”

“I have accumulated a little information. It is at your disposal. Naturally I have no authority to ask these people questions. In fact, it would not be wise for me to do so.”

“I shall go slowly myself. You don’t want to fluster your bird too soon. But when you do fluster it, you want to fluster it well.”

“A very sound technique. For you then, my friend, the routine—with all the machinery you have at your disposal. It is slow—but sure. For myself—”

“Yes, M. Poirot?”

“For myself, I go North. As I have told you, it is people in whom I interest myself. Yes—a little preparatory camouflage—and I go North.

“I intend,” added Hercule Poirot, “to purchase a country mansion for foreign refugees. I represent U.N.A.R.C.O.”

“And what’s U.N.A.R.C.O.?”

“United Nations Aid for Refugee Centre Organization. It sounds well, do you not think?”

Inspector Morton grinned.

Fourteen

Hercule Poirot said to a grim-faced Janet:

“Thank you very much. You have been most kind.”

Janet, her lips still fixed in a sour line, left the room. These foreigners! The questions they asked. Their impertinence! All very well to say that he was a specialist interested in unsuspected heart conditions such as Mr. Abernethie must have suffered from. That was very likely true—gone very sudden the master had, and the doctor had been surprised. But what business was it of some foreign doctor coming along and nosing around?

All very well for Mrs. Leo to say: “Please answer Monsieur Pontarlier’s questions. He has a good reason for asking.”

Questions. Always questions. Sheets of them sometimes to fill in as best you could—and what did the Government or anyone else want to know about your private affairs for? Asking your age at that census—downright impertinent and she hadn’t told them, either! Cut off five years she had. Why not? If she only felt fifty-four, she’d call herself fifty-four!

At any rate Monsieur Pontarlier hadn’t wanted to know her age. He’d had some decency. Just questions about the medicines the master had taken, and where they were kept, and if, perhaps, he might have taken too much of them if he was feeling not quite the thing—or if he’d been forgetful. As though she could remember all that rubbish—the master knew what he was doing! And asking if any of the medicines he took were still in the house. Naturally they’d all been thrown away. Heart condition—and some long word he’d used. Always thinking of something new they were, these doctors. Look at them telling old Rogers he had a disc or some such in his spine. Plain lumbago, that was all that was the matter with him. Her father had been a gardener and he’d suffered from lumbago. Doctors!

The self-appointed medical man sighed and went downstairs in search of Lanscombe. He had not got very much out of Janet but he had hardly expected to do so. All he had really wanted to do was to check such information as could unwillingly be extracted from her with that given him by Helen Abernethie and which had been obtained from the same source—but with much less difficulty, since Janet was ready to admit that Mrs. Leo had a perfect right to ask such questions and indeed Janet herself had enjoyed dwelling at length on the last few weeks of her master's life. Illness and death were congenial subjects to her.

Yes, Poirot thought, he could have relied on the information that Helen had got for him. He had done so really. But by nature and long habit he trusted nobody until he himself had tried and proved them.

In any case the evidence was slight and unsatisfactory. It boiled down to the fact that Richard Abernethie had been prescribed vitamin oil capsules. That these had been in a large bottle which had been nearly finished at the time of his death. Anybody who had wanted to, could have operated on one or more of those capsules with a hypodermic syringe and could have rearranged the bottle so that the fatal dose would only be taken some weeks after that somebody had left the house. Or someone might have slipped into the house on the day before Richard Abernethie died and have doctored a capsule then—or, which was more likely—have substituted something else for a sleeping tablet in the little bottle that stood beside the bed. Or again he might have quite simply tampered with the food or drink.

Hercule Poirot had made his own experiments. The front door was kept locked, but there was a side door giving on the garden which was not locked until evening. At about quarter past one, when the gardeners had gone to lunch and when the household was in the dining room, Poirot had entered the grounds, come to the side door, and mounted the stairs to Richard Abernethie's bedroom without meeting anybody. As a variant he had pushed through a baize door and slipped into the larder. He had heard voices from the kitchen at the end of the passage but no one had seen him.

Yes, it could have been done. But had it been done? There was nothing to indicate that that was so. Not that Poirot was really looking for evidence—he wanted only to satisfy himself as to possibilities. The murder of Richard Abernethie could only be a hypothesis. It was Cora Lansquenet's murder for which evidence was needed. What he wanted was to study the people who had been assembled for the funeral that day, and to form his own conclusions about them. He already had his plan, but first he wanted a few more words with old Lanscombe.

Lanscombe was courteous but distant. Less resentful than Janet, he nevertheless regarded this upstart foreigner as the materialization of the Writing on the Wall. This was What We are Coming to!

He put down the leather with which he was lovingly polishing the Georgian teapot and straightened his back.

“Yes, sir?” he said politely.

Poirot sat down gingerly on a pantry stool.

“Mrs. Abernethie tells me that you hoped to reside in the lodge by the north gate when you retired from service here?”

“That is so, sir. Naturally all that is changed now. When the propety is sold —”

Poirot interrupted deftly:

“It might still be possible. There are cottages for the gardeners. The lodge is not needed for the guests or their attendants. It might be possible to make an arrangement of some kind.”

“Well, thank you, sir, for the suggestion. But I hardly think— The majority of the—guests would be foreigners, I presume?”

“Yes, they will be foreigners. Amongst those who fled from Europe to this country are several who are old and infirm. There can be no future for them if they return to their own countries, for these persons, you understand, are those whose relatives there have perished. They cannot earn their living here as an able-bodied man or woman can do. Funds have been raised and are being administered by the organization which I represent to endow various country homes for them. This place is, I think, eminently suitable. The matter is practically settled.”

Lanscombe sighed.

“You’ll understand, sir, that it’s sad for me to think that this won’t be a private dwelling house any longer. But I know how things are nowadays. None of the family could afford to live here—and I don’t think the young ladies and gentlemen would even want to do so. Domestic help is too difficult to obtain these days, and even if obtained is expensive and unsatisfactory. I quite realize that these fine mansions have served their turn.” Lanscombe sighed again. “If it has to be an—an institution of some kind, I’ll be glad to think that it’s the kind you’re mentioning. We were Spared in This Country, sir, owing to our Navy and Air Force and our brave young men and being fortunate enough to be an island. If Hitler had landed here we’d all have turned out and given him short shrift. My sight isn’t good enough for shooting, but I could have used a pitchfork, sir, and I intended to do so if necessary. We’ve always welcomed the unfortunate in this country, sir, it’s been our pride. We shall continue so to do.”

“Thank you, Lanscombe,” said Poirot gently. “Your master’s death must have been a great blow to you.”

“It was, sir. I’d been with the master since he was quite a young man. I’ve been very fortunate in my life, sir. No one could have had a better master.”

“I have been conversing with my friend and—er—colleague, Dr. Larraby. We were wondering if your master could have had any extra worry—any unpleasant interview—on the day before he died? You do not remember if any visitors came to the house that day?”

“I think not, sir. I do not recall any.”

“No one called at all just about that time?”

“The vicar was here to tea the day before. Otherwise some nuns called for a subscription—and a young man came to the back door and wanted to sell Marjorie some brushes and saucepan cleaners. Very persistent he was. Nobody else.”

A worried expression had appeared on Lanscombe's face. Poirot did not press him further. Lanscombe had already unburdened himself to Mr. Entwhistle. He would be far less forthcoming with Hercule Poirot.

With Marjorie, on the other hand, Poirot had had instant success. Marjorie had none of the conventions of "good service." Marjorie was a first-class cook and the way to her heart lay through her cooking. Poirot had visited her in the kitchen, praised certain dishes with discernment, and Marjorie, realizing that here was someone who knew what he was talking about, hailed him immediately as a fellow spirit. He had no difficulty in finding out exactly what had been served the night before Richard Abernethie had died. Marjorie, indeed, was inclined to view the matter as, "It was the night I made that chocolate soufflé that Mr. Abernethie died. Six eggs I'd saved up for it. The dairyman he's a friend of mine. Got hold of some cream too. Better not ask how. Enjoyed it, Mr. Abernethie did." The rest of the meal was likewise detailed. What had come out from the dining room had been finished in the kitchen. Ready as Marjorie was to talk, Poirot had learned nothing of value from her.

He went now to fetch his overcoat and a couple of scarves, and thus padded against the North Country air he went out on the terrace and joined Helen Abernethie, who was clipping some late roses.

"Have you found out anything fresh?" she asked.

"Nothing. But I hardly expected to do so."

"I know. Ever since Mr. Entwhistle told me you were coming, I've been ferreting around, but there's really been nothing."

She paused and said hopefully:

"Perhaps it is all a mare's nest?"

"To be attacked with a hatchet?"

"I wasn't thinking of Cora."

“But it is of Cora that I think. Why was it necessary for someone to kill her? Mr. Entwhistle has told me that on that day, at the moment that she came out suddenly with her gaffe, you yourself felt that something was wrong. That is so?”

“Well—yes, but I don’t know—”

Poirot swept on.

“How ‘wrong’? Unexpected? Surprising? Or—what shall we say—uneasy? Sinister?”

“Oh no, not sinister. Just something that wasn’t—oh, I don’t know. I can’t remember and it wasn’t important.”

“But why cannot you remember—because something else put it out of your head—something more important?”

“Yes—yes—I think you’re right there. It was the mention of murder, I suppose. That swept away everything else.”

“It was, perhaps, the reaction of some particular person to the word ‘murder’?”

“Perhaps… But I don’t remember looking at anyone in particular. We were all staring at Cora.”

“It may have been something you heard—something dropped perhaps…or broken….”

Helen frowned in an effort of remembrance.

“No… I don’t think so….”

“Ah well, some day it will come back. And it may be of no consequence. Now tell me, Madame, of those there, who knew Cora best?”

Helen considered.

“Lanscombe, I suppose. He remembers her from a child. The housemaid, Janet, only came after she had married and gone away.”

“And next to Lanscombe?”

Helen said thoughtfully: “I suppose—I did. Maude hardly knew her at all.”

“Then, taking you as the person who knew her best, why do you think she asked that question as she did?”

Helen smiled.

“It was very characteristic of Cora!”

“What I mean is, was it a bêtise pure and simple? Did she just blurt out what was in her mind without thinking? Or was she being malicious—amusing herself by upsetting everyone?”

Helen reflected.

“You can’t ever be quite sure about a person, can you? I never have known whether Cora was just ingenuous—or whether she counted, childishly, on making an effect. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I was thinking: Suppose this Mrs. Cora says to herself ‘What fun it would be to ask if Richard was murdered and see how they all look!’ That would be like her, yes?”

Helen looked doubtful.

“It might be. She certainly had an impish sense of humour as a child. But what difference does it make?”

“It would underline the point that it is unwise to make jokes about murder,” said Poirot drily.

Helen shivered.

“Poor Cora.”

Poirot changed the subject.

“Mrs. Timothy Abernethie stayed the night after the funeral?”

“Yes.”

“Did she talk to you at all about what Cora had said?”

“Yes, she said it was outrageous and just like Cora!”

“She didn’t take it seriously?”

“Oh no. No, I’m sure she didn’t.”

The second “no,” Poirot thought, had sounded suddenly doubtful. But was not that almost always the case when you went back over something in your mind?

“And you, Madame, did you take it seriously?”

Helen Abernethie, her eyes looking very blue and strangely young under the sideways sweep of crisp grey hair, said thoughtfully:

“Yes, M. Poirot, I think I did.”

“Because of your feeling that something was wrong?”

“Perhaps.”

He waited—but as she said nothing more, he went on:

“There had been an estrangement, lasting many years, between Mrs. Lansquenet and her family?”

“Yes. None of us liked her husband and she was offended about it, and so the estrangement grew.”

“And then, suddenly, your brother-in-law went to see her. Why?”

“I don’t know—I suppose he knew, or guessed, that he hadn’t very long to live and wanted to be reconciled—but I really don’t know.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me?”

“Yes. You were here, staying with him, just before he went there. He didn’t even mention his intention to you?”

He thought a slight reserve came into her manner.

“He told me that he was going to see his brother Timothy—which he did. He never mentioned Cora at all. Shall we go in? It must be nearly lunchtime.”

She walked beside him carrying the flowers she had picked. As they went in by the side door, Poirot said:

“You are sure, quite sure, that during your visit, Mr. Abernethie said nothing to you about any member of the family which might be relevant?”

A faint resentment in her manner, Helen said:

“You are speaking like a policeman.”

“I was a policeman—once. I have no status—no right to question you. But you want the truth—or so I have been led to believe?”

They entered the green drawing room. Helen said with a sigh:

“Richard was disappointed in the younger generation. Old men usually are. He disparaged them in various ways—but there was nothing—nothing, do you understand—that could possibly suggest a motive for murder.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. She reached for a Chinese bowl, and began to arrange the roses in it. When they were disposed to her satisfaction she looked round for a place to put it.

“You arrange flowers admirably, Madame,” said Hercule. “I think that anything you undertook you would manage to do with perfection.”

“Thank you. I am fond of flowers. I think this would look well on that green malachite table.”

There was a bouquet of wax flowers under a glass shade on the malachite table. As she lifted it off, Poirot said casually:

“Did anyone tell Mr. Abernethie that his niece Susan’s husband had come near to poisoning a customer when making up a prescription? Ah, pardon!”

He sprang forward.

The Victorian ornament had slipped from Helen’s fingers. Poirot’s spring forward was not quick enough. It dropped on the floor and the glass shade broke. Helen gave an expression of annoyance.

“How careless of me. However, the flowers are not damaged. I can get a new glass shade made for it. I’ll put it away in the big cupboard under the stairs.”

It was not until Poirot had helped her to lift it on to a shelf in the dark cupboard and had followed her back to the drawing room that he said:

“It was my fault. I should not have startled you.”

“What was it that you asked me? I have forgotten.”

“Oh, there is no need to repeat my question. Indeed—I have forgotten what it was.”

Helen came up to him. She laid her hand on his arm. “M. Poirot, is there anyone whose life would really bear close investigation? Must people’s lives be dragged into this when they have nothing to do with—with—”

“With the death of Cora Lansquenet? Yes. Because one has to examine everything. Oh! it is true enough—it is an old maxim—everyone has something to hide. It is true of all of us—it is perhaps true of you, too, Madame. But I say to you, nothing can be ignored. That is why your friend, Mr. Entwhistle, he has come to me. For I am not the police. I am discreet and what I learn does not concern me. But I have to know. And since in this matter it is not so much evidence as people—then it is people with whom I occupy myself. I need, Madame, to meet everyone who was here on the day of the funeral. And it would be a great convenience—yes, and it would be strategically satisfactory—if I could meet them here."

"I'm afraid," said Helen slowly, "that that would be too difficult—"

"Not so difficult as you think. Already I have devised a means. The house, it is sold. So Mr. Entwhistle will declare. (Entendu, sometimes these things fall through!) He will invite the various members of the family to assemble here and to choose what they will from the furnishings before it is all put up to auction. A suitable weekend can be selected for that purpose."

He paused and then said:

"You see, it is easy, is it not?"

Helen looked at him. The blue eyes were cold—almost frosty.

"Are you laying a trap for someone, M. Poirot?"

"Alas! I wish I knew enough. No, I have still the open mind.

"There may," Hercule Poirot added thoughtfully, "be certain tests…."

"Tests? What kind of tests?"

"I have not yet formulated them to myself. And in any case, Madame, it would be better that you should not know them."

"So that I can be tested too?"

"You, Madame, have been taken behind the scenes. Now there is one thing that is doubtful. The young people will, I think, come readily. But it may be difficult, may it not, to secure the presence here of Mr. Timothy Abernethie. I hear that he never leaves home."

Helen smiled suddenly.

“I believe you may be lucky there, M. Poirot. I heard from Maude yesterday. The workmen are in painting the house and Timothy is suffering terribly from the smell of the paint. He says that it is seriously affecting his health. I think that he and Maude would both be pleased to come here—perhaps for a week or two. Maude is still not able to get about very well—you know she broke her ankle?”

“I had not heard. How unfortunate.”

“Luckily they have got Cora’s companion, Miss Gilchrist. It seems that she has turned out a perfect treasure.”

“What is that?” Poirot turned sharply on Helen. “Did they ask for Miss Gilchrist to go to them? Who suggested it?”

“I think Susan fixed it up. Susan Banks.”

“Aha,” said Poirot in a curious voice. “So it was the little Susan who suggested it. She is fond of making the arrangements.”

“Susan struck me as being a very competent girl.”

“Yes. She is competent. Did you hear that Miss Gilchrist had a narrow escape from death with a piece of poisoned wedding cake?”

“No!” Helen looked startled. “I do remember now that Maude said over the telephone that Miss Gilchrist had just come out of hospital but I’d no idea why she had been in hospital. Poisoned? But, M. Poirot—why—”

“Do you really ask that?”

Helen said with sudden vehemence:

“Oh! get them all here! Find out the truth! There mustn’t be any more murders.”

“So you will cooperate?”

“Yes— I will cooperate.”

Fifteen

I

“That linoleum does look nice, Mrs. Jones. What a hand you have with lino. The teapot’s on the kitchen table, so go and help yourself. I’ll be there as soon as I’ve taken up Mr. Abernethie’s elevenses.”

Miss Gilchrist trotted up the staircase, carrying a daintily set out tray. She tapped on Timothy’s door, interpreted a growl from within as an invitation to enter, and tripped briskly in.

“Morning coffee and biscuits, Mr. Abernethie. I do hope you’re feeling brighter today. Such a lovely day.”

Timothy grunted and said suspiciously:

“Is there skim on that milk?”

“Oh no, Mr. Abernethie. I took it off very carefully, and anyway I’ve brought up the little strainer in case it should form again. Some people like it, you know, they say it’s the cream—and so it is really.”

“Idiots!” said Timothy. “What kind of biscuits are those?”

“They’re those nice digestive biscuits.”

“Digestive tripe. Ginger-nuts are the only biscuits worth eating.”

“I’m afraid the grocer hadn’t got any this week. But these are really very nice. You try them and see.”

“I know what they’re like, thank you. Leave those curtains alone, can’t you?”

“I thought you might like a little sunshine. It’s such a nice sunny day.”

"I want the room kept dark. My head's terrible. It's this paint. I've always been sensitive to paint. It's poisoning me."

Miss Gilchrist sniffed experimentally and said brightly:

"One really can't smell it much in here. The workmen are over on the other side."

"You're not sensitive like I am. Must I have all the books I'm reading taken out of my reach?"

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Abernethie, I didn't know you were reading all of them."

"Where's my wife? I haven't seen her for over an hour."

"Mrs. Abernethie is resting on the sofa."

"Tell her to come and rest up here."

"I'll tell her, Mr. Abernethie. But she may have dropped off to sleep. Shall we say in about a quarter of an hour?"

"No, tell her I want her now. Don't monkey about with that rug. It's arranged the way I like it."

"I'm so sorry. I thought it was slipping off the far side."

"I like it slipping off. Go and get Maude. I want her."

Miss Gilchrist departed downstairs and tiptoed into the drawing room where Maude Abernethie was sitting with her leg up reading a novel.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Abernethie," she said apologetically. "Mr. Abernethie is asking for you."

Maude thrust aside her novel with a guilty expression.

"Oh dear," she said. "I'll go at once."

She reached for her stick.

Timothy burst out as soon as his wife entered the room:

“So there you are at last!”

“I’m so sorry dear, I didn’t know you wanted me.”

“That woman you’ve got into the house will drive me mad. Twittering and fluttering round like a demented hen. Real typical old maid, that’s what she is.”

“I’m sorry she annoys you. She tries to be kind, that’s all.”

“I don’t want anybody kind. I don’t want a blasted old maid always chirruping over me. She’s so damned arch, too—”

“Just a little, perhaps.”

“Treats me as thought I was a confounded kid! It’s maddening.”

“I’m sure it must be. But please, please, Timothy, do try not to be rude to her. I’m really very helpless still—and you yourself say she cooks well.”

“Her cooking’s all right,” Mr. Abernethie admitted grudgingly. “Yes, she’s a decent enough cook. But keep her in the kitchen, that’s all I ask. Don’t let her come fussing round me.”

“No, dear, of course not. How are you feeling?”

“Not at all well. I think you’d better send for Barton to come and have a look at me. This paint affects my heart. Feel my pulse—the irregular way it’s beating.”

Maude felt it without comment.

“Timothy, shall we go to an hotel until the house painting is finished?”

“It would be a great waste of money.”

"Does that matter so much—now?"

"You're just like all women—hopelessly extravagant! Just because we've come into a ridiculously small part of my brother's estate, you think we can go and live indefinitely at the Ritz."

"I didn't quite say that, dear."

"I can tell you that the difference Richard's money will make will be hardly appreciable. This bloodsucking Government will see to that. You mark my words, the whole lot will go in taxation."

Mrs. Abernethie shook her head sadly.

"This coffee's cold," said the invalid, looking with distaste at the cup which he had not as yet tasted. "Why can't I ever get a cup of really hot coffee?"

"I'll take it down and warm it up."

In the kitchen Miss Gilchrist was drinking tea and conversing affably, though with slight condescension, with Mrs. Jones.

"I'm so anxious to spare Mrs. Abernethie all I can," she said. "All this running up and down stairs is so painful for her."

"Waits on him hand and foot, she does," said Mrs. Jones, stirring the sugar in her cup.

"It's very sad his being such an invalid."

"Not such an invalid either," Mrs. Jones said darkly. "Suits him very well to lie up and ring bells and have trays brought up and down. But he's well able to get up and go about. Even seen him out in the village, I have, when she's been away. Walking as hearty as you please. Anything he really needs—like his tobacco or a stamp—he can come and get. And that's why when she was off to that funeral and got held up on the way back, and he told me I'd got to come in and stay the night again, I refused. 'I'm sorry, sir,' I said, 'but I've got my husband to think of. Going out to oblige in the mornings is all very well, but I've got to be there to see to him when he comes back from work.’ Nor I wouldn’t budge, I wouldn’t. Do him good, I thought, to get about the house and look after himself for once. Might make him see what a lot he gets done for him. So I stood firm, I did. He didn’t half create.”

Mrs. Jones drew a deep breath and took a long satisfying drink of sweet inky tea. “Ar,” she said.

Though deeply suspicious of Miss Gilchrist, and considering her as a finicky thing and a “regular fussy old maid,” Mrs. Jones approved of the lavish way in which Miss Gilchrist dispensed her employer’s tea and sugar ration.

She set down the cup and said affably:

“I’ll give the kitchen floor a nice scrub down and then I’ll be getting along. The potatoes is all ready peeled, dear, you’ll find them by the sink.”

Though slightly affronted by the “dear,” Miss Gilchrist was appreciative of the goodwill which had divested an enormous quantity of potatoes of their outer coverings.

Before she could say anything the telephone rang and she hurried out in the hall to answer it. The telephone, in the style of fiftyodd years ago, was situated inconveniently in a draughty passage behind the staircase.

Maude Abernethie appeared at the top of the stairs while Miss Gilchrist was still speaking. The latter looked up and said:

“It’s Mrs.—Leo—is it?—Abernethie speaking.”

“Tell her I’m just coming.”

Maude descended the stairs slowly and painfully.

Miss Gilchrist murmured, “I’m so sorry you’ve had to come down again, Mrs. Abernethie. Has Mr. Abernethie finished his elevenses? I’ll just nip up and get the tray.”

She trotted up the stairs as Mrs. Abernethie said into the receiver:

"Helen? This is Maude here."

The invalid received Miss Gilchrist with a baleful glare. As she picked up the tray he asked fretfully:

"Who's that on the telephone?"

"Mrs. Leo Abernethie."

"Oh? Suppose they'll go on gossiping for about an hour. Women have no sense of time when they get on the phone. Never think of the money they're wasting."

Miss Gilchrist said brightly that it would be Mrs. Leo who had to pay, and Timothy grunted.

"Just pull that curtain aside, will you? No, not that one, the other one. I don't want the light slap in my eyes. That's better. No reason because I'm an invalid that I should have to sit in the dark all day."

He went on:

"And you might look in that bookcase over there for a green— What's the matter now? What are you rushing off for?"

"It's the front door, Mr. Abernethie."

"I didn't hear anything. You've got that woman downstairs, haven't you? Let her go and answer it."

"Yes, Mr. Abernethie. What was the book you wanted me to find?"

The invalid closed his eyes.

"I can't remember now. You've put it out of my head. You'd better go."

Miss Gilchrist seized the tray and hurriedly departed. Putting the tray on the pantry table she hurried into the front hall, passing Mrs. Abernethie who was still at the telephone.

She returned in a moment to ask in a muted voice:

“I’m so sorry to interrupt. It’s a nun. Collecting. The Heart of Mary Fund, I think she said. She has a book. Half a crown or five shillings most people seem to have given.”

Maude Abernethie said:

“Just a moment, Helen,” into the telephone, and to Miss Gilchrist, “I don’t subscribe to Roman Catholics. We have our own Church charities.”

Miss Gilchrist hurried away again.

Maude terminated her conversation after a few minutes with the phrase, “I’ll talk to Timothy about it.”

She replaced the receiver and came into the front hall. Miss Gilchrist was standing quite still by the drawing room door. She was frowning in a puzzled way and jumped when Maude Abernethie spoke to her.

“There’s nothing the matter, is there, Miss Gilchrist?”

“Oh no, Mrs. Abernethie, I’m afraid I was just woolgathering. So stupid of me when there’s so much to be done.”

Miss Gilchrist resumed her imitation of a busy ant and Maude Abernethie climbed the stairs slowly and painfully to her husband’s room.

“That was Helen on the telephone. It seems that the place is definitely sold—some Institution for Foreign Refugees—”

She paused whilst Timothy expressed himself forcibly on the subject of Foreign Refugees, with side issues as to the house in which he had been born and brought up. “No decent standards left in this country. My old home! I can hardly bear to think of it.”

Maude went on:

“Helen quite appreciates what you—we—will feel about it. She suggests that we might like to come there for a visit before it goes. She was very distressed about your health and the way the painting is affecting it. She thought you might prefer coming to Enderby to going to an hotel. The servants are there still, so you could be looked after comfortably.”

Timothy, whose mouth had been open in outraged protests halfway through this, had closed it again. His eyes had become suddenly shrewd. He now nodded his head approvingly.

“Thoughtful of Helen,” he said. “Very thoughtful. I don’t know, I’m sure, I’ll have to think it over… There’s no doubt that this paint is poisoning me—there’s arsenic in paint, I believe. I seem to have heard something of the kind. On the other hand the exertion of moving might be too much for me. It’s difficult to know what would be the best.”

“Perhaps you’d prefer an hotel, dear,” said Maude. “A good hotel is very expensive, but where your health is concerned—”

Timothy interrupted.

“I wish I could make you understand, Maude, that we are not millionaires. Why go to an hotel when Helen has very kindly suggested that we should go to Enderby? Not that it’s really for her to suggest! The house isn’t hers. I don’t understand legal subtleties, but I presume it belongs to us equally until it’s sold and the proceeds divided. Foreign Refugees! It would have made old Cornelius turn in his grave. Yes,” he sighed, “I should like to see the old place again before I die.”

Maude played her last card adroitly.

“I understand that Mr. Entwhistle has suggested that the members of the family might like to choose certain pieces of furniture or china or something—before the contents are put up for auction.”

Timothy heaved himself briskly upright.

"We must certainly go. There must be a very exact valuation of what is chosen by each person. Those men the girls have married— I wouldn't trust either of them from what I've heard. There might be some sharp practice. Helen is far too amiable. As the head of the family, it is my duty to be present!"

He got up and walked up and down the room with a brisk vigorous tread.

"Yes, it is an excellent plan. Write to Helen and accept. What I am really thinking about is you, my dear. It will be a nice rest and change for you. You have been doing far too much lately. The decorators can get on with the painting while we are away and that Gillespie woman can stay here and look after the house."

"Gilchrist," said Maude.

Timothy waved a hand and said that it was all the same.

II

"I can't do it," said Miss Gilchrist.

Maude looked at her in surprise.

Miss Gilchrist was trembling. Her eyes looked pleadingly into Maude's.

"It's stupid of me, I know… But I simply can't. Not stay here all alone in the house. If there was anyone who could come and—and sleep here too?"

She looked hopefully at the other woman, but Maude shook her head. Maude Abernethie knew only too well how difficult it was to get anyone in the neighbourhood to "live in."

Miss Gilchrist went on, a kind of desperation in her voice. "I know you'll think it nervy and foolish—and I wouldn't have dreamed once that I'd ever feel like this. I've never been a nervous woman—or fanciful. But now it all seems different. I'd be terrified—yes, literally terrified—to be all alone here."

“Of course,” said Maude. “It’s stupid of me. After what happend at Lytchett St. Mary.”

“I suppose that’s it… It’s not logical, I know. And I didn’t feel it at first. I didn’t mind being alone in the cottage after—after it had happened. The feeling’s grown up gradually. You’ll have no opinion of me at all, Mrs. Abernethie, but ever since I’ve been here I’ve been feeling it—frightened, you know. Not of anything in particular—but just frightened… It’s so silly and I really am ashamed. It’s just as though all the time I was expecting something awful to happen… Even that nun coming to the door startled me. Oh dear, I am in a bad way….”

“I suppose it’s what they call delayed shock,” said Maude vaguely.

“Is it? I don’t know. Oh, dear, I’m so sorry to appear so—so ungrateful, and after all your kindness. What you will think—”

Maude soothed her.

“We must think of some other arrangement,” she said.

Sixteen

George Crossfield paused irresolutely for a moment as he watched a particular feminine back disappear through a doorway. Then he nodded to himself and went in pursuit.

The doorway in question was that of a double-fronted shop—a shop that had gone out of business. The plate-glass windows showed a disconcerting emptiness within. The door was closed, but George rapped on it. A vacuous faced young man with spectacles opened it and stared at George.

“Excuse me,” said George. “But I think my cousin just came in here.”

The young man drew back and George walked in.

“Hallo, Susan,” he said.

Susan, who was standing on a packing case and using a footrule, turned her head in some surprise.

“Hallo, George. Where did you spring from?”

“I saw your back. I was sure it was yours.”

“How clever of you. I suppose backs are distinctive.”

“Much more so than faces. Add a beard and pads in your cheeks and do a few things to your hair and nobody will know you when you come face to face with them—but beware of the moment when you walk away.”

“I’ll remember. Can you remember seven feet five inches until I’ve got time to write it down.”

“Certainly. What is this, bookshelves?”

“No, cubicle space. Eight feet nine—and three seven….”

The young man with the spectacles who had been fidgeting from one foot to the other, coughed apologetically.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Banks, but if you want to be here for some time—”

“I do, rather,” said Susan. “If you leave the keys, I’ll lock the door and return them to the office when I go past. Will that be all right?”

“Yes, thank you. If it weren’t that we’re short staffed this morning—”

Susan accepted the apologetic intent of the half-finished sentence and the young man removed himself to the outer world of the street.

“I’m glad we’ve got rid of him,” said Susan. “House agents are a bother. They will keep talking just when I want to do sums.”

“Ah,” said George. “Murder in an empty shop. How exciting it would be for the passersby to see the dead body of a beautiful young woman displayed behind plate glass. How they would goggle. Like goldfish.”

“There wouldn’t be any reason for you to murder me, George.”

“Well, I should get a fourth part of your share of our esteemed uncle’s estate. If one were sufficiently fond of money that should be a reason.”

Susan stopped taking measurements and turned to look at him. Her eyes opened a little.

“You look a different person, George. It’s really—extraordinary.”

“Different? How different?”

“Like an advertisement. This is the same man that you saw overleaf, but now he has taken Uppington’s Health Salts.”

She sat down on another packing case and lit a cigarette.

“You must have wanted your share of old Richard’s money pretty badly, George?”

“Nobody could honestly say that money isn’t welcome these days.”

George’s tone was light.

Susan said: “You were in a jam, weren’t you?”

“Hardly your business, is it, Susan?”

“I was just interested.”

“Are you renting this shop as a place of business?”

“I’m buying the whole house.”

“With possession?”

“Yes. The two upper floors were flats. One’s empty and went with the shop. The other, I’m buying the people out.”

“Nice to have money, isn’t it, Susan?”

There was a malicious tone in George’s voice. But Susan merely took a deep breath and said:

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s wonderful. An answer to prayer.”

“Does prayer kill off elderly relatives?”

Susan paid no attention.

“This place is exactly right. To begin with, it’s a very good piece of period architecture. I can make the living part upstairs something quite unique. There are two lovely moulded ceilings and the rooms are a beautiful shape. This part down here which has already been hacked about I shall have completely modern.”

“What is this? A dress business?”

“No. Beauty culture. Herbal preparations. Face creams!”

“The full racket?”

“The racket as before. It pays. It always pays. What you need to put it over is personality. I can do it.”

George looked at his cousin appreciatively. He admired the slanting planes of her face, the generous mouth, the radiant colouring. Altogether an unusual and vivid face. And he recognized in Susan that odd, indefinable quality, the quality of success.

“Yes,” he said, “I think you’ve got what it takes, Susan. You’ll get back your outlay on this scheme and you’ll get places with it.”

“It’s the right neighbourhood, just off a main shopping street and you can park a car right in front of the door.”

Again George nodded.

“Yes, Susan, you’re going to succeed. Have you had this in mind for a long time?”

“Over a year.”

“Why didn’t you put it up to old Richard? He might have staked you.”

“I did put it up to him.”

“And he didn’t see his way? I wonder why. I should have thought he’d have recognized the same mettle that he himself was made of.”

Susan did not answer, and into George’s mind there leapt a swift bird’s eye view of another figure. A thin, nervous, suspicious-eyed young man.

“Where does—what’s his name—Greg—come in on all this?” he asked. “He’ll give up dishing out pills and powders, I take it?”

“Of course. There will be a laboratory built out at the back. We shall have our own formulas for face creams and beauty preparations.”

George suppressed a grin. He wanted to say: “So baby is to have his playpen,” but he did not say it. As a cousin he did not mind being spiteful, but he had an uneasy sense that Susan’s feeling for her husband was a thing to be treated with care. It had all the qualities of a dangerous explosive. He wondered, as he had wondered on the day of the funeral, about that queer fish, Gregory. Something odd about the fellow. So nondescript in appearance—and yet, in some way, not nondescript….

He looked again at Susan, calmly and radiantly triumphant.

“You’ve got the true Abernethie touch,” he said. “The only one of the family who has. Pity as far as old Richard was concerned that you’re a woman. If you’d been a boy, I bet he’d have left you the whole caboodle.”

Susan said slowly: “Yes, I think he would.”

She paused and then went on:

“He didn’t like Greg, you know….”

“Ah.” George raised his eyebrows. “His mistake.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well. Anyway, things are going well now—all going according to plan.”

As he said the words he was struck by the fact that they seemed particularly applicable to Susan.

The idea made him, just for a moment, a shade uncomfortable.

He didn’t really like a woman who was so cold-bloodedly efficient.

Changing the subject he said:

“By the way, did you get a letter from Helen? About Enderby?”

“Yes, I did. This morning. Did you?”

“Yes. What are you going to do about it?”

“Greg and I thought of going up the weekend after next—if that suits everyone else. Helen seemed to want us all together.”

George laughed shrewdly.

“Or somebody might choose a more valuable piece of furniture than somebody else?”

Susan laughed.

“Oh, I suppose there is a proper valuation. But a valuation for probate will be much lower than the things would be in the open market. And besides, I’d quite like to have a few relics of the founder of the family fortunes. Then I think it would be amusing to have one or two really absurd and charming specimens of the Victorian age in this place. Make a kind of thing of them! That period’s coming in now. There was a green malachite table in the drawing room. You could build quite a colour scheme around it. And perhaps a case of stuffed hummingbirds—or one of those crowns made of waxed flowers. Something like that—just as a keynote—can be very effective.”

“I trust your judgement.”

“You’ll be there, I suppose?”

“Oh, I shall be there—to see fair play if nothing else.”

Susan laughed.

“What do you bet there will be a grand family row?” she asked.

“Rosamund will probably want your green malachite table for a stage set!”

Susan did not laugh. Instead she frowned.

“Have you seen Rosamund lately?”

“I have not seen beautiful Cousin Rosamund since we all came back third-class from the funeral.”

“I’ve seen her once or twice… She—she seemed rather odd—”

“What was the matter with her? Trying to think?”

“No. She seemed—well—upset.”

“Upset about coming into a lot of money and being able to put on some perfectly frightful play in which Michael can make an ass of himself?”

“Oh, that’s going ahead and it does sound frightful—but all the same, it may be a success. Michael’s good, you know. He can put himself across the footlights—or whatever the term is. He’s not like Rosamund, who’s just beautiful and ham.”

“Poor beautiful ham Rosamund.”

“All the same Rosamund is not quite so dumb as one might think. She says things that are quite shrewd, sometimes. Things that you wouldn’t have imagined she’d even noticed. It’s—it’s quite disconcerting.”

“Quite like our Aunt Cora—”

“Yes….”

A momentary uneasiness descended on them both—conjured up it seemed, by the mention of Cora Lansquenet.

Then George said with a rather elaborate air of unconcern:

“Talking of Cora—what about that companion woman of hers? I rather think something ought to be done about her.”

“Done about her? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s up to the family, so to speak. I mean I’ve been thinking Cora was our Aunt—and it occurred to me that this woman mayn’t find it easy to get another post.”

“That occurred to you, did it?”

“Yes. People are so careful of their skins. I don’t say they’d actually think that this Gilchrist female would take a hatchet to them—but at the back of their minds they’d feel that it might be unlucky. People are superstitious.”

“How odd that you should have thought of all that, George? How would you know about things like that?”

George said drily:

“You forget that I’m a lawyer. I see a lot of the queer illogical side of people. What I’m getting at is, that I think we might do something about the woman, give her a small allowance or something, to tide her over, or find some office post for her if she’s capable of that sort of thing. I feel rather as though we ought to keep in touch with her.”

“You needn’t worry,” said Susan. Her voice was dry and ironic. “I’ve seen to things. She’s gone to Timothy and Maude.”

George looked startled.

“I say, Susan—is that wise?”

“It was the best thing I could think of—at the moment.”

George looked at her curiously.

“You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you, Susan? You know what you’re doing and you don’t have—regrets.”

Susan said lightly:

“It’s a waste of time—having regrets.”

Seventeen

Michael tossed the letter across the table to Rosamund.

“What about it?”

“Oh, we’ll go. Don’t you think so?”

Michael said slowly:

“It might be as well.”

“There might be some jewellery… Of course all the things in the house are quite hideous—stuffed birds and wax flowers—ugh!”

“Yes. Bit of a mausoleum. As a matter of fact I’d like to make a sketch or two—particularly in that drawing room. The mantelpiece, for instance, and that very odd shaped couch. They’d be just right for The Baronet’s Progress—if we revive it.”

He got up and looked at his watch.

“That reminds me. I must go round and see Rosenheim. Don’t expect me until rather late this evening. I’m dining with Oscar and we’re going into the question of taking up that option and how it fits in with the American offer.”

“Darling Oscar. He’ll be pleased to see you after all this time. Give him my love.”

Michael looked at her sharply. He no longer smiled and his face had an alert predatory look.

“What do you mean—after all this time? Anyone would think I hadn’t seen him for months.”

“Well, you haven’t, have you?” murmured Rosamund.

"Yes, I have. We lunched together only a week ago."

"How funny. He must have forgotten about it. He rang up yesterday and said he hadn't seen you since the first night of Tilly Looks West."

"The old fool must be off his head."

Michael laughed. Rosamund, her eyes wide and blue, looked at him without emotion.

"You think I'm a fool, don't you, Mick?"

Michael protested.

"Darling, of course I don't."

"Yes, you do. But I'm not an absolute nitwit. You didn't go near Oscar that day. I know where you did go."

"Rosamund darling—what do you mean?"

"I mean I know where you really were…."

Michael, his attractive face uncertain, stared at his wife. She stared back at him, placid, unruffled.

How very disconcerting, he suddenly thought, a really empty stare could be.

He said rather unsuccessfully:

"I don't know what you're driving at…."

"I just meant it's rather silly telling me a lot of lies."

"Look here, Rosamund—"

He had started to bluster—but he stopped, taken aback as his wife said softly:

"We do want to take up this option and put this play on, don't we?"

"Want to? It's the part I've always dreamed must exist somewhere."

"Yes—that's what I mean."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Well—it's worth a good deal, isn't it? But one mustn't take too many risks."

He stared at her and said slowly:

"It's your money— I know that. If you don't want to risk it—"

"It's our money, darling." Rosamund stressed it. "I think that's rather important."

"Listen, darling. The part of Eileen—it would bear writing up."

Rosamund smiled.

"I don't think—really— I want to play it."

"My dear girl." Michael was aghast. "What's come over you?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is, you've been different lately—moody—nervous, what is it?"

"Nothing. I only want you to be—careful, Mick."

"Careful about what? I'm always careful."

"No, I don't think you are. You always think you can get away with things and that everyone will believe whatever you want them to. You were stupid about Oscar that day."

Michael flushed angrily.

“And what about you? You said you were going shopping with Jane. You didn’t. Jane’s in America, has been for weeks.”

“Yes,” said Rosamund. “That was stupid, too. I really just went for a walk—in Regent’s Park.”

Michael looked at her curiously.

“Regent’s Park? You never went for a walk in Regent’s Park in your life. What’s it all about? Have you got a boyfriend? You may say what you like, Rosamund, you have been different lately. Why?”

“I’ve been—thinking about things. About what to do….”

Michael came round the table to her in a satisfying spontaneous rush. His voice held fervour as he cried:

“Darling—you know I love you madly!”

She responded satisfactorily to the embrace, but as they drew apart he was struck again disagreeably by the odd calculation in those beautiful eyes.

“Whatever I’d done, you’d always forgive me, wouldn’t you?” he demanded.

“I suppose so,” said Rosamund vaguely. “That’s not the point. You see, it’s all different now. We’ve got to think and plan.”

“Think and plan—what?”

Rosamund, frowning, said:

“Things aren’t over when you’ve done them. It’s really a sort of beginning and then one’s got to arrange what to do next, and what’s important and what is not.”

“Rosamund….”

She sat, her face perplexed, her wide gaze on a middle distance in which Michael, apparently, did not feature.

At the third repetition of her name, she started slightly and came out of her reverie.

“What did you say?”

“I asked you what you were thinking about….”

“Oh? Oh yes, I was wondering if I’d go down to—what is it?—Lytchett St. Mary, and see that Miss Somebody—the one who was with Aunt Cora.”

“But why?”

“Well, she’ll be going away soon, won’t she? To relatives or someone. I don’t think we ought to let her go away until we’ve asked her.”

“Asked her what?”

“Asked her who killed Aunt Cora.”

Michael stared.

“You mean—you think she knows?”

Rosamund said rather absently:

“Oh yes, I expect so… She lived there, you see.”

“But she’d have told the police.”

“Oh, I don’t mean she knows that way—I just mean that she’s probably quite sure. Because of what Uncle Richard said when he went down there. He did go down there, you know, Susan told me so.”

“But she wouldn’t have heard what he said.”

“Oh yes, she would, darling.” Rosamund sounded like someone arguing with an unreasonable child.

“Nonsense, I can hardly see old Richard Abernethie discussing his suspicions of his family before an outsider.”

“Well, of course. She’d have heard it through the door.”

“Eavesdropping, you mean?”

“I expect so—in fact I’m sure. It must be deadly dull shut up, two women in a cottage and nothing ever happening except washing up and the sink and putting the cat out and things like that. Of course she listened and read letters—anyone would.”

Michael looked at her with something faintly approaching dismay.

“Would you?” he demanded bluntly.

“I wouldn’t go and be a companion in the country.” Rosamund shuddered. “I’d rather die.”

“I mean—would you read letters and—and all that?”

Rosamund said calmly:

“If I wanted to know, yes. Everybody does, don’t you think so?”

The limpid gaze met his.

“One just wants to know,” said Rosamund. “One doesn’t want to do anything about it. I expect that’s how she feels—Miss Gilchrist, I mean. But I’m certain she knows.”

Michael said in a stifled voice:

“Rosamund, who do you think killed Cora? And old Richard?”

Once again that limpid blue gaze met his.

“Darling—don’t be absurd… You know as well as I do. But it’s much, much better never to mention it. So we won’t.”

Eighteen

From his seat by the fireplace in the library, Hercule Poirot looked at the assembled company.

His eyes passed thoughtfully over Susan, sitting upright, looking vivid and animated, over her husband, sitting near her, his expression rather vacant and his fingers twisting a loop of string; they went on to George Crossfield, debonair and distinctly pleased with himself, talking about card sharpers on Atlantic cruises to Rosamund, who said mechanically, “How extraordinary, darling. But why?” in a completely uninterested voice; went on to Michael with his very individual type of haggard good looks and his very apparent charm; to Helen, poised and slightly remote; to Timothy, comfortably settled in the best armchair with an extra cushion at his back; and Maude, sturdy and thickset, in devoted attendance, and finally to the figure sitting with a tinge of apology just beyond the range of the family circle—the figure of Miss Gilchrist wearing a rather peculiar “dressy” blouse. Presently, he judged, she would get up, murmur her excuse and leave the family gathering and go up to her room. Miss Gilchrist, he thought, knew her place. She had learned it the hard way.

Hercule Poirot sipped his after-dinner coffee and between half-closed lids made his appraisal.

He had wanted them there—all together, and he had got them. And what, he thought to himself, was he going to do with them now? He felt a sudden weary distaste for going on with the business. Why was that, he wondered? Was it the influence of Helen Abernethie? There was a quality of passive resistance about her that seemed unexpectedly strong. Had she, while apparently graceful and unconcerned, managed to impress her own reluctance upon him? She was averse to this raking up of the details of old Richard’s death, he knew that. She wanted it left alone, left to die out into oblivion. Poirot was not surprised by that. What did surprise him was his own disposition to agree with her.

Mr. Entwhistle's account of the family had, he realized, been admirable. He had described all these people shrewdly and well. With the old lawyer's knowledge and appraisal to guide him, Poirot had wanted to see for himself. He had fancied that, meeting these people intimately, he would have a very shrewd idea—not of how and when—(those were questions with which he did not propose to concern himself. Murder had been possible—that was all he needed to know!)—but of who. For Hercule Poirot had a lifetime of experience behind him, and as a man who deals with pictures can recognize the artist, so Poirot believed he could recognize a likely type of the amateur criminal who will—if his own particular need arises—be prepared to kill.

But it was not to be so easy.

Because he could visualize almost all of these people as a possible—though not a probable—murderer. George might kill—as the cornered rat kills. Susan calmly—efficiently—to further a plan. Gregory because he had that queer morbid streak which discounts and invites, almost craves, punishment. Michael because he was ambitious and had a murderer's cocksure vanity. Rosamund because she was frighteningly simple in outlook. Timothy because he had hated and resented his brother and had craved the power his brother's money would give. Maude because Timothy was her child and where her child was concerned she would be ruthless. Even Miss Gilchrist, he thought, might have contemplated murder if it could have restored to her the Willow Tree in its ladylike glory! And Helen? He could not see Helen as committing murder. She was too civilized—too removed from violence. And she and her husband had surely loved Richard Abernethie.

Poirot sighed to himself. There were to be no shortcuts to the truth. Instead he would have to adopt a longer, but a reasonably sure method. There would have to be conversation. Much conversation. For in the long run, either through a lie, or through truth, people were bound to give themselves away….

He had been introduced by Helen to the gathering, and had set to work to overcome the almost universal annoyance caused by his presence—a foreign stranger!—in this family gathering. He had used his eyes and his ears. He had watched and listened—openly and behind doors! He had noticed affinities, antagonism, the unguarded words that arose as always when property was to be divided. He had engineered adroitly tête-à-têtes, walks upon the terrace, and had made his deductions and observations. He had talked with Miss Gilchrist about the vanished glories of her tea shop and about the correct composition of brioches and chocolate éclairs and had visited the kitchen garden with her to discuss the proper use of herbs in cooking. He had spent some long half hours listening to Timothy talking about his own health and about the effect upon it of paint.

Paint? Poirot frowned. Somebody else had said something about paint—Mr. Entwhistle?

There had also been discussion of a different kind of painting. Pierre Lansquenet as a painter. Cora Lansquenet's paintings, rapturized over by Miss Gilchrist, dismissed scornfully by Susan. "Just like picture postcards," she had said. "She did them from postcards, too."

Miss Gilchrist had been quite upset by that and had said sharply that dear Mrs. Lansquenet always painted from Nature.

"But I bet she cheated," said Susan to Poirot when Miss Gilchrist had gone out of the room. "In fact I know she did, though I won't upset the old pussy by saying so."

"And how do you know?"

Poirot watched the strong confident line of Susan's chin.

"She will always be sure, this one," he thought. "And perhaps sometimes, she will be too sure…."

Susan was going on.

"I'll tell you, but don't pass it on to the Gilchrist. One picture is of Polflexan, the cove and lighthouse and the pier—the usual aspect that all amateur artists sit down and sketch. But the pier was blown up in the war, and since Aunt Cora's sketch was done a couple of years ago, it can't very well be from Nature, can it? But the postcards they sell there still show the pier as it used to be. There was one in her bedroom drawer. So Aunt Cora started her ‘rough sketch’ down there, I expect, and then finished it surreptitiously later at home from a postcard! It’s funny, isn’t it, the way people get caught out?”

“Yes, it is, as you say, funny.” He paused, and then thought that the opening was a good one.

“You do not remember me, Madame,” he said, “but I remember you. This is not the first time that I have seen you.”

She stared at him. Poirot nodded with great gusto.

“Yes, yes, it is so. I was inside an automobile, well wrapped up and from the window I saw you. You were talking to one of the mechanics in the garage. You do not notice me—it is natural— I am inside the car—an elderly muffled-up foreigner! But I noticed you, for you are young and agreeable to look at and you stand there in the sun. So when I arrive here, I say to myself, ‘Tiens! What a coincidence!’”

“A garage? Where? When was this?”

“Oh, a little time ago—a week—no, more. For the moment,” said Poirot disingenuously and with a full recollection of the King’s Arms garage in his mind, “I cannot remember where. I travel so much all over this country.”

“Looking for a suitable house to buy for your refugees?”

“Yes. There is so much to take into consideration, you see. Price—neighbourhood—suitability for conversion.”

“I suppose you’ll have to pull the house about a lot? Lots of horrible partitions.”

“In the bedrooms, yes, certainly. But most of the ground floor rooms we shall not touch.” He paused before going on. “Does it sadden you, Madame, that this old family mansion of yours should go this way—to strangers?”

"Of course not." Susan looked amused. "I think it's an excellent idea. It's an impossible place for anybody to think of living in as it is. And I've nothing to be sentimental about. It's not my old home. My mother and father lived in London. We just came here for Christmas sometimes. Actually I've always thought it quite hideous—an almost indecent temple to wealth."

"The altars are different now. There is the building in, and the concealed lighting and the expensive simplicity. But wealth still has its temples, Madame. I understand—I am not, I hope, indiscreet—that you yourself are planning such an edifice? Everything de luxe—and no expense spared."

Susan laughed.

"Hardly a temple—it's just a place of business."

"Perhaps the name does not matter… But it will cost much money—that is true, is it not?"

"Everything's wickedly expensive nowadays. But the initial outlay will be worthwhile, I think."

"Tell me something about these plans of yours. It amazes me to find a beautiful young woman so practical, so competent. In my young days—a long time ago, I admit—beautiful women thought only of their pleasures, of cosmetics—of la toilette."

"Women still think a great deal about their faces—that's where I come in."

"Tell me."

And she had told him. Told him with a wealth of detail and with a great deal of unconscious self-revelation. He appreciated her business acumen, her boldness of planning and her grasp of detail. A good bold planner, sweeping all side issues away. Perhaps a little ruthless as all those who plan boldly must be.

Watching her, he had said:

"Yes, you will succeed. You will go ahead. How fortunate that you are not restricted, as so many are, by poverty. One cannot go far without the capital outlay. To have had these creative ideas and to have been frustrated by lack of means—that would have been unbearable."

"I couldn't have borne it! But I'd have raised money somehow or other—got someone to back me."

"Ah! of course. Your uncle, whose house this was, was rich. Even if he had not died, he would, as you express it, have 'staked' you."

"Oh no, he wouldn't. Uncle Richard was a bit of a stick-in-the-mud where women were concerned. If I'd been a man—" A quick flash of anger swept across her face. "He made me very angry."

"I see—yes, I see…."

"The old shouldn't stand in the way of the young. I—oh, I beg your pardon."

Hercule Poirot laughed easily and twirled his moustache.

"I am old, yes. But I do not impede youth. There is no one who needs to wait for my death."

"What a horrid idea."

"But you are a realist, Madame. Let us admit without more ado that the world is full of the young—or even the middle-aged—who wait, patiently or impatiently, for the death of someone whose decease will give them if not affluence—then opportunity."

"Opportunity!" Susan said, taking a deep breath. "That's what one needs."

Poirot who had been looking beyond her, said gaily:

"And here is your husband come to join our little discussion…We talk, Mr. Banks, of opportunity. Opportunity the golden—opportunity who must be grasped with both hands. How far in conscience can one go? Let us hear your views?”

But he was not destined to hear the views of Gregory Banks on opportunity or on anything else. In fact he had found it next to impossible to talk to Gregory Banks at all. Banks had a curious fluid quality. Whether by his own wish, or by that of his wife, he seemed to have no liking for tête-à-têtes or quiet discussions. No, “conversation” with Gregory had failed.

Poirot had talked with Maude Abernethie—also about paint (the smell of) and how fortunate it had been that Timothy had been able to come to Enderby, and how kind it had been of Helen to extend an invitation to Miss Gilchrist also.

“For really she is most useful. Timothy so often feels like a snack—and one cannot ask too much of other people’s servants but there is a gas ring in a little room off the pantry, so that Miss Gilchrist can warm up Ovaltine or Benger’s there without disturbing anybody. And she’s so willing about fetching things, she’s quite willing to run up and down stairs a dozen times a day. Oh yes, I feel that it was really quite Providential that she should have lost her nerve about staying alone in the house as she did, though I admit it vexed me at the time.”

“Lost her nerve?” Poirot was interested.

He listened whilst Maude gave him an account of Miss Gilchrist’s sudden collapse.

“She was frightened, you say? And yet could not exactly say why? That is interesting. Very interesting.”

“I put it down myself to delayed shock.”

“Perhaps.”

“Once during the war, when a bomb dropped about a mile from us, I remember Timothy—”

Poirot abstracted his mind from Timothy.

“Had anything particular happened that day?” he asked.

“On what day?” Maude looked blank.

“The day that Miss Gilchrist was upset.”

“Oh, that—no, I don’t think so. It seems to have been coming on ever since she left Lytchett St. Mary, or so she said. She didn’t seem to mind when she was there.”

And the result, Poirot thought, had been a piece of poisoned wedding cake. Not so very surprising that Miss Gilchrist was frightened after that… And even when she had removed herself to the peaceful country round Stansfield Grange, the fear had lingered. More than lingered. Grown. Why grown? Surely attending on an exacting hypochondriac like Timothy must be so exhausting that nervous fears would be likely to be swallowed up in exasperation?

But something in that house had made Miss Gilchrist afraid. What? Did she know herself?

Finding himself alone with Miss Gilchrist for a brief space before dinner, Poirot had sailed into the subject with an exaggerated foreign curiosity.

“Impossible, you comprehend, for me to mention the matter of murder to members of the family. But I am intrigued. Who would not be? A brutal crime—a sensitive artist attacked in a lonely cottage. Terrible for her family. But terrible, also, I imagine, for you. Since Mrs. Timothy Abernethie gives me to understand that you were there at the time?”

“Yes, I was. And if you’ll excuse me, M. Pontarlier, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I understand—oh yes, I completely understand.”

Having said this, Poirot waited. And, as he had thought, Miss Gilchrist immediately did begin to talk about it.

He heard nothing from her that he had not heard before, but he played his part with perfect sympathy, uttering little cries of comprehension and listening with an absorbed interest which Miss Gilchrist could not help but enjoy.

Not until she had exhausted the subject of what she herself had felt, and what the doctor had said, and how kind Mr. Entwhistle had been, did Poirot proceed cautiously to the next point.

“You were wise, I think, not to remain alone down in that cottage.”

“I couldn’t have done it, M. Pontarlier. I really couldn’t have done it.”

“No. I understand even that you were afraid to remain alone in the house of Mr. Timothy Abernethie whilst they came here?”

Miss Gilchrist looked guilty.

“I’m terribly ashamed about that. So foolish really. It was just a kind of panic I had—really don’t know why.”

“But of course one knows why. You had just recovered from a dastardly attempt to poison you—”

Miss Gilchrist here sighed and said she simply couldn’t understand it. Why should anyone try to poison her?

“But obviously, my dear lady, because this criminal, this assassin, thought that you knew something that might lead to his apprehension by the police.”

“But what could I know? Some dreadful tramp, or semi-crazed creature.”

“If it was a tramp. It seems to me unlikely—”

“Oh, please, M. Pontarlier—” Miss Gilchrist became suddenly very upset. “Don’t suggest such things. I don’t want to believe it.”

“You do not want to believe what?”

“I don’t want to believe that it wasn’t—I mean—that it was—”

She paused, confused.

“And yet,” said Poirot shrewdly, “you do believe.”

“Oh, I don’t. I don’t!”

“But I think you do. That is why you are frightened… You are still frightened, are you not?”

“Oh, no, not since I came here. So many people. And such a nice family atmosphere. Oh, no, everything seems quite all right here.”

“It seems to me—you must excuse my interest—I am an old man, somewhat infirm and a great part of my time is given to idle speculation on matters which interest me—it seems to me that there must have been some definite occurrence at Stansfield Grange which, so to speak, brought your fears to a head. Doctors recognize nowadays how much takes place in our subconscious.”

“Yes, yes— I know they say so.”

“And I think your subconscious fears might have been brought to a point by some small concrete happening, something, perhaps, quite extraneous, serving, shall we say, as a focal point.”

Miss Gilchrist seemed to lap this up eagerly.

“I’m sure you are right,” she said.

“Now what, should you think, was this—er—extraneous circumstance?”

Miss Gilchrist pondered a moment, and then said, unexpectedly:

“I think, you know, M. Pontarlier, it was the nun.”

Before Poirot could take this up, Susan and her husband came in, closely followed by Helen.

“A nun,” thought Poirot… “Now where, in all this, have I heard something about a nun?”

He resolved to lead the conversation on to nuns some time in the course of the evening.

Nineteen

The family had all been polite to M. Pontarlier, the representative of U.N.A.R.C.O. And how right he had been to have chosen to designate himself by initials. Everyone had accepted U.N.A.R.C.O. as a matter of course—had even pretended to know all about it! How averse human beings were ever to admit ignorance! An exception had been Rosamund, who had asked him wonderingly: “But what is it? I never heard of it?” Fortunately no one else had been there at the time. Poirot had explained the organization in such a way that anyone but Rosamund would have felt abashed at having displayed ignorance of such a well-known worldwide institution. Rosamund, however, had only said vaguely, “Oh! refugees all over again. I’m so tired of refugees.” Thus voicing the unspoken reaction of many, who were usually too conventional to express themselves so frankly.

M. Pontarlier was, therefore, now accepted—as a nuisance but also as a nonentity. He had become, as it were, a piece of foreign décor. The general opinion was that Helen should have avoided having him here this particular weekend, but as he was here they must make the best of it. Fortunately this queer little foreigner did not seem to know much English. Quite often he did not understand what you said to him, and when everyone was speaking more or less at once he seemed completely at sea. He appeared to be interested only in refugees and postwar conditions, and his vocabulary only included those subjects. Ordinary chit-chat appeared to bewilder him. More or less forgotten by all, Hercule Poirot leant back in his chair, sipped his coffee and observed, as a cat may observe the twitterings and comings and goings of a flock of birds. The cat is not ready yet to make its spring.

After twenty-four hours of prowling round the house and examining its contents, the heirs of Richard Abernethie were ready to state their preferences, and, if need be, to fight for them.

The subject of conversation was, first, a certain Spode dinner dessert service off which they had just been eating dessert.

“I don’t suppose I have long to live,” said Timothy in a faint melancholy voice. “And Maude and I have no children. It is hardly worthwhile our burdening ourselves with useless possessions. But for sentiment’s sake I should like to have the old dessert service. I remember it in the dear old days. It’s out of fashion, of course, and I understand dessert services have very little value nowadays—but there it is. I shall be quite content with that—and perhaps the Boule Cabinet in the White Boudoir.”

“You’re too late, Uncle,” George spoke with debonair insouciance. “I asked Helen to mark off the Spode service to me this morning.”

Timothy became purple in the face.

“Mark it off—mark it off? What do you mean? Nothing’s been settled yet. And what do you want with a dessert service? You’re not married.”

“As a matter of fact I collect Spode. And this is really a splendid specimen. But it’s quite all right about the Boule Cabinet, Uncle. I wouldn’t have that as a gift.”

Timothy waved aside the Boule Cabinet.

“Now look here, young George. You can’t go butting in, in this way. I’m an older man than you are—and I’m Richard’s only surviving brother. That dessert service is mine.”

“Why not take the Dresden service, Uncle? A very fine example and I’m sure just as full of sentimental memories. Anyway, the Spode’s mine. First come, first served.”

“Nonsense—nothing of the kind!” Timothy spluttered.

Maude said sharply:

“Please don’t upset your uncle, George. It’s very bad for him. Naturally he will take the Spode if he wants to! The first choice is his, and you young people must come afterwards. He was Richard’s brother, as he says, and you are only a nephew.”

"And I can tell you this, young man." Timothy was seething with fury. "If Richard had made a proper will, the disposal of the contents of this place would have been entirely in my hands. That's the way the property should have been left, and if it wasn't, I can only suspect undue influence. Yes—and I repeat it—undue influence."

Timothy glared at his nephew.

"A preposterous will," he said. "Preposterous!"

He leant back, placed a hand to his heart, and groaned:

"This is very bad for me. If I could have—a little brandy."

Miss Gilchrist hurried to get it and returned with the restorative in a small glass.

"Here you are, Mr. Abernethie. Please—please don't excite youself. Are you sure you oughtn't to go up to bed?"

"Don't be a fool." Timothy swallowed the brandy. "Go to bed? I intend to protect my interests."

"Really, George, I'm surprised at you," said Maude. "What your uncle says is perfectly true. His wishes come first. If he wants the Spode dessert service he shall have it!"

"It's quite hideous anyway," said Susan.

"Hold your tongue, Susan," said Timothy.

The thin young man who sat beside Susan raised his head. In a voice that was a little shriller than his ordinary tones, he said:

"Don't speak like that to my wife!"

He half rose from his seat.

Susan said quickly: "It's all right, Greg. I don't mind."

"But I do."

Helen said: "I think it would be graceful on your part, George, to let your uncle have the dessert service."

Timothy spluttered indignantly: "There's no 'letting' about it!"

But George, with a slight bow to Helen said, "Your wish is law, Aunt Helen. I abandon my claim."

"You didn't really want it, anyway, did you?" said Helen.

He cast a sharp glance at her, then grinned:

"The trouble with you, Aunt Helen, is that you're too sharp by half! You see more than you're meant to see. Don't worry, Uncle Timothy, the Spode is yours. Just my idea of fun."

"Fun, indeed." Maude Abernethie was indignant. "Your uncle might have had a heart attack!"

"Don't you believe it," said George cheerfully. "Uncle Timothy will probably outlive us all. He's what is known as a creaking gate."

Timothy leaned forward balefully.

"I don't wonder," he said, "that Richard was disappointed in you."

"What's that?" The good humour went out of George's face.

"You came up here after Mortimer died, expecting to step into his shoes—expecting that Richard would make you his heir, didn't you? But my poor brother soon took your measure. He knew where the money would go if you had control of it. I'm surprised that he even left you a part of his fortune. He knew where it would go. Horses, gambling, Monte Carlo, foreign casinos. Perhaps worse. He suspected you of not being straight, didn't he?"

George, a white dint appearing each side of his nose, said quietly:

“Hadn’t you better be careful of what you are saying?”

“I wasn’t well enough to come here for the funeral,” said Timothy slowly, “but Maude told me what Cora said. Cora always was a fool—but there may have been something in it! And if so, I know who I’d suspect—”

“Timothy!” Maude stood up, solid, calm, a tower of forcefulness. “You have had a very trying evening. You must consider your health. I can’t have you getting ill again. Come up with me. You must take a sedative and go straight to bed. Timothy and I, Helen, will take the Spode dessert service and the Boule Cabinet as mementoes of Richard. There is no objection to that, I hope?”

Her glance swept round the company. Nobody spoke, and she marched out of the room supporting Timothy with a hand under his elbow, waving aside Miss Gilchrist who was hovering half-heartedly by the door.

George broke the silence after they had departed.

“Femme formidable!” he said. “That describes Aunt Maude exactly. I should hate ever to impede her triumphal progress.”

Miss Gilchrist sat down again rather uncomfortably and murmured:

“Mrs. Abernethie is always so kind.”

The remark fell rather flat.

Michael Shane laughed suddenly and said: “You know, I’m enjoying all this! ‘The Voysey Inheritance’ to the life. By the way, Rosamund and I want that malachite table in the drawing room.”

“Oh, no,” cried Susan. “I want that.”

“Here we go again,” said George, raising his eyes to the ceiling.

“Well, we needn’t get angry about it,” said Susan. “The reason I want it is for my new Beauty shop. Just a note of colour—and I shall put a great bouquet of wax flowers on it. It would look wonderful. I can find wax flowers easily enough, but a green malachite table isn't so common."

"But, darling," said Rosamund, "that's just why we want it. For the new set. As you say, a note of colour—and so absolutely period. And either wax flowers or stuffed hummingbirds. It will be absolutely right."

"I see what you mean, Rosamund," said Susan. "But I don't think you've got as good a case as I have. You could easily have a painted malachite table for the stage—it would look just the same. But for my salon I've got to have the genuine thing."

"Now, ladies," said George. "What about a sporting decision? Why not toss for it? Or cut the cards? All quite in keeping with the period of the table."

Susan smiled pleasantly.

"Rosamund and I will talk about it tomorrow," she said.

She seemed, as usual, quite sure of herself. George looked with some interest from her face to that of Rosamund. Rosamund's face had a vague, rather faraway expression.

"Which one will you back, Aunt Helen?" he asked. "An even money chance, I'd say. Susan has determination, but Rosamund is so wonderfully single-minded."

"Or perhaps not hummingbirds," said Rosamund. "One of those big Chinese vases would make a lovely lamp, with a gold shade."

Miss Gilchrist hurried into placating speech.

"This house is full of so many beautiful things," she said. "That green table would look wonderful in your new establishment, I'm sure, Mrs. Banks. I've never seen one like it. It must be worth a lot of money."

"It will be deducted from my share of the estate, of course," said Susan.

“I’m so sorry—I didn’t mean—” Miss Gilchrist was covered with confusion.

“It may be deducted from our share of the estate,” Michael pointed out. “With the wax flowers thrown in.”

“They look so right on that table,” Miss Gilchrist murmured. “Really artistic. Sweetly pretty.”

But nobody was paying any attention to Miss Gilchrist’s well-meant trivialities.

Greg said, speaking again in that high nervous voice:

“Susan wants that table.”

There was a momentary stir of unease, as though, by his words, Greg had set a different musical key.

Helen said quickly:

“And what do you really want, George? Leaving out the Spode service.”

George grinned and the tension relaxed.

“Rather a shame to bait old Timothy,” he said. “But he really is quite unbelievable. He’s had his own way in everything so long that he’s become quite pathological about it.”

“You have to humour an invalid, Mr. Crossfield,” said Miss Gilchrist.

“Ruddy old hypochondriac, that’s what he is,” said George.

“Of course he is,” Susan agreed. “I don’t believe there’s anything whatever the matter with him, do you, Rosamund?”

“What?”

“Anything the matter with Uncle Timothy.”

"No—no, I shouldn't think so." Rosamund was vague. She apologized. "I'm sorry. I was thinking about what lighting would be right for the table."

"You see?" said George. "A woman of one idea. Your wife's a dangerous woman, Michael. I hope you realize it."

"I realize it," said Michael rather grimly.

George went on with every appearance of enjoyment.

"The Battle of the Table! To be fought tomorrow—politely—but with grim determination. We ought all to take sides. I back Rosamund who looks so sweet and yielding and isn't. Husbands, presumably back their own wives. Miss Gilchrist? On Susan's side, obviously."

"Oh, really, Mr. Crossfield, I wouldn't venture to—"

"Aunt Helen?" George paid no attention to Miss Gilchrist's flutterings. "You have the casting vote. Oh, er—I forgot. M. Pontarlier?"

"Pardon?" Hercule Poirot looked blank.

George considered explanations, but decided against it. The poor old boy hadn't understood a word of what was going on. He said: "Just a family joke."

"Yes, yes, I comprehend." Poirot smiled amiably.

"So yours is the casting vote, Aunt Helen. Whose side are you on?"

Helen smiled.

"Perhaps I want it myself, George."

She changed the subject deliberately, turning to her foreign guest.

"I'm afraid this is all very dull for you, M. Pontarlier?"

“Not at all, Madame. I consider myself privileged to be admitted to your family life—” he bowed. “I would like to say—I cannot quite express my meaning—my regret that this house had to pass out of your hands into the hands of strangers. It is without doubt—a great sorrow.”

“No, indeed, we don’t regret at all,” Susan assured him.

“You are very amiable, Madame. It will be, let me tell you, perfection here for my elderly sufferers of persecution. What a haven! What peace! I beg you to remember that, when the harsh feelings come to you as assuredly they must. I hear that there was also the question of a school coming here—not a regular school, a convent—run by religieuses—by ‘nuns,’ I think you say? You would have preferred that, perhaps?”

“Not at all,” said George.

“The Sacred Heart of Mary,” continued Poirot. “Fortunately, owing to the kindness of an unknown benefactory we were able to make a slightly higher offer.” He addressed Miss Gilchrist directly. “You do not like nuns, I think?”

Miss Gilchrist flushed and looked embarrassed.

“Oh, really, Mr. Pontarlier, you mustn’t—I mean, it’s nothing personal. But I never do see that it’s right to shut yourself up from the world in that way—not necessary, I mean, and really almost selfish, though not teaching ones, of course, or the ones that go about amongst the poor—because I’m sure they’re thoroughly unselfish women and do a lot of good.”

“I simply can’t imagine wanting to be a nun,” said Susan.

“It’s very becoming,” said Rosamund. “You remember—when they revived The Miracle last year. Sonia Wells looked absolutely too glamorous for words.”

“What beats me,” said George, “is why it should be pleasing to the Almighty to dress oneself up in medieval dress. For after all, that’s all a nun’s dress is. Thoroughly cumbersome, unhygienic and impractical.”

"And it makes them look so alike, doesn't it?" said Miss Gilchrist. "It's silly, you know, but I got quite a turn when I was at Mrs. Abernethie's and a nun came to the door, collecting. I got it into my head she was the same as the nun who came to the door on the day of the inquest on poor Mrs. Lansquenet at Lytchett St. Mary. I felt, you know, almost as though she had been following me round!"

"I thought nuns always collected in couples," said George. "Surely a detective story hinged on that point once?"

"There was only one this time," said Miss Gilchrist. "Perhaps they've got to economize," she added vaguely. "And anyway it couldn't have been the same nun, for the other one was collecting for an organ for St—Barnabas, I think—and this one was for something quite different—something to do with children."

"But they both had the same type of features?" Hercule Poirot asked. He sounded interested. Miss Gilchrist turned to him.

"I suppose that must be it. The upper lip—almost as though she had a moustache. I think, you know, that that is really what alarmed me—being in a rather nervous state at the time, and remembering those stories during the war of nuns who were really men and in the Fifth Column and landed by parachute. Of course it was very foolish of me. I knew that afterwards."

"A nun would be a good disguise," said Susan thoughtfully. "It hides your feet."

"The truth is," said George, "that one very seldom looks properly at anyone. That's why one gets such wildly differing accounts of a person from different witnesses in court. You'd be surprised. A man is often described as tall—short; thin—stout; fair—dark; dressed in a dark—light—suit, and so on. There's usually one reliable observer, but one has to make up one's mind who that is."

"Another queer thing," said Susan, "is that you sometimes catch sight of yourself in a mirror unexpectedly and don't know who it is. It just looks vaguely familiar. And you say to yourself, ‘There’s somebody I know quite well… ’ and then suddenly realize it’s yourself!”

George said: “It would be more difficult still if you could really see yourself—and not a mirror image.”

“Why?” asked Rosamund, looking puzzled.

“Because, don’t you see, nobody ever sees themselves—as they appear to other people. They always see themselves in a glass—that is—as a reversed image.”

“But why does that look any different?”

“Oh yes,” said Susan quickly. “It must. Because people’s faces aren’t the same both sides. Their eyebrows are different, and their mouths go up one side, and their noses aren’t really straight. You can see with a pencil—who’s got a pencil?”

Somebody produced a pencil, and they experimented, holding a pencil each side of the nose and laughing to see the ridiculous variation in angle.

The atmosphere now had lightened a good deal. Everybody was in a good humour. They were no longer the heirs of Richard Abernethie gathered together for a division of property. They were a cheerful and normal set of people gathered together for a weekend in the country.

Only Helen Abernethie remained silent and abstracted.

With a sigh, Hercule Poirot rose to his feet and bade his hostess a polite good night.

“And perhaps, Madame, I had better say good-bye. My train departs itself at nine o’clock tomorrow morning. That is very early. So I will thank you now for all your kindness and hospitality. The date of possession—that will be arranged with the good Mr. Entwhistle. To suit your convenience, of course.”

"It can be anytime you please, M. Pontarlier. I—I have finished all that I came here to do."

"You will return now to your villa at Cyprus?"

"Yes." A little smile curved Helen Abernethie's lips.

Poirot said:

"You are glad, yes. You have no regrets?"

"At leaving England? Or leaving here, do you mean?"

"I meant—leaving here?"

"Oh—no. It's no good, is it, to cling on to the past? One must leave that behind one."

"If one can." Blinking his eyes innocently Poirot smiled apologetically round on the group of polite faces that surrounded him.

"Sometimes, is it not, the Past will not be left, will not suffer itself to pass into oblivion? It stands at one's elbow—it says, 'I am not done with yet.'"

Susan gave a rather doubtful laugh. Poirot said:

"But I am serious—yes."

"You mean," said Michael, "that your refugees when they come here will not be able to put their past sufferings completely behind them?"

"I did not mean my Refugees."

"He meant us, darling," said Rosamund. "He means Uncle Richard and Aunt Cora and the hatchet and all that."

She turned to Poirot.

"Didn't you?"

Poirot looked at her with a blank face. Then he said:

“Why do you think that, Madame?”

“Because you’re a detective, aren’t you? That’s why you’re here. N.A.R.C.O., or whatever you call it, is just nonsense, isn’t it?”

Twenty

I

There was a moment of extraordinary tenseness. Poirot felt it, though he himself did not remove his eyes from Rosamund’s lovely placid face.

He said with a little bow, “You have great perspicacity, Madame.”

“Not really,” said Rosamund. “You were pointed out to me once in a restaurant. I remembered.”

“But you have not mentioned it—until now?”

“I thought it would be more fun not to,” said Rosamund.

Michael said in an imperfectly controlled voice:

“My—dear girl.”

Poirot shifted his gaze then to look at him.

Michael was angry. Angry and something else—apprehensive?

Poirot’s eyes went slowly round all the faces. Susan’s, angry and watchful; Gregory’s dead and shut in; Miss Gilchrist’s, foolish, her mouth wide open; George, wary; Helen, dismayed and nervous….

All those expressions were normal ones under the circumstances. He wished he could have seen their faces a split second earlier, when the words “a detective” fell from Rosamund’s lips. For now, inevitably, it could not be quite the same….

He squared his shoulders and bowed to them. His language and his accent became less foreign.

“Yes,” he said. “I am a detective.”

George Crossfield said, the white dints showing once more each side of his nose, “Who sent you here?”

“I was commissioned to inquire into the circumstances of Richard Abernethie’s death.”

“By whom?”

“For the moment, that does not concern you. But it would be an advantage, would it not, if you could be assured beyond any possible doubt that Richard Abernethie died a natural death?”

“Of course he died a natural death. Who says anything else?”

“Cora Lansquenet said so. And Cora Lansquenet is dead herself.”

A little wave of uneasiness seemed to sigh through the room like an evil breeze.

“She said it here—in this room,” said Susan. “But I didn’t really think—”

“Didn’t you, Susan?” George Crossfield turned his sardonic glance upon her. “Why pretend anymore? You won’t take M. Pontarlier in?”

“We all thought so really,” said Rosamund. And his name isn’t Pontarlier—it’s Hercules something.”

“Hercule Poirot—at your service.”

Poirot bowed.

There were no gasps of astonishment or of apprehension. His name seemed to mean nothing at all to them.

They were less alarmed by it than they had been by the single word “detective.”

“May I ask what conclusions you have come to?” asked George.

“He won’t tell you, darling,” said Rosamund. “Or if he does tell you, what he says won’t be true.”

Alone of all the company she appeared to be amused.

Hercule Poirot looked at her thoughtfully.

II

Hercule Poirot did not sleep well that night. He was perturbed, and he was not quite sure why he was perturbed. Elusive snatches of conversation, various glances, odd movements—all seemed fraught with a tantalizing significance in the loneliness of the night. He was on the threshold of sleep, but sleep would not come. Just as he was about to drop off, something flashed into his mind and woke him up again. Paint—Timothy and paint. Oil paint—the smell of oil paint—connected somehow with Mr. Entwhistle. Paint and Cora. Cora’s paintings—picture postcards… Cora was deceitful about her painting… No, back to Mr. Entwhistle—something Mr. Entwhistle had said—or was it Lanscombe? A nun who came to the house on the day that Richard Abernethie died. A nun with a moustache. A nun at Stansfield Grange—and at Lytchett St. Mary. Altogether too many nuns! Rosamund looking glamorous as a nun on the stage. Rosamund—saying that he was a detective—and everyone staring at her when she said it. That was the way that they must all have stared at Cora that day when she said, “But he was murdered, wasn’t he?” What was it Helen Abernethie had felt to be “wrong” on that occasion? Helen Abernethie—leaving the past behind—going to Cyprus… Helen dropping the wax flowers with a crash when he had said—what was it he had said? He couldn’t quite remember….

He slept then, and as he slept he dreamed….

He dreamed of the green malachite table. On it was the glass-covered stand of wax flowers—only the whole thing had been painted over with thick crimson oil paint. Paint the colour of blood. He could smell the paint, and Timothy was groaning, was saying, “I’m dying—dying…this is the end.” And Maude, standing by, tall and stern, with a large knife in her hand was echoing him, saying, “Yes, it’s the end…” The end—a deathbed, with candles and a nun praying. If he could just see the nun’s face, he would know….

Hercule Poirot woke up—and he did know!

Yes, it was the end….

Though there was still a long way to go.

He sorted out the various bits of the mosaic.

Mr. Entwhistle, the smell of paint, Timothy’s house and something that must be in it—or might be in it…the wax flowers… Helen… Broken glass….

III

Helen Abernethie, in her room, took some time in going to bed. She was thinking.

Sitting in front of her dressing table, she stared at herself unseeingly in the glass.

She had been forced into having Hercule Poirot in the house. She had not wanted it. But Mr. Entwhistle had made it hard for her to refuse. And now the whole thing had come out into the open. No question any more of letting Richard Abernethie lie quiet in his grave. All started by those few words of Cora’s….

That day after the funeral… How had they all looked, she wondered? How had they looked to Cora? How had she herself looked?

What was it George had said? About seeing oneself?

There was some quotation, too. To see ourselves as others see us… As others see us.

The eyes that were staring into the glass unseeingly suddenly focused. She was seeing herself—but not really herself—not herself as others saw her—

not as Cora had seen her that day.

Her right—no, her left eyebrow was arched a little higher than the right. The mouth? No, the curve of the mouth was symmetrical. If she met herself she would surely not see much difference from this mirror image. Not like Cora.

Cora—the picture came quite clearly… Cora, on the day of the funeral, her head tilted sideways—asking her question—looking at Helen….

Suddenly Helen raised her hands to her face. She said to herself, “It doesn’t make sense…it can’t make sense….”

IV

Miss Entwhistle was aroused from a delightful dream in which she was playing Piquet with Queen Mary, by the ringing of the telephone.

She tried to ignore it—but it persisted. Sleepily she raised her head from the pillow and looked at the watch beside her bed. Five minutes to seven—who on earth could be ringing up at that hour? It must be a wrong number.

The irritating ding-dong continued. Miss Entwhistle sighed, snatched up a dressing gown and marched into the sitting room.

“This is Kensington 675498,” she said with asperity as she picked up the receiver.

“This is Mrs. Abernethie speaking. Mrs. Leo Abernethie. Can I speak to Mr. Entwhistle?”

“Oh, good morning, Mrs. Abernethie.” The “good morning” was not cordial. “This is Miss Entwhistle. My brother is still asleep, I’m afraid. I was asleep myself.”

“I’m so sorry,” Helen was forced to the apology. “But it’s very important that I should speak to your brother at once.”

“Wouldn’t it do later?”

"I'm afraid not."

"Oh, very well then."

Miss Entwhistle was tart.

She tapped at her brother's door and went in.

"Those Abernethies again!" she said bitterly.

"Eh! The Aberbethies?"

"Mrs. Leo Abernethie. Ringing up before seven in the morning! Really!"

"Mrs. Leo, is it? Dear me. How remarkable. Where is my dressing gown? Ah, thank you."

Presently he was saying:

"Entwhistle speaking. Is that you, Helen?"

"Yes. I'm terribly sorry to get you out of bed like this. But you did tell me once to ring you up at once if I remembered what it was that struck me as having been wrong somehow on the day of the funeral when Cora electrified us all by suggesting that Richard had been murdered."

"Ah! You have remembered?"

Helen said in a puzzled voice:

"Yes, but it doesn't make sense."

"You must allow me to be the judge of that. Was it something you noticed about one of the people?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

“It seems absurd.” Helen’s voice sounded apologetic. “But I’m quite sure of it. It came to me when I was looking at myself in the glass last night. Oh….”

The little startled half cry was succeeded by a sound that came oddly through the wires—a dull heavy sound that Mr. Entwhistle couldn’t place at all.

He said urgently:

“Hallo—hallo—are you there? Helen, are you there?… Helen….”

Twenty-one

I

It was not until nearly an hour later that Mr. Entwhistle, after a great deal of conversation with supervisors and others, found himself at last speaking to Hercule Poirot.

“Thank heaven!” said Mr. Entwhistle with pardonable exasperation. “The Exchange seems to have had the greatest difficulty in getting the number.”

“That is not surprising. The receiver was off the hook.”

There was a grim quality in Poirot’s voice which carried through to the listener.

Mr. Entwhistle said sharply:

“Has something happened?”

“Yes. Mrs. Leo Abernethie was found by the housemaid about twenty minutes ago lying by the telephone in the study. She was unconscious. A serious concussion.”

“Do you mean she was struck on the head?”

“I think so. It is just possible that she fell and struck her head on a marble doorstop, but me I do not think so, and the doctor, he does not think so either.”

“She was telephoning to me at the time. I wondered when we were cut off so suddenly.”

“So it was to you she was telephoning? What did she say?”

“She mentioned to me some time ago that on the occasion when Cora Lansquenet suggested her brother had been murdered, she herself had a feeling of something being wrong—odd—she did not quite know how to put it—unfortunately she could not remember why she had that impression."

"And suddenly, she did remember?"

"Yes."

"And rang you up to tell you?"

"Yes."

"Eh bien."

"There's no eh bien about it," said Mr. Entwhistle testily. "She started to tell me, but was interrupted."

"How much had she said?"

"Nothing pertinent."

"You will excuse me, mon ami, but I am the judge of that, not you. What exactly did she say?"

"She reminded me that I had asked her to let me know at once if she remembered what it was that had struck her as peculiar. She said she had remembered—but that it 'didn't make sense.'

"I asked her if it was something about one of the people who were there that day, and she said, yes, it was. She said it had come to her when she was looking in the glass—"

"Yes?"

"That was all."

"She gave no hint as to—which of the people concerned it was?"

“I should hardly fail to let you know if she had told me that,” said Mr. Entwhistle acidly.

“I apologize, mon ami. Of course you would have told me.”

Mr. Entwhistle said:

“We shall just have to wait until she recovers consciousness before we know.”

Poirot said gravely:

“That may not be for a very long time. Perhaps never.”

“Is it as bad as that?” Mr. Entwhistle’s voice shook a little.

“Yes, it is as bad as that.”

“But—that’s terrible, Poirot.”

“Yes, it is terrible. And it is why we cannot afford to wait. For it shows that we have to deal with someone who is either completely ruthless or so frightened that it comes to the same thing.”

“But look here, Poirot. What about Helen? I feel worried. Are you sure she will be safe at Enderby?”

“No, she would not be safe. So she is not at Enderby. Already the ambulance has come and is taking her to a nursing home where she will have special nurses and where no one, family or otherwise, will be allowed in to see her.”

Mr. Entwhistle sighed.

“You relieve my mind! She might have been in danger.”

“She assuredly would have been in danger!”

Mr. Entwhistle’s voice sounded deeply moved.

“I have a great regard for Helen Abernethie. I always have had. A woman of very exceptional character. She may have had certain—what shall I say?—reticences in her life.”

“Ah, there were reticences?”

“I have always had an idea that such was the case.”

“Hence the villa in Cyprus. Yes, that explains a good deal….”

“I don’t want you to begin thinking—”

“You cannot stop me thinking. But now, there is a little commission that I have for you. One moment.”

There was a pause, then Poirot’s voice spoke again.

“I had to make sure that nobody was listening. All is well. Now here is what I want you to do for me. You must prepare to make a journey.”

“A journey?” Mr. Entwhistle sounded faintly dismayed. “Oh, I see—you want me to come down to Enderby?”

“Not at all. I am in charge here. No, you will not have to travel so far. Your journey will not take you very far from London. You will travel to Bury St. Edmunds—(Ma foi! what names your English towns have!) and there you will hire a car and drive to Forsdyke House. It is a Mental Home. Ask for Dr. Penrith and inquire of him particulars about a patient who was recently discharged.”

“What patient? Anyway, surely—”

Poirot broke in:

“The name of the patient is Gregory Banks. Find out for what form of insanity he was being treated.”

“Do you mean that Gregory Banks is insane?”

“Sh! Be careful what you say. And now—I have not yet breakfasted and you, too, I suspect, have not breakfasted?”

“Not yet. I was too anxious—”

“Quite so. Then, I pray you, eat your breakfast, repose yourself. There is a good train to Bury St. Edmunds at twelve o’clock. If I have any more news I will telephone you before you start.”

“Be careful of yourself, Poirot,” said Mr. Entwhistle with some concern.

“Ah that, yes! Me, I do not want to be hit on the head with a marble doorstop. You may be assured that I will take every precaution. And now—for the moment—good-bye.”

Poirot heard the sound of the receiver being replaced at the other end, then he heard a very faint second click—and smiled to himself. Somebody had replaced the receiver on the telephone in the hall.

He went out there. There was no one about. He tiptoed to the cupboard at the back of the stairs and looked inside. At that moment Lanscombe came through the service door carrying a tray with toast and a silver coffeepot. He looked slightly surprised to see Poirot emerge from the cupboard.

“Breakfast is ready in the dining room, sir,” he said.

Poirot surveyed him thoughtfully.

The old butler looked white and shaken.

“Courage,” said Poirot, clapping him on the shoulder. “All will yet be well. Would it be too much trouble to serve me a cup of coffee in my bedroom?”

“Certainly, sir. I will send Janet up with it, sir.”

Lanscombe looked disapprovingly at Hercule Poirot’s back as the latter climbed the stairs. Poirot was attired in an exotic silk dressing gown with a pattern of triangles and squares.

"Foreigners!" thought Lanscombe bitterly. "Foreigners in the house! And Mrs. Leo with concussion! I don't know what we're coming to. Nothing's the same since Mr. Richard died."

Hercule Poirot was dressed by the time he received his coffee from Janet. His murmurs of sympathy were well-received, since he stressed the shock her discovery must have given her.

"Yes, indeed, sir, what I felt when I opened the door of the study and came in with the Hoover and saw Mrs. Leo lying there I shall never forget. There she lay—and I made sure she was dead. She must have been taken faint as she stood at the phone—and fancy her being up at that time in the morning! I've never known her to do such a thing before."

"Fancy, indeed!" He added casually: "No one else was up, I suppose?"

"As it happens, sir, Mrs. Timothy was up and about. She's a very early riser always—often goes for a walk before breakfast."

"She is of the generation that rises early," said Poirot, nodding his head. "The younger ones, now—they do not get up so early?"

"No, indeed, sir, all fast asleep when I brought them their tea—and very late I was, too, what with the shock and getting the doctor to come and having to have a cup first to steady myself."

She went off and Poirot reflected on what she had said.

Maude Abernethie had been up and about, and the younger generation had been in bed—but that, Poirot reflected, meant nothing at all. Anyone could have heard Helen's door open and close, and have followed her down to listen—and would afterwards have made a point of being fast asleep in bed.

"But if I am right," thought Poirot, "and after all, it is natural to me to be right—it is a habit I have!—then there is no need to go into who was here and who was these. First, I must seek a proof where I have deduced the proof may be. And then—I make my little speech. And I sit back and see what happens…."

As soon as Janet had left the room, Poirot drained his coffee cup, put on his overcoat and his hat, left his room, ran nimbly down the back stairs and left the house by the side door. He walked briskly the quarter mile to the post office where he demanded a trunk call. Presently he was once more speaking to Mr. Entwhistle.

“Yes, it is I yet again! Pay no attention to the commission with which I entrusted you. C’était une blague! Someone was listening. Now, mon vieux, to the real commission. You must, as I said, take a train. But not to Bury St. Edmunds. I want you to proceed to the house of Mr. Timothy Abernethie.”

“But Timothy and Maude are at Enderby.”

“Exactly. There is no one in the house but a woman by the name of Jones who has been persuaded by the offer of considerable largesse to guard the house whilst they are absent. What I want you to do is to take something out of that house!”

“My dear Poirot! I really can’t stoop to burglary!”

“It will not seem like burglary. You will say to the excellent Mrs. Jones who knows you, that you have been asked by Mr. or Mrs. Abernethie to fetch this particular object and take it to London. She will not suspect anything amiss.”

“No, no, probably not. But I don’t like it.” Mr. Entwhistle sounded most reluctant. “Why can’t you go and get whatever it is yourself?”

“Because, my friend, I should be a stranger of foreign appearance and as such a suspicious character, and Mrs. Jones would at once raise the difficulties! With you, she will not.”

“No, no—I see that. But what on earth are Timothy and Maude going to think when they hear about it? I have known them for forty odd years.”

“And you knew Richard Abernethie for that time also! And you knew Cora Lansquenet when she was a little girl!”

In a martyred voice Mr. Entwhistle asked:

“You’re sure this is really necessary, Poirot?”

“The old question they asked in wartime on the posters. Is your journey really necessary? I say to you, it is necessary. It is vital!”

“And what is this object I’ve got to get hold of?”

Poirot told him.

“But really, Poirot, I don’t see—”

“It is not necessary for you to see. I am doing the seeing.”

“And what do you want me to do with the damned thing?”

“You will take it to London, to an address in Elm Park Gardens. If you have a pencil, note it down.”

Having done so, Mr. Entwhistle said, still in his martyred voice:

“I hope you know what you are doing, Poirot?”

He sounded very doubtful—but Poirot’s reply was not doubtful at all.

“Of course I know what I am doing. We are nearing the end.”

Mr. Entwhistle sighed:

“If we could only guess what Helen was going to tell me.”

“No need to guess, I know.”

“You know? But my dear Poirot—”

“Explanations must wait. But let me assure you of this. I know what Helen Abernethie saw when she looked in her mirror.”

II

Breakfast had been an uneasy meal. Neither Rosamund nor Timothy had appeared, but the others were there and had talked in rather subdued tones, and eaten a little less than they normally would have done.

George was the first one to recover his spirits. His temperament was mercurial and optimistic.

“I expect Aunt Helen will be all right,” he said. “Doctors always like to pull a long face. After all, what’s concussion? Often clears up completely in a couple of days.”

“A woman I knew had concussion during the war,” said Miss Gilchrist conversationally. “A brick or something hit her as she was walking down Tottenham Court Road—it was during fly bomb time—and she never felt anything at all. Just went on with what she was doing—and collapsed in a train to Liverpool twelve hours later. And would you believe it, she had no recollection at all of going to the station and catching the train or anything. She just couldn’t understand it when she woke up in hospital. She was there for nearly three weeks.”

“What I can’t make out,” said Susan, “is what Helen was doing telephoning at that unearthly hour, and who she was telephoning to?”

“Felt ill,” said Maude with decision. “Probably woke up feeling queer and came down to ring up the doctor. Then had a giddy fit and fell. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Bad luck hitting her head on that doorstop,” said Michael. “If she’d just pitched over onto that thick pile carpet she’d have been all right.”

The door opened and Rosamund came in, frowning.

“I can’t find those wax flowers,” she said. “I mean the ones that were standing on the malachite table the day of Uncle Richard’s funeral.” She looked accusingly at Susan. “You haven’t taken them?”

"Of course I haven't! Really, Rosamund, you're not still thinking about malachite tables with poor old Helen carted off to hospital with concussion?"

"I don't see why I shouldn't think about them. If you've got concussion you don't know what's happening and it doesn't matter to you. We can't do anything for Aunt Helen, and Michael and I have got to get back to London by tomorrow lunchtime because we're seeing Jackie Lygo about opening dates for The Baronet's Progress. So I'd like to fix up definitely about the table. But I'd like to have a look at those wax flowers again. There's a kind of Chinese vase on the table now—nice—but not nearly so period. I do wonder where they are—perhaps Lanscombe knows."

Lanscombe had just looked in to see if they had finished breakfast.

"We're all through, Lanscombe," said George getting up. "What's happened to our foreign friend?"

"He is having his coffee and toast served upstairs, sir."

"Petit déjeuner for N.A.R.C.O."

"Lanscombe, do you know where those wax flowers are that used to be on that green table in the drawing room?" asked Rosamund.

"I understand Mrs. Leo had an accident with them, ma'am. She was going to have a new glass shade made, but I don't think she has seen about it yet."

"Then where is the thing?"

"It would probably be in the cupboard behind the staircase, ma'am. That is where things are usually placed when awaiting repair. Shall I ascertain for you?"

"I'll go and look myself. Come with me, Michael sweetie. It's dark there, and I'm not going in any dark corners by myself after what happened to Aunt Helen."

Everybody showed a sharp reaction. Maude demanded in her deep voice:

“What do you mean, Rosamund?”

“Well, she was coshed by someone, wasn’t she?”

Gregory Banks said sharply:

“She was taken suddenly faint and fell.”

Rosamund laughed.

“Did she tell you so? Don’t be silly, Greg, of course she was coshed.”

George said sharply:

“You shouldn’t say things like that, Rosamund.”

“Nonsense,” said Rosamund. “She must have been. I mean, it all adds up. A detective in the house looking for clues, and Uncle Richard poisoned, and Aunt Cora killed with a hatchet, and Miss Gilchrist given poisoned wedding cake, and now Aunt Helen struck down with a blunt instrument. You’ll see, it will go on like that. One after another of us will be killed and the one that’s left will be It—the murderer, I mean. But it’s not going to be me—who’s killed, I mean.”

“And why should anyone want to kill you, beautiful Rosamund?” asked George lightly.

Rosamund opened her eyes very wide.

“Oh,” she said. “Because I know too much, of course.”

“What do you know?” Maude Abernethie and Gregory Banks spoke almost in unison.

Rosamund gave her vacant and angelic smile.

“Wouldn’t you all like to know?” she said agreeably. “Come on, Michael.”

Twenty-two

I

At eleven o’clock, Hercule Poirot called an informal meeting in the library. Everyone was there and Poirot looked thoughtfully round the semicircle of faces.

“Last night,” he said, “Mrs. Shane announced to you that I was a private detective. For myself, I hoped to retain my—camouflage, shall we say?—a little longer. But no matter! Today—or at most the day after—I would have told you the truth. Please listen carefully now to what I have to say.

“I am in my own line a celebrated person—I may say a most celebrated person. My gifts, in fact, are unequalled!”

George Crossfield grinned and said:

“That’s the stuff, M. Pont—no, it’s M. Poirot, isn’t it? Funny, isn’t it, that I’ve never even heard of you?”

“It is not funny,” said Poirot severely. “It is lamentable! Alas, there is no proper education nowadays. Apparently one learns nothing but economics—and how to sit Intelligence Tests! But to continue. I have been a friend for many years of Mr. Entwhistle’s—”

“So he’s the fly in the ointment!”

“If you like to put it that way, Mr. Crossfield! Mr. Entwhistle was greatly upset by the death of his old friend, Mr. Richard Abernethie. He was particularly perturbed by some words spoken on the day of the funeral by Mr. Abernethie’s sister, Mrs. Lansquenet. Words spoken in this very room.”

“Very silly—and just like Cora,” said Maude. “Mr. Entwhistle should have had more sense than to pay attention to them!”

Poirot went on:

"Mr. Entwhistle was even more perturbed after the—the coincidence, shall I say?—of Mrs. Lansquenet's death. He wanted one thing only—to be assured that that death was a coincidence. In other words he wanted to feel assured that Richard Abernethie had died a natural death. To that end he commissioned me to make the necessary investigations."

There was a pause.

"I have made them…."

Again there was a pause. No one spoke.

Poirot threw back his head.

"Eh bien, you will all be delighted to hear that as a result of my investigations—there is absolutely no reason to believe that Mr. Abernethie died anything but a natural death. There is no reason at all to believe that he was murdered!" He smiled. He threw out his hands in a triumphant gesture.

"That is good news, is it not?"

It hardly seemed to be, by the way they took it. They stared at him and in all but the eyes of one person there still seemed to be doubt and suspicion.

The exception was Timothy Abernethie, who was nodding his head in violent agreement.

"Of course Richard wasn't murdered," he said angrily. "Never could understand why anybody ever even thought of such a thing for a moment! Just Cora up to her tricks, that was all. Wanting to give you all a scare. Her idea of being funny. Truth is that although she was my own sister, she was always a bit mental, poor girl. Well, Mr. whatever your name is, I'm glad you've had the sense to come to the right conclusion, though if you ask me, I call it damned cheek of Entwhistle to go commissioning you to come prying and poking about. And if he thinks he's going to charge the estate with your fee, I can tell you he won't get away with it! Damned cheek, and most uncalled for! Who's Entwhistle to set himself up? If the family's satisfied—"

"But the family wasn't, Uncle Timothy," said Rosamund.

"Hey—what's that?"

Timothy peered at her under beetling brows of displeasure.

"We weren't satisfied. And what about Aunt Helen this morning?"

Maude said sharply:

"Helen's just the age when you're liable to get a stroke. That's all there is to that."

"I see," said Rosamund. "Another coincidence, you think?"

She looked at Poirot.

"Aren't there rather too many coincidences?"

"Coincidences," said Hercule Poirot, "do happen."

"Nonsense," said Maude. "Helen felt ill, came down and rang up the doctor, and then—"

"But she didn't ring up the doctor," said Rosamund. "I asked him—"

Susan said sharply:

"Who did she ring up?"

"I don't know," said Rosamund, a shade of vexation passing over her face. "But I dare say I can find out," she added hopefully.

II

Hercule Poirot was sitting in the Victorian summerhouse. He drew his large watch from his pocket and laid it on the table in front of him.

He had announced that he was leaving by the twelve o’clock train. There was still half an hour to go. Half an hour for someone to make up their mind and come to him. Perhaps more than one person….

The summerhouse was clearly visible from most of the windows of the house. Surely, soon, someone would come?

If not, his knowledge of human nature was deficient, and his main premises incorrect.

He waited—and above his head a spider in its web waited for a fly.

It was Miss Gilchrist who came first. She was flustered and upset and rather incoherent.

“Oh, Mr. Pontarlier—I can’t remember your other name,” she said. “I had to come and speak to you although I don’t like doing it—but really I feel I ought to. I mean, after what happened to poor Mrs. Leo this morning—and I think myself Mrs. Shane was quite right—and not coincidence, and certainly not a stroke—as Mrs. Timothy suggested, because my own father had a stroke and it was quite a different appearance, and anyway the doctor said concussion quite clearly!”

She paused, took breath and looked at Poirot with appealing eyes.

“Yes,” said Poirot gently and encouragingly. “You want to tell me something?”

“As I say, I don’t like doing it—because she’s been so kind. She found me the position with Mrs. Timothy and everything. She’s been really very kind. That’s why I feel so ungrateful. And even gave me Mrs. Lansquenet’s musquash jacket which is really most handsome and fits beautifully because it never matters if fur is a little on the large side. And when I wanted to return her amethyst brooch she wouldn’t hear of it—”

“You are referring,” said Poirot gently, “to Mrs. Banks?”

"Yes, you see—" Miss Gilchrist looked down, twisting her fingers unhappily. She looked up and said with a sudden gulp:

"You see, I listened!"

"You mean you happened to overhear a conversation—"

"No." Miss Gilchrist shook her head with an air of heroic determination. "I'd rather speak the truth. And it's not so bad telling you because you're not English."

Hercule Poirot understood her without taking offence.

"You mean that to a foreigner it is natural that people should listen at doors and open letters, or read letters that are left about?"

"Oh, I'd never open anybody else's letters," said Miss Gilchrist in a shocked tone. "Not that. But I did listen that day—the day that Mr. Richard Abernethie came down to see his sister. I was curious, you know, about his turning up suddenly after all those years. And I did wonder why—and—and—you see when you haven't much life of your own or very many friends, you do tend to get interested—when you're living with anybody, I mean."

"Most natural," said Poirot.

"Yes, I do think it was natural… Though not, of course, at all right. But I did it! And I heard what he said!"

"You heard what Mr. Abernethie said to Mrs. Lansquenet?"

"Yes. He said something like—'It's no good talking to Timothy. He pooh-poohs everything. Simply won't listen. But I thought I'd like to get it off my chest to you, Cora. We three are the only ones left. And though you've always liked to play the simpleton you've got a lot of common sense. So what would you do about it, if you were me?'

"I couldn't quite hear what Mrs. Lansquenet said, but I caught the word police—and then Mr. Abernethie burst out quite loud, and said, 'I can't do that. Not when it's a question of my own niece.' And then I had to run in the kitchen for something boiling over and when I got back Mr. Abernethie was saying, ‘Even if I die an unnatural death I don’t want the police called in, if it can possibly be avoided. You understand that, don’t you, my dear girl? But don’t worry. Now that I know, I shall take all possible precautions.’ And he went on, saying he’d made a new will, and that she, Cora, would be quite all right. And then he said about her having been happy with her husband and how perhaps he’d made a mistake over that in the past.”

Miss Gilchrist stopped.

“Poirot said: “I see—I see….”

“But I never wanted to say—to tell. I didn’t think Mrs. Lansquenet would have wanted me to… But now—after Mrs. Leo being attacked this morning—and then you saying so calmly it was coincidence. But, oh, M. Pontarlier, it wasn’t coincidence!”

Poirot smiled. He said:

“No, it wasn’t coincidence… Thank you, Miss Gilchrist, for coming to me. It was very necessary that you should.”

III

He had a little difficulty in getting rid of Miss Gilchrist, and it was urgent that he should, for he hoped for further confidences.

His instinct was right. Miss Gilchrist had hardly gone before Gregory Banks, striding across the lawn, came impetuously into the summerhouse. His face was pale and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead. His eyes were curiously excited.

“At last!” he said. “I thought that stupid woman would never go. You’re all wrong in what you said this morning. You’re wrong about everything. Richard Abernethie was killed. I killed him.”

Hercule Poirot let his eyes move up and down over the excited young man. He showed no surprise.

“So you killed him, did you? How?”

Gregory Banks smiled.

“It wasn’t difficult for me. You can surely realize that. There were fifteen or twenty different drugs I could lay my hands on that would do it. The method of administration took rather more thinking out, but I hit on a very ingenious idea in the end. The beauty of it was that I didn’t need to be anywhere near at the time.”

“Clever,” said Poirot.

“Yes.” Gregory Banks cast his eyes down modestly. He seemed pleased. “Yes— I do think it was ingenious.”

Poirot asked with interest:

“Why did you kill him? For the money that would come to your wife?”

“No. No, of course not.” Greg was suddenly excitedly indignant. “I’m not a money grubber. I didn’t marry Susan for her money!”

“Didn’t you, Mr. Banks?”

“That’s what he thought,” Greg said with sudden venom. “Richard Abernethie! He liked Susan, he admired her, he was proud of her as an example of Abernethie blood! But he thought she’d married beneath her—he thought I was no good—he despised me! I dare say I hadn’t the right accent—I didn’t wear my clothes the right way. He was a snob—a filthy snob!”

“I don’t think so,” said Poirot mildly. “From all I have heard, Richard Abernethie was no snob.”

“He was. He was.” The young man spoke with something approaching hysteria. “He thought nothing of me. He sneered at me—always very polite but underneath I could see that he didn't like me!"

"Possibly."

"People can't treat me like that and get away with it! They've tried it before! A woman who used to come and have her medicines made up. She was rude to me. Do you know what I did?"

"Yes," said Poirot.

Gregory looked startled.

"So you know that?"

"Yes."

"She nearly died." He spoked in a satisfied manner. "That shows you I'm not the sort of person to be trifled with! Richard Abernethie despised me—and what happened to him? He died."

"A most successful murder," said Poirot with grave congratulation.

He added: "But why come and give yourself away—to me?"

"Because you said you were through with it all! You said he hadn't been murdered. I had to show you that you're not as clever as you think you are—and besides—besides—"

"Yes," said Poirot. "And besides?"

Greg collapsed suddenly on the bench. His face changed. It took on a sudden ecstatic quality.

"It was wrong—wicked… I must be punished… I must go back there—to the place of punishment…to atone… Yes, to atone! Repentance! Retribution!"

His face was alight now with a kind of glowing ecstasy. Poirot studied him for a moment or two curiously.

Then he asked:

"How badly do you want to get away from your wife?"

Gregory's face changed.

"Susan? Susan is wonderful—wonderful!"

"Yes. Susan is wonderful. That is a grave burden. Susan loves you devotedly. That is a burden, too?"

Gregory sat looking in front of him. Then he said, rather in the manner of a sulky child:

"Why couldn't she let me alone?"

He sprang up.

"She's coming now—across the lawn. I'll go now. But you'll tell her what I told you? Tell her I've gone to the police station. To confess."

IV

Susan came in breathlessly.

"Where's Greg? He was here! I saw him."

"Yes." Poirot paused a moment—before saying: "He came to tell me that it was he who poisoned Richard Abernethie…."

"What absolute nonsense! You didn't believe him, I hope?"

"Why should I not believe him?"

"He wasn't even near this place when Uncle Richard died!"

"Perhaps not. Where was he when Cora Lansquenet died?"

"In London. We both were."

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

“No, no, that will not do. You, for instance, took out your car that day and were away all the afternoon. I think I know where you went. You went to Lytchett St. Mary.”

“I did no such thing!”

Poirot smiled.

“When I met you here, Madame, it was not, as I told you, the first time I had seen you. After the inquest on Mrs. Lansquenet you were in the garage of the King’s Arms. You talk there to a mechanic and close by you is a car containing an elderly foreign gentleman. You did not notice him, but he noticed you.”

“I don’t see what you mean. That was the day of the inquest.”

“Ah, but remember what that mechanic said to you! He asked you if you were a relative of the victim, and you said you were her niece.”

“He was just being a ghoul. They’re all ghouls.”

“And his next words were, ‘Ah, wondered where I’d seen you before.’ Where did he see you before, Madame? It must have been in Lytchett St. Mary, since in his mind his seeing you before was accounted for by your being Mrs. Lansquenet’s niece. Had he seen you near her cottage? And when? It was a matter, was it not, that demands inquiry. And the result of the inquiry is, that you were there—in Lytchett St. Mary—on the afternoon Cora Lansquenet died. You parked your car in the same quarry where you left it the morning of the inquest. The car was seen and the number was noted. By this time Inspector Morton knows whose car it was.”

Susan stared at him. Her breath came rather fast, but she showed no signs of discomposure.

“You’re talking nonsense, M. Poirot. And you’re making me forget what I came here to say—I wanted to try and find you alone—”

"To confess to me it was you and not your husband who committed the murder?"

"No, of course not. What kind of a fool do you think I am? And I've already told you that Gregory never left London that day."

"A fact which you cannot possibly know since you were away yourself. Why did you go down to Lytchett St. Mary, Mrs. Banks?"

Susan drew a deep breath.

"All right, if you must have it! What Cora said at the funeral worried me. I kept on thinking about it. Finally I decided to run down in the car and see her, and ask her what had put the idea into her head. Greg thought it a silly idea, so I didn't even tell him where I was going. I got there about three o'clock, knocked and rang, but there was no answer, so I thought she must be out or gone away. That's all there is to it. I didn't go round to the back of the cottage. If I had, I might have seen the broken window. I just went back to London without the faintest idea there was anything wrong."

Poirot's face was noncommittal. He said:

"Why does your husband accuse himself of the crime?"

"Because he's—" a word trembled on Susan's tongue and was rejected. Poirot seized on it.

"You were going to say 'because he is batty' speaking in jest—but the jest was too near the truth, was it not?"

"Greg's all right. He is. He is."

"I know something of his history," said Poirot. "He was for some months in Forsdyke House Mental Home before you met him."

"He was never certified. He was a voluntary patient."

"That is true. He is not, I agree, to be classed as insane. But he is, very definitely, unbalanced. He has a punishment complex—has had it, I suspect, since infancy.”

Susan spoke quickly and eagerly:

“You don’t understand, M. Poirot. Greg has never had a chance. That’s why I wanted Uncle Richard’s money so badly. Uncle Richard was so matter-of-fact. He couldn’t understand. I knew Greg had got to set up for himself. He had got to feel he was someone—not just a chemist’s assistant, being pushed around. Everything will be different now. He will have his own laboratory. He can work out his own formulas.”

“Yes, yes—you will give him the earth—because you love him. Love him too much for safety or for happiness. But you cannot give to people what they are incapable of receiving. At the end of it all, he will still be something that he does not want to be….”

“What’s that?”

“Susan’s husband.”

“How cruel you are! And what nonsense you talk!”

“Where Gregory Banks is concerned you are unscrupulous. You wanted your uncle’s money—not for yourself—but for your husband. How badly did you want it?”

Angrily, Susan turned and dashed away.

V

“I thought,” said Michael Shane lightly, “that I’d just come along and say good-bye.”

He smiled, and his smile had a singularly intoxicating quality.

Poirot was aware of the man’s vital charm.

He studied Michael Shane for some moments in silence. He felt as though he knew this man least well of all the house party, for Michael Shane only showed the side of himself that he wanted to show.

“Your wife,” said Poirot conversationally, “is a very unusual woman.”

Michael raised his eyebrows.

“Do you think so? She’s a lovely, I agree. But not, or so I’ve found, conspicuous for brains.”

“She will never try to be too clever,” Poirot agreed. “But she knows what she wants.” He sighed. “So few people do.”

“Ah!” Michael’s smile broke out again. “Thinking of the malachite table?”

“Perhaps.” Poirot paused and added: “And of what was on it.”

“The wax flowers, you mean?”

“The wax flowers.”

Michael frowned.

“I don’t always quite understand you, M. Poirot. However,” the smile was switched on again, “I’m more thankful than I can say that we’re all out of the wood. It’s unpleasant, to say the least of it, to go around with the suspicion that somehow or other one of us murdered poor old Uncle Richard.”

“That is how he seemed to you when you met him?” Poirot inquired. “Poor old Uncle Richard?”

“Of course he was very well-preserved and all that—”

“And in full possession of his faculties—”

“Oh yes.”

“And, in fact, quite shrewd?”

“I dare say.”

“A shrewd judge of character.”

The smile remained unaltered.

“You can’t expect me to agree with that, M. Poirot. He didn’t approve of me.”

“He thought you, perhaps, the unfaithful type?” Poirot suggested.

Michael laughed.

“What an old-fashioned idea!”

“But it is true, isn’t it?”

“Now I wonder what you mean by that?”

Poirot placed the tips of his fingers together.

“There have been inquiries made, you know,” he murmured.

“By you?”

“Not only by me.”

Michael Shane gave him a quick searching glance. His reactions, Poirot noted, were quick. Michael Shane was no fool.

“You mean—the police are interested?”

“They have never been quite satisfied, you know, to regard the murder of Cora Lansquenet as a casual crime.”

“And they’ve been making inquiries about me?”

Poirot said primly:

“They are interested in the movements of Mrs. Lansquenet’s relations on the day that she was killed.”

“That’s extremely awkward.” Michael spoke with a charming confidential rueful air.

“Is it, Mr. Shane?”

“More so than you can imagine! I told Rosamund, you see, that I was lunching with a certain Oscar Lewis on that day.”

“When, in actual fact, you were not?”

“No. Actually I motored down to see a woman called Sorrel Dainton—quite a well-known actress. I was with her in her last show. Rather awkward, you see—for though it’s quite satisfactory as far as the police are concerned, it won’t go down very well with Rosamund.”

“Ah!” Poirot looked discreet. “There has been a little trouble over this friendship of yours?”

“Yes… In fact—Rosamund made me promise I wouldn’t see her anymore.”

“Yes, I can see that may be awkward… Entre nous, you had an affair with the lady?”

“Oh, just one of those things! It’s not as though I cared for the woman at all.”

“But she cares for you?”

“Well, she’s been rather tiresome… Women do cling so. However, as you say, the police at any rate will be satisfied.”

“You think so?”

“Well, I could hardly be taking a hatchet to Cora if I was dallying with Sorrel miles and miles away. She’s got a cottage in Kent.”

“I see—I see—and this Miss Dainton, she will testify for you?”

“She won’t like it—but as it’s murder, I suppose she’ll have to do it.”

“She will do it, perhaps, even if you were not dallying with her.”

“What do you mean?” Michael looked suddenly black as thunder.

“The lady is fond of you. When they are fond, women will swear to what is true—and also to what is untrue.”

“Do you mean to say that you don’t believe me?”

“It does not matter if I believe you or not. It is not I you have to satisfy.”

“Who then?”

Poirot smiled.

“Inspector Morton—who has just come out on the terrace through the side door.”

Michael Shane wheeled round sharply.

Twenty-three

I

“I heard you were here, M. Poirot,” said Inspector Morton.

The two men were pacing the terrace together.

“I came over with Superintendent Parwell from Matchfield. Dr. Larraby rang him up about Mrs. Leo Abernethie and he’s come over here to make a few inquiries. The doctor wasn’t satisfied.”

“And you, my friend,” inquired Poirot, “where do you come in? You are a long way from your native Berkshire.”

“I wanted to ask a few questions—and the people I wanted to ask them of seemed very conveniently assembled here.” He paused before adding, “Your doing?”

“Yes, my doing.”

“And as a result Mrs. Leo Abernethie gets knocked out.”

“You must not blame me for that. If she had come to me… But she did not. Instead she rang up her lawyer in London.”

“And was in the process of spilling the beans to him when—Wonk!”

“When—as you say—Wonk!”

“And what had she managed to tell him?”

“Very little. She had only got as far as telling him that she was looking at herself in the glass.”

“Ah! well,” said Inspector Morton philosophically. “Women will do it.” He looked sharply at Poirot. “That suggests something to you?”

“Yes, I think I know what it was she was going to tell him.”

“Wonderful guesser, aren’t you? You always were. Well, what was it?”

“Excuse me, are you inquiring into the death of Richard Abernethie?”

“Officially, no. Actually, of course, if it has a bearing on the murder of Mrs. Lansquenet—”

“It has a bearing on that, yes. But I will ask you, my friend, to give me a few more hours. I shall know by then if what I have imagined—imagined only, you comprehend—is correct. If it is—”

“Well, if it is?”

“Then I may be able to place in your hands a piece of concrete evidence.”

“We could certainly do with it,” said Inspector Morton with feeling. He looked askance at Poirot. “What have you been holding back?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Since the piece of evidence I have imagined may not in fact exist. I have only deduced its existence from various scraps of conversation. I may,” said Poirot in a completely unconvinced tone, “be wrong.”

Morton smiled.

“But that doesn’t often happen to you?”

“No. Though I will admit—yes, I am forced to admit—that it has happened to me.”

“I must say I’m glad to hear it! To be always right must be sometimes monotonous.”

“I do not find it so,” Poirot assured him.

Inspector Morton laughed.

“And you’re asking me to hold off with my questioning?”

“No, no, not at all. Proceed as you had planned to do. I suppose you were not actually contemplating an arrest?”

Morton shook his head.

“Much too flimsy for that. We’d have to get a decision from the Public Prosecutor first—and we’re a long way from that. No, just statements from certain parties of their movements on the day in question—in one case with a caution, perhaps.”

“I see. Mrs. Banks?”

“Smart, aren’t you? Yes. She was there that day. Her car was parked in that quarry.”

“She was not seen actually driving the car?”

“No.”

The Inspector added, “It’s bad you know, that she’s never said a word about being down there that day. She’s got to explain that satisfactorily.”

“She is quite skilful at explanations,” said Poirot drily.

“Yes. Clever young lady. Perhaps a thought too clever.”

“It is never wise to be too clever. That is how murderers get caught. Has anything more come up about George Crossfield?”

“Nothing definite. He’s a very ordinary type. There are a lot of young men like him going about the country in trains and buses or on bicycles. People find it hard to remember when a week or so has gone by if it was Wednesday or Thursday when they were at a certain place or noticed a certain person.”

He paused and went on: “We’ve had one piece of rather curious information—from the Mother Superior of some convent or other. Two of her nuns had been out collecting from door to door. It seems that they went to Mrs. Lansquenet's cottage on the day before she was murdered, but couldn't make anyone hear when they knocked and rang. That's natural enough—she was up North at the Abernethie funeral and Gilchrist had been given the day off and had gone on an excursion to Bournemouth. The point is that they say there was someone in the cottage. They say they heard sighs and groans. I've queried whether it wasn't a day later but the Mother Superior is quite definite that that couldn't be so. It's all entered up in some book. Was there someone searching for something in the cottage that day, who seized the opportunity of both the women being away? And did that somebody not find what he or she was looking for and come back the next day? I don't set much store on the sighs and still less on the groans. Even nuns are suggestible and a cottage where murder has occurred positively asks for groans. The point is, was there someone in the cottage who shouldn't have been there? And if so, who was it? All the Abernethie crowd were at the funeral."

Poirot asked a seemingly irrelevant question:

"These nuns who were collecting in that district, did they return at all at a later date to try again?"

"As a matter of fact they did come again—about a week later. Actually on the day of the inquest, I believe."

"That fits," said Hercule Poirot. "That fits very well."

Inspector Morton looked at him.

"Why this interest in nuns?"

"They have been forced on my attention whether I will or no. It will not have escaped your attention, Inspector, that the visit of the nuns was the same day that poisoned wedding cake found its way into that cottage."

"You don't think— Surely that's a ridiculous idea?"

“My ideas are never ridiculous,” said Hercule Poirot severely. “And now, mon cher, I must leave you to your questions and to the inquiries into the attack on Mrs. Abernethie. I myself must go in search of the late Richard Abernethie’s niece.”

“Now be careful what you go saying to Mrs. Banks.”

“I do not mean Mrs. Banks. I mean Richard Abernethie’s other niece.”

II

Poirot found Rosamund sitting on a bench overlooking a little stream that cascaded down in a waterfall and then flowed through rhododendron thickets. She was staring into the water.

“I do not, I trust, disturb an Ophelia,” said Poirot as he took his seat beside her. “You are, perhaps, studying the role?”

“I’ve never played in Shakespeare,” said Rosamund. “Except once in Rep. I was Jessica in The Merchant. A lousy part.”

“Yet not without pathos. ‘I am never merry when I hear sweet music.’ What a load she carried, poor Jessica, the daughter of the hated and despised Jew. What doubts of herself she must have had when she brought with her her father’s ducats when she ran away to her lover. Jessica with gold was one thing—Jessica without gold might have been another.”

Rosamund turned her head to look at him.

“I thought you’d gone,” she said with a touch of reproach. She glanced down at her wristwatch. “It’s past twelve o’clock.”

“I have missed my train,” said Poirot.

“Why?”

“You think I missed it for a reason?”

“I suppose so. You’re rather precise, aren’t you? If you wanted to catch a train, I should think you’d catch it.”

“Your judgement is admirable. Do you know, Madame, I have been sitting in the little summerhouse hoping that you would, perhaps, pay me a visit there?”

Rosamund stared at him.

“Why should I? You more or less said good-bye to us all in the library.”

“Quite so. And there was nothing—you wanted to say to me?”

“No.” Rosamund shook her head. “I had a lot I wanted to think about. Important things.”

“I see.”

“I don’t often do much thinking,” said Rosamund. “It seems a waste of time. But this is important. I think one ought to plan one’s life just as one wants it to be.”

“And that is what you are doing?”

“Well, yes… I was trying to make a decision about something.”

“About your husband?”

“In a way.”

Poirot waited a moment, then he said:

“Inspector Morton has just arrived here.” He anticipated Rosamund’s question by going on: “He is the police officer in charge of the inquiries about Mrs. Lansquenet’s death. He has come here to get statements from you all about what you were doing on the day she was murdered.”

“I see. Alibis,” said Rosamund cheerfully.

Her beautiful face relaxed into an impish glee.

“That will be hell for Michael,” she said. “He thinks I don’t really know he went off to be with that woman that day.”

“How did you know?”

“It was obvious from the way he said he was going to lunch with Oscar. So frightfully casually, you know, and his nose twitching just a tiny bit like it always does when he tells lies.”

“How devoutly thankful I am I am not married to you, Madame!”

“And then, of course, I made sure by ringing up Oscar,” continued Rosamund. “Men always tell such silly lies.”

“He is not, I fear, a very faithful husband?” Poirot hazarded.

Rosamund, however, did not reject the statement.

“No.”

“But you do not mind?”

“Well, it’s rather fun in a way,” said Rosamund. “I mean having a husband that all the other women want to snatch away from you. I should hate to be married to a man that nobody wanted—like poor Susan. Really Greg is so completely wet!”

Poirot was studying her.

“And suppose someone did succeed—in snatching your husband away from you?”

“They won’t,” said Rosamund. “Not now,” she added.

“You mean—”

"Not now that there's Uncle Richard's money. Michael falls for these creatures in a way—that Sorrel Dainton woman nearly got her hooks into him—wanted him for keeps—but with Michael the show will always come first. He can launch out now in a big way—put his own shows on. Do some production as well as acting. He's ambitious, you know, and he really is good. Not like me. I adore acting—but I'm ham, though I look nice. No, I'm not worried about Michael anymore. Because it's my money, you see."

Her eyes met Poirot's calmly. He thought how strange it was that both Richard Abernethie's nieces should have fallen deeply in love with men who were incapable of returning that love. And yet Rosamund was unusually beautiful and Susan was attractive and full of sex appeal. Susan needed and clung to the illusion that Gregory loved her. Rosamund, clear-sighted, had no illusions at all, but knew what she wanted.

"The point is," said Rosamund, "that I've got to make a big decision—about the future. Michael doesn't know yet." Her face curved into a smile. "He found out that I wasn't shopping that day and he's madly suspicious about Regent's Park."

"What is this about Regent's Park?" Poirot looked puzzled.

"I went there, you see, after Harley Street. Just to walk about and think. Naturally Michael thinks that if I went there at all, I went to meet some man!"

Rosamund smiled beatifically and added:

"He didn't like that at all!"

"But why should you not go to Regent's Park?" asked Poirot.

"Just to walk there, you mean?"

"Yes. Have you never done it before?"

"Never. Why should I? What is there to go to Regent's Park for?"

Poirot looked at her and said:

"For you—nothing."

He added:

"I think, Madame, that you must cede the green malachite table to your cousin Susan."

Rosamund's eyes opened very wide.

"Why should I? I want it."

"I know. I know. But you—you will keep your husband. And the poor Susan, she will lose hers."

"Lose him? Do you mean Greg's going off with someone? I wouldn't have believed it of him. He looks so wet."

"Infidelity is not the only way of losing a husband, Madame."

"You don't mean—?" Rosamund stared at him. "You're not thinking that Greg poisoned Uncle Richard and killed Aunt Cora and conked Aunt Helen on the head? That's ridiculous. Even I know better than that."

"Who did, then?"

"George, of course. George is a wrong un, you know, he's mixed up in some sort of currency swindle—I heard about it from some friends of mine who were in Monte. I expect Uncle Richard got to know about it and was just going to cut him out of his will."

Rosamund added complacently:

"I've always known it was George."

Twenty-four

I

The telegram came about six o’clock that evening.

As specially requested it was delivered by hand, not telephoned, and Hercule Poirot, who had been hovering for some time in the neighbourhood of the front door, was at hand to receive it from Lanscombe as the latter took it from the telegraph boy.

He tore it open with somewhat less than his usual precision. It consisted of three words and a signature.

Poirot gave vent to an enormous sigh of relief.

Then he took a pound note from his pocket and handed it to the dumbfounded boy.

“There are moments,” he said to Lanscombe, “when economy should be abandoned.”

“Very possibly, sir,” said Lanscombe politely.

“Where is Inspector Morton?” asked Poirot.

“One of the police gentlemen,” Lanscombe spoke with distaste—and indicated subtly that such things as names for police officers were impossible to remember—“has left. The other is, I believe, in the study.”

“Splendid,” said Poirot. “I join him immediately.”

He once more clapped Lanscombe on the shoulder and said:

“Courage, we are on the point of arriving!”

Lanscombe looked slightly bewildered since departures, and not arrivals, had been in his mind.

He said:

“You do not, then, propose to leave by the nine thirty train after all, sir?”

“Do not lose hope,” Poirot told him.

Poirot moved away, then wheeling round, he asked:

“I wonder, can you remember what were the first words Mrs. Lansquenet said to you when she arrived here on the day of your master’s funeral?”

“I remember very well, sir,” said Lanscombe, his face lighting up. “Miss Cora—I beg pardon, Mrs. Lansquenet—I always think of her as Miss Cora, somehow—”

“Very naturally.”

“She said to me: ‘Hallo, Lanscombe. It’s a long time since you used to bring us out meringues to the huts.’ All the children used to have a hut of their own—down by the fence in the Park. In summer, when there was going to be a dinner party, I used to take the young ladies and gentlemen—the younger ones, you understand, sir—some meringues. Miss Cora, sir, was always very fond of her food.”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “that was as I thought. Yes, it was very typical, that.”

He went into the study to find Inspector Morton and without a word handed him the telegram.

Morton read it blankly.

“I don’t understand a word of this.”

“The time has come to tell you all.”

Inspector Morton grinned.

“You sound like a young lady in a Victorian melodrama. But it’s about time you came across with something. I can’t hold out on this setup much longer. That Banks fellow is still insisting that he poisoned Richard Abernethie and boasting that we can’t find out how. What beats me is why there’s always somebody who comes forward when there’s a murder and yells out that they did it! What do they think there is in it for them? I’ve never been able to fathom that.”

“In this case, probably shelter from the difficulties of being responsible for oneself—in other words— Forsdyke Sanatorium.”

“More likely to be Broadmoor.”

“That might be equally satisfactory.”

“Did he do it, Poirot? The Gilchrist woman came out with the story she’d already told you and it would fit with what Richard Abernethie said about his niece. If her husband did it, it would involve her. Somehow, you know, I can’t visualize that girl committing a lot of crimes. But there’s nothing she wouldn’t do to try and cover him.”

“I will tell you all—”

“Yes, yes, tell me all! And for the Lord’s sake hurry up and do it!”

II

This time it was in the big drawing room that Hercule Poirot assembled his audience.

There was amusement rather than tension in the faces that were turned towards him. Menace had materialized in the shape of Inspector Morton and Superintendent Parwell. With the police in charge, questioning, asking for statements, Hercule Poirot, private detective, had receded into something closely resembling a joke.

Timothy was not far from voicing the general feeling when he remarked in an audible sotto voce to his wife:

“Damned little mountebank! Entwhistle must be gaga!—that’s all I can say.”

It looked as though Hercule Poirot would have to work hard to make his proper effect.

He began in a slightly pompous manner.

“For the second time, I announce my departure! This morning I announced it for the twelve o’clock train. This evening I announce it for the nine thirty—immediately, that is, after dinner. I go because there is nothing more here for me to do.”

“Could have told him that all along.” Timothy’s commentary was still in evidence. “Never was anything for him to do. The cheek of these fellows!”

“I came here originally to solve a riddle. The riddle is solved. Let me, first, go over the various points which were brought to my attention by the excellent Mr. Entwhistle.

“First, Mr. Richard Abernethie dies suddenly. Secondly, after his funeral, his sister Cora Lansquenet says, ‘He was murdered, wasn’t he?’ Thirdly Mrs. Lansquenet is killed. The question is, are those three things part of a sequence? Let us observe what happens next? Miss Gilchrist, the dead woman’s companion, is taken ill after eating a piece of wedding cake which contains arsenic. That, then, is the next step in the sequence.

“Now, as I told you this morning, in the course of my inquiries I have come across nothing—nothing at all, to substantiate the belief that Mr. Abernethie was poisoned. Equally, I may say, I have found nothing to prove conclusively that he was not poisoned. But as we proceed, things become easier. Cora Lansquenet undoubtedly asked that sensational question at the funeral. Everyone agrees upon that. And undoubtedly, on the following day, Mrs. Lansquenet was murdered—a hatchet being the instrument employed. Now let us examine the fourth happening. The local post van driver is strongly of the belief—though he will not definitely swear to it—that he did not deliver that parcel of wedding cake in the usual way. And if that is so, then the parcel was left by hand and though we cannot exclude a ‘person unknown’—we must take particular notice of those people who were actually on the spot and in a position to put the parcel where it was subsequently found. Those were: Miss Gilchrist herself, of course; Susan Banks who came down that day for the inquest; Mr. Entwhistle (but yes, we must consider Mr. Entwhistle; he was present, remember, when Cora made her disquieting remark!) And there were two other people. An old gentleman who represented himself to be a Mr. Guthrie, an art critic, and a nun or nuns who called early that morning to collect a subscription.

“Now I decided that I would start on the assumption that the postal van driver’s recollection was correct. Therefore the little group of people under suspicion must be very carefully studied. Miss Gilchrist did not benefit in any way by Richard Abernethie’s death and in only a very minute degree by Mrs. Lansquenet’s—in actual fact the death of the latter put her out of employment and left her with the possibility of finding it difficult to get new employment. Also Miss Gilchrist was taken to hospital definitely suffering from arsenic poisoning.

“Susan Banks did benefit from Richard Abernethie’s death, and in a small degree from Mrs. Lansquenet’s—though here her motive must almost certainly have been security. She might have very good reason to believe that Miss Gilchrist had overheard a conversation between Cora Lansquenet and her brother which referred to her, and she might therefore decide that Miss Gilchrist must be eliminated. She herself, remember, refused to partake of the wedding cake and also suggested not calling in a doctor until the morning, when Miss Gilchrist was taken ill in the night.

“Mr. Entwhistle did not benefit by either of the deaths—but he had had considerable control over Mr. Abernethie’s affairs, and the trust funds, and there might well be some reason why Richard Abernethie should not live too long. But—you will say—if it is Mr. Entwhistle who was concerned, why should he come to me?

“And to that I will answer—it is not the first time that a murderer has been too sure of himself.

“We now come to what I may call the two outsiders. Mr. Guthrie and a nun. If Mr. Guthrie is really Mr. Guthrie, the art critic, then that clears him. The same applies to the nun, if she is really a nun. The question is, are these people themselves, or are they somebody else?

“And I may say that there seems to be a curious—motif—one might call it—of a nun running through this business. A nun comes to the door of Mr. Timothy Abernethie’s house and Miss Gilchrist believes it is the same nun she has seen at Lytchett St. Mary. Also a nun, or nuns, called here the day before Mr. Abernethie died….”

George Crossfield murmured, “Three to one, the nun.”

Poirot went on:

“So here we have certain pieces of our pattern—the death of Mr. Abernethie, the murder of Cora Lansquenet, the poisoned wedding cake, the ‘motif’ of the ‘nun.’

“I will add some other features of the case that engaged my attention:

“The visit of an art critic, a smell of oil paint, a picture postcard of Polflexan harbour, and finally a bouquet of wax flowers standing on that malachite table where a Chinese vase stands now.

“It was reflecting on these things that led me to the truth—and I am now about to tell you the truth.

“The first part of it I told you this morning. Richard Abernethie died suddenly—but there would have been no reason at all to suspect foul play had it not been for the words uttered by his sister Cora at his funeral. The whole case for the murder of Richard Abernethie rests upon those words. As a result of them, you all believed that murder had taken place, and you believed it, not really because of the words themselves but because of the character of Cora Lansquenet herself. For Cora Lansquenet had always been famous for speaking the truth at awkward moments. So the case for Richard’s murder rested not only upon what Cora had said but upon Cora herself.

“And now I come to the question that I suddenly asked myself:

“How well did you all know Cora Lansquenet?”

He was silent for a moment, and Susan asked sharply, “What do you mean?”

Poirot went on:

“Not well at all—that is the answer! The younger generation had never seen her at all, or if so, only when they were very young children. There were actually only three people present that day who actually knew Cora. Lanscombe, the butler, who is old and very blind; Mrs. Timothy Abernethie who had only seen her a few times round about the date of her own wedding, and Mrs. Leo Abernethie who had known her quite well, but who had not seen her for over twenty years.

“So I said to myself: ‘Supposing it was not Cora Lansquenet who came to the funeral that day?’”

“Do you mean that Aunt Cora—wasn’t Aunt Cora?” Susan demanded incredulously. “Do you mean that it wasn’t Aunt Cora who was murdered, but someone else?”

“No, no, it was Cora Lansquenet who was murdered. But it was not Cora Lansquenet who came the day before to her brother’s funeral. The woman who came that day came for one purpose only—to exploit, one may say, the fact that Richard died suddenly. And to create in the minds of his relations that he had been murdered. Which she managed to do most successfully!”

“Nonsense! Why? What was the point of it?” Maude spoke bluffly.

“Why? To draw attention away from the other murder. From the murder of Cora Lansquenet herself. For if Cora says that Richard has been murdered and the next day she herself is killed, the two deaths are bound to be at least considered as possible cause and effect. But if Cora is murdered and her cottage is broken into, and if the apparent robbery does not convince the police, then they will look—where? Close at home, will they not? Suspicion will tend to fall on the woman who shares the house with her.”

Miss Gilchrist protested in a tone that was almost bright:

“Oh come—really—Mr. Pontarlier—you don’t suggest I’d commit a murder for an amethyst brooch and a few worthless sketches?”

“No,” said Poirot. “For a little more than that. There was one of those sketches, Miss Gilchrist, that represented Polflexan harbour and which, as Mrs. Banks was clever enough to realize, had been copied from a picture postcard which showed the old pier still in position. But Mrs. Lansquenet painted always from life. I remembered then that Mr. Entwhistle had mentioned there being a smell of oil paint in the cottage when he first got there. You can paint, can’t you, Miss Gilchrist? Your father was an artist and you know a good deal about pictures. Supposing that one of the pictures that Cora picked up cheaply at a sale was a valuable picture. Supposing that she herself did not recognize it for what it was, but that you did. You knew she was expecting, very shortly, a visit from an old friend of hers who was a well-known art critic. Then her brother died suddenly—and a plan leaps into your head. Easy to administer a sedative to her in her early cup of tea that will keep her unconscious for the whole of the day of the funeral whilst you yourself are playing her part at Enderby. You know Enderby well from listening to her talk about it. She has talked, as people do when they get on in life, a great deal about her childhood days. Easy for you to start off by a remark to old Lanscombe about meringues and huts which will make him quite sure of your identity in case he was inclined to doubt. Yes, you used your knowledge of Enderby well that day, with allusions to this and that, and recalling memories, None of them suspected you were not Cora. You were wearing her clothes, slightly padded, and since she wore a false front of hair, it was easy for you to assume that. Nobody had seen Cora for twenty years—and in twenty years people change so much that one often hears the remark: ‘I would never have known her!’ But mannerisms are remembered, and Cora had certain very definite mannerisms, all of which you had practised carefully before the glass.

"And it was there, strangely enough, that you made your first mistake. You forgot that a mirror image is reversed. When you saw in the glass the perfect reproduction of Cora's birdlike sidewise tilt of the head, you didn't realize that it was actually the wrong way round. You saw, let us say, Cora inclining her head to the right—but you forgot that actually your own head was inclined to the left to produce that effect in the glass.

"That was what puzzled and worried Helen Abernethie at the moment when you made your famous insinuation. Something seemed to her 'wrong.' I realized myself the other night when Rosamund Shane made an unexpected remark what happens on such an occasion. Everybody inevitably looks at the speaker. Therefore, when Mrs. Leo felt something was 'wrong,' it must be that something was wrong with Cora Lansquenet. The other evening, after talk about mirror images and 'seeing oneself ' I think Mrs. Leo experimented before a looking glass. Her own face is not particularly asymmetrical. She probably thought of Cora, remembered how Cora used to incline her head to the right, did so, and looked in the glass—when, of course, the image seemed to her 'wrong' and she realized, in a flash, just what had been wrong on the day of the funeral. She puzzled it out—either Cora had taken to inclining her head in the opposite direction—most unlikely—or else Cora had not been Cora. Neither way seemed to her to make sense. But she was determined to tell Mr. Entwhistle of her discovery at once. Someone who was used to getting up early was already about, and followed her down, and fearful of what revelations she might be about to make struck her down with a heavy doorstop."

Poirot paused and added:

"I may as well tell you now, Miss Gilchrist, that Mrs. Abernethie's concussion is not serious. She will soon be able to tell us her own story."

"I never did anything of the sort," said Miss Gilchrist. "The whole thing is a wicked lie."

"It was you that day," said Michael Shane suddenly. He had been studying Miss Gilchrist's face. "I ought to have seen it sooner— I felt in a vague kind of way I had seen you before somewhere—but of course one never looks much at—" he stopped.

“No, one doesn’t bother to look at a mere companion-help,” said Miss Gilchrist. Her voice shook a little. “A drudge, a domestic drudge! Almost a servant! But go on, M. Poirot. Go on with this fantastic piece of nonsense!”

“The suggestion of murder thrown out at the funeral was only the first step, of course,” said Poirot. “You had more in reserve. At any moment you were prepared to admit to having listened to a conversation between Richard and his sister. What he actually told her, no doubt, was the fact that he had not long to live, and that explains a cryptic phrase in the letter he wrote to her after getting home. The ‘nun’ was another of your suggestions. The nun—or rather nuns—who called at the cottage on the day of the inquest suggested to you a mention of a nun who was ‘following you round,’ and you used that when you were anxious to hear what Mrs. Timothy was saying to her sister-in-law at Enderby. And also because you wished to accompany her there and find out for yourself just how suspicions were going. Actually to poison yourself, badly but not fatally, with arsenic, is a very old device—and I may say that it served to awaken Inspector Morton’s suspicions of you.”

“But the picture?” said Rosamund. “What kind of a picture was it?”

Poirot slowly unfolded a telegram.

“This morning I rang up Mr. Entwhistle, a responsible person, to go to Stansfield Grange and, acting on authority from Mr. Abernethie himself” (here Poirot gave a hard stare at Timothy) “to look amongst the pictures in Miss Gilchrist’s room and select the one of Polflexan Harbour on pretext of having it reframed as a surprise for Miss Gilchrist. He was to take it back to London and call upon Mr. Guthrie whom I had warned by telegram. The hastily painted sketch of Polflexan Harbour was removed and the original picture exposed.”

He held up the telegram and read:

“Definitely a Vermeer. Guthrie.”

Suddenly, with electrifying effect, Miss Gilchrist burst into speech.

"I knew it was a Vermeer. I knew it! She didn't know! Talking about Rembrandts and Italian Primitives and unable to recognize a Vermeer when it was under her nose! Always prating about Art—and really knowing nothing about it! She was a thoroughly stupid woman. Always maundering on about this place—about Enderby, and what they did there as children, and about Richard and Timothy and Laura and all the rest of them. Rolling in money always! Always the best of everything those children had. You don't know how boring it is listening to somebody going on about the same things, hour after hour and day after day. And saying, 'Oh, yes, Mrs. Lansquenet' and 'Really, Mrs. Lansquenet?' Pretending to be interested. And really bored—bored—bored… And nothing to look forward to… And then—a Vermeer! I saw in the papers that a Vermeer sold the other day for over five thousand pounds!"

"You killed her—in that brutal way—for five thousand pounds?" Susan's voice was incredulous.

"Five thousand pounds," said Poirot, "would have rented and equipped a tea shop…."

Miss Gilchrist turned to him.

"At least," she said. "You do understand. It was the only chance I'd ever get. I had to have a capital sum." Her voice vibrated with the force and obsession of her dream. "I was going to call it the Palm Tree. And have little camels as menu holders. One can occasionally get quite nice china—export rejects—not that awful white utility stuff. I meant to start it in some nice neighbourhood where nice people would come in. I had thought of Rye… Or perhaps Chichester… I'm sure I could have made a success of it." She paused a minute, then added musingly, "Oak tables—and little basket chairs with striped red and white cushions…."

For a few moments, the tea shop that would never be, seemed more real than the Victorian solidity of the drawing room at Enderby….

It was Inspector Morton who broke the spell.

Miss Gilchrist turned to him quite politely.

“Oh, certainly,” she said. “At once. I don’t want to give any trouble, I’m sure. After all, if I can’t have the Palm Tree, nothing really seems to matter very much….”

She went out of the room with him and Susan said, her voice still shaken:

“I’ve never imagined a ladylike murderer. It’s horrible….”

Twenty-five

“But I don’t understand about the wax flowers,” said Rosamund.

She fixed Poirot with large reproachful blue eyes.

They were at Helen’s flat in London. Helen herself was resting on the sofa and Rosamund and Poirot were having tea with her.

“I don’t see that wax flowers had anything to do with it,” said Rosamund. “Or the malachite table.”

“The malachite table, no. But the wax flowers were Miss Gilchrist’s second mistake. She said how nice they looked on the malachite table. And you see, Madame, she could not have seen them there. Because they had been broken and put away before she arrived with the Timothy Abernethies. So she could only have seen them when she was there as Cora Lansquenet.”

“That was stupid of her, wasn’t it?” said Rosamund.

Poirot shook a forefinger at her.

“It shows you, Madame, the dangers of conversations. It is a profound belief of mine that if you can induce a person to talk to you for long enough, on any subject whatever! sooner or later they will give themselves away. Miss Gilchrist did.”

“I shall have to be careful,” said Rosamund thoughtfully.

Then she brightened up.

“Did you know? I’m going to have a baby.”

“Aha! So that is the meaning of Harley Street and Regent’s Park?”

“Yes. I was so upset, you know, and so surprised—that I just had to go somewhere and think.”

"You said, I remember, that that does not very often happen."

"Well, it's much easier not to. But this time I had to decide about the future. And I've decided to leave the stage and just be a mother."

"A role that will suit you admirably. Already I foresee delightful pictures in the Sketch and the Tatler."

Rosamund smiled happily.

"Yes, it's wonderful. Do you know, Michael is delighted. I didn't really think he would be."

She paused and added:

"Susan's got the malachite table. I thought, as I was having a baby—"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"Susan's cosmetic business promises well," said Helen. "I think she is all set for a big success."

"Yes, she was born to succeed," said Poirot. "She is like her uncle."

"You mean Richard, I suppose," said Rosamund. "Not Timothy?"

"Assuredly not like Timothy," said Poirot.

They laughed.

"Greg's away somewhere," said Rosamund. "Having a rest cure Susan says?"

She looked inquiringly at Poirot who said nothing.

"I can't think why he kept on saying he'd killed Uncle Richard," said Rosamund. "Do you think it was a form of Exhibitionism?"

Poirot reverted to the previous topic.

“I received a very amiable letter from Mr. Timothy Abernethie,” he said. “He expressed himself as highly satisfied with the services I had rendered the family.”

“I do think Uncle Timothy is quite awful,” said Rosamund.

“I am going to stay with them next week,” said Helen. “They seem to be getting the gardens into order, but domestic help is still difficult.”

“They miss the awful Gilchrist, I suppose,” said Rosamund. “But I dare say in the end, she’d have killed Uncle Timothy too. What fun if she had!”

“Murder has always seemed fun to you, Madame.”

“Oh! not really,” said Rosamund vaguely. “But I did think it was George.” She brightened up. “Perhaps he will do one some day.”

“And that will be fun,” said Poirot sarcastically.

“Yes, won’t it?” Rosamund agreed.

She ate another éclair from the plate in front of her.

Poirot turned to Helen.

“And you, Madame, are off to Cyprus?”

“Yes, in a fortnight’s time.”

“Then let me wish you a happy journey.”

He bowed over her hand. She came with him to the door, leaving Rosamund dreamily stuffing herself with cream pastries.

Helen said abruptly:

“I should like you to know, M. Poirot, that the legacy Richard left me meant more to me than theirs did to any of the others.”

“As much as that, Madame?”

“Yes. You see—there is a child in Cyprus… My husband and I were very devoted—it was a great sorrow to us to have no children. After he died my loneliness was unbelievable. When I was nursing in London at the end of the war, I met someone… He was younger than I was and married, though not very happily. We came together for a little while. That was all. He went back to Canada—to his wife and his children. He never knew about—our child. He would not have wanted it. I did. It seemed like a miracle to me—a middle-aged woman with everything behind her. With Richard’s money I can educate my so-called nephew, and give him a start in life.” She paused, then added, “I never told Richard. He was fond of me and I of him—but he would not have understood. You know so much about us all that I thought I would like you to know this about me.”

Once again Poirot bowed over her hand.

He got home to find the armchair on the left of the fireplace occupied.

“Hallo, Poirot,” said Mr. Entwhistle. “I’ve just come back from the Assizes. They brought in a verdict of Guilty, of course. But I shouldn’t be surprised if she ends up in Broadmoor. She’s gone definitely over the edge since she’s been in prison. Quite happy, you know, and most gracious. She spends most her time making the most elaborate plans to run a chain of tea shops. Her newest establishment is to be the Lilac Bush. She’s opening it in Cromer.”

“One wonders if she was always a little mad? But me, I think not.”

“Good Lord, no! Sane as you and I when she planned that murder. Carried it out in cold blood. She’s got a good head on her, you know, underneath the fluffy manner.”

Poirot gave a little shiver.

“I am thinking,” he said, “of some words that Susan Banks said—that she had never imagined a ladylike murderer.”

“Why not?” said Mr. Entwhistle. “It takes all sorts.”

They were silent—and Poirot thought of murderers he had known….

Hickory Dickory Dock (1955)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Chapter One

Hercule Poirot frowned.

“Miss Lemon,” he said.

“Yes, M. Poirot?”

“There are three mistakes in this letter.”

His voice held incredulity. For Miss Lemon, that hideous and efficient woman, never made mistakes. She was never ill, never tired, never upset, never inaccurate. For all practical purposes, that is to say, she was not a woman at all. She was a machine—the perfect secretary. She knew everything, she coped with everything. She ran Hercule Poirot’s life for him, so that it, too, functioned like a machine. Order and method had been Hercule Poirot’s watchwords from many years ago. With George, his perfect manservant, and Miss Lemon, his perfect secretary, order and method ruled supreme in his life. Now that crumpets were baked square as well as round, he had nothing about which to complain.

And yet, this morning, Miss Lemon had made three mistakes in typing a perfectly simple letter, and moreover, had not even noticed those mistakes. The stars stood still in their courses!

Hercule Poirot held out the offending document. He was not annoyed, he was merely bewildered. This was one of the things that could not happen—but it had happened!

Miss Lemon took the letter. She looked at it. For the first time in his life, Poirot saw her blush; a deep ugly unbecoming flush that dyed her face right up to the roots of her strong grizzled hair.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I can’t think how—at least I can. It’s because of my sister.”

“Your sister?”

Another shock. Poirot had never conceived of Miss Lemon’s having a sister. Or, for that matter, having a father, mother, or even grandparents. Miss Lemon, somehow, was so completely machine made—a precision instrument so to speak—that to think of her having affections, or anxieties, or family worries, seemed quite ludicrous. It was well known that the whole of Miss Lemon’s heart and mind was given, when she was not on duty, to the perfection of a new filing system which was to be patented and bear her name.

“Your sister?” Hercule Poirot repeated, therefore, with an incredulous note in his voice.

Miss Lemon nodded a vigorous assent.

“Yes,” she said, “I don’t think I’ve ever mentioned her to you. Practically all her life has been spent in Singapore. Her husband was in the rubber business there.”

Hercule Poirot nodded understandingly. It seemed to him appropriate that Miss Lemon’s sister should have spent most of her life in Singapore. That was what places like Singapore were for. The sisters of women like Miss Lemon married men in Singapore, so that the Miss Lemons of this world could devote themselves with machinelike efficiency to their employers’ affairs (and of course to the invention of filing systems in their moments of relaxation).

“I comprehend,” he said. “Proceed.”

Miss Lemon proceeded.

“She was left a widow four years ago. No children. I managed to get her fixed up in a very nice little flat at quite a reasonable rent—”

(Of course Miss Lemon would manage to do just that almost impossible thing.)

“She is reasonably well off—though money doesn’t go as far as it did, but her tastes aren’t expensive and she has enough to be quite comfortable if she is careful.”

Miss Lemon paused and then continued:

“But the truth is, of course, she was lonely. She had never lived in England and she’d got no old friends or cronies and of course she had a lot of time on her hands. Anyway, she told me about six months ago that she was thinking of taking up this job.”

“Job?”

“Warden, I think they call it—or matron—of a hostel for students. It was owned by a woman who was partly Greek and she wanted someone to run it for her. Manage the catering and see that things went smoothly. It’s an old-fashioned roomy house—in Hickory Road, if you know where that is.” Poirot did not. “It used to be a superior neighbourhood once, and the houses are well built. My sister was to have very nice accommodation, bedroom and sitting room and a tiny bath kitchenette of her own—”

Miss Lemon paused. Poirot made an encouraging noise. So far this did not seem at all like a tale of disaster.

"I wasn't any too sure about it myself, but I saw the force of my sister's arguments. She's never been one to sit with her hands crossed all day long and she's a very practical woman and good at running things—and of course it wasn't as though she were thinking of putting money into it or anything like that. It was purely a salaried position—not a high salary, but she didn't need that, and there was no hard physical work. She's always been fond of young people and good with them, and having lived in the East so long she understands racial differences and people's susceptibilities. Because these students at the hostel are of all nationalities; mostly English, but some of them actually black, I believe."

"Naturally," said Hercule Poirot.

"Half the nurses in our hospitals seem to be black nowadays," said Miss Lemon doubtfully, "and I understand much pleasanter and more attentive than the English ones. But that's neither here nor there. We talked the scheme over and finally my sister moved in. Neither she nor I cared very much for the proprietress, Mrs. Nicoletis, a woman of very uncertain temper, sometimes charming and sometimes, I'm sorry to say, quite the reverse—and both cheeseparing and impractical. Still, naturally, if she'd been a thoroughly competent woman, she wouldn't have needed any assistance. My sister is not one to let people's tantrums and vagaries worry her. She can hold her own with anyone and she never stands any nonsense."

Poirot nodded. He felt a vague resemblance to Miss Lemon showing in this account of Miss Lemon's sister—a Miss Lemon softened as it were by marriage and the climate of Singapore, but a woman with the same hard core of sense.

“So your sister took the job?” he asked.

“Yes, she moved into 26 Hickory Road about six months ago. On the whole, she liked her work there and found it interesting.”

Hercule Poirot listened. So far the adventure of Miss Lemon’s sister had been disappointingly tame.

“But for some time now she’s been badly worried. Very badly worried.”

“Why?”

“Well, you see, M. Poirot, she doesn’t like the things that are going on.”

“There are students there of both sexes?” Poirot inquired delicately.

“Oh no, M. Poirot, I don’t mean that! One is always prepared for difficulties of that kind, one expects them! No, you see, things have been disappearing.”

“Disappearing?”

“Yes. And such odd things . . . And all in rather an unnatural way.”

“When you say things have been disappearing, you mean things have been stolen?”

“Yes.”

"Have the police been called in?"

"No. Not yet. My sister hopes that it may not be necessary. She is fond of these young people—of some of them, that is—and she would very much prefer to straighten things out by herself."

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully. "I can quite see that. But that does not explain, if I may say so, your own anxiety which I take to be a reflex of your sister's anxiety."

"I don't like the situation, M. Poirot. I don't like it at all. I cannot help feeling that something is going on which I do not understand. No ordinary explanation seems quite to cover the facts—and I really cannot imagine what other explanation there can be."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Miss Lemon's Heel of Achilles had always been her imagination. She had none. On questions of fact she was invincible. On questions of surmise, she was lost. Not for her the state of mind of Cortez's men upon the peak of Darien.

"Not ordinary petty thieving? A kleptomaniac, perhaps?"

"I do not think so. I read up the subject," said the conscientious Miss Lemon, "in the Encyclopaedia Britannica and in a medical work. But I was not convinced."

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute and a half.

Did he wish to embroil himself in the troubles of Miss Lemon's sister and the passions and grievances of a polyglot hostel? But it was very annoying and inconvenient to have Miss Lemon making mistakes in typing his letters. He told himself that if he were to embroil himself in the matter, that would be the reason. He did not admit to himself that he had been rather bored of late and that the very triviality of the business attracted him.

“ ‘The parsley sinking into the butter on a hot day,’ ” he murmured to himself.

“Parsley? Butter?” Miss Lemon looked startled.

“A quotation from one of your classics,” he said. “You are acquainted, no doubt, with the Adventures, to say nothing of the Exploits, of Sherlock Holmes.”

“You mean these Baker Street societies and all that,” said Miss Lemon. “Grown men being so silly! But there, that’s men all over. Like the model railways they go on playing with. I can’t say I’ve ever had time to read any of the stories. When I do get time for reading, which isn’t very often, I prefer an improving book.”

Hercule Poirot bowed his head gracefully.

“How would it be, Miss Lemon, if you were to invite your sister here for some suitable refreshment—afternoon tea, perhaps? I might be able to be of some slight assistance to her.”

“That’s very kind of you, M. Poirot. Really very kind indeed. My sister is always free in the afternoons.”

“Then shall we say tomorrow, if you can arrange it?”

And in due course, the faithful George was instructed to provide a meal of square crumpets richly buttered, symmetrical sandwiches, and other suitable components of a lavish English afternoon tea.

Chapter Two

Miss Lemon’s sister, whose name was Mrs. Hubbard, had a definite resemblance to her sister. She was a good deal yellower of skin, she was plumper, her hair was more frivolously done, and she was less brisk in manner, but the eyes that looked out of a round and amiable countenance were the same shrewd eyes that gleamed through Miss Lemon’s pince-nez.

“This is very kind of you, I’m sure, M. Poirot,” she said. “Very kind. And such a delicious tea, too. I’m sure I’ve eaten far more than I should—well, perhaps just one more sandwich—tea? Well, just half a cup.”

“First,” said Poirot, “we make the repast—afterwards we get down to business.”

He smiled at her amiably and twirled his moustache, and Mrs. Hubbard said:

“You know, you’re exactly like I pictured you from Felicity’s description.”

After a moment’s startled realisation that Felicity was the severe Miss Lemon’s Christian name, Poirot replied that he should have expected no less given Miss Lemon’s efficiency.

“Of course,” said Mrs. Hubbard absently, taking a second sandwich, “Felicity has never cared for people. I do. That’s why I’m so worried.”

“Can you explain to me exactly what does worry you?”

"Yes, I can. It would be natural enough for money to be taken—small sums here and there. And if it were jewellery that's quite straightforward too—at least, I don't mean straightforward, quite the opposite—but it would fit in—with kleptomania or dishonesty. But I'll just read you a list of the things that have been taken, that I've put down on paper."

Mrs. Hubbard opened her bag and took out a small notebook.

Evening shoe (one of a new pair)

Bracelet (costume jewellery)

Diamond ring (found in plate of soup)

Powder compact

Lipstick

Stethoscope

Earrings

Cigarette lighter

Old flannel trousers

Electric lightbulbs

Box of chocolates

Silk scarf (found cut to pieces)

Rucksack (ditto)

Boracic powder

Bath salts

Cookery book

Hercule Poirot drew in a long deep breath.

“Remarkable,” he said, “and quite—quite fascinating.”

He was entranced. He looked from the severe disapproving face of Miss Lemon to the kindly, distressed face of Mrs. Hubbard.

“I congratulate you,” he said warmly to the latter.

She looked startled.

“But why, M. Poirot?”

“I congratulate you on having such a unique and beautiful problem.”

“Well, perhaps it makes sense to you, M. Poirot, but—”

“It does not make sense at all. It reminds me of nothing so much as a round game I was recently persuaded to play by some young friends during the Christmas season. It was called, I understand, the Three Horned Lady. Each person in turn uttered the following phrase, ‘I went to Paris and bought—’ adding some article. The next person repeated that and added a further article and the object of the game was to memorise in their proper order the articles thus enumerated, some of them, I may say, of a most monstrous and ridiculous nature. A piece of soap, a white elephant, a gate-legged table and a Muscovy duck were, I remember, some of the items. The difficulty of memorisation lay, of course, in the totally unrelated nature of the objects—the lack of sequence, so to speak. As in the list you have just shown me. By the time that, say, twelve objects had been mentioned, to enumerate them in their proper order became almost impossible. A failure to do so resulted in a paper horn being handed to the competitor and he or she had to continue the recitation next time in the terms, ‘I, a one horned lady, went to Paris,’ etc. After three horns had been acquired, retirement was compulsory, the last left in was the winner.”

“I’m sure you were the winner, M. Poirot,” said Miss Lemon, with the faith of a loyal employee.

Poirot beamed.

“That was, in fact, so,” he said. “To even the most haphazard assembly of objects one can bring order, and with a little ingenuity, sequence, so to speak. That is: one says to oneself mentally, ‘With a piece of soap I wash the dirt from a large white marble elephant which stands on a gatelegged table’—and so on.”

Mrs. Hubbard said respectfully: “Perhaps you could do the same thing with the list of things I’ve given you.”

“Undoubtedly I could. A lady with her right shoe on, puts a bracelet on her left arm. She then puts on powder and lipstick and goes down to dinner and drops her ring in the soup, and so on—I could thus commit your list to memory—but that is not what we are seeking. Why was such a haphazard collection of things stolen? Is there any system behind it? Some fixed idea of any kind? We have here primarily a process of analysis. The first thing to do is to study the list of objects very carefully.”

There was a silence whilst Poirot applied himself to study. Mrs. Hubbard watched him with the rapt attention of a small boy watching a conjurer, waiting hopefully for a rabbit or at least streams of coloured ribbons to appear. Miss Lemon, unimpressed, withdrew into consideration of the finer points of the system.

When Poirot finally spoke, Mrs. Hubbard jumped.

“The first thing that strikes me is this,” said Poirot. “Of all these things that disappeared, most of them were of small value (some quite negligible) with the exception of two—a stethoscope and a diamond ring. Leaving the stethoscope aside for a moment, I should like to concentrate on the ring. You say a valuable ring—how valuable?”

“Well, I couldn’t say exactly, M. Poirot. It was a solitaire diamond, with a cluster of small diamonds top and bottom. It had been Miss Lane’s mother’s engagement ring, I understand. She was most upset when it was missing, and we were all relieved when it turned up the same evening in Miss Hobhouse’s plate of soup. Just a nasty practical joke, we thought.”

“And so it may have been. But I myself consider that its theft and return are significant. If a lipstick, or a powder compact or a book are missing—it is not sufficient to make you call in the police. But a valuable diamond ring is different. There is every chance that the police will be called in. So the ring is returned.”

“But why take it if you’re going to return it?” said Miss Lemon, frowning.

“Why indeed,” said Poirot. “But for the moment we will leave the questions. I am engaged now on classifying these thefts, and I am taking the ring first. Who is this Miss Lane from whom it was stolen?”

“Patricia Lane? She’s a very nice girl. Going in for a what-do-you-call-it, a diploma in history or archaeology or something.”

“Well off?”

“Oh no. She’s got a little money of her own, but she’s very careful always. The ring, as I say, belonged to her mother. She has one or two nice bits of jewellery but she doesn’t have many new clothes, and she’s given up smoking lately.”

“What is she like? Describe her to me in your own words.”

“Well, she’s sort of betwixt and between in colouring. Rather washed-out looking. Quiet and ladylike, but not much spirit to her. What you’d call rather a—well, an earnest type of girl.”

“And the ring turned up again in Miss Hobhouse’s plate of soup. Who is Miss Hobhouse?”

“Valerie Hobhouse? She’s a clever dark girl with rather a sarcastic way of talking. She works in a beauty parlour. Sabrina Fair—I suppose you have heard of it.”

“Are these two girls friendly?”

Mrs. Hubbard considered.

“I should say so—yes. They don’t have much to do with each other. Patricia gets on well with everybody, I should say, without being particularly popular or anything like that. Valerie Hobhouse has her enemies, her tongue being what it is—but she’s got quite a following too, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I know,” said Poirot.

So Patricia Lane was nice but dull, and Valerie Hobhouse had personality. He resumed his study of the list of thefts.

“What is so intriguing is all the different categories represented here. There are the small trifles that would tempt a girl who was both vain and hard up, the lipstick, the costume jewellery, a powder compact—bath salts—the box of chocolates, perhaps. Then we have the stethoscope, a more likely theft for a man who would know just where to sell it or pawn it. Who did it belong to?”

“It belonged to Mr. Bateson—he’s a big friendly young man.”

“A medical student?”

“Yes.”

“Was he very angry?”

“He was absolutely livid, M. Poirot. He’s got one of those flaring up tempers—say anything at the time, but it’s soon over. He’s not the sort who’d take kindly to having his things pinched.”

“Does anyone?”

"Well, there's Mr. Gopal Ram, one of our Indian students. He smiles at everything. He waves his hand and says material possessions do not matter—"

"Has anything been stolen from him?"

"No."

"Ah! Who did the flannel trousers belong to?"

"Mr. McNabb. Very old they were, and anyone else would say they were done for, but Mr. McNabb is very attached to his old clothes and he never throws anything away."

"So we have come to the things that it would seem were not worth stealing—old flannel trousers, electric lightbulbs, boracic powder, bath salts—a cookery book. They may be important, more likely they are not. The boracic was probably removed by error, someone may have removed a dead bulb and intended to replace it, but forgot—the cookery book may have been borrowed and not returned. Some charwoman may have taken away the trousers."

"We employ two very reliable cleaning women. I'm sure they would neither of them have done such a thing without asking first."

"You may be right. Then there is the evening shoe, one of a new pair, I understand? Who do they belong to?"

"Sally Finch. She's an American girl studying over here on a Fulbright scholarship."

"Are you sure that the shoe has not simply been mislaid? I cannot conceive what use one shoe could be to anyone."

“It wasn’t mislaid, M. Poirot. We all had a terrific hunt. You see Miss Finch was going out to a party in what she calls ‘formal dress’—evening dress to us—and the shoes were really vital—they were her only evening ones.”

“It caused her inconvenience—and annoyance—yes . . . yes, I wonder. Perhaps there is something there. . . .”

He was silent for a moment or two and then went on.

“And there are two more items—a rucksack cut to pieces and a silk scarf in the same state. Here we have something that is neither vanity, nor profit—instead we have something that is deliberately vindictive. Who did the rucksack belong to?”

“Nearly all the students have rucksacks—they all hitchhike a lot, you know. And a great many of the rucksacks are alike—bought at the same place, so it’s hard to identify one from the other. But it seems fairly certain that this one belonged to Leonard Bateson or Colin McNabb.”

“And the silk scarf that was also cut about. To whom did that belong?”

“To Valerie Hobhouse. She had it as a Christmas present—it was emerald green and really good quality.”

“Miss Hobhouse . . . I see.”

Poirot closed his eyes. What he perceived mentally was a kaleidoscope, no more, no less. Pieces of cut-up scarves and rucksacks, cookery books, lipsticks, bath salts; names and thumbnail sketches of odd students. Nowhere was there cohesion or form. Unrelated incidents and people whirled round in space. But Poirot knew quite well that somehow and somewhere there must be a pattern . . . The question was where to start.. . . .

He opened his eyes.

“This is a matter that needs some reflection. A good deal of reflection.”

“Oh, I’m sure it does, M. Poirot,” assented Mrs. Hubbard eagerly. “And I’m sure I didn’t want to trouble you—”

“You are not troubling me. I am intrigued. But whilst I am reflecting, we might make a start on the practical side. A start . . . The shoe, the evening shoe . . . yes, we might make a start there. Miss Lemon.”

“Yes, M. Poirot?” Miss Lemon banished filing from her thoughts, sat even more upright, and reached automatically for pad and pencil.

“Mrs. Hubbard will obtain for you, perhaps, the remaining shoe. Then go to Baker Street Station, to the lost property department. The loss occurred—when?”

Mrs. Hubbard considered.

“Well, I can’t remember exactly now, M. Poirot. Perhaps two months ago. I can’t get nearer than that. But I could find out from Sally Finch the date of the party.”

“Yes. Well——” He turned once more to Miss Lemon. “You can be a little vague. You will say you left a shoe in an Inner Circle train—

that is the most likely—or you may have left it in some other train. Or possibly a bus. How many buses serve the neighbourhood of Hickory Road?”

“Two only, M. Poirot.”

“Good. If you get no results from Baker Street, try Scotland Yard and say it was left in a taxi.”

“Lambeth,” corrected Miss Lemon efficiently.

Poirot waved a hand.

“You always know these things.”

“But why do you think—” began Mrs. Hubbard.

Poirot interrupted her.

“Let us see first what results we get. Then, if they are negative or positive, you and I, Mrs. Hubbard, must consult again. You will tell me then those things which it is necessary that I should know.”

“I really think I’ve told you everything I can.”

“No, no. I disagree. Here we have young people herded together, of varying temperaments, of different sexes. A loves B, but B loves C, and D and E are at daggers drawn because of A perhaps. It is all that I need to know. The interplay of human emotions. The quarrels, the jealousies, the friendships, the malice and all uncharitableness.”

“I’m sure,” said Mrs. Hubbard uncomfortably, “I don’t know anything about that sort of thing. I don’t mix at all. I just run the place and see to the catering and all that.”

“But you are interested in people. You have told me so. You like young people. You took this post, not because it was of much interest financially, but because it would bring you in contact with human problems. There will be those of the students that you like and some that you do not like so well, or indeed at all, perhaps. You will tell me—yes, you will tell me! Because you are worried—not about what has been happening—you could go to the police about that—”

“Mrs. Nicoletis wouldn’t like to have the police in, I assure you.”

Poirot swept on, disregarding the interruption.

“No, you are worried about someone—someone who you think may have been responsible or at least mixed up in this. Someone, therefore, that you like.”

“Really, M. Poirot.”

“Yes, really. And I think you are right to be worried. For that silk scarf cut to pieces, it is not nice. And the slashed rucksack, that also is not nice. For the rest it seems childishness—and yet—I am not sure. I am not sure at all!”

Chapter Three

Hurrying a little as she went up the steps, Mrs. Hubbard inserted her latch key into the door of 26 Hickory Road. Just as the door opened, a big young man with fiery red hair ran up the steps behind her.

“Hallo, Ma,” he said, for in such a fashion did Len Bateson usually address her. He was a friendly soul, with a Cockney accent and mercifully free from any kind of inferiority complex. “Been out gallivanting?”

“I’ve been out to tea, Mr. Bateson. Don’t delay me now, I’m late.”

“I cut up a lovely corpse today,” said Len. “Smashing!”

“Don’t be so horrid, you nasty boy. A lovely corpse, indeed! The idea. You make me feel quite squeamish.”

Len Bateson laughed, and the hall echoed the sound in a great ha ha.

“Nothing to Celia,” he said. “I went along to the Dispensary. ‘Come to tell you about a corpse,’ I said. She went as white as a sheet and I thought she was going to pass out. What do you think of that, Mother Hubbard?”

“I don’t wonder at it,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “The idea! Celia probably thought you meant a real one.”

“What do you mean—a real one? What do you think our corpses are? Synthetic?”

A thin young man with long untidy hair strolled out of a room on the right, and said in a waspish way:

“Oh, it’s only you. I thought it was at least a posse of strong men. The voice is but the voice of one man, but the volume is as the volume of ten.”

“Hope it doesn’t get on your nerves, I’m sure.”

“Not more than usual,” said Nigel Chapman and went back again.

“Our delicate flower,” said Len.

“Now don’t you two scrap,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “Good temper, that’s what I like, and a bit of give and take.”

The big young man grinned down at her affectionately.

“I don’t mind our Nigel, Ma,” he said.

“Oh, Mrs. Hubbard, Mrs. Nicoletis is in her room and said she would like to see you as soon as you got back.”

Mrs. Hubbard sighed and started up the stairs. The tall dark girl who had given the message stood against the wall to let her pass.

Len Bateson, divesting himself of his mackintosh said, “What’s up, Valerie? Complaints of our behaviour to be passed on by Mother Hubbard in due course?”

The girl shrugged her thin elegant shoulders. She came down the stairs and across the hall. “This place gets more like a madhouse every day,” she said over her shoulder.

She went through the door at the right as she spoke. She moved with that insolent effortless grace that is common to those who have been professional mannequins.

Twenty-six Hickory Road was in reality two houses, 24 and 26 semidetached. They had been thrown into one on the ground floor so that there was both a communal sitting room and a large dining room on the ground floor, as well as two cloakrooms and a small office towards the back of the house. Two separate staircases led to the floors above which remained detached. The girls occupied bedrooms in the right-hand side of the house, and the men on the other, the original No. 24.

Mrs. Hubbard went upstairs loosening the collar of her coat. She sighed as she turned in the direction of Mrs. Nicoletis’s room.

She tapped on the door and entered.

“In one of her states again, I suppose,” she muttered.

Mrs. Nicoletis’s sitting room was kept very hot. The big electric fire had all its bars turned on and the window was tightly shut. Mrs. Nicoletis was sitting smoking on a sofa surrounded by a lot of rather dirty silk and velvet sofa cushions. She was a big dark woman, still good-looking, with a bad-tempered mouth and enormous brown eyes.

“Ah! So there you are.” Mrs. Nicoletis made it sound like an accusation.

Mrs. Hubbard, true to her Lemon blood, was unperturbed.

“Yes,” she said tartly, “I’m here. I was told you wanted to see me specially.”

“Yes, indeed I do. It is monstrous, no less, monstrous!”

“What’s monstrous?”

“These bills! Your accounts!” Mrs. Nicoletis produced a sheaf of papers from beneath a cushion in the manner of a successful conjuror. “What are we feeding these miserable students on? Foie gras and quails? Is this the Ritz? Who do they think they are, these students?”

“Young people with a healthy appetite,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “They get a good breakfast and a decent evening meal—plain food but nourishing. It all works out very economically.”

“Economically? Economically? You dare to say that to me? When I am being ruined?”

“You make a very substantial profit, Mrs. Nicoletis, out of this place. For students, the rates are on the high side.”

“But am I not always full? Do I ever have a vacancy that is not applied for three times over? Am I not sent students by the British Council, by London University Lodging Board—by the Embassies—by the French Lycée? Are not there always three applications for every vacancy?”

“That’s very largely because the meals here are appetising and sufficient. Young people must be properly fed.”

"Bah! These totals are scandalous. It is that Italian cook and her husband. They swindle you over the food."

"Oh no, they don't, Mrs. Nicoletis. I can assure you that no foreigner is going to put anything over on me."

"Then it is you yourself—you who are robbing me."

Mrs. Hubbard remained unperturbed.

"I can't allow you to say things like that," she said, in the voice an old-fashioned Nanny might have used to a particularly truculent charge. "It isn't a nice thing to do, and one of these days it will land you in trouble."

"Ah!" Mrs. Nicoletis threw the sheaf of bills dramatically up in the air whence they fluttered to the ground in all directions. Mrs. Hubbard bent and picked them up, pursing her lips. "You enrage me," shouted her employer.

"I dare say," said Mrs. Hubbard, "but it's bad for you, you know, getting all worked up. Tempers are bad for the blood pressure."

"You admit that these totals are higher than those of last week?"

"Of course they are. There's been some very good cut price stuff going at Lampson's Stores. I've taken advantage of it. Next week's totals will be below average."

Mrs. Nicoletis looked sulky.

"You explain everything so plausibly."

“There.” Mrs. Hubbard put the bills in a neat pile on the table. “Anything else?”

“The American girl, Sally Finch, she talks of leaving—I do not want her to go. She is a Fulbright scholar. She will bring here other Fulbright scholars. She must not leave.”

“What’s her reason for leaving?”

Mrs. Nicoletis humped monumental shoulders.

“How can I remember? It was not genuine. I could tell that. I always know.”

Mrs. Hubbard nodded thoughtfully. She was inclined to believe Mrs. Nicoletis on that point.

“Sally hasn’t said anything to me,” she said.

“But you will talk to her?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And if it is these coloured students, these Indians, these Negresses—then they can all go, you understand? The colour bar, it means everything to these Americans—and for me it is the Americans that matter—as for these coloured ones—scram!”

She made a dramatic gesture.

“Not while I’m in charge,” said Mrs. Hubbard coldly. “And anyway, you’re wrong. There’s no feeling of that sort here amongst the students, and Sally certainly isn’t like that. She and Mr.

Akibombo have lunch together quite often, and nobody could be blacker than he is."

"Then it is communists—you know what the Americans are about communists. Nigel Chapman now—he is a communist."

"I doubt it."

"Yes, yes. You should have heard what he was saying the other evening."

"Nigel will say anything to annoy people. He is very tiresome that way."

"You know them all so well. Dear Mrs. Hubbard, you are wonderful! I say to myself again and again—what should I do without Mrs. Hubbard? I rely on you utterly. You are a wonderful, wonderful woman."

"After the powder, the jam," said Mrs. Hubbard.

"What is that?"

"Don't worry. I'll do what I can."

She left the room, cutting short a gushing speech of thanks.

Muttering to herself: "Wasting my time—what a maddening woman she is!" she hurried along the passage and into her own sitting room.

But there was to be no peace for Mrs. Hubbard as yet. A tall figure rose to her feet as Mrs. Hubbard entered and said:

“I should be glad to speak to you for a few minutes, please.”

“Of course, Elizabeth.”

Mrs. Hubbard was rather surprised. Elizabeth Johnston was a girl from the West Indies who was studying law. She was a hard worker, ambitious, who kept very much to herself. She had always seemed particularly well balanced and competent, and Mrs. Hubbard had always regarded her as one of the most satisfactory students in the hostel.

She was perfectly controlled now, but Mrs. Hubbard caught the slight tremor in her voice although the dark features were quite impassive.

“Is something the matter?”

“Yes. Will you come with me to my room, please?”

“Just a moment.” Mrs. Hubbard threw off her coat and gloves and then followed the girl out of the room and up the next flight of stairs. The girl had a room on the top floor. She opened the door and went across to a table near the window.

“Here are the notes of my work,” she said. “This represents several months of hard study. You see what has been done?”

Mrs. Hubbard caught her breath with a slight gasp.

Ink had been spilled on the table. It had run all over the papers, soaking them through. Mrs. Hubbard touched it with her fingertip. It was still wet.

She said, knowing the question to be foolish as she asked it:

“You didn’t spill the ink yourself?”

“No. It was done whilst I was out.”

“Mrs. Biggs, do you think—”

Mrs. Biggs was the cleaning woman who looked after the top-floor bedrooms.

“It was not Mrs. Biggs. It was not even my own ink. That is here on the shelf by my bed. It has not been touched. It was done by someone who brought ink here and did it deliberately.”

Mrs. Hubbard was shocked.

“What a very wicked—and cruel thing to do.”

“Yes, it is a bad thing.”

The girl spoke quietly, but Mrs. Hubbard did not make the mistake of underrating her feelings.

“Well, Elizabeth, I hardly know what to say. I am shocked, badly shocked, and I shall do my utmost to find out who did this wicked malicious thing. You’ve no ideas yourself as to that?”

The girl replied at once.

“This is green ink, you saw that.”

“Yes, I noticed that.”

“It is not very common, this green ink. I know one person here who uses it. Nigel Chapman.”

“Nigel? Do you think Nigel would do a thing like that?”

“I should not have thought so—no. But he writes his letters and his notes with green ink.”

“I shall have to ask a lot of questions. I’m very sorry, Elizabeth, that such a thing should happen in this house and I can only tell you that I shall do my best to get to the bottom of it.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hubbard. There have been—other things, have there not?”

“Yes—er—yes.”

Mrs. Hubbard left the room and started towards the stairs. But she stopped suddenly before proceeding down and instead went along the passage to a door at the end of the corridor. She knocked and the voice of Miss Sally Finch bade her enter.

The room was a pleasant one and Sally Finch herself, a cheerful redhead, was a pleasant person.

She was writing on a pad and looked up with a bulging cheek. She held out an open box of sweets and said indistinctly:

“Candy from home. Have some.”

“Thank you, Sally. Not just now. I’m rather upset.” She paused. “Have you heard what’s happened to Elizabeth Johnston?”

"What's happened to Black Bess?"

The nickname was an affectionate one and had been accepted as such by the girl herself.

Mrs. Hubbard described what had happened. Sally showed every sign of sympathetic anger.

"I'll say that's a mean thing to do. I wouldn't believe anyone would do a thing like that to our Bess. Everybody likes her. She's quiet and doesn't get around much, or join in, but I'm sure there's no one who dislikes her."

"That's what I should have said."

"Well, it's all of a piece, isn't it, with the other things? That's why —"

"That's why what?" Mrs. Hubbard asked as the girl stopped abruptly.

Sally said slowly:

"That's why I'm getting out of here. Did Mrs. Nick tell you?"

"Yes. She was very upset about it. Seemed to think you hadn't given her the real reason."

"Well, I didn't. No point in making her go up in smoke. You know what she's like. But that's the reason, right enough. I just don't like what's going on here. It was odd losing my shoe, and then Valerie's scarf being all cut to bits and Len's rucksack . . . it wasn't so much things being pinched—after all, that may happen any time—it's not nice but it’s roughly normal—but this other isn’t.” She paused for a moment, smiling, and then suddenly grinned. “Akibombo’s scared,” she said. “He’s always very superior and civilised—but there’s a good old West African belief in magic very close to the surface.”

“Tchah!” said Mrs. Hubbard crossly. “I’ve no patience with superstitious nonsense. Just some ordinary human being making a nuisance of themselves. That’s all there is to it.”

Sally’s mouth curved up in a wide catlike grin.

“The emphasis,” she said, “is on ordinary. I’ve a sort of feeling that there’s a person in this house who isn’t ordinary.”

Mrs. Hubbard went on down the stairs. She turned into the students’ common room on the ground floor. There were four people in the room. Valerie Hobhouse, prone on a sofa with her narrow, elegant feet stuck up over the arm of it; Nigel Chapman sitting at a table with a heavy book open in front of him; Patricia Lane leaning against the mantelpiece, and a girl in a mackintosh who had just come in and who was pulling off a woolly cap as Mrs. Hubbard entered. She was a stocky, fair girl with brown eyes set wide apart and a mouth that was usually just a little open so that she seemed perpetually startled.

Valerie, removing a cigarette from her mouth, said in a lazy, drawling voice:

“Hallo, Ma, have you administered soothing syrup to the old devil, our revered proprietress?”

Patricia Lane said:

"Has she been on the warpath?"

"And how?" said Valerie and chuckled.

"Something very unpleasant has happened," said Mrs. Hubbard. "Nigel, I want you to help me."

"Me, ma'am?" Nigel looked at her and shut his book. His thin, malicious face was suddenly illuminated by a mischievous but surprisingly sweet smile. "What have I done?"

"Nothing, I hope," said Mrs. Hubbard. "But ink has been deliberately and maliciously spilt all over Elizabeth Johnston's notes, and it's green ink. You write with green ink, Nigel."

He stared at her, his smile disappearing.

"Yes, I use green ink."

"Horrid stuff," said Patricia. "I wish you wouldn't, Nigel. I've always told you I think it's horribly affected of you."

"I like being affected," said Nigel. "Lilac ink would be even better, I think. I must try and get some. But are you serious, Mum? About the sabotage, I mean?"

"Yes, I am serious. Was it your doing, Nigel?"

"No, of course not. I like annoying people, as you know, but I'd never do a filthy trick like that—and certainly not to Black Bess who minds her own business in a way that's an example to some people I could mention. Where is that ink of mine? I filled my pen yesterday evening, I remember. I usually keep it on the shelf over there.” He sprang up and went across the room. “You’re right. The bottle’s nearly empty. It should be practically full.”

The girl in the mackintosh gave a little gasp.

“Oh dear,” she said. “Oh dear, I don’t like it—”

Nigel wheeled at her accusingly.

“Have you got an alibi, Celia?” he said menacingly.

The girl gave a gasp.

“I didn’t do it. I really didn’t do it. Anyway, I’ve been at the hospital all day. I couldn’t—”

“Now, Nigel,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “Don’t tease Celia.”

Patricia Lane said angrily:

“I don’t see why Nigel should be suspected. Just because his ink was taken—”

Valerie said cattishly:

“That’s right, darling, defend your young.”

“But it’s so unfair—”

“But really I didn’t have anything to do with it,” Celia protested earnestly.

“Nobody thinks you did, infant,” said Valerie impatiently. “All the same, you know,” her eyes met Mrs. Hubbard’s and exchanged a glance, “all this is getting beyond a joke. Something will have to be done about it.”

“Something is going to be done,” said Mrs. Hubbard grimly.

Chapter Four

“Here you are, M. Poirot.”

Miss Lemon laid a small brown paper parcel before Poirot. He removed the paper and looked appraisingly at a well-cut silver evening shoe.

“It was at Baker Street just as you said.”

“That has saved us trouble,” said Poirot. “Also it confirms my ideas.”

“Quite,” said Miss Lemon, who was sublimely incurious by nature.

She was, however, susceptible to the claims of family affection. She said:

“If it is not troubling you too much, M. Poirot, I received a letter from my sister. There have been some new developments.”

“You permit that I read it?”

She handed it to him and, after reading it, he directed Miss Lemon to get her sister on the telephone. Presently Miss Lemon indicated that the connection had been obtained. Poirot took the receiver.

“Mrs. Hubbard?”

“Oh yes, M. Poirot. So kind of you to ring me up so promptly. I was really very—”

Poirot interrupted her.

“Where are you speaking from?”

“Why—from 26 Hickory Road, of course. Oh I see what you mean. I am in my own sitting room.”

“There is an extension?”

“This is the extension. The main phone is downstairs in the hall.”

“Who is in the house who might listen in?”

“All the students are out at this time of day. The cook is out marketing. Geronimo, her husband, understands very little English. There is a cleaning woman, but she is deaf and I’m quite sure wouldn’t bother to listen in.”

“Very good, then. I can speak freely. Do you occasionally have lectures in the evening, or films? Entertainments of some kind?”

“We do have lectures occasionally. Miss Baltrout, the explorer, came not long ago, with her coloured transparencies. And we had an appeal for Far Eastern Missions, though I am afraid that quite a lot of the students went out that night.”

“Ah. Then this evening you will have prevailed on M. Hercule Poirot, the employer of your sister, to come and discourse to your students on the more interesting of his cases.”

“That will be very nice, I’m sure, but do you think—”

“It is not a question of thinking. I am sure!”

That evening, students entering the common room found a notice tacked up on the board which stood just inside the door.

M. Hercule Poirot, the celebrated private detective, has kindly consented to give a talk this evening on the theory and practice of successful detection, with an account of certain celebrated criminal cases.

Returning students made varied comments on this.

“Who’s this private eye?” “Never heard of him.” “Oh, I have. There was a man condemned to death for the murder of a charwoman and this detective got him off at the last moment by finding the real person.” “Sounds crummy to me.” “I think it might be rather fun.” “Colin ought to enjoy it. He’s mad on criminal psychology.” “I would not put it precisely like that, but I’ll not deny that a man who has been closely acquainted with criminals might be interesting to interrogate.”

Dinner was at seven-thirty and most of the students were already seated when Mrs. Hubbard came down from her sitting-room (where sherry had been served to the distinguished guest) followed by a small elderly man with suspiciously black hair and a moustache of ferocious proportions which he twirled continuously.

“These are some of our students, M. Poirot. This is M. Hercule Poirot who is kindly going to talk to us after dinner.”

Salutations were exchanged and Poirot sat down by Mrs. Hubbard and busied himself with keeping his moustaches out of the excellent minestrone which was served by a small active Italian manservant from a big tureen.

This was followed by a piping hot dish of spaghetti and meat balls and it was then that a girl sitting on Poirot's right spoke shyly to him.

"Does Mrs. Hubbard's sister really work for you?"

Poirot turned to her.

"But yes indeed. Miss Lemon has been my secretary for many years. She is the most efficient woman that ever lived. I am sometimes afraid of her."

"Oh I see. I wondered—"

"Now what did you wonder, mademoiselle?"

He smiled upon her in paternal fashion, making a mental note as he did so.

"Pretty, worried, not too quick mentally, frightened . . ." He said:

"May I know your name and what it is you are studying?"

"Celia Austin. I don't study. I'm a dispenser at St. Catherine's Hospital."

"Ah, that is interesting work?"

"Well, I don't know—perhaps it is." She sounded rather uncertain.

"And these others? Can you tell me something about them, perhaps? I understood this was a home for foreign students, but these seem mostly to be English."

"Some of the foreign ones are out. Mr. Chandra Lal and Mr. Gopal Ram—they're Indians—and Miss Reinjeer who's Dutch—and Mr. Achmed Ali who's Egyptian and frightfully political!"

"And those who are here? Tell me about these."

"Well, sitting on Mrs. Hubbard's left is Nigel Chapman. He's studying Medieval History and Italian at London University. Then there's Patricia Lane next to him, with the spectacles. She's taking a diploma in Archaeology. The big red-headed boy is Len Bateson, he's a medical and the dark girl is Valerie Hobhouse, she's in a beauty shop. Next to her is Colin McNabb—he's doing a post-graduate course in Psychiatry."

There was a faint change in her voice as she described Colin. Poirot glanced keenly at her and saw that the colour had come up in her face.

He said to himself:

"So—she is in love and she cannot easily conceal the fact."

He noticed that young McNabb never seemed to look at her across the table, being far too much taken up with his conversation with a laughing red-headed girl beside him.

"That's Sally Finch. She's American—over here on a Fulbright. Then there's Genevieve Maricaud. She's doing English, and so is René Halle who sits next to her. The small fair girl is Jean Tomlinson—she's at St. Catherine's too. She's a physiotherapist. The black man is Akibombo—he comes from West Africa and he's frightfully nice. Then there's Elizabeth Johnston, she's from Jamaica and she's studying law. Next to us on my right are two

Turkish students who came about a week ago. They know hardly any English."

"Thank you. And do you all get on well together? Or do you have quarrels?"

The lightness of his tone robbed the words of seriousness.

Celia said:

"Oh, we're all too busy really to have fights—although—"

"Although what, Miss Austin?"

"Well—Nigel—next to Mrs. Hubbard. He likes stirring people up and making them angry. And Len Bateson gets angry. He gets wild with rage sometimes. But he's very sweet really."

"And Colin McNabb—does he too get annoyed?"

"Oh no. Colin just raises his eyebrows and looks amused."

"I see. And the young ladies, do you have your quarrels?"

"Oh no, we all get on very well. Genevieve has feelings sometimes. I think French people are inclined to be touchy—oh, I mean—I'm sorry—"

Celia was the picture of confusion.

"Me, I am Belgian," said Poirot solemnly. He went on quickly, before Celia could recover control of herself: "What did you mean just now, Miss Austin, when you said that you wondered. You wondered—what?"

She crumbled her bread nervously.

“Oh that—nothing—nothing really—just, there have been some silly practical jokes lately—I thought Mrs. Hubbard—But really it was silly of me. I didn’t mean anything.”

Poirot did not press her. He turned away to Mrs. Hubbard and was presently engaged in a three-cornered conversation with her and with Nigel Chapman, who introduced the controversial challenge that crime was a form of creative art—and that the misfits of society were really the police who only entered that profession because of their secret sadism. Poirot was amused to note that the anxious-looking young woman in spectacles who sat beside him tried desperately to explain away his remarks as fast as he made them. Nigel, however, took absolutely no notice of her.

Mrs. Hubbard looked benignly amused.

“All you young people nowadays think of nothing but politics and psychology,” she said. “When I was a girl we were much more lighthearted. We danced. If you rolled back the carpet in the common room there’s quite a good floor, and you could dance to the wireless, but you never do.”

Celia laughed and said with a tinge of malice:

“But you used to dance, Nigel. I’ve danced with you myself once, though I don’t expect you remember.”

“You’ve danced with me,” said Nigel incredulously. “Where?”

“At Cambridge—in May Week.”

“Oh, May Week!” Nigel waved away the follies of youth.

“One goes through that adolescent phase. Mercifully it soon passes.”

Nigel was clearly not much more than twenty-five now. Poirot concealed a smile in his moustache.

Patricia Lane said earnestly:

“You see, Mrs. Hubbard, there is so much study to be done. With lectures to attend and one’s notes to write up, there’s really not time for anything but what is really worthwhile.”

“Well, my dear, one’s only young once,” said Mrs. Hubbard.

A chocolate pudding succeeded the spaghetti and afterwards they all went into the common room, and helped themselves to coffee from an urn that stood on a table. Poirot was then invited to begin his discourse. The two Turks politely excused themselves. The rest seated themselves and looked expectant.

Poirot rose to his feet and spoke with his usual aplomb. The sound of his own voice was always pleasant to him, and he spoke for three-quarters of an hour in a light and amusing fashion, recalling those of his experiences that lent themselves to an agreeable exaggeration. If he managed to suggest, in a subtle fashion, that he was, perhaps, something of a mountebank, it was not too obviously contrived.

“And so, you see,” he finished, “I say to this city gentleman that I am reminded of a soap manufacturer I knew in Liége who poisoned his wife in order to marry a beautiful blonde secretary. I say it very lightly but at once I get a reaction. He presses upon me the stolen money I had just recovered for him. He goes pale and there is fear in his eyes. ‘I will give this money,’ I say, ‘to a deserving charity.’ ‘Do anything you like with it,’ he says. And I say to him then, and I say it very significantly, ‘It will be advisable, monsieur, to be very careful.’ He nods, speechless, and as I go out, I see that he wipes his forehead. He has had the big fright, and I—I have saved his life. For though he is infatuated with his blonde secretary he will not now try and poison his stupid and disagreeable wife. Prevention, always, is better than cure. We want to prevent murders—not wait until they have been committed.”

He bowed and spread out his hands.

“There, I have wearied you long enough.”

The students clapped him vigorously. Poirot bowed. And then, as he was about to sit down, Colin McNabb took his pipe from between his teeth and observed:

“And now, perhaps, you’ll talk about what you’re really here for!”

There was a momentary silence and then Patricia said reproachfully, “Colin.”

“Well, we can guess, can’t we?” He looked round scornfully. “M. Poirot’s given us a very amusing little talk, but that’s not what he came here for. He’s on the job. You don’t really think, M. Poirot, that we’re not wise to that?”

“You speak for yourself, Colin,” said Sally.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” said Colin.

Again Poirot spread out his hands in a graceful acknowledging gesture.

“I will admit,” he said, “that my kind hostess has confided to me that certain events have caused her—worry.”

Len Bateson got up, his face heavy and truculent.

“Look here,” he said, “what’s all this? Has this been planted on us?”

“Have you really only just tumbled to that, Bateson?” asked Nigel sweetly.

Celia gave a frightened gasp and said: Then I was right!”

Mrs. Hubbard spoke with decisive authority.

“I asked M. Poirot to give us a talk, but I also wanted to ask his advice about various things that have happened lately. Something’s got to be done and it seemed to me that the only other alternative is —the police.”

At once a violent altercation broke out. Genevieve burst into heated French. “It was a disgrace, shameful, to go to the police!” Other voices chimed in, for or against. In a final lull Leonard Bateson’s voice was raised with decision.

“Let’s hear what M. Poirot has to say about our trouble.”

Mrs. Hubbard said:

“I’ve given M. Poirot all the facts. If he wants to ask any questions, I’m sure none of you will object.”

Poirot bowed to her.

“Thank you.” With the air of a conjurer he brought out a pair of evening shoes and handed them to Sally Finch.

“Your shoes, mademoiselle?”

“Why—yes—both of them? Where did the missing one come from?”

“From the Lost Property Office at Baker Street Station.”

“But what made you think it might be there, M. Poirot?”

“A very simple process of deduction. Someone takes a shoe from your room. Why? Not to wear and not to sell. And since the house will be searched by everyone to try and find it, then the shoe must be got out of the house, or destroyed. But it is not so easy to destroy a shoe. The easiest way is to take it in a bus or train in a parcel in the rush hour and leave it thrust down under a seat. That was my first guess and it proved right—so I knew that I was on safe ground—the shoe was taken, as your poet says, ‘to annoy, because he knows it teases.’ ”

Valerie gave a short laugh.

“That points to you, Nigel, my love, with an unerring finger.”

Nigel said, smirking a little, “If the shoe fits, wear it.”

“Nonsense,” said Sally. “Nigel didn’t take my shoe.”

“Of course he didn’t,” said Patricia angrily. “It’s the most absurd idea.”

“I don’t know about absurd,” said Nigel. “Actually I didn’t do anything of the kind—as no doubt we shall all say.”

It was as though Poirot had been waiting for just those words as an actor waits for his cue. His eyes rested thoughtfully on Len Bateson’s flushed face, then they swept inquiringly over the rest of the students.

He said, using his hands in a deliberately foreign gesture:

“My position is delicate. I am a guest here. I have come at the invitation of Mrs. Hubbard—to spend a pleasant evening, that is all. And also, of course, to return a very charming pair of shoes to mademoiselle. For anything further—” he paused. “Monsieur—Bateson? yes, Bateson—has asked me to say what I myself think of this—trouble. But it would be an impertinence for me to speak unless I were invited so to do not by one person alone, but by you all.”

Mr. Akibombo was seen to nod his black curled head in vigorous asseveration.

“That is very correct procedure, yes,” he said. “True democratic proceeding is to put matter to the voting of all present.”

The voice of Sally Finch rose impatiently.

“Oh, shucks,” she said. “This is a kind of party, all friends together. Let’s hear what M. Poirot advises without any more fuss.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Sally,” said Nigel.

Poirot bowed his head.

“Very well,” he said. “Since you all ask me this question, I reply that my advice is quite simple. Mrs. Hubbard—or Mrs. Nicoletis rather—should call in the police at once. No time should be lost.”

Chapter Five

There was no doubt that Poirot's statement was unexpected. It caused not a ripple of protest or comment, but a sudden and uncomfortable silence.

Under cover of that momentary paralysis, Poirot was taken by Mrs. Hubbard up to her own sitting room, with only a quick polite "Good night to you all," to herald his departure.

Mrs. Hubbard switched on the light, closed the door, and begged M. Poirot to take the armchair by the fireplace. Her nice good-humoured face was puckered with doubt and anxiety. She offered her guest a cigarette, but Poirot refused politely, explaining that he preferred his own. He offered her one, but she refused, saying in an abstracted tone: "I don't smoke, M. Poirot."

Then, as she sat down opposite him, she said, after a momentary hesitation:

"I dare say you're right, M. Poirot. Perhaps we should get the police in on this—especially after this malicious ink business. But I rather wish you hadn't said so—right out like that."

"Ah," said Poirot, as he lit one of his tiny cigarettes and watched the smoke ascend. "You think I should have dissembled?"

"Well, I suppose it's nice to be fair and above board about things—but it seems to me it might have been better to keep quiet, and just ask an officer to come round and explain things privately to him. What I mean is, whoever's been doing these stupid things—well, that person's warned now."

“Perhaps, yes.”

“I should say quite certainly,” said Mrs. Hubbard, rather sharply. “No perhaps about it! Even if he’s one of the servants or a student who wasn’t here this evening, the word will get around. It always does.”

“So true. It always does.”

“And there’s Mrs. Nicoletis, too. I really don’t know what attitude she’ll take up. One never does know with her.”

“It will be interesting to find out.”

“Naturally we can’t call in the police unless she agrees—oh, who’s that now?”

There had been a sharp authoritative tap on the door. It was repeated and almost before Mrs. Hubbard had called an irritable “Come in,” the door opened and Colin McNabb, his pipe clenched firmly between his teeth and a scowl on his face, entered the room.

Removing the pipe, and closing the door behind him, he said:

“You’ll excuse me, but I was anxious to just have a word with M. Poirot here.”

“With me?” Poirot turned his head in innocent surprise.

“Ay, with you.” Colin spoke grimly.

He drew up a rather uncomfortable chair and sat squarely on it facing Hercule Poirot.

"You've given us an amusing talk tonight," he said indulgently. "And I'll not deny that you're a man who's had a varied and lengthy experience, but if you'll excuse me for saying so, your methods and your ideas are both equally antiquated."

"Really, Colin," said Mrs. Hubbard, colouring. "You're extremely rude."

"I'm not meaning to give offence, but I've got to make things clear. Crime and Punishment, M. Poirot—that's as far as your horizon stretches."

"They seem to me a natural sequence," said Poirot.

"You take the narrow view of the Law—and what's more, of the Law at its most old-fashioned. Nowadays, even the Law has to keep itself cognisant of the newest and most up-to-date theories of what causes crime. It is the causes that are important, M. Poirot."

"But there," cried Poirot, "to speak in your new-fashioned phrase, I could not agree with you more!"

"Then you've got to consider the cause of what has been happening in this house—you've got to find out why these things have been done."

"But I am still agreeing with you—yes, that is most important."

"Because there always is a reason, and it may be, to the person concerned, a very good reason."

At this point Mrs. Hubbard, unable to contain herself, interjected sharply, "Rubbish."

"That's where you're wrong," said Colin, turning slightly towards her. "You've got to take into account the psychological background."

"Psychological balderdash," said Mrs. Hubbard. "I've no patience with all that sort of talk!"

"That's because you know precisely nothing about it," said Colin, in a gravely rebuking fashion. He returned his gaze to Poirot.

"I'm interested in these subjects. I am at present taking a post-graduate course in psychiatry and psychology. We come across the most involved and astounding cases and what I'm pointing out to you, M. Poirot, is that you can't just dismiss the criminal with a doctrine of original sin, or wilful disregard of the laws of the land. You've got to have an understanding of the root of the trouble if you're ever to effect a cure of the young delinquent. These ideas were not known or thought of in your day and I've no doubt you find them hard to accept—"

"Stealing's stealing," put in Mrs. Hubbard stubbornly.

Colin frowned impatiently.

Poirot said meekly:

"My ideas are doubtless old-fashioned, but I am perfectly prepared to listen to you, Mr. McNabb."

Colin looked agreeably surprised.

"That's very fairly said, M. Poirot. Now I'll try to make this matter clear to you, using very simple terms."

“Thank you,” said Poirot meekly.

“For convenience’s sake, I’ll start with the pair of shoes you brought with you tonight and returned to Sally Finch. If you remember, one shoe was stolen. Only one.”

“I remember being struck by the fact,” said Poirot.

Colin McNabb leaned forward; his dour but handsome features were lit up by eagerness.

“Ah, but you didn’t see the significance of it. It’s one of the prettiest and most satisfying examples anyone could wish to come across. We have here, very definitely, a Cinderella complex. You are maybe acquainted with the Cinderella fairy story.”

“Of French origin—mais oui.”

“Cinderella, the unpaid drudge, sits by the fire; her sisters, dressed in their finery, go to the Prince’s ball. A Fairy Godmother sends Cinderella too, to that ball. At the stroke of midnight, her finery turns back to rags—she escapes hurriedly, leaving behind her one slipper. So here we have a mind that compares itself to Cinderella (unconsciously, of course). Here we have frustration, envy, the sense of inferiority. The girl steals a slipper. Why?”

“A girl?”

“But naturally, a girl. That,” said Colin reprovingly, “should be clear to the meanest intelligence.”

“Really, Colin!” said Mrs. Hubbard.

"Pray continue," said Poirot courteously.

"Probably she herself does not know why she does it—but the inner wish is clear. She wants to be the Princess, to be identified by the Prince and claimed by him. Another significant fact, the slipper is stolen from an attractive girl who is going to a ball."

Colin's pipe had long since gone out. He waved it now with mounting enthusiasm.

"And now we'll take a few of the other happenings. A magpie acquiring of pretty things—all things associated with attractive femininity. A powder compact, lipsticks, earrings, a bracelet, a ring—there is a two-fold significance here. The girl wants to be noticed. She wants, even, to be punished—as is frequently the case with very young juvenile delinquents. These things are none of them what you could call ordinary criminal thefts. It is not the value of these things that is wanted. In just such a way do well-to-do women go into department stores and steal things they could perfectly well afford to pay for."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Hubbard belligerently. "Some people are just plain dishonest, that's all there is to it."

"Yet a diamond ring of some value was amongst the things stolen," said Poirot, ignoring Mrs. Hubbard's interpolation.

"That was returned."

"And surely, Mr. McNabb, you would not say that a stethoscope is a feminine pretty pretty?"

“That had a deeper significance. Women who feel they are deficient in feminine attraction can find sublimation in the pursuit of a career.”

“And the cookery book?”

“A symbol of home life, husband and family.”

“And boracic powder?”

Colin said irritably:

“My dear M. Poirot. Nobody would steal boracic powder! Why should they?”

“This is what I have asked myself. I must admit, M. McNabb, that you seem to have an answer for everything. Explain to me, then, the significance of the disappearance of an old pair of flannel trousers—your flannel trousers, I understand.”

For the first time Colin appeared ill at ease. He blushed and cleared his throat.

“I could explain that—but it would be somewhat involved, and perhaps—er well, rather embarrassing.”

“Ah, you spare my blushes.”

Suddenly Poirot leaned forward and tapped the young man on the knee.

“And the ink that is spilt over another student’s papers, the silk scarf that is cut and slashed. Do these things cause you no disquietude?”

The complacence and superiority of Colin’s manner underwent a sudden and not unlikeable change.

“They do,” he said. “Believe me, they do. It’s serious. She ought to have treatment—at once. But medical treatment, that’s the point. It’s not a case for the police. She’s all tied up in knots. If I. . . .”

Poirot interrupted him.

“You know then who she is?”

“Well, I have a very strong suspicion.”

Poirot murmured with the air of one who is recapitulating:

“A girl who is not outstandingly successful with the other sex. A shy girl. An affectionate girl. A girl whose brain is inclined to be slow in its reactions. A girl who feels frustrated and lonely. A girl. . . .”

There was a tap on the door. Poirot broke off. The tap was repeated.

“Come in,” said Mrs. Hubbard.

The door opened and Celia Austin came in.

“Ah,” said Poirot, nodding his head. “Exactly. Miss Celia Austin.”

Celia looked at Colin with agonised eyes.

“I didn’t know you were here,” she said breathlessly. “I came—I came. . . .”

She took a deep breath and rushed to Mrs. Hubbard.

“Please, please don’t send for the police. It’s me. I’ve been taking those things. I don’t know why. I can’t imagine. I didn’t want to. It just—it just came over me.” She whirled round on Colin. “So now you know what I’m like . . . and I suppose you’ll never speak to me again. I know I’m awful. . . .”

“Och! not a bit of it,” said Colin. His rich voice was warm and friendly. “You’re just a bit mixed up, that’s all. It’s just a kind of illness you’ve had, from not looking at things clearly. If you’ll trust me, Celia, I’ll soon be able to put you right.”

“Oh Colin—really?”

Celia looked at him with unconcealed adoration.

“I’ve been so dreadfully worried.”

He took her hand in a slightly avuncular manner.

“Well, there’s no need to worry any more.” Rising to his feet he drew Celia’s hand through his arm and looked sternly at Mrs. Hubbard.

“I hope now,” he said, “that there’ll be no more foolish talk of calling in the police. Nothing’s been stolen of any real worth, and what has been taken Celia will return.”

“I can’t return the bracelet and the powder compact,” said Celia anxiously. “I pushed them down a gutter. But I’ll buy new ones.”

“And the stethoscope?” said Poirot. “Where did you put that?”

Celia flushed.

“I never took any stethoscope. What should I want with a silly old stethoscope?” Her flush deepened. “And it wasn’t me who spilt ink all over Elizabeth’s papers. I’d never do a—malicious thing like that.”

“Yet you cut and slashed Miss Hobhouse’s scarf, mademoiselle.”

Celia looked uncomfortable. She said rather uncertainly:

“That was different. I mean—Valerie didn’t mind.”

“And the rucksack?”

“Oh, I didn’t cut that up. That was just temper.”

Poirot took out the list he had copied from Mrs. Hubbard’s little book.

“Tell me,” he said, “and this time it must be the truth. What are you or are you not responsible for of these happenings?”

Celia glanced down the list and her answer came at once.

“I don’t know anything about the rucksack, or the electric lightbulbs, or boracic or bath salts, and the ring was just a mistake. When I realised it was valuable I returned it.”

“I see.”

“Because really I didn’t mean to be dishonest. It was only—”

“Only what?”

A faintly wary look came into Celia’s eyes.

“I don’t know—really I don’t. I’m all mixed up.”

Colin cut in in a peremptory manner.

“I’ll be thankful if you’ll not catechise her. I can promise you that there will be no recurrence of this business. From now on I’ll definitely make myself responsible for her.”

“Oh, Colin, you are good to me.”

“I’d like you to tell me a great deal about yourself, Celia. Your early home life, for instance. Did your father and mother get on well together?”

“Oh no, it was awful—at home—”

“Precisely. And—”

Mrs. Hubbard cut in. She spoke with the voice of authority.

“That will do now, both of you. I’m glad, Celia, that you’ve come and owned up. You’ve caused a great deal of worry and anxiety, though, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. But I’ll say this. I accept your word that you didn’t spill ink deliberately on Elizabeth’s notes. I don’t believe you’d do a thing like that. Now take yourself off, you and Colin. I’ve had enough of you both for this evening.”

As the door closed behind them, Mrs. Hubbard drew a deep breath.

“Well,” she said. “What do you think of that?”

There was a twinkle in Hercule Poirot's eye. He said:

"I think—that we have assisted at a love scene—modern style."

Mrs. Hubbard made an ejaculation of disapproval.

"Autres temps, autres mæurs," murmured Poirot. "In my young days the young men lent the girls books on theosophy or discussed Maeterlinck's 'Bluebird.' All was sentiment and high ideals. Nowadays it is the maladjusted lives and the complexes which bring a boy and girl together."

"All such nonsense," said Mrs. Hubbard.

Poirot dissented.

"No, it is not all nonsense. The underlying principles are sound enough—but when one is an earnest young researcher like Colin one sees nothing but complexes and the victim's unhappy home life."

"Celia's father died when she was four years old," said Mrs. Hubbard. "And she's had a very agreeable childhood with a nice but stupid mother."

"Ah, but she is wise enough not to say so to the young McNabb! She will say what he wants to hear. She is very much in love."

"Do you believe all this hooey, M. Poirot?"

"I do not believe that Celia had a Cinderella complex or that she stole things without knowing what she was doing. I think she took the risk of stealing unimportant trifles with the object of attracting the attention of the earnest Colin McNabb—in which object she has been successful. Had she remained a pretty, shy, ordinary girl he might never have looked at her. In my opinion," said Poirot, "a girl is entitled to attempt desperate measures to get her man."

"I shouldn't have thought she had the brains to think it up," said Mrs. Hubbard.

Poirot did not reply. He frowned. Mrs. Hubbard went on:

"So the whole thing's been a mare's nest! I really do apologise, M. Poirot, for taking up your time over such a trivial business. Anyway, all's well that ends well."

"No, no." Poirot shook his head. "I do not think we are at the end yet. We have cleared out of the way something rather trivial that was at the front of the picture. But there are things still that are not explained; and me, I have the impression that we have here something serious—really serious."

"Oh, M. Poirot, do you really think so?"

"It is my impression . . . I wonder, madame, if I could speak to Miss Patricia Lane. I would like to examine the ring that was stolen."

"Why, of course, M. Poirot. I'll go down and send her up to you. I want to speak to Len Bateson about something."

Patricia Lane came in shortly afterwards with an inquiring look on her face.

"I am so sorry to disturb you, Miss Lane."

"Oh, that's all right. I wasn't busy. Mrs. Hubbard said you wanted to see my ring."

She slipped it off her finger and held it out to him.

"It's quite a large diamond really, but of course it's an old-fashioned setting. It was my mother's engagement ring."

Poirot, who was examining the ring, nodded his head.

"She is alive still, your mother?"

"No. Both my parents are dead."

"That is sad."

"Yes. They were both very nice people but somehow I was never quite so close to them as I ought to have been. One regrets that afterwards. My mother wanted a frivolous pretty daughter, a daughter who was fond of clothes and social things. She was very disappointed when I took up archaeology."

"You have always been of a serious turn of mind?"

"I think so, really. One feels life is so short one ought really to be doing something worthwhile."

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully.

Patricia Lane was, he guessed, in her early thirties. Apart from a smear of lipstick, carelessly applied, she wore no makeup. Her mouse-coloured hair was combed back from her face and arranged without artifice. Her quite pleasant blue eyes looked at you seriously through glasses.

“No allure, bon Dieu,” said Poirot to himself with feeling. “And her clothes! What is it they say? Dragged through a hedge backwards? Ma foi, that expresses it exactly!”

He was disapproving. He found Patricia’s well-bred unaccented tones wearisome to the ear. “She is intelligent and cultured, this girl,” he said to himself, “and, alas, every year she will grow more boring! In old age—” His mind darted for a fleeting moment to the memory of Countess Vera Rossakoff. What exotic splendour there, even in decay! These girls of nowadays—

“But that is because I grow old,” said Poirot to himself. “Even this excellent girl may appear a veritable Venus to some man.” But he doubted that.

Patricia was saying:

“I’m really very shocked about what happened to Bess—to Miss Johnston. Using that green ink seems to me to be a deliberate attempt to make it look as though it was Nigel’s doing. But I do assure you, M. Poirot, Nigel would never do a thing like that.”

“Ah.” Poirot looked at her with more interest. She had become flushed and quite eager.

“Nigel’s not easy to understand,” she said earnestly. “You see, he had a very difficult home life as a child.”

“Mon Dieu, another of them!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. You were saying—”

“About Nigel. His being difficult. He’s always had the tendency to go against authority of any kind. He’s very clever—brilliant really, but I must admit that he sometimes has a very unfortunate manner. Sneering—you know. And he’s much too scornful ever to explain or defend himself. Even if everybody in this place thinks he did that trick with the ink, he won’t go out of his way to say he didn’t. He’ll just say, ‘Let them think it if they want to.’ And that attitude is really so utterly foolish.”

“It can be misunderstood, certainly.”

“It’s a kind of pride, I think. Because he’s been so much misunderstood always.”

“You have known him for many years?”

“No, only for about a year. We met on a tour of the Châteaux of the Loire. He went down with flu which turned to pneumonia and I nursed him through it. He’s very delicate and he takes absolutely no care of his own health. In some ways, in spite of his being so independent, he needs looking after like a child. He really needs someone to look after him.”

Poirot sighed. He felt, suddenly, very tired of love . . . First there had been Celia, with the adoring eyes of a spaniel. And now here was Patricia looking like an earnest Madonna. Admittedly there must be love, young people must meet and pair off, but he, Poirot, was mercifully past all that. He rose to his feet.

“Will you permit me, mademoiselle, to retain your ring? It shall be returned to you tomorrow without fail.”

“Certainly, if you like,” said Patricia, rather surprised.

“You are very kind. And please, mademoiselle, be careful.”

“Careful? Careful of what?”

“I wish I knew,” said Hercule Poirot.

He was still worried.

Chapter Six

The following day Mrs. Hubbard found exasperating in every particular. She had awoken with a considerable sense of relief. The nagging doubt about recent occurrences was at last relieved. A silly girl, behaving in that silly modern fashion (with which Mrs. Hubbard had no patience) had been responsible. And from now on, order would reign.

Descending to breakfast in this comfortable assurance, Mrs. Hubbard found her newly attained ease menaced. The students chose this particular morning to be particularly trying, each in his or her way.

Mr. Chandra Lal who had heard of the sabotage to Elizabeth's papers became excited and voluble. "Oppression," he spluttered, "deliberate oppression of native races. Contempt and prejudice, colour prejudice. It is here well authenticated example."

"Now, Mr. Chandra Lal," said Mrs. Hubbard sharply. "You've no call to say anything of that kind. Nobody knows who did it or why it was done."

"Oh but, Mrs. Hubbard, I thought Celia had come to you herself and really faced up," said Jean Tomlinson. "I thought it splendid of her. We must all be very kind to her."

"Must you be so revoltingly pi, Jean," demanded Valerie Hobhouse angrily.

"I think that's a very unkind thing to say."

“Faced up,” said Nigel, with a shudder. “Such an utterly revolting term.”

“I don’t see why. The Oxford Group use it and—”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, have we got to have the Oxford Group for breakfast?”

“What’s all this, Ma? It is Celia who’s been pinching those things, do you say? Is that why she’s not down to breakfast?”

“I do not understand, please,” said Mr. Akibombo.

Nobody enlightened him. They were all too anxious to say their own piece.

“Poor kid,” Len Bateson went on. “Was she hard up or something?”

“I’m not really surprised, you know,” said Sally slowly. “I always had a sort of idea. . . .”

“You are saying that it was Celia who spilt ink on my notes?” Elizabeth Johnston looked incredulous. “That seems to be surprising and hardly credible.”

“Celia did not throw ink on your work,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “And I wish you would all stop discussing this. I meant to tell you all quietly later but—”

“But Jean was listening outside the door last night,” said Valerie.

“I was not listening. I just happened to go—”

“Come now, Bess,” said Nigel. “You know quite well who spilt the ink. I, said bad Nigel, with my little green phial, I spilt the ink.”

“He didn’t. He’s only pretending. Oh, Nigel, how can you be so stupid?”

“I’m being noble and shielding you, Pat. Who borrowed my ink yesterday morning? You did.”

“I do not understand, please,” said Mr. Akibombo.

“You don’t want to,” Sally told him. “I’d keep right out of it if I were you.”

Mr. Chandra Lal rose to his feet.

“You ask why is the Mau Mau? You ask why does Egypt resent the Suez Canal?”

“Oh, hell!” said Nigel violently, and crashed his cup down on his saucer. “First the Oxford Group and now politics! At breakfast! I’m going.”

He pushed back his chair violently and left the room.

“There’s a cold wind. Do take your coat.” Patricia rushed after him.

“Cluck, cluck, cluck,” said Valerie unkindly. “She’ll grow feathers and flap her wings soon.”

The French girl, Genevieve, whose English was as yet not equal to following rapid exchanges of English, had been listening to explanations hissed into her ear by René. She now burst into rapid French, her voice rising to a scream.

"Comment donc? C'est cette petite qui m'a volé mon compact? Ah, par example! J'irai à la police. Je ne supporterai pas une pareille. . . ."

Colin McNabb had been attempting to make himself heard for some time, but his deep superior drawl had been drowned by the higher pitched voices. Abandoning his superior attitude he now brought down his fist with a heavy crash on the table and startled everyone into silence. The marmalade pot skidded off the table and broke.

"Will you hold your tongues, all of you, and hear me speak. I've never heard more crass ignorance and unkindness! Don't any of you have even a nodding acquaintance with psychology? The girl's not to be blamed, I tell you. She's been going through a severe emotional crisis and she needs treating with the utmost sympathy and care—or she may remain unstable for life. I'm warning you. The utmost care—that's what she needs."

"But after all," said Jean, in a clear, priggish voice, "although I quite agree about being kind—we oughtn't to condone that sort of thing, ought we? Stealing, I mean."

"Stealing," said Colin. "This wasn't stealing. Och! You make me sick—all of you."

"Interesting case, is she, Colin?" said Valerie, and grinned at him.

"If you're interested in the workings of the mind, yes."

“Of course, she didn’t take anything of mine,” began Jean, “but I do think—”

“No, she didn’t take anything of yours,” said Colin, turning to scowl at her. “And if you knew in the least what that meant you’d maybe not be too pleased about it.”

“Really, I don’t see—”

“Oh, come on, Jean,” said Len Bateson. “Let’s stop nagging and nattering. I’m going to be late and so are you.”

They went out together. “Tell Celia to buck up,” he said over his shoulder.

“I should like to make formal protest,” said Mr. Chandra Lal. “Boracic powder, very necessary for my eyes which much inflamed by study, was removed.”

“And you’ll be late too, Mr. Chandra Lal,” said Mrs. Hubbard firmly.

“My professor is often unpunctual,” said Mr. Chandra Lal gloomily, but moving towards the door. “Also, he is irritable and unreasonable when I ask many questions of searching nature.”

“Mais il faut qu’elle me le rende, ce compact,” said Genevieve.

“You must speak English, Genevieve—you’ll never learn English if you go back into French whenever you’re excited. And you had Sunday dinner in this week and you haven’t paid me for it.”

“Ah, I have not my purse just now. Tonight—Viens, René, nous serons en retard.”

“Please,” said Mr. Akibombo, looking round him beseechingly. “I do not understand.”

“Come along, Akibombo,” said Sally. “I’ll tell you about it on the way to the Institute.”

She nodded reassuringly to Mrs. Hubbard and steered the bewildered Akibombo out of the room.

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Hubbard, drawing a deep breath. “Why in the world I ever took this job on!”

Valerie, who was the only person left, grinned in a friendly fashion.

“Don’t worry, Ma,” she said. “It’s a good thing it’s all come out. Everyone was getting on the jumpy side.”

“I must say I was very surprised.”

“That it turned out to be Celia?”

“Yes. Weren’t you?”

Valerie said in a rather absent voice:

“Rather obvious, really, I should have thought.”

“Have you been thinking so all along?”

“Well, one or two things made me wonder. At any rate she’s got Colin where she wants him.”

"Yes. I can't help feeling that it's wrong."

"You can't get a man with a gun," Valerie laughed. "But a spot of kleptomania does the trick? Don't worry, Mum. And for God's sake make Celia give Genevieve back her compact, otherwise we shall never have any peace at meals."

Mrs. Hubbard said with a sigh:

"Nigel has cracked his saucer and the marmalade pot is broken."

"Hell of a morning, isn't it?" said Valerie. She went out. Mrs. Hubbard heard her voice in the hall saying cheerfully:

"Good morning, Celia. The coast's clear. All is known and all is going to be forgiven—by order of Pious Jean. As for Colin, he's been roaring like a lion on your behalf."

Celia came into the dining room. Her eyes were reddened with crying.

"Oh, Mrs. Hubbard."

"You're very late, Celia. The coffee's cold and there's not much left to eat."

"I didn't want to meet the others."

"So I gather. But you've got to meet them sooner or later."

"Oh, yes, I know, But I thought—by this evening—it would be easier. And of course I shan't stop here. I'll go at the end of the week."

Mrs. Hubbard frowned.

“I don’t think there’s any need for that. You must expect a little unpleasantness—that’s only fair—but they’re generous-minded young people on the whole. Of course you’ll have to make reparation as far as possible.”

Celia interrupted her eagerly.

“Oh, yes, I’ve got my cheque book here. That’s one of the things I wanted to say to you.” She looked down. She was holding a cheque book and an envelope in her hand. “I’d written to you in case you weren’t about when I got down, to say how sorry I was and I meant to put in a cheque, so that you could square up with people—but my pen ran out of ink.”

“We’ll have to make a list.”

“I have—as far as possible. But I don’t know whether to try and buy new things or just to give the money.”

“I’ll think it over. It’s difficult to say offhand.”

“Oh, but do let me give you a cheque now. I’d feel so much better.”

About to say uncompromisingly “Really? And why should you be allowed to make yourself feel better?” Mrs. Hubbard reflected that since the students were always short of ready cash, the whole affair would be more easily settled that way. It would also placate Genevieve who otherwise might make trouble with Mrs. Nicoletis. (There would be trouble enough there anyway).

"All right," she said. She ran her eye down the list of objects. "It's difficult to say how much offhand—"

Celia said eagerly, "Let me give you a cheque for what you think roughly and then you find out from people and I can take some back or give you more."

"Very well." Mrs. Hubbard tentatively mentioned a sum which gave, she considered, ample margin, and Celia agreed at once. She opened the cheque book.

"Oh, bother my pen." She went over to the shelves where odds and ends were kept belonging to various students. "There doesn't seem to be any ink here except Nigel's awful green. Oh, I'll use that. Nigel won't mind. I must remember to get a new bottle of Quink when I go out."

She filled the pen and came back and wrote out the cheque.

Giving it to Mrs. Hubbard, she glanced at her watch.

"I shall be late. I'd better not stop for breakfast."

"Now, you'd better have something, Celia—even if it's only a bit of bread and butter—no good going out on an empty stomach. Yes, what is it?"

Geronimo, the Italian manservant, had come into the room and was making emphatic gestures with his hands, his wizened, monkeylike face screwed up in a comical grimace.

"The padrona, she just come in. She want to see you." He added, with a final gesture, "She plenty mad."

“I’m coming.”

Mrs. Hubbard left the room while Celia hurriedly began hacking a piece off the loaf.

Mrs. Nicoletis was walking up and down her room in a fairly good imitation of a tiger at the Zoo near feeding time.

“What is this I hear?” she burst out. “You send for the police? Without a word to me? Who do you think you are? My God, who does the woman think she is?”

“I did not send for the police.”

“You are a liar.”

“Now then, Mrs. Nicoletis, you can’t talk to me like that.”

“Oh no. Certainly not! It is I who am wrong. Not you. Always me. Everything you do is perfect. Police in my respectable hostel.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” said Mrs. Hubbard, recalling various unpleasant incidents. “There was that West Indian student who was wanted for living on immoral earnings and the notorious young Communist agitator who came here under a false name—and—”

“Ah! You throw that in my teeth? Is it my fault that people come here and lie to me and have forged papers and are wanted to assist the police in murder cases? And you reproach me for what I have suffered!”

“I’m doing nothing of the kind. I only point out that it wouldn’t be exactly a novelty to have the police here—I dare say it’s inevitable with a mixed lot of students. But the fact is that no one has ‘called in the police.’ A private detective with a big reputation happened to dine here as my guest last night. He gave a very interesting talk on criminology to the students.”

“As if there were any need to talk about criminology to our students! They know quite enough already. Enough to steal and destroy and sabotage as they like! And nothing is done about it—nothing!”

“I have done something about it.”

“Yes, you have told this friend of yours all about our most intimate affair. That is a gross breach of confidence.”

“Not at all. I’m responsible for running this place. I’m glad to tell you the matter is now cleared up. One of the students has confessed that she has been responsible for most of these happenings.”

“Dirty little cat,” said Mrs. Nicoletis. “Throw her into the street.”

“She is ready to leave of her own accord and she is making full reparation.”

“What is the good of that? My beautiful Students’ Home will now have a bad name. No one will come.” Mrs. Nicoletis sat down on the sofa and burst into tears. “Nobody thinks of my feelings,” she sobbed. “It is abominable, the way I am treated. Ignored! Thrust aside! If I were to die tomorrow, who would care?”

Wisely leaving this question unanswered, Mrs. Hubbard left the room.

“May the Almighty give me patience,” said Mrs. Hubbard to herself, and went down to the kitchen to interview Maria.

Maria was sullen and uncooperative. The word “police” hovered unspoken in the air.

“It is I who will be accused. I and Geronimo—the povero. What justice can you expect in a foreign land? No, I cannot cook the risotto as you suggest—they send the wrong rice. I make you instead the spaghetti.”

“We had spaghetti last night.”

“It does not matter. In my country we eat the spaghetti every day—every single day. The pasta, it is good all the time.”

“Yes, but you’re in England now.”

“Very well then, I make the stew. The English stew. You will not like it but I make it—pale—pale—with the onions boiled in much water instead of cooked in the oil—and pale meat on cracked bones.”

Maria spoke so menacingly that Mrs. Hubbard felt she was listening to an account of a murder.

“Oh, cook what you like,” she said angrily, and left the kitchen.

By six o’clock that evening, Mrs. Hubbard was once more her efficient self again. She had put notes in all the students’ rooms asking them to come and see her before dinner, and when the various summonses were obeyed, she explained that Celia had asked her to arrange matters. They were all, she thought, very nice about it. Even Genevieve, softened by a generous estimate of the value of her compact, said cheerfully that all would be sans rancune and added with a wise air, “One knows that these crises of the nerves occur. She is rich, this Celia, she does not need to steal. No, it is a storm in her head. M. McNabb is right there.”

Len Bateson drew Mrs. Hubbard aside as she came down when the dinner bell rang.

“I’ll wait for Celia out in the hall,” he said, “and bring her in. So that she sees it’s all right.”

“That’s very nice of you, Len.”

“That’s OK, Ma.”

In due course, as soup was being passed round, Len’s voice was heard booming from the hall.

“Come along in, Celia. All friends here.”

Nigel remarked waspishly to his soup plate:

“Done his good deed for the day!” but otherwise controlled his tongue and waved a hand of greeting to Celia as she came in with Len’s large arm passed round her shoulders.

There was a general outburst of cheerful conversation on various topics and Celia was appealed to by one and the other.

Almost inevitably this manifestation of goodwill died away into a doubtful silence. It was then that Mr. Akibombo turned a beaming face towards Celia and, leaning across the table, said:

“They have explained me good now all that I did not understand. You very clever at steal things. Long time nobody know. Very clever.”

At this point Sally Finch, gasping out, “Akibombo, you’ll be the death of me,” had such a severe choke that she had to go out in the hall to recover. And the laughter broke out in a thoroughly natural fashion.

Colin McNabb came in late. He seemed reserved and even more uncommunicative than usual. At the close of the meal and before the others had finished he got up and said in an embarrassed mumble:

“Got to go out and see someone. Like to tell you all first. Celia and I—hope to get married next year when I’ve done my course.”

The picture of blushing misery, he received the congratulations and jeering catcalls of his friends and finally escaped, looking terribly sheepish. Celia, on the other hand, was pink and composed.

“Another good man gone west,” sighed Len Bateson.

“I’m so glad, Celia,” said Patricia. “I hope you’ll be very happy.”

“Everything in the garden is now perfect,” said Nigel. “Tomorrow we’ll bring some chianti in and drink your health. Why is our dear Jean looking so grave? Do you disapprove of marriage, Jean?”

“Of course not, Nigel.”

“I always think it’s so much better than free love, don’t you? Nicer for the children. Looks better on their passports.”

“But the mother should not be too young,” said Genevieve. “They tell one that in the physiology classes.”

“Really, dear,” said Nigel, “you’re not suggesting that Celia’s below the age of consent or anything like that, are you? She’s free, white, and twenty-one.”

“That,” said Mr. Chandra Lal, “is a most offensive remark.”

“No, no, Mr. Chandra Lal,” said Patricia. “It’s just a—a kind of idiom. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I do not understand,” said Mr. Akibombo. “If a thing does not mean anything, why should it be said?”

Elizabeth Johnston said suddenly, raising her voice a little:

“Things are sometimes said that do not seem to mean anything but they may mean a good deal. No, it is not your American quotation I mean. I am talking of something else.” She looked round the table. “I am talking of what happened yesterday.”

Valerie said sharply:

“What’s up, Bess?”

“Oh, please,” said Celia. “I think—I really do—that by tomorrow everything will be cleared up. I really mean it. The ink on your papers, and that silly business of the rucksack. And if—if the person owns up, like I’ve done, then everything will be cleared up.”

She spoke earnestly, with a flushed face, and one or two people looked at her curiously.

Valerie said with a short laugh:

“And we’ll all live happy ever afterwards.”

Then they got up and went into the common room. There was quite a little competition to give Celia her coffee. Then the wireless was turned on, some students left to keep appointments or to work and finally the inhabitants of 24 and 26 Hickory Road got to bed.

It had been, Mrs. Hubbard reflected, as she climbed gratefully between the sheets, a long wearying day.

“But thank goodness,” she said to herself. “It’s all over now.”

Chapter Seven

Miss Lemon was seldom, if ever, unpunctual. Fog, storm, epidemic of flu, transport breakdowns—none of these things seemed to affect that remarkable woman. But this morning Miss Lemon arrived, breathless, at five minutes past ten instead of on the stroke of ten o'clock. She was profusely apologetic and for her, quite ruffled.

“I'm extremely sorry, M. Poirot—really extremely sorry. I was just about to leave the flat when my sister rang up.”

“Ah, she is in good health and spirits, I trust?”

“Well, frankly no.” Poirot looked inquiring. “In fact, she's very distressed. One of the students has committed suicide.”

Poirot stared at her. He muttered something softly under his breath.

“I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?”

“What is the name of the student?”

“A girl called Celia Austin.”

“How?”

“They think she took morphia.”

“Could it have been an accident?”

“Oh no. She left a note, it seems.”

Poirot said softly, “It was not this I expected, no, it was not this . . . and yet it is true, I expected something.”

He looked up to find Miss Lemon at attention, waiting with pencil poised above her pad. He sighed and shook his head.

“No, I will hand you here this morning’s mail. File them, please, and answer what you can. Me, I shall go round to Hickory Road.”

Geronimo let Poirot in, and recognising him as the honoured guest of two nights before, became at once voluble in a sibilant conspiratorial whisper.

“Ah, signor, it is you. We have here the trouble—the big trouble. The little signorina, she is dead in her bed this morning. First the doctor come. He shake his head. Now comes an inspector of the police. He is upstairs with the signora and the padrona. Why should she wish to kill herself, the poverina? When last night is so gay and the betrothment is made?”

“Betrothment?”

“Si, si. To Mr. Colin—you know—big, dark, always smoke the pipe.”

“I know.”

Geronimo opened the door of the common room and introduced Poirot into it with a redoublement of the conspiratorial manner.

“You stay here, yes? Presently, when the police go, I tell the signora you are here. That is good, yes?”

Poirot said that it was good and Geronimo withdrew. Left to himself, Poirot, who had no scruples of delicacy, made as minute an examination as possible of everything in the room with special attention to everything belonging to the students. His rewards were mediocre. The students kept most of their belongings and personal papers in their bedrooms.

Upstairs, Mrs. Hubbard was sitting facing Inspector Sharpe, who was asking questions in a soft apologetic voice. He was a big comfortable looking man with a deceptively mild manner.

“It’s very awkward and distressing for you, I know,” he said soothingly. “But you see, as Dr. Coles has already told you, there will have to be an inquest, and we have just to get the picture right, so to speak. Now this girl had been distressed and unhappy lately, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Love affair?”

“Not exactly.” Mrs. Hubbard hesitated.

“You’d better tell me, you know,” said Inspector Sharpe, persuasively. “As I say, we’ve got to get the picture. There was a reason, or she thought there was, for taking her own life? Any possibility that she might have been pregnant?”

“It wasn’t that kind of thing at all. I hesitated, Inspector Sharpe, simply because the child had done some very foolish things and I hoped it wouldn’t be necessary to bring them out in the open.”

Inspector Sharpe coughed.

“We have a good deal of discretion, and the coroner is a man of wide experience. But we have to know.”

“Yes, of course. I was being foolish. The truth is that for some time past, three months or more, things have been disappearing—small things, I mean—nothing very important.”

“Trinkets, you mean, finery, nylon stockings and all that? Money, too?”

“No money as far as I know.”

“Ah. And this girl was responsible?”

“Yes.”

“You’d caught her at it?”

“Not exactly. The night before last a—er—a friend of mine came to dine. A M. Hercule Poirot—I don’t know if you know the name.”

Inspector Sharpe had looked up from his notebook. His eyes had opened rather wide. It happened that he did know that name.

“M. Hercule Poirot?” he said. “Indeed? Now that’s very interesting.”

“He gave us a little talk after dinner and the subject of these thefts came up. He advised me, in front of them all, to go to the police.”

“He did, did he?”

“Afterwards, Celia came along to my room and owned up. She was very distressed.”

“Any question of prosecution?”

“No. She was going to make good the losses, and everyone was very nice to her about it.”

“Had she been hard up?”

“No. She had an adequately paid job as a dispenser at St. Catherine’s Hospital and has a little money of her own, I believe. She’s rather better off than most of our students.”

“So she’d no need to steal—but did,” said the inspector, writing it down.

“It’s kleptomania, I suppose,” said Mrs. Hubbard.

“That’s the label that’s used. I just mean one of the people that don’t need to take things, but nevertheless do take them.”

“I wonder if you’re being a little unfair to her. You see, there was a young man.”

“And he ratted on her?”

“Oh no. Quite the reverse. He spoke very strongly in her defence and as a matter of fact, last night, after supper, he announced that they’d become engaged.”

Inspector Sharpe’s eyebrows mounted his forehead in a surprised fashion.

“And then she goes to bed and takes morphia? That’s rather surprising, isn’t it?”

"It is. I can't understand it."

Mrs. Hubbard's face was creased with perplexity and distress.

"And yet the facts are clear enough." Sharpe nodded to the small torn piece of paper that lay on the table between them.

Dear Mrs. Hubbard (it ran), I really am sorry and this is the best thing I can do.

"It's not signed, but you've no doubt it's her handwriting?"

"No."

Mrs. Hubbard spoke rather uncertainly and frowned as she looked at the torn scrap of paper. Why did she feel so strongly that there was something wrong about it—?

"There's one clear fingerprint on it which is definitely hers," said the inspector. "The morphia was in a small bottle with the label of St. Catherine's Hospital on it and you tell me that she works as a dispenser in St. Catherine's. She'd have access to the poison cupboard and that's where she probably got it. Presumably she brought it home with her yesterday with suicide in mind."

"I really can't believe it. It doesn't seem right somehow. She was so happy last night."

"Then we must suppose that a reaction set in when she went up to bed. Perhaps there's more in her past than you know about. Perhaps she was afraid of that coming out. You think she was very much in love with this young man—what's his name, by the way?"

"Colin McNabb. He's doing a postgraduate course at St. Catherine's."

"A doctor? And at St. Catherine's?"

"Celia was very much in love with him, more, I should say, than he with her. He's a rather self-centred young man."

"Then that's probably the explanation. She didn't feel worthy of him, or hadn't told him all she ought to tell him. She was quite young, wasn't she?"

"Twenty-three."

"They're idealistic at that age and they take love affairs hard. Yes, that's it, I'm afraid. Pity."

He rose to his feet. "I'm afraid the actual facts will have to come out, but we'll do all we can to gloss things over. Thank you, Mrs. Hubbard, I've got all the information I need now. Her mother died two years ago and the only relative you know of is this elderly aunt in Yorkshire—we'll communicate with her."

He picked up a small torn fragment with Celia's agitated writing on it.

"There's something wrong about that," said Mrs. Hubbard suddenly.

"Wrong? In what way?"

"I don't know—but I feel I ought to know. Oh dear."

"You're quite sure it's her handwriting?"

"Oh yes. It's not that." Mrs. Hubbard pressed her hands to her eyeballs.

"I feel so dreadfully stupid this morning," she said apologetically.

"It's all been very trying for you, I know," said the inspector with gentle sympathy. "I don't think we'll need to trouble you further at the moment, Mrs. Hubbard."

Inspector Sharpe opened the door and immediately fell over Geronimo, who was pressed against the door outside.

"Hallo," said Inspector Sharpe pleasantly. "Listening at doors, eh?"

"No, no," Geronimo answered with an air of virtuous indignation. "I do not listen—never, never! I am just coming in with message."

"I see. What message?"

Geronimo said sulkily:

"Only that there is gentleman downstairs to see la Signora Hubbard."

"All right. Go along in, sonny, and tell her."

He walked past Geronimo down the passage and then, taking a leaf out of the Italian's book, turned sharply, and tiptoed noiselessly back. Might as well know if little monkey-face had been telling the truth.

He arrived in time to hear Geronimo say:

“The gentleman who came to supper the other night, the gentleman with the moustaches, he is downstairs waiting to see you.”

“Eh? What?” Mrs. Hubbard sounded abstracted. “Oh, thank you, Geronimo. I’ll be down in a minute or two.”

“Gentleman with the moustaches, eh,” said Sharpe to himself, grinning. “I bet I know who that is.”

He went downstairs and into the commom room.

“Hallo, M. Poirot,” he said. “It’s a long time since we met.”

Poirot rose without visible discomposure from a kneeling position by the bottom shelf near the fireplace.

“Aha,” he said. “But surely—yes, it is Inspector Sharpe, is it not? But you were not formerly in this division?”

“Transferred two years ago. Remember that business down at Crays Hill?”

“Ah yes. That is a long time ago now. You are still a young man, Inspector—”

“Getting on, getting on.”

“—and I am an old one. Alas!” Poirot sighed.

“But still active, eh, M. Poirot. Active in certain ways, shall we say?”

“Now what do you mean by that?”

"I mean that I'd like to know why you came along here the other night to give a talk on criminology to students."

Poirot smiled.

"But there is such a simple explanation. Mrs. Hubbard here is the sister of my much valued secretary, Miss Lemon. So when she asked me—"

"When she asked you to look into what had been going on here, you came along. That's it really, isn't it?"

"You are quite correct."

"But why? That's what I want to know. What was there in it for you?"

"To interest me, you mean?"

"That's what I mean. Here's a silly kid who's been pinching a few things here and there. Happens all the time. Rather small beer for you, M. Poirot, isn't it?"

Poirot shook his head.

"It is not so simple as that."

"Why not? What isn't simple about it?"

Poirot sat down on a chair. With a slight frown he dusted the knees of his trousers.

"I wish I knew," he said simply.

Sharpe frowned.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“No, and I do not understand. The things that were taken—” He shook his head. “They did not make a pattern—they did not make sense. It is like seeing a trail of footprints and they are not all made by the same feet. There is, quite clearly, the print of what you have called ‘a silly kid’—but there is more than that. Other things happened that were meant to fit in with the pattern of Celia Austin—but they did not fit in. They were meaningless, apparently purposeless. There was evidence, too, of malice. And Celia was not malicious.”

“She was a kleptomaniac?”

“I should very much doubt it.”

“Just an ordinary petty thief, then?”

“Not in the way you mean. I give it you as my opinion that all this pilfering of petty objects was done to attract the attention of a certain young man.”

“Colin McNabb?”

“Yes. She was desperately in love with Colin McNabb. Colin never noticed her. Instead of a nice, pretty, well-behaved young girl, she displayed herself as an interesting young criminal. The result was successful. Colin McNabb immediately fell for her, as they say, in a big way.”

“He must be a complete fool, then.”

“Not at all. He is a keen psychologist.”

“Oh,” Inspector Sharpe groaned. “One of those! I understand now.” A faint grin showed on his face. “Pretty smart of the girl.”

“Surprisingly so.”

Poirot repeated, musingly, “Yes, surprisingly so.”

Inspector Sharpe looked alert.

“Meaning by that, M. Poirot?”

“That I wondered—I still wonder—if the idea had been suggested to her by someone else?”

“For what reason?”

“How do I know? Altruism? Some ulterior motive? One is in the dark.”

“Any idea as to who it might have been who gave her the tip?”

“No—unless—but no—”

“All the same,” said Sharpe, pondering, “I don’t quite get it. If she’s been simply trying this kleptomania business on, and it’s succeeded, why the hell go and commit suicide?”

“The answer is that she should not have committed suicide.”

The two men looked at each other.

Poirot murmured:

“You are quite sure that she did?”

“It’s clear as day, M. Poirot. There’s no reason to believe otherwise and—”

The door opened and Mrs. Hubbard came in. She looked flushed and triumphant. Her chin stuck out aggressively.

“I’ve got it,” she said triumphantly. “Good morning, M. Poirot. I’ve got it, Inspector Sharpe. It came to me quite suddenly. Why that suicide note looked wrong, I mean. Celia couldn’t possibly have written it.”

“Why not, Mrs. Hubbard?”

“Because it’s written in ordinary blue black ink. And Celia filled her pen with green ink—that ink over there,” Mrs. Hubbard nodded towards the shelf, “at breakfast time yesterday morning.”

Inspector Sharpe, a somewhat different Inspector Sharpe, came back into the room which he had left abruptly after Mrs. Hubbard’s statement.

“Quite right,” he said. “I’ve checked up. The only pen in the girl’s room, the one that was by her bed, has green ink in it. Now that green ink—”

Mrs. Hubbard held up the nearly empty bottle.

Then she explained, clearly and concisely, the scene at the breakfast table.

"I feel sure," she ended, "that the scrap of paper was torn out of the letter she had written to me yesterday—and which I never opened."

"What did she do with it? Can you remember?"

Mrs. Hubbard shook her head.

"I left her alone in here and went to do my housekeeping. She must, I think, have left it lying somewhere in here, and forgotten about it."

"And somebody found it . . . and opened it . . . somebody—"

He broke off.

"You realise," he said, "what this means? I haven't been very happy about this torn bit of paper all along. There was quite a pile of lecture notepaper in her room—much more natural to write a suicide note on one of them. This means that somebody saw the possibility of using the opening phrase of her letter to you—to suggest something very different. To suggest suicide—"

He paused and then said slowly:

"This means—"

"Murder," said Hercule Poirot.

Chapter Eight

Though personally deprecating le five o'clock as inhibiting the proper appreciation of the supreme meal of the day, dinner, Poirot was now getting quite accustomed to serving it.

The resourceful George had on this occasion produced large cups, a pot of really strong Indian tea and, in addition to the hot and buttery square crumpets, bread and jam and a large square of rich plum cake.

All this for the delectation of Inspector Sharpe, who was leaning back contentedly sipping his third cup of tea.

"You don't mind my coming along like this, M. Poirot? I've got an hour to spare until the time when the students will be getting back. I shall want to question them all—and, frankly, it's not a business I'm looking forward to. You met some of them the other night and I wondered if you could give me any useful dope—on the foreigners, anyway."

"You think I am a good judge of foreigners? But mon cher, there were no Belgians amongst them."

"No Belg—oh, I see what you mean! You mean that as you're a Belgian, all the other nationalities are as foreign to you as they are to me. But that's not quite true, is it? I mean you probably know more about the Continental types than I do—though not the Indians and the West Africans and that lot."

"Your best assistance will probably be from Mrs. Hubbard. She has been there for some months in intimate association with these young people and she is quite a good judge of human nature.”

“Yes, thoroughly competent woman. I’m relying on her. I shall have to see the proprietress of the place, too. She wasn’t there this morning. Owns several of these places, I understand, as well as some of the student clubs. Doesn’t seem to be much liked.”

Poirot said nothing for a moment or two, then he asked:

“You have been to St. Catherine’s?”

“Yes. The chief pharmacist was most helpful. He was much shocked and distressed by the news.”

“What did he say of the girl?”

“She’d worked there for just over a year and was well liked. He described her as rather slow, but very conscientious.” He paused and then added, “The morphia came from there all right.”

“It did? That is interesting—and rather puzzling.”

“It was morphine tartrate. Kept in the poison cupboard in the Dispensary. Upper shelf—amongst drugs that were not often used. The hypodermic tablets, of course, are what are in general use, and it appears that morphine hydrochloride is more often used than the tartrate. There seems to be a kind of fashion in drugs like everything else. Doctors seem to follow one another in prescribing like a lot of sheep. He didn’t say that. It was my own thought. There are some drugs in the upper shelf of that cupboard that were once popular, but haven’t been prescribed for years.”

"So the absence of one small dusty phial would not immediately be noticed?"

"That's right. Stocktaking is only done at regular intervals. Nobody remembers any prescription with morphine tartrate in it for a long time. The absence of the bottle wouldn't be noticed until it was wanted—or until they went over stock. The three dispensers all had keys of the poison cupboard and the dangerous drug cupboard. The cupboards are opened as needed, and as on a busy day (which is practically every day) someone is going to the cupboard every few minutes, the cupboard is unlocked and remains unlocked till the end of work."

"Who has access to it, other than Celia herself?"

"The two other women dispensers, but they have no connection of any kind with Hickory Road. One has been there for four years, the other only came a few weeks ago, was formerly at a hospital in Devon. Good record. Then there are the three senior pharmacists who have all been at St. Catherine's for years. Those are the people who have what you might call rightful and normal access to the cupboard. Then there's an old woman who scrubs the floors. She's there between nine and ten in the morning and she could have grabbed a bottle out of the cupboard if the girls were busy at the outpatients' hatches, or attending to the ward baskets, but she's been working for the hospital for years and it seems very unlikely. The lab attendant comes through with stock bottles and he, too, could help himself to a bottle if he watched his opportunity—but none of these suggestions seem at all probable."

"What outsiders come into the Dispensary?"

“Quite a lot, one way or another. They’d pass through the Dispensary to go to the chief pharmacist’s office for instance—or travellers from the big wholesale drug houses would go though it to the manufacturing departments. Then, of course, friends come in occasionally to see one of the dispensers—not a usual thing, but it happens.”

“That is better. Who came in recently to see Celia Austin?”

Sharpe consulted his notebook.

“A girl called Patricia Lane came in on Tuesday of last week. She wanted Celia to come to meet her at the pictures after the Dispensary closed.”

“Patricia Lane,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“She was only there about five minutes and she did not go near the poison cupboard but remained near the outpatients’ windows talking to Celia and another girl. They also remember a coloured girl coming—about two weeks ago—a very superior girl, they said. She was interested in the work and asked questions about it and made notes. Spoke perfect English.”

“That would be Elizabeth Johnston. She was interested, was she?”

“It was a Welfare Clinic afternoon. She was interested in the organisation of such things and also in what was prescribed for such ailments as infant diarrhoea and skin infections.”

Poirot nodded.

“Anyone else?”

"Not that can be remembered."

"Do doctors come to the Dispensary?"

Sharpe grinned.

"All the time. Officially and unofficially. Sometimes to ask about a particular formula, or to see what is kept in stock."

"To see what is kept in stock?"

"Yes, I thought of that. Sometimes they ask advice—about a substitute for some preparation that seems to irritate a patient's skin or interfere with digestion unduly. Sometimes a physician just strolls in for a chat—slack moment. A good many of the young chaps come in for Vegenin or aspirin when they've got a hangover—and occasionally, I'd say, for a flirtatious word or two with one of the girls if the opportunity arises. Human nature is always human nature. You see how it is. Pretty hopeless."

Poirot said, "And if I recollect rightly, one or more of the students at Hickory Road is attached to St. Catherine's—a big, red-haired boy—Bates—Bateman—"

"Leonard Bateson. That's right. And Colin McNabb is doing a postgraduate course there. Then there's a girl, Jean Tomlinson, who works in the physiotherapy department."

"And all of these have probably been quite often in the Dispensary?"

"Yes, and what's more, nobody remembers when because they're used to seeing them and know them by sight. Jean Tomlinson was by way of being a friend of the senior dispenser—"

"It is not easy," said Poirot.

"I'll say it's not! You see, anyone who was on the staff could take a look in the poison cupboard, and say, 'Why on earth do you have so much Liquor Arsenicalis?' or something like that. 'Didn't know anybody used it nowadays.' And nobody would think twice about it or remember it."

Sharpe paused and then said:

"What we are postulating is that someone gave Celia Austin morphia and afterwards put the morphia bottle and the torn-out fragment of letter in her room to make it look like suicide. But why, M. Poirot, why?"

Poirot shook his head. Sharpe went on:

"You hinted this morning that someone might have suggested the kleptomania idea to Celia Austin."

Poirot moved uneasily.

"That was only a vague idea of mine. It was just that it seemed doubtful if she would have had the wits to think of it herself."

"Then who?"

"As far as I know, only three of the students would have been capable of thinking out such an idea. Leonard Bateson would have had the requisite knowledge. He is aware of Colin's enthusiasm for 'maladjusted personalities.' He might have suggested something of the kind to Celia more or less as a joke and coached her in her part. But I cannot really see him conniving at such a thing for month after month—unless, that is, he had an ulterior motive, or is a very different person from what he appears to be. (That is always a thing one must take into account.) Nigel Chapman has a mischievous and slightly malicious turn of mind. He'd think it good fun, and I should imagine would have no scruples whatever. He is a kind of grown up 'enfant terrible.' The third person I have in mind is a young woman called Valerie Hobhouse. She has brains, is modern in outlook and education, and has probably read enough psychology to judge Colin's probable reaction. If she were fond of Celia, she might think it legitimate fun to make a fool of Colin."

"Leonard Bateson, Nigel Chapman, Valerie Hobhouse," said Sharpe, writing down the names. "Thanks for the tip. I'll remember when I'm questioning them. What about the Indians? One of them is a medical student."

"His mind is entirely occupied with politics and persecution mania," said Poirot. "I don't think he would be interested enough to suggest kleptomania to Celia Austin and I don't think she would have accepted such advice from him."

"And that's all the help you can give me, M. Poirot?" said Sharpe, rising to his feet and buttoning away his notebook.

"I fear so. But I consider myself personally interested—that is if you do not object, my friend?"

"Not in the least. Why should I?"

"In my own amateurish way I shall do what I can. For me, there is, I think, only one line of action."

“And that is?”

Poirot sighed.

“Conversation, my friend. Conversation and again conversation! All the murderers I have ever come across enjoyed talking. In my opinion the strong silent man seldom commits a crime—and if he does it is simple, violent, and perfectly obvious. But our clever subtle murderer—he is so pleased with himself that sooner or later he says something unfortunate and trips himself up. Talk to these people, mon cher, do not confine yourself to simple interrogation. Encourage their views, demand their help, inquire about their hunches—but, bon dieu! I do not need to teach you your business. I remember your abilities well enough.”

Sharpe smiled gently.

“Yes,” he said, “I’ve always found—well—amiability—a great help.”

The two men smiled at each other in mutual accord. Sharpe rose to depart.

“I suppose every single one of them is a possible murderer,” he said slowly.

“I should think so,” said Poirot nonchalantly. “Leonard Bateson, for instance, has a temper. He could lose control. Valerie Hobhouse has brains and could plan cleverly. Nigel Chapman is the childish type that lacks proportion. There is a French girl there who might kill if enough money were involved. Patricia Lane is a maternal type and maternal types are always ruthless. The American girl, Sally Finch, is cheerful and gay, but she could play an assumed part better than most. Jean Tomlinson is very full of sweetness and righteousness but we have all known killers who attended Sunday school with sincere devotion. The West Indian girl Elizabeth Johnston has probably the best brains of anyone in the hostel. She has subordinated her emotional life to her brain—that is dangerous. There is a charming young African who might have motives for killing about which we could never guess. We have Colin McNabb, the psychologist. How many psychologists does one know to whom it might be said Physician, heal thyself?"

"For heaven's sake, Poirot. You are making my head spin! Is nobody incapable of murder?"

"I have often wondered," said Hercule Poirot.

Chapter Nine

Inspector Sharpe sighed, leaned back in his chair and rubbed his forehead with a handkerchief. He had interviewed an indignant and tearful French girl, a supercilious and uncooperative young Frenchman, a stolid and suspicious Dutchman, a voluble and aggressive Egyptian. He had exchanged a few brief remarks with two nervous young Turkish students who did not really understand what he was saying and the same went for a charming young Iraqi. None of these, he was pretty certain, had had anything to do, or could help him in any way with the death of Celia Austin. He had dismissed them one by one with a few reassuring words and was now preparing to do the same to Mr. Akibombo.

The young West African looked at him with smiling white teeth and rather childlike, plaintive, eyes.

“I should like to help—yes—please,” he said. “She is very nice to me, this Miss Celia. She give me once a box of Edinburgh rock—very nice confection which I do not know before. It seems very sad she should be killed. Is it blood feud, perhaps? Or is it perhaps fathers or uncles who come and kill her because they have heard false stories that she do wrong things.”

Inspector Sharpe assured him that none of these things were remotely possible. The young man shook his head sadly.

“Then I do not know why it happened,” he said. “I do not see why anybody here should want to do harm to her. But you give me piece of her hair and nail clippings,” he continued, “and I see if I find out by old method. Not scientific, not modern, but very much in use where I come from.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Akibombo, but I don’t think that will be necessary. We—er—don’t do things that way over here.”

“No, sir, I quite understand. Not modern. Not atomic age. Not done at home now by new policemen—only old men from bush. I am sure all new methods very superior and sure to achieve complete success.” Mr. Akibombo bowed politely and removed himself. Inspector Sharpe murmured to himself:

“I sincerely hope we do meet with success—if only to maintain prestige.”

His next interview was with Nigel Chapman, who was inclined to take the conduct of the conversation into his own hands.

“This is an absolutely extraordinary business, isn’t it?” he said. “Mind you, I had an idea that you were barking up the wrong tree when you insisted on suicide. I must say, it’s rather gratifying to me to think that the whole thing hinges, really, on her having filled her fountain pen with my green ink. Just the one thing the murderer couldn’t possibly foresee. I suppose you’ve given due consideration as to what can possibly be the motive for this crime?”

“I’m asking the questions, Mr. Chapman,” said Inspector Sharpe drily.

“Oh, of course, of course,” said Nigel, airily, waving a hand. “I was trying to make a bit of a shortcut of it, that was all. But I suppose we’ve got to go through with all the red tape as usual. Name, Nigel Chapman. Age, twenty-five. Born, I believe, in Nagasaki—it really seems a most ridiculous place. What my father and mother were doing there at the time I can’t imagine. On a world tour, I suppose. However, it doesn’t make me necessarily a Japanese, I understand.

I’m taking a diploma at London University in Bronze Age and Medieval History. Anything else you want to know?”

“What is your home address, Mr. Chapman?”

“No home address, my dear sir. I have a papa, but he and I have quarrelled, and his address is therefore no longer mine. So 26 Hickory Road and Coutts Bank, Leadenhall Street Branch, will always find me, as one says to travelling acquaintances whom you hope you will never meet again.”

Inspector Sharpe displayed no reaction towards Nigel’s airy impertinence. He had met Nigels before and shrewdly suspected that Nigel’s impertinence masked a natural nervousness of being questioned in connection with murder.

“How well did you know Celia Austin?” he asked.

“That’s really quite a difficult question. I knew her very well in the sense of seeing her practically every day, and being on quite cheerful terms with her, but actually I didn’t know her at all. Of course, I wasn’t in the least bit interested in her and I think she probably disapproved of me, if anything.”

“Did she disapprove of you for any particular reason?”

“Well, she didn’t like my sense of humour very much. Then, of course, I wasn’t one of those brooding, rude young men like Colin McNabb. That kind of rudeness is really the perfect technique for attracting women.”

“When was the last time you saw Celia Austin?”

"At dinner yesterday evening. We'd all given her the big hand, you know. Colin had got up and hemmed and hawed and finally admitted, in a coy and bashful way, that they were engaged. Then we all ragged him a bit, and that was that."

"Was that at dinner or in the common room?"

"Oh, at dinner. Afterwards, when we went into the common room Colin went off somewhere."

"And the rest of you had coffee in the common room."

"If you call the fluid they serve coffee—yes," said Nigel.

"Did Celia Austin have coffee?"

"Well, I suppose so. I mean, I didn't actually notice her having coffee, but she must have had it."

"You did not personally hand her her coffee, for instance?"

"How horribly suggestive all this is! When you said that and looked at me in that searching way, d'you know I felt quite certain that I had handed Celia her coffee and had filled it up with strychnine, or whatever it was. Hypnotic suggestion, I suppose, but actually, Mr. Sharpe, I didn't go near her—and to be frank, I didn't even notice her drinking coffee, and I can assure you, whether you believe me or not, that I have never had any passion for Celia myself and that the announcement of her engagement to Colin McNabb aroused no feelings of murderous revenge in me."

"I'm not really suggesting anything of the kind, Mr. Chapman," said Sharpe mildly. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, there's no particular love angle to this, but somebody wanted Celia Austin out of the way. Why?”

“I simply can’t imagine why, Inspector. It’s really most intriguing because Celia was really a most harmless kind of girl, if you know what I mean. Slow on the uptake; a bit of a bore; thoroughly nice; and absolutely, I should say, not the kind of girl to get herself murdered.”

“Were you surprised when you found that it was Celia Austin who had been responsible for the various disappearances, thefts, etcetera, in this place?”

“My dear man, you could have knocked me over with a feather! Most uncharacteristic, that’s what I thought.”

“You didn’t, perhaps, put her up to doing these things?”

Nigel’s stare of surprise seemed quite genuine.

“I? Put her up to it? Why should I?”

“Well, that would be rather the question, wouldn’t it? Some people have a funny sense of humour.”

“Well, really, I may be dense, but I can’t see anything amusing about all this silly pilfering that’s been going on.”

“Not your idea of a joke?”

“It never occurred to me it was meant to be funny. Surely, Inspector, the thefts were purely psychological?”

"You definitely consider that Celia Austin was a kleptomaniac?"

"But surely there can't be any other explanation, Inspector?"

"Perhaps you don't know as much about kleptomaniacs as I do, Mr. Chapman."

"Well, I really can't think of any other explanation."

"You don't think it's possible that someone might have put Miss Austin up to all this as a means of—say—arousing Mr. McNabb's interest in her?"

Nigel's eyes glistened with appreciative malice.

"Now that really is a most diverting explanation, Inspector," he said. "You know, when I think of it, it's perfectly possible and of course old Colin would swallow it, line, hook and sinker." Nigel savoured this with much glee for a second or two. Then he shook his head sadly.

"But Celia wouldn't have played," he said. "She was soppy about him."

"You've no theory of your own, Mr. Chapman, about the things that have been going on in this house? About, for instance, the spilling of ink over Miss Johnston's papers?"

"If you're thinking I did it, Inspector Sharpe, that's quite untrue. Of course, it looks like me because of the green ink, but if you ask me, that was just spite."

"What was spite?"

"Using my ink. Somebody deliberately used my ink to make it look like me. There's a lot of spite about here, Inspector."

The Inspector looked at him sharply.

"Now what exactly do you mean by a lot of spite about?"

But Nigel immediately drew back into his shell and became noncommittal.

"I didn't mean anything really—just that when a lot of people are cooped up together, they get rather petty."

The next person on Inspector Sharpe's list was Leonard Bateson. Len Bateson was even less at his ease than Nigel, though it showed in a different way. He was suspicious and truculent.

"All right!" he burst out, after the first routine inquiries were concluded. "I poured out Celia's coffee and gave it to her. So what?"

"You gave her her after-dinner coffee—is that what you're saying, Mr. Bateson?"

"Yes. At least I filled the cup up from the urn and put it down beside her and you can believe it or not, but there was no morphia in it."

"You saw her drink it?"

"No, I didn't actually see her drink it. We were all moving around and I got into an argument with someone just after that. I didn't notice when she drank it. There were other people round her."

"I see. In fact, what you are saying is that anybody could have dropped morphia into her coffee cup?"

"You try and put anything in anyone's cup! Everybody would see you."

"Not necessarily," said Sharpe.

Len burst out aggressively:

"What the hell do you think I want to poison the kid for? I've nothing against her."

"I've not suggested that you did want to poison her."

"She took the stuff herself. She must have taken it herself. There's no other explanation."

"We might think so, if it weren't for that faked suicide note."

"Faked my hat! She wrote it, didn't she?"

"She wrote it as part of a letter, early that morning."

"Well—she could have torn a bit out and used it as a suicide note."

"Come now, Mr. Bateson. If you wanted to write a suicide note you'd write one. You wouldn't take a letter you'd written to somebody else and carefully tear out one particular phrase."

"I might do. People do all sorts of funny things."

"In that case, where is the rest of the letter?"

“How should I know? That’s your business, not mine.”

“I’m making it my business. You’d be well advised, Mr. Bateson, to answer my questions civilly.”

“Well, what do you want to know? I didn’t kill the girl, and I’d no motive for killing her.”

“You liked her?”

Len said less aggressively:

“I liked her very much. She was a nice kid. A bit dumb, but nice.”

“You believed her when she owned up to having committed the thefts which had been worrying everyone for some time past?”

“Well, I believed her, of course, since she said so. But I must say it seemed odd.”

“You didn’t think it was a likely thing for her to do?”

“Well, no. Not really.”

Leonard’s truculence had subsided now that he was no longer on the defensive and was giving his mind to a problem which obviously intrigued him.

“She didn’t seem to be the type of a kleptomaniac, if you know what I mean,” he said. “Nor a thief either.”

“And you can’t think of any other reason for her having done what she did?”

“Other reason? What other reason could there be?”

“Well, she might have wanted to arouse the interest of Mr. Colin McNabb.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, isn’t it?”

“But it did arouse his interest.”

“Yes, of course it did. Old Colin’s absolutely dead keen on any kind of psychological abnormality.”

“Well, then. If Celia Austin knew that. . . .”

Len shook his head.

“You’re wrong there. She wouldn’t have been capable of thinking a thing like that out. Of planning it, I mean. She hadn’t got the knowledge.”

“You’ve got the knowledge, though, haven’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that, out of a purely kind intention, you might have suggested something of the kind to her.”

Len gave a short laugh.

“Think I’d do a damfool thing like that? You’re crazy.”

The Inspector shifted his ground.

"Do you think that Celia Austin spilled the ink over Elizabeth Johnston's papers or do you think someone else did it?"

"Someone else. Celia said she didn't do that and I believe her. Celia never got riled by Bess; not like some other people did."

"Who got riled by her—and why?"

"She ticked people off, you know." Len thought about it for a moment or two. "Anyone who made a rash statement. She'd look across the table and she'd say, in that precise way of hers, 'I'm afraid that is not borne out by the facts. It has been well established by statistics that . . . ' Something of that kind. Well, it was riling, you know—especially to people who like making rash statements, like Nigel Chapman for instance."

"Ah yes. Nigel Chapman."

"And it was green ink, too."

"So you think it was Nigel who did it?"

"Well, it's possible, at least. He's a spiteful sort of cove, you know, and I think he might have a bit of racial feeling. About the only one of us who has."

"Can you think of anybody else who Miss Johnston annoyed with her exactitude and her habit of correction?"

"Well, Colin McNabb wasn't too pleased now and again, and she got Jean Tomlinson's goat once or twice."

Sharpe asked a few more desultory questions but Len Bateson had nothing useful to add. Next Sharpe saw Valerie Hobhouse.

Valerie was cool, elegant, and wary. She displayed much less nervousness than either of the men had done. She had been fond of Celia, she said. Celia was not particularly bright and it was rather pathetic the way she had set her heart on Colin McNabb.

“Do you think she was a kleptomaniac, Miss Hobhouse?”

“Well, I suppose so. I don’t really know much about the subject.”

“Do you think anyone had put her up to doing what she did?”

Valerie shrugged her shoulders.

“You mean in order to attract that pompous ass Colin?”

“You’re very quick on the point, Miss Hobhouse. Yes, that’s what I mean. You didn’t suggest it to her yourself, I suppose?”

Valerie looked amused.

“Well, hardly, my dear man, considering that a particularly favourite scarf of mine was cut to ribbons. I’m not so altruistic as that.”

“Do you think anyone else suggested it to her?”

“I should hardly think so. I should say it was just natural on her part.”

“What do you mean by natural?”

“Well, I first had a suspicion that it was Celia when all the fuss happened about Sally’s shoe. Celia was jealous of Sally. Sally Finch, I’m talking about. She’s far and away the most attractive girl here and Colin paid her a fair amount of attention. So on the night of this party Sally’s shoe disappears and she has to go in an old black dress and black shoes. There was Celia looking as smug as a cat that’s swallowed cream about it. Mind you, I didn’t suspect her of all these petty thievings of bracelets and compacts.”

“Who did you think was responsible for those?”

Valerie shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, I don’t know. One of the cleaning women, I thought.”

“And the slashed rucksack?”

“Was there a slashed rucksack? I’d forgotten. That seems very pointless.”

“You’ve been here a good long time, haven’t you, Miss Hobhouse?”

“Well, yes. I should say I’m probably the oldest inhabitant. That is to say, I’ve been here two years and a half now.”

“So you probably know more about this hostel than anybody else?”

“I should say so, yes.”

“Have you any ideas of your own about Celia Austin’s death? Any idea of the motive that underlay it?”

Valerie shook her head. Her face was serious now.

“No,” she said. “It was a horrible thing to happen. I can’t see anybody who could possibly have wanted Celia to die. She was a nice, harmless child, and she’d just got engaged to be married, and. . . .”

“Yes. And?” the Inspector prompted.

“I wondered if that was why,” said Valerie slowly. “Because she’d got engaged. Because she was going to be happy. But that means, doesn’t it, somebody—well—mad.”

She said the word with a little shiver, and Inspector Sharpe looked at her thoughtfully.

“Yes,” he said. “We can’t quite rule out madness.” He went on, “Have you any theory about the damage done to Elizabeth Johnston’s notes and papers?”

“No. That was a spiteful thing, too. I don’t believe for a moment that Celia would do a thing like that.”

“Any idea who it could have been?”

“Well . . . Not a reasonable idea.”

“But an unreasonable one?”

“You don’t want to hear something that’s just a hunch, do you, Inspector?”

“I’d like to hear a hunch very much. I’ll accept it as such, and it’ll only be between ourselves.”

“Well, I may probably be quite wrong, but I’ve got a sort of idea that it was Patricia Lane’s work.”

“Indeed! Now you do surprise me, Miss Hobhouse. I shouldn’t have thought of Patricia Lane. She seems a very well-balanced, amiable, young lady.”

“I don’t say she did do it. I just had a sort of idea she might have done.”

“For what reason in particular?”

“Well, Patricia disliked Black Bess. Black Bess was always ticking off Patricia’s beloved Nigel, putting him right, you know, when he made silly statements in the way he does sometimes.”

“You think it was more likely to have been Patricia Lane than Nigel himself?”

“Oh, yes. I don’t think Nigel would bother, and he’d certainly not go using his own pet brand of ink. He’s got plenty of brains. But it’s just the sort of stupid thing that Patricia would do without thinking that it might involve her precious Nigel as a suspect.”

“Or again, it might be somebody who had a down on Nigel Chapman and wanted to suggest that it was his doing?”

“Yes, that’s another possibility.”

“Who dislikes Nigel Chapman?”

"Oh, well, Jean Tomlinson for one. And he and Len Bateson are always scrapping a good deal."

"Have you any ideas, Miss Hobhouse, how morphia could have been administered to Celia Austin?"

"I've been thinking and thinking. Of course, I suppose the coffee is the most obvious way. We were all milling around in the common room. Celia's coffee was on a small table near her and she always waited until her coffee was nearly cold before she drank it. I suppose anybody who had sufficient nerve could have dropped a tablet or something into her cup without being seen, but it would be rather a risk to take. I mean, it's the sort of thing that might be noticed quite easily."

"The morphia," said Inspector Sharpe, "was not in tablet form."

"What was it? Powder?"

"Yes."

Valerie frowned.

"That would be rather more difficult, wouldn't it?"

"Anything else besides coffee you can think of?"

"She sometimes had a glass of hot milk before she went to bed. I don't think she did that night, though."

"Can you describe to me exactly what happened that evening in the common room?"

"Well, as I say, we all sat about, talked; somebody turned the wireless on. Most of the boys, I think, went out. Celia went up to bed fairly early and so did Jean Tomlinson. Sally and I sat on there fairly late. I was writing letters and Sally was mugging over some notes. I rather think I was the last to go up to bed."

"It was just a usual evening, in fact?"

"Absolutely, Inspector."

"Thank you, Miss Hobhouse. Will you send Miss Lane to me now?"

Patricia Lane looked worried, but not apprehensive. Questions and answers elicited nothing very new. Asked about the damage to Elizabeth Johnston's papers Patricia said that she had no doubt that Celia had been responsible.

"But she denied it, Miss Lane, very vehemently."

"Well, of course," said Patricia. "She would. I think she was ashamed of having done it. But it fits in, doesn't it, with all the other things?"

"Do you know what I find about this case, Miss Lane? That nothing fits in very well."

"I suppose," said Patricia, flushing, "that you would think it was Nigel who messed up Bess's papers. Because of the ink. That's such absolute nonsense. I mean, Nigel wouldn't have used his own ink if he'd done a thing like that. He wouldn't be such a fool. But anyway, he wouldn't do it."

"He didn't always get on very well with Miss Johnston, did he?"

"Oh, she had an annoying manner sometimes, but he didn't really mind." Patricia Lane leaned forward earnestly. "I would like to try and make you understand one or two things, Inspector. About Nigel Chapman, I mean. You see, Nigel is really very much his own worst enemy. I'm the first to admit that he's got a very difficult manner. It prejudices people against him. He's rude and sarcastic and makes fun of people, and so he puts people's backs up and they think the worst of him. But really he's quite different from what he seems. He's one of those shy, rather unhappy people who really want to be liked but who, from a kind of spirit of contradiction, find themselves saying and doing the opposite to what they mean to say and do."

"Ah," said Inspector Sharpe. "Rather unfortunate for them, that."

"Yes, but they really can't help it, you know. It comes from having had an unfortunate childhood. Nigel had a very unhappy home life. His father was very harsh and severe and never understood him. And his father treated his mother very badly. After she died they had the most terrific quarrel and Nigel flung out of the house, and his father said that he'd never give him a penny and he must get on as well as he could without any help from him. Nigel said he didn't want any help from his father; and wouldn't take it if it was offered. A small amount of money came to him under his mother's will, and he never wrote to his father or went near him again. Of course, I think that was a pity in a way, but there's no doubt that his father is a very unpleasant man. I don't wonder that that's made Nigel bitter and difficult to get on with. Since his mother died, he's never had anyone to care for him and look after him. His health's not been good, though his mind is brilliant. He is handicapped in life and he just can’t show himself as he really is.”

Patricia Lane stopped. She was flushed and a little breathless as the result of her long earnest speech. Inspector Sharpe looked at her thoughtfully. He had come across many Patricia Lanes before. “In love with the chap,” he thought to himself. “Don’t suppose he cares twopence for her, but probably accepts being mothered. Father certainly sounds a cantankerous old cuss, but I dare say the mother was a foolish woman who spoilt her son and by doting on him, widened the breach between him and his father. I’ve seen enough of that kind of thing.” He wondered if Nigel Chapman had been attracted at all to Celia Austin. It seemed unlikely, but it might be so. “And if so,” he thought, “Patricia Lane might have bitterly resented the fact.” Resented it enough to do murder? Surely not—and in any case, the fact that Celia had got engaged to Colin McNabb would surely wash that out as a possible motive for murder. He dismissed Patricia Lane and asked for Jean Tomlinson.

Chapter Ten

Miss Tomlinson was a severe-looking young woman of twenty-seven, with fair hair, regular features and a rather pursed-up mouth. She sat down and said primly:

“Yes, Inspector? What can I do for you?”

“I wonder if you can help us at all, Miss Tomlinson, about this very tragic matter.”

“It’s shocking. Really quite shocking,” said Jean. “It was bad enough when we thought Celia had committed suicide, but now that it’s supposed to be murder . . .” She stopped and shook her head, sadly.

“We are fairly sure that she did not poison herself,” said Sharpe. “You know where the poison came from?”

Jean nodded.

“I gather it came from St. Catherine’s Hospital, where she works. But surely that makes it seem more like suicide?”

“It was intended to, no doubt,” said the inspector.

“But who else could possibly have got that poison except Celia?”

“Quite a lot of people,” said Inspector Sharpe, “if they were determined to do so. Even you, yourself, Miss Tomlinson,” he said, “might have managed to help yourself to it if you had wished to do so.”

“Really, Inspector Sharpe!” Jean’s tones were sharp with indignation.

“Well, you visited the Dispensary fairly often, didn’t you, Miss Tomlinson?”

“I went in there to see Mildred Carey, yes. But naturally I would never have dreamed of tampering with the poison cupboard.”

“But you could have done so?”

“I certainly couldn’t have done anything of the kind!”

“Oh, come now, Miss Tomlinson. Say that your friend was busy packing up the ward baskets and the other girl was at the outpatients’ window. There are frequent times when there are only two dispensers in the front room. You could have wandered casually round the back of the shelves of bottles that run across the middle of the floor. You could have nipped a bottle out of the cupboard and into your pocket, and neither of the two dispensers would have dreamed of what you had done.”

“I resent what you say very much, Inspector Sharpe. It’s—it’s a—disgraceful accusation.”

“But it’s not an accusation, Miss Tomlinson. It’s nothing of the kind. You mustn’t misunderstand me. You said to me that it wasn’t possible for you to do such a thing, and I’m trying to show you that it was possible. I’m not suggesting for a moment that you did so. After all,” he added, “why should you?”

“Quite so. You don’t seem to realise, Inspector Sharpe, that I was a friend of Celia’s.”

“Quite a lot of people get poisoned by their friends. There’s a certain question we have to ask ourselves sometimes. ‘When is a friend not a friend?’ ”

“There was no disagreement between me and Celia; nothing of the kind. I liked her very much.”

“Had you any reason to suspect it was she who had been responsible for these thefts in the house?”

“No, indeed. I was never so surprised in my life. I always thought Celia had high principles. I wouldn’t have dreamed of her doing such a thing.”

“Of course,” said Sharpe, watching her carefully, “kleptomaniacs can’t really help themselves, can they?”

Jean Tomlinson’s lips pursed themselves together even more closely. Then she opened them and spoke.

“I can’t say I can quite subscribe to that idea, Inspector Sharpe. I’m old-fashioned in my views and believe that stealing is stealing.”

“You think that Celia stole things because, frankly, she wanted to take them?”

“Certainly I do.”

“Plain dishonest, in fact?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Ah!” said Inspector Sharpe, shaking his head. “That’s bad.”

“Yes, it’s always upsetting when you feel you’re disappointed in anyone.”

“There was a question, I understand, of our being called in—the police, I mean.”

“Yes. That would have been the right thing to do in my opinion.”

“Perhaps you think it ought to have been done anyway?”

“I think it would have been the right thing. Yes, I don’t think, you know, people ought to be allowed to get away with these things.”

“With calling oneself a kleptomaniac when one is really a thief, do you mean?”

“Well, more or less, yes—that is what I mean.”

“Instead of which everything was ending happily and Miss Austin had wedding bells ahead.”

“Of course, one isn’t surprised at anything Colin McNabb does,” said Jean Tomlinson viciously. “I’m sure he’s an atheist and a most disbelieving, mocking, unpleasant young man. He’s rude to everybody. It’s my opinion that he’s a communist!”

“Ah!” said Inspector Sharpe. “Bad!” He shook his head.

“He backed up Celia, I think, because he hasn’t got any proper feeling about property. He probably thinks everyone should help themselves to everything they want.”

"Still, at any rate," said Inspector Sharpe, "Miss Austin did own up."

"After she was found out. Yes," said Jean sharply.

"Who found her out?"

"That Mr.—what-was-his-name . . . Poirot, who came."

"But why do you think he found her out, Miss Tomlinson? He didn't say so. He just advised calling in the police."

"He must have shown her that he knew. She obviously knew the game was up and rushed off to confess."

"What about the ink on Elizabeth Johnston's papers? Did she confess to that?"

"I really don't know. I suppose so."

"You suppose wrong," said Sharpe. "She denied most vehemently that she had anything to do with that."

"Well, perhaps that may be so. I must say it doesn't seem very likely."

"You think it is more likely that it was Nigel Chapman?"

"No, I don't think Nigel would do that either. I think it's much more likely to be Mr. Akibombo."

"Really? Why should he do it?"

“Jealousy. All these coloured people are very jealous of each other and very hysterical.”

“That’s interesting, Miss Tomlinson. When was the last time you saw Celia Austin?”

“After dinner on Friday night.”

“Who went up to bed first? Did she or did you?”

“I did.”

“You did not go to her room or see her after you’d left the common room?”

“No.”

“And you’ve no idea who could have introduced morphia into her coffee—if it was given that way?”

“No idea at all.”

“You never saw morphia lying about the house or in anyone’s room?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? What do you mean by that, Miss Tomlinson?”

“Well, I just wondered. There was that silly bet, you know.”

“What bet?”

“One—oh, two or three of the boys were arguing—”

"What were they arguing about?"

"Murder, and ways of doing it. Poisoning in particular."

"Who was concerned in the discussion?"

"Well, I think Colin and Nigel started it, and then Len Bateson chipped in and Patricia was there too—"

"Can you remember, as closely as possible, what was said on that occasion—how the argument went?"

Jean Tomlinson reflected a few moments.

"Well, it started, I think, with a discussion on murdering by poisoning, saying that the difficulty was to get hold of the poison, that the murderer was usually traced by either the sale of the poison or having an opportunity to get it, and Nigel said that wasn't at all necessary. He said that he could think of three distinct ways by which anyone could get hold of poison, and nobody would ever know they had it. Len Bateson said then that he was talking through his hat. Nigel said no he wasn't, and he was quite prepared to prove it. Pat said that of course Nigel was quite right. She said that either Len or Colin could probably help themselves to poison any time they liked from a hospital, and so could Celia, she said. And Nigel said that wasn't what he meant at all. He said it would be noticed if Celia took anything from the Dispensary. Sooner or later they'd look for it and find it gone. And Pat said no, not if she took the bottle and emptied some stuff out and filled it up with something else. Colin laughed then and said there'd be very serious complaints from the patients one of these days, in that case. But Nigel said of course he didn't mean special opportunities. He said that he himself, who hadn't got any particular access, either as a doctor or dispenser, could jolly well get three different kinds of poison by three different methods. Len Bateson said, ‘All right, then, but what are your methods?’ and Nigel said, ‘I shan’t tell you, now, but I’m prepared to bet you that within three weeks I can produce samples of three deadly poisons here,’ and Len Bateson said he’d bet him a fiver he couldn’t do it.”

“Well?” said Inspector Sharpe, when Jean stopped.

“Well, nothing more came of it, I think, for some time and then, one evening in the common room, Nigel said, ‘Now then, chaps, look here—I’m as good as my word,’ and he threw down three things on the table. He had a tube of hyoscine tablets, and a bottle of tincture of digitalin, and a tiny bottle of morphine tartrate.”

The inspector said sharply:

“Morphine tartrate. Any label on it?”

“Yes, it had St. Catherine’s Hospital on it. I do remember that because, naturally, it caught my eye.”

“And the others?”

“I didn’t notice. They were not hospital stores, I should say.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, of course, there was a lot of talk and jawing, and Len Bateson said, ‘Come now, if you’d done a murder this would be traced to you soon enough,’ and Nigel said, ‘Not a bit of it. I’m a layman. I’ve no connection with any clinic or hospital and nobody will connect me for one moment with these. I didn’t buy them over the counter,' and Colin McNabb took his pipe out of his teeth and said, 'No, you'd certainly not be able to do that. There's no chemist would sell you those three things without a doctor's prescription.' Anyway, they argued a bit but in the end Len said he'd pay up. He said, 'I can't do it now, because I'm a bit short of cash, but there's no doubt about it; Nigel's proved his point,' and then he said, 'What are we going to do with the guilty spoils?' Nigel grinned and said we'd better get rid of them before any accidents occurred, so they emptied out the tube and threw the tablets on the fire and emptied out the powder from the morphine tartrate and threw that on the fire too. The tincture of digitalis they poured down the lavatory."

"And the bottles?"

"I don't know what happened to the bottles . . . I should think they probably were just thrown into the wastepaper basket?"

"But the poison itself was destroyed?"

"Yes. I'm sure of that. I saw it."

"And that was—when?"

"About, oh, just over a fortnight ago, I think."

"I see. Thank you, Miss Tomlinson."

Jean lingered, clearly wanting to be told more.

"D'you think it might be important?"

"It might be. One can't tell."

Inspector Sharpe remained brooding for a few moments. Then he had Nigel Chapman in again.

“I’ve just had a rather interesting statement from Miss Jean Tomlinson,” he said.

“Ah! Who’s dear Jean been poisoning your mind against? Me?”

“She’s been talking about poison, and in connection with you, Mr. Chapman.”

“Poison and me? What on earth?”

“Do you deny that some weeks ago you had a wager with Mr. Bateson about methods of obtaining poison in some way that could not be traced to you?”

“Oh, that!” Nigel was suddenly enlightened. “Yes, of course! Funny I never thought of that. I don’t even remember Jean being there. But you don’t think it could have any possible significance, do you?”

“Well, one doesn’t know. You admit the fact, then?”

“Oh yes, we were arguing on the subject. Colin and Len were being very superior and high-handed about it so I told them that with a little ingenuity anyone could get hold of a suitable supply of poison—in fact I said I could think of three distinct ways of doing it, and I’d prove my point, I said, by putting them into practice.”

“Which you then proceeded to do?”

“Which I then proceeded to do, Inspector.”

“And what were those three methods, Mr. Chapman?”

Nigel put his head a little on one side.

“Aren’t you asking me to incriminate myself?” he said. “Surely you ought to warn me?”

“It hasn’t come to warning you yet, Mr. Chapman, but, of course, there’s no need for you to incriminate yourself, as you put it. In fact you’re perfectly entitled to refuse my questions if you like to do so.”

“I don’t know that I want to refuse.” Nigel considered for a moment or two, a slight smile playing round his lips.

“Of course,” he said, “what I did was, no doubt, against the law. You could haul me in for it if you liked. On the other hand, this is a murder case and if it’s got any bearing on poor little Celia’s death I suppose I ought to tell you.”

“That would certainly be the sensible point of view to take.”

“All right then. I’ll talk.”

“What were these three methods?”

“Well.” Nigel leant back in his chair. “One’s always reading in the papers, isn’t one, about doctors losing dangerous drugs from a car? People are being warned about it.”

“Yes.”

"Well, it occurred to me that one very simple method would be to go down to the country, follow a GP about on his rounds, when occasion offered—just open the car, look in the doctor's case, and extract what you wanted. You see, in these country districts, the doctor doesn't always take his case into the house. It depends what sort of patient he's going to see."

"Well?"

"Well, that's all. That's to say that's all for method number one. I had to sleuth three doctors until I found a suitably careless one. When I did, it was simplicity itself. The car was left outside a farmhouse in a rather lonely spot. I opened the door, looked at the case, took out a tube of hyoscine hydrobromide, and that was that."

"Ah! And method number two?"

"That entailed just a little pumping of dear Celia, as a matter of fact. She was quite unsuspicious. I told you she was a stupid girl, she had no idea what I was doing. I simply talked a bit about the mumbo jumbo Latin of doctors' prescriptions, and asked her to write me out a prescription in the way a doctor writes it, for tincture digitalin. She obliged quite unsuspecting. All I had to do after that was to find a doctor in the classified directory, living in a far off district of London, add his initials or slightly illegible signature. I then took it to a chemist in a busy part of London, who would not be likely to be familiar with that particular doctor's signature, and I received the prescription made up without any difficulty at all. Digitalin is prescribed in quite large quantities for heart cases and I had written out the prescription on hotel notepaper."

"Very ingenious," said Inspector Sharpe drily.

"I am incriminating myself! I can hear it in your voice."

"And the third method?"

Nigel did not reply at once. Then he said:

"Look here. What exactly am I letting myself in for?"

"The theft of drugs from an unlocked car is larceny," said Inspector Sharpe. "Forging a prescription. . . ."

Nigel interrupted him.

"Not exactly forging, is it? I mean, I didn't obtain money by it, and it wasn't exactly an imitation of any doctor's signature. I mean, if I write a prescription and write H R James on it, you can't say I'm forging any particular Dr. James's name, can you?" He went on with rather a wry smile. "You see what I mean? I'm sticking my neck out. If you like to turn nasty over this—well—I'm obviously for it. On the other hand, if. . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Chapman, on the other hand?"

Nigel said with a sudden passion:

"I don't like murder. It's a beastly, horrible thing. Celia, poor little devil, didn't deserve to be murdered. I want to help. But does it help? I can't see that it does. Telling you my peccadilloes, I mean."

"The police have a good deal of latitude, Mr. Chapman. It's up to them to look upon certain happenings as a light-hearted prank of an irresponsible nature. I accept your assurance that you want to help in the solving of this girl’s murder. Now please go on, and tell me about your third method.”

“Well,” said Nigel, “we’re coming fairly near the bone now. It was a bit more risky than the other two, but at the same time it was a great deal more fun. You see, I’d been to visit Celia once or twice in her Dispensary. I knew the lay of the land there. . . .”

“So you were able to pinch the bottle out of the cupboard?”

“No, no, nothing as simple as that. That wouldn’t have been fair from my point of view. And, incidentally, if it had been a real murder—that is, if I had been stealing the poison for the purpose of murder—it would probably be remembered that I had been there. Actually, I hadn’t been in Celia’s Dispensary for about six months. No, I knew that Celia always went into the back room at eleven-fifteen for what you might call ‘elevenses,’ that is, a cup of coffee and a biscuit. The girls went in turn, two at a time. There was a new girl there who had only just come and she certainly wouldn’t know me by sight. So what I did was this. I strolled into the Dispensary with a white coat on and a stethoscope round my neck. There was only the new girl there and she was busy at the outpatients’ hatch. I strolled in, went along to the poison cupboard, took out a bottle, strolled round the end of the partition, said to the girl, ‘What strength adrenalin do you keep?’ She told me and I nodded, then I asked her if she had a couple of Veganin as I had a terrific hangover. I swallowed them down and strolled out again. She never had the least suspicion that I wasn’t somebody’s houseman or a medical student. It was child’s play. Celia never even knew I’d been there.”

“A stethoscope,” said Inspector Sharpe curiously. “Where did you get a stethoscope?”

Nigel grinned suddenly.

“It was Len Bateson’s,” he said. “I pinched it.”

“From this house?”

“Yes.”

“So that explains the theft of the stethoscope. That was not Celia’s doing.”

“Good lord no! Can’t see a kleptomaniac stealing a stethoscope, can you?”

“What did you do with it afterwards?”

“Well, I had to pawn it,” said Nigel apologetically.

“Wasn’t that a little hard on Bateson?”

“Very hard on him. But without explaining my methods, which I didn’t mean to do, I couldn’t tell him about it. However,” added Nigel cheerfully, “I took him out not long after and gave him a hell of a party one evening.”

“You’re a very irresponsible young man,” said Inspector Sharpe.

“You should have seen their faces,” said Nigel, his grin widening, “when I threw down those three lethal preparations on the table and told them I had managed to pinch them without anybody being wise as to who took them.”

“What you’re telling me is,” said the inspector, “that you had three means of poisoning someone by three different poisons and that in each case the poison could not have been traced to you.”

Nigel nodded.

“That’s fair enough,” he said. “And given the circumstances it’s not a very pleasant thing to admit. But the point is, that the poisons were all disposed of at least a fortnight ago or longer.”

“That is what you think, Mr. Chapman, but it may not really be so.”

Nigel stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“You had these things in your possession, how long?”

Nigel considered.

“Well, the tube of hyoscine about ten days, I suppose. The morphine tartrate, about four days. The tincture digitalin I’d only got that very afternoon.”

“And where did you keep these things—the hyoscine hydrobromide and the morphine tartrate, that is to say?”

“In the drawer of my chest of drawers, pushed to the back under my socks.”

“Did anyone know you had it there?”

“No. No, I’m sure they didn’t.”

There had been, however, a faint hesitation in his voice which Inspector Sharpe noticed, but for the moment he did not press the point.

“Did you tell anyone what you were doing? Your methods? The way you were going about these things?”

“No. At least—no, I didn’t.”

“You said ‘at least,’ Mr. Chapman.”

“Well, I didn’t actually. As a matter of fact, I was going to tell Pat, then I thought she wouldn’t approve. She’s very strict, Pat is, so I fobbed her off.”

“You didn’t tell her about stealing the stuff from the doctor’s car, or the prescription, or the morphia from the hospital?”

“Actually, I told her afterwards about the digitalin; that I’d written a prescription and got a bottle from the chemist, and about masquerading as a doctor at the hospital. I’m sorry to say Pat wasn’t amused. I didn’t tell her about pinching things from a car. I thought she’d go up in smoke.”

“Did you tell her you were going to destroy this stuff after you’d won the bet?”

“Yes. She was all worried and het up about it. Started to insist I took the things back or something like that.”

“That course of action never occurred to you yourself?”

“Good lord no! That would have been fatal; it would have landed me in no end of a row. No, we three just chucked the stuff on the fire and poured it down the loo and that was that. No harm done.”

“You say that, Mr. Chapman, but it’s quite possible that harm was done.”

“How can it have been, if the stuff was chucked away as I tell you?”

“Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Chapman, that someone might have seen where you put those things, or found them perhaps, and that someone might have emptied morphia out of the bottle and replaced it with something else?”

“Good lord no!” Nigel stared at him. “I never thought of anything of that kind. I don’t believe it.”

“But it’s a possibility, Mr. Chapman.”

“But nobody could possibly have known.”

“I should say,” said the inspector drily, “that in a place of this kind a great deal more is known than you yourself might believe possible.”

“Snooping, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps you’re right there.”

"Which of the students might normally, at any time, be in your room?"

"Well, I share it with Len Bateson. Most of the men here have been in it now and again. Not the girls, of course. The girls aren't supposed to come to the bedroom floors on our side of the house. Propriety. Pure living."

"They're not supposed to, but they might do so, I suppose?"

"Anyone might," said Nigel. "In the daytime. The afternoon, for instance, there's nobody about."

"Does Miss Lane ever come to your room?"

"I hope you don't mean that the way it sounds, Inspector. Pat comes to my room sometimes to replace some socks she's been darning. Nothing more than that."

Leaning forward, Inspector Sharpe said:

"You do realise, Mr. Chapman, that the person who could most easily have taken some of that poison out of the bottle and substituted something else for it, was yourself?"

Nigel looked at him, his face suddenly hard and haggard.

"Yes," he said. "I've seen that just a minute and a half ago. I could have done just exactly that. But I'd no reason on earth for putting that girl out of the way, Inspector, and I didn't do it. Still, there it is—I quite realise that you've only got my word for it."

Chapter Eleven

The story of the bet and the disposal of the poison was confirmed by Len Bateson and by Colin McNabb. Sharpe retained Colin McNabb after the others had gone.

“I don’t want to cause you any more pain than I can help, Mr. McNabb,” he said. “I can realise what it means to you for your fiancée to have been poisoned on the very night of your engagement.”

“There’ll be no need to go into that aspect of it,” said Colin McNabb, his face immovable. “You’ll not need to concern yourself with my feelings. Just ask me any questions you like which you think may be useful to you.”

“It was your considered opinion that Celia Austin’s behaviour had a psychological origin?”

“There’s no doubt about it at all,” said Colin McNabb. “If you’d like me to go into the theory of the thing. . . .”

“No, no,” said Inspector Sharpe hastily. “I’m taking your word for it as a student of psychology.”

“Her childhood had been particularly unfortunate. It had set up an emotional block. . . .”

“Quite so, quite so.” Inspector Sharpe was desperately anxious to avoid hearing the story of yet another unhappy childhood. Nigel’s had been quite enough.

“You had been attracted to her for some time?”

“I would not say precisely that,” said Colin, considering the matter conscientiously. “These things sometimes surprise you by the way they dawn upon you suddenly, like. Subconsciously no doubt, I had been attracted, but I was not aware of the fact. Since it was not my intention to marry young, I had no doubt set up a considerable resistance to the idea in my conscious mind.”

“Yes. Just so. Celia Austin was happy in her engagement to you? I mean, she expressed no doubts? Uncertainties? There was nothing she felt she ought to tell you?”

“She made a very full confession of all she’d been doing. There was nothing more in her mind to worry her.”

“And you were planning to get married—when?”

“Not for a considerable time. I’m not in a position at the moment to support a wife.”

“Had Celia any enemies here? Anyone who did not like her?”

“I can hardly believe so. I’ve given that point of view a great deal of thought, Inspector. Celia was well-liked here. I’d say, myself, it was not a personal matter at all which brought about her end.”

“What do you mean by ‘not a personal matter?’ ”

“I do not wish to be very precise at the moment. It’s only a vague kind of idea I have and I’m not clear about it myself.”

From that position the inspector could not budge him.

The last two students to be interviewed were Sally Finch and Elizabeth Johnston. The inspector took Sally Finch first.

Sally was an attractive girl with a mop of red hair and eyes that were bright and intelligent. After routine inquiries Sally Finch suddenly took the initiative.

“D’you know what I’d like to do, Inspector? I’d like to tell you just what I think. I personally. There’s something all wrong about this house, something very wrong indeed. I’m sure of that.”

“You mean you’re afraid of something, Miss Finch?” Sally nodded her head.

“Yes, I’m afraid. There’s something or someone here who’s pretty ruthless. The whole place isn’t—well, how shall I put it?—it isn’t what it seems. No, no, Inspector, I don’t mean communists. I can see that just trembling on your lips. It’s not communists I mean. Perhaps it isn’t even criminal. I don’t know. But I’ll bet you anything you like that awful old woman knows about it all.”

“What old woman? You don’t mean Mrs. Hubbard?”

“No. Not Ma Hubbard. She’s a dear. I mean old Nicoletis. That old she-wolf.”

“That’s interesting, Miss Finch. Can you be more definite? About Mrs. Nicoletis, I mean.”

Sally shook her head.

“No. That’s just what I can’t be. All I can tell you is she gives me the creeps every time I pass her. Something queer is going on here,

Inspector."

"I wish you could be a little more definite."

"So do I. You'll be thinking I'm fanciful. Well, perhaps I am, but other people feel it too. Akibombo does. He's scared. I believe Black Bess does, too, but she wouldn't let on. And I think, Inspector, that Celia knew something about it."

"Knew something about what?"

"That's just it. What? But there were things she said. Said that last day. About clearing everything up. She had owned up to her part in what was going on, but she sort of hinted that there were other things she knew about and she wanted to get them cleared up too. I think she knew something, Inspector, about someone. That's the reason I think she was killed."

"But if it was something as serious as that. . . ."

Sally interrupted him.

"I'd say that she had no idea how serious it was. She wasn't bright, you know. She was pretty dumb. She'd got hold of something but she'd no idea that the something she'd got hold of was dangerous. Anyway, that's my hunch for what it's worth."

"I see. Thank you . . . Now the last time you saw Celia Austin was in the common room after dinner last night, is that right?"

"That's right. At least, actually, I saw her after that."

"You saw her after that? Where? In her room?"

“No. When I went up to bed she was going out of the front door just as I came out of the common room.”

“Going out of the front door? Out of the house, do you mean?”

“Yes.”

“That’s rather surprising. Nobody else has suggested that.”

“I dare say they didn’t know. She certainly said good night and that she was going up to bed, and if I hadn’t seen her I would have assumed that she had gone up to bed.”

“Whereas actually she went upstairs, put on some outdoor things and then left the house. Is that right?”

Sally nodded.

“And I think she was going to meet someone.”

“I see. Someone from outside. Or could it have been one of the students?”

“Well, it’s my hunch that it would be one of the students. You see, if she wanted to speak to somebody privately, there was nowhere very well she could do it in the house. Someone might have suggested that she should come out and meet them somewhere outside.”

“Have you any idea when she got in again?”

“No idea whatever.”

“Would Geronimo know, the manservant?”

“He’d know if she came in after eleven o’clock because that’s the time he bolts and chains the door. Up to that time anyone can get in with their own key.”

“Do you know exactly what time it was when you saw her going out of the house?”

“I’d say it was about—ten. Perhaps a little past ten, but not much.”

“I see. Thank you, Miss Finch, for what you’ve told me.”

Last of all the inspector talked to Elizabeth Johnston. He was at once impressed with the quiet capability of the girl. She answered his questions with intelligent decision and then waited for him to proceed.

“Celia Austin,” he said, “protested vehemently that it was not she who damaged your papers, Miss Johnston. Do you believe her?”

“I do not think Celia did that. No.”

“You don’t know who did?”

“The obvious answer is Nigel Chapman. But it seems to me a little too obvious. Nigel is intelligent. He would not use his own ink.”

“And if not Nigel, who then?”

“That is more difficult. But I think Celia knew who it was—or at least guessed.”

“Did she tell you so?”

“Not in so many words; but she came to my room on the evening of the day she died, before going down to dinner. She came to tell me that though she was responsible for the thefts she had not sabotaged my work. I told her that I accepted that assurance. I asked her if she knew who had done so.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said”—Elizabeth paused a moment, as though to be sure of the accuracy of what she was about to say—“she said, ‘I can’t really be sure, because I don’t see why . . . It might have been a mistake or an accident . . . I’m sure whoever did it is very unhappy about it, and would really like to own up.’ Celia went on, ‘There are some things I don’t understand, like the electric lightbulbs the day the police came.’ ”

Sharpe interrupted.

“What’s this about the police and electric lightbulbs?”

“I don’t know. All Celia said was: ‘I didn’t take them out.’ And then she said: ‘I wondered if it had anything to do with the passport?’ I said, ‘What passport are you talking about?’ And she said: ‘I think someone might have a forged passport.’ ”

The inspector was silent for a moment or two.

Here at last some vague pattern seemed to be taking shape. A passport. . . .

He asked, “What more did she say?”

"Nothing more. She just said: 'Anyway I shall know more about it tomorrow.' "

"She said that, did she? I shall know more about it tomorrow. That's a very significant remark, Miss Johnston."

"Yes."

The inspector was again silent as he reflected.

Something about a passport—and a visit from the police . . . Before coming to Hickory Road, he had carefully looked up the files. A fairly close eye was kept on hostels which housed foreign students. 26 Hickory Road had a good record. Such details as there were, were meagre and unsuggestive. A West African student wanted by the Sheffield police for living on a woman's earnings; the student in question had been at Hickory Road for a few days and had then gone elsewhere, and had in due course been gathered in and since deported. There had been a routine check of all hostels and boardinghouses for a Eurasian "wanted to assist the police" in the investigation of the murder of a publican's wife near Cambridge. That had been cleared up when the young man in question had walked into the police station at Hull and had given himself up for the crime. There had been an inquiry into a student's distribution of subversive pamphlets. All these occurrences had taken place some time ago and could not possibly have any connection with the death of Celia Austin.

He sighed and looked up to find Elizabeth Johnston's dark intelligent eyes watching him.

On an impulse, he said, "Tell me, Miss Johnston, have you ever had a feeling—an impression—of something wrong about this place?”

She looked surprised.

“In what way—wrong?”

“I couldn’t really say. I’m thinking of something Miss Sally Finch said to me.”

“Oh—Sally Finch!”

There was an intonation in her voice which he found hard to place. He felt interested and went on:

“Miss Finch seemed to me a good observer, both shrewd and practical. She was very insistent on there being something—odd, about this place—though she found it difficult to define just what it was.”

Elizabeth said sharply:

“That is her American way of thought. They are all the same, these Americans, nervous, apprehensive, suspecting every kind of foolish thing! Look at the fools they make of themselves with their witch hunts, their hysterical spy mania, their obsession over communism. Sally Finch is typical.”

The inspector’s interest grew. So Elizabeth disliked Sally Finch. Why? Because Sally was an American? Or did Elizabeth dislike Americans merely because Sally Finch was an American, and had she some reason of her own for disliking the attractive redhead? Perhaps it was just simple female jealousy.

He resolved to try a line of approach that he had sometimes found useful. He said smoothly:

"As you may appreciate, Miss Johnston, in an establishment like this, the level of intelligence varies a great deal. Some people—most people—we just ask for facts. But when we come across someone with a high level of intelligence—"

He paused. The inference was flattering. Would she respond?

After a brief pause, she did.

"I think I understand what you mean, Inspector. The intellectual level here is not, as you say, very high. Nigel Chapman has a certain quickness of intellect, but his mind is shallow. Leonard Bateson is a plodder—no more. Valerie Hobhouse has a good quality of mind, but her outlook is commercial, and she's too lazy to use her brains on anything worthwhile. What you want is the detachment of a trained mind."

"Such as yours, Miss Johnston."

She accepted the tribute without a protest. He realised, with some interest, that behind her modest pleasant manner, here was a young woman who was positively arrogant in her appraisement of her own qualities.

"I'm inclined to agree with your estimate of your fellow students, Miss Hobhouse. Chapman is clever but childish. Valerie Hobhouse has brains but a blasé attitude to life. You, as you say, have a trained mind. That's why I'd value your views—the views of a powerful detached intellect."

For a moment he was afraid he had overdone it, but he need have had no fears.

“There is nothing wrong about this place, Inspector. Pay no attention to Sally Finch. This is a decent well-run hostel. I am certain that you will find no trace here of any subversive activities.”

Inspector Sharpe felt a little surprised.

“It wasn’t really subversive activities I was thinking about.”

“Oh—I see—” She was a little taken aback. “I was linking up what Celia said about a passport. But looking at it impartially and weighing up all the evidence, it seems quite certain to me that the reason for Celia’s death was what I should express as a private one—some sex complication, perhaps. I’m sure it had nothing to do with what I might call the hostel as a hostel, or anything ‘going on’ here. Nothing, I am sure, is going on. I should be aware of the fact if it were so, my perceptions are very keen.”

“I see. Well, thank you, Miss Johnston. You’ve been very kind and helpful.”

Elizabeth Johnston went out. Inspector Sharpe sat staring at the closed door and Sergeant Cobb had to speak to him twice before he roused himself.

“Eh?”

“I said that’s the lot, sir.”

“Yes, and what have we got? Precious little. But I’ll tell you one thing, Cobb. I’m coming back here tomorrow with a search warrant. We’ll go away talking pretty now and they’ll think it’s all over. But there’s something going on in this place. Tomorrow I’ll turn it upside down—not so easy when you don’t know what you’re looking for, but there’s a chance that I’ll find something to give me a clue. That’s a very interesting girl who just went out. She’s got the ego of a Napoleon, and I strongly suspect that she knows something.”

Chapter Twelve

I

Hercule Poirot, at work upon his correspondence, paused in the middle of a sentence that he was dictating. Miss Lemon looked up questioningly.

“Yes, M. Poirot?”

“My mind wanders!” Poirot waved a hand. “After all, this letter is not important. Be so kind, Miss Lemon, as to get me your sister upon the telephone.”

“Yes, M. Poirot.”

A few moments later Poirot crossed the room and took the receiver from his secretary’s hand.

“’Allo!” he said.

“Yes, M. Poirot?”

Mrs. Hubbard sounded rather breathless.

“I trust, Mrs. Hubbard, that I am not disturbing you?”

“I’m past being disturbed,” said Mrs. Hubbard.

“There have been agitations, yes?” Poirot asked delicately.

“That’s a very nice way of putting it, M. Poirot. That’s exactly what they have been. Inspector Sharpe finished questioning all the students yesterday, and then he came back with a search warrant today and I've got Mrs. Nicoletis on my hands with raving hysterics."

Poirot clucked his tongue sympathetically.

Then he said, "It is just a little question I have to ask. You sent me a list of those things that had disappeared—and other queer happenings—what I have to ask is this, did you write that list in chronological order?"

"You mean?"

"I mean, were the things written down exactly in the order of their disappearance?"

"No, they weren't. I'm sorry—I just put them down as I thought of them. I'm so sorry if I misled you."

"I should have asked you before," said Poirot. "But it did not strike me then as important. I have your list here. One evening shoe, bracelet, diamond ring, powder compact, lipstick, stethoscope, and so on. But you say that was not the order of disappearance?"

"No."

"Can you remember now, or would it be too difficult for you, what was the proper order?"

"Well, I'm not sure if I could now, M. Poirot. You see it's all some time ago. I should have to think it out. Actually, after I had talked with my sister and knew I was coming to see you, I made a list, and I should say that I put it down in the order of things as I remembered them. I mean, the evening shoe because it was so peculiar; and then the bracelet and the powder compact and the cigarette lighter and the diamond ring because they were all rather important things and looked as though we had a genuine thief at work; and then I remembered the other more unimportant things later and added them. I mean the boracic and the electric lightbulbs and the rucksack. They weren’t really important and I only really thought of them as a kind of afterthought.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “Yes, I see . . . Now what I would ask of you, madame, is to sit down now, when you have the leisure, that is. . . .”

“I dare say when I’ve got Mrs. Nicoletis to bed with a sedative and calmed down Geronimo and Maria, I shall have a little time. What is it you want me to do?”

“Sit down and try to put down, as nearly as you can, the chronological order in which the various incidents occurred.”

“Certainly, M. Poirot. The rucksack, I believe, was the first, and the electric light bulbs—which I really didn’t think had any connection with the other things—and then the bracelet and the compact, no—the evening shoe. But there, you don’t want to hear me speculate about it. I’ll put them down as best I can.”

“Thank you, madame, I shall be much obliged to you.”

Poirot hung up the phone.

“I am vexed with myself,” he said to Miss Lemon. “I have departed from the principles of order and method. I should have made quite sure from the start, the exact order in which these thefts occurred.”

“Dear, dear,” said Miss Lemon mechanically. “Are you going to finish these letters now, M. Poirot?”

But once again Poirot waved her indignantly away.

II

On arrival back at Hickory Road with a search warrant on Saturday morning, Inspector Sharpe had demanded an interview with Mrs. Nicoletis, who always came on Saturdays to do accounts with Mrs. Hubbard. He had explained what he was about to do.

Mrs. Nicoletis protested with vigour.

“But it is an insult, that! My students they will leave—they will all leave. I shall be ruined. . . .”

“No, no, madam. I’m sure they will be sensible. After all, this is a case of murder.”

“It is not murder—it is suicide.”

“And I’m sure once I’ve explained, no one will object. . . .”

Mrs. Hubbard put in a soothing word.

“I’m sure,” she said, “everyone will be sensible—except,” she added thoughtfully, “perhaps Mr. Achmed Ali and Mr. Chandra Lal.”

“Pah!” said Mrs. Nicoletis. “Who cares about them?”

“Thank you, madam,” said the inspector. “Then I’ll make a start here, in your sitting room.”

An immediate and violent protest came from Mrs. Nicoletis at the suggestion.

“You search where you please,” she said, “but here, no! I refuse.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Nicoletis, but I have to go through the house from top to bottom.”

“That is right, yes, but not in my room. I am above the law.”

“No one’s above the law. I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to stand aside.”

“It is an outrage,” Mrs. Nicoletis screamed with fury. “You are officious busybodies. I will write to everyone. I will write to my member of Parliament. I will write to the papers.”

“Write to anyone you please, madam,” said Inspector Sharpe. “I’m going to search this room.”

He started straight away upon the bureau. A large carton of confectionery, a mass of papers, and a large variety of assorted junk rewarded his search. He moved from there to a cupboard in the corner of the room.

“This is locked. Can I have the key, please?”

“Never!” screamed Mrs. Nicoletis. “Never, never, never shall you have the key! Beast and pig of a policeman, I spit at you. I spit! I spit! I spit!”

“You might just as well give me the key,” said Inspector Sharpe. “If not, I shall simply prise the door open.”

“I will not give you the key! You will have to tear my clothes off me before you get the key! And that—that will be a scandal.”

“Get a chisel, Cobb,” said Inspector Sharpe resignedly.

Mrs. Nicoletis uttered a scream of fury. Inspector Sharpe paid no attention. The chisel was brought. Two sharp cracks and the door of the cupboard came open. As it swung forward a large consignment of empty brandy bottles poured out of the cupboard.

“Beast! Pig! Devil!” screamed Mrs. Nicoletis.

“Thank you, madam,” said the inspector politely. “We’ve finished in here.”

Mrs. Hubbard tactfully replaced the bottles while Mrs. Nicoletis had hysterics.

One mystery, the mystery of Mrs. Nicoletis’s tempers, was now cleared up.

III

Poirot’s telephone call came through just as Mrs. Hubbard was pouring out an appropriate dose of sedative from the private medicine cupboard in her sitting room. After replacing the receiver she went back to Mrs. Nicoletis whom she had left screaming and kicking her heels on the sofa in her own sitting room.

“Now you drink this,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “And you’ll feel better.”

“Gestapo!” said Mrs. Nicoletis, who was now quiet but sullen.

“I shouldn’t think any more about it if I were you,” said Mrs. Hubbard soothingly.

“Gestapo!” said Mrs. Nicoletis again. “Gestapo! That is what they are!”

“They have to do their duty, you know,” said Mrs. Hubbard.

“Is it their duty to pry into my private cupboards? I say to them, ‘That is not for you.’ I lock it. I put the key down my bosom. If you had not been there as a witness they would have torn my clothes off me without shame.”

“Oh no, I don’t think they would have done that,” said Mrs. Hubbard.

“That is what you say! Instead they get a chisel and they force my door. That is structural damage to the house for which I shall be responsible.”

“Well, you see, if you wouldn’t give them the key. . . .”

“Why should I give them the key? It is my key. My private key. And this is my private room. My private room and I say to the police, ‘Keep out’ and they do not keep out.”

“Well, after all, Mrs. Nicoletis, there has been a murder, remember. And after a murder one has to put up with certain things which might not be very pleasant at ordinary times.”

“I spit upon the murder!” said Mrs. Nicoletis. “That little Celia she commits suicide. She has a silly love affair and she takes poison. It is the sort of thing that is always happening. They are so stupid about love, these girls—as though love mattered! One year, two years and it is all finished, the grand passion! The man is the same as any other man! But these silly girls they do not know that. They take the sleeping draught and the disinfectant and they turn on gas taps and then it is too late.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Hubbard, turning full circle, as it were, to where the conversation had started, “I shouldn’t worry any more about it all now.”

“That is all very well for you. Me, I have to worry. It is not safe for me any longer.”

“Safe?” Mrs. Hubbard looked at her, startled.

“It was my private cupboard,” Mrs. Nicoletis insisted. “Nobody knows what was in my private cupboard. I did not want them to know. And now they do know. I am very uneasy. They may think—what will they think?”

“Who do you mean by they?”

Mrs. Nicoletis shrugged her large, handsome shoulders and looked sulky.

“You do not understand,” she said, “but it makes me uneasy. Very uneasy.”

“You’d better tell me,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “Then perhaps I can help you.”

“Thank goodness I do not sleep here,” said Mrs. Nicoletis. “These locks on the doors here they are all alike; one key fits any other.

No, thanks to heaven, I do not sleep here."

Mrs. Hubbard said:

"Mrs. Nicoletis, if you are afraid of something, hadn't you better tell me just what it is?"

Mrs. Nicoletis gave her a flickering look from her dark eyes and then looked away again.

"You have said it yourself," she said evasively. "You have said there has been a murder in this house, so naturally one is uneasy. Who may be next? One does not even know who the murderer is. That is because the police are so stupid, or perhaps they have been bribed."

"That's all nonsense and you know it," said Mrs. Hubbard. "But tell me, have you got any cause for real anxiety. . . ."

Mrs. Nicoletis flew into one of her tempers.

"Ah, you do not think I have any cause for anxiety? You know best as usual! You know everything! You are so wonderful; you cater, you manage, you spend money like water on food so that the students are fond of you, and now you want to manage my affairs! But that, no! I keep my affairs to myself and nobody shall pry into them, do you hear? No, Mrs. What-do-you-call-it Paul Pry."

"Please yourself," said Mrs. Hubbard, exasperated.

"You are a spy—I always knew it."

"A spy on what?"

“Nothing,” said Mrs. Nicoletis. “There is nothing here to spy upon. If you think there is it is because you made it up. If lies are told about me I shall know who told them.”

“If you wish me to leave,” said Mrs. Hubbard, “you’ve only got to say so.”

“No, you are not to leave. I forbid it. Not at this moment. Not when I have all the cares of the police, of murder, of everything else on my hands, I shall not allow you to abandon me.”

“Oh, all right,” said Mrs. Hubbard helplessly. “But really, it’s very difficult to know what you do want. Sometimes I don’t think you know yourself. You’d better lie down on my bed and have a sleep —”

Chapter Thirteen

Hercule Poirot alighted from a taxi at 26 Hickory Road.

The door was opened to him by Geronimo who welcomed him as an old friend. There was a constable standing in the hall and Geronimo drew Poirot into the dining room and closed the door.

“It is terrible,” he whispered, as he assisted Poirot off with his overcoat. “We have police there all time! Ask questions, go here, go there, look in cupboards, look in drawers, come into Maria’s kitchen even. Maria very angry. She says she like to hit policeman with rolling pin but I say better not. I say policeman not like being hit by rolling pins and they make us more embarrassments if Maria do that.”

“You have the good sense,” said Poirot approvingly. “Is Mrs. Hubbard at liberty?”

“I take you upstairs to her.”

“A little moment.” Poirot stopped him. “Do you remember the day when certain electric lightbulbs disappeared?”

“Oh yes, I remember. But that long time ago now. One—two—three months ago.”

“Exactly what electric lightbulbs were taken?”

“The one in the hall and I think in the common room. Someone make joke. Take all the bulbs out.”

“You don’t remember the exact date?”

Geronimo struck an attitude as he thought.

“I do not remember,” he said. “But I think it was on day when policeman come, some time in February—”

“A policeman? What did a policeman come here for?”

“He come here to see Mrs. Nicoletis about a student. Very bad student, come from Africa. Not do work. Go to labour exchange, get National Assistance, then have woman and she go out with men for him. Very bad that. Police not like that. All this in Manchester, I think, or Sheffield. So he ran away from there and he come here, but police come after him and they talk to Mrs. Hubbard about him. Yes. And she say he not stop here because she no like him and she send him away.”

“I see. They were trying to trace him.”

“Scusi?”

“They were trying to find him?”

“Yes, yes, that is right. They find him and then they put him in prison because he live on woman, and live on woman must not do. This is nice house here. Nothing like that here.”

“And that was the day the bulbs were missing?”

“Yes. Because I turn switch and nothing happen. And I go into common room and no bulb there, and I look in drawer here for spares and I see bulbs have been taken away. So I go down to kitchen and ask Maria if she know where spare bulbs—but she angry because she not like police come and she say spare bulbs not her business, so I bring just candles."

Poirot digested this story as he followed Geronimo up the stairs to Mrs. Hubbard's room.

Poirot was welcomed warmly by Mrs. Hubbard, who was looking tired and harassed. She held out, at once, a piece of paper to him.

"I've done my best, M. Poirot, to write down these things in the proper order but I wouldn't like to say that it's a hundred percent accurate now. You see, it's very difficult when you look back over a period of months to remember just when this, that or the other happened."

"I am deeply grateful to you, madame. And how is Mrs. Nicoletis?"

"I've given her a sedative and I hope she's asleep now. She made a terrible fuss over the search warrant. She refused to open the cupboard in her room and the inspector broke it open and quantities of empty brandy bottles tumbled out."

"Ah!" said Poirot, making a tactful sound.

"Which really explains quite a lot of things," said Mrs. Hubbard. "I really can't imagine why I didn't think of that before, having seen as much of drink as I have out in Singapore. But all that, I'm sure, isn't what interests you."

"Everything interests me," said Poirot.

He sat down and studied the piece of paper that Mrs. Hubbard had handed to him.

“Ah!” he said, after a moment or two. “I see that now the rucksack heads the list.”

“Yes. It wasn’t a very important thing, but I do remember now, definitely, that it happened before the jewellery and those sort of things began to disappear. It was all rather mixed up with some trouble we had about one of the coloured students. He’d left a day or two before this happened and I remember thinking that it might have been a revengeful act on his part before he went. There’d been, well—a little trouble.”

“Ah! Geronimo has recounted to me something like that. You had, I believe, the police here? Is that right?”

“Yes. It seems they had an inquiry from Sheffield or Birmingham or somewhere. It had all been rather a scandal. Immoral earnings and all that sort of thing. He was had up about it in court later. Actually, he’d only stayed here about three or four days. Then I didn’t like his behaviour, the way he was carrying on, so I told him that his room was engaged and that he’d have to go. I wasn’t really at all surprised when the police called. Of course, I couldn’t tell them where he’d gone to, but they got on his track all right.”

“And it was after that that you found the rucksack?”

“Yes, I think so—it’s hard to remember. You see, Len Bateson was going off on a hitchhike and he couldn’t find his rucksack anywhere and he created a terrible fuss about it, and everyone did a lot of searching, and at last Geronimo found it shoved behind the boiler all cut to ribbons. Such an odd thing to happen. So curious; and pointless, M. Poirot.”

“Yes,” Poirot agreed. “Curious and pointless.”

He remained thoughtful for a moment.

“And it was on that same day, the day the police came to inquire about this African student, that some electric bulbs disappeared—or so Geronimo tells me. Was it that day?”

“Well, I can’t really remember. Yes, yes, I think you’re right, because I remember coming downstairs with the police inspector and going into the common room with him and there were candles there. We wanted to ask Akibombo whether this other young man had spoken to him at all or told him where he was going to stay.”

“Who else was in the common room?”

“Oh, I think most of the students had come back by that time. It was in the evening, you know, just about six o’clock. I asked Geronimo about the bulbs and he said they’d been taken out. I asked him why he hadn’t replaced them and he said we were right out of electric bulbs. I was rather annoyed as it seemed such a silly pointless joke. I thought of it as a joke, not as stealing, but I was rather surprised that we had no more electric bulbs because we usually keep quite a good supply in stock. Still, I didn’t take it seriously, M. Poirot, not at that time.”

“The bulbs and the rucksack,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“But it still seems to me possible,” said Mrs. Hubbard, “that those two things have no connection with poor little Celia’s peccadilloes.

You remember she denied very earnestly that she'd ever touched the rucksack at all."

"Yes, yes, that is true. How soon after this did the thefts begin?"

"Oh dear, M. Poirot, you've no idea how difficult all this is to remember. Let me see—that was March, no, February—the end of February. Yes, yes, I think Genevieve said she'd missed her bracelet about a week after that. Yes, between the 20th and 25th of February."

"And after that the thefts went on fairly continuously?"

"Yes."

"And this rucksack was Len Bateson's?"

"Yes."

"And he was very annoyed about it?"

"Well, you mustn't go by that, M. Poirot," said Mrs. Hubbard, smiling a little. "Len Bateson is that kind of boy, you know. Warm hearted, generous, kind to a fault, but one of those fiery, outspoken tempers."

"What was it, this rucksack—something special?"

"Oh no, it was just the ordinary kind."

"Could you show me one like it?"

"Well, yes, of course. Colin's got one, I think, just like it. So has Nigel—in fact Len's got one again now because he had to go and buy another. The students usually buy them at the shop at the end of the road. It’s a very good place for all kinds of camping equipment and hikers’ outfits. Shorts, sleeping bags, all that sort of thing. And very cheap—much cheaper than any of the big stores.”

“If I could just see one of these rucksacks, madame?”

Mrs. Hubbard obligingly led him to Colin McNabb’s room.

Colin himself was not there, but Mrs. Hubbard opened the wardrobe, stooped, and picked up a rucksack which she held out to Poirot.

“There you are, M. Poirot. That’s exactly like the one that was missing and that we found all cut up.”

“It would take some cutting,” murmured Poirot, as he fingered the rucksack appreciatively. “One could not snip at this with a little pair of embroidery scissors.”

“Oh no, it wasn’t what you’d expect a—well, a girl to do, for instance. There must have been a certain amount of strength involved, I should say. Strength and—well—malice, you know.”

“I know, yes, I know. It is not pleasant. Not pleasant to think about.”

“Then, when later that scarf of Valerie’s was found, also slashed to pieces, well, it did look—what shall I say—unbalanced.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. “But I think there you are wrong, madame. I do not think there is anything unbalanced about this business. I think it has aim and purpose, and shall we say, method?”

"Well, I dare say you know more about these things, M. Poirot, than I do," said Mrs. Hubbard. "All I can say is, I don't like it. As far as I can judge we've got a very nice lot of students here and it would distress me very much to think that one of them is—well, not what I'd like to think he or she is."

Poirot had wandered over to the window. He opened it and stepped out on to the old-fashioned balcony.

The room looked out over the back of the house. Below was a small, sooty garden.

"It is more quiet here than at the front, I expect?" he said.

"In a way. But Hickory Road isn't really a noisy road. And facing this way you get all the cats at night. Yowling, you know, and knocking the lids off the dustbins."

Poirot looked down at four large battered ash cans and other assorted backyard junk.

"Where is the boiler house?"

"That's the door to it, down there next to the coal house."

"I see."

He gazed down speculatively.

"Who else has rooms facing this way?"

"Nigel Chapman and Len Bateson have the next room to this."

"And beyond them?"

"Then it's the next house—and the girls' rooms. First the room Celia had and beyond it Elizabeth Johnston's and then Patricia Lane's. Valerie and Jean Tomlinson look out to the front."

Poirot nodded and came back into the room.

"He is neat, this young man," he murmured, looking round him appreciatively.

"Yes. Colin's room is always very tidy. Some of the boys live in a terrible mess," said Mrs. Hubbard. "You should see Len Bateson's room." She added indulgently, "But he is a nice boy, M. Poirot."

"You say that these rucksacks are bought at the shop at the end of the road?"

"Yes."

"What is the name of that shop?"

"Now really, M. Poirot, when you ask me like that I can't remember. Mabberley, I think. Or else Kelso. No, I know they don't sound the same kind of name but they're the same sort of name in my mind. Really, of course, because I knew some people once called Kelso and some other ones called Mabberley, and they were very alike."

"Ah," said Poirot. "That is one of the reasons for things that always fascinate me. The unseen link."

He looked once more out of the window and down into the garden, then took his leave of Mrs. Hubbard and left the house.

He walked down Hickory Road until he came to the corner and turned into the main road. He had no difficulty in recognising the shop of Mrs. Hubbard’s description. It displayed in great profusion picnic baskets, rucksacks, Thermos flasks, sports equipment of all kinds, shorts, bush shirts, topees, tents, swimming suits, bicycle lamps and torches; in fact all possible needs of young and athletic youth. The name above the shop, he noted, was neither Mabberley nor Kelso but Hicks. After a careful study of the goods displayed in the window, Poirot entered and represented himself as desirous of purchasing a rucksack for a hypothetical nephew.

“He makes ‘le camping,’ you understand,” said Poirot at his most foreign. “He goes with other students upon the feet and all he needs he takes with him on his back, and the cars and the lorries that pass, they give him a lift.”

The proprietor, who was a small obliging man with sandy hair, replied promptly.

“Ah, hitchhiking,” he said. “They all do it nowadays. Must lose the buses and the railways a lot of money, though. Hitchhike themselves all over Europe some of these young people do. Now it’s a rucksack you’re wanting sir. Just an ordinary rucksack?”

“I understand so. You have a variety then?”

“Well, we have one or two extra light ones for ladies, but this is the general article we sell. Good, stout, stand a lot of wear, and really very cheap though I say it myself.”

He produced a stout canvas affair which was, as far as Poirot could judge, an exact replica of the one he had been shown in Colin’s room. Poirot examined it, asked a few more exotic and unnecessary questions, and ended by paying for it then and there.

“Ah yes, we sell a lot of these,” said the man as he made it up into a parcel.

“A good many students lodge round here, do they not?”

“Yes. This is a neighbourhood with a lot of students.”

“There is one hostel, I believe in Hickory Road?”

“Oh yes, I’ve sold several to the young gentlemen there. And the young ladies. They usually come here for any equipment they want before they go off. My prices are cheaper than the big stores, and so I tell them. There you are, sir, and I’m sure your nephew will be delighted with the service he gets out of this.”

Poirot thanked him and went out with his parcel.

He had only gone a step or two when a hand fell on his shoulder.

It was Inspector Sharpe.

“Just the man I want to see,” said Sharpe.

“You have accomplished your search of the house?”

“I’ve searched the house, but I don’t know that I’ve accomplished very much. There’s a place along here where you can get a decent sandwich and a cup of coffee. Come along with me if you’re not busy. I’d like to talk to you.”

The sandwich bar was almost empty. The two men carried their plates and cups to a small table in a corner.

Here Sharpe recounted the results of his questioning of the students.

“The only person we’ve got any evidence against is young Chapman,” he said. “And there we’ve got too much. Three lots of poison through his hands! But there’s no reason to believe he’d any animus against Celia Austin, and I doubt if he’d have been as frank about his activities if he was really guilty.”

“It opens out other possibilities, though.”

“Yes—all that stuff knocking about in a drawer. Silly young ass!”

He went on to Elizabeth Johnston and her account of what Celia had said to her.

“If what she said is true, it’s significant.”

“Very significant,” Poirot agreed.

The inspector quoted:

“ ‘I shall know more about it tomorrow.’ ”

“And so—tomorrow never came for that poor girl. Your search of the house—did it accomplish anything?”

“There were one or two things that were—what shall I say?—unexpected, perhaps.”

“Such as?”

“Elizabeth Johnston is a member of the Communist Party. We found her Party card.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, thoughtfully. “That is interesting.”

“You wouldn’t have expected it,” said Inspector Sharpe. “I didn’t until I questioned her yesterday. She’s got a lot of personality, that girl.”

“I should think she was a valuable recruit to the Party,” said Hercule Poirot. “She is a young woman of quite unusual intelligence, I should say.”

“It was interesting to me,” said Inspector Sharpe, “because she has never paraded those sympathies, apparently. She’s kept very quiet about it at Hickory Road. I don’t see that it has any significance in connection with the case of Celia Austin, I mean—but it’s a thing to bear in mind.”

“What else did you find?”

Inspector Sharpe shrugged his shoulders.

“Miss Patricia Lane, in her drawer, had a handkerchief rather extensively stained with green ink.”

Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

“Green ink? Patricia Lane! So it may have been she who took the ink and spilled it over Elizabeth Johnston’s papers and then wiped her hands afterwards. But surely. . . .”

"Surely she wouldn't want her dear Nigel to be suspected," Sharpe finished for him.

"One would not have thought so. Of course, someone else might have put the handkerchief in her drawer."

"Likely enough."

"Anything else?"

"Well," Sharpe reflected for a moment. "It seems Leonard Bateson's father is in Longwith Vale Mental Hospital, a certified patient. I don't suppose it's of any particular interest, but. . . ."

"But Len Bateson's father is insane. Probably without significance, as you say, but it is a fact to be stored away in the memory. It would even be interesting to know what particular form his mania takes."

"Bateson's a nice young fellow," said Sharpe, "but of course his temper is a bit, well, uncontrolled."

Poirot nodded. Suddenly, vividly, he remembered Celia Austin saying, "Of course, I wouldn't cut up a rucksack. Anyway that was only temper." How did she know it was temper? Had she seen Len Bateson hacking at that rucksack? He came back to the present to hear Sharpe say, with a grin:

". . . and Mr. Achmed Ali has some extremely pornographic literature and postcards which explains why he went up in the air over the search."

"There were many protests, no doubt?"

"I should say there were. A French girl practically had hysterics and an Indian, Mr. Chandra Lal, threatened to make an international incident of it. There were a few subversive pamphlets amongst his belongings—the usual half-baked stuff—and one of the West Africans had some rather fearsome souvenirs and fetishes. Yes, a search warrant certainly shows you the peculiar side of human nature. You heard about Mrs. Nicoletis and her private cupboard?"

"Yes, I heard about that."

Inspector Sharpe grinned.

"Never seen so many empty brandy bottles in my life! And was she mad at us!"

He laughed, and then, abruptly, became serious.

"But we didn't find what we went after," he said. "No passports except strictly legitimate ones."

"You can hardly expect such a thing as a false passport to be left about for you to find, mon ami. You never had occasion, did you, to make an official visit to 26 Hickory Road in connection with a passport? Say, in the last six months?"

"No. I'll tell you the only occasions on which we did call round—within the times you mention."

He detailed them carefully.

Poirot listened with a frown.

“All that, it does not make sense,” he said.

He shook his head.

“Things will only make sense if we begin at the beginning.”

“What do you call the beginning, Poirot?”

“The rucksack, my friend,” said Poirot softly. “The rucksack. All this began with a rucksack.”

Chapter Fourteen

I

Mrs. Nicoletis came up the stairs from the basement, where she had just succeeded in thoroughly infuriating both Geronimo and the temperamental Maria.

“Liars and thieves,” said Mrs. Nicoletis, in a loud triumphant voice. “All Italians are liars and thieves!”

Mrs. Hubbard, who was just descending the stairs, gave a short vexed sigh.

“It’s a pity,” she said, “to upset them just while they’re cooking the supper.”

Mrs. Hubbard suppressed the retort that rose to her lips.

“I shall come in as usual on Monday,” said Mrs. Nicoletis.

“Yes, Mrs. Nicoletis.”

“And please get someone to repair my cupboard door first thing Monday morning. The bill for repairing it will go to the police, do you understand? To the police.”

Mrs. Hubbard looked dubious.

“And I want fresh electric lightbulbs put in the dark passages—stronger ones. The passages are too dark.”

“You said especially that you wanted low power bulbs in the passages—for economy.”

“That was last week,” snapped Mrs. Nicoletis. “Now—it is different. Now I look over my shoulder—and I wonder ‘Who is following me?’ ”

Was her employer dramatising herself, Mrs. Hubbard wondered, or was she really afraid of something or someone? Mrs. Nicoletis had such a habit of exaggerating everything that it was always hard to know how much reliance to place on her statements.

Mrs. Hubbard said doubtfully:

“Are you sure you ought to go home by yourself? Would you like me to come with you?”

“I shall be safer there than here, I can tell you!”

“But what is it you are afraid of? If I knew, perhaps I could—”

“It is not your business. I tell you nothing. I find it insupportable the way you continually ask me questions.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure—”

“Now you are offended.” Mrs. Nicoletis gave her a beaming smile. “I am bad tempered and rude—yes. But I have much to worry me. And remember I trust you and rely on you. What I should do without you, dear Mrs. Hubbard, I really do not know. See, I kiss my hand to you. Have a pleasant weekend. Good night.”

Mrs. Hubbard watched her as she went out through the front door and pulled it to behind her. Relieving her feelings with a rather inadequate “Well, really!” Mrs. Hubbard turned towards the kitchen stairs.

Mrs. Nicoletis went down the front steps, out through the gate and turned to the left. Hickory Road was a fairly broad road. The houses in it were set back a little in their gardens. At the end of the road, a few minutes’ walk from number 26, was one of London’s main thoroughfares, down which buses were roaring. There were traffic lights at the end of the road and a public house, The Queen’s Necklace, at the corner. Mrs. Nicoletis walked in the middle of the pavement and from time to time sent a nervous glance over her shoulder, but there was no one in sight. Hickory Road appeared to be unusually deserted this evening. She quickened her steps a little as she drew near The Queen’s Necklace. Taking another hasty glance round she slipped rather guiltily through into the saloon bar.

Sipping the double brandy that she had asked for, her spirits revived. She no longer looked the frightened and uneasy woman that she had a short time previously. Her animosity against the police, however, was not lessened. She murmured under her breath, “Gestapo! I shall make them pay. Yes, they shall pay!” and finished off her drink. She ordered another and brooded over recent happenings. Unfortunate, extremely unfortunate, that the police should have been so tactless as to discover her secret hoard, and too much to hope that word would not get around amongst the students and the rest of them. Mrs. Hubbard would be discreet, perhaps, or again perhaps not, because really, could one trust anyone? These things always did get round. Geronimo knew. He had probably already told his wife, and she would tell the cleaning women and so it would go on until—she started violently as a voice behind her said:

“Why, Mrs. Nick, I didn’t know this was a haunt of yours?”

“Oh, it’s you,” she said. “I thought. . . .”

“Who did you think it was? The big bad wolf? What are you drinking? Have another on me.”

“It is all the worry,” Mrs. Nicoletis explained with dignity. “These policemen searching my house, upsetting everyone. My poor heart. I have to be careful with my heart. I do not care for drink, but really I felt quite faint outside. I thought a little brandy. . . .”

“Nothing like brandy. Here you are.”

Mrs. Nicoletis left The Queen’s Necklace a short while later feeling revived and positively happy. She would not take a bus, she decided. It was such a fine night and the air would be good for her. Yes, definitely, the air would be good for her. She felt not exactly unsteady on her feet but just a little bit uncertain. One brandy less, perhaps, would have been wise, but the air would soon clear her head. After all, why shouldn’t a lady have a quiet drink in her own room from time to time? What was there wrong with it? It was not as though she had ever allowed herself to be seen intoxicated. Intoxicated? Of course, she was never intoxicated. And anyway, if they didn’t like it; if they ticked her off, she’d soon tell them where they got off! She knew a thing or two, didn’t she? If she liked to shoot off her mouth! Mrs. Nicoletis tossed her head in a bellicose manner and swerved abruptly to avoid a pillar-box which had advanced upon her in a menacing manner. No doubt, her head was swimming a little. Perhaps if she just leant against the wall here for a little? If she closed her eyes for a moment or two. . . .

II

Police Constable Bott, swinging magnificently down on his beat, was accosted by a timid-looking clerk.

“There’s a woman here, Officer. I really—she seems to have been taken ill or something. She’s lying in a heap.”

Police Constable Bott bent his energetic steps that way, and stooped over the recumbent form. A strong aroma of brandy confirmed his suspicions.

“Passed out,” he said. “Drunk. Ah well, don’t worry, sir, we’ll see to it.”

III

Hercule Poirot, having finished his Sunday breakfast, wiped his moustaches carefully free from all traces of his breakfast cup of chocolate and passed into his sitting room.

Neatly arranged on the table were four rucksacks, each with its bill attached—the result of instructions given to George. Poirot took the rucksack he had purchased the day before from its wrapping, and added it to the others. The result was interesting. The rucksack he had bought from Mr. Hicks did not seem inferior in any way that he could see, to the articles purchased by George from various other establishments. But it was very decidedly cheaper.

“Interesting,” said Hercule Poirot.

He stared at the rucksacks.

Then he examined them in detail. Inside and outside, turning them upside down, feeling the seams, the pockets, the handles. Then he rose, went into the bathroom and came back with a small sharp corn knife. Turning the rucksack he had bought at Mr. Hicks's store inside out, he attacked the bottom of it with the knife. Between the inner lining and the bottom there was a heavy piece of corrugated stiffening, rather resembling in appearance corrugated paper. Poirot looked at the dismembered rucksack with a great deal of interest.

Then he proceeded to attack the other rucksacks.

He sat back finally and surveyed the amount of destruction he had just accomplished.

Then he drew the telephone towards him and after a short delay managed to get through to Inspector Sharpe.

"Ecoutez, mon cher," he said. "I want to know just two things."

Something in the nature of a guffaw came from Inspector Sharpe.

"I know two things about the horse,

And one of them is rather coarse," he observed.

"I beg your pardon?" said Hercule Poirot, surprised.

"Nothing. Nothing. Just a rhyme I used to know. What are the two things you want to know?"

“You mentioned yesterday certain police inquiries at Hickory Road made during the last three months. Can you tell me the dates of them and also the time of day they were made?”

“Yes—well—that should be easy. It’ll be in the files. Just wait and I’ll look it up.”

It was not long before the inspector returned to the phone. “First inquiry as to Indian student disseminating subversive propaganda, 18th December last—3:30 p.m.”

“That is too long ago.”

“Inquiry re Montague Jones, Eurasian, wanted in connection with murder of Mrs. Alice Combe of Cambridge—February 24th—5:30 p.m. Inquiry re William Robinson—native West Africa, wanted by Sheffield police—March 6th, 11 a.m.”

“Ah! I thank you.”

“But if you think that either of those cases could have any connection with—”

Poirot interrupted him.

“No, they have no connection. I am interested only in the time of day they were made.”

“What are you up to, Poirot?”

“I dissect rucksacks, my friend. It is very interesting.”

Gently he replaced the receiver.

He took from his pocketbook the amended list that Mrs. Hubbard had handed him the day before. It ran as follows:

Rucksack (Len Bateson’s)

Electric light bulbs

Bracelet (Genevieve’s)

Diamond ring (Patricia’s)

Powder compact (Genevieve’s)

Evening shoe (Sally’s)

Lipstick (Elizabeth Johnston’s)

Earrings (Valerie’s)

Stethoscope (Len Bateson’s)

Bath salts (?)

Scarf cut in pieces (Valerie’s)

Trousers (Colin’s)

Cookery book (?)

Boracic (Chandra Lal’s)

Costume brooch (Sally’s)

Ink spilled on Elizabeth’s notes.

(This is the best I can do. It's not absolutely accurate. L Hubbard.)

Poirot looked at it a long time.

He sighed and murmured to himself, "Yes . . . decidedly . . . we have to eliminate the things that do not matter. . . ."

He had an idea as to who could help him to do that. It was Sunday. Most of the students would probably be at home.

He dialled the number of 26 Hickory Road and asked to speak to Miss Valerie Hobhouse. A thick rather guttural voice seemed rather doubtful as to whether she was up yet, but said it would go and see.

Presently he heard a low husky voice:

"Valerie Hobhouse speaking."

"It is Hercule Poirot. You remember me?"

"Of course, M. Poirot. What can I do for you?"

"I would like, if I may, to have a short conversation with you?"

"Certainly."

"I may come round, then, to Hickory Road?"

"Yes. I'll be expecting you. I'll tell Geronimo to bring you up to my room. There's not much privacy here on a Sunday."

"Thank you, Miss Hobhouse. I am most grateful."

Geronimo opened the door to Poirot with a flourish, then bending forward he spoke with his usual conspiratorial air.

“I take you up to Miss Valerie very quietly. Hush sh sh.”

Placing a finger on his lips, he led the way upstairs and into a good sized room overlooking Hickory Road. It was furnished with taste and a reasonable amount of luxury as a bed-sitting room. The divan bed was covered with a worn but beautiful Persian rug, and there was an attractive Queen Anne walnut bureau which Poirot judged hardly likely to be one of the original furnishings of 26 Hickory Road.

Valerie Hobhouse was standing ready to greet him. She looked tired, he thought, and there were dark circles round her eyes.

“Mais vous êtes très bien ici,” said Poirot, as he greeted her. “It is chic. It has an air.”

Valerie smiled.

“I’ve been here a good time,” she said. “Two and a half years. Nearly three. I’ve dug myself in more or less and I’ve got some of my own things.”

“You are not a student, are you, mademoiselle?”

“Oh no. Purely commercial. I’ve got a job.”

“In a—cosmetic firm, was it?”

“Yes. I’m one of the buyers for Sabrina Fair—it’s a beauty salon. Actually I have a small share in the business. We run a certain amount of sidelines besides beauty treatment. Accessories, that type of thing. Small Parisian novelties. And that's my department."

"You go over then fairly often to Paris and to the Continent?"

"Oh yes, about once a month, sometimes oftener."

"You must forgive me," said Poirot, "if I seem to be displaying curiosity. . . ."

"Why not?" She cut him short. "In the circumstances in which we find ourselves we must all put up with curiosity. I've answered a good many questions yesterday from Inspector Sharpe. You look as though you would like an upright chair, M. Poirot, rather than a low armchair."

"You display the perspicacity, mademoiselle." Poirot sat down carefully and squarely in a high-backed chair with arms to it.

Valerie sat down on the divan. She offered him a cigarette and took one herself and lighted it. He studied her with some attention. She had a nervous, rather haggard elegance that appealed to him more than mere conventional good looks would have done. An intelligent and attractive young woman, he thought. He wondered if her nervousness was the result of the recent inquiry or whether it was a natural component of her manner. He remembered that he had thought much the same about her on the evening when he had come to supper.

"Inspector Sharpe has been making inquiries of you?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed."

"And you have told him all that you know?"

"Of course."

"I wonder," said Poirot, "if that is true."

She looked at him with an ironic expression.

"Since you did not hear my answers to Inspector Sharpe you can hardly be a judge," she said.

"Ah no. It is merely one of my little ideas. I have them, you know—the little ideas. They are here." He tapped his head.

It could be noticed that Poirot, as he sometimes did, was deliberately playing the mountebank. Valerie, however, did not smile. She looked at him in a straightforward manner. When she spoke it was with a certain abruptness.

"Shall we come to the point, M. Poirot?" she asked. "I really don't know what you're driving at."

"But certainly, Miss Hobhouse."

He took from his pocket a little package.

"You can guess, perhaps, what I have here?"

"I'm not clairvoyant, M. Poirot. I can't see through paper and wrappings."

"I have here," said Poirot, "the ring that was stolen from Miss Patricia Lane."

"The engagement ring? I mean, her mother's engagement ring? But why should you have it?"

"I asked her to lend it to me for a day or two."

Again Valerie's rather surprised eyebrows mounted her forehead.

"Indeed," she observed.

"I was interested in the ring," said Poirot. "Interested in its disappearance, in its return and in something else about it. So I asked Miss Lane to lend it to me. She agreed readily. I took it straight away to a jeweller friend of mine."

"Yes?"

"I asked him to report on the diamond in it. A fairly large stone, if you remember, flanked at either side by a little cluster of small stones. You remember—mademoiselle?"

"I think so. I don't really remember it very well."

"But you handled it, didn't you? It was in your soup plate."

"That was how it was returned! Oh yes, I remember that. I nearly swallowed it." Valerie gave a short laugh.

"As I say, I took the ring to my jeweller friend and I asked him his opinion on the diamond. Do you know what his answer was?"

"How could I?"

"His answer was that the stone was not a diamond. It was merely a zircon. A white zircon."

"Oh!" She stared at him. Then she went on, her tone a little uncertain. "D'you mean that—Patricia thought it was a diamond but it was only a zircon or. . . ."

Poirot was shaking his head.

"No, I do not mean that. It was the engagement ring, so I understand, of this Patricia Lane's mother. Miss Patricia Lane is a young lady of good family, and her people, I should say, certainly before recent taxation, were in comfortable circumstances. In those circles, mademoiselle, money is spent upon an engagement ring—a diamond ring or a ring containing some other precious stone. I am quite certain that the papa of Miss Lane would not have given her mamma anything but a valuable engagement ring."

"As to that," said Valerie, "I couldn't agree with you more. Patricia's father was a small country squire, I believe."

"Therefore," said Poirot, "it would seem that the stone in the ring must have been replaced by another stone later."

"I suppose," said Valerie slowly, "that Pat might have lost the stone out of it, couldn't afford to replace it with a diamond, and had a zircon put in instead."

"That is possible," said Hercule Poirot, "but I do not think it is what happened."

"Well, M. Poirot, if we're guessing, what do you think happened?"

"I think," said Poirot, "that the ring was taken by Mademoiselle Celia and that the diamond was deliberately removed and the zircon substituted before the ring was returned."

Valerie sat up very straight.

“You think that Celia stole that diamond deliberately?”

Poirot shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I think you stole it, mademoiselle.”

Valerie Hobhouse caught her breath sharply:

“Well, really!” she exclaimed. “That seems to me pretty thick. You’ve no earthly evidence of any kind.”

“But, yes,” Poirot interrupted her. “I have evidence. The ring was returned in a plate of soup. Now me, I dined here one evening. I noticed the way the soup was served. It was served from a tureen on the side table. Therefore, if anyone found a ring in their soup plate it could only have been placed there either by the person who was serving the soup (in this case Geronimo) or by the person whose soup plate it was. You! I do not think it was Geronimo. I think that you staged the return of the ring in the soup in that way because it amused you. You have, if I may make the criticism, rather too humorous a sense of the dramatic. To hold up the ring! To exclaim! I think you indulged your sense of humour there, mademoiselle, and did not realise that you betrayed yourself in so doing.”

“Is that all?” Valerie spoke scornfully.

“Oh, no, it is by no means all. You see, when Celia confessed that evening to having been responsible for the thefts here, I noticed several small points. For instance, in speaking of this ring she said, ‘I didn’t realise how valuable it was. As soon as I knew I managed to return it.’ How did she know, Miss Valerie? Who told her how valuable the ring was? And then again in speaking of the cut scarf, little Miss Celia said something like, ‘That didn’t matter, Valerie didn’t mind . . . ’ Why did you not mind if a good quality silk scarf belonging to you was cut to shreds? I formed the impression then and there that the whole campaign of stealing things, of making herself out to be a kleptomaniac, and so attracting the attention of Colin McNabb, had been thought out for Celia by someone else. Someone with far more intelligence than Celia Austin had and with a good working knowledge of psychology. You told her the ring was valuable; you took it from her and arranged for its return. In the same way it was at your suggestion that she slashed a scarf of yours to pieces.”

“These are all theories,” said Valerie, “and rather farfetched theories at that. The inspector has already suggested to me that I put Celia up to doing these tricks.”

“And what did you say to him?”

“I said it was nonsense,” said Valerie.

“And what do you say to me?”

Valerie looked at him searchingly for a moment or two. Then she gave a short laugh, stubbed out her cigarette, leaned back thrusting a cushion behind her back, and said:

“You’re quite right. I put her up to it.”

“May I ask you why?”

Valerie said impatiently:

"Oh, sheer foolish good nature. Benevolent interfering. There Celia was, mooning about like a little ghost, yearning over Colin who never looked at her. It all seemed so silly. Colin's one of those conceited opinionated young men wrapped up in psychology and complexes and emotional blocks and all the rest of it, and I thought it would be really rather fun to egg him on and make a fool of him. Anyway I hated to see Celia look so miserable, so I got hold of her, gave her a talking-to, explained in outline the whole scheme, and urged her on to it. She was a bit nervous, I think, about it all, but rather thrilled at the same time. Then, of course, one of the first things the little idiot does is to find Pat's ring left in the bathroom and pinch that—a really valuable piece of jewellery about which there'd be a lot of hoo-haa and the police would be called in and the whole thing might take a serious turn. So I grabbed the ring off her, told her I'd return it somehow, and urged her in future to stick to costume jewellery and cosmetics and a little wilful damage to something of mine which wouldn't land her in trouble."

Poirot drew a deep breath.

"That was exactly what I thought," he said.

"I wish that I hadn't done it now," said Valerie sombrely. "But I really did mean well. That's an atrocious thing to say and just like Jean Tomlinson, but there it is."

"And now," said Poirot, "we come to this business of Patricia's ring. Celia gave it to you. You were to find it somewhere and return it to Patricia. But before returning it to Patricia," he paused. "What happened?"

He watched her fingers nervously plaiting and unplaiting the end of a fringed scarf that she was wearing round her neck. He went on, in an even more persuasive voice:

"You were hard up, eh, was that it?"

Without looking up at him she gave a short nod of the head.

"I said I'd come clean," she said and there was bitterness in her voice. "The trouble with me is, M. Poirot, I'm a gambler. That's one of the things that's born in you and you can't do anything much about it. I belong to a little club in Mayfair—oh, I shan't tell you just where—I don't want to be responsible for getting it raided by the police or anything of that kind. We'll just let it go at the fact that I belong to it. There's roulette there, baccarat, all the rest of it. I've taken a nasty series of losses one after the other. I had this ring of Pat's. I happened to be passing a shop where there was a zircon ring. I thought to myself, 'if this diamond was replaced with a white zircon Pat would never know the difference!' You never do look at a ring you know really well. If the diamond seems a bit duller than usual you just think it needs cleaning or something like that. All right, I had an impulse. I fell. I prised out the diamond and sold it. Replaced it with a zircon and that night I pretended to find it in my soup. That was a damn silly thing to do, too, I agree. There! Now you know it all. But honestly, I never meant Celia to be blamed for that."

"No, no, I understand." Poirot nodded his head. "It was just an opportunity that came your way. It seemed easy and you took it. But you made there a great mistake, mademoiselle."

"I realise that," said Valerie drily. Then she broke out unhappily:

"But what the hell! Does that matter now? Oh, turn me in if you like. Tell Pat. Tell the inspector. Tell the world! But what good is it going to do? How's it going to help us with finding out who killed Celia?"

Poirot rose to his feet.

"One never knows," he said, "what may help and what may not. One has to clear out of the way so many things that do not matter and that confuse the issue. It was important for me to know who had inspired the little Celia to play the part she did. I know that now. As to the ring, I suggest that you go yourself to Miss Patricia Lane and that you tell her what you did and express the customary sentiments."

Valerie made a grimace.

"I dare say that's pretty good advice on the whole," she said. "All right, I'll go to Pat and I'll eat humble pie. Pat's a very decent sort. I'll tell her that when I can afford it again I'll replace the diamond. Is that what you want, M. Poirot?"

"It is not what I want, it is what is advisable."

The door opened suddenly and Mrs. Hubbard came in.

She was breathing hard and the expression in her face made Valerie exclaim:

"What's the matter, Mum? What's happened?"

Mrs. Hubbard dropped into a chair.

"It's Mrs. Nicoletis."

"Mrs. Nick? What about her?"

"Oh, my dear. She's dead."

"Dead?" Valerie's voice came harshly. "How? When?"

"It seems she was picked up in the street last night—they took her to the police station. They thought she was—was—"

"Drunk? I suppose. . . ."

"Yes—she had been drinking. But anyway—she died—"

"Poor old Mrs. Nick," said Valerie. There was a tremor in her husky voice.

Poirot said gently:

"You were fond of her, mademoiselle?"

"It's odd in a way—she could be a proper old devil—but yes—I was . . . When I first came here—three years ago, she wasn't nearly as—as temperamental as she became later. She was good company—amusing—warmhearted. She's changed a lot in the last year—"

Valerie looked at Mrs. Hubbard.

"I suppose that's because she'd taken to drinking on the quiet—they found a lot of bottles and things in her room, didn't they?"

"Yes," Mrs. Hubbard hesitated, then burst out: "I do blame myself—letting her go off home alone last night—she was afraid of something, you know.”

“Afraid?”

Poirot and Valerie said it in unison.

Mrs. Hubbard nodded unhappily. Her mild round face was troubled.

“Yes. She kept saying she wasn’t safe. I asked her to tell me what she was afraid of—and she snubbed me. And one never knew with her, of course, how much was exaggeration. But now—I wonder—”

Valerie said:

“You don’t think that she—that she, too—that she was—”

She broke off with a look of horror in her eyes.

Poirot asked:

“What did they say was the cause of death?”

Mrs. Hubbard said unhappily:

“They—they didn’t say. There’s to be an inquest—on Tuesday—”

Chapter Fifteen

In a quiet room at New Scotland Yard, four men were sitting round a table.

Presiding over the conference was Superintendent Wilding of the Narcotics squad. Next to him was Sergeant Bell, a young man of great energy and optimism who looked rather like an eager greyhound. Leaning back in his chair, quiet and alert, was Inspector Sharpe. The fourth man was Hercule Poirot. On the table was a rucksack.

Superintendent Wilding stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“It’s an interesting idea, M. Poirot,” he said cautiously. “Yes, it’s an interesting idea.”

“It is, as I say, simply an idea,” said Poirot.

Wilding nodded.

“We’ve outlined the general position,” he said. “Smuggling goes on all the time, of course, in one form or another. We clear up one lot of operators, and after a due interval things start again somewhere else. Speaking for my own branch, there’s been a good lot of the stuff coming into this country in the last year and a half. Heroin mostly—a fair amount of coke. There are various depots dotted here and there on the Continent. The French police have got a lead or two as to how it comes into France—they’re less certain how it goes out again.”

“Would I be right in saying,” Poirot asked, “that your problem could be divided roughly under three heads. There is the problem of distribution, there is the problem of how the consignments enter the country, and there is the problem of who really runs the business and takes the main profits?”

“Roughly I’d say that’s quite right. We know a fair amount about the small distributors and how the stuff is distributed. Some of the distributors we pull in, some we leave alone hoping that they may lead us to the big fish. It’s distributed in a lot of different ways, nightclubs, pubs, drug stores, an odd doctor or so, fashionable women’s dressmakers and hairdressers. It is handed over on racecourses, and in antique dealers’, sometimes in a crowded multiple store. But I needn’t tell you all this. It’s not that side of it that’s important. We can keep pace with all that fairly well. And we’ve got certain very shrewd suspicions as to what I’ve called the big fish. One or two very respectable wealthy gentlemen against whom there’s never a breath of suspicion. Very careful they are; they never handle the stuff themselves, and the little fry don’t even know who they are. But every now and again, one of them makes a slip—and then—we get him.”

“That is all very much as I supposed. The line in which I am interested is the third line—how do the consignments come into the country?”

“Ah. We’re an island. The most usual way is the good old-fashioned way of the sea. Running a cargo. Quiet landing somewhere on the east coast, or a little cove down south, by a motorboat that’s slipped quietly across the Channel. That succeeds for a bit but sooner or later we get a line on the particular fellow who owns the boat and once he’s under suspicion his opportunity’s gone. Once or twice lately the stuff 's come in on one of the airliners. There's big money offered, and occasionally one of the stewards or one of the crew proves to be only too human. And then there are the commercial importers. Respectable firms that import grand pianos, or what have you! They have quite a good run for a bit, but we usually get wise to them in the end."

"You would agree that it is one of the chief difficulties when you are running an illicit trade—the entry from abroad into this country?"

"Decidedly. And I'll say more. For some time now, we've been worried. More stuff is coming in than we can keep pace with."

"And what about other things, such as gems?"

Sergeant Bell spoke.

"There's a good deal of it going on, sir. Illicit diamonds and other stones are coming out of South Africa and Australia, some from the Far East. They're coming into this country in a steady stream, and we don't know how. The other day a young woman, an ordinary tourist, in France, was asked by a casual acquaintance if she'd take a pair of shoes across the Channel. Not new ones, nothing dutiable, just some shoes someone had left behind. She agreed quite unsuspiciously. We happened to be on to that. The heels of the shoes turned out to be hollow and packed with uncut diamonds."

Superintendent Wilding said:

"But look here, M. Poirot, what is it you're on the track of, dope or smuggled gems?"

“Either. Anything, in fact, of high value and small bulk. There is an opening, it seems to me, for what you might call a freight service, conveying goods such as I have described to and fro across the Channel. Stolen jewellery, the stones removed from their settings, could be taken out of England, illicit stones and drugs brought in. It could be a small independent agency, unconnected with distribution, that carried stuff on a commission basis. And the profits might be high.”

“I’ll say you’re right there! You can pack ten or twenty thousand pounds’ worth of heroin in a very small space and the same goes for uncut stones of high quality.”

“You see,” said Poirot, “the weakness of the smuggler is always the human element. Sooner or later you suspect a person, an airline steward, a yachting enthusiast with a small cabin cruiser, the woman who travels to and fro to France too often, the importer who seems to be making more money than is reasonable, the man who lives well without visible means of support. But if the stuff is brought into this country by an innocent person, and what is more, by a different person each time, then the difficulties of spotting the cargoes are enormously increased.”

Wilding pushed a finger towards the rucksack. “And that’s your suggestion?”

“Yes. Who is the person who is least vulnerable to suspicion these days? The student. The earnest, hard-working student. Badly off, travelling about with no more luggage than what he can carry on his back. Hitchhiking his way across Europe. If one particular student were to bring the stuff in all the time, no doubt you’d get wise to him or her, but the whole essence of the arrangement is that the carriers are innocent and that there are a lot of them."

Wilding rubbed his jaw.

"Just how exactly do you think it's managed, M. Poirot?" he asked.

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"As to that it is my guess only. No doubt I am wrong in many details, but I should say that it worked roughly like this: First, a line of rucksacks is placed on the market. They are of the ordinary, conventional type, just like any other rucksack, well and strongly made and suitable for their purpose. When I say 'just like any other rucksack' that is not so. The lining at the base is slightly different. As you see, it is quite easily removable and is of a thickness and composition to allow for rouleaux of gems or powder concealed in the corrugations. You would never suspect it unless you were looking for it. Pure heroin or pure cocaine would take up very little room."

"Too true," said Wilding. "Why," he measured with rapid fingers, "you could bring in stuff worth five or six thousand pounds each time without anyone being the wiser."

"Exactly," said Hercule Poirot. "Alors! The rucksacks are made, put on the market, are on sale—probably in more than one shop. The proprietor of the shop may be in the racket or he may not. It may be that he has just been sold a cheap line which he finds profitable, since his prices will compare favourably with that charged by other camping outfit sellers. There is, of course, a definite organisation in the background; a carefully kept list of students at the medical schools, at London University and at other places. Someone who is himself a student, or posing as a student, is probably at the head of the racket. Students go abroad. At some point in the return journey a duplicate rucksack is exchanged. The student returns to England; customs investigations will be perfunctory. The student arrives back at his or her hostel, unpacks, and the empty rucksack is tossed into a cupboard or into a corner of the room. At this point there will be again an exchange of rucksacks or possibly the false bottom will be neatly extracted and an innocent one replace it."

"And you think that's what happened at Hickory Road?"

Poirot nodded.

"That is my suspicion. Yes."

"But what put you on to it, M. Poirot—assuming you're right, that is?"

"A rucksack was cut to pieces," said Poirot. "Why? Since the reason is not plain, one has to imagine a reason. There is something queer about the rucksacks that come to Hickory Road. They are too cheap. There have been a series of peculiar happenings at Hickory Road, but the girl responsible for them swore that the destruction of the rucksack was not her doing. Since she has confessed to the other things why should she deny that, unless she was speaking the truth? So there must be another reason for the destruction of the rucksack—and to destroy a rucksack, I may say, is not an easy thing. It was hard work and someone must have been pretty desperate to undertake it. I got my clue when I found that roughly—(only roughly, alas, because people's memories after a period of some months are not too certain) but roughly—that that rucksack was destroyed at about the date when a police officer called to see the person in charge of the hostel. The actual reason that the police officer called had to do with quite another matter, but I will put it to you like this: You are someone concerned in this smuggling racket. You go home to the house that evening and you are informed that the police have called and are at the moment upstairs with Mrs. Hubbard. Immediately you assume that the police are on to the smuggling racket, that they have come to make an investigation; and let us say that at that moment there is in the house a rucksack just brought back from abroad containing—or which has recently contained—contraband. Now, if the police have a line on what has been going on, they will have come to Hickory Road for the express purpose of examining the rucksacks of the students. You dare not walk out of the house with the rucksack in question because, for all you know, somebody may have been left outside by the police to watch the house with just that object in view, and a rucksack is not an easy thing to conceal or disguise. The only thing you can think of is to rip up the rucksack, and cram the pieces away among the junk in the boiler house. If there is dope or gems on the premises, they can be concealed in bath salts as a temporary measure. But even an empty rucksack, if it had held dope, might yield traces of heroin or cocaine on close examination or analysis. So the rucksack must be destroyed. You agree that that is possible?”

“It is an idea, as I said before,” said Superintendent Wilding.

“It also seems possible that a small incident not hitherto regarded as important may be connected with the rucksack. According to the Italian servant, Geronimo, on the day, or one of the days, when the police called, the light in the hall had gone. He went to look for a bulb to replace it; found the spare bulbs, too, were missing. He was quite sure that a day or two previously there had been spare bulbs in the drawer. It seems to me a possibility—this is far-fetched and I would not say that I am sure of it, you understand, it is a mere possibility—that there was someone with a guilty conscience who had been mixed up with a smuggling racket before and who feared that his face might be known to the police if they saw him in a bright light. So he quietly removed the bulb from the hall light and took away the new ones so that it should not be replaced. As a result the hall was illuminated by a candle only. This, as I say, is merely a supposition."

"It's an ingenious idea," said Wilding.

"It's possible, sir," said Sergeant Bell eagerly. "The more I think of it the more possible I think it is."

"But if so," went on Wilding, "there's more to it than just Hickory Road?"

Poirot nodded.

"Oh yes. The organisation must cover a wide range of students' clubs and so on."

"You have to find a connecting link between them," said Wilding.

Inspector Sharpe spoke for the first time.

"There is such a link, sir," he said, "or there was. A woman who ran several student clubs and organisations. A woman who was right on the spot at Hickory Road. Mrs. Nicoletis."

Wilding flicked a quick glance at Poirot.

“Yes,” said Poirot. “Mrs. Nicoletis fits the bill. She had a financial interest in all these places though she didn’t run them herself. Her method was to get someone of unimpeachable integrity and antecedents to run the place. My friend Mrs. Hubbard is such a person. The financial backing was supplied by Mrs. Nicoletis—but there again I suspect her of being only a figurehead.”

“H’m,” said Wilding. “I think it would be interesting to know a little more about Mrs. Nicoletis.”

Sharpe nodded.

“We’re investigating her,” he said. “Her background and where she came from. It has to be done carefully. We don’t want to alarm our birds too soon. We’re looking into her financial background, too. My word, that woman was a tartar if ever there was one.”

He described his experiences of Mrs. Nicoletis when confronted with a search warrant.

“Brandy bottles, eh?” said Wilding. “So she drank? Well, that ought to make it easier. What’s happened to her? Hooked it—”

“No sir. She’s dead.”

“Dead?” Wilding raised his eyebrows. “Monkey business, do you mean?”

“We think so—yes. We’ll know for certain after the autopsy. I think myself she’d begun to crack. Maybe she didn’t bargain for murder.”

“You’re talking about the Celia Austin case. Did the girl know something?”

“She knew something,” said Poirot, “but if I may so put it, I do not think she knew what it was she knew!”

“You mean she knew something but didn’t appreciate the implications of it?”

“Yes. Just that. She was not a clever girl. She would be quite likely to fail to grasp an inference. But having seen something, or heard something, she may have mentioned the fact quite unsuspiciously.”

“You’ve no idea what she saw or heard, M. Poirot?”

“I make guesses,” said Poirot. “I cannot do more. There has been mention of a passport. Did someone in the house have a false passport allowing them to go to and fro to the Continent under another name? Would the revelation of that fact be a serious danger to that person? Did she see the rucksack being tampered with or did she, perhaps, one day see someone removing the false bottom from the rucksack without realising what it was that that person was doing? Did she perhaps see the person who removed the light bulbs? And mention the fact to him or her, not realising that it was of any importance? Ah, mon dieu!” said Hercule Poirot with irritation. “Guesses! guesses! guesses! One must know more. Always one must know more!”

“Well,” said Sharpe, “we can make a start on Mrs. Nicoletis’s antecedents. Something may come up.”

“She was put out of the way because they thought she might talk? Would she have talked?”

“She’d been drinking secretly for some time . . . and that means her nerves were shot to pieces,” said Sharpe. “She might have broken down and spilled the whole thing. Turned Queen’s Evidence.”

“She didn’t really run the racket, I suppose?”

Poirot shook his head.

“I should not think so, no. She was out in the open, you see. She knew what was going on, of course, but I should not say she was the brains behind it. No.”

“Any idea who is the brains behind it?”

“I could make a guess—I might be wrong. Yes—I might be wrong!”

Chapter Sixteen

I

"Hickory, dickory, dock," said Nigel, "the mouse ran up the clock. The police said 'Boo,' I wonder who, will eventually stand in the Dock?"

He added:

"To tell or not to tell? That is the question!"

He poured himself out a fresh cup of coffee and brought it back to the breakfast table.

"Tell what?" asked Len Bateson.

"Anything one knows," said Nigel, with an airy wave of the hand.

Jean Tomlinson said disapprovingly:

"But of course! If we have any information that may be of use, of course we must tell the police. That would be only right."

"And there speaks our bonnie Jean," said Nigel.

"Moi je n'aime pas les flics," said René, offering his contribution to the discussion.

"Tell what?" Leonard Bateson said again.

"The things we know," said Nigel. "About each other, I mean," he said helpfully. His glance swept round the breakfast table with a malicious gleam.

“After all,” he said cheerfully, “we all do know lots of things about each other, don’t we? I mean, one’s bound to, living in the same house.”

“But who is to decide what is important or not? There are many things no business of the police at all,” said Mr. Achmed Ali. He spoke hotly, with an injured remembrance of the inspector’s sharp remarks about his collection of postcards.

“I hear,” said Nigel, turning towards Mr. Akibombo, “that they found some very interesting things in your room.”

Owing to his colour, Mr. Akibombo was not able to blush, but his eyelids blinked in a discomfited manner.

“Very much superstition in my country,” he said. “My grandfather give me things to bring here. I keep out of feeling of piety and respect. I, myself, am modern and scientific; not believe in voodoo, but owing to imperfect command of language I find very difficult to explain to policeman.”

“Even dear little Jean has her secrets, I expect,” said Nigel, turning his gaze back to Miss Tomlinson.

Jean said hotly that she wasn’t going to be insulted.

“I shall leave this place and go to the YWCA,” she said.

“Come now, Jean,” said Nigel. “Give us another chance.”

“Oh, cut it out, Nigel!” said Valerie wearily. “The police have to snoop, I suppose, under the circumstances.”

Colin McNabb cleared his throat, preparatory to making a remark.

“In my opinion,” he said judicially, “the present position ought to be made clear to us. What exactly was the cause of Mrs. Nick’s death?”

“We’ll hear at the inquest, I suppose,” said Valerie, impatiently.

“I very much doubt it,” said Colin. “In my opinion they’ll adjourn the inquest.”

“I suppose it was her heart, wasn’t it?” said Patricia. “She fell down in the street.”

“Drunk and incapable,” said Len Bateson. “That’s how she got taken to the police station.”

“So she did drink,” said Jean. “You know, I always thought so. When the police searched the house they found cupboards full of empty brandy bottles in her room, I believe,” she added.

“Trust our Jean to know all the dirt,” said Nigel approvingly.

“Well, that does explain why she was sometimes so odd in her manner,” said Patricia.

Colin cleared his throat again.

“Ahem!” he said. “I happened to observe her going into The Queen’s Necklace on Saturday evening, when I was on my way home.”

“That’s where she got tanked up, I suppose,” said Nigel.

“I suppose she just died of drink, then?” said Jean.

Len Bateson shook his head.

“Cerebral haemorrhage? I rather doubt it.”

“For goodness’ sake, you don’t think she was murdered too, do you?” said Jean.

“I bet she was,” said Sally Finch. “Nothing would surprise me less.”

“Please,” said Mr. Akibombo. “It is thought someone killed her? Is that right?”

He looked from face to face.

“We’ve no reason to suppose anything of the sort yet,” said Colin.

“But who would want to kill her?” demanded Genevieve. “Had she much money to leave? If she was rich it is possible, I suppose.”

“She was a maddening woman, my dear,” said Nigel. “I’m sure everybody wanted to kill her. I often did,” he added, helping himself happily to marmalade.

II

“Please, Miss Sally, may I ask you a question? It is after what was said at breakfast. I have been thinking very much.”

“Well, I shouldn’t think too much if I were you, Akibombo,” said Sally. “It isn’t healthy.”

Sally and Akibombo were partaking of an open-air lunch in Regent’s Park. Summer was officially supposed to have come and the restaurant was open.

“All this morning,” said Akibombo mournfully, “I have been much disturbed. I cannot answer my professor’s questions good at all. He is not pleased at me. He says to me that I copy large bits out of books and do not think for myself. But I am here to acquire wisdom from much books and it seems to me that they say better in the books than the way I put it, because I have not good command of the English. And besides, this morning I find it very hard to think at all except of what goes on at Hickory Road and difficulties there.”

“I’ll say you’re right about that,” said Sally. “I just couldn’t concentrate myself this morning.”

“So that is why I ask you please to tell me certain things, because as I say, I have been thinking very much.”

“Well, let’s hear what you’ve been thinking about, then.”

“Well, it is this borr—ass—sic.”

“Borr-ass-ic? Oh, boracic! Yes. What about it?”

“Well, I do not understand very well. It is an acid, they say? An acid like sulphuric acid?”

“Not like sulphuric acid, no,” said Sally.

“It is not something for laboratory experiment only?”

“I shouldn’t imagine they ever did any experiments in laboratories with it. It’s something quite mild and harmless.”

“You mean, even you could put it in your eyes?”

“That’s right. That’s just what one does use it for.”

“Ah, that explains that then. Mr. Chandra Lal, he have little white bottle with white powder, and he puts powder in hot water and bathes his eyes with it. He keeps it in bathroom and then it is not there one day and he is very angry. That would be the bor-ac-ic, yes?”

“What is all this about boracic?”

“I tell you by and by. Please not now. I think some more.”

“Well, don’t go sticking your neck out,” said Sally. “I don’t want yours to be the next corpse, Akibombo.”

III

“Valerie, do you think you could give me some advice?”

“Of course I could give you advice, Jean, though I don’t know why anyone ever wants advice. They never take it.”

“It’s really a matter of conscience,” said Jean.

“Then I’m the last person you ought to ask. I haven’t got any conscience, to speak of.”

"Oh, Valerie, don't say things like that!"

"Well, it's quite true," said Valerie. She stubbed out a cigarette as she spoke. "I smuggle clothes in from Paris and tell the most frightful lies about their faces to the hideous women who come to the salon. I even travel on buses without paying my fare when I'm hard up. But come on, tell me. What's it all about?"

"It's what Nigel said at breakfast. If one knows something about someone else, do you think one ought to tell?"

"What an idiotic question! You can't put a thing like that in general terms. What is it you want to tell, or don't want to tell?"

"It's about a passport."

"A passport?" Valerie sat up, surprised. "Whose passport?"

"Nigel's. He's got a false passport."

"Nigel?" Valerie sounded disbelieving. "I don't believe it. It seems most improbable."

"But he has. And you know, Valerie, I believe there's some question—I think I heard the police saying that Celia had said something about a passport. Supposing she'd found out about it and he killed her?"

"Sounds very melodramatic," said Valerie. "But frankly, I don't believe a word of it. What is this story about a passport?"

"I saw it."

“How did you see it?”

“Well, it was absolutely an accident,” said Jean. “I was looking for something in my despatch case a week or two ago, and by mistake I must have looked in Nigel’s attaché case instead. They were both on the shelf in the common room.”

Valerie laughed rather disagreeably.

“Tell that to the marines!” she said. “What were you really doing? Snooping?”

“No, of course not!” Jean sounded justly indignant. “The one thing I’d never do is to look among anybody’s private papers. I’m not that sort of person. It was just that I was feeling rather absentminded, so I opened the case and I was just sorting through it. . . .”

“Look here, Jean, you can’t get away with that. Nigel’s attaché case is a good deal larger than yours and it’s an entirely different colour. While you’re admitting things you might just as well admit that you are that sort of person. All right. You found a chance to go through some of Nigel’s things and you took it.”

Jean rose.

“Of course, Valerie, if you’re going to be so unpleasant and so very unfair and unkind, I shall. . . .”

“Oh, come back, child!” said Valerie. “Get on with it. I’m getting interested now. I want to know.”

"Well, there was this passport," said Jean. "It was down at the bottom and it had a name on it. Stanford or Stanley or some name like that, and I thought, 'How odd that Nigel should have somebody else's passport here.' I opened it and the photograph inside was Nigel! So don't you see, he must be leading a double life? What I wonder is, ought I to tell the police? Do you think it's my duty?"

Valerie laughed.

"Bad luck, Jean," she said. "As a matter of fact, I believe there's quite a simple explanation. Pat told me. Nigel came into some money, or something, on condition that he changed his name. He did it perfectly properly by deed poll or whatever it is, but that's all it is. I believe his original name was Stanfield or Stanley, or something like that."

"Oh!" Jean looked thoroughly chagrined.

"Ask Pat about it if you don't believe me," said Valerie.

"Oh—no—well, if it's as you say, I must have made a mistake."

"Better luck next time," said Valerie.

"I don't know what you mean, Valerie."

"You'd like to get your knife into Nigel, wouldn't you? And get him in wrong with the police?"

Jean drew herself up.

“You may not believe me, Valerie,” she said, “but all I wanted to do was my duty.”

She left the room.

“Oh, hell!” said Valerie.

There was a tap at the door and Sally entered.

“What’s the matter, Valerie? You’re looking a bit down in the mouth.”

“It’s that disgusting Jean. She really is too awful! You don’t think, do you, that there’s the remotest chance it was Jean that bumped off poor Celia? I should rejoice madly if I ever saw Jean in the dock.”

“I’m with you there,” said Sally. “But I don’t think it’s particularly likely. I don’t think Jean would ever stick her neck out enough to murder anybody.”

“What do you think about Mrs. Nick?”

“I just don’t know what to think. I suppose we shall hear soon.”

“I’d say ten to one she was bumped off, too,” said Valerie.

“But why? What’s going on here?” said Sally.

“I wish I knew. Sally, do you ever find yourself looking at people?”

“What do you mean, Val, looking at people?”

“Well, looking and wondering, ‘Is it you?’ I’ve got a feeling, Sally, that there’s someone here who’s mad. Really mad. Bad mad, I mean—not just thinking they’re a cucumber.”

“That may well be,” said Sally. She shivered.

“Ouch!” she said. “Somebody’s walking over my grave.”

IV

“Nigel I’ve got something I must tell you.”

“Well, what is it, Pat?” Nigel was burrowing frantically in his chest of drawers. “What the hell did I do with those notes of mine I can’t imagine. I shoved them in here, I thought.”

“Oh, Nigel, don’t scrabble like that! You leave everything in such a frightful mess and I’ve just tidied it.”

“Well, what the hell, I’ve got to find my notes, haven’t I?”

“Nigel, you must listen!”

“OK, Pat, don’t look so desperate. What is it?”

“It’s something I’ve got to confess.”

“Not murder, I hope?” said Nigel, with his usual flippancy.

“No, of course not!”

“Good. Well, what lesser sin?”

“It was one day when I mended your socks and I brought them along here to your room and was putting them away in your drawer. . . .”

“Yes?”

“And the bottle of morphia was there. The one you told me about, that you got from the hospital.”

“Yes, and you made such a fuss about it!”

“But, Nigel, it was there in your drawer among your socks, where anybody could have found it.”

“Why should they? Nobody else goes rooting about among my socks except you.”

“Well, it seemed to me dreadful to leave it about like that, and I know you’d said you were going to get rid of it after you’d won your bet, but in the meantime there it was, still there.”

“Of course. I hadn’t got the third thing yet.”

“Well, I thought it was very wrong, and so I took the bottle out of the drawer and I emptied the poison out of it, and I replaced it with some ordinary bicarbonate of soda. It looked almost exactly the same.”

Nigel paused in his scramble for his lost notes.

“Good lord!” he said. “Did you really? You mean that when I was swearing to Len and old Colin that the stuff was morphine sulphate or tartrate or whatever it was, it was merely bicarbonate of soda all the time?”

“Yes. You see. . . .”

Nigel interrupted her. He was frowning.

“I’m not sure, you know, that that doesn’t invalidate the bet. Of course, I’d no idea—”

“But Nigel, it was really dangerous keeping it there.”

“Oh lord, Pat, must you always fuss so? What did you do with the actual stuff?”

“I put it in the soda bic bottle and I hid it at the back of my handkerchief drawer.”

Nigel looked at her in mild surprise.

“Really, Pat, your logical thought processes beggar description! What was the point?”

“I felt it was safer there.”

“My dear girl, either the morphia should have been under lock and key, or if it wasn’t, it couldn’t really matter whether it was among my socks or your handkerchiefs.”

“Well, it did matter. For one thing, I have a room to myself and you share yours.”

“Why, you don’t think poor old Len was going to pinch the morphia off me, do you?”

“I wasn’t going to tell you about it, ever, but I must now. Because, you see, it’s gone.”

“You mean the police have swiped it?”

“No. It disappeared before that.”

“Do you mean . . . ? ” Nigel gazed at her in consternation. “Let’s get this straight. There’s a bottle labelled ‘Soda Bic,’ containing morphine sulphate, which is knocking about the place somewhere, and at any time someone may take a heaping teaspoonful of it if they’ve got a pain in their middle? Good God, Pat! You have done it! Why the hell didn’t you throw the stuff away if you were so upset about it?”

“Because I thought it was valuable and ought to go back to the hospital instead of being just thrown away. As soon as you’d won your bet, I meant to give it to Celia and ask her to put it back.”

“You’re sure you didn’t give it to her?”

“No, of course not. You mean I gave it to her, and she took it and it was suicide, and it was all my fault?”

“Calm down. When did it disappear?”

“I don’t know exactly. I looked for it the day before Celia died. I couldn’t find it, but I just thought I’d perhaps put it somewhere else.”

“It was gone the day before she died?”

“I suppose,” said Patricia, her face white, “that I’ve been very stupid.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” said Nigel. “To what lengths can a muddled mind and an active conscience go!”

“Nigel. D’you think I ought to tell the police?”

“Oh, hell!” said Nigel. “I suppose so, yes. And it’s going to be all my fault.”

“Oh, no, Nigel darling, it’s me. I—”

“I pinched the damned stuff in the first place,” said Nigel. “It all seemed to be a very amusing stunt at the time. But now—I can already hear the vitriolic remarks from the bench.”

“I am sorry. When I took it I really meant it for—”

“You meant it for the best. I know! Look here, Pat, I simply can’t believe the stuff has disappeared. You’ve forgotten just where you put it. You do mislay things sometimes, you know.”

“Yes, but—”

She hesitated, a shade of doubt appearing on her frowning face.

Nigel rose briskly.

“Let’s go along to your room and have a thorough search.”

V

“Nigel, those are my underclothes.”

“Really, Pat, you can’t go all prudish on me at this stage. Down among the panties is just where you would hide a bottle, now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but I’m sure I—”

“We can’t be sure of anything until we’ve looked everywhere. And I’m jolly well going to do it.”

There was a perfunctory tap on the door and Sally Finch entered. Her eyes widened with surprise. Pat, clasping a handful of Nigel’s socks, was sitting on the bed, and Nigel, the bureau drawers all pulled out, was burrowing like an excited terrier into a heap of pullovers whilst about him were strewn panties, brassières, stockings, and other component parts of female attire.

“For land’s sake,” said Sally, “what goes on?”

“Looking for bicarbonate,” said Nigel briefly.

“Bicarbonate? Why?”

“I’ve got a pain,” said Nigel, grinning. “A pain in my tum-tum-tum—and nothing but bicarbonate will assuage it.”

“I’ve got some somewhere, I believe.”

“No good, Sally, it’s got to be Pat’s. Hers is the only brand that will ease my particular ailment.”

“You’re crazy,” said Sally. “What’s he up to, Pat?”

Patricia shook her head miserably.

“You haven’t seen my soda bic, have you, Sally?” she asked. “Just a little in the bottom of the bottle?”

“No.” Sally looked at her curiously. Then she frowned. “Let me see. Somebody around here—no, I can’t remember—Have you got a stamp, Pat? I want to mail a letter and I've run out."

"In the drawer there."

Sally opened the shallow drawer of the writing table, took out a book of stamps, extracted one, affixed it to the letter she held in her hand, dropped the stamp book back in the drawer, and put twopence-halfpenny on the desk.

"Thanks. Shall I mail this letter of yours at the same time?"

"Yes—no—no, I think I'll wait."

Sally nodded and left the room.

Pat dropped the socks she had been holding, and twisted her fingers nervously together.

"Nigel?"

"Yes?" Nigel had transferred his attention to the wardrobe and was looking in the pockets of a coat.

"There's something else I've got to confess."

"Good lord, Pat, what else have you been doing?"

"I'm afraid you'll be angry."

"I'm past being angry. I'm just plain scared. If Celia was poisoned with the stuff that I pinched, I shall probably go to prison for years and years, even if they don't hang me."

"It's nothing to do with that. It's about your father."

“What?” Nigel spun round, an expression of incredulous astonishment on his face.

“You do know he’s very ill, don’t you?”

“I don’t care how ill he is.”

“It said so on the wireless last night. ‘Sir Arthur Stanley, the famous research chemist, is lying in a very critical condition.’ ”

“So nice to be a VIP. All the world gets the news when you’re ill.”

“Nigel, if he’s dying, you ought to be reconciled to him.”

“Like hell I will!”

“But if he’s dying.”

“He’s the same swine dying as he was when he was in the pink of condition!”

“You mustn’t be like that, Nigel. So bitter and unforgiving.”

“Listen, Pat—I told you once: he killed my mother.”

“I know you said so, and I know you adored her. But I do think, Nigel, that you sometimes exaggerate. Lots of husbands are unkind and unfeeling and their wives resent it and it makes them very unhappy. But to say your father killed your mother is an extravagant statement and isn’t really true.”

“You know so much about it, don’t you?”

"I know that some day you'll regret not having made it up with your father before he died. That's why—" Pat paused and braced herself. "That's why I—I've written to your father—telling him—"

"You've written to him? Is that the letter Sally wanted to post?" He strode over to the writing table. "I see."

He picked up the letter lying addressed and stamped, and with quick, nervous fingers, he tore it into small pieces and threw it into the wastepaper basket.

"That's that! And don't you dare do anything of that kind again."

"Really, Nigel, you are absolutely childish. You can tear the letter up, but you can't stop me writing another, and I shall."

"You're so incurably sentimental. Did it ever occur to you that when I said my father killed my mother, I was stating just a plain unvarnished fact. My mother died of an overdose of medinal. Took it by mistake, they said at the inquest. But she didn't take it by mistake. It was given to her, deliberately, by my father. He wanted to marry another woman, you see, and my mother wouldn't give him a divorce. It's a plain sordid murder story. What would you have done in my place? Denounced him to the police? My mother wouldn't have wanted that . . . So I did the only thing I could do—told the swine I knew—and cleared out—for ever. I even changed my name."

"Nigel—I'm sorry . . . I never dreamed. . . ."

"Well, you know now . . . The respected and famous Arthur Stanley with his researches and antibiotics. Flourishing like the green bay tree! But his fancy piece didn’t marry him after all. She sheered off. I think she guessed what he’d done—”

“Nigel dear, how awful—I am sorry. . . .”

“All right. We won’t talk of it again. Let’s get back to this blasted bicarbonate business. Now think back carefully to exactly what you did with the stuff. Put your head in your hands and think, Pat.”

VI

Genevieve entered the common room in a state of great excitement. She spoke to the assembled students in a low thrilled voice.

“I am sure now, but absolutely sure I know who killed the little Celia.”

“Who was it, Genevieve?” demanded René. “What has arrived to make you so positive?”

Genevieve looked cautiously round to make sure the door of the common room was closed. She lowered her voice.

“It is Nigel Chapman.”

“Nigel Chapman, but why?”

“Listen. I pass along the corridor to go down the stairs just now and I hear voices in Patricia’s room. It is Nigel who speaks.”

“Nigel? In Patricia’s room?” Jean spoke in a disapproving voice. But Genevieve swept on.

“And he is saying to her that his father killed his mother, and that, pour ça, he has changed his name. So it is clear, is it not? His father was a convicted murderer, and Nigel he has the hereditary taint. . . .”

“It is possible,” said Mr. Chandra Lal, dwelling pleasurably on the possibility. “It is certainly possible. He is so violent, Nigel, so unbalanced. No self-control. You agree?” He turned condescendingly to Akibombo, who nodded an enthusiastic black woolly head and showed his white teeth in a pleased smile.

“I’ve always felt very strongly,” said Jean, “that Nigel has no moral sense . . . A thoroughly degenerate character.”

“It is sex murder, yes,” said Mr. Achmed Ali. “He sleeps with this girl, then he kills her. Because she is a nice girl, respectable, she will expect marriage. . . .”

“Rot,” said Leonard Bateson explosively.

“What did you say?”

“I said rot!” roared Len.

Chapter Seventeen

I

Seated in a room at the police station, Nigel looked nervously into the stern eyes of Inspector Sharpe. Stammering slightly, he had just brought his narrative to a close.

“You realise, Mr. Chapman, that what you have just told us is very serious? Very serious indeed.”

“Of course I realise it. I wouldn’t have come here to tell you about it unless I’d felt that it was urgent.”

“And you say Miss Lane can’t remember exactly when she last saw this bicarbonate bottle containing morphine?”

“She’s got herself all muddled up. The more she tries to think the more uncertain she gets. She said I flustered her. She’s trying to think it out while I came round to you.”

“We’d better go round to Hickory Road right away.”

As the inspector spoke the telephone on the table rang, and the constable who had been taking notes of Nigel’s story stretched out his hand and lifted the receiver.

“It’s Miss Lane now,” he said, as he listened. “Wanting to speak to Mr. Chapman.”

Nigel leaned across the table and took the receiver from him.

“Pat? Nigel here.”

The girl’s voice came, breathless, eager, the words tumbling over each other.

“Nigel. I think I’ve got it! I mean, I think I know now who must have taken—you know—taken it from my handkerchief drawer, I mean—you see, there’s only one person who—”

The voice broke off.

“Pat. Hallo? Are you there? Who was it?”

“I can’t tell you now. Later. You’ll be coming round?”

The receiver was near enough for the constable and the inspector to have heard the conversation clearly, and the latter nodded in answer to Nigel’s questioning look.

“Tell her ‘at once,’ ” he said.

“We’re coming round at once,” said Nigel. “On our way this minute.”

“Oh! Good. I’ll be in my room.”

“So long, Pat.”

Hardly a word was spoken during the brief ride to Hickory Road. Sharpe wondered to himself whether this was a break at last. Would Patricia Lane have any definite evidence to offer, or would it be pure surmise on her part? Clearly she had remembered something that had seemed to her important. He supposed that she had been telephoning from the hall, and that therefore she had had to be guarded in her language. At this time in the evening so many people would have been passing through.

Nigel opened the front door at 26 Hickory Road with his key and they passed inside. Through the open door of the common room, Sharpe could see the rumpled red head of Leonard Bateson bent over some books.

Nigel led the way upstairs and along the passage to Pat's room. He gave a short tap on the door and entered.

"Hallo, Pat. Here we—"

His voice stopped, dying away in a long choking gasp. He stood motionless. Over his shoulder, Sharpe saw also what there was to see.

Patricia Lane lay slumped on the floor.

The inspector pushed Nigel gently aside. He went forward and knelt down by the girl's huddled body. He raised her head, felt for the pulse, then delicately let the head resume its former position. He rose to his feet, his face grim and set.

"No?" said Nigel, his voice high and unnatural. "No. No. No."

"Yes, Mr. Chapman. She's dead."

"No, no. Not Pat! Dear stupid Pat. How—"

"With this."

It was a simple, quickly improvised weapon. A marble paperweight slipped into a woollen sock.

“Struck on the back of the head. A very efficacious weapon. If it’s any consolation to you, Mr. Chapman, I don’t think she even knew what happened to her.”

Nigel sat down shakily on the bed. He said:

“That’s one of my socks . . . She was going to mend it . . . Oh, God, she was going to mend it. . . .”

Suddenly he began to cry. He cried like a child—with abandon and without self-consciousness.

Sharpe was continuing his reconstruction.

“It was someone she knew quite well. Someone who picked up a sock and just slipped the paperweight into it. Do you recognise the paperweight, Mr. Chapman?”

He rolled the sock back so as to display it.

Nigel, still weeping, looked.

“Pat always had it on her desk. A Lion of Lucerne.”

He buried his face in his hands.

“Pat—oh, Pat! What shall I do without you!”

Suddenly he sat upright, flinging back his untidy fair hair.

“I’ll kill whoever did this! I’ll kill him! Murdering swine!”

“Gently, Mr. Chapman. Yes, yes, I know how you feel. A brutal piece of work.”

“Pat never harmed anybody. . . .”

Speaking soothingly, Inspector Sharpe got him out of the room. Then he went back himself into the bedroom. He stooped over the dead girl. Very gently he detached something from between her fingers.

II

Geronimo, perspiration running down his forehead, turned frightened dark eyes from one face to the other.

“I see nothing. I hear nothing, I tell you. I do not know anything at all. I am with Maria in kitchen. I put the minestrone on, I grate the cheese—”

Sharpe interrupted the catalogue.

“Nobody’s accusing you. We just want to get some times quite clear. Who was in and out of the house the last hour?”

“I do not know. How should I know?”

“But you can see very clearly from the kitchen window who goes in and out, can’t you?”

“Perhaps, yes.”

“Then just tell us.”

“They come in and out all the time at this hour of the day.”

“Who was in the house from six o’clock until six thirty-five when we arrived?”

“Everybody except Mr. Nigel and Mrs. Hubbard and Miss Hobhouse.”

“When did they go out?”

“Mrs. Hubbard she go out before teatime, she has not come back yet.”

“Go on.”

“Mr. Nigel goes out about half an hour ago, just before six—look very upset. He come back with you just now—”

“That’s right, yes.”

“Miss Valerie, she goes out just at six o’clock. Time signal, pip, pip, pip. Dressed for cocktails, very smart. She still out.”

“And everybody else is here?”

“Yes, sir. All here.”

Sharpe looked down at his notebook. The time of Patricia’s call was noted there. Eight minutes past six, exactly.

“Everybody else was here, in the house? Nobody came back during that time?”

“Only Miss Sally. She been down to pillar-box with letter and come back in—”

"Do you know what time she came in?"

Geronimo frowned.

"She came back while the news was going on."

"After six, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"What part of the news was it?"

"I don't remember, sir. But before the sport. Because when sport come we switch off."

Sharpe smiled grimly. It was a wide field. Only Nigel Chapman, Valerie Hobhouse and Mrs. Hubbard could be excluded. It would mean long and exhaustive questioning. Who had been in the common room, who had left it? And when? Who would vouch for who? Add to that, that many of the students, especially the Asiatic and African ones, were constitutionally vague about times, and the task was no enviable one.

But it would have to be done.

III

In Mrs. Hubbard's room the atmosphere was unhappy. Mrs. Hubbard herself, still in her outdoor things, her nice round face strained and anxious, sat on the sofa. Sharpe and Sergeant Cobb sat at a small table.

“I think she telephoned from in here,” said Sharpe. “Around about six-eight several people left or entered the common room, or so they say—and nobody saw or noticed or heard the hall telephone being used. Of course, their times aren’t reliable, half these people never seem to look at a clock. But I think that anyway she’d come in here if she wanted to telephone the police station. You were out, Mrs. Hubbard, but I don’t suppose you lock your door?”

Mrs. Hubbard shook her head.

“Mrs. Nicoletis always did, but I never do—”

“Well then, Patricia Lane comes in here to telephone, all agog with what’s she’s remembered. Then, whilst she was talking, the door opened and somebody looked in or came in. Patricia stalled and hung up. Was that because she recognised the intruder as the person whose name she was just about to say? Or was it just a general precaution? Might be either. I incline myself to the first supposition.”

Mrs. Hubbard nodded emphatically.

“Whoever it was may have followed her here, perhaps listening outside the door. Then came in to stop Pat from going on.”

“And then—”

Sharpe’s face darkened. “That person went back to Patricia’s room with her, talking quite normally and easily. Perhaps Patricia taxed her with removing the bicarbonate, and perhaps the other gave a plausible explanation.”

Mrs. Hubbard said sharply:

"Why do you say 'her?' "

"Funny thing—a pronoun! When we found the body, Nigel Chapman said, 'I'll kill whoever did this. I'll kill him.' 'Him,' you notice. Nigel Chapman clearly believed the murder was done by a man. It may be because he associated the idea of violence with a man. It may be that he's got some particular suspicion pointing to a man, to some particular man. If the latter, we must find out his reasons for thinking so. But speaking for myself, I plump for a woman."

"Why?"

"Just this. Somebody went into Patricia's room with her—someone with whom she felt quite at home. That points to another girl. The men don't go to the girls' bedroom floors unless it's for some special reason. That's right, isn't it, Mrs. Hubbard?"

"Yes. It's not exactly a hard and fast rule, but it's fairly generally observed."

"The other side of the house is cut off from this side, except on the ground floor. Taking it that the conversation earlier between Nigel and Pat was overheard, it would in all probability be a woman who overheard it."

"Yes, I see what you mean. And some of the girls seem to spend half their time here listening at keyholes."

She flushed and added apologetically:

"That's rather too harsh. Actually, although these houses are solidly built, they've been cut up and partitioned, and all the new work is flimsy as anything, like paper. You can’t help hearing through it. Jean, I must admit, does do a good deal of snooping. She’s the type. And of course, when Genevieve heard Nigel telling Pat his father had murdered his mother, she stopped and listened for all she was worth.”

The inspector nodded. He had listened to the evidence of Sally Finch and Jean Tomlinson and Genevieve. He said:

“Who occupies the rooms on either side of Patricia’s?”

“Genevieve’s is beyond it—but that’s a good original wall. Elizabeth Johnston’s is on the other side, nearer the stairs. That’s only a partition wall.”

“That narrows it down a bit,” said the inspector.

“The French girl heard the end of the conversation. Sally Finch was present earlier on before she went out to post her letter. But the fact that those two girls were there automatically excludes anybody else having been able to snoop, except for a very short period. Always with the exception of Elizabeth Johnston, who could have heard everything through the partition wall if she’d been in her bedroom, but it seems to be fairly clear that she was already in the common room when Sally Finch went out to the post.”

“She did not remain in the common room all the time?”

“No, she went upstairs again at some period to fetch a book she had forgotten. As usual, nobody can say when.”

“It might have been any of them,” said Mrs. Hubbard helplessly.

“As far as their statements go, yes—but we’ve got a little extra evidence.”

He took a small folded paper packet out of his pocket.

“What’s that?” demanded Mrs. Hubbard.

Sharpe smiled.

“A couple of hairs—I took them from between Patricia Lane’s fingers.”

“You mean that—”

There was a tap on the door.

“Come in,” said the inspector.

The door opened to admit Mr. Akibombo. He was smiling broadly, all over his black face.

“Please,” he said.

Inspector Sharpe said impatiently:

“Yes, Mr.—er—um, what is it?”

“I think, please, I have a statement to make. Of first-class importance to elucidation of sad and tragic occurrence.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Now, Mr. Akibombo,” said Inspector Sharpe, resignedly, “let’s hear, please, what all this is about.”

Mr. Akibombo had been provided with a chair. He sat facing the others who were all looking at him with keen attention.

“Thank you. I begin now?”

“Yes, please.”

“Well, it is, you see, that sometimes I have the disquieting sensations in my stomach.”

“Oh.”

“Sick to my stomach. That is what Miss Sally calls it. But I am not, you see, actually sick. I do not, that is, vomit.”

Inspector Sharpe restrained himself with difficulty while these medical details were elaborated.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Very sorry, I’m sure. But you want to tell us —”

“It is, perhaps, unaccustomed food. I feel very full here.” Mr. Akibombo indicated exactly where. “I think myself, not enough meat, and too much what you call cardohydrates.”

“Carbohydrates,” the inspector corrected him mechanically. “But I don’t see—”

"Sometimes I take small pill, soda mint; and sometimes stomach powder. It does not matter very much what it is—so that a great pouf comes and much air—like this." Mr. Akibombo gave a most realistic and gigantic belch. "After that," he smiled seraphically, "I feel much better, much better."

The inspector's face was becoming a congested purple. Mrs. Hubbard said authoritatively:

"We understand all about that. Now get on to the next part."

"Yes. Certainly. Well, as I say, this happens to me early last week—I do not remember exactly which day. Very good macaroni and I eat a lot, and afterwards feel very bad. I try to do work for my professor but difficult to think with fullness here." (Again Akibombo indicated the spot.) "It is after supper in the common room and only Elizabeth there and I say to her, 'Have you bicarbonate or stomach powder, I have finished mine.' And she says, 'No. But,' she says, 'I saw some in Pat's drawer when I was putting back a handkerchief I borrowed from her. I will get it for you,' she says. 'Pat will not mind.' So she goes upstairs and comes back with soda bicarbonate bottle. Very little left, at bottom of bottle, almost empty. I thank her and go with it to the bathroom, and I put nearly all of it about a teaspoonful in water and stir it up and drink it."

"A teaspoonful? A teaspoonful! My God!"

The inspector gazed at him fascinated. Sergeant Cobb leaned forward with an astonished face. Mrs. Hubbard said obscurely:

"Rasputin!"

“You swallowed a teaspoonful of morphia?”

“Naturally, I think it is bicarbonate.”

“Yes, yes, what I can’t understand is why you’re sitting here now!”

“And then, afterwards, I was ill, but really ill. Not just the fullness. Pain, bad pain in my stomach.”

“I can’t make out why you’re not dead!”

“Rasputin,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “They used to give him poison again and again, lots of it, and it didn’t kill him!”

Mr. Akibombo was continuing.

“So then, next day, when I am better, I take the bottle and the tiny bit of powder that is left in it to a chemist and I say please tell me what is this I have taken that has made me feel so bad?”

“Yes?”

“And he says come back later, and when I do, he says, ‘No wonder! This is not the bicarbonate. It is the borasseek. The acid borasseek. You can put it in the eyes, yes, but if you swallow a teaspoonful it makes you ill.’ ”

“Boracic?” The Inspector stared at him stupefied. “But how did boracic get into that bottle? What happened to the morphia?” He groaned. “Of all the haywire cases!”

“And I have been thinking, please,” went on Akibombo.

“You have been thinking,” Sharpe said. “And what have you been thinking?”

“I have been thinking of Miss Celia and how she died and that someone, after she was dead, must have come into her room and left there the empty morphia bottle and the little piece of paper that say she killed herself—”

Akibombo paused and the inspector nodded.

“And so I say—who could have done that? And I think if it is one of the girls it will be easy, but if a man not so easy, because he would have to go downstairs in our house and up the other stairs and someone might wake up and hear him or see him. So I think again, and I say, suppose it is someone in our house, but in the next room to Miss Celia’s—only she is in this house, you understand? Outside his window is a balcony and outside hers is a balcony too, and she will sleep with her window open because that is hygienic practice. So if he is big and strong and athletic he could jump across.”

“The room next to Celia’s in the other house,” said Mrs. Hubbard, “Let me see, that’s Nigel’s and—and. . . .”

“Len Bateson’s,” said the inspector. His finger touched the folded paper in his hand. “Len Bateson.”

“He is very nice, yes, said Mr. Akibombo sadly. “And to me most pleasant, but psychologically one does not know what goes on below top surface. That is so, is it not? That is modern theory. Mr. Chandra Lal very angry when his boracic for the eyes disappears and later, when I ask, he says he has been told that it was taken by Len Bateson. . . .”

"The morphia was taken from Nigel's drawer and boracic was substituted for it, and when Patricia Lane came along and substituted soda bicarbonate for what she thought was morphia but which was really boracic powder . . . Yes . . . I see. . . ."

"I have helped you, yes?" Mr. Akibombo asked politely.

"Yes, indeed, we're most grateful to you. Don't—er—repeat any of this."

"No, sir. I will be most careful."

Mr. Akibombo bowed politely to all and left the room.

"Len Bateson," said Mrs. Hubbard, in a distressed voice. "Oh! No."

Sharpe looked at her.

"You don't want it to be Len Bateson?"

"I've got fond of that boy. He's got a temper, I know, but he's always seemed so nice."

"That's been said about a lot of criminals," said Sharpe.

Gently he unfolded his little paper packet. Mrs. Hubbard obeyed his gesture and leaned forward to look.

On the white paper were two red short curly hairs. . . .

"Oh! dear," said Mrs. Hubbard.

"Yes," said Sharpe reflectively. "In my experience a murderer usually makes at least one mistake."

Chapter Nineteen

I

“But it is beautiful, my friend,” said Hercule Poirot with admiration. “So clear—so beautifully clear.”

“You sound as if you were talking about soup,” grumbled the inspector. “It may be Consommé to you—but to me there’s a good deal of thick Mock Turtle about it still.”

“Not now. Everything fits in in its appointed place.”

“Even these?”

As he had done to Mrs. Hubbard, Inspector Sharpe produced his exhibit of two red hairs.

Poirot’s answer was almost in the same words as Sharpe had used.

“Ah—yes,” he said. “What do you call it on the radio? The one deliberate mistake.”

The eyes of the two men met.

“No one,” said Hercule Poirot, “is as clever as they think they are.”

Inspector Sharpe was greatly tempted to say:

“Not even Hercule Poirot?” but he restrained himself.

“For the other, my friend, it is all fixed?”

"Yes, the balloon goes up tomorrow."

"You go yourself?"

"No. I'm scheduled to appear at 26 Hickory Road. Cobb will be in charge."

"We will wish him good luck."

Gravely, Hercule Poirot raised his glass. It contained crème de menthe.

Inspector Sharpe raised his whisky glass.

"Here's hoping," he said.

II

"They do think up things, these places," said Sergeant Cobb.

He was looking with grudging admiration at the display window of SABRINA FAIR. Framed and enclosed in an expensive illustration of the glassmaker's art—the "glassy green translucent wave"—Sabrina was displayed, recumbent, clad in brief and exquisite panties and happily surrounded with every variety of deliciously packaged cosmetics. Besides the panties she wore various examples of barbaric costume jewellery.

Detective-Constable McCrae gave a snort of deep disapproval.

"Blasphemy, I call it. Sabrina Fair, that's Milton, that is."

"Well, Milton isn't the Bible, my lad."

“You’ll not deny that Paradise Lost is about Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden and all the devils of hell and if that’s not religion, what is?”

Sergeant Cobb did not enter on these controversial matters. He marched boldly into the establishment, the dour constable at his heels. In the shell pink interior of Sabrina Fair the sergeant and his satellite looked as out of place as the traditional bull in a china shop.

An exquisite creature in delicate salmon pink swam up to them, her feet hardly seeming to touch the floor.

Sergeant Cobb said, “Good morning, madam,” and produced his credentials. The lovely creature withdrew in a flutter. An equally lovely but slightly older creature appeared. She in turn gave way to a superb and resplendent duchess whose blue grey hair and smooth cheeks set age and wrinkles at nought. Appraising steel grey eyes met the steady gaze of Sergeant Cobb.

“This is most unusual,” said the duchess severely. “Please come this way.”

She led him through a square salon with a centre table where magazines and periodicals were heaped carelessly. All round the walls were curtained recesses where glimpses could be obtained of recumbent women supine under the ministrant hands of pink robed priestesses.

The duchess led the police officers into a small businesslike apartment with a big roll top desk, severe chairs, and no softening of the harsh northern light.

“I am Mrs. Lucas, the proprietress of this establishment,” she said. “My partner, Miss Hobhouse, is not here today.”

“No, madam,” said Sergeant Cobb, to whom this was no news.

“This search warrant of yours seems to be most high-handed,” said Mrs. Lucas. “This is Miss Hobhouse’s private office. I sincerely hope that it will not be necessary for you to—er—upset our clients in any way.”

“I don’t think you need to worry unduly on that score,” said Cobb. “What we’re after isn’t likely to be in the public rooms.”

He waited politely until she unwillingly withdrew. Then he looked round Valerie Hobhouse’s office. The narrow window gave a view of the back premises of the other Mayfair firms. The walls were panelled in pale grey and there were two good Persian rugs on the floor. His eyes went from the small wall safe to the big desk.

“Won’t be in the safe,” said Cobb. “Too obvious.”

A quarter of an hour later, the safe and the drawers of the desk had yielded up their secrets.

“Looks like it’s maybe a mare’s nest,” said McCrae, who was by nature both gloomy and disapproving.

“We’re only beginning,” said Cobb.

Having emptied the drawers of their contents and arranged the latter neatly in piles, he now proceeded to take the drawers out and turn them upside down.

He uttered an ejaculation of pleasure.

“Here we are, my lad,” he said.

Fastened to the underneath side of the bottom drawer with adhesive tape were a half-dozen small dark blue books with gilt lettering.

“Passports,” said Sergeant Cobb. “Issued by Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, God bless his trusting heart.”

McCrae bent over with interest as Cobb opened the passports and compared the affixed photographs.

“Hardly think it was the same woman, would you?” said McCrae.

The passports were those of Mrs. da Silva, Miss Irene French, Mrs. Olga Kohn, Miss Nina Le Mesurier, Mrs. Gladys Thomas, and Miss Moira O’Neele. They represented a dark young woman whose age varied between twenty-five and forty.

“It’s the different hairdo every time that does it,” said Cobb. “Pompadour, curls, straight cut, page boy bob, etc. She’s done something to her nose for Olga Kohn, plumpers in her cheeks for Mrs. Thomas. Here are two more—foreign passports—Madame Mahmoudi, Algerian. Sheila Donovan, Eire. I’ll say she’s got bank accounts in all these different names.”

“Bit complicated, isn’t that?”

“It has to be complicated, my lad. Inland Revenue always snooping round asking embarrassing questions. It’s not so difficult to make money by smuggling goods—but it’s hell and all to account for money when you’ve got it! I bet this little gambling club in

Mayfair was started by the lady for just that reason. Winning money by gambling is about the only thing an income tax inspector can't check up on. A good part of the loot, I should say, is cached around in Algerian and French banks and in Eire. The whole thing's a thoroughly well thought out businesslike setup. And then, one day, she must have had one of these fake passports lying about at Hickory Road and that poor little devil Celia saw it."

Chapter Twenty

“It was a clever idea of Miss Hobhouse’s,” said Inspector Sharpe. His voice was indulgent, almost fatherly.

He shuffled the passports from one hand to the other like a man dealing cards.

“Complicated thing, finance,” he said. “We’ve had a busy time haring round from one bank to the other. She covered her tracks well—her financial tracks, I mean. I’d say that in a couple of years’ time she could have cleared out, gone abroad and lived happily ever after, as they say, on ill-gotten gains. It wasn’t a big show—illicit diamonds, sapphires, etc., coming in—stolen stuff going out—and narcotics on the side, as you might say. Thoroughly well organised. She went abroad under her own and under different names, but never too often, and the actual smuggling was always done, unknowingly, by someone else. She had agents abroad who saw to the exchange of rucksacks at the right moment. Yes, it was a clever idea. And we’ve got M. Poirot here to thank for putting us on to it. It was smart of her, too, to suggest that psychological stealing stunt to poor little Miss Austin. You were wise to that almost at once, weren’t you, M. Poirot?”

Poirot smiled in a deprecating manner and Mrs. Hubbard looked admiringly at him. The conversation was strictly off the record in Mrs. Hubbard’s sitting room.

“Greed was her undoing,” said Poirot. “She was tempted by that fine diamond in Patricia Lane’s ring. It was foolish of her because it suggested at once that she was used to handling precious stones—that business of prising the diamond out and replacing it with a zircon. Yes, that certainly gave me ideas about Valerie Hobhouse. She was clever, though, when I taxed her with inspiring Celia, she admitted it and explained it in a thoroughly sympathetic way."

"But murder!" said Mrs. Hubbard. "Cold-blooded murder. I can't really believe it even now."

Inspector Sharpe looked gloomy.

"We aren't in a position to charge her with the murder of Celia Austin yet," he said. "We've got her cold on the smuggling, of course. No difficulties about that. But the murder charge is more tricky. The public prosecutor doesn't see his way. There's motive, of course, and opportunity. She probably knew all about the bet and Nigel's possession of morphia, but there's no real evidence, and there are the two other deaths to take into account. She could have poisoned Mrs. Nicoletis all right—but on the other hand, she definitely did not kill Patricia Lane. Actually she's about the only person who's completely in the clear. Geronimo says positively that she left the house at six o'clock. He sticks to that. I don't know whether she bribed him—"

"No," said Poirot, shaking his head. "She did not bribe him."

"And we've the evidence of the chemist at the corner of the road. He knows her quite well and he sticks to it that she came in at five minutes past six and bought face powder and aspirin and used the telephone. She left his shop at quarter past six and took a taxi from the rank outside."

Poirot sat up in his chair.

"But that," he said, "is magnificent! It is just what we want!"

“What on earth do you mean?”

“I mean that she actually telephoned from the box at the chemist’s shop.”

Inspector Sharpe looked at him in an exasperated fashion.

“Now, see here, M. Poirot. Let’s take the known facts. At eight minutes past six, Patricia Lane is alive and telephoning to the police station from this room. You agree to that?”

“I do not think she was telephoning from this room.”

“Well then, from the hall downstairs.”

“Not from the hall either.”

Inspector Sharpe sighed.

“I suppose you don’t deny that a call was put through to the police station? You don’t think that I and my sergeant and Police Constable Nye and Nigel Chapman were the victims of mass hallucination?”

“Assuredly not. A call was put through to you. I should say at a guess that it was put through from the public call box at the chemist’s on the corner.”

Inspector Sharpe’s jaw dropped for a moment.

“You mean that Valerie Hobhouse put through that call? That she pretended to speak as Patricia Lane, and that Patricia Lane was already dead.”

"That is what I mean, yes."

The inspector was silent for a moment, then he brought down his fist with a crash on the table.

"I don't believe it. The voice—I heard it myself—"

"You heard it, yes. A girl's voice, breathless, agitated. But you didn't know Patricia Lane's voice well enough to say definitely that it was her voice."

"I didn't, perhaps. But it was Nigel Chapman who actually took the call. You can't tell me that Nigel Chapman could be deceived. It isn't so easy to disguise a voice over the telephone, or to counterfeit somebody else's voice. Nigel Chapman would have known if it wasn't Pat's voice speaking."

"Yes," said Poirot. "Nigel Chapman would have known. Nigel Chapman knew quite well that it wasn't Patricia. Who should know better than he, since he had killed her with a blow on the back of the head only a short while before."

It was a moment or two before the inspector recovered his voice.

"Nigel Chapman? Nigel Chapman? But when we found her dead—he cried—cried like a child."

"I dare say," said Poirot. "I think he was as fond of that girl as he could be of anybody—but that wouldn't save her—not if she represented a menace to his interests. All along, Nigel Chapman has stood out as the obvious probability. Who had morphia in his possession? Nigel Chapman. Who had the shallow brilliant intellect to plan and the audacity to carry out fraud and murder? Nigel

Chapman. Who do we know to be both ruthless and vain? Nigel Chapman. He has all the hallmarks of the killer; the overweening vanity, the spitefulness, the growing recklessness that led him to draw attention to himself in every conceivable way—using the green ink in a stupendous double bluff, and finally overreaching himself by the silly deliberate mistake of putting Len Bateson's hairs in Patricia's fingers, oblivious of the fact that as Patricia was struck down from behind, she could not possibly have grasped her assailant by the hair. They are like that, these murderers, carried away by their own egotism, by their admiration of their own cleverness, relying on their charm—for he has charm, this Nigel—he has all the charm of a spoiled child who has never grown up, who never will grow up—who sees only one thing, himself, and what he wants!"

"But why, M. Poirot? Why murder? Celia Austin, perhaps, but why Patricia Lane?"

"That," said Poirot, "we have got to find out."

Chapter Twenty-one

“I haven’t seen you for a long time,” said old Mr. Endicott to Hercule Poirot. He peered at the other keenly. “It’s very nice of you to drop in.”

“Not really,” said Hercule Poirot. “I want something.”

“Well, as you know, I’m deeply in your debt. You cleared up that nasty Abernethy business for me.”

“I am surprised really to find you here. I thought you had retired.”

The old lawyer smiled grimly. His firm was a most respectable and old-established one.

“I came in specially today to see a very old client. I still attend to the affairs of one or two old friends.”

“Sir Arthur Stanley was an old friend and client, was he not?”

“Yes. We’ve undertaken all his legal work since he was quite a young man. A very brilliant man, Poirot—quite an exceptional brain.”

“His death was announced on the six o’clock news yesterday, I believe.”

“Yes. The funeral’s on Friday. He’s been ailing some time. A malignant growth, I understand.”

“Lady Stanley died some years ago?”

“Two and a half years ago, roughly.”

The keen eyes below the bushy brows looked sharply at Poirot.

“How did she die?”

The lawyer replied promptly.

“Overdose of sleeping stuff. Medinal as far as I remember.”

“There was an inquest?”

“Yes. The verdict was that she took it accidentally.”

“Did she?”

Mr. Endicott was silent for a moment.

“I won’t insult you,” he said. “I’ve no doubt you’ve got a good reason for asking. Medinal’s a rather dangerous drug, I understand, because there’s not a big margin between an effective dose and a lethal one. If the patient gets drowsy and forgets she’s taken a dose and takes another—well, it can have a fatal result.”

Poirot nodded.

“Is that what she did?”

“Presumably. There was no suggestion of suicide, or suicidal tendencies.”

“And no suggestion of—anything else?”

Again that keen glance was shot at him.

“Her husband gave evidence.”

“And what did he say?”

“He made it clear that she did sometimes get confused after taking her nightly dose and ask for another.”

“Was he lying?”

“Really, Poirot, what an outrageous question. Why should you suppose for a minute that I should know?”

Poirot smiled. The attempt at bluster did not deceive him.

“I suggest, my friend, that you know very well. But for the moment I will not embarrass you by asking you what you know. Instead I will ask you for an opinion. The opinion of one man about another. Was Arthur Stanley the kind of man who would do away with his wife if he wanted to marry another woman?”

Mr. Endicott jumped as though he had been stung by a wasp.

“Preposterous,” he said angrily. “Quite preposterous. And there was no other woman. Stanley was devoted to his wife.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “I thought so. And now—I will come to the purpose of my call upon you. You are the solicitors who drew up Arthur Stanley’s will. You are, perhaps, his executor.”

“That is so.”

“Arthur Stanley had a son. The son quarrelled with his father at the time of his mother’s death. Quarrelled with him and left home. He even went so far as to change his name.”

“That I did not know. What’s he calling himself?”

“We shall come to that. Before we do I am going to make an assumption. If I am right, perhaps you will admit the fact. I think that Arthur Stanley left a sealed letter with you, a letter to be opened under certain circumstances or after his death.”

“Really, Poirot! In the Middle Ages you would certainly have been burnt at the stake. How you can possibly know the things you do!”

“I am right then? I think there was an alternative in the letter. Its contents were either to be destroyed—or you were to take a certain course of action.”

He paused.

“Bon dieu!” said Poirot with alarm. “You have not already destroyed—”

He broke off in relief as Mr. Endicott slowly shook his head in negation.

“We never act in haste,” he said reprovingly. “I have to make full inquiries—to satisfy myself absolutely—”

He paused. “This matter,” he said severely, “is highly confidential. Even to you, Poirot—” He shook his head.

“And if I show you good cause why you should speak.”

"That is up to you. I cannot conceive how you can possibly know anything at all that is relevant to the matter we are discussing."

"I do not know—so I have to guess. If I guess correctly—"

"Highly unlikely," said Mr. Endicott, with a wave of his hand.

Poirot drew a deep breath.

"Very well then. It is in my mind that your instructions are as follows. In the event of Sir Arthur's death, you are to trace his son Nigel, to ascertain where he is living and how he is living and particularly whether he is or has been engaged in any criminal activity whatsoever."

This time Mr. Endicott's impregnable legal calm was really shattered. He uttered an exclamation such as few had ever heard from his lips.

"Since you appear to be in full possession of the facts," he said, "I'll tell you anything you want to know. I gather you've come across young Nigel in the course of your professional activities. What's the young devil been up to?"

"I think the story goes as follows. After he had left home he changed his name, telling anyone who was interested that he had to do so as a condition of a legacy. He then fell in with some people who were running a smuggling racket—drugs and jewels. I think it was due to him that the racket assumed its final form—an exceedingly clever one involving the using of innocent bona fide students. The whole thing was operated by two people, Nigel Chapman, as he now called himself, and a young woman called Valerie Hobhouse who, I think, originally introduced him to the smuggling trade. It was a small private concern and they worked it on a commission basis—but it was immensely profitable. The goods had to be of small bulk, but thousands of pounds worth of gems and narcotics occupy a very small space. Everything went well until one of those unforeseen chances occurred. A police officer came one day to a students' hostel to make inquiries in connection with a murder near Cambridge. I think you know the reason why that particular piece of information should cause Nigel to panic. He thought the police were after him. He removed certain electric lightbulbs so that the light should be dim and he also, in a panic, took a certain rucksack out into the back yard, hacked it to pieces and threw it behind the boiler since he feared traces of narcotic might be found in its false bottom.

"His panic was quite unfounded—the police had merely come to ask questions about a certain Eurasian student—but one of the girls living in the hostel had happened to look out of her window and had seen him destroying the rucksack. That did not immediately sign her death warrant. Instead, a clever scheme was thought up by which she herself was induced to commit certain foolish actions which would place her in a very invidious position. But they carried that scheme too far. I was called in. I advised going to the police. The girl lost her head and confessed. She confessed, that is, to the things that she had done. But she went, I think, to Nigel, and urged him to confess also to the rucksack business and to spilling ink over a fellow student's work. Neither Nigel nor his accomplice could consider attention being called to the rucksack—their whole plan of campaign would be ruined. Moreover Celia, the girl in question, had another dangerous piece of knowledge which she revealed, as it happened, the night I dined there. She knew who Nigel really was."

“But surely—” Mr. Endicott frowned.

“Nigel had moved from one world to another. Any former friends he met might know that he now called himself Chapman, but they knew nothing of what he was doing. In the hostel nobody knew that his real name was Stanley—but Celia suddenly revealed that she knew him in both capacities. She also knew that Valerie Hobhouse, on one occasion at least, had travelled abroad on a false passport. She knew too much. The next evening she went out to meet him by appointment somewhere. He gave her a drink of coffee and in it was morphia. She died in her sleep with everything arranged to look like suicide.”

Mr. Endicott stirred. An expression of deep distress crossed his face. He murmured something under his breath.

“But that was not the end,” said Poirot. “The woman who owned the chain of hostels and students’ clubs died soon after in suspicious circumstances and then, finally, there came the last most cruel and heartless crime. Patricia Lane, a girl who was devoted to Nigel and of whom he himself was really fond, meddled unwittingly in his affairs, and moreover insisted that he should be reconciled to his father before the latter died. He told her a string of lies, but he realised that her obstinacy might urge her actually to write a second letter after the first was destroyed. I think, my friend, that you can tell me why, from his point of view, that would have been such a fatal thing to happen.”

Mr. Endicott rose. He went across the room to a safe, unlocked it, and came back with a long envelope in his hand. It had a broken red seal on the back of it. He drew out two enclosures and laid them before Poirot.

Dear Endicott,

You will open this after I am dead. I wish you to trace my son Nigel and find out if he has been guilty of any criminal actions whatsoever.

The facts I am about to tell you are known to me only. Nigel has always been profoundly unsatisfactory in his character. He has twice been guilty of forging my name to a cheque. On each occasion I acknowledged the signature as mine, but warned him that I would not do so again. On the third occasion it was his mother's name he forged. She charged him with it. He begged her to keep silent. She refused. She and I had discussed him, and she made it clear she was going to tell me. It was then, in handing her her evening sleeping mixture, he administered an overdose. Before it took effect, however, she had come to my room and told me all about matters. When, the next morning, she was found dead, I knew who had done it.

I accused Nigel and told him that I intended to make a clean breast of all the facts to the police. He pleaded desperately with me. What would you have done, Endicott? I have no illusions about my son, I know him for what he is, one of those dangerous misfits who have neither conscience nor pity. I had no cause to save him. But it was the thought of my beloved wife that swayed me. Would she wish me to execute justice? I thought that I knew the answer—she would have wanted her son saved from the scaffold. She would have shrunk, as I shrank, from the dragging down of our name. But there was another consideration. I firmly believe that once a killer, always a killer. There might be, in the future, other victims. I made a bargain with my son, and whether I did right or wrong, I do not know. He was to write out a confession of his crime which I should keep. He was to leave my house and never return, but make a new life for himself. I would give him a second chance. Money belonging to his mother would come to him automatically. He had had a good education. He had every chance of making good.

But—if he were convicted of any criminal activity whatsoever the confession he had left with me should go to the police. I safeguarded myself by explaining that my own death would not solve the problem.

You are my oldest friend. I am placing a burden on your shoulders, but I ask it in the name of a dead woman who was also your friend. Find Nigel. If his record is clean, destroy this letter and the enclosed confession. If not—then justice must be done.

Your affectionate friend,

Arthur Stanley

“Ah!” Poirot breathed a long sigh.

He unfolded the enclosure.

I hereby confess that I murdered my mother by giving her an overdose of medinal on November 18, 195—

Nigel Stanley

Chapter Twenty-two

“You quite understand your position, Miss Hobhouse. I have already warned you—”

Valerie Hobhouse cut him short.

“I know what I’m doing. You’ve warned me what I say will be used in evidence. I’m prepared for that. You’ve got me on the smuggling charge. I haven’t got a hope. That means a long term of imprisonment. This other means that I’ll be charged as an accessory to murder.”

“Your being willing to make a statement may help you, but I can’t make any promise or hold out any inducement.”

“I don’t know that I care. Just as well end it all as languish in prison for years. I want to make a statement. I may be what you call an accessory, but I’m not a killer. I never intended murder or wanted it. I’m not such a fool. What I do want is that there should be a clear case against Nigel. . . .

“Celia knew far too much, but I could have dealt with that somehow. Nigel didn’t give me time. He got her to come out and meet him, told her that he was going to own up to the rucksack and the ink business and then slipped her the morphia in a cup of coffee. He’d got hold of her letter to Mrs. Hubbard earlier on and had torn out a useful ‘suicide’ phrase. He put that and the empty morphia phial (which he had retrieved after pretending to throw it away) by her bed. I see now that he’d been contemplating murder for quite a little time. Then he came and told me what he’d done. For my own sake I had to stand in with him.

"The same thing must have happened with Mrs. Nick. He'd found out that she drank, that she was getting unreliable—he managed to meet her somewhere on her way home, and poisoned her drink. He denied it to me—but I know that that's what he did. Then came Pat. He came up to my room and told me what had happened. He told me what I'd got to do—so that both he and I would have an unbreakable alibi. I was in the net by then, there was no way out . . . I suppose, if you hadn't caught me, I'd have got away abroad somewhere, and made a new life for myself. But you did catch me . . . And now I only care about one thing—to make sure that that cruel smiling devil gets hanged."

Inspector Sharpe drew a deep breath. All this was eminently satisfactory, it was an unbelievable piece of luck; but he was puzzled.

The constable licked his pencil.

"I'm not sure that I quite understand," began Sharpe.

She cut him short.

"You don't need to understand. I've got my reasons."

Hercule Poirot spoke very gently.

"Mrs. Nicoletis?" he asked.

He heard the sharp intake of her breath.

"She was—your mother, was she not?"

"Yes," said Valerie Hobhouse. "She was my mother. . . ."

Chapter Twenty-three

I

“I do not understand,” said Mr. Akibombo plaintively.

He looked anxiously from one red head to the other.

Sally Finch and Len Bateson were conducting a conversation which Mr. Akibombo found hard to follow.

“Do you think,” asked Sally, “that Nigel meant me to be suspected, or you?”

“Either, I should say,” replied Len. “I believe he actually took the hairs from my brush.”

“I do not understand, please,” said Mr. Akibombo. “Was it then Mr. Nigel who jumped the balcony?”

“Nigel can jump like a cat. I couldn’t have jumped across that space. I’m far too heavy.”

“I want to apologise very deeply and humbly for wholly unjustifiable suspicions.”

“That’s all right,” said Len.

“Actually, you helped a lot,” said Sally. “All your thinking—about the boracic.”

Mr. Akibombo brightened up.

"One ought to have realised all along," said Len, "that Nigel was a thoroughly maladjusted type and—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake—you sound just like Colin. Frankly, Nigel always gave me the creeps—and at last I see why. Do you realise, Len, that if poor Sir Arthur Stanley hadn't been sentimental and had turned Nigel straight over to the police, three other people would be alive today? It's a solemn thought."

"Still, one can understand what he felt about it—"

"Please, Miss Sally."

"Yes, Akibombo?"

"If you meet my professor at University party tonight will you tell him, please, that I have done some good thinking? My professor he says often that I have a muddled thought process."

"I'll tell him," said Sally.

Len Bateson was looking the picture of gloom.

"In a week's time you'll be back in America," he said.

There was a momentary silence.

"I shall come back," said Sally. "Or you might come and do a course over there."

"What's the use?"

"Akibombo," said Sally, "would you like, one day, to be best man at a wedding?"

“What is best man, please?”

“The bridegroom, Len here for instance, gives you a ring to keep for him, and he and you go to church very smartly dressed and at the right moment he asks you for the ring and you give it to him, and he puts it on my finger, and the organ plays the wedding march and everybody cries. And there we are.”

“You mean that you and Mr. Len are to be married?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Sally!”

“Unles, of course, Len doesn’t care for the idea.”

“Sally! But you don’t know—about my father—”

“So what? Of course I know. So your father’s nuts. All right, so are lots of people’s fathers.”

“It isn’t a hereditary type of mania. I can assure you of that, Sally. If you only knew how desperately unhappy I’ve been about you.”

“I did just have a tiny suspicion.”

“In Africa,” said Mr. Akibombo, “in old days, before atomic age and scientific thought had come, marriage customs very curious and interesting. I tell you—”

“You’d better not,” said Sally. “I have an idea they might make both Len and me blush, and when you’ve got red hair it’s very noticeable when you blush.”

II

Hercule Poirot signed the last of the letters that Miss Lemon had laid before him.

“Très bien,” he said gravely. “Not a single mistake.”

Miss Lemon looked slightly affronted.

“I don’t often make mistakes, I hope,” she said.

“Not often. But it has happened. How is your sister, by the way?”

“She is thinking of going on a cruise, M. Poirot. To the northern capitals.”

“Ah,” said Hercule Poirot.

He wondered if—possibly—on a cruise—?

Not that he himself would undertake a sea voyage—not for any inducement. . . .

The clock behind him struck one.

“The clock struck one,

The mouse ran down

Hickory, dickory, dock,”

declared Hercule Poirot.

“I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?”

“Nothing,” said Hercule Poirot.

Dead Man's Folly (1956)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

I

It was Miss Lemon, Poirot's efficient secretary, who took the telephone call.

Laying aside her shorthand notebook, she raised the receiver and said without emphasis, "Trafalgar 8137."

Hercule Poirot leaned back in his upright chair and closed his eyes. His fingers beat a meditative soft tattoo on the edge of the table. In his head he continued to compose the polished periods of the letter he had been dictating.

Placing her hand over the receiver, Miss Lemon asked in a low voice:

"Will you accept a personal call from Nassecombe, Devon?"

Poirot frowned. The place meant nothing to him.

"The name of the caller?" he demanded cautiously.

Miss Lemon spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Air raid?" she asked doubtingly. "Oh, yes—what was the last name again?"

Once more she turned to Hercule Poirot.

"Mrs. Ariadne Oliver."

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows shot up. A memory rose in his mind: windswept grey hair…an eagle profile….

He rose and replaced Miss Lemon at the telephone.

"Hercule Poirot speaks," he announced grandiloquently.

“Is that Mr. Hercules Porrot speaking personally?” the suspicious voice of the telephone operator demanded.

Poirot assured her that that was the case.

“You’re through to Mr. Porrot,” said the voice.

Its thin reedy accents were replaced by a magnificent booming contralto which caused Poirot hastily to shift the receiver a couple of inches farther from his ear.

“M. Poirot, is that really you?” demanded Mrs. Oliver.

“Myself in person, Madame.”

“This is Mrs. Oliver. I don’t know if you’ll remember me—”

“But of course I remember you, Madame. Who could forget you?”

“Well, people do sometimes,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Quite often, in fact. I don’t think that I’ve got a very distinctive personality. Or perhaps it’s because I’m always doing different things to my hair. But all that’s neither here nor there. I hope I’m not interrupting you when you’re frightfully busy?”

“No, no, you do not derange me in the least.”

“Good gracious—I’m sure I don’t want to drive you out of your mind. The fact is, I need you.”

“Need me?”

“Yes, at once. Can you take an aeroplane?”

“I do not take aeroplanes. They make me sick.”

“They do me, too. Anyway, I don’t suppose it would be any quicker than the train really, because I think the only airport near here is Exeter which is miles away. So come by train. Twelve o’clock from Paddington to

Nassecombe. You can do it nicely. You’ve got three-quarters of an hour if my watch is right—though it isn’t usually.”

“But where are you, Madame? What is all this about?”

“Nasse House, Nassecombe. A car or taxi will meet you at the station at Nassecombe.”

“But why do you need me? What is all this about?” Poirot repeated frantically.

“Telephones are in such awkward places,” said Mrs. Oliver. “This one’s in the hall…People passing through and talking…I can’t really hear. But I’m expecting you. Everybody will be so thrilled. Good-bye.”

There was a sharp click as the receiver was replaced. The line hummed gently.

With a baffled air of bewilderment, Poirot put back the receiver and murmured something under his breath. Miss Lemon sat with her pencil poised, incurious. She repeated in muted tones the final phrase of dictation before the interruption.

“—allow me to assure you, my dear sir, that the hypothesis you have advanced….”

Poirot waved aside the advancement of the hypothesis.

“That was Mrs. Oliver,” he said. “Ariadne Oliver, the detective novelist. You may have read…” But he stopped, remembering that Miss Lemon only read improving books and regarded such frivolities as fictional crime with contempt. “She wants me to go down to Devonshire today, at once, in”—he glanced at the clock—“thirty-five minutes.”

Miss Lemon raised disapproving eyebrows.

“That will be running it rather fine,” she said. “For what reason?”

“You may well ask! She did not tell me.”

"How very peculiar. Why not?"

"Because," said Hercule Poirot thoughtfully, "she was afraid of being overheard. Yes, she made that quite clear."

"Well, really," said Miss Lemon, bristling in her employer's defence. "The things people expect! Fancy thinking that you'd go rushing off on some wild goose chase like that! An important man like you! I have always noticed that these artists and writers are very unbalanced—no sense of proportion. Shall I telephone through a telegram: Regret unable leave London?"

Her hand went out to the telephone. Poirot's voice arrested the gesture.

"Du tout!" he said. "On the contrary. Be so kind as to summon a taxi immediately." He raised his voice. "Georges! A few necessities of toilet in my small valise. And quickly, very quickly, I have a train to catch."

II

The train, having done one hundred and eighty-odd miles of its two hundred and twelve miles journey at top speed, puffed gently and apologetically through the last thirty and drew into Nassecombe station. Only one person alighted, Hercule Poirot. He negotiated with care a yawning gap between the step of the train and the platform and looked round him. At the far end of the train a porter was busy inside a luggage compartment. Poirot picked up his valise and walked back along the platform to the exit. He gave up his ticket and walked out through the booking office.

A large Humber saloon was drawn up outside and a chauffeur in uniform came forward.

"Mr. Hercule Poirot?" he inquired respectfully.

He took Poirot's case from him and opened the door of the car. They drove away from the station over the railway bridge and turned down a country lane which wound between high hedges on either side. Presently the ground fell away on the right and disclosed a very beautiful river view with hills of a misty blue in the distance. The chauffeur drew into the hedge and stopped.

“The River Helm, sir,” he said. “With Dartmoor in the distance.”

It was clear that admiration was necessary. Poirot made the necessary noises, murmuring Magnifique! several times. Actually, Nature appealed to him very little. A well-cultivated neatly arranged kitchen garden was far more likely to bring a murmur of admiration to Poirot’s lips. Two girls passed the car, toiling slowly up the hill. They were carrying heavy rucksacks on their backs and wore shorts, with bright coloured scarves tied over their heads.

“There is a Youth Hostel next door to us, sir,” explained the chauffeur, who had clearly constituted himself Poirot’s guide to Devon. “Hoodown Park. Mr. Fletcher’s place it used to be. The Youth Hostel Association bought it and it’s fairly crammed in summer time. Take in over a hundred a night, they do. They’re not allowed to stay longer than a couple of nights—then they’ve got to move on. Both sexes and mostly foreigners.”

Poirot nodded absently. He was reflecting, not for the first time, that seen from the back, shorts were becoming to very few of the female sex. He shut his eyes in pain. Why, oh why, must young women array themselves thus? Those scarlet thighs were singularly unattractive!

“They seem heavily laden,” he murmured.

“Yes, sir, and it’s a long pull from the station or the bus stop. Best part of two miles to Hoodown Park.” He hesitated. “If you don’t object, sir, we could give them a lift?”

“By all means, by all means,” said Poirot benignantly. There was he in luxury in an almost empty car and here were these two panting and perspiring young women weighed down with heavy rucksacks and without the least idea how to dress themselves so as to appear attractive to the other sex. The chauffeur started the car and came to a slow purring halt beside the two girls. Their flushed and perspiring faces were raised hopefully.

Poirot opened the door and the girls climbed in.

“It is most kind, please,” said one of them, a fair girl with a foreign accent. “It is longer way than I think, yes.”

The other girl, who had a sunburnt and deeply flushed face with bronzed chestnut curls peeping out beneath her headscarf, merely nodded her head several times, flashed her teeth, and murmured, Grazie. The fair girl continued to talk vivaciously.

“I to England come for two week holiday. I come from Holland. I like England very much. I have been Stratford Avon, Shakespeare Theatre and Warwick Castle. Then I have been Clovelly, now I have seen Exeter Cathedral and Torquay—very nice—I come to famous beauty spot here and tomorrow I cross river, go to Plymouth where discovery of New World was made from Plymouth Hoe.”

“And you, signorina?” Poirot turned to the other girl. But she only smiled and shook her curls.

“She does not much English speak,” said the Dutch girl kindly. “We both a little French speak—so we talk in train. She is coming from near Milan and has relative in England married to gentleman who keeps shop for much groceries. She has come with friend to Exeter yesterday, but friend has eat veal ham pie not good from shop in Exeter and has to stay there sick. It is not good in hot weather, the veal ham pie.”

At this point the chauffeur slowed down where the road forked. The girls got out, uttered thanks in two languages and proceeded up the left-hand road. The chauffeur laid aside for a moment his Olympian aloofness and said feelingly to Poirot:

“It’s not only veal and ham pie—you want to be careful of Cornish pasties too. Put anything in a pasty they will, holiday time!”

He restarted the car and drove down the right-hand road which shortly afterwards passed into thick woods. He proceeded to give a final verdict on the occupants of Hoodown Park Youth Hostel.

"Nice enough young women, some of 'em, at that hostel," he said; "but it's hard to get them to understand about trespassing. Absolutely shocking the way they trespass. Don't seem to understand that a gentleman's place is private here. Always coming through our woods, they are, and pretending that they don't understand what you say to them." He shook his head darkly.

They went on, down a steep hill through woods, then through big iron gates, and along a drive, winding up finally in front of a big white Georgian house looking out over the river.

The chauffeur opened the door of the car as a tall black-haired butler appeared on the steps.

"Mr. Hercule Poirot?" murmured the latter.

"Yes."

"Mrs. Oliver is expecting you, sir. You will find her down at the Battery. Allow me to show you the way."

Poirot was directed to a winding path that led along the wood with glimpses of the river below. The path descended gradually until it came out at last on an open space, round in shape, with a low battlemented parapet. On the parapet Mrs. Oliver was sitting.

She rose to meet him and several apples fell from her lap and rolled in all directions. Apples seemed to be an inescapable motif of meeting Mrs. Oliver.

"I can't think why I always drop things," said Mrs. Oliver somewhat indistinctly, since her mouth was full of apple. "How are you, M. Poirot?"

"Très bien, chère Madame," replied Poirot politely. "And you?"

Mrs. Oliver was looking somewhat different from when Poirot had last seen her, and the reason lay, as she had already hinted over the telephone, in the fact that she had once more experimented with her coiffure. The last time

Poirot had seen her, she had been adopting a windswept effect. Today, her hair, richly blued, was piled upward in a multiplicity of rather artificial little curls in a pseudo Marquise style. The Marquise effect ended at her neck; the rest of her could have been definitely labelled “country practical,” consisting of a violent yolk-of-egg rough tweed coat and skirt and a rather bilious-looking mustard-coloured jumper.

“I knew you’d come,” said Mrs. Oliver cheerfully.

“You could not possibly have known,” said Poirot severely.

“Oh, yes, I did.”

“I still ask myself why I am here.”

“Well, I know the answer. Curiosity.”

Poirot looked at her and his eyes twinkled a little. “Your famous woman’s intuition,” he said, “has, perhaps, for once not led you too far astray.”

“Now, don’t laugh at my woman’s intuition. Haven’t I always spotted the murderer right away?”

Poirot was gallantly silent. Otherwise he might have replied, “At the fifth attempt, perhaps, and not always then!”

Instead he said, looking round him:

“It is indeed a beautiful property that you have here.”

“This? But it doesn’t belong to me, M. Poirot. Did you think it did? Oh, no, it belongs to some people called Stubbs.”

“Who are they?”

“Oh, nobody really,” said Mrs. Oliver vaguely. “Just rich. No, I’m down here professionally, doing a job.”

“Ah, you are getting local colour for one of your chefs-d’oeuvre?”

“No, no. Just what I said. I’m doing a job. I’ve been engaged to arrange a murder.”

Poirot stared at her.

“Oh, not a real one,” said Mrs. Oliver reassuringly. “There’s a big fête thing on tomorrow, and as a kind of novelty there’s going to be a Murder Hunt. Arranged by me. Like a Treasure Hunt, you see; only they’ve had a Treasure Hunt so often that they thought this would be a novelty. So they offered me a very substantial fee to come down and think it up. Quite fun, really—rather a change from the usual grim routine.”

“How does it work?”

“Well, there’ll be a Victim, of course. And Clues. And Suspects. All rather conventional—you know, the Vamp and the Blackmailer and the Young Lovers and the Sinister Butler and so on. Half a crown to enter and you get shown the first Clue and you’ve got to find the Victim, and the Weapon and say Whodunnit and the Motive. And there are Prizes.”

“Remarkable!” said Hercule Poirot.

“Actually,” said Mrs. Oliver ruefully, “it’s all much harder to arrange than you’d think. Because you’ve got to allow for real people being quite intelligent, and in my books they needn’t be.”

“And it is to assist you in arranging this that you have sent for me?”

Poirot did not try very hard to keep an outraged resentment out of his voice.

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Of course not! I’ve done all that. Everything’s all set for tomorrow. No, I wanted you for quite another reason.”

“What reason?”

Mrs. Oliver’s hands strayed upward to her head. She was just about to sweep them frenziedly through her hair in the old familiar gesture when she remembered the intricacy of her hairdo. Instead, she relieved her feelings by tugging at her ear lobes.

“I dare say I’m a fool,” she said. “But I think there’s something wrong.”

Two

There was a moment's silence as Poirot stared at her. Then he asked sharply: "Something wrong? How?"

"I don't know…That's what I want you to find out. But I've felt—more and more—that I was being—oh!—engineered…jockeyed along…Call me a fool if you like, but I can only say that if there was to be a real murder tomorrow instead of a fake one, I shouldn't be surprised!"

Poirot stared at her and she looked back at him defiantly.

"Very interesting," said Poirot.

"I suppose you think I'm a complete fool," said Mrs. Oliver defensively.

"I have never thought you a fool," said Poirot.

"And I know what you always say—or look—about intuition."

"One calls things by different names," said Poirot. "I am quite ready to believe that you have noticed something, or heard something, that has definitely aroused in you anxiety. I think it is possible that you yourself may not even know just what it is that you have seen or noticed or heard. You are aware only of the result. If I may so put it, you do not know what it is that you know. You may label that intuition if you like."

"It makes one feel such a fool," said Mrs. Oliver, ruefully, "not to be able to be definite."

"We shall arrive," said Poirot encouragingly. "You say that you have had the feeling of being—how did you put it—jockeyed along? Can you explain a little more clearly what you mean by that?"

"Well, it's rather difficult…You see, this is my murder, so to speak. I've thought it out and planned it and it all fits in—dovetails. Well, if you know anything at all about writers, you'll know that they can't stand suggestions.

People say ‘Splendid, but wouldn’t it be better if so and so did so and so?’ or ‘Wouldn’t it be a wonderful idea if the victim was A instead of B? Or the murderer turned out to be D instead of E?’ I mean, one wants to say: ‘All right then, write it yourself if you want it that way!’”

Poirot nodded.

“And that is what has been happening?”

“Not quite…That sort of silly suggestion has been made, and then I’ve flared up, and they’ve given in, but have just slipped in some quite minor trivial suggestion and because I’ve made a stand over the other, I’ve accepted the triviality without noticing much.”

“I see,” said Poirot. “Yes—it is a method, that…Something rather crude and preposterous is put forward—but that is not really the point. The small minor alteration is really the objective. Is that what you mean?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” said Mrs. Oliver. “And, of course, I may be imagining it, but I don’t think I am—and none of the things seem to matter anyway. But it’s got me worried—that, and a sort of—well—atmosphere.”

“Who has made these suggestions of alterations to you?”

“Different people,” said Mrs. Oliver. “If it was just one person I’d be more sure of my ground. But it’s not just one person—although I think it is really. I mean it’s one person working through other quite unsuspecting people.”

“Have you an idea as to who that one person is?”

Mrs. Oliver shook her head.

“It’s somebody very clever and very careful,” she said. “It might be anybody.”

“Who is there?” asked Poirot. “The cast of characters must be fairly limited?”

“Well,” began Mrs. Oliver. “There’s Sir George Stubbs who owns this place. Rich and plebeian and frightfully stupid outside business, I should think, but probably dead sharp in it. And there’s Lady Stubbs—Hattie—about twenty years younger than he is, rather beautiful, but dumb as a fish—in fact, I think she’s definitely half-witted. Married him for his money, of course, and doesn’t think about anything but clothes and jewels. Then there’s Michael Weyman—he’s an architect, quite young, and good-looking in a craggy kind of artistic way. He’s designing a tennis pavilion for Sir George and repairing the Folly.”

“Folly? What is that—a masquerade?”

“No, it’s architectural. One of those little sort of temple things, white, with columns. You’ve probably seen them at Kew. Then there’s Miss Brewis, she’s a sort of secretary housekeeper, who runs things and writes letters—very grim and efficient. And then there are the people round about who come in and help. A young married couple who have taken a cottage down by the river—Alec Legge and his wife Sally. And Captain Warburton, who’s the Mastertons’ agent. And the Mastertons, of course, and old Mrs. Folliat who lives in what used to be the lodge. Her husband’s people owned Nasse originally. But they’ve died out, or been killed in wars, and there were lots of death duties so the last heir sold the place.”

Poirot considered this list of characters, but at the moment they were only names to him. He returned to the main issue.

“Whose idea was the Murder Hunt?”

“Mrs. Masterton’s, I think. She’s the local M.P.’s wife, very good at organizing. It was she who persuaded Sir George to have the fête here. You see the place has been empty for so many years that she thinks people will be keen to pay and come in to see it.”

“That all seems straightforward enough,” said Poirot.

“It all seems straightforward,” said Mrs. Oliver obstinately; “but it isn’t. I tell you, M. Poirot, there’s something wrong.”

Poirot looked at Mrs. Oliver and Mrs. Oliver looked back at Poirot.

“How have you accounted for my presence here? For your summons to me?” Poirot asked.

“That was easy,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You’re to give away the prizes for the Murder Hunt. Everybody’s awfully thrilled. I said I knew you, and could probably persuade you to come and that I was sure your name would be a terrific draw—as, of course, it will be,” Mrs. Oliver added tactfully.

“And the suggestion was accepted—without demur?”

“I tell you, everybody was thrilled.”

Mrs. Oliver thought it unnecessary to mention that amongst the younger generation one or two had asked “Who is Hercule Poirot?”

“Everybody? Nobody spoke against the idea?”

Mrs. Oliver shook her head.

“That is a pity,” said Hercule Poirot.

“You mean it might have given us a line?”

“A would-be criminal could hardly be expected to welcome my presence.”

“I suppose you think I’ve imagined the whole thing,” said Mrs. Oliver ruefully. “I must admit that until I started talking to you I hadn’t realized how very little I’ve got to go upon.”

“Calm yourself,” said Poirot kindly. “I am intrigued and interested. Where do we begin?”

Mrs. Oliver glanced at her watch.

“It’s just teatime. We’ll go back to the house and then you can meet everybody.”

She took a different path from the one by which Poirot had come. This one seemed to lead in the opposite direction.

“We pass by the boathouse this way,” Mrs. Oliver explained.

As she spoke the boathouse came into view. It jutted out on to the river and was a picturesque thatched affair.

“That’s where the Body’s going to be,” said Mrs. Oliver. “The body for the Murder Hunt, I mean.”

“And who is going to be killed?”

“Oh, a girl hiker, who is really the Yugoslavian first wife of a young Atom Scientist,” said Mrs. Oliver glibly.

Poirot blinked.

“Of course it looks as though the Atom Scientist had killed her—but naturally it’s not as simple as that.”

“Naturally not—since you are concerned….”

Mrs. Oliver accepted the compliment with a wave of the hand.

“Actually,” she said, “she’s killed by the Country Squire—and the motive is really rather ingenious—I don’t believe many people will get it—though there’s a perfectly clear pointer in the fifth clue.”

Poirot abandoned the subtleties of Mrs. Oliver’s plot to ask a practical question:

“But how do you arrange for a suitable body?”

“Girl Guide,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Sally Legge was going to be it—but now they want her to dress up in a turban and do the fortune-telling. So it’s a Girl Guide called Marlene Tucker. Rather dumb and sniffs,” she added in an explanatory manner. “It’s quite easy—just peasant scarves and a rucksack—and all she has to do when she hears someone coming is to flop down on the floor and arrange the cord round her neck. Rather dull for the poor kid—just sticking inside that boathouse until she's found, but I've arranged for her to have a nice bundle of comics—there's a clue to the murderer scribbled on one of them as a matter of fact—so it all works in."

"Your ingenuity leaves me spellbound! The things you think of!"

"It's never difficult to think of things," said Mrs. Oliver. "The trouble is that you think of too many, and then it all becomes too complicated, so you have to relinquish some of them and that is rather agony. We go up this way now."

They started up a steep zigzagging path that led them back along the river at a higher level. At a twist through the trees they came out on a space surmounted by a small white pilastered temple. Standing back and frowning at it was a young man wearing dilapidated flannel trousers and a shirt of rather virulent green. He spun round towards them.

"Mr. Michael Weyman, M. Hercule Poirot," said Mrs. Oliver.

The young man acknowledged the introduction with a careless nod.

"Extraordinary," he said bitterly, "the places people put things! This thing here, for instance. Put up only about a year ago—quite nice of its kind and quite in keeping with the period of the house. But why here? These things were meant to be seen—'situated on an eminence'—that's how they phrased it—with a nice grassy approach and daffodils, etcetera. But here's this poor little devil, stuck away in the midst of trees—not visible from anywhere—you'd have to cut down about twenty trees before you'd even see it from the river."

"Perhaps there wasn't any other place," said Mrs. Oliver.

Michael Weyman snorted.

"Top of that grassy bank by the house—perfect natural setting. But no, these tycoon fellows are all the same—no artistic sense. Has a fancy for a 'Folly,' as he calls it, orders one. Looks round for somewhere to put it.

Then, I understand, a big oak tree crashes down in a gale. Leaves a nasty scar. ‘Oh, we’ll tidy the place up by putting a Folly there,’ says the silly ass. That’s all they ever think about, these rich city fellows, tidying up! I wonder he hasn’t put beds of red geraniums and calceolarias all round the house! A man like that shouldn’t be allowed to own a place like this!”

He sounded heated.

“This young man,” Poirot observed to himself, “assuredly does not like Sir George Stubbs.”

“It’s bedded down in concrete,” said Weyman. “And there’s loose soil underneath—so it’s subsided. Cracked all up here—it will be dangerous soon…Better pull the whole thing down and re-erect it on the top of the bank near the house. That’s my advice, but the obstinate old fool won’t hear of it.”

“What about the tennis pavilion?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

Gloom settled even more deeply on the young man.

“He wants a kind of Chinese pagoda,” he said, with a groan. “Dragons if you please! Just because Lady Stubbs fancies herself in Chinese coolie hats. Who’d be an architect? Anyone who wants something decent built hasn’t got the money, and those who have the money want something too utterly goddam awful!”

“You have my commiserations,” said Poirot gravely.

“George Stubbs,” said the architect scornfully. “Who does he think he is? Dug himself into some cushy Admiralty job in the safe depths of Wales during the war—and grows a beard to suggest he saw active naval service on convoy duty—or that’s what they say. Stinking with money—absolutely stinking!”

“Well, you architects have got to have someone who’s got money to spend, or you’d never have a job,” Mrs. Oliver pointed out reasonably enough. She moved on towards the house and Poirot and the dispirited architect prepared to follow her.

“These tycoons,” said the latter bitterly, “can’t understand first principles.” He delivered a final kick to the lopsided Folly. “If the foundations are rotten—everything’s rotten.”

“It is profound what you say there,” said Poirot. “Yes, it is profound.”

The path they were following came out from the trees and the house showed white and beautiful before them in its setting of dark trees rising up behind it.

“It is of a veritable beauty, yes,” murmured Poirot.

“He wants to build a billiard room on,” said Mr. Weyman venomously.

On the bank below them a small elderly lady was busy with sécateurs on a clump of shrubs. She climbed up to greet them, panting slightly.

“Everything neglected for years,” she said. “And so difficult nowadays to get a man who understands shrubs. This hillside should be a blaze of colour in March and April, but very disappointing this year—all this dead wood ought to have been cut away last autumn—”

“M. Hercule Poirot, Mrs. Folliat,” said Mrs. Oliver.

The elderly lady beamed.

“So this is the great M. Poirot! It is kind of you to come and help us tomorrow. This clever lady here has thought out a most puzzling problem—it will be such a novelty.”

Poirot was faintly puzzled by the graciousness of the little lady’s manner. She might, he thought, have been his hostess.

He said politely:

"Mrs. Oliver is an old friend of mine. I was delighted to be able to respond to her request. This is indeed a beautiful spot, and what a superb and noble mansion."

Mrs. Folliat nodded in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Yes. It was built by my husband's great-grandfather in 1790. There was an Elizabethan house previously. It fell into disrepair and burned down in about 1700. Our family has lived here since 1598."

Her voice was calm and matter of fact. Poirot looked at her with closer attention. He saw a very small and compact little person, dressed in shabby tweeds. The most noticeable feature about her was her clear china-blue eyes. Her grey hair was closely confined by a hairnet. Though obviously careless of her appearance, she had that indefinable air of being someone which is so hard to explain.

As they walked together towards the house, Poirot said diffidently, "It must be hard for you to have strangers living here."

There was a moment's pause before Mrs. Folliat answered. Her voice was clear and precise and curiously devoid of emotion.

"So many things are hard, M. Poirot," she said.

Three

It was Mrs. Folliat who led the way into the house and Poirot followed her. It was a gracious house, beautifully proportioned. Mrs. Folliat went through a door on the left into a small daintily furnished sitting room and on into the big drawing room beyond, which was full of people who all seemed, at the moment, to be talking at once.

“George,” said Mrs. Folliat, “this is M. Poirot who is so kind as to come and help us. Sir George Stubbs.”

Sir George, who had been talking in a loud voice, swung round. He was a big man with a rather florid red face and a slightly unexpected beard. It gave a rather disconcerting effect of an actor who had not quite made up his mind whether he was playing the part of a country squire, or of a “rough diamond” from the Dominions. It certainly did not suggest the navy, in spite of Michael Weyman’s remarks. His manner and voice were jovial, but his eyes were small and shrewd, of a particularly penetrating pale blue.

He greeted Poirot heartily.

“We’re so glad that your friend Mrs. Oliver managed to persuade you to come,” he said. “Quite a brain wave on her part. You’ll be an enormous attraction.”

He looked round a little vaguely.

“Hattie?” He repeated the name in a slightly sharper tone. “Hattie!”

Lady Stubbs was reclining in a big armchair a little distance from the others. She seemed to be paying no attention to what was going on round her. Instead she was smiling down at her hand which was stretched out on the arm of the chair. She was turning it from left to right, so that a big solitaire emerald on her third finger caught the light in its green depths.

She looked up now in a slightly startled childlike way and said, “How do you do.”

Poirot bowed over her hand.

Sir George continued his introductions.

“Mrs. Masterton.”

Mrs. Masterton was a somewhat monumental woman who reminded Poirot faintly of a bloodhound. She had a full underhung jaw and large, mournful, slightly blood-shot eyes.

She bowed and resumed her discourse in a deep voice which again made Poirot think of a bloodhound’s baying note.

“This silly dispute about the tea tent has got to be settled, Jim,” she said forcefully. “They’ve got to see sense about it. We can’t have the whole show a fiasco because of these idiotic women’s local feuds.”

“Oh, quite,” said the man addressed.

“Captain Warburton,” said Sir George.

Captain Warburton, who wore a check sports coat and had a vaguely horsy appearance, showed a lot of white teeth in a somewhat wolfish smile, then continued his conversation.

“Don’t you worry, I’ll settle it,” he said. “I’ll go and talk to them like a Dutch uncle. What about the fortune-telling tent? In the space by the magnolia? Or at the far end of the lawn by the rhododendrons?”

Sir George continued his introductions.

“Mr. and Mrs. Legge.”

A tall young man with his face peeling badly from sunburn grinned agreeably. His wife, an attractive freckled redhead, nodded in a friendly fashion, then plunged into controversy with Mrs. Masterton, her agreeable high treble making a kind of duet with Mrs. Masterton’s deep bay.

“—not by the magnolia—a bottle-neck—”

"—one wants to disperse things—but if there's a queue—"

"—much cooler. I mean, with the sun full on the house—"

"—and the coconut shy can't be too near the house—the boys are so wild when they throw—"

"And this," said Sir George, "is Miss Brewis—who runs us all."

Miss Brewis was seated behind the large silver tea tray.

She was a spare efficient-looking woman of fortyodd, with a brisk pleasant manner.

"How do you do, M. Poirot," she said. "I do hope you didn't have too crowded a journey? The trains are sometimes too terrible this time of year. Let me give you some tea. Milk? Sugar?"

"Very little milk, mademoiselle, and four lumps of sugar." He added, as Miss Brewis dealt with his request, "I see that you are all in a great state of activity."

"Yes, indeed. There are always so many last-minute things to see to. And people let one down in the most extraordinary way nowadays. Over marquees, and tents and chairs and catering equipment. One has to keep on at them. I was on the telephone half the morning."

"What about these pegs, Amanda?" said Sir George. "And the extra putters for the clock golf?"

"That's all arranged, Sir George. Mr. Benson at the golf club was most kind."

She handed Poirot his cup.

"A sandwich, M. Poirot? Those are tomato and these are paté. But perhaps," said Miss Brewis, thinking of the four lumps of sugar, "you would rather have a cream cake?"

Poirot would rather have a cream cake, and helped himself to a particularly sweet and squelchy one.

Then, balancing it carefully on his saucer, he went and sat down by his hostess. She was still letting the light play over the jewel on her hand, and she looked up at him with a pleased child’s smile.

“Look,” she said. “It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

He had been studying her carefully. She was wearing a big coolie-style hat of vivid magenta straw. Beneath it her face showed its pinky reflection on the dead-white surface of her skin. She was heavily made up in an exotic un-English style. Dead-white matt skin; vivid cyclamen lips, mascara applied lavishly to the eyes. Her hair showed beneath the hat, black and smooth, fitting like a velvet cap. There was a languorous un-English beauty about the face. She was a creature of the tropical sun, caught, as it were, by chance in an English drawing room. But it was the eyes that startled Poirot. They had a childlike, almost vacant, stare.

She had asked her question in a confidential childish way, and it was as though to a child that Poirot answered.

“It is a very lovely ring,” he said.

She looked pleased.

“George gave it to me yesterday,” she said, dropping her voice as though she were sharing a secret with him. “He gives me lots of things. He’s very kind.”

Poirot looked down at the ring again and the hand outstretched on the side of the chair. The nails were very long and varnished a deep puce.

Into his mind a quotation came: “They toil not, neither do they spin….”

He certainly couldn’t imagine Lady Stubbs toiling or spinning. And yet he would hardly have described her as a lily of the field. She was a far more artificial product.

“This is a beautiful room you have here, Madame,” he said, looking round appreciatively.

“I suppose it is,” said Lady Stubbs vaguely.

Her attention was still on her ring; her head on one side, she watched the green fire in its depths as her hand moved.

She said in a confidential whisper, “D’you see? It’s winking at me.”

She burst out laughing and Poirot had a sense of sudden shock. It was a loud uncontrolled laugh.

From across the room Sir George said: “Hattie.”

His voice was quite kind but held a faint admonition. Lady Stubbs stopped laughing.

Poirot said in a conventional manner:

“Devonshire is a very lovely county. Do you not think so?”

“It’s nice in the daytime,” said Lady Stubbs. “When it doesn’t rain,” she added mournfully. “But there aren’t any nightclubs.”

“Ah, I see. You like nightclubs?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lady Stubbs fervently.

“And why do you like nightclubs so much?”

“There is music and you dance. And I wear my nicest clothes and bracelets and rings. And all the other women have nice clothes and jewels, but not as nice as mine.”

She smiled with enormous satisfaction. Poirot felt a slight pang of pity.

“And all that amuses you very much?”

"Yes. I like the casino, too. Why are there not any casinos in England?"

"I have often wondered," said Poirot, with a sigh. "I do not think it would accord with the English character."

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. Then she bent slightly towards him.

"I won sixty thousand francs at Monte Carlo once. I put it on number twenty-seven and it came up."

"That must have been very exciting, Madame."

"Oh, it was. George gives me money to play with—but usually I lose it."

She looked disconsolate.

"That is sad."

"Oh, it does not really matter. George is very rich. It is nice to be rich, don't you think so?"

"Very nice," said Poirot gently.

"Perhaps, if I was not rich, I should look like Amanda." Her gaze went to Miss Brewis at the tea table and studied her dispassionately. "She is very ugly, don't you think?"

Miss Brewis looked up at that moment and across to where they were sitting. Lady Stubbs had not spoken loudly, but Poirot wondered whether Amanda Brewis had heard.

As he withdrew his gaze, his eyes met those of Captain Warburton. The Captain's glance was ironic and amused.

Poirot endeavoured to change the subject.

"Have you been very busy preparing for the fête?" he asked.

Hattie Stubbs shook her head.

"Oh, no, I think it is all very boring—very stupid. There are servants and gardeners. Why should not they make the preparations?"

"Oh, my dear." It was Mrs. Folliat who spoke. She had come to sit on the sofa nearby. "Those are the ideas you were brought up with on your island estates. But life isn't like that in England these days. I wish it were." She sighed. "Nowadays one has to do nearly everything oneself."

Lady Stubbs shrugged her shoulders.

"I think it is stupid. What is the good of being rich if one has to do everything oneself?"

"Some people find it fun," said Mrs. Folliat, smiling at her. "I do really. Not all things, but some. I like gardening myself and I like preparing for a festivity like this one tomorrow."

"It will be like a party?" asked Lady Stubbs hopefully.

"Just like a party—with lots and lots of people."

"Will it be like Ascot? With big hats and everyone very chic?"

"Well, not quite like Ascot," said Mrs. Folliat. She added gently, "But you must try and enjoy country things, Hattie. You should have helped us this morning, instead of staying in bed and not getting up until teatime."

"I had a headache," said Hattie sulkily. Then her mood changed and she smiled affectionately at Mrs. Folliat.

"But I will be good tomorrow. I will do everything you tell me."

"That's very sweet of you, dear."

"I've got a new dress to wear. It came this morning. Come upstairs with me and look at it."

Mrs. Folliat hesitated. Lady Stubbs rose to her feet and said insistently:

"You must come. Please. It is a lovely dress. Come now!"

"Oh, very well." Mrs. Folliat gave a half laugh and rose.

As she went out of the room, her small figure following Hattie's tall one, Poirot saw her face and was quite startled at the weariness on it which had replaced her smiling composure. It was as though, relaxed and off her guard for a moment, she no longer bothered to keep up the social mask. And yet—it seemed more than that. Perhaps she was suffering from some disease about which, like many women, she never spoke. She was not a person, he thought, who would care to invite pity or sympathy.

Captain Warburton dropped down in the chair Hattie Stubbs had just vacated. He, too, looked at the door through which the two women had just passed, but it was not of the older woman that he spoke. Instead he drawled, with a slight grin:

"Beautiful creature, isn't she?" He observed with the tail of his eye Sir George's exit through a french window with Mrs. Masterton and Mrs. Oliver in tow. "Bowled over old George Stubbs all right. Nothing's too good for her! Jewels, mink, all the rest of it. Whether he realizes she's a bit wanting in the top storey, I've never discovered. Probably thinks it doesn't matter. After all, these financial johnnies don't ask for intellectual companionship."

"What nationality is she?" Poirot asked curiously.

"Looks South American, I always think. But I believe she comes from the West Indies. One of those islands with sugar and rum and all that. One of the old families there—a creole, I don't mean a half-caste. All very intermarried, I believe, on these islands. Accounts for the mental deficiency."

Young Mrs. Legge came over to join them.

"Look here, Jim," she said, "you've got to be on my side. That tent's got to be where we all decided—on the far side of the lawn backing on the rhododendrons. It's the only possible place."

"Ma Masterton doesn't think so."

"Well, you've got to talk her out of it."

He gave her his foxy smile.

"Mrs. Masterton's my boss."

"Wilfred Masterton's your boss. He's the M.P."

"I dare say, but she should be. She's the one who wears the pants—and don't I know it."

Sir George reentered the window.

"Oh, there you are, Sally," he said. "We need you. You wouldn't think everyone could get het up over who butters the buns and who raffles a cake, and why the garden produce stall is where the fancy woollens was promised it should be. Where's Amy Folliat? She can deal with these people—about the only person who can."

"She went upstairs with Hattie."

"Oh, did she—?"

Sir George looked round in a vaguely helpless manner and Miss Brewis jumped up from where she was writing tickets, and said, "I'll fetch her for you, Sir George."

"Thank you, Amanda."

Miss Brewis went out of the room.

"Must get hold of some more wire fencing," murmured Sir George.

"For the fête?"

"No, no. To put up where we adjoin Hoodown Park in the woods. The old stuff's rotted away, and that's where they get through."

“Who get through?”

“Trespassers!” ejaculated Sir George.

Sally Legge said amusedly:

“You sound like Betsy Trotwood campaigning against donkeys.”

“Betsy Trotwood? Who’s she?” asked Sir George simply.

“Dickens.”

“Oh, Dickens. I read the Pickwick Papers once. Not bad. Not bad at all—surprised me. But, seriously, trespassers are a menace since they’ve started this Youth Hostel tomfoolery. They come out at you from everywhere wearing the most incredible shirts—boy this morning had one all covered with crawling turtles and things—made me think I’d been hitting the bottle or something. Half of them can’t speak English—just gibber at you…” He mimicked: “‘Oh, plees—yes, haf you—tell me—iss way to ferry?’ I say no, it isn’t, roar at them, and send them back where they’ve come from, but half the time they just blink and stare and don’t understand. And the girls giggle. All kinds of nationalities, Italian, Yugoslavian, Dutch, Finnish—Eskimos I shouldn’t be surprised! Half of them communists, I shouldn’t wonder,” he ended darkly.

“Come now, George, don’t get started on communists,” said Mrs. Legge. “I’ll come and help you deal with the rabid women.”

She led him out of the window and called over her shoulder: “Come on, Jim. Come and be torn to pieces in a good cause.”

“All right, but I want to put M. Poirot in the picture about the Murder Hunt since he’s going to present the prizes.”

“You can do that presently.”

“I will await you here,” said Poirot agreeably.

In the ensuing silence, Alec Legge stretched himself out in his chair and sighed.

“Women!” he said. “Like a swarm of bees.”

He turned his head to look out of the window.

“And what’s it all about? Some silly garden fête that doesn’t matter to anyone.”

“But obviously,” Poirot pointed out, “there are those to whom it does matter.”

“Why can’t people have some sense? Why can’t they think? Think of the mess the whole world has got itself into. Don’t they realize that the inhabitants of the globe are busy committing suicide?”

Poirot judged rightly that he was not intended to reply to this question. He merely shook his head doubtfully.

“Unless we can do something before it’s too late…” Alec Legge broke off. An angry look swept over his face. “Oh, yes,” he said, “I know what you’re thinking. That I’m nervy, neurotic—all the rest of it. Like those damned doctors. Advising rest and change and sea air. All right, Sally and I came down here and took the Mill Cottage for three months, and I’ve followed their prescription. I’ve fished and bathed and taken long walks and sunbathed—”

“I noticed that you had sunbathed, yes,” said Poirot politely.

“Oh, this?” Alec’s hand went to his sore face. “That’s the result of a fine English summer for once in a way. But what’s the good of it all? You can’t get away from facing truth just by running away from it.”

“No, it is never any good running away.”

“And being in a rural atmosphere like this just makes you realize things more keenly—that and the incredible apathy of the people of this country.

Even Sally, who's intelligent enough, is just the same. Why bother? That's what she says. It makes me mad! Why bother?"

"As a matter of interest, why do you?"

"Good God, you too?"

"No, it is not advice. It is just that I would like to know your answer."

"Don't you see, somebody's got to do something."

"And that somebody is you?"

"No, no, not me personally. One can't be personal in times like these."

"I do not see why not. Even in 'these times' as you call it, one is still a person."

"But one shouldn't be! In times of stress, when it's a matter of life or death, one can't think of one's own insignificant ills or preoccupations."

"I assure you, you are quite wrong. In the late war, during a severe air raid, I was much less preoccupied by the thought of death than of the pain from a corn on my little toe. It surprised me at the time that it should be so. 'Think,' I said to myself, 'at any moment now, death may come.' But I was still conscious of my corn—indeed, I felt injured that I should have that to suffer as well as the fear of death. It was because I might die that every small personal matter in my life acquired increased importance. I have seen a woman knocked down in a street accident, with a broken leg, and she has burst out crying because she sees that there is a ladder in her stocking."

"Which just shows you what fools women are!"

"It shows you what people are. It is, perhaps, that absorption in one's personal life that has led the human race to survive."

Alec Legge gave a scornful laugh.

"Sometimes," he said, "I think it's a pity they ever did."

“It is, you know,” Poirot persisted, “a form of humility. And humility is valuable. There was a slogan that was written up in your underground railways here, I remember, during the war. ‘It all depends on you.’ It was composed, I think, by some eminent divine—but in my opinion it was a dangerous and undesirable doctrine. For it is not true. Everything does not depend on, say, Mrs. Blank of Little-Blank-in-the-Marsh. And if she is led to think it does, it will not be good for her character. While she thinks of the part she can play in world affairs, the baby pulls over the kettle.”

“You are rather old-fashioned in your views, I think. Let’s hear what your slogan would be.”

“I do not need to formulate one of my own. There is an older one in this country which contents me very well.”

“What is that?”

“‘Put your trust in God, and keep your powder dry.’”

“Well, well…” Alec Legge seemed amused. “Most unexpected coming from you. Do you know what I should like to see done in this country?”

“Something, no doubt, forceful and unpleasant,” said Poirot, smiling.

Alec Legge remained serious.

“I should like to see every feeble-minded person put out—right out! Don’t let them breed. If, for one generation, only the intelligent were allowed to breed, think what the result would be.”

“A very large increase of patients in the psychiatric wards, perhaps,” said Poirot dryly. “One needs roots as well as flowers on a plant, Mr. Legge. However large and beautiful the flowers, if the earthy roots are destroyed there will be no more flowers.” He added in a conversational tone: “Would you consider Lady Stubbs a candidate for the lethal chamber?”

“Yes, indeed. What’s the good of a woman like that? What contribution has she ever made to society? Has she ever had an idea in her head that wasn’t of clothes or furs or jewels? As I say, what good is she?”

“You and I,” said Poirot blandly, “are certainly much more intelligent than Lady Stubbs. But”—he shook his head sadly—“it is true, I fear, that we are not nearly so ornamental.”

“Ornamental…” Alec was beginning with a fierce snort, but he was interrupted by the reentry of Mrs. Oliver and Captain Warburton through the window.

Four

“You must come and see the clues and things for the Murder Hunt, M. Poirot,” said Mrs. Oliver breathlessly.

Poirot rose and followed them obediently.

The three of them went across the hall and into a small room furnished plainly as a business office.

“Lethal weapons to your left,” observed Captain Warburton, waving his hand towards a small baize-covered card table. On it were laid out a small pistol, a piece of lead piping with a rusty sinister stain on it, a blue bottle labelled Poison, a length of clothesline and a hypodermic syringe.

“Those are the Weapons,” explained Mrs. Oliver, “and these are the Suspects.”

She handed him a printed card which he read with interest.

Suspects

Estelle Glynne — a beautiful and mysterious young woman, the guest of

Colonel Blunt — the local Squire, whose daughter

Joan — is married to

Peter Gaye — a young Atom Scientist.

Miss Willing — a housekeeper.

Quiett — a butler.

Maya Stavisky — a girl hiker.

Esteban Loyola — an uninvited guest.

Poirot blinked and looked towards Mrs. Oliver in mute incomprehension.

“A magnificent Cast of Characters,” he said politely. “But permit me to ask, Madame, what does the Competitor do?”

“Turn the card over,” said Captain Warburton.

Poirot did so.

On the other side was printed:

Name and address……………………………

Solution:

Name of Murderer:…………………………..

Weapon:………………………………….

Motive:…………………………………..

Time and Place:……………………………..

Reasons for arriving at your conclusions:…………….

“Everyone who enters gets one of these,” explained Captain Warburton rapidly. “Also a notebook and pencil for copying clues. There will be six clues. You go on from one to the other like a Treasure Hunt, and the weapons are concealed in suspicious places. Here’s the first clue. A snapshot. Everyone starts with one of these.”

Poirot took the small print from him and studied it with a frown. Then he turned it upside down. He still looked puzzled. Warburton laughed.

“Ingenious bit of trick photography, isn’t it?” he said complacently. “Quite simple once you know what it is.”

Poirot, who did not know what it was, felt a mounting annoyance.

“Some kind of barred window?” he suggested.

“Looks a bit like it, I admit. No, it’s a section of a tennis net.”

“Ah.” Poirot looked again at the snapshot. “Yes, it is as you say—quite obvious when you have been told what it is!”

“So much depends on how you look at a thing,” laughed Warburton.

“That is a very profound truth.”

“The second clue will be found in a box under the centre of the tennis net. In the box are this empty poison bottle—here, and a loose cork.”

“Only, you see,” said Mrs. Oliver rapidly, “it’s a screw-topped bottle, so the cork is really the clue.”

“I know, Madame, that you are always full of ingenuity, but I do not quite see—”

Mrs. Oliver interrupted him.

“Oh, but of course,” she said, “there’s a story. Like in a magazine serial—a synopsis.” She turned to Captain Warburton. “Have you got the leaflets?”

“They’ve not come from the printers yet.”

“But they promised!”

“I know. I know. Everyone always promises. They’ll be ready this evening at six. I’m going in to fetch them in the car.”

"Oh, good."

Mrs. Oliver gave a deep sigh and turned to Poirot.

"Well, I'll have to tell it you, then. Only I'm not very good at telling things. I mean if I write things, I get them perfectly clear, but if I talk, it always sounds the most frightful muddle; and that's why I never discuss my plots with anyone. I've learnt not to, because if I do, they just look at me blankly and say '—er—yes, but—I don't see what happened—and surely that can't possibly make a book.' So damping. And not true, because when I write it, it does!"

Mrs. Oliver paused for breath, and then went on:

"Well, it's like this. There's Peter Gaye who's a young Atom Scientist and he's suspected of being in the pay of the Communists, and he's married to this girl, Joan Blunt, and his first wife's dead, but she isn't, and she turns up because she's a secret agent, or perhaps not, I mean she may really be a hiker—and the wife's having an affair, and this man Loyola turns up either to meet Maya, or to spy upon her, and there's a blackmailing letter which might be from the housekeeper, or again it might be the butler, and the revolver's missing, and as you don't know who the blackmailing letter's to, and the hypodermic syringe fell out at dinner, and after that it disappeared…."

Mrs. Oliver came to a full stop, estimating correctly Poirot's reaction.

"I know," she said sympathetically. "It sounds just a muddle, but it isn't really—not in my head—and when you see the synopsis leaflet, you'll find it's quite clear.

"And, anyway," she ended, "the story doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, not to you. All you've got to do is to present the prizes—very nice prizes, the first's a silver cigarette case shaped like a revolver—and say how remarkably clever the solver has been."

Poirot thought to himself that the solver would indeed have been clever. In fact, he doubted very much that there would be a solver. The whole plot and action of the Murder Hunt seemed to him to be wrapped in impenetrable fog.

“Well,” said Captain Warburton cheerfully, glancing at his wristwatch, “I’d better be off to the printers and collect.”

Mrs. Oliver groaned.

“If they’re not done—”

“Oh, they’re done all right. I telephoned. So long.”

He left the room.

Mrs. Oliver immediately clutched Poirot by the arm and demanded in a hoarse whisper:

“Well?”

“Well—what?”

“Have you found out anything? Or spotted anybody?”

Poirot replied with mild reproof in his tones:

“Everybody and everything seems to me completely normal.”

“Normal?”

“Well, perhaps that is not quite the right word. Lady Stubbs, as you say, is definitely subnormal, and Mr. Legge would appear to be rather abnormal.”

“Oh, he’s all right,” said Mrs. Oliver impatiently. “He’s had a nervous breakdown.”

Poirot did not question the somewhat doubtful wording of this sentence but accepted it at its face value.

“Everybody appears to be in the expected state of nervous agitation, high excitement, general fatigue, and strong irritation, which are characteristic of preparations for this form of entertainment. If you could only indicate—”

“Sh!” Mrs. Oliver grasped his arm again. “Someone’s coming.”

It was just like a bad melodrama, Poirot felt, his own irritation mounting.

The pleasant mild face of Miss Brewis appeared round the door.

“Oh, there you are, M. Poirot. I’ve been looking for you to show you your room.”

She led him up the staircase and along a passage to a big airy room looking out over the river.

“There is a bathroom just opposite. Sir George talks of adding more bathrooms, but to do so would sadly impair the proportions of the rooms. I hope you’ll find everything quite comfortable.”

“Yes, indeed.” Poirot swept an appreciative eye over the small bookstand, the reading lamp and the box labelled “Biscuits” by the bedside. “You seem, in this house, to have everything organized to perfection. Am I to congratulate you, or my charming hostess?”

“Lady Stubbs’ time is fully taken up in being charming,” said Miss Brewis, a slightly acid note in her voice.

“A very decorative young woman,” mused Poirot.

“As you say.”

“But in other respects is she not, perhaps…” He broke off. “Pardon. I am indiscreet. I comment on something I ought not, perhaps, to mention.”

Miss Brewis gave him a steady look. She said dryly:

“Lady Stubbs knows perfectly well exactly what she is doing. Besides being, as you said, a very decorative young woman, she is also a very shrewd one."

She had turned away and left the room before Poirot's eyebrows had fully risen in surprise. So that was what the efficient Miss Brewis thought, was it? Or had she merely said so for some reason of her own? And why had she made such a statement to him—to a newcomer? Because he was a newcomer, perhaps? And also because he was a foreigner. As Hercule Poirot had discovered by experience, there were many English people who considered that what one said to foreigners didn't count!

He frowned perplexedly, staring absentmindedly at the door out of which Miss Brewis had gone. Then he strolled over to the window and stood looking out. As he did so, he saw Lady Stubbs come out of the house with Mrs. Folliat and they stood for a moment or two talking by the big magnolia tree. Then Mrs. Folliat nodded a good-bye, picked up her gardening basket and gloves and trotted off down the drive. Lady Stubbs stood watching her for a moment, then absentmindedly pulled off a magnolia flower, smelt it and began slowly to walk down the path that led through the trees to the river. She looked just once over her shoulder before she disappeared from sight. From behind the magnolia tree Michael Weyman came quietly into view, paused a moment irresolutely and then followed the tall slim figure down into the trees.

A good-looking and dynamic young man, Poirot thought. With a more attractive personality, no doubt, than that of Sir George Stubbs….

But if so, what of it? Such patterns formed themselves eternally through life. Rich middle-aged unattractive husband, young and beautiful wife with or without sufficient mental development, attractive and susceptible young man. What was there in that to make Mrs. Oliver utter a peremptory summons through the telephone? Mrs. Oliver, no doubt, had a vivid imagination, but….

"But after all," murmured Hercule Poirot to himself, "I am not a consultant in adultery—or in incipient adultery."

Could there really be anything in this extraordinary notion of Mrs. Oliver's that something was wrong? Mrs. Oliver was a singularly muddle-headed woman, and how she managed somehow or other to turn out coherent detective stories was beyond him, and yet, for all her muddle-headedness she often surprised him by her sudden perception of truth.

“The time is short—short,” he murmured to himself. “Is there something wrong here, as Mrs. Oliver believes? I am inclined to think there is. But what? Who is there who could enlighten me? I need to know more, much more, about the people in this house. Who is there who could inform me?”

After a moment’s reflection he seized his hat (Poirot never risked going out in the evening air with uncovered head), and hurried out of his room and down the stairs. He heard afar the dictatorial baying of Mrs. Masterton’s deep voice. Nearer at hand, Sir George’s voice rose with an amorous intonation.

“Damned becoming that yashmak thing. Wish I had you in my harem, Sally. I shall come and have my fortune told a good deal tomorrow. What’ll you tell me, eh?”

There was a slight scuffle and Sally Legge’s voice said breathlessly:

“George, you mustn’t.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows, and slipped out of a conveniently adjacent side door. He set off at top speed down a back drive which his sense of locality enabled him to predict would at some point join the front drive.

His manoeuvre was successful and enabled him—panting very slightly—to come up beside Mrs. Folliat and relieve her in a gallant manner of her gardening basket.

“You permit, Madame?”

“Oh, thank you, M. Poirot, that’s very kind of you. But it’s not heavy.”

“Allow me to carry it for you to your home. You live near here?”

“I actually live in the lodge by the front gate. Sir George very kindly rents it to me.”

The lodge by the front gate of her former home…How did she really feel about that, Poirot wondered. Her composure was so absolute that he had no clue to her feelings. He changed the subject by observing:

“Lady Stubbs is much younger than her husband, is she not?”

“Twenty-three years younger.”

“Physically she is very attractive.”

Mrs. Folliat said quietly:

“Hattie is a dear good child.”

It was not an answer he had expected. Mrs. Folliat went on:

“I know her very well, you see. For a short time she was under my care.”

“I did not know that.”

“How should you? It is in a way a sad story. Her people had estates, sugar estates, in the West Indies. As a result of an earthquake, the house there was burned down and her parents and brothers and sisters all lost their lives. Hattie herself was at a convent in Paris and was thus suddenly left without any near relatives. It was considered advisable by the executors that Hattie should be chaperoned and introduced into society after she had spent a certain time abroad. I accepted the charge of her.” Mrs. Folliat added with a dry smile: “I can smarten myself up on occasions and, naturally, I had the necessary connections—in fact, the late Governor had been a close friend of ours.”

“Naturally, Madame, I understand all that.”

“It suited me very well—I was going through a difficult time. My husband had died just before the outbreak of war. My elder son who was in the navy went down with his ship, my younger son, who had been out in Kenya, came back, joined the commandos and was killed in Italy. That meant three lots of death duties and this house had to be put up for sale. I myself was very badly off and I was glad of the distraction of having someone young to look after and travel about with. I became very fond of Hattie, all the more so, perhaps, because I soon realized that she was—shall we say—not fully capable of fending for herself? Understand me, M. Poirot, Hattie is not mentally deficient, but she is what country folk describe as ‘simple.’ She is easily imposed upon, overdocile, completely open to suggestion. I think myself that it was a blessing that there was practically no money. If she had been an heiress her position might have been one of much greater difficulty. She was attractive to men and being of an affectionate nature was easily attracted and influenced—she had definitely to be looked after. When, after the final winding up of her parents’ estate, it was discovered that the plantation was destroyed and there were more debts than assets, I could only be thankful that a man such as Sir George Stubbs had fallen in love with her and wanted to marry her.”

“Possibly—yes—it was a solution.”

“Sir George,” said Mrs. Folliat, “though he is a self-made man and—let us face it—a complete vulgarian, is kindly and fundamentally decent, besides being extremely wealthy. I don’t think he would ever ask for mental companionship from a wife, which is just as well. Hattie is everything he wants. She displays clothes and jewels to perfection, is affectionate and willing, and is completely happy with him. I confess that I am very thankful that that is so, for I admit that I deliberately influenced her to accept him. If it had turned out badly”—her voice faltered a little—“it would have been my fault for urging her to marry a man so many years older than herself. You see, as I told you, Hattie is completely suggestible. Anyone she is with at the time can dominate her.”

“It seems to me,” said Poirot approvingly, “that you made there a most prudent arrangement for her. I am not, like the English, romantic. To arrange a good marriage, one must take more than romance into consideration.”

He added:

“And as for this place here, Nasse House, it is a most beautiful spot. Quite, as the saying goes, out of this world.”

“Since Nasse had to be sold,” said Mrs. Folliat, with a faint tremor in her voice, “I am glad that Sir George bought it. It was requisitioned during the war by the Army and afterwards it might have been bought and made into a guest house or a school, the rooms cut up and partitioned, distorted out of their natural beauty. Our neighbours, the Fletchers, at Hoodown, had to sell their place and it is now a Youth Hostel. One is glad that young people should enjoy themselves—and fortunately Hoodown is late-Victorian, and of no great architectural merit, so that the alterations do not matter. I’m afraid some of the young people trespass on our grounds. It makes Sir George very angry. It’s true that they have occasionally damaged the rare shrubs by hacking them about—they come through here trying to get a shortcut to the ferry across the river.”

They were standing now by the front gate. The lodge, a small white one-storied building, lay a little back from the drive with a small railed garden round it.

Mrs. Folliat took back her basket from Poirot with a word of thanks.

“I was always very fond of the lodge,” she said, looking at it affectionately. “Merdle, our head gardener for thirty years, used to live there. I much prefer it to the top cottage, though that has been enlarged and modernized by Sir George. It had to be; we’ve got quite a young man now as head gardener, with a young wife—and these young women must have electric irons and modern cookers and television, and all that. One must go with the times…” She sighed. “There is hardly a person left now on the estate from the old days—all new faces.”

“I am glad, Madame,” said Poirot, “that you at least have found a haven.”

“You know those lines of Spenser’s? ‘Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas, ease after war, death after life, doth greatly please….’”

She paused and said without any change of tone: “It’s a very wicked world, M. Poirot. And there are very wicked people in the world. You probably know that as well as I do. I don’t say so before the younger people, it might discourage them, but it’s true…Yes, it’s a very wicked world….”

She gave him a little nod, then turned and went into the lodge. Poirot stood still, staring at the shut door.

Five

I

In a mood of exploration Poirot went through the front gates and down the steeply twisting road that presently emerged on a small quay. A large bell with a chain had a notice upon it: “Ring for the Ferry.” There were various boats moored by the side of the quay. A very old man with rheumy eyes, who had been leaning against a bollard, came shuffling towards Poirot.

“Du ee want the ferry, sir?”

“I thank you, no. I have just come down from Nasse House for a little walk.”

“Ah, ’tis up at Nasse yu are? Worked there as a boy, I did, and my son, he were head gardener there. But I did use to look after the boats. Old Squire Folliat, he was fair mazed about boats. Sail in all weathers, he would. The Major, now, his son, he didn’t care for sailing. Horses, that’s all he cared about. And a pretty packet went on ’em. That and the bottle—had a hard time with him, his wife did. Yu’ve seen her, maybe—lives at the Lodge now, she du.”

“Yes, I have just left her there now.”

“Her be a Folliat, tu, second cousin from over Tiverton way. A great one for the garden, she is, all them there flowering shrubs she had put in. Even when it was took over during the war, and the two young gentlemen was gone to the war, she still looked after they shrubs and kept ’em from being overrun.”

“It was hard on her, both her sons being killed.”

“Ah, she’ve had a hard life, she have, what with this and that. Trouble with her husband, and trouble with the young gentlemen, tu. Not Mr. Henry. He was as nice a young gentleman as yu could wish, took after his grandfather, fond of sailing and went into the Navy as a matter of course, but Mr. James, he caused her a lot of trouble. Debts and women it were, and then, tu, he were real wild in his temper. Born one of they as can't go straight. But the war suited him, as yu might say—give him his chance. Ah! There's many who can't go straight in peace who dies bravely in war."

"So now," said Poirot, "there are no more Folliats at Nasse."

The old man's flow of talk died abruptly.

"Just as yu say, sir."

Poirot looked curiously at the old man.

"Instead you have Sir George Stubbs. What is thought locally of him?"

"Us understands," said the old man, "that he be powerful rich."

His tone sounded dry and almost amused.

"And his wife?"

"Ah, she's a fine lady from London, she is. No use for gardens, not her. They du say, tu, as her du be wanting up here."

He tapped his temple significantly.

"Not as her isn't always very nice spoken and friendly. Just over a year they've been here. Bought the place and had it all done up like new. I remember as though 'twere yesterday them arriving. Arrived in the evening, they did, day after the worst gale as I ever remember. Trees down right and left—one down across the drive and us had to get it sawn away in a hurry to get the drive clear for the car. And the big oak up along, that come down and brought a lot of others down with it, made a rare mess, it did."

"Ah, yes, where the Folly stands now?"

The old man turned aside and spat disgustedly.

“Folly ’tis called and Folly ’tis—newfangled nonsense. Never was no Folly in the old Folliats’ time. Her ladyship’s idea that Folly was. Put up not three weeks after they first come, and I’ve no doubt she talked Sir George into it. Rare silly it looks stuck up there among the trees, like a heathen temple. A nice summerhouse now, made rustic like with stained glass. I’d have nothing against that.”

Poirot smiled faintly.

“The London ladies,” he said, “they must have their fancies. It is sad that the day of the Folliats is over.”

“Don’t ee never believe that, sir.” The old man gave a wheezy chuckle. “Always be Folliats at Nasse.”

“But the house belongs to Sir George Stubbs.”

“That’s as may be—but there’s still a Folliat here. Ah! Rare and cunning the Folliats are!”

“What do you mean?”

The old man gave him a sly sideways glance.

“Mrs. Folliat be living up tu Lodge, bain’t she?” he demanded.

“Yes,” said Poirot slowly. “Mrs. Folliat is living at the Lodge and the world is very wicked, and all the people in it are very wicked.”

The old man stared at him.

“Ah,” he said. “Yu’ve got something there, maybe.”

He shuffled away again.

“But what have I got?” Poirot asked himself with irritation as he slowly walked up the hill back to the house.

II

Hercule Poirot made a meticulous toilet, applying a scented pomade to his moustaches and twirling them to a ferocious couple of points. He stood back from the mirror and was satisfied with what he saw.

The sound of a gong resounded through the house, and he descended the stairs.

The butler, having finished a most artistic performance, crescendo, forte, diminuendo, rallentando, was just replacing the gong stick on its hook. His dark melancholy face showed pleasure.

Poirot thought to himself: "A blackmailing letter from the housekeeper—or it may be the butler…" This butler looked as though blackmailing letters would be well within his scope. Poirot wondered if Mrs. Oliver took her characters from life.

Miss Brewis crossed the hall in an unbecoming flowered chiffon dress and he caught up with her, asking as he did so:

"You have a housekeeper here?"

"Oh, no, M. Poirot. I'm afraid one doesn't run to niceties of that kind nowadays, except in a really large establishment, of course. Oh, no, I'm the housekeeper—more housekeeper than secretary, sometimes, in this house."

She gave a short acid laugh.

"So you are the housekeeper?" Poirot considered her thoughtfully.

He could not see Miss Brewis writing a blackmailing letter. Now, an anonymous letter—that would be a different thing. He had known anonymous letters written by women not unlike Miss Brewis—solid, dependable women, totally unsuspected by those around them.

"What is your butler's name?" he asked.

"Henden." Miss Brewis looked a little astonished.

Poirot recollected himself and explained quickly:

“I ask because I had a fancy I had seen him somewhere before.”

“Very likely,” said Miss Brewis. “None of these people ever seem to stay in any place more than four months. They must soon have done the round of all the available situations in England. After all, it’s not many people who can afford butlers and cooks nowadays.”

They came into the drawing room, where Sir George, looking somehow rather unnatural in a dinner jacket, was proffering sherry. Mrs. Oliver, in iron-grey satin, was looking like an obsolete battleship, and Lady Stubbs’ smooth black head was bent down as she studied the fashions in Vogue.

Alec and Sally Legge were dining and also Jim Warburton.

“We’ve a heavy evening ahead of us,” he warned them. “No bridge tonight. All hands to the pumps. There are any amount of notices to print, and the big card for the Fortune Telling. What name shall we have? Madame Zuleika? Esmeralda? Or Romany Leigh, the Gipsy Queen?”

“The Eastern touch,” said Sally. “Everyone in agricultural districts hates gipsies. Zuleika sounds all right. I brought my paint box over and I thought Michael could do us a curling snake to ornament the notice.”

“Cleopatra rather than Zuleika, then?”

Henden appeared at the door.

“Dinner is served, my lady.”

They went in. There were candles on the long table. The room was full of shadows.

Warburton and Alec Legge sat on either side of their hostess. Poirot was between Mrs. Oliver and Miss Brewis. The latter was engaged in brisk general conversation about further details of preparation for tomorrow.

Mrs. Oliver sat in brooding abstraction and hardly spoke.

When she did at last break her silence, it was with a somewhat contradictory explanation.

“Don’t bother about me,” she said to Poirot. “I’m just remembering if there’s anything I’ve forgotten.”

Sir George laughed heartily.

“The fatal flaw, eh?” he remarked.

“That’s just it,” said Mrs. Oliver. “There always is one. Sometimes one doesn’t realize it until a book’s actually in print. And then it’s agony!” Her face reflected this emotion. She sighed. “The curious thing is that most people never notice it. I say to myself, ‘But of course the cook would have been bound to notice that two cutlets hadn’t been eaten.’ But nobody else thinks of it at all.”

“You fascinate me.” Michael Weyman leant across the table. “The Mystery of the Second Cutlet. Please, please never explain. I shall wonder about it in my bath.”

Mrs. Oliver gave him an abstracted smile and relapsed into her preoccupations.

Lady Stubbs was also silent. Now and again she yawned. Warburton, Alec Legge and Miss Brewis talked across her.

As they came out of the dining room, Lady Stubbs stopped by the stairs.

“I’m going to bed,” she announced. “I’m very sleepy.”

“Oh, Lady Stubbs,” exclaimed Miss Brewis, “there’s so much to be done. We’ve been counting on you to help us.”

“Yes, I know,” said Lady Stubbs. “But I’m going to bed.”

She spoke with the satisfaction of a small child.

She turned her head as Sir George came out of the dining room.

“I’m tired, George. I’m going to bed. You don’t mind?”

He came up to her and patted her on the shoulder affectionately.

“You go and get your beauty sleep, Hattie. Be fresh for tomorrow.”

He kissed her lightly and she went up the stairs, waving her hand and calling out:

“Goodnight, all.”

Sir George smiled up at her. Miss Brewis drew in her breath sharply and turned brusquely away.

“Come along, everybody,” she said, with a forced cheerfulness that did not ring true. “We’ve got to work.”

Presently everyone was set to their tasks. Since Miss Brewis could not be everywhere at once, there were soon some defaulters. Michael Weyman ornamented a placard with a ferociously magnificent serpent and the words, Madame Zuleika will tell your Fortune, and then vanished unobtrusively. Alec Legge did a few nondescript chores and then went out avowedly to measure for the hoopla and did not reappear. The women, as women do, worked energetically and conscientiously. Hercule Poirot followed his hostess’s example and went early to bed.

III

Poirot came down to breakfast on the following morning at nine-thirty. Breakfast was served in pre-war fashion. A row of hot dishes on an electric heater. Sir George was eating a full-sized Englishman’s breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon and kidneys. Mrs. Oliver and Miss Brewis had a modified version of the same. Michael Weyman was eating a plateful of cold ham. Only Lady Stubbs was unheedful of the fleshpots and was nibbling thin toast and sipping black coffee. She was wearing a large pale-pink hat which looked odd at the breakfast table.

The post had just arrived. Miss Brewis had an enormous pile of letters in front of her which she was rapidly sorting into piles. Any of Sir George's marked "Personal" she passed over to him. The others she opened herself and sorted into categories.

Lady Stubbs had three letters. She opened what were clearly a couple of bills and tossed them aside. Then she opened the third letter and said suddenly and clearly:

"Oh!"

The exclamation was so startled that all heads turned towards her.

"It's from Etienne," she said. "My cousin Etienne. He's coming here in a yacht."

"Let's see, Hattie." Sir George held out his hand. She passed the letter down the table. He smoothed out the sheet and read.

"Who's this Etienne de Sousa? A cousin, you say?"

"I think so. A second cousin. I do not remember him very well—hardly at all. He was—"

"Yes, my dear?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It does not matter. It is all a long time ago. I was a little girl."

"I suppose you wouldn't remember him very well. But we must make him welcome, of course," said Sir George heartily. "Pity in a way it's the fête today, but we'll ask him to dinner. Perhaps we could put him up for a night or two—show him something of the country?"

Sir George was being the hearty country squire.

Lady Stubbs said nothing. She stared down into her coffee cup.

Conversation on the inevitable subject of the fête became general. Only Poirot remained detached, watching the slim exotic figure at the head of the table. He wondered just what was going on in her mind. At that very moment her eyes came up and cast a swift glance along the table to where he sat. It was a look so shrewd and appraising that he was startled. As their eyes met, the shrewd expression vanished—emptiness returned. But that other look had been there, cold, calculating, watchful….

Or had he imagined it? In any case, wasn’t it true that people who were slightly mentally deficient very often had a kind of sly native cunning that sometimes surprised even the people who knew them best?

He thought to himself that Lady Stubbs was certainly an enigma. People seemed to hold diametrically opposite ideas concerning her. Miss Brewis had intimated that Lady Stubbs knew very well what she was doing. Yet Mrs. Oliver definitely thought her half-witted, and Mrs. Folliat who had known her long and intimately had spoken of her as someone not quite normal, who needed care and watchfulness.

Miss Brewis was probably prejudiced. She disliked Lady Stubbs for her indolence and her aloofness. Poirot wondered if Miss Brewis had been Sir George’s secretary prior to his marriage. If so, she might easily resent the coming of the new régime.

Poirot himself would have agreed wholeheartedly with Mrs. Folliat and Mrs. Oliver—until this morning. And, after all, could he really rely on what had been only a fleeting impression?

Lady Stubbs got up abruptly from the table.

“I have a headache,” she said. “I shall go and lie down in my room.”

Sir George sprang up anxiously.

“My dear girl. You’re all right, aren’t you?”

“It’s just a headache.”

“You’ll be fit enough for this afternoon, won’t you?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Take some aspirin, Lady Stubbs,” said Miss Brewis briskly. “Have you got some or shall I bring it to you?”

“I’ve got some.”

She moved towards the door. As she went she dropped the handkerchief she had been squeezing between her fingers. Poirot, moving quietly forward, picked it up unobtrusively.

Sir George, about to follow his wife, was stopped by Miss Brewis.

“About the parking of cars this afternoon, Sir George. I’m just going to give Mitchell instructions. Do you think that the best plan would be, as you said—?”

Poirot, going out of the room, heard no more.

He caught up his hostess on the stairs.

“Madame, you dropped this.”

He proffered the handkerchief with a bow.

She took it unheedingly.

“Did I? Thank you.”

“I am most distressed, Madame, that you should be suffering. Particularly when your cousin is coming.”

She answered quickly, almost violently.

“I don’t want to see Etienne. I don’t like him. He’s bad. He was always bad. I’m afraid of him. He does bad things.”

The door of the dining room opened and Sir George came across the hall and up the stairs.

"Hattie, my poor darling. Let me come and tuck you up."

They went up the stairs together, his arm round her tenderly, his face worried and absorbed.

Poirot looked up after them, then turned to encounter Miss Brewis moving fast, and clasping papers.

"Lady Stubbs' headache—" he began.

"No more headache than my foot," said Miss Brewis crossly, and disappeared into her office, closing the door behind her.

Poirot sighed and went out through the front door on to the terrace. Mrs. Masterton had just driven up in a small car and was directing the elevation of a tea marquee, baying out orders in rich full-blooded tones.

She turned to greet Poirot.

"Such a nuisance, these affairs," she observed. "And they will always put everything in the wrong place. No, Rogers! More to the left—left—not right! What do you think of the weather, M. Poirot? Looks doubtful to me. Rain, of course, would spoil everything. And we've had such a fine summer this year for a change. Where's Sir George? I want to talk to him about car parking."

"His wife had a headache and has gone to lie down."

"She'll be all right this afternoon," said Mrs. Masterton confidently. "Likes functions, you know. She'll make a terrific toilet and be as pleased about it as a child. Just fetch me a bundle of those pegs over there, will you? I want to mark the places for the clock golf numbers."

Poirot, thus pressed into service, was worked by Mrs. Masterton relentlessly, as a useful apprentice. She condescended to talk to him in the intervals of hard labour.

“Got to do everything yourself, I find. Only way…By the way, you’re a friend of the Eliots, I believe?”

Poirot, after his long sojourn in England, comprehended that this was an indication of social recognition. Mrs. Masterton was in fact saying: “Although a foreigner, I understand you are One of Us.” She continued to chat in an intimate manner.

“Nice to have Nasse lived in again. We were all so afraid it was going to be a hotel. You know what it is nowadays; one drives through the country and passes place after place with the board up ‘Guest House’ or ‘Private Hotel’ or ‘Hotel A.A. Fully Licensed.’ All the houses one stayed in as a girl—or where one went to dances. Very sad. Yes, I’m glad about Nasse and so is poor dear Amy Folliat, of course. She’s had such a hard life—but never complains, I will say. Sir George has done wonders for Nasse—and not vulgarized it. Don’t know whether that’s the result of Amy Folliat’s influence—or whether it’s his own natural good taste. He has got quite good taste, you know. Very surprising in a man like that.”

“He is not, I understand, one of the landed gentry?” said Poirot cautiously.

“He isn’t even really Sir George—was christened it, I understand. Took the idea from Lord George Sanger’s Circus, I suspect. Very amusing really. Of course we never let on. Rich men must be allowed their little snobberies, don’t you agree? The funny thing is that in spite of his origins George Stubbs would go down perfectly well anywhere. He’s a throwback. Pure type of the eighteenth-century country squire. Good blood in him, I’d say. Father a gent and mother a barmaid, is my guess.”

Mrs. Masterton interrupted herself to yell to a gardener.

“Not by that rhododendron. You must leave room for the skittles over to the right. Right—not left!”

She went on: “Extraordinary how they can’t tell their left from their right. The Brewis woman is efficient. Doesn’t like poor Hattie, though. Looks at her sometimes as though she’d like to murder her. So many of these good secretaries are in love with their boss. Now where do you think Jim

Warburton can have got to? Silly the way he sticks to calling himself 'Captain.' Not a regular soldier and never within miles of a German. One has to put up, of course, with what one can get these days—and he's a hard worker—but I feel there's something rather fishy about him. Ah! Here are the Legges."

Sally Legge, dressed in slacks and a yellow pullover, said brightly:

"We've come to help."

"Lots to do," boomed Mrs. Masterton. "Now, let me see…"

Poirot, profiting by her inattention, slipped away. As he came round the corner of the house on to the front terrace he became a spectator of a new drama.

Two young women, in shorts, with bright blouses, had come out from the wood and were standing uncertainly looking up at the house. In one of them he thought he recognized the Italian girl of yesterday's lift in the car. From the window of Lady Stubbs' bedroom Sir George leaned out and addressed them wrathfully.

"You're trespassing," he shouted.

"Please?" said the young woman with the green headscarf.

"You can't come through here. Private."

The other young woman, who had a royal blue headscarf, said brightly:

"Please? Nassecombe Quay…" She pronounced it carefully. "It is this way? Please."

"You're trespassing," bellowed Sir George.

"Please?"

"Trespassing! No way through. You've got to go back. BACK! The way you came."

They stared as he gesticulated. Then they consulted together in a flood of foreign speech. Finally, doubtfully, blue-scarf said:

“Back? To Hostel?”

“That’s right. And you take the road—road round that way.”

They retreated unwillingly. Sir George mopped his brow and looked down at Poirot.

“Spend my time turning people off,” he said. “Used to come through the top gate. I’ve padlocked that. Now they come through the woods, having got over the fence. Think they can get down to the shore and the quay easily this way. Well, they can, of course, much quicker. But there’s no right of way—never has been. And they’re practically all foreigners—don’t understand what you say, and just jabber back at you in Dutch or something.”

“Of these, one is German and the other Italian, I think—I saw the Italian girl on her way from the station yesterday.”

“Every kind of language they talk…Yes, Hattie? What did you say?” He drew back into the room.

Poirot turned to find Mrs. Oliver and a well-developed girl of fourteen dressed in Guide uniform close behind him.

“This is Marlene,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Marlene giggled.

“I’m the horrible Corpse,” she said. “But I’m not going to have any blood on me.” Her tone expressed disappointment.

“No?”

“No. Just strangled with a cord, that’s all. I’d of liked to be stabbed—and have lashings of red paint.”

“Captain Warburton thought it might look too realistic,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“In a murder I think you ought to have blood,” said Marlene sulkily. She looked at Poirot with hungry interest. “Seen lots of murders, haven’t you? So she says.”

“One or two,” said Poirot modestly.

He observed with alarm that Mrs. Oliver was leaving them.

“Any sex maniacs?” asked Marlene with avidity.

“Certainly not.”

“I like sex maniacs,” said Marlene with relish. “Reading about them, I mean.”

“You would probably not like meeting one.”

“Oh, I dunno. D’you know what? I believe we’ve got a sex maniac round here. My granddad saw a body in the woods once. He was scared and ran away, and when he come back it was gone. It was a woman’s body. But of course he’s batty, my granddad is, so no one listens to what he says.”

Poirot managed to escape and, regaining the house by a circuitous route, took refuge in his bedroom. He felt in need of repose.

Six

Lunch was an early and quickly snatched affair of a cold buffet. At two-thirty a minor film star was to open the fête. The weather, after looking ominously like rain, began to improve. By three o'clock the fête was in full swing. People were paying the admission charge of half a crown in large numbers, and cars were lining one side of the long drive. Students from the Youth Hostel arrived in batches conversing loudly in foreign tongues. True to Mrs. Masterton's forecast, Lady Stubbs had emerged from her bedroom just before half past two, dressed in a cyclamen dress with an enormous coolie-shaped hat of black straw. She wore large quantities of diamonds.

Miss Brewis murmured sardonically:

"Thinks it's the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, evidently!"

But Poirot complimented her gravely.

"It is a beautiful creation that you have on, Madame."

"It is nice, isn't it," said Hattie happily. "I wore it for Ascot."

The minor film star was arriving and Hattie moved forward to greet her.

Poirot retreated into the background. He wandered around disconsolately—everything seemed to be proceeding in the normal fashion of fêtes. There was a coconut shy, presided over by Sir George in his heartiest fashion, a skittle alley and a hoopla. There were various "stalls" displaying local produce of fruit, vegetables, jams and cakes—and others displaying "fancy objects." There were "raffles" of cakes, of baskets of fruit; even, it seemed, of a pig; and a "Lucky Dip" for children at twopence a go.

There was a good crowd of people by now and an Exhibition of Children's Dancing began. Poirot saw no sign of Mrs. Oliver, but Lady Stubbs' cyclamen pink figure showed up amongst the crowd as she drifted rather vaguely about. The focus of attention, however, seemed to be Mrs. Folliat. She was quite transformed in appearance—wearing a hydrangea-blue foulard frock and a smart grey hat, she appeared to preside over the proceedings, greeting new arrivals, and directing people to the various side shows.

Poirot lingered near her and listened to some of the conversations.

“Amy, my dear, how are you?”

“Oh, Pamela, how nice of you and Edward to come. Such a long way from Tiverton.”

“The weather’s held for you. Remember the year before the war? Cloudburst came down about four o’clock. Ruined the whole show.”

“But it’s been a wonderful summer this year. Dorothy! It’s ages since I’ve seen you.”

“We felt we had to come and see Nasse in its glory. I see you’ve cut back the berberis on the bank.”

“Yes, it shows the hydrangeas better, don’t you think?”

“How wonderful they are. What a blue! But, my dear, you’ve done wonders in the last year. Nasse is really beginning to look like itself again.”

Dorothy’s husband boomed in a deep voice:

“Came over to see the commandant here during the war. Nearly broke my heart.”

Mrs. Folliat turned to greet a humbler visitor.

“Mrs. Knapper, I am pleased to see you. Is this Lucy? How she’s grown!”

“She’ll be leaving school next year. Pleased to see you looking so well, ma’am.”

“I’m very well, thank you. You must go and try your luck at hoopla, Lucy. See you in the tea tent later, Mrs. Knapper. I shall be helping with the teas.”

An elderly man, presumably Mr. Knapper, said diffidently:

“Pleased to have you back at Nasse, ma’am. Seems like old times.”

Mrs. Folliat’s response was drowned as two women and a big beefy man rushed towards her.

“Amy, dear, such ages. This looks the greatest success! Do tell me what you’ve done about the rose garden. Muriel told me that you’re restocking it with all the new floribundas.”

The beefy man chipped in.

“Where’s Marylin Gale—?”

“Reggie’s just dying to meet her. He saw her last picture.”

“That her in the big hat? My word, that’s some getup.”

“Don’t be stupid, darling. That’s Hattie Stubbs. You know, Amy, you really shouldn’t let her go round quite so like a mannequin.”

“Amy?” Another friend claimed attention. “This is Roger, Edward’s boy. My dear, so nice to have you back at Nasse.”

Poirot moved slowly away and absentmindedly invested a shilling on a ticket that might win him the pig.

He heard faintly still, the “So good of you to come” refrain from behind him. He wondered whether Mrs. Folliat realized how completely she had slipped into the role of hostess or whether it was entirely unconscious. She was, very definitely this afternoon, Mrs. Folliat of Nasse House.

He was standing by the tent labelled “Madame Zuleika will tell your Fortune for 2s. 6d.” Teas had just begun to be served and there was no longer a queue for the fortune telling. Poirot bowed his head, entered the tent and paid over his half crown willingly for the privilege of sinking into a chair and resting his aching feet.

Madame Zuleika was wearing flowing black robes, a gold tinsel scarf wound round her head and a veil across the lower half of her face which slightly muffled her remarks. A gold bracelet hung with lucky charms tinkled as she took Poirot's hand and gave him a rapid reading, agreeably full of money to come, success with a dark beauty and a miraculous escape from an accident.

"It is very agreeable all that you tell me, Madame Legge. I only wish that it could come true."

"Oh!" said Sally. "So you know me, do you?"

"I had advance information—Mrs. Oliver told me that you were originally to be the 'victim,' but that you had been snatched from her for the Occult."

"I wish I was being the 'body,'" said Sally. "Much more peaceful. All Jim Warburton's fault. Is it four o'clock yet? I want my tea. I'm off duty from four to half past."

"Ten minutes to go, still," said Poirot, consulting his large old-fashioned watch. "Shall I bring you a cup of tea here?"

"No, no. I want the break. This tent is stifling. Are there a lot of people waiting still?"

"No. I think they are lining up for tea."

"Good."

Poirot emerged from the tent and was immediately challenged by a determined woman and made to pay sixpence and guess the weight of a cake.

A hoopla stall presided over by a fat motherly woman urged him to try his luck and, much to his discomfiture, he immediately won a large Kewpie doll. Walking sheepishly along with this he encountered Michael Weyman who was standing gloomily on the outskirts near the top of a path that led down to the quay.

“You seem to have been enjoying yourself, M. Poirot,” he said, with a sardonic grin.

Poirot contemplated his prize.

“It is truly horrible, is it not?” he said sadly.

A small child near him suddenly burst out crying. Poirot stooped swiftly and tucked the doll into the child’s arm.

“Voilà, it is for you.”

The tears ceased abruptly.

“There—Violet—isn’t the gentleman kind? Say, Ta, ever so—”

“Children’s Fancy Dress,” called out Captain Warburton through a megaphone. “The first class—three to five. Form up, please.”

Poirot moved towards the house and was cannoned into by a young man who was stepping backwards to take a better aim at a coconut. The young man scowled and Poirot apologized, mechanically, his eye held fascinated by the varied pattern of the young man’s shirt. He recognized it as the “turtle’ shirt of Sir George’s description. Every kind of turtle, tortoise and sea monster appeared to be writhing and crawling over it.

Poirot blinked and was accosted by the Dutch girl to whom he had given a lift the day before.

“So you have come to the fête,” he said. “And your friend?”

“Oh, yes, she, too, comes here this afternoon. I have not seen her yet, but we shall leave together by the bus that goes from the gates at five-fifteen. We go to Torquay and there I change to another bus for Plymouth. It is convenient.”

This explained what had puzzled Poirot, the fact that the Dutch girl was perspiring under the weight of a rucksack.

He said: “I saw your friend this morning.”

“Oh, yes, Elsa, a German girl, was with her and she told me they had tried to get through woods to the river and quay. And the gentleman who owns the house was very angry and made them go back.”

She added, turning her head to where Sir George was urging competitors on at the coconut shy:

“But now—this afternoon, he is very polite.”

Poirot considered explaining that there was a difference between young women who were trespassers and the same young women when they had paid two shillings and sixpence entrance fee and were legally entitled to sample the delights of Nasse House and its grounds. But Captain Warburton and his megaphone bore down upon him. The Captain was looking hot and bothered.

“Have you seen Lady Stubbs, Poirot? Anyone seen Lady Stubbs? She’s supposed to be judging this Fancy Dress business and I can’t find her anywhere.”

“I saw her, let me see—oh, about half an hour ago. But then I went to have my fortune told.”

“Curse the woman,” said Warburton angrily. “Where can she have disappeared to? The children are waiting and we’re behind schedule as it is.”

He looked round.

“Where’s Amanda Brewis?”

Miss Brewis, also, was not in evidence.

“It really is too bad,” said Warburton. “One’s got to have some cooperation if one’s trying to run a show. Where can Hattie be? Perhaps she’s gone into the house.”

He strode off rapidly.

Poirot edged his way towards the roped-off space where teas were being served in a large marquee, but there was a long queue waiting and he decided against it.

He inspected the Fancy Goods stall where a determined old lady very nearly managed to sell him a plastic collar box, and finally made his way round the outskirts to a place where he could contemplate the activity from a safe distance.

He wondered where Mrs. Oliver was.

Footsteps behind him made him turn his head. A young man was coming up the path from the quay; a very dark young man, faultlessly attired in yachting costume. He paused as though disconcerted by the scene before him.

Then he spoke hesitatingly to Poirot.

“You will excuse me. Is this the house of Sir George Stubbs?”

“It is indeed.” Poirot paused and then hazarded a guess. “Are you, perhaps, the cousin of Lady Stubbs?”

“I am Etienne de Sousa—”

“My name is Hercule Poirot.”

They bowed to each other. Poirot explained the circumstances of the fête. As he finished, Sir George came across the lawn towards them from the coconut shy.

“De Sousa? Delighted to see you. Hattie got your letter this morning. Where’s your yacht?”

“It is moored at Helmmouth. I came up the river to the quay here in my launch.”

"We must find Hattie. She's somewhere about…You'll dine with us this evening, I hope?"

"You are most kind."

"Can we put you up?"

"That also is most kind, but I will sleep on my yacht. It is easier so."

"Are you staying here long?"

"Two or three days, perhaps. It depends." De Sousa shrugged elegant shoulders.

"Hattie will be delighted, I'm sure," said Sir George politely. "Where is she? I saw her not long ago."

He looked round in a perplexed manner.

"She ought to be judging the children's fancy dress. I can't understand it. Excuse me a moment. I'll ask Miss Brewis."

He hurried off. De Sousa looked after him. Poirot looked at de Sousa.

"It is some little time since you last saw your cousin?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I have not seen her since she was fifteen years old. Soon after that she was sent abroad—to school at a convent in France. As a child she promised to have good looks."

He looked inquiringly at Poirot.

"She is a beautiful woman," said Poirot.

"And that is her husband? He seems what they call 'a good fellow,' but not perhaps very polished? Still, for Hattie it might be perhaps a little difficult to find a suitable husband."

Poirot remained with a politely inquiring expression on his face. The other laughed.

“Oh, it is no secret. At fifteen Hattie was mentally undeveloped. Feebleminded, do you not call it? She is still the same?”

“It would seem so—yes,” said Poirot cautiously.

De Sousa shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah, well! Why should one ask it of women—that they should be intelligent? It is not necessary.”

Sir George was back, fuming. Miss Brewis was with him, speaking rather breathlessly.

“I’ve no idea where she is, Sir George. I saw her over by the fortune teller’s tent last. But that was at least twenty minutes or half an hour ago. She’s not in the house.”

“Is it not possible,” asked Poirot, “that she has gone to observe the progress of Mrs. Oliver’s murder hunt?”

Sir George’s brow cleared.

“That’s probably it. Look here, I can’t leave the shows here. I’m in charge. And Amanda’s got her hands full. Could you possibly have a look round, Poirot? You know the course.”

But Poirot did not know the course. However, an inquiry of Miss Brewis gave him rough guidance. Miss Brewis took brisk charge of de Sousa and Poirot went off murmuring to himself, like an incantation: “Tennis Court, Camellia Garden, The Folly, Upper Nursery Garden, Boathouse….”

As he passed the coconut shy he was amused to notice Sir George proffering wooden balls with a dazzling smile of welcome to the same young Italian woman whom he had driven off that morning and who was clearly puzzled at his change of attitude.

He went on his way to the tennis court. But there was no one there but an old gentleman of military aspect who was fast asleep on a garden seat with his hat pulled over his eyes. Poirot retraced his steps to the house and went on down to the camellia garden.

In the camellia garden Poirot found Mrs. Oliver dressed in purple splendour, sitting on a garden seat in a brooding attitude, and looking rather like Mrs. Siddons. She beckoned him to the seat beside her.

“This is only the second clue,” she hissed. “I think I’ve made them too difficult. Nobody’s come yet.”

At this moment a young man in shorts, with a prominent Adam’s apple, entered the garden. With a cry of satisfaction he hurried to a tree in one corner and a further satisfied cry announced his discovery of the next clue. Passing them, he felt impelled to communicate his satisfaction.

“Lots of people don’t know about cork trees,” he said confidentially. “Clever photograph, the first clue, but I spotted what it was—section of a tennis net. There was a poison bottle, empty, and a cork. Most of ’em will go all out after the bottle clue—I guessed it was a red herring. Very delicate, cork trees, only hardy in this part of the world. I’m interested in rare shrubs and trees. Now where does one go, I wonder?”

He frowned over the entry in the notebook he carried.

“I’ve copied the next clue but it doesn’t seem to make sense.” He eyed them suspiciously. “You competing?”

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Oliver. “We’re just—looking on.”

“Righty-ho…‘When lovely woman stoops to folly.’…I’ve an idea I’ve heard that somewhere.”

“It is a well-known quotation,” said Poirot.

“A Folly can also be a building,” said Mrs. Oliver helpfully. “White—with pillars,” she added.

"That's an idea! Thanks a lot. They say Mrs. Ariadne Oliver is down here herself somewhere about. I'd like to get her autograph. You haven't seen her about, have you?"

"No," said Mrs. Oliver firmly.

"I'd like to meet her. Good yarns she writes." He lowered his voice. "But they say she drinks like a fish."

He hurried off and Mrs. Oliver said indignantly:

"Really! That's most unfair when I only like lemonade!"

"And have you not just perpetrated the greatest unfairness in helping that young man towards the next clue?"

"Considering he's the only one who's got here so far, I thought he ought to be encouraged."

"But you wouldn't give him your autograph."

"That's different," said Mrs. Oliver. "Sh! Here come some more."

But these were not clue hunters. They were two women who having paid for admittance were determined to get their money's worth by seeing the grounds thoroughly.

They were hot and dissatisfied.

"You'd think they'd have some nice flower beds," said one to the other. "Nothing but trees and more trees. It's not what I call a garden."

Mrs. Oliver nudged Poirot, and they slipped quietly away.

"Supposing," said Mrs. Oliver distractedly, "that nobody ever finds my body?"

"Patience, Madame, and courage," said Poirot. "The afternoon is still young."

"That's true," said Mrs. Oliver, brightening. "And it's half-price admission after four-thirty, so probably lots of people will flock in. Let's go and see how that Marlene child is getting on. I don't really trust that girl, you know. No sense of responsibility. I wouldn't put it past her to sneak away quietly, instead of being a corpse, and go and have tea. You know what people are like about their teas."

They proceeded amicably along the woodland path and Poirot commented on the geography of the property.

"I find it very confusing," he said. "So many paths, and one is never sure where they lead. And trees, trees everywhere."

"You sound like that disgruntled woman we've just left."

They passed the Folly and zigzagged down the path to the river. The outlines of the boathouse showed beneath them.

Poirot remarked that it would be awkward if the murder searchers were to light upon the boathouse and find the body by accident.

"A sort of short cut? I thought of that. That's why the last clue is just a key. You can't unlock the door without it. It's a Yale. You can only open it from the inside."

A short steep slope led down to the door of the boathouse which was built out over the river, with a little wharf and a storage place for boats underneath. Mrs. Oliver took a key from a pocket concealed amongst her purple folds and unlocked the door.

"We've just come to cheer you up, Marlene," she said brightly as she entered.

She felt slightly remorseful at her unjust suspicions of Marlene's loyalty, for Marlene, artistically arranged as "the body," was playing her part nobly, sprawled on the floor by the window.

Marlene made no response. She lay quite motionless. The wind blowing gently through the open window rustled a pile of “comics” spread out on the table.

“It’s all right,” said Mrs. Oliver impatiently. “It’s only me and M. Poirot. Nobody’s got any distance with the clues yet.”

Poirot was frowning. Very gently he pushed Mrs. Oliver aside and went and bent over the girl on the floor. A suppressed exclamation came from his lips. He looked up at Mrs. Oliver.

“So…” he said. “That which you expected has happened.”

“You don’t mean…” Mrs. Oliver’s eyes widened in horror. She grasped for one of the basket chairs and sat down. “You can’t mean…She isn’t dead?”

Poirot nodded.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “She is dead. Though not very long dead.”

“But how—?”

He lifted the corner of the gay scarf bound round the girl’s head, so that Mrs. Oliver could see the ends of the clothesline.

“Just like my murder,” said Mrs. Oliver unsteadily. “But who? And why?”

“That is the question,” said Poirot.

He forebore to add that those had also been her questions.

And that the answers to them could not be her answers, since the victim was not the Yugoslavian first wife of an Atom Scientist, but Marlene Tucker, a fourteen-year-old village girl who, as far as was known, had not an enemy in the world.

Seven

Detective-Inspector Bland sat behind a table in the study. Sir George had met him on arrival, had taken him down to the boathouse and had now returned with him to the house. Down at the boathouse a photographic unit was now busy and the fingerprint men and the medical officer had just arrived.

“This do for you here all right?” asked Sir George.

“Very nicely, thank you, sir.”

“What am I to do about this show that’s going on, tell ’em about it, stop it, or what?”

Inspector Bland considered for a moment or two.

“What have you done so far, Sir George?” he asked.

“Haven’t said anything. There’s a sort of idea floating round that there’s been an accident. Nothing more than that. I don’t think anyone’s suspected yet that it’s—er—well, murder.”

“Then leave things as they are just for the moment,” decided Bland. “The news will get round fast enough, I daresay,” he added cynically. He thought again for a moment or two before asking, “How many people do you think there are at this affair?”

“Couple of hundred I should say,” answered Sir George, “and more pouring in every moment. People seem to have come from a good long way round. In fact the whole thing’s being a roaring success. Damned unfortunate.”

Inspector Bland inferred correctly that it was the murder and not the success of the fête to which Sir George was referring.

“A couple of hundred,” he mused, “and any one of them, I suppose, could have done it.”

He sighed.

“Tricky,” said Sir George sympathetically. “But I don’t see what reason any one of them could have had. The whole thing seems quite fantastic—don’t see who would want to go murdering a girl like that.”

“How much can you tell me about the girl? She was a local girl, I understand?”

“Yes. Her people live in one of the cottages down near the quay. Her father works at one of the local farms—Paterson’s, I think.” He added, “The mother is here at the fête this afternoon. Miss Brewis—that’s my secretary, and she can tell you about everything much better than I can—Miss Brewis winkled the woman out and has got her somewhere, giving her cups of tea.”

“Quite so,” said the inspector, approvingly. “I’m not quite clear yet, Sir George, as to the circumstances of all this. What was the girl doing down there in the boathouse? I understand there’s some kind of a murder hunt—or treasure hunt, going on.”

Sir George nodded.

“Yes. We all thought it rather a bright idea. Doesn’t seem quite so bright now. I think Miss Brewis can probably explain it all to you better than I can. I’ll send her to you, shall I? Unless there’s anything else you want to know about first.”

“Not at the moment, Sir George. I may have more questions to ask you later. There are people I shall want to see. You, and Lady Stubbs, and the people who discovered the body. One of them, I gather, is the woman novelist who designed this murder hunt as you call it.”

“That’s right. Mrs. Oliver. Mrs. Ariadne Oliver.”

The inspector’s eyebrows went up slightly.

“Oh—her!” he said. “Quite a best-seller. I’ve read a lot of her books myself.”

“She’s a bit upset at present,” said Sir George, “naturally, I suppose. I’ll tell her you’ll be wanting her, shall I? I don’t know where my wife is. She seems to have disappeared completely from view. Somewhere among the two or three hundred, I suppose—not that she’ll be able to tell you much. I mean about the girl or anything like that. Who would you like to see first?”

“I think perhaps your secretary, Miss Brewis, and after that the girl’s mother.”

Sir George nodded and left the room.

The local police constable, Robert Hoskins, opened the door for him and shut it after he went out. He then volunteered a statement, obviously intended as a commentary on some of Sir George’s remarks.

“Lady Stubbs is a bit wanting,” he said, “up here.” He tapped his forehead. “That’s why he said she wouldn’t be much help. Scatty, that’s what she is.”

“Did he marry a local girl?”

“No. Foreigner of some sort. Coloured, some say, but I don’t think that’s so myself.”

Bland nodded. He was silent for a moment, doodling with a pencil on a sheet of paper in front of him. Then he asked a question which was clearly off the record.

“Who did it, Hoskins?” he said.

If anyone did have any ideas as to what had been going on, Bland thought, it would be P.C. Hoskins. Hoskins was a man of inquisitive mind with a great interest in everybody and everything. He had a gossiping wife and that, taken with his position as local constable, provided him with vast stores of information of a personal nature.

“Foreigner, if you ask me. ’Twouldn’t be anyone local. The Tuckers is all right. Nice, respectable family. Nine of ’em all told. Two of the older girls is married, one boy in the Navy, the other one’s doing his National Service, another girl's over to a hairdresser's at Torquay. There's three younger ones at home, two boys and a girl." He paused, considering. "None of 'em's what you'd call bright, but Mrs. Tucker keeps her home nice, clean as a pin—youngest of eleven, she was. She's got her old father living with her."

Bland received this information in silence. Given in Hoskins' particular idiom, it was an outline of the Tuckers' social position and standing.

"That's why I say it was a foreigner," continued Hoskins. "One of those that stop up to the Hostel at Hoodown, likely as not. There's some queer ones among them—and a lot of goings-on. Be surprised, you would, at what I've seen 'em doing in the bushes and the woods! Every bit as bad as what goes on in parked cars along the Common."

P.C. Hoskins was by this time an absolute specialist on the subject of sexual "goings-on." They formed a large portion of his conversation when off duty and having his pint in the Bull and Bear. Bland said:

"I don't think there was anything—well, of that kind. The doctor will tell us, of course, as soon as he's finished his examination."

"Yes, sir, that'll be up to him, that will. But what I say is, you never know with foreigners. Turn nasty, they can, all in a moment."

Inspector Bland sighed as he thought to himself that it was not quite as easy as that. It was all very well for Constable Hoskins to put the blame conveniently on "foreigners." The door opened and the doctor walked in.

"Done my bit," he remarked. "Shall they take her away now? The other outfits have packed up."

"Sergeant Cottrill will attend to that," said Bland. "Well, Doc, what's the finding?"

"Simple and straightforward as it can be," said the doctor. "No complications. Garrotted with a piece of clothesline. Nothing could be simpler or easier to do. No struggle of any kind beforehand. I'd say the kid didn't know what was happening to her until it had happened."

“Any signs of assault?”

“None. No assault, signs of rape, or interference of any kind.”

“Not presumably a sexual crime, then?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no.” The doctor added, “I shouldn’t say she’d been a particularly attractive girl.”

“Was she fond of the boys?”

Bland addressed this question to Constable Hoskins.

“I wouldn’t say they’d much use for her,” said Constable Hoskins, “though maybe she’d have liked it if they had.”

“Maybe,” agreed Bland. His mind went back to the pile of comic papers in the boathouse and the idle scrawls on the margin. “Johnny goes with Kate,” “Georgie Porgie kisses hikers in the wood.” He thought there had been a little wishful thinking there. On the whole, though, it seemed unlikely that there was a sex angle to Marlene Tucker’s death. Although, of course, one never knew…There were always those queer criminal individuals, men with a secret lust to kill, who specialized in immature female victims. One of these might be present in this part of the world during this holiday season. He almost believed that it must be so—for otherwise he could really see no reason for so pointless a crime. However, he thought, we’re only at the beginning. I’d better see what all these people have to tell me.

“What about time of death?” he asked.

The doctor glanced over at the clock and his own watch.

“Just after half past five now,” he said. “Say I saw her about twenty past five—she’d been dead about an hour. Roughly, that is to say. Put it between four o’clock and twenty to five. Let you know if there’s anything more after the autopsy.” He added: “You’ll get the proper report with the long words in due course. I’ll be off now. I’ve got some patients to see.”

He left the room and Inspector Bland asked Hoskins to fetch Miss Brewis. His spirits rose a little when Miss Brewis came into the room. Here, as he recognized at once, was efficiency. He would get clear answers to his questions, definite times and no muddleheadedness.

“Mrs. Tucker’s in my sitting room,” Miss Brewis said as she sat down. “I’ve broken the news to her and given her some tea. She’s very upset, naturally. She wanted to see the body but I told her it was much better not. Mr. Tucker gets off work at six o’clock and was coming to join his wife here. I told them to look out for him and bring him along when he arrives. The younger children are at the fête still, and someone is keeping an eye on them.”

“Excellent,” said Inspector Bland, with approval. “I think before I see Mrs. Tucker I would like to hear what you and Lady Stubbs can tell me.”

“I don’t know where Lady Stubbs is,” said Miss Brewis acidly. “I rather imagine she got bored with the fête and has wandered off somewhere, but I don’t expect she can tell you anything more than I can. What exactly is it that you want to know?”

“I want to know all the details of this murder hunt first and of how this girl, Marlene Tucker, came to be taking a part in it.”

“That’s quite easy.”

Succinctly and clearly Miss Brewis explained the idea of the murder hunt as an original attraction for the fête, the engaging of Mrs. Oliver, the well-known novelist, to arrange the matter, and a short outline of the plot.

“Originally,” Miss Brewis explained, “Mrs. Alec Legge was to have taken the part of the victim.”

“Mrs. Alec Legge?” queried the inspector.

Constable Hoskins put in an explanatory word.

“She and Mr. Legge have the Lawders’ cottage, the pink one down by Mill Creek. Came here a month ago, they did. Two or three months they got it for.”

“I see. And Mrs. Legge, you say, was to be the original victim? Why was that changed?”

“Well, one evening Mrs. Legge told all our fortunes and was so good at it that it was decided we’d have a fortune teller’s tent as one of the attractions and that Mrs. Legge should put on Eastern dress and be Madame Zuleika and tell fortunes at half a crown a time. I don’t think that’s really illegal, is it, Inspector? I mean it’s usually done at these kind of fêtes?”

Inspector Bland smiled faintly.

“Fortune telling and raffles aren’t always taken too seriously, Miss Brewis,” he said. “Now and then we have to—er—make an example.”

“But usually you’re tactful? Well, that’s how it was. Mrs. Legge agreed to help us that way and so we had to find somebody else to do the body. The local Guides were helping us at the fête, and I think someone suggested that one of the Guides would do quite well.”

“Just who was it who suggested that, Miss Brewis?”

“Really, I don’t quite know…I think it may have been Mrs. Masterton, the Member’s wife. No, perhaps it was Captain Warburton…Really, I can’t be sure. But, anyway, it was suggested.”

“Is there any reason why this particular girl should have been chosen?”

“N-no, I don’t think so. Her people are tenants on the estate, and her mother, Mrs. Tucker, sometimes comes to help in the kitchen. I don’t know quite why we settled on her. Probably her name came to mind first. We asked her and she seemed quite pleased to do it.”

“She definitely wanted to do it?”

"Oh, yes, I think she was flattered. She was a very moronic kind of girl," continued Miss Brewis, "she couldn't have acted a part or anything like that. But this was all very simple, and she felt she'd been singled out from the others and was pleased about it."

"What exactly was it that she had to do?"

"She had to stay in the boathouse. When she heard anyone coming to the door she was to lie down on the floor, put the cord round her neck and sham dead." Miss Brewis' tones were calm and businesslike. The fact that the girl who was to sham dead had actually been found dead did not at the moment appear to affect her emotionally.

"Rather a boring way for the girl to spend the afternoon when she might have been at the fête," suggested Inspector Bland.

"I suppose it was in a way," said Miss Brewis, "but one can't have everything, can one? And Marlene did enjoy the idea of being the body. It made her feel important. She had a pile of papers and things to read to keep her amused."

"And something to eat as well?" said the inspector. "I noticed there was a tray down there with a plate and glass."

"Oh, yes, she had a big plate of sweet cakes, and a raspberry fruit drink. I took them down to her myself."

Bland looked up sharply.

"You took them down to her? When?"

"About the middle of the afternoon."

"What time exactly? Can you remember?"

Miss Brewis considered a moment.

"Let me see. Children's Fancy Dress was judged, there was a little delay—Lady Stubbs couldn't be found, but Mrs. Folliat took her place, so that was all right…Yes, it must have been—I'm almost sure—about five minutes past four that I collected the cakes and the fruit drink."

"And you took them down to her at the boathouse yourself. What time did you reach there?"

"Oh, it takes about five minutes to go down to the boathouse—about quarter past four, I should think."

"And at quarter past four Marlene Tucker was alive and well?"

"Yes, of course," said Miss Brewis, "and very eager to know how people were getting on with the murder hunt, too. I'm afraid I couldn't tell her. I'd been too busy with the sideshow on the lawn, but I did know that a lot of people had entered for it. Twenty or thirty to my knowledge. Probably a good many more."

"How did you find Marlene when you arrived at the boathouse?"

"I've just told you."

"No, no, I don't mean that. I mean, was she lying on the floor shamming dead when you opened the door?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Brewis, "because I called out just before I got there. So she opened the door and I took the tray in and put it on the table."

"At a quarter past four," said Bland, writing it down, "Marlene Tucker was alive and well. You will understand, I'm sure, Miss Brewis, that that is a very important point. You are quite sure of your times?"

"I can't be exactly sure because I didn't look at my watch, but I had looked at it a short time previously and that's as near as I can get." She added, with a sudden dawning realization of the inspector's point, "Do you mean that it was soon after—?"

"It can't have been very long after, Miss Brewis."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Brewis.

It was a rather inadequate expression, but nevertheless it conveyed well enough Miss Brewis' dismay and concern.

"Now, Miss Brewis, on your way down to the boathouse and on your way back again to the house, did you meet anybody or see anyone near the boathouse?"

Miss Brewis considered.

"No," she said, "I didn't meet anyone. I might have, of course, because the grounds are open to everyone this afternoon. But on the whole, people tend to stay round the lawn and the side shows and all that. They like to go round the kitchen gardens and the greenhouses, but they don't walk through the woodlands as much as I should have thought they would. People tend to herd together very much at these affairs, don't you think so, Inspector?"

The inspector said that that was probably so.

"Though, I think," said Miss Brewis, with sudden memory, "that there was someone in the Folly."

"The Folly?"

"Yes. A small white temple arrangement. It was put up just a year or two ago. It's to the right of the path as you go down to the boathouse. There was someone in there. A courting couple, I suspect. Someone was laughing and then someone said, 'Hush.'"

"You don't know who this courting couple was?"

"I've no idea. You can't see the front of the Folly from the path. The sides and back are enclosed."

The inspector thought for a moment or two, but it did not seem likely to him that the couple—whoever they were—in the Folly were important. Better find out who they were, perhaps, because they in their turn might have seen someone coming up from or going down to the boathouse.

"And there was no one else on the path? No one at all?" he insisted.

"I see what you're driving at, of course," said Miss Brewis. "I can only assure you that I didn't meet anyone. But then, you see, I needn't have. I mean, if there had been anyone on the path who didn't want me to see them, it's the simplest thing in the world just to slip behind some of the rhododendron bushes. The path's ordered on both sides with shrubs and rhododendron bushes. If anyone who had no business to be there heard someone coming along the path, they could slip out of sight in a moment."

The inspector shifted on to another tack.

"Is there anything you know about this girl yourself, that could help us?" he asked.

"I really know nothing about her," said Miss Brewis. "I don't think I'd ever spoken to her until this affair. She's one of the girls I've seen about—I know her vaguely by sight, but that's all."

"And you know nothing about her—nothing that could be helpful?"

"I don't know of any reason why anyone should want to murder her," said Miss Brewis. "In fact it seems to me, if you know what I mean, quite impossible that such a thing should have happened. I can only think that to some unbalanced mind, the fact that she was to be the murdered victim might have induced the wish to make her a real victim. But even that sounds very far-fetched and silly."

Bland sighed.

"Oh, well," he said, "I suppose I'd better see the mother now."

Mrs. Tucker was a thin, hatchet-faced woman with stringy blonde hair and a sharp nose. Her eyes were reddened with crying, but she had herself in hand now, and was ready to answer the inspector's questions.

"Doesn't seem right that a thing like that should happen," she said. "You read of these things in the papers, but that it should happen to our Marlene —"

"I'm very, very sorry about it," said Inspector Bland gently. "What I want you to do is to think as hard as you can and tell me if there is anyone who could have had any reason to harm the girl?"

"I've been thinking about that already," said Mrs. Tucker, with a sudden sniff. "Thought and thought, I have, but I can't get anywhere. Words with the teacher at school Marlene had now and again, and she'd have her quarrels now and again with one of the girls or boys, but nothing serious in any way. There's no one who had a real down on her, nobody who'd do her a mischief."

"She never talked to you about anyone who might have been an enemy of any kind?"

"She talked silly often, Marlene did, but nothing of that kind. It was all makeup and hairdos, and what she'd like to do to her face and herself. You know what girls are. Far too young she was, to put on lipstick and all that muck, and her dad told her so, and so did I. But that's what she'd do when she got hold of any money. Buy herself scent and lipsticks and hide them away."

Bland nodded. There was nothing here that could help him. An adolescent, rather silly girl, her head full of film stars and glamour—there were hundreds of Marlenes.

"What her dad'll say, I don't know," said Mrs. Tucker. "Coming here any minute he'll be, expecting to enjoy himself. He's a rare shot at the coconuts, he is."

She broke down suddenly and began to sob.

"If you ask me," she said, "it's one of them nasty foreigners up at the Hostel. You never know where you are with foreigners. Nice spoken as most of them are, some of the shirts they wear you wouldn't believe. Shirts with girls on them with these bikinis, as they call them. And all of them sunning themselves here and there with no shirts at all on—it all leads to trouble. That's what I say!"

Still weeping, Mrs. Tucker was escorted from the room by Constable Hoskins. Bland reflected that the local verdict seemed to be the comfortable and probably age-long one of attributing every tragic occurrence to unspecified foreigners.

Eight

“Got a sharp tongue, she has,” Hoskins said when he returned. “Nags her husband and bullies her old father. I daresay she’s spoke sharp to the girl once or twice and now she’s feeling bad about it. Not that girls mind what their mothers say to them. Drops off ’em like water off a duck’s back.”

Inspector Bland cut short these general reflections and told Hoskins to fetch Mrs. Oliver.

The inspector was slightly startled by the sight of Mrs. Oliver. He had not expected anything so voluminous, so purple and in such a state of emotional disturbance.

“I feel awful,” said Mrs. Oliver, sinking down in the chair in front of him like a purple blancmange. “AWFUL,” she added in what were clearly capital letters.

The inspector made a few ambiguous noises, and Mrs. Oliver swept on.

“Because, you see, it’s my murder. I did it!”

For a startled moment Inspector Bland thought that Mrs. Oliver was accusing herself of the crime.

“Why I should ever have wanted the Yugoslavian wife of an Atom Scientist to be the victim, I can’t imagine,” said Mrs. Oliver, sweeping her hands through her elaborate hairdo in a frenzied manner with the result that she looked slightly drunk. “Absolutely asinine of me. It might just as well have been the second gardener who wasn’t what he seemed—and that wouldn’t have mattered half as much because, after all, most men can look after themselves. If they can’t look after themselves they ought to be able to look after themselves, and in that case I shouldn’t have minded so much. Men get killed and nobody minds—I mean, nobody except their wives and sweethearts and children and things like that.”

At this point the inspector entertained unworthy suspicions about Mrs. Oliver. This was aided by the faint fragrance of brandy which was wafted towards him. On their return to the house Hercule Poirot had firmly administered to his friend this sovereign remedy for shocks.

“I’m not mad and I’m not drunk,” said Mrs. Oliver, intuitively divining his thoughts, “though I daresay with that man about who thinks I drink like a fish and says everybody says so, you probably think so too.”

“What man?” demanded the inspector, his mind switching from the unexpected introduction of the second gardener into the drama, to the further introduction of an unspecified man.

“Freckles and a Yorkshire accent,” said Mrs. Oliver. “But, as I say, I’m not drunk and I’m not mad. I’m just upset. Thoroughly UPSET,” she repeated, once more resorting to capital letters.

“I’m sure, madam, it must have been most distressing,” said the inspector.

“The awful thing is,” said Mrs. Oliver, “that she wanted to be a sex maniac’s victim, and now I suppose she was—is—which should I mean?”

“There’s no question of a sex maniac,” said the inspector.

“Isn’t there?” said Mrs. Oliver. “Well, thank God for that. Or, at least, I don’t know. Perhaps she would rather have had it that way. But if he wasn’t a sex maniac, why did anybody murder her, Inspector?”

“I was hoping,” said the inspector, “that you could help me there.”

Undoubtedly, he thought, Mrs. Oliver had put her finger on the crucial point. Why should anyone murder Marlene?

“I can’t help you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I can’t imagine who could have done it. At least, of course, I can imagine—I can imagine anything! That’s the trouble with me. I can imagine things now—this minute. I could even make them sound all right, but of course none of them would be true. I mean, she could have been murdered by someone who just likes murdering girls but that's too easy—and, anyway, too much of a coincidence that somebody should be at this fête who wanted to murder a girl. And how would he know that Marlene was in the boathouse? Or she might have known some secret about somebody's love affairs, or she may have seen someone bury a body at night, or she may have recognized somebody who was concealing his identity—or she may have known a secret about where some treasure was buried during the war. Or the man in the launch may have thrown somebody into the river and she saw it from the window of the boathouse—or she may even have got hold of some very important message in secret code and not known what it was herself."

"Please!" The inspector held up his hand. His head was whirling.

Mrs. Oliver stopped obediently. It was clear that she could have gone on in this vein for some time, although it seemed to the inspector that she had already envisaged every possibility, likely or otherwise. Out of the richness of the material presented to him, he seized upon one phrase.

"What did you mean, Mrs. Oliver, by the 'man in the launch?' Are you just imagining a man in a launch?"

"Somebody told me he'd come in a launch," said Mrs. Oliver. "I can't remember who. The one we were talking about at breakfast, I mean," she added.

"Please." The inspector's tone was now pleading. He had had no idea before what the writers of detective stories were like. He knew that Mrs. Oliver had written forty-odd books. It seemed to him astonishing at the moment that she had not written a hundred and forty. He rapped out a peremptory inquiry. "What is all this about a man at breakfast who came in a launch?"

"He didn't come in the launch at breakfast time," said Mrs. Oliver, "it was a yacht. At least, I don't mean that exactly. It was a letter."

"Well, what was it?" demanded Bland. "A yacht or a letter?"

“It was a letter,” said Mrs. Oliver, “to Lady Stubbs. From a cousin in a yacht. And she was frightened,” she ended.

“Frightened? What of?”

“Of him, I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Anybody could see it. She was terrified of him and she didn’t want him to come, and I think that’s why she’s hiding now.”

“Hiding?” said the inspector.

“Well, she isn’t about anywhere,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Everyone’s been looking for her. And I think she’s hiding because she’s afraid of him and doesn’t want to meet him.”

“Who is this man?” demanded the inspector.

“You’d better ask M. Poirot,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Because he spoke to him and I haven’t. His name’s Esteban—no, it isn’t, that was in my plot. De Sousa, that’s what his name is, Etienne de Sousa.”

But another name had caught the inspector’s attention.

“Who did you say?” he asked. “Mr. Poirot?”

“Yes. Hercule Poirot. He was with me when we found the body.”

“Hercule Poirot…I wonder now. Can it be the same man? A Belgian, a small man with a very big moustache?”

“An enormous moustache,” agreed Mrs. Oliver. “Yes. Do you know him?”

“It’s a good many years since I met him. I was a young sergeant at the time.”

“You met him on a murder case?”

“Yes, I did. What’s he doing down here?”

“He was to give away the prizes,” said Mrs. Oliver.

There was a momentary hesitation before she gave this answer, but it went unperceived by the inspector.

“And he was with you when you discovered the body,” said Bland. “H’m, I’d like to talk to him.”

“Shall I get him for you?” Mrs. Oliver gathered up her purple draperies hopefully.

“There’s nothing more that you can add, madam? Nothing more that you think could help us in any way?”

“I don’t think so,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t know anything. As I say, I could imagine reasons—”

The inspector cut her short. He had no wish to hear any more of Mrs. Oliver’s imagined solutions. They were far too confusing.

“Thank you very much, madam,” he said briskly. “If you’ll ask M. Poirot to come and speak to me here I shall be very much obliged to you.”

Mrs. Oliver left the room. P.C. Hoskins inquired with interest:

“Who’s this Monsieur Poirot, sir?”

“You’d describe him probably as a scream,” said Inspector Bland. “Kind of music hall parody of a Frenchman, but actually he’s a Belgian. But in spite of his absurdities, he’s got brains. He must be a fair age now.”

“What about this de Sousa?” asked the constable. “Think there’s anything in that, sir?”

Inspector Bland did not hear the question. He was struck by a fact which, though he had been told it several times, was only now beginning to register.

First it had been Sir George, irritated and alarmed. “My wife seems to have disappeared. I can’t think where she has got to.” Then Miss Brewis, contemptuous: “Lady Stubbs was not to be found. She’d got bored with the show.” And now Mrs. Oliver with her theory that Lady Stubbs was hiding.

“Eh? What?” he asked absently.

Constable Hoskins cleared his throat.

“I was asking you, sir, if you thought there was anything in this business of de Sousa—whoever he is.”

Constable Hoskins was clearly delighted at having a specific foreigner rather than foreigners in the mass introduced into the case. But Inspector Bland’s mind was running on a different course.

“I want Lady Stubbs,” he said curtly. “Get hold of her for me. If she isn’t about, look for her.”

Hoskins looked slightly puzzled but he left the room obediently. In the doorway he paused and fell back a little to allow Hercule Poirot to enter. He looked back over his shoulder with some interest before closing the door behind him.

“I don’t suppose,” said Bland, rising and holding out his hand, “that you remember me, M. Poirot.”

“But assuredly,” said Poirot. “It is—now give me a moment, just a little moment. It is the young sergeant—yes, Sergeant Bland whom I met fourteen—no, fifteen years ago.”

“Quite right. What a memory!”

“Not at all. Since you remember me, why should I not remember you?”

It would be difficult, Bland thought, to forget Hercule Poirot, and this not entirely for complimentary reasons.

“So here you are, M. Poirot,” he said. “Assisting at a murder once again.”

"You are right," said Poirot. "I was called down here to assist."

"Called down to assist?" Bland looked puzzled. Poirot said quickly:

"I mean, I was asked down here to give away the prizes of this murder hunt."

"So Mrs. Oliver told me."

"She told you nothing else?" Poirot said it with apparent carelessness. He was anxious to discover whether Mrs. Oliver had given the inspector any hint of the real motives which had led her to insist on Poirot's journey to Devon.

"Told me nothing else? She never stopped telling me things. Every possible and impossible motive for the girl's murder. She set my head spinning. Phew! What an imagination!"

"She earns her living by her imagination, mon ami," said Poirot dryly.

"She mentioned a man called de Sousa—did she imagine that?"

"No, that is sober fact."

"There was something about a letter at breakfast and a yacht and coming up the river in a launch. I couldn't make head or tail of it."

Poirot embarked upon an explanation. He told of the scene at the breakfast table, the letter, Lady Stubbs' headache.

"Mrs. Oliver said that Lady Stubbs was frightened. Did you think she was afraid, too?"

"That was the impression she gave me."

"Afraid of this cousin of hers? Why?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no idea. All she told me was that he was bad—a bad man. She is, you understand, a little simple. Subnormal."

"Yes, that seems to be pretty generally known round here. She didn't say why she was afraid of this de Sousa?"

"No."

"But you think her fear was real?"

"If it was not, then she is a very clever actress," said Poirot dryly.

"I'm beginning to have some odd ideas about this case," said Bland. He got up and walked restlessly to and fro. "It's that cursed woman's fault, I believe."

"Mrs. Oliver's?"

"Yes. She's put a lot of melodramatic ideas into my head."

"And you think they may be true?"

"Not all of them—naturally—but one or two of them mightn't be as wild as they sounded. It all depends…" He broke off as the door opened to re-admit P.C. Hoskins.

"Don't seem able to find the lady, sir," he said. "She's not about anywhere."

"I know that already," said Bland irritably. "I told you to find her."

"Sergeant Farrell and P.C. Lorimer are searching the grounds, sir," said Hoskins. "She's not in the house," he added.

"Find out from the man who's taking admission tickets at the gate if she's left the place. Either on foot or in a car."

"Yes, sir."

Hoskins departed.

"And find out when she was last seen and where," Bland shouted after him.

"So that is the way your mind is working," said Poirot.

"It isn't working anywhere yet," said Bland, "but I've just woken up to the fact that a lady who ought to be on the premises isn't on the premises! And I want to know why. Tell me what more you know about what's-his-name de Sousa."

Poirot described his meeting with the young man who had come up the path from the quay.

"He is probably still here at the fête," he said. "Shall I tell Sir George that you want to see him?"

"Not for a moment or two," said Bland. "I'd like to find out a little more first. When did you yourself last see Lady Stubbs?"

Poirot cast his mind back. He found it difficult to remember exactly. He recalled vague glimpses of her tall, cyclamen-clad figure with the drooping black hat moving about the lawn talking to people, hovering here and there; occasionally he would hear that strange laugh of hers, distinctive amongst the many other confused sounds.

"I think," he said doubtfully, "it must have been not long before four o'clock."

"And where was she then, and who was she with?"

"She was in the middle of a group of people near the house."

"Was she there when de Sousa arrived?"

"I don't remember. I don't think so, at least I did not see her. Sir George told de Sousa that his wife was somewhere about. He seemed surprised, I remember, that she was not judging the Children's Fancy Dress, as she was supposed to do."

"What time was it when de Sousa arrived?"

“It must have been about half past four, I should think. I did not look at my watch so I cannot tell you exactly.”

“And Lady Stubbs had disappeared before he arrived?”

“It seems so.”

“Possibly she ran away so as not to meet him,” suggested the inspector.

“Possibly,” Poirot agreed.

“Well, she can’t have gone far,” said Bland. “We ought to be able to find her quite easily, and when we do…” He broke off.

“And supposing you don’t?” Poirot put the question with a curious intonation in his voice.

“That’s nonsense,” said the inspector vigorously. “Why? What d’you think’s happened to her?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“What indeed! One does not know. All one does know is that she has—disappeared!”

“Dash it all, M. Poirot, you’re making it sound quite sinister.”

“Perhaps it is sinister.”

“It’s the murder of Marlene Tucker that we’re investigating,” said the inspector severely.

“But evidently. So—why this interest in de Sousa? Do you think he killed Marlene Tucker?”

Inspector Bland replied irrelevantly:

“It’s that woman!”

Poirot smiled faintly.

“Mrs. Oliver, you mean?”

“Yes. You see, M. Poirot, the murder of Marlene Tucker doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t make sense at all. Here’s a nondescript, rather moronic kid found strangled and not a hint of any possible motive.”

“And Mrs. Oliver supplied you with a motive?”

“With a dozen at least! Amongst them she suggested that Marlene might have a knowledge of somebody’s secret love affair, or that Marlene might have witnessed somebody being murdered, or that she knew where a buried treasure was hidden, or that she might have seen from the window of the boathouse some action performed by de Sousa in his launch as he was going up the river.”

“Ah. And which of those theories appeals to you, mon cher?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t help thinking about them. Listen, M. Poirot. Think back carefully. Would you say from your impression of what Lady Stubbs said to you this morning that she was afraid of her cousin’s coming because he might, perhaps, know something about her which she did not want to come to the ears of her husband, or would you say that it was a direct personal fear of the man himself?”

Poirot had no hesitation in his reply.

“I should say it was a direct personal fear of the man himself.”

“H’m,” said Inspector Bland. “Well, I’d better have a little talk with this young man if he’s still about the place.”

Nine

I

Although he had none of Constable Hoskins' ingrained prejudice against foreigners, Inspector Bland took an instant dislike to Etienne de Sousa. The polished elegance of the young man, his sartorial perfection, the rich flowery smell of his brilliantined hair, all combined to annoy the inspector.

De Sousa was very sure of himself, very much at ease. He also displayed, decorously veiled, a certain aloof amusement.

"One must admit," he said, "that life is full of surprises. I arrive here on a holiday cruise, I admire the beautiful scenery, I come to spend an afternoon with a little cousin that I have not seen for years—and what happens? First I am engulfed in a kind of carnival with coconuts whizzing past my head, and immediately afterwards, passing from comedy to tragedy, I am embroiled in a murder."

He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and said:

"Not that it concerns me in any way, this murder. Indeed, I am at a loss to know why you should want to interview me."

"You arrived here as a stranger, Mr. de Sousa—"

De Sousa interrupted:

"And strangers are necessarily suspicious, is that it?"

"No, no, not at all, sir. No, you don't take my meaning. Your yacht, I understand, is moored in Helmmouth?"

"That is so, yes."

"And you came up the river this afternoon in a motor launch?"

“Again—that is so.”

“As you came up the river, did you notice on your right a small boathouse jutting out into the river with a thatched roof and a little mooring quay underneath it?”

De Sousa threw back his handsome, dark head and frowned as he reflected.

“Let me see, there was a creek and a small grey tiled house.”

“Farther up the river than that, Mr. de Sousa. Set amongst trees.”

“Ah, yes, I remember now. A very picturesque spot. I did not know it was the boathouse attached to this house. If I had done so, I would have moored my boat there and come ashore. When I asked for directions I had been told to come up to the ferry itself and go ashore at the quay there.”

“Quite so. And that is what you did?”

“That is what I did.”

“You didn’t land at, or near, the boathouse?”

De Sousa shook his head.

“Did you see anyone at the boathouse as you passed?”

“See anyone? No. Should I have seen anyone?”

“It was just a possibility. You see, Mr. de Sousa, the murdered girl was in the boathouse this afternoon. She was killed there, and she must have been killed at a time not very distant from when you were passing.”

Again de Sousa raised his eyebrows.

“You think I might have been a witness to this murder?”

“The murder took place inside the boathouse, but you might have seen the girl—she might have looked out from the window or come out on to the balcony. If you had seen her it would, at any rate, have narrowed the time of death for us. If, when you'd passed, she'd been still alive—"

"Ah. I see. Yes, I see. But why ask me particularly? There are plenty of boats going up and down from Helmmouth. Pleasure steamers. They pass the whole time. Why not ask them?"

"We shall ask them," said the inspector. "Never fear, we shall ask them. I am to take it, then, that you saw nothing unusual at the boathouse?"

"Nothing whatever. There was nothing to show there was anyone there. Of course I did not look at it with any special attention, and I did not pass very near. Somebody might have been looking out of the windows, as you suggest, but if so I should not have seen that person." He added in a polite tone, "I am very sorry that I cannot assist you."

"Oh, well," said Inspector Bland in a friendly manner, "we can't hope for too much. There are just a few other things I would like to know, Mr. de Sousa."

"Yes?"

"Are you alone down here or have you friends with you on this cruise?"

"I have had friends with me until quite recently, but for the last three days I have been on my own—with the crew, of course."

"And the name of your yacht, Mr. de Sousa?"

"The Espérance."

"Lady Stubbs is, I understand, a cousin of yours?"

De Sousa shrugged his shoulders.

"A distant cousin. Not very near. In the islands, you must understand, there is much intermarrying. We are all cousins of one another. Hattie is a second or third cousin. I have not seen her since she was practically a little girl, fourteen—fifteen."

“And you thought you would pay her a surprise visit today?”

“Hardly a surprise visit, Inspector. I had already written to her.”

“I know that she received a letter from you this morning, but it was a surprise to her to know that you were in this country.”

“Oh, but you are wrong there, Inspector. I wrote to my cousin—let me see, three weeks ago. I wrote to her from France just before I came across to this country.”

The inspector was surprised.

“You wrote to her from France telling her you proposed to visit her?”

“Yes. I told her I was going on a yachting cruise and that we should probably arrive at Torquay or Helmmouth round about this date, and that I would let her know later exactly when I should arrive.”

Inspector Bland stared at him. This statement was at complete variance with what he had been told about the arrival of Etienne de Sousa’s letter at the breakfast table. More than one witness had testified to Lady Stubbs having been alarmed and upset and very clearly startled at the contents of the letter. De Sousa returned his stare calmly. With a little smile he flicked a fragment of dust from his knee.

“Did Lady Stubbs reply to your first letter?” the inspector asked.

De Sousa hesitated for a moment or two before he answered, then he said:

“It is so difficult to remember…No, I do not think she did. But it was not necessary. I was travelling about, I had no fixed address. And besides, I do not think my cousin, Hattie, is very good at writing letters.” He added: “She is not, you know, very intelligent, though I understand that she has grown into a very beautiful woman.”

“You have not yet seen her?” Bland put it in the form of a question and de Sousa showed his teeth in an agreeable smile.

“She seems to be most unaccountably missing,” he said. “No doubt this espèce de gala bores her.”

Choosing his words carefully, Inspector Bland said:

“Have you any reason to believe, Mr. de Sousa, that your cousin might have some reason for wishing to avoid you?”

“Hattie wish to avoid me? Really, I do not see why. What reason could she have?”

“That is what I am asking you, Mr. de Sousa.”

“You think that Hattie has absented herself from this fête in order to avoid me? What an absurd idea.”

“She had no reason, as far as you know, to be—shall we say—afraid of you in any way?”

“Afraid—of me?” De Sousa’s voice was sceptical and amused. “But if I may say so, Inspector, what a fantastic idea!”

“Your relations with her have always been quite amicable?”

“It is as I have told you. I have had no relations with her. I have not seen her since she was a child of fourteen.”

“Yet you look her up when you come to England?”

“Oh, as to that, I had seen a paragraph about her in one of your society papers. It mentions her maiden name and that she is married to this rich Englishman, and I think ‘I must see what the little Hattie has turned into. Whether her brains now work better than they used to do.’” He shrugged his shoulders again. “It was a mere cousinly politeness. A gentle curiosity—no more.”

Again the inspector stared hard at de Sousa. What, he wondered, was going on behind the mocking, smooth façade? He adopted a more confidential manner.

“I wonder if you can perhaps tell me a little more about your cousin? Her character, her reactions?”

De Sousa appeared politely surprised.

“Really—has this anything to do with the murder of the girl in the boathouse, which I understand is the real matter with which you occupy yourself?”

“It might have a connection,” said Inspector Bland.

De Sousa studied him for a moment or two in silence. Then he said with a slight shrug of the shoulders:

“I never knew my cousin at all well. She was a unit in a large family and not particularly interesting to me. But in answer to your question I would say to you that although mentally weak, she was not, as far as I know, ever possessed by any homicidal tendencies.”

“Really, Mr. de Sousa, I wasn’t suggesting that!”

“Weren’t you? I wonder. I can see no other reason for your question. No, unless Hattie has changed very much, she is not homicidal!” He rose. “I am sure that you cannot want to ask me anything further, Inspector. I can only wish you every possible success in tracking down the murderer.”

“You are not thinking of leaving Helmmouth for a day or two, I hope, Mr. de Sousa?”

“You speak very politely, Inspector. Is that an order?”

“Just a request, sir.”

“Thank you. I propose to stay in Helmmouth for two days. Sir George has very kindly asked me to come and stay in the house, but I prefer to remain on the Espérance. If you should want to ask me any further questions, that is where you will find me.”

He bowed politely. P.C. Hoskins opened the door for him, and he went out.

“Smarmy sort of fellow,” muttered the inspector to himself.

“Aah,” said P.C. Hoskins in complete agreement.

“Say she is homicidal if you like,” went on the inspector, to himself. “Why should she attack a nondescript girl? There’d be no sense in it.”

“You never know with the barmy ones,” said Hoskins.

“The question really is, how barmy is she?”

Hoskins shook his head sapiently.

“Got a low I.Q., I reckon,” he said.

The inspector looked at him with annoyance.

“Don’t bring out these newfangled terms like a parrot. I don’t care if she’s got a high I.Q. or a low I.Q. All I care about is, is she the sort of woman who’d think it funny, or desirable, or necessary, to put a cord round a girl’s neck and strangle her? And where the devil is the woman, anyway? Go out and see how Frank’s getting on.”

Hoskins left obediently, and returned a moment or two later with Sergeant Cottrell, a brisk young man with a good opinion of himself, who always managed to annoy his superior officer. Inspector Bland much preferred the rural wisdom of Hoskins to the smart know-all attitude of Frank Cottrell.

“Still searching the grounds, sir,” said Cottrell. “The lady hasn’t passed out through the gate, we’re quite sure of that. It’s the second gardener who’s there giving out the tickets and taking the admission money. He’ll swear she hasn’t left.”

“There are other ways of leaving than by the main gate, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, sir. There’s the path down to the ferry, but the old boy down there—Merdell, his name is—is also quite positive that she hasn’t left that way. He’s about a hundred, but pretty reliable, I think. He described quite clearly how the foreign gentleman arrived in his launch and asked the way to Nasse

House. The old man told him he must go up the road to the gate and pay for admission. But he said the gentleman seemed to know nothing about the fête and said he was a relation of the family. So the old man set him on the path up from the ferry through the woods. Merdell seems to have been hanging about the quay all the afternoon so he'd be pretty sure to have seen her ladyship if she'd come that way. Then there's the top gate that leads over the fields to Hoodown Park, but that's been wired up because of trespassers, so she didn't go through there. Seems as though she must be still here, doesn't it?"

"That may be so," said the inspector, "but there's nothing to prevent her, is there, from slipping under a fence and going off across country? Sir George is still complaining of trespassing here from the hostel next door, I understand. If you can get in the way the trespassers get in, you can get out the same way, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, sir, indubitably, sir. But I've talked to her maid, sir. She's wearing"—Cottrell consulted a paper in his hand—"a dress of cyclamen crêpe georgette (whatever that is), a large black hat, black court shoes with four-inch french heels. Not the sort of things you'd wear for a cross-country run."

"She didn't change her clothes?"

"No. I went into that with the maid. There's nothing missing—nothing whatever. She didn't pack a suitcase or anything of that kind. She didn't even change her shoes. Every pair's there and accounted for."

Inspector Bland frowned. Unpleasant possibilities were rising in his mind. He said curtly:

"Get me that secretary woman again—Bruce—whatever her name is."

II

Miss Brewis came in looking rather more ruffled than usual, and a little out of breath.

"Yes, Inspector?" she said. "You wanted me? If it isn't urgent, Sir George is in a terrible state and—"

"What's he in a state about?"

"He's only just realized that Lady Stubbs is—well, really missing. I told him she's probably only gone for a walk in the woods or something, but he's got it into his head that something's happened to her. Quite absurd."

"It might not be so absurd, Miss Brewis. After all, we've had one—murder here this afternoon."

"You surely don't think that Lady Stubbs—? But that's ridiculous! Lady Stubbs can look after herself."

"Can she?"

"Of course she can! She's a grown woman, isn't she?"

"But rather a helpless one, by all accounts."

"Nonsense," said Miss Brewis. "It suits Lady Stubbs now and then to play the helpless nitwit if she doesn't want to do anything. It takes her husband in, I dare say, but it doesn't take me in!"

"You don't like her very much, Miss Brewis?" Bland sounded gently interested.

Miss Brewis' lips closed in a thin line.

"It's not my business either to like or dislike her," she said.

The door burst open and Sir George came in.

"Look here," he said violently, "you've got to do something. Where's Hattie? You've got to find Hattie. What the hell's going on round here I don't know. This confounded fête—some ruddy homicidal maniac's got in here, paying his half crown and looking like everyone else, spending his afternoon going round murdering people. That's what it looks like to me."

“I don’t think we need take such an exaggerated view as that, Sir George.”

“It’s all very well for you sitting there behind the table, writing things down. What I want is my wife.”

“I’m having the grounds searched, Sir George.”

“Why did nobody tell me she’d disappeared? She’s been missing a couple of hours now, it seems. I thought it was odd that she didn’t turn up to judge the Children’s Fancy Dress stuff, but nobody told me she’d really gone.”

“Nobody knew,” said the inspector.

“Well, someone ought to’ve known. Somebody ought to have noticed.”

He turned on Miss Brewis.

“You ought to have known, Amanda, you were keeping an eye on things.”

“I can’t be everywhere,” said Miss Brewis. She sounded suddenly almost tearful. “I’ve got so much to see to. If Lady Stubbs chose to wander away —”

“Wander away? Why should she wander away? She’d no reason to wander away unless she wanted to avoid that dago fellow.”

Bland seized his opportunity.

“There is something I want to ask you,” he said. “Did your wife receive a letter from Mr. de Sousa some three weeks ago, telling her he was coming to this country?”

Sir George looked astonished.

“No, of course she didn’t.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Oh, quite sure. Hattie would have told me. Why, she was thoroughly startled and upset when she got his letter this morning. It more or less knocked her out. She was lying down most of the morning with a headache.”

“What did she say to you privately about her cousin’s visit? Why did she dread seeing him so much?”

Sir George looked rather embarrassed.

“Blessed if I really know,” he said. “She just kept saying that he was wicked.”

“Wicked? In what way?”

“She wasn’t very articulate about it. Just went on rather like a child saying that he was a wicked man. Bad; and that she wished he wasn’t coming here. She said he’d done bad things.”

“Done bad things? When?”

“Oh, long ago. I should imagine this Etienne de Sousa was the black sheep of the family and that Hattie picked up odds and ends about him during her childhood without understanding them very well. And as a result she’s got a sort of horror of him. I thought it was just a childish hangover myself. My wife is rather childish sometimes. Has likes and dislikes, but can’t explain them.”

“You are sure she did not particularize in any way, Sir George?”

Sir George looked uneasy.

“I wouldn’t want you to go by—er—what she said.”

“Then she did say something?”

“All right. I’ll let you have it. What she said was—and she said it several times—‘He kills people.’”

Ten

I

“He kills people,” Inspector Bland repeated.

“I don’t think you ought to take it too seriously,” said Sir George. “She kept repeating it and saying, ‘He kills people,’ but she couldn’t tell me who he killed or when or why. I thought myself it was just some queer, childlike memory—trouble with the natives—something like that.”

“You say she couldn’t tell you anything definite—do you mean couldn’t, Sir George—or might it have been wouldn’t?”

“I don’t think…” He broke off. “I don’t know. You’ve muddled me. As I say, I didn’t take any of it seriously. I thought perhaps this cousin had teased her a bit when she was a kid—something of that kind. It’s difficult to explain to you because you don’t know my wife. I am devoted to her, but half the time I don’t listen to what she says because it just doesn’t make sense. Anyway, this de Sousa fellow couldn’t have had anything to do with all this—don’t tell me he lands here off a yacht and goes straight away through the woods and kills a wretched Girl Guide in a boathouse! Why should he?”

“I’m not suggesting that anything like that happened,” said Inspector Bland, “but you must realize, Sir George, that in looking for the murderer of Marlene Tucker the field is a more restricted one than one might think at first.”

“Restricted!” Sir George stared. “You’ve got the whole ruddy fête to choose from, haven’t you? Two hundred—three hundred—people? Any one of ’em might have done it.”

“Yes, I thought so at first, but from what I’ve learnt now that’s hardly so. The boathouse door has a Yale lock. Nobody could come in from outside without a key.”

“Well, there were three keys.”

“Exactly. One key was the final clue in this Murder Hunt. It is still concealed in the hydrangea walk at the very top of the garden. The second key was in the possession of Mrs. Oliver, the organizer of the Murder Hunt. Where is the third key, Sir George?”

“It ought to be in the drawer of that desk where you’re sitting. No, the right-hand one with a lot of the other estate duplicates.”

He came over and rummaged in the drawer.

“Yes. Here it is all right.”

“Then you see,” said Inspector Bland, “what that means? The only people who could have got into the boathouse were first, the person who had completed the Murder Hunt and found the key (which as far as we know, did not happen). Second, Mrs. Oliver or some member of the household to whom she may have lent her key, and, third, someone whom Marlene herself admitted to the room.”

“Well, that latter point covers pretty well everyone, doesn’t it?”

“Very far from it,” said Inspector Bland. “If I understand the arrangement of this Murder Hunt correctly, when the girl heard anyone approaching the door she was to lie down and enact the part of the Victim, and wait to be discovered by the person who had found the last clue—the key. Therefore, as you must see for yourself, the only people whom she would have admitted, had they called to her from outside and asked her to do so, were the people who had actually arranged the Murder Hunt. Any inmate, that is, of this house—that is to say, yourself, Lady Stubbs, Miss Brewis, Mrs. Oliver—possibly M. Poirot whom I believe she had met this morning. Who else, Sir George?”

Sir George considered for a moment or two.

“The Legges, of course,” he said. “Alec and Sally Legge. They’ve been in it from the start. And Michael Weyman, he’s an architect staying here in the house to design a tennis pavilion. And Warburton, the Mastertons—oh, and Mrs. Folliat of course."

"That is all—nobody else?"

"That's the lot."

"So you see, Sir George, it is not a very wide field."

Sir George's face went scarlet.

"I think you're talking nonsense—absolute nonsense! Are you suggesting—what you are suggesting?"

"I'm only suggesting," said Inspector Bland, "that there's a great deal we don't know as yet. It's possible, for instance, that Marlene, for some reason, came out of the boathouse. She may even have been strangled somewhere else, and her body brought back and arranged on the floor. But even if so, whoever arranged her was again someone who was thoroughly cognisant with all the details of the Murder Hunt. We always come back to that." He added in a slightly changed voice, "I can assure you, Sir George, that we're doing all we can to find Lady Stubbs. In the meantime I'd like to have a word with Mr. and Mrs. Alec Legge and Mr. Michael Weyman."

"Amanda."

"I'll see what I can do about it, Inspector," said Miss Brewis. "I expect Mrs. Legge is still telling fortunes in the tent. A lot of people have come in with the half-price admission since five o'clock, and all the sideshows are busy. I can probably get hold of Mr. Legge or Mr. Weyman for you—whichever you want to see first."

"It doesn't matter in what order I see them," said Inspector Bland.

Miss Brewis nodded and left the room. Sir George followed her, his voice rising plaintively.

"Look here, Amanda, you've got to…."

Inspector Bland realized that Sir George depended a great deal upon the efficient Miss Brewis. Indeed, at this moment, Bland found the master of the house rather like a small boy.

Whilst waiting, Inspector Bland picked up the telephone, demanded to be put through to the police station at Helmmouth and made certain arrangements with them concerning the yacht Espérance.

“You realize, I suppose,” he said to Hoskins, who was obviously quite incapable of realizing anything of the sort, “that there’s just one perfectly possible place where this damn’ woman might be—and that’s on board de Sousa’s yacht?”

“How d’you make that out, sir?”

“Well, the woman has not been seen to leave by any of the usual exits, she’s togged up in a way that makes it unlikely that she’s legging it through the fields or woods, but it is just possible that she met de Sousa by appointment down at the boathouse and that he took her by launch to the yacht, returning to the fête afterwards.”

“And why would he do that, sir?” demanded Hoskins, puzzled.

“I’ve no idea,” said the inspector, “and it’s very unlikely that he did. But it’s a possibility. And if she is on the Espérance, I’ll see to it that she won’t get off there without being observed.”

“But if her fair hated the sight of him…” Hoskins dropped into the vernacular.

“All we know is that she said she did. Women,” said the inspector sententiously, “tell a lot of lies. Always remember that, Hoskins.”

“Aah,” said Constable Hoskins appreciatively.

II

Further conversation was brought to an end as the door opened and a tall vague-looking young man entered. He was wearing a neat grey flannel suit, but his shirt collar was crumpled and his tie askew and his hair stood up on end in an unruly fashion.

“Mr. Alec Legge?” said the inspector, looking up.

“No,” said the young man, “I’m Michael Weyman. You asked for me, I understand.”

“Quite true, sir,” said Inspector Bland. “Won’t you take a chair?” He indicated a chair at the opposite side of the table.

“I don’t care for sitting,” said Michael Weyman, “I like to stride about. What are all you police doing here anyway? What’s happened?”

Inspector Bland looked at him in surprise.

“Didn’t Sir George inform you, sir?” he asked.

“Nobody’s ‘informed me,’ as you put it, of anything. I don’t sit in Sir George’s pocket all the time. What has happened?”

“You’re staying in the house, I understand?”

“Of course I’m staying in the house. What’s that got to do with it?”

“Simply that I imagined that all the people staying in the house would by now have been informed of this afternoon’s tragedy.”

“Tragedy? What tragedy?”

“The girl who was playing the part of the murder victim has been killed.”

“No!” Michael Weyman seemed exuberantly surprised. “Do you mean really killed? No fakery-pokery?”

“I don’t know what you mean by fakery-pokery. The girl’s dead.”

“How was she killed?”

“Strangled with a piece of cord.”

Michael Weyman gave a whistle.

“Exactly as in the scenario? Well, well, that does give one ideas.” He strode over to the window, turned rapidly about, and said, “So we’re all under suspicion, are we? Or was it one of the local boys?”

“We don’t see how it could possibly have been one of the local boys, as you put it,” said the inspector.

“No more do I really,” said Michael Weyman. “Well, Inspector, many of my friends call me crazy, but I’m not that kind of crazy. I don’t roam around the countryside strangling underdeveloped spotty young women.”

“You are down here, I understand, Mr. Weyman, designing a tennis pavilion for Sir George?”

“A blameless occupation,” said Michael. “Criminally speaking, that is. Architecturally, I’m not so sure. The finished product will probably represent a crime against good taste. But that doesn’t interest you, Inspector. What does interest you?”

“Well, I should like to know, Mr. Weyman, exactly where you were between quarter past four this afternoon and say five o’clock.”

“How do you tape it down to that—medical evidence?”

“Not entirely, sir. A witness saw the girl alive at a quarter past four.”

“What witness—or mayn’t I ask?”

“Miss Brewis. Lady Stubbs asked her to take down a tray of creamy cakes with some fruitade to the girl.”

“Our Hattie asked her that? I don’t believe it for a moment.”

“Why don’t you believe it, Mr. Weyman?”

“It’s not like her. Not the sort of thing she’d think of or bother about. Dear Lady Stubbs’ mind revolves entirely round herself.”

“I’m still waiting, Mr. Weyman, for your answer to my question.”

“Where I was between four fifteen and five o’clock? Well, really, Inspector, I can’t say offhand. I was about—if you know what I mean.”

“About where?”

“Oh, here and there. I mingled a bit on the lawn, watched the locals amusing themselves, had a word or two with the fluttery film star. Then, when I got sick of it all, I went along to the tennis court and mused over the design for the Pavilion. I also wondered how soon someone would identify the photograph that was the first clue for the Murder Hunt with a section of tennis net.”

“Did someone identify it?”

“Yes, I believe someone did come along, but I wasn’t really noticing by then. I got a new idea about the Pavilion—a way of making the best of two worlds. My own and Sir George’s.”

“And after that?”

“After that? Well, I strolled around and came back to the house. I strolled down the quay and had a crack with old Merdell, then came back. I can’t fix any of the times with any accuracy. I was, as I said, in the first place, about! That’s all there is to it.”

“Well, Mr. Weyman,” said the inspector briskly, “I expect we can get some confirmation of all this.”

“Merdell can tell you that I talked to him on the quay. But of course that’ll be rather later than the time you’re interested in. Must have been after five when I got down there. Very unsatisfactory, isn’t it, Inspector?”

“We shall be able to narrow it down, I expect, Mr. Weyman.”

The inspector’s tone was pleasant, but there was a steely ring in it that did not escape the young architect’s notice. He sat down on the arm of a chair.

“Seriously,” he said, “who can have wanted to murder that girl?”

“You’ve no ideas yourself, Mr. Weyman?”

“Well, offhand, I’d say it was our prolific authoress, the Purple Peril. Have you seen her imperial purple getup? I suggest that she went a bit off her onion and thought how much better the Murder Hunt would be if there was a real body. How’s that?”

“Is that a serious suggestion, Mr. Weyman?”

“It’s the only probability I can think of.”

“There’s one other thing I would like to ask you, Mr. Weyman. Did you see Lady Stubbs during the course of the afternoon?”

“Of course I saw her. Who could miss her? Dressed up like a mannequin of Jacques Fath or Christian Dior?”

“When did you see her last?”

“Last? I don’t know. Striking an attitude on the lawn about half past three—or a quarter to four perhaps.”

“And you didn’t see her after that?”

“No. Why?”

“I wondered—because after four o’clock nobody seems to have seen her. Lady Stubbs has—vanished, Mr. Weyman.”

“Vanished! Our Hattie?”

“That surprises you?”

“Yes, it does rather…What’s she up to, I wonder?”

“D’you know Lady Stubbs well, Mr. Weyman?”

“Never met her till I came down here four or five days ago.”

“Have you formed any opinions about her?”

“I should say she knows which side her bread is buttered better than most,” said Michael Weyman dryly. “A very ornamental young woman and knows how to make the most of it.”

“But mentally not very active? Is that right?”

“Depends what you mean by mentally,” said Michael Weyman. “I wouldn’t describe her as an intellectual. But if you’re thinking that she’s not all there, you’re wrong.” A tone of bitterness came into his voice. “I’d say she was very much all there. Nobody more so.”

The inspector’s eyebrows rose.

“That’s not the generally accepted opinion.”

“For some reason she likes playing the dim nitwit. I don’t know why. But as I’ve said before, in my opinion, she’s very much all there.”

The inspector studied him for a moment, then he said:

“And you really can’t get any nearer to exact times and places between the hours I have mentioned?”

“Sorry.” Weyman spoke jerkily. “I’m afraid I can’t. Rotten memory, never any good about time.” He added, “Finished with me?”

As the inspector nodded, he left the room quickly.

“And I’d like to know,” said the inspector, half to himself and half to Hoskins, “what there’s been between him and her Ladyship. Either he’s made a pass at her and she’s turned him down, or there’s been some kind of a dustup.” He went on, “What would you say was the general opinion round these parts about Sir George and his lady?”

“She’s daft,” said Constable Hoskins.

“I know you think that, Hoskins. Is that the accepted view?”

“I’d say so.”

“And Sir George—is he liked?”

“He’s liked well enough. He’s a good sportsman and he knows a bit about farming. The old lady’s done a lot to help.”

“What old lady?”

“Mrs. Folliat who lives at the Lodge here.”

“Oh, of course. The Folliats used to own this place, didn’t they?”

“Yes, and it’s owing to the old lady that Sir George and Lady Stubbs have been taken up as well as they have. Got ’em in with the nobs everywhere, she has.”

“Paid for doing so, do you think?”

“Oh, no, not Mrs. Folliat.” Hoskins sounded shocked. “I understand she knew Lady Stubbs before she was married and it was she who urged on Sir George to buy this place.”

“I’ll have to talk to Mrs. Folliat,” said the inspector.

“Ah, she’s a shrewd old lady, she is. If anything is going on, she’d know about it.”

“I must talk to her,” said the inspector. “I wonder where she is now.”

Eleven

I

Mrs. Folliat was at that moment being talked to by Hercule Poirot in the big drawing room. He had found her there leaning back in a chair in a corner of the room. She had started nervously when he came in. Then sinking back, she had murmured:

“Oh, it’s you, M. Poirot.”

“I apologize, Madame. I disturbed you.”

“No, no. You don’t disturb me. I’m just resting, that’s all. I’m not as young as I was. The shock—it was too much for me.”

“I comprehend,” said Poirot. “Indeed, I comprehend.”

Mrs. Folliat, a handkerchief clutched in her small hand, was staring up at the ceiling. She said in a voice half-stifled with emotion:

“I can hardly bear to think of it. That poor girl. That poor, poor girl—”

“I know,” said Poirot. “I know.”

“So young,” said Mrs. Folliat; “just at the beginning of life.” She said again, “I can hardly bear to think of it.”

Poirot looked at her curiously. She seemed, he thought, to have aged by about ten years since the time early in the afternoon, when he had seen her, the gracious hostess, welcoming her guests. Now her face seemed drawn and haggard with the lines in it clearly marked.

“You said to me only yesterday, Madame, it is a very wicked world.”

“Did I say that?” Mrs. Folliat seemed startled. “It’s true…Oh, yes, I’m only just beginning to know how true it is.” She added in a low voice, “But I never thought anything like this would happen.”

Again he looked at her curiously.

“What did you think would happen, then? Something?”

“No, no. I didn’t mean that.”

Poirot persisted.

“But you did expect something to happen—something out of the usual.”

“You misunderstand me, M. Poirot. I only mean that it’s the last thing you would expect to happen in the middle of a fête like this.”

“Lady Stubbs this morning also spoke of wickedness.”

“Hattie did? Oh, don’t speak of her to me—don’t speak of her. I don’t want to think about her.” She was silent for a moment or two, and then said, “What did she say—about wickedness?”

“She was speaking of her cousin. Etienne de Sousa. She said that he was wicked, that he was a bad man. She said, too, that she was afraid of him.”

He watched, but she merely shook her head incredulously.

“Etienne de Sousa—who is he?”

“Of course, you were not at breakfast. I forgot, Mrs. Folliat. Lady Stubbs received a letter from this cousin of hers whom she had not seen since she was a girl of fifteen. He told her that he proposed to call upon her today, this afternoon.”

“And did he come?”

“Yes. He arrived here about half past four.”

“Surely—d’you mean that rather handsome, dark young man who came up the ferry path? I wondered who he was at the time.”

“Yes, Madame, that was Mr. de Sousa.”

Mrs. Folliat said energetically:

“If I were you I should pay no attention to the things Hattie says.” She flushed as Poirot looked at her in surprise and went on, “She is like a child—I mean, she uses terms like a child—wicked, good. No half shades. I shouldn’t pay any attention to what she tells you about this Etienne de Sousa.”

Again Poirot wondered. He said slowly:

“You know Lady Stubbs very well, do you not, Mrs. Folliat?”

“Probably as well as anyone knows her. Possibly even better than her husband really knows her. And if I do?”

“What is she really like, Madame?”

“What a very odd question, M. Poirot.”

“You know, do you not, Madame, that Lady Stubbs cannot be found anywhere?”

Again her answer surprised him. She expressed no concern or astonishment. She said:

“So she has run away, has she? I see.”

“It seems to you quite natural, that?”

“Natural? Oh, I don’t know. Hattie is rather unaccountable.”

“Do you think she has run away because she has a guilty conscience?”

“What do you mean, M. Poirot?”

“Her cousin was talking about her this afternoon. He mentioned casually that she had always been mentally subnormal. I think you must know, Madame, that people who are subnormal mentally are not always accountable for their actions."

"What are you trying to say, M. Poirot?"

"Such people are, as you say, very simple—like children. In a sudden fit of rage they might even kill."

Mrs. Folliat turned on him in sudden anger.

"Hattie was never like that! I won't allow you to say such things. She was a gentle warmhearted girl, even if she was—a little simple mentally. Hattie would never have killed anyone."

She faced him, breathing hard, still indignant.

Poirot wondered. He wondered very much.

II

Breaking into this scene, P.C. Hoskins made his appearance.

He said in an apologetic manner:

"I've been looking for you, ma'am."

"Good evening, Hoskins." Mrs. Folliat was once more her poised self again, the mistress of Nasse House. "Yes, what is it?"

"The inspector's compliments, and he'd be glad to have a word with you—if you feels up to it, that is," Hoskins hastened to add; noting, as Hercule Poirot had done, the effects of shock.

"Of course I feel up to it." Mrs. Folliat rose to her feet. She followed Hoskins out of the room. Poirot, having risen politely, sat down again and stared up at the ceiling with a puzzled frown.

The inspector rose when Mrs. Folliat entered and the constable held the chair for her to sit down.

"I'm sorry to worry you, Mrs. Folliat," said Bland. "But I imagine that you know all the people in the neighbourhood and I think you may be able to help us."

Mrs. Folliat smiled faintly. "I expect," she said, "that I know everyone round here as well as anyone could do. What do you want to know, Inspector?"

"You knew the Tuckers? The family and the girl?"

"Oh, yes, of course, they've always been tenants on the estate. Mrs. Tucker was the youngest of a large family. Her eldest brother was our head gardener. She married Alfred Tucker, who is a farm labourer—a stupid man but very nice. Mrs. Tucker is a bit of a shrew. A good housewife, you know, and very clean in the house, but Tucker is never allowed to come anywhere farther than the scullery with his muddy boots on. All that sort of thing. She nags the children rather. Most of them have married and gone into jobs now. There was just this poor child, Marlene, left and three younger children. Two boys and a girl still at school."

"Now, knowing the family as you do, Mrs. Folliat, can you think of any reason why Marlene should have been killed today?"

"No, indeed I can't. It's quite, quite unbelievable, if you know what I mean, Inspector. There was no boyfriend or anything of that kind, or I shouldn't think so. Not that I've ever heard of, anyway."

"Now what about the people who've been taking part in this Murder Hunt? Can you tell me anything about them?"

"Well, Mrs. Oliver I'd never met before. She is quite unlike my idea of what a crime novelist would be. She's very upset, poor dear, by what has happened—naturally."

"And what about the other helpers—Captain Warburton, for instance?"

"I don't see any reason why he should murder Marlene Tucker, if that's what you're asking me," said Mrs. Folliat composedly. "I don't like him very much. He’s what I call a foxy sort of man, but I suppose one has to be up to all the political tricks and all that kind of thing, if one is a political agent. He’s certainly energetic and has worked very hard over this fête. I don’t think he could have killed the girl, anyway, because he was on the lawn the whole time this afternoon.”

The inspector nodded.

“And the Legges? What do you know about the Legges?”

“Well, they seem a very nice young couple. He’s inclined to be what I should call—moody. I don’t know very much about him. She was a Carstairs before her marriage and I know some relations of hers very well. They took the Mill Cottage for two months, and I hope they’ve enjoyed their holiday here. We’ve all got very friendly together.”

“She’s an attractive lady, I understand.”

“Oh, yes, very attractive.”

“Would you say that at any time Sir George had felt that attraction?”

Mrs. Folliat looked rather astonished.

“Oh, no, I’m sure there was nothing of that kind. Sir George is really absorbed by his business, and very fond of his wife. He’s not at all a philandering sort of man.”

“And there was nothing, you would say, between Lady Stubbs and Mr. Legge?”

Again Mrs. Folliat shook her head.

“Oh, no, positively.”

The inspector persisted.

“There’s been no trouble of any kind between Sir George and his wife, that you know of?”

"I'm sure there hasn't," said Mrs. Folliat, emphatically. "And I would know if there had been."

"It wouldn't be, then, as a result of any disagreement between husband and wife that Lady Stubbs has gone away?"

"Oh, no." She added lightly, "The silly girl, I understand, didn't want to meet this cousin of hers. Some childish phobia. So she's run away just like a child might do."

"That's your opinion. Nothing more than that?"

"Oh, no. I expect she'll turn up again quite soon. Feeling rather ashamed of herself." She added carelessly, "What's become of this cousin, by the way? Is he still here in the house?"

"I understand he's gone back to his yacht."

"And that's at Helmmouth, is it?"

"Yes, at Helmmouth."

"I see," said Mrs. Folliat. "Well, it's rather unfortunate—Hattie behaving so childishly. However, if he's staying on here for a day or so, we can make her see she must behave properly."

It was, the inspector thought, a question, but although he noticed it he did not answer it.

"You are probably thinking," he said, "that all this is rather beside the point. But you do understand, don't you, Mrs. Folliat, that we have to range over rather a wide field. Miss Brewis, for instance. What do you know about Miss Brewis?"

"Well, she's an excellent secretary. More than a secretary. She practically acts as housekeeper down here. In fact, I don't know what they'd do without her."

"Was she Sir George's secretary before he married his wife?"

"I think so. I'm not quite sure. I've only known her since she came down here with them."

"She doesn't like Lady Stubbs very much, does she?"

"No," said Mrs. Folliat, "I'm afraid she doesn't. I don't think these good secretaries ever do care for wives much, if you know what I mean. Perhaps it's natural."

"Was it you or Lady Stubbs who asked Miss Brewis to take cakes and a fruit drink to the girl in the boathouse?"

Mrs. Folliat looked slightly surprised.

"I remember Miss Brewis collecting some cakes and things and saying she was taking them along to Marlene. I didn't know anyone had particularly asked her to do it, or arranged about it. It certainly wasn't me."

"I see. You say you were in the tea tent from four o'clock on. I believe Mrs. Legge was also having tea in the tent at that time."

"Mrs. Legge? No, I don't think so. At least I don't remember seeing her there. In fact, I'm quite sure she wasn't there. We'd had a great influx by the bus from Torquay, and I remember looking round the tent and thinking that they must all be summer visitors; there was hardly a face there that I knew. I think Mrs. Legge must have come in to tea later."

"Oh, well," said the inspector, "it doesn't matter." He added smoothly, "Well, I really think that's all. Thank you, Mrs. Folliat, you've been very kind. We can only hope that Lady Stubbs will return shortly."

"I hope so, too," said Mrs. Folliat. "Very thoughtless of the dear child giving us all so much anxiety." She spoke briskly but the animation in her voice was not very natural. "I'm sure," said Mrs. Folliat, "that she's quite all right. Quite all right."

At that moment the door opened and an attractive young woman with red hair and a freckled face came in, and said:

“I hear you’ve been asking for me?”

“This is Mrs. Legge, Inspector,” said Mrs. Folliat. “Sally, dear, I don’t know whether you’ve heard about the terrible thing that has happened?”

“Oh, yes! Ghastly, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Legge. She uttered an exhausted sigh, and sank down in the chair as Mrs. Folliat left the room.

“I’m terribly sorry about all this,” she said. “It seems really unbelievable, if you know what I mean. I’m afraid I can’t help you in any way. You see, I’ve been telling fortunes all the afternoon, so I haven’t seen anything of what was going on.”

“I know, Mrs. Legge. But we just have to ask everybody the same routine questions. For instance, just where were you between four fifteen and five o’clock?”

“Well, I went and had tea at four o’clock.”

“In the tea tent?”

“Yes.”

“It was very crowded, I believe?”

“Oh, frightfully crowded.”

“Did you see anyone you knew there?”

“Oh, a few old people, yes. Nobody to speak to. Goodness, how I wanted that tea! That was four o’clock, as I say. I got back to the fortune-telling tent at half past four and went on with my job. And goodness knows what I was promising the women in the end. Millionaire husbands, film stardom in Hollywood—heaven knows what. Mere journeys across the sea and suspicious dark women seemed too tame.”

“What happened during the half hour when you were absent—I mean, supposing people wanted to have their fortunes told?”

“Oh, I hung a card up outside the tent. ‘Back at four-thirty.’”

The inspector made a note in his pad.

“When did you last see Lady Stubbs?”

“Hattie? I don’t really know. She was quite near at hand when I came out of the fortune-telling tent to go to tea, but I didn’t speak to her. I don’t remember seeing her afterwards. Somebody told me just now that she’s missing. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Oh, well,” said Sally Legge cheerfully, “she’s a bit queer in the top storey, you know. I dare say having a murder here has frightened her.”

“Well, thank you, Mrs. Legge.”

Mrs. Legge accepted the dismissal with promptitude. She went out, passing Hercule Poirot in the doorway.

III

Looking at the ceiling, the inspector spoke.

“Mrs. Legge says she was in the tea tent between four and four-thirty. Mrs. Folliat says she was helping in the tea tent from four o’clock on but that Mrs. Legge was not among those present.” He paused and then went on, “Miss Brewis says that Lady Stubbs asked her to take a tray of cakes and fruit juice to Marlene Tucker. Michael Weyman says that it’s quite impossible Lady Stubbs should have done any such thing—it would be most uncharacteristic of her.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “the conflicting statements! Yes, one always has them.”

“And what a nuisance they are to clear up, too,” said the inspector. “Sometimes they matter but in nine times out of ten they don’t. Well, we’ve got to do a lot of spade work, that’s clear.”

“And what do you think now, mon cher? What are the latest ideas?”

“I think,” said the inspector gravely, “that Marlene Tucker saw something she was not meant to see. I think that it was because of what Marlene Tucker saw that she had to be killed.”

“I will not contradict you,” said Poirot. “The point is what did she see?”

“She might have seen a murder,” said the inspector. “Or she might have seen the person who did the murder.”

“Murder?” said Poirot. “The murder of whom?”

“What do you think, Poirot? Is Lady Stubbs alive or dead?”

Poirot took a moment or two before he replied. Then he said:

“I think, mon ami, that Lady Stubbs is dead. And I will tell you why I think that. It is because Mrs. Folliat thinks she is dead. Yes, whatever she may say now, or pretend to think, Mrs. Folliat believes that Hattie Stubbs is dead. Mrs. Folliat,” he added, “knows a great deal that we do not.”

Twelve

Hercule Poirot came down to the breakfast table on the following morning to a depleted table. Mrs. Oliver, still suffering from the shock of yesterday's occurrence, was having her breakfast in bed. Michael Weyman had had a cup of coffee and gone out early. Only Sir George and the faithful Miss Brewis were at the breakfast table. Sir George was giving indubitable proof of his mental condition by being unable to eat any breakfast. His plate lay almost untasted before him. He pushed aside the small pile of letters which, after opening them, Miss Brewis had placed before him. He drank coffee with an air of not knowing what he was doing. He said:

"Morning, M. Poirot," perfunctorily, and then relapsed into his state of preoccupation. At times a few ejaculatory murmurs came from him.

"So incredible, the whole damn' thing. Where can she be?"

"The inquest will be held at the Institute on Thursday," said Miss Brewis. "They rang up to tell us."

Her employer looked at her as if he did not understand.

"Inquest?" he said. "Oh, yes, of course." He sounded dazed and uninterested. After another sip or two of coffee he said, "Women are incalculable. What does she think she's doing?"

Miss Brewis pursed her lips. Poirot observed acutely enough that she was in a state of taut nervous tension.

"Hodgson's coming to see you this morning," she remarked, "about the electrification of the milking sheds on the farm. And at twelve o'clock there's the—"

Sir George interrupted.

"I can't see anyone. Put 'em all off! How the devil d'you think a man can attend to business when he's worried half out of his mind about his wife?"

“If you say so, Sir George.” Miss Brewis gave the domestic equivalent of a barrister saying “as your lordship pleases.” Her dissatisfaction was obvious.

“Never know,” said Sir George, “what women get into their heads, or what fool things they’re likely to do! You agree, eh?” he shot the last question at Poirot.

“Les femmes? They are incalculable,” said Poirot, raising his eyebrows and his hands with Gallic fervour. Miss Brewis blew her nose in an annoyed fashion.

“She seemed all right,” said Sir George. “Damn’ pleased about her new ring, dressed herself up to enjoy the fête. All just the same as usual. Not as though we’d had words or a quarrel of any kind. Going off without a word.”

“About those letters, Sir George,” began Miss Brewis.

“Damn the bloody letters to hell,” said Sir George, and pushed aside his coffee cup.

He picked up the letters by his plate and more or less threw them at her.

“Answer them any way you like! I can’t be bothered.” He went on more or less to himself, in an injured tone, “Doesn’t seem to be anything I can do… Don’t even know if that police chap’s any good. Very soft spoken and all that.”

“The police are, I believe,” said Miss Brewis, “very efficient. They have ample facilities for tracing the whereabouts of missing persons.”

“They take days sometimes,” said Sir George, “to find some miserable kid who’s run off and hidden himself in a haystack.”

“I don’t think Lady Stubbs is likely to be in a haystack, Sir George.”

“If only I could do something,” repeated the unhappy husband. “I think, you know, I’ll put an advertisement in the papers. Take it down, Amanda, will you?” He paused a moment in thought. “Hattie. Please come home. Desperate about you. George. All the papers, Amanda.”

Miss Brewis said acidly:

“Lady Stubbs doesn’t often read the papers, Sir George. She’s no interest at all in current affairs or what’s going on in the world.” She added, rather cattily, but Sir George was not in the mood to appreciate cattiness, “Of course you could put an advertisement in Vogue. That might catch her eye.”

Sir George said simply:

“Anywhere you think but get on with it.”

He got up and walked towards the door. With his hand on the handle he paused and came back a few steps. He spoke directly to Poirot.

“Look here, Poirot,” he said, “you don’t think she’s dead, do you?”

Poirot fixed his eyes on his coffee cup as he replied:

“I should say it is far too soon, Sir George, to assume anything of that kind. There is no reason as yet to entertain such an idea.”

“So you do think so,” said Sir George, heavily. “Well,” he added defiantly, “I don’t! I say she’s quite all right.” He nodded his head several times with increasing defiance, and went out banging the door behind him.

Poirot buttered a piece of toast thoughtfully. In cases where there was any suspicion of a wife being murdered, he always automatically suspected the husband. (Similarly, with a husband’s demise, he suspected the wife.) But in this case he did not suspect Sir George of having done away with Lady Stubbs. From his brief observation of them he was quite convinced that Sir George was devoted to his wife. Moreover, as far as his excellent memory served him (and it served him pretty well), Sir George had been present on the lawn the entire afternoon until he himself had left with Mrs. Oliver to discover the body. He had been there on the lawn when they had returned with the news. No, it was not Sir George who was responsible for Hattie’s death. That is, if Hattie were dead. After all, Poirot told himself, there was no reason to believe so as yet. What he had just said to Sir George was true enough. But in his own mind the conviction was unalterable. The pattern, he thought, was the pattern of murder—a double murder.

Miss Brewis interrupted his thoughts by speaking with almost tearful venom.

“Men are such fools,” she said, “such absolute fools! They’re quite shrewd in most ways, and then they go marrying entirely the wrong sort of woman.”

Poirot was always willing to let people talk. The more people who talked to him, and the more they said, the better. There was nearly always a grain of wheat among the chaff.

“You think it has been an unfortunate marriage?” he demanded.

“Disastrous—quite disastrous.”

“You mean—that they were not happy together?”

“She’d a thoroughly bad influence over him in every way.”

“Now I find that very interesting. What kind of a bad influence?”

“Making him run to and fro at her beck and call, getting expensive presents out of him—far more jewels than one woman could wear. And furs. She’s got two mink coats and a Russian ermine. What could any woman want with two mink coats, I’d like to know?”

Poirot shook his head.

“That I would not know,” he said.

“Sly,” continued Miss Brewis. “Deceitful! Always playing the simpleton—especially when people were here. I suppose because she thought he liked her that way!”

“And did he like her that way?”

“Oh, men!” said Miss Brewis, her voice trembling on the edge of hysteria. “They don’t appreciate efficiency or unselfishness, or loyalty or any one of those qualities! Now with a clever, capable wife Sir George would have got somewhere.”

“Got where?” asked Poirot.

“Well, he could take a prominent part in local affairs. Or stand for Parliament. He’s a much more able man than poor Mr. Masterton. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard Mr. Masterton on a platform—a most halting and uninspired speaker. He owes his position entirely to his wife. It’s Mrs. Masterton who’s the power behind the throne. She’s got all the drive and the initiative and the political acumen.”

Poirot shuddered inwardly at the thought of being married to Mrs. Masterton, but he agreed quite truthfully with Miss Brewis’ words.

“Yes,” he said, “she is all that you say. A femme formidable,” he murmured to himself.

“Sir George doesn’t seem ambitious,” went on Miss Brewis; “he seems quite content to live here and potter about and play the country squire, and just go to London occasionally to attend to all his city directorships and all that, but he could make far more of himself than that with his abilities. He’s really a very remarkable man, M. Poirot. That woman never understood him. She just regards him as a kind of machine for tipping out fur coats and jewels and expensive clothes. If he were married to someone who really appreciated his abilities…” She broke off, her voice wavering uncertainly.

Poirot looked at her with a real compassion. Miss Brewis was in love with her employer. She gave him a faithful, loyal and passionate devotion of which he was probably quite unaware and in which he would certainly not be interested. To Sir George, Amanda Brewis was an efficient machine who took the drudgery of daily life off his shoulders, who answered telephone calls, wrote letters, engaged servants, ordered meals and generally made life smooth for him. Poirot doubted if he had ever once thought of her as a woman. And that, he reflected, had its dangers. Women could work themselves up, they could reach an alarming pitch of hysteria unnoticed by the oblivious male who was the object of their devotion.

“A sly, scheming, clever cat, that’s what she is,” said Miss Brewis tearfully.

“You say is, not was, I observe,” said Poirot.

“Of course she isn’t dead!” said Miss Brewis, scornfully. “Gone off with a man, that’s what she’s done! That’s her type.”

“It is possible. It is always possible,” said Poirot. He took another piece of toast, inspected the marmalade pot gloomily and looked down the table to see if there were any kind of jam. There was none, so he resigned himself to butter.

“It’s the only explanation,” said Miss Brewis. “Of course he wouldn’t think of it.”

“Has there—been any—trouble with men?” asked Poirot, delicately.

“Oh, she’s been very clever,” said Miss Brewis.

“You mean you have not observed anything of the kind?”

“She’d be careful that I shouldn’t,” said Miss Brewis.

“But you think that there may have been—what shall I say?—surreptitious episodes?”

“She’s done her best to make a fool of Michael Weyman,” said Miss Brewis. “Taking him down to see the camellia gardens at this time of year! Pretending she’s so interested in the tennis pavilion.”

“After all, that is his business for being here and I understand Sir George is having it built principally to please his wife.”

“She’s no good at tennis,” said Miss Brewis. “She’s no good at any games. Just wants an attractive setting to sit in, while other people run about and get hot. Oh, yes, she’s done her best to make a fool of Michael Weyman. She’d probably have done it too, if he hadn’t had other fish to fry.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, helping himself to a very little marmalade, placing it on the corner of a piece of toast and taking a mouthful dubiously. “So he has other fish to fry, M. Weyman?”

“It was Mrs. Legge who recommended him to Sir George,” said Miss Brewis. “She knew him before she was married. Chelsea, I understand, and all that. She used to paint, you know.”

“She seems a very attractive and intelligent young woman,” said Poirot tentatively.

“Oh, yes, she’s very intelligent,” said Miss Brewis. “She’s had a university education and I daresay could have made a career for herself if she hadn’t married.”

“Has she been married long?”

“About three years, I believe. I don’t think the marriage has turned out very well.”

“There is—incompatibility?”

“He’s a queer young man, very moody. Wanders off a lot by himself and I’ve heard him very bad-tempered with her sometimes.”

“Ah, well,” said Poirot, “the quarrels, the reconciliations, they are a part of early married life. Without them it is possible that life would be drab.”

“She’s spent a good deal of time with Michael Weyman since he’s been down here,” said Miss Brewis. “I think he was in love with her before she married Alec Legge. I dare say it’s only a flirtation on her side.”

“But Mr. Legge was not pleased about it, perhaps?”

“One never knows with him, he’s so vague. But I think he’s been even moodier than usual, lately.”

“Did he admire Lady Stubbs, perhaps?”

“I dare say she thought he did. She thinks she only has to hold up a finger for any man to fall in love with her!”

“In any case, if she has gone off with a man, as you suggest, it is not Mr. Weyman, for Mr. Weyman is still here.”

“It’s somebody she’s been meeting on the sly, I’ve no doubt,” said Miss Brewis. “She often slips out of the house on the quiet and goes off into the woods by herself. She was out the night before last. Yawning and saying she was going up to bed. I caught sight of her not half an hour later slipping out by the side door with a shawl over her head.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at the woman opposite him. He wondered if any reliance at all was to be placed in Miss Brewis’ statements where Lady Stubbs was concerned, or whether it was entirely wishful thinking on her part. Mrs. Folliat, he was sure, did not share Miss Brewis’ ideas and Mrs. Folliat knew Hattie much better than Miss Brewis could do. If Lady Stubbs had run away with a lover it would clearly suit Miss Brewis’ book very well. She would be left to console the bereaved husband and to arrange for him efficiently the details of divorce. But that did not make it true, or probable, or even likely. If Hattie Stubbs had left with a lover, she had chosen a very curious time to do so, Poirot thought. For his own part he did not believe she had.

Miss Brewis sniffed through her nose and gathered together various scattered correspondence.

“If Sir George really wants those advertisements put in, I suppose I’d better see about it,” she said. “Complete nonsense and waste of time. Oh, good morning, Mrs. Masterton,” she added, as the door opened with authority and Mrs. Masterton walked in.

“Inquest is set for Thursday, I hear,” she boomed. “Morning, M. Poirot.”

Miss Brewis paused, her hand full of letters.

“Anything I can do for you, Mrs. Masterton?” she asked.

“No, thank you, Miss Brewis. I expect you’ve plenty on your hands this morning, but I do want to thank you for all the excellent work you put in yesterday. You’re such a good organizer and such a hard worker. We’re all very grateful.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Masterton.”

“Now don’t let me keep you. I’ll sit down and have a word with M. Poirot.”

“Enchanted, Madame,” said Poirot. He had risen to his feet and he bowed.

Mrs. Masterton pulled out a chair and sat down. Miss Brewis left the room, quite restored to her usual efficient self.

“Marvellous woman, that,” said Mrs. Masterton. “Don’t know what the Stubbses would do without her. Running a house takes some doing nowadays. Poor Hattie couldn’t have coped with it. Extraordinary business, this, M. Poirot. I came to ask you what you thought about it.”

“What do you yourself think, Madame?”

“Well, it’s an unpleasant thing to face, but I should say we’ve got some pathological character in this part of the world. Not a native, I hope. Perhaps been let out of an asylum—they’re always letting ’em out half-cured nowadays. What I mean is, no one would ever want to strangle that Tucker girl. There couldn’t be any motive, I mean, except some abnormal one. And if this man, whoever he is, is abnormal I should say he’s probably strangled that poor girl, Hattie Stubbs, as well. She hasn’t very much sense you know, poor child. If she met an ordinary-looking man and he asked her to come and look at something in the woods she’d probably go like a lamb, quite unsuspecting and docile.”

“You think her body is somewhere on the estate?”

“Yes, M. Poirot, I do. They’ll find it once they search around. Mind you, with about sixty-five acres of woodland here, it’ll take some finding, if it’s been dragged into the bushes or tumbled down a slope into the trees. What they need is bloodhounds," said Mrs. Masterton, looking, as she spoke, exactly like a bloodhound herself. "Bloodhounds! I shall ring up the Chief Constable myself and say so."

"It is very possible that you are right, Madame," said Poirot. It was clearly the only thing one could say to Mrs. Masterton.

"Of course I'm right," said Mrs. Masterton; "but I must say, you know, it makes me very uneasy because the fellow is somewhere about. I'm calling in at the village when I leave here, telling the mothers to be very careful about their daughters—not let 'em go about alone. It's not a nice thought, M. Poirot, to have a killer in our midst."

"A little point, Madame. How could a strange man have obtained admission to the boathouse? That would need a key."

"Oh, that," said Mrs. Masterton, "that's easy enough. She came out, of course."

"Came out of the boathouse?"

"Yes. I expect she got bored, like girls do. Probably wandered out and looked about her. The most likely thing, I think, is that she actually saw Hattie Stubbs murdered. Heard a struggle or something, went to see and the man, having disposed of Lady Stubbs, naturally had to kill her too. Easy enough for him to take her back to the boathouse, dump her there and come out, pulling the door behind him. It was a Yale lock. It would pull to, and lock."

Poirot nodded gently. It was not his purpose to argue with Mrs. Masterton or to point out to her the interesting fact which she had completely overlooked, that if Marlene Tucker had been killed away from the boathouse, somebody must have known enough about the murder game to put her back in the exact place and position which the victim was supposed to assume. Instead, he said gently:

"Sir George Stubbs is confident that his wife is still alive."

“That’s what he says, man, because he wants to believe it. He was very devoted to her, you know.” She added, rather unexpectedly, “I like George Stubbs in spite of his origins and his city background and all that, he goes down very well in the county. The worst that can be said about him is that he’s a bit of a snob. And after all, social snobbery’s harmless enough.”

Poirot said somewhat cynically:

“In these days, Madame, surely money has become as acceptable as good birth.”

“My dear man, I couldn’t agree with you more. There’s no need for him to be a snob—only got to buy the place and throw his money about, and we’d all come and call! But actually, the man’s liked. It’s not only his money. Of course Amy Folliat’s had something to do with that. She has sponsored them, and mind you, she’s got a lot of influence in this part of the world. Why, there have been Folliats here since Tudor times.”

“There have always been Folliats at Nasse House,” Poirot murmured to himself.

“Yes.” Mrs. Masterton sighed. “It’s sad, the toll taken by the war. Young men killed in battle—death duties and all that. Then whoever comes into a place can’t afford to keep it up and has to sell—”

“But Mrs. Folliat, although she has lost her home, still lives on the estate.”

“Yes. She’s made the Lodge quite charming too. Have you been inside it?”

“No, we parted at the door.”

“It wouldn’t be everybody’s cup of tea,” said Mrs. Masterton. “To live at the lodge of your old home and see strangers in possession. But to do Amy Folliat justice I don’t think she feels bitter about that. In fact, she engineered the whole thing. There’s no doubt she imbued Hattie with the idea of living down here, and got her to persuade George Stubbs into it. The thing, I think, that Amy Folliat couldn’t have borne was to see the place turned into a hostel or institution, or carved up for building.” She rose to her feet. “Well, I must be getting along. I’m a busy woman.”

“Of course. You have to talk to the Chief Constable about bloodhounds.”

Mrs. Masterton gave a sudden deep bay of laughter. “Used to breed ’em at one time,” she said. “People tell me I’m a bit like a bloodhound myself.”

Poirot was slightly taken aback and she was quick enough to see it.

“I bet you’ve been thinking so, M. Poirot,” she said.

Thirteen

After Mrs. Masterton had left, Poirot went out and strolled through the woods. His nerves were not quite what they should be. He felt an irresistible desire to look behind every bush and to consider every thicket of rhododendron as a possible hiding place for a body. He came at last to the Folly and, going inside it, he sat down on the stone bench there, to rest his feet which were, as was his custom, enclosed in tight, pointed patent leather shoes.

Through the trees he could catch faint glimmers of the river and of the wooded banks on the opposite side. He found himself agreeing with the young architect that this was no place to put an architectural fantasy of this kind. Gaps could be cut in the trees, of course, but even then there would be no proper view. Whereas, as Michael Weyman had said, on the grassy bank near the house a Folly could have been erected with a delightful vista right down the river to Helmmouth. Poirot’s thoughts flew off at a tangent. Helmmouth, the yacht Espérance, and Etienne de Sousa. The whole thing must tie up in some kind of pattern, but what the pattern was he could not visualize. Tempting strands of it showed here and there but that was all.

Something that glittered caught his eye and he bent to pick it up. It had come to rest in a small crack of the concrete base to the temple. He held it in the palm of his hand and looked at it with a faint stirring of recognition. It was a little gold aeroplane charm. As he frowned at it, a picture came into his mind. A bracelet. A gold bracelet hung over with dangling charms. He was sitting once more in the tent and the voice of Madame Zuleika, alias Sally Legge, was talking of dark women and journeys across the sea and good fortune in a letter. Yes, she had had on a bracelet from which depended a multiplicity of small gold objects. One of these modern fashions which repeated the fashions of Poirot’s early days. Probably that was why it had made an impression on him. Some time or other, presumably, Mrs. Legge had sat here in the Folly, and one of the charms had fallen from her bracelet. Perhaps she had not even noticed it. It might have been yesterday afternoon.

Poirot considered that latter point. Then he heard footsteps outside and looked up sharply. A figure came round to the front of the Folly and stopped, startled, at the sight of Poirot. Poirot looked with a considering eye on the slim, fair young man wearing a shirt on which a variety of tortoise and turtle was depicted. The shirt was unmistakable. He had observed it closely yesterday when its wearer was throwing coconuts.

He noticed that the young man was almost unusually perturbed. He said quickly in a foreign accent:

"I beg your pardon—I did not know—"

Poirot smiled gently at him but with a reproving air.

"I am afraid," he said, "that you are trespassing."

"Yes, I am sorry."

"You come from the hostel?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I thought perhaps one could get through the woods this way and so to the quay."

"I am afraid," said Poirot gently, "that you will have to go back the way you came. There is no through road."

The young man said again, showing all his teeth in a would-be agreeable smile:

"I am sorry. I am very sorry."

He bowed and turned away.

Poirot came out of the Folly and back on to the path, watching the boy retreat. When he got to the ending of the path, he looked over his shoulder. Then, seeing Poirot watching him, he quickened his pace and disappeared round the bend.

"Eh bien," said Poirot to himself, "is this a murderer I have seen, or is it not?"

The young man had certainly been at the fête yesterday and had scowled when he had collided with Poirot, and just as certainly therefore he must know quite well that there was no through path by way of the woods to the ferry. If, indeed, he had been looking for a path to the ferry he would not have taken this path by the Folly, but would have kept on the lower level near the river. Moreover, he had arrived at the Folly with the air of one who has reached his rendezvous, and who is badly startled at finding the wrong person at the meeting place.

"So it is like this," said Poirot to himself. "He came here to meet someone. Who did he come to meet?" He added as an afterthought, "And why?"

He strolled down to the bend of the path and looked at it where it wound away into the trees. There was no sign of the young man in the turtle shirt now. Presumably he had deemed it prudent to retreat as rapidly as possible. Poirot retraced his steps, shaking his head.

Lost in thought, he came quietly round the side of the Folly, and stopped on the threshold, startled in his turn. Sally Legge was there on her knees, her head bent down to the cracks in the flooring. She jumped up, startled.

"Oh, M. Poirot, you gave me such a shock. I didn't hear you coming."

"You were looking for something, Madame?"

"I—no, not exactly."

"You had lost something, perhaps," said Poirot. "Dropped something. Or perhaps…" He adopted a roguish, gallant air, "Or perhaps, Madame, it is a rendezvous. I am, most unfortunately, not the person you came to meet?"

She had recovered her aplomb by now.

"Does one ever have rendezvous in the middle of the morning?" she demanded, questioningly.

“Sometimes,” said Poirot, “one has to have a rendezvous at the only time one can. Husbands,” he added sententiously, “are sometimes jealous.”

“I doubt if mine is,” said Sally Legge.

She said the words lightly enough, but behind them Poirot heard an undertone of bitterness.

“He’s so completely engrossed in his own affairs.”

“All women complain of that in husbands,” said Poirot. “Especially in English husbands,” he added.

“You foreigners are more gallant.”

“We know,” said Poirot, “that it is necessary to tell a woman at least once a week, and preferably three or four times, that we love her; and that it is also wise to bring her a few flowers, to pay her a few compliments, to tell her that she looks well in her new dress or new hat.”

“Is that what you do?”

“I, Madame, am not a husband,” said Hercule Poirot. “Alas!” he added.

“I’m sure there’s no alas about it. I’m sure you’re quite delighted to be a carefree bachelor.”

“No, no, Madame, it is terrible all that I have missed in life.”

“I think one’s a fool to marry,” said Sally Legge.

“You regret the days when you painted in your studio in Chelsea?”

“You seem to know all about me, M. Poirot?”

“I am a gossip,” said Hercule Poirot. “I like to hear all about people.” He went on, “Do you really regret, Madame?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She sat down impatiently on the seat. Poirot sat beside her.

He witnessed once more the phenomenon to which he was becoming accustomed. This attractive, redhaired girl was about to say things to him that she would have thought twice about saying to an Englishman.

“I hoped,” she said, “that when we came down here for a holiday away from everything, that things would be the same again…But it hasn’t worked out like that.”

“No?”

“No. Alec’s just as moody and—oh, I don’t know—wrapped up in himself. I don’t know what’s the matter with him. He’s so nervy and on edge. People ring him up and leave queer messages for him and he won’t tell me anything. That’s what makes me mad. He won’t tell me anything! I thought at first it was some other woman, but I don’t think it is. Not really….”

But her voice held a certain doubt which Poirot was quick to notice.

“Did you enjoy your tea yesterday afternoon, Madame?” he asked.

“Enjoy my tea?” She frowned at him, her thoughts seeming to come back from a long way away. Then she said hastily, “Oh, yes. You’ve no idea how exhausting it was, sitting in that tent muffled up in all those veils. It was stifling.”

“The tea tent also must have been somewhat stifling?”

“Oh, yes, it was. However, there’s nothing like a cuppa, is there?”

“You were searching for something just now, were you not, Madame? Would it, by any possibility, be this?” He held out in his hand the little gold charm.

“I—oh, yes. Oh, thank you, M. Poirot. Where did you find it?”

“It was here, on the floor, in that crack over there.”

“I must have dropped it some time.”

“Yesterday?”

“Oh, no, not yesterday. It was before that.”

“But surely, Madame, I remember seeing that particular charm on your wrist when you were telling me my fortune.”

Nobody could tell a deliberate lie better than Hercule Poirot. He spoke with complete assurance and before that assurance Sally Legge’s eyelids dropped.

“I don’t really remember,” she said. “I only noticed this morning that it was missing.”

“Then I am happy,” said Poirot gallantly, “to be able to restore it to you.”

She was turning the little charm over nervously in her fingers. Now she rose.

“Well, thank you, M. Poirot, thank you very much,” she said. Her breath was coming rather unevenly and her eyes were nervous.

She hurried out of the Folly. Poirot leaned back in the seat and nodded his head slowly.

No, he said to himself, no, you did not go to the tea tent yesterday afternoon. It was not because you wanted your tea that you were so anxious to know if it was four o’clock. It was here you came yesterday afternoon. Here, to the Folly. Halfway to the boathouse. You came here to meet someone.

Once again he heard footsteps approaching. Rapid impatient footsteps. “And here perhaps,” said Poirot, smiling in anticipation, “comes whoever it was that Mrs. Legge came up here to meet.”

But then, as Alec Legge came round the corner of the Folly, Poirot ejaculated:

"Wrong again."

"Eh? What's that?" Alec Legge looked startled.

"I said," explained Poirot, "that I was wrong again. I am not often wrong," he explained, "and it exasperates me. It was not you I expected to see."

"Whom did you expect to see?" asked Alec Legge.

Poirot replied promptly.

"A young man—a boy almost—in one of these gaily-patterned shirts with turtles on it."

He was pleased at the effect of his words. Alec Legge took a step forward. He said rather incoherently:

"How do you know? How did—what d'you mean?"

"I am psychic," said Hercule Poirot, and closed his eyes.

Alec Legge took another couple of steps forward. Poirot was conscious that a very angry man was standing in front of him.

"What the devil did you mean?" he demanded.

"Your friend has, I think," said Poirot, "gone back to the Youth Hostel. If you want to see him you will have to go there to find him."

"So that's it," muttered Alec Legge.

He dropped down at the other end of the stone bench.

"So that's why you're down here? It wasn't a question of 'giving away the prizes.' I might have known better." He turned towards Poirot. His face was haggard and unhappy. "I know what it must seem like," he said. "I know what the whole thing looks like. But it isn't as you think it is. I'm being victimized. I tell you that once you get into these people's clutches, it isn't so easy to get out of them. And I want to get out of them. That's the point. I want to get out of them. You get desperate, you know. You feel like taking desperate measures. You feel you're caught like a rat in a trap and there's nothing you can do. Oh, well, what's the good of talking! You know what you want to know now, I suppose. You've got your evidence."

He got up, stumbled a little as though he could hardly see his way, then rushed off energetically without a backward look.

Hercule Poirot remained behind with his eyes very wide open and his eyebrows rising.

"All this is very curious," he murmured. "Curious and interesting. I have the evidence I need, have I? Evidence of what? Murder?"

Fourteen

I

Inspector Bland sat in Helmmouth Police Station. Superintendent Baldwin, a large comfortable-looking man, sat on the other side of the table. Between the two men, on the table, was a black sodden mass. Inspector Bland poked at it with a cautious forefinger.

“That’s her hat all right,” he said. “I’m sure of it, though I don’t suppose I could swear to it. She fancied that shape, it seems. So her maid told me. She’d got one or two of them. A pale pink and a sort of puce colour, but yesterday she was wearing the black one. Yes, this is it. And you fished it out of the river? That makes it look as though it’s the way we think it is.”

“No certainty yet,” said Baldwin. “After all,” he added, “anyone could throw a hat into the river.”

“Yes,” said Bland, “they could throw it in from the boathouse, or they could throw it in off a yacht.”

“The yacht’s sewed up, all right,” said Baldwin. “If she’s there, alive or dead, she’s still there.”

“He hasn’t been ashore today?”

“Not so far. He’s on board. He’s been sitting out in a deck chair smoking a cigar.”

Inspector Bland glanced at the clock.

“Almost time to go aboard,” he said.

“Think you’ll find her?” asked Baldwin.

“I wouldn’t bank on it,” said Bland. “I’ve got the feeling, you know, that he’s a clever devil.” He was lost in thought for a moment, poking again at the hat. Then he said, “What about the body—if there was a body? Any ideas about that?”

“Yes,” said Baldwin, “I talked to Otterweight this morning. Ex-coastguard man. I always consult him in anything to do with tides and currents. About the time the lady went into the Helm, if she did go into the Helm, the tide was just on the ebb. There is a full moon now and it would be flowing swiftly. Reckon she’d be carried out to sea and the current would take her towards the Cornish coast. There’s no certainty where the body would fetch up or if it would fetch up at all. One or two drownings we’ve had here, we’ve never recovered the body. It gets broken up, too, on the rocks. Here, by Start Point. On the other hand, it might fetch up any day.”

“If it doesn’t, it’s going to be difficult,” said Bland.

“You’re certain in your own mind that she did go into the river?”

“I don’t see what else it can be,” said Inspector Bland sombrely. “We’ve checked up, you know, on the buses and the trains. This place is a cul-de-sac. She was wearing conspicuous clothes and she didn’t take any others with her. So I should say she never left Nasse. Either her body’s in the sea or else it’s hidden somewhere on the property. What I want now,” he went on heavily, “is motive. And the body of course,” he added, as an afterthought. “Can’t get anywhere until I find the body.”

“What about the other girl?”

“She saw it—or she saw something. We’ll get at the facts in the end, but it won’t be easy.”

Baldwin in his turn looked up at the clock.

“Time to go,” he said.

The two police officers were received on board the Espérance with all de Sousa’s charming courtesy. He offered them drinks which they refused, and went on to express a kindly interest in their activities.

“You are farther forward with your inquiries regarding the death of this young girl?”

“We’re progressing,” Inspector Bland told him.

The superintendent took up the running and expressed very delicately the object of their visit.

“You would like to search the Espérance?” De Sousa did not seem annoyed. Instead he seemed rather amused. “But why? You think I conceal the murderer or do you think perhaps that I am the murderer myself?”

“It’s necessary, Mr. de Sousa, as I’m sure you’ll understand. A search warrant….”

De Sousa raised his hands.

“But I am anxious to cooperate—eager! Let this be all among friends. You are welcome to search where you will in my boat. Ah, perhaps you think that I have here my cousin, Lady Stubbs? You think, perhaps, she has run away from her husband and taken shelter with me? But search, gentlemen, by all means search.”

The search was duly undertaken. It was a thorough one. In the end, striving to conceal their chagrin, the two police officers took leave of Mr. de Sousa.

“You have found nothing? How disappointing. But I told you that was so. You will perhaps have some refreshment now. No?”

He accompanied them to where their boat lay alongside.

“And for myself?” he asked. “I am free to depart? You understand it becomes a little boring here. The weather is good. I should like very much to proceed to Plymouth.”

“If you would be kind enough, sir, to remain here for the inquest—that is tomorrow—in case the Coroner should wish to ask you anything.”

“Why, certainly. I want to do all that I can. But after that?”

"After that, sir," said Superintendent Baldwin, his face wooden, "you are, of course, at liberty to proceed where you will."

The last thing they saw as the launch moved away from the yacht was de Sousa's smiling face looking down on them.

II

The inquest was almost painfully devoid of interest. Apart from the medical evidence and evidence of identity, there was little to feed the curiosity of the spectators. An adjournment was asked for and granted. The whole proceedings had been purely formal.

What followed the inquest, however, was not quite so formal. Inspector Bland spent the afternoon taking a trip in that well-known pleasure steamer, the Devon Belle. Leaving Brixwell at about three o'clock, it rounded the headland, proceeded around the coast, entered the mouth of the Helm and went up the river. There were about two hundred and thirty people on board besides Inspector Bland. He sat on the starboard side of the boat, scanning the wooded shore. They came round a bend in the river and passed the isolated grey tiled boathouse that belonged to Hoodown Park. Inspector Bland looked surreptitiously at his watch. It was just quarter past four. They were coming now close beside the Nasse boathouse. It nestled remote in its trees with its little balcony and its small quay below. There was no sign apparent that there was anyone inside the boathouse, though as a matter of fact, to Inspector Bland's certain knowledge, there was someone inside. P.C. Hoskins, in accordance with orders, was on duty there.

Not far from the boathouse steps was a small launch. In the launch were a man and girl in holiday kit. They were indulging in what seemed like some rather rough horseplay. The girl was screaming, the man was playfully pretending he was going to duck her overboard. At that same moment a stentorian voice spoke through a megaphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," it boomed, "you are now approaching the famous village of Gitcham where we shall remain for three-quarters of an hour and where you can have a crab or lobster tea, as well as Devonshire cream. On your right are the grounds of Nasse House. You will pass the house itself in two or three minutes, it is just visible through the trees. Originally the home of Sir Gervase Folliat, a contemporary of Sir Francis Drake who sailed with him in his voyage to the new world, it is now the property of Sir George Stubbs. On your left is the famous Gooseacre Rock. There, ladies and gentlemen, it was the habit to deposit scolding wives at low tide and leave them there until the water came up to their necks."

Everybody on the Devon Belle stared with fascinated interest at the Gooseacre Rock. Jokes were made and there were many shrill giggles and guffaws.

While this was happening, the holidaymaker in the boat, with a final scuffle, did push his lady friend overboard. Leaning over, he held her in the water, laughing and saying, "No, I don't pull you out till you've promised to behave."

Nobody, however, observed this with the exception of Inspector Bland. They had all been listening to the megaphone, staring for the first sight of Nasse House through the trees, and gazing with fascinated interest at the Gooseacre Rock.

The holidaymaker released the girl, she sank under water and a few moments later appeared on the other side of the boat. She swam to it and got in, heaving herself over the side with practised skill. Policewoman Alice Jones was an accomplished swimmer.

Inspector Bland came ashore at Gitcham with the other two hundred and thirty passengers and consumed a lobster tea with Devonshire cream and scones. He said to himself as he did so, "So it could be done, and no one would notice!"

III

While Inspector Bland was doing his experiment on the Helm, Hercule Poirot was experimenting with a tent on the lawn at Nasse House. It was, in actual fact, the same tent where Madame Zuleika had told her fortunes. When the rest of the marquees and stands had been dismantled Poirot had asked for this to remain behind.

He went into it now, closed the flaps and went to the back of it. Deftly he unlaced the flaps there, slipped out, relaced them, and plunged into the hedge of rhododendron that immediately backed the tent. Slipping between a couple of bushes, he soon reached a small rustic arbour. It was a kind of summerhouse with a closed door. Poirot opened the door and went inside.

It was very dim inside because very little light came in through the rhododendrons which had grown up round it since it had been first placed there many years ago. There was a box there with croquet balls in it, and some old rusted hoops. There were one or two broken hockey sticks, a good many earwigs and spiders, and a round irregular mark on the dust on the floor. At this Poirot looked for some time. He knelt down, and taking a little yard measure from his pocket, he measured its dimensions carefully. Then he nodded his head in a satisfied fashion.

He slipped out quietly, shutting the door behind him. Then he pursued an oblique course through the rhododendron bushes. He worked his way up the hill in this way and came out a short time after on the path which led to the Folly and down from there to the boathouse.

He did not visit the Folly this time, but went straight down the zigzagging way until he reached the boathouse. He had the key with him and he opened the door and went in.

Except for the removal of the body, and of the tea tray with its glass and plate, it was just as he remembered it. The police had noted and photographed all that it contained. He went over now to the table where the pile of comics lay. He turned them over and his expression was not unlike Inspector Bland’s had been as he noted the words Marlene had doodled down there before she died. “Jackie Blake goes with Susan Brown.” “Peter pinches girls at the pictures.” “Georgie Porgie kisses hikers in the wood.” “Biddy Fox likes boys.” “Albert goes with Doreen.”

He found the remarks pathetic in their young crudity. He remembered Marlene’s plain, rather spotty face. He suspected that boys had not pinched Marlene at the pictures. Frustrated, Marlene had got a vicarious thrill by her spying and peering at her young contemporaries. She had spied on people, she had snooped, and she had seen things. Things that she was not meant to have seen—things, usually, of small importance, but on one occasion perhaps something of more importance? Something of whose importance she herself had had no idea.

It was all conjecture, and Poirot shook his head doubtfully. He replaced the pile of comics neatly on the table, his passion for tidiness always in the ascendent. As he did so, he was suddenly assailed with the feeling of something missing. Something…What was it? Something that ought to have been there…Something…He shook his head as the elusive impression faded.

He went slowly out of the boathouse, unhappy and displeased with himself. He, Hercule Poirot, had been summoned to prevent a murder—and he had not prevented it. It had happened. What was even more humiliating was that he had no real ideas, even now, as to what had actually happened. It was ignominious. And tomorrow he must return to London defeated. His ego was seriously deflated—even his moustaches drooped.

Fifteen

It was a fortnight later that Inspector Bland had a long and unsatisfying interview with the Chief Constable of the County.

Major Merrall had irritable tufted eyebrows and looked rather like an angry terrier. But his men all liked him and respected his judgment.

“Well, well, well,” said Major Merrall. “What have we got? Nothing that we can act on. This fellow de Sousa now? We can’t connect him in any way with the Girl Guide. If Lady Stubbs’ body had turned up, that would have been different.” He brought his eyebrows down towards his nose and glared at Bland. “You think there is a body, don’t you?”

“What do you think, sir?”

“Oh, I agree with you. Otherwise, we’d have traced her by now. Unless, of course, she’d made her plans very carefully. And I don’t see the least indication of that. She’d no money, you know. We’ve been into all the financial side of it. Sir George had the money. He made her a very generous allowance, but she’s not got a stiver of her own. And there’s no trace of a lover. No rumour of one, no gossip—and there would be, mark you, in a country district like that.”

He took a turn up and down the floor.

“The plain fact of it is that we don’t know. We think de Sousa for some unknown reason of his own made away with his cousin. The most probable thing is that he got her to meet him down at the boathouse, took her aboard the launch and pushed her overboard. You’ve tested that that could happen?”

“Good lord, sir! You could drown a whole boatful of people during holiday time in the river or on the seashore. Nobody’d think anything of it. Everyone spends their time squealing and pushing each other off things. But the thing de Sousa didn’t know about, was that that girl was in the boathouse, bored to death with nothing to do and ten to one was looking out of the window.”

“Hoskins looked out of the window and watched the performance you put up, and you didn’t see him?”

“No, sir. You’d have no idea anyone was in that boathouse unless they came out on the balcony and showed themselves—”

“Perhaps the girl did come out on the balcony. De Sousa realizes she’s seen what he’s doing, so he comes ashore and deals with her, gets her to let him into the boathouse by asking her what she’s doing there. She tells him, pleased with her part in the Murder Hunt, he puts the cord round her neck in a playful manner—and whoooosh…” Major Merrall made an expressive gesture with his hands. “That’s that! Okay, Bland; okay. Let’s say that’s how it happened. Pure guesswork. We haven’t got any evidence. We haven’t got a body, and if we attempted to detain de Sousa in this country we’d have a hornets’ nest about our ears. We’ll have to let him go.”

“Is he going, sir?”

“He’s laying up his yacht a week from now. Going back to his blasted island.”

“So we haven’t got much time,” said Inspector Bland gloomily.

“There are other possibilities, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, sir, there are several possibilities. I still hold to it that she must have been murdered by somebody who was in on the facts of the Murder Hunt. We can clear two people completely. Sir George Stubbs and Captain Warburton. They were running shows on the lawn and taking charge of things the entire afternoon. They are vouched for by dozens of people. The same applies to Mrs. Masterton, if, that is, one can include her at all.”

“Include everybody,” said Major Merrall. “She’s continually ringing me up about bloodhounds. In a detective story,” he added wistfully, “she’d be just the woman who had done it. But, dash it, I’ve known Connie Masterton pretty well all my life. I just can’t see her going round strangling Girl Guides, or disposing of mysterious exotic beauties. Now, then, who else is there?”

“There’s Mrs. Oliver,” said Bland. “She devised the Murder Hunt. She’s rather eccentric and she was away on her own for a good part of the afternoon. Then there’s Mr. Alec Legge.”

“Fellow in the pink cottage, eh?”

“Yes. He left the show fairly early on, or he wasn’t seen there. He says he got fed up with it and walked back to his cottage. On the other hand, old Merdell—that’s the old boy down at the quay who looks after people’s boats for them and helps with the parking—he says Alec Legge passed him going back to the cottage about five o’clock. Not earlier. That leaves about an hour of his time unaccounted for. He says, of course, that Merdell has no idea of time and was quite wrong as to when he saw him. And after all, the old man is ninety-two.”

“Rather unsatisfactory,” said Major Merrall. “No motive or anything of that kind to tie him in?”

“He might have been having an affair with Lady Stubbs,” said Bland doubtfully, “and she might have been threatening to tell his wife, and he might have done her in, and the girl might have seen it happen—”

“And he concealed Lady Stubbs’ body somewhere?”

“Yes. But I’m blessed if I know how or where. My men have searched that sixty-five acres and there’s no trace anywhere of disturbed earth, and I should say that by now we’ve rooted under every bush there is. Still, say he did manage to hide the body, he could have thrown her hat into the river as a blind. And Marlene Tucker saw him and so he disposed of her? That part of it’s always the same.” Inspector Bland paused, then said, “And, of course, there’s Mrs. Legge—”

“What have we got on her?”

“She wasn’t in the tea tent from four to half past as she says she was,” said Inspector Bland slowly. “I spotted that as soon as I’d talked to her and to Mrs. Folliat. Evidence supports Mrs. Folliat’s statement. And that’s the particular, vital half hour.” Again he paused. “Then there’s the architect, young Michael Weyman. It’s difficult to tie him up with it in any way, but he’s what I should call a likely murderer—one of those cocky, nervy young fellows. Would kill anyone and not turn a hair about it. In with a loose set, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“You’re so damned respectable, Bland,” said Major Merrall. “How does he account for his movements?”

“Very vague, sir. Very vague indeed.”

“That proves he’s a genuine architect,” said Major Merrall with feeling. He had recently built himself a house near the sea coast. “They’re so vague, I wonder they’re alive at all sometimes.”

“Doesn’t know where he was or when and there’s nobody who seems to have seen him. There is some evidence that Lady Stubbs was keen on him.”

“I suppose you’re hinting at one of these sex murders?”

“I’m only looking about for what I can find, sir,” said Inspector Bland with dignity. “And then there’s Miss Brewis…” He paused. It was a long pause.

“That’s the secretary, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. Very efficient woman.”

Again there was a pause. Major Merrall eyed his subordinate keenly.

“You’ve got something on your mind about her, haven’t you?” he said.

“Yes, I have, sir. You see, she admits quite openly that she was in the boathouse at about the time the murder must have been committed.”

“Would she do that if she was guilty?”

“She might,” said Inspector Bland slowly. “Actually, it’s the best thing she could do. You see, if she picks up a tray with cake and a fruit drink and tells everyone she’s taking that for the child down there—well, then, her presence is accounted for. She goes there and comes back and says the girl was alive at that time. We’ve taken her word for it. But if you remember, sir, and look again at the medical evidence, Dr. Cook’s time of death is between four o’clock and quarter to five. We’ve only Miss Brewis’ word for it that Marlene was alive at a quarter past four. And there’s one curious point that came up about her testimony. She told me that it was Lady Stubbs who told her to take the cakes and fruit drink to Marlene. But another witness said quite definitely that that wasn’t the sort of thing that Lady Stubbs would think about. And I think, you know, that they’re right there. It’s not like Lady Stubbs. Lady Stubbs was a dumb beauty wrapped up in herself and her own appearance. She never seems to have ordered meals or taken an interest in household management or thought of anybody at all except her own handsome self. The more I think of it, the more it seems most unlikely that she should have told Miss Brewis to take anything to the Girl Guide.”

“You know, Bland,” said Merrall, “you’ve got something there. But what’s her motive, if so?”

“No motive for killing the girl,” said Bland; “but I do think, you know, that she might have a motive for killing Lady Stubbs. According to M. Poirot, whom I told you about, she’s head over heels in love with her employer. Supposing she followed Lady Stubbs into the woods and killed her and that Marlene Tucker, bored in the boathouse, came out and happened to see it? Then of course she’d have to kill Marlene too. What would she do next? Put the girl’s body in the boathouse, come back to the house, fetch the tray and go down to the boathouse again. Then she’s covered her own absence from the fête and we’ve got her testimony, our only reliable testimony on the face of it, that Marlene Tucker was alive at a quarter past four.”

“Well,” said Major Merrall, with a sigh, “keep after it, Bland. Keep after it. What do you think she did with Lady Stubbs’ body, if she’s the guilty party?”

“Hid it in the woods, buried it, or threw it into the river.”

“The last would be rather difficult, wouldn’t it?”

“It depends where the murder was committed,” said the inspector. “She’s quite a hefty woman. If it was not far from the boathouse, she could have carried her down there and thrown her off the edge of the quay.”

“With every pleasure steamer on the Helm looking on?”

“It would be just another piece of horseplay. Risky, but possible. But I think it far more likely myself that she hid the body somewhere, and just threw the hat into the Helm. It’s possible, you see, that she, knowing the house and grounds well, might know some place where you could conceal a body. She may have managed to dispose of it in the river later. Who knows? That is, of course, if she did it,” added Inspector Bland as an afterthought. “But, actually, sir, I stick to de Sousa—”

Major Merrall had been noting down points on a pad. He looked up now, clearing his throat.

“It comes to this, then. We can summarize it as follows: we’ve got five or six people who could have killed Marlene Tucker. Some of them are more likely than others, but that’s as far as we can go. In a general way, we know why she was killed. She was killed because she saw something. But until we know exactly what it was she saw—we don’t know who killed her.”

“Put like that, you make it sound a bit difficult, sir.”

“Oh, it is difficult. But we shall get there—in the end.”

“And meantime that chap will have left England—laughing in his sleeve—having got away with two murders.”

“You’re fairly sure about him, aren’t you? I don’t say you’re wrong. All the same….”

The chief constable was silent for a moment or two, then he said, with a shrug of his shoulders:

“Anyway, it’s better than having one of these psychopathic murderers. We’d probably be having a third murder on our hands by now.”

“They do say things go in threes,” said the inspector gloomily.

He repeated that remark the following morning when he heard that old Merdell, returning home from a visit to his favourite pub across the river at Gitcham, must have exceeded his usual potations and had fallen in the river when boarding the quay. His boat was found adrift, and the old man’s body was recovered that evening.

The inquest was short and simple. The night had been dark and overcast, old Merdell had had three pints of beer and, after all, he was ninety-two.

The verdict brought in was Accidental Death.

Sixteen

I

Hercule Poirot sat in a square chair in front of the square fireplace in the square room of his London flat. In front of him were various objects that were not square: that were instead violently and almost impossibly curved. Each of them, studied separately, looked as if it could not have any conceivable function in a sane world. They appeared improbable, irresponsible, and wholly fortuitous. In actual fact, of course, they were nothing of the sort.

Assessed correctly, each had its particular place in a particular universe. Assembled in their proper place in their particular universe, they not only made sense, they made a picture. In other words, Hercule Poirot was doing a jigsaw puzzle.

He looked down at where a rectangle still showed improbably shaped gaps. It was an occupation he found soothing and pleasant. It brought disorder into order. It had, he reflected, a certain resemblance to his own profession. There, too, one was faced with various improbably shaped and unlikely facts which, though seeming to bear no relationship to each other, yet did each have its properly balanced part in assembling the whole. His fingers deftly picked up an improbable piece of dark grey and fitted it into a blue sky. It was, he now perceived, part of an aeroplane.

“Yes,” murmured Poirot to himself, “that is what one must do. The unlikely piece here, the improbable piece there, the oh-so-rational piece that is not what it seems; all of these have their appointed place, and once they are fitted in, eh bien, there is an end of the business! All is clear. All is—as they say nowadays—in the picture.”

He fitted in, in rapid succession, a small piece of a minaret, another piece that looked as though it was part of a striped awning and was actually the backside of a cat, and a missing piece of sunset that had changed with Turneresque suddenness from orange to pink.

If one knew what to look for, it would be so easy, said Hercule Poirot to himself. But one does not know what to look for. And so one looks in the wrong places or for the wrong things. He sighed vexedly. His eyes strayed from the jigsaw puzzle in front of him to the chair on the other side of the fireplace. There, not half an hour ago, Inspector Bland had sat consuming tea and crumpets (square crumpets) and talking sadly. He had had to come to London on police business and that police business having been accomplished, he had come to call upon M. Poirot. He had wondered, he explained, whether M. Poirot had any ideas. He had then proceeded to explain his own ideas. On every point he outlined, Poirot had agreed with him. Inspector Bland, so Poirot thought, had made a very fair and unprejudiced survey of the case.

It was now a month, nearly five weeks, since the occurrences at Nasse House. It had been five weeks of stagnation and of negation. Lady Stubbs' body had not been recovered. Lady Stubbs, if living, had not been traced. The odds, Inspector Bland pointed out, were strongly against her being alive. Poirot agreed with him.

"Of course," said Bland, "the body might not have been washed up. There's no telling with a body once it's in the water. It may show up yet, though it will be pretty unrecognizable when it does."

"There is a third possibility," Poirot pointed out.

Bland nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I've thought of that. I keep thinking of that, in fact. You mean the body's there—at Nasse, hidden somewhere where we've never thought of looking. It could be, you know. It just could be. With an old house, and with grounds like that, there are places you'd never think of—that you'd never know were there."

He paused a moment, ruminated, and then said:

"There's a house I was in only the other day. They'd built an air raid shelter, you know, in the war. A flimsy sort of more or less homemade job in the garden, by the wall of the house, and had made a way from it into the house

—into the cellar. Well, the war ended, the shelters tumbled down, they heaped it up in irregular mounds and made a kind of rockery of it. Walking through that garden now, you'd never think that the place had once been an air raid shelter and that there was a chamber underneath. Looks as though it was always meant to be a rockery. And all the time, behind a wine bin in the cellar, there's a passage leading into it. That's what I mean. That kind of thing. Some sort of way into some kind of place that no outsider would know about. I don't suppose there's an actual Priest's Hole or anything of that kind?"

"Hardly—not at that period."

"That's what Mr. Weyman says—he says the house was built about 1790 or thereabouts. No reason for priests to hide themselves by that date. All the same, you know, there might be—somewhere, some alteration in the structure—something that one of the family might know about. What do you think, M. Poirot?"

"It is possible, yes," said Poirot. "Mais oui, decidedly it is an idea. If one accepts the possibility, then the next thing is—who would know about it? Anyone staying in the house might know, I suppose?"

"Yes. Of course it would let out de Sousa." The inspector looked dissatisfied. De Sousa was still his preferred suspect. "As you say, anyone who lived in the house, such as a servant or one of the family, might know about it. Someone just staying in the house would be less likely. People who only came in from outside, like the Legges, less likely still."

"The person who would certainly know about such a thing, and who could tell you if you asked her, would be Mrs. Folliat," said Poirot.

Mrs. Folliat, he thought, knew all there was to know about Nasse House. Mrs. Folliat knew a great deal…Mrs. Folliat had known straight away that Hattie Stubbs was dead. Mrs. Folliat knew, before Marlene and Hattie Stubbs died, that it was a very wicked world and that there were very wicked people in it. Mrs. Folliat, thought Poirot vexedly, was the key to the whole business. But Mrs. Folliat, he reflected, was a key that would not easily turn in the lock.

“I’ve interviewed the lady several times,” said the inspector. “Very nice, very pleasant she’s been about everything, and seems very distressed that she can’t suggest anything helpful.”

Can’t or won’t? thought Poirot. Bland was perhaps thinking the same.

“There’s a type of lady,” he said, “that you can’t force. You can’t frighten them, or persuade them, or diddle them.”

No, Poirot thought, you couldn’t force or persuade or diddle Mrs. Folliat.

The inspector had finished his tea, and sighed and gone, and Poirot had got out his jigsaw puzzle to alleviate his mounting exasperation. For he was exasperated. Both exasperated and humiliated. Mrs. Oliver had summoned him, Hercule Poirot, to elucidate a mystery. She had felt that there was something wrong, and there had been something wrong. And she had looked confidently to Hercule Poirot, first to prevent it—and he had not prevented it—and, secondly, to discover the killer, and he had not discovered the killer. He was in a fog, in the type of fog where there are from time to time baffling gleams of light. Every now and then, or so it seemed to him, he had had one of those glimpses. And each time he had failed to penetrate farther. He had failed to assess the value of what he seemed, for one brief moment, to have seen.

Poirot got up, crossed to the other side of the hearth, rearranged the second square chair so that it was at a definite geometric angle, and sat down in it. He had passed from the jigsaw of painted wood and cardboard to the jigsaw of a murder problem. He took a notebook from his pocket and wrote in small neat characters:

“Etienne de Sousa, Amanda Brewis, Alec Legge, Sally Legge, Michael Weyman.”

It was physically impossible for Sir George or Jim Warburton to have killed Marlene Tucker. Since it was not physically impossible for Mrs. Oliver to have done so, he added her name after a brief space. He also added the name of Mrs. Masterton since he did not remember of his own knowledge having seen Mrs. Masterton constantly on the lawn between four o’clock and quarter to five. He added the name of Henden, the butler; more, perhaps, because a sinister butler had figured in Mrs. Oliver's Murder Hunt than because he had really any suspicions of the dark-haired artist with the gong stick. He also put down "Boy in turtle shirt" with a query mark after it. Then he smiled, shook his head, took a pin from the lapel of his jacket, shut his eyes and stabbed with it. It was as good a way as any other, he thought.

He was justifiably annoyed when the pin proved to have transfixed the last entry.

"I am an imbecile," said Hercule Poirot. "What has a boy in a turtle shirt to do with this?"

But he also realized he must have had some reason for including this enigmatic character in his list. He recalled again the day he had sat in the Folly, and the surprise on the boy's face at seeing him there. Not a very pleasant face, despite the youthful good looks. An arrogant ruthless face. The young man had come there for some purpose. He had come to meet someone, and it followed that that someone was a person whom he could not meet, or did not wish to meet, in the ordinary way. It was a meeting, in fact, to which attention must not be called. A guilty meeting. Something to do with the murder?

Poirot pursued his reflections. A boy who was staying at the Youth Hostel—that is to say, a boy who would be in that neighbourhood for two nights at most. Had he come there casually? One of the many young students visiting Britain? Or had he come there for a special purpose, to meet some special person? There could have been what seemed a casual encounter on the day of the fête—possibly there had been.

I know a good deal, said Hercule Poirot to himself. I have in my hands many, many pieces of this jigsaw. I have an idea of the kind of crime this was—but it must be that I am not looking at it the right way.

He turned a page of his notebook, and wrote:

Did Lady Stubbs ask Miss Brewis to take tea to Marlene? If not, why does Miss Brewis say that she did?

He considered the point. Miss Brewis might quite easily herself have thought of taking cake and a fruit drink to the girl. But if so why did she not simply say so? Why lie about Lady Stubbs having asked her to do so? Could this be because Miss Brewis went to the boathouse and found Marlene dead? Unless Miss Brewis was herself guilty of the murder, that seemed very unlikely. She was not a nervous woman nor an imaginative one. If she had found the girl dead, she would surely at once have given the alarm?

He stared for some time at the two questions he had written. He could not help feeling that somewhere in those words there was some vital pointer to the truth that had escaped him. After four or five minutes of thought he wrote down something more.

Etienne de Sousa declares that he wrote to his cousin three weeks before his arrival at Nasse House. Is that statement true or false?

Poirot felt almost certain that it was false. He recalled the scene at the breakfast table. There seemed no earthly reason why Sir George or Lady Stubbs should pretend to a surprise and, in the latter’s case, a dismay, which they did not feel. He could see no purpose to be accomplished by it. Granting, however, that Etienne de Sousa had lied, why did he lie? To give the impression that his visit had been announced and welcomed? It might be so, but it seemed a very doubtful reason. There was certainly no evidence that such a letter had ever been written or received. Was it an attempt on de Sousa’s part to establish his bona fides—to make his visit appear natural and even expected? Certainly Sir George had received him amicably enough, although he did not know him.

Poirot paused, his thoughts coming to a stop. Sir George did not know de Sousa. His wife, who did know him, had not seen him. Was there perhaps something there? Could it be possible that the Etienne de Sousa who had arrived that day at the fête was not the real Etienne de Sousa? He went over the idea in his mind, but again he could see no point to it. What had de Sousa to gain by coming and representing himself as de Sousa if he was not de Sousa? In any case, de Sousa did not derive any benefit from Hattie's death. Hattie, as the police had ascertained, had no money of her own except that which was allowed her by her husband.

Poirot tried to remember exactly what she had said to him that morning. "He is a bad man. He does wicked things." And, according to Bland, she had said to her husband: "He kills people."

There was something rather significant about that, now that one came to examine all the facts. He kills people.

On the day Etienne de Sousa had come to Nasse House one person certainly had been killed, possibly two people. Mrs. Folliat had said that one should pay no attention to these melodramatic remarks of Hattie's. She had said so very insistently. Mrs. Folliat….

Hercule Poirot frowned, then brought his hand down with a bang on the arm of his chair.

"Always, always—I return to Mrs. Folliat. She is the key to the whole business. If I knew what she knows…I can no longer sit in an armchair and just think. No, I must take a train and go again to Devon and visit Mrs. Folliat."

II

Hercule Poirot paused for a moment outside the big wrought iron gates of Nasse House. He looked ahead of him along the curving drive. It was no longer summer. Golden-brown leaves fluttered gently down from the trees. Near at hand the grassy banks were coloured with small mauve cyclamen. Poirot sighed. The beauty of Nasse House appealed to him in spite of himself. He was not a great admirer of nature in the wild, he liked things trim and neat, yet he could not but appreciate the soft wild beauty of massed shrubs and trees.

At his left was the small white porticoed lodge. It was a fine afternoon. Probably Mrs. Folliat would not be at home. She would be out somewhere with her gardening basket or else visiting some friends in the neighbourhood. She had many friends. This was her home, and had been her home for many long years. What was it the old man on the quay had said? “There’ll always be Folliats at Nasse House.”

Poirot rapped gently upon the door of the Lodge. After a few moments’ delay he heard footsteps inside. They sounded to his ear slow and almost hesitant. Then the door was opened and Mrs. Folliat stood framed in the doorway. He was startled to see how old and frail she looked. She stared at him incredulously for a moment or two, then she said:

“M. Poirot? You!”

He thought for a moment that he had seen fear leap into her eyes, but perhaps that was sheer imagination on his part. He said politely:

“May I come in, Madame?”

“But of course.”

She had recovered all her poise now, beckoned him in with a gesture and led the way into her small sittingroom. There were some delicate Chelsea figures on the mantelpiece, a couple of chairs covered in exquisite petit point, and a Derby tea service stood on the small table. Mrs. Folliat said:

“I will fetch another cup.”

Poirot raised a faintly protesting hand, but she pushed the protest aside.

“Of course you must have some tea.”

She went out of the room. He looked round him once more. A piece of needlework, a petit point chair seat, lay on a table with a needle sticking in it. Against the wall was a bookcase with books. There was a little cluster of miniatures on the wall and a faded photograph in a silver frame of a man in uniform with a stiff moustache and a weak chin.

Mrs. Folliat came back into the room with a cup and saucer in her hand.

Poirot said, “Your husband, Madame?”

"Yes."

Noticing that Poirot's eyes swept along the top of the bookcase as though in search of further photographs, she said brusquely:

"I'm not fond of photographs. They make one live in the past too much. One must learn to forget. One must cut away the dead wood."

Poirot remembered how the first time he had seen Mrs. Folliat she had been clipping with sécateurs at a shrub on the bank. She had said then, he remembered, something about dead wood. He looked at her thoughtfully, appraising her character. An enigmatical woman, he thought, and a woman who, in spite of the gentleness and fragility of her appearance, had a side to her that could be ruthless. A woman who could cut away dead wood not only from plants but from her own life…

She sat down and poured out a cup of tea, asking: "Milk? Sugar?"

"Three lumps if you will be so good, Madame?"

She handed him his cup and said conversationally:

"I was surprised to see you. Somehow I did not imagine you would be passing through this part of the world again."

"I am not exactly passing through," said Poirot.

"No?" She queried him with slightly uplifted eyebrows.

"My visit to this part of the world is intentional."

She still looked at him in inquiry.

"I came here partly to see you, Madame."

"Really?"

"First of all—there has been no news of the young Lady Stubbs?"

Mrs. Folliat shook her head.

“There was a body washed up the other day in Cornwall,” she said. “George went there to see if he could identify it. But it was not her.” She added: “I am very sorry for George. The strain has been very great.”

“Does he still believe that his wife may be alive?”

Slowly Mrs. Folliat shook her head.

“I think,” she said, “that he has given up hope. After all, if Hattie were alive, she couldn’t possibly conceal herself successfully with the whole of the Press and the police looking for her. Even if something like loss of memory had happened to her—well, surely the police would have found her by now?”

“It would seem so, yes,” said Poirot. “Do the police still search?”

“I suppose so. I do not really know.”

“But Sir George has given up hope.”

“He does not say so,” said Mrs. Folliat. “Of course I have not seen him lately. He has been mostly in London.”

“And the murdered girl? There have been no developments there?”

“Not that I know of.” She added. “It seems a senseless crime—absolutely pointless. Poor child—”

“It still upsets you, I see, to think of her, Madame.”

Mrs. Folliat did not reply for a moment or two. Then she said:

“I think when one is old, the death of anyone who is young upsets one out of due proportion. We old folks expect to die, but that child had her life before her.”

“It might not have been a very interesting life.”

“Not from our point of view, perhaps, but it might have been interesting to her.”

“And although, as you say, we old folk must expect to die,” said Poirot, “we do not really want to. At least I do not want to. I find life very interesting still.”

“I don’t think that I do.”

She spoke more to herself than him, her shoulders drooped still more.

“I am very tired, M. Poirot. I shall be not only ready, but thankful, when my time comes.”

He shot a quick glance at her. He wondered, as he had wondered before, whether it was a sick woman who sat talking to him, a woman who had perhaps the knowledge or even the certainty of approaching death. He could not otherwise account for the intense weariness and lassitude of her manner. That lassitude, he felt, was not really characteristic of the woman. Amy Folliat, he felt, was a woman of character, energy and determination. She had lived through many troubles, loss of her home, loss of wealth, the deaths of her sons. All these, he felt, she had survived. She had cut away the “dead wood,” as she herself had expressed it. But there was something now in her life that she could not cut away, that no one could cut away for her. If it was not physical illness he did not see what it could be. She gave a sudden little smile as though she were reading his thoughts.

“Really, you know, I have not very much to live for, M. Poirot,” she said. “I have many friends but no near relations, no family.”

“You have your home,” said Poirot on an impulse.

“You mean Nasse? Yes—”

“It is your home, isn’t it, although technically it is the property of Sir George Stubbs? Now Sir George Stubbs has gone to London you rule in his stead.”

Again he saw the sharp look of fear in her eyes. When she spoke her voice held an icy edge to it.

“I don’t quite know what you mean, M. Poirot. I am grateful to Sir George for renting me this lodge, but I do rent it. I pay him a yearly sum for it with the right to walk in the grounds.”

Poirot spread out his hands.

“I apologize, Madame. I did not mean to offend you.”

“No doubt I misunderstood you,” said Mrs. Folliat coldly.

“It is a beautiful place,” said Poirot. “A beautiful house, beautiful grounds. It has about it a great peace, great serenity.”

“Yes.” Her face lightened. “We have always felt that. I felt it as a child when I first came here.”

“But is there the same peace and serenity now, Madame?”

“Why not?”

“Murder unavenged,” said Poirot. “The spilling of innocent blood. Until that shadow lifts, there will not be peace.” He added, “I think you know that, Madame, as well as I do.”

Mrs. Folliat did not answer. She neither moved nor spoke. She sat quite still and Poirot had no idea what she was thinking. He leaned forward a little and spoke again.

“Madame, you know a good deal—perhaps everything—about this murder. You know who killed that girl, you know why. You know who killed Hattie Stubbs, you know, perhaps, where her body lies now.”

Mrs. Folliat spoke then. Her voice was loud, almost harsh.

“I know nothing,” she said. “Nothing.”

“Perhaps I have used the wrong word. You do not know, but I think you guess, Madame. I’m quite sure that you guess.”

“Now you are being—excuse me—absurd!”

“It is not absurd—it is something quite different—it is dangerous.”

“Dangerous? To whom?”

“To you, Madame. So long as you keep your knowledge to yourself you are in danger. I know murderers better than you do, Madame.”

“I have told you already, I have no knowledge.”

“Suspicions, then—”

“I have no suspicions.”

“That, excuse me, is not true, Madame.”

“To speak out of mere suspicion would be wrong—indeed, wicked.”

Poirot leaned forward. “As wicked as what was done here just over a month ago?”

She shrank back into her chair, huddled into herself. She half whispered:

“Don’t talk to me of it.” And then added, with a long shuddering sigh, “Anyway, it’s over now. Done—finished with.”

“How can you tell that, Madame? I tell you of my own knowledge that it is never finished with a murderer.”

She shook her head.

“No. No, it’s the end. And, anyway, there is nothing I can do. Nothing.”

He got up and stood looking down at her. She said almost fretfully:

“Why, even the police have given up.”

Poirot shook his head.

“Oh, no, Madame, you are wrong there. The police do not give up. And I,” he added, “do not give up either. Remember that, Madame, I, Hercule Poirot, do not give up.”

It was a very typical exit line.

Seventeen

After leaving Nasse, Poirot went to the village where, by inquiry, he found the cottage occupied by the Tuckers. His knock at the door went unanswered for some moments as it was drowned by the high-pitched tone of Mrs. Tucker's voice from inside.

"—And what be yu thinking of, Jim Tucker, bringing them boots of yours on to my nice linoleum? If I've tell ee once I've tell ee a thousand times. Been polishing it all the morning, I have, and now look at it."

A faint rumbling denoted Mr. Tucker's reaction to these remarks. It was on the whole a placatory rumble.

"Yu've no cause to go forgetting. 'Tis all this eagerness to get the sports news on the wireless. Why, 'twouldn't have took ee tu minutes to be off with them boots. And yu, Gary, do ee mind what yu'm doing with that lollipop. Sticky fingers I will not have on my best silver teapot. Marilyn, that be someone at the door, that be. Du ee go and see who 'tis."

The door was opened gingerly and a child of about eleven or twelve years old peered out suspiciously at Poirot. One cheek was bulged with a sweet. She was a fat child with small blue eyes and a rather piggy kind of prettiness.

"'Tis a gentleman, Mum," she shouted.

Mrs. Tucker, wisps of hair hanging over her somewhat hot face, came to the door.

"What is it?" she demanded sharply. "We don't need…" She paused, a faint look of recognition came across her face. "Why let me see, now, didn't I see you with the police that day?"

"Alas, Madame, that I have brought back painful memories," said Poirot, stepping firmly inside the door.

Mrs. Tucker cast a swift agonized glance at his feet, but Poirot's pointed patent leather shoes had only trodden the high road. No mud was being deposited on Mrs. Tucker's brightly polished linoleum.

"Come in, won't you, sir," she said, backing before him, and throwing open the door of a room on her right hand.

Poirot was ushered into a devastatingly neat little parlour. It smelt of furniture polish and Brasso and contained a large Jacobean suite, a round table, two potted geraniums, an elaborate brass fender, and a large variety of china ornaments.

"Sit down, sir, do. I can't remember the name. Indeed, I don't think as I ever heard it."

"My name is Hercule Poirot," said Poirot rapidly. "I found myself once more in this part of the world and I called here to offer you my condolences and to ask you if there had been any developments. I trust the murderer of your daughter has been discovered."

"Not sight or sound of him," said Mrs. Tucker, speaking with some bitterness. "And 'tis a downright wicked shame if you ask me. 'Tis my opinion the police don't disturb themselves when it's only the likes of us. What's the police anyway? If they'm all like Bob Hoskins I wonder the whole country isn't a mass of crime. All that Bob Hoskins does is spend his time looking into parked cars on the Common."

At this point, Mr. Tucker, his boots removed, appeared through the doorway, walking on his stockinged feet. He was a large, red-faced man with a pacific expression.

"Police be all right," he said in a husky voice. "Got their troubles like anyone else. These here maniacs ar'n't so easy to find. Look the same as you or me, if you take my meaning," he added, speaking directly to Poirot.

The little girl who had opened the door to Poirot appeared behind her father, and a boy of about eight poked his head round her shoulder. They all stared at Poirot with intense interest.

“This is your younger daughter, I suppose,” said Poirot.

“That’s Marilyn, that is,” said Mrs. Tucker. “And that’s Gary. Come and say how do you do, Gary, and mind your manners.”

Gary backed away.

“Shy-like, he is,” said his mother.

“Very civil of you, I’m sure, sir,” said Mr. Tucker, “to come and ask about Marlene. Ah, that was a terrible business, to be sure.”

“I have just called upon Mrs. Folliat,” said M. Poirot. “She, too, seems to feel this very deeply.”

“She’s been poorly-like ever since,” said Mrs. Tucker. “She’s an old lady an’t was a shock to her, happening as it did at her own place.”

Poirot noted once more everybody’s unconscious assumption that Nasse House still belonged to Mrs. Folliat.

“Makes her feel responsible-like in a way,” said Mr. Tucker, “not that ’twere anything to do with her.”

“Who was it that actually suggested that Marlene should play the victim?” asked Poirot.

“The lady from London that writes the books,” said Mrs. Tucker promptly.

Poirot said mildly:

“But she was a stranger down here. She did not even know Marlene.”

“’Twas Mrs. Masterton what rounded the girls up,” said Mrs. Tucker, “and I suppose ’twas Mrs. Masterton said Marlene was to do it. And Marlene, I must say, was pleased enough at the idea.”

Once again, Poirot felt, he came up against a blank wall. But he knew now what Mrs. Oliver had felt when she first sent for him. Someone had been working in the dark, someone who had pushed forward their own desires through other recognized personalities. Mrs. Oliver, Mrs. Masterton. Those were the figureheads. He said:

"I have been wondering, Mrs. Tucker, whether Marlene was already acquainted with this—er—homicidal maniac."

"She wouldn't know nobody like that," said Mrs. Tucker virtuously.

"Ah," said Poirot, "but as your husband has just observed, these maniacs are very difficult to spot. They look the same as—er—you and me. Someone may have spoken to Marlene at the fête, or even before it. Made friends with her in a perfectly harmless manner. Given her presents, perhaps."

"Oh, no, sir, nothing of that kind. Marlene wouldn't take presents from a stranger. I brought her up better than that."

"But she might see no harm in it," said Poirot, persisting. "Supposing it had been some nice lady who had offered her things."

"Someone, you mean, like young Mrs. Legge down at the Mill Cottage."

"Yes," said Poirot. "Someone like that."

"Give Marlene a lipstick once, she did," said Mrs. Tucker. "Ever so mad, I was. I won't have you putting that muck on your face, Marlene, I said. Think what your father would say. Well, she says, perky as may be, 'tis the lady down at Lawder's Cottage as give it me. Said as how it would suit me, she did. Well, I said, don't you listen to what no London ladies say. 'Tis all very well for them, painting their faces and blacking their eyelashes and everything else. But you're a decent girl, I said, and you wash your face with soap and water until you're a good deal older than what you are now."

"But she did not agree with you, I expect," said Poirot, smiling.

"When I say a thing I mean it," said Mrs. Tucker.

The fat Marilyn suddenly gave an amused giggle. Poirot shot her a keen glance.

“Did Mrs. Legge give Marlene anything else?” he asked.

“Believe she gave her a scarf or summat—one she hadn’t no more use for. A showy sort of thing, but not much quality. I know quality when I see it,” said Mrs. Tucker, nodding her head. “Used to work at Nasse House as a girl, I did. Proper stuff the ladies wore in those days. No gaudy colours and all this nylon and rayon; real good silk. Why, some of their taffeta dresses would have stood up by themselves.”

“Girls like a bit of finery,” said Mr. Tucker indulgently. “I don’t mind a few bright colours myself, but I won’t have this ’ere mucky lipstick.”

“A bit sharp I was with her,” said Mrs. Tucker, her eyes suddenly misty, “and her gorn in that terrible way. Wished afterwards I hadn’t spoken so sharp. Ah, nought but trouble and funerals lately, it seems. Troubles never come singly, so they say, and ’tis true enough.”

“You have had other losses?” inquired Poirot politely.

“The wife’s father,” explained Mr. Tucker. “Come across the ferry in his boat from the Three Dogs late at night, and must have missed his footing getting on to the quay and fallen in the river. Of course he ought to have stayed quiet at home at his age. But there, yu can’t do anything with the old ’uns. Always pottering about on the quay, he was.”

“Father was a great one for the boats always,” said Mrs. Tucker. “Used to look after them in the old days for Mr. Folliat, years and years ago that was. Not,” she added brightly, “as Father’s much loss, as you might say. Well over ninety, he was, and trying in many of his ways. Always babbling some nonsense or other. ’Twas time he went. But, of course, us had to bury him nice—and two funerals running costs a lot of money.”

These economic reflections passed Poirot by—a faint remembrance was stirring.

“An old man—on the quay? I remember talking to him. Was his name—?”

“Merdell, sir. That was my name before I married.”

“Your father, if I remember rightly, was head gardener at Nasse?”

“No, that was my eldest brother. I was the youngest of the family—eleven of us, there were.” She added with some pride, “There’s been Merdells at Nasse for years, but they’re all scattered now. Father was the last of us.”

Poirot said softly:

“There’ll always be Folliats at Nasse House.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I am repeating what your old father said to me on the quay.”

“Ah, talked a lot of nonsense, Father did. I had to shut him up pretty sharp now and then.”

“So Marlene was Merdell’s granddaughter,” said Poirot. “Yes, I begin to see.” He was silent for a moment, an immense excitement was surging within him. “Your father was drowned, you say, in the river?”

“Yes, sir. Took a drop too much, he did. And where he got the money from, I don’t know. Of course he used to get tips now and again on the quay helping people with boats or with parking their cars. Very cunning he was at hiding his money from me. Yes, I’m afraid as he’d had a drop too much. Missed his footing, I’d say, getting off his boat on to the quay. So he fell in and was drowned. His body was washed up down at Helmmouth the next day. ’Tis a wonder, as you might say, that it never happened before, him being ninety-two and half-blinded anyway.”

“The fact remains that it did not happen before—”

“Ah, well, accidents happen, sooner or later—”

“Accident,” mused Poirot. “I wonder.”

He got up. He murmured:

“I should have guessed. Guessed long ago. The child practically told me—”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“It is nothing,” said Poirot. “Once more I tender you my condolences both on the death of your daughter and on that of your father.”

He shook hands with them both and left the cottage. He said to himself:

“I have been foolish—very foolish. I have looked at everything the wrong way round.”

“Hi—mister.”

It was a cautious whisper. Poirot looked round. The fat child Marilyn was standing in the shadow of the cottage wall. She beckoned him to her and spoke in a whisper.

“Mum don’t know everything,” she said. “Marlene didn’t get that scarf off of the lady down at the cottage.”

“Where did she get it?”

“Bought it in Torquay. Bought some lipstick, too, and some scent—Newt in Paris—funny name. And a jar of foundation cream, what she’d read about in an advertisement.” Marilyn giggled. “Mum doesn’t know. Hid it at the back of her drawer, Marlene did, under her winter vests. Used to go into the convenience at the bus stop and do herself up, when she went to the pictures.”

Marilyn giggled again.

“Mum never knew.”

“Didn’t your mother find these things after your sister died?”

Marilyn shook her fair fluffy head.

“No,” she said. “I got ’em now—in my drawer. Mum doesn’t know.”

Poirot eyed her consideringly, and said:

“You seem a very clever girl, Marilyn.”

Marilyn grinned rather sheepishly.

“Miss Bird says it’s no good my trying for the grammar school.”

“Grammar school is not everything,” said Poirot. “Tell me, how did Marlene get the money to buy these things?”

Marilyn looked with close attention at a drainpipe.

“Dunno,” she muttered.

“I think you do know,” said Poirot.

Shamelessly he drew out a half crown from his pocket and added another half crown to it.

“I believe,” he said, “there is a new, very attractive shade of lipstick called ‘Carmine Kiss.’”

“Sounds smashing,” said Marilyn, her hand advanced towards the five shillings. She spoke in a rapid whisper. “She used to snoop about a bit, Marlene did. Used to see goings-on—you know what. Marlene would promise not to tell and then they’d give her a present, see?”

Poirot relinquished the five shillings.

“I see,” he said.

He nodded to Marilyn and walked away. He murmured again under his breath, but this time with intensified meaning:

“I see.”

So many things now fell into place. Not all of it. Not clear yet by any means—but he was on the right track. A perfectly clear trail all the way if only he had had the wit to see it. That first conversation with Mrs. Oliver, some casual words of Michael Weyman's, the significant conversation with old Merdell on the quay, an illuminating phrase spoken by Miss Brewis—the arrival of Etienne de Sousa.

A public telephone box stood adjacent to the village post office. He entered it and rang up a number. A few minutes later he was speaking to Inspector Bland.

"Well, M. Poirot, where are you?"

"I am here, in Nassecombe."

"But you were in London yesterday afternoon?"

"It only takes three and a half hours to come here by a good train," Poirot pointed out. "I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"What kind of a yacht did Etienne de Sousa have?"

"Maybe I can guess what you're thinking, M. Poirot, but I assure you there was nothing of that kind. It wasn't fitted up for smuggling if that's what you mean. There were no fancy hidden partitions or secret cubbyholes. We'd have found them if there had been. There was nowhere on it you could have stowed away a body."

"You are wrong, mon cher, that is not what I mean. I only asked what kind of yacht, big or small?"

"Oh, it was very fancy. Must have cost the earth. All very smart, newly painted, luxury fittings."

"Exactly," said Poirot. He sounded so pleased that Inspector Bland felt quite surprised.

“What are you getting at, M. Poirot?” he asked.

“Etienne de Sousa,” said Poirot, “is a rich man. That, my friend, is very significant.”

“Why?” demanded Inspector Bland.

“It fits in with my latest idea,” said Poirot.

“You’ve got an idea, then?”

“Yes. At last I have an idea. Up to now I have been very stupid.”

“You mean we’ve all been very stupid.”

“No,” said Poirot, “I mean specially myself. I had the good fortune to have a perfectly clear trail presented to me, and I did not see it.”

“But now you’re definitely on to something?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Look here, M. Poirot—”

But Poirot had rung off. After searching his pockets for available change, he put through a personal call to Mrs. Oliver at her London number.

“But do not,” he hastened to add, when he made his demand, “disturb the lady to answer the telephone if she is at work.”

He remembered how bitterly Mrs. Oliver had once reproached him for interrupting a train of creative thought and how the world in consequence had been deprived of an intriguing mystery centring round an old-fashioned long-sleeved woollen vest. The exchange, however, was unable to appreciate his scruples.

“Well,” it demanded, “do you want a personal call or don’t you?”

“I do,” said Poirot, sacrificing Mrs. Oliver’s creative genius upon the altar of his own impatience. He was relieved when Mrs. Oliver spoke. She interrupted his apologies.

“It’s splendid that you’ve rung me up,” she said. “I was just going out to give a talk on How I Write My Books. Now I can get my secretary to ring up and say I am unavoidably detained.”

“But, Madame, you must not let me prevent—”

“It’s not a case of preventing,” said Mrs. Oliver joyfully. “I’d have made the most awful fool of myself. I mean, what can you say about how you write books? What I mean is, first you’ve got to think of something, and when you’ve thought of it you’ve got to force yourself to sit down and write it. That’s all. It would have taken me just three minutes to explain that, and then the Talk would have been ended and everyone would have been very fed up. I can’t imagine why everybody is always so keen for authors to talk about writing. I should have thought it was an author’s business to write, not talk.”

“And yet it is about how you write that I want to ask you.”

“You can ask,” said Mrs. Oliver; “but I probably shan’t know the answer. I mean one just sits down and writes. Half a minute, I’ve got a frightfully silly hat on for the Talk—and I must take it off. It scratches my forehead.” There was a momentary pause and then the voice of Mrs. Oliver resumed in a relieved voice, “Hats are really only a symbol, nowadays, aren’t they? I mean, one doesn’t wear them for sensible reasons anymore; to keep one’s head warm, or shield one from the sun, or hide one’s face from people one doesn’t want to meet. I beg your pardon, M. Poirot, did you say something?”

“It was an ejaculation only. It is extraordinary,” said Poirot, and his voice was awed. “Always you give me ideas. So also did my friend Hastings whom I have not seen for many, many years. You have given me now the clue to yet another piece of my problem. But no more of all that. Let me ask you instead my question. Do you know an atom scientist, Madame?”

“Do I know an atom scientist?” said Mrs. Oliver in a surprised voice. “I don’t know. I suppose I may. I mean, I know some professors and things. I’m never quite sure what they actually do.”

“Yet you made an atom scientist one of the suspects in your Murder Hunt?”

“Oh, that! That was just to be up to date. I mean, when I went to buy presents for my nephews last Christmas, there was nothing but science fiction and the stratosphere and supersonic toys, and so I thought when I started on the Murder Hunt, ‘Better have an atom scientist as the chief suspect and be modern.’ After all, if I’d needed a little technical jargon for it I could always have got it from Alec Legge.”

“Alec Legge—the husband of Sally Legge? Is he an atom scientist?”

“Yes, he is. Not Harwell. Wales somewhere. Cardiff. Or Bristol, is it? It’s just a holiday cottage they have on the Helm. Yes, so, of course, I do know an atom scientist after all.”

“And it was meeting him at Nasse House that probably put the idea of an atom scientist into your head? But his wife is not Yugoslavian.”

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Oliver, “Sally is English as English. Surely you realize that?”

“Then what put the idea of the Yugoslavian wife into your head?”

“I really don’t know…Refugees perhaps? Students? All those foreign girls at the hostel trespassing through the woods and speaking broken English.”

“I see…Yes, I see now a lot of things.”

“It’s about time,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Pardon?”

“I said it was about time,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That you did see things, I mean. Up to now you don’t seem to have done anything.” Her voice held reproach.

"One cannot arrive at things all in a moment," said Poirot, defending himself. "The police," he added, "have been completely baffled."

"Oh, the police," said Mrs. Oliver. "Now if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard…."

Recognizing this well-known phrase, Poirot hastened to interrupt.

"The matter has been complex," he said. "Extremely complex. But now—I tell you this in confidence—but now I arrive!"

Mrs. Oliver remained unimpressed.

"I daresay," she said; "but in the meantime there have been two murders."

"Three," Poirot corrected her.

"Three murders? Who's the third?"

"An old man called Merdell," said Hercule Poirot.

"I haven't heard of that one," said Mrs. Oliver. "Will it be in the paper?"

"No," said Poirot, "up to now no one has suspected that it was anything but an accident."

"And it wasn't an accident?"

"No," said Poirot, "it was not an accident."

"Well, tell me who did it—did them, I mean—or can't you over the telephone?"

"One does not say these things over the telephone," said Poirot.

"Then I shall ring off," said Mrs. Oliver. "I can't bear it."

"Wait a moment," said Poirot, "there is something else I wanted to ask you. Now, what was it?"

“That’s a sign of age,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I do that, too. Forget things—”

“There was something, some little point—it worried me. I was in the boathouse….”

He cast his mind back. That pile of comics. Marlene’s phrases scrawled on the margin. “Albert goes with Doreen.” He had had a feeling that there was something lacking—that there was something he must ask Mrs. Oliver.

“Are you still there, M. Poirot?” demanded Mrs. Oliver. At the same time the operator requested more money.

These formalities completed, Poirot spoke once more.

“Are you still there, Madame?”

“I’m still here,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Don’t let’s waste any more money asking each other if we’re there. What is it?”

“It is something very important. You remember your Murder Hunt?”

“Well, of course I remember it. It’s practically what we’ve just been talking about, isn’t it?”

“I made one grave mistake,” said Poirot. “I never read your synopsis for competitors. In the gravity of discovering a murder it did not seem to matter. I was wrong. It did matter. You are a sensitive person, Madame. You are affected by your atmosphere, by the personalities of the people you meet. And these are translated into your work. Not recognizably so, but they are the inspiration from which your fertile brain draws its creations.”

“That’s very nice flowery language,” said Mrs. Oliver. “But what exactly do you mean?”

“That you have always known more about this crime than you have realized yourself. Now for the question I want to ask you—two questions actually; but the first is very important. Did you, when you first began to plan your Murder Hunt, mean the body to be discovered in the boathouse?”

"No, I didn't."

"Where did you intend it to be?"

"In that funny little summerhouse tucked away in the rhododendrons near the house. I thought it was just the place. But then someone, I can't remember who exactly, began insisting that it should be found in the Folly. Well, that, of course, was an absurd idea! I mean, anyone could have strolled in there quite casually and come across it without having followed a single clue. People are so stupid. Of course I couldn't agree to that."

"So, instead, you accepted the boathouse?"

"Yes, that's just how it happened. There was really nothing against the boathouse though I still thought the little summerhouse would have been better."

"Yes, that is the technique you outlined to me that first day. There is one thing more. Do you remember telling me that there was a final clue written on one of the 'comics' that Marlene was given to amuse her?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell me, was it something like" (he forced his memory back to a moment when he had stood reading various scrawled phrases): "Albert goes with Doreen; Georgie Porgie kisses hikers in the wood; Peter pinches girls in the Cinema?"

"Good gracious me, no," said Mrs. Oliver in a slightly shocked voice. "It wasn't anything silly like that. No, mine was a perfectly straightforward clue." She lowered her voice and spoke in mysterious tones. "Look in the hiker's rucksack."

"Epatant!" cried Poirot. "Epatant! Of course, the 'comic' with that on it would have to be taken away. It might have given someone ideas!"

"The rucksack, of course, was on the floor by the body and—"

"Ah, but it is another rucksack of which I am thinking."

“You’re confusing me with all these rucksacks,” Mrs. Oliver complained. “There was only one in my murder story. Don’t you want to know what was in it?”

“Not in the least,” said Poirot. “That is to say,” he added politely, “I should be enchanted to hear, of course, but—”

Mrs. Oliver swept over the “but.”

“Very ingenious, I think,” she said, the pride of authorship in her voice. “You see, in Marlene’s haversack, which was supposed to be the Yugoslavian wife’s haversack, if you understand what I mean—”

“Yes, yes,” said Poirot, preparing himself to be lost in fog once more.

“Well, in it was the bottle of medicine containing poison with which the country squire poisoned his wife. You see, the Yugoslavian girl had been over here training as a nurse and she’d been in the house when Colonel Blunt poisoned his first wife for her money. And she, the nurse, had got hold of the bottle and taken it away, and then come back to blackmail him. That, of course, is why he killed her. Does that fit in, M. Poirot?”

“Fit in with what?”

“With your ideas,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Not at all,” said Poirot, but added hastily, “All the same, my felicitations, Madame. I am sure your Murder Hunt was so ingenious that nobody won the prize.”

“But they did,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Quite late, about seven o’clock. A very dogged old lady supposed to be quite gaga. She got through all the clues and arrived at the boathouse triumphantly, but of course the police were there. So then she heard about the murder, and she was the last person at the whole fête to hear about it, I should imagine. Anyway, they gave her the prize.” She added with satisfaction, “That horrid young man with the freckles who said I drank like a fish never got farther than the camellia garden.”

“Some day, Madame,” said Poirot, “you shall tell me this story of yours.”

“Actually,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I’m thinking of turning it into a book. It would be a pity to waste it.”

And it may here be mentioned that some three years later Hercule Poirot read The Woman in the Wood, by Ariadne Oliver, and wondered whilst he read it why some of the persons and incidents seemed to him vaguely familiar.

Eighteen

The sun was setting when Poirot came to what was called officially Mill Cottage, and known locally as the Pink Cottage down by Lawder's Creek. He knocked on the door and it was flung open with such suddenness that he started back. The angry-looking young man in the doorway stared at him for a moment without recognizing him. Then he gave a short laugh.

"Hallo," he said, "it's the sleuth. Come in, M. Poirot. I'm packing up."

Poirot accepted the invitation and stepped into the cottage. It was plainly, rather badly furnished. And Alec Legge's personal possessions were at the moment taking up a disproportionate amount of room. Books, papers and articles of stray clothing were strewn all around, an open suitcase stood on the floor.

"The final breakup of the ménage," said Alec Legge. "Sally has cleared out. I expect you know that."

"I did not know it, no."

Alec Legge gave a short laugh.

"I'm glad there's something you don't know. Yes, she's had enough of married life. Going to link up her life with that tame architect."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Poirot.

"I don't see why you should be sorry."

"I am sorry," said Poirot, clearing off two books and a shirt and sitting down on the corner of the sofa, "because I do not think she will be as happy with him as she would be with you."

"She hasn't been particularly happy with me this last six months."

“Six months is not a lifetime,” said Poirot, “it is a very short space out of what might be a long happy married life.”

“Talking rather like a parson, aren’t you?”

“Possibly. May I say, Mr. Legge, that if your wife has not been happy with you it is probably more your fault than hers.”

“She certainly thinks so. Everything’s my fault, I suppose.”

“Not everything, but some things.”

“Oh, blame everything on me. I might as well drown myself in the damn’ river and have done with it.”

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

“I am glad to observe,” he remarked, “that you are now more perturbed with your own troubles than with those of the world.”

“The world can go hang,” said Mr. Legge. He added bitterly, “I seem to have made the most complete fool of myself all along the line.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I would say that you have been more unfortunate than reprehensible in your conduct.”

Alec Legge stared at him.

“Who hired you to sleuth me?” he demanded. “Was it Sally?”

“Why should you think that?”

“Well, nothing’s happened officially. So I concluded that you must have come down after me on a private job.”

“You are in error,” replied Poirot. “I have not at any time been sleuthing you. When I came down here I had no idea that you existed.”

"Then how do you know whether I've been unfortunate or made a fool of myself or what?"

"From the result of observation and reflection," said Poirot. "Shall I make a little guess and will you tell me if I am right?"

"You can make as many little guesses as you like," said Alec Legge. "But don't expect me to play."

"I think," said Poirot, "that some years ago you had an interest and sympathy for a certain political party. Like many other young men of a scientific bent. In your profession such sympathies and tendencies are naturally regarded with suspicion. I do not think you were ever seriously compromised, but I do think that pressure was brought upon you to consolidate your position in a way you did not want to consolidate it. You tried to withdraw and you were faced with a threat. You were given a rendezvous with someone. I doubt if I shall ever know that young man's name. He will be for me always the young man in a turtle shirt."

Alec Legge gave a sudden explosion of laughter.

"I suppose that shirt was a bit of a joke. I wasn't seeing things very funny at the time."

Hercule Poirot continued.

"What with worry over the fate of the world, and the worry over your own predicament, you became, if I may say so, a man almost impossible for any woman to live with happily. You did not confide in your wife. That was unfortunate for you, as I should say that your wife was a woman of loyalty, and that if she had realized how unhappy and desperate you were, she would have been wholeheartedly on your side. Instead of that she merely began to compare you, unfavourably, with a former friend of hers, Michael Weyman."

He rose.

"I should advise you, Mr. Legge, to complete your packing as soon as possible, to follow your wife to London, to ask her to forgive you and to tell her all that you have been through."

"So that's what you advise," said Alec Legge. "And what the hell business is it of yours?"

"None," said Hercule Poirot. He withdrew towards the door. "But I am always right."

There was a moment's silence. Then Alec Legge burst into a wild peal of laughter.

"Do you know," he said, "I think I'll take your advice. Divorce is damned expensive. Anyway, if you've got hold of the woman you want, and are then not able to keep her, it's a bit humiliating, don't you think? I shall go up to her flat in Chelsea, and if I find Michael there I shall take hold of him by that hand-knitted pansy tie he wears and throttle the life out of him. I'd enjoy that. Yes, I'd enjoy it a good deal."

His face suddenly lit up with a most attractive smile.

"Sorry for my filthy temper," he said, "and thanks a lot."

He clapped Poirot on the shoulder. With the force of the blow Poirot staggered and all but fell.

Mr. Legge's friendship was certainly more painful than his animosity.

"And now," said Poirot, leaving Mill Cottage on painful feet and looking up at the darkening sky, "where do I go?"

Nineteen

The chief constable and Inspector Bland looked up with keen curiosity as Hercule Poirot was ushered in. The chief constable was not in the best of tempers. Only Bland's quiet persistence had caused him to cancel his dinner appointment for that evening.

"I know, Bland, I know," he said fretfully. "Maybe he was a little Belgian wizard in his day—but surely, man, his day's over. He's what age?"

Bland slid tactfully over the answer to this question which, in any case, he did not know. Poirot himself was always reticent on the subject of his age.

"The point is, sir, he was there—on the spot. And we're not getting anywhere any other way. Up against a blank wall, that's where we are."

The chief constable blew his nose irritably.

"I know. I know. Makes me begin to believe in Mrs. Masterton's homicidal pervert. I'd even use bloodhounds, if there were anywhere to use them."

"Bloodhounds can't follow a scent over water."

"Yes. I know what you've always thought, Bland. And I'm inclined to agree with you. But there's absolutely no motive, you know. Not an iota of motive."

"The motive may be out in the islands."

"Meaning that Hattie Stubbs knew something about de Sousa out there? I suppose that's reasonably possible, given her mentality. She was simple, everyone agrees on that. She might blurt out what she knew to anyone at any time. Is that the way you see it?"

"Something like that."

"If so, he waited a long time before crossing the sea and doing something about it."

"Well, sir, it's possible he didn't know what exactly had become of her. His own story was that he'd seen a piece in some society periodical about Nasse House, and its beautiful châtelaine. (Which I have always thought myself," added Bland parenthetically, "to be a silver thing with chains, and bits and pieces hung on it that people's grandmothers used to clip on their waistbands—and a good idea, too. Wouldn't be all these silly women forever leaving their handbags around.) Seems, though, that in women's jargon châtelaine means mistress of a house. As I say, that's history and maybe it's true enough, and he didn't know where she was or who she'd married until then."

"But once he did know, he came across posthaste in a yacht in order to murder her? It's far-fetched, Bland, very far-fetched."

"But it could be, sir."

"And what on earth could the woman know?"

"Remember what she said to her husband. 'He kills people.'"

"Murder remembered? From the time she was fifteen? And presumably only her word for it? Surely he'd be able to laugh that off?"

"We don't know the facts," said Bland stubbornly. "You know yourself, sir, how once one knows who did a thing, one can look for evidence and find it."

"H'm. We've made inquiries about de Sousa—discreetly—through the usual channels—and got nowhere."

"That's just why, sir, this funny old Belgian boy might have stumbled on something. He was in the house—that's the important thing. Lady Stubbs talked to him. Some of the random things she said may have come together in his mind and made sense. However that may be, he's been down in Nassecombe most of today."

"And he rang you up to ask what kind of a yacht Etienne de Sousa had?"

"When he rang up the first time, yes. The second time was to ask me to arrange this meeting."

"Well," the chief constable looked at his watch, "if he doesn't come within five minutes…."

But it was at that very moment that Hercule Poirot was shown in.

His appearance was not as immaculate as usual. His moustache was limp, affected by the damp Devon air, his patent-leather shoes were heavily coated with mud, he limped, and his hair was ruffled.

"Well, so here you are, M. Poirot." The chief constable shook hands. "We're all keyed up, on our toes, waiting to hear what you have to tell us."

The words were faintly ironic, but Hercule Poirot, however damp physically, was in no mood to be damped mentally.

"I cannot imagine," he said, "how it was I did not see the truth before."

The chief constable received this rather coldly.

"Are we to understand that you do see the truth now?"

"Yes, there are details—but the outline is clear."

"We want more than an outline," said the chief constable dryly. "We want evidence. Have you got evidence, M. Poirot?"

"I can tell you where to find the evidence."

Inspector Bland spoke. "Such as?"

Poirot turned to him and asked a question.

"Etienne de Sousa has, I suppose, left the country?"

“Two weeks ago.” Bland added bitterly, “It won’t be easy to get him back.”

“He might be persuaded.”

“Persuaded? There’s not sufficient evidence to warrant an extradition order, then?”

“It is not a question of an extradition order. If the facts are put to him—”

“But what facts, M. Poirot?” The chief constable spoke with some irritation. “What are these facts you talk about so glibly?”

“The fact that Etienne de Sousa came here in a lavishly appointed luxury yacht showing that his family is rich, the fact that old Merdell was Marlene Tucker’s grandfather (which I did not know until today), the fact that Lady Stubbs was fond of wearing the coolie type of hat, the fact that Mrs. Oliver, in spite of an unbridled and unreliable imagination, is, unrealized by herself, a very shrewd judge of character, the fact that Marlene Tucker had lipsticks and bottles of perfume hidden at the back of her bureau drawer, the fact that Miss Brewis maintains that it was Lady Stubbs who asked her to take a refreshment tray down to Marlene at the boathouse.”

“Facts?” The chief constable stared. “You call those facts? But there’s nothing new there.”

“You prefer evidence—definite evidence—such as—Lady Stubbs’ body?”

Now it was Bland who stared.

“You have found Lady Stubbs’ body?”

“Not actually found it—but I know where it is hidden. You shall go to the spot, and when you have found it, then—then you will have evidence—all the evidence you need. For only one person could have hidden it there.”

“And who’s that?”

Hercule Poirot smiled—the contented smile of a cat who has lapped up a saucer of cream.

“The person it so often is,” he said softly; “the husband. Sir George Stubbs killed his wife.”

“But that’s impossible, M. Poirot. We know it’s impossible.”

“Oh, no,” said Poirot, “it is not impossible at all! Listen, and I will tell you.”

Twenty

Hercule Poirot paused a moment at the big wrought iron gates. He looked ahead of him along the curving drive. The last of the golden-brown leaves fluttered down from the trees. The cyclamen were over.

Poirot sighed. He turned aside and rapped gently on the door of the little white pilastered lodge.

After a few moments' delay he heard footsteps inside, those slow hesitant footsteps. The door was opened by Mrs. Folliat. He was not startled this time to see how old and frail she looked.

She said, "M. Poirot? You again?"

"May I come in?"

"Of course."

He followed her in.

She offered him tea which he refused. Then she asked in a quiet voice:

"Why have you come?"

"I think you can guess, Madame."

Her answer was oblique.

"I am very tired," she said.

"I know." He went on, "There have now been three deaths, Hattie Stubbs, Marlene Tucker, old Merdell."

She said sharply:

“Merdell? That was an accident. He fell from the quay. He was very old, half-blind, and he’d been drinking in the pub.”

“It was not an accident. Merdell knew too much.”

“What did he know?”

“He recognized a face, or a way of walking, or a voice—something like that. I talked to him the day I first came down here. He told me then all about the Folliat family—about your father-in-law and your husband, and your sons who were killed in the war. Only—they were not both killed, were they? Your son Henry went down with his ship, but your second son, James, was not killed. He deserted. He was reported at first, perhaps, Missing believed killed, and later you told everyone that he was killed. It was nobody’s business to disbelieve that statement. Why should they?”

Poirot paused and then went on:

“Do not imagine I have no sympathy for you, Madame. Life has been hard for you, I know. You can have had no real illusions about your younger son, but he was your son, and you loved him. You did all you could to give him a new life. You had the charge of a young girl, a subnormal but very rich girl. Oh yes, she was rich. You gave out that her parents had lost all their money, that she was poor, and that you had advised her to marry a rich man many years older than herself. Why should anybody disbelieve your story? Again, it was nobody’s business. Her parents and near relatives had been killed. A firm of French lawyers in Paris acted as instructed by lawyers in San Miguel. On her marriage, she assumed control of her own fortune. She was, as you have told me, docile, affectionate, suggestible. Everything her husband asked her to sign, she signed. Securities were probably changed and re-sold many times, but in the end the desired financial result was reached. Sir George Stubbs, the new personality assumed by your son, became a rich man and his wife became a pauper. It is no legal offence to call yourself ‘sir’ unless it is done to obtain money under false pretences. A title creates confidence—it suggests, if not birth, then certainly riches. So the rich Sir George Stubbs, older and changed in appearance and having grown a beard, bought Nasse House and came to live where he belonged, though he had not been there since he was a boy. There was nobody left after the devastation of war who was likely to have recognized him. But old Merdell did. He kept the knowledge to himself, but when he said to me slyly that there would always be Folliats at Nasse House, that was his own private joke.

“So all had turned out well, or so you thought. Your plan, I fully believe, stopped there. Your son had wealth, his ancestral home, and though his wife was subnormal she was a beautiful and docile girl, and you hoped he would be kind to her and that she would be happy.”

Mrs. Folliat said in a low voice:

“That’s how I thought it would be—I would look after Hattie and care for her. I never dreamed—”

“You never dreamed—and your son carefully did not tell you, that at the time of the marriage he was already married. Oh, yes—we have searched the records for what we knew must exist. Your son had married a girl in Trieste, a girl of the underground criminal world with whom he concealed himself after his desertion. She had no mind to be parted from him, nor for that matter had he any intention of being parted from her. He accepted the marriage with Hattie as a means to wealth, but in his own mind he knew from the beginning what he intended to do.”

“No, no, I do not believe that! I cannot believe it…It was that woman—that wicked creature.”

Poirot went on inexorably:

“He meant murder. Hattie had no relations, few friends. Immediately on their return to England, he brought her here. The servants hardly saw her that first evening, and the woman they saw the next morning was not Hattie, but his Italian wife made up as Hattie and behaving roughly much as Hattie behaved. And there again it might have ended. The false Hattie would have lived out her life as the real Hattie though doubtless her mental powers would have unexpectedly improved owing to what would vaguely be called ‘new treatment.’ The secretary, Miss Brewis, already realized that there was very little wrong with Lady Stubbs’ mental processes.

"But then a totally unforeseen thing happened. A cousin of Hattie's wrote that he was coming to England on a yachting trip, and although that cousin had not seen her for many years, he would not be likely to be deceived by an impostor.

"It is odd," said Poirot, breaking off his narrative, "that though the thought did cross my mind that de Sousa might not be de Sousa, it never occurred to me that the truth lay the other way round—that is to say, that Hattie was not Hattie."

He went on:

"There might have been several different ways of meeting that situation. Lady Stubbs could have avoided a meeting with a plea of illness, but if de Sousa remained long in England she could hardly have continued to avoid meeting him. And there was already another complication. Old Merdell, garrulous in his old age, used to chatter to his granddaughter. She was probably the only person who bothered to listen to him, and even she dismissed most of what he said because she thought him 'batty.' Nevertheless, some of the things he said about having seen 'a woman's body in the woods,' and 'Sir George Stubbs being really Mr. James' made sufficient impression on her to make her hint about them tentatively to Sir George. In doing so, of course, she signed her own death warrant. Sir George and his wife could take no chances of stories like that getting around. I imagine that he handed her out small sums of hush money, and proceeded to make his plans.

"They worked out their scheme very carefully. They already knew the date when de Sousa was due at Helmmouth. It coincided with the date fixed for the fête. They arranged their plan so that Marlene should be killed and Lady Stubbs 'disappear' in conditions which should throw vague suspicion on de Sousa. Hence the reference to his being a 'wicked man' and the accusation: 'he kills people.' Lady Stubbs was to disappear permanently (possibly a conveniently unrecognizable body might be identified at some time by Sir George), and a new personality was to take her place. Actually, 'Hattie' would merely resume her own Italian personality. All that was needed was for her to double the parts over a period of a little more than twenty-four hours. With the connivance of Sir George, this was easy. On the day I arrived, ‘Lady Stubbs’ was supposed to have remained in her room until just before teatime. Nobody saw her there except Sir George. Actually, she slipped out, took a bus or a train to Exeter, and travelled from Exeter in the company of another girl student (several travel every day this time of year) to whom she confided her story of the friend who had eaten bad veal and ham pie. She arrives at the hostel, books her cubicle, and goes out to ‘explore.’ By teatime, Lady Stubbs is in the drawing room. After dinner, Lady Stubbs goes early to bed—but Miss Brewis caught a glimpse of her slipping out of the house a short while afterwards. She spends the night in the hostel, but is out early, and is back at Nasse as Lady Stubbs for breakfast. Again she spends a morning in her room with a ‘headache,’ and this time manages to stage an appearance as a ‘trespasser’ rebuffed by Sir George from the window of his wife’s room where he pretends to turn and speak to his wife inside that room. The changes of costume were not difficult—shorts and an open shirt under one of the elaborate dresses that Lady Stubbs was fond of wearing. Heavy white makeup for Lady Stubbs with a big coolie hat to shade her face; a gay peasant scarf, sunburned complexion, and bronze-red curls for the Italian girl. No one would have dreamed that those two were the same woman.

“And so the final drama was staged. Just before four o’clock Lady Stubbs told Miss Brewis to take a tea tray down to Marlene. That was because she was afraid such an idea might occur to Miss Brewis independently, and it would be fatal if Miss Brewis should inconveniently appear at the wrong moment. Perhaps, too, she had a malicious pleasure in arranging for Miss Brewis to be at the scene of the crime at approximately the time it was committed. Then, choosing her moment, she slipped into the empty fortune-telling tent, out through the back and into the summerhouse in the shrubbery where she kept her hiker’s rucksack with its change of costume. She slipped through the woods, called to Marlene to let her in, and strangled the unsuspecting girl then and there. The big coolie hat she threw into the river, then she changed into her hiker dress and makeup, packaged up her cyclamen georgette dress and high-heeled shoes in the rucksack—and presently an Italian student from the youth hostel joined her Dutch acquaintance at the shows on the lawn, and left with her by the local bus as planned. Where she is now I do not know. I suspect in Soho where she doubtless has underworld affiliations of her own nationality who can provide her with the necessary papers. In any case, it is not for an Italian girl that the police are looking, it is for Hattie Stubbs, simple, subnormal, exotic.

“But poor Hattie Stubbs is dead, as you yourself, Madame, know only too well. You revealed that knowledge when I spoke to you in the drawing room on the day of the fête. The death of Marlene had been a bad shock to you—you had not had the least idea of what was planned; but you revealed very clearly, though I was dense enough not to see it at the time, that when you talked of ‘Hattie,’ you were talking of two different people—one a woman you disliked who would be ‘better dead,’ and against whom you warned me ‘not to believe a word she said’—the other a girl of whom you spoke in the past tense, and whom you defended with a warm affection. I think, Madame, that you were very fond of poor Hattie Stubbs….”

There was a long pause.

Mrs. Folliat sat quite still in her chair. At last she roused herself and spoke. Her voice had the coldness of ice.

“Your whole story is quite fantastic, M. Poirot. I really think you must be mad…All this is entirely in your head, you have no evidence whatsoever.”

Poirot went across to one of the windows and opened it.

“Listen, Madame. What do you hear?”

“I am a little deaf…What should I hear?”

“The blows of a pick axe…They are breaking up the concrete foundation of the Folly…What a good place to bury a body—where a tree has been uprooted and the earth is already disturbed. A little later, to make all safe, concrete over the ground where the body lies, and, on the concrete, erect a Folly…” He added gently: “Sir George’s Folly…The Folly of the owner of Nasse House.”

A long shuddering sigh escaped Mrs. Folliat.

“Such a beautiful place,” said Poirot. “Only one thing evil…The man who owns it….”

“I know.” Her words came hoarsely. “I have always known…Even as a child he frightened me…Ruthless…Without pity…And without conscience…But he was my son and I loved him…I should have spoken out after Hattie’s death…But he was my son. How could I be the one to give him up? And so, because of my silence—that poor silly child was killed…And after her, dear old Merdell…Where would it have ended?”

“With a murderer it does not end,” said Poirot.

She bowed her head. For a moment or two she stayed so, her hands covering her eyes.

Then Mrs. Folliat of Nasse House, daughter of a long line of brave men, drew herself erect. She looked straight at Poirot and her voice was formal and remote.

“Thank you, M. Poirot,” she said, “for coming to tell me yourself of this. Will you leave me now? There are some things that one has to face quite alone….”

Cat Among The Pigeons (1959)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Prologue

SUMMER TERM

I

It was the opening day of the summer term at Meadowbank school. The late afternoon sun shone down on the broad gravel sweep in front of the house. The front door was flung hospitably wide, and just within it, admirably suited to its Georgian proportions, stood Miss Vansittart, every hair in place, wearing an impeccably cut coat and skirt.

Some parents who knew no better had taken her for the great Miss Bulstrode herself, not knowing that it was Miss Bulstrode’s custom to retire to a kind of holy of holies to which only a selected and privileged few were taken.

To one side of Miss Vansittart, operating on a slightly different plane, was Miss Chadwick, comfortable, knowledgeable, and so much a part of Meadowbank that it would have been impossible to imagine Meadowbank without her. It had never been without her. Miss Bulstrode and Miss Chadwick had started Meadowbank school together. Miss Chadwick wore pince-nez, stooped, was dowdily dressed, amiably vague in speech, and happened to be a brilliant mathematician.

Various welcoming words and phrases, uttered graciously by Miss Vansittart, floated through the house.

“How do you do, Mrs. Arnold? Well, Lydia, did you enjoy your Hellenic cruise? What a wonderful opportunity! Did you get some good photographs?

“Yes, Lady Garnett, Miss Bulstrode had your letter about the Art Classes and everything’s been arranged.

“How are you, Mrs. Bird? … Well? I don’t think Miss Bulstrode will have time today to discuss the point. Miss Rowan is somewhere about if you’d like to talk to her about it?

“We’ve moved your bedroom, Pamela. You’re in the far wing by the apple tree….

“Yes, indeed, Lady Violet, the weather has been terrible so far this spring. Is this your youngest? What is your name? Hector? What a nice aeroplane you have, Hector.

“Très heureuse de vous voir, Madame. Ah, je regrette, ce ne serait pas possible, cette après-midi. Mademoiselle Bulstrode est tellement occupée.

“Good afternoon, Professor. Have you been digging up some more interesting things?”

II

In a small room on the first floor, Ann Shapland, Miss Bulstrode’s secretary, was typing with speed and efficiency. Ann was a nice-looking young woman of thirty-five, with hair that fitted her like a black satin cap. She could be attractive when she wanted to be but life had taught her that efficiency and competence often paid better results and avoided painful complications. At the moment she was concentrating on being everything that a secretary to the headmistress of a famous girls’ school should be.

From time to time, as she inserted a fresh sheet in her machine, she looked out of the window and registered interest in the arrivals.

“Goodness!” said Ann to herself, awed, “I didn’t know there were so many chauffeurs left in England!”

Then she smiled in spite of herself, as a majestic Rolls moved away and a very small Austin of battered age drove up. A harassed-looking father emerged from it with a daughter who looked far calmer than he did.

As he paused uncertainly, Miss Vansittart emerged from the house and took charge.

"Major Hargreaves? And this is Alison? Do come into the house. I'd like you to see Alison's room for yourself. I—"

Ann grinned and began to type again.

"Good old Vansittart, the glorified understudy," she said to herself. "She can copy all the Bulstrode's tricks. In fact she's word perfect!"

An enormous and almost incredibly opulent Cadillac, painted in two tones, raspberry fool and azure blue, swept (with difficulty owing to its length) into the drive and drew up behind Major the Hon. Alistair Hargreaves' ancient Austin.

The chauffeur sprang to open the door, an immense bearded, dark-skinned man, wearing a flowing aba, stepped out, a Parisian fashion plate followed and then a slim dark girl.

That's probably Princess Whatshername herself, thought Ann. Can't imagine her in school uniform, but I suppose the miracle will be apparent tomorrow….

Both Miss Vansittart and Miss Chadwick appeared on this occasion.

"They'll be taken to the Presence," decided Ann.

Then she thought that, strangely enough, one didn't quite like making jokes about Miss Bulstrode. Miss Bulstrode was Someone.

"So you'd better mind your P.s and Q.s, my girl," she said to herself, "and finish these letters without making any mistakes."

Not that Ann was in the habit of making mistakes. She could take her pick of secretarial posts. She had been P.A. to the chief executive of an oil company, private secretary to Sir Mervyn Todhunter, renowned alike for his erudition, his irritability and the illegibility of his handwriting. She numbered two Cabinet Ministers and an important Civil Servant among her employers. But on the whole, her work had always lain amongst men. She wondered how she was going to like being, as she put it herself, completely submerged in women. Well—it was all experience! And there was always Dennis! Faithful Dennis returning from Malaya, from Burma, from various parts of the world, always the same, devoted, asking her once again to marry him. Dear Dennis! But it would be very dull to be married to Dennis.

She would miss the company of men in the near future. All these schoolmistressy characters—not a man about the place, except a gardener of about eighty.

But here Ann got a surprise. Looking out of the window, she saw there was a man clipping the hedge just beyond the drive—clearly a gardener but a long way from eighty. Young, dark, good-looking. Ann wondered about him—there had been some talk of getting extra labour—but this was no yokel. Oh well, nowadays people did every kind of job. Some young man trying to get together some money for some project or other, or indeed just to keep body and soul together. But he was cutting the hedge in a very expert manner. Presumably he was a real gardener after all!

"He looks," said Ann to herself, "he looks as though he might be amusing…."

Only one more letter to do, she was pleased to note, and then she might stroll round the garden….

III

Upstairs, Miss Johnson, the matron, was busy allotting rooms, welcoming newcomers, and greeting old pupils.

She was pleased it was term time again. She never knew quite what to do with herself in the holidays. She had two married sisters with whom she stayed in turn, but they were naturally more interested in their own doings and families than in Meadowbank. Miss Johnson, though dutifully fond of her sisters, was really only interested in Meadowbank.

Yes, it was nice that term had started—

"Miss Johnson?"

"Yes, Pamela."

"I say, Miss Johnson. I think something's broken in my case. It's oozed all over things. I think it's hair oil."

"Chut, chut!" said Miss Johnson, hurrying to help.

IV

On the grass sweep of lawn beyond the gravelled drive, Mademoiselle Blanche, the new French mistress, was walking. She looked with appreciative eyes at the powerful young man clipping the hedge.

"Assez bien," thought Mademoiselle Blanche.

Mademoiselle Blanche was slender and mouselike and not very noticeable, but she herself noticed everything.

Her eyes went to the procession of cars sweeping up to the front door. She assessed them in terms of money. This Meadowbank was certainly formidable! She summed up mentally the profits that Miss Bulstrode must be making.

Yes, indeed! Formidable!

V

Miss Rich, who taught English and Geography, advanced towards the house at a rapid pace, stumbling a little now and then because, as usual, she forgot to look where she was going. Her hair, also as usual, had escaped from its bun. She had an eager ugly face.

She was saying to herself:

"To be back again! To be here … It seems years … " She fell over a rake, and the young gardener put out an arm and said:

"Steady, miss."

Eileen Rich said “Thank you,” without looking at him.

VI

Miss Rowan and Miss Blake, the two junior mistresses, were strolling towards the Sports Pavilion. Miss Rowan was thin and dark and intense, Miss Blake was plump and fair. They were discussing with animation their recent adventures in Florence: the pictures they had seen, the sculpture, the fruit blossom, and the attentions (hoped to be dishonourable) of two young Italian gentlemen.

“Of course one knows,” said Miss Blake, “how Italians go on.”

“Uninhibited,” said Miss Rowan, who had studied Psychology as well as Economics. “Thoroughly healthy, one feels. No repressions.”

“But Guiseppe was quite impressed when he found I taught at Meadowbank,” said Miss Blake. “He became much more respectful at once. He has a cousin who wants to come here, but Miss Bulstrode was not sure she had a vacancy.”

“Meadowbank is a school that really counts,” said Miss Rowan, happily. “Really, the new Sports Pavilion looks most impressive. I never thought it would be ready in time.”

“Miss Bulstrode said it had to be,” said Miss Blake in the tone of one who has said the last word.

“Oh,” she added in a startled kind of way.

The door of the Sports Pavilion had opened abruptly, and a bony young woman with ginger-coloured hair emerged. She gave them a sharp unfriendly stare and moved rapidly away.

“That must be the new Games Mistress,” said Miss Blake. “How uncouth!”

“Not a very pleasant addition to the staff,” said Miss Rowan. “Miss Jones was always so friendly and sociable.”

“She absolutely glared at us,” said Miss Blake resentfully.

They both felt quite ruffled.

VII

Miss Bulstrode’s sitting room had windows looking out in two directions, one over the drive and lawn beyond, and another towards a bank of rhododendrons behind the house. It was quite an impressive room, and Miss Bulstrode was rather more than quite an impressive woman. She was tall, and rather noble looking, with well-dressed grey hair, grey eyes with plenty of humour in them, and a firm mouth. The success of her school (and Meadowbank was one of the most successful schools in England) was entirely due to the personality of its Headmistress. It was a very expensive school, but that was not really the point. It could be put better by saying that though you paid through the nose, you got what you paid for.

Your daughter was educated in the way you wished, and also in the way Miss Bulstrode wished, and the result of the two together seemed to give satisfaction. Owing to the high fees, Miss Bulstrode was able to employ a full staff. There was nothing mass produced about the school, but if it was individualistic, it also had discipline. Discipline without regimentation, was Miss Bulstrode’s motto. Discipline, she held, was reassuring to the young, it gave them a feeling of security; regimentation gave rise to irritation. Her pupils were a varied lot. They included several foreigners of good family, often foreign royalty. There were also English girls of good family or of wealth, who wanted a training in culture and the arts, with a general knowledge of life and social facility who would be turned out agreeable, well groomed and able to take part in intelligent discussion on any subject. There were girls who wanted to work hard and pass entrance examinations, and eventually take degrees and who, to do so, needed only good teaching and special attention. There were girls who had reacted unfavourably to school life of the conventional type. But Miss Bulstrode had her rules, she did not accept morons, or juvenile delinquents, and she preferred to accept girls whose parents she liked, and girls in whom she herself saw a prospect of development. The ages of her pupils varied within wide limits. There were girls who would have been labelled in the past as “finished,” and there were girls little more than children, some of them with parents abroad, and for whom Miss Bulstrode had a scheme of interesting holidays. The last and final court of appeal was Miss Bulstrode's own approval.

She was standing now by the chimneypiece listening to Mrs. Gerald Hope's slightly whining voice. With great foresight, she had not suggested that Mrs. Hope should sit down.

"Henrietta, you see, is very highly strung. Very highly strung indeed. Our doctor says—"

Miss Bulstrode nodded, with gentle reassurance, refraining from the caustic phrase she sometimes was tempted to utter.

"Don't you know, you idiot, that that is what every fool of a woman says about her child?"

She spoke with firm sympathy.

"You need have no anxiety, Mrs. Hope. Miss Rowan, a member of our staff, is a fully trained psychologist. You'll be surprised, I'm sure, at the change you'll find in Henrietta" (Who's a nice intelligent child, and far too good for you) "after a term or two here."

"Oh I know. You did wonders with the Lambeth child—absolutely wonders! So I am quite happy. And I—oh yes, I forgot. We're going to the South of France in six weeks' time. I thought I'd take Henrietta. It would make a little break for her."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," said Miss Bulstrode, briskly and with a charming smile, as though she were granting a request instead of refusing one.

"Oh! but—" Mrs. Hope's weak petulant face wavered, showed temper. "Really, I must insist. After all, she's my child."

"Exactly. But it's my school," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Surely I can take the child away from a school anytime I like?"

“Oh yes,” said Miss Bulstrode. “You can. Of course you can. But then, I wouldn’t have her back.”

Mrs. Hope was in a real temper now.

“Considering the size of the fees I pay here—”

“Exactly,” said Miss Bulstrode. “You wanted my school for your daughter, didn’t you? But it’s take it as it is, or leave it. Like that very charming Balenciaga model you are wearing. It is Balenciaga, isn’t it? It is so delightful to meet a woman with real clothes sense.”

Her hand enveloped Mrs. Hope’s, shook it, and imperceptibly guided her towards the door.

“Don’t worry at all. Ah, here is Henrietta waiting for you.” (She looked with approval at Henrietta, a nice well-balanced intelligent child if ever there was one, and who deserved a better mother.) “Margaret, take Henrietta Hope to Miss Johnson.”

Miss Bulstrode retired into her sitting room and a few moments later was talking French.

“But certainly, Excellence, your niece can study modern ballroom dancing. Most important socially. And languages, also, are most necessary.”

The next arrivals were prefaced by such a gust of expensive perfume as almost to knock Miss Bulstrode backwards.

“Must pour a whole bottle of the stuff over herself every day,” Miss Bulstrode noted mentally, as she greeted the exquisitely dressed dark-skinned woman.

“Enchantée, Madame.”

Madame giggled very prettily.

The big bearded man in Oriental dress took Miss Bulstrode’s hand, bowed over it, and said in very good English, “I have the honour to bring to you the Princess Shaista.”

Miss Bulstrode knew all about her new pupil who had just come from a school in Switzerland, but was a little hazy as to who it was escorting her. Not the Emir himself, she decided, probably the Minister, or Chargé d’Affaires. As usual when in doubt, she used that useful title Excellence, and assured him that Princess Shaista would have the best of care.

Shaista was smiling politely. She was also fashionably dressed and perfumed. Her age, Miss Bulstrode knew, was fifteen, but like many Eastern and Mediterranean girls, she looked older—quite mature. Miss Bulstrode spoke to her about her projected studies and was relieved to find that she answered promptly in excellent English and without giggling. In fact, her manners compared favourably with the awkward ones of many English school girls of fifteen. Miss Bulstrode had often thought that it might be an excellent plan to send English girls abroad to the Near Eastern countries to learn courtesy and manners there. More compliments were uttered on both sides and then the room was empty again though still filled with such heavy perfume that Miss Bulstrode opened both windows to their full extent to let some of it out.

The next comers were Mrs. Upjohn and her daughter Julia.

Mrs. Upjohn was an agreeable young woman in the late thirties with sandy hair, freckles and an unbecoming hat which was clearly a concession to the seriousness of the occasion, since she was obviously the type of young woman who usually went hatless.

Julia was a plain freckled child, with an intelligent forehead, and an air of good humour.

The preliminaries were quickly gone through and Julia was despatched via Margaret to Miss Johnson, saying cheerfully as she went, “So long, Mum. Do be careful lighting that gas heater now that I’m not there to do it.”

Miss Bulstrode turned smilingly to Mrs. Upjohn, but did not ask her to sit. It was possible that, despite Julia’s appearance of cheerful common sense, her mother, too, might want to explain that her daughter was highly strung.

“Is there anything special you want to tell me about Julia?” she asked.

Mrs. Upjohn replied cheerfully:

“Oh no, I don’t think so. Julia’s a very ordinary sort of child. Quite healthy and all that. I think she’s got reasonably good brains, too, but I daresay mothers usually think that about their children, don’t they?”

“Mothers,” said Miss Bulstrode grimly, “vary!”

“It’s wonderful for her to be able to come here,” said Mrs. Upjohn. “My aunt’s paying for it, really, or helping. I couldn’t afford it myself. But I’m awfully pleased about it. And so is Julia.” She moved to the window as she said enviously, “How lovely your garden is. And so tidy. You must have lots of real gardeners.”

“We had three,” said Miss Bulstrode, “but just now we’re shorthanded except for local labour.”

“Of course the trouble nowadays,” said Mrs. Upjohn, “is that what one calls a gardener usually isn’t a gardener, just a milkman who wants to do something in his spare time, or an old man of eighty. I sometimes think—Why!” exclaimed Mrs. Upjohn, still gazing out of the window—“how extraordinary!”

Miss Bulstrode paid less attention to this sudden exclamation than she should have done. For at that moment she herself had glanced casually out of the other window which gave on to the rhododendron shrubbery, and had perceived a highly unwelcome sight, none other than Lady Veronica Carlton-Sandways, weaving her way along the path, her large black velvet hat on one side, muttering to herself and clearly in a state of advanced intoxication.

Lady Veronica was not an unknown hazard. She was a charming woman, deeply attached to her twin daughters, and very delightful when she was, as they put it, herself—but unfortunately at unpredictable intervals, she was not herself. Her husband, Major Carlton-Sandways, coped fairly well. A cousin lived with them, who was usually at hand to keep an eye on Lady

Veronica and head her off if necessary. On Sports Day, with both Major Carlton-Sandways and the cousin in close attendance, Lady Veronica arrived completely sober and beautifully dressed and was a pattern of what a mother should be.

But there were times when Lady Veronica gave her well-wishers the slip, tanked herself up and made a beeline for her daughters to assure them of her maternal love. The twins had arrived by train early today, but no one had expected Lady Veronica.

Mrs. Upjohn was still talking. But Miss Bulstrode was not listening. She was reviewing various courses of action, for she recognized that Lady Veronica was fast approaching the truculent stage. But suddenly, an answer to prayer, Miss Chadwick appeared at a brisk trot, slightly out of breath. Faithful Chaddy, thought Miss Bulstrode. Always to be relied upon, whether it was a severed artery or an intoxicated parent.

“Disgraceful,” said Lady Veronica to her loudly. “Tried to keep me away—didn’t want me to come down here—I fooled Edith all right. Went to have my rest—got out car—gave silly old Edith slip … regular old maid … no man would ever look at her twice … Had a row with police on the way … said I was unfit to drive car … nonshense … Going to tell Miss Bulstrode I’m taking the girls home—want ’em home, mother love. Wonderful thing, mother love—”

“Splendid, Lady Veronica,” said Miss Chadwick. “We’re so pleased you’ve come. I particularly want you to see the new Sports Pavilion. You’ll love it.”

Adroitly she turned Lady Veronica’s unsteady footsteps in the opposite direction, leading her away from the house.

“I expect we’ll find your girls there,” she said brightly. “Such a nice Sports Pavilion, new lockers, and a drying room for the swim suits—” their voices trailed away.

Miss Bulstrode watched. Once Lady Veronica tried to break away and return to the house, but Miss Chadwick was a match for her. They disappeared round the corner of the rhododendrons, headed for the distant loneliness of the new Sports Pavilion.

Miss Bulstrode heaved a sigh of relief. Excellent Chaddy. So reliable! Not modern. Not brainy—apart from mathematics—but always a present help in time of trouble.

She turned with a sigh and a sense of guilt to Mrs. Upjohn who had been talking happily for some time….

" … though, of course," she was saying, "never real cloak and dagger stuff. Not dropping by parachute, or sabotage, or being a courier. I shouldn't have been brave enough. It was mostly dull stuff. Office work. And plotting. Plotting things on a map, I mean—not the story telling kind of plotting. But of course it was exciting sometimes and it was often quite funny, as I just said—all the secret agents followed each other round and round Geneva, all knowing each other by sight, and often ending up in the same bar. I wasn't married then, of course. It was all great fun."

She stopped abruptly with an apologetic and friendly smile.

"I'm sorry I've been talking so much. Taking up your time. When you've got such lots of people to see."

She held out a hand, said good-bye and departed.

Miss Bulstrode stood frowning for a moment. Some instinct warned her that she had missed something that might be important.

She brushed the feeling aside. This was the opening day of summer term, and she had many more parents to see. Never had her school been more popular, more assured of success. Meadowbank was at its zenith.

There was nothing to tell her that within a few weeks Meadowbank would be plunged into a sea of trouble; that disorder, confusion and murder would reign there, that already certain events had been set in motion….

One

REVOLUTION IN RAMAT

About two months earlier than the first day of the summer term at Meadowbank, certain events had taken place which were to have unexpected repercussions in that celebrated girls' school.

In the Palace of Ramat, two young men sat smoking and considering the immediate future. One young man was dark, with a smooth olive face and large melancholy eyes. He was Prince Ali Yusuf, Hereditary Sheikh of Ramat, which, though small, was one of the richest states in the Middle East. The other young man was sandy haired and freckled and more or less penniless, except for the handsome salary he drew as private pilot to His Highness Prince Ali Yusuf. In spite of this difference in status, they were on terms of perfect equality. They had been at the same public school and had been friends then and ever since.

“They shot at us, Bob,” said Prince Ali almost incredulously.

“They shot at us all right,” said Bob Rawlinson.

“And they meant it. They meant to bring us down.”

“The bastards meant it all right,” said Bob grimly.

Ali considered for a moment.

“It would hardly be worthwhile trying again?”

“We mightn't be so lucky this time. The truth is, Ali, we've left things too late. You should have got out two weeks ago. I told you so.”

“One doesn't like to run away,” said the ruler of Ramat.

“I see your point. But remember what Shakespeare or one of these poetical fellows said about those who run away living to fight another day.”

“To think,” said the young Prince with feeling, “of the money that has gone into making this a Welfare State. Hospitals, schools, a Health Service—”

Bob Rawlinson interrupted the catalogue.

“Couldn’t the Embassy do something?”

Ali Yusuf flushed angrily.

“Take refuge in your Embassy? That, never. The extremists would probably storm the place—they wouldn’t respect diplomatic immunity. Besides, if I did that, it really would be the end! Already the chief accusation against me is of being pro-Western.” He sighed. “It is so difficult to understand.” He sounded wistful, younger than his twenty-five years. “My grandfather was a cruel man, a real tyrant. He had hundreds of slaves and treated them ruthlessly. In his tribal wars, he killed his enemies unmercifully and executed them horribly. The mere whisper of his name made everyone turn pale. And yet—he is a legend still! Admired! Respected! The great Achmed Abdullah! And I? What have I done? Built hospitals and schools, welfare, housing … all the things people are said to want. Don’t they want them? Would they prefer a reign of terror like my grandfather’s?”

“I expect so,” said Bob Rawlinson. “Seems a bit unfair, but there it is.”

“But why, Bob? Why?”

Bob Rawlinson sighed, wriggled and endeavoured to explain what he felt. He had to struggle with his own inarticulateness.

“Well,” he said. “He put up a show—I suppose that’s it really. He was—sort of—dramatic, if you know what I mean.”

He looked at his friend who was definitely not dramatic. A nice quiet decent chap, sincere and perplexed, that was what Ali was, and Bob liked him for it. He was neither picturesque nor violent, but whilst in England people who are picturesque and violent cause embarrassment and are not much liked, in the Middle East, Bob was fairly sure, it was different.

"But democracy—" began Ali.

"Oh, democracy—" Bob waved his pipe. "That's a word that means different things everywhere. One thing's certain. It never means what the Greeks originally meant by it. I bet you anything you like that if they boot you out of here, some spouting hot air merchant will take over, yelling his own praises, building himself up into God Almighty, and stringing up, or cutting off the heads of anyone who dares to disagree with him in any way. And, mark you, he'll say it's a Democratic Government—of the people and for the people. I expect the people will like it too. Exciting for them. Lots of bloodshed."

"But we are not savages! We are civilized nowadays."

"There are different kinds of civilization … " said Bob vaguely. "Besides—I rather think we've all got a bit of savage in us—if we can think up a good excuse for letting it rip."

"Perhaps you are right," said Ali sombrely.

"The thing people don't seem to want anywhere, nowadays," said Bob, "is anyone who's got a bit of common sense. I've never been a brainy chap—well, you know that well enough, Ali—but I often think that that's what the world really needs—just a bit of common sense." He laid aside his pipe and sat in his chair. "But never mind all that. The thing is how we're going to get you out of here. Is there anybody in the Army you can really trust?"

Slowly, Prince Ali Yusuf shook his head.

"A fortnight ago, I should have said 'Yes.' But now, I do not know … cannot be sure—"

Bob nodded. "That's the hell of it. As for this palace of yours, it gives me the creeps."

Ali acquiesced without emotion.

"Yes, there are spies everywhere in palaces … They hear everything—they—know everything."

"Even down in the hangars—" Bob broke off. "Old Achmed's all right. He's got a kind of sixth sense. Found one of the mechanics trying to tamper with the plane—one of the men we'd have sworn was absolutely trustworthy. Look here, Ali, if we're going to have a shot at getting you away, it will have to be soon."

"I know—I know. I think—I am quite certain now—that if I stay I shall be killed."

He spoke without emotion, or any kind of panic: with a mild detached interest.

"We'll stand a good chance of being killed anyway," Bob warned him. "We'll have to fly out north, you know. They can't intercept us that way. But it means going over the mountains—and at this time of year—"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You've got to understand. It's damned risky."

Ali Yusuf looked distressed.

"If anything happened to you, Bob—"

"Don't worry about me, Ali. That's not what I meant. I'm not important. And anyway, I'm the sort of chap that's sure to get killed sooner or later. I'm always doing crazy things. No—it's you—I don't want to persuade you one way or the other. If a portion of the Army is loyal—"

"I don't like the idea of running away," said Ali simply. "But I do not in the least want to be a martyr, and be cut to pieces by a mob."

He was silent for a moment or two.

"Very well then," he said at last with a sigh. "We will make the attempt. When?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Sooner the better. We've got to get you to the airstrip in some natural way … How about saying you're going to inspect the new road construction out at Al Jasar? Sudden whim. Go this afternoon. Then, as your car passes the airstrip, stop there—I'll have the bus all ready and tuned up. The idea will be to go up to inspect the road construction from the air, see? We take off and go! We can't take any baggage, of course. It's got to be all quite impromptu."

"There is nothing I wish to take with me—except one thing—"

He smiled, and suddenly the smile altered his face and made a different person of him. He was no longer the modern conscientious Westernized young man—the smile held all the racial guile and craft which had enabled a long line of his ancestors to survive.

"You are my friend, Bob, you shall see."

His hand went inside his shirt and fumbled. Then he held out a little chamois leather bag.

"This?" Bob frowned and looked puzzled.

Ali took it from him, untied the neck, and poured the contents on the table.

Bob held his breath for a moment and then expelled it in a soft whistle.

"Good lord. Are they real?"

Ali looked amused.

"Of course they are real. Most of them belonged to my father. He acquired new ones every year. I, too. They have come from many places, bought for our family by men we can trust—from London, from Calcutta, from South Africa. It is a tradition of our family. To have these in case of need." He added in a matter-of-fact voice: "They are worth, at today's prices, about three-quarters of a million."

"Three-quarters of a million pounds." Bob let out a whistle, picked up the stones, let them run through his fingers. "It's fantastic. Like a fairy tale. It does things to you.”

“Yes.” The dark young man nodded. Again that age-long weary look was on his face. “Men are not the same when it comes to jewels. There is always a trail of violence to follow such things. Deaths, bloodshed, murder. And women are the worst. For with women it will not only be the value. It is something to do with the jewels themselves. Beautiful jewels drive women mad. They want to own them. To wear them round their throats, on their bosoms. I would not trust any woman with these. But I shall trust you.”

“Me?” Bob stared.

“Yes. I do not want these stones to fall into the hands of my enemies. I do not know when the rising against me will take place. It may be planned for today. I may not live to reach the airstrip this afternoon. Take the stones and do the best you can.”

“But look here—I don’t understand. What am I to do with them?”

“Arrange somehow to get them out of the country.”

Ali stared placidly at his perturbed friend.

“You mean, you want me to carry them instead of you?”

“You can put it that way. But I think, really, you will be able to think of some better plan to get them to Europe.”

“But look here, Ali, I haven’t the first idea how to set about such a thing.”

Ali leaned back in his chair. He was smiling in a quietly amused manner.

“You have common sense. And you are honest. And I remember, from the days when you were my fag, that you could always think up some ingenious idea … I will give you the name and address of a man who deals with such matters for me—that is—in case I should not survive. Do not look so worried, Bob. Do the best you can. That is all I ask. I shall not blame you if you fail. It is as Allah wills. For me, it is simple. I do not want those stones taken from my dead body. For the rest—” he shrugged his shoulders. “It is as I have said. All will go as Allah wills.”

“You’re nuts!”

“No. I am a fatalist, that is all.”

“But look here, Ali. You said just now I was honest. But three-quarters of a million … Don’t you think that might sap any man’s honesty?”

Ali Yusuf looked at his friend with affection.

“Strangely enough,” he said, “I have no doubt on that score.”

Two

THE WOMAN ON THE BALCONY

I

As Bob Rawlinson walked along the echoing marble corridors of the Palace, he had never felt so unhappy in his life. The knowledge that he was carrying three-quarters of a million pounds in his trousers pocket caused him acute misery. He felt as though every Palace official he encountered must know the fact. He felt even that the knowledge of his precious burden must show in his face. He would have been relieved to learn that his freckled countenance bore exactly its usual expression of cheerful good nature.

The sentries outside presented arms with a clash. Bob walked down the main crowded street of Ramat, his mind still dazed. Where was he going? What was he planning to do? He had no idea. And time was short.

The main street was like most main streets in the Middle East. It was a mixture of squalor and magnificence. Banks reared their vast newly built magnificence. Innumerable small shops presented a collection of cheap plastic goods. Babies' bootees and cheap cigarette lighters were displayed in unlikely juxtaposition. There were sewing machines, and spare parts for cars. Pharmacies displayed flyblown proprietary medicines, and large notices of penicillin in every form and antibiotics galore. In very few of the shops was there anything that you could normally want to buy, except possibly the latest Swiss watches, hundreds of which were displayed crowded into a tiny window. The assortment was so great that even there one would have shrunk from purchase, dazzled by sheer mass.

Bob, still walking in a kind of stupor, jostled by figures in native or European dress, pulled himself together and asked himself again where the hell he was going?

He turned into a native café and ordered lemon tea. As he sipped it, he began, slowly, to come to. The atmosphere of the café was soothing. At a table opposite him an elderly Arab was peacefully clicking through a string of amber beads. Behind him two men played tric trac. It was a good place to sit and think.

And he'd got to think. Jewels worth three-quarters of a million had been handed to him, and it was up to him to devise some plan of getting them out of the country. No time to lose either. At any minute the balloon might go up….

Ali was crazy, of course. Tossing three-quarters of a million lightheartedly to a friend in that way. And then sitting back quietly himself and leaving everything to Allah. Bob had not got that recourse. Bob's God expected his servants to decide on and perform their own actions to the best of the ability their God had given them.

What the hell was he going to do with those damned stones?

He thought of the Embassy. No, he couldn't involve the Embassy. The Embassy would almost certainly refuse to be involved.

What he needed was some person, some perfectly ordinary person who was leaving the country in some perfectly ordinary way. A business man, or a tourist would be best. Someone with no political connections whose baggage would, at most, be subjected to a superficial search or more probably no search at all. There was, of course, the other end to be considered … Sensation at London Airport. Attempt to smuggle in jewels worth three-quarters of a million. And so on and so on. One would have to risk that—

Somebody ordinary—a bona fide traveller. And suddenly Bob kicked himself for a fool. Joan, of course. His sister Joan Sutcliffe. Joan had been out here for two months with her daughter Jennifer who after a bad bout of pneumonia had been ordered sunshine and a dry climate. They were going back by "long sea" in four or five days' time.

Joan was the ideal person. What was it Ali had said about women and jewels? Bob smiled to himself. Good old Joan! She wouldn't lose her head over jewels. Trust her to keep her feet on the earth. Yes—he could trust Joan.

Wait a minute, though … could he trust Joan? Her honesty, yes. But her discretion? Regretfully Bob shook his head. Joan would talk, would not be able to help talking. Even worse. She would hint. "I'm taking home something very important, I mustn't say a word to anyone. It's really rather exciting…."

Joan had never been able to keep a thing to herself though she was always very incensed if one told her so. Joan, then, mustn't know what she was taking. It would be safer for her that way. He'd make the stones up into a parcel, an innocent-looking parcel. Tell her some story. A present for someone? A commission? He'd think of something….

Bob glanced at his watch and rose to his feet. Time was getting on.

He strode along the street oblivious of the midday heat. Everything seemed so normal. There was nothing to show on the surface. Only in the Palace was one conscious of the banked-down fires, of the spying, the whispers. The Army—it all depended on the Army. Who was loyal? Who was disloyal? A coup d'état would certainly be attempted. Would it succeed or fail?

Bob frowned as he turned into Ramat's leading hotel. It was modestly called the Ritz Savoy and had a grand modernistic façade. It had opened with a flourish three years ago with a Swiss manager, a Viennese chef, and an Italian Mâitre d'hôtel. Everything had been wonderful. The Viennese chef had gone first, then the Swiss manager. Now the Italian head waiter had gone too. The food was still ambitious, but bad, the service abominable, and a good deal of the expensive plumbing had gone wrong.

The clerk behind the desk knew Bob well and beamed at him.

"Good morning, Squadron Leader. You want your sister? She has gone on a picnic with the little girl—"

“A picnic?” Bob was taken aback—of all the silly times to go for a picnic.

“With Mr. and Mrs. Hurst from the Oil Company,” said the clerk informatively. Everyone always knew everything. “They have gone to the Kalat Diwa dam.”

Bob swore under his breath. Joan wouldn’t be home for hours.

“I’ll go up to her room,” he said and held out his hand for the key which the clerk gave him.

He unlocked the door and went in. The room, a large double-bedded one, was in its usual confusion. Joan Sutcliffe was not a tidy woman. Golf clubs lay across a chair, tennis racquets had been flung on the bed. Clothing lay about, the table was littered with rolls of film, postcards, paperbacked books and an assortment of native curios from the South, mostly made in Birmingham and Japan.

Bob looked round him, at the suitcases and the zip bags. He was faced with a problem. He wouldn’t be able to see Joan before flying Ali out. There wouldn’t be time to get to the dam and back. He could parcel up the stuff and leave it with a note—but almost immediately he shook his head. He knew quite well that he was nearly always followed. He’d probably been followed from the Palace to the café and from the café here. He hadn’t spotted anyone—but he knew that they were good at the job. There was nothing suspicious in his coming to the hotel to see his sister—but if he left a parcel and a note, the note would be read and the parcel opened.

Time … time … He’d no time….

Three-quarters of a million in precious stones in his trousers pocket.

He looked round the room….

Then, with a grin, he fished out from his pocket the little tool kit he always carried. His niece Jennifer had some plasticine, he noted, that would help.

He worked quickly and skilfully. Once he looked up, suspicious, his eyes going to the open window. No, there was no balcony outside this room. It was just his nerves that made him feel that someone was watching him.

He finished his task and nodded in approval. Nobody would notice what he had done—he felt sure of that. Neither Joan nor anyone else. Certainly not Jennifer, a self-centred child, who never saw or noticed anything outside herself.

He swept up all evidences of his toil and put them into his pocket … Then he hesitated, looking round.

He drew Mrs. Sutcliffe's writing pad towards him and sat frowning—

He must leave a note for Joan—

But what could he say? It must be something that Joan would understand—but which would mean nothing to anyone who read the note.

And really that was impossible! In the kind of thriller that Bob liked reading to fill up his spare moments, you left a kind of cryptogram which was always successfully puzzled out by someone. But he couldn't even begin to think of a cryptogram—and in any case Joan was the sort of commonsense person who would need the i's dotted and the t's crossed before she noticed anything at all—

Then his brow cleared. There was another way of doing it—divert attention away from Joan—leave an ordinary everyday note. Then leave a message with someone else to be given to Joan in England. He wrote rapidly—

Dear Joan—Dropped in to ask if you'd care to play a round of golf this evening but if you've been up at the dam, you'll probably be dead to the world. What about tomorrow? Five o'clock at the Club.

Yours, Bob.

A casual sort of a message to leave for a sister that he might never see again—but in some ways the more casual the better. Joan mustn't be involved in any funny business, mustn’t even know that there was any funny business. Joan could not dissimulate. Her protection would be the fact that she clearly knew nothing.

And the note would accomplish a dual purpose. It would seem that he, Bob, had no plan for departure himself.

He thought for a minute or two, then he crossed to the telephone and gave the number of the British Embassy. Presently he was connected with Edmundson, the third secretary, a friend of his.

“John? Bob Rawlinson here. Can you meet me somewhere when you get off? … Make it a bit earlier than that? … You’ve got to, old boy. It’s important. Well, actually, it’s a girl … ” He gave an embarrassed cough. “She’s wonderful, quite wonderful. Out of this world. Only it’s a bit tricky.”

Edmundson’s voice, sounding slightly stuffed shirt and disapproving, said, “Really, Bob, you and your girls. All right, 2 o’clock do you?” and rang off. Bob heard the little echoing click as whoever had been listening in, replaced the receiver.

Good old Edmundson. Since all the telephones in Ramat had been tapped, Bob and John Edmundson had worked out a little code of their own. A wonderful girl who was “out of this world” meant something urgent and important.

Edmundson would pick him up in his car outside the new Merchants Bank at 2 o’clock and he’d tell Edmundson of the hiding place. Tell him that Joan didn’t know about it but that, if anything happened to him, it was important. Going by the long sea route Joan and Jennifer wouldn’t be back in England for six weeks. By that time the revolution would almost certainly have happened and either been successful or have been put down. Ali Yusuf might be in Europe, or he and Bob might both be dead. He would tell Edmundson enough, but not too much.

Bob took a last look around the room. It looked exactly the same, peaceful, untidy, domestic. The only thing added was his harmless note to Joan. He propped it up on the table and went out. There was no one in the long corridor.

II

The woman in the room next to that occupied by Joan Sutcliffe stepped back from the balcony. There was a mirror in her hand.

She had gone out on the balcony originally to examine more closely a single hair that had had the audacity to spring up on her chin. She dealt with it with tweezers, then subjected her face to a minute scrutiny in the clear sunlight.

It was then, as she relaxed, that she saw something else. The angle at which she was holding her mirror was such that it reflected the mirror of the hanging wardrobe in the room next to hers and in that mirror she saw a man doing something very curious.

So curious and unexpected that she stood there motionless, watching. He could not see her from where he sat at the table, and she could only see him by means of the double reflection.

If he had turned his head behind him, he might have caught sight of her mirror in the wardrobe mirror, but he was too absorbed in what he was doing to look behind him….

Once, it was true, he did look up suddenly towards the window, but since there was nothing to see there, he lowered his head again.

The woman watched him while he finished what he was doing. After a moment’s pause he wrote a note which he propped up on the table. Then he moved out of her line of vision but she could just hear enough to realize that he was making a telephone call. She couldn’t catch what was said, but it sounded lighthearted—casual. Then she heard the door close.

The woman waited a few minutes. Then she opened her door. At the far end of the passage an Arab was flicking idly with a feather duster. He turned the corner out of sight.

The woman slipped quickly to the door of the next room. It was locked, but she had expected that. The hairpin she had with her and the blade of a small knife did the job quickly and expertly.

She went in, pushing the door to behind her. She picked up the note. The flap had only been stuck down lightly and opened easily. She read the note, frowning. There was no explanation there.

She sealed it up, put it back, and walked across the room.

There, with her hand outstretched, she was disturbed by voices through the window from the terrace below.

One was a voice that she knew to be the occupier of the room in which she was standing. A decided didactic voice, fully assured of itself.

She darted to the window.

Below on the terrace, Joan Sutcliffe, accompanied by her daughter Jennifer, a pale solid child of fifteen, was telling the world and a tall unhappy looking Englishman from the British Consulate just what she thought of the arrangements he had come to make.

“But it’s absurd! I never heard such nonsense. Everything’s perfectly quiet here and everyone quite pleasant. I think it’s all a lot of panicky fuss.”

“We hope so, Mrs. Sutcliffe, we certainly hope so. But H.E. feels that the responsibility is such—”

Mrs. Sutcliffe cut him short. She did not propose to consider the responsibility of ambassadors.

“We’ve a lot of baggage, you know. We were going home by long sea—next Wednesday. The sea voyage will be good for Jennifer. The doctor said so. I really must absolutely decline to alter all my arrangements and be flown to England in this silly flurry.”

The unhappy looking man said encouragingly that Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter could be flown, not to England, but to Aden and catch their boat there.

“With our baggage?”

“Yes, yes, that can be arranged. I’ve got a car waiting—a station wagon. We can load everything right away.”

“Oh well.” Mrs. Sutcliffe capitulated. “I suppose we’d better pack.”

“At once, if you don’t mind.”

The woman in the bedroom drew back hurriedly. She took a quick glance at the address on a luggage label on one of the suitcases. Then she slipped quickly out of the room and back into her own just as Mrs. Sutcliffe turned the corner of the corridor.

The clerk from the office was running after her.

“Your brother, the Squadron Leader, has been here, Mrs. Sutcliffe. He went up to your room. But I think that he has left again. You must just have missed him.”

“How tiresome,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “Thank you,” she said to the clerk and went on to Jennifer, “I suppose Bob’s fussing too. I can’t see any sign of disturbance myself in the streets. This door’s unlocked. How careless these people are.”

“Perhaps it was Uncle Bob,” said Jennifer.

“I wish I hadn’t missed him … Oh, there’s a note.” She tore it open.

“At any rate Bob isn’t fussing,” she said triumphantly. “He obviously doesn’t know a thing about all this. Diplomatic windup, that’s all it is. How I hate trying to pack in the heat of the day. This room’s like an oven. Come on, Jennifer, get your things out of the chest of drawers and the wardrobe. We must just shove everything in anyhow. We can repack later.”

“I’ve never been in a revolution,” said Jennifer thoughtfully.

“I don’t expect you’ll be in one this time,” said her mother sharply. “It will be just as I say. Nothing will happen.”

Jennifer looked disappointed.

Three

INTRODUCING MR. ROBINSON

It was some six weeks later that a young man tapped discreetly on the door of a room in Bloomsbury and was told to come in.

It was a small room. Behind a desk sat a fat middle-aged man slumped in a chair. He was wearing a crumpled suit, the front of which was smothered in cigar ash. The windows were closed and the atmosphere was almost unbearable.

“Well?” said the fat man testily, and speaking with half-closed eyes. “What is it now, eh?”

It was said of Colonel Pikeaway that his eyes were always just closing in sleep, or just opening after sleep. It was also said that his name was not Pikeaway and that he was not a colonel. But some people will say anything!

“Edmundson, from the F.O., is here sir.”

“Oh,” said Colonel Pikeaway.

He blinked, appeared to be going to sleep again and muttered:

“Third secretary at our Embassy in Ramat at the time of the Revolution. Right?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“I suppose, then, I’d better see him,” said Colonel Pikeaway without any marked relish. He pulled himself into a more upright position and brushed off a little of the ash from his paunch.

Mr. Edmundson was a tall fair young man, very correctly dressed with manners to match, and a general air of quiet disapproval.

"Colonel Pikeaway? I'm John Edmundson. They said you—er—might want to see me."

"Did they? Well, they should know," said Colonel Pikeaway. "Siddown," he added.

His eyes began to close again, but before they did so, he spoke:

"You were in Ramat at the time of the Revolution?"

"Yes, I was. A nasty business."

"I suppose it would be. You were a friend of Bob Rawlinson's, weren't you?"

"I know him fairly well, yes."

"Wrong tense," said Colonel Pikeaway. "He's dead."

"Yes, sir, I know. But I wasn't sure—" he paused.

"You don't have to take pains to be discreet here," said Colonel Pikeaway. "We know everything here. Or if we don't, we pretend we do. Rawlinson flew Ali Yusuf out of Ramat on the day of the Revolution. Plane hasn't been heard of since. Could have landed in some inaccessible place, or could have crashed. Wreckage of a plane has been found in the Arolez mountains. Two bodies. News will be released to the Press tomorrow. Right?"

Edmundson admitted that it was quite right.

"We know all about things here," said Colonel Pikeaway. "That's what we're for. Plane flew into the mountain. Could have been weather conditions. Some reason to believe it was sabotage. Delayed action bomb. We haven't got the full reports yet. The plane crashed in a pretty inaccessible place. There was a reward offered for finding it, but these things take a long time to filter through. Then we had to fly out experts to make an examination. All the red tape, of course. Applications to a foreign government, permission from ministers, palm greasing—to say nothing of the local peasantry appropriating anything that might come in useful."

He paused and looked at Edmundson.

“Very sad, the whole thing,” said Edmundson. “Prince Ali Yusuf would have made an enlightened ruler, with democratic principles.”

“That’s what probably did the poor chap in,” said Colonel Pikeaway. “But we can’t waste time in telling sad stories of the deaths of kings. We’ve been asked to make certain—inquiries. By interested parties. Parties, that is, to whom Her Majesty’s Government is well-disposed.” He looked hard at the other. “Know what I mean?”

“Well, I have heard something.” Edmundson spoke reluctantly.

“You’ve heard perhaps, that nothing of value was found on the bodies, or amongst the wreckage, or as far as is known, had been pinched by the locals. Though as to that, you can never tell with peasants. They can clam up as well as the Foreign Office itself. And what else have you heard?”

“Nothing else.”

“You haven’t heard that perhaps something of value ought to have been found? What did they send you to me for?”

“They said you might want to ask me certain questions,” said Edmundson primly.

“If I ask you questions I shall expect answers,” Colonel Pikeaway pointed out.

“Naturally.”

“Doesn’t seem natural to you, son. Did Bob Rawlinson say anything to you before he flew out of Ramat? He was in Ali’s confidence if anyone was. Come now, let’s have it. Did he say anything?”

“As to what, sir?”

Colonel Pikeaway stared hard at him and scratched his ear.

“Oh, all right,” he grumbled. “Hush up this and don’t say that. Overdo it in my opinion! If you don’t know what I’m talking about, you don’t know, and there it is.”

“I think there was something—” Edmundson spoke cautiously and with reluctance. “Something important that Bob might have wanted to tell me.”

“Ah,” said Colonel Pikeaway, with the air of a man who has at last pulled the cork out of a bottle. “Interesting. Let’s have what you know.”

“It’s very little, sir. Bob and I had a kind of simple code. We’d cottoned on to the fact that all the telephones in Ramat were being tapped. Bob was in the way of hearing things at the Palace, and I sometimes had a bit of useful information to pass on to him. So if one of us rang the other up and mentioned a girl or girls, in a certain way, using the term ‘out of this world’ for her, it meant something was up!”

“Important information of some kind or other?”

“Yes. Bob rang me up using those terms the day the whole show started. I was to meet him at our usual rendezvous—outside one of the banks. But rioting broke out in that particular quarter and the police closed the road. I couldn’t make contact with Bob or he with me. He flew Ali out the same afternoon.”

“I see,” said Pikeaway. “No idea where he was telephoning from?”

“No. It might have been anywhere.”

“Pity.” He paused and then threw out casually:

“Do you know Mrs. Sutcliffe?”

“You mean Bob Rawlinson’s sister? I met her out there, of course. She was there with a schoolgirl daughter. I don’t know her well.”

“Were she and Bob Rawlinson very close?”

Edmundson considered.

"No, I shouldn't say so. She was a good deal older than he was, and rather much of the elder sister. And he didn't much like his brother-in-law—always referred to him as a pompous ass."

"So he is! One of our prominent industrialists—and how pompous can they get! So you don't think it likely that Bob Rawlinson would have confided an important secret to his sister?"

"It's difficult to say—but no, I shouldn't think so."

"I shouldn't either," said Colonel Pikeaway.

He sighed. "Well, there we are, Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter are on their way home by the long sea route. Dock at Tilbury on the Eastern Queen tomorrow."

He was silent for a moment or two, whilst his eyes made a thoughtful survey of the young man opposite him. Then, as though having come to a decision, he held out his hand and spoke briskly.

"Very good of you to come."

"I'm only sorry I've been of such little use. You're sure there's nothing I can do?"

"No. No. I'm afraid not."

John Edmundson went out.

The discreet young man came back.

"Thought I might have sent him to Tilbury to break the news to the sister," said Pikeaway. "Friend of her brother's—all that. But I decided against it. Inelastic type. That's the F.O. training. Not an opportunist. I'll send round what's his name."

"Derek?"

“That’s right,” Colonel Pikeaway nodded approval. “Getting to know what I mean quite well, ain’t you?”

“I try my best, sir.”

“Trying’s not enough. You have to succeed. Send me along Ronnie first. I’ve got an assignment for him.”

II

Colonel Pikeaway was apparently just going off to sleep again when the young man called Ronnie entered the room. He was tall, dark, muscular, and had a gay and rather impertinent manner.

Colonel Pikeaway looked at him for a moment or two and then grinned.

“How’d you like to penetrate into a girls’ school?” he asked.

“A girls’ school?” The young man lifted his eyebrows. “That will be something new! What are they up to? Making bombs in the chemistry class?”

“Nothing of that kind. Very superior high-class school. Meadowbank.”

“Meadowbank!” the young man whistled. “I can’t believe it!”

“Hold your impertinent tongue and listen to me. Princess Shaista, first cousin and only near relative of the late Prince Ali Yusuf of Ramat, goes there this next term. She’s been at school in Switzerland up to now.”

“What do I do? Abduct her?”

“Certainly not. I think it possible she may become a focus of interest in the near future. I want you to keep an eye on developments. I’ll have to leave it vague. I don’t know what or who may turn up, but if any of our more unlikeable friends seem to be interested, report it … A watching brief, that’s what you’ve got.”

The young man nodded.

"And how do I get in to watch? Shall I be the drawing master?"

"The visiting staff is all female." Colonel Pikeaway looked at him in a considering manner. "I think I'll have to make you a gardener."

"A gardener?"

"Yes. I'm right in thinking you know something about gardening?"

"Yes, indeed. I ran a column on Your Garden in the Sunday Mail for a year in my younger days."

"Tush!" said Colonel Pikeaway. "That's nothing! I could do a column on gardening myself without knowing a thing about it—just crib from a few luridly illustrated Nurseryman's catalogues and a Gardening Encyclopedia. I know all the patter. 'Why not break away from tradition and sound a really tropical note in your border this year? Lovely Amabellis Gossiporia, and some of the wonderful new Chinese hybrids of Sinensis Maka foolia. Try the rich blushing beauty of a clump of Sinistra Hopaless, not very hardy but they should be all right against a west wall.'" He broke off and grinned. "Nothing to it! The fools buy the things and early frost sets in and kills them and they wish they'd stuck to wallflowers and forget-me-nots! No, my boy, I mean the real stuff. Spit on your hands and use the spade, be well acquainted with the compost heap, mulch diligently, use the Dutch hoe and every other kind of hoe, trench really deep for your sweet peas—and all the rest of the beastly business. Can you do it?"

"All these things I have done from my youth upwards!"

"Of course you have. I know your mother. Well, that's settled."

"Is there a job going as a gardener at Meadowbank?"

"Sure to be," said Colonel Pikeaway. "Every garden in England is short staffed. I'll write you some nice testimonials. You'll see, they'll simply jump at you. No time to waste, summer term begins on the 29th."

"I garden and I keep my eyes open, is that right?"

"That's it, and if any oversexed teenagers make passes at you, Heaven help you if you respond. I don't want you thrown out on your ear too soon."

He drew a sheet of paper towards him. "What do you fancy as a name?"

"Adam would seem appropriate."

"Last name?"

"How about Eden?"

"I'm not sure I like the way your mind is running. Adam Goodman will do very nicely. Go and work out your past history with Jenson and then get cracking." He looked at his watch. "I've no more time for you. I don't want to keep Mr. Robinson waiting. He ought to be here by now."

Adam (to give him his new name) stopped as he was moving to the door.

"Mr. Robinson?" he asked curiously. "Is he coming?"

"I said so." A buzzer went on the desk. "There he is now. Always punctual, Mr. Robinson."

"Tell me," said Adam curiously. "Who is he really? What's his real name?"

"His name," said Colonel Pikeaway, "is Mr. Robinson. That's all I know, and that's all anybody knows."

III

The man who came into the room did not look as though his name was, or could ever have been, Robinson. It might have been Demetrius, or Isaacstein, or Perenna—though not one or the other in particular. He was not definitely Jewish, nor definitely Greek nor Portuguese nor Spanish, nor South American. What did seem highly unlikely was that he was an Englishman called Robinson. He was fat and well-dressed, with a yellow face, melancholy dark eyes, a broad forehead, and a generous mouth that displayed rather over-large very white teeth. His hands were well-shaped and beautifully kept. His voice was English with no trace of accent.

He and Colonel Pikeaway greeted each other rather in the manner of two reigning monarchs. Politenesses were exchanged.

Then, as Mr. Robinson accepted a cigar, Colonel Pikeaway said:

“It is very good of you to offer to help us.”

Mr. Robinson lit his cigar, savoured it appreciatively, and finally spoke.

“My dear fellow. I just thought—I hear things, you know. I know a lot of people, and they tell me things. I don’t know why.”

Colonel Pikeaway did not comment on the reason why.

He said:

“I gather you’ve heard that Prince Ali Yusuf’s plane has been found?”

“Wednesday of last week,” said Mr. Robinson. “Young Rawlinson was the pilot. A tricky flight. But the crash wasn’t due to an error on Rawlinson’s part. The plane had been tampered with—by a certain Achmed—senior mechanic. Completely trustworthy—or so Rawlinson thought. But he wasn’t. He’s got a very lucrative job with the new régime now.”

“So it was sabotage! We didn’t know that for sure. It’s a sad story.”

“Yes. That poor young man—Ali Yusuf, I mean—was ill equipped to cope with corruption and treachery. His public school education was unwise—or at least that is my view. But we do not concern ourselves with him now, do we? He is yesterday’s news. Nothing is so dead as a dead king. We are concerned, you in your way, I in mine, with what dead kings leave behind them.”

“Which is?”

Mr. Robinson shrugged his shoulders.

“A substantial bank balance in Geneva, a modest balance in London, considerable assets in his own country now taken over by the glorious new régime (and a little bad feeling as to how the spoils have been divided, or so I hear!), and finally a small personal item."

"Small?"

"These things are relative. Anyway, small in bulk. Handy to carry upon the person."

"They weren't on Ali Yusuf's person, as far as we know."

"No. Because he had handed them over to young Rawlinson."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Pikeaway sharply.

"Well, one is never sure," said Mr. Robinson apologetically. "In a palace there is so much gossip. It cannot all be true. But there was a very strong rumour to that effect."

"They weren't on young Rawlinson's person, either—"

"In that case," said Mr. Robinson, "it seems as though they must have been got out of the country by some other means."

"What other means? Have you any idea?"

"Rawlinson went to a café in the town after he had received the jewels. He was not seen to speak to anyone or approach anyone whilst he was there. Then he went to the Ritz Savoy Hotel where his sister was staying. He went up to her room and was there for about 20 minutes. She herself was out. He then left the hotel and went to the Merchants Bank in Victory Square where he cashed a cheque. When he came out of the bank a disturbance was beginning. Students rioting about something. It was some time before the square was cleared. Rawlinson then went straight to the airstrip where, in company with Sergeant Achmed, he went over the plane.

"Ali Yusuf drove out to see the new road construction, stopped his car at the airstrip, joined Rawlinson and expressed a desire to take a short flight and see the dam and the new highway construction from the air. They took off and did not return."

"And your deductions from that?"

"My dear fellow, the same as yours. Why did Bob Rawlinson spend twenty minutes in his sister's room when she was out and he had been told that she was not likely to return until evening? He left her a note that would have taken him at most three minutes to scribble. What did he do for the rest of the time?"

"You are suggesting that he concealed the jewels in some appropriate place amongst his sister's belongings?"

"It seems indicated, does it not? Mrs. Sutcliffe was evacuated that same day with other British subjects. She was flown to Aden with her daughter. She arrives at Tilbury, I believe, tomorrow."

Pikeaway nodded.

"Look after her," said Mr. Robinson.

"We're going to look after her," said Pikeaway. "That's all arranged."

"If she has the jewels, she will be in danger." He closed his eyes. "I so much dislike violence."

"You think there is likely to be violence?"

"There are people interested. Various undesirable people—if you understand me."

"I understand you," said Pikeaway grimly.

"And they will, of course, double cross each other."

Mr. Robinson shook his head. "So confusing."

Colonel Pikeaway asked delicately: "Have you yourself any—er—special interest in the matter?"

"I represent a certain group of interests," said Mr. Robinson. His voice was faintly reproachful. "Some of the stones in question were supplied by my syndicate to his late highness—at a very fair and reasonable price. The group of people I represent who were interested in the recovery of the stones, would, I may venture to say, have had the approval of the late owner. I shouldn't like to say more. These matters are so delicate."

"But you are definitely on the side of the angels," Colonel Pikeaway smiled.

"Ah, angels! Angels—yes." He paused. "Do you happen to know who occupied the rooms in the hotel on either side of the room occupied by Mrs. Sutcliffe and her daughter?"

Colonel Pikeaway looked vague.

"Let me see now—I believe I do. On the left hand side was Señora Angelica de Toredo—a Spanish—er—dancer appearing at the local cabaret. Perhaps not strictly Spanish and perhaps not a very good dancer. But popular with the clientèle. On the other side was one of a group of schoolteachers, I understand—"

Mr. Robinson beamed approvingly.

"You are always the same. I come to tell you things, but nearly always you know them already."

"No no." Colonel Pikeaway made a polite disclaimer.

"Between us," said Mr. Robinson, "we know a good deal."

Their eyes met.

"I hope," Mr. Robinson said rising, "that we know enough—"

Four

RETURN OF A TRAVELLER

I

“Really!” said Mrs. Sutcliffe, in an annoyed voice, as she looked out of her hotel window, “I don’t see why it always has to rain when one comes back to England. It makes it all seem so depressing.”

“I think it’s lovely to be back,” said Jennifer. “Hearing everyone talk English in the streets! And we’ll be able to have a really good tea presently. Bread and butter and jam and proper cakes.”

“I wish you weren’t so insular, darling,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “What’s the good of my taking you abroad all the way to the Persian Gulf if you’re going to say you’d rather have stayed at home?”

“I don’t mind going abroad for a month or two,” said Jennifer. “All I said was I’m glad to be back.”

“Now do get out of the way, dear, and let me make sure that they’ve brought up all the luggage. Really, I do feel—I’ve felt ever since the war that people have got very dishonest nowadays. I’m sure if I hadn’t kept an eye on things that man would have gone off with my green zip bag at Tilbury. And there was another man hanging about near the luggage. I saw him afterwards on the train. I believe, you know, that these sneak thieves meet the boats and if the people are flustered or seasick they go off with some of the suitcases.”

“Oh, you’re always thinking things like that, Mother,” said Jennifer. “You think everybody you meet is dishonest.”

“Most of them are,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe grimly.

“Not English people,” said the loyal Jennifer.

“That’s worse,” said her mother. “One doesn’t expect anything else from Arabs and foreigners, but in England one’s off guard and that makes it easier for dishonest people. Now do let me count. That’s the big green suitcase and the black one, and the two small brown and the zip bag and the golf clubs and the racquets and the holdall and the canvas suitcase—and where’s the green bag? Oh, there it is. And that local tin we bought to put the extra things in—yes, one, two, three, four, five, six—yes, that’s all right. All fourteen things are here.”

“Can’t we have some tea now?” said Jennifer.

“Tea? It’s only three o’clock.”

“I’m awfully hungry.”

“All right, all right. Can you go down by yourself and order it? I really feel I must have a rest, and then I’ll just unpack the things we’ll need for tonight. It’s too bad your father couldn’t have met us. Why he had to have an important directors’ meeting in Newcastle-on-Tyne today I simply cannot imagine. You’d think his wife and daughter would come first. Especially as he hasn’t seen us for three months. Are you sure you can manage by yourself?”

“Good gracious, Mummy,” said Jennifer, “what age do you think I am? Can I have some money, please? I haven’t got any English money.”

She accepted the ten shilling note her mother handed to her, and went out scornfully.

The telephone rang by the bed. Mrs. Sutcliffe went to it and picked up the receiver.

“Hallo … Yes … Yes, Mrs. Sutcliffe speaking….”

There was a knock at the door. Mrs. Sutcliffe said, “Just one moment” to the receiver, laid it down and went over to the door. A young man in dark blue overalls was standing there with a small kit of tools.

“Electrician,” he said briskly. “The lights in this suite aren’t satisfactory. I’ve been sent up to see to them.”

“Oh—all right….”

She drew back. The electrician entered.

“Bathroom?”

“Through there—beyond the other bedroom.”

She went back to the telephone.

“I’m so sorry … What were you saying?”

“My name is Derek O’Connor. Perhaps I might come up to your suite, Mrs. Sutcliffe. It’s about your brother.”

“Bob? Is there—news of him?”

“I’m afraid so—yes.”

“Oh … Oh, I see … Yes, come up. It’s on the third floor, 310.”

She sat down on the bed. She already knew what the news must be.

Presently there was a knock on the door and she opened it to admit a young man who shook hands in a suitably subdued manner.

“Are you from the Foreign Office?”

“My name’s Derek O’Connor. My chief sent me round as there didn’t seem to be anybody else who could break it to you.”

“Please tell me,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “He’s been killed. Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s it, Mrs. Sutcliffe. He was flying Prince Ali Yusuf out from Ramat and they crashed in the mountains.”

“Why haven’t I heard—why didn’t someone wireless it to the boat?”

“There was no definite news until a few days ago. It was known that the plane was missing, that was all. But under the circumstances there might still have been hope. But now the wreck of the plane has been found … I am sure you will be glad to know that death was instantaneous.”

“The Prince was killed as well?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not at all surprised,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. Her voice shook a little but she was in full command of herself. “I knew Bob would die young. He was always reckless, you know—always flying new planes, trying new stunts. I’ve hardly seen anything of him for the last four years. Oh well, one can’t change people, can one?”

“No,” said her visitor, “I’m afraid not.”

“Henry always said he’d smash himself up sooner or later,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. She seemed to derive a kind of melancholy satisfaction from the accuracy of her husband’s prophecy. A tear rolled down her cheek and she looked for her handkerchief. “It’s been a shock,” she said.

“I know—I’m awfully sorry.”

“Bob couldn’t run away, of course,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “I mean, he’d taken on the job of being the Prince’s pilot. I wouldn’t have wanted him to throw in his hand. And he was a good flier too. I’m sure if he ran into a mountain it wasn’t his fault.”

“No,” said O’Connor, “it certainly wasn’t his fault. The only hope of getting the Prince out was to fly in no matter what conditions. It was a dangerous flight to undertake and it went wrong.”

Mrs. Sutcliffe nodded.

“I quite understand,” she said. “Thank you for coming to tell me.”

“There’s something more,” said O’Connor, “something I’ve got to ask you. Did your brother entrust anything to you to take back to England?”

“Entrust something to me?” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “What do you mean?”

“Did he give you any—package—any small parcel to bring back and deliver to anyone in England?”

She shook her head wonderingly. “No. Why should you think he did?”

“There was a rather important package which we think your brother may have given to someone to bring home. He called on you at your hotel that day—the day of the Revolution, I mean.”

“I know. He left a note. But there was nothing in that—just some silly thing about playing tennis or golf the next day. I suppose when he wrote that note, he couldn’t have known that he’d have to fly the Prince out that very afternoon.”

“That was all it said?”

“The note? Yes.”

“Have you kept it, Mrs. Sutcliffe?”

“Kept the note he left? No, of course I haven’t. It was quite trivial. I tore it up and threw it away. Why should I keep it?”

“No reason,” said O’Connor. “I just wondered.”

“Wondered what?” said Mrs. Sutcliffe crossly.

“Whether there might have been some—other message concealed in it. After all—” he smiled, “—There is such a thing as invisible ink, you know.”

“Invisible ink!” said Mrs. Sutcliffe, with a great deal of distaste, “do you mean the sort of thing they use in spy stories?”

“Well, I’m afraid I do mean just that,” said O’Connor, rather apologetically.

“How idiotic,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “I’m sure Bob would never use anything like invisible ink. Why should he? He was a dear matter-of-fact sensible person.” A tear dripped down her cheek again. “Oh dear, where is my bag? I must have a handkerchief. Perhaps I left it in the other room.”

“I’ll get it for you,” said O’Connor.

He went through the communicating door and stopped as a young man in overalls who was bending over a suitcase straightened up to face him, looking rather startled.

“Electrician,” said the young man hurriedly. “Something wrong with the lights here.”

O’Connor flicked a switch.

“They seem all right to me,” he said pleasantly.

“Must have given me the wrong room number,” said the electrician.

He gathered up his tool bag and slipped out quickly through the door to the corridor.

O’Connor frowned, picked up Mrs. Sutcliffe’s bag from the dressing table and took it back to her.

“Excuse me,” he said, and picked up the telephone receiver. “Room 310 here. Have you just sent up an electrician to see to the light in this suite? Yes … Yes, I’ll hang on.”

He waited.

“No? No, I thought you hadn’t. No, there’s nothing wrong.”

He replaced the receiver and turned to Mrs. Sutcliffe.

“There’s nothing wrong with any of the lights here,” he said. “And the office didn’t send up an electrician.”

“Then what was that man doing? Was he a thief?”

“He may have been.”

Mrs. Sutcliffe looked hurriedly in her bag. “He hasn’t taken anything out of my bag. The money is all right.”

“Are you sure, Mrs. Sutcliffe, absolutely sure that your brother didn’t give you anything to take home, to pack among your belongings?”

“I’m absolutely sure,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

“Or your daughter—you have a daughter, haven’t you?”

“Yes. She’s downstairs having tea.”

“Could your brother have given anything to her?”

“No, I’m sure he couldn’t.”

“There’s another possibility,” said O’Connor. “He might have hidden something in your baggage among your belongings that day when he was waiting for you in your room.”

“But why should Bob do such a thing? It sounds absolutely absurd.”

“It’s not quite so absurd as it sounds. It seems possible that Prince Ali Yusuf gave your brother something to keep for him and that your brother thought it would be safer among your possessions than if he kept it himself.”

“Sounds very unlikely to me,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

“I wonder now, would you mind if we searched?”

“Searched through my luggage, do you mean? Unpack?” Mrs. Sutcliffe’s voice rose with a wail on that word.

"I know," said O'Connor. "It's a terrible thing to ask you. But it might be very important. I could help you, you know," he said persuasively. "I often used to pack for my mother. She said I was quite a good packer."

He exerted all the charm which was one of his assets to Colonel Pikeaway.

"Oh well," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, yielding, "I suppose—If you say so—if, I mean, it's really important—"

"It might be very important," said Derek O'Connor. "Well, now," he smiled at her. "Suppose we begin."

II

Three-quarters of an hour later Jennifer returned from her tea. She looked round the room and gave a gasp of surprise.

"Mummy, what have you been doing?"

"We've been unpacking," said Mrs. Sutcliffe crossly. "Now we're packing things up again. This is Mr. O'Connor. My daughter Jennifer."

"But why are you packing and unpacking?"

"Don't ask me why," snapped her mother. "There seems to be some idea that your Uncle Bob put something in my luggage to bring home. He didn't give you anything, I suppose, Jennifer?"

"Uncle Bob give me anything to bring back? No. Have you been unpacking my things too?"

"We've unpacked everything," said Derek O'Connor cheerfully, "and we haven't found a thing and now we're packing them up again. I think you ought to have a drink of tea or something, Mrs. Sutcliffe. Can I order you something? A brandy and soda perhaps?" He went to the telephone.

"I wouldn't mind a good cup of tea," said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

"I had a smashing tea," said Jennifer. "Bread and butter and sandwiches and cake and then the waiter brought me more sandwiches because I asked him if he'd mind and he said he didn't. It was lovely."

O'Connor ordered the tea, then he finished packing up Mrs. Sutcliffe's belongings again with a neatness and a dexterity which forced her unwilling admiration.

"Your mother seems to have trained you to pack very well," she said.

"Oh, I've all sorts of handy accomplishments," said O'Connor smiling.

His mother was long since dead, and his skill in packing and unpacking had been acquired solely in the service of Colonel Pikeaway.

"There's just one thing more, Mrs. Sutcliffe. I'd like you to be very careful of yourself."

"Careful of myself? In what way?"

"Well," O'Connor left it vague. "Revolutions are tricky things. There are a lot of ramifications. Are you staying in London long?"

"We're going down to the country tomorrow. My husband will be driving us down."

"That's all right then. But—don't take any chances. If anything in the least out of the ordinary happens, ring 999 straight away."

"Ooh!" said Jennifer, in high delight. "Dial 999. I've always wanted to."

"Don't be silly, Jennifer," said her mother.

III

Extract from account in a local paper.

A man appeared before the Magistrate's court yesterday charged with breaking into the residence of Mr. Henry Sutcliffe with intent to steal. Mrs.

Sutcliffe's bedroom was ransacked and left in wild confusion whilst the members of the family were at Church on Sunday morning. The kitchen staff who were preparing the midday meal, heard nothing. Police arrested the man as he was making his escape from the house. Something had evidently alarmed him and he had fled without taking anything.

Giving his name as Andrew Ball of no fixed abode, he pleaded guilty. He said he had been out of work and was looking for money. Mrs. Sutcliffe's jewellery, apart from a few pieces which she was wearing, is kept at her bank.

"I told you to have the lock of that drawing room french window seen to," had been the comment of Mr. Sutcliffe in the family circle.

"My dear Henry," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, "you don't seem to realize that I have been abroad for the last three months. And anyway, I'm sure I've read somewhere that if burglars want to get in they always can."

She added wistfully, as she glanced again at the local paper:

"How beautifully grand 'kitchen staff' sounds. So different from what it really is, old Mrs. Ellis who is quite deaf and can hardly stand up and that half-witted daughter of the Bardwells who comes in to help on Sunday mornings."

"What I don't see," said Jennifer, "is how the police found out the house was being burgled and got here in time to catch him?"

"It seems extraordinary that he didn't take anything," commented her mother.

"Are you quite sure about that, Joan?" demanded her husband. "You were a little doubtful at first."

Mrs. Sutcliffe gave an exasperated sigh.

"It's impossible to tell about a thing like that straight away. The mess in my bedroom—things thrown about everywhere, drawers pulled out and overturned. I had to look through everything before I could be sure—though now I come to think of it, I don't remember seeing my best Jacqmar scarf."

"I'm sorry, Mummy. That was me. It blew overboard in the Mediterranean. I'd borrowed it. I meant to tell you but I forgot."

"Really, Jennifer, how often have I asked you not to borrow things without telling me first?"

"Can I have some more pudding?" said Jennifer, creating a diversion.

"I suppose so. Really, Mrs. Ellis has a wonderfully light hand. It makes it worthwhile having to shout at her so much. I do hope, though, that they won't think you too greedy at school. Meadowbank isn't quite an ordinary school, remember."

"I don't know that I really want to go to Meadowbank," said Jennifer. "I knew a girl whose cousin had been there, and she said it was awful. They spent all their time telling you how to get in and out of Rolls-Royces, and how to behave if you went to lunch with the Queen."

"That will do, Jennifer," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "You don't appreciate how extremely fortunate you are in being admitted to Meadowbank. Miss Bulstrode doesn't take every girl, I can tell you. It's entirely owing to your father's important position and the influence of your Aunt Rosamond. You are exceedingly lucky. And if," added Mrs. Sutcliffe, "you are ever asked to lunch with the Queen, it will be a good thing for you to know how to behave."

"Oh well," said Jennifer. "I expect the Queen often has to have people to lunch who don't know how to behave—African chiefs and jockeys and sheikhs."

"African chiefs have the most polished manners," said her father, who had recently returned from a short business trip to Ghana.

"So do Arab sheikhs," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "Really courtly."

“D’you remember that sheikh’s feast we went to,” said Jennifer. “And how he picked out the sheep’s eye and gave it to you, and Uncle Bob nudged you not to make a fuss and to eat it? I mean, if a sheikh did that with roast lamb at Buckingham Palace, it would give the Queen a bit of a jolt, wouldn’t it?”

“That will do, Jennifer,” said her mother and closed the subject.

IV

When Andrew Ball of no fixed abode had been sentenced to three months for breaking and entering, Derek O’Connor, who had been occupying a modest position at the back of the Magistrate’s Court, put through a call to a Museum number.

“Not a thing on the fellow when we picked him up,” he said. “We gave him plenty of time too.”

“Who was he? Anyone we know?”

“One of the Gecko lot, I think. Small time. They hire him out for this sort of thing. Not much brain but he’s said to be thorough.”

“And he took his sentence like a lamb?” At the other end of the line Colonel Pikeaway grinned as he spoke.

“Yes. Perfect picture of a stupid fellow lapsed from the straight and narrow path. You’d never connect him with any big time stuff. That’s his value, of course.”

“And he didn’t find anything,” mused Colonel Pikeaway. “And you didn’t find anything. It rather looks, doesn’t it, as though there isn’t anything to find? Our idea that Rawlinson planted these things on his sister seems to have been wrong.”

“Other people appear to have the same idea.”

“It’s a bit obvious really … Maybe we are meant to take the bait.”

“Could be. Any other possibilities?”

“Plenty of them. The stuff may still be in Ramat. Hidden somewhere in the Ritz Savoy Hotel, maybe. Or Rawlinson passed it to someone on his way to the airstrip. Or there may be something in that hint of Mr. Robinson’s. A woman may have got hold of it. Or it could be that Mrs. Sutcliffe had it all the time unbeknownst to herself, and flung it overboard in the Red Sea with something she had no further use for.

“And that,” he added thoughtfully, “might be all for the best.”

“Oh, come now, it’s worth a lot of money, sir.”

“Human life is worth a lot, too,” said Colonel Pikeaway.

Five

LETTERS FROM MEADOWBANK SCHOOL

Letter from Julia Upjohn to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

I've settled in now and am liking it very much. There's a girl who is new this term too called Jennifer and she and I rather do things together. We're both awfully keen on tennis. She's rather good. She has a really smashing serve when it comes off, but it doesn't usually. She says her racquet's got warped from being out in the Persian Gulf. It's very hot out there. She was in all that Revolution that happened. I said wasn't it very exciting, but she said no, they didn't see anything at all. They were taken away to the Embassy or something and missed it.

Miss Bulstrode is rather a lamb, but she's pretty frightening too—or can be. She goes easy on you when you're new. Behind her back everyone calls her The Bull or Bully. We're taught English literature by Miss Rich, who's terrific. When she gets in a real state her hair comes down. She's got a queer but rather exciting face and when she reads bits of Shakespeare it all seems different and real. She went on at us the other day about Iago, and what he felt—and a lot about jealousy and how it ate into you and you suffered until you went quite mad wanting to hurt the person you loved. It gave us all the shivers—except Jennifer, because nothing upsets her. Miss Rich teaches us Geography, too. I always thought it was such a dull subject, but it isn't with Miss Rich. This morning she told us all about the spice trade and why they had to have spices because of things going bad so easily.

I'm starting Art with Miss Laurie. She comes twice a week and takes us up to London to see picture galleries as well. We do French with Mademoiselle Blanche. She doesn't keep order very well. Jennifer says French people can't. She doesn't get cross, though, only bored. She says "Enfin, vous m'ennuiez, mes enfants!" Miss Springer is awful. She does gym and P.T. She's got ginger hair and smells when she's hot. Then there's Miss

Chadwick (Chaddy)—she's been here since the school started. She teaches mathematics and is rather fussy, but quite nice. And there's Miss Vansittart who teaches History and German. She's a sort of Miss Bulstrode with the pep left out.

There are a lot of foreign girls here, two Italians and some Germans, and a rather jolly Swede (she's a Princess or something) and a girl who's half Turkish and half Persian and who says she would have been married to Prince Ali Yusuf who got killed in that aeroplane crash, but Jennifer says that isn't true, that Shaista only says so because she was a kind of cousin, and you're supposed to marry a cousin. But Jennifer says he wasn't going to. He liked someone else. Jennifer knows a lot of things but she won't usually tell them.

I suppose you'll be starting on your trip soon. Don't leave your passport behind you like you did last time!!! And take your first aid kit in case you have an accident.

Love from Julia

Letter from Jennifer Sutcliffe to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

It really isn't bad here. I'm enjoying it more than I expected to do. The weather has been very fine. We had to write a composition yesterday on "Can a good quality be carried to excess?" I couldn't think of anything to say. Next week it will be "Contrast the characters of Juliet and Desdemona." That seems silly too. Do you think I could have a new tennis racquet? I know you had mine restrung last Autumn—but it feels all wrong. Perhaps it's got warped. I'd rather like to learn Greek. Can I? I love languages. Some of us are going to London to see the ballet next week. It's Swan Lake. The food here is jolly good. Yesterday we had chicken for lunch, and we had lovely homemade cakes for tea.

I can't think of anymore news—have you had anymore burglaries?

Your loving daughter,

Jennifer

Letter from Margaret Gore-West, Senior Prefect, to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

There is very little news. I am doing German with Miss Vansittart this term. There is a rumour that Miss Bulstrode is going to retire and that Miss Vansittart will succeed her but they've been saying that for over a year now, and I'm sure it isn't true. I asked Miss Chadwick (of course I wouldn't dare ask Miss Bulstrode!) and she was quite sharp about it. Said certainly not and don't listen to gossip. We went to the ballet on Tuesday. Swan Lake. Too dreamy for words!

Princess Ingrid is rather fun. Very blue eyes, but she wears braces on her teeth. There are two new German girls. They speak English quite well.

Miss Rich is back and looking quite well. We did miss her last term. The new Games Mistress is called Miss Springer. She's terribly bossy and nobody likes her much. She coaches you in tennis very well, though. One of the new girls, Jennifer Sutcliffe, is going to be really good, I think. Her backhand's a bit weak. Her great friend is a girl called Julia. We call them the Jays!

You won't forget about taking me out on the 20th, will you? Sports Day is June 19th.

Your Loving

Margaret

Letter from Ann Shapland to Dennis Rathbone:

Dear Dennis,

I shan't get any time off until the third week of term. I should like to dine with you then very much. It would have to be Saturday or Sunday. I'll let you know.

I find it rather fun working in a school. But thank God I'm not a schoolmistress! I'd go raving mad.

Yours ever,

Ann

Letter from Miss Johnson to her sister:

Dear Edith,

Everything much the same as usual here. The summer term is always nice. The garden is looking beautiful and we've got a new gardener to help old Briggs—young and strong! Rather good-looking, too, which is a pity. Girls are so silly.

Miss Bulstrode hasn't said anything more about retiring, so I hope she's got over the idea. Miss Vansittart wouldn't be at all the same thing. I really don't believe I would stay on.

Give my love to Dick and to the children, and remember me to Oliver and Kate when you see them.

Elspeth

Letter from Mademoiselle Angèle Blanche to René Dupont, Post Restante, Bordeaux.

Dear René,

All is well here, though I cannot say that I amuse myself. The girls are neither respectful nor well-behaved. I think it better, however, not to complain to Miss Bulstrode. One has to be on one's guard when dealing with that one!

There is nothing interesting at present to tell you.

Mouche

Letter from Miss Vansittart to a friend:

Dear Gloria,

The summer term has started smoothly. A very satisfactory set of new girls. The foreigners are settling down well. Our little Princess (the Middle East one, not the Scandinavian) is inclined to lack application, but I suppose one has to expect that. She has very charming manners.

The new Games Mistress, Miss Springer, is not a success. The girls dislike her and she is far too high-handed with them. After all, this is not an ordinary school. We don't stand or fall by P.T.! She is also very inquisitive, and asks far too many personal questions. That sort of thing can be very trying, and is so ill bred. Mademoiselle Blanche, the new French Mistress, is quite amiable but not up to the standard of Mademoiselle Depuy.

We had a near escape on the first day of term. Lady Veronica Carlton-Sandways turned up completely intoxicated!! But for Miss Chadwick spotting it and heading her off, we might have had a most unpleasant incident. The twins are such nice girls, too.

Miss Bulstrode has not said anything definite yet about the future—but from her manner, I think her mind is definitely made up. Meadowbank is a really fine achievement, and I shall be proud to carry on its traditions.

Give my love to Marjorie when you see her.

Yours ever,

Eleanor

Letter to Colonel Pikeaway, sent through the usual channels:

Talk about sending a man into danger! I'm the only able-bodied male in an establishment of, roughly, some hundred and ninety females.

Her Highness arrived in style. Cadillac of squashed strawberry and pastel blue, with Wog Notable in native dress, fashion-plate-from-Paris wife, and junior edition of same (H.R.H.).

Hardly recognized her the next day in her school uniform. There will be no difficulty in establishing friendly relations with her. She has already seen to that. Was asking me the names of various flowers in a sweet innocent way, when a female Gorgon with freckles, red hair, and a voice like a corncrake bore down upon her and removed her from my vicinity. She didn't want to go. I'd always understood these Oriental girls were brought up modestly behind the veil. This one must have had a little worldly experience during her schooldays in Switzerland, I think.

The Gorgon, alias Miss Springer, the Games Mistress, came back to give me a raspberry. Garden staff were not to talk to the pupils, etc. My turn to express innocent surprise. "Sorry, Miss. The young lady was asking what these here delphiniums was. Suppose they don't have them in the parts she comes from." The Gorgon was easily pacified, in the end she almost simpered. Less success with Miss Bulstrode's secretary. One of these coat and skirt country girls. French mistress is more cooperative. Demure and mousy to look at, but not such a mouse really. Also have made friends with three pleasant gigglers, Christian names, Pamela, Lois and Mary, surnames unknown, but of aristocratic lineage. A sharp old warhorse called Miss Chadwick keeps a wary eye on me, so I'm careful not to blot my copybook.

My boss, old Briggs, is a crusty kind of character whose chief subject of conversation is what things used to be in the good old days, when he was, I suspect, the fourth of a staff of five. He grumbles about most things and people, but has a wholesome respect for Miss Bulstrode herself. So have I. She had a few words, very pleasant, with me, but I had a horrid feeling she was seeing right through me and knowing all about me.

No sign, so far, of anything sinister—but I live in hope.

Six

EARLY DAYS

I

In the Mistresses' Common Room news was being exchanged. Foreign travel, plays seen, Art Exhibitions visited. Snapshots were handed round. The menace of coloured transparencies was in the offing. All the enthusiasts wanted to show their own pictures, but to get out of being forced to see other people's.

Presently conversation became less personal. The new Sports Pavilion was both criticized and admired. It was admitted to be a fine building, but naturally everybody would have liked to improve its design in one way or another.

The new girls were then briefly passed in review, and, on the whole, the verdict was favourable.

A little pleasant conversation was made to the two new members of the staff. Had Mademoiselle Blanche been in England before? What part of France did she come from?

Mademoiselle Blanche replied politely but with reserve.

Miss Springer was more forthcoming.

She spoke with emphasis and decision. It might almost have been said that she was giving a lecture. Subject: The excellence of Miss Springer. How much she had been appreciated as a colleague. How headmistresses had accepted her advice with gratitude and had reorganized their schedules accordingly.

Miss Springer was not sensitive. A restlessness in her audience was not noticed by her. It remained for Miss Johnson to ask in her mild tones:

"All the same, I expect your ideas haven't always been accepted in the way they—er—should have been."

"One must be prepared for ingratitude," said Miss Springer. Her voice, already loud, became louder. "The trouble is, people are so cowardly—won't face facts. They often prefer not to see what's under their noses all the time. I'm not like that. I go straight to the point. More than once I've unearthed a nasty scandal—brought it into the open. I've a good nose—once I'm on the trail, I don't leave it—not till I've pinned down my quarry." She gave a loud jolly laugh. "In my opinion, no one should teach in a school whose life isn't an open book. If anyone's got anything to hide, one can soon tell. Oh! you'd be surprised if I told you some of the things I've found out about people. Things that nobody else had dreamed of."

"You enjoyed that experience, yes?" said Mademoiselle Blanche.

"Of course not. Just doing my duty. But I wasn't backed up. Shameful laxness. So I resigned—as a protest."

She looked round and gave her jolly sporting laugh again.

"Hope nobody here has anything to hide," she said gaily.

Nobody was amused. But Miss Springer was not the kind of woman to notice that.

II

"Can I speak to you, Miss Bulstrode?"

Miss Bulstrode laid her pen aside and looked up into the flushed face of the matron, Miss Johnson.

"Yes, Miss Johnson."

"It's that girl Shaista—the Egyptian girl or whatever she is."

"Yes?"

"It's her—er—underclothing."

Miss Bulstrode's eyebrows rose in patient surprise.

"Her—well—her bust bodice."

"What is wrong with her brassière?"

"Well—it isn't an ordinary kind—I mean it doesn't hold her in, exactly. It—er—well it pushes her up—really quite unnecessarily."

Miss Bulstrode bit her lip to keep back a smile, as so often when in colloquy with Miss Johnson.

"Perhaps I'd better come and look at it," she said gravely.

A kind of inquest was then held with the offending contraption held up to display by Miss Johnson, whilst Shaista looked on with lively interest.

"It's this sort of wire and—er—boning arrangement," said Miss Johnson with disapprobation.

Shaista burst into animated explanation.

"But you see my breasts they are not very big—not nearly big enough. I do not look enough like a woman. And it is very important for a girl—to show she is a woman and not a boy."

"Plenty of time for that. You're only fifteen," said Miss Johnson.

"Fifteen—that is a woman! And I look like a woman, do I not?"

She appealed to Miss Bulstrode who nodded gravely.

"Only my breasts, they are poor. So I want to make them look not so poor. You understand?"

"I understand perfectly," said Miss Bulstrode. "And I quite see your point of view. But in this school, you see, you are amongst girls who are, for the most part, English, and English girls are not very often women at the age of fifteen. I like my girls to use makeup discreetly and to wear clothes suitable to their stage of growth. I suggest that you wear your brassière when you are dressed for a party or for going to London, but not every day here. We do a good deal of sports and games here and for that your body needs to be free to move easily."

"It is too much—all this running and jumping," said Shaista sulkily, "and the P.T. I do not like Miss Springer—she always says, 'Faster, faster, do not slack.' I get tired."

"That will do, Shaista," said Miss Bulstrode, her voice becoming authoritative. "Your family has sent you here to learn English ways. All this exercise will be very good for your complexion, and for developing your bust."

Dismissing Shaista, she smiled at the agitated Miss Johnson.

"It's quite true," she said. "The girl is fully mature. She might easily be over twenty by the look of her. And that is what she feels like. You can't expect her to feel the same age as Julia Upjohn, for instance. Intellectually Julia is far ahead of Shaista. Physically, she could quite well wear a liberty bodice still."

"I wish they were all like Julia Upjohn," said Miss Johnson.

"I don't," said Miss Bulstrode briskly. "A schoolful of girls all alike would be very dull."

Dull, she thought, as she went back to her marking of Scripture essays. That word had been repeating itself in her brain for some time now. Dull….

If there was one thing her school was not, it was dull. During her career as its headmistress, she herself had never felt dull. There had been difficulties to combat, unforeseen crises, irritations with parents, with children: domestic upheavals. She had met and dealt with incipient disasters and turned them into triumphs. It had all been stimulating, exciting, supremely worthwhile. And even now, though she had made up her mind to it, she did not want to go.

She was physically in excellent health, almost as tough as when she and Chaddy (faithful Chaddy!) had started the great enterprise with a mere handful of children and backing from a banker of unusual foresight. Chaddy's academic distinctions had been better than hers, but it was she who had had the vision to plan and make of the school a place of such distinction that it was known all over Europe. She had never been afraid to experiment, whereas Chaddy had been content to teach soundly but unexcitingly what she knew. Chaddy's supreme achievement had always been to be there, at hand, the faithful buffer, quick to render assistance when assistance was needed. As on the opening day of term with Lady Veronica. It was on her solidity, Miss Bulstrode reflected, that an exciting edifice had been built.

Well, from the material point of view, both women had done very well out of it. If they retired now, they would both have a good assured income for the rest of their lives. Miss Bulstrode wondered if Chaddy would want to retire when she herself did? Probably not. Probably, to her, the school was home. She would continue, faithful and reliable, to buttress up Miss Bulstrode's successor.

Because Miss Bulstrode had made up her mind—a successor there must be. Firstly associated with herself in joint rule and then to rule alone. To know when to go—that was one of the great necessities of life. To go before one's powers began to fail, one's sure grip to loosen, before one felt the faint staleness, the unwillingness to envisage continuing effort.

Miss Bulstrode finished marking the essays and noted that the Upjohn child had an original mind. Jennifer Sutcliffe had a complete lack of imagination, but showed an unusually sound grasp of facts. Mary Vyse, of course, was scholarship class—a wonderful retentive memory. But what a dull girl! Dull—that word again. Miss Bulstrode dismissed it from her mind and rang for her secretary.

She began to dictate letters.

Dear Lady Valence. Jane has had some trouble with her ears. I enclose the doctor’s report—etc.

Dear Baron Von Eisenger. We can certainly arrange for Hedwig to go to the Opera on the occasion of Hellstern’s taking the role of Isolda—

An hour passed swiftly. Miss Bulstrode seldom paused for a word. Ann Shapland’s pencil raced over the pad.

A very good secretary, Miss Bulstrode thought to herself. Better than Vera Lorrimer. Tiresome girl, Vera. Throwing up her post so suddenly. A nervous breakdown, she had said. Something to do with a man, Miss Bulstrode thought resignedly. It was usually a man.

“That’s the lot,” said Miss Bulstrode, as she dictated the last word. She heaved a sigh of relief.

“So many dull things to be done,” she remarked. “Writing letters to parents is like feeding dogs. Pop some soothing platitude into every waiting mouth.”

Ann laughed. Miss Bulstrode looked at her appraisingly.

“What made you take up secretarial work?”

“I don’t quite know. I had no special bent for anything in particular, and it’s the sort of thing almost everybody drifts into.”

“You don’t find it monotonous?”

“I suppose I’ve been lucky. I’ve had a lot of different jobs. I was with Sir Mervyn Todhunter, the archaeologist, for a year, then I was with Sir Andrew Peters in Shell. I was secretary to Monica Lord, the actress, for a while—that really was hectic!” She smiled in remembrance.

“There’s a lot of that nowadays amongst you girls,” said Miss Bulstrode. “All this chopping and changing.” She sounded disapproving.

"Actually, I can't do anything for very long. I've got an invalid mother. She's rather—well—difficult from time to time. And then I have to go back home and take charge."

"I see."

"But all the same, I'm afraid I should chop and change anyway. I haven't got the gift for continuity. I find chopping and changing far less dull."

"Dull … " murmured Miss Bulstrode, struck again by the fatal word.

Ann looked at her in surprise.

"Don't mind me," said Miss Bulstrode. "It's just that sometimes one particular word seems to crop up all the time. How would you have liked to be a schoolmistress?" she asked, with some curiosity.

"I'm afraid I should hate it," said Ann frankly.

"Why?"

"I'd find it terribly dull—Oh, I am sorry."

She stopped in dismay.

"Teaching isn't in the least dull," said Miss Bulstrode with spirit. "It can be the most exciting thing in the world. I shall miss it terribly when I retire."

"But surely—" Ann stared at her. "Are you thinking of retiring?"

"It's decided—yes. Oh, I shan't go for another year—or even two years."

"But—why?"

"Because I've given my best to the school—and had the best from it. I don't want second best."

"The school will carry on?"

“Oh yes. I have a good successor.”

“Miss Vansittart, I suppose?”

“So you fix on her automatically?” Miss Bulstrode looked at her sharply, “That’s interesting—”

“I’m afraid I hadn’t really thought about it. I’ve just overheard the staff talking. I should think she’ll carry on very well—exactly in your tradition. And she’s very striking-looking, handsome and with quite a presence. I imagine that’s important, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Yes, I’m sure Eleanor Vansittart is the right person.”

“She’ll carry on where you leave off,” said Ann gathering up her things.

But do I want that? thought Miss Bulstrode to herself as Ann went out. Carry on where I leave off? That’s just what Eleanor will do! No new experiments, nothing revolutionary. That wasn’t the way I made Meadowbank what it is. I took chances. I upset lots of people. I bullied and cajoled, and refused to follow the pattern of other schools. Isn’t that what I want to follow on here now? Someone to pour new life into the school. Some dynamic personality … like—yes—Eileen Rich.

But Eileen wasn’t old enough, hadn’t enough experience. She was stimulating, though, she could teach. She had ideas. She would never be dull—Nonsense, she must get that word out of her mind. Eleanor Vansittart was not dull….

She looked up as Miss Chadwick came in.

“Oh, Chaddy,” she said. “I am pleased to see you!”

Miss Chadwick looked a little surprised.

“Why? Is anything the matter?”

“I’m the matter. I don’t know my own mind.”

"That's very unlike you, Honoria."

"Yes, isn't it? How's the term going, Chaddy?"

"Quite all right, I think." Miss Chadwick sounded a little unsure.

Miss Bulstrode pounced.

"Now then. Don't hedge. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Really, Honoria, nothing at all. It's just—" Miss Chadwick wrinkled up her forehead and looked rather like a perplexed Boxer dog—"Oh, a feeling. But really it's nothing that I can put a finger on. The new girls seem a pleasant lot. I don't care for Mademoiselle Blanche very much. But then I didn't like Geneviève Depuy, either. Sly."

Miss Bulstrode did not pay very much attention to this criticism. Chaddy always accused the French mistresses of being sly.

"She's not a good teacher," said Miss Bulstrode. "Surprising really. Her testimonials were so good."

"The French never can teach. No discipline," said Miss Chadwick. "And really Miss Springer is a little too much of a good thing! Leaps about so. Springer by nature as well as by name…."

"She's good at her job."

"Oh yes, first class."

"New staff is always upsetting," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Yes," agreed Miss Chadwick eagerly. "I'm sure it's nothing more than that. By the way, that new gardener is quite young. So unusual nowadays. No gardeners seem to be young. A pity he's so good-looking. We shall have to keep a sharp eye open."

The two ladies nodded their heads in agreement. They knew, none better, the havoc caused by a good-looking young man to the hearts of adolescent girls.

Seven

STRAWS IN THE WIND

I

“Not too bad, boy,” said old Briggs grudgingly, “not too bad.”

He was expressing approval of his new assistant’s performance in digging a strip of ground. It wouldn’t do, thought Briggs, to let the young fellow get above himself.

“Mind you,” he went on, “you don’t want to rush at things. Take it steady, that’s what I say. Steady is what does it.”

The young man understood that his performance had compared rather too favourably with Briggs’s own tempo of work.

“Now, along this here,” continued Briggs, “we’ll put some nice asters out. She don’t like asters—but I pay no attention. Females has their whims, but if you don’t pay no attention, ten to one they never notice. Though I will say She is the noticing kind on the whole. You’d think she ’ad enough to bother her head about, running a place like this.”

Adam understood that “She” who figured so largely in Briggs’s conversation referred to Miss Bulstrode.

“And who was it I saw you talking to just now?” went on Briggs suspiciously, “when you went along to the potting shed for them bamboos?”

“Oh, that was just one of the young ladies,” said Adam.

“Ah. One of them two Eye-ties, wasn’t it? Now you be careful, my boy. Don’t you get mixed up with no Eye-ties, I know what I’m talkin’ about. I knew Eye-ties, I did, in the first war and if I’d known then what I know now I’d have been more careful. See?”

“Wasn’t no harm in it,” said Adam, putting on a sulky manner. “Just passed the time of day with me, she did, and asked the names of one or two things.”

“Ah,” said Briggs, “but you be careful. It’s not your place to talk to any of the young ladies. She wouldn’t like it.”

“I wasn’t doing no harm and I didn’t say anything I shouldn’t.”

“I don’t say you did, boy. But I say a lot o’ young females penned up together here with not so much as a drawing master to take their minds off things—well, you’d better be careful. That’s all. Ah, here comes the Old Bitch now. Wanting something difficult, I’ll be bound.”

Miss Bulstrode was approaching with a rapid step. “Good morning, Briggs,” she said. “Good morning—er—”

“Adam, miss.”

“Ah yes, Adam. Well, you seem to have got that piece dug very satisfactorily. The wire netting’s coming down by the far tennis court, Briggs. You’d better attend to that.”

“All right, ma’am, all right. It’ll be seen to.”

“What are you putting in front here?”

“Well ma’am, I had thought—”

“Not asters,” said Miss Bulstrode, without giving him time to finish “Pom Pom dahlias,” and she departed briskly.

“Coming along—giving orders,” said Briggs. “Not that she isn’t a sharp one. She soon notices if you haven’t done work properly. And remember what I’ve said and be careful, boy. About Eye-ties and the others.”

“If she’s any fault to find with me, I’ll soon know what I can do,” said Adam sulkily. “Plenty o’ jobs going.”

"Ah. That's like you young men all over nowadays. Won't take a word from anybody. All I say is, mind your step."

Adam continued to look sulky, but bent to his work once more.

Miss Bulstrode walked back along the path towards the school. She was frowning a little.

Miss Vansittart was coming in the opposite direction.

"What a hot afternoon," said Miss Vansittart.

"Yes, it's very sultry and oppressive." Again Miss Bulstrode frowned. "Have you noticed that young man—the young gardener?"

"No, not particularly."

"He seems to me—well—an odd type," said Miss Bulstrode thoughtfully. "Not the usual kind around here."

"Perhaps he's just come down from Oxford and wants to make a little money."

"He's good-looking. The girls notice him."

"The usual problem."

Miss Bulstrode smiled. "To combine freedom for the girls and strict supervision—is that what you mean, Eleanor?"

"Yes."

"We manage," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Yes, indeed. You've never had a scandal at Meadowbank, have you?"

"We've come near it once or twice," said Miss Bulstrode. She laughed. "Never a dull moment in running a school." She went on, "Do you ever find life dull here, Eleanor?"

“No indeed,” said Miss Vansittart. “I find the work here most stimulating and satisfying. You must feel very proud and happy, Honoria, at the great success you have achieved.”

“I think I made a good job of things,” said Miss Bulstrode thoughtfully. “Nothing, of course, is ever quite as one first imagined it….

“Tell me, Eleanor,” she said suddenly, “if you were running this place instead of me, what changes would you make? Don’t mind saying. I shall be interested to hear.”

“I don’t think I should want to make any changes,” said Eleanor Vansittart. “It seems to me the spirit of the place and the whole organization is well-nigh perfect.”

“You’d carry on on the same lines, you mean?”

“Yes, indeed. I don’t think they could be bettered.” Miss Bulstrode was silent for a moment. She was thinking to herself: I wonder if she said that in order to please me. One never knows with people. However close to them you may have been for years. Surely, she can’t really mean that. Anybody with any creative feeling at all must want to make changes. It’s true, though, that it mightn’t have seemed tactful to say so … And tact is very important. It’s important with parents, it’s important with the girls, it’s important with the staff. Eleanor certainly has tact.

Aloud, she said, “There must always be adjustments, though, mustn’t there? I mean with changing ideas and conditions of life generally.”

“Oh, that, yes,” said Miss Vansittart. “One has, as they say, to go with the times. But it’s your school, Honoria, you’ve made it what it is and your traditions are the essence of it. I think tradition is very important, don’t you?”

Miss Bulstrode did not answer. She was hovering on the brink of irrevocable words. The offer of a partnership hung in the air. Miss Vansittart, though seeming unaware in her well-bred way, must be conscious of the fact that it was there. Miss Bulstrode did not know really what was holding her back. Why did she so dislike to commit herself? Probably, she admitted ruefully, because she hated the idea of giving up control. Secretly, of course, she wanted to stay, she wanted to go on running her school. But surely nobody could be a worthier successor than Eleanor? So dependable, so reliable. Of course, as far as that went, so was dear Chaddy—reliable as they came. And yet you could never envisage Chaddy as headmistress of an outstanding school.

“What do I want?” said Miss Bulstrode to herself. “How tiresome I am being! Really, indecision has never been one of my faults up to now.”

A bell sounded in the distance.

“My German class,” said Miss Vansittart. “I must go in.” She moved at a rapid but dignified step towards the school buildings. Following her more slowly, Miss Bulstrode almost collided with Eileen Rich, hurrying from a side path.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Miss Bulstrode. I didn’t see you.” Her hair, as usual, was escaping from its untidy bun. Miss Bulstrode noted anew the ugly but interesting bones of her face, a strange, eager, compelling young woman.

“You’ve got a class?”

“Yes. English—”

“You enjoy teaching, don’t you?” said Miss Bulstrode.

“I love it. It’s the most fascinating thing in the world.”

“Why?”

Eileen Rich stopped dead. She ran a hand through her hair. She frowned with the effort of thought.

“How interesting. I don’t know that I’ve really thought about it. Why does one like teaching? Is it because it makes one feel grand and important? No, no … it’s not as bad as that. No, it’s more like fishing, I think. You don’t know what catch you’re going to get, what you’re going to drag up from the sea. It’s the quality of the response. It’s so exciting when it comes. It doesn’t very often, of course.”

Miss Bulstrode nodded in agreement. She had been right! This girl had something!

“I expect you’ll run a school of your own some day,” she said.

“Oh, I hope so,” said Eileen Rich. “I do hope so. That’s what I’d like above anything.”

“You’ve got ideas already, haven’t you, as to how a school should be run?”

“Everyone has ideas, I suppose,” said Eileen Rich. “I daresay a great many of them are fantastic and they’d go utterly wrong. That would be a risk, of course. But one would have to try them out. I would have to learn by experience … The awful thing is that one can’t go by other people’s experience, can one?”

“Not really,” said Miss Bulstrode. “In life one has to make one’s own mistakes.”

“That’s all right in life,” said Eileen Rich. “In life you can pick yourself up and start again.” Her hands, hanging at her sides, clenched themselves into fists. Her expression was grim. Then suddenly it relaxed into humour. “But if a school’s gone to pieces, you can’t very well pick that up and start again, can you?”

“If you ran a school like Meadowbank,” said Miss Bulstrode, “would you make changes—experiment?”

Eileen Rich looked embarrassed. “That’s—that’s an awfully hard thing to say,” she said.

“You mean you would,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Don’t mind speaking your mind, child.”

“One would always want, I suppose, to use one’s own ideas,” said Eileen Rich. “I don’t say they’d work. They mightn’t.”

"But it would be worth taking a risk?"

"It's always worth taking a risk, isn't it?" said Eileen Rich. "I mean if you feel strongly enough about anything."

"You don't object to leading a dangerous life. I see … " said Miss Bulstrode.

"I think I've always led a dangerous life." A shadow passed over the girl's face. "I must go. They'll be waiting." She hurried off.

Miss Bulstrode stood looking after her. She was still standing there lost in thought when Miss Chadwick came hurrying to find her.

"Oh! there you are. We've been looking everywhere for you. Professor Anderson has just rung up. He wants to know if he can take Meroe this next weekend. He knows it's against the rules so soon but he's going off quite suddenly to—somewhere that sounds like Azure Basin."

"Azerbaijan," said Miss Bulstrode automatically, her mind still on her own thoughts.

"Not enough experience," she murmured to herself. "That's the risk. What did you say, Chaddy?"

Miss Chadwick repeated the message.

"I told Miss Shapland to say that we'd ring him back, and sent her to find you."

"Say it will be quite all right," said Miss Bulstrode. "I recognize that this is an exceptional occasion."

Miss Chadwick looked at her keenly.

"You're worrying, Honoria."

"Yes, I am. I don't really know my own mind. That's unusual for me—and it upsets me … I know what I'd like to do—but I feel that to hand over to someone without the necessary experience wouldn’t be fair to the school.”

“I wish you’d give up this idea of retirement. You belong here. Meadowbank needs you.”

“Meadowbank means a lot to you, Chaddy, doesn’t it?”

“There’s no school like it anywhere in England,” said Miss Chadwick. “We can be proud of ourselves, you and I, for having started it.”

Miss Bulstrode put an affectionate arm round her shoulders. “We can indeed, Chaddy. As for you, you’re the comfort of my life. There’s nothing about Meadowbank you don’t know. You care for it as much as I do. And that’s saying a lot, my dear.”

Miss Chadwick flushed with pleasure. It was so seldom that Honoria Bulstrode broke through her reserve.

II

“I simply can’t play with the beastly thing. It’s no good.”

Jennifer flung her racquet down in despair.

“Oh, Jennifer, what a fuss you make.”

“It’s the balance,” Jennifer picked it up again and waggled it experimentally. “It doesn’t balance right.”

“It’s much better than my old thing,” Julia compared her racquet. “Mine’s like a sponge. Listen to the sound of it.” She twanged. “We meant to have it restrung, but Mummy forgot.”

“I’d rather have it than mine, all the same.” Jennifer took it and tried a swish or two with it.

“Well, I’d rather have yours. I could really hit something then. I’ll swap, if you will.”

“All right then, swap.”

The two girls peeled off the small pieces of adhesive plaster on which their names were written, and reaffixed them, each to the other’s racquet.

“I’m not going to swap back again,” said Julia warningly. “So it’s no use saying you don’t like my old sponge.”

III

Adam whistled cheerfully as he tacked up the wire netting round the tennis court. The door of the Sports Pavilion opened and Mademoiselle Blanche, the little mousy French Mistress, looked out. She seemed startled at the sight of Adam. She hesitated for a moment and then went back inside.

“Wonder what she’s been up to,” said Adam to himself. It would not have occurred to him that Mademoiselle Blanche had been up to anything, if it had not been for her manner. She had a guilty look which immediately roused surmise in his mind. Presently she came out again, closing the door behind her, and paused to speak as she passed him.

“Ah, you repair the netting, I see.”

“Yes, miss.”

“They are very fine courts here, and the swimming pool and the pavilion too. Oh! le sport! You think a lot in England of le sport, do you not?”

“Well, I suppose we do, miss.”

“Do you play tennis yourself?” Her eyes appraised him in a definitely feminine way and with a faint invitation in her glance. Adam wondered once more about her. It struck him that Mademoiselle Blanche was a somewhat unsuitable French Mistress for Meadowbank.

“No,” he said untruthfully, “I don’t play tennis. Haven’t got the time.”

“You play cricket, then?”

“Oh well, I played cricket as a boy. Most chaps do.”

“I have not had much time to look around,” said Angèle Blanche. “Not until today and it was so fine I thought I would like to examine the Sports Pavilion. I wish to write home to my friends in France who keep a school.”

Again Adam wondered a little. It seemed a lot of unnecessary explanation. It was almost as though Mademoiselle Blanche wished to excuse her presence out here at the Sports Pavilion. But why should she? She had a perfect right to go anywhere in the school grounds that she pleased. There was certainly no need to apologize for it to a gardener’s assistant. It raised queries again in his mind. What had this young woman been doing in the Sports Pavilion?

He looked thoughtfully at Mademoiselle Blanche. It would be a good thing perhaps to know a little more about her. Subtly, deliberately, his manner changed. It was still respectful but not quite so respectful. He permitted his eyes to tell her that she was an attractive-looking young woman.

“You must find it a bit dull sometimes working in a girls’ school, miss,” he said.

“It does not amuse me very much, no.”

“Still,” said Adam, “I suppose you get your times off, don’t you?”

There was a slight pause. It was as though she were debating with herself. Then, he felt it was with slight regret, the distance between them was deliberately widened.

“Oh yes,” she said, “I have adequate time off. The conditions of employment here are excellent.” She gave him a little nod of the head. “Good morning.” She walked off towards the house.

“You’ve been up to something,” said Adam to himself, “in the Sports Pavilion.”

He waited till she was out of sight, then he left his work, went across to the Sports Pavilion and looked inside. But nothing that he could see was out of place. “All the same,” he said to himself, “she was up to something.”

As he came out again, he was confronted unexpectedly by Ann Shapland.

“Do you know where Miss Bulstrode is?” she asked.

“I think she’s gone back to the house, miss. She was talking to Briggs just now.”

Ann was frowning.

“What are you doing in the Sports Pavilion?”

Adam was slightly taken aback. Nasty suspicious mind she’s got, he thought. He said, with a faint insolence in his voice:

“Thought I’d like to take a look at it. No harm in looking, is there?”

“Oughtn’t you to be getting on with your work?”

“I’ve just about finished nailing the wire round the tennis court.” He turned, looking up at the building behind him. “This is new, isn’t it? Must have cost a packet. The best of everything the young ladies here get, don’t they?”

“They pay for it,” said Ann dryly.

“Pay through the nose, so I’ve heard,” agreed Adam.

He felt a desire he hardly understood himself, to wound or annoy this girl. She was so cool always, so self-sufficient. He would really enjoy seeing her angry.

But Ann did not give him that satisfaction. She merely said:

“You’d better finish tacking up the netting,” and went back towards the house. Halfway there, she slackened speed and looked back. Adam was busy at the tennis wire. She looked from him to the Sports Pavilion in a puzzled manner.

Eight

MURDER

I

On night duty in Hurst St. Cyprian Police Station, Sergeant Green yawned. The telephone rang and he picked up the receiver. A moment later his manner had changed completely. He began scribbling rapidly on a pad.

“Yes? Meadowbank? Yes—and the name? Spell it, please. S-P-R-I-N-G-for greengage?-E-R. Springer. Yes. Yes, please see that nothing is disturbed. Someone’ll be with you very shortly.”

Rapidly and methodically he then proceeded to put into motion the various procedures indicated.

“Meadowbank?” said Detective Inspector Kelsey when his turn came. “That’s the girls’ school, isn’t it? Who is it who’s been murdered?”

“Death of a Games Mistress,” said Kelsey, thoughtfully. “Sounds like the title of a thriller on a railway bookstall.”

“Who’s likely to have done her in, d’you think?” said the Sergeant. “Seems unnatural.”

“Even Games Mistresses may have their love lives,” said Detective Inspector Kelsey. “Where did they say the body was found?”

“In the Sports Pavilion. I suppose that’s a fancy name for the gymnasium.”

“Could be,” said Kelsey. “Death of a Games Mistress in the Gymnasium. Sounds a highly athletic crime, doesn’t it? Did you say she was shot?”

“Yes.”

“They find the pistol?”

“No.”

“Interesting,” said Detective Inspector Kelsey, and having assembled his retinue, he departed to carry out his duties.

II

The front door at Meadowbank was open, with light streaming from it, and here Inspector Kelsey was received by Miss Bulstrode herself. He knew her by sight, as indeed most people in the neighbourhood did. Even in this moment of confusion and uncertainty, Miss Bulstrode remained eminently herself, in command of the situation and in command of her subordinates.

“Detective Inspector Kelsey, madam,” said the Inspector.

“What would you like to do first, Inspector Kelsey? Do you wish to go out to the Sports Pavilion or do you want to hear full details?”

“The doctor is with me,” said Kelsey. “If you will show him and two of my men to where the body is, I should like a few words with you.”

“Certainly. Come into my sitting room. Miss Rowan, will you show the doctor and the others the way?” She added, “One of my staff is out there seeing that nothing is disturbed.”

“Thank you, madam.”

Kelsey followed Miss Bulstrode into her sitting room. “Who found the body?”

“The matron, Miss Johnson. One of the girls had earache and Miss Johnson was up attending to her. As she did so, she noticed the curtains were not pulled properly and going to pull them she observed that there was a light on in the Sports Pavilion which there should not have been at 1 a.m.,” finished Miss Bulstrode dryly.

“Quite so,” said Kelsey. “Where is Miss Johnson now?”

“She is here if you want to see her?”

“Presently. Will you go on, madam.”

“Miss Johnson went and woke up another member of my staff, Miss Chadwick. They decided to go out and investigate. As they were leaving by the side door they heard the sound of a shot, whereupon they ran as quickly as they could towards the Sports Pavilion. On arrival there—”

The Inspector broke in. “Thank you, Miss Bulstrode. If, as you say, Miss Johnson is available, I will hear the next part from her. But first, perhaps, you will tell me something about the murdered woman.”

“Her name is Grace Springer.”

“She has been with you long?”

“No. She came to me this term. My former Games Mistress left to take up a post in Australia.”

“And what did you know about this Miss Springer?”

“Her testimonials were excellent,” said Miss Bulstrode.

“You didn’t know her personally before that?”

“No.”

“Have you any idea at all, even the vaguest, of what might have precipitated this tragedy? Was she unhappy? Any unfortunate entanglements?”

Miss Bulstrode shook her head. “Nothing that I know of. I may say,” she went on, “that it seems to me most unlikely. She was not that kind of a woman.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Inspector Kelsey darkly.

“Would you like me to fetch Miss Johnson now?”

“If you please. When I’ve heard her story I’ll go out to the gym—or the—what d’you call it—Sports Pavilion?”

“It is a newly built addition to the school this year,” said Miss Bulstrode. “It is built adjacent to the swimming pool and it comprises a squash court and other features. The racquets, lacrosse and hockey sticks are kept there, and there is a drying room for swim suits.”

“Was there any reason why Miss Springer should be in the Sports Pavilion at night?”

“None whatever,” said Miss Bulstrode unequivocally.

“Very well, Miss Bulstrode. I’ll talk to Miss Johnson now.”

Miss Bulstrode left the room and returned bringing the matron with her. Miss Johnson had had a sizeable dollop of brandy administered to her to pull her together after her discovery of the body. The result was a slightly added loquacity.

“This is Detective Inspector Kelsey,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Pull yourself together, Elspeth, and tell him exactly what happened.”

“It’s dreadful,” said Miss Johnson, “it’s really dreadful. Such a thing has never happened before in all my experience. Never! I couldn’t have believed it, I really couldn’t’ve believed it. Miss Springer too!”

Inspector Kelsey was a perceptive man. He was always willing to deviate from the course of routine if a remark struck him as unusual or worth following up.

“It seems to you, does it,” he said, “very strange that it was Miss Springer who was murdered?”

“Well yes, it does, Inspector. She was so—well, so tough, you know. So hearty. Like the sort of woman one could imagine taking on a burglar single-handed—or two burglars.”

“Burglars? H’m,” said Inspector Kelsey. “Was there anything to steal in the Sports Pavilion?”

"Well, no, really I can't see what there can have been. Swim suits of course, sports paraphernalia."

"The sort of thing a sneak thief might have taken," agreed Kelsey. "Hardly worth breaking in for, I should have thought. Was it broken into, by the way?"

"Well, really, I never thought to look," said Miss Johnson. "I mean, the door was open when we got there and—"

"It had not been broken into," said Miss Bulstrode.

"I see," said Kelsey. "A key was used." He looked at Miss Johnson. "Was Miss Springer well-liked?" he asked.

"Well, really, I couldn't say. I mean, after all, she's dead."

"So, you didn't like her," said Kelsey perceptively, ignoring Miss Johnson's finer feelings.

"I don't think anyone could have liked her very much," said Miss Johnson. "She had a very positive manner, you know. Never minded contradicting people flatly. She was very efficient and took her work very seriously I should say, wouldn't you, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Certainly," said Miss Bulstrode.

Kelsey returned from the bypath he had been pursuing. "Now, Miss Johnson, let's hear just what happened."

"Jane, one of our pupils, had earache. She woke up with a rather bad attack of it and came to me. I got some remedies and when I'd got her back to bed, I saw the window curtains were flapping and thought perhaps it would be better for once if her window was not opened at night as it was blowing rather in that direction. Of course the girls always sleep with their windows open. We have difficulties sometimes with the foreigners, but I always insist that—"

“That really doesn’t matter now,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Our general rules of hygiene would not interest Inspector Kelsey.”

“No, no, of course not,” said Miss Johnson. “Well, as I say I went to shut the window and what was my surprise to see a light in the Sports Pavilion. It was quite distinct, I couldn’t mistake it. It seemed to be moving about.”

“You mean it was not the electric light turned on but the light of a torch or flashlight?”

“Yes, yes, that’s what it must have been. I thought at once ‘Dear me, what’s anyone doing out there at this time of night?’ Of course I didn’t think of burglars. That would have been a very fanciful idea, as you said just now.”

“What did you think of?” asked Kelsey.

Miss Johnson shot a glance at Miss Bulstrode and back again.

“Well, really, I don’t know that I had any ideas in particular. I mean, well—well really, I mean I couldn’t think—”

Miss Bulstrode broke in. “I should imagine that Miss Johnson had the idea that one of our pupils might have gone out there to keep an assignation with someone,” she said. “Is that right, Elspeth?”

Miss Johnson gasped. “Well, yes, the idea did come into my head just for the moment. One of our Italian girls, perhaps. Foreigners are so much more precocious than English girls.”

“Don’t be so insular,” said Miss Bulstrode. “We’ve had plenty of English girls trying to make unsuitable assignations. It was a very natural thought to have occurred to you and probably the one that would have occurred to me.”

“Go on,” said Inspector Kelsey.

“So I thought the best thing,” went on Miss Johnson, “was to go to Miss Chadwick and ask her to come out with me and see what was going on.”

“Why Miss Chadwick?” asked Kelsey. “Any particular reason for selecting that particular mistress?”

“Well, I didn’t want to disturb Miss Bulstrode,” said Miss Johnson, “and I’m afraid it’s rather a habit of ours always to go to Miss Chadwick if we don’t want to disturb Miss Bulstrode. You see, Miss Chadwick’s been here a very long time and has had so much experience.”

“Anyway,” said Kelsey, “you went to Miss Chadwick and woke her up. Is that right?”

“Yes. She agreed with me that we must go out there immediately. We didn’t wait to dress or anything, just put on pullovers and coats and went out by the side door. And it was then, just as we were standing on the path, that we heard a shot from the Sports Pavilion. So we ran along the path as fast as we could. Rather stupidly we hadn’t taken a torch with us and it was hard to see where we were going. We stumbled once or twice but we got there quite quickly. The door was open. We switched on the light and—”

Kelsey interrupted. “There was no light then when you got there. Not a torch or any other light?”

“No. The place was in darkness. We switched on the light and there she was. She—”

“That’s all right,” said Inspector Kelsey kindly, “you needn’t describe anything. I shall be going out there now and I shall see for myself. You didn’t meet anyone on your way there?”

“No.”

“Or hear anybody running away?”

“No. We didn’t hear anything.”

“Did anybody else hear the shot in the school building?” asked Kelsey looking at Miss Bulstrode.

She shook her head. “No. Not that I know of. Nobody has said that they heard it. The Sports Pavilion is some distance away and I rather doubt if the shot would be noticeable.”

“Perhaps from one of the rooms on the side of the house giving on the Sports Pavilion?”

“Hardly, I think, unless one were listening for such a thing. I’m sure it wouldn’t be loud enough to wake anybody up.”

“Well, thank you,” said Inspector Kelsey. “I’ll be going out to the Sports Pavilion now.”

“I will come with you,” said Miss Bulstrode.

“Do you want me to come too?” asked Miss Johnson. “I will if you like. I mean it’s no good shirking things, is it? I always feel that one must face whatever comes and—”

“Thank you,” said Inspector Kelsey, “there’s no need, Miss Johnson. I wouldn’t think of putting you to any further strain.”

“So awful,” said Miss Johnson, “it makes it worse to feel I didn’t like her very much. In fact, we had a disagreement only last night in the Common Room. I stuck to it that too much P.T. was bad for some girls—the more delicate girls. Miss Springer said nonsense, that they were just the ones who needed it. Toned them up and made new women of them, she said. I said to her that really she didn’t know everything though she might think she did. After all I have been professionally trained and I know a great deal more about delicacy and illness than Miss Springer does—did, though I’ve no doubt that Miss Springer knows everything about parallel bars and vaulting horses and coaching tennis. But, oh dear, now I think of what’s happened, I wish I hadn’t said quite what I did. I suppose one always feels like that afterwards when something dreadful has occurred. I really do blame myself.”

“Now sit down there, dear,” said Miss Bulstrode, settling her on the sofa. “You just sit down and rest and pay no attention to any little disputes you may have had. Life would be very dull if we agreed with each other on every subject.”

Miss Johnson sat down shaking her head, then yawned. Miss Bulstrode followed Kelsey into the hall.

“I gave her rather a lot of brandy,” she said, apologetically. “It’s made her a little voluble. But not confused, do you think?”

“No,” said Kelsey. “She gave quite a clear account of what happened.”

Miss Bulstrode led the way to the side door.

“Is this the way Miss Johnson and Miss Chadwick went out?”

“Yes. You see it leads straight on to the path through the rhododendrons there which comes out at the Sports Pavilion.”

The Inspector had a powerful torch and he and Miss Bulstrode soon reached the building where the lights were now glaring.

“Fine bit of building,” said Kelsey, looking at it.

“It cost us a pretty penny,” said Miss Bulstrode, “but we can afford it,” she added serenely.

The open door led into a fair-sized room. There were lockers there with the names of the various girls on them. At the end of the room there was a stand for tennis racquets and one for lacrosse sticks. The door at the side led off to showers and changing cubicles. Kelsey paused before going in. Two of his men had been busy. A photographer had just finished his job and another man who was busy testing for fingerprints looked up and said,

“You can walk straight across the floor, sir. You’ll be all right. We haven’t finished down this end yet.”

Kelsey walked forward to where the police surgeon was kneeling by the body. The latter looked up as Kelsey approached.

“She was shot from about four feet away,” he said. “Bullet penetrated the heart. Death must have been pretty well instantaneous.”

“Yes. How long ago?”

“Say an hour or thereabouts.”

Kelsey nodded. He strolled round to look at the tall figure of Miss Chadwick where she stood grimly, like a watchdog, against one wall. About fifty-five, he judged, good forehead, obstinate mouth, untidy grey hair, no trace of hysteria. The kind of woman, he thought, who could be depended upon in a crisis though she might be overlooked in ordinary everyday life.

“Miss Chadwick?” he said.

“Yes.”

“You came out with Miss Johnson and discovered the body?”

“Yes. She was just as she is now. She was dead.”

“And the time?”

“I looked at my watch when Miss Johnson roused me. It was ten minutes to one.”

Kelsey nodded. That agreed with the time that Miss Johnson had given him. He looked down thoughtfully at the dead woman. Her bright red hair was cut short. She had a freckled face, with a chin which jutted out strongly, and a spare, athletic figure. She was wearing a tweed skirt and a heavy, dark pullover. She had brogues on her feet with no stockings.

“Any sign of the weapon?” asked Kelsey.

One of his men shook his head. “No sign at all, sir.”

“What about the torch?”

“There’s a torch there in the corner.”

"Any prints on it?"

"Yes. The dead woman's."

"So she's the one who had the torch," said Kelsey thoughtfully. "She came out here with a torch—why?" He asked it partly of himself, partly of his men, partly of Miss Bulstrode and Miss Chadwick. Finally he seemed to concentrate on the latter. "Any ideas?"

Miss Chadwick shook her head. "No idea at all. I suppose she might have left something here—forgotten it this afternoon or evening—and come out to fetch it. But it seems rather unlikely in the middle of the night."

"It must have been something very important if she did," said Kelsey.

He looked round him. Nothing seemed disturbed except the stand of racquets at the end. That seemed to have been pulled violently forward. Several of the racquets were lying about on the floor.

"Of course," said Miss Chadwick, "she could have seen a light here, like Miss Johnson did later, and have come out to investigate. That seems the most likely thing to me."

"I think you're right," said Kelsey. "There's just one small matter. Would she have come out here alone?"

"Yes." Miss Chadwick answered without hesitation.

"Miss Johnson," Kelsey reminded her, "came and woke you up."

"I know," said Miss Chadwick, "and that's what I should have done if I'd seen the light. I would have woken up Miss Bulstrode or Miss Vansittart or somebody. But Miss Springer wouldn't. She would have been quite confident—indeed would have preferred to tackle an intruder on her own."

"Another point," said the Inspector. "You came out through the side door with Miss Johnson. Was the side door unlocked?"

"Yes, it was."

“Presumably left unlocked by Miss Springer?”

“That seems the natural conclusion,” said Miss Chadwick.

“So we assume,” said Kelsey, “that Miss Springer saw a light out here in the gymnasium—Sports Pavilion—whatever you call it—that she came out to investigate and that whoever was here shot her.” He wheeled round on Miss Bulstrode as she stood motionless in the doorway. “Does that seem right to you?” he asked.

“It doesn’t seem right at all,” said Miss Bulstrode. “I grant you the first part. We’ll say Miss Springer saw a light out here and that she went out to investigate by herself. That’s perfectly probable. But that the person she disturbed here should shoot her—that seems to me all wrong. If anyone was here who had no business to be here they would be more likely to run away, or to try to run away. Why should someone come to this place at this hour of night with a pistol? It’s ridiculous, that’s what it is. Ridiculous! There’s nothing here worth stealing, certainly nothing for which it would be worthwhile doing murder.”

“You think it more likely that Miss Springer disturbed a rendezvous of some kind?”

“That’s the natural and most probable explanation,” said Miss Bulstrode. “But it doesn’t explain the fact of murder, does it? Girls in my school don’t carry pistols about with them and any young man they might be meeting seems very unlikely to have a pistol either.”

Kelsey agreed. “He’d have had a flick knife at most,” he said. “There’s an alternative,” he went on. “Say Miss Springer came out here to meet a man—”

Miss Chadwick giggled suddenly. “Oh no,” she said, “not Miss Springer.”

“I do not mean necessarily an amorous assignment,” said the Inspector dryly. “I’m suggesting that the murder was deliberate, that someone intended to murder Miss Springer, that they arranged to meet her here and shot her.”

Nine

CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS

I

Letter from Jennifer Sutcliffe to her mother:

Dear Mummy,

We had a murder last night. Miss Springer, the gym mistress. It happened in the middle of the night and the police came and this morning they're asking everybody questions.

Miss Chadwick told us not to talk to anybody about it but I thought you'd like to know.

With love,
Jennifer

II

Meadowbank was an establishment of sufficient importance to merit the personal attention of the Chief Constable. While routine investigation was going on Miss Bulstrode had not been inactive. She rang up a Press magnate and the Home Secretary, both personal friends of hers. As a result of those manoeuvres, very little had appeared about the event in the papers. A games mistress had been found dead in the school gymnasium. She had been shot, whether by accident or not was as yet not determined. Most of the notices of the event had an almost apologetic note in them, as though it were thoroughly tactless of any games mistress to get herself shot in such circumstances.

Ann Shapland had a busy day taking down letters to parents. Miss Bulstrode did not waste time in telling her pupils to keep quiet about the event. She knew that it would be a waste of time. More or less lurid reports would be sure to be penned to anxious parents and guardians. She intended her own balanced and reasonable account of the tragedy to reach them at the same time.

Later that afternoon she sat in conclave with Mr. Stone, the Chief Constable, and Inspector Kelsey. The police were perfectly amenable to having the Press play the thing down as much as possible. It enabled them to pursue their inquiries quietly and without interference.

“I’m very sorry about this, Miss Bulstrode, very sorry indeed,” said the Chief Constable. “I suppose it’s—well—a bad thing for you.”

“Murder’s a bad thing for any school, yes,” said Miss Bulstrode. “It’s no good dwelling on that now, though. We shall weather it, no doubt, as we have weathered other storms. All I do hope is that the matter will be cleared up quickly.”

“Don’t see why it shouldn’t, eh?” said Stone. He looked at Kelsey.

Kelsey said, “It may help when we get her background.”

“D’you really think so?” asked Miss Bulstrode dryly.

“Somebody may have had it in for her,” Kelsey suggested.

Miss Bulstrode did not reply.

“You think it’s tied up with this place?” asked the Chief Constable.

“Inspector Kelsey does really,” said Miss Bulstrode. “He’s only trying to save my feelings, I think.”

“I think it does tie up with Meadowbank,” said the Inspector slowly. “After all, Miss Springer had her times off like all the other members of the staff. She could have arranged a meeting with anyone if she had wanted to do so at any spot she chose. Why choose the gymnasium here in the middle of the night?”

“You have no objection to a search being made of the school premises, Miss Bulstrode?” asked the Chief Constable.

“None at all. You’re looking for the pistol or revolver or whatever it is, I suppose?”

“Yes. It was a small pistol of foreign make.”

“Foreign,” said Miss Bulstrode thoughtfully.

“To your knowledge, do any of your staff or any of the pupils have such a thing as a pistol in their possession?”

“Certainly not to my knowledge,” said Miss Bulstrode. “I am fairly certain that none of the pupils have. Their possessions are unpacked for them when they arrive and such a thing would have been seen and noted, and would, I may say, have aroused considerable comment. But please, Inspector Kelsey, do exactly as you like in that respect. I see your men have been searching the grounds today.”

The Inspector nodded. “Yes.”

He went on: “I should also like interviews with the other members of your staff. One or other of them may have heard some remark made by Miss Springer that will give us a clue. Or may have observed some oddity of behaviour on her part.”

He paused, then went on, “The same thing might apply to the pupils.”

Miss Bulstrode said: “I had formed the plan of making a short address to the girls this evening after prayers. I would ask that if any of them has any knowledge that might possibly bear upon Miss Springer’s death that they should come and tell me of it.”

“Very sound idea,” said the Chief Constable.

“But you must remember this,” said Miss Bulstrode, “one or other of the girls may wish to make herself important by exaggerating some incident or even by inventing one. Girls do very odd things: but I expect you are used to dealing with that form of exhibitionism."

"I've come across it," said Inspector Kelsey. "Now," he added, "please give me a list of your staff, also the servants."

III

"I've looked through all the lockers in the Pavilion, sir."

"And you didn't find anything?" said Kelsey.

"No, sir, nothing of importance. Funny things in some of them, but nothing in our line."

"None of them were locked, were they?"

"No, sir, they can lock. There were keys in them, but none of them were locked."

Kelsey looked round the bare floor thoughtfully. The tennis and lacrosse sticks had been replaced tidily on their stands.

"Oh well," he said, "I'm going up to the house now to have a talk with the staff."

"You don't think it was an inside job, sir?"

"It could have been," said Kelsey. "Nobody's got an alibi except those two mistresses, Chadwick and Johnson and the child Jane that had the earache. Theoretically, everyone else was in bed and asleep, but there's no one to vouch for that. The girls all have separate rooms and naturally the staff do. Any one of them, including Miss Bulstrode herself, could have come out and met Springer here, or could have followed her here. Then, after she'd been shot, whoever it was could dodge back quietly through the bushes to the side door, and be nicely back in bed again when the alarm was given. It's motive that's difficult. Yes," said Kelsey, "it's motive. Unless there's something going on here that we don't know anything about, there doesn't seem to be any motive."

He stepped out of the Pavilion and made his way slowly back to the house. Although it was past working hours, old Briggs, the gardener, was putting in a little work on a flower bed and he straightened up as the Inspector passed.

“You work late hours,” said Kelsey, smiling.

“Ah,” said Briggs. “Young ’uns don’t know what gardening is. Come on at eight and knock off at five—that’s what they think it is. You’ve got to study your weather, some days you might as well not be out in the garden at all, and there’s other days as you can work from seven in the morning until eight at night. That is if you love the place and have pride in the look of it.”

“You ought to be proud of this one,” said Kelsey. “I’ve never seen anyplace better kept these days.”

“These days is right,” said Briggs. “But I’m lucky I am. I’ve got a strong young fellow to work for me. A couple of boys, too, but they’re not much good. Most of these boys and young men won’t come and do this sort of work. All for going into factories, they are, or white collars and working in an office. Don’t like to get their hands soiled with a bit of honest earth. But I’m lucky, as I say. I’ve got a good man working for me as come and offered himself.”

“Recently?” said Inspector Kelsey.

“Beginning of the term,” said Briggs. “Adam, his name is. Adam Goodman.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen him about,” said Kelsey.

“Asked for the day off today, he did,” said Briggs. “I give it him. Didn’t seem to be much doing today with you people tramping all over the place.”

“Somebody should have told me about him,” said Kelsey sharply.

“What do you mean, told you about him?”

“He’s not on my list,” said the Inspector. “Of people employed here, I mean.”

“Oh, well, you can see him tomorrow, mister,” said Briggs. “Not that he can tell you anything, I don’t suppose.”

“You never know,” said the Inspector.

A strong young man who had offered himself at the beginning of the term? It seemed to Kelsey that here was the first thing that he had come across which might be a little out of the ordinary.

IV

The girls filed into the hall for prayers that evening as usual, and afterwards Miss Bulstrode arrested their departure by raising her hand.

“I have something to say to you all. Miss Springer, as you know, was shot last night in the Sports Pavilion. If any of you has heard or seen anything in the past week—anything that has puzzled you relating to Miss Springer, anything Miss Springer may have said or someone else may have said of her that strikes you as at all significant, I should like to know it. You can come to me in my sitting room anytime this evening.”

“Oh,” Julia Upjohn sighed, as the girls filed out, “how I wish we did know something! But we don’t, do we, Jennifer?”

“No,” said Jennifer, “of course we don’t.”

“Miss Springer always seemed so very ordinary,” said Julia sadly, “much too ordinary to get killed in a mysterious way.”

“I don’t suppose it was so mysterious,” said Jennifer. “Just a burglar.”

“Stealing our tennis racquets, I suppose,” said Julia with sarcasm.

“Perhaps someone was blackmailing her,” suggested one of the other girls hopefully.

"What about?" said Jennifer.

But nobody could think of any reason for blackmailing Miss Springer.

V

Inspector Kelsey started his interviewing of the staff with Miss Vansittart. A handsome woman, he thought, summing her up. Possibly forty or a little over; tall, well-built, grey hair tastefully arranged. She had dignity and composure, with a certain sense, he thought, of her own importance. She reminded him a little of Miss Bulstrode herself: she was the schoolmistress type all right. All the same, he reflected, Miss Bulstrode had something that Miss Vansittart had not. Miss Bulstrode had a quality of unexpectedness. He did not feel that Miss Vansittart would ever be unexpected.

Question and answer followed routine. In effect, Miss Vansittart had seen nothing, had noticed nothing, had heard nothing. Miss Springer had been excellent at her job. Yes, her manner had perhaps been a trifle brusque, but not, she thought, unduly so. She had not perhaps had a very attractive personality but that was really not a necessity in a Games Mistress. It was better, in fact, not to have mistresses who had attractive personalities. It did not do to let the girls get emotional about the mistresses. Miss Vansittart, having contributed nothing of value, made her exit.

"See no evil, hear no evil, think no evil. Same like the monkeys," observed Sergeant Percy Bond, who was assisting Inspector Kelsey in his task.

Kelsey grinned. "That's about right, Percy," he said.

"There's something about schoolmistresses that gives me the hump," said Sergeant Bond. "Had a terror of them ever since I was a kid. Knew one that was a holy terror. So upstage and la-di-da you never knew what she was trying to teach you."

The next mistress to appear was Eileen Rich. Ugly as sin was Inspector Kelsey's first reaction. Then he qualified it; she had a certain attraction. He started his routine questions, but the answers were not quite so routine as he had expected. After saying No, she had not heard or noticed anything special that anyone else had said about Miss Springer or that Miss Springer herself had said, Eileen Rich’s next answer was not what he anticipated. He had asked:

“There was no one as far as you know who had a personal grudge against her?”

“Oh no,” said Eileen Rich quickly. “One couldn’t have. I think that was her tragedy, you know. That she wasn’t a person one could ever hate.”

“Now just what do you mean by that, Miss Rich?”

“I mean she wasn’t a person one could ever have wanted to destroy. Everything she did and was, was on the surface. She annoyed people. They often had sharp words with her, but it didn’t mean anything. Not anything deep. I’m sure she wasn’t killed for herself, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m not quite sure that I do, Miss Rich.”

“I mean if you had something like a bank robbery, she might quite easily be the cashier that gets shot, but it would be as a cashier, not as Grace Springer. Nobody would love her or hate her enough to want to do away with her. I think she probably felt that without thinking about it, and that’s what made her so officious. About finding fault, you know, and enforcing rules and finding out what people were doing that they shouldn’t be doing, and showing them up.”

“Snooping?” asked Kelsey.

“No, not exactly snooping.” Eileen Rich considered. “She wouldn’t tiptoe round on sneakers or anything of that kind. But if she found something going on that she didn’t understand she’d be quite determined to get to the bottom of it. And she would get to the bottom of it.”

“I see.” He paused a moment. “You didn’t like her yourself much, did you, Miss Rich?”

“I don’t think I ever thought about her. She was just the Games Mistress. Oh! What a horrible thing that is to say about anybody! Just this—just that! But that’s how she felt about her job. It was a job that she took pride in doing well. She didn’t find it fun. She wasn’t keen when she found a girl who might be really good at tennis, or really fine at some form of athletics. She didn’t rejoice in it or triumph.”

Kelsey looked at her curiously. An odd young woman, this, he thought.

“You seem to have your ideas on most things, Miss Rich,” he said.

“Yes. Yes, I suppose I do.”

“How long have you been at Meadowbank?”

“Just over a year and a half.”

“There’s never been any trouble before?”

“At Meadowbank?” She sounded startled.

“Yes.”

“Oh no. Everything’s been quite all right until this term.”

Kelsey pounced.

“What’s been wrong this term? You don’t mean the murder, do you? You mean something else—”

“I don’t—” she stopped—“Yes, perhaps I do—but it’s all very nebulous.”

“Go on.”

“Miss Bulstrode’s not been happy lately,” said Eileen slowly. “That’s one thing. You wouldn’t know it. I don’t think anybody else has even noticed it. But I have. And she’s not the only one who’s unhappy. But that isn’t what you mean, is it? That’s just people’s feelings. The kind of things you get when you’re cooped up together and think about one thing too much. You meant, was there anything that didn't seem right just this term. That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Kelsey, looking at her curiously, "yes, that's it. Well, what about it?"

"I think there is something wrong here," said Eileen Rich slowly. "It's as though there were someone among us who didn't belong." She looked at him, smiled, almost laughed and said, "Cat among the pigeons, that's the sort of feeling. We're the pigeons, all of us, and the cat's amongst us. But we can't see the cat."

"That's very vague, Miss Rich."

"Yes, isn't it? It sounds quite idiotic. I can hear that myself. What I really mean, I suppose, is that there has been something, some little thing that I've noticed but I don't know what I've noticed."

"About anyone in particular?"

"No, I told you, that's just it. I don't know who it is. The only way I can sum it up is to say that there's someone here, who's—somehow—wrong! There's someone here—I don't know who—who makes me uncomfortable. Not when I'm looking at her but when she's looking at me because it's when she's looking at me that it shows, whatever it is. Oh, I'm getting more incoherent than ever. And anyway, it's only a feeling. It's not what you want. It isn't evidence."

"No," said Kelsey, "it isn't evidence. Not yet. But it's interesting, and if your feeling gets anymore definite, Miss Rich, I'd be glad to hear about it."

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "because it's serious, isn't it? I mean, someone's been killed—we don't know why—and the killer may be miles away, or, on the other hand, the killer may be here in the school. And if so that pistol or revolver or whatever it is, must be here too. That's not a very nice thought, is it?"

She went out with a slight nod. Sergeant Bond said, “Crackers—or don’t you think so?”

“No,” said Kelsey, “I don’t think she’s crackers. I think she’s what’s called a sensitive. You know, like the people who know when there’s a cat in the room long before they see it. If she’d been born in an African tribe she might have been a witch doctor.”

“They go round smelling out evil, don’t they?” said Sergeant Bond.

“That’s right, Percy,” said Kelsey. “And that’s exactly what I’m trying to do myself. Nobody’s come across with any concrete facts so I’ve got to go about smelling out things. We’ll have the French woman next.”

Ten

FANTASTIC STORY

Mademoiselle Angèle Blanche was thirty-five at a guess. No makeup, dark brown hair arranged neatly but unbecomingly. A severe coat and skirt.

It was Mademoiselle Blanche's first term at Meadowbank, she explained. She was not sure that she wished to remain for a further term.

"It is not nice to be in a school where murders take place," she said disapprovingly.

Also, there did not seem to be burglar alarms anywhere in the house—that was dangerous.

"There's nothing of any great value, Mademoiselle Blanche, to attract burglars."

Mademoiselle Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

"How does one know? These girls who come here, some of them have very rich fathers. They may have something with them of great value. A burglar knows about that, perhaps, and he comes here because he thinks this is an easy place to steal it."

"If a girl had something of value with her it wouldn't be in the gymnasium."

"How do you know?" said Mademoiselle. "They have lockers there, do they not, the girls?"

"Only to keep their sports kit in, and things of that kind."

"Ah yes, that is what is supposed. But a girl could hide anything in the toe of a gym shoe, or wrapped up in an old pullover or in a scarf."

“What sort of thing, Mademoiselle Blanche?”

But Mademoiselle Blanche had no idea what sort of thing.

“Even the most indulgent fathers don’t give their daughters diamond necklaces to take to school,” the Inspector said.

Again Mademoiselle Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

“Perhaps it is something of a different kind of value—a scarab, say, or something that a collector would give a lot of money for. One of the girls has a father who is an archaeologist.”

Kelsey smiled. “I don’t really think that’s likely, you know, Mademoiselle Blanche.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Oh well, I only make the suggestion.”

“Have you taught in any other English schools, Mademoiselle Blanche?”

“One in the north of England some time ago. Mostly I have taught in Switzerland and in France. Also in Germany. I think I will come to England to improve my English. I have a friend here. She went sick and she told me I could take her position here as Miss Bulstrode would be glad to find somebody quickly. So I came. But I do not like it very much. As I tell you, I do not think I shall stay.”

“Why don’t you like it?” Kelsey persisted.

“I do not like places where there are shootings,” said Mademoiselle Blanche. “And the children, they are not respectful.”

“They are not quite children, are they?”

“Some of them behave like babies, some of them might be twenty-five. There are all kinds here. They have much freedom. I prefer an establishment with more routine.”

“Did you know Miss Springer well?”

“I knew her practically not at all. She had bad manners and I conversed with her as little as possible. She was all bones and freckles and a loud ugly voice. She was like caricatures of English-women. She was rude to me often and I did not like it.”

“What was she rude to you about?”

“She did not like me coming to her Sports Pavilion. That seems to be how she feels about it—or felt about it, I mean—that it was her Sports Pavilion! I go there one day because I am interested. I have not been in it before and it is a new building. It is very well arranged and planned and I am just looking round. Then Miss Springer she comes and says ‘What are you doing here? This is no business of yours to be in here.’ She says that to me—me, a mistress in the school! What does she think I am, a pupil?”

“Yes, yes, very irritating, I’m sure,” said Kelsey, soothingly.

“The manners of a pig, that is what she had. And then she calls out ‘Do not go away with the key in your hand.’ She upset me. When I pull the door open the key fell out and I pick it up. I forget to put it back, because she has offended me. And then she shouts after me as though she thinks I was meaning to steal it. Her key, I suppose, as well as her Sports Pavilion.”

“That seems a little odd, doesn’t it?” said Kelsey. “That she should feel like that about the gymnasium, I mean. As though it were her private property, as though she were afraid of people finding something she had hidden there.” He made the faint feeler tentatively, but Angèle Blanche merely laughed.

“Hide something there—what could you hide in a place like that? Do you think she hides her love letters there? I am sure she has never had a love letter written to her! The other mistresses, they are at least polite. Miss Chadwick, she is old-fashioned and she fusses. Miss Vansittart, she is very nice, grande dame, sympathetic. Miss Rich, she is a little crazy I think, but friendly. And the younger mistresses are quite pleasant.”

Angèle Blanche was dismissed after a few more unimportant questions.

“Touchy,” said Bond. “All the French are touchy.”

“All the same, it’s interesting,” said Kelsey. “Miss Springer didn’t like people prowling about her gymnasium—Sports Pavilion—I don’t know what to call the thing. Now why?”

“Perhaps she thought the Frenchwoman was spying on her,” suggested Bond.

“Well, but why should she think so? I mean, ought it to have mattered to her that Angèle Blanche should spy on her unless there was something she was afraid of Angèle Blanche finding out?

“Who have we got left?” he added.

“The two junior mistresses, Miss Blake and Miss Rowan, and Miss Bulstrode’s secretary.”

Miss Blake was young and earnest with a round good-natured face. She taught Botany and Physics. She had nothing much to say that could help. She had seen very little of Miss Springer and had no idea of what could have led to her death.

Miss Rowan, as befitted one who held a degree in psychology, had views to express. It was highly probable, she said, that Miss Springer had committed suicide.

Inspector Kelsey raised his eyebrows.

“Why should she? Was she unhappy in any way?”

“She was aggressive,” said Miss Rowan, leaning forward and peering eagerly through her thick lenses. “Very aggressive. I consider that significant. It was a defence mechanism, to conceal a feeling of inferiority.”

“Everything I’ve heard so far,” said Inspector Kelsey, “points to her being very sure of herself.”

“Too sure of herself,” said Miss Rowan darkly. “And several of the things she said bear out my assumption.”

“Such as?”

“She hinted at people being ‘not what they seemed.’ She mentioned that at the last school where she was employed, she had ‘unmasked’ someone. The Headmistress, however, had been prejudiced, and refused to listen to what she had found out. Several of the other mistresses, too, had been what she called ‘against her.’

“You see what that means, Inspector?” Miss Rowan nearly fell off her chair as she leaned forward excitedly. Strands of lank dark hair fell forward across her face. “The beginnings of a persecution complex.”

Inspector Kelsey said politely that Miss Rowan might be correct in her assumptions, but that he couldn’t accept the theory of suicide, unless Miss Rowan could explain how Miss Springer had managed to shoot herself from a distance of at least four feet away, and had also been able to make the pistol disappear into thin air afterwards.

Miss Rowan retorted acidly that the police were well known to be prejudiced against psychology.

She then gave place to Ann Shapland.

“Well, Miss Shapland,” said Inspector Kelsey, eyeing her neat and businesslike appearance with favour, “what light can you throw upon this matter?”

“Absolutely none, I’m afraid. I’ve got my own sitting room, and I don’t see much of the staff. The whole thing’s unbelievable.”

“In what way unbelievable?”

“Well, first that Miss Springer should get shot at all. Say somebody broke into the gymnasium and she went out to see who it was. That’s all right, I suppose, but who’d want to break into the gymnasium?”

“Boys, perhaps, some young locals who wanted to help themselves to equipment of some kind or another, or who did it for a lark.”

“If that’s so, I can’t help feeling that what Miss Springer would have said was: ‘Now then, what are you doing here? Be off with you,’ and they’d have gone off.”

“Did it ever seem to you that Miss Springer adopted any particular attitude about the Sports Pavilion?”

Ann Shapland looked puzzled. “Attitude?”

“I mean did she regard it as her special province and dislike other people going there?”

“Not that I know of. Why should she? It was just part of the school buildings.”

“You didn’t notice anything yourself? You didn’t find that if you went there she resented your presence—anything of that kind?”

Ann Shapland shook her head. “I haven’t been out there myself more than a couple of times. I haven’t the time. I’ve gone out there once or twice with a message for one of the girls from Miss Bulstrode. That’s all.”

“You didn’t know that Miss Springer had objected to Mademoiselle Blanche being out there?”

“No, I didn’t hear anything about that. Oh yes, I believe I did. Mademoiselle Blanche was rather cross about something one day, but then she is a little bit touchy, you know. There was something about her going into the drawing class one day and resenting something the drawing mistress said to her. Of course she hasn’t really very much to do—Mademoiselle Blanche, I mean. She only teaches one subject—French, and she has a lot of time on her hands. I think—” she hesitated, “I think she is perhaps rather an inquisitive person.”

“Do you think it likely that when she went into the Sports Pavilion she was poking about in any of the lockers?”

“The girls’ lockers? Well, I wouldn’t put it past her. She might amuse herself that way.”

“Does Miss Springer herself have a locker out there?”

“Yes, of course.”

“If Mademoiselle Blanche was caught poking about in Miss Springer’s locker, then I can imagine that Miss Springer would be annoyed?”

“She certainly would!”

“You don’t know anything about Miss Springer’s private life?”

“I don’t think anyone did,” said Ann. “Did she have one, I wonder?”

“And there’s nothing else—nothing connected with the Sports Pavilion, for instance, that you haven’t told me?”

“Well—” Ann hesitated.

“Yes, Miss Shapland, let’s have it.”

“It’s nothing really,” said Ann slowly. “But one of the gardeners—not Briggs, the young one. I saw him come out of the Sports Pavilion one day, and he had no business to be in there at all. Of course it was probably just curiosity on his part—or perhaps an excuse to slack off a bit from work—he was supposed to be nailing down the wire on the tennis court. I don’t suppose really there’s anything in it.”

“Still, you remembered it,” Kelsey pointed out. “Now why?”

“I think—” she frowned. “Yes, because his manner was a little odd. Defiant. And—he sneered at all the money that was spent here on the girls.”

“That sort of attitude … I see.”

“I don’t suppose there’s really anything in it.”

“Probably not—but I’ll make a note of it, all the same.”

“Round and round the mulberry bush,” said Bond when Ann Shapland had gone. “Same thing over and over again! For goodness’ sake let’s hope we get something out of the servants.”

But they got very little out of the servants.

“It’s no use asking me anything, young man,” said Mrs. Gibbons, the cook. “For one thing I can’t hear what you say, and for another I don’t know a thing. I went to sleep last night and I slept unusually heavy. Never heard anything of all the excitement there was. Nobody woke me up and told me anything about it.” She sounded injured. “It wasn’t until this morning I heard.”

Kelsey shouted a few questions and got a few answers that told him nothing.

Miss Springer had come new this term, and she wasn’t as much liked as Miss Jones who’d held the post before her. Miss Shapland was new, too, but she was a nice young lady, Mademoiselle Blanche was like all the Frenchies—thought the other mistresses were against her and let the young ladies treat her something shocking in class. “Not a one for crying, though,” Mrs. Gibbons admitted. “Some schools I’ve been in the French mistresses used to cry something awful!”

Most of the domestic staff were dailies. There was only one other maid who slept in the house, and she proved equally uninformative, though able to hear what was said to her. She couldn’t say, she was sure. She didn’t know nothing. Miss Springer was a bit sharp in her manner. She didn’t know nothing about the Sports Pavilion nor what was kept there, and she’d never seen nothing like a pistol nowhere.

This negative spate of information was interrupted by Miss Bulstrode. “One of the girls would like to speak to you, Inspector Kelsey,” she said.

Kelsey looked up sharply. “Indeed? She knows something?”

“As to that I’m rather doubtful,” said Miss Bulstrode, “but you had better talk to her yourself. She is one of our foreign girls. Princess Shaista—niece of the Emir Ibrahim. She is inclined to think, perhaps, that she is of rather more importance than she is. You understand?”

Kelsey nodded comprehendingly. Then Miss Bulstrode went out and a slight dark girl of middle height came in.

She looked at them, almond-eyed and demure.

“You are the police?”

“Yes,” said Kelsey smiling, “we are the police. Will you sit down and tell me what you know about Miss Springer?”

“Yes, I will tell you.”

She sat down, leaned forward, and lowered her voice dramatically.

“There have been people watching this place. Oh, they do not show themselves clearly, but they are there!”

She nodded her head significantly.

Inspector Kelsey thought that he understood what Miss Bulstrode had meant. This girl was dramatizing herself—and enjoying it.

“And why should they be watching the school?”

“Because of me! They want to kidnap me.”

Whatever Kelsey had expected, it was not this. His eyebrows rose.

“Why should they want to kidnap you?”

“To hold me to ransom, of course. Then they would make my relations pay much money.”

"Er—well—perhaps," said Kelsey dubiously. "But—er—supposing this is so, what has it got to do with the death of Miss Springer?"

"She must have found out about them," said Shaista. "Perhaps she told them she had found out something. Perhaps she threatened them. Then perhaps they promised to pay her money if she would say nothing. And she believed them. So she goes out to the Sports Pavilion where they say they will pay her the money, and then they shoot her."

"But surely Miss Springer would never have accepted blackmail money?"

"Do you think it is such fun to be a schoolteacher—to be a teacher of gymnastics?" Shaista was scornful. "Do you not think it would be nice instead to have money, to travel, to do what you want? Especially someone like Miss Springer who is not beautiful, at whom men do not even look! Do you not think that money would attract her more than it would attract other people?"

"Well—er—" said Inspector Kelsey, "I don't know quite what to say." He had not had this point of view presented to him before.

"This is just—er—your own idea?" he said. "Miss Springer never said anything to you?"

"Miss Springer never said anything except 'Stretch and bend,' and 'Faster,' and 'Don't slack,'" said Shaista with resentment.

"Yes—quite so. Well, don't you think you may have imagined all this about kidnapping?"

Shaista was immediately much annoyed.

"You do not understand at all! My cousin was Prince Ali Yusuf of Ramat. He was killed in a revolution, or at least in fleeing from a revolution. It was understood that when I grew up I should marry him. So you see I am an important person. It may be perhaps the Communists who come here. Perhaps it is not to kidnap. Perhaps they intend to assassinate me."

Inspector Kelsey looked still more incredulous.

“That’s rather far-fetched, isn’t it?”

“You think such things could not happen? I say they can. They are very very wicked, the Communists! Everybody knows that.”

As he still looked dubious, she went on:

“Perhaps they think I know where the jewels are!”

“What jewels?”

“My cousin had jewels. So had his father. My family always has a hoard of jewels. For emergencies, you comprehend.”

She made it sound very matter of fact.

Kelsey stared at her.

“But what has all this got to do with you—or with Miss Springer?”

“But I already tell you! They think, perhaps, I know where the jewels are. So they will take me prisoner and force me to speak.”

“Do you know where the jewels are?”

“No, of course I do not know. They disappeared in the Revolution. Perhaps the wicked Communists take them. But again, perhaps not.”

“Who do they belong to?”

“Now my cousin is dead, they belong to me. No men in his family anymore. His aunt, my mother, is dead. He would want them to belong to me. If he were not dead, I marry him.”

“That was the arrangement?”

“I have to marry him. He is my cousin, you see.”

“And you would have got the jewels when you married him?”

“No, I would have had new jewels. From Cartier in Paris. These others would still be kept for emergencies.”

Inspector Kelsey blinked, letting this Oriental insurance scheme for emergencies sink into his consciousness.

Shaista was racing on with great animation.

“I think that is what happens. Somebody gets the jewels out of Ramat. Perhaps good person, perhaps bad. Good person would bring them to me, would say: ‘These are yours,’ and I should reward him.”

She nodded her head regally, playing the part.

Quite a little actress, thought the Inspector.

“But if it was a bad person, he would keep the jewels and sell them. Or he would come to me and say: ‘What will you give me as a reward if I bring them to you?’ And if it worthwhile, he brings—but if not, then not!”

“But in actual fact, nobody has said anything at all to you?”

“No,” admitted Shaista.

Inspector Kelsey made up his mind.

“I think, you know,” he said pleasantly, “that you’re really talking a lot of nonsense.”

Shaista flashed a furious glance at him.

“I tell you what I know, that is all,” she said sulkily.

“Yes—well, it’s very kind of you, and I’ll bear it in mind.”

He got up and opened the door for her to go out.

“The Arabian Nights aren’t in it,” he said, as he returned to the table. “Kidnapping and fabulous jewels! What next?”

Eleven

CONFERENCE

When Inspector Kelsey returned to the station, the sergeant on duty said:

“We’ve got Adam Goodman here, waiting, sir.”

“Adam Goodman? Oh yes. The gardener.”

A young man had risen respectfully to his feet. He was tall, dark and good-looking. He wore stained corduroy trousers loosely held up by an aged belt, and an open-necked shirt of very bright blue.

“You wanted to see me, I hear.”

His voice was rough, and as that of so many young men of today, slightly truculent.

Kelsey said merely:

“Yes, come into my room.”

“I don’t know anything about the murder,” said Adam Goodman sulkily. “It’s nothing to do with me. I was at home and in bed last night.”

Kelsey merely nodded noncommittally.

He sat down at his desk, and motioned to the young man to take the chair opposite. A young policeman in plainclothes had followed the two men in unobtrusively and sat down a little distance away.

“Now then,” said Kelsey. “You’re Goodman—” he looked at a note on his desk—“Adam Goodman.”

“That’s right, sir. But first, I’d like to show you this.”

Adam’s manner had changed. There was no truculence or sulkiness in it now. It was quiet and deferential. He took something from his pocket and passed it across the desk. Inspector Kelsey’s eyebrows rose very slightly as he studied it. Then he raised his head.

“I shan’t need you, Barbar,” he said.

The discreet young policeman got up and went out. He managed not to look surprised, but he was.

“Ah,” said Kelsey. He looked across at Adam with speculative interest. “So that’s who you are? And what the hell, I’d like to know, are you—”

“Doing in a girls’ school?” the young man finished for him. His voice was still deferential, but he grinned in spite of himself. “It’s certainly the first time I’ve had an assignment of that kind. Don’t I look like a gardener?”

“Not around these parts. Gardeners are usually rather ancient. Do you know anything about gardening?”

“Quite a lot. I’ve got one of these gardening mothers. England’s speciality. She’s seen to it that I’m a worthy assistant to her.”

“And what exactly is going on at Meadowbank—to bring you on the scene?”

“We don’t know, actually, that there’s anything going on at Meadowbank. My assignment is in the nature of a watching brief. Or was—until last night. Murder of a Games Mistress. Not quite in the school’s curriculum.”

“It could happen,” said Inspector Kelsey. He sighed. “Anything could happen—anywhere. I’ve learnt that. But I’ll admit that it’s a little off the beaten track. What’s behind all this?”

Adam told him. Kelsey listened with interest.

“I did that girl an injustice,” he remarked—“But you’ll admit it sounds too fantastic to be true. Jewels worth between half a million and a million pounds? Who do you say they belong to?”

“That’s a very pretty question. To answer it, you’d have to have a gaggle of international lawyers on the job—and they’d probably disagree. You could argue the case a lot of ways. They belonged, three months ago, to His Highness Prince Ali Yusuf of Ramat. But now? If they’d turned up in Ramat they’d have been the property of the present Government, they’d have made sure of that. Ali Yusuf may have willed them to someone. A lot would then depend on where the will was executed and whether it could be proved. They may belong to his family. But the real essence of the matter is, that if you or I happened to pick them up in the street and put them in our pockets, they would for all practical purposes belong to us. That is, I doubt if any legal machine exists that could get them away from us. They could try, of course, but the intricacies of international law are quite incredible….”

“You mean that, practically speaking, it’s findings are keepings?” asked Inspector Kelsey. He shook his head disapprovingly. “That’s not very nice,” he said primly.

“No,” said Adam firmly. “It’s not very nice. There’s more than one lot after them, too. None of them scrupulous. Word’s got around, you see. It may be a rumour, it may be true, but the story is that they were got out of Ramat just before the bust up. There are a dozen different tales of how.”

“But why Meadowbank? Because of little Princess Butter-won’t-melt-in-my-mouth?”

“Princess Shaista, first cousin of Ali Yusuf. Yes. Someone may try and deliver the goods to her or communicate with her. There are some questionable characters from our point of view hanging about the neighbourhood. A Mrs. Kolinsky, for instance, staying at the Grand Hotel. Quite a prominent member of what one might describe as International Riff Raff Ltd. Nothing in your line, always strictly within the law, all perfectly respectable, but a grand picker-up of useful information. Then there’s a woman who was out in Ramat dancing in cabaret there. She’s reported to have been working for a certain foreign government. Where she is now we don’t know, we don’t even know what she looks like, but there’s a rumour that she might be in this part of the world. Looks, doesn’t it, as though it were all centring round Meadowbank? And last night, Miss Springer gets herself killed.”

Kelsey nodded thoughtfully.

“Proper mix-up,” he observed. He struggled a moment with his feelings. “You see this sort of thing on the telly … far-fetched—that’s what you think … can’t really happen. And it doesn’t—not in the normal course of events.”

“Secret agents, robbery, violence, murder, double crossing,” agreed Adam. “All preposterous—but that side of life exists.”

“But not at Meadowbank!”

The words were wrung from Inspector Kelsey.

“I perceive your point,” said Adam. “Lese-majesty.”

There was a silence, and then Inspector Kelsey asked:

“What do you think happened last night?”

Adam took his time, then he said slowly:

“Springer was in the Sports Pavilion—in the middle of the night. Why? We’ve got to start there. It’s no good asking ourselves who killed her until we’ve made up our minds why she was there, in the Sports Pavilion at that time of night. We can say that in spite of her blameless and athletic life she wasn’t sleeping well, and got up and looked out of her window and saw a light in the Sports Pavilion—her window does look out that way?”

Kelsey nodded.

“Being a tough and fearless young woman, she went out to investigate. She disturbed someone there who was—doing what? We don’t know. But it was someone desperate enough to shoot her dead.”

Again Kelsey nodded.

“That’s the way we’ve been looking at it,” he said. “But your last point had me worried all along. You don’t shoot to kill—and come prepared to do so, unless—”

“Unless you’re after something big? Agreed! Well, that’s the case of what we might call Innocent Springer—shot down in the performance of duty. But there’s another possibility. Springer, as a result of private information, gets a job at Meadowbank or is detailed for it by her bosses—because of her qualification—She waits until a suitable night, then slips out to the Sports Pavilion (again our stumbling-block of a question—why?)—Somebody is following her—or waiting for her—someone who carries a pistol and is prepared to use it … But again—why? What for? In fact, what the devil is there about the Sports Pavilion? It’s not the sort of place that one can imagine hiding anything.”

“There wasn’t anything hidden there, I can tell you that. We went through it with a tooth comb—the girls’ lockers, Miss Springer’s ditto. Sports equipment of various kinds, all normal and accounted for. And a brand new building! There wasn’t anything there in the nature of jewellery.”

“Whatever it was it could have been removed, of course. By the murderer,” said Adam. “The other possibility is that the Sports Pavilion was simply used as a rendezvous—by Miss Springer or by someone else. It’s quite a handy place for that. A reasonable distance from the house. Not too far. And if anyone was noticed going out there, a simple answer would be that whoever it was thought they had seen a light, etc., etc. Let’s say that Miss Springer went out to meet someone—there was a disagreement and she got shot. Or, a variation, Miss Springer noticed someone leaving the house, followed that someone, intruded upon something she wasn’t meant to see or hear.”

“I never met her alive,” said Kelsey, “but from the way everyone speaks of her, I get the impression that she might have been a nosey woman.”

“I think that’s really the most probable explanation,” agreed Adam. “Curiosity killed the cat. Yes, I think that’s the way the Sports Pavilion comes into it.”

“But if it was a rendezvous, then—” Kelsey paused.

Adam nodded vigorously.

“Yes. It looks as though there is someone in the school who merits our very close attention. Cat among the pigeons, in fact.”

“Cat among the pigeons,” said Kelsey, struck by the phrase. “Miss Rich, one of the mistresses, said something like that today.”

He reflected a moment or two.

“There were three newcomers to the staff this term,” he said. “Shapland, the secretary. Blanche, the French Mistress, and, of course, Miss Springer herself. She’s dead and out of it. If there is a cat among the pigeons, it would seem that one of the other two would be the most likely bet.” He looked towards Adam. “Any ideas, as between the two of them?”

Adam considered.

“I caught Mademoiselle Blanche coming out of the Sports Pavilion one day. She had a guilty look. As though she’d been doing something she ought not to have done. All the same, on the whole—I think I’d plump for the other. For Shapland. She’s a cool customer and she’s got brains. I’d go into her antecedents rather carefully if I were you. What the devil are you laughing for?”

Kelsey was grinning.

“She was suspicious of you,” he said. “Caught you coming out of the Sports Pavilion—and thought there was something odd about your manner!”

“Well, I’m damned!” Adam was indignant. “The cheek of her!”

Inspector Kelsey resumed his authoritative manner.

“The point is,” he said, “that we think a lot of Meadowbank round these parts. It’s a fine school. And Miss Bulstrode’s a fine woman. The sooner we can get to the bottom of all this, the better for the school. We want to clear things up and give Meadowbank a clean bill of health.”

He paused, looking thoughtfully at Adam.

“I think,” he said, “we’ll have to tell Miss Bulstrode who you are. She’ll keep her mouth shut—don’t fear for that.”

Adam considered for a moment. Then he nodded his head.

“Yes,” he said. “Under the circumstances, I think it’s more or less inevitable.”

Twelve

NEW LAMPS FOR OLD

I

Miss Bulstrode had another faculty which demonstrated her superiority over most other women. She could listen.

She listened in silence to both Inspector Kelsey and Adam. She did not so much as raise an eyebrow. Then she uttered one word.

“Remarkable.”

It’s you who are remarkable, thought Adam, but he did not say so aloud.

“Well,” said Miss Bulstrode, coming as was habitual to her straight to the point. “What do you want me to do?”

Inspector Kelsey cleared his throat.

“It’s like this,” he said. “We felt that you ought to be fully informed—for the sake of the school.”

Miss Bulstrode nodded.

“Naturally,” she said, “the school is my first concern. It has to be. I am responsible for the care and safety of my pupils—and in a lesser degree for that of my staff. And I would like to add now that if there can be as little publicity as possible about Miss Springer’s death—the better it will be for me. This is a purely selfish point of view—though I think my school is important in itself—not only to me. And I quite realize that if full publicity is necessary for you, then you will have to go ahead. But is it?”

“No,” said Inspector Kelsey. “In this case I should say the less publicity the better. The inquest will be adjourned and we’ll let it get about that we think it was a local affair. Young thugs—or juvenile delinquents, as we have to call them nowadays—out with guns amongst them, trigger happy. It's usually flick knives, but some of these boys do get hold of guns. Miss Springer surprised them. They shot her. That's what I should like to let it go at—then we can get to work quiet-like. Not more than can be helped in the Press. But of course, Meadowbank's famous. It's news. And murder at Meadowbank will be hot news."

"I think I can help you there," said Miss Bulstrode crisply, "I am not without influence in high places." She smiled and reeled off a few names. These included the Home Secretary, two Press barons, a bishop and the Minister of Education. "I'll do what I can." She looked at Adam. "You agree?"

Adam spoke quickly.

"Yes, indeed. We always like things nice and quiet."

"Are you continuing to be my gardener?" inquired Miss Bulstrode.

"If you don't object. It puts me right where I want to be. And I can keep an eye on things."

This time Miss Bulstrode's eyebrows did rise.

"I hope you're not expecting anymore murders?"

"No, no."

"I'm glad of that. I doubt if any school could survive two murders in one term."

She turned to Kelsey.

"Have you people finished with the Sports Pavilion? It's awkward if we can't use it."

"We've finished with it. Clean as a whistle—from our point of view, I mean. For whatever reason the murder was committed—there's nothing there now to help us. It’s just a Sports Pavilion with the usual equipment.”

“Nothing in the girls’ lockers?”

Inspector Kelsey smiled.

“Well—this and that—copy of a book—French—called Candide—with—er—illustrations. Expensive book.”

“Ah,” said Miss Bulstrode. “So that’s where she keeps it! Giselle d’Aubray, I suppose?”

Kelsey’s respect for Miss Bulstrode rose.

“You don’t miss much, M’am,” he said.

“She won’t come to harm with Candide,” said Miss Bulstrode. “It’s a classic. Some forms of pornography I do confiscate. Now I come back to my first question. You have relieved my mind about the publicity connected with the school. Can the school help you in any way? Can I help you?”

“I don’t think so, at the moment. The only thing I can ask is, has anything caused you uneasiness this term? Any incident? Or any person?”

Miss Bulstrode was silent for a moment or two. Then she said slowly:

“The answer, literally, is: I don’t know.”

Adam said quickly:

“You’ve got a feeling that something’s wrong?”

“Yes—just that. It’s not definite. I can’t put my finger on any person, or any incident—unless—”

She was silent for a moment, then she said:

“I feel—I felt at the time—that I’d missed something that I ought not to have missed. Let me explain.”

She recited briefly the little incident of Mrs. Upjohn and the distressing and unexpected arrival of Lady Veronica.

Adam was interested.

“Let me get this clear, Miss Bulstrode. Mrs. Upjohn, looking out of the window, this front window that gives on the drive, recognized someone. There’s nothing in that. You have over a hundred pupils and nothing is more likely than for Mrs. Upjohn to see some parent or relation that she knew. But you are definitely of the opinion that she was astonished to recognize that person—in fact, that it was someone whom she would not have expected to see at Meadowbank?”

“Yes, that was exactly the impression I got.”

“And then through the window looking in the opposite direction you saw one of the pupils’ mothers, in a state of intoxication, and that completely distracted your mind from what Mrs. Upjohn was saying?”

Miss Bulstrode nodded.

“She was talking for some minutes?”

“Yes.”

“And when your attention did return to her, she was speaking of espionage, of Intelligence work she had done in the war before she married?”

“Yes.”

“It might tie up,” said Adam thoughtfully. “Someone she had known in her war days. A parent or relation of one of your pupils, or it could have been a member of your teaching staff.”

“Hardly a member of my staff,” objected Miss Bulstrode.

“It’s possible.”

"We'd better get in touch with Mrs. Upjohn," said Kelsey. "As soon as possible. You have her address, Miss Bulstrode?"

"Of course. But I believe she is abroad at the moment. Wait—I will find out."

She pressed her desk buzzer twice, then went impatiently to the door and called to a girl who was passing.

"Find Julia Upjohn for me, will you, Paula?"

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode."

"I'd better go before the girl comes," Adam said. "It wouldn't be natural for me to assist in the inquiries the Inspector is making. Ostensibly he's called me in here to get the lowdown on me. Having satisfied himself that he's got nothing on me for the moment, he now tells me to take myself off."

"Take yourself off and remember I've got my eye on you!" growled Kelsey with a grin.

"By the way," said Adam, addressing Miss Bulstrode as he paused by the door, "will it be all right with you if I slightly abuse my position here? If I get, shall we say, a little too friendly with some members of your staff?"

"With which members of my staff?"

"Well—Mademoiselle Blanche, for instance."

"Mademoiselle Blanche? You think that she—?"

"I think she's rather bored here."

"Ah!" Miss Bulstrode looked rather grim. "Perhaps you're right. Anyone else?"

"I shall have a good try all round," said Adam cheerfully. "If you should find that some of your girls are being rather silly, and slipping off to assignations in the garden, please believe that my intentions are strictly sleuthial—if there is such a word.”

“You think the girls are likely to know something?”

“Everybody always knows something,” said Adam, “even if it’s something they don’t know they know.”

“You may be right.”

There was a knock on the door, and Miss Bulstrode called—“Come in.”

Julia Upjohn appeared, very much out of breath.

“Come in, Julia.”

Inspector Kelsey growled.

“You can go now, Goodman. Take yourself off and get on with your work.”

“I’ve told you I don’t know a thing about anything,” said Adam sulkily. He went out, muttering “Blooming Gestapo.”

“I’m sorry I’m so out of breath, Miss Bulstrode,” apologized Julia. “I’ve run all the way from the tennis courts.”

“That’s quite all right. I just wanted to ask you your mother’s address—that is, where can I get in touch with her?”

“Oh! You’ll have to write to Aunt Isabel. Mother’s abroad.”

“I have your aunt’s address. But I need to get in touch with your mother personally.”

“I don’t see how you can,” said Julia, frowning. “Mother’s gone to Anatolia on a bus.”

“On a bus?” said Miss Bulstrode, taken aback.

Julia nodded vigorously.

“She likes that sort of thing,” she explained. “And of course it’s frightfully cheap. A bit uncomfortable, but Mummy doesn’t mind that. Roughly, I should think she’d fetch up in Van in about three weeks or so.”

“I see—yes. Tell me, Julia, did your mother ever mention to you seeing someone here whom she’d known in her war service days?”

“No, Miss Bulstrode, I don’t think so. No, I’m sure she didn’t.”

“Your mother did Intelligence work, didn’t she?”

“Oh, yes. Mummy seems to have loved it. Not that it sounds really exciting to me. She never blew up anything. Or got caught by the Gestapo. Or had her toenails pulled out. Or anything like that. She worked in Switzerland, I think—or was it Portugal?”

Julia added apologetically: “One gets rather bored with all that old war stuff; and I’m afraid I don’t always listen properly.”

“Well, thank you, Julia. That’s all.”

“Really!” said Miss Bulstrode, when Julia had departed. “Gone to Anatolia on a bus! The child said it exactly as though she were saying her mother had taken a 73 bus to Marshall and Snelgrove’s.”

II

Jennifer walked away from the tennis courts rather moodily, swishing her racquet. The amount of double faults she had served this morning depressed her. Not, of course, that you could get a hard serve with this racquet, anyway. But she seemed to have lost control of her service lately. Her backhand, however, had definitely improved. Springer’s coaching had been helpful. In many ways it was a pity that Springer was dead.

Jennifer took tennis very seriously. It was one of the things she thought about.

"Excuse me—"

Jennifer looked up, startled. A well-dressed woman with golden hair, carrying a long flat parcel, was standing a few feet away from her on the path. Jennifer wondered why on earth she hadn't seen the woman coming along towards her before. It did not occur to her that the woman might have been hidden behind a tree or in the rhododendron bushes and just stepped out of them. Such an idea would not have occurred to Jennifer, since why should a woman hide behind rhododendron bushes and suddenly step out of them?

Speaking with a slightly American accent the woman said, "I wonder if you could tell me where I could find a girl called"—she consulted a piece of paper—"Jennifer Sutcliffe."

Jennifer was surprised.

"I'm Jennifer Sutcliffe."

"Why! How ridiculous! That is a coincidence. That in a big school like this I should be looking for one girl and I should happen upon the girl herself to ask. And they say things like that don't happen."

"I suppose they do happen sometimes," said Jennifer, uninterested.

"I was coming down to lunch today with some friends down here," went on the woman, "and at a cocktail party yesterday I happened to mention I was coming, and your aunt—or was it your godmother?—I've got such a terrible memory. She told me her name and I've forgotten that too. But anyway, she said could I possibly call here and leave a new tennis racquet for you. She said you had been asking for one."

Jennifer's face lit up. It seemed like a miracle, nothing less.

"It must have been my godmother, Mrs. Campbell. I call her Aunt Gina. It wouldn't have been Aunt Rosamond. She never gives me anything but a mingy ten shillings at Christmas."

"Yes, I remember now. That was the name. Campbell."

The parcel was held out. Jennifer took it eagerly. It was quite loosely wrapped. Jennifer uttered an exclamation of pleasure as the racquet emerged from its coverings.

"Oh, it's smashing!" she exclaimed. "A really good one. I've been longing for a new racquet—you can't play decently if you haven't got a decent racquet."

"Why I guess that's so."

"Thank you very much for bringing it," said Jennifer gratefully.

"It was really no trouble. Only I confess I felt a little shy. Schools always make me feel shy. So many girls. Oh, by the way, I was asked to bring back your old racquet with me."

She picked up the racquet Jennifer had dropped.

"Your aunt—no—godmother—said she would have it restrung. It needs it badly, doesn't it?"

"I don't think that it's really worthwhile," said Jennifer, but without paying much attention.

She was still experimenting with the swing and balance of her new treasure.

"But an extra racquet is always useful," said her new friend. "Oh dear," she glanced at her watch. "It is much later than I thought. I must run."

"Have you—do you want a taxi? I could telephone—"

"No, thank you, dear. My car is right by the gate. I left it there so that I shouldn't have to turn in a narrow space. Good-bye. So pleased to have met you. I hope you enjoy the racquet."

She literally ran along the path towards the gate. Jennifer called after her once more. "Thank you very much."

Then, gloating, she went in search of Julia.

“Look,” she flourished the racquet dramatically.

“I say! Where did you get that?”

“My godmother sent it to me. Aunt Gina. She’s not my aunt, but I call her that. She’s frightfully rich. I expect Mummy told her about me grumbling about my racquet. It is smashing, isn’t it? I must remember to write and thank her.”

“I should hope so!” said Julia virtuously.

“Well, you know how one does forget things sometimes. Even things you really mean to do. Look, Shaista,” she added as the latter girl came towards them. “I’ve got a new racquet. Isn’t it a beauty?”

“It must have been very expensive,” said Shaista, scanning it respectfully. “I wish I could play tennis well.”

“You always run into the ball.”

“I never seem to know where the ball is going to come,” said Shaista vaguely. “Before I go home, I must have some really good shorts made in London. Or a tennis dress like the American champion Ruth Allen wears. I think that is very smart. Perhaps I will have both,” she smiled in pleasurable anticipation.

“Shaista never thinks of anything except things to wear,” said Julia scornfully as the two friends passed on. “Do you think we shall ever be like that?”

“I suppose so,” said Jennifer gloomily. “It will be an awful bore.”

They entered the Sports Pavilion, now officially vacated by the police, and Jennifer put her racquet carefully into her press.

“Isn’t it lovely?” she said, stroking it affectionately.

“What have you done with the old one?”

“Oh, she took it.”

“Who?”

“The woman who brought this. She’d met Aunt Gina at a cocktail party, and Aunt Gina asked her to bring me this as she was coming down here today, and Aunt Gina said to bring up my old one and she’d have it restrung.”

“Oh, I see … ” But Julia was frowning.

“What did Bully want with you?” asked Jennifer.

“Bully? Oh, nothing really. Just Mummy’s address. But she hasn’t got one because she’s on a bus. In Turkey somewhere. Jennifer—look here. Your racquet didn’t need restringing.”

“Oh, it did, Julia. It was like a sponge.”

“I know. But it’s my racquet really. I mean, we exchanged. It was my racquet that needed restringing. Yours, the one I’ve got now, was restrung. You said yourself your mother had had it restrung before you went abroad.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Jennifer looked a little startled. “Oh well, I suppose this woman—whoever she was—I ought to have asked her name, but I was so entranced—just saw that it needed restringing.”

“But you said that she said that it was your Aunt Gina who had said it needed restringing. And your Aunt Gina couldn’t have thought it needed restringing if it didn’t.”

“Oh, well—” Jennifer looked impatient. “I suppose—I suppose—”

“You suppose what?”

“Perhaps Aunt Gina just thought that if I wanted a new racquet, it was because the old one wanted restringing. Anyway what does it matter?”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” said Julia slowly. “But I do think it’s odd, Jennifer. It’s like—like new lamps for old. Aladdin, you know.”

Jennifer giggled.

“Fancy rubbing my old racquet—your old racquet, I mean, and having a genie appear! If you rubbed a lamp and a genie did appear, what would you ask him for, Julia?”

“Lots of things,” breathed Julia ecstatically. “A tape recorder, and an Alsatian—or perhaps a Great Dane, and a hundred thousand pounds, and a black satin party frock, and oh! lots of other things … What would you?”

“I don’t really know,” said Jennifer. “Now I’ve got this smashing new racquet, I don’t really want anything else.”

Thirteen

CATASTROPHE

I

The third weekend after the opening of term followed the usual plan. It was the first weekend on which parents were allowed to take pupils out. As a result Meadowbank was left almost deserted.

On this particular Sunday there would only be twenty girls left at the school itself for the midday meal. Some of the staff had weekend leave, returning late Sunday night or early Monday morning. On this particular occasion Miss Bulstrode herself was proposing to be absent for the weekend. This was unusual since it was not her habit to leave the school during term time. But she had her reasons. She was going to stay with the Duchess of Welsham at Welsington Abbey. The duchess had made a special point of it and had added that Henry Banks would be there. Henry Banks was the Chairman of the Governors. He was an important industrialist and he had been one of the original backers of the school. The invitation was therefore almost in the nature of a command. Not that Miss Bulstrode would have allowed herself to be commanded if she had not wished to do so. But as it happened, she welcomed the invitation gladly. She was by no means indifferent to duchesses and the Duchess of Welsham was an influential duchess, whose own daughters had been sent to Meadowbank. She was also particularly glad to have the opportunity of talking to Henry Banks on the subject of the school's future and also to put forward her own account of the recent tragic occurrence.

Owing to the influential connections at Meadowbank the murder of Miss Springer had been played down very tactfully in the Press. It had become a sad fatality rather than a mysterious murder. The impression was given, though not said, that possibly some young thugs had broken into the Sports Pavilion and that Miss Springer's death had been more accident than design. It was reported vaguely that several young men had been asked to come to the police station and "assist the police." Miss Bulstrode herself was anxious to mitigate any unpleasant impression that might have been given to these two influential patrons of the school. She knew that they wanted to discuss the veiled hint that she had thrown out of her coming retirement. Both the duchess and Henry Banks were anxious to persuade her to remain on. Now was the time, Miss Bulstrode felt, to push the claims of Eleanor Vansittart, to point out what a splendid person she was, and how well fitted to carry on the traditions of Meadowbank.

On Saturday morning Miss Bulstrode was just finishing off her correspondence with Ann Shapland when the telephone rang. Ann answered it.

“It’s the Emir Ibrahim, Miss Bulstrode. He’s arrived at Claridge’s and would like to take Shaista out tomorrow.”

Miss Bulstrode took the receiver from her and had a brief conversation with the Emir’s equerry. Shaista would be ready anytime from eleven thirty onwards on Sunday morning, she said. The girl must be back at the school by eight p.m.

She rang off and said:

“I wish Orientals sometimes gave you a little more warning. It has been arranged for Shaista to go out with Giselle d’Aubray tomorrow. Now that will have to be cancelled. Have we finished all the letters?”

“Yes, Miss Bulstrode.”

“Good, then I can go off with a clear conscience. Type them and send them off, and then you, too, are free for the weekend. I shan’t want you until lunchtime on Monday.”

“Thank you, Miss Bulstrode.”

“Enjoy yourself, my dear.”

“I’m going to,” said Ann.

“Young man?”

“Well—yes.” Ann coloured a little. “Nothing serious, though.”

“Then there ought to be. If you’re going to marry, don’t leave it too late.”

“Oh this is only an old friend. Nothing exciting.”

“Excitement,” said Miss Bulstrode warningly, “isn’t always a good foundation for married life. Send Miss Chadwick to me, will you?”

Miss Chadwick bustled in.

“The Emir Ibrahim, Shaista’s uncle, is taking her out tomorrow Chaddy. If he comes himself, tell him she is making good progress.”

“She’s not very bright,” said Miss Chadwick.

“She’s immature intellectually,” agreed Miss Bulstrode. “But she has a remarkably mature mind in other ways. Sometimes, when you talk to her, she might be a woman of twenty-five. I suppose it’s because of the sophisticated life she’s led. Paris, Teheran, Cairo, Istanbul and all the rest of it. In this country we’re inclined to keep our children too young. We account it a merit when we say: ‘She’s still quite a child.’ It isn’t a merit. It’s a grave handicap in life.”

“I don’t know that I quite agree with you there, dear,” said Miss Chadwick. “I’ll go now and tell Shaista about her uncle. You go away for your weekend and don’t worry about anything.”

“Oh! I shan’t,” said Miss Bulstrode. “It’s a good opportunity, really, for leaving Eleanor Vansittart in charge and seeing how she shapes. With you and her in charge nothing’s likely to go wrong.”

“I hope not, indeed. I’ll go and find Shaista.”

Shaista looked surprised and not at all pleased to hear that her uncle had arrived in London.

“He wants to take me out tomorrow?” she grumbled. “But Miss Chadwick, it is all arranged that I go out with Giselle d’Aubray and her mother.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to do that another time.”

“But I would much rather go out with Giselle,” said Shaista crossly. “My uncle is not at all amusing. He eats and then he grunts and it is all very dull.”

“You mustn’t talk like that. It is impolite,” said Miss Chadwick. “Your uncle is only in England for a week, I understand, and naturally he wants to see you.”

“Perhaps he has arranged a new marriage for me,” said Shaista, her face brightening. “If so, that would be fun.”

“If that is so, he will no doubt tell you so. But you are too young to get married yet awhile. You must first finish your education.”

“Education is very boring,” said Shaista.

II

Sunday morning dawned bright and serene—Miss Shapland had departed soon after Miss Bulstrode on Saturday. Miss Johnson, Miss Rich and Miss Blake left on Sunday morning.

Miss Vansittart, Miss Chadwick, Miss Rowan and Mademoiselle Blanche were left in charge.

“I hope all the girls won’t talk too much,” said Miss Chadwick dubiously. “About poor Miss Springer I mean.”

“Let us hope,” said Eleanor Vansittart, “that the whole affair will soon be forgotten.” She added: “If any parents talk to me about it, I shall discourage them. It will be best, I think, to take quite a firm line.”

The girls went to church at 10 o’clock accompanied by Miss Vansittart and Miss Chadwick. Four girls who were Roman Catholics were escorted by Angèle Blanche to a rival religious establishment. Then, about half past eleven, the cars began to roll into the drive. Miss Vansittart, graceful, poised and dignified, stood in the hall. She greeted mothers smilingly, produced their offspring and adroitly turned aside any unwanted references to the recent tragedy.

“Terrible,” she said, “yes, quite terrible, but, you do understand, we don’t talk about it here. All these young minds—such a pity for them to dwell on it.”

Chaddy was also on the spot greeting old friends among the parents, discussing plans for the holidays and speaking affectionately of the various daughters.

“I do think Aunt Isabel might have come and taken me out,” said Julia who with Jennifer was standing with her nose pressed against the window of one of the classrooms, watching the comings and goings on the drive outside.

“Mummy’s going to take me out next weekend,” said Jennifer. “Daddy’s got some important people coming down this weekend so she couldn’t come today.”

“There goes Shaista,” said Julia, “all togged up for London. Oo-ee! Just look at the heels on her shoes. I bet old Johnson doesn’t like those shoes.”

A liveried chauffeur was opening the door of a large Cadillac. Shaista climbed in and was driven away.

“You can come out with me next weekend, if you like,” said Jennifer. “I told Mummy I’d got a friend I wanted to bring.”

“I’d love to,” said Julia. “Look at Vansittart doing her stuff.”

“Terribly gracious, isn’t she?” said Jennifer.

“I don’t know why,” said Julia, “but somehow it makes me want to laugh. It’s a sort of copy of Miss Bulstrode, isn’t it? Quite a good copy, but it’s rather like Joyce Grenfell or someone doing an imitation.”

“There’s Pam’s mother,” said Jennifer. “She’s brought the little boys. How they can all get into that tiny Morris Minor I don’t know.”

“They’re going to have a picnic,” said Julia. “Look at all the baskets.”

“What are you going to do this afternoon?” asked Jennifer. “I don’t think I need write to Mummy this week, do you, if I’m going to see her next week?”

“You are slack about writing letters, Jennifer.”

“I never can think of anything to say,” said Jennifer.

“I can,” said Julia, “I can think of lots to say.” She added mournfully, “But there isn’t really anyone much to write to at present.”

“What about your mother?”

“I told you she’s gone to Anatolia in a bus. You can’t write letters to people who go to Anatolia in buses. At least you can’t write to them all the time.”

“Where do you write to when you do write?”

“Oh, consulates here and there. She left me a list. Stamboul is the first and then Ankara and then some funny name.” She added, “I wonder why Bully wanted to get in touch with Mummy so badly? She seemed quite upset when I said where she’d gone.”

“It can’t be about you,” said Jennifer. “You haven’t done anything awful, have you?”

“Not that I know of,” said Julia. “Perhaps she wanted to tell her about Springer.”

“Why should she?” said Jennifer. “I should think she’d be jolly glad that there’s at least one mother who doesn’t know about Springer.”

“You mean mothers might think that their daughters were going to get murdered too?”

“I don’t think my mother’s quite as bad as that,” said Jennifer. “But she did get in quite a flap about it.”

“If you ask me,” said Julia, in a meditative manner, “I think there’s a lot that they haven’t told us about Springer.”

“What sort of things?”

“Well, funny things seem to be happening. Like your new tennis racquet.”

“Oh, I meant to tell you,” said Jennifer, “I wrote and thanked Aunt Gina and this morning I got a letter from her saying she was very glad I’d got a new racquet but that she never sent it to me.”

“I told you that racquet business was peculiar,” said Julia triumphantly, “and you had a burglary, too, at your home, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but they didn’t take anything.”

“That makes it even more interesting,” said Julia. “I think,” she added thoughtfully, “that we shall probably have a second murder soon.”

“Oh really, Julia, why should we have a second murder?”

“Well, there’s usually a second murder in books,” said Julia. “What I think is, Jennifer, that you’ll have to be frightfully careful that it isn’t you who gets murdered.”

“Me?” said Jennifer, surprised. “Why should anyone murder me?”

“Because somehow you’re mixed up in it all,” said Julia. She added thoughtfully, “We must try and get a bit more out of your mother next week, Jennifer. Perhaps somebody gave her some secret papers out in Ramat.”

“What sort of secret papers?”

“Oh, how should I know,” said Julia. “Plans or formulas for a new atomic bomb. That sort of thing.”

Jennifer looked unconvinced.

III

Miss Vansittart and Miss Chadwick were in the Common Room when Miss Rowan entered and said:

“Where is Shaista? I can’t find her anywhere. The Emir’s car has just arrived to call for her.”

“What?” Chaddy looked up surprised. “There must be some mistake. The Emir’s car came for her about three-quarters of an hour ago. I saw her get into it and drive off myself. She was one of the first to go.”

Eleanor Vansittart shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose a car must have been ordered twice over, or something,” she said.

She went out herself and spoke to the chauffeur. “There must be some mistake,” she said. “The young lady has already left for London three-quarters of an hour ago.”

The chauffeur seemed surprised. “I suppose there must be some mistake, if you say so, madam,” he said. “I was definitely given instructions to call at Meadowbank for the young lady.”

“I suppose there’s bound to be a muddle sometimes,” said Miss Vansittart.

The chauffeur seemed unperturbed and unsurprised. “Happens all the time,” he said. “Telephone messages taken, written down, forgotten. All that sort of thing. But we pride ourselves in our firm that we don’t make mistakes. Of course, if I may say so, you never know with these Oriental gentlemen. They’ve sometimes got quite a big entourage with them, and orders get given twice and even three times over. I expect that’s what must have happened in this instance.” He turned his large car with some adroitness and drove away.

Miss Vansittart looked a little doubtful for a moment or two, but she decided there was nothing to worry about and began to look forward with satisfaction to a peaceful afternoon.

After luncheon the few girls who remained wrote letters or wandered about the grounds. A certain amount of tennis was played and the swimming pool was well patronized. Miss Vansittart took her fountain pen and her writing pad to the shade of the cedar tree. When the telephone rang at half past four it was Miss Chadwick who answered it.

“Meadowbank School?” The voice of a well-bred young Englishman spoke. “Oh, is Miss Bulstrode there?”

“Miss Bulstrode’s not here today. This is Miss Chadwick speaking.”

“Oh, it’s about one of your pupils. I am speaking from Claridge’s, the Emir Ibrahim’s suite.”

“Oh yes? You mean about Shaista?”

“Yes. The Emir is rather annoyed at not having got a message of any kind.”

“A message? Why should he get a message?”

“Well, to say that Shaista couldn’t come, or wasn’t coming.”

“Wasn’t coming! Do you mean to say she hasn’t arrived?”

“No, no, she’s certainly not arrived. Did she leave Meadowbank then?”

“Yes. A car came for her this morning—oh, about half past eleven I should think, and she drove off.”

“That’s extraordinary because there’s no sign of her here … I’d better ring up the firm that supplies the Emir’s cars.”

“Oh dear,” said Miss Chadwick, “I do hope there hasn’t been an accident.”

“Oh, don’t let’s assume the worst,” said the young man cheerfully. “I think you’d have heard, you know, if there’d been an accident. Or we would. I shouldn’t worry if I were you.”

But Miss Chadwick did worry.

“It seems to me very odd,” she said.

“I suppose—” the young man hesitated.

“Yes?” said Miss Chadwick.

“Well, it’s not quite the sort of thing I want to suggest to the Emir, but just between you and me there’s no—er—well, no boyfriend hanging about, is there?”

“Certainly not,” said Miss Chadwick with dignity.

“No, no, well I didn’t think there would be, but, well one never knows with girls, does one? You’d be surprised at some of the things I’ve run into.”

“I can assure you,” said Miss Chadwick with dignity, “that anything of that kind is quite impossible.”

But was it impossible? Did one ever know with girls?

She replaced the receiver and rather unwillingly went in search of Miss Vansittart. There was no reason to believe that Miss Vansittart would be any better able to deal with the situation than she herself but she felt the need of consulting with someone. Miss Vansittart said at once,

“The second car?”

They looked at each other.

“Do you think,” said Chaddy slowly, “that we ought to report this to the police?”

“Not to the police,” said Eleanor Vansittart in a shocked voice.

“She did say, you know,” said Chaddy, “that somebody might try to kidnap her.”

“Kidnap her? Nonsense!” said Miss Vansittart sharply.

“You don’t think—” Miss Chadwick was persistent.

“Miss Bulstrode left me in charge here,” said Eleanor Vansittart, “and I shall certainly not sanction anything of the kind. We don’t want anymore trouble here with the police.”

Miss Chadwick looked at her without affection. She thought Miss Vansittart was being shortsighted and foolish. She went back into the house and put through a call to the Duchess of Welsham’s house. Unfortunately everyone was out.

Fourteen

MISS CHADWICK LIES AWAKE

I

Miss Chadwick was restless. She turned to and fro in her bed counting sheep, and employing other time-honoured methods of invoking sleep. In vain.

At eight o'clock, when Shaista had not returned, and there had been no news of her, Miss Chadwick had taken matters into her own hands and rung up Inspector Kelsey. She was relieved to find that he did not take the matter too seriously. She could leave it all to him, he assured her. It would be an easy matter to check up on a possible accident. After that, he would get in touch with London. Everything would be done that was necessary. Perhaps the girl herself was playing truant. He advised Miss Chadwick to say as little as possible at the school. Let it be thought that Shaista was staying the night with her uncle at Claridge's.

"The last thing you want, or that Miss Bulstrode would want, is anymore publicity," said Kelsey. "It's most unlikely that the girl has been kidnapped. So don't worry, Miss Chadwick. Leave it all to us."

But Miss Chadwick did worry.

Lying in bed, sleepless, her mind went from possible kidnapping back to murder.

Murder at Meadowbank. It was terrible! Unbelievable! Meadowbank. Miss Chadwick loved Meadowbank. She loved it, perhaps, even more than Miss Bulstrode did, though in a somewhat different way. It had been such a risky, gallant enterprise. Following Miss Bulstrode faithfully into the hazardous undertaking, she had endured panic more than once. Supposing the whole thing should fail. They hadn't really had much capital. If they did not succeed—if their backing was withdrawn—Miss Chadwick had an anxious mind and could always tabulate innumerable ifs. Miss Bulstrode had enjoyed the adventure, the hazard of it all, but Chaddy had not. Sometimes, in an agony of apprehension, she had pleaded for Meadowbank to be run on more conventional lines. It would be safer, she urged. But Miss Bulstrode had been uninterested in safety. She had her vision of what a school should be and she had pursued it unafraid. And she had been justified in her audacity. But oh, the relief to Chaddy when success was a fait accompli. When Meadowbank was established, safely established, as a great English institution. It was then that her love for Meadowbank had flowed most fully. Doubts, fears, anxieties, all slipped from her. Peace and prosperity had come. She basked in the prosperity of Meadowbank like a purring tabby cat.

She had been quite upset when Miss Bulstrode had first begun to talk of retirement. Retire now—when everything was set fair? What madness! Miss Bulstrode talked of travel, of all the things in the world to see. Chaddy was unimpressed. Nothing, anywhere, could be half as good as Meadowbank! It had seemed to her that nothing could affect the well-being of Meadowbank—But now—Murder!

Such an ugly violent word—coming in from the outside world like an ill-mannered storm wind. Murder—a word associated by Miss Chadwick only with delinquent boys with flick knives, or evil-minded doctors poisoning their wives. But murder here—at a school—and not any school—at Meadowbank. Incredible.

Really, Miss Springer—poor Miss Springer, naturally it wasn’t her fault—but, illogically, Chaddy felt that it must have been her fault in some way. She didn’t know the traditions of Meadowbank. A tactless woman. She must in some way have invited murder. Miss Chadwick rolled over, turned her pillow, said “I mustn’t go on thinking of it all. Perhaps I had better get up and take some aspirin. I’ll just try counting to fifty….”

Before she had got to fifty, her mind was off again on the same track. Worrying. Would all this—and perhaps kidnapping too—get into the papers? Would parents, reading, hasten to take their daughters away….

Oh dear, she must calm down and go to sleep. What time was it? She switched on her light and looked at her watch—Just after a quarter to one. Just about the time that poor Miss Springer … No, she would not think of it anymore. And, how stupid of Miss Springer to have gone off by herself like that without waking up somebody else.

“Oh dear,” said Miss Chadwick. “I’ll have to take some aspirin.”

She got out of bed and went over to the washstand. She took two aspirins with a drink of water. On her way back, she pulled aside the curtain of the window and peered out. She did so to reassure herself more than for any other reason. She wanted to feel that of course there would never again be a light in the Sports Pavilion in the middle of the night.

But there was.

In a minute Chaddy had leapt to action. She thrust her feet into stout shoes, pulled on a thick coat, picked up her electric torch and rushed out of her room and down the stairs. She had blamed Miss Springer for not obtaining support before going out to investigate, but it never occurred to her to do so. She was only eager to get out to the Pavilion and find out who the intruder was. She did pause to pick up a weapon—not perhaps a very good one, but a weapon of kinds, and then she was out of the side door and following quickly along the path through the shrubbery. She was out of breath, but completely resolute. Only when she got at last to the door, did she slacken up and take care to move softly. The door was slightly ajar. She pushed it further open and looked in….

II

At about the time when Miss Chadwick was rising from bed in search of aspirin, Ann Shapland, looking very attractive in a black dance frock, was sitting at a table in Le Nid Sauvage eating Supreme of Chicken and smiling at the young man opposite her. Dear Dennis, thought Ann to herself, always so exactly the same. It is what I simply couldn’t bear if I married him. He is rather a pet, all the same. Aloud she remarked:

“What fun this is, Dennis. Such a glorious change.”

“How is the new job?” said Dennis.

“Well, actually, I’m rather enjoying it.”

“Doesn’t seem to me quite your sort of thing.”

Ann laughed. “I’d be hard put to it to say what is my sort of thing. I like variety, Dennis.”

“I never can see why you gave up your job with old Sir Mervyn Todhunter.”

“Well, chiefly because of Sir Mervyn Todhunter. The attention he bestowed on me was beginning to annoy his wife. And it’s part of my policy never to annoy wives. They can do you a lot of harm, you know.”

“Jealous cats,” said Dennis.

“Oh no, not really,” said Ann. “I’m rather on the wives’ side. Anyway I liked Lady Todhunter much better than old Mervyn. Why are you surprised at my present job?”

“Oh, a school. You’re not scholastically minded at all, I should have said.”

“I’d hate to teach in a school. I’d hate to be penned up. Herded with a lot of women. But the work as the secretary of a school like Meadowbank is rather fun. It really is a unique place, you know. And Miss Bulstrode’s unique. She’s really something, I can tell you. Her steel-grey eye goes through you and sees your innermost secrets. And she keeps you on your toes. I’d hate to make a mistake in any letters I’d taken down for her. Oh yes, she’s certainly something.”

“I wish you’d get tired of all these jobs,” said Dennis. “It’s quite time, you know, Ann, that you stopped all this racketing about with jobs here and jobs there and—and settled down.”

“You are sweet, Dennis,” said Ann in a noncommittal manner.

“We could have quite fun, you know,” said Dennis.

"I daresay," said Ann, "but I'm not ready yet. And anyway, you know, there's my mamma."

"Yes, I was—going to talk to you about that."

"About my mamma? What were you going to say?"

"Well, Ann, you know I think you're wonderful. The way you get an interesting job and then you chuck it all up and go home to her."

"Well, I have to now and again when she gets a really bad attack."

"I know. As I say, I think it's wonderful of you. But all the same there are places, you know, very good places nowadays where—where people like your mother are well looked after and all that sort of thing. Not really loony bins."

"And which cost the earth," said Ann.

"No, no, not necessarily. Why, even under the Health Scheme—"

A bitter note crept into Ann's voice. "Yes, I daresay it will come to that one day. But in the meantime I've got a nice old pussy who lives with Mother and who can cope normally. Mother is quite reasonable most of the time—And when she—isn't, I come back and lend a hand."

"She's—she isn't—she's never—?"

"Are you going to say violent, Dennis? You've got an extraordinarily lurid imagination. No. My dear mamma is never violent. She just gets fuddled. She forgets where she is and who she is and wants to go for long walks, and then as like as not she'll jump into a train or a bus and take off somewhere and—well, it's all very difficult, you see. Sometimes it's too much for one person to cope with. But she's quite happy, even when she is fuddled. And sometimes quite funny about it. I remember her saying: 'Ann, darling, it really is very embarrassing. I knew I was going to Tibet and there I was sitting in that hotel in Dover with no idea how to get there. Then I thought why was I going to Tibet? And I thought I'd better come home. Then I couldn’t remember how long ago it was when I left home. It makes it very embarrassing, dear, when you can’t quite remember things.’ Mummy was really very funny over it all, you know. I mean she quite sees the humorous side herself.”

“I’ve never actually met her,” Dennis began.

“I don’t encourage people to meet her,” said Ann. “That’s the one thing I think you can do for your people. Protect them from—well, curiosity and pity.”

“It’s not curiosity, Ann.”

“No, I don’t think it would be that with you. But it would be pity. I don’t want that.”

“I can see what you mean.”

“But if you think I mind giving up jobs from time to time and going home for an indefinite period, I don’t,” said Ann. “I never meant to get embroiled in anything too deeply. Not even when I took my first post after my secretarial training. I thought the thing was to get really good at the job. Then if you’re really good you can pick and choose your posts. You see different places and you see different kinds of life. At the moment I’m seeing school life. The best school in England seen from within! I shall stay there, I expect, about a year and a half.”

“You never really get caught up in things, do you, Ann?”

“No,” said Ann thoughtfully, “I don’t think I do. I think I’m one of those people who is a born observer. More like a commentator on the radio.”

“You’re so detached,” said Dennis gloomily. “You don’t really care about anything or anyone.”

“I expect I shall some day,” said Ann encouragingly.

“I do understand more or less how you’re thinking and feeling.”

“I doubt it,” said Ann.

“Anyway, I don’t think you’ll last a year. You’ll get fed up with all those women,” said Dennis.

“There’s a very good-looking gardener,” said Ann. She laughed when she saw Dennis’s expression. “Cheer up, I’m only trying to make you jealous.”

“What’s this about one of the mistresses having been killed?”

“Oh, that.” Ann’s face became serious and thoughtful.

“That’s odd, Dennis. Very odd indeed. It was the Games Mistress. You know the type. I-am-a-plain-Games Mistress. I think there’s a lot more behind it than has come out yet.”

“Well, don’t you get mixed up in anything unpleasant.”

“That’s easy to say. I’ve never had any chance at displaying my talents as a sleuth. I think I might be rather good at it.”

“Now, Ann.”

“Darling, I’m not going to trail dangerous criminals. I’m just going to—well, make a few logical deductions. Why and who. And what for? That sort of thing. I’ve come across one piece of information that’s rather interesting.”

“Ann!”

“Don’t look so agonized. Only it doesn’t seem to link up with anything,” said Ann thoughtfully. “Up to a point it all fits in very well. And then, suddenly, it doesn’t.” She added cheerfully, “Perhaps there’ll be a second murder, and that will clarify things a little.”

It was at exactly that moment that Miss Chadwick pushed open the Sports Pavilion door.

Fifteen

MURDER REPEATS ITSELF

“Come along,” said Inspector Kelsey, entering the room with a grim face. “There’s been another.”

“Another what?” Adam looked up sharply.

“Another murder,” said Inspector Kelsey. He led the way out of the room and Adam followed him. They had been sitting in the latter’s room drinking beer and discussing various probabilities when Kelsey had been summoned to the telephone.

“Who is it?” demanded Adam, as he followed Inspector Kelsey down the stairs.

“Another mistress—Miss Vansittart.”

“Where?”

“In the Sports Pavilion.”

“The Sports Pavilion again,” said Adam. “What is there about this Sports Pavilion?”

“You’d better give it the once-over this time,” said Inspector Kelsey. “Perhaps your technique of searching may be more successful than ours has been. There must be something about that Sports Pavilion or why should everyone get killed there?”

He and Adam got into his car. “I expect the doctor will be there ahead of us. He hasn’t so far to go.”

It was, Kelsey thought, like a bad dream repeating itself as he entered the brilliantly lighted Sports Pavilion. There, once again, was a body with the doctor kneeling beside it. Once again the doctor rose from his knees and got up.

“Killed about half an hour ago,” he said. “Forty minutes at most.”

“Who found her?” said Kelsey.

One of his men spoke up. “Miss Chadwick.”

“That’s the old one, isn’t it?”

“Yes. She saw a light, came out here, and found her dead. She stumbled back to the house and more or less went into hysterics. It was the matron who telephoned, Miss Johnson.”

“Right,” said Kelsey. “How was she killed? Shot again?”

The doctor shook his head. “No. Slugged on the back of the head, this time. Might have been a cosh or a sandbag. Something of that kind.”

A golf club with a steel head was lying near the door. It was the only thing that looked remotely disorderly in the place.

“What about that?” said Kelsey, pointing. “Could she have been hit with that?”

The doctor shook his head. “Impossible. There’s no mark on her. No, it was definitely a heavy rubber cosh or a sandbag, something of that sort.”

“Something—professional?”

“Probably, yes. Whoever it was, didn’t mean to make any noise this time. Came up behind her and slugged her on the back of the head. She fell forward and probably never knew what hit her.”

“What was she doing?”

“She was probably kneeling down,” said the doctor. “Kneeling in front of this locker.”

The Inspector went up to the locker and looked at it. “That’s the girl’s name on it, I presume,” he said. “Shaista—let me see, that’s the—that’s the Egyptian girl, isn’t it? Her Highness Princess Shaista.” He turned to Adam. “It seems to tie in, doesn’t it? Wait a minute—that’s the girl they reported this evening as missing?”

“That’s right, sir,” said the Sergeant. “A car called for her here, supposed to have been sent by her uncle who’s staying at Claridge’s in London. She got into it and drove off.”

“No reports come in?”

“Not as yet, sir. Got a network out. And the Yard is on it.”

“A nice simple way of kidnapping anyone,” said Adam. “No struggle, no cries. All you’ve got to know is that the girl’s expecting a car to fetch her and all you’ve got to do is to look like a high-class chauffeur and arrive there before the other car does. The girl will step in without a second thought and you can drive off without her suspecting in the least what’s happening to her.”

“No abandoned car found anywhere?” asked Kelsey.

“We’ve had no news of one,” said the Sergeant. “The Yard’s on it now as I said,” he added, “and the Special Branch.”

“May mean a bit of a political schemozzle,” said the Inspector. “I don’t suppose for a minute they’ll be able to take her out of the country.”

“What do they want to kidnap her for anyway?” asked the doctor.

“Goodness knows,” said Kelsey gloomily. “She told me she was afraid of being kidnapped and I’m ashamed to say I thought she was just showing off.”

“I thought so, too, when you told me about it,” said Adam.

“The trouble is we don’t know enough,” said Kelsey. “There are far too many loose ends.” He looked around. “Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything more that I can do here. Get on with the usual stuff—photographs, fingerprints, etc. I'd better go along to the house."

At the house he was received by Miss Johnson. She was shaken but preserved her self-control.

"It's terrible, Inspector," she said. "Two of our mistresses killed. Poor Miss Chadwick's in a dreadful state."

"I'd like to see her as soon as I can."

"The doctor gave her something and she's much calmer now. Shall I take you to her?"

"Yes, in a minute or two. First of all, just tell me what you can about the last time you saw Miss Vansittart."

"I haven't seen her at all today," said Miss Johnson. "I've been away all day. I arrived back here just before eleven and went straight up to my room. I went to bed."

"You didn't happen to look out of your window towards the Sports Pavilion?"

"No. No, I never thought of it. I'd spent the day with my sister whom I hadn't seen for some time and my mind was full of home news. I took a bath and went to bed and read a book, and I turned off the light and went to sleep. The next thing I knew was when Miss Chadwick burst in, looking as white as a sheet and shaking all over."

"Was Miss Vansittart absent today?"

"No, she was here. She was in charge. Miss Bulstrode's away."

"Who else was here, of the mistresses, I mean?"

Miss Johnson considered a moment. "Miss Vansittart, Miss Chadwick, the French mistress, Mademoiselle Blanche, Miss Rowan."

“I see. Well, I think you’d better take me to Miss Chadwick now.”

Miss Chadwick was sitting in a chair in her room. Although the night was a warm one the electric fire had been turned on and a rug was wrapped round her knees. She turned a ghastly face towards Inspector Kelsey.

“She’s dead—she is dead? There’s no chance that—that she might come round?”

Kelsey shook his head slowly.

“It’s so awful,” said Miss Chadwick, “with Miss Bulstrode away.” She burst into tears. “This will ruin the school,” she said. “This will ruin Meadowbank. I can’t bear it—I really can’t bear it.”

Kelsey sat down beside her. “I know,” he said sympathetically, “I know. It’s been a terrible shock to you, but I want you to be brave, Miss Chadwick, and tell me all you know. The sooner we can find out who did it, the less trouble and publicity there will be.”

“Yes, yes, I can see that. You see, I—I went to bed early because I thought it would be nice for once to have a nice long night. But I couldn’t go to sleep. I was worrying.”

“Worrying about the school?”

“Yes. And about Shaista being missing. And then I began thinking of Miss Springer and whether—whether her murder would affect the parents, and whether perhaps they wouldn’t send their girls back here next term. I was so terribly upset for Miss Bulstrode. I mean, she’s made this place. It’s been such a fine achievement.”

“I know. Now go on telling me—you were worried, and you couldn’t sleep?”

“No, I counted sheep and everything. And then I got up and took some aspirin and when I’d taken it I just happened to draw back the curtains from the window. I don’t quite know why. I suppose because I’d been thinking about Miss Springer. Then you see, I saw … I saw a light there.”

“What kind of a light?”

“Well, a sort of dancing light. I mean—I think it must have been a torch. It was just like the light that Miss Johnson and I saw before.”

“It was just the same, was it?”

“Yes. Yes, I think so. Perhaps a little feebler, but I don’t know.”

“Yes. And then?”

“And then,” said Miss Chadwick, her voice suddenly becoming more resonant, “I was determined that this time I would see who it was out there and what they were doing. So I got up and pulled on my coat and my shoes, and I rushed out of the house.”

“You didn’t think of calling anyone else?”

“No. No, I didn’t. You see I was in such a hurry to get there, I was so afraid the person—whoever it was—would go away.”

“Yes. Go on, Miss Chadwick.”

“So I went as fast as I could. I went up to the door and just before I got there I went on tiptoe so that—so that I should be able to look in and nobody would hear me coming. I got there. The door was not shut—just ajar and I pushed it very slightly open. I looked round it and—and there she was. Fallen forward on her face, dead….”

She began to shake all over.

“Yes, yes, Miss Chadwick, it’s all right. By the way, there was a golf club out there. Did you take it out? Or did Miss Vansittart?”

“A golf club?” said Miss Chadwick vaguely. “I can’t remember—Oh, yes, I think I picked it up in the hall. I took it out with me in case—well, in case I should have to use it. When I saw Eleanor I suppose I just dropped it. Then I got back to the house somehow and I found Miss Johnson—Oh! I can’t bear it. I can’t bear it—this will be the end of Meadowbank—”

Miss Chadwick’s voice rose hysterically. Miss Johnson came forward.

“To discover two murders is too much of a strain for anyone,” said Miss Johnson. “Certainly for anyone her age. You don’t want to ask her anymore, do you?”

Inspector Kelsey shook his head.

As he was going downstairs, he noticed a pile of old-fashioned sandbags with buckets in an alcove. Dating from the war, perhaps, but the uneasy thought occurred to him that it needn’t have been a professional with a cosh who had slugged Miss Vansittart. Someone in the building, someone who hadn’t wished to risk the sound of a shot a second time, and who, very likely, had disposed of the incriminating pistol after the last murder, could have helped themselves to an innocent-looking but lethal weapon—and possibly even replaced it tidily afterwards!

Sixteen

RIDDLE OF THE SPORTS PAVILION

I

“My head is bloody but unbowed,” said Adam to himself.

He was looking at Miss Bulstrode. He had never, he thought, admired a woman more. She sat, cool and unmoved, with her life-work falling in ruins about her.

From time to time telephone calls came through announcing that yet another pupil was being removed.

Finally Miss Bulstrode had taken her decision. Excusing herself to the police officers, she summoned Ann Shapland, and dictated a brief statement. The school would be closed until the end of term. Parents who found it inconvenient to have their children home, were welcome to leave them in her care and their education would be continued.

“You’ve got the list of parents’ names and addresses? And their telephone numbers?”

“Yes, Miss Bulstrode.”

“Then start on the telephone. After that see a typed notice goes to everyone.”

“Yes, Miss Bulstrode.”

On her way out, Ann Shapland paused near the door.

She flushed and her words came with a rush.

“Excuse me, Miss Bulstrode. It’s not my business—but isn’t it a pity to—to be premature? I mean—after the first panic, when people have had time to think—surely they won't want to take the girls away. They'll be sensible and think better of it."

Miss Bulstrode looked at her keenly.

"You think I'm accepting defeat too easily?"

Ann flushed.

"I know—you think it's cheek. But—but, well then, yes, I do."

"You're a fighter, child, I'm glad to see. But you're quite wrong. I'm not accepting defeat. I'm going on my knowledge of human nature. Urge people to take their children away, force it on them—and they won't want to nearly so much. They'll think up reasons for letting them remain. Or at the worst they'll decide to let them come back next term—if there is a next term," she added grimly.

She looked at Inspector Kelsey.

"That's up to you," she said. "Clear these murders up—catch whoever is responsible for them—and we'll be all right."

Inspector Kelsey looked unhappy. He said: "We're doing our best."

Ann Shapland went out.

"Competent girl," said Miss Bulstrode. "And loyal."

This was in the nature of a parenthesis. She pressed her attack.

"Have you absolutely no idea of who killed two of my mistresses in the Sports Pavilion? You ought to, by this time. And this kidnapping on top of everything else. I blame myself there. The girl talked about someone wanting to kidnap her. I thought, God forgive me, she was making herself important. I see now that there must have been something behind it. Someone must have hinted, or warned—one doesn't know which—" She broke off, resuming: "You've no news of any kind?"

“Not yet. But I don’t think you need worry too much about that. It’s been passed to the C.I.D. The Special Branch is on to it, too. They ought to find her within twenty-four hours, thirty-six at most. There are advantages in this being an island. All the ports, airports, etc., are alerted. And the police in every district are keeping a lookout. It’s actually easy enough to kidnap anyone—it’s keeping them hidden that’s the problem. Oh, we’ll find her.”

“I hope you’ll find her alive,” said Miss Bulstrode grimly. “We seem to be up against someone who isn’t too scrupulous about human life.”

“They wouldn’t have troubled to kidnap her if they’d meant to do away with her,” said Adam. “They could have done that here easily enough.”

He felt that the last words were unfortunate. Miss Bulstrode gave him a look.

“So it seems,” she said dryly.

The telephone rang. Miss Bulstrode took up the receiver.

“Yes?”

She motioned to Inspector Kelsey.

“It’s for you.”

Adam and Miss Bulstrode watched him as he took the call. He grunted, jotted down a note or two, said finally: “I see. Alderton Priors. That’s Wallshire. Yes, we’ll cooperate. Yes, Super. I’ll carry on here, then.”

He put down the receiver and stayed a moment lost in thought. Then he looked up.

“His Excellency got a ransom note this morning. Typed on a new Corona. Postmark Portsmouth. Bet that’s a blind.”

“Where and how?” asked Adam.

"Crossroads two miles north of Alderton Priors. That's a bit of bare moorland. Envelope containing money to be put under stone behind A.A. box there at 2 a.m. tomorrow morning."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand." He shook his head. "Sounds amateurish to me."

"What are you going to do?" asked Miss Bulstrode.

Inspector Kelsey looked at her. He was a different man. Official reticence hung about him like a cloak.

"The responsibility isn't mine, madam," he said. "We have our methods."

"I hope they're successful," said Miss Bulstrode.

"Ought to be easy," said Adam.

"Amateurish?" said Miss Bulstrode, catching at a word they had used. "I wonder…."

Then she said sharply:

"What about my staff? What remains of it, that is to say? Do I trust them, or don't I?"

As Inspector Kelsey hesitated, she said,

"You're afraid that if you tell me who is not cleared, I should show it in my manner to them. You're wrong. I shouldn't."

"I don't think you would," said Kelsey. "But I can't afford to take any chances. It doesn't look, on the face of it, as though any of your staff can be the person we're looking for. That is, not so far as we've been able to check up on them. We've paid special attention to those who are new this term—that is Mademoiselle Blanche, Miss Springer and your secretary, Miss Shapland. Miss Shapland's past is completely corroborated. She's the daughter of a retired general, she has held the posts she says she did and her former employers vouch for her. In addition she has an alibi for last night. When Miss Vansittart was killed, Miss Shapland was with a Mr. Dennis Rathbone at a nightclub. They’re both well known there, and Mr. Rathbone has an excellent character. Mademoiselle Blanche’s antecedents have also been checked. She has taught at a school in the north of England and at two schools in Germany, and has been given an excellent character. She is said to be a first-class teacher.”

“Not by our standards,” sniffed Miss Bulstrode.

“Her French background has also been checked. As regards Miss Springer, things are not quite so conclusive. She did her training where she says, but there have been gaps since in her periods of employment which are not fully accounted for.

“Since, however, she was killed,” added the Inspector, “that seems to exonerate her.”

“I agree,” said Miss Bulstrode dryly, “that both Miss Springer and Miss Vansittart are hors de combat as suspects. Let us talk sense. Is Mademoiselle Blanche, in spite of her blameless background, still a suspect merely because she is still alive?”

“She could have done both murders. She was here, in the building, last night,” said Kelsey. “She says she went to bed early and slept and heard nothing until the alarm was given. There’s no evidence to the contrary. We’ve got nothing against her. But Miss Chadwick says definitely that she’s sly.”

Miss Bulstrode waved that aside impatiently.

“Miss Chadwick always finds the French Mistresses sly. She’s got a thing about them.” She looked at Adam. “What do you think?”

“I think she pries,” said Adam slowly. “It may be just natural inquisitiveness. It may be something more. I can’t make up my mind. She doesn’t look to me like a killer, but how does one know?”

“That’s just it,” said Kelsey. “There is a killer here, a ruthless killer who has killed twice—but it’s very hard to believe that it’s one of the staff. Miss Johnson was with her sister last night at Limeston on Sea, and anyway she’s been with you seven years. Miss Chadwick’s been with you since you started. Both of them, anyway, are clear of Miss Springer’s death. Miss Rich has been with you over a year and was staying last night at the Alton Grange Hotel, twenty miles away, Miss Blake was with friends at Littleport, Miss Rowan has been with you for a year and has a good background. As for your servants, frankly I can’t see any of them as murderers. They’re all local, too….”

Miss Bulstrode nodded pleasantly.

“I quite agree with your reasoning. It doesn’t leave much, does it? So—” She paused and fixed an accusing eye on Adam. “It looks really—as though it must be you.”

His mouth opened in astonishment.

“On the spot,” she mused. “Free to come and go … Good story to account for your presence here. Background OK but you could be a double-crosser, you know.”

Adam recovered himself.

“Really, Miss Bulstrode,” he said admiringly, “I take off my hat to you. You think of everything!”

II

“Good gracious!” cried Mrs. Sutcliffe at the breakfast table. “Henry!”

She had just unfolded her newspaper.

The width of the table was between her and her husband since her weekend guests had not yet put in an appearance for the meal.

Mr. Sutcliffe, who had opened his paper to the financial page, and was absorbed in the unforeseen movements of certain shares, did not reply.

“Henry!”

The clarion call reached him. He raised a startled face.

“What’s the matter, Joan?”

“The matter? Another murder! At Meadowbank! At Jennifer’s school.”

“What? Here, let me see!”

Disregarding his wife’s remark that it would be in his paper, too, Mr. Sutcliffe leant across the table and snatched the sheet from his wife’s grasp.

“Miss Eleanor Vansittart … Sports Pavilion … same spot where Miss Springer, the Games Mistress … hm … hm….”

“I can’t believe it!” Mrs. Sutcliffe was wailing. “Meadowbank. Such an exclusive school. Royalty there and everything….”

Mr. Sutcliffe crumpled up the paper and threw it down on the table.

“Only one thing to be done,” he said. “You get over there right away and take Jennifer out of it.”

“You mean take her away—altogether?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“You don’t think that would be a little too drastic? After Rosamond being so good about it and managing to get her in?”

“You won’t be the only one taking your daughter away! Plenty of vacancies soon at your precious Meadowbank.”

“Oh, Henry, do you think so?”

“Yes, I do. Something badly wrong there. Take Jennifer away today.”

“Yes—of course—I suppose you’re right. What shall we do with her?”

“Send her to a secondary modern somewhere handy. They don’t have murders there.”

“Oh, Henry, but they do. Don’t you remember? There was a boy who shot the science master at one. It was in last week’s News of the World.”

“I don’t know what England’s coming to,” said Mr. Sutcliffe.

Disgusted, he threw his napkin on the table and strode from the room.

III

Adam was alone in the Sports Pavilion … His deft fingers were turning over the contents of the lockers. It was unlikely that he would find anything where the police had failed but after all, one could never be sure. As Kelsey had said every department’s technique varied a little.

What was there that linked this expensive modern building with sudden and violent death? The idea of a rendezvous was out. No one would choose to keep a rendezvous a second time in the same place where murder had occurred. It came back to it, then, that there was something here that someone was looking for. Hardly a cache of jewels. That seemed ruled out. There could be no secret hiding place, false drawers, spring catches, etc. And the contents of the lockers were pitifully simple. They had their secrets, but they were the secrets of school life. Photographs of pin up heroes, packets of cigarettes, an occasional unsuitable cheap paperback. Especially he returned to Shaista’s locker. It was while bending over that that Miss Vansittart had been killed. What had Miss Vansittart expected to find there? Had she found it? Had her killer taken it from her dead hand and then slipped out of the building in the nick of time to miss being discovered by Miss Chadwick?

In that case it was no good looking. Whatever it was, was gone.

The sound of footsteps outside aroused him from his thoughts. He was on his feet and lighting a cigarette in the middle of the floor when Julia Upjohn appeared in the doorway, hesitating a little.

“Anything you want, miss?” asked Adam.

“I wondered if I could have my tennis racquet.”

“Don’t see why not,” said Adam. “Police constable left me here,” he explained mendaciously. “Had to drop back to the station for something. Told me to stop here while he was away.”

“To see if he came back, I suppose,” said Julia.

“The police constable?”

“No. I mean, the murderer. They do, don’t they? Come back to the scene of the crime. They have to! It’s a compulsion.”

“You may be right,” said Adam. He looked up at the serried rows of racquets in their presses. “Whereabouts is yours?”

“Under U,” said Julia. “Right at the far end. We have our names on them,” she explained, pointing out the adhesive tape as he handed the racquet to her.

“Seen some service,” said Adam. “But been a good racquet once.”

“Can I have Jennifer Sutcliffe’s too?” asked Julia.

“New,” said Adam appreciatively, as he handed it to her.

“Brand new,” said Julia. “Her aunt sent it to her only the other day.”

“Lucky girl.”

“She ought to have a good racquet. She’s very good at tennis. Her backhand’s come on like anything this term.” She looked round. “Don’t you think he will come back?”

Adam was a moment or two getting it.

“Oh. The murderer? No, I don’t think it’s really likely. Bit risky, wouldn’t it be?”

“You don’t think murderers feel they have to?”

“Not unless they’ve left something behind.”

“You mean a clue? I’d like to find a clue. Have the police found one?”

“They wouldn’t tell me.”

“No. I suppose they wouldn’t … Are you interested in crime?”

She looked at him inquiringly. He returned her glance. There was, as yet, nothing of the woman in her. She must be of much the same age as Shaista, but her eyes held nothing but interested inquiry.

“Well—I suppose—up to a point—we all are.”

Julia nodded in agreement.

“Yes. I think so, too … I can think of all sorts of solutions—but most of them are very far-fetched. It’s rather fun, though.”

“You weren’t fond of Miss Vansittart?”

“I never really thought about her. She was all right. A bit like the Bull—Miss Bulstrode—but not really like her. More like an understudy in a theatre. I didn’t mean it was fun she was dead. I’m sorry about that.”

She walked out holding the two racquets.

Adam remained looking round the Pavilion.

“What the hell could there ever have been here?” he muttered to himself.

IV

“Good lord,” said Jennifer, allowing Julia’s forehand drive to pass her. “There’s Mummy.”

The two girls turned to stare at the agitated figure of Mrs. Sutcliffe, shepherded by Miss Rich, rapidly arriving and gesticulating as she did so.

“More fuss, I suppose,” said Jennifer resignedly. “It’s the murder. You are lucky, Julia, that your mother’s safely on a bus in the Caucasus.”

“There’s still Aunt Isabel.”

“Aunts don’t mind in the same way.”

“Hallo, Mummy,” she added, as Mrs. Sutcliffe arrived.

“You must come and pack your things, Jennifer. I’m taking you back with me.”

“Back home?”

“Yes.”

“But—you don’t mean altogether? Not for good?”

“Yes. I do.”

“But you can’t—really. My tennis has come on like anything. I’ve got a very good chance of winning the singles and Julia and I might win the doubles, though I don’t think it’s very likely.”

“You’re coming home with me today.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask questions.”

“I suppose it’s because of Miss Springer and Miss Vansittart being murdered. But no one’s murdered any of the girls. I’m sure they wouldn’t want to. And Sports Day is in three weeks' time. I think I shall win the Long Jump and I've a good chance for the Hurdling."

"Don't argue with me, Jennifer. You're coming back with me today. Your father insists."

"But, Mummy—"

Arguing persistently Jennifer moved towards the house by her mother's side.

Suddenly she broke away and ran back to the tennis court.

"Good-bye, Julia. Mummy seems to have got the wind up thoroughly. Daddy, too, apparently. Sickening, isn't it? Good-bye, I'll write to you."

"I'll write to you, too, and tell you all that happens."

"I hope they don't kill Chaddy next. I'd rather it was Mademoiselle Blanche, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. She's the one we could spare best. I say, did you notice how black Miss Rich was looking?"

"She hasn't said a word. She's furious at Mummy coming and taking me away."

"Perhaps she'll stop her. She's very forceful, isn't she? Not like anyone else."

"She reminds me of someone," said Jennifer.

"I don't think she's a bit like anybody. She always seems to be quite different."

"Oh yes. She is different. I meant in appearance. But the person I knew was quite fat."

"I can't imagine Miss Rich being fat."

“Jennifer … ” called Mrs. Sutcliffe.

“I do think parents are trying,” said Jennifer crossly. “Fuss, fuss, fuss. They never stop. I do think you’re lucky to—”

“I know. You said that before. But just at the moment, let me tell you, I wish Mummy were a good deal nearer, and not on a bus in Anatolia.”

“Jennifer … ”

“Coming….”

Julia walked slowly in the direction of the Sports Pavilion. Her steps grew slower and slower and finally she stopped altogether. She stood, frowning, lost in thought.

The luncheon bell sounded, but she hardly heard it. She stared down at the racquet she was holding, moved a step or two along the path, then wheeled round and marched determinedly towards the house. She went in by the front door, which was not allowed, and thereby avoided meeting any of the other girls. The hall was empty. She ran up the stairs to her small bedroom, looked round her hurriedly, then lifting the mattress on her bed, shoved the racquet flat beneath it. Then, rapidly smoothing her hair, she walked demurely downstairs to the dining room.

Seventeen

ALADDIN'S CAVE

I

The girls went up to bed that night more quietly than usual. For one thing their numbers were much depleted. At least thirty of them had gone home. The others reacted according to their several dispositions. Excitement, trepidation, a certain amount of giggling that was purely nervous in origin and there were some again who were merely quiet and thoughtful.

Julia Upjohn went up quietly amongst the first wave. She went into her room and closed the door. She stood there listening to the whispers, giggles, footsteps and goodnights. Then silence closed down—or a near silence. Faint voices echoed in the distance, and footsteps went to and fro to the bathroom.

There was no lock on the door. Julia pulled a chair against it, with the top of the chair wedged under the handle. That would give her warning if anyone should come in. But no one was likely to come in. It was strictly forbidden for the girls to go into each other's rooms, and the only mistress who did so was Miss Johnson, if one of the girls was ill or out of sorts.

Julia went to her bed, lifted up the mattress and groped under it. She brought out the tennis racquet and stood a moment holding it. She had decided to examine it now, and not later. A light in her room showing under the door might attract attention when all lights were supposed to be off. Now was the time when a light was normal for undressing and for reading in bed until half past ten if you wanted to do so.

She stood staring down at the racquet. How could there be anything hidden in a tennis racquet?

"But there must be," said Julia to herself. "There must. The burglary at Jennifer's home, the woman who came with that silly story about a new racquet….”

Only Jennifer would have believed that, thought Julia scornfully.

No, it was “new lamps for old” and that meant, like in Aladdin, that there was something about this particular tennis racquet. Jennifer and Julia had never mentioned to anyone that they had swopped racquets—or at least, she herself never had.

So really then, this was the racquet that everyone was looking for in the Sports Pavilion. And it was up to her to find out why! She examined it carefully. There was nothing unusual about it to look at. It was a good quality racquet, somewhat the worse for wear, but restrung and eminently usable. Jennifer had complained of the balance.

The only place you could possibly conceal anything in a tennis racquet was in the handle. You could, she supposed, hollow out the handle to make a hiding place. It sounded a little far-fetched but it was possible. And if the handle had been tampered with, that probably would upset the balance.

There was a round of leather with lettering on it, the lettering almost worn away. That of course was only stuck on. If one removed that? Julia sat down at her dressing table and attacked it with a penknife and presently managed to pull the leather off. Inside was a round of thin wood. It didn’t look quite right. There was a join all round it. Julia dug in her penknife. The blade snapped. Nail scissors were more effective. She succeeded at last in prising it out. A mottled red and blue substance now showed. Julia poked it and enlightenment came to her. Plasticine! But surely handles of tennis racquets didn’t normally contain plasticine? She grasped the nail scissors firmly and began to dig out lumps of plasticine. The stuff was encasing something. Something that felt like buttons or pebbles.

She attacked the plasticine vigorously.

Something rolled out on the table—then another something. Presently there was quite a heap.

Julia leaned back and gasped.

She stared and stared and stared….

Liquid fire, red and green and deep blue and dazzling white….

In that moment, Julia grew up. She was no longer a child. She became a woman. A woman looking at jewels….

All sorts of fantastic snatches of thought raced through her brain. Aladdin’s cave … Marguerite and her casket of jewels … (They had been taken to Covent Garden to hear Faust last week) … Fatal stones … the Hope diamond … Romance … herself in a black velvet gown with a flashing necklace round her throat….

She sat and gloated and dreamed … She held the stones in her fingers and let them fall through in a rivulet of fire, a flashing stream of wonder and delight.

And then something, some slight sound perhaps, recalled her to herself.

She sat thinking, trying to use her common sense, deciding what she ought to do. That faint sound had alarmed her. She swept up the stones, took them to the washstand and thrust them into her sponge bag and rammed her sponge and nail brush down on top of them. Then she went back to the tennis racquet, forced the plasticine back inside it, replaced the wooden top and tried to gum down the leather on top again. It curled upwards, but she managed to deal with that by applying adhesive plaster the wrong way up in thin strips and then pressing the leather on to it.

It was done. The racquet looked and felt just as before, its weight hardly altered in feel. She looked at it and then cast it down carelessly on a chair.

She looked at her bed, neatly turned down and waiting. But she did not undress. Instead she sat listening. Was that a footstep outside?

Suddenly and unexpectedly she knew fear. Two people had been killed. If anyone knew what she had found, she would be killed.

There was a fairly heavy oak chest of drawers in the room. She managed to drag it in front of the door, wishing that it was the custom at Meadowbank to have keys in the locks. She went to the window, pulled up the top sash and bolted it. There was no tree growing near the window and no creepers. She doubted if it was possible for anyone to come in that way but she was not going to take any chances.

She looked at her small clock. Half past ten. She drew a deep breath and turned out the light. No one must notice anything unusual. She pulled back the curtain a little from the window. There was a full moon and she could see the door clearly. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed. In her hand she held the stoutest shoe she possessed.

"If anyone tries to come in," Julia said to herself, "I'll rap on the wall here as hard as I can. Mary King is next door and that will wake her up. And I'll scream—at the top of my voice. And then, if lots of people come, I'll say I had a nightmare. Anyone might have a nightmare after all the things that have been going on here."

She sat there and time passed. Then she heard it—a soft step along the passage. She heard it stop outside her door. A long pause and then she saw the handle slowly turning.

Should she scream? Not yet.

The door was pushed—just a crack, but the chest of drawers held it. That must have puzzled the person outside.

Another pause, and then there was a knock, a very gentle little knock, on the door.

Julia held her breath. A pause, and then the knock came again—but still soft and muted.

"I'm asleep," said Julia to herself. "I don't hear anything."

Who would come and knock on her door in the middle of the night? If it was someone who had a right to knock, they'd call out, rattle the handle, make a noise. But this person couldn’t afford to make a noise….

For a long time Julia sat there. The knock was not repeated, the handle stayed immovable. But Julia sat tense and alert.

She sat like that for a long time. She never knew herself how long it was before sleep overcame her. The school bell finally awoke her, lying in a cramped and uncomfortable heap on the edge of the bed.

II

After breakfast, the girls went upstairs and made their beds, then went down to prayers in the big hall and finally dispersed to various classrooms.

It was during that last exercise, when girls were hurrying in different directions, that Julia went into one classroom, out by a further door, joined a group hurrying round the house, dived behind a rhododendron, made a series of further strategic dives and arrived finally near the wall of the grounds where a lime tree had thick growth almost down to the ground. Julia climbed the tree with ease, she had climbed trees all her life. Completely hidden in the leafy branches, she sat, glancing from time to time at her watch. She was fairly sure she would not be missed for some time. Things were disorganized, two teachers were missing, and more than half the girls had gone home. That meant that all classes would have been reorganized, so nobody would be likely to observe the absence of Julia Upjohn until lunchtime and by then—

Julia looked at her watch again, scrambled easily down the tree to the level of the wall, straddled it and dropped neatly on the other side. A hundred yards away was a bus stop where a bus ought to arrive in a few minutes. It duly did so, and Julia hailed and boarded it, having by now abstracted a felt hat from inside her cotton frock and clapped it on her slightly dishevelled hair. She got out at the station and took a train to London.

In her room, propped up on the washstand, she had left a note addressed to Miss Bulstrode.

Dear Miss Bulstrode,

I have not been kidnapped or run away, so don’t worry. I will come back as soon as I can.

Yours very sincerely,

Julia Upjohn

III

At 228 Whitehouse Mansions, George, Hercule Poirot’s immaculate valet and manservant, opened the door and contemplated with some surprise a schoolgirl with a rather dirty face.

“Can I see M. Hercule Poirot, please?”

George took just a shade longer than usual to reply. He found the caller unexpected.

“Mr. Poirot does not see anyone without an appointment,” he said.

“I’m afraid I haven’t time to wait for that. I really must see him now. It is very urgent. It’s about some murders and a robbery and things like that.”

“I will ascertain,” said George, “if Mr. Poirot will see you.”

He left her in the hall and withdrew to consult his master.

“A young lady, sir, who wishes to see you urgently.”

“I daresay,” said Hercule Poirot. “But things do not arrange themselves as easily as that.”

“That is what I told her, sir.”

“What kind of a young lady?”

“Well, sir, she’s more of a little girl.”

“A little girl? A young lady? Which do you mean, Georges? They are really not the same.”

“I’m afraid you did not quite get my meaning sir. She is, I should say, a little girl—of school age, that is to say. But though her frock is dirty and indeed torn, she is essentially a young lady.”

“A social term. I see.”

“And she wishes to see you about some murders and a robbery.”

Poirot’s eyebrows went up.

“Some murders, and a robbery. Original. Show the little girl—the young lady—in.”

Julia came into the room with only the slightest trace of diffidence. She spoke politely and quite naturally.

“How do you do, M. Poirot. I am Julia Upjohn. I think you know a great friend of Mummy’s. Mrs. Summerhayes. We stayed with her last summer and she talked about you a lot.”

“Mrs. Summerhayes … ” Poirot’s mind went back to a village that climbed a hill and to a house on top of that hill. He recalled a charming freckled face, a sofa with broken springs, a large quantity of dogs, and other things both agreeable and disagreeable.

“Maureen Summerhayes,” he said. “Ah yes.”

“I call her Aunt Maureen, but she isn’t really an aunt at all. She told us how wonderful you’d been and saved a man who was in prison for murder, and when I couldn’t think of what to do and who to go to, I thought of you.”

“I am honoured,” said Poirot gravely.

He brought forward a chair for her.

"Now tell me," he said. "Georges, my servant, told me you wanted to consult me about a robbery and some murders—more than one murder, then?"

"Yes," said Julia. "Miss Springer and Miss Vansittart. And of course there's the kidnapping, too—but I don't think that's really my business."

"You bewilder me," said Poirot. "Where have all these exciting happenings taken place?"

"At my school—Meadowbank."

"Meadowbank," exclaimed Poirot. "Ah." He stretched out his hand to where the newspapers lay neatly folded beside him. He unfolded one and glanced over the front page, nodding his head.

"I begin to comprehend," he said. "Now tell me, Julia, tell me everything from the beginning."

Julia told him. It was quite a long story and a comprehensive one—but she told it clearly—with an occasional break as she went back over something she had forgotten.

She brought her story up to the moment when she had examined the tennis racquet in her bedroom last night.

"You see, I thought it was just like Aladdin—new lamps for old—and there must be something about that tennis racquet."

"And there was?"

"Yes."

Without any false modesty, Julia pulled up her skirt, rolled up her knicker leg nearly to her thigh and exposed what looked like a grey poultice attached by adhesive plaster to the upper part of her leg.

She tore off the strips of plaster, uttering an anguished "Ouch" as she did so, and freed the poultice which Poirot now perceived to be a packet enclosed in a portion of grey plastic sponge bag. Julia unwrapped it and without warning poured a heap of glittering stones on the table.

“Nom d’un nom d’un nom!” ejaculated Poirot in an awe-inspired whisper.

He picked them up, letting them run through his fingers.

“Nom d’un nom d’un nom! But they are real. Genuine.”

Julia nodded.

“I think they must be. People wouldn’t kill other people for them otherwise, would they? But I can understand people killing for these!”

And suddenly, as had happened last night, a woman looked out of the child’s eyes.

Poirot looked keenly at her and nodded.

“Yes—you understand—you feel the spell. They cannot be to you just pretty coloured playthings—more is the pity.”

“They’re jewels!” said Julia, in tones of ecstasy.

“And you found them, you say, in this tennis racquet?”

Julia finished her recital.

“And you have now told me everything?”

“I think so. I may, perhaps, have exaggerated a little here and there. I do exaggerate sometimes. Now Jennifer, my great friend, she’s the other way round. She can make the most exciting things sound dull.” She looked again at the shining heap. “M. Poirot, who do they really belong to?”

“It is probably very difficult to say. But they do not belong to either you or to me. We have to decide now what to do next.”

Julia looked at him in an expectant fashion.

"You leave yourself in my hands? Good."

Hercule Poirot closed his eyes.

Suddenly he opened them and became brisk.

"It seems that this is an occasion when I cannot, as I prefer, remain in my chair. There must be order and method, but in what you tell me, there is no order and method. That is because we have here many threads. But they all converge and meet at one place, Meadowbank. Different people, with different aims, and representing different interests—all converge at Meadowbank. So, I, too, go to Meadowbank. And as for you—where is your mother?"

"Mummy's gone in a bus to Anatolia."

"Ah, your mother has gone in a bus to Anatolia. Il ne manquait que ça! I perceive well that she might be a friend of Mrs. Summerhayes! Tell me, did you enjoy your visit with Mrs. Summerhayes?"

"Oh yes, it was great fun. She's got some lovely dogs."

"The dogs, yes, I well remember."

"They come in and out through all the windows—like in a pantomime."

"You are so right! And the food? Did you enjoy the food?"

"Well, it was a bit peculiar sometimes," Julia admitted.

"Peculiar, yes, indeed."

"But Aunt Maureen makes smashing omelettes."

"She makes smashing omelettes." Poirot's voice was happy. He sighed.

"Then Hercule Poirot has not lived in vain," he said. "It was I who taught your Aunt Maureen to make an omelette." He picked up the telephone receiver.

“We will now reassure your good schoolmistress as to your safety and announce my arrival with you at Meadowbank.”

“She knows I’m all right. I left a note saying I hadn’t been kidnapped.”

“Nevertheless, she will welcome further reassurance.”

In due course he was connected, and was informed that Miss Bulstrode was on the line.

“Ah, Miss Bulstrode? My name is Hercule Poirot. I have with me here your pupil Julia Upjohn. I propose to motor down with her immediately, and for the information of the police officer in charge of the case, a certain packet of some value has been safely deposited in the bank.”

He rang off and looked at Julia.

“You would like a sirop?” he suggested.

“Golden syrup?” Julia looked doubtful.

“No, a syrup of fruit juice. Blackcurrant, raspberry, groseille—that is, red currant?”

Julia settled for red currant.

“But the jewels aren’t in the bank,” she pointed out.

“They will be in a very short time,” said Poirot. “But for the benefit of anyone who listens in at Meadowbank, or who overhears, or who is told, it is as well to think they are already there and no longer in your possession. To obtain jewels from a bank requires time and organization. And I should very much dislike anything to happen to you, my child. I will admit that I have formed a high opinion of your courage and your resource.”

Julia looked pleased but embarrassed.

Eighteen

CONSULTATION

I

Hercule Poirot had prepared himself to beat down an insular prejudice that a headmistress might have against aged foreigners with pointed patent leather shoes and large moustaches. But he was agreeably surprised. Miss Bulstrode greeted him with cosmopolitan aplomb. She also, to his gratification, knew all about him.

“It was kind of you, M. Poirot,” she said, “to ring up so promptly and allay our anxiety. All the more so because that anxiety had hardly begun. You weren’t missed at lunch, Julia, you know,” she added, turning to the girl. “So many girls were fetched away this morning, and there were so many gaps at table, that half the school could have been missing, I think, without any apprehension being aroused. These are unusual circumstances,” she said, turning back to Poirot. “I assure you we would not be so slack normally. When I received your telephone call,” she went on, “I went to Julia’s room and found the note she had left.”

“I didn’t want you to think I’d been kidnapped, Miss Bulstrode,” said Julia.

“I appreciate that, but I think, Julia, that you might have told me what you were planning to do.”

“I thought I’d better not,” said Julia, and added unexpectedly, “Les oreilles ennemies nous écoutent.”

“Mademoiselle Blanche doesn’t seem to have done much to improve your accent yet,” said Miss Bulstrode, briskly. “But I’m not scolding you, Julia.” She looked from Julia to Poirot. “Now, if you please, I want to hear exactly what has happened.”

“You permit?” said Hercule Poirot. He stepped across the room, opened the door and looked out. He made an exaggerated gesture of shutting it. He returned beaming.

“We are alone,” he said mysteriously. “We can proceed.”

Miss Bulstrode looked at him, then she looked at the door, then she looked at Poirot again. Her eyebrows rose. He returned her gaze steadily. Very slowly Miss Bulstrode inclined her head. Then, resuming her brisk manner, she said, “Now then, Julia, let’s hear all about this.”

Julia plunged into her recital. The exchange of tennis racquets, the mysterious woman. And finally her discovery of what the racquet contained. Miss Bulstrode turned to Poirot. He nodded his head gently.

“Mademoiselle Julia has stated everything correctly,” he said. “I took charge of what she brought me. It is safely lodged in a bank. I think therefore that you need anticipate no further developments of an unpleasant nature here.”

“I see,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Yes, I see … ” She was quiet for a moment or two and then she said, “You think it wise for Julia to remain here? Or would it be better for her to go to her aunt in London?”

“Oh please,” said Julia, “do let me stay here.”

“You’re happy here then?” said Miss Bulstrode.

“I love it,” said Julia. “And besides, there have been such exciting things going on.”

“That is not a normal feature of Meadowbank,” said Miss Bulstrode, dryly.

“I think that Julia will be in no danger here now,” said Hercule Poirot. He looked again towards the door.

“I think I understand,” said Miss Bulstrode.

"But for all that," said Poirot, "there should be discretion. Do you understand discretion, I wonder?" he added, looking at Julia.

"M. Poirot means," said Miss Bulstrode, "that he would like you to hold your tongue about what you found. Not talk about it to the other girls. Can you hold your tongue?"

"Yes," said Julia.

"It is a very good story to tell to your friends," said Poirot. "Of what you found in a tennis racquet in the dead of night. But there are important reasons why it would be advisable that that story should not be told."

"I understand," said Julia.

"Can I trust you, Julia?" said Miss Bulstrode.

"You can trust me," said Julia. "Cross my heart."

Miss Bulstrode smiled. "I hope your mother will be home before long," she said.

"Mummy? Oh, I do hope so."

"I understand from Inspector Kelsey," said Miss Bulstrode, "that every effort is being made to get in touch with her. Unfortunately," she added, "Anatolian buses are liable to unexpected delays and do not always run to schedule."

"I can tell Mummy, can't I?" said Julia.

"Of course. Well, Julia, that's all settled. You'd better run along now."

Julia departed. She closed the door after her. Miss Bulstrode looked very hard at Poirot.

"I have understood you correctly, I think," she said. "Just now, you made a great parade of closing that door. Actually—you deliberately left it slightly open."

Poirot nodded.

"So that what we said could be overheard?"

"Yes—if there was anyone who wanted to overhear. It was a precaution of safety for the child—the news must get round that what she found is safely in a bank, and not in her possession."

Miss Bulstrode looked at him for a moment—then she pursed her lips grimly together.

"There's got to be an end to all this," she said.

II

"The idea is," said the Chief Constable, "that we try to pool our ideas and information. We are very glad to have you with us, M. Poirot," he added. "Inspector Kelsey remembers you well."

"It's a great many years ago," said Inspector Kelsey. "Chief Inspector Warrender was in charge of the case. I was a fairly raw sergeant, knowing my place."

"The gentleman called, for convenience's sake by us—Mr. Adam Goodman, is not known to you, M. Poirot, but I believe you do know his—his—er—chief. Special Branch," he added.

"Colonel Pikeaway?" said Hercule Poirot thoughtfully.

"Ah, yes it is some time since I have seen him. Is he still as sleepy as ever?" he asked Adam.

Adam laughed. "I see you know him all right, M. Poirot. I've never seen him wide-awake. When I do, I'll know that for once he isn't paying attention to what goes on."

"You have something there, my friend. It is well observed."

“Now,” said the Chief Constable, “let’s get down to things. I shan’t push myself forward or urge my own opinions. I’m here to listen to what the men who are actually working on the case know and think. There are a great many sides to all this, and one thing perhaps I ought to mention first of all. I’m saying this as a result of representations that have been made to me from—er—various quarters high up.” He looked at Poirot. “Let’s say,” he said, “that a little girl—a schoolgirl—came to you with a pretty tale of something she’d found in the hollowed-out handle of a tennis racquet. Very exciting for her. A collection, shall we say, of coloured stones, paste, good imitation—something of that kind—or even semi-precious stones which often look as attractive as the other kind. Anyway let’s say something that a child would be excited to find. She might even have exaggerated ideas of its value. That’s quite possible, don’t you think?” He looked very hard at Hercule Poirot.

“It seems to me eminently possible,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Good,” said the Chief Constable. “Since the person who brought these—er—coloured stones into the country did so quite unknowingly and innocently, we don’t want any question of illicit smuggling to arise.

“Then there is the question of our foreign policy,” he went on. “Things, I am led to understand, are rather—delicate just at present. When it comes to large interests in oil, mineral deposits, all that sort of thing, we have to deal with whatever government’s in power. We don’t want any awkward questions to arise. You can’t keep murder out of the Press, and murder hasn’t been kept out of the Press. But there’s been no mention of anything like jewels in connection with it. For the present, at any rate, there needn’t be.”

“I agree,” said Poirot. “One must always consider international complications.”

“Exactly,” said the Chief Constable. “I think I’m right in saying that the late ruler of Ramat was regarded as a friend of this country, and that the powers that be would like his wishes in respect of any property of his that might be in this country to be carried out. What that amounts to, I gather, nobody knows at present. If the new Government of Ramat is claiming certain property which they allege belongs to them, it will be much better if we know nothing about such property being in this country. A plain refusal would be tactless."

"One does not give plain refusals in diplomacy," said Hercule Poirot. "One says instead that such a matter shall receive the utmost attention but that at the moment nothing definite is known about any little—nest egg, say—that the late ruler of Ramat may have possessed. It may be still in Ramat, it may be in the keeping of a faithful friend of the late Prince Ali Yusuf, it may have been taken out of the country by half a dozen people, it may be hidden somewhere in the city of Ramat itself." He shrugged his shoulders. "One simply does not know."

The Chief Constable heaved a sigh. "Thank you," he said. "That's just what I mean." He went on, "M. Poirot, you have friends in very high quarters in this country. They put much trust in you. Unofficially they would like to leave a certain article in your hands if you do not object."

"I do not object," said Poirot. "Let us leave it at that. We have more serious things to consider, have we not?" He looked round at them. "Or perhaps you do not think so? But after all, what is three-quarters of a million or some such sum in comparison with human life?"

"You're right, M. Poirot," said the Chief Constable.

"You're right every time," said Inspector Kelsey. "What we want is a murderer. We shall be glad to have your opinion, M. Poirot," he added, "because it's largely a question of guess and guess again and your guess is as good as the next man's and sometimes better. The whole thing's like a snarl of tangled wool."

"That is excellently put," said Poirot, "one has to take up that snarl of wool and pull out the one colour that we seek, the colour of a murderer. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Then tell me, if it is not too tedious for you to indulge in repetition, all that is known so far."

He settled down to listen.

He listened to Inspector Kelsey, and he listened to Adam Goodman. He listened to the brief summing up of the Chief Constable. Then he leaned back, closed his eyes, and slowly nodded his head.

"Two murders," he said, "committed in the same place and roughly under the same conditions. One kidnapping. The kidnapping of a girl who might be the central figure of the plot. Let us ascertain first why she was kidnapped."

"I can tell you what she said herself," said Kelsey.

He did so, and Poirot listened.

"It does not make sense," he complained.

"That's what I thought at the time. As a matter of fact I thought she was just making herself important…."

"But the fact remains that she was kidnapped. Why?"

"There have been ransom demands," said Kelsey slowly, "but—" he paused.

"But they have been, you think, phoney? They have been sent merely to bolster up the kidnapping theory?"

"That's right. The appointments made weren't kept."

"Shaista, then, was kidnapped for some other reason. What reason?"

"So that she could be made to tell where the—er—valuables were hidden?" suggested Adam doubtfully.

Poirot shook his head.

"She did not know where they were hidden," he pointed out. "That at least, is clear. No, there must be something…."

His voice tailed off. He was silent, frowning, for a moment or two. Then he sat up, and asked a question.

"Her knees," he said. "Did you ever notice her knees?"

Adam stared at him in astonishment.

"No," he said. "Why should I?"

"There are many reasons why a man notices a girl's knees," said Poirot severely. "Unfortunately, you did not."

"Was there something odd about her knees? A scar? Something of that kind? I wouldn't know. They all wear stockings most of the time, and their skirts are just below knee length."

"In the swimming pool, perhaps?" suggested Poirot hopefully.

"Never saw her go in," said Adam. "Too chilly for her, I expect. She was used to a warm climate. What are you getting at? A scar? Something of that kind?"

"No, no, that is not it at all. Ah well, a pity."

He turned to the Chief Constable.

"With your permission, I will communicate with my old friend, the Préfet, at Geneva. I think he may be able to help us."

"About something that happened when she was at school there?"

"It is possible, yes. You do permit? Good. It is just a little idea of mine." He paused and went on: "By the way, there has been nothing in the papers about the kidnapping?"

"The Emir Ibrahim was most insistent."

“But I did notice a little remark in a gossip column. About a certain foreign young lady who had departed from school very suddenly. A budding romance, the columnist suggested? To be nipped in the bud if possible!”

“That was my idea,” said Adam. “It seemed a good line to take.”

“Admirable. So now we pass from kidnapping to something more serious. Murder. Two murders at Meadowbank.”

Nineteen

CONSULTATION CONTINUED

I

“Two murders at Meadowbank,” repeated Poirot thoughtfully.

“We’ve given you the facts,” said Kelsey. “If you’ve any ideas—”

“Why the Sports Pavilion?” said Poirot. “That was your question, wasn’t it?” he said to Adam. “Well, now we have the answer. Because in the Sports Pavilion there was a tennis racquet containing a fortune in jewels. Someone knew about that racquet. Who was it? It could have been Miss Springer herself. She was, so you all say, rather peculiar about that Sports Pavilion. Disliked people coming there—unauthorized people, that is to say. She seemed to be suspicious of their motives. Particularly was that so in the case of Mademoiselle Blanche.”

“Mademoiselle Blanche,” said Kelsey thoughtfully.

Hercule Poirot again spoke to Adam.

“You yourself considered Mademoiselle Blanche’s manner odd where it concerned the Sports Pavilion?”

“She explained,” said Adam. “She explained too much. I should never have questioned her right to be there if she had not taken so much trouble to explain it away.”

Poirot nodded.

“Exactly. That certainly gives one to think. But all we know is that Miss Springer was killed in the Sports Pavilion at one o’clock in the morning when she had no business to be there.”

He turned to Kelsey.

“Where was Miss Springer before she came to Meadowbank?”

“We don’t know,” said the Inspector. “She left her last place of employment,” he mentioned a famous school, “last summer. Where she has been since we do not know.” He added dryly: “There was no occasion to ask the question until she was dead. She has no near relatives, nor, apparently, any close friends.”

“She could have been in Ramat, then,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“I believe there was a party of schoolteachers out there at the time of the trouble,” said Adam.

“Let us say, then, that she was there, that in some way she learned about the tennis racquet. Let us assume that after waiting a short time to familiarize herself with the routine at Meadowbank she went out one night to the Sports Pavilion. She got hold of the racquet and was about to remove the jewels from their hiding place when—” he paused—“when someone interrupted her. Someone who had been watching her? Following her that evening? Whoever it was had a pistol—and shot her—but had no time to prise out the jewels, or to take the racquet away, because people were approaching the Sports Pavilion who had heard the shot.”

He stopped.

“You think that’s what happened?” asked the Chief Constable.

“I do not know,” said Poirot. “It is one possibility. The other is that that person with the pistol was there first, and was surprised by Miss Springer. Someone whom Miss Springer was already suspicious of. She was, you have told me, that kind of woman. A noser out of secrets.”

“And the other woman?” asked Adam.

Poirot looked at him. Then, slowly, he shifted his gaze to the other two men.

"You do not know," he said. "And I do not know. It could have been someone from outside—?"

His voice half asked a question.

Kelsey shook his head.

"I think not. We have sifted the neighbourhood very carefully. Especially, of course, in the case of strangers. There was a Madam Kolinsky staying nearby—known to Adam here. But she could not have been concerned in either murder."

"Then it comes back to Meadowbank. And there is only one method to arrive at the truth—elimination."

Kelsey sighed.

"Yes," he said. "That's what it amounts to. For the first murder, it's a fairly open field. Almost anybody could have killed Miss Springer. The exceptions are Miss Johnson and Miss Chadwick—and a child who had the earache. But the second murder narrows things down. Miss Rich, Miss Blake and Miss Shapland are out of it. Miss Rich was staying at the Alton Grange Hotel, twenty miles away, Miss Blake was at Littleport on Sea, Miss Shapland was in London at a nightclub, the Nid Sauvage, with Mr. Dennis Rathbone."

"And Miss Bulstrode was also away, I understand?"

Adam grinned. The Inspector and the Chief Constable looked shocked.

"Miss Bulstrode," said the Inspector severely, "was staying with the Duchess of Welsham."

"That eliminates Miss Bulstrode then," said Poirot gravely. "And leaves us—what?"

"Two members of the domestic staff who sleep in, Mrs. Gibbons and a girl called Doris Hogg. I can't consider either of them seriously. That leaves Miss Rowan and Mademoiselle Blanche."

"And the pupils, of course."

Kelsey looked startled.

"Surely you don't suspect them?"

"Frankly, no. But one must be exact."

Kelsey paid no attention to exactitude. He plodded on.

"Miss Rowan has been here over a year. She has a good record. We know nothing against her."

"So we come, then, to Mademoiselle Blanche. It is there that the journey ends."

There was a silence.

"There's no evidence," said Kelsey. "Her credentials seem genuine enough."

"They would have to be," said Poirot.

"She snooped," said Adam. "But snooping isn't evidence of murder."

"Wait a minute," said Kelsey, "there was something about a key. In our first interview with her—I'll look it up—something about the key of the Pavilion falling out of the door and she picked it up and forgot to replace it—walked out with it and Springer bawled her out."

"Whoever wanted to go out there at night and look for the racquet would have had to have a key to get in with," said Poirot. "For that, it would have been necessary to take an impression of the key."

"Surely," said Adam, "in that case she would never have mentioned the key incident to you."

"That doesn't follow," said Kelsey. "Springer might have talked about the key incident. If so, she might think it better to mention it in a casual fashion.”

“It is a point to be remembered,” said Poirot.

“It doesn’t take us very far,” said Kelsey.

He looked gloomily at Poirot.

“There would seem,” said Poirot, “(that is, if I have been informed correctly), one possibility. Julia Upjohn’s mother, I understand, recognized someone here on the first day of term. Someone whom she was surprised to see. From the context, it would seem likely that that someone was connected with foreign espionage. If Mrs. Upjohn definitely points out Mademoiselle as the person she recognized, then I think we could proceed with some assurance.”

“Easier said than done,” said Kelsey. “We’ve been trying to get in contact with Mrs. Upjohn, but the whole thing’s a headache! When the child said a bus, I thought she meant a proper coach tour, running to schedule, and a party all booked together. But that’s not it at all. Seems she’s just taking local buses to anyplace she happens to fancy! She’s not done it through Cook’s or a recognized travel agency. She’s all on her own, wandering about. What can you do with a woman like that? She might be anywhere. There’s a lot of Anatolia!”

“It makes it difficult, yes,” said Poirot.

“Plenty of nice coach tours,” said the Inspector in an injured voice. “All made easy for you—where you stop and what you see, and all-in fares so that you know exactly where you are.”

“But clearly, that kind of travel does not appeal to Mrs. Upjohn.”

“And in the meantime, here we are,” went on Kelsey. “Stuck! That Frenchwoman can walk out any moment she chooses. We’ve nothing on which we could hold her.”

Poirot shook his head.

“She will not do that.”

“You can’t be sure.”

“I am sure. If you have committed murder, you do not want to do anything out of character, that may draw attention to you. Mademoiselle Blanche will remain here quietly until the end of the term.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am sure I am right. And remember, the person whom Mrs. Upjohn saw, does not know that Mrs. Upjohn saw her. The surprise when it comes will be complete.”

Kelsey sighed.

“If that’s all we’ve got to go on—”

“There are other things. Conversation, for instance.”

“Conversation?”

“It is very valuable, conversation. Sooner or later, if one has something to hide, one says too much.”

“Gives oneself away?” The Chief Constable sounded sceptical.

“It is not quite so simple as that. One is guarded about the thing one is trying to hide. But often one says too much about other things. And there are other uses for conversation. There are the innocent people who know things, but are unaware of the importance of what they know. And that reminds me—”

He rose to his feet.

“Excuse me, I pray. I must go and demand of Miss Bulstrode if there is someone here who can draw.”

“Draw?”

"Draw."

"Well," said Adam, as Poirot went out. "First girls' knees, and now draughtsmanship! What next, I wonder?"

II

Miss Bulstrode answered Poirot's questions without evincing any surprise.

"Miss Laurie is our visiting Drawing Mistress," she said briskly. "But she isn't here today. What do you want her to draw for you?" she added in a kindly manner as though to a child.

"Faces," said Poirot.

"Miss Rich is good at sketching people. She's clever at getting a likeness."

"That is exactly what I need."

Miss Bulstrode, he noted with approval, asked him no questions as to his reasons. She merely left the room and returned with Miss Rich.

After introductions, Poirot said: "You can sketch people? Quickly? With a pencil?"

Eileen Rich nodded.

"I often do. For amusement."

"Good. Please, then, sketch for me the late Miss Springer."

"That's difficult. I knew her for such a short time. I'll try." She screwed up her eyes, then began to draw rapidly.

"Bien," said Poirot, taking it from her. "And now, if you please, Miss Bulstrode, Miss Rowan, Mademoiselle Blanche and—yes—the gardener Adam."

Eileen Rich looked at him doubtfully, then set to work. He looked at the result, and nodded appreciatively.

“You are good—you are very good. So few strokes—and yet the likeness is there. Now I will ask you to do something more difficult. Give, for example, to Miss Bulstrode a different hair arrangement. Change the shape of her eyebrows.”

Eileen stared at him as though she thought he was mad.

“No,” said Poirot. “I am not mad. I make an experiment, that is all. Please do as I ask.”

In a moment or two she said: “Here you are.”

“Excellent. Now do the same for Mademoiselle Blanche and Miss Rowan.”

When she had finished he lined up the three sketches.

“Now I will show you something,” he said. “Miss Bulstrode, in spite of the changes you have made is still unmistakably Miss Bulstrode. But look at the other two. Because their features are negative, and since they have not Miss Bulstrode’s personality, they appear almost different people, do they not?”

“I see what you mean,” said Eileen Rich.

She looked at him as he carefully folded the sketches away.

“What are you going to do with them?” she asked.

“Use them,” said Poirot.

Twenty

CONVERSATION

“Well—I don’t know what to say,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe. “Really I don’t know what to say—”

She looked with definite distaste at Hercule Poirot.

“Henry, of course,” she said, “is not at home.”

The meaning of this pronouncement was slightly obscure, but Hercule Poirot thought that he knew what was in her mind. Henry, she was feeling, would be able to deal with this sort of thing. Henry had so many international dealings. He was always flying to the Middle East and to Ghana and to South America and to Geneva, and even occasionally, but not so often, to Paris.

“The whole thing,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe, “has been most distressing. I was so glad to have Jennifer safely at home with me. Though, I must say,” she added, with a trace of vexation, “Jennifer has really been most tiresome. After having made a great fuss about going to Meadowbank and being quite sure she wouldn’t like it there, and saying it was a snobby kind of school and not the kind she wanted to go to, now she sulks all day long because I’ve taken her away. It’s really too bad.”

“It is undeniably a very good school,” said Hercule Poirot. “Many people say the best school in England.”

“It was, I daresay,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe.

“And will be again,” said Hercule Poirot.

“You think so?” Mrs. Sutcliffe looked at him doubtfully. His sympathetic manner was gradually piercing her defences. There is nothing that eases the burden of a mother’s life more than to be permitted to unburden herself of the difficulties, rebuffs and frustrations which she has in dealing with her offspring. Loyalty so often compels silent endurance. But to a foreigner like Hercule Poirot Mrs. Sutcliffe felt that this loyalty was not applicable. It was not like talking to the mother of another daughter.

“Meadowbank,” said Hercule Poirot, “is just passing through an unfortunate phase.”

It was the best thing he could think of to say at the moment. He felt its inadequacy and Mrs. Sutcliffe pounced upon the inadequacy immediately.

“Rather more than unfortunate!” she said. “Two murders! And a girl kidnapped. You can’t send your daughter to a school where the mistresses are being murdered all the time.”

It seemed a highly reasonable point of view.

“If the murders,” said Poirot, “turn out to be the work of one person and that person is apprehended, that makes a difference, does it not?”

“Well—I suppose so. Yes,” said Mrs. Sutcliffe doubtfully. “I mean—you mean—oh, I see, you mean like Jack the Ripper or that other man—who was it? Something to do with Devonshire. Cream? Neil Cream. Who went about killing an unfortunate type of woman. I suppose this murderer just goes about killing schoolmistresses! If once you’ve got him safely in prison, and hanged too, I hope, because you’re only allowed one murder, aren’t you?—like a dog with a bite—what was I saying? Oh yes, if he’s safely caught, well, then I suppose it would be different. Of course there can’t be many people like that, can there?”

“One certainly hopes not,” said Hercule Poirot.

“But then there’s this kidnapping too,” pointed out Mrs. Sutcliffe. “You don’t want to send your daughter to a school where she may be kidnapped, either, do you?”

“Assuredly not, madame. I see how clearly you have thought out the whole thing. You are so right in all you say.”

Mrs. Sutcliffe looked faintly pleased. Nobody had said anything like that to her for some time. Henry had merely said things like "What did you want to send her to Meadowbank for anyway?" and Jennifer had sulked and refused to answer.

"I have thought about it," she said. "A great deal."

"Then I should not let kidnapping worry you, madame. Entre nous, if I may speak in confidence, about Princess Shaista—It is not exactly a kidnapping—one suspects a romance—"

"You mean the naughty girl just ran away to marry somebody?"

"My lips are sealed," said Hercule Poirot. "You comprehend it is not desired that there should be any scandal. This is in confidence entre nous. I know you will say nothing."

"Of course not," said Mrs. Sutcliffe virtuously. She looked down at the letter that Poirot had brought with him from the Chief Constable. "I don't quite understand who you are, M.—er—Poirot. Are you what they call in books—a private eye?"

"I am a consultant," said Hercule Poirot loftily.

This flavour of Harley Street encouraged Mrs. Sutcliffe a great deal.

"What do you want to talk to Jennifer about?" she demanded.

"Just to get her impressions of things," said Poirot. "She is observant—yes?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't say that," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "She's not what I call a noticing kind of child at all. I mean, she is always so matter of fact."

"It is better than making up things that have never happened at all," said Poirot.

"Oh, Jennifer wouldn't do that sort of thing," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, with certainty. She got up, went to the window and called "Jennifer."

"I wish," she said, to Poirot, as she came back again, "that you'd try and get it into Jennifer's head that her father and I are only doing our best for her."

Jennifer came into the room with a sulky face and looked with deep suspicion at Hercule Poirot.

"How do you do?" said Poirot. "I am a very old friend of Julia Upjohn. She came to London to find me."

"Julia went to London?" said Jennifer, slightly surprised. "Why?"

"To ask my advice," said Hercule Poirot.

Jennifer looked unbelieving.

"I was able to give it to her," said Poirot. "She is now back at Meadowbank," he added.

"So her Aunt Isabel didn't take her away," said Jennifer, shooting an irritated look at her mother.

Poirot looked at Mrs. Sutcliffe and for some reason, perhaps because she had been in the middle of counting the laundry when Poirot arrived and perhaps because of some unexplained compulsion, she got up and left the room.

"It's a bit hard," said Jennifer, "to be out of all that's going on there. All this fuss! I told Mummy it was silly. After all, none of the pupils have been killed."

"Have you any ideas of your own about the murders?" asked Poirot.

Jennifer shook her head. "Someone who's batty?" she offered. She added thoughtfully, "I suppose Miss Bulstrode will have to get some new mistresses now."

"It seems possible, yes," said Poirot. He went on, "I am interested, Mademoiselle Jennifer, in the woman who came and offered you a new racquet for your old one. Do you remember?"

“I should think I do remember,” said Jennifer. “I’ve never found out to this day who really sent it. It wasn’t Aunt Gina at all.”

“What did this woman look like?” said Poirot.

“The one who brought the racquet?” Jennifer half closed her eyes as though thinking. “Well, I don’t know. She had on a sort of fussy dress with a little cape, I think. Blue, and a floppy sort of hat.”

“Yes?” said Poirot. “I meant perhaps not so much her clothes as her face.”

“A good deal of makeup, I think,” said Jennifer vaguely. “A bit too much for the country, I mean, and fair hair. I think she was an American.”

“Had you ever seen her before?” asked Poirot.

“Oh no,” said Jennifer. “I don’t think she lived down there. She said she’d come down for a luncheon party or a cocktail party or something.”

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully. He was interested in Jennifer’s complete acceptance of everything that was said to her. He said gently,

“But she might not have been speaking the truth?”

“Oh,” said Jennifer. “No, I suppose not.”

“You’re quite sure you hadn’t seen her before? She could not have been, for instance, one of the girls dressed up? Or one of the mistresses?”

“Dressed up?” Jennifer looked puzzled.

Poirot laid before her the sketch Eileen Rich had done for him of Mademoiselle Blanche.

“This was not the woman, was it?”

Jennifer looked at it doubtfully.

“It’s a little like her—but I don’t think it’s her.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

There was no sign that Jennifer recognized that this was actually a sketch of Mademoiselle Blanche.

“You see,” said Jennifer, “I didn’t really look at her much. She was an American and a stranger, and then she told me about the racquet—”

After that, it was clear, Jennifer would have had eyes for nothing but her new possession.

“I see,” said Poirot. He went on, “Did you ever see at Meadowbank anyone that you’d seen out in Ramat?”

“In Ramat?” Jennifer thought. “Oh no—at least—I don’t think so.”

Poirot pounced on the slight expression of doubt. “But you are not sure, Mademoiselle Jennifer.”

“Well,” Jennifer scratched her forehead with a worried expression, “I mean, you’re always seeing people who look like somebody else. You can’t quite remember who it is they look like. Sometimes you see people that you have met but you don’t remember who they are. And they say to you ‘You don’t remember me,’ and then that’s awfully awkward because really you don’t. I mean, you sort of know their face but you can’t remember their names or where you saw them.”

“That is very true,” said Poirot. “Yes, that is very true. One often has that experience.” He paused a moment then he went on, prodding gently, “Princess Shaista, for instance, you probably recognized her when you saw her because you must have seen her in Ramat.”

“Oh, was she in Ramat?”

“Very likely,” said Poirot. “After all she is a relation of the ruling house. You might have seen her there?”

“I don’t think I did,” said Jennifer frowning. “Anyway, she wouldn’t go about with her face showing there, would she? I mean, they all wear veils and things like that. Though they take them off in Paris and Cairo, I believe. And in London, of course," she added.

"Anyway, you had no feeling of having seen anyone at Meadowbank whom you had seen before?"

"No, I'm sure I hadn't. Of course most people do look rather alike and you might have seen them anywhere. It's only when somebody's got an odd sort of face like Miss Rich, that you notice it."

"Did you think you'd seen Miss Rich somewhere before?"

"I hadn't really. It must have been someone like her. But it was someone much fatter than she was."

"Someone much fatter," said Poirot thoughtfully.

"You couldn't imagine Miss Rich being fat," said Jennifer with a giggle. "She's so frightfully thin and nobbly. And anyway Miss Rich couldn't have been in Ramat because she was away ill last term."

"And the other girls?" said Poirot, "had you seen any of the girls before?"

"Only the ones I knew already," said Jennifer. "I did know one or two of them. After all, you know, I was only there three weeks and I really don't know half of the people there even by sight. I wouldn't know most of them if I met them tomorrow."

"You should notice things more," said Poirot severely.

"One can't notice everything," protested Jennifer. She went on: "If Meadowbank is carrying on I would like to go back. See if you can do anything with Mummy. Though really," she added, "I think it's Daddy who's the stumbling block. It's awful here in the country. I get no opportunity to improve my tennis."

"I assure you I will do what I can," said Poirot.

Twenty-one

GATHERING THREADS

I

“I want to talk to you, Eileen,” said Miss Bulstrode.

Eileen Rich followed Miss Bulstrode into the latter’s sitting room. Meadowbank was strangely quiet. About twenty-five pupils were still there. Pupils whose parents had found it either difficult or unwelcome to fetch them. The panic-stricken rush had, as Miss Bulstrode had hoped, been checked by her own tactics. There was a general feeling that by next term everything would have been cleared up. It was much wiser of Miss Bulstrode, they felt, to close the school.

None of the staff had left. Miss Johnson fretted with too much time on her hands. A day in which there was too little to do did not in the least suit her. Miss Chadwick, looking old and miserable, wandered round in a kind of coma of misery. She was far harder hit to all appearance than Miss Bulstrode. Miss Bulstrode, indeed, managed apparently without difficulty to be completely herself, unperturbed, and with no sign of strain or collapse. The two younger mistresses were not averse to the extra leisure. They bathed in the swimming pool, wrote long letters to friends and relations and sent for cruise literature to study and compare. Ann Shapland had a good deal of time on her hands and did not appear to resent the fact. She spent a good deal of that time in the garden and devoted herself to gardening with quite unexpected efficiency. That she preferred to be instructed in the work by Adam rather than by old Briggs was perhaps a not unnatural phenomenon.

“Yes, Miss Bulstrode?” said Eileen Rich.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Whether this school can continue or not I do not know. What people will feel is always fairly incalculable because they will all feel differently. But the result will be that whoever feels most strongly will end by converting all the rest. So either Meadowbank is finished—"

"No," said Eileen Rich, interrupting, "not finished." She almost stamped her foot and her hair immediately began coming down. "You mustn't let it be stopped," she said. "It would be a sin—a crime."

"You speak very strongly," said Miss Bulstrode.

"I feel strongly. There are so many things that really don't seem worthwhile a bit, but Meadowbank does seem worthwhile. It seemed worthwhile to me the first moment I came here."

"You're a fighter," said Miss Bulstrode. "I like fighters, and I assure you that I don't intend to give in tamely. In a way I'm going to enjoy the fight. You know, when everything's too easy and things go too well one gets—I don't know the exact word I mean—complacent? Bored? A kind of hybrid of the two. But I'm not bored now and I'm not complacent and I'm going to fight with every ounce of strength I've got, and with every penny I've got, too. Now what I want to say to you is this: If Meadowbank continues, will you come in on a partnership basis?"

"Me?" Eileen Rich stared at her. "Me?"

"Yes, my dear," said Miss Bulstrode. "You."

"I couldn't," said Eileen Rich. "I don't know enough. I'm too young. Why, I haven't got the experience, the knowledge that you'd want."

"You must leave it to me to know what I want," said Miss Bulstrode. "Mind you, this isn't, at the present moment of talking, a good offer. You'd probably do better for yourself elsewhere. But I want to tell you this, and you've got to believe me. I had already decided before Miss Vansittart's unfortunate death, that you were the person I wanted to carry on this school."

"You thought so then?" Eileen Rich stared at her. "But I thought—we all thought—that Miss Vansittart…."

“There was no arrangement made with Miss Vansittart,” said Miss Bulstrode. “I had her in mind, I will confess. I’ve had her in mind for the last two years. But something’s always held me back from saying anything definite to her about it. I daresay everyone assumed that she’d be my successor. She may have thought so herself. I myself thought so until very recently. And then I decided that she was not what I wanted.”

“But she was so suitable in every way,” said Eileen Rich. “She would have carried out things in exactly your ways, in exactly your ideas.”

“Yes,” said Miss Bulstrode, “and that’s just what would have been wrong. You can’t hold on to the past. A certain amount of tradition is good but never too much. A school is for the children of today. It’s not for the children of fifty years ago or even of thirty years ago. There are some schools in which tradition is more important than others, but Meadowbank is not one of those. It’s not a school with a long tradition behind it. It’s a creation, if I may say it, of one woman. Myself. I’ve tried certain ideas and carried them out to the best of my ability, though occasionally I’ve had to modify them when they haven’t produced the results I’d expected. It’s not been a conventional school, but it has not prided itself on being an unconventional school either. It’s a school that tries to make the best of both worlds: the past and the future, but the real stress is on the present. That’s how it’s going to go on, how it ought to go on. Run by someone with ideas—ideas of the present day. Keeping what is wise from the past, looking forward towards the future. You’re very much the age I was when I started here but you’ve got what I no longer can have. You’ll find it written in the Bible. Their old men dream dreams and their young men have visions. We don’t need dreams here, we need vision. I believe you to have vision and that’s why I decided that you were the person and not Eleanor Vansittart.”

“It would have been wonderful,” said Eileen Rich. “Wonderful. The thing I should have liked above all.”

Miss Bulstrode was faintly surprised by the tense, although she did not show it. Instead she agreed promptly.

“Yes,” she said, “it would have been wonderful. But it isn’t wonderful now? Well, I suppose I understand that.”

"No, no, I don't mean that at all," said Eileen Rich. "Not at all. I—I can't go into details very well, but if you had—if you had asked me, spoken to me like this a week or a fortnight ago, I should have said at once that I couldn't, that it would have been quite impossible. The only reason why it—why it might be possible now is because—well, because it is a case of fighting—of taking on things. May I—may I think it over, Miss Bulstrode? I don't know what to say now."

"Of course," said Miss Bulstrode. She was still surprised. One never really knew, she thought, about anybody.

II

"There goes Rich with her hair coming down again," said Ann Shapland as she straightened herself up from a flower bed. "If she can't control it I can't think why she doesn't get it cut off. She's got a good-shaped head and she would look better."

"You ought to tell her so," said Adam.

"We're not on those terms," said Ann Shapland. She went on, "D'you think this place will be able to carry on?"

"That's a very doubtful question," said Adam, "and who am I to judge?"

"You could tell as well as another I should think," said Ann Shapland. "It might, you know. The old Bull, as the girls call her, has got what it takes. A hypnotizing effect on parents to begin with. How long is it since the beginning of term—only a month? It seems like a year. I shall be glad when it comes to an end."

"Will you come back if the school goes on?"

"No," said Ann with emphasis, "no indeed. I've had enough of schools to last me for a lifetime. I'm not cut out for being cooped up with a lot of women anyway. And, frankly, I don't like murder. It's the sort of thing that's fun to read about in the paper or to read yourself to sleep with in the way of a nice book. But the real thing isn't so good. I think," added Ann thoughtfully, “that when I leave here at the end of the term I shall marry Dennis and settle down.”

“Dennis?” said Adam. “That’s the one you mentioned to me, wasn’t it? As far as I remember his work takes him to Burma and Malaya and Singapore and Japan and places like that. It won’t be exactly settling down, will it, if you marry him?”

Ann laughed suddenly. “No, no, I suppose it won’t. Not in the physical, geographical sense.”

“I think you can do better than Dennis,” said Adam.

“Are you making me an offer?” said Ann.

“Certainly not,” said Adam. “You’re an ambitious girl, you wouldn’t like to marry a humble jobbing gardener.”

“I was wondering about marrying into the C.I.D.,” said Ann.

“I’m not in the C.I.D.,” said Adam.

“No, no, of course not,” said Ann. “Let’s preserve the niceties of speech. You’re not in the C.I.D. Shaista wasn’t kidnapped, everything in the garden’s lovely. It is rather,” she added, looking round. “All the same,” she said after a moment or two, “I don’t understand in the least about Shaista turning up in Geneva or whatever the story is. How did she get there? All you people must be very slack to allow her to be taken out of this country.”

“My lips are sealed,” said Adam.

“I don’t think you know the first thing about it,” said Ann.

“I will admit,” said Adam, “that we have to thank Monsieur Hercule Poirot for having had a bright idea.”

“What, the funny little man who brought Julia back and came to see Miss Bulstrode?”

"Yes. He calls himself," said Adam, "a consultant detective."

"I think he's pretty much of a has-been," said Ann.

"I don't understand what he's up to at all," said Adam. "He even went to see my mother—or some friend of his did."

"Your mother?" said Ann. "Why?"

"I've no idea. He seems to have a kind of morbid interest in mothers. He went to see Jennifer's mother too."

"Did he go and see Miss Rich's mother, and Chaddy's?"

"I gather Miss Rich hasn't got a mother," said Adam. "Otherwise, no doubt, he would have gone to see her."

"Miss Chadwick's got a mother in Cheltenham, she told me," said Ann, "but she's about eighty-odd, I believe. Poor Miss Chadwick, she looks about eighty herself. She's coming to talk to us now."

Adam looked up. "Yes," he said, "she's aged a lot in the last week."

"Because she really loves the school," said Ann. "It's her whole life. She can't bear to see it go downhill."

Miss Chadwick indeed looked ten years older than she had done on the day of the opening term. Her step had lost its brisk efficiency. She no longer trotted about, happy and bustling. She came up to them now, her steps dragging a little.

"Will you please come to Miss Bulstrode," she said to Adam. "She has some instruction about the garden."

"I'll have to clean up a bit first," said Adam. He laid down his tools and moved off in the direction of the potting shed.

Ann and Miss Chadwick walked together towards the house.

“It does seem quiet, doesn’t it,” said Ann, looking round. “Like an empty house at the theatre,” she added thoughtfully, “with people spaced out by the box office as tactfully as possible to make them look like an audience.”

“It’s dreadful,” said Miss Chadwick, “dreadful! Dreadful to think that Meadowbank has come to this. I can’t get over it. I can’t sleep at night. Everything in ruins. All the years of work, of building up something really fine.”

“It may get all right again,” said Ann cheerfully. “People have got very short memories, you know.”

“Not as short as all that,” said Miss Chadwick grimly.

Ann did not answer. In her heart she rather agreed with Miss Chadwick.

III

Mademoiselle Blanche came out of the classroom where she had been teaching French literature.

She glanced at her watch. Yes, there would be plenty of time for what she intended to do. With so few pupils there was always plenty of time these days.

She went upstairs to her room and put on her hat. She was not one of those who went about hatless. She studied her appearance in the mirror with satisfaction. Not a personality to be noticed! Well, there could be advantages in that! She smiled to herself. It had made it easy for her to use her sister’s testimonials. Even the passport photograph had gone unchallenged. It would have been a thousand pities to waste those excellent credentials when Angèle had died. Angèle had really enjoyed teaching. For herself, it was unutterable boredom. But the pay was excellent. Far above what she herself had ever been able to earn. And besides, things had turned out unbelievably well. The future was going to be very different. Oh yes, very different. The drab Mademoiselle Blanche would be transformed. She saw it all in her mind’s eye. The Riviera. Herself smartly dressed, suitably made-up. All one needed in this world was money. Oh yes, things were going to be very pleasant indeed. It was worth having come to this detestable English school.

She picked up her handbag, went out of her room and along the corridor. Her eyes dropped to the kneeling woman who was busy there. A new daily help. A police spy, of course. How simple they were—to think that one would not know!

A contemptuous smile on her lips, she went out of the house and down the drive to the front gate. The bus stop was almost opposite. She stood at it, waiting. The bus should be here in a moment or two.

There were very few people about in this quiet country road. A car, with a man bending over the open bonnet. A bicycle leaning against a hedge. A man also waiting for the bus.

One or other of the three would, no doubt, follow her. It would be skilfully done, not obviously. She was quite alive to the fact, and it did not worry her. Her "shadow" was welcome to see where she went and what she did.

The bus came. She got in. A quarter of an hour later, she got out in the main square of the town. She did not trouble to look behind her. She crossed to where the shop windows of a fairly large departmental store showed their display of new model gowns. Poor stuff, for provincial tastes, she thought, with a curling lip. But she stood looking at them as though much attracted.

Presently she went inside, made one or two trivial purchases, then went up to the first floor and entered the Ladies Rest Room. There was a writing table there, some easy chairs, and a telephone box. She went into the box, put the necessary coins in, dialled the number she wanted, waiting to hear if the right voice answered.

She nodded in approval, pressed button A and spoke.

"This is the Maison Blanche. You understand me, the Maison Blanche? I have to speak of an account that is owed. You have until tomorrow evening. Tomorrow evening. To pay into the account of the Maison Blanche at the Credit Nationale in London, Ledbury St. branch the sum that I tell you."

She named the sum.

“If that money is not paid in, then it will be necessary for me to report in the proper quarters what I observed on the night of the 12th. The reference—pay—attention—is to Miss Springer. You have a little over twenty-four hours.”

She hung up and emerged into the rest room. A woman had just come in from outside. Another customer of the shop, perhaps, or again perhaps not. But if the latter, it was too late for anything to be overheard.

Mademoiselle Blanche freshened herself up in the adjoining cloak room, then she went and tried on a couple of blouses, but did not buy them; she went out into the street again, smiling to herself. She looked into a bookshop, and then caught a bus back to Meadowbank.

She was still smiling to herself as she walked up the drive. She had arranged matters very well. The sum she had demanded had not been too large—not impossible to raise at short notice. And it would do very well to go on with. Because, of course, in the future, there would be further demands….

Yes, a very pretty little source of income this was going to be. She had no qualms of conscience. She did not consider it in any way her duty to report what she knew and had seen to the police. That Springer had been a detestable woman, rude, mal élevée. Prying into what was no business of hers. Ah, well, she had got her deserts.

Mademoiselle Blanche stayed for a while by the swimming pool. She watched Eileen Rich diving. Then Ann Shapland, too, climbed up and dived—very well, too. There was laughing and squeals from the girls.

A bell rang, and Mademoiselle Blanche went in to take her junior class. They were inattentive and tiresome, but Mademoiselle Blanche hardly noticed. She would soon have done with teaching forever.

She went up to her room to tidy herself for supper. Vaguely, without really noticing, she saw that, contrary to her usual practice, she had thrown her garden coat across a chair in the corner instead of hanging it up as usual.

She leaned forward, studying her face in the glass. She applied powder, lipstick—

The movement was so quick that it took her completely by surprise. Noiseless! Professional. The coat on the chair seemed to gather itself together, drop to the ground and in an instant behind Mademoiselle Blanche a hand with a sandbag rose and, as she opened her lips to scream, fell, dully, on the back of her neck.

Twenty-two

INCIDENT IN ANATOLIA

Mrs. Upjohn was sitting by the side of the road overlooking a deep ravine. She was talking partly in French and partly with gestures to a large and solid-looking Turkish woman who was telling her with as much detail as possible under these difficulties of communications all about her last miscarriage. Nine children she had had, she explained. Eight of them boys, and five miscarriages. She seemed as pleased at the miscarriages as she did at the births.

“And you?” she poked Mrs. Upjohn amiably in the ribs. “Combien?—garçons?—filles?—combien?” She held up her hands ready to indicate on the fingers.

“Une fille,” said Mrs. Upjohn.

“Et garçons?”

Seeing that she was about to fall in the Turkish woman’s estimation, Mrs. Upjohn in a surge of nationalism proceeded to perjure herself. She held up five fingers of her right hand.

“Cinq,” she said.

“Cinq garçons? Très bien!”

The Turkish woman nodded with approbation and respect. She added that if only her cousin who spoke French really fluently was here they could understand each other a great deal better. She then resumed the story of her last miscarriage.

The other passengers were sprawled about near them, eating odd bits of food from the baskets they carried with them. The bus, looking slightly the worse for wear, was drawn up against an overhanging rock, and the driver and another man were busy inside the bonnet. Mrs. Upjohn had lost complete count of time. Floods had blocked two of the roads, détours had been necessary and they had once been stuck for seven hours until the river they were fording subsided. Ankara lay in the not impossible future and that was all she knew. She listened to her friend's eager and incoherent conversation, trying to gauge when to nod admiringly, when to shake her head in sympathy.

A voice cut into her thoughts, a voice highly incongruous with her present surroundings.

"Mrs. Upjohn, I believe," said the voice.

Mrs. Upjohn looked up. A little way away a car had driven up. The man standing opposite her had undoubtedly alighted from it. His face was unmistakably British, as was his voice. He was impeccably dressed in a grey flannel suit.

"Good heavens," said Mrs. Upjohn. "Dr. Livingstone?"

"It must seem rather like that," said the stranger pleasantly. "My name's Atkinson. I'm from the Consulate in Ankara. We've been trying to get in touch with you for two or three days, but the roads have been cut."

"You wanted to get in touch with me? Why?" Suddenly Mrs. Upjohn rose to her feet. All traces of the gay traveller had disappeared. She was all mother, every inch of her. "Julia?" she said sharply. "Has something happened to Julia?"

"No, no," Mr. Atkinson reassured her. "Julia's quite all right. It's not that at all. There's been a spot of trouble at Meadowbank and we want to get you home there as soon as possible. I'll drive you back to Ankara, and you can get on a plane in about an hour's time."

Mrs. Upjohn opened her mouth and then shut it again. Then she rose and said, "You'll have to get my bag off the top of that bus. It's the dark one." She turned, shook hands with her Turkish companion, said: "I'm sorry, I have to go home now," waved to the rest of the bus load with the utmost friendliness, called out a Turkish farewell greeting which was part of her small stock of Turkish, and prepared to follow Mr. Atkinson immediately without asking any further questions. It occurred to him as it had occurred to many other people that Mrs. Upjohn was a very sensible woman.

Twenty-three

SHOWDOWN

I

In one of the smaller classrooms Miss Bulstrode looked at the assembled people. All the members of her staff were there: Miss Chadwick, Miss Johnson, Miss Rich and the two younger mistresses. Ann Shapland sat with her pad and pencil in case Miss Bulstrode wanted her to take notes. Beside Miss Bulstrode sat Inspector Kelsey and beyond him, Hercule Poirot. Adam Goodman sat in a no-man's-land of his own halfway between the staff and what he called to himself the executive body. Miss Bulstrode rose and spoke in her practised, decisive voice.

"I feel it is due to you all," she said, "as members of my staff, and interested in the fortunes of the school, to know exactly to what point this inquiry has progressed. I have been informed by Inspector Kelsey of several facts. M. Hercule Poirot who has international connections, has obtained valuable assistance from Switzerland and will report himself on that particular matter. We have not yet come to the end of the inquiry, I am sorry to say, but certain minor matters have been cleared up and I thought it would be a relief to you all to know how matters stand at the present moment." Miss Bulstrode looked towards Inspector Kelsey, and he rose.

"Officially," he said, "I am not in a position to disclose all that I know. I can only reassure you to the extent of saying that we are making progress and we are beginning to have a good idea who is responsible for the three crimes that have been committed on the premises. Beyond that I will not go. My friend, M. Hercule Poirot, who is not bound by official secrecy and is at perfect liberty to give you his own ideas, will disclose to you certain information which he himself has been influential in procuring. I am sure you are all loyal to Meadowbank and to Miss Bulstrode and will keep to yourselves various matters upon which M. Poirot is going to touch and which are not of any public interest. The less gossip or speculation about them the better, so I will ask you to keep the facts that you will learn here today to yourselves. Is that understood?”

“Of course,” said Miss Chadwick, speaking first and with emphasis. “Of course we’re all loyal to Meadowbank, I should hope.”

“Naturally,” said Miss Johnson.

“Oh yes,” said the two younger mistresses.

“I agree,” said Eileen Rich.

“Then perhaps, M. Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot rose to his feet, beamed on his audience and carefully twisted his moustaches. The two younger mistresses had a sudden desire to giggle, and looked away from each other pursing their lips together.

“It has been a difficult and anxious time for you all,” he said. “I want you to know first that I do appreciate that. It has naturally been worst of all for Miss Bulstrode herself, but you have all suffered. You have suffered first the loss of three of your colleagues, one of whom has been here for a considerable period of time. I refer to Miss Vansittart. Miss Springer and Mademoiselle Blanche were, of course, newcomers, but I do not doubt that their deaths were a great shock to you and a distressing happening. You must also have suffered a good deal of apprehension yourselves, for it must have seemed as though there were a kind of vendetta aimed against the mistresses of Meadowbank school. That I can assure you, and Inspector Kelsey will assure you also, is not so. Meadowbank by a fortuitous series of chances became the centre for the attentions of various undesirable interests. There has been, shall we say, a cat among the pigeons. There have been three murders here and also a kidnapping. I will deal first with the kidnapping, for all through this business the difficulty has been to clear out of the way extraneous matters which, though criminal in themselves, obscure the most important thread—the thread of a ruthless and determined killer in your midst.”

He took from his pocket a photograph.

“First, I will pass round this photograph.”

Kelsey took it, handed it to Miss Bulstrode and she in turn handed it to the staff. It was returned to Poirot. He looked at their faces, which were quite blank.

“I ask you, all of you, do you recognize the girl in that photograph?”

One and all they shook their heads.

“You should do so,” said Poirot. “Since that is a photograph obtained by me from Geneva of Princess Shaista.”

“But it’s not Shaista at all,” cried Miss Chadwick.

“Exactly,” said Poirot. “The threads of all this business start in Ramat where, as you know, a revolutionary coup d’état took place about three months ago. The ruler, Prince Ali Yusuf, managed to escape, flown out by his own private pilot. Their plane, however, crashed in the mountains north of Ramat and was not discovered until later in the year. A certain article of great value, which was always carried on Prince Ali’s person, was missing. It was not found in the wreck and there were rumours that it had been brought to this country. Several groups of people were anxious to get hold of this very valuable article. One of their leads to it was Prince Ali Yusuf’s only remaining relation, his first cousin, a girl who was then at a school in Switzerland. It seemed likely that if the precious article had been safely got out of Ramat it would be brought to Princess Shaista or to her relatives and guardians. Certain agents were detailed to keep an eye on her uncle, the Emir Ibrahim, and others to keep an eye on the Princess herself. It was known that she was due to come to this school, Meadowbank, this term. Therefore it would have been only natural that someone should be detailed to obtain employment here and to keep a close watch on anyone who approached the Princess, her letters, and any telephone messages. But an even simpler and more efficacious idea was evolved, that of kidnapping Shaista and sending one of their own number to the school as Princess Shaista herself. This could be done successfully since the Emir Ibrahim was in Egypt and did not propose to visit England until late summer. Miss Bulstrode herself had not seen the girl and all arrangements that she had made concerning her reception had been made with the Embassy in London.

"The plan was simple in the extreme. The real Shaista left Switzerland accompanied by a representative from the Embassy in London. Or so it was supposed. Actually, the Embassy in London was informed that a representative from the Swiss school would accompany the girl to London. The real Shaista was taken to a very pleasant chalet in Switzerland where she has been ever since, and an entirely different girl arrived in London, was met there by a representative of the Embassy and subsequently brought to this school. This substitute, of course, was necessarily much older than the real Shaista. But that would hardly attract attention since Eastern girls noticeably look much more mature than their age. A young French actress who specializes in playing schoolgirl parts was the agent chosen.

"I did ask," said Hercule Poirot, in a thoughtful voice, "as to whether anyone had noticed Shaista's knees. Knees are a very good indication of age. The knees of a woman of twenty-three or twenty-four can never really be mistaken for the knees of a girl of fourteen or fifteen. Nobody, alas, had noticed her knees.

"The plan was hardly as successful as had been hoped. Nobody attempted to get in touch with Shaista, no letters or telephone calls of significance arrived for her and as time went on an added anxiety arose. The Emir Ibrahim might arrive in England ahead of schedule. He was not a man who announced his plans ahead. He was in the habit, I understand, of saying one evening, 'Tomorrow I go to London' and thereupon to go.

"The false Shaista, then, was aware that at any moment someone who knew the real Shaista might arrive. Especially was this so after the murder and therefore she began to prepare the way for a kidnapping by talking about it to Inspector Kelsey. Of course, the actual kidnapping was nothing of the kind. As soon as she learned that her uncle was coming to take her out the following morning, she sent a brief message by telephone, and half an hour earlier than the genuine car, a showy car with false C.D. plates on it arrived and Shaista was officially 'kidnapped.' Actually, of course, she was set down by the car in the first large town where she at once resumed her own personality. An amateurish ransom note was sent just to keep up the fiction."

Hercule Poirot paused, then said, "It was, as you can see, merely the trick of the conjurer. Misdirection. You focus the eyes on the kidnapping here and it does not occur to anyone that the kidnapping really occurred three weeks earlier in Switzerland."

What Poirot really meant, but was too polite to say, was that it had not occurred to anyone but himself!

"We pass now," he said, "to something far more serious than kidnapping—murder.

"The false Shaista could, of course, have killed Miss Springer but she could not have killed Miss Vansittart or Mademoiselle Blanche, and would have had no motive to kill anybody, nor was such a thing required of her. Her role was simply to receive a valuable packet if, as seemed likely, it should be brought to her: or, alternatively, to receive news of it.

"Let us go back now to Ramat where all this started. It was widely rumoured in Ramat that Prince Ali Yusuf had given this valuable packet to Bob Rawlinson, his private pilot, and that Bob Rawlinson had arranged for its despatch to England. On the day in question Rawlinson went to Ramat's principal hotel where his sister, Mrs. Sutcliffe, and her daughter Jennifer were staying. Mrs. Sutcliffe and Jennifer were out, but Bob Rawlinson went up to their room where he remained for at least twenty minutes. That is rather a long time under the circumstances. He might of course have been writing a long letter to his sister. But that was not so. He merely left a short note which he could have scribbled in a couple of minutes.

"It was a very fair inference then, inferred by several separate parties, that during his time in her room he had placed this object amongst his sister's effects and that she had brought it back to England. Now we come to what I may call the dividing of two separate threads. One set of interests—(or possibly more than one set)—assumed that Mrs. Sutcliffe had brought this article back to England and in consequence her house in the country was ransacked and a thorough search made. This showed that whoever was searching did not know where exactly the article was hidden. Only that it was probably somewhere in Mrs. Sutcliffe's possession.

"But somebody else knew very definitely exactly where that article was, and I think that by now it will do no harm for me to tell you where, in fact, Bob Rawlinson did conceal it. He concealed it in the handle of a tennis racquet, hollowing out the handle and afterwards piecing it together again so skilfully that it was difficult to see what had been done.

"The tennis racquet belonged, not to his sister, but to her daughter Jennifer. Someone who knew exactly where the cache was, went out to the Sports Pavilion one night, having previously taken an impression of the key and got a key cut. At that time of night everyone should have been in bed and asleep. But that was not so. Miss Springer saw the light of a torch in the Sports Pavilion from the house, and went out to investigate. She was a tough hefty young woman and had no doubts of her own ability to cope with anything she might find. The person in question was probably sorting through the tennis racquets to find the right one. Discovered and recognized by Miss Springer, there was no hesitation … The searcher was a killer, and shot Miss Springer dead. Afterwards, however, the killer had to act fast. The shot had been heard, people were approaching. At all costs the killer must get out of the Sports Pavilion unseen. The racquet must be left where it was for the moment….

"Within a few days another method was tried. A strange woman with a faked American accent waylaid Jennifer Sutcliffe as she was coming from the tennis courts, and told her a plausible story about a relative of hers having sent her down a new tennis racquet. Jennifer unsuspiciously accepted this story and gladly exchanged the racquet she was carrying for the new, expensive one the stranger had brought. But a circumstance had arisen which the woman with the American accent knew nothing about. That was that a few days previously Jennifer Sutcliffe and Julia Upjohn had exchanged racquets so that what the strange woman took away with her was in actual fact Julia Upjohn's old racquet, though the identifying tape on it bore Jennifer's name.

"We come now to the second tragedy. Miss Vansittart for some unknown reason, but possibly connected with the kidnapping of Shaista which had taken place that afternoon, took a torch and went out to the Sports Pavilion after everybody had gone to bed. Somebody who had followed her there struck her down with a cosh or a sandbag, as she was stooping down by Shaista's locker. Again the crime was discovered almost immediately. Miss Chadwick saw a light in the Sports Pavilion and hurried out there.

"The police once more took charge at the Sports Pavilion, and again the killer was debarred from searching and examining the tennis racquets there. But by now, Julia Upjohn, an intelligent child, had thought things over and had come to the logical conclusion that the racquet she possessed and which had originally belonged to Jennifer, was in some way important. She investigated on her own behalf, found that she was correct in her surmise, and brought the contents of the racquet to me.

"These are now," said Hercule Poirot, "in safe custody and need concern us here no longer." He paused and then went on, "It remains to consider the third tragedy.

"What Mademoiselle Blanche knew or suspected we shall never know. She may have seen someone leaving the house on the night of Miss Springer's murder. Whatever it was that she knew or suspected, she knew the identity of the murderer. And she kept that knowledge to herself. She planned to obtain money in return for her silence.

"There is nothing," said Hercule Poirot, with feeling, "more dangerous than levying blackmail on a person who has killed perhaps twice already. Mademoiselle Blanche may have taken her own precautions but whatever they were, they were inadequate. She made an appointment with the murderer and she was killed."

He paused again.

"So there," he said, looking round at them, "you have the account of this whole affair."

They were all staring at him. Their faces, which at first had reflected interest, surprise, excitement, seemed now frozen into a uniform calm. It was as though they were terrified to display any emotion. Hercule Poirot nodded at them.

“Yes,” he said, “I know how you feel. It has come, has it not, very near home? That is why, you see, I and Inspector Kelsey and Mr. Adam Goodman have been making the inquiries. We have to know, you see, if there is still a cat among the pigeons! You understand what I mean? Is there still someone here who is masquerading under false colours?”

There was a slight ripple passing through those who listened to him, a brief almost furtive sidelong glance as though they wished to look at each other, but did not dare do so.

“I am happy to reassure you,” said Poirot. “All of you here at this moment are exactly who you say you are. Miss Chadwick, for instance, is Miss Chadwick—that is certainly not open to doubt, she has been here as long as Meadowbank itself! Miss Johnson, too, is unmistakably Miss Johnson. Miss Rich is Miss Rich. Miss Shapland is Miss Shapland. Miss Rowan and Miss Blake are Miss Rowan and Miss Blake. To go further,” said Poirot, turning his head, “Adam Goodman who works here in the garden, is, if not precisely Adam Goodman, at any rate the person whose name is on his credentials. So then, where are we? We must seek not for someone masquerading as someone else, but for someone who is, in his or her proper identity, a murderer.”

The room was very still now. There was menace in the air.

Poirot went on.

“We want, primarily, someone who was in Ramat three months ago. Knowledge that the prize was concealed in the tennis racquet could only have been acquired in one way. Someone must have seen it put there by Bob Rawlinson. It is as simple as that. Who then, of all of you present here, was in Ramat three months ago? Miss Chadwick was here, Miss Johnson was here.” His eyes went on to the two junior Mistresses. “Miss Rowan and Miss Blake were here.”

His finger went out pointing.

"But Miss Rich—Miss Rich was not here last term, was she?"

"I—no. I was ill." She spoke hurriedly. "I was away for a term."

"That is the thing we did not know," said Hercule Poirot, "until a few days ago somebody mentioned it casually. When questioned by the police originally, you merely said that you had been at Meadowbank for a year and a half. That in itself is true enough. But you were absent last term. You could have been in Ramat—I think you were in Ramat. Be careful. It can be verified, you know, from your passport."

There was a moment's silence, then Eileen Rich looked up.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I was in Ramat. Why not?"

"Why did you go to Ramat, Miss Rich?"

"You already know. I had been ill. I was advised to take a rest—to go abroad. I wrote to Miss Bulstrode and explained that I must take a term off. She quite understood."

"That is so," said Miss Bulstrode. "A doctor's certificate was enclosed which said that it would be unwise for Miss Rich to resume her duties until the following term."

"So—you went to Ramat?" said Hercule Poirot.

"Why shouldn't I go to Ramat?" said Eileen Rich. Her voice trembled slightly. "There are cheap fares offered to schoolteachers. I wanted a rest. I wanted sunshine. I went out to Ramat. I spent two months there. Why not? Why not, I say?"

"You have never mentioned that you were at Ramat at the time of the Revolution."

"Why should I? What has it got to do with anyone here? I haven't killed anyone, I tell you. I haven't killed anyone."

“You were recognized, you know,” said Hercule Poirot. “Not recognized definitely, but indefinitely. The child Jennifer was very vague. She said she thought she’d seen you in Ramat but concluded it couldn’t be you because, she said, the person she had seen was fat, not thin.” He leaned forward, his eyes boring into Eileen Rich’s face.

“What have you to say, Miss Rich?”

She wheeled round. “I know what you’re trying to make out!” she cried. “You’re trying to make out that it wasn’t a secret agent or anything of that kind who did these murders. That it was someone who just happened to be there, someone who happened to see this treasure hidden in a tennis racquet. Someone who realized that the child was coming to Meadowbank and that she’d have an opportunity to take for herself this hidden thing. But I tell you it isn’t true!”

“I think that is what happened. Yes,” said Poirot. “Someone saw the jewels being hidden and forgot all other duties or interests in the determination to possess them!”

“It isn’t true, I tell you. I saw nothing—”

“Inspector Kelsey.” Poirot turned his head.

Inspector Kelsey nodded—went to the door, opened it, and Mrs. Upjohn walked into the room.

II

“How do you do, Miss Bulstrode,” said Mrs. Upjohn, looking rather embarrassed. “I’m sorry I’m looking rather untidy, but I was somewhere near Ankara yesterday and I’ve just flown home. I’m in a terrible mess and I really haven’t had time to clean myself up or do anything.”

“That does not matter,” said Hercule Poirot. “We want to ask you something.”

“Mrs. Upjohn,” said Kelsey, “when you came here to bring your daughter to the school and you were in Miss Bulstrode’s sitting room, you looked out of the window—the window which gives on the front drive—and you uttered an exclamation as though you recognized someone you saw there. That is so, is it not?”

Mrs. Upjohn stared at him. “When I was in Miss Bulstrode’s sitting room? I looked—oh, yes, of course! Yes, I did see someone.”

“Someone you were surprised to see?”

“Well, I was rather … You see, it had all been such years ago.”

“You mean the days when you were working in Intelligence towards the end of the war?”

“Yes. It was about fifteen years ago. Of course, she looked much older, but I recognized her at once. And I wondered what on earth she could be doing here.”

“Mrs. Upjohn, will you look round this room and tell me if you see that person here now?”

“Yes, of course,” said Mrs. Upjohn. “I saw her as soon as I came in. That’s her.”

She stretched out a pointing finger. Inspector Kelsey was quick and so was Adam, but they were not quick enough. Ann Shapland had sprung to her feet. In her hand was a small wicked-looking automatic and it pointed straight at Mrs. Upjohn. Miss Bulstrode, quicker than the two men, moved sharply forward, but swifter still was Miss Chadwick. It was not Mrs. Upjohn that she was trying to shield, it was the woman who was standing between Ann Shapland and Mrs. Upjohn.

“No, you shan’t,” cried Chaddy, and flung herself on Miss Bulstrode just as the small automatic went off.

Miss Chadwick staggered, then slowly crumpled down. Miss Johnson ran to her. Adam and Kelsey had got hold of Ann Shapland now. She was struggling like a wild cat, but they wrested the small automatic from her.

Mrs. Upjohn said breathlessly:

“They said then that she was a killer. Although she was so young. One of the most dangerous agents they had. Angelica was her code name.”

“You lying bitch!” Ann Shapland fairly spat out the words.

Hercule Poirot said:

“She does not lie. You are dangerous. You have always led a dangerous life. Up to now, you have never been suspected in your own identity. All the jobs you have taken in your own name have been perfectly genuine jobs, efficiently performed—but they have all been jobs with a purpose, and that purpose has been the gaining of information. You have worked with an Oil Company, with an archaeologist whose work took him to a certain part of the globe, with an actress whose protector was an eminent politician. Ever since you were seventeen you have worked as an agent—though for many different masters. Your services have been for hire and have been highly paid. You have played a dual role. Most of your assignments have been carried out in your own name, but there were certain jobs for which you assumed different identities. Those were the times when ostensibly you had to go home and be with your mother.

“But I strongly suspect, Miss Shapland, that the elderly woman I visited who lives in a small village with a nurse-companion to look after her, an elderly woman who is genuinely a mental patient with a confused mind, is not your mother at all. She has been your excuse for retiring from employment and from the circle of your friends. The three months this winter that you spent with your ‘mother’ who had one of her ‘bad turns’ covers the time when you went out to Ramat. Not as Ann Shapland but as Angelica de Toredo, a Spanish, or near-Spanish cabaret dancer. You occupied the room in the hotel next to that of Mrs. Sutcliffe and somehow you managed to see Bob Rawlinson conceal the jewels in the racquet. You had no opportunity of taking the racquet then for there was the sudden evacuation of all British people, but you had read the labels on their luggage and it was easy to find out something about them. To obtain a secretarial post here was not difficult. I have made some inquiries. You paid a substantial sum to Miss Bulstrode's former secretary to vacate her post on the plea of a 'breakdown.' And you had quite a plausible story. You had been commissioned to write a series of articles on a famous girls' school 'from within.'

"It all seemed quite easy, did it not? If a child's racquet was missing, what of it? Simpler still, you would go out at night to the Sports Pavilion, and abstract the jewels. But you had not reckoned with Miss Springer. Perhaps she had already seen you examining the racquets. Perhaps she just happened to wake that night. She followed you out there and you shot her. Later, Mademoiselle Blanche tried to blackmail you, and you killed her. It comes natural to you, does it not, to kill?"

He stopped. In a monotonous official voice, Inspector Kelsey cautioned his prisoner.

She did not listen. Turning towards Hercule Poirot, she burst out in a low-pitched flood of invective that startled everyone in the room.

"Whew!" said Adam, as Kelsey took her away. "And I thought she was a nice girl!"

Miss Johnson had been kneeling by Miss Chadwick.

"I'm afraid she's badly hurt," she said. "She'd better not be moved until the doctor comes."

Twenty-four

POIROT EXPLAINS

I

Mrs. Upjohn, wandering through the corridors of Meadowbank School, forgot the exciting scene she had just been through. She was for the moment merely a mother seeking her young. She found her in a deserted classroom. Julia was bending over a desk, her tongue protruding slightly, absorbed in the agonies of composition.

She looked up and stared. Then flung herself across the room and hugged her mother.

“Mummy!”

Then, with the self-consciousness of her age, ashamed of her unrestrained emotion, she detached herself and spoke in a carefully casual tone—indeed almost accusingly.

“Aren’t you back rather soon, Mummy?”

“I flew back,” said Mrs. Upjohn, almost apologetically, “from Ankara.”

“Oh,” said Julia. “Well—I’m glad you’re back.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Upjohn, “I am very glad too.”

They looked at each other, embarrassed. “What are you doing?” said Mrs. Upjohn, advancing a little closer.

“I’m writing a composition for Miss Rich,” said Julia. “She really does set the most exciting subjects.”

“What’s this one?” said Mrs. Upjohn. She bent over.

The subject was written at the top of the page. Some nine or ten lines of writing in Julia's uneven and sprawling handwriting came below. "Contrast the Attitudes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to Murder" read Mrs. Upjohn.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "you can't say that the subject isn't topical!"

She read the start of her daughter's essay. "Macbeth," Julia had written, "liked the idea of murder and had been thinking of it a lot, but he needed a push to get him started. Once he'd got started he enjoyed murdering people and had no more qualms or fears. Lady Macbeth was just greedy and ambitious. She thought she didn't mind what she did to get what she wanted. But once she'd done it she found she didn't like it after all."

"Your language isn't very elegant," said Mrs. Upjohn. "I think you'll have to polish it up a bit, but you've certainly got something there."

II

Inspector Kelsey was speaking in a slightly complaining tone.

"It's all very well for you, Poirot," he said. "You can say and do a lot of things we can't: and I'll admit the whole thing was well stage-managed. Got her off her guard, made her think we were after Rich, and then, Mrs. Upjohn's sudden appearance made her lose her head. Thank the lord she kept that automatic after shooting Springer. If the bullet corresponds—"

"It will, mon ami, it will," said Poirot.

"Then we've got her cold for the murder of Springer. And I gather Miss Chadwick's in a bad way. But look here, Poirot, I still can't see how she can possibly have killed Miss Vansittart. It's physically impossible. She's got a cast-iron alibi—unless young Rathbone and the whole staff of the Nid Sauvage are in it with her."

Poirot shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "Her alibi is perfectly good. She killed Miss Springer and Mademoiselle Blanche. But Miss Vansittart—" he hesitated for a moment, his eyes going to where Miss Bulstrode sat listening to them. "Miss Vansittart was killed by Miss Chadwick."

“Miss Chadwick?” exclaimed Miss Bulstrode and Kelsey together.

Poirot nodded. “I am sure of it.”

“But—why?”

“I think,” said Poirot, “Miss Chadwick loved Meadowbank too much … ” His eyes went across to Miss Bulstrode.

“I see … ” said Miss Bulstrode. “Yes, yes, I see … I ought to have known.” She paused. “You mean that she—?”

“I mean,” said Poirot, “that she started here with you, that all along she has regarded Meadowbank as a joint venture between you both.”

“Which in one sense it was,” said Miss Bulstrode.

“Quite so,” said Poirot. “But that was merely the financial aspect. When you began to talk of retiring she regarded herself as the person who would take over.”

“But she’s far too old,” objected Miss Bulstrode.

“Yes,” said Poirot, “she is too old and she is not suited to be a headmistress. But she herself did not think so. She thought that when you went she would be headmistress of Meadowbank as a matter of course. And then she found that was not so. That you were considering someone else, that you had fastened upon Eleanor Vansittart. And she loved Meadowbank. She loved the school and she did not like Eleanor Vansittart. I think in the end she hated her.”

“She might have done,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Yes, Eleanor Vansittart was —how shall I put it?—she was always very complacent, very superior about everything. That would be hard to bear if you were jealous. That’s what you mean, isn’t it? Chaddy was jealous.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “She was jealous of Meadowbank and jealous of Eleanor Vansittart. She couldn’t bear the thought of the school and Miss Vansittart together. And then perhaps something in your manner led her to think that you were weakening?”

“I did weaken,” said Miss Bulstrode. “But I didn’t weaken in the way that perhaps Chaddy thought I would weaken. Actually I thought of someone younger still than Miss Vansittart—I thought it over and then I said No, she’s too young … Chaddy was with me then, I remember.”

“And she thought,” said Poirot, “that you were referring to Miss Vansittart. That you were saying Miss Vansittart was too young. She thoroughly agreed. She thought that experience and wisdom such as she had got were far more important things. But then, after all, you returned to your original decision. You chose Eleanor Vansittart as the right person and left her in charge of the school that weekend. This is what I think happened. On that Sunday night Miss Chadwick was restless, she got up and she saw the light in the squash court. She went out there exactly as she says she went. There is only one thing different in her story from what she said. It wasn’t a golf club she took with her. She picked up one of the sandbags from the pile in the hall. She went out there all ready to deal with a burglar, with someone who for a second time had broken into the Sports Pavilion. She had the sandbag ready in her hand to defend herself if attacked. And what did she find? She found Eleanor Vansittart kneeling down looking in a locker, and she thought, it may be—(for I am good,” said Hercule Poirot in a parenthesis, “—at putting myself into other people’s minds—) she thought if I were a marauder, a burglar, I would come up behind her and strike her down. And as the thought came into her mind, only half conscious of what she was doing, she raised the sandbag and struck. And there was Eleanor Vansittart dead, out of her way. She was appalled then, I think, at what she had done. It has preyed on her ever since—for she is not a natural killer, Miss Chadwick. She was driven, as some are driven, by jealousy and by obsession. The obsession of love for Meadowbank. Now that Eleanor Vansittart was dead she was quite sure that she would succeed you at Meadowbank. So she didn’t confess. She told her story to the police exactly as it had occurred but for the one vital fact, that it was she who had struck the blow. But when she was asked about the golf club which presumably Miss Vansittart took with her being nervous after all that had occurred, Miss

Chadwick said quickly that she had taken it out there. She didn't want you to think even for a moment that she had handled the sandbag."

"Why did Ann Shapland also choose a sandbag to kill Mademoiselle Blanche?" asked Miss Bulstrode.

"For one thing, she could not risk a pistol shot in the school building, and for another she is a very clever young woman. She wanted to tie up this third murder with the second one, for which she had an alibi."

"I don't really understand what Eleanor Vansittart was doing herself in the Sports Pavilion," said Miss Bulstrode.

"I think one could make a guess. She was probably far more concerned over the disappearance of Shaista than she allowed to appear on the surface. She was as upset as Miss Chadwick was. In a way it was worse for her, because she had been left by you in charge—and the kidnapping had happened whilst she was responsible. Moreover she had pooh-poohed it as long as possible through an unwillingness to face unpleasant facts squarely."

"So there was weakness behind the façade," mused Miss Bulstrode. "I sometimes suspected it."

"She, too, I think, was unable to sleep. And I think she went out quietly to the Sports Pavilion to make an examination of Shaista's locker in case there might be some clue there to the girl's disappearance."

"You seem to have explanations for everything, Mr. Poirot."

"That's his speciality," said Inspector Kelsey with slight malice.

"And what was the point of getting Eileen Rich to sketch various members of my staff?"

"I wanted to test the child Jennifer's ability to recognize a face. I soon satisfied myself that Jennifer was so entirely preoccupied by her own affairs, that she gave outsiders at most a cursory glance, taking in only the external details of their appearance. She did not recognize a sketch of

Mademoiselle Blanche with a different hairdo. Still less, then, would she have recognized Ann Shapland who, as your secretary, she seldom saw at close quarters.”

“You think that the woman with the racquet was Ann Shapland herself.”

“Yes. It has been a one woman job all through. You remember that day, you rang for her to take a message to Julia but in the end, as the buzzer went unanswered, sent a girl to find Julia. Ann was accustomed to quick disguise. A fair wig, differently pencilled eyebrows, a ‘fussy’ dress and hat. She need only be absent from her typewriter for about twenty minutes. I saw from Miss Rich’s clever sketches how easy it is for a woman to alter her appearance by purely external matters.”

“Miss Rich—I wonder—” Miss Bulstrode looked thoughtful.

Poirot gave Inspector Kelsey a look and the Inspector said he must be getting along.

“Miss Rich?” said Miss Bulstrode again.

“Send for her,” said Poirot. “It is the best way.”

Eileen Rich appeared. She was white-faced and slightly defiant.

“You want to know,” she said to Miss Bulstrode, “what I was doing in Ramat?”

“I think I have an idea,” said Miss Bulstrode.

“Just so,” said Poirot. “Children nowadays know all the facts of life—but their eyes often retain innocence.”

He added that he, too, must be getting along, and slipped out.

“That was it, wasn’t it?” said Miss Bulstrode. Her voice was brisk and businesslike. “Jennifer merely described it as fat. She didn’t realize it was a pregnant woman she had seen.”

“Yes,” said Eileen Rich. “That was it. I was going to have a child. I didn’t want to give up my job here. I carried on all right through the autumn, but after that, it was beginning to show. I got a doctor’s certificate that I wasn’t fit to carry on, and I pleaded illness. I went abroad to a remote spot where I thought I wasn’t likely to meet anyone who knew me. I came back to this country and the child was born—dead. I came back this term and I hoped that no one would ever know … But you understand now, don’t you, why I said I should have had to refuse your offer of a partnership if you’d made it? Only now, with the school in such a disaster, I thought that, after all, I might be able to accept.”

She paused and said in a matter-of-fact voice,

“Would you like me to leave now? Or wait until the end of term?”

“You’ll stay till the end of the term,” said Miss Bulstrode, “and if there is a new term here, which I still hope, you’ll come back.”

“Come back?” said Eileen Rich. “Do you mean you still want me?”

“Of course I want you,” said Miss Bulstrode. “You haven’t murdered anyone, have you?—not gone mad over jewels and planned to kill to get them? I’ll tell you what you’ve done. You’ve probably denied your instincts too long. There was a man, you fell in love with him, you had a child. I suppose you couldn’t marry.”

“There was never any question of marriage,” said Eileen Rich. “I knew that. He isn’t to blame.”

“Very well, then,” said Miss Bulstrode. “You had a love affair and a child. You wanted to have that child?”

“Yes,” said Eileen Rich. “Yes, I wanted to have it.”

“So that’s that,” said Miss Bulstrode. “Now I’m going to tell you something. I believe that in spite of this love affair, your real vocation in life is teaching. I think your profession means more to you than any normal woman’s life with a husband and children would mean.”

“Oh yes,” said Eileen Rich. “I’m sure of that. I’ve known that all along. That’s what I really want to do—that’s the real passion of my life.”

“Then don’t be a fool,” said Miss Bulstrode. “I’m making you a very good offer. If, that is, things come right. We’ll spend two or three years together putting Meadowbank back on the map. You’ll have different ideas as to how that should be done from the ideas that I have. I’ll listen to your ideas. Maybe I’ll even give in to some of them. You want things to be different, I suppose, at Meadowbank?”

“I do in some ways, yes,” said Eileen Rich. “I won’t pretend. I want more emphasis on getting girls that really matter.”

“Ah,” said Miss Bulstrode, “I see. It’s the snob element that you don’t like, is that it?”

“Yes,” said Eileen, “it seems to me to spoil things.”

“What you don’t realize,” said Miss Bulstrode, “is that to get the kind of girl you want you’ve got to have that snob element. It’s quite a small element really, you know. A few foreign royalties, a few great names and everybody, all the silly parents all over this country and other countries want their girls to come to Meadowbank. Fall over themselves to get their girl admitted to Meadowbank. What’s the result? An enormous waiting list, and I look at the girls and I see the girls and I choose! You get your pick, do you see? I choose my girls. I choose them very carefully, some for character, some for brains, some for pure academic intellect. Some because I think they haven’t had a chance but are capable of being made something of that’s worthwhile. You’re young, Eileen. You’re full of ideals—it’s the teaching that matters to you and the ethical side of it. Your vision’s quite right. It’s the girls that matter, but if you want to make a success of anything, you know, you’ve got to be a good tradesman as well. Ideas are like everything else. They’ve got to be marketed. We’ll have to do some pretty slick work in future to get Meadowbank going again. I’ll have to get my hooks into a few people, former pupils, bully them, plead with them, get them to send their daughters here. And then the others will come. You let me be up to my tricks, and then you shall have your way. Meadowbank will go on and it’ll be a fine school.”

“It’ll be the finest school in England,” said Eileen Rich enthusiastically.

“Good,” said Miss Bulstrode, “—and Eileen, I should go and get your hair properly cut and shaped. You don’t seem able to manage that bun. And now,” she said, her voice changing, “I must go to Chaddy.”

She went in and came up to the bed. Miss Chadwick was lying very still and white. The blood had all gone from her face and she looked drained of life. A policeman with a notebook sat nearby and Miss Johnson sat on the other side of the bed. She looked at Miss Bulstrode and shook her head gently.

“Hallo, Chaddy,” said Miss Bulstrode. She took up the limp hand in hers. Miss Chadwick’s eyes opened.

“I want to tell you,” she said, “Eleanor—it was—it was me.”

“Yes, dear, I know,” said Miss Bulstrode.

“Jealous,” said Chaddy. “I wanted—”

“I know,” said Miss Bulstrode.

Tears rolled very slowly down Miss Chadwick’s cheeks. “It’s so awful … I didn’t mean—I don’t know how I came to do such a thing!”

“Don’t think about it anymore,” said Miss Bulstrode.

“But I can’t—you’ll never—I’ll never forgive myself—”

“Listen, dear,” she said. “You saved my life, you know. My life and the life of that nice woman, Mrs. Upjohn. That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“I only wish,” said Miss Chadwick, “I could have given my life for you both. That would have made it all right….”

Miss Bulstrode looked at her with great pity. Miss Chadwick took a great breath, smiled, then, moving her head very slightly to one side, she died….

“You did give your life, my dear,” said Miss Bulstrode softly. “I hope you realize that—now.”

Twenty-five

LEGACY

I

“A Mr. Robinson has called to see you, sir.”

“Ah!” said Hercule Poirot. He stretched out his hand and picked up a letter from the desk in front of him. He looked down on it thoughtfully.

He said: “Show him in, Georges.”

The letter was only a few lines,

Dear Poirot,

A Mr. Robinson may call upon you in the near future. You may already know something about him. Quite a prominent figure in certain circles. There is a demand for such men in our modern world … I believe, if I may so put it, that he is, in this particular matter, on the side of the angels. This is just a recommendation, if you should be in doubt. Of course, and I underline this, we have no idea as to the matter on which he wishes to consult you …

Ha ha! and likewise ho ho!

Yours ever,

Ephraim Pikeaway

Poirot laid down the letter and rose as Mr. Robinson came into the room. He bowed, shook hands, indicated a chair.

Mr. Robinson sat, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his large yellow face. He observed that it was a warm day.

“You have not, I hope, walked here in this heat?”

Poirot looked horrified at the idea. By a natural association of ideas, his fingers went to his moustache. He was reassured. There was no limpness.

Mr. Robinson looked equally horrified.

“No, no, indeed. I came in my Rolls. But these traffic blocks … One sits for half an hour sometimes.”

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

There was a pause—the pause that ensues on part one of conversation before entering upon part two.

“I was interested to hear—of course one hears so many things—most of them quite untrue—that you had been concerning yourself with the affairs of a girls’ school.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. “That!”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Meadowbank,” said Mr. Robinson thoughtfully. “Quite one of the premier schools of England.”

“It is a fine school.”

“Is? Or was?”

“I hope the former.”

“I hope so, too,” said Mr. Robinson. “I fear it may be touch and go. Ah well, one must do what one can. A little financial backing to tide over a certain inevitable period of depression. A few carefully chosen new pupils. I am not without influence in European circles.”

“I, too, have applied persuasion in certain quarters. If, as you say, we can tide things over. Mercifully, memories are short.”

"That is what one hopes. But one must admit that events have taken place there that might well shake the nerves of fond mammas—and papas also. The Games Mistress, the French Mistress, and yet another mistress—all murdered."

"As you say."

"I hear," said Mr. Robinson, "(one hears so many things), that the unfortunate young woman responsible has suffered from a phobia about schoolmistresses since her youth. An unhappy childhood at school. Psychiatrists will make a good deal of this. They will try at least for a verdict of diminished responsibility, as they call it nowadays."

"That line would seem to be the best choice," said Poirot. "You will pardon me for saying that I hope it will not succeed."

"I agree with you entirely. A most cold-blooded killer. But they will make much of her excellent character, her work as secretary to various well-known people, her war record—quite distinguished, I believe—counterespionage—"

He let the last words out with a certain significance—a hint of a question in his voice.

"She was very good, I believe," he said more briskly. "So young—but quite brilliant, of great use—to both sides. That was her métier—she should have stuck to it. But I can understand the temptation—to play a lone hand, and gain a big prize." He added softly, "A very big prize."

Poirot nodded.

Mr. Robinson leaned forward.

"Where are they, M. Poirot?"

"I think you know where they are."

"Well, frankly, yes. Banks are such useful institutions are they not?"

Poirot smiled.

“We needn’t beat about the bush really, need we, my dear fellow? What are you going to do about them?”

“I have been waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“Shall we say—for suggestions?”

“Yes—I see.”

“You understand they do not belong to me. I would like to hand them over to the person they do belong to. But that, if I appraise the position correctly, is not so simple.”

“Governments are in such a difficult position,” said Mr. Robinson. “Vulnerable, so to speak. What with oil, and steel, and uranium, and cobalt and all the rest of it, foreign relations are a matter of the utmost delicacy. The great thing is to be able to say that Her Majesty’s Government, etc., etc., has absolutely no information on the subject.”

“But I cannot keep this important deposit at my bank indefinitely.”

“Exactly. That is why I have come to propose that you should hand it over to me.”

“Ah,” said Poirot. “Why?”

“I can give you some excellent reasons. These jewels—mercifully we are not official, we can call things by their right names—were unquestionably the personal property of the late Prince Ali Yusuf.”

“I understand that is so.”

“His Highness handed them over to Squadron Leader Robert Rawlinson with certain instructions. They were to be got out of Ramat, and they were to be delivered to me.”

"Have you proof of that?"

"Certainly."

Mr. Robinson drew a long envelope from his pocket. Out of it he took several papers. He laid them before Poirot on the desk.

Poirot bent over them and studied them carefully.

"It seems to be as you say."

"Well, then?"

"Do you mind if I ask a question?"

"Not at all."

"What do you, personally, get out of this?"

Mr. Robinson looked surprised.

"My dear fellow. Money, of course. Quite a lot of money."

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

"It is a very old trade," said Mr. Robinson. "And a lucrative one. There are quite a lot of us, a network all over the globe. We are, how shall I put it, the Arrangers behind the scenes. For kings, for presidents, for politicians, for all those, in fact, upon whom the fierce light beats, as a poet has put it. We work in with one another and remember this: we keep faith. Our profits are large but we are honest. Our services are costly—but we do render service."

"I see," said Poirot. "Eh bien! I agree to what you ask."

"I can assure you that that decision will please everyone." Mr. Robinson's eyes just rested for a moment on Colonel Pikeaway's letter where it lay at Poirot's right hand.

“But just one little moment. I am human. I have curiosity. What are you going to do with these jewels?”

Mr. Robinson looked at him. Then his large yellow face creased into a smile. He leaned forward.

“I shall tell you.”

He told him.

II

Children were playing up and down the street. Their raucous cries filled the air. Mr. Robinson, alighting ponderously from his Rolls, was cannoned into by one of them.

Mr. Robinson put the child aside with a not unkindly hand and peered up at the number on the house.

No. 15. This was right. He pushed open the gate and went up the three steps to the front door. Neat white curtains at the windows, he noted, and a well-polished brass knocker. An insignificant little house in an insignificant street in an insignificant part of London, but it was well kept. It had self-respect.

The door opened. A girl of about twenty-five, pleasant looking, with a kind of fair, chocolate box prettiness, welcomed him with a smile.

“Mr. Robinson? Come in.”

She took him into the small sitting room. A television set, cretonnes of a Jacobean pattern, a cottage piano against the wall. She had on a dark skirt and a grey pullover.

“You’ll have some tea? I’ve got the kettle on.”

“Thank you, but no. I never drink tea. And I can only stay a short time. I have only come to bring you what I wrote to you about.”

"From Ali?"

"Yes."

"There isn't—there couldn't be—any hope? I mean—it's really true—that he was killed? There couldn't be any mistake?"

"I'm afraid there was no mistake," said Mr. Robinson gently.

"No—no, I suppose not. Anyway, I never expected—When he went back there I didn't think really I'd ever see him again. I don't mean I thought he was going to be killed or that there would be a Revolution. I just mean—well, you know—he'd have to carry on, do his stuff—what was expected of him. Marry one of his own people—all that."

Mr. Robinson drew out a package and laid it down on the table.

"Open it, please."

Her fingers fumbled a little as she tore the wrappings off and then unfolded the final covering….

She drew her breath in sharply.

Red, blue, green, white, all sparkling with fire, with life, turning the dim little room into Aladdin's cave….

Mr. Robinson watched her. He had seen so many women look at jewels….

She said at last in a breathless voice,

"Are they—they can't be—real?"

"They are real."

"But they must be worth—they must be worth—"

Her imagination failed.

Mr. Robinson nodded.

“If you wish to dispose of them, you can probably get at least half a million pounds for them.”

“No—no, it’s not possible.”

Suddenly she scooped them up in her hands and rewrapped them with shaking fingers.

“I’m scared,” she said. “They frighten me. What am I to do with them?”

The door burst open. A small boy rushed in.

“Mum, I got a smashing tank off Billy. He—”

He stopped, staring at Mr. Robinson.

An olive skinned, dark boy.

His mother said,

“Go in the kitchen, Allen, your tea’s all ready. Milk and biscuits and there’s a bit of gingerbread.”

“Oh good.” He departed noisily.

“You call him Allen?” said Mr. Robinson.

She flushed.

“It was the nearest name to Ali. I couldn’t call him Ali—too difficult for him and the neighbours and all.”

She went on, her face clouding over again.

“What am I to do?”

“First, have you got your marriage certificate? I have to be sure you’re the person you say you are.”

She stared a moment, then went over to a small desk. From one of the drawers she brought out an envelope, extracted a paper from it and brought it to him.

“Hm … yes … Register of Edmonstow … Ali Yusuf, student … Alice Calder, spinster … Yes, all in order.”

“Oh it’s legal all right—as far as it goes. And no one ever tumbled to who he was. There’s so many of these foreign Moslem students, you see. We knew it didn’t mean anything really. He was a Moslem and he could have more than one wife, and he knew he’d have to go back and do just that. We talked about it. But Allen was on the way, you see, and he said this would make it all right for him—we were married all right in this country and Allen would be legitimate. It was the best he could do for me. He really did love me, you know. He really did.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Robinson. “I am sure he did.”

He went on briskly.

“Now, supposing that you put yourself in my hands. I will see to the selling of these stones. And I will give you the address of a lawyer, a really good and reliable solicitor. He will advise you, I expect, to put most of the money in a trust fund. And there will be other things, education for your son, and a new way of life for you. You’ll want social education and guidance. You’re going to be a very rich woman and all the sharks and the confidence tricksters and the rest of them will be after you. Your life’s not going to be easy except in the purely material sense. Rich people don’t have an easy time in life, I can tell you—I’ve seen too many of them to have that illusion. But you’ve got character. I think you’ll come through. And that boy of yours may be a happier man than his father ever was.”

He paused. “You agree?”

“Yes. Take them.” She pushed them towards him, then said suddenly: “That schoolgirl—the one who found them—I’d like her to have one of them—which—what colour do you think she’d like?”

Mr. Robinson reflected. “An emerald, I think—green for mystery. A good idea of yours. She will find that very thrilling.”

He rose to his feet.

“I shall charge you for my services, you know,” said Mr. Robinson. “And my charges are pretty high. But I shan’t cheat you.”

She gave him a level glance.

“No, I don’t think you will. And I need someone who knows about business, because I don’t.”

“You seem a very sensible woman if I may say so. Now then, I’m to take these? You don’t want to keep—just one—say?”

He watched her with curiosity, the sudden flicker of excitement, the hungry covetous eyes—and then the flicker died.

“No,” said Alice. “I won’t keep—even one.” She flushed. “Oh I daresay that seems daft to you—not to keep just one big ruby or an emerald—just as a keepsake. But you see, he and I—he was a Moslem but he let me read bits now and again out of the Bible. And we read that bit—about a woman whose price was above rubies. And so—I won’t have any jewels. I’d rather not….”

“A most unusual woman,” said Mr. Robinson to himself as he walked down the path and into his waiting Rolls.

He repeated to himself,

“A most unusual woman….”

The Adventure Of The Christmas Pudding (1960)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

"Why do you say that?"

He did not answer that question. Instead he said briskly:

"Now to business. Who are the solicitors acting for Major Rich?"

She told him and he made a note of the address.

"Will you write a few words to them and give it to me? I shall want to make arrangements to see Major Rich."

"He - it's been remanded for a week."

"Naturally. That is the procedure. Will you also write a note to Commander McLaren and to your friends the Spences? I shall want to see all of them, and it is essential that they do not at once show me the door."

When she rose from the writing desk, he said:

"One thing more. I shall register my own impressions, but I also want yours - of Commander McLaren and of Mr. and Mrs. Spence."

"Jock is one of our oldest friends. I've known him ever since I was a child. He appears to be quite a dour person, but he's really a dear - always the same - always to be relied upon. He's not gay and amusing but he's a tower of strength - both Arnold and I relied on his judgement a lot."

"And he, also, is doubtless in love with you?" Poirot's eyes twinkled slightly.

"Oh yes," said Margharita happily. "He's always been in love with me - but by now it's become a kind of habit."

"And the Spences?"

"They're amusing - and very good company. Linda Spence is really rather a clever girl. Arnold enjoyed talking with her. She's attractive, too."

"You are friends?"

"She and I? In a way. I don't know that I really like her. She's too malicious."

"And her husband?"

"Oh, Jeremy is delightful. Very musical. Knows a good deal about pictures, too. He and I go to picture shows a good deal together."

"Ah, well, I shall see for myself." He took her hand in his, "I hope, madame, you will not regret asking for my help."

"Why should I regret it?" Her eyes opened wide.

"One never knows," said Poirot cryptically.

"And I - I do not know," he said to himself, as he went down the stairs. The cocktail party was still in full spate, but he avoided being captured and reached the street.

"No," he repeated. "I do not know."

It was of Margharita Clayton he was thinking. That apparently childlike candor, that frank innocence - was it just that? Or did it mask something else? There had been women like that in medieval days - women on whom history had not been able to agree.

He thought of Mary Stuart, the Scottish Queen. Had she known, that night in Kirk o'Fields, of the deed that was to be done? Or was she completely innocent? Had the conspirators told her nothing? Was she one of those childlike simple women who can say to themselves "I do not know" and believe it? He felt the spell of Margharita Clayton. But he was not entirely sure about her...

Such women could be, though innocent themselves, the cause of crimes.

Such women could be, in intent and design, criminals themselves, though not in action.

Theirs was never the hand that held the knife - as to Margharita Clayton - no - he did not know!

Hercule Poirot did not find Major Rich's solicitors very helpful. He had not expected to do so.

They managed to indicate, though without saying so, that it would be in their client's best interest if Mrs. Clayton showed no sign of activity on his behalf.

His visit to them was in the interests of "correctness." He had enough pull with the Home Office and the CID to arrange his interview with the prisoner.

Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the Clayton case, was not one of Poirot's favorites. He was not, however, hostile on this occasion, merely contemptuous.

"Can't waste much time over the old dodderer," he had said to his assisting sergeant before Poirot was shown in. "Still, I'll have to be polite."

"You'll really have to pull some rabbits out of a hat if you're going to do anything with this one, M. Poirot," he remarked cheerfully. "Nobody else but Rich could have killed the bloke."

"Except the valet."

"Oh, I'll give you the valet! As a possibility, that is. But you won't find anything there. No motives whatever."

"You cannot be entirely sure of that. Motives are very curious things."

"Well, he wasn't acquainted with Clayton in any way. He's got a perfectly innocuous past. And he seems to be perfectly right in his head. I don't know what more you want?"

"I want to find out that Rich did not commit the crime."

"To please the lady, eh?" Inspector Miller grinned wickedly. "She's been getting at you, I suppose. Quite something, isn't she? Cherchez la femme with a vengeance. If she'd had the opportunity, you know, she might have done it herself."

"That, no!"

"You'd be surprised. I once knew a woman like that. Put a couple of husbands out of the way without a blink of her innocent blue eyes. Broken-hearted each time, too. The jury would have aquitted her if they'd had half a chance which they hadn't, the evidence being practically cast iron."

"Well, my friend, let us not argue. What I make so bold as to ask is a few reliable details on the facts. What a newspaper prints is news - but not always truth!"

"They have to enjoy themselves. What do you want?"

"Time of death as near as can be."

"Which can't be very near because the body wasn't examined until the following morning. Death is estimated to have taken place from thirteen to ten hours previously. That is, between seven and ten o'clock the night before... He was stabbed through the jugular vein - death must have been matter of moments."

"And the weapon?"

"A kind of Italian stiletto - quite small - razor sharp. Nobody has ever seen it before, or knows where it comes from. But we shall know - in the end it's a matter of time and patience."

"It could not have been picked up in the course of a quarrel."

"No. The valet says no such thing was in the flat."

"What interests me is the telegram," said Poirot. "The telegram that called Arnold Clayton away to Scot- land. Was that summons genuine?"

"No. There was no hitch or trouble up there. The land transfer, or whatever it was, was proceeding normally."

"Then who sent that telegram - I am presuming there was a telegram?"

"There must have been. Not that we'd necessarily believe Mrs. Clayton. But Clayton told the valet he was called by wire to Scotland. And he also told Commander McLaren."

"What time did he see Commander McLaren?"

"They had a snack together at their club - Combined Services - that was at about a quarter past seven. Then Clayton took a taxi to Rich's flat, arriving there just before eight o'clock. After that -" Miller spread his hands out.

"Anybody noticed anything at all odd about Rich's manner that evening?"

"Oh well, you know what people are. Once a thing has happened, people think they noticed a lot of things I bet they never saw at all. Mrs. Spence, now, she says he was distrait all the evening. Didn't always answer to the point. As though he had 'something on his mind.' I bet he had, too, if he had a body in the chest! Wondering how the hell to get rid of it!"

"Why didn't he get rid of it?"

"Beats me. Lost his nerve, perhaps. But it was madness to leave it until the next day. He had the best chance he'd ever have that night. There's no night porter on. He could have got his car round, packed the body in the boot - it's a big boot - driven out in the country and parked it somewhere. He might have been seen getting the body into the car, but the flats are in a side street and there's a courtyard you drive a car through. At, say, three in the morning, he had a reasonable chance. And what does he do? Goes to bed, sleeps late the next morning and wakes up to find the police in the flat!"

"He went to bed and slept well as an innocent man might do."

"Have it that way if you like. But do you really believe that yourself?"

"I shall have to leave that question until I have seen the man myself."

"Think you know an innocent man when you see one? It's not so easy as that."

"I know it is not easy - and I should not attempt to say I could do it. What I want to make up my mind about is whether the man is as stupid as he seems to be."

Poirot had no intention of seeing Charles Rich until he had seen everyone else.

He started with Commander McLaren.

McLaren was a tall, swarthy, uncommunicative man. He had a rugged but pleasant face. He was a shy man and not easy to talk to. But Poirot persevered.

Fingering Margharita's note, McLaren said almost reluctantly:

"Well, if Margharita wants me to tell you all I can, of course I'll do so. Don't know what there is to tell, though. You've heard it all already. But whatever Margharita wants - I've always done what she wanted - ever since she was sixteen. She's got a way with her, you know."

"I know," said Poirot. He went on. "First I should like you to answer a question quite frankly. Do you think Major Rich is guilty?"

"Yes, I do. I wouldn't say so to Margharita if she wants to think he's innocent, but I simply can't see it any other way. Hang it all, the fellow's got to be guilty."

"Was there bad feeling between him and Mr. Clayton?"

"Not in the least. Arnold and Charles were the best of friends. That's what makes the whole thing so extraordinary."

"Perhaps Major Rich's friendship with Mrs. Clayton -"

He was interrupted.

"Faugh! All that stuff. All the papers slyly hinting at it. Damned innuendoes! Mrs. Clayton and Rich were good friends and that's all! Margharita's got lots of friends. I'm her friend. Been one for years. And nothing the whole world mightn't know about it. Same with Charles and Margharita."

"You do not then consider that they were having an affair together?"

"Certainly not!" McLaren was wrathful. "Don't go listening to that hellcat Spence woman. She'd say anything."

"But perhaps Mr. Clayton suspected there might be something between his wife and Major Rich."

"You can take it from me he did nothing of the sort! I'd have known if so. Arnold and I were very close."

"What sort of man was he? You, if anyone, should know."

"Well, Arnold was a quiet sort of chap. But he was clever - quite brilliant, I believe. What they call a first-class financial brain. He was quite high up in the Treasury, you know."

"So I have heard."

"He read a good deal. And he collected stamps. And he was extremely fond of music. He didn't dance, or care much for going out."

"Was it, do you think, a happy marriage?"

Commander McLaren's answer did not come quickly. He seemed to be puzzling it out.

"That sort of thing's very hard to say... Yes, I think they were happy. He was devoted to her in his quiet way. I'm sure she was fond of him. They weren't likely to split up, if that's what you're thinking. They hadn't, perhaps, a lot in common."

Poirot nodded. It was as much as he was likely to get. He said: "Now tell me about that last evening. Mr. Clayton dined with you at the club. What did he say?"

"Told me he'd got to go to Scotland. Seemed vexed about it. We didn't have dinner, by the way. No time. Just sandwiches and a drink. For him, that is. I had only the drink. I was going out to a buffet supper, remember."

"Mr. Clayton mentioned a telegram?"

"Yes."

"He did not actually show you the telegram?"

"No."

"Did he say he was going to call on Rich?"

"Not definitely. In fact he said he doubted if he'd have time. He said, 'Margharita can explain or you can,' And then he said, 'See she gets home all right, won't you?' Then he went off. It was all quite natural and easy."

"He had no suspicion at all that the telegram wasn't genuine?"

"Wasn't it?" Commander McLaren looked startled.

"Apparently not."

"How very odd -" Commander McLaren went into a kind of coma, emerging suddenly to say:

"But that really is odd. I mean, what's the point? Why should anybody want him to go to Scotland?"

"It is a question that needs answering, certainly."

Hercule Poirot left, leaving the commander apparently still puzzling on the matter.

The Spences lived in a minute house in Chelsea.

Linda Spence received Poirot with the utmost delight.

"Do tell me," she said. "Tell me all about Margharita! Where is she?"

"That I am not at liberty to state, madame."

"She has hidden herself well! Margharita is very clever at that sort of thing. But she'll be called to give evidence at the trial, I suppose? She can't wiggle herself out of that."

Poirot looked at her appraisingly. He decided grudgingly that she was attractive in the modern style (which at that moment resembled an underfed orphan child). It was not a type he admired. The artistically disordered hair fluffed out round her head, a pair of shrewd eyes watched him from a slightly dirty face devoid of makeup save for a vivid cerise mouth. She wore an enormous pale yellow sweater hanging almost to her knees, and tight black trousers.

"What's your part in all this?" demanded Mrs. Spence. "Get the boyfriend out of it somehow? Is that it? What a hope!"

"You think then, that he is guilty?"

"Of course. Who else?"

That, Poirot thought, was very much the question. He parried it by asking another question.

"What did Major Rich seem like to you on that fatal evening? As usual? Or not as usual?"

Linda Spence screwed up her eyes judicially.

"No, he wasn't himself. He was - different."

"How different?"

"Well, surely, if you've just stabbed a man in cold blood -"

"But you were not aware at the time that he had just stabbed a man in cold blood, were you?"

"No, of course not."

"So how did you account for his being 'different'? In what way?"

"Well - distrait. Oh, I don't know. But thinking it over afterwards I decided that there had definitely been something."

Poirot sighed.

"Who arrived first?"

"We did, Jim and I. And then Jock. And finally Margharita."

"When was Mr. Clayton's departure for Scotland first mentioned?"

"When Margharita came. She said to Charles: 'Arnold's terribly sorry. He's had to rush off to Edinburgh by the night train.' And Charles said: 'Oh, that's too bad.' And then Jock said: 'Sorry. Thought you already knew.' And then we had drinks."

"Major Rich at no time mentioned seeing Mr. Clayton that evening? He said nothing of his having called in on his way to the station?"

"Not that I heard."

"It was strange, was it not," said Poirot, "about that telegram?"

"What was strange?"

"It was a fake. Nobody in Edinburgh knows anything about it."

"So that's it. I wondered at the time."

"You have an idea about the telegram?"

"I should say it rather leaps to the eye."

"How do you mean exactly?"

"My dear man," said Linda. "Don't play the innocent. Unknown hoaxer gets the husband out of the way! For that night, at all events, the coast is clear."

"You mean that Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton planned to spend the night together."

"You have heard of such things, haven't you?"

Linda looked amused.

"And the telegram was sent by one or the other of them?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were having an affair together you think?"

"Let's say I shouldn't be surprised if they were. I don't know it for a fact."

"Did Mr. Clayton suspect?"

"Arnold was an extraordinary person. He was all bottled up, if you know what I mean. I think he did know. But he was the kind of man who would never have let on. Anyone would think he was a dry stick with no feelings at all. But I'm pretty sure he wasn't like that underneath. The queer thing is that I should have been much less surprised if Arnold had stabbed Charles than the other way about. I've an idea Arnold was really an insanely jealous person."

"That is interesting."

"Though it's more likely, really, that he'd have done in Margharita. Othello - that sort of thing. Margharita, you know, has an extraordinary effect on men."

"She is a good-looking woman," said Poirot with judicious understatement.

"It was more than that. She had something. She would get men all het up - mad about her - and turn round and look at them with a sort of wide-eyed surprise that drove them barmy."

"Une femme fatale."

"That's probably the foreign name for it."

"You know her well?"

"My dear, she's one of my best friends - and I wouldn't trust her an inch."

"Ah," said Poirot and shifted the subject to Commander McLaren.

"Jock? Old faithful? He's a pet. Born to be the friend of the family. He and Arnold were really close friends. I think Arnold unbent to him more than to anyone else. And of course he was Margharita's tame cat. He'd been devoted to her for years."

"And was Mr. Clayton jealous of him, too?"

"Jealous of Jock? What an idea! Margharita's genuinely fond of Jock, but she's never given him a thought of that kind. I don't think, really, that one ever would... I don't know why... It seems a shame. He's so nice."

Poirot switched to consideration of the valet. But beyond saying vaguely that he mixed a very good side car, Linda Spence seemed to have no ideas about Burgess, and indeed seemed barely to have noticed him.

But she was quite quick in the uptake.

"You're thinking, I suppose, that he could have killed Arnold just as easily as Charles could? It seems to me madly unlikely."

"That remark depresses me, madame. But then, it seems to me (though you will probably not agree) that it is madly unlikely - not that Major Rich should kill Arnold Clayton - but that he should kill him in just the way he did."

"Stiletto stuff? Yes, definitely not in character. More likely the blunt instrument. Or he might have strangled him, perhaps?"

Poirot sighed.

"We are back at Othello. Yes, Othello... you have given me there a little idea "

"Have I? What -" There was the sound of a latchkey and an opening door. "Oh, here's Jeremy. Do you want to talk to him, too?"

Jeremy Spence was a pleasant looking man of thirty-odd, well groomed, and almost ostentatiously discreet. Mrs. Spence said that she had better go and have a look at a casserole in the kitchen and went off, leaving the two men together.

Jeremy Spence displayed none of the engaging candor of his wife. He was clearly disliking very much being mixed up in the case at all, and his remarks were carefully noninformative. They had known the Claytons some time, Rich not so well. Had seemed a pleasant fellow. As far as he could remember, Rich had seemed absolutely as usual on the evening in question. Clayton and Rich always seemed on good terms. The whole thing seemed quite unaccountable.

Throughout the conversation Jeremy Spence was making it clear that he expected Poirot to take his departure. He was civil, but only just so.

"I am afraid," said Poirot, "that you do not like these questions?"

"Well, we've had quite a session of this with the police. I rather feel that's enough. We've told all we know or saw. Now - I'd like to forget it."

"You have my sympathy. It is most unpleasant to be mixed up in this. To be asked not only what you know or what you saw but perhaps even what you think?"

"Best not to think."

"But can one avoid it? Do you think, for instance, that Mrs. Clayton was in it, too? Did she plan the death of her husband with Rich?"

"Good lord, no." Spence sounded shocked and dismayed. "I'd no idea that there was any question of such a thing?"

"Has your wife not suggested such a possibility?"

"Oh Linda! You know what women are - always got their knife into each other. Margharita never gets much of a show from her own sex - a darned sight too attractive. But surely this theory about Rich and Margharita planning murder - that's fantastic!"

"Such things have been known. The weapon, for instance. It is the kind of weapon a woman might possess, rather than a man."

"Do you mean the police have traced it to her… they can't have! I mean -"

"I know nothing," said Poirot truthfully, and escaped hastily.

From the consternation on Spence's face, he judged that he had left that gentleman something to think about!

"You will forgive my saying, M. Poirot, that I cannot see how you can be of assistance to me in any way."

Poirot did not answer. He was looking thoughtfully at the man who had been charged with the murder of his friend Arnold Clayton.

He was looking at the firm jaw, the narrow head. A lean brown man, athletic and sinewy. Something of the greyhound about him. A man whose face gave nothing away, and who was receiving his visitor with a marked lack of cordiality.

"I quite understand that Mrs. Clayton sent you to see me with the best intentions. But quite frankly, I think she was unwise. Unwise both for her own sake and mine."

"You mean?"

Rich gave a nervous glance over his shoulder. But the attendant warder was the regulation distance away. Rich lowered his voice.

"They've got to find a motive for this ridiculous accusation. They'll try to bring that there was an - association between Mrs. Clayton and myself. That, as I know Mrs. Clayton will have told you, is quite untrue. We are friends, nothing more. But surely it is advisable that she should make no move on my behalf."

Hercule Poirot ignored the point. Instead he picked out a word.

"You said this 'ridiculous' accusation. But it is not that, you know."

"I did not kill Arnold Clayton."

"Call it then a false accusation. Say the accusation is not true. But it is not ridiculous. On the contrary, it is highly plausible. You must know that very well."

"I can only tell you that to me it seems fantastic."

"Saying that will be of very little use to you. We must think of something more useful than that."

"I am represented by solicitors. They have briefed, I understand, eminent counsel to appear for my defence. I cannot accept your use of the word 'we.'"

Unexpectedly Poirot smiled.

"Ah," he said, in his most foreign manner, "that is the flea in the ear you give me. Very well. I go. I wanted to see you. I have seen you. Already I have looked up your career. You passed high up into Sandhurst. You passed into the Staff College. And so on and so on. I have made my own judgement of you today. You are not a stupid man."

"And what has all that got to do with it?"

"Everything! It is impossible that a man of your ability should commit a murder in the way this one was committed. Very well. You are innocent. Tell me now about your manservant Burgess."

"Burgess?"

"Yes. If you didn't kill Clayton, Burgess must have done so. The conclusion seems inescapable. But why? There must be a 'why?' You are the only person who knows Burgess well enough to make a guess at it. Why, Major Rich, why?"

"I can't imagine. I simply can't see it. Oh, I've followed the same line of reasoning as you have. Yes, Burgess had opportunity - the only person who had except myself. The trouble is, I just can't believe it. Burgess is not the sort of man you can imagine murdering anybody."

"What do your legal advisers think?"

Rich's lips set in a grim line.

"My legal advisers spend their time asking me, in a persuasive way, if it isn't true that I have suffered all my life from blackouts when I don't really know what I am doing!"

"As bad as that," said Poirot. "Well, perhaps we shall find it is Burgess who is subject to blackouts. It is always an idea. The weapon now. They showed it to you and asked you if it was yours?"

"It was not mine. I had never seen it before."

"It was not yours, no. But are you quite sure you had never seen it before?"

"No." Was there a faint hesitation. "It's a kind of ornamental toy - really - one sees things like that lying about in people's houses."

"In a woman's drawing room, perhaps. Perhaps in Mrs. Clayton's drawing room?"

"Certainly not!"

The last word came out loudly and the warder looked up.

"Très bien. Certainly not - and there is no need to shout. But somewhere, at some time, you have seen something very like it. Eh? I am right?"

"I do not think so. In some curio shop... perhaps."

"Ah, very likely." Poirot rose. "I take my leave."

"And now," said Hercule Poirot, "for Burgess. Yes, at long last, for Burgess."

He had learned something about the people in the case, from themselves and from each other. But nobody had given him any knowledge of Burgess. No clue, no hint, of what kind of a man he was.

When he saw Burgess he realized why.

The valet was waiting for him at Major Rich's flat, apprised of his arrival by a telephone call from Commander McLaren.

"I am M. Hercule Poirot."

"Yes, sir, I was expecting you."

Burgess held back the door with a deferential hand and Poirot entered. A small square entrance hall, a door on the left, open, leading into the sitting room. Burgess relieved Poirot of his hat and coat, and followed him into the sitting room.

"Ah," said Poirot looking round. "It was here, then, that it happened?"

"Yes, sir."

A quiet fellow, Burgess, white-faced, a little weedy. Awkward shoulders and elbows. A flat voice with a provincial accent that Poirot did not know. From the east coast, perhaps. Rather a nervous man, perhaps - but otherwise no definite characteristics. It was hard to associate him with positive action of any kind. Could one postulate a negative killer?

He had those pale blue, rather shifty eyes that observant people often equate with dishonesty. Yet a liar can look you in the face with a bold and confident eye.

"What is happening to the flat?" Poirot inquired.

"I'm still looking after it, sir. Major Rich arranged for my pay and to keep it nice until - until -"

The eyes shifted uncomfortably.

"Until -" agreed Poirot.

He added in a matter-of-fact manner: "I should say that Major Rich will almost certainly be committed for trial. The case will come up probably within three months."

Burgess shook his head, not in denial, simply in perplexity.

"It really doesn't seem possible," he said.

"That Major Rich should be a murderer?"

"The whole thing. That chest -"

His eyes went across the room.

"Ah, so that is the famous chest?"

It was a mammoth piece of furniture of very dark polished wood, studded with brass, with a great brass hasp and antique lock.

"A handsome affair." Poirot went over to it.

It stood against the wall near the window, next to a modern cabinet for holding records. On the other side of it was a door, half ajar. The door was partly masked by a big painted leather screen.

"That leads into Major Rich's bedroom," said Burgess.

Poirot nodded. His eyes traveled to the other side of the room. There were two stereophonic record players, each on a low table, trailing snake-like electrical cord. There were easy chairs - a big table. On the walls were a set of Japanese prints. It was a handsome room, comfortable, but not luxurious.

He looked back at William Burgess.

"The discovery," he said kindly, "must have been a great shock to you."

"Oh it was, sir. I'll never forget it." The valet rushed into speech. Words poured from him. He felt, perhaps, that by telling the story often enough, he might at last expunge it from his mind.

"I'd gone round the room, sir. Clearing up. Glasses and so on. I'd just stooped to pick up a couple of olives off the floor - and I saw it - on the rug, a rusty dark stain. No, the rug's gone now. To the cleaners. The police had done with it. Whatever's that? I thought. Saying to myself, almost in joke like: 'Really it might be blood! But where does it come from? What got spilled?' And then I saw it was from the chest - down the side, here, where there's a crack. And I said, still not thinking anything, 'Well whatever -?' And I lifted up the lid like this -" (he suited the action to the word) "and there it was the body of a man lying on his side doubled up - like he might be asleep. And that nasty foreign knife or dagger thing sticking up out of his neck. I'll never forget it - never! Not as long as I live! The shock - not expecting it, you understand…"

He breathed deeply.

"I let the lid fall and I ran out of the flat and down to the street. Looking for a policeman - and lucky, I found one - just round the corner."

Poirot regarded him reflectively. The performance, if it was a performance, was very good. He began to be afraid that it was not a performance - that it was just how things had happened.

"You did not think of awakening first Major Rich?" he asked.

"It never occurred to me, sir. What with the shock, I - I just wanted to get out of here -" he swallowed - "and - and get help."

Poirot nodded.

"Did you realize that it was Mr. Clayton?" he asked.

"I ought to have, sir, but you know, I don't believe I did. Of course, as soon as I got back with the police officer, I said 'Why, it's Mr. Clayton!' And he says 'Who's Mr. Clayton?' And I says: 'He was here last night.'"

"Ah," said Poirot, "last night. Do you remember exactly when it was Mr. Clayton arrived here?"

"Not to the minute. But as near as not a quarter to eight, I'd say."

"You knew him well?"

"He and Mrs. Clayton had been here quite frequently during the year and a half I've been employed here."

"Did he seem quite as usual?"

"I think so. A little out of breath - but I took it he'd been hurrying. He was catching a train, or so he said."

"He had a bag with him, I suppose, as he was going to Scotland?"

"No, sir. I imagine he was keeping a taxi down below."

"Was he disappointed to find that Major Rich was out?"

"Not to notice. Just said he'd scribble a note. He came in here and went over to the desk and I went back to the kitchen. I was a little behindhand with the anchovy eggs. The kitchen's at the end of the passage and you don't hear very well from there. I didn't hear him go out or the master come in - but then I wouldn't expect to."

"And the next thing -"

"Major Rich called me. He was standing in the door here. He said he'd forgotten Mrs. Spence's Turkish cigarettes. I was to hurry out and get them. So I did. I brought them back and put them on the table in here. Of course I took it that Mr. Clayton had left by then to get his train."

"And nobody else came to the flat during the time Major Rich was out and you were in the kitchen?"

"No, sir - no one."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"How could anyone, sir? They'd have had to ring the bell."

Poirot shook his head. How could anyone? The Spences and McLaren and also Mrs. Clayton could, he already knew, account for every minute of their time. McLaren had been with acquaintances at the club, the Spences had had a couple of friends in for a drink before starting. Margharita Clayton had talked to a friend on the telephone at just that period. Not that he thought of any of them as possibilities. There would have been better ways of killing Arnold Clayton than following him to a flat with a manservant there and the host returning any moment. No, he had had a last minute hope of a "mysterious stranger"! Someone out of Clayton's apparently impeccable past, recognizing him in the street, following him here. Attacking him with the stiletto, thrusting the body into the chest, and fleeing. Pure melodrama, unrelated to reason or to probabilities! In tune with romantic historical fictions - matching the Spanish chest.

He went back across the room to the chest. He raised the lid. It came up easily, noiselessly. In a faint voice, Burgess said: "It's been scrubbed out, sir, I saw to that."

Poirot bent over it. With a faint exclamation he bent lower. He explored with his fingers.

"These holes - at the back and one side - they look - they feel, as though they had been made quite recently."

"Holes, sir?" The valet bent to see. "I really couldn't say. I've never noticed them particularly."

"They are not very obvious. But they are there. What is their purpose, would you say?"

"I really wouldn't know, sir. Some animal, perhaps - I mean a beetle, something of that kind. Something that gnaws wood?"

"Some animal?" said Poirot. "I wonder."

He stepped back across the room.

"When you came in here with the cigarettes, was there anything at all about this room that looked different? Anything at all? Chairs moved, table, something of that kind?"

"It's odd your saying that, sir... Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draft from the bedroom door, it was moved over a bit more to the left."

"Like this?" Poirot moved swiftly.

"A little more still... That's right."

The screen had already masked about half of the chest. The way it was now arranged, it almost hid the chest altogether.

"Why did you think it had been moved?"

"I didn't think, sir."

(Another Miss Lemon!)

Burgess added doubtfully:

"I suppose it leaves the way into the bedroom clearer - if the ladies wanted to leave their wraps."

"Perhaps. But there might be another reason." Burgess looked inquiring. "The screen hides the chest now, and it hides the rug below the chest. If Major Rich stabbed Mr. Clayton, blood would presently start dripping through the cracks at the base of the chest. Someone might notice - as you noticed the next morning. So - the screen was moved."

"I never thought of that, sir."

"What are the lights like here, strong or dim?"

"I'll show you, sir."

Quickly, the valet drew the curtains and switched on a couple of lamps. They gave a soft mellow light, hardly strong enough even to read by. Poirot glanced up at a ceiling light.

"That wasn't on, sir. It's very little used."

Poirot looked round in the soft glow. The valet said:

"I don't believe you'd see any bloodstains, sir, it's too dim."

"I think you are right. So, then, why was the screen moved?"

Burgess shivered.

"It's awful to think of - a nice gentleman like Major Rich doing a thing like that."

"You've no doubt that he did do it? Why did he do it, Burgess?"

"Well, he'd been through the war, of course. He might have had a head wound, mightn't he? They do say as sometimes it all flares up years afterwards. They suddenly go all queer and don't know what they're doing. And they say as often as not, it's their nearest and dearest as they goes for. Do you think it could have been like that?"

Poirot gazed at him. He sighed. He turned away. "No," he said, "it was not like that."

With the air of a conjuror, a piece of crisp paper was insinuated into Burgess's hand.

"Oh thank you, sir, but really I don't -"

"You have helped me," said Poirot. "By showing me this room. By showing me what is in the room. By showing me what took place that evening. The impossible is never impossible! Remember that. I said that there were only two possibilities - I was wrong. There is a third possibility." He looked round the room again and gave a little shiver. "Pull back the curtains. Let in the light and the air. This room needs it. It needs cleansing. It will be a long time, I think, before it is purified from what afflicts it - the lingering memory of hate."

Burgess, his mouth open, handed Poirot his hat and coat. He seemed bewildered. Poirot, who enjoyed making incomprehensible statements, went down to the street with a brisk step.

When Poirot got home, he made a telephone call to Inspector Miller.

"What happened to Clayton's bag? His wife said he had packed one."

"It was at the club. He left it with the porter. Then he must have forgotten it and gone off without it."

"What was in it?"

"What you'd expect. Pyjamas, extra shirt, washing things."

"Very thorough."

"What did you expect would be in it?"

Poirot ignored that question. He said:

"About the stiletto. I suggest that you get hold of whatever cleaning woman attends Mrs. Spence's house. Find out if she ever saw anything like it lying about there."

"Mrs. Spence?" Miller whistled. "Is that the way your mind is working? The Spences were shown the stiletto. They didn't recognize it."

"Ask them again."

"Do you mean -"

"And then let me know what they say."

"I can't imagine what you think you have got hold of."

"Read Othello, Miller. Consider the characters in Othello. We've missed out one of them."

He rang off. Next he dialed Lady Chatterton. The number was engaged.

He tried again a little later. Still no success. He called for George, his valet, and instructed him to continue ringing the number until he got a reply. Lady Chatterton, he knew, was an incorrigible telephoner.

He sat down in a chair, carefully eased off his patent leather shoes, stretched his toes, and leaned back.

"I am old," said Hercule Poirot. "I tire easily..." He brightened. "But the cells - they still function. Slowly - but they function. Othello, yes. Who was it said that to me? Ah yes, Mrs. Spence. The bag... the screen... the body, lying there like a man asleep. A clever murder. Premeditated, planned... I think, enjoyed!.."

George announced to him that Lady Chatterton was on the line.

"Hercule Poirot here, madame. May I speak to your guest?"

"Why, of course! Oh M. Poirot, have you done something wonderful?"

"Not yet," said Poirot. "But possibly, it marches."

Presently Margharita's voice - quiet, gentle.

"Madame, when I asked you if you noticed anything out of place that evening at the party, you frowned, as though you remembered something - and then it escaped you. Would it have been the position of the screen that night?"

"The screen? Why, of course, yes. It was not quite in its usual place."

"Did you dance that night?"

"Part of the time."

"Who did you dance with mostly?"

"Jeremy Spence. He's a wonderful dancer. Charles is good but not spectacular. He and Linda danced, and now and then we changed. Jock McLaren doesn't dance. He got out the records and sorted them and arranged what we'd have."

"You had serious music later?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Then Margharita said:

"M. Poirot, what is - all this? Have you - is there - hope?"

"Do you ever know, madame, what the people around you are feeling?"

Her voice, faintly surprised, said:

"I - suppose so."

"I suppose not. I think you have no idea. I think that is the tragedy of your life. But the tragedy is for other people - not for you.

"Someone today mentioned to me Othello. I asked you if your husband was jealous, and you said you thought he must be. But you said it quite lightly. You said it as Desdemona might have said it, not realizing danger. She, too, recognized jealousy, but she did not understand it, because she herself never had, and never could, experience jealousy. She was, I think, quite unaware of the force of acute physical passion. She loved her husband with the romantic fervor of hero worship, she loved her friend Cassio, quite innocently, as a close companion. I think that because of her immunity to passion, she herself drove men mad. Am I making sense to you, madame?"

There was a pause - and then Margharita's voice answered. Cool, sweet, a little bewildered:

"I don't - I don't really understand what you are saying -"

Poirot sighed.

He spoke in matter-of-fact tones. "This evening," he said, "I pay you a visit."

Inspector Miller was not an easy man to persuade. But equally Hercule Poirot was not an easy man to shake off until he had got his way. Inspector Miller grumbled, but capitulated.

"- though what Lady Chatterton's got to do with this -"

"Nothing, really. She has provided asylum for a friend, that is all."

"About those Spences - how did you know?"

"That stiletto came from there? It was a mere guess. Something Jeremy Spence said gave me the idea. I suggested that the stiletto belonged to Margharita Clayton. He showed that he knew positively that it did not." He paused. "What did they say?" he asked with some curiosity.

"Admitted that it was very like a toy dagger they'd once had. But it had been mislaid some weeks ago, and they had really forgotten about it. I suppose Rich pinched it from there."

"A man who likes to play safe, Mr. Jeremy Spence," said Hercule Poirot. He muttered to himself: "Some weeks ago. Oh yes, the planning began a long time ago."

"Eh, what's that?"

"We arrive," said Poirot. The taxi drew up at Lady Chatterton's house in Cheriton Street. Poirot paid the fare.

Margharita Clayton was waiting for them in the room upstairs. Her face hardened when she saw Miller.

"I didn't know -"

"You did not know who the friend was I proposed to bring?"

"Inspector Miller is not a friend of mine."

"That rather depends on whether you want to see justice done or not, Mrs. Clayton. Your husband was murdered -"

"And now we have to talk of who killed him," said Poirot quickly. "May we sit down, madame?"

Slowly Margharita sat down in a high-backed chair facing the two men.

"I ask," said Poirot, addressing both his hearers, "to listen to me patiently. I think I now know what happened on that fatal evening at Major Rich's flat. We started, all of us, by an assumption that was not true - the assumption that there were only two persons who had the opportunity of putting the body in the chest - that is to say, Major Rich or William Burgess. But we were wrong - there was a third person at the flat that evening who had an equally good opportunity to do so."

"And who was that?" demanded Miller sceptically. "The lift boy?"

"No. Arnold Clayton."

"What? Concealed his own dead body? You're crazy."

"Naturally not a dead body - a live one. In simple terms, he hid himself in the chest. A thing that has often been done throughout the course of history. The dead bride in the Mistletoe Bough, Iachimo with designs on the virtue of Imogen, and so on. I thought of it as soon as I saw that there had been holes bored in the chest quite recently. Why? They were made so that there might be a sufficiency of air in the chest. Why was the screen moved from its usual position that evening? So as to hide the chest from the people in the room. So that the hidden man could lift the lid from time to time and relieve his cramp, and hear better what went on."

"But why," demanded Margharita wide-eyed with astonishment. "Why should Arnold want to hide in the chest?"

"Is it you who ask that, madame? Your husband was a jealous man. He was also an inarticulate man. 'Bottled up,' as your friend Mrs. Spence put it. His jealousy mounted. It tortured him! Were you or were you not Rich's mistress? He did not know! He had to know! So - a 'telegram from Scotland,' the telegram that was never sent and that no one ever saw! The overnight bag is packed and conveniently forgotten at the club. He goes to the flat at a time when he has probably ascertained Rich will be out. He tells the valet he will write a note. As soon as he is left alone, he bores the holes in the chest, moves the screen, and climbs inside the chest. Tonight he will know the truth. Perhaps his wife will stay behind the others, perhaps she will go but come back again. That night the desperate, jealousy racked man will know…"

"You're not saying he stabbed himself?" Miller's voice was incredulous. "Nonsense!"

"Oh no, someone else stabbed him. Somebody who knew he was there. It was murder all right. Carefully planned, long premeditated murder. Think of the other characters in Othello. It is Iago we should have remembered. Subtle poisoning of Arnold Clayton's mind; hints, suspicions. Honest Iago, the faithful friend, the man you always believe! Arnold Clayton believed him. Arnold Clayton let his jealousy be played upon, be roused to fever pitch. Was the plan of hiding in the chest Arnold's own idea? He may have thought it was - probably he did think so! And so the scene is set. The stiletto, quietly abstracted some weeks earlier, is ready. The evening comes. The lights are low, the gramophone is playing, two couples dance, the odd man out is busy at the record cabinet, close to the Spanish chest and its masking screen. To slip behind the screen, lift the lid and strike - Audacious, but quiet easy!"

"Clayton would have cried out!"

"Not if he were drugged," said Poirot. "According to the valet, the body was 'lying like a man asleep.' Clayton was asleep, drugged by the only man who could have drugged him, the man he had had a drink with at the club."

"Jock?" Margharita's voice rose high in childlike surprise. "Jock? Not dear old Jock. Why, I've known Jock all my life! Why on earth should Jock...?"

Poirot turned on her.

"Why did two Italians fight a duel? Why did a young man shoot himself? Jock McLaren is an inarticulate man. He has resigned himself, perhaps, to being the faithful friend to you and your husband, but then comes Major Rich as well. It is too much! In the darkness of hate and desire, he plans what is well nigh the perfect murder - a double murder, for he is almost certain to be found guilty of it. And with Rich and your husband both out of the way - he thinks that at last you may turn to him. And perhaps, madame, you would have done... Eh?"

She was staring at him, wide-eyed, horror-struck. Almost unconsciously she breathed:

"Perhaps... I don't know..."

Inspector Miller spoke with sudden authority.

"This is all very well, Poirot. It's a theory, nothing more. There's not a shred of evidence, probably not a word of it is true."

"It is all true."

"But there's no evidence. There's nothing we can act on."

"You are wrong. I think that McLaren, if this is put to him, will admit it. That is, if it is made clear to him that Margharita Clayton knows..."

Poirot paused and added:

"Because, once he knows that, he has lost. The perfect murder has been in vain."

THE UNDER DOG

Lily Margrave smoothed her gloves out on her knee with a nervous gesture, and darted a glance at the occupant of the big chair opposite her.

She had heard of M. Hercule Poirot, the well-known investigator, but this was the first time she had seen him in the flesh.

The comic, almost ridiculous, aspect that he presented disturbed her conception of him. Could this funny little man, with the egg-shaped head and the enormous mustaches, really do the wonderful things that were claimed for him? His occupation at the moment struck her as particularly childish. He was piling small blocks of colored wood one upon the other, and seemed far more interested in the result than in the story she was telling.

At her sudden silence, however, he looked sharply across at her.

"Mademoiselle, continue, I pray of you. It is not that I do not attend; I attend very carefully, I assure you."

He began once more to pile the little blocks of wood one upon the other, while the girl's voice took up the tale again. It was a gruesome tale, a tale of violence and tragedy, but the voice was so calm and unemotional, the recital was so concise that something of the savor of humanity seemed to have been left out of it.

She stopped at last.

"I hope," she said anxiously, "that I have made everything clear."

Poirot nodded his head several times in emphatic assent. Then he swept his hand across the wooden blocks, scattering them over the table, and, leaning back in his chair, his fingertips pressed together and his eyes on the ceiling, he began to recapitulate.

"Sir Reuben Astwell was murdered ten days ago. On Wednesday, the day before yesterday, his nephew, Charles Leverson, was arrested by the police. The facts against him as far as you know are - you will correct me if I am wrong, Mademoiselle.

"Sir Reuben was sitting up late writing in his own special sanctum, the Tower room. Mr Leverson came in late, letting himself in with a latch key. He was overheard quarreling with his uncle by the butler, whose room was directly below the Tower room. The quarrel ended with a sudden thud as of a chair being thrown over and a half-smothered cry.

"The butler was alarmed, and thought of getting up to see what was the matter, but as a few seconds later he heard Mr Leverson leave the room gaily whistling a tune, he thought nothing more of it. On the following morning, however, a housemaid discovered Sir Reuben dead by his desk. He had been struck down by some heavy instrument. The butler, I gather, did not at once tell the story to the police. That was natural, I think, eh, Mademoiselle?"

The sudden question made Lily Margrave start.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"One looks for humanity in these matters, does one not?" said the little man. "As you recited the story to me - so admirably, so concisely - you made of the actors in the drama machines - puppets. But me, I look always for human nature. I say to myself, this butler, this - what did you say his name was?"

"His name is Parsons."

"This Parsons, then, he will have the characteristics of his class, he will object very strongly to the police, he will tell them as little as possible. Above all, he will say nothing that might seem to incriminate a member of the household. A housebreaker, a burglar, he will cling to that idea with all the strength of extreme obstinacy. Yes, the loyalties of the servant class are an interesting study."

He leaned back beaming.

"In the meantime," he went on, "everyone in the household has told his or her tale, Mr Leverson among the rest, and his tale was that he had come in late and gone up to bed without seeing his uncle."

"That is what he said."

"And no one saw reason to doubt that tale," mused Poirot, "except, of course, Parsons. Then there comes down an inspector from Scotland Yard, Inspector Miller you said, did you not? I know him, I have come across him once or twice in the past. He is what they call the sharp man, the ferret, the weasel.

"Yes I know him! And the sharp Inspector Miller, he sees what the local inspector has not seen, that Parsons is ill at ease and uncomfortable, and knows something that he has not told. Eh bien, he makes short work of Parsons. By now it has been clearly proved that no one broke into the house that night, that the murderer must be looked for inside the house and not outside. And Parsons is unhappy and frightened, and feels very relieved to have his secret knowledge drawn out of him.

"He has done his best to avoid scandal, but there are limits; and so Inspector Miller listens to Parsons' story, and asks a question or two, and then makes some private investigations of his own. The case he builds up is very strong - very strong.

"Blood-stained fingers rested on the corner of the chest in the Tower room and the fingerprints were those of Charles Leverson. The housemaid told him she emptied a basin of blood-stained water in Mr Leverson's room the morning after the crime. He explained to her that he had cut his finger, and he had a little cut there, oh yes, but such a very little cut! The cuff of his evening shirt had been washed, but they found blood stains in the sleeve of his coat. He was hard pressed for money, and he inherited money at Sir Reuben's death. Oh, yes, a very strong case, Mademoiselle," He paused.

"And yet you come to me today."

Lily Margrave shrugged her slender shoulders.

"As I told you, M. Poirot, Lady Astwell sent me."

"You would not have come of your own accord, eh?"

The little man glanced at her shrewdly. The girl did not answer.

"You do not reply to my question."

Lily Margrave began smoothing her gloves again.

"It is rather difficult for me, M. Poirot. I have my loyalty to Lady Astwell to consider. Strictly speaking, I am only her paid companion, but she has treated me more as though I were a daughter or a niece. She has been extraordinarily kind, and whatever her faults, I should not like to appear to criticise her actions, or - well, to prejudice you against taking up the case."

"Impossible to prejudice Hercule Poirot, cela ne se fait pas," declared the little man cheerily. I perceive that you think Lady Astwell has in her bonnet the buzzing bee. Come now, is it not so?"

"If I must say -"

"Speak, Mademoiselle."

"I think the whole thing is simply silly."

"It strikes you like that, eh?"

"I don't want to say anything against Lady Astwell -"

"I comprehend," murmured Poirot gently. "I comprehend perfectly." His eyes invited her to go on.

"She really is an awfully good sort, and frightfully kind, but she isn't - how can I put it? She isn't an educated woman. You know she was an actress when Sir Reuben married her, and she has all sorts of prejudices and superstitions. If she says a thing, it must be so, and she simply won't listen to reason. The Inspector was not very tactful with her, and it put her back up. She says it is nonsense to suspect Mr Leverson and just the sort of stupid, pigheaded mistake the police would make, and that, of course, dear Charles did not do it."

"But she has no reasons, eh?"

"None whatever."

"Ha! Is that so? Really, now."

"I told her," said Lily, "that it would be no good coming to you with a mere statement like that and nothing to go on."

"You told her that," said Poirot, "did you really? That is interesting."

His eyes swept over Lily Margrave in a quick comprehensive survey, taking in the details of her neat black tailor-made, the touch of white at her throat, an expensive crêpe de Chine blouse showing dainty tucks, and the smart little black felt hat. He saw the elegance of her, the pretty face with its slightly pointed chin, and the dark blue long-lashed eyes. Insensibly his attitude changed; he was interested now, not so much in the case as in the girl sitting opposite him.

"Lady Astwell is, I should imagine, Mademoiselle, just a trifle inclined to be unbalanced and hysterical?"

Lily Margrave nodded eagerly.

"That describes her exactly. She is, as I told you, very kind, but it is impossible to argue with her or to make her see things logically."

"Possibly she suspects someone on her own account," suggested Poirot, "someone quite absurd."

"That is exactly what she does do," cried Lily. "She has taken great dislike to Sir Reuben's secretary, poor man. She says she knows he did it, and yet it has been proved quite conclusively that poor Mr Owen Trefusis cannot possibly have done it.

"And she has no reasons?"

"Of course not; it is all intuition with her."

Lily Margrave's voice was very scornful.

"I perceive, Mademoiselle, said Poirot, smiling, "that you do not believe in intuition?"

"I think it is nonsense," replied Lily.

Poirot leaned back in his chair.

"Les femmes," he murmured, "they like to think that it is a special weapon that the good God has given them, and for every once that it shows them the truth, at least nine times it leads them astray."

"I know," said Lily, "but I have told you what Lady Astwell is like. You simply cannot argue with her."

"So you, Mademoiselle, being wise and discreet, came along to me as you were bidden, and have managed to put me au courant of the situation."

Something in the tone of his voice made the girl look up sharply.

"Of course, I know," said Lily apologetically, "how very valuable your time is."

"You are too flattering, Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "but indeed - yes, it is true, at this present time I have many cases of moment on hand."

"I was afraid that might be so," said Lily, rising. "I will tell Lady Astwell -"

But Poirot did not rise also. Instead he lay back in his chair and looked steadily up at the girl.

"You are in haste to be gone, Mademoiselle? Sit down one more little moment, I pray of you."

He saw the color flood into her face and ebb out again. She sat down once more slowly and unwillingly.

"Mademoiselle is quick and decisive," said Poirot. "She must make allowances for an old man like myself, who comes to his decisions slowly. You mistook me, Mademoiselle. I did not say that I would not go down to Lady Astwell."

"You will come, then?"

The girl's tone was flat. She did not look at Poirot, but down at the ground, and so was unaware of the keen scrutiny with which he regarded her.

"Tell Lady Astwell, Mademoiselle, that I am entirely at her service. I will be at - Mon Repos, is it not? - this afternoon."

He rose. The girl followed suit.

"I - I will tell her. It is very good of you to come, M. Poirot. I am afraid, though, you will find you have been brought on a wild goose chase."

"Very likely, but - who knows?"

He saw her out with punctilious courtesy to the door. Then he returned to the sitting-room, frowning, deep in thought. Once or twice he nodded his head, then he opened the door and called to his valet.

"My good George, prepare me, I pray of you, a little valise. I go down to the country this afternoon."

"Very good, sir," said George.

He was an extremely English-looking person. Tall, cadaverous and unemotional.

"A young girl is a very interesting phenomenon, George," said Poirot, as he dropped once more into his armchair and lighted a tiny cigarette. "Especially, you understand, when she has brains. To ask someone to do a thing and at the same time to put them against doing it, that is a delicate operation. It requires finesse. She was very adroit - oh, very adroit - but Hercule Poirot, my good George, is of a cleverness quite exceptional."

"I have heard you say so, sir."

"It is not the secretary she has in mind," mused Poirot. "Lady Astwell's accusation of him she treats with contempt. Just the same she is anxious that no one should disturb the sleeping dogs. I, my good George, I go to disturb them, I go to make the dogs fight! There is a drama there, at Mon Repos. A human drama, and it excites me. She was adroit, the little one, but not adroit enough. I wonder - I wonder what I shall find there?"

Into the dramatic pause which succeeded these words George's voice broke apologetically:

"Shall I pack dress clothes, sir?"

Poirot looked at him sadly.

"Always the concentration, the attention to your own job. You are very good for me, George."

When the 4:55 drew up at Abbots Cross station, there descended from it M. Hercule Poirot, very neatly and foppishly attired, his mustaches waxed to a stiff point. He gave up his ticket, passed through the barrier, and was accosted by a tall chauffeur.

"Mr Poirot?"

The little man beamed upon him.

"That is my name."

"This way, sir, if you please."

He held open the door of the big Rolls Royce limousine.

The house was a bare three minutes from the station.

The chauffeur descended once more and opened the door of the car, and Poirot stepped out. The butler was already holding the front door open.

Poirot gave the outside of the house a swift appraising glance before passing through the open door. It was a big, solidly built red brick mansion, with no pretensions to beauty, but with an air of solid comfort.

Poirot stepped into the hall. The butler relieved him deftly of his hat and overcoat, then murmured with that deferential undertone only to be achieved by the best servants:

"Her Ladyship is expecting you, sir."

Poirot followed the butler up the soft carpeted stairs. This, without doubt, was Parsons, a very well-trained servant, with a manner suitably devoid of emotion. At the top of the staircase he turned to the right along a corridor. He passed through a door into a little anteroom, from which two more doors led. He threw open the lefthand one of these, and announced:

"M. Poirot, m'lady."

The room was not a very large one, and it was crowded with furniture and knickknacks. A woman, dressed in black, got up from a sofa and came quickly toward Poirot.

"M. Poirot," she said with outstretched hand. Her eye ran rapidly over the dandified figure. She paused a minute, ignoring the little man's bow over her hand, and his murmured "My Lady," and then, releasing his hand after a sudden vigorous pressure, she exclaimed:

"I believe in small men! They are the clever ones."

"Inspector Miller," murmured Poirot, "is, I think, a tall man?"

"He is a bumptious idiot," said Lady Astwell. "Sit down here by me, will you, M. Poirot?"

She indicated the sofa and went on:

"Lily did her best to put me off sending for you, but I have not come to my time of life without knowing my own mind."

"A rare accomplishment," said Poirot, as he followed her to the settee.

Lady Astwell settled herself comfortably among the cushions and turned so as to face him.

"Lily is a dear girl," said Lady Astwell, "but she thinks she knows everything, and as often as not in my experience those sort of people are wrong. I am not clever, M. Poirot, I never have been, but I am right where many a more stupid person is wrong. I believe in guidance. Now do you want me to tell you who is the murderer, or do you not? A woman knows, M. Poirot."

"Does Miss Margrave know?"

"What did she tell you?" asked Lady Astwell sharply.

"She gave me the facts of the case."

"The facts? Oh, of course they are dead against Charles, but I tell you, M. Poirot, he didn't do it. I know he didn't!"

She bent upon him an earnestness that was almost disconcerting.

"You are very positive, Lady Astwell?"

"Trefusis killed my husband, M. Poirot. I am sure of it."

"Why?"

"Why should he kill him, do you mean, or why am I sure? I tell you I know it! I am funny about those things. I made up my mind at once, and I stick to it."

"Did Mr Trefusis benefit in any way by Sir Reuben's death?"

"Never left him a penny," returned Lady Astwell promptly. "Now that shows you dear Reuben couldn't have liked or trusted him."

"Had he been with Sir Reuben long, then?"

"Close on nine years."

"That is a long time," said Poirot softly, "a very long time to remain in the employment of one man. Yes, Mr Trefusis, he must have known his employer well."

Lady Astwell stared at him.

"What are you driving at? I don't see what that has to do with it."

"I was following out a little idea of my own," said Poirot. "A little idea, not interesting, perhaps, but original, on the effects of service."

Lady Astwell still stared.

"You are very clever, aren't you?" she said in rather a doubtful tone. "Everybody says so."

Hercule Poirot laughed.

"Perhaps you shall pay me that compliment, too, Madame, one of these days. But let us return to the motive. Tell me now of your household, of the people who were here in the house on the day of the tragedy."

"There was Charles, of course."

"He was your husband's nephew, I understand, not yours."

"Yes, Charles was the only son of Reuben's sister. She married a comparatively rich man, but one of those crashes came - they do in the city

- and he died, and his wife, too, and Charles came to live with us. He was twenty-three at the time, and going to be a barrister. But when the trouble came, Reuben took him into his office."

"He was industrious, M. Charles?"

"I like a man who is quick on the uptake," said Lady Astwell with a nod of approval. "No, that's just the trouble, Charles was not industrious. He was always having rows with his uncle over some muddle or other that he had made. Not that poor Reuben was an easy man to get on with. Many's the time I've told him that he had forgotten what it was to be young himself. He was very different in those days, M. Poirot."

Lady Astwell heaved a sigh of reminiscence.

"Changes must come, Milady," said Poirot. "It is the law."

"Still," said Lady Astwell, "he was never really rude to me. At least if he was, he was always sorry afterward - poor dear Reuben."

"He was difficult, eh?" said Poirot.

"I could always manage him," said Lady Astwell with the air of a successful lion tamer. "But it was rather awkward sometimes when he would lose his temper with the servants. There are ways of doing it, and Reuben's was not the right way."

"How exactly did Sir Reuben leave his money, Lady Astwell?"

"Half to me - and half to Charles," replied Lady Astwell promptly. "The lawyers don't put it simply like that, but that's what it amounts to."

Poirot nodded his head.

"I see - I see," he murmured. "Now, Lady Astwell, I will demand of you that you will describe to me the household. There was yourself, and Sir Reuben's nephew, Mr Charles Leverson, and the secretary, Mr Owen Trefusis, and there was Miss Lily Margrave. Perhaps you will tell me something of that young lady."

"You want to know about Lily?"

"Yes, she has been with you long?"

"About a year. I have had a lot of secretary-companions, you know, but somehow or other they all got on my nerves. Lily was different. She was tactful and full of common sense, and besides she looks so nice. I do like to have a pretty face about me, M. Poirot. I am a funny kind of person; I take likes and dislikes straight away. As soon as I saw that girl, I said to myself: 'She'll do.'"

"Did she come to you through friends, Lady Astwell?"

"I think she answered an advertisement. Yes - that was it."

"You know something of her people, of where she comes from?"

"Her father and mother are out in India, I believe. I don't really know much about them, but you can see at a glance that Lily is a lady, can't you, M. Poirot?"

"Oh perfectly, perfectly."

"Of course," went on Lady Astwell, "I am not a lady myself. I know it, and the servants know it, but there is nothing mean-spirited about me. I can appreciate the real thing when I see it, and no one could be nicer than Lily has been to me. I look upon that girl almost as a daughter, M. Poirot, indeed I do."

Poirot's right hand strayed out and straightened one or two of the objects lying on a table near him.

"Did Sir Reuben share this feeling?" he asked.

His eyes were on the knickknacks, but doubtless he noted the pause before Lady Astwell's answer came.

"With a man it's different. Of course they - they got on very well," "Thank you, Madame," said Poirot. He was smiling to himself.

"And these were the only people in the house that night?" he asked, "Excepting, of course, the servants."

"Oh, there was Victor."

"Victor?"

"Yes my husband's brother, you know, and his partner."

"He lived with you?"

"No, he had just arrived on a visit. He has been out in West Africa for the past few years."

"West Africa," murmured Poirot.

He had learned that Lady Astwell could be trusted to develop a subject herself if sufficient time was given her.

"They say it's a wonderful country, but I think it's the kind of place that has a very bad effect upon a man. They drink too much and they get uncontrolled. None of the Astwells has a good temper and Victor's, since he came back from Africa, has been simply too shocking. He has frightened me once or twice."

"Did he frighten Miss Margrave, I wonder?" murmured Poirot gently.

"Lily? Oh I don't think he has seen much of Lily."

Poirot made a note or two in a diminutive notebook; then he put the pencil back in its loop and returned the notebook to his pocket.

"I thank you, Lady Astwell. I will now, if I may, interview Parsons."

"Will you have him up here?"

Lady Astwell's hand moved toward the bell. Poirot arrested the gesture quickly.

"No, no, a thousand times no. I will descend to him."

"If you think it is better -"

Lady Astwell was clearly disappointed at not being able to participate in the forthcoming scene. Poirot adopted an air of secrecy.

"It is essential," he said mysteriously, and left Lady Astwell duly impressed.

He found Parsons in the butler's pantry, polishing silver. Poirot opened the proceedings with one of his funny little bows.

"I must explain myself," he said. "I am a detective agent."

"Yes, sir," said Parsons, "we gathered as much."

His tone was respectful but aloof.

"Lady Astwell sent for me," continued Poirot. "She is not satisfied; no, she is not satisfied at all."

"I have heard her Ladyship say so on several occasions," said Parsons.

"In fact," said Poirot, "I recount to you the things you already know? Eh? Let us then not waste time on these bagatelles. Take me, if you will be so good, to your bedroom and tell me exactly what it was you heard there on the night of the murder."

The butler's room was on the ground floor, adjoining the servants hall. It had barred windows, and the strong room was in one corner of it. Parsons indicated the narrow bed.

"I had retired, sir, at 11 o'clock. Miss Margrave had gone to bed, and Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben in the Tower room."

"Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben? Ah, proceed."

"The Tower room, sir, is directly over this. If people are talking in it one can hear the murmur of voices but naturally not anything that is said. I must have fallen asleep about half-past eleven. It was just 12 o'clock when I was awakened by the sound of the front door being slammed to and knew Mr Leverson had returned. Presently I heard footsteps overhead, and a minute or two later Mr Leverson's voice talking to Sir Reuben.

"It was my fancy at the time, sir, that Mr Leverson was - I should not exactly like to say drunk, but inclined to be a little indiscreet and noisy. He was shouting at his uncle at the top of his voice. I caught a word or two here or there but not enough to understand what it was all about, and then there was a sharp cry and a heavy thud."

There was a pause, and Parsons repeated the last words. "A heavy thud," he said impressively.

"If I mistake not, it is a dull thud in most words of romance," murmured Poirot.

"Maybe, sir," said Parsons severely. "It was a heavy thud I heard."

"A thousand pardons," said Poirot.

"Do not mention it, sir. After the thud in the silence, I heard Mr Leverson's voice as plain as plain can be, raised high. 'My God,' he said, 'My God,' just like that, sir."

Parsons, from his first reluctance to tell the tale, had now progressed to a thorough enjoyment of it. He fancied himself mightily as a narrator. Poirot played up to him.

"Mon Dieu," he murmured. "What emotion you must have experienced!"

"Yes, indeed, sir," said Parsons, "as you say, sir. Not that I thought very much of it at the time. But it did occur to me to wonder if anything was amiss, and whether I had better go up and see. I went to turn the electric light on, and was unfortunate enough to knock over a chair.

"I opened the door, and went through the servants' hall, and opened the other door which gives on a passage. The back stairs lead up from there, and as I stood at the bottom of them, hesitating, I heard Mr Leverson's voice from up above, speaking hearty and cheery-like. 'No harm done, luckily,' he says. 'Good night,' and I heard him move off along the passage to his own room, whistling.

"Of course I went back to bed at once. Just something knocked over, that's all I thought it was. I ask you, sir, was I to think Sir Reuben was murdered, with Mr Leverson saying good night and all?"

"You are sure it was Mr Leverson's voice you heard?"

Parsons looked at the little Belgian pityingly, and Poirot saw clearly enough that, right or wrong, Parsons' mind was made up on this point.

"Is there anything further you would like to ask me, sir?"

"There is one thing." said Poirot, "do you like Mr Leverson?"

"I - I beg your pardon, sir?"

"It is a simple question. Do you like Mr Leverson?"

Parsons, from being startled at first, now seemed embarrassed.

"The general opinion in the servants' hall, sir," he said, and paused.

"By all means," said Poirot, "put it that way if it pleases you."

"The opinion is, sir, that Mr Leverson is an open-handed young gentleman, but not, if I may say so, particularly intelligent, sir."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Do you know, Parsons, that without having seen him, that is also precisely my opinion of Mr Leverson."

"Indeed, sir."

"What is your opinion - I beg your pardon - the opinion of the servants' hall of the secretary?"

"He is a very quiet, patient gentleman, sir. Anxious to give no trouble."

"Vraiment," said Poirot.

The butler coughed.

"Her ladyship, sir," he murmured, "is apt to be a little hasty in her judgments."

"Then, in the opinion of the servants' hall, Mr Leverson committed the crime?"

"We none of us wish to think it was Mr Leverson," said Parsons. "We - well, plainly we didn't think he had it in him, sir."

"But he has a somewhat violent temper, has he not?" asked Poirot.

Parsons came nearer to him.

"If you are asking me who had the most violent temper in the house -"

Poirot held up a hand.

"Ah! But that is not the question I should ask," he said softly. "My question would be, who has the best temper?"

Parsons stared at him open-mouthed.

Poirot wasted no further time on him. With an amiable little bow - he was always amiable - he left the room and wandered out into the big square hall of Mon Repos. There he stood a minute or two in thought, then, at a slight sound that came to him, cocked his head on one side in the manner of a perky robin, and finally, with noiseless steps, crossed to one of the doors that led out of the hall.

He stood in the doorway, looking into the room; a small room furnished as a library. At a big desk at the further end of it sat a thin, pale young man busily writing. He had a receding chin, and wore a pince-nez.

Poirot watched him for some minutes, and then he broke the silence by giving a completely artificial and theatrical cough.

"Ahem!" coughed M. Hercule Poirot.

The young man at the desk stopped writing and turned his head. He did not appear unduly startled, but an expression of perplexity gathered on his face as he eyed Poirot.

The latter came forward with a little bow.

"I have the honor of speaking to M. Trefusis, yes? Ah! my name is Poirot, Hercule Poirot. You may perhaps have heard of me."

"Oh - er - yes, certainly," said the young man.

Poirot eyed him attentively.

Owen Trefusis was about thirty-three years of age, and the detective saw at once why nobody was inclined to treat Lady Astwell's accusation seriously. Mr Owen Trefusis was a prim, proper young man, disarmingly meek, the type of man who can be, and is, systematically bullied. One could feel quite sure that he would never display resentment.

"Lady Astwell sent for you, of course," said the secretary. "She mentioned that she was going to do so. Is there any way in which I can help you?"

His manner was polite without being effusive. Poirot accepted a chair, and murmured gently:

"Has Lady Astwell said anything to you of her beliefs and suspicions?"

Owen Trefusis smiled a little.

"As far as that goes," he said, "I believe she suspects me. It is absurd, but there it is. She has hardly spoken a civil word to me since, and she shrinks against the wall as I pass by."

His manner was perfectly natural, and there was more amusement than resentment in his voice. Poirot nodded with an air of engaging frankness.

"Between ourselves," he explained, "she said the same thing to me. I did not argue with her - me, I have made it a rule never to argue with very positive ladies. You comprehend, it is a waste of time."

"Oh, quite."

"I say, yes, Milady - oh, perfectly, Milady - precisement, Milady. They mean nothing, those words, but they soothe all the same. I make my investigations, for though it seems almost impossible that anyone except M. Leverson could have committed the crime, yet - well, the impossible has happened before now."

"I understand your position perfectly," said the secretary. "Please regard me as entirely at your service."

"Bon," said Poirot. "We understand one another. Now recount to me the events of that evening. Better start with dinner."

"Leverson was not at dinner, as you doubtless know," said the secretary. "He had a serious disagreement with his uncle, and went off to dine at the Golf Club. Sir Reuben was in a very bad temper in consequence."

"Not too amiable, ce Monsieur, eh?" hinted Poirot delicately.

Trefusis laughed.

"Oh! He was a Tartar! I haven't worked with him for nine years without knowing most of his little ways. He was an extraordinarily difficult man, M. Poirot. He would get into childish fits of rage and abuse anybody who came near him. I was used to it by that time. I got into the habit of paying absolutely no attention to anything he said. He was not bad-hearted really, but he could be most foolish and exasperating in his manner. The great thing was never to answer him back."

"Were other people as wise as you were in that respect?"

Trefusis shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Astwell enjoyed a good row," he said. "She was not in the least afraid of Sir Reuben, and she always stood up to him and gave him as good as she got. They always made up afterward, and Sir Reuben was really devoted to her."

"Did they quarrel that last night?"

The secretary looked at him sideways, hesitated a minute, then he said:

"I believe so; what made you ask?"

"An idea, that is all."

"I don't know, of course," explained the secretary, "but things looked as though they were working up that way."

Poirot did not pursue the topic.

"Who else was at dinner?"

"Miss Margrave, Mr Victor Astwell, and myself."

"And afterward?"

"We went into the drawing-room. Sir Reuben did not accompany us. About ten minutes later he came in and hauled me over the coals for some trifling matter about a letter. I went up with him to the Tower room and set the thing straight; then Mr Victor Astwell came in and said he had something he wished to talk to his brother about, so I went downstairs and joined the two ladies.

"About a quarter of an hour later I heard Sir Reuben's bell ringing violently, and Parsons came to say I was to go up to Sir Reuben at once. As I entered the room, Mr Victor Astwell was coming out. He nearly knocked me over. Something had evidently happened to upset him. He has a very violent temper. I really believe he didn't see me."

"Did Sir Reuben make any comment on the matter?"

"He said: 'Victor is a lunatic; he will do for somebody some day when he is in one of these rages.'"

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Have you any idea what the trouble was about?"

"I couldn't say at all."

Poirot turned his head very slowly and looked at the secretary. Those last words had been uttered too hastily. He formed the conviction that Trefusis could have said more had he wished to do so. But once again Poirot did not press the question.

"And then? Proceed, I pray of you."

"I worked with Sir Reuben for about an hour and a half. At 11 o'clock Lady Astwell came in, and Sir Reuben told me I could go to bed."

"And you went?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea how long she stayed with him?"

"None at all. Her room is on the first floor, and mine is on the second, so I would not hear her go to bed."

"I see."

Poirot nodded his head once or twice and sprang to his feet.

"And now, Monsieur, take me to the Tower room."

He followed the secretary up the broad stairs to the first landing. Here Trefusis led him along the corridor, and through a baize door at the end of it, which gave on the servants staircase and on a short passage that ended in a door. They passed through this door and found themselves on the scene of the crime.

It was a lofty room twice as high as any of the others, and was roughly about thirty feet square. Swords and assegais adorned the walls, and many native curios were arranged about on tables. At the far end, in the embrasure of the window, was a large writing table. Poirot crossed straight to it.

"It was here Sir Reuben was found?"

Trefusis nodded.

"He was struck from behind, I understand?"

Again the secretary nodded.

"The crime was committed with one of these native clubs," he explained. "A tremendously heavy thing. Death must have been practically instantaneous."

"That strengthens the conviction that the crime was not premeditated. A sharp quarrel, and a weapon snatched up almost unconsciously."

"Yes, it does not look well for poor Leverson."

"And the body was found fallen forward on the desk?"

"No, it had slipped sideways to the ground."

"Ah," said Poirot, "that is curious."

"Why curious?" asked the secretary.

"Because of this."

Poirot pointed to a round irregular stain on the polished surface of the writing table.

"That is a blood stain mon ami,"

"It may have splattered there," suggested Trefusis, "or it may have been made later, when they moved the body."

"Very possibly, very possibly," said the little man. "There is only the one door to this room?"

"There is a staircase here."

Trefusis pulled aside a velvet curtain in the corner of the room nearest the door, where a small spiral staircase led upward.

"This place was originally built by an astronomer. The stairs lead up to the tower where the telescope was fixed. Sir Reuben had the place fitted up as a bedroom, and sometimes slept there if he was working very late."

Poirot went nimbly up the steps. The circular room upstairs was plainly furnished, with a camp bed, a chair and dressing-table. Poirot satisfied himself that there was no other exit, and then came down again to where Trefusis stood waiting for him.

"Did you hear Mr Leverson come in?" he asked.

Trefusis shook his head.

"I was fast asleep by that time."

Poirot nodded. He looked slowly round the room.

"Eh bien!" he said at last. "I do not think there is any thing further here, unless - perhaps you would be so kind as to draw the curtains."

Obediently Trefusis pulled the heavy black curtains across the window at the far end of the room. Poirot switched on the light - which was masked by a big alabaster bowl hanging from the ceiling.

"There was a desk light?" he asked.

For reply the secretary clicked on a powerful green-shaded hand lamp, which stood on the writing table. Poirot switched the other light off, then on, then off again.

"C'est bien! I have finished here."

"Dinner is at half-past seven," murmured the secretary.

"I thank you, M. Trefusis, for your many amiabilities."

"Not at all."

Poirot went thoughtfully along the corridor to the room appointed for him. The immovable George was there laying out his master's things.

"My good George," he said presently, "I shall, I hope, meet at dinner a certain gentleman who begins to intrigue me greatly. A man who has come home from the tropics, George. With a tropical temper - so it is said. A man whom Parsons tries to tell me about, and whom Lily Margrave does not mention. The late Sir Reuben had a temper of his own, George. Supposing such a man to come into contact with a man whose temper was worse than his own - how do you say it? The fur would jump about, eh?"

"'Would fly' is the correct expression, sir, and it is not always the case, sir, not by a long way."

"No?"

"No, sir. There was my Aunt Jemima, sir, a most shrewish tongue she had, bullied a poor sister of hers who lived with her, something shocking she did. Nearly worried the life out of her. But if anyone came along who stood up to her, well, it was a very different thing. It was meekness she couldn't bear."

"Ha!" said Poirot, "it is suggestive - that."

George coughed apologetically.

"Is there anything I can do in any way," he inquired delicately, "to - er - assist you, sir?"

"Certainly," said Poirot promptly. "You can find out for me what color evening dress Miss Lily Margrave wore that night, and which housemaid attends her."

George received these commands with his usual stolidity.

"Very good. sir, I will have the information for you in the morning."

Poirot rose from his seat and stood gazing into the fire.

"You are very useful to me, George," he murmured. "Do you know, I shall not forget your Aunt Jemima?"

Poirot did not, after all, see Victor Astwell that night. A telephone message came from him that he was detained in London.

"He attends to the affairs of your late husband's business, eh?" asked Poirot of Lady Astwell.

"Victor is a partner," she explained. "He went out to Africa to look into some mining concessions for the firm. It was mining, wasn't it, Lily?"

"Yes, Lady Astwell."

"Gold mines, I think, or was it copper or tin? You ought to know, Lily, you were always asking Reuben questions about it all. Oh, do be careful, dear, you will have that vase over!"

"It is dreadfully hot in here with the fire," said the girl. "Shall I - shall I open the window a little?"

"If you like, dear," said Lady Astwell placidly.

Poirot watched while the girl went across to the window and opened it. She stood there a minute or two breathing in the cool night air. When she returned and sat down in her seat, Poirot said to her politely:

"So Mademoiselle is interested in mines?"

"Oh, not really," said the girl indifferently, "I listened to Sir Reuben, but I don't know anything about the subject."

"You pretended very well, then," said Lady Astwell. "Poor Reuben actually thought you had some ulterior motive in asking all those questions."

The little detective's eyes had not moved from the fire, into which he was steadily staring, but nevertheless, he did not miss the quick flush of vexation on Lily Margrave's face. Tactfully he changed the conversation. When the hour for good nights came, Poirot said to his hostess:

"May I have just two little words with you, Madame?"

Lily Margrave vanished discreetly. Lady Astwell looked inquiringly at the detective.

"You were the last person to see Sir Reuben alive that night?"

She nodded. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hastily held a black-edged handkerchief to them.

"Ah, do not distress yourself, I beg of you do not distress yourself."

"It's all very well, M. Poirot, but I can't help it."

"I am a triple imbecile thus to vex you."

"No, no, go on. What were you going to say?"

"It was about 11 o'clock, I fancy, when you went into the Tower room, and Sir Reuben dismissed Mr Trefusis. Is that right?"

"It must have been about then."

"How long were you with him?"

"It was just a quarter to twelve when I got up to my room; I remember glancing at the clock."

"Lady Astwell, will you tell me what your conversation with your husband was about?"

Lady Astwell sank down on the sofa and broke down completely. Her sobs were vigorous.

"We - qua - qua - quarreled," she moaned.

"What about?" Poirot's voice was coaxing, almost tender.

"L - l - lots of things. It b - b - began with L - Lily. Reuben took a dislike to her - for no reason, and said he had caught her interfering with his papers. He wanted to send her away, and I said she was a dear girl, and I would not have it. And then he s - s - started shouting me down, and I wouldn't have that, so I just told him what I thought of him.

"Not that I really meant it, M. Poirot, and he said he had taken me out of the gutter to marry me, and I said - ah, but what does it all matter now? I shall never forgive myself. You know how it is, M Poirot, I always did say a good row clears the air, and how was I to know someone was going to murder him that very night? Poor old Reuben."

Poirot had listened sympathetically to all this outburst.

"I have caused you suffering," he said. "I apologize. Let us now be very business-like - very practical, very exact. You still cling to your idea that Mr Trefusis murdered your husband?"

Lady Astwell drew herself up.

"A woman's instinct, M. Poirot," she said solemnly, "never lies."

"Exactly, exactly," said Poirot. "But when did he do it?"

"When? After I left him, of course."

"You left Sir Reuben at a quarter to twelve. At five minutes to twelve Mr Leverson came in. In that ten minutes you say the secretary came down from his bedroom and murdered him?"

"It is perfectly possible."

"So many things are possible," said Poirot. "It could be done in ten minutes. Oh, yes! But was it?"

"Of course he says he was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell, "but who is to know if he was or not?"

"Nobody saw him about," Poirot reminded her.

"Everybody was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell triumphantly. "Of course nobody saw him."

"I wonder," said Poirot to himself.

A short pause.

"Eh bien, Lady Astwell, I will wish you good night."

George deposited a tray of early morning coffee by his master's bedside.

"Miss Margrave, sir, wore a dress of light green chiffon on the night in question."

"Thank you, George, you are most reliable."

"The third housemaid looks after Miss Margrave, sir. Her name is Gladys."

"Thank you, George. You are invaluable."

"Not at at all, sir."

"It is a fine morning," said Poirot, looking out of the window, "and no one is likely to be astir very early. I think, my good George, that we shall have the Tower room to ourselves if we proceed there to make a little experiment."

"You need me, sir?"

"The experiment'," said Poirot, "will not be painful."

The curtains were still drawn in the Tower room when they arrived there. George was about to pull them, when Poirot restrained him.

"We will leave the room as it is. Just turn on the desk lamp."

The valet obeyed.

"Now, my good George, sit down in that chair. Dispose yourself as though you were writing. Très bien. Me, I seize a club, I steal up behind you, so, and I hit you on the back of the head."

"Yes, sir," said George.

"Ah!" said Poirot, "but when I hit you, do not continue to write. You comprehend I cannot be exact. I cannot hit you with the same force with which the assassin hit Sir Reuben. When it comes to that point, we must do the make-believe. I hit you on the head, and you collapse, so. The arms well relaxed, the body limp. Permit me to arrange you. But no, do not flex your muscles."

He heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"You press admirably the trousers, George," he said, "but the imagination, you possess it not. Get up and let me take your place."

Poirot in his turn sat down at the writing table.

"I write," he declared, "I write busily. You steal up behind me you hit me on the head with the club. Crash! The pen slips from my fingers, I drop forward, but not very far forward, for the chair is low, and the desk is high, and, moreover, my arms support me. Have the goodness, George, to go back to the door, stand there, and tell me what you see."

"Ahem!"

"Yes, George?" encouragingly. "I see you, sir, sitting at the desk."

"Sitting at the desk?"

"It is a little difficult to see plainly, sir," explained George, "being such a long way away, sir, and the lamp being so heavily shaded. If I might turn on this light, sir?"

His hand reached out to the switch.

"Not at all," said Poirot sharply. "We shall do very well as we are. Here am I bending over the desk, there are you standing by the door. Advance now, George, advance, and put your hand on my shoulder."

George obeyed.

"Lean on me a little, George, to steady yourself on your feet, as it were. Ah! Voilà."

Hercule Poirot's limp body slid artistically sideways.

"I collapse - so!" he observed. "Yes, it is very well imagined. There is now something most important that must be done."

"Indeed, sir?" said the valet.

"Yes it is necessary that I should breakfast well."

The little man laughed heartily at his own joke.

"The stomach, George; it must not be ignored."

George maintained a disapproving silence. Poirot went downstairs chuckling happily to himself. He was pleased at the way things were shaping. After breakfast he made the acquaintance of Gladys, the third housemaid. He was very interested in what she could tell him of the crime. She was sympathetic toward Charles, although she had no doubt of his guilt.

"Poor young gentleman, sir, it seems hard, it does, him not being quite himself at the time."

"He and Miss Margrave should have got on well together," suggested Poirot, "as the only two young people in the house."

Gladys shook her head.

"Very stand-offish Miss Lily was with him. She wouldn't have no carryings-on, and she made it plain."

"He was fond of her, was he?"

"Oh, only in passing, so to speak; no harm in it, sir. Mr Victor Astwell, now he is properly gone on Miss Lily."

She giggled.

"Ah vraiment!"

Gladys giggled again.

"Sweet on her straight away he was. Miss Lily is just like a lily, isn't she, sir? So tall and such a lovely shade of gold hair."

"She should wear a green evening frock," mused Poirot. "There is a certain shade of green -"

"She has one, sir," said Gladys. "Of course, she can't wear it now, being in mourning, but she had it on the very night Sir Reuben died."

"It should be a light green, not a dark green," said Poirot.

"It is a light green, sir. If you wait a minute I'll show it to you. Miss Lily has just gone out with the dogs."

Poirot nodded. He knew that as well as Gladys did. In fact, it was only after seeing Lily safely off the premises that he had gone in search of the housemaid. Gladys hurried away, and returned a few minutes later with a green evening dress on a hanger.

"Exquis!" murmured Poirot, holding up hands of admiration. "Permit me to take it to the light a minute."

He took the dress from Gladys, turned his back on her and hurried to the window. He bent over it, then held it out at arm's length.

"It is perfect," he declared. "Perfectly ravishing. A thousand thanks for showing it to me."

"Not at ail, sir," said Gladys. "We all know that Frenchmen are interested in ladies' dresses."

"You are too kind," murmured Poirot.

He watched her hurry away again with the dress. Then he looked down at his two hands and smiled. In the right hand was a tiny pair of small nail scissors, in the left was a neatly clipped fragment of green chiffon.

"And now," he murmured, "to be heroic."

He returned to his own apartment and summoned George.

"On the dressing-table, my good George, you will perceive a gold scarf pin."

"Yes, sir."

"On the washstand is a solution of carbolic. Immerse, I pray you, the point of the pin in the carbolic."

George did as he was bid. He had long ago ceased to wonder at the vagaries of his master.

"I have done that, sir."

"Très bien! Now approach. I tender to you my first finger; insert the point of the pin in it."

"Excuse me, sir, you want me to prick you, sir?"

"But, yes, you have guessed correctly. You must draw blood, you understand, but not too much."

George took hold of his master's finger. Poirot shut his eyes and leaned back. The valet stabbed at the finger with the scarf pin, and Poirot uttered a shrill yell.

"Je vous remercie, George," he said. "What you have done is ample."

Taking a small piece of green chiffon from his pocket, he dabbed his finger with it gingerly.

"The operation has succeeded to a miracle," he remarked, gazing at the result. "You have no curiosity, George? Now, that is admirable!"

The valet had just taken a discreet look out of the window.

"Excuse me, sir," he murmured, "a gentleman has driven up in a large car."

"Ah! Ah!" said Poirot. He rose briskly to his feet. "The elusive Mr Victor Astwell. I go down to make his acquaintance."

Poirot was destined to hear Mr Victor Astwell some time before he saw him. A loud voice rang out from the hall.

"Mind what you are doing, you damned idiot! That case has got glass in it. Curse you, Parsons, get out of the way! Put it down, you fool!"

Poirot skipped nimbly down the stairs. Victor Astwell was a big man. Poirot bowed to him politely.

"Who the devil are you?" roared the big man.

Poirot bowed again.

"My name is Hercule Poirot."

"Lord!" said Victor Astwell. "So Nancy sent for you, after all, did she?"

He put a hand on Poirot's shoulder and steered him into the library.

"So you are the fellow they make such a fuss about," he remarked, looking him up and down. "Sorry for my language just now. That chauffeur of mine is a damned ass, and Parsons always does get on my nerves, blithering old idiot.

"I don't suffer fools gladly, you know," he said, half apologetically, "but by all accounts you are not a fool, eh, M. Poirot?"

He laughed breezily.

"Those who have thought so have been sadly mistaken," said Poirot placidly.

"Is that so? Well, so Nancy has carted you down here - got a bee in her bonnet about the secretary. There is nothing in that; Trefusis is as mild as milk - drinks milk, too, I believe. The fellow is a teetotaler. Rather waste of your time, isn't it?"

"If one has an opportunity to observe human nature, time is never wasted," said Poirot quietly.

"Human nature, eh?"

Victor Astwell stared at him, then he flung himself down in a chair.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, you can tell me what your quarrel with your brother was about that evening."

Victor Astwell shook his head.

"Nothing to do with the case," he said decisively.

"One can never be sure," said Poirot.

"It had nothing to do with Charles Leverson."

"Lady Astwell thinks that Charles had nothing to do with the murder."

"Oh, Nancy!"

"Parsons assumes that it was M. Charles Leverson who came in that night, but he didn't see him. Remember nobody saw him."

"You are wrong there," said Astwell. "I saw him."

"You saw him?"

"It's very simple. Reuben had been pitching into young Charles - not without good reason, I must say. Later on he tried to bully me. I told him a few home truths and, just to annoy him, I made up my mind to back the boy. I meant to see him that night, so as to tell him how the land lay. When I went up to my room I didn't go to bed. Instead, I left the door ajar and sat on a chair smoking. My room is on the second floor, M. Poirot, and Charles's room is next to it."

"Pardon my interrupting you - Mr Trefusis, he, too, sleeps on that floor?"

Astwell nodded.

"Yes, his room is just beyond mine."

"Nearer the stairs?"

"No, the other way."

A curious light came into Poirot's face, but the other didn't notice it and went on:

"As I say, I waited up for Charles. I heard the front door slam, as I thought, about five minutes to twelve, but there was no sign of Charles for about ten minutes. When he did come up the stairs I saw that it was no good tackling him that night.

He lifted his elbows significantly.

"I see," murmured Poirot.

"Poor devil couldn't walk straight," said Astwell. "He was looking pretty ghastly, too. I put it down to his condition at the time. Of course, now I realize that he had come straight from committing the crime."

Poirot interposed a quick question.

"You heard nothing from the Tower room?"

"No but you must remember that I was right at the other end of the building. The walls are thick, and I don't believe you would even hear a pistol shot fired from there."

Poirot nodded.

"I asked if he would like some help getting to bed," continued Astwell. "But he said he was all right and went into his room and banged the door. I undressed and went to bed."

Poirot was staring thoughtfully at the carpet.

"You realize, M. Astwell," he said at last, "that your evidence is very important?"

"I suppose so, at least - what do you mean?"

"Your evidence that ten minutes elapsed between the slamming of the front door and Leverson's appearance upstairs. He himself says, so I understand, that he came into the house and went straight up to bed. But there is more than that. Lady Astwell's accusation of the secretary is fantastic, I admit, yet up to now it has not been proved impossible. But your evidence creates an alibi."

"How is that?"

"Lady Astwell says that she left her husband at a quarter to twelve, while the secretary had gone to bed at eleven o'clock. The only time he could have committed the crime was between a quarter to twelve and Charles Leverson's return. Now, if, as you say, you sat with your door open, he could not have come down from his room without your seeing him."

"That is so," agreed the other.

"There is no other staircase?"

"No, to get down to the Tower room he would have had to pass my door, and he didn't, I am quite sure of that. And, anyway, M. Poirot, as I said just now, the man is as meek as a parson, I assure you."

"But yes, but yes," said Poirot soothingly, "I understand all that." He paused. "And you will not tell me the subject of your quarrel with Sir Reuben?"

The other's face turned a dark red.

"You'll get nothing out of me."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"I can always be discreet," he murmured, "where a lady is concerned."

Victor Astwell sprang to his feet.

"Damn you, how did you - what do you mean?"

"I was thinking," said Poirot, "of Miss Lily Margrave."

Victor Astwell stood undecided for a minute or two then his color subsided, and he sat down again.

"You are too clever for me, M. Poirot. Yes, it was Lily we quarreled about. Reuben had his knife into her; he had ferreted out something or other about the girl - false references, something of that kind. I don't believe a word of it myself.

"And then he went further than he had any right to go, talked about her stealing down at night and getting out of the house to meet some fellow or other. My God! I gave it to him; I told him that better men than he had been killed for saying less. That shut him up. Reuben was inclined to be a bit afraid of me when I got going."

"I hardly wonder at it," murmured Poirot politely.

"I think a lot of Lily Margrave," said Victor in another tone. "A nice girl through and through."

Poirot did not answer. He was staring in front of him, seemingly lost in abstraction. He came out of his brown study with a jerk.

"I must, I think, promenade myself a little. There is a hotel here, yes?"

"Two," said Victor Astwell, "the Golf Hotel up by the links and the Mitre down by the station."

"I thank you," said Poirot. "Yes, certainly I must promenade myself a little."

The Golf Hotel as befits its name, stands on the golf links almost adjoining the club house. It was to this hostelry that Poirot repaired first in the course of that "promenade" which he had advertised himself as being about to take. The little man had his own way of doing things. Three minutes after he had entered the Golf Hotel he was in private consultation with Miss Langdon, the manageress.

"I regret to incommode you in any way, Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "but you see I am a detective."

Simplicity always appealed to him. In this case the method proved efficacious at once.

"A detective!" exclaimed Miss Langdon, looking at him doubtfully.

"Not from Scotland Yard," Poirot assured her. "In fact - you may have noticed it? I am not an Englishman. No, I make the private inquiries into the death of Sir Reuben Astwell."

"You don't say, now!" Miss Langdon goggled at him expectantly.

"Precisely," said Poirot, beaming. "Only to someone of discretion like yourself would I reveal the fact. I think, Mademoiselle, you may be able to aid me. Can you tell me of any gentleman staying here on the night of the murder who was absent from the hotel that evening and returned to it about twelve or half-past?"

Miss Langdon's eyes opened wider than ever.

"You don't think -?" she breathed.

"That yon had the murderer here? No, but I have reason to believe that a guest staying here promenaded himself in the direction of Mon Repos that night, and if so he may have seen something which, though conveying no meaning to him, might be very useful to me."

The manageress nodded her head sapiently, with an air of one thoroughly well up in the annals of detective law.

"I understand perfectly. Now, let me see; who did we have staying here?"

She frowned, evidently running over the names in her mind, and helping her memory by occasionally checking them off on her fingertips.

"Captain Swann, Mr Elkins, Major Blunt, old Mr Benson. No, really, sir, I don't believe anyone went out that evening."

"You would have noticed if they had done so, eh?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it is not very usual, you see. I mean gentlemen go out to dinner and all that, but they don't go out after dinner, because - well, there is nowhere to go to, is there?"

The attractions of Abbots Cross were golf and nothing but golf.

"That is so," agreed Poirot. "Then, as far as you remember, Mademoiselle, nobody from here was out that night?"

"Captain England and his wife were out to dinner."

Poirot shook his head.

"That is not the kind of thing I mean. I will try the other hotel; the Mitre, is it not?"

"Oh, the Mitre," said Miss Langdon. "Of course, anyone might have gone out walking from there."

The disparagement of her tone, though vague, was evident, and Poirot beat a tactful retreat.

Ten minutes later he was repeating the scene this time with Miss Cole, the brusque manageress of the Mitre, a less pretentious hotel with lower prices, situated close to the station.

"There was one gentleman out late that night, came in about half-past twelve, as far as I can remember. Quite a habit of his it was, to go out for a walk at that time of the evening. He had done it once or twice before. Let me see now, what was his name? Just for the moment I can't remember it."

She pulled a large ledger toward her and began turning over the pages.

"Nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-second. Ah, here we are. Naylor, Captain Humphrey Naylor."

"He had stayed here before? You know him well?"

"Once before," said Miss Cole, "about a fortnight earlier. He went out then in the evening, I remember."

"He came to play golf, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Miss Cole; "that's what most of the gentlemen come for."

"Very true," said Poirot. "Well, Mademoiselle, I thank you infinitely, and I wish you good day."

He went back to Mon Repos with a very thoughtful face. Once or twice he drew something from his pocket and looked at it.

"It must be done," he murmured to himself, "and soon, as soon as I can make the opportunity."

His first proceeding on re-entering the house was to ask Parsons where Miss Margrave might be found. He was told that she was in the small study dealing with Lady Astwell's correspondence and the information seemed to afford Poirot satisfaction.

He found the little study without difficulty. Lily Margrave was seated at a desk by the window, writing. But for her the room was empty. Poirot carefully shut the door behind him and came toward the girl.

"I may have a little minute of your time, Mademoiselle, you will be so kind?"

"Certainly."

Lily Margrave put the papers aside and turned toward him.

"What can I do for you?"

"On the evening of the tragedy, Mademoiselle, I understand that when Lady Astwell went to her husband you went straight up to bed. Is that so?"

Lily Margrave nodded.

"You did not come down again, by any chance?"

The girl shook her head.

"I think you said, Mademoiselle, that you had not at any time that evening been in the Tower room?"

"I don't remember saying so, but as a matter of fact that is quite true. I was not in the Tower room that evening."

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"Curious," he murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Very curious," murmured Hercule Poirot again. "How do you account, then, for this?"

He drew from his pocket a little scrap of stained green chiffon and held it up for the girl's inspection.

Her expression did not change, but he felt rather than heard the sharp intake of breath.

"I don't understand, M. Poirot."

"You wore, I understand, a green chiffon dress that evening, Mademoiselle. This -" he tapped the scrap in his fingers - "was torn from it."

"And you found it in the Tower room?" asked the girl sharply. "Whereabouts?"

Hercule Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"For the moment shall we just say - in the Tower room?"

For the first time, a look of fear sprang into the girl's eyes. She began to speak, then checked herself. Poirot watched her small white hands clenching themselves on the edge of the desk.

"I wonder if I did go into the Tower room that evening?" she mused. "Before dinner, I mean. I don't think so. I am almost sure I didn t. If that scrap has been in the Tower room all this time, it seems to me a very extraordinary thing the police did not find it right away."

"The police," said the little man, "do not think of things that Hercule Poirot thinks of."

"I may have run in there for a minute just before dinner," mused Lily Margrave, "or it may have been the night before. I wore the same dress then. Yes, I am almost sure it was the night before."

"I think not," said Poirot evenly.

"Why?"

He only shook his head slowly from side to side.

"What do you mean?" whispered the girl.

She was leaning forward, staring at him, all the color ebbing out of her face.

"You do not notice, Mademoiselle, that this fragment is stained? There is no doubt about it, that stain is human blood."

"You mean -?"

"I mean, Mademoiselle, that you were in the Tower room after the crime was committed, not before. I think you will do well to tell me the whole truth, lest worse should befall you."

He stood up now, a stern little figure of a man, his forefinger pointed accusingly at the girl.

"How did you find out?" gasped Lily.

"No matter, Mademoiselle. I tell you Hercule Poirot knows. I know all about Captain Humphrey Naylor, and that you went down to meet him that night."

Lily suddenly put her head down on her arms and burst into tears. Immediately Poirot relinquished his accusing attitude.

"There, there, my little one," he said, patting the girl on the shoulder. "Do not distress yourself. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot; once realize that and all your troubles will be at an end. And now you will tell me the whole story, will you not? You will tell old Papa Poirot?"

"It is not what you think, it isn't, indeed. Humphrey - my brother - never touched a hair of his head."

"Your brother, eh?" said Poirot. "So that is how the land lies. Well, if you wish to save him from suspicion, you must tell me the whole story now, without reservations."

Lily sat up again, pushing back the hair from her forehead. After a minute or two, she began to speak in a low, clear voice.

"I will tell you the truth, M. Poirot. I can see now that it would be absurd to do anything else. My real name is Lily Naylor, and Humphrey is my only brother. Some years ago, when he was out in Africa, he discovered a gold mine, or rather, I should say, discovered the presence of gold. I can't tell you this part of it properly, because I don't understand the technical details, but what it amounted to was this:

"The thing seemed likely to be a very big undertaking, and Humphrey came home with letters to Sir Reuben Astwell in the hopes of getting him interested in the matter. I don't understand the rights of it even now, but I gather that Sir Reuben sent out an expert to report, and that he subsequently told my brother that the expert's report was unfavorable and that he, Humphrey, had made a great mistake. My brother went back to Africa on an expedition into the interior and was lost sight of. It was assumed that he and the expedition had perished.

"It was soon after that that a company was formed to exploit the Mpala Cold Fields. When my brother got back to England he at once jumped to the conclusion that these gold fields were identical with those he had discovered. Sir Reuben Astwell had apparently nothing to do with this company, and they had seemingly discovered the place on their own. But my brother was not satisfied; he was convinced that Sir Reuben had deliberately swindled him.

"He became more and more violent and unhappy about the matter. We two are alone in the world, M. Poirot, and as it was necessary then for me to go out and earn my own living, I conceived the idea of taking a post in this household and trying to find out if any connection existed between Sir Reuben and the Mpala Gold Fields. For obvious reasons I concealed my real name, and I'll admit frankly that I used a forged reference.

"There were many applicants for the post, most of them with better qualifications than mine, so - well, M. Poirot, I wrote a beautiful letter from the Duchess of Perthshire who I knew had just gone to America. I thought a Duchess would have a great effect upon Lady Astwell, and I was quite right. She engaged me on the spot.

"Since then I have been that hateful thing, a spy, and until lately with no success. Sir Reuben is not a man to give away his business secrets, but when Victor Astwell came back from Africa he was less guarded in his talk, and I began to believe that, after all, Humphrey had not been mistaken. My brother came down here about a fortnight before the murder, and I crept out of the house to meet him secretly at night. I told him the things Victor Astwell had said, and he became very excited and assured me I was definitely on the right track.

"But after that things began to go wrong; someone must have seen me stealing out of the house and have reported the matter to Sir Reuben. He became suspicious and hunted up my references, and soon discovered the fact that they were forged. The crisis came on the day of the murder. I think he thought I was after his wife's jewels. Whatever his suspicions were, he had no intention to allow me to remain any longer at Mon Repos, though he agreed not to prosecute me on account of the references. Lady Astwell took my part throughout and stood up valiantly to Sir Reuben."

She paused. Poirot's face was very grave.

"And now, Mademoiselle," he said, "we come to the night of the murder."

Lily swallowed hard and nodded her head.

"To begin with, M, Poirot, I must tell you that my brother had come down again, and that I had arranged to creep out and meet him once more. I went up to my room, as I have said, but I did not go to bed. Instead, I waited till I thought everyone was asleep, and then stole downstairs again and out by the side door. I met Humphrey and acquainted him in a few hurried words what had occurred. I told him that I believed the papers he wanted were in Sir Reuben's safe in the Tower room, and we agreed as a last desperate adventure to try and get hold of them that night.

"I was to go in first and see that the way was clear. I heard the church clock strike twelve as I went in by the side door. I was halfway up the stairs leading to the Tower room, when I heard a thud of something falling, and a voice cried out, 'My God!' A minute or two afterward the door of the Tower room opened, and Charles Leverson came out. I could see his face quite clearly in the moonlight, but I was crouching some way below him on the stairs where it was dark, and he did not see me at all.

"He stood there a moment swaying on his feet and looking ghastly. He seemed to be listening; then with an effort he seemed to pull himself together and, opening the door into the Tower room, called out something about there being no harm done. His voice was quite jaunty and debonair, but his face gave the lie to it. He waited a minute more, and then slowly went on upstairs and out of sight.

"When he had gone I waited a minute or two and then crept to the Tower room door, I had a feeling that something tragic had happened. The main light was out, but the desk lamp was on, and by its light I saw Sir Reuben lying on the floor by the desk. I don't know how I managed it, but I nerved myself at last to go over and kneel down by him. I saw at once that he was dead, struck down from behind, and also that he couldn't have been dead long; I touched his hand and it was still quite warm. It was just horrible, M. Poirot. Horrible!"

She shuddered again at the remembrance.

"And then?" said Poirot, looking at her keenly.

Lily Margrave nodded.

"Yes, M. Poirot, I know what you are thinking. Why didn't I give the alarm and raise the house? I should have done so, I know, but it came over me in a flash, as I knelt there, that my quarrel with Sir Reuben, my stealing out to meet Humphrey, the fact that I was being sent away on the morrow, made a fatal sequence. They would say that I had let Humphrey in, and that Humphrey had killed Sir Reuben out of revenge. If I said that I had seen Charles Leverson leaving the room, no one would believe me.

"It was terrible, M. Poirot! I knelt there, and thought and thought, and the more I thought the more my nerve failed me. Presently I noticed Sir Reuben's keys which had dropped from his pocket as he fell. Among them was the key of the safe, the combination word I already knew, since Lady

Astwell had mentioned it once in my hearing. I went over to that safe, M. Poirot, unlocked it and rummaged through the papers I found there.

"In the end I found what I was looking for. Humphrey had been perfectly right. Sir Reuben was behind the Mpala Gold Fields, and he had deliberately swindled Humphrey. That made it all the worse. It gave a perfectly definite motive for Humphrey having comitted the crime. I put the papers back in the safe, left the key in the door of it, and went straight upstairs to my room. In the morning I pretended to be surprised and horror-stricken, like everyone else, when the housemaid discovered the body."

She stopped and looked piteously across at Poirot.

"You do believe me, M. Poirot. Oh, do say you believe me!"

"I believe you, Mademoiselle," said Poirot; "you have explained many things that puzzled me. Your absolute certainty, for one thing, that Charles Leverson had committed the crime and at the same time your persistent efforts to keep me from coming down here."

Lily nodded.

"I was afraid of you," she admitted frankly. "Lady Astwell could not know, as I did, that Charles was guilty, and I couldn't say anything. I hoped against hope that you would refuse to take the case."

"But for that obvious anxiety on your part, I might have done so," said Poirot dryly.

Lily looked at him swiftly, her lips trembled a little.

"And now, M. Poirot, what - what are you going to do?"

"As far as you are concerned, Mademoiselle, nothing. I believe your story, and I accept it. The next step is to go to London and see Inspector Miller."

"And then?" asked Lily.

"And then," said Poirot, "we shall see."

Outside the door of the study he looked once more at the little square of stained green chiffon which he held in his hand.

"Amazing," he murmured to himself complacently, "the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot."

Detective Inspector Miller was not particularly fond of M. Hercule Poirot. He did not belong to that small band of inspectors at the Yard who welcomed the little Belgian's cooperation. He was wont to say that Hercule Poirot was much overrated. In this case he felt pretty sure of himself, and greeted Poirot with high good humor in consequence.

"Acting for Lady Astwell, are you? Well, you have taken up a mare's nest in that case."

"There is, then, no possible doubt about the matter?"

Miller winked. "Never was a clearer case, short of catching a murderer absolutely red-handed."

"M. Leverson has made a statement, I understand?"

"He had better have kept his mouth shut," said the detective. "He repeats over and over again that he went straight up to his room and never went near his uncle. That's a fool story on the face of it."

"It is certainly against the weight of evidence," murmured Poirot. "How does he strike you, this young M. Leverson?"

"Darned young fool."

"A weak character, eh?"

The inspector nodded.

"One would hardly think a young man of that type would have the - how do you say it - the bowels to commit such a crime."

"On the face of it, no," agreed the inspector. "But, bless you, I have come across the same thing many times. Get a weak, dissipated young man into a corner, fill him up with a drop too much to drink, and for a limited amount of time you can turn him into a fire-eater. A weak man in a corner is more dangerous than a strong man."

"That is true, yes; that is true what you say."

Miller unbent a little further.

"Of course, it is all right for you, M. Poirot," he said. "You get your fees just the same, and naturally you have to make a pretense of examining the evidence to satisfy her Ladyship. I can understand all that."

"You understand such interesting things," murmured Poirot, and took his leave.

His next call was upon the solicitor representing Charles Leverson. Mr Mayhew was a thin, dry, cautious gentleman. He received Poirot with reserve. Poirot, however, had his own ways of inducing confidence. In ten minutes' time the two were talking together amicably.

"You will understand," said Poirot, "I am acting in this case solely on behalf of M. Leverson. That is Lady Astwell's wish. She is convinced that he is not guilty."

"Yes, yes, quite so," said Mr Mayhew without enthusiasm. Poirot's eyes twinkled. "You do not perhaps attach much importance to the opinions, of Lady Astwell?" he suggested.

"She might be just as sure of his guilt tomorrow," said the lawyer dryly.

"Her intuitions are not evidence certainly," agreed Poirot, "and on the face of it the case looks very black against this poor young man."

"It is a pity he said what he did to the police," said the lawyer; "it will be no good his sticking to that story."

"Has he stuck to it with you?" inquired Poirot.

Mayhew nodded. "It never varies an iota. He repeats it like a parrot."

"And that is what destroys your faith in him," mused the other. "Ah, don't deny it," he added quickly, holding up an arresting hand. "I see it only too plainly. In your heart you believe him guilty. But listen now to me, to me, Hercule Poirot. I present to you a case.

"This young man comes home, he has drunk the cocktail, the cocktail, and again the cocktail, also without doubt the English whisky and soda many times. He is full of, what you call it? the courage Dutch, and in that mood he lets himself into the house with his latchkey, and he goes with unsteady steps up to the Tower room. He looks in at the door and sees in the dim light his uncle, apparently bending over the desk.

"M. Leverson is full, as we have said, of the courage Dutch. He lets himself go, he tells his uncle just what he thinks of him. He defies him, he insults him, and the more his uncle does not answer back, the more he is encouraged to go on, to repeat himself, to say the same thing over and over again, and each time more loudly. But at last the continued silence of his uncle awakens an apprehension. He goes nearer to him, he lays his hand on his uncle's shoulder, and his uncle's figure crumples under his touch and sinks in a heap to the ground.

"He is sobered, then, this M. Leverson. The chair falls with a crash, and he bends over Sir Reuben. He realizes what has happened, he looks at his hand covered with something warm and red. He is in a panic then, he would give anything on earth to recall the cry which has just sprung from his lips, echoing through the house. Mechanically he picks up the chair, then he hastens out through the door and listens. He fancies he hears a sound, and immediately, automatically, he pretends to be speaking to his uncle through the open door.

"The sound is not repeated. He is convinced he has been mistaken in thinking he heard one. Now all is silence, he creeps up to his room, and at once it occurs to him how much better it will be if he pretends never to have been near his uncle that night. So he tells his story. Parsons at that time, remember, has said nothing of what he heard. When he does do so, it is too late for M. Leverson to change. He is stupid, and he is obstinate, he sticks to his story. Tell me, Monsieur, is that not possible?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, "I suppose in the way you put it that it is possible."

Poirot rose to his feet.

"You have the privilege of seeing M. Leverson," he said. "Put to him the story I have told you, and ask him if it is not true."

Outside the lawyer's office, Poirot hailed a taxi.

"348 Harley Street," he murmured to the driver.

Poirot's departure for London had taken Lady Astwell by surprise, for the little man had not made any mention of what he proposed doing. On his return, after an absence of twenty-four hours, he was informed by Parsons that Lady Astwell would like to see him as soon as possible. Poirot found the lady in her own boudoir. She was lying down on the divan, her head propped up by cushions, and she looked startlingly ill and haggard; far more so than she had done on the day Poirot arrived.

"So you have come back, M. Poirot?"

"I have returned, milady."

"You went to London?"

Poirot nodded.

"You didn't tell me you were going," said Lady Astwell sharply.

"A thousand apologies, milady, I am in error, I should have done so. La prochaine fois -"

"You will do exactly the same," interrupted Lady Astwell with a shrewd touch of humor. "Do things first and tell people afterward, that is your motto right enough."

"Perhaps it has also been milady's motto?" His eyes twinkled.

"Now and then, perhaps," admitted the other. "What did you go up to London for, M. Poirot? You can tell me now, I suppose?"

"I had an interview with the good Inspector Miller, and also with the excellent Mr Mayhew."

Lady Astwell's eyes searched his face.

"And you think, now -?" she said slowly.

Poirot's eyes were fixed on her steadily.

"That there is a possibility of Charles Leverson's innocence," he said gravely.

"Ah!" Lady Astwell moved suddenly, sending two cushions rolling to the ground. "I was right, then, I was right!"

"I said a possibility, Madame, that is all."

Something in his tone seemed to strike her. She raised herself on one elbow and regarded him piercingly.

"Can I do anything?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded his head, "you can tell me, Lady Astwell, why you suspect Owen Trefusis."

"I have told you I know - that's all."

"Unfortunately that is not enough," said Poirot dryly. "Cast your mind back to the fatal evening, milady. Remember each detail, each tiny happening. What did you notice or observe about the secretary? I, Hercule Poirot, tell you there must have been something."

Lady Astwell shook her head.

"I hardly noticed him at all that evening," she said, "and I certainly was not thinking of him."

"Your mind was taken up by something else?"

"Yes."

"With your husband's animus against Miss Lily Margrave?"

"That's right," said Lady Astwell, nodding her head; "you seem to know all about it, M. Poirot."

"Me, I know everything," declared the little man with an absurdly grandiose air.

"I am fond of Lily, M. Poirot; you have seen that for yourself. Reuben began kicking up a rumpus about some reference or other of hers. Mind you, I don't say she hadn't cheated about it. She had. But, bless you, I have done many worse things than that in the old days. You have got to be up to all sorts of tricks to get around theatrical managers. There is nothing I wouldn't have written, or said, or done, in my time.

"Lily wanted this job, and she put in a lot of slick work that was not quite - well, quite the thing, you know. Men are so stupid about that sort of thing; Lily really might have been a bank clerk absconding with millions for the fuss he made about it. I was terribly worried all the evening, because, although I could usually get round Reuben in the end, he was terribly pigheaded at times, poor darling. So of course I hadn't time to go noticing secretaries, not that one does notice M. Trefusis much, anyway. He is just there and that's all there is to it."

"I have noticed that fact about M. Trefusis," said Poirot. "His is not a personality that stands forth, that shines, that hits you cr-r-rack."

"No," said Lady Astwell, "he is not like Victor."

"M. Victor Astwell is, I should say, explosive."

"That is a splendid word for him," said Lady Astwell. "He explodes all over the house, like one of those thingamy-jig firework things."

"A somewhat quick temper, I should imagine?" suggested Poirot.

"Oh, he's a perfect devil when roused," said Lady Astwell, "but bless you, I'm not afraid of him. All bark and no bite to Victor."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"And you can tell me nothing about the secretary that evening?" he murmured gently.

"I tell you, M. Poirot, I know. It's intuition. A woman's intuition -"

"Will not hang a man," said Poirot, "and what is more to the point, it will not save a man from being hanged. Lady Astwell, if you sincerely believe that M. Leverson is innocent, and that your suspicions of the secretary are well-founded, will you consent to a little experiment?"

"What kind of an experiment?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously.

"Will you permit yourself to be put into a condition of hypnosis?"

"Whatever for?"

Poirot leaned forward.

"If I were to tell you, Madame, that your intuition is based on certain facts recorded subconsciously, you would probably be skeptical. I will only say, then, that this experiment I propose may be of great importance to that unfortunate young man, Charles Leverson. You will not refuse?"

"Who is going to put me into a trance?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously. "You?"

"A friend of mine, Lady Astwell, arrives, if I mistake not, at this very minute. I hear the wheels of the car outside."

"Who is he?"

"A Doctor Cazalet of Harley Street."

"Is he - all right?" asked Lady Astwell apprehensively.

"He is not a quack, Madame, if that is what you mean. You can trust yourself in his hands quite safely."

"Well," said Lady Astwell with a sigh, "I think it is all bunkum, but you can try if you like. Nobody is going to say that I stood in your way."

"A thousand thanks, milady."

Poirot hurried from the room. In a few minutes he returned ushering in a cheerful, round-faced little man, with spectacles, who was very upsetting to Lady Astwell's conception of what a hypnotist should look like. Poirot introduced them.

"Well," said Lady Astwell good-humoredly, "how do we start this tomfoolery?"

"Quite simple, Lady Astwell, quite simple," said the little doctor. "Just lean back, so - that's right, that's right. No need to be uneasy."

"I am not in the least uneasy," said Lady Astwell. "I should like to see anyone hypnotizing me against my will."

Doctor Cazalet smiled broadly.

"Yes, but if you consent, it won't be against your will, will it?" he said cheerfully. "That's right. Turn off that other light, will you, M. Poirot? Just let yourself go to sleep, Lady Astwell."

He shifted his position a little.

"It's getting late. You are sleepy - very sleepy. Your eyelids are heavy, they are closing - closing - closing. Soon you will be asleep..."

His voice droned on, low, soothing, and monotonous. Presently he leaned forward and gently lifted Lady Astwell's right eyelid. Then he turned to Poirot, nodding in a satisfied manner.

"That's all right," he said in a low voice. "Shall I go ahead?"

"If you please."

The doctor spoke out sharply and authoritatively: "You are asleep, Lady Astwell, but you hear me, and you can answer my questions."

Without stirring or raising an eyelid, the motionless figure on the sofa replied in a low, monotonous voice:

"I hear you. I can answer your questions."

"Lady Astwell, I want you to go back to the evening on which your husband was murdered. You remember that evening?"

"Yes."

"You are at the dinner table. Describe to me what you saw and felt."

The prone figure stirred a little restlessly.

"I am in great distress. I am worried about Lily."

"We know that; tell us what you saw."

"Victor is eating all the salted almonds; he is greedy. Tomorrow I shall tell Parsons not to put the dish on that side of the table."

"Go on. Lady Astwell."

"Reuben is in a bad humor tonight. I don’t think it is altogether about Lily. It is something to do with business. Victor looks at him in a queer way."

"Tell us about Mr Trefusis, Lady Astwell."

"His left shirt cuff is frayed. He puts a lot of grease on his hair. I wish men didn't, it ruins the covers in the drawing-room."

Cazalet looked at Poirot; the other made a motion with his head.

"It is after dinner, Lady Astwell, you are having coffee. Describe the scene to me."

"The coffee is good tonight. It varies. Cook is very unreliable over her coffee. Lily keeps looking out of the window, I don't know why. Now, Reuben comes into the room; he is in one of his worst moods tonight, and bursts out with a perfect flood of abuse to poor Mr Trefusis. Mr Trefusis has his hand round the paper-knife, the big one with the sharp blade like a knife. How hard he is grasping it; his knuckles are quite white. Look, he has dug it so hard in the table that the point snaps. He holds it just as you would hold a dagger you were going to stick into someone. There, they have gone out together now. Lily has got her green evening dress on; she looks so pretty in green, just like a lily. I must have the covers cleaned next week."

"Just a minute, Lady Astwell."

The doctor leaned across to Poirot.

"We have got it, I think," he murmured; "that action with the paper-knife, that's what convinced her that the secretary did the thing."

"Let us go on to the Tower room now."

The doctor nodded, and began once more to question Lady Astwell in his high, decisive voice.

"It is later in the evening; you are in the Tower room with your husband. You and he have had a terrible scene together, have you not?"

Again the figure stirred uneasily.

"Yes - terrible - terrible. We said dreadful things - both of us."

"Never mind that now. You can see the room clearly, the curtains were drawn, the lights were on."

"Not the middle light, only the desk light."

"You are leaving your husband now, you are saying good night to him."

"No, I was too angry."

"It is the last time you will see him; very soon he will be murdered. Do you know who murdered him, Lady Astwell?"

"Yes. Mr Trefusis."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the bulge - the bulge in the curtain."

"There was a bulge in the curtain?"

"Yes."

"You saw it?"

"Yes. I almost touched it."

"Was there a man concealed there - Mr Trefusis?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

For the first time the monotonous answering voice hesitated and lost confidence.

"I - I - because of the paper-knife."

Poirot and the doctor again interchanged swift glances.

"I don't understand you, Lady Astwell. There was a bulge in the curtain, you say? Someone concealed there? You didn't see that person?"

"No."

"You thought it was Mr Trefusis because of the way he held the paper-knife earlier?"

"Yes."

"But Mr Trefusis had gone upstairs, had he not?"

"Yes - yes, that's right, he had gone upstairs."

"So he couldn't have been behind the curtain in the window?"

"No - no, of course not, he wasn't there."

"He had said good night to your husband some time before, hadn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't see him again?"

"No."

She was stirring now, throwing herself about, moaning faintly.

"She is coming out," said the doctor. "Well, I think we have got all we can, eh?"

Poirot nodded. The doctor leaned over Lady Astwell.

"You are waking," he murmured softly. "You are waking now. In another minute you will open your eyes."

The two men waited, and presently Lady Astwell sat upright and stared at them both.

"Have I been having a nap?"

"That's it, Lady Astwell, just a little sleep," said the doctor.

She looked at him.

"Some of your hocus-pocus, eh?"

"You don't feel any the worse, I hope?" he asked.

Lady Astwell yawned.

"I feel rather tired and done up."

The doctor rose.

"I will ask them to send you up some coffee," he said, "and we will leave you for the present."

"Did I - say anything?" Lady Astwell called after them as they reached the door.

Poirot smiled back at her.

"Nothing of great importance, Madame. You informed us that the drawing-room covers needed cleaning."

"So they do," said Lady Astwell. "You needn't have put me into a trance to get me to tell you that." She laughed good-humoredly. "Anything more?"

"Do you remember M. Trefusis picking up a paper-knife in the drawing-room that night?" asked Poirot.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Lady Astwell. "He may have done so."

"Does a bulge in the curtain convey anything to you?"

Lady Astwell frowned.

"I seem to remember," she said slowly. "No - it's gone, and yet -"

"Do not distress yourself, Lady Astwell," said Poirot quickly, "it is of no importance - of no importance whatever."

The doctor went with Poirot to the latter's room.

"Well," said Cazalet, "I think this explains things pretty clearly. No doubt when Sir Reuben was dressing down the secretary, the latter grabbed tight hold on a paper-knife, and had to exercise a good deal of self-control to prevent himself answering back. Lady Astwell's conscious mind was wholly taken up with the problem of Lily Margrave, but her subconscious mind noticed and misconstrued the action.

"It implanted in her the firm conviction that Trefusis murdered Sir Reuben. Now we come to the bulge in the curtain. That is interesting. I take it from what you have told me of the Tower room that the desk was right in the window. There are curtains across that window, of course?"

"Yes, mon ami, black velvet curtains."

"And there is room in the embrasure of the window for anyone to remain concealed behind them?"

"There would be just room, I think."

"Then there seems at least a possibility," said the doctor slowly, "that someone was concealed in the room, but if so it could not be the secretary, since they both saw him leave the room. It could not be Victor Astwell, for Trefusis met him going out, and it could not be Lily Margrave. Whoever it was must have been concealed there before Sir Reuben entered the room that evening. You have told me pretty well how the land lies. Now what about Captain Naylor? Could it have been he who was concealed there?"

"It is always possible," admitted Poirot. "He certainly dined at the hotel, but how soon he went out afterward is difficult to fix exactly. He returned about half-past twelve."

"Then it might have been he," said the doctor, "and if so, he committed the crime. He had the motive, and there was a weapon near at hand. You don't seem satisfied with the idea, though?"

"Me, I have other ideas," confessed Poirot. "Tell me now, M. le Docteur, supposing for one minute that Lady Astwell herself had committed this crime, would she necessarily betray the fact in the hypnotic state?"

The doctor whistled.

"So that's what you are getting at? Lady Astwell is the criminal, eh? Of course - it is possible; I never thought of it till this minute. She was the last to be with him, and no one saw him alive afterward. As to your question: I should be inclined to say - No. Lady Astwell would go into the hypnotic state with a strong mental reservation to say nothing of her own part in the crime. She would answer my questions truthfully, but she would be dumb on that one point. Yet I should hardly have expected her to be so insistent on Mr Trefusis's guilt."

"I comprehend," said Poirot. "But I have not said that I believe Lady Astwell to be the criminal. It is a suggestion, that is all."

"It is an interesting case," said the doctor after a minute or two. "Granting Charles Leverson is innocent, there are so many possibilities, Humphrey Naylor, Lady Astwell, and even Lily, Margrave."

"There is another you have not mentioned," said Poirot quietly, "Victor Astwell. According to his own story, he sat in his room with the door open waiting for Charles Leverson's return, but we have only his own word for it, you comprehend?"

"He is the bad-tempered fellow, isn't he?" asked the doctor. "The one you told me about?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

The doctor rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be getting back to town. You will let me know how things shape, won't you?"

After the doctor had left, Poirot pulled the bell for George.

"A cup of tisane, George. My nerves are much disturbed."

"Certainly, sir," said George. "I will prepare it immediately."

Ten minutes later he brought a steaming cup to his master. Poirot inhaled the noxious fumes with pleasure. As he sipped it, he soliloquized aloud.

"The chase is different all over the world. To catch the fox you ride hard with the dogs. You shout, you run, it is a matter of speed. I have not shot the stag myself, but I understand that to do so you crawl for many long, long hours upon your stomach. My friend Hastings has recounted the affair to me. Our method here, my good George, must be neither of these. Let us reflect upon the household cat. For many long, weary hours, he watches the mouse hole, he makes no movement, he betrays no energy, but - he does not go away."

He sighed and put the empty cup down on its saucer.

"I told you to pack for a few days. Tomorrow, my good George, you will go to London and bring down what is necessary for a fortnight."

"Very good, sir," said George. As usual he displayed no emotion.

The apparently permanent presence of Hercule Poirot at Mon Repos was disquieting to many people. Victor Astwell remonstrated with his sister-in-law about it.

"It's all very well, Nancy. You don't know what fellows of that kind are like. He has found jolly comfortable quarters here, and he is evidently going to settle down comfortably for about a month, charging you two guineas a day all the while."

Lady Astwell's reply was to the effect that she could manage her own affairs without interference.

Lily Margrave tried earnestly to conceal her perturbation. At the time, she had felt sure that Poirot believed her story. Now she was not so certain.

Poirot did not play an entirely quiescent game. On the fifth day of his sojourn he brought down a small thumbograph album to dinner. As a method of getting the thumbprints of the household, it seemed a rather clumsy device, yet not perhaps so clumsy as it seemed, since no one could afford to refuse his thumbprints. Only after the little man had retired to bed did Victor Astwell state his views.

"You see what it means, Nancy. He is out after one of us."

"Don't be absurd, Victor."

"Well, what other meaning could that blinking little book of his have?"

"M, Poirot knows what he is doing," said Lady Astwell complacently, and looked with some meaning at Owen Trefusis.

On another occasion Poirot introduced the game of tracing footprints on a sheet of paper. The following morning, going with his soft cat-like tread into the library, the detective startled Owen Trefusis, who leaped from his chair as though he had been shot.

"You must really excuse me, M. Poirot," he said primly, "but you have us on the jump."

"Indeed, how is that?" demanded the little man innocently.

"I will admit," said the secretary, "that I thought the case against Charles Leverson utterly overwhelming, You apparently do not find it so."

Poirot was standing looking out of the window. He turned suddenly to the other.

"I shall tell you something, M. Trefusis - in confidence."

"Yes?"

Poirot seemed in no hurry to begin. He waited a minute, hesitating. When he did speak, his opening words were coincident with the opening and shutting of the front door. For a man saying something in confidence, he spoke rather loudly, his voice drowning the sound of a footstep in the hall outside.

"I shall tell you this in confidence, Mr Trefusis. There is new evidence. It goes to prove that when Charles Leverson entered the Tower room that night, Sir Reuben was already dead."

The secretary stared at him.

"But what evidence? Why have we not heard of it?"

"You will hear," said the little man mysteriously. "In the meantime, you and I alone know the secret."

He skipped nimbly out of the room, and almost collided with Victor Astwell in the hall outside.

"You have just come in, eh, Monsieur?"

Astwell nodded.

"Beastly day outside," he said, breathing hard, "cold and blowy."

"Ah," said Poirot, "I shall not promenade myself today - me, I am like a cat, I sit by the fire and keep myself warm."

"Ça marche, George," he said that evening to the faithful valet, rubbing his hands as he spoke, "they are on the tenterhooks - the jump! It is hard, George, to play the game of the cat, the waiting game, but it answers, yes, it answers wonderfully. Tomorrow we make a further effect."

On the following day, Trefusis was obliged to go up to town. He went up by the same train as Victor Astwell. No sooner had they left the house than Poirot was galvanized into a fever of activity.

"Come, George, let us hurry to work. If the housemaid should approach these rooms, you must delay her. Speak to her sweet nothings, George, and keep her in the corridor."

He went first to the secretary's room, and began a thorough search. Not a drawer or a shelf was left uninspected. Then he replaced everything hurriedly, and declared his quest finished. George, on guard in the doorway, gave way to a deferential cough.

"If you will excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, my good George?"

"The shoes, sir. The two pairs of brown shoes were on the second shelf, and the patent-leather ones were on the shelf underneath. In replacing them you have reversed the order."

"Marvelous!" cried Poirot, holding up his hands. "But let us not distress ourselves over that. It is of no importance, I assure you, George. Never will M. Trefusis notice such a trifling matter."

"As you think, sir," said George.

"It is your business to notice such things," said Poirot encouragingly as he clapped the other on the shoulder. "It reflects credit upon you."

The valet did not reply, and when, later in the day, the proceeding was repeated in the room of Victor Astwell, he made no comment on the fact that Mr Astwell's underclothing was not returned to its drawers strictly according to plan. Yet, in the second case at least, events proved the valet to be right and Poirot wrong. Victor Astwell came storming into the drawing-room that evening.

"Now, look here, you blasted little Belgian jackanapes, what do you mean by searching my room? What the devil do you think you are going to find there? I won't have it, do you hear? That's what comes of having a ferreting little spy in the house."

Poirot's hands spread themselves out eloquently as his words tumbled one over the other. He offered a hundred apologies, a thousand, a million. He had been maladroit, officious, he was confused. He had taken an unwarranted liberty. In the end the infuriated gentleman was forced to subside, still growling. And again that evening, sipping his tisane, Poirot murmured to George: "It marches, my good George, yet - it marches."

"Friday," observed Hercule Poirot thoughtfully, "is my lucky day."

"Indeed, sir."

"You are not superstitious, perhaps, my good George?"

"I prefer not to sit down thirteen at table, sir, and I am adverse to passing under ladders. I have no superstitions about a Friday, sir."

"That is well," said Poirot, "for, see you, today we make our Waterloo."

"Really, sir."

"You have such enthusiasm, my good George, you do not even ask what I propose to do."

"And what is that, sir?"

"Today, George, I make a final thorough search of the Tower room."

True enough, after breakfast, Poirot, with the permission of Lady Astwell, went to the scene of the crime. There, at various times of the morning, members of the household saw him crawling about on all fours, examining minutely the black velvet curtains and standing on high chairs to examine the picture frames on the wall. Lady Astwell for the first time displayed uneasiness.

"I have to admit it," she said. "He is getting on my nerves at last. He has something up his sleeve, and I don't know what it is. And the way he is crawling about on the floor up there like a dog makes me downright shivery. What is he looking for, I'd like to know? Lily, my dear, I wish you would go up and see what he is up to now. No, on the whole, I'd rather you stayed with me."

"Shall I go, Lady Astwell?" asked the secretary, rising from the desk.

"If you would, Mr Trefusis."

Owen Trefusis left the room and mounted the stairs to the Tower room. At first glance, he thought the room was empty, there was certainly no sign of Hercule Poirot there. He was just turning to go down again when a sound caught his ears; he then saw the little man halfway down the spiral staircase that led to the bedroom above.

He was on his hands and knees; in his left hand was a little pocket lens, and through this he was examining minutely something on the woodwork beside the stair carpet.

As the secretary watched him, he uttered a sudden grunt, and slipped the lens into his pocket. He then rose to his feet, holding something between his finger and thumb. At that moment he became aware of the secretary's presence.

"Ah, hah! M. Trefusis, I didn't hear you enter."

He was in that moment a different man. Triumph and exultation beamed all over his face. Trefusis stared at him in surprise.

"What is the matter, M. Poirot? You look very pleased."

The little man puffed out his chest.

"Yes, indeed. See you I have at last found that which I have been looking for from the beginning. I have here between my finger and thumb the one thing necessary to convict the criminal."

"Then," the secretary raised his eyebrows, "it was not Charles Leverson?"

"It was not Charles Leverson," said Poirot. "Until this moment, though I know the criminal, I am not sure of his name but at last all is clear."

He stepped down the stairs and tapped the secretary on the shoulder.

"I am obliged to go to London immediately. Speak to Lady Astwell for me. Will you request of her that everyone should be assembled in the Tower room this evening at nine o'clock? I shall be there then, and I shall reveal the truth. Ah, me, but I am well content."

And breaking into a fantastic little dance, he skipped from the Tower room. Trefusis was left staring after him.

A few minutes later Poirot appeared in the library, demanding if anyone could supply him with a little cardboard box.

"Unfortunately, I have not such a thing with me," he explained, "and there is something of great value that it is necessary for me to put inside."

From one of the drawers in the desk Trefusis produced a small box, and Poirot professed himself highly delighted with it.

He hurried upstairs with his treasure-trove; meeting George on the landing, he handed the box to him.

"There is something of great importance inside," he explained. "Place it, my good George, in the second drawer of my dressing-table, beside the jewel-case that contains my pearl studs."

"Very good, sir," said George.

"Do not break it." said Poirot. "Be very careful. Inside that box is something that will hang a criminal."

"You don't say, sir," said George.

Poirot hurried down the stairs again and, seizing his hat, departed from the house at a brisk run.

His return was more unostentatious. The faithful George, according to orders, admitted him by the side door.

"They are all in the Tower room?" inquired Poirot.

"Yes, sir."

There was a murmured interchange of a few words, and then Poirot mounted with the triumphant step of the victor to that room where the murder had taken place less than a month ago. His eyes swept around the room. They were all there, Lady Astwell, Victor Astwell, Lily Margrave, the secretary, and Parsons, the butler. The latter was hovering by the door uncertainly.

"George, sir, said I should be needed here," said Parsons as Poirot made his appearance. "I don't know if that is right, sir?"

"Quite right," said Poirot. "Remain, I pray of you."

He advanced to the middle of the room.

"This has been a case of great interest," he said in a slow, reflective voice. "It is interesting because anyone might have murdered Sir Reuben Astwell. Who inherits his money? Charles Leverson and Lady Astwell. Who was with him last that night? Lady Astwell. Who quarreled with him violently? Again Lady Astwell."

"What are you talking about?" cried Lady Astwell. "I don't understand, I -"

"But someone else quarreled with Sir Reuben," continued Poirot in a pensive voice. "Someone else left him that night white with rage. Supposing Lady Astwell left her husband alive at a quarter to twelve that night, there would be ten minutes before Mr Charles Leverson returned, ten minutes in which it would be possible for someone from the second floor to steal down and do the deed, and then return to his room again."

Victor Astwell sprang up with a cry.

"What the hell -?" He stopped, choking with rage.

"In a rage, Mr Astwell, you once killed a man in West Africa."

"I don't believe it," cried Lily Margrave.

She came forward, her hands clenched, two bright spots of color in her cheeks.

"I don't believe it," repeated the girl. She came close to Victor Astwell's side.

"It's true, Lily," said Astwell, "but there are things this man doesn't know. The fellow I killed was a witch doctor who had just massacred fifteen children. I consider that I was justified."

Lily came up to Poirot.

"M. Poirot," she said earnestly, "you are wrong. Because a man has a sharp temper, because he breaks out and says all kinds of things, that is not any reason why he should do a murder. I know - I know, I tell you - that Mr Astwell is incapable of such a thing."

Poirot looked at her, a very curious smile on his face. Then he took her hand in his and patted it gently.

"You see, Mademoiselle," he said gently, "you also have your intuitions. So you believe in Mr Astwell, do you?"

Lily spoke quietly.

"Mr Astwell is a good man," she said, "and he is honest. He had nothing to do with the inside work of the Mpala Gold Fields. He is good through and through, and - I have promised to marry him."

Victor Astwell came to her side and took her other hand.

"Before God, M. Poirot," he said, "I didn't kill my brother."

"I know you did not," said Poirot.

His eyes swept around the room.

"Listen, my friends. In an hypnotic trance, Lady Astwell mentioned having seen a bulge in the curtain that night."

Everyone's eyes swept to the window.

"You mean there was a burglar concealed there?" exclaimed Victor Astwell. "What a splendid solution!"

"Ah!" said Poirot gently. "But it was not that curtain."

He wheeled around and pointed to the curtain that masked the little staircase.

"Sir Reuben used the bedroom the night prior to the crime. He breakfasted in bed, and he had Mr Trefusis up there to give him instructions. I don't know what it was that Mr Trefusis left in that bedroom, but there was something. When he said good night to Sir Reuben and Lady Astwell, he remembered this thing and ran up the stairs to fetch it. I don't think either the husband or wife noticed him, for they had already begun a violent discussion. They were in the middle of this quarrel when Mr Trefusis came down the stairs again.

"The things they were saying to each other were of so intimate and personal a nature that Mr Trefusis was placed in a very awkward position. It was clear to him that they imagined he had left the room some time ago. Fearing to arouse Sir Reuben's anger against himself, he decided to remain where he was and slip out later. He stayed there behind the curtain, and as Lady Astwell left the room she subconsciously noticed the outline of his form there.

"When Lady Astwell had left the room, Trefusis tried to steal out unobserved, but Sir Reuben happened to turn his head, and became aware of the secretary's presence. Already in a bad temper, Sir Reuben hurled abuse at his secretary, and accused him of deliberately eavesdropping and spying.

"Messieurs and Mesdames, I am a student of psychology. All through this case I have looked, not for the bad-tempered man or woman, for bad temper is its own safety valve. He who can bark does not bite. No, I have looked for the good-tempered man, for the man who is patient and self-controlled, for the man who for nine years has played the part of the under dog. There is no strain so great as that which has endured for years, there is no resentment like that which accumules slowly.

"For nine years Sir Reuben has bullied and browbeaten his secretary, and for nine years that man has endured in silence. But there comes a day when at last the strain reaches its breaking point. Something snaps! It was so that night. Sir Reuben sat down at his desk again, but the secretary, instead of turning humbly and meekly to the door, picks up the heavy wooden club, and strikes down the man who had bullied him once too often."

He turned to Trefusis, who was staring at him as though turned to stone.

"It was so simple, your alibi. Mr Astwell thought you were in your room, but no one saw you go there. You were just stealing out after striking down Sir Reuben, when you heard it sound, and you hastened back to cover, behind the curtain. You were behind there when Charles Leverson entered the room you were there when Lily Margrave came. It was not till long after that that you crept up through a silent house to your bedroom. Do you deny it?"

Trefusis began to stammer.

"I - I never -"

"Ah! Let us finish this. For two weeks now I have played the comedy, I have showed you the net closing slowly around you. The fingerprints, footprints, the search of your room with the things artistically replaced. I have struck terror into you with all of this; you have lain awake at night fearing and wondering; did you leave a fingerprint in the room or a footprint somewhere?

"Again and again you have gone over the events of that night wondering what you have done or left undone, and so I brought you to the state where you made a slip. I saw the fear leap into your eyes today when I picked up something from the stairs where you had stood hidden that night. Then I made a great parade, the little box, the entrusting of it to George, and I go out."

Poirot turned toward the door.

"George?"

"I am here, sir."

The valet came forward.

"Will you tell these ladies and gentlemen what my instructions were?"

"I was to remain concealed in the wardrobe in your room, sir, having placed the cardboard box where you told me to. At half-past three this afternoon, sir, Mr Trefusis entered the room; he went to the drawer and took out the box in question."

"And in that box," continued Poirot, "was a common pin. Me, I speak always the truth. I did pick up something on the stairs this morning. That is your English saying, is it not? 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.' Me, I have had good luck, I have found the murderer."

He turned to the secretary.

"You see?" he said gently. "You betrayed yourself."

Suddenly Trefusis broke down. He sank into a chair sobbing, his face buried in his hands.

"I was mad," he groaned. "I was mad. But, oh, my God, he badgered and bullied me beyond bearing. For years I had hated and loathed him."

"I knew!" cried Lady Astwell.

She sprang forward, her face irradiated with savage triumph.

"I knew that man had done it."

She stood there, savage and triumphant.

"And you were right," said Poirot. "One may call things by different names, but the fact remains. Your 'intuition,' Lady Astwell, proved correct. I felicitate you."

FOUR-AND-TWENTY BLACKBIRDS

Hercule Poirot was dining with his friend, Henry Bonnington at the Gallant Endeavour in the King's Road, Chelsea.

Mr Bonnington was fond of the Gallant Endeavour. He liked the leisurely atmosphere, he liked the food which was 'plain' and 'English' and 'not a lot of made up messes.' He liked to tell people who dined with him there just exactly where Augustus John had been wont to sit and draw the attention to the famous artists' names in the visitors' book. Mr Bonnington was himself the least artistic of men - but he took a certain pride in the artistic activities of others.

Molly, the sympathetic waitress, greeted Mr Bonnington as an old friend. She prided herself on remembering her customers' likes and dislikes in the way of food.

'Good evening, sir,' she said, as the two men took their seats at a corner table. 'You're in luck today - turkey stuffed with chestnuts - that's your favourite, isn't it? And ever such a nice Stilton we've got! Will you have soup first or fish?'

Mr Bonnington deliberated the point. He said to Poirot warningly as the latter studied the menu:

'None of your French kickshaws now. Good well-cooked English food.'

'My friend,' Hercule Poirot waved his hand, 'I ask no better! I put myself in your hands unreservedly.'

'Ah - hm - er - hm,' replied Mr Bonnington and gave careful attention to the matter.

These weighty matters, and the question of wine, settled, Mr Bonnington leaned back with a sigh and unfolded his napkin as Molly sped away.

'Good girl, that,' he said approvingly. 'Was quite a beauty once - artists used to paint her. She knows about food, too and that's a great deal more important. Women are very unsound on food as a rule. There's many a woman if she goes out with a fellow she fancies, won't even notice what she eats. She'll just order the first thing she sees.'

Hercule Poirot shook his head. 'C'est terrible.'

'Men aren't like that, thank God!' said Mr Bonnington complacently.

'Never?' There was a twinkle in Hercule Poirot's eye.

'Well, perhaps when they're very young,' conceded Mr Bonnington. 'Young puppies! Young fellows nowadays are all the same - no guts - no stamina. I've no use for the young - and they,' he added with strict impartiality, 'have no use for me. Perhaps they're right! But to hear some of these young fellows talk you'd think no man had a right to be alive after sixty! From the way they go on, you'd wonder more of them didn't help their elderly relations out of the world.'

'It is possible,' said Hercule Poirot, 'that they do.'

'Nice mind you've got, Poirot, I must say. All this police work saps your ideals.'

Hercule Poirot smiled.

'Tout de même,' he said. 'It would be interesting to make a table of accidental deaths over the age of sixty. I assure you it would raise some curious speculations in your mind.'

'The trouble with you is that you've started going to look for crime - instead of waiting for crime to come to you.'

'I apologize,' said Poirot. 'I talk what you call "the shop." Tell me, my friend, of your own affairs. How does the world go with you?'

'Mess!' said Mr Bonnington. 'That's what's the matter with the world nowadays. Too much mess. And too much fine language. The fine language helps to conceal the mess. Like a highly-flavoured sauce concealing the fact that the fish underneath it is none of the best! Give me an honest fillet of sole and no messy sauce over it.'

It was given him at that moment by Molly and he grunted approval.

'You know just what I like, my girl,' he said.

'Well, you come here pretty regular, don't you, sir? I ought to know what you like.'

Hercule Poirot said:

'Do people then always like the same things? Do not they like a change sometimes?'

'Not gentlemen, sir. Ladies like variety - gentlemen always like the same thing.'

'What did I tell you?' grunted Bonnington. 'Women are fundamentally unsound where food is concerned!'

He looked round the restaurant.

'The world's a funny place. See that odd-looking old fellow with a beard in the corner? Molly'll tell you he's always here Tuesdays and Thursday nights. He has come here for close on ten years now - he's a kind of landmark in the place. Yet nobody here knows his name or where he lives or what his business is. It's odd when you come to think of it.'

When the waitress brought the portions of turkey he said: 'I see you've still got Old Father Time over there.'

'That's right, sir. Tuesdays and Thursdays, his days are. Not but what he came in here on a Monday last week! It quite upset me! I felt I'd got my dates wrong and that it must be Tuesday without my knowing it! But he came in the next night as well - so the Monday was just a kind of extra, so to speak.'

'An interesting deviation from habit,' murmured Poirot. 'I wonder what the reason was?'

'Well, sir, if you ask me, I think he'd had some kind of upset or worry.'

'Why did you think that? His manner?'

'No, sir - not his manner exactly. He was very quiet as he always is. Never says much except good evening when he comes and goes. No, it was his order.'

'His order?'

'I dare say you gentlemen will laugh at me,' Molly flushed up, 'but when a gentleman has been here for ten years, you get to know his likes and dislikes. He never could bear suet pudding or blackberries and I've never known him take thick soup - but on that Monday night he ordered thick tomato soup, beefsteak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart! Seemed as though he just didn't notice what he ordered!'

'Do you know,' said Hercule Poirot, 'I find that extraordinarily interesting.'

Molly looked gratified and departed.

'Well, Poirot,' said Henry Bonnington with a chuckle. 'Let's have a few deductions from you. All in your best manner.'

'I would prefer to hear yours first.'

'Want me to be Watson, eh? Well, old fellow went to a doctor and the doctor changed his diet.'

'To thick tomato soup, steak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart? I cannot imagine any doctor doing that.'

'Don't believe it, old boy. Doctors will put you on to anything.'

'That is the only solution that occurs to you?'

Henry Bonnington said:

'Well, seriously, I suppose there's only one explanation possible. Our unknown friend was in the grip of some powerful mental emotion. He was so perturbed by it that he literally did not notice what he was ordering or eating.' He paused a minute and then said: 'You'll be telling me next that you know just what was on his mind. You'll say perhaps that he was making up his mind to commit a murder.'

He laughed at his own suggestion.

Hercule Poirot did not laugh.

He has admitted that at that moment he was seriously worried. He claims that he ought then to have had some inkling of what was likely to occur.

His friends assure him that such an idea is quite fantastic.

It was some three weeks later that Hercule Poirot and Bonnington met again - this time their meeting was in the Tube.

They nodded to each other, swaying about, hanging on to adjacent straps. Then at Piccadilly Circus there was a general exodus and they found seats right at the forward end of the car - a peaceful spot since nobody passed in or out that way.

'That's better,' said Mr Bonnington. 'Selfish lot, the human race, they won't pass up the car however much you ask 'em to!'

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'What will you?' he said. 'Life is too uncertain.'

'That's it. Here today, gone tomorrow,' said Mr Bonnington with a kind of gloomy relish. 'And talking of that, d'you remember that old boy we noticed at the Gallant Endeavour? I shouldn't wonder if he'd hopped it to a better world. He's not been there for a whole week. Molly's quite upset about it.'

Hercule Poirot sat up. His green eyes flashed.

'Indeed?' he said. 'Indeed?'

Bonnington said:

'D'you remember I suggested he'd been to a doctor and been put on a diet? Diet's nonsense of course - but I shouldn't wonder if he had consulted a doctor about his health and what the doctor said gave him a bit of a jolt. That would account for him ordering things off the menu without noticing what he was doing. Quite likely the jolt he got hurried him out of the world sooner than he would have gone otherwise. Doctors ought to be careful what they tell a chap.'

'They usually are,' said Hercule Poirot.

'This is my station,' said Mr Bonnington. 'Bye, bye. Don't suppose we shall ever know now who the old boy was - not even his name. Funny world!'

He hurried out of the carriage.

Hercule Poirot, sitting frowning, looked as though he did not think it was such a funny world.

He went home and gave certain instructions to his faithful valet, George.

Hercule Poirot ran his finger down a list of names. It was a record of deaths within a certain area.

Poirot's finger stopped.

'Henry Gascoigne. Sixty-nine. I might try him first.'

Later in the day, Hercule Poirot was sitting in Dr MacAndrew's surgery just off the King's Road. MacAndrew was a tall red-haired Scotsman with an intelligent face.

'Gascoigne?' he said. 'Yes, that's right. Eccentric old bird. Lived alone in one of those derelict old houses that are being cleared away in order to build a block of modern flats. I hadn't attended him before, but I'd seen him about and I knew who he was. It was the dairy people got the wind up first. The milk bottles began to pile up outside. In the end the people next door sent word to the police and they broke the door in and found him. He'd pitched down the stairs and broken his neck. Had on an old dressing-gown with a ragged cord - might easily have tripped himself up with it.'

'I see,' said Hercule Poirot. 'It was quite simple - an accident.'

'That's right.'

'Had he any relations?'

'There's a nephew. Used to come along and see his uncle about once a month. Lorrimer, his name is, George Lorrimer. He's a medico himself. Lives at Wimbledon.'

'Was he upset at the old man's death?'

'I don't know that I'd say he was upset. I mean, he had an affection for the old man, but he didn't really know him very well.'

'How long had Mr Gascoigne been dead when you saw him?'

'Ah!' said Dr MacAndrew. 'This is where we get official. Not less than forty-eight hours and not more than seventy-two hours. He was found on the morning of the sixth. Actually, we got closer than that. He'd got a letter in the pocket of his dressing-gown - written on the third - posted in Wimbledon that afternoon - would have been delivered somewhere around nine-twenty p.m. That puts the time of death at after nine-twenty on the evening of the third. That agrees with the contents of the stomach and the processes of digestion. He had had a meal about two hours before death. I examined him on the morning of the sixth and his condition was quite consistent with death having occurred about sixty hours previously - round about ten p.m. on the third.'

'It all seems very consistent. Tell me, when was he last seen alive?'

'He was seen in the King's Road about seven o'clock that same evening, Thursday the third, and he dined at the Gallant Endeavour restaurant at seven-thirty. It seems he always dined there on Thursdays. He was by way of being an artist, you know. An extremely bad one.'

'He had no other relations? Only this nephew?'

'There was a twin brother. The whole story is rather curious. They hadn't seen each other for years. It seems the other brother, Anthony Gascoigne, married a very rich woman and gave up art - and the brothers quarrelled over it. Hadn't seen each other since, I believe. But oddly enough, they died on the same day. The elder twin passed away at three o'clock on the afternoon of the third. Once before I've known a case of twins dying on the same day - in different parts of the world! Probably just a coincidence- but there it is.'

'Is the other brother's wife alive?'

'No, she died some years ago.'

'Where did Anthony Gascoigne live?'

'He had a house on Kingston Hill. He was, I believe, from what Dr Lorrimer tells me, very much of a recluse.'

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

The Scotsman looked at him keenly.

'What exactly have you got in your mind, M. Poirot?' he asked bluntly. 'I've answered your questions - as was my duty seeing the credentials you brought. But I'm in the dark as to what it's all about.'

Poirot said slowly:

'A simple case of accidental death, that's what you said. What I have in mind is equally simple - a simple push.'

Dr MacAndrew looked startled.

'In other words, murder! Have you any grounds for that belief?'

'No,' said Poirot. 'It is a mere supposition.'

'There must be something -' persisted the other.

Poirot did not speak.

MacAndrew said: 'If it's the nephew, Lorrimer, you suspect, I don't mind telling you here and now that you are barking up the wrong tree. Lorrimer was playing bridge in Wimbledon from eight-thirty till midnight. That came out at the inquest.'

Poirot murmured:

'And presumably it was verified. The police are careful.'

The doctor said:

'Perhaps you know something against him?'

'I didn't know that there was such a person until you mentioned him.'

'Then you suspect somebody else?'

'No, no. It is not that at all. It's a case of the routine habits of the human animal. That is very important. And the dead M. Gascoigne does not fit in. It is all wrong, you see.'

'I really don't understand.'

Hercule Poirot murmured:

'The trouble is, there is too much sauce over the bad fish.'

'My dear sir?'

Hercule Poirot smiled.

'You will be having me locked up as a lunatic soon, Monsieur le Docteur. But I am not really a mental case - just a man who has a liking for order and method and who is worried when he comes across a fact that does not fit in. I must ask you to forgive me for having given you so much trouble.'

He rose and the doctor rose also.

'You know,' said MacAndrew, 'honestly, I can't see anything the least bit suspicious about the death of Henry Gascoigne. I say he fell - you say somebody pushed him. It's all - well - in the air.'

Hercule Poirot sighed.

'Yes,' he said. 'It is workmanlike. Somebody has made the good job of it!'

'You still think -'

The little man spread out his hands.

"I'm an obstinate man - a man with a little idea - and nothing to support it! By the way, did Henry Gascoigne have false teeth?'

'No, his own teeth were in excellent preservation. Very creditable indeed at his age.'

'He looked after them well - they were white and well brushed?'

'Yes, I noticed them particularly. Teeth tend to grow a little yellow as one grows older, but they were in good condition.'

'Not discoloured in any way?'

'No. I don't think he was a smoker if that is what you mean.'

'I did not mean that precisely - it was just a long shot - which probably will not come off! Goodbye, Dr MacAndrew, and thank you for your kindness.'

He shook the doctor's hand and departed.

'And now,' he said, 'for the long shot.'

At the Gallant Endeavour, he sat down at the same table which he had shared with Bonnington. The girl who served him was not Molly. Molly, the girl told him, was away on a holiday.

It was only just seven and Hercule Poirot found no difficulty in entering into conversation with the girl on the subject of old Mr Gascoigne.

'Yes,' she said. 'He'd been here for years and years. But none of us girls ever knew his name. We saw about the inquest in the paper, and there was a picture of him. "There," I said to Molly. "If that isn't our 'Old Father Time'" as we used to call him.'

'He dined here on the evening of his death, did he not?'

'That's right, Thursday, the third. He was always here on a Thursday. Tuesdays and Thursdays punctual as a clock.'

'You don't remember, I suppose, what he had for dinner?'

'Now let me see, it was mulligatawny soup, that's right, and beefsteak pudding or was it the mutton? - no pudding, that's right, and blackberry and apple pie and cheese. And then to think of him going home and falling down those stairs that very same evening. A frayed dressing-gown cord they said it was as caused it. Of course, his clothes were always something awful - old-fashioned and put on anyhow, and all tattered, and yet he had a kind of air, all the same, as though he was somebody! Oh, we get all sorts of interesting customers here.'

She moved off.

Hercule Poirot ate his filleted sole. His eyes showed a green light.

'It is odd,' he said to himself, 'how the cleverest people slip over details. Bonnington will be interested.'

But the time had not yet come for leisurely discussion with Bonnington.

Armed with introductions from a certain influential quarter, Hercule Poirot found no difficulty at all in dealing with the coroner for the district.

'A curious figure, the deceased man Gascoigne,' he observed. 'A lonely, eccentric old fellow. But his decease seems to arouse an unusual amount of attention?'

He looked with some curiosity at his visitor as he spoke.

Hercule Poirot chose his words carefully. 'There are circumstances connected with it, Monsieur, which make investigation desirable.'

'Well, how can I help you?'

'It is, I believe, within your province to order documents produced in your court to be destroyed, or to be impounded - as you think fit. A certain letter was found in the pocket of Henry Gascoigne's dressing-gown, was it not?'

'That is so.'

'A letter from his nephew, Dr George Lorrimer?'

'Quite correct. The letter was produced at the inquest as helping to fix the time of death.'

'Which was corroborated by the medical evidence?'

'Exactly.'

'Is that letter still available?'

Hercule Poirot waited rather anxiously for the reply.

When he heard that the letter was still available for examination he drew a sigh of relief. When it was finally produced he studied it with some care. It was written in a slightly cramped handwriting with a stylographic pen. It ran as follows:

Dear Uncle Henry,

I am sorry to tell you that I have had no success as regards Uncle Anthony. He showed no enthusiasm for a visit from you and would give me no reply to your request that he would let bygones be bygones. He is, of course, extremely ill, and his mind is inclined to wander. I should fancy that the end is very near. He seemed hardly to remember who you were.

I am sorry to have failed you, but I can assure you that I did my best.

Your affectionate nephew,

George Lorrimer

The letter itself was dated 3rd November. Poirot glanced at the envelope's postmark - 4.30 p.m. 3 Nov.

He murmured:

'It is beautifully in order, is it not?'

Kingston Hill was his next objective. After a little trouble, with the exercise of good-humoured pertinacity, he obtained an interview with Amelia Hill, cook-housekeeper to the late Anthony Gascoigne.

Mrs Hill was inclined to be stiff and suspicious at first, but the charming geniality of this strange-looking foreigner would have had its effect on a stone. Mrs Amelia Hill began to unbend. She found herself, as had so many other women before her, pouring out her troubles to a really sympathetic listener. For fourteen years she had had charge of Mr Gascoigne's household - not an easy job! No, indeed! Many a woman would have quailed under the burdens she had had to bear! Eccentric the poor gentleman was and no denying it. Remarkably close with his money - a kind of mania with him it was - and he as rich a gentleman as might be! But Mrs Hill had served him faithfully, and put up with his ways, and naturally she'd expected at any rate a remembrance. But no - nothing at all! Just an old will that left all his money to his wife and if she predeceased him then everything to his brother, Henry. A will made years ago. It didn't seem fair!

Gradually Hercule Poirot detached her from her main theme of unsatisfied cupidity. It was indeed a heartless injustice! Mrs Hill could not be blamed for feeling hurt and surprised. It was well known that Mr Gascoigne was tight-fisted about money. It had even been said that the dead man had refused his only brother assistance. Mrs Hill probably knew all about that.

'Was it that that Dr Lorrimer came to see him about?' asked Mrs Hill. 'I knew it was something about his brother, but I thought it was just that his brother wanted to be reconciled. They'd quarrelled years ago.'

'I understand,' said Poirot, 'that Mr Gascoigne refused absolutely?'

'That's right enough,' said Mrs Hill with a nod. '"Henry?" he says, rather weak like. "What's this about Henry? Haven't seen him for years and don't want to. Quarrelsome fellow, Henry." Just that.'

The conversation then reverted to Mrs Hill's own special grievances, and the unfeeling attitude of the late Mr Gascoigne's solicitor.

With some difficulty Hercule Poirot took his leave without breaking off the conversation too abruptly.

And so, just after the dinner hour, he came to Elmcrest, Dorset Road, Wimbledon, the residence of Dr George Lorrimer.

The doctor was in. Hercule Poirot was shown into the surgery and there presently Dr George Lorrimer came to him, obviously just risen from the dinner table.

'I'm not a patient, Doctor,' said Hercule Poirot. 'And my coming here is, perhaps, somewhat of an impertinence - but I'm an old man and I believe in plain and direct dealing. I do not care for lawyers and their long-winded roundabout methods.'

He had certainly aroused Lorrimer's interest. The doctor was a clean-shaven man of middle height. His hair was brown, but his eyelashes were almost white which gave his eyes a pale, boiled appearance. His manner was brisk and not without humour.

'Lawyers?' he said, raising his eyebrows. 'Hate the fellows! You rouse my curiosity, my dear sir. Pray sit down.'

Poirot did so and then produced one of his professional cards which he handed to the doctor.

George Lorrimer's white eyelashes blinked.

Poirot leaned forward confidentially. 'A good many of my clients are women,' he said.

'Naturally,' said Dr George Lorrimer, with a slight twinkle.

'As you say, naturally,' agreed Poirot. 'Women distrust the official police. They prefer private investigations. They do not want to have their troubles made public. An elderly woman came to consult me a few days ago. She was unhappy about a husband she'd quarrelled with many years before. This husband of hers was your uncle, the late Mr Gascoigne.'

George Lorrimer's face went purple.

'My uncle? Nonsense! His wife died many years ago.'

'Not your uncle, Mr Anthony Gascoigne. Your uncle, Mr Henry Gascoigne.'

'Uncle Henry? But he wasn't married!'

'Oh yes, he was,' said Hercule Poirot, lying unblushingly. 'Not a doubt of it. The lady even brought along her marriage certificate.'

'It's a lie!' cried George Lorrimer. His face was now as purple as a plum. 'I don't believe it. You're an impudent liar.'

'It is too bad, is it not?' said Poirot. 'You have committed murder for nothing.'

'Murder?' Lorrimer's voice quavered. His pale eyes bulged with terror.

'By the way,' said Poirot, 'I see you have been eating blackberry tart again. An unwise habit. Blackberries are said to be full of vitamins, but they may be deadly in other ways. On this occasion I rather fancy they have helped to put a rope round a man's neck - your neck, Dr Lorrimer.'

'You see, mon ami, where you went wrong was over your fundamental assumption.' Hercule Poirot, beaming placidly across the table at his friend, waved an expository hand. 'A man under severe mental stress doesn't choose that time to do something that he's never done before. His reflexes just follow the track of least resistance. A man who is upset about something might conceivably come down to dinner dressed in his pyjamas - but they will be his own pyjamas - not somebody else's.

'A man who dislikes thick soup, suet pudding and blackberries suddenly orders all three one evening. You say, because he is thinking of something else. But I say that a man who has got something on his mind will order automatically the dish he has ordered most often before.

'Eh bien, then, what other explanation could there be? I simply could not think of a reasonable explanation. And I was worried! The incident was all wrong. It did not fit! I have an orderly mind and I like things to fit. Mr Gascoigne's dinner order worried me.

'Then you told me that the man had disappeared. He had missed a Tuesday and a Thursday the first time for years. I liked that even less. A queer hypothesis sprang up in my mind. If I were right about it the man was dead. I made inquiries. The man was dead. And he was very neatly and tidily dead. In other words the bad fish was covered up with the sauce!

'He had been seen in the King's Road at seven o'clock. He had had dinner here at seven-thirty - two hours before he died. It all fitted in - the evidence of the stomach contents, the evidence of the letter. Much too much sauce! You couldn't see the fish at all!

'Devoted nephew wrote the letter, devoted nephew had beautiful alibi for time of death. Death very simple - a fall down the stairs. Simple accident? Simple murder? Everyone says the former.

'Devoted nephew only surviving relative. Devoted nephew will inherit - but is there anything to inherit? Uncle notoriously poor.

'But there is a brother. And brother in his time had had married a rich wife. And brother lives in a big rich house on Kingston Hill, so it would seem that rich wife must have left him all her money. You see the sequence - rich wife leaves money to Anthony, Anthony leaves money to Henry, Henry's money goes to George - a complete chain.'

'All very pretty in theory,' said Bonnington. 'But what did you do?'

'Once you know - you can usually get hold of what you want. Henry had died two hours after a meal - that is all the inquest really bothered about. But supposing the meal was not dinner, but lunch. Put yourself in George's place. George wants money - badly. Anthony Gascoigne is dying - but his death is no good to George. His money goes to Henry, and Henry Gascoigne may live for years. So Henry must die too - and the sooner the better - but his death must take place after Anthony's, and at the same time George must have an alibi. Henry's habit of dining regularly at a restaurant on two evenings of the week suggest an alibi to George. Being a cautious fellow, he tries his plan out first. He impersonates his uncle on Monday evening at the restaurant in question. It goes without a hitch. Everyone there accepts him as his uncle. He is satisfied. He has only to wait till Uncle Anthony shows definite signs of pegging out. The time comes. He writes a letter to his uncle on the afternoon of the second November but dates it the third. He comes up to town on the afternoon of the third, calls on his uncle, and carries his scheme into action. A sharp shove and down the stairs goes Uncle Henry. George hunts about for the letter he has written, and shoves it in the pocket of his uncle's dressing-gown. At seven-thirty he is at the Gallant Endeavour, beard, bushy eyebrows all complete. Undoubtedly Mr Henry Gascoigne is alive at seven-thirty. Then a rapid metamorphosis in a lavatory and back full speed in his car to Wimbledon and an evening of bridge. The perfect alibi.'

Mr Bonnington looked at him.

'But the postmark on the letter?'

'Oh, that was very simple. The postmark was smudgy. Why? It had been altered with lamp black from second November to third November. You would not notice it unless you were looking for it. And finally there were the blackbirds.'

'Blackbirds?'

'Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie! Or black-berries if you prefer to be literal! George, you comprehend, was after all not quite a good enough actor. Do you remember the fellow who blacked himself all over to play Othello? That is the kind of actor you have got to be in crime. George looked like his uncle and walked like his uncle and spoke like his uncle and had his uncles' beard and eyebrows, but he forgot to eat like his uncle. He ordered the dishes that he himself liked. Blackberries discolour the teeth - the corpse's teeth were not discoloured, and yet Henry Gascoigne ate blackberries at the Gallant Endeavour that night. But there were no blackberries in the stomach. I asked this morning. And George had been fool enough to keep the beard and the rest of the make-up. Oh! plenty of evidence once you look for it. I called on George and rattled him. That finished it! He had been eating blackberries again, by the way. A greedy fellow - cared a lot about his food. Eh bien, greed will hang him all right unless I am very much mistaken.'

A waitress brought them two portions of blackberry and apple tart.

'Take it away,' said Mr Bonnington. 'One can't be too careful. Bring me a small helping of sago pudding.'

THE DREAM

Hercule Poirot gave the house a steady appraising glance. His eyes wandered a moment to its surroundings, the shops, the big factory building on the right, the blocks of cheap mansion flats opposite.

Then once more his eyes returned to Northway House, relic of an earlier age - an age of space and leisure, when green fields had surrounded its well-bred arrogance. Now it was an anachronism, submerged and forgotten in the hectic sea of modern London, and not one man in fifty could have told you where it stood.

Furthermore, very few people could have told you to whom it belonged, though its owner's name would have been recognized as one of the world's richest men. But money can quench publicity as well as flaunt it. Benedict Farley, that eccentric millionaire, chose not to advertise his choice of residence. He himself was rarely seen, seldom making a public appearance.

From time to time he appeared at board meetings, his lean figure, beaked nose, and rasping voice easily dominating the assembled directors. Apart from that, he was just a well-known figure of legend. There were his strange meannesses, his incredible generosities, as well as more personal details - his famous patch-work dressing-gown, now reputed to be twenty-eight years old, his invariable diet of cabbage soup and caviare, his hatred of cats. All these things the public knew.

Hercule Poirot knew them also. It was all he did know of the man he was about to visit. The letter which was in his coat pocket told him little more.

After surveying this melancholy landmark of a past age for a minute or two in silence, he walked up the steps to the front door and pressed the bell, glancing as he did so at the neat wrist-watch which had at last replaced an earlier favorite - the large turnip-faced watch of earlier days. Yes, it was exactly nine-thirty. As ever, Hercule Poirot was exact to the minute.

The door opened after just the right interval. A perfect specimen of the genus butler stood outlined against the lighted hall.

"Mr Benedict Farley?" asked Hercule Poirot.

The impersonal glance surveyed him from head to foot, inoffensively but effectively.

"En gros et en détail," thought Hercule Poirot to himself with appreciation.

"You have an appointment, sir?" asked the suave voice.

"Yes."

"Your name, sir?"

"M. Hercule Poirot."

The butler bowed and drew back. Hercule Poirot entered the house. The butler closed the door behind him.

But there was yet one more formality before the deft hands took hat and stick from the visitor.

"You will excuse me, sir. I was to ask for a letter."

With deliberation Poirot took from his pocket the folded letter and handed it to the butler. The latter gave it a mere glance, then returned it with a bow. Hercule Poirot returned it to his pocket. Its contents were simple.

Northway House, W.8.

M. Hercule Poirot.

Dear Sir,

Mr Benedict Farley would like to have the benefit of your advice. If convenient to yourself he would be glad if you would call upon him at the above address at 9:30 tomorrow (Thursday) evening.

Yours truly,

Hugo Cornworthy

(Secretary).

P.S. - Please bring this letter with you.

Deftly the butler relieved Poirot of hat, stick, and overcoat. He said:

"Will you please come up to Mr Cornworthy's room?"

He led the way up the broad staircase. Poirot followed him, looking with appreciation at such objets d'art as were of an opulent and florid nature. His taste in art was always somewhat bourgeois.

On the first floor the butler knocked on a door.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose very slightly. It was the first jarring note. For the best butlers do not knock at doors - and yet indubitably this was a first-class butler!

It was, so to speak, the first intimation of contact with the eccentricity of a millionaire.

A voice from within called out something. The butler threw open the door. He announced (and again Poirot sensed the deliberate departure from orthodoxy):

"The gentleman you are expecting, sir."

Poirot passed into the room. It was a fair-sized room, very plainly furnished in a workmanlike fashion. Filing cabinets, books of reference, a couple of easy chairs, and a large and imposing desk covered with neatly docketed papers. The corners of the room were dim, for the only light came from a big green-shaded reading-lamp which stood on a small table by the arm of one of the easy chairs. It was placed so as to cast its full light on anyone approaching from the door. Hercule Poirot blinked a little, realizing that the lamp bulb was at least 150 watts. In the armchair sat a thin figure in a patchwork dressing-gown - Benedict Farley. His head was stuck forward in a characteristic attitude, his beaked nose projecting like that of a bird. A crest of white hair like that of a cockatoo rose above his forehead. His eyes glittered behind thick lenses as he peered suspiciously at his visitor.

"Hey," he said at last - and his voice was shrill and harsh, with a rasping note in it. "So you're Hercule Poirot, hey?"

"At your service," said Poirot politely and bowed, one hand on the back of the chair.

"Sit down - sit down," said the old man testily.

Hercule Poirot sat down - in the full glare of the lamp. From behind it the old man seemed to be studying him attentively.

"How do I know you're Hercule Poirot - hey?" he demanded fretfully. "Tell me that - hey?"

Once more Poirot drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to Farley.

"Yes," admitted the millionaire grudgingly. "That's it. That's what I got Cornworthy to write." He folded it up and tossed it back. "So you're the fellow, are you?"

With a little wave of his hand Poirot said:

"I assure you there is no deception!"

Benedict Farley chuckled suddenly.

"That's what the conjuror says before he takes the goldfish out of the hat! Saying that is part of the trick, you know."

Poirot did not reply. Farley said suddenly:

"Think I'm a suspicious old man, hey? So I am. Don't trust anybody! That's my motto. Can't trust anybody when you're rich. No, no, it doesn't do."

"You wished," Poirot hinted gently, "to consult me?"

The old man nodded.

"That's right. Always buy the best. That's my motto. Go to the expert and don't count the cost. You'll notice, M. Poirot, I haven't asked you your fee. I'm not going to! Send me in the bill later - shan't cut up rough over it. Damned fools at the dairy thought they could charge me two and nine for eggs when two and seven's the market price - lot of swindlers! I won't be swindled. But the man at the top's different. He's worth the money. I'm at the top myself - I know."

Hercule Poirot made no reply. He listened attentively, his head poised a little on one side.

Behind his impassive exterior he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He could not exactly put his finger on it. So far Benedict Farley had run true to type - that is, he had conformed to the popular idea of himself; and yet - Poirot was disappointed.

"The man," he said disgustedly to himself, "is a mountebank - nothing but a mountebank!"

He had known other millionaires, eccentric men too, but in nearly every case he had been conscious of a certain force, an inner energy that had commanded his respect. If they had worn a patchwork dressing-gown, it would have been because they liked wearing such a dressing-gown. But the dressing-gown of Benedict Farley, or so it seemed to Poirot, was essentially a stage property. And the man himself was essentially stagey. Every word he spoke was uttered, so Poirot felt assured, sheerly for effect.

He repeated again unemotionally, "You wished to consult me, Mr Farley?"

Abruptly the millionaire's manner changed.

He leaned forward. His voice dropped to a croak.

"Yes. Yes... I want to hear what you've got to say - what you think... Go to the top! That's my way! The best doctor - the best detective - it's between the two of them."

"As yet, Monsieur, I do not understand."

"Naturally," snapped Farley. "I haven't begun to tell you."

He leaned forward once more and shot out an abrupt question.

"What do you know, M. Poirot, about dreams?"

The little man's eyebrows rose. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

"For that, Monsieur Farley, I should recommend Napoleon's Book of Dreams - or the latest practicing psychologist from Harley Street."

Benedict Farley said soberly, "I've tried both..."

There was a pause, then the millionaire spoke, at first almost in a whisper, then with a voice growing higher and higher.

"It's the same dream - night after night. And I'm afraid, I tell you - I'm afraid... It's always the same. I'm sitting in my room next door to this. Sitting at my desk, writing. There's a clock there and I glance at it and see the time - exactly twenty-eight minutes past three. Always the same time, you understand.

"And when I see the time, M. Poirot, I know I've got to do it. I don't want to do it - I loathe doing it - but I've got to -"

His voice had risen shrilly.

Unperturbed, Poirot said, "And what is it that you have to do?"

"At twenty-eight minutes past three," Benedict Farley said hoarsely, "I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it and walk over to the window. And then - and then -"

"Yes?"

Benedict Farley said in a whisper: "Then I shoot myself..."

There was silence.

Then Poirot said, "That is your dream?"

"Yes."

"The same every night?"

"Yes."

"What happens after you shoot yourself?"

"I wake up."

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully.

"As a matter of interest, do you keep a revolver in that particular drawer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I have always done so. It is as well to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

Farley said irritably, "A man in my position has to be on his guard. All rich men have enemies."

Poirot did not pursue the subject. He remained silent for a moment or two, then he said:

"Why exactly did you send for me?"

"I will tell you. First of all I consulted a doctor - three doctors to be exact."

"Yes?"

"The first told me it was all a question of diet. He was an elderly man. The second was a young man of the modern school. He assured me that it all hinged on a certain event that took place in infancy at that particular time of day - three twenty-eight. I am so determined, he says, not to remember that event, that I symbolize it by destroying myself. That is his explanation."

"And the third doctor?" asked Poirot.

Benedict Farley's voice rose in shrill anger.

"He's a young man too. He has a preposterous theory! He asserts that I, myself, am tired of life, that my life is so unbearable to me that I deliberately want to end it! But since to acknowledge that fact would be to acknowledge that essentially I am a failure, I refuse in my waking moments to face the truth. But when I am asleep, all inhibitions are removed, and I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself."

"His view is that you really wish, unknown to yourself, to commit suicide?" said Poirot.

Benedict Farley cried shrilly:

"And that's impossible - impossible! I'm perfectly happy! I've got everything I want - everything money can buy! It's fantastic - unbelievable even to suggest a thing like that!"

Poirot looked at him with interest. Perhaps something in the shaking hands, the trembling shrillness of the voice, warned him that the denial was too vehement, that its very insistence was in itself suspect. He contented himself with saying:

"And where do I come in, Monsieur?"

Benedict Farley calmed down suddenly. He tapped with an emphatic finger on the table beside him.

"There's another possibility. And if it's right, you're the man to know about it! You're famous, you've had hundreds of cases - fantastic, improbable cases! You'd know if anyone does."

"Know what?"

Farley's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Supposing someone wants to kill me... Could they do it this way? Could they make me dream that dream night after night?"

"Hypnotism, you mean?"

"Yes."

Hercule Poirot considered the question.

"It would be possible, I suppose," he said at last. "It is more a question for a doctor."

"You don't know of such a case in your experience?"

"Not precisely on those lines, no."

"You see what I'm driving at? I'm made to dream the same dream, night after night, night after night - and then - one day the suggestion is too much for me - and I act upon it. I do what I've dreamed of so often - kill myself!"

Slowly Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"You don't think that is possible?" asked Farley.

"Possible?" Poirot shook his head. "That is not a word I care to meddle with."

"But you think it improbable?"

"Most improbable."

Benedict Farley murmured, "The doctor said so too..." Then his voice rising shrilly again, he cried out, "But why do I have this dream? Why? Why?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head. Benedict Farley said abruptly, "You're sure you've never come across anything like this in your experience?"

"Never."

"That's what I wanted to know."

Delicately, Poirot cleared his throat.

"You permit," he said, "a question?"

"What is it? What is it? Say what you like."

"Who is it you suspect of wanting to kill you?"

Farley snapped out, "Nobody. Nobody at all."

"But the idea presented itself to your mind?" Poirot persisted.

"I wanted to know - if it was a possibility."

"Speaking from my own experience, I should say No. Have you ever been hypnotized, by the way?"

"Of course not. D'you think I'd lend myself to such tomfoolery?"

"Then I think one can say that your theory is definitely improbable."

"But the dream, you fool, the dream."

"The dream is certainly remarkable," said Poirot thoughtfully. He paused and then went on. "I should like to see the scene of this drama - the table, the clock, and the revolver."

"Of course, I'll take you next door."

Wrapping the folds of his dressing-gown round him, the old man half-rose from his chair. Then suddenly, as though a thought had struck him, he resumed his seat.

"No," he said. "There's nothing to see there. I've told you all there is to tell."

"But I should like to see for myself -"

"There's no need," Farley snapped. "You've given me your opinion. That's the end."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. "As you please."

He rose to his feet. "I am sorry, Mr Farley, that I have not been able to be of assistance to you."

Benedict Farley was staring straight ahead of him.

"Don't want a lot of hanky-pankying around," he growled out. "I've told you the facts - you can't make anything of them. That closes the matter. You can send me in a bill for a consultation fee."

"I shall not fail to do so," said the detective dryly. He walked towards the door.

"Stop a minute." The millionaire called him back. "That letter - I want it."

"The letter from your secretary?"

"Yes."

Poirot's eyebrows rose. He put his hand into his pocket, drew out a folded sheet, and handed it to the old man. The latter scrutinized it, then put it down on the table beside him with a nod.

Once more Hercule Poirot walked to the door. He was puzzled. His busy mind was going over and over the story he had been told. Yet in the midst of his mental preoccupation, a nagging sense of something wrong obtruded itself. And that something had to do with himself - not with Benedict Farley.

With his hand on the door knob, his mind cleared. He, Hercule Poirot, had been guilty of an error! He turned back into the room once more.

"A thousand pardons! In the interest of your problem I have committed a folly! That letter I handed to you - by mischance I put my hand into my right-hand pocket instead of the left -"

"What's all this? What's all this?"

"The letter that I handed you just now - an apology from my laundress concerning the treatment of my collars." Poirot was smiling, apologetic. He dipped into his left-hand pocket. "This is your letter."

Benedict Farley snatched at it - grunted: "Why the devil can't you mind what you're doing?"

Poirot retrieved his laundress's communication, apologized gracefully once more, and left the room.

He paused for a moment outside on the landing. It was a spacious one. Directly facing him was a big old oak settle with a refectory table in front of it. On the table were magazines. There were also two armchairs and a table with flowers. It reminded him a little of a dentist's waiting-room.

The butler was in the hall below waiting to let him out.

"Can I get you a taxi, sir?"

"No, I thank you. The night is fine. I will walk."

Hercule Poirot paused a moment on the pavement waiting for a lull in the traffic before crossing the busy street.

A frown creased his forehead.

"No," he said to himself. "I do not understand at all. Nothing makes sense. Regrettable to have to admit it, but I, Hercule Poirot, am completely baffled."

That was what might be termed the first act of the drama. The second act followed a week later. It opened with a telephone call from one John Stillingfleet, M.D.

He said with a remarkable lack of medical decorum:

"That you, Poirot, old horse? Stillingfleet here."

"Yes, my friend. What is it?"

"I'm speaking from Northway House - Benedict Farley's."

"Ah, yes?" Poirot's voice quickened with interest. "What of - Mr Farley?"

"Farley's dead. Shot himself this afternoon."

There was a pause, then Poirot said:

"Yes..."

"I notice you're not overcome with surprise. Know something about it, old horse?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Well, it isn't brilliant deduction or telepathy or anything like that. We found a note from Farley to you making an appointment about a week ago."

"I see."

"We've got a tame police inspector here - got to be careful, you know, when one of these millionaire blokes bumps himself off. Wondered whether you could throw any light on the case. If so, perhaps you'd come round?"

"I will come immediately."

"Good for you, old boy. Some dirty work at the cross-roads - eh?"

Poirot merely repeated that he would set forth immediately.

"Don't want to spill the beans over the telephone? Quite right. So long."

A quarter of an hour later Poirot was sitting in the library, a low long room at the back of Northway House on the ground floor. There were five other persons in the room, Inspector Barnett, Dr Stillingfleet, Mrs Farley, the widow of the millionaire, Joanna Farley, his only daughter, and Hugo Cornworthy, his private secretary.

Of these, Inspector Barnett was a discreet soldierly-looking man. Dr Stillingfleet, whose professional manner was entirely different from his telephonic style, was a tall, long-faced young man of thirty. Mrs Farley was obviously very much younger than her husband. She was a handsome dark-haired woman. Her mouth was hard and her black eyes gave absolutely no clue to her emotions. She appeared perfectly self-possessed. Joanna Farley had fair hair and a freckled face. The prominence of her nose and chin was clearly inherited from her father. Her eyes were intelligent and shrewd. Hugo Cornworthy was a somewhat colorless young man, very correctly dressed. He seemed intelligent and efficient.

After greetings and introductions, Poirot narrated simply and clearly the circumstances of his visit and the story told him by Benedict Farley. He could not complain of any lack of interest.

"Most extraordinary story I've ever heard!" said the inspector. "A dream, eh? Did you know anything about this, Mrs Farley?"

She bowed her head.

"My husband mentioned it to me. It upset him very much. I - I told him it was indigestion - his diet, you know, was very peculiar - and suggested his calling in Dr Stillingfleet."

That young man shook his head.

"He didn't consult me. From M. Poirot's story, I gather he went to Harley Street."

"I would like your advice on that point, doctor," said Poirot. "Mr Farley told me that he consulted three specialists. What do you think of the theories they advanced?"

Stillingfleet frowned.

"It's difficult to say. You've got to take into account that what he passed on to you wasn't exactly what had been said to him. It was a layman's interpretation."

"You mean he had got the phraseology wrong?"

"Not exactly. I mean they would put a thing to him in professional terms, he'd get the meaning a little distorted, and then recast it in his own language."

"So that what he told me was not really what the doctors said."

"That's what it amounts to. He's just got it all a little wrong, if you know what I mean."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "Is it known whom he consulted?" he asked.

Mrs Farley shook her head, and Joanna Farley remarked:

"None of us had any idea he had consulted anyone."

"Did he speak to you about his dream?" asked Poirot.

The girl shook her head.

"And you, Mr Cornworthy?"

"No, he said nothing at all. I took down a letter to you at his dictation, but I had no idea why he wished to consult you. I thought it might possibly have something to do with some business irregularity."

Poirot asked: "And now as to the actual facts of Mr Farley's death?"

Inspector Barnett looked interrogatively at Mrs Farley and at Dr Stillingfleet, and then took upon himself the role of spokesman.

"Mr Farley was in the habit of working in his own room on the first floor every afternoon. I understand that there was a big amalgamation of businesses in prospect -"

He looked at Hugo Cornworthy who said, "Consolidated Coachlines."

"In connection with that," continued Inspector Barnett, "Mr Farley had agreed to give an interview to two members of the Press. He very seldom did anything of the kind - only about once in five years, I understand. Accordingly two reporters, one from the Associated Newsgroups, and one from Amalgamated Press-sheets, arrived at a quarter past three by appointment. They waited on the first floor outside Mr Farley's door - which was the customary place for people to wait who had an appointment with Mr Farley. At twenty past three a messenger arrived from the office of Consolidated Coachlines with some urgent papers. He was shown into Mr Farley's room where he handed over the documents. Mr Farley accompanied him to the door of the room, and from there spoke to the two members of the Press. He said:

"'I am sorry, gentlemen, to have to keep you waiting, but I have some urgent business to attend to. I will be as quick as I can.'

"The two gentlemen, Mr Adams and Mr Stoddart, assured Mr Farley that they would await his convenience. He went back into his room, shut the door - and was never seen alive again!"

"Continue," said Poirot.

"At a little after four o'clock," went on the inspector, "Mr Cornworthy here came out of his room which is next door to Mr Farley's, and was surprised to see the two reporters still waiting. He wanted Mr Farley's signature to some letters and thought he had also better remind him that these two gentlemen were waiting. He accordingly went into Mr Farley's room. To his surprise he could not at first see Mr Farley and thought the room was empty. Then he caught sight of a boot sticking out behind the desk (which is placed in front of the window). He went quickly across and discovered Mr Farley lying there dead, with a revolver beside him.

"Mr Cornworthy hurried out of the room and directed the butler to ring up Dr Stillingfieet. By the latter's advice, Mr Cornworthy also informed the police."

"Was the shot heard?" asked Poirot.

"No. The traffic is very noisy here, the landing window was open. What with lorries and motor horns it would be most unlikely if it had been noticed."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "What time is it supposed he died?" he asked.

Stillingfieet said:

"I examined the body as soon as I got here - that is, at thirty-two minutes past four. Mr Farley had been dead at least an hour."

Poirot's face was very grave.

"So then, it seems possible that his death could have occurred at the time he mentioned to me - that is, at twenty-eight minutes past three."

"Exactly," said Stillingfleet.

"Any finger-marks on the revolver?"

"Yes, his own."

"And the revolver itself?"

The inspector took up the tale.

"Was one which he kept in the second right-hand drawer of his desk, just as he told you. Mrs Farley has identified it positively. Moreover, you understand, there is only one entrance to the room, the door giving on to the landing. The two reporters were sitting exactly opposite that door and they swear that no one entered the room from the time Mr Farley spoke to them, until Mr Cornworthy entered it at a little after four o'clock."

"So that there is every reason to suppose that Mr Farley committed suicide?"

Inspector Barnett smiled a little.

"There would have been no doubt at all but for one point."

"And that?"

"The letter written to you."

Poirot smiled too.

"I see! Where Hercule Poirot is concerned - immediately the suspicion of murder arises!"

"Precisely," said the inspector dryly. "However, after your clearing up of the situation -"

Poirot interrupted him. "One little minute."

He turned to Mrs Farley. "Had your husband ever been hypnotized?"

"Never."

"Had he studied the question of hypnotism? Was he interested in the subject?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Suddenly her self-control seemed to break down. "That horrible dream! It's uncanny! That he should have dreamed that - night after night - and then - and then - it's as though he were - hounded to death!"

Poirot remembered Benedict Farley saying - "I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself."

He said, "Had it ever occurred to you that your husband might be tempted to do away with himself?"

"No - at least - sometimes he was very queer..."

Joanna Farley's voice broke in clear and scornful. "Father would never have killed himself. He was far too careful of himself."

Dr Stillingfleet said, "It isn't the people who threaten to commit suicide who usually do it, you know, Miss Farley. That's why suicides sometimes seem unaccountable."

Poirot rose to his feet. "Is it permitted," he asked, "that I see the room where the tragedy occurred?"

"Certainly. Dr Stillingfleet -"

The doctor accompanied Poirot upstairs. Benedict Farley's room was a much larger one than the secretary's next door. It was luxuriously furnished with deep leather-covered armchairs, a thick pile carpet, and a superb outsize writing-desk.

Poirot passed behind the latter to where a dark stain on the carpet showed just before the window. He remembered the millionaire saying, "At twenty-eight minutes past three I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it, and walk over to the window. And then - and then I shoot myself."

He nodded slowly. Then he said:

"The window was open like this?"

"Yes. But nobody could have got in that way."

Poirot put his head out. There was no sill or parapet and no pipes near. Not even a cat could have gained access that way. Opposite rose the blank wall of the factory, a dead wall with no windows in it.

Stillingfleet said, "Funny room for a rich man to choose as his own sanctum with that outlook. It's like looking out on to a prison wall."

"Yes," said Poirot. He drew his head in and stared at the expanse of solid brick. "I think," he said, "that that wall is important."

Stillingfleet looked at him curiously. "You mean - psychologically?"

Poirot had moved to the desk. Idly, or so it seemed, he picked up a pair of what are usually called lazy-tongs. He pressed the handles; the tongs shot out to their full length. Delicately, Poirot picked up a burnt match stump with them from beside a chair some feet away and conveyed it carefully to the waste-paper basket.

"When you've finished playing with those things..." said Stillingfleet irritably.

Hercule Poirot murmured, "An ingenious invention," and replaced the tongs neatly on the writing-table. Then he asked:

"Where were Mrs Farley and Miss Farley at the time of the - death?"

"Mrs Farley was resting in her room on the floor above this. Miss Farley was painting in her studio at the top of the house."

Hercule Poirot drummed idly with his fingers on the table for a minute or two. Then he said:

"I should like to see Miss Farley. Do you think you could ask her to come here for a minute or two?"

"If you like."

Stillingfleet glanced at him curiously, then left the room. In another minute or two the door opened and Joanna Farley came in.

"You do not mind, mademoiselle, if I ask you a few questions?"

She returned his glance coolly. "Please ask anything you choose."

"Did you know that your father kept a revolver in his desk?"

"No."

"Where were you and your mother - that is to say your stepmother - that is right?"

"Yes, Louise is my father's second wife. She is only eight years older than I am. You were about to say -?"

"Where were you and she on Thursday of last week? That is to say, on Thursday night."

She reflected for a minute or two.

"Thursday? Let me see. Oh, yes, we had gone to the theater. To see Little Dog Laughed."

"Your father did not suggest accompanying you?"

"He never went out to theaters."

"What did he usually do in the evenings?"

"He sat in here and read."

"He was not a very sociable man?"

The girl looked at him directly. "My father," she said, "had a singularly unpleasant personality. No one who lived in close association with him could possibly be fond of him."

"That, mademoiselle, is a very candid statement."

"I am saving you time, M. Poirot. I realize quite well what you are getting at. My stepmother married my father for his money. I live here because I have no money to live elsewhere. There is a man I wish to marry - a poor man; my father saw to it that he lost his job. He wanted me, you see, to marry well - an easy matter since I was to be his heiress!"

"Your father's fortune passes to you?"

"Yes. That is, he left Louise, my stepmother, a quarter of a million free of tax, and there are other legacies, but the residue goes to me." She smiled suddenly. "So you see, M. Poirot, I had every reason to desire my father's death!"

"I see, mademoiselle, that you have inherited your father's intelligence."

She said thoughtfully, "Father was clever... One felt that with him - that he had force - driving power - but it had all turned sour - bitter - there was no humanity left... "

Hercule Poirot said softly, "Grand Dieu, but what an imbecile I am..."

Joanna Farley turned towards the door. "Is there anything more?"

"Two little questions. These tongs here," he picked up the lazytongs, "were they always on the table?"

"Yes. Father used them for picking up things. He didn't like stooping."

"One other question. Was your father's eye-sight good?"

She stared at him.

"Oh, no - he couldn't see at all - I mean he couldn't see without his glasses. His sight had always been bad from a boy."

"But with his glasses?"

"Oh, he could see all right then, of course."

"He could read newspapers and fine print?"

"Oh, yes."

"That is all, mademoiselle."

She went out of the room.

Poirot murmured, "I was stupid. It was there, all the time, under my nose. And because it was so near I could not see it."

He leaned out of the window once more. Down below, in the narrow way between the house and the factory, he saw a small dark object.

Hercule Poirot nodded, satisfied, and went downstairs again.

The others were still in the library. Poirot addressed himself to the secretary:

"I want you, Mr Cornworthy, to recount to me in detail the exact circumstances of Mr Farley's summons to me. When, for instance, did Mr Farley dictate that letter?"

"On Wednesday afternoon - at five-thirty, as far as I can remember."

"Were there any special directions about posting it?"

"He told me to post it myself."

"And you did so?"

"Yes."

"Did he give any special instructions to the butler about admitting me?"

"Yes. He told me to tell Holmes (Holmes is the butler) that a gentleman would be calling at 9:30. He was to ask the gentleman's name. He was also to ask to see the letter."

"Rather peculiar precautions to take, don't you think?"

Cornworthy shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr Farley," he said carefully, "was rather a peculiar man."

"Any other instructions?"

"Yes. He told me to take the evening off."

"Did you do so?"

"Yes, immediately after dinner I went to the cinema."

"When did you return?"

"I let myself in about a quarter past eleven."

"Did you see Mr Farley again that evening?"

"No."

"And he did not mention the matter the next morning?"

"No."

Poirot paused a moment, then resumed, "When I arrived I was not shown into Mr Farley's own room."

"No. He told me that I was to tell Holmes to show you into my room."

"Why was that? Do you know?"

Cornworthy shook his head. "I never questioned any of Mr Farley's orders," he said dryly. "He would have resented it if I had."

"Did he usually receive visitors in his own room?"

"Usually, but not always. Sometimes he saw them in my room."

"Was there any reason for that?"

Hugo Cornworthy considered.

"No - I hardly think so - I've never really thought about it."

Turning to Mrs Farley, Poirot asked:

"You permit that I ring for your butler?"

"Certainly, M. Poirot."

Very correct, very urbane, Holmes answered the bell.

"You rang, madam?"

Mrs Farley indicated Poirot with a gesture.

Holmes turned politely. "Yes, sir?"

"What were your instructions, Holmes, on the Thursday night when I came here?"

Holmes cleared his throat, then said:

"After dinner Mr Cornworthy told me that Mr Farley expected a Mr Hercule Poirot at 9:30. I was to ascertain the gentleman's name, and I was to verify the information by glancing at a letter. Then I was to show him up to Mr Cornworthy's room."

"Were you also told to knock on the door?"

An expression of distaste crossed the butler's countenance.

"That was one of Mr Farley's orders. I was always to knock when introducing visitors - business visitors, that is," he added.

"Ah, that puzzled me! Were you given any other instructions concerning me?"

"No, sir. When Mr Cornworthy had told me what I have just repeated to you he went out."

"What time was that?"

"Ten minutes to nine, sir."

"Did you see Mr Farley after that?"

"Yes, sir, I took him up a glass of hot water as usual at nine o'clock."

"Was he then in his own room or in Mr Cornworthy's?"

"He was in his own room, sir."

"You noticed nothing unusual about that room?"

"Unusual? No, sir."

"Where were Mrs Farley and Miss Farley?"

"They had gone to the theater, sir."

"Thank you, Holmes, that will do."

Holmes bowed and left the room. Poirot turned to the millionaire's widow.

"One more question, Mrs Farley. Had your husband good sight?"

"No. Not without his glasses."

"He was very shortsighted?"

"Oh, yes, he was quite helpless without his spectacles."

"He had several pairs of glasses?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said Poirot. He leaned back. "I think that that concludes the case..."

There was silence in the room. They were all looking at the little man who sat there complacently stroking his mustache. On the inspector's face was perplexity, Dr Stillingfleet was frowning, Cornworthy merely stared uncomprehendingly, Mrs Farley gazed in blank astonishment, Joanna Farley looked eager.

Mrs Farley broke the silence.

"I don't understand, M. Poirot." Her voice was fretful. "The dream -"

"Yes," said Poirot. "That dream was very important."

Mrs Farley shivered. She said:

"I've never believed in anything supernatural before - but now - to dream it night after night beforehand -"

"It's extraordinary," said Stillingfieet. "Extraordinary! If we hadn't got your word for it, Poirot, and if you hadn't had it straight from the horse's mouth - " he coughed in embarrassment, and readopting his professional manner, "I beg your pardon, Mrs Farley. If Mr Farley himself had not told that story -"

"Exactly," said Poirot. His eyes, which had been half-closed, opened suddenly. They were very green. "If Benedict Farley hadn't told me -"

He paused a minute, looking round at a circle of blank faces.

"There are certain things, you comprehend, that happened that evening which I was quite at a loss to explain. First, why make such a point of my bringing that letter with me?"

"Identification," suggested Cornworthy.

"No, no, my dear young man. Really that idea is too ridiculous. There must be some much more valid reason. For not only did Mr Farley require to see that letter produced, but he definitely demanded that I should leave it behind me. And moreover even then he did not destroy it! It was found among his papers this afternoon. Why did he keep it?"

Joanna Farley's voice broke in. "He wanted, in case anything happened to him, that the facts of his strange dream should be made known."

Poirot nodded approvingly.

"You are astute, Mademoiselle. That must be - that can only be - the point of the keeping of the letter. When Mr Farley was dead, the story of that strange dream was to be told! That dream was very important. That dream, Mademoiselle, was vital!

"I will come now," he went on, "to the second point. After hearing his story I ask Mr Farley to show me the desk and the revolver. He seems about to get up to do so, then suddenly refuses. Why did he refuse?"

This time no one advanced an answer.

"I will put that question differently. What was there in that next room that Mr Farley did not want me to see?"

There was still silence.

"Yes," said Poirot, "it is difficult, that. And yet there was some reason - some urgent reason why Mr Farley received me in his secretary's room and refused point blank to take me into his own room. There was something in that room he could not afford to have me see.

"And now I come to the third inexplicable thing that happened on that evening. Mr Farley, just as I was leaving, requested me to hand him the letter I had received. By inadvertence I handed him a communication from my laundress. He glanced at it and laid it down beside him. Just before I left the room I discovered my error - and rectified it! After that I left the house and - I admit it - I was completely at sea! The whole affair and especially that last incident seemed to me quite inexplicable."

He looked round from one to the other.

"You do not see?"

Stillingfleet said, "I don't really see how your laundress comes into it, Poirot."

"My laundress," said Poirot, "was very important. That miserable woman who ruins my collars, was, for the first time in her life, useful to somebody. Surely you see - it is so obvious. Mr Farley glanced at that communication - one glance would have told him that it was the wrong letter - and yet he knew nothing. Why? Because he could not see it properly!"

Inspector Barnett said sharply, "Didn't he have his glasses on?"

Hercule Poirot smiled. "Yes," he said. "He had his glasses on. That is what makes it so very interesting."

He leaned forward.

"Mr Farley's dream was very important. He dreamed, you see, that he committed suicide. And a little later on, he did commit suicide. That is to say he was alone in a room and was found there with a revolver by him, and no one entered or left the room at the time that he was shot. What does that mean? It means, does it not, that it must be suicide!"

"Yes," said Stillingfleet.

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"On the contrary," he said. "It was murder. An unusual and a very cleverly planned murder."

Again he leaned forward, tapping the table, his eyes green and shining.

"Why did Mr Farley not allow me to go into his own room that evening? What was there in there that I must not be allowed to see? I think, my friends, that there was - Benedict Farley himself!"

He smiled at the blank faces.

"Yes, yes, it is not nonsense what I say. Why could the Mr Farley to whom I had been talking not realize the difference between two totally dissimilar letters? Because, mes amis, he was a man of normal sight wearing a pair of very powerful glasses. Those glasses would render a man of normal eyesight practically blind. Isn't that so, doctor?"

Stillingfleet murmured, "That's so - of course."

"Why did I feel that in talking to Mr Farley I was talking to a mountebank, to an actor playing a part? Because he was playing a part! Consider the setting. The dim room, the green shaded light turned blindingly away from the figure in the chair. What did I see - the famous patchwork dressing-gown, the beaked nose (faked with that useful substance, nose putty), the white crest of hair, the powerful lenses concealing the eyes. What evidence is there that Mr Farley ever had a dream? Only the story I was told and the evidence of Mrs Farley. What evidence is there that Benedict Farley kept a revolver in his desk? Again only the story told me and the word of Mrs Farley. Two people carried this fraud through - Mrs Farley and Hugo Cornworthy. Cornworthy wrote the letter to me, gave instructions to the butler, went out ostensibly to the cinema, but let himself in again immediately with a key, went to his room, made himself up, and played the part of Benedict Farley.

"And so we come to this afternoon. The opportunity for which Mr Cornworthy has been waiting arrives. There are two witnesses on the landing to swear that no one goes in or out of Benedict Farley's room. Cornworthy waits until a particularly heavy batch of traffic is about to pass. Then he leans out of his window, and with the lazytongs which he has purloined from the desk next door he holds an object against the window of that room. Benedict Farley comes to the window. Cornworthy snatches back the tongs and as Farley leans out, and the lorries are passing outside, Cornworthy shoots him with the revolver that he has ready. There is a blank wall opposite, remember. There can be no witness of the crime. Cornworthy waits for over half an hour, then gathers up some papers, conceals the lazytongs and the revolver between them, and goes out on to the landing and into the next room. He replaces the tongs on the desk, lays down the revolver after pressing the dead man's fingers on it, and hurries out with the news of Mr Farley's 'suicide.'

"He arranges that the letter to me shall be found and that I shall arrive with my story - the story I heard from Mr Farley's own lips - of his extraordinary 'dream' - the strange compulsion he felt to kill himself! A few credulous people will discuss the hypnotism theory - but the main result will be to confirm without a doubt that the actual hand that held the revolver was Benedict Farley's own."

Hercule Poirot's eyes went to the widow's face - the dismay - the ashy pallor - the blind fear.

"And in due course," he finished gently, "the happy ending would have been achieved. A quarter of a million and two hearts that beat as one..."

John Stillingfleet, M.D., and Hercule Poirot walked along the side of Northway House. On their right was the towering wall of the factory. Above them, on their left, were the windows of Benedict Farley's and Hugo Cornworthy's rooms. Hercule Poirot stopped and picked up a small object - a black stuffed cat.

"Voilà," he said. "That is what Cornworthy held in the lazytongs against Farley's window. You remember, he hated cats? Naturally he rushed to the window."

"Why on earth didn't Cornworthy come out and pick it up after he'd dropped it?"

"How could he? To do so would have been definitely suspicious. After all, if this object where found what would anyone think - that some child had wandered round here and dropped it."

"Yes," said Stillingfleet with a sigh. "That's probably what the ordinary person would have thought. But not good old Hercule! D'you know, old horse, up to the very last minute I thought you were leading up to some subtle theory of highfalutin' psychological 'suggested' murder? I bet those two thought so too! Nasty bit of goods, the Farley. Goodness, how she cracked! Cornworthy might have got away with it if she hadn't had hysterics and tried to spoil your beauty by going for you with her nails. I only got her off you just in time."

He paused a minute and then said:

"I rather like the girl. Grit, you know, and brains. I suppose I'd be thought to be a fortune hunter if I had a shot at her...?"

"You are too late, my friend. There is already someone sur le tapis. Her father's death has opened the way to happiness."

"Take it all round, she had a pretty good motive for bumping off the unpleasant parent."

"Motive and opportunity are not enough," said Poirot. "There must also be the criminal temperament!"

"I wonder if you'll ever commit a crime, Poirot?" said Stillingfleet. "I bet you could get away with it all right. As a matter of fact, it would be too easy for you - I mean the thing would be off as definitely too unsporting."

"That," said Poirot, "is a typically English idea."

GREENSHAW'S FOLLY

The two men rounded the corner of the shrubbery.

"Well, there you are," said Raymond West. "That's it."

Horace Bindler took a deep, appreciative breath.

"How wonderful," he cried. His voice rose in a high screech of aesthetic delight, then deepened in reverent awe. "It's unbelievable. Out of this world! A period piece of the best."

"I thought you'd like it," said Raymond West complacently.

"Like it?" Words failed Horace. He unbuckled the strap of his camera and got busy. "This will be one of the gems of my collection," he said happily. "I do think, don't you, that it's rather amusing to have a collection of monstrosities? The idea came to me one night seven years ago in my bath. My last real gem was in the Campo Santo at Genoa, but I really think this beats it. What's it called?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Raymond.

"I suppose it's got a name?"

"It must have. But the fact is that it's never referred to round here as anything but Greenshaw's Folly."

"Greenshaw being the man who built it?"

"Yes. In eighteen sixty or seventy or thereabouts. The local success story of the time. Barefoot boy who had risen to immense prosperity. Local opinion is divided as to why he built this house, whether it was sheer exuberance of wealth or whether it was done to impress his creditors. If the latter, it didn't impress them. He either went bankrupt or the next thing to it. Hence the name, Greenshaw's Folly." Horace's camera clicked.

"There," he said in a satisfied voice. "Remind me to show you Number Three-ten in my collection. A really incredible marble mantelpiece in the Italian manner." He added, looking at the house, "I can't conceive of how Mr Greenshaw thought of it all."

"Rather obvious in some ways," said Raymond. "He had visited the châteaux of the Loire, don't you think? Those turrets. And then, rather unfortunately, he seems to have travelled in the Orient. The influence of the Taj Mahal is unmistakable. I rather like the Moorish wing," he added, "and the traces of a Venetian palace."

"One wonders how he ever got hold of an architect to carry out these ideas."

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"No difficulty about that, I expect," he said. "Probably the architect retired with a good income for life while poor old Greenshaw went bankrupt."

"Could we look at it from the other side?" asked Horace, "or are we trespassing?"

"We're trespassing all right," said Raymond, "but I don't think it will matter."

He turned toward the corner of the house and Horace skipped after him.

"But who lives here? Orphans or holiday visitors? It can't be a school. No playing fields or brisk efficiency."

"Oh, a Greenshaw lives here still," said Raymond over his shoulder. "The house itself didn't go in the crash. Old Greenshaw's son inherited it. He was a bit of a miser and lived here in a corner of it. Never spent a penny. Probably never had a penny to spend. His daughter lives here now. Old lady - very eccentric."

As he spoke Raymond was congratulating himself on having thought of Greenshaw's Folly as a means of entertaining his guest. These literary critics always professed themselves as longing for a weekend in the country and were wont to find the country extremely boring when they got there. Tomorrow there would be the Sunday papers, and for today Raymond West congratulated himself on suggesting a visit to Greenshaw's Folly to enrich Horace Bindler's well-known collection of monstrosities.

They turned the corner of the house and came out on a neglected lawn. In one corner of it was a large artificial rockery, and bending over it was a figure at the sight of which Horace clutched Raymond delightedly by the arm.

"Do you see what she's got on?" he exclaimed. "A sprigged print dress. Just like a housemaid - when there were housemaids. One of my most cherished memories is staying at a house in the country when I was quite a boy where a real housemaid called you in the morning, all crackling in a print dress and a cap. Yes, my boy, really - a cap. Muslin with streamers. No, perhaps it was the parlourmaid who had the streamers. But anyway, she was a real housemaid and she brought in an enormous brass can of hot water. What an exciting day we're having."

The figure in the print dress had straightened up and turned toward them, trowel in hand. She was a sufficiently startling figure. Unkempt locks of iron-grey fell wispily on her shoulders, and a straw hat, rather like the hats that horses wear in Italy, was crammed down on her head. The coloured print dress she wore fell nearly to her ankles. Out of a weather-beaten, not too clean face, shrewd eyes surveyed them appraisingly.

"I must apologize for trespassing, Miss Greenshaw," said Raymond West, as he advanced toward her, "but Mr Horace Bindler who is staying with me -"

Horace bowed and removed his hat.

"- is most interested in - er - ancient history and - er - fine buildings."

Raymond West spoke with the ease of a famous author who knows that he is a celebrity, that he can venture where other people may not.

Miss Greenshaw looked up at the sprawling exuberance behind her.

"It is a fine house," she said appreciatively. "My grandfather built it - before my time, of course. He is reported as having said that he wished to astonish the natives."

"I'll say he did that, ma'am," said Horace Bindler.

"Mr Bindler is the well-known literary critic," said Raymond West.

Miss Greenshaw had clearly no reverence for literary critics. She remained unimpressed.

"I consider it," said Miss Greenshaw, referring to the house, "as a monument to my grandfather's genius. Silly fools come here and ask me why I don't sell it and go and live in a flat. What would I do in a flat? It's my home and I live in t," said Miss Greenshaw. "Always have lived here." She considered, brooding over the past. "There were three of us. Laura married the curate. Papa wouldn't give her any money, said clergymen ought to be unworldly. She died, having a baby. Baby died too. Nettie ran away with the riding master. Papa cut her out of his will, of course. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but no good. Don't think Nettie was happy with him. Anyway, she didn't live long. They had a son. He writes to me sometimes, but of course he isn't a Greenshaw. I'm the last of the Greenshaws." She drew up her bent shoulders with a certain pride and readjusted the rakish angle of the straw hat. Then, turning, she said sharply:

"Yes, Mrs Cresswell, what is it?"

Approaching them from the house was a figure that, seen side by side with Miss Greenshaw, seemed ludicrously dissimilar. Mrs Cresswell had a marvelously dressed head of well-blued hair towering upward in meticulously arranged curls and rolls. It was as though she had dressed her head to go as a French marquise to a fancy dress party. The rest of her middle-aged person was dressed in what ought to have been rustling black silk but was actually one of the shinier varieties of black rayon. Although she was not a large woman, she had a well-developed and sumptuous bosom. Her voice was unexpectedly deep. She spoke with exquisite diction - only a slight hesitation over words beginning with h, and the final pronunciation of them with an exaggerated aspirate gave rise to a suspicion that at some remote period in her youth she might have had trouble over dropping her h's.

"The fish, madam," said Mrs Cresswell, "the slice of cod. It has not arrived. I have asked Alfred to go down for it and he refuses."

Rather unexpectedly, Miss Greenshaw gave a cackle of laughter.

"Refuses, does he?"

"Alfred, madam, has been most disobliging."

Miss Greenshaw raised two earth-stained fingers to her lips, suddenly produced an earsplitting whistle, and at the same time yelled, "Alfred, Alfred, come here."

Round the corner of the house a young man appeared in answer to the summons, carrying a spade in his hand. He had a bold, handsome face, and as he drew near he cast an unmistakably malevolent glance toward Mrs Cresswell.

"You wanted me, miss?" he said.

"Yes, Alfred. I hear you've refused to go down for the fish. What about it, eh?"

Alfred spoke in a surly voice.

"I'll go down for it if you wants it, miss. You've only got to say."

"I do want it. I want it for my supper."

"Right you are, miss. I'll go right away."

He threw an insolent glance at Mrs Cresswell, who flushed and murmured below her breath.

"Now that I think of it," said Miss Greenshaw, "a couple of strange visitors are just what we need, aren't they, Mrs Cresswell?"

Mrs Cresswell looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry, madam -"

"For you-know-what," said Miss Greenshaw, nodding her head. "Beneficiary to a will mustn't witness it. That's right, isn't it?" She appealed to Raymond West.

"Quite correct," said Raymond.

"I know enough law to know that," said Miss Greenshaw, "and you two are men of standing."

She flung down the trowel on her weeding basket.

"Would you mind coming up to the library with me?"

"Delighted," said Horace eagerly.

She led the way through French windows and through a vast yellow-and-gold drawing-room with faded brocade on the walls and dust covers arranged over the furniture, then through a large dim hall, up a staircase, and into a room on the second floor.

"My grandfather's library," she announced.

Horace looked round with acute pleasure. It was a room from his point of view quite full of monstrosities. The heads of sphinxes appeared on the most unlikely pieces of furniture; there was a colossal bronze representing, he thought, Paul and Virginia, and a vast bronze clock with classical motifs of which he longed to take a photograph.

"A fine lot of books," said Miss Greenshaw.

Raymond was already looking at the books. From what he could see from a cursory glance there was no book here of any real interest or, indeed, any book which appeared to have been read. They were all superbly bound sets of the classics as supplied ninety years ago for furnishing a gentleman's library. Some novels of a bygone period were included. But they too showed little signs of having been read.

Miss Greenshaw was fumbling in the drawers of a vast desk. Finally she pulled out a parchment document.

"My will," she explained. "Got to leave your money to someone - or so they say. If I died without a will, I suppose that son of a horse trader would get it. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but a rogue if ever there was one. Don't see why his son should inherit this place. No," she went on, as though answering some unspoken objection, "I've made up my mind. I'm leaving it to Cresswell."

"Your housekeeper?"

"Yes. I've explained it to her. I make a will leaving her all I've got and then I don't need to pay her any wages. Saves me a lot in current expenses, and it keeps her up to the mark. No giving me notice and walking off at any minute. Very la-di-dah and all that, isn't she? But her father was a working plumber in a very small way. She's nothing to give herself airs about."

By now Miss Greenshaw had unfolded the parchment. Picking up a pen, she dipped it in the inkstand and wrote her signature, Katherine Dorothy Greenshaw.

"That's right," she said. "You've seen me sign it, and then you two sign it, and that makes it legal."

She handed the pen to Raymond West. He hesitated a moment, feeling an unexpected repulsion to what he was asked to do. Then he quickly scrawled his well-known autograph, for which his morning's mail usually brought at least six requests.

Horace took the pen from him and added his own minute signature.

"That's done," said Miss Greenshaw.

She moved across the bookcases and stood looking at them uncertainly, then she opened a glass door, took out a book, and slipped the folded parchment inside.

"I've my own places for keeping things," she said.

"Lady Audley's Secret," Raymond West remarked, catching sight of the title as she replaced the book.

Miss Greenshaw gave another cackle of laughter.

"Bestseller in its day," she remarked. "But not like your books, eh?"

She gave Raymond a sudden friendly nudge in the ribs. Raymond was rather surprised that she even knew he wrote books. Although Raymond West was a "big name" in literature, he could hardly be described as a best-seller. Though softening a little with the advent of middle age, his books dealt bleakly with the sordid side of life.

"I wonder," Horace demanded breathlessly, "if I might just take a photograph of the clock."

"By all means," said Miss Greenshaw. "It came, I believe, from the Paris Exhibition."

"Very probably," said Horace. He took his picture. "This room's not been used much since my grandfather's time," said Miss Greenshaw. "This desk's full of old diaries of his. Interesting, I should think. I haven't the eyesight to read them myself. I'd like to get them published, but I suppose one would have to work on them a good deal."

"You could engage someone to do that," said Raymond West.

"Could I really? It's an idea, you know. I'll think about it."

Raymond West glanced at his watch.

"We mustn't trespass on your kindness any longer," he said.

"Pleased to have seen you," said Miss Greenshaw graciously. "Thought you were the policeman when I heard you coming round the corner of the house."

"Why a policeman?" demanded Horace, who never minded asking questions.

Miss Greenshaw responded unexpectedly.

"If you want to know the time, ask a policeman," she carolled, and with this example of Victorian wit she nudged Horace in the ribs and roared with laughter.

"It's been a wonderful afternoon." Horace sighed as he and Raymond walked home. "Really, that place has everything. The only thing the library needs is a body. Those old-fashioned detective stories about murder in the library - that's just the kind of library I'm sure the authors had in mind."

"If you want to discuss murder," said Raymond, "you must talk to my Aunt Jane."

"Your Aunt Jane? Do you mean Miss Marple?" Horace felt a little at a loss.

The charming old-world lady to whom he had been introduced the night before seemed the last person to be mentioned in connection with murder.

"Oh yes," said Raymond. "Murder is a specialty of hers."

"How intriguing! What do you really mean?"

"I mean just that," said Raymond. He paraphrased: "Some commit murder, some get mixed up in murders, others have murder thrust upon them. My Aunt Jane comes into the third category."

"You are joking."

"Not in the least. I can refer you to the former Commissioner of Scotland Yard, several chief constables, and one or two hard-working inspectors of the C.I.D."

Horace said happily that wonders would never cease. Over the tea table they gave Joan West, Raymond's wife, Louise her niece, and old Miss Marple a résumé of the afternoon's happenings, recounting in detail everything that Miss Greenshaw had said to them.

"But I do think," said Horace, "that there is something a little sinister about the whole setup. That duchess-like creature, the housekeeper - arsenic, perhaps, in the teapot, now that she knows her mistress has made the will in her favour?"

"Tell us, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "will there be murder or won't there? What do you think?"

"I think," said Miss Marple, winding up her wool with a rather severe air, "that you shouldn't joke about these things as much as you do, Raymond. Arsenic is, of course, quite a possibility. So easy to obtain. Probably present in the tool shed already in the form of weed killer."

"Oh, really, darling," said Joan West affectionately. "Wouldn't that be rather too obvious?"

"It's all very well to make a will," said Raymond. "I don't suppose the poor old thing has anything to leave except that awful white elephant of a house, and who would want that?"

"A film company possibly," said Horace, "or a hotel or an institution?"

"They'd expect to buy it for a song," said Raymond, but Miss Marple was shaking her head.

"You know, dear Raymond, I cannot agree with you there. About the money, I mean. The grandfather was evidently one of those lavish spenders who make money easily but can't keep it. He may have gone broke, as you say, but hardly bankrupt, or else his son would not have had the house. Now the son, as is so often the case, was of an entirely different character from his father. A miser. A man who saved every penny. I should say that in the course of his lifetime he probably put by a very good sum. This Miss Greenshaw appears to have taken after him - to dislike spending money, that is. Yes, I should think it quite likely that she has quite a substantial sum tucked away."

"In that case," said Joan West, "I wonder now - what about Louise?"

They looked at Louise as she sat, silent, by the fire.

Louise was Joan West's niece. Her marriage had recently, as she herself put it, come unstuck, leaving her with two young children and a bare sufficiency of money to keep them on.

"I mean," said Joan, "if this Miss Greenshaw really wants someone to go through diaries and get a book ready for publication..."

"It's an idea," said Raymond.

Louise said in a low voice. "It's work I could do - and I think I'd enjoy it."

"I'll write to her," said Raymond.

"I wonder," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "what the old lady meant by that remark about a policeman?"

"Oh, it was just a joke."

"It reminded me," said Miss Marple, nodding her head vigorously, "yes, it reminded me very much of Mr Naysmith."

"Who was Mr Naysmith?" asked Raymond curiously.

"He kept bees," said Miss Marple, "and was very good at doing the acrostics in the Sunday papers. And he liked giving people false impressions just for fun. But sometimes it led to trouble."

Everybody was silent for a moment, considering Mr Naysmith, but as there did not seem to be any points of resemblance between him and Miss Greenshaw, they decided that dear Aunt Jane was perhaps getting a little bit disconnected in her old age.

Horace Bindler went back to London without having collected any more monstrosities, and Raymond West wrote a letter to Miss Greenshaw telling her that he knew of a Mrs Louise Oxley who would be competent to undertake work on the diaries. After a lapse of some days a letter arrived, written in spidery old-fashioned handwriting, in which Miss Greenshaw declared herself anxious to avail herself of the services of Mrs Oxley, and making an appointment for Mrs Oxley to come and see her.

Louise duly kept the appointment, generous terms were arranged, and she started work the following day.

"I'm awfully grateful to you," she said to Raymond. "It will fit in beautifully. I can take the children to school, go on to Greenshaw's Folly, and pick them up on my way back. How fantastic the whole setup is! That old woman has to be seen to be believed."

On the evening of her first day at work she returned and described her day.

"I've hardly seen the housekeeper," she said. "She came in with coffee and biscuits at half-past eleven, with her mouth pursed up very prunes and prisms, and would hardly speak to me. I think she disapproves deeply of my having been engaged." She went on, "It seems there's quite a feud between her and the gardener, Alfred. He's a local boy and fairly lazy, I should imagine, and he and the housekeeper won't speak to each other. Miss Greenshaw said in her rather grand way, 'There have always been feuds as far as I can remember between the garden and the house staff. It was so in my grandfather's time. There were three men and a boy in the garden then, and eight maids in the house, but there was always friction.'"

On the next day Louise returned with another piece of news.

"Just fancy," she said, "I was asked to ring up the nephew today."

"Miss Greenshaw's nephew?"

"Yes. It seems he's an actor playing in the stock company that's doing a summer season at Boreham-on-Sea. I rang up the theater and left a message asking him to lunch tomorrow. Rather fun, really. The old girl didn't want the housekeeper to know. I think Mrs Cresswell has done something that's annoyed her."

"Tomorrow another installment of this thrilling serial," murmured Raymond.

"It's exactly like a serial, isn't it? Reconciliation with the nephew, blood is thicker than water - another will to be made and the old will destroyed.

"Aunt Jane, you're looking very serious."

"Was I, my dear? Have you heard any more about the policeman?"

Louise looked bewildered. "I don't know anything about a policeman."

"That remark of hers, my dear," said Miss Marple, "must have meant something."

Louise arrived, at her work the following day in a cheerful mood. She passed through the open front door - the doors and windows of the house were always open. Miss Greenshaw appeared to have no fear of burglars, and was probably justified, as most things in the house weighed several tons and were of no marketable value. Louise had passed Alfred in the drive. When she first noticed him he had been leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette, but as soon as he had caught sight of her he had seized a broom and begun diligently to sweep leaves. An idle young man, she thought, but good-looking. His features reminded her of someone. As she passed through the hall on the way upstairs to the library, she glanced at the large picture of Nathaniel Greenshaw which presided over the mantelpiece, showing him in the acme of Victorian prosperity, leaning back in a large armchair, his hands resting on the gold Albert chain across his capacious stomach. As her glance swept up from the stomach to the face with its heavy jowls, its bushy eyebrows and its flourishing black moustache, the thought occurred to her that Nathaniel Greenshaw must have been handsome as a young man. He had looked, perhaps, a little like Alfred...

She went into the library on the second floor, shut the door behind her, opened her typewriter, and got out the diaries from the drawer at the side of her desk. Through the open window she caught a glimpse of Miss Greenshaw below, in a pure-coloured sprigged print, bending over the rockery, weeding assiduously. They had had two wet days, of which the weeds had taken full advantage.

Louise, a town-bred girl, decided that if she ever had a garden, it would never contain a rockery which needed weeding by hand. Then she settled down to her work.

When Mrs Cresswell entered the library with the coffee tray at half- past eleven, she was clearly in a very bad temper. She banged the tray down on the table and observed to the universe:

"Company for lunch - and nothing in the house! What am I supposed to do, I should like to know? And no sign of Alfred."

"He was sweeping the drive when I got here," Louise offered.

"I daresay. A nice soft job."

Mrs Cresswell swept out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Louise grinned to herself. She wondered what "the nephew" would be like.

She finished her coffee and settled down to her work again. It was so absorbing that time passed quickly. Nathaniel Greenshaw, when he started to keep a diary, had succumbed to the pleasures of frankness. Typing out a passage relating to the personal charms of a barmaid in the neighbouring town, Louise reflected that a good deal of editing would be necessary.

As she was thinking this, she was startled by the scream from the garden. Jumping up, she ran to the open window. Below her Miss Greenshaw was staggering away from the rockery toward the house. Her hands were clasped to her breast, and between her hands there protruded a feathered shaft that Louise recognised with stupefaction to be the shaft of an arrow.

Miss Greenshaw's head, in its battered straw hat, fell forward on her breast. She called up to Louise in a failing voice: "... shot... he shot me... with an arrow... get help..."

Louise rushed to the door. She turned the handle, but the door would not open. It took her a moment or two of futile endeavour to realize that she was locked in. She ran back to the window and called down.

"I'm locked in!"

Miss Greenshaw, her back toward Louise and swaying a little on her feet, was calling up to the housekeeper at a window farther along.

"Ring police... telephone..."

Then, lurching from side to side like a drunkard, Miss Greenshaw disappeared from Louise's view through the window and staggered into the drawing-room on the ground floor. A moment later Louise heard a crash of broken china, a heavy fall, and then silence. Her imagination reconstructed the scene. Miss Greenshaw must have stumbled blindly into a small table with a Sévres tea set on it.

Desperately Louise pounded on the library door, calling and shouting. There was no creeper or drainpipe outside the window that could help her to get out that way.

Tired at last of beating on the door, Louise returned to the window. From the window of her sitting-room farther along the housekeeper's head appeared.

"Come and let me out, Mrs Oxley. I'm locked in."

"So am I," said Louise.

"Oh, dear, isn't it awful? I've telephoned the police. There's an extension in this room, but what I can't understand, Mrs Oxley, is our being locked in. I never heard a key turn, did you?"

"No, I didn't hear anything at all. Oh, dear, what shall we do? Perhaps Alfred might hear us." Louise shouted at the top of her voice, "Alfred, Alfred."

"Gone to his dinner as likely as not. What time is it?"

Louise glanced at her watch.

"Twenty-five past twelve."

"He's not supposed to go until half-past, but he sneaks off earlier whenever he can."

"Do you think - do you think -"

Louise meant to ask, "Do you think she's dead?" - but the words stuck in her throat.

There was nothing to do but wait. She sat down on the window sill. It seemed an eternity before the stolid helmeted figure of a police constable came round the corner of the house. She leaned out of the window and he looked up at her, shading his eyes with his hand.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

From their respective windows Louise and Mrs Cresswell poured a flood of excited information down on him.

The constable produced a notebook and pencil. "You ladies ran upstairs and locked yourselves in? Can I have your names, please?"

"Somebody locked us in. Come and let us out."

The constable said reprovingly, "All in good time," and disappeared through the French window below.

Once again time seemed infinite. Louise heard the sound of a car arriving, and after what seemed an hour, but was actually only three minutes, first Mrs Cresswell and then Louise were released by a police sergeant more alert than the original constable.

"Miss Greenshaw?" Louise's voice faltered. "What - what's happened?"

The sergeant cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, madam," he said, "what I've already told Mrs Cresswell here. Miss Greenshaw is dead."

"Murdered," said Mrs Cresswell. "That's what it is - murder?

The sergeant said dubiously, "Could have been an accident - some country lads shooting arrows."

Again there was the sound of a car arriving.

The sergeant said, "That'll be the M.O.," and he started downstairs.

But it was not the M.O. As Louise and Mrs Cresswell came down the stairs, a young man stepped hesitatingly through the front door and paused, looking around him with a somewhat bewildered air.

Then, speaking in a pleasant voice that in some way seemed familiar to Louise - perhaps it reminded her of Miss Greenshaw's - he asked, "Excuse me, does - er - does Miss Greenshaw live here?"

"May I have your name if you please?" said the sergeant, advancing upon him.

"Fletcher," said the young man. "Nat Fletcher. I'm Miss Greenshaw's nephew, as a matter of fact."

"Indeed, sir, well - I'm sorry -"

"Has anything happened?" asked Nat Fletcher.

"There's been an - accident. Your aunt was shot with an arrow - penetrated the jugular vein -"

Mrs Cresswell spoke hysterically and without her usual refinement:

"Your h'aunt's been murdered, that's what's happened. Your h'aunt's been murdered."

Inspector Welch drew his chair a little nearer to the table and let his gaze wander from one to the other of the four people in the room. It was evening of the same day. He had called at the Wests' house to take Louise Oxley once more over her statement.

"You are sure of the exact words? Shot - he shot me - with an arrow - get help?"

Louise nodded.

"And the time?"

"I looked at my watch a minute or two later - it was then twelve twenty-five -"

"Your watch keeps good time?"

"I looked at the clock as well." Louise left no doubt of her accuracy.

The inspector turned to Raymond West.

"It appears, sir, that about a week ago you and a Mr Horace Bindler were witnesses to Miss Greenshaw's will?"

Briefly Raymond recounted the events of the afternoon visit he and Horace Bindler had paid to Greenshaw's Folly.

"This testimony of yours may be important," said Welch. "Miss Greenshaw distinctly told you, did she, that her will was being made in favour of Mrs Cresswell, the housekeeper, and that she was not paying Mrs Cresswell any wages in view of the expectations Mrs Cresswell had of profiting by her death?"

"That is what she told me - yes."

"Would you say that Mrs Cresswell was definitely aware of these facts?"

"I should say undoubtedly. Miss Greenshaw made a reference in my presence to beneficiaries not being able to witness a will, and Mrs Creswell clearly understood what she meant by it. Moreover, Miss Greenshaw herself told me that she had come to this arrangement with Mrs Cresswell."

"So Mrs Cresswell had reason to believe she was an interested party. Motive clear enough in her case, and I daresay she'd be our chief suspect now if it wasn't for the fact that she was securely locked in her room like Mrs Oxley here, and also that Miss Greenshaw definitely said a man shot her -"

"She definitely was locked in her room?"

"Oh yes. Sergeant Cayley let her out. It's a big old-fashioned lock with a big old-fashioned key. The key was in the lock and there's not a chance that it could have been turned from inside or any hanky-panky of that kind. No, you can take it definitely that Mrs Cresswell was locked inside that room and couldn't get out. And there were no bows and arrows in the room and Miss Greenshaw couldn't in any case have been shot from her window - the angle forbids it. No, Mrs Cresswell's out." He paused, then went on: "Would you say that Miss Greenshaw, in your opinion, was a practical joker?"

Miss Marple looked up sharply from her corner.

"So the will wasn't in Mrs Cresswell's favour after all?" she said.

Inspector Welch looked over at her in a rather surprised fashion.

"That's a very clever guess of yours, madam," he said. "No, Mrs Cresswell isn't named as beneficiary."

"Just like Mr Naysmith," said Miss Marple, nodding her head. "Miss Greenshaw told Mrs Cresswell she was going to leave her everything and so got out of paying her wages, and then she left her money to somebody else. No doubt she was vastly pleased with herself. No wonder she chortled when she put the will away in Lady Audley's Secret."

"It was lucky Mrs Oxley was able to tell us about the will and where it was put," said the inspector. "We might have had a long hunt for it otherwise."

"A Victorian sense of humour," murmured Raymond West.

"So she left her money to her nephew after all," said Louise.

The inspector shook his head.

"No," he said, "she didn't leave it to Nat Fletcher. The story goes around here - of course, I'm new to the place and I only get the gossip that's secondhand but it seems that in the old days both Miss Greenshaw and her sister were set on the handsome young riding master, and the sister got him. No, she didn't leave the money to her nephew -" Inspector Welch paused, rubbing his chin. "She left it to Alfred," he said.

"Alfred - the gardener?" Joan spoke in a surprised voice.

"Yes, Mrs West. Alfred Pollock."

"But why?" cried Louise.

"I daresay," said Miss Marple, "that she thought Alfred Pollock might have a pride in the house, might even want to live in it, whereas her nephew would almost certainly have no use for it whatever and would sell it as soon as he could possibly do so. He's an actor, isn't he? What play exactly is he acting in at present?"

Trust an old lady to wander from the point, thought Inspector Welch; but he replied civilly, "I believe, madam, they are doing a season of Sir James M. Barrie's plays."

"Barrie," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"What Every Woman Knows," said Inspector Welch, and then blushed.

"Name of a play," he said quickly. "I'm not much of a theater-goer myself," he added, "but the wife went along and saw it last week. Quite well done, she said it was."

"Barrie, wrote some very charming plays," said Miss Marple, "though I must say that when I went with an old friend of mine, General Easterly, to see Barrie's Little Mary -" she shook her head sadly - "neither of us knew where to look."

The inspector, unacquainted with the play 'Little Mary', seemed completely fogged.

Miss Marple explained: "When I was a girl, Inspector, nobody ever mentioned the word stomach."

The inspector looked even more at sea. Miss Marple was murmuring titles under her breath.

"'The Admirable Crichton.' Very clever. 'Mary Rose' - a charming play. I cried, I remember. 'Quality Street' I didn't care for so much. Then there was 'A Kiss for Cinderella.' Oh, of course!"

Inspector Welch had no time to waste on theatrical discussion. He returned to the matter at hand.

"The question is," he said, "did Alfred Pollock know the old lady had made a will in his favour? Did she tell him?" He added, "You see - there's an archery club over at Boreham - and Alfred Pollock's a member. He's a very good shot indeed with a bow and arrow."

"Then isn't your case quite clear?" asked Raymond West. "It would fit in with the doors being locked on the two women - he'd know just where they were in the house."

The inspector looked at him. He spoke with deep melancholy.

"He's got an alibi," said the inspector.

"I always think alibis are definitely suspicious," Raymond remarked.

"Maybe, sir," said Inspector Welch. "You're talking as a writer."

"I don't write detective stories," said Raymond West, horrified at the mere idea.

"Easy enough to say that alibis are suspicious," went on Inspector Welch, "but unfortunately we've got to deal with facts." He sighed. "We've got three good suspects," he went on. "Three people who, as it happened, were very close upon the scene at the time. Yet the odd thing is that it looks as though none of the three could have done it. The housekeeper I've already dealt with; the nephew, Nat Fletcher, at the moment Miss Greenshaw was shot, was a couple of miles away, filling up his car at a garage and asking his way; as for Alfred Pollock, six people will swear that he entered the Dog and Duck at twenty past twelve and was there for an hour, having his usual bread and cheese and beer."

"Deliberately establishing an alibi," said Raymond West hopefully.

"Maybe," said Inspector Welch, "but if so, he did establish it."

There was a long silence. Then Raymond turned his head to where Miss Marple sat upright and thoughtful.

"It's up to you, Aunt Jane," he said. "The inspector's baffled, the sergeant's baffled, Joan's baffled, Louise is baffled. But to you, Aunt Jane, it is crystal clear. Am I right?"

"I wouldn't say that," said Miss Marple, "not crystal clear. And murder, dear Raymond, isn't a game. I don't suppose poor Miss Greenshaw wanted to die, and it was a particularly brutal murder. Very well-planned and quite cold-blooded. It's not a thing to make jokes about."

"I'm sorry," said Raymond. "I'm not really as callous as I sound. One treats a thing lightly to take away from the - well, the horror of it."

"That is, I believe, the modern tendency," said Miss Marple. "All these wars, and having to joke about funerals. Yes, perhaps I was thoughtless when I implied that you were callous."

"It isn't," said Joan, "as though we'd known her at all well."

"That is very true," said Miss Marple. "You, dear Joan, did not know her at all. I did not know her at all. Raymond gathered an impression of her from one afternoon's conversation. Louise knew her for only two days."

"Come now, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "tell us your views. You don't mind, Inspector?"

"Not at all," said the inspector politely.

"Well, my dear, it would seem that we have three people who had - or might have thought they had - a motive to kill the old lady. And three quite simple reasons why none of the three could have done so. The housekeeper could not have killed Miss Greenshaw because she was locked in her room and because her mistress definitely stated that a man shot her. The gardener was inside the Dog and Duck at the time, the nephew at the garage."

"Very clearly put, madam," said the inspector.

"And since it seems most unlikely that any outsider should have done it, where, then, are we?"

"That's what the inspector wants to know," said Raymond West.

"One so often looks at a thing the wrong way round," said Miss Marple apologetically. "If we can't alter the movements or the positions of those three people, then couldn't we perhaps alter the time of the murder?"

"You mean that both my watch and the clock were wrong?" asked Louise.

"No, dear," said Miss Marple, "I didn't mean that at all. I mean that the murder didn't occur when you thought it occurred."

"But I saw it," cried Louise.

"Well, what I have been wondering, my dear, was whether you weren't meant to see it. I've been asking myself, you know, whether that wasn't the real reason why you were engaged for this job."

"What do you mean, Aunt Jane?"

"Well, dear, it seems odd. Miss Greenshaw did not like spending money - yet she engaged you and agreed quite willingly to the terms you asked. It seems to me that perhaps you were meant to be there in that library on the second floor, looking out of the window so that you could be the key witness - someone from outside of irreproachably good character - to fix a definite time and place for the murder."

"But you can't mean," said Louise incredulously, "that Miss Greenshaw intended to be murdered."

"What I mean, dear," said Miss Marple, "is that you didn't really know Miss Greenshaw. There's no real reason, is there, why the Miss Greenshaw you saw when you went up to the house should be the same Miss Greenshaw that Raymond saw a few days earlier? Oh yes, I know," she went on, to prevent Louise's reply, "she was wearing the peculiar old-fashioned print dress and the strange straw hat and had unkempt hair. She corresponded exactly to the description Raymond gave us last weekend. But those two women, you know, were much the same age, height, and size. The housekeeper, I mean, and Miss Greenshaw."

"But the housekeeper is fat!" Louise exclaimed. "She's got an enormous bosom."

Miss Marple coughed.

"But, my dear, surely, nowadays I have seen - er - them myself in shops most indelicately displayed. It is very easy for anyone to have a - a bosom - of any size and dimension."

"What are you trying to say?" demanded Raymond.

"I was just thinking that during the two days Louise was working there, one woman could have played both parts. You said yourself, Louise, that you hardly saw the housekeeper, except for the one minute in the morning when she brought you the tray with coffee. One sees those clever artists on the stage coming in as different characters with only a moment or two to spare, and I am sure the change could have been effected quite easily. That marquise headdress could be just a wig slipped on and off."

"Aunt Jane! Do you mean that Miss Greenshaw was dead before I started work there?"

"Not dead. Kept under drugs, I should say. A very easy job for an unscrupulous woman like the housekeeper to do. Then she made the arrangements with you and got you to telephone to the nephew to ask him to lunch at a definite time. The only person who would have known that this Miss Greenshaw was not Miss Greenshaw would have been Alfred. And if you remember, the first two days you were working there it was wet, and Miss Greenshaw stayed in the house. Alfred never came into the house because of his feud with the housekeeper. And on the last morning Alfred was in the drive, while Miss Greenshaw was working on the rockery - I'd like to have a look at that rockery."

"Do you mean it was Mrs Cresswell who killed Miss Greenshaw?"

"I think that after bringing you your coffee, the housekeeper locked the door on you as she went out, then carried the unconscious Miss Greenshaw down to the drawing room, then assumed her 'Miss Greenshaw' disguise and went out to work on the rockery where you could see her from the upstairs window. In due course she screamed and came staggering to the house clutching an arrow as though it had penetrated her throat. She called for help and was careful to say 'he shot me' so as to remove suspicion from the housekeeper - from herself. She also called up to the housekeeper's window as though she saw her there. Then, once inside the drawing-room, she threw over a table with porcelain on it, ran quickly upstairs, put on her marquise wig, and was able a few moments later to lean her head out of the window and tell you that she, too, was locked in."

"But she was locked in," said Louise.

"I know. That is where the policeman comes in."

"What policeman?"

"Exactly - what policeman? I wonder, Inspector, if you would mind telling me how and when you arrived on the scene?"

The inspector looked a little puzzled.

"At twelve twenty-nine we received a telephone call from Mrs Cresswell, housekeeper to Miss Greenshaw, stating that her mistress had been shot. Sergeant Cayley and myself went out there at once in a car and arrived at the house at twelve thirty-five. We found Miss Greenshaw dead and the two ladies locked in their rooms."

"So, you see, my dear," said Miss Marple to Louise, "the police constable you saw wasn't a real police constable at all. You never thought of him again - one doesn't - one just accept one more uniform as part of the law."

"But who - why?"

"As to who - well, if they are playing A Kiss for Cinderella, a policeman is the principal character. Nat Fletcher would only have to help himself to the costume he wears on the stage. He'd ask his way at a garage, being careful to call attention to the time - twelve twenty-five; then he would drive on quickly, leave his car round a corner, slip on his police uniform, and do his 'act.'"

"But why - why?"

"Someone had to lock the housekeeper's door on the outside, and someone had to drive the arrow through Miss Greenshaw's throat. You can stab anyone with an arrow just as well as by shooting it but it needs force."

"You mean they were both in it?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Mother and son as likely as not."

"But Miss Greenshaw's sister died long ago."

"Yes, but I've no doubt Mr Fletcher married again - he sounds like the sort of man who would. I think it possible that the child died, too, and that this so-called nephew was the second wife's child and not really a relation at all. The woman got the post as housekeeper and spied out the land. Then he wrote to Miss Greenshaw as her nephew and proposed to call on her - he may have even made some joking reference to coming in his policeman's uniform - remember, she said she was expecting a policeman. But I think Miss Greenshaw suspected the truth and refused to see him. He would have been her heir if she had died without making a will but of course once she had made a will in the housekeeper's favour, as they thought, then it was clear sailing."

"But why use an arrow?" objected Joan. "So very farfetched."

"Not far-fetched at all, dear. Alfred belonged to an archery club- Alfred was meant to take the blame. The fact that he was in the pub as early as twelve-twenty was most unfortunate from their point of view. He always left a little before his proper time and that would have been just right." She shook her head. "It really seems all wrong - morally, I mean, that Alfred's laziness should have saved his life."

The inspector cleared his throat.

"Well, madam, these suggestions of yours are very interesting. I shall, of course, have to investigate -"

Miss Marple and Raymond West stood by the rockery and looked down at a gardening basket full of dying vegetation.

Miss Marple murmured: "Alyssum, saxifrage, cystis, thimble campanula... Yes, that's all the proof I need. Whoever was weeding here yesterday morning was no gardener - she pulled up plants as well as weeds. So now I know I'm right. Thank you, dear Raymond, for bringing me here. I wanted to see the place for myself."

She and Raymond both looked up at the outrageous pile of Greenshaw's Folly.

A cough made them turn. A handsome young man was also looking at the monstrous house.

"Plaguey big place," he said. "Too big for nowadays - or so they say. I dunno about that. If I won a football pool and made a lot of money, that's the kind of house I'd like to build."

He smiled bashfully at them, then rumpled his hair.

"Reckon I can say so now," said Alfred Pollock. "And a fine house it is, for all they call it Greenshaw's Folly!"

Double Sin And Other Stories (1961)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

DOUBLE SIN

“Double Sin” was first published as “By Road or Rail” in the Sunday Dispatch, 23 September 1928.

I had called in at my friend Poirot’s rooms to find him sadly overworked. So much had he become the rage that every rich woman who had mislaid a bracelet or lost a pet kitten rushed to secure the services of the great Hercule Poirot. My little friend was a strange mixture of Flemish thrift and artistic fervour. He accepted many cases in which he had little interest owing to the first instinct being predominant.

He also undertook cases in which there was a little or no monetary reward sheerly because the problem involved interested him. The result was that, as I say, he was overworking himself. He admitted as much himself, and I found little difficulty in persuading him to accompany me for a week’s holiday to that well-known South Coast resort, Ebermouth.

We had spent four very agreeable days when Poirot came to me, an open letter in his hand.

“Mon ami, you remember my friend Joseph Aarons, the theatrical agent?”

I assented after a moment’s thought. Poirot’s friends are so many and so varied, and range from dustmen to dukes.

“Eh bien, Hastings, Joseph Aarons finds himself at Charlock Bay. He is far from well, and there is a little affair that it seems is worrying him. He begs me to go over and see him. I think, mon ami, that I must accede to his request. He is a faithful friend, the good Joseph Aarons, and has done much to assist me in the past.”

“Certainly, if you think so,” I said. “I believe Charlock Bay is a beautiful spot, and as it happens I’ve never been there.”

“Then we combine business with pleasure,” said Poirot. “You will inquire the trains, yes?”

“It will probably mean a change or two,” I said with a grimace. “You know what these cross-country lines are. To go from the South Devon coast to the North Devon coast is sometimes a day’s journey.”

However, on inquiry, I found that the journey could be accomplished by only one change at Exeter and that the trains were good. I was hastening back to Poirot with the information when I happened to pass the offices of the Speedy cars and saw written up:

Tomorrow. All-day excursion to Charlock Bay. Starting 8:30 through some of the most beautiful scenery in Devon.

I inquired a few particulars and returned to the hotel full of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, I found it hard to make Poirot share my feelings.

“My friend, why this passion for the motor coach? The train, see you, it is true? The tyres, they do not burst; the accidents, they do not happen. One is not incommoded by too much air. The windows can be shut and no draughts admitted.”

I hinted delicately that the advantage of fresh air was what attracted me most to the motor-coach scheme.

“And if it rains? Your English climate is so uncertain.”

“There’s a hood and all that. Besides, if it rains badly, the excursion doesn’t take place.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “Then let us hope that it rains.”

“Of course, if you feel like that and. . . .”

“No, no, mon ami. I see that you have set your heart on the trip. Fortunately, I have my greatcoat with me and two mufflers.” He sighed. “But shall we have sufficient time at Charlock Bay?”

“Well, I’m afraid it means staying the night there. You see, the tour goes round by Dartmoor. We have lunch at Monkhampton. We arrive at Charlock Bay about four o’clock, and the coach starts back at five, arriving here at ten o’clock.”

“So!” said Poirot. “And there are people who do this for pleasure! We shall, of course, get a reduction of the fare since we do not make the return journey?”

“I hardly think that’s likely.”

“You must insist.”

“Come now, Poirot, don’t be mean. You know you’re coining money.”

“My friend, it is not the meanness. It is the business sense. If I were a millionaire, I would pay only what was just and right.”

As I had foreseen, however, Poirot was doomed to fail in this respect. The gentleman who issued tickets at the Speedy office was calm and unimpassioned but adamant. His point was that we ought to return. He even implied that we ought to pay extra for the privilege of leaving the coach at Charlock Bay.

Defeated, Poirot paid over the required sum and left the office.

“The English, they have no sense of money,” he grumbled. “Did you observe a young man, Hastings, who paid over the full fare and yet mentioned his intention of leaving the coach at Monkhampton?”

“I don’t think I did. As a matter of fact. . . .”

“You were observing the pretty young lady who booked No. 5, the next seat to ours. Ah! Yes, my friend, I saw you. And that is why when I was on the point of taking seats No. 13 and 14—which are in the middle and as well sheltered as it is possible to be—you rudely pushed yourself forward and said that 3 and 4 would be better.”

“Really, Poirot,” I said, blushing.

“Auburn hair—always the auburn hair!”

“At any rate, she was more worth looking at than an odd young man.”

“That depends upon the point of view. To me, the young man was interesting.”

Something rather significant in Poirot’s tone made me look at him quickly. “Why? What do you mean?”

“Oh, do not excite yourself. Shall I say that he interested me because he was trying to grow a moustache and as yet the result is poor.” Poirot stroked his own magnificent moustache tenderly. “It is an art,” he murmured, “the growing of the moustache! I have sympathy for all who attempt it.”

It is always difficult with Poirot to know when he is serious and when he is merely amusing himself at one’s expense. I judged it safest to say no more.

The following morning dawned bright and sunny. A really glorious day! Poirot, however, was taking no chances. He wore a woolly waistcoat, a mackintosh, a heavy overcoat, and two mufflers, in addition to wearing his thickest suit. He also swallowed two tablets of “Anti-grippe” before starting and packed a further supply.

We took a couple of small suitcases with us. The pretty girl we had noticed the day before had a small suitcase, and so did the young man whom I gathered to have been the object of Poirot’s sympathy. Otherwise, there was no luggage. The four pieces were stowed away by the driver, and we all took our places.

Poirot, rather maliciously, I thought, assigned me the outside place as “I had the mania for the fresh air” and himself occupied the seat next to our fair neighbour. Presently, however, he made amends. The man in seat 6 was a noisy fellow, inclined to be facetious and boisterous, and Poirot asked the girl in a low voice if she would like to change seats with him. She agreed gratefully, and the change having been effected, she entered into conversation with us and we were soon all three chattering together merrily.

She was evidently quite young, not more than nineteen, and as ingenuous as a child. She soon confided to us the reason for her trip. She was going, it seemed, on business for her aunt who kept a most interesting antique shop in Ebermouth.

This aunt had been left in very reduced circumstances on the death of her father and had used her small capital and a houseful of beautiful things which her father had left her to start in business. She had been extremely successful and had made quite a name for herself in the trade. This girl, Mary Durrant, had come to be with her aunt and learn the business and was very excited about it—much preferring it to the other alternative—becoming a nursery governess or companion.

Poirot nodded interest and approval to all this.

“Mademoiselle will be successful, I am sure,” he said gallantly. “But I will give her a little word of advice. Do not be too trusting, mademoiselle. Everywhere in the world there are rogues and vagabonds, even it may be on this very coach of ours. One should always be on the guard, suspicious!”

She stared at him openmouthed, and he nodded sapiently.

“But yes, it is as I say. Who knows? Even I who speak to you may be a malefactor of the worst description.”

And he twinkled more than ever at her surprised face.

We stopped for lunch at Monkhampton, and, after a few words with the waiter, Poirot managed to secure us a small table for three close by the window. Outside, in a big courtyard, about twenty char-a-bancs were parked—char-a-bancs which had come from all over the country. The hotel dining room was full, and the noise was rather considerable.

“One can have altogether too much of the holiday spirit,” I said with a grimace.

Mary Durrant agreed. “Ebermouth is quite spoiled in the summers nowadays. My aunt says it used to be quite different. Now one can hardly get along the pavements for the crowd.”

“But it is good for business, mademoiselle.”

“Not for ours particularly. We sell only rare and valuable things. We do not go in for cheap bric-a-brac. My aunt has clients all over England. If they want a particular period table or chair, or a certain piece of china, they write to her, and, sooner or later, she gets it for them. That is what has happened in this case.”

We looked interested and she went on to explain. A certain American gentleman, Mr. J. Baker Wood, was a connoisseur and collector of miniatures. A very valuable set of miniatures had recently come into the market, and Miss Elizabeth Penn—Mary’s aunt—had purchased them. She had written to Mr. Wood describing the miniatures and naming a price. He had replied at once, saying that he was prepared to purchase if the miniatures were as represented and asking that someone should be sent with them for him to see where he was staying at Charlock Bay. Miss Durrant had accordingly been despatched, acting as representative for the firm.

“They’re lovely things, of course,” she said. “But I can’t imagine anyone paying all that money for them. Five hundred pounds! Just think of it! They’re by Cosway. Is it Cosway I mean? I get so mixed up in these things.”

Poirot smiled. “You are not yet experienced, eh, mademoiselle?”

“I’ve had no training,” said Mary ruefully. “We weren’t brought up to know about old things. It’s a lot to learn.”

She sighed. Then suddenly, I saw her eyes widen in surprise. She was sitting facing the window, and her glance now was directed out of that window, into the courtyard. With a hurried word, she rose from her seat and almost ran out of the room. She returned in a few moments, breathless and apologetic.

“I’m so sorry rushing off like that. But I thought I saw a man taking my suitcase out of the coach. I went flying after him, and it turned out to be his own. It’s one almost exactly like mine. I felt like such a fool. It looked as though I were accusing him of stealing it.”

She laughed at the idea.

Poirot, however, did not laugh. “What man was it, mademoiselle? Describe him to me.”

“He had on a brown suit. A thin weedy young man with a very indeterminate moustache.”

“Aha,” said Poirot. “Our friend of yesterday, Hastings. You know this young man, mademoiselle? You have seen him before?”

“No, never. Why?”

“Nothing. It is rather curious—that is all.”

He relapsed into silence and took no further part in the conversation until something Mary Durrant said caught his attention.

“Eh, mademoiselle, what is that you say?”

“I said that on my return journey I should have to be careful of ‘malefactors’, as you call them. I believe Mr. Wood always pays for things in cash. If I have five hundred pounds in notes on me, I shall be worth some malefactor’s attention.”

She laughed but Poirot did not respond. Instead, he asked her what hotel she proposed to stay at in Charlock Bay.

“The Anchor Hotel. It is small and not expensive, but quite good.”

“So!” said Poirot. “The Anchor Hotel. Precisely where Hastings here has made up his mind to stay. How odd!”

He twinkled at me.

“You are staying long in Charlock Bay?” asked Mary.

“One night only. I have business there. You could not guess, I am sure, what my profession is, mademoiselle?”

I saw Mary consider several possibilities and reject them—probably from a feeling of caution. At last, she hazarded the suggestion that Poirot was a conjurer. He was vastly entertained.

“Ah! But it is an idea that! You think I take the rabbits out of the hat? No, mademoiselle. Me, I am the opposite of a conjurer. The conjurer, he makes things disappear. Me, I make things that have disappeared, reappear.” He leaned forward dramatically so as to give the words full effect. “It is a secret, mademoiselle, but I will tell you, I am a detective!”

He leaned back in his chair pleased with the effect he had created. Mary Durrant stared at him spellbound. But any further conversation was barred for the braying of various horns outside announced that the road monsters were ready to proceed.

As Poirot and I went out together I commented on the charm of our luncheon companion. Poirot agreed.

“Yes, she is charming. But, also rather silly?”

“Silly?”

“Do not be outraged. A girl may be beautiful and have auburn hair and yet be silly. It is the height of foolishness to take two strangers into her confidence as she has done.”

“Well, she could see we were all right.”

"That is imbecile, what you say, my friend. Anyone who knows his job—naturally he will appear 'all right.' That little one she talked of being careful when she would have five hundred pounds in money with her. But she has five hundred pounds with her now."

"In miniatures."

"Exactly. In miniatures. And between one and the other, there is no great difference, mon ami."

"But no one knew about them except us."

"And the waiter and the people at the next table. And, doubtless, several people in Ebermouth! Mademoiselle Durrant, she is charming, but, if I were Miss Elizabeth Penn, I would first of all instruct my new assistant in the common sense." He paused and then said in a different voice: "You know, my friend, it would be the easiest thing in the world to remove a suitcase from one of those char-a-bancs while we were all at luncheon."

"Oh, come, Poirot, somebody will be sure to see."

"And what would they see? Somebody removing his luggage. It would be done in an open and aboveboard manner, and it would be nobody's business to interfere."

"Do you mean—Poirot, are you hinting—But that fellow in the brown suit—it was his own suitcase?"

Poirot frowned. "So it seems. All the same, it is curious, Hastings, that he should have not removed his suitcase before, when the car first arrived. He has not lunched here, you notice."

"If Miss Durrant hadn't been sitting opposite the window, she wouldn't have seen him," I said slowly.

"And since it was his own suitcase, that would not have mattered," said Poirot. "So let us dismiss it from our thoughts, mon ami."

Nevertheless, when we had resumed our places and were speeding along once more, he took the opportunity of giving Mary Durrant a further lecture on the dangers of indiscretion which she received meekly enough but with the air of thinking it all rather a joke.

We arrived at Charlock Bay at four o'clock and were fortunate enough to be able to get rooms at the Anchor Hotel—a charming old-world inn in one of the side streets.

Poirot had just unpacked a few necessaries and was applying a little cosmetic to his moustache preparatory to going out to call upon Joseph Aarons when there came a frenzied knocking at the door. I called "Come in," and, to my utter amazement, Mary Durrant appeared, her face white and large tears standing in her eyes.

"I do beg your pardon—but—but the most awful thing has happened. And you did say you were a detective?" This to Poirot.

"What has happened, mademoiselle?"

"I opened my suitcase. The miniatures were in a crocodile despatch case—locked, of course. Now, look!"

She held out a small square crocodile-covered case. The lid hung loose. Poirot took it from her. The case had been forced; great strength must have been used. The marks were plain enough. Poirot examined it and nodded.

"The miniatures?" he asked, though we both knew the answer well enough.

"Gone. They've been stolen. Oh, what shall I do?"

"Don't worry," I said. "My friend is Hercule Poirot. You must have heard of him. He'll get them back for you if anyone can."

"Monsieur Poirot. The great Monsieur Poirot."

Poirot was vain enough to be pleased at the obvious reverence in her voice. "Yes, my child," he said. "It is I, myself. And you can leave your little affair in my hands. I will do all that can be done. But I fear—I much fear—that it will be too late. Tell me, was the lock of your suitcase forced also?”

She shook her head.

“Let me see it, please.”

We went together to her room, and Poirot examined the suitcase closely. It had obviously been opened with a key.

“Which is simple enough. These suitcase locks are all much of the same pattern. Eh bien, we must ring up the police and we must also get in touch with Mr. Baker Wood as soon as possible. I will attend to that myself.”

I went with him and asked what he meant by saying it might be too late. “Mon cher, I said today that I was the opposite of the conjurer—that I make the disappearing things reappear—but suppose someone has been beforehand with me. You do not understand? You will in a minute.”

He disappeared into the telephone box. He came out five minutes later looking very grave. “It is as I feared. A lady called upon Mr. Wood with the miniatures half an hour ago. She represented herself as coming from Miss Elizabeth Penn. He was delighted with the miniatures and paid for them forthwith.”

“Half an hour ago—before we arrived here.”

Poirot smiled rather enigmatically. “The Speedy cars are quite speedy, but a fast motor from, say, Monkhampton would get here a good hour ahead of them at least.”

“And what do we do now?”

“The good Hastings—always practical. We inform the police, do all we can for Miss Durrant, and—yes, I think decidedly, we have an interview with Mr. J. Baker Wood.”

We carried out this programme. Poor Mary Durrant was terribly upset, fearing her aunt would blame her.

“Which she probably will,” observed Poirot, as we set out for the Seaside Hotel where Mr. Wood was staying. “And with perfect justice. The idea of leaving five hundred pounds’ worth of valuables in a suitcase and going to lunch! All the same, mon ami, there are one or two curious points about the case. That despatch box, for instance, why was it forced?”

“To get out the miniatures.”

“But was not that a foolishness? Say our thief is tampering with the luggage at lunchtime under the pretext of getting out his own. Surely it is much simpler to open the suitcase, transfer the despatch case unopened to his own suitcase, and get away, than to waste the time forcing the lock?”

“He had to make sure the miniatures were inside.”

Poirot did not look convinced, but, as we were just being shown into Mr. Wood’s suite, we had no time for more discussion.

I took an immediate dislike to Mr. Baker Wood.

He was a large vulgar man, very much overdressed and wearing a diamond solitaire ring. He was blustering and noisy.

Of course, he’d not suspected anything amiss. Why should he? The woman said she had the miniatures all right. Very fine specimens, too! Had he the numbers of the notes? No, he hadn’t. And who was Mr.—er—Poirot, anyway, to come asking him all these questions?

“I will not ask you anything more, monsieur, except for one thing. A description of the woman who called upon you. Was she young and pretty?”

“No, sir, she was not. Most emphatically not. A tall woman, middle-aged, grey hair, blotchy complexion and a budding moustache. A siren? Not on your life.”

“Poirot,” I cried, as we took our departure. “A moustache. Did you hear?”

“I have the use of my ears, thank you, Hastings!”

“But what a very unpleasant man.”

“He has not the charming manner, no.”

“Well, we ought to get the thief all right,” I remarked. “We can identify him.”

“You are of such a naïve simplicity, Hastings. Do you not know that there is such a thing as an alibi?”

“You think he will have an alibi?”

Poirot replied unexpectedly: “I sincerely hope so.”

“The trouble with you is,” I said, “that you like a thing to be difficult.”

“Quite right, mon ami. I do not like—how do you say it—the bird who sits!”

Poirot’s prophecy was fully justified. Our travelling companion in the brown suit turned out to be a Mr. Norton Kane. He had gone straight to the George Hotel at Monkhampton and had been there during the afternoon. The only evidence against him was that of Miss Durrant who declared that she had seen him getting out his luggage from the car while we were at lunch.

“Which in itself is not a suspicious act,” said Poirot meditatively.

After that remark, he lapsed into silence and refused to discuss the matter any further, saying when I pressed him, that he was thinking of moustaches in general, and that I should be well advised to do the same.

I discovered, however, that he had asked Joseph Aarons—with whom he spent the evening—to give him every detail possible about Mr. Baker Wood. As both men were staying at the same hotel, there was a chance of gleaning some stray crumbs of information. Whatever Poirot learned, he kept to himself, however.

Mary Durrant, after various interviews with the police, had returned to Ebermouth by an early morning train. We lunched with Joseph Aarons, and after lunch, Poirot announced to me that he had settled the theatrical agent's problem satisfactorily, and that we could return to Ebermouth as soon as we liked. "But not by road, mon ami; we go by rail this time."

"Are you afraid of having your pocket picked, or of meeting another damsel in distress?"

"Both those affairs, Hastings, might happen to me on the train. No, I am in haste to be back in Ebermouth, because I want to proceed with our case."

"Our case?"

"But, yes, my friend. Mademoiselle Durrant appealed to me to help her. Because the matter is now in the hands of the police, it does not follow that I am free to wash my hands of it. I came here to oblige an old friend, but it shall never be said of Hercule Poirot that he deserted a stranger in need!" And he drew himself up grandiloquently.

"I think you were interested before that," I said shrewdly. "In the office of cars, when you first caught sight of that young man, though what drew your attention to him I don't know."

"Don't you, Hastings? You should. Well, well, that must remain my little secret."

We had a short conversation with the police inspector in charge of the case before leaving. He had interviewed Mr. Norton Kane, and told Poirot in confidence that the young man's manner had not impressed him favourably. He had blustered, denied, and contradicted himself.

"But just how the trick was done, I don't know," he confessed. "He could have handed the stuff to a confederate who pushed off at once in a fast car. But that's just theory. We've got to find the car and the confederate and pin the thing down."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“Do you think that was how it was done?” I asked him, as we were seated in the train.

“No, my friend, that was not how it was done. It was cleverer than that.”

“Won’t you tell me?”

“Not yet. You know—it is my weakness—I like to keep my little secrets till the end.”

“Is the end going to be soon?”

“Very soon now.”

We arrived in Ebermouth a little after six and Poirot drove at once to the shop which bore the name “Elizabeth Penn.” The establishment was closed, but Poirot rang the bell, and presently Mary herself opened the door, and expressed surprise and delight at seeing us.

“Please come in and see my aunt,” she said.

She led us into a back room. An elderly lady came forward to meet us; she had white hair and looked rather like a miniature herself with her pink-and-white skin and her blue eyes. Round her rather bent shoulders she wore a cape of priceless old lace.

“Is this the great Monsieur Poirot?” she asked in a low charming voice. “Mary has been telling me. I could hardly believe it. And you will really help us in our trouble. You will advise us?”

Poirot looked at her for a moment, then bowed.

“Mademoiselle Penn—the effect is charming. But you should really grow a moustache.”

Miss Penn gave a gasp and drew back.

“You were absent from business yesterday, were you not?”

“I was here in the morning. Later I had a bad headache and went directly home.”

“Not home, mademoiselle. For your headache you tried the change of air, did you not? The air of Charlock Bay is very bracing, I believe.”

He took me by the arm and drew me towards the door. He paused there and spoke over his shoulder.

“You comprehend, I know everything. This little—farce—it must cease.”

There was a menace in his tone. Miss Penn, her face ghastly white, nodded mutely. Poirot turned to the girl.

“Mademoiselle,” he said gently, “you are young and charming. But participating in these little affairs will lead to that youth and charm being hidden behind prison walls—and I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that that will be a pity.”

Then he stepped out into the street and I followed him, bewildered.

“From the first, mon ami, I was interested. When that young man booked his place as far as Monkhampton only, I saw the girl’s attention suddenly riveted on him. Now why? He was not of the type to make a woman look at him for himself alone. When we started on the coach, I had a feeling that something would happen. Who saw the young man tampering with the luggage? Mademoiselle and mademoiselle only, and remember she chose that seat—a seat facing the window—a most unfeminine choice.

“And then she comes to us with the tale of robbery—the despatch box forced which makes not the common sense, as I told you at the time.

“And what is the result of it all? Mr. Baker Wood has paid over good money for stolen goods. The miniatures will be returned to Miss Penn. She will sell them and will have made a thousand pounds instead of five hundred. I make the discreet inquiries and learn that her business is in a bad state—touch and go. I say to myself—the aunt and niece are in this together.”

“Then you never suspected Norton Kane?”

“Mon ami! With that moustache? A criminal is either clean-shaven or he has a proper moustache that can be removed at will. But what an opportunity for the clever Miss Penn—a shrinking elderly lady with a pink-and-white complexion as we saw her. But if she holds herself erect, wears large boots, alters her complexion with a few unseemly blotches and—crowning touch—adds a few sparse hairs to her upper lip. What then? A masculine woman, says Mr. Wood and ‘a man in disguise’ say we at once.”

“She really went to Charlock yesterday?”

“Assuredly. The train, as you may remember telling me, left here at eleven and got to Charlock Bay at two o’clock. Then the return train is even quicker—the one we came by. It leaves Charlock at four-five and gets here at six-fifteen. Naturally, the miniatures were never in the despatch case at all. That was artistically forced before being packed. Mademoiselle Mary has only to find a couple of mugs who will be sympathetic to her charm and champion beauty in distress. But one of the mugs was no mug—he was Hercule Poirot!”

I hardly liked the inference. I said hurriedly: “Then when you said you were helping a stranger, you were wilfully deceiving me. That’s exactly what you were doing.”

“Never do I deceive you, Hastings. I only permit you to deceive yourself. I was referring to Mr. Baker Wood—a stranger to these shores.” His face darkened. “Ah! When I think of that imposition, that iniquitous overcharge, the same fare single to Charlock as return, my blood boils to protect the visitor! Not a pleasant man, Mr. Baker Wood, not, as you would say, sympathetic. But a visitor! And we visitors, Hastings, must stand together. Me, I am all for the visitors!”

Two

WASPS’ NEST

“Wasps’ Nest” was first published as “The Wasps’ Nest” in the Daily Mail, 20 November 1928.

Out of the house came John Harrison and stood a moment on the terrace looking out over the garden. He was a big man with a lean, cadaverous face. His aspect was usually somewhat grim but when, as now, the rugged features softened into a smile, there was something very attractive about him.

John Harrison loved his garden, and it had never looked better than it did on this August evening, summery and languorous. The rambler roses were still beautiful; sweet peas scented the air.

A well-known creaking sound made Harrison turn his head sharply. Who was coming in through the garden gate? In another minute, an expression of utter astonishment came over his face, for the dandified figure coming up the path was the last he expected to see in this part of the world.

“By all that’s wonderful,” cried Harrison. “Monsieur Poirot!”

It was, indeed, the famous Hercule Poirot whose renown as a detective had spread over the whole world.

“Yes,” he said, “it is. You said to me once: ‘If you are ever in this part of the world, come and see me.’ I take you at your word. I arrive.”

“And I’m obliged,” said Harrison heartily. “Sit down and have a drink.”

With a hospitable hand, he indicated a table on the veranda bearing assorted bottles.

“I thank you,” said Poirot, sinking down into a basket chair. “You have, I suppose, no sirop? No, no. I thought not. A little plain soda water then—no whisky.” And he added in a feeling voice as the other placed the glass beside him: “Alas, my moustaches are limp. It is this heat!”

“And what brings you into this quiet spot?” asked Harrison as he dropped into another chair. “Pleasure?”

“No, mon ami, business.”

“Business? In this out-of-the-way place?”

Poirot nodded gravely. “But yes, my friend, all crimes are not committed in crowds, you know?”

The other laughed. “I suppose that was rather an idiotic remark of mine. But what particular crime are you investigating down here, or is that a thing I mustn’t ask?”

“You may ask,” said the detective. “Indeed, I would prefer that you asked.”

Harrison looked at him curiously. He sensed something a little unusual in the other’s manner. “You are investigating a crime, you say?” he advanced rather hesitatingly. “A serious crime?”

“A crime of the most serious there is.”

“You mean. . . .”

“Murder.”

So gravely did Hercule Poirot say that word that Harrison was quite taken aback. The detective was looking straight at him and again there was something so unusual in his glance that Harrison hardly knew how to proceed. At last, he said: “But I have heard of no murder.”

“No,” said Poirot, “you would not have heard of it.”

“Who has been murdered?”

“As yet,” said Hercule Poirot, “nobody.”

“What?”

“That is why I said you would not have heard of it. I am investigating a crime that has not yet taken place.”

“But look here, that is nonsense.”

“Not at all. If one can investigate a murder before it has happened, surely that is very much better than afterwards. One might even—a little idea—prevent it.”

Harrison stared at him. “You are not serious, Monsieur Poirot.”

“But yes, I am serious.”

“You really believe that a murder is going to be committed? Oh, it’s absurd!”

Hercule Poirot finished the first part of the sentence without taking any notice of the exclamation.

“Unless we can manage to prevent it. Yes, mon ami, that is what I mean.”

“We?”

“I said we. I shall need your cooperation.”

“Is that why you came down here?”

Again Poirot looked at him, and again an indefinable something made Harrison uneasy.

“I came here, Monsieur Harrison, because I—well—like you.”

And then he added in an entirely different voice: “I see, Monsieur Harrison, that you have a wasps’ nest there. You should destroy it.”

The change of subject made Harrison frown in a puzzled way. He followed Poirot's glance and said in a bewildered voice: "As a matter of fact, I'm going to. Or rather, young Langton is. You remember Claude Langton? He was at that same dinner where I met you. He's coming over this evening to take the nest. Rather fancies himself at the job."

"Ah," said Poirot. "And how is he going to do it?"

"Petrol and the garden syringe. He's bringing his own syringe over; it's a more convenient size than mine."

"There is another way, is there not?" asked Poirot. "With cyanide of potassium?"

Harrison looked a little surprised. "Yes, but that's rather dangerous stuff. Always a risk having it about the place."

Poirot nodded gravely. "Yes, it is deadly poison." He waited a minute and then repeated in a grave voice, "Deadly poison."

"Useful if you want to do away with your mother-in-law, eh?" said Harrison with a laugh.

But Hercule Poirot remained grave. "And you are quite sure, Monsieur Harrison, that it is with petrol that Monsieur Langton is going to destroy your wasps' nest?"

"Quite sure. Why?"

"I wondered. I was at the chemist's in Barchester this afternoon. For one of my purchases I had to sign the poison book. I saw the last entry. It was for cyanide of potassium and it was signed by Claude Langton."

Harrison stared. "That's odd," he said. "Langton told me the other day that he'd never dream of using the stuff; in fact, he said it oughtn't to be sold for the purpose."

Poirot looked out over the garden. His voice was very quiet as he asked a question. "Do you like Langton?"

The other started. The question somehow seemed to find him quite unprepared. “I—I—well, I mean—of course, I like him. Why shouldn’t I?”

“I only wondered,” said Poirot placidly, “whether you did.”

And as the other did not answer, he went on. “I also wondered if he liked you?”

“What are you getting at, Monsieur Poirot? There’s something in your mind I can’t fathom.”

“I am going to be very frank. You are engaged to be married, Monsieur Harrison. I know Miss Molly Deane. She is a very charming, a very beautiful girl. Before she was engaged to you, she was engaged to Claude Langton. She threw him over for you.”

Harrison nodded.

“I do not ask what her reasons were: she may have been justified. But I tell you this, it is not too much to suppose that Langton has not forgotten or forgiven.”

“You’re wrong, Monsieur Poirot. I swear you’re wrong. Langton’s been a sportsman; he’s taken things like a man. He’s been amazingly decent to me—gone out of his way to be friendly.”

“And that does not strike you as unusual? You use the word ‘amazingly,’ but you do not seem to be amazed.”

“What do you mean, M. Poirot?”

“I mean,” said Poirot, and his voice had a new note in it, “that a man may conceal his hate till the proper time comes.”

“Hate?” Harrison shook his head and laughed.

“The English are very stupid,” said Poirot. “They think that they can deceive anyone but that no one can deceive them. The sportsman—the good fellow—never will they believe evil of him. And because they are brave, but stupid, sometimes they die when they need not die."

"You are warning me," said Harrison in a low voice. "I see it now—what has puzzled me all along. You are warning me against Claude Langton. You came here today to warn me. . . ."

Poirot nodded. Harrison sprang up suddenly. "But you are mad, Monsieur Poirot. This is England. Things don't happen like that here. Disappointed suitors don't go about stabbing people in the back and poisoning them. And you're wrong about Langton. That chap wouldn't hurt a fly."

"The lives of flies are not my concern," said Poirot placidly. "And although you say Monsieur Langton would not take the life of one, yet you forget that he is even now preparing to take the lives of several thousand wasps."

Harrison did not at once reply. The little detective in his turn sprang to his feet. He advanced to his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder. So agitated was he that he almost shook the big man, and, as he did so, he hissed into his ear: "Rouse yourself, my friend, rouse yourself. And look—look where I am pointing. There on the bank, close by that tree root. See you, the wasps returning home, placid at the end of the day? In a little hour, there will be destruction, and they know it not. There is no one to tell them. They have not, it seems, a Hercule Poirot. I tell you, Monsieur Harrison, I am down here on business. Murder is my business. And it is my business before it has happened as well as afterwards. At what time does Monsieur Langton come to take this wasps' nest?"

"Langton would never. . . ."

"At what time?"

"At nine o'clock. But I tell you, you're all wrong. Langton would never. . . ."

"These English!" cried Poirot in a passion. He caught up his hat and stick and moved down the path, pausing to speak over his shoulder. "I do not stay to argue with you. I should only enrage myself. But you understand, I return at nine o’clock?”

Harrison opened his mouth to speak, but Poirot did not give him the chance. “I know what you would say: ‘Langton would never,’ et cetera. Ah, Langton would never! But all the same I return at nine o’clock. But, yes, it will amuse me—put it like that—it will amuse me to see the taking of a wasps’ nest. Another of your English sports!”

He waited for no reply but passed rapidly down the path and out through the door that creaked. Once outside on the road, his pace slackened. His vivacity died down, his face became grave and troubled. Once he drew his watch from his pocket and consulted it. The hands pointed to ten minutes past eight. “Over three quarters of an hour,” he murmured. “I wonder if I should have waited.”

His footsteps slackened; he almost seemed on the point of returning. Some vague foreboding seemed to assail him. He shook it off resolutely, however, and continued to walk in the direction of the village. But his face was still troubled, and once or twice he shook his head like a man only partly satisfied.

It was still some minutes off nine when he once more approached the garden door. It was a clear, still evening; hardly a breeze stirred the leaves. There was, perhaps, something a little sinister in the stillness, like the lull before a storm.

Poirot’s footsteps quickened ever so slightly. He was suddenly alarmed—and uncertain. He feared he knew not what.

And at that moment the garden door opened and Claude Langton stepped quickly out into the road. He started when he saw Poirot.

“Oh—er—good evening.”

“Good evening, Monsieur Langton. You are early.”

Langton stared at him. “I don’t know what you mean.”

"You have taken the wasps' nest?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't."

"Oh," said Poirot softly. "So you did not take the wasps' nest. What did you do then?"

"Oh, just sat and yarned a bit with old Harrison. I really must hurry along now, Monsieur Poirot. I'd no idea you were remaining in this part of the world."

"I had business here, you see."

"Oh! Well, you'll find Harrison on the terrace. Sorry I can't stop."

He hurried away. Poirot looked after him. A nervous young fellow, good-looking with a weak mouth!

"So I shall find Harrison on the terrace," murmured Poirot. "I wonder." He went in through the garden door and up the path. Harrison was sitting in a chair by the table. He sat motionless and did not even turn his head as Poirot came up to him.

"Ah! Mon ami," said Poirot. "You are all right, eh?"

There was a long pause and then Harrison said in a queer, dazed voice, "What did you say?"

"I said—are you all right?"

"All right? Yes, I'm all right. Why not?"

"You feel no ill effects? That is good."

"Ill effects? From what?"

"Washing soda."

Harrison roused himself suddenly. "Washing soda? What do you mean?"

Poirot made an apologetic gesture. “I infinitely regret the necessity, but I put some in your pocket.”

“You put some in my pocket? What on earth for?”

Harrison stared at him. Poirot spoke quietly and impersonally like a lecturer coming down to the level of a small child.

“You see, one of the advantages, or disadvantages, of being a detective is that it brings you into contact with the criminal classes. And the criminal classes, they can teach you some very interesting and curious things. There was a pickpocket once—I interested myself in him because for once in a way he had not done what they say he has done—and so I get him off. And because he is grateful he pays me in the only way he can think of—which is to show me the tricks of his trade.

“And so it happens that I can pick a man’s pocket if I choose without his ever suspecting the fact. I lay one hand on his shoulder, I excite myself, and he feels nothing. But all the same I have managed to transfer what is in his pocket to my pocket and leave washing soda in its place.

“You see,” continued Poirot dreamily, “if a man wants to get at some poison quickly to put in a glass, unobserved, he positively must keep it in his right-hand coat pocket; there is nowhere else. I knew it would be there.”

He dropped his hand into his pocket and brought out a few white, lumpy crystals. “Exceedingly dangerous,” he murmured, “to carry it like that—loose.”

Calmly and without hurrying himself, he took from another pocket a wide-mouthed bottle. He slipped in the crystals, stepped to the table and filled up the bottle with plain water. Then carefully corking it, he shook it until all the crystals were dissolved. Harrison watched him as though fascinated.

Satisfied with his solution, Poirot stepped across to the nest. He uncorked the bottle, turned his head aside, and poured the solution into the wasps’ nest, then stood back a pace or two watching.

Some wasps that were returning alighted, quivered a little and then lay still. Other wasps crawled out of the hole only to die. Poirot watched for a minute or two and then nodded his head and came back to the veranda.

“A quick death,” he said. “A very quick death.”

Harrison found his voice. “How much do you know?”

Poirot looked straight ahead. “As I told you, I saw Claude Langton’s name in the book. What I did not tell you was that almost immediately afterwards, I happened to meet him. He told me he had been buying cyanide of potassium at your request—to take a wasps’ nest. That struck me as a little odd, my friend, because I remember that at that dinner of which you spoke, you held forth on the superior merits of petrol and denounced the buying of cyanide as dangerous and unnecessary.”

“Go on.”

“I knew something else. I had seen Claude Langton and Molly Deane together when they thought no one saw them. I do not know what lovers’ quarrel it was that originally parted them and drove her into your arms, but I realized that misunderstandings were over and that Miss Deane was drifting back to her love.”

“Go on.”

“I knew something more, my friend. I was in Harley Street the other day, and I saw you come out of a certain doctor’s house. I know the doctor and for what disease one consults him, and I read the expression on your face. I have seen it only once or twice in my lifetime, but it is not easily mistaken. It was the face of a man under sentence of death. I am right, am I not?”

“Quite right. He gave me two months.”

“You did not see me, my friend, for you had other things to think about. I saw something else on your face—the thing that I told you this afternoon men try to conceal. I saw hate there, my friend. You did not trouble to conceal it, because you thought there were none to observe.”

“Go on,” said Harrison.

“There is not much more to say. I came down here, saw Langton’s name by accident in the poison book as I tell you, met him, and came here to you. I laid traps for you. You denied having asked Langton to get cyanide, or rather you expressed surprise at his having done so. You were taken aback at first at my appearance, but presently you saw how well it would fit in and you encouraged my suspicions. I knew from Langton himself that he was coming at half past eight. You told me nine o’clock, thinking I should come and find everything over. And so I knew everything.”

“Why did you come?” cried Harrison. “If only you hadn’t come!”

Poirot drew himself up. “I told you,” he said, “murder is my business.”

“Murder? Suicide, you mean.”

“No.” Poirot’s voice rang out sharply and clearly. “I mean murder. Your death was to be quick and easy, but the death you planned for Langton was the worst death any man can die. He bought the poison; he comes to see you, and he is alone with you. You die suddenly, and the cyanide is found in your glass, and Claude Langton hangs. That was your plan.”

Again Harrison moaned.

“Why did you come? Why did you come?”

“I have told you, but there is another reason. I liked you. Listen, mon ami, you are a dying man; you have lost the girl you loved, but there is one thing that you are not; you are not a murderer. Tell me now: are you glad or sorry that I came?”

There was a moment’s pause and Harrison drew himself up. There was a new dignity in his face—the look of a man who has conquered his own baser self. He stretched out his hand across the table.

“Thank goodness you came,” he cried. “Oh, thank goodness you came.”

Three

THE THEFT OF THE ROYAL RUBY

“The Theft of the Royal Ruby” was first published as “The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding” in The Sketch, 12 December 1923. This is an expanded version of the story.

I regret exceedingly—” said M. Hercule Poirot.

He was interrupted. Not rudely interrupted. The interruption was suave, dexterous, persuasive rather than contradictory.

“Please don’t refuse offhand, M. Poirot. There are grave issues of State. Your cooperation will be appreciated in the highest quarters.”

“You are too kind,” Hercule Poirot waved a hand, “but I really cannot undertake to do as you ask. At this season of the year—”

Again Mr. Jesmond interrupted. “Christmastime,” he said, persuasively. “An old-fashioned Christmas in the English countryside.”

Hercule Poirot shivered. The thought of the English countryside at this season of the year did not attract him.

“A good old-fashioned Christmas!” Mr. Jesmond stressed it.

“Me—I am not an Englishman,” said Hercule Poirot. “In my country, Christmas, it is for the children. The New Year, that is what we celebrate.”

“Ah,” said Mr. Jesmond, “but Christmas in England is a great institution and I assure you at Kings Lacey you would see it at its best. It’s a wonderful old house, you know. Why, one wing of it dates from the fourteenth century.”

Again Poirot shivered. The thought of a fourteenth-century English manor house filled him with apprehension. He had suffered too often in the historic country houses of England. He looked round appreciatively at his comfortable modern flat with its radiators and the latest patent devices for excluding any kind of draught.

“In the winter,” he said firmly, “I do not leave London.”

“I don’t think you quite appreciate, M. Poirot, what a very serious matter this is.” Mr. Jesmond glanced at his companion and then back at Poirot.

Poirot’s second visitor had up to now said nothing but a polite and formal “How do you do.” He sat now, gazing down at his well-polished shoes, with an air of the utmost dejection on his coffee-coloured face. He was a young man, not more than twenty-three, and he was clearly in a state of complete misery.

“Yes, yes,” said Hercule Poirot. “Of course the matter is serious. I do appreciate that. His Highness has my heartfelt sympathy.”

“The position is one of the utmost delicacy,” said Mr. Jesmond.

Poirot transferred his gaze from the young man to his older companion. If one wanted to sum up Mr. Jesmond in a word, the word would have been discretion. Everything about Mr. Jesmond was discreet. His well-cut but inconspicuous clothes, his pleasant, well-bred voice which rarely soared out of an agreeable monotone, his light-brown hair just thinning a little at the temples, his pale serious face. It seemed to Hercule Poirot that he had known not one Mr. Jesmond but a dozen Mr. Jesmonds in his time, all using sooner or later the same phrase—“a position of the utmost delicacy.”

“The police,” said Hercule Poirot, “can be very discreet, you know.”

Mr. Jesmond shook his head firmly.

“Not the police,” he said. “To recover the—er—what we want to recover will almost inevitably invoke taking proceedings in the law courts and we know so little. We suspect, but we do not know.”

“You have my sympathy,” said Hercule Poirot again.

If he imagined that his sympathy was going to mean anything to his two visitors, he was wrong. They did not want sympathy, they wanted practical help. Mr. Jesmond began once more to talk about the delights of an English Christmas.

“It’s dying out, you know,” he said, “the real old-fashioned type of Christmas. People spend it at hotels nowadays. But an English Christmas with all the family gathered round, the children and their stockings, the Christmas tree, the turkey and plum pudding, the crackers. The snowman outside the window—”

In the interests of exactitude, Hercule Poirot intervened.

“To make a snowman one has to have the snow,” he remarked severely. “And one cannot have snow to order, even for an English Christmas.”

“I was talking to a friend of mine in the meteorological office only today,” said Mr. Jesmond, “and he tells me that it is highly probable there will be snow this Christmas.”

It was the wrong thing to have said. Hercule Poirot shuddered more forcefully than ever.

“Snow in the country!” he said. “That would be still more abominable. A large, cold, stone manor house.”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Jesmond. “Things have changed very much in the last ten years or so. Oil-fired central heating.”

“They have oil-fired central heating at Kings Lacey?” asked Poirot. For the first time he seemed to waver.

Mr. Jesmond seized his opportunity. “Yes, indeed,” he said, “and a splendid hot water system. Radiators in every bedroom. I assure you, my dear M. Poirot, Kings Lacey is comfort itself in the wintertime. You might even find the house too warm.”

"That is most unlikely," said Hercule Poirot.

With practised dexterity Mr. Jesmond shifted his ground a little.

"You can appreciate the terrible dilemma we are in," he said, in a confidential manner.

Hercule Poirot nodded. The problem was, indeed, not a happy one. A young potentate-to-be, the only son of the ruler of a rich and important native State had arrived in London a few weeks ago. His country had been passing through a period of restlessness and discontent. Though loyal to the father whose way of life had remained persistently Eastern, popular opinion was somewhat dubious of the younger generation. His follies had been Western ones and as such looked upon with disapproval.

Recently, however, his betrothal had been announced. He was to marry a cousin of the same blood, a young woman who, though educated at Cambridge, was careful to display no Western influence in her own country. The wedding day was announced and the young prince had made a journey to England, bringing with him some of the famous jewels of his house to be reset in appropriate modern settings by Cartier. These had included a very famous ruby which had been removed from its cumbersome old-fashioned necklace and had been given a new look by the famous jewellers. So far so good, but after this came the snag. It was not to be supposed that a young man possessed of much wealth and convivial tastes, should not commit a few follies of the pleasanter type. As to that there would have been no censure. Young princes were supposed to amuse themselves in this fashion. For the prince to take the girlfriend of the moment for a walk down Bond Street and bestow upon her an emerald bracelet or a diamond clip as a reward for the pleasure she had afforded him would have been regarded as quite natural and suitable, corresponding in fact to the Cadillac cars which his father invariably presented to his favourite dancing girl of the moment.

But the prince had been far more indiscreet than that. Flattered by the lady's interest, he had displayed to her the famous ruby in its new setting, and had finally been so unwise as to accede to her request to be allowed to wear it—just for one evening!

The sequel was short and sad. The lady had retired from their supper table to powder her nose. Time passed. She did not return. She had left the establishment by another door and since then had disappeared into space. The important and distressing thing was that the ruby in its new setting had disappeared with her.

These were the facts that could not possibly be made public without the most dire consequences. The ruby was something more than a ruby, it was a historical possession of great significance, and the circumstances of its disappearance were such that any undue publicity about them might result in the most serious political consequences.

Mr. Jesmond was not the man to put these facts into simple language. He wrapped them up, as it were, in a great deal of verbiage. Who exactly Mr. Jesmond was, Hercule Poirot did not know. He had met other Mr. Jesmonds in the course of his career. Whether he was connected with the Home Office, the Foreign Secretary or some other discreet branch of public service was not specified. He was acting in the interests of the Commonwealth. The ruby must be recovered.

M. Poirot, so Mr. Jesmond delicately insisted, was the man to recover it.

“Perhaps—yes,” Hercule Poirot admitted, “but you can tell me so little. Suggestion—suspicion—all that is not very much to go upon.”

“Come now, Monsieur Poirot, surely it is not beyond your powers. Ah, come now.”

“I do not always succeed.”

But this was mock modesty. It was clear enough from Poirot’s tone that for him to undertake a mission was almost synonymous with succeeding in it.

“His Highness is very young,” Mr. Jesmond said. “It will be sad if his whole life is to be blighted for a mere youthful indiscretion.”

Poirot looked kindly at the downcast young man. “It is the time for follies, when one is young,” he said encouragingly, “and for the ordinary young man it does not matter so much. The good papa, he pays up: the family lawyer, he helps to disentangle the inconvenience; the young man, he learns by experience and all ends for the best. In a position such as yours, it is hard indeed. Your approaching marriage—"

"That is it. That is it exactly." For the first time words poured from the young man. "You see she is very, very serious. She takes life very seriously. She has acquired at Cambridge many very serious ideas. There is to be education in my country. There are to be schools. There are to be many things. All in the name of progress, you understand, of democracy. It will not be, she says, like it was in my father's time. Naturally she knows that I will have diversions in London, but not the scandal. No! It is the scandal that matters. You see it is very, very famous, this ruby. There is a long trail behind it, a history. Much bloodshed—many deaths!"

"Deaths," said Hercule Poirot thoughtfully. He looked at Mr. Jesmond. "One hopes," he said, "it will not come to that?"

Mr. Jesmond made a peculiar noise rather like a hen who has decided to lay an egg and then thought better of it.

"No, no indeed," he said, sounding rather prim. "There is no question, I am sure, of anything of that kind."

"You cannot be sure," said Hercule Poirot. "Whoever has the ruby now, there may be others who want to gain possession of it, and who will not stick at a trifle, my friend."

"I really don't think," said Mr. Jesmond, sounding more prim than ever, "that we need enter into speculation of that kind. Quite unprofitable."

"Me," said Hercule Poirot, suddenly becoming very foreign, "me, I explore all the avenues, like the politicians."

Mr. Jesmond looked at him doubtfully. Pulling himself together, he said, "Well, I can take it that is settled, M. Poirot? You will go to Kings Lacey?"

"And how do I explain myself there?" asked Hercule Poirot.

Mr. Jesmond smiled with confidence.

“That, I think, can be arranged very easily,” he said. “I can assure you that it will all seem quite natural. You will find the Laceys most charming. Delightful people.”

“And you do not deceive me about the oil-fired central heating?”

“No, no, indeed.” Mr. Jesmond sounded quite pained. “I assure you you will find every comfort.”

“Tout confort moderne,” murmured Poirot to himself, reminiscently. “Eh bien,” he said, “I accept.”

The temperature in the long drawing room at Kings Lacey was a comfortable sixty-eight as Hercule Poirot sat talking to Mrs. Lacey by one of the big mullioned windows. Mrs. Lacey was engaged in needlework. She was not doing petit point or embroidered flowers upon silk. Instead, she appeared to be engaged in the prosaic task of hemming dishcloths. As she sewed she talked in a soft reflective voice that Poirot found very charming.

“I hope you will enjoy our Christmas party here, M. Poirot. It’s only the family, you know. My granddaughter and a grandson and a friend of his and Bridget who’s my great niece, and Diana who’s a cousin and David Welwyn who is a very old friend. Just a family party. But Edwina Morecombe said that that’s what you really wanted to see. An old-fashioned Christmas. Nothing could be more old-fashioned than we are! My husband, you know, absolutely lives in the past. He likes everything to be just as it was when he was a boy of twelve years old, and used to come here for his holidays.” She smiled to herself. “All the same old things, the Christmas tree and the stockings hung up and the oyster soup and the turkey—two turkeys, one boiled and one roast—and the plum pudding with the ring and the bachelor’s button and all the rest of it in it. We can’t have sixpences nowadays because they’re not pure silver any more. But all the old desserts, the Elvas plums and Carlsbad plums and almonds and raisins, and crystallized fruit and ginger. Dear me, I sound like a catalogue from Fortnum and Mason!”

“You arouse my gastronomic juices, Madame.”

“I expect we’ll all have frightful indigestion by tomorrow evening,” said Mrs. Lacey. “One isn’t used to eating so much nowadays, is one?”

She was interrupted by some loud shouts and whoops of laughter outside the window. She glanced out.

“I don’t know what they’re doing out there. Playing some game or other, I suppose. I’ve always been so afraid, you know, that these young people would be bored by our Christmas here. But not at all, it’s just the opposite. Now my own son and daughter and their friends, they used to be rather sophisticated about Christmas. Say it was all nonsense and too much fuss and it would be far better to go out to a hotel somewhere and dance. But the younger generation seem to find all this terribly attractive. Besides,” added Mrs. Lacey practically, “schoolboys and schoolgirls are always hungry, aren’t they? I think they must starve them at these schools. After all, one does know children of that age each eat about as much as three strong men.”

Poirot laughed and said, “It is most kind of you and your husband, Madame, to include me in this way in your family party.”

“Oh, we’re both delighted, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Lacey. “And if you find Horace a little gruff,” she continued, “pay no attention. It’s just his manner, you know.”

What her husband, Colonel Lacey, had actually said was: “Can’t think why you want one of these damned foreigners here cluttering up Christmas? Why can’t we have him some other time? Can’t stick foreigners! All right, all right, so Edwina Morecombe wished him on us. What’s it got to do with her, I should like to know? Why doesn’t she have him for Christmas?”

“Because you know very well,” Mrs. Lacey had said, “that Edwina always goes to Claridge’s.”

Her husband had looked at her piercingly and said, “Not up to something, are you, Em?”

“Up to something?” said Em, opening very blue eyes. “Of course not. Why should I be?”

Old Colonel Lacey laughed, a deep, rumbling laugh. “I wouldn’t put it past you, Em,” he said. “When you look your most innocent is when you are up to something.”

Revolving these things in her mind, Mrs. Lacey went on: “Edwina said she thought perhaps you might help us . . . I’m sure I don’t know quite how, but she said that friends of yours had once found you very helpful in—in a case something like ours. I—well, perhaps you don’t know what I’m talking about?”

Poirot looked at her encouragingly. Mrs. Lacey was close on seventy, as upright as a ramrod, with snow-white hair, pink cheeks, blue eyes, a ridiculous nose and a determined chin.

“If there is anything I can do I shall only be too happy to do it,” said Poirot. “It is, I understand, a rather unfortunate matter of a young girl’s infatuation.”

Mrs. Lacey nodded. “Yes. It seems extraordinary that I should—well, want to talk to you about it. After all, you are a perfect stranger. . . .”

“And a foreigner,” said Poirot, in an understanding manner.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Lacey, “but perhaps that makes it easier, in a way. Anyhow, Edwina seemed to think that you might perhaps know something—how shall I put it—something useful about this young Desmond Lee-Wortley.”

Poirot paused a moment to admire the ingenuity of Mr. Jesmond and the ease with which he had made use of Lady Morecombe to further his own purposes.

“He has not, I understand, a very good reputation, this young man?” he began delicately.

“No, indeed, he hasn’t! A very bad reputation! But that’s no help so far as Sarah is concerned. It’s never any good, is it, telling young girls that men have a bad reputation? It—it just spurs them on!”

“You are so very right,” said Poirot.

“In my young day,” went on Mrs. Lacey. (“Oh dear, that’s a very long time ago!) We used to be warned, you know, against certain young men, and of course it did heighten one’s interest in them, and if one could possibly manage to dance with them, or to be alone with them in a dark conservatory—” she laughed. “That’s why I wouldn’t let Horace do any of the things he wanted to do.”

“Tell me,” said Poirot, “exactly what is it that troubles you?”

“Our son was killed in the war,” said Mrs. Lacey. “My daughter-in-law died when Sarah was born so that she has always been with us, and we’ve brought her up. Perhaps we’ve brought her up unwisely—I don’t know. But we thought we ought always to leave her as free as possible.”

“That is desirable, I think,” said Poirot. “One cannot go against the spirit of the times.”

“No,” said Mrs. Lacey, “that’s just what I felt about it. And, of course, girls nowadays do these sort of things.”

Poirot looked at her inquiringly.

“I think the way one expresses it,” said Mrs. Lacey. “is that Sarah has got in with what they call the coffee-bar set. She won’t go to dances or come out properly or be a deb or anything of that kind. Instead she has two rather unpleasant rooms in Chelsea down by the river and wears these funny clothes that they like to wear, and black stockings or bright green ones. Very thick stockings. (So prickly, I always think!) And she goes about without washing or combing her hair.”

“Ça, c’est tout à fait naturelle,” said Poirot. “It is the fashion of the moment. They grow out of it.”

“Yes, I know,” said Mrs. Lacey. “I wouldn’t worry about that sort of thing. But you see she’s taken up with this Desmond Lee-Wortley and he really has a very unsavoury reputation. He lives more or less on well-to-do girls. They seem to go quite mad about him. He very nearly married the Hope girl, but her people got her made a ward in court or something. And of course that’s what Horace wants to do. He says he must do it for her protection. But I don’t think it’s really a good idea, M. Poirot. I mean, they’ll just run away together and go to Scotland or Ireland or the Argentine or somewhere and either get married or else live together without getting married. And although it may be contempt of court and all that—well, it isn’t really an answer, is it, in the end? Especially if a baby’s coming. One has to give in then, and let them get married. And then, nearly always, it seems to me, after a year or two there’s a divorce. And then the girl comes home and usually after a year or two she marries someone so nice he’s almost dull and settles down. But it’s particularly sad, it seems to me, if there is a child, because it’s not the same thing, being brought up by a stepfather, however nice. No, I think it’s much better if we did as we did in my young days. I mean the first young man one fell in love with was always someone undesirable. I remember I had a horrible passion for a young man called—now what was his name now?—how strange it is, I can’t remember his Christian name at all! Tibbitt, that was his surname. Young Tibbitt. Of course, my father more or less forbade him the house, but he used to get asked to the same dances, and we used to dance together. And sometimes we’d escape and sit out together and occasionally friends would arrange picnics to which we both went. Of course, it was all very exciting and forbidden and one enjoyed it enormously. But one didn’t go to the—well, to the lengths that girls go nowadays. And so, after a while, the Mr. Tibbitts faded out. And do you know, when I saw him four years later I was surprised what I could ever have seen in him! He seemed to be such a dull young man. Flashy, you know. No interesting conversation.”

“One always thinks the days of one’s own youth are best,” said Poirot, somewhat sententiously.

“I know,” said Mrs. Lacey. “It’s tiresome, isn’t it? I mustn’t be tiresome. But all the same I don’t want Sarah, who’s a dear girl really, to marry Desmond Lee-Wortley. She and David Welwyn, who is staying here, were always such friends and so fond of each other, and we did hope, Horace and I, that they would grow up and marry. But of course she just finds him dull now, and she's absolutely infatuated with Desmond."

"I do not quite understand, Madame," said Poirot. "You have him here now, staying in the house, this Desmond Lee-Wortley?"

"That's my doing," said Mrs. Lacey. "Horace was all for forbidding her to see him and all that. Of course, in Horace's day, the father or guardian would have called round at the young man's lodgings with a horse whip! Horace was all for forbidding the fellow the house, and forbidding the girl to see him. I told him that was quite the wrong attitude to take. 'No,' I said. 'Ask him down here. We'll have him down for Christmas with the family party.' Of course, my husband said I was mad! But I said, 'At any rate, dear, let's try it. Let her see him in our atmosphere and our house and we'll be very nice to him and very polite, and perhaps then he'll seem less interesting to her'!"

"I think, as they say, you have something there, Madame," said Poirot. "I think your point of view is very wise. Wiser than your husband's."

"Well, I hope it is," said Mrs. Lacey doubtfully. "It doesn't seem to be working much yet. But of course he's only been here a couple of days." A sudden dimple showed in her wrinkled cheek. "I'll confess something to you, M. Poirot. I myself can't help liking him. I don't mean I really like him, with my mind, but I can feel the charm all right. Oh yes, I can see what Sarah sees in him. But I'm an old enough woman and have enough experience to know that he's absolutely no good. Even if I do enjoy his company. Though I do think," added Mrs. Lacey, rather wistfully, "he has some good points. He asked if he might bring his sister here, you know. She's had an operation and was in hospital. He said it was so sad for her being in a nursing home over Christmas and he wondered if it would be too much trouble if he could bring her with him. He said he'd take all her meals up to her and all that. Well now, I do think that was rather nice of him, don't you, M. Poirot?"

"It shows a consideration," said Poirot, thoughtfully, "which seems almost out of character."

“Oh, I don’t know. You can have family affections at the same time as wishing to prey on a rich young girl. Sarah will be very rich, you know, not only with what we leave her—and of course that won’t be very much because most of the money goes with the place to Colin, my grandson. But her mother was a very rich woman and Sarah will inherit all her money when she’s twenty-one. She’s only twenty now. No, I do think it was nice of Desmond to mind about his sister. And he didn’t pretend she was anything very wonderful or that. She’s a shorthand typist, I gather—does secretarial work in London. And he’s been as good as his word and does carry up trays to her. Not all the time, of course, but quite often. So I think he has some nice points. But all the same,” said Mrs. Lacey with great decision, “I don’t want Sarah to marry him.”

“From all I have heard and been told,” said Poirot, “that would indeed be a disaster.”

“Do you think it would be possible for you to help us in any way?” asked Mrs. Lacey.

“I think it is possible, yes,” said Hercule Poirot, “but I do not wish to promise too much. For the Mr. Desmond Lee-Wortleys of this world are clever, Madame. But do not despair. One can, perhaps, do a little something. I shall at any rate, put forth my best endeavours, if only in gratitude for your kindness in asking me here for this Christmas festivity.” He looked round him. “And it cannot be so easy these days to have Christmas festivities.”

“No, indeed,” Mrs. Lacey sighed. She leaned forward. “Do you know, M. Poirot, what I really dream of—what I would love to have?”

“But tell me, Madame.”

“I simply long to have a small, modern bungalow. No, perhaps not a bungalow exactly, but a small, modern, easy to run house built somewhere in the park here, and live in it with an absolute up-to-date kitchen and no long passages. Everything easy and simple.”

“It is a very practical idea, Madame.”

“It’s not practical for me,” said Mrs. Lacey. “My husband adores this place. He loves living here. He doesn’t mind being slightly uncomfortable, he doesn’t mind the inconveniences and he would hate, simply hate, to live in a small modern house in the park!”

“So you sacrifice yourself to his wishes?”

Mrs. Lacey drew herself up. “I do not consider it a sacrifice, M. Poirot,” she said. “I married my husband with the wish to make him happy. He has been a good husband to me and made me very happy all these years, and I wish to give happiness to him.”

“So you will continue to live here,” said Poirot.

“It’s not really too uncomfortable,” said Mrs. Lacey.

“No, no,” said Poirot, hastily. “On the contrary, it is most comfortable. Your central heating and your bathwater are perfection.”

“We spent a lot of money in making the house comfortable to live in,” said Mrs. Lacey. “We were able to sell some land. Ripe for development, I think they call it. Fortunately right out of sight of the house on the other side of the park. Really rather an ugly bit of ground with no nice view, but we got a very good price for it. So that we have been able to have as many improvements as possible.”

“But the service, Madame?”

“Oh, well, that presents less difficulty than you might think. Of course, one cannot expect to be looked after and waited upon as one used to be. Different people come in from the village. Two women in the morning, another two to cook lunch and wash it up, and different ones again in the evening. There are plenty of people who want to come and work for a few hours a day. Of course for Christmas we are very lucky. My dear Mrs. Ross always comes in every Christmas. She is a wonderful cook, really first-class. She retired about ten years ago, but she comes in to help us in any emergency. Then there is dear Peverell.”

“Your butler?”

“Yes. He is pensioned off and lives in the little house near the lodge, but he is so devoted, and he insists on coming to wait on us at Christmas. Really, I’m terrified, M. Poirot, because he’s so old and so shaky that I feel certain that if he carries anything heavy he will drop it. It’s really an agony to watch him. And his heart is not good and I’m afraid of his doing too much. But it would hurt his feelings dreadfully if I did not let him come. He hems and hahs and makes disapproving noises when he sees the state our silver is in and within three days of being here, it is all wonderful again. Yes. He is a dear faithful friend.” She smiled at Poirot. “So you see, we are all set for a happy Christmas. A white Christmas, too,” she added as she looked out of the window. “See? It is beginning to snow. Ah, the children are coming in. You must meet them, M. Poirot.”

Poirot was introduced with due ceremony. First, to Colin and Michael, the schoolboy grandson and his friend, nice polite lads of fifteen, one dark, one fair. Then to their cousin, Bridget, a black-haired girl of about the same age with enormous vitality.

“And this is my granddaughter, Sarah,” said Mrs. Lacey.

Poirot looked with some interest at Sarah, an attractive girl with a mop of red hair, her manner seemed to him nervy and a trifle defiant, but she showed real affection for her grandmother.

“And this is Mr. Lee-Wortley.”

Mr. Lee-Wortley wore a fisherman’s jersey and tight black jeans; his hair was rather long and it seemed doubtful whether he had shaved that morning. In contrast to him was a young man introduced as David Welwyn, who was solid and quiet, with a pleasant smile, and rather obviously addicted to soap and water. There was one other member of the party, a handsome, rather intense-looking girl who was introduced as Diana Middleton.

Tea was brought in. A hearty meal of scones, crumpets, sandwiches and three kinds of cake. The younger members of the party appreciated the tea.

Colonel Lacey came in last, remarking in a noncommittal voice:

“Hey, tea? Oh yes, tea.”

He received his cup of tea from his wife’s hand, helped himself to two scones, cast a look of aversion at Desmond Lee-Wortley and sat down as far away from him as he could. He was a big man with bushy eyebrows and a red, weather-beaten face. He might have been taken for a farmer rather than the lord of the manor.

“Started to snow,” he said. “It’s going to be a white Christmas all right.”

After tea the party dispersed.

“I expect they’ll go and play with their tape recorders now,” said Mrs. Lacey to Poirot. She looked indulgently after her grandson as he left the room. Her tone was that of one who says “The children are going to play with their toy soldiers.”

“They’re frightfully technical, of course,” she said, “and very grand about it all.”

The boys and Bridget, however, decided to go along to the lake and see if the ice on it was likely to make skating possible.

“I thought we could have skated on it this morning,” said Colin. “But old Hodgkins said no. He’s always so terribly careful.”

“Come for a walk, David,” said Diana Middleton, softly.

David hesitated for half a moment, his eyes on Sarah’s red head. She was standing by Desmond Lee-Wortley, her hand on his arm, looking up into his face.

“All right,” said David Welwyn, “yes, let’s.”

Diana slipped a quick hand through his arm and they turned towards the door into the garden. Sarah said:

“Shall we go, too, Desmond? It’s fearfully stuffy in the house.”

“Who wants to walk?” said Desmond. “I’ll get my car out. We’ll go along to the Speckled Boar and have a drink.”

Sarah hesitated for a moment before saying:

“Let’s go to Market Ledbury to the White Hart. It’s much more fun.”

Though for all the world she would not have put it into words, Sarah had an instinctive revulsion from going down to the local pub with Desmond. It was, somehow, not in the tradition of Kings Lacey. The women of Kings Lacey had never frequented the bar of the Speckled Boar. She had an obscure feeling that to go there would be to let old Colonel Lacey and his wife down. And why not? Desmond Lee-Wortley would have said. For a moment of exasperation Sarah felt that he ought to know why not! One didn’t upset such old darlings as Grandfather and dear old Em unless it was necessary. They’d been very sweet, really, letting her lead her own life, not understanding in the least why she wanted to live in Chelsea in the way she did, but accepting it. That was due to Em of course. Grandfather would have kicked up no end of a row.

Sarah had no illusions about her grandfather’s attitude. It was not his doing that Desmond had been asked to stay at Kings Lacey. That was Em, and Em was a darling and always had been.

When Desmond had gone to fetch his car, Sarah popped her head into the drawing room again.

“We’re going over to Market Ledbury,” she said. “We thought we’d have a drink there at the White Hart.”

There was a slight amount of defiance in her voice, but Mrs. Lacey did not seem to notice it.

“Well, dear,” she said. “I’m sure that will be very nice. David and Diana have gone for a walk, I see. I’m so glad. I really think it was a brainwave on my part to ask Diana here. So sad being left a widow so young—only twenty-two—I do hope she marries again soon.”

Sarah looked at her sharply. “What are you up to, Em?”

“It’s my little plan,” said Mrs. Lacey gleefully. “I think she’s just right for David. Of course I know he was terribly in love with you, Sarah dear, but you’d no use for him and I realize that he isn’t your type. But I don’t want him to go on being unhappy, and I think Diana will really suit him.”

“What a matchmaker you are, Em,” said Sarah.

“I know,” said Mrs. Lacey. “Old women always are. Diana’s quite keen on him already, I think. Don’t you think she’d be just right for him?”

“I shouldn’t say so,” said Sarah. “I think Diana’s far too—well, too intense, too serious. I should think David would find it terribly boring being married to her.”

“Well, we’ll see,” said Mrs. Lacey. “Anyway, you don’t want him, do you, dear?”

“No, indeed,” said Sarah, very quickly. She added, in a sudden rush, “You do like Desmond, don’t you, Em?”

“I’m sure he’s very nice indeed,” said Mrs. Lacey.

“Grandfather doesn’t like him,” said Sarah.

“Well, you could hardly expect him to, could you?” said Mrs. Lacey reasonably, “but I dare say he’ll come round when he gets used to the idea. You mustn’t rush him, Sarah dear. Old people are very slow to change their minds and your grandfather is rather obstinate.”

“I don’t care what Grandfather thinks or says,” said Sarah. “I shall get married to Desmond whenever I like!”

“I know, dear, I know. But do try and be realistic about it. Your grandfather could cause a lot of trouble, you know. You’re not of age yet. In another year you can do as you please. I expect Horace will have come round long before that."

"You're on my side aren't you, darling?" said Sarah. She flung her arms round her grandmother's neck and gave her an affectionate kiss.

"I want you to be happy," said Mrs. Lacey. "Ah! there's your young man bringing his car round. You know, I like these very tight trousers these young men wear nowadays. They look so smart—only, of course, it does accentuate knock knees."

Yes, Sarah thought, Desmond had got knock knees, she had never noticed it before. . . .

"Go on, dear, enjoy yourself," said Mrs. Lacey.

She watched her go out to the car, then, remembering her foreign guest, she went along to the library. Looking in, however, she saw that Hercule Poirot was taking a pleasant little nap, and smiling to herself, she went across the hall and out into the kitchen to have a conference with Mrs. Ross.

"Come on, beautiful," said Desmond. "Your family cutting up rough because you're coming out to a pub? Years behind the times here, aren't they?"

"Of course they're not making a fuss," said Sarah, sharply as she got into the car.

"What's the idea of having that foreign fellow down? He's a detective, isn't he? What needs detecting here?"

"Oh, he's not here professionally," said Sarah. "Edwina Morecombe, my grandmother, asked us to have him. I think he's retired from professional work long ago."

"Sounds like a broken-down old cab horse," said Desmond.

"He wanted to see an old-fashioned English Christmas, I believe," said Sarah vaguely.

Desmond laughed scornfully. “Such a lot of tripe, that sort of thing,” he said. “How you can stand it I don’t know.”

Sarah’s red hair was tossed back and her aggressive chin shot up.

“I enjoy it!” she said defiantly.

“You can’t, baby. Let’s cut the whole thing tomorrow. Go over to Scarborough or somewhere.”

“I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, it would hurt their feelings.”

“Oh, bilge! You know you don’t enjoy this childish sentimental bosh.”

“Well, not really perhaps but—” Sarah broke off. She realized with a feeling of guilt that she was looking forward a good deal to the Christmas celebration. She enjoyed the whole thing, but she was ashamed to admit that to Desmond. It was not the thing to enjoy Christmas and family life. Just for a moment she wished that Desmond had not come down here at Christmastime. In fact, she almost wished that Desmond had not come down here at all. It was much more fun seeing Desmond in London than here at home.

In the meantime the boys and Bridget were walking back from the lake, still discussing earnestly the problems of skating. Flecks of snow had been falling, and looking up at the sky it could be prophesied that before long there was going to be a heavy snowfall.

“It’s going to snow all night,” said Colin. “Bet you by Christmas morning we have a couple of feet of snow.”

The prospect was a pleasurable one.

“Let’s make a snowman,” said Michael.

“Good lord,” said Colin, “I haven’t made a snowman since—well, since I was about four years old.”

“I don’t believe it’s a bit easy to do,” said Bridget. “I mean, you have to know how.”

“We might make an effigy of M. Poirot,” said Colin. “Give it a big black moustache. There is one in the dressing-up box.”

“I don’t see, you know,” said Michael thoughtfully, “how M. Poirot could ever have been a detective. I don’t see how he’d ever be able to disguise himself.”

“I know,” said Bridget, “and one can’t imagine him running about with a microscope and looking for clues or measuring footprints.”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Colin. “Let’s put on a show for him!”

“What do you mean, a show?” asked Bridget.

“Well, arrange a murder for him.”

“What a gorgeous idea,” said Bridget. “Do you mean a body in the snow—that sort of thing?”

“Yes. It would make him feel at home, wouldn’t it?”

Bridget giggled.

“I don’t know that I’d go as far as that.”

“If it snows,” said Colin, “we’ll have the perfect setting. A body and footprints—we’ll have to think that out rather carefully and pinch one of Grandfather’s daggers and make some blood.”

They came to a halt and oblivious to the rapidly falling snow, entered into an excited discussion.

“There’s a paintbox in the old schoolroom. We could mix up some blood—crimson-lake, I should think.”

“Crimson-lake’s a bit too pink, I think,” said Bridget. “It ought to be a bit browner.”

“Who’s going to be the body?” asked Michael.

“I’ll be the body,” said Bridget quickly.

“Oh, look here,” said Colin, “I thought of it.”

“Oh, no, no,” said Bridget, “it must be me. It’s got to be a girl. It’s more exciting. Beautiful girl lying lifeless in the snow.”

“Beautiful girl! Ah-ha,” said Michael in derision.

“I’ve got black hair, too,” said Bridget.

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Well, it’ll show up so well on the snow and I shall wear my red pyjamas.”

“If you wear red pyjamas, they won’t show the bloodstains,” said Michael in a practical manner.

“But they’d look so effective against the snow,” said Bridget, “and they’ve got white facings, you know, so the blood could be on that. Oh, won’t it be gorgeous? Do you think he will really be taken in?”

“He will if we do it well enough,” said Michael. “We’ll have just your footprints in the snow and one other person’s going to the body and coming away from it—a man’s, of course. He won’t want to disturb them, so he won’t know that you’re not really dead. You don’t think,” Michael stopped, struck by a sudden idea. The others looked at him. “You don’t think he’ll be annoyed about it?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so,” said Bridget, with facile optimism. “I’m sure he’ll understand that we’ve just done it to entertain him. A sort of

Christmas treat.”

“I don’t think we ought to do it on Christmas Day,” said Colin reflectively. “I don’t think Grandfather would like that very much.”

“Boxing Day then,” said Bridget.

“Boxing Day would be just right,” said Michael.

“And it’ll give us more time, too,” pursued Bridget. “After all, there are a lot of things to arrange. Let’s go and have a look at all the props.”

They hurried into the house.

The evening was a busy one. Holly and mistletoe had been brought in in large quantities and a Christmas tree had been set up at one end of the dining room. Everyone helped to decorate it, to put up the branches of holly behind pictures and to hang mistletoe in a convenient position in the hall.

“I had no idea anything so archaic still went on,” murmured Desmond to Sarah with a sneer.

“We’ve always done it,” said Sarah, defensively.

“What a reason!”

“Oh, don’t be tiresome, Desmond. I think it’s fun.”

“Sarah my sweet, you can’t!”

“Well, not—not really perhaps but—I do in a way.”

“Who’s going to brave the snow and go to midnight mass?” asked Mrs. Lacey at twenty minutes to twelve.

“Not me,” said Desmond. “Come on, Sarah.”

With a hand on her arm he guided her into the library and went over to the record case.

“There are limits, darling,” said Desmond. “Midnight mass!”

“Yes,” said Sarah. “Oh yes.”

With a good deal of laughter, donning of coats and stamping of feet, most of the others got off. The two boys, Bridget, David and Diana set out for the ten minutes’ walk to the church through the falling snow. Their laughter died away in the distance.

“Midnight mass!” said Colonel Lacey, snorting. “Never went to midnight mass in my young days. Mass, indeed! Popish, that is! Oh, I beg your pardon, M. Poirot.”

Poirot waved a hand. “It is quite all right. Do not mind me.”

“Matins is good enough for anybody, I should say,” said the colonel. “Proper Sunday morning service. ‘Hark the herald angels sing,’ and all the good old Christmas hymns. And then back to Christmas dinner. That’s right, isn’t it, Em?”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Lacey. “That’s what we do. But the young ones enjoy the midnight service. And it’s nice, really, that they want to go.”

“Sarah and that fellow don’t want to go.”

“Well, there dear, I think you’re wrong,” said Mrs. Lacey. “Sarah, you know, did want to go, but she didn’t like to say so.”

“Beats me why she cares what that fellow’s opinion is.”

“She’s very young, really,” said Mrs. Lacey placidly. “Are you going to bed, M. Poirot? Good night. I hope you’ll sleep well.”

“And you, Madame? Are you not going to bed yet?”

“Not just yet,” said Mrs. Lacey. “I’ve got the stockings to fill, you see. Oh, I know they’re all practically grown up, but they do like their stockings. One puts jokes in them! Silly little things. But it all makes for a lot of fun.”

“You work very hard to make this a happy house at Christmas time,” said Poirot. “I honour you.”

He raised her hand to his lips in a courtly fashion.

“Hm,” grunted Colonel Lacey, as Poirot departed. “Flowery sort of fellow. Still—he appreciates you.”

Mrs. Lacey dimpled up at him. “Have you noticed, Horace, that I’m standing under the mistletoe?” she asked with the demureness of a girl of nineteen.

Hercule Poirot entered his bedroom. It was a large room well provided with radiators. As he went over towards the big four-poster bed he noticed an envelope lying on his pillow. He opened it and drew out a piece of paper. On it was a shakily printed message in capital letters.

DON’T EAT NONE OF THE PLUM PUDDING. ONE AS WISHES YOU WELL.

Hercule Poirot stared at it. His eyebrows rose. “Cryptic,” he murmured, “and most unexpected.”

Christmas dinner took place at 2 p.m. and was a feast indeed. Enormous logs crackled merrily in the wide fireplace and above their crackling rose the babel of many tongues talking together. Oyster soup had been consumed, two enormous turkeys had come and gone, mere carcasses of their former selves. Now, the supreme moment, the Christmas pudding was brought in, in state! Old Peverell, his hands and his knees shaking with the weakness of eighty years, permitted no one but himself to bear it in. Mrs. Lacey sat, her hands pressed together in nervous apprehension. One Christmas, she felt sure, Peverell would fall down dead. Having either to take the risk of letting him fall down dead or of hurting his feelings to such an extent that he would probably prefer to be dead than alive, she had so far chosen the former alternative. On a silver dish the Christmas pudding reposed in its glory. A large football of a pudding, a piece of holly stuck in it like a triumphant flag and glorious flames of blue and red rising round it. There was a cheer and cries of “Ooh-ah.”

One thing Mrs. Lacey had done: prevailed upon Peverell to place the pudding in front of her so that she could help it rather than hand it in turn round the table. She breathed a sigh of relief as it was deposited safely in front of her. Rapidly the plates were passed round, flames still licking the portions.

“Wish, M. Poirot,” cried Bridget. “Wish before the flame goes. Quick, Gran darling, quick.”

Mrs. Lacey leant back with a sigh of satisfaction. Operation Pudding had been a success. In front of everyone was a helping with flames still licking it. There was a momentary silence all round the table as everyone wished hard.

There was nobody to notice the rather curious expression on the face of M. Poirot as he surveyed the portion of pudding on his plate. “Don’t eat none of the plum pudding.” What on earth did that sinister warning mean? There could be nothing different about his portion of plum pudding from that of everyone else! Sighing as he admitted himself baffled—and Hercule Poirot never liked to admit himself baffled—he picked up his spoon and fork.

“Hard sauce, M. Poirot?”

Poirot helped himself appreciatively to hard sauce.

“Swiped my best brandy again, eh Em?” said the colonel good-humouredly from the other end of the table. Mrs. Lacey twinkled at him.

“Mrs. Ross insists on having the best brandy, dear,” she said. “She says it makes all the difference.”

“Well, well,” said Colonel Lacey, “Christmas comes but once a year and Mrs. Ross is a great woman. A great woman and a great cook.”

“She is indeed,” said Colin. “Smashing plum pudding, this. Mmmm.” He filled an appreciative mouth.

Gently, almost gingerly, Hercule Poirot attacked his portion of pudding. He ate a mouthful. It was delicious! He ate another. Something tinkled faintly on his plate. He investigated with a fork. Bridget, on his left, came to his aid.

“You’ve got something, M. Poirot,” she said. “I wonder what it is.”

Poirot detached a little silver object from the surrounding raisins that clung to it.

“Oooh,” said Bridget, “it’s the bachelor’s button! M. Poirot’s got the bachelor’s button!”

Hercule Poirot dipped the small silver button into the finger-glass of water that stood by his plate, and washed it clear of pudding crumbs.

“It is very pretty,” he observed.

“That means you’re going to be a bachelor, M. Poirot,” explained Colin helpfully.

“That is to be expected,” said Poirot gravely. “I have been a bachelor for many long years and it is unlikely that I shall change that status now.”

“Oh, never say die,” said Michael. “I saw in the paper that someone of ninety-five married a girl of twenty-two the other day.”

“You encourage me,” said Hercule Poirot.

Colonel Lacey uttered a sudden exclamation. His face became purple and his hand went to his mouth.

“Confound it, Emmeline,” he roared, “why on earth do you let the cook put glass in the pudding?”

“Glass!” cried Mrs. Lacey, astonished.

Colonel Lacey withdrew the offending substance from his mouth. “Might have broken a tooth,” he grumbled. “Or swallowed the damn thing and had appendicitis.”

He dropped the piece of glass into the finger bowl, rinsed it and held it up.

“God bless my soul,” he ejaculated. “It’s a red stone out of one of the cracker brooches.” He held it aloft.

“You permit?”

Very deftly M. Poirot stretched across his neighbour, took it from Colonel Lacey’s fingers and examined it attentively. As the squire had said, it was an enormous red stone the colour of a ruby. The light gleamed from its facets as he turned it about. Somewhere around the table a chair was pushed sharply back and then drawn in again.

“Phew!” cried Michael. “How wizard it would be if it was real.”

“Perhaps it is real,” said Bridget hopefully.

“Oh, don’t be an ass, Bridget. Why a ruby of that size would be worth thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds. Wouldn’t it, M. Poirot?”

“It would indeed,” said Poirot.

“But what I can’t understand,” said Mrs. Lacey, “is how it got into the pudding.”

“Oooh,” said Colin, diverted by his last mouthful, “I’ve got the pig. It isn’t fair.”

Bridget chanted immediately, “Colin’s got the pig! Colin’s got the pig! Colin is the greedy guzzling pig!”

“I’ve got the ring,” said Diana in a clear, high voice.

“Good for you, Diana. You’ll be married first, of us all.”

“I’ve got the thimble,” wailed Bridget.

“Bridget’s going to be an old maid,” chanted the two boys. “Yah, Bridget’s going to be an old maid.”

“Who’s got the money?” demanded David. “There’s a real ten shilling piece, gold, in this pudding. I know. Mrs. Ross told me so.”

“I think I’m the lucky one,” said Desmond Lee-Wortley.

Colonel Lacey’s two next door neighbours heard him mutter. “Yes, you would be.”

“I’ve got a ring, too,” said David. He looked across at Diana. “Quite a coincidence, isn’t it?”

The laughter went on. Nobody noticed that M. Poirot carelessly, as though thinking of something else, had dropped the red stone into his pocket.

Mince pies and Christmas dessert followed the pudding. The older members of the party then retired for a welcome siesta before the teatime ceremony of the lighting of the Christmas tree. Hercule Poirot, however, did not take a siesta. Instead, he made his way to the enormous old-fashioned kitchen.

“It is permitted,” he asked, looking round and beaming, “that I congratulate the cook on this marvellous meal that I have just eaten?”

There was a moment’s pause and then Mrs. Ross came forward in a stately manner to meet him. She was a large woman, nobly built with all the dignity of a stage duchess. Two lean grey-haired women were beyond in the scullery washing up and a tow-haired girl was moving to and fro between the scullery and the kitchen. But these were obviously mere myrmidons. Mrs. Ross was the queen of the kitchen quarters.

“I am glad to hear you enjoyed it, sir,” she said graciously.

“Enjoyed it!” cried Hercule Poirot. With an extravagant foreign gesture he raised his hand to his lips, kissed it, and wafted the kiss to the ceiling. “But you are a genius, Mrs. Ross! A genius! Never have I tasted such a wonderful meal. The oyster soup—" he made an expressive noise with his lips "—and the stuffing. The chestnut stuffing in the turkey, that was quite unique in my experience."

"Well, it's funny that you should say that, sir," said Mrs. Ross graciously. "It's a very special recipe, that stuffing. It was given me by an Austrian chef that I worked with many years ago. But all the rest," she added, "is just good, plain English cooking."

"And is there anything better?" demanded Hercule Poirot.

"Well, it's nice of you to say so, sir. Of course, you being a foreign gentleman might have preferred the continental style. Not but what I can't manage continental dishes too."

"I am sure, Mrs. Ross, you could manage anything! But you must know that English cooking—good English cooking, not the cooking one gets in the second-class hotels or the restaurants—is much appreciated by gourmets on the continent, and I believe I am correct in saying that a special expedition was made to London in the early eighteen hundreds, and a report sent back to France of the wonders of the English puddings. 'We have nothing like that in France,' they wrote. 'It is worth making a journey to London just to taste the varieties and excellencies of the English puddings.' And above all puddings," continued Poirot, well launched now on a kind of rhapsody, "is the Christmas plum pudding, such as we have eaten today. That was a homemade pudding, was it not? Not a bought one?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. Of my own making and my own recipe such as I've made for many years. When I came here Mrs. Lacey said that she'd ordered a pudding from a London store to save me the trouble. But no, Madam, I said, that may be kind of you but no bought pudding from a store can equal a homemade Christmas one. Mind you," said Mrs. Ross, warming to her subject like the artist she was, "it was made too soon before the day. A good Christmas pudding should be made some weeks before and allowed to wait. The longer they're kept, within reason, the better they are. I mind now that when I was a child and we went to church every Sunday, we'd start listening for the collect that begins 'Stir up O Lord we beseech thee' because that collect was the signal, as it were, that the puddings should be made that week. And so they always were. We had the collect on the Sunday, and that week sure enough my mother would make the Christmas puddings. And so it should have been here this year. As it was, that pudding was only made three days ago, the day before you arrived, sir. However, I kept to the old custom. Everyone in the house had to come out into the kitchen and have a stir and make a wish. That's an old custom, sir, and I've always held to it."

"Most interesting," said Hercule Poirot. "Most interesting. And so everyone came out into the kitchen?"

"Yes, sir. The young gentlemen, Miss Bridget and the London gentleman who's staying here, and his sister and Mr. David and Miss Diana—Mrs. Middleton, I should say—All had a stir, they did."

"How many puddings did you make? Is this the only one?"

"No, sir, I made four. Two large ones and two smaller ones. The other large one I planned to serve on New Year's Day and the smaller ones were for Colonel and Mrs. Lacey when they're alone like and not so many in the family."

"I see, I see," said Poirot.

"As a matter of fact, sir," said Mrs. Ross, "it was the wrong pudding you had for lunch today."

"The wrong pudding?" Poirot frowned. "How is that?"

"Well, sir, we have a big Christmas mould. A china mould with a pattern of holly and mistletoe on top and we always have the Christmas Day pudding boiled in that. But there was a most unfortunate accident. This morning, when Annie was getting it down from the shelf in the larder, she slipped and dropped it and it broke. Well, sir, naturally I couldn't serve that, could I? There might have been splinters in it. So we had to use the other one—the New Year's Day one, which was in a plain bowl. It makes a nice round but it's not so decorative as the Christmas mould. Really, where we'll get another mould like that I don't know. They don't make things in that size nowadays. All tiddly bits of things. Why, you can't even buy a breakfast dish that'll take a proper eight to ten eggs and bacon. Ah, things aren't what they were."

"No, indeed," said Poirot. "But today that is not so. This Christmas Day has been like the Christmas Days of old, is that not true?"

Mrs. Ross sighed. "Well, I'm glad you say so, sir, but of course I haven't the help now that I used to have. Not skilled help, that is. The girls nowadays—" she lowered her voice slightly, "—they mean very well and they're very willing but they've not been trained, sir, if you understand what I mean."

"Times change, yes," said Hercule Poirot. "I too find it sad sometimes."

"This house, sir," said Mrs. Ross, "it's too large, you know, for the mistress and the colonel. The mistress, she knows that. Living in a corner of it as they do, it's not the same thing at all. It only comes alive, as you might say, at Christmas time when all the family come."

"It is the first time, I think, that Mr. Lee-Wortley and his sister have been here?"

"Yes, sir." A note of slight reserve crept into Mrs. Ross's voice. "A very nice gentleman he is but, well—it seems a funny friend for Miss Sarah to have, according to our ideas. But there—London ways are different! It's sad that his sister's so poorly. Had an operation, she had. She seemed all right the first day she was here, but that very day, after we'd been stirring the puddings, she was took bad again and she's been in bed ever since. Got up too soon after her operation, I expect. Ah, doctors nowadays, they have you out of hospital before you can hardly stand on your feet. Why, my very own nephew's wife . . ." And Mrs. Ross went into a long and spirited tale of hospital treatment as accorded to her relations, comparing it unfavourably with the consideration that had been lavished upon them in older times.

Poirot duly commiserated with her. "It remains," he said, "to thank you for this exquisite and sumptuous meal. You permit a little acknowledgement of my appreciation?” A crisp five pound note passed from his hand into that of Mrs. Ross who said perfunctorily:

“You really shouldn’t do that, sir.”

“I insist. I insist.”

“Well, it’s very kind of you indeed, sir.” Mrs. Ross accepted the tribute as no more than her due. “And I wish you, sir, a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.”

The end of Christmas Day was like the end of most Christmas Days. The tree was lighted, a splendid Christmas cake came in for tea, was greeted with approval but was partaken of only moderately. There was cold supper.

Both Poirot and his host and hostess went to bed early.

“Good night, M. Poirot,” said Mrs. Lacey. “I hope you’ve enjoyed yourself.”

“It has been a wonderful day, Madame, wonderful.”

“You’re looking very thoughtful,” said Mrs. Lacey.

“It is the English pudding that I consider.”

“You found it a little heavy, perhaps?” asked Mrs. Lacey delicately.

“No, no, I do not speak gastronomically. I consider its significance.”

“It’s traditional, of course,” said Mrs. Lacey. “Well, good night, M. Poirot, and don’t dream too much of Christmas puddings and mince pies.”

“Yes,” murmured Poirot to himself as he undressed. “It is a problem certainly, that Christmas plum pudding. There is here something that I do not understand at all.” He shook his head in a vexed manner. “Well—we shall see.”

After making certain preparations, Poirot went to bed, but not to sleep.

It was some two hours later that his patience was rewarded. The door of his bedroom opened very gently. He smiled to himself. It was as he had thought it would be. His mind went back fleetingly to the cup of coffee so politely handed him by Desmond Lee-Wortley. A little later, when Desmond's back was turned, he had laid the cup down for a few moments on a table. He had then apparently picked it up again and Desmond had had the satisfaction, if satisfaction it was, of seeing him drink the coffee to the last drop. But a little smile lifted Poirot's moustache as he reflected that it was not he but someone else who was sleeping a good sound sleep tonight. "That pleasant young David," said Poirot to himself, "he is worried, unhappy. It will do him no harm to have a night's really sound sleep. And now, let us see what will happen?"

He lay quite still, breathing in an even manner with occasionally a suggestion, but the very faintest suggestion, of a snore.

Someone came up to the bed and bent over him. Then, satisfied, that someone turned away and went to the dressing table. By the light of a tiny torch the visitor was examining Poirot's belongings neatly arranged on top of the dressing table. Fingers explored the wallet, gently pulled open the drawers of the dressing table, then extended the search to the pockets of Poirot's clothes. Finally the visitor approached the bed and with great caution slid his hand under the pillow. Withdrawing his hand, he stood for a moment or two as though uncertain what to do next. He walked round the room looking inside ornaments, went into the adjoining bathroom from whence he presently returned. Then, with a faint exclamation of disgust, he went out of the room.

"Ah," said Poirot, under his breath. "You have a disappointment. Yes, yes, a serious disappointment. Bah! To imagine, even, that Hercule Poirot would hide something where you could find it!" Then, turning over on his other side, he went peacefully to sleep.

He was aroused next morning by an urgent soft tapping on his door.

"Qui est là? Come in, come in."

The door opened. Breathless, red-faced, Colin stood upon the threshold. Behind him stood Michael.

“Monsieur Poirot, Monsieur Poirot.”

“But yes?” Poirot sat up in bed. “It is the early tea? But no. It is you, Colin. What has occurred?”

Colin was, for a moment, speechless. He seemed to be under the grip of some strong emotion. In actual fact it was the sight of the nightcap that Hercule Poirot wore that affected for the moment his organs of speech. Presently he controlled himself and spoke.

“I think—M. Poirot, could you help us? Something rather awful has happened.”

“Something has happened? But what?”

“It’s—it’s Bridget. She’s out there in the snow. I think—she doesn’t move or speak and—oh, you’d better come and look for yourself. I’m terribly afraid—she may be dead.”

“What?” Poirot cast aside his bed covers. “Mademoiselle Bridget—dead!”

“I think—I think somebody’s killed her. There’s—there’s blood and—oh do come!”

“But certainly. But certainly. I come on the instant.”

With great practicality Poirot inserted his feet into his outdoor shoes and pulled a fur-lined overcoat over his pyjamas.

“I come,” he said. “I come on the moment. You have aroused the house?”

“No. No, so far I haven’t told anyone but you. I thought it would be better. Grandfather and Gran aren’t up yet. They’re laying breakfast downstairs, but I didn’t say anything to Peverell. She—Bridget—she’s round the other side of the house, near the terrace and the library window.”

“I see. Lead the way. I will follow.”

Turning away to hide his delighted grin, Colin led the way downstairs. They went out through the side door. It was a clear morning with the sun not yet high over the horizon. It was not snowing now, but it had snowed heavily during the night and everywhere around was an unbroken carpet of thick snow. The world looked very pure and white and beautiful.

“There!” said Colin breathlessly. “I—it’s—there!” He pointed dramatically.

The scene was indeed dramatic enough. A few yards away Bridget lay in the snow. She was wearing scarlet pyjamas and a white wool wrap thrown round her shoulders. The white wool wrap was stained with crimson. Her head was turned aside and hidden by the mass of her outspread black hair. One arm was under her body, the other lay flung out, the fingers clenched, and standing up in the centre of the crimson stain was the hilt of a large curved Kurdish knife which Colonel Lacey had shown to his guests only the evening before.

“Mon Dieu!” ejaculated M. Poirot. “It is like something on the stage!”

There was a faint choking noise from Michael. Colin thrust himself quickly into the breach.

“I know,” he said. “It—it doesn’t seem real somehow, does it. Do you see those footprints—I suppose we mustn’t disturb them?”

“Ah yes, the footprints. No, we must be careful not to disturb those footprints.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Colin. “That’s why I wouldn’t let anyone go near her until we got you. I thought you’d know what to do.”

“All the same,” said Hercule Poirot briskly, “first, we must see if she is still alive? Is not that so?”

“Well—yes—of course,” said Michael, a little doubtfully, “but you see, we thought—I mean, we didn’t like—”

“Ah, you have the prudence! You have read the detective stories. It is most important that nothing should be touched and that the body should be left as it is. But we cannot be sure as yet if it is a body, can we? After all, though prudence is admirable, common humanity comes first. We must think of the doctor, must we not, before we think of the police?”

“Oh yes. Of course,” said Colin, still a little taken aback.

“We only thought—I mean—we thought we’d better get you before we did anything,” said Michael hastily.

“Then you will both remain here,” said Poirot. “I will approach from the other side so as not to disturb these footprints. Such excellent footprints, are they not—so very clear? The footprints of a man and a girl going out together to the place where she lies. And then the man’s footsteps come back but the girl’s—do not.”

“They must be the footprints of the murderer,” said Colin, with bated breath.

“Exactly,” said Poirot. “The footprints of the murderer. A long narrow foot with rather a peculiar type of shoe. Very interesting. Easy, I think, to recognize. Yes, those footprints will be very important.”

At that moment Desmond Lee-Wortley came out of the house with Sarah and joined them.

“What on earth are you all doing here?” he demanded in a somewhat theatrical manner. “I saw you from my bedroom window. What’s up? Good lord, what’s this? It—it looks like—”

“Exactly,” said Hercule Poirot. “It looks like murder, does it not?”

Sarah gave a gasp, then shot a quick suspicious glance at the two boys.

“You mean someone’s killed the girl—what’s-her-name—Bridget?” demanded Desmond. “Who on earth would want to kill her? It’s unbelievable!”

“There are many things that are unbelievable,” said Poirot. “Especially before breakfast, is it not? That is what one of your classics says. Six impossible things before breakfast.” He added: “Please wait here, all of you.”

Carefully making a circuit, he approached Bridget and bent for a moment down over the body. Colin and Michael were now both shaking with suppressed laughter. Sarah joined them, murmuring “What have you two been up to?”

“Good old Bridget,” whispered Colin. “Isn’t she wonderful? Not a twitch!”

“I’ve never seen anything look so dead as Bridget does,” whispered Michael.

Hercule Poirot straightened up again.

“This is a terrible thing,” he said. His voice held an emotion it had not held before.

Overcome by mirth, Michael and Colin both turned away. In a choked voice Michael said:

“What—what must we do?”

“There is only one thing to do,” said Poirot. “We must send for the police. Will one of you telephone or would you prefer me to do it?”

“I think,” said Colin, “I think—what about it, Michael?”

“Yes,” said Michael, “I think the jig’s up now.” He stepped forward. For the first time he seemed a little unsure of himself. “I’m awfully sorry,” he said, “I hope you won’t mind too much. It—er—it was a sort of joke for Christmas and all that, you know. We thought we’d—well, lay on a murder for you.”

“You thought you would lay on a murder for me? Then this—then this—”

“It’s just a show we put on,” explained. Colin, “to—to make you feel at home, you know.”

“Aha,” said Hercule Poirot. “I understand. You make of me the April fool, is that it? But today is not April the first, it is December the twenty-sixth.”

“I suppose we oughtn’t to have done it really,” said Colin, “but—but—you don’t mind very much, do you, M. Poirot? Come on, Bridget,” he called, “get up. You must be half frozen to death already.”

The figure in the snow, however, did not stir.

“It is odd,” said Hercule Poirot, “she does not seem to hear you.” He looked thoughtfully at them. “It is a joke, you say? You are sure this is a joke?”

“Why, yes.” Colin spoke uncomfortably. “We—we didn’t mean any harm.”

“But why then does Mademoiselle Bridget not get up?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Colin.

“Come on, Bridget,” said Sarah impatiently. “Don’t go on lying there playing the fool.”

“We really are very sorry, M. Poirot,” said Colin apprehensively. “We do really apologize.”

“You need not apologize,” said Poirot, in a peculiar tone.

“What do you mean?” Colin stared at him. He turned again. “Bridget! Bridget! What’s the matter? Why doesn’t she get up? Why does she go on lying there?”

Poirot beckoned to Desmond. “You, Mr. Lee-Wortley. Come here—”

Desmond joined him.

“Feel her pulse,” said Poirot.

Desmond Lee-Wortley bent down. He touched the arm—the wrist.

“There’s no pulse . . .” he stared at Poirot. “Her arm’s still. Good God, she really is dead!”

Poirot nodded. “Yes, she is dead,” he said. “Someone has turned the comedy into a tragedy.”

“Someone—who?”

“There is a set of footprints going and returning. A set of footprints that bears a strong resemblance to the footprints you have just made, Mr. Lee-Wortley, coming from the path to this spot.”

Desmond Lee-Wortley wheeled round.

“What on earth—Are you accusing me? ME? You’re crazy! Why on earth should I want to kill the girl?”

“Ah—why? I wonder . . . Let us see. . . .”

He bent down and very gently prised open the stiff fingers of the girl’s clenched hand.

Desmond drew a sharp breath. He gazed down unbelievingly. In the palm of the dead girl’s hand was what appeared to be a large ruby.

“It’s that damn thing out of the pudding!” he cried.

“Is it?” said Poirot. “Are you sure?”

“Of course it is.”

With a swift movement Desmond bent down and plucked the red stone out of Bridget’s hand.

“You should not do that,” said Poirot reproachfully. “Nothing should have been disturbed.”

"I haven't disturbed the body, have I? But this thing might—might get lost and it's evidence. The great thing is to get the police here as soon as possible. I'll go at once and telephone."

He wheeled round and ran sharply towards the house. Sarah came swiftly to Poirot's side.

"I don't understand," she whispered. Her face was dead white. "I don't understand." She caught at Poirot's arm. "What did you mean about—about the footprints?"

"Look for yourself, Mademoiselle."

The footprints that led to the body and back again were the same as the ones just made accompanying Poirot to the girl's body and back.

"You mean—that it was Desmond? Nonsense!"

Suddenly the noise of a car came through the clear air. They wheeled round. They saw the car clearly enough driving at a furious pace down the drive and Sarah recognized what car it was.

"It's Desmond," she said. "It's Desmond's car. He—he must have gone to fetch the police instead of telephoning."

Diana Middleton came running out of the house to join them.

"What's happened?" she cried in a breathless voice. "Desmond just came rushing into the house. He said something about Bridget being killed and then he rattled the telephone but it was dead. He couldn't get an answer. He said the wires must have been cut. He said the only thing was to take a car and go for the police. Why the police? . . ."

Poirot made a gesture.

"Bridget?" Diana stared at him. "But surely—isn't it a joke of some kind? I heard something—something last night. I thought that they were going to play a joke on you, M. Poirot?"

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that was the idea—to play a joke on me. But now come into the house, all of you. We shall catch our deaths of cold here and there is nothing to be done until Mr. Lee-Wortley returns with the police.”

“But look here,” said Colin, “we can’t—we can’t leave Bridget here alone.”

“You can do her no good by remaining,” said Poirot gently. “Come, it is a sad, a very sad tragedy, but there is nothing we can do anymore to help Mademoiselle Bridget. So let us come in and get warm and have perhaps a cup of tea or of coffee.”

They followed him obediently into the house. Peverell was just about to strike the gong. If he thought it extraordinary for most of the household to be outside and for Poirot to make an appearance in pyjamas and an overcoat, he displayed no sign of it. Peverell in his old age was still the perfect butler. He noticed nothing that he was not asked to notice. They went into the dining room and sat down. When they all had a cup of coffee in front of them and were sipping it, Poirot spoke.

“I have to recount to you,” he said, “a little history. I cannot tell you all the details, no. But I can give you the main outline. It concerns a young princeling who came to this country. He brought with him a famous jewel which he was to have reset for the lady he was going to marry, but unfortunately before that he made friends with a very pretty young lady. This pretty young lady did not care very much for the man, but she did care for his jewel—so much so that one day she disappeared with this historic possession which had belonged to his house for generations. So the poor young man, he is in a quandary, you see. Above all he cannot have a scandal. Impossible to go to the police. Therefore he comes to me, to Hercule Poirot. ‘Recover for me,’ he says, ‘my historic ruby.’ Eh bien, this young lady, she has a friend, and the friend, he has put through several very questionable transactions. He has been concerned with blackmail and he has been concerned with the sale of jewellery abroad. Always he has been very clever. He is suspected, yes, but nothing can be proved. It comes to my knowledge that this very clever gentleman, he is spending Christmas here in this house. It is important that the pretty young lady, once she has acquired the jewel, should disappear for a while from circulation, so that no pressure can be put upon her, no questions can be asked her. It is arranged, therefore, that she comes here to Kings Lacey, ostensibly as the sister of the clever gentleman—"

Sarah drew a sharp breath.

"Oh, no. Oh, no, not here! Not with me here!"

"But so it is," said Poirot. "And by a little manipulation I, too, become a guest here for Christmas. This young lady, she is supposed to have just come out of hospital. She is much better when she arrives here. But then comes the news that I, too, arrive, a detective—a well-known detective. At once she has what you call the windup. She hides the ruby in the first place she can think of, and then very quickly she has a relapse and takes to her bed again. She does not want that I should see her, for doubtless I have a photograph and I shall recognize her. It is very boring for her, yes, but she has to stay in her room and her brother, he brings her up the trays."

"And the ruby?" demanded Michael.

"I think," said Poirot, "that at the moment it is mentioned I arrive, the young lady was in the kitchen with the rest of you, all laughing and talking and stirring the Christmas puddings. The Christmas puddings are put into bowls and the young lady she hides the ruby, pressing it down into one of the pudding bowls. Not the one that we are going to have on Christmas Day. Oh no, that one she knows is in a special mould. She put it in the other one, the one that is destined to be eaten on New Year's Day. Before then she will be ready to leave, and when she leaves no doubt that Christmas pudding will go with her. But see how fate takes a hand. On the very morning of Christmas Day there is an accident. The Christmas pudding in its fancy mould is dropped on the stone floor and the mould is shattered to pieces. So what can be done? The good Mrs. Ross, she takes the other pudding and sends it in."

"Good lord," said Colin, "do you mean that on Christmas Day when Grandfather was eating his pudding that that was a real ruby he'd got in his mouth?"

“Precisely,” said Poirot, “and you can imagine the emotions of Mr. Desmond Lee-Wortley when he saw that. Eh bien, what happens next? The ruby is passed round. I examine it and I manage unobtrusively to slip it in my pocket. In a careless way as though I were not interested. But one person at least observes what I have done. When I lie in bed that person searches my room. He searches me. He does not find the ruby. Why?”

“Because,” said Michael breathlessly, “you had given it to Bridget. That’s what you mean. And so that’s why—but I don’t understand quite—I mean—Look here, what did happen?”

Poirot smiled at him.

“Come now into the library,” he said, “and look out of the window and I will show you something that may explain the mystery.”

He led the way and they followed him.

“Consider once again,” said Poirot, “the scene of the crime.”

He pointed out of the window. A simultaneous gasp broke from the lips of all of them. There was no body lying on the snow, no trace of the tragedy seemed to remain except a mass of scuffled snow.

“It wasn’t all a dream, was it?” said Colin faintly. “I—has someone taken the body away?”

“Ah,” said Poirot. “You see? The Mystery of the Disappearing Body.” He nodded his head and his eyes twinkled gently.

“Good lord,” cried Michael. “M. Poirot, you are—you haven’t—oh, look here, he’s been having us on all this time!”

Poirot twinkled more than ever.

“It is true, my children, I also have had my little joke. I knew about your little plot, you see, and so I arranged a counterplot of my own. Ah, voilà Mademoiselle Bridget. None the worse, I hope, for your exposure in the snow? Never should I forgive myself if you attrapped une fluxion de poitrine."

Bridget had just come into the room. She was wearing a thick skirt and a woollen sweater. She was laughing.

"I sent a tisane to your room," said Poirot severely. "You have drunk it?"

"One sip was enough!" said Bridget. "I'm all right. Did I do it well, M. Poirot? Goodness, my arm hurts still after that tourniquet you made me put on it."

"You were splendid, my child," said Poirot. "Splendid. But see, all the others are still in the fog. Last night I went to Mademoiselle Bridget. I told her that I knew about your little complot and I asked her if she would act a part for me. She did it very cleverly. She made the footprints with a pair of Mr. Lee-Wortley's shoes."

Sarah said in a harsh voice:

"But what's the point of it all, M. Poirot? What's the point of sending Desmond off to fetch the police? They'll be very angry when they find out it's nothing but a hoax."

Poirot shook his head gently.

"But I do not think for one moment, Mademoiselle, that Mr. Lee-Wortley went to fetch the police," he said. "Murder is a thing in which Mr. Lee-Wortley does not want to be mixed up. He lost his nerve badly. All he could see was his chance to get the ruby. He snatched that, he pretended the telephone was out of order and he rushed off in a car on the pretence of fetching the police. I think myself it is the last you will see of him for some time. He has, I understand, his own ways of getting out of England. He has his own plane, has he not, Mademoiselle?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes," she said. "We were thinking of—" She stopped.

“He wanted you to elope with him that way, did he not? Eh bien, that is a very good way of smuggling a jewel out of the country. When you are eloping with a girl, and that fact is publicized, then you will not be suspected of also smuggling a historic jewel out of the country. Oh yes, that would have made a very good camouflage.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Sarah. “I don’t believe a word of it!”

“Then ask his sister,” said Poirot, gently nodding his head over her shoulder. Sarah turned her head sharply.

A platinum blonde stood in the doorway. She wore a fur coat and was scowling. She was clearly in a furious temper.

“Sister my foot!” she said, with a short unpleasant laugh. “That swine’s no brother of mine! So he’s beaten it, has he, and left me to carry the can? The whole thing was his idea! He put me up to it! Said it was money for jam. They’d never prosecute because of the scandal. I could always threaten to say that Ali had given me his historic jewel. Des and I were to have shared the swag in Paris—and now the swine runs out on me! I’d like to murder him!” She switched abruptly. “The sooner I get out of here—Can someone telephone for a taxi?”

“A car is waiting at the front door to take you to the station, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot.

“Think of everything, don’t you?”

“Most things,” said Poirot complacently.

But Poirot was not to get off so easily. When he returned to the dining room after assisting the spurious Miss Lee-Wortley into the waiting car, Colin was waiting for him.

There was a frown on his boyish face.

“But look here, M. Poirot. What about the ruby? Do you mean to say you’ve let him get away with it?”

Poirot’s face fell. He twirled his moustaches. He seemed ill at ease.

“I shall recover it yet,” he said weakly. “There are other ways. I shall still —”

“Well, I do think!” said Michael. “To let that swine get away with the ruby!”

Bridget was sharper.

“He’s having us on again,” she cried. “You are, aren’t you, M. Poirot?”

“Shall we do a final conjuring trick, Mademoiselle? Feel in my left-hand pocket.”

Bridget thrust her hand in. She drew it out again with a scream of triumph and held aloft a large ruby blinking in crimson splendour.

“You comprehend,” explained Poirot, “the one that was clasped in your hand was a paste replica. I brought it from London in case it was possible to make a substitute. You understand? We do not want the scandal. Monsieur Desmond will try and dispose of that ruby in Paris or in Belgium or wherever it is that he has his contacts, and then it will be discovered that the stone is not real! What could be more excellent? All finishes happily. The scandal is avoided, my princeling receives his ruby back again, he returns to his country and makes a sober and we hope a happy marriage. All ends well.”

“Except for me,” murmured Sarah under her breath.

She spoke so low that no one heard her but Poirot. He shook his head gently.

“You are in error, Mademoiselle Sarah, in what you say there. You have gained experience. All experience is valuable. Ahead of you I prophesy there lies happiness.”

“That’s what you say,” said Sarah.

“But look here, M. Poirot,” Colin was frowning. “How did you know about the show we were going to put on for you?”

“It is my business to know things,” said Hercule Poirot. He twirled his moustache.

“Yes, but I don’t see how you could have managed it. Did someone split—did someone come and tell you?”

“No, no, not that.”

“Then how? Tell us how?”

They all chorused, “Yes, tell us how.”

“But no,” Poirot protested. “But no. If I tell you how I deduced that, you will think nothing of it. It is like the conjurer who shows how his tricks are done!”

“Tell us, M. Poirot! Go on. Tell us, tell us!”

“You really wish that I should solve for you this last mystery?”

“Yes, go on. Tell us.”

“Ah, I do not think I can. You will be so disappointed.”

“Now, come on, M. Poirot, tell us. How did you know?”

“Well, you see, I was sitting in the library by the window in a chair after tea the other day and I was reposing myself. I had been asleep and when I awoke you were discussing your plans just outside the window close to me, and the window was open at the top.”

“Is that all?” cried Colin, disgusted. “How simple!”

“Is it not?” said Hercule Poirot, smiling. “You see? You are disappointed!”

“Oh well,” said Michael, “at any rate we know everything now.”

“Do we?” murmured Hercule Poirot to himself. “I do not. I, whose business it is to know things.”

He walked out into the hall, shaking his head a little. For perhaps the twentieth time he drew from his pocket a rather dirty piece of paper. “don’t eat none of the plum pudding. one as wishes you well.”

Hercule Poirot shook his head reflectively. He who could explain everything could not explain this! Humiliating. Who had written it? Why had it been written? Until he found that out he would never know a moment’s peace. Suddenly he came out of his reverie to be aware of a peculiar gasping noise. He looked sharply down. On the floor, busy with a dustpan and brush was a tow-headed creature in a flowered overall. She was staring at the paper in his hand with large round eyes.

“Oh sir,” said this apparition. “Oh, sir. Please, sir.”

“And who may you be, mon enfant?” inquired M. Poirot genially.

“Annie Bates, sir, please, sir. I come here to help Mrs. Ross. I didn’t mean, sir, I didn’t mean to—to do anything what I shouldn’t do. I did mean it well, sir. For your good, I mean.”

Enlightenment came to Poirot. He held out the dirty piece of paper.

“Did you write that, Annie?”

“I didn’t mean any harm, sir. Really I didn’t.”

“Of course you didn’t, Annie.” He smiled at her. “But tell me about it. Why did you write this?”

“Well, it was them two, sir. Mr. Lee-Wortley and his sister. Not that she was his sister, I’m sure. None of us thought so! And she wasn’t ill a bit. We could all tell that. We thought—we all thought—something queer was going on. I’ll tell you straight, sir. I was in her bathroom taking in the clean towels, and I listened at the door. He was in her room and they were talking together. I heard what they said plain as plain. ‘This detective,’ he was saying. ‘This fellow Poirot who’s coming here. We’ve got to do something about it. We’ve got to get him out of the way as soon as possible.’ And then he says to her in a nasty, sinister sort of way, lowering his voice, ‘Where did you put it?’ And she answered him, ‘In the pudding.’ Oh, sir, my heart gave such a leap I thought it would stop beating. I thought they meant to poison you in the Christmas pudding. I didn’t know what to do! Mrs. Ross, she wouldn’t listen to the likes of me. Then the idea came to me as I’d write you a warning. And I did and I put it on your pillow where you’d find it when you went to bed.” Annie paused breathlessly.

Poirot surveyed her gravely for some minutes.

“You see too many sensational films, I think, Annie,” he said at last, “or perhaps it is the television that affects you? But the important thing is that you have the good heart and a certain amount of ingenuity. When I return to London I will send you a present.”

“Oh thank you, sir. Thank you very much, sir.”

“What would you like, Annie, as a present?”

“Anything I like, sir? Could I have anything I like?”

“Within reason,” said Hercule Poirot prudently, “yes.”

“Oh sir, could I have a vanity box? A real posh slap-up vanity box like the one Mr. Lee-Wortley’s sister, wot wasn’t his sister, had?”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “yes, I think that could be managed.

“It is interesting,” he mused. “I was in a museum the other day observing some antiquities from Babylon or one of those places, thousands of years old—and among them were cosmetic boxes. The heart of woman does not change.”

“Beg your pardon, sir?” said Annie.

“It is nothing,” said Poirot. “I reflect. You shall have your vanity box, child.”

“Oh thank you, sir. Oh thank you very much indeed, sir.”

Annie departed ecstatically. Poirot looked after her, nodding his head in satisfaction.

“Ah,” he said to himself. “And now—I go. There is nothing more to be done here.”

A pair of arms slipped round his shoulders unexpectedly.

“If you will stand just under the mistletoe—” said Bridget.

Hercule Poirot enjoyed it. He enjoyed it very much. He said to himself that he had had a very good Christmas.

The original version of this story, “Christmas Adventure,” can be found in the volume While the Light Lasts and Other Stories.

Four

THE DRESSMAKER’S DOLL

“The Dressmaker’s Doll” was first published in Woman’s Journal, December 1958.

The doll lay in the big velvet-covered chair. There was not much light in the room; the London skies were dark. In the gentle, greyish-green gloom, the sage-green coverings and the curtains and the rugs all blended with each other. The doll blended, too. She lay long and limp and sprawled in her green-velvet clothes and her velvet cap and the painted mask of her face. She was the Puppet Doll, the whim of Rich Women, the doll who lolls beside the telephone, or among the cushions of the divan. She sprawled there, eternally limp and yet strangely alive. She looked a decadent product of the twentieth century.

Sybil Fox, hurrying in with some patterns and a sketch, looked at the doll with a faint feeling of surprise and bewilderment. She wondered—but whatever she wondered did not get to the front of her mind. Instead, she thought to herself, “Now, what’s happened to the pattern of the blue velvet? Wherever have I put it? I’m sure I had it here just now.” She went out on the landing and called up to the workroom.

“Elspeth, Elspeth, have you the blue pattern up there? Mrs. Fellows-Brown will be here any minute now.”

She went in again, switching on the lights. Again she glanced at the doll. “Now where on earth—ah, there it is.” She picked the pattern up from where it had fallen from her hand. There was the usual creak outside on the landing as the elevator came to a halt and in a minute or two Mrs. Fellows-Brown, accompanied by her Pekinese, came puffing into the room rather like a fussy local train arriving at a wayside station.

“It’s going to pour,” she said, “simply pour!”

She threw off her gloves and a fur. Alicia Coombe came in. She didn't always come in nowadays, only when special customers arrived, and Mrs. Fellows-Brown was such a customer.

Elspeth, the forewoman of the workroom, came down with the frock and Sybil pulled it over Mrs. Fellows-Brown's head.

"There," she said, "I think it's good. Yes, it's definitely a success."

Mrs. Fellows-Brown turned sideways and looked in the mirror.

"I must say," she said, "your clothes do do something to my behind."

"You're much thinner than you were three months ago," Sybil assured her.

"I'm really not," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown, "though I must say I look it in this. There's something about the way you cut, it really does minimize my behind. I almost look as though I hadn't got one—I mean only the usual kind that most people have." She sighed and gingerly smoothed the troublesome portion of her anatomy. "It's always been a bit of a trial to me," she said. "Of course, for years I could pull it in, you know, by sticking out my front. Well, I can't do that any longer because I've got a stomach now as well as a behind. And I mean—well, you can't pull it in both ways, can you?"

Alicia Coombe said, "You should see some of my customers!"

Mrs. Fellows-Brown experimented to and fro.

"A stomach is worse than a behind," she said. "It shows more. Or perhaps you think it does, because, I mean, when you're talking to people you're facing them and that's the moment they can't see your behind but they can notice your stomach. Anyway, I've made it a rule to pull in my stomach and let my behind look after itself." She craned her neck round still farther, then said suddenly, "Oh, that doll of yours! She gives me the creeps. How long have you had her?"

Sybil glanced uncertainly at Alicia Coombe, who looked puzzled but vaguely distressed.

“I don’t know exactly . . . some time I think—I never can remember things. It’s awful nowadays—I simply cannot remember. Sybil, how long have we had her?”

Sybil said shortly, “I don’t know.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Fellows-Brown, “she gives me the creeps. Uncanny! She looks, you know, as though she was watching us all, and perhaps laughing in that velvet sleeve of hers. I’d get rid of her if I were you.” She gave a little shiver, then she plunged once more into dressmaking details. Should she or should she not have the sleeves an inch shorter? And what about the length? When all these important points were settled satisfactorily, Mrs. Fellows-Brown resumed her own garments and prepared to leave. As she passed the doll, she turned her head again.

“No,” she said, “I don’t like that doll. She looks too much as though she belonged here. It isn’t healthy.”

“Now what did she mean by that?” demanded Sybil, as Mrs. Fellows-Brown departed down the stairs.

Before Alicia Coombe could answer, Mrs. Fellows-Brown returned, poking her head round the door.

“Good gracious, I forgot all about Fou-Ling. Where are you, ducksie? Well, I never!”

She stared and the other two women stared, too. The Pekinese was sitting by the green-velvet chair, staring up at the limp doll sprawled on it. There was no expression, either of pleasure or resentment, on his small, pop-eyed face. He was merely looking.

“Come along, mum’s darling,” said Mrs. Fellows-Brown.

Mum’s darling paid no attention whatever.

“He gets more disobedient every day,” said Mrs. Fellows-Brown, with the air of one cataloguing a virtue. “Come on, Fou-Ling. Dindins. Luffly liver.”

Fou-Ling turned his head about an inch and a half towards his mistress, then with disdain resumed his appraisal of the doll.

“She’s certainly made an impression on him,” said Mrs. Fellows-Brown. “I don’t think he’s ever noticed her before. I haven’t either. Was she here last time I came?”

The other two women looked at each other. Sybil now had a frown on her face, and Alicia Coombe said, wrinkling up her forehead, “I told you—I simply can’t remember anything nowadays. How long have we had her, Sybil?”

“Where did she come from?” demanded Mrs. Fellows-Brown. “Did you buy her?”

“Oh no.” Somehow Alicia Coombe was shocked at the idea. “Oh no. I suppose—I suppose someone gave her to me.” She shook her head. “Maddening!” she exclaimed. “Absolutely maddening, when everything goes out of your head the very moment after it’s happened.”

“Now don’t be stupid, Fou-Ling,” said Mrs. Fellows-Brown sharply. “Come on. I’ll have to pick you up.”

She picked him up. Fou-Ling uttered a short bark of agonized protest. They went out of the room with Fou-Ling’s pop-eyed face turned over his fluffy shoulder, still staring with enormous attention at the doll on the chair. . . .

“That there doll,” said Mrs. Groves, “fair gives me the creeps, it does.”

Mrs. Groves was the cleaner. She had just finished a crablike progress backwards along the floor. Now she was standing up and working slowly round the room with a duster.

“Funny thing,” said Mrs. Groves, “never noticed it really until yesterday. And then it hit me all of a sudden, as you might say.”

“You don’t like it?” asked Sybil.

“I tell you, Mrs. Fox, it gives me the creeps,” said the cleaning woman. “It ain’t natural, if you know what I mean. All those long hanging legs and the way she’s slouched down there and the cunning look she has in her eye. It doesn’t look healthy, that’s what I say.”

“You’ve never said anything about her before,” said Sybil.

“I tell you, I never noticed her—not till this morning . . . Of course I know she’s been here some time but—” She stopped and a puzzled expression flitted across her face. “Sort of thing you might dream of at night,” she said, and gathering up various cleaning implements she departed from the fitting room and walked across the landing to the room on the other side.

Sybil stared at the relaxed doll. An expression of bewilderment was growing on her face. Alicia Coombe entered and Sybil turned sharply.

“Miss Coombe, how long have you had this creature?”

“What, the doll? My dear, you know I can’t remember things. Yesterday—why, it’s too silly!—I was going out to that lecture and I hadn’t gone halfway down the street when I suddenly found I couldn’t remember where I was going. I thought and I thought. Finally I told myself it must be Fortnums. I knew there was something I wanted to get at Fortnums. Well, you won’t believe me, it wasn’t till I actually got home and was having some tea that I remembered about the lecture. Of course, I’ve always heard that people go gaga as they get on in life, but it’s happening to me much too fast. I’ve forgotten now where I’ve put my handbag—and my spectacles, too. Where did I put those spectacles? I had them just now—I was reading something in The Times.”

“The spectacles are on the mantelpiece here,” said Sybil, handing them to her. “How did you get the doll? Who gave her to you?”

“That’s a blank, too,” said Alicia Coombe. “Somebody gave her to me or sent her to me, I suppose . . . However, she does seem to match the room very well, doesn’t she?”

"Rather too well, I think," said Sybil. "Funny thing is, I can't remember when I first noticed her here."

"Now don't you get the same way as I am," Alicia Coombe admonished her. "After all, you're young still."

"But really, Miss Coombe, I don't remember. I mean, I looked at her yesterday and thought there was something—well, Mrs. Groves is quite right—something creepy about her. And then I thought I'd already thought so, and then I tried to remember when I first thought so, and—well, I just couldn't remember anything! In a way, it was as if I'd never seen her before—only it didn't feel like that. It felt as though she'd been here a long time but I'd only just noticed her."

"Perhaps she flew in through the window one day on a broomstick," said Alicia Coombe. "Anyway, she belongs here now all right." She looked round. "You could hardly imagine the room without her, could you?"

"No," said Sybil, with a slight shiver, "but I rather wish I could."

"Could what?"

"Imagine the room without her."

"Are we all going barmy about this doll?" demanded Alicia Coombe impatiently. "What's wrong with the poor thing? Looks like a decayed cabbage to me, but perhaps," she added, "that's because I haven't got spectacles on." She put them on her nose and looked firmly at the doll. "Yes," she said, "I see what you mean. She is a little creepy . . . Sad looking but—well, sly and rather determined, too."

"Funny," said Sybil, "Mrs. Fellows-Brown taking such a violent dislike to her."

"She's one who never minds speaking her mind," said Alicia Coombe.

"But it's odd," persisted Sybil, "that this doll should make such an impression on her."

“Well, people do take dislikes very suddenly sometimes.”

“Perhaps,” said Sybil with a little laugh, “that doll never was here until yesterday . . . Perhaps she just—flew in through the window, as you say, and settled herself here.”

“No,” said Alicia Coombe, “I’m sure she’s been here some time. Perhaps she only became visible yesterday.”

“That’s what I feel, too,” said Sybil, “that she’s been here some time . . . but all the same I don’t remember really seeing her till yesterday.”

“Now, dear,” said Alicia Coombe briskly, “do stop it. You’re making me feel quite peculiar with shivers running up and down my spine. You’re not going to work up a great deal of supernatural hoo-hah about that creature, are you?” She picked up the doll, shook it out, rearranged its shoulders, and sat it down again on another chair. Immediately the doll flopped slightly and relaxed.

“It’s not a bit lifelike,” said Alicia Coombe, staring at the doll. “And yet, in a funny way, she does seem alive, doesn’t she?”

“Oo, it did give me a turn,” said Mrs. Groves, as she went round the showroom, dusting. “Such a turn as I hardly like to go into the fitting room any more.”

“What’s given you a turn?” demanded Miss Coombe who was sitting at a writing table in the corner, busy with various accounts. “This woman,” she added more for her own benefit than that of Mrs. Groves, “thinks she can have two evening dresses, three cocktail dresses, and a suit every year without ever paying me a penny for them! Really, some people!”

“It’s that doll,” said Mrs. Groves.

“What, our doll again?”

“Yes, sitting up there at the desk, like a human. Oo, it didn’t half give me a turn!”

“What are you talking about?”

Alicia Coombe got up, strode across the room, across the landing outside, and into the room opposite—the fitting room. There was a small Sheraton desk in one corner of it, and there, sitting in a chair drawn up to it, her long floppy arms on the desk, sat the doll.

“Sombody seems to have been having fun,” said Alicia Coombe. “Fancy sitting her up like that. Really, she looks quite natural.”

Sybil Fox came down the stairs at this moment, carrying a dress that was to be tried on that morning.

“Come here, Sybil. Look at our doll sitting at my private desk and writing letters now.”

The two women looked.

“Really,” said Alicia Coombe, “it’s too ridiculous! I wonder who propped her up there. Did you?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Sybil. “It must have been one of the girls from upstairs.”

“A silly sort of joke, really,” said Alicia Coombe. She picked up the doll from the desk and threw her back on the sofa.

Sybil laid the dress over a chair carefully, then she went out and up the stairs to the workroom.

“You know the doll,” she said, “the velvet doll in Miss Coombe’s room downstairs—in the fitting room?”

The forewoman and three girls looked up.

“Yes, miss, of course we know.”

“Who sat her up at the desk this morning for a joke?”

The three girls looked at her, then Elspeth, the forewoman, said, “Sat her up at the desk? I didn’t.”

“Nor did I,” said one of the girls. “Did you, Marlene?” Marlene shook her head.

“This your bit of fun, Elspeth?”

“No, indeed,” said Elspeth, a stern woman who looked as though her mouth should always be filled with pins. “I’ve more to do than going about playing with dolls and sitting them up at desks.”

“Look here,” said Sybil, and to her surprise her voice shook slightly. “It was—it was quite a good joke, only I’d just like to know who did it.”

The three girls bristled.

“We’ve told you, Mrs. Fox. None of us did it, did we, Marlene?”

“I didn’t,” said Marlene, “and if Nellie and Margaret say they didn’t, well then, none of us did.”

“You’ve heard what I had to say,” said Elspeth. “What’s this all about anyway, Mrs. Fox?”

“Perhaps it was Mrs. Groves?” said Marlene.

Sybil shook her head. “It wouldn’t be Mrs. Groves. It gave her quite a turn.”

“I’ll come down and see for myself,” said Elspeth.

“She’s not there now,” said Sybil. “Miss Coombe took her away from the desk and threw her back on the sofa. Well—” she paused—“what I mean is, someone must have stuck her up there in the chair at the writing desk—thinking it was funny. I suppose. And—and I don’t see why they won’t say so.”

“I’ve told you twice, Mrs. Fox,” said Margaret. “I don’t see why you should go on accusing us of telling lies. None of us would do a silly thing like that.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sybil, “I didn’t mean to upset you. But—but who else could possibly have done it?”

“Perhaps she got up and walked there herself,” said Marlene, and giggled.

For some reason Sybil didn’t like the suggestion.

“Oh, it’s all a lot of nonsense, anyway,” she said, and went down the stairs again.

Alicia Coombe was humming quite cheerfully. She looked round the room.

“I’ve lost my spectacles again,” she said, “but it doesn’t really matter. I don’t want to see anything this moment. The trouble is, of course, when you’re as blind as I am, that when you have lost your spectacles, unless you’ve got another pair to put on and find them with, well, then you can’t find them because you can’t see to find them.”

“I’ll look round for you,” said Sybil. “You had them just now.”

“I went into the other room when you went upstairs. I expect I took them back in there.”

She went across to the other room.

“It’s such a bother,” said Alicia Coombe. “I want to get on with these accounts. How can I if I haven’t my spectacles?”

“I’ll go up and get your second pair from the bedroom,” said Sybil.

“I haven’t a second pair at present,” said Alicia Coombe.

“Why, what’s happened to them?”

“Well, I think I left them yesterday when I was out at lunch. I’ve rung up there, and I’ve rung up the two shops I went into, too.”

“Oh, dear,” said Sybil, “you’ll have to get three pairs, I suppose.”

“If I had three pairs of spectacles,” said Alicia Coombe, “I should spend my whole life looking for one or the other of them. I really think it’s best to have only one. Then you’ve got to look till you find it.”

“Well, they must be somewhere,” said Sybil. “You haven’t been out of these two rooms. They’re certainly not here, so you must have laid them down in the fitting room.”

She went back, walking round, looking quite closely. Finally, as a last idea, she took up the doll from the sofa.

“I’ve got them,” she called.

“Oh, where were they, Sybil?”

“Under our precious doll. I suppose you must have thrown them down when you put her back on the sofa.”

“I didn’t. I’m sure I didn’t.”

“Oh,” said Sybil with exasperation. “Then I suppose the doll took them and was hiding them from you!”

“Really, you know,” said Alicia, looking thoughtfully at the doll, “I wouldn’t put it past her. She looks very intelligent, don’t you think, Sybil?”

“I don’t think I like her face,” said Sybil. “She looks as though she knew something that we didn’t.”

“You don’t think she looks sort of sad and sweet?” said Alicia Coombe pleadingly, but without conviction.

“I don’t think she’s in the least sweet,” said Sybil.

“No . . . perhaps you’re right . . . Oh, well, let’s get on with things. Lady Lee will be here in another ten minutes. I just want to get these invoices done and posted.”

“Mrs. Fox. Mrs. Fox?”

“Yes, Margaret?” said Sybil. “What is it?”

Sybil was busy leaning over a table, cutting a piece of satin material.

“Oh, Mrs. Fox, it’s that doll again. I took down the brown dress like you said, and there’s that doll sitting up at the desk again. And it wasn’t me—it wasn’t any of us. Please, Mrs. Fox, we really wouldn’t do such a thing.”

Sybil’s scissors slid a little.

“There,” she said angrily, “look what you’ve made me do. Oh, well, it’ll be all right, I suppose. Now, what’s this about the doll?”

“She’s sitting at the desk again.”

Sybil went down and walked into the fitting room. The doll was sitting at the desk exactly as she had sat there before.

“You’re very determined, aren’t you?” said Sybil, speaking to the doll.

She picked her up unceremoniously and put her back on the sofa.

“That’s your place, my girl,” she said. “You stay there.”

She walked across to the other room.

“Miss Coombe.”

“Yes, Sybil?”

“Somebody is having a game with us, you know. That doll was sitting at the desk again.”

“Who do you think it is?”

“It must be one of those three upstairs,” said Sybil. “Thinks it’s funny, I suppose. Of course they all swear to high heaven it wasn’t them.”

“Who do you think it is—Margaret?”

“No, I don’t think it’s Margaret. She looked quite queer when she came in and told me. I expect it’s that giggling Marlene.”

“Anyway, it’s a very silly thing to do.”

“Of course it is—idiotic,” said Sybil. “However,” she added grimly, “I’m going to put a stop to it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You’ll see,” said Sybil.

That night when she left, she locked the fitting room from the outside.

“I’m locking this door,” she said, “and I’m taking the key with me.”

“Oh, I see,” said Alicia Coombe, with a faint air of amusement. “You’re beginning to think it’s me, are you? You think I’m so absentminded that I go in there and think I’ll write at the desk, but instead I pick the doll up and put her there to write for me. Is that the idea? And then I forget all about it?”

“Well, it’s a possibility,” Sybil admitted. “Anyway, I’m going to be quite sure that no silly practical joke is played tonight.”

The following morning, her lips set grimly, the first thing Sybil did on arrival was to unlock the door of the fitting room and march in. Mrs. Groves, with an aggrieved expression and mop and duster in hand, had been waiting on the landing.

“Now we’ll see!” said Sybil.

Then she drew back with a slight gasp.

The doll was sitting at the desk.

"Cool!" said Mrs. Groves behind her. "It's uncanny! That's what it is. Oh, there, Mrs. Fox, you look quite pale, as though you've come over queer. You need a little drop of something. Has Miss Coombe got a drop upstairs, do you know?"

"I'm quite all right," said Sybil.

She walked over to the doll, lifted her carefully, and crossed the room with her.

"Somebody's been playing a trick on you again," said Mrs. Groves.

"I don't see how they could have played a trick on me this time," said Sybil slowly. "I locked that door last night. You know yourself that no one could get in."

"Somebody's got another key, maybe," said Mrs. Groves helpfully.

"I don't think so," said Sybil. "We've never bothered to lock this door before. It's one of those old-fashioned keys and there's only one of them."

"Perhaps the other key fits it—the one to the door opposite."

In due course they tried all the keys in the shop, but none fitted the door of the fitting room.

"It is odd, Miss Coombe," said Sybil later, as they were having lunch together.

Alicia Coombe was looking rather pleased.

"My dear," she said. "I think it's simply extraordinary. I think we ought to write to the psychical research people about it. You know, they might send an investigator—a medium or someone—to see if there's anything peculiar about the room."

"You don't seem to mind at all," said Sybil.

“Well, I rather enjoy it in a way,” said Alicia Coombe. “I mean, at my age, it’s rather fun when things happen! All the same—no,” she added thoughtfully. “I don’t think I do quite like it. I mean, that doll’s getting rather above herself, isn’t she?”

On that evening Sybil and Alicia Coombe locked the door once more on the outside.

“I still think,” said Sybil, “that somebody might be playing a practical joke, though, really, I don’t see why. . . .”

“Do you think she’ll be at the desk again tomorrow morning?” demanded Alicia.

“Yes,” said Sybil, “I do.”

But they were wrong. The doll was not at the desk. Instead, she was on the window sill, looking out into the street. And again there was an extraordinary naturalness about her position.

“It’s all frightfully silly, isn’t it?” said Alicia Coombe, as they were snatching a quick cup of tea that afternoon. By common consent they were not having it in the fitting room, as they usually did, but in Alicia Coombe’s own room opposite.

“Silly in what way?”

“Well, I mean, there’s nothing you can get hold of. Just a doll that’s always in a different place.”

As day followed day it seemed a more and more apt observation. It was not only at night that the doll now moved. At any moment when they came into the fitting room, after they had been absent even a few minutes, they might find the doll in a different place. They could have left her on the sofa and find her on a chair. Then she’d be on a different chair. Sometimes she’d be in the window seat, sometimes at the desk again.

"She just moves about as she likes," said Alicia Coombe. "And I think, Sybil, I think it's amusing her."

The two women stood looking down at the inert sprawling figure in its limp, soft velvet, with its painted silk face.

"Some old bits of velvet and silk and a lick of paint, that's all it is," said Alicia Coombe. Her voice was strained. "I suppose, you know, we could—er—we could dispose of her."

"What do you mean, dispose of her?" asked Sybil. Her voice sounded almost shocked.

"Well," said Alicia Coombe, "we could put her in the fire, if there was a fire. Burn her, I mean, like a witch . . . Or of course," she added matter-of-factly, "we could just put her in the dustbin."

"I don't think that would do," said Sybil. "Somebody would probably take her out of the dustbin and bring her back to us."

"Or we could send her somewhere," said Alicia Coombe. "You know, to one of those societies who are always writing and asking for something—for a sale or a bazaar. I think that's the best idea."

"I don't know . . ." said Sybil. "I'd be almost afraid to do that."

"Afraid?"

"Well, I think she'd come back," said Sybil.

"You mean, she'd come back here?"

"Yes."

"Like a homing pigeon?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

“I suppose we’re not going off our heads, are we?” said Alicia Coombe. “Perhaps I’ve really gone gaga and perhaps you’re just humouring me, is that it?”

“No,” said Sybil. “But I’ve got a nasty frightening feeling—a horrid feeling that she’s too strong for us.”

“What? That mess of rags?”

“Yes, that horrible limp mess of rags. Because, you see, she’s so determined.”

“Determined?”

“To have her own way! I mean, this is her room now!”

“Yes,” said Alicia Coombe, looking round, “it is, isn’t it? Of course, it always was, when you come to think of it—the colours and everything . . . I thought she fitted in here, but it’s the room that fits her. I must say,” added the dressmaker, with a touch of briskness in her voice, “it’s rather absurd when a doll comes and takes possession of things like this. You know, Mrs. Groves won’t come in here any longer and clean.”

“Does she say she’s frightened of the doll?”

“No. She just makes excuses of some kind or other.” Then Alicia added with a hint of panic, “What are we going to do, Sybil? It’s getting me down, you know. I haven’t been able to design anything for weeks.”

“I can’t keep my mind on cutting out properly,” Sybil confessed. “I make all sorts of silly mistakes. Perhaps,” she said uncertainly, your idea of writing to the psychical research people might do some good.”

“Just make us look like a couple of fools,” said Alicia Coombe. “I didn’t seriously mean it. No, I suppose we’ll just have to go on until—”

“Until what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Alicia, and she laughed uncertainly.

On the following day Sybil, when she arrived, found the door of the fitting room locked.

“Miss Coombe, have you got the key? Did you lock this last night?”

“Yes,” said Alicia Coombe, “I locked it and it’s going to stay locked.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean I’ve given up the room. The doll can have it. We don’t need two rooms. We can fit in here.”

“But it’s your own private sitting room.”

“Well, I don’t want it any more. I’ve got a very nice bedroom. I can make a bed-sitting room out of that, can’t I?”

“Do you mean you’re really not going into that fitting room ever again?” said Sybil incredulously.

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“But—what about cleaning? It’ll get in a terrible state.”

“Let it!” said Alicia Coombe. “If this place is suffering from some kind of possession by a doll, all right—let her keep possession. And clean the room herself.” And she added, “She hates us, you know.”

“What do you mean?” said Sybil. “The doll hates us?”

“Yes,” said Alicia. “Didn’t you know? You must have known. You must have seen it when you looked at her.”

“Yes,” said Sybil thoughtfully, “I suppose I did. I suppose I felt that all along—that she hated us and wanted to get us out of there.”

“She’s a malicious little thing,” said Alicia Coombe. “Anyway, she ought to be satisfied now.”

Things went on rather more peacefully after that. Alicia Coombe announced to her staff that she was giving up the use of the fitting room for the present—it made too many rooms to dust and clean, she explained.

But it hardly helped her to overhear one of the work girls saying to another on the evening of the same day, “She really is batty, Miss Coombe is now. I always thought she was a bit queer—the way she lost things and forgot things. But it’s really beyond anything now, isn’t it? She’s got a sort of thing about that doll downstairs.”

“Ooo, you don’t think she’ll go really bats, do you?” said the other girl. “That she might knife us or something?”

They passed, chattering, and Alicia sat up indignantly in her chair. Going bats indeed! Then she added ruefully, to herself, “I suppose, if it wasn’t for Sybil, I should think myself that I was going bats. But with me and Sybil and Mrs. Groves too, well, it does look as though there was something in it. But what I don’t see is, how is it going to end?”

Three weeks later, Sybil said to Alicia Coombe, “We’ve got to go into that room sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Well, I mean, it must be in a filthy state. Moths will be getting into things, and all that. We ought just to dust and sweep it and then lock it up again.”

“I’d much rather keep it shut up and not go back in there,” said Alicia Coombe.

Sybil said, “Really, you know, you’re even more superstitious than I am.”

“I suppose I am,” said Alicia Coombe. “I was much more ready to believe in all this than you were, but to begin with, you know—I—well, I found it exciting in an odd sort of way. I don’t know. I’m just scared, and I’d rather not go into that room again.”

“Well, I want to,” said Sybil, “and I’m going to.”

“You know what’s the matter with you?” said Alicia Coombe. “You’re simply curious, that’s all.”

“All right, then I’m curious. I want to see what the doll’s done.”

“I still think it’s much better to leave her alone,” said Alicia. “Now we’ve got out of that room, she’s satisfied. You’d better leave her satisfied.” She gave an exasperated sigh. “What nonsense we are talking!”

“Yes. I know we’re talking nonsense, but if you tell me of any way of not talking nonsense—come on, now, give me the key.”

“All right, all right.”

“I believe you’re afraid I’ll let her out or something. I should think she was the kind that could pass through doors or windows.”

Sybil unlocked the door and went in.

“How terribly odd,” she said.

“What’s odd?” said Alicia Coombe, peering over her shoulder.

“The room hardly seems dusty at all, does it? You’d think, after being shut up all this time—”

“Yes, it is odd.”

“There she is,” said Sybil.

The doll was on the sofa. She was not lying in her usual limp position. She was sitting upright, a cushion behind her back. She had the air of the mistress of the house, waiting to receive people.

“Well,” said Alicia Coombe, “she seems at home all right, doesn’t she? I almost feel I ought to apologize for coming in.”

“Let’s go,” said Sybil.

She backed out; pulling the door to, and locked it again.

The two women gazed at each other.

“I wish I knew,” said Alicia Coombe, “why it scares us so much. . . .”

“My goodness, who wouldn’t be scared?”

“Well, I mean, what happens, after all? It’s nothing really—just a kind of puppet that gets moved around the room. I expect it isn’t the puppet itself—it’s a poltergeist.”

“Now that is a good idea.”

“Yes, but I don’t really believe it. I think it’s—it’s that doll.”

“Are you sure you don’t know where she really came from?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Alicia. “And the more I think of it the more I’m perfectly certain that I didn’t buy her, and that nobody gave her to me. I think she—well, she just came.”

“Do you think she’ll—ever go?”

“Really,” said Alicia, “I don’t see why she should . . . She’s got all she wants.”

But it seemed that the doll had not got all she wanted. The next day, when Sybil went into the showroom, she drew in her breath with a sudden gasp. Then she called up the stairs.

“Miss Coombe, Miss Coombe, come down here.”

“What’s the matter?”

Alicia Coombe, who had got up late, came down the stairs, hobbling a little precariously for she had rheumatism in her right knee.

“What is the matter with you, Sybil?”

“Look. Look what’s happened now.”

They stood in the doorway of the showroom. Sitting on a sofa, sprawled easily over the arm of it, was the doll.

“She’s got out,” said Sybil, “She’s got out of that room! She wants this room as well.”

Alicia Coombe sat down by the door. “In the end,” she said, “I suppose she’ll want the whole shop.”

“She might,” said Sybil.

“You nasty, sly, malicious brute,” said Alicia, addressing the doll. “Why do you want to come and pester us so? We don’t want you.”

It seemed to her, and to Sybil too, that the doll moved very slightly. It was as though its limbs relaxed still further. A long limp arm was lying on the arm of the sofa and the half-hidden face looked as if it were peering from under the arm. And it was a sly, malicious look.

“Horrible creature,” said Alicia. “I can’t bear it! I can’t bear it any longer.”

Suddenly, taking Sybil completely by surprise, she dashed across the room, picked up the doll, ran to the window, opened it, and flung the doll out into the street. There was a gasp and a half cry of fear from Sybil.

“Oh, Alicia, you shouldn’t have done that! I’m sure you shouldn’t have done that!”

“I had to do something,” said Alicia Coombe. “I just couldn’t stand it any more.”

Sybil joined her at the window. Down below on the pavement the doll lay, loose limbed, face down.

“You’ve killed her,” said Sybil.

“Don’t be absurd . . . How can I kill something that’s made of velvet and silk, bits and pieces. It’s not real.”

“It’s horribly real,” said Sybil.

Alicia caught her breath.

“Good heavens. That child—”

A small ragged girl was standing over the doll on the pavement. She looked up and down the street—a street that was not unduly crowded at this time of the morning though there was some automobile traffic; then, as though satisfied, the child bent, picked up the doll, and ran across the street.

“Stop, stop!” called Alicia.

She turned to Sybil.

“That child mustn’t take the doll. She mustn’t! That doll is dangerous—it’s evil. We’ve got to stop her.”

It was not they who stopped her. It was the traffic. At that moment three taxis came down one way and two tradesmen’s vans in the other direction. The child was marooned on an island in the middle of the road. Sybil rushed down the stairs, Alicia Coombe following her. Dodging between a tradesman’s van and a private car, Sybil, with Alicia Coombe directly behind her, arrived on the island before the child could get through the traffic on the opposite side.

“You can’t take that doll,” said Alicia Coombe. “Give her back to me.”

The child looked at her. She was a skinny little girl about eight years old, with a slight squint. Her face was defiant.

“Why should I give ’er to you?” she said. “Pitched her out of the window, you did—I saw you. If you pushed her out of the window you don’t want her, so now she’s mine.”

"I'll buy you another doll," said Alicia frantically. "We'll go to a toy shop—anywhere you like—and I'll buy you the best doll we can find. But give me back this one."

"Shan't," said the child.

Her arms went protectingly round the velvet doll.

"You must give her back," said Sybil. "She isn't yours."

She stretched out to take the doll from the child and at that moment the child stamped her foot, turned, and screamed at them.

"Shan't! Shan't! Shan't! She's my very own. I love her. You don't love her. You hate her. If you didn't hate her you wouldn't have pushed her out of the window. I love her, I tell you, and that's what she wants. She wants to be loved."

And then like an eel, sliding through the vehicles, the child ran across the street, down an alleyway, and out of sight before the two older women could decide to dodge the cars and follow.

"She's gone," said Alicia.

"She said the doll wanted to be loved," said Sybil.

"Perhaps," said Alicia, "perhaps that's what she wanted all along . . . to be loved. . . ."

In the middle of the London traffic the two frightened women stared at each other.

Five

GREENSHAW'S FOLLY

The two men rounded the corner of the shrubbery.

“Well, there you are,” said Raymond West. “That's it.”

Horace Bindler took a deep, appreciative breath.

“But my dear,” he cried, “how wonderful.” His voice rose in a high screech of ’sthetic delight, then deepened in reverent awe. “It's unbelievable. Out of this world! A period piece of the best.”

“I thought you'd like it,” said Raymond West, complacently.

“Like it? My dear—” Words failed Horace. He unbuckled the strap of his camera and got busy. “This will be one of the gems of my collection,” he said happily. “I do think, don't you, that it's rather amusing to have a collection of monstrosities? The idea came to me one night seven years ago in my bath. My last real gem was in the Campo Santo at Genoa, but I really think this beats it. What's it called?”

“I haven't the least idea,” said Raymond.

“I suppose it's got a name?”

“It must have. But the fact is that it's never referred to round here as anything but Greenshaw's Folly.”

“Greenshaw being the man who built it?”

“Yes. In eighteen-sixty or seventy or thereabouts. The local success story of the time. Barefoot boy who had risen to immense prosperity. Local opinion is divided as to why he built this house, whether it was sheer exuberance of wealth or whether it was done to impress his creditors. If the latter, it didn't impress them. He either went bankrupt or the next thing to it. Hence the name, Greenshaw's Folly."

Horace's camera clicked. "There," he said in a satisfied voice. "Remind me to show you No. 310 in my collection. A really incredible marble mantelpiece in the Italian manner." He added, looking at the house, "I can't conceive of how Mr. Greenshaw thought of it all."

"Rather obvious in some ways," said Raymond. "He had visited the châteaux of the Loire, don't you think? Those turrets. And then, rather unfortunately, he seems to have travelled in the Orient. The influence of the Taj Mahal is unmistakable. I rather like the Moorish wing," he added, "and the traces of a Venetian palace."

"One wonders how he ever got hold of an architect to carry out these ideas."

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"No difficulty about that, I expect," he said. "Probably the architect retired with a good income for life while poor old Greenshaw went bankrupt."

"Could we look at it from the other side?" asked Horace, "or are we trespassing!"

"We're trespassing all right," said Raymond, "but I don't think it will matter."

He turned towards the corner of the house and Horace skipped after him.

"But who lives here, my dear? Orphans or holiday visitors? It can't be a school. No playing fields or brisk efficiency."

"Oh, a Greenshaw lives here still," said Raymond over his shoulder. "The house itself didn't go in the crash. Old Greenshaw's son inherited it. He was a bit of a miser and lived here in a corner of it. Never spent a penny. Probably never had a penny to spend. His daughter lives here now. Old lady—very eccentric."

As he spoke Raymond was congratulating himself on having thought of Greenshaw's Folly as a means of entertaining his guest. These literary critics always professed themselves as longing for a weekend in the country, and were wont to find the country extremely boring when they got there. Tomorrow there would be the Sunday papers, and for today Raymond West congratulated himself on suggesting a visit to Greenshaw's Folly to enrich Horace Bindler's well-known collection of monstrosities.

They turned the corner of the house and came out on a neglected lawn. In one corner of it was a large artificial rockery, and bending over it was a figure at sight of which Horace clutched Raymond delightedly by the arm.

"My dear," he exclaimed, "do you see what she's got on? A sprigged print dress. Just like a housemaid—when there were housemaids. One of my most cherished memories is staying at a house in the country when I was quite a boy where a real housemaid called you in the morning, all crackling in a print dress and a cap. Yes, my boy, really—a cap. Muslin with streamers. No, perhaps it was the parlourmaid who had the streamers. But anyway she was a real housemaid and she brought in an enormous brass can of hot water. What an exciting day we're having."

The figure in the print dress had straightened up and had turned towards them, trowel in hand. She was a sufficiently startling figure. Unkempt locks of iron-grey fell wispily on her shoulders, a straw hat rather like the hats that horses wear in Italy was crammed down on her head. The coloured print dress she wore fell nearly to her ankles. Out of a weather-beaten, not-too-clean face, shrewd eyes surveyed them appraisingly.

"I must apologize for trespassing, Miss Greenshaw," said Raymond West, as he advanced towards her, "but Mr. Horace Bindler who is staying with me—"

Horace bowed and removed his hat.

"—is most interested in—er—ancient history and—er—fine buildings."

Raymond West spoke with the ease of a well-known author who knows that he is a celebrity, that he can venture where other people may not.

Miss Greenshaw looked up at the sprawling exuberance behind her.

"It is a fine house," she said appreciatively. "My grandfather built it—before my time, of course. He is reported as having said that he wished to astonish the natives."

"I'll say he did that, ma'am," said Horace Bindler.

"Mr. Bindler is the well-known literary critic," said Raymond West.

Miss Greenshaw had clearly no reverence for literary critics. She remained unimpressed.

"I consider it," said Miss Greenshaw, referring to the house, "as a monument to my grandfather's genius. Silly fools come here, and ask me why I don't sell it and go and live in a flat. What would I do in a flat? It's my home and I live in it," said Miss Greenshaw. "Always have lived here." She considered, brooding over the past. "There were three of us. Laura married the curate. Papa wouldn't give her any money, said clergymen ought to be unworldly. She died, having a baby. Baby died too. Nettie ran away with the riding master. Papa cut her out of his will, of course. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but no good. Don't think Nettie was happy with him. Anyway, she didn't live long. They had a son. He writes to me sometimes, but of course he isn't a Greenshaw. I'm the last of the Greenshaws." She drew up her bent shoulders with a certain pride, and readjusted the rakish angle of the straw hat. Then, turning, she said sharply,

"Yes, Mrs. Cresswell, what is it?"

Approaching them from the house was a figure that, seen side by side with Miss Greenshaw, seemed ludicrously dissimilar. Mrs. Cresswell had a marvellously dressed head of well-blued hair towering upwards in meticulously arranged curls and rolls. It was as though she had dressed her head to go as a French marquise to a fancy-dress party. The rest of her middle-aged person was dressed in what ought to have been rustling black silk but was actually one of the shinier varieties of black rayon. Although she was not a large woman, she had a well-developed and sumptuous bust. Her voice when she spoke, was unexpectedly deep. She spoke with exquisite diction, only a slight hesitation over words beginning with “h” and the final pronunciation of them with an exaggerated aspirate gave rise to a suspicion that at some remote period in her youth she might have had trouble over dropping her h’s.

“The fish, madam,” said Mrs. Cresswell, “the slice of cod. It has not arrived. I have asked Alfred to go down for it and he refuses to do so.”

Rather unexpectedly, Miss Greenshaw gave a cackle of laughter.

“Refuses, does he?”

“Alfred, madam, has been most disobliging.”

Miss Greenshaw raised two earth-stained fingers to her lips, suddenly produced an earsplitting whistle and at the same time yelled:

“Alfred. Alfred, come here.”

Round the corner of the house a young man appeared in answer to the summons, carrying a spade in his hand. He had a bold, handsome face and as he drew near he cast an unmistakably malevolent glance towards Mrs. Cresswell.

“You wanted me, miss?” he said.

“Yes, Alfred. I hear you’ve refused to go down for the fish. What about it, eh?”

Alfred spoke in a surly voice.

“I’ll go down for it if you wants it, miss. You’ve only got to say.”

“I do want it. I want it for my supper.”

“Right you are, miss. I’ll go right away.”

He threw an insolent glance at Mrs. Cresswell, who flushed and murmured below her breath:

"Really! It's unsupportable."

"Now that I think of it," said Miss Greenshaw, "a couple of strange visitors are just what we need aren't they, Mrs. Cresswell?"

Mrs. Cresswell looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry, madam—"

"For you-know-what," said Miss Greenshaw, nodding her head. "Beneficiary to a will mustn't witness it. That's right, isn't it?" She appealed to Raymond West.

"Quite correct," said Raymond.

"I know enough law to know that," said Miss Greenshaw. "And you two are men of standing."

She flung down her trowel on her weeding basket.

"Would you mind coming up to the library with me?"

"Delighted," said Horace eagerly.

She led the way through french windows and through a vast yellow and gold drawing room with faded brocade on the walls and dust covers arranged over the furniture, then through a large dim hall, up a staircase and into a room on the first floor.

"My grandfather's library," she announced.

Horace looked round the room with acute pleasure. It was a room, from his point of view, quite full of monstrosities. The heads of sphinxes appeared on the most unlikely pieces of furniture, there was a colossal bronze representing, he thought, Paul and Virginia, and a vast bronze clock with classical motifs of which he longed to take a photograph.

"A fine lot of books," said Miss Greenshaw.

Raymond was already looking at the books. From what he could see from a cursory glance there was no book here of any real interest or, indeed, any book which appeared to have been read. They were all superbly bound sets of the classics as supplied ninety years ago for furnishing a gentleman's library. Some novels of a bygone period were included. But they too showed little signs of having been read.

Miss Greenshaw was fumbling in the drawers of a vast desk. Finally she pulled out a parchment document.

"My will," she explained. "Got to leave your money to someone—or so they say. If I died without a will I suppose that son of a horse-coper would get it. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but a rogue if there ever was one. Don't see why his son should inherit this place. No," she went on, as though answering some unspoken objection, "I've made up my mind. I'm leaving it to Cresswell."

"Your housekeeper?"

"Yes. I've explained it to her. I make a will leaving her all I've got and then I don't need to pay her any wages. Saves me a lot in current expenses, and it keeps her up to the mark. No giving me notice and walking off at any minute. Very la-di-dah and all that, isn't she? But her father was a working plumber in a very small way. She's nothing to give herself airs about."

She had by now unfolded the parchment. Picking up a pen she dipped it in the inkstand and wrote her signature, Katherine Dorothy Greenshaw.

"That's right," she said. "You've seen me sign it, and then you two sign it, and that makes it legal."

She handed the pen to Raymond West. He hesitated a moment, feeling an unexpected repulsion to what he was asked to do. Then he quickly scrawled the well-known signature, for which his morning's mail usually brought at least six demands a day.

Horace took the pen from him and added his own minute signature.

“That’s done,” said Miss Greenshaw.

She moved across to the bookcase and stood looking at them uncertainly, then she opened a glass door, took out a book and slipped the folded parchment inside.

“I’ve my own places for keeping things,” she said.

“Lady Audley’s Secret,” Raymond West remarked, catching sight of the title as she replaced the book.

Miss Greenshaw gave another cackle of laughter.

“Best seller in its day,” she remarked. “Not like your books, eh?”

She gave Raymond a sudden friendly nudge in the ribs. Raymond was rather surprised that she even knew he wrote books. Although Raymond West was quite a name in literature, he could hardly be described as a best seller. Though softening a little with the advent of middle age, his books dealt bleakly with the sordid side of life.

“I wonder,” Horace demanded breathlessly, “if I might just take a photograph of the clock?”

“By all means,” said Miss Greenshaw. “It came, I believe, from the Paris exhibition.”

“Very probably,” said Horace. He took his picture.

“This room’s not been used much since my grandfather’s time,” said Miss Greenshaw. “This desk’s full of old diaries of his. Interesting, I should think. I haven’t the eyesight to read them myself. I’d like to get them published, but I suppose one would have to work on them a good deal.”

“You could engage someone to do that,” said Raymond West.

“Could I really? It’s an idea, you know. I’ll think about it.”

Raymond West glanced at his watch.

“We mustn’t trespass on your kindness any longer,” he said.

“Pleased to have seen you,” said Miss Greenshaw graciously. “Thought you were the policeman when I heard you coming round the corner of the house.”

“Why a policeman?” demanded Horace, who never minded asking questions.

Miss Greenshaw responded unexpectedly.

“If you want to know the time, ask a policeman,” she carolled, and with this example of Victorian wit, nudged Horace in the ribs and roared with laughter.

“It’s been a wonderful afternoon,” sighed Horace as they walked home. “Really, that place has everything. The only thing the library needs is a body. Those old-fashioned detective stories about murder in the library—that’s just the kind of library I’m sure the authors had in mind.”

“If you want to discuss murder,” said Raymond, “you must talk to my Aunt Jane.”

“Your Aunt Jane? Do you mean Miss Marple?” He felt a little at a loss.

The charming old-world lady to whom he had been introduced the night before seemed the last person to be mentioned in connection with murder.

“Oh, yes,” said Raymond. “Murder is a specialty of hers.”

“But my dear, how intriguing. What do you really mean?”

“I mean just that,” said Raymond. He paraphrased: “Some commit murder, some get mixed-up in murders, others have murder thrust upon them. My Aunt Jane comes into the third category.”

“You are joking.”

“Not in the least. I can refer you to the former Commissioner of Scotland Yard, several Chief Constables and one or two hard-working inspectors of the CID.”

Horace said happily that wonders would never cease. Over the tea table they gave Joan West, Raymond’s wife, Lou Oxley her niece, and old Miss Marple, a résumé of the afternoon’s happenings, recounting in detail everything that Miss Greenshaw had said to them.

“But I do think,” said Horace, “that there is something a little sinister about the whole setup. That duchesslike creature, the housekeeper—arsenic, perhaps, in the teapot, now that she knows her mistress has made the will in her favour?”

“Tell us, Aunt Jane,” said Raymond. “Will there be murder or won’t there? What do you think?”

“I think,” said Miss Marple, winding up her wool with a rather severe air, “that you shouldn’t joke about these things as much as you do, Raymond. Arsenic is, of course, quite a possibility. So easy to obtain. Probably present in the toolshed already in the form of weed killer.”

“Oh, really, darling,” said Joan West, affectionately. “Wouldn’t that be rather too obvious?”

“It’s all very well to make a will,” said Raymond, “I don’t suppose really the poor old thing has anything to leave except that awful white elephant of a house, and who would want that?”

“A film company possibly,” said Horace, “or a hotel or an institution?”

“They’d expect to buy it for a song,” said Raymond, but Miss Marple was shaking her head.

“You know, dear Raymond, I cannot agree with you there. About the money, I mean. The grandfather was evidently one of those lavish spenders who make money easily, but can’t keep it. He may have gone broke, as you say, but hardly bankrupt or else his son would not have had the house. Now the son, as is so often the case, was an entirely different character to his father. A miser. A man who saved every penny. I should say that in the course of his lifetime he probably put by a very good sum. This Miss Greenshaw appears to have taken after him, to dislike spending money, that is. Yes, I should think it quite likely that she had quite a good sum tucked away."

"In that case," said Joan West, "I wonder now—what about Lou?"

They looked at Lou as she sat, silent, by the fire.

Lou was Joan West's niece. Her marriage had recently, as she herself put it, come unstuck, leaving her with two young children and a bare sufficiency of money to keep them on.

"I mean," said Joan, "if this Miss Greenshaw really wants someone to go through diaries and get a book ready for publication. . . ."

"It's an idea," said Raymond.

Lou said in a low voice:

"It's work I could do—and I'd enjoy it."

"I'll write to her," said Raymond.

"I wonder," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "what the old lady meant by that remark about a policeman?"

"Oh, it was just a joke."

"It reminded me," said Miss Marple, nodding her head vigorously, "yes, it reminded me very much of Mr. Naysmith."

"Who was Mr. Naysmith?" asked Raymond, curiously.

"He kept bees," said Miss Marple, "and was very good at doing the acrostics in the Sunday papers. And he liked giving people false impressions just for fun. But sometimes it led to trouble."

Everybody was silent for a moment, considering Mr. Naysmith, but as there did not seem to be any points of resemblance between him and Miss Greenshaw, they decided that dear Aunt Jane was perhaps getting a little bit disconnected in her old age.

Horace Bindler went back to London without having collected any more monstrosities and Raymond West wrote a letter to Miss Greenshaw telling her that he knew of a Mrs. Louisa Oxley who would be competent to undertake work on the diaries. After a lapse of some days, a letter arrived, written in spidery old-fashioned handwriting, in which Miss Greenshaw declared herself anxious to avail herself of the services of Mrs. Oxley, and making an appointment for Mrs. Oxley to come and see her.

Lou duly kept the appointment, generous terms were arranged and she started work on the following day.

“I’m awfully grateful to you,” she said to Raymond. “It will fit in beautifully. I can take the children to school, go on to Greenshaw’s Folly and pick them up on my way back. How fantastic the whole setup is! That old woman has to be seen to be believed.”

On the evening of her first day at work she returned and described her day.

“I’ve hardly seen the housekeeper,” she said. “She came in with coffee and biscuits at half past eleven with her mouth pursed up very prunes and prisms, and would hardly speak to me. I think she disapproves deeply of my having been engaged.” She went on, “It seems there’s quite a feud between her and the gardener, Alfred. He’s a local boy and fairly lazy, I should imagine, and he and the housekeeper won’t speak to each other. Miss Greenshaw said in her rather grand way, ‘There have always been feuds as far as I can remember between the garden and the house staff. It was so in my grandfather’s time. There were three men and a boy in the garden then, and eight maids in the house, but there was always friction.’ ”

On the following day Lou returned with another piece of news.

“Just fancy,” she said, “I was asked to ring up the nephew this morning.”

"Miss Greenshaw's nephew?"

"Yes. It seems he's an actor playing in the company that's doing a summer season at Boreham on Sea. I rang up the theatre and left a message asking him to lunch tomorrow. Rather fun, really. The old girl didn't want the housekeeper to know. I think Mrs. Cresswell has done something that's annoyed her."

"Tomorrow another instalment of this thrilling serial," murmured Raymond.

"It's exactly like a serial, isn't it? Reconciliation with the nephew, blood is thicker than water—another will to be made and the old will destroyed."

"Aunt Jane, you're looking very serious."

"Was I, my dear? Have you heard anymore about the policeman?"

Lou looked bewildered. "I don't know anything about a policeman."

"That remark of hers, my dear," said Miss Marple, "must have meant something."

Lou arrived at her work the next day in a cheerful mood. She passed through the open front door—the doors and windows of the house were always open. Miss Greenshaw appeared to have no fear of burglars, and was probably justified, as most things in the house weighed several tons and were of no marketable value.

Lou had passed Alfred in the drive. When she first caught sight of him he had been leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette, but as soon as he had caught sight of her he had seized a broom and begun diligently to sweep leaves. An idle young man, she thought, but good-looking. His features reminded her of someone. As she passed through the hall on her way upstairs to the library she glanced at the large picture of Nathaniel Greenshaw which presided over the mantelpiece, showing him in the acme of Victorian prosperity, leaning back in a large armchair, his hands resting on the gold albert across his capacious stomach. As her glance swept up from the stomach to the face with its heavy jowls, its bushy eyebrows and its flourishing black moustache, the thought occurred to her that Nathaniel Greenshaw must have been handsome as a young man. He had looked, perhaps, a little like Alfred. . . .

She went into the library, shut the door behind her, opened her typewriter and got out the diaries from the drawer at the side of the desk. Through the open window she caught a glimpse of Miss Greenshaw in a puce-coloured sprigged print, bending over the rockery, weeding assiduously. They had had two wet days, of which the weeds had taken full advantage.

Lou, a town-bred girl, decided that if she ever had a garden it would never contain a rockery which needed hand weeding. Then she settled down to her work.

When Mrs. Cresswell entered the library with the coffee tray at half past eleven, she was clearly in a very bad temper. She banged the tray down on the table, and observed to the universe.

“Company for lunch—and nothing in the house! What am I supposed to do, I should like to know? And no sign of Alfred.”

“He was sweeping in the drive when I got here,” Lou offered.

“I daresay. A nice soft job.”

Mrs. Cresswell swept out of the room and banged the door behind her. Lou grinned to herself. She wondered what “the nephew” would be like.

She finished her coffee and settled down to her work again. It was so absorbing that time passed quickly. Nathaniel Greenshaw, when he started to keep a diary, had succumbed to the pleasure of frankness. Trying out a passage relating to the personal charm of a barmaid in the neighbouring town, Lou reflected that a good deal of editing would be necessary.

As she was thinking this, she was startled by a scream from the garden. Jumping up, she ran to the open window. Miss Greenshaw was staggering away from the rockery towards the house. Her hands were clasped to her breast and between them there protruded a feathered shaft that Lou recognized with stupefaction to be the shaft of an arrow.

Miss Greenshaw's head, in its battered straw hat, fell forward on her breast. She called up to Lou in a failing voice: ". . . shot . . . he shot me . . . with an arrow . . . get help. . . ."

Lou rushed to the door. She turned the handle, but the door would not open. It took her a moment or two of futile endeavour to realize that she was locked in. She rushed back to the window.

"I'm locked in."

Miss Greenshaw, her back towards Lou, and swaying a little on her feet was calling up to the housekeeper at a window farther along.

"Ring police . . . telephone. . . ."

Then, lurching from side to side like a drunkard she disappeared from Lou's view through the window below into the drawing room. A moment later Lou heard a crash of broken china, a heavy fall, and then silence. Her imagination reconstructed the scene. Miss Greenshaw must have staggered blindly into a small table with a Sèvres tea set on it.

Desperately Lou pounded on the door, calling and shouting. There was no creeper or drainpipe outside the window that could help her to get out that way.

Tired at last of beating on the door, she returned to the window. From the window of her sitting room farther along, the housekeeper's head appeared.

"Come and let me out, Mrs. Oxley. I'm locked in."

"So am I."

"Oh dear, isn't it awful? I've telephoned the police. There's an extension in this room, but what I can't understand, Mrs. Oxley, is our being locked in. I never heard a key turn, did you?"

"No. I didn't hear anything at all. Oh dear, what shall we do? Perhaps Alfred might hear us." Lou shouted at the top of her voice, "Alfred, Alfred."

"Gone to his dinner as likely as not. What time is it?"

Lou glanced at her watch.

"Twenty-five past twelve."

"He's not supposed to go until half past, but he sneaks off earlier whenever he can."

"Do you think—do you think—"

Lou meant to ask "Do you think she's dead?" but the words stuck in her throat.

There was nothing to do but wait. She sat down on the windowsill. It seemed an eternity before the stolid helmeted figure of a police constable came round the corner of the house. She leant out of the window and he looked up at her, shading his eyes with his hand. When he spoke his voice held reproof.

"What's going on here?" he asked disapprovingly.

From their respective windows, Lou and Mrs. Cresswell poured a flood of excited information down on him.

The constable produced a notebook and pencil. "You ladies ran upstairs and locked yourselves in? Can I have your names, please?"

"No. Somebody else locked us in. Come and let us out."

The constable said reprovingly, "All in good time," and disappeared through the window below.

Once again time seemed infinite. Lou heard the sound of a car arriving, and, after what seemed an hour, but was actually three minutes, first Mrs.

Cresswell and then Lou, were released by a police sergeant more alert than the original constable.

“Miss Greenshaw?” Lou’s voice faltered. “What—what’s happened?”

The sergeant cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, madam,” he said, “what I’ve already told Mrs. Cresswell here. Miss Greenshaw is dead.”

“Murdered,” said Mrs. Cresswell. “That’s what it is—murder.”

The sergeant said dubiously:

“Could have been an accident—some country lads shooting with bows and arrows.”

Again there was the sound of a car arriving. The sergeant said:

“That’ll be the MO,” and started downstairs.

But it was not the MO. As Lou and Mrs. Cresswell came down the stairs a young man stepped hesitatingly through the front door and paused, looking round him with a somewhat bewildered air.

Then, speaking in a pleasant voice that in some way seemed familiar to Lou—perhaps it had a family resemblance to Miss Greenshaw’s—he asked:

“Excuse me, does—er—does Miss Greenshaw live here?”

“May I have your name if you please,” said the sergeant advancing upon him.

“Fletcher,” said the young man. “Nat Fletcher. I’m Miss Greenshaw’s nephew, as a matter of fact.”

“Indeed, sir, well—I’m sorry—I’m sure—”

“Has anything happened?” asked Nat Fletcher.

“There’s been an—accident—your aunt was shot with an arrow—penetrated the jugular vein—”

Mrs. Cresswell spoke hysterically and without her usual refinement:

“Your h’aunt’s been murdered, that’s what’s ’appened. Your h’aunt’s been murdered.”

Inspector Welch drew his chair a little nearer to the table and let his gaze wander from one to the other of the four people in the room. It was the evening of the same day. He had called at the Wests’ house to take Lou Oxley once more over her statement.

“You are sure of the exact words? Shot—he shot me—with an arrow—get help?”

Lou nodded.

“And the time?”

“I looked at my watch a minute or two later—it was then twelve twenty-five.”

“Your watch keeps good time?”

“I looked at the clock as well.”

The inspector turned to Raymond West.

“It appears, sir, that about a week ago you and a Mr. Horace Bindler were witnesses to Miss Greenshaw’s will?”

Briefly, Raymond recounted the events of the afternoon visit that he and Horace Bindler had paid to Greenshaw’s Folly.

“This testimony of yours may be important,” said Welch. “Miss Greenshaw distinctly told you, did she, that her will was being made in favour of Mrs. Cresswell, the housekeeper, that she was not paying Mrs. Cresswell any wages in view of the expectations Mrs. Cresswell had of profiting by her death?"

"That is what she told me—yes."

"Would you say that Mrs. Cresswell was definitely aware of these facts?"

"I should say undoubtedly. Miss Greenshaw made a reference in my presence to beneficiaries not being able to witness a will and Mrs. Cresswell clearly understood what she meant by it. Moreover, Miss Greenshaw herself told me that she had come to this arrangement with Mrs. Cresswell."

"So Mrs. Cresswell had reason to believe she was an interested party. Motive's clear enough in her case, and I daresay she'd be our chief suspect now if it wasn't for the fact that she was securely locked in her room like Mrs. Oxley here, and also that Miss Greenshaw definitely said a man shot her—"

"She definitely was locked in her room?"

"Oh yes. Sergeant Cayley let her out. It's a big old-fashioned lock with a big old-fashioned key. The key was in the lock and there's not a chance that it could have been turned from inside or any hanky-panky of that kind. No, you can take it definitely that Mrs. Cresswell was locked inside that room and couldn't get out. And there were no bows and arrows in the room and Miss Greenshaw couldn't in any case have been shot from a window—the angle forbids it—no, Mrs. Cresswell's out of it."

He paused and went on:

"Would you say that Miss Greenshaw, in your opinion, was a practical joker?"

Miss Marple looked up sharply from her corner.

"So the will wasn't in Mrs. Cresswell's favour after all?" she said.

Inspector Welch looked over at her in a rather surprised fashion.

“That’s a very clever guess of yours, madam,” he said. “No. Mrs. Cresswell isn’t named as beneficiary.”

“Just like Mr. Naysmith,” said Miss Marple, nodding her head. “Miss Greenshaw told Mrs. Cresswell she was going to leave her everything and so got out of paying her wages; and then she left her money to somebody else. No doubt she was vastly pleased with herself. No wonder she chortled when she put the will away in Lady Audley’s Secret.”

“It was lucky Mrs. Oxley was able to tell us about the will and where it was put,” said the inspector. “We might have had a long hunt for it otherwise.”

“A Victorian sense of humour,” murmured Raymond West. “So she left her money to her nephew after all,” said Lou.

The inspector shook his head.

“No,” he said, “she didn’t leave it to Nat Fletcher. The story goes around here—of course I’m new to the place and I only get the gossip that’s secondhand—but it seems that in the old days both Miss Greenshaw and her sister were set on the handsome young ridding master, and the sister got him. No, she didn’t leave the money to her nephew—” He paused, rubbing his chin, “She left it to Alfred,” he said.

“Alfred—the gardener?” Joan spoke in a surprised voice.

“Yes, Mrs. West. Alfred Pollock.”

“But why?” cried Lou.

Miss Marple coughed and murmured:

“I should imagine, though perhaps I am wrong, that there may have been—what we might call family reasons.”

“You could call them that in a way,” agreed the inspector. “It’s quite well-known in the village, it seems, that Thomas Pollock, Alfred’s grandfather, was one of old Mr. Greenshaw’s by-blows.”

"Of course," cried Lou, "the resemblance! I saw it this morning."

She remembered how after passing Alfred she had come into the house and looked up at old Greenshaw's portrait.

"I daresay," said Miss Marple, "that she thought Alfred Pollock might have a pride in the house, might even want to live in it, whereas her nephew would almost certainly have no use for it whatever and would sell it as soon as he could possibly do so. He's an actor, isn't he? What play exactly is he acting in at present?"

Trust an old lady to wander from the point, thought Inspector Welch, but he replied civilly:

"I believe, madam, they are doing a season of James Barrie's plays."

"Barrie," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"What Every Woman Knows," said Inspector Welch, and then blushed. "Name of a play," he said quickly. "I'm not much of a theatregoer myself," he added, "but the wife went along and saw it last week. Quite well done, she said it was."

"Barrie wrote some very charming plays," said Miss Marple, "though I must say that when I went with an old friend of mine, General Easterly, to see Barrie's Little Mary—" she shook her head sadly, "—neither of us knew where to look."

The inspector, unacquainted with the play Little Mary looked completely fogged. Miss Marple explained:

"When I was a girl, Inspector, nobody ever mentioned the word stomach."

The inspector looked even more at sea. Miss Marple was murmuring titles under her breath.

"The Admirable Crichton. Very clever. Mary Rose—a charming play. I cried, I remember. Quality Street I didn't care for so much. Then there was A Kiss for Cinderella. Oh, of course."

Inspector Welch had no time to waste on theatrical discussion. He returned to the matter in hand.

“The question is,” he said, “did Alfred Pollock know that the old lady had made a will in his favour? Did she tell him?” He added: “You see—there’s an archery club over at Boreham Lovell and Alfred Pollock’s a member. He’s a very good shot indeed with a bow and arrow.”

“Then isn’t your case quite clear?” asked Raymond West. “It would fit in with the doors being locked on the two women—he’d know just where they were in the house.”

The inspector looked at him. He spoke with deep melancholy.

“He’s got an alibi,” said the inspector.

“I always think alibis are definitely suspicious.”

“Maybe, sir,” said Inspector Welch. “You’re talking as a writer.”

“I don’t write detective stories,” said Raymond West, horrified at the mere idea.

“Easy enough to say that alibis are suspicious,” went on Inspector Welch, “but unfortunately we’ve got to deal with facts.”

He sighed.

“We’ve got three good suspects,” he said. “Three people who, as it happened, were very close upon the scene at the time. Yet the odd thing is that it looks as though none of the three could have done it. The housekeeper I’ve already dealt with—the nephew, Nat Fletcher, at the moment Miss Greenshaw was shot, was a couple of miles away filling up his car at a garage and asking his way—as for Alfred Pollock six people will swear that he entered the Dog and Duck at twenty past twelve and was there for an hour having his usual bread and cheese and beer.”

“Deliberately establishing an alibi,” said Raymond West hopefully.

“Maybe,” said Inspector Welch, “but if so, he did establish it.”

There was a long silence. Then Raymond turned his head to where Miss Marple sat upright and thoughtful.

“It’s up to you, Aunt Jane,” he said. “The inspector’s baffled, the sergeant’s baffled, I’m baffled, Joan’s baffled, Lou is baffled. But to you, Aunt Jane, it is crystal clear. Am I right?”

“I wouldn’t say that, dear,” said Miss Marple, “not crystal clear, and murder, dear Raymond, isn’t a game. I don’t suppose poor Miss Greenshaw wanted to die, and it was a particularly brutal murder. Very well-planned and quite cold-blooded. It’s not a thing to make jokes about!”

“I’m sorry,” said Raymond, abashed. “I’m not really as callous as I sound. One treats a thing lightly to take away from the—well, the horror of it.”

“That is, I believe, the modern tendency,” said Miss Marple, “All these wars, and having to joke about funerals. Yes, perhaps I was thoughtless when I said you were callous.”

“It isn’t,” said Joan, “as though we’d known her at all well.”

“That is very true,” said Miss Marple. “You, dear Joan, did not know her at all. I did not know her at all. Raymond gathered an impression of her from one afternoon’s conversation. Lou knew her for two days.”

“Come now, Aunt Jane,” said Raymond, “tell us your views. You don’t mind, Inspector?”

“Not at all,” said the inspector politely.

“Well, my dear, it would seem that we have three people who had, or might have thought they had, a motive to kill the old lady. And three quite simple reasons why none of the three could have done so. The housekeeper could not have done so because she was locked in her room and because Miss Greenshaw definitely stated that a man shot her. The gardener could not have done it because he was inside the Dog and Duck at the time the murder was committed, the nephew could not have done it because he was still some distance away in his car at the time of the murder."

"Very clearly put, madam," said the inspector.

"And since it seems most unlikely that any outsider should have done it, where, then, are we?"

"That's what the inspector wants to know," said Raymond West.

"One so often looks at a thing the wrong way round," said Miss Marple apologetically. "If we can't alter the movements or the position of those three people, then couldn't we perhaps alter the time of the murder?"

"You mean that both my watch and the clock were wrong?" asked Lou.

"No dear," said Miss Marple, "I didn't mean that at all. I mean that the murder didn't occur when you thought it occurred."

"But I saw it," cried Lou.

"Well, what I have been wondering, my dear, was whether you weren't meant to see it. I've been asking myself, you know, whether that wasn't the real reason why you were engaged for this job."

"What do you mean, Aunt Jane?"

"Well, dear, it seems odd. Miss Greenshaw did not like spending money, and yet she engaged you and agreed quite willingly to the terms you asked. It seems to me that perhaps you were meant to be there in that library on the first floor, looking out of the window so that you could be the key witness —someone from outside of irreproachable good faith—to fix a definite time and place for the murder."

"But you can't mean," said Lou, incredulously, "that Miss Greenshaw intended to be murdered."

"What I mean, dear," said Miss Marple, "is that you didn't really know Miss Greenshaw. There's no real reason, is there, why the Miss Greenshaw you saw when you went up to the house should be the same Miss Greenshaw that Raymond saw a few days earlier? Oh, yes, I know," she went on, to prevent Lou's reply, "she was wearing the peculiar old-fashioned print dress and the strange straw hat, and had unkempt hair. She corresponded exactly to the description Raymond gave us last weekend. But those two women, you know, were much of an age and height and size. The housekeeper, I mean, and Miss Greenshaw."

"But the housekeeper is fat!" Lou exclaimed. "She's got an enormous bosom."

Miss Marple coughed.

"But my dear, surely, nowadays I have seen—er—them myself in shops most indelicately displayed. It is very easy for anyone to have a—a bust—of any size and dimension."

"What are you trying to say?" demanded Raymond.

"I was just thinking, dear, that during the two or three days Lou was working there, one woman could have played the two parts. You said yourself, Lou, that you hardly saw the housekeeper, except for the one moment in the morning when she brought you in the tray with coffee. One sees those clever artists on the stage coming in as different characters with only a minute or two to spare, and I am sure the change could have been effected quite easily. That marquise head-dress could be just a wig slipped on and off."

"Aunt Jane! Do you mean that Miss Greenshaw was dead before I started work there?"

"Not dead. Kept under drugs, I should say. A very easy job for an unscrupulous woman like the housekeeper to do. Then she made the arrangements with you and got you to telephone to the nephew to ask him to lunch at a definite time. The only person who would have known that this Miss Greenshaw was not Miss Greenshaw would have been Alfred. And if you remember, the first two days you were working there it was wet, and Miss Greenshaw stayed in the house. Alfred never came into the house because of his feud with the housekeeper. And on the last morning Alfred was in the drive, while Miss Greenshaw was working on the rockery—I'd like to have a look at that rockery."

"Do you mean it was Mrs. Cresswell who killed Miss Greenshaw?"

"I think that after bringing you your coffee, the woman locked the door on you as she went out, carried the unconscious Miss Greenshaw down to the drawing room, then assumed her 'Miss Greenshaw' disguise and went out to work on the rockery where you could see her from the window. In due course she screamed and came staggering to the house clutching an arrow as though it had penetrated her throat. She called for help and was careful to say "he shot me" so as to remove suspicion from the housekeeper. She also called up to the housekeeper's window as though she saw her there. Then, once inside the drawing room, she threw over a table with porcelain on it—and ran quickly upstairs, put on her marquise wig and was able a few moments later to lean her head out of the window and tell you that she, too, was locked in."

"But she was locked in," said Lou.

"I know. That is where the policeman comes in."

"What policeman?"

"Exactly—what policeman? I wonder, Inspector, if you would mind telling me how and when you arrived on the scene?"

The inspector looked a little puzzled.

"At twelve twenty-nine we received a telephone call from Mrs. Cresswell, housekeeper to Miss Greenshaw, stating that her mistress had been shot. Sergeant Cayley and myself went out there at once in a car and arrived at the house at twelve thirty-five. We found Miss Greenshaw dead and the two ladies locked in their rooms."

"So, you see, my dear," said Miss Marple to Lou. "The police constable you saw wasn't a real police constable. You never thought of him again—one doesn’t—one just accepts one more uniform as part of the law.”

“But who—why?”

“As to who—well, if they are playing A Kiss for Cinderella, a policeman is the principal character. Nat Fletcher would only have to help himself to the costume he wears on the stage. He’d ask his way at a garage being careful to call attention to the time—twelve twenty-five, then drive on quickly, leave his car round a corner, slip on his police uniform and do his ‘act.’ ”

“But why?—why?”

“Someone had to lock the housekeeper’s door on the outside, and someone had to drive the arrow through Miss Greenshaw’s throat. You can stab anyone with an arrow just as well as by shooting it—but it needs force.”

“You mean they were both in it?”

“Oh yes, I think so. Mother and son as likely as not.”

“But Miss Greenshaw’s sister died long ago.”

“Yes, but I’ve no doubt Mr. Fletcher married again. He sounds the sort of man who would, and I think it possible that the child died too, and that this so called nephew was the second wife’s child, and not really a relation at all. The woman got a post as housekeeper and spied out the land. Then he wrote as her nephew and proposed to call upon her—he may have made some joking reference to coming in his policeman’s uniform—or asked her over to see the play. But I think she suspected the truth and refused to see him. He would have been her heir if she had died without making a will—but of course once she had made a will in the housekeeper’s favour (as they thought) then it was clear sailing.”

“But why use an arrow?” objected Joan. “So very far-fetched.”

“Not far-fetched at all, dear. Alfred belonged to an archery club—Alfred was meant to take the blame. The fact that he was in the pub as early as twelve twenty was most unfortunate from their point of view. He always left a little before his proper time and that would have been just right—” she shook her head. “It really seems all wrong—morally, I mean, that Alfred’s laziness should have saved his life.”

The inspector cleared his throat.

“Well, madam, these suggestions of yours are very interesting. I shall have, of course, to investigate—”

Miss Marple and Raymond West stood by the rockery and looked down at that gardening basket full of dying vegetation.

Miss Marple murmured:

“Alyssum, saxifrage, cytisus, thimble campanula . . . Yes, that’s all the proof I need. Whoever was weeding here yesterday morning was no gardener—she pulled up plants as well as weeds. So now I know I’m right. Thank you, dear Raymond, for bringing me here. I wanted to see the place for myself.”

She and Raymond both looked up at the outrageous pile of Greenshaw’s Folly.

A cough made them turn. A handsome young man was also looking at the house.

“Plaguey big place,” he said. “Too big for nowadays—or so they say. I dunno about that. If I won a football pool and made a lot of money, that’s the kind of house I’d like to build.”

He smiled bashfully at them.

“Reckon I can say so now—that there house was built by my great-grandfather,” said Alfred Pollock. “And a fine house it is, for all they call it Greenshaw’s Folly!”

Six

THE DOUBLE CLUE

"The Double Clue" was first published in The Sketch, 5 December 1923.

But above everything—no publicity," said Mr. Marcus Hardman for perhaps the fourteenth time.

The word publicity occurred throughout his conversation with the regularity of a leitmotif. Mr. Hardman was a small man, delicately plump, with exquisitely manicured hands and a plaintive tenor voice. In his way, he was somewhat of a celebrity and the fashionable life was his profession. He was rich, but not remarkably so, and he spent his money zealously in the pursuit of social pleasure. His hobby was collecting. He had the collector's soul. Old lace, old fans, antique jewellery—nothing crude or modern for Marcus Hardman.

Poirot and I, obeying an urgent summons, had arrived to find the little man writhing in an agony of indecision. Under the circumstances, to call in the police was abhorrent to him. On the other hand, not to call them in was to acquiesce in the loss of some of the gems of his collection. He hit upon Poirot as a compromise.

"My rubies, Monsieur Poirot, and the emerald necklace said to have belonged to Catherine de' Medici. Oh, the emerald necklace!"

"If you will recount to me the circumstances of their disappearance?" suggested Poirot gently.

"I am endeavouring to do so. Yesterday afternoon I had a little tea party—quite an informal affair, some half a dozen people or so. I have given one or two of them during the season, and though perhaps I should not say so, they have been quite a success. Some good music—Nacora, the pianist, and Katherine Bird, the Australian contralto—in the big studio. Well, early in the afternoon, I was showing my guests my collection of medieval jewels. I keep them in the small wall safe over there. It is arranged like a cabinet inside, with coloured velvet background, to display the stones. Afterwards we inspected the fans—in the case on the wall. Then we all went to the studio for music. It was not until after everyone had gone that I discovered the safe rifled! I must have failed to shut it properly, and someone had seized the opportunity to denude it of its contents. The rubies, Monsieur Poirot, the emerald necklace—the collection of a lifetime! What would I not give to recover them! But there must be no publicity! You fully understand that, do you not, Monsieur Poirot? My own guests, my personal friends! It would be a horrible scandal!"

"Who was the last person to leave this room when you went to the studio?"

"Mr. Johnston. You may know him? The South African millionaire. He has just rented the Abbotburys' house in Park Lane. He lingered behind a few moments, I remember. But surely, oh, surely it could not be he!"

"Did any of your guests return to this room during the afternoon on any pretext?"

"I was prepared for that question, Monsieur Poirot. Three of them did so. Countess Vera Rossakoff, Mr. Bernard Parker, and Lady Runcorn."

"Let us hear about them."

"The Countess Rossakoff is a very charming Russian lady, a member of the old régime. She has recently come to this country. She had bade me good-bye, and I was therefore somewhat surprised to find her in this room apparently gazing in rapture at my cabinet of fans. You know, Monsieur Poirot, the more I think of it, the more suspicious it seems to me. Don't you agree?"

"Extremely suspicious; but let us hear about the others."

"Well, Parker simply came here to fetch a case of miniatures that I was anxious to show to Lady Runcorn."

"And Lady Runcorn herself?"

"As I daresay you know, Lady Runcorn is a middle-aged woman of considerable force of character who devotes most of her time to various charitable committees. She simply returned to fetch a handbag she had laid down somewhere."

"Bien, monsieur. So we have four possible suspects. The Russian countess, the English grande dame, the South African millionaire, and Mr. Bernard Parker. Who is Mr. Parker, by the way?"

The question appeared to embarrass Mr. Hardman considerably.

"He is—er—he is a young fellow. Well, in fact, a young fellow I know."

"I had already deduced as much," replied Poirot gravely. "What does he do, this Mr. Parker?"

"He is a young man about town—not, perhaps, quite in the swim, if I may so express myself."

"How did he come to be a friend of yours, may I ask?"

"Well—er—on one or two occasions he has—performed certain little commissions for me."

"Continue, monsieur," said Poirot.

Hardman looked piteously at him. Evidently the last thing he wanted to do was to continue. But as Poirot maintained an inexorable silence, he capitulated.

"You see, Monsieur Poirot—it is well-known that I am interested in antique jewels. Sometimes there is a family heirloom to be disposed of—which, mind you, would never be sold in the open market or to a dealer. But a private sale to me is a very different matter. Parker arranges the details of such things, he is in touch with both sides, and thus any little embarrassment is avoided. He brings anything of that kind to my notice. For instance, the Countess Rossakoff has brought some family jewels with her from Russia. She is anxious to sell them. Bernard Parker was to have arranged the transaction.”

“I see,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “And you trust him implicitly?”

“I have had no reason to do otherwise.”

“Mr. Hardman, of these four people, which do you yourself suspect?”

“Oh, Monsieur Poirot, what a question! They are my friends, as I told you. I suspect none of them—or all of them, whichever way you like to put it.”

“I do not agree. You suspect one of those four. It is not Countess Rossakoff. It is not Mr. Parker. Is it Lady Runcorn or Mr. Johnston?”

“You drive me into a corner, Monsieur Poirot, you do indeed. I am most anxious to have no scandal. Lady Runcorn belongs to one of the oldest families in England; but it is true, it is most unfortunately true, that her aunt, Lady Caroline, suffered from a most melancholy affliction. It was understood, of course, by all her friends, and her maid returned the teaspoons, or whatever it was, as promptly as possible. You see my predicament!”

“So Lady Runcorn had an aunt who was a kleptomaniac? Very interesting. You permit that I examine the safe?”

Mr. Hardman assenting, Poirot pushed back the door of the safe and examined the interior. The empty velvet-lined shelves gaped at us.

“Even now the door does not shut properly,” murmured Poirot, as he swung it to and fro. “I wonder why? Ah, what have we here? A glove, caught in the hinge. A man’s glove.”

He held it out to Mr. Hardman.

“That’s not one of my gloves,” the latter declared.

“Aha! Something more!” Poirot bent deftly and picked up a small object from the floor of the safe. It was a flat cigarette case made of black moiré.

“My cigarette case!” cried Mr. Hardman.

“Yours? Surely not, monsieur. Those are not your initials.”

He pointed to an entwined monogram of two letters executed in platinum.

Hardman took it in his hand.

“You are right,” he declared. “It is very like mine, but the initials are different. A ‘B’ and a ‘P.’ Good heavens—Parker!”

“It would seem so,” said Poirot. “A somewhat careless young man—especially if the glove is his also. That would be a double clue, would it not?”

“Bernard Parker!” murmured Hardman. “What a relief! Well, Monsieur Poirot, I leave it to you to recover the jewels. Place the matter in the hands of the police if you think fit—that is, if you are quite sure that it is he who is guilty.”

“See you, my friend,” said Poirot to me, as we left the house together, “he has one law for the titled, and another law for the plain, this Mr. Hardman. Me, I have not yet been ennobled, so I am on the side of the plain. I have sympathy for this young man. The whole thing was a little curious, was it not? There was Hardman suspecting Lady Runcorn; there was I, suspecting the Countess and Johnston; and all the time, the obscure Mr. Parker was our man.”

“Why did you suspect the other two?”

“Parbleu! It is such a simple thing to be a Russian refugee or a South African millionaire. Any woman can call herself a Russian countess; anyone can buy a house in Park Lane and call himself a South African millionaire. Who is going to contradict them? But I observe that we are passing through Bury Street. Our careless young friend lives here. Let us, as you say, strike while the iron is in the fire.”

Mr. Bernard Parker was at home. We found him reclining on some cushions, clad in an amazing dressing gown of purple and orange. I have seldom taken a greater dislike to anyone than I did to this particular young man with his white, effeminate face and affected lisping speech.

“Good morning, monsieur,” said Poirot briskly. “I come from Mr. Hardman. Yesterday, at the party, somebody has stolen all his jewels. Permit me to ask you, monsieur—is this your glove?”

Mr. Parker’s mental processes did not seem very rapid. He stared at the glove, as though gathering his wits together.

“Where did you find it?” he asked at last.

“Is it your glove, monsieur?”

Mr. Parker appeared to make up his mind.

“No, it isn’t,” he declared.

“And this cigarette case, is that yours?”

“Certainly not. I always carry a silver one.”

“Very well, monsieur. I go to put matters in the hands of the police.”

“Oh, I say, I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” cried Mr. Parker in some concern. “Beastly unsympathetic people, the police. Wait a bit. I’ll go round and see old Hardman. Look here—oh, stop a minute.”

But Poirot beat a determined retreat.

“We have given him something to think about, have we not?” he chuckled. “Tomorrow we will observe what has occurred.”

But we were destined to have a reminder of the Hardman case that afternoon. Without the least warning the door flew open, and a whirlwind in human form invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables (it was as cold as only an English June day can be) and a hat rampant with slaughtered ospreys. Countess Vera Rossakoff was a somewhat disturbing personality.

“You are Monsieur Poirot? What is this that you have done? You accuse that poor boy! It is infamous. It is scandalous. I know him. He is a chicken, a lamb—never would he steal. He has done everything for me. Will I stand by and see him martyred and butchered?”

“Tell me, madame, is this his cigarette case?” Poirot held out the black moiré case.

The Countess paused for a moment while she inspected it.

“Yes, it is his. I know it well. What of it? Did you find it in the room? We were all there; he dropped it then, I suppose. Ah, you policemen, you are worse than the Red Guards—”

“And is this his glove?”

“How should I know? One glove is like another. Do not try to stop me—he must be set free. His character must be cleared. You shall do it. I will sell my jewels and give you much money.”

“Madame—”

“It is agreed, then? No, no, do not argue. The poor boy! He came to me, the tears in his eyes. ‘I will save you,’ I said. ‘I will go to this man—this ogre, this monster! Leave it to Vera.’ Now it is settled, I go.”

With as little ceremony as she had come, she swept from the room, leaving an overpowering perfume of an exotic nature behind her.

“What a woman!” I exclaimed. “And what furs!”

“Ah, yes, they were genuine enough. Could a spurious countess have real furs? My little joke, Hastings . . . No, she is truly Russian, I fancy. Well, well, so Master Bernard went bleating to her.”

“The cigarette case is his. I wonder if the glove is also—”

With a smile Poirot drew from his pocket a second glove and placed it by the first. There was no doubt of their being a pair.

“Where did you get the second one, Poirot?”

“It was thrown down with a stick on the table in the hall in Bury Street. Truly, a very careless young man, Monsieur Parker. Well, well, mon ami—we must be thorough. Just for the form of the thing, I will make a little visit to Park Lane.”

Needless to say, I accompanied my friend. Johnston was out, but we saw his private secretary. It transpired that Johnston had only recently arrived from South Africa. He had never been in England before.

“He is interested in precious stones, is he not?” hazarded Poirot.

“Gold mining is nearer the mark,” laughed the secretary.

Poirot came away from the interview thoughtful. Late that evening, to my utter surprise, I found him earnestly studying a Russian grammar.

“Good heavens, Poirot!” I cried. “Are you learning Russian in order to converse with the Countess in her own language?”

“She certainly would not listen to my English, my friend!”

“But surely, Poirot, well-born Russians invariably speak French?”

“You are a mine of information, Hastings! I will cease puzzling over the intricacies of the Russian alphabet.”

He threw the book from him with a dramatic gesture. I was not entirely satisfied. There was a twinkle in his eye which I knew of old. It was an invariable sign that Hercule Poirot was pleased with himself.

“Perhaps,” I said sapiently, “you doubt her being really a Russian. You are going to test her?”

“Ah, no, no, she is Russian all right.”

“Well, then—”

“If you really want to distinguish yourself over this case, Hastings, I recommend First Steps in Russian as an invaluable aid.”

Then he laughed and would say no more. I picked up the book from the floor and dipped into it curiously, but could make neither head nor tail of Poirot’s remarks.

The following morning brought us no news of any kind, but that did not seem to worry my little friend. At breakfast, he announced his intention of calling upon Mr. Hardman early in the day. We found the elderly social butterfly at home, and seemingly a little calmer than on the previous day.

“Well, Monsieur Poirot, any news?” he demanded eagerly.

Poirot handed him a slip of paper.

“That is the person who took the jewels, monsieur. Shall I put matters in the hands of the police? Or would you prefer me to recover the jewels without bringing the police into the matter?”

Mr. Hardman was staring at the paper. At last he found his voice.

“Most astonishing. I should infinitely prefer to have no scandal in the matter. I give you carte blanche, Monsieur Poirot. I am sure you will be discreet.”

Our next procedure was to hail a taxi, which Poirot ordered to drive to the Carlton. There he inquired for Countess Rossakoff. In a few minutes we were ushered up into the lady’s suite. She came to meet us with outstretched hands, arrayed in a marvellous negligée of barbaric design.

“Monsieur Poirot!” she cried. “You have succeeded? You have cleared that poor infant?”

“Madame la Comtesse, your friend Mr. Parker is perfectly safe from arrest.”

“Ah, but you are the clever little man! Superb! And so quickly too.”

“On the other hand, I have promised Mr. Hardman that the jewels shall be returned to him today.”

“So?”

“Therefore, madame, I should be extremely obliged if you would place them in my hands without delay. I am sorry to hurry you, but I am keeping a taxi—in case it should be necessary for me to go on to Scotland Yard; and we Belgians, madame, we practise the thrift.”

The Countess had lighted a cigarette. For some seconds she sat perfectly still, blowing smoke rings, and gazing steadily at Poirot. Then she burst into a laugh, and rose. She went across to the bureau, opened a drawer, and took out a black silk handbag. She tossed it lightly to Poirot. Her tone, when she spoke, was perfectly light and unmoved.

“We Russians, on the contrary, practise prodigality,” she said. “And to do that, unfortunately, one must have money. You need not look inside. They are all there.”

Poirot arose.

“I congratulate you, madame, on your quick intelligence and your promptitude.”

“Ah! But since you were keeping your taxi waiting, what else could I do?”

“You are too amiable, madame. You are remaining long in London?”

“I am afraid no—owing to you.”

“Accept my apologies.”

“We shall meet again elsewhere, perhaps.”

“I hope so.”

“And I—do not!” exclaimed the Countess with a laugh. “It is a great compliment that I pay you there—there are very few men in the world whom I fear. Good-bye, Monsieur Poirot."

"Good-bye, Madame la Comtesse. Ah—pardon me, I forgot! Allow me to return you your cigarette case."

And with a bow he handed to her the little black moiré case we had found in the safe. She accepted it without any change of expression—just a lifted eyebrow and a murmured: "I see!"

"What a woman!" cried Poirot enthusiastically as we descended the stairs. "Mon Dieu, quelle femme! Not a word of argument—of protestation, of bluff! One quick glance, and she had sized up the position correctly. I tell you, Hastings, a woman who can accept defeat like that—with a careless smile—will go far! She is dangerous, she has the nerves of steel; she—" He tripped heavily.

"If you can manage to moderate your transports and look where you're going, it might be as well," I suggested. "When did you first suspect the Countess?"

"Mon ami, it was the glove and the cigarette case—the double clue, shall we say—that worried me. Bernard Parker might easily have dropped one or the other—but hardly both. Ah, no, that would have been too careless! In the same way, if someone else had placed them there to incriminate Parker, one would have been sufficient—the cigarette case or the glove—again not both. So I was forced to the conclusion that one of the two things did not belong to Parker. I imagined at first that the case was his, and that the glove was not. But when I discovered the fellow to the glove, I saw that it was the other way about. Whose, then, was the cigarette case? Clearly, it could not belong to Lady Runcorn. The initials were wrong. Mr. Johnston? Only if he were here under a false name. I interviewed his secretary, and it was apparent at once that everything was clear and above board. There was no reticence about Mr. Johnston's past. The Countess, then? She was supposed to have brought jewels with her from Russia; she had only to take the stones from their settings, and it was extremely doubtful if they could ever be identified. What could be easier for her than to pick up one of Parker's gloves from the hall that day and thrust it into the safe? But, bien sûr, she did not intend to drop her own cigarette case."

“But if the case was hers, why did it have ‘B.P.’ on it? The Countess’s initials are V.R.”

Poirot smiled gently upon me.

“Exactly, mon ami; but in the Russian alphabet, B is V and P is R.”

“Well, you couldn’t expect me to guess that. I don’t know Russian.”

“Neither do I, Hastings. That is why I bought my little book—and urged it on your attention.”

He sighed.

“A remarkable woman. I have a feeling, my friend—a very decided feeling—I shall meet her again. Where, I wonder?”

Seven

THE LAST SÉANCE

"The Last Séance" was first published in the USA in Ghost Stories magazine, November 1926, and as "The Stolen Ghost" in The Sovereign Magazine, March 1927.

Raoul Daubreuil crossed the Seine humming a little tune to himself. He was a good-looking young Frenchman of about thirty-two, with a fresh-coloured face and a little black moustache. By profession he was an engineer. In due course he reached the Cardonet and turned in at the door of No. 17. The concierge looked out from her lair and gave him a grudging "Good morning," to which he replied cheerfully. Then he mounted the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. As he stood there waiting for his ring at the bell to be answered he hummed once more his little tune. Raoul Daubreuil was feeling particularly cheerful this morning. The door was opened by an elderly Frenchwoman whose wrinkled face broke into smiles when she saw who the visitor was.

"Good morning, Monsieur."

"Good morning, Elise," said Raoul.

He passed into the vestibule, pulling off his gloves as he did so.

"Madame expects me, does she not?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Ah, yes, indeed, Monsieur."

Elise shut the front door and turned towards him.

"If Monsieur will pass into the little salon Madame will be with him in a few minutes. At the moment she reposes herself."

Raoul looked up sharply.

“Is she not well?”

“Well!”

Elise gave a snort. She passed in front of Raoul and opened the door of the little salon for him. He went in and she followed him.

“Well!” she continued. “How could she be well, poor lamb? Séances, séances, and always séances! It is not right—not natural, not what the good God intended for us. For me, I say straight out, it is trafficking with the devil.”

Raoul patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

“There, there, Elise,” he said soothingly, “do not excite yourself, and do not be too ready to see the devil in everything you do not understand.”

Elise shook her head doubtingly.

“Ah, well,” she grumbled under her breath, “Monsieur may say what he pleases, I don’t like it. Look at Madame, every day she gets whiter and thinner, and the headaches!”

She held up her hands.

“Ah, no, it is not good, all this spirit business. Spirits indeed! All the good spirits are in Paradise, and the others are in Purgatory.”

“Your view of the life after death is refreshingly simple, Elise,” said Raoul as he dropped into the chair.

The old woman drew herself up.

“I am a good Catholic, Monsieur.”

She crossed herself, went towards the door, then paused, her hand on the handle.

“Afterwards when you are married, Monsieur,” she said pleadingly, “it will not continue—all this?”

Raoul smiled at her affectionately.

“You are a good faithful creature, Elise,” he said, “and devoted to your mistress. Have no fear, once she is my wife, all this ‘spirit business’ as you call it, will cease. For Madame Daubreuil there will be no more séances.”

Elise’s face broke into smiles.

“Is it true what you say?” she asked eagerly.

The other nodded gravely.

“Yes,” he said, speaking almost more to himself than to her. “Yes, all this must end. Simone has a wonderful gift and she has used it freely, but now she has done her part. As you have justly observed, Elise, day by day she gets whiter and thinner. The life of a medium is a particularly trying and arduous one, involving a terrible nervous strain. All the same, Elise, your mistress is the most wonderful medium in Paris—more, in France. People from all over the world come to her because they know that with her there is no trickery, no deceit.”

Elise gave a snort of contempt.

“Deceit! Ah, no, indeed. Madame could not deceive a newborn babe if she tried.”

“She is an angel,” said the young Frenchman with fervour. “And I—I shall do everything a man can to make her happy. You believe that?”

Elise drew herself up, and spoke with a certain simple dignity.

“I have served Madame for many years, Monsieur. With all respect I may say that I love her. If I did not believe that you adored her as she deserves to be adored—eh bien, Monsieur! I should be willing to tear you limb from limb.”

Raoul laughed.

“Bravo, Elise! you are a faithful friend, and you must approve of me now that I have told you Madame is going to give up the spirits.”

He expected the old woman to receive this pleasantry with a laugh, but somewhat to his surprise she remained grave.

“Supposing, Monsieur,” she said hesitatingly, “the spirits will not give her up?”

Raoul stared at her.

“Eh! What do you mean?”

“I said,” repeated Elise, “supposing the spirits will not give her up?”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the spirits, Elise?”

“No more I do,” said Elise stubbornly. “It is foolish to believe in them. All the same—”

“Well?”

“It is difficult for me to explain, Monsieur. You see, me, I always thought that these mediums, as they call themselves, were just clever cheats who imposed on the poor souls who had lost their dear ones. But Madame is not like that. Madame is good. Madame is honest and—”

She lowered her voice and spoke in a tone of awe.

“Things happen. It is no trickery, things happen, and that is why I am afraid. For I am sure of this, Monsieur, it is not right. It is against nature and le bon Dieu, and somebody will have to pay.”

Raoul got up from his chair and came and patted her on the shoulder.

“Calm yourself, my good Elise,” he said, smiling. “See, I will give you some good news. Today is the last of these séances; after today there will be no more.”

“There is one today then?” asked the old woman suspiciously.

“The last, Elise, the last.”

Elise shook her head disconsolately.

“Madame is not fit—” she began.

But her words were interrupted, the door opened and a tall, fair woman came in. She was slender and graceful, with the face of a Botticelli Madonna. Raoul’s face lighted up, and Elise withdrew quickly and discreetly.

“Simone!”

He took both her long, white hands in his and kissed each in turn. She murmured his name very softly.

“Raoul, my dear one.”

Again he kissed her hands and then looked intently into her face.

“Simone, how pale you are! Elise told me you were resting; you are not ill, my well-beloved?”

“No, not ill—” she hesitated.

He led her over to the sofa and sat down on it beside her.

“But tell me then.”

The medium smiled faintly.

“You will think me foolish,” she murmured.

“I? Think you foolish? Never.”

Simone withdrew her hand from his grasp. She sat perfectly still for a moment or two gazing down at the carpet. Then she spoke in a low, hurried voice.

“I am afraid, Raoul.”

He waited for a minute or two expecting her to go on, but as she did not he said encouragingly:

“Yes, afraid of what?”

“Just afraid—that is all.”

“But—”

He looked at her in perplexity, and she answered the look quickly.

“Yes, it is absurd, isn’t it, and yet I feel just that. Afraid, nothing more. I don’t know what of, or why, but all the time I am possessed with the idea that something terrible—terrible, is going to happen to me. . . .”

She stared out in front of her. Raoul put an arm gently round her.

“My dearest,” he said, “come, you must not give way. I know what it is, the strain, Simone, the strain of a medium’s life. All you need is rest—rest and quiet.”

She looked at him gratefully.

“Yes, Raoul, you are right. That is what I need, rest and quiet.”

She closed her eyes and leant back a little against his arm.

“And happiness,” murmured Raoul in her ear.

His arm drew her closer. Simone, her eyes still closed, drew a deep breath.

“Yes,” she murmured, “yes. When your arms are round me I feel safe. I forget my life—the terrible life—of a medium. You know much, Raoul, but even you do not know all it means.”

He felt her body grow rigid in his embrace. Her eyes opened again, staring in front of her.

“One sits in the cabinet in the darkness, waiting, and the darkness is terrible, Raoul, for it is the darkness of emptiness, of nothingness. Deliberately one gives oneself up to be lost in it. After that one knows nothing, one feels nothing, but at last there comes the slow, painful return, the awakening out of sleep, but so tired—so terribly tired.”

“I know,” murmured Raoul, “I know.”

“So tired,” murmured Simone again.

Her whole body seemed to droop as she repeated the words.

“But you are wonderful, Simone.”

He took her hands in his, trying to rouse her to share his enthusiasm.

“You are unique—the greatest medium the world has ever known.”

She shook her head, smiling a little at that.

“Yes, yes,” Raoul insisted.

He drew two letters from his pocket.

“See here, from Professor Roche of the Salpétrière, and this one from Dr. Genir at Nancy, both imploring that you will continue to sit for them occasionally.”

“Ah, no!”

Simone sprang to her feet.

“I will not, I will not. It is to be all finished—all done with. You promised me, Raoul.”

Raoul stared at her in astonishment as she stood wavering, facing him almost like a creature at bay. He got up and took her hand.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Certainly it is finished, that is understood. But I am so proud of you, Simone, that is why I mentioned those letters.”

She threw him a swift sideways glance of suspicion.

“It is not that you will ever want me to sit again?”

“No, no,” said Raoul, “unless perhaps you yourself would care to, just occasionally for these old friends—”

But she interrupted him, speaking excitedly.

“No, no, never again. There is a danger. I tell you, I can feel it, great danger.”

She clasped her hands on her forehead a minute, then walked across to the window.

“Promise me never again,” she said in a quieter voice over her shoulder.

Raoul followed her and put his arms round her shoulders.

“My dear one,” he said tenderly, “I promise you after today you shall never sit again.”

He felt the sudden start she gave.

“Today,” she murmured. “Ah, yes—I had forgotten Madame Exe.”

Raoul looked at his watch.

“She is due any minute now; but perhaps, Simone, if you do not feel well —”

Simone hardly seemed to be listening to him; she was following out her own train of thought.

“She is—a strange woman, Raoul, a very strange woman. Do you know I—I have almost a horror of her.”

“Simone!”

There was reproach in his voice, and she was quick to feel it.

“Yes, yes, I know, you are like all Frenchmen, Raoul. To you a mother is sacred and it is unkind of me to feel like that about her when she grieves so for her lost child. But—I cannot explain it, she is so big and black, and her hands—have you ever noticed her hands, Raoul? Great big strong hands, as strong as a man’s. Ah!”

She gave a little shiver and closed her eyes. Raoul withdrew his arm and spoke almost coldly.

“I really cannot understand you, Simone. Surely you, a woman, should have nothing but sympathy for another woman, a mother bereft of her only child.”

Simone made a gesture of impatience.

“Ah, it is you who do not understand, my friend! One cannot help these things. The first moment I saw her I felt—”

She flung her hands out.

“Fear! You remember, it was a long time before I would consent to sit for her? I felt sure in some way she would bring me misfortune.”

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

“Whereas, in actual fact, she brought you the exact opposite,” he said drily. “All the sittings have been attended with marked success. The spirit of the little Amelie was able to control you at once, and the materializations have really been striking. Professor Roche ought really to have been present at the last one.”

“Materializations,” said Simone in a low voice. “Tell me, Raoul (you know that I know nothing of what takes place while I am in the trance), are the materializations really so wonderful?”

He nodded enthusiastically.

“At the first few sittings the figure of the child was visible in a kind of nebulous haze,” he explained, “but at the last séance—”

“Yes?”

He spoke very softly.

“Simone, the child that stood there was an actual living child of flesh and blood. I even touched her—but seeing that the touch was acutely painful to you, I would not permit Madame Exe to do the same. I was afraid that her self-control might break down, and that some harm to you might result.”

Simone turned away again towards the window.

“I was terribly exhausted when I woke,” she murmured. “Raoul, are you sure—are you really sure that all this is right? You know what dear old Elise thinks, that I am trafficking with the devil?”

She laughed rather uncertainly.

“You know what I believe,” said Raoul gravely. “In the handling of the unknown there must always be danger, but the cause is a noble one, for it is the cause of Science. All over the world there have been martyrs to Science, pioneers who have paid the price so that others may follow safely in their footsteps. For ten years now you have worked for Science at the cost of a terrific nervous strain. Now your part is done, from today onward you are free to be happy.”

She smiled at him affectionately, her calm restored. Then she glanced quickly up at the clock.

“Madame Exe is late,” she murmured. “She may not come.”

“I think she will,” said Raoul. “Your clock is a little fast, Simone.”

Simone moved about the room, rearranging an ornament here and there.

“I wonder who she is, this Madame Exe?” she observed. “Where she comes from, who her people are? It is strange that we know nothing about her.”

Raoul shrugged his shoulders.

“Most people remain incognito if possible when they come to a medium,” he observed. “It is an elementary precaution.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Simone listlessly.

A little china vase she was holding slipped from her fingers and broke to pieces on the tiles of the fireplace. She turned sharply on Raoul.

“You see,” she murmured, “I am not myself. Raoul, would you think me very—very cowardly if I told Madame Exe I could not sit today?”

His look of pained astonishment made her redden.

“You promised, Simone—” he began gently.

She backed against the wall.

“I won’t do it, Raoul. I won’t do it.”

And again that glance of his, tenderly reproachful, made her wince.

“It is not of the money I am thinking, Simone, though you must realize that the money this woman has offered you for the last sitting is enormous—simply enormous.”

She interrupted him defiantly.

“There are things that matter more than money.”

"Certainly there are," he agreed warmly. "That is just what I am saying. Consider—this woman is a mother, a mother who has lost her only child. If you are not really ill, if it is only a whim on your part—you can deny a rich woman a caprice, can you deny a mother one last sight of her child?"

The medium flung her hands out despairingly in front of her.

"Oh, you torture me," she murmured. "All the same you are right. I will do as you wish, but I know now what I am afraid of—it is the word 'mother.' "

"Simone!"

"There are certain primitive elementary forces, Raoul. Most of them have been destroyed by civilization, but motherhood stands where it stood at the beginning. Animals—human beings, they are all the same. A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."

She stopped, panting a little, then turned to him with a quick, disarming smile.

"I am foolish today, Raoul. I know it."

He took her hand in his.

"Lie down for a minute or two," he urged. "Rest till she comes."

"Very well." She smiled at him and left the room.

Raoul remained for a minute or two lost in thought, then he strode to the door, opened it, and crossed the little hall. He went into a room the other side of it, a sitting room very much like the one he had left, but at one end was an alcove with a big armchair set in it. Heavy black velvet curtains were arranged so as to pull across the alcove. Elise was busy arranging the room. Close to the alcove she had set two chairs and a small round table. On the table was a tambourine, a horn, and some paper and pencils.

"The last time," murmured Elise with grim satisfaction. "Ah, Monsieur, I wish it were over and done with."

The sharp ting of an electric bell sounded.

“There she is, the great gendarme of a woman,” continued the old servant. “Why can’t she go and pray decently for her little one’s soul in a church, and burn a candle to Our Blessed Lady? Does not the good God know what is best for us?”

“Answer the bell, Elise,” said Raoul peremptorily.

She threw him a look, but obeyed. In a minute or two she returned ushering in the visitor.

“I will tell my mistress you are here, Madame.”

Raoul came forward to shake hands with Madame Exe. Simone’s words floated back to his memory.

“So big and so black.”

She was a big woman, and the heavy black of French mourning seemed almost exaggerated in her case. Her voice when she spoke was very deep.

“I fear I am a little late, Monsieur.”

“A few moments only,” said Raoul, smiling. “Madame Simone is lying down. I am sorry to say she is far from well, very nervous and overwrought.”

Her hand, which she was just withdrawing, closed on his suddenly like a vice.

“But she will sit?” she demanded sharply.

“Oh, yes, Madame.”

Madame Exe gave a sigh of relief, and sank into a chair, loosening one of the heavy black veils that floated round her.

“Ah, Monsieur!” she murmured, “you cannot imagine, you cannot conceive the wonder and the joy of these séances to me! My little one! My Amelie! To see her, to hear her, even—perhaps—yes, perhaps to be even able to—stretch out my hand and touch her.”

Raoul spoke quickly and peremptorily.

“Madame Exe—how can I explain?—on no account must you do anything except under my express directions, otherwise there is the gravest danger.”

“Danger to me?”

“No, Madame,” said Raoul, “to the medium. You must understand that the phenomena that occur are explained by Science in a certain way. I will put the matter very simply, using no technical terms. A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapour of fluid issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit’s dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. We hope to prove this some day by careful weighing and testing—but the great difficulty is the danger and pain which attends the medium on any handling of the phenomena. Were anyone to seize hold of the materialization roughly the death of the medium might result.”

Madame Exe had listened to him with close attention.

“That is very interesting, Monsieur. Tell me, shall not a time come when the materialization shall advance so far that it shall be capable of detachment from its parent, the medium?”

“That is a fantastic speculation, Madame.”

She persisted.

“But, on the facts, not impossible?”

“Quite impossible today.”

“But perhaps in the future?”

He was saved from answering, for at that moment Simone entered. She looked languid and pale, but had evidently regained entire control of herself. She came forward and shook hands with Madame Exe, though Raoul noticed the faint shiver that passed through her as she did so.

“I regret, Madame, to hear that you are indisposed,” said Madame Exe.

“It is nothing,” said Simone rather brusquely. “Shall we begin?”

She went to the alcove and sat down in the armchair. Suddenly Raoul in his turn felt a wave of fear pass over him.

“You are not strong enough,” he exclaimed. “We had better cancel the séance. Madame Exe will understand.”

“Monsieur!”

Madame Exe rose indignantly.

“Yes, yes, it is better not, I am sure of it.”

“Madame Simone promised me one last sitting.”

“That is so,” agreed Simone quietly, “and I am prepared to carry out my promise.”

“I hold you to it, Madame,” said the other woman.

“I do not break my word,” said Simone coldly. “Do not fear, Raoul,” she added gently, “after all, it is for the last time—the last time, thank God.”

At a sign from her Raoul drew the heavy black curtains across the alcove. He also pulled the curtains of the window so that the room was in semiobscurity. He indicated one of the chairs to Madame Exe and prepared himself to take the other. Madame Exe, however, hesitated.

“You will pardon me, Monsieur, but—you understand I believe absolutely in your integrity and in that of Madame Simone. All the same, so that my testimony may be the more valuable, I took the liberty of bringing this with me.”

From her handbag she drew a length of fine cord.

“Madame!” cried Raoul. “This is an insult!”

“A precaution.”

“I repeat it is an insult.”

“I don’t understand your objection, Monsieur,” said Madame Exe coldly. “If there is no trickery you have nothing to fear.”

Raoul laughed scornfully.

“I can assure you that I have nothing to fear, Madame. Bind me hand and foot if you will.”

His speech did not produce the effect he hoped, for Madame Exe merely murmured unemotionally:

“Thank you, Monsieur,” and advanced upon him with her roll of cord.

Suddenly Simone from behind the curtain gave a cry.

“No, no, Raoul, don’t let her do it.”

Madame Exe laughed derisively.

“Madame is afraid,” she observed sarcastically.

“Yes, I am afraid.”

“Remember what you are saying, Simone,” cried Raoul. “Madame Exe is apparently under the impression that we are charlatans.”

“I must make sure,” said Madame Exe grimly.

She went methodically about her task, binding Raoul securely to his chair.

“I must congratulate you on your knots, Madame,” he observed ironically when she had finished. “Are you satisfied now?”

Madame Exe did not reply. She walked round the room examining the panelling of the walls closely. Then she locked the door leading into the hall, and, removing the key, returned to her chair.

“Now,” she said in an indescribable voice, “I am ready.”

The minutes passed. From behind the curtain the sound of Simone’s breathing became heavier and more stertorous. Then it died away altogether, to be succeeded by a series of moans. Then again there was silence for a little while, broken by the sudden clattering of the tambourine. The horn was caught up from the table and dashed to the ground. Ironic laughter was heard. The curtains of the alcove seemed to have been pulled back a little, the medium’s figure was just visible through the opening, her head fallen forward on her breast. Suddenly Madame Exe drew in her breath sharply. A ribbonlike stream of mist was issuing from the medium’s mouth. It condensed and began gradually to assume a shape, the shape of a little child.

“Amelie! My little Amelie!”

The hoarse whisper came from Madame Exe. The hazy figure condensed still further. Raoul stared almost incredulously. Never had there been a more successful materialization. Now, surely it was a real child, a real flesh and blood child standing there.

“Maman!”

The soft childish voice spoke.

“My child!” cried Madame Exe. “My child!”

She half rose from her seat.

“Be careful, Madame,” cried Raoul warningly.

The materialization came hesitatingly through the curtains. It was a child. She stood there, her arms held out.

“Maman!”

“Ah!” cried Madame Exe.

Again she half rose from her seat.

“Madame,” cried Raoul, alarmed, “the medium—”

“I must touch her,” cried Madame Exe hoarsely.

She moved a step forward.

“For God’s sake, Madame, control yourself,” cried Raoul.

He was really alarmed now.

“Sit down at once.”

“My little one, I must touch her.”

“Madame, I command you, sit down!”

He was writhing desperately in his bonds, but Madame Exe had done her work well; he was helpless. A terrible sense of impending disaster swept over him.

“In the name of God, Madame, sit down!” he shouted. “Remember the medium.”

Madame Exe turned on him with a harsh laugh.

“What do I care for your medium?” she cried. “I want my child.”

“You are mad!”

“My child, I tell you. Mine! My own! My own flesh and blood! My little one come back to me from the dead, alive and breathing.”

Raoul opened his lips, but no words would come. She was terrible, this woman! Remorseless, savage, absorbed by her own passion. The baby lips parted, and for the third time the word echoed:

“Maman!”

“Come then, my little one,” cried Madame Exe.

With a sharp gesture she caught up the child in her arms. From behind the curtains came a long-drawn scream of utter anguish.

“Simone!” cried Raoul. “Simone!”

He was aware vaguely of Madame Exe rushing past him, of the unlocking of the door, of the retreating footsteps down the stairs.

From behind the curtains there still sounded the terrible high long-drawn scream—such a scream as Raoul had never heard. It died away with a horrible kind of gurgle. Then there came the thud of a body falling. . . .

Raoul was working like a maniac to free himself from his bonds. In his frenzy he accomplished the impossible, snapping the cord by sheer strength. As he struggled to his feet, Elise rushed in crying “Madame!”

“Simone!” cried Raoul.

Together they rushed forward and pulled the curtain.

Raoul staggered back.

“My God!” he murmured. “Red—all red. . . .”

Elise’s voice came beside him harsh and shaking.

“So Madame is dead. It is ended. But tell me, Monsieur, what has happened. Why is Madame all shrunken away—why is she half her usual size? What has been happening here?”

“I do not know,” said Raoul.

His voice rose to a scream.

“I do not know. I do not know. But I think—I am going mad . . . Simone! Simone!”

Eight

SANCTUARY

The vicar’s wife came round the corner of the vicarage with her arms full of chrysanthemums. A good deal of rich garden soil was attached to her strong brogue shoes and a few fragments of earth were adhering to her nose, but of that fact she was perfectly unconscious.

She had a slight struggle in opening the vicarage gate which hung, rustily, half off its hinges. A puff of wind caught at her battered felt hat, causing it to sit even more rakishly than it had done before. “Bother!” said Bunch.

Christened by her optimistic parents Diana, Mrs. Harmon had become Bunch at an early age for somewhat obvious reasons and the name had stuck to her ever since. Clutching the chrysanthemums, she made her way through the gate to the churchyard, and so to the church door.

The November air was mild and damp. Clouds scudded across the sky with patches of blue here and there. Inside, the church was dark and cold; it was unheated except at service times.

“Brrrrrh!” said Bunch expressively. “I’d better get on with this quickly. I don’t want to die of cold.”

With the quickness born of practice she collected the necessary paraphernalia: vases, water, flower holders. “I wish we had lilies,” thought Bunch to herself. “I get so tired of these scraggy chrysanthemums.” Her nimble fingers arranged the blooms in their holders.

There was nothing particularly original or artistic about the decorations, for Bunch Harmon herself was neither original nor artistic, but it was a homely and pleasant arrangement. Carrying the vases carefully, Bunch stepped up the aisle and made her way towards the altar. As she did so the sun came out.

It shone through the east window of somewhat crude coloured glass, mostly blue and red—the gift of a wealthy Victorian churchgoer. The effect was almost startling in its sudden opulence. “Like jewels,” thought Bunch. Suddenly she stopped, staring ahead of her. On the chancel steps was a huddled dark form.

Putting down the flowers carefully, Bunch went up to it and bent over it. It was a man lying there, huddled over on himself. Bunch knelt down by him and slowly, carefully, she turned him over. Her fingers went to his pulse—a pulse so feeble and fluttering that it told its own story, as did the almost greenish pallor of his face. There was no doubt, Bunch thought, that the man was dying.

He was a man of about forty-five, dressed in a dark, shabby suit. She laid down the limp hand she had picked up and looked at his other hand. This seemed clenched like a fist on his breast. Looking more closely she saw that the fingers were closed over what seemed to be a large wad or handkerchief which he was holding tightly to his chest. All round the clenched hand there were splashes of a dry brown fluid which, Bunch guessed, was dry blood. Bunch sat back on her heels, frowning.

Up till now the man’s eyes had been closed but at this point they suddenly opened and fixed themselves on Bunch’s face. They were neither dazed nor wandering. They seemed fully alive and intelligent. His lips moved, and Bunch bent forward to catch the words, or rather the word. It was only one word that he said:

“Sanctuary.”

There was, she thought, just a very faint smile as he breathed out this word. There was no mistaking it, for after a moment he said it again, “Sanctuary. . . .”

Then, with a faint, long-drawn-out sigh, his eyes closed again. Once more Bunch’s fingers went to his pulse. It was still there, but fainter now and more intermittent. She got up with decision.

“Don’t move,” she said, “or try to move. I’m going for help.”

The man’s eyes opened again but he seemed now to be fixing his attention on the coloured light that came through the east window. He murmured something that Bunch could not quite catch. She thought, startled, that it might have been her husband’s name.

“Julian?” she said. “Did you come here to find Julian?” But there was no answer. The man lay with eyes closed, his breathing coming in slow, shallow fashion.

Bunch turned and left the church rapidly. She glanced at her watch and nodded with some satisfaction. Dr. Griffiths would still be in his surgery. It was only a couple of minutes’ walk from the church. She went in, without waiting to knock or ring, passing through the waiting room and into the doctor’s surgery.

“You must come at once,” said Bunch. “There’s a man dying in the church.”

Some minutes later Dr. Griffiths rose from his knees after a brief examination.

“Can we move him from here into the vicarage? I can attend to him better there—not that it’s any use.”

“Of course,” said Bunch. “I’ll go along and get things ready. I’ll get Harper and Jones, shall I? To help you carry him.”

“Thanks. I can telephone from the vicarage for an ambulance, but I’m afraid—by the time it comes. . . .” He left the remark unfinished.

Bunch said, “Internal bleeding?”

Dr. Griffiths nodded. He said, “How on earth did he come here?”

“I think he must have been here all night,” said Bunch, considering. “Harper unlocks the church in the morning as he goes to work, but he doesn’t usually come in.”

It was about five minutes later when Dr. Griffiths put down the telephone receiver and came back into the morning room where the injured man was lying on quickly arranged blankets on the sofa. Bunch was moving a basin of water and clearing up after the doctor's examination.

"Well, that's that," said Griffiths. "I've sent for an ambulance and I've notified the police." He stood, frowning, looking down on the patient who lay with closed eyes. His left hand was plucking in a nervous, spasmodic way at his side.

"He was shot," said Griffiths. "Shot at fairly close quarters. He rolled his handkerchief up into a ball and plugged the wound with it so as to stop the bleeding."

"Could he have gone far after that happened?" Bunch asked.

"Oh, yes, it's quite possible. A mortally wounded man has been known to pick himself up and walk along a street as though nothing had happened, and then suddenly collapse five or ten minutes later. So he needn't have been shot in the church. Oh no. He may have been shot some distance away. Of course, he may have shot himself and then dropped the revolver and staggered blindly towards the church. I don't quite know why he made for the church and not for the vicarage."

"Oh, I know that," said Bunch. "He said it: 'Sanctuary.' "

The doctor stared at her. "Sanctuary?"

"Here's Julian," said Bunch, turning her head as she heard her husband's steps in the hall. "Julian! Come here."

The Reverend Julian Harmon entered the room. His vague, scholarly manner always made him appear much older than he really was. "Dear me!" said Julian Harmon, staring in a mild, puzzled manner at the surgical appliances and the prone figure on the sofa.

Bunch explained with her usual economy of words. "He was in the church, dying. He'd been shot. Do you know him, Julian? I thought he said your name."

The vicar came up to the sofa and looked down at the dying man. “Poor fellow,” he said, and shook his head. “No, I don’t know him. I’m almost sure I’ve never seen him before.”

At that moment the dying man’s eyes opened once more. They went from the doctor to Julian Harmon and from him to his wife. The eyes stayed there, staring into Bunch’s face. Griffiths stepped forward.

“If you could tell us,” he said urgently.

But with eyes fixed on Bunch, the man said in a weak voice, “Please—please—” And then, with a slight tremor, he died. . . .

Sergeant Hayes licked his pencil and turned the page of his notebook.

“So that’s all you can tell me, Mrs. Harmon?”

“That’s all,” said Bunch. “These are the things out of his coat pockets.”

On a table at Sergeant Hayes’s elbow was a wallet, a rather battered old watch with the initials. W.S. and the return half of a ticket to London. Nothing more.

“You’ve found out who he is?” asked Bunch.

“A Mr. and Mrs. Eccles phoned up the station. He’s her brother, it seems. Name of Sandbourne. Been in a low state of health and nerves for some time. He’s been getting worse lately. The day before yesterday he walked out and didn’t come back. He took a revolver with him.”

“And he came out here and shot himself with it?” said Bunch. “Why?”

“Well, you see, he’d been depressed. . . .”

Bunch interrupted him. “I don’t mean that. I mean, why here?”

Since Sergeant Hayes obviously did not know the answer to that one, he replied in an oblique fashion, “Come out here, he did, on the five ten bus.”

“Yes,” said Bunch again. “But why?”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Harmon,” said Sergeant Hayes. “There’s no accounting. If the balance of the mind is disturbed—”

Bunch finished for him. “They may do it anywhere. But it still seems to me unnecessary to take a bus out to a small country place like this. He didn’t know anyone here, did he?”

“Not so far as can be ascertained,” said Sergeant Hayes. He coughed in an apologetic manner and said, as he rose to his feet, “It may be as Mr. and Mrs. Eccles will come out and see you, ma’am—if you don’t mind, that is.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” said Bunch. “It’s very natural. I only wish I had something to tell them.”

“I’ll be getting along,” said Sergeant Hayes.

“I’m only so thankful,” said Bunch, going with him to the front door, “that it wasn’t murder.”

A car had driven up at the vicarage gate. Sergeant Hayes, glancing at it, remarked: “Looks as though that’s Mr. and Mrs. Eccles come here now, ma’am, to talk with you.”

Bunch braced herself to endure what, she felt, might be rather a difficult ordeal. “However,” she thought, “I can always call Julian to help me. A clergyman’s a great help when people are bereaved.”

Exactly what she had expected Mr. and Mrs. Eccles to be like, Bunch could not have said, but she was conscious, as she greeted them, of a feeling of surprise. Mr. Eccles was a stout florid man whose natural manner would have been cheerful and facetious. Mrs. Eccles had a vaguely flashy look about her. She had a small, mean, pursed-up mouth. Her voice was thin and reedy.

“It’s been a terrible shock, Mrs. Harmon, as you can imagine,” she said.

"Oh, I know," said Bunch. "It must have been. Do sit down. Can I offer you—well, perhaps it's a little early for tea—"

Mr. Eccles waved a pudgy hand. "No, no, nothing for us," he said. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure. Just wanted to . . . well . . . what poor William said and all that, you know?"

"He's been abroad a long time," said Mrs. Eccles, "and I think he must have had some very nasty experiences. Very quiet and depressed he's been, ever since he came home. Said the world wasn't fit to live in and there was nothing to look forward to. Poor Bill, he was always moody."

Bunch stared at them both for a moment or two without speaking.

"Pinched my husband's revolver, he did," went on Mrs. Eccles. "Without our knowing. Then it seems he come here by bus. I suppose that was nice feeling on his part. He wouldn't have liked to do it in our house."

"Poor fellow, poor fellow," said Mr. Eccles, with a sigh. "It doesn't do to judge."

There was another short pause, and Mr. Eccles said, "Did he leave a message? Any last words, nothing like that?"

His bright, rather piglike eyes watched Bunch closely. Mrs. Eccles, too, leaned forward as though anxious for the reply.

"No," said Bunch quietly. "He came into the church when he was dying, for sanctuary."

Mrs. Eccles said in a puzzled voice. "Sanctuary? I don't think I quite. . . ."

Mr. Eccles interrupted. "Holy place, my dear," he said impatiently. "That's what the vicar's wife means. It's a sin—suicide, you know. I expect he wanted to make amends."

"He tried to say something just before he died," said Bunch. "He began, 'Please,' but that's as far as he got."

Mrs. Eccles put her handkerchief to her eyes and sniffed. “Oh, dear,” she said. “It’s terribly upsetting, isn’t it?”

“There, there, Pam,” said her husband. “Don’t take on. These things can’t be helped. Poor Willie. Still, he’s at peace now. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Harmon. I hope we haven’t interrupted you. A vicar’s wife is a busy lady, we know that.”

They shook hands with her. Then Eccles turned back suddenly to say, “Oh yes, there’s just one other thing. I think you’ve got his coat here, haven’t you?”

“His coat?” Bunch frowned.

Mrs. Eccles said, “We’d like all his things, you know. Sentimental-like.”

“He had a watch and a wallet and a railway ticket in the pockets,” said Bunch. “I gave them to Sergeant Hayes.”

“That’s all right, then,” said Mr. Eccles. “He’ll hand them over to us, I expect. His private papers would be in the wallet.”

“There was a pound note in the wallet,” said Bunch. “Nothing else.”

“No letters? Nothing like that?”

Bunch shook her head.

“Well, thank you again, Mrs. Harmon. The coat he was wearing—perhaps the sergeant’s got that too, has he?”

Bunch frowned in an effort of remembrance.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think . . . let me see. The doctor and I took his coat off to examine his wound.” She looked round the room vaguely. “I must have taken it upstairs with the towels and basin.”

“I wonder now, Mrs. Harmon, if you don’t mind . . . We’d like his coat, you know, the last thing he wore. Well, the wife feels rather sentimental about it."

"Of course," said Bunch. "Would you like me to have it cleaned first? I'm afraid it's rather—well—stained."

"Oh, no, no, no, that doesn't matter."

Bunch frowned. "Now I wonder where . . . excuse me a moment." She went upstairs and it was some few minutes before she returned.

"I'm so sorry," she said breathlessly, "my daily woman must have put it aside with other clothes that were going to the cleaners. It's taken me quite a long time to find it. Here it is. I'll do it up for you in brown paper."

Disclaiming their protests she did so; then once more effusively bidding her farewell the Eccleses departed.

Bunch went slowly back across the hall and entered the study. The Reverend Julian Harmon looked up and his brow cleared. He was composing a sermon and was fearing that he'd been led astray by the interest of the political relations between Judaea and Persia, in the reign of Cyrus.

"Yes, dear?" he said hopefully.

"Julian," said Bunch. "What's Sanctuary exactly?"

Julian Harmon gratefully put aside his sermon paper.

"Well," he said. "Sanctuary in Roman and Greek temples applied to the cella in which stood the statue of a god. The Latin word for altar 'ara' also means protection." He continued learnedly: "In three hundred and ninety-nine A.D. the right of sanctuary in Christian churches was finally and definitely recognized. The earliest mention of the right of sanctuary in England is in the Code of Laws issued by Ethelbert in A.D. six hundred. . . ."

He continued for some time with his exposition but was, as often, disconcerted by his wife's reception of his erudite pronouncement.

“Darling,” she said. “You are sweet.”

Bending over, she kissed him on the tip of his nose. Julian felt rather like a dog who has been congratulated on performing a clever trick.

“The Eccleses have been here,” said Bunch.

The vicar frowned. “The Eccleses? I don’t seem to remember. . . .”

“You don’t know them. They’re the sister and her husband of the man in the church.”

“My dear, you ought to have called me.”

“There wasn’t any need,” said Bunch. “They were not in need of consolation. I wonder now. . . .” She frowned. “If I put a casserole in the oven tomorrow, can you manage, Julian? I think I shall go up to London for the sales.”

“The sails?” Her husband looked at her blankly. “Do you mean a yacht or a boat or something?”

Bunch laughed. “No, darling. There’s a special white sale at Burrows and Portman’s. You know, sheets, tablecloths and towels and glass cloths. I don’t know what we do with our glass cloths, the way they wear through. Besides,” she added thoughtfully, “I think I ought to go and see Aunt Jane.”

That sweet old lady, Miss Jane Marple, was enjoying the delights of the metropolis for a fortnight, comfortably installed in her nephew’s studio flat.

“So kind of dear Raymond,” she murmured. “He and Joan have gone to America for a fortnight and they insisted I should come up here and enjoy myself. And now, dear Bunch, do tell me what it is that’s worrying you.”

Bunch was Miss Marple’s favourite godchild, and the old lady looked at her with great affection as Bunch, thrusting her best felt hat farther on the back of her head, started her story.

Bunch’s recital was concise and clear. Miss Marple nodded her head as Bunch finished. “I see,” she said. “Yes, I see.”

“That’s why I felt I had to see you,” said Bunch. “You see, not being clever—”

“But you are clever, my dear.”

“No, I’m not. Not clever like Julian.”

“Julian, of course, has a very solid intellect,” said Miss Marple.

“That’s it,” said Bunch. “Julian’s got the intellect, but on the other hand, I’ve got the sense.”

“You have a lot of common sense, Bunch, and you’re very intelligent.”

“You see, I don’t really know what I ought to do. I can’t ask Julian because—well, I mean, Julian’s so full of rectitude. . . .”

This statement appeared to be perfectly understood by Miss Marple, who said, “I know what you mean, dear. We women—well, it’s different.” She went on. “You told me what happened, Bunch, but I’d like to know first exactly what you think.”

“It’s all wrong,” said Bunch. “The man who was there in the church, dying, knew all about Sanctuary. He said it just the way Julian would have said it. I mean, he was a well-read, educated man. And if he’d shot himself, he wouldn’t drag himself to a church afterwards and say ‘sanctuary.’ Sanctuary means that you’re pursued, and when you get into a church you’re safe. Your pursuers can’t touch you. At one time even the law couldn’t get at you.”

She looked questioningly at Miss Marple. The latter nodded. Bunch went on. “Those people, the Eccleses, were quite different. Ignorant and coarse. And there’s another thing. That watch—the dead man’s watch. It had the initials W.S. on the back of it. But inside—I opened it—in very small lettering there was ‘To Walter from his father’ and a date. Walter. But the Eccleses kept talking of him as William or Bill.”

Miss Marple seemed about to speak but Bunch rushed on. “Oh, I know you’re not always called the name you’re baptized by. I mean, I can understand that you might be christened William and called ‘Porgy’ or ‘Carrots’ or something. But your sister wouldn’t call you William or Bill if your name was Walter.”

“You mean that she wasn’t his sister?”

“I’m quite sure she wasn’t his sister. They were horrid—both of them. They came to the vicarage to get his things and to find out if he’d said anything before he died. When I said he hadn’t I saw it in their faces—relief. I think myself,” finished Bunch, “it was Eccles who shot him.”

“Murder?” said Miss Marple.

“Yes,” said Bunch. “Murder. That’s why I came to you, darling.”

Bunch’s remark might have seemed incongruous to an ignorant listener, but in certain spheres Miss Marple had a reputation for dealing with murder.

“He said ‘please’ to me before he died,” said Bunch. “He wanted me to do something for him. The awful thing is I’ve no idea what.”

Miss Marple considered for a moment or two, and then pounced on the point that had already occurred to Bunch. “But why was he there at all?” she asked.

“You mean,” said Bunch, “if you wanted sanctuary you might pop into a church anywhere. There’s no need to take a bus that only goes four times a day and come out to a lonely spot like ours for it.”

“He must have come there for a purpose,” Miss Marple thought. “He must have come to see someone. Chipping Cleghorn’s not a big place, Bunch. Surely you must have some idea of who it was he came to see?”

Bunch reviewed the inhabitants of her village in her mind before rather doubtfully shaking her head. “In a way,” she said, “it could be anybody.”

“He never mentioned a name?”

“He said Julian, or I thought he said Julian. It might have been Julia, I suppose. As far as I know, there isn’t any Julia living in Chipping Cleghorn.”

She screwed up her eyes as she thought back to the scene. The man lying there on the chancel steps, the light coming through the window with its jewels of red and blue light.

“Jewels,” said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

“I’m coming now,” said Bunch, “to the most important thing of all. The reason why I’ve really come here today. You see, the Eccleses made a great fuss about having his coat. We took it off when the doctor was seeing him. It was an old, shabby sort of coat—there was no reason they should have wanted it. They pretended it was sentimental, but that was nonsense.

“Anyway, I went up to find it, and as I was just going up the stairs I remembered how he’d made a kind of picking gesture with his hand, as though he was fumbling with the coat. So when I got hold of the coat I looked at it very carefully and I saw that in one place the lining had been sewn up again with a different thread. So I unpicked it and I found a little piece of paper inside. I took it out and I sewed it up again properly with thread that matched. I was careful and I don’t really think that the Eccleses would know I’ve done it. I don’t think so, but I can’t be sure. And I took the coat down to them and made some excuse for the delay.”

“The piece of paper?” asked Miss Marple.

Bunch opened her handbag. “I didn’t show it to Julian,” she said, “because he would have said that I ought to have given it to the Eccleses. But I thought I’d rather bring it to you instead.”

“A cloakroom ticket,” said Miss Marple, looking at it. “Paddington Station.”

“He had a return ticket to Paddington in his pocket,” said Bunch.

The eyes of the two women met.

“This calls for action,” said Miss Marple briskly. “But it would be advisable, I think, to be careful. Would you have noticed at all, Bunch dear, whether you were followed when you came to London today?”

“Followed!” exclaimed Bunch. “You don’t think—”

“Well, I think it’s possible,” said Miss Marple. “When anything is possible, I think we ought to take precautions.” She rose with a brisk movement. “You came up here ostensibly, my dear, to go to the sales. I think the right thing to do, therefore, would be for us to go to the sales. But before we set out, we might put one or two little arrangements in hand. I don’t suppose,” Miss Marple added obscurely, “that I shall need the old speckled tweed with the beaver collar just at present.”

It was about an hour and a half later that the two ladies, rather the worse for wear and battered in appearance, and both clasping parcels of hardly-won household linen, sat down at a small and sequestered hostelry called the Apple Bough to restore their forces with steak and kidney pudding followed by apple tart and custard.

“Really a prewar quality face towel,” gasped Miss Marple, slightly out of breath. “With a J on it, too. So fortunate that Raymond’s wife’s name is Joan. I shall put them aside until I really need them and then they will do for her if I pass on sooner than I expect.”

“I really did need the glass cloths,” said Bunch. “And they were very cheap, though not as cheap as the ones that woman with the ginger hair managed to snatch from me.”

A smart young woman with a lavish application of rouge and lipstick entered the Apple Bough at that moment. After looking around vaguely for a moment or two, she hurried to their table. She laid down an envelope by Miss Marple’s elbow.

“There you are, miss,” she said briskly.

“Oh, thank you, Gladys,” said Miss Marple. “Thank you very much. So kind of you.”

“Always pleased to oblige, I’m sure,” said Gladys. “Ernie always says to me, ‘Everything what’s good you learned from that Miss Marple of yours that you were in service with,’ and I’m sure I’m always glad to oblige you, miss.”

“Such a dear girl,” said Miss Marple as Gladys departed again. “Always so willing and so kind.”

She looked inside the envelope and then passed it on to Bunch. “Now be very careful, dear,” she said. “By the way, is there still that nice young inspector at Melchester that I remember?”

“I don’t know,” said Bunch. “I expect so.”

“Well, if not,” said Miss Marple thoughtfully. “I can always ring up the Chief Constable. I think he would remember me.”

“Of course he’d remember you,” said Bunch. “Everybody would remember you. You’re quite unique.” She rose.

Arrived at Paddington, Bunch went to the luggage office and produced the cloakroom ticket. A moment or two later a rather shabby old suitcase was passed across to her, and carrying this she made her way to the platform.

The journey home was uneventful. Bunch rose as the train approached Chipping Cleghorn and picked up the old suitcase. She had just left her carriage when a man, sprinting along the platform, suddenly seized the suitcase from her hand and rushed off with it.

“Stop!” Bunch yelled. “Stop him, stop him. He’s taken my suitcase.”

The ticket collector who, at this rural station, was a man of somewhat slow processes, had just begun to say, “Now, look here, you can’t do that—” when a smart blow on the chest pushed him aside, and the man with the suitcase rushed out from the station. He made his way towards a waiting car. Tossing the suitcase in, he was about to climb after it, but before he could move a hand fell on his shoulder, and the voice of Police Constable Abel said, “Now then, what’s all this?”

Bunch arrived, panting, from the station. “He snatched my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it.”

“Nonsense,” said the man. “I don’t know what this lady means. It’s my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it.”

He looked at Bunch with a bovine and impartial stare. Nobody would have guessed that Police Constable Abel and Mrs. Harmon spent long half hours in Police Constable Abel’s off-time discussing the respective merits of manure and bone meal for rose bushes.

“You say, madam, that this is your suitcase?” said Police Constable Abel.

“Yes,” said Bunch. “Definitely.”

“And you, sir?”

“I say this suitcase is mine.”

The man was tall, dark and well-dressed, with a drawling voice and a superior manner. A feminine voice from inside the car said, “Of course it’s your suitcase, Edwin. I don’t know what this woman means.”

“We’ll have to get this clear,” said Police Constable Abel. “If it’s your suitcase, madam, what do you say is inside it?”

“Clothes,” said Bunch. “A long speckled coat with a beaver collar, two wool jumpers and a pair of shoes.”

“Well, that’s clear enough,” said Police Constable Abel. He turned to the other.

“I am a theatrical costumer,” said the dark man importantly. “This suitcase contains theatrical properties which I brought down here for an amateur performance.”

“Right, sir,” said Police Constable Abel. “Well, we’ll just look inside, shall we, and see? We can go along to the police station, or if you’re in a hurry we’ll take the suitcase back to the station and open it there.”

“It’ll suit me,” said the dark man. “My name is Moss, by the way, Edwin Moss.”

The police constable, holding the suitcase, went back into the station. “Just taking this into the parcels office, George,” he said to the ticket collector.

Police Constable Abel laid the suitcase on the counter of the parcels office and pushed back the clasp. The case was not locked. Bunch and Mr. Edwin Moss stood on either side of him, their eyes regarding each other vengefully.

“Ah!” said Police Constable Abel, as he pushed up the lid.

Inside, neatly folded, was a long rather shabby tweed coat with a beaver fur collar. There were also two wool jumpers and a pair of country shoes.

“Exactly as you say, madam,” said Police Constable Abel, turning to Bunch.

Nobody could have said that Mr. Edwin Moss underdid things. His dismay and compunction were magnificent.

“I do apologize,” he said. “I really do apologize. Please believe me, dear lady, when I tell you how very, very sorry I am. Unpardonable—quite unpardonable—my behaviour has been.” He looked at his watch. “I must rush now. Probably my suitcase has gone on the train.” Raising his hat once more, he said meltingly to Bunch, “Do, do forgive me,” and rushed hurriedly out of the parcels office.

“Are you going to let him get away?” asked Bunch in a conspiratorial whisper to Police Constable Abel.

The latter slowly closed a bovine eye in a wink.

“He won’t get too far, ma’am,” he said. “That’s to say he won’t get far unobserved, if you take my meaning.”

“Oh,” said Bunch, relieved.

“That old lady’s been on the phone,” said Police Constable Abel, “the one as was down here a few years ago. Bright she is, isn’t she? But there’s been a lot cooking up all today. Shouldn’t wonder if the inspector or sergeant was out to see you about it tomorrow morning.”

It was the inspector who came, the Inspector Craddock whom Miss Marple remembered. He greeted Bunch with a smile as an old friend.

“Crime in Chipping Cleghorn again,” he said cheerfully. “You don’t lack for sensation here, do you, Mrs. Harmon?”

“I could do with rather less,” said Bunch. “Have you come to ask me questions or are you going to tell me things for a change?”

“I’ll tell you some things first,” said the inspector. “To begin with, Mr. and Mrs. Eccles have been having an eye kept on them for some time. There’s reason to believe they’ve been connected with several robberies in this part of the world. For another thing, although Mrs. Eccles has a brother called Sandbourne who has recently come back from abroad, the man you found dying in the church yesterday was definitely not Sandbourne.”

“I knew that he wasn’t,” said Bunch. “His name was Walter, to begin with, not William.”

The inspector nodded. “His name was Walter St. John, and he escaped forty-eight hours ago from Charrington Prison.”

“Of course,” said Bunch softly to herself, “he was being hunted down by the law, and he took sanctuary.” Then she asked, “What had he done?”

“I’ll have to go back rather a long way. It’s a complicated story. Several years ago there was a certain dancer doing turns at the music halls. I don’t expect you’ll have ever heard of her, but she specialized in an Arabian Night turn, ‘Aladdin in the Cave of Jewels’ it was called. She wore bits of rhinestone and not much else.

“She wasn’t much of a dancer, I believe, but she was—well—attractive. Anyway, a certain Asiatic royalty fell for her in a big way. Amongst other things he gave her a very magnificent emerald necklace.”

“The historic jewels of a Rajah?” murmured Bunch ecstatically.

Inspector Craddock coughed. “Well, a rather more modern version, Mrs. Harmon. The affair didn’t last very long, broke up when our potentate’s attention was captured by a certain film star whose demands were not quite so modest.

“Zobeida, to give the dancer her stage name, hung onto the necklace, and in due course it was stolen. It disappeared from her dressing room at the theatre, and there was a lingering suspicion in the minds of the authorities that she herself might have engineered its disappearance. Such things have been known as a publicity stunt, or indeed from more dishonest motives.

“The necklace was never recovered, but during the course of the investigation the attention of the police was drawn to this man, Walter St. John. He was a man of education and breeding who had come down in the world, and who was employed as a working jeweller with a rather obscure firm which was suspected of acting as a fence for jewel robberies.

“There was evidence that this necklace had passed through his hands. It was, however, in connection with the theft of some other jewellery that he was finally brought to trial and convicted and sent to prison. He had not very much longer to serve, so his escape was rather a surprise.”

“But why did he come here?” asked Bunch.

“We’d like to know that very much, Mrs. Harmon. Following up his trial, it seems that he went first to London. He didn’t visit any of his old associates but he visited an elderly woman, a Mrs. Jacobs who had formerly been a theatrical dresser. She won’t say a word of what he came for, but according to other lodgers in the house he left carrying a suitcase.”

“I see,” said Bunch. “He left it in the cloakroom at Paddington and then he came down here.”

“By that time,” said Inspector Craddock, “Eccles and the man who calls himself Edwin Moss were on his trail. They wanted that suitcase. They saw him get on the bus. They must have driven out in a car ahead of him and been waiting for him when he left the bus.”

“And he was murdered?” said Bunch.

“Yes,” said Craddock. “He was shot. It was Eccles’s revolver, but I rather fancy it was Moss who did the shooting. Now, Mrs. Harmon, what we want to know is, where is the suitcase that Walter St. John actually deposited at Paddington Station?”

Bunch grinned. “I expect Aunt Jane’s got it by now,” she said. “Miss Marple, I mean. That was her plan. She sent a former maid of hers with a suitcase packed with her things to the cloakroom at Paddington and we exchanged tickets. I collected her suitcase and brought it down by train. She seemed to expect that an attempt would be made to get it from me.”

It was Inspector Craddock’s turn to grin. “So she said when she rang up. I’m driving up to London to see her. Do you want to come, too, Mrs. Harmon?”

“Wel-l,” said Bunch, considering. “Wel-l, as a matter of fact, it’s very fortunate. I had a toothache last night so I really ought to go to London to see the dentist, oughtn’t I?”

“Definitely,” said Inspector Craddock. . . .

Miss Marple looked from Inspector Craddock’s face to the eager face of Bunch Harmon. The suitcase lay on the table. “Of course, I haven’t opened it,” the old lady said. “I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing till somebody official arrived. Besides," she added, with a demurely mischievous Victorian smile, "it's locked."

"Like to make a guess at what's inside, Miss Marple?" asked the inspector.

"I should imagine, you know," said Miss Marple, "that it would be Zobeida's theatrical costumes. Would you like a chisel, Inspector?"

The chisel soon did its work. Both women gave a slight gasp as the lid flew up. The sunlight coming through the window lit up what seemed like an inexhaustible treasure of sparkling jewels, red, blue, green, orange.

"Aladdin's Cave," said Miss Marple. "The flashing jewels the girl wore to dance."

"Ah," said Inspector Craddock. "Now, what's so precious about it, do you think, that a man was murdered to get hold of it?"

"She was a shrewd girl, I expect," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "She's dead, isn't she, Inspector?"

"Yes, died three years ago."

"She had this valuable emerald necklace," said Miss Marple, musingly. "Had the stones taken out of their setting and fastened here and there on her theatrical costume, where everyone would take them for merely coloured rhinestones. Then she had a replica made of the real necklace, and that, of course, was what was stolen. No wonder it never came on the market. The thief soon discovered the stones were false."

"Here is an envelope," said Bunch, pulling aside some of the glittering stones.

Inspector Craddock took it from her and extracted two official-looking papers from it. He read aloud, " 'Marriage Certificate between Walter Edmund St. John and Mary Moss.' That was Zobeida's real name."

"So they were married," said Miss Marple. "I see."

“What’s the other?” asked Bunch.

“A birth certificate of a daughter, Jewel.”

“Jewel?” cried Bunch. “Why, of course. Jewel! Jill! That’s it. I see now why he came to Chipping Cleghorn. That’s what he was trying to say to me. Jewel. The Mundys, you know. Laburnum Cottage. They look after a little girl for someone. They’re devoted to her. She’s been like their own granddaughter. Yes, I remember now, her name was Jewel, only, of course, they call her Jill.

“Mrs. Mundy had a stroke about a week ago, and the old man’s been very ill with pneumonia. They were both going to go to the infirmary. I’ve been trying hard to find a good home for Jill somewhere. I didn’t want her taken away to an institution.

“I suppose her father heard about it in prison and he managed to break away and get hold of this suitcase from the old dresser he or his wife left it with. I suppose if the jewels really belonged to her mother, they can be used for the child now.”

“I should imagine so, Mrs. Harmon. If they’re here.”

“Oh, they’ll be here all right,” said Miss Marple cheerfully. . . .

“Thank goodness you’re back, dear,” said the Reverend Julian Harmon, greeting his wife with affection and a sigh of content. “Mrs. Burt always tries to do her best when you’re away, but she really gave me some very peculiar fish-cakes for lunch. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings so I gave them to Tiglath Pileser, but even he wouldn’t eat them so I had to throw them out of the window.”

“Tiglath Pileser,” said Bunch, stroking the vicarage cat, who was purring against her knee, “is very particular about what fish he eats. I often tell him he’s got a proud stomach!”

“And your tooth, dear? Did you have it seen to?”

“Yes,” said Bunch. “It didn’t hurt much, and I went to see Aunt Jane again, too. . . .”

“Dear old thing,” said Julian. “I hope she’s not failing at all.”

“Not in the least,” said Bunch, with a grin.

The following morning Bunch took a fresh supply of chrysanthemums to the church. The sun was once more pouring through the east window, and Bunch stood in the jewelled light on the chancel steps. She said very softly under her breath, “Your little girl will be all right. I’ll see that she is. I promise.”

Then she tidied up the church, slipped into a pew and knelt for a few moments to say her prayers before returning to the vicarage to attack the piled-up chores of two neglected days.

The Clocks (1963)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Prologue

The afternoon of the 9th of September was exactly like any other afternoon. None of those who were to be concerned in the events of that day could lay claim to having had a premonition of disaster. (With the exception, that is, of Mrs. Packer of 47, Wilbraham Crescent, who specialized in premonitions, and who always described at great length afterwards the peculiar forebodings and tremors that had beset her. But Mrs. Packer at No. 47, was so far away from No. 19, and so little concerned with the happenings there, that it seemed unnecessary for her to have had a premonition at all.)

At the Cavendish Secretarial and Typewriting Bureau, Principal, Miss K. Martindale, September 9th had been a dull day, a day of routine. The telephone rang, typewriters clicked, the pressure of business was average, neither above nor below its usual volume. None of it was particularly interesting. Up till 2:35, September 9th might have been a day like any other day.

At 2:35 Miss Martindale's buzzer went, and Edna Brent in the outer office answered it in her usual breathy and slightly nasal voice, as she manoeuvred a toffee along the line of her jaw.

"Yes, Miss Martindale?"

"Now, Edna—that is not the way I've told you to speak when answering the telephone. Enunciate clearly, and keep your breath behind your tone."

"Sorry, Miss Martindale."

"That's better. You can do it when you try. Send Sheila Webb in to me."

"She's not back from lunch yet, Miss Martindale."

"Ah." Miss Martindale's eye consulted the clock on her desk. 2:36. Exactly six minutes late. Sheila Webb had been getting slack lately. "Send her in when she comes."

“Yes, Miss Martindale.”

Edna restored the toffee to the centre of her tongue and, sucking pleasurably, resumed her typing of Naked Love by Armand Levine. Its painstaking eroticism left her uninterested—as indeed it did most of Mr. Levine’s readers, in spite of his efforts. He was a notable example of the fact that nothing can be duller than dull pornography. In spite of lurid jackets and provocative titles, his sales went down every year, and his last typing bill had already been sent in three times.

The door opened and Sheila Webb came in, slightly out of breath.

“Sandy Cat’s asking for you,” said Edna.

Sheila Webb made a face.

“Just my luck—on the one day I’m late back!”

She smoothed down her hair, picked up pad and pencil, and knocked at the Principal’s door.

Miss Martindale looked up from her desk. She was a woman of forty-odd, bristling with efficiency. Her pompadour of pale reddish hair and her Christian name of Katherine had led to her nickname of Sandy Cat.

“You’re late back, Miss Webb.”

“Sorry, Miss Martindale. There was a terrific bus jam.”

“There is always a terrific bus jam at this time of day. You should allow for it.” She referred to a note on her pad. “A Miss Pebmarsh rang up. She wants a stenographer at three o’clock. She asked for you particularly. Have you worked for her before?”

“I can’t remember doing so, Miss Martindale. Not lately anyway.”

“The address is 19, Wilbraham Crescent.” She paused questioningly, but Sheila Webb shook her head.

“I can’t remember going there.”

Miss Martindale glanced at the clock.

“Three o’clock. You can manage that easily. Have you any other appointments this afternoon? Ah, yes,” her eye ran down the appointment book at her elbow. “Professor Purdy at the Curlew Hotel. Five o’clock. You ought to be back before then. If not, I can send Janet.”

She gave a nod of dismissal, and Sheila went back to the outer office.

“Anything interesting, Sheila?”

“Just another of those dull days. Some old pussy up at Wilbraham Crescent. And at five Professor Purdy—all those awful archaeological names! How I wish something exciting could sometimes happen.”

Miss Martindale’s door opened.

“I see I have a memo here, Sheila. If Miss Pebmarsh is not back when you arrive, you are to go in, the door will not be latched. Go in and go into the room on the right of the hall and wait. Can you remember that or shall I write it down?”

“I can remember it, Miss Martindale.”

Miss Martindale went back into her sanctum.

Edna Brent fished under her chair and brought up, secretly, a rather flashy shoe and a stiletto heel that had become detached from it.

“However am I going to get home?” she moaned.

“Oh, do stop fussing—we’ll think of something,” said one of the other girls, and resumed her typing.

Edna sighed and put in a fresh sheet of paper:

“Desire had him in its grasp. With frenzied fingers he tore the fragile chiffon from her breasts and forced her down on the soap.”

“Damn,” said Edna and reached for the eraser.

Sheila picked up her handbag and went out.

Wilbraham Crescent was a fantasy executed by a Victorian builder in the 1880’s. It was a half-moon of double houses and gardens set back to back. This conceit was a source of considerable difficulty to persons unacquainted with the locality. Those who arrived on the outer side were unable to find the lower numbers and those who hit the inner side first were baffled as to the whereabouts of the higher numbers. The houses were neat, prim, artistically balconied and eminently respectable. Modernization had as yet barely touched them—on the outside, that is to say. Kitchens and bathrooms were the first to feel the wind of change.

There was nothing unusual about No. 19. It had neat curtains and a well-polished brass front doorhandle. There were standard rose trees each side of the path leading to the front door.

Sheila Webb opened the front gate, walked up to the front door and rang the bell. There was no response and after waiting a minute or two, she did as she had been directed, and turned the handle. The door opened and she walked in. The door on the right of the small hall was ajar. She tapped on it, waited, and then walked in. It was an ordinary quite pleasant sitting room, a little overfurnished for modern tastes. The only thing at all remarkable about it was the profusion of clocks—a grandfather clock ticking in the corner, a Dresden china clock on the mantelpiece, a silver carriage clock on the desk, a small fancy gilt clock on a whatnot near the fireplace and on a table by the window, a faded leather travelling clock, with ROSEMARY in worn gilt letters across the corner.

Sheila Webb looked at the clock on the desk with some surprise. It showed the time to be a little after ten minutes past four. Her gaze shifted to the chimney piece. The clock there said the same.

Sheila started violently as there was a whir and a click above her head, and from a wooden carved clock on the wall a cuckoo sprang out through his little door and announced loudly and definitely: Cuckoo, Cuckoo, Cuckoo! The harsh note seemed almost menacing. The cuckoo disappeared again with a snap of his door.

Sheila Webb gave a half-smile and walked round the end of the sofa. Then she stopped short, pulling up with a jerk.

Sprawled on the floor was the body of a man. His eyes were half open and sightless. There was a dark moist patch on the front of his dark grey suit. Almost mechanically Sheila bent down. She touched his cheek—cold—his hand, the same … touched the wet patch and drew her hand away sharply, staring at it in horror.

At that moment she heard the click of a gate outside, her head turned mechanically to the window. Through it she saw a woman's figure hurrying up the path. Sheila swallowed mechanically—her throat was dry. She stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, to cry out … staring in front of her.

The door opened and a tall elderly woman entered, carrying a shopping bag. She had wavy grey hair pulled back from her forehead, and her eyes were a wide and beautiful blue. Their gaze passed unseeingly over Sheila.

Sheila uttered a faint sound, no more than a croak. The wide blue eyes came to her and the woman spoke sharply:

"Is somebody there?"

"I—it's—" The girl broke off as the woman came swiftly towards her round the back of the sofa.

And then she screamed.

"Don't—don't … you'll tread on it—him … And he's dead…."

One

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I

To use police terms: at 2:59 p.m. on September 9th, I was proceeding along Wilbraham Crescent in a westerly direction. It was my first introduction to Wilbraham Crescent, and frankly Wilbraham Crescent had me baffled.

I had been following a hunch with a persistence becoming more dogged day by day as the hunch seemed less and less likely to pay off. I'm like that.

The number I wanted was 61, and could I find it? No, I could not. Having studiously followed the numbers from 1 to 35, Wilbraham Crescent then appeared to end. A thoroughfare uncompromisingly labelled Albany Road barred my way. I turned back. On the north side there were no houses, only a wall. Behind the wall, blocks of modern flats soared upwards, the entrance of them being obviously in another road. No help there.

I looked up at the numbers I was passing. 24, 23, 22, 21. Diana Lodge (presumably 20, with an orange cat on the gatepost washing its face), 19—

The door of 19 opened and a girl came out of it and down the path with what seemed to be the speed of a bomb. The likeness to a bomb was intensified by the screaming that accompanied her progress. It was high and thin and singularly inhuman. Through the gate the girl came and collided with me with a force that nearly knocked me off the pavement. She did not only collide. She clutched—a frenzied desperate clutching.

“Steady,” I said, as I recovered my balance. I shook her slightly. “Steady now.”

The girl steadied. She still clutched, but she stopped screaming. Instead she gasped—deep sobbing gasps.

I can’t say that I reacted to the situation with any brilliance. I asked her if anything was the matter. Recognizing that my question was singularly feeble I amended it.

“What’s the matter?”

The girl took a deep breath.

“In there!” she gestured behind her.

“Yes?”

“There’s a man on the floor … dead … She was going to step on him.”

“Who was? Why?”

“I think—because she’s blind. And there’s blood on him.” She looked down and loosened one of her clutching hands. “And on me. There’s blood on me.”

“So there is,” I said. I looked at the stains on my coat sleeve. “And on me as well now,” I pointed out. I sighed and considered the situation. “You’d better take me in and show me,” I said.

But she began to shake violently.

“I can’t—I can’t … I won’t go in there again.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” I looked round. There seemed nowhere very suitable to deposit a half-fainting girl. I lowered her gently to the pavement and sat her with her back against the iron railings.

“You stay there,” I said, “until I come back. I shan’t be long. You’ll be all right. Lean forward and put your head between your knees if you feel queer.”

“I—I think I’m all right now.”

She was a little doubtful about it, but I didn’t want to parley. I gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and strode off briskly up the path. I went in through the door, hesitated a moment in the hallway, looked into the door on the left, found an empty dining room, crossed the hall and entered the sitting room opposite.

The first thing I saw was an elderly woman with grey hair sitting in a chair. She turned her head sharply as I entered and said:

“Who’s that?”

I realized at once that the woman was blind. Her eyes which looked directly towards me were focused on a spot behind my left ear.

I spoke abruptly and to the point.

“A young woman rushed out into the street saying there was a dead man in here.”

I felt a sense of absurdity as I said the words. It did not seem possible that there should be a dead man in this tidy room with this calm woman sitting in her chair with her hands folded.

But her answer came at once.

“Behind the sofa,” she said.

I moved round the angle of the sofa. I saw it then—the out-flung arms—the glazed eyes—the congealing patch of blood.

“How did this happen?” I asked abruptly.

“I don’t know.”

“But—surely. Who is he?”

“I have no idea.”

“We must get the police.” I looked round. “Where’s the telephone?”

“I have not got a telephone.”

I concentrated upon her more closely.

“You live here? This is your house?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“Certainly. I came in from shopping—” I noted the shopping bag flung on a chair near the door. “I came in here. I realized at once there was someone in the room. One does very easily when one is blind. I asked who was there. There was no answer—only the sound of someone breathing rather quickly. I went towards the sound—and then whoever it was cried out—something about someone being dead and that I was going to tread on him. And then whoever it was rushed past me out of the room screaming.”

I nodded. Their stories clicked.

“And what did you do?”

“I felt my way very carefully until my foot touched an obstacle.”

“And then?”

“I knelt down. I touched something—a man’s hand. It was cold—there was no pulse … I got up and came over here and sat down—to wait. Someone was bound to come in due course. The young woman, whoever she was, would give the alarm. I thought I had better not leave the house.”

I was impressed with the calm of this woman. She had not screamed, or stumbled panic-stricken from the house. She had sat down calmly to wait. It was the sensible thing to do, but it must have taken some doing.

Her voice inquired:

“Who exactly are you?”

“My name is Colin Lamb. I happened to be passing by.”

“Where is the young woman?”

“I left her propped up by the gate. She’s suffering from shock. Where is the nearest telephone?”

“There is a call box about fifty yards down the road just before you come to the corner.”

“Of course. I remember passing it. I’ll go and ring the police. Will you—” I hesitated.

I didn’t know whether to say “Will you remain here?” or to make it “Will you be all right?”

She relieved me from my choice.

“You had better bring the girl into the house,” she said decisively.

“I don’t know that she will come,” I said doubtfully.

“Not into this room, naturally. Put her in the dining room the other side of the hall. Tell her I am making some tea.”

She rose and came towards me.

“But—can you manage—”

A faint grim smile showed for a moment on her face.

“My dear young man. I have made meals for myself in my own kitchen ever since I came to live in this house—fourteen years ago. To be blind is not necessarily to be helpless.”

“I’m sorry. It was stupid of me. Perhaps I ought to know your name?”

“Millicent Pebmarsh—Miss.”

I went out and down the path. The girl looked up at me and began to struggle to her feet.

“I—I think I’m more or less all right now.”

I helped her up, saying cheerfully:

“Good.”

“There—there was a dead man in there, wasn’t there?”

I agreed promptly.

“Certainly there was. I’m just going down to the telephone box to report it to the police. I should wait in the house if I were you.” I raised my voice to cover her quick protest. “Go into the dining room—on the left as you go in. Miss Pebmarsh is making a cup of tea for you.”

“So that was Miss Pebmarsh? And she’s blind?”

“Yes. It’s been a shock to her, too, of course, but she’s being very sensible. Come on, I’ll take you in. A cup of tea will do you good whilst you are waiting for the police to come.”

I put an arm round her shoulders and urged her up the path. I settled her comfortably by the dining room table, and hurried off again to telephone.

II

An unemotional voice said, “Crowdean Police Station.”

“Can I speak to Detective Inspector Hardcastle?”

The voice said cautiously:

“I don’t know whether he is here. Who is speaking?”

“Tell him it’s Colin Lamb.”

"Just a moment, please."

I waited. Then Dick Hardcastle's voice spoke.

"Colin? I didn't expect you yet awhile. Where are you?"

"Crowdean. I'm actually in Wilbraham Crescent. There's a man lying dead on the floor of Number 19, stabbed I should think. He's been dead approximately half an hour or so."

"Who found him. You?"

"No, I was an innocent passerby. Suddenly a girl came flying out of the house like a bat out of hell. Nearly knocked me down. She said there was a dead man on the floor and a blind woman was trampling on him."

"You're not having me on, are you?" Dick's voice asked suspiciously.

"It does sound fantastic, I admit. But the facts seem to be as stated. The blind woman is Miss Millicent Pebmarsh who owns the house."

"And was she trampling on the dead man?"

"Not in the sense you mean it. It seems that being blind she just didn't know he was there."

"I'll set the machinery in motion. Wait for me there. What have you done with the girl?"

"Miss Pebmarsh is making her a cup of tea."

Dick's comment was that it all sounded very cosy.

Two

At 19, Wilbraham Crescent the machinery of the Law was in possession. There was a police surgeon, a police photographer, fingerprint men. They moved efficiently, each occupied with his own routine.

Finally came Detective Inspector Hardcastle, a tall, pokerfaced man with expressive eyebrows, godlike, to see that all he had put in motion was being done, and done properly. He took a final look at the body, exchanged a few brief words with the police surgeon and then crossed to the dining room where three people sat over empty teacups. Miss Pebmarsh, Colin Lamb and a tall girl with brown curling hair and wide, frightened eyes. “Quite pretty,” the inspector noted, parenthetically as it were.

He introduced himself to Miss Pebmarsh.

“Detective Inspector Hardcastle.”

He knew a little about Miss Pebmarsh, though their paths had never crossed professionally. But he had seen her about, and he was aware that she was an ex-schoolteacher, and that she had a job connected with the teaching of Braille at the Aaronberg Institute for handicapped children. It seemed wildly unlikely that a man should be found murdered in her neat, austere house—but the unlikely happened more often than one would be disposed to believe.

“This is a terrible thing to have happened, Miss Pebmarsh,” he said. “I’m afraid it must have been a great shock to you. I’ll need to get a clear statement of exactly what occurred from you all. I understand that it was Miss—” he glanced quickly at the notebook the constable had handed him, “Sheila Webb who actually discovered the body. If you’ll allow me to use your kitchen, Miss Pebmarsh, I’ll take Miss Webb in there where we can be quiet.”

He opened the connecting door from the dining room to the kitchen and waited until the girl had passed through. A young plainclothes detective was already established in the kitchen, writing unobtrusively at a Formica-topped small table.

“This chair looks comfortable,” said Hardcastle, pulling forward a modernized version of a Windsor chair.

Sheila Webb sat down nervously, staring at him with large frightened eyes.

Hardcastle very nearly said: “I shan’t eat you, my dear,” but repressed himself, and said instead:

“There’s nothing to worry about. We just want to get a clear picture. Now your name is Sheila Webb—and your address?”

“14, Palmerstone Road—beyond the gasworks.”

“Yes, of course. And you are employed, I suppose?”

“Yes. I’m a shorthand typist—I work at Miss Martindale’s Secretarial Bureau.”

“The Cavendish Secretarial and Typewriting Bureau—that’s its full name, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“And how long have you been working there?”

“About a year. Well, ten months actually.”

“I see. Now just tell me in your own words how you came to be at 19, Wilbraham Crescent today.”

“Well, it was this way.” Sheila Webb was speaking now with more confidence. “This Miss Pebmarsh rang up the Bureau and asked for a stenographer to be here at three o’clock. So when I came back from lunch Miss Martindale told me to go.”

“That was just routine, was it? I mean—you were the next on the list—or however you arrange these things?”

“Not exactly. Miss Pebmarsh had asked for me specially.”

“Miss Pebmarsh had asked for you specially.” Hardcastle’s eyebrows registered this point. “I see … Because you had worked for her before?”

“But I hadn’t,” said Sheila quickly.

“You hadn’t? You’re quite sure of that?”

“Oh, yes, I’m positive. I mean, she’s not the sort of person one would forget. That’s what seems so odd.”

“Quite. Well, we won’t go into that just now. You reached here when?”

“It must have been just before three o’clock, because the cuckoo clock—” she stopped abruptly. Her eyes widened. “How queer. How very queer. I never really noticed at the time.”

“What didn’t you notice, Miss Webb?”

“Why—the clocks.”

“What about the clocks?”

“The cuckoo clock struck three all right, but all the others were about an hour fast. How very odd!”

“Certainly very odd,” agreed the inspector. “Now when did you first notice the body?”

“Not till I went round behind the sofa. And there it—he—was. It was awful, yes awful….”

“Awful, I agree. Now did you recognize the man? Was it anyone you had seen before?”

“Oh no.”

“You’re quite sure of that? He might have looked rather different from the way he usually looked, you know. Think carefully. You’re quite sure he was someone you’d never seen before?”

“Quite sure.”

“Right. That’s that. And what did you do?”

“What did I do?”

“Yes.”

“Why—nothing … nothing at all. I couldn’t.”

“I see. You didn’t touch him at all?”

“Yes—yes I did. To see if—I mean—just to see—But he was—quite cold—and—and I got blood on my hand. It was horrible—thick and sticky.”

She began to shake.

“There, there,” said Hardcastle in an avuncular fashion. “It’s all over now, you know. Forget about the blood. Go on to the next thing. What happened next?”

“I don’t know … Oh, yes, she came home.”

“Miss Pebmarsh, you mean?”

“Yes. Only I didn’t think about her being Miss Pebmarsh then. She just came in with a shopping basket.” Her tone underlined the shopping basket as something incongruous and irrelevant.

“And what did you say?”

“I don’t think I said anything … I tried to, but I couldn’t. I felt all choked up here.” She indicated her throat.

The inspector nodded.

“And then—and then—she said: ‘Who’s there?’ and she came round the back of the sofa and I thought—I thought she was going to—to tread on It. And I screamed … And once I began I couldn’t stop screaming, and somehow I got out of the room and through the front door—”

“Like a bat out of hell,” the inspector remembered Colin’s description.

Sheila Webb looked at him out of miserable frightened eyes and said rather unexpectedly:

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. You’ve told your story very well. There’s no need to think about it any more now. Oh, just one point, why were you in that room at all?”

“Why?” She looked puzzled.

“Yes. You’d arrived here, possibly a few minutes early, and you’d pushed the bell, I suppose. But if nobody answered, why did you come in?”

“Oh that. Because she told me to.”

“Who told you to?”

“Miss Pebmarsh did.”

“But I thought you hadn’t spoken to her at all.”

“No, I hadn’t. It was Miss Martindale she said it to—that I was to come in and wait in the sitting room on the right of the hall.”

Hardcastle said: “Indeed” thoughtfully.

Sheila Webb asked timidly:

“Is—is that all?”

"I think so. I'd like you to wait here about ten minutes longer, perhaps, in case something arises I might want to ask you about. After that, I'll send you home in a police car. What about your family—you have a family?"

"My father and mother are dead. I live with an aunt."

"And her name is?"

"Mrs. Lawton."

The inspector rose and held out his hand.

"Thank you very much, Miss Webb," he said. "Try and get a good night's rest tonight. You'll need it after what you've been through."

She smiled at him timidly as she went through the door into the dining room.

"Look after Miss Webb, Colin," the inspector said. "Now, Miss Pebmarsh, can I trouble you to come in here?"

Hardcastle had half held out a hand to guide Miss Pebmarsh, but she walked resolutely past him, verified a chair against the wall with a touch of her fingertips, drew it out a foot and sat down.

Hardcastle closed the door. Before he could speak, Millicent Pebmarsh said abruptly:

"Who's that young man?"

"His name is Colin Lamb."

"So he informed me. But who is he? Why did he come here?"

Hardcastle looked at her in faint surprise.

"He happened to be walking down the street when Miss Webb rushed out of this house screaming murder. After coming in and satisfying himself as to what had occurred he rang us up, and was asked to come back here and wait."

"You spoke to him as Colin."

"You are very observant, Miss Pebmarsh—(observant? hardly the word. And yet none other fitted)—Colin Lamb is a friend of mine, though it is some time since I have seen him." He added: "He's a marine biologist."

"Oh! I see."

"Now, Miss Pebmarsh, I shall be glad if you can tell me anything about this rather surprising affair."

"Willingly. But there is very little to tell."

"You have resided here for some time, I believe?"

"Since 1950. I am—was—a schoolmistress by profession. When I was told nothing could be done about my failing eyesight and that I should shortly go blind, I applied myself to become a specialist in Braille and various techniques for helping the blind. I have a job here at the Aaronberg Institute for Blind and Handicapped children."

"Thank you. Now as to the events of this afternoon. Were you expecting a visitor?"

"No."

"I will read you a description of the dead man to see if it suggests to you anyone in particular. Height five feet nine to ten, age approximately sixty, dark hair going grey, brown eyes, clean shaven, thin face, firm jaw. Well nourished but not fat. Dark grey suit, well-kept hands. Might be a bank clerk, an accountant, a lawyer, or a professional man of some kind. Does that suggest to you anyone that you know?"

Millicent Pebmarsh considered carefully before replying.

“I can’t say that it does. Of course it’s a very generalized description. It would fit quite a number of people. It might be someone I have seen or met on some occasion, but certainly not anyone I know well.”

“You have not received any letter lately from anyone proposing to call upon you?”

“Definitely not.”

“Very good. Now, you rang up the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau and asked for the services of a stenographer and—”

She interrupted him.

“Excuse me. I did nothing of the kind.”

“You did not ring up the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau and ask—” Hardcastle stared.

“I don’t have a telephone in the house.”

“There is a call box at the end of the street,” Inspector Hardcastle pointed out.

“Yes, of course. But I can only assure you, Inspector Hardcastle, that I had no need for a stenographer and did not—repeat not—ring up this Cavendish place with any such request.”

“You did not ask for Miss Sheila Webb particularly?”

“I have never heard that name before.”

Hardcastle stared at her, astonished.

“You left the front door unlocked,” he pointed out.

“I frequently do so in the daytime.”

“Anybody might walk in.”

“Anybody seems to have done so in this case,” said Miss Pebmarsh drily.

“Miss Pebmarsh, this man according to the medical evidence died roughly between 1:30 and 2:45. Where were you yourself then?”

Miss Pebmarsh reflected.

“At 1:30 I must either have left or been preparing to leave the house. I had some shopping to do.”

“Can you tell me exactly where you went?”

“Let me see. I went to the post office, the one in Albany Road, posted a parcel, got some stamps, then I did some household shopping, yes and I got some patent fasteners and safety pins at the drapers, Field and Wren. Then I returned here. I can tell you exactly what the time was. My cuckoo clock cuckooed three times as I came to the gate. I can hear it from the road.”

“And what about your other clocks?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your other clocks seem all to be just over an hour fast.”

“Fast? You mean the grandfather clock in the corner?”

“Not that only—all the other clocks in the sitting room are the same.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by the ‘other clocks.’ There are no other clocks in the sitting room.”

Three

Hardcastle stared.

“Oh come, Miss Pebmarsh. What about that beautiful Dresden china clock on the mantelpiece? And a small French clock—ormolu. And a silver carriage clock, and—oh yes, the clock with ‘Rosemary’ across the corner.”

It was Miss Pebmarsh’s turn to stare.

“Either you or I must be mad, Inspector. I assure you I have no Dresden china clock, no—what did you say—clock with ‘Rosemary’ across it—no French ormolu clock and—what was the other one?”

“Silver carriage clock,” said Hardcastle mechanically.

“Not that either. If you don’t believe me, you can ask the woman who comes to clean for me. Her name is Mrs. Curtin.”

Detective Inspector Hardcastle was taken aback. There was a positive assurance, a briskness in Miss Pebmarsh’s tone that carried conviction. He took a moment or two turning over things in his mind. Then he rose to his feet.

“I wonder, Miss Pebmarsh, if you would mind accompanying me into the next room?”

“Certainly. Frankly, I would like to see those clocks myself.”

“See?” Hardcastle was quick to query the word.

“Examine would be a better word,” said Miss Pebmarsh, “but even blind people, Inspector, use conventional modes of speech that do not exactly apply to their own powers. When I say I would like to see those clocks, I mean I would like to examine and feel them with my own fingers.”

Followed by Miss Pebmarsh, Hardcastle went out of the kitchen, crossed the small hall and into the sitting room. The fingerprint man looked up at him.

“I’ve about finished in here, sir,” he said. “You can touch anything you like.”

Hardcastle nodded and picked up the small travelling clock with “Rosemary” written across the corner. He put it into Miss Pebmarsh’s hands. She felt it over carefully.

“It seems an ordinary travelling clock,” she said, “the leather folding kind. It is not mine, Inspector Hardcastle, and it was not in this room, I am fairly sure I can say, when I left the house at half past one.”

“Thank you.”

The inspector took it back from her. Carefully he lifted the small Dresden clock from the mantelpiece.

“Be careful of this,” he said, as he put it into her hands, “it’s breakable.”

Millicent Pebmarsh felt the small china clock with delicate probing fingertips. Then she shook her head. “It must be a charming clock,” she said, “but it’s not mine. Where was it, do you say?”

“On the right hand side of the mantelpiece.”

“There should be one of a pair of china candlesticks there,” said Miss Pebmarsh.

“Yes,” said Hardcastle, “there is a candlestick there, but it’s been pushed to the end.”

“You say there was still another clock?”

“Two more.”

Hardcastle took back the Dresden china clock and gave her the small French gilt ormolu one. She felt it over rapidly, then handed it back to him.

“No. That is not mine either.”

He handed her the silver one and that, too, she returned.

“The only clocks ordinarily in this room are a grandfather clock there in that corner by the window—”

“Quite right.”

“—and a cuckoo on the wall near the door.”

Hardcastle found it difficult to know exactly what to say next. He looked searchingly at the woman in front of him with the additional security of knowing that she could not return his survey. There was a slight frown as of perplexity on her forehead. She said sharply:

“I can’t understand it. I simply can’t understand it.”

She stretched out one hand, with the easy knowledge of where she was in the room, and sat down. Hardcastle looked at the fingerprint man who was standing by the door.

“You’ve been over these clocks?” he asked.

“I’ve been over everything, sir. No dabs on the gilt clock, but there wouldn’t be. The surface wouldn’t take it. The same goes for the china one. But there are no dabs on the leather travelling clock or the silver one and that is a bit unlikely if things were normal—there ought to be dabs. By the way, none of them are wound up and they are all set to the same time—thirteen minutes past four.”

“What about the rest of the room?”

“There are about three or four different sets of prints in the room, all women’s, I should say. The contents of the pockets are on the table.”

By an indication of his head he drew attention to a small pile of things on a table. Hardcastle went over and looked at them. There was a notecase containing seven pounds ten, a little loose change, a silk pocket handkerchief, unmarked, a small box of digestive pills and a printed card. Hardcastle bent to look at it.

Mr. R. H. Curry,
Metropolis and Provincial Insurance Co. Ltd
7, Denvers Street,
London, W2.

Hardcastle came back to the sofa where Miss Pebmarsh sat.

“Were you by any chance expecting someone from an insurance company to call upon you?”

“Insurance company? No, certainly not.”

“The Metropolis and Provincial Insurance Company,” said Hardcastle.

Miss Pebmarsh shook her head. “I’ve never heard of it,” she said.

“You were not contemplating taking out insurance of any kind?”

“No, I was not. I am insured against fire and burglary with the Jove Insurance Company which has a branch here. I carry no personal insurance. I have no family or near relations so I see no point in insuring my life.”

“I see,” said Hardcastle. “Does the name of Curry mean anything to you? Mr. R. H. Curry?” He was watching her closely. He saw no reaction in her face.

“Curry,” she repeated the name, then shook her head. “It’s not a very usual name, is it? No, I don’t think I’ve heard the name or known anyone of that name. Is that the name of the man who is dead?”

“It would seem possible,” said Hardcastle.

Miss Pebmarsh hesitated a moment. Then she said:

“Do you want me to—to—touch—”

He was quick to understand her.

“Would you, Miss Pebmarsh? If it’s not asking too much of you, that is? I’m not very knowledgeable in these matters, but your fingers will probably tell you more accurately what a person looks like than you would know by description.”

“Exactly,” said Miss Pebmarsh. “I agree it is not a very pleasant thing to have to do but I am quite willing to do it if you think it might be a help to you.”

“Thank you,” said Hardcastle. “If you will let me guide you—”

He took her round the sofa, indicated to her to kneel down, then gently guided her hands to the dead man’s face. She was very calm, displaying no emotion. Her fingers traced the hair, the ears, lingering a moment behind the left ear, the line of the nose, mouth and chin. Then she shook her head and got up.

“I have a clear idea what he would look like,” she said, “but I am quite sure that it is no one I have seen or known.”

The fingerprint man had packed up his kit and gone out of the room. He stuck his head back in.

“They’ve come for him,” he said, indicating the body. “All right to take him away?”

“Right,” said Inspector Hardcastle. “Just come and sit over here, will you, Miss Pebmarsh?”

He established her in a corner chair. Two men came into the room. The removal of the late Mr. Curry was rapid and professional. Hardcastle went out to the gate and then returned to the sitting room. He sat down near Miss Pebmarsh.

“This is an extraordinary business, Miss Pebmarsh,” he said. “I’d like to run over the main points with you and see if I’ve got it right. Correct me if I am wrong. You expected no visitors today, you’ve made no inquiries re insurance of any kind and you have received no letter from anyone stating that a representative of an insurance company was going to call upon you today. Is that correct?”

“Quite correct.”

“You did not need the services of a shorthand typist or stenographer and you did not ring up the Cavendish Bureau or request that one should be here at three o’clock.”

“That again is correct.”

“When you left the house at approximately 1:30, there were in this room only two clocks, the cuckoo clock and the grandfather clock. No others.”

About to reply, Miss Pebmarsh checked herself.

“If I am to be absolutely accurate, I could not swear to that statement. Not having my sight I would not notice the absence or presence of anything not usually in the room. That is to say, the last time I can be sure of the contents of this room was when I dusted it early this morning. Everything then was in its place. I usually do this room myself as cleaning women are apt to be careless with ornaments.”

“Did you leave the house at all this morning?”

“Yes. I went at ten o’clock as usual to the Aaronberg Institute. I have classes there until twelve fifteen. I returned here at about quarter to one, made myself some scrambled eggs in the kitchen and a cup of tea and went out again, as I have said, at half past one. I ate my meal in the kitchen, by the way, and did not come into this room.”

“I see,” said Hardcastle. “So while you can say definitely that at ten o’clock this morning there were no superfluous clocks here, they could possibly have been introduced some time during the morning.”

“As to that you would have to ask my cleaning woman, Mrs. Curtin. She comes here about ten and usually leaves about twelve o’clock. She lives at 17, Dipper Street.”

“Thank you, Miss Pebmarsh. Now we are left with these following facts and this is where I want you to give me any ideas or suggestions that occur to you. At some time during today four clocks were brought here. The hands of these four clocks were set at thirteen minutes past four. Now does that time suggest anything to you?”

“Thirteen minutes past four.” Miss Pebmarsh shook her head. “Nothing at all.”

“Now we pass from the clocks to the dead man. It seems unlikely that he would have been let in by your cleaning woman and left in the house by her unless you had told her you were expecting him, but that we can learn from her. He came here presumably to see you for some reason, either a business one or a private one. Between one thirty and two forty-five he was stabbed and killed. If he came here by appointment, you say you know nothing of it. Presumably he was connected with insurance—but there again you cannot help us. The door was unlocked so he could have come in and sat down to wait for you—but why?”

“The whole thing’s daft,” said Miss Pebmarsh impatiently. “So you think that this—what’s-his-name Curry—brought those clocks with him?”

“There’s no sign of a container anywhere,” said Hardcastle. “He could hardly have brought four clocks in his pockets. Now Miss Pebmarsh, think very carefully. Is there any association in your mind, any suggestion you could possibly make about anything to do with clocks, or if not with clocks, say with time. 4:13. Thirteen minutes past four?”

She shook her head.

“I’ve been trying to say to myself that it is the work of a lunatic or that somebody came to the wrong house. But even that doesn’t really explain anything. No, Inspector, I can’t help you.”

A young constable looked in. Hardcastle went to join him in the hall and from there went down to the gate. He spoke for a few minutes to the men.

“You can take the young lady home now,” he said, “14 Palmerston Road is the address.”

He went back and into the dining room. Through the open door to the kitchen he could hear Miss Pebmarsh busy at the sink. He stood in the doorway.

“I shall want to take those clocks, Miss Pebmarsh. I’ll leave you a receipt for them.”

“That will be quite all right, Inspector—they don’t belong to me—”

Hardcastle turned to Sheila Webb.

“You can go home now, Miss Webb. The police car will take you.”

Sheila and Colin rose.

“Just see her into the car, will you, Colin?” said Hardcastle as he pulled a chair to the table and started to scribble a receipt.

Colin and Sheila went out and started down the path. Sheila paused suddenly.

“My gloves—I left them—”

“I’ll get them.”

“No—I know just where I put them. I don’t mind now—now that they’ve taken it away.”

She ran back and rejoined him a moment or two later.

“I’m sorry I was so silly—before.”

“Anybody would have been,” said Colin.

Hardcastle joined them as Sheila entered the car. Then, as it drove away, he turned to the young constable.

“I want those clocks in the sitting room packed up carefully—all except the cuckoo clock on the wall and the big grandfather clock.”

He gave a few more directions and then turned to his friend.

“I’m going places. Want to come?”

“Suits me,” said Colin.

Four

COLIN LAMB’S NARRATIVE

“Where do we go?” I asked Dick Hardcastle.

He spoke to the driver.

“Cavendish Secretarial Bureau. It’s on Palace Street, up towards the Esplanade on the right.”

“Yes, sir.”

The car drew away. There was quite a little crowd by now, staring with fascinated interest. The orange cat was still sitting on the gatepost of Diana Lodge next door. He was no longer washing his face but was sitting up very straight, lashing his tail slightly, and gazing over the heads of the crowd with that complete disdain for the human race that is the special prerogative of cats and camels.

“The Secretarial Bureau, and then the cleaning woman, in that order,” said Hardcastle, “because the time is getting on.” He glanced at his watch. “After four o’clock.” He paused before adding, “Rather an attractive girl?”

“Quite,” I said.

He cast an amused look in my direction.

“But she told a very remarkable story. The sooner it’s checked up on, the better.”

“You don’t think that she—”

He cut me short.

“I’m always interested in people who find bodies.”

“But that girl was half mad with fright! If you had heard the way she was screaming….”

He gave me another of his quizzical looks and repeated that she was a very attractive girl.

“And how did you come to be wandering about in Wilbraham Crescent, Colin? Admiring our genteel Victorian architecture? Or had you a purpose?”

“I had a purpose. I was looking for Number 61—and I couldn’t find it. Possibly it doesn’t exist?”

“It exists all right. The numbers go up to—88, I think.”

“But look here, Dick, when I came to Number 28, Wilbraham Crescent just petered out.”

“It’s always puzzling to strangers. If you’d turned to the right up Albany Road and then turned to the right again you’d have found yourself in the other half of Wilbraham Crescent. It’s built back to back, you see. The gardens back on each other.”

“I see,” I said, when he had explained this peculiar geography at length. “Like those Squares and Gardens in London. Onslow Square, isn’t it? Or Cadogan. You start down one side of a square, and then it suddenly becomes a Place or Gardens. Even taxis are frequently baffled. Anyway, there is a 61. Any idea who lives there?”

“61? Let me see … Yes, that would be Bland the builder.”

“Oh dear,” I said. “That’s bad.”

“You don’t want a builder?”

“No. I don’t fancy a builder at all. Unless—perhaps he’s only just come here recently—just started up?”

“Bland was born here, I think. He’s certainly a local man—been in business for years.”

“Very disappointing.”

“He’s a very bad builder,” said Hardcastle encouragingly. “Uses pretty poor materials. Puts up the kind of houses that look more or less all right until you live in them, then everything falls down or goes wrong. Sails fairly near the wind sometimes. Sharp practice—but just manages to get away with it.”

“It’s no good tempting me, Dick. The man I want would almost certainly be a pillar of rectitude.”

“Bland came into a lot of money about a year ago—or rather his wife did. She’s a Canadian, came over here in the war and met Bland. Her family didn’t want her to marry him, and more or less cut her off when she did. Then last year a great-uncle died, his only son had been killed in an air crash and what with war casualties and one thing and another, Mrs. Bland was the only one left of the family. So he left his money to her. Just saved Bland from going bankrupt, I believe.”

“You seem to know a lot about Mr. Bland.”

“Oh that—well, you see, the Inland Revenue are always interested when a man suddenly gets rich overnight. They wonder if he’s been doing a little fiddling and salting away—so they check up. They checked and it was all O.K.”

“In any case,” I said, “I’m not interested in a man who has suddenly got rich. It’s not the kind of setup that I’m looking for.”

“No? You’ve had that, haven’t you?”

I nodded.

“And finished with it? Or—not finished with it?”

“It’s something of a story,” I said evasively. “Are we dining together tonight as planned—or will this business put paid to that?”

“No, that will be all right. At the moment the first thing to do is set the machinery in motion. We want to find out all about Mr. Curry. In all probability once we know just who he is and what he does, we’ll have a pretty good idea as to who wanted him out of the way.” He looked out of the window. “Here we are.”

The Cavendish Secretarial and Typewriting Bureau was situated in the main shopping street, called rather grandly Palace Street. It had been adapted, like many other of the establishments there, from a Victorian house. To the right of it a similar house displayed the legend Edwin Glen, Artist Photographer. Specialist, Children’s Photographs, Wedding Groups, etc. In support of this statement the window was filled with enlargements of all sizes and ages of children, from babies to six-year-olds. These presumably were to lure in fond mammas. A few couples were also represented. Bashful looking young men with smiling girls. On the other side of the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau were the offices of an old-established and old-fashioned coal merchant. Beyond that again the original old-fashioned houses had been pulled down and a glittering three-storey building proclaimed itself as the Orient Café and Restaurant.

Hardcastle and I walked up the four steps, passed through the open front door and obeying the legend on a door on the right which said “Please Enter,” entered. It was a good-sized room, and three young women were typing with assiduity. Two of them continued to type, paying no attention to the entrance of strangers. The third one who was typing at a table with a telephone, directly opposite the door, stopped and looked at us inquiringly. She appeared to be sucking a sweet of some kind. Having arranged it in a convenient position in her mouth, she inquired in faintly adenoidal tones:

“Can I help you?”

“Miss Martindale?” said Hardcastle.

“I think she’s engaged at the moment on the telephone—” At that moment there was a click and the girl picked up the telephone receiver and fiddled with a switch, and said: “Two gentlemen to see you, Miss Martindale.” She looked at us and asked, “Can I have your names, please?”

“Hardcastle,” said Dick.

“A Mr. Hardcastle, Miss Martindale.” She replaced the receiver and rose. “This way, please,” she said, going to a door which bore the name MISS MARTINDALE on a brass plate. She opened the door, flattened herself against it to let us pass, said, “Mr. Hardcastle,” and shut the door behind us.

Miss Martindale looked up at us from a large desk behind which she was sitting. She was an efficient-looking woman of about fifty with a pompadour of pale red hair and an alert glance.

She looked from one to the other of us.

“Mr. Hardcastle?”

Dick took out one of his official cards and handed it to her. I effaced myself by taking an upright chair near the door.

Miss Martindale’s sandy eyebrows rose in surprise and a certain amount of displeasure.

“Detective Inspector Hardcastle? What can I do for you, Inspector?”

“I have come to you to ask for a little information, Miss Martindale. I think you may be able to help me.”

From his tone of voice, I judged that Dick was going to play it in a roundabout way, exerting charm. I was rather doubtful myself whether Miss Martindale would be amenable to charm. She was of the type that the French label so aptly a femme formidable.

I was studying the general layout. On the walls above Miss Martindale’s desk was hung a collection of signed photographs. I recognized one as that of Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, detective writer, with whom I was slightly acquainted. Sincerely yours, Ariadne Oliver, was written across it in a bold black hand. Yours gratefully, Garry Gregson adorned another photograph of a thriller writer who had died about sixteen years ago. Yours ever, Miriam adorned the photograph of Miriam Hogg, a woman writer who specialized in romance. Sex was represented by a photograph of a timid-looking balding man, signed in tiny writing, Gratefully, Armand Levine. There was a sameness about these trophies. The men mostly held pipes and wore tweeds, the women looked earnest and tended to fade into furs.

Whilst I was using my eyes, Hardcastle was proceeding with his questions.

“I believe you employ a girl called Sheila Webb?”

“That is correct. I am afraid she is not here at present—at least—”

She touched a buzzer and spoke to the outer office.

“Edna, has Sheila Webb come back?”

“No, Miss Martindale, not yet.”

Miss Martindale switched off.

“She went out on an assignment earlier this afternoon,” she explained. “I thought she might have been back by now. It is possible she has gone on to the Curlew Hotel at the end of the Esplanade where she had an appointment at five o’clock.”

“I see,” said Hardcastle. “Can you tell me something about Miss Sheila Webb?”

“I can’t tell you very much,” said Miss Martindale. “She has been here for—let me see, yes, I should say close on a year now. Her work has proved quite satisfactory.”

“Do you know where she worked before she came to you?”

“I dare say I could find out for you if you specially want the information, Inspector Hardcastle. Her references will be filed somewhere. As far as I can remember offhand, she was formerly employed in London and had quite a good reference from her employers there. I think, but I am not sure, that it was some business firm—estate agents possibly, that she worked for.”

“You say she is good at her job?”

“Fully adequate,” said Miss Martindale, who was clearly not one to be lavish with praise.

“Not first class?”

“No, I should not say that. She has good average speed and is tolerably well-educated. She is a careful and accurate typist.”

“Do you know her personally, apart from your official relations?”

“No. She lives, I believe, with an aunt.” Here Miss Martindale got slightly restive. “May I ask, Inspector Hardcastle, why you are asking all these questions? Has the girl got herself into trouble in any way?”

“I would not quite say that, Miss Martindale. Do you know a Miss Millicent Pebmarsh?”

“Pebmarsh,” said Miss Martindale, wrinkling her sandy brows. “Now when—oh, of course. It was to Miss Pebmarsh’s house that Sheila went this afternoon. The appointment was for three o’clock.”

“How was that appointment made, Miss Martindale?”

“By telephone. Miss Pebmarsh rang up and said she wanted the services of a shorthand typist and would I send her Miss Webb.”

“She asked for Sheila Webb particularly?”

“Yes.”

“What time was this call put through?”

Miss Martindale reflected for a moment.

“It came through to me direct. That would mean that it was in the lunch hour. As near as possible I would say that it was about ten minutes to two.

Before two o’clock at all events. Ah yes, I see I made a note on my pad. It was 1:49 precisely.”

“It was Miss Pebmarsh herself who spoke to you?” Miss Martindale looked a little surprised.

“I presume so.”

“But you didn’t recognize her voice? You don’t know her personally?”

“No. I don’t know her. She said that she was Miss Millicent Pebmarsh, gave me her address, a number in Wilbraham Crescent. Then, as I say, she asked for Sheila Webb, if she was free, to come to her at three o’clock.”

It was a clear, definite statement. I thought that Miss Martindale would make an excellent witness.

“If you would kindly tell me what all this is about?” said Miss Martindale with slight impatience.

“Well, you see, Miss Martindale, Miss Pebmarsh herself denies making any such call.”

Miss Martindale stared.

“Indeed! How extraordinary.”

“You, on the other hand, say such a call was made, but you cannot say definitely that it was Miss Pebmarsh who made that call.”

“No, of course I can’t say definitely. I don’t know the woman. But really, I can’t see the point of doing such a thing. Was it a hoax of some kind?”

“Rather more than that,” said Hardcastle. “Did this Miss Pebmarsh—or whoever it was—give any reason for wanting Miss Sheila Webb particularly?”

Miss Martindale reflected a moment.

“I think she said that Sheila Webb had done work for her before.”

“And is that in fact so?”

“Sheila said she had no recollection of having done anything for Miss Pebmarsh. But that is not quite conclusive, Inspector. After all, the girls go out so often to different people at different places that they would be unlikely to remember if it had taken place some months ago. Sheila wasn’t very definite on the point. She only said that she couldn’t remember having been there. But really, Inspector, even if this was a hoax, I cannot see where your interest comes in?”

“I am just coming to that. When Miss Webb arrived at 19, Wilbraham Crescent she walked into the house and into the sitting room. She has told me that those were the directions given her. You agree?”

“Quite right,” said Miss Martindale. “Miss Pebmarsh said that she might be a little late in getting home and that Sheila was to go in and wait.”

“When Miss Webb went into the sitting room,” continued Hardcastle, “she found a dead man lying on the floor.”

Miss Martindale stared at him. For a moment she could hardly find her voice.

“Did you say a dead man, Inspector?”

“A murdered man,” said Hardcastle. “Stabbed, actually.”

“Dear, dear,” said Miss Martindale. “The girl must have been very upset.”

It seemed the kind of understatement characteristic of Miss Martindale.

“Does the name of Curry mean anything to you, Miss Martindale? Mr. R.H. Curry?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“From the Metropolis and Provincial Insurance Company?”

Miss Martindale continued to shake her head.

“You see my dilemma,” said the inspector. “You say Miss Pebmarsh telephoned you and asked for Sheila Webb to go to her house at three o’clock. Miss Pebmarsh denies doing any such thing. Sheila Webb gets there. She finds a dead man there.” He waited hopefully.

Miss Martindale looked at him blankly.

“It all seems to me wildly improbable,” she said disapprovingly.

Dick Hardcastle sighed and got up.

“Nice place you’ve got here,” he said politely. “You’ve been in business some time, haven’t you?”

“Fifteen years. We have done extremely well. Starting in quite a small way, we have extended the business until we have almost more than we can cope with. I now employ eight girls, and they are kept busy all the time.”

“You do a good deal of literary work, I see.” Hardcastle was looking up at the photographs on the wall.

“Yes, to start with I specialized in authors. I had been secretary to the well-known thriller writer, Mr. Garry Gregson, for many years. In fact, it was with a legacy from him that I started this Bureau. I knew a good many of his fellow authors and they recommended me. My specialized knowledge of authors’ requirements came in very useful. I offer a very helpful service in the way of necessary research—dates and quotations, inquiries as to legal points and police procedure, and details of poison schedules. All that sort of thing. Then foreign names and addresses and restaurants for people who set their novels in foreign places. In old days the public didn’t really mind so much about accuracy, but nowadays readers take it upon themselves to write to authors on every possible occasion, pointing out flaws.”

Miss Martindale paused. Hardcastle said politely: “I’m sure you have every cause to congratulate yourself.”

He moved towards the door. I opened it ahead of him.

In the outer office, the three girls were preparing to leave. Lids had been placed on typewriters. The receptionist, Edna, was standing forlornly, holding in one hand a stiletto heel and in the other a shoe from which it had been torn.

“I’ve only had them a month,” she was wailing. “And they were quite expensive. It’s that beastly grating—the one at the corner by the cake shop quite near here. I caught my heel in it and off it came. I couldn’t walk, had to take both shoes off and come back here with a couple of buns, and how I’ll ever get home or get on to the bus I really don’t know—”

At that moment our presence was noted and Edna hastily concealed the offending shoe with an apprehensive glance towards Miss Martindale whom I appreciated was not the sort of woman to approve of stiletto heels. She herself was wearing sensible flat-heeled leather shoes.

“Thank you, Miss Martindale,” said Hardcastle. “I’m sorry to have taken up so much of your time. If anything should occur to you—”

“Naturally,” said Miss Martindale, cutting him short rather brusquely.

As we got into the car, I said:

“So Sheila Webb’s story, in spite of your suspicions, turns out to have been quite true.”

“All right, all right,” said Dick. “You win.”

Five

“Mom!” said Ernie Curtin, desisting for a moment from his occupation of running a small metal model up and down the window pane, accompanying it with a semi-zooming, semi-moaning noise intended to reproduce a rocket ship going through outer space on its way to Venus, “Mom, what d’you think?”

Mrs. Curtin, a stern-faced woman who was busy washing up crockery in the sink, made no response.

“Mom, there’s a police car drawn up outside our house.”

“Don’t you tell no more of yer lies, Ernie,” said Mrs. Curtin as she banged cups and saucers down on the draining board. “You know what I’ve said to you about that before.”

“I never,” said Ernie virtuously. “And it’s a police car right enough, and there’s two men gettin’ out.”

Mrs. Curtin wheeled round on her offspring.

“What’ve you been doing now?” she demanded. “Bringing us into disgrace, that’s what it is!”

“Course I ain’t,” said Ernie. “I ’aven’t done nothin’.”

“It’s going with that Alf,” said Mrs. Curtin. “Him and his gang. Gangs indeed! I’ve told you, and yer father’s told you, that gangs isn’t respectable. In the end there’s trouble. First it’ll be the juvenile court and then you’ll be sent to a remand home as likely as not. And I won’t have it, d’you hear?”

“They’re comin’ up to the front door,” Ernie announced.

Mrs. Curtin abandoned the sink and joined her offspring at the window.

“Well,” she muttered.

At that moment the knocker was sounded. Wiping her hands quickly on the tea towel, Mrs. Curtin went out into the passage and opened the door. She looked with defiance and doubt at the two men on her doorstep.

“Mrs. Curtin?” said the taller of the two, pleasantly.

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Curtin.

“May I come in a moment? I’m Detective Inspector Hardcastle.”

Mrs. Curtin drew back rather unwillingly. She threw open a door and motioned the inspector inside. It was a very neat, clean little room and gave the impression of seldom being entered, which impression was entirely correct.

Ernie, drawn by curiosity, came down the passage from the kitchen and sidled inside the door.

“Your son?” said Detective Inspector Hardcastle.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Curtin, and added belligerently, “he’s a good boy, no matter what you say.”

“I’m sure he is,” said Detective Inspector Hardcastle, politely.

Some of the defiance in Mrs. Curtin’s face relaxed.

“I’ve come to ask you a few questions about 19, Wilbraham Crescent. You work there, I understand.”

“Never said I didn’t,” said Mrs. Curtin, unable yet to shake off her previous mood.

“For a Miss Millicent Pebmarsh.”

“Yes, I work for Miss Pebmarsh. A very nice lady.”

“Blind,” said Detective Inspector Hardcastle.

“Yes, poor soul. But you’d never know it. Wonderful the way she can put her hand on anything and find her way about. Goes out in the street, too, and over the crossings. She’s not one to make a fuss about things, not like some people I know.”

“You work there in the mornings?”

“That’s right. I come about half past nine to ten, and leave at twelve o’clock or when I’m finished.” Then sharply, “You’re not saying as anything ’as been stolen, are you?”

“Quite the reverse,” said the inspector, thinking of four clocks.

Mrs. Curtin looked at him uncomprehendingly.

“What’s the trouble?” she asked.

“A man was found dead in the sitting room at 19, Wilbraham Crescent this afternoon.”

Mrs. Curtin stared. Ernie Curtin wriggled in ecstasy, opened his mouth to say “Coo,” thought it unwise to draw attention to his presence, and shut it again.

“Dead?” said Mrs. Curtin unbelievingly. And with even more unbelief, “In the sitting room?”

“Yes. He’d been stabbed.”

“You mean it’s murder?”

“Yes, murder.”

“Oo murdered ’im?” demanded Mrs. Curtin.

“I’m afraid we haven’t got quite so far as that yet,” said Inspector Hardcastle. “We thought perhaps you may be able to help us.”

“I don’t know anything about murder,” said Mrs. Curtin positively.

“No, but there are one or two points that have arisen. This morning, for instance, did any man call at the house?”

“Not that I can remember. Not today. What sort of man was he?”

“An elderly man about sixty, respectably dressed in a dark suit. He may have represented himself as an insurance agent.”

“I wouldn’t have let him in,” said Mrs. Curtin. “No insurance agents and nobody selling vacuum cleaners or editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Nothing of that sort. Miss Pebmarsh doesn’t hold with selling at the door and neither do I.”

“The man’s name, according to a card that was on him, was Mr. Curry. Have you ever heard that name?”

“Curry? Curry?” Mrs. Curtin shook her head. “Sounds Indian to me,” she said, suspiciously.

“Oh, no,” said Inspector Hardcastle, “he wasn’t an Indian.”

“Who found him—Miss Pebmarsh?”

“A young lady, a shorthand typist, had arrived because, owing to a misunderstanding, she thought she’d been sent for to do some work for Miss Pebmarsh. It was she who discovered the body. Miss Pebmarsh returned almost at the same moment.”

Mrs. Curtin uttered a deep sigh.

“What a to-do,” she said, “what a to-do!”

“We may ask you at some time,” said Inspector Hardcastle, “to look at this man’s body and tell us if he is a man you have ever seen in Wilbraham Crescent or calling at the house before. Miss Pebmarsh is quite positive he has never been there. Now there are various small points I would like to know. Can you recall offhand how many clocks there are in the sitting room?”

Mrs. Curtin did not even pause.

“There’s that big clock in the corner, grandfather they call it, and there’s the cuckoo clock on the wall. It springs out and says ‘cuckoo.’ Doesn’t half make you jump sometimes.” She added hastily, “I didn’t touch neither of them. I never do. Miss Pebmarsh likes to wind them herself.”

“There’s nothing wrong with them,” the inspector assured her. “You’re sure these were the only two clocks in the room this morning?”

“Of course. What others should there be?”

“There was not, for instance, a small square silver clock, what they call a carriage clock, or a little gilt clock—on the mantelpiece that was, or a china clock with flowers on it—or a leather clock with the name Rosemary written across the corner?”

“Of course there wasn’t. No such thing.”

“You would have noticed them if they had been there?”

“Of course I should.”

“Each of these four clocks represented a time about an hour later than the cuckoo clock and the grandfather clock.”

“Must have been foreign,” said Mrs. Curtin. “Me and my old man went on a coach trip to Switzerland and Italy once and it was a whole hour further on there. Must be something to do with this Common Market. I don’t hold with the Common Market and nor does Mr. Curtin. England’s good enough for me.”

Inspector Hardcastle declined to be drawn into politics.

“Can you tell me exactly when you left Miss Pebmarsh’s house this morning?”

“Quarter past twelve, near as nothing,” said Mrs. Curtin.

“Was Miss Pebmarsh in the house then?”

“No, she hadn’t come back. She usually comes back some time between twelve and half past, but it varies.”

“And she had left the house—when?”

“Before I got there. Ten o’clock’s my time.”

“Well, thank you, Mrs. Curtin.”

“Seems queer about these clocks,” said Mrs. Curtin. “Perhaps Miss Pebmarsh had been to a sale. Antiques, were they? They sound like it by what you say.”

“Does Miss Pebmarsh often go to sales?”

“Got a roll of hair carpet about four months ago at a sale. Quite good condition. Very cheap, she told me. Got some velour curtains too. They needed cutting down, but they were really as good as new.”

“But she doesn’t usually buy bric-à-brac or things like pictures or china or that kind of thing at sales?”

Mrs. Curtin shook her head.

“Not that I’ve ever known her, but of course, there’s no saying in sales, is there? I mean, you get carried away. When you get home you say to yourself ‘whatever did I want with that?’ Bought six pots of jam once. When I thought about it I could have made it cheaper myself. Cups and saucers, too. Them I could have got better in the market on a Wednesday.”

She shook her head darkly. Feeling that he had no more to learn for the moment, Inspector Hardcastle departed. Ernie then made his contribution to the subject that had been under discussion.

“Murder! Coo!” said Ernie.

Momentarily the conquest of outer space was displaced in his mind by a present-day subject of really thrilling appeal.

“Miss Pebmarsh couldn’t have done ’im in, could she?” he suggested yearningly.

“Don’t talk so silly,” said his mother. A thought crossed her mind. “I wonder if I ought to have told him—”

“Told him what, Mom?”

“Never you mind,” said Mrs. Curtin. “It was nothing, really.”

Six

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I

When we had put ourselves outside two good underdone steaks, washed down with draught beer, Dick Hardcastle gave a sigh of comfortable repletion, announced that he felt better and said:

“To hell with dead insurance agents, fancy clocks and screaming girls! Let’s hear about you, Colin. I thought you’d finished with this part of the world. And here you are wandering about the back streets of Crowdean. No scope for a marine biologist at Crowdean, I can assure you.”

“Don’t you sneer at marine biology, Dick. It’s a very useful subject. The mere mention of it so bores people and they’re so afraid you’re going to talk about it, that you never have to explain yourself further.”

“No chance of giving yourself away, eh?”

“You forget,” I said coldly, “that I am a marine biologist. I took a degree in it at Cambridge. Not a very good degree, but a degree. It’s a very interesting subject, and one day I’m going back to it.”

“I know what you’ve been working on, of course,” said Hardcastle. “And congratulations to you. Larkin’s trial comes on next month, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Amazing the way he managed to carry on passing stuff out for so long. You’d think somebody would have suspected.”

“They didn’t, you know. When you’ve got it into your head that a fellow is a thoroughly good chap, it doesn’t occur to you that he mightn’t be.”

"He must have been clever," Dick commented.

I shook my head.

"No, I don't think he was, really. I think he just did as he was told. He had access to very important documents. He walked out with them, they were photographed and returned to him, and they were back again where they belonged the same day. Good organization there. He made a habit of lunching at different places every day. We think that he hung up his overcoat where there was always an overcoat exactly like it—though the man who wore the other overcoat wasn't always the same man. The overcoats were switched, but the man who switched them never spoke to Larkin, and Larkin never spoke to him. We'd like to know a good deal more about the mechanics of it. It was all very well-planned with perfect timing. Somebody had brains."

"And that's why you're still hanging round the Naval Station at Portlebury?"

"Yes, we know the Naval end of it and we know the London end. We know just when and where Larkin got his pay and how. But there's a gap. In between the two there's a very pretty little bit of organization. That's the part we'd like to know more about, because that's the part where the brains are. Somewhere there's a very good headquarters, with excellent planning, which leaves a trail that is confused not once but probably seven or eight times."

"What did Larkin do it for?" asked Hardcastle, curiously. "Political idealist? Boosting his ego? Or plain money?"

"He was no idealist," I said. "Just money, I'd say."

"Couldn't you have got on to him sooner that way? He spent the money, didn't he? He didn't salt it away."

"Oh, no, he splashed it about all right. Actually, we got on to him a little sooner than we're admitting."

Hardcastle nodded his head understandingly.

“I see. You tumbled and then you used him for a bit. Is that it?”

“More or less. He had passed out some quite valuable information before we got on to him, so we let him pass out more information, also apparently valuable. In the Service I belong to, we have to resign ourselves to looking fools now and again.”

“I don’t think I’d care for your job, Colin,” said Hardcastle thoughtfully.

“It’s not the exciting job that people think it is,” I said. “As a matter of fact, it’s usually remarkably tedious. But there’s something beyond that. Nowadays one gets to feeling that nothing really is secret. We know Their secrets and They know our secrets. Our agents are often Their agents, too, and Their agents are very often our agents. And in the end who is double-crossing who becomes a kind of nightmare! Sometimes I think that everybody knows everybody else’s secrets and that they enter into a kind of conspiracy to pretend that they don’t.”

“I see what you mean,” Dick said thoughtfully.

Then he looked at me curiously.

“I can see why you should still be hanging around Portlebury. But Crowdean’s a good ten miles from Portlebury.”

“What I’m really after,” I said, “are Crescents.”

“Crescents?” Hardcastle looked puzzled.

“Yes. Or alternatively, moons. New moons, rising moons and so on. I started my quest in Portlebury itself. There’s a pub there called The Crescent Moon. I wasted a long time over that. It sounded ideal. Then there’s The Moon and Stars. The Rising Moon, The Jolly Sickle, The Cross and the Crescent—that was in a little place called Seamede. Nothing doing. Then I abandoned moons and started on Crescents. Several Crescents in

Portlebury. Lansbury Crescent, Aldridge Crescent, Livermead Crescent, Victoria Crescent."

I caught sight of Dick's bewildered face and began to laugh.

"Don't look so much at sea, Dick. I had something tangible to start me off."

I took out my wallet, extracted a sheet of paper and passed it over to him. It was a single sheet of hotel writing paper on which a rough sketch had been drawn.

"A chap called Hanbury had this in his wallet. Hanbury did a lot of work in the Larkin case. He was good—very good. He was run over by a hit and run car in London. Nobody got its number. I don't know what this means, but it's something that Hanbury jotted down, or copied, because he thought it was important. Some idea that he had? Or something that he'd seen or heard? Something to do with a moon or crescent, the number 61 and the initial M. I took over after his death. I don't know what I'm looking for yet, but I'm pretty sure there's something to find. I don't know what 61 means. I don't know what M means. I've been working in a radius from Portlebury outwards. Three weeks of unremitting and unrewarding toil. Crowdean is on my route. That's all there is to it. Frankly, Dick, I didn't expect very much of Crowdean. There's only one Crescent here. That's Wilbraham Crescent. I was going to have a walk along Wilbraham Crescent and see what I thought of Number 61 before asking you if you'd got any dope that could help me. That's what I was doing this afternoon—but I couldn't find Number 61."

"As I told you, 61 is occupied by a local builder."

"And that's not what I'm after. Have they got a foreign help of any kind?"

"Could be. A good many people do nowadays. If so, she'll be registered. I'll look it up for you by tomorrow."

"Thanks, Dick."

"I'll be making routine inquiries tomorrow at the two houses on either side of 19. Whether they saw anyone come to the house, etcetera. I might include the houses directly behind 19, the ones whose gardens adjoin it. I rather think that 61 is almost directly behind 19. I could take you along with me if you liked."

I closed with the offer greedily.

"I'll be your Sergeant Lamb and take shorthand notes."

We agreed that I should come to the police station at nine thirty the following morning.

II

I arrived the next morning promptly at the agreed hour and found my friend literally fuming with rage.

When he had dismissed an unhappy subordinate, I inquired delicately what had happened.

For a moment Hardcastle seemed unable to speak. Then he spluttered out: "Those damned clocks!"

"The clocks again? What's happened now?"

"One of them is missing."

"Missing? Which one?"

"The leather travelling clock. The one with 'Rosemary' across the corner."

I whistled.

"That seems very extraordinary. How did it come about?"

"The damned fools—I'm one of them really, I suppose—" (Dick was a very honest man) "—One's got to remember to cross every t and dot every i or things go wrong. Well, the clocks were there all right yesterday in the sitting room. I got Miss Pebmarsh to feel them all to see if they felt familiar. She couldn't help. Then they came to remove the body."

"Yes?"

"I went out to the gate to supervise, then I came back to the house, spoke to Miss Pebmarsh who was in the kitchen, and said I must take the clocks away and would give her a receipt for them."

"I remember. I heard you."

"Then I told the girl I'd send her home in one of our cars, and I asked you to see her into it."

"Yes."

"I gave Miss Pebmarsh the receipt though she said it wasn't necessary since the clocks weren't hers. Then I joined you. I told Edwards I wanted the clocks in the sitting room packed up carefully and brought here. All of them except the cuckoo clock and, of course, the grandfather. And that's where I went wrong. I should have said, quite definitely, four clocks. Edwards says he went in at once and did as I told him. He insists there were only three clocks other than the two fixtures."

"That doesn't give much time," I said. "It means—"

"The Pebmarsh woman could have done it. She could have picked up the clock after I left the room and gone straight to the kitchen with it."

"True enough. But why?"

"We've got a lot to learn. Is there anybody else? Could the girl have done it?"

I reflected. "I don't think so. I—" I stopped, remembering something.

"So she did," said Hardcastle. "Go on. When was it?"

"We were just going out to the police car," I said unhappily. "She'd left her gloves behind. I said, 'I'll get them for you' and she said, 'Oh, I know just where I must have dropped them. I don't mind going into that room now that the body's gone' and she ran back into the house. But she was only gone a minute—"

"Did she have her gloves on, or in her hand when she rejoined you?"

I hesitated. "Yes—yes, I think she did."

"Obviously she didn't," said Hardcastle, "or you wouldn't have hesitated."

"She probably stuffed them in her bag."

"The trouble is," said Hardcastle in an accusing manner, "you've fallen for that girl."

"Don't be idiotic," I defended myself vigorously. "I saw her for the first time yesterday afternoon, and it wasn't exactly what you'd call a romantic introduction."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Hardcastle. "It isn't every day that young men have girls falling into their arms screaming for help in the approved Victorian fashion. Makes a man feel a hero and a gallant protector. Only you've got to stop protecting her. That's all. So far as you know, that girl may be up to the neck in this murder business."

"Are you saying that this slip of a girl stuck a knife into a man, hid it somewhere so carefully that none of your sleuths could find it, then deliberately rushed out of the house and did a screaming act all over me?"

"You'd be surprised at what I've seen in my time," said Hardcastle darkly.

"Don't you realize," I demanded, indignantly, "that my life has been full of beautiful spies of every nationality? All of them with vital statistics that would make an American private eye forget all about the shot of rye in his collar drawer. I'm immune to all female allurements."

“Everybody meets his Waterloo in the end,” said Hardcastle. “It all depends on the type. Sheila Webb seems to be your type.”

“Anyway, I can’t see why you’re so set on fastening it on her.”

Hardcastle sighed.

“I’m not fastening it on her—but I’ve got to start somewhere. The body was found in Pebmarsh’s house. That involves her. The body was found by the Webb girl—I don’t need to tell you how often the first person to find a dead body is the same as the person who last saw him alive. Until more facts turn up, those two remain in the picture.”

“When I went into that room at just after three o’clock, the body had been dead at least half an hour, probably longer. How about that?”

“Sheila Webb had her lunch hour from 1:30 to 2:30.”

I looked at him in exasperation.

“What have you found out about Curry?”

Hardcastle said with unexpected bitterness: “Nothing!”

“What do you mean—nothing?”

“Just that he doesn’t exist—there’s no such person.”

“What do the Metropolis Insurance Company say?”

“They’ve nothing to say either, because there’s no such thing. The Metropolis and Provincial Insurance Company doesn’t exist. As far as Mr. Curry from Denvers Street goes, there’s no Mr. Curry, no Denvers Street, Number 7 or any other number.”

“Interesting,” I said. “You mean he just had some bogus cards printed with a bogus name, address and insurance company?”

“Presumably.”

“What is the big idea, do you think?”

Hardcastle shrugged his shoulders.

“At the moment it’s guesswork. Perhaps he collected bogus premiums. Perhaps it was a way of introducing himself into houses and working some confidence trick. He may have been a swindler or a confidence trickster or a picker-up of unconsidered trifles or a private inquiry agent. We just don’t know.”

“But you’ll find out.”

“Oh, yes, we’ll know in the end. We sent up his fingerprints to see if he’s got a record of any kind. If he has it’ll be a big step on the way. If he hasn’t, it’ll be rather more difficult.”

“A private dick,” I said thoughtfully. “I rather like that. It opens up—possibilities.”

“Possibilities are all we’ve got so far.”

“When’s the inquest?”

“Day after tomorrow. Purely formal and an adjournment.”

“What’s the medical evidence?”

“Oh, stabbed with a sharp instrument. Something like a kitchen vegetable knife.”

“That rather lets out Miss Pebmarsh, doesn’t it?” I said thoughtfully. “A blind woman would hardly be able to stab a man. She really is blind, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes, she’s blind. We checked up. And she’s exactly what she says she is. She was a teacher of mathematics in a North Country school—lost her sight about sixteen years ago—took up training in Braille, etc., and finally got a post with the Aaronberg Institute here.”

"She could be mental, I suppose?"

"With a fixation on clocks and insurance agents?"

"It really is all too fantastic for words." I couldn't help speaking with some enthusiasm. "Like Ariadne Oliver in her worst moments, or the late Garry Gregson at the top of his form—"

"Go on—enjoy yourself. You're not the wretched D.I. in charge. You haven't got to satisfy a superintendent or a chief constable and all the rest of it."

"Oh well! Perhaps we'll get something useful out of the neighbours."

"I doubt it," said Hardcastle bitterly. "If that man was stabbed in the front garden and two masked men carried him into the house—nobody would have looked out of the window or seen anything. This isn't a village, worse luck. Wilbraham Crescent is a genteel residential road. By one o'clock, daily women who might have seen something have gone home. There's not even a pram being wheeled along—"

"No elderly invalid who sits all day by the window?"

"That's what we want—but that's not what we've got."

"What about numbers 18 and 20?"

"18 is occupied by Mr. Waterhouse, Managing Clerk to Gainsford and Swettenham, Solicitors, and his sister who spends her spare time managing him. All I know about 20 is that the woman who lives there keeps about twenty cats. I don't like cats—"

I told him that a policeman's life was a hard one, and we started off.

Seven

Mr. Waterhouse, hovering uncertainly on the steps of 18, Wilbraham Crescent, looked back nervously at his sister.

“You’re quite sure you’ll be all right?” said Mr. Waterhouse.

Miss Waterhouse snorted with some indignation.

“I really don’t know what you mean, James.”

Mr. Waterhouse looked apologetic. He had to look apologetic so often that it was practically his prevailing cast of countenance.

“Well, I just meant, my dear, considering what happened next door yesterday….”

Mr. Waterhouse was prepared for departure to the solicitors’ office where he worked. He was a neat, grey-haired man with slightly stooping shoulders and a face that was also grey rather than pink, though not in the least unhealthy looking.

Miss Waterhouse was tall, angular, and the kind of woman with no nonsense about her who is extremely intolerant of nonsense in others.

“Is there any reason, James, because someone was murdered in the next door house that I shall be murdered today?”

“Well, Edith,” said Mr. Waterhouse, “it depends so much, does it not, by whom the murder was committed?”

“You think, in fact, that there’s someone going up and down Wilbraham Crescent selecting a victim from every house? Really, James, that is almost blasphemous.”

“Blasphemous, Edith?” said Mr. Waterhouse in lively surprise. Such an aspect of his remark would never have occurred to him.

"Reminiscent of the Passover," said Miss Waterhouse. "Which, let me remind you, is Holy Writ."

"That is a little farfetched I think, Edith," said Mr. Waterhouse.

"I should like to see anyone coming here, trying to murder me," said Miss Waterhouse with spirit.

Her brother reflected to himself that it did seem highly unlikely. If he himself had been choosing a victim he would not have chosen his sister. If anyone were to attempt such a thing it was far more likely that the attacker would be knocked out by a poker or a lead doorstop and delivered over to the police in a bleeding and humiliated condition.

"I just meant," he said, the apologetic air deepening, "that there are—well—clearly undesirable characters about."

"We don't know very much about what did happen yet," said Miss Waterhouse. "All sorts of rumours are going about. Mrs. Head had some extraordinary stories this morning."

"I expect so, I expect so," said Mr. Waterhouse. He looked at his watch. He had no real desire to hear the stories brought in by their loquacious daily help. His sister never lost time in debunking these lurid flights of fancy, but nevertheless enjoyed them.

"Some people are saying," said Miss Waterhouse, "that this man was the treasurer or a trustee of the Aaronberg Institute and that there is something wrong in the accounts, and that he came to Miss Pebmarsh to inquire about it."

"And that Miss Pebmarsh murdered him?" Mr. Waterhouse looked mildly amused. "A blind woman? Surely—"

"Slipped a piece of wire round his neck and strangled him," said Miss Waterhouse. "He wouldn't be on his guard, you see. Who would be with anyone blind? Not that I believe it myself," she added. "I'm sure Miss Pebmarsh is a person of excellent character. If I do not see eye to eye with her on various subjects, that is not because I impute anything of a criminal nature to her. I merely think that her views are bigoted and extravagant. After all, there are other things besides education. All these new peculiar looking grammar schools, practically built of glass. You might think they were meant to grow cucumbers in, or tomatoes. I'm sure very prejudicial to children in the summer months. Mrs. Head herself told me that her Susan didn't like their new classrooms. Said it was impossible to attend to your lessons because with all those windows you couldn't help looking out of them all the time."

"Dear, dear," said Mr. Waterhouse, looking at his watch again. "Well, well, I'm going to be very late, I'm afraid. Good-bye, my dear. Look after yourself. Better keep the door on the chain perhaps?"

Miss Waterhouse snorted again. Having shut the door behind her brother she was about to retire upstairs when she paused thoughtfully, went to her golf bag, removed a niblick, and placed it in a strategic position near the front door. "There," said Miss Waterhouse, with some satisfaction. Of course James talked nonsense. Still it was always as well to be prepared. The way they let mental cases out of nursing homes nowadays, urging them to lead a normal life, was in her view fraught with danger to all sorts of innocent people.

Miss Waterhouse was in her bedroom when Mrs. Head came bustling up the stairs. Mrs. Head was small and round and very like a rubber ball—she enjoyed practically everything that happened.

"A couple of gentlemen want to see you," said Mrs. Head with avidity. "Leastways," she added, "they aren't really gentlemen—it's the police."

She shoved forward a card. Miss Waterhouse took it.

"Detective Inspector Hardcastle," she read. "Did you show them into the drawing room?"

"No. I put 'em in the dinin' room. I'd cleared away breakfast and I thought that that would be more proper a place. I mean, they're only the police after all."

Miss Waterhouse did not quite follow this reasoning. However she said, “I’ll come down.”

“I expect they’ll want to ask you about Miss Pebmarsh,” said Mrs. Head. “Want to know whether you’ve noticed anything funny in her manner. They say these manias come on very sudden sometimes and there’s very little to show beforehand. But there’s usually something, some way of speaking, you know. You can tell by their eyes, they say. But then that wouldn’t hold with a blind woman, would it? Ah—” she shook her head.

Miss Waterhouse marched downstairs and entered the dining room with a certain amount of pleasurable curiosity masked by her usual air of belligerence.

“Detective Inspector Hardcastle?”

“Good morning, Miss Waterhouse.” Hardcastle had risen. He had with him a tall, dark young man whom Miss Waterhouse did not bother to greet. She paid no attention to a faint murmur of “Sergeant Lamb.”

“I hope I have not called at too early an hour,” said Hardcastle, “but I imagine you know what it is about. You’ve heard what happened next door yesterday.”

“Murder in one’s next door neighbour’s house does not usually go unnoticed,” said Miss Waterhouse. “I even had to turn away one or two reporters who came here asking if I had observed anything.”

“You turned them away?”

“Naturally.”

“You were quite right,” said Hardcastle. “Of course they like to worm their way in anywhere but I’m sure you are quite capable of dealing with anything of that kind.”

Miss Waterhouse allowed herself to show a faintly pleasurable reaction to this compliment.

“I hope you won’t mind us asking you the same kind of questions,” said Hardcastle, “but if you did see anything at all that could be of interest to us, I can assure you we should be only too grateful. You were here in the house at the time, I gather?”

“I don’t know when the murder was committed,” said Miss Waterhouse.

“We think between half past one and half past two.”

“I was here then, yes, certainly.”

“And your brother?”

“He does not come home to lunch. Who exactly was murdered? It doesn’t seem to say in the short account there was in the local morning paper.”

“We don’t yet know who he was,” said Hardcastle.

“A stranger?”

“So it seems.”

“You don’t mean he was a stranger to Miss Pebmarsh also?”

“Miss Pebmarsh assures us that she was not expecting this particular guest and that she has no idea who he was.”

“She can’t be sure of that,” said Miss Waterhouse. “She can’t see.”

“We gave her a very careful description.”

“What kind of man was he?”

Hardcastle took a rough print from an envelope and handed it to her.

“This is the man,” he said. “Have you any idea who he can be?”

Miss Waterhouse looked at the print. “No. No … I’m certain I’ve never seen him before. Dear me. He looks quite a respectable man.”

“He was a most respectable-looking man,” said the inspector. “He looks like a lawyer or a business man of some kind.”

“Indeed. This photograph is not at all distressing. He just looks as though he might be asleep.”

Hardcastle did not tell her that of the various police photographs of the corpse this one had been selected as the least disturbing to the eye.

“Death can be a peaceful business,” he said. “I don’t think this particular man had any idea that it was coming to him when it did.”

“What does Miss Pebmarsh say about it all?” demanded Miss Waterhouse.

“She is quite at a loss.”

“Extraordinary,” commented Miss Waterhouse.

“Now, can you help us in any way, Miss Waterhouse? If you cast your mind back to yesterday, were you looking out of the window at all, or did you happen to be in your garden, say any time between half past twelve and three o’clock?”

Miss Waterhouse reflected.

“Yes, I was in the garden … Now let me see. It must have been before one o’clock. I came in about ten to one from the garden, washed my hands and sat down to lunch.”

“Did you see Miss Pebmarsh enter or leave the house?”

“I think she came in—I heard the gate squeak—yes, some time after half past twelve.”

“You didn’t speak to her?”

“Oh no. It was just the squeak of the gate made me look up. It is her usual time for returning. She finishes her classes then, I believe. She teaches at the Disabled Children as probably you know.”

“According to her own statement, Miss Pebmarsh went out again about half past one. Would you agree to that?”

“Well, I couldn’t tell you the exact time but—yes, I do remember her passing the gate.”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Waterhouse, you said ‘passing the gate.’”

“Certainly. I was in my sitting room. That gives on the street, whereas the dining room, where we are sitting now, gives as you can see, on the back garden. But I took my coffee into the sitting room after lunch and I was sitting with it in a chair near the window. I was reading The Times, and I think it was when I was turning the sheet that I noticed Miss Pebmarsh passing the front gate. Is there anything extraordinary about that, Inspector?”

“Not extraordinary, no,” said the inspector, smiling. “Only I understood that Miss Pebmarsh was going out to do a little shopping and to the post office, and I had an idea that the nearest way to the shops and the post office would be to go the other way along the crescent.”

“Depends on which shops you are going to,” said Miss Waterhouse. “Of course the shops are nearer that way, and there’s a post office in Albany Road—”

“But perhaps Miss Pebmarsh usually passed your gate about that time?”

“Well, really, I don’t know what time Miss Pebmarsh usually went out, or in which direction. I’m not really given to watching my neighbours in any way, Inspector. I’m a busy woman and have far too much to do with my own affairs. Some people I know spend their entire time looking out of the window and noticing who passes and who calls on whom. That is more a habit of invalids or of people who’ve got nothing better to do than to speculate and gossip about their neighbours’ affairs.”

Miss Waterhouse spoke with such acerbity that the inspector felt sure that she had some one particular person in mind. He said hastily, “Quite so. Quite so.” He added, “Since Miss Pebmarsh passed your front gate, she might have been going to telephone, might she not? That is where the public telephone box is situated?"

"Yes. It's opposite Number 15."

"The important question I have to ask you, Miss Waterhouse, is if you saw the arrival of this man—the mystery man as I'm afraid the morning papers have called him."

Miss Waterhouse shook her head. "No, I didn't see him or any other caller."

"What were you doing between half past one and three o'clock?"

"I spent about half an hour doing the crossword in The Times, or as much of it as I could, then I went out to the kitchen and washed up the lunch. Let me see. I wrote a couple of letters, made some cheques out for bills, then I went upstairs and sorted out some things I wanted to take to the cleaners. I think it was from my bedroom that I noticed a certain amount of commotion next door. I distinctly heard someone screaming, so naturally I went to the window. There was a young man and a girl at the gate. He seemed to be embracing her."

Sergeant Lamb shifted his feet but Miss Waterhouse was not looking at him and clearly had no idea that he had been that particular young man in question.

"I could only see the back of the young man's head. He seemed to be arguing with the girl. Finally he sat her down against the gatepost. An extraordinary thing to do. And he strode off and went into the house."

"You had not seen Miss Pebmarsh return to the house a short time before?"

Miss Waterhouse shook her head. "No. I don't really think I had looked out the window at all until I heard this extraordinary screaming. However, I didn't pay much attention to all this. Young girls and men are always doing such extraordinary things—screaming, pushing each other, giggling or making some kind of noise—that I had no idea it was anything serious. Not until some cars drove up with policemen did I realize anything out of the ordinary had occurred.”

“What did you do then?”

“Well, naturally I went out of the house, stood on the steps and then I walked round to the back garden. I wondered what had happened but there didn’t seem to be anything much to see from that side. When I got back again there was quite a little crowd gathering. Somebody told me there’d been a murder in the house. It seemed to me most extraordinary. Most extraordinary!” said Miss Waterhouse with a great deal of disapproval.

“There is nothing else you can think of? That you can tell us?”

“Really, I’m afraid not.”

“Has anybody recently written to you suggesting insurance, or has anybody called upon you or proposed calling upon you?”

“No. Nothing of the kind. Both James and I have taken out insurance policies with the Mutual Help Assurance Society. Of course one is always getting letters which are really circulars or advertisements of some kind but I don’t recall anything of that kind recently.”

“No letters signed by anybody called Curry?”

“Curry? No, certainly not.”

“And the name of Curry means nothing to you in any way?”

“No. Should it?”

Hardcastle smiled. “No. I really don’t think it should,” he said. “It just happens to be the name that the man who was murdered was calling himself by.”

“It wasn’t his real name?”

“We have some reason to think that it was not his real name.”

“A swindler of some kind, eh?” said Miss Waterhouse.

“We can’t say that till we have evidence to prove it.”

“Of course not, of course not. You’ve got to be careful. I know that,” said Miss Waterhouse. “Not like some of the people around here. They’d say anything. I wonder some aren’t had up for libel all the time.”

“Slander,” corrected Sergeant Lamb, speaking for the first time.

Miss Waterhouse looked at him in some surprise, as though not aware before that he had an entity of his own and was anything other than a necessary appendage to Inspector Hardcastle.

“I’m sorry I can’t help you, I really am,” said Miss Waterhouse.

“I’m sorry too,” said Hardcastle. “A person of your intelligence and judgement with a faculty of observation would have been a very useful witness to have.”

“I wish I had seen something,” said Miss Waterhouse.

For a moment her tone was as wistful as a young girl’s.

“Your brother, Mr. James Waterhouse?”

“James wouldn’t know anything,” said Miss Waterhouse scornfully. “He never does. And anyway he was at Gainsford and Swettenhams in the High Street. Oh no, James wouldn’t be able to help you. As I say, he doesn’t come back to lunch.”

“Where does he lunch usually?”

“He usually has sandwiches and coffee at the Three Feathers. A very nice respectable house. They specialize in quick lunches for professional people.”

“Thank you, Miss Waterhouse. Well, we mustn’t keep you any longer.”

He rose and went out into the hall. Miss Waterhouse accompanied them. Colin Lamb picked up the golf club by the door.

“Nice club, this,” he said. “Plenty of weight in the head.” He weighed it up and down in his hand. “I see you are prepared, Miss Waterhouse, for any eventualities.”

Miss Waterhouse was slightly taken aback.

“Really,” she said, “I can’t imagine how that club came to be there.”

She snatched it from him and replaced it in the golf bag.

“A very wise precaution to take,” said Hardcastle.

Miss Waterhouse opened the door and let them out.

“Well,” said Colin Lamb, with a sigh, “we didn’t get much out of her, in spite of you buttering her up so nicely all the time. Is that your invariable method?”

“It gets good results sometimes with a person of her type. The tough kind always respond to flattery.”

“She was purring like a cat that has been offered a saucer of cream in the end,” said Colin. “Unfortunately, it didn’t disclose anything of interest.”

“No?” said Hardcastle.

Colin looked at him quickly. “What’s on your mind?”

“A very slight and possibly unimportant point. Miss Pebmarsh went out to the post office and the shops but she turned left instead of right, and that telephone call, according to Miss Martindale, was put through about ten minutes to two.”

Colin looked at him curiously.

"You still think that in spite of her denial she might have made it? She was very positive."

"Yes," said Hardcastle. "She was very positive."

His tone was noncommittal.

"But if she did make it, why?"

"Oh, it's all why," said Hardcastle impatiently. "Why, why? Why all this rigmarole? If Miss Pebmarsh made that call, why did she want to get the girl there? If it was someone else, why did they want to involve Miss Pebmarsh? We don't know anything yet. If that Martindale woman had known Miss Pebmarsh personally, she'd have known whether it was her voice or not, or at any rate whether it was reasonably like Miss Pebmarsh's. Oh well, we haven't got much from Number 18. Let's see whether Number 20 will do us any better."

Eight

In addition to its number, 20, Wilbraham Crescent had a name. It was called Diana Lodge. The gates had obstacles against intruders by being heavily wired on the inside. Rather melancholy speckled laurels, imperfectly trimmed, also interfered with the efforts of anyone to enter through the gate.

“If ever a house could have been called The Laurels, this one could,” remarked Colin Lamb. “Why call it Diana Lodge, I wonder?”

He looked round him appraisingly. Diana Lodge did not run to neatness or to flower beds. Tangled and overgrown shrubbery was its most salient point together with a strong catty smell of ammonia. The house seemed in a rather tumbledown condition with gutters that could do with repairing. The only sign of any recent kind of attention being paid to it was a freshly painted front door whose colour of bright azure blue made the general unkempt appearance of the rest of the house and garden even more noticeable. There was no electric bell but a kind of handle that was clearly meant to be pulled. The inspector pulled it and a faint sound of remote jangling was heard inside.

“It sounds,” said Colin, “like the Moated Grange.”

They waited for a moment or two, then sounds were heard from inside. Rather curious sounds. A kind of high crooning, half singing, half speaking.

“What the devil—” began Hardcastle.

The singer or crooner appeared to be approaching the front door and words began to be discernible.

“No, sweet-sweetie. In there, my love. Mindems tailems Shah-Shah-Mimi. Cleo—Cleopatra. Ah de doodlums. Ah lou-lou.”

Doors were heard to shut. Finally the front door opened. Facing them was a lady in a pale moss-green, rather rubbed, velvet tea gown. Her hair, in flaxen grey wisps, was twirled elaborately in a kind of coiffure of some thirty years back. Round her neck she was wearing a necklet of orange fur. Inspector Hardcastle said dubiously:

“Mrs. Hemming?”

“I am Mrs. Hemming. Gently, Sunbeam, gently doodleums.”

It was then that the inspector perceived that the orange fur was really a cat. It was not the only cat. Three other cats appeared along the hall, two of them miaowing. They took up their place, gazing at the visitors, twirling gently round their mistress’s skirts. At the same time a pervading smell of cat afflicted the nostrils of both men.

“I am Detective Inspector Hardcastle.”

“I hope you’ve come about that dreadful man who came to see me from the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals,” said Mrs. Hemming. “Disgraceful! I wrote and reported him. Saying my cats were kept in a condition prejudicial to their health and happiness! Quite disgraceful! I live for my cats, Inspector. They are my only joy and pleasure in life. Everything is done for them. Shah-Shah-Mimi. Not there, sweetie.”

Shah-Shah-Mimi paid no attention to a restraining hand and jumped on the hall table. He sat down and washed his face, staring at the strangers.

“Come in,” said Mrs. Hemming. “Oh no, not that room. I’d forgotten.”

She pushed open a door on the left. The atmosphere here was even more pungent.

“Come on, my pretties, come on.”

In the room various brushes and combs with cat hairs in them lay about on chairs and tables. There were faded and soiled cushions, and there were at least six more cats.

“I live for my darlings,” said Mrs. Hemming. “They understand every word I say to them.”

Inspector Hardcastle walked in manfully. Unfortunately for him he was one of those men who have cat allergy. As usually happens on these occasions all the cats immediately made for him. One jumped on his knee, another rubbed affectionately against his trousers. Detective Inspector Hardcastle, who was a brave man, set his lips and endured.

“I wonder if I could ask you a few questions, Mrs. Hemming, about—”

“Anything you please,” said Mrs. Hemming, interrupting him. “I have nothing to hide. I can show you the cats’ food, their beds where they sleep, five in my room, the other seven down here. They have only the very best fish cooked by myself.”

“This is nothing to do with cats,” said Hardcastle, raising his voice. “I came to talk to you about the unfortunate affair which happened next door. You have probably heard about it.”

“Next door? You mean Mr. Joshua’s dog?”

“No,” said Hardcastle, “I do not. I mean at Number 19 where a man was found murdered yesterday.”

“Indeed?” said Mrs. Hemming, with polite interest but no more. Her eyes were still straying over her pets.

“Were you at home yesterday afternoon, may I ask? That is to say between half past one and half past three?”

“Oh yes, indeed. I usually do my shopping quite early in the day and then get back so that I can do the darlings’ lunch, and then comb and groom them.”

“And you didn’t notice any activity next door? Police cars—ambulance—anything like that?”

“Well, I’m afraid I didn’t look out of the front windows. I went out of the back of the house into the garden because dear Arabella was missing. She is quite a young cat and she had climbed up one of the trees and I was afraid she might not be able to get down. I tried to tempt her with a saucer of fish but she was frightened, poor little thing. I had to give up in the end and come back into the house. And would you believe it, just as I went through the door, down she came and followed me in.” She looked from one man to the other as though testing their powers of belief.

“Matter of fact, I would believe it,” said Colin, unable to keep silence any more.

“I beg your pardon?” Mrs. Hemming looked at him slightly startled.

“I am much attached to cats,” said Colin, “and I have therefore made a study of cat nature. What you have told me illustrates perfectly the pattern of cat behaviour and the rules they have made for themselves. In the same way your cats are all congregating round my friend who frankly does not care for cats, they will pay no attention to me in spite of all my blandishments.”

If it occurred to Mrs. Hemming that Colin was hardly speaking in the proper role of sergeant of police, no trace of it appeared in her face. She merely murmured vaguely:

“They always know, the dear things, don’t they?”

A handsome grey Persian put two paws on Inspector Hardcastle’s knees, looked at him in an ecstasy of pleasure and dug his claws in hard with a kneading action as though the inspector was a pincushion. Goaded beyond endurance, Inspector Hardcastle rose to his feet.

“I wonder, madam,” he said, “if I could see this back garden of yours.”

Colin grinned slightly.

“Oh, of course, of course. Anything you please.” Mrs. Hemming rose.

The orange cat unwound itself from her neck. She replaced it in an absentminded way with the grey Persian. She led the way out of the room. Hardcastle and Colin followed.

“We’ve met before,” said Colin to the orange cat and added, “And you’re a beauty, aren’t you,” addressing another grey Persian who was sitting on a table by a Chinese lamp, swishing his tail slightly. Colin stroked him, tickled him behind the ears and the grey cat condescended to purr.

“Shut the door, please, as you come out, Mr.—er—er,” said Mrs. Hemming from the hall. “There’s a sharp wind today and I don’t want my dears to get cold. Besides, there are those terrible boys—it’s really not safe to let the dear things wander about in the garden by themselves.”

She walked towards the back of the hall and opened a side door.

“What terrible boys?” asked Hardcastle.

“Mrs. Ramsay’s two boys. They live in the south part of the crescent. Our gardens more or less back on each other. Absolute young hooligans, that’s what they are. They have a catapult, you know, or they had. I insisted on its being confiscated but I have my suspicions. They make ambushes and hide. In the summer they throw apples.”

“Disgraceful,” said Colin.

The back garden was like the front only more so. It had some unkempt grass, some unpruned and crowded shrubs and a great many more laurels of the speckled variety, and some rather gloomy macrocarpas. In Colin’s opinion, both he and Hardcastle were wasting their time. There was a solid barrage of laurels, trees and shrubs through which nothing of Miss Pebmarsh’s garden could possibly be seen. Diana Lodge could be described as a fully detached house. From the point of view of its inhabitants, it might have had no neighbours.

“Number 19, did you say?” said Mrs. Hemming, pausing irresolutely in the middle of her back garden. “But I thought there was only one person living in the house, a blind woman.”

“The murdered man was not an occupant of the house,” said the inspector.

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs. Hemming, still vaguely, “he came here to be murdered. How odd.”

“Now that,” said Colin thoughtfully to himself, “is a damned good description.”

Nine

They drove along Wilbraham Crescent, turned to the right up Albany Road and then to the right again along the second instalment of Wilbraham Crescent.

“Simple really,” said Hardcastle.

“Once you know,” said Colin.

“61 really backs on Mrs. Hemming’s house—but a corner of it touches on 19, so that’s good enough. It will give you a chance to look at your Mr. Bland. No foreign help, by the way.”

“So there goes a beautiful theory.” The car drew up and the two men got out.

“Well, well,” said Colin. “Some front garden!”

It was indeed a model of surburban perfection in a small way. There were beds of geraniums with lobelia edging. There were large fleshy-looking begonias, and there was a fine display of garden ornaments—frogs, toadstools, comic gnomes and pixies.

“I’m sure Mr. Bland must be a nice worthy man,” said Colin, with a shudder. “He couldn’t have these terrible ideas if he wasn’t.” He added as Hardcastle pushed the bell, “Do you expect him to be in at this time of the morning?”

“I rang up,” explained Hardcastle. “Asked him if it would be convenient.”

At that moment a smart little Traveller van drew up and turned into the garage, which had obviously been a late addition to the house. Mr. Josaiah Bland got out, slammed the door and advanced towards them. He was a man of medium height with a bald head and rather small blue eyes. He had a hearty manner.

"Inspector Hardcastle? Come right in."

He led the way into the sitting room. It evinced several proofs of prosperity. There were expensive and rather ornate lamps, an Empire writing desk, a coruscated ormolu set of mantelpiece ornaments, a marquetry cabinet, and a jardinère full of flowers in the window. The chairs were modern and richly upholstered.

"Sit down," said Mr. Bland heartily. "Smoke? Or can't you when you're on the job?"

"No, thanks," said Hardcastle.

"Don't drink either, I suppose?" said Mr. Bland. "Ah well, better for both of us, I dare say. Now what's it all about? This business at Number 19 I suppose? The corners of our gardens adjoin, but we've not much real view of it except from the upper floor windows. Extraordinary business altogether it seems to be—at least from what I read in our local paper this morning. I was delighted when I got your message. A chance of getting some of the real dope. You've no idea the rumours that are flying about! It's made my wife quite nervous—feeling there's a killer on the loose, you know. The trouble is they let all these barmy people out of lunatic asylums nowadays. Send them home on parole or whatever they call it. Then they do in someone else and they clap them back again. And as I say, the rumours! I mean, what with our daily woman and the milk and paper boy, you'd be surprised. One says he was strangled with picture wire, and the other says he was stabbed. Someone else that he was coshed. At any rate it was a he, wasn't it? I mean, it wasn't the old girl who was done in? An unknown man, the papers said."

Mr. Bland came to a full stop at last.

Hardcastle smiled and said in a deprecating voice:

"Well, as to unknown, he had a card and an address in his pocket."

"So much for that story then," said Bland. "But you know what people are. I don't know who thinks up all these things."

“While we’re on the subject of the victim,” said Hardcastle, “perhaps you’ll have a look at this.”

Once more he brought out the police photograph.

“So that’s him, is it?” said Bland. “He looks a perfectly ordinary chap, doesn’t he? Ordinary as you and me. I suppose I mustn’t ask if he had any particular reason to be murdered?”

“It’s early days to talk about that,” said Hardcastle. “What I want to know, Mr. Bland, is if you’ve ever seen this man before.”

Bland shook his head.

“I’m sure I haven’t. I’m quite good at remembering faces.”

“He hasn’t called upon you for any particular purpose—selling insurance or—vacuum cleaners or washing machines, or anything of that kind?”

“No, no. Certainly not.”

“We ought perhaps to ask your wife,” said Hardcastle. “After all, if he called at the house, it’s your wife he would see.”

“Yes, that’s perfectly true. I don’t know, though … Valerie’s not got very good health, you know. I wouldn’t like to upset her. What I mean is, well, I suppose that’s a picture of him when he’s dead, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Hardcastle, “that is quite true. But it is not a painful photograph in any way.”

“No, no. Very well done. The chap might be asleep, really.”

“Are you talking about me, Josaiah?”

An adjoining door from the other room was pushed open and a middle-aged woman entered the room. She had, Hardcastle decided, been listening with close attention on the other side of the door.

“Ah, there you are, my dear,” said Bland, “I thought you were having your morning nap. This is my wife, Detective Inspector Hardcastle.”

“That terrible murder,” murmured Mrs. Bland. “It really makes me shiver to think of it.”

She sat down on the sofa with a little gasping sigh.

“Put your feet up, dear,” said Bland.

Mrs. Bland obeyed. She was a sandy-haired woman, with a faint whining voice. She looked anaemic, and had all the airs of an invalid who accepts her invalidism with a certain amount of enjoyment. For a moment or two, she reminded Inspector Hardcastle of somebody. He tried to think who it was, but failed. The faint, rather plaintive voice continued.

“My health isn’t very good, Inspector Hardcastle, so my husband naturally tries to spare me any shocks or worry. I’m very sensitive. You were speaking about a photograph, I think, of the—of the murdered man. Oh dear, how terrible that sounds. I don’t know that I can bear to look!”

“Dying to see it, really,” thought Hardcastle to himself.

With faint malice in his voice, he said:

“Perhaps I’d better not ask you to look at it, then, Mrs. Bland. I just thought you might be able to help us, in case the man has called at this house at any time.”

“I must do my duty, mustn’t I,” said Mrs. Bland, with a sweet brave smile. She held out her hand.

“Do you think you’d better upset yourself, Val?”

“Don’t be foolish, Josaiah. Of course I must see.”

She looked at the photograph with much interest and, or so the inspector thought, a certain amount of disappointment.

“He looks—really, he doesn’t look dead at all,” she said. “Not at all as though he’d been murdered. Was he—he can’t have been strangled?”

“He was stabbed,” said the inspector.

Mrs. Bland closed her eyes and shivered.

“Oh dear,” she said, “how terrible.”

“You don’t feel you’ve ever seen him, Mrs. Bland?”

“No,” said Mrs. Bland with obvious reluctance, “no, no, I’m afraid not. Was he the sort of man who—who calls at houses selling things?”

“He seems to have been an insurance agent,” said the inspector carefully.

“Oh, I see. No, there’s been nobody of that kind, I’m sure. You never remember my mentioning anything of that kind, do you, Josaiah?”

“Can’t say I do,” said Mr. Bland.

“Was he any relation to Miss Pebmarsh?” asked Mrs. Bland.

“No,” said the inspector, “he was quite unknown to her.”

“Very peculiar,” said Mrs. Bland.

“You know Mrs. Pebmarsh?”

“Oh yes, I mean, we know her as neighbours, of course. She asks my husband for advice sometimes about the garden.”

“You’re a very keen gardener, I gather?” said the inspector.

“Not really, not really,” said Bland deprecatingly. “Haven’t the time, you know. Of course, I know what’s what. But I’ve got an excellent fellow—comes twice a week. He sees the garden’s kept well stocked, and well tidied up. I’d say you couldn’t beat our garden round here, but I’m not one of those real gardeners like my neighbour.”

"Mrs. Ramsay?" said Hardcastle in some surprise.

"No, no, farther along. 63. Mr. McNaughton. He just lives for his garden. In it all day long, and mad on compost. Really, he's quite a bore on the subject of compost—but I don't suppose that's what you want to talk about."

"Not exactly," said the inspector. "I only wondered if anyone—you or your wife, for instance—were out in your garden yesterday. After all, as you say, it does touch on the border of 19 and there's just a chance that you might have seen something interesting yesterday—or heard something, perhaps?"

"Midday, wasn't it? When the murder happened I mean?"

"The relevant times are between one o'clock and three o'clock."

Bland shook his head. "I wouldn't have seen much then. I was here. So was Valerie, but we'd be having lunch, you know, and our dining room looks out on the roadside. We shouldn't see anything that was going on in the garden."

"What time do you have your meal?"

"One o'clock or thereabouts. Sometimes it's one thirty."

"And you didn't go out in the garden at all afterwards?"

Bland shook his head.

"Matter of fact," he said, "my wife always goes up to rest after lunch and, if things aren't too busy, I take a bit of shuteye myself in that chair there. I must have left the house about—oh, I suppose a quarter to three, but unfortunately I didn't go out in the garden at all."

"Oh, well," said Hardcastle with a sigh, "we have to ask everyone."

"Of course, of course. Wish I could be more helpful."

"Nice place you have here," said the inspector. "No money spared, if I may say so."

Bland laughed jovially.

“Ah well, we like things that are nice. My wife’s got a lot of taste. We had a bit of a windfall a year ago. My wife came into some money from an uncle of hers. She hadn’t seen him for twenty-five years. Quite a surprise it was! It made a bit of difference to us, I can tell you. We’ve been able to do ourselves well and we’re thinking of going on one of these cruises later in the year. Very educational they are, I believe. Greece and all that. A lot of professors on them lecturing. Well, of course, I’m a self-made man and I haven’t had much time for that sort of thing but I’d be interested. That chap who went and dug up Troy, he was a grocer, I believe. Very romantic. I must say I like going to foreign parts—not that I’ve done much of that—an occasional weekend in gay Paree, that’s all. I’ve toyed with the idea of selling up here and going to live in Spain or Portugal or even the West Indies. A lot of people are doing it. Saves income tax and all that. But my wife doesn’t fancy the idea.”

“I’m fond of travel, but I wouldn’t care to live out of England,” said Mrs. Bland. “We’ve got all our friends here—and my sister lives here, and everybody knows us. If we went abroad we’d be strangers. And then we’ve got a very good doctor here. He really understands my health. I shouldn’t care at all for a foreign doctor. I wouldn’t have any confidence in him.”

“We’ll see,” said Mr. Bland cheerfully. “We’ll go on a cruise and you may fall in love with a Greek island.”

Mrs. Bland looked as though that were very unlikely.

“There’d be a proper English doctor aboard, I suppose,” she said doubtfully.

“Sure to be,” said her husband.

He accompanied Hardcastle and Colin to the front door, repeating once more how sorry he was that he couldn’t help them.

“Well,” said Hardcastle. “What do you think of him?”

"I wouldn't care to let him build a house for me," said Colin. "But a crooked little builder isn't what I'm after. I'm looking for a man who is dedicated. And as regards your murder case, you've got the wrong kind of murder. Now if Bland was to feed his wife arsenic or push her into the Aegean in order to inherit her money and marry a slap-up blonde—"

"We'll see about that when it happens," said Inspector Hardcastle. "In the meantime we've got to get on with this murder."

Ten

At No. 62, Wilbraham Crescent, Mrs. Ramsay was saying to herself encouragingly, “Only two days now. Only two days.”

She pushed back some dank hair from her forehead. An almighty crash came from the kitchen. Mrs. Ramsay felt very disinclined even to go and see what the crash portended. If only she could pretend that there hadn’t been a crash. Oh well—only two days. She stepped across the hall, flung the kitchen door open and said in a voice of far less belligerence than it would have held three weeks ago:

“Now what have you done?”

“Sorry, Mum,” said her son Bill. “We were just having a bit of a bowling match with these tins and somehow or other they rolled into the bottom of the china cupboard.”

“We didn’t mean them to go into the bottom of the china cupboard,” said his younger brother Ted agreeably.

“Well, pick up those things and put them back in the cupboard and sweep up that broken china and put it in the bin.”

“Oh, Mum, not now.”

“Yes, now.”

“Ted can do it,” said Bill.

“I like that,” said Ted. “Always putting on me. I won’t do it if you won’t.”

“Bet you will.”

“Bet I won’t.”

“I’ll make you.”

“Yahh!”

The boys closed in a fierce wrestling match. Ted was forced back against the kitchen table and a bowl of eggs rocked ominously.

“Oh, get out of the kitchen!” cried Mrs. Ramsay. She pushed the two boys out of the kitchen door and shut it, and began to pick up tins and sweep up china.

“Two days,” she thought, “and they’ll be back at school! What a lovely, what a heavenly thought for a mother.”

She remembered vaguely some wicked remark by a woman columnist.

Only six happy days in the year for a woman.

The first and the last days of the holidays. How true that was, thought Mrs. Ramsay, sweeping up portions of her best dinner service. With what pleasure, what joy, had she contemplated the return of her offspring a bare five weeks before! And now? “The day after tomorrow,” she repeated to herself, “the day after tomorrow Bill and Ted will be back at school. I can hardly believe it. I can’t wait!”

How heavenly it had been five weeks ago when she met them at the station. Their tempestuous and affectionate welcome! The way they had rushed all over the house and garden. A special cake baked for tea. And now—what was she looking forward to now? A day of complete peace. No enormous meals to prepare, no incessant clearing up. She loved the boys—they were fine boys, no doubt of that. She was proud of them. But they were also exhausting. Their appetite, their vitality, the noise they made.

At that moment, raucous cries arose. She turned her head in sharp alarm. It was all right. They had only gone out in the garden. That was better, there was far more room for them in the garden. They would probably annoy the neighbours. She hoped to goodness they would leave Mrs. Hemming’s cats alone. Not, it must be confessed, for the sake of the cats, but because the wired enclosure surrounding Mrs. Hemming’s garden was apt to tear their shorts. She cast a fleeting eye over the first-aid box which lay handy on the dresser. Not that she fussed unduly over the natural accidents of vigorous boyhood. In fact her first inevitable remark was: “Now haven’t I told you a hundred times, you are not to bleed in the drawing room! Come straight into the kitchen and bleed there, where I can wipe over the linoleum.”

A terrific yell from outside seemed to be cut off midway and was followed by a silence so profound that Mrs. Ramsay felt a real feeling of alarm spring up in her breast. Really, that silence was most unnatural. She stood uncertainly, the dustpan with broken china in her hand. The kitchen door opened and Bill stood there. He had an awed, ecstatic expression most unusual on his eleven-year-old face.

“Mum,” he said. “There’s a detective inspector here and another man with him.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Ramsay, relieved. “What does he want, dear?”

“He asked for you,” said Bill, “but I think it must be about the murder. You know, the one at Miss Pebmarsh’s yesterday.”

“I don’t see why he should come and wish to see me,” said Mrs. Ramsay, in a slightly vexed voice.

Life was just one thing after another, she thought. How was she to get the potatoes on for the Irish stew if detective inspectors came along at this awkward hour?

“Oh well,” she said with a sigh. “I suppose I’d better come.”

She shot the broken china into the bin under the sink, rinsed her hands under the tap, smoothed her hair and prepared to follow Bill, who was saying impatiently, “Oh, come on, Mum.”

Mrs. Ramsay, closely flanked by Bill, entered the sitting room. Two men were standing there. Her younger son, Ted, was in attendance upon them, staring at them with wide appreciative eyes.

“Mrs. Ramsay?”

“Good morning.”

“I expect these young men have told you that I am Detective Inspector Hardcastle?”

“It’s very awkward,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “Very awkward this morning. I’m very busy. Will it take very long?”

“Hardly any time at all,” said Detective Inspector Hardcastle reassuringly. “May we sit down?”

“Oh, yes, do, do.”

Mrs. Ramsay took an upright chair and looked at them impatiently. She had suspicions that it was not going to take hardly any time at all.

“No need for you two to remain,” said Hardcastle to the boys pleasantly.

“Aw, we’re not going,” said Bill.

“We’re not going,” echoed Ted.

“We want to hear all about it,” said Bill.

“Sure we do,” said Ted.

“Was there a lot of blood?” asked Bill.

“Was it a burglar?” said Ted.

“Be quiet, boys,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “Didn’t you hear the—Mr. Hardcastle say he didn’t want you in here?”

“We’re not going,” said Bill. “We want to hear.”

Hardcastle moved across to the door and opened it. He looked at the boys.

“Out,” he said.

It was only one word, quietly uttered, but it had behind it the quality of authority. Without more ado both boys got up, shuffled their feet and shuffled out of the room.

“How wonderful,” thought Mrs. Ramsay appreciatively. “Now why can’t I be like that?”

But then, she reflected, she was the boys’ mother. She knew by hearsay that the boys, when they went out, behaved in a manner entirely different from at home. It was always mothers who got the worst of things. But perhaps, she reflected, one would rather have it like that. To have nice quiet attentive polite boys at home and to have little hooligans going out, creating unfavourable opinions of themselves, would be worse—yes, that would be worse. She recalled herself to what was required of her, as Inspector Hardcastle came back and sat down again.

“If it’s about what happened at Number 19 yesterday,” she said nervously, “I really don’t see that I can tell you anything, Inspector. I don’t know anything about it. I don’t even know the people who live there.”

“The house is lived in by a Miss Pebmarsh. She’s blind and works at the Aaronberg Institute.”

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “I’m afraid I know hardly anybody in the lower Crescent.”

“Were you yourself here yesterday between half past twelve and three o’clock?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Ramsay. “There was dinner to cook and all that. I went out before three, though. I took the boys to the cinema.”

The inspector took the photograph from his pocket and handed it to her.

“I’d like you to tell me if you’ve ever seen this man before.”

Mrs. Ramsay looked at it with a slight awakening of interest.

"No," she said, "no, I don't think so. I'm not sure if I would remember if I had seen him."

"He did not come to this house on any occasion—trying to sell you insurance or anything of that kind?"

Mrs. Ramsay shook her head more positively.

"No. No, I'm sure he didn't."

"His name, we have some reason to believe, is Curry. Mr. R. Curry."

He looked inquiringly at her. Mrs. Ramsay shook her head again.

"I'm afraid," she said apologetically, "I really haven't time to see or notice anything during the holidays."

"That's always a busy time, isn't it," said the inspector. "Fine boys you've got. Full of life and spirits. Rather too many spirits sometimes, I expect?"

Mrs. Ramsay positively smiled.

"Yes," she said, "it gets a little tiring, but they're very good boys really."

"I'm sure they are," said the inspector. "Fine fellows, both of them. Very intelligent, I should say. I'll have a word with them before I go, if you don't mind. Boys notice things sometimes that nobody else in the house does."

"I don't really see how they can have noticed anything," said Mrs. Ramsay. "It's not as though we were next door or anything."

"But your gardens back on each other."

"Yes, they do," agreed Mrs. Ramsay. "But they're quite separate."

"Do you know Mrs. Hemming at Number 20?"

"Well, in a way I do," said Mrs. Ramsay, "because of the cats and one thing and another."

“You are fond of cats?”

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Ramsay, “it’s not that. I mean it’s usually complaints.”

“Oh, I see. Complaints. What about?”

Mrs. Ramsay flushed.

“The trouble is,” she said, “when people keep cats in that way—fourteen, she’s got—they get absolutely besotted about them. And it’s all a lot of nonsense. I like cats. We used to have a cat ourselves, a tabby. Very good mouser, too. But all the fuss that woman makes, cooking special food—hardly ever letting the poor things out to have a life of their own. Of course the cats are always trying to escape. I would, if I was one of those cats. And the boys are very good really, they wouldn’t torment a cat in any way. What I say is cats can always take care of themselves very well. They’re very sensible animals, cats, that is if they are treated sensibly.”

“I’m sure you’re quite right,” said the inspector. “You must have a busy life,” he went on, “keeping those boys of yours amused and fed during the holidays. When are they going back to school?”

“The day after tomorrow,” said Mrs. Ramsay.

“I hope you’ll have a good rest then.”

“I mean to treat myself to a real lazy time,” she said.

The other young man who had been silently taking down notes, startled her a little by speaking.

“You ought to have one of those foreign girls,” he said. “Au pair, don’t they call it, come and do chores here in return for learning English.”

“I suppose I might try something of that kind,” said Mrs. Ramsay, considering, “though I always feel that foreigners may be difficult. My husband laughs at me. But then of course he knows more about it than I do. I haven’t travelled abroad as much as he has.”

"He's away now, isn't he?" said Hardcastle.

"Yes—he had to go to Sweden at the beginning of August. He's a constructional engineer. A pity he had to go just then—at the beginning of the holidays, too. He's so good with the children. He really likes playing with electric trains more than the boys do. Sometimes the lines and the marshalling yards and everything go right across the hall and into the other room. It's very difficult not to fall over them." She shook her head. "Men are such children," she said indulgently.

"When do you expect him back, Mrs. Ramsay?"

"I never know." She sighed. "It makes it rather—difficult." There was a tremor in her voice. Colin looked at her keenly.

"We mustn't take up more of your time, Mrs. Ramsay."

Hardcastle rose to his feet.

"Perhaps your boys will show us the garden?"

Bill and Ted were waiting in the hall and fell in with the suggestion immediately.

"Of course," said Bill apologetically, "it isn't a very big garden."

There had been some slight effort made to keep the garden of No. 62, Wilbraham Crescent in reasonable order. On one side there was a border of dahlias and Michaelmas daisies. Then a small lawn somewhat unevenly mown. The paths badly needed hoeing, models of aeroplanes, space guns and other representations of modern science lay about, looking slightly the worse for wear. At the end of the garden was an apple tree with pleasant-looking red apples on it. Next to it was a pear tree.

"That's it," said Ted, pointing at the space between the apple and the pear, through which the back of Miss Pebmarsh's house showed clearly. "That's Number 19 where the murder was."

"Got quite a good view of the house, haven't you," said the inspector. "Better still, I expect, from the upstairs windows."

"That's right," said Bill. "If only we'd been up there yesterday looking out, we might have seen something. But we didn't."

"We were at the cinema," said Ted.

"Were there fingerprints?" asked Bill.

"Not very helpful ones. Were you out in the garden at all yesterday?"

"Oh, yes, off and on," said Bill. "All the morning, that is. We didn't hear anything, though, or see anything."

"If we'd been there in the afternoon we might have heard screams," said Ted, wistfully. "Awful screams there were."

"Do you know Miss Pebmarsh, the lady who owns that house, by sight?"

The boys looked at each other, then nodded.

"She's blind," said Ted, "but she can walk around the garden all right. Doesn't have to walk with a stick or anything like that. She threw a ball back to us once. Quite nice about it she was."

"You didn't see her at all yesterday?"

The boys shook their heads.

"We wouldn't see her in the morning. She's always out," Bill explained. "She usually comes out in the garden after tea."

Colin was exploring a line of hosepipe which was attached to a tap in the house. It ran along the garden path and was laid down in the corner near the pear tree.

"Never knew that pear trees needed watering," he remarked.

“Oh, that,” said Bill. He looked slightly embarrassed.

“On the other hand,” said Colin, “if you climbed up in this tree.” He looked at both boys and grinned suddenly. “You could get a very nice little line of water to play on a cat, couldn’t you?”

Both boys scuffled the gravel with their feet and looked in every other direction but at Colin.

“That’s what you do, isn’t it?” said Colin.

“Aw, well,” said Bill, “it doesn’t hurt ’em. It’s not,” he said with an air of virtue, “like a catapult.”

“I suppose you used to use a catapult at one time.”

“Not properly,” said Ted. “We never seemed to hit anything.”

“Anyway, you do have a bit of fun with that hose sometimes,” said Colin, “and then Mrs. Hemming comes along and complains?”

“She’s always complaining,” said Bill.

“You ever get through her fence?”

“Not through that wire here,” said Ted, unguardedly.

“But you do get through into her garden sometimes, is that right? How do you do it?”

“Well, you can get through the fence—into Miss Pebmarsh’s garden. Then a little way down to the right you can push through the hedge into Mrs. Hemming’s garden. There’s a hole there in the wire.”

“Can’t you shut up, you fool?” said Bill.

“I suppose you’ve done a bit of hunting about for clues since the murder?” said Hardcastle.

The boys looked at each other.

“When you came back from the cinema and heard what had happened, I bet you went through the fence into the garden of 19 and had a jolly good look round.”

“Well—” Bill paused cautiously.

“It’s always possible,” said Hardcastle seriously, “that you may have found something that we missed. If you have—er—a collection I should be much obliged if you would show it to me.”

Bill made up his mind.

“Get ’em, Ted,” he said.

Ted departed obediently at a run.

“I’m afraid we haven’t got anything really good,” admitted Bill. “We only—sort of pretended.”

He looked at Hardcastle anxiously.

“I quite understand,” said the inspector. “Most of police work is like that. A lot of disappointments.”

Bill looked relieved.

Ted returned at a run. He passed over a grubby knotted handkerchief which chinked. Hardcastle unknotted it, with a boy on either side of him, and spread out the contents.

There was the handle off a cup, a fragment of willow pattern china, a broken trowel, a rusty fork, a coin, a clothes peg, a bit of iridescent glass and half a pair of scissors.

“An interesting lot,” said the inspector solemnly.

He took pity on the eager faces of the boys and picked up the piece of glass.

“I’ll take this. It may just possibly tie up with something.”

Colin had picked up the coin and was examining it.

“It’s not English,” said Ted.

“No,” said Colin. “It’s not English.” He looked across at Hardcastle. “We might perhaps take this, too,” he suggested.

“Don’t say a word about this to anyone,” said Hardcastle in a conspiratorial fashion.

The boys promised delightedly that they wouldn’t.

Eleven

“Ramsay,” said Colin, thoughtfully.

“What about him?”

“I like the sound of him, that’s all. He travels abroad—at a moment’s notice. His wife says he’s a construction engineer, but that’s all she seems to know about him.”

“She’s a nice woman,” said Hardcastle.

“Yes—and not a very happy one.”

“Tired, that’s all. Kids are tiring.”

“I think it’s more than that.”

“Surely the sort of person you want wouldn’t be burdened with a wife and two sons,” Hardcastle said sceptically.

“You never know,” said Colin. “You’d be surprised what some of the boys do for camouflage. A hard-up widow with a couple of kids might be willing to come to an arrangement.”

“I shouldn’t have thought she was that kind,” said Hardcastle primly.

“I don’t mean living in sin, my dear fellow. I mean that she’d agree to be Mrs. Ramsay and supply a background. Naturally, he’d spin her a yarn of the right kind. He’d be doing a spot of espionage, say, on our side. All highly patriotic.”

Hardcastle shook his head.

“You live in a strange world, Colin,” he said.

“Yes we do. I think, you know, I’ll have to get out of it one day … One begins to forget what is what and who is who. Half of these people work for both sides and in the end they don’t know themselves which side they are really on. Standards get gummed up—Oh, well—let’s get on with things.”

“We’d better do the McNaughtons,” said Hardcastle, pausing at the gates of 63. “A bit of his garden touches 19—same as Bland.”

“What do you know about the McNaughtons?”

“Not much—they came here about a year ago. Elderly couple—retired professor, I believe. He gardens.”

The front garden had rose bushes in it and a thick bed of autumn crocus under the windows.

A cheerful young woman in a brightly flowered overall opened the door to them and said:

“You want?—Yes?”

Hardcastle murmured, “The foreign help at last,” and handed her his card.

“Police,” said the young woman. She took a step or two back and looked at Hardcastle as though he were the Fiend in person.

“Mrs. McNaughton,” said Hardcastle.

“Mrs. McNaughton is here.”

She led them into the sitting room, which overlooked the back garden. It was empty.

“She up the stairs is,” said the no-longer cheerful young woman. She went out into the hall and called, “Mrs. McNaughton—Mrs. McNaughton.”

A voice far away said, “Yes. What is it, Gretel?”

“It is the police—two police. I put them in sitting room.”

There was a faint scurrying noise upstairs and the words “Oh, dear. Oh, dear, what next?” floated down. Then there was a patter of feet and presently Mrs. McNaughton entered the room with a worried expression on her face. There was, Hardcastle decided quite soon, usually a worried expression on Mrs. McNaughton’s face.

“Oh, dear,” she said again, “oh, dear. Inspector—what is it—Hardcastle—oh, yes.” She looked at the card. “But why do you want to see us? We don’t know anything about it. I mean I suppose it is this murder, isn’t it? I mean, it wouldn’t be the television licence?”

Hardcastle reassured her on that point.

“It all seems so extraordinary, doesn’t it?” said Mrs. McNaughton, brightening up. “And more or less midday, too. Such an odd time to come and burgle a house. Just the time when people are usually at home. But then one does read of such terrible things nowadays. All happening in broad daylight. Why, some friends of ours—they were out for lunch and a furniture van drove up and the men broke in and carried out every stick of furniture. The whole street saw it happen but of course they never thought there was anything wrong. You know, I did think I heard someone screaming yesterday, but Angus said it was those dreadful boys of Mrs. Ramsay’s. They rush about the garden making noises like spaceships, you know, or rockets, or atom bombs. It really is quite frightening sometimes.”

Once again Hardcastle produced his photograph.

“Have you ever seen this man, Mrs. McNaughton?”

Mrs. McNaughton stared at it with avidity.

“I’m almost sure I’ve seen him. Yes. Yes, I’m practically certain. Now, where was it? Was it the man who came and asked me if I wanted to buy a new encyclopedia in fourteen volumes? Or was it the man who came with a new model of vacuum cleaner. I wouldn’t have anything to do with him, and he went out and worried my husband in the front garden. Angus was planting some bulbs, you know, and he didn’t want to be interrupted and the man went on and on saying what the thing would do. You know, how it would run up and down curtains, and would clean doorsteps and do the stairs and cushions and spring-clean things. Everything, he said, absolutely everything. And then Angus just looked up at him and said, ‘Can it plant bulbs?’ and I must say I had to laugh because it took the man quite aback and he went away.”

“And you really think that was the man in this photograph?”

“Well, no, I don’t really,” said Mrs. McNaughton, “because that was a much younger man, now I come to think of it. But all the same I think I have seen this face before. Yes. The more I look at it the more sure I am that he came here and asked me to buy something.”

“Insurance perhaps?”

“No, no, not insurance. My husband attends to all that kind of thing. We are fully insured in every way. No. But all the same—yes, the more I look at that photograph—”

Hardcastle was less encouraged by this than he might have been. He put down Mrs. McNaughton, from the fund of his experience, as a woman who would be anxious for the excitement of having seen someone connected with murder. The longer she looked at the picture, the more sure she would be that she could remember someone just like it.

He sighed.

“He was driving a van, I believe,” said Mrs. McNaughton. “But just when I saw him I can’t remember. A baker’s van, I think.”

“You didn’t see him yesterday, did you, Mrs. McNaughton?”

Mrs. McNaughton’s face fell slightly. She pushed back her rather untidy grey waved hair from her forehead.

“No. No, not yesterday,” she said. “At least—” she paused. “I don’t think so.” Then she brightened a little. “Perhaps my husband will remember.”

“Is he at home?”

“Oh, he’s out in the garden.” She pointed through the window where at this moment an elderly man was pushing a wheelbarrow along the path.

“Perhaps we might go out and speak to him.”

“Of course. Come this way.”

She led the way out through a side door and into the garden. Mr. McNaughton was in a fine state of perspiration.

“These gentlemen are from the police, Angus,” said his wife breathlessly. “Come about the murder at Miss Pebmarsh’s. There’s a photograph they’ve got of the dead man. Do you know, I’m sure I’ve seen him somewhere. It wasn’t the man, was it, who came last week and asked us if we had any antiques to dispose of?”

“Let’s see,” said Mr. McNaughton. “Just hold it for me, will you,” he said to Hardcastle. “My hands are too earthy to touch anything.”

He took a brief look and remarked, “Never seen that fellow in my life.”

“Your neighbour tells me you’re very fond of gardening,” said Hardcastle.

“Who told you that—not Mrs. Ramsay?”

“No. Mr. Bland.”

Angus McNaughton snorted.

“Bland doesn’t know what gardening means,” he said. “Bedding out, that’s all he does. Shoves in begonias and geraniums and lobelia edging. That’s not what I call gardening. Might as well live in a public park. Are you interested in shrubs at all, Inspector? Of course, it’s the wrong time of year now, but I’ve one or two shrubs here that you’d be surprised at my being able to grow. Shrubs that they say only do well in Devon and Cornwall.”

“I’m afraid I can’t lay claim to be a practical gardener,” said Hardcastle.

McNaughton looked at him much as an artist looks at someone who says they know nothing of art but they know what they like.

“I’m afraid I’ve called about a much less pleasant subject,” Hardcastle said.

“Of course. This business yesterday. I was out in the garden, you know, when it happened.”

“Indeed?”

“Well, I mean I was here when the girl screamed.”

“What did you do?”

“Well,” said Mr. McNaughton rather sheepishly, “I didn’t do anything. As a matter of fact I thought it was those blasted Ramsay boys. Always yelling and screaming and making a noise.”

“But surely this scream didn’t come from quite the same direction?”

“Not if those blasted boys ever stayed in their own garden. But they don’t, you know. They get through people’s fences and hedges. They chase those wretched cats of Mrs. Hemming’s all over the place. There’s nobody to keep a firm hand on them, that’s the trouble. Their mother’s weak as water. Of course, when there’s no man in the house, boys do get out of hand.”

“Mr. Ramsay is abroad a good deal I understand.”

“Construction engineer, I believe,” said Mr. McNaughton vaguely. “Always going off somewhere. Dams, you know. I’m not swearing, my dear,” he assured his wife. “I mean jobs to do with the building of dams, or else it’s oil or pipelines or something like that. I don’t really know. He had to go off to Sweden a month ago at a moment’s notice. That left the boys’ mother with a lot to do—cooking and housework and that—and, well—of course they were bound to run wild. They’re not bad boys, mind you, but they need discipline.”

“You yourself didn’t see anything—apart I mean from hearing the scream? When was that, by the way?”

"No idea," said Mr. McNaughton. "I take my watch off always before I come out here. Ran the hose over it the other day and had quite a job getting it repaired afterwards. What time was it, my dear? You heard it, didn't you?"

"It must have been half past two perhaps—it was at least half an hour after we finished lunch."

"I see. What time do you lunch?"

"Half past one," said Mr. McNaughton, "if we're lucky. Our Danish girl has got no sense of time."

"And afterwards—do you have a nap?"

"Sometimes. I didn't today. I wanted to get on with what I was doing. I was clearing away a lot of stuff, adding to the compost heap, and all that."

"Wonderful thing, a compost heap," said Hardcastle, solemnly.

Mr. McNaughton brightened immediately.

"Absolutely. Nothing like it. Ah! The number of people I've converted. Using all these chemical manures! Suicide! Let me show you."

He drew Hardcastle eagerly by the arm and trundling his barrow, went along the path to the edge of the fence that divided his garden from that of No. 19. Screened by lilac bushes, the compost heap was displayed in its glory. Mr. McNaughton wheeled the wheelbarrow to a small shed beside it. Inside the shed were several nicely arranged tools.

"Very tidy you keep everything," remarked Hardcastle.

"Got to take care of your tools," said McNaughton.

Hardcastle was looking thoughtfully towards No. 19. On the other side of the fence was a rose pergola which led up to the side of the house.

“You didn’t see anyone in the garden at Number 19 or looking out of the window in the house, or anything like that while you were at your compost heap?”

McNaughton shook his head.

“Didn’t see anything at all,” he said. “Sorry I can’t help you, Inspector.”

“You know, Angus,” said his wife, “I believe I did see a figure skulking in the garden of 19.”

“I don’t think you did, my dear,” said her husband firmly. “I didn’t, either.”

“That woman would say she’d seen anything,” Hardcastle growled when they were back in the car.

“You don’t think she recognized the photograph?”

Hardcastle shook his head. “I doubt it. She just wants to think she’s seen him. I know that type of witness only too well. When I pinned her down to it, she couldn’t give chapter or verse, could she?”

“No.”

“Of course she may have sat opposite him in a bus or something. I’ll allow you that. But if you ask me, it’s wishful thinking. What do you think?”

“I think the same.”

“We didn’t get much,” Hardcastle sighed. “Of course there are things that seem queer. For instance, it seems almost impossible that Mrs. Hemming—no matter how wrapped up in her cats she is—should know so little about her neighbour, Miss Pebmarsh, as she does. And also that she should be so extremely vague and uninterested in the murder.”

“She is a vague kind of woman.”

“Scatty!” said Hardcastle. “When you meet a scatty woman—well, fires, burglaries, murders can go on all round them and they wouldn’t notice it.”

"She's very well fenced in with all that wire netting, and that Victorian shrubbery doesn't leave you much of a view."

They had arrived back at the police station. Hardcastle grinned at his friend and said:

"Well, Sergeant Lamb, I can let you go off duty now."

"No more visits to pay?"

"Not just now. I must pay one more later, but I'm not taking you with me."

"Well, thanks for this morning. Can you get these notes of mine typed up?" He handed them over. "Inquest is the day after tomorrow you said? What time?"

"Eleven."

"Right. I'll be back for it."

"Are you going away?"

"I've got to go up to London tomorrow—make my report up to date."

"I can guess who to."

"You're not allowed to do that."

Hardcastle grinned.

"Give the old boy my love."

"Also, I may be going to see a specialist," said Colin.

"A specialist? What for? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing—bar thickheadedness. I don't mean that kind of a specialist. One in your line."

“Scotland Yard?”

“No. A private detective—a friend of my Dad’s—and a friend of mine. This fantastic business of yours will be just down his street. He’ll love it—it will cheer him up. I’ve an idea he needs cheering up.”

“What’s his name?”

“Hercule Poirot.”

“I’ve heard of him. I thought he was dead.”

“He’s not dead. But I have a feeling he’s bored. That’s worse.”

Hardcastle looked at him curiously.

“You’re an odd fellow, Colin. You make such unlikely friends.”

“Including you,” Colin said, and grinned.

Twelve

Having dismissed Colin, Inspector Hardcastle looked at the address neatly written in his notebook and nodded his head. Then he slipped the book back in his pocket and started to deal with the routine matters that had piled up on his desk.

It was a busy day for him. He sent out for coffee and sandwiches, and received reports from Sergeant Cray—no helpful lead had come up. Nobody at the railway station or buses had recognized the photograph of Mr. Curry. The laboratory reports on clothing added up to nil. The suit had been made by a good tailor, but the tailor’s name had been removed. Desire for anonymity on the part of Mr. Curry? Or on the part of his killer. Details of dentistry had been circulated to the proper quarters and were probably the most helpful leads—it took a little time—but it got results in the end. Unless, of course, Mr. Curry had been a foreigner? Hardcastle considered the idea. There might be a possibility that the dead man was French—on the other hand his clothes were definitely not French. No laundry marks had helped yet.

Hardcastle was not impatient. Identification was quite often a slow job. But in the end, someone always came forward. A laundry, a dentist, a doctor, a landlady. The picture of the dead man would be circulated to police stations, would be reproduced in newspapers. Sooner or later, Mr. Curry would be known in his rightful identity.

In the meantime there was work to be done, and not only on the Curry case. Hardcastle worked without a break until half past five. He looked at his wristwatch again and decided the time was ripe for the call he wanted to make.

Sergeant Cray had reported that Sheila Webb had resumed work at the Cavendish Bureau, and that at five o’clock she would be working with Professor Purdy at the Curlew Hotel and that she was unlikely to leave there until well after six.

What was the aunt’s name again? Lawton—Mrs. Lawton. 14, Palmerston Road. He did not take a police car but chose to walk the short distance.

Palmerston Road was a gloomy street that had known, as is said, better days. The houses, Hardcastle noted, had been mainly converted into flats or maisonettes. As he turned the corner, a girl who was approaching him along the sidewalk hesitated for a moment. His mind occupied, the inspector had some momentary idea that she was going to ask him the way to somewhere. However, if that was so, the girl thought better of it and resumed her walk past him. He wondered why the idea of shoes came into his mind so suddenly. Shoes … No, one shoe. The girl’s face was faintly familiar to him. Who was it now—someone he had seen just lately … Perhaps she had recognized him and was about to speak to him?

He paused for a moment, looking back after her. She was walking quite fast now. The trouble was, he thought, she had one of those indeterminate faces that are very hard to recognize unless there is some special reason for doing so. Blue eyes, fair complexion, slightly open mouth. Mouth. That recalled something also. Something that she’d been doing with her mouth? Talking? Putting on lipstick? No. He felt slightly annoyed with himself. Hardcastle prided himself on his recognition of faces. He never forgot, he’d been apt to say, a face he had seen in the dock or in the witness-box, but there were after all other places of contact. He would not be likely to remember, for instance, every waitress who had ever served him. He would not remember every bus conductress. He dismissed the matter from his mind.

He had arrived now at No. 14. The door stood ajar and there were four bells with names underneath. Mrs. Lawton, he saw, had a flat on the ground floor. He went in and pressed the bell on the door on the left of the hall. It was a few moments before it was answered. Finally he heard steps inside and the door was opened by a tall, thin woman with straggling dark hair who had on an overall and seemed a little short of breath. The smell of onions wafted along from the direction of what was obviously the kitchen.

“Mrs. Lawton?”

“Yes?” She looked at him doubtfully, with slight annoyance.

She was, he thought, about forty-five. Something faintly gypsyish about her appearance.

“What is it?”

“I should be glad if you could spare me a moment or two.”

“Well, what about? I’m really rather busy just now.” She added sharply, “You’re not a reporter, are you?”

“Of course,” said Hardcastle, adopting a sympathetic tone, “I expect you’ve been a good deal worried by reporters.”

“Indeed we have. Knocking at the door and ringing the bell and asking all sorts of foolish questions.”

“Very annoying I know,” said the inspector. “I wish we could spare you all that, Mrs. Lawton. I am Detective Inspector Hardcastle, by the way, in charge of the case about which the reporters have been annoying you. We’d put a stop to a good deal of that if we could, but we’re powerless in the matter, you know. The Press has its rights.”

“It’s a shame to worry private people as they do,” said Mrs. Lawton, “saying they have to have news for the public. The only thing I’ve ever noticed about the news that they print is that it’s a tissue of lies from beginning to end. They’ll cook up anything so far as I can see. But come in.”

She stepped back and the inspector passed over the doorstep and she shut the door. There were a couple of letters which had fallen on the mat. Mrs. Lawton bent forward to pick them up, but the inspector politely forestalled her. His eyes swept over them for half a second as he handed them to her, addresses uppermost.

“Thank you.”

She laid them down on the hall table.

"Come into the sitting room, won't you? At least—if you go in this door and give me just a moment. I think something's boiling over."

She beat a speedy retreat to the kitchen. Inspector Hardcastle took a last deliberate look at the letters on the hall table. One was addressed to Mrs. Lawton and the two others to Miss R. S. Webb. He went into the room indicated. It was a small room, rather untidy, shabbily furnished but here and there it displayed some bright spot of colour or some unusual object. An attractive, probably expensive piece of Venetian glass of moulded colours and an abstract shape, two brightly coloured velvet cushions and an earthenware platter of foreign shells. Either the aunt or the niece, he thought, had an original streak in her makeup.

Mrs. Lawton returned, slightly more breathless than before.

"I think that'll be all right now," she said, rather uncertainly.

The inspector apologized again.

"I'm sorry if I've called at an inconvenient time," he said, "but I happened to be in this neighbourhood and I wanted to check over a few further points about this affair in which your niece was so unfortunately concerned. I hope she's none the worse for her experience? It must have been a great shock to any girl."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Lawton. "Sheila came back in a terrible state. But she was all right by this morning and she's gone back to work again."

"Oh, yes, I know that," said the inspector. "But I was told she was out doing work for a client somewhere and I didn't want to interrupt anything of that kind so I thought it would be better if I came round here and talked to her in her own home. But she's not back yet, is that it?"

"She'll probably be rather late this evening," said Mrs. Lawton. "She's working for a Professor Purdy and from what Sheila says, he's a man with no idea of time at all. Always says 'this won't take more than another ten minutes so I think we might as well get it finished,' and then of course it takes nearer to three-quarters of an hour. He's a very nice man and most apologetic. Once or twice he's urged her to stay and have dinner and seemed quite concerned because he's kept her so much longer than he realized. Still, it is rather annoying sometimes. Is there something I can tell you, Inspector? In case Sheila is delayed a long time."

"Well, not really," said the inspector smiling. "Of course, we only took down the bare details the other day and I'm not sure really whether I've even got those right." He made a show of consulting his notebook once more. "Let me see. Miss Sheila Webb—is that her full name or has she another Christian name? We have to have these things very exact, you know, for the records at the inquest."

"The inquest is the day after tomorrow, isn't it? She got a notice to attend."

"Yes, but she needn't let that worry her," said Hardcastle. "She'll just have to tell her story of how she found the body."

"You don't know who the man was yet?"

"No. I'm afraid it's early days for that. There was a card in his pocket and we thought at first he was some kind of insurance agent. But it seems more likely now that it was a card he'd been given by someone. Perhaps he was contemplating insurance himself."

"Oh, I see," Mrs. Lawton looked vaguely interested.

"Now I'll just get these names right," said the inspector. "I think I've got it down as Miss Sheila Webb or Miss Sheila R. Webb. I just couldn't remember what the other name was. Was it Rosalie?"

"Rosemary," said Mrs. Lawton, "she was christened Rosemary Sheila but Sheila always thought Rosemary was rather fanciful so she's never called anything but Sheila."

"I see." There was nothing in Hardcastle's tone to show that he was pleased that one of his hunches had come out right. He noted another point. The name Rosemary occasioned no distress in Mrs. Lawton. To her Rosemary was simply a Christian name that her niece did not use.

"I've got it straight now all right," said the inspector smiling. "I gather that your niece came from London and has been working for the Cavendish Bureau for the last ten months or so. You don't know the exact date, I suppose?"

"Well, really, I couldn't say now. It was last November some time. I think more towards the end of November."

"Quite so. It doesn't really matter. She was not living with you here previously to taking the job at the Cavendish Bureau?"

"No. She was living in London before that."

"Have you got her address in London?"

"Well, I've got it somewhere," Mrs. Lawton looked round her with the vague expression of the habitually untidy. "I've got such a short memory," she said. "Something like Allington Grove, I think it was—out Fulham way. She shared a flat with two other girls. Terribly expensive rooms are in London for girls."

"Do you remember the name of the firm she worked at there?"

"Oh, yes. Hopgood and Trent. They were estate agents in the Fulham Road."

"Thank you. Well all that seems very clear. Miss Webb is an orphan, I understand?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Lawton. She moved uneasily. Her eyes strayed to the door. "Do you mind if I just go into the kitchen again?"

"Of course."

He opened the door for her. She went out. He wondered if he had been right or wrong in thinking that his last question had in some way perturbed Mrs. Lawton. Her replies had come quite readily and easily up to then. He thought about it until Mrs. Lawton returned.

"I'm so sorry," she said, apologetically, "but you know what it is—cooking things. Everything's quite all right now. Was there anything else you want to ask me? I've remembered, by the way, it wasn't Allington Grove. It was Carrington Grove and the number was 17."

"Thank you," said the inspector. "I think I was asking you whether Miss Webb was an orphan."

"Yes, she's an orphan. Her parents are dead."

"Long ago?"

"They died when she was a child."

There was something like defiance just perceptible in her tone.

"Was she your sister's child or your brother's?"

"My sister's."

"Ah, yes. And what was Mr. Webb's profession?"

Mrs. Lawton paused a moment before answering. She was biting her lips. Then she said, "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I mean I don't remember, it's so long ago."

Hardcastle waited, knowing that she would speak again. She did.

"May I ask what all this has got to do with it—I mean what does it matter who her father and mother were and what her father did and where he came from or anything like that?"

"I suppose it doesn't matter really, Mrs. Lawton, not from your point of view, that is. But you see, the circumstances are rather unusual."

"What do you mean—the circumstances are unusual?"

"Well, we have reason to believe that Miss Webb went to that house yesterday because she had been specially asked for at the Cavendish Bureau by name. It looks therefore as though someone had deliberately arranged for her to be there. Someone perhaps—" he hesitated "—with a grudge against her."

"I can't imagine that anyone could have a grudge against Sheila. She's a very sweet girl. A nice friendly girl."

"Yes," said Hardcastle mildly. "That's what I should have thought myself."

"And I don't like to hear anybody suggesting the contrary," said Mrs. Lawton belligerently.

"Exactly." Hardcastle continued to smile appeasingly. "But you must realize, Mrs. Lawton, that it looks as though your niece has been deliberately made a victim. She was being, as they say on the films, put on the spot. Somebody was arranging for her to go into a house where there was a dead man, and that dead man had died very recently. It seems on the face of it a malicious thing to do."

"You mean—you mean someone was trying to make it appear that Sheila killed him? Oh, no, I can't believe it."

"It is rather difficult to believe," agreed the inspector, "but we've got to make quite sure and clear up the matter. Could there be, for instance, some young man, someone perhaps who had fallen in love with your niece, and whom she, perhaps, did not care for? Young men sometimes do some very bitter and revengeful things, especially if they're rather ill-balanced."

"I don't think it could be anything of that kind," said Mrs. Lawton, puckering her eyes in thought and frowning. "Sheila has had one or two boys she's been friendly with, but there's been nothing serious. Nobody steady of any kind."

"It might have been while she was living in London?" the inspector suggested. "After all, I don't suppose you know very much about what friends she had there."

"No, no, perhaps not … Well, you'll have to ask her about that yourself, Inspector Hardcastle. But I never heard of any trouble of any kind."

"Or it might have been another girl," suggested Hardcastle. "Perhaps one of the girls she shared rooms with there was jealous of her?"

"I suppose," said Mrs. Lawton doubtfully, "that there might be a girl who'd want to do her a bad turn. But not involving murder, surely."

It was a shrewd appreciation and Hardcastle noted that Mrs. Lawton was by no means a fool. He said quickly:

"I know it all sounds most unlikely, but then this whole business is unlikely."

"It must have been someone mad," said Mrs. Lawton.

"Even in madness," said Hardcastle, "there's a definite idea behind the madness, you know. Something that's given rise to it. And that really," he went on, "is why I was asking you about Sheila Webb's father and mother. You'd be surprised how often motives arise that have their roots in the past. Since Miss Webb's father and mother died when she was a young child, naturally she can't tell me anything about them. That's why I'm applying to you."

"Yes, I see, but—well…."

He noted that the trouble and uncertainty were back in her voice.

"Were they killed at the same time, in an accident, anything like that?"

"No, there was no accident."

"They both died from natural causes?"

"I—well, yes, I mean—I don't really know."

"I think you must know a little more than you are telling me, Mrs. Lawton." He hazarded a guess. "Were they, perhaps, divorced—something of that kind?”

“No, they weren’t divorced.”

“Come now, Mrs. Lawton. You know—you must know of what your sister died?”

“I don’t see what—I mean, I can’t say—it’s all very difficult. Raking up things. It’s much better not raking them up.” There was a kind of desperate perplexity in her glance.

Hardcastle looked at her keenly. Then he said gently, “Was Sheila Webb perhaps—an illegitimate child?”

He saw immediately a mixture of consternation and relief in her face.

“She’s not my child,” she said.

“She is your sister’s illegitimate child?”

“Yes. But she doesn’t know it herself. I’ve never told her. I told her her parents died young. So that’s why—well, you see….”

“Oh, yes, I see,” said the inspector, “and I assure you that unless something comes of this particular line of inquiry there is no need for me to question Miss Webb on this subject.”

“You mean you needn’t tell her?”

“Not unless there is some relevance to the case, which, I may say, seems unlikely. But I do want all the facts that you know, Mrs. Lawton, and I assure you that I’ll do my best to keep what you tell me entirely between ourselves.”

“It’s not a nice thing to happen,” said Mrs. Lawton, “and I was very distressed about it, I can tell you. My sister, you see, had always been the clever one of the family. She was a schoolteacher and doing very well. Highly respected and everything else. The last person you’d ever think would—”

“Well,” said the inspector, tactfully, “it often happens that way. She got to know this man—this Webb—”

“I never even knew what his name was,” said Mrs. Lawton. “I never met him. But she came to me and told me what had happened. That she was expecting a child and that the man couldn’t, or wouldn’t—I never knew which—marry her. She was ambitious and it would have meant giving up her job if the whole thing came out. So naturally I—I said I’d help.”

“Where is your sister now, Mrs. Lawton?”

“I’ve no idea. Absolutely no idea at all.” She was emphatic.

“She’s alive, though.”

“I suppose so.”

“But you haven’t kept in touch with her?”

“That’s the way she wanted it. She thought it was best for the child and best for her that there should be a clean break. So it was fixed that way. We both had a little income of our own that our mother left us. Ann turned her half-share over to me to be used for the child’s bringing up and keep. She was going to continue with her profession, she said, but she would change schools. There was some idea, I believe, of a year’s exchange with a teacher abroad. Australia or somewhere. That’s all I know, Inspector Hardcastle, and that’s all I can tell you.”

He looked at her thoughtfully. Was that really all she knew? It was a difficult question to answer with any certainty. It was certainly all that she meant to tell him. It might very well be all she knew. Slight as the reference to the sister had been, Hardcastle got an impression of a forceful, bitter, angry personality. The sort of woman who was determined not to have her life blasted by one mistake. In a cold hardheaded way she had provided for the upkeep and presumable happiness of her child. From that moment on she had cut herself adrift to start life again on her own.

It was conceivable, he thought, that she might feel like that about the child. But what about her sister? He said mildly:

“It seems odd that she did not at least keep in touch with you by letter, did not want to know how the child was progressing?”

Mrs. Lawton shook her head.

“Not if you knew Ann,” she said. “She was always very clear-cut in her decisions. And then she and I weren’t very close. I was younger than she was by a good deal—twelve years. As I say, we were never very close.”

“And what did your husband feel about this adoption?”

“I was a widow then,” said Mrs. Lawton. “I married young and my husband was killed in the war. I kept a small sweet shop at the time.”

“Where was all this? Not here in Crowdean.”

“No. We were living in Lincolnshire at the time. I came here in the holidays once, and I liked it so much that I sold the shop and came here to live. Later, when Sheila was old enough to go to school, I took a job in Roscoe and West, the big drapers here, you know. I still work there. They’re very pleasant people.”

“Well,” said Hardcastle, rising to his feet, “thank you very much, Mrs. Lawton, for your frankness in what you have told me.”

“And you won’t say a word of it to Sheila?”

“Not unless it should become necessary, and that would only happen if some circumstances out of the past proved to have been connected with this murder at 19, Wilbraham Crescent. And that, I think, is unlikely.” He took the photograph from his pocket which he had been showing to so many people, and showed it to Mrs. Lawton. “You’ve no idea who this man could be?”

“They’ve shown it me already,” said Mrs. Lawton.

She took it and scrutinized it earnestly.

“No. I’m sure, quite sure, I’ve never seen this man before. I don’t think he belonged round here or I might have remembered seeing him about. Of course—” she looked closely. She paused a moment before adding, rather unexpectedly, “He looks a nice man I think. A gentleman, I’d say, wouldn’t you?”

It was a slightly outmoded term in the inspector’s experience, yet it fell very naturally from Mrs. Lawton’s lips. “Brought up in the country,” he thought. “They still think of things that way.” He looked at the photograph again himself reflecting, with faint surprise, that he had not thought of the dead man in quite that way. Was he a nice man? He had been assuming just the contrary. Assuming it unconsciously perhaps, or influenced perhaps by the fact that the man had a card in his pocket which bore a name and an address which were obviously false. But the explanation he had given to Mrs. Lawton just now might have been the true one. It might have been that the card did represent some bogus insurance agent who had pressed the card upon the dead man. And that, he thought wryly, would really make the whole thing even more difficult. He glanced at his watch again.

“I mustn’t keep you from your cooking any longer,” he said, “since your niece is not home yet—”

Mrs. Lawton in turn looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Only one clock in this room, thank heaven,” thought the inspector to himself.

“Yes, she is late,” she remarked. “Surprising really. It’s a good thing Edna didn’t wait.”

Seeing a slightly puzzled expression on Hardcastle’s face, she explained.

“It’s just one of the girls from the office. She came here to see Sheila this evening and she waited a bit but after a while she said she couldn’t wait any longer. She’d got a date with someone. She said it would do tomorrow, or some other time.”

Enlightenment came to the inspector. The girl he had passed in the street! He knew now why she'd made him think of shoes. Of course. It was the girl who had received him in the Cavendish Bureau and the girl who, when he left, had been holding up a shoe with a stiletto heel torn off it, and had been discussing in unhappy puzzlement how on earth she was going to get home like that. A nondescript kind of girl, he remembered, not very attractive, sucking some kind of sweet as she talked. She had recognized him when she passed him in the street, although he had not recognized her. She had hesitated, too, as though she thought of speaking to him. He wondered rather idly what she had wanted to say. Had she wanted to explain why she was calling on Sheila Webb or had she thought he would expect her to say something? He asked:

"Is she a great friend of your niece's?"

"Well, not particularly," said Mrs. Lawton. "I mean they work in the same office and all that, but she's rather a dull girl. Not very bright and she and Sheila aren't particular friends. In fact, I wondered why she was so keen to see Sheila tonight. She said it was something she couldn't understand and that she wanted to ask Sheila about it."

"She didn't tell you what it was?"

"No, she said it would keep and it didn't matter."

"I see. Well, I must be going."

"It's odd," said Mrs. Lawton, "that Sheila hasn't telephoned. She usually does if she's late, because the professor sometimes asks her to stay to dinner. Ah, well, I expect she'll be here any moment now. There are a lot of bus queues sometimes and the Curlew Hotel is quite a good way along the Esplanade. There's nothing—no message—you want to leave for Sheila?"

"I think not," said the inspector.

As he went out he asked, "By the way, who chose your niece's Christian names, Rosemary and Sheila? Your sister or yourself?"

“Sheila was our mother’s name. Rosemary was my sister’s choice. Funny name to choose really. Fanciful. And yet my sister wasn’t fanciful or sentimental in any way.”

“Well, good night, Mrs. Lawton.”

As the inspector turned the corner from the gateway into the street he thought, “Rosemary—hm … Rosemary for remembrance. Romantic remembrance? Or—something quite different?”

Thirteen

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I walked up Charing Cross Road and turned into the maze of streets that twist their way between New Oxford Street and Covent Garden. All sorts of unsuspected shops did business there, antique shops, a dolls' hospital, ballet shoes, foreign delicatessen shops.

I resisted the lure of the dolls' hospital with its various pairs of blue or brown glass eyes, and came at last to my objective. It was a small dingy bookshop in a side street not far from the British Museum. It had the usual trays of books outside. Ancient novels, old text books, odds and ends of all kinds, labelled 3d., 6d., 1s., even some aristocrats which had nearly all their pages, and occasionally even their binding intact.

I sidled through the doorway. It was necessary to sidle since precariously arranged books impinged more and more every day on the passageway from the street. Inside, it was clear that the books owned the shop rather than the other way about. Everywhere they had run wild and taken possession of their habitat, breeding and multiplying and clearly lacking any strong hand to keep them down. The distance between bookshelves was so narrow that you could only get along with great difficulty. There were piles of books perched on every shelf or table. On a stool in a corner, hemmed in by books, was an old man in a pork-pie hat with a large flat face like a stuffed fish. He had the air of one who has given up an unequal struggle. He had attempted to master the books, but the books had obviously succeeded in mastering him. He was a kind of King Canute of the book world, retreating before the advancing book tide. If he ordered it to retreat it would have been with the sure and hopeless certainty that it would not do so. This was Mr. Solomon, proprietor of the shop. He recognized me, his fishlike stare softened for a moment and he nodded.

"Got anything in my line?" I asked.

"You'll have to go up and see, Mr. Lamb. Still on seaweeds and that stuff?"

“That’s right.”

“Well, you know where they are. Marine biology, fossils, Antarctica—second floor. I had a new parcel in day before yesterday. I started to unpack ’em but I haven’t got round to it properly yet. You’ll find them in a corner up there.”

I nodded and sidled my way onwards to where a small rather rickety and very dirty staircase led up from the back of the shop. On the first floor were Orientalia, art books, medicine, and French classics. In this room was a rather interesting little curtained corner not known to the general public, but accessible to experts, where what is called “odd” or “curious” volumes reposed. I passed them and went on up to the second floor.

Here archaeological, natural history, and other respectable volumes were rather inadequately sorted into categories. I steered my way through students and elderly colonels and clergymen, passed round the angle of a bookcase, stepped over various gaping parcels of books on the floor and found my further progress barred by two students of opposite sexes lost to the world in a closely knit embrace. They stood there swaying to and fro. I said:

“Excuse me,” pushed them firmly aside, raised a curtain which masked a door, and slipping a key from my pocket, turned it in the lock and passed through. I found myself incongruously in a kind of vestibule with cleanly distempered walls hung with prints of Highland cattle, and a door with a highly polished knocker on it. I manipulated the knocker discreetly and the door was opened by an elderly woman with grey hair, spectacles of a particularly old-fashioned kind, a black skirt and a rather unexpected peppermint-striped jumper.

“It’s you, is it?” she said without any other form of greeting. “He was asking about you only yesterday. He wasn’t pleased.” She shook her head at me, rather as an elderly governess might do at a disappointing child. “You’ll have to try and do better,” she said.

“Oh, come off it, Nanny,” I said.

“And don’t call me Nanny,” said the lady. “It’s a cheek. I’ve told you so before.”

“It’s your fault,” I said. “You mustn’t talk to me as if I were a small boy.”

“Time you grew up. You’d better go in and get it over.”

She pressed a buzzer, picked up a telephone from the desk, and said:

“Mr. Colin … Yes, I’m sending him in.” She put it down and nodded to me.

I went through a door at the end of the room into another room which was so full of cigar smoke that it was difficult to see anything at all. After my smarting eyes had cleared, I beheld the ample proportions of my chief sitting back in an aged, derelict grandfather chair, by the arm of which was an old-fashioned reading or writing desk on a swivel.

Colonel Beck took off his spectacles, pushed aside the reading desk on which was a vast tome and looked disapprovingly at me.

“So it’s you at last?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Got anything?”

“No, sir.”

“Ah! Well, it won’t do, Colin, d’you hear? Won’t do. Crescents indeed!”

“I still think,” I began.

“All right. You still think. But we can’t wait forever while you’re thinking.”

“I’ll admit it was only a hunch,” I said.

“No harm in that,” said Colonel Beck.

He was a contradictory man.

"Best jobs I've ever done have been hunches. Only this hunch of yours doesn't seem to be working out. Finished with the pubs?"

"Yes, sir. As I told you I've started on Crescents. Houses in crescents is what I mean."

"I didn't suppose you meant bakers' shops with French rolls in them, though, come to think of it, there's no reason why not. Some of these places make an absolute fetish of producing French croissants that aren't really French. Keep 'em in a deep freeze nowadays like everything else. That's why nothing tastes of anything nowadays."

I waited to see whether the old boy would enlarge upon this topic. It was a favourite one of his. But seeing that I was expecting him to do so, Colonel Beck refrained.

"Wash out all round?" he demanded.

"Almost. I've still got a little way to go."

"You want more time, is that it?"

"I want more time, yes," I said. "But I don't want to move on to another place this minute. There's been a kind of coincidence and it might—only might—mean something."

"Don't waffle. Give me facts."

"Subject of investigation, Wilbraham Crescent."

"And you drew a blank! Or didn't you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Define yourself, define yourself, boy."

"The coincidence is that a man was murdered in Wilbraham Crescent."

"Who was murdered?"

“As yet he’s unknown. Had a card with a name and address in his pocket, but that was bogus.”

“Hm. Yes. Suggestive. Tie up in any way?”

“I can’t see that it does, sir, but all the same….”

“I know, I know. All the same … Well, what have you come for? Come for permission to go on nosing about Wilbraham Crescent—wherever that absurd-sounding place is?”

“It’s a place called Crowdean. Ten miles from Portlebury.”

“Yes, yes. Very good locality. But what are you here for? You don’t usually ask permission. You go your own pigheaded way, don’t you?”

“That’s right, sir, I’m afraid I do.”

“Well, then, what is it?”

“There are a couple of people I want vetted.”

With a sigh Colonel Beck drew his reading desk back into position, took a ball-pen from his pocket, blew on it and looked at me.

“Well?”

“House called Diana Lodge. Actually, 20, Wilbraham Crescent. Woman called Mrs. Hemming and about eighteen cats live there.”

“Diana? Hm,” said Colonel Beck. “Moon goddess! Diana Lodge. Right. What does she do, this Mrs. Hemming?”

“Nothing,” I said, “she’s absorbed in her cats.”

“Damned good cover, I dare say,” said Beck appreciatively. “Certainly could be. Is that all?”

“No,” I said. “There’s a man called Ramsay. Lives at 62, Wilbraham Crescent. Said to be a construction engineer, whatever that is. Goes abroad a good deal.”

“I like the sound of that,” said Colonel Beck. “I like the sound of that very much. You want to know about him, do you? All right.”

“He’s got a wife,” I said. “Quite a nice wife, and two obstreperous children—boys.”

“Well, he might have,” said Colonel Beck. “It has been known. You remember Pendleton? He had a wife and children. Very nice wife. Stupidest woman I’ve ever come across. No idea in her head that her husband wasn’t a pillar of respectability in oriental book dealing. Come to think of it, now I remember, Pendleton had a German wife as well, and a couple of daughters. And he also had a wife in Switzerland. I don’t know what the wives were—his private excesses or just camouflage. He’d say of course that they were camouflage. Well, anyway, you want to know about Mr. Ramsay. Anything else?”

“I’m not sure. There’s a couple at 63. Retired professor. McNaughton by name. Scottish. Elderly. Spends his time gardening. No reason to think he and his wife are not all right—but—”

“All right. We’ll check. We’ll put ’em through the machine to make sure. What are all these people, by the way?”

“They’re people whose gardens verge on or touch the garden of the house where the murder was committed.”

“Sounds like a French exercise,” said Beck. “Where is the dead body of my uncle? In the garden of the cousin of my aunt. What about Number 19 itself?”

“A blind woman, a former school teacher, lives there. She works in an institute for the blind and she’s been thoroughly investigated by the local police.”

“Live by herself?”

“Yes.”

“And what is your idea about all these other people?”

“My idea is,” I said, “that if a murder was committed by any of these other people in any of these other houses that I have mentioned to you, it would be perfectly easy, though risky, to convey the dead body into Number 19 at a suitable time of day. It’s a mere possibility, that’s all. And there’s something I’d like to show you. This.”

Beck took the earthstained coin I held out to him.

“A Czech Haller? Where did you find it?”

“I didn’t. But it was found in the back garden of Number 19.”

“Interesting. You may have something after all in your persistent fixation on crescents and rising moons.” He added thoughtfully, “There’s a pub called The Rising Moon in the next street to this. Why don’t you go and try your luck there?”

“I’ve been there already,” I said.

“You’ve always got an answer, haven’t you?” said Colonel Beck. “Have a cigar?”

I shook my head. “Thank you—no time today.”

“Going back to Crowdean?”

“Yes. There’s the inquest to attend.”

“It will only be adjourned. Sure it’s not some girl you’re running after in Crowdean?”

“Certainly not,” I said sharply.

Colonel Beck began to chuckle unexpectedly.

“You mind your step, my boy! Sex rearing its ugly head as usual. How long have you known her?”

“There isn’t any—I mean—well—there was a girl who discovered the body.”

“What did she do when she discovered it?”

“Screamed.”

“Very nice too,” said the colonel. “She rushed to you, cried on your shoulder and told you about it. Is that it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said coldly. “Have a look at these.”

I gave him a selection of the police photographs.

“Who’s this?” demanded Colonel Beck.

“The dead man.”

“Ten to one this girl you’re so keen about killed him. The whole story sounds very fishy to me.”

“You haven’t even heard it yet,” I said. “I haven’t told it to you.”

“I don’t need telling,” Colonel Beck waved his cigar. “Go away to your inquest, my boy, and look out for that girl. Is her name Diana, or Artemis, or anything crescenty or moonlike?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Well, remember that it might be!”

Fourteen

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

It had been quite a long time since I had visited Whitehaven Mansions. Some years ago it had been an outstanding building of modern flats. Now there were many other more imposing and even more modern blocks of buildings flanking it on either side. Inside, I noted, it had recently had a face-lift. It had been repainted in pale shades of yellow and green.

I went up in the lift and pressed the bell of Number 203. It was opened to me by that impeccable manservant, George. A smile of welcome came to his face.

“Mr. Colin! It’s a long time since we’ve seen you here.”

“Yes, I know. How are you, George?”

“I am in good health, I am thankful to say, sir.”

I lowered my voice. “And how’s he?”

George lowered his own voice, though that was hardly necessary since it had been pitched in a most discreet key from the beginning of our conversation.

“I think, sir, that sometimes he gets a little depressed.”

I nodded sympathetically.

“If you will come this way, sir—” He relieved me of my hat.

“Announce me, please, as Mr. Colin Lamb.”

“Very good, sir.” He opened a door and spoke in a clear voice. “Mr. Colin Lamb to see you, sir.”

He drew back to allow me to pass him and I went into the room.

My friend, Hercule Poirot, was sitting in his usual large, square armchair in front of the fireplace. I noted that one bar of the rectangular electric fire glowed red. It was early September, the weather was warm, but Poirot was one of the first men to recognize the autumn chill, and to take precautions against it. On either side of him on the floor was a neat pile of books. More books stood on the table at his left side. At his right hand was a cup from which steam rose. A tisane, I suspected. He was fond of tisanes and often urged them on me. They were nauseating to taste and pungent to smell.

“Don’t get up,” I said, but Poirot was already on his feet. He came towards me on twinkling, patent-leather shod feet with outstretched hands.

“Aha, so it is you, it is you, my friend! My young friend Colin. But why do you call yourself by the name of Lamb? Let me think now. There is a proverb or a saying. Something about mutton dressed as lamb. No. That is what is said of elderly ladies who are trying to appear younger than they are. That does not apply to you. Aha, I have it. You are a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Is that it?”

“Not even that,” I said. “It’s just that in my line of business I thought my own name might be rather a mistake, that it might be connected too much with my old man. Hence Lamb. Short, simple, easily remembered. Suiting, I flatter myself, my personality.”

“Of that I cannot be sure,” said Poirot. “And how is my good friend, your father?”

“The old man’s fine,” I said. “Very busy with his holly-hocks—or is it chrysanthemums? The seasons go by so fast I can never remember what it is at the moment.”

“He busies himself then, with the horticulture?”

“Everyone seems to come to that in the end,” I said.

“Not me,” said Hercule Poirot. “Once the vegetable marrows, yes—but never again. If you want the best flowers, why not go to the florist’s shop? I thought the good Superintendent was going to write his memoirs?”

“He started,” I said, “but he found that so much would have to be left out that he finally came to the conclusion that what was left in would be so unbearably tame as not to be worth writing.”

“One has to have the discretion, yes. It is unfortunate,” said Poirot, “because your father could tell some very interesting things. I have much admiration for him. I always had. You know, his methods were to me very interesting. He was so straightforward. He used the obvious as no man has used it before. He would set the trap, the very obvious trap and the people he wished to catch would say ‘it is too obvious, that. It cannot be true’ and so they fell into it!”

I laughed. “Well,” I said, “it’s not the fashion nowadays for sons to admire their fathers. Most of them seem to sit down, venom in their pens, and remember all the dirty things they can and put them down with obvious satisfaction. But personally, I’ve got enormous respect for my old man. I hope I’ll even be as good as he was. Not that I’m exactly in his line of business, of course.”

“But related to it,” said Poirot. “Closely related to it, though you have to work behind the scenes in a way that he did not.” He coughed delicately. “I think I am to congratulate you on having had a rather spectacular success lately. Is it not so? The affaire Larkin.”

“It’s all right so far as it goes,” I said. “But there’s a good deal more that I’d like to have, just to round it off properly. Still, that isn’t really what I came here to talk to you about.”

“Of course not, of course not,” said Poirot. He waved me to a chair and offered me some tisane, which I instantly refused.

George entered at the apposite moment with a whisky decanter, a glass and a siphon which he placed at my elbow.

“And what are you doing with yourself these days?” I asked Poirot.

Casting a look at the various books around him I said: “It looks as though you are doing a little research?”

Poirot sighed. “You may call it that. Yes, perhaps in a way it is true. Lately I have felt very badly the need for a problem. It does not matter, I said to myself, what the problem is. It can be like the good Sherlock Holmes, the depth at which the parsley has sunk in the butter. All that matters is that there should be a problem. It is not the muscles I need to exercise, you see, it is the cells of the brain.”

“Just a question of keeping fit. I understand.”

“As you say.” He sighed. “But problems, mon cher, are not so easy to come by. It is true that last Thursday one presented itself to me. The unwarranted appearance of three pieces of dried orange peel in my umbrella stand. How did they come there? How could they have come there? I do not eat oranges myself. George would never put old pieces of orange peel in the umbrella stand. Nor is a visitor likely to bring with him three pieces of orange peel. Yes, it was quite a problem.”

“And you solved it?”

“I solved it,” said Poirot.

He spoke with more melancholy than pride.

“It was not in the end very interesting. A question of a remplacement of the usual cleaning woman and the new one brought with her, strictly against orders, one of her children. Although it does not sound interesting, nevertheless it needed a steady penetration of lies, camouflage and all the rest of it. It was satisfactory, shall we say, but not important.”

“Disappointing,” I suggested.

“Enfin,” said Poirot, “I am modest. But one should not need to use a rapier to cut the string of a parcel.”

I shook my head in a solemn manner. Poirot continued, “I have occupied myself of late in reading various real life unsolved mysteries. I apply to them my own solutions.”

“You mean cases like the Bravo case, Adelaide Bartlett and all the rest of them?”

“Exactly. But it was in a way too easy. There is no doubt whatever in my own mind as to who murdered Charles Bravo. The companion may have been involved, but she was certainly not the moving spirit in the matter. Then there was that unfortunate adolescent, Constance Kent. The true motive that lay behind her strangling of the small brother whom she undoubtedly loved has always been a puzzle. But not to me. It was clear as soon as I read about the case. As for Lizzie Borden, one wishes only that one could put a few necessary questions to various people concerned. I am fairly sure in my own mind of what the answers would be. Alas, they are all by now dead, I fear.”

I thought to myself, as so often before, that modesty was certainly not Hercule Poirot’s strong point.

“And what did I do next?” continued Poirot.

I guessed that for some time now he had had no one much to talk to and was enjoying the sound of his own voice.

“From real life I turned to fiction. You see me here with various examples of criminal fiction at my right hand and my left. I have been working backwards. Here—” he picked up the volume that he had laid on the arm of his chair when I entered, “—here, my dear Colin, is The Leavenworth Case.” He handed the book to me.

“That’s going back quite a long time,” I said. “I believe my father mentioned that he read it as a boy. I believe I once read it myself. It must seem rather old-fashioned now.”

“It is admirable,” said Poirot. “One savours its period atmosphere, its studied and deliberate melodrama. Those rich and lavish descriptions of the golden beauty of Eleanor, the moonlight beauty of Mary!”

“I must read it again,” I said. “I’d forgotten the parts about the beautiful girls.”

“And there is the maidservant, Hannah, so true to type, and the murderer, an excellent psychological study.”

I perceived that I had let myself in for a lecture. I composed myself to listen.

“Then we will take the Adventures of Arsene Lupin,” Poirot went on. “How fantastic, how unreal. And yet what vitality there is in them, what vigour, what life! They are preposterous, but they have panache. There is humour, too.”

He laid down the Adventures of Arsene Lupin and picked up another book. “And there is The Mystery of the Yellow Room. That—ah, that is really a classic! I approve of it from start to finish. Such a logical approach! There were criticisms of it, I remember, which said that it was unfair. But it is not unfair, my dear Colin. No, no. Very nearly so, perhaps, but not quite. There is the hair’s breadth of difference. No. All through there is truth, concealed with a careful and cunning use of words. Everything should be clear at that supreme moment when the men meet at the angle of three corridors.” He laid it down reverently. “Definitely a masterpiece, and, I gather, almost forgotten nowadays.”

Poirot skipped twenty years or so, to approach the works of somewhat later authors.

“I have read also,” he said, “some of the early works of Mrs. Ariadne Oliver. She is by way of being a friend of mine, and of yours, I think. I do not wholly approve of her works, mind you. The happenings in them are highly improbable. The long arm of coincidence is far too freely employed. And, being young at the time, she was foolish enough to make her detective a Finn, and it is clear that she knows nothing about Finns or Finland except possibly the works of Sibelius. Still, she has an original habit of mind, she makes an occasional shrewd deduction, and of later years she has learnt a good deal about things which she did not know before. Police procedure for instance. She is also now a little more reliable on the subject of firearms. What was even more needed, she has possibly acquired a solicitor or a barrister friend who has put her right on certain points of the law."

He laid aside Mrs. Ariadne Oliver and picked up another book.

"Now here is Mr. Cyril Quain. Ah, he is a master, Mr. Quain, of the alibi."

"He's a deadly dull writer if I remember rightly," I said.

"It is true," said Poirot, "that nothing particularly thrilling happens in his books. There is a corpse, of course. Occasionally more than one. But the whole point is always the alibi, the railway timetable, the bus routes, the plans of the cross-country roads. I confess I enjoy this intricate, this elaborate use of the alibi. I enjoy trying to catch Mr. Cyril Quain out."

"And I suppose you always succeed," I said.

Poirot was honest.

"Not always," he admitted. "No, not always. Of course, after a time one realizes that one book of his is almost exactly like another. The alibis resemble each other every time, even though they are not exactly the same. You know, mon cher Colin, I imagine this Cyril Quain sitting in his room, smoking his pipe as he is represented to do in his photographs, sitting there with around him the A.B.C.s, the continental Bradshaws, the airline brochures, the timetables of every kind. Even the movements of liners. Say what you will, Colin, there is order and method in Mr. Cyril Quain."

He laid Mr. Quain down and picked up another book.

"Now here is Mr. Garry Gregson, a prodigious writer of thrillers. He has written at least sixty-four, I understand. He is almost the exact opposite of Mr. Quain. In Mr. Quain's books nothing much happens, in Garry Gregson's far too many things happen. They happen implausibly and in mass confusion. They are all highly coloured. It is melodrama stirred up with a stick. Bloodshed—bodies—clues—thrills piled up and bulging over.

All lurid, all very unlike life. He is not quite, as you would say, my cup of tea. He is, in fact, not a cup of tea at all. He is more like one of these American cocktails of the more obscure kind, whose ingredients are highly suspect."

Poirot paused, sighed and resumed his lecture. "Then we turn to America." He plucked a book from the left-hand pile. "Florence Elks, now. There is order and method there, colourful happenings, yes, but plenty of point in them. Gay and alive. She has wit, this lady, though perhaps, like so many American writers, a little too obsessed with drink. I am, as you know, mon ami, a connoisseur of wine. A claret or a burgundy introduced into a story, with its vintage and date properly authenticated, I always find pleasing. But the exact amount of rye and bourbon that are consumed on every other page by the detective in an American thriller do not seem to me interesting at all. Whether he drinks a pint or a half-pint which he takes from his collar drawer does not seem to me really to affect the action of the story in any way. This drink motive in American books is very much what King Charles's head was to poor Mr. Dick when he tried to write his memoirs. Impossible to keep it out."

"What about the tough school?" I asked.

Poirot waved aside the tough school much as he would have waved an intruding fly or mosquito.

"Violence for violence' sake? Since when has that been interesting? I have seen plenty of violence in my early career as a police officer. Bah, you might as well read a medical text book. Tout de même, I give American crime fiction on the whole a pretty high place. I think it is more ingenious, more imaginative than English writing. It is less atmospheric and overladen with atmosphere than most French writers. Now take Louisa O'Malley for instance."

He dived once more for a book.

"What a model of fine scholarly writing is hers, yet what excitement, what mounting apprehension she arouses in her reader. Those brownstone mansions in New York. Enfin what is a brownstone mansion—I have never known? Those exclusive apartments, and soulful snobberies, and underneath, deep unsuspected seams of crime run their uncharted course. It could happen so, and it does happen so. She is very good, this Louisa O'Malley, she is very good indeed."

He sighed, leaned back, shook his head and drank off the remainder of his tisane.

"And then—there are always the old favourites."

Again he dived for a book.

"The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," he murmured lovingly, and even uttered reverently the one word, "Maître!"

"Sherlock Holmes?" I asked.

"Ah, non, non, not Sherlock Holmes! It is the author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, that I salute. These tales of Sherlock Holmes are in reality farfetched, full of fallacies and most artificially contrived. But the art of the writing—ah, that is entirely different. The pleasure of the language, the creation above all of that magnificent character, Dr. Watson. Ah, that was indeed a triumph."

He sighed and shook his head and murmured, obviously by a natural association of ideas:

"Ce cher Hastings. My friend Hastings of whom you have often heard me speak. It is a long time since I have had news of him. What an absurdity to go and bury oneself in South America, where they are always having revolutions."

"That's not confined to South America," I pointed out. "They're having revolutions all over the world nowadays."

"Let us not discuss the Bomb," said Hercule Poirot. "If it has to be, it has to be, but let us not discuss it."

"Actually," I said, "I came to discuss something quite different with you."

"Ah! You are about to be married, is that it? I am delighted, mon cher, delighted."

"What on earth put that in your head, Poirot?" I asked. "Nothing of the kind."

"It happens," said Poirot, "it happens every day."

"Perhaps," I said firmly, "but not to me. Actually I came to tell you that I'd run across rather a pretty little problem in murder."

"Indeed? A pretty problem in murder, you say? And you have brought it to me. Why?"

"Well—" I was slightly embarrassed. "I—I thought you might enjoy it," I said.

Poirot looked at me thoughtfully. He caressed his moustache with a loving hand, then he spoke.

"A master," he said, "is often kind to his dog. He goes out and throws a ball for the dog. A dog, however, is also capable of being kind to its master. A dog kills a rabbit or a rat and he brings it and lays it at his master's feet. And what does he do then? He wags his tail."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Am I wagging my tail?"

"I think you are, my friend. Yes, I think you are."

"All right then," I said. "And what does master say? Does he want to see doggy's rat? Does he want to know all about it?"

"Of course. Naturally. It is a crime that you think will interest me. Is that right?"

"The whole point of it is," I said, "that it just doesn't make sense."

"That is impossible," said Poirot. "Everything makes sense. Everything."

"Well, you try and make sense of this. I can't. Not that it's really anything to do with me. I just happened to come in on it. Mind you, it may turn out to be quite straightforward, once the dead man is identified."

"You are talking without method or order," said Poirot severely. "Let me beg of you to let me have the facts. You say it is a murder, yes?"

"It's a murder all right," I assured him. "Well, here we go."

I described to him in detail the events that had taken place at 19, Wilbraham Crescent. Hercule Poirot leant back in his chair. He closed his eyes and gently tapped with a forefinger the arm of his chair while he listened to my recital. When I finally stopped, he did not speak for a moment. Then he asked, without opening his eyes:

"Sans blague?"

"Oh, absolutely," I said.

"Epatant," said Hercule Poirot. He savoured the word on his tongue and repeated it syllable by syllable. "E-pa-tant." After that he continued his tapping on the arm of his chair and gently nodded his head.

"Well," I said impatiently, after waiting a few moments more. "What have you got to say?"

"But what do you want me to say?"

"I want you to give me the solution. I've always understood from you that it was perfectly possible to lie back in one's chair, just think about it all, and come up with the answer. That it was quite unnecessary to go and question people and run about looking for clues."

"It is what I have always maintained."

"Well, I'm calling your bluff," I said. "I've given you the facts, and now I want the answer."

“Just like that, hein? But then there is a lot more to be known, mon ami. We are only at the beginning of the facts. Is that not so?”

“I still want you to come up with something.”

“I see.” He reflected a moment. “One thing is certain,” he pronounced. “It must be a very simple crime.”

“Simple?” I demanded in some astonishment.

“Naturally.”

“Why must it be simple?”

“Because it appears so complex. If it has necessarily to appear complex, it must be simple. You comprehend that?”

“I don’t really know that I do.”

“Curious,” mused Poirot, “what you have told me—I think—yes, there is something familiar to me there. Now where—when—have I come across something … ” He paused.

“Your memory,” I said, “must be one vast reservoir of crimes. But you can’t possibly remember them all, can you?”

“Unfortunately no,” said Poirot, “but from time to time these reminiscences are helpful. There was a soap boiler, I remember, once, at Liège. He poisoned his wife in order to marry a blonde stenographer. The crime made a pattern. Later, much later, that pattern recurred. I recognized it. This time it was an affair of a kidnapped Pekinese dog, but the pattern was the same. I looked for the equivalent of the blonde stenographer and the soap boiler, and voilà! That is the kind of thing. And here again in what you have told me I have that feeling of recognition.”

“Clocks?” I suggested hopefully. “Bogus insurance agents?”

“No, no,” Poirot shook his head.

“Blind women?”

“No, no, no. Do not confuse me.”

“I’m disappointed in you, Poirot,” I said. “I thought you’d give me the answer straight away.”

“But, my friend, at present you have presented me only with a pattern. There are many more things to find out. Presumably this man will be identified. In that kind of thing the police are excellent. They have their criminal records, they can advertise the man’s picture, they have access to a list of missing persons, there is scientific examination of the dead man’s clothing, and so on and so on. Oh, yes, there are a hundred other ways and means at their disposal. Undoubtedly, this man will be identified.”

“So there’s nothing to do at the moment. Is that what you think?”

“There is always something to do,” said Hercule Poirot, severely.

“Such as?”

He wagged an emphatic forefinger at me.

“Talk to the neighbours,” he said.

“I’ve done that,” I said. “I went with Hardcastle when he was questioning them. They don’t know anything useful.”

“Ah, tcha, tcha, that is what you think. But I assure you, that cannot be so. You go to them, you ask them: ‘Have you seen anything suspicious?’ and they say no, and you think that that is all there is to it. But that is not what I mean when I say talk to the neighbours. I say talk to them. Let them talk to you. And from their conversation always, somewhere, you will find a clue. They may be talking about their gardens or their pets or their hairdressing or their dressmaker, or their friends, or the kind of food they like. Always somewhere there will be a word that sheds light. You say there was nothing in those conversations that was useful. I say that cannot be so. If you could repeat them to me word for word….”

“Well, that’s practically what I can do,” I said. “I took shorthand transcripts of what was said, acting in my role of assistant police officer. I’ve had them transcribed and typed and I’ve brought them along to you. Here they are.”

“Ah, but you are a good boy, you are a very good boy indeed! What you have done is exactly right. Exactly. Je vous remercie infiniment.”

I felt quite embarrassed.

“Have you any more suggestions?” I asked.

“Yes, always I have suggestions. There is this girl. You can talk to this girl. Go and see her. Already you are friends, are you not? Have you not clasped her in your arms when she flew from the house in terror?”

“You’ve been affected by reading Garry Gregson,” I said. “You’ve caught the melodramatic style.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Poirot admitted. “One gets infected, it is true, by the style of a work that one has been reading.”

“As for the girl—” I said, then paused.

Poirot looked at me inquiringly.

“Yes?” he said.

“I shouldn’t like—I don’t want….”

“Ah, so that is it. At the back of your mind you think she is concerned somehow in this case.”

“No, I don’t. It was absolutely pure chance that she happened to be there.”

“No, no, mon ami, it was not pure chance. You know that very well. You’ve told me so. She was asked for over the telephone. Asked for specially.”

“But she doesn’t know why.”

“You cannot be sure that she does not know why. Very likely she does know why and is hiding the fact.”

“I don’t think so,” I said obstinately.

“It is even possible you may find out why by talking to her, even if she herself does not realize the truth.”

“I don’t see very well how—I mean—I hardly know her.”

Hercule Poirot shut his eyes again.

“There is a time,” he said, “in the course of an attraction between two persons of the opposite sex, when that particular statement is bound to be true. She is an attractive girl, I suppose?”

“Well—yes,” I said. “Quite attractive.”

“You will talk to her,” Poirot ordered, “because you are already friends, and you will go again and see this blind woman with some excuse. And you will talk to her. And you will go to the typewriting bureau on the pretence perhaps of having some manuscript typed. You will make friends, perhaps, with one of the other young ladies who works there. You will talk to all these people and then you will come and see me again and you will tell me all the things that they will say.”

“Have mercy!” I said.

“Not at all,” said Poirot, “you will enjoy it.”

“You don’t seem to realize that I’ve got my own work to do.”

“You will work all the better for having a certain amount of relaxation,” Poirot assured me.

I got up and laughed.

“Well,” I said, “you’re the doctor! Any more words of wisdom for me? What do you feel about this strange business of the clocks?”

Poirot leaned back in his chair again and closed his eyes.

The words he spoke were quite unexpected.

“‘The time has come, the Walrus said,

To talk of many things.

Of shoes and ships and sealing wax,

And cabbages and kings.

And why the sea is boiling hot

And whether pigs have wings.’”

He opened his eyes again and nodded his head.

“Do you understand?” he said.

“Quotation from ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter,’ Alice Through the Looking Glass.”

“Exactly. For the moment, that is the best I can do for you, mon cher. Reflect upon it.”

Fifteen

The inquest was well attended by the general public. Thrilled by a murder in their midst, Crowdean turned out with eager hopes of sensational disclosures. The proceedings, however, were as dry as they could be. Sheila Webb need not have dreaded her ordeal, it was over in a couple of minutes.

There had been a telephone message to the Cavendish Bureau directing her to go to 19, Wilbraham Crescent. She had gone, acting as told to do, by entering the sitting room. She had found the dead man there and had screamed and rushed out of the house to summon assistance. There were no questions or elaborations. Miss Martindale, who also gave evidence, was questioned for an even shorter time. She had received a message purporting to be from Miss Pebmarsh asking her to send a shorthand typist, preferably Miss Sheila Webb, to 19, Wilbraham Crescent, and giving certain directions. She had noted down the exact time of the telephone call as 1:49. That disposed of Miss Martindale.

Miss Pebmarsh, called next, denied categorically that she had asked for any typist to be sent to her that day from the Cavendish Bureau. Detective Inspector Hardcastle made a short emotionless statement. On receipt of a telephone call, he had gone to 19, Wilbraham Crescent where he had found the body of a dead man. The coroner then asked him:

“Have you been able to identify the dead man?”

“Not as yet, sir. For that reason, I would ask for this inquest to be adjourned.”

“Quite so.”

Then came the medical evidence. Doctor Rigg, the police surgeon, having described himself and his qualifications, told of his arrival at 19, Wilbraham Crescent, and of his examination of the dead man.

“Can you give us an approximate idea of the time of death, Doctor?”

“I examined him at half past three. I should put the time of death as between half past one and half past two.”

“You cannot put it nearer than that?”

“I should prefer not to do so. At a guess, the most likely time would be two o’clock or rather earlier, but there are many factors which have to be taken into account. Age, state of health, and so on.”

“You performed an autopsy?”

“I did.”

“The cause of death?”

“The man had been stabbed with a thin, sharp knife. Something in the nature, perhaps, of a French cooking knife with a tapering blade. The point of the knife entered … ” Here the doctor became technical as he explained the exact position where the knife had entered the heart.

“Would death have been instantaneous?”

“It would have occurred within a very few minutes.”

“The man would not have cried out or struggled?”

“Not under the circumstances in which he was stabbed.”

“Will you explain to us, Doctor, what you mean by that phrase?”

“I made an examination of certain organs and made certain tests. I would say that when he was killed he was in a state of coma due to the administration of a drug.”

“Can you tell us what this drug was, Doctor?”

“Yes. It was chloral hydrate.”

“Can you tell how this was adminstered?”

“I should say presumably in alcohol of some kind. The effect of chloral hydrate is very rapid.”

“Known in certain quarters as a Mickey Finn, I believe,” murmured the coroner.

“That is quite correct,” said Doctor Rigg. “He would drink the liquid unsuspectingly, and a few moments later he would reel over and fall unconscious.”

“And he was stabbed, in your opinion, while unconscious?”

“That is my belief. It would account for there being no sign of a struggle and for his peaceful appearance.”

“How long after becoming unconscious was he killed?”

“That I cannot say with any accuracy. There again it depends on the personal idiosyncrasy of the victim. He would certainly not come round under half an hour and it might be a good deal more than that.”

“Thank you, Doctor Rigg. Have you any evidence as to when this man last had a meal?”

“He had not lunched if that is what you mean. He had eaten no solid food for at least four hours.”

“Thank you, Doctor Rigg. I think that is all.”

The coroner then looked round and said:

“The inquest will be adjourned for a fortnight, until September 28th.”

The inquest concluded, people began to move out of the court. Edna Brent who, with most of the other girls at the Cavendish Bureau, had been present, hesitated as she got outside the door. The Cavendish Secretarial Bureau had been closed for the morning. Maureen West, one of the other girls, spoke to her.

“What about it, Edna? Shall we go to the Bluebird for lunch? We’ve got heaps of time. At any rate, you have.”

“I haven’t got any more time than you have,” said Edna in an injured voice. “Sandy Cat told me I’d better take the first interval for lunch. Mean of her. I thought I’d get a good extra hour for shopping and things.”

“Just like Sandy Cat,” said Maureen. “Mean as hell, isn’t she? We open up again at two and we’ve all got to be there. Are you looking for anyone?”

“Only Sheila. I didn’t see her come out.”

“She went away earlier,” said Maureen, “after she’d finished giving her evidence. She went off with a young man—but I didn’t see who he was. Are you coming?”

Edna still hovered uncertainly, and said, “You go on—I’ve got shopping to do anyway.”

Maureen and another girl went off together. Edna lingered. Finally she nerved herself to speak to the fair-haired young policeman who stood at the entrance.

“Could I go in again?” she murmured timidly, “and speak to—to the one who came to the office—Inspector something.”

“Inspector Hardcastle?”

“That’s right. The one who was giving evidence this morning.”

“Well—” the young policeman looked into the court and observed the inspector in deep consultation with the coroner and with the chief constable of the county.

“He looks busy at the moment, miss,” he said. “If you called round at the station later, or if you’d like to give me a message … Is it anything important?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter really,” said Edna. “It’s—well—just that I don’t see how what she said could have been true because I mean … ” She turned away, still frowning perplexedly.

She wandered away from the Cornmarket and along the High Street. She was still frowning perplexedly and trying to think. Thinking had never been Edna’s strong point. The more she tried to get things clear in her mind, the more muddled her mind became.

Once she said aloud:

“But it couldn’t have been like that … It couldn’t have been like she said….”

Suddenly, with an air of one making a resolution, she turned off from the High Street and along Albany Road in the direction of Wilbraham Crescent.

Since the day that the Press had announced that a murder had been committed at 19, Wilbraham Crescent, large numbers of people had gathered in front of the house every day to have a good look at it. The fascination mere bricks and mortar can have for the general public under certain circumstances is a truly mysterious thing. For the first twenty-four hours a policeman had been stationed there to pass people along in an authoritative manner. Since then interest had lessened; but had still not ceased entirely. Tradesmen’s delivery vans would slacken speed a little as they passed, women wheeling prams would come to a four or five minute stop on the opposite pavement and stare their eyes out as they contemplated Miss Pebmarsh’s neat residence. Shopping women with baskets would pause with avid eyes and exchange pleasurable gossip with friends.

“That’s the house—that one there….”

“The body was in the sitting room … No, I think the sitting room’s the room at the front, the one on the left….”

“The grocer’s man told me it was the one on the right.”

“Well, of course it might be, I’ve been into Number 10 once and there, I distinctly remember the dining room was on the right, and the sitting room was on the left….”

“It doesn’t look a bit as though there had been a murder done there, does it … ?”

“The girl, I believe, came out of the gate screaming her head off….”

“They say she’s not been right in her head since … Terrible shock, of course….”

“He broke in by a back window, so they say. He was putting the silver in a bag when this girl came in and found him there….”

“The poor woman who owns the house, she’s blind, poor soul. So, of course, she couldn’t know what was going on.”

“Oh, but she wasn’t there at the time….”

“Oh, I thought she was. I thought she was upstairs and heard him. Oh, dear, I must get on to the shops.”

These and similar conversations went on most of the time. Drawn as though by a magnet, the most unlikely people arrived in Wilbraham Crescent, paused, stared, and then passed on, some inner need satisfied.

Here, still puzzling in her mind, Edna Brent found herself jostling a small group of five or six people who were engaged in the favourite pastime of looking at the murder house.

Edna, always suggestible, stared also.

So that was the house where it happened! Net curtains in the windows. Looked ever so nice. And yet a man had been killed there. Killed with a kitchen knife. An ordinary kitchen knife. Nearly everybody had got a kitchen knife….

Mesmerized by the behaviour of the people round her, Edna, too, stared and ceased to think….

She had almost forgotten what had brought her here….

She started when a voice spoke in her ear.

She turned her head in surprised recognition.

Sixteen

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I

I noticed when Sheila Webb slipped quietly out of the Coroner's Court. She'd given her evidence very well. She had looked nervous but not unduly nervous. Just natural, in fact. (What would Beck say? "Quite a good performance." I could hear him say it!)

I took in the surprise finish of Doctor Rigg's evidence. (Dick Hardcastle hadn't told me that, but he must have known) and then I went after her.

"It wasn't so bad after all, was it?" I said, when I had caught her up.

"No. It was quite easy really. The coroner was very nice." She hesitated. "What will happen next?"

"He'll adjourn the inquest—for further evidence. A fortnight probably or until they can identify the dead man."

"You think they will identify him?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "They'll identify him all right. No doubt of that."

She shivered. "It's cold today."

It wasn't particularly cold. In fact I thought it was rather warm.

"What about an early lunch?" I suggested. "You haven't got to go back to your typewriting place, have you?"

"No. It's closed until two o'clock."

"Come along then. How do you react to Chinese food? I see there's a little Chinese restaurant just down the street."

Sheila looked hesitant.

“I’ve really got to do some shopping.”

“You can do it afterwards.”

“No, I can’t—some of the shops close between one and two.”

“All right then. Will you meet me there? In half an hour’s time?”

She said she would.

I went along to the seafront and sat there in a shelter. As the wind was blowing straight in from the sea, I had it to myself.

I wanted to think. It always infuriates one when other people know more about you than you know about yourself. But old Beck and Hercule Poirot and Dick Hardcastle, they all had seen quite clearly what I was now forced to admit to myself was true.

I minded about this girl—minded in a way I had never minded about a girl before.

It wasn’t her beauty—she was pretty, pretty in rather an unusual way, no more. It wasn’t her sex appeal—I had met that often enough—had been given the full treatment.

It was just that, almost from the first, I had recognized that she was my girl.

And I didn’t know the first damned thing about her!

II

It was just after two o’clock that I walked into the station and asked for Dick. I found him at his desk leafing over a pile of stuff. He looked up and asked me what I had thought of the inquest.

I told him I thought it had been a very nicely managed and gentlemanly performance.

"We do this sort of thing so well in this country."

"What did you think of the medical evidence?"

"Rather a facer. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"You were away. Did you consult your specialist?"

"Yes, I did."

"I believe I remember him vaguely. A lot of moustache."

"Oceans of it," I agreed. "He's very proud of that moustache."

"He must be quite old."

"Old but not gaga," I said.

"Why did you really go to see him? Was it purely the milk of human kindness?"

"You have such a suspicious policeman's mind, Dick! It was mainly that. But I admit to curiosity, too. I wanted to hear what he had to say about our own particular setup. You see, he's always talked what I call a lot of cock about its being easy to solve a case by just sitting in your chair, bringing the tips of your fingers symmetrically together, closing your eyes and thinking. I wanted to call his bluff."

"Did he go through that procedure for you?"

"He did."

"And what did he say?" Dick asked with some curiosity.

"He said," I told him, "that it must be a very simple murder."

"Simple, my God!" said Hardcastle, roused. "Why simple?"

"As far as I could gather," I said, "because the whole setup was so complex."

Hardcastle shook his head. "I don't see it," he said. "It sounds like one of those clever things that young people in Chelsea say, but I don't see it. Anything else?"

"Well, he told me to talk to the neighbours. I assured him we had done so."

"The neighbours are even more important now in view of the medical evidence."

"The presumption being that he was doped somewhere else and brought to Number 19 to be killed?"

Something familiar about the words struck me.

"That's more or less what Mrs. What's-her-name, the cat woman, said. It struck me at the time as a rather interesting remark."

"Those cats," said Dick, and shuddered. He went on: "We've found the weapon, by the way. Yesterday."

"You have? Where?"

"In the cattery. Presumably thrown there by the murderer after the crime."

"No fingerprints, I suppose?"

"Carefully wiped. And it could be anybody's knife—slightly used—recently sharpened."

"So it goes like this. He was doped—then brought to Number 19—in a car? Or how?"

"He could have been brought from one of the houses with an adjoining garden."

"Bit risky, wouldn't it have been?"

"It would need audacity," Hardcastle agreed, "and it would need a very good knowledge of the neighbourhood's habits. It's more likely that he would have been brought in a car."

"That would have been risky too. People notice a car."

"Nobody did. But I agree that the murderer couldn't know that they wouldn't. Passersby would have noted a car stopping at Number 19 that day —"

"I wonder if they would notice," I said. "Everyone's so used to cars. Unless, of course, it had been a very lush car—something unusual, but that's not likely—"

"And of course it was the lunch hour. You realize, Colin, that this brings Miss Millicent Pebmarsh back into the picture? It seems farfetched to think of an able-bodied man being stabbed by a blind woman—but if he was doped—"

"In other words 'if he came there to be killed,' as our Mrs. Hemming put it, he arrived by appointment quite unsuspiciously, was offered a sherry or a cocktail—the Mickey Finn took effect and Miss Pebmarsh got to work. Then she washed up the Mickey Finn glass, arranged the body neatly on the floor, threw the knife into her neighbour's garden, and tripped out as usual."

"Telephoning to the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau on the way—"

"And why should she do that? And ask particularly for Sheila Webb?"

"I wish we knew." Hardcastle looked at me. "Does she know? The girl herself?"

"She says not."

"She says not," Hardcastle repeated tonelessly. "I'm asking you what you think about it?"

I didn't speak for a moment or two. What did I think? I had to decide right now on my course of action. The truth would come out in the end. It would do Sheila no harm if she were what I believed her to be.

With a brusque movement I pulled a postcard out of my pocket and shoved it across the table.

“Sheila got this through the post.”

Hardcastle scanned it. It was one of a series of postcards of London buildings. It represented the Central Criminal Court. Hardcastle turned it over. On the right was the address—in neat printing. Miss R. S. Webb, 14, Palmerston Road, Crowdean, Sussex. On the left-hand side, also printed, was the word REMEMBER! and below it 4:13.

“4:13,” said Hardcastle. “That was the time the clocks showed that day.” He shook his head. “A picture of the Old Bailey, the word ‘Remember’ and a time—4:13. It must tie up with something.”

“She says she doesn’t know what it means.” I added: “I believe her.”

Hardcastle nodded.

“I’m keeping this. We may get something from it.”

“I hope you do.”

There was embarrassment between us. To relieve it, I said:

“You’ve got a lot of bumf there.”

“All the usual. And most of it no damned good. The dead man hadn’t got a criminal record, his fingerprints aren’t on file. Practically all this stuff is from people who claim to have recognized him.” He read:

“‘Dear Sir, the picture that was in the paper I’m almost sure is the same as a man who was catching a train at Willesden Junction the other day. He was muttering to himself and looking very wild and excited, I thought when I saw him there must be something wrong.’

"'Dear Sir, I think this man looks very like my husband's cousin John. He went abroad to South Africa but it may be that he's come back. He had a moustache when he went away but of course he could have shaved that off.'

"'Dear Sir, I saw the man in the paper in a tube train last night. I thought at the time there was something peculiar about him.'

"And of course there are all the women who recognize husbands. Women don't really seem to know what their husbands look like! There are hopeful mothers who recognize sons they have not seen for twenty years.

"And here's the list of missing persons. Nothing here likely to help us. 'George Barlow, 65, missing from home. His wife thinks he must have lost his memory.' And a note below: 'Owes a lot of money. Has been seen going about with a red-haired widow. Almost certain to have done a bunk.'

"Next one: 'Professor Hargraves, expected to deliver a lecture last Tuesday. Did not turn up and sent no wire or note of excuse.'"

Hardcastle did not appear to consider Professor Hargraves seriously.

"Thought the lecture was the week before or the week after," he said. "Probably thought he had told his housekeeper where he was going but hasn't done so. We get a lot of that."

The buzzer on Hardcastle's table sounded. He picked up the receiver.

"Yes? … What? … Who found her? Did she give her name? … I see. Carry on." He put down the receiver again. His face as he turned to me was a changed face. It was stern, almost vindictive.

"They've found a girl dead in a telephone box on Wilbraham Crescent," he said.

"Dead?" I stared at him. "How?"

"Strangled. With her own scarf!"

I felt suddenly cold.

“What girl? It’s not—”

Hardcastle looked at me with a cold, appraising glance that I didn’t like.

“It’s not your girlfriend,” he said, “if that’s what you’re afraid of. The constable there seems to know who she is. He says she’s a girl who works in the same office as Sheila Webb. Edna Brent her name is.”

“Who found her? The constable?”

“She was found by Miss Waterhouse, the woman from Number 18. It seems she went to the box to make a telephone call as her phone was out of order and found the girl there huddled down in a heap.”

The door opened and a police constable said:

“Doctor Rigg telephoned that he’s on his way, sir. He’ll meet you at Wilbraham Crescent.”

Seventeen

It was an hour and a half later and Detective Inspector Hardcastle sat down behind his desk and accepted with relief an official cup of tea. His face still held its bleak, angry look.

“Excuse me, sir, Pierce would like a word with you.”

Hardcastle roused himself.

“Pierce? Oh, all right. Send him in.”

Pierce entered, a nervous-looking young constable.

“Excuse me, sir, I thought per’aps as I ought to tell you.”

“Yes? Tell me what?”

“It was after the inquest, sir. I was on duty at the door. This girl—this girl that’s been killed. She—she spoke to me.”

“Spoke to you, did she? What did she say?”

“She wanted to have a word with you, sir.”

Hardcastle sat up, suddenly alert.

“She wanted to have a word with me? Did she say why?”

“Not exactly, sir. I’m sorry, sir, if I—if I ought to have done something about it. I asked her if she could give me a message or—or if perhaps she could come to the station later on. You see, you were busy with the chief constable and the coroner and I thought—”

“Damn!” said Hardcastle, under his breath. “Couldn’t you have told her just to wait until I was free?”

“I’m sorry, sir.” The young man flushed. “I suppose if I’d known, I ought to have done so. But I didn’t think it was anything important. I don’t think she thought it was important. It was just something she said she was worried about.”

“Worried?” said Hardcastle. He was silent for quite a minute turning over in his mind certain facts. This was the girl he had passed in the street when he was going to Mrs. Lawton’s house, the girl who had wanted to see Sheila Webb. The girl who had recognized him as she passed him and had hesitated a moment as though uncertain whether to stop him or not. She’d had something on her mind. Yes, that was it. Something on her mind. He’d slipped up. He’d not been quick enough on the ball. Filled with his own purpose of finding out a little more about Sheila Webb’s background, he had overlooked a valuable point. The girl had been worried? Why? Now, probably, they’d never know why.

“Go on, Pierce,” he said, “tell me all you can remember.” He added kindly, for he was a fair man: “You couldn’t know that it was important.”

It wasn’t, he knew, any good to pass on his own anger and frustration by blaming it on the boy. How should the boy have known? Part of his training was to uphold discipline, to make sure that his superiors were only accosted at the proper times and in the proper places. If the girl had said it was important or urgent, that would have been different. But she hadn’t been, he thought, remembering his first view of her in the office, that kind of girl. A slow thinker. A girl probably distrustful of her own mental processes.

“Can you remember exactly what happened, and what she said to you, Pierce?” he asked.

Pierce was looking at him with a kind of eager gratitude.

“Well, sir, she just come up to me when everyone was leaving and she sort of hesitated a moment and looked round just as though she were looking for someone. Not you, sir, I don’t think. Somebody else. Then she come up to me and said could she speak to the police officer, and she said the one that had given evidence. So, as I said, I saw you were busy with the chief constable so I explained to her that you were engaged just now, could she give me a message or contact you later at the station. And I think she said that would do quite well. I said was it anything particular….”

“Yes?” Hardcastle leaned forward.

“And she said well not really. It was just something, she said, that she didn’t see how it could have been the way she’d said it was.”

“She didn’t see how what she said could have been like that?” Hardcastle repeated.

“That’s right, sir. I’m not sure of the exact words. Perhaps it was: ‘I don’t see how what she said can have been true.’ She was frowning and looking puzzled-like. But when I asked her, she said it wasn’t really important.”

Not really important, the girl had said. The same girl who had been found not long afterwards strangled in a telephone box….

“Was anybody near you at the time she was talking to you?” he asked.

“Well, there were a good many people, sir, filing out, you know. There’d been a lot of people attending the inquest. It’s caused quite a stir, this murder has, what with the way the Press have taken it up and all.”

“You don’t remember anyone in particular who was near you at the time—any of the people who’d given evidence, for instance?”

“I’m afraid I don’t recall anyone in particular, sir.”

“Well,” said Hardcastle, “it can’t be helped. All right, Pierce, if you remember anything further, come to me at once with it.”

Left alone he made an effort to subdue his rising anger and self-condemnation. That girl, that rabbity-looking girl, had known something. No, perhaps not put it as high as known, but she had seen something, heard something. Something that had worried her; and the worry had been intensified after attending the inquest. What could it have been? Something in the evidence? Something, in all probability, in Sheila Webb’s evidence? Had she gone to Sheila’s aunt’s house two days before on purpose to see

Sheila? Surely she could have talked to Sheila at the office? Why did she want to see her privately? Did she know something about Sheila Webb that perplexed her? Did she want to ask Sheila for an explanation of whatever it was, somewhere in private—not in front of the other girls? It looked that way. It certainly looked like it.

He dismissed Pierce. Then he gave a few directions to Sergeant Cray.

“What do you think the girl went to Wilbraham Crescent for?” Sergeant Cray asked.

“I’ve been wondering about that,” said Hardcastle. “It’s possible, of course, that she just suffered from curiosity—wanted to see what the place looked like. There’s nothing unusual about that—half the population of Crowdean seems to feel the same.”

“Don’t we know it,” said Sergeant Cray with feeling.

“On the other hand,” said Hardcastle slowly, “she may have gone to see someone who lived there….”

When Sergeant Cray had gone out again, Hardcastle wrote down three numbers on his blotting pad.

“20,” he wrote, and put a query after it. He added: “19?” and then “18?” He wrote names to correspond. Hemming, Pebmarsh, Waterhouse. The three houses in the higher crescent were out of it. To visit one of them Edna Brent would not have gone along the lower road at all.

Hardcastle studied the three possibilities.

He took No. 20 first. The knife used in the original murder had been found there. It seemed more likely that the knife had been thrown there from the garden of No. 19 but they didn’t know that it had. It could have been thrust into the shrubbery by the owner of No. 20 herself. When questioned, Mrs. Hemming’s only reaction had been indignation. “How wicked of someone to throw a nasty knife like that at my cats!” she had said. How did Mrs.

Hemming connect up with Edna Brent? She didn’t, Inspector Hardcastle decided. He went on to consider Miss Pebmarsh.

Had Edna Brent gone to Wilbraham Crescent to call on Miss Pebmarsh? Miss Pebmarsh had given evidence at the inquest. Had there been something in that evidence which had aroused disbelief in Edna? But she had been worried before the inquest. Had she already known something about Miss Pebmarsh? Had she known, for instance, that there was a link of some kind between Miss Pebmarsh and Sheila Webb? That would fit in with her words to Pierce. “It couldn’t have been true what she said.”

“Conjecture, all conjecture,” he thought angrily.

And No. 18? Miss Waterhouse had found the body. Inspector Hardcastle was professionally prejudiced against people who found bodies. Finding the body avoided so many difficulties for a murderer—it saved the hazards of arranging an alibi, it accounted for any overlooked fingerprints. In many ways it was a cast-iron position—with one proviso only. There must be no obvious motive. There was certainly no apparent motive for Miss Waterhouse to do away with little Edna Brent. Miss Waterhouse had not given evidence at the inquest. She might have been there, though. Did Edna perhaps have some reason for knowing, or believing, that it was Miss Waterhouse who had impersonated Miss Pebmarsh over the telephone and asked for a shorthand typist to be sent to No. 19?

More conjecture.

And there was, of course, Sheila Webb herself….

Hardcastle’s hand went to the telephone. He got on to the hotel where Colin Lamb was staying. Presently he got Colin himself on the wire.

“Hardcastle here—what time was it when you lunched with Sheila Webb today?”

There was a pause before Colin answered:

“How do you know that we lunched together?”

“A damned good guess. You did, didn’t you?”

“Why shouldn’t I have lunch with her?”

“No reason at all. I’m merely asking you the time. Did you go off to lunch straight from the inquest?”

“No. She had shopping to do. We met at the Chinese place in Market Street at one o’clock.”

“I see.”

Hardcastle looked down his notes. Edna Brent had died between 12:30 and one o’clock.

“Don’t you want to know what we had for lunch?”

“Keep your hair on. I just wanted the exact time. For the record.”

“I see. It’s like that.”

There was a pause. Hardcastle said, endeavouring to ease the strain:

“If you’re not doing anything this evening—”

The other interrupted.

“I’m off. Just packing up. I found a message waiting for me. I’ve got to go abroad.”

“When will you be back?”

“That’s anybody’s guess. A week at least—perhaps longer—possibly never!”

“Bad luck—or isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure,” said Colin, and rang off.

Eighteen

I

Hardcastle arrived at No. 19, Wilbraham Crescent just as Miss Pebmarsh was coming out of the house.

“Excuse me a minute, Miss Pebmarsh.”

“Oh. Is it—Detective Inspector Hardcastle?”

“Yes. Can I have a word with you?”

“I don’t want to be late at the Institute. Will it take long?”

“I assure you only three or four minutes.”

She went into the house and he followed.

“You’ve heard what happened this afternoon?” he said.

“Has anything happened?”

“I thought you might have heard. A girl was killed in the telephone box just down the road.”

“Killed? When?”

“Two hours and three quarters ago.” He looked at the grandfather clock.

“I’ve heard nothing about it. Nothing,” said Miss Pebmarsh. A kind of anger sounded momentarily in her voice. It was as though her disability had been brought home to her in some particularly wounding way. “A girl—killed! What girl?”

“Her name is Edna Brent and she worked at the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau.”

“Another girl from there! Had she been sent for like this girl, Sheila what’s-her-name was?”

“I don’t think so,” said the inspector. “She did not come to see you here, at your house?”

“Here? No. Certainly not.”

“Would you have been in if she had come here?”

“I’m not sure. What time did you say?”

“Approximately twelve thirty or a little later.”

“Yes,” said Miss Pebmarsh. “I would have been home by then.”

“Where did you go after the inquest?”

“I came straight back here.” She paused and then asked, “Why did you think this girl might have come to see me?”

“Well, she had been at the inquest this morning and she had seen you there, and she must have had some reason for coming to Wilbraham Crescent. As far as we know, she was not acquainted with anyone in this road.”

“But why should she come to see me just because she had seen me at the inquest?”

“Well—” the inspector smiled a little, then hastily tried to put the smile in his voice as he realized that Miss Pebmarsh could not appreciate its disarming quality. “One never knows with these girls. She might just have wanted an autograph. Something like that.”

“An autograph!” Miss Pebmarsh sounded scornful. Then she said, “Yes … Yes, I suppose you’re right. That sort of thing does happen.” Then she shook her head briskly. “I can only assure you, Inspector Hardcastle, that it did not happen today. Nobody has been here since I came back from the inquest.”

“Well, thank you, Miss Pebmarsh. We thought we had better check up on every possibility.”

“How old was she?” asked Miss Pebmarsh.

“I believe she was nineteen.”

“Nineteen? Very young.” Her voice changed slightly. “Very young … Poor child. Who would want to kill a girl of that age?”

“It happens,” said Hardcastle.

“Was she pretty—attractive—sexy?”

“No,” said Hardcastle. “She would have liked to be, I think, but she was not.”

“Then that was not the reason,” said Miss Pebmarsh. She shook her head again. “I’m sorry. More sorry than I can say, Inspector Hardcastle, that I can’t help you.”

He went out, impressed as he always was impressed, by Miss Pebmarsh’s personality.

II

Miss Waterhouse was also at home. She was also true to type, opening the door with a suddenness which displayed a desire to trap someone doing what they should not do.

“Oh, it’s you!” she said. “Really, I’ve told your people all I know.”

“I’m sure you’ve replied to all the questions that were asked you,” said Hardcastle, “but they can’t all be asked at once, you know. We have to go into a few more details.”

“I don’t see why. The whole thing was a most terrible shock,” said Miss Waterhouse, looking at him in a censorious way as though it had been all his doing. “Come in, come in. You can’t stand on the mat all day. Come in and sit down and ask me any questions you want to, though really what questions there can be, I cannot see. As I told you, I went out to make a telephone call. I opened the door of the box and there was the girl. Never had such a shock in my life. I hurried down and got the police constable. And after that, in case you want to know, I came back here and I gave myself a medicinal dose of brandy. Medicinal," said Miss Waterhouse fiercely.

"Very wise of you, madam," said Inspector Hardcastle.

"And that's that," said Miss Waterhouse with finality.

"I wanted to ask you if you were quite sure you had never seen this girl before?"

"May have seen her a dozen times," said Miss Waterhouse, "but not to remember. I mean, she may have served me in Woolworth's, or sat next to me in a bus, or sold me tickets in a cinema."

"She was a shorthand typist at the Cavendish Bureau."

"I don't think I've ever had occasion to use a shorthand typist. Perhaps she worked in my brother's office at Gainsford and Swettenham. Is that what you're driving at?"

"Oh, no," said Inspector Hardcastle, "there appears to be no connection of that kind. But I just wondered if she'd come to see you this morning before being killed."

"Come to see me? No, of course not. Why should she?"

"Well, that we wouldn't know," said Inspector Hardcastle, "but you would say, would you, that anyone who saw her coming in at your gate this morning was mistaken?" He looked at her with innocent eyes.

"Somebody saw her coming in at my gate? Nonsense," said Miss Waterhouse. She hesitated. "At least—"

"Yes?" said Hardcastle, alert though he did not show it.

“Well, I suppose she may have pushed a leaflet or something through the door … There was a leaflet there at lunchtime. Something about a meeting for nuclear disarmament, I think. There’s always something every day. I suppose conceivably she might have come and pushed something through the letter box; but you can’t blame me for that, can you?”

“Of course not. Now as to your telephone call—you say your own telephone was out of order. According to the exchange, that was not so.”

“Exchanges will say anything! I dialled and got a most peculiar noise, not the engaged signal, so I went out to the call box.”

Hardcastle got up.

“I’m sorry, Miss Waterhouse, for bothering you in this way, but there is some idea that this girl did come to call on someone in the crescent and that she went to a house not very far from here.”

“And so you have to inquire all along the crescent,” said Miss Waterhouse. “I should think the most likely thing is that she went to the house next door—Miss Pebmarsh’s, I mean.”

“Why should you consider that the most likely?”

“You said she was a shorthand typist and came from the Cavendish Bureau. Surely, if I remember rightly, it was said that Miss Pebmarsh asked for a shorthand typist to come to her house the other day when that man was killed.”

“It was said so, yes, but she denied it.”

“Well, if you ask me,” said Miss Waterhouse, “not that anyone ever listens to what I say until it’s too late, I should say that she’d gone a little batty. Miss Pebmarsh, I mean. I think, perhaps, that she does ring up bureaux and ask for shorthand typists to come. Then, perhaps, she forgets all about it.”

“But you don’t think that she would do murder?”

"I never suggested murder or anything of that kind. I know a man was killed in her house, but I'm not for a moment suggesting that Miss Pebmarsh had anything to do with it. No. I just thought that she might have one of those curious fixations like people do. I knew a woman once who was always ringing up a confectioner's and ordering a dozen meringues. She didn't want them, and when they came she said she hadn't ordered them. That sort of thing."

"Of course, anything is possible," said Hardcastle. He said good-bye to Miss Waterhouse and left.

He thought she'd hardly done herself justice by her last suggestion. On the other hand, if she believed that the girl had been seen entering her house, and that that had in fact been the case, then the suggestion that the girl had gone to No. 19 was quite an adroit one under the circumstances.

Hardcastle glanced at his watch and decided that he had still time to tackle the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau. It had, he knew, been reopened at two o'clock this afternoon. He might get some help from the girls there. And he would find Sheila Webb there too.

III

One of the girls rose at once as he entered the office.

"It's Detective Inspector Hardcastle, isn't it?" she said. "Miss Martindale is expecting you."

She ushered him into the inner office. Miss Martindale did not wait a moment before attacking him.

"It's disgraceful, Inspector Hardcastle, absolutely disgraceful! You must get to the bottom of this. You must get to the bottom of it at once. No dilly-dallying about. The police are supposed to give protection and that is what we need here at this office. Protection. I want protection for my girls and I mean to get it."

"I'm sure, Miss Martindale, that—"

"Are you going to deny that two of my girls, two of them, have been victimized? There is clearly some irresponsible person about who has got some kind of—what do they call it nowadays—a fixture or a complex—about shorthand typists or secretarial bureaux. They are deliberately martyrizing this institute. First Sheila Webb was summoned by a heartless trick to find a dead body—the kind of thing that might send a nervous girl off her head—and now this. A perfectly nice harmless girl murdered in a telephone box. You must get to the bottom of it, Inspector."

"There's nothing I want more than to get to the bottom of it, Miss Martindale. I've come to see if you can give me any help."

"Help! What help can I give you? Do you think if I had any help, I wouldn't have rushed to you with it before now? You've got to find who killed that poor girl, Edna, and who played that heartless trick on Sheila. I'm strict with my girls, Inspector, I keep them up to their work and I won't allow them to be late or slipshod. But I don't stand for their being victimized or murdered. I intend to defend them, and I intend to see that people who are paid by the State to defend them do their work." She glared at him and looked rather like a tigress in human form.

"Give us time, Miss Martindale," he said.

"Time? Just because that silly child is dead, I suppose you think you've all the time in the world. The next thing that happens will be one of the other girls is murdered."

"I don't think you need fear that, Miss Martindale."

"I don't suppose you thought this girl was going to be killed when you got up this morning, Inspector. If so, you'd have taken a few precautions, I suppose, to look after her. And when one of my girls gets killed or is put in some terribly compromising position, you'll be equally surprised. The whole thing is extraordinary, crazy! You must admit yourself it's a crazy setup. That is, if the things one reads in the paper were true. All those clocks for instance. They weren't mentioned this morning at the inquest, I noticed."

"As little as possible was mentioned this morning, Miss Martindale. It was only an adjourned inquest, you know."

"All I say is," said Miss Martindale, glaring at him again, "you must do something about it."

"And there's nothing you can tell me, no hint Edna might have given to you? She didn't appear worried by anything, she didn't consult you?"

"I don't suppose she'd have consulted me if she was worried," said Miss Martindale. "But what had she to be worried about?"

That was exactly the question that Inspector Hardcastle would have liked to have answered for him, but he could see that it was not likely that he would get the answer from Miss Martindale. Instead he said:

"I'd like to talk to as many of your girls here as I can. I can see that it is not likely that Edna Brent would have confided any fears or worries to you, but she might have spoken of them to her fellow employees."

"That's possible enough, I expect," said Miss Martindale. "They spend their time gossiping—these girls. The moment they hear my step in the passage outside all the typewriters begin to rattle. But what have they been doing just before? Talking. Chat, chat, chitter-chat!" Calming down a little, she said, "There are only three of them in the office at present. Would you like to speak to them while you're here? The others are out on assignments. I can give you their names and their home addresses, if you like."

"Thank you, Miss Martindale."

"I expect you'd like to speak to them alone," said Miss Martindale. "They wouldn't talk as freely if I was standing there looking on. They'd have to admit, you see, that they had been gossiping and wasting their time."

She got up from her seat and opened the door into the outer office.

"Girls," she said, "Detective Inspector Hardcastle wants to talk things over with you. You can stop work for the moment. Try and tell him anything you know that can help him to find out who killed Edna Brent.”

She went back into her own private office and shut the door firmly. Three startled girlish faces looked at the inspector. He summed them up quickly and superficially, but sufficiently to make up his mind as to the quality of the material with which he was about to deal. A fair solid-looking girl with spectacles. Dependable, he thought, but not particularly bright. A rather rakish-looking brunette with the kind of hairdo that suggested she’d been out in a blizzard lately. Eyes that noticed things here, perhaps, but probably highly unreliable in her recollection of events. Everything would be suitably touched up. The third was a born giggler who would, he was sure, agree with whatever anyone else said.

He spoke quietly, informally.

“I suppose you’ve all heard what has happened to Edna Brent who worked here?”

Three heads nodded violently.

“By the way, how did you hear?”

They looked at each other as if trying to decide who should be spokesman. By common consent it appeared to be the fair girl, whose name, it seemed, was Janet.

“Edna didn’t come to work at two o’clock, as she should have done,” she explained.

“And Sandy Cat was very annoyed,” began the dark-haired girl, Maureen, and then stopped herself. “Miss Martindale, I mean.”

The third girl giggled. “Sandy Cat is just what we call her,” she explained.

“And not a bad name,” the inspector thought.

“She’s a perfect terror when she likes,” said Maureen. “Fairly jumps on you. She asked if Edna had said anything to us about not coming back to the office this afternoon, and that she ought to have at least sent an excuse.”

The fair girl said: “I told Miss Martindale that she’d been at the inquest with the rest of us, but that we hadn’t seen her afterwards and didn’t know where she’d gone.”

“That was true, was it?” asked Hardcastle. “You’ve no idea where she did go when she left the inquest.”

“I suggested she should come and have some lunch with me,” said Maureen, “but she seemed to have something on her mind. She said she wasn’t sure that she’d bother to have any lunch. Just buy something and eat it in the office.”

“So she meant, then, to come back to the office?”

“Oh, yes, of course. We all knew we’d got to do that.”

“Have any of you noticed anything different about Edna Brent these last few days? Did she seem to you worried at all, as though she had something on her mind? Did she tell you anything to that effect? If there is anything at all you know, I must beg of you to tell me.”

They looked at each other but not in a conspiratorial manner. It seemed to be merely vague conjecture.

“She was always worried about something,” said Maureen. “She gets things muddled up, and makes mistakes. She was a bit slow in the uptake.”

“Things always seemed to happen to Edna,” said the giggler. “Remember when that stiletto heel of hers came off the other day? Just the sort of thing that would happen to Edna.”

“I remember,” said Hardcastle.

He remembered how the girl had stood looking down ruefully at the shoe in her hand.

“You know, I had a feeling something awful had happened this afternoon when Edna didn’t get here at two o’clock,” said Janet. She nodded with a solemn face.

Hardcastle looked at her with some dislike. He always disliked people who were wise after the event. He was quite sure that the girl in question had thought nothing of the kind. Far more likely, he thought to himself, that she had said, “Edna will catch it from Sandy Cat when she does come in.”

“When did you hear what had happened?” he asked again.

They looked at each other. The giggler flushed guiltily. Her eyes shot sideways to the door into Miss Martindale’s private office.

“Well, I—er—I just slipped out for a minute,” she said. “I wanted some pastries to take home and I knew they’d all be gone by the time we left. And when I got to the shop—it’s on the corner and they know me quite well there—the woman said, ‘She worked at your place, didn’t she, ducks?’ and I said, ‘Who do you mean?’ And then she said, ‘This girl they’ve just found dead in a telephone box.’ Oh, it gave me ever such a turn! So I came rushing back and I told the others and in the end we all said we’d have to tell Miss Martindale about it, and just at that moment she came bouncing out of her office and said to us, ‘Now what are you doing? Not a single typewriter going.’”

The fair girl took up the saga.

“And I said, ‘Really it’s not our fault. We’ve heard some terrible news about Edna, Miss Martindale.’”

“And what did Miss Martindale say or do?”

“Well, she wouldn’t believe it at first,” said the brunette. “She said, ‘Nonsense. You’ve just been picking up some silly gossip in a shop. It must be some other girl. Why should it be Edna?’ And she marched back into her room and rang up the police station and found out it was true.”

“But I don’t see,” said Janet almost dreamily, “I don’t see why anyone should want to kill Edna.”

“It’s not as though she had a boy or anything,” said the brunette.

All three looked at Hardcastle hopefully as though he could give them the answer to the problem. He sighed. There was nothing here for him. Perhaps one of the other girls might be more helpful. And there was Sheila Webb herself.

“Were Sheila Webb and Edna Brent particular friends?” he asked.

They looked at each other vaguely.

“Not special, I don’t think.”

“Where is Miss Webb, by the way?”

He was told that Sheila Webb was at the Curlew Hotel, attending on Professor Purdy.

Nineteen

Professor Purdy sounded irritated as he broke off dictating and answered the telephone.

“Who? What? You mean he is here now? Well, ask him if tomorrow will do?—Oh, very well—very well—Tell him to come up.”

“Always something,” he said with vexation. “How can one ever be expected to do any serious work with these constant interruptions.” He looked with mild displeasure at Sheila Webb and said: “Now where were we, my dear?”

Sheila was about to reply when there was a knock at the door. Professor Purdy brought himself back with some difficulty from the chronological difficulties of approximately three thousand years ago.

“Yes?” he said testily, “yes, come in, what is it? I may say I mentioned particularly that I was not to be disturbed this afternoon.”

“I’m very sorry, sir, very sorry indeed that it has been necessary to do so. Good evening, Miss Webb.”

Sheila Webb had risen to her feet, setting aside her notebook. Hardcastle wondered if he only fancied that he saw sudden apprehension come into her eyes.

“Well, what is it?” said the professor again, sharply.

“I am Detective Inspector Hardcastle, as Miss Webb here will tell you.”

“Quite,” said the professor. “Quite.”

“What I really wanted was a few words with Miss Webb.”

“Can’t you wait? It is really most awkward at this moment. Most awkward. We were just at a critical point. Miss Webb will be disengaged in about a quarter of an hour—oh, well, perhaps half an hour. Something like that. Oh, dear me, is it six o'clock already?"

"I'm very sorry, Professor Purdy," Hardcastle's tone was firm.

"Oh, very well, very well. What is it—some motoring offence, I suppose? How very officious these traffic wardens are. One insisted the other day that I had left my car four and a half hours at a parking meter. I'm sure that could not possibly be so."

"It's a little more serious than a parking offence, sir."

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And you don't have a car, do you, my dear?" He looked vaguely at Sheila Webb. "Yes, I remember, you come here by bus. Well, Inspector, what is it?"

"It's about a girl called Edna Brent." He turned to Sheila Webb. "I expect you've heard about it."

She stared at him. Beautiful eyes. Cornflower-blue eyes. Eyes that reminded him of someone.

"Edna Brent, did you say?" She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, yes, I know her, of course. What about her?"

"I see the news hasn't got to you yet. Where did you lunch, Miss Webb?"

Colour came up in her cheeks.

"I lunched with a friend at the Ho Tung restaurant, if—if it's really any business of yours."

"You didn't go on afterwards to the office?"

"To the Cavendish Bureau, you mean? I called in there and was told it had been arranged that I was to come straight here to Professor Purdy at half past two."

“That’s right,” said the professor, nodding his head. “Half past two. And we have been working here ever since. Ever since. Dear me, I should have ordered tea. I am very sorry, Miss Webb, I’m afraid you must have missed having your tea. You should have reminded me.”

“Oh, it didn’t matter, Professor Purdy, it didn’t matter at all.”

“Very remiss of me,” said the professor, “very remiss. But there. I mustn’t interrupt, since the inspector wants to ask you some questions.”

“So you don’t know what’s happened to Edna Brent?”

“Happened to her?” asked Sheila, sharply, her voice rising. “Happened to her? What do you mean? Has she had an accident or something—been run over?”

“Very dangerous, all this speeding,” put in the professor.

“Yes,” said Hardcastle, “something’s happened to her.” He paused and then said, putting it as brutally as possible, “She was strangled about half past twelve, in a telephone box.”

“In a telephone box?” said the professor, rising to the occasion by showing some interest.

Sheila Webb said nothing. She stared at him. Her mouth opened slightly, her eyes widened. “Either this is the first you’ve heard of it or you’re a damn’ good actress,” thought Hardcastle to himself.

“Dear, dear,” said the professor. “Strangled in a telephone box. That seems very extraordinary to me. Very extraordinary. Not the sort of place I would choose myself. I mean, if I were to do such a thing. No, indeed. Well, well. Poor girl. Most unfortunate for her.”

“Edna—killed! But why?”

“Did you know, Miss Webb, that Edna Brent was very anxious to see you the day before yesterday, that she came to your aunt’s house, and waited for some time for you to come back?”

“My fault again,” said the professor guiltily. “I kept Miss Webb very late that evening, I remember. Very late indeed. I really still feel very apologetic about it. You must always remind me of the time, my dear. You really must.”

“My aunt told me about that,” said Sheila, “but I didn’t know it was anything special. Was it? Was Edna in trouble of any kind?”

“We don’t know,” said the inspector. “We probably never shall know. Unless you can tell us?”

“I tell you? How should I know?”

“You might have had some idea, perhaps, of what Edna Brent wanted to see you about?”

She shook her head. “I’ve no idea, no idea at all.”

“Hasn’t she hinted anything to you, spoken to you in the office at all about whatever the trouble was?”

“No. No, indeed she hasn’t—hadn’t—I wasn’t at the office at all yesterday. I had to go over to Landis Bay to one of our authors for the whole day.”

“You didn’t think that she’d been worried lately?”

“Well, Edna always looked worried or puzzled. She had a very—what shall I say—diffident, uncertain kind of mind. I mean, she was never quite sure that what she thought of doing was the right thing or not. She missed out two whole pages in typing Armand Levine’s book once and she was terribly worried about what to do then, because she’d sent it off to him before she realized what had happened.”

“I see. And she asked you all your advice as to what she should do about it?”

“Yes. I told her she’d better write a note to him quickly because people don’t always start reading their typescript at once for correction. She could write and say what had happened and ask him not to complain to Miss Martindale. But she said she didn’t quite like to do that.”

“She usually came and asked for advice when one of these problems arose?”

“Oh, yes, always. But the trouble was, of course, that we didn’t always all agree as to what she should do. Then she got puzzled again.”

“So it would be quite natural that she should come to one of you if she had a problem? It happened quite frequently?”

“Yes. Yes, it did.”

“You don’t think it might have been something more serious this time?”

“I don’t suppose so. What sort of serious thing could it be?”

Was Sheila Webb, the inspector wondered, quite as much at ease as she tried to appear?”

“I don’t know what she wanted to talk to me about,” she went on, speaking faster and rather breathlessly. “I’ve no idea. And I certainly can’t imagine why she wanted to come out to my aunt’s house and speak to me there.”

“It would seem, wouldn’t it, that it was something she did not want to speak to you about at the Cavendish Bureau? Before the other girls, shall we say? Something, perhaps, that she felt ought to be kept private between you and her. Could that have been the case?”

“I think it’s very unlikely. I’m sure it couldn’t have been at all like that.” Her breath came quickly.

“So you can’t help me, Miss Webb?”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m very sorry about Edna, but I don’t know anything that could help you.”

"Nothing that might have a connection or a tie-up with what happened on the 9th of September?"

"You mean—that man—that man in Wilbraham Crescent?"

"That's what I mean."

"How could it have been? What could Edna have known about that?"

"Nothing very important, perhaps," said the inspector, "but something. And anything would help. Anything, however small." He paused. "The telephone box where she was killed was in Wilbraham Crescent. Does that convey anything to you, Miss Webb?"

"Nothing at all."

"Were you yourself in Wilbraham Crescent today?"

"No, I wasn't," she said vehemently. "I never went near it. I'm beginning to feel that it's a horrible place. I wish I'd never gone there in the first place, I wish I'd never got mixed up in all this. Why did they send for me, ask for me specially, that day? Why did Edna have to get killed near there? You must find out, Inspector, you must, you must!"

"We mean to find out, Miss Webb," the inspector said. There was a faint menace in his voice as he went on: "I can assure you of that."

"You're trembling, my dear," said Professor Purdy. "I think, I really do think that you ought to have a glass of sherry."

Twenty

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I reported to Beck as soon as I got to London.

He waved his cigar at me.

"There might have been something in that idiotic crescent idea of yours after all," he allowed.

"I've turned up something at last, have I?"

"I won't go as far as that, but I'll just say that you may have. Our construction engineer, Mr. Ramsay of 62, Wilbraham Crescent, is not all he seems. Some very curious assignments he's taken on lately. Genuine firms, but firms without much back history, and what history they have, rather a peculiar one. Ramsay went off at a minute's notice about five weeks ago. He went to Rumania."

"That's not what he told his wife."

"Possibly not, but that's where he went. And that's where he is now. We'd like to know a bit more about him. So you can stir your stumps, my lad, and get going. I've got all the visas ready for you, and a nice new passport. Nigel Trench it will be this time. Rub up your knowledge of rare plants in the Balkans. You're a botanist."

"Any special instructions?"

"No. We'll give you your contact when you pick up your papers. Find out all you can about our Mr. Ramsay." He looked at me keenly. "You don't sound as pleased as you might be." He peered through the cigar smoke.

"It's always pleasant when a hunch pays off," I said evasively.

"Right Crescent, wrong number. 61 is occupied by a perfectly blameless builder. Blameless in our sense, that is. Poor old Hanbury got the number wrong, but he wasn't far off."

"Have you vetted the others? Or only Ramsay?"

"Diana Lodge seems to be as pure as Diana. A long history of cats. McNaughton was vaguely interesting. He's a retired professor, as you know. Mathematics. Quite brilliant, it seems. Resigned his Chair quite suddenly on the grounds of ill-health. I suppose that may be true—but he seems quite hale and hearty. He seems to have cut himself off from all his old friends, which is rather odd."

"The trouble is," I said, "that we get to thinking that everything that everybody does is highly suspicious."

"You may have got something there," said Colonel Beck. "There are times when I suspect you, Colin, of having changed over to the other side. There are times when I suspect myself of having changed over to the other side, and then having changed back again to this one! All a jolly mix-up."

My plane left at ten p.m. I went to see Hercule Poirot first. This time he was drinking a sirop de cassis (Black currant to you and me). He offered me some. I refused. George brought me whisky. Everything as usual.

"You look depressed," said Poirot.

"Not at all. I'm just off abroad."

He looked at me. I nodded.

"So it is like that?"

"Yes, it is like that."

"I wish you all success."

"Thank you. And what about you, Poirot, how are you getting along with your homework?"

“Pardon?”

“What about the Crowdean Clocks Murder—Have you leaned back, closed your eyes and come up with all the answers?”

“I have read what you left here with great interest,” said Poirot.

“Not much there, was there? I told you these particular neighbours were a wash-out—”

“On the contrary. In the case of at least two of these people very illuminating remarks were made—”

“Which of them? And what were the remarks?”

Poirot told me in an irritating fashion that I must read my notes carefully.

“You will see for yourself then—It leaps to the eye. The thing to do now is to talk to more neighbours.”

“There aren’t any more.”

“There must be. Somebody has always seen something. It is an axiom.”

“It may be an axiom but it isn’t so in this case. And I’ve got further details for you. There has been another murder.”

“Indeed? So soon? That is interesting. Tell me.”

I told him. He questioned me closely until he got every single detail out of me. I told him, too, of the postcard I had passed on to Hardcastle.

“Remember—four one three—or four thirteen,” he repeated. “Yes—it is the same pattern.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Poirot closed his eyes.

“That postcard lacks only one thing, a fingerprint dipped in blood.”

I looked at him doubtfully.

“What do you really think of this business?”

“It grows much clearer—as usual, the murderer cannot let well alone.”

“But who’s the murderer?”

Poirot craftily did not reply to that.

“Whilst you are away, you permit that I make a few researches?”

“Such as?”

“Tomorrow I shall instruct Miss Lemon to write a letter to an old lawyer friend of mine, Mr. Enderby. I shall ask her to consult the marriage records at Somerset House. She will also send for me a certain overseas cable.”

“I’m not sure that’s fair,” I objected. “You’re not just sitting and thinking.”

“That is exactly what I am doing! What Miss Lemon is to do, is to verify for me the answers that I have already arrived at. I ask not for information, but for confirmation.”

“I don’t believe you know a thing, Poirot! This is all bluff. Why, nobody knows yet who the dead man is—”

“I know.”

“What’s his name?”

“I have no idea. His name is not important. I know, if you can understand, not who he is but who he is.”

“A blackmailer?”

Poirot closed his eyes.

“A private detective?”

Poirot opened his eyes.

“I say to you a little quotation. As I did last time. And after that I say no more.”

He recited with the utmost solemnity:

“Dilly, dilly, dilly—Come and be killed.”

Twenty-one

Detective Inspector Hardcastle looked at the calendar on his desk. 20th September. Just over ten days. They hadn't been able to make as much progress as he would have liked because they were held up with that initial difficulty: the identification of a dead body. It had taken longer than he would have thought possible. All the leads seemed to have petered out, failed. The laboratory examination of the clothes had brought in nothing particularly helpful. The clothes themselves had yielded no clues. They were good quality clothes, export quality, not new but well cared for. Dentists had not helped, nor laundries, nor cleaners. The dead man remained a "mystery man!" And yet, Hardcastle felt, he was not really a "mystery man." There was nothing spectacular or dramatic about him. He was just a man whom nobody had been able to come forward and recognize. That was the pattern of it, he was sure. Hardcastle sighed as he thought of the telephone calls and letters that had necessarily poured in after the publication in the public press of the photograph with the caption below it: DO YOU KNOW THIS MAN? Astonishing the amount of people who thought they did know this man. Daughters who wrote in a hopeful vein of fathers from whom they'd been estranged for years. An old woman of ninety was sure that the photograph in question was her son who had left home thirty years ago. Innumerable wives had been sure that it was a missing husband. Sisters had not been quite so anxious to claim brothers. Sisters, perhaps, were less hopeful thinkers. And, of course, there were vast numbers of people who had seen that very man in Lincolnshire, Newcastle, Devon, London, on a tube, in a bus, lurking on a pier, looking sinister at the corner of a road, trying to hide his face as he came out of the cinema. Hundreds of leads, the more promising of them patiently followed up and not yielding anything.

But today, the inspector felt slightly more hopeful. He looked again at the letter on his desk. Merlina Rival. He didn't like the Christian name very much. Nobody in their senses, he thought, could christen a child Merlina. No doubt it was a fancy name adopted by the lady herself. But he liked the feel of the letter. It was not extravagant or overconfident. It merely said that the writer thought it possible that the man in question was her husband from whom she had parted several years ago. She was due this morning. He pressed his buzzer and Sergeant Cray came in.

“That Mrs. Rival not arrived yet?”

“Just come this minute,” said Cray. “I was coming to tell you.”

“What’s she like?”

“Bit theatrical-looking,” said Cray, after reflecting a moment. “Lots of makeup—not very good makeup. Fairly reliable sort of woman on the whole, I should say.”

“Did she seem upset?”

“No. Not noticeably.”

“All right,” said Hardcastle, “let’s have her in.”

Cray departed and presently returned saying as he did so, “Mrs. Rival, sir.”

The inspector got up and shook hands with her. About fifty, he would judge, but from a long way away—quite a long way—she might have looked thirty. Close at hand, the result of makeup carelessly applied made her look rather older than fifty but on the whole he put it at fifty. Dark hair heavily hennaed. No hat, medium height and build, wearing a dark coat and skirt and a white blouse. Carrying a large tartan bag. A jingly bracelet or two, several rings. On the whole, he thought, making moral judgements on the basis of his experience, rather a good sort. Not overscrupulous, probably, but easy to live with, reasonably generous, possibly kind. Reliable? That was the question. He wouldn’t bank on it, but then he couldn’t afford to bank on that kind of thing anyway.

“I’m very glad to see you, Mrs. Rival,” he said, “and I hope very much you’ll be able to help us.”

“Of course, I’m not at all sure,” said Mrs. Rival. She spoke apologetically. “But it did look like Harry. Very much like Harry. Of course I’m quite prepared to find that it isn’t, and I hope I shan’t have taken up your time for nothing.”

She seemed quite apologetic about it.

“You mustn’t feel that in any case,” said the inspector. “We want help very badly over this case.”

“Yes, I see. I hope I’ll be able to be sure. You see, it’s a long time since I saw him.”

“Shall we get down a few facts to help us? When did you last see your husband?”

“I’ve been trying to get it accurate,” said Mrs. Rival, “all the way down in the train. It’s terrible how one’s memory goes when it comes to time. I believe I said in my letter to you it was about ten years ago, but it’s more than that. D’you know, I think it’s nearer fifteen. Time does go so fast. I suppose,” she added shrewdly, “that one tends to think it’s less than it is because it makes you yourself feel younger. Don’t you think so?”

“I should think it could do,” said the inspector. “Anyway you think it’s roughly fifteen years since you saw him? When were you married?”

“It must have been about three years before that,” said Mrs. Rival.

“And you were living then?”

“At a place called Shipton Bois in Suffolk. Nice town. Market town. Rather one-horse, if you know what I mean.”

“And what did your husband do?”

“He was an insurance agent. At least—” she stopped herself “—that’s what he said he was.”

The inspector looked up sharply.

“You found out that that wasn’t true?”

“Well, no, not exactly … Not at the time. It’s only since then that I’ve thought that perhaps it wasn’t true. It’d be an easy thing for a man to say, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose it would in certain circumstances.”

“I mean, it gives a man an excuse for being away from home a good deal.”

“Your husband was away from home a good deal, Mrs. Rival?”

“Yes. I never thought about it much to begin with—”

“But later?”

She did not answer at once then she said:

“Can’t we get on with it? After all, if it isn’t Harry….”

He wondered what exactly she was thinking. There was strain in her voice, possibly emotion? He was not sure.

“I can understand,” he said, “that you’d like to get it over. We’ll go now.”

He rose and escorted her out of the room to the waiting car. Her nervousness when they got to where they were going, was no more than the nervousness of other people he had taken to this same place. He said the usual reassuring things.

“It’ll be quite all right. Nothing distressing. It will only take a minute or two.”

The tray was rolled out, the attendant lifted the sheet. She stood staring down for a few moments, her breath came a little faster, she made a faint gasping sound, then she turned away abruptly. She said:

“It’s Harry. Yes. He’s a lot older, he looks different … But it’s Harry.”

The inspector nodded to the attendant, then he laid his hand on her arm and took her out again to the car and they drove back to the station. He didn’t say anything. He left her to pull herself together. When they got back to his room a constable came in almost at once with a tray of tea.

“There you are, Mrs. Rival. Have a cup, it’ll pull you together. Then we’ll talk.”

“Thank you.”

She put sugar in the tea, a good deal of it, and gulped it down quickly.

“That’s better,” she said. “It’s not that I mind really. Only—only, well it does turn you up a bit, doesn’t it?”

“You think this man is definitely your husband?”

“I’m sure he is. Of course, he’s much older, but he hasn’t changed really so much. He always looked—well, very neat. Nice, you know, good class.”

Yes, thought Hardcastle, it was quite a good description. Good class. Presumably, Harry had looked much better class than he was. Some men did, and it was helpful to them for their particular purposes.

Mrs. Rival said, “He was very particular always about his clothes and everything. That’s why, I think—they fell for him so easily. They never suspected anything.”

“Who fell for him, Mrs. Rival?” Hardcastle’s voice was gentle, sympathetic.

“Women,” said Mrs. Rival. “Women. That’s where he was most of the time.”

“I see. And you got to know about it.”

“Well, I—I suspected. I mean, he was away such a lot. Of course I knew what men are like. I thought probably there was a girl from time to time. But it’s no good asking men about these things. They’ll lie to you and that’s all. But I didn’t think—I really didn’t think that he made a business of it.”

“And did he?”

She nodded. “I think he must have done.”

“How did you find out?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“He came back one day from a trip he’d taken. To Newcastle, he said. Anyway, he came back and said he’d have to clear out quickly. He said that the game was up. There was some woman he’d got into trouble. A schoolteacher, he said, and there might be a bit of a stink about it. I asked him questions then. He didn’t mind telling me. Probably he thought I knew more than I did. They used to fall for him, you know, easily enough, just as I did. He’d give her a ring and they’d get engaged—and then he’d say he’d invest money for them. They usually gave it him quite easily.”

“Had he tried the same thing with you?”

“He had, as a matter of fact, only I didn’t give him any.”

“Why not? Didn’t you trust him even then?”

“Well, I wasn’t the kind that trusts anybody. I’d had what you’d call a bit of experience, you know, of men and their ways and the seamier side of things. Anyway, I didn’t want him investing my money for me. What money I had I could invest for myself. Always keep your money in your hands and then you’ll be sure you’ve got it! I’ve seen too many girls and women make fools of themselves.”

“When did he want you to invest money? Before you were married or after?”

“I think he suggested something of the kind beforehand, but I didn’t respond and he sheered off the subject at once. Then, after we were married, he told me about some wonderful opportunity he’d got. I said, ‘Nothing doing.’ It wasn’t only because I didn’t trust him, but I’d often heard men say they’re on to something wonderful and then it turned out that they’d been had for a mug themselves.”

“Had your husband ever been in trouble with the police?”

“No fear,” said Mrs. Rival. “Women don’t like the world to know they’ve been duped. But this time, apparently, things might be different. This girl or woman, she was an educated woman. She wouldn’t be as easy to deceive as the others may have been.”

“She was going to have a child?”

“Yes.”

“Had that happened on other occasions?”

“I rather think so.” She added, “I don’t honestly know what it was used to start him off in the first place. Whether it was only the money—a way of getting a living, as you might say—or whether he was the kind of man who just had to have women and he saw no reason why they shouldn’t pay the expenses of his fun.” There was no bitterness now in her voice.

Hardcastle said gently:

“You were fond of him, Mrs. Rival?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. I suppose I was in a way, or I wouldn’t have married him….”

“You were—excuse me—married to him?”

“I don’t even know that for sure,” said Mrs. Rival frankly. “We were married all right. In a church, too, but I don’t know if he had married other women as well, using a different name, I suppose. His name was Castleton when I married him. I don’t think it was his own name.”

“Harry Castleton. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And you lived in this place, Shipton Bois, as man and wife—for how long?”

“We’d been there about two years. Before that we lived near Doncaster. I don’t say I was really surprised when he came back that day and told me. I think I’d known he was a wrong ’un for some time. One just couldn’t believe it because, you see, he always seemed so respectable. So absolutely the gentleman!”

“And what happened then?”

“He said he’d got to get out of there quick and I said he could go and good riddance, that I wasn’t standing for all this!” She added thoughtfully, “I gave him ten pounds. It was all I had in the house. He said he was short of money … I’ve never seen or heard of him since. Until today. Or rather, until I saw his picture in the paper.”

“He didn’t have any special distinguishing marks? Scars? An operation—or a fracture—anything like that?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Did he ever use the name Curry?”

“Curry? No, I don’t think so. Not that I know of, anyway.” Hardcastle slipped the card across the table to her.

“This was in his pocket,” he said.

“Still saying he’s an insurance agent, I see,” she remarked. “I expect he uses—used, I mean—all sorts of different names.”

“You say you’ve never heard of him for the last fifteen years?”

“He hasn’t sent me a Christmas card, if that’s what you mean,” said Mrs. Rival, with a sudden glint of humour. “I don’t suppose he’d know where I was, anyway. I went back to the stage for a bit after we parted. On tour mostly. It wasn’t much of a life and I dropped the name of Castleton too. Went back to Merlina Rival.”

“Merlina’s—er—not your real name, I suppose?”

She shook her head and a faint, cheerful smile appeared on her face.

“I thought it up. Unusual. My real name’s Flossie Gapp. Florence, I suppose I must have been christened, but everyone always calls me Flossie or Flo. Flossie Gapp. Not very romantic, is it?”

“What are you doing now? Are you still acting, Mrs. Rival?”

“Occasionally,” said Mrs. Rival with a touch of reticence. “On and off, as you might say.”

Hardcastle was tactful.

“I see,” he said.

“I do odd jobs here and there,” she said. “Help out at parties, a bit of hostess work, that sort of thing. It’s not a bad life. At any rate you meet people. Things get near the bone now and again.”

“You’ve never heard anything of Henry Castleton since you parted—or about him?”

“Not a word. I thought perhaps he’d gone abroad—or was dead.”

“The only other thing I can ask you, Mrs. Rival, is if you have any idea why Harry Castleton should have come to this neighbourhood?”

“No. Of course I’ve no idea. I don’t even know what he’s been doing all these years.”

“Would it be likely that he would be selling fraudulent insurance—something of that kind?”

"I simply don't know. It doesn't seem to me terribly likely. I mean, Harry was very careful of himself always. He wouldn't stick his neck out doing something that he might be brought to book for. I should have thought it more likely it was some racket with women."

"Might it have been, do you think, Mrs. Rival, some form of blackmail?"

"Well, I don't know … I suppose, yes, in a way. Some woman, perhaps, that wouldn't want something in her past raked up. He'd feel pretty safe over that, I think. Mind you, I don't say it is so, but it might be. I don't think he'd want very much money, you know. I don't think he'd drive anyone desperate, but he might just collect in a small way." She nodded in affirmation. "Yes."

"Women liked him, did they?"

"Yes. They always fell for him rather easily. Mainly, I think, because he always seemed so good class and respectable. They were proud of having made a conquest of a man like that. They looked forward to a nice safe future with him. That's the nearest way I can put it. I felt the same way myself," added Mrs. Rival with some frankness.

"There's just one more small point," Hardcastle spoke to his subordinate. "Just bring those clocks in, will you?"

They were brought in on a tray with a cloth over them. Hardcastle whipped off the cloth and exposed them to Mrs. Rival's gaze. She inspected them with frank interest and approbation.

"Pretty, aren't they? I like that one." She touched the ormolu clock.

"You haven't seen any of them before? They don't mean anything to you?"

"Can't say they do. Ought they to?"

"Can you think of any connection between your husband and the name Rosemary?"

"Rosemary? Let me think. There was a red-head—No, her name was Rosalie. I'm afraid I can't think of anyone. But then I probably wouldn't know, would I? Harry kept his affairs very dark."

"If you saw a clock with the hands pointing to four-thirteen—" Hardcastle paused.

Mrs. Rival gave a cheerful chuckle.

"I'd think it was getting on for teatime."

Hardcastle sighed.

"Well, Mrs. Rival," he said, "we are very grateful to you. The adjourned inquest, as I told you, will be the day after tomorrow. You won't mind giving evidence of identification, will you?"

"No. No, that will be all right. I'll just have to say who he was, is that it? I shan't have to go into things? I won't have to go into the manner of his life—anything of that kind?"

"That will not be necessary at present. All you will have to swear to is he is the man, Harry Castleton, to whom you were married. The exact date will be on record at Somerset House. Where were you married? Can you remember that?"

"Place called Donbrook—St. Michael's, I think was the name of the church. I hope it isn't more than twenty years ago. That would make me feel I had one foot in the grave," said Mrs. Rival.

She got up and held out her hand. Hardcastle said good-bye. He went back to his desk and sat there tapping it with a pencil. Presently Sergeant Cray came in.

"Satisfactory?" he asked.

"Seems so," said the inspector. "Name of Harry Castleton—possibly an alias. We'll have to see what we can find out about the fellow. It seems likely that more than one woman might have reason to want revenge on him."

"Looks so respectable, too," said Cray.

"That," said Hardcastle, "seems to have been his principal stock-in-trade."

He thought again about the clock with Rosemary written on it. Remembrance?

Twenty-two

COLIN LAMB’S NARRATIVE

I

“So you have returned,” said Hercule Poirot.

He placed a bookmarker carefully to mark his place in the book he was reading. This time a cup of hot chocolate stood on the table by his elbow. Poirot certainly has the most terrible taste in drinks! For once he did not urge me to join him.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I am disturbed. I am much disturbed. They make the renovations, the redecorations, even the structural alteration in these flats.”

“Won’t that improve them?”

“It will improve them, yes—but it will be most vexatious to me. I shall have to disarrange myself. There will be a smell of paint!” He looked at me with an air of outrage.

Then, dismissing his difficulties with a wave of his hand, he asked:

“You have had the success, yes?”

I said slowly: “I don’t know.”

“Ah—it is like that.”

“I found out what I was sent to find out. I did not find the man himself. I myself do not know what was wanted. Information? Or a body?”

“Speaking of bodies, I read the account of the adjourned inquest at Crowdean. Wilful murder by a person or persons unknown. And your body has been given a name at last.”

I nodded.

“Harry Castleton, whoever he may be.”

“Identified by his wife. You have been to Crowdean?”

“Not yet. I thought of going down tomorrow.”

“Oh, you have some leisure time?”

“Not yet. I’m still on the job. My job takes me there—” I paused a moment and then said: “I don’t know much about what’s been happening while I’ve been abroad—just the mere fact of identification—what do you think of it?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“It was to be expected.”

“Yes—the police are very good—”

“And wives are very obliging.”

“Mrs. Merlina Rival! What a name!”

“It reminds me of something,” said Poirot. “Now of what does it remind me?”

He looked at me thoughtfully but I couldn’t help him. Knowing Poirot, it might have reminded him of anything.

“A visit to a friend—in a country house,” mused Poirot, then shook his head. “No—it is so long ago.”

“When I come back to London, I’ll come and tell you all I can find out from Hardcastle about Mrs. Merlina Rival,” I promised.

Poirot waved a hand and said: “It is not necessary.”

“You mean you know all about her already without being told?”

“No. I mean that I am not interested in her—”

“You’re not interested—but why not? I don’t get it.” I shook my head.

“One must concentrate on the essentials. Tell me instead of the girl called Edna—who died in the telephone box in Wilbraham Crescent.”

“I can’t tell you more than I’ve told you already—I know nothing about the girl.”

“So all you know,” said Poirot accusingly, “or all you can tell me is that the girl was a poor little rabbit, whom you saw in a typewriting office, where she had torn the heel off her shoe in a grating—” he broke off. “Where was that grating, by the way?”

“Really, Poirot, how should I know?”

“You could have known if you had asked. How do you expect to know anything if you do not ask the proper questions?”

“But how can it matter where the heel came off?”

“It may not matter. On the other hand, we should know a definite spot where this girl had been, and that might connect up with a person she had seen there—or with an event of some kind which took place there.”

“You are being rather farfetched. Anyway I do know it was quite near the office because she said so and that she bought a bun and hobbled back on her stocking feet to eat the bun in the office and she ended up by saying how on earth was she to get home like that?”

“Ah, and how did she get home?” Poirot asked with interest.

I stared at him.

“I’ve no idea.”

"Ah—but it is impossible, the way you never ask the right questions! As a result you know nothing of what is important."

"You'd better come down to Crowdean and ask questions yourself," I said, nettled.

"That is impossible at the moment. There is a most interesting sale of authors' manuscripts next week—"

"Still on your hobby?"

"But, yes, indeed." His eyes brightened. "Take the works of John Dickson Carr or Carter Dickson, as he calls himself sometimes—"

I escaped before he could get under way, pleading an urgent appointment. I was in no mood to listen to lectures on past masters of the art of crime fiction.

II

I was sitting on the front step of Hardcastle's house, and rose out of the gloom to greet him when he got home on the following evening.

"Hallo, Colin? Is that you? So you've appeared out of the blue again, have you?"

"If you called it out of the red, it would be much more appropriate."

"How long have you been here, sitting on my front doorstep?"

"Oh, half an hour or so."

"Sorry you couldn't get into the house."

"I could have got into the house with perfect ease," I said indignantly. "You don't know our training!"

"Then why didn't you get in?"

“I wouldn’t like to lower your prestige in any way,” I explained. “A detective inspector of police would be bound to lose face if his house were entered burglariously with complete ease.”

Hardcastle took his keys from his pocket and opened the front door.

“Come on in,” he said, “and don’t talk nonsense.”

He led the way into the sitting room, and proceeded to supply liquid refreshment.

“Say when.”

I said it, not too soon, and we settled ourselves with our drinks.

“Things are moving at last,” said Hardcastle. “We’ve identified our corpse.”

“I know. I looked up the newspaper files—who was Harry Castleton?”

“A man of apparently the utmost respectability and who made his living by going through a form of marriage or merely getting engaged to well-to-do credulous women. They entrusted their savings to him, impressed by his superior knowledge of finance and shortly afterwards he quietly faded into the blue.”

“He didn’t look that kind of man,” I said, casting my mind back.

“That was his chief asset.”

“Wasn’t he ever prosecuted?”

“No—we’ve made inquiries but it isn’t easy to get much information. He changed his name fairly often. And although they think at the Yard that Harry Castleton, Raymond Blair, Lawrence Dalton, Roger Byron were all one and the same person, they never could prove it. The women, you see, wouldn’t tell. They preferred to lose their money. The man was really more of a name than anything—cropping up here and there—always the same pattern—but incredibly elusive. Roger Byron, say, would disappear from Southend, and a man called Lawrence Dalton would commence operations in Newcastle on Tyne. He was shy of being photographed—eluded his lady friends' desire to snapshot him. All this goes quite a long time back—fifteen to twenty years. About that time he seemed really to disappear. The rumour spread about that he was dead—but some people said he had gone abroad—"

"Anyway, nothing was heard of him until he turned up, dead, on Miss Pebmarsh's sitting room carpet?" I said.

"Exactly."

"It certainly opens up possibilities."

"It certainly does."

"A woman scorned who never forgot?" I suggested.

"It does happen, you know. There are women with long memories who don't forget—"

"And if such a woman were to go blind—a second affliction on top of the other—"

"That's only conjecture. Nothing to substantiate it as yet."

"What was the wife like—Mrs—what was it?—Merlina Rival? What a name! It can't be her own."

"Her real name is Flossie Gapp. The other she invented. More suitable for her way of life."

"What is she? A tart?"

"Not a professional."

"What used to be called, tactfully, a lady of easy virtue?"

"I should say she was a good-natured woman, and one willing to oblige her friends. Described herself as an ex-actress. Occasionally did 'hostess' work.

Quite likeable.”

“Reliable?”

“As reliable as most. Her recognition was quite positive. No hesitation.”

“That’s a blessing.”

“Yes. I was beginning to despair. The amount of wives I’ve had here! I’d begun to think it’s a wise woman who knows her own husband. Mind you, I think Mrs. Rival might have known a little more about her husband than she lets on.”

“Has she herself ever been mixed up in criminal activities?”

“Not for the record. I think she may have had, perhaps still has, some shady friends. Nothing serious—just fiddles—that kind of thing.”

“What about the clocks?”

“Didn’t mean a thing to her. I think she was speaking the truth. We’ve traced where they came from—Portobello Market. That’s the ormolu and the Dresden china. And very little help that is! You know what it’s like on a Saturday there. Bought by an American lady, the stall keeper thinks—but I’d say that’s just a guess. Portobello Market is full of American tourists. His wife says it was a man bought them. She can’t remember what he looked like. The silver one came from a silversmith in Bournemouth. A tall lady who wanted a present for her little girl! All she can remember about her is she wore a green hat.”

“And the fourth clock? The one that disappeared?”

“No comment,” said Hardcastle.

I knew just what he meant by that.

Twenty-three

COLIN LAMB’S NARRATIVE

The hotel I was staying in was a poky little place by the station. It served a decent grill but that was all that could be said for it. Except, of course, that it was cheap.

At ten o’clock the following morning I rang the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau and said that I wanted a shorthand typist to take down some letters and retype a business agreement. My name was Douglas Weatherby and I was staying at the Clarendon Hotel (extraordinarily tatty hotels always have grand names). Was Miss Sheila Webb available? A friend of mine had found her very efficient.

I was in luck. Sheila could come straight away. She had, however, an appointment at twelve o’clock. I said that I would have finished with her well before that as I had an appointment myself.

I was outside the swing doors of the Clarendon when Sheila appeared. I stepped forward.

“Mr. Douglas Weatherby at your service,” I said.

“Was it you rang up?”

“It was.”

“But you can’t do things like that.” She looked scandalized.

“Why not? I’m prepared to pay the Cavendish Bureau for your services. What does it matter to them if we spend your valuable and expensive time in the Buttercup Café just across the street instead of dictating dull letters beginning ‘Yours of the 3rd prontissimo to hand,’ etc. Come on, let’s go and drink indifferent coffee in peaceful surroundings.”

The Buttercup Café lived up to its name by being violently and aggressively yellow. Formica tabletops, plastic cushions and cups and saucers were all canary colour.

I ordered coffee and scones for two. It was early enough for us to have the place practically to ourselves.

When the waitress had taken the order and gone away, we looked across the table at each other.

“Are you all right, Sheila?”

“What do you mean—am I all right?”

Her eyes had such dark circles under them that they looked violet rather than blue.

“Have you been having a bad time?”

“Yes—no—I don’t know. I thought you had gone away?”

“I had. I’ve come back.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

Her eyes dropped.

“I’m afraid of him,” she said after a pause of at least a minute, which is a long time.

“Who are you afraid of?”

“That friend of yours—that inspector. He thinks … he thinks I killed that man, and that I killed Edna too….”

“Oh, that’s just his manner,” I said reassuringly. “He always goes about looking as though he suspected everybody.”

“No, Colin, it’s not like that at all. It’s no good saying things just to cheer me up. He’s thought that I had something to do with it right from the beginning.”

“My dear girl, there’s no evidence against you. Just because you were there on the spot that day, because someone put you on the spot….”

She interrupted.

“He thinks I put myself on the spot. He thinks it’s all a trumped-up story. He thinks that Edna in some way knew about it. He thinks that Edna recognized my voice on the telephone pretending to be Miss Pebmarsh.”

“Was it your voice?” I asked.

“No, of course it wasn’t. I never made that telephone call. I’ve always told you so.”

“Look here, Sheila,” I said. “Whatever you tell anyone else, you’ve got to tell me the truth.”

“So you don’t believe a word I say!”

“Yes, I do. You might have made that telephone call that day for some quite innocent reason. Someone may have asked you to make it, perhaps told you it was part of a joke, and then you got scared and once you’d lied about it, you had to go on lying. Was it like that?”

“No, no, no! How often have I got to tell you?”

“It’s all very well, Sheila, but there’s something you’re not telling me. I want you to trust me. If Hardcastle has got something against you, something that he hasn’t told me about—”

She interrupted again.

“Do you expect him to tell you everything?”

“Well, there’s no reason why he shouldn’t. We’re roughly members of the same profession.”

The waitress brought our order at this point. The coffee was as pale as the latest fashionable shade of mink.

“I didn’t know you had anything to do with the police,” Sheila said, slowly stirring her coffee round and round.

“It’s not exactly the police. It’s an entirely different branch. But what I was getting at was, that if Dick doesn’t tell me things he knows about you, it’s for a special reason. It’s because he thinks I’m interested in you. Well, I am interested in you. I’m more than that. I’m for you, Sheila, whatever you’ve done. You came out of that house that day scared to death. You were really scared. You weren’t pretending. You couldn’t have acted a part the way you did.”

“Of course I was scared. I was terrified.”

“Was it only finding the dead body that scared you? Or was there something else?”

“What else should there be?”

I braced myself.

“Why did you pinch that clock with Rosemary written across it?”

“What do you mean? Why should I pinch it?”

“I’m asking you why you did.”

“I never touched it.”

“You went back into that room because you’d left your gloves there, you said. You weren’t wearing any gloves that day. A fine September day. I’ve never seen you wear gloves. All right then, you went back into that room and you picked up that clock. Don’t lie to me about that. That’s what you did, isn’t it?”

She was silent for a moment or two, crumbling up the scones on her plate.

“All right,” she said in a voice that was almost a whisper. “All right. I did. I picked up the clock and I shoved it into my bag and I came out again.”

“But why did you do it?”

“Because of the name—Rosemary. It’s my name.”

“Your name is Rosemary, not Sheila?”

“It’s both. Rosemary Sheila.”

“And that was enough, just that? The fact that you’d the same name as was written on one of those clocks?”

She heard my disbelief, but she stuck to it.

“I was scared, I tell you.”

I looked at her. Sheila was my girl—the girl I wanted—and wanted for keeps. But it wasn’t any use having illusions about her. Sheila was a liar and probably always would be a liar. It was her way of fighting for survival—the quick easy glib denial. It was a child’s weapon—and she’d probably never got out of using it. If I wanted Sheila I must accept her as she was—be at hand to prop up the weak places. We’ve all got our weak places. Mine were different from Sheila’s but they were there.

I made up my mind and attacked. It was the only way.

“It was your clock, wasn’t it?” I said. “It belonged to you?”

She gasped.

“How did you know?”

“Tell me about it.”

The story tumbled out then in a helter-skelter of words. She’d had the clock nearly all her life. Until she was about six years old she’d always gone by the name of Rosemary—but she hated it and had insisted on being called Sheila. Lately the clock had been giving trouble. She’d taken it with her to leave at a clock-repairing shop not far from the Bureau. But she’d left it somewhere—in the bus, perhaps, or in the milk bar where she went for a sandwich at lunchtime.

“How long was this before the murder at 19, Wilbraham Crescent?”

About a week, she thought. She hadn’t bothered much, because the clock was old and always going wrong and it would really be better to get a new one.

And then:

“I didn’t notice it at first,” she said. “Not when I went into the room. And then I—found the dead man. I was paralysed. I straightened up after touching him and I just stood there staring and my clock was facing me on a table by the fire—my clock—and there was blood on my hand—and then she came in and I forgot everything because she was going to tread on him. And—and so—I bolted. To get away—that’s all I wanted.”

I nodded.

“And later?”

“I began to think. She said she hadn’t telephoned for me—then who had—who’d got me there and put my clock there? I—I said that about leaving gloves and—and stuffed it into my bag. I suppose it was—stupid of me.”

“You couldn’t have done anything sillier,” I told her. “In some ways, Sheila, you’ve got no sense at all.”

“But someone is trying to involve me. That postcard. It must have been sent by someone who knows I took that clock. And the postcard itself—the Old Bailey. If my father was a criminal—”

“What do you know about your father and mother?”

“My father and mother died in an accident when I was a baby. That’s what my aunt told me, what I’ve always been told. But she never speaks about them, she never tells me anything about them. Sometimes, once or twice when I asked, she’s told me things about them that aren’t the same as what she’s told me before. So I’ve always known, you see, that there’s something wrong.”

“Go on.”

“So I think that perhaps my father was some kind of criminal—perhaps even, a murderer. Or perhaps it was my mother. People don’t say your parents are dead and can’t or won’t tell you anything about those parents, unless the real reason is something—something that they think would be too awful for you to know.”

“So you got yourself all worked up. It’s probably quite simple. You may just have been an illegitimate child.”

“I thought of that, too. People do sometimes try and hide that kind of thing from children. It’s very stupid. They’d much better just tell them the real truth. It doesn’t matter as much nowadays. But the whole point is, you see, that I don’t know. I don’t know what’s behind all this. Why was I called Rosemary? It’s not a family name. It means remembrance, doesn’t it?”

“Which could be a nice meaning,” I pointed out.

“Yes, it could … But I don’t feel it was. Anyway, after the inspector had asked me questions that day, I began to think. Why had someone wanted to get me there? To get me there with a strange man who was dead? Or was it the dead man who had wanted me to meet him there? Was he, perhaps—my father, and he wanted me to do something for him? And then someone had come along and killed him instead. Or did someone want to make out from the beginning that it was I who had killed him? Oh, I was all mixed up, frightened. It seemed somehow as if everything was being made to point at me. Getting me there, and a dead man and my name—Rosemary—on my own clock that didn’t belong there. So I got in a panic and did something that was stupid, as you say.”

I shook my head at her.

“You’ve been reading or typing too many thrillers and mystery stories,” I said accusingly. “What about Edna? Haven’t you any idea at all what she’d got into her head about you? Why did she come all the way to your house to talk to you when she saw you every day at the office?”

“I’ve no idea. She couldn’t have thought I had anything to do with the murder. She couldn’t.”

“Could it have been something she overheard and made a mistake about?”

“There was nothing, I tell you. Nothing!”

I wondered. I couldn’t help wondering … Even now, I didn’t trust Sheila to tell the truth.

“Have you got any personal enemies? Disgruntled young men, jealous girls, someone or other a bit unbalanced who might have it in for you?”

It sounded most unconvincing as I said it.

“Of course not.”

So there it was. Even now I wasn’t sure about that clock. It was a fantastic story. 413. What did those figures mean? Why write them on a postcard with the word: REMEMBER unless they would mean something to the person to whom the postcard was sent?

I sighed, paid the bill and got up.

“Don’t worry,” I said. (Surely the most fatuous words in the English or any other language.) “The Colin Lamb Personal Service is on the job. You’re going to be all right, and we’re going to be married and live happily ever after on practically nothing a year. By the way,” I said, unable to stop myself, though I knew it would have been better to end on the romantic note, but the Colin Lamb Personal Curiosity drove me on. “What have you actually done with that clock? Hidden it in your stocking drawer?”

She waited just a moment before she said:

“I put it in the dustbin of the house next door.”

I was quite impressed. It was simple and probably effective. To think of that had been clever of her. Perhaps I had underestimated Sheila.

Twenty-four

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I

When Sheila had gone, I went across to the Clarendon, packed my bag and left it ready with the porter. It was the kind of hotel where they are particular about your checking out before noon.

Then I set out. My route took me past the police station, and after hesitating a moment, I went in. I asked for Hardcastle and he was there. I found him frowning down at a letter in his hand.

“I'm off again this evening, Dick,” I said. “Back to London.”

He looked up at me with a thoughtful expression.

“Will you take a piece of advice from me?”

“No,” I said immediately.

He paid no attention. People never do when they want to give you advice.

“I should get away—and stay away—if you know what's best for you.”

“Nobody can judge what's best for anyone else.”

“I doubt that.”

“I'll tell you something, Dick. When I've tidied up my present assignment, I'm quitting. At least—I think I am.”

“Why?”

“I'm like an old-fashioned Victorian clergyman. I have Doubts.”

"Give yourself time."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that. I asked him what he himself was looking so worried about.

"Read that." He passed me the letter he had been studying.

Dear Sir,

I've just thought of something. You asked me if my husband had any identifying marks and I said he hadn't. But I was wrong. Actually he has a kind of scar behind his left ear. He cut himself with a razor when a dog we had jumped up at him, and he had to have it stitched up. It was so small and unimportant I never thought of it the other day.

Yours truly,
Merlina Rival

"She writes a nice dashing hand," I said, "though I've never really fancied purple ink. Did the deceased have a scar?"

"He had a scar all right. Just where she says."

"Didn't she see it when she was shown the body?"

Hardcastle shook his head.

"The ear covers it. You have to bend the ear forward before you can see it."

"Then that's all right. Nice piece of corroboration. What's eating you?"

Hardcastle said gloomily that this case was the devil! He asked if I would be seeing my French or Belgian friend in London.

"Probably. Why?"

"I mentioned him to the chief constable who says he remembers him quite well—that Girl Guide murder case. I was to extend a very cordial welcome to him if he is thinking of coming down here."

“Not he,” I said. “The man is practically a limpet.”

II

It was a quarter past twelve when I rang the bell at 62, Wilbraham Crescent. Mrs. Ramsay opened the door. She hardly raised her eyes to look at me.

“What is it?” she said.

“Can I speak to you for a moment? I was here about ten days ago. You may not remember.”

She lifted her eyes to study me further. A faint frown appeared between her eyebrows.

“You came—you were with the police inspector, weren’t you?”

“That’s right, Mrs. Ramsay. Can I come in?”

“If you want to, I suppose. One doesn’t refuse to let the police in. They’d take a very poor view of it if you did.”

She led the way into the sitting room, made a brusque gesture towards a chair and sat down opposite me. There had been a faint acerbity in her voice, but her manner now resumed a listlessness which I had not noted in it previously.

I said:

“It seems quiet here today … I suppose your boys have gone back to school?”

“Yes. It does make a difference.” She went on, “I suppose you want to ask some more questions, do you, about this last murder? The girl who was killed in the telephone box.”

“No, not exactly that. I’m not really connected with the police, you know.”

She looked faintly surprised.

“I thought you were Sergeant—Lamb, wasn’t it?”

“My name is Lamb, yes, but I work in an entirely different department.”

The listlessness vanished from Mrs. Ramsay’s manner. She gave me a quick, hard, direct stare.

“Oh,” she said, “well, what is it?”

“Your husband is still abroad?”

“Yes.”

“He’s been gone rather a long time, hasn’t he, Mrs. Ramsay? And gone rather a long way?”

“What do you know about it?”

“Well, he’s gone beyond the Iron Curtain, hasn’t he?”

She was silent for a moment or two, and then she said in a quiet, toneless voice:

“Yes. Yes, that’s quite right.”

“Did you know he was going?”

“More or less.” She paused a minute and then said, “He wanted me to join him there.”

“Had he been thinking of it for some time?”

“I suppose so. He didn’t tell me until lately.”

“You are not in sympathy with his views?”

“I was once, I suppose. But you must know that already … You check up pretty thoroughly on things like that, don’t you? Go back into the past, find out who was a fellow traveller, who was a party member, all that sort of thing.”

“You might be able to give us information that would be very useful to us,” I said.

She shook her head.

“No. I can’t do that. I don’t mean that I won’t. You see, he never told me anything definite. I didn’t want to know. I was sick and tired of the whole thing! When Michael told me that he was leaving this country, clearing out, and going to Moscow, it didn’t really startle me. I had to decide then, what I wanted to do.”

“And you decided you were not sufficiently in sympathy with your husband’s aims?”

“No, I wouldn’t put it like that at all! My view is entirely personal. I believe it always is with women in the end, unless of course one is a fanatic. And then women can be very fanatical, but I wasn’t. I’ve never been anything more than mildly left-wing.”

“Was your husband mixed up in the Larkin business?”

“I don’t know. I suppose he might have been. He never told me anything or spoke to me about it.”

She looked at me suddenly with more animation.

“We’d better get it quite clear, Mr. Lamb. Or Mr. Wolf in Lamb’s clothing, or whatever you are. I loved my husband, I might have been fond enough of him to go with him to Moscow, whether I agreed with what his politics were or not. He wanted me to bring the boys. I didn’t want to bring the boys! It was as simple as that. And so I decided I’d have to stay with them. Whether I shall ever see Michael again or not I don’t know. He’s got to choose his way of life and I’ve got to choose mine, but I did know one thing quite definitely. After he talked about it to me. I wanted the boys brought up here in their own country. They’re English. I want them to be brought up as ordinary English boys.”

“I see.”

“And that I think is all,” said Mrs. Ramsay, as she got up.

There was now a sudden decision in her manner.

“It must have been a hard choice,” I said gently. “I’m very sorry for you.”

I was, too. Perhaps the real sympathy in my voice got through to her. She smiled very slightly.

“Perhaps you really are … I suppose in your job you have to try and get more or less under people’s skins, know what they’re feeling and thinking. It’s been rather a knockout blow for me, but I’m over the worst of it … I’ve got to make plans now, what to do, where to go, whether to stay here or go somewhere else. I shall have to get a job. I used to do secretarial work once. Probably I’ll take a refresher course in shorthand and typing.”

“Well, don’t go and work for the Cavendish Bureau,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Girls who are employed there seem to have rather unfortunate things happen to them.”

“If you think I know anything at all about that, you’re wrong. I don’t.”

I wished her luck and went. I hadn’t learnt anything from her. I hadn’t really thought I should. But one has to tidy up the loose ends.

III

Going out of the gate I almost cannoned into Mrs. McNaughton. She was carrying a shopping bag and seemed very wobbly on her feet.

"Let me," I said and took it from her. She was inclined to clutch it from me at first, then she leaned her head forward, peering at me, and relaxed her grip.

"You're the young man from the police," she said. "I didn't recognize you at first."

I carried the shopping bag to her front door and she teetered beside me. The shopping bag was unexpectedly heavy. I wondered what was in it. Pounds of potatoes?

"Don't ring," she said. "The door isn't locked."

Nobody's door seemed ever to be locked in Wilbraham Crescent.

"And how are you getting on with things?" she asked chattily. "He seems to have married very much below him."

I didn't know what she was talking about.

"Who did—I've been away," I explained.

"Oh, I see. Shadowing someone, I suppose. I meant that Mrs. Rival. I went to the inquest. Such a common-looking woman. I must say she didn't seem much upset by her husband's death."

"She hadn't see him for fifteen years," I explained.

"Angus and I have been married for twenty years." She sighed. "It's a long time. And so much gardening now that he isn't at the university … It makes it difficult to know what to do with oneself."

At that moment, Mr. McNaughton, spade in hand, came round the corner of the house.

"Oh, you're back, my dear. Let me take the things—"

"Just put it in the kitchen," said Mrs. McNaughton to me swiftly—her elbow nudged me. "Just the Cornflakes and the eggs and a melon," she said to her husband, smiling brightly.

I deposited the bag on the kitchen table. It clinked.

Cornflakes, my foot! I let my spy's instincts take over. Under a camouflage of sheet gelatine were three bottles of whisky.

I understood why Mrs. McNaughton was sometimes so bright and garrulous and why she was occasionally a little unsteady on her feet. And possibly why McNaughton had resigned his Chair.

It was a morning for neighbours. I met Mr. Bland as I was going along the crescent towards Albany Road. Mr. Bland seemed in very good form. He recognized me at once.

"How are you? How's crime? Got your dead body identified, I see. Seems to have treated that wife of his rather badly. By the way, excuse me, you're not one of the locals, are you?"

I said evasively I had come down from London.

"So the Yard was interested, was it?"

"Well—" I drew the word out in a noncommittal way.

"I understand. Mustn't tell tales out of school. You weren't at the inquest, though."

I said I had been abroad.

"So have I, my boy. So have I!" He winked at me.

"Gay Paree?" I asked, winking back.

"Wish it had been. No, only a day trip to Boulogne."

He dug me in the side with his elbow (quite like Mrs. McNaughton!).

"Didn't take the wife. Teamed up with a very nice little bit. Blonde. Quite a hot number."

"Business trip?" I said. We both laughed like men of the world.

He went on towards No. 61 and I walked on towards Albany Road.

I was dissatisfied with myself. As Poirot had said, there should have been more to be got out of the neighbours. It was positively unnatural that nobody should have seen anything! Perhaps Hardcastle had asked the wrong questions. But could I think of any better ones? As I turned into Albany Road I made a mental list of questions. It went something like this:

Mr. Curry (Castleton) had been doped—When? ditto had been killed—Where?

Mr. Curry (Castleton) had been taken to No. 19—How?

Somebody must have seen something!—Who? ditto—What?

I turned to the left again. Now I was walking along Wilbraham Crescent just as I had walked on September 9th. Should I call on Miss Pebmarsh? Ring the bell and say—well, what should I say?

Call on Miss Waterhouse? But what on earth could I say to her?

Mrs. Hemming perhaps? It wouldn't much matter what one said to Mrs. Hemming. She wouldn't be listening, and what she said, however haphazard and irrelevant, might lead to something.

I walked along, mentally noting the numbers as I had before. Had the late Mr. Curry come along here, also noting numbers, until he came to the number he meant to visit?

Wilbraham Crescent had never looked primmer. I almost found myself exclaiming in Victorian fashion, "Oh! if these stones could speak!" It was a favourite quotation in those days, so it seemed. But stones don't speak, no more do bricks and mortar, nor even plaster nor stucco. Wilbraham Crescent remained silently itself. Old-fashioned, aloof, rather shabby, and not given to conversation. Disapproving, I was sure, of itinerant prowlers who didn’t even know what they were looking for.

There were few people about, a couple of boys on bicycles passed me, two women with shopping bags. The houses themselves might have been embalmed like mummies for all the signs of life there were in them. I knew why that was. It was already, or close upon, the sacred hour of one, an hour sanctified by English traditions to the consuming of a midday meal. In one or two houses I could see through the uncurtained windows a group of one or two people round a dining table, but even that was exceedingly rare. Either the windows were discreetly screened with nylon netting, as opposed to the once popular Nottingham lace, or—which was far more probable—anyone who was at home was eating in the “modern” kitchen, according to the custom of the 1960’s.

It was, I reflected, a perfect hour of day for a murder. Had the murderer thought of that, I wondered? Was it part of the murderer’s plan? I came at last to No. 19.

Like so many other moronic members of the populace I stood and stared. There was, by now, no other human being in sight. “No neighbours,” I said sadly, “no intelligent onlookers.”

I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder. I had been wrong. There was a neighbour here, all right, a very useful neighbour if the neighbour had only been able to speak. I had been leaning against the post of No. 20, and the same large orange cat I had seen before was sitting on the gatepost. I stopped and exchanged a few words with him, first detaching his playful claw from my shoulder.

“If cats could speak,” I offered him as a conversational opening.

The orange cat opened his mouth, gave a loud melodious miaow.

“I know you can,” I said. “I know you can speak just as well as I can. But you’re not speaking my language. Were you sitting here that day? Did you see who went into that house or came out of it? Do you know all about what happened? I wouldn’t put it past you, puss.”

The cat took my remark in poor part. He turned his back on me and began to switch his tail.

“I’m sorry, your Majesty,” I said.

He gave me a cold look over his shoulder and started industriously to wash himself. Neighbours, I reflected bitterly! There was no doubt about it, neighbours were in short supply in Wilbraham Crescent. What I wanted—what Hardcastle wanted—was some nice gossipy, prying, peering old lady with time hanging heavy on her hands. Always hoping to look out and see something scandalous. The trouble is that that kind of old lady seems to have died out nowadays. They are all sitting grouped together in Old Ladies’ Homes with every comfort for the aged, or crowding up hospitals where beds are needed urgently for the really sick. The lame and the halt and the old didn’t live in their own houses anymore, attended by a faithful domestic or by some half-witted poor relation glad of a good home. It was a serious setback to criminal investigation.

I looked across the road. Why couldn’t there be any neighbours there? Why couldn’t there be a neat row of houses facing me instead of that great, inhuman-looking concrete block. A kind of human beehive, no doubt, tenanted by worker bees who were out all day and only came back in the evening to wash their smalls or make up their faces and go out to meet their young men. By contrast with the inhumanity of that block of flats I began almost to have a kindly feeling for the faded Victorian gentility of Wilbraham Crescent.

My eye was caught by a flash of light somewhere halfway up the building. It puzzled me. I stared up. Yes, there it came again. An open window and someone looking through it. A face slightly obliterated by something that was being held up to it. The flash of light came again. I dropped a hand into my pocket. I keep a good many things in my pockets, things that may be useful. You’d be surprised at what is useful sometimes. A little adhesive tape. A few quite innocent-looking instruments which are quite capable of opening most locked doors, a tin of grey powder labelled something which it isn’t and an insufflator to use with it, and one or two other little gadgets which most people wouldn’t recognize for what they are. Amongst other things I had a pocket bird watcher. Not a high-powered one but just good enough to be useful. I took this out and raised it to my eye.

There was a child at the window. I could see a long plait of hair lying over one shoulder. She had a pair of small opera glasses and she was studying me with what might have been flattering attention. As there was nothing else for her to look at, however, it might not be as flattering as it seemed. At that moment, however, there was another midday distraction in Wilbraham Crescent.

A very old Rolls-Royce came with dignity along the road driven by a very elderly chauffeur. He looked dignified but rather disgusted with life. He passed me with the solemnity of a whole procession of cars. My child observer, I noticed, was now training her opera glasses on him. I stood there, thinking.

It is always my belief that if you wait long enough, you’re bound to have some stroke of luck. Something that you can’t count upon and that you would never have thought of, but which just happens. Was it possible that this might be mine? Looking up again at the big square block, I noted carefully the position of the particular window I was interested in, counting from it to each end and up from the ground. Third floor. Then I walked along the street till I came to the entrance to the block of flats. It had a wide carriagedrive sweeping round the block with neatly spaced flower beds at strategic positions in the grass.

It’s always well, I find, to go through all the motions, so I stepped off the carriage drive towards the block, looked up over my head as though startled, bent down to the grass, pretended to hunt about and finally straightened up, apparently transferring something from my hand to my pocket. Then I walked round the block until I came to the entrance.

At most times of the day I should think there was a porter here, but between the sacred hour of one and two the entrance hall was empty. There was a bell with a large sign above it, saying PORTER, but I did not ring it. There was an automatic lift and I went to it and pressed a button for the third floor. After that I had to check things pretty carefully.

It looks simple enough from the outside to place one particular room, but the inside of a building is confusing. However, I’ve had a good deal of practice at that sort of thing in my time, and I was fairly sure that I’d got the right door. The number on it, for better or worse, was No. 77. “Well,” I thought, “sevens are lucky. Here goes.” I pressed the bell and stood back to await events.

Twenty-five

COLIN LAMB’S NARRATIVE

I had to wait just a minute or two, then the door opened.

A big blonde Nordic girl with a flushed face and wearing gaycoloured clothing looked at me inquiringly. Her hands had been hastily wiped but there were traces of flour on them and there was a slight smear of flour on her nose so it was easy for me to guess what she had been doing.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but you have a little girl here, I think. She dropped something out of the window.”

She smiled at me encouragingly. The English language was not as yet her strong point.

“I am sorry—what you say?”

“A child here—a little girl.”

“Yes, yes.” She nodded.

“Dropped something—out of the window.”

Here I did a little gesticulation.

“I picked it up and brought it here.”

I held out an open hand. In it was a silver fruit knife. She looked at it without recognition.

“I do not think—I have not seen….”

“You’re busy cooking,” I said sympathetically.

“Yes, yes, I cook. That is so.” She nodded vigorously.

“I don’t want to disturb you,” I said. “If you let me just take it to her.”

“Excuse?”

My meaning seemed to come to her. She led the way across the hall and opened a door. It led into a pleasant sitting room. By the window a couch had been drawn up and on it there was a child of about nine or ten years old, with a leg done up in plaster.

“This gentleman, he say you—you drop….”

At this moment, rather fortunately, a strong smell of burning came from the kitchen. My guide uttered an exclamation of dismay.

“Excuse, please excuse.”

“You go along,” I said heartily. “I can manage this.”

She fled with alacrity. I entered the room, shut the door behind me and came across to the couch.

“How d’you do?” I said.

The child said, “How d’you do?” and proceeded to sum me up with a long, penetrating glance that almost unnerved me. She was rather a plain child with straight mousy hair arranged in two plaits. She had a bulging forehead, a sharp chin and a pair of very intelligent grey eyes.

“I’m Colin Lamb,” I said. “What’s your name?”

She gave me the information promptly.

“Geraldine Mary Alexandra Brown.”

“Dear me,” I said, “that’s quite a bit of a name. What do they call you?”

“Geraldine. Sometimes Gerry, but I don’t like that. And Daddy doesn’t approve of abbreviations.”

One of the great advantages of dealing with children is that they have their own logic. Anyone of adult years would at once have asked me what I wanted. Geraldine was quite ready to enter into conversation without resorting to foolish questions. She was alone and bored and the onset of any kind of visitor was an agreeable novelty. Until I proved myself a dull and unamusing fellow, she would be quite ready to converse.

“Your daddy’s out, I suppose,” I said.

She replied with the same promptness and fullness of detail which she had already shown.

“Cartinghaven Engineering Works, Beaverbridge,” she said. “It’s fourteen and three-quarter miles from here exactly.”

“And your mother?”

“Mummy’s dead,” said Geraldine, with no diminution of cheerfulness. “She died when I was a baby two months old. She was in a plane coming from France. It crashed. Everyone was killed.”

She spoke with a certain satisfaction and I perceived that to a child, if her mother is dead, it reflects a certain kudos if she has been killed in a complete and devastating accident.

“I see,” I said. “So you have—” I looked towards the door.

“That’s Ingrid. She comes from Norway. She’s only been here a fortnight. She doesn’t know any English to speak of yet. I’m teaching her English.”

“And she is teaching you Norwegian?”

“Not very much,” said Geraldine.

“Do you like her?”

“Yes. She’s all right. The things she cooks are rather odd sometimes. Do you know, she likes eating raw fish.”

“I’ve eaten raw fish in Norway,” I said. “It’s very good sometimes.”

Geraldine looked extremely doubtful about that.

“She is trying to make a treacle tart today,” she said.

“That sounds good.”

“Umm—yes, I like treacle tart.” She added politely, “Have you come to lunch?”

“Not exactly. As a matter of fact I was passing down below out there, and I think you dropped something out of the window.”

“Me?”

“Yes.” I advanced the silver fruit knife.

Geraldine looked at it, at first suspiciously and then with signs of approval.

“It’s rather nice,” she said. “What is it?”

“It’s a fruit knife.”

I opened it.

“Oh, I see. You mean you can peel apples with it and things like that.”

“Yes.”

Geraldine sighed.

“It’s not mine. I didn’t drop it. What made you think I did?”

“Well, you were looking out of the window, and….”

“I look out of the window most of the time,” said Geraldine. “I fell down and broke my leg, you see.”

"Hard luck."

"Yes, wasn't it. I didn't break it in a very interesting way, though. I was getting out of a bus and it went on suddenly. It hurt rather at first and it ached a bit, but it doesn't now."

"Must be rather dull for you," I said.

"Yes, it is. But Daddy brings me things. Plasticine, you know, and books and crayons and jigsaw puzzles and things like that, but you get tired of doing things, so I spend a lot of time looking out of the window with these."

She produced with enormous pride a small pair of opera glasses.

"May I look?" I said.

I took them from her, adjusted them to my eyes and looked out of the window.

"They're jolly good," I said appreciatively.

They were indeed, excellent. Geraldine's daddy, if it had been he who supplied them, had not spared expense. It was astonishing how clearly you could see No. 19, Wilbraham Crescent and its neighbouring houses. I handed them back to her.

"They're excellent," I said. "First-class."

"They're proper ones," said Geraldine, with pride. "Not just for babies and pretending."

"No … I can see that."

"I keep a little book," said Geraldine.

She showed me.

"I write down things in it and the times. It's like trainspotting," she added. "I've got a cousin called Dick and he does trainspotting. We do motorcar numbers too. You know, you start at one and see how far you can get.”

“It’s rather a good sport,” I said.

“Yes, it is. Unfortunately there aren’t many cars come down this road so I’ve rather given that up for the time being.”

“I suppose you must know all about those houses down there, who lives in them and all that sort of thing.”

I threw it out casually enough but Geraldine was quick to respond.

“Oh, yes. Of course I don’t know their real names, so I have to give them names of my own.”

“That must be rather fun,” I said.

“That’s the Marchioness of Carrabas down there,” said Geraldine, pointing. “That one with all the untidy trees. You know, like Puss In Boots. She has masses and masses of cats.”

“I was talking to one just now,” I said, “an orange one.”

“Yes, I saw you,” said Geraldine.

“You must be very sharp,” I said. “I don’t expect you miss much, do you?”

Geraldine smiled in a pleased way. Ingrid opened the door and came in breathless.

“You are all right, yes?”

“We’re quite all right,” said Geraldine firmly. “You needn’t worry, Ingrid.”

She nodded violently and pantomimed with her hands.

“You go back, you cook.”

“Very well, I go. It is nice that you have a visitor.”

“She gets nervous when she cooks,” explained Geraldine, “when she’s trying anything new, I mean. And sometimes we have meals very late because of that. I’m glad you’ve come. It’s nice to have someone to distract you, then you don’t think about being hungry.”

“Tell me more about the people in the houses there,” I said, “and what you see. Who lives in the next house—the neat one?”

“Oh, there’s a blind woman there. She’s quite blind and yet she walks just as well as though she could see. The porter told me that. Harry. He’s very nice, Harry is. He tells me a lot of things. He told me about the murder.”

“The murder?” I said, sounding suitably astonished.

Geraldine nodded. Her eyes shone with importance at the information she was about to convey.

“There was a murder in that house. I practically saw it.”

“How very interesting.”

“Yes, isn’t it? I’ve never seen a murder before. I mean I’ve never seen a place where a murder happened.”

“What did you—er—see?”

“Well, there wasn’t very much going on just then. You know, it’s rather an empty time of day. The exciting thing was when somebody came rushing out of the house screaming. And then of course I knew something must have happened.”

“Who was screaming?”

“Just a woman. She was quite young, rather pretty really. She came out of the door and she screamed and she screamed. There was a young man coming along the road. She came out of the gate and sort of clutched him—like this.” She made a motion with her arms. She fixed me with a sudden glance. “He looked rather like you.”

“I must have a double,” I said lightly. “What happened next? This is very exciting.”

“Well, he sort of plumped her down. You know, on the ground there and then he went back into the house and the Emperor—that’s the orange cat, I always call him the Emperor because he looks so proud—stopped washing himself and he looked quite surprised, and then Miss Pikestaff came out of her house—that’s the one there, Number 18—she came out and stood on the steps staring.”

“Miss Pikestaff?”

“I call her Miss Pikestaff because she’s so plain. She’s got a brother and she bullies him.”

“Go on,” I said with interest.

“And then all sorts of things happened. The man came out of the house again—are you sure it wasn’t you?”

“I’m a very ordinary-looking chap,” I said modestly, “there are lots like me.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” said Geraldine, somewhat unflatteringly. “Well, anyway, this man, he went off down the road and telephoned from the call box down there. Presently police began arriving.” Her eyes sparkled. “Lots of police. And they took the dead body away in a sort of ambulance thing. Of course there were lots of people by that time, staring, you know. I saw Harry there, too. That’s the porter from these flats. He told me about it afterwards.”

“Did he tell you who was murdered?”

“He just said it was a man. Nobody knew his name.”

“It’s all very interesting,” I said.

I prayed fervently that Ingrid would not choose this moment to come in again with a delectable treacle tart or other delicacy.

"But go back a little, do. Tell me earlier. Did you see this man—the man who was murdered—did you see him arrive at the house?"

"No, I didn't. I suppose he must have been there all along."

"You mean he lived there?"

"Oh, no, nobody lives there except Miss Pebmarsh."

"So you know her real name?"

"Oh, yes, it was in the papers. About the murder. And the screaming girl was called Sheila Webb. Harry told me that the man who was murdered was called Mr. Curry. That's a funny name, isn't it, like the thing you eat. And there was a second murder, you know. Not the same day—later—in the telephone box down the road. I can see it from here, just, but I have to get my head right out of the window and turn it round. Of course I didn't really see it, because I mean if I'd known it was going to happen, I would have looked out. But, of course, I didn't know it was going to happen, so I didn't. There were a lot of people that morning just standing there in the street, looking at the house opposite. I think that's rather stupid, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, "very stupid."

Here Ingrid made her appearance once more.

"I come soon," she said reassuringly. "I come very soon now."

She departed again. Geraldine said:

"We don't really want her. She gets worried about meals. Of course this is the only one she has to cook except breakfast. Daddy goes down to the restaurant in the evening and he has something sent up for me from there. Just fish or something. Not a real dinner." Her voice sounded wistful.

"What time do you usually have your lunch, Geraldine?"

"My dinner, you mean? This is my dinner. I don't have dinner in the evening, it's supper. Well, I really have my dinner at any time Ingrid happens to have cooked it. She’s rather funny about time. She has to get breakfast ready at the right time because Daddy gets so cross, but midday dinner we have anytime. Sometimes we have it at twelve o’clock and sometimes I don’t get it till two. Ingrid says you don’t have meals at a particular time, you just have them when they’re ready.”

“Well, it’s an easy idea,” I said. “What time did you have your lunch—dinner, I mean—on the day of the murder?”

“That was one of the twelve o’clock days. You see, Ingrid goes out that day. She goes to the cinema or to have her hair done and a Mrs. Perry comes and keeps me company. She’s terrible, really. She pats one.”

“Pats one?” I said, slightly puzzled.

“You know, on the head. Says things like ‘dear little girlie.’ She’s not,” said Geraldine, “the kind of person you can have any proper conversation with. But she brings me sweets and that sort of thing.”

“How old are you, Geraldine?”

“I’m ten. Ten and three months.”

“You seem to me very good at intelligent conversation,” I said.

“That’s because I have to talk to Daddy a lot,” said Geraldine seriously.

“So you had your dinner early on that day of the murder?”

“Yes, so Ingrid could get washed up and go off just after one.”

“Then you were looking out of the window that morning, watching people.”

“Oh, yes. Part of the time. Earlier, about ten o’clock, I was doing a crossword puzzle.”

“I’ve been wondering whether you could possibly have seen Mr. Curry arriving at the house?”

Geraldine shook her head.

“No. I didn’t. It is rather odd, I agree.”

“Well, perhaps he got there quite early.”

“He didn’t go to the front door and ring the bell. I’d have seen him.”

“Perhaps he came in through the garden. I mean through the other side of the house.”

“Oh, no,” said Geraldine. “It backs on other houses. They wouldn’t like anyone coming through their garden.”

“No, no, I suppose they wouldn’t.”

“I wish I knew what he’d looked like,” said Geraldine.

“Well, he was quite old. About sixty. He was clean-shaven and he had on a dark grey suit.”

Geraldine shook her head.

“It sounds terribly ordinary,” she said with disapprobation.

“Anyway,” I said, “I suppose it’s difficult for you to remember one day from another when you’re lying here and always looking.”

“It’s not at all difficult.” She rose to the challenge. “I can tell you everything about that morning. I know when Mrs. Crab came and when she left.”

“That’s the daily cleaning woman, is it?”

“Yes. She scuttles, just like a crab. She’s got a little boy. Sometimes she brings him with her, but she didn’t that day. And then Miss Pebmarsh goes out about ten o’clock. She goes to teach children at a blind school. Mrs. Crab goes away about twelve. Sometimes she has a parcel with her that she didn’t have when she came. Bits of butter, I expect, and cheese, because

Miss Pebmarsh can’t see. I know particularly well what happened that day because you see Ingrid and I were having a little quarrel so she wouldn’t talk to me. I’m teaching her English and she wanted to know how to say ‘until we meet again.’ She had to tell it me in German. Auf Wiedersehen. I know that because I once went to Switzerland and people said that there. And they said Grüss Gott, too. That’s rude if you say it in English.”

“So what did you tell Ingrid to say?”

Geraldine began to laugh a deep malicious chuckle. She started to speak but her chuckles prevented her, but at last she got it out.

“I told her to say ‘Get the hell out of here!’ So she said it to Miss Bulstrode next door and Miss Bulstrode was furious. So Ingrid found out and was very cross with me and we didn’t make friends until nearly teatime the next day.”

I digested this information.

“So you concentrated on your opera glasses.”

Geraldine nodded.

“So that’s how I know Mr. Curry didn’t go in by the front door. I think perhaps he got in somehow in the night and hid in an attic. Do you think that’s likely?”

“I suppose anything really is possible,” I said, “but it doesn’t seem to me very probable.”

“No,” said Geraldine, “he would have got hungry, wouldn’t he? And he couldn’t have asked Miss Pebmarsh for breakfast, not if he was hiding from her.”

“And nobody came to the house?” I said. “Nobody at all? Nobody in a car—a tradesman—callers?”

“The grocer comes Mondays and Thursdays,” said Geraldine, “and the milk comes at half past eight in the morning.”

The child was a positive encyclopaedia.

“The cauliflowers and things Miss Pebmarsh buys herself. Nobody called at all except the laundry. It was a new laundry,” she added.

“A new laundry?”

“Yes. It’s usually the Southern Downs Laundry. Most people have the Southern Downs. It was a new laundry that day—the Snowflake Laundry. I’ve never seen the Snowflake Laundry. They must have just started.”

I fought hard to keep any undue interest out of my voice. I didn’t want to start her romancing.

“Did it deliver laundry or call for it?” I asked.

“Deliver it,” said Geraldine. “In a great big basket, too. Much bigger than the usual one.”

“Did Miss Pebmarsh take it in?”

“No, of course not, she’d gone out again.”

“What time was this, Geraldine?”

“1:35 exactly,” said Geraldine. “I wrote it down,” she added proudly.

She motioned towards a small notebook and opening it pointed with a rather dirty forefinger to an entry. 1:35 laundry came. No. 19.

“You ought to be at Scotland Yard,” I said.

“Do they have women detectives? I’d quite like that. I don’t mean policewomen. I think policewomen are silly.”

“You haven’t told me exactly what happened when the laundry came.”

“Nothing happened,” said Geraldine. “The driver got down, opened the van, took out this basket and staggered along round the side of the house to the back door. I expect he couldn't get in. Miss Pebmarsh probably locks it, so he probably left it there and came back."

"What did he look like?"

"Just ordinary," said Geraldine.

"Like me?" I asked.

"Oh, no, much older than you," said Geraldine, "but I didn't really see him properly because he drove up to the house—this way." She pointed to the right. "He drew up in front of 19 although he was on the wrong side of the road. But it doesn't matter in a street like this. And then he went in through the gate bent over the basket. I could only see the back of his head and when he came out again he was rubbing his face. I expect he found it a bit hot and trying, carrying that basket."

"And then he drove off again?"

"Yes. Why do you think it so interesting?"

"Well, I don't know," I said. "I thought perhaps he might have seen something interesting."

Ingrid flung the door open. She was wheeling a trolley.

"We eat dinner now," she said, nodding brightly.

"Goody," said Geraldine, "I'm starving."

I got up.

"I must be going now," I said. "Good-bye, Geraldine."

"Good-bye. What about this thing?" She picked up the fruit knife. "It's not mine." Her voice became wistful. "I wish it were."

"It looks as though it's nobody's in particular, doesn't it?"

“Would that make it treasure trove, or whatever it is?”

“Something of the kind,” I said. “I think you’d better hang on to it. That is, hang on to it until someone else claims it. But I don’t think,” I said truthfully, “that anybody will.”

“Get me an apple, Ingrid,” said Geraldine.

“Apple?”

“Pomme! Apfel!”

She did her linguistic best. I left them to it.

Twenty-six

Mrs. Rival pushed open the door of the Peacock's Arms and made a slightly unsteady progress towards the bar. She was murmuring under her breath. She was no stranger to this particular hostelry and was greeted quite affectionately by the barman.

"How do, Flo," he said, "how's tricks?"

"It's not right," said Mrs. Rival. "It's not fair. No, it's not right. I know what I'm talking about, Fred, and I say it's not right."

"Of course it isn't right," said Fred, soothingly. "What is, I'd like to know? Want the usual, dear?"

Mrs. Rival nodded assent. She paid and began to sip from her glass. Fred moved away to attend to another customer. Her drink cheered Mrs. Rival slightly. She still muttered under her breath but with a more good-humoured expression. When Fred was near her once more she addressed him again with a slightly softened manner.

"All the same, I'm not going to put up with it," she said. "No, I'm not. If there's one thing I can't bear, it's deceit. I don't stand for deceit, I never did."

"Of course you didn't," said Fred.

He surveyed her with a practised eye. "Had a good few already," he thought to himself. "Still, she can stand a couple more, I expect. Something's upset her."

"Deceit," said Mrs. Rival. "Prevari—prevari—well, you know the word I mean."

"Sure I know," said Fred.

He turned to greet another acquaintance. The unsatisfactory performance of certain dogs came under review. Mrs. Rival continued to murmur.

“I don’t like it and I won’t stand for it. I shall say so. People can’t think they can go around treating me like that. No, indeed they can’t. I mean, it’s not right and if you don’t stick up for yourself, who’ll stick up for you? Give me another, dearie,” she added in a louder voice.

Fred obliged.

“I should go home after that one, if I were you,” he advised.

He wondered what had upset the old girl so much. She was usually fairly even-tempered. A friendly soul, always good for a laugh.

“It’ll get me in bad, Fred, you see,” she said. “When people ask you to do a thing, they should tell you all about it. They should tell you what it means and what they’re doing. Liars. Dirty liars, that’s what I say. And I won’t stand for it.”

“I should cut along home, if I were you,” said Fred, as he observed a tear about to trickle down the mascaraed splendour. “Going to come on to rain soon, it is, and rain hard, too. Spoil that pretty hat of yours.”

Mrs. Rival gave one faint appreciative smile.

“I always was fond of cornflowers,” she said. “Oh, dear me, I don’t know what to do, I’m sure.”

“I should go home and have a nice kip,” said the barman, kindly.

“Well, perhaps, but—”

“Come on, now, you don’t want to spoil that hat.”

“That’s very true,” said Mrs. Rival. “Yes, that’s very true. That’s a very prof—profumed—no I don’t mean that—what do I mean?”

“Profound remark of yours, Fred.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome,” said Fred.

Mrs. Rival slipped down from her high seat and went not too steadily towards the door.

“Something seems to have upset old Flo tonight,” said one of the customers.

“She’s usually a cheerful bird—but we all have our ups and downs,” said another man, a gloomy-looking individual.

“If anyone had told me,” said the first man, “that Jerry Grainger would come in fifth, way behind Queen Caroline, I wouldn’t have believed it. If you ask me, there’s been hanky-panky. Racing’s not straight nowadays. Dope the horses, they do. All of ’em.”

Mrs. Rival had come out of the Peacock’s Arms. She looked up uncertainly at the sky. Yes, perhaps it was going to rain. She walked along the street, hurrying slightly, took a turn to the left, a turn to the right and stopped before a rather dingy-looking house. As she took out a key and went up the front steps a voice spoke from the area below, and a head poked round a corner of the door and looked up at her.

“Gentleman waiting for you upstairs.”

“For me?”

Mrs. Rival sounded faintly surprised.

“Well, if you call him a gentleman. Well dressed and all that, but not quite Lord Algernon Vere de Vere, I would say.”

Mrs. Rival succeeded in finding the keyhole, turned the key in it and entered.

The house smelled of cabbage and fish and eucalyptus. The latter smell was almost permanent in this particular hall. Mrs. Rival’s landlady was a great believer in taking care of her chest in winter weather and began the good work in mid-September. Mrs. Rival climbed the stairs, aiding herself with the banisters. She pushed open the door on the first floor and went in, then she stopped dead and took a step backwards.

“Oh,” she said, “it’s you.”

Detective Inspector Hardcastle rose from the chair where he was sitting.

“Good evening, Mrs. Rival.”

“What do you want?” asked Mrs. Rival with less finesse than she would normally have shown.

“Well, I had to come up to London on duty,” said Inspector Hardcastle, “and there were just one or two things I thought I’d like to take up with you, so I came along on the chance of finding you. The—er—the woman downstairs seemed to think you might be in before long.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Rival. “Well, I don’t see—well—”

Inspector Hardcastle pushed forward a chair.

“Do sit down,” he said politely.

Their positions might have been reversed, he the host and she the guest. Mrs. Rival sat down. She stared at him very hard.

“What did you mean by one or two things?” she said.

“Little points,” said Inspector Hardcastle, “little points that come up.”

“You mean—about Harry?”

“That’s right.”

“Now look here,” said Mrs. Rival, a slight belligerence coming into her voice; at the same time as an aroma of spirits came clearly to Inspector Hardcastle’s nostrils. “I’ve had Harry. I don’t want to think of him any more. I came forward, didn't I, when I saw his picture in the paper? I came and told you about him. It's all a long time ago and I don't want to be reminded of it. There's nothing more I can tell you. I've told you everything I could remember and now I don't want to hear any more about it."

"It's quite a small point," said Inspector Hardcastle. He spoke gently and apologetically.

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Rival, rather ungraciously. "What is it? Let's have it."

"You recognized the man as your husband or the man you'd gone through a form of marriage with about fifteen years ago. That is right, is it not?"

"I should have thought that by this time you would have known exactly how many years ago it was."

"Sharper than I thought," Inspector Hardcastle said to himself. He went on.

"Yes, you're quite right there. We looked it up. You were married on May 15th, 1948."

"It's always unlucky to be a May bride, so they say," said Mrs. Rival gloomily. "It didn't bring me any luck."

"In spite of the years that have elapsed, you were able to identify your husband quite easily."

Mrs. Rival moved with some slight uneasiness.

"He hadn't aged much," she said, "always took care of himself, Harry did."

"And you were able to give us some additional identification. You wrote to me, I think, about a scar."

"That's right. Behind his left ear it was. Here," Mrs. Rival raised a hand and pointed to the place.

"Behind his left ear?" Hardcastle stressed the word.

“Well—” she looked momentarily doubtful, “yes. Well, I think so. Yes I’m sure it was. Of course one never does know one’s left from one’s right in a hurry, does one? But, yes, it was the left side of his neck. Here.” She placed her hand on the same spot again.

“And he did it shaving, you say?”

“That’s right. The dog jumped up on him. A very bouncy dog we had at the time. He kept rushing in—affectionate dog. He jumped up on Harry and he’d got the razor in his hand, and it went in deep. It bled a lot. It healed up but he never lost the mark.” She was speaking now with more assurance.

“That’s a very valuable point, Mrs. Rival. After all, one man sometimes looks very like another man, especially when a good many years have passed. But to find a man closely resembling your husband who has a scar in the identical place—well that makes the identification very nice and safe, doesn’t it? It seems that we really have something to go on.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased,” said Mrs. Rival.

“And this accident with the razor happened—when?”

Mrs. Rival considered a moment.

“It must have been about—oh, about six months after we were married. Yes, that was it. We got the dog that summer, I remember.”

“So it took place about October or November, 1948. Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“And after your husband left you in 1951….”

“He didn’t so much leave me as I turned him out,” said Mrs. Rival with dignity.

“Quite so. Whichever way you like to put it. Anyway, after you turned your husband out in 1951 you never saw him again until you saw his picture in the paper?”

"Yes. That's what I told you."

"And you're quite sure about that, Mrs. Rival?"

"Of course I'm sure. I never set eyes on Harry Castleton since that day until I saw him dead."

"That's odd, you know," said Inspector Hardcastle, "that's very odd."

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Well, it's a very curious thing, scar tissue. Of course, it wouldn't mean much to you or me. A scar's a scar. But doctors can tell a lot from it. They can tell roughly, you know, how long a man has had a scar."

"I don't know what you're getting at."

"Well, simply this, Mrs. Rival. According to our police surgeon and to another doctor whom we consulted, that scar tissue behind your husband's ear shows very clearly that the wound in question could not be older than about five to six years ago."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Rival. "I don't believe it. I—nobody can tell. Anyway that wasn't when…."

"So you see," proceeded Hardcastle in a smooth voice, "if that wound made a scar only five or six years ago, it means that if the man was your husband he had no scar at the time when he left you in 1951."

"Perhaps he didn't. But anyway it was Harry."

"But you've never seen him since, Mrs. Rival. So if you've never seen him since, how would you know that he had acquired a scar five or six years ago?"

"You mix me up," said Mrs. Rival, "you mix me up badly. Perhaps it wasn't as long ago as 1948—You can't remember all these things. Anyway, Harry had that scar and I know it."

“I see,” said Inspector Hardcastle and he rose to his feet. “I think you’d better think over that statement of yours very carefully, Mrs. Rival. You don’t want to get into trouble, you know.”

“How do you mean, get into trouble?”

“Well,” Inspector Hardcastle spoke almost apologetically, “perjury.”

“Perjury. Me!”

“Yes. It’s quite a serious offence in law, you know. You could get into trouble, even go to prison. Of course, you’ve not been on oath in a coroner’s court, but you may have to swear to this evidence of yours in a proper court sometime. Then—well, I’d like you to think it over very carefully, Mrs. Rival. It may be that somebody—suggested to you that you should tell us this story about the scar?”

Mrs. Rival got up. She drew herself to her full height, her eyes flashed. She was at that moment almost magnificent.

“I never heard such nonsense in my life,” she said. “Absolute nonsense. I try and do my duty. I come and help you, I tell you all I can remember. If I’ve made a mistake I’m sure it’s natural enough. After all I meet a good many—well, gentlemen friends, and one may get things a little wrong sometimes. But I don’t think I did make a mistake. That man was Harry and Harry had a scar behind his left ear, I’m quite sure of it. And now, perhaps, Inspector Hardcastle, you’ll go away instead of coming here and insinuating that I’ve been telling lies.”

Inspector Hardcastle got up promptly.

“Good night, Mrs. Rival,” he said. “Just think it over. That’s all.”

Mrs. Rival tossed her head. Hardcastle went out of the door. With his departure, Mrs. Rival’s attitude altered immediately. The fine defiance of her attitude collapsed. She looked frightened and worried.

“Getting me into this,” she murmured, “getting me into this. I’ll—I’ll not go on with it. I’ll—I’ll—I’m not going to get into trouble for anybody. Telling me things, lying to me, deceiving me. It’s monstrous. Quite monstrous. I shall say so.”

She walked up and down unsteadily, then finally making up her mind, she took an umbrella from the corner and went out again. She walked along to the end of the street, hesitated at a call-box, then went on to a post office. She went in there, asked for change and went into one of the call boxes. She dialled Directory and asked for a number. She stood there waiting till the call came through.

“Go ahead please. Your party is on the line.”

She spoke.

“Hallo … oh, it’s you. Flo here. No, I know you told me not to but I’ve had to. You’ve not been straight with me. You never told me what I was getting into. You just said it would be awkward for you if this man was identified. I didn’t dream for a moment that I would get mixed up in a murder … Well, of course you’d say that, but at any rate it wasn’t what you told me … Yes, I do. I think you are mixed up in it in some way … Well, I’m not going to stand for it, I tell you … There’s something about being an—ac—well, you know the word I mean—accessory, something like that. Though I always thought that was costume jewellery. Anyway, it’s something like being a something after the fact, and I’m frightened, I tell you … telling me to write and tell them that bit about a scar. Now it seems he’d only got that scar a year or two ago and here’s me swearing he had it when he left me years ago … And that’s perjury and I might go to prison for it. Well, it’s no good your trying to talk me round … No … Obliging someone is one thing … Well I know … I know you paid me for it. And not very much either … Well, all right, I’ll listen to you, but I’m not going to … All right, all right, I’ll keep quiet … What did you say? … How much? … That’s a lot of money. How do I know that you’ve got it even … Well, yes, of course it would make a difference. You swear you didn’t have anything to do with it?—I mean with killing anyone … No, well I’m sure you wouldn’t. Of course, I see that … Sometimes you get mixed up with a crowd of people—and they go further than you would and it’s not your fault … You always make things sound so plausible … You always did … Well, all right, I’ll think it over but it’s got to be soon … Tomorrow? What time? … Yes … yes, I’ll come but no cheque. It might bounce … I don’t know really that I ought to go on getting myself mixed up in things even … all right. Well, if you say so … Well, I didn’t mean to be nasty about it … All right then.”

She came out of the post office weaving from side to side of the pavement and smiling to herself.

It was worth risking a little trouble with the police for that amount of money. It would set her up nicely. And it wasn’t very much risk really. She’d only got to say she’d forgotten or couldn’t remember. Lots of women couldn’t remember things that had only happened a year ago. She’d say she got mixed up between Harry and another man. Oh, she could think up lots of things to say.

Mrs. Rival was a naturally mercurial type. Her spirits rose as much now as they had been depressed before. She began to think seriously and intently of the first things she would spend the money on….

Twenty-seven

COLIN LAMB’S NARRATIVE

I

“You don’t seem to have got much out of that Ramsay woman?” complained Colonel Beck.

“There wasn’t much to get.”

“Sure of that?”

“Yes.”

“She’s not an active party?”

“No.”

Beck gave me a searching glance.

“Satisfied?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“You hoped for more?”

“It doesn’t fill the gap.”

“Well—we’ll have to look elsewhere … give up crescents—eh?”

“Yes.”

“You’re very monosyllabic. Got a hangover?”

“I’m no good at this job,” I said slowly.

“Want me to pat you on the head and say ‘There, there?’”

In spite of myself I laughed.

“That’s better,” said Beck. “Now then, what’s it all about? Girl trouble, I suppose.”

I shook my head. “It’s been coming on for some time.”

“As a matter of fact I’ve noticed it,” said Beck unexpectedly. “The world’s in a confusing state nowadays. The issues aren’t clear as they used to be. When discouragement sets in, it’s like dry rot. Whacking great mushrooms bursting through the walls! If that’s so, your usefulness to us is over. You’ve done some first-class work, boy. Be content with that. Go back to those damned seaweeds of yours.”

He paused and said: “You really like the beastly things, don’t you?”

“I find the whole subject passionately interesting.”

“I should find it repulsive. Splendid variation in nature, isn’t there? Tastes, I mean. How’s that patent murder of yours? I bet you the girl did it.”

“You’re wrong,” I said.

Beck shook his finger at me in an admonitory and avuncular manner.

“What I say to you is: ‘Be prepared.’ And I don’t mean it in the Boy Scout sense.”

I walked down Charing Cross Road deep in thought.

At the tube station I bought a paper.

I read that a woman, supposed to have collapsed in the rush hour at Victoria Station yesterday, had been taken to hospital. On arrival there she was found to have been stabbed. She had died without recovering consciousness.

Her name was Mrs. Merlina Rival.

II

I rang Hardcastle.

“Yes,” he said in answer to my questions. “It’s just as they say.”

His voice sounded hard and bitter.

“I went to see her night before last. I told her her story about the scar just wouldn’t jell. That the scar tissue was comparatively recent. Funny how people slip up. Just by trying to overdo things. Somebody paid that woman to identify the corpse as being that of her husband, who ran out on her years ago.

“Very well she did it, too! I believed her all right. And then whoever it was tried to be a little too clever. If she remembered that unimportant little scar as an afterthought, it would carry conviction and clinch the identification. If she had plumped out with it straight away, it might have sounded a bit too glib.”

“So Merlina Rival was in it up to the neck?”

“Do you know, I rather doubt that. Suppose an old friend or acquaintance goes to her and says: ‘Look here, I’m in a bit of a spot. A chap I’ve had business dealings with has been murdered. If they identify him and all our dealings come to light, it will be absolute disaster. But if you were to come along and say it’s that husband of yours, Harry Castleton, who did a bunk years ago, then the whole case will peter out.’”

“Surely she’d jib at that—say it was too risky?”

“If so, that someone would say: ‘What’s the risk? At the worst, you’ve made a mistake. Any woman can make a mistake after fifteen years.’ And probably at that point a nice little sum would have been mentioned. And she says O.K. she’ll be a sport! and do it.”

“With no suspicions?”

"She wasn't a suspicious woman. Why, good lord, Colin, every time we catch a murderer there are people who've known him well, and simply can't believe he could do anything like that!"

"What happened when you went up to see her?"

"I put the wind up her. After I left, she did what I expected she'd do—tried to get in touch with the man or woman who'd got her into this. I had a tail on her, of course. She went to a post office and put through a call from an automatic call box. Unfortunately, it wasn't the box I'd expected her to use at the end of her own street. She had to get change. She came out of the call box looking pleased with herself. She was kept under observation, but nothing of interest happened until yesterday evening. She went to Victoria Station and took a ticket to Crowdean. It was half past six, the rush hour. She wasn't on her guard. She thought she was going to meet whoever it was at Crowdean. But the cunning devil was a step ahead of her. Easiest thing in the world to gang up behind someone in a crowd, and press the knife in … Don't suppose she even knew she had been stabbed. People don't, you know. Remember that case of Barton in the Levitti Gang robbery? Walked the length of a street before he fell down dead. Just a sudden sharp pain—then you think you're all right again. But you're not. You're dead on your feet although you don't know it."

He finished up: "Damn and damn and damn!"

"Have you—checked on—anybody?"

I had to ask. I couldn't help myself.

His reply came swift and sharp.

"The Pebmarsh woman was in London yesterday. She did some business for the Institute and returned to Crowdean by the 7:40 train." He paused. "And Sheila Webb took up a typescript to check over with a foreign author who was in London on his way to New York. She left the Ritz Hotel at 5:30 approx. and took in a cinema—alone—before returning."

“Look here, Hardcastle,” I said, “I’ve got something for you. Vouched for by an eyewitness. A laundry van drew up at 19, Wilbraham Crescent at 1:35 on September the 9th. The man who drove it delivered a big laundry basket at the back door of the house. It was a particularly large laundry basket.”

“Laundry? What laundry?”

“The Snowflake Laundry. Know it?”

“Not offhand. New laundries are always starting up. It’s an ordinary sort of name for a laundry.”

“Well—you check up. A man drove it—and a man took the basket into the house—”

Hardcastle’s voice came suddenly, alert with suspicion.

“Are you making this up, Colin?”

“No. I told you I’ve got an eyewitness. Check up, Dick. Get on with it.”

I rang off before he could badger me further.

I walked out from the box and looked at my watch. I had a good deal to do—and I wanted to be out of Hardcastle’s reach whilst I did it. I had my future life to arrange.

Twenty-eight

COLIN LAMB'S NARRATIVE

I

I arrived at Crowdean at eleven o'clock at night, five days later. I went to the Clarendon Hotel, got a room, and went to bed. I'd been tired the night before and I overslept. I woke up at a quarter to ten.

I sent for coffee and toast and a daily paper. It came and with it a large square note addressed to me with the words BY HAND in the top left-hand corner.

I examined it with some surprise. It was unexpected. The paper was thick and expensive, the superscription neatly printed.

After turning it over and playing with it, I finally opened it.

Inside was a sheet of paper. Printed on it in large letters were the words:

CURLEW HOTEL 11:30

ROOM 413

(Knock three times)

I stared at it, turned it over in my hand—what was all this?

I noted the room number—413—the same as the clocks. A coincidence? Or not a coincidence.

I had thoughts of ringing the Curlew Hotel. Then I thought of ringing Dick Hardcastle. I didn't do either.

My lethargy was gone. I got up, shaved, washed, dressed and walked along the front to the Curlew Hotel and got there at the appointed time.

The summer season was pretty well over now. There weren’t many people about inside the hotel.

I didn’t make any inquiries at the desk. I went up in the lift to the fourth floor and walked along the corridor to No. 413.

I stood there for a moment or two: then, feeling a complete fool, I knocked three times….

A voice said, “Come in.”

I turned the handle, the door wasn’t locked. I stepped inside and stopped dead.

I was looking at the last person on earth I would have expected to see.

Hercule Poirot sat facing me. He beamed at me.

“Une petite surprise, n’est-ce pas?” he said. “But a pleasant one, I hope.”

“Poirot, you old fox,” I shouted. “How did you get here?”

“I got here in a Daimler limousine—most comfortable.”

“But what are you doing here?”

“It was most vexing. They insisted, positively insisted on the redecoration of my apartment. Imagine my difficulty. What can I do? Where can I go?”

“Lots of places,” I said coldly.

“Possibly, but it is suggested to me by my doctor that the air of the sea will be good for me.”

“One of those obliging doctors who finds out where his patient wants to go, and advises him to go there! Was it you who sent me this?” I brandished the letter I had received.

“Naturally—who else?”

"Is it a coincidence that you have a room whose number is 413?"

"It is not a coincidence. I asked for it specially."

"Why?"

Poirot put his head on one side and twinkled at me.

"It seemed to be appropriate."

"And knocking three times?"

"I could not resist it. If I could have enclosed a sprig of rosemary it would have been better still. I thought of cutting my finger and putting a bloodstained fingerprint on the door. But enough is enough! I might have got an infection."

"I suppose this is second childhood," I remarked coldly. "I'll buy you a balloon and a woolly rabbit this afternoon."

"I do not think you enjoy my surprise. You express no joy, no delight at seeing me."

"Did you expect me to?"

"Pourquoi pas? Come, let us be serious, now that I have had my little piece of foolery. I hope to be of assistance. I have called up the chief constable who has been of the utmost amiability, and at this moment I await your friend, Detective Inspector Hardcastle."

"And what are you going to say to him?"

"It was in my mind that we might all three engage in conversation."

I looked at him and laughed. He might call it conversation—but I knew who was going to do the talking.

Hercule Poirot!

II

Hardcastle had arrived. We had had the introduction and the greetings. We were now settled down in a companionable fashion, with Dick occasionally glancing surreptitiously at Poirot with the air of a man at the Zoo studying a new and surprising acquisition. I doubt if he had ever met anyone quite like Hercule Poirot before!

Finally, the amenities and politeness having been observed, Hardcastle cleared his throat and spoke.

"I suppose, M. Poirot," he said cautiously, "that you'll want to see—well, the whole setup for yourself? It won't be exactly easy—" He hesitated. "The chief constable told me to do everything I could for you. But you must appreciate that there are difficulties, questions that may be asked, objections. Still, as you have come down here specially—"

Poirot interrupted him—with a touch of coldness.

"I came here," he said, "because of the reconstruction and decoration of my apartment in London."

I gave a horse laugh and Poirot shot me a look of reproach.

"M. Poirot doesn't have to go and see things," I said. "He has always insisted that you can do it all from an armchair. But that's not quite true, is it, Poirot? Or why have you come here?"

Poirot replied with dignity.

"I said that it was not necessary to be the foxhound, the bloodhound, the tracking dog, running to and fro upon the scent. But I will admit that for the chase a dog is necessary. A retriever, my friend. A good retriever."

He turned towards the inspector. One hand twirled his moustache in a satisfied gesture.

"Let me tell you," he said, "that I am not like the English, obsessed with dogs. I, personally, can live without the dog. But I accept, nevertheless, your ideal of the dog. The man loves and respects his dog. He indulges him, he boasts of the intelligence and sagacity of his dog to his friends. Now figure to yourself, the opposite may also come to pass! The dog is fond of his master. He indulges that master! He, too, boasts of his master, boasts of his master's sagacity and intelligence. And as a man will rouse himself when he does not really want to go out, and take his dog for a walk because the dog enjoys the walk so much, so will the dog endeavour to give his master what that master pines to have.

"It was so with my kind young friend Colin here. He came to see me, not to ask for help with his own problem; that he was confident that he could solve for himself, and has, I gather, done so. No, he felt concern that I was unoccupied and lonely so he brought to me a problem that he felt would interest me and give me something to work upon. He challenged me with it—challenged me to do what I had so often told him it was possible to do—sit still in my chair and—in due course—resolve that problem. It may be, I suspect it is, that there was a little malice, just a small harmless amount, behind that challenge. He wanted, let us say, to prove to me that it was not so easy after all. Mais oui, mon ami, it is true, that! You wanted to mock yourself at me—just a little! I do not reproach you. All I say is, you did not know your Hercule Poirot."

He thrust out his chest and twirled his moustaches.

I looked at him and grinned affectionately.

"All right then," I said. "Give us the answer to the problem—if you know it."

"But of course I know it!"

Hardcastle stared at him incredulously.

"Are you saying you know who killed the man at 19, Wilbraham Crescent?"

"Certainly."

“And also who killed Edna Brent?”

“Of course.”

“You know the identity of the dead man?”

“I know who he must be.”

Hardcastle had a very doubtful expression on his face. Mindful of the chief constable, he remained polite. But there was scepticism in his voice.

“Excuse me, M. Poirot, you claim that you know who killed three people. And why?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got an open and shut case?”

“That, no.”

“All you mean is that you have a hunch,” I said, unkindly.

“I will not quarrel with you over a word, mon cher Colin. All I say is, I know!”

Hardcastle sighed.

“But you see, M. Poirot, I have to have evidence.”

“Naturally, but with the resources you have at your disposal, it will be possible for you, I think, to get that evidence.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Come now, Inspector. If you know—really know—is not that the first step? Can you not, nearly always, go on from there?”

“Not always,” said Hardcastle with a sigh. “There are men walking about today who ought to be in gaol. They know it and we know it.”

“But that is a very small percentage, is it not—”

I interrupted.

“All right. All right. You know … Now let us know too!”

“I perceive you are still sceptical. But first let me say this: To be sure means that when the right solution is reached, everything falls into place. You perceive that in no other way could things have happened.”

“For the love of Mike,” I said, “get on with it! I grant you all the points you’ve made.”

Poirot arranged himself comfortably in his chair and motioned to the inspector to replenish his glass.

“One thing, mes amis, must be clearly understood. To solve any problem one must have the facts. For that one needs the dog, the dog who is a retriever, who brings the pieces one by one and lays them at—”

“At the feet of the master,” I said. “Admitted.”

“One cannot from one’s seat in a chair solve a case solely from reading about it in a newspaper. For one’s facts must be accurate, and newspapers are seldom, if ever, accurate. They report something happened at four o’clock when it was a quarter past four, they say a man had a sister called Elizabeth when actually he had a sister-in-law called Alexandra. And so on. But in Colin here, I have a dog of remarkable ability—an ability, I may say, which has taken him far in his own career. He has always had a remarkable memory. He can repeat to you, even several days later, conversations that have taken place. He can repeat them accurately—that is, not transposing them, as nearly all of us do, to what the impression made on him was. To explain roughly—he would not say, ‘And at twenty past eleven the post came’ instead of describing what actually happened, namely a knock on the front door and someone coming into the room with letters in their hand. All this is very important. It means that he heard what I would have heard if I had been there and seen what I would have seen.”

“Only the poor dog hasn’t made the necessary deductions?”

“So, as far as can be, I have the facts—I am ‘in the picture.’ It is your wartime term, is it not? To ‘put one in the picture.’ The thing that struck me first of all, when Colin recounted the story to me, was its highly fantastic character. Four clocks, each roughly an hour ahead of the right time, and all introduced into the house without the knowledge of the owner, or so she said. For we must never, must we, believe what we are told, until such statements have been carefully checked?”

“Your mind works the way that mine does,” said Hardcastle approvingly.

“On the floor lies a dead man—a respectable-looking elderly man. Nobody knows who he is (or again so they say). In his pocket is a card bearing the name of Mr. R. H. Curry, 7, Denvers Street. Metropolis Insurance Company. But there is no Metropolis Insurance Company. There is no Denvers Street and there seems to be no such person as Mr. Curry. That is negative evidence, but it is evidence. We now proceed further. Apparently at about ten minutes to two a secretarial agency is rung up, a Miss Millicent Pebmarsh asks for a stenographer to be sent to 19, Wilbraham Crescent at three o’clock. It is particularly asked that a Miss Sheila Webb should be sent. Miss Webb is sent. She arrives there at a few minutes before three; goes, according to instructions, into the sitting room, finds a dead man on the floor and rushes out of the house screaming. She rushes into the arms of a young man.”

Poirot paused and looked at me. I bowed.

“Enter our young hero,” I said.

“You see,” Poirot pointed out. “Even you cannot resist a farcical melodramatic tone when you speak of it. The whole thing is melodramatic, fantastic and completely unreal. It is the kind of thing that could occur in the writings of such people as Garry Gregson, for instance. I may mention that when my young friend arrived with this tale I was embarking on a course of thriller writers who had plied their craft over the last sixty years. Most interesting. One comes almost to regard actual crimes in the light of fiction. That is to say that if I observe that a dog has not barked when he should bark, I say to myself, ‘Ha! A Sherlock Holmes crime!’ Similarly, if the corpse is found in a sealed room, naturally I say, ‘Ha! A Dickson Carr case!’ Then there is my friend Mrs. Oliver. If I were to find—but I will say no more. You catch my meaning? So here is the setting of a crime in such wildly improbable circumstances that one feels at once, ‘This book is not true to life. All this is quite unreal.’ But alas, that will not do here, for this is real. It happened. That gives one to think furiously, does it not?”

Hardcastle would not have put it like that, but he fully agreed with the sentiment, and nodded vigorously. Poirot went on:

“It is, as it were, the opposite of Chesterton’s, ‘Where would you hide a leaf? In a forest. Where would you hide a pebble? On a beach.’ Here there is excess, fantasy, melodrama! When I say to myself in imitation of Chesterton, ‘Where does a middle-aged woman hide her fading beauty?’ I do not reply, ‘Amongst other faded middle-aged faces.’ Not at all. She hides it under makeup, under rouge and mascara, with handsome furs wrapped round her and with jewels round her neck and hanging in her ears. You follow me?”

“Well—” said the inspector, disguising the fact that he didn’t.

“Because then, you see, people will look at the furs and the jewels and the coiffure and the haute couture, and they will not observe what the woman herself is like at all! So I say to myself—and I say to my friend Colin—Since this murder has so many fantastic trappings to distract one it must really be very simple. Did I not?”

“You did,” I said. “But I still don’t see how you can possibly be right.”

“For that you must wait. So, then, we discard the trappings of the crime and we go to the essentials. A man has been killed. Why has he been killed? And who is he? The answer to the first question will obviously depend on the answer to the second. And until you get the right answer to these two questions you cannot possibly proceed. He could be a blackmailer, or a confidence trickster, or somebody’s husband whose existence was obnoxious or dangerous to his wife. He could be one of a dozen things. The more I heard, the more everybody seems to agree that he looked a perfectly ordinary, well-to-do, reputable elderly man. And suddenly I think to myself, ‘You say this should be a simple crime? Very well, make it so. Let this man be exactly what he seems—a well-to-do respectable elderly man.’” He looked at the inspector. “You see?”

“Well—” said the inspector again, and paused politely.

“So here is someone, an ordinary, pleasant, elderly man whose removal is necessary to someone. To whom? And here at last we can narrow the field a little. There is local knowledge—of Miss Pebmarsh and her habits, of the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau, of a girl working there called Sheila Webb. And so I say to my friend Colin: ‘The neighbours. Converse with them. Find out about them. Their backgrounds. But above all, engage in conversation. Because in conversation you do not get merely the answers to questions—in ordinary conversational prattle things slip out. People are on their guard when the subject may be dangerous to them, but the moment ordinary talk ensues they relax, they succumb to the relief of speaking the truth, which is always very much easier than lying. And so they let slip one little fact which unbeknown to them makes all the difference.”

“An admirable exposition,” I said. “Unfortunately it didn’t happen in this case.”

“But, mon cher, it did. One little sentence of inestimable importance.”

“What?” I demanded. “Who said it? When?”

“In due course, mon cher.”

“You were saying, M. Poirot?” The inspector politely drew Poirot back to the subject.

“If you draw a circle round Number 19, anybody within it might have killed Mr. Curry. Mrs. Hemming, the Blands, the McNaughtons, Miss Waterhouse. But more important still, there are those already positioned on the spot. Miss Pebmarsh who could have killed him before she went out at 1:35 or thereabouts and Miss Webb who could have arranged to meet him there, and killed him before rushing from the house and giving the alarm.”

“Ah,” said the inspector. “You’re coming down to brass tacks now.”

“And of course,” said Poirot, wheeling round, “you, my dear Colin. You were also on the spot. Looking for a high number where the low numbers were.”

“Well, really,” I said indignantly. “What will you say next?”

“Me, I say anything!” declared Poirot grandly.

“And yet I am the person who comes and dumps the whole thing in your lap!”

“Murderers are often conceited,” Poirot pointed out. “And there too, it might have amused you—to have a joke like that at my expense.”

“If you go on, you’ll convince me,” I said.

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Poirot turned back to Inspector Hardcastle.

“Here, I say to myself, must be essentially a simple crime. The presence of irrelevant clocks, the advancing of time by an hour, the arrangements made so deliberately for the discovery of the body, all these must be set aside for the moment. They are, as is said in your immortal ‘Alice’ like ‘shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings.’ The vital point is that an ordinary elderly man is dead and that somebody wanted him dead. If we knew who the dead man was, it would give us a pointer to his killer. If he was a well-known blackmailer then we must look for a man who could be blackmailed. If he was a detective, then we look for a man who has a criminal secret; if he is a man of wealth, then we look among his heirs. But if we do not know who the man is—then we have the more difficult task of hunting amongst those in the surrounding circle for a man who has a reason to kill.

“Setting aside Miss Pebmarsh and Sheila Webb, who is there who might not be what they seem to be? The answer was disappointing. With the exception of Mr. Ramsay who I understood was not what he seemed to be?" Here Poirot looked inquiringly at me and I nodded, "everybody's bona fides were genuine. Bland was a well-known local builder, McNaughton had had a Chair at Cambridge, Mrs. Hemming was the widow of a local auctioneer, the Waterhouses were respectable residents of long standing. So we come back to Mr. Curry. Where did he come from? What brought him to 19, Wilbraham Crescent? And here one very valuable remark was spoken by one of the neighbours, Mrs. Hemming. When told that the dead man did not live at Number 19, she said, 'Oh! I see. He just came there to be killed. How odd.' She had the gift, often possessed by those who are too occupied with their own thoughts to pay attention to what others are saying, to come to the heart of the problem. She summed up the whole crime. Mr. Curry came to 19, Wilbraham Crescent to be killed. It was as simple as that!"

"That remark of hers struck me at the time," I said.

Poirot took no notice of me.

"'Dilly, dilly, dilly—come and be killed.' Mr. Curry came—and he was killed. But that was not all. It was important that he should not be identified. He had no wallet, no papers, the tailor's marks were removed from his clothes. But that would not be enough. The printed card of Curry, Insurance Agent, was only a temporary measure. If the man's identity was to be concealed permanently, he must be given a false identity. Sooner or later, I was sure, somebody would turn up, recognize him positively and that would be that. A brother, a sister, a wife. It was a wife. Mrs. Rival—and the name alone might have aroused suspicion. There is a village in Somerset—I have stayed near there with friends—the village of Curry Rival—Subconsciously, without knowing why those two names suggested themselves, they were chosen. Mr. Curry—Mrs. Rival.

"So far—the plan is obvious, but what puzzled me was why our murderer took for granted that there would be no real identification. If the man had no family, there are at least landladies, servants, business associates. That led me to the next assumption—this man was not known to be missing. A further assumption was that he was not English, and was only visiting this country. That would tie in with the fact that the dental work done on his teeth did not correspond with any dental records here.

"I began to have a shadowy picture both of the victim and of the murderer. No more than that. The crime was well-planned and intelligently carried out—but now there came that one piece of sheer bad luck that no murderer can foresee."

"And what was that?" asked Hardcastle.

Unexpectedly, Poirot threw his head back, and recited dramatically:

"For want of a nail the shoe was lost,

For want of a shoe the horse was lost,

For want of a horse the battle was lost,

For want of a battle the Kingdom was lost,

And all for the want of a horse shoe nail."

He leaned forward.

"A good many people could have killed Mr. Curry. But only one person could have killed, or could have had reason to kill, the girl Edna."

We both stared at him.

"Let us consider the Cavendish Secretarial Bureau. Eight girls work there. On the 9th of September, four of those girls were out on assignments some little distance away—that is, they were provided with lunch by the clients to whom they had gone. They were the four who normally took the first lunch period from 12:30 to 1:30. The remaining four, Sheila Webb, Edna Brent and two girls, Janet and Maureen, took the second period, 1:30 to 2:30. But on that day Edna Brent had an accident quite soon after leaving the office. She tore the heel off her shoe in the grating. She could not walk like that. She bought some buns and came back to the office."

Poirot shook an emphatic finger at us.

“We have been told that Edna Brent was worried about something. She tried to see Sheila Webb out of the office, but failed. It has been assumed that that something was connected with Sheila Webb, but there is no evidence of that. She might only have wanted to consult Sheila Webb about something that had puzzled her—but if so one thing was clear. She wanted to talk to Sheila Webb away from the bureau.

“Her words to the constable at the inquest are the only clue we have as to what was worrying her: She said something like: ‘I don’t see how what she said can have been true.’ Three women had given evidence that morning. Edna could have been referring to Miss Pebmarsh. Or, as it has been generally assumed, she could have been referring to Sheila Webb. But there is a third possibility—she could have been referring to Miss Martindale.”

“Miss Martindale? But her evidence only lasted a few minutes.”

“Exactly. It consisted only of the telephone call she had received purporting to be from Miss Pebmarsh.”

“Do you mean that Edna knew that it wasn’t from Miss Pebmarsh?”

“I think it was simpler than that. I am suggesting that there was no telephone call at all.”

He went on:

“The heel of Edna’s shoe came off. The grating was quite close to the office. She came back to the bureau. But Miss Martindale, in her private office, did not know that Edna had come back. As far as she knew there was nobody but herself in the bureau. All she need do was to say a telephone call had come through at 1:49. Edna does not see the significance of what she knows at first. Sheila is called in to Miss Martindale and told to go out on an appointment. How and when that appointment was made is not mentioned to Edna. News of the murder comes through and little by little the story gets more definite. Miss Pebmarsh rang up and asked for Sheila Webb to be sent. But Miss Pebmarsh says it was not she who rang up. The call is said to have come through at ten minutes to two. But Edna knows that couldn’t be true. No telephone call came through then. Miss Martindale must have made a mistake—But Miss Martindale definitely doesn't make mistakes. The more Edna thinks about it, the more puzzling it is. She must ask Sheila about it. Sheila will know.

"And then comes the inquest. And the girls all go to it. Miss Martindale repeats her story of the telephone call and Edna knows definitely now that the evidence Miss Martindale gives so clearly, with such precision as to the exact time, is untrue. It was then that she asked the constable if she could speak to the inspector. I think probably that Miss Martindale, leaving the Cornmarket in a crowd of people, overheard her asking that. Perhaps by then she had heard the girls chaffing Edna about her shoe accident without realizing what it involved. Anyway, she followed the girl to Wilbraham Crescent. Why did Edna go there, I wonder?"

"Just to stare at the place where it happened, I expect," said Hardcastle with a sigh. "People do."

"Yes, that is true enough. Perhaps Miss Martindale speaks to her there, walks with her down the road and Edna plumps out her question. Miss Martindale acts quickly. They are just by the telephone box. She says, 'This is very important. You must ring up the police at once. The number of the police station is so and so. Ring up and tell them we are both coming there now.' It is second nature for Edna to do what she is told. She goes in, picks up the receiver and Miss Martindale comes in behind her, pulls the scarf round her neck and strangles her."

"And nobody saw this?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"They might have done, but they didn't! It was just on one o'clock. Lunchtime. And what people there were in the Crescent were busy staring at 19. It was a chance boldly taken by a bold and unscrupulous woman."

Hardcastle was shaking his head doubtfully.

"Miss Martindale? I don't see how she can possibly come into it."

"No. One does not see at first. But since Miss Martindale undoubtedly killed Edna—oh, yes—only she could have killed Edna, then she must come into it. And I begin to suspect that in Miss Martindale we have the Lady Macbeth of this crime, a woman who is ruthless and unimaginative."

"Unimaginative?" queried Hardcastle.

"Oh, yes, quite unimaginative. But very efficient. A good planner."

"But why? Where's the motive?"

Hercule Poirot looked at me. He wagged a finger.

"So the neighbours' conversation was no use to you, eh? I found one most illuminating sentence. Do you remember that after talking of living abroad, Mrs. Bland remarked that she liked living in Crowdean because she had a sister here. But Mrs. Bland was not supposed to have a sister. She had inherited a large fortune a year ago from a Canadian great-uncle because she was the only surviving member of his family."

Hardcastle sat up alertly.

"So you think—"

Poirot leaned back in his chair and put his fingertips together. He half closed his eyes and spoke dreamily.

"Say you are a man, a very ordinary and not too scrupulous man, in bad financial difficulties. A letter comes one day from a firm of lawyers to say that your wife has inherited a big fortune from a great-uncle in Canada. The letter is addressed to Mrs. Bland and the only difficulty is that the Mrs. Bland who receives it is the wrong Mrs. Bland—she is the second wife—not the first one—Imagine the chagrin! The fury! And then an idea comes. Who is to know that it is the wrong Mrs. Bland? Nobody in Crowdean knows that Bland was married before. His first marriage, years ago, took place during the war when he was overseas. Presumably his first wife died soon afterwards, and he almost immediately remarried. He has the original marriage certificate, various family papers, photographs of Canadian relations now dead—It will be all plain sailing. Anyway, it is worth risking. They risk it, and it comes off. The legal formalities go through. And there the Blands are, rich and prosperous, all their financial troubles over—

“And then—a year later—something happens. What happens? I suggest that someone was coming over from Canada to this country—and that this someone had known the first Mrs. Bland well enough not to be deceived by an impersonation. He may have been an elderly member of the family attorneys, or a close friend of the family—but whoever he was, he will know. Perhaps they thought of ways of avoiding a meeting. Mrs. Bland could feign illness, she could go abroad—but anything of that kind would only arouse suspicion. The visitor would insist on seeing the woman he had come over to see—”

“And so—to murder?”

“Yes. And here, I fancy, Mrs. Bland’s sister may have been the ruling spirit. She thought up and planned the whole thing.”

“You are taking it that Miss Martindale and Mrs. Bland are sisters?”

“It is the only way things make sense.”

“Mrs. Bland did remind me of someone when I saw her,” said Hardcastle. “They’re very different in manner—but it’s true—there is a likeness. But how could they hope to get away with it?” The man would be missed. Inquiries would be made—”

“If this man were travelling abroad—perhaps for pleasure, not for business, his schedule would be vague. A letter from one place—a postcard from another—it would be a little time before people wondered why they had not heard from him. By that time who would connect a man identified and buried as Harry Castleton, with a rich Canadian visitor to the country who has not even been seen in this part of the world? If I had been the murderer, I would have slipped over on a day trip to France or Belgium and discarded the dead man’s passport in a train or a tram so that the inquiry would take place from another country.”

I moved involuntarily, and Poirot's eyes came round to me.

"Yes?" he said.

"Bland mentioned to me that he had recently taken a day trip to Boulogne—with a blonde, I understand—"

"Which would make it quite a natural thing to do. Doubtless it is a habit of his."

"This is still conjecture," Hardcastle objected.

"But inquiries can be made," said Poirot.

He took a sheet of hotel notepaper from the rack in front of him and handed it to Hardcastle.

"If you will write to Mr. Enderby at 10, Ennismore Gardens, S.W. 7 he has promised to make certain inquiries for me in Canada. He is a well-known international lawyer."

"And what about the business of the clocks?"

"Oh! The clocks. Those famous clocks!" Poirot smiled. "I think you will find that Miss Martindale was responsible for them. Since the crime, as I said, was a simple crime, it was disguised by making it a fantastic one. That Rosemary clock that Sheila Webb took to be repaired. Did she lose it in the Bureau of Secretarial Studies? Did Miss Martindale take it as the foundation of her rigmarole, and was it partly because of that clock that she chose Sheila as the person to discover the body—?"

Hardcastle burst out:

"And you say this woman is unimaginative? When she concocted all this?"

"But she did not concoct it. That is what is so interesting. It was all there—waiting for her. From the very first I detected a pattern—a pattern I knew. A pattern familiar because I had just been reading such patterns. I have been very fortunate. As Colin here will tell you, I attended this week a sale of authors’ manuscripts. Among them were some of Garry Gregson’s. I hardly dared hope. But luck was with me. Here—” Like a conjuror he whipped from a drawer in the desk two shabby exercise books “—it is all here! Among the many plots of books he planned to write. He did not live to write this one—but Miss Martindale, who was his secretary, knew all about it. She just lifted it bodily to suit her purpose.”

“But the clocks must have meant something originally—in Gregson’s plot, I mean.”

“Oh, yes. His clocks were set at one minute past five, four minutes past five and seven minutes past five. That was the combination number of a safe, 515457. The safe was concealed behind a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Inside the safe,” continued Poirot, with distaste, “were the Crown jewels of the Russian Royal Family. Un tas de bêtises, the whole thing! And of course there was a story of kinds—a persecuted girl. Oh, yes, it came in very handy for la Martindale. She just chose her local characters and adapted the story to fit in. All these flamboyant clues would lead—where? Exactly nowhere! Ah, yes, an efficient woman. One wonders—he left her a legacy—did he not? How and of what did he die, I wonder?”

Hardcastle refused to be interested in past history. He gathered up the exercise books and took the sheet of hotel paper from my hand. For the last two minutes I had been staring at it, fascinated. Hardcastle had scribbled down Enderby’s address without troubling to turn the sheet the right way up. The hotel address was upside down in the left-hand bottom corner.

Staring at the sheet of paper, I knew what a fool I had been.

“Well, thank you, M. Poirot,” said Hardcastle. “You’ve certainly given us something to think about. Whether anything will come of it—”

“I am most delighted if I have been of any assistance.”

Poirot was playing it modestly.

“I’ll have to check various things—”

“Naturally—naturally—”

Good-byes were said. Hardcastle took his departure.

Poirot turned his attention to me. His eyebrows rose.

“Eh bien—and what, may I ask, is biting you?—you look like a man who has seen an apparition.”

“I’ve seen what a fool I’ve been.”

“Aha. Well, that happens to many of us.”

But presumably not to Hercule Poirot! I had to attack him.

“Just tell me one thing, Poirot. If, as you said, you could do all this sitting in your chair in London and could have got me and Dick Hardcastle to come to you there, why—oh, why, did you come down here at all?”

“I told you, they make the reparation in my apartment.”

“They would have lent you another apartment. Or you could have gone to the Ritz, you would have been more comfortable there than in the Curlew Hotel.”

“Indubitably,” said Hercule Poirot. “The coffee here, mon dieu, the coffee!”

“Well, then, why?”

Hercule Poirot flew into a rage.

“Eh bien, since you are too stupid to guess, I will tell you. I am human, am I not? I can be the machine if it is necessary. I can lie back and think. I can solve the problem so. But I am human, I tell you. And the problems concern human beings.”

“And so?”

“The explanation is as simple as the murder was simple. I came out of human curiosity,” said Hercule Poirot, with an attempt at dignity.

Twenty-nine

Once more I was in Wilbraham Crescent, proceeding in a westerly direction.

I stopped before the gate of No. 19. No one came screaming out of the house this time. It was neat and peaceful.

I went up to the front door and rang the bell.

Miss Millicent Pebmarsh opened it.

“This is Colin Lamb,” I said. “May I come in and speak to you?”

“Certainly.”

She preceded me into the sitting room.

“You seem to spend a lot of time down here, Mr. Lamb. I understood that you were not connected with the local police—”

“You understood rightly. I think, really, you have known exactly who I am from the first day you spoke to me.”

“I’m not sure quite what you mean by that.”

“I’ve been extremely stupid, Miss Pebmarsh. I came to this place to look for you. I found you the first day I was here—and I didn’t know I had found you!”

“Possibly murder distracted you.”

“As you say. I was also stupid enough to look at a piece of paper the wrong way up.”

“And what is the point of all this?”

"Just that the game is up, Miss Pebmarsh. I've found the headquarters where all the planning is done. Such records and memoranda as are necessary are kept by you on the microdot system in Braille. The information Larkin got at Portlebury was passed to you. From here it went to its destination by means of Ramsay. He came across when necessary from his house to yours at night by way of the garden. He dropped a Czech coin in your garden one day—"

"That was careless of him."

"We're all careless at some time or another. Your cover is very good. You're blind, you work at an institute for disabled children, you keep children's books in Braille in your house as is only natural—you are a woman of unusual intelligence and personality. I don't know what is the driving power that animates you—"

"Say if you like that I am dedicated."

"Yes. I thought it might be like that."

"And why are you telling me all this? It seems unusual."

I looked at my watch.

"You have two hours, Miss Pebmarsh. In two hours' time members of the special branch will come here and take charge—"

"I don't understand you. Why do you come here ahead of your people, to give me what seems to be a warning—"

"It is a warning. I have come here myself, and shall remain here until my people arrive, to see that nothing leaves this house—with one exception. That exception is you yourself. You have two hours' start if you choose to go."

"But why? Why?"

I said slowly:

“Because I think there is an off-chance that you might shortly become my mother-in-law … I may be quite wrong.”

There was a silence. Millicent Pebmarsh got up and went to the window. I didn’t take my eyes off her. I had no illusions about Millicent Pebmarsh. I didn’t trust her an inch. She was blind but even a blind woman can catch you if you are off guard. Her blindness wouldn’t handicap her if she once got her chance to jam an automatic against my spine.

She said quietly:

“I shall not tell you if you’re right or wrong. What makes you think that—that it might be so?”

“Eyes.”

“But we are not alike in character.”

“No.”

She spoke almost defiantly.

“I did the best I could for her.”

“That’s a matter of opinion. With you a cause came first.”

“As it should do.”

“I don’t agree.”

There was silence again. Then I asked, “Did you know who she was—that day?”

“Not until I heard the name … I had kept myself informed about her—always.”

“You were never as inhuman as you would have liked to be.”

“Don’t talk nonsense.”

I looked at my watch again.

"Time is going on," I said.

She came back from the window and across to the desk.

"I have a photograph of her here—as a child…."

I was behind her as she pulled the drawer open. It wasn't an automatic. It was a small very deadly knife….

My hand closed over hers and took it away.

"I may be soft, but I'm not a fool," I said.

She felt for a chair and sat down. She displayed no emotion whatever.

"I am not taking advantage of your offer. What would be the use? I shall stay here until—they come. There are always opportunities—even in prison."

"Of indoctrination, you mean?"

"If you like to put it that way."

We sat there, hostile to each other, but with understanding.

"I've resigned from the Service," I told her. "I'm going back to my old job—marine biology. There's a post going at a university in Australia."

"I think you are wise. You haven't got what it takes for this job. You are like Rosemary's father. He couldn't understand Lenin's dictum: 'Away with softness.'"

I thought of Hercule Poirot's words.

"I'm content," I said, "to be human…."

We sat there in silence, each of us convinced that the other’s point of view was wrong.

Letter from Detective Inspector Hardcastle to M. Hercule Poirot

Dear M. Poirot,

We are now in possession of certain facts, and I feel you may be interested to hear about them.

A Mr. Quentin Duguesclin of Quebec left Canada for Europe approximately four weeks ago. He has no near relatives and his plans for return were indefinite. His passport was found by the proprietor of a small restaurant in Boulogne, who handed it in to the police. It has not so far been claimed.

Mr. Duguesclin was a lifelong friend of the Montresor family of Quebec. The head of that family, Mr. Henry Montresor, died eighteen months ago, leaving his very considerable fortune to his only surviving relative, his great-niece Valerie, described as the wife of Josaiah Bland of Portlebury, England. A very reputable firm of London solicitors acted for the Canadian executors. All communications between Mrs. Bland and her family in Canada ceased from the time of her marriage of which her family did not approve. Mr. Duguesclin mentioned to one of his friends that he intended to look up the Blands while he was in England, since he had always been very fond of Valerie.

The body hitherto identified as that of Henry Castleton has been positively identified as Quentin Duguesclin.

Certain boards have been found stowed away in a corner of Bland’s building yard. Though hastily painted out, the words SNOWFLAKE LAUNDRY are plainly perceptible after treatment by experts.

I will not trouble you with lesser details, but the public prosecutor considers that a warrant can be granted for the arrest of Josaiah Bland. Miss Martindale and Mrs. Bland are, as you conjectured, sisters, but though I agree with your views on her participation in these crimes, satisfactory evidence will be hard to obtain. She is undoubtedly a very clever woman. I have hopes, though, of Mrs. Bland. She is the type of woman who rats.

The death of the first Mrs. Bland through enemy action in France, and his second marriage to Hilda Martindale (who was in the N.A.A.F.I.) also in France can be, I think, clearly established, though many records were, of course, destroyed at that time.

It was a great pleasure meeting you that day, and I must thank you for the very useful suggestions you made on that occasion. I hope the alterations and redecorations of your London flat have been satisfactory.

Yours sincerely,
Richard Hardcastle

Further communication from R.H. to H.P.

Good news! The Bland woman cracked! Admitted the whole thing!!! Puts the blame entirely on her sister and her husband. She “never understood until too late what they meant to do!” Thought they were only “going to dope him so that he wouldn’t recognize she was the wrong woman!” A likely story! But I’d say it’s true enough that she wasn’t the prime mover.

The Portobello Market people have identified Miss Martindale as the “American” lady who bought two of the clocks.

Mrs. McNaughton now says she saw Duguesclin in Bland’s van being driven into Bland’s garage. Did she really?

Our friend Colin has married that girl. If you ask me, he’s mad. All the best.

Yours,
Richard Hardcastle

Third Girl (1966)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

Hercule Poirot was sitting at the breakfast table. At his right hand was a steaming cup of chocolate. He had always had a sweet tooth. To accompany the chocolate was a brioche. It went agreeably with chocolate. He nodded his approval. This was from the fourth shop he had tried. It was a Danish pâtisserie but infinitely superior to the so-called French one nearby. That had been nothing less than a fraud.

He was satisfied gastronomically. His stomach was at peace. His mind also was at peace, perhaps somewhat too much so. He had finished his Magnum Opus, an analysis of great writers of detective fiction. He had dared to speak scathingly of Edgar Allen Poe, he had complained of the lack of method or order in the romantic outpourings of Wilkie Collins, had lauded to the skies two American authors who were practically unknown, and had in various other ways given honour where honour was due and sternly withheld it where he considered it was not. He had seen the volume through the press, had looked upon the results and, apart from a really incredible number of printer's errors, pronounced that it was good. He had enjoyed this literary achievement and enjoyed the vast amount of reading he had had to do, had enjoyed snorting with disgust as he flung a book across the floor (though always remembering to rise, pick it up and dispose of it tidily in the wastepaper basket) and had enjoyed appreciatively nodding his head on the rare occasions when such approval was justified.

And now? He had had a pleasant interlude of relaxation, very necessary after his intellectual labour. But one could not relax forever, one had to go on to the next thing. Unfortunately he had no idea what the next thing might be. Some further literary accomplishment? He thought not. Do a thing well then leave it alone. That was his maxim. The truth of the matter was, he was bored. All this strenuous mental activity in which he had been indulging—there had been too much of it. It had got him into bad habits, it had made him restless….

Vexatious! He shook his head and took another sip of chocolate.

The door opened and his well-trained servant, George, entered. His manner was deferential and slightly apologetic. He coughed and murmured, “A—” he paused, “—a—young lady has called.”

Poirot looked at him with surprise and mild distaste.

“I do not see people at this hour,” he said reprovingly.

“No, sir,” agreed George.

Master and servant looked at each other. Communication was sometimes fraught with difficulties for them. By inflexion or innuendo or a certain choice of words George would signify that there was something that might be elicited if the right question was asked. Poirot considered what the right question in this case might be.

“She is good-looking, this young lady?” he inquired carefully.

“In my view—no, sir, but there is no accounting for tastes.”

Poirot considered his reply. He remembered the slight pause that George had made before the phrase—young lady. George was a delicate social recorder. He had been uncertain of the visitor’s status but had given her the benefit of the doubt.

“You are of the opinion that she is a young lady rather than, let us say, a young person?”

“I think so, sir, though it is not always easy to tell nowadays.” George spoke with genuine regret.

“Did she give a reason for wishing to see me?”

“She said—” George pronounced the words with some reluctance, apologising for them in advance as it were, “that she wanted to consult you about a murder she might have committed.”

Hercule Poirot stared. His eyebrows rose. “Might have committed? Does she not know?”

"That is what she said, sir."

"Unsatisfactory, but possibly interesting," said Poirot.

"It might—have been a joke, sir," said George, dubiously.

"Anything is possible, I suppose," conceded Poirot, "but one would hardly think—" He lifted his cup. "Show her in after five minutes."

"Yes, sir." George withdrew.

Poirot finished the last sip of chocolate. He pushed aside his cup and rose to his feet. He walked to the fireplace and adjusted his moustaches carefully in the mirror over the chimneypiece. Satisfied, he returned to his chair and awaited the arrival of his visitor. He did not know exactly what to expect….

He had hoped perhaps for something nearer to his own estimate of female attraction. The outworn phrase "beauty in distress" had occurred to him. He was disappointed when George returned ushering in the visitor; inwardly he shook his head and sighed. Here was no beauty—and no noticeable distress either. Mild perplexity would seem nearer the mark.

"Pha!" thought Poirot disgustedly. "These girls! Do they not even try to make something of themselves? Well made-up, attractively dressed, hair that has been arranged by a good hairdresser, then perhaps she might pass. But now!"

His visitor was a girl of perhaps twenty-odd. Long straggly hair of indeterminate colour strayed over her shoulders. Her eyes, which were large, bore a vacant expression and were of a greenish blue. She wore what were presumably the chosen clothes of her generation. Black high leather boots, white openwork woollen stockings of doubtful cleanliness, a skimpy skirt, and a long and sloppy pullover of heavy wool. Anyone of Poirot's age and generation would have had only one desire. To drop the girl into a bath as soon as possible. He had often felt this same reaction walking along the streets. There were hundreds of girls looking exactly the same. They all looked dirty. And yet—a contradiction in terms—this one had the look of having been recently drowned and pulled out of a river. Such girls, he reflected, were not perhaps really dirty. They merely took enormous care and pains to look so.

He rose with his usual politeness, shook hands, drew out a chair.

“You demanded to see me, mademoiselle? Sit down, I pray of you.”

“Oh,” said the girl, in a slightly breathless voice. She stared at him.

“Eh bien?” said Poirot.

She hesitated. “I think I’d—rather stand.” The large eyes continued to stare doubtfully.

“As you please.” Poirot resumed his seat and looked at her. He waited. The girl shuffled her feet. She looked down on them then up again at Poirot.

“You—you are Hercule Poirot?”

“Assuredly. In what way can I be of use to you?”

“Oh, well, it’s rather difficult. I mean—”

Poirot felt that she might need perhaps a little assistance. He said helpfully, “My manservant told me that you wanted to consult me because you thought you ‘might have committed a murder.’ Is that correct?”

The girl nodded. “That’s right.”

“Surely that is not a matter that admits of any doubt. You must know yourself whether you have committed a murder or not.”

“Well, I don’t know quite how to put it. I mean—”

“Come now,” said Poirot kindly. “Sit down. Relax the muscles. Tell me all about it.”

“I don’t think—oh dear, I don’t know how to—You see, it’s all so difficult. I’ve—I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to be rude but—well, I think I’d better go.”

“Come now. Courage.”

“No, I can’t. I thought I could come and—and ask you, ask you what I ought to do—but I can’t, you see. It’s all so different from—”

“From what?”

“I’m awfully sorry and I really don’t want to be rude, but—”

She breathed an enormous sigh, looked at Poirot, looked away, and suddenly blurted out, “You’re too old. Nobody told me you were so old. I really don’t want to be rude but—there it is. You’re too old. I’m really very sorry.”

She turned abruptly and blundered out of the room, rather like a desperate moth in lamplight.

Poirot, his mouth open, heard the bang of the front door.

He ejaculated: “Nom d’un nom d’un nom….”

Two

I

The telephone rang.

Hercule Poirot did not even seem aware of the fact.

It rang with shrill and insistent persistence.

George entered the room and stepped towards it, turning a questioning glance towards Poirot.

Poirot gestured with his hand.

“Leave it,” he said.

George obeyed, leaving the room again. The telephone continued to ring. The shrill irritating noise continued. Suddenly it stopped. After a minute or two, however, it commenced to ring again.

“Ah Sapristi! That must be a woman—undoubtedly a woman.”

He sighed, rose to his feet and came to the instrument.

He picked up the receiver. “’Allo,” he said.

“Are you—is that M. Poirot?”

“I, myself.”

“It’s Mrs. Oliver—your voice sounds different. I didn’t recognise it at first.”

“Bonjour, Madame—you are well, I hope?”

“Oh, I’m all right.” Ariadne Oliver’s voice came through in its usual cheerful accents. The well-known detective story writer and Hercule Poirot were on friendly terms.

“It’s rather early to ring you up, but I want to ask you a favour.”

“Yes?”

“It is the annual dinner of our Detective Authors’ Club; I wondered if you would come and be our Guest Speaker this year. It would be very very sweet of you if you would.”

“When is this?”

“Next month—the twenty-third.”

A deep sigh came over the telephone.

“Alas! I am too old.”

“Too old? What on earth do you mean? You’re not old at all.”

“You think not?”

“Of course not. You’ll be wonderful. You can tell us lots of lovely stories about real crimes.”

“And who will want to listen?”

“Everyone. They—M. Poirot, is there anything the matter? Has something happened? You sound upset.”

“Yes, I am upset. My feelings—ah, well, no matter.”

“But tell me about it.”

“Why should I make a fuss?”

“Why shouldn’t you? You’d better come and tell me all about it. When will you come? This afternoon. Come and have tea with me.”

“Afternoon tea, I do not drink it.”

"Then you can have coffee."

"It is not the time of day I usually drink coffee."

"Chocolate? With whipped cream on top? Or a tisane. You love sipping tisanes. Or lemonade. Or orangeade. Or would you like decaffeinated coffee if I can get it—"

"Ah ça, non, par example! It is an abomination."

"One of those sirops you like so much. I know, I've got half a bottle of Ribena in the cupboard."

"What is Ribena?"

"Black currant flavour."

"Indeed, one has to hand it to you! You really do try, Madame. I am touched by your solicitude. I will accept with pleasure to drink a cup of chocolate this afternoon."

"Good. And then you'll tell me all about what's upset you."

She rang off.

II

Poirot considered for a moment. Then he dialled a number. Presently he said: "Mr. Goby? Hercule Poirot here. Are you very fully occupied at this moment?"

"Middling," said the voice of Mr. Goby. "Middling to fair. But to oblige you, Monsieur Poirot, if you're in a hurry, as you usually are—well, I wouldn't say that my young men couldn't manage mostly what's on hand at present. Of course good boys aren't as easy to get as they used to be. Think too much of themselves nowadays. Think they know it all before they've started to learn. But there! Can't expect old heads on young shoulders. I'll be pleased to put myself at your disposal, M. Poirot. Maybe I can put one or two of the better lads on the job. I suppose it’s the usual—collecting information?”

He nodded his head and listened whilst Poirot went into details of exactly what he wanted done. When he had finished with Mr. Goby, Poirot rang up Scotland Yard where in due course he got through to a friend of his. When he in turn had listened to Poirot’s requirements, he replied,

“Don’t want much, do you? Any murder, anywhere. Time, place and victim unknown. Sounds a bit of a wild goose chase, if you ask me, old boy.” He added disapprovingly, “You don’t seem really to know anything!”

III

At 4:15 that afternoon Poirot sat in Mrs. Oliver’s drawing room sipping appreciatively at a large cup of chocolate topped with foaming whipped cream which his hostess had just placed on a small table beside him. She added a small plate full of langue de chats biscuits.

“Chère Madame, what kindness.” He looked over his cup with faint surprise at Mrs. Oliver’s coiffure and also at her new wallpaper. Both were new to him. The last time he had seen Mrs. Oliver, her hairstyle had been plain and severe. It now displayed a richness of coils and twists arranged in intricate patterns all over her head. Its prolific luxury was, he suspected, largely artificial. He debated in his mind how many switches of hair might unexpectedly fall off if Mrs. Oliver was to get suddenly excited, as was her wont. As for the wallpaper….

“These cherries—they are new?” he waved a teaspoon. It was, he felt, rather like being in a cherry orchard.

“Are there too many of them, do you think?” said Mrs. Oliver. “So hard to tell beforehand with wallpaper. Do you think my old one was better?”

Poirot cast his mind back dimly to what he seemed to remember as large quantities of bright coloured tropical birds in a forest. He felt inclined to remark “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,” but restrained himself.

"And now," said Mrs. Oliver, as her guest finally replaced his cup on its saucer and sat back with a sigh of satisfaction, wiping remnants of foaming cream from his moustache, "what is all this about?"

"That I can tell you very simply. This morning a girl came to see me. I suggested she might make an appointment. One has one's routine, you comprehend. She sent back word that she wanted to see me at once because she thought she might have committed a murder."

"What an odd thing to say. Didn't she know?"

"Precisely! C'est inouï! so I instructed George to show her in. She stood there! She refused to sit down. She just stood there staring at me. She seemed quite half-witted. I tried to encourage her. Then suddenly she said that she'd changed her mind. She said she didn't want to be rude but that—(what do you think?)—but that I was too old.…"

Mrs. Oliver hastened to utter soothing words. "Oh well, girls are like that. Anyone over thirty-five they think is half dead. They've no sense, girls, you must realise that."

"It wounded me," said Hercule Poirot.

"Well, I shouldn't worry about it, if I were you. Of course it was a very rude thing to say."

"That does not matter. And it is not only my feelings. I am worried. Yes, I am worried."

"Well, I should forget all about it if I were you," advised Mrs. Oliver comfortably.

"You do not understand. I am worried about this girl. She came to me for help. Then she decided that I was too old. Too old to be of any use to her. She was wrong of course, that goes without saying, and then she just ran away. But I tell you that girl needs help."

“I don’t suppose she does really,” said Mrs. Oliver soothingly. “Girls make a fuss about things.”

“No. You are wrong. She needs help.”

“You don’t think she really has committed a murder?”

“Why not? She said she had.”

“Yes, but—” Mrs. Oliver stopped. “She said she might have,” she said slowly. “But what can she possibly mean by that?”

“Exactly. It does not make sense.”

“Who did she murder or did she think she murdered?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“And why did she murder someone?”

Again Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“Of course it could be all sorts of things.” Mrs. Oliver began to brighten as she set her ever prolific imagination to work. “She could have run over someone in her car and not stopped. She could have been assaulted by a man on a cliff and struggled with him and managed to push him over. She could have given someone the wrong medicine by mistake. She could have gone to one of those purple pill parties and had a fight with someone. She could have come to and found she had stabbed someone. She—”

“Assez, madame, assez!”

But Mrs. Oliver was well away.

“She might have been a nurse in the operating theatre and administered the wrong anaesthetic or—” she broke off, suddenly anxious for clearer details. “What did she look like?”

Poirot considered for a moment.

“An Ophelia devoid of physical attraction.”

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I can almost see her when you say that. How queer.”

“She is not competent,” said Poirot. “That is how I see her. She is not one who can cope with difficulties. She is not one of those who can see beforehand the dangers that must come. She is one of whom others will look round and say ‘we want a victim. That one will do.’”

But Mrs. Oliver was no longer listening. She was clutching her rich coils of hair with both hands in a gesture with which Poirot was familiar.

“Wait,” she cried in a kind of agony. “Wait!”

Poirot waited, his eyebrows raised.

“You didn’t tell me her name,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“She did not give it. Unfortunate, I agree with you.”

“Wait!” implored Mrs. Oliver, again with the same agony. She relaxed her grip on her head and uttered a deep sigh. Hair detached itself from its bonds and tumbled over her shoulders, a super imperial coil of hair detached itself completely and fell on the floor. Poirot picked it up and put it discreetly on the table.

“Now then,” said Mrs. Oliver, suddenly restored to calm. She pushed in a hairpin or two, and nodded her head while she thought. “Who told this girl about you, M. Poirot?”

“No one, so far as I know. Naturally, she had heard about me, no doubt.”

Mrs. Oliver thought that “naturally” was not the word at all. What was natural was that Poirot himself was sure that everyone had always heard of him. Actually large numbers of people would only look at you blankly if the name of Hercule Poirot was mentioned, especially the younger generation. “But how am I going to put that to him,” thought Mrs. Oliver, “in such a way that it won’t hurt his feelings?”

“I think you’re wrong,” she said. “Girls—well, girls and young men—they don’t know very much about detectives and things like that. They don’t hear about them.”

“Everyone must have heard about Hercule Poirot,” said Poirot, superbly.

It was an article of belief for Hercule Poirot.

“But they are all so badly educated nowadays,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Really, the only people whose names they know are pop singers, or groups, or disc jockeys—that sort of thing. If you need someone special, I mean a doctor or a detective or a dentist—well, then, I mean you would ask someone—ask who’s the right person to go to? And then the other person says—‘My dear, you must go to that absolutely wonderful man in Queen Anne’s Street, twists your legs three times round your head and you’re cured,’ or ‘All my diamonds were stolen, and Henry would have been furious, so I couldn’t go to the police, but there’s a simply uncanny detective, most discreet, and he got them back for me and Henry never knew a thing.’—That’s the way it happens all the time. Someone sent that girl to you.”

“I doubt it very much.”

“You wouldn’t know until you were told. And you’re going to be told now. It’s only just come to me. I sent that girl to you.”

Poirot stared. “You? But why did you not say so at once?”

“Because it’s only just come to me—when you spoke about Ophelia—long wet-looking hair, and rather plain. It seemed a description of someone I’d actually seen. Quite lately. And then it came to me who it was.”

“Who is she?”

“I don’t actually know her name, but I can easily find out. We were talking—about private detectives and private eyes—and I spoke about you and some of the amazing things you had done.”

“And you gave her my address?”

"No, of course I didn't. I'd no idea she wanted a detective or anything like that. I thought we were just talking. But I'd mentioned the name several times, and of course it would be easy to look you up in the telephone book and just come along."

"Were you talking about murder?"

"Not that I can remember. I don't even know how we came to be talking about detectives—unless, yes, perhaps it was she who started the subject…."

"Tell me then, tell me all you can—even if you do not know her name, tell me all you know about her."

"Well, it was last weekend. I was staying with the Lorrimers. They don't come into it except that they took me over to some friends of theirs for drinks. There were several people there—and I didn't enjoy myself much because, as you know, I don't really like drink, and so people have to find a soft drink for me which is rather a bore for them. And then people say things to me—you know—how much they like my books, and how they've been longing to meet me—and it all makes me feel hot and bothered and rather silly. But I manage to cope more or less. And they say how much they love my awful detective Sven Hjerson. If they knew how I hated him! But my publisher always says I'm not to say so. Anyway, I suppose the talk about detectives in real life grew out of all that, and I talked a bit about you, and this girl was standing around listening. When you said an unattractive Ophelia it clicked somehow. I thought: 'Now who does that remind me of?' And then it came to me: 'Of course. The girl at the party that day.' I rather think she belonged there unless I'm confusing her with some other girl."

Poirot sighed. With Mrs. Oliver one always needed a lot of patience.

"Who were these people with whom you went to have drinks?"

"Trefusis, I think, unless it was Treherne. That sort of name—he's a tycoon. Rich. Something in the City, but he's spent most of his life in South Africa —"

"He has a wife?"

"Yes. Very good-looking woman. Much younger than he is. Lots of golden hair. Second wife. The daughter was the first wife's daughter. Then there was an uncle of incredible antiquity. Rather deaf. He's frightfully distinguished—strings of letters after his name. An admiral or an air marshal or something. He's an astronomer too, I think. Anyway, he's got a kind of big telescope sticking out of the roof. Though I suppose that might be just a hobby. There was a foreign girl there, too, who sort of trots about after the old boy. Goes up to London with him, I believe, and sees he doesn't get run over. Rather pretty, she was."

Poirot sorted out the information Mrs. Oliver had supplied him with, feeling rather like a human computer.

"There lives then in the house Mr. and Mrs. Trefusis—"

"It's not Trefusis—I remember now—It's Restarick."

"That is not at all the same type of name."

"Yes it is. It's a Cornish name, isn't it?"

"There lives there then, Mr. and Mrs. Restarick, the distinguished elderly uncle. Is his name Restarick too?"

"It's Sir Roderick something."

"And there is the au pair girl, or whatever she is, and a daughter—anymore children?"

"I don't think so—but I don't really know. The daughter doesn't live at home, by the way. She was only down for the weekend. Doesn't get on with the stepmother, I expect. She's got a job in London, and she's picked up with a boyfriend they don't much like, so I understand."

"You seem to know quite a lot about the family."

“Oh well, one picks things up. The Lorrimers are great talkers. Always chattering about someone or other. One hears a lot of gossip about the people all around. Sometimes, though, one gets them mixed up. I probably have. I wish I could remember that girl’s Christian name. Something connected with a song…Thora? Speak to me, Thora. Thora, Thora. Something like that, or Myra? Myra, oh Myra my love is all for thee. Something like that. I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls. Norma? Or do I mean Maritana? Norma—Norma Restarick. That’s right, I’m sure.” She added inconsequently, “She’s a third girl.”

“I thought you said you thought she was an only child.”

“So she is—or I think so.”

“Then what do you mean by saying she is the third girl?”

“Good gracious, don’t you know what a third girl is? Don’t you read The Times?”

“I read the births, deaths, and marriages. And such articles as I find of interest.”

“No, I mean the front advertisement page. Only it isn’t in the front now. So I’m thinking of taking some other paper. But I’ll show you.”

She went to a side table and snatched up The Times, turned the pages over and brought it to him. “Here you are—look. ‘THIRD GIRL for comfortable second floor flat, own room, central heating, Earl’s Court.’ ‘Third girl wanted to share flat. 5gns. week own room.’ ‘4th girl wanted. Regent’s park. Own room.’ It’s the way girls like living now. Better than PGs or a hostel. The main girl takes a furnished flat, and then shares out the rent. Second girl is usually a friend. Then they find a third girl by advertising if they don’t know one. And, as you see, very often they manage to squeeze in a fourth girl. First girl takes the best room, second girl pays rather less, third girl less still and is stuck in a cat-hole. They fix it among themselves which one has the flat to herself which night a week—or something like that. It works reasonably well.”

"And where does this girl whose name might just possibly be Norma live in London?"

"As I've told you I don't really know anything about her."

"But you could find out?"

"Oh yes, I expect that would be quite easy."

"You are sure there was no talk, no mention of an unexpected death?"

"Do you mean a death in London—or at the Restaricks' home?"

"Either."

"I don't think so. Shall I see what I can rake up?"

Mrs. Oliver's eyes sparkled with excitement. She was by now entering into the spirit of the thing.

"That would be very kind."

"I'll ring up the Lorrimers. Actually now would be quite a good time." She went towards the telephone. "I shall have to think of reasons and things—perhaps invent things?"

She looked towards Poirot rather doubtfully.

"But naturally. That is understood. You are a woman of imagination—you will have no difficulty. But—not too fantastic, you understand. Moderation."

Mrs. Oliver flashed him an understanding glance.

She dialled and asked for the number she wanted. Turning her head, she hissed: "Have you got a pencil and paper—or a notebook—something to write down names or addresses or places?"

Poirot had already his notebook arranged by his elbow and nodded his head reassuringly.

Mrs. Oliver turned back to the receiver she held and launched herself into speech. Poirot listened attentively to one side of a telephone conversation.

“Hallo. Can I speak to—Oh, it’s you, Naomi. Ariadne Oliver here. Oh, yes—well, it was rather a crowd…Oh, you mean the old boy?…No, you know I don’t…Practically blind?…I thought he was going up to London with the little foreign girl…Yes, it must be rather worrying for them sometimes—but she seems to manage him quite well…One of the things I rang up for was to ask you what the girl’s address was—No, the Restarick girl, I mean—somewhere in South Ken, isn’t it? Or was it Knightsbridge? Well, I promised her a book and I wrote down the address, but of course I’ve lost it as usual. I can’t even remember her name. Is it Thora or Norma?…Yes, I thought it was Norma:…Wait a minute, I’ll get a pencil…Yes, I’m ready…67 Borodene Mansions…I know—that great block that looks rather like Wormwood Scrubs prison…Yes, I believe the flats are very comfortable with central heating and everything…Who are the other two girls she lives with?…Friends of hers?…or advertisements?…Claudia Reece-Holland…her father’s the MP, is he? Who’s the other one?…No, I suppose you wouldn’t know—she’s quite nice, too, I suppose…What do they all do? They always seem to be secretaries, don’t they?…Oh, the other girl’s an interior decorator—you think—or to do with an art gallery—No, Naomi, of course I don’t really want to know—one just wonders—what do all the girls do nowadays?—well, it’s useful for me to know because of my books—one wants to keep up to date…What was it you told me about some boyfriend…Yes, but one’s so helpless, isn’t one? I mean girls do just exactly as they like…does he look very awful? Is he the unshaven dirty kind? Oh, that kind—Brocade waistcoats, and long curling chestnut hair—lying on his shoulders—yes, so hard to tell whether they’re girls or boys, isn’t it?—Yes, they do look like Vandykes sometimes if they’re good-looking…What did you say? That Andrew Restarick simply hates him?…Yes, men usually do…Mary Restarick?…Well, I suppose you do usually have rows with a stepmother. I expect she was quite thankful when the girl got a job in London. What do you mean about people saying things…Why, couldn’t they find out what was the matter with her?…Who said?…Yes, but what did they hush up?…Oh—a nurse?—talked to the Jenners' governess? Do you mean her husband? Oh, I see—The doctors couldn't find out…No, but people are so ill-natured. I do agree with you. These things are usually quite untrue…Oh, gastric, was it?…But how ridiculous. Do you mean people said what's his name—Andrew—You mean it would be easy with all those weed killers about—Yes, but why?…I mean, it's not a case of some wife he's hated for years—she's the second wife—and much younger than he is and good-looking…Yes, I suppose that could be—but why should the foreign girl want to either?…You mean she might have resented things that Mrs. Restarick said to her…She's quite an attractive little thing—I suppose Andrew might have taken a fancy to her—nothing serious of course—but it might have annoyed Mary, and then she might have pitched into the girl and —"

Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Oliver perceived Poirot signalling wildly to her.

"Just a moment, darling," said Mrs. Oliver into the telephone. "It's the baker." Poirot looked affronted. "Hang on."

She laid down the receiver, hurried across the room, and backed Poirot into a breakfast nook.

"Yes," she demanded breathlessly.

"A baker," said Poirot with scorn. "Me!"

"Well, I had to think of something quickly. What were you signalling about? Did you understand what she—"

Poirot cut her short.

"You shall tell me presently. I know enough. What I want you to do is, with your rapid powers of improvisation, to arrange some plausible pretext for me to visit the Restaricks—an old friend of yours, shortly to be in the neighbourhood. Perhaps you could say—"

"Leave it to me. I'll think of something. Shall you give a false name?"

“Certainly not. Let us at least try to keep it simple.”

Mrs. Oliver nodded, and hurried back to the abandoned telephone.

“Naomi? I can’t remember what we were saying. Why does something always come to interrupt just when one has settled down to a nice gossip? I can’t even remember now what I rang you up for to begin with—Oh yes—that child Thora’s address—Norma, I mean—and you gave it to me. But there was something else I wanted to—oh, I remember. An old friend of mine. A most fascinating little man. Actually I was talking about him the other day down there. Hercule Poirot his name is. He’s going to be staying quite close to the Restaricks and he is most tremendously anxious to meet old Sir Roderick. He knows a lot about him and has a terrific admiration for him, and for some wonderful discovery of his in the war—or some scientific thing he did—anyway, he is very anxious to ‘call upon him and present his respects,’ that’s how he put it. Will that be all right, do you think? Will you warn them? Yes, he’ll probably just turn up out of the blue. Tell them to make him tell them some wonderful espionage stories…He—what? Oh! your mowers? Yes, of course you must go. Good-bye.”

She put back the receiver and sank down in an armchair. “Goodness, how exhausting. Was that all right?”

“Not bad,” said Poirot.

“I thought I’d better pin it all to the old boy. Then you’ll get to see the lot which I suppose is what you want. And one can always be vague about scientific subjects if one is a woman, and you can think up something more definite that sounds probable by the time you arrive. Now, do you want to hear what she was telling me?”

“There has been gossip, I gather. About the health of Mrs. Restarick?”

“That’s it. It seems she had some kind of mysterious illness—gastric in nature—and the doctors were puzzled. They sent her into hospital and she got quite all right, but there didn’t seem any real cause to account for it. And she went home, and it all began to start again—and again the doctors were puzzled. And then people began to talk. A rather irresponsible nurse started it and her sister told a neighbour, and the neighbour went out on daily work and told someone else, and how queer it all was. And then people began saying that her husband must be trying to poison her. The sort of thing people always say—but in this case it really didn't seem to make sense. And then Naomi and I wondered about the au pair girl, she's a kind of secretary companion to the old boy—so really there isn't any kind of reason why she should administer weed killer to Mrs. Restarick."

"I heard you suggesting a few."

"Well, there is usually something possible.…"

"Murder desired…" said Poirot thoughtfully…"But not yet committed."

Three

Mrs. Oliver drove into the inner court of Borodene Mansions. There were six cars filling the parking space. As Mrs. Oliver hesitated, one of the cars reversed out and drove away. Mrs. Oliver hurried neatly into the vacant space.

She descended, banged the door and stood looking up to the sky. It was a recent block, occupying a space left by the havoc of a land mine in the last war. It might, Mrs. Oliver thought, have been lifted en bloc from the Great West Road and, first deprived of some such legend as SKYLARK'S FEATHER RAZOR BLADES, have been deposited as a block of flats in situ. It looked extremely functional and whoever had built it had obviously scorned any ornamental additions.

It was a busy time. Cars and people were going in and out of the courtyard as the day's work came to a close.

Mrs. Oliver glanced down at her wrist. Ten minutes to seven. About the right time, as far as she could judge. The kind of time when girls in jobs might be presumed to have returned, either to renew their makeup, change their clothes to tight exotic pants or whatever their particular addiction was, and go out again, or else to settle down to home life and wash their smalls and their stockings. Anyway, quite a sensible time to try. The block was exactly the same on the east and the west, with big swing doors set in the centre. Mrs. Oliver chose the left-hand side but immediately found that she was wrong. All this side was numbers from 100 to 200. She crossed over to the other side.

No. 67 was on the sixth floor. Mrs. Oliver pressed the button of the lift. The doors opened like a yawning mouth with a menacing clash. Mrs. Oliver hurried into the yawning cavern. She was always afraid of modern lifts.

Crash. The doors came to again. The lift went up. It stopped almost immediately (that was frightening too!). Mrs. Oliver scuttled out like a frightened rabbit.

She looked up at the wall and went along the right-hand passage. She came to a door marked 67 in metal numbers affixed to the centre of the door. The numeral 7 detached itself and fell on her feet as she arrived.

“This place doesn’t like me,” said Mrs. Oliver to herself as she winced with pain and picked the number up gingerly and affixed it by its spike to the door again.

She pressed the bell. Perhaps everyone was out.

However, the door opened almost at once. A tall handsome girl stood in the doorway. She was wearing a dark well-cut suit with a very short skirt, a white silk shirt, and was very well shod. She had swept-up dark hair, good but discreet makeup, and for some reason was slightly alarming to Mrs. Oliver.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Oliver, galvanizing herself to say the right thing. “Is Miss Restarick in, by any chance?”

“No, I’m sorry, she’s out. Can I give her a message?”

Mrs. Oliver said, “Oh” again—before proceeding. She made a play of action by producing a parcel rather untidily done up in brown paper. “I promised her a book,” she explained. “One of mine that she hadn’t read. I hope I’ve remembered actually which it was. She won’t be in soon, I suppose?”

“I really couldn’t say. I don’t know what she is doing tonight.”

“Oh. Are you Miss Reece-Holland?”

The girl looked slightly surprised.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’ve met your father,” said Mrs. Oliver. She went on, “I’m Mrs. Oliver. I write books,” she added in the usual guilty style in which she invariably made such an announcement.

“Won’t you come in?”

Mrs. Oliver accepted the invitation, and Claudia Reece-Holland led her into a sitting room. All the rooms of the flats were papered the same with an artificial raw wood pattern. Tenants could then display their modern pictures or apply any forms of decoration they fancied. There was a foundation of modern built-in furniture, cupboard, bookshelves and so on, a large settee and a pullout type of table. Personal bits and pieces could be added by the tenants. There were also signs of individuality displayed here by a gigantic Harlequin pasted on one wall, and a stencil of a monkey swinging from branches of palm fronds on another wall.

“I’m sure Norma will be thrilled to get your book, Mrs. Oliver. Won’t you have a drink? Sherry? Gin?”

This girl had the brisk manner of a really good secretary. Mrs. Oliver refused.

“You’ve got a splendid view up here,” she said, looking out of the window and blinking a little as she got the setting sun straight in her eyes.

“Yes. Not so funny when the lift goes out of order.”

“I shouldn’t have thought that lift would dare to go out of order. It’s so—so—robot-like.”

“Recently installed, but none the better for that,” said Claudia. “It needs frequent adjusting and all that.”

Another girl came in, talking as she entered.

“Claudia, have you any idea where I put—”

She stopped, looking at Mrs. Oliver.

Claudia made a quick introduction.

“Frances Cary—Mrs. Oliver. Mrs. Ariadne Oliver.”

"Oh, how exciting," said Frances.

She was a tall willowy girl, with long black hair, a heavily made up dead-white face, and eyebrows and eyelashes slightly slanted upwards—the effect heightened by mascara. She wore tight velvet pants and a heavy sweater. She was a complete contrast to the brisk and efficient Claudia.

"I brought a book I'd promised Norma Restarick," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Oh!—what a pity she's still in the country."

"Hasn't she come back?"

There was quite definitely a pause. Mrs. Oliver thought the two girls exchanged a glance.

"I thought she had a job in London," said Mrs. Oliver, endeavouring to convey innocent surprise.

"Oh yes," said Claudia. "She's in an interior decorating place. She's sent down with patterns occasionally to places in the country." She smiled. "We live rather separate lives here," she explained. "Come and go as we like—and don't usually bother to leave messages. But I won't forget to give her your book when she does get back."

Nothing could have been easier than the casual explanation.

Mrs. Oliver rose. "Well, thank you very much."

Claudia accompanied her to the door. "I shall tell my father I've met you," she said. "He's a great reader of detective stories."

Closing the door she went back into the sitting room.

The girl Frances was leaning against the window.

"Sorry," she said. "Did I boob?"

"I'd just said that Norma was out."

Frances shrugged her shoulders.

“I couldn’t tell. Claudia, where is that girl? Why didn’t she come back on Monday? Where has she gone?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“She didn’t stay on down with her people? That’s where she went for the weekend.”

“No. I rang up, actually, to find out.”

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter…All the same, she is—well, there’s something queer about her.”

“She’s not really queerer than anyone else.” But the opinion sounded uncertain.

“Oh yes, she is,” said Frances. “Sometimes she gives me the shivers. She’s not normal, you know.”

She laughed suddenly.

“Norma isn’t normal! You know she isn’t, Claudia, although you won’t admit it. Loyalty to your employer, I suppose.”

Four

Hercule Poirot walked along the main street of Long Basing. That is, if you can describe as a main street a street that is to all intents and purposes the only street, which was the case in Long Basing. It was one of those villages that exhibit a tendency to length without breadth. It had an impressive church with a tall tower and a yew tree of elderly dignity in its churchyard. It had its full quota of village shops disclosing much variety. It had two antique shops, one mostly consisting of stripped pine chimneypieces, the other disclosing a full house of piled up ancient maps, a good deal of porcelain, most of it chipped, some worm-eaten old oak chests, shelves of glass, some Victorian silver, all somewhat hampered in display by lack of space. There were two cafés, both rather nasty, there was a basket shop, quite delightful, with a large variety of homemade wares, there was a post office-cum-greengrocer, there was a draper's which dealt largely in millinery and also a shoe department for children and a large miscellaneous selection of haberdashery of all kinds. There was a stationery and newspaper shop which also dealt in tobacco and sweets. There was a wool shop which was clearly the aristocrat of the place. Two white-haired severe women were in charge of shelves and shelves of knitting materials of every description. Also large quantities of dressmaking patterns and knitting patterns and which branched off into a counter for art needlework. What had lately been the local grocer's had now blossomed into calling itself "a supermarket" complete with stacks of wire baskets and packaged materials of every cereal and cleaning material, all in dazzling paper boxes. And there was a small establishment with one small window with Lillah written across it in fancy letters, a fashion display of one French blouse, labelled "Latest chic," and a navy skirt and a purple striped jumper labelled "separates." These were displayed by being flung down as by a careless hand in the window.

All of this Poirot observed with a detached interest. Also contained within the limits of the village and facing on the street were several small houses, old-fashioned in style, sometimes retaining Georgian purity, more often showing some signs of Victorian improvement, as a veranda, bow window, or a small conservatory. One or two houses had had a complete face-lift and showed signs of claiming to be new and proud of it. There were also some delightful and decrepit old-world cottages, some pretending to be a hundred or so years older than they were, others completely genuine, any added comforts of plumbing or such being carefully hidden from any casual glance.

Poirot walked gently along digesting all that he saw. If his impatient friend, Mrs. Oliver, had been with him, she would have immediately demanded why he was wasting time, as the house to which he was bound was a quarter of a mile beyond the village limits. Poirot would have told her that he was absorbing the local atmosphere; that these things were sometimes important. At the end of the village there came an abrupt transition. On one side, set back from the road, was a row of newly built council houses, a strip of green in front of them and a gay note set by each house having been given a different coloured front door. Beyond the council houses the sway of fields and hedges resumed its course interspersed now and then by the occasional “desirable residences” of a house agent’s list, with their own trees and gardens and a general air of reserve and of keeping themselves to themselves. Ahead of him farther down the road Poirot descried a house, the top storey of which displayed an unusual note of bulbous construction. Something had evidently been tacked on up there not so many years ago. This no doubt was the Mecca towards which his feet were bent. He arrived at a gate to which the nameplate Crosshedges was attached. He surveyed the house. It was a conventional house dating perhaps to the beginning of the century. It was neither beautiful nor ugly. Commonplace was perhaps the word to describe it. The garden was more attractive than the house and had obviously been the subject of a great deal of care and attention in its time, though it had been allowed to fall into disarray. It still had smooth green lawns, plenty of flower beds, carefully planted areas of shrubs to display a certain landscape effect. It was all in good order. A gardener was certainly employed in this garden, Poirot reflected. A personal interest was perhaps also taken, since he noted in a corner near the house a woman bending over one of the flower beds, tying up dahlias, he thought. Her head showed as a bright circle of pure gold colour. She was tall, slim but square-shouldered. He unlatched the gate, passed through and walked up towards the house. The woman turned her head and then straightened herself, turning towards him inquiringly.

She remained standing, waiting for him to speak, some garden twine hanging from her left hand. She looked, he noted, puzzled.

“Yes?” she said.

Poirot, very foreign, took off his hat with a flourish and bowed. Her eyes rested on his moustaches with a kind of fascination.

“Mrs. Restarick?”

“Yes. I—”

“I hope I do not derange you, Madame.”

A faint smile touched her lips. “Not at all. Are you—”

“I have permitted myself to pay a visit on you. A friend of mine, Mrs. Ariadne Oliver—”

“Oh, of course. I know who you must be. Monsieur Poiret.”

“Monsieur Poirot,” he corrected her with an emphasis on the last syllable. “Hercule Poirot, at your service. I was passing through this neighbourhood and I ventured to call upon you here in the hope that I might be allowed to pay my respects to Sir Roderick Horsefield.”

“Yes. Naomi Lorrimer told us you might turn up.”

“I hope it is not inconvenient?”

“Oh, it is not inconvenient at all. Ariadne Oliver was here last weekend. She came over with the Lorrimers. Her books are most amusing, aren’t they? But perhaps you don’t find detective stories amusing. You are a detective yourself, aren’t you—a real one?”

“I am all that there is of the most real,” said Hercule Poirot.

He noticed that she repressed a smile. He studied her more closely. She was handsome in a rather artificial fashion. Her golden hair was stiffly arranged.

He wondered whether she might not at heart be secretly unsure of herself, whether she were not carefully playing the part of the English lady absorbed in her garden. He wondered a little what her social background might have been.

“You have a very fine garden here,” he said.

“You like gardens?”

“Not as the English like gardens. You have for a garden a special talent in England. It means something to you that it does not to us.”

“To French people, you mean? Oh yes. I believe that Mrs. Oliver mentioned that you were once with the Belgian Police Force?”

“That is so. Me, I am an old Belgian police dog.” He gave a polite little laugh and said, waving his hands, “But your gardens, you English, I admire. I sit at your feet! The Latin races, they like the formal garden, the gardens of the château, the Château of Versailles in miniature, and also of course they invented the potager. Very important, the potager. Here in England you have the potager, but you got it from France and you do not love your potager as much as you love your flowers. Hein? That is so?”

“Yes, I think you are right,” said Mary Restarick. “Do come into the house. You came to see my uncle.”

“I came, as you say, to pay homage to Sir Roderick, but I pay homage to you also, Madame. Always I pay homage to beauty when I meet it.” He bowed.

She laughed with slight embarrassment. “You mustn’t pay me so many compliments.”

She led the way through an open French window and he followed her.

“I knew your uncle slightly in 1944.”

“Poor dear, he’s getting quite an old man now. He’s very deaf, I’m afraid.”

"It was long ago that I encountered him. He will probably have forgotten. It was a matter of espionage and of scientific developments of a certain invention. We owed that invention to the ingenuity of Sir Roderick. He will be willing, I hope, to receive me."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll love it," said Mrs. Restarick. "He has rather a dull life in some ways nowadays. I have to be so much in London—we are looking for a suitable house there." She sighed and said, "Elderly people can be very difficult sometimes."

"I know," said Poirot. "Frequently I, too, am difficult."

She laughed. "Ah no, M. Poirot, come now, you mustn't pretend you're old."

"Sometimes I am told so," said Poirot. He sighed. "By young girls," he added mournfully.

"That's very unkind of them. It's probably the sort of thing that our daughter would do," she added.

"Ah, you have a daughter?"

"Yes. At least, she is my stepdaughter."

"I shall have much pleasure in meeting her," said Poirot politely.

"Oh well, I'm afraid she is not here. She's in London. She works there."

"The young girls, they all do jobs nowadays."

"Everybody's supposed to do a job," said Mrs. Restarick vaguely. "Even when they get married they're always being persuaded back into industry or back into teaching."

"Have they persuaded you, Madame, to come back into anything?"

"No. I was brought up in South Africa. I only came here with my husband a short time ago—It's all—rather strange to me still."

She looked round her with what Poirot judged to be an absence of enthusiasm. It was a handsomely furnished room of a conventional type—without personality. Two large portraits hung on the walls—the only personal touch. The first was that of a thin lipped woman in a grey velvet evening dress. Facing her on the opposite wall was a man of about thirty-odd with an air of repressed energy about him.

“Your daughter, I suppose, finds it dull in the country?”

“Yes, it is much better for her to be in London. She doesn’t like it here.” She paused abruptly, and then as though the last words were almost dragged out of her, she said, “—and she doesn’t like me.”

“Impossible,” said Hercule Poirot, with Gallic politeness.

“Not at all impossible! Oh well, I suppose it often happens. I suppose it’s hard for girls to accept a stepmother.”

“Was your daughter very fond of her own mother?”

“I suppose she must have been. She’s a difficult girl. I suppose most girls are.”

Poirot sighed and said, “Mothers and fathers have much less control over daughters nowadays. It is not as it used to be in the old good-fashioned days.”

“No indeed.”

“One dare not say so, Madame, but I must confess I regret that they show so very little discrimination in choosing their—how do you say it?—their boyfriends?”

“Norma has been a great worry to her father in that way. However, I suppose it is no good complaining. People must make their own experiments. But I must take you up to Uncle Roddy—he has his own rooms upstairs.”

She led the way out of the room. Poirot looked back over his shoulder. A dull room, a room without character—except perhaps for the two portraits. By the style of the woman's dress, Poirot judged that they dated from some years back. If that was the first Mrs. Restarick, Poirot did not think that he would have liked her.

He said, "Those are fine portraits, Madame."

"Yes. Lansberger did them."

It was the name of a famous and exceedingly expensive fashionable portrait painter of twenty years ago. His meticulous naturalism had now gone out of fashion, and since his death, he was little spoken of. His sitters were sometimes sneeringly spoken of as "clothes props," but Poirot thought they were a good deal more than that. He suspected that there was a carefully concealed mockery behind the smooth exteriors that Lansberger executed so effortlessly.

Mary Restarick said as she went up the stairs ahead of him:

"They have just come out of storage—and been cleaned up and—"

She stopped abruptly—coming to a dead halt, one hand on the stair rail.

Above her, a figure had just turned the corner of the staircase on its way down. It was a figure that seemed strangely incongruous. It might have been someone in fancy dress, someone who certainly did not match with this house.

He was a figure familiar enough to Poirot in different conditions, a figure often met in the streets of London or even at parties. A representative of the youth of today. He wore a black coat, an elaborate velvet waistcoat, skintight pants, and rich curls of chestnut hair hung down on his neck. He looked exotic and rather beautiful, and it needed a few moments to be certain of his sex.

"David!" Mary Restarick spoke sharply. "What on earth are you doing here?"

The young man was by no means taken aback. “Startled you?” he asked. “So sorry.”

“What are you doing here—in this house? You—have you come down here with Norma?”

“Norma? No, I hoped to find her here.”

“Find her here—what do you mean? She’s in London.”

“Oh, but my dear, she isn’t. At any rate, she’s not at 67 Borodene Mansions.”

“What do you mean, she isn’t there?”

“Well, since she didn’t come back this weekend, I thought she was probably here with you. I came down to see what she was up to.”

“She left here Sunday night as usual.” She added in an angry voice, “Why didn’t you ring the bell and let us know you were here? What are you doing roaming about the house?”

“Really, darling, you seem to be thinking I’m going to pinch the spoons or something. Surely it’s natural to walk into a house in broad daylight. Why ever not?”

“Well, we’re old-fashioned and we don’t like it.”

“Oh dear, dear.” David sighed. “The fuss everyone makes. Well, my dear, if I’m not going to have a welcome and you don’t seem to know where your stepdaughter is, I suppose I’d better be moving along. Shall I turn out my pockets before I go?”

“Don’t be absurd, David.”

“Ta-ta, then.” The young man passed them, waved an airy hand and went on down and out through the open front door.

“Horrible creature,” said Mary Restarick, with a sharpness of rancour that startled Poirot. “I can’t bear him. I simply can’t stand him. Why is En gland absolutely full of these people nowadays?”

“Ah, Madame, do not disquiet yourself. It is all a question of fashion. There have always been fashions. You see less in the country, but in London you meet plenty of them.”

“Dreadful,” said Mary. “Absolutely dreadful. Effeminate, exotic.”

“And yet not unlike a Vandyke portrait, do you not think so, Madame? In a gold frame, wearing a lace collar, you would not then say he was effeminate or exotic.”

“Daring to come down here like that. Andrew would have been furious. It worries him dreadfully. Daughters can be very worrying. It’s not even as though Andrew knew Norma well. He’s been abroad since she was a child. He left her entirely to her mother to bring up, and now he finds her a complete puzzle. So do I for that matter. I can’t help feeling that she is a very odd type of girl. One has no kind of authority over them these days. They seem to like the worst type of young men. She’s absolutely infatuated with this David Baker. One can’t do anything. Andrew forbade him the house, and look, he turns up here, walks in as cool as a cucumber. I think—I almost think I’d better not tell Andrew. I don’t want him to be unduly worried. I believe she goes about with this creature in London, and not only with him. There are some much worse ones even. The kind that don’t wash, completely unshaven faces and funny sprouting beards and greasy clothes.”

Poirot said cheerfully, “Alas, Madame, you must not distress yourself. The indiscretions of youth pass.”

“I hope so, I’m sure. Norma is a very difficult girl. Sometimes I think she’s not right in the head. She’s so peculiar. She really looks sometimes as though she isn’t all there. These extraordinary dislikes she takes—”

“Dislikes?”

“She hates me. Really hates me. I don’t see why it’s necessary. I suppose she was very devoted to her mother, but after all it’s only reasonable that her father should marry again, isn’t it?”

“Do you think she really hates you?”

“Oh, I know she does. I’ve had ample proof of it. I can’t say how relieved I was when she went off to London. I didn’t want to make trouble—” She stopped suddenly. It was as though for the first time she realised that she was talking to a stranger.

Poirot had the capacity to attract confidences. It was as though when people were talking to him they hardly realised who it was they were talking to. She gave a short laugh now.

“Dear me,” she said, “I don’t really know why I’m saying all this to you. I expect every family has these problems. Poor stepmothers, we have a hard time of it. Ah, here we are.”

She tapped on a door.

“Come in, come in.”

It was a stentorian roar.

“Here is a visitor to see you, Uncle,” said Mary Restarick, as she walked into the room, Poirot behind her.

A broad-shouldered, square-faced, red-cheeked, irascible looking elderly man had been pacing the floor. He stumped forward towards them. At the table behind him a girl was sitting sorting letters and papers. Her head was bent over them, a sleek, dark head.

“This is Monsieur Hercule Poirot, Uncle Roddy,” said Mary Restarick.

Poirot stepped forward gracefully into action and speech. “Ah, Sir Roderick, it is many years—many years since I have had the pleasure of meeting you. We have to go back, so far as the last war. It was, I think, in Normandy the last time. How well I remember, there was there also Colonel

Race and there was General Abercromby and there was Air-Marshal Sir Edmund Collingsby. What decisions we had to take! And what difficulties we had with security. Ah, nowadays, there is no longer the need for secrecy. I recall the unmasking of that secret agent who succeeded for so long—you remember Captain Henderson.”

“Ah. Captain Henderson indeed. Lord, that damned swine! Unmasked!”

“You may not remember me, Hercule Poirot.”

“Yes, yes, of course I remember you. Ah, it was a close shave that, a close shave. You were the French representative, weren’t you? There were one or two of them, one I couldn’t get on with—can’t remember his name. Ah well, sit down, sit down. Nothing like having a chat over old days.”

“I feared so much that you might not remember me or my colleague, Monsieur Giraud.”

“Yes, yes, of course I remember both of you. Ah, those were the days, those were the days indeed.”

The girl at the table got up. She moved a chair politely towards Poirot.

“That’s right, Sonia, that’s right,” said Sir Roderick. “Let me introduce you,” he said, “to my charming little secretary here. Makes a great difference to me. Helps me, you know, files all my work. Don’t know how I ever got on without her.”

Poirot bowed politely. “Enchanté, mademoiselle,” he murmured.

The girl murmured something in rejoinder. She was a small creature with black bobbed hair. She looked shy. Her dark blue eyes were usually modestly cast down, but she smiled up sweetly and shyly at her employer. He patted her on the shoulder.

“Don’t know what I should do without her,” he said. “I don’t really.”

“Oh, no,” the girl protested. “I am not much good really. I cannot type very fast.”

“You type quite fast enough, my dear. You’re my memory, too. My eyes and my ears and a great many other things.”

She smiled again at him.

“One remembers,” murmured Poirot, “some of the excellent stories that used to go the round. I don’t know if they were exaggerated or not. Now, for instance, the day that someone stole your car and—” he proceeded to follow up the tale.

Sir Roderick was delighted. “Ha, ha, of course now. Yes, indeed, well, bit of exaggeration, I expect. But on the whole, that’s how it was. Yes, yes, well, fancy your remembering that, after all this long time. But I could tell you a better one than that now.” He launched forth into another tale. Poirot listened, applauded. Finally he glanced at his watch and rose to his feet.

“But I must detain you no longer,” he said. “You are engaged, I can see, in important work. It was just that being in this neighbourhood I could not help paying my respects. Years pass, but you, I see, have lost none of your vigour, of your enjoyment of life.”

“Well, well, perhaps you may say so. Anyway, you mustn’t pay me too many compliments—but surely you’ll stay and have tea. I’m sure Mary will give you some tea.” He looked round. “Oh, she’s gone away. Nice girl.”

“Yes, indeed, and very handsome. I expect she has been a great comfort to you for many years.”

“Oh! They’ve only married recently. She’s my nephew’s second wife. I’ll be frank with you. I’ve never cared very much for this nephew of mine, Andrew—not a steady chap. Always restless. His elder brother Simon was my favourite. Not that I knew him well, either. As for Andrew, he behaved very badly to his first wife. Went off, you know. Left her high and dry. Went off with a thoroughly bad lot. Everybody knew about her. But he was infatuated with her. The whole thing broke up in a year or two: silly fellow. The girl he’s married seems all right. Nothing wrong with her as far as I know. Now Simon was a steady chap—damned dull, though. I can’t say I liked it when my sister married into that family. Marrying into trade, you know. Rich, of course, but money isn't everything—we've usually married into the Services. I never saw much of the Restarick lot."

"They have, I believe, a daughter. A friend of mine met her last week."

"Oh, Norma. Silly girl. Goes about in dreadful clothes and has picked up with a dreadful young man. Ah well, they're all alike nowadays. Long-haired young fellows, beatniks, Beatles, all sorts of names they've got. I can't keep up with them. Practically talk a foreign language. Still, nobody cares to hear an old man's criticisms, so there we are. Even Mary—I always thought she was a good, sensible sort, but as far as I can see she can be thoroughly hysterical in some ways—mainly about her health. Some fuss about going to hospital for observation or something. What about a drink? Whisky? No? Sure you won't stop and have a drop of tea?"

"Thank you, but I am staying with friends."

"Well, I must say I have enjoyed this chat with you very much. Nice to remember some of the things that happened in the old days. Sonia, dear, perhaps you'll take Monsieur—sorry, what's your name, it's gone again—ah, yes, Poirot. Take him down to Mary, will you?"

"No, no," Hercule Poirot hastily waved aside the offer. "I could not dream of troubling Madame anymore. I am quite all right. Quite all right. I can find my way perfectly. It has been a great pleasure to meet you again."

He left the room.

"Haven't the faintest idea who that chap was," said Sir Roderick, after Poirot had gone.

"You do not know who he was?" Sonia asked, looking at him in a startled manner.

"Personally I don't remember who half the people are who come up and talk to me nowadays. Of course, I have to make a good shot at it. One learns to get away with that, you know. Same thing at parties. Up comes a chap and says, 'Perhaps you don't remember me. I last saw you in 1939.' I have to say ‘Of course I remember,’ but I don’t. It’s a handicap being nearly blind and deaf. We got pally with a lot of frogs like that towards the end of the war. Don’t remember half of them. Oh, he’d been there all right. He knew me and I knew a good many of the chaps he talked about. That story about me and the stolen car, that was true enough. Exaggerated a bit, of course, they made a pretty good story of it at the time. Ah well, I don’t think he knew I didn’t remember him. Clever chap, I should say, but a thorough frog, isn’t he? You know, mincing and dancing and bowing and scraping. Now then, where were we?”

Sonia picked up a letter and handed it to him. She tentatively proffered a pair of spectacles which he immediately rejected.

“Don’t want those damned things—I can see all right.”

He screwed up his eyes and peered down at the letter he was holding. Then he capitulated and thrust it back into her hands.

“Well, perhaps you’d better read it to me.”

She started reading it in her clear soft voice.

Five

I

Hercule Poirot stood upon the landing for a moment. His head was a little on one side with a listening air. He could hear nothing from downstairs. He crossed to the landing window and looked out. Mary Restarick was below on the terrace, resuming her gardening work. Poirot nodded his head in satisfaction. He walked gently along the corridor. One by one in turn he opened the doors. A bathroom, a linen cupboard, a double bedded spare room, an occupied single bedroom, a woman's room with a double bed (Mary Restarick's?). The next door was that of an adjoining room and was, he guessed, the room belonging to Andrew Restarick. He turned to the other side of the landing. The door he opened first was a single bedroom. It was not, he judged, occupied at the time, but it was a room which possibly was occupied at weekends. There were toilet brushes on the dressing table. He listened carefully, then tiptoed in. He opened the wardrobe. Yes, there were some clothes hanging up there. Country clothes.

There was a writing table but there was nothing on it. He opened the desk drawers very softly. There were a few odds and ends, a letter or two, but the letters were trivial and dated some time ago. He shut the desk drawers. He walked downstairs, and going out of the house, bade farewell to his hostess. He refused her offer of tea. He had promised to get back, he said, as he had to catch a train to town very shortly afterwards.

"Don't you want a taxi? We could order you one, or I could drive you in the car."

"No, no, Madame, you are too kind."

Poirot walked back to the village and turned down the lane by the church. He crossed a little bridge over a stream. Presently he came to where a large car with a chauffeur was waiting discreetly under a beech tree. The chauffeur opened the door of the car, Poirot got inside, sat down and removed his patent leather shoes, uttering a gasp of relief.

“Now we return to London,” he said.

The chauffeur closed the door, returned to his seat and the car purred quietly away. The sight of a young man standing by the roadside furiously thumbing a ride was not an unusual one. Poirot’s eyes rested almost indifferently on this member of the fraternity, a brightly dressed young man with long and exotic hair. There were many such but in the moment of passing him Poirot suddenly sat upright and addressed the driver.

“If you please, stop. Yes, and if you can reverse a little…There is someone requesting a lift.”

The chauffeur turned an incredulous eye over his shoulder. It was the last remark he would have expected. However, Poirot was gently nodding his head, so he obeyed.

The young man called David advanced to the door. “Thought you weren’t going to stop for me,” he said cheerfully. “Much obliged, I’m sure.”

He got in, removed a small pack from his shoulders and let it slide to the floor, smoothed down his copper brown locks. “So you recognised me,” he said.

“You are perhaps somewhat conspicuously dressed.”

“Oh, do you think so? Not really. I’m just one of a band of brothers.”

“The school of Vandyke. Very dressy.”

“Oh. I’ve never thought of it like that. Yes, there may be something in what you say.”

“You should wear a cavalier’s hat,” said Poirot, “and a lace collar, if I might advise.”

“Oh, I don’t think we go quite as far as that.” The young man laughed. “How Mrs. Restarick dislikes the mere sight of me. Actually I reciprocate her dislike. I don’t care much for Restarick, either. There is something singularly unattractive about successful tycoons, don’t you think?”

"It depends on the point of view. You have been paying attentions to the daughter, I understand."

"That is such a nice phrase," said David. "Paying attentions to the daughter. I suppose it might be called that. But there's plenty of fifty-fifty about it, you know. She's paying attention to me, too."

"Where is Mademoiselle now?"

David turned his head rather sharply. "And why do you ask that?"

"I should like to meet her." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't believe she'd be your type, you know, anymore than I am. Norma's in London."

"But you said to her stepmother—"

"Oh! We don't tell stepmothers everything."

"And where is she in London?"

"She works in an interior decorator's down the King's Road somewhere in Chelsea. Can't remember the name of it for the moment. Susan Phelps, I think."

"But that is not where she lives, I presume. You have her address?"

"Oh yes, a great block of flats. I don't really understand your interest."

"One is interested in so many things."

"What do you mean?"

"What brought you to that house—(what is its name?—Crosshedges) today. Brought you secretly into the house and up the stairs."

"I came in the back door, I admit."

"What were you looking for upstairs?"

"That's my business. I don't want to be rude—but aren't you being rather nosy?"

"Yes, I am displaying curiosity. I would like to know exactly where this young lady is."

"I see. Dear Andrew and dear Mary—lord rot 'em—are employing you, is that it? They are trying to find her?"

"As yet," said Poirot, "I do not think they know that she is missing."

"Someone must be employing you."

"You are exceedingly perceptive," said Poirot. He leant back.

"I wondered what you were up to," said David. "That's why I hailed you. I hoped you'd stop and give me a bit of dope. She's my girl. You know that, I suppose?"

"I understand that that is supposed to be the idea," said Poirot cautiously. "If so, you should know where she is. Is that not so, Mr.—I am sorry, I do not think I know your name beyond, that is, that your Christian name is David."

"Baker."

"Perhaps, Mr. Baker, you have had a quarrel."

"No, we haven't had a quarrel. Why should you think we had?"

"Miss Norma Restarick left Crosshedges on Sunday evening, or was it Monday morning?"

"It depends. There is an early bus you can take. Gets you to London a little after ten. It would make her a bit late at work, but not too much. Usually she goes back on Sunday night."

"She left there Sunday night but she has not arrived at Borodene Mansions."

"Apparently not. So Claudia says."

"This Miss Reece-Holland—that is her name, is it not?—was she surprised or worried?"

"Good lord, no, why should she be. They don't keep tabs on each other all the time, these girls."

"But you thought she was going back there?"

"She didn't go back to work either. They're fed up at the shop, I can tell you."

"Are you worried, Mr. Baker?"

"No. Naturally—I mean, well, I'm damned if I know. I don't see any reason I should be worried, only time's getting on. What is it today—Thursday?"

"She has not quarrelled with you?"

"No. We don't quarrel."

"But you are worried about her, Mr. Baker?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"It is no business of mine but there has, I understand, been trouble at home. She does not like her stepmother."

"Quite right too. She's a bitch, that woman. Hard as nails. She doesn't like Norma either."

"She has been ill, has she not? She had to go to hospital."

"Who are you talking about—Norma?"

"No, I am not talking about Miss Restarick. I am talking about Mrs. Restarick."

"I believe she did go into a nursing home. No reason she should. Strong as a horse, I'd say."

"And Miss Restarick hates her stepmother."

"She's a bit unbalanced sometimes, Norma. You know, goes off the deep end. I tell you, girls always hate their stepmothers."

"Does that always make stepmothers ill? Ill enough to go to hospital?"

"What the hell are you getting at?"

"Gardening perhaps—or the use of weed killer."

"What do you mean by talking about weed killer? Are you suggesting that Norma—that she'd dream of—that—"

"People talk," said Poirot. "Talk goes round the neighbourhood."

"Do you mean that somebody has said that Norma has tried to poison her stepmother? That's ridiculous. It's absolutely absurd."

"It is very unlikely, I agree," said Poirot. "Actually, people have not been saying that."

"Oh. Sorry. I misunderstood. But—what did you mean?"

"My dear young man," said Poirot, "you must realise that there are rumours going about, and rumours are almost always about the same person—a husband."

"What, poor old Andrew? Most unlikely I should say."

"Yes. Yes, it does not seem to me very likely."

"Well, what were you there for then? You are a detective, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then?"

"We are talking at cross-purposes," said Poirot. "I did not go down there to inquire into any doubtful or possible case of poisoning. You must forgive me if I cannot answer your question. It is all very hush-hush, you understand."

"What on earth do you mean by that?"

"I went there," said Poirot, "to see Sir Roderick Horsefield."

"What, that old boy? He's practically gaga, isn't he?"

"He is a man," said Poirot, "who is in possession of a great many secrets. I do not mean that he takes an active part in such things nowadays, but he knows a good deal. He was connected with a great many things in the past war. He knew several people."

"That's all over years ago, though."

"Yes, yes, his part in things is all over years ago. But do you not realise that there are certain things that it might be useful to know?"

"What sort of things?"

"Faces," said Poirot. "A well-known face perhaps, which Sir Roderick might recognise. A face or a mannerism, a way of talking, a way of walking, a gesture. People do remember, you know. Old people. They remember, not things that have happened last week or last month or last year, but they remember something that happened, say, nearly twenty years ago. And they may remember someone who does not want to be remembered. And they can tell you certain things about a certain man or a certain woman or something they were mixed up in—I am speaking very vaguely, you understand. I went to him for information."

"You went to him for information, did you? That old boy? Gaga. And he gave it to you?"

“Let us say that I am quite satisfied.”

David continued to stare at him. “I wonder now,” he said. “Did you go to see the old boy or did you go to see the little girl, eh? Did you want to know what she was doing in the house? I’ve wondered once or twice myself. Do you think she took that post there to get a bit of past information out of the old boy?”

“I do not think,” said Poirot, “that it will serve any useful purpose to discuss these matters. She seems a very devoted and attentive—what shall I call her—secretary?”

“A mixture of a hospital nurse, a secretary, a companion, an au pair girl, an uncle’s help? Yes, one could find a good many names for her, couldn’t one? He’s besotted about her. You noticed that?”

“It is not unnatural under the circumstances,” said Poirot primly.

“I can tell you someone who doesn’t like her, and that’s our Mary.”

“And she perhaps does not like Mary Restarick either.”

“So that’s what you think, is it?” said David. “That Sonia doesn’t like Mary Restarick. Perhaps you go as far as thinking that she may have made a few inquiries as to where the weed killer was kept? Bah,” he added, “the whole thing’s ridiculous. All right. Thanks for the lift. I think I’ll get out here.”

“Aha. This is where you want to be? We are still a good seven miles out of London.”

“I’ll get out here. Good-bye, M. Poirot.”

“Good-bye.”

Poirot leant back in his seat as David slammed the door.

II

Mrs. Oliver prowled round her sitting room. She was very restless. An hour ago she had parcelled up a typescript that she had just finished correcting. She was about to send it off to her publisher who was anxiously awaiting it and constantly prodding her about it every three or four days.

“There you are,” said Mrs. Oliver, addressing the empty air and conjuring up an imaginary publisher. “There you are, and I hope you like it! I don’t. I think it’s lousy! I don’t believe you know whether anything I write is good or bad. Anyway, I warned you. I told you it was frightful. You said ‘Oh! no, no, I don’t believe that for a moment.’

“You just wait and see,” said Mrs. Oliver vengefully. “You just wait and see.”

She opened the door, called to Edith, her maid, gave her the parcel and directed that it should be taken to the post at once.

“And now,” said Mrs. Oliver, “what am I going to do with myself?”

She began strolling about again. “Yes,” thought Mrs. Oliver, “I wish I had those tropical birds and things back on the wall instead of these idiotic cherries. I used to feel like something in a tropical wood. A lion or a tiger or a leopard or a cheetah! What could I possibly feel like in a cherry orchard except a bird scarer?”

She looked round again. “Cheeping like a bird, that’s what I ought to be doing,” she said gloomily. “Eating cherries…I wish it was the right time of year for cherries. I’d like some cherries. I wonder now—” She went to the telephone. “I will ascertain, Madam,” said the voice of George in answer to her inquiry. Presently another voice spoke.

“Hercule Poirot, at your service, Madame,” he said.

“Where’ve you been?” said Mrs. Oliver. “You’ve been away all day. I suppose you went down to look up the Restaricks. Is that it? Did you see Sir Roderick? What did you find out?”

“Nothing,” said Hercule Poirot.

“How dreadfully dull,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“No, I do not think it is really so dull. It is rather astonishing that I have not found out anything.”

“Why is it so astonishing? I don’t understand.”

“Because,” said Poirot, “it means either there was nothing to find out, and that, let me tell you, does not accord with the facts; or else something was being very cleverly concealed. That, you see, would be interesting. Mrs. Restarick, by the way, did not know the girl was missing.”

“You mean—she has nothing to do with the girl having disappeared?”

“So it seems. I met there the young man.”

“You mean the unsatisfactory young man that nobody likes?”

“That is right. The unsatisfactory young man.”

“Did you think he was unsatisfactory?”

“From whose point of view?”

“Not from the girl’s point of view, I suppose.”

“The girl who came to see me I am sure would have been highly delighted with him.”

“Did he look very awful?”

“He looked very beautiful,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Beautiful?” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t know that I like beautiful young men.”

“Girls do,” said Poirot.

"Yes, you're quite right. They like beautiful young men. I don't mean good-looking young men or smart-looking young men or well-dressed or well-washed looking young men. I mean they either like young men looking as though they were just going on in a Restoration comedy, or else very dirty young men looking as though they were just going to take some awful tramp's job."

"It seemed that he also did not know where the girl is now—"

"Or else he wasn't admitting it."

"Perhaps. He had gone down there. Why? He was actually in the house. He had taken the trouble to walk in without anyone seeing him. Again why? For what reason? Was he looking for the girl? Or was he looking for something else?"

"You think he was looking for something?"

"He was looking for something in the girl's room," said Poirot.

"How do you know? Did you see him there?"

"No, I only saw him coming down the stairs, but I found a very nice little piece of damp mud in Norma's room that could have come from his shoe. It is possible that she herself may have asked him to bring her something from that room—there are a lot of possibilities. There is another girl in that house—and a pretty one—He may have come down there to meet her. Yes—many possibilities."

"What are you going to do next?" demanded Mrs. Oliver.

"Nothing," said Poirot.

"That's very dull," said Mrs. Oliver disapprovingly.

"I am going to receive, perhaps, a little information from those I have employed to find it; though it is quite possible that I shall receive nothing at all."

“But aren’t you going to do something?”

“Not till the right moment,” said Poirot.

“Well, I shall,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Pray, pray be very careful,” he implored her.

“What nonsense! What could happen to me?”

“Where there is murder, anything can happen. I tell that to you. I, Poirot.”

Six

I

Mr. Goby sat in a chair. He was a small shrunken little man, so nondescript as to be practically nonexistent.

He looked attentively at the claw foot of an antique table and addressed his remarks to it. He never addressed anybody direct.

“Glad you got the names for me, Mr. Poirot,” he said. “Otherwise, you know, it might have taken a lot of time. As it is, I’ve got the main facts—and a bit of gossip on the side…Always useful, that. I’ll begin at Borodene Mansions, shall I?”

Poirot inclined his head graciously.

“Plenty of porters,” Mr. Goby informed the clock on the chimneypiece. “I started there, used one or two different young men. Expensive, but worth it. Didn’t want it thought that there was anyone making any particular inquiries! Shall I use initials, or names?”

“Within these walls you can use the names,” said Poirot.

“Miss Claudia Reece-Holland spoken of as a very nice young lady. Father an MP. Ambitious man. Gets himself in the news a lot. She’s his only daughter. She does secretarial work. Serious girl. No wild parties, no drink, no beatniks. Shares flat with two others. Number two works for the Wedderburn Gallery in Bond Street. Arty type. Whoops it up a bit with the Chelsea set. Goes around to places arranging exhibitions and art shows.

“The third one is your one. Not been there long. General opinion is that she’s a bit ‘wanting.’ Not all there in the top storey. But it’s all a bit vague. One of the porters is a gossipy type. Buy him a drink or two and you’ll be surprised at the things he’ll tell you! Who drinks, and who drugs, and who’s having trouble with his income tax, and who keeps his cash behind the cistern. Of course you can’t believe it all. Anyway, there was some story about a revolver being fired one night.”

“A revolver fired? Was anyone injured?”

“There seems a bit of doubt as to that. His story is he heard a shot fired one night, and he comes out and there was this girl, your girl, standing there with a revolver in her hand. She looked sort of dazed. And then one of the other young ladies—or both of them, in fact—they come running along. And Miss Cary (that’s the arty one) says, ‘Norma, what on earth have you done?’ and Miss Reece-Holland, she says sharp-like, ‘Shut up, can’t you, Frances. Don’t be a fool!’ and she took the revolver away from your girl and says, ‘Give me that.’ She slams it into her handbag and then she notices this chap Micky, and goes over to him and says, laughing-like, ‘That must have startled you, didn’t it?’ and Micky he says it gave him quite a turn, and she says, ‘You needn’t worry. Matter of fact, we’d no idea this thing was loaded. We were just fooling about.’ And then she says: ‘Anyway, if anybody asks you questions, tell them it is quite all right,’ and then she says: ‘Come on, Norma,’ and took her arm and led her along to the elevator, and they all went up again.

“But Micky said he was a bit doubtful still. He went and had a good look round the courtyard.”

Mr. Goby lowered his eyes and quoted from his notebook:

“‘I’ll tell you, I found something, I did! I found some wet patches. Sure as anything I did. Drops of blood they were. I touched them with my finger. I tell you what I think. Somebody had been shot—some man as he was running away…I went upstairs and I asked if I could speak to Miss Holland. I says to her: “I think there may have been someone shot, Miss,” I says. “There are some drops of blood in the courtyard.” “Good gracious,” she says, “How ridiculous. I expect, you know,” she says, “it must have been one of the pigeons.” And then she says: “I’m sorry if it gave you a turn. Forget about it,” and she slipped me a five pound note. Five pound note, no less! Well, naturally, I didn’t open my mouth after that.’

"And then, after another whisky, he comes out with some more. 'If you ask me, she took a potshot at that low class young chap that comes to see her. I think she and he had a row and she did her best to shoot him. That's what I think. But least said soonest mended, so I'm not repeating it. If anyone asks me anything I'll say I don't know what they're talking about.'" Mr. Goby paused.

"Interesting," said Poirot.

"Yes, but it's as likely as not that it's a pack of lies. Nobody else seems to know anything about it. There's a story about a gang of young thugs who came barging into the courtyard one night, and had a bit of a fight—flick-knives out and all that."

"I see," said Poirot. "Another possible source of blood in the courtyard."

"Maybe the girl did have a row with her young man, threatened to shoot him, perhaps. And Micky overheard it and mixed the whole thing up—especially if there was a car backfiring just then."

"Yes," said Hercule Poirot, and sighed, "that would account for things quite well."

Mr. Goby turned over another leaf of his notebook and selected his confidant. He chose an electric radiator.

"Joshua Restarick Ltd. Family firm. Been going over a hundred years. Well thought of in the City. Always very sound. Nothing spectacular. Founded by Joshua Restarick in 1850. Launched out after the first war, with greatly increased investments abroad, mostly South Africa, West Africa and Australia. Simon and Andrew Restarick—the last of the Restaricks. Simon, the elder brother, died about a year ago, no children. His wife had died some years previously. Andrew Restarick seems to have been a restless chap. His heart was never really in the business though everyone says he had plenty of ability. Finally ran off with some woman, leaving his wife and a daughter of five years old. Went to South Africa, Kenya, and various other places. No divorce. His wife died two years ago. Had been an invalid for some time. He travelled about a lot, and wherever he went he seems to have made money. Concessions for minerals mostly. Everything he touched prospered.

“After his brother’s death, he seems to have decided it was time to settle down. He’d married again and he thought the right thing to do was to come back and make a home for his daughter. They’re living at the moment with his uncle Sir Roderick Horsefield—uncle by marriage that is. That’s only temporary. His wife’s looking at houses all over London. Expense no object. They’re rolling in money.”

Poirot sighed. “I know,” he said. “What you outline to me is a success story! Everyone makes money! Everybody is of good family and highly respected. Their relations are distinguished. They are well thought of in business circles.

“There is only one cloud in the sky. A girl who is said to be ‘a bit wanting,’ a girl who is mixed up with a dubious boyfriend who has been on probation more than once. A girl who may quite possibly have tried to poison her stepmother, and who either suffers from hallucinations, or else has committed a crime! I tell you, none of that accords well with the success story you have brought me.”

Mr. Goby shook his head sadly and said rather obscurely:

“There’s one in every family.”

“This Mrs. Restarick is quite a young woman. I presume she is not the woman he originally ran away with?”

“Oh no, that bust up quite soon. She was a pretty bad lot by all accounts, and a tartar as well. He was a fool ever to be taken in by her.” Mr. Goby shut his notebook and looked inquiringly at Poirot. “Anything more you want me to do?”

“Yes. I want to know a little more about the late Mrs. Andrew Restarick. She was an invalid, she was frequently in nursing homes. What kind of nursing homes? Mental homes?”

“I take your point, Mr. Poirot.”

“And any history of insanity in the family—on either side?”

“I’ll see to it, Mr. Poirot.”

Mr. Goby rose to his feet. “Then I’ll take leave of you, sir. Good night.”

Poirot remained thoughtful after Mr. Goby had left. He raised and lowered his eyebrows. He wondered, he wondered very much.

Then he rang Mrs. Oliver:

“I told you before,” he said, “to be careful. I repeat that—Be very careful.”

“Careful of what?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Of yourself. I think there might be danger. Danger to anyone who goes poking about where they are not wanted. There is murder in the air—I do not want it to be yours.”

“Have you had the information you said you might have?”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I have had a little information. Mostly rumour and gossip, but it seems something happened at Borodene Mansions.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Blood in the courtyard,” said Poirot.

“Really!” said Mrs. Oliver. “That’s just like the title of an old-fashioned detective story. The Stain on the Staircase. I mean nowadays you say something more like She Asked for Death.”

“Perhaps there may not have been blood in the courtyard. Perhaps it is only what an imaginative, Irish porter imagined.”

“Probably an upset milk bottle,” said Mrs. Oliver. “He couldn’t see it at night. What happened?”

Poirot did not answer directly.

“The girl thought she ‘might have committed a murder.’ Was that the murder she meant?”

“You mean she did shoot someone?”

“One might presume that she did shoot at someone, but for all intents and purposes missed them. A few drops of blood…That was all. No body.”

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Oliver, “it’s all very confused. Surely if anyone could still run out of a courtyard, you wouldn’t think you’d killed him, would you?”

“C’est difficile,” said Poirot, and rang off.

II

“I’m worried,” said Claudia Reece-Holland.

She refilled her cup from the coffee percolator. Frances Cary gave an enormous yawn. Both girls were breakfasting in the small kitchen of the flat. Claudia was dressed and ready to start for her day’s work. Frances was still in dressing gown and pyjamas. Her black hair fell over one eye.

“I’m worried about Norma,” continued Claudia.

Frances yawned.

“I shouldn’t worry if I were you. She’ll ring up or turn up sooner or later, I suppose.”

“Will she? You know, Fran, I can’t help wondering—”

“I don’t see why,” said Frances, pouring herself out more coffee. She sipped it doubtfully. “I mean—Norma’s not really our business, is she? I mean, we’re not looking after her or spoon-feeding her or anything. She just shares the flat. Why all this motherly solicitude? I certainly wouldn’t worry.”

“I daresay you wouldn’t. You never worry over anything. But it’s not the same for you as it is for me.”

“Why isn’t it the same? You mean because you’re the tenant of the flat or something?”

“Well, I’m in rather a special position, as you might say.”

Frances gave another enormous yawn.

“I was up too late last night,” she said. “At Basil’s party. I feel dreadful. Oh well, I suppose black coffee will be helpful. Have some more before I’ve drunk it all? Basil would make us try some new pills—Emerald Dreams. I don’t think it’s really worth trying all these silly things.”

“You’ll be late at your gallery,” said Claudia.

“Oh well, I don’t suppose it matters much. Nobody notices or cares.

“I saw David last night,” she added. “He was all dressed up and really looked rather wonderful.”

“Now don’t say you’re falling for him, too, Fran. He really is too awful.”

“Oh, I know you think so. You’re such a conventional type, Claudia.”

“Not at all. But I cannot say I care for all your arty set. Trying out all these drugs and passing out or getting fighting mad.”

Frances looked amused.

“I’m not a drug fiend, dear—I just like to see what these things are like. And some of the gang are all right. David can paint, you know, if he wants to.”

“David doesn’t very often want to, though, does he?”

“You’ve always got your knife into him, Claudia…You hate him coming here to see Norma. And talking of knives….”

“Well? Talking of knives?”

“I’ve been worrying,” said Frances slowly, “whether to tell you something or not.”

Claudia glanced at her wristwatch.

“I haven’t got time now,” she said. “You can tell me this evening if you want to tell me something. Anyway, I’m not in the mood. Oh dear,” she sighed, “I wish I knew what to do.”

“About Norma?”

“Yes. I’m wondering if her parents ought to know that we don’t know where she is….”

“That would be very unsporting. Poor Norma, why shouldn’t she slope off on her own if she wants to?”

“Well, Norma isn’t exactly—” Claudia stopped.

“No, she isn’t, is she? Non compos mentis. That’s what you meant. Have you rung up that terrible place where she works? ‘Homebirds,’ or whatever it’s called? Oh yes, of course you did. I remember.”

“So where is she?” demanded Claudia. “Did David say anything last night?”

“David didn’t seem to know. Really, Claudia, I can’t see that it matters.”

“It matters for me,” said Claudia, “because my boss happens to be her father. Sooner or later, if anything peculiar has happened to her, they’ll ask me why I didn’t mention the fact that she hadn’t come home.”

“Yes, I suppose they might pitch on you. But there’s no real reason, is there, why Norma should have to report to us every time she’s going to be away from here for a day or two. Or even a few nights. I mean, she’s not a paying guest or anything. You’re not in charge of the girl.”

“No, but Mr. Restarick did mention he felt glad to know that she had got a room here with us.”

“So that entitles you to go and tittle-tattle about her every time she’s absent without leave? She’s probably got a crush on some new man.”

“She’s got a crush on David,” said Claudia. “Are you sure she isn’t holed up at his place?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so. He doesn’t really care for her, you know.”

“You’d like to think he doesn’t,” said Claudia. “You are rather sweet on David yourself.”

“Certainly not,” said Frances sharply. “Nothing of the kind.”

“David’s really keen on her,” said Claudia. “If not, why did he come round looking for her here the other day?”

“You soon marched him out again,” said Frances. “I think,” she added, getting up and looking at her face in a rather unflattering small kitchen mirror, “I think it might have been me he really came to see.”

“You’re too idiotic! He came here looking for Norma.”

“That girl’s mental,” said Frances.

“Sometimes I really think she is!”

“Well, I know she is. Look here, Claudia, I’m going to tell you that something now. You ought to know. I broke the string of my bra the other day and I was in a hurry. I know you don’t like anyone fiddling with your things—”

“I certainly don’t,” said Claudia.

“—but Norma never minds, or doesn’t notice. Anyway, I went into her room and I rootled in her drawer and I—well, I found something. A knife.”

“A knife!” said Claudia, surprised. “What sort of a knife?”

“You know we had that sort of shindy thing in the courtyard? A group of beats, teenagers who’d come in here and were having a fight with flick-knives and all that? And Norma came in just after.”

“Yes, yes, I remember.”

“One of the boys got stabbed, so a reporter told me, and he ran away. Well, the knife in Norma’s drawer was a flick-knife. It had got a stain on it—looked like dried blood.”

“Frances! You’re being absurdly dramatic.”

“Perhaps. But I’m sure that’s what it was. And what on earth was that doing hidden away in Norma’s drawer, I should like to know?”

“I suppose—she might have picked it up.”

“What—a souvenir? And hidden it away and never told us?”

“What did you do with it?”

“I put it back,” said Frances slowly. “I—I didn’t know what else to do…I couldn’t decide whether to tell you or not. Then yesterday I looked again and it was gone, Claudia. Not a trace of it.”

“You think she sent David here to get it?”

“Well, she might have done…I tell you, Claudia, in future I’m going to keep my door locked at night.”

Seven

Mrs. Oliver woke up dissatisfied. She saw stretching before her a day with nothing to do. Having packed off her completed manuscript with a highly virtuous feeling, work was over. She had now only, as many times before, to relax, to enjoy herself; to lie fallow until the creative urge became active once more. She walked about her flat in a rather aimless fashion, touching things, picking them up, putting them down, looking in the drawers of her desk, realising that there were plenty of letters there to be dealt with but feeling also that in her present state of virtuous accomplishment, she was certainly not going to deal with anything so tiresome as that now. She wanted something interesting to do. She wanted—what did she want?

She thought about the conversation she had had with Hercule Poirot, the warning he had given her. Ridiculous! After all, why shouldn't she participate in this problem which she was sharing with Poirot? Poirot might choose to sit in a chair, put the tips of his fingers together, and set his grey cells whirring to work while his body reclined comfortably within four walls. That was not the procedure that appealed to Ariadne Oliver. She had said, very forcibly, that she at least was going to do something. She was going to find out more about this mysterious girl. Where was Norma Restarick? What was she doing? What more could she, Ariadne Oliver, find out about her?

Mrs. Oliver prowled about, more and more disconsolate. What could one do? It wasn't very easy to decide. Go somewhere and ask questions? Should she go down to Long Basing? But Poirot had already been there—and found out presumably what there was to be found out. And what excuse could she offer for barging into Sir Roderick Horsefield's house?

She considered another visit to Borodene Mansions. Something still to be found out there, perhaps? She would have to think of another excuse for going there. She wasn't quite sure what excuse she would use but anyway, that seemed the only possible place where more information could be obtained. What was the time? Ten a.m. There were certain possibilities….

On the way there she concocted an excuse. Not a very original excuse. In fact, Mrs. Oliver would have liked to have found something more intriguing, but perhaps, she reflected prudently, it was just as well to keep to something completely everyday and plausible. She arrived at the stately if grim elevation of Borodene Mansions and walked slowly round the courtyard considering it.

A porter was conversing with a furniture van—A milkman, pushing his milk float, came to join Mrs. Oliver near the service lift.

He rattled bottles, cheerfully whistling, whilst Mrs. Oliver continued to stare abstractedly at the furniture van.

“Number 76 moving out,” explained the milkman to Mrs. Oliver, mistaking her interest. He transferred a clutch of bottles from his float to the lift.

“Not that she hasn’t moved already in a manner of speaking,” he added, emerging again. He seemed a cheery kind of milkman.

He pointed a thumb upwards.

“Pitched herself out of a window—seventh floor—only a week ago, it was. Five o’clock in the morning. Funny time to choose.”

Mrs. Oliver didn’t think it so funny.

“Why?”

“Why did she do it? Nobody knows. Balance of mind disturbed, they said.”

“Was she—young?”

“Nah! Just an old trout. Fifty if she was a day.”

Two men struggled in the van with a chest of drawers. It resisted them and two mahogany drawers crashed to the ground—a loose piece of paper floated toward Mrs. Oliver who caught it.

“Don’t smash everything, Charlie,” said the cheerful milkman reprovingly, and went up in the lift with his cargo of bottles.

An altercation broke out between the furniture movers. Mrs. Oliver offered them the piece of paper, but they waved it away.

Making up her mind, Mrs. Oliver entered the building and went up to No. 67. A clank came from inside and presently the door was opened by a middle-aged woman with a mop who was clearly engaged in household labours.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Oliver, using her favourite monosyllable. “Good morning. Is—I wonder—is anyone in?”

“No, I’m afraid not, Madam. They’re all out. They’ve gone to work.”

“Yes, of course…As a matter of fact when I was here last I left a little diary behind. So annoying. It must be in the sitting room somewhere.”

“Well, I haven’t picked up anything of the kind, Madam, as far as I know. Of course I mightn’t have known it was yours. Would you like to come in?” She opened the door hospitably, set aside the mop with which she had been treating the kitchen floor, and accompanied Mrs. Oliver into the sitting room.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, determined to establish friendly relations, “yes, I see here—that’s the book I left for Miss Restarick, Miss Norma. Is she back from the country yet?”

“I don’t think she’s living here at the moment. Her bed wasn’t slept in. Perhaps she’s still down with her people in the country. I know she was going there last weekend.”

“Yes, I expect that’s it,” said Mrs. Oliver. “This was a book I brought her. One of my books.”

One of Mrs. Oliver’s books did not seem to strike any chord of interest in the cleaning woman.

“I was sitting here,” went on Mrs. Oliver, patting an armchair, “at least I think so. And then I moved to the window and perhaps to the sofa.”

She dug down vehemently behind the cushions of the chair. The cleaning woman obliged by doing the same thing to the sofa cushions.

“You’ve no idea how maddening it is when one loses something like that,” went on Mrs. Oliver, chattily. “One has all one’s engagements written down there. I’m quite sure I’m lunching with someone very important today, and I can’t remember who it was or where the luncheon was to be. Only, of course, it may be tomorrow. If so, I’m lunching with someone else quite different. Oh dear.”

“Very trying for you, ma’am, I’m sure,” said the cleaning woman with sympathy.

“They’re such nice flats, these,” said Mrs. Oliver, looking round.

“A long way up.”

“Well, that gives you a very good view, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but if they face east you get a lot of cold wind in winter. Comes right through these metal window frames. Some people have had double windows put in. Oh yes, I wouldn’t care for a flat facing this way in winter. No, give me a nice ground floor flat every time. Much more convenient too if you’ve got children. For prams and all that, you know. Oh yes, I’m all for the ground floor, I am. Think if there was to be a fire.”

“Yes, of course, that would be terrible,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I suppose there are fire escapes?”

“You can’t always get to a fire door. Terrified of fire, I am. Always have been. And they’re ever so expensive, these flats. You wouldn’t believe the rents they ask! That’s why Miss Holland, she gets two other girls to go in with her.”

“Oh yes, I think I met them both. Miss Cary’s an artist, isn’t she?”

“Works for an art gallery, she does. Don’t work at it very hard, though. She paints a bit—cows and trees that you’d never recognise as being what they’re meant to be. An untidy young lady. The state her room is in—you wouldn’t believe it! Now Miss Holland, everything is always as neat as a new pin. She was a secretary in the Coal Board at one time but she’s a private secretary in the City now. She likes it better, she says. She’s secretary to a very rich gentleman just come back from South America or somewhere like that. He’s Miss Norma’s father, and it was he who asked Miss Holland to take her as a boarder when the last young lady went off to get married—and she mentioned as she was looking for another girl. Well, she couldn’t very well refuse, could she? Not since he was her employer.”

“Did she want to refuse?”

The woman sniffed.

“I think she would have—if she’d known.”

“Known what?” The question was too direct.

“It’s not for me to say anything, I’m sure. It’s not my business—”

Mrs. Oliver continued to look mildly inquiring. Mrs. Mop fell.

“It’s not that she isn’t a nice young lady. Scatty but then they’re nearly all scatty. But I think as a doctor ought to see her. There are times when she doesn’t seem to know rightly what she’s doing, or where she is. It gives you quite a turn, sometimes—Looks just how my husband’s nephew does after he’s had a fit. (Terrible fits he has—you wouldn’t believe!) Only I’ve never known her have fits. Maybe she takes things—a lot do.”

“I believe there is a young man her family doesn’t approve of.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard. He’s come here to call for her once or twice—though I’ve never seen him. One of these Mods by all accounts. Miss Holland doesn’t like it—but what can you do nowadays? Girls go their own way.”

“Sometimes one feels very upset about girls nowadays,” said Mrs. Oliver, and tried to look serious and responsible.

“Not brought up right, that’s what I says.”

“I’m afraid not. No, I’m afraid not. One feels really a girl like Norma Restarick would be better at home than coming all alone to London and earning her living as an interior decorator.”

“She don’t like it at home.”

“Really?”

“Got a stepmother. Girls don’t like stepmothers. From what I’ve heard the stepmother’s done her best, tried to pull her up, tried to keep flashy young men out of the house, that sort of thing. She knows girls pick up with the wrong young man and a lot of harm may come of it. Sometimes—” the cleaning woman spoke impressively, “—I’m thankful I’ve never had any daughters.”

“Have you got sons?”

“Two boys, we’ve got. One’s doing very well at school, and the other one, he’s in a printer’s, doing well there too. Yes, very nice boys they are. Mind you, boys can cause you trouble, too. But girls is more worrying, I think. You feel you ought to be able to do something about them.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, thoughtfully, “one does feel that.”

She saw signs of the cleaning woman wishing to return to her cleaning.

“It’s too bad about my diary,” she said. “Well, thank you very much and I hope I haven’t wasted your time.”

“Well, I hope you’ll find it, I’m sure,” said the other woman obligingly.

Mrs. Oliver went out of the flat and considered what she should do next. She couldn’t think of anything she could do further that day, but a plan for tomorrow began to form in her mind.

When she got home, Mrs. Oliver, in an important way, got out a notebook and jotted down in it various things under the heading “Facts I have learned.” On the whole the facts did not amount to very much but Mrs. Oliver, true to her calling, managed to make the most of them that could be made. Possibly the fact that Claudia Reece-Holland was employed by Norma’s father was the most salient fact of any. She had not known that before, she rather doubted if Hercule Poirot had known it either. She thought of ringing him up on the telephone and acquainting him with it but decided to keep it to herself for the moment because of her plan for the morrow. In fact, Mrs. Oliver felt at this moment less like a detective novelist than like an ardent bloodhound. She was on the trail, nose down on the scent, and tomorrow morning—well, tomorrow morning we would see.

True to her plan, Mrs. Oliver rose early, partook of two cups of tea and a boiled egg and started out on her quest. Once more she arrived in the vicinity of Borodene Mansions. She wondered whether she might be getting a bit well known there, so this time she did not enter the courtyard, but skulked around either one entrance to it or the other, scanning the various people who were turning out into the morning drizzle to trot off on their way to work. They were mostly girls, and looked deceptively alike. How extraordinary human beings were when you considered them like this, emerging purposefully from these large tall buildings—just like anthills, thought Mrs. Oliver. One had never considered an anthill properly, she decided. It always looked so aimless, as one disturbed it with the toe of a shoe. All those little things rushing about with bits of grass in their mouths, streaming along industriously, worried, anxious, looking as though they were running to and fro and going nowhere, but presumably they were just as well organised as these human beings here. That man, for instance, who had just passed her. Scurrying along, muttering to himself. “I wonder what’s upsetting you,” thought Mrs. Oliver. She walked up and down a little more, then she drew back suddenly.

Claudia Reece-Holland came out of the entranceway walking at a brisk businesslike pace. As before, she looked very well turned out. Mrs. Oliver turned away so that she should not be recognised. Once she had allowed Claudia to get a sufficient distance ahead of her, she wheeled round again and followed in her tracks. Claudia Reece-Holland came to the end of the street and turned right into a main thoroughfare. She came to a bus stop and joined the queue. Mrs. Oliver, still following her, felt a momentary uneasiness. Supposing Claudia should turn round, look at her, recognise her? All Mrs. Oliver could think of was to do several protracted but noiseless blows of the nose. But Claudia Reece-Holland seemed totally absorbed in her own thoughts. She looked at none of her fellow waiters for buses. Mrs. Oliver was about third in the queue behind her. Finally the right bus came and there was a surge forward. Claudia got on the bus and went straight up to the top. Mrs. Oliver got inside and was able to get a seat close to the door as the uncomfortable third person. When the conductor came round for fares Mrs. Oliver pressed a reckless one and sixpence into his hand. After all, she had no idea by what route the bus went or indeed how far the distance was to what the cleaning woman had described vaguely as "one of those new buildings by St. Paul's." She was on the alert and ready when the venerable dome was at last sighted. Anytime now, she thought to herself, and fixed a steady eye on those who descended from the platform above. Ah yes, there came Claudia, neat and chic in her smart suit. She got off the bus. Mrs. Oliver followed her in due course and kept at a nicely calculated distance.

"Very interesting," thought Mrs. Oliver. "Here I am actually trailing someone! Just like in my books. And, what's more, I must be doing it very well because she hasn't the least idea."

Claudia Reece-Holland, indeed, looked very much absorbed in her own thoughts. "That's a very capable looking girl," thought Mrs. Oliver, as indeed she had thought before. "If I was thinking of having a go at guessing a murderer, a good capable murderer, I'd choose someone very like her."

Unfortunately, nobody had been murdered yet, that is to say, unless the girl Norma had been entirely right in her assumption that she herself had committed a murder.

This part of London seemed to have suffered or profited from a large amount of building in the recent years. Enormous skyscrapers, most of which Mrs. Oliver thought very hideous, mounted to the sky with a square matchbox-like air.

Claudia turned into a building. “Now I shall find out exactly,” thought Mrs. Oliver and turned into it after her. Four lifts appeared to be all going up and down with frantic haste. This, Mrs. Oliver thought, was going to be more difficult. However, they were of a very large size and by getting into Claudia’s one at the last minute Mrs. Oliver was able to interpose large masses of tall men between herself and the figure she was following. Claudia’s destination turned out to be the fourth floor. She went along a corridor and Mrs. Oliver, lingering behind two of her tall men, noted the door where she went in. Three doors from the end of the corridor. Mrs. Oliver arrived at the same door in due course and was able to read the legend on it. “Joshua Restarick Ltd.” was the legend it bore.

Having got as far as that Mrs. Oliver felt as though she did not quite know what to do next. She had found Norma’s father’s place of business and the place where Claudia worked, but now, slightly disabused, she felt that this was not as much of a discovery as it might have been. Frankly, did it help? Probably it didn’t.

She waited around a few moments, walking from one end to the other of the corridor looking to see if anybody else interesting went in at the door of Restarick Enterprises. Two or three girls did but they did not look particularly interesting. Mrs. Oliver went down again in the lift and walked rather disconsolately out of the building. She couldn’t quite think what to do next. She took a walk round the adjacent streets, she meditated a visit to St. Paul’s.

“I might go up in the Whispering Gallery and whisper,” thought Mrs. Oliver. “I wonder now how the Whispering Gallery would do for the scene of a murder?

“No,” she decided, “too profane, I’m afraid. No, I don’t think that would be quite nice.” She walked thoughtfully towards the Mermaid Theatre. That, she thought, had far more possibilities.

She walked back in the direction of the various new buildings. Then, feeling the lack of a more substantial breakfast than she had had, she turned into a local café. It was moderately well filled with people having extra late breakfast or else early “elevenses.” Mrs. Oliver, looking round vaguely for a suitable table, gave a gasp. At a table near the wall the girl Norma was sitting, and opposite her was sitting a young man with lavish chestnut hair curled on his shoulders, wearing a red velvet waistcoat and a very fancy jacket.

“David,” said Mrs. Oliver under her breath. “It must be David.” He and the girl Norma were talking excitedly together.

Mrs. Oliver considered a plan of campaign, made up her mind, and nodding her head in satisfaction, crossed the floor of the café to a discreet door marked “Ladies.”

Mrs. Oliver was not quite sure whether Norma was likely to recognise her or not. It was not always the vaguest looking people who proved the vaguest in fact. At the moment Norma did not look as though she was likely to look at anybody but David, but who knows?

“I expect I can do something to myself anyway,” thought Mrs. Oliver. She looked at herself in a small flyblown mirror provided by the café’s management, studying particularly what she considered to be the focal point of a woman’s appearance, her hair. No one knew this better than Mrs. Oliver, owing to the innumerable times that she had changed her mode of hairdressing, and had failed to be recognised by her friends in consequence. Giving her head an appraising eye she started work. Out came the pins, she took off several coils of hair, wrapped them up in her handkerchief and stuffed them into her handbag, parted her hair in the middle, combed it sternly back from her face and rolled it up into a modest bun at the back of her neck. She also took out a pair of spectacles and put them on her nose. There was a really earnest look about her now! “Almost intellectual,” Mrs. Oliver thought approvingly. She altered the shape of her mouth by an application of lipstick, and emerged once more into the café; moving carefully since the spectacles were only for reading and in consequence the landscape was blurred. She crossed the café, and made her way to an empty table next to that occupied by Norma and David. She sat down so that she was facing David. Norma, on the near side, sat with her back to her. Norma, therefore, would not see her unless she turned her head right round. The waitress drifted up. Mrs. Oliver ordered a cup of coffee and a Bath bun and settled down to be inconspicuous.

Norma and David did not even notice her. They were deeply in the middle of a passionate discussion. It took Mrs. Oliver just a minute or two to tune into them.

"…But you only fancy these things," David was saying. "You imagine them. They're all utter, utter nonsense, my dear girl."

"I don't know. I can't tell." Norma's voice had a queer lack of resonance in it.

Mrs. Oliver could not hear her as well as she heard David, since Norma's back was turned to her, but the dullness of the girl's tone struck her disagreeably. There was something wrong here, she thought. Very wrong. She remembered the story as Poirot had first told it to her. "She thinks she may have committed a murder." What was the matter with the girl? Hallucinations? Was her mind really slightly affected, or was it no more and no less than truth, and in consequence the girl had suffered a bad shock?

"If you ask me, it's all fuss on Mary's part! She's a thoroughly stupid woman anyway, and she imagines she has illnesses and all that sort of thing."

"She was ill."

"All right then, she was ill. Any sensible woman would get the doctor to give her some antibiotic or other, and not get het up."

"She thought I did it to her. My father thinks so too."

"I tell you, Norma, you imagine all these things."

"You just say that to me, David. You say it to me to cheer me up. Supposing I did give her the stuff?"

"What do you mean, suppose? You must know whether you did or you didn't. You can't be so idiotic, Norma."

"I don't know."

“You keep saying that. You keep coming back to that, and saying it again and again. ‘I don’t know.’ ‘I don’t know.’”

“You don’t understand. You don’t understand in the least what hate is. I hated her from the first moment I saw her.”

“I know. You told me that.”

“That’s the queer part of it. I told you that, and yet I don’t even remember telling you that. D’you see? Every now and then I—I tell people things. I tell people things that I want to do, or that I have done, or that I’m going to do. But I don’t even remember telling them the things. It’s as though I was thinking all these things in my mind, and sometimes they come out in the open and I say them to people. I did say them to you, didn’t I?”

“Well—I mean—look here, don’t let’s harp back to that.”

“But I did say it to you? Didn’t I?”

“All right, all right! One says things like that. ‘I hate her and I’d like to kill her. I think I’ll poison her!’ But that’s only kid stuff, if you know what I mean, as though you weren’t quite grown-up. It’s a very natural thing. Children say it a lot. ‘I hate so and so. I’ll cut off his head!’ Kids say it at school. About some master they particularly dislike.”

“You think it was just that? But—that sounds as though I wasn’t grown-up.”

“Well, you’re not in some ways. If you’d just pull yourself together, realise how silly it all is. What can it matter if you do hate her? You’ve got away from home and don’t have to live with her.”

“Why shouldn’t I live in my own home—with my own father?” said Norma. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair. First he went away and left my mother, and now, just when he’s coming back to me, he goes and marries Mary. Of course I hate her and she hates me too. I used to think about killing her, used to think of ways of doing it. I used to enjoy thinking like that. But then—when she really got ill….”

David said uneasily:

“You don’t think you’re a witch or anything, do you? You don’t make figures in wax and stick pins into them or do that sort of thing?”

“Oh no. That would be silly. What I did was real. Quite real.”

“Look here, Norma, what do you mean when you say it was real?”

“The bottle was there, in my drawer. Yes, I opened the drawer and found it.”

“What bottle?”

“The Dragon Exterminator. Selective weed killer. That’s what it was labelled. Stuff in a dark green bottle and you were supposed to spray it on things. And it had labels with Caution and Poison, too.”

“Did you buy it? Or did you just find it?”

“I don’t know where I got it, but it was there, in my drawer, and it was half empty.”

“And then you—you—remembered—”

“Yes,” said Norma. “Yes…” Her voice was vague, almost dreamy. “Yes…I think it was then it all came back to me. You think so too, don’t you, David?”

“I don’t know what to make of you, Norma. I really don’t. I think in a way, you’re making it all up, you’re telling it to yourself.”

“But she went to hospital, for observation. They said they were puzzled. Then they said they couldn’t find anything wrong so she came home—and then she got ill again, and I began to be frightened. My father began looking at me in a queer sort of way, and then the doctor came and they talked together, shut up in Father’s study. I went round outside, and crept up to the window and I tried to listen. I wanted to hear what they were saying. They were planning together—to send me away to a place where I’d be shut up!

A place where I'd have a 'course of treatment'—or something. They thought, you see, that I was crazy, and I was frightened…Because—because I wasn't sure what I'd done or what I hadn't done."

"Is that when you ran away?"

"No—that was later—"

"Tell me."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"You'll have to let them know sooner or later where you are—"

"I won't! I hate them. I hate my father as much as I hate Mary. I wish they were dead. I wish they were both dead. Then—then I think I'd be happy again."

"Don't get all het up! Look here, Norma—" He paused in an embarrassed manner—"I'm not very set on marriage and all that rubbish…I mean I didn't think I'd ever do anything of that kind…oh well, not for years. One doesn't want to tie oneself up—but I think it's the best thing we could do, you know. Get married. At a registry office or something. You'll have to say you're over twenty-one. Roll up your hair, put on some spectacles or something. Make you look a bit older. Once we're married, your father can't do a thing! He can't send you away to what you call a 'place.' He'll be powerless."

"I hate him."

"You seem to hate everybody."

"Only my father and Mary."

"Well, after all, it's quite natural for a man to marry again."

"Look what he did to my mother."

"All that must have been a long time ago."

“Yes. I was only a child, but I remember. He went away and left us. He sent me presents at Christmas—but he never came himself. I wouldn’t even have known him if I’d met him in the street by the time he did come back. He didn’t mean anything to me by then. I think he got my mother shut up, too. She used to go away when she was ill. I don’t know where. I don’t know what was the matter with her. Sometimes I wonder…I wonder, David. I think, you know, there’s something wrong in my head, and someday it will make me do something really bad. Like the knife.”

“What knife?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just a knife.”

“Well, can’t you tell me what you’re talking about?”

“I think it had bloodstains on it—it was hidden there…under my stockings.”

“Do you remember hiding a knife there?”

“I think so. But I can’t remember what I’d done with it before that. I can’t remember where I’d been…There is a whole hour gone out of that evening. A whole hour I didn’t know where I’d been. I’d been somewhere and done something.”

“Hush!” He hissed it quickly as the waitress approached their table. “You’ll be all right. I’ll look after you. Let’s have something more,” he said to the waitress in a loud voice, picking up the menu—“Two baked beans on toast.”

Eight

I

Hercule Poirot was dictating to his secretary, Miss Lemon.

“And while I much appreciate the honour you have done me, I must regretfully inform you that…”

The telephone rang. Miss Lemon stretched out a hand for it. “Yes? Who did you say?” She put her hand over the receiver and said to Poirot, “Mrs. Oliver.”

“Ah…Mrs. Oliver,” said Poirot. He did not particularly want to be interrupted at this moment, but he took the receiver from Miss Lemon. “’Allo,” he said, “Hercule Poirot speaks.”

“Oh, M. Poirot, I’m so glad I got you! I’ve found her for you!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve found her for you. Your girl! You know, the one who’s committed a murder or thinks she has. She’s talking about it too, a great deal. I think she is off her head. But never mind that now. Do you want to come and get her?”

“Where are you, chère Madame?”

“Somewhere between St. Paul’s and the Mermaid Theatre and all that. Calthorpe Street,” said Mrs. Oliver, suddenly looking out of the telephone box in which she was standing. “Do you think you can get here quickly? They’re in a restaurant.”

“They?”

“Oh, she and what I suppose is the unsuitable boyfriend. He is rather nice really, and he seems very fond of her. I can’t think why. People are odd.

Well, I don’t want to talk because I want to get back again. I followed them, you see. I came into the restaurant and saw them there.”

“Aha? You have been very clever, Madame.”

“No, I haven’t really. It was a pure accident. I mean, I walked into a small café place and there the girl was, just sitting there.”

“Ah. You had the good fortune then. That is just as important.”

“And I’ve been sitting at the next table to them, only she’s got her back to me. And anyway I don’t suppose she’d recognise me. I’ve done things to my hair. Anway, they’ve been talking as though they were alone in the world, and when they ordered another course—baked beans—(I can’t bear baked beans, it always seems to me so funny that people should)—”

“Never mind the baked beans. Go on. You left them and came out to telephone. Is that right?”

“Yes. Because the baked beans gave me time. And I shall go back now. Or I might hang about outside. Anway, try and get here quickly.”

“What is the name of this café?”

“The Merry Shamrock—but it doesn’t look very merry. In fact, it looks rather sordid, but the coffee is quite good.”

“Say no more. Go back. In due course, I will arrive.”

“Splendid,” said Mrs. Oliver, and rang off.

II

Miss Lemon, always efficient, had preceded him to the street, and was waiting by a taxi. She asked no questions and displayed no curiosity. She did not tell Poirot how she would occupy her time whilst he was away. She did not need to tell him. She always knew what she was going to do and she was always right in what she did.

Poirot duly arrived at the corner of Calthorpe Street. He descended, paid the taxi, and looked around him. He saw The Merry Shamrock but he saw no one in its vicinity who looked at all like Mrs. Oliver, however well disguised. He walked to the end of the street and back. No Mrs. Oliver. So either the couple in which they were interested had left the café and Mrs. Oliver had gone on a shadowing expedition, or else—To answer "or else" he went to the café door. One could not see the inside very well from the outside, on account of steam, so he pushed the door gently open and entered. His eyes swept round it.

He saw at once the girl who had come to visit him at the breakfast table. She was sitting by herself at a table against the wall. She was smoking a cigarette and staring in front of her. She seemed to be lost in thought. No, Poirot thought, hardly that. There did not seem to be any thought there. She was lost in a kind of oblivion. She was somewhere else.

He crossed the room quietly and sat down in the chair opposite her. She looked up then, and he was at least gratified to see that he was recognised.

"So we meet again, Mademoiselle," he said pleasantly. "I see you recognise me."

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"It is always gratifying to be recognised by a young lady one has only met once and for a very short time."

She continued to look at him without speaking.

"And how did you know me, may I ask? What made you recognise me?"

"Your moustache," said Norma immediately. "It couldn't be anyone else."

He was gratified by that observation and stroked it with the pride and vanity that he was apt to display on these occasions.

"Ah yes, very true. Yes, there are not many moustaches such as mine. It is a fine one, hein?"

"Yes—well, yes—I suppose it is."

"Ah, you are perhaps not a connoisseur of moustaches, but I can tell you, Miss Restarick—Miss Norma Restarick, is it not?—that it is a very fine moustache."

He had dwelt deliberately upon her name. She had at first looked so oblivious to everything around her, so far away, that he wondered if she would notice. She did. It startled her.

"How did you know my name?" she said.

"True, you did not give your name to my servant when you came to see me that morning."

"How did you know it? How did you get to know it? Who told you?"

He saw the alarm, the fear.

"A friend told me," he said. "One's friends can be very useful."

"Who was it?"

"Mademoiselle, you like keeping your little secrets from me. I, too, have a preference for keeping my little secrets from you."

"I don't see how you could know who I was."

"I am Hercule Poirot," said Poirot, with his usual magnificence. Then he left the initiative to her, merely sitting there smiling gently at her.

"I—" she began, then stopped. "—Would—" Again she stopped.

"We did not get very far that morning, I know," said Hercule Poirot. "Only so far as your telling me that you had committed a murder."

"Oh that!"

"Yes, Mademoiselle, that."

"But—I didn't mean it of course. I didn't mean anything like that. I mean, it was just a joke."

"Vraiment? You came to see me rather early in the morning, at breakfast time. You said it was urgent. The urgency was because you might have committed a murder. That is your idea of a joke, eh?"

A waitress who had been hovering, looking at Poirot with a fixed attention, suddenly came up to him and proffered him what appeared to be a paper boat such as is made for children to sail in a bath.

"This for you?" she said. "Mr. Porritt? A lady left it."

"Ah yes," said Poirot. "And how did you know who I was?"

"The lady said I'd know by your moustache. Said I wouldn't have seen a moustache like that before. And it's true enough," she added, gazing at it.

"Well, thank you very much."

Poirot took the boat from her, untwisted it and smoothed it out; he read some hastily pencilled words: "He's just going. She's staying behind, so I'm going to leave her for you, and follow him." It was signed Ariadne.

"Ah yes," said Hercule Poirot, folding it and slipping it into his pocket. "What were we talking about? Your sense of humour, I think, Miss Restarick."

"Do you know just my name or—or do you know everything about me?"

"I know a few things about you. You are Miss Norma Restarick, your address in London is 67 Borodene Mansions. Your home address is Crosshedges, Long Basing. You live there with a father, a stepmother, a great-uncle and—ah yes, an au pair girl. You see, I am quite well informed."

"You've been having me followed."

“No, no,” said Poirot. “Not at all. As to that, I give you my word of honour.”

“But you are not police, are you? You didn’t say you were.”

“I am not police, no.”

Her suspicion and defiance broke down.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“I am not urging you to employ me,” said Poirot. “For that you have said already that I am too old. Possibly you are right. But since I know who you are and something about you, there is no reason we should not discuss together in a friendly fashion the troubles that afflict you. The old, you must remember, though considered incapable of action, have nevertheless a good fund of experience on which to draw.”

Norma continued to look at him doubtfully, that wide-eyed stare that had disquieted Poirot before. But she was in a sense trapped, and she had at this particular moment, or so Poirot judged, a wish to talk about things. For some reason, Poirot had always been a person it was easy to talk to.

“They think I’m crazy,” she said bluntly. “And—and I rather think I’m crazy, too. Mad.”

“That is most interesting,” said Hercule Poirot, cheerfully. “There are many different names for these things. Very grand names. Names rolled out happily by psychiatrists, psychologists and others. But when you say crazy, that describes very well what the general appearance may be to ordinary, everyday people. Eh bien, then, you are crazy, or you appear crazy or you think you are crazy, and possibly you may be crazy. But all the same that is not to say the condition is serious. It is a thing that people suffer from a good deal, and it is usually easily cured with the proper treatment. It comes about because people have had too much mental strain, too much worry, have studied too much for examinations, have dwelled too much perhaps on their emotions, have too much religion or have a lamentable lack of religion, or have good reasons for hating their fathers or their mothers! Or, of course, it can be as simple as having an unfortunate love affair."

"I've got a stepmother. I hate her and I rather think I hate my father too. That seems rather a lot, doesn't it?"

"It is more usual to hate one or the other," said Poirot. "You were, I suppose, very fond of your own mother. Is she divorced or dead?"

"Dead. She died two or three years ago."

"And you cared for her very much?"

"Yes. I suppose I did. I mean of course I did. She was an invalid, you know, and she had to go to nursing homes a good deal."

"And your father?"

"Father had gone abroad a long time before that. He went to South Africa when I was about five or six. I think he wanted Mother to divorce him but she wouldn't. He went to South Africa and was mixed up with mines or something like that. Anyway, he used to write to me at Christmas, and send me a Christmas present or arrange for one to come to me. That was about all. So he didn't really seem very real to me. He came home about a year ago because he had to wind up my uncle's affairs and all that sort of financial thing. And when he came home he—he brought this new wife with him."

"And you resented the fact?"

"Yes, I did."

"But your mother was dead by then. It is not unusual, you know, for a man to marry again. Especially when he and his wife have been estranged for many years. This wife he brought, was she the same lady he had wished to marry previously, when he asked your mother for a divorce?"

"Oh, no, this one is quite young. And she's very good-looking and she acts as though she just owns my father!"

She went on after a pause—in a different, rather childish voice. “I thought perhaps when he came home this time he would be fond of me and take notice of me and—but she won’t let him. She’s against me. She’s crowded me out.”

“But that does not matter at all at the age you are. It is a good thing. You do not need anyone to look after you now. You can stand on your own feet, you can enjoy life, you can choose your own friends—”

“You wouldn’t think so, the way they go on at home! Well, I mean to choose my own friends.”

“Most girls nowadays have to endure criticism about their friends,” said Poirot.

“It was all so different,” said Norma. “My father isn’t at all like I remember him when I was five years old. He used to play with me, all the time, and be so gay. He’s not gay now. He’s worried and rather fierce and—oh quite different.”

“That must be nearly fifteen years ago, I presume. People change.”

“But ought people to change so much?”

“Has he changed in appearance?”

“Oh no, no, not that. Oh no! If you look at his picture just over his chair, although it’s of him when he was much younger, it’s exactly like him now. But it isn’t at all the way I remember him.”

“But you know, my dear,” said Poirot gently, “people are never like what you remember them. You make them, as the years go by, more and more the way you wish them to be, and as you think you remember them. If you want to remember them as agreeable and gay and handsome, you make them far more so than they actually were.”

“Do you think so? Do you really think so?” She paused and then said abruptly, “But why do you think I want to kill people?” The question came out quite naturally. It was there between them. They had, Poirot felt, got at last to a crucial moment.

“That may be quite an interesting question,” said Poirot, “and there may be quite an interesting reason. The person who can probably tell you the answer to that will be a doctor. The kind of doctor who knows.”

She reacted quickly.

“I won’t go to a doctor. I won’t go near a doctor! They wanted to send me to a doctor, and then I’ll be shut up in one of those loony places and they won’t let me out again. I’m not going to do anything like that.” She was struggling now to rise to her feet.

“It is not I who can send you to one! You need not be alarmed. You could go to a doctor entirely on your own behalf if you liked. You can go and say to him the things you have been saying to me, and you may ask him why, and he will perhaps tell you the cause.”

“That’s what David says. That’s what David says I should do but I don’t think—I don’t think he understands. I’d have to tell a doctor that I—I might have tried to do things….”

“What makes you think you have?”

“Because I don’t always remember what I’ve done—or where I’ve been. I lose an hour of time—two hours—and I can’t remember. I was in a corridor once—a corridor outside a door, her door. I’d something in my hand—I don’t know how I got it. She came walking along towards me—But when she got near me, her face changed. It wasn’t her at all. She’d changed into somebody else.”

“You are remembering, perhaps, a nightmare. There people do change into somebody else.”

“It wasn’t a nightmare. I picked up the revolver—It was lying there at my feet—”

“In a corridor?”

“No, in the courtyard. She came and took it away from me.”

“Who did?”

“Claudia. She took me upstairs and gave me some bitter stuff to drink.”

“Where was your stepmother then?”

“She was there, too—No, she wasn’t. She was at Crosshedges. Or in hospital. That’s where they found out she was being poisoned—and that it was me.”

“It need not have been you—It could have been someone else.”

“Who else could it have been?”

“Perhaps—her husband.”

“Father? Why on earth should Father want to poison Mary. He’s devoted to her. He’s silly about her!”

“There are others in the house, are there not?”

“Old Uncle Roderick? Nonsense!”

“One does not know,” said Poirot, “he might be mentally afflicted. He might think it was his duty to poison a woman who might be a beautiful spy. Something like that.”

“That would be very interesting,” said Norma, momentarily diverted, and speaking in a perfectly natural manner. “Uncle Roderick was mixed up a good deal with spies and things in the last war. Who else is there? Sonia? I suppose she might be a beautiful spy, but she’s not quite my idea of one.”

“No, and there does not seem very much reason why she should wish to poison your stepmother. I suppose there might be servants, gardeners?”

“No, they just come in for the days. I don’t think—well, they wouldn’t be the kind of people to have any reason.”

“She might have done it herself.”

“Committed suicide, do you mean? Like the other one?”

“It is a possibility.”

“I can’t imagine Mary committing suicide. She’s far too sensible. And why should she want to?”

“Yes, you feel that if she did, she would put her head in the gas oven, or she would lie on a bed nicely arranged and take an overdose of sleeping draughts. Is that right?”

“Well, it would have been more natural. So you see,” said Norma earnestly, “it must have been me.”

“Aha,” said Poirot, “that interests me. You would almost, it would seem, prefer that it should be you. You are attracted to the idea that it was your hand who slipped the fatal dose of this, that or the other. Yes, you like the idea.”

“How dare you say such a thing! How can you?”

“Because I think it is true,” said Poirot. “Why does the thought that you may have committed murder excite you, please you?”

“It’s not true.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot.

She scooped up her bag and began feeling in it with shaking fingers.

“I’m not going to stop here and have you say these horrible things to me.” She signalled to the waitress who came, scribbled on a pad of paper, detached it and laid it down by Norma’s plate.

“Permit me,” said Hercule Poirot.

He removed the slip of paper deftly, and prepared to draw his notecase from his pocket. The girl snatched it back again.

“No, I won’t let you pay for me.”

“As you please,” said Poirot.

He had seen what he wanted to see. The bill was for two. It would seem therefore that David of the fine feathers had no objection to having his bills paid by an infatuated girl.

“So it is you who entertain a friend to elevenses, I see.”

“How did you know that I was with anyone?”

“I tell you, I know a good deal.”

She placed coins on the table and rose. “I’m going now,” she said, “and I forbid you to follow me.”

“I doubt if I could,” said Poirot. “You must remember my advanced age. If you were to run down the street I should certainly not be able to follow you.”

She got up and went towards the door.

“Do you hear? You are not to follow me.”

“You permit me at least to open the door for you.” He did so with something of a flourish. “Au revoir, Mademoiselle.”

She threw a suspicious glance at him and walked away down the street with a rapid step, turning her head back over her shoulder from time to time. Poirot remained by the door watching her, but made no attempt to gain the pavement or to catch her up. When she was out of sight, he turned back into the café.

“And what the devil does all that mean?” said Poirot to himself.

The waitress was advancing upon him, displeasure on her face. Poirot regained his seat at the table and placated her by ordering a cup of coffee. “There is something here very curious,” he murmured to himself. “Yes, something very curious indeed.”

A cup of pale beige fluid was placed in front of him. He took a sip of it and made a grimace.

He wondered where Mrs. Oliver was at this moment.

Nine

Mrs. Oliver was seated in a bus. She was slightly out of breath though full of the zest of the chase. What she called in her own mind the Peacock, had led a somewhat brisk pace. Mrs. Oliver was not a rapid walker. Going along the Embankment she followed him at a distance of some twenty yards or so. At Charing Cross he got into the underground. Mrs. Oliver also got into the underground. At Sloane Square he got out, so did Mrs. Oliver. She waited in a bus queue some three or four people behind him. He got on a bus and so did she. He got out at World's End, so did Mrs. Oliver. He plunged into a bewildering maze of streets between King's Road and the river. He turned into what seemed a builder's yard. Mrs. Oliver stood in the shadow of a doorway and watched. He turned into an alleyway, Mrs. Oliver gave him a moment or two and then followed—he was nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Oliver reconnoitred her general surroundings. The whole place appeared somewhat decrepit. She wandered farther down the alleyway. Other alleyways led off from it—some of them cul-de-sacs. She had completely lost her sense of direction when she once more came to the builder's yard and a voice spoke behind her, startling her considerably. It said, politely, "I hope I didn't walk too fast for you."

She turned sharply. Suddenly what had recently been almost fun, a chase undertaken lightheartedly and in the best of spirits, now was that no longer. What she felt now was a sudden unexpected throb of fear. Yes, she was afraid. The atmosphere had suddenly become tinged with menace. Yet the voice was pleasant, polite; but behind it she knew there was anger. The sudden kind of anger that recalled to her in a confused fashion all the things one read in newspapers. Elderly women attacked by gangs of young men. Young men who were ruthless, cruel, who were driven by hate and the desire to do harm. This was the young man whom she had been following. He had known she was there, had given her the slip and had then followed her into this alleyway, and he stood there now barring her way out. As is the precarious fashion of London, one moment you are amongst people all round you and the next moment there is nobody in sight. There must be people in the next street, someone in the houses near, but nearer than that is a masterful figure, a figure with strong cruel hands. She felt that in this moment he was thinking of using those hands…The Peacock. A proud peacock. In his velvets, his tight, elegant black trousers, speaking in that quiet ironical amused voice that held behind it anger…Mrs. Oliver took three big gasps. Then, in a lightning moment of decision she put up a quickly imagined defence. Firmly and immediately she sat down on a dustbin which was against the wall quite close to her.

“Goodness, how you startled me,” she said. “I’d no idea you were there. I hope you’re not annoyed.”

“So you were following me?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I was. I expect it must have been rather annoying to you. You see I thought it would be such an excellent opportunity. I’m sure you’re frightfully angry but you needn’t be, you know. Not really. You see—” Mrs. Oliver settled herself more firmly on the dustbin, “you see I write books. I write detective stories and I’ve really been very worried this morning. In fact I went into a café to have a cup of coffee just to try and think things out. I’d just got to the point in my book where I was following somebody. I mean my hero was following someone and I thought to myself, ‘Really I know very little about following people.’ I mean, I’m always using the phrase in a book and I’ve read a lot of books where people do follow other people, and I wondered if it was as easy as it seems to be in some people’s books or if it was as almost entirely impossible as it seemed in other people’s books. So I thought ‘Well, really, the only thing was to try it out myself’—because until you try things out yourself you can’t really tell what it’s like. I mean you don’t know what you feel like, or whether you get worried at losing a person. As it happened, I just looked up and you were sitting at the next table to me in the café and I thought you’d be—I hope you won’t be annoyed again—but I thought you’d be an especially good person to follow.”

He was still staring at her with those strange, cold blue eyes, yet she felt somehow that the tension had left them.

“Why was I an especially good person to follow?”

“Well, you were so decorative,” explained Mrs. Oliver. “They are really very attractive clothes—almost Regency, you know, and I thought, well, I might take advantage of your being fairly easy to distinguish from other people. So you see, when you went out of the café I went out too. And it’s not really easy at all.” She looked up at him. “Do you mind telling me if you knew I was there all the time?”

“Not at once, no.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully. “But of course I’m not as distinctive as you are. I mean you wouldn’t be able to tell me very easily from a lot of other elderly women. I don’t stand out very much, do I?”

“Do you write books that are published? Have I ever come across them?”

“Well, I don’t know. You may have. I’ve written forty-three by now. My name’s Oliver.”

“Ariadne Oliver?”

“So you do know my name,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Well, that’s rather gratifying, of course, though I daresay you wouldn’t like my books very much. You probably would find them rather old-fashioned—not violent enough.”

“You didn’t know me personally beforehand?”

Mrs. Oliver shook her head. “No, I’m sure I don’t—didn’t, I mean.”

“What about the girl I was with?”

“You mean the one you were having—baked beans, was it—with in the café? No, I don’t think so. Of course I only saw the back of her head. She looked to me—well, I mean girls do look rather alike, don’t they?”

“She knew you,” said the boy suddenly. His tone in a moment had a sudden acid sharpness. “She mentioned once that she’d met you not long ago. About a week ago, I believe.”

"Where? Was it at a party? I suppose I might have met her. What's her name? Perhaps I'd know that."

She thought he was in two moods whether to mention the name or not, but he decided to and he watched her face very keenly as he did so.

"Her name's Norma Restarick."

"Norma Restarick. Oh, of course, yes, it was at a party in the country. A place called—wait a minute—Long Norton was it?—I don't remember the name of the house. I went there with some friends. I don't think I would have recognised her anyway, though I believe she did say something about my books. I even promised I'd give her one. It's very odd, isn't it, that I should make up my mind and actually choose to follow a person who was sitting with somebody I more or less knew. Very odd. I don't think I could put anything like that in my book. It would look rather too much of a coincidence, don't you think?"

Mrs. Oliver rose from her seat.

"Good gracious, what have I been sitting on? A dustbin! Really! Not a very nice dustbin either." She sniffed. "What is this place I've got to?"

David was looking at her. She felt suddenly that she was completely mistaken in everything she had previously thought. "Absurd of me," thought Mrs. Oliver, "absurd of me. Thinking that he was dangerous, that he might do something to me." He was smiling at her with an extraordinary charm. He moved his head slightly and his chestnut ringlets moved on his shoulders. What fantastic creatures there were in the way of young men nowadays!

"The least I can do," he said, "is to show you, I think, where you've been brought to, just by following me. Come on, up these stairs." He indicated a ramshackle outside staircase running up to what seemed to be a loft.

"Up those stairs?" Mrs. Oliver was not so certain about this. Perhaps he was trying to lure her up there with his charm, and he would then knock her on the head. "It's no good, Ariadne," said Mrs. Oliver to herself, "you've got yourself into this spot, and now you’ve got to go on with it and find out what you can find out.”

“Do you think they’ll stand my weight?” she said, “they look frightfully rickety.”

“They’re quite all right. I’ll go up first,” he said, “and show you the way.”

Mrs. Oliver mounted the ladderlike stairs behind him. It was no good. She was, deep down, still frightened. Frightened, not so much of the Peacock, as frightened of where the Peacock might be taking her. Well, she’d know very soon. He pushed open the door at the top and went into a room. It was a large, bare room and it was an artist’s studio, an improvised kind of one. A few mattresses lay here and there on the floor, there were canvasses stacked against the wall, a couple of easels. There was a pervading smell of paint. There were two people in the room. A bearded young man was standing at an easel, painting. He turned his head as they entered.

“Hallo, David,” he said, “bringing us company?”

He was, Mrs. Oliver thought, quite the dirtiest-looking young man she’d ever seen. Oily black hair hung in a kind of circular bob down the back of his neck and over his eyes in front. His face apart from the beard was unshaven, and his clothes seemed mainly composed of greasy black leather and high boots. Mrs. Oliver’s glance went beyond him to a girl who was acting as a model. She was on a wooden chair on a dais, half flung across it, her head back and her dark hair drooping down from it. Mrs. Oliver recognised her at once. It was the second one of the three girls in Borodene Mansions. Mrs. Oliver couldn’t remember her last name, but she remembered her first one. It was the highly decorative and languid-looking girl called Frances.

“Meet Peter,” said David, indicating the somewhat revolting looking artist. “One of our budding geniuses. And Frances who is posing as a desperate girl demanding abortion.”

“Shut up, you ape,” said Peter.

“I believe I know you, don’t I?” said Mrs. Oliver, cheerfully, without any air of conscious certainty. “I’m sure I’ve met you somewhere! Somewhere quite lately, too.”

“You’re Mrs. Oliver, aren’t you?” said Frances.

“That’s what she said she was,” said David. “True, too, is it?”

“Now, where did I meet you,” continued Mrs. Oliver. “Some party, was it? No. Let me think. I know. It was Borodene Mansions.”

Frances was sitting up now in her chair and speaking in weary but elegant tones. Peter uttered a loud and miserable groan.

“Now you’ve ruined the pose! Do you have to have all this wriggling about? Can’t you keep still?”

“No, I couldn’t any longer. It was an awful pose. I’ve got the most frightful crick in my shoulder.”

“I’ve been making experiments in following people,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s much more difficult than I thought. Is this an artist’s studio?” she added, looking round her brightly.

“That’s what they’re like nowadays, a kind of loft—and lucky if you don’t fall through the floor,” said Peter.

“It’s got all you need,” said David. “It’s got a north light and plenty of room and a pad to sleep on, and a fourth share in the loo downstairs—and what they call cooking facilities. And it’s got a bottle or two,” he added. Turning to Mrs. Oliver, but in an entirely different tone, one of utter politeness, he said, “And can we offer you a drink?”

“I don’t drink,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“The lady doesn’t drink,” said David. “Who would have thought it!”

“That’s rather rude but you’re quite right,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Most people come up to me and say, ‘I always thought you drank like a fish.’”

She opened her handbag—and immediately three coils of grey hair fell on the floor. David picked them up and handed them to her.

“Oh! thank you.” Mrs. Oliver took them. “I hadn’t time this morning. I wonder if I’ve got any more hairpins.” She delved in her bag and started attaching the coils to her head.

Peter roared with laughter—“Bully for you,” he said.

“How extraordinary,” Mrs. Oliver thought to herself, “that I should ever have had this silly idea that I was in danger. Danger—from these people? No matter what they look like, they’re really very nice and friendly. It’s quite true what people always say to me. I’ve far too much imagination.”

Presently she said she must be going, and David, with Regency gallantry, helped her down the rickety steps, and gave her definite directions as to how to rejoin the King’s Road in the quickest way.

“And then,” he said, “you can get a bus—or a taxi if you want it.”

“A taxi,” said Mrs. Oliver. “My feet are absolutely dead. The sooner I fall into a taxi the better. Thank you,” she added, “for being so very nice about my following you in what must have seemed a very peculiar way. Though after all I don’t suppose private detectives, or private eyes or whatever they call them, would look anything at all like me.”

“Perhaps not,” said David gravely. “Left here—and then right, and then left again until you see the river and go towards it, and then sharp right and straight on.”

Curiously enough, as she walked across the shabby yard the same feeling of unease and suspense came over her. “I mustn’t let my imagination go again.” She looked back at the steps and the window of the studio. The figure of David still stood looking after her. “Three perfectly nice young people,” said Mrs. Oliver to herself. “Perfectly nice and very kind. Left here, and then right. Just because they look rather peculiar, one goes and has silly ideas about their being dangerous. Was it right again? or left? Left, I think—Oh goodness, my feet. It’s going to rain, too.” The walk seemed endless and the King’s Road incredibly far away. She could hardly hear the traffic now—And where on earth was the river? She began to suspect that she had followed the directions wrongly.

“Oh! well,” thought Mrs. Oliver, “I’m bound to get somewhere soon—the river, or Putney or Wandsworth or somewhere.” She asked her way to the King’s Road from a passing man who said he was a foreigner and didn’t speak English.

Mrs. Oliver turned another corner wearily and there ahead of her was the gleam of the water. She hurried towards it down a narrow passageway, heard a footstep behind her, half turned, when she was struck from behind and the world went up in sparks.

Ten

I

A voice said:

“Drink this.”

Norma was shivering. Her eyes had a dazed look. She shrank back a little in the chair. The command was repeated. “Drink this.” This time she drank obediently, then choked a little.

“It’s—it’s very strong,” she gasped.

“It’ll put you right. You’ll feel better in a minute. Just sit still and wait.”

The sickness and the giddiness which had been confusing her passed off. A little colour came into her cheeks, and the shivering diminished. For the first time she looked round her, noting her surroundings. She had been obsessed by a feeling of fear and horror but now things seemed to be returning to normal. It was a medium-sized room and it was furnished in a way that seemed faintly familiar. A desk, a couch, an armchair and an ordinary chair, a stethoscope on a side table and some machine that she thought had to do with eyes. Then her attention went from the general to the particular. The man who had told her to drink.

She saw a man of perhaps thirty-odd with red hair and a rather attractive ugly face, the kind of face that is craggy but interesting. He nodded at her in a reassuring fashion.

“Beginning to get your bearings?”

“I—I think so. I—did you—what happened?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“The traffic. I—it came at me—it—” She looked at him. “I was run over.”

“Oh no, you weren’t run over.” He shook his head. “I saw to that.”

“You?”

“Well, there you were in the middle of the road, a car bearing down on you and I just managed to snatch you out of its way. What were you thinking of to go running into the traffic like that?”

“I can’t remember. I—yes, I suppose I must have been thinking of something else.”

“A Jaguar was coming pretty fast, and there was a bus bearing down on the other side of the road. The car wasn’t trying to run you down or anything like that, was it?”

“I—no, no, I’m sure it wasn’t. I mean I—”

“Well, I wondered—It just might have been something else, mightn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it could have been deliberate, you know.”

“What do you mean by deliberate?”

“Actually I just wondered whether you were trying to get yourself killed?” He added casually, “Were you?”

“I—no—well—no, of course not.”

“Damn’ silly way to do it, if so.” His tone changed slightly. “Come now, you must remember something about it.”

She began shivering again. “I thought—I thought it would be all over. I thought—”

“So you were trying to kill yourself, weren’t you? What’s the matter? You can tell me. Boyfriend? That can make one feel pretty bad. Besides, there’s always the hopeful thought that if you kill yourself you make him sorry—

but one should never trust to that. People don’t like feeling sorry or feeling anything is their fault. All the boyfriend will probably say is, ‘I always thought she was unbalanced. It’s really all for the best.’ Just remember that next time you have an urge to charge Jaguars. Even Jaguars have feelings to be considered. Was that the trouble? Boyfriend walk out on you?”

“No,” said Norma. “Oh no. It was quite the opposite.” She added suddenly, “He wanted to marry me.”

“That’s no reason for throwing yourself down in front of a Jaguar.”

“Yes it is. I did it because—” She stopped.

“You’d better tell me about it, hadn’t you?”

“How did I get here?” asked Norma.

“I brought you here in a taxi. You didn’t seem injured—a few bruises, I expect. You merely looked shaken to death, and in a state of shock. I asked you your address, but you looked at me as though you didn’t know what I was talking about. A crowd was about to collect. So I hailed a taxi and brought you here.”

“Is this a—a doctor’s surgery?”

“This is a doctor’s consulting room and I’m the doctor. Stillingfleet, my name is.”

“I don’t want to see a doctor! I don’t want to talk to a doctor! I don’t—”

“Calm down, calm down. You’ve been talking to a doctor for the last ten minutes. What’s the matter with doctors, anyway?”

“I’m afraid. I’m afraid a doctor would say—”

“Come now, my dear girl, you’re not consulting me professionally. Regard me as a mere outsider who’s been enough of a busybody to save you from being killed or, what is far more likely, having a broken arm or a fractured leg or a head injury or something extremely unpleasant which might incapacitate you for life. There are other disadvantages. Formerly, if you deliberately tried to commit suicide you could be had up in Court. You still can if it's a suicide pact. There now, you can't say I haven't been frank. You could oblige now by being frank with me, and telling me why on earth you're afraid of doctors. What's a doctor ever done to you?"

"Nothing. Nothing has been done to me. But I'm afraid that they might—"

"Might what?"

"Shut me up."

Dr. Stillingfleet raised his sandy eyebrows and looked at her.

"Well, well," he said. "You seem to have some very curious ideas about doctors. Why should I want to shut you up? Would you like a cup of tea," he added, "or would you prefer a purple heart or a tranquilliser? That's the kind of thing people of your age go in for. Done a bit yourself in that line, haven't you?"

She shook her head. "Not—not really."

"I don't believe you. Anyway, why the alarm and despondency? You're not really mental, are you? I shouldn't have said so. Doctors aren't at all anxious to have people shut up. Mental homes are far too full already. Difficult to squeeze in another body. In fact lately they've been letting a good many people out—in desperation—pushing them out, you might say—who jolly well ought to have been kept in. Everything's so overcrowded in this country.

"Well," he went on, "what are your tastes? Something out of my drug cupboard or a good solid old-fashioned English cup of tea?"

"I—I'd like some tea," said Norma.

"Indian or China? That's the thing to ask, isn't it? Mind you, I'm not sure if I've got any China."

"I like Indian better."

"Good."

He went to the door, opened it and shouted, "Annie. Pot of tea for two."

He came back and sat down and said, "Now you get this quite clear, young lady. What's your name, by the way?"

"Norma Res—" she stopped.

"Yes?"

"Norma West."

"Well, Miss West, let's get this clear. I'm not treating you, you're not consulting me. You are the victim of a street accident—that is the way we'll put it and that is the way I suppose you meant it to appear, which would have been pretty hard on the fellow in the Jaguar."

"I thought of throwing myself off a bridge first."

"Did you? You wouldn't have found that so easy. People who build bridges are rather careful nowadays. I mean you'd have had to climb up onto the parapet and it's not so easy. Somebody stops you. Well, to continue with my dissertation, I brought you home as you were in too much of a state of shock to tell me your address. What is it, by the way?"

"I haven't got an address. I—I don't live anywhere."

"Interesting," said Dr. Stillingfleet. "What the police call 'of no fixed abode.' What do you do—sit out on the Embankment all night?"

She looked at him suspiciously.

"I could have reported the accident to the police but there was no obligation upon me to do so. I preferred to take the view that in a state of maiden meditation you were crossing the street before looking left first."

"You're not at all like my idea of a doctor," said Norma.

"Really? Well, I've been getting gradually disillusioned in my profession in this country. In fact, I'm giving up my practice here and I'm going to Australia in about a fortnight. So you're quite safe from me, and you can if you like tell me how you see pink elephants walking out of the wall, how you think the trees are leaning out their branches to wrap round and strangle you, how you think you know just when the devil looks out of people's eyes, or any other cheerful fantasy, and I shan't do a thing about it! You look sane enough, if I may say so."

"I don't think I am."

"Well, you may be right," said Dr. Stillingfleet handsomely. "Let's hear what your reasons are."

"I do things and don't remember about them…I tell people things about what I've done but I don't remember telling them…."

"It sounds as though you have a bad memory."

"You don't understand. They're all—wicked things."

"Religious mania? Now that would be very interesting."

"It's not religious. It's just—just hate."

There was a tap at the door and an elderly woman came in with a tea tray. She put it down on the desk and went out again.

"Sugar?" said Dr. Stillingfleet.

"Yes, please."

"Sensible girl. Sugar is very good for you when you've had a shock." He poured out two cups of tea, set hers at her side and placed the sugar basin beside it. "Now then," he sat down. "What were we talking about? Oh yes, hate."

"It is possible, isn't it, that you could hate someone so much that you really want to kill them?"

“Oh, yes,” said Stillingfleet, cheerfully still. “Perfectly possible. In fact, most natural. But even if you really want to do it you can’t always screw yourself up to the point, you know. The human being is equipped with a natural braking system and it applies the brakes for you just at the right moment.”

“You make it sound so ordinary,” said Norma. There was a distinct overtone of annoyance in her voice.

“Oh, well, it is quite natural. Children feel like it almost every day. Lose their tempers, say to their mothers or their fathers: ‘You’re wicked, I hate you, I wish you were dead.’ Mothers, being sometimes sensible people, don’t usually pay any attention. When you grow up, you still hate people, but you can’t take quite so much trouble wanting to kill them by then. Or if you still do—well, then you go to prison. That is, if you actually brought yourself to do such a messy and difficult job. You aren’t putting all this on, are you, by the way?” he asked casually.

“Of course not.” Norma sat up straight. Her eyes flashed with anger. “Of course not. Do you think I would say such awful things if they weren’t true?”

“Well, again,” said Dr. Stillingfleet, “people do. They say all sorts of awful things about themselves and enjoy saying them.” He took her empty cup from her. “Now then,” he said, “you’d better tell me all about everything. Who you hate, why you hate them, what you’d like to do to them.”

“Love can turn to hate.”

“Sounds like a melodramatic ballad. But remember hate can turn to love, too. It works both ways. And you say it’s not a boyfriend. He was your man and he did you wrong. None of that stuff, eh?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. It’s—it’s my stepmother.”

“The cruel stepmother motif. But that’s nonsense. At your age you can get away from a stepmother. What has she done to you besides marrying your father? Do you hate him too, or are you so devoted to him that you don’t want to share him?”

“It’s not like that at all. Not at all. I used to love him once. I loved him dearly. He was—he was—I thought he was wonderful.”

“Now then,” said Dr. Stillingfleet, “listen to me. I’m going to suggest something. You see that door?”

Norma turned her head and looked in a puzzled fashion at the door.

“Perfectly ordinary door, isn’t it? Not locked. Opens and shuts in the ordinary way. Go on, try it for yourself. You saw my housekeeper come in and go out through it, didn’t you? No illusions. Come on. Get up. Do what I tell you.”

Norma rose from her chair and rather hesitatingly went to the door and opened it. She stood in the aperture, her head turned towards him inquiringly.

“Right. What do you see? A perfectly ordinary hallway, wants redecorating but it’s not worth having it done when I’m just off to Australia. Now go to the front door, open it, also no tricks about it. Go outside and down to the pavement and that will show you that you are perfectly free with no attempts to shut you up in any way. After that, when you have satisfied yourself that you could walk out of this place at any minute you like, come back, sit in that comfortable chair over there and tell me all about yourself. After which I will give you my valuable advice. You needn’t take it,” he added consolingly. “People seldom do take advice, but you might as well have it. See? Agreed?”

Norma got up slowly, she went a little shakily out of the room, out into—as the doctor had described—the perfectly ordinary hallway, opened the front door with a simple catch, down four steps and stood on the pavement in a street of decorous but rather uninteresting houses. She stood there a moment, unaware that she was being watched through a lace blind by Dr. Stillingfleet himself. She stood there for about two minutes, then with a slightly more resolute bearing she turned, went up the steps again, shut the front door and came back into the room.

“All right?” said Dr. Stillingfleet. “Satisfied you there’s nothing up my sleeve? All clear and aboveboard.”

The girl nodded.

“Right. Sit down there. Make yourself comfortable. Do you smoke?”

“Well, I—”

“Only reefers—something of that kind? Never mind, you needn’t tell me.”

“Of course I don’t take anything of that kind.”

“I shouldn’t have said there was any ‘of course’ about it, but one must believe what the patient tells one. All right. Now tell me about yourself.”

“I—I don’t know. There’s nothing to tell really. Don’t you want me to lie down on a couch?”

“Oh, you mean your memory of dreams and all that stuff? No, not particularly. I just like to get a background. You know. You were born, you lived in the country or the town, you have brothers and sisters or you’re an only child and so on. When your own mother died, were you very upset by her death?”

“Of course I was.” Norma sounded indignant.

“You’re much too fond of saying of course, Miss West. By the way, West isn’t really your name, is it? Oh, never mind, I don’t want to know any other one. Call yourself West or East or North or anything you like. Anyway, what went on after your mother died?”

“She was an invalid for a long time before she died. In nursing homes a good deal. I stayed with an aunt, rather an old aunt, down in Devonshire. She wasn’t really an aunt, she was Mother’s first cousin. And then my father came home just about six months ago. It—it was wonderful.” Her face lighted up suddenly. She was unaware of the quick, shrewd glance the apparently casual young man shot at her. “I could hardly remember him, you know. He must have gone away when I was about five. I didn’t really think I’d ever see him again. Mother didn’t very often talk about him. I think at first she hoped that he’d give up this other woman and come back.”

“Other woman?”

“Yes. He went away with someone. She was a very bad woman, Mother said. Mother talked about her very bitterly and very bitterly about Father too, but I used to think that perhaps—perhaps Father wasn’t as bad as she thought, that it was all this woman’s fault.”

“Did they marry?”

“No. Mother said she would never divorce Father. She was a—is it an Anglican?—very High Church, you know. Rather like a Roman Catholic. She didn’t believe in divorce.”

“Did they go on living together? What was the woman’s name or is that a secret too?”

“I don’t remember her last name.” Norma shook her head. “No, I don’t think they lived together long, but I don’t know much about it all, you see. They went to South Africa but I think they quarrelled and parted quite soon because that’s when Mother said she hoped Father might come back again. But he didn’t. He didn’t write even. Not even to me. But he sent me things at Christmas. Presents always.”

“He was fond of you?”

“I don’t know. How could I tell? Nobody ever spoke about him. Only Uncle Simon—his brother, you know. He was in business in the City and he was very angry that Father had chucked up everything. He said he had always been the same, could never settle to anything, but he said he wasn’t a bad chap really. He said he was just weak. I didn’t often see Uncle Simon. It was always Mother’s friends. Most of them were dreadfully dull. My whole life has been very dull….

"Oh, it seemed so wonderful that Father was really coming home. I tried to remember him better. You know, things he had said, games he had played with me. He used to make me laugh a lot. I tried to see if I couldn't find some old snapshots or photographs of him. They seem all to have been thrown away. I think Mother must have torn them all up."

"She had remained vindictive then."

"I think it was really Louise she was vindictive against."

"Louise?"

He saw a slight stiffening on the girl's part.

"I don't remember—I told you—I don't remember any names."

"Never mind. You're talking about the woman your father ran away with. Is that it?"

"Yes. Mother said she drank too much and took drugs and would come to a bad end."

"But you don't know whether she did?"

"I don't know anything."…Her emotion was rising. "I wish you wouldn't ask me questions! I don't know anything about her! I never heard of her again! I'd forgotten her until you spoke about her. I tell you I don't know anything."

"Well, well," said Dr. Stillingfleet. "Don't get so agitated. You don't need to bother about past history. Let's think about the future. What are you going to do next?"

Norma gave a deep sigh.

"I don't know. I've nowhere to go. I can't—it's much better—I'm sure it's much better to—to end it all—only—"

“Only you can’t make the attempt a second time, is that it? It would be very foolish if you did, I can tell you that, my girl. All right, you’ve nowhere to go, no one to trust; got any money?”

“Yes, I’ve got a banking account, and Father pays so much into it every quarter but I’m not sure…I think perhaps, by now, they might be looking for me. I don’t want to be found.”

“You needn’t be. I’ll fix that up for you all right. Place called Kenway Court. Not as fine as it sounds. It’s a kind of convalescent nursing home where people go for a rest cure. It’s got no doctors or couches, and you won’t be shut up there, I can promise you. You can walk out anytime you like. You can have breakfast in bed, stay in bed all day if you like. Have a good rest and I’ll come down one day and talk to you and we’ll solve a few problems together. Will that suit you? Are you willing?”

Norma looked at him. She sat, without expression, staring at him; slowly she nodded her head.

II

Later that evening Dr. Stillingfleet made a telephone call.

“Quite a good operation kidnap,” he said. “She’s down at Kenway Court. Came like a lamb. Can’t tell you much yet. The girl’s full of drugs. I’d say she’d been taking purple hearts, and dream bombs, and probably LSD… She’s been all hopped-up for some time. She says no, but I wouldn’t trust much to what she says.”

He listened for a moment. “Don’t ask me! One will have to go carefully there. She gets the wind up easy…Yes, she’s scared of something, or she’s pretending to be scared of something….

“I don’t know yet, I can’t tell. Remember people who take drugs are tricky. You can’t believe what they say always. We haven’t rushed things and I don’t want to startle her….

"A father complex as a child. I'd say didn't care much for her mother who sounds a grim woman by all accounts—the self-righteous martyr type. I'd say Father was a gay one, and couldn't quite stand the grimness of married life—Know of anyone called Louise?…The name seemed to frighten her—She was the girl's first hate, I should say. She took Father away at the time the child was five. Children don't understand very much at that age, but they're very quick to feel resentment of the person they feel was responsible. She didn't see Father again until apparently a few months ago. I'd say she'd had sentimental dreams of being her father's companion and the apple of his eye. She got disillusioned apparently. Father came back with a wife, a new young attractive wife. She's not called Louise, is she?…Oh well, I only asked. I'm giving you roughly the picture, the general picture, that is."

The voice at the other end of the wire said sharply, "What is that you say? Say it again."

"I said I'm giving you roughly the picture."

There was a pause.

"By the way, here's one little fact might interest you. The girl made a rather ham-handed attempt to commit suicide. Does that startle you?…

"Oh, it doesn't…No, she didn't swallow the aspirin bottle, or put her head in the gas oven. She rushed into the traffic in the path of a Jaguar going faster than it should have done…I can tell you I only got to her just in time…Yes, I'd say it was a genuine impulse…She admitted it. Usual classic phrase—she 'wanted to get out of it all.'"

He listened to a rapid flow of words, then he said: "I don't know. At this stage, I can't be sure—The picture presented is clear. A nervy girl, neurotic and in an overwrought state from taking drugs of too many kinds. No, I couldn't tell you definitely what kind. There are dozens of these things going about all producing slightly different effects. There can be confusion, loss of memory, aggression, bewilderment, or sheer fuzzleheadedness! The difficulty is to tell what the real reactions are as opposed to the reactions produced by drugs. There are two choices, you see. Either this is a girl who is playing herself up, depicting herself as neurotic and nervy and claiming suicidal tendencies. It could be actually so. Or it could be a whole pack of lies. I wouldn't put it past her to be putting up this story for some obscure reason of her own—wanting to give an entirely false impression of herself. If so, she's doing it very cleverly. Every now and then, there seems something not quite right in the picture she's giving. Is she a very clever little actress acting a part? Or is she a genuine semi-moronic suicidal victim? She could be either…What did you say?…Oh, the Jaguar!…Yes, it was being driven far too fast. You think it mightn't have been an attempt at suicide? That the Jaguar was deliberately meaning to run her down?"

He thought for a minute or two. "I can't say," he said slowly. "It just could be so. Yes, it could be so, but I hadn't thought of it that way. The trouble is, everything's possible, isn't it? Anyway, I'm going to get more out of her shortly. I've got her in a position where she's semi-willing to trust me, so long as I don't go too far too quickly, and make her suspicious. She'll become more trusting soon, and tell me more, and if she's a genuine case, she'll pour out her whole story to me—force it on me in the end. At the moment she's frightened of something….

"If, of course, she's leading me up the garden path we'll have to find out the reason why. She's at Kenway Court and I think she'll stay there. I'd suggest that you keep someone with an eye on it for a day or so and if she does attempt to leave, someone she doesn't know by sight had better follow her."

Eleven

I

Andrew Restarick was writing a cheque—he made a slight grimace as he did so.

His office was large and handsomely furnished in typical conventional tycoon fashion—the furnishing and fittings had been Simon Restarick's and Andrew Restarick had accepted them without interest and had made few changes except for removing a couple of pictures and replacing them by his own portrait which he had brought up from the country, and a watercolour of Table Mountain.

Andrew Restarick was a man of middle age, beginning to put on flesh, yet strangely little changed from the man some fifteen years younger in the picture hanging above him. There was the same jutting out chin, the lips firmly pressed together, and the slightly raised quizzical eyebrows. Not a very noticeable man—an ordinary type and at the moment not a very happy man. His secretary entered the room—she advanced towards his desk, as he looked up.

"A Monsieur Hercule Poirot is here. He insists that he has an appointment with you—but I can find no trace of one."

"A Monsieur Hercule Poirot?" The name seemed vaguely familiar, but he could not remember in what context. He shook his head—"I can't remember anything about him—though I seem to have heard the name. What does he look like?"

"A very small man—foreign—French I should say—with an enormous moustache—"

"Of course! I remember Mary describing him. He came to see old Roddy. But what's all this about an appointment with me?"

"He says you wrote him a letter."

“Can’t remember it—even if I did. Perhaps Mary—Oh well, never mind—bring him in. I suppose I’d better see what this is all about.”

A moment or two later Claudia Reece-Holland returned ushering with her a small man with an egg-shaped head, large moustaches, pointed patent leather shoes and a general air of complacency which accorded very well with the description he had had from his wife.

“Monsieur Hercule Poirot,” said Claudia Reece-Holland.

She went out again as Hercule Poirot advanced towards the desk. Restarick rose.

“Monsieur Restarick? I am Hercule Poirot, at your service.”

“Oh yes. My wife mentioned that you’d called upon us or rather called upon my uncle. What can I do for you?”

“I have presented myself in answer to your letter.”

“What letter? I did not write to you, M. Poirot.”

Poirot stared at him. Then he drew from his pocket a letter, unfolded it, glanced at it and handed it across the desk with a bow.

“See for yourself, Monsieur.”

Restarick stared at it. It was typewritten on his own office stationery. His signature was written in ink at the bottom.

Dear Monsieur Poirot,

I should be very glad if you could call upon me at the above address at your earliest convenience. I understand from what my wife tells me and also from what I have learned by making various inquiries in London, that you are a man to be trusted when you agree to accept a mission that demands discretion.

Yours truly,
Andrew Restarick

He said sharply:

“When did you receive this?”

“This morning. I had no matters of moment on my hands so I came along here.”

“This is an extraordinary thing, M. Poirot. That letter was not written by me.”

“Not written by you?”

“No. My signature is quite different—look for yourself.” He cast out a hand as though looking for some example of his handwriting and without conscious thought turned the cheque book on which he had just written his signature, so that Poirot could see it. “You see? The signature on the letter is not in the least like mine.”

“But that is extraordinary,” said Poirot. “Absolutely extraordinary. Who could have written this letter?”

“That’s just what I’m asking myself.”

“It could not—excuse me—have been your wife?”

“No, no. Mary would never do a thing like that. And anyway why should she sign it with my name? Oh no, she would have told me if she’d done such a thing, prepared me for your visit.”

“Then you have no idea why anyone might have sent this letter?”

“No, indeed.”

“Have you no knowledge, Mr. Restarick, as to what the matter might be on which in this letter you apparently want to engage me?”

“How could I have an idea?”

“Excuse me,” said Poirot, “you have not yet completely read this letter. You will notice at the bottom of the first page after the signature, there is a small p.t.o.”

Restarick turned the letter over. At the top of the next page the typewriting continued.

The matter on which I wish to consult you concerns my daughter, Norma.

Restarick’s manner changed. His face darkened.

“So, that’s it! But who could know—who could possibly meddle in this matter? Who knows about it?”

“Could it be a way of urging you to consult me? Some well-meaning friend? You have really no idea who the writer may have been?”

“I’ve no idea whatever.”

“And you are not in trouble over a daughter of yours—a daughter named Norma?”

Restarick said slowly:

“I have a daughter named Norma. My only daughter.” His voice changed slightly as he said the last words.

“And she is in trouble, difficulty of some kind?”

“Not that I know of.” But he hesitated slightly as he spoke the words.

Poirot leaned forward.

“I don’t think that is exactly right, Mr. Restarick. I think there is some trouble or difficulty concerning your daughter.”

“Why should you think that? Has someone spoken to you on the subject?”

"I was going entirely by your intonation, Monsieur. Many people," added Hercule Poirot, "are in trouble over daughters at the present date. They have a genius, young ladies, for getting into various kinds of trouble and difficulty. It is possible that the same obtains here."

Restarick was silent for some few moments, drumming with his fingers on the desk.

"Yes, I am worried about Norma," he said at last. "She is a difficult girl. Neurotic, inclined to be hysterical. I—unfortunately I don't know her very well."

"Trouble, no doubt, over a young man?"

"In a way, yes, but that is not entirely what is worrying me. I think—" he looked appraisingly at Poirot. "Am I to take it that you are a man of discretion?"

"I should be very little good in my profession if I were not."

"It is a case, you see, of wanting my daughter found."

"Ah?"

"She came home last weekend as she usually does to our house in the country. She went back on Sunday night ostensibly to the flat which she occupies in common with two other girls, but I now find that she did not go there. She must have gone—somewhere else."

"In fact, she has disappeared?"

"It sounds too much of a melodramatic statement, but it does amount to that. I expect there's a perfectly natural explanation, but—well, I suppose any father would be worried. She hasn't rung up, you see, or given any explanation to the girls with whom she shares her flat."

"They too are worried?"

“No, I should not say so. I think—well, I think they take such things easily enough. Girls are very independent. More so than when I left England fifteen years ago.”

“What about the young man of whom you say you do not approve? Can she have gone away with him?”

“I devoutly hope not. It’s possible, but I don’t—my wife doesn’t think so. You saw him, I believe, the day you came to our house to call on my uncle—”

“Ah yes, I think I know the young man of whom you speak. A very handsome young man but not, if I may say so, a man of whom a father would approve. I noticed that your wife was not pleased, either.”

“My wife is quite certain that he came to the house that day hoping to escape observation.”

“He knows, perhaps, that he is not welcome there?”

“He knows all right,” said Restarick grimly.

“Do you not then think that it is only too likely your daughter may have joined him?”

“I don’t know what to think. I didn’t—at first.”

“You have been to the police.”

“No.”

“In the case of anyone who is missing, it is usually much better to go to the police. They too are discreet and they have many means at their disposal which persons like myself have not.”

“I don’t want to go to the police. It’s my daughter, man, you understand? My daughter. If she’s chosen to—to go away for a short time and not let us know, well, that’s up to her. There’s no reason to believe that she’s in any danger or anything like that. I—I just want to know for my own satisfaction where she is.”

“Is it possible, Mr. Restarick—I hope I am not unduly presuming, that that is not the only thing that is worrying you about your daughter?”

“Why should you think there was anything else?”

“Because the mere fact that a girl is absent for a few days without telling her parents, or the friends with whom she is living, where she is going, is not particularly unusual nowadays. It is that, taken in conjunction with something else, I think, which has caused you this alarm.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right. It’s—” he looked doubtfully at Poirot. “It is very hard to speak of these things to strangers.”

“Not really,” said Poirot. “It is infinitely easier to speak to strangers of such things than it would be to speak of them to friends or acquaintances. Surely you must agree to that?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps. I can see what you mean. Well, I will admit I am upset about my girl. You see she—she’s not quite like other girls and there’s been something already that has definitely worried me—worried us both.”

Poirot said: “Your daughter, perhaps, is at that difficult age of young girlhood, an emotional adolescence when, quite frankly, they are capable of performing actions for which they are hardly to be held responsible. Do not take it amiss if I venture to make a surmise. Your daughter perhaps resents having a stepmother?”

“That is unfortunately true. And yet she has no reason to do so, M. Poirot. It is not as though my first wife and I had recently parted. The parting took place many years ago.” He paused and then said, “I might as well speak frankly to you. After all, there has been no concealment about the matter. My first wife and I drifted apart. I need not mince matters. I had met someone else, someone with whom I was quite infatuated. I left England and went to South Africa with the other woman. My wife did not approve of divorce and I did not ask her for one. I made suitable financial provision for my wife and for the child—she was only five years old at the time—"

He paused and then went on:

"Looking back, I can see that I had been dissatisfied with life for some time. I'd been yearning to travel. At that period of my life I hated being tied down to an office desk. My brother reproached me several times with not taking more interest in the family business, now that I had come in with him. He said that I was not pulling my weight. But I didn't want that sort of life. I was restless. I wanted an adventurous life. I wanted to see the world and wild places…."

He broke off abruptly.

"Anyway—you don't want to hear the story of my life. I went to South Africa and Louise went with me. It wasn't a success. I'll admit that straightaway. I was in love with her but we quarrelled incessantly. She hated life in South Africa. She wanted to get back to London and Paris—all the sophisticated places. We parted only about a year after we arrived there."

He sighed.

"Perhaps I ought to have gone back then, back to the tame life that I disliked the idea of so much. But I didn't. I don't know whether my wife would have had me back or not. Probably she would have considered it her duty to do so. She was a great woman for doing her duty."

Poirot noted the slight bitterness that ran through that sentence.

"But I ought to have thought more about Norma, I suppose. Well, there it was. The child was safely with her mother. Financial arrangements had been made. I wrote to her occasionally and sent her presents, but I never once thought of going back to En gland and seeing her. That was not entirely blameworthy on my part. I had adopted a different way of life and I thought it would be merely unsettling for the child to have a father who came and went, and perhaps disturbed her own peace of mind. Anyway, let's say I thought I was acting for the best."

Restarick's words came fast now. It was as though he was feeling a definite solace in being able to pour out his story to a sympathetic listener. It was a reaction that Poirot had often noticed before and he encouraged it.

"You never wished to come home on your own account?"

Restarick shook his head very definitely. "No. You see, I was living the kind of life I liked, the kind of life I was meant for. I went from South Africa to East Africa. I was doing very well financially, everything I touched seemed to prosper; projects with which I was associated, occasionally with other people, sometimes on my own, all went well. I used to go off into the bush and trek. That was the life I'd always wanted. I am by nature an out-of-door man. Perhaps that's why when I was married to my first wife I felt trapped, held down. No, I enjoyed my freedom and I'd no wish to go back to the conventional type of life that I'd led here."

"But you did come back in the end?"

Restarick sighed. "Yes. I did come back. Ah well, one grows old, I suppose. Also, another man and I had made a very good strike. We'd secured a concession which might have very important consequences. It would need negotiation in London. There I could have depended on my brother to act, but my brother died. I was still a partner in the firm. I could return if I chose and see to things myself. It was the first time I had thought of doing so. Of returning, I mean, to City life."

"Perhaps your wife—your second wife—"

"Yes, you may have something there. I had been married to Mary just a month or two when my brother died. Mary was born in South Africa but she had been to England several times and she liked the life there. She liked particularly the idea of having an English garden!

"And I? Well, for the first time perhaps I felt I would like life in England, too. And I thought of Norma as well. Her mother had died two years earlier. I talked to Mary about it all, and she was quite willing to help me make a home for my daughter. The prospects all seemed good and so—" he smiled, "—and so I came home."

Poirot looked at the portrait that hung behind Restarick's head. It was in a better light here than it had been at the house in the country. It showed very plainly the man who was sitting at the desk; there were the distinctive features, the obstinancy of the chin, the quizzical eyebrows, the poise of the head, but the portrait had one thing that the man sitting in the chair beneath it lacked. Youth!

Another thought occurred to Poirot. Why had Andrew Restarick moved the portrait from the country to his London office? The two portraits of him and his wife had been companion portraits done at the same time and by that particular fashionable artist of the day whose speciality was portrait painting. It would have been more natural, Poirot thought, to have left them together, as they had been meant to be originally. But Restarick had moved one portrait, his own, to his office. Was it a kind of vanity on his part—a wish to display himself as a City man, as someone important to the City? Yet he was a man who had spent his time in wild places, who professed to prefer wild places. Or did he perhaps do it in order to keep before his mind himself in his City personality? Did he feel the need of reinforcement?

"Or, of course," thought Poirot, "it could be simple vanity!

"Even I myself," said Poirot to himself, in an unusual fit of modesty, "even I myself am capable of vanity on occasions."

The short silence, of which both men had seemed unaware, was broken. Restarick spoke apologetically.

"You must forgive me, M. Poirot. I seem to have been boring you with the story of my life."

"There is nothing to excuse, Mr. Restarick. You have been talking really only of your life as it may have affected that of your daughter. You are much disquieted about your daughter. But I do not think that you have yet told me the real reason. You want her found, you say?"

"Yes, I want her found."

“You want her found, yes, but do you want her found by me? Ah, do not hesitate. La politesse—it is very necessary in life, but it is not necessary here. Listen. I tell you, if you want your daughter found I advise you, I—Hercule Poirot—to go to the police for they have the facilities. And from my own knowledge they can be discreet.”

“I won’t go to the police unless—well, unless I get very desperate.”

“You would rather go to a private agent?”

“Yes. But you see, I don’t know anything about private agents. I don’t know who—who can be trusted. I don’t know who—”

“And what do you know about me?”

“I do know something about you. I know, for instance, that you held a responsible position in Intelligence during the war, since, in fact, my own uncle vouches for you. That is an admitted fact.”

The faintly cynical expression on Poirot’s face was not perceived by Restarick. The admitted fact was, as Poirot was well aware, a complete illusion—although Restarick must have known how undependable Sir Roderick was in the matter of memory and eyesight—he had swallowed Poirot’s own account of himself, hook, line and sinker. Poirot did not disillusion him. It merely confirmed him in his long-held belief that you should never believe anything anyone said without first checking it. Suspect everybody, had been for many years, if not his whole life, one of his first axioms.

“Let me reassure you,” said Poirot. “I have been throughout my career exceptionally successful. I have been indeed in many ways unequalled.”

Restarick looked less reassured by this than he might have been! Indeed, to an Englishman, a man who praised himself in such terms aroused some misgivings.

He said: “What do you feel yourself, M. Poirot? Have you confidence that you can find my daughter?”

“Probably not as quickly as the police could do, but yes. I shall find her.”

“And—and if you do—”

“But if you wish me to find her, Mr. Restarick, you must tell me all the circumstances.”

“But I have told them to you. The time, the place, where she ought to be. I can give you a list of her friends….”

Poirot was making some violent shakings of his head. “No, no, I suggest you tell me the truth.”

“Do you suggest I haven’t told you the truth?”

“You have not told me all of it. Of that I am assured. What are you afraid of? What are the unknown facts—the facts that I have to know if I am to have success? Your daughter dislikes her stepmother. That is plain. There is nothing strange about that. It is a very natural reaction. You must remember that she may have secretly idealised you for many many years. That is quite possible in the case of a broken marriage where a child has had a severe blow in her affections. Yes, yes, I know what I am talking about. You say a child forgets. That is true. Your daughter could have forgotten you in the sense that when she saw you again she might not remember your face or your voice. She would make her own image of you. You went away. She wanted you to come back. Her mother, no doubt, discouraged her from talking about you, and therefore she thought about you perhaps all the more. You mattered to her all the more. And because she could not talk about you to her own mother she had what is a very natural reaction with a child—the blaming of the parent who remains for the absence of the parent who has gone. She said to herself something in the nature of ‘Father was fond of me. It’s Mother he didn’t like,’ and from that was born a kind of idealisation, a kind of secret liaison between you and her. What had happened was not her father’s fault. She will not believe it!

“Oh yes, that often happens, I assure you. I know something of the psychology. So when she learns that you are coming home, that you and she will be reunited, many memories that she has pushed aside and not thought of for years return. Her father is coming back! He and she will be happy together! She hardly realises the stepmother, perhaps, until she sees her. And then she is violently jealous. It is most natural, I assure you. She is violently jealous partly because your wife is a good-looking woman, sophisticated, and well poised, which is a thing girls often resent because they frequently lack confidence in themselves. She herself is possibly gauche with perhaps an inferiority complex. So when she sees her competent and good-looking stepmother, quite possibly she hates her; but hates her as an adolescent girl who is still half a child might do."

"Well—" Restarick hesitated. "That is more or less what the doctor said when we consulted him—I mean—"

"Aha," said Poirot, "so you consulted a doctor? You must have had some reason, is it not so, for calling in a doctor?"

"Nothing really."

"Ah no, you cannot say that to Hercule Poirot. It was not nothing. It was something serious and you had better tell me, because if I know just what has been in this girl's mind, I shall make more progress. Things will go quicker."

Restarick was silent for several moments, then he made up his mind.

"This is in absolute confidence, M. Poirot? I can rely on you—I have your assurance as to that?"

"By all means. What was the trouble?"

"I cannot be—be sure."

"Your daughter entered into some action against your wife? Something more than being merely childishly rude or saying unpleasant things. It was something worse than that—something more serious. Did she perhaps attack her physically?"

"No, it was not an attack—not a physical attack but—nothing was proved."

“No, no. We will admit that.”

“My wife became far from well—” He hesitated.

“Ah,” said Poirot. “Yes, I see…And what was the nature of her illness? Digestive, possibly? A form of enteritis?”

“You’re quick, M. Poirot. You’re very quick. Yes, it was digestive. This complaint of my wife’s was puzzling, because she had always had excellent health. Finally they sent her to hospital for ‘observation,’ as they call it. A check-up.”

“And the result?”

“I don’t think they were completely satisfied…She appeared to regain her health completely and was sent home in due course. But the trouble recurred. We went carefully over the meals she had, the cooking. She seemed to be suffering from a form of intestinal poisoning for which there appeared to be no cause. A further step was taken, tests were made of the dishes she ate. By taking samples of everything, it was definitely proved that a certain substance had been administered in various dishes. In each case it was a dish of which only my wife had partaken.”

“In plain language somebody was giving her arsenic. Is that right?”

“Quite right. In small doses which would in the end have a cumulative effect.”

“You suspected your daughter?”

“No.”

“I think you did. Who else could have done it? You suspected your daughter.”

Restarick gave a deep sigh.

“Frankly, yes.”

II

When Poirot arrived home, George was awaiting him:

“A woman named Edith rang up, sir—”

“Edith?” Poirot frowned.

“She is, I gather, in the service of Mrs. Oliver. She asked me to inform you that Mrs. Oliver is in St. Giles’s Hospital.”

“What has happened to her?”

“I understand she has been—er—coshed.” George did not add the latter part of the message, which had been—“—and you tell him it’s been all his fault.”

Poirot clicked his tongue. “I warned her—I was uneasy last night when I rang her up, and there was no answer. Les Femmes!”

Twelve

“Let’s buy a peacock,” said Mrs. Oliver suddenly and unexpectedly. She did not open her eyes as she made this remark, and her voice was weak though full of indignation.

Three people brought startled eyes to bear upon her. She made a further statement.

“Hit on the head.”

She opened badly focused eyes and endeavoured to make out where she was.

The first thing she saw was a face entirely strange to her. A young man who was writing in a notebook. He held the pencil poised in his hand.

“Policeman,” said Mrs. Oliver decisively.

“I beg your pardon, Madam?”

“I said you were a policeman,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Am I right?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Criminal assault,” said Mrs. Oliver and closed her eyes in a satisfied manner. When she opened them again, she took in her surroundings more fully. She was in a bed, one of those rather high hygienic-looking hospital beds, she decided. The kind that you shoot up and down and round and about. She was not in her own house. She looked round and decided on her environment.

“Hospital, or could be nursing home,” she said.

A sister was standing with an air of authority at the door, and a nurse was standing by her bed. She identified a fourth figure. “Nobody,” said Mrs.

Oliver, “could mistake those moustaches. What are you doing here, M. Poirot?”

Hercule Poirot advanced towards the bed. “I told you to be careful, Madame,” he said.

“Anyone might lose their way,” said Mrs. Oliver, somewhat obscurely, and added, “My head aches.”

“With good cause. As you surmise, you were hit on the head.”

“Yes. By the Peacock.”

The policeman stirred uneasily then said, “Excuse me, Madam, you say you were assaulted by a peacock?”

“Of course. I’d had an uneasy feeling for some time—you know, atmosphere.” Mrs. Oliver tried to wave her hand in an appropriate gesture to describe atmosphere, and winced. “Ouch,” she said, “I’d better not try that again.”

“My patient must not get overexcited,” said the sister with disapproval.

“Can you tell me where this assault occurred?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. I’d lost my way. I was coming from a kind of studio. Very badly kept. Dirty. The other young man hadn’t shaved for days. A greasy leather jacket.”

“Is this the man who assaulted you?”

“No, it’s another one.”

“If you could just tell me—”

“I am telling you, aren’t I? I’d followed him, you see, all the way from the café—only I’m not very good at following people. No practice. It’s much more difficult than you’d think.”

Her eyes focused on the policeman. “But I suppose you know all about that. You have courses—in following people, I mean? Oh, never mind, it doesn’t matter. You see,” she said, speaking with sudden rapidity, “it’s quite simple. I had got off at The World’s End, I think it was, and naturally I thought he had stayed with the others—or gone the other way. But instead, he came up behind me.”

“Who was this?”

“The Peacock,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and he startled me, you see. It does startle you when you find things are the wrong way round. I mean he following you instead of you following him—only it was earlier—and I had a sort of uneasy feeling. In fact, you know, I was afraid. I don’t know why. He spoke quite politely but I was afraid. Anyway there it was and he said ‘Come up and see the studio’ and so I came up rather a rickety staircase. A kind of ladder staircase and there was this other young man—the dirty young man—and he was painting a picture, and the girl was acting as model. She was quite clean. Rather pretty really. And so there we were and they were quite nice and polite, and then I said I must be getting home, and they told me the right way to get back to the King’s Road. But they can’t really have told me the right way. Of course I might have made a mistake. You know, when people tell you second left and third right, well, you sometimes do it the wrong way round. At least I do. Anyway, I got into a rather peculiar slummy part quite close to the river. The afraid feeling had gone away by then. I must have been quite off my guard when the Peacock hit me.”

“I think she’s delirous,” said the nurse in an explanatory voice.

“No, I’m not,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I know what I’m talking about.”

The nurse opened her mouth, caught the sister’s admonitory eye and shut it again quickly.

“Velvets and satins and long curly hair,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“A peacock in satin? A real peacock, Madam. You thought you saw a peacock near the river in Chelsea?”

“A real peacock?” said Mrs. Oliver. “Of course not. How silly. What would a real peacock be doing down on Chelsea Embankment?”

Nobody appeared to have an answer to this question.

“He struts,” said Mrs. Oliver, “that’s why I nicknamed him a peacock. Shows off, you know. Vain, I should think. Proud of his looks. Perhaps a lot of other things as well.” She looked at Poirot. “David something. You know who I mean.”

“You say this young man of the name of David assaulted you by striking you on the head?”

“Yes I do.”

Hercule Poirot spoke. “You saw him?”

“I didn’t see him,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I didn’t know anything about it. I just thought I heard something behind me, and before I could turn my head to look—it all happened! Just as if a ton of bricks or something fell on me. I think I’ll go to sleep now,” she added.

She moved her head slightly, made a grimace of pain, and relapsed into what appeared to be a perfectly satisfactory unconsciousness.

Thirteen

Poirot seldom used the key to his flat. Instead, in an old-fashioned manner, he pressed the bell and waited for that admirable factotum, George, to open the door. On this occasion, however, after his visit to the hospital, the door was opened to him by Miss Lemon.

“You’ve got two visitors,” said Miss Lemon, pitching her voice in an admirable tone, not as carrying as a whisper but a good many notes lower than her usual pitch. “One’s Mr. Goby and the other is an old gentleman called Sir Roderick Horsefield. I don’t know which you want to see first.”

“Sir Roderick Horsefield,” mused Poirot. He considered this with his head on one side, looking rather like a robin while he decided how this latest development was likely to affect the general picture. Mr. Goby, however, materialised with his usual suddenness from the small room which was sacred to Miss Lemon’s typewriting and where she had evidently kept him in storage.

Poirot removed his overcoat. Miss Lemon hung it up on the hall stand, and Mr. Goby, as was his fashion, addressed the back of Miss Lemon’s head.

“I’ll have a cup of tea in the kitchen with George,” said Mr. Goby. “My time is my own. I’ll keep.”

He disappeared obligingly into the kitchen. Poirot went into his sitting room where Sir Roderick was pacing up and down full of vitality.

“Run you down, my boy,” he said genially. “Wonderful thing the telephone.”

“You remembered my name? I am gratified.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly remember your name,” said Sir Roderick. “Names, you know, have never been my strong point. Never forget a face,” he ended proudly. “No. I rang up Scotland Yard.”

“Oh!” Poirot looked faintly startled, though reflecting that that was the sort of thing that Sir Roderick would do.

“Asked me who I wanted to speak to. I said, put me on to the top. That’s the thing to do in life, my boy. Never accept second in charge. No good. Go to the top, that’s what I say. I said who I was, mind you. Said I wanted to speak to the top brass and I got on to it in the end. Very civil fellow. Told him I wanted the address of a chap in Allied Intelligence who was out with me at a certain place in France at a certain date. The chap seemed a bit at sea, so I said: ‘You know who I mean.’ A Frenchman, I said, or a Belgian. Belgian, weren’t you? I said: ‘He’s got a Christian name something like Achilles. It’s not Achilles,’ I said, ‘but it’s like Achilles. Little chap,’ I said, ‘big moustaches.’ And then he seemed to catch on, and he said you’d be in the telephone book, he thought. I said that’s all right, but I said: ‘He won’t be listed under Achilles or Hercules (as he said it was), will he? and I can’t remember his second name.’ So then he gave it me. Very civil sort of fellow. Very civil, I must say.”

“I am delighted to see you,” said Poirot, sparing a hurried thought for what might be said to him later by Sir Roderick’s telephone acquaintance. Fortunately it was not likely to have been quite the top brass. It was presumably someone with whom he was already acquainted, and whose job it was to produce civility on tap for distinguished persons of a bygone day.

“Anyway,” said Sir Roderick, “I got here.”

“I am delighted. Let me offer you some refreshment. Tea, a grenadine, a whisky and soda, some sirop de cassis—”

“Good lord, no,” said Sir Roderick, alarmed at the mention of sirop de cassis. “I’ll take whisky for choice. Not that I’m allowed it,” he added, “but doctors are all fools, as we know. All they care for is stopping you having anything you’ve a fancy for.”

Poirot rang for George and gave him the proper instructions. The whisky and the siphon were placed at Sir Roderick’s elbow and George withdrew.

“Now,” said Poirot, “what can I do for you?”

“Got a job for you, old boy.”

After the lapse of time, he seemed even more convinced of the close liaison between him and Poirot in the past, which was as well, thought Poirot, since it would produce an even greater dependence on his, Poirot’s, capabilities by Sir Roderick’s nephew.

“Papers,” said Sir Roderick, dropping his voice. “Lost some papers and I’ve got to find ’em, see? So I thought what with my eyes not being as good as they were, and the memory being a trifle off-key sometimes, I’d better go to someone in the know. See? You came along in the nick of time the other day, just in time to be useful, because I’ve got to cough ’em up, you understand.”

“It sounds most interesting,” said Poirot. “What are these papers, if I may ask?”

“Well, I suppose if you’re going to find them, you’ll have to ask, won’t you? Mind you, they’re very secret and confidential. Top secret—or they were once. And it seems as though they are going to be again. An interchange of letters, it was. Not of any particular importance at the time—or it was thought they were of no importance; but then of course politics change. You know the way it is. They go round and face the other way. You know how it was when the war broke out. None of us knew whether we were on our head or on our heels. One war we’re pals with the Italians, next war we’re enemies. I don’t know which of them all was the worst. First war the Japanese were our dear allies, and the next war there they are blowing up Pearl Harbor! Never knew where you were! Start one way with the Russians, and finish the opposite way. I tell you, Poirot, nothing’s more difficult nowadays than the question of allies. They can change overnight.”

“And you have lost some papers,” said Poirot, recalling the old man to the subject of his visit.

“Yes. I’ve got a lot of papers, you know, and I’ve dug ’em out lately. I had ’em put away safely. In a bank, as a matter of fact, but I got ’em all out and I began sorting through them because I thought why not write my memoirs. All the chaps are doing it nowadays. We’ve had Montgomery and

Alanbrooke and Auchinleck all shooting their mouths off in print, mostly saying what they thought of the other generals. We've even had old Moran, a respectable physician, blabbing about his important patient. Don't know what things will come to next! Anyway, there it is, and I thought I'd be quite interested myself in telling a few facts about some people I knew! Why shouldn't I have a go as well as everyone else? I was in it all."

"I am sure it could be a matter of much interest to people," said Poirot.

"Ah-ha, yes! One knew a lot of people in the news. Everyone looked at them with awe. They didn't know they were complete fools, but I knew. My goodness, the mistakes some of those brass hats made—you'd be surprised. So I got out my papers, and I had the little girl help me sort 'em out. Nice little girl, that, and quite bright. Doesn't know English very well, but apart from that, she's very bright and helpful. I'd salted away a lot of stuff, but everything was in a bit of a muddle. The point of the whole thing is, the papers I wanted weren't there."

"Weren't there?"

"No. We thought we'd given it a miss by mistake to begin with, but we went over it again and I can tell you, Poirot, a lot of stuff seemed to me to have been pinched. Some of it wasn't important. Actually, the stuff I was looking for wasn't particularly important—I mean, nobody had thought it was, otherwise I suppose I shouldn't have been allowed to keep it. But anyway, these particular letters weren't there."

"I wish of course to be discreet," said Poirot, "but can you tell me at all the nature of these letters you refer to?"

"Don't know that I can, old boy. The nearest I can go is of somebody who's shooting off his mouth nowadays about what he did and what he said in the past. But he's not speaking the truth, and these letters just show exactly how much of a liar he is! Mind you, I don't suppose they'd be published now. We'll just send him nice copies of them, and tell him this is exactly what he did say at the time, and that we've got it in writing. I shouldn't be surprised if—well, things went a bit differently after that. See? I hardly need ask that, need I? You're familiar with all that kind of talky-talky."

“You’re quite right, Sir Roderick. I know exactly the kind of thing you mean, but you see also that it is not easy to help you recover something if one does not know what that something is, and where it is likely to be now.”

“First things first: I want to know who pinched ’em, because you see that’s the important point. There may be more top secret stuff in my little collection, and I want to know who’s tampering with it.”

“Have you any ideas yourself?”

“You think I ought to have, heh?”

“Well, it would seem that the principal possibility—”

“I know. You want me to say it’s the little girl. Well, I don’t think it is the little girl. She says she didn’t, and I believe her. Understand?”

“Yes,” said Poirot with a slight sigh, “I understand.”

“For one thing she’s too young. She wouldn’t know these things were important. It’s before her time.”

“Someone else might have instructed her as to that,” Poirot pointed out.

“Yes, yes, that’s true enough. But it’s too obvious as well.”

Poirot sighed. He doubted if it was any use insisting in view of Sir Roderick’s obvious partiality. “Who else had access?”

“Andrew and Mary, of course, but I doubt if Andrew would even be interested in such things. Anyway, he’s always been a very decent boy. Always was. Not that I’ve ever known him very well. Used to come for the holidays once or twice with his brother and that’s about all. Of course, he ditched his wife, and went off with an attractive bit of goods to South Africa, but that might happen to any man, especially with a wife like Grace. Not that I ever saw much of her, either. Kind of woman who looked down her nose and was full of good works. Anyway you can’t imagine a chap like Andrew being a spy. As for Mary, she seems all right. Never looks at anything but a rose bush as far as I can make out. There’s a gardener but he's eighty-three and has lived in the village all his life, and there are a couple of women always dodging about the house making a noise with Hoovers, but I can't see them in the role of spies either. So you see it's got to be an outsider. Of course Mary wears a wig," went on Sir Roderick rather inconsequently. "I mean it might make you think she was a spy because she wore a wig, but that's not the case. She lost her hair in a fever when she was eighteen. Pretty bad luck for a young woman. I'd no idea she wore a wig to begin with but a rose bush caught in her hair one day and whisked it sideways. Yes, very bad luck."

"I thought there was something a little odd about the way she had arranged her hair," said Poirot.

"Anyway, the best secret agents never wear wigs," Sir Roderick informed him. "Poor devils have to go to plastic surgeons and get their faces altered. But someone's been mucking about with my private papers."

"You don't think that you may perhaps have placed them in some different container—in a drawer or a different file. When did you see them last?"

"I handled these things about a year ago. I remember I thought then, they'd make rather good copy, and I noted those particular letters. Now they're gone. Somebody's taken them."

"You do not suspect your nephew Andrew, his wife or the domestic staff. What about the daughter?"

"Norma? Well Norma's a bit off her onion, I'd say. I mean she might be one of those kleptomaniacs who take people's things without knowing they're taking them but I don't see her fumbling about among my papers."

"Then what do you think?"

"Well, you've been in the house. You saw what the house is like. Anyone can walk in and out anytime they like. We don't lock our doors. We never have."

“Do you lock the door of your own room—if you go up to London, for instance?”

“I never thought of it as necessary. I do now of course, but what’s the use of that? Too late. Anyway, I’ve only an ordinary key, fits any of the doors. Someone must have come in from outside. Why nowadays that’s how all the burglaries take place. People walk in in the middle of the day, stump up the stairs, go into any room they like, rifle the jewel box, go out again, and nobody sees them or cares who they are. They probably look like mods or rockers or beatniks or whatever they call these chaps nowadays with the long hair and the dirty nails. I’ve seen more than one of them prowling about. One doesn’t like to say ‘Who the devil are you?’ You never know which sex they are, which is embarrassing. The place crawls with them. I suppose they’re Norma’s friends. Wouldn’t have been allowed in the old days. But you turn them out of the house, and then you find out it’s Viscount Endersleigh or Lady Charlotte Marjoribanks. Don’t know where you are nowadays.” He paused. “If anyone can get to the bottom of it, you can, Poirot.” He swallowed the last mouthful of whisky and got up.

“Well, that’s that. It’s up to you. You’ll take it on, won’t you?”

“I will do my best,” said Poirot.

The front-door bell rang.

“That’s the little girl,” said Sir Roderick. “Punctual to the minute. Wonderful, isn’t it? Couldn’t go about London without her, you know. Blind as a bat. Can’t see to cross the road.”

“Can you not have glasses?”

“I’ve got some somewhere, but they’re always falling off my nose or else I lose them. Besides, I don’t like glasses. I’ve never had glasses. When I was sixty-five I could see to read without glasses and that’s pretty good.”

“Nothing,” said Hercule Poirot, “lasts forever.”

George ushered in Sonia. She was looking extremely pretty. Her slightly shy manner became her very well, Poirot thought. He moved forward with Gallic empressement.

“Enchanté, Mademoiselle,” he said, bowing over her hand.

“I’m not late, am I, Sir Roderick,” she said, looking past him. “I have not kept you waiting. Please I hope not.”

“Exactly to the minute, little girl,” said Sir Roderick. “All shipshape and Bristol fashion,” he added.

Sonia looked slightly perplexed.

“Made a good tea, I hope,” Sir Roderick went on. “I told you, you know, to have a good tea, buy yourself some buns or éclairs or whatever it is young ladies like nowadays, eh? You obeyed orders, I hope.”

“No, not exactly. I took the time to buy a pair of shoes. Look, they are pretty, are they not?” She stuck out a foot.

It was certainly a very pretty foot. Sir Roderick beamed at it.

“Well, we must go and catch our train,” he said. “I may be old-fashioned but I’m all for trains. Start to time and get there on time, or they should do. But these cars, they get in a queue in the rush hour and you may idle the time away for about an hour and a half more than you need. Cars! Pah!”

“Shall I ask Georges to get you a taxi?” asked Hercule Poirot. “It will be no trouble, I assure you.”

“I have a taxi already waiting,” said Sonia.

“There you are,” said Sir Roderick, “you see, she thinks of everything.” He patted her on the shoulder. She looked at him in a way that Hercule Poirot fully appreciated.

Poirot accompanied them to the hall door and took a polite leave of them. Mr. Goby had come out of the kitchen and was standing in the hall giving, it could be said, an excellent performance of a man who had come to see about the gas.

George shut the hall door as soon as they had disappeared into the lift, and turned to meet Poirot's gaze.

"And what is your opinion of that young lady, Georges, may I ask?" said Poirot. On certain points he always said George was infallible.

"Well, sir," said George, "if I might put it that way, if you'll allow me, I would say he'd got it badly, sir. All over her as you might say."

"I think you are right," said Hercule Poirot.

"It's not unusual of course with gentlemen of that age. I remember Lord Mountbryan. He'd had a lot of experience in his life and you'd say he was as fly as anyone. But you'd be surprised. A young woman as came to give him massage. You'd be surprised at what he gave her. An evening frock, and a pretty bracelet. Forget-me-nots, it was. Turquoise and diamonds. Not too expensive but costing quite a pretty penny all the same. Then a fur wrap—not mink, Russian ermine, and a petty point evening bag. After that her brother got into trouble, debt or something, though whether she ever had a brother I sometimes wondered. Lord Mountbryan gave her the money to square it—she was so upset about it! All platonic, mind you, too. Gentlemen seem to lose their sense that way when they get to that age. It's the clinging ones they go for, not the bold type."

"I have no doubt that you are quite right, Georges," said Poirot. "It is all the same not a complete answer to my question. I asked what you thought of the young lady."

"Oh, the young lady…Well, sir, I wouldn't like to say definitely, but she's quite a definite type. There's never anything that you could put your finger on. But they know what they're doing, I'd say."

Poirot entered his sitting room and Mr. Goby followed him, obeying Poirot's gesture. Mr. Goby sat down on an upright chair in his usual attitude. Knees together, toes turned in. He took a rather dog-eared little notebook from his pocket, opened it carefully and then proceeded to survey the soda water siphon severely.

“Re the backgrounds you asked me to look up.

“Restarick family, perfectly respectable and of good standing. No scandal. The father, James Patrick Restarick, said to be a sharp man over a bargain. Business has been in the family three generations. Grandfather founded it, father enlarged it, Simon Restarick kept it going. Simon Restarick had coronary trouble two years ago, health declined. Died of coronary thrombosis, about a year ago.

“Young brother Andrew Restarick came into the business soon after he came down from Oxford, married Miss Grace Baldwin. One daughter, Norma. Left his wife and went out to South Africa. A Miss Birell went with him. No divorce proceedings. Mrs. Andrew Restarick died two and a half years ago. Had been an invalid for some time. Miss Norma Restarick was a boarder at Meadowfield Girls’ School. Nothing against her.”

Allowing his eyes to sweep across Hercule Poirot’s face, Mr. Goby observed, “In fact everything about the family seems quite OK and according to Cocker.”

“No black sheep, no mental instability?”

“It doesn’t appear so.”

“Disappointing,” said Poirot.

Mr. Goby let this pass. He cleared his throat, licked his finger, and turned over a leaf of his little book.

“David Baker. Unsatisfactory record. Been on probation twice. Police are inclined to be interested in him. He’s been on the fringe of several rather dubious affairs, thought to have been concerned in an important art robbery but no proof. He’s one of the arty lot. No particular means of subsistence but he does quite well. Prefers girls with money. Not above living on some of the girls who are keen on him. Not above being paid off by their fathers either. Thorough bad lot if you ask me but enough brains to keep himself out of trouble.”

Mr. Goby shot a sudden glance at Poirot.

“You met him?”

“Yes,” said Poirot.

“What conclusions did you form, if I may ask?”

“The same as you,” said Poirot. “A gaudy creature,” he added thoughtfully.

“Appeals to women,” said Mr. Goby. “Trouble is nowadays they won’t look twice at a nice hardworking lad. They prefer the bad lots—the scroungers. They usually say ‘he hasn’t had a chance, poor boy.’”

“Strutting about like peacocks,” said Poirot.

“Well, you might put it like that,” said Mr. Goby, rather doubtfully.

“Do you think he’d use a cosh on anyone?”

Mr. Goby thought, then very slowly shook his head at the electric fire.

“Nobody’s accused him of anything like that. I don’t say he’d be past it, but I wouldn’t say it was his line. He is a smooth-spoken type, not one for the rough stuff.”

“No,” said Poirot, “no, I should not have thought so. He could be bought off? That was your opinion?”

“He’d drop any girl like a hot coal if it was made worth his while.”

Poirot nodded. He was remembering something. Andrew Restarick turning a cheque towards him so that he could read the signature on it. It was not only the signature that Poirot had read, it was the person to whom the cheque was made out. It had been made out to David Baker and it was for a large sum. Would David Baker demur at taking such a cheque, Poirot wondered. He thought not on the whole. Mr. Goby clearly was of that opinion. Undesirable young men had been bought off in any time or age, so had undesirable young women. Sons had sworn and daughters had wept but money was money. To Norma, David had been urging marriage. Was he sincere? Could it be that he really cared for Norma? If so, he would not be so easily paid off. He had sounded genuine enough. Norma no doubt believed him genuine. Andrew Restarick and Mr. Goby and Hercule Poirot thought differently. They were very much more likely to be right.

Mr. Goby cleared his throat and went on.

"Miss Claudia Reece-Holland? She's all right. Nothing against her. Nothing dubious, that is. Father a Member of Parliament, well off. No scandals. Not like some MPs we've heard about. Educated Roedean, Lady Margaret Hall, came down and did a secretarial course. First secretary to a doctor in Harley Street, then went to the Coal Board. First-class secretary. Has been secretary to Mr. Restarick for the last two months. No special attachments, just what you'd call minor boyfriends. Eligible and useful if she wants a date. Nothing to show there's anything between her and Restarick. I shouldn't say there is, myself. Has had a flat in Borodene Mansions for the last three years. Quite a high rent there. She usually has two other girls sharing it, no special friends. They come and go. Young lady, Frances Cary, the second girl, has been there some time. Was at RADA for a time, then went to the Slade. Works for the Wedderburn Gallery—well-known place in Bond Street. Specialises in arranging art shows in Manchester, Birmingham, sometimes abroad. Goes to Switzerland and Portugal. Arty type and has a lot of friends amongst artists and actors."

He paused, cleared his throat and gave a brief look at the little notebook.

"Haven't been able to get much from South Africa yet. Don't suppose I shall. Restarick moved about a lot. Kenya, Uganda, Gold Coast, South America for a while. He just moved about. Restless chap. Nobody seems to have known him particularly well. He'd got plenty of money of his own to go where he liked. He made money, too, quite a lot of it. Liked going to out of the way places. Everyone who came across him seems to have liked him. Just seems as though he was a born wanderer. He never kept in touch with anyone. Three times I believe he was reported dead—gone off into the bush and not turned up again—but he always did in the end. Five or six months and he'd pop up in some entirely different place or country.

"Then last year his brother in London died suddenly. They had a bit of trouble in tracing him. His brother's death seemed to give him a shock. Perhaps he'd had enough, and perhaps he'd met the right woman at last. Good bit younger than him, she was, and a teacher, they say. The steady kind. Anyway he seems to have made up his mind then and there to chuck wandering about, and come home to England. Besides being a very rich man himself, he's his brother's heir."

"A success story and an unhappy girl," said Poirot. "I wish I knew more about her. You have ascertained for me all that you could, the facts I needed. The people who surrounded that girl, who might have influenced her, who perhaps did influence her. I wanted to know something about her father, her stepmother, the boy she is in love with, the people she lived with, and worked for in London. You are sure that in connection with this girl there have been no deaths? That is important—"

"Not a smell of one," said Mr. Goby. "She worked for a firm called Homebirds—on the verge of bankruptcy, and they didn't pay her much. Stepmother was in hospital for observation recently—in the country, that was. A lot of rumours flying about, but they didn't seem to come to anything."

"She did not die," said Poirot. "What I need," he added in a bloodthirsty manner, "is a death."

Mr. Goby said he was sorry about that and rose to his feet. "Will there be anything more you are wanting at present?"

"Not in the nature of information."

"Very good, sir." As he replaced his notebook in his pocket, Mr. Goby said: "You'll excuse me, sir, if I'm speaking out of turn, but that young lady you had here just now—"

"Yes, what about her?"

“Well, of course it’s—I don’t suppose it’s anything to do with this, but I thought I might just mention it to you, sir—”

“Please do. You have seen her before, I gather?”

“Yes. Couple of months ago.”

“Where did you see her?”

“Kew Gardens.”

“Kew Gardens?” Poirot looked slightly surprised.

“I wasn’t following her. I was following someone else, the person who met her.”

“And who was that?”

“I don’t suppose as it matters mentioning it to you, sir. It was one of the junior attachés of the Hertzogovinian Embassy.”

Poirot raised his eyebrows. “That is interesting. Yes, very interesting. Kew Gardens,” he mused. “A pleasant place for a rendezvous. Very pleasant.”

“I thought so at the time.”

“They talked together?”

“No, sir, you wouldn’t have said they knew each other. The young lady had a book with her. She sat down on a seat. She read the book for a little then she laid it down beside her. Then my bloke came and sat there on the seat also. They didn’t speak—only the young lady got up and wandered away. He just sat there and presently he gets up and walks off. He takes with him the book that the young lady has left behind. That’s all, sir.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It is very interesting.”

Mr. Goby looked at the bookcase and said good night to it. He went.

Poirot gave an exasperated sigh.

“Enfin,” he said, “it is too much! There is far too much. Now we have espionage and counterespionage. All I am seeking is one perfectly simple murder. I begin to suspect that that murder only occurred in a drug addict’s brain!”

Fourteen

"Chère Madame," Poirot bowed and presented Mrs. Oliver with a bouquet, very stylised, a posy in the Victorian manner.

"M. Poirot! Well, really, that is very nice of you, and it's very like you somehow. All my flowers are always so untidy." She looked towards a vase of rather temperamental-looking chrysanthemums, then back to the prim circle of rosebuds. "And how nice of you to come and see me."

"I come, Madame, to offer you my felicitations on your recovery."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "I suppose I am all right again." She shook her head to and fro rather gingerly. "I get headaches, though," she said. "Quite bad headaches."

"You remember, Madame, that I warned you not to do anything dangerous."

"Not to stick my neck out, in fact. That I suppose is just what I did do." She added, "I felt something evil was about. I was frightened, too, and I told myself I was a fool to be frightened, because what was I frightened of? I mean, it was London. Right in the middle of London. People all about. I mean—how could I be frightened? It wasn't like a lonely wood or anything."

Poirot looked at her thoughtfully. He wondered, had Mrs. Oliver really felt this nervous fear, had she really suspected the presence of evil, the sinister feeling that something or someone wished her ill, or had she read it into the whole thing afterwards? He knew only too well how easily that could be done. Countless clients had spoken in much the same words that Mrs. Oliver had just used. "I knew something was wrong. I could feel evil. I knew something was going to happen," and actually they had not felt anything of the kind. What kind of a person was Mrs. Oliver?

He looked at her consideringly. Mrs. Oliver in her own opinion was famous for her intuition. One intuition succeeded another with remarkable rapidity and Mrs. Oliver always claimed the right to justify the particular intuition which turned out to be right!

And yet one shared very often with animals the uneasiness of a dog or a cat before a thunderstorm, the knowledge that there is something wrong, although one does not know what it is that is wrong.

“When did it come upon you, this fear?”

“When I left the main road,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Up till then it was all ordinary and quite exciting and—yes, I was enjoying myself, though vexed at finding how difficult it was to trail anybody.”

She paused, considering. “Just like a game. Then suddenly it didn’t seem so much like a game, because there were queer little streets and rather sort of broken-down places, and sheds and open spaces being cleared for building—oh, I don’t know, I can’t explain it. But it was all different. Like a dream really. You know how dreams are. They start with one thing, a party or something, and then suddenly you find you’re in a jungle or somewhere quite different—and it’s all sinister.”

“A jungle?” said Poirot. “Yet, it is interesting you should put it like that. So it felt to you as though you were in a jungle and you were afraid of a peacock?”

“I don’t know that I was especially afraid of him. After all, a peacock isn’t a dangerous sort of animal. It’s—well I mean I thought of him as a peacock because I thought of him as a decorative creature. A peacock is very decorative, isn’t it? And this awful boy is decorative too.”

“You didn’t have any idea anyone was following you before you were hit?”

“No. No, I’d no idea—but I think he directed me wrong all the same.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“But of course it must have been the Peacock who hit me,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Who else? The dirty boy in the greasy clothes? He smelt nasty but he wasn't sinister. And it could hardly be that limp Frances something—she was draped over a packing case with long black hair streaming all over the place. She reminded me of some actress or other."

"You say she was acting as a model?"

"Yes. Not for the Peacock. For the dirty boy. I can't remember if you've seen her or not."

"I have not yet had that pleasure—if it is a pleasure."

"Well, she's quite nice looking in an untidy, arty sort of way. Very much made up. Dead white and lots of mascara and the usual kind of limp hair hanging over her face. Works in an art gallery so I suppose it's quite natural that she should be all among the beatniks, acting as a model. How these girls can! I suppose she might have fallen for the Peacock. But it's probably the dirty one. All the same I don't see her coshing me on the head somehow."

"I had another possibility in mind, Madame. Someone may have noticed you following David—and in turn followed you."

"Someone saw me trailing David, and then they trailed me?"

"Or someone may have been already in the mews or the yard, keeping perhaps an eye on the same people that you were observing."

"That's an idea, of course," said Mrs. Oliver. "I wonder who they could be?"

Poirot gave an exasperated sigh. "Ah, it is there. It is difficult—too difficult. Too many people, too many things. I cannot see anything clearly. I see only a girl who said that she may have committed a murder! That is all that I have to go on and you see even there there are difficulties."

"What do you mean by difficulties?"

"Reflect," said Poirot.

Reflection had never been Mrs. Oliver's strong point.

"You always mix me up," she complained.

"I am talking about a murder, but what murder?"

"The murder of the stepmother, I suppose."

"But the stepmother is not murdered. She is alive."

"You really are the most maddening man," said Mrs. Oliver.

Poirot sat up in his chair. He brought the tips of his fingers together and prepared—or so Mrs. Oliver suspected—to enjoy himself.

"You refuse to reflect," he said. "But to get anywhere we must reflect."

"I don't want to reflect. What I want to know is what you've been doing about everything while I've been in hospital. You must have done something. What have you done?"

Poirot ignored this question.

"We must begin at the beginning. One day you ring me up. I was in distress. Yes, I admit it, I was in distress. Something extremely painful had been said to me. You, Madame, were kindness itself. You cheered me, you encouraged me. You gave me a delicious tasse de chocolat. And what is more you not only offered to help me, but you did help me. You helped me to find a girl who had come to me and said that she thought she might have committed a murder! Let us ask ourselves, Madame, what about this murder? Who has been murdered? Where have they been murdered? Why have they been murdered?"

"Oh do stop," said Mrs. Oliver. "You're making my head ache again, and that's bad for me."

Poirot paid no attention to this plea. "Have we got a murder at all? You say—the stepmother—but I reply that the stepmother is not dead—so as yet we have no murder. But there ought to have been a murder. So me, I inquire first of all, who is dead? Somebody comes to me and mentions a murder. A murder that has been committed somewhere and somehow. But I cannot find that murder, and what you are about to say once again, that the attempted murder of Mary Restarick will do very well, does not satisfy Hercule Poirot.”

“I really can’t think what more you want,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I want a murder,” said Hercule Poirot.

“It sounds very bloodthirsty when you say it like that!”

“I look for a murder and I cannot find a murder. It is exasperating—so I ask you to reflect with me.”

“I’ve got a splendid idea,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Suppose Andrew Restarick murdered his first wife before he went off in a hurry to South Africa. Had you thought of that possibility?”

“I certainly did not think of any such thing,” said Poirot indignantly.

“Well, I’ve thought of it,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s very interesting. He was in love with this other woman, and he wanted like Crippen to go off with her, and so he murdered the first one and nobody ever suspected.”

Poirot drew a long, exasperated sigh. “But his wife did not die until eleven or twelve years after he’d left this country for South Africa, and his child could not have been concerned in the murder of her own mother at the age of five years old.”

“She could have given her mother the wrong medicine or perhaps Restarick just said that she died. After all, we don’t know that she’s dead.”

“I do,” said Hercule Poirot. “I have made inquiries. The first Mrs. Restarick died on the 14th April, 1963.”

“How can you know these things?”

"Because I have employed someone to check the facts. I beg of you, Madame, do not jump to impossible conclusions in this rash way."

"I thought I was being rather clever," said Mrs. Oliver obstinately. "If I was making it happen in a book that's how I would arrange it. And I'd make the child have done it. Not meaning to, but just by her father telling her to give her mother a drink made of pounded up box hedge."

"Non d'un nom d'un nom!" said Poirot.

"All right," said Mrs. Oliver. "You tell it your way."

"Alas, I have nothing to tell. I look for a murder and I do not find one."

"Not after Mary Restarick is ill and goes to hospital and gets better and comes back and is ill again, and if they looked they'd probably find arsenic or something hidden away by Norma somewhere."

"That is exactly what they did find."

"Well, really, M. Poirot, what more do you want?"

"I want you to pay some attention to the meaning of language. That girl said to me the same thing as she had said to my manservant, Georges. She did not say on either occasion 'I have tried to kill someone' or 'I have tried to kill my stepmother.' She spoke each time of a deed that had been done, something that had already happened. Definitely happened. In the past tense."

"I give up," said Mrs. Oliver. "You just won't believe that Norma tried to kill her stepmother."

"Yes, I believe it is perfectly possible that Norma may have tried to kill her stepmother. I think it is probably what happened—it is in accord psychologically. With her distraught frame of mind. But it is not proved. Anyone, remember, could have hidden a preparation of arsenic amongst Norma's things. It could even have been put there by the husband."

"You always seem to think that husbands are the ones who kill their wives," said Mrs. Oliver.

"A husband is usually the most likely person," said Hercule Poirot, "so one considers him first. It could have been the girl, Norma, or it could have been one of the servants, or it could have been the au pair girl, or it could have been old Sir Roderick. Or it could have been Mrs. Restarick herself."

"Nonsense. Why?"

"There could be reasons. Rather far-fetched reasons, but not beyond the bounds of belief."

"Really, Monsieur Poirot, you can't suspect everybody."

"Mais oui, that is just what I can do. I suspect everybody. First I suspect, then I look for reasons."

"And what reason would that poor foreign child have?"

"It might depend on what she is doing in that house, and what her reasons are for coming to England and a good deal more beside."

"You're really crazy."

"Or it could have been the boy David. Your Peacock."

"Much too far-fetched. David wasn't there. He's never been near the house."

"Oh yes he has. He was wandering about its corridors the day I went there."

"But not putting poison in Norma's room."

"How do you know?"

"But she and that awful boy are in love with each other."

"They appear to be so, I admit."

“You always want to make everything difficult,” complained Mrs. Oliver.

“Not at all. Things have been made difficult for me. I need information and there is only one person who can give me information. And she has disappeared.”

“You mean Norma.”

“Yes, I mean Norma.”

“But she hasn’t disappeared. We found her, you and I.”

“She walked out of that café and once more she has disappeared.”

“And you let her go?” Mrs. Oliver’s voice quivered with reproach.

“Alas!”

“You let her go? You didn’t even try to find her again?”

“I did not say I had not tried to find her.”

“But so far you have not succeeded. M. Poirot, I really am disappointed with you.”

“There is a pattern,” said Hercule Poirot almost dreamily. “Yes, there is a pattern. But because there is one factor missing, the pattern does not make sense. You see that, don’t you?”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver, whose head was aching.

Poirot continued to talk more to himself than his listener. If Mrs. Oliver could be said to be listening. She was highly indignant with Poirot and she thought to herself that the Restarick girl had been quite right and that Poirot was too old! There, she herself had found the girl for him, had telephoned him so that he might arrive in time, had gone off herself to shadow the other half of the couple. She had left the girl to Poirot, and what had Poirot done—lost her! In fact she could not really see that Poirot had done anything at all of any use at any time whatever. She was disappointed in him. When he stopped talking she would tell him so again.

Poirot was quietly and methodically outlining what he called “the pattern.”

“It interlocks. Yes, it interlocks and that is why it is difficult. One thing relates to another and then you find that it relates to something else that seems outside the pattern. But it is not outside the pattern. And so it brings more people again into a ring of suspicion. Suspicion of what? There again one does not know. We have first the girl and through all the maze of conflicting patterns I have to search the answer to the most poignant of questions. Is the girl a victim, is she in danger? Or is the girl very astute? Is the girl creating the impression she wants to create for her own purposes? It can be taken either way. I need something still. Some one sure pointer, and it is there somewhere. I am sure it is there somewhere.”

Mrs. Oliver was rummaging in her handbag.

“I can’t think why I can never find my aspirin when I want it,” she said in a vexed voice.

“We have one set of relationships that hook up. The father, the daughter, the stepmother. Their lives are interrelated. We have the elderly uncle, somewhat gaga, with whom they live. We have the girl Sonia. She is linked with the uncle. She works for him. She has pretty manners, pretty ways. He is delighted with her. He is, shall we say, a little soft about her. But what is her role in the household?”

“Wants to learn English, I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“She meets one of the members of the Herzogovinian Embassy—in Kew Gardens. She meets him there, but she does not speak to him. She leaves behind her a book and he takes it away—”

“What is all this?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Has this anything to do with the other pattern? We do not as yet know. It seems unlikely but it may not be unlikely. Had Mary Restarick unwittingly stumbled upon something which might be dangerous to the girl?”

“Don’t tell me all this has something to do with espionage or something.”

“I am not telling you. I am wondering.”

“You said yourself that old Sir Roderick was gaga.”

“It is not a question of whether he is gaga or not. He was a person of some importance during the war. Important papers passed through his hands. Important letters can have been written to him. Letters which he was at perfect liberty to have kept once they had lost their importance.”

“You’re talking of the war and that was ages ago.”

“Quite so. But the past is not always done with, because it is ages ago. New alliances are made. Public speeches are made repudiating this, denying that, telling various lies about something else. And suppose there exist still certain letters or documents that will change the picture of a certain personality. I am not telling you anything, you understand. I am only making assumptions. Assumptions such as I have known to be true in the past. It might be of the utmost importance that some letters or papers should be destroyed, or else passed to some foreign government. Who better to undertake that task than a charming young lady who assists and aids an elderly notability to collect material for his memoirs. Everyone is writing their memoirs nowadays. One cannot stop them from doing so! Suppose that the stepmother gets a little something in her food on the day that the helpful secretary plus au pair girl is doing the cooking? And suppose it is she who arranges that suspicion should fall on Norma?”

“What a mind you have,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Tortuous, that’s what I call it. I mean, all these things can’t have happened.”

“That is just it. There are too many patterns. Which is the right one? The girl Norma leaves home, goes to London. She is, as you have instructed me, a third girl sharing a flat with two other girls. There again you may have a pattern. The two girls are strangers to her. But then what do I learn? Claudia Reece-Holland is private secretary to Norma Restarick’s father. Here again we have a link. Is that mere chance? Or could there be a pattern of some kind behind it? The other girl, you tell me, acts as a model, and is acquainted with the boy you call ‘the Peacock’ with whom Norma is in love. Again a link. More links. And what is David—the Peacock—doing in all this? Is he in love with Norma? It would seem so. Her parents dislike it as is only probable and natural.”

“It’s odd about Claudia Reece-Holland being Restarick’s secretary,” said Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully. “I should judge she was unusually efficient at anything she undertook. Perhaps it was she who pushed the woman out of the window on the seventh floor.”

Poirot turned slowly towards her.

“What are you saying?” he demanded. “What are you saying?”

“Just someone in the flats—I don’t even know her name, but she fell out of a window or threw herself out of a window on the seventh floor and killed herself.”

Poirot’s voice rose high and stern.

“And you never told me?” he said accusingly.

Mrs. Oliver stared at him in surprise.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“What I mean? I ask you to tell me of a death. That is what I mean. A death. And you say there are no deaths. You can think only of an attempted poisoning. And yet here is a death. A death at—what is the name of those mansions?”

“Borodene Mansions.”

“Yes, yes. And when did it happen?”

“This suicide? Or whatever it was? I think—yes—I think it was about a week before I went there.”

"Perfect! How did you hear about it?"

"A milkman told me."

"A milkman, bon Dieu!"

"He was just being chatty," said Mrs. Oliver. "It sounded rather sad. It was in the daytime—very early in the morning, I think."

"What was her name?"

"I've no idea. I don't think he mentioned it."

"Young, middle-aged, old?"

Mrs. Oliver considered. "Well, he didn't say her exact age. Fifty-ish, I think, was what he said."

"I wonder now. Anyone the three girls knew?"

"How can I tell? Nobody has said anything about it."

"And you never thought of telling me."

"Well, really, M. Poirot, I cannot say that it has anything to do with all this. Well, I suppose it may have—but nobody seems to have said so, or thought of it."

"But yes, there is the link. There is this girl, Norma, and she lives in those flats, and one day somebody commits suicide (for that, I gather, was the general impression). That is, somebody throws herself or falls out of a seventh-floor high window and is killed. And then? Some days later this girl Norma, after having heard you talk about me at a party, comes to call upon me and she says to me that she is afraid that she may have committed a murder. Do you not see? A death—and not many days later someone who thinks she may have committed a murder. Yes, this must be the murder."

Mrs. Oliver wanted to say "Nonsense" but she did not quite dare to do so. Nevertheless, she thought it.

“This then must be the one piece of knowledge that had not yet come to me. This ought to tie up the whole thing! Yes, yes, I do not see yet how, but it must be so. I must think. That is what I must do. I must go home and think until slowly the pieces fit together—because this will be the key piece that ties them all together…Yes. At last. At last I shall see my way.”

He rose to his feet and said, “Adieu, chère Madame,” and hurried from the room. Mrs. Oliver at last relieved her feelings.

“Nonsense,” she said to the empty room. “Absolute nonsense. I wonder if four would be too many aspirins to take?”

Fifteen

At Hercule Poirot’s elbow was a tisane prepared for him by George. He sipped at it and thought. He thought in a certain way peculiar to himself. It was the technique of a man who selected thoughts as one might select pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In due course they would be reassembled together so as to make a clear and coherent picture. At the moment the important thing was the selection, the separation. He sipped his tisane, put down the cup, rested his hands on the arms of his chair and let various pieces of his puzzle come one by one into his mind. Once he recognised them all, he would select. Pieces of sky, pieces of green bank, perhaps striped pieces like those of a tiger….

The painfulness of his own feet in patent leather shoes. He started there. Walking along a road set on this path by his good friend, Mrs. Oliver. A stepmother. He saw himself with his hand on a gate. A woman who turned, a woman bending her head cutting out the weak growth of a rose, turning and looking at him? What was there for him there? Nothing. A golden head, a golden head bright as a cornfield, with twists and loops of hair slightly reminiscent of Mrs. Oliver’s own in shape. He smiled a little. But Mary Restarick’s hair was more tidily arranged than Mrs. Oliver’s ever was. A golden frame for her face that seemed just a little too large for her. He remembered that old Sir Roderick had said that she had to wear a wig, because of an illness. Sad for so young a woman. There was, when he came to think of it, something unusually heavy about her head. Far too static, too perfectly arranged. He considered Mary Restarick’s wig—if it was a wig—for he was by no means sure that he could depend on Sir Roderick. He examined the possibilities of the wig in case they should be of significance. He reviewed the conversation they had had. Had they said anything important? He thought not. He remembered the room into which they had gone. A characterless room recently inhabited in someone else’s house. Two pictures on the wall, the picture of a woman in a dove-grey dress. Thin mouth, lips set closely together. Hair that was greyish brown. The first Mrs. Restarick. She looked as though she might have been older than her husband. His picture was on the opposite wall, facing her. Good portraits, both of them. Lansberger had been a good portrait painter. His mind dwelt on the portrait of the husband. He had not seen it so well that first day, as he had later in Restarick's office….

Andrew Restarick and Claudia Reece-Holland. Was there any thing there? Was their association more than a merely secretarial one? It need not be. Here was a man who had come back to this country after years of absence, who had no near friends or relatives, who was perplexed and troubled over his daughter's character and conduct. It was probably natural enough that he should turn to his recently acquired eminently competent secretary and ask her to suggest somewhere for his daughter to live in London. It would be a favour on her part to provide that accommodation since she was looking for a Third Girl. Third girl…The phrase that he had acquired from Mrs. Oliver always seemed to be coming to his mind. As though it had a second significance which for some reason he could not see.

His manservant, George, entered the room, closing the door discreetly behind him.

"A young lady is here, sir. The young lady who came the other day."

The words came too aptly with what Poirot was thinking. He sat up in a startled fashion.

"The young lady who came at breakfast time?"

"Oh no, sir. I mean the young lady who came with Sir Roderick Horsefield."

"Ah, indeed."

Poirot raised his eyebrows. "Bring her in. Where is she?"

"I showed her into Miss Lemon's room, sir."

"Ah. Yes, bring her in."

Sonia did not wait for George to announce her. She came into the room ahead of him with a quick and rather aggressive step.

"It has been difficult for me to get away, but I have come to tell you that I did not take those papers. I did not steal anything. You understand?"

"Has anybody said that you had?" Poirot asked. "Sit down, Mademoiselle."

"I do not want to sit down. I have very little time. I just came to tell you that it is absolutely untrue. I am very honest and I do what I am told."

"I take your point. I have already taken it. Your statement is that you have not removed any papers, information, letters, documents of any kind from Sir Roderick Horsefield's house? That is so, is it not?"

"Yes, and I've come to tell you it is so. He believes me. He knows that I would not do such a thing."

"Very well then. That is a statement and I note it."

"Do you think you are going to find those papers?"

"I have other inquiries in hand," said Poirot. "Sir Roderick's papers will have to take their turn."

"He is worried. He is very worried. There is something that I cannot say to him. I will say it to you. He loses things. Things are not put away where he thinks they are. He puts them in—how do you say it—in funny places. Oh I know. You suspect me. Everyone suspects me because I am foreign. Because I come from a foreign country and so they think—they think I steal secret papers like in one of your silly English spy stories. I am not like that. I am an intellectual."

"Aha," said Poirot. "It is always nice to know." He added: "Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

"Why should I?"

"One never knows."

"What are these other cases you speak of?"

“Ah, I do not want to detain you. It is your day out, perhaps.”

“Yes. I have one day a week when I can do what I like. I can come to London. I can go to the British Museum.”

“Ah yes and to the Victoria and Albert also, no doubt.”

“That is so.”

“And to the National Gallery and see the pictures. And on a fine day you can go to Kensington Gardens, or perhaps as far as Kew Gardens.”

She stiffened…She shot him an angry questioning glance.

“Why do you say Kew Gardens?”

“Because there are some very fine plants and shrubs and trees there. Ah! you should not miss Kew Gardens. The admission fee is very small. A penny I think, or twopence. And for that you can go and see tropical trees, or you can sit on a seat and read a book.” He smiled at her disarmingly and was interested to notice that her uneasiness was increased. “But I must not detain you, Mademoiselle. You have perhaps friends to visit at one of the Embassies, maybe.”

“Why do you say that?”

“No particular reason. You are, as you say, a foreigner and it is quite possible you may have friends connected with your own Embassy here.”

“Someone has told you things. Someone has made accusations against me! I tell you he is a silly old man who mislays things. That is all! And he knows nothing of importance. He has no secret papers or documents. He never has had.”

“Ah, but you are not quite thinking of what you are saying. Time passes, you know. He was once an important man who did know important secrets.”

“You are trying to frighten me.”

“No, no. I am not being so melodramatic as that.”

“Mrs. Restarick. It is Mrs. Restarick who has been telling you things. She does not like me.”

“She has not said so to me.”

“Well, I do not like her. She is the kind of woman I mistrust. I think she has secrets.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, I think she has secrets from her husband. I think she goes up to London or to other places to meet other men. To meet at any rate one other man.”

“Indeed,” said Poirot, “that is very interesting. You think she goes to meet another man?”

“Yes, I do. She goes up to London very often and I do not think she always tells her husband, or she says it is shopping or things she has to buy. All those sort of things. He is busy in the office and he does not think of why his wife comes up. She is more in London than she is in the country. And yet she pretends to like gardening so much.”

“You have no idea who this man is whom she meets?”

“How should I know? I do not follow her. Mr. Restarick is not a suspicious man. He believes what his wife tells him. He thinks perhaps about business all the time. And, too, I think he is worried about his daughter.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “he is certainly worried about his daughter. How much do you know about the daughter? How well do you know her?”

“I do not know her very well. If you ask what I think—well, I tell you! I think she is mad.”

“You think she is mad? Why?”

“She says odd things sometimes. She sees things that are not there.”

“Sees things that are not there?”

“People that are not there. Sometimes she is very excited and other times she seems as though she is in a dream. You speak to her and she does not hear what you say to her. She does not answer. I think there are people who she would like to have dead.”

“You mean Mrs. Restarick?”

“And her father. She looks at him as though she hates him.”

“Because they are both trying to prevent her marrying a young man of her choice?”

“Yes. They do not want that to happen. They are quite right, of course, but it makes her angry. Someday,” added Sonia, nodding her head cheerfully, “I think she will kill herself. I hope she will do nothing so foolish, but that is the thing one does when one is much in love.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Well—I go now.”

“Just tell me one thing. Does Mrs. Restarick wear a wig?”

“A wig? How should I know?” She considered for a moment. “She might, yes,” she admitted. “It is useful for travelling. Also it is fashionable. I wear a wig myself sometimes. A green one! Or I did.” She added again, “I go now,” and went.

Sixteen

“Today I have much to do,” Hercule Poirot announced as he rose from the breakfast table next morning and joined Miss Lemon. “Inquiries to make. You have made the necessary researches for me, the appointments, the necessary contacts?”

“Certainly,” said Miss Lemon. “It is all here.” She handed him a small briefcase. Poirot took a quick glance at its contents and nodded his head.

“I can always rely on you, Miss Lemon,” he said. “C’est fantastique.”

“Really, Monsieur Poirot, I cannot see anything fantastic about it. You gave me instructions and I carried them out. Naturally.”

“Pah, it is not so natural as that,” said Poirot. “Do I not give instructions often to the gas men, the electricians, the man who comes to repair things, and do they always carry out my instructions? Very, very seldom.”

He went into the hall.

“My slightly heavier overcoat, Georges. I think the autumn chill is setting in.”

He popped his head back in his secretary’s room. “By the way, what did you think of that young woman who came yesterday?”

Miss Lemon, arrested as she was about to plunge her fingers on the typewriter, said briefly, “Foreign.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Obviously foreign.”

“You do not think anything more about her than that?”

Miss Lemon considered. “I had no means of judging her capability in any way.” She added rather doubtfully, “She seemed upset about something.”

“Yes. She is suspected, you see, of stealing! Not money, but papers, from her employer.”

“Dear, dear,” said Miss Lemon. “Important papers?”

“It seems highly probable. It is equally probable though, that he has not lost anything at all.”

“Oh well,” said Miss Lemon, giving her employer a special look that she always gave and which announced that she wished to get rid of him so that she could get on with proper fervour with her work. “Well, I always say that it’s better to know where you are when you are employing someone, and buy British.”

Hercule Poirot went out. His first visit was to Borodene Mansions. He took a taxi. Alighting at the courtyard he cast his eyes around. A uniformed porter was standing in one of the doorways, whistling a somewhat doleful melody. As Poirot advanced upon him, he said:

“Yes, sir?”

“I wondered,” said Poirot, “if you can tell me anything about a very sad occurrence that took place here recently.”

“Sad occurrence?” said the porter. “Nothing that I know of.”

“A lady who threw herself, or shall we say fell from one of the upper storeys, and was killed.”

“Oh, that. I don’t know anything about that because I’ve only been here a week, you see. Hi, Joe.”

A porter emerging from the opposite side of the block came over.

“You’d know about the lady as fell from the seventh. About a month ago, was it?”

“Not quite as much as that,” said Joe. He was an elderly, slow-speaking man. “Nasty business it was.”

“She was killed instantly?”

“Yes.”

“What was her name? It may, you understand, have been a relative of mine,” Poirot explained. He was not a man who had any scruples about departing from the truth.

“Indeed, sir. Very sorry to hear it. She was a Mrs. Charpentier.”

“She had been in the flat some time?”

“Well, let me see now. About a year—a year and a half perhaps. No, I think it must have been about two years. No. 76, seventh floor.”

“That is the top floor?”

“Yes, sir. A Mrs. Charpentier.”

Poirot did not press for any other descriptive information since he might be presumed to know such things about his own relative. Instead he asked:

“Did it cause much excitement, much questioning? What time of day was it?”

“Five or six o’clock in the morning, I think. No warning or anything. Just down she came. In spite of being so early we got a crowd almost at once, pushing through the railing over there. You know what people are.”

“And the police, of course.”

“Oh yes, the police came quite quickly. And a doctor and an ambulance. All the usual,” said the porter rather in the weary tone of one who had had people throwing themselves out of a seventh-storey window once or twice every month.

“And I suppose people came down from the flats when they heard what had happened.”

“Oh, there wasn’t so many coming from the flats because for one thing with the noise of traffic and everything around here most of them didn’t know about it. Someone or other said she gave a bit of a scream as she came down, but not so that it caused any real commotion. It was only people in the street, passing by, who saw it happen. And then, of course, they craned their necks over the railings, and other people saw them craning, and joined them. You know what an accident is!”

Poirot assured him he knew what an accident was.

“She lived alone?” he said, making it only half a question.

“That’s right.”

“But she had friends, I suppose, among the other flat dwellers?”

Joe shrugged and shook his head. “May have done. I couldn’t say. Never saw her in the restaurant much with any of our lot. She had outside friends to dinner here sometimes. No, I wouldn’t say she was specially pally with anybody here. You’d do best,” said Joe, getting slightly restive, “to go and have a chat with Mr. McFarlane who’s in charge here if you want to know about her.”

“Ah, I thank you. Yes, that is what I mean to do.”

“His office is in that block over there, sir. On the ground floor. You’ll see it marked up on the door.”

Poirot went as directed. He detached from his briefcase the top letter with which Miss Lemon had supplied him, and which was marked “Mr. McFarlane.” Mr. McFarlane turned out to be a good-looking, shrewd-looking man of about forty-five. Poirot handed him the letter. He opened and read it.

“Ah yes,” he said, “I see.”

He laid it down on the desk and looked at Poirot.

“The owners have instructed me to give you all the help I can about the sad death of Mrs. Louise Charpentier. Now what do you want to know exactly, Monsieur”—he glanced at the letter again—“Monsieur Poirot?”

“This is, of course, all quite confidential,” said Poirot. “Her relatives have been communicated with by the police and by a solicitor, but they were anxious, as I was coming to England, that I should get a few more personal facts, if you understand me. It is distressing when one can get only official reports.”

“Yes, quite so. Yes, I quite understand that it must be. Well, I’ll tell you anything I can.”

“How long had she been here and how did she come to take the flat?”

“She’d been here—I can look it up exactly—about two years. There was a vacant tenancy and I imagine that the lady who was leaving, being an acquaintance of hers, told her in advance that she was giving it up. That was a Mrs. Wilder. Worked for the BBC. Had been in London for some time, but was going to Canada. Very nice lady—I don’t think she knew the deceased well at all. Just happened to mention she was giving up the flat. Mrs. Charpentier liked the flat.”

“You found her a suitable tenant?” There was a very faint hesitation before Mr. McFarlane answered:

“She was a satisfactory tenant, yes.”

“You need not mind telling me,” said Hercule Poirot. “There were wild parties, eh? A little too—shall we say—gay in her entertaining?”

Mr. McFarlane stopped being so discreet.

“There were a few complaints from time to time, but mostly from elderly people.”

Hercule Poirot made a significant gesture.

"A bit too fond of the bottle, yes, sir—and in with quite a gay lot. It made for a bit of trouble now and again."

"And she was fond of the gentlemen?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to go as far as that."

"No, no, but one understands."

"Of course she wasn't so young."

"Appearances are very often deceptive. How old would you have said she was?"

"It's difficult to say. Forty—forty-five." He added, "Her health wasn't good, you know."

"So I understand."

"She drank too much—no doubt about it. And then she'd get very depressed. Nervous about herself. Always going to doctors, I believe, and not believing what they told her. Ladies do get it into their heads—especially about that time of life—she thought that she had cancer. Was quite sure of it. The doctor reassured her but she didn't believe him. He said at the inquest that there was nothing really wrong with her. Oh well, one hears of things like that every day. She got all worked up and one fine day—" he nodded.

"It is very sad," said Poirot. "Did she have any special friends among the residents of the flats?"

"Not that I know of. This place, you see, isn't what I call the matey kind. They're mostly people in business, in jobs."

"I was thinking possibly of Miss Claudia Reece-Holland. I wondered if they had known each other."

"Miss Reece-Holland? No, I don't think so. Oh I mean they were probably acquaintances, talked when they went up in the lift together, that sort of thing. But I don't think there was much social contact of any kind. You see, they would be in a different generation. I mean—" Mr. McFarlane seemed a little flustered. Poirot wondered why.

He said, "One of the other girls who share Miss Holland's flat knew Mrs. Charpentier, I believe—Miss Norma Restarick."

"Did she? I wouldn't know—she's only come here quite recently, I hardly know her by sight. Rather a frightened-looking young lady. Not long out of school, I'd say." He added, "Is there anything more I can do for you, sir?"

"No, thank you. You've been most kind. I wonder if possibly I could see the flat. Just in order to be able to say—" Poirot paused, not particularising what he wanted to be able to say.

"Well, now, let me see. A Mr. Travers has got it now. He's in the City all day. Yes, come up with me if you like, sir."

They went up to the seventh floor. As Mr. McFarlane introduced his key one of the numbers fell from the door and narrowly avoided Poirot's patent leather shoe. He hopped nimbly and then bent to pick it up. He replaced the spike which fixed it on the door very carefully.

"These numbers are loose," he said.

"I'm very sorry, sir. I'll make a note of it. Yes, they wear loose from time to time. Well, here we are."

Poirot went into the living room. At the moment it had little personality. The walls were papered with a paper resembling grained wood. It had conventional comfortable furniture, the only personal touch was a television set and a certain number of books.

"All the flats are partly furnished, you see," said Mr. McFarlane. "The tenants don't need to bring anything of their own, unless they want to. We cater very largely for people who come and go."

"And the decorations are all the same?"

“Not entirely. People seem to like this raw wood effect. Good background for pictures. The only things that are different are on the one wall facing the door. We have a whole set of frescoes which people can choose from.

“We have a set of ten,” said Mr. McFarlane with some pride. “There is the Japanese one—very artistic, don’t you think?—and there is an English garden one; a very striking one of birds; one of trees, a Harlequin one, a rather interesting abstract effect—lines and cubes, in vividly contrasting colours, that sort of thing. They’re all designs by good artists. Our furniture is all the same. Two choices of colours, or of course people can add what they like of their own. But they don’t usually bother.”

“Most of them are not, as you might say, homemakers,” Poirot suggested.

“No, rather the bird of passage type, or busy people who want solid comfort, good plumbing and all that but aren’t particularly interested in decoration, though we’ve had one or two of the do-it-yourself type, which isn’t really satisfactory from our point of view. We’ve had to put a clause in the lease saying they’ve got to put things back as they found them—or pay for that being done.”

They seemed to be getting rather far away from the subject of Mrs. Charpentier’s death. Poirot approached the window.

“It was from here?” he murmured delicately.

“Yes. That’s the window. The left-hand one. It has a balcony.”

Poirot looked out down below.

“Seven floors,” he said. “A long way.”

“Yes, death was instantaneous, I am glad to say. Of course, it might have been an accident.”

Poirot shook his head.

“You cannot seriously suggest that, Mr. McFarlane. It must have been deliberate.”

“Well, one always likes to suggest an easier possibility. She wasn’t a happy woman, I’m afraid.”

“Thank you,” said Poirot, “for your great courtesy. I shall be able to give her relations in France a very clear picture.”

His own picture of what had occurred was not as clear as he would have liked. So far there had been nothing to support his theory that the death of Louise Charpentier had been important. He repeated the Christian name thoughtfully. Louise…Why had the name Louise some haunting memory about it? He shook his head. He thanked Mr. McFarlane and left.

Seventeen

Chief Inspector Neele was sitting behind his desk looking very official and formal. He greeted Poirot politely and motioned him to a chair. As soon as the young man who had introduced Poirot to the presence had left, Chief Inspector Neele's manner changed.

"And what are you after now, you secretive old devil?" he said.

"As to that," said Poirot, "you already know."

"Oh yes, I've rustled up some stuff but I don't think there's much for you from that particular hole."

"Why call it a hole?"

"Because you're so exactly like a good mouser. A cat sitting over a hole waiting for the mouse to come out. Well, if you ask me, there isn't any mouse in this particular hole. Mind you, I don't say that you couldn't unearth some dubious transactions. You know these financiers. I daresay there's a lot of hoky-poky business, and all that, about minerals and concessions and oil and all those things. But Joshua Restarick Ltd. has got a good reputation. Family business—or used to be—but you can't call it that now. Simon Restarick hadn't any children, and his brother Andrew Restarick only has this daughter. There was an old aunt on the mother's side. Andrew Restarick's daughter lived with her after she left school and her own mother died. The aunt died of a stroke about six months ago. Mildly potty, I believe—belonged to a few rather peculiar religious societies. No harm in them. Simon Restarick was a perfectly plain type of shrewd businessman, and had a social wife. They were married rather late in life."

"And Andrew?"

"Andrew seems to have suffered from wanderlust. Nothing known against him. Never stayed anywhere long, wandered about South Africa, South

America, Kenya and a good many other places. His brother pressed him to come back more than once, but he wasn't having any. He didn't like London or business, but he seems to have had the Restarick family flair for making money. He went after mineral deposits, things like that. He wasn't an elephant hunter or an archaeologist or a plant man or any of those things. All his deals were business deals and they always turned out well."

"So he also in his way is conventional?"

"Yes, that about covers it. I don't know what made him come back to England after his brother died. Possibly a new wife—he's married again. Good-looking woman a good deal younger than he is. At the moment they're living with old Sir Roderick Horsefield whose sister had married Andrew Restarick's uncle. But I imagine that's only temporary. Is any of this news to you? Or do you know it all already?"

"I've heard most of it," said Poirot. "Is there any insanity in the family on either side?"

"Shouldn't think so, apart from old Auntie and her fancy religions. And that's not unusual in a woman who lives alone."

"So all you can tell me really is that there is a lot of money," said Poirot.

"Lots of money," said Chief Inspector Neele. "And all quite respectable. Some of it, mark you, Andrew Restarick brought into the firm. South African concessions, mines, mineral deposits. I'd say that by the time these were developed, or placed on the market, there'd be a very large sum of money indeed."

"And who will inherit it?" said Poirot.

"That depends on how Andrew Restarick leaves it. It's up to him, but I'd say that there's no one obvious, except his wife and his daughter."

"So they both stand to inherit a very large amount of money one day?"

“I should say so. I expect there are a good many family trusts and things like that. All the usual City gambits.”

“There is, for instance, no other woman in whom he might be interested?”

“Nothing known of such a thing. I shouldn’t think it likely. He’s got a good-looking new wife.”

“A young man,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “could easily learn all this?”

“You mean and marry the daughter? There’s nothing to stop him, even if she was made a ward of Court or something like that. Of course her father could then disinherit her if he wanted to.”

Poirot looked down at a neatly written list in his hand.

“What about the Wedderburn Gallery?”

“I wondered how you’d got onto that. Were you consulted by a client about a forgery?”

“Do they deal in forgeries?”

“People don’t deal in forgeries,” said Chief Inspector Neele reprovingly. “There was a rather unpleasant business. A millionaire from Texas over here buying pictures, and paying incredible sums for them. They sold him a Renoir and a Van Gogh. The Renoir was a small head of a girl and there was some query about it. There seemed no reason to believe that the Wedderburn Gallery had not bought it in the first place in all good faith. There was a case about it. A great many art experts came and gave their verdicts. In fact, as usual, in the end they all seemed to contradict each other. The gallery offered to take it back in any case. However, the millionaire didn’t change his mind, since the latest fashionable expert swore that it was perfectly genuine. So he stuck to it. All the same there’s been a bit of suspicion hanging round the gallery ever since.”

Poirot looked again at his list.

“And what about Mr. David Baker? Have you looked him up for me?”

“Oh, he’s one of the usual mob. Riffraff—go about in gangs and break up nightclubs. Live on purple hearts—heroin—Coke—Girls go mad about them. He’s the kind they moan over saying his life has been so hard and he’s such a wonderful genius. His painting is not appreciated. Nothing but good old sex, if you ask me.”

Poirot consulted his list again.

“Do you know anything about Mr. Reece-Holland, MP?”

“Doing quite well, politically. Got the gift of the gab all right. One or two slightly peculiar transactions in the City, but he’s wriggled out of them quite neatly. I’d say he was a slippery one. He’s made quite a good deal of money off and on by rather doubtful means.”

Poirot came to his last point.

“What about Sir Roderick Horsefield?”

“Nice old boy but gaga. What a nose you have, Poirot, get it into everything, don’t you? Yes, there’s been a lot of trouble in the Special Branch. It’s this craze for memoirs. Nobody knows what indiscreet revelations are going to be made next. All the old boys, service and otherwise, are racing hard to bring out their own particular brand of what they remember of the indiscretions of others! Usually it doesn’t much matter, but sometimes—well, you know, Cabinets change their policies and you don’t want to afront someone’s susceptibilities or give the wrong publicity, so we have to try and muffle the old boys. Some of them are not too easy. But you’ll have to go to the Special Branch if you want to nose into any of that. I shouldn’t think there was much wrong. The trouble is they don’t destroy the papers they should. They keep the lot. However, I don’t think there is much in that, but we have evidence that a certain Power is nosing around.”

Poirot gave a deep sigh.

“Haven’t I helped?” asked the Chief Inspector.

“I am very glad to get the real lowdown from official quarters. But no, I don’t think there is much help in what you have told me.” He sighed and then said, “What would be your opinion if someone said to you casually that a woman—a young attractive woman—wore a wig?”

“Nothing in that,” said Chief Inspector Neele, and added, with a slight asperity, “my wife wears a wig when we’re travelling anytime. It saves a lot of trouble.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Hercule Poirot.

As the two men bade each other good-bye, the Chief Inspector asked:

“You got all the dope, I suppose, on that suicide case you were asking about in the flats? I had it sent round to you.”

“Yes, thank you. The official facts, at least. A bare record.”

“There was something you were talking about just now that brought it back to my mind. I’ll think of it in a moment. It was the usual, rather sad story. Gay woman, fond of men, enough money to live upon, no particular worries, drank too much and went down the hill. And then she gets what I call the health bug. You know, they’re convinced they have cancer or something in that line. They consult a doctor and he tells them they’re all right, and they go home and don’t believe him. If you ask me it’s usually because they find they’re no longer as attractive as they used to be to men. That’s what’s really depressing them. Yes, it happens all the time. They’re lonely, I suppose, poor devils. Mrs. Charpentier was just one of them. I don’t suppose that any—” he stopped. “Oh yes, of course, I remember. You were asking about one of our MPs, Reece-Holland. He’s a fairly gay one himself in a discreet way. Anyway, Louise Charpentier was his mistress at one time. That’s all.”

“Was it a serious liaison?”

“Oh I shouldn’t say so particularly. They went to some rather questionable clubs together and things like that. You know, we keep a discreet eye on things of that kind. But there was never anything in the Press about them. Nothing of that kind."

"I see."

"But it lasted for a certain time. They were seen together, off and on, for about six months, but I don't think she was the only one and I don't think he was the only one either. So you can't make anything of that, can you?"

"I do not think so," said Poirot.

"But all the same," he said to himself as he went down the stairs, "all the same, it is a link. It explains the embarrassment of Mr. McFarlane. It is a link, a tiny link, a link between Emlyn Reece-Holland, MP, and Louise Charpentier." It didn't mean anything probably. Why should it? But yet—"I know too much," said Poirot angrily to himself. "I know too much. I know a little about everything and everyone but I cannot get my pattern. Half these facts are irrelevant. I want a pattern. A pattern. My kingdom for a pattern," he said aloud.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the lift boy, turning a startled head.

"It is nothing," said Poirot.

Eighteen

Poirot paused at the doorway of the Wedderburn Gallery to inspect a picture which depicted three aggressive-looking cows with vastly elongated bodies overshadowed by a colossal and complicated design of windmills. The two seemed to have nothing to do with each other or the very curious purple colouring.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” said a soft purring voice.

A middle-aged man, who at first sight seemed to have shown a smile which exhibited an almost excessive number of beautiful white teeth, was at his elbow.

“Such freshness.”

He had large white plump hands which he waved as though he was using them in an arabesque.

“Clever exhibition. Closed last week. Claude Raphael show opened the day before yesterday. It’s going to do well. Very well indeed.”

“Ah,” said Poirot and was led through grey velvet curtains into a long room.

Poirot made a few cautious if doubtful remarks. The plump man took him in hand in a practised manner. Here was someone, he obviously felt, who must not be frightened away. He was a very experienced man in the art of salesmanship. You felt at once that you were welcome to be in his gallery all day if you liked without making a purchase. Sheerly, solely looking at these delightful pictures—though when you entered the gallery you might not have thought that they were delightful. But by the time you went out you were convinced that delightful was exactly the word to describe them. After receiving some useful artistic instruction, and making a few of the amateur’s stock remarks such as “I rather like that one,” Mr. Boscombe responded encouragingly by some such phrase as:

"Now that's very interesting that you should say that. It shows, if I may say so, great perspicacity. Of course you know it isn't the ordinary reaction. Most people prefer something—well, shall I say slightly obvious like that"—he pointed to a blue and green striped effect arranged in one corner of the canvas—"but this, yes, you've spotted the quality of the thing. I'd say myself—of course it's only my personal opinion—that that's one of Raphael's masterpieces."

Poirot and he looked together with both their heads on one side at an orange lopsided diamond with two human eyes depending from it by what looked like a spidery thread. Pleasant relations established and time obviously being infinite, Poirot remarked:

"I think a Miss Frances Cary works for you, does she not?"

"Ah yes. Frances. Clever girl that. Very artistic and very competent too. Just come back from Portugal where she's been arranging an art show for us. Very successful. Quite a good artist herself, but not I should say really creative, if you understand me. She is better on the business side. I think she recognises that herself."

"I understand that she is a good patron of the arts?"

"Oh yes. She's interested in Les Jeunes. Encourages talent, persuaded me to give a show for a little group of young artists last spring. It was quite successful—the Press noticed it—all in a small way, you understand. Yes, she has her protégés."

"I am, you understand, somewhat old-fashioned. Some of these young men—vraiment!" Poirot's hands went up.

"Ah," said Mr. Boscombe indulgently, "you mustn't go by their appearances. It's just a fashion, you know. Beards and jeans or brocades and hair. Just a passing phase."

"David someone," said Poirot. "I forget his last name. Miss Cary seemed to think highly of him."

“Sure you don’t mean Peter Cardiff? He’s her present protégé. Mind you, I’m not quite so sure about him as she is. He’s really not so much avant-garde as he is—well, positively reactionary. Quite—quite—Burne-Jones sometimes! Still, one never knows. You do get these reactions. She acts as his model occasionally.”

“David Baker—that was the name I was trying to remember,” said Poirot.

“He is not bad,” said Mr. Boscombe, without enthusiasm. “Not much originality, in my opinion. He was one of the group of artists I mentioned, but he didn’t make any particular impression. A good painter, mind, but not striking. Derivative!”

Poirot went home. Miss Lemon presented him with letters to sign, and departed with them duly signed. George served him with an omellette fines herbes garnished, as you might say, with a discreetly sympathetic manner. After lunch, as Poirot was setting himself in his square-backed armchair with his coffee at his elbow, the telephone rang.

“Mrs. Oliver, sir,” said George, lifting the telephone and placing it at his elbow.

Poirot picked up the receiver reluctantly. He did not want to talk to Mrs. Oliver. He felt that she would urge upon him something which he did not want to do.

“M. Poirot?”

“C’est moi.”

“Well, what are you doing? What have you done?”

“I am sitting in this chair,” said Poirot. “Thinking,” he added.

“Is that all?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“It is the important thing,” said Poirot. “Whether I shall have success in it or not I do not know.”

“But you must find that girl. She’s probably been kidnapped.”

“It would certainly seem so,” said Poirot. “And I have a letter here which came by the midday post from her father, urging me to come and see him and tell him what progress I have made.”

“Well, what progress have you made?”

“At the moment,” said Poirot reluctantly, “none.”

“Really, M. Poirot, you really must take a grip on yourself.”

“You, too!”

“What do you mean, me too?”

“Urging me on.”

“Why don’t you go down to that place in Chelsea, where I was hit on the head?”

“And get myself hit on the head also?”

“I simply don’t understand you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I gave you a clue by finding the girl in the café. You said so.”

“I know, I know.”

“What about that woman who threw herself out of a window? Haven’t you got anything out of that?”

“I have made inquiries, yes.”

“Well?”

“Nothing. The woman is one of many. They are attractive when young, they have affairs, they are passionate, they have still more affairs, they get less attractive, they are unhappy and drink too much, they think they have cancer or some fatal disease and so at last in despair and loneliness they throw themselves out of a window!"

"You said her death was important—that it meant something."

"It ought to have done."

"Really!" At a loss for further comment, Mrs. Oliver rang off.

Poirot leant back in his armchair, as far as he could lean back since it was of an upright nature, waved to George to remove the coffee pot and also the telephone and proceeded to reflect upon what he did or did not know. To clarify his thoughts he spoke out loud. He recalled three philosophic questions.

"What do I know? What can I hope? What ought I to do?"

He was not sure that he got them in the right order or indeed if they were quite the right questions, but he reflected upon them.

"Perhaps I am too old," said Hercule Poirot, at the bottom depths of despair. "What do I know?"

Upon reflection he thought that he knew too much! He laid that question aside for the moment.

"What can I hope?" Well, one could always hope. He could hope that those excellent brains of his, so much better than anybody else's, would come up sooner or later with an answer to a problem which he felt uneasily that he did not really understand.

"What ought I to do?" Well, that was very definite. What he ought to do was to go and call upon Mr. Andrew Restarick who was obviously distraught about his daughter, and who would no doubt blame Poirot for not having by now delivered the daughter in person. Poirot could understand that, and sympathised with his point of view, but disliked having to present himself in such a very unfavourable light. The only other thing he could do was to telephone to a certain number and ask what developments there had been.

But before he did that, he would go back to the question he had laid aside.

“What do I know?”

He knew that the Wedderburn Gallery was under suspicion—so far it had kept on the right side of the law, but it would not hesitate at swindling ignorant millionaires by selling them dubious pictures.

He recalled Mr. Boscombe with his plump white hands and his plentiful teeth, and decided that he did not like him. He was the kind of man who was almost certainly up to dirty work, though he would no doubt protect himself remarkably well. That was a fact that might come into use because it might connect up with David Baker. Then there was David Baker himself, the Peacock. What did he know about him? He had met him, he had conversed with him, and he had formed certain opinions about him. He would do a crooked deal of any kind for money, he would marry a rich heiress for her money and not for love, he might perhaps be bought off. Yes, he probably could be bought off. Andrew Restarick certainly believed so and he was probably right. Unless—

He considered Andrew Restarick, thinking more of the picture on the wall hanging above him than of the man himself. He remembered the strong features, the jutting out chin, the air of resolution, of decision. Then he thought of Mrs. Andrew Restarick, deceased. The bitter lines of her mouth…Perhaps he would go down to Crosshedges again and look at that portrait, so as to see it more clearly because there might be a clue to Norma in that. Norma—no, he must not think of Norma yet. What else was there?

There was Mary Restarick whom the girl Sonia said must have a lover because she went up to London so often. He considered that point but he did not think that Sonia was right. He thought Mrs. Restarick was much more likely to go to London in order to look at possible properties to buy, luxury flats, houses in Mayfair, decorators, all the things that money in the metropolis could buy.

Money…It seemed to him that all the points that had been passing through his mind came to this in the end. Money. The importance of money. There was a great deal of money in this case. Somehow, in some way that was not obvious, money counted. Money played its part. So far there had been nothing to justify his belief that the tragic death of Mrs. Charpentier had been the work of Norma. No sign of evidence, no motive; yet it seemed to him that there was an undeniable link. The girl had said that she “might have committed a murder.” A death had taken place only a day or two previously. A death that had occurred in the building where she lived. Surely it would be too much of a coincidence that that death should not be connected in any way? He thought again of the mysterious illness which had affected Mary Restarick. An occurrence so simple as to be classic in its outline. A poison case where the poisoner was—must be—one of the household. Had Mary Restarick poisoned herself, had her husband tried to poison her, had the girl Sonia administered poison? Or had Norma been the culprit? Everything pointed, Hercule Poirot had to confess, to Norma as being the logical person.

“Tout de même,” said Poirot, “since I cannot find anything, et bien then the logic falls out of the window.”

He sighed, rose to his feet and told George to fetch him a taxi. He must keep his appointment with Andrew Restarick.

Nineteen

Claudia Reece-Holland was not in the office today. Instead, a middle-aged woman received Poirot. She said that Mr. Restarick was waiting for him and ushered him into Restarick's room.

"Well?" Restarick hardly waited until he had come through the door. "Well, what about my daughter?"

Poirot spread out his hands.

"As yet—nothing."

"But look here, man, there must be something—some clue. A girl can't just disappear into thin air."

"Girls have done it before now and will do it again."

"Did you understand that no expense was to be spared, none whatever? I—I can't go on like this."

He seemed completely on edge by this time. He looked thinner and his red-rimmed eyes spoke of sleepless nights.

"I know what your anxiety must be, but I assure you that I have done everything possible to trace her. These things, alas, cannot be hurried."

"She may have lost her memory or—or she may—I mean, she might be sick. Ill."

Poirot thought he knew what the broken form of the sentence meant. Restarick had been about to say "she may perhaps be dead."

He sat down on the other side of the desk and said:

"Believe me, I appreciate your anxiety and I have to say to you once again that the results would be a lot quicker if you consulted the police."

“No!” The word broke out explosively.

“They have greater facilities, more lines of inquiry. I assure you it is not only a question of money. Money cannot give you the same result as a highly efficient organisation can do.”

“Man, it’s no use your talking in that soothing way. Norma is my daughter. My only daughter, the only flesh and blood I’ve got.”

“Are you sure that you have told me everything—everything possible—about your daughter?”

“What more can I tell you?”

“That is for you to say, not me. Have there been, for instance, any incidents in the past?”

“Such as? What do you mean, man?”

“Any definite history of mental instability.”

“You think that—that—”

“How do I know? How can I know?”

“And how do I know?” said Restarick, suddenly bitter. “What do I know of her? All these years. Grace was a bitter woman. A woman who did not easily forgive or forget. Sometimes I feel—I feel that she was the wrong person to have brought Norma up.”

He got up, walked up and down the room and then sat down again.

“Of course I shouldn’t have left my wife. I know that. I left her to bring up the child. But then at the time I suppose I made excuses for myself. Grace was a woman of excellent character devoted to Norma. A thoroughly good guardian for her. But was she? Was she really? Some of the letters Grace wrote to me were as though they breathed anger and revenge. Well, I suppose that’s natural enough. But I was away all those years. I should have come back, come back more often and found out how the child was getting on. I suppose I had a bad conscience. Oh, it’s no good making excuses now.”

He turned his head sharply.

“Yes. I did think when I saw her again that Norma’s whole attitude was neurotic, indisciplined. I hoped she and Mary would—would get on better after a little while but I have to admit that I don’t feel the girl was entirely normal. I felt it would be better for her to have a job in London and come home for weekends, but not to be forced into Mary’s company the whole time. Oh, I suppose I’ve made a mess of everything. But where is she, M. Poirot? Where is she? Do you think she may have lost her memory? One hears of such things.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that is a possibility. In her state, she may be wandering about quite unaware of who she is. Or she may have had an accident. That is less likely. I can assure you that I have made all inquiries in hospitals and other places.”

“You don’t think she is—you don’t think she’s dead?”

“She would be easier to find dead than alive, I can assure you. Please calm yourself, Mr. Restarick. Remember she may have friends of whom you know nothing. Friends in any part of England, friends whom she has known while living with her mother, or with her aunt, or friends who were friends of school friends of hers. All these things take time to sort out. It may be—you must prepare yourself—that she is with a boyfriend of some kind.”

“David Baker? If I thought that—”

“She is not with David Baker. That,” said Poirot dryly, “I ascertained first of all.”

“How do I know what friends she has?” He sighed. “If I find her, when I find her—I’d rather put it that way—I’m going to take her out of all this.”

“Out of all what?”

"Out of this country. I have been miserable, M. Poirot, miserable ever since I returned here. I always hated City life. The boring round of office routine, continual consultations with lawyers and financiers. The life I liked was always the same. Travelling, moving about from place to place, going to wild and inaccessible places. That's the life for me. I should never have left it. I should have sent for Norma to come out to me and, as I say, when I find her that's what I'm going to do. Already I'm being approached with various takeover bids. Well, they can have the whole caboodle on very advantageous terms. I'll take the cash and go back to a country that means something, that's real."

"Aha! And what will your wife say to that?"

"Mary? She's used to that life. That's where she comes from."

"To les femmes with plenty of money," said Poirot, "London can be very attractive."

"She'll see it my way."

The telephone rang on his desk. He picked it up.

"Yes? Oh. From Manchester? Yes. If it's Claudia Reece-Holland, put her through."

He waited a minute.

"Hallo, Claudia. Yes. Speak up—it's a very bad line, I can't hear you. They agreed?…Ah, pity…No, I think you did very well…Right…All right then. Take the evening train back. We'll discuss it further tomorrow morning."

He replaced the telephone on its rest.

"That's a competent girl," he said.

"Miss Reece-Holland?"

"Yes. Unusually competent. Takes a lot of bother off my shoulders. I gave her pretty well carte blanche to put through this deal in Manchester on her own terms. I really felt I couldn’t concentrate. And she’s done exceedingly well. She’s as good as a man in some ways.”

He looked at Poirot, suddenly bringing himself back to the present.

“Ah yes, M. Poirot. Well, I’m afraid I’ve rather lost my grip. Do you need more money for expenses?”

“No, Monsieur. I assure you that I will do my utmost to restore your daughter sound and well. I have taken all possible precautions for her safety.”

He went out through the outer office. When he reached the street he looked up at the sky.

“A definite answer to one question,” he said, “that is what I need.”

Twenty

Hercule Poirot looked up at the façade of the dignified Georgian house in what had been until recently a quiet street in an old-fashioned market town. Progress was rapidly overtaking it, but the new supermarket, the Gifte Shoppe, Margery’s Boutique, Peg’s Café, and a palatial new bank, had all chosen sites in Croft Road and not encroached on the narrow High Street.

The brass knocker on the door was brightly polished, Poirot noted with approval. He pressed the bell at the side.

It was opened almost at once by a tall distinguished-looking woman with upswept grey hair and an energetic manner.

“M. Poirot? You are very punctual. Come in.”

“Miss Battersby?”

“Certainly.” She held back the door. Poirot entered. She deposited his hat on the hall stand and led the way to a pleasant room overlooking a narrow walled garden.

She waved towards a chair and sat down herself in an attitude of expectation. It was clear that Miss Battersby was not one to lose time in conventional utterances.

“You are, I think, the former Principal of Meadowfield School?”

“Yes. I retired a year ago. I understand you wished to see me on the subject of Norma Restarick, a former pupil.”

“That is right.”

“In your letters,” said Miss Battersby, “you gave me no further details.” She added, “I may say that I know who you are, M. Poirot. I should therefore like a little more information before I proceed further. Are you, for instance, thinking of employing Norma Restarick?”

“That is not my intention, no.”

“Knowing what your profession is you understand why I should want further details. Have you, for instance, an introduction to me from any of Norma’s relations?”

“Again, no,” said Hercule Poirot. “I will explain myself further.”

“Thank you.”

“In actual fact, I am employed by Miss Restarick’s father, Andrew Restarick.”

“Ah. He has recently returned to England, I believe, after many years’ absence.”

“That is so.”

“But you do not bring me a letter of introduction from him?”

“I did not ask him for one.”

Miss Battersby looked at him inquiringly.

“He might have insisted on coming with me,” said Hercule Poirot. “That would have hampered me in asking you the questions that I wish to ask, because it is likely that the answers to them might cause him pain and distress. There is no reason why he should be caused further distress than he is already suffering at this moment.”

“Has anything happened to Norma?”

“I hope not…There is, however, a possibility of that. You remember the girl, Miss Battersby?”

“I remember all my pupils. I have an excellent memory. Meadowfield, in any case, is not a very large school. Two hundred girls, no more.”

“Why have you resigned from it, Miss Battersby?”

"Really, M. Poirot, I cannot see that that is any of your business."

"No, I am merely expressing my quite natural curiosity."

"I am seventy. Is that not a reason?"

"Not in your case, I should say. You appear to me to be in full vigour and energy, fully capable of continuing your headmistressship for a good many years to come."

"Times change, M. Poirot. One does not always like the way they are changing. I will satisfy your curiosity. I found I was having less and less patience with parents. Their aims for their daughters are shortsighted and quite frankly stupid."

Miss Battersby was, as Poirot knew from looking up her qualifications, a very well-known mathematician.

"Do not think that I lead an idle life," said Miss Battersby. "I lead a life where the work is far more congenial to me. I coach senior students. And now, please, may I know the reason for your interest in the girl, Norma Restarick?"

"There is some occasion for anxiety. She has, to put it baldly, disappeared."

Miss Battersby continued to look quite unconcerned.

"Indeed? When you say 'disappeared,' I presume you mean that she has left home without telling her parents where she was going. Oh, I believe her mother is dead, so without telling her father where she was going. That is really not at all uncommon nowadays, M. Poirot. Mr. Restarick has not consulted the police?"

"He is adamant on that subject. He refuses definitely."

"I can assure you that I have no knowledge as to where the girl is. I have heard nothing from her. Indeed, I have had no news from her since she left Meadowfield. So I fear I cannot help you in any way."

"It is not precisely that kind of information that I want. I want to know what kind of a girl she is—how you would describe her. Not her personal appearance. I do not mean that. I mean as to her personality and characteristics."

"Norma, at school, was a perfectly ordinary girl. Not scholastically brilliant, but her work was adequate."

"Not a neurotic type?"

Miss Battersby considered. Then she said slowly: "No, I would not say so. Not more, that is, than might be expected considering her home circumstances."

"You mean her invalid mother?"

"Yes. She came from a broken home. The father, to whom I think she was very devoted, left home suddenly with another woman—a fact which her mother quite naturally resented. She probably upset her daughter more than she need have done by voicing her resentment without restraint."

"Perhaps it may be more to the point if I ask you your opinion of the late Mrs. Restarick?"

"What you are asking me for is my private opinion?"

"If you do not object?"

"No, I have no hesitation at all in answering your question. Home conditions are very important in a girl's life and I have always studied them as much as I can through the meagre information that comes to me. Mrs. Restarick was a worthy and upright woman, I should say. Self-righteous, censorious and handicapped in life by being an extremely stupid one!"

"Ah," said Poirot appreciatively.

"She was also, I would say, a malade imaginaire. A type that would exaggerate her ailments. The type of woman who is always in and out of nursing homes. An unfortunate home background for a girl—especially a girl who has no very definite personality of her own. Norma had no marked intellectual ambitions, she had no confidence in herself, she was not a girl to whom I would recommend a career. A nice ordinary job followed by marriage and children was what I would have hoped for her."

"You saw—forgive me for asking—no signs at any time of mental instability?"

"Mental instability?" said Miss Battersby. "Rubbish!"

"So that is what you say. Rubbish! And not neurotic?"

"Any girl, or almost any girl, can be neurotic, especially in adolescence, and in her first encounters with the world. She is still immature, and needs guidance in her first encounters with sex. Girls are frequently attracted to completely unsuitable, sometimes even dangerous young men. There are, it seems, no parents nowadays, or hardly any, with the strength of character to save them from this, so they often go through a time of hysterical misery, and perhaps make an unsuitable marriage which ends not long after in divorce."

"But Norma showed no signs of mental instability?" Poirot persisted with the question.

"She is an emotional but normal girl," said Miss Battersby. "Mental instability! As I said before—rubbish! She's probably run away with some young man to get married, and there's nothing more normal than that!"

Twenty-one

Poirot sat in his big square armchair. His hands rested on the arms, his eyes looked at the chimneypiece in front of him without seeing it. By his elbow was a small table and on it, neatly clipped together, were various documents. Reports from Mr. Goby, information obtained from his friend, Chief Inspector Neele, a series of separate pages under the heading of “Hearsay, gossip, rumour” and the sources from which it had been obtained.

At the moment he had no need to consult these documents. He had, in fact, read them through carefully and laid them there in case there was any particular point he wished to refer to once more. He wanted now to assemble together in his mind all that he knew and had learned because he was convinced that these things must form a pattern. There must be a pattern there. He was considering now, from what exact angle to approach it. He was not one to trust in enthusiasm for some particular intuition. He was not an intuitive person—but he did have feelings. The important thing was not the feelings themselves—but what might have caused them. It was the cause that was interesting, the cause was so often not what you thought it was. You had very often to work it out by logic, by sense and by knowledge.

What did he feel about this case—what kind of a case was it? Let him start from the general, then proceed to the particular. What were the salient facts of this case?

Money was one of them, he thought, though he did not know how. Somehow or other, money…He also thought, increasingly so, that there was evil somewhere. He knew evil. He had met it before. He knew the tang of it, the taste of it, the way it went. The trouble was that here he did not yet know exactly where it was. He had taken certain steps to combat evil. He hoped they would be sufficient. Something was happening, something was in progress, that was not yet accomplished. Someone, somewhere, was in danger.

The trouble was that the facts pointed both ways. If the person he thought was in danger was really in danger, there seemed so far as he could see no reason why. Why should that particular person be in danger? There was no motive. If the person he thought was in danger was not in danger, then the whole approach might have to be completely reversed…Everything that pointed one way he must turn round and look at from the complete opposite point of view.

He left that for the moment in the balance, and he came from there to the personalities—to the people. What pattern did they make? What part were they playing?

First—Andrew Restarick. He had accumulated by now a fair amount of information about Andrew Restarick. A general picture of his life before and after going abroad. A restless man, never sticking to one place or purpose long, but generally liked. Nothing of the wastrel about him, nothing shoddy or tricky. Not, perhaps, a strong personality? Weak in many ways?

Poirot frowned, dissatisfied. That picture did not somehow fit the Andrew Restarick that he himself had met. Not weak surely, with that thrust-out chin, the steady eyes, the air of resolution. He had been a successful businessman, too, apparently. Good at his job in the earlier years, and he had put through good deals in South Africa and in South America. He had increased his holdings. It was a success story that he had brought home with him, not one of failure. How then could he be a weak personality? Weak, perhaps, only where women were concerned. He had made a mistake in his marriage—married the wrong woman…Pushed into it perhaps by his family? And then he had met the other woman. Just that one woman? Or had there been several women? It was hard to find a record of that kind after so many years. Certainly he had not been a notoriously unfaithful husband. He had had a normal home, he had been fond, by all accounts, of his small daughter. But then he had come across a woman whom he had cared for enough to leave his home and to leave his country. It had been a real love affair.

But had it, perhaps, matched up with any additional motive? Dislike of office work, the City, the daily routine of London? He thought it might. It matched the pattern. He seemed, too, to have been a solitary type. Everyone had liked him both here and abroad, but there seemed no intimate friends. Indeed, it would have been difficult for him to have intimate friends abroad because he had never stopped in any one spot long enough. He had plunged into some gamble, attempted a coup, had made good, then tired of the thing and gone on somewhere else. Nomadic! A wanderer.

It still did not quite accord with his own picture of the man…A picture? The word stirred in his mind the memory of the picture that hung in Restarick’s office, on the wall behind his desk. It had been a portrait of the same man fifteen years ago. How much difference had those fifteen years made in the man sitting there? Surprisingly little, on the whole! More grey in the hair, a heavier set to the shoulders, but the lines of character on the face were much the same. A determined face. A man who knew what he wanted, who meant to get it. A man who would take risks. A man with a certain ruthlessness.

Why, he wondered, had Restarick brought that picture up to London? They had been companion portraits of a husband and wife. Strictly speaking artistically, they should have remained together. Would a psychologist have said that subconsciously Restarick wanted to dissociate himself from his former wife once more, to separate himself from her? Was he then mentally still retreating from her personality although she was dead? An interesting point….

The pictures had presumably come out of storage with various other family articles of furnishing. Mary Restarick had no doubt selected certain personal objects to supplement the furniture of Crosshedges for which Sir Roderick had made room. He wondered whether Mary Restarick, the new wife, had liked hanging up that particular pair of portraits. More natural, perhaps, if she had put the first wife’s portrait in an attic! But then he reflected that she would probably not have had an attic to stow away unwanted objects at Crosshedges. Presumably Sir Roderick had made room for a few family things whilst the returned couple were looking about for a suitable house in London. So it had not mattered much, and it would have been easier to hang both portraits. Besides, Mary Restarick seemed a sensible type of woman—not a jealous or emotional type.

"Tout de même," thought Hercule Poirot to himself, "les femmes, they are all capable of jealousy, and sometimes the one you would consider the least likely!"

His thoughts passed to Mary Restarick, and he considered her in turn. It struck him that what was really odd was that he had so few thoughts about her! He had seen her only the once, and she had, somehow or other, not made much impression on him. A certain efficiency, he thought, and also a certain—how could he put it?—artificiality? ("But there, my friend," said Hercule Poirot, again in parenthesis, "there you are considering her wig!")

It was absurd really that one should know so little about a woman. A woman who was efficient and who wore a wig, and who was good-looking, and who was sensible, and who could feel anger. Yes, she had been angry when she had found the Peacock Boy wandering uninvited in her house. She had displayed it sharply and unmistakably. And the boy—he had seemed what? Amused, no more. But she had been angry, very angry at finding him there. Well, that was natural enough. He would not be any mother's choice for her daughter—

Poirot stopped short in his thoughts, shaking his head vexedly. Mary Restarick was not Norma's mother. Not for her the agony, the apprehension about a daughter making an unsuitable unhappy marriage, or announcing an illegitimate baby with an unsuitable father! What did Mary feel about Norma? Presumably, to begin with, that she was a thoroughly tiresome girl—who had picked up with a young man who was going to be obviously a source of worry and annoyance to Andrew Restarick. But after that? What had she thought and felt about a stepdaughter who was apparently deliberately trying to poison her?

Her attitude seemed to have been the sensible one. She had wanted to get Norma out of the house, herself out of danger; and to cooperate with her husband in suppressing any scandal about what had happened. Norma came down for an occasional weekend to keep up appearances, but her life henceforward was bound to centre in London. Even when the Restaricks moved into the house they were looking for, they would not suggest Norma living with them. Most girls, nowadays, lived away from their families. So that problem had been settled.

Except that, for Poirot, the question of who had administered poison to Mary Restarick was very far from settled. Restarick himself believed it was his daughter—

But Poirot wondered….

His mind played with the possibilities of the girl Sonia. What was she doing in that house? Why had she come there? She had Sir Roderick eating out of her hand all right—perhaps she had no wish to go back to her own country? Possibly her designs were purely matrimonial—old men of Sir Roderick's age married pretty young girls every day of the week. In the worldly sense, Sonia could do very well for herself. A secure social position, and widowhood to look forward to with a settled and sufficient income—or were her aims quite different? Had she gone to Kew Gardens with Sir Roderick's missing papers tucked between the pages of a book?

Had Mary Restarick become suspicious of her—of her activities, of her loyalties, of where she went on her days off, and of whom she met? And had Sonia, then, administered the substances which, in cumulative small doses, would arouse no suspicion of anything but ordinary gastroenteritis?

For the time being, he put the household at Crosshedges out of his mind.

He came, as Norma had come, to London, and proceeded to the consideration of three girls who shared a flat.

Claudia Reece-Holland, Frances Cary, Norma Restarick. Claudia Reece-Holland, daughter of a well-known Member of Parliament, well-off, capable, well-trained, good-looking, a first-class secretary. Frances Cary, a country solicitor's daughter, artistic, had been to drama school for a short time, then to the Slade, chucked that also, occasionally worked for the Arts Council, now employed by an art gallery. Earned a good salary, was artistic and had bohemian associations. She knew the young man, David Baker, though not apparently more than casually. Perhaps she was in love with him? He was the kind of young man, Poirot thought, disliked generally by parents, members of the Establishment and also the police. Where the attraction lay for wellborn girls Poirot failed to see. But one had to acknowledge it as a fact. What did he himself think of David?

A good-looking boy with the impudent and slightly amused air whom he had first seen in the upper storeys of Crosshedges, doing an errand for Norma (or reconnoitring on his own, who should say?). He had seen him again when he gave him a lift in his car. A young man of personality, giving indeed an impression of ability in what he chose to do. And yet there was clearly an unsatisfactory side to him. Poirot picked up one of the papers on the table by his side and studied it. A bad record though not positively criminal. Small frauds on garages, hooliganism, smashing up things, on probation twice. All those things were the fashion of the day. They did not come under Poirot's category of evil. He had been a promising painter, but had chucked it. He was the kind that did no steady work. He was vain, proud, a peacock in love with his own appearance. Was he anything more than that? Poirot wondered.

He stretched out an arm and picked up a sheet of paper on which was scribbled down the rough heads of the conversation held between Norma and David in the café—that is, as well as Mrs. Oliver could remember them. And how well was that, Poirot thought? He shook his head doubtfully. One never knew quite at what point Mrs. Oliver's imagination would take over! Did the boy care for Norma, really want to marry her? There was no doubt about her feelings for him. He had suggested marrying her. Had Norma got money of her own? She was the daughter of a rich man, but that was not the same thing. Poirot made an exclamation of vexation. He had forgotten to inquire the terms of the late Mrs. Restarick's will. He flipped through the sheets of notes. No, Mr. Goby had not neglected this obvious need. Mrs. Restarick apparently had been well provided for by her husband during her lifetime. She had had, apparently, a small income of her own amounting perhaps to a thousand a year. She had left everything she possessed to her daughter. It would hardly amount, Poirot thought, to a motive for marriage. Probably, as his only child, she would inherit a lot of money at her father's death but that was not at all the same thing. Her father might leave her very little indeed if he disliked the man she had married.

He would say then, that David did care for her, since he was willing to marry her. And yet—Poirot shook his head. It was about the fifth time he had shaken it. All these things did not tie up, they did not make a satisfactory pattern. He remembered Restarick's desk, and the cheque he had been writing—apparently to buy off the young man—and the young man, apparently, was quite willing to be bought off! So that again did not tally. The cheque had certainly been made out to David Baker and it was for a very large—really a preposterous—sum. It was a sum that might have tempted any impecunious young man of bad character. And yet he had suggested marriage to her only a day before. That, of course, might have been just a move in the game—a move to raise the price he was asking. Poirot remembered Restarick sitting there, his lips hard. He must care a great deal for his daughter to be willing to pay so high a sum; and he must have been afraid too that the girl herself was quite determined to marry him.

From thoughts of Restarick, he went on to Claudia. Claudia and Andrew Restarick. Was it chance, sheer chance, that she had come to be his secretary? There might be a link between them. Claudia. He considered her. Three girls in a flat, Claudia Reece-Holland's flat. She had been the one who had taken the flat originally, and shared it first with a friend, a girl she already knew, and then with another girl, the third girl. The third girl, thought Poirot. Yes, it always came back to that. The third girl. And that is where he had come in the end. Where he had had to come. Where all this thinking out of patterns had led. To Norma Restarick.

A girl who had come to consult him as he sat at breakfast. A girl whom he had joined at a table in a café where she had recently been eating baked beans with the young man she loved. (He always seemed to see her at mealtimes, he noted!) And what did he think about her? First, what did other people think about her? Restarick cared for her and was desperately anxious about her, desperately frightened for her. He not only suspected—he was quite sure, apparently, that she had tried to poison his recently married wife. He had consulted a doctor about her. Poirot felt he would like dearly to talk to that doctor himself, but he doubted if he would get anywhere. Doctors were very chary of parting with medical information to anyone but a duly accredited person such as the parents. But Poirot could imagine fairly well what the doctor had said. He had been cautious, Poirot thought, as doctors are apt to be. He'd hemmed and hawed and spoken perhaps of medical treatment. He had not stressed too positively a mental angle, but had certainly suggested it or hinted at it. In fact, the doctor probably was privately sure that that was what had happened. But he also knew a good deal about hysterical girls, and that they sometimes did things that were not really the result of mental causes, but merely of temper, jealousy, emotion, and hysteria. He would not be a psychiatrist himself nor a neurologist. He would be a GP who took no risks of making accusations about which he could not be sure, but suggested certain things out of caution. A job somewhere or other—a job in London, later perhaps treatment from a specialist?

What did anyone else think of Norma Restarick? Claudia Reece-Holland? He didn't know. Certainly not from the little that he knew about her. She was capable of hiding any secret, she would certainly let nothing escape her which she did not mean to let escape. She had shown no signs of wanting to turn the girl out—which she might have done if she had been afraid of her mental condition. There could not have been much discussion between her and Frances on the subject since the other girl had so innocently let escape the fact that Norma had not returned to them after her weekend at home. Claudia had been annoyed about that. It was possible that Claudia was more in the pattern than she appeared. She had brains, Poirot thought, and efficiency…He came back to Norma, came back once again to the third girl. What was her place in the pattern? The place that would pull the whole thing together. Ophelia, he thought? But there were two opinions to that, just as there were two opinions about Norma. Was Ophelia mad or was she pretending madness? Actresses had been variously divided as to how the part should be played—or perhaps, he should say, producers. They were the ones who had the ideas. Was Hamlet mad or sane? Take your choice. Was Ophelia mad or sane?

Restarick would not have used the word “mad” even in his thoughts about his daughter. Mentally disturbed was the term that everyone preferred to use. The other word that had been used of Norma had been “batty.” “She's a bit batty.” “Not quite all there.” “A bit wanting, if you know what I mean.” Were “daily women” good judges? Poirot thought they might be. There was something odd about Norma, certainly, but she might be odd in a different way to what she seemed. He remembered the picture she had made slouching into his room, a girl of today, the modern type looking just as so many other girls looked. Limp hair hanging on her shoulders, the characterless dress, a skimpy look about the knees—all to his old-fashioned eyes looking like an adult girl pretending to be a child.

"I'm sorry, you are too old."

Perhaps it was true. He'd looked at her through the eyes of someone old, without admiration, to him just a girl without apparently will to please, without coquetry. A girl without any sense of her own femininity—no charm or mystery or enticement, who had nothing to offer, perhaps, but plain biological sex. So it may be that she was right in her condemnation of him. He could not help her because he did not understand her, because it was not even possible for him to appreciate her. He had done his best for her, but what had that meant up to date? What had he done for her since that one moment of appeal? And in his thoughts the answer came quickly. He had kept her safe. That at least. If, indeed, she needed keeping safe. That was where the whole point lay. Did she need keeping safe? That preposterous confession! Really, not so much a confession as an announcement: "I think I may have committed a murder."

Hold on to that, because that was the crux of the whole thing. That was his métier. To deal with murder, to clear up murder, to prevent murder! To be the good dog who hunts down murder. Murder announced. Murder somewhere. He had looked for it and had not found it. The pattern of arsenic in the soup? A pattern of young hooligans stabbing each other with knifes? The ridiculous and sinister phrase, bloodstains in the courtyard. A shot fired from a revolver. At whom, and why?

It was not as it ought to be, a form of crime that would fit with the words she had said: "I may have committed a murder." He had stumbled on in the dark, trying to see a pattern of crime, trying to see where the third girl fitted into that pattern, and coming back always to the same urgent need to know what this girl was really like.

And then with a casual phrase, Ariadne Oliver had, as he thought, shown him the light. The supposed suicide of a woman at Borodene Mansions. That would fit. It was where the third girl had her living quarters. It must be the murder that she had meant. Another murder committed about the same time would have been too much of a coincidence! Besides there was no sign or trace of any other murder that had been committed about then. No other death that could have sent her hotfoot to consult him, after listening at a party to the lavish admiration of his own achievements which his friend, Mrs. Oliver, had given to the world. And so, when Mrs. Oliver had informed him in a casual manner of the woman who had thrown herself out of the window, it had seemed to him that at last he had got what he had been looking for.

Here was the clue. The answer to his perplexity. Here he would find what he needed. The why, the when, the where.

“Quelle déception,” said Hercule Poirot, out loud.

He stretched out his hand, and sorted out the neatly typed résumé of a woman’s life. The bald facts of Mrs. Charpentier’s existence. A woman of forty-three of good social position, reported to have been a wild girl—two marriages—two divorces—a woman who liked men. A woman who of late years had drunk more than was good for her. A woman who liked parties. A woman who was now reported to go about with men a good many years younger than herself. Living in a flat alone in Borodene Mansions, Poirot could understand and feel the sort of woman she was, and had been, and he could see why such a woman might wish to throw herself out of a high window one early morning when she awoke to despair.

Because she had cancer or thought she had cancer? But at the inquest, the medical evidence had said very definitely that that was not so.

What he wanted was some kind of a link with Norma Restarick. He could not find it. He read through the dry facts again.

Identification had been supplied at the inquest by a solicitor. Louise Carpenter, though she had used a Frenchified form of her surname—Charpentier. Because it went better with her Christian name? Louise? Why was the name Louise familiar? Some casual mention?—a phrase?—his fingers riffled neatly through typewritten pages. Ah! there it was! Just that one reference. The girl for whom Andrew Restarick had left his wife had been a girl named Louise Birell. Someone who had proved to be of little significance in Restarick’s later life. They had quarrelled and parted after about a year. The same pattern, Poirot thought. The same thing obtaining that had probably obtained all through this particular woman's life. To love a man violently, to break up his home, perhaps, to live with him, and then quarrel with him and leave him. He felt sure, absolutely sure, that this Louise Charpentier was the same Louise.

Even so, how did it tie up with the girl Norma? Had Restarick and Louise Charpentier come together again when he returned to England? Poirot doubted it. Their lives had parted years ago. That they had by any chance come together again seemed unlikely to the point of impossibility! It had been a brief and in reality unimportant infatuation. His present wife would hardly be jealous enough of her husband's past to wish to push his former mistress out of a window. Ridiculous! The only person so far as he could see who might have been the type to harbour a grudge over many long years, and wish to execute revenge upon the woman who had broken up her home, might have been the first Mrs. Restarick. And that sounded wildly impossible also, and anyway, the first Mrs. Restarick was dead!

The telephone rang. Poirot did not move. At this particular moment he did not want to be disturbed. He had a feeling of being on a trail of some kind…He wanted to pursue it…The telephone stopped. Good. Miss Lemon would be coping with it.

The door opened and Miss Lemon entered.

"Mrs. Oliver wants to speak to you," she said.

Poirot waved a hand. "Not now, not now, I pray you! I cannot speak to her now."

"She says there is something that she has just thought of—something she forgot to tell you. About a piece of paper—an unfinished letter, which seems to have fallen out of a blotter in a desk in a furniture van. A rather incoherent story," added Miss Lemon, allowing a note of disapproval to enter her voice.

Poirot waved more frantically.

“Not now,” he urged. “I beg of you, not now.”

“I will tell her you are busy.”

Miss Lemon retreated.

Peace descended once more upon the room. Poirot felt waves of fatigue creeping over him. Too much thinking. One must relax. Yes, one must relax. One must let tension go—in relaxation the pattern would come. He closed his eyes. There were all the components there. He was sure of that now, there was nothing more he could learn from outside. It must come from inside.

And quite suddenly—just as his eyelids were relaxing in sleep—it came.…

It was all there—waiting for him! He would have to work it all out. But he knew now. All the bits were there, disconnected bits and pieces, all fitting in. A wig, a picture, 5 a.m., women and their hairdos, the Peacock Boy—all leading to the phrase with which it had begun:

Third Girl…

“I may have committed a murder…” Of course!

A ridiculous nursery rhyme came into his mind. He repeated it aloud.

Rub a dub dub, three men in a tub

And who do you think they be?

A butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker….

Too bad, he couldn’t remember the last line. A baker, yes, and in a far-fetched way, a butcher—He tried out a feminine parody:

Pat a cake, pat, three girls in a flat

And who do you think they be?

A Personal Aide and a girl from the Slade

And the Third is a—

Miss Lemon came in.

“Ah—I remember now—‘And they all came out of a weenie POTATO.’”

Miss Lemon looked at him in anxiety.

“Dr. Stillingfleet insists on speaking to you at once. He says it is urgent.”

“Tell Dr. Stillingfleet he can—Dr. Stillingfleet, did you say?”

He pushed past her, caught up the receiver. “I am here. Poirot speaking! Something has happened?”

“She’s walked out on me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. She’s walked out. Walked out through the front gate.”

“You let her go?”

“What else could I do?”

“You could have stopped her.”

“No.”

“To let her go was madness.”

“No.”

“You don’t understand.”

“That was the arrangement. Free to go at any time.”

“You don’t understand what may be involved.”

"All right then, I don't. But I know what I'm doing. And if I don't let her go, all the work I've done on her would go for nothing. And I have worked on her. Your job and my job aren't the same. We're not out for the same thing. I tell you I was getting somewhere. Getting somewhere, so that I was quite sure she wouldn't walk out on me."

"Ah yes. And then, mon ami, she did."

"Frankly, I can't understand it. I can't see why the setback came."

"Something happened."

"Yes, but what?"

"Somebody she saw, somebody who spoke to her, somebody who found out where she was."

"I don't see how that could have happened…But what you don't seem to see is that she's a free agent. She had to be a free agent."

"Somebody got at her. Somebody found out where she was. Did she get a letter, a telegram, a telephone call?"

"No, nothing of that kind. That I am quite sure of."

"Then how—of course! Newspapers. You have newspapers, I suppose, in that establishment of yours?"

"Certainly. Normal everyday life, that's what I stand for in my place of business."

"Then that is how they got at her. Normal, everyday life. What papers do you take?"

"Five." He named the five.

"When did she go?"

"This morning. Half past ten."

“Exactly. After she read the papers. That is good enough to start on. Which paper did she usually read?”

“I don’t think she had any special choice. Sometimes one, sometimes another, sometimes the whole lot of them—sometimes only glanced at them.”

“Well, I must not waste time talking.”

“You think she saw an advertisement. Something of that kind?”

“What other explanation can there be? Good-bye, I can say no more now. I have to search. Search for the possible advertisement and then get on quickly.”

He replaced the receiver.

“Miss Lemon, bring me our two papers. The Morning News and the Daily Comet. Send Georges out for all the others.”

As he opened out the papers to the Personal advertisements and went carefully down them, he followed his line of thought.

He would be in time. He must be in time…There had been one murder already. There would be another one to come. But he, Hercule Poirot, would prevent that…If he was in time…He was Hercule Poirot—the avenger of the innocent. Did he not say (and people laughed when he said it), “I do not approve of murder.” They had thought it an understatement. But it was not an understatement. It was a simple statement of fact without melodrama. He did not approve of murder.

George came in with a sheaf of newspapers.

“There are all this morning’s, sir.”

Poirot looked at Miss Lemon, who was standing by waiting to be efficient.

“Look through the ones that I have searched in case I have missed anything.”

“The Personal column, you mean?”

“Yes. I thought there would be the name David perhaps. A girl’s name. Some pet name or nickname. They would not use Norma. An appeal for help, perhaps, or to a meeting.”

Miss Lemon took the papers obediently with some distaste. This was not her kind of efficiency, but for the moment he had no other job to give her. He himself spread out the Morning Chronicle. That was the biggest field to search. Three columns of it. He bent over the open sheet.

A lady who wanted to dispose of her fur coat…Passengers wanted for a car trip abroad…Lovely period house for sale…Paying guests…Backward children…Homemade chocolates…“Julia. Shall never forget. Always yours.” That was more the kind of thing. He considered it, but passed on. Louis XVth furniture…Middle-aged lady to help run a hotel…“In desperate trouble. Must see you. Come to flat 4:30 without fail. Our code Goliath.”

He heard the doorbell ring just as he called out: “Georges, a taxi,” slipped on his overcoat, and went into the hall just as George was opening the front door and colliding with Mrs. Oliver. All three of them struggled to disentangle themselves in the narrow hall.

Twenty-two

I

Frances Cary, carrying her overnight bag, walked down Mandeville Road, chattering with the friend she had just met on the corner, towards the bulk of Borodene Mansions.

“Really, Frances, it’s like living in a prison block, that building. Wormwood Scrubs or something.”

“Nonsense, Eileen. I tell you, they’re frightfully comfortable, these flats. I’m very lucky and Claudia is a splendid person to share with—never bothers you. And she’s got a wonderful daily. The flat’s really very nicely run.”

“Are there just the two of you? I forget. I thought you had a third girl?”

“Oh, well, she seems to have walked out on us.”

“You mean she doesn’t pay her rent?”

“Oh, I think the rent’s all right. I think she’s probably having some affair with a boyfriend.”

Eileen lost interest. Boyfriends were too much a matter of course.

“Where are you coming back from now?”

“Manchester. Private view was on. Great success.”

“Are you really going to Vienna next month?”

“Yes, I think so. It’s pretty well fixed up by now. Rather fun.”

“Wouldn’t it be awful if some of the pictures got stolen?”

"Oh, they're all insured," said Frances. "All the really valuable ones, anyway."

"How did your friend Peter's show go?"

"Not terribly well, I'm afraid. But there was quite a good review by the critic of The Artist, and that counts a lot."

Frances turned into Borodene Mansions, and her friend went on her way to her own small mews house farther down the road. Frances said "Good evening" to the porter, and went up in the lift to the sixth floor. She walked along the passage, humming a little tune to herself.

She inserted her key in the door of the flat. The light in the hall was not on yet. Claudia was not due back from the office for another hour and a half. But in the sitting room, the door of which was ajar, the light was on.

Frances said aloud: "Light's on. That's funny."

She slipped out of her coat, dropped her overnight bag, pushed the sitting room door farther open and went in….

Then she stopped dead. Her mouth opened and then shut. She stiffened all over—her eyes staring at the prone figure on the floor; then they rose slowly to the mirror on the wall that reflected back at her her own horror-stricken face….

Then she drew a deep breath. The momentary paralysis over, she flung back her head and screamed. Stumbling over her bag on the hall floor and kicking it aside, she ran out of the flat and along the passage and beat frenziedly at the door of the next flat.

An elderly woman opened it.

"What on earth—"

"There's someone dead—someone dead. And I think it's someone I know… David Baker. He's lying there on the floor…I think he's stabbed…he must have been stabbed. There's blood—blood everywhere."

She began to sob hysterically. Miss Jacobs shoved a glass into her hand. “Stay there and drink it.”

Frances sipped obediently. Miss Jacobs went rapidly out of the door along the passage and through the open door from which the light was pouring out. The living room door was wide open and Miss Jacobs went straight through it.

She was not the kind of woman who screams. She stood just within the doorway, her lips pursed hard together.

What she was looking at had a nightmarish quality. On the floor lay a handsome young man, his arms flung wide, his chestnut hair falling on his shoulders. He wore a crimson velvet coat, and his white shirt was dappled with blood….

She was aware with a start that there was a second figure with her in the room. A girl was standing pressed back against the wall, the great Harlequin above seeming to be leaping across the painted sky.

The girl had a white woollen shift dress on, and her pale brown hair hung limp on either side of her face. In her hand she was holding a kitchen knife.

Miss Jacobs stared at her and she stared back at Miss Jacobs.

Then she said in a quiet reflective voice, as though she was answering what someone had said to her:

“Yes, I’ve killed him…The blood got on my hands from the knife…I went into the bathroom to wash it off—but you can’t really wash things like that off, can you? And then I came back in here to see if it was really true…But it is…Poor David…But I suppose I had to do it.”

Shock forced unlikely words from Miss Jacobs. As she said them, she thought how ridiculous they sounded!

“Indeed? Why did you have to do anything of the kind?”

"I don't know…At least—I suppose I do—really. He was in great trouble. He sent for me—and I came…But I wanted to be free of him. I wanted to get away from him. I didn't really love him."

She laid the knife carefully on the table and sat down on a chair.

"It isn't safe, is it?" she said. "To hate anyone…It isn't safe because you never know what you might do…Like Louise…."

Then she said quietly, "Hadn't you better ring up the police?"

Obediently, Miss Jacobs dialled 999.

II

There were six people now in the room with the Harlequin on the wall. A long time had passed. The police had come and gone.

Andrew Restarick sat like a man stunned. Once or twice he said the same words. "I can't believe it…" Telephoned for, he had come from his office, and Claudia Reece-Holland had come with him. In her quiet way, she had been ceaselessly efficient. She had put through telephone calls to lawyers, had rung Crosshedges and two firms of estate agents to try and get in touch with Mary Restarick. She had given Frances Cary a sedative and sent her to lie down.

Hercule Poirot and Mrs. Oliver sat side by side on a sofa. They had arrived together at the same time as the police.

Last of all to arrive, when nearly everyone else had gone, had been a quiet man with grey hair and a gentle manner, Chief Inspector Neele of Scotland Yard, who had greeted Poirot with a slight nod, and been introduced to Andrew Restarick. A tall red-haired young man was standing by the window staring down into the courtyard.

What were they all waiting for? Mrs. Oliver wondered. The body had been removed, the photographers and other police officers had done their work, they themselves, after being herded into Claudia's bedroom, had been readmitted into the sitting room, where they had been waiting, she supposed, for the Scotland Yard man to arrive.

“If you want me to go,” Mrs. Oliver said to him uncertainly—

“Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, aren’t you? No, if you have no objection, I’d rather you remained. I know it hasn’t been pleasant—”

“It didn’t seem real.”

Mrs. Oliver shut her eyes—seeing the whole thing again. The Peacock Boy, so picturesquely dead that he had seemed like a stage figure. And the girl—the girl had been different—not the uncertain Norma from Crosshedges—the unattractive Ophelia, as Poirot had called her—but some quiet figure of tragic dignity—accepting her doom.

Poirot had asked if he might make two telephone calls. One had been to Scotland Yard, and that had been agreed to, after the sergeant had made a preliminary suspicious inquiry on the phone. The sergeant had directed Poirot to the extension in Claudia’s bedroom, and he had made his call from there, closing the door behind him.

The sergeant had continued to look doubtful, murmuring to his subordinate, “They say it’s all right. Wonder who he is? Odd-looking little bloke.”

“Foreign, isn’t he? Might be Special Branch?”

“Don’t think so. It was Chief Inspector Neele he wanted.”

His assistant raised his eyebrows and suppressed a whistle.

After making his calls, Poirot had reopened the door and beckoned Mrs. Oliver from where she was standing uncertainly inside the kitchen, to join him. They had sat down side by side on Claudia Reece-Holland’s bed.

“I wish we could do something,” said Mrs. Oliver—always one for action.

“Patience, chère Madame.”

"Surely you can do something?"

"I have. I have rung up the people it is necessary to ring up. We can do nothing here until the police have finished their preliminary investigations."

"Who did you ring up after the inspector man? Her father? Couldn't he come and bail her out or something?"

"Bail is not likely to be granted where murder is concerned," said Poirot dryly. "The police have already notified her father. They got his number from Miss Cary."

"Where is she?"

"Having hysterics in the flat of a Miss Jacobs next door, I understand. She was the one who discovered the body. It seems to have upset her. She rushed out of here screaming."

"She's the arty one, isn't she? Claudia would have kept her head."

"I agree with you. A very—poised young woman."

"Who did you ring up, then?"

"First, as perhaps you heard, Chief Inspector Neele of Scotland Yard."

"Will this lot like his coming and meddling?"

"He is not coming to meddle. He has of late been making certain inquiries for me, which may throw light on this matter."

"Oh—I see…Who else did you ring up?"

"Dr. John Stillingfleet."

"Who's he? To say that poor Norma is potty and can't help killing people?"

"His qualifications would entitle him to give evidence to that effect in court if necessary."

"Does he know anything about her?"

"A good deal, I should say. She has been in his care since the day you found her in the Shamrock café."

"Who sent her there?"

Poirot smiled. "I did. I made certain arrangements by telephone before I came to join you at the café."

"What? All the time I was so disappointed in you and kept urging you to do something—you had done something? And you never told me! Really, Poirot! Not a word! How could you be so—so mean."

"Do not enrage yourself, Madame, I beg. What I did, I did for the best."

"People always say that when they have done something particularly maddening. What else did you do?"

"I arranged that my services should be retained by her father, so that I could make the necessary arrangements for her safety."

"Meaning this Doctor Stillingwater?"

"Stilling fleet. Yes."

"How on earth did you manage that? I shouldn't have thought for a moment that you would be the kind of person that her father would choose to make all these arrangements. He looks the kind of man who would be very suspicious of foreigners."

"I forced myself upon him—as a conjurer forces a card. I called upon him, purporting to have received a letter from him asking me to do so."

"And did he believe you?"

"Naturally. I showed the letter to him. It was typed on his office stationery and signed with his name—though as he pointed out to me, the handwriting was not his."

“Do you mean you had actually written that letter yourself?”

“Yes. I judged correctly that it would awaken his curiosity, and that he would want to see me. Having got so far, I trusted to my own talents.”

“You told him what you were going to do about this Dr. Stillingfleet?”

“No. I told no one. There was danger, you see.”

“Danger to Norma?”

“To Norma, or Norma was dangerous to someone else. From the very beginning there have always been the two possibilities. The facts could be interpreted in either way. The attempted poisoning of Mrs. Restarick was not convincing—it was delayed too long, it was not a serious attempt to kill. Then there was an indeterminate story of a revolver shot fired here in Borodene Mansions—and another tale of flick-knives and bloodstains. Every time these things happen, Norma knows nothing about them, cannot remember, etcetera. She finds arsenic in a drawer—but does not remember putting it there. Claims to have had lapses of memory, to have lost long periods of time when she does not remember what she had been doing. So one has to ask oneself—is what she says true, or did she, for some reason of her own, invent it? Is she a potential victim of some monstrous and perhaps crazy plot—or is it she herself who is the moving spirit? Is she painting a picture of herself as a girl suffering from mental instability, or has she murder in mind, with a defence of diminished responsibility?”

“She was different today,” said Mrs. Oliver slowly. “Did you notice? Quite different. Not—not scatty any longer.”

Poirot nodded.

“Not Ophelia—Iphigeneia.”

A sound of added commotion outside in the flat diverted the attention of both of them.

“Do you think—” Mrs. Oliver stopped. Poirot had gone to the window and was looking down to the courtyard far below. An ambulance was drawn up there.

“Are they going to take It away?” asked Mrs. Oliver in a shaky voice. And then added in a sudden rush of pity: “Poor Peacock.”

“He was hardly a likeable character,” said Poirot coldly.

“He was very decorative…And so young,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“That is sufficient for les femmes.” Poirot was opening the bedroom door a careful crack, as he peered out.

“Excuse me,” he said, “if I leave you for a moment.”

“Where are you going?” demanded Mrs. Oliver suspiciously.

“I understood that that was not a question considered delicate in this country,” said Poirot reproachfully.

“Oh, I beg your pardon.

“And that’s not the way to the loo,” she breathed sotto voce after him, as she too applied an eye to the crack of the door.

She went back to the window to observe what was going on below.

“Mr. Restarick has just driven up in a taxi,” she observed when Poirot slipped back quietly into the room a few minutes later, “and Claudia has come with him. Did you manage to get into Norma’s room, or wherever you really wanted to go?”

“Norma’s room is in the occupation of the police.”

“How annoying for you. What are you carrying in that kind of black folder thing you’ve got in your hand?”

Poirot in his turn asked a question.

“What have you got in that canvas bag with Persian horses on it?”

“My shopping bag? Only a couple of Avocado pears, as it happens.”

“Then if I may, I will entrust this folder to you. Do not be rough with it, or squeeze it, I beg.”

“What is it?”

“Something that I hoped to find—and that I have found—Ah, things begin to pass themselves—” He referred to increased sounds of activities.

Poirot’s words struck Mrs. Oliver as being much more exactly descriptive than English words would have been. Restarick, his voice loud and angry. Claudia coming in to telephone. A glimpse of a police stenographer on an excursion to the flat next door to take statements from Frances Cary and a mythical person called Miss Jacobs. A coming and going of ordered business, and a final departure of two men with cameras.

Then unexpectedly the sudden incursion into Claudia’s bedroom of a tall loosely-jointed young man with red hair.

Without taking any notice of Mrs. Oliver, he spoke to Poirot.

“What’s she done? Murder? Who is it? The boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“She admits it?”

“It would seem so.”

“Not good enough. Did she say so in definite words?”

“I have not heard her do so. I have had no chance of asking her anything myself.”

A policeman looked in.

“Dr. Stillingfleet?” he asked. “The police surgeon would like a word with you.”

Dr. Stillingfleet nodded and followed him out of the room.

“So that’s Dr. Stillingfleet,” said Mrs. Oliver. She considered for a moment or two. “Quite something, isn’t he?”

Twenty-three

Chief Inspector Neele drew a sheet of paper towards him, jotted one or two notes on it; and looked round at the other five people in the room. His voice was crisp and formal.

“Miss Jacobs?” he said. He looked towards the policeman who stood by the door. “Sergeant Conolly, I know, has taken her statement. But I’d like to ask her a few questions myself.”

Miss Jacobs was ushered into the room a few minutes later. Neele rose courteously to greet her.

“I am Chief Inspector Neele,” he said, shaking hands with her. “I am sorry to trouble you for a second time. But this time it is quite informal. I just want to get a clearer picture of exactly what you saw and heard. I’m afraid it may be painful—”

“Painful, no,” said Miss Jacobs, accepting the chair he offered her. “It was a shock, of course. But no emotions were involved.” She added: “You seem to have tidied up things.”

He presumed she was referring to the removal of the body.

Her eyes, both observant and critical, passed lightly over the assembled people, registering, for Poirot, frank astonishment (What on earth is this?), for Mrs. Oliver, mild curiosity; appraisement for the back of Dr. Stillingfleet’s red head, neighbourly recognition for Claudia to whom she vouchsafed a slight nod, and finally dawning sympathy for Andrew Restarick.

“You must be the girl’s father,” she said to him. “There’s not much point to condolences from a total stranger. They’re better left unsaid. It’s a sad world we live in nowadays—or so it seems to me. Girls study too hard in my opinion.”

Then she turned her face composedly towards Neele.

“Yes?”

“I would like you, Miss Jacobs, to tell me in your own words exactly what you saw and heard.”

“I expect it will vary from what I said before,” said Miss Jacobs unexpectedly. “Things do, you know. One tries to make one’s description as accurate as possible, and so one uses more words. I don’t think one is any more accurate; I think, unconsciously, one adds things that you think you may have seen or ought to have seen—or heard. But I will do my best.

“It started with screams. I was startled. I thought someone must have been hurt. So I was already coming to the door when someone began beating on it, and still screaming. I opened it and saw it was one of my next-door neighbours—the three girls who live in 67. I’m afraid I don’t know her name, though I know her by sight.”

“Frances Cary,” said Claudia.

“She was quite incoherent, and stammered out something about someone being dead—someone she knew—David Someone—I didn’t catch his last name. She was sobbing and shaking all over. I brought her in, gave her some brandy, and went to see for myself.”

Everyone felt that throughout life that would be what Miss Jacobs would invariably do.

“You know what I found. Need I describe it?”

“Just briefly, perhaps.”

“A young man, one of these modern young men—gaudy clothes and long hair. He was lying on the floor and he was clearly dead. His shirt was stiff with blood.”

Stillingfleet stirred. He turned his head and looked keenly at Miss Jacobs.

“Then I became aware that there was a girl in the room. She was holding a kitchen knife. She seemed quite calm and self-possessed—really, most peculiar.”

Stillingfleet said: “Did she say anything?”

“She said she had been into the bathroom to wash the blood off her hands—and then she said, ‘But you can’t wash things like that off, can you?’”

“Out, damnéd spot, in fact?”

“I cannot say that she reminded me particularly of Lady Macbeth. She was—how shall I put it?—perfectly composed. She laid the knife down on the table and sat down on a chair.”

“What else did she say?” asked Chief Inspector Neele, his eyes dropping to a scrawled note in front of him.

“Something about hate. That it wasn’t safe to hate anybody.”

“She said something about ‘poor David,’ didn’t she? Or so you told Sergeant Conolly. And that she wanted to be free of him.”

“I’d forgotten that. Yes. She said something about his making her come here—and something about Louise, too.”

“What did she say about Louise?” It was Poirot who asked, leaning forward sharply. Miss Jacobs looked at him doubtfully.

“Nothing, really, just mentioned the name. ‘Like Louise,’ she said, and then stopped. It was after she had said about its not being safe to hate people….”

“And then?”

“Then she told me, quite calmly, I had better ring up the police. Which I did. We just—sat there until they came…I did not think I ought to leave her. We did not say anything. She seemed absorbed in her thoughts, and I—well, frankly, I couldn’t think of anything to say.”

“You could see, couldn’t you, that she was mentally unstable?” said Andrew Restarick. “You could see that she didn’t know what she had done or why, poor child?”

He spoke pleadingly—hopefully.

“If it is a sign of mental instability to appear perfectly cool and collected after committing a murder, then I will agree with you.”

Miss Jacobs spoke in the voice of one who quite decidedly did not agree.

Stillingfleet said:

“Miss Jacobs, did she at any time admit that she had killed him?”

“Oh yes. I should have mentioned that before—It was the very first thing she did say. As though she was answering some question I had asked her. She said, ‘Yes. I’ve killed him.’ And then went on about having washed her hands.”

Restarick groaned and buried his face in his hands. Claudia put her hand on his arm.

Poirot said:

“Miss Jacobs, you say the girl put down the knife she was carrying on that table. It was quite near you? You saw it clearly? Did it appear to you that the knife also had been washed?”

Miss Jacobs looked hesitantly at Chief Inspector Neele. It was clear that she felt that Poirot struck an alien and unofficial note in this presumably official inquiry.

“Perhaps you would be kind enough to answer that?” said Neele.

“No—I don’t think the knife had been washed or wiped in any way. It was stained and discoloured with some thick sticky substance.”

“Ah.” Poirot leaned back in his chair.

“I should have thought you would have known all about the knife yourself,” said Miss Jacobs to Neele accusingly. “Didn’t your police examine it? It seems to me very lax if they didn’t.”

“Oh yes, the police examined it,” said Neele. “But we—er—always like to get corroboration.”

She darted him a shrewd glance.

“What you really mean, I suppose, is that you like to find out how accurate the observation of your witnesses is. How much they make up, or how much they actually see, or think they have seen.”

He smiled slightly as he said:

“I don’t think we need have doubts about you, Miss Jacobs. You will make an excellent witness.”

“I shan’t enjoy it. But it’s the kind of thing one has to go through with, I suppose.”

“I’m afraid so. Thank you, Miss Jacobs.” He looked round. “No one has any additional questions?”

Poirot indicated that he had. Miss Jacobs paused near the doorway, displeased.

“Yes?” she said.

“About this mention of someone called Louise. Did you know who it was the girl meant?”

“How should I know?”

“Isn’t it possible that she might have meant Mrs. Louise Charpentier? You knew Mrs. Charpentier, didn’t you?”

“I did not.”

“You knew that she recently threw herself out of a window in this block of flats?”

“I knew that, of course. I didn’t know her Christian name was Louise, and I was not personally acquainted with her.”

“Nor, perhaps, particularly wished to be?”

“I have not said so, since the woman is dead. But I will admit that that is quite true. She was a most undesirable tenant, and I and other residents have frequently complained to the management here.”

“Of what exactly?”

“To speak frankly, the woman drank. Her flat was actually on the top floor above mine and there were continual disorderly parties, with broken glass, furniture knocked over, singing and shouting, a lot of—er—coming and going.”

“She was, perhaps, a lonely woman,” suggested Poirot.

“That was hardly the impression she conveyed,” said Miss Jacobs acidly. “It was put forward at the inquest that she was depressed over the state of her health. Entirely her own imagination. She seems to have had nothing the matter with her.”

And having disposed of the late Mrs. Charpentier without sympathy, Miss Jacobs took her departure.

Poirot turned his attention to Andrew Restarick. He asked delicately:

“Am I correct in thinking, Mr. Restarick, that you were at one time well acquainted with Mrs. Charpentier?”

Restarick did not answer for a moment or two. Then he sighed deeply and transferred his gaze to Poirot.

“Yes. At one time, many years ago, I knew her very well indeed…Not, I may say, under the name of Charpentier. She was Louise Birell when I knew her.”

“You were—er—in love with her!”

“Yes, I was in love with her…Head over ears in love with her! I left my wife on her account. We went to South Africa. After barely a year the whole thing blew up. She returned to England. I never heard from her again. I never even knew what had become of her.”

“What about your daughter? Did she, also, know Louise Birell?”

“Not to remember her, surely. A child of five years old!”

“But did she know her?” Poirot persisted.

“Yes,” said Restarick slowly. “She knew Louise. That is to say, Louise came to our house. She used to play with the child.”

“So it is possible that the girl might remember her, even after a lapse of years?”

“I don’t know. I simply don’t know. I don’t know what she looked like; how much Louise might have changed. I never saw her again, as I told you.”

Poirot said gently, “But you heard from her, didn’t you, Mr. Restarick? I mean, you have heard from her since your return to England?”

Again there came that pause, and the deep unhappy sigh:

“Yes—I heard from her…” said Restarick. And then, with sudden curiosity, he asked: “How did you know that, M. Poirot?”

From his pocket, Poirot drew a neatly folded piece of paper. He unfolded it and handed it to Restarick.

The latter looked at it with a faintly puzzled frown.

Dear Andy

I see from the papers you're home again. We must meet and compare notes as to what we've both been doing all these years—

It broke off here—and started again.

Andy—Guess who this is from! Louise. Don't dare to say you've forgotten me!—

Dear Andy,

As you will see by this letterhead, I'm living in the same block of flats as your secretary. What a small world it is! We must meet. Could you come for a drink Monday or Tuesday next week?

Andy darling, I must see you again…Nobody has ever mattered to me but you—you haven't really forgotten me, either, have you?

"How did you get this?" asked Restarick of Poirot, tapping it curiously.

"From a friend of mine via a furniture van," said Poirot, with a glance at Mrs. Oliver.

Restarick looked at her without favour.

"I couldn't help it," said Mrs. Oliver, interpreting his look correctly. "I suppose it was her furniture being moved out, and the men let go of a desk, and a drawer fell out and scattered a lot of things, and the wind blew this along the courtyard, so I picked it up and tried to give it back to them, but they were cross and didn't want it, so I just put it in my coat pocket without thinking. And I never even looked at it until this afternoon when I was taking things out of pockets before sending the coat to the cleaners. So it really wasn't my fault."

She paused, slightly out of breath.

"Did she get her letter to you written in the end?" Poirot asked.

"Yes—she did—one of the more formal versions! I didn't answer it. I thought it would be wiser not to do so."

“You didn’t want to see her again?”

“She was the last person I wanted to see! She was a particularly difficult woman—always had been. And I’d heard things about her—for one that she had become a heavy drinker. And well—other things.”

“Did you keep her letter to you?”

“No, I tore it up!”

Dr. Stillingfleet asked an abrupt question.

“Did your daughter ever speak about her to you?”

Restarick seemed unwilling to answer.

Dr. Stillingfleet urged him:

“It might be significant if she did, you know.”

“You doctors! Yes, she did mention her once.”

“What did she say exactly?”

“She said quite suddenly: ‘I saw Louise the other day, Father.’ I was startled. I said: ‘Where did you see her?’ And she said: ‘In the restaurant of our flats.’ I was a bit embarrassed. I said: ‘I never dreamed you’d remembered her.’ And she said: ‘I’ve never forgotten. Mother wouldn’t have let me forget, even if I wanted to.’”

“Yes,” said Dr. Stillingfleet. “Yes, that could certainly be significant.”

“And you, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, turning suddenly to Claudia. “Did Norma ever speak to you about Louise Carpenter?”

“Yes—it was after the suicide. She said something about her being a wicked woman. She said it in rather a childish way, if you know what I mean.”

"You were here in the flats yourself on the night—or more correctly the early morning when Mrs. Carpenter's suicide occurred?"

"I was not here that night, no! I was away from home. I remember arriving back here the next day and hearing about it."

She half turned to Restarick…"You remember? It was the twenty-third. I had gone to Liverpool."

"Yes, of course. You were to represent me at the Hever Trust meeting."

Poirot said:

"But Norma slept here that night?"

"Yes." Claudia seemed uncomfortable.

"Claudia?" Restarick laid his hand on her arm. "What is it you know about Norma? There's something. Something that you're holding back."

"Nothing! What should I know about her?"

"You think she's off her head, don't you?" said Dr. Stillingfleet in a conversational voice. "And so does the girl with the black hair. And so do you," he added, turning suddenly on Restarick. "All of us behaving nicely and avoiding the subject and thinking the same thing! Except, that is, the chief inspector. He's not thinking anything. He's collecting the facts: mad or a murderess. What about you, Madam?"

"Me?" Mrs. Oliver jumped. "I—don't know."

"You reserve judgment? I don't blame you. It's difficult. On the whole, most people agree on what they think. They use different terms for it—that's all. Bats in the Belfry. Wanting in the top storey. Off her onion. Mental. Delusions. Does anyone think that girl is sane?"

"Miss Battersby," said Poirot.

"Who the devil is Miss Battersby?"

“A schoolmistress.”

“If I ever have a daughter I shall send her to that school…Of course I’m in a different category. I know. I know everything about that girl!”

Norma’s father stared at him.

“Who is this man?” he demanded of Neele. “What can he possibly mean by saying that he knows everything about my daughter?”

“I know about her,” said Stillingfleet, “because she’s been under my professional care for the last ten days.”

“Dr. Stillingfleet,” said Chief Inspector Neele, “is a highly qualified and reputable psychiatrist.”

“And how did she come into your clutches—without someone getting my consent first?”

“Ask Moustaches,” said Dr. Stillingfleet, nodding towards Poirot.

“You—you…”

Restarick could hardly speak he was so angry.

Poirot spoke placidly.

“I had your instructions. You wanted care and protection for your daughter when she was found. I found her—and I was able to interest Dr. Stillingfleet in her case. She was in danger, Mr. Restarick, very grave danger.”

“She could hardly be in any more danger than she is now! Arrested on a charge of murder!”

“Technically she is not yet charged,” murmured Neele.

He went on:

“Dr. Stillingfleet, do I understand that you are willing to give your professional opinion as to Miss Restarick’s mental condition, and as to how well she knows the nature and meaning of her acts?”

“We can save the M’Naughten act for court,” said Stillingfleet. “What you want to know now is, quite simply, if the girl is mad or sane? All right, I’ll tell you. That girl is sane—as sane as any one of you sitting here in this room!”

Twenty-four

I

They stared at him.

“Didn’t expect that, did you?”

Restarick said angrily: “You’re wrong. That girl doesn’t even know what she’s done. She’s innocent—completely innocent. She can’t be held responsible for what she doesn’t know she’s done.”

“You let me talk for a while. I know what I’m talking about. You don’t. That girl is sane and responsible for her actions. In a moment or two we’ll have her in and let her speak for herself. She’s the only one who hasn’t had the chance of speaking for herself! Oh yes, they’ve got her here still—locked up with a police matron in her bedroom. But before we ask her a question or two, I’ve got something to say that you’d better hear first.

“When that girl came to me she was full of drugs.”

“And he gave them to her!” shouted Restarick. “That degenerate, miserable boy.”

“He started her on them, no doubt.”

“Thank God,” said Restarick. “Thank God for it.”

“What are you thanking God for?”

“I misunderstood you. I thought you were going to throw her to the lions when you kept harping on her being sane. I misjudged you. It was the drugs that did it. Drugs that made her do things she would never have done of her own volition, and left her with no knowledge of having done them.”

Stillingfleet raised his voice:

“If you let me talk instead of talking so much yourself, and being so sure you know all about everything, we might get on a bit. First of all, she’s not an addict. There are no marks of injections. She didn’t sniff snow. Someone or other, perhaps the boy, perhaps someone else, was administering drugs to her without her knowledge. Not just a purple heart or two in the modern fashion. A rather interesting medley of drugs—LSD giving vivid dream sequences—nightmares or pleasurable. Hemp distorting the time factor, so that she might believe an experience has lasted an hour instead of a few minutes. And a good many other curious substances that I have no intention of letting any of you know about. Somebody who was clever with drugs played merry hell with that girl. Stimulants, sedatives, they all played their part in controlling her, and showing her to herself as a completely different person.”

Restarick interrupted: “That’s what I say. Norma wasn’t responsible! Someone was hypnotising her to do these things.”

“You still haven’t got the point! Nobody could make the girl do what she didn’t want to do! What they could do, was make her think she had done it. Now we’ll have her in and make her see what’s been happening to her.”

He looked inquiringly at Chief Inspector Neele, who nodded.

Stillingfleet spoke over his shoulder to Claudia, as he went out of the sitting room. “Where’d you put that other girl, the one you took away from Jacobs, gave a sedative to? In her room on her bed? Better shake her up a bit, and drag her along, somehow. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Claudia also went out of the sitting room.

Stillingfleet came back, propelling Norma, and uttering rough encouragement.

“There’s a good girl…Nobody’s going to bite you. Sit there.”

She sat obediently. Her docility was still rather frightening.

The policewoman hovered by the door looking scandalised.

"All I'm asking you to do is to speak the truth. It isn't nearly as difficult as you think."

Claudia came in with Frances Cary. Frances was yawning heavily. Her black hair hung like a curtain hiding half her mouth as she yawned and yawned again.

"You need a pick-me-up," said Stillingfleet to her.

"I wish you'd all let me go to sleep," murmured Frances indistinctly.

"Nobody's going to have a chance of sleep until I've done with them! Now, Norma, you answer my questions—That woman along the passage says you admitted to her that you killed David Baker. Is that right?"

Her docile voice said:

"Yes. I killed David."

"Stabbed him?"

"Yes."

"How do you know you did?"

She looked faintly puzzled. "I don't know what you mean. He was there on the floor—dead."

"Where was the knife?"

"I picked it up."

"It had blood on it?"

"Yes. And on his shirt."

"What did it feel like—the blood on the knife? The blood that you got on your hand and had to wash off—Wet? Or more like strawberry jam?"

“It was like strawberry jam—sticky.” She shivered. “I had to go and wash it off my hands.”

“Very sensible. Well, that ties up everything very nicely. Victim, murderer—you—all complete with the weapon. Do you remember actually doing it?”

“No…I don’t remember that…But I must have done it, mustn’t I?”

“Don’t ask me! I wasn’t there. It’s you are the one who’s saying it. But there was another killing before that, wasn’t there? An earlier killing.”

“You mean—Louise?”

“Yes. I mean Louise…When did you first think of killing her?”

“Years ago. Oh, years ago.”

“When you were a child.”

“Yes.”

“Had to wait a long time, didn’t you?”

“I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Until you saw her again and recognised her?”

“Yes.”

“When you were a child, you hated her. Why?”

“Because she took Father, my father, away.”

“And made your mother unhappy?”

“Mother hated Louise. She said Louise was a really wicked woman.”

“Talked to you about her a lot, I suppose?”

“Yes. I wish she hadn’t…I didn’t want to go on hearing about her.”

“Monotonous—I know. Hate isn’t creative. When you saw her again did you really want to kill her?”

Norma seemed to consider. A faintly interested look came into her face.

“I didn’t, really, you know…It seemed all so long ago. I couldn’t imagine myself—that’s why—”

“Why you weren’t sure you had?”

“Yes. I had some quite wild idea that I hadn’t killed her at all. That it had been all a dream. That perhaps she really had thrown herself out of the window.”

“Well—why not?”

“Because I knew I had done it—I said I had done it.”

“You said you had done it? Who did you say that to?”

Norma shook her head. “I mustn’t…It was someone who tried to be kind—to help me. She said she was going to pretend to have known nothing about it.” She went on, the words coming fast and excitedly: “I was outside Louise’s door, the door of 76, just coming out of it. I thought I’d been walking in my sleep. They—she—said there had been an accident. Down in the courtyard. She kept telling me it had been nothing to do with me. Nobody would ever know—And I couldn’t remember what I had done—but there was stuff in my hand—”

“Stuff? What stuff? Do you mean blood?”

“No, not blood—torn curtain stuff. When I’d pushed her out.”

“You remember pushing her out, do you?”

“No, no. That’s what was so awful. I didn’t remember anything. That’s why I hoped. That’s why I went—” She turned her head towards Poirot—“to him—"

She turned back again to Stillingfleet.

"I never remembered the things I'd done, none of them. But I got more and more frightened. Because there used to be quite long times that were blank—quite blank—hours I couldn't account for, or remember where I'd been and what I'd been doing. But I found things—things I must have hidden away myself. Mary was being poisoned by me, they found out she was being poisoned at the hospital. And I found the weed killer I'd hidden away in the drawer. In the flat here there was a flick-knife. And I had a revolver that I didn't even know I'd bought! I did kill people, but I didn't remember killing them, so I'm not really a murderer—I'm just—mad! I realised that at last. I'm mad, and I can't help it. People can't blame you if you do things when you are mad. If I could come here and even kill David, it shows I am mad, doesn't it?"

"You'd like to be mad, very much?"

"I—yes, I suppose so."

"If so, why did you confess to someone that you had killed a woman by pushing her out of the window? Who was it you told?"

Norma turned her head, hesitated. Then raised her hand and pointed.

"I told Claudia."

"That is absolutely untrue." Claudia looked at her scornfully. "You never said anything of the kind to me!"

"I did. I did."

"When? Where?"

"I—don't know."

"She told me that she had confessed it all to you," said Frances indistinctly. "Frankly, I thought she was hysterical and making the whole thing up."

Stillingfleet looked across at Poirot.

“She could be making it all up,” he said judicially. “There is quite a case for that solution. But if so, we would have to find the motive, a strong motive, for her desiring the death of those two people, Louise Carpenter and David Baker. A childish hate? Forgotten and done with years ago? Nonsense. David—just to be ‘free of him?’ It is not for that that girls kill! We want better motives than that. A whacking great lot of money—say!—Greed!” He looked round him and his voice changed to a conventional tone.

“We want a little more help. There’s still one person missing. Your wife is a long time joining us here, Mr. Restarick?”

“I can’t think where Mary can be. I’ve rung up. Claudia has left messages in every place we can think of. By now she ought to have rung up at least from somewhere.”

“Perhaps we have the wrong idea,” said Hercule Poirot. “Perhaps Madame is at least partly here already—in a manner of speaking.”

“What on earth do you mean?” shouted Restarick angrily.

“Might I trouble you, chère Madame?”

Poirot leaned towards Mrs. Oliver. Mrs. Oliver stared.

“The parcel I entrusted to you—”

“Oh.” Mrs. Oliver dived into her shopping bag. She handed the black folder to him.

He heard a sharply indrawn breath near him, but did not turn his head.

He shook off the wrappings delicately and held up—a wig of bouffant golden hair.

“Mrs. Restarick is not here,” he said, “but her wig is. Interesting.”

“Where the devil did you get that, Poirot?” asked Neele.

“From the overnight bag of Miss Frances Cary from which she had as yet no opportunity of removing it. Shall we see how it becomes her?”

With a single deft movement, he swept aside the black hair that masked Frances’s face so effectively. Crowned with a golden aureole before she could defend herself, she glared at them.

Mrs. Oliver exclaimed:

“Good gracious—it is Mary Restarick.”

Frances was twisting like an angry snake. Restarick jumped from his seat to come to her—but Neele’s strong grip restrained him.

“No. We don’t want any violence from you. The game’s up, you know, Mr. Restarick—or shall I call you Robert Orwell—”

A stream of profanity came from the man’s lips. Frances’s voice was raised sharply:

“Shut up, you damned fool!” she said.

II

Poirot had abandoned his trophy, the wig. He had gone to Norma, and taken her hand gently in his.

“Your ordeal is over, my child. The victim will not be sacrificed. You are neither mad, nor have you killed anyone. There are two cruel and heartless creatures who plotted against you, with cunningly administered drugs, with lies, doing their best to drive you either to suicide or to belief in your own guilt and madness.”

Norma was staring with horror at the other plotter.

“My father. My father? He could think of doing that to me. His daughter. My father who loved me—”

“Not your father, mon enfant—a man who came here after your father’s death, to impersonate him and lay hands on an enormous fortune. Only one person was likely to recognise him—or rather to recognise that this man was not Andrew Restarick—the woman who had been Andrew Restarick’s mistress fifteen years ago.”

Twenty-five

Four people sat in Poirot's room. Poirot in his square chair was drinking a glass of sirop de cassis. Norma and Mrs. Oliver sat on the sofa. Mrs. Oliver was looking particularly festive in unbecoming apple green brocade, surmounted by one of her more painstaking coiffures. Dr. Stillingfleet was sprawled out in a chair with his long legs stretched out, so that they seemed to reach half across the room.

"Now then, there are lots of things I want to know," said Mrs. Oliver. Her voice was accusatory.

Poirot hastened to pour oil on troubled waters.

"But, chère Madame, consider. What I owe to you I can hardly express. All, but all my good ideas were suggested to me by you."

Mrs. Oliver looked at him doubtfully.

"Was it not you who introduced to me the phrase 'Third Girl?' It is there that I started—and there, too, that I ended—at the third girl of three living in a flat. Norma was always technically, I suppose, the Third Girl—but when I looked at things the right way round it all fell into place. The missing answer, the lost piece of the puzzle, every time it was the same—the third girl.

"It was always, if you comprehend me, the person who was not there. She was a name to me, no more."

"I wonder I never connected her with Mary Restarick," said Mrs. Oliver. "I'd seen Mary Restarick at Crosshedges, talked to her. Of course the first time I saw Frances Cary, she had black hair hanging all over her face. That would have put anyone off!"

"Again it was you, Madame, who drew my attention to how easily a woman's appearance is altered by the way she arranges her hair. Frances Cary, remember, had had dramatic training. She knew all about the art of swift makeup. She could alter her voice at need. As Frances, she had long black hair, framing her face and half hiding it, heavy dead white maquillage, dark pencilled eyebrows and mascara, with a drawling husky voice. Mary Restarick, with her wig of formally arranged golden hair with crimped waves, her conventional clothes, her slight Colonial accent, her brisk way of talking, presented a complete contrast. Yet one felt, from the beginning, that she was not quite real. What kind of a woman was she? I did not know.

“I was not clever about her—No—I, Hercule Poirot, was not clever at all.”

“Hear, hear,” said Dr. Stillingfleet. “First time I’ve ever heard you say that, Poirot! Wonders will never cease!”

“I don’t really see why she wanted two personalities,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It seems unnecessarily confusing.”

“No. It was very valuable to her. It gave her, you see, a perpetual alibi whenever she wanted it. To think that it was there, all the time, before my eyes, and I did not see it! There was the wig—I kept being subconsciously worried by it, but not seeing why I was worried. Two women—never, at any time, seen together. Their lives so arranged that no one noticed the large gaps in their time schedules when they were unaccounted for. Mary goes often to London, to shop, to visit house agents, to depart with a sheaf of orders to view, supposedly to spend her time that way. Frances goes to Birmingham, to Manchester, even flies abroad, frequents Chelsea with her special coterie of arty young men whom she employs in various capacities which would not be looked on with approval by the law. Special picture frames were designed for the Wedderburn Gallery. Rising young artists had ‘shows’ there—their pictures sold quite well, and were shipped abroad or sent on exhibition with their frames stuffed with secret packets of heroin—Art rackets—skilful forgeries of the more obscure Old Masters—She arranged and organised all these things. David Baker was one of the artists she employed. He had the gift of being a marvellous copyist.”

Norma murmured: “Poor David. When I first met him I thought he was wonderful.”

“That picture,” said Poirot dreamily. “Always, always, I came back to that in my mind. Why had Restarick brought it up to his office? What special significance did it have for him? Enfin, I do not admire myself for being so dense.”

“I don’t understand about the pictures.”

“It was a very clever idea. It served as a kind of certificate of identity. A pair of portraits, husband and wife, by a celebrated and fashionable portrait painter of his day. David Baker, when they come out of store, replaces Restarick’s portrait with one of Orwell, making him about twenty years younger in appearance. Nobody would have dreamed that the portrait was a fake; the style, the brush strokes, the canvas, it was a splendidly convincing bit of work. Restarick hung it over his desk. Anyone who knew Restarick years ago, might say: ‘I’d hardly have known you!’ Or ‘You’ve changed quite a lot,’ would look up at the portrait, but would only think he himself had really forgotten what the other man had looked like!”

“It was a great risk for Restarick—or rather Orwell—to take,” said Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully.

“Less than you might think. He was never a claimant, you see, in the Tichborne sense. He was only a member of a well-known City firm, returning home after his brother’s death to settle up his brother’s affairs after having spent some years abroad. He brought with him a young wife recently acquired abroad, and took up residence with an elderly, half blind but extremely distinguished uncle by marriage who had never known him well after his schoolboy days, and who accepted him without question. He had no other near relations, except for the daughter whom he had last seen when she was a child of five. When he originally left for South Africa, the office staff had had two very elderly clerks, since deceased. Junior staff never remains anywhere long nowadays. The family lawyer is also dead. You may be sure that the whole position was studied very carefully on the spot by Frances after they had decided on their coup.

“She had met him, it seems, in Kenya about two years ago. They were both crooks, though with entirely different interests. He went in for various shoddy deals as a prospector—Restarick and Orwell went together to prospect for mineral deposits in somewhat wild country. There was a rumour of Restarick's death (probably true) which was later contradicted."

"A lot of money in the gamble, I suspect?" said Stillingfleet.

"An enormous amount of money was involved. A terrific gamble—for a terrific stake. It came off. Andrew Restarick was a very rich man himself and he was his brother's heir. Nobody questioned his identity. And then—things went wrong. Out of the blue, he got a letter from a woman who, if she ever came face to face with him, would know at once that he wasn't Andrew Restarick. And a second piece of bad fortune occurred—David Baker started to blackmail him."

"That might have been expected, I suppose," said Stillingfleet thoughtfully.

"They didn't expect it," said Poirot. "David had never blackmailed before. It was the enormous wealth of this man that went to his head, I expect. The sum he had been paid for faking the portrait seemed to him grossly inadequate. He wanted more. So Restarick wrote him large cheques, and pretended that it was on account of his daughter—to prevent her from making an undesirable marriage. Whether he really wanted to marry her, I do not know—he may have done. But to blackmail two people like Orwell and Frances Cary was a dangerous thing to do."

"You mean those two just cold-bloodedly planned to kill two people—quite calmly—just like that?" demanded Mrs. Oliver.

She looked rather sick.

"They might have added you to their list, Madame," said Poirot.

"Me? Do you mean that it was one of them who hit me on the head? Frances, I suppose? Not the poor Peacock?"

"I do not think it was the Peacock. But you had been already to Borodene Mansions. Now you perhaps follow Frances to Chelsea, or so she thinks, with a rather dubious story to account for yourself. So she slips out and gives you a nice little tap on the head to put paid to your curiosity for a while. You would not listen when I warned you there was danger about."

"I can hardly believe it of her! Lying about in attitudes of a Burne-Jones heroine in that dirty studio that day. But why—" She looked at Norma—then back at Poirot. "They used her—deliberately—worked upon her, drugged her, made her believe that she had murdered two people. Why?"

"They wanted a victim…" said Poirot.

He rose from his chair and went to Norma.

"Mon enfant, you have been through a terrible ordeal. It is a thing that need never happen to you again. Remember that now, you can have confidence in yourself always. To have known, at close quarters, what absolute evil means, is to be armoured against what life can do to you."

"I suppose you are right," said Norma. "To think you are mad—really to believe it, is a frightening thing…" She shivered. "I don't see, even now, why I escaped—why anyone managed to believe that I hadn't killed David—not when even I believed I had killed him?"

"Blood was wrong," said Dr. Stillingfleet in a matter-of-fact tone. "Starting to coagulate. Shirt was 'stiff with it,' as Miss Jacobs said, not wet. You were supposed to have killed him not more than about five minutes before Frances's screaming act."

"How did she—" Mrs. Oliver began to work things out. "She had been to Manchester—"

"She came home by an earlier train, changed into her Mary wig and makeup on the train. Walked into Borodene Mansions and went up in the lift as an unknown blonde. Went into the flat where David was waiting for her, as she had told him to do. He was quite unsuspecting, and she stabbed him. Then she went out again, and kept watch until she saw Norma coming. She slipped into a public cloakroom, changed her appearance, and joined a friend at the end of the road and walked with her, said good-bye to her at Borodene Mansions and went up herself and did her stuff—quite enjoying doing it, I expect. By the time the police had been called and got there, she didn't think anyone would suspect the time lag. I must say, Norma, you gave us all a hell of a time that day. Insisting on having killed everyone the way you did!"

"I wanted to confess and get it all over…Did you—did you think I might really have done it, then?"

"Me? What do you take me for? I know what my patients will do or won't do. But I thought you were going to make things damned difficult. I didn't know how far Neele was sticking his neck out. Didn't seem proper police procedure to me. Look at the way he gave Poirot here his head."

Poirot smiled.

"Chief Inspector Neele and I have known each other for many years. Besides, he had been making inquiries about certain matters already. You were never really outside Louise's door. Frances changed the numbers. She reversed the 6 and the 7 on your own door. Those numbers were loose, stuck on with spikes. Claudia was away that night. Frances drugged you so that the whole thing was a nightmare dream to you.

"I saw the truth suddenly. The only other person who could have killed Louise was the real 'third girl,' Frances Cary."

"You kept half recognising her, you know," said Stillingfleet, "when you described to me how one person seemed to turn into another."

Norma looked at him thoughtfully.

"You were very rude to people," she said to Stillingfleet. He looked slightly taken aback.

"Rude?"

"The things you said to everyone. The way you shouted at them."

"Oh well, yes, perhaps I was…I've got in the way of it. People are so damned irritating."

He grinned suddenly at Poirot.

“She’s quite a girl, isn’t she?”

Mrs. Oliver rose to her feet with a sigh.

“I must go home.” She looked at the two men and then at Norma. “What are we going to do with her?” she asked.

They both looked startled.

“I know she’s staying with me at the moment,” she went on. “And she says she’s quite happy. But I mean there it is, quite a problem. Lots and lots of money because your father—the real one, I mean—left it all to you. And that will cause complications, and begging letters and all that. She could go and live with old Sir Roderick, but that wouldn’t be fun for a girl—he’s pretty deaf already as well as blind—and completely selfish. By the way, what about his missing papers, and the girl, and Kew Gardens?”

“They turned up where he thought he’d already looked—Sonia found them,” said Norma, and added, “Uncle Roddy and Sonia are getting married—next week—”

“No fool like an old fool,” said Stillingfleet.

“Aha!” said Poirot. “So the young lady prefers life in England to being embroiled in la politique. She is perhaps wise, that little one.”

“So that’s that,” said Mrs. Oliver with finality. “But to go on about Norma, one has to be practical. One’s got to make plans. The girl can’t know what she wants to do all by herself. She’s waiting for someone to tell her.”

She looked at them severely.

Poirot said nothing. He smiled.

“Oh, her?” said Dr. Stillingfleet. “Well, I’ll tell you, Norma. I’m flying to Australia Tuesday week. I want to look around first—see if what’s been fixed up for me is going to work, and all that. Then I’ll cable you and you can join me. Then we get married. You'll have to take my word for it that it's not your money I want. I'm not one of those doctors who want to endow whacking great research establishments and all that. I'm just interested in people. I think, too, that you'd be able to manage me all right. All that about my being rude to people—I hadn't noticed it myself. It's odd, really, when you think of all the mess you've been in—helpless as a fly in treacle—yet it's not going to be me running you, it's going to be you running me."

Norma stood quite still. She looked at John Stillingfleet very carefully, as though she was considering something that she knew from an entirely different point of view.

And then she smiled. It was a very nice smile—like a happy young nannie.

"All right," she said.

She crossed the room to Hercule Poirot.

"I was rude, too," she said. "The day I came here when you were having breakfast. I said to you that you were too old to help me. That was a rude thing to say. And it wasn't true.…"

She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him.

"You'd better get us a taxi," she said to Stillingfleet.

Dr. Stillingfleet nodded and left the room. Mrs. Oliver collected a handbag and a fur stole and Norma slipped on a coat and followed her to the door.

"Madame, un petit moment—"

Mrs. Oliver turned. Poirot had collected from the recesses of the sofa a handsome coil of grey hair.

Mrs. Oliver exclaimed vexedly: "It's just like everything that they make nowadays, no good at all! Hairpins, I mean. They just slip out, and everything falls off!"

She went out frowning.

A moment or two later she poked her head round the door again. She spoke in a conspiratorial whisper:

“Just tell me—it’s all right, I’ve sent her on down—did you send that girl to this particular doctor on purpose?”

“Of course I did. His qualifications are—”

“Never mind his qualifications. You know what I mean. He and she—Did you?”

“If you must know, yes.”

“I thought so,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You do think of things, don’t you.”

Hallowe'en Party (1969)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

Mrs. Ariadne Oliver had gone with the friend with whom she was staying, Judith Butler, to help with the preparations for a children's party which was to take place that same evening.

At the moment it was a scene of chaotic activity. Energetic women came in and out of doors moving chairs, small tables, flower vases, and carrying large quantities of yellow pumpkins which they disposed strategically in selected spots.

It was to be a Hallowe'en party for invited guests of an age group between ten and seventeen years old.

Mrs. Oliver, removing herself from the main group, leant against a vacant background of wall and held up a large yellow pumpkin, looking at it critically—"The last time I saw one of these," she said, sweeping back her grey hair from her prominent forehead, "was in the United States last year—hundreds of them. All over the house. I've never seen so many pumpkins. As a matter of fact," she added thoughtfully, "I've never really known the difference between a pumpkin and a vegetable marrow. What's this one?"

"Sorry, dear," said Mrs. Butler, as she fell over her friend's feet.

Mrs. Oliver pressed herself closer against the wall.

"My fault," she said. "I'm standing about and getting in the way. But it was rather remarkable, seeing so many pumpkins or vegetable marrows, whatever they are. They were everywhere, in the shops, and in people's houses, with candles or nightlights inside them or strung up. Very interesting really. But it wasn't for a Hallowe'en party, it was Thanksgiving. Now I've always associated pumpkins with Hallowe'en and that's the end of October. Thanksgiving comes much later, doesn't it? Isn't it November, about the third week in November? Anyway, here, Hallowe'en is definitely the 31st of October, isn't it? First Hallowe'en and then, what comes next? All Souls' Day? That's when in Paris you go to cemeteries and put flowers on graves. Not a sad sort of feast. I mean, all the children go too, and enjoy themselves. You go to flower markets first and buy lots and lots of lovely flowers. Flowers never look so lovely as they do in Paris in the market there.”

A lot of busy women were falling over Mrs. Oliver occasionally, but they were not listening to her. They were all too busy with what they were doing.

They consisted for the most part of mothers, one or two competent spinsters; there were useful teenagers, boys of sixteen and seventeen climbing up ladders or standing on chairs to put decorations, pumpkins or vegetable marrows or brightly coloured witch-balls at a suitable elevation; girls from eleven to fifteen hung about in groups and giggled.

“And after All Souls’ Day and cemeteries,” went on Mrs. Oliver, lowering her bulk on to the arm of a settee, “you have All Saints’ Day. I think I’m right?”

Nobody responded to this question. Mrs. Drake, a handsome middle-aged woman who was giving the party, made a pronouncement.

“I’m not calling this a Hallowe’en party, although of course it is one really. I’m calling it the Eleven Plus party. It’s that sort of age group. Mostly people who are leaving the Elms and going on to other schools.”

“But that’s not very accurate, Rowena, is it?” said Miss Whittaker, resetting her pince-nez on her nose disapprovingly.

Miss Whittaker as a local schoolteacher was always firm on accuracy.

“Because we’ve abolished the eleven-plus some time ago.”

Mrs. Oliver rose from the settee apologetically. “I haven’t been making myself useful. I’ve just been sitting here saying silly things about pumpkins and vegetable marrows’—And resting my feet, she thought, with a slight pang of conscience, but without sufficient feeling of guilt to say it aloud.

“Now what can I do next?” she asked, and added, “What lovely apples!”

Someone had just brought a large bowl of apples into the room. Mrs. Oliver was partial to apples.

“Lovely red ones,” she added.

“They’re not really very good,” said Rowena Drake. “But they look nice and partified. That’s for bobbing for apples. They’re rather soft apples, so people will be able to get their teeth into them better. Take them into the library, will you, Beatrice? Bobbing for apples always makes a mess with the water slopping over, but that doesn’t matter with the library carpet, it’s so old. Oh! Thank you, Joyce.”

Joyce, a sturdy thirteen-year-old, seized the bowl of apples. Two rolled off it and stopped, as though arrested by a witch’s wand, at Mrs. Oliver’s feet.

“You like apples, don’t you,” said Joyce. “I read you did, or perhaps I heard it on the telly. You’re the one who writes murder stories, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“We ought to have made you do something connected with murders. Have a murder at the party tonight and make people solve it.”

“No, thank you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Never again.”

“What do you mean, never again?”

“Well, I did once, and it didn’t turn out much of a success,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“But you’ve written lots of books,” said Joyce, “you make a lot of money out of them, don’t you?”

“In a way,” said Mrs. Oliver, her thoughts flying to the Inland Revenue.

“And you’ve got a detective who’s a Finn.”

Mrs. Oliver admitted the fact. A small stolid boy not yet, Mrs. Oliver would have thought, arrived at the seniority of the eleven-plus, said sternly, “Why a Finn?”

“I’ve often wondered,” said Mrs. Oliver truthfully.

Mrs. Hargreaves, the organist’s wife, came into the room breathing heavily, and bearing a large green plastic pail.

“What about this,” she said, “for the apple bobbing? Kind of gay, I thought.”

Miss Lee, the doctor’s dispenser, said, “Galvanized bucket’s better. Won’t tip over so easily. Where are you going to have it, Mrs. Drake?”

“I thought the bobbing for apples had better be in the library. The carpet’s old there and a lot of water always gets spilt, anyway.”

“All right. We’ll take them along. Rowena, here’s another basket of apples.”

“Let me help,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She picked up the two apples at her feet. Almost without noticing what she was doing, she sank her teeth into one of them and began to crunch it. Mrs. Drake abstracted the second apple from her firmly and restored it to the basket. A buzz of conversation broke out.

“Yes, but where are we going to have the Snapdragon?”

“You ought to have the Snapdragon in the library, it’s much the darkest room.”

“No, we’re going to have that in the dining room.”

“We’ll have to put something on the table first.”

“There’s a green baize to put on that and then the rubber sheet over it.”

“What about the looking glasses? Shall we really see our husbands in them?”

Surreptitiously removing her shoes and still quietly champing at her apple, Mrs. Oliver lowered herself once more on to the settee and surveyed the room full of people critically. She was thinking in her authoress's mind: "Now, if I was going to make a book about all these people, how should I do it? They're nice people, I should think, on the whole, but who knows?"

In a way, she felt, it was rather fascinating not to know anything about them. They all lived in Woodleigh Common, some of them had faint tags attached to them in her memory because of what Judith had told her. Miss Johnson—something to do with the church, not the vicar's sister. Oh no, it was the organist's sister, of course. Rowena Drake, who seemed to run things in Woodleigh Common. The puffing woman who had brought in the pail, a particularly hideous plastic pail. But then Mrs. Oliver had never been fond of plastic things. And then the children, the teenage girls and boys.

So far they were really only names to Mrs. Oliver. There was a Nan and a Beatrice and a Cathie, a Diana and a Joyce, who was boastful and asked questions. I don't like Joyce much, thought Mrs. Oliver. A girl called Ann, who looked tall and superior. There were two adolescent boys who appeared to have just got used to trying out different hair styles, with rather unfortunate results.

A smallish boy entered in some condition of shyness.

"Mummy sent these mirrors to see if they'd do," he said in a slightly breathless voice.

Mrs. Drake took them from him.

"Thank you so much, Eddy," she said.

"They're just ordinary looking hand mirrors," said the girl called Ann. "Shall we really see our future husbands' faces in them?"

"Some of you may and some may not," said Judith Butler.

"Did you ever see your husband's face when you went to a party—I mean this kind of a party?"

“Of course she didn’t,” said Joyce.

“She might have,” said the superior Beatrice. “E.S.P. they call it. Extra sensory perception,” she added in the tone of one pleased with being thoroughly conversant with the terms of the times.

“I read one of your books,” said Ann to Mrs. Oliver. “The Dying Goldfish. It was quite good,” she said kindly.

“I didn’t like that one,” said Joyce. “There wasn’t enough blood in it. I like murders to have lots of blood.”

“A bit messy,” said Mrs. Oliver, “don’t you think?”

“But exciting,” said Joyce.

“Not necessarily,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I saw a murder once,” said Joyce.

“Don’t be silly, Joyce,” said Miss Whittaker, the schoolteacher.

“I did,” said Joyce.

“Did you really?” asked Cathie, gazing at Joyce with wide eyes, “really and truly see a murder?”

“Of course she didn’t,” said Mrs. Drake. “Don’t say silly things, Joyce.”

“I did see a murder,” said Joyce. “I did. I did. I did.”

A seventeen-year-old boy poised on a ladder looked down interestedly.

“What kind of a murder?” he asked.

“I don’t believe it,” said Beatrice.

“Of course not,” said Cathie’s mother. “She’s just making it up.”

"I'm not. I saw it."

"Why didn't you go to the police about it?" asked Cathie.

"Because I didn't know it was a murder when I saw it. It wasn't really till a long time afterwards, I mean, that I began to know that it was a murder. Something that somebody said only about a month or two ago suddenly made me think: Of course, that was a murder I saw."

"You see," said Ann, "she's making it all up. It's nonsense."

"When did it happen?" asked Beatrice.

"Years ago," said Joyce. "I was quite young at the time," she added.

"Who murdered who?" said Beatrice.

"I shan't tell any of you," said Joyce. "You're all so horrid about it."

Miss Lee came in with another kind of bucket. Conversation shifted to a comparison of buckets or plastic pails as most suitable for the sport of bobbing for apples. The majority of the helpers repaired to the library for an appraisal on the spot. Some of the younger members, it may be said, were anxious to demonstrate, by a rehearsal of the difficulties and their own accomplishment in the sport. Hair got wet, water got spilt, towels were sent for to mop it up. In the end it was decided that a galvanized bucket was preferable to the more meretricious charms of a plastic pail which overturned rather too easily.

Mrs. Oliver, setting down a bowl of apples which she had carried in to replenish the store required for tomorrow, once more helped herself to one.

"I read in the paper that you were fond of eating apples," the accusing voice of Ann or Susan—she was not quite sure which—spoke to her.

"It's my besetting sin," said Mrs. Oliver.

"It would be more fun if it was melons," objected one of the boys. "They're so juicy. Think of the mess it would make," he said, surveying the carpet with pleasurable anticipation.

Mrs. Oliver, feeling a little guilty at the public arraignment of greediness, left the room in search of a particular apartment, the geography of which is usually fairly easily identified. She went up the staircase and, turning the corner on the half landing, cannoned into a pair, a girl and a boy, clasped in each other's arms and leaning against the door which Mrs. Oliver felt fairly certain was the door to the room to which she herself was anxious to gain access. The couple paid no attention to her. They sighed and they snuggled. Mrs. Oliver wondered how old they were. The boy was fifteen, perhaps, the girl little more than twelve, although the development of her chest seemed certainly on the mature side.

Apple Trees was a house of fair size. It had, she thought, several agreeable nooks and corners. How selfish people are, thought Mrs. Oliver. No consideration for others. That well-known tag from the past came into her mind. It had been said to her in succession by a nursemaid, a nanny, a governess, her grandmother, two great-aunts, her mother and a few others.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Oliver in a loud, clear voice.

The boy and the girl clung closer than ever, their lips fastened on each other's.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Oliver again, "do you mind letting me pass? I want to get in at this door."

Unwillingly the couple fell apart. They looked at her in an aggrieved fashion. Mrs. Oliver went in, banged the door and shot the bolt.

It was not a very close-fitting door. The faint sound of words came to her from outside.

"Isn't that like people?" one voice said in a somewhat uncertain tenor. "They might see we didn't want to be disturbed."

"People are so selfish," piped a girl's voice. "They never think of anyone but themselves."

“No consideration for others,” said the boy’s voice.

Two

Preparations for a children’s party usually give far more trouble to the organizers than an entertainment devised for those of adult years. Food of good quality and suitable alcoholic refreshment—with lemonade on the side, that, to the right people, is quite enough to make a party go. It may cost more but the trouble is infinitely less. So Ariadne Oliver and her friend Judith Butler agreed together.

“What about teenage parties?” said Judith.

“I don’t know much about them,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“In one way,” said Judith, “I think they’re probably least trouble of all. I mean, they just throw all of us adults out. And say they’ll do it all themselves.”

“And do they?”

“Well, not in our sense of the word,” said Judith. “They forget to order some of the things, and order a lot of other things that nobody likes. Having turfed us out, then they say there were things we ought to have provided for them to find. They break a lot of glasses, and other things, and there’s always somebody undesirable or who brings an undesirable friend. You know the sort of thing. Peculiar drugs and—what do they call it?—Flower Pot or Purple Hemp or L.S.D., which I always have thought just meant money; but apparently it doesn’t.”

“I suppose it costs it,” suggested Ariadne Oliver.

“It’s very unpleasant, and Hemp has a nasty smell.”

“It all sounds very depressing,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Anyway, this party will go all right. Trust Rowena Drake for that. She’s a wonderful organizer. You’ll see.”

“I don’t feel I even want to go to a party,” sighed Mrs. Oliver.

“You go up and lie down for an hour or so. You’ll see. You’ll enjoy it when you get there. I wish Miranda hadn’t got a temperature—she’s so disappointed at not being able to go, poor child.”

The party came into being at half past seven. Ariadne Oliver had to admit that her friend was right. Arrivals were punctual. Everything went splendidly. It was well-imagined, well-run and ran like clockwork. There were red and blue lights on the stairs and yellow pumpkins in profusion. The girls and boys arrived holding decorated broomsticks for a competition. After greetings, Rowena Drake announced the programme for the evening. “First, judging of the broomstick competition,” she said, “three prizes, first, second and third. Then comes cutting the flour cake. That’ll be in the small conservatory. Then bobbing for apples—there’s a list pinned upon the wall over there of the partners for that event—then there’ll be dancing. Every time the lights go out you change partners. Then girls to the small study where they’ll be given their mirrors. After that, supper, Snapdragon and then prize giving.”

Like all parties, it went slightly stickily at first. The brooms were admired, they were very small miniature brooms, and on the whole the decorating of them had not reached a very high standard of merit, “which makes it easier,” said Mrs. Drake in an aside to one of her friends. “And it’s a very useful thing because I mean there are always one or two children one knows only too well won’t win a prize at anything else, so one can cheat a little over this.”

“So unscrupulous, Rowena.”

“I’m not really. I just arrange so that things should be fair and evenly divided. The whole point is that everyone wants to win something.”

“What’s the Flour Game?” asked Ariadne Oliver.

“Oh yes, of course, you weren’t here when we were doing it. Well, you just fill a tumbler with flour, press it in well, then you turn it out in a tray and place a sixpence on top of it. Then everyone slices a slice off it very carefully so as not to tumble the sixpence off. As soon as someone tumbles the sixpence off, that person goes out. It’s a sort of elimination. The last one left in gets the sixpence of course. Now then, away we go.”

And away they went. Squeals of excitement were heard coming from the library where bobbing for apples went on, and competitors returned from there with wet locks and having disposed a good deal of water about their persons.

One of the most popular contests, at any rate among the girls, was the arrival of the Hallowe’en witch played by Mrs. Goodbody, a local cleaning woman who, not only having the necessary hooked nose and chin which almost met, was admirably proficient in producing a semi-cooing voice which had definitely sinister undertones and also produced magical doggerel rhymes.

“Now then, come along, Beatrice, is it? Ah, Beatrice. A very interesting name. Now you want to know what your husband is going to look like. Now, my dear, sit here. Yes, yes, under this light here. Sit here and hold this little mirror in your hand, and presently when the lights go out you’ll see him appear. You’ll see him looking over your shoulder. Now hold the mirror steady. Abracadabra, who shall see? The face of the man who will marry me. Beatrice, Beatrice, you shall find, the face of the man who shall please your mind.”

A sudden shaft of light shot across the room from a step-ladder, placed behind a screen. It hit the right spot in the room, which was reflected in the mirror grasped in Beatrice’s excited hand.

“Oh!” cried Beatrice. “I’ve seen him. I’ve seen him! I can see him in my mirror!”

The beam was shut off, the lights came on and a coloured photograph pasted on a card floated down from the ceiling. Beatrice danced about excitedly.

“That was him! That was him! I saw him,” she cried. “Oh, he’s got a lovely ginger beard.”

She rushed to Mrs. Oliver, who was the nearest person.

“Do look, do look. Don’t you think he’s rather wonderful? He’s like Eddie Presweight, the pop singer. Don’t you think so?”

Mrs. Oliver did think he looked like one of the faces she daily deplored having to see in her morning paper. The beard, she thought, had been an afterthought of genius.

“Where do all these things come from?” she asked.

“Oh, Rowena gets Nicky to make them. And his friend Desmond helps. He experiments a good deal with photography. He and a couple of pals of his made themselves up, with a great deal of hair or sideburns or beards and things. And then with the light on him and everything, of course it sends the girls wild with delight.”

“I can’t help thinking,” said Ariadne Oliver, “that girls are really very silly nowadays.”

“Don’t you think they always were?” asked Rowena Drake.

Mrs. Oliver considered.

“I suppose you’re right,” she admitted.

“Now then,” cried Mrs. Drake—“supper.”

Supper went off well. Rich iced cakes, savouries, prawns, cheese and nut confections. The eleven-pluses stuffed themselves.

“And now,” said Rowena, “the last one for the evening. Snapdragon. Across there, through the pantry. That’s right. Now then. Prizes first.”

The prizes were presented, and then there was a wailing, banshee call. The children rushed across the hall back to the dining room.

The food had been cleared away. A green baize cloth was laid across the table and here was borne a great dish of flaming raisins. Everybody shrieked, rushing forward, snatching the blazing raisins, with cries of “Ow, I’m burned! Isn’t it lovely?” Little by little the Snapdragon flickered and died down. The lights went up. The party was over.

“It’s been a great success,” said Rowena.

“So it should be with all the trouble you’ve taken.”

“It was lovely,” said Judith quietly. “Lovely.”

“And now,” she added ruefully, “we’ll have to clear up a bit. We can’t leave everything for those poor women tomorrow morning.”

Three

In a flat in London the telephone bell rang. The owner of the flat, Hercule Poirot, stirred in his chair. Disappointment attacked him. He knew before he answered it what it meant. His friend Solly, with whom he had been going to spend the evening, reviving their never-ending controversy about the real culprit in the Canning Road Municipal Baths murder, was about to say that he could not come. Poirot, who had collected certain bits of evidence in favour of his own somewhat far-fetched theory, was deeply disappointed. He did not think his friend Solly would accept his suggestions, but he had no doubt that when Solly in his turn produced his own fantastic beliefs, he himself, Hercule Poirot, would just as easily be able to demolish them in the name of sanity, logic, order and method. It was annoying, to say the least of it, if Solly did not come this evening. But it is true that when they had met earlier in the day, Solly had been racked with a chesty cough and was in a state of highly infectious catarrh.

"He had a nasty cold," said Hercule Poirot, "and no doubt, in spite of the remedies that I have handy here, he would probably have given it to me. It is better that he should not come. Tout de même," he added, with a sigh, "it will mean that now I shall pass a dull evening."

Many of the evenings were dull now, Hercule Poirot thought. His mind, magnificent as it was (for he had never doubted that fact) required stimulation from outside sources. He had never been of a philosophic cast of mind. There were times when he almost regretted that he had not taken to the study of theology instead of going into the police force in his early days. The number of angels who could dance on the point of a needle; it would be interesting to feel that that mattered and to argue passionately on the point with one's colleagues.

His manservant, George, entered the room.

"It was Mr. Solomon Levy, sir."

"Ah yes," said Hercule Poirot.

"He very much regrets that he will not be able to join you this evening. He is in bed with a serious bout of 'flu."

"He has not got 'flu," said Hercule Poirot. "He has only a nasty cold. Everyone always thinks they have 'flu. It sounds more important. One gets more sympathy. The trouble with a catarrhal cold is that it is hard to glean the proper amount of sympathetic consideration from one's friends."

"Just as well he isn't coming here, sir, really," said George. "Those colds in the head are very infectious. Wouldn't be good for you to go down with one of those."

"It would be extremely tedious," Poirot agreed.

The telephone bell rang again.

"And now who has a cold?" he demanded. "I have not asked anyone else."

George crossed towards the telephone.

"I will take the call here," said Poirot. "I have no doubt that it is nothing of interest. But at any rate—" he shrugged his shoulders "—it will perhaps pass the time. Who knows?"

George said, "Very good, sir," and left the room.

Poirot stretched out a hand, raised the receiver, thus stilling the clamour of the bell.

"Hercule Poirot speaks," he said, with a certain grandeur of manner designed to impress whoever was at the other end of the line.

"That's wonderful," said an eager voice. A female voice, slightly impaired with breathlessness. "I thought you'd be sure to be out, that you wouldn't be there."

"Why should you think that?" inquired Poirot.

"Because I can't help feeling that nowadays things always happen to frustrate one. You want someone in a terrible hurry, you feel you can't wait, and you have to wait. I wanted to get hold of you urgently—absolutely urgently."

"And who are you?" asked Hercule Poirot.

The voice, a female one, seemed surprised.

"Don't you know?" it said incredulously.

"Yes, I know," said Hercule Poirot. "You are my friend, Ariadne."

"And I'm in a terrible state," said Ariadne.

"Yes, yes, I can hear that. Have you also been running? You are very breathless, are you not?"

"I haven't exactly been running. It's emotion. Can I come and see you at once?"

Poirot let a few moments elapse before he answered. His friend, Mrs. Oliver, sounded in a highly excitable condition. Whatever was the matter with her, she would no doubt spend a very long time pouring out her grievances, her woes, her frustrations or whatever was ailing her. Once having established herself within Poirot's sanctum, it might be hard to induce her to go home without a certain amount of impoliteness. The things that excited Mrs. Oliver were so numerous and frequently so unexpected that one had to be careful how one embarked upon a discussion of them.

"Something has upset you?"

"Yes. Of course I'm upset. I don't know what to do. I don't know—oh, I don't know anything. What I feel is that I've got to come and tell you—tell you just what's happened, for you're the only person who might know what to do. Who might tell me what I ought to do. So can I come?"

"But certainly, but certainly. I shall be delighted to receive you."

The receiver was thrown down heavily at the other end and Poirot summoned George, reflected a few minutes, then ordered lemon barley water, bitter lemon and a glass of brandy for himself.

“Mrs. Oliver will be here in about ten minutes,” he said.

George withdrew. He returned with the brandy for Poirot, who accepted it with a nod of satisfaction, and George then proceeded to provide the teetotal refreshment that was the only thing likely to appeal to Mrs. Oliver. Poirot took a sip of brandy delicately, fortifying himself for the ordeal which was about to descend upon him.

“It’s a pity,” he murmured to himself, “that she is so scatty. And yet, she has originality of mind. It could be that I am going to enjoy what she is coming to tell me. It could be—” he reflected a minute “—that it may take a great deal of the evening and that it will all be excessively foolish. Eh bien, one must take one’s risks in life.”

A bell sounded. A bell on the outside door of the flat this time. It was not a single pressure of the button. It lasted for a long time with a kind of steady action that was very effective, the sheer making of noise.

“Assuredly, she has excited herself,” said Poirot.

He heard George go to the door, open it, and before any decorous announcement could be made the door of his sitting room opened and Ariadne Oliver charged through it, with George in tow behind her, hanging on to something that looked like a fisherman’s sou’wester and oilskins.

“What on earth are you wearing?” said Hercule Poirot. “Let George take it from you. It’s very wet.”

“Of course it’s wet,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s very wet out. I never thought about water before. It’s a terrible thing to think of.”

Poirot looked at her with interest.

“Will you have some lemon barley water,” he said, “or could I persuade you to a small glass of eau de vie?”

“I hate water,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Poirot looked surprised.

“I hate it. I’ve never thought about it before. What it can do, and everything.”

“My dear friend,” said Hercule Poirot, as George extricated her from the flapping folds of watery oilskin. “Come and sit down here. Let George finally relieve you of—what is it you are wearing?”

“I got it in Cornwall,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Oilskins. A real, proper fisherman’s oilskin.”

“Very useful to him, no doubt,” said Poirot, “but not, I think, so suitable for you. Heavy to wear. But come—sit down and tell me.”

“I don’t know how,” said Mrs. Oliver, sinking into a chair. “Sometimes, you know, I can’t feel it’s really true. But it happened. It really happened.”

“Tell me,” said Poirot.

“That’s what I’ve come for. But now I’ve got here, it’s so difficult because I don’t know where to begin.”

“At the beginning?” suggested Poirot, “or is that too conventional a way of acting?”

“I don’t know when the beginning was. Not really. It could have been a long time ago, you know.”

“Calm yourself,” said Poirot. “Gather together the various threads of this matter in your mind and tell me. What is it that has so upset you?”

“It would have upset you, too,” said Mrs. Oliver. “At least, I suppose it would.” She looked rather doubtful. “One doesn’t know, really, what does upset you. You take so many things with a lot of calm.”

“It is often the best way,” said Poirot.

“All right,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It began with a party.”

“Ah yes,” said Poirot, relieved to have something as ordinary and sane as a party presented to him. “A party. You went to a party and something happened.”

“Do you know what a Hallowe’en party is?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I know what Hallowe’en is,” said Poirot. “The 31st of October.” He twinkled slightly as he said, “When witches ride on broomsticks.”

“There were broomsticks,” said Mrs. Oliver. “They gave prizes for them.”

“Prizes?”

“Yes, for who brought the best decorated ones.”

Poirot looked at her rather doubtfully. Originally relieved at the mention of a party, he now again felt slightly doubtful. Since he knew that Mrs. Oliver did not partake of spirituous liquor, he could not make one of the assumptions that he might have made in any other case.

“A children’s party,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Or rather, an eleven-plus party.”

“Eleven-plus?”

“Well, that’s what they used to call it, you know, in schools. I mean they see how bright you are, and if you’re bright enough to pass your eleven-plus, you go on to a grammar school or something. But if you’re not bright enough, you go to something called a Secondary Modern. A silly name. It doesn’t seem to mean anything.”

“I do not, I confess, really understand what you are talking about,” said Poirot. They seemed to have got away from parties and entered into the realms of education.

Mrs. Oliver took a deep breath and began again.

“It started really,” she said, “with the apples.”

“Ah yes,” said Poirot, “it would. It always might with you, mightn’t it?”

He was thinking to himself of a small car on a hill and a large woman getting out of it, and a bag of apples breaking, and the apples running and cascading down the hill.

“Yes,” he said encouragingly, “apples.”

“Bobbing for apples,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That’s one of the things you do at a Hallowe’en party.”

“Ah yes, I think I have heard of that, yes.”

“You see, all sorts of things were being done. There was bobbing for apples, and cutting sixpence off a tumblerful of flour, and looking in a looking glass—”

“To see your true love’s face?” suggested Poirot knowledgeably.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Oliver, “you’re beginning to understand at last.”

“A lot of old folklore, in fact,” said Poirot, “and this all took place at your party.”

“Yes, it was all a great success. It finished up with Snapdragon. You know, burning raisins in a great dish. I suppose—” her voice faltered, “—I suppose that must be the actual time when it was done.”

“When what was done?”

“A murder. After the Snapdragon everyone went home,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That, you see, was when they couldn’t find her.”

“Find whom?”

“A girl. A girl called Joyce. Everyone called her name and looked around and asked if she’d gone home with anyone else, and her mother got rather annoyed and said that Joyce must have felt tired or ill or something and gone off by herself, and that it was very thoughtless of her not to leave word. All the sort of things that mothers say when things like that happen. But anyway, we couldn’t find Joyce.”

“And had she gone home by herself?”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver, “she hadn’t gone home…” Her voice faltered. “We found her in the end—in the library. That’s where—where someone did it, you know. Bobbing for apples. The bucket was there. A big, galvanized bucket. They wouldn’t have the plastic one. Perhaps if they’d had the plastic one it wouldn’t have happened. It wouldn’t have been heavy enough. It might have tipped over—”

“What happened?” said Poirot. His voice was sharp.

“That’s where she was found,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Someone, you know, someone had shoved her head down into the water with the apples. Shoved her down and held her there so that she was dead, of course. Drowned. Drowned. Just in a galvanized iron bucket nearly full of water. Kneeling there, sticking her head down to bob at an apple. I hate apples,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I never want to see an apple again.”

Poirot looked at her. He stretched out a hand and filled a small glass with cognac.

“Drink this,” he said. “It will do you good.”

Four

Mrs. Oliver put down the glass and wiped her lips.

“You were right,” she said. “That—that helped. I was getting hysterical.”

“You have had a great shock, I see now. When did this happen?”

“Last night. Was it only last night? Yes, yes, of course.”

“And you came to me.”

It was not quite a question, but it displayed a desire for more information than Poirot had yet had.

“You came to me—why?”

“I thought you could help,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You see, it’s—it’s not simple.”

“It could be and it could not,” said Poirot. “A lot depends. You must tell me more, you know. The police, I presume, are in charge. A doctor was, no doubt, called. What did he say?”

“There’s to be an inquest,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Naturally.”

“Tomorrow or the next day.”

“This girl, Joyce, how old was she?”

“I don’t know exactly. I should think perhaps twelve or thirteen.”

“Small for her age?”

“No, no, I should think rather mature, perhaps. Lumpy,” said Mrs. Oliver.

"Well-developed? You mean sexy-looking?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. But I don't think that was the kind of crime it was—I mean that would have been more simple, wouldn't it?"

"It is the kind of crime," said Poirot, "of which one reads every day in the paper. A girl who is attacked, a school child who is assaulted—yes, every day. This happened in a private house which makes it different, but perhaps not so different as all that. But all the same, I'm not sure yet that you've told me everything."

"No, I don't suppose I have," said Mrs. Oliver. "I haven't told you the reason, I mean, why I came to you."

"You knew this Joyce, you knew her well?"

"I didn't know her at all. I'd better explain to you, I think, just how I came to be there."

"There is where?"

"Oh, a place called Woodleigh Common."

"Woodleigh Common," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Now where lately—" he broke off.

"It's not very far from London. About—oh, thirty to forty miles, I think. It's near Medchester. It's one of those places where there are a few nice houses, but where a certain amount of new building has been done. Residential. A good school nearby, and people can commute from there to London or into Medchester. It's quite an ordinary sort of place where people with what you might call everyday reasonable incomes live."

"Woodleigh Common," said Poirot again, thoughtfully.

"I was staying with a friend there. Judith Butler. She's a widow. I went on a Hellenic cruise this year and Judith was on the cruise and we became friends. She's got a daughter. A girl called Miranda who is twelve or thirteen. Anyway, she asked me to come and stay and she said friends of hers were giving this party for children, and it was to be a Hallowe’en party. She said perhaps I had some interesting ideas.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “she did not suggest this time that you should arrange a murder hunt or anything of that kind?”

“Good gracious, no,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Do you think I should ever consider such a thing again?”

“I should think it unlikely.”

“But it happened, that’s what’s so awful,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I mean, it couldn’t have happened just because I was there, could it?”

“I do not think so. At least—Did any of the people at the party know who you were?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver. “One of the children said something about my writing books and that they liked murders. That’s how it—well—that’s what led to the thing—I mean to the thing that made me come to you.”

“Which you still haven’t told me.”

“Well, you see, at first I didn’t think of it. Not straight away. I mean, children do queer things sometimes. I mean there are queer children about, children who—well, once I suppose they would have been in mental homes and things, but they send them home now and tell them to lead ordinary lives or something, and then they go and do something like this.”

“There were some young adolescents there?”

“There were two boys, or youths as they always seem to call them in police reports. About sixteen to eighteen.”

“I suppose one of them might have done it. Is that what the police think?”

“They don’t say what they think,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but they looked as though they might think so.”

"Was this Joyce an attractive girl?"

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Oliver. "You mean attractive to boys, do you?"

"No," said Poirot, "I think I meant—well, just the plain simple meaning of the word."

"I don't think she was a very nice girl," said Mrs. Oliver, "not one you'd want to talk to much. She was the sort of girl who shows off and boasts. It's a rather tiresome age, I think. It sounds unkind what I'm saying, but—"

"It is not unkind in murder to say what the victim was like," said Poirot. "It is very, very necessary. The personality of the victim is the cause of many a murder. How many people were there in the house at the time?"

"You mean for the party and so on? Well, I suppose there were five or six women, some mothers, a schoolteacher, a doctor's wife, or sister, I think, a couple of middle-aged married people, the two boys of sixteen to eighteen, a girl of fifteen, two or three of eleven or twelve—well that sort of thing. About twenty-five or thirty in all, perhaps."

"Any strangers?"

"They all knew each other, I think. Some better than others. I think the girls were mostly in the same school. There were a couple of women who had come in to help with the food and the supper and things like that. When the party ended, most of the mothers went home with their children. I stayed behind with Judith and a couple of others to help Rowena Drake, the woman who gave the party, to clear up a bit, so the cleaning women who came in the morning wouldn't have so much mess to deal with. You know, there was a lot of flour about, and paper caps out of crackers and different things. So we swept up a bit, and we got to the library last of all. And that's when—when we found her. And then I remembered what she'd said."

"What who had said?"

"Joyce."

“What did she say? We are coming to it now, are we not? We are coming to the reason why you are here?”

“Yes. I thought it wouldn’t mean anything to—oh, to a doctor or the police or anyone, but I thought it might mean something to you.”

“Eh bien,” said Poirot, “tell me. Was this something Joyce said at the party?”

“No—earlier in the day. That afternoon when we were fixing things up. It was after they’d talked about my writing murder stories and Joyce said ‘I saw a murder once’ and her mother or somebody said ‘Don’t be silly, Joyce, saying things like that’ and one of the older girls said ‘You’re just making it up’ and Joyce said ‘I did. I saw it I tell you. I did. I saw someone do a murder,’ but no one believed her. They just laughed and she got very angry.”

“Did you believe her?”

“No, of course not.”

“I see,” said Poirot, “yes, I see.” He was silent for some moments, tapping a finger on the table. Then he said: “I wonder—she gave no details—no names?”

“No. She went on boasting and shouting a bit and being angry because most of the other girls were laughing at her. The mothers, I think, and the older people, were rather cross with her. But the girls and the younger boys just laughed at her! They said things like ‘Go on, Joyce, when was this? Why did you never tell us about it?’ And Joyce said, ‘I’d forgotten all about it, it was so long ago.’”

“Aha! Did she say how long ago?”

“‘Years ago,’” she said. You know, in rather a would-be grown-up way.

“‘Why didn’t you go and tell the police then?’ one of the girls said. Ann, I think, or Beatrice. Rather a smug, superior girl.”

“Aha, and what did she say to that?”

“She said: ‘Because I didn’t know at the time it was a murder.’”

“A very interesting remark,” said Poirot, sitting up rather straighter in his chair.

“She’d got a bit mixed up by then, I think,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You know, trying to explain herself and getting angry because they were all teasing her.

“They kept asking her why she hadn’t gone to the police, and she kept on saying ‘Because I didn’t know then that it was a murder. It wasn’t until afterwards that it came to me quite suddenly that that was what I had seen.’”

“But nobody showed any signs of believing her—and you yourself did not believe her—but when you came across her dead you suddenly felt that she might have been speaking the truth?”

“Yes, just that. I didn’t know what I ought to do, or what I could do. But then, later, I thought of you.”

Poirot bowed his head gravely in acknowledgement. He was silent for a moment or two, then he said:

“I must pose to you a serious question, and reflect before you answer it. Do you think that this girl had really seen a murder? Or do you think that she merely believed that she had seen a murder?”

“The first, I think,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I didn’t at the time. I just thought that she was vaguely remembering something she had once seen and was working it up to make it sound important and exciting. She became very vehement, saying, ‘I did see it, I tell you. I did see it happen.’”

“And so.”

“And so I’ve come along to you,” said Mrs. Oliver, “because the only way her death makes sense is that there really was a murder and that she was a witness to it.”

“That would involve certain things. It would involve that one of the people who were at the party committed the murder, and that that same person must also have been there earlier that day and have heard what Joyce said.”

“You don’t think I’m just imagining things, do you?” said Mrs. Oliver. “Do you think that it is all just my very far-fetched imagination?”

“A girl was murdered,” said Poirot. “Murdered by someone who had strength enough to hold her head down in a bucket of water. An ugly murder and a murder that was committed with what we might call, no time to lose. Somebody was threatened, and whoever it was struck as soon as it was humanly possible.”

“Joyce could not have known who it was who did the murder she saw,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I mean she wouldn’t have said what she did if there was someone actually in the room who was concerned.”

“No,” said Poirot, “I think you are right there. She saw a murder, but she did not see the murderer’s face. We have to go beyond that.”

“I don’t understand exactly what you mean.”

“It could be that someone who was there earlier in the day and heard Joyce’s accusation knew about the murder, knew who committed the murder, perhaps was closely involved with that person. It may have been that someone thought he was the only person who knew what his wife had done, or his mother or his daughter or his son. Or it might have been a woman who knew what her husband or mother or daughter or son had done. Someone who thought that no one else knew. And then Joyce began talking….”

“And so—”

“Joyce had to die?”

“Yes. What are you going to do?”

“I have just remembered,” said Hercule Poirot, “why the name of Woodleigh Common was familiar to me.”

Five

Hercule Poirot looked over the small gate which gave admission to Pine Crest. It was a modern, perky little house, nicely built. Hercule Poirot was slightly out of breath. The small, neat house in front of him was very suitably named. It was on a hill top, and the hill top was planted with a few sparse pines. It had a small neat garden and a large elderly man was trundling along a path a big tin galvanized waterer.

Superintendent Spence's hair was now grey all over instead of having a neat touch of grey hair at the temples. He had not shrunk much in girth. He stopped trundling his can and looked at the visitor at the gate. Hercule Poirot stood there without moving.

"God bless my soul," said Superintendent Spence. "It must be. It can't be but it is. Yes, it must be. Hercule Poirot, as I live."

"Aha," said Hercule Poirot, "you know me. That is gratifying."

"May your moustaches never grow less," said Spence.

He abandoned the watering can and came down to the gate.

"Diabolical weeds," he said. "And what brings you down here?"

"What has brought me to many places in my time," said Hercule Poirot, "and what once a good many years ago brought you to see me. Murder."

"I've done with murder," said Spence, "except in the case of weeds. That's what I'm doing now. Applying weed killer. Never so easy as you think, something's always wrong, usually the weather. Mustn't be too wet, mustn't be too dry and all the rest of it. How did you know where to find me?" he asked as he unlatched the gate and Poirot passed through.

"You sent me a Christmas card. It had your new address notified on it."

"Ah yes, so I did. I'm old-fashioned, you know. I like to send round cards at Christmas time to a few old friends."

"I appreciate that," said Poirot.

Spence said, "I'm an old man now."

"We are both old men."

"Not much grey in your hair," said Spence.

"I attend to that with a bottle," said Hercule Poirot. "There is no need to appear in public with grey hair unless you wish to do so."

"Well, I don't think jet black would suit me," said Spence.

"I agree," said Poirot. "You look most distinguished with grey hair."

"I should never think of myself as a distinguished man."

"I think of you as such. Why have you come to live in Woodleigh Common?"

"As a matter of fact, I came here to join forces with a sister of mine. She lost her husband, her children are married and living abroad, one in Australia and the other in South Africa. So I moved in here. Pensions don't go far nowadays, but we do pretty comfortably living together. Come and sit down."

He led the way on to the small glazed-in verandah where there were chairs and a table or two. The autumn sun fell pleasantly upon this retreat.

"What shall I get you?" said Spence. "No fancy stuff here, I'm afraid. No blackcurrant or rose hip syrup or any of your patent things. Beer? Or shall I get Elspeth to make you a cup of tea? Or I can do you a shandy or Coca-Cola or some cocoa if you like it. My sister, Elspeth, is a cocoa drinker."

"You are very kind. For me, I think a shandy. The ginger beer and the beer? That is right, is it not?"

“Absolutely so.”

He went into the house and returned shortly afterwards carrying two large glass mugs. “I’m joining you,” he said.

He drew a chair up to the table and sat down, placing the two glasses in front of himself and Poirot.

“What was it you said just now?” he said, raising his glass. “We won’t say ‘Here’s to crime.’ I’ve done with crime, and if you mean the crime I think you do, in fact which I think you have to do, because I don’t recall any other crime just lately. I don’t like the particular form of murder we’ve just had.”

“No. I do not think you would do so.”

“We are talking about the child who had her head shoved into a bucket?”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that is what I am talking about.”

“I don’t know why you come to me,” said Spence. “I’m nothing to do with the police nowadays. All that’s over many years ago.”

“Once a policeman,” said Hercule Poirot, “always a policeman. That is to say, there is always the point of view of the policeman behind the point of view of the ordinary man. I know, I who talk to you. I, too, started in the police force in my country.”

“Yes, so you did. I remember now your telling me. Well, I suppose one’s outlook is a bit slanted, but it’s a long time since I’ve had any active connection.”

“But you hear the gossip,” said Poirot. “You have friends of your own trade. You will hear what they think or suspect or what they know.”

Spence sighed.

“One knows too much,” he said, “that is one of the troubles nowadays. There is a crime, a crime of which the pattern is familiar, and you know, that is to say the active police officers know, pretty well who's probably done that crime. They don't tell the newspapers but they make their inquiries, and they know. But whether they're going to get any further than that—well, things have their difficulties."

"You mean the wives and the girl friends and the rest of it?"

"Partly that, yes. In the end, perhaps, one gets one's man. Sometimes a year or two passes. I'd say, you know, roughly, Poirot, that more girls nowadays marry wrong 'uns than they ever used to in my time."

Hercule Poirot considered, pulling his moustaches.

"Yes," he said, "I can see that that might be so. I suspect that girls have always been partial to the bad lots, as you say, but in the past there were safeguards."

"That's right. People were looking after them. Their mothers looked after them. Their aunts and their older sisters looked after them. Their younger sisters and brothers knew what was going on. Their fathers were not averse to kicking the wrong young men out of the house. Sometimes, of course, the girls used to run away with one of the bad lots. Nowadays there's no need even to do that. Mother doesn't know who the girl's out with, father's not told who the girl is out with, brothers know who the girl is out with but they think 'more fool her.' If the parents refuse consent, the couple go before a magistrate and manage to get permission to marry, and then when the young man who everyone knows is a bad lot proceeds to prove to everybody, including his wife, that he is a bad lot, the fat's in the fire! But love's love; the girl doesn't want to think that her Henry has these revolting habits, these criminal tendencies, and all the rest of it. She'll lie for him, swear black's white for him and everything else. Yes, it's difficult. Difficult for us, I mean. Well, there's no good going on saying things were better in the old days. Perhaps we only thought so. Anyway, Poirot, how did you get yourself mixed up in all this? This isn't your part of the country, is it? Always thought you lived in London. You used to when I knew you."

"I still live in London. I involved myself here at the request of a friend, Mrs. Oliver. You remember Mrs. Oliver?"

Spence raised his head, closed his eyes and appeared to reflect.

“Mrs. Oliver? Can’t say that I do.”

“She writes books. Detective stories. You met her, if you will throw your mind back, during the time that you persuaded me to investigate the murder of Mrs. McGinty. You will not have forgotten Mrs. McGinty?”

“Good lord, no. But it was a long time ago. You did me a good turn there, Poirot, a very good turn. I went to you for help and you didn’t let me down.”

“I was honoured—flattered—that you should come to consult me,” said Poirot. “I must say that I despaired once or twice. The man we had to save—to save his neck in those days I believe, it is long ago enough for that—was a man who was excessively difficult to do anything for. The kind of standard example of how not to do anything useful for himself.”

“Married that girl, didn’t he? The wet one. Not the bright one with the peroxide hair. Wonder how they got on together. Have you ever heard about it?”

“No,” said Poirot. “I presume all goes well with them.”

“Can’t see what she saw in him.”

“It is difficult,” said Poirot, “but it is one of the great consolations in nature that a man, however unattractive, will find that he is attractive—to some woman. One can only say or hope that they married and lived happily ever afterwards.”

“Shouldn’t think they lived happily ever afterwards if they had to have Mother to live with them.”

“No, indeed,” said Poirot. “Or Stepfather,” he added.

“Well,” said Spence, “here we are talking of old days again. All that’s over. I always thought that man, can’t remember his name now, ought to have run an undertaking parlour. Had just the face and manner for it. Perhaps he did.

The girl had some money, didn’t she? Yes, he’d have made a very good undertaker. I can see him, all in black, calling for orders for the funeral. Perhaps he can even have been enthusiastic over the right kind of elm or teak or whatever they use for coffins. But he’d never have made good selling insurance or real estate. Anyway, don’t let’s harp back.” Then he said suddenly, “Mrs. Oliver. Ariadne Oliver. Apples. Is that how she’s got herself mixed up in this? That poor child got her head shoved under water in a bucket of floating apples, didn’t she, at a party? Is that what interested Mrs. Oliver?”

“I don’t think she was particularly attracted because of the apples,” said Poirot, “but she was at the party.”

“Do you say she lived here?”

“No, she does not live here. She was staying with a friend, a Mrs. Butler.”

“Butler? Yes, I know her. Lives down not far from the church. Widow. Husband was an airline pilot. Has a daughter. Rather nice-looking girl. Pretty manners. Mrs. Butler’s rather an attractive woman, don’t you think so?”

“I have as yet barely met her, but, yes, I thought she was very attractive.”

“And how does this concern you, Poirot? You weren’t here when it happened?”

“No. Mrs. Oliver came to me in London. She was upset, very upset. She wanted me to do something.”

A faint smile showed on Superintendent Spence’s face.

“I see. Same old story. I came up to you, too, because I wanted you to do something.”

“And I have carried things one step further,” said Poirot. “I have come to you.”

"Because you want me to do something? I tell you, there's nothing I can do."

"Oh yes there is. You can tell me all about the people. The people who live here. The people who went to that party. The fathers and mothers of the children who were at the party. The school, the teachers, the lawyers, the doctors. Somebody, during a party, induced a child to kneel down, and perhaps, laughing, saying: 'I'll show you the best way to get hold of an apple with your teeth. I know the trick of it.' And then he or she—whoever it was—put a hand on that girl's head. There wouldn't have been much struggle or noise or anything of that kind."

"A nasty business," said Spence. "I thought so when I heard about it. What do you want to know? I've been here a year. My sister's been here longer—two or three years. It's not a big community. It's not a particularly settled one either. People come and go. The husband has a job in either Medchester or Great Canning, or one of the other places round about. Their children go to school here. Then perhaps the husband changes his job and they go somewhere else. It's not a fixed community. Some of the people have been here a long time, Miss Emlyn, the schoolmistress, has, Dr. Ferguson has. But on the whole, it fluctuates a bit."

"One supposes," said Hercule Poirot, "that having agreed with you that this was a nasty business, I might hope that you would know who are the nasty people here."

"Yes," said Spence. "It's the first thing one looks for, isn't it? And the next thing one looks for is a nasty adolescent in a thing of this kind. Who wants to strangle or drown or get rid of a lump of a girl of thirteen? There doesn't seem to have been any evidence of a sexual assault or anything of that kind, which would be the first thing one looks for. Plenty of that sort of thing in every small town or village nowadays. There again, I think there's more of it than there used to be in my young day. We had our mentally disturbed, or whatever they call them, but not so many as we have now. I expect there are more of them let out of the place they ought to be kept safe in. All our mental homes are too full; overcrowded, so doctors say 'Let him or her lead a normal life. Go back and live with his relatives,' etc. And then the nasty bit of goods, or the poor afflicted fellow, whichever way you like to look at it, gets the urge again and another young woman goes out walking and is found in a gravel pit, or is silly enough to take lifts in a car. Children don't come home from school because they've accepted a lift from a stranger, although they've been warned not to. Yes, there's a lot of that nowadays."

"Does that quite fit the pattern we have here?"

"Well, it's the first thing one thinks of," said Spence. "Somebody was at the party who had the urge, shall we say. Perhaps he'd done it before, perhaps he'd only wanted to do it. I'd say roughly that there might be some past history of assaulting a child somewhere. As far as I know, nobody's come up with anything of that kind. Not officially, I mean. There were two in the right age group at the party. Nicholas Ransom, nice looking lad, seventeen or eighteen. He'd be the right age. Comes from the East Coast or somewhere like that, I think. Seems all right. Looks normal enough, but who knows? And there's Desmond, remanded once for a psychiatric report, but I wouldn't say there was much to it. It's got to be someone at the party, though of course I suppose anyone could have come in from outside. A house isn't usually locked up during a party. There's a side door open, or a side window. One of our half-baked people, I suppose could have come along to see what was on and sneaked in. A pretty big risk to take. Would a child agree, a child who'd gone to a party, to go playing apple games with anyone she didn't know? Anyway, you haven't explained yet, Poirot, what brings you into it. You said it was Mrs. Oliver. Some wild idea of hers?"

"Not exactly a wild idea," said Poirot. "It is true that writers are prone to wild ideas. Ideas, perhaps, which are on the far side of probability. But this was simply something that she heard the girl say."

"What, the child Joyce?"

"Yes."

Spence leant forward and looked at Poirot inquiringly.

"I will tell you," said Poirot.

Quietly and succinctly he recounted the story as Mrs. Oliver had told it to him.

“I see,” said Spence. He rubbed his moustache. “The girl said that, did she? Said she’d seen a murder committed. Did she say when or how?”

“No,” said Poirot.

“What led up to it?”

“Some remark, I think, about the murders in Mrs. Oliver’s books. Somebody said something about it to Mrs. Oliver. One of the children, I think, to the effect that there wasn’t enough blood in her books or enough bodies. And then Joyce spoke up and said she’d seen a murder once.”

“Boasted of it? That’s the impression you’re giving me.”

“That’s the impression Mrs. Oliver got. Yes, she boasted of it.”

“It mightn’t have been true.”

“No, it might not have been true at all,” said Poirot.

“Children often make these extravagant statements when they wish to call attention to themselves or to make an effect. On the other hand, it might have been true. Is that what you think?”

“I do not know,” said Poirot. “A child boasts of having witnessed a murder. Only a few hours later, that child is dead. You must admit that there are grounds for believing that it might—it’s a far-fetched idea perhaps—but it might have been cause and effect. If so, somebody lost no time.”

“Definitely,” said Spence. “How many were present at the time the girl made her statement re murder, do you know exactly?”

“All that Mrs. Oliver said was that she thought there were about fourteen or fifteen people, perhaps more. Five or six children, five or six grown-ups who were running the show. But for exact information I must rely on you.”

"Well, that will be easy enough," said Spence. "I don't say I know offhand at the moment, but it's easily obtained from the locals. As to the party itself, I know pretty well already. A preponderance of women, on the whole. Fathers don't turn up much at children's parties. But they look in, sometimes, or come to take their children home. Dr. Ferguson was there, the vicar was there. Otherwise, mothers, aunts, social workers, two teachers from the school. Oh, I can give you a list—and roughly about fourteen children. The youngest not more than ten—running on into teenagers."

"And I suppose you would know the list of probables amongst them?" said Poirot.

"Well, it won't be so easy now if what you think is true."

"You mean you are no longer looking for a sexually disturbed personality. You are looking instead for somebody who has committed a murder and got away with it, someone who never expected it to be found out and who suddenly got a nasty shock."

"Blest if I can think who it could have been, all the same," said Spence. "I shouldn't have said we had any likely murderers round here. And certainly nothing spectacular in the way of murders."

"One can have likely murderers anywhere," said Poirot, "or shall I say unlikely murderers, but nevertheless murderers. Because unlikely murderers are not so prone to be suspected. There is probably not very much evidence against them, and it would be a rude shock to such a murderer to find that there had actually been an eyewitness to his or her crime."

"Why didn't Joyce say anything at the time? That's what I'd like to know. Was she bribed to silence by someone, do you think? Too risky surely."

"No," said Poirot. "I gather from what Mrs. Oliver mentioned that she didn't recognize that it was a murder she was looking at at the time."

"Oh, surely that's most unlikely," said Spence.

“Not necessarily,” said Poirot. “A child of thirteen was speaking. She was remembering something she’d seen in the past. We don’t know exactly when. It might have been three or even four years previously. She saw something but she didn’t realize its true significance. That might apply to a lot of things you know, mon cher. Some rather peculiar car accident. A car where it appeared that the driver drove straight at the person who was injured or perhaps killed. A child might not realize it was deliberate at the time. But something someone said, or something she saw or heard a year or two later might awaken her memory and she’d think perhaps: ‘A or B or X did it on purpose.’ ‘Perhaps it was really a murder, not just an accident.’ And there are plenty of other possibilities. Some of them I will admit suggested by my friend, Mrs. Oliver, who can easily come up with about twelve different solutions to everything, most of them not very probable but all of them faintly possible. Tablets added to a cup of tea administered to someone. Roughly that sort of thing. A push perhaps on a dangerous spot. You have no cliffs here, which is rather a pity from the point of view of likely theories. Yes, I think there could be plenty of possibilities. Perhaps it is some murder story that the girl reads which recalls to her an incident. It may have been an incident that puzzled her at the time, and she might, when she reads the story, say: ‘Well, that might have been so-and-so and so-and-so. I wonder if he or she did it on purpose?’ Yes, there are a lot of possibilities.”

“And you have come here to inquire into them?”

“It would be in the public interest, I think, don’t you?” said Poirot.

“Ah, we’re to be public spirited, are we, you and I?”

“You can at least give me information,” said Poirot. “You know the people here.”

“I’ll do what I can,” said Spence. “And I’ll rope in Elspeth. There’s not much about people she doesn’t know.”

Six

Satisfied with what he had achieved, Poirot took leave of his friend.

The information he wanted would be forthcoming—he had no doubt as to that. He had got Spence interested. And Spence, once set upon a trail, was not one to relinquish it. His reputation as a retired high-ranking officer of the C.I.D. would have won him friends in the local police departments concerned.

And next—Poirot consulted his watch—he was to meet Mrs. Oliver in exactly ten minutes' time outside a house called Apple Trees. Really, the name seemed uncannily appropriate.

Really, thought Poirot, one didn't seem able to get away from apples. Nothing could be more agreeable than a juicy English apple—And yet here were apples mixed up with broomsticks, and witches, and old-fashioned folklore, and a murdered child.

Following the route indicated to him, Poirot arrived to the minute outside a red brick Georgian style house with a neat beech hedge enclosing it, and a pleasant garden showing beyond.

He put his hand out, raised the latch and entered through the wrought iron gate which bore a painted board labelled "Apple Trees." A path led up to the front door. Looking rather like one of those Swiss clocks where figures come out automatically of a door above the clock face, the front door opened and Mrs. Oliver emerged on the steps.

"You're absolutely punctual," she said breathlessly. "I was watching for you from the window."

Poirot turned and closed the gate carefully behind him. Practically on every occasion that he had met Mrs. Oliver, whether by appointment or by accident, a motif of apples seemed to be introduced almost immediately. She was either eating an apple or had been eating an apple—witness an apple core nestling on her broad chest—or was carrying a bag of apples. But today there was no apple in evidence at all. Very correct, Poirot thought approvingly. It would have been in very bad taste to be gnawing an apple here, on the scene of what had been not only a crime but a tragedy. For what else can it be but that? thought Poirot. The sudden death of a child of only thirteen years old. He did not like to think of it, and because he did not like to think of it he was all the more decided in his mind that that was exactly what he was going to think of until by some means or other, light should shine out of the darkness and he should see clearly what he had come here to see.

"I can't think why you wouldn't come and stay with Judith Butler," said Mrs. Oliver. "Instead of going to a fifth-class guest house."

"Because it is better that I should survey things with a certain degree of aloofness," said Poirot. "One must not get involved, you comprehend."

"I don't see how you can avoid getting involved," said Mrs. Oliver. "You've got to see everyone and talk to them, haven't you?"

"That most decidedly," said Poirot.

"Who have you seen so far?"

"My friend, Superintendent Spence."

"What's he like nowadays?" said Mrs. Oliver.

"A good deal older than he was," said Poirot.

"Naturally," said Mrs. Oliver, "what else would you expect? Is he deafer or blinder or fatter or thinner?"

Poirot considered.

"He has lost a little weight. He wears spectacles for reading the paper. I do not think he is deaf, not to any noticeable extent."

"And what does he think about it all?"

"You go too quickly," said Poirot.

"And what exactly are you and he going to do?"

"I have planned my programme," said Poirot. "First I have seen and consulted with my old friend. I asked him to get me, perhaps, some information that would not be easy to get otherwise."

"You mean the police here will be his buddies and he'll get a lot of inside stuff from them?"

"Well, I should not put it exactly like that, but yes, those are the lines along which I have been thinking."

"And after that?"

"I come to meet you here, Madame. I have to see just where this thing happened."

Mrs. Oliver turned her head and looked up at the house.

"It doesn't look the sort of house there'd be a murder in, does it?" she said.

Poirot thought again: What an unerring instinct she has!

"No," he said, "it does not look at all that sort of a house. After I have seen where, then I go with you to see the mother of the dead child. I hear what she can tell me. This afternoon my friend Spence is making an appointment for me to talk with the local inspector at a suitable hour. I should also like a talk with the doctor here. And possibly the headmistress at the school. At six o'clock I drink tea and eat sausages with my friend Spence and his sister again in their house and we discuss."

"What more do you think he'll be able to tell you?"

"I want to meet his sister. She has lived here longer than he has. He came here to join her when her husband died. She will know, perhaps, the people here fairly well."

“Do you know what you sound like?” said Mrs. Oliver. “A computer. You know. You’re programming yourself. That’s what they call it, isn’t it? I mean you’re feeding all these things into yourself all day and then you’re going to see what comes out.”

“It is certainly an idea you have there,” said Poirot, with some interest. “Yes, yes, I play the part of the computer. One feeds in the information—”

“And supposing you come up with all the wrong answers?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“That would be impossible,” said Hercule Poirot. “Computers do not do that sort of a thing.”

“They’re not supposed to,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but you’d be surprised at the things that happen sometimes. My last electric light bill, for instance. I know there’s a proverb which says ‘To err is human,’ but a human error is nothing to what a computer can do if it tries. Come on in and meet Mrs. Drake.”

Mrs. Drake was certainly something, Poirot thought. She was a tall, handsome woman of forty-odd, her golden hair was lightly tinged with grey, her eyes were brilliantly blue, she oozed competence from the fingertips downwards. Any party she had arranged would have been a successful one. In the drawing room a tray of morning coffee with two sugared biscuits was awaiting them.

Apple Trees, he saw, was a most admirably kept house. It was well furnished, it had carpets of excellent quality, everything was scrupulously polished and cleaned, and the fact that it had hardly any outstanding object of interest in it was not readily noticeable. One would not have expected it. The colours of the curtains and the covers were pleasant but conventional. It could have been let furnished at any moment for a high rent to a desirable tenant, without having to put away any treasures or make any alterations to the arrangement of the furniture.

Mrs. Drake greeted Mrs. Oliver and Poirot and concealed almost entirely what Poirot could not help suspecting was a feeling of vigorously suppressed annoyance at the position in which she found herself as the hostess at a social occasion at which something as antisocial as murder had occurred. As a prominent member of the community of Woodleigh Common, he suspected that she felt an unhappy sense of having herself in some way proved inadequate. What had occurred should not have occurred. To someone else in someone else’s house—yes. But at a party for children, arranged by her, given by her, organized by her, nothing like this ought to have happened. Somehow or other she ought to have seen to it that it did not happen. And Poirot also had a suspicion that she was seeking round irritably in the back of her mind for a reason. Not so much a reason for murder having taken place, but to find out and pin down some inadequacy on the part of someone who had been helping her and who had by some mismanagement or some lack of perception failed to realize that something like this could happen.

“Monsieur Poirot,” said Mrs. Drake, in her fine speaking voice, which Poirot thought would come over excellently in a small lecture room or the village hall, “I am so pleased you could come down here. Mrs. Oliver has been telling me how invaluable your help will be to us in this terrible crisis.”

“Rest assured, Madame, I shall do what I can, but as you no doubt realize from your experience of life, it is going to be a difficult business.”

“Difficult?” said Mrs. Drake. “Of course it’s going to be difficult. It seems incredible, absolutely incredible, that such an awful thing should have happened. I suppose,” she added, “the police may know something? Inspector Raglan has a very good reputation locally, I believe. Whether or not they ought to call Scotland Yard in, I don’t know. The idea seems to be that this poor child’s death must have had a local significance. I needn’t tell you, Monsieur Poirot—after all, you read the papers as much as I do—that there have been very many sad fatalities with children all over the countryside. They seem to be getting more and more frequent. Mental instability seems to be on the increase, though I must say that mothers and families generally are not looking after their children properly, as they used to do. Children are sent home from school alone, on dark evenings, go alone on dark early mornings. And children, however much you warn them, are unfortunately very foolish when it comes to being offered a lift in a smart-looking car. They believe what they're told. I suppose one cannot help that."

"But what happened here, Madame, was of an entirely different nature."

"Oh, I know—I know. That is why I used the term incredible. I still cannot quite believe it," said Mrs. Drake. "Everything was entirely under control. All the arrangements were made. Everything was going perfectly, all according to plan. It just seems—seems incredible. Personally I consider myself that there must be what I call an outside significance to this. Someone walked into the house—not a difficult thing to do under the circumstances—someone of highly disturbed mentality, I suppose, the kind of people who are let out of mental homes simply because there is no room for them there, as far as I can see. Nowadays, room has to be made for fresh patients all the time. Anyone peeping in through a window could see a children's party was going on, and this poor wretch—if one can really feel pity for these people, which I really must say I find it very hard to do myself sometimes—enticed this child away somehow and killed her. You can't think such a thing could happen, but it did happen."

"Perhaps you would show me where—"

"Of course. No more coffee?"

"I thank you, no."

Mrs. Drake got up. "The police seem to think it took place while the Snapdragon was going on. That was taking place in the dining room."

She walked across the hall, opened the door and, rather in the manner of someone doing the honours of a stately home to a party of charabanc goers, indicated the large dining table and the heavy velvet curtains.

"It was dark here, of course, except for the blazing dish. And now—"

She led them across the hall and opened the door of a small room with armchairs, sporting prints and bookshelves.

“The library,” said Mrs. Drake, and shivered a little. “The bucket was here. On a plastic sheet, of course—”

Mrs. Oliver had not accompanied them into the room. She was standing outside in the hall—

“I can’t come in,” she said to Poirot. “It makes me think of it too much.”

“There’s nothing to see now,” said Mrs. Drake. “I mean, I’m just showing you where, as you asked.”

“I suppose,” said Poirot, “there was water—a good deal of water.”

“There was water in the bucket, of course,” said Mrs. Drake.

She looked at Poirot as though she thought that he was not quite all there.”

“And there was water on the sheet. I mean, if the child’s head was pushed under water, there would be a lot of water splashed about.”

“Oh yes. Even while the bobbing was going on, the bucket had to be filled up once or twice.”

“So the person who did it? That person also would have got wet, one would think.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose so.”

“That was not specially noticed?”

“No, no, the Inspector asked me about that. You see, by the end of the evening nearly everyone was a bit dishevelled or damp or floury. There doesn’t seem to be any useful clues there at all. I mean, the police didn’t think so.”

“No,” said Poirot. “I suppose the only clue was the child herself. I hope you will tell me all you know about her.”

“About Joyce?”

Mrs. Drake looked slightly taken aback. It was as though Joyce in her mind had by now retreated so far out of things that she was quite surprised to be reminded of her.

“The victim is always important,” said Poirot. “The victim, you see, is so often the cause of the crime.”

“Well, I suppose, yes, I see what you mean,” said Mrs. Drake, who quite plainly did not. “Shall we come back to the drawing room?”

“And then you will tell me about Joyce,” said Poirot.

They settled themselves once more in the drawing room.

Mrs. Drake was looking uncomfortable.

“I don’t know really what you expect me to say, Monsieur Poirot,” she said. “Surely all information can be obtained quite easily from the police or from Joyce’s mother. Poor woman, it will be painful for her, no doubt, but—”

“But what I want,” said Poirot, “is not a mother’s estimate of a dead daughter. It is a clear, unbiased opinion from someone who has a good knowledge of human nature. I should say, Madame, that you yourself have been an active worker in many welfare and social fields here. Nobody, I am sure, could sum up more aptly the character and disposition of someone whom you know.”

“Well—it is a little difficult. I mean, children of that age—she was thirteen, I think, twelve or thirteen—are very much alike at a certain age.”

“Ah no, surely not,” said Poirot. “There are very great differences in character, in disposition. Did you like her?”

Mrs. Drake seemed to find the question embarrassing.

“Well, of course I—I liked her. I mean, well, I like all children. Most people do.”

“Ah, there I do not agree with you,” said Poirot. “Some children I consider are most unattractive.”

“Well, I agree, they’re not brought up very well nowadays. Everything seems left to the school, and of course they lead very permissive lives. Have their own choice of friends and—er—oh, really, Monsieur Poirot.”

“Was she a nice child or not a nice child?” said Poirot insistently.

Mrs. Drake looked at him and registered censure.

“You must realize, Monsieur Poirot, that the poor child is dead.”

“Dead or alive, it matters. Perhaps if she was a nice child, nobody would have wanted to kill her, but if she was not a nice child, somebody might have wanted to kill her, and did so—”

“Well, I suppose—Surely it isn’t a question of niceness, is it?”

“It could be. I also understand that she claimed to have seen a murder committed.”

“Oh that,” said Mrs. Drake contemptuously.

“You did not take that statement seriously?”

“Well, of course I didn’t. It was a very silly thing to say.”

“How did she come to say it?”

“Well, I think really they were all rather excited about Mrs. Oliver being here. You are a very famous person, you must remember, dear,” said Mrs. Drake, addressing Mrs. Oliver.

The word “dear” seemed included in her speech without any accompanying enthusiasm.

“I don’t suppose the subject would ever have arisen otherwise, but the children were excited by meeting a famous authoress—”

“So Joyce said that she had seen a murder committed,” said Poirot thoughtfully.

“Yes, she said something of the kind. I wasn’t really listening.”

“But you do remember that she said it?”

“Oh yes, she said it. But I didn’t believe it,” said Mrs. Drake. “Her sister hushed her up at once, very properly.”

“And she was annoyed about that, was she?”

“Yes, she went on saying that it was true.”

“In fact, she boasted about it.”

“When you put it that way, yes.”

“It might have been true, I suppose,” said Poirot.

“Nonsense! I don’t believe it for one minute,” said Mrs. Drake. “It’s the sort of stupid thing Joyce would say.”

“She was a stupid girl?”

“Well, she was the kind, I think, who liked to show off,” said Mrs. Drake. “You know, she always wanted to have seen more or done more than other girls.”

“Not a very lovable character,” said Poirot.

“No indeed,” said Mrs. Drake. “Really the kind that you have to be shutting up all the time.”

“What did the other children who were here have to say about it? Were they impressed?”

“They laughed at her,” said Mrs. Drake. “So, of course, that made her worse.”

“Well,” said Poirot, as he rose, “I am glad to have your positive assurance on that point.” He bowed politely over her hand. “Goodbye, Madame, thank you so much for allowing me to view the scene of this very unpleasant occurrence. I hope it has not recalled unpleasant memories too definitely to you.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Drake, “it is very painful to recall anything of this kind. I had so hoped our little party would go off well. Indeed, it was going off well and everyone seemed to be enjoying it so much till this terrible thing happened. However, the only thing one can do is to try and forget it all. Of course, it’s very unfortunate that Joyce should have made this silly remark about seeing a murder.”

“Have you ever had a murder in Woodleigh Common?”

“Not that I can remember,” said Mrs. Drake firmly.

“In this age of increased crime that we live in,” said Poirot, “that really seems somewhat unusual, does it not?”

“Well, I think there was a lorry driver who killed a pal of his—something like that—and a little girl whom they found buried in a gravel pit about fifteen miles from here, but that was years ago. They were both rather sordid and uninteresting crimes. Mainly the result of drink, I think.”

“In fact, the kind of murder unlikely to have been witnessed by a girl of twelve or thirteen.”

“Most unlikely, I should say. And I can assure you, Monsieur Poirot, this statement that the girl made was solely in order to impress friends and perhaps interest a famous character.” She looked rather coldly across at Mrs. Oliver.

“In fact,” said Mrs. Oliver, “it’s all my fault for being at the party, I suppose.”

“Oh, of course not, my dear, of course I didn’t mean it that way.”

Poirot sighed as he departed from the house with Mrs. Oliver by his side.

“A very unsuitable place for a murder,” he said, as they walked down the path to the gate. “No atmosphere, no haunting sense of tragedy, no character worth murdering, though I couldn’t help thinking that just occasionally someone might feel like murdering Mrs. Drake.”

“I know what you mean. She can be intensely irritating sometimes. So pleased with herself and so complacent.”

“What is her husband like?”

“Oh, she’s a widow. Her husband died a year or two ago. He got polio and had been a cripple for years. He was a banker originally, I think. He was very keen on games and sport and hated having to give all that up and be an invalid.”

“Yes, indeed.” He reverted to the subject of the child Joyce. “Just tell me this. Did anyone who was listening take this assertion of the child Joyce about murder seriously?”

“I don’t know. I shouldn’t have thought anyone did.”

“The other children, for instance?”

“Well, I was thinking really of them. No, I don’t think they believed what Joyce was saying. They thought she was making up things.”

“Did you think that, too?”

“Well, I did really,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Of course,” she added, “Mrs. Drake would like to believe that the murder never really happened, but she can’t very well go as far as that, can she?”

“I understand that this may be painful for her.”

“I suppose it is in a way,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but I think that by now, you know, she is actually getting quite pleased to talk about it. I don’t think she likes to have to bottle it up all the time.”

“Do you like her?” asked Poirot. “Do you think she’s a nice woman?”

“You do ask the most difficult questions. Embarrassing ones,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It seems the only thing you are interested in is whether people are nice or not. Rowena Drake is the bossy type—likes running things and people. She runs this whole place more or less, I should think. But runs it very efficiently. It depends if you like bossy women. I don’t much—”

“What about Joyce’s mother whom we are on our way to see?”

“She’s quite a nice woman. Rather stupid, I should think. I’m sorry for her. It’s pretty awful to have your daughter murdered, isn’t it? And everyone here thinks it was a sex crime which makes it worse.”

“But there was no evidence of sexual assault, or so I understand?”

“No, but people like to think these things happen. It makes it more exciting. You know what people are like.”

“One thinks one does—but sometimes—well—we do not really know at all.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if my friend Judith Butler was to take you to see Mrs. Reynolds? She knows her quite well, and I’m a stranger to her.”

“We will do as planned.”

“The Computer Programme will go on,” murmured Mrs. Oliver rebelliously.

Seven

Mrs. Reynolds was a complete contrast to Mrs. Drake. There was no air of poised competence about her, nor indeed was there ever likely to be.

She was wearing conventional black, had a moist handkerchief clasped in her hand and was clearly prepared to dissolve into tears at any moment.

“It’s very kind of you, I’m sure,” she said to Mrs. Oliver, “to bring a friend of yours down here to help us.” She put a damp hand into Poirot’s and looked at him doubtfully. “And if he can help in any way I’m sure I’ll be very grateful, though I don’t see what anyone can do. Nothing will bring her back, poor child. It’s awful to think of. How anyone could deliberately kill anyone of that age. If she had only cried out—though I suppose he rammed her head under water straight away and held it there. Oh, I can’t bear to think of it. I really can’t.”

“Indeed, Madame, I do not want to distress you. Please do not think of it. I only want to ask you a few questions that might help—help, that is, to find your daughter’s murderer. You’ve no idea yourself, I suppose, who it can possibly be?”

“How could I have any idea? I shouldn’t have thought there was anyone, anyone living here, I mean. This is such a nice place. And the people living here are such nice people. I suppose it was just someone—some awful man who came in through one of the windows. Perhaps he’d taken drugs or something. He saw the light and that it was a party, so he gate-crashed.”

“You are quite sure that the assailant was male?”

“Oh, it must have been.” Mrs. Reynolds sounded shocked. “I’m sure it was. It couldn’t have been a woman, could it?”

“A woman might have been strong enough.”

“Well, I suppose in a way I know what you mean. You mean women are much more athletic nowadays and all that. But they wouldn’t do a thing like this, I’m sure. Joyce was only a child—thirteen years old.”

“I don’t want to distress you by staying here too long, Madame, or to ask you difficult questions. That already, I am sure, the police are doing elsewhere, and I don’t want to upset you by dwelling on painful facts. It was just concerning a remark that your daughter made at the party. You were not there yourself, I think?”

“Well, no, I wasn’t. I haven’t been very well lately and children’s parties can be very tiring. I drove them there, and then later I came back to fetch them. The three children went together, you know. Ann, that’s the older one, she is sixteen, and Leopold who is nearly eleven. What was it Joyce said that you wanted to know about?”

“Mrs. Oliver, who was there, will tell you what your daughter’s words were exactly. She said, I believe, that she had once seen a murder committed.”

“Joyce? Oh, she couldn’t have said a thing like that. What murder could she possibly have seen committed?”

“Well, everyone seems to think it was rather unlikely,” said Poirot. “I just wondered if you thought it likely. Did she ever speak to you about such a thing?”

“Seeing a murder? Joyce?”

“You must remember,” said Poirot, “that the term murder might have been used by someone of Joyce’s age in a rather loose way. It might have been just a question of somebody being run over by a car, or of children fighting together perhaps and one pushing another into a stream or over a bridge. Something that was not meant seriously, but which had an unfortunate result.”

“Well, I can’t think of anything like that happening here that Joyce could have seen, and she certainly never said anything about it to me. She must have been joking.”

“She was very positive,” said Mrs. Oliver. “She kept on saying that it was true and that she’d seen it.”

“Did anyone believe her?” asked Mrs. Reynolds.

“I don’t know,” said Poirot.

“I don’t think they did,” said Mrs. Oliver, “or perhaps they didn’t want to—er—well, encourage her by saying they believed it.”

“They were inclined to jeer at her and say she was making it all up,” said Poirot, less kindhearted than Mrs. Oliver.

“Well, that wasn’t very nice of them,” said Mrs. Reynolds. “As though Joyce would tell a lot of lies about things like that.” She looked flushed and indignant.

“I know. It seems unlikely,” said Poirot. “It was more possible, was it not, that she might have made a mistake, that she might have seen something she did think could have been described as a murder. Some accident, perhaps.”

“She’d have said something about it to me, if so, wouldn’t she?” said Mrs. Reynolds, still indignant.

“One would think so,” said Poirot. “She did not say so at any time in the past? You might have forgotten. Especially if it wasn’t really important.”

“When do you mean?”

“We don’t know,” said Poirot. “That is one of the difficulties. It might have been three weeks ago—or three years. She said she had been ‘quite young’ at the time. What does a thirteen-year-old consider quite young? There was no sensational happening round here that you can recall?”

“Oh, I don’t think so. I mean, you do hear of things. Or read about them in the papers. You know, I mean women being attacked, or a girl and her young man, or things like that. But nothing important that I can remember, nothing that Joyce took an interest in or anything of that kind.”

"But if Joyce said positively she saw a murder, would you think she really thought so?"

"She wouldn't say so unless she really did think so, would she?" said Mrs. Reynolds. "I think she must have got something mixed up really."

"Yes, it seems possible. I wonder," he asked, "if I might speak to your two children who were also at the party?"

"Well, of course, though I don't know what you can expect them to tell you. Ann's doing her work for her 'A' levels upstairs and Leopold's in the garden assembling a model aeroplane."

Leopold was a solid, pudgy-faced boy entirely absorbed, it seemed, in mechanical construction. It was some few moments before he could pay attention to the questions he was being asked.

"You were there, weren't you, Leopold? You heard what your sister said. What did she say?"

"Oh, you mean about the murder?" He sounded bored.

"Yes, that's what I mean," said Poirot. "She said she saw a murder once. Did she really see such a thing?"

"No, of course she didn't," said Leopold. "Who on earth would she see murdered? It was just like Joyce, that."

"How do you mean, it was just like her?"

"Showing off," said Leopold, winding round a piece of wire and breathing forcefully through his nose as he concentrated. "She was an awfully stupid sort of girl," he added. "She'd say anything, you know, to make people sit up and take notice."

"So you really think she invented the whole thing?"

Leopold shifted his gaze to Mrs. Oliver.

“I expect she wanted to impress you a bit,” he said. “You write detective stories, don’t you? I think she was just putting it on so that you should take more notice of her than you did of the others.”

“That would also be rather like her, would it?” said Poirot.

“Oh, she’d say anything,” said Leopold. “I bet nobody believed her though.”

“Were you listening? Do you think anyone believed it?”

“Well, I heard her say it, but I didn’t really listen. Beatrice laughed at her and so did Cathie. They said ‘that’s a tall story,’ or something.”

There seemed little more to be got out of Leopold. They went upstairs to where Ann, looking rather more than her sixteen years, was bending over a table with various study books spread round her.

“Yes, I was at the party,” she said.

“You heard your sister say something about having seen a murder?”

“Oh yes, I heard her. I didn’t take any notice, though.”

“You didn’t think it was true?”

“Of course it wasn’t true. There haven’t been any murders here for ages. I don’t think there’s been a proper murder for years.”

“Then why do you think she said so?”

“Oh, she likes showing off. I mean she used to like showing off. She had a wonderful story once about having travelled to India. My uncle had been on a voyage there and she pretended she went with him. Lots of girls at school actually believed her.”

“So you don’t remember any what you call murders taking place here in the last three or four years?”

“No, only the usual kind,” said Ann. “I mean, the ones you read every day in the newspaper. And they weren’t actually here in Woodleigh Common. They were mostly in Medchester, I think.”

“Who do you think killed your sister, Ann? You must have known her friends, you would know any people who didn’t like her.”

“I can’t imagine who’d want to kill her. I suppose someone who was just batty. Nobody else would, would they?”

“There was no one who had—quarrelled with her or who did not get on with her?”

“You mean, did she have an enemy? I think that’s silly. People don’t have enemies really. There are just people you don’t like.”

As they departed from the room, Ann said:

“I don’t want to be nasty about Joyce, because she’s dead, and it wouldn’t be kind, but she really was the most awful liar, you know. I mean, I’m sorry to say things about my sister, but it’s quite true.”

“Are we making any progress?” said Mrs. Oliver as they left the house.

“None whatever,” said Hercule Poirot. “That is interesting,” he said thoughtfully.

Mrs. Oliver looked as though she didn’t agree with him.

Eight

It was six o'clock at Pine Crest. Hercule Poirot put a piece of sausage into his mouth and followed it up with a sip of tea. The tea was strong and to Poirot singularly unpalatable. The sausage, on the other hand, was delicious. Cooked to perfection. He looked with appreciation across the table to where Mrs. McKay presided over the large brown teapot.

Elspeth McKay was as unlike her brother, Superintendent Spence, as she could be in every way. Where he was broad, she was angular. Her sharp, thin face looked out on the world with shrewd appraisal. She was thin as a thread, yet there was a certain likeness between them. Mainly the eyes and the strongly marked line of the jaw. Either of them, Poirot thought, could be relied upon for judgement and good sense. They would express themselves differently, but that was all. Superintendent Spence would express himself slowly and carefully as the result of due thought and deliberation. Mrs. McKay would pounce, quick and sharp, like a cat upon a mouse.

“A lot depends,” said Poirot, “upon the character of this child. Joyce Reynolds. This is what puzzles me most.”

He looked inquiringly at Spence.

“You can't go by me,” said Spence, “I've not lived here long enough. Better ask Elspeth.”

Poirot looked across the table, his eyebrows raised inquiringly. Mrs. McKay was sharp as usual in response.

“I'd say she was a proper little liar,” she said.

“Not a girl whom you'd trust and believe what she said?”

Elspeth shook her head decidedly.

“No, indeed. Tell a tall tale, she would, and tell it well, mind you. But I'd never believe her.”

“Tell it with the object of showing off?”

“That’s right. They told you the Indian story, didn’t they? There’s many as believed that, you know. Been away for the holidays, the family had. Gone abroad somewhere. I don’t know if it was her father and mother or her uncle and aunt, but they went to India and she came back from those holidays with tall tales of how she’d been taken there with them. Made a good story of it, she did. A Maharajah and a tiger shoot and elephants—ah, it was fine hearing and a lot of those around her here believed it. But I said straight along, she’s telling more than ever happened. Could be, I thought at first, she was just exaggerating. But the story got added to every time. There were more tigers, if you know what I mean. Far more tigers than could possibly happen. And elephants, too, for that matter. I’d known her before, too, telling tall stories.”

“Always to get attention?”

“Aye, you’re right there. She was a great one for getting attention.”

“Because a child told a tall story about a travel trip she never took,” said Superintendent Spence, “you can’t say that every tall tale she told was a lie.”

“It might not be,” said Elspeth, “but I’d say the likelihood was that it usually would be.”

“So you think that if Joyce Reynolds came out with a tale that she’d seen a murder committed, you’d say she was probably lying and you wouldn’t believe the story was true?”

“That’s what I’d think,” said Mrs. McKay.

“You might be wrong,” said her brother.

“Yes,” said Mrs. McKay. “Anyone may be wrong. It’s like the old story of the boy who cried ‘Wolf, wolf,’ and he cried it once too often, when it was a real wolf, and nobody believed him, and so the wolf got him.”

"So you'd sum it up—"

"I'd still say the probabilities are that she wasn't speaking the truth. But I'm a fair woman. She may have been. She may have seen something. Not quite so much as she said she saw, but something."

"And so she got herself killed," said Superintendent Spence. "You've got to mind that, Elspeth. She got herself killed."

"That's true enough," said Mrs. McKay. "And that's why I'm saying maybe I've misjudged her. And if so, I'm sorry. But ask anyone who knew her and they'll tell you that lies came natural to her. It was a party she was at, remember, and she was excited. She'd want to make an effect."

"Indeed, they didn't believe her," said Poirot.

Elspeth McKay shook her head doubtfully.

"Who could she have seen murdered?" asked Poirot.

He looked from brother to sister.

"Nobody," said Mrs. McKay with decision.

"There must have been deaths here, say, over the last three years."

"Oh that, naturally," said Spence. "Just the usual—old folks or invalids or what you'd expect—or maybe a hit-and-run motorist—"

"No unusual or unexpected deaths?"

"Well—" Elspeth hesitated. "I mean—"

Spence took over.

"I've jotted a few names down here." He pushed the paper over to Poirot. "Save you a bit of trouble, asking questions around."

"Are these suggested victims?"

“Hardly as much as that. Say within the range of possibility.”

Poirot read aloud.

“Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe. Charlotte Benfield. Janet White. Lesley Ferrier—” He broke off, looked across the table and repeated the first name. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe.

“Could be,” said Mrs. McKay. “Yes, you might have something there.” She added a word that sounded like “opera.”

“Opera?” Poirot looked puzzled. He had heard of no opera.

“Went off one night, she did,” said Elspeth, “was never heard of again.”

“Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe?”

“No, no. The opera girl. She could have put something in the medicine easily enough. And she came into all the money, didn’t she—or so she thought at the time?”

Poirot looked at Spence for enlightenment.

“And never been heard of since,” said Mrs. McKay. “These foreign girls are all the same.”

The significance of the word “opera” came to Poirot.

“An au pair girl,” he said.

“That’s right. Lived with the old lady, and a week or two after the old lady died, the au pair girl just disappeared.”

“Went off with some man, I’d say,” said Spence.

“Well, nobody knew of him if so,” said Elspeth. “And there’s usually plenty to talk about here. Usually know just who’s going with who.”

"Did anybody think there had been anything wrong about Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's death?" asked Poirot.

"No. She'd got heart trouble. Doctor attended her regularly."

"But you headed your list of possible victims with her, my friend?"

"Well, she was a rich woman, a very rich woman. Her death was not unexpected but it was sudden. I'd say offhand that Dr. Ferguson was surprised, even if only slightly surprised. I think he expected her to live longer. But doctors do have these surprises. She wasn't one to do as the doctor ordered. She'd been told not to overdo things, but she did exactly as she liked. For one thing, she was a passionate gardener, and that doesn't do heart cases any good."

Elspeth McKay took up the tale.

"She came here when her health failed. She was living abroad before. She came here to be near her nephew and niece, Mr. and Mrs. Drake, and she bought the Quarry House. A big Victorian house which included a disused quarry which attracted her as having possibilities. She spent thousands of pounds on turning that quarry into a sunk garden or whatever they call the thing. Had a landscape gardener down from Wisley or one of these places to design it. Oh, I can tell you, it's something to look at."

"I shall go and look at it," said Poirot. "Who knows—it might give me ideas."

"Yes, I would go if I were you. It's worth seeing."

"And she was rich, you say?" said Poirot.

"Widow of a big shipbuilder. She had packets of money."

"Her death was not unexpected because she had a heart condition, but it was sudden," said Spence. "No doubts arose that it was due to anything but natural causes. Cardiac failure, or whatever the longer name is that doctors use. Coronary something."

“No question of an inquest ever arose?”

Spence shook his head.

“It has happened before,” said Poirot. “An elderly woman told to be careful, not to run up and down stairs, not to do any intensive gardening, and so on and so on. But if you get an energetic woman who’s been an enthusiastic gardener all her life and done as she liked in most ways, then she doesn’t always treat these recommendations with due respect.”

“That’s true enough. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe made a wonderful thing of the quarry—or rather, the landscape artist did. Three or four years they worked at it, he and his employer. She’d seen some garden, in Ireland I think it was, when she went on a National Trust tour visiting gardens. With that in mind, they fairly transformed the place. Oh yes, it has to be seen to be believed.”

“Here is a natural death, then,” said Poirot, “certified as such by the local doctor. Is that the same doctor who is here now? And whom I am shortly going to see?”

“Dr. Ferguson—yes. He’s a man of about sixty, good at his job and well-liked here.”

“But you suspect that her death might have been murder? For any other reason than those that you’ve already given me?”

“The opera girl, for one thing,” said Elspeth.

“Why?”

“Well, she must have forged the Will. Who forged the Will if she didn’t?”

“You must have more to tell me,” said Poirot. “What is all this about a forged Will?”

“Well, there was a bit of fuss when it came to probating, or whatever you call it, the old lady’s Will.”

“Was it a new Will?”

“It was what they call—something that sounded like fish—a codi—a codicil.”

Elspeth looked at Poirot, who nodded.

“She’d made Wills before,” said Spence. “All much the same. Bequests to charities, legacies to old servants, but the bulk of her fortune always went to her nephew and his wife, who were her near relatives.”

“And this particular codicil?”

“Left everything to the opera girl,” said Elspeth, “because of her devoted care and kindness. Something like that.”

“Tell me, then, more about the au pair girl.”

“She came from some country in the middle of Europe. Some long name.”

“How long had she been with the old lady?”

“Just over a year.”

“You call her the old lady always. How old was she?”

“Well in the sixties. Sixty-five or six, say.”

“That is not so very old,” said Poirot feelingly.

“Made several Wills, she had, by all accounts,” said Elspeth. “As Bert has told you, all of them much the same. Leaving money to one or two charities and then perhaps she’d change the charities and some different souvenirs to old servants and all that. But the bulk of the money always went to her nephew and his wife, and I think some other old cousin who was dead, though, by the time she died. She left the bungalow she’d built to the landscape man, for him to live in as long as he liked, and some kind of income for which he was to keep up the quarry garden and let it be walked in by the public. Something like that.”

"I suppose the family claimed that the balance of her mind had been disturbed, that there had been undue influence?"

"I think probably it might have come to that," said Spence. "But the lawyers, as I say, got on to the forgery sharply. It was not a very convincing forgery, apparently. They spotted it almost at once."

"Things came to light to show that the opera girl could have done it quite easily," said Elspeth. "You see, she wrote a great many of Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's letters for her and it seems Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had a great dislike of typed letters being sent to friends or anything like that. If it wasn't a business letter, she'd always say 'write it in handwriting and make it as much like mine as you can and sign it with my name.' Mrs. Minden, the cleaning woman, heard her say that one day, and I suppose the girl got used to doing it and copying her employer's handwriting and then it came to her suddenly that she could do this and get away with it. And that's how it all came about. But as I say, the lawyers were too sharp and spotted it."

"Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's own lawyers?"

"Yes. Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter. Very respectable firm in Medchester. They'd always done all her legal business for her. Anyway, they got experts on to it and questions were asked and the girl was asked questions and got the wind up. Just walked out one day leaving half her things behind her. They were preparing to take proceedings against her, but she didn't wait for that. She just got out. It's not so difficult, really, to get out of this country, if you do it in time. Why, you can go on day trips on the Continent without a passport, and if you've got a little arrangement with someone on the other side, things can be arranged long before there is any real hue and cry. She's probably gone back to her own country or changed her name or gone to friends."

"But everyone thought that Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe died a natural death?" asked Poirot.

"Yes, I don't think there was ever any question of that. I only say it's possible because, as I say, these things have happened before where the doctor has no suspicion. Supposing that girl Joyce had heard something, had heard the au pair girl giving medicines to Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, and the old lady saying ‘this medicine tastes different to the usual one.’ Or ‘this has got a bitter taste’ or ‘it’s peculiar.’”

“Anyone would think you’d been there listening to things yourself, Elspeth,” said Superintendent Spence. “This is all your imagination.”

“When did she die?” said Poirot. “Morning, evening, indoors, out of doors, at home or away from home?”

“Oh, at home. She’d come up from doing things in the garden one day, breathing rather heavily. She said she was very tired and she went to lie down on her bed. And to put it in one sentence, she never woke up. Which is all very natural, it seems, medically speaking.”

Poirot took out a little notebook. The page was already headed “Victims.” Under, he wrote, “No. 1. suggested, Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe.” On the next pages of his book he wrote down the other names that Spence had given him. He said, inquiringly:

“Charlotte Benfield?”

Spence replied promptly. “Sixteen-year-old shop assistant. Multiple head injuries. Found on a footpath near the Quarry Wood. Two young men came under suspicion. Both had walked out with her from time to time. No evidence.”

“They assisted the police in their inquiries?” asked Poirot.

“As you say. It’s the usual phrase. They didn’t assist much. They were frightened. Told a few lies, contradicted themselves. They didn’t carry conviction as likely murderers. But either of them might have been.”

“What were they like?”

“Peter Gordon, twenty-one. Unemployed. Had had one or two jobs but never kept them. Lazy. Quite good-looking. Had been on probation once or twice for minor pilferings, things of that kind. No record before of violence.

Was in with a rather nasty lot of likely young criminals, but usually managed to keep out of serious trouble.”

“And the other one?”

“Thomas Hudd. Twenty. Stammered. Shy. Neurotic. Wanted to be a teacher, but couldn’t make the grade. Mother a widow. The doting mother type. Didn’t encourage girlfriends. Kept him as close to her apron strings as she could. He had a job in a stationer’s. Nothing criminal known against him, but a possibility psychologically, so it seems. The girl played him up a good deal. Jealousy a possible motive, but no evidence that we could prosecute on. Both of them had alibis. Hudd’s was his mother’s. She would have sworn to kingdom come that he was indoors with her all that evening, and nobody can say he wasn’t or had seen him elsewhere or in the neighbourhood of the murder. Young Gordon was given an alibi by some of his less reputable friends. Not worth much, but you couldn’t disprove it.”

“This happened when?”

“Eighteen months ago.”

“And where?”

“In a footpath in a field not far from Woodleigh Common.”

“Three quarters of a mile,” said Elspeth.

“Near Joyce’s house—the Reynolds’ house?”

“No, it was on the other side of the village.”

“It seems unlikely to have been the murder Joyce was talking about,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “If you see a girl being bashed on the head by a young man you’d be likely to think of murder straight away. Not to wait for a year before you began to think it was murder.”

Poirot read another name.

“Lesley Ferrier.”

Spence spoke again. “Lawyer’s clerk, twenty-eight, employed by Messrs Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter of Market Street, Medchester.”

“Those were Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe’s solicitors, I think you said.”

“Yes. Same ones.”

“And what happened to Lesley Ferrier?”

“He was stabbed in the back. Not far from the Green Swan Pub. He was said to have been having an affair with the wife of the landlord, Harry Griffin. Handsome piece, she was, indeed still is. Getting perhaps a bit long in the tooth. Five or six years older than he was, but she liked them young.”

“The weapon?”

“The knife wasn’t found. Les was said to have broken with her and taken up with some other girl, but what girl was never satisfactorily discovered.”

“Ah. And who was suspected in this case? The landlord or the wife?”

“Quite right,” said Spence. “Might have been either. The wife seemed the more likely. She was half gypsy and a temperamental piece. But there were other possibilities. Our Lesley hadn’t led a blameless life. Got into trouble in his early twenties, falsifying his accounts somewhere. With a spot of forgery. Was said to have come from a broken home and all the rest of it. Employers spoke up for him. He got a short sentence and was taken on by Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter when he came out of prison.”

“And after that he’d gone straight?”

“Well, nothing proved. He appeared to do so as far as his employers were concerned, but he had been mixed up in a few questionable transactions with his friends. He’s what you might call a wrong ’un but a careful one.”

“So the alternative was?”

“That he might have been stabbed by one of his less reputable associates. When you’re in with a nasty crowd you’ve got it coming to you with a knife if you let them down.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, he had a good lot of money in his bank account. Paid in in cash, it had been. Nothing to show where it came from. That was suspicious in itself.”

“Possibly pinched from Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter?” suggested Poirot.

“They say not. They had a chartered accountant to work on it and look into things.”

“And the police had no idea where else it might have come from?”

“No.”

“Again,” said Poirot, “not Joyce’s murder, I should think.”

He read the last name, “Janet White.”

“Found strangled on a footpath which was a short cut from the schoolhouse to her home. She shared a flat there with another teacher, Nora Ambrose. According to Nora Ambrose, Janet White had occasionally spoken of being nervous about some man with whom she’d broken off relations a year ago, but who had frequently sent her threatening letters. Nothing was ever found out about this man. Nora Ambrose didn’t know his name, didn’t know exactly where he lived.”

“Aha,” said Poirot, “I like this better.”

He made a good, thick black tick against Janet White’s name.

“For what reason?” asked Spence.

“It is a more likely murder for a girl of Joyce’s age to have witnessed. She could have recognized the victim, a schoolteacher whom she knew and who perhaps taught her. Possibly she did not know the attacker. She might have seen a struggle, heard a quarrel between a girl whom she knew and a strange man. But thought no more of it than that at the time. When was Janet White killed?"

"Two and a half years ago."

"That again," said Poirot, "is about the right time. Both for not realizing that the man she may have seen with his hands round Janet White's neck was not merely necking her, but might have been killing her. But then as she grew more mature, the proper explanation came to her."

He looked at Elspeth. "You agree with my reasoning?"

"I see what you mean," said Elspeth. "But aren't you going at all this the wrong way round? Looking for a victim of a past murder instead of looking for a man who killed a child here in Woodleigh Common not more than three days ago?"

"We go from the past to the future," said Poirot. "We arrive, shall we say, from two and a half years ago to three days ago. And, therefore, we have to consider—what you, no doubt, have already considered—who was there in Woodleigh Common amongst the people who were at the party who might have been connected with an older crime?"

"One can narrow it down a bit more than that now," said Spence. "That is if we are right in accepting your assumption that Joyce was killed because of what she claimed earlier in the day about seeing murder committed. She said those words during the time the preparations for the party were going on. Mind you, we may be wrong in believing that that was the motive for killing, but I don't think we are wrong. So let us say she claimed to have seen a murder, and someone who was present during the preparations for the party that afternoon could have heard her and acted as soon as possible."

"Who was present?" said Poirot. "You know, I presume."

"Yes, I have the list for you here."

“You have checked it carefully?”

“Yes, I’ve checked and re-checked, but it’s been quite a job. Here are the eighteen names.”

List of people present during preparation for Hallowe’en Party

Mrs. Drake (owner of house)

Mrs. Butler

Mrs. Oliver

Miss Whittaker (schoolteacher)

Rev. Charles Cotterell (Vicar)

Simon Lampton (Curate)

Miss Lee (Dr. Ferguson’s dispenser)

Ann Reynolds

Joyce Reynolds

Leopold Reynolds

Nicholas Ransom

Desmond Holland

Beatrice Ardley

Cathie Grant

Diana Brent

Mrs. Garlton (household help)

Mrs. Minden (cleaning woman)

Mrs. Goodbody (helper)

“You are sure these are all?”

“No,” said Spence. “I’m not sure. I can’t really be sure. Nobody can. You see, odd people brought things. Somebody brought some coloured light bulbs. Somebody else supplied some mirrors. There were some extra plates. Someone lent a plastic pail. People brought things, exchanged a word or two and went away again. They didn’t remain to help. Therefore such a person could have been overlooked and not remembered as being present. But that somebody, even if they had only just deposited a bucket in the hall, could have overheard what Joyce was saying in the sitting room. She was shouting, you know. We can’t really limit it to this list, but it’s the best we can do. Here you are. Take a look at it. I’ve made a brief descriptive note against the names.”

“I thank you. Just one question. You must have interrogated some of these people, those for instance who were also at the party. Did anyone, anyone at all, mention what Joyce had said about seeing a murder?”

“I think not. There is no record of it officially. The first I heard of it is what you told me.”

“Interesting,” said Poirot. “One might also say remarkable.”

“Obviously no one took it seriously,” said Spence.

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“I must go now to keep my appointment with Dr. Ferguson, after his surgery,” he said.

He folded up Spence’s list and put it in his pocket.

Nine

Dr. Ferguson was a man of sixty, of Scottish extraction with a brusque manner. He looked Poirot up and down with shrewd eyes under bristling eyebrows, and said:

“Well, what’s all this about? Sit down. Mind that chair leg. The castor’s loose.

“I should perhaps explain,” said Dr. Ferguson. “Everybody knows everything in a place like this. That authoress woman brought you down here as God’s greatest detective to puzzle police officers. That’s more or less right, isn’t it?”

“In part,” said Poirot. “I came here to visit an old friend ex-Superintendent Spence, who lives with his sister here.”

“Spence? Hm. Good type, Spence. Bulldog breed. Good honest police officer of the old type. No graft. No violence. Not stupid either. Straight as a die.”

“You appraise him correctly.”

“Well,” said Ferguson, “what did you tell him and what did he tell you?”

“Both he and Inspector Raglan have been exceedingly kind to me. I hope you will likewise.”

“I’ve nothing to be kind about,” said Ferguson. “I don’t know what happened. Child gets her head shoved in a bucket and is drowned in the middle of a party. Nasty business. Mind you, doing in a child isn’t anything to be startled about nowadays. I’ve been called out to look at too many murdered children in the last seven to ten years—far too many. A lot of people who ought to be under mental restraint aren’t under mental restraint. No room in the asylums. They go about, nicely spoken, nicely got up and looking like everybody else, looking for somebody they can do in. And enjoy themselves. Don’t usually do it at a party, though. Too much chance of getting caught, I suppose, but novelty appeals even to a mentally disturbed killer.”

“Have you any idea who killed her?”

“Do you really suppose that’s a question I can answer just like that? I’d have to have some evidence, wouldn’t I? I’d have to be sure.”

“You could guess,” said Poirot.

“Anyone can guess. If I’m called in to a case I have to guess whether the chap’s going to have measles or whether it’s a case of an allergy to shellfish or to feather pillows. I have to ask questions to find out what they’ve been eating, or drinking, or sleeping on, or what other children they’ve been meeting. Whether they’ve been in a crowded bus with Mrs. Smith’s or Mrs. Robinson’s children who’ve all got the measles, and a few other things. Then I advance a tentative opinion as to which it is of the various possibilities, and that, let me tell you, is what’s called diagnosis. You don’t do it in a hurry and you make sure.”

“Did you know this child?”

“Of course. She was one of my patients. There are two of us here. Myself and Worrall. I happen to be the Reynolds’ doctor. She was quite a healthy child, Joyce. Had the usual small childish ailments. Nothing peculiar or out of the way. Ate too much, talked too much. Talking too much hadn’t done her any harm. Eating too much gave her what used to be called in the old days a bilious attack from time to time. She’d had mumps and chicken pox. Nothing else.”

“But she had perhaps talked too much on one occasion, as you suggest she might be able to do?”

“So that’s the tack you’re on? I heard some rumour of that. On the lines of ‘what the butler saw’—only tragedy instead of comedy. Is that it?”

“It could form a motive, a reason.”

"Oh yes. Grant you that. But there are other reasons. Mentally disturbed seems the usual answer nowadays. At any rate, it does always in the Magistrates' courts. Nobody gained by her death, nobody hated her. But it seems to me with children nowadays you don't need to look for the reason. The reason's in another place. The reason's in the killer's mind. His disturbed mind or his evil mind or his kinky mind. Any kind of mind you like to call it. I'm not a psychiatrist. There are times when I get tired of hearing those words: 'Remanded for a psychiatrist's report,' after a lad has broken in somewhere, smashed the looking glasses, pinched the bottles of whisky, stolen the silver, knocked an old woman on the head. Doesn't matter much what it is now. Remand them for the psychiatrist's report."

"And who would you favour, in this case, to remand for a psychiatrist's report?"

"You mean of those there at the 'do' the other night?"

"Yes."

"The murderer would have had to be there, wouldn't he? Otherwise there wouldn't have been a murder. Right? He was among the guests, he was among the helpers or he walked in through the window with malice aforethought. Probably he knew the fastenings of that house. Might have been in there before, looking round. Take your man or boy. He wants to kill someone. Not at all unusual. Over in Medchester we had a case of that. Came to light after about six or seven years. Boy of thirteen. Wanted to kill someone, so he killed a child of nine, pinched a car, drove it seven or eight miles into a copse, burned her there, went away, and as far as we know led a blameless life until he was twenty-one or two. Mind you, we have only his word for that, he may have gone on doing it. Probably did. Found he liked killing people. Don't suppose he's killed too many, or some police force would have been on to him before now. But every now and then he felt the urge. Psychiatrist's report. Committed murder while mentally disturbed. I'm trying to say myself that that's what happened here. That sort of thing, anyway. I'm not a psychiatrist myself, thank goodness. I have a few psychiatrist friends. Some of them are sensible chaps. Some of them—well, I'll go as far as saying they ought to be remanded for a psychiatrist's report themselves. This chap who killed Joyce probably had nice parents, ordinary manners, good appearance. Nobody’d dream anything was wrong with him. Ever had a bite at a nice red juicy apple and there, down by the core, something rather nasty rears itself up and wags its head at you? Plenty of human beings about like that. More than there used to be, I’d say nowadays.”

“And you’ve no suspicion of your own?”

“I can’t stick my neck out and diagnose a murderer without some evidence.”

“Still, you admit it must have been someone at the party. You cannot have a murder without a murderer.”

“You can easily in some detective stories that are written. Probably your pet authoress writes them like that. But in this case I agree. The murderer must have been there. A guest, a domestic help, someone who walked in through the window. Easily done if he’d studied the catch of the window beforehand. It might have struck some crazy brain that it would be a novel idea and a bit of fun to have a murder at a Hallowe’en party. That’s all you’ve got to start off with, isn’t it? Just someone who was at the party.”

Under bushy brows a pair of eyes twinkled at Poirot.

“I was there myself,” he said. “Came in late, just to see what was doing.”

He nodded his head vigorously.

“Yes, that’s the problem, isn’t it? Like a social announcement in the papers:

‘Amongst those present was—

A Murderer.’”

Ten

Poirot looked up at The Elms and approved of it.

He was admitted and taken promptly by what he judged to be a secretary to the headmistress's study. Miss Emlyn rose from her desk to greet him.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Poirot. I've heard about you."

"You are too kind," said Poirot.

"From a very old friend of mine, Miss Bulstrode. Former headmistress of Meadowbank. You remember Miss Bulstrode, perhaps?"

"One would not be likely to forget her. A great personality."

"Yes," said Miss Emlyn. "She made Meadowbank the school it is." She sighed slightly and said, "It has changed a little nowadays. Different aims, different methods, but it still holds its own as a school of distinction, of progress, and also of tradition. Ah well, we must not live too much in the past. You have come to see me, no doubt, about the death of Joyce Reynolds. I don't know if you have any particular interest in her case. It's out of your usual run of things, I imagine. You knew her personally, or her family perhaps?"

"No," said Poirot. "I came at the request of an old friend, Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, who was staying down here and was present at the party."

"She writes delightful books," said Miss Emlyn. "I have met her once or twice. Well, that makes the whole thing easier, I think, to discuss. So long as no personal feelings are involved, one can go straight ahead. It was a horrifying thing to happen. If I may say so, it was an unlikely thing to happen. The children involved seem neither old enough nor young enough for it to fall into any special class. A psychological crime is indicated. Do you agree?"

“No,” said Poirot. “I think it was a murder, like most murders, committed for a motive, possibly a sordid one.”

“Indeed. And the reason?”

“The reason was a remark made by Joyce; not actually at the party, I understand, but earlier in the day when preparations were being made by some of the older children and other helpers. She announced that she had once seen a murder committed.”

“Was she believed?”

“On the whole, I think she was not believed.”

“That seems the most likely response. Joyce—I speak plainly to you, Monsieur Poirot, because we do not want unnecessary sentiment to cloud mental faculties—she was a rather mediocre child, neither stupid nor particularly intellectual. She was, quite frankly, a compulsive liar. And by that I do not mean that she was specially deceitful. She was not trying to avoid retribution or to avoid being found out in some peccadillo. She boasted. She boasted of things that had not happened, but that would impress her friends who were listening to her. As a result, of course, they inclined not to believe the tall stories she told.”

“You think that she boasted of having seen a murder committed in order to make herself important, to intrigue someone—?”

“Yes. And I would suggest that Ariadne Oliver was doubtless the person whom she wanted to impress….”

“So you don’t think Joyce saw a murder committed at all?”

“I should doubt it very much.”

“You are of the opinion that she made the whole thing up?”

“I would not say that. She did witness, perhaps, a car accident, or someone perhaps who was hit with a ball on the golf links and injured—something that she could work up into an impressive happening that might, just conceivably, pass as an attempted murder."

"So the only assumption we can make with any certainty is that there was a murderer present at the Hallowe'en party."

"Certainly," said Miss Emlyn, without turning a grey hair. "Certainly. That follows on logically, does it not?"

"Would you have any idea who that murderer might be?"

"That is certainly a sensible question," said Miss Emlyn. "After all, the majority of the children at the party were aged between nine and fifteen, and I suppose nearly all of them had been or were pupils at my school. I ought to know something about them. Something, too, about their families and their backgrounds."

"I believe that one of your own teachers, a year or two ago, was strangled by an unknown killer."

"You are referring to Janet White? About twenty-four years of age. An emotional girl. As far as is known, she was out walking alone. She may, of course, have arranged to meet some young man. She was a girl who was quite attractive to men in a modest sort of way. Her killer has not been discovered. The police questioned various young men or asked them to assist them in their inquiries, as the technique goes, but they were not able to find sufficient evidence to bring a case against anyone. An unsatisfactory business from their point of view. And, I may say, from mine."

"You and I have a principle in common. We do not approve of murder."

Miss Emlyn looked at him for a moment or two. Her expression did not change, but Poirot had an idea that he was being sized up with a great deal of care.

"I like the way you put it," she said. "From what you read and hear nowadays, it seems that murder under certain aspects is slowly but surely being made acceptable to a large section of the community."

She was silent for a few minutes, and Poirot also did not speak. She was, he thought, considering a plan of action.

She rose and touched a bell.

“I think,” she said, “that you had better talk to Miss Whittaker.”

Some five minutes passed after Miss Emlyn had left the room and then the door opened and a woman of about forty entered. She had russet-coloured hair, cut short, and came in with a brisk step.

“Monsieur Poirot?” she said. “Can I help you? Miss Emlyn seems to think that that might be so.”

“If Miss Emlyn thinks so, then it is almost a certainty that you can. I would take her word for it.”

“You know her?”

“I have only met her this afternoon.”

“But you have made up your mind quickly about her.”

“I hope you are going to tell me that I am right.”

Elizabeth Whittaker gave a short, quick sigh.

“Oh, yes, you’re right. I presume that this is about the death of Joyce Reynolds. I don’t know exactly how you come into it. Through the police?” She shook her head slightly in a dissatisfied manner.

“No, not through the police. Privately, through a friend.”

She took a chair, pushing it back a little so as to face him.

“Yes. What do you want to know?”

“I don’t think there is any need to tell you. No need to waste time asking questions that may be of no importance. Something happened that evening at the party which perhaps it is well that I should know about. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“You were at the party?”

“I was at the party.” She reflected a minute or two. “It was a very good party. Well-run. Well-arranged. About thirty-odd people were there, that is, counting helpers of different kinds. Children—teenagers—grown-ups—and a few cleaning and domestic helpers in the background.”

“Did you take part in the arrangements which were made, I believe, earlier that afternoon or that morning?”

“There was nothing really to do. Mrs. Drake was fully competent to deal with all the various preparations with a small number of people to help her. It was more domestic preparations that were needed.”

“I see. But you came to the party as one of the guests?”

“That is right.”

“And what happened?”

“The progress of the party, I have no doubt, you already know. You want to know if there is anything I can tell you that I specially noticed or that I thought might have a certain significance? I don’t want to waste your time unduly, you understand.”

“I am sure you will not waste my time. Yes, Miss Whittaker, tell me quite simply.”

“The various events happened in the way already arranged for. The last event was what was really more a Christmas festivity or associated with Christmas, than it would be with Hallowe’en. The Snapdragon, a burning dish of raisins with brandy poured over them, and those round snatch at the raisins—there are squeals of laughter and excitement. It became very hot, though, in the room, with the burning dish, and I left it and came out in the hall. It was then, as I stood there, that I saw Mrs. Drake coming out of the lavatory on the first floor landing. She was carrying a large vase of mixed autumn leaves and flowers. She stood at the angle of the staircase, pausing for a moment before coming downstairs. She was looking down over the well of the staircase. Not in my direction. She was looking towards the other end of the hall where there is a door leading into the library. It is set just across the hall from the door into the dining room. As I say, she was looking that way and pausing for a moment before coming downstairs. She was shifting slightly the angle of the vase as it was a rather awkward thing to carry, and weighty if it was, as I presumed, full of water. She was shifting the position of it rather carefully so that she could hold it to her with one arm, and put out the other arm to the rail of the staircase as she came round the slightly shaped corner stairway. She stood there for a moment or two, still not looking at what she was carrying, but towards the hall below. And suddenly she made a sudden movement—a start I would describe it as—yes, definitely something had startled her. So much so that she relinquished her hold of the vase and it fell, reversing itself as it did so so that the water streamed over her and the vase itself crashed down to the hall below, where it broke in smithereens on the hall floor."

"I see," said Poirot. He paused a minute or two, watching her. Her eyes, he noticed, were shrewd and knowledgeable. They were asking now his opinion of what she was telling him. "What did you think had happened to startle her?"

"On reflection, afterwards, I thought she had seen something."

"You thought she had seen something," repeated Poirot, thoughtfully. "Such as?"

"The direction of her eyes, as I have told you, was towards the door of the library. It seems to me possible that she may have seen that door open or the handle turn, or indeed she might have seen something slightly more than that. She might have seen somebody who was opening that door and preparing to come out of it. She may have seen someone she did not expect to see."

"Were you looking at the door yourself?"

“No. I was looking in the opposite direction up the stairs towards Mrs. Drake.”

“And you think definitely that she saw something that startled her?”

“Yes. No more than that, perhaps. A door opening. A person, just possibly an unlikely person, emerging. Just sufficient to make her relinquish her grasp on the very heavy vase full of water and flowers, so that she dropped it.”

“Did you see anyone come out of that door?”

“No. I was not looking that way. I do not think anyone actually did come out into the hall. Presumably whoever it was drew back into the room.”

“What did Mrs. Drake do next?”

“She made a sharp exclamation of vexation, came down the stairs and said to me, ‘Look what I’ve done now! What a mess!’ She kicked some of the broken glass away. I helped her sweep it in a broken pile into a corner. It wasn’t practicable to clear it all up at that moment. The children were beginning to come out of the Snapdragon room. I fetched a glass cloth and mopped her up a bit, and shortly after that the party came to an end.”

“Mrs. Drake did not say anything about having been startled or make any reference as to what might have startled her?”

“No. Nothing of the kind.”

“But you think she was startled.”

“Possibly, Monsieur Poirot, you think that I am making a rather unnecessary fuss about something of no importance whatever?”

“No,” said Poirot, “I do not think that at all. I have only met Mrs. Drake once,” he added thoughtfully, “when I went to her house with my friend, Mrs. Oliver, to visit—as one might say, if one wishes to be melodramatic—the scene of the crime. It did not strike me during the brief period I had for observation that Mrs. Drake could be a woman who is easily startled. Do you agree with my view?"

"Certainly. That is why I, myself, since have wondered."

"You asked no special questions at the time?"

"I had no earthly reason to do so. If your hostess has been unfortunate to drop one of her best glass vases, and it has smashed to smithereens, it is hardly the part of a guest to say 'What on earth made you do that?'; thereby accusing her of a clumsiness which I can assure you is not one of Mrs. Drake's characteristics."

"And after that, as you have said, the party came to an end. The children and their mothers or friends left, and Joyce could not be found. We know now that Joyce was behind the library door and that Joyce was dead. So who could it have been who was about to come out of the library door, a little while earlier, shall we say, and then hearing voices in the hall shut the door again and made an exit later when there were people milling about in the hall making their farewells, putting on their coats and all the rest of it? It was not until after the body had been found, I presume, Miss Whittaker, that you had time to reflect on what you had seen?"

"That is so." Miss Whittaker rose to her feet. "I'm afraid there's nothing else that I can tell you. Even this may be a very foolish little matter."

"But noticeable. Everything noticeable is worth remembering. By the way, there is one question I should like to ask you. Two, as a matter of fact."

Elizabeth Whittaker sat down again. "Go on," she said, "ask anything you like."

"Can you remember exactly the order in which the various events occurred at the party?"

"I think so." Elizabeth Whittaker reflected for a moment or two. "It started with a broomstick competition. Decorated broomsticks. There were three or four different small prizes for that. Then there was a kind of contest with balloons, punching them and batting them about. A sort of mild horseplay to get the children warmed up. There was a looking glass business where the girls went into a small room and held a mirror where a boy's or young man's face reflected in it."

"How was that managed?"

"Oh, very simply. The transom of the door had been removed, and so different faces looked through and were reflected in the mirror a girl was holding."

"Did the girls know who it was they saw reflected in the glass?"

"I presume some of them did and some of them didn't. A little makeup was employed on the male half of the arrangement. You know, a mask or a wig, sideburns, a beard, some greasepaint effects. Most of the boys were probably known to the girls already and one or two strangers might have been included. Anyway, there was a lot of quite happy giggling," said Miss Whittaker, showing for a moment or two a kind of academic contempt for this kind of fun. "After that there was an obstacle race and then there was flour packed into a glass tumbler and reversed, sixpence laid on top and everyone took a slice off. When the flour collapsed that person was out of the competition and the others remained until the last one claimed the sixpence. After that there was dancing, and then there was supper. After that, as a final climax, came the Snapdragon."

"When did you yourself see the girl Joyce last?"

"I've no idea," said Elizabeth Whittaker. "I don't know her very well. She's not in my class. She wasn't a very interesting girl so I wouldn't have been watching her. I do remember I saw her cutting the flour because she was so clumsy that she capsized it almost at once. So she was alive then—but that was quite early on."

"You did not see her go into the library with anyone?"

"Certainly not. I should have mentioned it before if I had. That at least might have been significant and important."

“And now,” said Poirot, “for my second question or questions. How long have you been at the school here?”

“Six years this next autumn.”

“And you teach—?”

“Mathematics and Latin.”

“Do you remember a girl who was teaching here two years ago—Janet White by name?”

Elizabeth Whittaker stiffened. She half rose from her chair, then sat down again.

“But that—that has nothing to do with all this, surely?”

“It could have,” said Poirot.

“But how? In what way?”

Scholastic circles were less well-informed than village gossip, Poirot thought.

“Joyce claimed before witnesses to have seen a murder done some years ago. Could that possibly have been the murder of Janet White, do you think? How did Janet White die?”

“She was strangled, walking home from school one night.”

“Alone?”

“Probably not alone.”

“But not with Nora Ambrose?”

“What do you know about Nora Ambrose?”

“Nothing as yet,” said Poirot, “but I should like to. What were they like, Janet White and Nora Ambrose?”

“Oversexed,” said Elizabeth Whittaker, “but in different ways. How could Joyce have seen anything of the kind or know anything about it? It took place in a lane near Quarry Wood. She wouldn’t have been more than ten or eleven years old.”

“Which one had the boyfriend?” asked Poirot. “Nora or Janet?”

“All this is past history.”

“Old sins have long shadows,” quoted Poirot. “As we advance through life, we learn the truth of that saying. Where is Nora Ambrose now?”

“She left the school and took another post in the North of England—she was, naturally, very upset. They were—great friends.”

“The police never solved the case?”

Miss Whittaker shook her head. She got up and looked at her watch.

“I must go now.”

“Thank you for what you have told me.”

Eleven

Hercule Poirot looked up at the façade of Quarry House. A solid, well-built example of mid-Victorian architecture. He had a vision of its interior—a heavy mahogany sideboard, a central rectangular table also of heavy mahogany, a billiard room, perhaps, a large kitchen with adjacent scullery, stone flags on the floor, a massive coal range now no doubt replaced by electricity or gas.

He noted that most of the upper windows were still curtained. He rang the front doorbell. It was answered by a thin, grey-haired woman who told him that Colonel and Mrs. Weston were away in London and would not be back until next week.

He asked about the Quarry Woods and was told that they were open to the public without charge. The entrance was about five minutes' walk along the road. He would see a notice board on an iron gate.

He found his way there easily enough, and passing through the gate began to descend a path that led downwards through trees and shrubs.

Presently he came to a halt and stood there lost in thought. His mind was not only on what he saw, on what lay around him. Instead he was conning over one or two sentences, and reflecting over one or two facts that had given him at the time, as he expressed it to himself, furiously to think. A forged Will, a forged Will and a girl. A girl who had disappeared, the girl in whose favour the Will had been forged. A young artist who had come here professionally to make out of an abandoned quarry of rough stone a garden, a sunk garden. Here again, Poirot looked round him and nodded his head with approval of the phrase. A Quarry Garden was an ugly term. It suggested the noise of blasting rock, the carrying away by lorries of vast masses of stone for road making. It had behind it industrial demand. But a Sunk Garden—that was different. It brought with it vague remembrances in his own mind. So Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had gone on a National Trust tour of gardens in Ireland. He himself, he remembered, had been in Ireland five or six years ago. He had gone there to investigate a robbery of old family silver. There had been some interesting points about the case which had aroused his curiosity, and having (as usual)—Poirot added this bracket to his thoughts—solved his mission with full success, he had put in a few days travelling around and seeing the sights.

He could not remember now the particular garden he had been to see. Somewhere, he thought, not very far from Cork. Killarney? No, not Killarney. Somewhere not far from Bantry Bay. And he remembered it because it had been a garden quite different from the gardens which he had so far acclaimed as the great successes of this age, the gardens of the Châteaux in France, the formal beauty of Versailles. Here, he remembered, he had started with a little group of people in a boat. A boat difficult to get into if two strong and able boatmen had not practically lifted him in. They had rowed towards a small island, not a very interesting island, Poirot had thought, and began to wish that he had not come. His feet were wet and cold and the wind was blowing through the crevices of his mackintosh. What beauty, he had thought, what formality, what symmetrical arrangement of great beauty could there be on this rocky island with its sparse trees? A mistake—definitely a mistake.

They had landed at the little wharf. The fishermen had landed him with the same adroitness they had shown before. The remaining members of the party had gone on ahead, talking and laughing. Poirot, readjusting his mackintosh in position and tying up his shoes again, had followed them up the rather dull path with shrubs and bushes and a few sparse trees either side. A most uninteresting park, he thought.

And then, rather suddenly, they had come out from among the scrub on to a terrace with steps leading down from it. Below it he had looked down into what struck him at once as something entirely magical. Something as it might have been if elemental beings such as he believed were common in Irish poetry, had come out of their hollow hills and had created there, not so much by toil and hard labour as by waving a magic wand, a garden. You looked down into the garden. Its beauty, the flowers and bushes, the artificial water below in the fountain, the path round it, enchanted, beautiful and entirely unexpected. He wondered how it had been originally. It seemed too symmetrical to have been a quarry. A deep hollow here in the raised ground of the island, but beyond it you could see the waters of the Bay and the hills rising the other side, their misty tops an enchanting scene. He thought perhaps that it might have been that particular garden which had stirred Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe to possess such a garden of her own, to have the pleasure of taking an unkempt quarry set in this smug, tidy, elementary and essentially conventional countryside of that part of England.

And so she had looked about for the proper kind of well-paid slave to do her bidding. And she had found the professionally qualified young man called Michael Garfield and had brought him here and had paid him no doubt a large fee, and had in due course built a house for him. Michael Garfield, thought Poirot, had not failed her.

He went and sat down on a bench, a bench which had been strategically placed. He pictured to himself what the sunken quarry would look like in the spring. There were young beech trees and birches with their white shivering barks. Bushes of thorn and white rose, little juniper trees. But now it was autumn, and autumn had been catered for also. The gold and red of acers, a parrotia or two, a path that led along a winding way to fresh delights. There were flowering bushes of gorse or Spanish broom—Poirot was not famous for knowing the names of either flowers or shrubs—only roses and tulips could he approve and recognize.

But everything that grew here had the appearance of having grown by its own will. It had not been arranged or forced into submission. And yet, thought Poirot, that is not really so. All has been arranged, all has been planned to this tiny little plant that grows here and to that large towering bush that rises up so fiercely with its golden and red leaves. Oh yes. All has been planned here and arranged. What is more, I would say that it had obeyed.

He wondered then whom it had obeyed. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe or Michael Garfield? It makes a difference, said Poirot to himself, yes, it makes a difference. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe was knowledgeable, he felt sure. She had gardened for many years, she was no doubt a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society, she went to shows, she consulted catalogues, she visited gardens. She took journeys abroad, no doubt, for botanical reasons. She would know what she wanted, she would say what she wanted. Was that enough? Poirot thought it was not quite enough. She could have given orders to gardeners and made sure her orders were carried out. But did she know—really know—see in her mind's eye exactly what her orders would look like when they had been carried out? Not in the first year of their planting, not even the second, but things that she would see two years later, three years later, perhaps, even six or seven years later. Michael Garfield, thought Poirot, Michael Garfield knows what she wants because she has told him what she wants, and he knows how to make this bare quarry of stone and rock blossom as a desert can blossom. He planned and he brought it about; he had no doubt the intense pleasure that comes to an artist who is commissioned by a client with plenty of money. Here was his conception of a fairy-land tucked away in a conventional and rather dull hillside, and here it would grow up. Expensive shrubs for which large cheques would have to be written, and rare plants that perhaps would only be obtainable through the goodwill of a friend, and here, too, the humble things that were needed and which cost next to nothing at all. In spring on the bank just to his left there would be primroses, their modest green leaves all bunched together up the side of it told him that.

"In England," said Poirot, "people show you their herbaceous borders and they take you to see their roses and they talk at inordinate length about their iris gardens, and to show they appreciate one of the great beauties of England, they take you on a day when the sun shines and the beech trees are in leaf, and underneath them are all the bluebells. Yes, it is a very beautiful sight, but I have been shown it, I think, once too often. I prefer—" the thought broke off in his mind as he thought back to what he had preferred. A drive through Devon lanes. A winding road with great banks up each side of it, and on those banks a great carpet and showing of primroses. So pale, so subtly and timidly yellow, and coming from them that sweet, faint, elusive smell that the primrose has in large quantities, which is the smell of spring almost more than any other smell. And so it would not be all rare shrubs here. There would be spring and autumn, there would be little wild cyclamen and there would be autumn crocus here too. It was a beautiful place.

He wondered about the people who lived in Quarry House now. He had their names, a retired elderly Colonel and his wife, but surely, he thought, Spence might have told him more about them. He had the feeling that whoever owned this now had not got the love of it that dead Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had had. He got up and walked along the path a little way. It was an easy path, carefully levelled, designed, he thought, to be easy for an elderly person to walk where she would at will, without undue amount of steep steps, and at a convenient angle and convenient intervals a seat that looked rustic but was much less rustic than it looked. In fact, the angle for the back and for one's feet was remarkably comfortable. Poirot thought to himself, I'd like to see this Michael Garfield. He made a good thing of this. He knew his job, he was a good planner and he got experienced people to carry his plans out, and he managed, I think, to get his patron's plans so arranged that she would think that the whole planning had been hers. But I don't think it was only hers. It was mostly his. Yes, I'd like to see him. If he's still in the cottage—or the bungalow—that was built for him, I suppose—his thought broke off.

He stared. Stared across a hollow that lay at his feet where the path ran round the other side of it. Stared at one particular golden red branching shrub which framed something that Poirot did not know for a moment was really there or was a mere effect of shadow and sunshine and leaves.

What am I seeing? thought Poirot. Is this the result of enchantment? It could be. In this place here, it could be. Is it a human being I see, or is it—what could it be? His mind reverted to some adventures of his many years ago which he had christened "The Labours of Hercules." Somehow, he thought, this was not an English garden in which he was sitting. There was an atmosphere here. He tried to pin it down. It had qualities of magic, of enchantment, certainly of beauty, bashful beauty, yet wild. Here, if you were staging a scene in the theatre, you would have your nymphs, your fauns, you would have Greek beauty, you would have fear too. Yes, he thought, in this sunk garden there is fear. What did Spence's sister say? Something about a murder that took place in the original quarry years ago? Blood had stained the rock there, and afterwards, death had been forgotten, all had been covered over, Michael Garfield had come, had planned and had created a garden of great beauty, and an elderly woman who had not many more years to live had paid out money for it.

He saw now it was a young man who stood on the other side of the hollow, framed by golden red leaves, and a young man, so Poirot now recognized, of an unusual beauty. One didn't think of young men that way nowadays. You said of a young man that he was sexy or madly attractive, and these evidences of praise are often quite justly made. A man with a craggy face, a man with wild greasy hair and whose features were far from regular. You didn't say a young man was beautiful. If you did say it, you said it apologetically as though you were praising some quality that had been long dead. The sexy girls didn't want Orpheus with his lute, they wanted a pop singer with a raucous voice, expressive eyes and large masses of unruly hair.

Poirot got up and walked round the path. As he got to the other side of the steep descent, the young man came out from the trees to meet him. His youth seemed the most characteristic thing about him, yet, as Poirot saw, he was not really young. He was past thirty, perhaps nearer forty. The smile on his face was very, very faint. It was not quite a welcoming smile, it was just a smile of quiet recognition. He was tall, slender, with features of great perfection such as a classical sculptor might have produced. His eyes were dark, his hair was black and fitted him as a woven chain mail helmet or cap might have done. For a moment Poirot wondered whether he and this young man might not be meeting in the course of some pageant that was being rehearsed. If so, thought Poirot, looking down at his galoshes, I, alas, shall have to go to the wardrobe mistress to get myself better equipped. He said:

"I am perhaps trespassing here. If so, I must apologize. I am a stranger in this part of the world. I only arrived yesterday."

"I don't think one could call it trespassing." The voice was very quiet; it was polite yet in a curious way uninterested, as if this man's thoughts were really somewhere quite far away. "It's not exactly open to the public, but people do walk round here. Old Colonel Weston and his wife don't mind. They would mind if there was any damage done, but that's not really very likely."

"No vandalism," said Poirot, looking round him. "No litter that is noticeable. Not even a little basket. That is very unusual, is it not? And it seems deserted—strange. Here you would think,” he went on, “there would be lovers walking.”

“Lovers don’t come here,” said the young man. “It’s supposed to be unlucky for some reason.”

“Are you, I wonder, the architect? But perhaps I’m guessing wrong.”

“My name is Michael Garfield,” said the young man.

“I thought it might be,” said Poirot. He gesticulated with a hand around him. “You made this?”

“Yes,” said Michael Garfield.

“It is beautiful,” said Poirot. “Somehow one feels it is always rather unusual when something beautiful is made in—well, frankly, what is a dull part of the English landscape.

“I congratulate you,” he said. “You must be satisfied with what you have done here.”

“Is one ever satisfied? I wonder.”

“You made it, I think, for a Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe. No longer alive, I believe. There is a Colonel and Mrs. Weston, I believe? Do they own it now?”

“Yes. They got it cheap. It’s a big, ungainly house—not easy to run—not what most people want. She left it in her Will to me.”

“And you sold it.”

“I sold the house.”

“And not the Quarry Garden?”

“Oh yes. The Quarry Garden went with it, practically thrown in, as one might say.”

“Now why?” said Poirot. “It is interesting, that. You do not mind if I am perhaps a little curious?”

“Your questions are not quite the usual ones,” said Michael Garfield.

“I ask not so much for facts as for reasons. Why did A do so and so? Why did B do something else? Why was C’s behaviour quite different from that of A and B?”

“You should be talking to a scientist,” said Michael. “It is a matter—or so we are told nowadays—of genes or chromosomes. The arrangement, the pattern, and so on.”

“You said just now you were not entirely satisfied because no one ever was. Was your employer, your patron, whatever you like to call her—was she satisfied? With this thing of beauty?”

“Up to a point,” said Michael. “I saw to that. She was easy to satisfy.”

“That seems most unlikely,” said Hercule Poirot. “She was, I have learned, over sixty. Sixty-five at least. Are people of that age often satisfied?”

“She was assured by me that what I had carried out was the exact carrying out of her instructions and imagination and ideas.”

“And was it?”

“Do you ask me that seriously?”

“No,” said Poirot. “No. Frankly I do not.”

“For success in life,” said Michael Garfield, “one has to pursue the career one wants, one has to satisfy such artistic leanings as one has got, but one has as well to be a tradesman. You have to sell your wares. Otherwise you are tied to carrying out other people’s ideas in a way which will not accord with one’s own. I carried out mainly my own ideas and I sold them, marketed them perhaps is a better word, to the client who employed me, as a direct carrying out of her plans and schemes. It is not a very difficult art to learn. There is no more to it than selling a child brown eggs rather than white ones. The customer has to be assured they are the best ones, the right ones. The essence of the countryside. Shall we say, the hen's own preference? Brown, farm, country eggs. One does not sell them if one says 'they are just eggs. There is only one difference in eggs. They are new laid or they are not.'"

"You are an unusual young man," said Poirot. "Arrogant," he said thoughtfully."

"Perhaps."

"You have made here something very beautiful. You have added vision and planning to the rough material of stone hollowed out in the pursuit of industry, with no thought of beauty in that hacking out. You have added imagination, a result seen in the mind's eye, that you have managed to raise the money to fulfil. I congratulate you. I pay my tribute. The tribute of an old man who is approaching a time when the end of his own work is come."

"But at the moment you are still carrying it on?"

"You know who I am, then?"

Poirot was pleased indubitably. He liked people to know who he was. Nowadays, he feared, most people did not.

"You follow the trail of blood…It is already known here. It is a small community, news travels. Another public success brought you here."

"Ah, you mean Mrs. Oliver."

"Ariadne Oliver. A best seller. People wish to interview her, to know what she thinks about such subjects as student unrest, socialism, girls' clothing, should sex be permissive, and many other things that are no concern of hers."

"Yes, yes," said Poirot, "deplorable, I think. They do not learn very much, I have noticed, from Mrs. Oliver. They learn only that she is fond of apples. That has now been known for twenty years at least, I should think, but she still repeats it with a pleasant smile. Although now, I fear, she no longer likes apples.”

“It was apples that brought you here, was it not?”

“Apples at a Hallowe’en party,” said Poirot. “You were at that party?”

“No.”

“You were fortunate.”

“Fortunate?” Michael Garfield repeated the word, something that sounded faintly like surprise in his voice.

“To have been one of the guests at a party where murder is committed is not a pleasant experience. Perhaps you have not experienced it, but I tell you, you are fortunate because—” Poirot became a little more foreign “—il y a des ennuis, vous comprenez? People ask you times, dates, impertinent questions.” He went on, “You knew the child?”

“Oh yes. The Reynolds are well known here. I know most of the people living round here. We all know each other in Woodleigh Common, though in varying degrees. There is some intimacy, some friendships, some people remain the merest acquaintances, and so on.”

“What was she like, the child Joyce?”

“She was—how can I put it?—not important. She had rather an ugly voice. Shrill. Really, that’s about all I remember about her. I’m not particularly fond of children. Mostly they bore me. Joyce bored me. When she talked, she talked about herself.”

“She was not interesting?”

Michael Garfield looked slightly surprised.

“I shouldn’t think so,” he said. “Does she have to be?”

"It is my view that people devoid of interest are unlikely to be murdered. People are murdered for gain, for fear or for love. One takes one's choice, but one has to have a starting point—"

He broke off and glanced at his watch.

"I must proceed. I have an engagement to fulfil. Once more, my felicitations."

He went on down, following the path and picking his way carefully. He was glad that for once he was not wearing his tight patent leather shoes.

Michael Garfield was not the only person he was to meet in the sunk garden that day. As he reached the bottom he noted that three paths led from here in slightly different directions. At the entrance of the middle path, sitting on a fallen trunk of a tree, a child was awaiting him. She made this clear at once.

"I expect you are Mr. Hercule Poirot, aren't you?" she said.

Her voice was clear, almost bell-like in tone. She was a fragile creature. Something about her matched the sunk garden. A dryad or some elf-like being.

"That is my name," said Poirot.

"I came to meet you," said the child. "You are coming to tea with us, aren't you?"

"With Mrs. Butler and Mrs. Oliver? Yes."

"That's right. That's Mummy and Aunt Ariadne." She added with a note of censure: "You're rather late."

"I am sorry. I stopped to speak to someone."

"Yes, I saw you. You were talking to Michael, weren't you?"

"You know him?"

“Of course. We’ve lived here quite a long time. I know everybody.”

Poirot wondered how old she was. He asked her. She said,

“I’m twelve years old. I’m going to boarding school next year.”

“Will you be sorry or glad?”

“I don’t really know till I get there. I don’t think I like this place very much, not as much as I did.” She added, “I think you’d better come with me now, please.”

“But certainly. But certainly. I apologize for being late.”

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter.”

“What’s your name?”

“Miranda.”

“I think it suits you,” said Poirot.

“Are you thinking of Shakespeare?”

“Yes. Do you have it in lessons?”

“Yes. Miss Emlyn read us some of it. I asked Mummy to read some more. I liked it. It has a wonderful sound. A brave new world. There isn’t anything really like that, is there?”

“You don’t believe in it?”

“Do you?”

“There is always a brave new world,” said Poirot, “but only, you know, for very special people. The lucky ones. The ones who carry the making of that world within themselves.”

"Oh, I see," said Miranda, with an air of apparently seeing with the utmost ease, though what she saw Poirot rather wondered.

She turned, started along the path and said,

"We go this way. It's not very far. You can go through the hedge of our garden."

Then she looked back over her shoulder and pointed, saying:

"In the middle there, that's where the fountain was."

"A fountain?"

"Oh, years ago. I suppose it's still there, underneath the shrubs and the azaleas and the other things. It was all broken up, you see. People took bits of it away but nobody has put a new one there."

"It seems a pity."

"I don't know. I'm not sure. Do you like fountains very much?"

"Ca dépend," said Poirot.

"I know some French," said Miranda. "That's it depends, isn't it?"

"You are quite right. You seem very well-educated."

"Everyone says Miss Emlyn is a very fine teacher. She's our headmistress. She's awfully strict and a bit stern, but she's terribly interesting sometimes in the things she tells us."

"Then she is certainly a good teacher," said Hercule Poirot. "You know this place very well—you seem to know all the paths. Do you come here often?"

"Oh yes, it's one of my favourite walks. Nobody knows where I am, you see, when I come here. I sit in trees—on the branches, and watch things. I like that. Watching things happen."

“What sort of things?”

“Mostly birds and squirrels. Birds are very quarrelsome, aren’t they? Not like in the bit of poetry that says ‘birds in their little nests agree.’ They don’t really, do they? And I watch squirrels.”

“And you watch people?”

“Sometimes. But there aren’t many people who come here.”

“Why not, I wonder?”

“I suppose they are afraid.”

“Why should they be afraid?”

“Because someone was killed here long ago. Before it was a garden, I mean. It was a quarry once and then there was a gravel pile or a sand pile and that’s where they found her. In that. Do you think the old saying is true—about you’re born to be hanged or born to be drowned?”

“Nobody is born to be hanged nowadays. You do not hang people any longer in this country.”

“But they hang them in some other countries. They hang them in the streets. I’ve read it in the papers.”

“Ah. Do you think that is a good thing or a bad thing?”

Miranda’s response was not strictly in answer to the question, but Poirot felt that it was perhaps meant to be.

“Joyce was drowned,” she said. “Mummy didn’t want to tell me, but that was rather silly, I think, don’t you? I mean, I’m twelve years old.”

“Was Joyce a friend of yours?”

“Yes. She was a great friend in a way. She told me very interesting things sometimes. All about elephants and rajahs. She’d been to India once. I wish

I’d been to India. Joyce and I used to tell each other all our secrets. I haven’t so much to tell as Mummy. Mummy’s been to Greece, you know. That’s where she met Aunt Ariadne, but she didn’t take me.”

“Who told you about Joyce?”

“Mrs. Perring. That’s our cook. She was talking to Mrs. Minden who comes and cleans. Someone held her head down in a bucket of water.”

“Have you any idea who that someone was?”

“I shouldn’t think so. They didn’t seem to know, but then they’re both rather stupid really.”

“Do you know, Miranda?”

“I wasn’t there. I had a sore throat and a temperature so Mummy wouldn’t take me to the party. But I think I could know. Because she was drowned. That’s why I asked if you thought people were born to be drowned. We go through the hedge here. Be careful of your clothes.”

Poirot followed her lead. The entrance through the hedge from the Quarry Garden was more suited to the build of his childish guide with her elfin slimness—it was practically a highway to her. She was solicitous for Poirot, however, warning him of adjacent thorn bushes and holding back the more prickly components of the hedge. They emerged at a spot in the garden adjacent to a compost heap and turned a corner by a derelict cucumber frame to where two dustbins stood. From there on a small neat garden mostly planted with roses gave easy access to the small bungalow house. Miranda led the way through an open french window, announcing with the modest pride of a collector who has just secured a sample of a rare beetle:

“I’ve got him all right.”

“Miranda, you didn’t bring him through the hedge, did you? You ought to have gone round by the path at the side gate.”

“This is a better way,” said Miranda. “Quicker and shorter.”

“And much more painful, I suspect.”

“I forget,” said Mrs. Oliver—“I did introduce you, didn’t I, to my friend Mrs. Butler?”

“Of course. In the post office.”

The introduction in question had been a matter of a few moments while there had been a queue in front of the counter. Poirot was better able now to study Mrs. Oliver’s friend at close quarters. Before it had been a matter of a slim woman in a disguising headscarf and a mackintosh. Judith Butler was a woman of about thirty-five, and whilst her daughter resembled a dryad or a wood nymph, Judith had more the attributes of a water-spirit. She could have been a Rhine maiden. Her long blonde hair hung limply on her shoulders, she was delicately made with a rather long face and faintly hollow cheeks, whilst above them were big sea-green eyes fringed with long eyelashes.

“I’m very glad to thank you properly, Monsieur Poirot,” said Mrs. Butler. “It was very good of you to come down here when Ariadne asked you.”

“When my friend, Mrs. Oliver, asks me to do anything I always have to do it,” said Poirot.

“What nonsense,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“She was sure, quite sure, that you would be able to find out all about this beastly thing. Miranda, dear, will you go into the kitchen? You’ll find the scones on the wire tray above the oven.”

Miranda disappeared. She gave, as she went, a knowledgeable smile directed at her mother that said as plainly as a smile could say, “She’s getting me out of the way for a short time.”

“I tried not to let her know,” said Miranda’s mother, “about this—this horrible thing that happened. But I suppose that was a forlorn chance from the start.”

“Yes indeed,” said Poirot. “There’s nothing that goes round any residential centre with the same rapidity as news of a disaster, and particularly an unpleasant disaster. And anyway,” he added, “one cannot go long through life without knowing what goes on around one. And children seem particularly apt at that sort of thing.”

“I don’t know if it was Burns or Sir Walter Scott who said ‘There’s a chiel among you taking notes,’” said Mrs. Oliver, “but he certainly knew what he was talking about.”

“Joyce Reynolds certainly seems to have noticed such a thing as a murder,” said Mrs. Butler. “One can hardly believe it.”

“Believe that Joyce noticed it?”

“I meant believe that if she saw such a thing she never spoke about it earlier. That seems very unlike Joyce.”

“The first thing that everybody seems to tell me here,” said Poirot, in a mild voice, “is that this girl, Joyce Reynolds, was a liar.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” said Judith Butler, “that a child might make up a thing and then it might turn out to be true?”

“That is certainly the focal point from which we start,” said Poirot. “Joyce Reynolds was unquestionably murdered.”

“And you have started. Probably you know already all about it,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Madame, do not ask impossibilities of me. You are always in such a hurry.”

“Why not?” said Mrs. Oliver. “Nobody would ever get anything done nowadays if they weren’t in a hurry.”

Miranda returned at this moment with a plateful of scones.

"Shall I put them down here?" she asked. "I expect you've finished talking by now, haven't you? Or is there anything else you would like me to get from the kitchen?"

There was a gentle malice in her voice. Mrs. Butler lowered the Georgian silver teapot to the fender, switched on an electric kettle which had been turned off just before it came to the boil, duly filled the teapot and served the tea. Miranda handed hot scones and cucumber sandwiches with a serious elegance of manner.

"Ariadne and I met in Greece," said Judith.

"I fell into the sea," said Mrs. Oliver, "when we were coming back from one of the islands. It had got rather rough and the sailors always say 'jump' and, of course, they always say jump just when the thing's at its furthest point which makes it come right for you, but you don't think that can possibly happen and so you dither and you lose your nerve and you jump when it looks close and, of course, that's the moment when it goes far away." She paused for breath. "Judith helped fish me out and it made a kind of bond between us, didn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Butler. "Besides, I liked your Christian name," she added. "It seemed very appropriate, somehow."

"Yes, I suppose it is a Greek name," said Mrs. Oliver. "It's my own, you know. I didn't just make it up for literary purposes. But nothing Ariadne-like has ever happened to me. I've never been deserted on a Greek island by my own true love or anything like that."

Poirot raised a hand to his moustache in order to hide the slight smile that he could not help coming to his lips as he envisaged Mrs. Oliver in the rôle of a deserted Greek maiden.

"We can't all live up to our names," said Mrs. Butler.

"No, indeed. I can't see you in the rôle of cutting off your lover's head. That is the way it happened, isn't it, Judith and Holofernes, I mean?"

"It was her patriotic duty," said Mrs. Butler, "for which, if I remember rightly, she was highly commended and rewarded."

"I'm not really very well up in Judith and Holofernes. It's the Apocrypha, isn't it? Still, if one comes to think of it, people do give other people—their children, I mean—some very queer names, don't they? Who was the one who hammered some nails in someone's head? Jael or Sisera. I never remember which is the man or which is the woman there. Jael, I think. I don't think I remember any child having been christened Jael."

"She laid butter before him in a lordly dish," said Miranda unexpectedly, pausing as she was about to remove the tea tray.

"Don't look at me," said Judith Butler to her friend, "it wasn't I who introduced Miranda to the Apocrypha. "That's her school training."

"Rather unusual for schools nowadays, isn't it?" said Mrs. Oliver. "They give them ethical ideas instead, don't they?"

"Not Miss Emlyn," said Miranda. "She says that if we go to church nowadays we only get the modern version of the Bible read to us in the lessons and things, and that it has no literary merit whatsoever. We should at least know the fine prose and blank verse sometimes of the Authorized Version. I enjoyed the story of Jael and Sisera very much," she added. "It's not a thing," she said meditatively, "that I should ever have thought of doing myself. Hammering nails, I mean, into someone's head when they were asleep."

"I hope not indeed," said her mother.

"And how would you dispose of your enemies, Miranda?" asked Poirot.

"I should be very kind," said Miranda in a gently contemplative tone. "It would be more difficult, but I'd rather have it that way because I don't like hurting things. I'd use a sort of drug that gives people euthanasia. They would go to sleep and have beautiful dreams and they just wouldn't wake up." She lifted some tea cups and the bread and butter plate. "I'll wash up, Mummy," she said, "if you like to take Monsieur Poirot to look at the garden. There are still some Queen Elizabeth roses at the back of the border."

She went out of the room carefully carrying the tea tray.

"She's an astonishing child, Miranda," said Mrs. Oliver.

"You have a very beautiful daughter, Madame," said Poirot.

"Yes, I think she is beautiful now. One doesn't know what they will look like by the time they grow up. They acquire puppy fat and look like well-fattened pigs sometimes. But now—now she is like a wood nymph."

"One does not wonder that she is fond of the Quarry Garden which adjoins your house."

"I wish she wasn't so fond of it sometimes. One gets nervous about people wandering about in isolated places, even if they are quite near people or a village. One's—oh, one's very frightened all the time nowadays. That's why—why you've got to find out why this awful thing happened to Joyce, Monsieur Poirot. Because until we know who that was, we shan't feel safe for a minute—about our children, I mean. Take Monsieur Poirot out in the garden, will you, Ariadne? I'll join you in a minute or two."

She took the remaining two cups and a plate and went into the kitchen. Poirot and Mrs. Oliver went out through the french window. The small garden was like most autumn gardens. It retained a few candles of golden rod and michaelmas daisies in a border, and some Queen Elizabeth roses held their pink statuesque heads up high. Mrs. Oliver walked rapidly down to where there was a stone bench, sat down, and motioned Poirot to sit down beside her.

"You said you thought Miranda was like a wood nymph," she said. "What do you think of Judith?"

"I think Judith's name ought to be Undine," said Poirot.

"A water spirit, yes. Yes, she does look as though she'd just come out of the Rhine or the sea or a forest pool or something. Her hair looks as though it had been dipped in water. Yet there's nothing untidy or scatty about her, is there?"

"She, too, is a very lovely woman," said Poirot.

"What do you think about her?"

"I have not had time to think as yet. I just think that she is beautiful and attractive and that something is giving her great concern."

"Well, of course, wouldn't it?"

"What I would like, Madame, is for you to tell me what you know or think about her."

"Well, I got to know her very well on the cruise. You know, one does make quite intimate friends. Just one or two people. The rest of them, I mean, they like each other and all that, but you don't really go to any trouble to see them again. But one or two you do. Well, Judith was one of the ones I did want to see again."

"You did not know her before the cruise?"

"No."

"But you know something about her?"

"Well, just ordinary things. She's a widow," said Mrs. Oliver. "Her husband died a good many years ago—he was an air pilot. He was killed in a car accident. One of those pileup things, I think it was, coming off the M what-is-it that runs near here on to the ordinary road one evening, or something of that kind. He left her rather badly off, I imagine. She was very broken up about it, I think. She doesn't like talking about him."

"Is Miranda her only child?"

"Yes. Judith does some part-time secretarial work in the neighbourhood, but she hasn't got a fixed job."

"Did she know the people who lived at the Quarry House?"

"You mean old Colonel and Mrs. Weston?"

"I mean the former owner, Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, wasn't it?"

"I think so. I think I've heard that name mentioned. But she died two or three years ago, so of course one doesn't hear about her much. Aren't the people who are alive enough for you?" demanded Mrs. Oliver with some irritation.

"Certainly not," said Poirot. "I have also to inquire into those who have died or disappeared from the scene."

"Who's disappeared?"

"An au pair girl," said Poirot.

"Oh well," said Mrs. Oliver, "they're always disappearing, aren't they? I mean, they come over here and get their fare paid and then they go straight into hospital because they're pregnant and have a baby, and call it Auguste, or Hans or Boris, or some name like that. Or they've come over to marry someone, or to follow up some young man they're in love with. You wouldn't believe the things friends tell me! The thing about au pair girls seems to be either they're Heaven's gift to overworked mothers and you never want to part with them, or they pinch your stockings—or get themselves murdered—" She stopped. "Oh!" she said.

"Calm yourself, Madame," said Poirot. "There seems no reason to believe that an au pair girl has been murdered—quite the contrary."

"What do you mean by quite the contrary? It doesn't make sense."

"Probably not. All the same—"

He took out his notebook and made an entry in it.

"What are you writing down there?"

"Certain things that have occurred in the past."

"You seem to be very perturbed by the past altogether."

"The past is the father of the present," said Poirot sententiously.

He offered her the notebook.

"Do you wish to see what I have written?"

"Of course I do. I daresay it won't mean anything to me. The things you think important to write down, I never do."

He held out the small black notebook.

"Deaths: e.g. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe (Wealthy). Janet White (Schoolteacher). Lawyer's clerk—Knifed, Former prosecution for forgery."

Below it was written "Opera girl disappears."

"What opera girl?"

"It is the word my friend, Spence's sister, uses for what you and I call an au pair girl."

"Why should she disappear?"

"Because she was possibly about to get into some form of legal trouble."

Poirot's finger went down to the next entry. The word was simply "Forgery," with two question marks after it.

"Forgery?" said Mrs. Oliver. "Why forgery?"

"That is what I asked. Why forgery?"

"What kind of forgery?"

"A Will was forged, or rather a codicil to a Will. A codicil in the au pair girl's favour."

"Undue influence?" suggested Mrs. Oliver.

"Forgery is something rather more serious than undue influence," said Poirot.

"I don't see what that's got to do with the murder of poor Joyce."

"Nor do I," said Poirot. "But, therefore, it is interesting."

"What is the next word? I can't read it."

"Elephants."

"I don't see what that's got to do with anything."

"It might have," said Poirot, "believe me, it might have."

He rose.

"I must leave you now," he said. "Apologize, please, to my hostess for my not saying good-bye to her. I much enjoyed meeting her and her lovely and unusual daughter. Tell her to take care of that child."

"'My mother said I never should, play with the children in the wood,'" quoted Mrs. Oliver. "Well, good-bye. If you like to be mysterious, I suppose you will go on being mysterious. You don't even say what you're going to do next."

"I have made an appointment for tomorrow morning with Messrs Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter in Medchester."

"Why?"

"To talk about forgery and other matters."

"And after that?"

“I want to talk to certain people who were also present.”

“At the party?”

“No—at the preparation for the party.”

Twelve

The premises of Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter were typical of an old-fashioned firm of the utmost respectability. The hand of time had made itself felt. There were no more Harrisons and no more Leadbetters. There was a Mr. Atkinson and a young Mr. Cole, and there was still Mr. Jeremy Fullerton, senior partner.

A lean, elderly man, Mr. Fullerton, with an impassive face, a dry, legal voice, and eyes that were unexpectedly shrewd. Beneath his hand rested a sheet of notepaper, the few words on which he had just read. He read them once again, assessing their meaning very exactly. Then he looked at the man whom the note introduced to him.

“Monsieur Hercule Poirot?” He made his own assessment of the visitor. An elderly man, a foreigner, very dapper in his dress, unsuitably attired as to the feet in patent leather shoes which were, so Mr. Fullerton guessed shrewdly, too tight for him. Faint lines of pain were already etching themselves round the corners of his eyes. A dandy, a fop, a foreigner and recommended to him by, of all people, Inspector Henry Raglan, C.I.D., and also vouched for by Superintendent Spence (retired), formerly of Scotland Yard.

“Superintendent Spence, eh?” said Mr. Fullerton.

Fullerton knew Spence. A man who had done good work in his time, had been highly thought of by his superiors. Faint memories flashed across his mind. Rather a celebrated case, more celebrated actually than it had showed any signs of being, a case that had seemed cut and dried. Of course! It came to him that his nephew Robert had been connected with it, had been Junior Counsel. A psychopathic killer, it had seemed, a man who had hardly bothered to try and defend himself, a man whom you might have thought really wanted to be hanged (because it had meant hanging at that time). No fifteen years, or indefinite number of years in prison. No. You paid the full penalty—and more’s the pity they’ve given it up, so Mr. Fullerton thought in his dry mind. The young thugs nowadays thought they didn’t risk much by prolonging assault to the point where it became mortal. Once your man was dead, there'd be no witness to identify you.

Spence had been in charge of the case, a quiet, dogged man who had insisted all along that they'd got the wrong man. And they had got the wrong man, and the person who found the evidence that they'd got the wrong man was some sort of an amateurish foreigner. Some retired detective chap from the Belgian police force. A good age then. And now—senile, probably, thought Mr. Fullerton, but all the same he himself would take the prudent course. Information, that's what was wanted from him. Information which, after all, could not be a mistake to give, since he could not see that he was likely to have any information that could be useful in this particular matter. A case of child homicide.

Mr. Fullerton might think he had a fairly shrewd idea of who had committed that homicide, but he was not so sure as he would like to be, because there were at least three claimants in the matter. Any one of three young ne'er-do-wells might have done it. Words floated through his head. Mentally retarded. Psychiatrist's report. That's how the whole matter would end, no doubt. All the same, to drown a child during a party—that was rather a different cup of tea from one of the innumerable school children who did not arrive home and who had accepted a lift in a car after having been repeatedly warned not to do so, and who had been found in a nearby copse or gravel pit. A gravel pit now. When was that? Many, many years ago now.

All this took about four minutes' time and Mr. Fullerton then cleared his throat in a slightly asthmatic fashion, and spoke.

"Monsieur Hercule Poirot," he said again. "What can I do for you? I suppose it's the business of this young girl, Joyce Reynolds. Nasty business, very nasty business. I can't see actually where I can assist you. I know very little about it all."

"But you are, I believe, the legal adviser to the Drake family?"

"Oh yes, yes. Hugo Drake, poor chap. Very nice fellow. I've known them for years, ever since they bought Apple Trees and came here to live. Sad thing, polio—he contracted it when they were holidaying abroad one year. Mentally, of course, his health was quite unimpaired. It's sad when it happens to a man who has been a good athlete all his life, a sportsman, good at games and all the rest of it. Yes. Sad business to know you're a cripple for life."

"You were also, I believe, in charge of the legal affairs of Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe?"

"The aunt, yes. Remarkable woman really. She came here to live after her health broke down, so as to be near her nephew and his wife. Bought that white elephant of a place, Quarry House. Paid far more than it was worth—but money was no object to her. She was very well off. She could have found a more attractive house, but it was the quarry itself that fascinated her. Got a landscape gardener on to it, fellow quite high up in his profession, I believe. One of those handsome, long-haired chaps, but he had ability all right. He did well for himself in this quarry garden work. Got himself quite a reputation over it, illustrated in Homes and Gardens and all the rest of it. Yes, Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe knew how to pick people. It wasn't just a question of a handsome young man as a protégé. Some elderly women are foolish that way, but this chap had brains and was at the top of his profession. But I'm wandering on a bit. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe died nearly two years ago."

"Quite suddenly."

Fullerton looked at Poirot sharply.

"Well, no, I wouldn't say that. She had a heart condition and doctors tried to keep her from doing too much, but she was the sort of woman that you couldn't dictate to. She wasn't a hypochondriac type." He coughed and said, "But I expect we are getting away from the subject about which you came to talk to me."

"Not really," said Poirot, "although I would like, if I may, to ask you a few questions on a completely different matter. Some information about one of your employees, by name Lesley Ferrier."

Mr. Fullerton looked somewhat surprised. “Lesley Ferrier?” he said. “Lesley Ferrier. Let me see. Really you know, I’d nearly forgotten his name. Yes, yes, of course. Got himself knifed, didn’t he?”

“That is the man I mean.”

“Well, I don’t really know that I can tell you much about him. It took place some years ago. Knifed near the Green Swan one night. No arrest was ever made. I daresay the police had some idea who was responsible, but it was mainly, I think, a matter of getting evidence.”

“The motive was emotional?” inquired Poirot.

“Oh yes, I should think certainly so. Jealousy, you know. He’d been going steady with a married woman. Her husband had a pub. The Green Swan at Woodleigh Common. Unpretentious place. Then it seems young Lesley started playing around with another young woman—or more than one, it was said. Quite a one for the girls, he was. There was a bit of trouble once or twice.”

“You were satisfied with him as an employee?”

“I would rather describe it as not dissatisfied. He had his points. He handled clients well and was studying for his articles, and if only he’d paid more attention to his position and keeping up a good standard of behaviour, it would have been better instead of mixing himself up with one girl after another, most of whom I am apt in my old-fashioned way to consider as considerably beneath him in station. There was a row one night at the Green Swan, and Lesley Ferrier was knifed on his way home.”

“Was one of the girls responsible, or would it be Mrs. Green Swan, do you think?”

“Really, it is not a case of knowing anything definite. I believe the police considered it was a case of jealousy—but—” He shrugged his shoulders.

“But you are not sure?”

"Oh, it happens," said Mr. Fullerton. "'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' That is always being quoted in Court. Sometimes it's true."

"But I think I discern that you yourself are not at all sure that that was the case here."

"Well, I should have preferred rather more evidence, shall we say. The police would have preferred rather more evidence, too. Public prosecutor threw it out, I believe."

"It could have been something quite different?"

"Oh yes. One could propound several theories. Not a very stable character, young Ferrier. Well brought up. Nice mother—a widow. Father not so satisfactory. Got himself out of several scrapes by the skin of his teeth. Hard luck on his wife. Our young man in some ways resembled his father. He was associated once or twice with rather a doubtful crowd. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. He was still young. But I warned him that he was getting himself mixed up with the wrong lot. Too closely connected with fiddling transactions outside the law. Frankly, but for his mother, I wouldn't have kept him. He was young, and he had ability; I gave him a warning or two which I hoped might do the trick. But there's a lot of corruption about these days. It's been on the increase for the last ten years."

"Someone might have had it in for him, you think?"

"Quite possible. These associations—gangs is a rather melodramatic word—but you run a certain danger when you get tangled up with them. Any idea that you may split on them, and a knife between your shoulder blades isn't an uncommon thing to happen."

"Nobody saw it happen?"

"No. Nobody saw it happen. They wouldn't, of course. Whoever took the job on would have all the arrangements nicely made. Alibi at the proper place and time, and so on and so on."

“Yet somebody might have seen it happen. Somebody quite unlikely. A child, for instance.”

“Late at night? In the neighbourhood of the Green Swan? Hardly a very credible idea, Monsieur Poirot.”

“A child,” persisted Poirot, “who might remember. A child coming home from a friend’s house. At some short distance, perhaps, from her own home. She might have been coming by a footpath or seen something from behind a hedge.”

“Really, Monsieur Poirot, what an imagination you have got. What you are saying seems to me most unlikely.”

“It does not seem so unlikely to me,” said Poirot. “Children do see things. They are so often, you see, not expected to be where they are.”

“But surely when they go home and relate what they have seen?”

“They might not,” said Poirot. “They might not, you see, be sure of what they had seen. Especially if what they had seen had been faintly frightening to them. Children do not always go home and report a street accident they have seen, or some unexpected violence. Children keep their secrets very well. Keep them and think about them. Sometimes they like to feel that they know a secret, a secret which they are keeping to themselves.”

“They’d tell their mothers,” said Mr. Fullerton.

“I am not so sure of that,” said Poirot. “In my experience the things that children do not tell their mothers are quite numerous.”

“What interests you so much, may I know, about this case of Lesley Ferrier? The regrettable death of a young man by a violence which is so lamentably often amongst us nowadays?”

“I know nothing about him. But I wanted to know something about him because his is a violent death that occurred not many years ago. That might be important to me.”

“You know, Mr. Poirot,” said Mr. Fullerton, with some slight acerbity. “I really cannot quite make out why you have come to me, and in what you are really interested. You cannot surely suspect any tie-up between the death of Joyce Reynolds and the death of a young man of promise but slightly criminal activities who has been dead for some years?”

“One can suspect anything,” said Poirot. “One has to find out more.”

“Excuse me, what one has to have in all matters dealing with crime, is evidence.”

“You have perhaps heard that the dead girl Joyce was heard by several witnesses to say that she had with her own eyes witnessed a murder.”

“In a place like this,” said Mr. Fullerton, “one usually hears any rumour that may be going round. One usually hears it, too, if I may add these words, in a singularly exaggerated form not usually worthy of credence.”

“That also,” said Poirot, “is quite true. Joyce was, I gather, just thirteen years of age. A child of nine could remember something she had seen—a hit-and-run accident, a fight or a struggle with knives on a dark evening, or a schoolteacher who was strangled, say—all these things might leave a very strong impression on a child’s mind about which she would not speak, being uncertain, perhaps, of the actual facts she had seen, and mulling them over in her own mind. Forgetting about them even, possibly, until something happened to remind her. You agree that that is a possible happening?”

“Oh yes, yes, but I hardly—I think it is an extremely far-fetched supposition.”

“You had, also, I believe, a disappearance here of a foreign girl. Her name, I believe, was Olga or Sonia—I am not sure of the surname.”

“Olga Seminoff. Yes, indeed.”

“Not, I fear, a very reliable character?”

“No.”

“She was companion or nurse attendant to Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, was she not, whom you described to me just now? Mrs. Drake’s aunt—”

“Yes. She had had several girls in that position—two other foreign girls, I think, one of them with whom she quarrelled almost immediately, and another one who was nice but painfully stupid. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe was not one to suffer fools gladly. Olga, her last venture, seems to have suited her very well. She was not, if I remember rightly, a particularly attractive girl,” said Mr. Fullerton. “She was short, rather stocky, had rather a dour manner, and people in the neighbourhood did not like her very much.”

“But Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe did like her,” suggested Poirot.

“She became very much attached to her—unwisely so, it seemed at one moment.”

“Ah, indeed.”

“I have no doubt,” said Mr. Fullerton, “that I am not telling you anything that you have not heard already. These things, as I say, go round the place like wildfire.”

“I understand that Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe left a large sum of money to the girl.”

“A most surprising thing to happen,” said Mr. Fullerton. “Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had not changed her fundamental testamentary disposition for many years, except for adding new charities or altering legacies left void by death. Perhaps I am telling you what you know already, if you are interested in this matter. Her money had always been left jointly to her nephew, Hugo Drake, and his wife, who was also his first cousin, and so also niece to Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe. If either of them predeceased her the money went to the survivor. A good many bequests were left to charities and to old servants. But what was alleged to be her final disposal of her property was made about three weeks before her death, and not, as heretofore, drawn up by our firm. It was a codicil written in her own handwriting. It included one or two charities—not so many as before—the old servants had no legacies at all, and the whole residue of her considerable fortune was left to Olga Seminoff in gratitude for the devoted service and affection she had shown her. A most astonishing disposition, one that seemed totally unlike anything Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had ever done before.”

“And then?” said Poirot.

“You have presumably heard more or less the developments. From the evidence of handwriting experts, it became clear that the codicil was a complete forgery. It bore only a faint resemblance to Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe’s handwriting, no more than that. Mrs. Smythe had disliked the typewriter and had frequently got Olga to write letters of a personal nature, as far as possible copying her employer’s handwriting—sometimes, even, signing the letter with her employer’s signature. She had had plenty of practice in doing this. It seems that when Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe died the girl went one step further and thought that she was proficient enough to make the handwriting acceptable as that of her employer. But that sort of thing won’t do with experts. No, indeed it won’t.”

“Proceedings were about to be taken to contest the document?”

“Quite so. There was, of course, the usual legal delay before the proceedings actually came to court. During that period the young lady lost her nerve and well, as you said yourself just now, she—disappeared.”

Thirteen

When Hercule Poirot had taken his leave and departed, Jeremy Fullerton sat before his desk drumming gently with his fingertips. His eyes, however, were far away—lost in thought.

He picked up a document in front of him and dropped his eyes down to it, but without focusing his glance. The discreet buzz of the house telephone caused him to pick up the receiver on his desk.

“Yes, Miss Miles?”

“Mr. Holden is here, sir.”

“Yes. Yes, his appointment, I believe was for nearly three quarters of an hour ago. Did he give any reason for having been so late?…Yes, yes. I quite see. Rather the same excuse he gave last time. Will you tell him I’ve seen another client, and I am now too short of time. Make an appointment with him for next week, will you? We can’t have this sort of thing going on.”

“Yes, Mr. Fullerton.”

He replaced the receiver and sat looking thoughtfully down at the document in front of him. He was still not reading it. His mind was going over events of the past. Two years—close on two years ago—and that strange little man this morning with his patent leather shoes and his big moustaches, had brought it back to him, asking all those questions.

Now he was going over in his own mind a conversation of nearly two years ago.

He saw again, sitting in the chair opposite him, a girl, a short, stocky figure—the olive brown skin, the dark red generous mouth, the heavy cheekbones and the fierceness of the blue eyes that looked into his beneath the heavy, beetling brows. A passionate face, a face full of vitality, a face that had known suffering—would probably always know suffering—but would never learn to accept suffering. The kind of woman who would fight and protest until the end. Where was she now, he wondered? Somehow or other she had managed—what had she managed exactly? Who had helped her? Had anyone helped her? Somebody must have done so.

She was back again, he supposed, in some trouble-stricken spot in Central Europe where she had come from, where she belonged, where she had had to go back to because there was no other course for her to take unless she was content to lose her liberty.

Jeremy Fullerton was an upholder of the law. He believed in the law, he was contemptuous of many of the magistrates of today with their weak sentences, their acceptance of scholastic needs. The students who stole books, the young married women who denuded the supermarkets, the girls who filched money from their employers, the boys who wrecked telephone boxes, none of them in real need, none of them desperate, most of them had known nothing but overindulgence in bringing up and a fervent belief that anything they could not afford to buy was theirs to take. Yet along with his intrinsic belief in the administration of the law justly, Mr. Fullerton was a man who had compassion. He could be sorry for people. He could be sorry, and was sorry, for Olga Seminoff though he was quite unaffected by the passionate arguments she advanced for herself.

“I came to you for help. I thought you would help me. You were kind last year. You helped me with forms so that I could remain another year in England. So they say to me: ‘You need not answer any questions you do not wish to. You can be represented by a lawyer.’ So I come to you.”

“The circumstances you have instanced—” and Mr. Fullerton remembered how drily and coldly he had said that, all the more drily and coldly because of the pity that lay behind the dryness of the statement “—do not apply. In this case I am not at liberty to act for you legally. I am representing already the Drake family. As you know, I was Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe’s solicitor.”

“But she is dead. She does not want a solicitor when she is dead.”

“She was fond of you,” said Mr. Fullerton.

“Yes, she was fond of me. That is what I am telling you. That is why she wanted to give me the money.”

“All her money?”

“Why not? Why not? She did not like her relations.”

“You are wrong. She was very fond of her niece and nephew.”

“Well, then, she may have liked Mr. Drake but she did not like Mrs. Drake. She found her very tiresome. Mrs. Drake interfered. She would not let Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe do always what she liked. She would not let her eat the food she liked.”

“She is a very conscientious woman, and she tried to get her aunt to obey the doctor’s orders as to diet and not too much exercise and many other things.”

“People do not always want to obey a doctor’s orders. They do not want to be interfered with by relations. They like living their own lives and doing what they want and having what they want. She had plenty of money. She could have what she wanted! She could have as much as she liked of everything. She was rich—rich—rich, and she could do what she liked with her money. They have already quite enough money, Mr. and Mrs. Drake. They have a fine house and clothes and two cars. They are very well-to-do. Why should they have any more?”

“They were her only living relations.”

“She wanted me to have the money. She was sorry for me. She knew what I had been through. She knew about my father, arrested by the police and taken away. We never saw him again, my mother and I. And then my mother and how she died. All my family died. It is terrible, what I have endured. You do not know what it is like to live in a police state, as I have lived in it. No, no. You are on the side of the police. You are not on my side.”

"No," Mr. Fullerton said, "I am not on your side. I am very sorry for what has happened to you, but you've brought this trouble about yourself."

"That is not true! It is not true that I have done anything I should not do. What have I done? I was kind to her, I was nice to her. I brought her in lots of things that she was not supposed to eat. Chocolates and butter. All the time nothing but vegetable fats. She did not like vegetable fats. She wanted butter. She wanted lots of butter."

"It's not just a question of butter," said Mr. Fullerton.

"I looked after her, I was nice to her! And so she was grateful. And then when she died and I find that in her kindness and her affection she has left a signed paper leaving all her money to me, then those Drakes come along and say I shall not have it. They say all sorts of things. They say I had a bad influence. And then they say worse things than that. Much worse. They say I wrote the Will myself. That is nonsense. She wrote it. She wrote it. And then she sent me out of the room. She got the cleaning woman and Jim the gardener. She said they had to sign the paper, not me. Because I was going to get the money. Why should not I have the money? Why should I not have some good luck in my life, some happiness? It seemed so wonderful. All the things I planned to do when I knew about it."

"I have no doubt, yes, I have no doubt."

"Why shouldn't I have plans? Why should not I rejoice? I am going to be happy and rich and have all the things I want. What did I do wrong? Nothing. Nothing, I tell you. Nothing."

"I have tried to explain to you," said Mr. Fullerton.

"That is all lies. You say I tell lies. You say I wrote the paper myself. I did not write it myself. She wrote it. Nobody can say anything different."

"Certain people say a good many things," said Mr. Fullerton. "Now listen. Stop protesting and listen to me. It is true, is it not, that Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe in the letters you wrote for her, often asked you to copy her handwriting as nearly as you could? That was because she had an old-fashioned idea that to write typewritten letters to people who are friends or with whom you have a personal acquaintance, is an act of rudeness. That is a survival from Victorian days. Nowadays nobody cares whether they receive handwritten letters or typewritten ones. But to Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe that was discourtesy. You understand what I am saying?"

"Yes, I understand. And so she asks me. She says, 'Now, Olga,' she says. 'These four letters you will answer as I have told you and that you have taken down in shorthand. But you will write them in handwriting and you will make the handwriting as close to mine as possible.' And she told me to practise writing her handwriting, to notice how she made her a's, and her b's and her l's and all the different letters. 'So long as it is reasonably like my handwriting,' she said, 'that will do, and then you can sign my name. But I do not want people to think that I am no longer able to write my own letters. Although, as you know, the rheumatism in my wrist is getting worse and I find it more difficult, but I don't want my personal letters typewritten.'"

"You could have written them in your ordinary handwriting," said Mr. Fullerton, "and put a note at the end saying 'per secretary' or per initials if you liked."

"She did not want me to do that. She wanted it to be thought that she wrote the letters herself."

And that, Mr. Fullerton thought, could be true enough. It was very like Louise Llewellyn-Smythe. She was always passionately resentful of the fact that she could no longer do the things she used to do, that she could no longer walk far or go up hills quickly or perform certain actions with her hands, her right hand especially. She wanted to be able to say "I'm perfectly well, perfectly all right and there's nothing I can't do if I set my mind to it." Yes, what Olga was telling him now was perfectly true, and because it was true it was one of the reasons why the codicil appended to the last Will properly drawn out and signed by Louise Llewellyn-Smythe had been accepted at first without suspicion. It was in his own office, Mr. Fullerton reflected, that suspicions had arisen because both he and his younger partner knew Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's handwriting very well. It was young Cole who had first said, "You know, I really can't believe that Louise Llewellyn-Smythe wrote that codicil. I know she had arthritis lately but look at these specimens of her own writing that I've brought along from amongst her papers to show you. There's something wrong about that codicil."

Mr. Fullerton had agreed that there was something wrong about it. He had said they would take expert opinion on this handwriting question. The answer had been quite definite. Separate opinions had not varied. The handwriting of the codicil was definitely not that of Louise Llewellyn-Smythe. If Olga had been less greedy, Mr. Fullerton thought, if she had been content to write a codicil beginning as this one had done—"Because of her great care and attention to me and the affection and kindness she has shown me, I leave—" That was how it had begun, that was how it could have begun, and if it had gone on to specify a good round sum of money left to the devoted au pair girl, the relations might have considered it overdone, but they would have accepted it without questioning. But to cut out the relations altogether, the nephew who had been his aunt's residuary legatee in the last four wills she had made during a period of nearly twenty years, to leave everything to the stranger Olga Seminoff—that was not in Louise Llewellyn-Smythe's character. In fact, a plea of undue influence could upset such a document anyway. No. She had been greedy, this hot, passionate child. Possibly Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had told her that some money would be left to her because of her kindness, because of her attention, because of a fondness the old lady was beginning to feel for this girl who fulfilled all her whims, who did whatever she asked her. And that had opened up a vista for Olga. She would have everything. The old lady should leave everything to her, and she would have all the money. All the money and the house and the clothes and the jewels. Everything. A greedy girl. And now retribution had caught up with her.

And Mr. Fullerton, against his will, against his legal instincts and against a good deal more, felt sorry for her. Very sorry for her. She had known suffering since she was a child, had known the rigours of a police state, had lost her parents, lost a brother and a sister and known injustice and fear, and it had developed in her a trait that she had no doubt been born with but which she had never been able so far to indulge. It had developed a childish passionate greed.

“Everyone is against me,” said Olga. “Everyone. You are all against me. You are not fair because I am a foreigner, because I do not belong to this country, because I do not know what to say, what to do. What can I do? Why do you not tell me what I can do?”

“Because I do not really think there is anything much you can do,” said Mr. Fullerton. “Your best chance is to make a clean breast of things.”

“If I say what you want me to say, it will be all lies and not true. She made that Will. She wrote it down there. She told me to go out of the room while the others signed it.”

“There is evidence against you, you know. There are people who will say that Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe often did not know what she was signing. She had several documents of different kinds, and she did not always reread what was put before her.”

“Well, then she did not know what she was saying.”

“My dear child,” said Mr. Fullerton, “your best hope is the fact that you are a first offender, that you are a foreigner, that you understand the English language only in a rather rudimentary form. In that case you may get off with a minor sentence—or you may, indeed, get put on probation.”

“Oh, words. Nothing but words. I shall be put in prison and never let out again.”

“Now you are talking nonsense,” Mr. Fullerton said.

“It would be better if I ran away, if I ran away and hid myself so that nobody could find me.”

“Once there is a warrant out for your arrest, you would be found.”

“Not if I did it quickly. Not if I went at once. Not if someone helped me. I could get away. Get away from England. In a boat or a plane. I could find someone who forges passports or visas, or whatever you have to have. Someone who will do something for me. I have friends. I have people who are fond of me. Somebody could help me to disappear. That is what I needed. I could put on a wig. I could walk about on crutches."

"Listen," Mr. Fullerton had said, and he had spoken then with authority, "I am sorry for you. I will recommend you to a lawyer who will do his best for you. You can't hope to disappear. You are talking like a child."

"I have got enough money. I have saved money." And then she had said, "You have tried to be kind. Yes, I believe that. But you will not do anything because it is all the law—the law. But someone will help me. Someone will. And I shall get away where nobody will ever find me."

Nobody, Mr. Fullerton thought, had found her. He wondered—yes; he wondered very much—where she was or could be now.

Fourteen

I

Admitted to Apple Trees, Hercule Poirot was shown into the drawing room and told that Mrs. Drake would not be long.

In passing through the hall he heard the hum of female voices behind what he took to be the dining room door.

Poirot crossed to the drawing room window and surveyed the neat and pleasant garden. Well laid out, kept studiously in control. Rampant autumn michaelmas daisies still survived, tied up severely to sticks; chrysanthemums had not yet relinquished life. There were still a persistent rose or two scorning the approach of winter.

Poirot could discern no sign as yet of the preliminary activities of a landscape gardener. All was care and convention. He wondered if Mrs. Drake had been one too many for Michael Garfield. He had spread his lures in vain. It showed every sign of remaining a splendidly kept suburban garden.

The door opened.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Monsieur Poirot,” said Mrs. Drake.

Outside in the hall there was a diminishing hum of voices as various people took their leave and departed.

“It’s our church Christmas fête,” explained Mrs. Drake. “A Committee Meeting for arrangements for it and all the rest of it. These things always go on much longer than they ought to, of course. Somebody always objects to something, or has a good idea—the good idea usually being a perfectly impossible one.”

There was a slight acerbity in her tone. Poirot could well imagine that Rowena Drake would put things down as quite absurd, firmly and definitely. He could understand well enough from remarks he had heard from Spence’s sister, from hints of what other people had said and from various other sources, that Rowena Drake was that dominant type of personality whom everyone expects to run the show, and whom nobody has much affection for while she is doing it. He could imagine, too, that her conscientiousness had not been the kind to be appreciated by an elderly relative who was herself of the same type. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, he gathered, had come here to live so as to be near to her nephew and his wife, and that the wife had readily undertaken the supervision and care of her husband’s aunt as far as she could do so without actually living in the house. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had probably acknowledged in her own mind that she owed a great deal to Rowena, and had at the same time resented what she had no doubt thought of as her bossy ways.

“Well, they’ve all gone now,” said Rowena Drake, hearing the final shutting of the hall door. “Now what can I do for you? Something more about that dreadful party? I wish I’d never had it here. But no other house really seemed suitable. Is Mrs. Oliver still staying with Judith Butler?”

“Yes. She is, I believe, returning to London in a day or two. You had not met her before?”

“No. I love her books.”

“She is, I believe, considered a very good writer,” said Poirot.

“Oh well, she is a good writer. No doubt of that. She’s a very amusing person too. Has she any ideas herself—I mean about who might have done this dreadful thing?”

“I think not. And you, Madame?”

“I’ve told you already. I’ve no idea whatever.”

“You would perhaps say so, and yet—you might, might you not, have, perhaps, what amounts to a very good idea, but only an idea. A half-formed idea. A possible idea.”

"Why should you think that?"

She looked at him curiously.

"You might have seen something—something quite small and unimportant but which on reflection might seem more significant to you, perhaps, than it had done at first."

"You must have something in your mind, Monsieur Poirot, some definite incident."

"Well, I admit it. It is because of what someone said to me."

"Indeed! And who was that?"

"A Miss Whittaker. A schoolteacher."

"Oh yes, of course. Elizabeth Whittaker. She's the mathematics mistress, isn't she, at The Elms? She was at the party, I remember. Did she see something?"

"It was not so much that she saw something as she had the idea that you might have seen something."

Mrs. Drake looked surprised and shook her head.

"I can't think of anything I can possibly have seen," said Rowena Drake, "but one never knows."

"It had to do with a vase," said Poirot. "A vase of flowers."

"A vase of flowers?" Rowena Drake looked puzzled. Then her brow cleared. "Oh, of course, I know. Yes, there was a big vase of autumn leaves and chrysanthemums on the table in the angle of the stairs. A very nice glass vase. One of my wedding presents. The leaves seemed to be drooping and so did one or two of the flowers. I remember noticing it as I passed through the hall—it was near the end of the party, I think, by then, but I'm not sure—I wondered why it looked like that, and I went up and dipped my fingers into it and found that some idiot must have forgotten to put any water into it after arranging it. It made me very angry. So I took it into the bathroom and filled it up. But what could I have seen in that bathroom? There was nobody in it. I am quite sure of that. I think one or two of the older girls and boys had done a little harmless, what the Americans call ‘necking,’ there during the course of the party, but there was certainly nobody when I went into it with the vase.”

“No, no, I do not mean that,” said Poirot. “But I understood that there was an accident. That the vase slipped out of your hand and it fell to the hall below and was shattered to pieces.”

“Oh yes,” said Rowena. “Broken to smithereens. I was rather upset about it because as I’ve said, it had been one of our wedding presents, and it was really a perfect flower vase, heavy enough to hold big autumn bouquets and things like that. It was very stupid of me. My fingers just slipped. It went out of my hand and crashed on the hall floor below. Elizabeth Whittaker was standing there. She helped me to pick up the pieces and sweep some of the broken glass out of the way in case someone stepped on it. We just swept it into a corner by the Grandfather clock to be cleared up later.”

She looked inquiringly at Poirot.

“Is that the incident you mean?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Poirot. “Miss Whittaker wondered, I think, how you had come to drop the vase. She thought that something perhaps had startled you.”

“Startled me?” Rowena Drake looked at him, then frowned as she tried to think again. “No, I don’t think I was startled, anyway. It was just one of those ways things do slip out of your hands. Sometimes when you’re washing up. I think, really, it’s a result of being tired. I was pretty tired by that time, what with the preparations for the party and running the party and all the rest of it. It went very well, I must say. I think it was—oh, just one of those clumsy actions that you can’t help when you’re tired.”

“There was nothing—you are sure—that startled you? Something unexpected that you saw?”

"Saw? Where? In the hall below? I didn't see anything in the hall below. It was empty at the moment because everyone was in at the Snapdragon excepting, of course, for Miss Whittaker. And I don't think I even noticed her until she came forward to help when I ran down."

"Did you see someone, perhaps, leaving the library door?"

"The library door…I see what you mean. Yes, I could have seen that." She paused for quite a long time, then she looked at Poirot with a very straight, firm glance. "I didn't see anyone leave the library," she said. "Nobody at all…."

He wondered. The way in which she said it was what aroused the belief in his mind that she was not speaking the truth, that instead she had seen someone or something, perhaps the door just opening a little, a mere glance perhaps of a figure inside. But she was quite firm in her denial. Why, he wondered, had she been so firm? Because the person she had seen was a person she did not want to believe for one moment had had anything to do with the crime committed on the other side of the door? Someone she cared about, or someone—which seemed more likely, he thought—someone whom she wished to protect. Someone, perhaps, who had not long passed beyond childhood, someone whom she might feel was not truly conscious of the awful thing they had just done.

He thought her a hard creature but a person of integrity. He thought that she was, like many women of the same type, women who were often magistrates, or who ran councils or charities, or interested themselves in what used to be called "good works." Women who had an inordinate belief in extenuating circumstances, who were ready, strangely enough, to make excuses for the young criminal. An adolescent boy, a mentally retarded girl. Someone perhaps who had already been—what is the phrase—"in care." If that had been the type of person she had seen coming out of the library, then he thought it possible that Rowena Drake's protective instinct might have come into play. It was not unknown in the present age for children to commit crimes, quite young children. Children of seven, of nine and so on, and it was often difficult to know how to dispose of these natural, it seemed, young criminals who came before the juvenile courts. Excuses had to be brought for them. Broken homes. Negligent and unsuitable parents. But the people who spoke the most vehemently for them, the people who sought to bring forth every excuse for them, were usually the type of Rowena Drake. A stern and censorious woman, except in such cases.

For himself, Poirot did not agree. He was a man who thought first always of justice. He was suspicious, had always been suspicious, of mercy—too much mercy, that is to say. Too much mercy, as he knew from former experience both in Belgium and this country, often resulted in further crimes which were fatal to innocent victims who need not have been victims if justice had been put first and mercy second.

“I see,” said Poirot. “I see.”

“You don’t think it’s possible that Miss Whittaker might have seen someone go into the library?” suggested Mrs. Drake.

Poirot was interested.

“Ah, you think that that might have been so?”

“It seemed to me merely a possibility. She might have caught sight of someone going in through the library, say, perhaps five minutes or so earlier, and then, when I dropped the vase it might have suggested to her that I could have caught a glimpse of the same person. That I might have seen who it was. Perhaps she doesn’t like to say anything that might suggest, unfairly perhaps, some person whom she had perhaps only half glimpsed—not enough to be sure of. Some back view perhaps of a child, or a young boy.”

“You think, do you not, Madame, that it was—shall we say, a child—a boy or girl, a mere child, or a young adolescent? You think it was not any definite one of these but, shall we say, you think that that is the most likely type to have committed the crime we are discussing?”

She considered the point thoughtfully, turning it over in her mind.

“Yes,” she said at last, “I suppose I do. I haven’t thought it out. It seems to me that crimes are so often associated nowadays with the young. People who don’t really know quite what they are doing, who want silly revenges, who have an instinct for destruction. Even the people who wreck telephone boxes, or who slash the tyres of cars, do all sorts of things just to hurt people, just because they hate—not anyone in particular, but the whole world. It’s a sort of symptom of this age. So I suppose when one comes across something like a child drowned at a party for no reason really, one does assume that it’s someone who is not yet fully responsible for their actions. Don’t you agree with me that—that—well, that that is certainly the most likely possibility here?”

“The police, I think, share your point of view—or did share it.”

“Well, they should know. We have a very good class of policeman in this district. They’ve done well in several crimes. They are painstaking and they never give up. I think probably they will solve this murder, though I don’t think it will happen very quickly. These things seem to take a long time. A long time of patient gathering of evidence.”

“The evidence in this case will not be very easy to gather, Madame.”

“No, I suppose it won’t. When my husband was killed—He was a cripple, you know. He was crossing the road and a car ran over him and knocked him down. They never found the person who was responsible. As you know, my husband—or perhaps you don’t know—my husband was a polio victim. He was partially paralyzed as a result of polio, six years ago. His condition had improved, but he was still crippled, and it would be difficult for him to get out of the way if a car bore down upon him quickly. I almost felt that I had been to blame, though he always insisted on going out without me or without anyone with him, because he would have resented very much being in the care of a nurse, or a wife who took the part of a nurse, and he was always careful before crossing a road. Still, one does blame oneself when accidents happen.”

“That came on top of the death of your aunt?”

“No. She died not long afterwards. Everything seems to come at once, doesn’t it?”

“That is very true,” said Hercule Poirot. He went on: “The police were not able to trace the car that ran down your husband?”

“It was a Grasshopper Mark 7, I believe. Every third car you notice on the road is a Grasshopper Mark 7—or was then. It’s the most popular car on the market, they tell me. They believe it was pinched from the Market Place in Medchester. A car park there. It belonged to a Mr. Waterhouse, an elderly seed merchant in Medchester. Mr. Waterhouse was a slow and careful driver. It was certainly not he who caused the accident. It was clearly one of those cases where irresponsible young men help themselves to cars. Such careless, or should I say such callous young men, should be treated, one sometimes feels, more severely than they are now.”

“A long gaol sentence, perhaps. Merely to be fined, and the fine paid by indulgent relatives, makes little impression.”

“One has to remember,” said Rowena Drake, “that there are young people at an age when it is vital that they should continue with their studies if they are to have the chance of doing well in life.”

“The sacred cow of education,” said Hercule Poirot. “That is a phrase I have heard uttered,” he added quickly, “by people—well, should I say people who ought to know. People who themselves hold academic posts of some seniority.”

“They do not perhaps make enough allowances for youth, for a bad bringing up. Broken homes.”

“So you think they need something other than gaol sentences?”

“Proper remedial treatment,” said Rowena Drake firmly.

“And that will make—(another old-fashioned proverb)—a silk purse out of a sow’s ear? You do not believe in the maxim ‘the fate of every man have we bound about his neck?’”

Mrs. Drake looked extremely doubtful and slightly displeased.

“An Islamic saying, I believe,” said Poirot. Mrs. Drake looked unimpressed.

“I hope,” she said, “we do not take our ideas—or perhaps I should say our ideals—from the Middle East.”

“One must accept facts,” said Poirot, “and a fact that is expressed by modern biologists—Western biologists—” he hastened to add, “—seems to suggest very strongly that the root of a person’s actions lies in his genetic makeup. That a murderer of twenty-four was a murderer in potential at two or three or four years old. Or of course a mathematician or a musical genius.”

“We are not discussing murderers,” said Mrs. Drake. “My husband died as a result of an accident. An accident caused by a careless and badly adjusted personality. Whoever the boy or young man was, there is always the hope of eventual adjustment to a belief and acceptance that it is a duty to consider others, to be taught to feel an abhorrence if you have taken life unawares, simply out of what may be described as criminal carelessness that was not really criminal in intent?”

“You are quite sure, therefore, that it was not criminal in intent?”

“I should doubt it very much.” Mrs. Drake looked slightly surprised. “I do not think that the police ever seriously considered that possibility. I certainly did not. It was an accident. A very tragic accident which altered the pattern of many lives, including my own.”

“You say we are not discussing murderers,” said Poirot. “But in the case of Joyce that is just what we are discussing. There was no accident about that. Deliberate hands pushed that child’s head down into water, holding her there till death occurred. Deliberate intent.”

“I know. I know. It’s terrible. I don’t like to think of it, to be reminded of it.”

She got up, moving about restlessly. Poirot pushed on relentlessly.

“We are still presented with a choice there. We still have to find the motive involved.”

“It seems to me that such a crime must have been quite motiveless.”

“You mean committed by someone mentally disturbed to the extent of enjoying killing someone? Presumably killing someone young and immature.”

“One does hear of such cases. What is the original cause of them is difficult to find out. Even psychiatrists do not agree.”

“You refuse to accept a simpler explanation?”

She looked puzzled. “Simpler?”

“Someone not mentally disturbed, not a possible case for psychiatrists to disagree over. Somebody perhaps who just wanted to be safe.”

“Safe? Oh, you mean—”

“The girl had boasted that same day, some hours previously, that she had seen someone commit a murder.”

“Joyce,” said Mrs. Drake, with calm certainty, “was really a very silly little girl. Not, I am afraid, always very truthful.”

“So everyone has told me,” said Hercule Poirot. “I am beginning to believe, you know, that what everybody has told me must be right,” he added with a sigh. “It usually is.”

He rose to his feet, adopting a different manner.

“I must apologize, Madame. I have talked of painful things to you, things that do not truly concern me here. But it seemed from what Miss Whittaker told me—”

“Why don’t you find out more from her?”

“You mean—?”

“She is a teacher. She knows, much better than I can, what potentialities (as you have called them) exist amongst the children she teaches.”

She paused and then said:

“Miss Emlyn, too.”

“The headmistress?” Poirot looked surprised.

“Yes. She knows things. I mean, she is a natural psychologist. You said I might have ideas—half-formed ones—as to who killed Joyce. I haven’t—but I think Miss Emlyn might.”

“This is interesting….”

“I don’t mean has evidence. I mean she just knows. She could tell you—but I don’t think she will.”

“I begin to see,” said Poirot, “that I have still a long way to go. People know things—but they will not tell them to me.” He looked thoughtfully at Rowena Drake.

“Your aunt, Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, had an au pair girl who looked after her, a foreign girl.”

“You seem to have got hold of all the local gossip.” Rowena spoke dryly. “Yes, that is so. She left here rather suddenly soon after my aunt’s death.”

“For good reasons, it would seem.”

“I don’t know whether it’s libel or slander to say so—but there seems no doubt that she forged a codicil to my aunt’s Will—or that someone helped her to do so.”

“Someone?”

"She was friendly with a young man who worked in a solicitor's office in Medchester. He had been mixed up in a forgery case before. The case never came to court because the girl disappeared. She realized the Will would not be admitted to probate, and that there was going to be a court case. She left the neighbourhood and has never been heard of since."

"She too came, I have heard, from a broken home," said Poirot.

Rowena Drake looked at him sharply but he was smiling amiably.

"Thank you for all you have told me, Madame," he said.

II

When Poirot had left the house, he went for a short walk along a turning off the main road which was labelled "Helpsly Cemetery Road." The cemetery in question did not take him long to reach. It was at most ten minutes' walk. It was obviously a cemetery that had been made in the last ten years, presumably to cope with the rising importance of Woodleigh as a residential entity. The church, a church of reasonable size dating from some two or three centuries back, had had a very small enclosure round it already well filled. So the new cemetery had come into being with a footpath connecting it across two fields. It was, Poirot thought, a businesslike, modern cemetery with appropriate sentiments on marble or granite slabs; it had urns, chippings, small plantations of bushes or flowers. No interesting old epitaphs or inscriptions. Nothing much for an antiquarian. Cleaned, neat, tidy and with suitable sentiments expressed.

He came to a halt to read a tablet erected on a grave contemporary with several others near it, all dating within two or three years back. It bore a simple inscription, "Sacred to the Memory of Hugo Edmund Drake, beloved husband of Rowena Arabella Drake, who departed this life March the 20th 19—"

He giveth his beloved sleep

It occurred to Poirot, fresh from the impact of the dynamic Rowena Drake, that perhaps sleep might have come in welcome guise to the late Mr. Drake.

An alabaster urn had been fixed in position there and contained the remains of flowers. An elderly gardener, obviously employed to tend the graves of good citizens departed this life, approached Poirot in the pleasurable hopes of a few minutes' conversation while he laid his hoe and his broom aside.

"Stranger in these parts, I think," he said, "aren't you, sir?"

"It is very true," said Poirot. "I am a stranger with you as were my fathers before me."

"Ah, aye. We've got that text somewhere or summat very like it. Over down the other corner, it is." He went on, "He was a nice gentleman, he were, Mr. Drake. A cripple, you know. He had that infant paralysis, as they call it, though as often as not it isn't infants as suffer from it. It's grown-ups. Men and women too. My wife, she had an aunt, who caught it in Spain, she did. Went there with a tour, she did, and bathed somewhere in some river. And they said afterwards as it was the water infection, but I don't think they know much. Doctors don't, if you ask me. Still, it's made a lot of difference nowadays. All this inoculation they give the children, and that. Not nearly as many cases as there were. Yes, he were a nice gentleman and didn't complain, though he took it hard, being a cripple, I mean. He'd been a good sportsman, he had, in his time. Used to bat for us here in the village team. Many a six he's hit to the boundary. Yes, he were a nice gentleman."

"He died of an accident, did he not?"

"That's right. Crossing the road, towards twilight this was. One of these cars come along, a couple of these young thugs in it with beards growing up to their ears. That's what they say. Didn't stop either. Went on. Never looked to see. Abandoned the car somewhere in a car park twenty miles away. Wasn't their own car either. Pinched from a car park somewhere. Ah, it's terrible, a lot of those accidents nowadays. And the police often can't do anything about them. Very devoted to him, his wife was. Took it very hard, she did. She comes here, nearly every week, brings flowers and puts them here. Yes, they were a very devoted couple. If you ask me, she won't stay here much longer."

"Really? But she has a very nice house here."

“Yes, oh yes. And she does a lot in the village, you know. All these things—women’s institutes and teas and various societies and all the rest of it. Runs a lot of things, she does. Runs a bit too many for some people. Bossy, you know. Bossy and interfering, some people say. But the vicar relies on her. She starts things. Women’s activities and all the rest of it. Gets up tours and outings. Ah yes. Often thought myself, though I wouldn’t like to say it to my wife, that all these good works as ladies does, doesn’t make you any fonder of the ladies themselves. Always know best, they do. Always telling you what you should do and what you shouldn’t do. No freedom. Not much freedom anywhere nowadays.”

“Yet you think Mrs. Drake may leave here?”

“I shouldn’t wonder if she didn’t go away and live somewhere abroad. They liked being abroad, used to go there for holidays.”

“Why do you think she wants to leave here?”

A sudden rather roguish smile appeared on the old man’s face.

“Well, I’d say, you know, that she’s done all she can do here. To put it scriptural, she needs another vineyard to work in. She needs more good works. Aren’t no more good works to be done round here. She’s done all there is, and even more than there need be, so some think. Yes.”

“She needs a new field in which to labour?” suggested Poirot.

“You’ve hit it. Better settle somewhere else where she can put a lot of things right and bully a lot of other people. She’d got us where she wants us here and there’s not much more for her to do.”

“It may be,” said Poirot.

“Hasn’t even got her husband to look after. She looked after him a good few years. That gave her a kind of object in life, as you might say. What with that and a lot of outside activities, she could be busy all the time. She’s the type likes being busy all the time. And she’s no children, more’s the pity. So it’s my view as she’ll start all over again somewhere else.”

“You may have something there. Where would she go?”

“I couldn’t say as to that. One of these Riviery places, maybe—or there’s them as goes to Spain or Portugal. Or Greece—I’ve heard her speak of Greece—Islands. Mrs. Butler, she’s been to Greece on one of them tours. Hellenic, they call them, which sounds more like fire and brimstone to me.”

Poirot smiled.

“The isles of Greece,” he murmured. Then he asked: “Do you like her?”

“Mrs. Drake? I wouldn’t say I exactly like her. She’s a good woman. Does her duty to her neighbour and all that—but she’ll always need a power of neighbours to do her duty to—and if you ask me, nobody really likes people who are always doing their duty. Tells me how to prune my roses which I know well enough myself. Always at me to grow some newfangled kind of vegetable. Cabbage is good enough for me, and I’m sticking to cabbage.”

Poirot smiled. He said, “I must be on my way. Can you tell me where Nicholas Ransom and Desmond Holland live?”

“Past the church, third house on the left. They board with Mrs. Brand, go into Medchester Technical every day to study. They’ll be home by now.”

He gave Poirot an interested glance.

“So that’s the way your mind is working, is it? There’s some already as thinks the same.”

“No, I think nothing as yet. But they were among those present—that is all.”

As he took leave and walked away, he mused, “Among those present—I have come nearly to the end of my list.”

Fifteen

Two pairs of eyes looked at Poirot uneasily.

“I don’t see what else we can tell you. We’ve both been interviewed by the police, M. Poirot.”

Poirot looked from one boy to the other. They would not have described themselves as boys; their manner was carefully adult. So much so that if one shut one’s eyes, their conversation could have passed as that of elderly clubmen. Nicholas was eighteen. Desmond was sixteen.

“To oblige a friend, I make my inquiries of those present on a certain occasion. Not the Hallowe’en party itself—the preparations for that party. You were both active in these.”

“Yes, we were.”

“So far,” Poirot said, “I have interviewed cleaning women, I have had the benefit of police views, of talks to a doctor—the doctor who examined the body first—have talked to a schoolteacher who was present, to the headmistress of the school, to distraught relatives, have heard much of the village gossip—By the way, I understand you have a local witch here?”

The two young men confronting him both laughed.

“You mean Mother Goodbody. Yes, she came to the party and played the part of the witch.”

“I have come now,” said Poirot, “to the younger generation, to those of acute eyesight and acute hearing and who have up-to-date scientific knowledge and shrewd philosophy. I am eager—very eager—to hear your views on this matter.”

Eighteen and sixteen, he thought to himself, looking at the two boys confronting him. Youths to the police, boys to him, adolescents to newspaper reporters. Call them what you will. Products of today. Neither of them, he judged, at all stupid, even if they were not quite of the high mentality that he had just suggested to them by way of a flattering sop to start the conversation. They had been at the party. They had also been there earlier in the day to do helpful offices for Mrs. Drake.

They had climbed up stepladders, they had placed yellow pumpkins in strategic positions, they had done a little electrical work on fairy lights, one or other of them had produced some clever effects in a nice batch of phoney photographs of possible husbands as imagined hopefully by teenage girls. They were also, incidentally, of the right age to be in the forefront of suspects in the mind of Inspector Raglan and, it seemed, in the view of an elderly gardener. The percentage of murders committed by this group had been increasing in the last few years. Not that Poirot inclined to that particular suspicion himself, but anything was possible. It was even possible that the killing which had occurred two or three years ago might have been committed by a boy, youth, or adolescent of fourteen or twelve years of age. Such cases had occurred in recent newspaper reports.

Keeping all these possibilities in mind he pushed them, as it were, behind a curtain for the moment, and concentrated instead on his own appraisement of these two, their looks, their clothes, their manner, their voices and so on and so forth, in the Hercule Poirot manner, masked behind a foreign shield of flattering words and much increased foreign mannerisms, so that they themselves should feel agreeably contemptuous of him, though hiding that under politeness and good manners. For both of them had excellent manners. Nicholas, the eighteen-year-old, was good-looking, wearing sideburns, hair that grew fairly far down his neck, and a rather funereal outfit of black. Not as a mourning for the recent tragedy, but what was obviously his personal taste in modern clothes. The younger one was wearing a rose-coloured velvet coat, mauve trousers and a kind of frilled shirting. They both obviously spent a good deal of money on their clothes which were certainly not purchased locally and were probably paid for by themselves and not by their parents or guardians.

Desmond’s hair was ginger-coloured and there was a good deal of fluffy profusion about it.

“You were there in the morning or afternoon of the party, I understand, helping with the preparations for it?”

“Early afternoon,” corrected Nicholas.

“What sort of preparations were you helping with? I have heard of preparation from several people, but I am not quite clear. They don’t all agree.”

“A good deal of the lighting, for one thing.”

“Getting up on steps for things that had to be put high up.”

“I understand there were some very good photographic results too.”

Desmond immediately dipped into his pocket and took out a folder from which he proudly brought certain cards.

“We faked up these beforehand,” he said. “Husbands for the girls,” he explained. “They’re all alike, birds are. They all want something up-to-date. Not a bad assortment, are they?”

He handed a few specimens to Poirot who looked with interest at a rather fuzzy reproduction of a ginger-bearded young man and another young man with an aureole of hair, a third one whose hair came to his knees almost, and there were a few assorted whiskers, and other facial adornments.

“Made ’em pretty well all different. It wasn’t bad, was it?”

“You had models, I suppose?”

“Oh, they’re all ourselves. Just makeup, you know. Nick and I got ’em done. Some Nick took of me and some I took of him. Just varied what you might call the hair motif.”

“Very clever,” said Poirot.

“We kept ’em a bit out of focus, you know, so that they’d look more like spirit pictures, as you might say.”

The other boy said,

“Mrs. Drake was very pleased with them. She congratulated us. They made her laugh too. It was mostly electrical work we did at the house. You know, fitting up a light or two so that when the girls sat with the mirror one or other of us could take up a position, you’d only to bob up over a screen and the girl would see a face in the mirror with, mind you, the right kind of hair. Beard or whiskers or something or other.”

“Did they know it was you and your friend?”

“Oh, I don’t think so for a moment. Not at the party, they didn’t. They knew we had been helping at the house with some things, but I don’t think they recognized us in the mirrors. Weren’t smart enough, I should say. Besides, we’d got sort of an instant makeup to change the image. First me, then Nicholas. The girls squeaked and shrieked. Damned funny.”

“And the people who were there in the afternoon? I do not ask you to remember who was at the party.”

“At the party, there must have been about thirty, I suppose, knocking about. In the afternoon there was Mrs. Drake, of course, and Mrs. Butler. One of the schoolteachers, Whittaker I think her name is. Mrs. Flatterbut or some name like that. She’s the organist’s sister or wife. Dr. Ferguson’s dispenser, Miss Lee; it’s her afternoon off and she came along and helped too and some of the kids came to make themselves useful if they could. Not that I think they were very useful. The girls just hung about and giggled.”

“Ah yes. Do you remember what girls there were there?”

“Well, the Reynolds were there. Poor old Joyce, of course. The one who got done in and her elder sister Ann. Frightful girl. Puts no end of side on. Thinks she’s terribly clever. Quite sure she’s going to pass all her ‘A’ levels. And the small kid, Leopold, he’s awful,” said Desmond. “He’s a sneak. He eavesdrops. Tells tales. Real nasty bit of goods. And there was Beatrice Ardley and Cathie Grant, who is dim as they make and a couple of useful women, of course. Cleaning women, I mean. And the authoress woman—the one who brought you down here.”

“Any men?”

“Oh, the vicar looked in if you count him. Nice old boy, rather dim. And the new curate. He stammers when he’s nervous. Hasn’t been here long. That’s all I can think of now.”

“And then I understand you heard this girl—Joyce Reynolds—saying something about having seen a murder committed.”

“I never heard that,” said Desmond. “Did she?”

“Oh, they’re saying so,” said Nicholas. “I didn’t hear her, I suppose I wasn’t in the room when she said it. Where was she—when she said that, I mean?”

“In the drawing room.”

“Yes, well, most of the people were in there unless they were doing something special. Of course Nick and I,” said Desmond, “were mostly in the room where the girls were going to look for their true loves in mirrors. Fixing up wires and various things like that. Or else we were out on the stairs fixing fairy lights. We were in the drawing room once or twice putting the pumpkins up and hanging up one or two that had been hollowed out to hold lights in them. But I didn’t hear anything of that kind when we were there. What about you, Nick?”

“I didn’t,” said Nick. He added with some interest, “Did Joyce really say that she’d seen a murder committed? Jolly interesting, you know, if she did, isn’t it?”

“Why is it so interesting?” asked Desmond.

“Well, it’s E.S.P., isn’t it? I mean there you are. She saw a murder committed and within an hour or two she herself was murdered. I suppose she had a sort of vision of it. Makes you think a bit. You know these last experiments they’ve been having seems as though there is something you can do to help it by getting an electrode, or something of that kind, fixed up to your jugular vein. I’ve read about it somewhere.”

“They’ve never got very far with this E.S.P. stuff,” said Desmond, scornfully. “People sit in different rooms looking at cards in a pack or words with squares and geometrical figures on them. But they never see the right things, or hardly ever.”

“Well, you’ve got to be pretty young to do it. Adolescents are much better than older people.”

Hercule Poirot, who had no wish to listen to this high-level scientific discussion, broke in.

“As far as you can remember, nothing occurred during your presence in the house which seemed to you sinister or significant in any way. Something which probably nobody else would have noticed, but which might have come to your attention.”

Nicholas and Desmond frowned hard, obviously racking their brains to produce some incident of importance.

“No, it was just a lot of clacking and arranging and doing things.”

“Have you any theories yourself?”

Poirot addressed himself to Nicholas.

“What, theories as to who did Joyce in?”

“Yes. I mean something that you might have noticed that could lead you to a suspicion on perhaps purely psychological grounds.”

“Yes, I can see what you mean. There might be something in that.”

“Whittaker for my money,” said Desmond, breaking into Nicholas’s absorption in thought.

“The schoolmistress?” asked Poirot.

“Yes. Real old spinster, you know. Sex-starved. And all that teaching, bottled up among a lot of women. You remember, one of the teachers got strangled a year or two ago. She was a bit queer, they say."

"Lesbian?" asked Nicholas, in a man of the world voice.

"I shouldn't wonder. D'you remember Nora Ambrose, the girl she lived with? She wasn't a bad looker. She had a boy friend or two, so they said, and the girl she lived with got mad with her about it. Someone said she was an unmarried mother. She was away for two terms with some illness and then came back. They'd say anything in this nest of gossip."

"Well, anyway, Whittaker was in the drawing room most of the morning. She probably heard what Joyce said. Might have put it into her head, mightn't it?"

"Look here," said Nicholas, "supposing Whittaker—what age is she, do you think? Forty odd? Getting on for fifty—Women do go a bit queer at that age."

They both looked at Poirot with the air of contented dogs who have retrieved something useful which master has asked for.

"I bet Miss Emlyn knows if it is so. There's not much she doesn't know, about what goes on in her school."

"Wouldn't she say?"

"Perhaps she feels she has to be loyal and shield her."

"Oh, I don't think she'd do that. If she thought Elizabeth Whittaker was going off her head, well then, I mean, a lot of the pupils at the school might get done in."

"What about the curate?" said Desmond hopefully. "He might be a bit off his nut. You know, original sin perhaps, and all that, and the water and the apples and the things and then—look here, I've got a good idea now. Suppose he is a bit barmy. Not been here very long. Nobody knows much about him. Supposing it's the Snapdragon put it into his head. Hell fire! All those flames going up! Then, you see, he took hold of Joyce and he said ‘come along with me and I’ll show you something,’ and he took her to the apple room and he said ‘kneel down.’ He said ‘This is baptism,’ and pushed her head in. See? It would all fit. Adam and Eve and the apple and hell fire and the Snapdragon and being baptised again to cure you of sin.”

“Perhaps he exposed himself to her first,” said Nicholas hopefully. “I mean, there’s always got to be a sex background to all these things.”

They both looked with satisfied faces to Poirot.

“Well,” said Poirot, “you’ve certainly given me something to think about.”

Sixteen

Hercule Poirot looked with interest at Mrs. Goodbody's face. It was indeed perfect as a model for a witch. The fact that it almost undoubtedly went with extreme amiability of character did not dispel the illusion. She talked with relish and pleasure.

"Yes, I was up there right enough, I was. I always does the witches round here. Vicar he complimented me last year and he said as I'd done such a good job in the pageant as he'd give me a new steeple hat. A witch's hat wears out just like anything else does. Yes, I was right up there that day. I does the rhymes, you know. I mean the rhymes for the girls, using their own Christian name. One for Beatrice, one for Ann and all the rest of it. And I gives them to whoever is doing the spirit voice and they recite it out to the girl in the mirror, and the boys, Master Nicholas and young Desmond, they send the phoney photographs floating down. Make me die of laughing, some of it does. See those boys sticking hair all over their faces and photographing each other. And what they dress up in! I saw Master Desmond the other day, and what he was wearing you'd hardly believe. Rose-coloured coat and fawn breeches. Beat the girls hollow, they do. All the girls can think of is to push their skirts higher and higher, and that's not much good to them because they've got to put on more underneath. I mean what with the things they call body stockings and tights, which used to be for chorus girls in my day and none other—they spend all their money on that. But the boys—my word, they look like kingfishers and peacocks or birds of paradise. Well, I like to see a bit of colour and I always think it must have been fun in those old historical days as you see on the pictures. You know, everybody with lace and curls and cavalier hats and all the rest of it. Gave the girls something to look at, they did. And doublet and hose. All the girls could think of in historical times, as far as I can see, was to put great balloon skirts on, crinolines they called them later, and great ruffles around their necks! My grandmother, she used to tell me that her young ladies—she was in service, you know, in a good Victorian family—and her young ladies (before the time of Victoria I think it was)—it was the time the King what had a head like a pear was on the throne—Silly Billy, wasn't it, William IVth—well then, her young ladies, I mean my grandmother's young ladies, they used to have muslin gowns very long down to their ankles, very prim but they used to damp their muslins with water so they stuck to them. You know, stuck to them so it showed everything there was to show. Went about looking ever so modest, but it tickled up the gentlemen, all right, it did.

"I lent Mrs. Drake my witch ball for the party. Bought that witch ball at a jumble sale somewhere. There it is hanging up there now by the chimney, you see? Nice bright dark blue. I keep it over my door."

"Do you tell fortunes?"

"Mustn't say I do, must I?" she chuckled. "The police don't like that. Not that they mind the kind of fortunes I tell. Nothing to it, as you might say. Place like this you always know who's going with who, and so that makes it easy."

"Can you look in your witch ball, look in there, see who killed that little girl, Joyce?"

"You got mixed up, you have," said Mrs. Goodbody. "It's a crystal ball you look in to see things, not a witch ball. If I told you who I thought it was did it, you wouldn't like it. Say it was against nature, you would. But lots of things go on that are against nature."

"You may have something there."

"This is a good place to live, on the whole. I mean, people are decent, most of them, but wherever you go, the devil's always got some of his own. Born and bred to it."

"You mean—black magic?"

"No, I don't mean that." Mrs. Goodbody was scornful. "That's nonsense, that is. That's for people who like to dress up and do a lot of tomfoolery. Sex and all that. No, I mean those that the devil has touched with his hand. They're born that way. The sons of Lucifer. They're born so that killing don't mean nothing to them, not if they profit by it. When they want a thing, they want it. And they’re ruthless to get it. Beautiful as angels, they can look like. Knew a little girl once. Seven years old. Killed her little brother and sister. Twins they were. Five or six months old, no more. Stifled them in their prams.”

“That took place here in Woodleigh Common?”

“No, no, it wasn’t in Woodleigh Common. I came across that up in Yorkshire, far as I remember. Nasty case. Beautiful little creature she was, too. You could have fastened a pair of wings on her, let her go on a platform and sing Christmas hymns, and she’d have looked right for the part. But she wasn’t. She was rotten inside. You’ll know what I mean. You’re not a young man. You know what wickedness there is about in the world.”

“Alas!” said Poirot. “You are right. I do know only too well. If Joyce really saw a murder committed—”

“Who says she did?” said Mrs. Goodbody.

“She said so herself.”

“That’s no reason for believing. She’s always been a little liar.” She gave him a sharp glance. “You won’t believe that, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I do believe it. Too many people have told me so, for me to continue disbelieving it.”

“Odd things crop up in families,” said Mrs. Goodbody. “You take the Reynolds, for example. There’s Mr. Reynolds. In the estate business he is. Never cut much ice at it and never will. Never got on much, as you’d say. And Mrs. Reynolds, always getting worried and upset about things. None of their three children take after their parents. There’s Ann, now, she’s got brains. She’s going to do well with her schooling, she is. She’ll go to college, I shouldn’t wonder, maybe get herself trained as a teacher. Mind you, she’s pleased with herself. She’s so pleased with herself that nobody can stick her. None of the boys look at her twice. And then there was Joyce. She wasn’t clever like Ann, nor as clever as her little brother Leopold, either, but she wanted to be. She wanted always to know more than other people and to have done better than other people and she'd say anything to make people sit up and take notice. But don't you believe any single word she ever said was true. Because nine times out of ten it wasn't."

"And the boy?"

"Leopold? Well, he's only nine or ten, I think, but he's clever all right. Clever with his fingers and other ways, too. He wants to study things like physics. He's good at mathematics, too. Quite surprised about it they were, in school. Yes, he's clever. He'll be one of these scientists, I expect. If you ask me, the things he does when he's a scientist and the things he'll think of—they'll be nasty, like atom bombs! He's one of the kind that studies and are ever so clever and think up something that'll destroy half the globe, and all us poor folk with it. You beware of Leopold. He plays tricks on people, you know, and eavesdrops. Finds out all their secrets. Where he gets all his pocket money from I'd like to know. It isn't from his mother or his father. They can't afford to give him much. He's got lots of money always. Keeps it in a drawer under his socks. He buys things. Quite a lot of expensive gadgets. Where does he get the money from? That's what I'd like to know. Finds people's secrets out, I'd say, and makes them pay him for holding his tongue."

She paused for breath.

"Well, I can't help you, I'm afraid, in any way."

"You have helped me a great deal," said Poirot. "What happened to the foreign girl who is said to have run away?"

"Didn't go far, in my opinion. 'Ding dong dell, pussy's in the well.' That's what I've always thought, anyway."

Seventeen

“Excuse me, Ma’am, I wonder if I might speak to you a minute.”

Mrs. Oliver, who was standing on the verandah of her friend’s house looking out to see if there were any signs of Hercule Poirot approaching—he had notified her by telephone that he would be coming round to see her about now—looked round.

A neatly attired woman of middle age was standing, twisting her hands nervously in their neat cotton gloves.

“Yes?” said Mrs. Oliver, adding an interrogation point by her intonation.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, I’m sure, Madam, but I thought—well, I thought….”

Mrs. Oliver listened but did not attempt to prompt her. She wondered what was worrying the woman so much.

“I take it rightly as you’re the lady who writes stories, don’t I? Stories about crimes and murders and things of that kind.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I’m the one.”

Her curiosity was now aroused. Was this a preface for a demand for an autograph or even a signed photograph? One never knew. The most unlikely things happened.

“I thought as you’d be the right one to tell me,” said the woman.

“You’d better sit down,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She foresaw that Mrs. Whoever-it-was—she was wearing a wedding ring so she was a Mrs.—was the type who takes some time in getting to the point. The woman sat down and went on twisting her hands in their gloves.

“Something you’re worried about?” said Mrs. Oliver, doing her best to start the flow.

“Well, I’d like advice, and it’s true. It’s about something that happened a good while ago and I wasn’t really worried at the time. But you know how it is. You think things over and you wish you knew someone you could go and ask about it.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Oliver, hoping to inspire confidence by this entirely meretricious statement.

“Seeing the things what have happened lately, you never do know, do you?”

“You mean—?”

“I mean what happened at the Hallowe’en party, or whatever they called it. I mean it shows you there’s people who aren’t dependable here, doesn’t it? And it shows you things before that weren’t as you thought they were. I mean, they mightn’t have been what you thought they were, if you understand what I mean.”

“Yes?” said Mrs. Oliver, adding an even greater tinge of interrogation to the monosyllable. “I don’t think I know your name,” she added.

“Leaman. Mrs. Leaman. I go out and do cleaning to oblige ladies here. Ever since my husband died, and that was five years ago. I used to work for Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, the lady who lived up at the Quarry House, before Colonel and Mrs. Weston came. I don’t know if you ever knew her.”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I never knew her. This is the first time I have been down to Woodleigh Common.”

“I see. Well, you wouldn’t know much about what was going on perhaps at that time, and what was said at that time.”

“I’ve heard a certain amount about it since I’ve been down here this time,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“You see, I don’t know anything about the law, and I’m worried always when it’s a question of law. Lawyers, I mean. They might tangle it up and I wouldn’t like to go to the police. It wouldn’t be anything to do with the police, being a legal matter, would it?”

“Perhaps not,” said Mrs. Oliver, cautiously.

“You know perhaps what they said at the time about the codi—I don’t know, some word like codi. Like the fish I mean.”

“A codicil to the Will?” suggested Mrs. Oliver.

“Yes, that’s right. That’s what I’m meaning. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, you see, made one of these cod—codicils and she left all her money to the foreign girl what looked after her. And it was a surprise, that, because she’d got relations living here, and she’d come here anyway to live near them. She was very devoted to them, Mr. Drake, in particular. And it struck people as pretty queer, really. And then the lawyers, you see, they began saying things. They said as Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe hadn’t written the codicil at all. That the foreign pair girl had done it, seeing as she got all the money left to her. And they said as they were going to law about it. That Mrs. Drake was going to counterset the Will—if that is the right word.”

“The lawyers were going to contest the Will. Yes, I believe I did hear something about that,” said Mrs. Oliver encouragingly. “And you know something about it, perhaps?”

“I didn’t mean no harm,” said Mrs. Leaman. A slight whine came into her voice, a whine with which Mrs. Oliver had been acquainted several times in the past.

Mrs. Leaman, she thought, was presumably an unreliable woman in some ways, a snooper perhaps, a listener at doors.

“I didn’t say nothing at the time,” said Mrs. Leaman, “because you see I didn’t rightly know. But you see I thought it was queer and I’ll admit to a lady like you, who knows what these things are, that I did want to know the truth about it. I'd worked for Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe for some time, I had, and one wants to know how things happened."

"Quite," said Mrs. Oliver.

"If I thought I'd done what I oughtn't to have done, well, of course, I'd have owned up to it. But I didn't think as I'd done anything really wrong, you see. Not at the time, if you understand," she added.

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "I'm sure I shall understand. Go on. It was about this codicil."

"Yes, you see one day Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe—she hadn't felt too good that day and so she asked us to come in. Me that was, and young Jim who helps down in the garden and brings the sticks in and the coals, and things like that. So we went into her room, where she was, and she'd got papers before her there on the desk. And she turns to this foreign girl—Miss Olga we all called her—and said 'You go out of the room now, dear, because you mustn't be mixed up in this part of it,' or something like that. So Miss Olga, she goes out of the room and Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, she tells us to come close and she says 'This is my Will, this is.' She got a bit of blotting paper over the top part of it but the bottom of it's quite clear. She said 'I'm writing something here on this piece of paper and I want you to be a witness of what I've written and of my signature at the end of it.' So she starts writing along the page. Scratchy pen she always used, she wouldn't use Biros or anything like that. And she writes two or three lines of writing and then she signed her name, and then she says to me, 'Now, Mrs. Leaman, you write your name there. Your name and your address' and then she says to Jim 'And now you write your name underneath there, and your address too. There. That'll do. Now you've seen me write that and you've seen my signature and you've written your names, both of you, to say that's that.' And then she says 'That's all. Thank you very much.' So we goes out of the room. Well, I didn't think nothing more of it at the time, but I wondered a bit. And it happened as I turns my head just as I was going out of the room. You see the door doesn't always latch properly. You have to give it a pull, to make it click. And so I was doing that—I wasn't really looking, if you know what I mean—"

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Oliver, in a noncommittal voice.

"And so I sees Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe pull herself up from the chair—she'd got arthritis and had pain moving about sometimes—and go over to the bookcase and she pulled out a book and she puts that piece of paper she'd just signed—in an envelope it was—in one of the books. A big tall book it was in the bottom shelf. And she sticks it back in the bookcase. Well, I never thought of it again, as you might say. No, really I didn't. But when all this fuss came up, well, of course I felt—at least, I—" She came to a stop.

Mrs. Oliver had one of her useful intuitions.

"But surely," she said, "you didn't wait as long as all that—"

"Well, I'll tell you the truth, I will. I'll admit I was curious. After all, I mean, you want to know when you've signed anything, what you've signed, don't you? I mean, it's only human nature."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "it's only human nature."

Curiosity, she thought, was a highly component part in Mrs. Leaman's human nature.

"So I will admit that next day, when Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had driven into Medchester and I was doing her bedroom as usual—a bedsitting room she had because she had to rest a lot. And I thinks, 'Well, one ought really to know when you've signed a thing, what it is you've signed.' I mean they always say with these hire purchase things, you should read the small print."

"Or in this case, the handwriting," suggested Mrs. Oliver.

"So I thought, well, there's no harm—it's not as though I was taking anything. I mean to say I'd had to sign my name there, and I thought I really ought to know what I'd signed. So I had a look along the bookshelves. They needed dusting anyway. And I found the one. It was on the bottom shelf. It was an old book, a sort of Queen Victoria's kind of book. And I found this envelope with a folded paper in it and the title of the book said Enquire Within upon Everything. And it seemed then as though it was, sort of meant, if you know what I mean?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver. "It was clearly meant. And so you took out the paper and looked at it."

"That's right, Madam. And whether I did wrong or not I don't know. But anyway, there it was. It was a legal document all right. On the last page there was the writing what she'd made the morning before. New writing with a new scratchy pen she was using. It was clear enough to read, though, although she had a rather spiky handwriting."

"And what did it say," said Mrs. Oliver, her curiosity now having joined itself to that previously felt by Mrs. Leaman.

"Well, it said something like, as far as I remember—the exact words I'm not quite sure of—something about a codicil and that after the legacies mentioned in her Will, she bequeathed her entire fortune to Olga—I'm not sure of the surname, it began with an S. Seminoff, or something like that—in consideration of her great kindness and attention to her during her illness. And there it was written down and she'd signed it and I'd signed it, and Jim had signed it. So I put it back where it was because I shouldn't like Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe to know that I'd been poking about in her things.

"But well, I said to myself, well, this is a surprise. And I thought, fancy that foreign girl getting all that money because we all know as Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe was very rich. Her husband had been in shipbuilding and he'd left her a big fortune, and I thought, well, some people have all the luck. Mind you, I wasn't particularly fond of Miss Olga myself. She had a sharp way with her sometimes and she had quite a bad temper. But I will say as she was always very attentive and polite and all that, to the old lady. Looking out for herself, all right, she was, and she got away with it. And I thought, well, leaving all that money away from her own family. Then I thought, well, perhaps she's had a tiff with them and likely as not that will blow over, so maybe she'll tear this up and make another Will or codicil after all. But anyway, that was that, and I put it back and I forgot about it, I suppose.

"But when all the fuss came up about the Will, and there was talk of how it had been forged and Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe could never have written that codicil herself—for that's what they were saying, mind you, as it wasn't the old lady who had written that at all, it was somebody else—"

"I see," said Mrs. Oliver. "And so, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. And that's what's worrying me…I didn't get the hang of things at once. And when I'd thought things over a bit I didn't know rightly what I ought to do and I thought, well, it was all talk because the lawyers were against the foreigner, like people always are. I'm not very fond of foreigners myself, I'll admit. At any rate, there it was, and the young lady herself was swanking about, giving herself airs, looking as pleased as Punch and I thought, well, maybe it's all a legal thing of some kind and they'll say she's no right to the money because she wasn't related to the old lady. So everything will be all right. And it was in a way because, you see, they gave up the idea of bringing the case. It didn't come to court at all and as far as anyone knew, Miss Olga ran away. Went off back to the Continent somewhere, where she came from. So it looks as though there must have been some hocus-pocus of some kind on her part. Maybe she threatened the old lady and made her do it. You never know, do you? One of my nephews who's going to be a doctor, says you can do wonderful things with hypnotism. I thought perhaps she hypnotized the old lady."

"This was how long ago?"

"Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's been dead for—let me see, nearly two years."

"And it didn't worry you?"

"No, it didn't worry me. Not at the time. Because you see, I didn't rightly see that it mattered. Everything was all right, there wasn't any question of that Miss Olga getting away with the money, so I didn't see as it was any call for me—"

"But now you feel differently?"

"It's that nasty death—the child that was pushed into a bucket of apples. Saying things about a murder, saying she'd seen something or known something about a murder. And I thought maybe as Miss Olga had murdered the old lady because she knew all this money was coming to her and then she got the wind up when there was a fuss and lawyers and the police, maybe, and so she ran away. So then I thought well, perhaps I ought to—well, I ought to tell someone, and I thought you'd be a lady as has got friends in legal departments. Friends in the police perhaps, and you'd explain to them that I was only dusting a bookshelf, and this paper was there in a book and I put it back where it belonged. I didn't take it away or anything."

"But that's what happened, was it, on that occasion? You saw Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe write a codicil to her Will. You saw her write her name and you yourself and this Jim someone were both there and you both wrote your own names yourselves. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"So if you both saw Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe write her name, then that signature couldn't have been a forgery, could it? Not if you saw her write it herself."

"I saw her write it herself and that's the absolute truth I'm speaking. And Jim'd say so too only he's gone to Australia, he has. Went over a year ago and I don't know his address or anything. He didn't come from these parts, anyway."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Well, I want you to tell me if there's anything I ought to say, or do—now. Nobody's asked me, mind you. Nobody ever asked me if I knew anything about a Will."

"Your name is Leaman. What Christian name?"

"Harriet."

“Harriet Leaman. And Jim, what was his last name?”

“Well, now, what was it? Jenkins. That’s right. James Jenkins. I’d be much obliged if you could help me because it worries me, you see. All this trouble coming along and if that Miss Olga did it, murdered Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, I mean, and young Joyce saw her do it…She was ever so cock-a-hoop about it all, Miss Olga was, I mean about hearing from the lawyers as she’d come into a lot of money. But it was different when the police came round asking questions, and she went off very sudden, she did. Nobody asked me anything, they didn’t. But now I can’t help wondering if I ought to have said something at the time.”

“I think,” said Mrs. Oliver, “that you will probably have to tell this story of yours to whoever represented Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe as a lawyer. I’m sure a good lawyer will quite understand your feelings and your motive.”

“Well, I’m sure if you’d say a word for me and tell them, being a lady as knows what’s what, how it came about, and how I never meant to—well, not to do anything dishonest in any way. I mean, all I did—”

“All you did was to say nothing,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It seems quite a reasonable explanation.”

“And if it could come from you—saying a word for me first, you know, to explain, I’d be ever so grateful.”

“I’ll do what I can,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Her eyes strayed to the garden path where she saw a neat figure approaching.

“Well, thanks ever so much. They said as you were a very nice lady, and I’m sure I’m much obliged to you.”

She rose to her feet, replaced the cotton gloves which she had twisted entirely off in her anguish, made a kind of half nod or bob, and trotted off. Mrs. Oliver waited until Poirot approached.

“Come here,” she said, “and sit down. What’s the matter with you? You look upset.”

“My feet are extremely painful,” said Hercule Poirot.

“It’s those awful tight patent leather shoes of yours,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Sit down. Tell me what you came to tell me, and then I’ll tell you something that you may be surprised to hear!”

Eighteen

Poirot sat down, stretched out his legs and said: “Ah! that is better.”

“Take your shoes off,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and rest your feet.”

“No, no, I could not do that.” Poirot sounded shocked at the possibility.

“Well, we’re old friends together,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and Judith wouldn’t mind if she came out of the house. You know, if you’ll excuse me saying so, you oughtn’t to wear patent leather shoes in the country. Why don’t you get yourself a nice pair of suède shoes? Or the things all the hippy-looking boys wear nowadays? You know, the sort of shoes that slip on, and you never have to clean them—apparently they clean themselves by some extraordinary process or other. One of these laboursaving gimmicks.”

“I would not care for that at all,” said Poirot severely. “No, indeed!”

“The trouble with you is,” said Mrs. Oliver, beginning to unwrap a package on the table which she had obviously recently purchased, “the trouble with you is that you insist on being smart. You mind more about your clothes and your moustaches and how you look and what you wear than comfort. Now comfort is really the great thing. Once you’ve passed, say, fifty, comfort is the only thing that matters.”

“Madame, chère Madame, I do not know that I agree with you.”

“Well, you’d better,” said Mrs. Oliver. “If not, you will suffer a great deal, and it will be worse year after year.”

Mrs. Oliver fished a gaily covered box from its paper bag. Removing the lid of this, she picked up a small portion of its contents and transferred it to her mouth. She then licked her fingers, wiped them on a handkerchief, and murmured, rather indistinctly:

“Sticky.”

“Do you no longer eat apples? I have always seen you with a bag of apples in your hand, or eating them, or on occasions the bag breaks and they tumble out on the road.”

“I told you,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I told you that I never want to see an apple again. No. I hate apples. I suppose I shall get over it some day and eat them again, but—well, I don’t like the associations of apples.”

“And what is it that you eat now?” Poirot picked up the gaily coloured lid decorated with a picture of a palm tree. “Tunis dates,” he read. “Ah, dates now.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Dates.”

She took another date and put it in her mouth, removed a stone which she threw into a bush and continued to munch.

“Dates,” said Poirot. “It is extraordinary.”

“What is extraordinary about eating dates? People do.”

“No, no, I did not mean that. Not eating them. It is extraordinary that you should say to me like that—dates.”

“Why?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

“Because,” said Poirot, “again and again you indicate to me the path, the how do you say, the chemin that I should take or that I should have already taken. You show me the way that I should go. Dates. Till this moment I did not realize how important dates were.”

“I can’t see that dates have anything to do with what’s happened here. I mean, there’s no real time involved. The whole thing took place what—only five days ago.”

“The event took place four days ago. Yes, that is very true. But to everything that happens there has to be a past. A past which is by now incorporated in today, but which existed yesterday or last month or last year. The present is nearly always rooted in the past. A year, two years, perhaps even three years ago, a murder was committed. A child saw that murder. Because that child saw that murder on a certain date now long gone by, that child died four days ago. Is not that so?”

“Yes. That’s so. At least, I suppose it is. It mightn’t have been at all. It might be just some mentally disturbed nut who liked killing people and whose idea of playing with water is to push somebody’s head under it and hold it there. It might have been described as a mental delinquent’s bit of fun at a party.”

“It was not that belief that brought you to me, Madame.”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver, “no, it wasn’t. I didn’t like the feel of things. I still don’t like the feel of things.”

“And I agree with you. I think you are quite right. If one does not like the feel of things, one must learn why. I am trying very hard, though you may not think so, to learn why.”

“By going around and talking to people, finding out if they are nice or not and then asking them questions?”

“Exactly.”

“And what have you learnt?”

“Facts,” said Poirot. “Facts which will have in due course to be anchored in their place by dates, shall we say.”

“Is that all? What else have you learnt?”

“That nobody believes in the veracity of Joyce Reynolds.”

“When she said she saw someone killed? But I heard her.”

“Yes, she said it. But nobody believes it is true. The probability is, therefore, that it was not true. That she saw no such thing.”

“It seems to me,” said Mrs. Oliver, “as though your facts were leading you backwards instead of remaining on the spot or going forward.”

“Things have to be made to accord. Take forgery, for instance. The fact of forgery. Everybody says that a foreign girl, the au pair girl, so endeared herself to an elderly and very rich widow that that rich widow left a Will, or a codicil to a Will, leaving all her money to this girl. Did the girl forge that Will or did somebody else forge it?”

“Who else could have forged it?”

“There was another forger in this village. Someone, that is, who had once been accused of forgery but had got off lightly as a first offender and with extenuating circumstances.”

“Is this a new character? One I know?”

“No, you do not know him. He is dead.”

“Oh? When did he die?”

“About two years ago. The exact date I do not as yet know. But I shall have to know. He is someone who had practised forgery and who lived in this place. And because of a little what you might call girl trouble arousing jealousy and various emotions, he was knifed one night and died. I have the idea, you see, that a lot of separated incidents might tie up more closely than anyone has thought. Not any of them. Probably not all of them, but several of them.”

“It sounds interesting,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but I can’t see—”

“Nor can I as yet,” said Poirot. “But I think dates might help. Dates of certain happenings, where people were, what happened to them, what they were doing. Everybody thinks that the foreign girl forged the Will and probably,” said Poirot, “everybody was right. She was the one to gain by it, was she not? Wait—wait—”

“Wait for what?” said Mrs. Oliver.

"An idea that passed through my head," said Poirot.

Mrs. Oliver sighed and took another date.

"You return to London, Madame? Or are you making a long stay here?"

"Day after tomorrow," said Mrs. Oliver. "I can't stay any longer. I've got a good many things cropping up."

"Tell me, now—in your flat, your house, I cannot remember which it is now, you have moved so many times lately, there is room there to have guests?"

"I never admit that there is," said Mrs. Oliver. "If you ever admit that you've got a free guest room in London, you've asked for it. All your friends, and not only your friends, your acquaintances or indeed your acquaintances' third cousins sometimes, write you letters and say would you mind just putting them up for a night. Well, I do mind. What with sheets and laundry, pillow cases and wanting early morning tea and very often expecting meals served to them, people come. So I don't let on that I have got an available spare room. My friends come and stay with me. The people I really want to see, but the others—no, I'm not helpful. I don't like just being made use of."

"Who does?" said Hercule Poirot. "You are very wise."

"And anyway, what's all this about?"

"You could put up one or two guests, if need arose?"

"I could," said Mrs. Oliver. "Who do you want me to put up? Not you yourself. You've got a splendid flat of your own. Ultra modern, very abstract, all squares and cubes."

"It is just that there might be a wise precaution to take."

"For whom? Somebody else going to be killed?"

"I trust and pray not, but it might be within the bound of possibility."

"But who? Who? I can't understand."

"How well do you know your friend?"

"Know her? Not well. I mean, we liked each other on a cruise and got in the habit of pairing off together. There was something—what shall I say?—exciting about her. Different."

"Did you think you might put her in a book some day?"

"I do hate that phrase being used. People are always saying it to me and it's not true. Not really. I don't put people in books. People I meet, people I know."

"Is it perhaps not true to say, Madame, that you do put people in books sometimes? People that you meet, but not, I agree, people that you know. There would be no fun in that."

"You're quite right," said Mrs. Oliver. "You're really rather good at guessing things sometimes. It does happen that way. I mean, you see a fat woman sitting in a bus eating a currant bun and her lips are moving as well as eating, and you can see she's either saying something to someone or thinking up a telephone call that she's going to make, or perhaps a letter she's going to write. And you look at her and you study her shoes and the skirt she's got on and her hat and guess her age and whether she's got a wedding ring on and a few other things. And then you get out of the bus. You don't want ever to see her again, but you've got a story in your mind about somebody called Mrs. Carnaby who is going home in a bus, having had a very strange interview somewhere where she saw someone in a pastry cook's and was reminded of someone she'd only met once and who she had heard was dead and apparently isn't dead. Dear me," said Mrs. Oliver, pausing for breath. "You know, it's quite true. I did sit across from someone in a bus just before I left London, and here it is all working out beautifully inside my head. I shall have the whole story soon. The whole sequence, what she's going back to say, whether it'll run her into danger or somebody else into danger. I think I even know her name. Her name's Constance. Constance Carnaby. There's only one thing would ruin it."

“And what is that?”

“Well, I mean, if I met her again in another bus, or spoke to her or she talked to me or I began to know something about her. That would ruin everything, of course.”

“Yes, yes. The story must be yours, the character is yours. She is your child. You have made her, you begin to understand her, you know how she feels, you know where she lives and you know what she does. But that all started with a real, live human being and if you found out what the real live human being was like—well then, there would be no story, would there?”

“Right again,” said Mrs. Oliver. “As to what you were saying about Judith, I think that is true. I mean, we were together a lot on the cruise, and we went to see the places but I didn’t really get to know her particularly well. She’s a widow, and her husband died and she was left badly off with one child, Miranda, whom you’ve seen. And it’s true that I’ve got rather a funny feeling about them. A feeling as though they mattered, as though they’re mixed up in some interesting drama. I don’t want to know what the drama is. I don’t want them to tell me. I want to think of the sort of drama I would like them to be in.”

“Yes. Yes, I can see that they are—well, candidates for inclusion for another best seller by Ariadne Oliver.”

“You really are a beast sometimes,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You make it all sound so vulgar.” She paused thoughtfully. “Perhaps it is.”

“No, no, it is not vulgar. It is just human.”

“And you want me to invite Judith and Miranda to my flat or house in London?”

“Not yet,” said Poirot. “Not yet until I am sure that one of my little ideas might be right.”

“You and your little ideas! Now I’ve got a piece of news for you.”

“Madame, you delight me.”

“Don’t be too sure. It will probably upset your ideas. Supposing I tell you that the forgery you have been so busy talking about wasn’t a forgery at all.”

“What is that you say?”

“Mrs. Ap Jones Smythe, or whatever her name is, did make a codicil to her Will leaving all her money to the au pair girl and two witnesses saw her sign it, and signed it also in the presence of each other. Put that in your moustache and smoke it.”

Nineteen

“Mrs.—Leaman—” said Poirot, writing down the name.

“That’s right. Harriet Leaman. And the other witness seems to have been a James Jenkins. Last heard of going to Australia. And Miss Olga Seminoff seems to have been last heard of returning to Czechoslovakia, or wherever she came from. Everybody seems to have gone somewhere else.”

“How reliable do you think this Mrs. Leaman is?”

“I don’t think she made it all up, if that’s what you mean. I think she signed something, that she was curious about it, and that she took the first opportunity she had of finding out what she’d signed.”

“She can read and write?”

“I suppose so. But I agree that people aren’t very good sometimes, at reading old ladies’ handwriting, which is very spiky and very hard to read. If there were any rumours flying about later, about this Will or codicil, she might have thought that that was what she’d read in this rather undecipherable handwriting.”

“A genuine document,” said Poirot. “But there was also a forged codicil.”

“Who says so?”

“Lawyers.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t forged at all.”

“Lawyers are very particular about these matters. They were prepared to come into court with expert witnesses.”

“Oh well,” said Mrs. Oliver, “then it’s easy to see what must have happened, isn’t it?”

"What is easy? What happened?"

"Well, of course, the next day or a few days later, or even as much as a week later, Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe either had a bit of a tiff with her devoted au pair attendant, or she had a delicious reconciliation with her nephew, Hugo, or her niece Rowena, and she tore up the Will or scratched out the codicil or something like that, or burnt the whole thing."

"And after that?"

"Well, after that, I suppose, Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe dies, and the girl seizes her chance and writes a new codicil in roughly the same terms in as near to Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's handwriting as she can, and the two witnessing signatures as near as she can. She probably knows Mrs. Leaman's writing quite well. It would be on national health cards or something like that, and she produces it, thinking that someone will agree to having witnessed the Will and that all would be well. But her forgery isn't good enough and so trouble starts."

"Will you permit me, chère Madame, to use your telephone?"

"I will permit you to use Judith Butler's telephone, yes."

"Where is your friend?"

"Oh, she's gone to get her hair done. And Miranda has gone for a walk. Go on, it's in the room through the window there."

Poirot went in and returned about ten minutes later.

"Well? What have you been doing?"

"I rang up Mr. Fullerton, the solicitor. I will now tell you something. The codicil, the forged codicil that was produced for probate was not witnessed by Harriet Leaman. It was witnessed by a Mary Doherty, deceased, who had been in service with Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe but had recently died. The other witness was the James Jenkins, who, as your friend Mrs. Leaman has told you, departed for Australia."

“So there was a forged codicil,” said Mrs. Oliver. “And there seems to have been a real codicil as well. Look here, Poirot, isn’t this all getting a little too complicated?”

“It is getting incredibly complicated,” said Hercule Poirot. “There is, if I may mention it, too much forgery about.”

“Perhaps the real one is still in the library at Quarry House, within the pages of Enquire Within upon Everything.”

“I understand all the effects of the house were sold up at Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe’s death, except for a few pieces of family furniture and some family pictures.”

“What we need,” said Mrs. Oliver, “is something like Enquire Within here now. It’s a lovely title, isn’t it? I remember my grandmother had one. You could, you know, inquire within about everything, too. Legal information and cooking recipes and how to take ink stains out of linen. How to make homemade face powder that would not damage the complexion. Oh—and lots more. Yes, wouldn’t you like to have a book like that now?”

“Doubtless,” said Hercule Poirot, “it would give the recipe for treatment of tired feet.”

“Plenty of them, I should think. But why don’t you wear proper country shoes?”

“Madame, I like to look soigné in my appearance.”

“Well, then you’ll have to go on wearing things that are painful, and grin and bear it,” said Mrs. Oliver. “All the same, I don’t understand anything now. Was that Leaman woman telling me a pack of lies just now?”

“It is always possible.”

“Did someone tell her to tell a pack of lies?”

“That too is possible.”

"Did someone pay her to tell me a pack of lies?"

"Continue," said Poirot, "continue. You are doing very nicely."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully, "that Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe, like many another rich woman, enjoyed making Wills. I expect she made a good many during her life. You know; benefiting one person and then another. Changing about. The Drakes were well off, anyway. I expect she always left them at least a handsome legacy, but I wonder if she ever left anyone else as much as she appears, according to Mrs. Leaman and according to the forged Will as well, to that girl Olga. I'd like to know a bit more about that girl, I must say. She certainly seems a very successful disappearess."

"I hope to know more about her shortly," said Hercule Poirot.

"How?"

"Information that I shall receive shortly."

"I know you've been asking for information down here."

"Not here only. I have an agent in London who obtains information for me both abroad and in this country. I should have some news possibly soon from Herzogovinia."

"Will you find out if she ever arrived back there?"

"That might be one thing I should learn, but it seems more likely that I may get information of a different kind—letters perhaps written during her sojourn in this country, mentioning friends she may have made here, and become intimate with."

"What about the schoolteacher?" said Mrs. Oliver.

"Which one do you mean?"

"I mean the one who was strangled—the one Elizabeth Whittaker told you about?" She added, "I don't like Elizabeth Whittaker much. Tiresome sort of woman, but clever, I should think.” She added dreamily, “I wouldn’t put it past her to have thought up a murder.”

“Strangle another teacher, do you mean?”

“One has to exhaust all the possibilities.”

“I shall rely, as so often, on your intuition, Madame.”

Mrs. Oliver ate another date thoughtfully.

Twenty

When he left Mrs. Butler's house, Poirot took the same way as had been shown him by Miranda. The aperture in the hedge, it seemed to him, had been slightly enlarged since last time. Somebody, perhaps, with slightly more bulk than Miranda, had used it also. He ascended the path in the quarry, noticing once more the beauty of the scene. A lovely spot, and yet in some way, Poirot felt as he had felt before, that it could be a haunted spot. There was a kind of pagan ruthlessness about it. It could be along these winding paths that the fairies hunted their victims down or a cold goddess decreed that sacrifices would have to be offered.

He could understand why it had not become a picnic spot. One would not want for some reason to bring your hard-boiled eggs and your lettuce and your oranges and sit down here and crack jokes and have a jollification. It was different, quite different. It would have been better, perhaps, he thought suddenly, if Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had not wanted this fairy-like transformation. Quite a modest sunk garden could have been made out of a quarry without the atmosphere, but she had been an ambitious woman, ambitious and a very rich woman. He thought for a moment or two about Wills, the kind of Wills made by rich women, the kind of lies told about Wills made by rich women, the places in which the Wills of rich widows were sometimes hidden, and he tried to put himself back into the mind of a forger. Undoubtably the Will offered for probate had been a forgery. Mr. Fullerton was a careful and competent lawyer. He was sure of that. The kind of lawyer, too, who would never advise a client to bring a case or to take legal proceedings unless there was very good evidence and justification for so doing.

He turned a corner of the pathway feeling for the moment that his feet were much more important than his speculations. Was he taking a short cut to Superintendent Spence's dwelling or was he not? As the crow flies, perhaps, but the main road might have been more good to his feet. This path was not a grassy or mossy one, it had the quarry hardness of stone. Then he paused.

In front of him were two figures. Sitting on an outcrop of rock was Michael Garfield. He had a sketching block on his knees and he was drawing, his attention fully on what he was doing. A little way away from him, standing close beside a minute but musical stream that flowed down from above, Miranda Butler was standing. Hercule Poirot forgot his feet, forgot the pains and ills of the human body, and concentrated again on the beauty that human beings could attain. There was no doubt that Michael Garfield was a very beautiful young man. He found it difficult to know whether he himself liked Michael Garfield or not. It is always difficult to know if you like anyone beautiful. You like beauty to look at, at the same time you dislike beauty almost on principle. Women could be beautiful, but Hercule Poirot was not at all sure that he liked beauty in men. He would not have liked to be a beautiful young man himself, not that there had ever been the least chance of that. There was only one thing about his own appearance which really pleased Hercule Poirot, and that was the profusion of his moustaches, and the way they responded to grooming and treatment and trimming. They were magnificent. He knew of nobody else who had any moustache half as good. He had never been handsome or good-looking. Certainly never beautiful.

And Miranda? He thought again, as he had thought before, that it was her gravity that was so attractive. He wondered what passed through her mind. It was the sort of thing one would never know. She would not say what she was thinking easily. He doubted if she would tell you what she was thinking, if you asked her. She had an original mind, he thought, a reflective mind. He thought too she was vulnerable. Very vulnerable. There were other things about her that he knew, or thought he knew. It was only thinking so far, but yet he was almost sure.

Michael Garfield looked up and said,

“Ha! Señor Moustachios. A very good afternoon to you, sir.”

“Can I look at what you are doing or would it incommode you? I do not want to be intrusive.”

“You can look,” said Michael Garfield, “it makes no difference to me.” He added gently, “I’m enjoying myself very much.”

Poirot came to stand behind his shoulder. He nodded. It was a very delicate pencil drawing, the lines almost invisible. The man could draw, Poirot thought. Not only design gardens. He said, almost under his breath:

“Exquisite!”

“I think so too,” said Michael Garfield.

He let it be left doubtful whether he referred to the drawing he was making, or to the sitter.

“Why?” asked Poirot.

“Why am I doing it? Do you think I have a reason?”

“You might have.”

“You’re quite right. If I go away from here, there are one or two things I want to remember. Miranda is one of them.”

“Would you forget her easily?”

“Very easily. I am like that. But to have forgotten something or someone, to be unable to bring a face, a turn of a shoulder, a gesture, a tree, a flower, a contour of landscape, to know what it was like to see it but not to be able to bring that image in front of one’s eyes, that sometimes causes—what shall I say—almost agony. You see, you record—and it all passes away.”

“Not the Quarry Garden or park. That has not passed away.”

“Don’t you think so? It soon will. It soon will if no one is here. Nature takes over, you know. It needs love and attention and care and skill. If a Council takes it over—and that’s what happens very often nowadays—then it will be what they call ‘kept up.’ The latest sort of shrubs may be put in, extra paths will be made, seats will be put at certain distances. Litter bins even may be erected. Oh, they are so careful, so kind at preserving. You can’t preserve this. It’s wild. To keep something wild is far more difficult than to preserve it.”

“Monsieur Poirot.” Miranda’s voice came across the stream.

Poirot moved forward, so that he came within earshot of her.

“So I find you here. So you came to sit for your portrait, did you?”

She shook her head.

“I didn’t come for that. That just happened.”

“Yes,” said Michael Garfield, “yes, it just happened. A piece of luck sometimes comes one’s way.”

“You were just walking in your favourite garden?”

“I was looking for the well, really,” said Miranda.

“A well?”

“There was a wishing well once in this wood.”

“In a former quarry? I didn’t know they kept wells in quarries.”

“There was always a wood round the quarry. Well, there were always trees here. Michael knows where the well is but he won’t tell me.”

“It will be much more fun for you,” said Michael Garfield, “to go on looking for it. Especially when you’re not at all sure it really exists.”

“Old Mrs. Goodbody knows all about it.”

And added:

“She’s a witch.”

“Quite right,” said Michael. “She’s the local witch, Monsieur Poirot. There’s always a local witch, you know, in most places. They don’t always call themselves witches, but everyone knows. They tell a fortune or put a spell on your begonias or shrivel up your peonies or stop a farmer’s cow from giving milk and probably give love potions as well.”

“It was a wishing well,” said Miranda. “People used to come here and wish. They had to go round it three times backwards and it was on the side of the hill, so it wasn’t always very easy to do.”

She looked past Poirot at Michael Garfield. “I shall find it one day,” she said, “even if you won’t tell me. It’s here somewhere, but it was sealed up, Mrs. Goodbody said. Oh! years ago. Sealed up because it was said to be dangerous. A child fell into it years ago—Kitty Somebody. Someone else might have fallen into it.”

“Well, go on thinking so,” said Michael Garfield. “It’s a good local story, but there is a wishing well over at Little Belling.”

“Of course,” said Miranda. “I know all about that one. It’s a very common one,” she said. “Everybody knows about it, and it’s very silly. People throw pennies into it and there’s not any water in it any more so there’s not even a splash.”

“Well, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll tell you when I find it,” said Miranda.

“You mustn’t always believe everything a witch says. I don’t believe any child ever fell into it. I expect a cat fell into it once and got drowned.”

“Ding dong dell, pussy’s in the well,” said Miranda. She got up. “I must go now,” she said. “Mummy will be expecting me.”

She moved carefully from the knob of rock, smiled at both the men and went off down an even more intransigent path that ran the other side of the water.

“‘Ding dong dell,’” said Poirot, thoughtfully. “One believes what one wants to believe, Michael Garfield. Was she right or was she not right?”

Michael Garfield looked at him thoughtfully, then he smiled.

"She is quite right," he said. "There is a well, and it is as she says sealed up. I suppose it may have been dangerous. I don't think it was ever a wishing well. I think that's Mrs. Goodbody's own bit of fancy talk. There's a wishing tree, or there was once. A beech tree halfway up the hillside that I believe people did go round three times backwards and wished."

"What's happened to that? Don't they go round it any more?"

"No. I believe it was struck by lightning about six years ago. Split in two. So that pretty story's gone west."

"Have you told Miranda about that?"

"No. I thought I'd rather leave her with her well. A blasted beech wouldn't be much fun for her, would it?"

"I must go on my way," said Poirot.

"Going back to your police friend?"

"Yes."

"You look tired."

"I am tired," said Hercule Poirot. "I am extremely tired."

"You'd be more comfortable in canvas shoes or sandals."

"Ah, ça, non."

"I see. You are sartorially ambitious." He looked at Poirot. "The tout ensemble, it is very good and especially, if I may mention it, your superb moustache."

"I am gratified," said Poirot, "that you have noticed it."

"The point is rather, could anyone not notice it?"

Poirot put his head on one side. Then he said:

“You spoke of the drawing you are doing because you wish to remember the young Miranda. Does that mean you’re going away from here?”

“I have thought of it, yes.”

“Yet you are, it seems to me, bien placé ici.”

“Oh yes, eminently so. I have a house to live in, a house small but designed by myself, and I have my work, but that is less satisfactory than it used to be. So restlessness is coming over me.”

“Why is your work less satisfactory?”

“Because people wish me to do the most atrocious things. People who want to improve their gardens, people who bought some land and they’re building a house and want the garden designed.”

“Are you not doing her garden for Mrs. Drake?”

“She wants me to, yes. I made suggestions for it and she seemed to agree with them. I don’t think, though,” he added thoughtfully, “that I really trust her.”

“You mean that she would not let you have what you wanted?”

“I mean that she would certainly have what she wanted herself and that though she is attracted by the ideas I have set out, she would suddenly demand something quite different. Something utilitarian, expensive and showy, perhaps. She would bully me, I think. She would insist on her ideas being carried out. I would not agree, and we should quarrel. So on the whole it is better I leave here before I quarrel. And not only with Mrs. Drake but many other neighbours. I am quite well-known. I don’t need to stay in one spot. I could go and find some other corner of England, or it could be some corner of Normandy or Brittany.”

“Somewhere where you can improve, or help, nature? Somewhere where you can experiment or you can put strange things where they have never grown before, where neither sun will blister nor frost destroy? Some good stretch of barren land where you can have the fun of playing at being Adam all over again? Have you always been restless?”

“I never stayed anywhere very long.”

“You have been to Greece?”

“Yes. I should like to go to Greece again. Yes, you have something there. A garden on a Greek hillside. There may be cypresses there, not much else. A barren rock. But if you wished, what could there not be?”

“A garden for gods to walk—”

“Yes. You’re quite a mind reader, aren’t you, Mr. Poirot?”

“I wish I were. There are so many things I would like to know and do not know.”

“You are talking now of something quite prosaic, are you not?”

“Unfortunately so.”

“Arson, murder and sudden death?”

“More or less. I do not know that I was considering arson. Tell me, Mr. Garfield, you have been here some considerable time, did you know a young man called Lesley Ferrier?”

“Yes, I remember him. He was in a Medchester solicitor’s office, wasn’t he? Fullerton, Harrison and Leadbetter. Junior clerk, something of that kind. Good-looking chap.”

“He came to a sudden end, did he not?”

“Yes. Got himself knifed one evening. Woman trouble, I gather. Everyone seems to think that the police know quite well who did it, but they can’t get the evidence they want. He was more or less tied up with a woman called Sandra—can’t remember her name for the moment—Sandra Somebody, yes. Her husband kept the local pub. She and young Lesley were running an affair, and then Lesley took up with another girl. Or that was the story."

"And Sandra did not like it?"

"No, she did not like it at all. Mind you, he was a great one for the girls. There were two or three that he went around with."

"Were they all English girls?"

"Why do you ask that, I wonder? No, I don't think he confined himself to English girls, so long as they could speak enough English to understand more or less what he said to them, and he could understand what they said to him."

"There are doubtless from time to time foreign girls in this neighbourhood?"

"Of course there are. Is there any neighbourhood where there aren't? Au pair girls—they're a part of daily life. Ugly ones, pretty ones, honest ones, dishonest ones, ones that do some good to distracted mothers and some who are no use at all and some who walk out of the house."

"Like the girl Olga did?"

"As you say, like the girl Olga did."

"Was Lesley a friend of Olga's?"

"Oh, that's the way your mind is running. Yes, he was. I don't think Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe knew much about it. Olga was rather careful, I think. She spoke gravely of someone she hoped to marry some day in her own country. I don't know whether that was true or whether she made it up. Young Lesley was an attractive young man, as I said. I don't know what he saw in Olga—she wasn't very beautiful. Still—" he considered a minute or two "—she had a kind of intensity about her. A young Englishman might have found that attractive, I think. Anyway, Lesley did all right, and his other girl friends weren't pleased."

“That is very interesting,” said Poirot. “I thought you might give me information that I wanted.”

Michael Garfield looked at him curiously.

“Why? What’s it all about? Where does Lesley come in? Why this raking up of the past?”

“Well, there are things one wants to know. One wants to know how things come into being. I am even looking farther back still. Before the time that those two, Olga Seminoff and Lesley Ferrier, met secretly without Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe knowing about it.”

“Well, I’m not sure about that. That’s only my—well, it’s only my idea. I did come across them fairly frequently but Olga never confided in me. As for Lesley Ferrier, I hardly knew him.”

“I want to go back behind that. He had, I gather, certain disadvantages in his past.”

“I believe so. Yes, well, anyway it’s been said here locally. Mr. Fullerton took him on and hoped to make an honest man of him. He’s a good chap, old Fullerton.”

“His offence had been, I believe, forgery?”

“Yes.”

“It was a first offence, and there were said to be extenuating circumstances. He had a sick mother or drunken father or something of that kind. Anyway, he got off lightly.”

“I never heard any of the details. It was something that he seemed to have got away with to begin with, then accountants came along and found him out. I’m very vague. It’s only hearsay. Forgery. Yes, that was the charge. Forgery.”

“And when Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe died and her Will was to be admitted to probate, it was found the Will was forged.”

“Yes, I see the way your mind’s working. You’re fitting those two things as having a connection with each other.”

“A man who was up to a point successful in forging. A man who became friends with the girl, a girl who, if a Will had been accepted when submitted to probate, would have inherited the larger part of a vast fortune.”

“Yes, yes, that’s the way it goes.”

“And this girl and the man who had committed forgery were great friends. He had given up his own girl and he’d tied up with the foreign girl instead.”

“What you’re suggesting is that that forged Will was forged by Lesley Ferrier.”

“There seems a likelihood of it, does there not?”

“Olga was supposed to have been able to copy Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe’s handwriting fairly well, but it seemed to me always that that was rather a doubtful point. She wrote handwritten letters for Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe but I don’t suppose that they were really particularly similar. Not enough to pass muster. But if she and Lesley were in it together, that’s different. I daresay he could pass off a good enough job and he was probably quite cocksure that it would go through. But then he must have been sure of that when he committed his original offence, and he was wrong there, and I suppose he was wrong this time. I suppose that when the balloon went up, when the lawyers began making trouble and difficulties, and experts were called in to examine things and started asking questions, it could be that she lost her nerve, and had a row with Lesley. And then she cleared out, hoping he’d carry the can.”

He gave his head a sharp shake. “Why do you come and talk to me about things like that here, in my beautiful wood?”

“I wanted to know.”

“It’s better not to know. It’s better never to know. Better to leave things as they are. Not push and pry and poke.”

“You want beauty,” said Hercule Poirot. “Beauty at any price. For me, it is truth I want. Always truth.”

Michael Garfield laughed. “Go on home to your police friends and leave me here in my local paradise. Get thee beyond me, Satan.”

Twenty-one

Poirot went on up the hill. Suddenly he no longer felt the pain of his feet. Something had come to him. The fitting together of the things he had thought and felt, had known they were connected, but had not seen how they were connected. He was conscious now of danger—danger that might come to someone any minute now unless steps were taken to prevent it. Serious danger.

Elspeth McKay came out to the door to meet him. “You look fagged out,” she said. “Come and sit down.”

“Your brother is here?”

“No. He’s gone down to the station. Something’s happened, I believe.”

“Something has happened?” He was startled. “So soon? Not possible.”

“Eh?” said Elspeth. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Something has happened to somebody, do you mean?”

“Yes, but I don’t know who exactly. Anyway, Tim Raglan rang up and asked for him to go down there. I’ll get you a cup of tea, shall I?”

“No,” said Poirot, “thank you very much, but I think—I think I will go home.” He could not face the prospect of black bitter tea. He thought of a good excuse that would mask any signs of bad manners. “My feet,” he explained. “My feet. I am not very suitably attired as to footwear for the country. A change of shoes would be desirable.”

Elspeth McKay looked down at them. “No,” she said. “I can see they’re not. Patent leather draws the feet. There’s a letter for you, by the way. Foreign stamps on it. Come from abroad—c/o Superintendent Spence, Pine Crest. I’ll bring it to you.”

She came back in a minute or two, and handed it to him.

“If you don’t want the envelope, I’d like it for one of my nephews—he collects stamps.”

“Of course.” Poirot opened the letter and handed her the envelope. She thanked him and went back into the house.

Poirot unfolded the sheet and read.

Mr. Goby’s foreign service was run with the same competence that he showed in his English one. He spared no expense and got his results quickly.

True, the results did not amount to much—Poirot had not thought that they would.

Olga Seminoff had not returned to her hometown. She had had no family still living. She had had a friend, an elderly woman, with whom she had corresponded intermittently, giving news of her life in England. She had been on good terms with her employer who had been occasionally exacting, but had also been generous.

The last letters received from Olga had been dated about a year and a half ago. In them there had been mention of a young man. There were hints that they were considering marriage, but the young man, whose name she did not mention, had, she said, his way to make, so nothing could be settled as yet. In her last letter she spoke happily of their prospects being good. When no more letters came, the elderly friend assumed that Olga had married her Englishman and changed her address. Such things happened frequently when girls went to England. If they were happily married they often never wrote again.

She had not worried.

It fitted, Poirot thought. Lesley had spoken of marriage, but might not have meant it. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had been spoken of as “generous.” Lesley had been given money by someone, Olga perhaps (money originally given her by her employers), to induce him to do forgery on her behalf.

Elspeth McKay came out on the terrace again. Poirot consulted her as to his surmises about a partnership between Olga and Lesley.

She considered a moment. Then the oracle spoke.

“Kept very quiet about it, if so. Never any rumours about those two. There usually is in a place like this if there’s anything in it.”

“Young Ferrier was tied up to a married woman. He might have warned the girl not to say anything about him to her employer.”

“Likely enough. Mrs. Smythe would probably know that Lesley Ferrier was a bad character, and would warn the girl to have nothing to do with him.”

Poirot folded up the letter and put it into his pocket.

“I wish you’d let me get you a pot of tea.”

“No, no—I must go back to my guest house and change my shoes. You do not know when your brother will be back?”

“I’ve no idea. They didn’t say what they wanted him for.”

Poirot walked along the road to his guest house. It was only a few hundred yards. As he walked up to the front door it was opened and his landlady, a cheerful lady of thirty odd, came out to him.

“There’s a lady here to see you,” she said. “Been waiting some time. I told her I didn’t know where you’d gone exactly or when you’d be back, but she said she’d wait.” She added, “It’s Mrs. Drake. She’s in a state, I’d say. She’s usually so calm about everything, but really I think she’s had a shock of some kind. She’s in the sitting room. Shall I bring you in some tea and something?”

“No,” said Poirot, “I think it will be better not. I will hear first what she has to say.”

He opened the door and went into the sitting room. Rowena Drake had been standing by the window. It was not the window overlooking the front path so she had not seen his approach. She turned abruptly as she heard the sound of the door.

“Monsieur Poirot. At last. It seemed so long.”

“I am sorry, Madame. I have been in the Quarry Wood and also talking to my friend, Mrs. Oliver. And then I have been talking to two boys. To Nicholas and Desmond.”

“Nicholas and Desmond? Yes, I know. I wonder—oh! one thinks all sorts of things.”

“You are upset,” said Poirot gently.

It was not a thing he thought he would ever see. Rowena Drake upset, no longer mistress of events, no longer arranging everything, and enforcing her decisions on others.

“You’ve heard, haven’t you?” she asked. “Oh well, perhaps you haven’t.”

“What should I have heard?”

“Something dreadful. He’s—he’s dead. Somebody killed him.”

“Who is dead, Madame?”

“Then you haven’t really heard. And he’s only a child, too, and I thought—oh, what a fool I’ve been. I should have told you. I should have told you when you asked me. It makes me feel terrible—terribly guilty for thinking I knew best and thinking—but I did mean it for the best, Monsieur Poirot, indeed I did.”

“Sit down, Madame, sit down. Calm yourself and tell me. There is a child dead—another child?”

“Her brother,” said Mrs. Drake. “Leopold.”

“Leopold Reynolds?”

"Yes. They found his body on one of the field paths. He must have been coming back from school and gone out of his way to play in the brook near here. Somebody held him down in the brook—held his head under water."

"The same kind of thing as they did to the child Joyce?"

"Yes, yes. I can see it must be—it must be madness of some kind. And one doesn't know who, that's what's so awful. One hasn't the least idea. And I thought I knew. I really thought—I suppose, yes, it was a very wicked thing."

"You must tell me, Madame."

"Yes, I want to tell you. I came here to tell you. Because, you see, you came to me after you'd talked to Elizabeth Whittaker. After she'd told you that something had startled me. That I'd seen something. Something in the hall of the house, my house. I said that I hadn't seen anything and that nothing had startled me because, you see, I thought—" she stopped.

"What did you see?"

"I ought to have told you then. I saw the door of the library open, open rather carefully and—then he came out. At least, he didn't come right out. He just stood in the doorway and then pulled the door back quickly and went back inside."

"Who was this?"

"Leopold. Leopold, the child that's been killed now. And you see, I thought I—oh, what a mistake, what an awful mistake. If I'd told you, perhaps—perhaps you'd have got at what was behind it."

"You thought?" Poirot said. "You thought that Leopold had killed his sister. Is that what you thought?"

"Yes, that's what I thought. Not then, of course, because I didn't know she was dead. But he had a queer look on his face. He's always been a queer child. In a way you’re a little afraid of him because you feel he’s not—not quite right. Very clever and a high I.Q., but all the same not all there.

“And I thought ‘Why is Leopold coming out of there instead of being at the Snapdragon?’ and I thought ‘What’s he been doing—he looks so queer?’ And then, well then I didn’t think of it again after that, but I suppose, the way he looked upset me. And that’s why I dropped the vase. Elizabeth helped me to pick up the glass pieces, and I went back to the Snapdragon and I didn’t think of it again. Until we found Joyce. And that’s when I thought—”

“You thought that Leopold had done it?”

“Yes. Yes, I did think that. I thought it explained the way he’d looked. I thought I knew. I always think—I’ve thought too much all my life that I know things, that I’m right about things. And I can be very wrong. Because, you see, his being killed must mean something quite different. He must have gone in there, and he must have found her there—dead—and it gave him a terrible shock and he was frightened. And so he wanted to come out of the room without anyone seeing him and I suppose he looked up and saw me and he got back into the room and shut the door and waited until the hall was empty before coming out. But not because he’d killed her. No. Just the shock of finding her dead.”

“And yet you said nothing? You didn’t mention who it was you’d seen, even after the death was discovered?”

“No. I—oh, I couldn’t. He’s—you see, he’s so young—was so young, I suppose I ought to say now. Ten. Ten—eleven at most and I mean—I felt he couldn’t have known what he was doing, it couldn’t have been his fault exactly. He must have been morally not responsible. He’s always been rather queer, and I thought one could get treatment for him. Not leave it all to the police. Not send him to approved places. I thought one could get special psychological treatment for him, if necessary. I—I meant well. You must believe that, I meant well.”

Such sad words, Poirot thought, some of the saddest words in the world. Mrs. Drake seemed to know what he was thinking.

“Yes,” she said, “‘I did it for the best.’ ‘I meant well.’ One always thinks one knows what is best to do for other people, but one doesn’t. Because, you see, the reason he looked so taken aback must have been that he either saw who the murderer was, or saw something that would give a clue to who the murderer might be. Something that made the murderer feel that he himself wasn’t safe. And so—and so he’s waited until he got the boy alone and then drowned him in the brook so that he shouldn’t speak, so that he shouldn’t tell. If I’d only spoken out, if I’d told you, or told the police, or told someone, but I thought I knew best.”

“Only today,” said Poirot, after he had sat silent for a moment or two, watching Mrs. Drake where she sat controlling her sobs, “I was told that Leopold had been very flush of money lately. Somebody must have been paying him to keep silent.”

“But who—who?”

“We shall find out,” said Poirot. “It will not be long now.”

Twenty-two

It was not very characteristic of Hercule Poirot to ask the opinions of others. He was usually quite satisfied with his own opinions. Nevertheless, there were times when he made exceptions. This was one of them. He and Spence had had a brief conversation together and then Poirot had got in touch with a car hire service and after another short conversation with his friend and with Inspector Raglan, he drove off. He had arranged with the car to drive him back to London but he had made one halt on the way there. He drove to The Elms. He told the driver of the car that he would not be long—a quarter of an hour at most—and then he sought audience with Miss Emlyn.

“I am sorry to disturb you at this hour. It is no doubt the hour of your supper or dinner.”

“Well, I do you at least the compliment, Monsieur Poirot, to think you would not disturb me at either supper or dinner unless you have a valid reason for so doing.”

“You are very kind. To be frank, I want your advice.”

“Indeed?”

Miss Emlyn looked slightly surprised. She looked more than surprised, she looked sceptical.

“That does not seem very characteristic of you, Monsieur Poirot. Are you not usually satisfied with your own opinions?”

“Yes, I am satisfied with my own opinions, but it would give me solace and support if someone whose opinion I respected agreed with them.”

She did not speak, merely looked at him inquiringly.

“I know the killer of Joyce Reynolds,” he said. “It is my belief that you know it also.”

"I have not said so," said Miss Emlyn.

"No. You have not said so. And that might lead me to believe that it is on your part an opinion only."

"A hunch?" inquired Miss Emlyn, and her tone was colder than ever.

"I would prefer not to use that word. I would prefer to say that you had a definite opinion."

"Very well then. I will admit that I have a definite opinion. That does not mean that I shall repeat to you what my opinion is."

"What I should like to do, Mademoiselle, is to write down four words on a piece of paper. I will ask you if you agree with the four words I have written."

Miss Emlyn rose. She crossed the room to her desk, took a piece of writing paper and came across to Poirot with it.

"You interest me," she said. "Four words."

Poirot had taken a pen from his pocket. He wrote on the paper, folded it and handed it to her. She took it, straightened out the paper and held it in her hand, looking at it.

"Well?" said Poirot.

"As to two of the words on that paper, I agree, yes. The other two, that is more difficult. I have no evidence and, indeed, the ideas had not entered my head."

"But in the case of the first two words, you have definite evidence?"

"I consider so, yes."

"Water," said Poirot, thoughtfully. "As soon as you heard that, you knew. As soon as I heard that I knew. You are sure, and I am sure. And now," said Poirot, "a boy has been drowned in a brook. You have heard that?"

"Yes. Someone rang me up on the telephone and told me. Joyce's brother. How was he concerned?"

"He wanted money," said Poirot. "He got it. And so, at a suitable opportunity, he was drowned in a brook."

His voice did not change. It had, if anything, not a softened, but a harsher note,

"The person who told me," he said, "was riddled with compassion. Upset emotionally. But I am not like that. He was young, this second child who died, but his death was not an accident. It was, as so many things in life, a result of his actions. He wanted money and he took a risk. He was clever enough, astute enough to know he was taking a risk, but he wanted the money. He was ten years old but cause and effect is much the same at that age as it would be at thirty or fifty or ninety. Do you know what I think of first in such a case?"

"I should say," said Miss Emlyn, "that you are more concerned with justice than with compassion."

"Compassion," said Poirot, "on my part would do nothing to help Leopold. He is beyond help. Justice, if we obtain justice, you and I, for I think you are of my way of thinking over this—justice, one could say, will also not help Leopold. But it might help some other Leopold, it might help to keep some other child alive, if we can reach justice soon enough. It is not a safe thing, a killer who has killed more than once, to whom killing has appealed as a way of security. I am now on my way to London where I am meeting with certain people to discuss a way of approach. To convert them, perhaps, to my own certainty in this case."

"You may find that difficult," said Miss Emlyn.

"No, I do not think so. The ways and means to it may be difficult but I think I can convert them to my knowledge of what has happened. Because they have minds that understand the criminal mind. There is one thing more I would ask you. I want your opinion. Your opinion only this time, not evidence. Your opinion of the character of Nicholas Ransom and Desmond Holland. Would you advise me to trust them?”

“I should say that both of them were thoroughly trustworthy. That is my opinion. They are in many ways extremely foolish, but that is only in the ephemeral things of life. Fundamentally, they are sound. Sound as an apple without maggots in it.”

“One always comes back to apples,” said Hercule Poirot sadly. “I must go now. My car is waiting. I have one more call still to pay.”

Twenty-three

I

“Have you heard what’s on at Quarry Wood?” said Mrs. Cartwright, putting a packet of Fluffy Flakelets and Wonder White into her shopping bag.

“Quarry Wood?” said Elspeth McKay, to whom she was talking. “No, I haven’t heard anything particular.” She selected a packet of cereal. The two women were in the recently opened supermarket making their morning purchases.

“They’re saying the trees are dangerous there. Couple of forestry men arrived this morning. It’s there on the side of the hill where there’s a steep slope and a tree leaning sideways. Could be I suppose, that a tree could come down there. One of them was struck by lightning last winter but that was farther over, I think. Anyway, they’re digging round the roots of the trees a bit, and a bit farther down too. Pity. They’ll make an awful mess of the place.”

“Oh well,” said Elspeth McKay, “I suppose they know what they’re doing. Somebody’s called them in, I suppose.”

“They’ve got a couple of the police there, too, seeing that people don’t come near. Making sure they keep away from things. They say something about finding out which the diseased trees are first.”

“I see,” said Elspeth McKay.

Possibly she did. Not that anyone had told her but then Elspeth never needed telling.

II

Ariadne Oliver smoothed out a telegram she had just taken as delivered to her at the door. She was so used to getting telegrams through the telephone, making frenzied hunts for a pencil to take them down, insisting firmly that she wanted a confirmatory copy sent to her, that she was quite startled to receive what she called to herself a "real telegram" again.

"PLEASE BRING MRS BUTLER AND MIRANDA
TO YOUR FLAT AT ONCE. NO TIME TO LOSE.
IMPORTANT SEE DOCTOR FOR OPERATION."

She went into the kitchen where Judith Butler was making quince jelly.

"Judy," said Mrs. Oliver, "go and pack a few things, I'm going back to London and you're coming with me and Miranda, too."

"It's very nice of you, Ariadne, but I've got a lot of things on here. Anyway, you needn't rush away today, need you?"

"Yes, I need to, I've been told to," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Who's told you—your housekeeper?"

"No," said Mrs. Oliver. "Somebody else. One of the few people I obey. Come on. Hurry up."

"I don't want to leave home just now. I can't."

"You've got to come," said Mrs. Oliver. "The car is ready. I brought it round to the front door. We can go at once."

"I don't think I want to take Miranda. I could leave her here with someone, with the Reynolds or Rowena Drake."

"Miranda's coming, too," Mrs. Oliver interrupted definitely. "Don't make difficulties, Judy. This is serious. I don't see how you can even consider leaving her with the Reynolds. Two of the Reynolds children have been killed, haven't they?"

"Yes, yes, that's true enough. You think there's something wrong with that house. I mean there's someone there who—oh, what do I mean?"

“We’re talking too much,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Anyway,” she added, “if anyone is going to be killed, it seems to me that probably the most likely one would be Ann Reynolds.”

“What’s the matter with the family? Why should they all get killed, one after another? Oh, Ariadne, it’s frightening!”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but there are times when it’s quite right to be frightened. I’ve just had a telegram and I’m acting upon it.”

“Oh, I didn’t hear the telephone.”

“It didn’t come through the telephone. It came to the door.”

She hesitated a moment, then she held it out to her friend.

“What’s this mean? Operation?”

“Tonsils, probably,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Miranda had a bad throat last week, hadn’t she? Well, what more likely than that she should be taken to consult a throat specialist in London?”

“Are you quite mad, Ariadne?”

“Probably,” said Mrs. Oliver, “raving mad. Come on. Miranda will enjoy being in London. You needn’t worry. She’s not going to have any operation. That’s what’s called ‘cover’ in spy stories. We’ll take her to a theatre, or an opera or the ballet, whichever way her tastes lie. On the whole I think it would be best to take her to the ballet.”

“I’m frightened,” said Judith.

Ariadne Oliver looked at her friend. She was trembling slightly. She looked more than ever, Mrs. Oliver thought, like Undine. She looked divorced from reality.

“Come on,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I promised Hercule Poirot I’d bring you when he gave me the word. Well, he’s given me the word.”

“What’s going on in this place?” said Judith. “I can’t think why I ever came here.”

“I sometimes wondered why you did,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but there’s no accounting for where people go to live. A friend of mine went to live in Moreton-in-the-Marsh the other day. I asked him why he wanted to go and live there. He said he’d always wanted to and thought about it. Whenever he retired he meant to go there. I said that I hadn’t been to it myself but it sounded to me bound to be damp. What was it actually like? He said he didn’t know what it was like because he’d never been there himself. But he had always wanted to live there. He was quite sane, too.”

“Did he go?”

“Yes.”

“Did he like it when he got there?”

“Well, I haven’t heard that yet,” said Mrs. Oliver. “But people are very odd, aren’t they? The things they want to do, the things they simply have to do…” She went to the garden and called, “Miranda, we’re going to London.”

Miranda came slowly towards them.

“Going to London?”

“Ariadne’s going to drive us there,” said her mother. “We’ll go and see a theatre there. Mrs. Oliver thinks perhaps she can get tickets for the ballet. Would you like to go to the ballet?”

“I’d love it,” said Miranda. Her eyes lighted up. “I must go and say goodbye to one of my friends first.”

“We’re going practically at once.”

“Oh, I shan’t be as long as that, but I must explain. There are things I promised to do.”

She ran down the garden and disappeared through the gate.

“Who are Miranda’s friends?” asked Mrs. Oliver, with some curiosity.”

“I never really know,” said Judith. “She never tells one things, you know. Sometimes I think that the only things that she really feels are her friends are the birds she looks at in the woods. Or squirrels or things like that. I think everybody likes her but I don’t know that she has any particular friends. I mean, she doesn’t bring back girls to tea and things like that. Not as much as other girls do. I think her best friend really was Joyce Reynolds.” She added vaguely: “Joyce used to tell her fantastic things about elephants and tigers.” She roused herself. “Well, I must go up and pack, I suppose, as you insist. But I don’t want to leave here. There are lots of things I’m in the middle of doing, like this jelly and—”

“You’ve got to come,” said Mrs. Oliver. She was quite firm about it.

Judith came downstairs again with a couple of suitcases just as Miranda ran in through the side door, somewhat out of breath.

“Aren’t we going to have lunch first?” she demanded.

In spite of her elfin woodland appearance, she was a healthy child who liked her food.

“We’ll stop for lunch on the way,” said Mrs. Oliver. “We’ll stop at The Black Boy at Haversham. That would be about right. It’s about three-quarters of an hour from here and they give you quite a good meal. Come on, Miranda, we’re going to start now.”

“I shan’t have time to tell Cathie I can’t go to the pictures with her tomorrow. Oh, perhaps I could ring her up.”

“Well, hurry up,” said her mother.

Miranda ran into the sitting room where the telephone was situated. Judith and Mrs. Oliver put suitcases into the car. Miranda came out of the sitting room.

“I left a message,” she said breathlessly. “That’s all right now.”

“I think you’re mad, Ariadne,” said Judith, as they got into the car. “Quite mad. What’s it all about?”

“We shall know in due course, I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t know if I’m mad or he is.”

“He? Who?”

“Hercule Poirot,” said Mrs. Oliver.

III

In London Hercule Poirot was sitting in a room with four other men. One was Inspector Timothy Raglan, looking respectful and poker-faced as was his invariable habit when in the presence of his superiors; the second was Superintendent Spence. The third was Alfred Richmond, Chief Constable of the County and the fourth was a man with a sharp, legal face from the Public Prosecutor’s office. They looked at Hercule Poirot with varying expressions, or what one might describe as nonexpressions.

“You seem quite sure, Monsieur Poirot.”

“I am quite sure,” said Hercule Poirot. “When a thing arranges itself so, one realizes that it must be so, one only looks for reasons why it should not be so. If one does not find the reasons why it should not be so, then one is strengthened in one’s opinion.”

“The motives seem somewhat complex, if I may say so.”

“No,” said Poirot, “not complex really. But so simple that they are very difficult to see clearly.”

The legal gentleman looked sceptical.

“We shall have one piece of definite evidence very soon now,” said Inspector Raglan. “Of course, if there has been a mistake on that point….”

“Ding dong dell, no pussy in the well?” said Hercule Poirot. “That is what you mean?”

“Well, you must agree it is only a surmise on your part.”

“The evidence pointed to it all along. When a girl disappears, there are not many reasons. The first is that she has gone away with a man. The second is that she is dead. Anything else is very far-fetched and practically never happens.”

“There are no special points that you can bring to our attention, Monsieur Poirot?”

“Yes. I have been in touch with a well-known firm of estate agents. Friends of mine, who specialize in real estate in the West Indies, the Aegean, the Adriatic, the Mediterranean and other places. They specialize in sunshine and their clients are usually wealthy. Here is a recent purchase that might interest you.”

He handed over a folded paper.

“You think this ties up?”

“I’m sure it does.”

“I thought the sale of islands was prohibited by that particular government?”

“Money can usually find a way.”

“There is nothing else that you would care to dwell upon?”

“It is possible that within twenty-four hours I shall have for you something that will more or less clinch matters.”

“And what is that?”

“An eyewitness.”

"You mean—"

"An eyewitness to a crime."

The legal man looked at Poirot with mounting disbelief.

"Where is this eyewitness now?"

"On the way to London, I hope and trust."

"You sound—disturbed."

"That is true. I have done what I can to take care of things, but I will admit to you that I am frightened. Yes, I am frightened in spite of the protective measure I have taken. Because, you see, we are—how shall I describe it?—we are up against ruthlessness, quick reactions, greed pushed beyond an expectable human limit and perhaps—I am not sure but I think it possible—a touch, shall we say, of madness? Not there originally, but cultivated. A seed that took root and grows fast. And now perhaps has taken charge, inspiring an inhuman rather than a human attitude to life."

"We'll have to have a few extra opinions on this," said the legal man. "We can't rush into things. Of course, a lot depends on the—er—forestry business. If that's positive, we'd have to think again."

Hercule Poirot rose to his feet.

"I will take my leave. I have told you all that I know and all that I fear and envisage as possible. I shall remain in touch with you."

He shook hands all round with foreign precision, and went out.

"The man's a bit of a mountebank," said the legal man. "You don't think he's a bit touched, do you? Touched in the head himself, I mean? Anyway, he's a pretty good age. I don't know that one can rely on the faculties of a man of that age."

"I think you can rely upon him," said the Chief Constable. "At least, that is my impression. Spence, I've known you a good many years. You're a friend of his. Do you think he’s become a little senile?”

“No, I don’t,” said Superintendent Spence. “What’s your opinion, Raglan?”

“I’ve only met him recently, sir. At first I thought his—well, his way of talking, his ideas, might be fantastic. But on the whole I’m converted. I think he’s going to be proved right.”

Twenty-four

I

Mrs. Oliver had ensconced herself at a table in the window of The Black Boy. It was still fairly early, so the dining room was not very full. Presently, Judith Butler returned from powdering her nose and sat down opposite her and examined the menu.

“What does Miranda like?” asked Mrs. Oliver. “We might as well order for her as well. I suppose she’ll be back in a minute.”

“She likes roast chicken.”

“Well, that’s easy then. What about you?”

“I’ll have the same.”

“Three roast chickens,” Mrs. Oliver ordered.

She leaned back, studying her friend.

“Why are you staring at me in that way?”

“I was thinking,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Thinking what?”

“Thinking really how very little I knew about you.”

“Well, that’s the same with everybody, isn’t it?”

“You mean, one never knows all about anyone.”

“I shouldn’t think so.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Both women were silent for some time.

“They’re rather slow serving things here.”

“It’s coming now, I think,” said Mrs. Oliver.

A waitress arrived with a tray full of dishes.

“Miranda’s a long time. Does she know where the dining room is?”

“Yes, of course she does. We looked in on the way.” Judith got up impatiently. “I’ll have to go and fetch her.”

“I wonder if perhaps she gets car sick.”

“She used to when she was younger.”

She returned some four or five minutes later.

“She’s not in the Ladies’,” she said. “There’s a door outside it into the garden. Perhaps she went out that way to look at a bird or something. She’s like that.”

“No time to look at birds today,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Go and call her or something. We want to get on.”

II

Elspeth McKay pricked some sausages with a fork, laid them on a baking dish, put it in the Frigidair and started to peel potatoes.

The telephone rang.

“Mrs. McKay? Sergeant Goodwin here. Is your brother there?”

“No. He’s in London today.”

“I’ve rung him there—he’s left. When he gets back, tell him we’ve had a positive result.”

"You mean you've found a body in the well?"

"Not much use clamming up about it. The word's got around already."

"Who is it? The au pair girl?"

"Seems like it."

"Poor girl," said Elspeth. "Did she throw herself in—or what?"

"It wasn't suicide—she was knifed. It was murder all right."

III

After her mother had left the Ladies' Room, Miranda waited for a minute or two. Then she opened the door, cautiously peered out, opened the side door to the garden which was close at hand and ran down the garden path that led round to the back yard of what had once been a coaching inn and was now a garage. She went out at a small door that enabled pedestrians to get into a lane outside. A little farther down the lane a car was parked. A man with beetling grey eyebrows and a grey beard was sitting in it reading a newspaper. Miranda opened the door and climbed in beside the driving seat. She laughed.

"You do look funny."

"Have a hearty laugh, there's nothing to stop you."

The car started, went down the lane, turned right, turned left, turned right again and came out on a secondary road.

"We're all right for time," said the grey-bearded man. "At the right moment you'll see the double axe as it ought to be seen. And Kilterbury Down, too. Wonderful view."

A car dashed past them so closely that they were almost forced into the hedge.

"Young idiots," said the grey-bearded man.

One of the young men had long hair reaching over his shoulders and large, owlish spectacles. The other one affected a more Spanish appearance with sideburns.

“You don’t think Mummy will worry about me?” asked Miranda.

“She won’t have time to worry about you. By the time she worries about you, you’ll have got where you want to be.”

IV

In London, Hercule Poirot picked up the telephone. Mrs. Oliver’s voice came over.

“We’ve lost Miranda.”

“What do you mean, lost her?”

“We had lunch at The Black Boy. She went to the loo. She didn’t come back. Somebody said they saw her driving away with an elderly man. But it mightn’t have been her. It might have been someone else. It—”

“Someone should have stayed with her. Neither of you ought to have let her out of your sight. I told you there was danger. Is Mrs. Butler very worried?”

“Of course she’s worried. What do you think? She’s frantic. She insists on ringing the police.”

“Yes, that would be the natural thing to do. I will ring them also.”

“But why should Miranda be in danger?”

“Don’t you know? You ought to by now.” He added, “The body’s been found. I’ve just heard—”

“What body?”

“A body in a well.”

Twenty-five

“It’s beautiful,” said Miranda, looking round her.

Kilterbury Ring was a local beauty spot though its remains were not particularly famous. They had been dismantled many hundreds of years ago. Yet here and there a tall megalithic stone still stood, upright, telling of a long past ritual worship. Miranda asked questions.

“Why did they have all these stones here?”

“For ritual. Ritual worship. Ritual sacrifice. You understand about sacrifice, don’t you, Miranda?”

“I think so.”

“It has to be, you see. It’s important.”

“You mean, it’s not a sort of punishment? It’s something else?”

“Yes, it’s something else. You die so that others should live. You die so that beauty should live. Should come into being. That’s the important thing.”

“I thought perhaps—”

“Yes, Miranda?”

“I thought perhaps you ought to die because what you’ve done has killed someone else.”

“What put that into your head?”

“I was thinking of Joyce. If I hadn’t told her about something, she wouldn’t have died, would she?”

“Perhaps not.”

"I've felt worried since Joyce died. I needn't have told her, need I? I told her because I wanted to have something worth while telling her. She'd been to India and she kept talking about it—about the tigers and about the elephants and their gold hangings and decorations and their trappings. And I think, too—suddenly I wanted somebody else to know, because you see I hadn't really thought about it before." She added: "Was—was that a sacrifice, too?"

"In a way."

Miranda remained contemplative, then she said, "Isn't it time yet?"

"The sun is not quite right yet. Another five minutes, perhaps, and then it will fall directly on the stone."

Again they sat silent, beside the car.

"Now, I think," said Miranda's companion, looking up at the sky where the sun was dipping towards the horizon. "Now is a wonderful moment. No one here. Nobody comes up at this time of day and walks up to the top of Kilterbury Down to see Kilterbury Ring. Too cold in November and the blackberries are over. I'll show you the double axe first. The double axe on the stone. Carved there when they came from Mycenae or from Crete hundreds of years ago. It's wonderful, Miranda, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's very wonderful," said Miranda. "Show it me."

They walked up to the topmost stone. Beside it lay a fallen one and a little farther down the slope a slightly inclined one leant as though bent with the weariness of years.

"Are you happy, Miranda?"

"Yes, I'm very happy."

"There's the sign here."

"Is that really the double axe?"

"Yes, it's worn with time but that's it. That's the symbol. Put your hand on it. And now—now we will drink to the past and the future and to beauty."

"Oh, how lovely," said Miranda.

A golden cup was put into her hand, and from a flask her companion poured a golden liquid into it.

"It tastes of fruit, of peaches. Drink it, Miranda, and you will be happier still."

Miranda took the gilt cup. She sniffed at it.

"Yes. Yes, it does smell of peaches. Oh look, there's the sun. Really red gold—looking as though it was lying on the edge of the world."

He turned her towards it.

"Hold the cup and drink."

She turned obediently. One hand was still on the megalithic stone and its semierased sign. Her companion now was standing behind her. From below the inclined stone down the hill, two figures slipped out, bent half double. Those on the summit had their backs to them, and did not even notice them. Quickly but stealthily they ran up the hill.

"Drink to beauty, Miranda."

"Like hell she does!" said a voice behind them.

A rose velvet coat shot over a head, a knife was knocked from the hand that was slowly rising. Nicholas Ransom caught hold of Miranda, clasping her tightly and dragging her away from the other two who were struggling.

"You bloody little idiot," said Nicholas Ransom. "Coming up here with a barmy murderer. You should have known what you were doing."

"I did in a way," said Miranda. "I was going to be a sacrifice, I think, because you see it was all my fault. It was because of me that Joyce was killed. So it was right for me to be a sacrifice, wasn’t it? It would be a kind of ritual killing.”

“Don’t start talking nonsense about ritual killings. They’ve found that other girl. You know, the au pair girl who has been missing so long. A couple of years or something like that. They all thought she’d run away because she’d forged a Will. She hadn’t run away. Her body was found in the well.”

“Oh!” Miranda gave a sudden cry of anguish. “Not in the wishing well? Not in the wishing well that I wanted to find so badly? Oh, I don’t want her to be in the wishing well. Who—who put her there?”

“The same person who brought you here.”

Twenty-six

Once again four men sat looking at Poirot. Timothy Raglan, Superintendent Spence and the Chief Constable had the pleased expectant look of a cat who is counting on a saucer of cream to materialize at any moment. The fourth man still had the expression of one who suspends belief.

“Well, Monsieur Poirot,” said the Chief Constable, taking charge of the proceedings and leaving the D.P.P. man to hold a watching brief. “We’re all here—”

Poirot made a motion with his hand. Inspector Raglan left the room and returned ushering in a woman of thirty odd, a girl, and two adolescent young men.

He introduced them to the Chief Constable. “Mrs. Butler, Miss Miranda Butler, Mr. Nicholas Ransom and Mr. Desmond Holland.”

Poirot got up and took Miranda’s hand. “Sit here by your mother, Miranda—Mr. Richmond here who is what is called a Chief Constable, wants to ask you some questions. He wants you to answer them. It concerns something you saw—over a year ago now, nearer two years. You mentioned this to one person, and, so I understand, to one person only. Is that correct?”

“I told Joyce.”

“And what exactly did you tell Joyce?”

“That I’d seen a murder.”

“Did you tell anyone else?”

“No. But I think Leopold guessed. He listens, you know. At doors. That sort of thing. He likes knowing people’s secrets.”

“You have heard that Joyce Reynolds, on the afternoon before the Hallowe’en party, claimed that she herself had seen a murder committed.

Was that true?”

“No. She was just repeating what I’d told her—but pretending that it had happened to her.”

“Will you tell us now just what you did see.”

“I didn’t know at first that it was a murder. I thought there had been an accident. I thought she’d fallen from up above somewhere.”

“Where was this?”

“In the Quarry Garden—in the hollow where the fountain used to be. I was up in the branches of a tree. I’d been looking at a squirrel and one has to keep very quiet, or they rush away. Squirrels are very quick.”

“Tell us what you saw.”

“A man and a woman lifted her up and were carrying her up the path. I thought they were taking her to a hospital or to the Quarry House. Then the woman stopped suddenly and said, ‘Someone is watching us,’ and stared at my tree. Somehow it made me feel frightened. I kept very still. The man said ‘Nonsense,’ and they went on. I saw there was blood on a scarf and there was a knife with blood on that—and I thought perhaps someone had tried to kill themselves—and I went on keeping very still.”

“Because you were frightened?”

“Yes, but I don’t know why.”

“You didn’t tell your mother?”

“No. I thought perhaps I oughtn’t to have been there watching. And then the next day nobody said anything about an accident, so I forgot about it. I never thought about it again until—”

She stopped suddenly. The Chief Constable opened his mouth—then shut it. He looked at Poirot and made a very slight gesture.

“Yes, Miranda,” said Poirot, “until what?”

“It was as though it was happening all over again. It was a green woodpecker this time, and I was being very still, watching it from behind some bushes. And those two were sitting there talking—about an island—a Greek island. She said something like, ‘It’s all signed up. It’s ours, we can go to it whenever we like. But we’d better go slow still—not rush things.’ And then the woodpecker flew away, and I moved. And she said—‘Hush—be quiet—somebody’s watching us.’ It was just the way she’d said it before, and she had just the same look on her face, and I was frightened again, and I remembered. And this time I knew. I knew it had been a murder I had seen and it had been a dead body they were carrying away to hide somewhere. You see, I wasn’t a child any more. I knew—things and what they must mean—the blood and the knife and the dead body all limp—”

“When was this?” asked the Chief Constable. “How long ago?”

Miranda thought for a moment.

“Last March—just after Easter.”

“Can you say definitely who these people were, Miranda?”

“Of course I can.” Miranda looked bewildered.

“You saw their faces?”

“Of course.”

“Who were they?”

“Mrs. Drake and Michael….”

It was not a dramatic denunciation. Her voice was quiet, with something in it like wonder, but it carried conviction.

The Chief Constable said, “You did not tell anyone. Why not?”

“I thought—I thought it might have been a sacrifice.”

“Who told you that?”

“Michael told me—he said sacrifices were necessary.”

Poirot said gently, “You loved Michael?”

“Oh yes,” said Miranda, “I loved him very much.”

Twenty-seven

“Now I’ve got you here at last,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I want to know all about everything.”

She looked at Poirot with determination and asked severely:

“Why haven’t you come sooner?”

“My excuses, Madame, I have been much occupied assisting the police with their inquiries.”

“It’s criminals who do that. What on earth made you think of Rowena Drake being mixed up in a murder? Nobody else would have dreamed of it?”

“It was simple as soon as I got the vital clue.”

“What do you call the vital clue?”

“Water. I wanted someone who was at the party and who was wet, and who shouldn’t have been wet. Whoever killed Joyce Reynolds would necessarily have got wet. You hold down a vigorous child with its head in a full bucket of water, and there will be struggling and splashing and you are bound to be wet. So something has got to happen to provide an innocent explanation of how you got wet. When everyone crowded into the dining room for the Snapdragon, Mrs. Drake took Joyce with her to the library. If your hostess asks you to come with her, naturally you go. And certainly Joyce had no suspicion of Mrs. Drake. All Miranda had told her was that she had once seen a murder committed. And so Joyce was killed and her murderer was fairly well soaked with water. There must be a reason for that and she set about creating a reason. She had to get a witness as to how she got wet. She waited on the landing with an enormous vase of flowers filled with water. In due course Miss Whittaker came out from the Snapdragon room—it was hot in there. Mrs. Drake pretended to start nervously, and let the vase go, taking care that it flooded her person as it crashed down to the hall below.

She ran down the stairs and she and Miss Whittaker picked up the pieces and the flowers while Mrs. Drake complained at the loss of her beautiful vase. She managed to give Miss Whittaker the impression that she had seen something or someone coming out of the room where a murder had been committed. Miss Whittaker took the statement at its face value, but when she mentioned it to Miss Emlyn, Miss Emlyn realized the really interesting thing about it. And so she urged Miss Whittaker to tell me the story.

“And so,” said Poirot, twirling his moustaches, “I, too, knew who the murderer of Joyce was.”

“And all the time Joyce had never seen any murder committed at all!”

“Mrs. Drake did not know that. But she had always suspected that someone had been there in the Quarry Wood when she and Michael Garfield had killed Olga Seminoff, and might have seen it happen.”

“When did you know it had been Miranda and not Joyce?”

“As soon as common sense forced me to accept the universal verdict that Joyce was a liar. Then Miranda was clearly indicated. She was frequently in the Quarry Wood, observing birds and squirrels. Joyce was, as Miranda told me, her best friend. She said: ‘We tell each other everything.’ Miranda was not at the party, so the compulsive liar Joyce could use the story her friend had told her of having once seen a murder committed—probably in order to impress you, Madame, the well-known crime writer.”

“That’s right, blame it all on me.”

“No, no.”

“Rowena Drake,” mused Mrs. Oliver. “I still can’t believe it of her.”

“She had all the qualities necessary. I have always wondered,” he added, “exactly what sort of woman Lady Macbeth was. What would she be like if you met her in real life? Well, I think I have met her.”

“And Michael Garfield? They seem such an unlikely pair.”

"Interesting—Lady Macbeth and Narcissus, an unusual combination."

"Lady Macbeth," Mrs. Oliver murmured thoughtfully.

"She was a handsome woman—efficient and competent—a born administrator—an unexpectedly good actress. You should have heard her lamenting over the death of the little boy Leopold and weeping large sobs into a dry handkerchief."

"Disgusting."

"You remember I asked you who, in your opinion, were or were not nice people."

"Was Michael Garfield in love with her?"

"I doubt if Michael Garfield has ever loved anyone but himself. He wanted money—a lot of money. Perhaps he believed at first he could influence Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe to dote upon him to the extent of making a Will in his favour—but Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe was not that kind of woman."

"What about the forgery? I still don't understand that. What was the point of it all?"

"It was confusing at first. Too much forgery, one might say. But if one considered it, the purpose of it was clear. You had only to consider what actually happened.

"Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe's fortune all went to Rowena Drake. The codicil produced was so obviously forged that any lawyer would spot it. It would be contested, and the evidence of experts would result in its being upset, and the original Will would stand. As Rowena Drake's husband had recently died she would inherit everything."

"But what about the codicil that the cleaning woman witnessed?"

"My surmise is that Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe discovered that Michael Garfield and Rowena Drake were having an affair—probably before her husband died. In her anger Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe made a codicil to her

Will leaving everything to her au pair girl. Probably the girl told Michael about this—she was hoping to marry him."

"I thought it was young Ferrier?"

"That was a plausible tale told me by Michael. There was no confirmation of it."

"Then if he knew there was a real codicil why didn't he marry Olga and get hold of the money that way?"

"Because he doubted whether she really would get the money. There is such a thing as undue influence. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe was an elderly woman and a sick woman also. All her preceding Wills had been in favour of her own kith and kin—good sensible Wills such as law courts approve of. This girl from foreign parts had been known to her only a year—and had no kind of claim upon her. That codicil even though genuine could have been upset. Besides, I doubt if Olga could have put through the purchase of a Greek island—or would even have been willing to do so. She had no influential friends, or contacts in business circles. She was attracted to Michael, but she looked upon him as a good prospect matrimonially, who would enable her to live in England—which is what she wanted to do."

"And Rowena Drake?"

"She was infatuated. Her husband had been for many years a crippled invalid. She was middle-aged but she was a passionate woman, and into her orbit came a young man of unusual beauty. Women fell for him easily—but he wanted—not the beauty of women—but the exercise of his own creative urge to make beauty. For that he wanted money—a lot of money. As for love—he only loved himself. He was Narcissus. There is an old French song I heard many years ago—"

He hummed softly.

"Regarde, Narcisse

Regarde dans l'eau

Regarde, Narcisse, que tu es beau

Il n’y a au monde

Que la Beauté

Et la Jeunesse,

Hélas! Et la Jeunesse…

Regarde, Narcisse…

Regarde dans l’eau….”

“I can’t believe—I simply can’t believe that anyone would do murder just to make a garden on a Greek island,” said Mrs. Oliver unbelievingly.

“Can’t you? Can’t you visualize how he held it in his mind? Bare rock, perhaps, but so shaped as to hold possibilities. Earth, cargoes of fertile earth to clothe the bare bones of the rocks—and then plants, seeds, shrubs, trees. Perhaps he read in the paper of a shipping millionaire who had created an island garden for the woman he loved. And so it came to him—he would make a garden, not for a woman, but—for himself.”

“It still seems to me quite mad.”

“Yes. That happens. I doubt if he even thought of his motive as sordid. He thought of it only as necessary for the creation of more beauty. He’d gone mad on creation. The beauty of the Quarry Wood, the beauty of other gardens he’d laid out and made—and now he envisaged even more—a whole island of beauty. And there was Rowena Drake, infatuated with him. What did she mean to him but the source of money with which he could create beauty. Yes—he had become mad, perhaps. Whom the gods destroy, they first drive mad.”

“He really wanted his island so much? Even with Rowena Drake tied round his neck as well? Bossing him the whole time?”

“Accidents can happen. I think one might possibly have happened to Mrs. Drake in due course.”

“One more murder?”

“Yes. It started simply. Olga had to be removed because she knew about the codicil—and she was also to be the scapegoat, branded as a forger. Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe had hidden the original document, so I think that young Ferrier was given money to produce a similar forged document. So obviously forged that it would arouse suspicion at once. That sealed his death warrant. Lesley Ferrier, I soon decided, had had no arrangement or love affair with Olga. That was a suggestion made to me by Michael Garfield, but I think it was Michael who paid money to Lesley. It was Michael Garfield who was laying siege to the au pair girl’s affections, warning her to keep quiet about this and not tell her employer, speaking of possible marriage in the future but at the same time marking her down cold-bloodedly as the victim whom he and Rowena Drake would need if the money was to come to them. It was not necessary for Olga Seminoff to be accused of forgery, or prosecuted. She needed only to be suspected of it. The forgery appeared to benefit her. It could have been done by her very easily, there was evidence to the effect that she did copy her employer’s handwriting and if she was suddenly to disappear, it would be assumed that she had been not only a forger, but quite possibly might have assisted her employer to die suddenly. So on a suitable occasion Olga Seminoff died. Lesley Ferrier was killed in what is purported to have been a gang knifing or a knifing by a jealous woman. But the knife that was found in the well corresponds very closely with the knife wounds that he suffered. I knew that Olga’s body must be hidden somewhere in this neighbourhood, but I had no idea where until I heard Miranda one day inquiring about a wishing well, urging Michael Garfield to take her there. And he was refusing. Shortly afterwards when I was talking to Mrs. Goodbody, I said I wondered where that girl had disappeared to, and she said ‘Ding dong dell, pussy’s in the well’ and then I was quite sure the girl’s body was in the wishing well. I discovered it was in the wood, in the Quarry Wood, on an incline not far from Michael Garfield’s cottage and I thought that Miranda could have seen either the actual murder or the disposal of the body later. Mrs. Drake and Michael feared that someone had been a witness—but they had no idea who it was—and as nothing happened they were lulled into security. They made their plans—they were in no hurry, but they set things in motion. She talked about buying land abroad—gave people the idea she wanted to get away from Woodleigh Common. Too many sad associations, referring always to her grief over her husband's death. Everything was nicely in train and then came the shock of Hallowe'en and Joyce's sudden assertion of having witnessed a murder. So now Rowena knew, or thought she knew, who it had been in the wood that day. So she acted quickly. But there was more to come. Young Leopold asked for money—there were things he wanted to buy, he said. What he guessed or knew is uncertain, but he was Joyce's brother, and so they probably thought he knew far more than he really did. And so—he, too, died."

"You suspected her because of the water clue," said Mrs. Oliver. "How did you come to suspect Michael Garfield?"

"He fitted," said Poirot simply. "And then—the last time I spoke to Michael Garfield, I was sure. He said to me, laughing—'Get thee beyond me, Satan. Go and join your police friends.' And I knew then, quite certainly. It was the other way round. I said to myself: 'I am leaving you behind me, Satan.' A Satan so young and beautiful as Lucifer can appear to mortals…."

There was another woman in the room—until now she had not spoken, but now she stirred in her chair.

"Lucifer," she said. "Yes, I see now. He was always that."

"He was very beautiful," said Poirot, "and he loved beauty. The beauty that he made with his brain and his imagination and his hands. To it he would sacrifice everything. In his own way, I think, he loved the child Miranda—but he was ready to sacrifice her—to save himself. He planned her death very carefully—he made of it a ritual and, as one might put it, indoctrinated her with the idea. She was to let him know if she were leaving Woodleigh Common—he instructed her to meet him at the Inn where you and Mrs. Oliver lunched. She was to have been found on Kilterbury Ring—there by the sign of the double axe, with a golden goblet by her side—a ritual sacrifice."

“Mad,” said Judith Butler. “He must have been mad.”

“Madame, your daughter is safe—but there is something I would like to know very much.”

“I think you deserve to know anything I can tell you, Monsieur Poirot.”

“She is your daughter—was she also Michael Garfield’s daughter?”

Judith was silent for a moment, and then she said, “Yes.”

“But she doesn’t know that?”

“No. She has no idea. Meeting him here was a pure coincidence. I knew him when I was a young girl. I fell wildly in love with him and then—and then I got afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes. I don’t know why. Not of anything he would do or that sort of thing, just afraid of his nature. His gentleness, but behind it, a coldness and a ruthlessness. I was even afraid of his passion for beauty and for creation in his work. I didn’t tell him I was going to have a child. I left him—I went away and the baby was born. I invented the story of a pilot husband who had had a crash. I moved about rather restlessly. I came to Woodleigh Common more or less by chance. I had got contacts in Medchester where I could find secretarial work.

“And then one day Michael Garfield came here to work in the Quarry Wood. I don’t think I minded. Nor did he. All that was over long ago, but later, although I didn’t realize how often Miranda went there to the Wood, I did worry—”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “there was a bond between them. A natural affinity. I saw the likeness between them—only Michael Garfield, the follower of Lucifer the beautiful, was evil, and your daughter has innocence and wisdom, and there is no evil in her.”

He went over to his desk and brought back an envelope. Out of it he drew a delicate pencil drawing.

“Your daughter,” he said.

Judith looked at it. It was signed “Michael Garfield.”

“He was drawing her by the stream,” said Poirot, “in the Quarry Wood. He drew it, he said, so that he should not forget. He was afraid of forgetting. It wouldn’t have stopped him killing her, though.”

Then he pointed to a pencilled word across the top left hand corner.

“Can you read that?”

She spelt it out slowly.

“Iphigenia.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “Iphigenia. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, so that he should get a wind to take his ships to Troy. Michael would have sacrificed his daughter so that he should have a new Garden of Eden.”

“He knew what he was doing,” said Judith. “I wonder—if he would ever have had regrets?”

Poirot did not answer. A picture was forming in his mind of a young man of singular beauty lying by the megalithic stone marked with a double axe, and still clasping in his dead fingers the golden goblet he had seized and drained when retribution had come suddenly to save his victim and to deliver him to justice.

It was so that Michael Garfield had died—a fitting death, Poirot thought—but, alas, there would be no garden blossoming on an island in the Grecian Seas….

Instead there would be Miranda—alive and young and beautiful.

He raised Judith’s hand and kissed it.

“Goodbye, Madame, and remember me to your daughter.”

“She ought always to remember you and what she owes you.”

“Better not—some memories are better buried.”

He went on to Mrs. Oliver.

“Good night, chère Madame. Lady Macbeth and Narcissus. It has been remarkably interesting. I have to thank you for bringing it to my notice—”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Oliver in an exasperated voice, “blame it all on me as usual!”

Elephants Can Remember (1972)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

A LITERARY LUNCHEON

Mrs. Oliver looked at herself in the glass. She gave a brief, sideways look towards the clock on the mantelpiece, which she had some idea was twenty minutes slow. Then she resumed her study of her coiffure. The trouble with Mrs. Oliver was—and she admitted it freely—that her styles of hairdressing were always being changed. She had tried almost everything in turn. A severe pompadour at one time, then a windswept style where you brushed back your locks to display an intellectual brow, at least she hoped the brow was intellectual. She had tried tightly arranged curls, she had tried a kind of artistic disarray. She had to admit that it did not matter very much today what her type of hairdressing was, because today she was going to do what she very seldom did, wear a hat.

On the top shelf of Mrs. Oliver's wardrobe there reposed four hats. One was definitely allotted to weddings. When you went to a wedding, a hat was a "must." But even then Mrs. Oliver kept two. One, in a round bandbox, was of feathers. It fitted closely to the head and stood up very well to sudden squalls of rain if they should overtake one unexpectedly as one passed from a car to the interior of the sacred edifice, or as so often nowadays, a registrar's office.

The other, and more elaborate, hat was definitely for attending a wedding held on a Saturday afternoon in summer. It had flowers and chiffon and a covering of yellow net attached with mimosa.

The other two hats on the shelf were of a more all-purpose character. One was what Mrs. Oliver called her "country house hat," made of tan felt suitable for wearing with tweeds of almost any pattern, with a becoming brim that you could turn up or turn down.

Mrs. Oliver had a cashmere pullover for warmth and a thin pullover for hot days, either of which was suitable in colour to go with this. However, though the pullovers were frequently worn, the hat was practically never worn. Because, really, why put on a hat just to go to the country and have a meal with your friends?

The fourth hat was the most expensive of the lot and it had extraordinarily durable advantages about it. Possibly, Mrs. Oliver sometimes thought, because it was so expensive. It consisted of a kind of turban of various layers of contrasting velvets, all of rather becoming pastel shades which would go with anything.

Mrs. Oliver paused in doubt and then called for assistance.

“Maria,” she said, then louder, “Maria. Come here a minute.”

Maria came. She was used to being asked to give advice on what Mrs. Oliver was thinking of wearing.

“Going to wear your lovely smart hat, are you?” said Maria.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I wanted to know whether you think it looks best this way or the other way round.”

Maria stood back and took a look.

“Well, that’s back to front you’re wearing it now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I know,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I know that quite well. But I thought somehow it looked better that way.”

“Oh, why should it?” said Maria.

“Well, it’s meant, I suppose. But it’s got to be meant by me as well as the shop that sold it,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Why do you think it’s better the wrong way round?”

“Because you get that lovely shade of blue and the dark brown, and I think that looks better than the other way which is green with the red and the chocolate colour.”

At this point Mrs. Oliver removed the hat, put it on again and tried it wrong way round, right way round and sideways, which both she and Maria disapproved of.

“You can’t have it the wide way. I mean, it’s wrong for your face, isn’t it? It’d be wrong for anyone’s face.”

“No. That won’t do. I think I’ll have it the right way round, after all.”

“Well, I think it’s safer always,” said Maria.

Mrs. Oliver took off the hat. Maria assisted her to put on a well cut, thin woollen dress of a delicate puce colour, and helped her to adjust the hat.

“You look ever so smart,” said Maria.

That was what Mrs. Oliver liked so much about Maria. If given the least excuse for saying so, she always approved and gave praise.

“Going to make a speech at the luncheon, are you?” Maria asked.

“A speech!” Mrs. Oliver sounded horrified. “No, of course not. You know I never make speeches.”

“Well, I thought they always did at these here literary luncheons. That’s what you’re going to, isn’t it? Famous writers of 1973—or whichever year it is we’ve got to now.”

“I don’t need to make a speech,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Several other people who like doing it will be making speeches, and they are much better at it than I would be.”

“I’m sure you’d make a lovely speech if you put your mind to it,” said Maria, adjusting herself to the rôle of a tempter.

“No, I shouldn’t,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I know what I can do and I know what I can’t. I can’t make speeches. I get all worried and nervy and I should probably stammer or say the same thing twice. I should not only feel silly, I should probably look silly. Now it’s all right with words. You can write words down or speak them into a machine or dictate them. I can do things with words so long as I know it's not a speech I'm making."

"Oh well. I hope everything'll go all right. But I'm sure it will. Quite a grand luncheon, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, in a deeply depressed voice. "Quite a grand luncheon."

And why, she thought, but did not say, why on earth am I going to it? She searched her mind for a bit because she always really liked knowing what she was going to do instead of doing it first and wondering why she had done it afterwards.

"I suppose," she said, again to herself and not to Maria, who had had to return rather hurriedly to the kitchen, summoned by a smell of overflowing jam which she happened to have on the stove, "I wanted to see what it felt like. I'm always being asked to literary lunches or something like that and I never go."

Mrs. Oliver arrived at the last course of the grand luncheon with a sigh of satisfaction as she toyed with the remains of the meringue on her plate. She was particularly fond of meringues and it was a delicious last course in a very delicious luncheon. Nevertheless, when one reached middle age, one had to be careful with meringues. One's teeth? They looked all right, they had the great advantage that they could not ache, they were white and quite agreeable looking—just like the real thing. But it was true enough that they were not real teeth. And teeth that were not real teeth—or so Mrs. Oliver believed—were not really of high-class material. Dogs, she had always understood, had teeth of real ivory, but human beings had teeth merely of bone. Or, she supposed, if they were false teeth, of plastic. Anyway, the point was that you mustn't get involved in some rather shame-making appearance, which false teeth might lead you into. Lettuce was a difficulty, and salted almonds, and such things as chocolates with hard centres, clinging caramels and the delicious stickiness and adherence of meringues. With a sigh of satisfaction, she dealt with the final mouthful. It had been a good lunch, a very good lunch.

Mrs. Oliver was fond of her creature comforts. She had enjoyed the luncheon very much. She had enjoyed the company, too. The luncheon, which had been given to celebrated female writers, had fortunately not been confined to female writers only. There had been other writers, and critics, and those who read books as well as those who wrote them. Mrs. Oliver had sat between two very charming members of the male sex. Edwin Aubyn, whose poetry she always enjoyed, an extremely entertaining person who had had various entertaining experiences in his tours abroad, and various literary and personal adventures. Also he was interested in restaurants and food and they had talked very happily about food, and left the subject of literature aside.

Sir Wesley Kent, on her other side, had also been an agreeable luncheon companion. He had said very nice things about her books, and had had the tact to say things that did not make her feel embarrassed, which many people could do almost without trying. He had mentioned one or two reasons why he had liked one or other of her books, and they had been the right reasons, and therefore Mrs. Oliver had thought favourably of him for that reason. Praise from men, Mrs. Oliver thought to herself, is always acceptable. It was women who gushed. Some of the things that women wrote to her! Really! Not always women, of course. Sometimes emotional young men from very far away countries. Only last week she had received a fan letter beginning “Reading your book, I feel what a noble woman you must be.” After reading The Second Goldfish he had then gone off into an intense kind of literary ecstasy which was, Mrs. Oliver felt, completely unfitting. She was not unduly modest. She thought the detective stories she wrote were quite good of their kind. Some were not so good and some were much better than others. But there was no reason, so far as she could see, to make anyone think that she was a noble woman. She was a lucky woman who had established a happy knack of writing what quite a lot of people wanted to read. Wonderful luck that was, Mrs. Oliver thought to herself.

Well, all things considered, she had got through this ordeal very well. She had quite enjoyed herself, talked to some nice people. Now they were moving to where coffee was being handed round and where you could change partners and chat with other people. This was the moment of danger, as Mrs. Oliver knew well. This was now where other women would come and attack her. Attack her with fulsome praise, and where she always felt lamentably inefficient at giving the right answers because there weren't really any right answers that you could give. It went really rather like a travel book for going abroad with the right phrases.

Question: “I must tell you how very fond I am of reading your books and how wonderful I think they are.”

Answer from flustered author, “Well, that's very kind. I am so glad.”

“You must understand that I've been waiting to meet you for months. It really is wonderful.”

“Oh, it's very nice of you. Very nice indeed.”

It went on very much like that. Neither of you seemed to be able to talk about anything of outside interest. It had to be all about your books, or the other woman's books if you knew what her books were. You were in the literary web and you weren't good at this sort of stuff. Some people could do it, but Mrs. Oliver was bitterly aware of not having the proper capacity. A foreign friend of hers had once put her, when she was staying at an embassy abroad, through a kind of course.

“I listen to you,” Albertina had said in her charming, low, foreign voice, “I have listened to what you say to that young man who came from the newspaper to interview you. You have not got—no! you have not got the pride you should have in your work. You should say ‘Yes, I write well. I write better than anyone else who writes detective stories.’ ”

“But I don't,” Mrs. Oliver had said at that moment. “I'm not bad, but—”

“Ah, do not say ‘I don't’ like that. You must say you do; even if you do not think you do, you ought to say you do.”

“I wish, Albertina,” said Mrs. Oliver, “that you could interview these journalists who come. You would do it so well. Can't you pretend to be me one day, and I'll listen behind the door?”

“Yes, I suppose I could do it. It would be rather fun. But they would know I was not you. They know your face. But you must say ‘Yes, yes, I know that I am better than anyone else.’ You must say that to everybody. They should know it. They should announce it. Oh yes—it is terrible to hear you sitting there and say things as though you apologize for what you are. It must not be like that.”

It had been rather, Mrs. Oliver thought, as though she had been a budding actress trying to learn a part, and the director had found her hopelessly bad at taking direction. Well, anyway, there’d be not much difficulty here. There’d be a few waiting females when they all got up from the table. In fact, she could see one or two hovering already. That wouldn’t matter much. She would go and smile and be nice and say “So kind of you. I’m so pleased. One is so glad to know people like one’s books.” All the stale old things. Rather as you put a hand into a box and took out some useful words already strung together like a necklace of beads. And then, before very long now, she could leave.

Her eyes went round the table because she might perhaps see some friends there as well as would-be admirers. Yes, she did see in the distance Maurine Grant, who was great fun. The moment came, the literary women and the attendant cavaliers who had also attended the lunch, rose. They streamed towards chairs, towards coffee tables, towards sofas, and confidential corners. The moment of peril, Mrs. Oliver often thought of it to herself, though usually at cocktail and not literary parties because she seldom went to the latter. At any moment the danger might arise, as someone whom you did not remember but who remembered you, or someone whom you definitely did not want to talk to but whom you found you could not avoid. In this case it was the first dilemma that came to her. A large woman. Ample proportions, large white champing teeth. What in French could have been called une femme formidable, but who definitely had not only the French variety of being formidable, but the English one of being supremely bossy. Obviously she either knew Mrs. Oliver, or was intent on making her acquaintance there and then. The last was how it happened to go.

“Oh, Mrs. Oliver,” she said in a high-pitched voice. “What a pleasure to meet you today. I have wanted to for so long. I simply adore your books. So does my son. And my husband used to insist on never travelling without at least two of your books. But come, do sit down. There are so many things I want to ask you about."

Oh well, thought Mrs. Oliver, not my favourite type of woman, this. But as well her as any other.

She allowed herself to be conducted in a firm way rather as a police officer might have done. She was taken to a settee for two across a corner, and her new friend accepted coffee and placed coffee before her also.

"There. Now we are settled. I don't suppose you know my name. I am Mrs. Burton-Cox."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Oliver, embarrassed, as usual. Mrs. Burton-Cox? Did she write books also? No, she couldn't really remember anything about her. But she seemed to have heard the name. A faint thought came to her. A book on politics, something like that? Not fiction, not fun, not crime. Perhaps a highbrow intellectual with political bias? That ought to be easy, Mrs. Oliver thought with relief. I can just let her talk and say "How interesting!" from time to time.

"You'll be very surprised, really, at what I'm going to say," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "But I have felt, from reading your books, how sympathetic you are, how much you understand of human nature. And I feel that if there is anyone who can give me an answer to the question I want to ask, you will be the one to do so."

"I don't think, really . . ." said Mrs. Oliver, trying to think of suitable words to say that she felt very uncertain of being able to rise to the heights demanded of her.

Mrs. Burton-Cox dipped a lump of sugar in her coffee and crunched it in a rather carnivorous way, as though it was a bone. Ivory teeth, perhaps, thought Mrs. Oliver vaguely. Ivory? Dogs had ivory, walruses had ivory and elephants had ivory, of course. Great big tusks of ivory. Mrs. Burton-Cox was saying:

"Now the first thing I must ask you—I'm pretty sure I am right, though—you have a goddaughter, haven't you? A goddaughter who's called Celia Ravenscroft?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Oliver, rather pleasurably surprised. She felt she could deal perhaps with a goddaughter. She had a good many goddaughters—and godsons, for that matter. There were times, she had to admit as the years were growing upon her, when she couldn't remember them all. She had done her duty in due course, one's duty being to send toys to your godchildren at Christmas in their early years, to visit them and their parents, or to have them visit you during the course of their upbringing, to take the boys out from school perhaps, and the girls also. And then, when the crowning days came, either the twenty-first birthday at which a godmother must do the right thing and let it be acknowledged to be done, and do it handsomely, or else marriage which entailed the same type of gift and a financial or other blessing. After that godchildren rather receded into the middle or far distance. They married or went abroad to foreign countries, foreign embassies, or taught in foreign schools or took up social projects. Anyway, they faded little by little out of your life. You were pleased to see them if they suddenly, as it were, floated up on the horizon again. But you had to remember to think when you had seen them last, whose daughters they were, what link had led to your being chosen as a godmother.

"Celia Ravenscroft," said Mrs. Oliver, doing her best. "Yes, yes, of course. Yes, definitely."

Not that any picture rose before her eyes of Celia Ravenscroft, not, that is, since a very early time. The christening. She'd gone to Celia's christening and had found a very nice Queen Anne silver strainer as a christening present. Very nice. Do nicely for straining milk and would also be the sort of thing a goddaughter could always sell for a nice little sum if she wanted ready money at any time. Yes, she remembered the strainer very well indeed. Queen Anne—Seventeen-eleven it had been. Britannia mark. How much easier it was to remember silver coffeepots or strainers or christening mugs than it was the actual child.

"Yes," she said, "yes, of course. I'm afraid I haven't seen Celia for a very long time now."

“Ah yes. She is, of course, a rather impulsive girl,” said Mrs. Burton-Cox. “I mean, she’s changed her ideas very often. Of course, very intellectual, did very well at university, but—her political notions—I suppose all young people have political notions nowadays.”

“I’m afraid I don’t deal much with politics,” said Mrs. Oliver, to whom politics had always been anathema.

“You see, I’m going to confide in you. I’m going to tell you exactly what it is I want to know. I’m sure you won’t mind. I’ve heard from so many people how kind you are, how willing always.”

I wonder if she’s going to try and borrow money from me, thought Mrs. Oliver, who had known many interviews that began with this kind of approach.

“You see, it is a matter of the greatest moment to me. Something that I really feel I must find out. Celia, you see, is going to marry—or thinks she is going to marry—my son, Desmond.”

“Oh, indeed!” said Mrs. Oliver.

“At least, that is their idea at present. Of course, one has to know about people, and there’s something I want very much to know. It’s an extraordinary thing to ask anyone and I couldn’t go—well, I mean, I couldn’t very well go and ask a stranger, but I don’t feel you are a stranger, dear Mrs. Oliver.”

Mrs. Oliver thought, I wish you did. She was getting nervous now. She wondered if Celia had had an illegitimate baby or was going to have an illegitimate baby, and whether she, Mrs. Oliver, was supposed to know about it and give details. That would be very awkward. On the other hand, thought Mrs. Oliver, I haven’t seen her now for five or six years and she must be about twenty-five or -six, so it would be quite easy to say I don’t know anything.

Mrs. Burton-Cox leaned forward and breathed hard.

“I want you to tell me because I’m sure you must know or perhaps have a very good idea how it all came about. Did her mother kill her father or was it the father who killed the mother?”

Whatever Mrs. Oliver had expected, it was certainly not that. She stared at Mrs. Burton-Cox unbelievingly.

“But I don’t—” She stopped. “I—I can’t understand. I mean—what reason —”

“Dear Mrs. Oliver, you must know . . . I mean, such a famous case . . . Of course, I know it’s a long time ago now, well, I suppose ten—twelve years at least, but it did cause a lot of attention at the time. I’m sure you’ll remember, you must remember.”

Mrs. Oliver’s brain was working desperately. Celia was her goddaughter. That was quite true. Celia’s mother—yes, of course. Celia’s mother had been Molly Preston-Grey, who had been a friend of hers, though not a particularly intimate one, and of course she had married a man in the Army, yes—what was his name—Sir Something Ravenscroft. Or was he an ambassador? Extraordinary, one couldn’t remember these things. She couldn’t even remember whether she herself had been Molly’s bridesmaid. She thought she had. Rather a smart wedding at the Guards Chapel or something like that. But one did forget so. And after that she hadn’t met them for years—they’d been out somewhere—in the Middle East? In Persia? In Iraq? One time in Egypt? Malaya? Very occasionally, when they had been visiting England, she met them again. But they’d been like one of those photographs that one takes and looks at. One knows the people vaguely who are in it but it’s so faded that you really can’t recognize them or remember who they were. And she couldn’t remember now whether Sir Something Ravenscroft and Lady Ravenscroft, born Molly Preston-Grey, had entered much into her life. She didn’t think so. But then . . . Mrs. Burton-Cox was still looking at her. Looking at her as though disappointed in her lack of savoir-faire, her inability to remember what had evidently been a cause célèbre.

“Killed? You mean—an accident?”

“Oh no. Not an accident. In one of those houses by the sea. Cornwall, I think. Somewhere where there were rocks. Anyway, they had a house down there. And they were both found on the cliff there and they’d been shot, you know. But there was nothing really by which the police could tell whether the wife shot the husband and then shot herself, or whether the husband shot the wife and then shot himself. They went into the evidence of the—you know—of the bullets and the various things, but it was very difficult. They thought it might be a suicide pact and—I forget what the verdict was. Something—it could have been misadventure or something like that. But of course everyone knew it must have been meant, and there were a lot of stories that went about, of course, at the time—”

“Probably all invented ones,” said Mrs. Oliver hopefully, trying to remember even one of the stories if she could.

“Well, maybe. Maybe. It’s very hard to say, I know. There were tales of a quarrel either that day or before, there was some talk of another man, and then of course there was the usual talk about some other woman. And one never knows which way it was about. I think things were hushed up a good deal because General Ravenscroft’s position was rather a high one, and I think it was said that he’d been in a nursing home that year, and he’d been very run down or something, and that he really didn’t know what he was doing.”

“I’m really afraid,” said Mrs. Oliver, speaking firmly, “that I must say that I don’t know anything about it. I do remember, now you mention it, that there was such a case, and I remember the names and that I knew the people, but I never knew what happened or anything at all about it. And I really don’t think I have the least idea. . . .”

And really, thought Mrs. Oliver, wishing she was brave enough to say it, how on earth you have the impertinence to ask me such a thing I don’t know.

“It’s very important that I should know,” Mrs. Burton-Cox said.

Her eyes, which were rather like hard marbles, started to snap.

"It's important, you see, because of my boy, my dear boy wanting to marry Celia."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," said Mrs. Oliver. "I've never heard anything."

"But you must know," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "I mean, you write these wonderful stories, you know all about crime. You know who commits crimes and why they do it, and I'm sure that all sorts of people will tell you the story behind the story, as one so much thinks of these things."

"I don't know anything," said Mrs. Oliver, in a voice which no longer held very much politeness, and definitely now spoke in tones of distaste.

"But you do see that really one doesn't know who to go to ask about it? I mean, one couldn't go to the police after all these years, and I don't suppose they'd tell you anyway because obviously they were trying to hush it up. But I feel it's important to get the truth."

"I only write books," said Mrs. Oliver coldly. "They are entirely fictional. I know nothing personally about crime and have no opinions on criminology. So I'm afraid I can't help you in any way."

"But you could ask your goddaughter. You could ask Celia."

"Ask Celia!" Mrs. Oliver stared again. "I don't see how I could do that. She was—why, I think she must have been quite a child when this tragedy happened."

"Oh, I expect she knew all about it, though," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "Children always know everything. And she'd tell you. I'm sure she'd tell you."

"You'd better ask her yourself, I should think," said Mrs. Oliver.

"I don't think I could really do that," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "I don't think, you know, that Desmond would like it. You know he's rather—well, he's rather touchy where Celia is concerned and I really don't think that—no—I'm sure she'd tell you."

“I really shouldn’t dream of asking her,” said Mrs. Oliver. She made a pretence of looking at her watch. “Oh dear,” she said, “what a long time we’ve been over this delightful lunch. I must run now, I have a very important appointment. Goodbye, Mrs.—er—Bedley-Cox, so sorry I can’t help you but these things are rather delicate and—does it really make any difference anyway, from your point of view?”

“Oh, I think it makes all the difference.”

At that moment, a literary figure whom Mrs. Oliver knew well drifted past. Mrs. Oliver jumped up to catch her by the arm.

“Louise, my dear, how lovely to see you. I hadn’t noticed you were here.”

“Oh, Ariadne, it’s a long time since I’ve seen you. You’ve grown a lot thinner, haven’t you?”

“What nice things you always say to me,” said Mrs. Oliver, engaging her friend by the arm and retreating from the settee. “I’m rushing away because I’ve got an appointment.”

“I suppose you got tied up with that awful woman, didn’t you?” said her friend, looking over her shoulder at Mrs. Burton-Cox.

“She was asking me the most extraordinary questions,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Oh. Didn’t you know how to answer them?”

“No. They weren’t any of my business anyway. I didn’t know anything about them. Anyway, I wouldn’t have wanted to answer them.”

“Was it about anything interesting?”

“I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver, letting a new idea come into her head. “I suppose it might be interesting, only—”

“She’s getting up to chase you,” said her friend. “Come along. I’ll see you get out and give you a lift to anywhere you want to go if you haven’t got your car here.”

“I never take my car about in London, it’s so awful to park.”

“I know it is. Absolutely deadly.”

Mrs. Oliver made the proper goodbyes. Thanks, words of greatly expressed pleasure, and presently was being driven round a London square.

“Eaton Terrace, isn’t it?” said the kindly friend.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but where I’ve got to go now is—I think it’s Whitefriars Mansions. I can’t quite remember the name of it, but I know where it is.”

“Oh, flats. Rather modern ones. Very square and geometrical.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Two

FIRST MENTION OF ELEPHANTS

Having failed to find her friend Hercule Poirot at home, Mrs. Oliver had to resort to a telephone enquiry.

“Are you by any chance going to be at home this evening?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

She sat by her telephone, her fingers tapping rather nervously on the table.

“Would that be—?”

“Ariadne Oliver,” said Mrs. Oliver, who was always surprised to find she had to give her name because she always expected all her friends to know her voice as soon as they heard it.

“Yes, I shall be at home all this evening. Does that mean that I may have the pleasure of a visit from you?”

“It’s very nice of you to put it that way,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t know that it will be such a pleasure.”

“It is always a pleasure to see you, chère Madame.”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I might be going to—well, bother you rather. Ask things. I want to know what you think about something.”

“That I am always ready to tell anyone,” said Poirot.

“Something’s come up,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Something tiresome and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“And so you will come and see me. I am flattered. Highly flattered.”

“What time would suit you?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Nine o’clock? We will drink coffee together, perhaps, unless you prefer a Grenadine or a Sirop de Cassis. But no, you do not like that. I remember.”

“George,” said Poirot, to his invaluable manservant, “we are to receive tonight the pleasure of a visit from Mrs. Oliver. Coffee, I think, and perhaps a liqueur of some kind. I am never sure what she likes.”

“I have seen her drink kirsch, sir.”

“And also, I think, crème de menthe. But kirsch, I think, is what she prefers. Very well then,” said Poirot. “So be it.”

Mrs. Oliver came punctual to time. Poirot had been wondering, while eating his dinner, what it was that was driving Mrs. Oliver to visit him, and why she was so doubtful about what she was doing. Was she bringing him some difficult problem, or was she acquainting him with a crime? As Poirot knew well, it could be anything with Mrs. Oliver. The most commonplace things or the most extraordinary things. They were, as you might say, all alike to her. She was worried, he thought. Ah well, Hercule Poirot thought to himself, he could deal with Mrs. Oliver. He always had been able to deal with Mrs. Oliver. On occasion she maddened him. At the same time he was really very much attached to her. They had shared many experiences and experiments together. He had read something about her in the paper only that morning—or was it the evening paper? He must try and remember it before she came. He had just done so when she was announced.

She came into the room and Poirot deduced at once that his diagnosis of worry was true enough. Her hairdo, which was fairly elaborate, had been ruffled by the fact that she had been running her fingers through it in the frenzied and feverish way that she did sometimes. He received her with every sign of pleasure, established her in a chair, poured her some coffee and handed her a glass of kirsch.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Oliver, with the sigh of someone who has relief. “I expect you’re going to think I’m awfully silly, but still. . . .”

“I see, or rather, I saw in the paper that you were attending a literary luncheon today. Famous women writers. Something of that kind. I thought you never did that kind of thing.”

“I don’t usually,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and I shan’t ever do it again.”

“Ah. You suffered much?” Poirot was quite sympathetic.

He knew Mrs. Oliver’s embarrassing moments. Extravagant praise of her books always upset her highly because, as she had once told him, she never knew the proper answers.

“You did not enjoy it?”

“Up to a point I did,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and then something very tiresome happened.”

“Ah. And that is what you have come to see me about.”

“Yes, but I really don’t know why. I mean, it’s nothing to do with you and I don’t think it’s the sort of thing you’d even be interested in. And I’m not really interested in it. At least, I suppose I must be or I wouldn’t have wanted to come to you to know what you thought. To know what—well, what you’d do if you were me.”

“That is a very difficult question, that last one,” said Poirot. “I know how I, Hercule Poirot, would act in anything, but I do not know how you would act, well though I know you.”

“You must have some idea by this time,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You’ve known me long enough.”

“About what—twenty years now?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I can never remember what years are, what dates are. You know, I get mixed up. I know 1939 because that’s when the war started and I know other dates because of queer things, here and there.”

"Anyway, you went to your literary luncheon. And you did not enjoy it very much."

"I enjoyed the lunch but it was afterwards. . . ."

"People said things to you," said Poirot, with the kindliness of a doctor demanding symptoms.

"Well, they were just getting ready to say things to me. Suddenly one of those large, bossy women who always manage to dominate everyone and who can make you feel more uncomfortable than anyone else, descended on me. You know, like somebody who catches a butterfly or something, only she'd have needed a butterfly net. She sort of rounded me up and pushed me onto a settee and then she began to talk to me, starting about a goddaughter of mine."

"Ah yes. A goddaughter you are fond of?"

"I haven't seen her for a good many years," said Mrs. Oliver, "I can't keep up with all of them, I mean. And then she asked me a most worrying question. She wanted me—oh dear, how very difficult it is for me to tell this—"

"No, it isn't," said Poirot kindly. "It is quite easy. Everyone tells everything to me sooner or later. I'm only a foreigner, you see, so it does not matter. It is easy because I am a foreigner."

"Well, it is rather easy to say things to you," said Mrs. Oliver. "You see, she asked me about the girl's father and mother. She asked me whether her mother had killed her father or her father had killed her mother."

"I beg your pardon," said Poirot.

"Oh, I know it sounds mad. Well, I thought it was mad."

"Whether your goddaughter's mother had killed her father, or whether her father had killed her mother."

"That's right," said Mrs. Oliver.

"But—was that a matter of fact? Had her father killed her mother or her mother killed her father?"

"Well, they were both found shot," said Mrs. Oliver. "On the top of a cliff. I can't remember if it was in Cornwall or in Corsica. Something like that."

"Then it was true, then, what she said?"

"Oh yes, that part of it was true. It happened years ago. Well, but I mean—why come to me?"

"All because you were a crime writer," said Poirot. "She no doubt said you knew all about crime. This was a real thing that happened?"

"Oh yes. It wasn't something like what would A do—or what would be the proper procedure if your mother had killed your father or your father had killed your mother. No, it was something that really happened. I suppose really I'd better tell you all about it. I mean, I can't remember all about it but it was quite well known at the time. It was about—oh, I should think it was about twelve years ago at least. And, as I say, I can remember the names of the people because I did know them. The wife had been at school with me and I'd known her quite well. We'd been friends. It was a well-known case—you know, it was in all the papers and things like that. Sir Alistair Ravenscroft and Lady Ravenscroft. A very happy couple and he was a colonel or a general and she'd been with him and they'd been all over the world. Then they bought this house somewhere—I think it was abroad but I can't remember. And then there were suddenly accounts of this case in the papers. Whether somebody else had killed them or whether they'd been assassinated or something, or whether they killed each other. I think it was a revolver that had been in the house for ages and—well, I'd better tell you as much as I can remember."

Pulling herself slightly together, Mrs. Oliver managed to give Poirot a more or less clear résumé of what she had been told. Poirot from time to time checked on a point here or there.

"But why?" he said finally, "why should this woman want to know this?"

“Well, that’s what I want to find out,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I could get hold of Celia, I think. I mean, she still lives in London. Or perhaps it’s Cambridge she lives in, or Oxford—I think she’s got a degree and either lectures here or teaches somewhere, or does something like that. And—very modern, you know. Goes about with long-haired people in queer clothes. I don’t think she takes drugs. She’s quite all right and—just very occasionally I hear from her. I mean, she sends a card at Christmas and things like that. Well, one doesn’t think of one’s godchildren all the time, and she’s quite twenty-five or -six.”

“Not married?”

“No. Apparently she is going to marry—or that is the idea—Mrs.—What’s the name of that woman again?—oh yes, Mrs. Brittle—no—Burton-Cox’s son.”

“And Mrs. Burton-Cox does not want her son to marry this girl because her father killed her mother or her mother killed her father?”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s the only thing I can think. But what does it matter which? If one of your parents killed the other, would it really matter to the mother of the boy you were going to marry, which way round it was?”

“That is a thing one might have to think about,” said Poirot. “It is—yes, you know it is quite interesting. I do not mean it is very interesting about Sir Alistair Ravenscroft or Lady Ravenscroft. I seem to remember vaguely—oh, some case like this one, or it might not have been the same one. But it is very strange about Mrs. Burton-Cox. Perhaps she is a bit touched in the head. Is she very fond of her son?”

“Probably,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Probably she doesn’t want him to marry this girl at all.”

“Because she may have inherited a predisposition to murder the man she marries—or something of that kind?”

"How do I know?" said Mrs. Oliver. "She seems to think that I can tell her, and she's really not told me enough, has she? But why, do you think? What's behind it all? What does it mean?"

"It would be almost interesting to find out," said Poirot.

"Well, that's why I've come to you," said Mrs. Oliver. "You like finding out things. Things that you can't see the reason for at first. I mean, that nobody can see the reason for."

"Do you think Mrs. Burton-Cox has any preference?" said Poirot.

"You mean that she'd rather the husband killed the wife, or the wife killed the husband? I don't think so."

"Well," said Poirot, "I see your dilemma. It is very intriguing. You come home from a party. You've been asked to do something that is very difficult, almost impossible, and—you wonder what is the proper way to deal with such a thing."

"Well, what would you think is the proper way?" said Mrs. Oliver.

"It is not easy for me to say," said Poirot. "I'm not a woman. A woman whom you do not really know, whom you had met at a party, has put this problem to you, asked you to do it, giving no discernible reason."

"Right," said Mrs. Oliver. "Now what does Ariadne do? What does A do, in other words, if you were reading this as a problem in a newspaper?"

"Well, I suppose," said Poirot, "there are three things that A could do. A could write a note to Mrs. Burton-Cox and say, 'I'm very sorry but I really feel I cannot oblige you in this matter,' or whatever words you like to put. B. You get into touch with your goddaughter and you tell her what has been asked of you by the mother of the boy, or the young man, or whatever he is, whom she is thinking of marrying. You will find out from her if she is really thinking of marrying this young man. If so, whether she has any idea or whether the young man has said anything to her about what his mother has got in her head. And there will be other interesting points, like finding out what this girl thinks of the mother of the young man she wants to marry. The third thing you could do," said Poirot, "and this really is what I firmly advise you to do, is . . ."

"I know," said Mrs. Oliver, "one word."

"Nothing," said Poirot.

"Exactly," said Mrs. Oliver. "I know that is the simple and proper thing to do. Nothing. It's darned cheek to go and tell a girl who's my goddaughter what her future mother-in-law is going about saying, and asking people. But —"

"I know," said Poirot, "it is human curiosity."

"I want to know why that odious woman came and said what she did to me," said Mrs. Oliver. "Once I know that I could relax and forget all about it. But until I know that. . . ."

"Yes," said Poirot, "you won't sleep. You'll wake up in the night and, if I know you, you will have the most extraordinary and extravagant ideas which presently, probably, you will be able to make into a most attractive crime story. A whodunit—a thriller. All sorts of things."

"Well, I suppose I could if I thought of it that way," said Mrs. Oliver. Her eyes flashed slightly.

"Leave it alone," said Poirot. "It will be a very difficult plot to undertake. It seems as though there could be no good reason for this."

"But I'd like to make sure that there is no good reason."

"Human curiosity," said Poirot. "Such a very interesting thing." He sighed. "To think what we owe to it throughout history. Curiosity. I don't know who invented curiosity. It is said to be usually associated with the cat. Curiosity killed the cat. But I should say really that the Greeks were the inventors of curiosity. They wanted to know. Before them, as far as I can see, nobody wanted to know much. They just wanted to know what the rules of the country they were living in were, and how they could avoid having their heads cut off or being impaled on spikes or something disagreeable happening to them. But they either obeyed or disobeyed. They didn’t want to know why. But since then a lot of people have wanted to know why and all sorts of things have happened because of that. Boats, trains, flying machines and atom bombs and penicillin and cures for various illnesses. A little boy watches his mother’s kettle raising its lid because of the steam. And the next thing we know is we have railway trains, leading on in due course to railway strikes and all that. And so on and so on.”

“Just tell me,” said Mrs. Oliver, “do you think I’m a terrible nosey parker?”

“No, I don’t,” said Poirot. “On the whole I don’t think you are a woman of great curiosity. But I can quite see you getting in a het-up state at a literary party, busy defending yourself against too much kindness, too much praise. You ran yourself instead into a very awkward dilemma, and took a very strong dislike to the person who ran you into it.”

“Yes. She’s a very tiresome woman, a very disagreeable woman.”

“This murder in the past of this husband and wife who were supposed to get on well together and no apparent signs of a quarrel was known. One never really read about any cause for it, according to you?”

“They were shot. Yes, they were shot. It could have been a suicide pact. I think the police thought it was at first. Of course, one can’t find out about things all those years afterwards.”

“Oh yes,” said Poirot, “I think I could find out something about it.”

“You mean—through the exciting friends you’ve got?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say the exciting friends, perhaps. Certainly there are knowledgeable friends, friends who could get certain records, look up the accounts that were given of the crime at the time, some access I could get to certain records.”

“You could find out things,” said Mrs. Oliver hopefully, “and then tell me.”

"Yes," said Poirot, "I think I could help you to know at any rate the full facts of the case. It'll take a little time, though."

"I can see that if you do that, which is what I want you to do, I've got to do something myself. I'll have to see the girl. I've got to see whether she knows anything about all this, ask her if she'd like me to give her mother-in-law-to-be a raspberry or whether there is any other way in which I can help her. And I'd like to see the boy she's going to marry, too."

"Quite right," said Poirot. "Excellent."

"And I suppose," said Mrs. Oliver, "there might be people—" She broke off, frowning.

"I don't suppose people will be very much good," said Hercule Poirot. "This is an affair of the past. A cause célèbre perhaps at the time. But what is a cause célèbre when you come to think of it? Unless it comes to an astonishing dénouement, which this one didn't. Nobody remembers it."

"No," said Mrs. Oliver, "that is quite true. There was a lot about it in the papers and mentions of it for some time, and then it just—faded out. Well, like things do now. Like that girl, the other day. You know, who left her home and they couldn't find her anywhere. Well, I mean, that was five or six years ago and then suddenly a little boy, playing about in a sand heap or a gravel pit or something, suddenly came across her dead body. Five or six years later."

"That is true," said Poirot. "And it is true that knowing from that body how long it is since death and what happened on the particular day and going back over various events of which there is a written record, one may in the end turn up a murderer. But it will be more difficult in your problem since it seems the answer must be one of two things: that the husband disliked his wife and wanted to get rid of her, or that the wife hated her husband or else had a lover. Therefore, it might have been a passionate crime or something quite different. Anyway, there would be nothing, as it were, to find out about it. If the police could not find out at the time, then the motive must have been a difficult one, not easy to see. Therefore it has remained a nine days' wonder, that is all."

"I suppose I can go to the daughter. Perhaps that is what that odious woman was getting me to do—wanted me to do. She thought the daughter knew—well, the daughter might have known," said Mrs. Oliver. "Children do, you know. They know the most extraordinary things."

"Have you any idea how old this goddaughter of yours would have been at the time?"

"Well, I have if I reckon it up, but I can't say offhand. I think she might have been nine or ten, but perhaps older, I don't know. I think that she was away at school at the time. But that may be just my fancy, remembering back what I read."

"But you think Mrs. Burton-Cox's wish was to make you get information from the daughter? Perhaps the daughter knows something, perhaps she said something to the son, and the son said something to his mother. I expect Mrs. Burton-Cox tried to question the girl herself and got rebuffed, but thought the famous Mrs. Oliver, being both a godmother and also full of criminal knowledge, might obtain information. Though why it should matter to her, I still don't see," said Poirot. "And it does not seem to me that what you call vaguely 'people' can help after all this time." He added, "Would anybody remember?"

"Well, that's where I think they might," said Mrs. Oliver.

"You surprise me," said Poirot, looking at her with a somewhat puzzled face. "Do people remember?"

"Well," said Mrs. Oliver, "I was really thinking of elephants."

"Elephants?"

As he had thought often before, Poirot thought that really Mrs. Oliver was the most unaccountable woman. Why suddenly elephants?

"I was thinking of elephants at the lunch yesterday," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Why were you thinking of elephants?" said Poirot, with some curiosity.

“Well, I was really thinking of teeth. You know, things one tries to eat, and if you’ve got some sort of false teeth—well, you can’t do it very well. You know, you’ve got to know what you can eat and what you can’t.”

“Ah!” said Poirot, with a deep sigh. “Yes, yes. The dentists, they can do much for you, but not everything.”

“Quite so. And then I thought of—you know—our teeth being only bone and so not awfully good, and how nice it would be to be a dog, who has real ivory teeth. And then I thought of anyone else who has ivory teeth, and I thought about walruses and—oh, other things like that. And I thought about elephants. Of course when you think of ivory you do think of elephants, don’t you? Great big elephant tusks.”

“That is very true,” said Poirot, still not seeing the point of what Mrs. Oliver was saying.

“So I thought that what we’ve really got to do is to get at the people who are like elephants. Because elephants, so they say, don’t forget.”

“I have heard the phrase, yes,” said Poirot.

“Elephants don’t forget,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You know, a story children get brought up on? How someone, an Indian tailor, stuck a needle or something in an elephant’s tusk. No. Not a tusk, his trunk, of course, an elephant’s trunk. And the next time the elephant came past he had a great mouthful of water and he splashed it out all over the tailor though he hadn’t seen him for several years. He hadn’t forgotten. He remembered. That’s the point, you see. Elephants remember. What I’ve got to do is—I’ve got to get in touch with some elephants.”

“I do not know yet if I quite see what you mean,” said Hercule Poirot. “Who are you classifying as elephants? You sound as though you were going for information to the Zoo.”

“Well, it’s not exactly like that,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Not elephants, as elephants, but the way people up to a point would resemble elephants. There are some people who do remember. In fact, one does remember queer things, I mean there are a lot of things that I remember very well. They happened—I remember a birthday party I had when I was five, and a pink cake—a lovely pink cake. It had a sugar bird on it. And I remember the day my canary flew away and I cried. And I remember another day when I went into a field and there was a bull there and somebody said it would gore me, and I was terrified and wanted to run out of the field. Well, I remember that quite well. It was a Tuesday too. I don't know why I should remember it was a Tuesday, but it was a Tuesday. And I remember a wonderful picnic with blackberries. I remember getting pricked terribly, but getting more blackberries than anyone else. It was wonderful! By that time I was nine, I think. But one needn't go back as far as that. I mean, I've been to hundreds of weddings in my life, but when I look back on a wedding there are only two that I remember particularly. One where I was a bridesmaid. It took place in the New Forest, I remember, and I can't remember who was there actually. I think it was a cousin of mine getting married. I didn't know her very well but she wanted a good many bridesmaids and, well, I came in handy, I suppose. But I know another wedding. That was a friend of mine in the Navy. He was nearly drowned in a submarine, and then he was saved, and then the girl he was engaged to, her people didn't want her to marry him but then he did marry her after that and I was one of her bridesmaids at the marriage. Well, I mean, there's always things you do remember."

"I see your point," said Poirot. "I find it interesting. So you will go à la recherche des éléphants?"

"That's right. I'd have to get the date right."

"There," said Poirot, "I hope I may be able to help you."

"And then I'll think of people I knew about at that time, people that I may have known who also knew the same friends that I did, who probably knew General What-not. People who may have known them abroad, but whom I also knew although I mayn't have seen them for a good many years. You can look up people, you know, that you haven't seen for a long time. Because people are always quite pleased to see someone coming up out of the past, even if they can't remember very much about you. And then you naturally will talk about the things that were happening at that date, that you remember about."

“Very interesting,” said Poirot. “I think you are very well equipped for what you propose to do. People who knew the Ravenscrofts either well or not very well; people who lived in the same part of the world where the things happened or who might have been staying there. More difficult, but I think one could get at it. And so, somehow or other one would try different things. Start a little talk going about what happened, what they think happened, what anyone else has ever told you about what might have happened. About any love affairs the husband or wife had, about any money that somebody might have inherited. I think you could scratch up a lot of things.”

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I’m afraid really I’m just a nosey parker.”

“You’ve been given an assignment,” said Poirot, “not by someone you like, not by someone you wish to oblige, but someone you entirely dislike. That does not matter. You are still on a quest, a quest of knowledge. You take your own path. It is the path of the elephants. The elephants may remember. Bon voyage,” said Poirot.

“I beg your pardon,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I’m sending you forth on your voyage of discovery,” said Poirot. “À la recherche des éléphants.”

“I expect I’m mad,” said Mrs. Oliver sadly. She brushed her hands through her hair again so that she looked like the old picture books of Struwelpeter. “I was just thinking of starting a story about a golden retriever. But it wasn’t going well. I couldn’t get started, if you know what I mean.”

“All right, abandon the golden retriever. Concern yourself only with elephants.”

BOOK ONE

ELEPHANTS

Three

GREAT AUNT ALICE’S GUIDE TO KNOWLEDGE

“Can you find my address book for me, Miss Livingstone?”

“It’s on your desk, Mrs. Oliver. In the left-hand corner.”

“I don’t mean that one,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That’s the one I’m using now. I mean my last one. The one I had last year, or perhaps the one before that again.”

“Has it been thrown away, perhaps?” suggested Miss Livingstone.

“No, I don’t throw away address books and things like that because so often you want one. I mean some address that you haven’t copied into the new one. I expect it may be in one of the drawers of the tallboys.”

Miss Livingstone was a fairly new arrival, replacing Miss Sedgwick. Ariadne Oliver missed Miss Sedgwick. Sedgwick knew so many things. She knew the places where Mrs. Oliver sometimes put things, the kind of places Mrs. Oliver kept things in. She remembered the names of people Mrs. Oliver had written nice letters to, and the names of people that Mrs. Oliver, goaded beyond endurance, had written rather rude things to. She was invaluable, or rather, had been invaluable. “She was like—what was the book called?” Mrs. Oliver said, casting her mind back. “Oh yes, I know—a big brown book. All Victorians had it. Enquire Within Upon Everything. And you could too! How to take iron mark stains off linen, how to deal with curdled mayonnaise, how to start a chatty letter to a bishop. Many, many things. It was all there in Enquire Within Upon Everything.” Great Aunt Alice’s great standby.

Miss Sedgwick had been just as good as Aunt Alice’s book. Miss Livingstone was not at all the same thing. Miss Livingstone stood there always, very long-faced with a sallow skin, looking purposefully efficient.

Every line of her face said “I am very efficient.” But she wasn’t really, Mrs. Oliver thought. She only knew all the places where former literary employers of hers had kept things and where she clearly considered Mrs. Oliver ought to keep them.

“What I want,” said Mrs. Oliver, with firmness and the determination of a spoilt child, “is my 1970 address book. And I think 1969 as well. Please look for it as quick as you can, will you?”

“Of course, of course,” said Miss Livingstone.

She looked round her with the rather vacant expression of someone who is looking for something she has never heard of before but which efficiency may be able to produce by some unexpected turn of luck.

If I don’t get Sedgwick back, I shall go mad, thought Mrs. Oliver to herself. I can’t deal with this thing if I don’t have Sedgwick.

Miss Livingstone started pulling open various drawers in the furniture in Mrs. Oliver’s so-called study and writing room.

“Here is last year’s,” said Miss Livingstone happily. “That will be much more up-to-date, won’t it? 1971.”

“I don’t want 1971,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Vague thoughts and memories came to her.

“Look in that tea caddy table,” she said.

Miss Livingstone looked round, looking worried.

“That table,” said Mrs. Oliver, pointing.

“A desk book wouldn’t be likely to be in a tea caddy,” said Miss Livingstone, pointing out to her employer the general facts of life.

“Yes, it could,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I seem to remember.”

Edging Miss Livingstone aside, she went to the tea caddy table, raised the lid, looked at the attractive inlaid work inside. “And it is here,” said Mrs. Oliver, raising the lid of a papier-mâché round canister, devised to contain Lapsang Souchong as opposed to Indian tea, and taking out a curled up small brown notebook.

“Here it is,” she said.

“That’s only 1968, Mrs. Oliver. Four years ago.”

“That’s about right,” said Mrs. Oliver, seizing it and taking it back to the desk. “That’s all for the present, Miss Livingstone, but you might see if you can find my birthday book somewhere.”

“I didn’t know. . . .”

“I don’t use it now,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but I used to have one once. Quite a big one, you know. Started when I was a child. Goes on for years. I expect it’ll be in the attic upstairs. You know, the one we use as a spare room sometimes when it’s only boys coming for holidays, or people who don’t mind. The sort of chest or bureau thing next to the bed.”

“Oh. Shall I look and see?”

“That’s the idea,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She cheered up a little as Miss Livingstone went out of the room. Mrs. Oliver shut the door firmly behind her, went back to the desk and started looking down the addresses written in faded ink and smelling of tea.

“Ravenscroft. Celia Ravenscroft. Yes. 14 Fishacre Mews, S.W.3. That’s the Chelsea address. She was living there then. But there was another one after that. Somewhere like Strand-on-the-Green near Kew Bridge.”

She turned a few more pages.

“Oh yes, this seems to be a later one. Mardyke Grove. That’s off Fulham Road, I think. Somewhere like that. Has she got a telephone number? It’s very rubbed out, but I think—yes, I think that's right—Flaxman . . . Anyway, I'll try it."

She went across to the telephone. The door opened and Miss Livingstone looked in.

"Do you think that perhaps—"

"I found the address I want," said Mrs. Oliver. "Go on looking for that birthday book. It's important."

"Do you think you could have left it when you were in Sealy House?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Oliver. "Go on looking."

She murmured, as the door closed, "Be as long as you like about it."

She dialled the telephone and waited, opening the door to call up the stairs: "You might try that Spanish chest. You know, the one that's bound with brass. I've forgotten where it is now. Under the table in the hall, I think."

Mrs. Oliver's first dialling was not successful. She appeared to have connected herself to a Mrs. Smith Potter, who seemed both annoyed and unhelpful and had no idea what the present telephone number might be of anyone who had lived in that particular flat before.

Mrs. Oliver applied herself to an examination of the address book once more. She discovered two more addresses which were hastily scrawled over other numbers and did not seem wildly helpful. However, at the third attempt a somewhat illegible Ravenscroft seemed to emerge from the crossings out and initials and addresses.

A voice admitted to knowing Celia.

"Oh dear, yes. But she hasn't lived here for years. I think she was in Newcastle when I last heard from her."

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Oliver, "I'm afraid I haven't got that address."

"No, I haven't got it either," said the kindly girl. "I think she went to be secretary to a veterinary surgeon."

It did not sound very hopeful. Mrs. Oliver tried once or twice more. The addresses in the latest of her two address books were no use, so she went back a bit further. She struck oil, as you might put it, when she came to the last one, which was for the year 1967.

"Oh, you mean Celia," said a voice. "Celia Ravenscroft, wasn't it? Or was it Finchwell?"

Mrs. Oliver just prevented herself in time from saying, "No, and it wasn't redbreast either."

"A very competent girl," said the voice. "She worked for me for over a year and a half. Oh yes, very competent. I would have been quite happy if she had stayed longer. I think she went from here to somewhere in Harley Street, but I think I've got her address somewhere. Now let me see." There was a long pause while Mrs. X—name unknown—was seeing. "I've got one address here. It seems to be in Islington somewhere. Do you think that's possible?"

Mrs. Oliver said that anything was possible and thanked Mrs. X very much and wrote it down.

"So difficult, isn't it, trying to find people's addresses. They do send them to you usually. You know, a sort of postcard or something of that kind. Personally I always seem to lose it."

Mrs. Oliver said that she herself also suffered in this respect. She tried the Islington number. A heavy, foreign voice replied to her.

"You want, yes—you tell me what? Yes, who live here?"

"Miss Celia Ravenscroft?"

"Oh yes, that is very true. Yes, yes she lives here. She has a room on the second floor. She is out now and she not come home."

“Will she be in later this evening?”

“Oh, she be home very soon now, I think, because she come home to dress for party and go out.”

Mrs. Oliver thanked her for the information and rang off.

“Really,” said Mrs. Oliver to herself, with some annoyance, “girls!”

She tried to think how long it was since she had last seen her goddaughter, Celia. One lost touch. That was the whole point. Celia, she thought, was in London now. If her boyfriend was in London, or if the mother of her boyfriend was in London—all of it went together. Oh dear, thought Mrs. Oliver, this really makes my head ache. “Yes, Miss Livingstone?” she turned her head.

Miss Livingstone, looking rather unlike herself and decorated with a good many cobwebs and a general coating of dust, stood looking annoyed in the doorway holding a pile of dusty volumes.

“I don’t know whether any of these things will be any use to you, Mrs. Oliver. They seem to go back for a great many years.” She was disapproving.

“Bound to,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I don’t know if there’s anything particular you want me to search for.”

“I don’t think so,” said Mrs. Oliver, “if you’ll just put them on the corner of the sofa there I can look at them this evening.”

Miss Livingstone, looking more disapproving every moment, said, “Very good, Mrs. Oliver. I think I will just dust them first.”

“That will be very kind of you,” said Mrs. Oliver, just stopping herself in time from saying—“and for goodness’ sake dust yourself as well. You’ve got six cobwebs in your left ear.”

She glanced at her watch and rang the Islington number again. The voice that answered this time was purely Anglo-Saxon and had a crisp sharpness about it that Mrs. Oliver felt was rather satisfactory.

“Miss Ravenscroft?—Celia Ravenscroft?”

“Yes, this is Celia Ravenscroft.”

“Well, I don’t expect you’ll remember me very well. I’m Mrs. Oliver. Ariadne Oliver. We haven’t seen each other for a long time, but actually I’m your godmother.”

“Oh yes, of course. I know that. No, we haven’t seen each other for a long time.”

“I wonder very much if I could see you, if you could come and see me, or whatever you like. Would you like to come to a meal or . . .”

“Well, it’s rather difficult at present, where I’m working. I could come round this evening, if you like. About half past seven or eight. I’ve got a date later but. . . .”

“If you do that I shall be very, very pleased,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Well, of course I will.”

“I’ll give you the address.” Mrs. Oliver gave it.

“Good. I’ll be there. Yes, I know where that is, quite well.”

Mrs. Oliver made a brief note on the telephone pad, and looked with some annoyance at Miss Livingstone, who had just come into the room struggling under the weight of a large album.

“I wondered if this could possibly be it, Mrs. Oliver?”

“No, it couldn’t,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That’s got cookery recipes in it.”

“Oh dear,” said Miss Livingstone, “so it has.”

"Well, I might as well look at some of them anyway," said Mrs. Oliver, removing the volume firmly. "Go and have another look. You know, I've thought about the linen cupboard. Next door to the bathroom. You'd have to look on the top shelf above the bath towels. I do sometimes stick papers and books in there. Wait a minute. I'll come up and look myself."

Ten minutes later Mrs. Oliver was looking through the pages of a faded album. Miss Livingstone, having entered her final stage of martyrdom, was standing by the door. Unable to bear the sight of so much suffering, Mrs. Oliver said,

"Well, that's all right. You might just take a look in the desk in the dining room. The old desk. You know, the one that's broken a bit. See if you can find some more address books. Early ones. Anything up to about ten years old will be worth while having a look at. And after that," said Mrs. Oliver, "I don't think I shall want anything more today."

Miss Livingstone departed.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Oliver to herself, releasing a deep sigh as she sat down. She looked through the pages of the birthday book. "Who's better pleased? She to go or I to see her go? After Celia has come and gone, I shall have to have a busy evening."

Taking a new exercise book from the pile she kept on a small table by her desk, she entered various dates, possible addresses and names, looked up one or two more things in the telephone book and then proceeded to ring up Monsieur Hercule Poirot.

"Ah, is that you, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Yes, madame, it is I myself."

"Have you done anything?" said Mrs. Oliver.

"I beg your pardon—have I done what?"

"Anything," said Mrs. Oliver. "What I asked you about yesterday."

"Yes, certainly. I have put things in motion. I have arranged to make certain enquiries."

"But you haven't made them yet," said Mrs. Oliver, who had a poor view of what the male view was of doing something.

"And you, chère madame?"

"I have been very busy," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Ah! And what have you been doing, madame?"

"Assembling elephants," said Mrs. Oliver, "if that means anything to you."

"I think I can understand what you mean, yes."

"It's not very easy, looking into the past," said Mrs. Oliver. "It is astonishing, really, how many people one does remember when one comes to look up names. My word, the silly things they write in birthday books sometimes, too. I can't think why when I was about sixteen or seventeen or even thirty, I wanted people to write in my birthday book. There's a sort of quotation from a poet for every particular day in the year. Some of them are terribly silly."

"You are encouraged in your search?"

"Not quite encouraged," said Mrs. Oliver. "But I still think I'm on the right lines. I've rung up my goddaughter—"

"Ah. And you are going to see her?"

"Yes, she is coming to see me. Tonight between seven and eight, if she doesn't run out on me. One never knows. Young people are very unreliable."

"She appeared pleased that you had rung her up?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Oliver, "not particularly pleased. She's got a very incisive voice and—I remember now, the last time I saw her, that must be about six years ago, I thought then that she was rather frightening."

"Frightening? In what way?"

"What I mean is that she was more likely to bully me than I would be to bully her."

"That may be a good thing and not a bad thing."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"If people have made up their minds that they do not wish to like you, that they are quite sure they do not like you, they will get more pleasure out of making you aware of the fact and in that way will release more information to you than they would have done if they were trying to be amiable and agreeable."

"Sucking up to me, you mean? Yes, you have something there. You mean then they tell you things that they thought would please you. And the other way they'd be annoyed with you and they'd say things that they'd hope would annoy you. I wonder if Celia's like that? I really remember her much better when she was five years old than at any other age. She had a nursery governess and she used to throw her boots at her."

"The governess at the child, or the child at the governess?"

"The child at the governess, of course!" said Mrs. Oliver.

She replaced the receiver and went over to the sofa to examine the various piled-up memories of the past. She murmured names under her breath.

"Mariana Josephine Pontarlier—of course, yes, I haven't thought of her for years—I thought she was dead. Anna Braceby—yes, yes, she lived in that part of the world—I wonder now—"

Continuing all this, time passed—she was quite surprised when the bell rang. She went out herself to open the door.

Four

CELIA

A tall girl was standing on the mat outside. Just for a moment Mrs. Oliver was startled looking at her. So this was Celia. The impression of vitality and of life was really very strong. Mrs. Oliver had the feeling which one does not often get.

Here, she thought, was someone who meant something. Aggressive, perhaps, could be difficult, could be almost dangerous perhaps. One of those girls who had a mission in life, who was dedicated to violence, perhaps, who went in for causes. But interesting. Definitely interesting.

“Come in, Celia,” she said. “It’s such a long time since I saw you. The last time, as far as I remember, was at a wedding. You were a bridesmaid. You wore apricot chiffon, I remember, and large bunches of—I can’t remember what it was, something that looked like Golden Rod.”

“Probably was Golden Rod,” said Celia Ravenscroft. “We sneezed a lot—with hay fever. It was a terrible wedding. I know. Martha Leghorn, wasn’t it? Ugliest bridesmaids’ dresses I’ve ever seen. Certainly the ugliest I’ve ever worn!”

“Yes. They weren’t very becoming to anybody. You looked better than most, if I may say so.”

“Well, it’s nice of you to say that,” said Celia. “I didn’t feel my best.”

Mrs. Oliver indicated a chair and manipulated a couple of decanters.

“Like sherry or something else?”

“No. I’d like sherry.”

“There you are, then. I suppose it seems rather odd to you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “My ringing you up suddenly like this.”

“Oh no, I don’t know that it does particularly.”

“I’m not a very conscientious godmother, I’m afraid.”

“Why should you be, at my age?”

“You’re right there,” said Mrs. Oliver. “One’s duties, one feels, end at a certain time. Not that I ever really fulfilled mine. I don’t remember coming to your Confirmation.”

“I believe the duty of a godmother is to make you learn your catechism and a few things like that, isn’t it? Renounce the devil and all his works in my name,” said Celia. A faint, humorous smile came to her lips.

She was being very amiable but all the same, thought Mrs. Oliver, she’s rather a dangerous girl in some ways.

“Well, I’ll tell you why I’ve been trying to get hold of you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “The whole thing is rather peculiar. I don’t often go out to literary parties, but as it happened I did go out to one the day before yesterday.”

“Yes, I know,” said Celia. “I saw mention of it in the paper, and you had your name in it, too, Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, and I rather wondered because I know you don’t usually go to that sort of thing.”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I rather wish I hadn’t gone to that one.”

“Didn’t you enjoy it?”

“Yes, I did in a way because I hadn’t been to one before. And so—well, the first time there’s always something that amuses you. But,” she added, “there’s usually something that annoys you as well.”

“And something happened to annoy you?”

“Yes. And it’s connected in an odd sort of way with you. And I thought—well, I thought I ought to tell you about it because I didn’t like what happened. I didn’t like it at all.”

“Sounds intriguing,” said Celia, and sipped her sherry.

“There was a woman there who came and spoke to me. I didn’t know her and she didn’t know me.”

“Still, I suppose that often happens to you,” said Celia.

“Yes, invariably,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s one of the—hazards of literary life. People come up to you and say ‘I do love your books so much and I’m so pleased to be able to meet you.’ That sort of thing.”

“I was secretary to a writer once. I do know about that sort of thing and how difficult it is.”

“Yes, well, there was some of that too, but that I was prepared for. And then this woman came up to me and she said ‘I believe you have a goddaughter called Celia Ravenscroft.’”

“Well, that was a bit odd,” said Celia. “Just coming up to you and saying that. It seems to me she ought to have led into it more gradually. You know, talking about your books first and how much she’d enjoyed the last one, or something like that. And then sliding into me. What had she got against me?”

“As far as I know she hadn’t got anything against you,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Was she a friend of mine?”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Oliver.

There was a silence. Celia sipped some more sherry and looked very searchingly at Mrs. Oliver.

“You know,” she said, “you’re rather intriguing me. I can’t see quite what you’re leading into.”

"Well," said Mrs. Oliver, "I hope you won't be angry with me."

"Why should I be angry with you?"

"Well, because I'm going to tell you something, or repeat something, and you might say it's no business of mine or I ought to keep quiet about it and not mention it."

"You've aroused my curiosity," said Celia.

"Her name she mentioned to me. She was a Mrs. Burton-Cox."

"Oh!" Celia's "Oh" was rather distinctive. "Oh."

"You know her?"

"Yes, I know her," said Celia.

"Well, I thought you must because—"

"Because of what?"

"Because of something she said."

"What—about me? That she knew me?"

"She said that she thought her son might be going to marry you."

Celia's expression changed. Her eyebrows went up, came down again. She looked very hard at Mrs. Oliver.

"You want to know if that's so or not?"

"No," said Mrs. Oliver, "I don't particularly want to know. I merely mention that because it's one of the first things she said to me. She said because you were my goddaughter, I might be able to ask you to give me some information. I presume that she meant that if the information was given to me I was to pass it on to her."

"What information?"

"Well, I don't suppose you'll like what I'm going to say now," said Mrs. Oliver. "I didn't like it myself. In fact, it gives me a very nasty feeling all down my spine because I think it was—well, such awful cheek. Awful bad manners. Absolutely unpardonable. She said, 'Can you find out if her father murdered her mother or if her mother murdered her father.'"

"She said that to you? Asked you to do that?"

"Yes."

"And she didn't know you? I mean, apart from being an authoress and being at the party?"

"She didn't know me at all. She'd never met me, I'd never met her."

"Didn't you find that extraordinary?"

"I don't know that I'd find anything extraordinary that that woman said. She struck me," said Mrs. Oliver, "if I may say so, as a particularly odious woman."

"Oh yes. She is a particularly odious woman."

"And are you going to marry her son?"

"Well, we've considered the question. I don't know. You knew what she was talking about?"

"Well, I know what I suppose anyone would know who was acquainted with your family."

"That my father and mother, after he had retired from the Army, bought a house in the country, that they went out one day for a walk together, a walk along the cliff path. That they were found there, both of them shot. There was a revolver lying there. It belonged to my father. He had two revolvers in the house, it seems. There was nothing to say whether it was a suicide pact or whether my father killed my mother and then shot himself, or my mother shot my father and then killed herself. But perhaps you know all this already."

"I know it after a fashion," said Mrs. Oliver. "It happened I think about twelve years ago."

"About that, yes."

"And you were about twelve or fourteen at the time."

"Yes. . . ."

"I don't know much about it," said Mrs. Oliver. "I wasn't even in England myself. At the time—I was on a lecture tour in America. I simply read it in the paper. It was given a lot of space in the press because it was difficult to know the real facts—there did not seem to be any motive. Your father and mother had always been happy together and lived on good terms. I remember that being mentioned. I was interested because I had known your father and mother when we were all much younger, especially your mother. I was at school with her. After that our ways led apart. I married and went somewhere and she married and went out, as far as I remember, to Malaya or some place like that, with her soldier husband. But she did ask me to be godmother to one of her children. You. Since your mother and father were living abroad, I saw very little of them for many years. I saw you occasionally."

"Yes. You used to take me out from school. I remember that. Gave me some specially good feeds, too. Lovely food you gave me."

"You were an unusual child. You liked caviar."

"I still do," said Celia, "though I don't get it offered to me very often."

"I was shocked to read this mention of things in the paper. Very little was said. I gathered it was a kind of open verdict. No particular motive. Nothing to show. No accounts of a quarrel, there was no suggestion of there having been an attack from outside. I was shocked by it," said Mrs. Oliver, "and then I forgot it. I wondered once or twice what could have led to it, but as I was not in the country—I was doing a tour at the time, in America as I've said—the whole thing passed out of my mind. It was some years later when I next saw you and naturally I did not speak of it to you."

"No," said Celia, "I appreciate that."

"All through life," Mrs. Oliver said, "one comes across very curious things that happen to friends or to acquaintances. With friends, of course, very often you have some idea of what led to—whatever the incident might be. But if it's a long time since you've heard them discussed or talked to them, you are quite in the dark and there is nobody that you can show too much curiosity to about the occasion."

"You were always very nice to me," said Celia. "You sent me nice presents, a particularly nice present when I was twenty-one, I remember."

"That's the time when girls need some extra cash in hand," said Mrs. Oliver, "because there are so many things they want to do and have just then."

"Yes, I always thought you were an understanding person and not—well, you know what some people are like. Always questioning, and asking things and wanting to know all about you. You never asked questions. You used to take me out to shows, or give me nice meals, and talk to me as though, well, as though everything was all right and you were just a distant relation of the family. I've appreciated that. I've known so many nosey parkers in my life."

"Yes. Everyone comes up against that sooner or later," said Mrs. Oliver. "But you see now what upset me at this particular party. It seems an extraordinary thing to be asked to do by a complete stranger like Mrs. Burton-Cox. I couldn't imagine why she should want to know. It was no business of hers, surely. Unless—"

"You thought it was, unless it was something to do with my marrying Desmond. Desmond is her son."

“Yes, I suppose it could have been, but I couldn’t see how, or what business it was of hers.”

“Everything’s her business. She’s nosey—in fact she’s what you said she was, an odious woman.”

“But I gather Desmond isn’t odious.”

“No. No, I’m very fond of Desmond and Desmond is fond of me. I don’t like his mother.”

“Does he like his mother?”

“I don’t really know,” said Celia. “I suppose he might like her—anything’s possible, isn’t it? Anyway, I don’t want to get married at present, I don’t feel like it. And there are a lot of—oh, well, difficulties, you know, there are a lot of fors and againsts. It must have made you feel rather curious,” said Celia. “I mean, why Mrs. Nosey Cox should have asked you to try and worm things out of me and then run along and spill it all to her—Are you asking me that particular question by the way?”

“You mean, am I asking you whether you think or know that your mother killed your father or your father killed your mother, or whether it was a double suicide. Is that what you mean?”

“Well, I suppose it is, in a way. But I think I have to ask you also, if you were wanting to ask me that, whether you were doing so with the idea of giving Mrs. Burton-Cox the information you obtained, in case you did receive any information from me.”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Quite decidedly no. I shouldn’t dream of telling the odious woman anything of the sort. I shall tell her quite firmly that it is not any business of hers or of mine, and that I have no intention of obtaining information from you and retailing it to her.”

“Well, that’s what I thought,” said Celia. “I thought I could trust you to that extent. I don’t mind telling you what I do know. Such as it is.”

“You needn’t. I’m not asking you for it.”

“No. I can quite see that. But I’ll give you the answer all the same. The answer is—nothing.”

“Nothing,” said Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully.

“No. I wasn’t there at the time. I mean, I wasn’t in the house at the time. I can’t remember now quite where I was. I think I was at school in Switzerland, or else I was staying with a school friend during the school holidays. You see, it’s all rather mixed up in my mind by now.”

“I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver doubtfully, “it wouldn’t be likely that you would know. Considering your age at the time.”

“I’d be interested,” said Celia, “to know just what you feel about that. Do you think it would be likely for me to know all about it? Or not to know?”

“Well, you said you weren’t in the house. If you’d been in the house at the time, then yes, I think it would be quite likely that you might know something. Children do. Teenagers do. People of that age know a lot, they see a lot, they don’t talk about it very often. But they do know things that the outside world wouldn’t know, and they do know things that they wouldn’t be willing, shall we say, to tell to police enquirers.”

“No. You’re being quite sensible. I wouldn’t’ve known. I don’t think I did know. I don’t think I had any idea. What did the police think? You don’t mind my asking you that, I hope, because I should be interested. You see, I never read any account of the inquest or anything like that or the enquiry into it.”

“I think they thought it was a double suicide, but I don’t think they ever had any inkling as to the reason for it.”

“Do you want to know what I think?”

“Not if you don’t want me to know,” said Mrs. Oliver.

"But I expect you are interested. After all, you write crime stories about people who kill themselves or kill each other, or who have reasons for things. I should think you would be interested."

"Yes, I'll admit that," said Mrs. Oliver. "But the last thing I want to do is to offend you by seeking for information which is no business of mine to know."

"Well, I wondered," said Celia. "I've often wondered from time to time why, and how, but I knew very little about things. I mean, about how things were going on at home. The holidays before that I had been away on exchange on the Continent, so I hadn't seen my mother and father really very recently. I mean, they'd come out to Switzerland and taken me out from school once or twice, but that was all. They seemed much as usual, but they seemed older. My father, I think, was ailing. I mean, getting feebler. I don't know if it was heart or what it was. One doesn't really think about that. My mother, too, she was going rather nervy. Not hypochondriac but a little inclined to fuss over her health. They were on good terms, quite friendly. There wasn't anything that I noticed. Only sometimes one would, well, sometimes one gets ideas. One doesn't think they're true or necessarily right at all, but one just wonders if—"

"I don't think we'd better talk about it anymore," said Mrs. Oliver. "We don't need to know or find out. The whole thing's over and done with. The verdict was quite satisfactory. No means to show, or motive, or anything like that. But there was no question of your father having deliberately killed your mother, or of your mother having deliberately killed your father."

"If I thought which was most likely," said Celia, "I would think my father killed my mother. Because, you see, it's more natural for a man to shoot anyone, I think. To shoot a woman for whatever reason it was. I don't think a woman, or a woman like my mother, would be so likely to shoot my father. If she wanted him dead, I should think she might have chosen some other method. But I don't think either of them wanted the other one dead."

"So it could have been an outsider."

"Yes, but what does one mean by an outsider?" said Celia.

“Who else was there living in the house?”

“A housekeeper, elderly, rather blind and rather deaf, a foreign girl, an au pair girl, she’d been my governess once—she was awfully nice—she came back to look after my mother who had been in hospital—And there was an aunt whom I never loved much. I don’t think any of them could have been likely to have any grudge against my parents. There was nobody who profited by their deaths, except, I suppose, myself and my brother Edward, who was four years younger than I was. We inherited what money there was but it wasn’t very much. My father had his pension, of course. My mother had a small income of her own. No. There was nothing there of any importance.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I’m sorry if I’ve distressed you by asking all this.”

“You haven’t distressed me. You’ve brought it up in my mind a little and it has interested me. Because, you see, I am of an age now that I wish I did know. I knew and was fond of them, as one is fond of parents. Not passionately, just normally, but I realize I don’t know what they were really like. What their life was like. What mattered to them. I don’t know anything about it at all. I wish I did know. It’s like a burr, something sticking into you, and you can’t leave it alone. Yes. I would like to know. Because then, you see, I shouldn’t have to think about it anymore.”

“So you do? Think about it?”

Celia looked at her for a moment. She seemed to be trying to come to a decision.

“Yes,” she said, “I think about it nearly all the time. I’m getting to have a thing about it, if you know what I mean. And Desmond feels the same.”

Five

OLD SINS HAVE LONG SHADOWS

Hercule Poirot let the revolving door wind him round. Arresting the swing of it with one hand, he stepped forward into the small restaurant. There were not many people there. It was an unfashionable time of day, but his eyes soon saw the man he had come to meet. The square, solid bulk of Superintendent Spence rose from the table in one corner.

“Good,” he said. “You have arrived here. You had no difficulty in finding it?”

“None at all. Your instructions were most adequate.”

“Let me introduce you now. This is Chief Superintendent Garroway. Monsieur Hercule Poirot.”

Garroway was a tall, thin man with a lean, ascetic face, grey hair which left a small round spot like a tonsure, so that he had a faint resemblance to an ecclesiastic.

“This is wonderful,” said Poirot.

“I am retired now, of course,” said Garroway, “but one remembers. Yes, certain things one remembers, although they are past and gone, and the general public probably remembers nothing about them. But yes.”

Hercule Poirot very nearly said “Elephants do remember,” but checked himself in time. That phrase was so associated in his mind now with Mrs. Ariadne Oliver that he found it difficult to restrain it from his tongue in many clearly unsuitable categories.

“I hope you have not been getting impatient,” said Superintendent Spence.

He pulled forward a chair, and the three men sat down. A menu was brought. Superintendent Spence, who was clearly addicted to this particular restaurant, offered tentative words of advice. Garroway and Poirot made their choice. Then, leaning back a little in their chairs and sipping glasses of sherry, they contemplated each other for some minutes in silence before speaking.

"I must apologize to you," said Poirot, "I really must apologize to you for coming to you with my demands about an affair which is over and done with."

"What interests me," said Spence, "is what has interested you. I thought first that it was unlike you to have this wish to delve in the past. It is connected with something that has occurred nowadays, or is it sudden curiosity about a rather inexplicable, perhaps, case? Do you agree with that?"

He looked across the table.

"Inspector Garroway," he said, "as he was at that time, was the officer in charge of the investigations into the Ravenscroft shooting. He was an old friend of mine and so I had no difficulty in getting in touch with him."

"And he was kind enough to come here today," said Poirot, "simply because I must admit to a curiosity which I am sure I have no right to feel about an affair that is past and done with."

"Well, I wouldn't say that," said Garroway. "We all have interests in certain cases that are past. Did Lizzie Borden really kill her father and mother with an axe? There are people who still do not think so. Who killed Charles Bravo and why? There are several different ideas, mostly not very well founded. But still people try to find alternative explanations."

His keen, shrewd eyes looked across at Poirot.

"And Monsieur Poirot, if I am not mistaken, has occasionally shown a leaning towards looking into cases, going back, shall we say, for murder, back into the past, twice, perhaps three times."

“Three times, certainly,” said Superintendent Spence.

“Once, I think I am right, by request of a Canadian girl.”

“That is so,” said Poirot. “A Canadian girl, very vehement, very passionate, very forceful, who had come here to investigate a murder for which her mother had been condemned to death, although she died before sentence was carried out. Her daughter was convinced that her mother had been innocent.”

“And you agreed?” said Garroway.

“I did not agree,” said Poirot, “when she first told me of the matter. But she was very vehement and very sure.”

“It was natural for a daughter to wish her mother to have been innocent and to try and prove against all appearances that she was innocent,” said Spence.

“It was just a little more than that,” said Poirot. “She convinced me of the type of woman her mother was.”

“A woman incapable of murder?”

“No,” said Poirot, “it would be very difficult, and I am sure both of you agree with me, to think there is anyone quite incapable of murder if one knows what kind of person they are, what led up to it. But in that particular case, the mother never protested her innocence. She appeared to be quite content to be sentenced. That was curious to begin with. Was she a defeatist? It did not seem so. When I began to enquire, it became clear that she was not a defeatist. She was, one would say, almost the opposite of it.”

Garroway looked interested. He leaned across the table, twisting a bit of bread off the roll on his plate.

“And was she innocent?”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “She was innocent.”

“And that surprised you?”

“Not by the time I realized it,” said Poirot. “There were one or two things—one thing in particular—that showed she could not have been guilty. One fact that nobody had appreciated at the time. Knowing that one had only to look at what there was, shall we say, on the menu in the way of looking elsewhere.”[1]

Grilled trout was put in front of them at this point.

“There was another case, too, where you looked into the past, not quite in the same way,” continued Spence. “A girl who said at a party that she had once seen a murder committed.”[2]

“There again one had to—how shall I put it?—step backwards instead of forward,” said Poirot. “Yes, that is very true.”

“And had the girl seen the murder committed?”

“No,” said Poirot, “because it was the wrong girl. This trout is delicious,” he added, with appreciation.

“They do all fish dishes very well here,” said Superintendent Spence.

He helped himself from the sauceboat proffered to him.

“A most delicious sauce,” he added.

Silent appreciation of food filled the next three minutes.

“When Spence came along to me,” said Superintendent Garroway, “asking if I remembered anything about the Ravenscroft case, I was intrigued and delighted at once.”

“You haven’t forgotten all about it?”

“Not the Ravenscroft case. It wasn’t an easy case to forget about.”

“You agree,” said Poirot, “that there were discrepancies about it? Lack of proof, alternative solutions?”

“No,” said Garroway, “nothing of that kind. All the evidence recorded the visible facts. Deaths of which there were several former examples, yes, all plain sailing. And yet—”

“Well?” said Poirot.

“And yet it was all wrong,” said Garroway.

“Ah,” said Spence. He looked interested.

“That’s what you felt once, isn’t it?” said Poirot, turning to him.

“In the case of Mrs. McGinty. Yes.”[3]

“You weren’t satisfied,” said Poirot, “when that extremely difficult young man was arrested. He had every reason for doing it, he looked as though he had done it, everyone thought he had done it. But you knew he hadn’t done it. You were so sure of it that you came to me and told me to go along to see what I could find out.”

“See if you could help—and you did help, didn’t you?” said Spence.

Poirot sighed.

“Fortunately, yes. But what a tiresome young man he was. If ever a young man deserved to be hanged, not because he had done a murder but because he wouldn’t help anyone to prove that he hadn’t. Now we have the Ravenscroft case. You say, Superintendent Garroway, something was wrong?”

“Yes, I felt quite sure of it if you understand what I mean.”

“I do understand,” said Poirot. “And so does Spence. One does come across these things sometimes. The proofs are there, the motive, the opportunity, the clues, the mise-en-scène, it’s all there. A complete blueprint, as you might say. But all the same, those whose profession it is, know. They know that it's all wrong, just like a critic in the artistic world knows when a picture is all wrong. Knows when it's a fake and not the real thing."

"There wasn't anything I could do about it, either," said Superintendent Garroway. "I looked into it, around it, up above it and down below it, as you might say. I talked to the people. There was nothing there. It looked like a suicide pact, it had all the marks of the suicide pact. Alternatively, of course, it could be a husband who shot a wife and then himself, or a wife who shot her husband and then herself. All those three things happen. When one comes across them, one knows they have happened. But in most cases one has some idea of why."

"There wasn't any real idea of why in this case, was that it?" said Poirot.

"Yes. That's it. You see, the moment you begin to enquire into a case, to enquire about people and things, you get a very good picture as a rule of what their lives have been like. This was a couple, ageing, the husband with a good record, a wife affectionate, pleasant, on good terms together. That's a thing one soon finds out about. They were happy living together. They went for walks, they played picquet, and poker patience with each other in the evenings, they had children who caused them no particular anxiety. A boy in school in England and a girl in a pensionnat in Switzerland. There was nothing wrong with their lives as far as one could tell. From such medical evidence as one could obtain, there was nothing definitely wrong with their health. The husband had suffered from high blood pressure at one time, but was in good condition by the taking of suitable medicaments which kept him on an even keel. His wife was slightly deaf and had had a little minor heart trouble, nothing to be worried about. Of course it could be, as does happen sometimes, that one or other of them had fears for their health. There are a lot of people who are in good health but are quite convinced they have cancer, are quite sure that they won't live another year. Sometimes that leads to their taking their own life. The Ravenscrofts didn't seem that kind of person. They seemed well-balanced and placid."

"So what did you really think?" said Poirot.

"The trouble is that I couldn't think. Looking back, I said to myself it was suicide. It could only have been suicide. For some reason or other they decided that life was unbearable to them. Not through financial trouble, not through health difficulties, not because of unhappiness. And there, you see, I came to a full stop. It had all the marks of suicide. I cannot see any other thing that could have happened except suicide. They went for a walk. In that walk they took a revolver with them. The revolver lay between the two bodies. There were blurred fingerprints of both of them. Both of them in fact had handled it, but there was nothing to show who had fired it last. One tends to think the husband perhaps shot his wife and then himself. That is only because it seems more likely. Well, why? A great many years have passed. When something reminds me now and again, something I read in the papers of bodies, a husband's and wife's bodies somewhere, lying dead, having taken their own lives apparently, I think back and then I wonder again what happened in the Ravenscroft case. Twelve years ago or fourteen and I still remember the Ravenscroft case and wonder—well, just the one word, I think. Why—why—why? Did the wife really hate her husband and want to get rid of him? Did they go on hating each other until they could bear it no longer?"

Garroway broke off another piece of bread and chewed at it.

"You got some idea, Monsieur Poirot? Has somebody come to you and told you something that has awakened your interest particularly? Do you know something that might explain the 'Why?'"

"No. All the same," said Poirot, "you must have had a theory. Come now, you had a theory?"

"You're quite right, of course. One does have theories. One expects them all, or one of them at least, to work out, but they don't usually. I think that my theory was in the end that you couldn't look for the cause, because one didn't know enough. What did I know about them? General Ravenscroft was close on sixty, his wife was thirty-five. All I knew of them, strictly speaking, was the last five or six years of their lives. The General had retired on a pension. They had come back to England from abroad and all the evidence that came to me, all the knowledge, was of a brief period during which they had first a house at Bournemouth and then moved to where they lived in the home where the tragedy took place. They had lived there peacefully, happily, their children came home there for school holidays. It was a peaceful period, I should say, at the end of what one presumed was a peaceful life. I knew of their life after retirement in England, of their family. There was no financial motive, no motive of hatred, no motive of sexual involvement, of intrusive love affairs. No. But there was a period before that. What did I know about that? What I knew was a life spent mostly abroad with occasional visits home, a good record for the man, pleasant remembrances of her from friends of the wife's. There was no outstanding tragedy, dispute, nothing that one knew of. But then I mightn't have known. One doesn't know. There was a period of, say, twenty–thirty years, years from childhood to the time they married, the time they lived abroad in Malaya and other places. Perhaps the root of the tragedy was there. There is a proverb my grandmother used to repeat: Old sins have long shadows. Was the cause of death some long shadow, a shadow from the past? That's not an easy thing to find out about. You find out about a man's record, what friends or acquaintances say, but you don't know any inner details. Well, I think little by little the theory grew up in my mind that that would have been the place to look, if I could have looked. Something that had happened then, in another country, perhaps. Something that had been thought to be forgotten, to have passed out of existence, but which still perhaps existed. A grudge from the past, some happening that nobody knew about, that had happened elsewhere, not in their life in England, but which may have been there. If one had known where to look for it."

"Not the sort of thing, you mean," said Poirot, "that anybody would remember. I mean, remember nowadays. Something that no friends of theirs in England, perhaps, would have known about."

"Their friends in England seem to have been mostly made since retirement, though I suppose old friends did come and visit them or see them occasionally. But one doesn't hear about things that happened in the past. People forget."

"Yes," said Poirot, thoughtfully. "People forget."

"They're not like elephants," said Superintendent Garroway, giving a faint smile. "Elephants, they always say, remember everything."

“It is odd that you should say that,” said Poirot.

“That I should say that about long sins?”

“Not so much that. It was your mention of elephants that interested me.”

Superintendent Garroway looked at Poirot with some surprise. He seemed to be waiting for more. Spence also cast a quick glance at his old friend.

“Something that happened out East, perhaps,” he suggested. “I mean—well, that’s where elephants come from, isn’t it? Or from Africa. Anyway, who’s been talking to you about elephants?” he added.

“A friend of mine happened to mention them,” said Poirot. “Someone you know,” he said to Superintendent Spence. “Mrs. Oliver.”

“Oh, Mrs. Ariadne Oliver. Well!” He paused.

“Well what?” said Poirot.

“Well, does she know something, then?” he asked.

“I do not think so as yet,” said Poirot, “but she might know something before very long.” He added thoughtfully, “She’s that kind of person. She gets around, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes,’ said Spence. “Yes. Has she got any ideas?” he asked.

“Do you mean Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, the writer?” asked Garroway with some interest.

“That’s the one,” said Spence.

“Does she know a good deal about crime? I know she writes crime stories. I’ve never known where she got her ideas from or her facts.”

“Her ideas,” said Poirot, “come out of her head. Her facts—well, that’s more difficult.” He paused for a moment.

“What are you thinking of, Poirot, something in particular?”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “I ruined one of her stories once, or so she tells me. She had just had a very good idea about a fact, something that had to do with a long-sleeved woollen vest. I asked her something over the telephone and it put the idea for the story out of her head. She reproaches me at intervals.”

“Dear, dear,” said Spence. “Sounds rather like that parsley that sank into the butter on a hot day. You know. Sherlock Holmes and the dog who did nothing in the nighttime.”

“Did they have a dog?” asked Poirot.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said did they have a dog? General and Lady Ravenscroft. Did they take a dog for that walk with them on the day they were shot? The Ravenscrofts.”

“They had a dog—yes,” said Garroway. “I suppose, I suppose they did take him for a walk most days.”

“If it had been one of Mrs. Oliver’s stories,” said Spence, “you ought to have found the dog howling over the two dead bodies. But that didn’t happen.”

Garroway shook his head.

“I wonder where the dog is now?” said Poirot.

“Buried in somebody’s garden, I expect,” said Garroway. “It’s fourteen years ago.”

“So we can’t go and ask the dog, can we?” said Poirot. He added thoughtfully, “A pity. It’s astonishing, you know, what dogs can know. Who was there exactly in the house? I mean on the day when the crime happened?”

“I brought you a list,” said Superintendent Garroway, “in case you like to consult it. Mrs. Whittaker, the elderly cook-housekeeper. It was her day out so we couldn’t get much from her that was helpful. A visitor was staying there who had been governess to the Ravenscroft children once, I believe. Mrs. Whittaker was rather deaf and slightly blind. She couldn’t tell us anything of interest, except that recently Lady Ravenscroft had been in hospital or in a nursing home—for nerves but not illness, apparently. There was a gardener, too.”

“But a stranger might have come from outside. A stranger from the past. That’s your idea, Superintendent Garroway?”

“Not so much an idea as just a theory.”

Poirot was silent, he was thinking of a time when he had asked to go back into the past, had studied five people out of the past who had reminded him of the nursery rhyme “Five little pigs.” Interesting it had been, and in the end rewarding, because he had found out the truth.

Six

AN OLD FRIEND REMEMBERS

When Mrs. Oliver returned to the house the following morning, she found Miss Livingstone waiting for her.

“There have been two telephone calls, Mrs. Oliver.”

“Yes?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“The first one was from Crichton and Smith. They wanted to know whether you had chosen the lime green brocade or the pale blue one.”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Just remind me tomorrow morning, will you? I’d like to see it by night light.”

“And the other was from a foreigner, a Mr. Hercule Poirot, I believe.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Oliver. “What did he want?”

“He asked if you would be able to call and see him this afternoon.”

“That will be quite impossible,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Ring him up, will you? I’ve got to go out again at once, as a matter of fact. Did he leave a telephone number?”

“Yes, he did.”

“That’s all right, then. We won’t have to look it up again. All right. Just ring him. Tell him I’m sorry that I can’t but that I’m out on the track of an elephant.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Miss Livingstone.

“Say that I’m on the track of an elephant.”

"Oh yes," said Miss Livingstone, looking shrewdly at her employer to see if she was right in the feelings that she sometimes had that Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, though a successful novelist, was at the same time not quite right in the head.

"I've never hunted elephants before," said Mrs. Oliver. "It's quite an interesting thing to do, though."

She went into the sitting room, opened the top volume of the assorted books on the sofa, most of them looking rather the worse for wear, since she had toiled through them the evening before and written out a paper with various addresses.

"Well, one has got to make a start somewhere," she said. "On the whole I think that if Julia hasn't gone completely off her rocker by now, I might start with her. She always had ideas and after all, she knew that part of the country because she lived near there. Yes, I think we'll start with Julia."

"There are four letters here for you to sign," said Miss Livingstone.

"I can't be bothered now," said Mrs. Oliver. "I really can't spare a moment. I've got to go down to Hampton Court, and it's quite a long ride."

The Honourable Julia Carstairs, struggling with some slight difficulty out of her armchair, the difficulty that those over the age of seventy have when rising to their feet after prolonged rest, even a possible nap, stepped forward, peering a little to see who it was who had just been announced by the faithful retainer who shared the apartment which she occupied in her status of a member of "Homes for the Privileged." Being slightly deaf, the name had not come clearly to her. Mrs. Gulliver. Was that it? But she didn't remember a Mrs. Gulliver. She advanced on slightly shaky knees, still peering forward.

"I don't expect you'll remember me, it's so many years since we met."

Like many elderly people, Mrs. Carstairs could remember voices better than she did faces.

“Why,” she exclaimed, “it’s—dear me, it’s Ariadne! My dear, how very nice to see you.”

Greetings passed.

“I just happened to be in this part of the world,” explained Mrs. Oliver. “I had to come down to see someone not far from here. And then I remembered that looking in my address book last night I had seen that this was quite near where you had your apartment. Delightful, isn’t it?” she added, looking round.

“Not too bad,” said Mrs. Carstairs. “Not quite all it’s written up to be, you know. But it has many advantages. One brings one’s own furniture and things like that, and there is a central restaurant where you can have a meal, or you can have your own things, of course. Oh yes, it’s very good, really. The grounds are charming and well kept up. But sit down, Ariadne, do sit down. You look very well. I saw you were at a literary lunch the other day, in the paper. How odd it is that one just sees something in the paper and almost the next day one meets the person. Quite extraordinary.”

“I know,” said Mrs. Oliver, taking the chair that was offered her. “Things do go like that, don’t they.”

“You are still living in London?”

Mrs. Oliver said yes, she was still living in London. She then entered into what she thought of in her own mind, with vague memories of going to dancing class as a child, as the first figure of the Lancers. Advance, retreat, hands out, turn round twice, whirl round, and so on.

She enquired after Mrs. Carstairs’s daughter and about the two grandchildren, and she asked about the other daughter, what she was doing. She appeared to be doing it in New Zealand. Mrs. Carstairs did not seem to be quite sure what it was. Some kind of social research. Mrs. Carstairs pressed an electric bell that rested on the arm of her chair, and ordered Emma to bring tea. Mrs. Oliver begged her not to bother. Julia Carstairs said:

“Of course Ariadne has got to have tea.”

The two ladies leant back. The second and third figures of the Lancers. Old friends. Other people’s children. The death of friends.

“It must be years since I saw you last,” said Mrs. Carstairs.

“I think it was at the Llewellyns’ wedding,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Yes, that must have been about it. How terrible Moira looked as a bridesmaid. That dreadfully unbecoming shade of apricot they wore.”

“I know. It didn’t suit them.”

“I don’t think weddings are nearly as pretty as they used to be in our day. Some of them seem to wear such very peculiar clothes. The other day one of my friends went to a wedding and she said the bridegroom was dressed in some sort of quilted white satin and ruffles at his neck. Made of Valenciennes lace, I believe. Most peculiar. And the girl was wearing a very peculiar trouser suit. Also white but it was stamped with green shamrocks all over.”

“Well, my dear Ariadne, can you imagine it. Really, extraordinary. In church too. If I’d been a clergyman I’d have refused to marry them.”

Tea came. Talk continued.

“I saw my goddaughter, Celia Ravenscroft, the other day,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Do you remember the Ravenscrofts? Of course, it’s a great many years ago.”

“The Ravenscrofts? Now wait a minute. That was that very sad tragedy, wasn’t it? A double suicide, didn’t they think it was? Near their house at Overcliffe.”

“You’ve got such a wonderful memory, Julia,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Always had. Though I have difficulties with names sometimes. Yes, it was very tragic, wasn’t it.”

“Very tragic indeed.”

“One of my cousins knew them very well in Malaya, Roddy Foster, you know. General Ravenscroft had had a most distinguished career. Of course he was a bit deaf by the time he retired. He didn’t always hear what one said very well.”

“Do you remember them quite well?”

“Oh yes. One doesn’t really forget people, does one? I mean, they lived at Overcliffe for quite five or six years.”

“I’ve forgotten her Christian name now,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Margaret, I think. But everyone called her Molly. Yes, Margaret. So many people were called Margaret, weren’t they, at about that time? She used to wear a wig, do you remember?”

“Oh yes,” said Mrs. Oliver. “At least I can’t quite remember, but I think I do.”

“I’m not sure she didn’t try to persuade me to get one. She said it was so useful when you went abroad and travelled. She had four different wigs. One for evening and one for travelling and one—very strange, you know. You could put a hat on over it and not really disarrange it.”

“I didn’t know them as well as you did,” said Mrs. Oliver. “And of course at the time of the shooting I was in America on a lecture tour. So I never really heard any details.”

“Well, of course, it was a great mystery,” said Julia Carstairs. “I mean to say, one didn’t know. There were so many different stories going about.”

“What did they say at the inquest—I suppose they had an inquest?”

“Oh yes, of course. The police had to investigate it. It was one of those indecisive things, you know, in that the death was due to revolver shots. They couldn’t say definitely what had occurred. It seemed possible that General Ravenscroft had shot his wife and then himself, but apparently it was just as probable that Lady Ravenscroft had shot her husband and then herself. It seemed more likely, I think, that it was a suicide pact, but it couldn't be said definitely how it came about."

"There seemed to be no question of its being a crime?"

"No, no. It was said quite clearly there was no suggestion of foul play. I mean there were no footprints or any signs of anyone coming near them. They left the house to go for a walk after tea, as they so often did. They didn't come back again for dinner and the manservant or somebody or the gardener—whoever it was—went out to look for them, and found them both dead. The revolver was lying by the bodies."

"The revolver belonged to him, didn't it?"

"Oh yes. He had two revolvers in the house. These ex-military people so often do, don't they? I mean, they feel safer what with everything that goes on nowadays. A second revolver was still in the drawer in the house, so that he—well, he must have gone out deliberately with the revolver, presumably. I don't think it likely that she'd have gone out for a walk carrying a revolver."

"No. No, it wouldn't have been so easy, would it?"

"But there was nothing apparently in the evidence to show that there was any unhappiness or that there'd been any quarrel between them or that there was any reason why they should commit suicide. Of course one never knows what sad things there are in people's lives."

"No, no," said Mrs. Oliver. "One never knows. How very true that is, Julia. Did you have any idea yourself?"

"Well, one always wonders, my dear."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "one always wonders."

"It might be of course, you see, that he had some disease. I think he might have been told he was going to die of cancer, but that wasn't so, according to the medical evidence. He was quite healthy. I mean, he had—I think he had had a—what do they call those things?—coronary, is that what I mean? It sounds like a crown, doesn't it, but it's really a heart attack, isn't it? He'd had that but he'd recovered from it, and she was, well, she was very nervy. She was neurotic always."

"Yes, I seem to remember that," said Mrs. Oliver. "Of course I didn't know them well, but—" she asked suddenly—"was she wearing a wig?"

"Oh. Well, you know, I can't really remember that. She always wore her wig. One of them, I mean."

"I just wondered," said Mrs. Oliver. "Somehow I feel if you were going to shoot yourself or even shoot your husband, I don't think you'd wear your wig, do you?"

The ladies discussed this point with some interest.

"What do you really think, Julia?"

"Well, as I said, dear, one wonders, you know. There were things said, but then there always are."

"About him or her?"

"Well, they said that there was a young woman, you know. Yes, I think she did some secretarial work for him. He was writing his memoirs of his career abroad—I believe commissioned by a publisher at that—and she used to take dictation from him. But some people said—well, you know what they do say sometimes, that perhaps he had got—er—tied up with this girl in some way. She wasn't very young. She was over thirty, and not very good-looking and I don't think—there were no scandals about her or anything, but still, one doesn't know. People thought he might have shot his wife because he wanted to—well, he might have wanted to marry her, yes. But I don't really think people said that sort of thing and I never believed it."

"What did you think?"

“Well, of course I wondered a little about her.”

“You mean that a man was mentioned?”

“I believe there was something out in Malaya. Some kind of story I heard about her. That she got embroiled with some young man much younger than herself. And her husband hadn’t liked it much and it had caused a bit of scandal. I forget where. But anyway, that was a long time ago and I don’t think anything ever came of it.”

“You don’t think there was any talk nearer home? No special relationship with anyone in the neighbourhood? There wasn’t any evidence of quarrels between them, or anything of that kind?”

“No, I don’t think so. Of course I read everything about it at the time. One did discuss it, of course, because one couldn’t help feeling there might be some—well, some really very tragic love story connected with it.”

“But there wasn’t, you think? They had children, didn’t they. There was my goddaughter, of course.”

“Oh yes, and there was a son. I think he was quite young. At school somewhere. The girl was only twelve, no—older than that. She was with a family in Switzerland.”

“There was no—no mental trouble, I suppose, in the family?”

“Oh, you mean the boy—yes, might be of course. You do hear very strange things. There was that boy who shot his father—that was somewhere near Newcastle, I think. Some years before that. You know. He’d been very depressed and at first I think they said he tried to hang himself when he was at the university, and then he came and shot his father. But nobody quite knew why. Anyway, there wasn’t anything of that sort with the Ravenscrofts. No, I don’t think so, in fact I’m pretty sure of it. I can’t help thinking, in some ways—”

“Yes, Julia?”

"I can't help thinking that there might have been a man, you know."

"You mean that she—"

"Yes, well—well, one thinks it rather likely, you know. The wigs, for one thing."

"I don't quite see how the wigs come into it."

"Well, wanting to improve her appearance."

"She was thirty-five, I think."

"More. More. Thirty-six, I think. And, well, I know she showed me the wigs one day, and one or two of them really made her look quite attractive. And she used a good deal of makeup. And that had all started just after they had come to live there, I think. She was rather a good-looking woman."

"You mean, she might have met someone, some man?"

"Well, that's what I've always thought," said Mrs. Carstairs. "You see, if a man's getting off with a girl, people notice it usually because men aren't so good at hiding their tracks. But a woman, it might be—well, I mean like someone she'd met and nobody knew much about it."

"Oh, do you really think so, Julia?"

"No I don't really think so," said Julia, "because I mean, people always do know, don't they? I mean, you know, servants know, or gardeners or bus drivers. Or somebody in the neighbourhood. And they know. And they talk. But still, there could have been something like that, and either he found out about it . . ."

"You mean it was a crime of jealousy?"

"I think so, yes."

"So you think it's more likely that he shot her, then himself, than that she shot him and then herself."

"Well, I should think so, because I think if she were trying to get rid of him—well, I don't think they'd have gone for a walk together and she'd have to have taken the revolver with her in a handbag and it would have been rather a bigger handbag if so. One has to think of the practical side of things."

"I know," said Mrs. Oliver. "One does. It's very interesting."

"It must be interesting to you, dear, because you write these crime stories. So I expect really you would have better ideas. You'd know more what's likely to happen."

"I don't know what's likely to happen," said Mrs. Oliver, "because, you see, in all the crimes that I write, I've invented the crimes. I mean, what I want to happen, happens in my stories. It's not something that actually has happened or that could happen. So I'm really the worst person to talk about it. I'm interested to know what you think because you know people very well, Julia, and you knew them well. And I think she might have said something to you one day—or he might."

"Yes. Yes, now wait a minute when you say that, that seems to bring something back to me."

Mrs. Carstairs leaned back in her chair, shook her head doubtfully, half closed her eyes and went into a kind of coma. Mrs. Oliver remained silent with a look on her face which women are apt to wear when they are waiting for the first signs of a kettle coming to the boil.

"She did say something once, I remember, and I wonder what she meant by it," said Mrs. Carstairs. "Something about starting a new life—in connection I think with St. Teresa. St. Teresa of Avila. . . ."

Mrs. Oliver looked slightly startled.

"But how did St. Teresa of Avila come into it?"

"Well, I don't know really. I think she must have been reading a Life of her. Anyway, she said that it was wonderful how women get a sort of second wind. That's not quite the term she used, but something like that. You know, when they are forty or fifty or that sort of age and they suddenly want to begin a new life. Teresa of Avila did. She hadn’t done anything special up till then except being a nun, then she went out and reformed all the convents, didn’t she, and flung her weight about and became a great Saint.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t seem quite the same thing.”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Mrs. Carstairs. “But women do talk in a very silly way, you know, when they are referring to love affairs when they get on in life. About how it’s never too late.”

Seven

BACK TO THE NURSERY

Mrs. Oliver looked rather doubtfully at the three steps and the front door of a small, rather dilapidated-looking cottage in the side street. Below the windows some bulbs were growing, mainly tulips.

Mrs. Oliver paused, opened the little address book in her hand, verified that she was in the place she thought she was, and rapped gently with the knocker after having tried to press a bell push of possible electrical significance but which did not seem to yield any satisfactory bell ringing inside, or anything of that kind. Presently, not getting any response, she knocked again. This time there were sounds from inside. A shuffling sound of feet, some asthmatic breathing and hands apparently trying to manage the opening of the door. With this noise there came a few vague echoes in the letter box.

“Oh, drat it. Drat it. Stuck again, you brute, you.”

Finally, success met these inward industries, and the door, making a creaky and rather doubtful noise, was slowly pulled open. A very old woman with a wrinkled face, humped shoulders and a general arthritic appearance, looked at her visitor. Her face was unwelcoming. It held no sign of fear, merely of distaste for those who came and knocked at the home of an Englishwoman’s castle. She might have been seventy or eighty, but she was still a valiant defender of her home.

“I dunno what you’ve come about and I—” she stopped. “Why,” she said, “it’s Miss Ariadne. Well I never now! It’s Miss Ariadne.”

“I think you’re wonderful to know me,” said Mrs. Oliver. “How are you, Mrs. Matcham?”

“Miss Ariadne! Just think of that now.”

It was, Mrs. Ariadne Oliver thought, a long time ago since she had been addressed as Miss Ariadne, but the intonation of the voice, cracked with age though it was, rang a familiar note.

“Come in, m’dear,” said the old dame, “come in now. You’re lookin’ well, you are. I dunno how many years it is since I’ve seen you. Fifteen at least.”

It was a good deal more than fifteen but Mrs. Oliver made no corrections. She came in. Mrs. Matcham was shaking hands, her hands were rather unwilling to obey their owner’s orders. She managed to shut the door and, shuffling her feet and limping, entered a small room which was obviously one that was kept for the reception of any likely or unlikely visitors whom Mrs. Matcham was prepared to admit to her home. There were large numbers of photographs, some of babies, some of adults. Some in nice leather frames which were slowly drooping but had not quite fallen to pieces yet. One in a silver frame by now rather tarnished, representing a young woman in presentation Court Dress with feathers rising up on her head. Two naval officers, two military gentlemen, some photographs of naked babies sprawling on rugs. There was a sofa and two chairs. As bidden, Mrs. Oliver sat in a chair. Mrs. Matcham pressed herself down on the sofa and pulled a cushion into the hollow of her back with some difficulty.

“Well, my dear, fancy seeing you. And you’re still writing your pretty stories, are you?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, assenting to this though with a slight doubt as to how far detective stories and stories of crime and general criminal behaviour could be called “pretty stories.” But that, she thought, was very much a habit of Mrs. Matcham’s.

“I’m all alone now,” said Mrs. Matcham. “You remember Gracie, my sister? She died last autumn, she did. Cancer it was. They operated but it was too late.”

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry,” said Mrs. Oliver.

Conversation proceeded for the next ten minutes on the subject of the demise, one by one, of Mrs. Matcham's last remaining relatives.

"And you're all right, are you? Doing all right? Got a husband now? Oh now, I remember, he's dead years ago, isn't he? And what brings you here, to Little Saltern Minor?"

"I just happened to be in the neighbourhood," said Mrs. Oliver, "and as I've got your address in my little address book with me, I thought I'd just drop in and—well, see how you were and everything."

"Ah! And talk about old times, perhaps. Always nice when you can do that, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Oliver, feeling some relief that this particular line had been indicated to her since it was more or less what she had come for. "What a lot of photographs you've got," she said.

"Ah, I have, an' that. D'you know, when I was in that Home—silly name it had. Sunset House of Happiness for the Aged, something like that it was called, a year and a quarter I lived there till I couldn't stand it no more, a nasty lot they were, saying you couldn't have any of your own things with you. You know, everything had to belong to the Home. I don't say as it wasn't comfortable, but you know, I like me own things around me. My photos and my furniture. And then there was ever so nice a lady, came from a Council she did, some society or other, and she told me there was another place where they had homes of their own or something and you could take what you liked with you. And there's ever such a nice helper as comes in every day to see if you're all right. Ah, very comfortable I am here. Very comfortable indeed. I've got all my own things."

"Something from everywhere," said Mrs. Oliver, looking round.

"Yes, that table—the brass one—that's Captain Wilson, he sent me that from Singapore or something like that. And that Benares brass too. That's nice, isn't it? That's a funny thing on the ashtray. That's Egyptian, that is. It's a scarabee, or some name like that. You know. Sounds like some kind of scratching disease but it isn't. No, it's a sort of beetle and it's made out of some stone. They call it a precious stone. Bright blue. A lazy—a lavis—a lazy lapin or something like that."

"Lapis lazuli," said Mrs. Oliver.

"That's right. That's what it is. Very nice, that is. That was my archaeological boy what went digging. He sent me that."

"All your lovely past," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Yes, all my boys and girls. Some of them as babies, some of them I had from the month, and the older ones. Some of them when I went to India and that other time when I was in Siam. Yes. That's Miss Moya in her Court dress. Ah, she was a pretty thing. Divorced two husbands, she has. Yes. Trouble with his lordship, the first one, and then she married one of those pop singers and of course that couldn't take very well. And then she married someone in California. They had a yacht and went places, I think. Died two or three years ago and only sixty-two. Pity dying so young, you know."

"You've been to a lot of different parts of the world yourself, haven't you?" said Mrs. Oliver. "India, Hong Kong, then Egypt, and South America, wasn't it?"

"Ah yes, I've been about a good deal."

"I remember," said Mrs. Oliver, "when I was in Malaya, you were with a service family then, weren't you? A General somebody. Was it—now wait a minute, I can't remember the name—it wasn't General and Lady Ravenscroft, was it?"

"No, no, you've got the name wrong. You're thinking of when I was with the Barnabys. That's right. You came to stay with them. Remember? You were doing a tour, you were, and you came and stayed with the Barnabys. You were an old friend of hers. He was a Judge."

"Ah yes," said Mrs. Oliver. "It's difficult a bit. One gets names mixed up."

“Two nice children they had,” said Mrs. Matcham. “Of course they went to school in England. The boy went to Harrow and the girl went to Roedean, I think it was, and so I moved on to another family after that. Ah, things have changed nowadays. Not so many amahs, even, as there used to be. Mind you, the amahs used to be a bit of a trouble now and then. I got on with our one very well when I was with the Barnabys, I mean. Who was it you spoke of? The Ravenscrofts? Well, I remember them. Yes—I forget the name of the place where they lived now. Not far from us. The families were acquainted, you know. Oh yes, it’s a long time ago, but I remember it all. I was still out there with the Barnabys, you know. I stayed on when the children went to school to look after Mrs. Barnaby. Look after her things, you know, and mend them and all that. Oh yes, I was there when that awful thing happened. I don’t mean the Barnabys, I mean to the Ravenscrofts. Yes, I shall never forget that. Hearing about it, I mean. Naturally I wasn’t mixed up in it myself, but it was a terrible thing to happen, wasn’t it?”

“I should think it must have been,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“It was after you’d gone back to England, a good long time after that, I think. A nice couple they were. Very nice couple and it was a shock to them.”

“I don’t really remember now,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I know. One forgets things. I don’t myself. But they said she’d always been queer, you know. Ever since the time she was a child. Some early story there was. She took a baby out of the pram and threw it in the river. Jealousy, they said. Other people said she wanted the baby to go to heaven and not wait.”

“Is it—is it Lady Ravenscroft, you mean?”

“No, of course I don’t. Ah, you don’t remember as well as I do. It was the sister.”

“Her sister?”

“I’m not sure now whether it was her sister or his sister. They said she’d been in a kind of mental place for a long time, you know. Ever since she was about eleven or twelve years old. They kept her there and then they said she was all right again and she came out. And she married someone in the Army. And then there was trouble. And the next thing they heard, I believe, was that she’d been put back again in one of them loony bin places. They treat you very well, you know. They have a suite, nice rooms and all that. And they used to go and see her, I believe. I mean the General did or his wife. The children were brought up by someone else, I think, because they were afraid-like. However, they said she was all right in the end. So she came back to live with her husband, and then he died or something. Blood pressure I think it was, or heart. Anyway, she was very upset and she came out to stay with her brother or her sister—whichever it was—she seemed quite happy there and everything, and ever so fond of children, she was. It wasn’t the little boy, I think, he was at school. It was the little girl, and another little girl who’d come to play with her that afternoon. Ah well, I can’t remember the details now. It’s so long ago. There was a lot of talk about it. There was some as said, you know, as it wasn’t her at all. They thought it was the amah that had done it, but the amah loved them and she was very, very upset. She wanted to take them away from the house. She said they weren’t safe there, and all sorts of things like that. But of course the others didn’t believe in it and then this came about and I gather they think it must have been whatever her name was—I can’t remember it now. Anyway, there it was.”

“And what happened to this sister, either of General or Lady Ravenscroft?”

“Well, I think, you know, as she was taken away by a doctor and put in some place and went back to England, I believe, in the end. I dunno if she went to the same place as before, but she was well looked after somewhere. There was plenty of money, I think, you know. Plenty of money in the husband’s family. Maybe she got all right again. But well, I haven’t thought of it for years. Not till you came here asking me stories about General and Lady Ravenscroft. I wonder where they are now. They must have retired before now, long ago.”

"Well, it was rather sad," said Mrs. Oliver. "Perhaps you read about it in the papers."

"Read what?"

"Well, they bought a house in England and then—"

"Ah now, it's coming back to me. I remember reading something about that in the paper. Yes, and thinking then that I knew the name Ravenscroft, but I couldn't quite remember when and how. They fell over a cliff, didn't they? Something of that kind."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "something of that kind."

"Now look here, dearie, it's so nice to see you, it is. You must let me give you a cup of tea."

"Really," said Mrs. Oliver, "I don't need any tea. Really, I don't want it."

"Of course you want some tea. If you don't mind now, come into the kitchen, will you? I mean, I spend most of my time there now. It's easier to get about there. But I take visitors always into this room because I'm proud of my things, you know. Proud of my things and proud of all the children and the others."

"I think," said Mrs. Oliver, "that people like you must have had a wonderful life with all the children you've looked after."

"Yes. I remember when you were a little girl, you liked to listen to the stories I told you. There was one about a tiger, I remember, and one about monkeys—monkeys in a tree."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "I remember those. It was a very long time ago."

Her mind swept back to herself, a child of six or seven, walking in button boots that were rather too tight on a road in England, and listening to a story of India and Egypt from an attendant Nanny. And this was Nanny. Mrs. Matcham was Nanny. She looked round the room as she followed her hostess out. At the pictures of girls, of schoolboys, of children and various middle-aged people, all mainly photographed in their best clothes and sent in nice frames or other things because they hadn't forgotten Nanny. Because of them, probably, Nanny was having a reasonably comfortable old age with money supplied. Mrs. Oliver felt a sudden desire to burst out crying. This was so unlike her that she was able to stop herself by an effort of will. She followed Mrs. Matcham to the kitchen. There she produced the offering she had brought.

"Well, I never! A tin of Tophole Thathams tea. Always my favourite. Fancy you remembering. I can hardly ever get it nowadays. And that's my favourite tea biscuits. Well, you are a one for never forgetting. What was it they used to call you—those two little boys who came to play—one would call you Lady Elephant and the other one called you Lady Swan. The one who called you Lady Elephant used to sit on your back and you went about the floor on all fours and pretended to have a trunk you picked things up with."

"You don't forget many things, do you, Nanny?" said Mrs. Oliver.

"Ah," said Mrs. Matcham. "Elephants don't forget. That's the old saying."

Eight

MRS. OLIVER AT WORK

Mrs. Oliver entered the premises of Williams & Barnet, a well-appointed chemist’s shop also dealing with various cosmetics. She paused by a kind of dumbwaiter containing various types of corn remedies, hesitated by a mountain of rubber sponges, wandered vaguely towards the prescription desk and then came down past the well-displayed aids to beauty as imagined by Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein, Max Factor and other benefit providers for women’s lives.

She stopped finally near a rather plump girl and enquired for certain lipsticks, then uttered a short cry of surprise.

“Why, Marlene—it is Marlene, isn’t it?”

“Well, I never. It’s Mrs. Oliver. I am pleased to see you. It’s wonderful, isn’t it? All the girls will be very excited when I tell them that you’ve been in to buy things here.”

“No need to tell them,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Oh, now I’m sure they’ll be bringing out their autograph books!”

“I’d rather they didn’t,” said Mrs. Oliver. “And how are you, Marlene?”

“Oh, getting along, getting along,” said Marlene.

“I didn’t know whether you’d be working here still.”

“Well, it’s as good as any other place, I think, and they treat you very well here, you know. I had a rise in salary last year and I’m more or less in charge of this cosmetic counter now.”

“And your mother? Is she well?”

“Oh yes. Mum will be pleased to hear I’ve met you.”

“Is she still living in her same house down the—the road past the hospital?”

“Oh yes, we’re still there. Dad’s not been so well. He’s been in hospital for a while, but Mum keeps along very well indeed. Oh, she will be pleased to hear I’ve seen you. Are you staying here by any chance?”

“Not really,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I’m just passing through, as a matter of fact. I’ve been to see an old friend and I wonder now—” she looked at her wristwatch. “Would your mother be at home now, Marlene? I could just call in and see her. Have a few words before I have to get on.”

“Oh, do do that,” said Marlene. “She’d be ever so pleased. I’m sorry I can’t leave here and come with you, but I don’t think—well, it wouldn’t be viewed very well. You know I can’t get off for another hour and a half.”

“Oh well, some other time,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Anyway, I can’t quite remember—was it number 17 or has it got a name?”

“It’s called Laurel Cottage.”

“Oh yes, of course. How stupid of me. Well, nice to have seen you.”

She hurried out plus one unwanted lipstick in her bag, and drove her car down the main street of Chipping Bartram and turned, after passing a garage and a hospital building, down a rather narrow road which had quite pleasant small houses on either side of it.

She left the car outside Laurel Cottage and went in. A thin, energetic woman with grey hair, of about fifty years of age, opened the door and displayed instant signs of recognition.

“Why, so it’s you, Mrs. Oliver. Ah well, now. Not seen you for years and years, I haven’t.”

“Oh, it’s a very long time.”

“Well, come in then, come in. Can I make you a nice cup of tea?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Mrs. Oliver, “because I’ve had tea already with a friend, and I’ve got to get back to London. As it happened, I went into the chemist for something I wanted and I saw Marlene there.”

“Yes, she’s got a very good job there. They think a lot of her in that place. They say she’s got a lot of enterprise.”

“Well, that’s very nice. And how are you, Mrs. Buckle? You look very well. Hardly older than when I saw you last.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t like to say that. Grey hairs, and I’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“This seems to be a day when I meet a lot of friends I knew formerly,” said Mrs. Oliver, going into the house and being led into a small, rather over-cluttered sitting room. “I don’t know if you remember Mrs. Carstairs—Mrs. Julia Carstairs.”

“Oh, of course I do. Yes, rather. She must be getting on.”

“Oh yes, she is, really. But we talked over a few old days, you know. In fact, we went as far as talking about that tragedy that occurred. I was in America at the time so I didn’t know much about it. People called Ravenscroft.”

“Oh, I remember that well.”

“You worked for them, didn’t you, at one time, Mrs. Buckle?”

“Yes. I used to go in three mornings a week. Very nice people they were. You know, real military lady and gentleman, as you might say. The old school.”

“It was a very tragic thing to happen.”

“Yes, it was, indeed.”

“Were you still working for them at that time?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I’d given up going there. I had my old Aunt Emma come to live with me and she was rather blind and not very well, and I couldn’t really spare the time anymore to go out doing things for people. But I’d been with them up to about a month or two before that.”

“It seemed such a terrible thing to happen,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I understand that they thought it was a suicide pact.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Mrs. Buckle. “I’m sure they’d never have committed suicide together. Not people like that. And living so pleasantly together as they did. Of course, they hadn’t lived there very long.”

“No, I suppose they hadn’t,” said Mrs. Oliver. “They lived somewhere near Bournemouth, didn’t they, when they first came to England?”

“Yes, but they found it was a bit too far for getting to London from there, and so that’s why they came to Chipping Bartram. Very nice house it was, and a nice garden.”

“Were they both in good health when you were working for them last?”

“Well, he felt his age a bit as most people do. The General, he’d had some kind of heart trouble or a slight stroke. Something of that kind, you know. They’d take pills, you know, and lie up a bit from time to time.”

“And Lady Ravenscroft?”

“Well, I think she missed the life she’d had abroad, you know. They didn’t know so very many people there, although they got to know a good many families, of course, being the sort of class they were. But I suppose it wasn’t like Malaya or those places. You know, where you have a lot of servants. I suppose gay parties and that sort of thing.”

“You think she missed her gay parties?”

“Well, I don’t know that exactly.”

“Somebody told me she’d taken to wearing a wig.”

“Oh, she’d got several wigs,” said Mrs. Buckle, smiling slightly. “Very smart ones and very expensive. You know, from time to time she’d send one back to the place she’d got it from in London, and they’d re-dress it for her again and send it. There were all kinds. You know, there was one with auburn hair, and one with little grey curls all over her head. Really, she looked very nice in that one. And two—well, not so attractive really but useful for—you know—windy days when you wanted something to put on when it might be raining. Thought a lot about her appearance, you know and spent a lot of her money on clothes.”

“What do you think was the cause of the tragedy?” said Mrs. Oliver. “You see, not being anywhere near here and not seeing any of my friends at that time because I was in America, I missed hearing anything about it and, well, one doesn’t like to ask questions or write letters about things of that kind. I suppose there must have been some cause. I mean, it was General Ravenscroft’s own revolver that was used, I understand.”

“Oh yes, he had two of those in the house because he said that no house was safe without. Perhaps he was right there, you know. Not that they’d had any trouble beforehand as far as I know. One afternoon a rather nasty sort of fellow came along to the door. Didn’t like the look of him, I didn’t. Wanted to see the General. Said he’d been in the General’s regiment when he was a young fellow. The General asked him a few questions and I think thought as how he didn’t—well, thought he wasn’t very reliable. So he sent him off.”

“You think then that it was someone outside that did it?”

“Well, I think it must have been because I can’t see any other thing. Mind you, I didn’t like the man who came and did the gardening for them very much. He hadn’t got a very good reputation and I gather he’d had a few jail sentences earlier in his life. But of course the General took up his references and he wanted to give him a chance.”

“So you think the gardener might have killed them?”

“Well, I—I always thought that. But then I’m probably wrong. But it doesn’t seem to me—I mean, the people who said there was some scandalous story or something about either her or him and that either he’d shot her or she’d shot him, that’s all nonsense, I’d say. No, it was some outsider. One of these people that—well, it’s not as bad as it is nowadays because that, you must remember, was before people began getting all this violence idea. But look at what you read in the papers every day now. Young men, practically only boys still, taking a lot of drugs and going wild and rushing about, shooting a lot of people for nothing at all, asking a girl in a pub to have a drink with them and then they see her home and next day her body’s found in a ditch. Stealing children out of prams from their mothers, taking a girl to a dance and murdering her or strangling her on the way back. If anything, you feel as anyone can do anything. And anyway, there’s that nice couple, the General and his wife, out for a nice walk in the evening, and there they were, both shot through the head.”

“Was it through the head?”

“Well, I don’t remember exactly now and of course I never saw anything myself. But anyway, just went for a walk as they often did.”

“And they’d not been on bad terms with each other?”

“Well, they had words now and again, but who doesn’t?”

“No boyfriend or girlfriend?”

“Well, if you can use that term of people of that age, oh, I mean there was a bit of talk here and there, but it was all nonsense. Nothing to it at all. People always want to say something of that kind.”

“Perhaps one of them was—ill.”

“Well, Lady Ravenscroft had been up to London once or twice consulting a doctor about something and I rather think she was going into hospital, or planning to go into hospital for an operation of some kind though she never told me exactly what it was. But I think they managed to put her right—she was in this hospital for a short time. No operation, I think. And when she came back she looked very much younger. Altogether, she’d had a lot of face treatment and you know, she looked so pretty in these wigs with curls on them. Rather as though she’d got a new lease of life.”

“And General Ravenscroft?”

“He was a very nice gentleman and I never heard or knew of any scandal about him and I don’t think there was any. People say things, but then they want to say something when there’s been a tragedy of any kind. It seems to me perhaps as he might have had a blow on the head in Malaya or something like that. I had an uncle or a great-uncle, you know, who fell off his horse there once. Hit it on a cannon or something and he was very queer afterwards. All right for about six months and then they had to put him into an asylum because he wanted to take his wife’s life the whole time. He said she was persecuting him and following him and that she was a spy for another nation. Ah, there’s no saying what things happen or can happen in families.”

“Anyway, you don’t think there was any truth in some of the stories about them that I have happened to hear of, bad feeling between them so that one of them shot the other and then shot himself or herself.”

“Oh no, I don’t.”

“Were her children at home at the time?”

“No. Miss—er—oh what was her name now, Rosie? No. Penelope?”

“Celia,” said Mrs. Oliver. “She’s my goddaughter.”

“Oh, of course she is. Yes, I know that now. I remember you coming and taking her out once. She was a high-spirited girl, rather bad-tempered in some ways, but she was very fond of her father and mother, I think. No, she was away at a school in Switzerland when it happened, I’m glad to say, because it would have been a terrible shock to her if she’d been at home and the one who saw them.”

“And there was a boy, too, wasn’t there?”

“Oh yes. Master Edward. His father was a bit worried about him, I think. He looked as though he disliked his father.”

“Oh, there’s nothing in that. Boys go through that stage. Was he very devoted to his mother?”

“Well, she fussed over him a bit too much, I think, which he found tiresome. You know, they don’t like a mother fussing over them, telling them to wear thicker vests or put an extra pullover on. His father, he didn’t like the way he wore his hair. It was—well they weren’t wearing hair like the way they are nowadays, but they were beginning to, if you know what I mean.”

“But the boy wasn’t at home at the time of the tragedy?”

“No.”

“I suppose it was a shock to him?”

“Well, it must have been. Of course, I wasn’t going to the house anymore at that time so I didn’t hear so much. If you ask me, I didn’t like that gardener. What was his name now—Fred, I think. Fred Wizell. Some name like that. Seems to me if he’d done a bit of—well, a bit of cheating or something like that and the General had found him out and was going to sack him, I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“To shoot the husband and wife?”

“Well, I’d have thought it more likely he’d just have shot the General. If he shot the General and the wife came along, then he’d have had to shoot her too. You read things like that in books.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver thoughtfully, “one does read all sorts of things in books.”

“There was the tutor. I didn’t like him much.”

“What tutor?”

“Well, there was a tutor for the boy earlier. You know, he couldn’t pass an exam and things at the earlier school he was at—prep school or something. So they had a tutor for him. He was there for about a year, I think. Lady

Ravenscroft liked him very much. She was musical, you know, and so was this tutor. Mr. Edmunds, I think his name was. Rather a namby-pamby sort of young man, I thought myself, and it's my opinion that General Ravenscroft didn't care for him much."

"But Lady Ravenscroft did."

"Oh, they had a lot in common, I think. And I think she was the one really that chose him rather more than the General. Mind you, he had very nice manners and spoke to everyone nicely and all that—"

"And did—what's-his-name?"

"Edward? Oh yes, he liked him all right, I think. Almost a bit of hero worship. Anyway, don't you believe any stories you hear about scandals in the family or her having an affair with anyone or General Ravenscroft with that rather po-faced girl who did filing work for him and all that sort of thing. No. Whoever that wicked murderer was, it's one who came from outside. The police never got on to anyone, a car was seen near there but there was nothing to it and they never got any further. But all the same I think one ought to look about for somebody perhaps who'd known them in Malaya or abroad or somewhere else, or even when they were first living at Bournemouth. One never knows."

"What did your husband think about it?" said Mrs. Oliver. "He wouldn't have known as much about them as you would, of course, but still he might have heard a lot."

"Oh, he heard a lot of talk, of course. In the George and Flag, of an evening, you know. People saying all sorts of things. Said as she drank and that cases of empty bottles had been taken out of the house. Absolutely untrue, that was, I know for a fact. And there was a nephew as used to come and see them sometimes. Got into trouble with the police in some way, he did, but I don't think there was anything in that. The police didn't, either. Anyway, it wasn't at that time."

"There was no one else really living in the house, was there, except the General and Lady Ravenscroft?"

“Well, she had a sister as used to come sometimes, Lady Ravenscroft did. She was a half sister, I think. Something like that. Looked rather like Lady Ravenscroft. She made a bit of trouble between them, I always used to think, when she came for a visit. She was one of those who likes stirring things up, if you know what I mean. Just said things to annoy people.”

“Was Lady Ravenscroft fond of her?”

“Well, if you ask me, I don’t think she was really. I think the sister more or less wished herself on to them sometimes and she didn’t like not to have her, but I think she found it pretty trying to have her there. The General quite liked her because she played cards well. Played chess and things with him and he enjoyed that. And she was an amusing woman in a way. Mrs. Jerryboy or something like that, her name was. She was a widow, I think. Used to borrow money from them, I think, too.”

“Did you like her?”

“Well, if you don’t mind my saying so, ma’am, no, I didn’t like her. I disliked her very much. I thought she was one of those troublemakers, you know. But she hadn’t been down for some time before the tragedy happened. I don’t really remember very much what she was like. She had a son as came with her once or twice. Didn’t like him very much. Shifty, I thought.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I suppose nobody will really ever know the truth. Not now. Not after all this time. I saw my goddaughter the other day.”

“Did you now, ma’am. I’d be interested to hear about Miss Celia. How is she? All right?”

“Yes. She seems quite all right. I think she’s thinking perhaps of getting married. At any rate she’s got a—”

“Got a steady boyfriend, has she?” said Mrs. Buckle. “Ah well, we’ve all got that. Not that we all marry the first one we settle on. Just as well if you don’t, nine times out of ten.”

“You don’t know a Mrs. Burton-Cox, do you?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

“Burton-Cox? I seem to know that name. No, I don’t think so. Wasn’t living down here or come to stay with them or anything? No, not that I remember. Yet I did hear something. Some old friend of General Ravenscroft, I think, which he’d known in Malaya. But I don’t know.” She shook her head.

“Well,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I mustn’t stay gossiping with you any longer. It’s been so nice to see you and Marlene.”

Nine

RESULTS OF ELEPHANTINE RESEARCH

“A telephone call for you,” said Hercule Poirot’s manservant, George. “From Mrs. Oliver.”

“Ah yes, George. And what had she to say?”

“She wondered if she could come and see you this evening, sir, after dinner.”

“That would be admirable,” said Poirot. “Admirable. I have had a tiring day. It will be a stimulating experience to see Mrs. Oliver. She is always entertaining as well as being highly unexpected in the things she says. Did she mention elephants, by the way?”

“Elephants, sir? No, I do not think so.”

“Ah. Then it would seem perhaps that the elephants have been disappointing.”

George looked at his master rather doubtfully. There were times when he did not quite understand the relevance of Poirot’s remarks.

“Ring her back,” said Hercule Poirot, “tell her I shall be delighted to receive her.”

George went away to carry out this order, and returned to say that Mrs. Oliver would be there about quarter to nine.

“Coffee,” said Poirot. “Let coffee be prepared and some petit-fours. I rather think I ordered some in lately from Fortnum and Mason.”

“A liqueur of any kind, sir?”

“No, I think not. I myself will have some Sirop de Cassis.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mrs. Oliver arrived exactly on time. Poirot greeted her with every sign of pleasure.

“And how are you, chère madame?”

“Exhausted,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She sank down into the armchair that Poirot indicated.

“Completely exhausted.”

“Ah. Qui va à la chasse—oh, I cannot remember the saying.”

“I remember it,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I learnt it as a child. ‘Qui va à la chasse perd sa place.’ ”

“That, I am sure, is not applicable to the chase you have been conducting. I am referring to the pursuit of elephants, unless that was merely a figure of speech.”

“Not at all,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I have been pursuing elephants madly. Here, there and everywhere. The amount of petrol I have used, the amount of trains I have taken, the amount of letters I’ve written, the amount of telegrams I’ve sent—you wouldn’t believe how exhausting it all is.”

“Then repose yourself. Have some coffee.”

“Nice, strong, black coffee—yes, I will. Just what I want.”

“Did you, may I ask, get any results?”

“Plenty of results,” said Mrs. Oliver. “The trouble is, I don’t know whether any of them are any use.”

“You learn facts, however?”

“No. Not really. I learnt things that people told me were facts, but I strongly doubt myself whether any of them were facts.”

“They were hearsay?”

“No. They were what I said they would be. They were memories. Lots of people who had memories. The trouble is, when you remember things you don’t always remember them right, do you?”

“No. But they are still what you might describe perhaps as results. Is not that so?”

“And what have you done?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“You are always so stern, madame,” said Poirot. “You demand that I run about, that I also do things.”

“Well, have you run about?”

“I have not run about, but I have had a few consultations with others of my own profession.”

“It sounds far more peaceful than what I have been doing,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Oh, this coffee is nice. It’s really strong. You wouldn’t believe how tired I am. And how muddled.”

“Come, come. Let us have good expectancy. You have got things. You have got something, I think.”

“I’ve got a lot of different suggestions and stories. I don’t know whether any of them are true.”

“They could be not true, but still be of use,” said Poirot.

“Well, I know what you mean,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and that’s what I think, too. I mean, that’s what I thought when I went about it. When people remember something and tell you about it—I mean, it’s often not quite actually what occurred, but it’s what they themselves thought occurred.”

“But they must have had something on which to base it,” said Poirot.

“I’ve brought you a list of a kind,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t need to go into details of where I went or what I said or why, I went out deliberately for—well, information one couldn’t perhaps get from anybody in this country now. But it’s all from people who knew something about the Ravenscrofts, even if they hadn’t known them very well.”

“News from foreign places, do you mean?”

“Quite a lot of them were from foreign places. Other people who knew them here rather slightly or from people whose aunts or cousins or friends knew them long ago.”

“And each one that you’ve noted down had some story to tell—some reference to the tragedy or to people involved?”

“That’s the idea,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I’ll tell you roughly, shall I?”

“Yes. Have a petit-four.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She took a particularly sweet and rather bilious-looking one and champed it with energy.

“Sweet things,” she said, “really give you a lot of vitality, I always think. Well now, I’ve got the following suggestions. These things have usually been said to me starting by:—‘Oh yes, of course!’ ‘How sad it was, that whole story!’ ‘Of course, I think everyone knows really what happened.’ That’s the sort of thing.”

“Yes.”

“These people thought they knew what happened. But there weren’t really any very good reasons. It was just something someone had told them, or they’d heard either from friends or servants or relations or things like that. The suggestions, of course, are all the kind that you might think they were. A. That General Ravenscroft was writing his memoirs of his Malayan days and that he had a young woman who acted as his secretary and took dictation and typed things for him and was helping him, that she was a nice-looking girl and no doubt there was something there. The result being—well, there seemed to be two schools of thought. One school of thought was that he shot his wife because he hoped to marry the girl, and then when he had shot her, immediately was horror-stricken at what he'd done and shot himself. . . ."

"Exactly," said Poirot. "A romantic explanation."

"The other idea was that there had been a tutor who came to give lessons to the son who had been ill and away from his prep school for six months or so—a good-looking young man."

"Ah yes. And the wife had fallen in love with the young man. Perhaps had an affair with him?"

"That was the idea," said Mrs. Oliver. "No kind of evidence. Just romantic suggestion again."

"And therefore?"

"Therefore I think the idea was that the General probably shot his wife and then in a fit of remorse shot himself. There was another story that the General had had an affair, and his wife found out about it, that she shot him and then herself. It's always been slightly different every time. But nobody really knew anything. I mean, it's always just a likely story every time. I mean, the General may have had an affair with a girl or lots of girls or just another married woman, or it might have been the wife who had an affair with someone. It's been a different someone in each story I've been told. There was nothing definite about it or any evidence for it. It's just the gossip that went around about twelve or thirteen years ago, which people have rather forgotten about now. But they remember enough about it to tell one a few names and get things only moderately wrong about what happened. There was an angry gardener who happened to live on the place, there was a nice elderly cook-housekeeper, who was rather blind and rather deaf, but nobody seems to suspect that she had anything to do with it. And so on. I've got all the names and possibilities written down. The names of some of them wrong and some of them right. It’s all very difficult. His wife had been ill, I gather, for some short time, I think it was some kind of fever that she had. A lot of her hair must have fallen out because she bought four wigs. There were at least four new wigs found among her things.”

“Yes. I, too, heard that,” said Poirot.

“Who did you hear it from?”

“A friend of mine in the police. He went back over the accounts of the inquest and the various things in the house. Four wigs! I would like to have your opinion on that, madame. Do you think that four wigs seems somewhat excessive?”

“Well, I do really,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I had an aunt who had a wig, and she had an extra wig, but she sent one back to be redressed and wore the second one. I never heard of anyone who had four wigs.”

Mrs. Oliver extracted a small notebook from her bag, ruffled the pages of it, searching for extracts.

“Mrs. Carstairs, she’s seventy-seven and rather gaga. Quote from her: ‘I do remember the Ravenscrofts quite well. Yes, yes, a very nice couple. It’s very sad, I think. Yes. Cancer it was!’ I asked her which of them had cancer,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but Mrs. Carstairs had rather forgotten about that. She said she thought the wife came to London and consulted a doctor and had an operation and then came home and was very miserable, and her husband was very upset about her. So of course he shot her and himself.”

“Was that her theory or did she have an exact knowledge?”

“I think it was entirely theory. As far as I can see and hear in the course of my investigations,” said Mrs. Oliver, making rather a point of this last word, “when anybody has heard that any of their friends whom they don’t happen to know very well have sudden illness or consult doctors, they always think it’s cancer. And so do the people themselves, I think. Somebody else—I can’t read her name here, I’ve forgotten, I think it began with T—she said that it was the husband who had cancer. He was very unhappy, and so was his wife. And they talked it over together and they couldn’t bear the thought of it all, so they decided to commit suicide.”

“Sad and romantic,” said Poirot.

“Yes, and I don’t think really true,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It is worrying, isn’t it? I mean, the people remembering so much and that they really mostly seem to have made it up themselves.”

“They have made up the solution of something they knew about,” said Poirot. “That is to say, they know that somebody comes to London, say, to consult a doctor, or that somebody has been in hospital for two or three months. That is a fact that they know.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and then when they come to talk about it a long time afterwards, they’ve got the solution for it which they’ve made up themselves. That isn’t awfully helpful, is it?”

“It is helpful,” said Poirot. “You are quite right, you know, in what you said to me.”

“About elephants?” said Mrs. Oliver, rather doubtfully.

“About elephants,” said Poirot. “It is important to know certain facts which have lingered in people’s memories although they may not know exactly what the fact was, why it happened or what led to it. But they might easily know something that we do not know and that we have no means of learning. So there have been memories leading to theories—theories of infidelity, of illness, of suicide pacts, of jealousy, all these things have been suggested to you. Further search could be made as to points if they seem in any way probable.”

“People like talking about the past,” said Mrs. Oliver. “They like talking about the past really much more than they like talking about what’s happening now, or what happened last year. It brings things back to them. They tell you, of course, first about a lot of other people that you don’t want to hear about and then you hear what the other people that they’ve remembered knew about somebody else that they didn’t know but they heard about. You know, so that the General and Lady Ravenscroft you hear about is at one remove, as it were. It's like family relationships," she said. "You know, first cousin once removed, second cousin twice removed, all the rest of it. I don't think I've been really very helpful, though."

"You must not think that," said Poirot. "I am pretty sure that you will find that some of these things in your agreeable little purple-coloured notebook will have something to do with the past tragedy. I can tell you from my own enquiries into the official accounts of these two deaths, that they have remained a mystery. That is, from the police point of view. They were an affectionate couple, there was no gossip or hearsay much about them of any sex trouble, there was no illness discovered such as would have caused anyone to take their own lives. I talk now only of the time, you understand, immediately preceding the tragedy. But there was a time before that, further back."

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Oliver, "and I've got something about that from an old Nanny. An old Nanny who is now—I don't know, she might be a hundred, but I think she's only about eighty. I remember her from my childhood days. She used to tell me stories about people in the Services abroad—India, Egypt, Siam and Hong Kong and the rest."

"Anything that interested you?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "there was some tragedy that she talked about. She seemed a bit uncertain about what it was. I'm not sure that it had anything to do with the Ravenscrofts, it might have been to do with some other people out there because she doesn't remember surnames and things very well. It was a mental case in one family. Someone's sister-in-law. Either General Whoever-it-was's sister or Mrs. Who-ever-it-was's sister. Somebody who'd been in a mental home for years. I gathered she'd killed her own children or tried to kill her own children long ago, and then she'd been supposed to be cured or paroled or something and came out to Egypt, or Malaya or wherever it was. She came out to stay with the people. And then it seems there was some other tragedy, connected again, I think, with children or something of that kind. Anyway, it was something that was hushed up. But I wondered. I mean, if there was something mental in the family, either Lady Ravenscroft's family or General Ravenscroft's family. I don’t think it need have been as near as a sister. It could have been a cousin or something like that. But—well, it seemed to me a possible line of enquiry.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “there’s always possibility and something that waits for many years and then comes home to roost from somewhere in the past. That is what someone said to me. Old sins have long shadows.”

“It seemed to me,” said Mrs. Oliver, “not that it was likely or even that old Nanny Matcham remembered it right or even really about it being the people she thought it was. But it might have fitted in with what that awful woman at the literary luncheon said to me.”

“You mean when she wanted to know. . . .”

“Yes. When she wanted me to find out from the daughter, my godchild, whether her mother had killed her father or whether her father had killed her mother.”

“And she thought the girl might know?”

“Well, it’s likely enough that the girl would know. I mean, not at the time—it might have been shielded from her—but she might know things about it which would make her be aware what the circumstances were in their lives and who was likely to have killed whom, though she would probably never mention it or say anything about it or talk to anyone about it.”

“And you say that woman—this Mrs.—”

“Yes. I’ve forgotten her name now. Mrs. Burton something. A name like that. She said something about her son had this girlfriend and that they were thinking of getting married. And I can quite see you might want to know, if so, whether her mother or father had criminal relations in their family—or a loony strain. She probably thought that if it was the mother who killed the father it would be very unwise for the boy to marry her, whereas if the father had killed the mother, she probably wouldn’t mind as much,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“You mean that she would think that the inheritance would go in the female line?”

“Well, she wasn’t a very clever type of woman. Bossy,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Thinks she knows a lot, but no. I think you might think that way if you were a woman.”

“An interesting point of view, but possible,” said Poirot. “Yes, I realize that.” He sighed. “We have a lot to do still.”

“I’ve got another side light on things, too. Same thing, but second hand, if you know what I mean. You know. Someone says ‘The Ravenscrofts? Weren’t they that couple who adopted a child? Then it seems, after it was all arranged, and they were absolutely stuck on it—very, very keen on it, one of their children had died in Malaya, I think—but at any rate they had adopted this child and then its own mother wanted it back and they had a court case or something. But the court gave them the custody of the child and the mother came and tried to kidnap it back.’”

“There are simpler points,” said Poirot, “arising out of your report, points that I prefer.”

“Such as?”

“Wigs. Four wigs.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I thought that was interesting you but I don’t know why. It doesn’t seem to mean anything. The other story was just somebody mental. There are mental people who are in homes or loony bins because they have killed their children or some other child, for some absolutely batty reason, no sense to it at all. I don’t see why that would make General and Lady Ravenscroft want to kill themselves.”

“Unless one of them was implicated,” said Poirot.

“You mean that General Ravenscroft may have killed someone, a boy—an illigitimate child, perhaps, of his wife’s or of his own? No, I think we’re getting a bit too melodramatic there. Or she might have killed her husband’s child or her own.”

“And yet,” said Poirot, “what people seem to be, they usually are.”

“You mean—?”

“They seemed an affectionate couple, a couple who lived together happily without disputes. They seem to have had no case history of illness beyond a suggestion of an operation, of someone coming to London to consult some medical authority, a possibility of cancer, of leukaemia, something of that kind, some future that they could not face. And yet, somehow we do not seem to get at something beyond what is possible, but not yet what is probable. If there was anyone else in the house, anyone else at the time, the police, my friends that is to say, who have known the investigation at the time, say that nothing told was really compatible with anything else but with the facts. For some reason, those two didn’t want to go on living. Why?”

“I knew a couple,” said Mrs. Oliver, “in the war—the second war, I mean—they thought that the Germans would land in England and they had decided if that happened they would kill themselves. I said it was very stupid. They said it would be impossible to go on living. It still seems to me stupid. You’ve got to have enough courage to live through something. I mean, it’s not as though your death was going to do any good to anybody else. I wonder—”

“Yes, what do you wonder?”

“Well, when I said that I wondered suddenly if General and Lady Ravenscroft’s deaths did any good to anyone else.”

“You mean somebody inherited money from them?”

“Yes. Not quite as blatant as that. Perhaps somebody would have a better chance of doing well in life. Something there was in their life that they didn’t want either of their two children ever to hear about or to know about.”

Poirot sighed.

“The trouble with you, is,” he said, “you think so often of something that well might have occurred, that might have been. You give me ideas. Possible ideas. If only they were probable ideas also. Why? Why were the deaths of those two necessary? Why is it—they were not in pain, they were not in illness, they were not deeply unhappy from what one can see. Then why, in the evening of a beautiful day, did they go for a walk to a cliff and taking the dog with them. . . .”

“What’s the dog got to do with it?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Well, I wondered for a moment. Did they take the dog, or did the dog follow them? Where does the dog come in?”

“I suppose it comes in like the wigs,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Just one more thing that you can’t explain and doesn’t seem to make sense. One of my elephants said the dog was devoted to Lady Ravenscroft, but another one said the dog bit her.”

“One always comes back to the same thing,” said Poirot. “One wants to know more.” He sighed. “One wants to know more about the people, and how can you know people separated from you by a gulf of years.”

“Well, you’ve done it once or twice, haven’t you?” said Mrs. Oliver. “You know—something about where a painter was shot or poisoned. That was near the sea on a sort of fortification or something. You found out who did that, although you didn’t know any of the people.”

“No. I didn’t know any of the people, but I learnt about them from the other people who were there.”[1]

“Well, that’s what I’m trying to do,” said Mrs. Oliver, “only I can’t get near enough. I can’t get to anyone who really knew anything, who was really involved. Do you think really we ought to give it up?”

“I think it would be very wise to give it up,” said Poirot, “but there is a moment when one no longer wants to be wise. One wants to find out more.

I have an interest now in that couple of kindly people, with two nice children. I presume they are nice children?"

"I don't know the boy," said Mrs. Oliver, "I don't think I've ever met him. Do you want to see my goddaughter? I could send her to see you, if you like."

"Yes, I think I would like to see her, meet her some way. Perhaps she would not wish to come and see me, but a meeting could be brought about. It might, I think, be interesting. And there is someone else I would like to see."

"Oh! Who is that?"

"The woman at the party. The bossy woman. Your bossy friend."

"She's no friend of mine," said Mrs. Oliver. "She just came up and spoke to me, that's all."

"You could resume acquaintance with her?"

"Oh yes, quite easily. I would think she'd probably jump at it."

"I would like to see her. I would like to know why she wants to know these things."

"Yes. I suppose that might be useful. Anyway—" Mrs. Oliver sighed—"I shall be glad to have a rest from elephants. Nanny—you know, the old Nanny I talked about—she mentioned elephants and that elephants didn't forget. That sort of silly sentence is beginning to haunt me. Ah well, you must look for more elephants. It's your turn."

"And what about you?"

"Perhaps I could look for swans."

"Mon dieu, where do swans come in?"

“It is only what I remember, which Nanny reminded me of. That there were little boys I used to play with and one used to call me Lady Elephant and the other one used to call me Lady Swan. When I was Lady Swan I pretended to be swimming about on the floor. When I was Lady Elephant they rode on my back. There are no swans in this.”

“That is a good thing,” said Poirot. “Elephants are quite enough.”

Ten

DESMOND

Two days later, as Hercule Poirot drank his morning chocolate, he read at the same time a letter that had been among his correspondence that morning. He was reading it now for the second time. The handwriting was a moderately good one, though it hardly bore the stamp of maturity.

Dear Monsieur Poirot,

I am afraid you will find this letter of mine somewhat peculiar, but I believe it would help if I mentioned a friend of yours. I tried to get in touch with her to ask her if she would arrange for me to come and see you, but apparently she had left home. Her secretary—I am referring to Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, the novelist—her secretary seemed to say something about her having gone on a safari in East Africa. If so, I can see she may not return for some time. But I'm sure she would help me. I would indeed like to see you so much. I am badly in need of advice of some kind.

Mrs. Oliver, I understand, is acquainted with my mother, who met her at a literary luncheon party. If you could give me an appointment to visit you one day I should be very grateful. I can suit my time to anything you suggested. I don't know if it is helpful at all but Mrs. Oliver's secretary did mention the word "elephants." I presume this has something to do with Mrs. Oliver's travels in East Africa. The secretary spoke as though it was some kind of password. I don't really understand this but perhaps you will. I am in a great state of worry and anxiety and I would be very grateful if you could see me.

Yours truly,

Desmond Burton-Cox.

"Nom d'un petit bonhomme!" said Hercule Poirot.

“I beg your pardon, sir?” said George.

“A mere ejaculation,” said Hercule Poirot. “There are some things, once they have invaded your life, which you find very difficult to get rid of again. With me it seems to be a question of elephants.”

He left the breakfast table, summoned his faithful secretary, Miss Lemon, handed her the letter from Desmond Cox and gave her directions to arrange an appointment with the writer of the letter.

“I am not too occupied at the present time,” he said. “Tomorrow will be quite suitable.”

Miss Lemon reminded him of two appointments which he already had, but agreed that that left plenty of hours vacant and she would arrange something as he wished.

“Something to do with the Zoological Gardens?” she enquired.

“Hardly,” said Poirot. “No, do not mention elephants in your letter. There can be too much of anything. Elephants are large animals. They occupy a great deal of the horizon. Yes. We can leave elephants. They will no doubt arise in the course of the conversation I propose to hold with Desmond Burton-Cox.”

“Mr. Desmond Burton-Cox,” announced George, ushering in the expected guest.

Poirot had risen to his feet and was standing beside the mantelpiece. He remained for a moment or two without speaking, then he advanced, having summed up his own impression. A somewhat nervous and energetic personality. Quite naturally so, Poirot thought. A little ill at ease but managing to mask it very successfully. He said, extending a hand,

“Mr. Hercule Poirot?”

“That is right,” said Poirot. “And your name is Desmond Burton-Cox. Pray sit down and tell me what I can do for you, the reasons why you have come to see me.”

“It’s all going to be rather difficult to explain,” said Desmond Burton-Cox.

“So many things are difficult to explain,” said Hercule Poirot, “but we have plenty of time. Sit down.”

Desmond looked rather doubtfully at the figure confronting him. Really, a very comic personality, he thought. The egg-shaped head, the big moustaches. Not somehow very imposing. Not quite, in fact, what he had expected to encounter.

“You—you are a detective, aren’t you?” he said. “I mean you—you find out things. People come to you to find out, or to ask you to find out things for them.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that is one of my tasks in life.”

“I don’t suppose that you know what I’ve come about or that you know anything much about me.”

“I know something,” said Poirot.

“You mean Mrs. Oliver, your friend Mrs. Oliver. She’s told you something?”

“She told me that she had had an interview with a goddaughter of hers, a Miss Celia Ravenscroft. That is right, is it not?”

“Yes. Yes, Celia told me. This Mrs. Oliver, is she—does she also know my mother—know her well, I mean?”

“No. I do not think that they know each other well. According to Mrs. Oliver, she met her at a literary luncheon recently and had a few words with her. Your mother, I understand, made a certain request to Mrs. Oliver.”

“She’d no business to do so,” said the boy.

His eyebrows came down over his nose. He looked angry now, angry—almost revengeful.

“Really,” he said. “Mothers—I mean—”

“I understand,” said Poirot. “There is much feeling these days, indeed perhaps there always has been. Mothers are continually doing things which their children would much rather they did not. Am I right?”

“Oh you’re right enough. But my mother—I mean, she interferes in things in which really she has no concern.”

“You and Celia Ravenscroft, I understand, are close friends. Mrs. Oliver understood from your mother that there was some question of marriage. Perhaps in the near future?”

“Yes, but my mother really doesn’t need to ask questions and worry about things which are—well, no concern of hers.”

“But mothers are like that,” said Poirot. He smiled faintly. He added, “You are, perhaps, very much attached to your mother?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Desmond. “No, I certainly wouldn’t say that. You see—well, I’d better tell you straight away, she’s not really my mother.”

“Oh, indeed. I had not understood that.”

“I’m adopted,” said Desmond. “She had a son. A little boy who died. And then she wanted to adopt a child so I was adopted, and she brought me up as her son. She always speaks of me as her son, and thinks of me as her son, but I’m not really. We’re not a bit alike. We don’t look at things the same way.”

“Very understandable,” said Poirot.

“I don’t seem to be getting on,” said Desmond, “with what I want to ask you.”

“You want me to do something to find out something, to cover a certain line of interrogation?”

“I suppose that does cover it. I don’t know how much you know about—about well, what the trouble is all about.”

“I know a little,” said Poirot. “Not details. I do not know very much about you or about Miss Ravenscroft, whom I have not yet met. I’d like to meet her.”

“Yes, well, I was thinking of bringing her to talk to you but I thought I’d better talk to you myself first.”

“Well, that seems quite sensible,” said Poirot. “You are unhappy about something? Worried? You have difficulties?”

“Not really. No. No, there shouldn’t be any difficulties. There aren’t any. What happened is a thing that happened years ago when Celia was only a child, or a schoolgirl at least. And there was a tragedy, the sort of thing that happens—well, it happens every day, any time. Two people you know whom something has upset very much and they commit suicide. A sort of suicide pact, this was. Nobody knew very much about it or why, or anything like that. But, after all, it happens and it’s no business really of people’s children to worry about it. I mean, if they know the facts that’s quite enough, I should think. And it’s no business of my mother’s at all.”

“As one journeys through life,” said Poirot, “one finds more and more that people are often interested in things that are none of their own business. Even more so than they are in things that could be considered as their own business.”

“But this is all over. Nobody knew much about it or anything. But, you see, my mother keeps asking questions. Wants to know things, and she’s got at Celia. She’s got Celia into a state where she doesn’t really know whether she wants to marry me or not.”

“And you? You know if you want to marry her still?”

"Yes, of course I know. I mean to marry her. I'm quite determined to marry her. But she's got upset. She wants to know things. She wants to know why all this happened and she thinks—I'm sure she's wrong—she thinks that my mother knows something about it. That she's heard something about it."

"Well, I have much sympathy for you," said Poirot, "but it seems to me that if you are sensible young people and if you want to marry, there is no reason why you should not. I may say that I have been given some information at my request about this sad tragedy. As you say, it is a matter that happened years ago. There was no full explanation of it. There never has been. But in life one cannot have explanations of all the sad things that happen."

"It was a suicide pact," said the boy. "It couldn't have been anything else. But—well. . . ."

"You want to know the cause of it. Is that it?"

"Well, yes, that's it. That's what Celia's been worried about, and she's almost made me worried. Certainly my mother is worried, though, as I've said, it's absolutely no business of hers. I don't think any fault is attached to anyone. I mean, there wasn't a row or anything. The trouble is, of course, that we don't know. Well, I mean, I shouldn't know anyway because I wasn't there."

"You didn't know General and Lady Ravenscroft or Celia?"

"I've known Celia more or less all my life. You see, the people I went to for holidays and her people lived next door to each other when we were very young. You know—just children. And we always liked each other, and got on together and all that. And then of course, for a long time all that passed over. I didn't meet Celia for a great many years after that. Her parents, you see, were in Malaya, and so were mine. I think they met each other again there—I mean my father and mother. My father's dead, by the way. But I think when my mother was in Malaya she heard things and she's remembered now what she heard and she's worked herself up about them and she sort of—sort of thinks things that can't possibly be true. I'm sure they aren't true. But she's determined to worry Celia about them. I want to know what really happened. Celia wants to know what really happened. What it was all about. And why? And how? Not just people’s silly stories.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “it is not unnatural perhaps that you should both feel that. Celia, I should imagine, more than you. She is more disturbed by it than you are. But, if I may say so, does it really matter? What matters is the now, the present. The girl you want to marry, the girl who wants to marry you—what has the past to do with you? Does it matter whether her parents had a suicide pact or whether they died in an aeroplane accident or one of them was killed in an accident and the other one later committed suicide? Whether there were love affairs which came into their lives and made for unhappiness.”

“Yes,” said Desmond Burton-Cox, “yes, I think what you say is sensible and quite right but—well, things have been built up in such a way that I’ve got to make sure that Celia is satisfied. She’s—she’s a person who minds about things although she doesn’t talk about them much.”

“Has it not occurred to you,” said Hercule Poirot, “that it may be very difficult, if not impossible, to find out what really happened.”

“You mean which of them killed the other or why, or that one shot the other and then himself. Not unless—not unless there had been something.”

“Yes, but that something would have been in the past, so why does it matter now?”

“It oughtn’t to matter—it wouldn’t matter but for my mother interfering, poking about in things. It wouldn’t have mattered. I don’t suppose that, well, Celia’s ever thought much about it. I think probably that she was away at school in Switzerland at the time the tragedy happened and nobody told her much and, well, when you’re a teenager or younger still you just accept things as something that happened, but that’s not anything to do with you really.”

“Then don’t you think that perhaps you’re wanting the impossible?”

"I want you to find out," said Desmond. "Perhaps it's not the kind of thing that you can find out, or that you like finding out—"

"I have no objection to finding out," said Poirot. "In fact one has even a certain—curiosity, shall I say. Tragedies, things that arise as a matter of grief, surprise, shock, illness, they are human tragedies, human things, and it is only natural that if one's attention is drawn to them one should want to know. What I say is, is it wise or necessary to rake up things?"

"Perhaps it isn't," said Desmond, "but you see. . . ."

"And also," said Poirot, interrupting him, "don't you agree with me that it is rather an impossible thing to do after all this time?"

"No," said Desmond, "that's where I don't agree with you. I think it would be quite possible."

"Very interesting," said Poirot. "Why do you think it would be quite possible?"

"Because—"

"Of what? You have a reason."

"I think there are people who would know. I think there are people who could tell you if they were willing to tell you. People, perhaps, who would not wish to tell me, who would not wish to tell Celia, but you might find out from them."

"That is interesting," said Poirot.

"Things happened," said Desmond. "Things happened in the past. I—I've sort of heard about them in a vague way. There was some mental trouble. There was someone—I don't know who exactly, I think it might have been Lady Ravenscroft—I think she was in a mental home for years. Quite a long time. Some tragedy had happened when she was quite young. Some child who died or an accident. Something that—well, she was concerned in it in some way."

“It is not what you know of your own knowledge, I presume?”

“No. It’s something my mother said. Something she heard. She heard it in Malaya, I think. Gossip there from other people. You know how they get together in the Services, people like that, and the women all gossip together—all the memsahibs. Saying things that mightn’t be true at all.”

“And you want to know whether they were true or were not true?”

“Yes, and I don’t know how to find out myself. Not now, because it was a long time ago and I don’t know who to ask. I don’t know who to go to, but until we really find out what did happen and why—”

“What you mean is,” said Poirot, “at least I think I am right only this is pure surmise on my part, Celia Ravenscroft does not want to marry you unless she is quite sure that there is no mental flaw passed to her presumably by her mother. Is that it?”

“I think that is what she has got into her head somehow. And I think my mother put it there. I think it’s what my mother wants to believe. I don’t think she’s any reason really for believing it except ill-mannered spite and gossip and all the rest of it.”

“It will not be a very easy thing to investigate,” said Poirot.

“No, but I’ve heard things about you. They say that you’re very clever at finding out what did happen. Asking people questions and getting them to tell you things.”

“Whom do you suggest I should question or ask? When you say Malaya, I presume you are not referring to people of Malayan nationality. You are speaking of what you might call the memsahib days, the days when there were Service communities in Malaya. You are speaking of English people and the gossip in some English station there.”

“I don’t really mean that that would be any good now. I think whoever it was who gossiped, who talked—I mean, it’s so long ago now that they’d have forgotten all about it, that they are probably dead themselves. I think that my mother’s got a lot of things wrong, that she’s heard things and made up more things about them in her mind.”

“And you still think that I would be capable—”

“Well, I don’t mean that I want you to go out to Malaya and ask people things. I mean, none of the people would be there now.”

“So you think you could not give me names?”

“Not those sort of names,” said Desmond.

“But some names?”

“Well, I’ll come out with what I mean. I think there are two people who might know what happened and why. Because, you see, they’d have been there. They’d have known, really known, of their own knowledge.”

“You do not want to go to them yourself?”

“Well, I could. I have in a way, but I don’t think, you see, that they—I don’t know. I wouldn’t like to ask some of the things I want to ask. I don’t think Celia would. They’re very nice, and that’s why they’d know. Not because they’re nasty, not because they gossip, but because they might have helped. They might have done something to make things better, or have tried to do so, only they couldn’t. Oh, I’m putting it all so badly.”

“No,” said Poirot, “you are doing it very well, and I am interested and I think you have something definite in your mind. Tell me, does Celia Ravenscroft agree with you?”

“I haven’t said too much to her. You see, she was very fond of Maddy and of Zélie.”

“Maddy and Zélie?”

“Oh well, that’s their names. Oh, I must explain. I haven’t done it very well. You see, when Celia was quite a child—at the time when I first knew her, as I say, when we were living next door in the country—she had a French sort of—well, I suppose nowadays we call it an au pair girl but it was called a governess then. You know, a French governess. A mademoiselle. And you see, she was very nice. She played with all of us children and Celia always called her 'Maddy' for short—and all the family called her Maddy."

"Ah yes. The mademoiselle."

"Yes, you see being French I thought—I thought perhaps she would tell you things that she knew and wouldn't wish to speak about to other people."

"Ah. And the other name you mentioned?"

"Zélie. The same sort of thing, you see. A mademoiselle. Maddy was there, I think, for about two or three years and then, later, she went back to France, or Switzerland I think it was, and this other one came. Younger than Maddy was and we didn't call her Maddy. Celia called her Zélie. She was very young, pretty and great fun. We were all frightfully fond of her. She played games with us and we all loved her. The family did. And General Ravenscroft was very taken with her. They used to play games together, picquet, you know and lots of things."

"And Lady Ravenscroft?"

"Oh she was devoted to Zélie too, and Zélie was devoted to her. That's why she came back again after she'd left."

"Came back?"

"Yes, when Lady Ravenscroft was ill, and had been in hospital, Zélie came back and was sort of companion to her and looked after her. I don't know, but I believe, I think, I'm almost sure that she was there when it—the tragedy—happened. And so, you see she'd know—what really happened."

"And you know her address? You know where she is now?"

"Yes. I know where she is. I've got her address. I've got both their addresses. I thought perhaps you could go and see her, or both of them. I know it's a lot to ask—" He broke off.

Poirot looked at him for some minutes. Then he said: “Yes, it is a possibility—certainly—a possibility.”

Book Two

LONG SHADOWS

Eleven

SUPERINTENDENT GARROWAY AND POIROT COMPARE NOTES

Superintendent Garroway looked across the table at Poirot. His eyes twinkled. At his side George delivered a whisky and soda. Passing on to Poirot, he put down a glass filled with a dark purple liquid.

“What’s your tipple?” said Superintendent Garroway, with some interest.

“A syrup of black currant,” said Poirot.

“Well, well,” said Superintendent Garroway, “everyone to their own taste. What was it Spence told me? He told me you used to drink something called a tisane, wasn’t it? What’s that, a variant of French piano or something?”

“No,” said Poirot, “it’s useful for reducing fevers.”

“Ah. Invalid dope of some kind.” He drank from his glass. “Well,” he said, “here’s to suicide!”

“It was suicide?” Poirot asked.

“What else can it be?” said Superintendent Garroway. “The things you wanted to know!” He shook his head. His smile grew more pronounced.

“I am sorry,” said Poirot, “to have troubled you so much. I am like the animal or the child in one of your stories by Mr. Kipling. I Suffer from Insatiable Curiosity.”

“Insatiable curiosity,” said Superintendent Garroway. “Nice stories he wrote, Kipling. Knew his stuff, too. They told me once that that man could go for one short tour round a destroyer and know more about it than one of the top engineers in the Royal Navy.”

“Alas,” said Hercule Poirot. “I do not know everything. Therefore, you see, I have to ask questions. I am afraid that I sent you rather a long list of questions.”

“What intrigued me,” said Superintendent Garroway, “is the way you jumped from one thing to another. Psychiatrists, doctors’ reports, how money was left, who had money, who got money. Who expected money and didn’t get money, particulars of ladies’ hairdressing, wigs, name of the supplier of wigs, charming rose-coloured cardboard boxes they came in by the way.”

“You knew all these things,” said Poirot. “That has amazed me, I can assure you.”

“Ah well, it was a puzzling case and of course we made full notes on the subject. None of this was any good to us but we kept the files and it was all there if one wanted to look for it.”

He pushed a piece of paper across the table.

“Here you are. Hairdressers. Bond Street. Expensive firm. Eugene and Rosentelle was the name of it. They moved later. Same firm but went into business in Sloane Street. Here’s the address, but it’s a Pet Shop now. Two of their assistants retired some years ago now, but they were the top assistants serving people then, and Lady Ravenscroft was on their list. Rosentelle lives in Cheltenham now. Still in the same line of business—Calls herself a Hair Stylist—That’s the up-to-date term—and you add Beautician. Same man, different hat, as one used to say in my young days.”

“Ah-ha?” said Poirot.

“Why ah-ha?” asked Garroway.

“I am immensely obliged to you,” said Hercule Poirot. “You have presented me with an idea. How strange it is the way ideas arrive into one’s head.”

“You’ve too many ideas in your head already,” said the Superintendent, “that’s one of your troubles—you don’t need anymore. Now then, I’ve checked up as well as I could on the family history—nothing much there. Alistair Ravenscroft was of Scottish extraction. Father was a clergyman—two uncles in the Army—both quite distinguished. Married Margaret Preston-Grey—well-born girl—presented at Court and all the rest of it. No family scandals. You were quite right about her being one of twin sisters. Don't know where you picked that up—Dorothea and Margaret Preston-Grey—known colloquially as Dolly and Molly. The Preston-Greys lived at Hatters Green in Sussex. Identical twins—usual kind of history of that kind of twin. Cut their first tooth the same day—both got scarlet fever the same month—wore the same kind of clothes—fell in love with the same kind of man—got married about the same time—both husbands in the Army. Family doctor who attended the family when they were young died some years ago, so there's nothing of interest to be got out of him. There was an early tragedy, though, connected with one of them."

"Lady Ravenscroft?"

"No, the other one—she married a Captain Jarrow—had two children; the younger one, a boy of four, was knocked down by a wheelbarrow or some kind of child's garden toy—or a spade or a child's hoe. Hit him on his head and he fell into an artificial pond or something and drowned. Apparently it was the older child, a girl of nine who did it. They were playing together and quarrelled, as children do. Doesn't seem much doubt, but there was another story. Someone said the mother did it—got angry and hit him—and someone else said it was a woman who lived next door who hit him. Don't suppose it's of any interest to you—no bearing on a suicide pact entered into by the mother's sister and her husband years after."

"No," said Poirot, "it does not seem to. But one likes to know background."

"Yes," said Garroway, "as I told you, one has to look into the past. I can't say we'd thought of looking into the past as long ago as this. I mean, as I've said, all this was some years before the suicide."

"Were there any proceedings at the time?"

"Yes. I managed to look up the case. Accounts of it. Newspaper accounts. Various things. There were some doubts about it, you know. The mother was badly affected. She broke down completely and had to go into hospital. They do say she was never the same woman again afterwards.”

“But they thought she had done it?”

“Well, that’s what the doctor thought. There was no direct evidence, you understand. She said that she had seen this happen from a window, that she’d seen the older child, the girl, hit the boy and push him in. But her account—well, I don’t think they believed it at the time. She talked so wildly.”

“There was, I suppose, some psychiatric evidence?”

“Yes. She went to a nursing home or hospital of some kind, she was definitely a mental case. She was a good long time in one or two different establishments having treatment, I believe under the care of one of the specialists from St. Andrew’s Hospital in London. In the end she was pronounced cured, and released after about three years, and sent home to lead a normal life with her family.”

“And she was then quite normal?”

“She was always neurotic, I believe—”

“Where was she at the time of the suicide? Was she staying with the Ravenscrofts?”

“No—she had died nearly three weeks before that. She was staying with them at Overcliffe when it happened. It seemed again to be an illustration of the identical twin destiny. She walked in her sleep—had suffered from that over a period of years, it seems. She had had one or two minor accidents that way. Sometimes she took too many tranquillizers and that resulted in her walking round the house and sometimes out of it during the night. She was following a path along the cliff edge, lost her footing and fell over the cliff. Killed immediately—they didn’t find her until the next day. Her sister, Lady Ravenscroft, was terribly upset. They were very devoted to each other and she had to be taken to hospital suffering from shock.”

"Could this tragic accident have led to the Ravenscrofts' suicide some weeks later?"

"There was never a suggestion of such a thing."

"Odd things happen with twins as you say—Lady Ravenscroft might have killed herself because of the link between her and her twin sister. Then the husband may have shot himself because possibly he felt guilty in some way —"

Superintendent Garroway said: "You have too many ideas, Poirot. Alistair Ravenscroft couldn't have had an affair with his sister-in-law without everyone knowing about it. There was nothing of that kind—if that's what you've been imagining."

The telephone rang—Poirot rose and answered it. It was Mrs. Oliver.

"Monsieur Poirot, can you come to tea or sherry tomorrow? I have got Celia coming—and later on the bossy woman. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Poirot said it was just what he wanted.

"I've got to dash now," said Mrs. Oliver. "Going to meet an old War Horse —provided by my elephant No. 1, Julia Carstairs. I think she's got his name wrong—she always does—but I hope she's got his address right."

Twelve

CELIA MEETS HERCULE POIROT

“Well, madame,” said Poirot, “and how did you fare with Sir Hugo Foster?”

“To begin with his name wasn’t Foster—it was Fothergill. Trust Julia to get a name wrong. She’s always doing it.”

“So elephants are not always reliable in the names they remember?”

“Don’t talk of elephants—I’ve finished with elephants.”

“And your War Horse?”

“Quite an old pet—but useless as a source of information. Obsessed by some people called Barnet who did have a child killed in an accident in Malaya. But nothing to do with the Ravenscrofts. I tell you I’ve finished with elephants—”

“Madame, you have been most persevering, most noble.”

“Celia is coming along in about half an hour’s time. You wanted to meet her, didn’t you? I’ve told her that you are—well, helping me in this matter. Or would you rather she came to see you?”

“No,” said Poirot, “I think I should like her to come in the way you have arranged.”

“I don’t suppose she’ll stay very long. If we get rid of her in about an hour, that would be all right, just to think over things a bit, and then Mrs. Burton-Cox is coming.”

“Ah yes. That will be interesting. Yes, that will be very interesting.”

Mrs. Oliver sighed. “Oh dear, it’s a pity, though, isn’t it?” She said again, “We do have too much material, don’t we?”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “We do not know what we are looking for. All we know of still is, in all probability, the double suicide of a married couple who lived quiet and happy lives together. And what have we got to show for cause, for reason? We’ve gone forward and back to the right, to the left, to the west, to the east.”

“Quite right,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Everywhere. We haven’t been to the North Pole yet,” she added.

“Nor to the South Pole,” said Poirot.

“So what is there, when it all comes to it?”

“Various things,” said Poirot. “I have made here a list. Do you want to read it?”

Mrs. Oliver came over and sat beside him and looked over his shoulder.

“Wigs,” she said, pointing to the first item. “Why wigs first?”

“Four wigs,” said Poirot, “seem to be interesting. Interesting and rather difficult to solve.”

“I believe the shop she got her wigs from has gone out of the trade now. People go to quite different places for wigs and they’re not wearing so many as they did just then. People used to wear wigs to go abroad. You know, because it saves bother in travelling.”

“Yes, yes,” said Poirot, “we will do what we can with wigs. Anyway, that is one thing that interests me. And then there are other stories. Stories of mental disturbance in the family. Stories of a twin sister who was mentally disturbed and spent a good many years of her life in a mental home.”

“It doesn’t seem to lead anywhere,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I mean to say, I suppose she could have come and shot the two of them, but I don’t really see why.”

"No," said Poirot, "the fingerprints on the revolver were definitely only the fingerprints of General Ravenscroft and his wife, I understand. Then there are stories of a child, a child in Malaya was murdered or attacked, possibly by this twin sister of Lady Ravenscroft. Possibly by some quite different woman—possibly by an amah or a servant. Point two. You know a little more about money."

"Where does money come into it?" said Mrs. Oliver, in some surprise.

"It does not come into it," said Poirot. "That is what is so interesting. Money usually comes in. Money someone got as a result of that suicide. Money lost as a result of it. Money somewhere causing difficulties, causing trouble, causing covetousness and desire. It is difficult, that. Difficult to see. There does not seem to have been any large amount of money anywhere. There are various stories of love affairs, women who were attractive to the husband, men who were attractive to the wife. An affair on one side or the other could have led to suicide or to murder. It very often does. Then we come to what at the moment inclines me to the most interest. That is why I am so anxious to meet Mrs. Burton-Cox."

"Oh. That awful woman. I don't see why you think she's important. All she did was to be a nosey parker and want me to find out things."

"Yes, but why did she want you to find out things? It seems to me very odd, that. It seems to me that that is something that one has to find out about. She is the link, you see."

"The link?"

"Yes. We do not know what the link was, where it was, how it was. All we know is that she wants desperately to learn more about this suicide. Being a link, she connects both with your godchild, Celia Ravenscroft, and with the son who is not her son."

"What do you mean—not her son?"

"He is an adopted son," said Poirot. "A son she adopted because her own son died."

"How did her own child die? Why? When?"

"All these things I asked myself. She could be a link, a link of emotion, a wish for revenge through hatred, through some love affair. At any rate I must see her. I must make up my mind about her. Yes, I cannot help but think that is very important."

There was a ring at the bell and Mrs. Oliver went out of the room to answer it.

"This, I think, could be Celia," she said. "You're sure it's all right?"

"By me, yes," said Poirot. "By her also, I hope."

Mrs. Oliver came back a few minutes later. Celia Ravenscroft was with her. She had a doubtful, suspicious look.

"I don't know," she said, "if I—" She stopped, staring at Hercule Poirot.

"I want to introduce you," said Mrs. Oliver, "to someone who is helping me, and I hope is helping you also. That is, helping you in what you want to know and to find out. This is Monsieur Hercule Poirot. He has special genius in finding out things."

"Oh," said Celia.

She looked very doubtfully at the egg-shaped head, the monstrous moustaches and the small stature.

"I think," she said, rather doubtfully, "that I have heard of him."

Hercule Poirot stopped himself with a slight effort from saying firmly "Most people have heard of me." It was not quite as true as it used to be because many people who had heard of Hercule Poirot and known him, were now reposing with suitable memorial stones over them, in churchyards. He said,

"Sit down, mademoiselle. I will tell you this much about myself. That when I start an investigation I pursue it to the end. I will bring to light the truth and if it is, shall we say, truly the truth that you want, then I will deliver that knowledge to you. But it may be that you want reassuring. That is not the same thing as the truth. I can find various aspects that might reassure you. Will that be enough? If so, do not ask for more."

Celia sat down in the chair he had pushed towards her, and looked at him rather earnestly. Then she said,

"You don't think I'd care for the truth, is that it?"

"I think," said Poirot, "that the truth might be—a shock, a sorrow, and it might be that you would have said 'Why did I not leave all this behind? Why did I ask for knowledge? It is painful knowledge about which I can do nothing helpful or hopeful.' It is a double suicide by a father and a mother that I—well, we'll admit it—that I loved. It is not a disadvantage to love a mother and father."

"It seems to be considered so nowadays occasionally," said Mrs. Oliver. "New article of belief, shall we say."

"That's the way I've been living," said Celia. "Beginning to wonder, you know. Catching on to odd things that people said sometimes. People who looked at me rather pityingly. But more than that. With curiosity as well. One begins to find out, you know, things about people, I mean. People you meet, people you know, people who used to know your family. I don't want this life. I want . . . you think I don't really want it but I do—I want truth. I'm able to deal with truth. Just tell me something."

It was not a continuation of the conversation. Celia had turned on Poirot with a separate question. Something which had replaced what had been in her mind just previously.

"You saw Desmond, didn't you?" she said. "He went to see you. He told me he had."

"Yes. He came to see me. Did you not want him to do so?"

"He didn't ask me."

“If he had asked you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know whether I should have forbidden him to do so, told him on no account to do such a thing, or whether I should have encouraged it.”

“I would like to ask you one question, mademoiselle. I want to know if there is one clear thing in your mind that matters to you, that could matter to you more than anything else.”

“Well, what is that?”

“As you say, Desmond Burton-Cox came to see me. A very attractive and likeable young man, and very much in earnest over what he came to say. Now that—that is the really important thing. The important thing is if you and he really wish to marry—because that is serious. That is—though young people do not always think so nowadays—that is a link together for life. Do you want to enter into that state? It matters. What difference can it make to you or to Desmond whether the death of two people was a double suicide or something quite different?”

“You think it is something quite different—or, it was?”

“I do not as yet know,” said Poirot. “I have reason to believe that it might be. There are certain things that do not accord with a double suicide, but as far as I can go on the opinion of the police—and the police are very reliable, Mademoiselle Celia, very reliable—they put together all the evidence and they thought very definitely that it could be nothing else but a double suicide.”

“But they never knew the cause of it? That’s what you mean.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that’s what I mean.”

“And don’t you know the cause of it, either? I mean, from looking into things or thinking about them, or whatever you do?”

“No, I am not sure about it,” said Poirot. “I think there might be something very painful to learn and I am asking you whether you will be wise enough to say: ‘The past is the past. Here is a young man whom I care for and who cares for me. This is the future we are spending together, not the past.’”

“Did he tell you he was an adopted child?” asked Celia.

“Yes, he did.”

“You see, what business is it really, of hers? Why should she come worrying Mrs. Oliver here, trying to make Mrs. Oliver ask me questions, find out things? She’s not his own mother.”

“Does he care for her?”

“No,” said Celia. “I’d say on the whole he dislikes her. I think he always has.”

“She’s spent money on him, schooling and on clothes and on all sorts of different things. And you think she cares for him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. She wanted, I suppose, a child to replace her own child. She’d had a child who died in an accident, that was why she wanted to adopt someone, and her husband had died quite recently. All these dates are so difficult.”

“I know, I know. I would like perhaps to know one thing.”

“About her or about him?”

“Is he provided for financially?”

“I don’t know quite what you mean by that. He’ll be able to support me—to support a wife. I gather some money was settled on him when he was adopted. A sufficient sum, that is. I don’t mean a fortune or anything like that.”

“There is nothing that she could—withhold?”

“What, you mean that she’d cut off the money supplies if he married me? I don’t think she’s ever threatened to do that, or indeed that she could do it. I think it was all fixed up by lawyers or whoever arranges adoptions. I mean, they make a lot of fuss, these adoption societies, from all I hear.”

“I would ask you something else which you might know but nobody else does. Presumably Mrs. Burton-Cox knows it. Do you know who his actual mother was?”

“You think that might have been one of the reasons for her being so nosey and all that? Something to do with, as you say, what he was really. I don’t know. I suppose he might have been an illegitimate child. They’re the usual ones that go for adoption, aren’t they? She might have known something about his real mother or his real father, or something like that. If so, she didn’t tell him. I gather she just told him the silly things they suggest you should say. That it is just as nice to be adopted because it shows you really were wanted. There’s a lot of silly slop like that.”

“I think some societies suggest that that’s the way you should break the news. Does he or you know of any blood relations?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think he knows, but I don’t think it worries him at all. He’s not that kind of a worrier.”

“Do you know if Mrs. Burton-Cox was a friend of your family, of your mother and father? Did you ever meet her as far as you can remember, when you were living in your own home in the early days?”

“I don’t think so. I think Desmond’s mother—I mean, I think Mrs. Burton-Cox went to Malaya. I think perhaps her husband died out in Malaya, and that Desmond was sent to school in England while they were out there and that he was boarded with some cousins or people who take in children for holidays. And that’s how we came to be friends in those days. I always remembered him, you know. I was a great hero-worshipper. He was wonderful at climbing trees and he taught me things about birds’ nests and birds’ eggs. So it seemed quite natural, when I met him again I mean, met him at the university, and we both talked about where we’d lived and then he asked me my name. He said ‘Only your Christian name I know,’ and then we remembered quite a lot of things together. It’s what made us, you might say, get acquainted. I don’t know everything about him. I don’t know anything. I want to know. How can you arrange your life and know what you’re going to do with your life if you don’t know all about the things that affect you, that really happened?”

“So you tell me to carry on with my investigation?”

“Yes, if it’s going to produce any results, though I don’t think it will be because in a way, well, Desmond and I have tried our hand at finding out a few things. We haven’t been very successful. It seems to come back to this plain fact which isn’t really the story of a life. It’s the story of a death, isn’t it? Of two deaths, that’s to say. When it’s a double suicide, one thinks of it as one death. Is it in Shakespeare or where does the quotation come from—‘And in death they were not divided.’” She turned to Poirot again. “Yes, go on. Go on finding out. Go on telling Mrs. Oliver or telling me direct. I’d rather you told me direct.” She turned towards Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t mean to be horrid to you, Godmother. You’ve been a very nice godmother to me always, but—but I’d like it straight from the horse’s mouth. I’m afraid that’s rather rude, Monsieur Poirot, but I didn’t mean it that way.”

“No,” said Poirot, “I am content to be the horse’s mouth.”

“And you think you will be?”

“I always believe that I can.”

“And it’s always true, is it?”

“It is usually true,” said Poirot. “I do not say more than that.”

Thirteen

MRS. BURTON-COX

“Well,” said Mrs. Oliver as she returned into the room after seeing Celia to the door. “What do you think of her?”

“She is a personality,” said Poirot, “an interesting girl. Definitely, if I may put it so, she is somebody, not anybody.”

“Yes, that’s true enough,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“I would like you to tell me something.”

“About her? I don’t really know her very well. One doesn’t really, with godchildren. I mean, you only see them, as it were, at stated intervals rather far apart.”

“I didn’t mean her. Tell me about her mother.”

“Oh. I see.”

“You knew her mother?”

“Yes. We were in a sort of pensionnat in Paris together. People used to send girls to Paris then to be finished,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That sounds more like an introduction to a cemetery than an introduction into Society. What do you want to know about her?”

“You remember her? You remember what she was like?”

“Yes. As I tell you, one doesn’t entirely forget things or people because they’re in the past.”

“What impression did she make on you?”

"She was beautiful," said Mrs. Oliver. "I do remember that. Not when she was about thirteen or fourteen. She had a lot of puppy fat then. I think we all did," she added, thoughtfully.

"Was she a personality?"

"It's difficult to remember because, you see, she wasn't my only friend or my greatest friend. I mean, there were several of us together—a little pack, as you might say. People with tastes more or less the same. We were keen on tennis and we were keen on being taken to the opera and we were bored to death being taken to the picture galleries. I really can only give you a general idea.

"Molly Preston-Grey. That was her name."

"You both had boyfriends?"

"We had one or two passions, I think. Not for pop singers, of course. They hadn't happened yet. Actors usually. There was one rather famous variety actor. A girl—one of the girls—had him pinned up over her bed and Mademoiselle Girand, the French mistress, on no account allowed that actor to be pinned up there. 'Ce n'est pas convenable,' she said. The girl didn't tell her that he was her father! We laughed," added Mrs. Oliver. "Yes, we laughed a good deal."

"Well, tell me more about Molly or Margaret Preston-Grey. Does this girl remind you of her?"

"No, I don't think she does. No. They are not alike. I think Molly was more—was more emotional than this girl."

"There was a twin sister, I understand. Was she at the same pensionnat?"

"No, she wasn't. She might have been since they were the same age, but no, I think she was in some entirely different place in England. I'm not sure. I have a feeling that the twin sister Dolly, whom I had met once or twice very occasionally and who of course at that time looked exactly like Molly—I mean they hadn't started trying to look different, have different hairdos and all that, as twins do usually when they grow up. I think Molly was devoted to her sister Dolly, but she didn't talk about her very much. I have a feeling —nowadays, I mean, I didn't have it then—that there might have been something a bit wrong perhaps with the sister even then. Once or twice, I remember, there were mentions of her having been ill or gone away for a course of treatment somewhere. Something like that. I remember once wondering whether she was a cripple. She was taken once by an aunt on a sea voyage to do her health good." She shook her head. "I can't really remember, though. I just had a feeling that Molly was devoted to her and would have liked to have protected her in some way. Does that seem nonsense to you?"

"Not at all," said Hercule Poirot.

"There were other times, I think, when she didn't want to talk about her. She talked about her mother and her father. She was fond of them, I think, in the ordinary sort of way. Her mother came once to Paris and took her out, I remember. Nice woman. Not very exciting or good-looking or anything. Nice, quiet, kindly."

"I see. So you have nothing to help us there? No boyfriends?"

"We didn't have so many boyfriends then," said Mrs. Oliver. "It's not like nowadays when it's a matter of course. Later, when we were both back again at home we more or less drifted apart. I think Molly went abroad somewhere with her parents. I don't think it was India—I don't think so. Somewhere else I think it was. Egypt perhaps. I think now they were in the Diplomatic Service. They were in Sweden at one time, and after that somewhere like Bermuda or the West Indies. I think he was a Governor or something there. But those sort of things one doesn't really remember. Molly was very keen on the music master, which was very satisfying to us both and I should think much less troublesome than boyfriends seem to be nowadays. I mean, you adored—longed for the day when they came again to teach you. They were, I have no doubt, quite indifferent to you. But one dreamt about them at night and I remember having a splendid kind of daydream in which I nursed my beloved Monsieur Adolphe when he had cholera and I gave him, I think, blood transfusions to save his life. How very silly one is. And think of all the other things you think of doing! There was one time when I was quite determined to be a nun and later on I thought I'd be a hospital nurse. Well, I suppose we shall have Mrs. Burton-Cox in a moment. I wonder how she will react to you?"

Poirot gazed at his watch.

"We shall be able to see that fairly soon."

"Have we anything else we ought to talk about first?"

"I think there are a few things we might compare notes on. As I say, there are one or two things that I think could do with investigation. An elephant investigation for you, shall we say? And an understudy for an elephant for me."

"What an extraordinary thing to say," said Mrs. Oliver. "I told you I was done with elephants."

"Ah," said Poirot, "but elephants perhaps have not done with you."

The front doorbell sounded once again. Poirot and Mrs. Oliver looked at each other.

"Well," said Mrs. Oliver, "here we go."

She left the room once more. Poirot heard sounds of greeting going on outside and in a moment or two Mrs. Oliver returned, ushering the somewhat massive figure of Mrs. Burton-Cox.

"What a delightful flat you have," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "So charming of you to have spared time—your very valuable time, I'm sure—you asked me to come and see you." Her eyes shot sideways to Hercule Poirot. A faint expression of surprise passed over her face. For a moment her eyes went from him to the baby grand piano that stood in one window. It occurred to Mrs. Oliver that Mrs. Burton-Cox was thinking that Hercule Poirot was a piano tuner. She hastened to dispel this illusion.

"I want to introduce you," she said, "to M. Hercule Poirot."

Poirot came forward and bent over her hand.

“I think he is the only person who might be able to help you in some way. You know. What you were asking me about the other day concerning my godchild, Celia Ravenscroft.”

“Oh yes, how kind of you to remember. I do so hope you can give me a little more knowledge of what really happened.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t been very successful,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and that is really why I asked M. Poirot to meet you. He is a wonderful person, you know, for information on things generally. Really on top of his profession. I cannot tell you how many friends of mine he has assisted and how many, well, I can really call them mysteries, he has elucidated. And this was such a tragic thing to have happened.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Burton-Cox. Her eyes were still somewhat doubtful. Mrs. Oliver indicated chairs and remarked,

“Now what will you have? A glass of sherry? It’s too late for tea, of course. Or would you prefer a cocktail of some kind?”

“Oh, a glass of sherry. You are very kind.”

“Monsieur Poirot?”

“I, too,” said Poirot.

Mrs. Oliver could not help being thankful that he had not asked for Sirop de Cassis or one of his favourite fruit drinks. She got out glasses and a decanter.

“I have already indicated to Monsieur Poirot the outlines of the enquiry you want to make.”

“Oh yes,” said Mrs. Burton-Cox.

She seemed rather doubtful and not so sure of herself as it would seem she was in the natural habit of being.

"These young people," she said to Poirot, "so difficult nowadays. These young people. My son, such a dear boy, we have great hopes of his doing well in the future. And then there is this girl, a very charming girl, who, as probably Mrs. Oliver told you, is her goddaughter, and—well, of course one never knows. I mean these friendships spring up and very often they don't last. They are what we used to call calf-love, you know, years ago, and it is very important to know a little at least about the—antecedents of people. You know, what their families are like. Oh, of course I know Celia's a very well-born girl and all that, but there was this tragedy. Mutual suicide, I believe, but nobody has been really able to enlighten me at all on what led to it or what led up to it, shall we say. I have no actual friends who were friends in common with the Ravenscrofts and so it is very difficult for me to have ideas. I know Celia is a charming girl and all that, but one would like to know, to know more."

"I understand from my friend, Mrs. Oliver, that you wanted to know something specifically. You wanted to know, in fact—"

"What you said you wanted to know," said Mrs. Oliver, chipping in with some firmness, "was whether Celia's father shot her mother and then himself or whether Celia's mother shot her father and then herself."

"I feel it makes a difference," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "Yes, definitely I feel it makes a difference."

"A very interesting point of view," said Poirot.

His tone was not very encouraging.

"Oh, the emotional background, shall I say, the emotional events that led up to all this. In a marriage, you must admit, one has to think of the children. The children, I mean, that are to come. I mean heredity. I think now we realize that heredity does more than environment. It leads to certain formation of character and certain very grave risks that one might not want to take."

"True," said Poirot. "The people who undertake the risks are the ones that have to make the decision. Your son and this young lady, it will be their choice.”

“Oh, I know, I know. Not mine. Parents are never allowed to choose, are they, or even to give any advice. But I would like to know something about it, yes, I would like to know very much. If you feel that you could undertake any—investigation I suppose is the word you would use. But perhaps—perhaps I am being a very foolish mother. You know. Overanxious about my dear son. Mothers are like that.”

She gave a little whinney of laughter, putting her head slightly on one side.

“Perhaps,” she said, as she tipped up the sherry glass, “perhaps you will think about it and I also will let you know. Perhaps the exact points and things that I am worried about.”

She looked at her watch.

“Oh dear. Oh dear, I’m late for another appointment. I shall have to go. I am so sorry, dear Mrs. Oliver, to have to run away so soon, but you know what it is. I had great difficulties finding a taxi this afternoon. One after another just turned his head aside and drove straight past me. All very, very difficult, isn’t it? I think Mrs. Oliver has your address, has she not?”

“I will give you my address,” said Poirot. He removed a card from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Oh yes, yes. I see. Monsieur Hercule Poirot. You are French, is that right?”

“I am Belgian,” said Poirot.

“Oh yes, yes. Belgique. Yes, yes, I quite understand. I am so pleased to have met you and I feel so hopeful. Oh dear, I must go very, very fast.”

Shaking Mrs. Oliver warmly by the hand, then extending the same hand to Poirot, she left the room and the door sounded in the hall.

“Well, what do you think of that?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“What do you?” said Poirot.

“She ran away,” said Mrs. Oliver. “She ran away. You frightened her in some way.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I think you’ve judged quite right.”

“She wanted me to get things out of Celia, she wanted me to get some knowledge out of Celia, some expression, some sort of secret she suspected was there, but she doesn’t want a real proper investigation, does she?”

“I think not,” said Poirot. “That is interesting. Very interesting. She is well-to-do, you think?”

“I should say so. Her clothes are expensive, she lives at an expensive address, she is—it’s difficult to make out. She’s a pushing woman and a bossy woman. She sits on a lot of committees. There’s nothing, I mean, suspicious about her. I’ve asked a few people. Nobody likes her very much. But she’s a sort of public-spirited woman who takes part in politics, all those sort of things.”

“Then what is wrong with her?” said Poirot.

“You think there is something wrong with her? Or do you just not like her, like I do?”

“I think there is something there that she does not want to come to light,” said Poirot.

“Oh. And are you going to find out what it is?”

“Naturally, if I can,” said Poirot. “It may not be easy. She is in retreat. She was in retreat when she left us here. She was afraid of what questions I was going to ask her. Yes. It is interesting.” He sighed. “One will have to go back, you know, even farther than one thought.”

“What, back into the past again?”

“Yes. Somewhere in the past, in more cases than one, there is something that one will have to know before we can come back again to what happened—what is it now?—fifteen years ago, twenty years ago, at a house called Overcliffe. Yes. One will have to go back again."

"Well, that's that," said Mrs. Oliver. "And now, what is there to do? What is this list of yours?"

"I have heard a certain amount of information through police records on what was found in the house. You will remember that among the things there were four wigs."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "you said that four wigs were too many."

"It seemed to be a little excessive," said Poirot. "I have also got certain useful addresses. The address of a doctor that might be helpful."

"The doctor? You mean, the family doctor?"

"No, not the family doctor. The doctor who gave evidence at an inquest on a child who met with an accident. Either pushed by an older child or possibly by someone else."

"You mean by the mother?"

"Possibly the mother, possibly by someone else who was in the house at the time. I know the part of England where that happened, and Superintendent Garroway has been able to trace him, through sources known to him and also through journalistic friends of mine, who were interested in this particular case."

"And you're going to see—he must be a very old man by now."

"It is not him I shall go to see, it is his son. His son is also qualified as a specialist in various forms of mental disorders. I have an introduction to him and he might be able to tell me something interesting. There have also been enquiries into a case of money."

"What do you mean by money?"

“Well, there are certain things we have to find out. That is one of the things in anything which might be a crime. Money. Who has money to lose by some happening, who has money to gain by something happening. That, one has to find out.”

“Well, they must have found out in the case of the Ravenscrofts.”

“Yes, that was all quite natural, it seems. They had both made normal wills, leaving in each case, the money to the other partner. The wife left her money to the husband and the husband left his money to his wife. Neither of them benefited by what happened because they both died. So that the people who did profit, were the daughter, Celia, and a younger child, Edward, who I gather is now at a university abroad.”

“Well, that won’t help. Neither of the children were there or could have had anything to do with it.”

“Oh no, that is quite true. One must go further—further back, further forward, further sideways to find out if there is some financial motive somewhere that is—well, shall we say, significant.”

“Well, don’t ask me to do that sort of thing,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I’ve no real qualifications for that. I mean, that’s come up, I suppose, fairly reasonable in the—well, in the elephants that I’ve talked to.”

“No. I think the best thing for you to do would be to, shall we say, take on the subject of the wigs.”

“Wigs?”

“There had been a note made in the careful police report at the time of the suppliers of the wigs, who were a very expensive firm of hairdressers and wig-makers in London, in Bond Street. Later, that particular shop closed and the business was transferred somewhere else. Two of the original partners continued to run it and I understand it has now been given up, but I have here an address of one of the principal fitters and hairdressers, and I thought perhaps that it would come more easily if enquiries were made by a woman.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Oliver, “me?”

“Yes, you.”

“All right. What do you want me to do?”

“Pay a visit to Cheltenham to an address I shall give you and there you will find a Madame Rosentelle. A woman no longer young but who was a very fashionable maker of ladies’ hair adornments of all kinds, and who was married, I understand, to another in the same profession, a hairdresser who specialized in surmounting the problems of gentlemen’s baldness. Toupees and other things.”

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Oliver, “the jobs you do give me to do. Do you think they’ll remember anything about it?”

“Elephants remember,” said Hercule Poirot.

“Oh, and who are you going to ask questions of? This doctor you talked about?”

“For one, yes.”

“And what do you think he’ll remember?”

“Not very much,” said Poirot, “but it seems to me possible that he might have heard about a certain accident. It must have been an interesting case, you know. There must be records of the case history.”

“You mean of the twin sister?”

“Yes. There were two accidents as far as I can hear connected with her. One when she was a young mother living in the country, at Hatters Green I think the address was, and again later when she was in Malaya. Each time an accident which resulted in the death of a child. I might learn something about—”

“You mean that as they were twin sisters, that Molly—my Molly I mean—might also have had mental disability of some kind? I don’t believe it for a minute. She wasn’t like that. She was affectionate, loving, very good-looking, emotional and—oh, she was a terribly nice person.”

“Yes. Yes, so it would seem. And a very happy person on the whole, would you say?”

“Yes. She was a happy person. A very happy person. Oh, I know I never saw anything of her later in life, of course; she was living abroad. But it always seemed to me on the very rare occasions when I got a letter or went to see her that she was a happy person.”

“And the twin sister you did not really know?”

“No. Well, I think she was . . . well, quite frankly she was in an institution of some kind, I think, on the rare occasions that I saw Molly. She wasn’t at Molly’s wedding, not as a bridesmaid even.”

“That is odd in itself.”

“I still don’t see what you’re going to find out from that.”

“Just information,” said Poirot.

Fourteen

DR. WILLOUGHBY

Hercule Poirot got out of the taxi, paid the fare and a tip, verified the fact that the address he had come to was the address corresponding to that written down in his little notebook, took carefully a letter from his pocket addressed to Dr. Willoughby, mounted the steps to the house and pressed the bell. The door was opened by a manservant. On reception of Poirot's name he was told that Dr. Willoughby was expecting him.

He was shown into a small, comfortable room with bookshelves up the side of it, there were two armchairs drawn to the fire and a tray with glasses on it and two decanters. Dr. Willoughby rose to greet him. He was a man between fifty and sixty with a lean, thin body, a high forehead, dark-haired and with very piercing grey eyes. He shook hands and motioned him to a seat. Poirot produced the letter from his pocket.

"Ah, yes."

The doctor took it from him, opened it, read it and then, placing it beside him, looked at Poirot with some interest.

"I had already heard," he said, "from Superintendent Garroway and also, I may say, from a friend of mine in the Home Office, who also begged me to do what I can for you in the matter that interests you."

"It is a rather serious favour to ask, I know," said Poirot, "but there are reasons which make it important for me."

"Important for you after this number of years?"

"Yes. Of course I shall quite understand if those particular events have passed out of your mind altogether."

"I can't say they've done that. I am interested, as you may have heard, in special branches of my profession, and have been for many years."

"Your father, I know, was a very celebrated authority on them."

"Yes, he was. It was a great interest in his life. He had a lot of theories, some of them triumphantly proved right and some of them which proved disappointing. It is, I gather, a mental case you are interested in?"

"A woman. Her name was Dorothea Preston-Grey."

"Yes. I was quite a young man at the time. I was already interested in my father's line of thought although my theories and his did not always agree. The work he did was interesting and the work I did in collaboration interested me very much. I don't know what your particular interest was in Dorothea Preston-Grey, as she was at the time, Mrs. Jarrow later."

"She was one of twins, I gather," said Poirot.

"Yes. That was at that moment, I may say, my father's particular field of study. There was a project on hand at that time, to follow up the general lives of selected pairs of identical twins. Those who were brought up in the same environment, those who through various chances of life were brought up in entirely different environments. To see how alike they remained, how similar the things were that happened to them. Two sisters, perhaps, or two brothers who had hardly spent any of their life together and yet in an extraordinary way the same things seemed to happen to them at the same time. It was all—indeed it has been all—extremely interesting. However, that is not your interest in the matter, I gather."

"No," said Poirot, "it is a case, I think—the part of it that is to say that I'm interested in—of an accident to a child."

"That is so. It was in Surrey, I think. Yes, a very pleasant area, that, in which people lived. Not very far from Camberley, I think. Mrs. Jarrow was a young widow at that time and she had two small children. Her husband had recently died in an accident. She was, as a result—"

“Mentally disturbed?” asked Poirot.

“No, she was not thought to be so. She was deeply shocked by her husband’s death and had a great sense of loss, but she was not recovering very satisfactorily in the impression of her own doctor. He did not quite like the way her convalescence was tending, and she did not seem to be getting over her bereavement in the way that he would have liked. It seemed to be causing her rather peculiar reactions. Anyway, he wanted a consultation and my father was asked by him to come and see what he could make of it. He found her condition interesting, and at the same time he thought it held very decided dangers, and he seemed to think that it would be as well if she was put under observation in some nursing home where particular care could be taken. Things like that. Even more so after the case when this accident to the child happened. There were two children, and according to Mrs. Jarrow’s account of what happened, it was the older child, a girl who attacked the little boy who was four or five years younger than she was, hitting him with a garden spade or hoe, so that he fell into an ornamental pond they had in the garden and was drowned. Well, these things, as you know, happen quite often among children. Children are pushed in a perambulator into a pond sometimes because an older child, being jealous, thinks that ‘Mummy will have so much less trouble if only Edward or Donald, or whatever his name is, wasn’t here,’ or, ‘It would be much nicer for her.’ It all results from jealousy. There did not seem to be any particular cause or evidence of jealousy in this case, though. The child had not resented the birth of her brother. On the other hand, Mrs. Jarrow had not wanted this second child. Although her husband had been pleased to have this second child coming, Mrs. Jarrow did not want it. She had tried two doctors with the idea of having an abortion but did not succeed in finding one who would perform what was then an illegal operation. It was said by one of the servants, and also by a boy who was bringing a telegram, I believe, to the house, that it was a woman who attacked the boy, not the other child. And one of the servants said very definitely she had been looking out of the window and that it was her mistress. She said, ‘I don’t think the poor thing knows what she is doing nowadays. You know, just since the master died she’s been in, oh, such a state as never was.’ Well, as I say, I don’t know exactly what you want to know about the case. A verdict was brought in of accident, it was considered to be an accident, and the children had been said to be playing together, pushing each other, etcetera, and that therefore it was undoubtedly a very unfortunate accident. It was left at that, but my father when consulted, and after a conversation with Mrs. Jarrow and certain tests, questionnaires, sympathetic remarks to her and questions, he was quite sure she had been responsible for what happened. According to his advice it would be advisable for her to have mental treatment.”

“But your father was quite sure that she had been responsible?”

“Yes. There was a school of treatment at the time which was very popular and which my father believed in. That school’s belief was that after sufficient treatment, lasting sometimes quite a long time, a year or longer, people could resume a normal everyday life, and it was to their advantage to do so. They could be returned to live at home and with a suitable amount of attention, both medical and from those, usually near relatives, who were with them and could observe them living a normal life, everything would go well. This, I may say, did meet with success at first in many cases, but later there was a difference. Several cases had most unfortunate results. Patients who appeared to be cured came home to their natural surroundings, to a family, a husband, their mothers and fathers, and slowly relapsed, so that very often tragedies or near tragedies occurred. One case my father was bitterly disappointed in—also a very important case in his knowledge—was a woman who came back to live with the same friend she lived with before. All seemed to be going happily but after about five or six months she sent urgently for a doctor and when he came said, ‘I must take you upstairs because you will be angry at what I have done, and you will have to send for the police, I am afraid. I know that must happen. But you see, I was commanded to do this. I saw the Devil looking out of Hilda’s eyes. I saw the Devil there so I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to kill her.’ The woman was lying dead in a chair, strangled, and after her death her eyes had been attacked. The killer died in a mental home with never any feeling about her crime except that it had been a necessary command laid upon her because it was her duty to destroy the Devil.”

Poirot shook his head sadly—

The doctor went on: “Yes. Well, I consider that in a mild way Dorothea Preston-Grey suffered from a form of mental disorder that was dangerous and that she could only be considered safe if she lived under supervision. This was not generally accepted, I may say, at the time, and my father did consider it most inadvisable. Once she had been committed to a very pleasant nursing home a very good treatment was given. And again, after a period of years she appeared to be completely sane, left the establishment, lived in an ordinary life with a very pleasant nurse more or less in charge of her, though considered in the household as a lady’s maid. She went about, made friends and sooner or later went abroad.”

“To Malaya,” said Poirot.

“Yes. I see you’ve been correctly informed. She went to Malaya to stay with her twin sister.”

“And there another tragedy happened?”

“Yes. A child of a neighbour was attacked. It was thought at first by an amah, and afterwards I believe one of the native servants, a bearer, was suspected. But there again there seemed no doubt that Mrs. Jarrow had, for one of those mental reasons known only to her, been guilty of the attack. There was no definite evidence, I understand, which could be brought against her. I think General—I forget his name now—”

“Ravenscroft?” said Poirot.

“Yes, yes, General Ravenscroft agreed to arrange for her to go back to England and again undergo medical treatment. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that is what I have partly heard already, but mainly I may say, by hearsay, which is not dependable. What I want to ask you was, this was a case concerned with identical twins. What about the other twin? Margaret Preston-Grey. Afterwards the wife of General Ravenscroft. Was she likely to be affected by the same malady?”

“There was never any medical case about her. She was perfectly sane. My father was interested, visited her once or twice and talked to her because he had so often seen cases of almost identical illnesses or mental disturbances happen between identical twins who had started life very devoted to each other.”

“Only started life, you said?”

“Yes. On certain occasions a state of animosity can arise between identical twins. It follows on a first keen protective love one for the other, but it can degenerate into something which is nearer hatred, if there is some emotional strain that could trigger it off or could arouse it, or any emotional crisis to account for animosity arising between two sisters.

“I think there might have been that here. General Ravenscroft as a young subaltern or captain or whatever he was, fell deeply in love, I think, with Dorothea Preston-Grey, who was a very beautiful girl. Actually the more beautiful of the two—she also fell in love with him. They were not officially engaged, but General Ravenscroft transferred his affections fairly soon to the other sister, Margaret. Or Molly as she was called. He fell in love with her, and asked her to marry him. She returned his affection and they were married as soon as it became feasible in his career. My father had no doubt that the other twin, Dolly, was bitterly jealous of her sister’s marriage and that she continued to be in love with Alistair Ravenscroft and to resent his marriage. However, she got over it all, married another man in due course—a thoroughly happy marriage, it seemed, and later she used frequently to go to visit the Ravenscrofts, not only on that one occasion in Malaya, but later when they were in another station abroad and after they returned home. She was by that time apparently cured again, was no longer in any kind of mental dejection and lived with a very reliable nurse companion and staff of servants. I believe, or so my father had always told me, that Lady Ravenscroft, Molly, remained very devoted to her sister. She felt very protective towards her and loved her dearly. She wanted often, I think, to see more of her than she did, but General Ravenscroft was not so keen on her doing so. I think it possible that the slightly unbalanced Dolly—Mrs. Jarrow—continued to feel a very strong attachment to General Ravenscroft, which I think may have been embarrassing and difficult for him, though I believe that his wife was quite convinced that her sister had got over any feelings of jealousy or anger."

"I understand Mrs. Jarrow was staying with the Ravenscrofts about three weeks or so before the tragedy of their suicide happened."

"Yes, that was quite true. Her own tragic death happened then. She was quite frequently a sleepwalker. She went out one night walking in her sleep and had an accident, falling down a portion of the cliff to which a pathway which had been discarded appeared to lead. She was found the next day and I believe died in hospital without recovering consciousness. Her sister Molly was extremely upset and bitterly unhappy about this, but I would like to say, which you probably want to know, I do not think that this can in any way be held responsible for the subsequent suicide of the married couple who were living so happily together. Grief for a sister's or a sister-in-law's death would hardly lead you to commit suicide. Certainly not to a double suicide."

"Unless, perhaps," said Hercule Poirot, "Margaret Ravenscroft had been responsible for her sister's death."

"Good heavens!" said Dr. Willoughby—"surely you are not suggesting—"

"That it was Margaret who followed her sleepwalking sister, and that it was Margaret's hand that was stretched out to push Dorothea over the cliff edge?"

"I refuse absolutely," said Dr. Willoughby, "to accept any such idea."

"With people," said Hercule Poirot, "one never knows."

Fifteen

EUGENE AND ROSENTELLE, HAIR STYLISTS AND BEAUTICIANS

Mrs. Oliver looked at Cheltenham with approval. As it happened, she had never been to Cheltenham before. How nice, said Mrs. Oliver to herself, to see some houses that are really like houses, proper houses.

Casting her mind back to youthful days, she remembered that she had known people, or at least her relations, her aunts, had known people who lived at Cheltenham. Retired people usually. Army or Navy. It was the sort of place, she thought, where one would like to come and live if one had spent a good deal of time abroad. It had a feeling of English security, good taste and pleasant chat and conversation.

After looking in one or two agreeable antique shops, she found her way to where she wanted—or rather Hercule Poirot wanted her—to go. It was called The Rose Green Hairdressing Saloons. She walked inside it and looked round. Four or five people were in process of having things done to their hair. A plump young lady left her client and came forward with an enquiring air.

“Mrs. Rosentelle?” said Mrs. Oliver, glancing down at a card. “I understand she said she could see me if I came here this morning. I don’t mean,” she added, “having anything done to my hair, but I wanted to consult her about something and I believe a telephone call was made and she said if I came at half past eleven she could spare me a short time.”

“Oh yes,” said the girl. “I think Madam is expecting someone.”

She led the way through a passage down a short flight of steps and pushed a swing door at the bottom of it. From the hairdressing saloon they had passed into what was obviously Mrs. Rosentelle’s house. The plump girl knocked at the door and said, “The lady to see you,” as she put her nose in, and then asked rather nervously, “What name did you say?”

“Mrs. Oliver,” said Mrs. Oliver.

She walked in. It had a faint effect of what might have been yet another showroom. There were curtains of rose gauze and roses on the wallpaper and Mrs. Rosentelle, a woman Mrs. Oliver thought of as roughly her own age or possibly a good many years older, was just finishing what was obviously a cup of morning coffee.

“Mrs. Rosentelle?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Yes?”

“You did expect me?”

“Oh yes. I didn’t quite understand what it was all about. The lines are so bad on the telephone. That is quite all right, I have about half an hour to spare. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I won’t keep you any longer than I need. It is just something that I want to ask you about, that you may happen to remember. You have had quite a long career, I understand, in the hairdressing business.”

“Oh yes. I’m quite thankful to give over to the girls now. I don’t do anything myself these days.”

“Perhaps you still advise people?”

“Yes, I do that.” Mrs. Rosentelle smiled.

She had a nice, intelligent face with well-arranged, brown hair, with somewhat interesting grey streaks in it here and there.

“I’m not sure what it’s all about.”

“Well, really I wanted to ask you a question about, well, I suppose in a way about wigs generally.”

“We don’t do as much in wigs now as we used to do.”

"You had a business in London, didn't you?"

"Yes. First in Bond Street and then we moved to Sloane Street but it's very nice to live in the country after all that, you know. Oh yes, my husband and I are very satisfied here. We run a small business but we don't do much in the wig line nowadays," she said, "though my husband does advise and get wigs designed for men who are bald. It really makes a big difference, you know, to many people in their business if they don't look too old and it often helps in getting a job."

"I can quite imagine that," said Mrs. Oliver.

From sheer nervousness she said a few more things in the way of ordinary chat and wondered how she would start on her subject. She was startled when Mrs. Rosentelle leant forward and said suddenly, "You are Ariadne Oliver, aren't you? The novel writer?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver, "as a matter of fact—" she had her usual somewhat shamefaced expression when she said this, that was habitual to her—"yes, I do write novels."

"I'm so fond of your books. I've read a lot of them. Oh, this is very nice indeed. Now tell me in what way can I help you?"

"Well, I wanted to talk about wigs and about something that happened a great many years ago and probably you mayn't remember anything about it."

"Well, I rather wonder—do you mean fashions of years ago?"

"Not exactly. It's a woman, a friend of mine—actually I was at school with her—and then she married and went out to Malaya and came back to England, and there was a tragedy later and one of the things I think that people found surprising after it was that she had so many wigs. I think they had been all supplied by you, by your firm, I mean."

"Oh, a tragedy. What was her name?"

"Well, her name when I knew her was Preston-Grey, but afterwards her name was Ravenscroft."

"Oh. Oh yes, that one. Yes, I do remember Lady Ravenscroft. I remember her quite well. She was so nice and really very, very good-looking still. Yes, her husband was a Colonel or a General or something and they'd retired and they lived in—I forget the county now—"

"—And there was what was supposed to be a double suicide," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Yes. Yes, I remember reading about it and saying, 'Why that's our Lady Ravenscroft,' and then there was a picture of them both in the paper, and I saw that it was so. Of course, I'd never seen him but it was her all right. It seemed so sad, so much grief. I heard that they discovered that she had cancer and they couldn't do anything about it so this happened. But I never heard any details or anything."

"No," said Mrs. Oliver.

"But what is it you think I can tell you?"

"You supplied her with wigs and I understand the people investigating, I suppose the police, thought four wigs was quite a lot to have, but perhaps people did have four wigs at a time?"

"Well, I think that most people had two wigs at least," said Mrs. Rosentelle. "You know, one to send back to be serviced, as you might say, and the other one that they wore while it was away."

"Do you remember Lady Ravenscroft ordering an extra two wigs?"

"She didn't come herself. I think she'd been or was ill in hospital, or something, and it was a French young lady who came. I think a French lady who was companion to her or something like that. Very nice. Spoke perfect English. And she explained all about the extra wigs she wanted, sizes and colours and styles and ordered them. Yes. Fancy my remembering it. I suppose I wouldn't have except that about—oh it must have been a month later—a month, perhaps more, six weeks—I read about the suicide, you know. I'm afraid they gave her bad news at the hospital or wherever she was, and so she just couldn't face living anymore, and her husband felt he couldn't face life without her—"

Mrs. Oliver shook her head sadly—and continued her enquiries.

"They were different kinds of wigs, I suppose."

"Yes, one had a very pretty grey streak in it, and then there was a party one and one for evening wear, and one close-cropped with curls. Very nice, that you could wear under a hat and it didn't get messed up. I was sorry not to have seen Lady Ravenscroft again. Even apart from her illness, she had been very unhappy about a sister who had recently died. A twin sister."

"Yes, twins are very devoted, aren't they," said Mrs. Oliver.

"She'd always seemed such a happy woman before," said Mrs. Rosentelle.

Both women sighed. Mrs. Oliver changed the subject.

"Do you think that I'd find a wig useful?" she asked.

The expert stretched out a hand and laid it speculatively on Mrs. Oliver's head.

"I wouldn't advise it—you've got a splendid crop of hair—very thick still—I imagine—" a faint smile came to her lips—"you enjoy doing things with it?"

"How clever of you to know that. It's quite true—I enjoy experimenting—it's such fun."

"You enjoy life altogether, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I suppose it's the feeling that one never knows what might be going to happen next."

“Yet that feeling,” said Mrs. Rosentelle, “is just what makes so many people never stop worrying!”

Sixteen

MR. GOBY REPORTS

Mr. Goby came into the room and sat, as indicated by Poirot, in his usual chair. He glanced around him before choosing what particular piece of furniture or part of the room he was about to address. He settled, as often before, for the electric fire, not turned on at this time of year. Mr. Goby had never been known to address the human being he was working for directly. He selected always the cornice, a radiator, a television set, a clock, sometimes a carpet or a mat. Out of a briefcase he took a few papers.

“Well,” said Hercule Poirot, “you have something for me?”

“I have collected various details,” said Mr. Goby.

Mr. Goby was celebrated all over London, indeed possibly all over England and even further, as a great purveyor of information. How he performed these miracles nobody ever really quite knew. He employed a not excessive staff. Sometimes he complained that his legs, as he sometimes called them, were not as good as they used to be. But his results were still able to astonish people who had commissioned them.

“Mrs. Burton-Cox,” he said, announcing the name much as though he had been the local churchwarden having his turn at reading the lessons. He might equally have been saying “Third verse, fourth chapter, the book of Isaiah.”

“Mrs. Burton-Cox,” he said again. “Married Mr. Cecil Aldbury, manufacturer of buttons on a large scale. Rich man. Entered politics, was MP for Little Stansmere. Mr. Cecil Aldbury was killed in a car accident four years after their marriage. The only child of the marriage died in an accident shortly afterwards. Mr. Aldbury’s estate was inherited by his wife, but was not as much as had been expected since the firm had not been doing well of late years. Mr. Aldbury also left quite a considerable sum of money to a Miss Kathleen Fenn, with whom it seemed he had been having intimate relations quite unknown to his wife. Mrs. Burton-Cox continued her political career. Some three years after that she adopted a child which had been born to Miss Kathleen Fenn. Miss Kathleen Fenn insisted that the child was the son of the late Mr. Aldbury. This, from what I have been able to learn in my enquiries, is somewhat difficult to accept," continued Mr. Goby. "Miss Fenn had had many relationships, usually with gentlemen of ample means and generous dispositions, but after all, so many people have their price, have they not? I'm afraid this is quite a serious bill I may have to send you in."

"Continue," said Hercule Poirot.

"Mrs. Aldbury, as she then was, agreed to adopt the child. A short while later she married Major Burton-Cox. Miss Kathleen Fenn became, I may say, a most successful actress and pop singer and made a very large amount of money. She then wrote to Mrs. Burton-Cox saying she would be willing to take back the adopted child. Mrs. Burton-Cox refused. Mrs. Burton-Cox has been living quite comfortably since, I understand, Major Burton-Cox was killed in Malaya. He left her moderately well off. A further piece of information I have obtained is that Miss Kathleen Fenn, who died a very short while ago—eighteen months, I think—left a Will by which her entire fortune, which amounted by then to a considerable sum of money, was left to her natural son Desmond, at present known under the name of Desmond Burton-Cox."

"Very generous," said Poirot. "Of what did Miss Fenn die?"

"My informant tells me that she contracted leukaemia."

"And the boy has inherited his mother's money?"

"It was left in trust for him to acquire at the age of twenty-five."

"So he will be independent, will have a substantial fortune? And Mrs. Burton-Cox?"

“Has not been happy in her investments, it is understood. She has sufficient to live on but not much more.”

“Has the boy Desmond made a Will?” asked Poirot.

“That,” said Mr. Goby, “I fear I do not know as yet. But I have certain means of finding out. If I do, I will acquaint you with the fact without loss of time.”

Mr. Goby took his leave, absentmindedly bowing a farewell to the electric fire.

About an hour and a half later the telephone rang.

Hercule Poirot, with a sheet of paper in front of him, was making notes. Now and then he frowned, twirled his moustaches, crossed something out and rewrote it and then proceeded onward. When the telephone rang he picked up the receiver and listened.

“Thank you,” he said, “that was quick work. Yes . . . yes, I’m grateful. I really do not know sometimes how you manage these things . . . Yes, that sets out the position clearly. It makes sense of something that did not make sense before . . . Yes . . . I gather . . . yes, I’m listening . . . you are pretty sure that that is the case. He knows he is adopted . . . but he never has been told who his real mother was . . . yes. Yes, I see . . . Very well. You will clear up the other point too? Thank you.”

He replaced the receiver and started once more writing down words. In half an hour the telephone rang once more. Once again he picked up the phone.

“I’m back from Cheltenham,” said a voice which Poirot had no difficulty in recognizing.

“Ah, chère madame, you have returned? You have seen Mrs. Rosentelle?”

“Yes. She is nice. Very nice. And you were quite right, you know, she is another elephant.”

“Meaning, chère madame?”

“I mean that she remembered Molly Ravenscroft.”

“And she remembered her wigs?”

“Yes.”

Briefly she outlined what the retired hairdresser had told her about the wigs.

“Yes,” said Poirot, “that agrees. That is exactly what Superintendent Garroway mentioned to me. The four wigs that the police found. Curls, an evening type of headdress, and two other plainer ones. Four.”

“So I really only told you what you knew already?”

“No, you told me something more than that. She said—that is what you told me just now, is it not?—that Lady Ravenscroft wanted two extra wigs to add to the two that she already had and that this was about three weeks to six weeks before the suicide tragedy occurred. Yes, that is interesting, is it not?”

“It’s very natural,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I mean, you know that people, women, I mean, may do awful damage to things. To false hair and things of that kind. If it can’t be redressed and cleaned, if it’s got burnt or got stuff spilt on it you can’t get out, or it’s been dyed and dyed all wrong—something like that—well then, of course you have to get two new wigs or switches or whatever they are. I don’t see what makes you excited about that.”

“Not exactly excited,” said Poirot, “no. It is a point, but the more interesting point is what you have just added. It was a French lady, was it not, who brought the wigs to be copied or matched?”

“Yes. I gathered some kind of companion or something. Lady Ravenscroft had been or was in hospital or in a nursing home somewhere and she was not in good health and she could not come herself to make a choice or anything of that kind.”

“I see.”

“And so her French companion came.”

“Do you know the name of that companion by any chance?”

“No. I don’t think Mrs. Rosentelle mentioned it. In fact I don’t think she knew. The appointment was made by Lady Ravenscroft and the French girl or woman just brought the wigs along for size and matching and all the rest of it, I suppose.”

“Well,” said Poirot, “that helps me towards the further step that I am about to take.”

“What have you learnt?” said Mrs. Oliver. “Have you done anything?”

“You are always so sceptical,” said Poirot. “You always consider that I do nothing, that I sit in a chair and repose myself.”

“Well I think you sit in a chair and think,” admitted Mrs. Oliver, “but I quite agree that you don’t often go out and do things.”

“In the near future I think I may possibly go out and do things,” said Hercule Poirot, “and that will please you. I may even cross the Channel though certainly not in a boat. A plane, I think is indicated.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Do you want me to come too?”

“No,” said Poirot, “I think it would be better if I went alone on this occasion.”

“You really will go?”

“Oh yes, oh yes. I will run about with all activity and so you should be pleased with me, madame.”

When he had rung off, he dialled another number which he looked up from a note he had made in his pocketbook. Presently he was connected to the person whom he wished to speak to.

“My dear Superintendent Garroway, it is Hercule Poirot who addresses you. I do not derange you too much? You are not very busy at this moment?”

“No, I am not busy,” said Superintendent Garroway. “I am pruning my roses, that’s all.”

“There is something that I want to ask you. Quite a small thing.”

“About our problem of the double suicide?”

“Yes, about our problem. You said there was a dog in the house. You said that the dog went for walks with the family, or so you understood.”

“Yes, there was some mention made of a dog. I think it may have been either the housekeeper or someone who said that they went for a walk with the dog as usual that day.”

“In examination of the body was there any sign that Lady Ravenscroft had been bitten by a dog? Not necessarily very recently or on that particular day?”

“Well, it’s odd you should say that. I can’t say I’d have remembered about it if you hadn’t mentioned such a thing. But yes, there were a couple of scars. Not bad ones. But again the housekeeper mentioned that the dog had attacked its mistress more than once and bitten her, though not very severely. Look here, Poirot, there was no rabies about, if that’s what you are thinking. There couldn’t have been anything of that kind. After all she was shot—they were both shot. There was no question of any septic poisoning or danger of tetanus.”

“I do not blame the dog,” said Poirot, “it was only something I wanted to know.”

“One dog bite was fairly recent, about a week before, I think, or two weeks somebody said. There was no case of necessary injections or anything of that kind. It had healed quite well. What’s that quotation?” went on Superintendent Garroway. “‘The dog it was that died.’ I can’t remember where it comes from but—”

“Anyway, it wasn’t the dog that died,” said Poirot. “That wasn’t the point of my question. I would like to have known that dog. He was perhaps a very intelligent dog.”

After he had replaced the receiver with thanks to the Superintendent, Poirot murmured: “An intelligent dog. More intelligent perhaps than the police were.”

Seventeen

POIROT ANNOUNCES DEPARTURE

Miss Livingstone showed in a guest. “Mr. Hercules Porrett.”

As soon as Miss Livingstone had left the room, Poirot shut the door after her and sat down by his friend, Mrs. Ariadne Oliver.

He said, lowering his voice slightly, “I depart.”

“You do what?” said Mrs. Oliver, who was always slightly startled by Poirot’s methods of passing on information.

“I depart. I make the departure. I take a plane to Geneva.”

“You sound as though you were UNO or UNESCO or something.”

“No. It is just a private visit that I make.”

“Have you got an elephant in Geneva?”

“Well, I suppose you might look at it that way. Perhaps two of them.”

“I haven’t found out anything more,” said Mrs. Oliver. “In fact I don’t know who I can go to, to find out anymore.”

“I believe you mentioned, or somebody did, that your goddaughter, Celia Ravenscroft, had a young brother.”

“Yes. He’s called Edward, I think. I’ve hardly ever seen him. I took him out once or twice from school, I remember. But that was years ago.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s at university, in Canada I think. Or he’s taking some engineering course there. Do you want to go and ask him things?”

“No, not at the moment. I should just like to know where he is now. But I gather he was not in the house when this suicide happened?”

“You’re not thinking—you’re not thinking for a moment that he did it, are you? I mean, shot his father and his mother, both of them. I know boys do sometimes. Very queer they are sometimes when they’re at a funny age.”

“He was not in the house,” said Poirot. “That I know already from my police reports.”

“Have you found out anything else interesting? You look quite excited.”

“I am excited in a way. I have found out certain things that may throw light upon what we already know.”

“Well, what throws light on what?”

“It seems to me possible now that I can understand why Mrs. Burton-Cox approached you as she did and tried to get you to obtain information for her about the facts of the suicide of the Ravenscrofts.”

“You mean she wasn’t just being a nosey parker?”

“No. I think there was some motive behind it. This is where, perhaps, money comes in.”

“Money? What’s money got to do with that? She’s quite well off, isn’t she?”

“She has enough to live upon, yes. But it seems that her adopted son whom she regards apparently as her true son—he knows that he was adopted although he knows nothing about the family from which he really came. It seems that when he came of age he made a Will, possibly urged by his adopted mother to do so. Perhaps it was merely hinted to him by some friends of hers or possibly by some lawyer that she had consulted. Anyway, on coming of age he may have felt that he might as well leave everything to her, to his adopted mother. Presumably at that time he had nobody else to leave it to.”

“I don’t see how that leads to wanting news about a suicide.”

“Don’t you? She wanted to discourage the marriage. If young Desmond had a girlfriend, if he proposed to marry her in the near future, which is what a lot of young people do nowadays—they won’t wait or think it over. In that case, Mrs. Burton-Cox would not inherit the money he left, since the marriage would invalidate any earlier Will, and presumably if he did marry his girl he would make a new Will leaving everything to her and not to his adopted mother.”

“And you mean Mrs. Burton-Cox didn’t want that?”

“She wanted to find something that would discourage him from marrying the girl. I think she hoped, and probably really believed as far as that goes, that Celia’s mother killed her husband, afterwards shooting herself. That is the sort of thing that might discourage a boy. Even if her father killed her mother, it is still a discouraging thought. It might quite easily prejudice and influence a boy at that age.”

“You mean he’d think that if her father or mother was a murderer, the girl might have murderous tendencies?”

“Not quite as crude as that but that might be the main idea, I should think.”

“But he wasn’t rich, was he? An adopted child.”

“He didn’t know his real mother’s name or who she was, but it seems that his mother, who was an actress and a singer and who managed to make a great deal of money before she became ill and died, wanted at one time to get her child returned to her and when Mrs. Burton-Cox would not agree to that, I should imagine she thought about this boy a great deal and decided that she would leave her money to him. He will inherit this money at the age of twenty-five, but it is held in trust for him until then. So of course Mrs. Burton-Cox doesn’t want him to marry, or only to marry someone that she really approves of or over whom she might have influence.”

“Yes, that seems to me fairly reasonable. She’s not a nice woman though, is she?”

“No,” said Poirot, “I did not think her a very nice woman.”

“And that’s why she didn’t want you coming to see her and messing about with things and finding out what she was up to.”

“Possibly,” said Poirot.

“Anything else you have learnt?”

“Yes, I have learnt—that is only a few hours ago really—when Superintendent Garroway happened to ring me up about some other small matters, but I did ask him and he told me that the housekeeper, who was elderly, had very bad eyesight.”

“Does that come into it anywhere?”

“It might,” said Poirot. He looked at his watch. “I think,” he said, “it is time that I left.”

“You are on your way to catch your plane at the airport?”

“No. My plane does not leave until tomorrow morning. But there is a place I have to visit today—a place that I wish to see with my own eyes. I have a car waiting outside now to take me there—”

“What is it you want to see?” Mrs. Oliver asked with some curiosity.

“Not so much to see—to feel. Yes—that is the right word—to feel and to recognize what it will be that I feel. . . .”

Eighteen

INTERLUDE

Hercule Poirot passed through the gate of the churchyard. He walked up one of the paths, and presently, against a moss-grown wall he stopped, looking down on a grave. He stood there for some minutes looking first at the grave, then at the view of the Downs and sea beyond. Then his eyes came back again. Flowers had been put recently on the grave. A small bunch of assorted wild flowers, the kind of bunch that might have been left by a child, but Poirot did not think that it was a child who had left them. He read the lettering on the grave.

To the memory of
DOROTHEA JARROW
Died Sept 15th 1960

Also of
MARGARET RAVENSCROFT
Died Oct 3rd 1960
Sister of above

Also of
ALISTAIR RAVENSCROFT
Died Oct 3rd 1960
Her husband

In their Death they were not divided

Forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those that trespass against us
Lord, have Mercy upon us
Christ, have Mercy upon us
Lord, have Mercy upon us

Poirot stood there a moment or two. He nodded his head once or twice. Then he left the churchyard and walked by a footpath that led out onto the cliff and along the cliff. Presently he stood still again looking out to the sea. He spoke to himself.

“I am sure now that I know what happened and why. I understand the pity of it and the tragedy. One has to go back such a long way. In my end is my beginning, or should one put it differently? ‘In my beginning was my tragic end?’ The Swiss girl must have known—but will she tell me? The boy believes she will. For their sakes—the girl and the boy. They cannot accept life unless they know.”

Nineteen

MADDY AND ZÉLIE

"Mademoiselle Rouselle?" said Hercule Poirot. He bowed.

Mademoiselle Rouselle extended her hand. About fifty, Poirot thought. A fairly imperious woman. Would have her way. Intelligent, intellectual, satisfied, he thought, with life as she had lived it, enjoying the pleasures and suffering the sorrows life brings.

"I have heard your name," she said. "You have friends, you know, both in this country and in France. I do not know exactly what I can do for you. Oh, I know that you explained, in the letter that you sent me. It is an affair of the past, is it not? Things that happened. Not exactly things that happened, but the clue to things that happened many, many years ago. But sit down. Yes. Yes, that chair is quite comfortable, I hope. There are some petit-fours and the decanter is on the table."

She was quietly hospitable without any urgency. She was unworried but amiable.

"You were at one time a governess in a certain family," said Poirot. "The Preston-Greys. Perhaps now you hardly remember them."

"Oh yes, one does not forget, you know, things that happen when you were young. There was a girl, and a boy about four or five years younger in the family I went to. They were nice children. Their father became a General in the Army."

"There was also another sister."

"Ah yes, I remember. She was not there when I first came. I think she was delicate. Her health was not good. She was having treatment somewhere."

"You remember their Christian names?"

"Margaret, I think was one. The other one I am not sure of by now."

"Dorothea."

"Ah yes. A name I have not often come across. But they called each other by shorter names. Molly and Dolly. They were identical twins, you know, remarkably alike. They were both very handsome young women."

"And they were fond of each other?"

"Yes, they were devoted. But we are, are we not, becoming slightly confused? Preston-Grey is not the name of the children I went to teach. Dorothea Preston-Grey married a Major—ah, I cannot remember the name now. Arrow? No, Jarrow. Margaret's married name was—"

"Ravenscroft," said Poirot.

"Ah, that. Yes. Curious how one cannot remember names. The Preston-Greys are a generation older. Margaret Preston-Grey had been in a pensionnat in this part of the world, and when she wrote after her marriage asking Madame Benôit, who ran that pensionnat, if she knew of someone who would come to her as nursery-governess to her children, I was recommended. That is how I came to go there. I spoke only of the other sister because she happened to be staying there during part of my time of service with the children. The children were a girl, I think then of six or seven. She had a name out of Shakespeare. I remember, Rosalind or Celia."

"Celia," said Poirot.

"And the boy was only about three or four. His name was Edward. A mischievous but lovable child. I was happy with them."

"And they were happy, I hear, with you. They enjoyed playing with you and you were very kind in your playing with them."

"Moi, j'aime les enfants," said Mademoiselle Rouselle.

"They called you 'Maddy,' I believe."

She laughed.

“Ah, I like hearing that word. It brings back past memories.”

“Did you know a boy called Desmond? Desmond Burton-Cox?”

“Ah yes. He lived I think in a house next door or nearly next door. We had several neighbours and the children very often came to play together. His name was Desmond. Yes, I remember.”

“You were there long, mademoiselle?”

“No. I was only there for three or four years at most. Then I was recalled to this country. My mother was very ill. It was a question of coming back and nursing her, although I knew it would not be perhaps for very long. That was true. She died a year and a half or two years at the most after I returned here. After that I started a small pensionnat out here, taking in rather older girls who wanted to study languages and other things. I did not visit England again, although for a year or two I kept up communication with the country. The two children used to send me a card at Christmas time.”

“Did General Ravenscroft and his wife strike you as a happy couple?”

“Very happy. They were fond of their children.”

“They were very well suited to each other?”

“Yes, they seemed to me to have all the necessary qualities to make their marriage a success.”

“You said Lady Ravenscroft was devoted to her twin sister. Was the twin sister also devoted to her?”

“Well, I had not very much occasion of judging. Frankly, I thought that the sister—Dolly, as they called her—was very definitely a mental case. Once or twice she acted in a very peculiar manner. She was a jealous woman, I think, and I understood that she had at one time thought she was engaged, or was going to be engaged, to General Ravenscroft. As far as I could see he’d fallen in love with her first, then later, however, his affections turned towards her sister, which was fortunate, I thought, because Molly Ravenscroft was a well-balanced and very sweet woman. As for Dolly—sometimes I thought she adored her sister, sometimes that she hated her. She was a very jealous woman and she decided too much affection was being shown to the children. There is one who could tell you about all this better than I. Mademoiselle Meauhourat. She lives in Lausanne and she went to the Ravenscrofts about a year and a half or two years after I had to leave. She was with them for some years. Later I believe she went back as companion to Lady Ravenscroft when Celia was abroad at school."

"I am going to see her. I have her address," said Poirot.

"She knows a great deal that I do not, and she is a charming and reliable person. It was a terrible tragedy that happened later. She knows if anyone does what led to it. She is very discreet. She has never told me anything. Whether she will tell you I do not know. She may do, she may not."

Poirot stood for a moment or two looking at Mademoiselle Meauhourat. He had been impressed by Mademoiselle Rouselle, he was impressed also by the woman who stood waiting to receive him. She was not so formidable, she was much younger, at least ten years younger, he thought, and she had a different kind of impressiveness. She was alive, still attractive, eyes that watched you and made their own judgment on you, willing to welcome you, looking with kindliness on those who came her way but without undue softness. Here is someone, thought Hercule Poirot, very remarkable.

"I am Hercule Poirot, mademoiselle."

"I know. I was expecting you either today or tomorrow."

"Ah. You received a letter from me?"

"No. It is no doubt still in the post. Our posts are a little uncertain. No. I had a letter from someone else."

"From Celia Ravenscroft?"

"No. It was a letter written by someone in close touch with Celia. A boy or a young man, whichever we like to regard him as, called Desmond Burton-Cox. He prepared me for your arrival."

"Ah. I see. He is intelligent and he wastes no time, I think. He was very urgent that I should come and see you."

"So I gathered. There's trouble, I understand. Trouble that he wants to resolve, and so does Celia. They think you can help them?"

"Yes, and they think that you can help me."

"They are in love with each other and wish to marry."

"Yes, but there are difficulties being put in their way."

"Ah, by Desmond's mother, I presume. So he lets me understand."

"There are circumstances, or have been circumstances, in Celia's life that have prejudiced his mother against his early marriage to this particular girl."

"Ah. Because of the tragedy, for it was a tragedy."

"Yes, because of the tragedy. Celia has a godmother who was asked by Desmond's mother to try and find out from Celia the exact circumstances under which that suicide occurred."

"There's no sense in that," said Mademoiselle Meauhourat. She motioned with her hand. "Sit down. Please sit down. I expect we shall have to talk for some little time. Yes, Celia could not tell her godmother—Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, the novelist is it not? Yes, I remember. Celia could not give her the information because she has not got the information herself."

"She was not there when the tragedy occurred, and no one told her anything about it. Is that right?"

"Yes, that is right. It was thought inadvisable."

“Ah. And do you approve of that decision or disapprove of it?”

“It is difficult to be sure. Very difficult. I’ve not been sure of it in the years that have passed since then, and there are quite a lot. Celia, as far as I know, has never been worried. Worried, I mean, as to the why and wherefore. She’s accepted it as she would have accepted an aeroplane accident or a car accident. Something that resulted in the death of her parents. She spent many years in a pensionnat abroad.”

“Actually I think the pensionnat was run by you, Mademoiselle Meauhourat.”

“That is quite true. I have retired recently. A colleague of mine is now taking it on. But Celia was sent out to me and I was asked to find for her a good place for her to continue her education, as many girls do come to Switzerland for that purpose. I could have recommended several places. At the moment I took her into my own.”

“And Celia asked you nothing, did not demand information?”

“No. It was, you see, before the tragedy happened.”

“Oh. I did not quite understand that.”

“Celia came out here some weeks before the tragic occurrence. I was at that time not here myself. I was still with General and Lady Ravenscroft. I looked after Lady Ravenscroft, acting as a companion to her rather than as a governess to Celia, who was still at that moment in boarding school. But it was suddenly arranged that Celia should come to Switzerland and finish her education there.”

“Lady Ravenscroft had been in poor health, had she not?”

“Yes. Nothing very serious. Nothing as serious as she had herself feared at one time. But she had suffered a lot of nervous strain and shock and general worry.”

“You remained with her?”

"A sister whom I had living in Lausanne received Celia on her arrival and settled her into the institution which was only for about fifteen or sixteen girls, but there she would start her studies and await my return. I returned some three or four weeks later."

"But you were at Overcliffe at the time it happened."

"I was at Overcliffe. General and Lady Ravenscroft went for a walk, as was their habit. They went out and did not return. They were found dead, shot. The weapon was found lying by them. It was one that belonged to General Ravenscroft and had been always kept in a drawer in his study. The fingermarks of both of them were found on that weapon. There was no definite indication of who had held it last. Impressions of both people, slightly smeared, were on it. The obvious solution was a double suicide."

"You found no reason to doubt that?"

"The police found no reason, so I believe."

"Ah," said Poirot.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mademoiselle Meauhourat.

"Nothing. Nothing. Just something upon which I reflect."

Poirot looked at her. Brown hair as yet hardly touched with grey, lips closed firmly together, grey eyes, a face which showed no emotion. She was in control of herself completely.

"So you cannot tell me anything more?"

"I fear not. It was a long time ago."

"You remember that time well enough."

"Yes. One cannot entirely forget such a sad thing."

"And you agreed that Celia should not be told anything more of what had led up to this?"

“Have I not just told you that I had no extra information?”

“You were there, living at Overcliffe, for a period of time before the tragedy, were you not? Four or five weeks—six weeks perhaps.”

“Longer than that, really. Although I had been governess to Celia earlier, I came back this time, after she went to school, in order to help Lady Ravenscroft.”

“Lady Ravenscroft’s sister was living with her also about that time, was she not?”

“Yes. She had been in hospital having special treatment for some time. She had shown much improvement and the authorities had felt—the medical authorities I speak of—that she would do better to lead a normal life with her own relations and the atmosphere of a home. As Celia had gone to school, it seemed a good time for Lady Ravenscroft to invite her sister to be with her.”

“Were they fond of each other, those two sisters?”

“It was difficult to know,” said Mademoiselle Meauhourat. Her brows drew together. It was as though what Poirot had just said aroused her interest. “I have wondered, you know. I have wondered so much since, and at the time really. They were identical twins, you know. They had a bond between them, a bond of mutual dependence and love and in many ways they were very alike. But there were ways also in which they were not alike.”

“You mean? I should be glad to know just what you mean by that.”

“Oh, this has nothing to do with the tragedy. Nothing of that kind. But there was a definite, as I shall put it, a definite physical or mental flaw—whichever way you like to put it—some people nowadays hold the theory that there is some physical cause for any kind of mental disorder. I believe that it is fairly well recognized by the medical profession that identical twins are born either with a great bond between them, a great likeness in their characters which means that although they may be divided in their environment, where they are brought up, the same things will happen to them at the same time of life. They will take the same trend. Some of the cases quoted as medical example seem quite extraordinary. Two sisters, one living in Europe, one say in France, the other in England, they have a dog of the same kind which they choose at about the same date. They marry men singularly alike. They give birth perhaps to a child almost within a month of each other. It as though they have to follow the pattern wherever they are and without knowing what the other one is doing. Then there is the opposite to that. A kind of revulsion, a hatred almost, that makes one sister draw apart, or one brother reject the other as though they seek to get away from the sameness, the likeness, the knowledge, the things they have in common. And that can lead to very strange results."

"I know," said Poirot. "I have heard of it. I have seen it once or twice. Love can turn to hate very easily. It is easier to hate where you have loved than it is to be indifferent where you have loved."

"Ah, you know that," said Mademoiselle Meauhourat.

"Yes, I have seen it not once but several times. Lady Ravenscroft's sister was very like her?"

"I think she was still very like her in appearance, though, if I may say so, the expression on her face was very different. She was in a condition of strain as Lady Ravenscroft was not. She had a great aversion to children. I don't know why. Perhaps she had had a miscarriage in early life. Perhaps she had longed for a child and never had one, but she had a kind of resentment against children. A dislike of them."

"That had led to one or two rather serious happenings, had it not?" said Poirot.

"Someone has told you that?"

"I have heard things from people who knew both sisters when they were in Malaya. Lady Ravenscroft was there with her husband and her sister, Dolly, came out to stay with them there. There was an accident to a child there, and it was thought that Dolly might have been partially responsible for it. Nothing was proved definitely, but I gather that Molly's husband took his sister-in-law home to England and she had once more to go into a mental home.”

“Yes, I believe that is a very good account of what happened. I do not of course know it of my own knowledge.”

“No, but there are things you do know, I think, from your own knowledge.”

“If so, I see no reason for bringing them back to mind now. Is it not better to leave things when at least they have been accepted?”

“There are other things that could have happened that day at Overcliffe. It may have been a double suicide, it could have been a murder, it could have been several other things. You were told what had happened, but I think from one little sentence you just said, that you know what happened that day and I think you know what happened perhaps—or began to happen, shall we say?—some time before that. The time when Celia had gone to Switzerland and you were still at Overcliffe. I will ask you one question. I would like to know what your answer would be to it. It is not a thing of direct information, it is a question of what you believe. What were the feelings of General Ravenscroft towards those two sisters, the twin sisters?”

“I know what you mean.”

For the first time her manner changed slightly. She was no longer on her guard, she leaned forward now and spoke to Poirot almost as though she definitely found a relief in doing so.

“They were both beautiful,” she said, “as girls. I heard that from many people. General Ravenscroft fell in love with Dolly, the mentally afflicted sister. Although she had a disturbed personality she was exceedingly attractive—sexually attractive. He loved her very dearly, and then I don’t know whether he discovered in her some characteristic, something perhaps that alarmed him or in which he found a repulsion of some kind. He saw perhaps the beginnings of insanity in her, the dangers connected with her. His affections went to her sister. He fell in love with the sister and married her.”

“He loved them both, you mean. Not at the same time but in each case there was a genuine fact of love.”

“Oh, yes, he was devoted to Molly, relied on her and she on him. He was a very lovable man.”

“Forgive me,” said Poirot, “you too were in love with him, I think.”

“You—you dare say that to me?”

“Yes. I dare say it to you. I am not suggesting that you and he had a love affair, nothing of that kind. I’m only saying that you loved him.”

“Yes,” said Zélie Meauhourat. “I loved him. In a sense, I still love him. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. He trusted me and relied on me, but he was never in love with me. You can love and serve and still be happy. I wanted no more than I had. Trust, sympathy, belief in me—”

“And you did,” said Poirot, “what you could to help him in a terrible crisis in his life. There are things you do not wish to tell me. There are things that I will say to you, things that I have gathered from various information that has come to me, that I know something about. Before I have come to see you I have heard from others, from people who have known not only Lady Ravenscroft, not only Molly, but who have known Dolly. And I know something of Dolly, the tragedy of her life, the sorrow, the unhappiness and also the hatred, the streak perhaps of evil, the love of destruction that can be handed down in families. If she loved the man she was engaged to she must have, when he married her sister, felt hatred perhaps towards that sister. Perhaps she never quite forgave her. But what of Molly Ravenscroft? Did she dislike her sister? Did she hate her?”

“Oh no,” said Zélie Meauhourat, “she loved her sister. She loved her with a very deep and protective love. That I do know. It was she who always asked that her sister should come and make her home with her. She wanted to save her sister from unhappiness, from danger too, because her sister would often relapse into fits of rather dangerous rages. She was frightened sometimes. Well, you know enough. You have already said that there was a strange dislike of children from which Dolly suffered.”

"You mean that she disliked Celia?"

"No, no, not Celia. The other one, Edward. The younger one. Twice Edward had dangers of an accident. Once, some kind of tinkering with a car and once some outburst of violent annoyance. I know Molly was glad when Edward went back to school. He was very young, remember, much younger than Celia. He was only eight or nine, at preparatory school. He was vulnerable. Molly was frightened about him."

"Yes," said Poirot, "I can understand that. Now, if I may I will talk of wigs. Wigs. The wearing of wigs. Four wigs. That is a lot for one woman to possess at one time. I know what they were like, what they looked like. I know that when more were needed, a French lady went to the shop in London and spoke about them and ordered them. There was a dog, too. A dog who went for a walk on the day of the tragedy with General Ravenscroft and his wife. Earlier that dog, some little time earlier, had bitten his mistress, Molly Ravenscroft."

"Dogs are like that," said Zélie Meauhourat. "They are never quite to be trusted. Yes, I know that."

"And I will tell you what I think happened on that day, and what happened before that. Some little time before that."

"And if I will not listen to you?"

"You will listen to me. You may say that what I have imagined is false. Yes, you might even do that, but I do not think you will. I am telling you, and I believe it with all my heart, that what is needed here is the truth. It is not just imagining, it is not just wondering. There is a girl and a boy who care for each other and who are frightened of the future because of what may have happened and what there might be handed down from the father or the mother to the child. I am thinking of the girl, Celia. A rebellious girl, spirited, difficult perhaps to manage but with brains, a good mind, capable of happiness, capable of courage but needing—there are people who need—truth. Because they can face truth without dismay. They can face it with that brave acceptance you have to have in life if life is to be any good to you.

And the boy that she loves, he wants that for her too. Will you listen to me?”

“Yes,” said Zélie Meauhourat, “I am listening. You understand a great deal, I think, and I think you know more than I could have imagined you would know. Speak and I will listen.”

Twenty

COURT OF ENQUIRY

Once more Hercule Poirot stood on the cliff overlooking the rocks below and the sea breaking against them. Here where he stood the bodies of a husband and wife had been found. Here, three weeks before that a woman had walked in her sleep and fallen to her death.

“Why had these things happened?” That had been Superintendent Garroway’s question.

Why? What had led to it?

An accident first—and three weeks later a double suicide. Old sins that had left long shadows. A beginning that had led years later to a tragic end.

Today there would be people meeting here. A boy and a girl who sought the Truth. Two people who knew the truth.

Hercule Poirot turned away from the sea and back along the narrow path that led to a house once called Overcliffe.

It was not very far. He saw cars parked against a wall. He saw the outline of a house against the sky. A house that was clearly empty—that needed repainting. A house agent’s board hung there—announcing that “this desirable property” was for sale. On the gate the word Overcliffe had a line drawn over it and the name Down House replaced it. He went to meet two people who were walking towards him. One was Desmond Burton-Cox and the other was Celia Ravenscroft.

“I got an order from the house agent,” said Desmond, “saying we wanted to view it or however they put it. I’ve got the key in case we want to go inside. It’s changed hands twice in the last five years. But there wouldn’t be anything to see there now, would there?”

"I shouldn't think so," said Celia. "After all, it's belonged to lots of people already. Some people called Archer who first bought it, and then somebody called Fallowfield, I think. They said it was too lonely. And now these last people are selling it too. Perhaps they were haunted."

"Do you really believe in haunted houses?" said Desmond.

"Well now, of course I don't think so really," said Celia, "but this might be, mightn't it? I mean, the sort of things that happened, the sort of place it is and everything. . . ."

"I do not think so," said Poirot. "There was sorrow here and Death, but there was also Love."

A taxi came along the road.

"I expect that's Mrs. Oliver," said Celia. "She said she'd come by train and take a taxi from the station."

Two women got out of the taxi. One was Mrs. Oliver and with her was a tall, elegantly dressed woman. Since Poirot knew she was coming he was not taken by surprise. He watched Celia to see if she had any reactions.

"Oh!" Celia sprang forward.

She went towards the woman and her face had lit up.

"Zélie!" she said, "it is Zélie? It is really Zélie! Oh, I am so pleased. I didn't know you were coming."

"Monsieur Hercule Poirot asked me to come."

"I see," said Celia. "Yes, yes, I suppose I see. But I—I didn't—" she stopped. She turned her head and looked at the handsome boy standing beside her. "Desmond, was it—was it you?"

"Yes. I wrote to Mademoiselle Meauhourat—to Zélie, if I may still call her that."

“You can always call me that, both of you,” said Zélie. “I was not sure I wanted to come, I did not know if I was wise to come. That I still do not know, but I hope so.”

“I want to know,” said Celia. “We both want to know. Desmond thought you could tell us something.”

“Monsieur Poirot came to see me,” said Zélie. “He persuaded me to come today.”

Celia linked her arm in Mrs. Oliver’s.

“I wanted you to come too because you put this in hand, didn’t you? You got Monsieur Poirot and you found out some things yourself, didn’t you?”

“People told me things,” said Mrs. Oliver, “people whom I thought might remember things. Some of them did remember things. Some of them remembered them right and some of them remembered them wrong. That was confusing. Monsieur Poirot says that that does not really matter.”

“No,” said Poirot, “it is just as important to know what is hearsay and what is certain knowledge. Because from one you can learn facts even if they are not quite the right facts or had not got the explanation that you think they had. With the knowledge that you got from me, madame, from the people whom you designated elephants—” he smiled a little.

“Elephants?!” said Mademoiselle Zélie.

“It is what she called them,” said Poirot.

“Elephants can remember,” explained Mrs. Oliver. “That was the idea I started on. And people can remember things that happened a long time ago just like elephants can. Not all people, of course, but they can usually remember something. There were a lot of people who did. I turned a lot of the things I heard over to Monsieur Poirot and he—he has made a sort of—oh, if he was a doctor I should call it a sort of diagnosis, I suppose.”

“I made a list,” said Poirot. “A list of things that seemed to be pointers to the truth of what happened all those years ago. I shall read the various items to you to see perhaps if you who were concerned in all this, feel that they have any significance. You may not see their significance or you may see it plainly.”

“One wants to know,” said Celia. “Was it suicide, or was it murder? Did somebody—some outside person—kill both my father and my mother, shoot them for some reason we don’t know about, some motive? I shall always think there was something of that kind or something else. It’s difficult, but—”

“We will stay here, I think,” said Poirot. “We will not go into the house as yet. Other people have lived in it and it has a different atmosphere. We will perhaps go in if we wish when we have finished our court of enquiry here.”

“It’s a court of enquiry, is it?” said Desmond.

“Yes. A court of enquiry into what happened.”

He moved towards some iron seats which stood near the shelter of a large magnolia near the house. Poirot took from the case he carried a sheet of paper with writing on it. He said to Celia:

“To you, it has got to be that way? A definite choice. Suicide or murder.”

“One of them must be true,” said Celia.

“I shall say to you that both are true, and more than those two. According to my ideas, we have here not only a murder and also a suicide, but we have as well what I shall call an execution, and we have a tragedy also. A tragedy of two people who loved each other and who died for love. A tragedy of love may not always belong to Romeo and Juliet, it is not necessarily only the young who suffer the pains of love and are ready to die for love. No. There is more to it than that.”

“I don’t understand,” said Celia.

"Not yet."

"Shall I understand?" said Celia.

"I think so," said Poirot. "I will tell you what I think happened and I will tell you how I came to think so. The first thing that struck me was the things that were not explained by the evidence that the police examined. Some things were very commonplace, were not evidence at all, you'd think. Among the possessions of the dead Margaret Ravenscroft, were four wigs." He repeated with emphasis. "Four wigs." He looked at Zélie.

"She did not use a wig all the time," said Zélie. "Only occasionally. If she travelled or if she'd been out and got very dishevelled and wanted to tidy herself in a hurry, or sometimes she'd use one that was suitable for evening wear."

"Yes," said Poirot, "it was quite the fashion at that particular date. People certainly when they travelled abroad usually had a wig or two wigs. But in her possession were four wigs. Four wigs seemed to me rather a lot. I wondered why she needed four. According to the police whom I asked, it was not that she had any tendency to baldness, she had the ordinary hair a woman of her age would have and in good condition. All the same, I wondered about those. One of the wigs had a grey streak in it, I learnt later. It was her hairdresser who told me that. And one of the wigs had little curls. It was the latter wig she was wearing the day she died."

"Is that significant in any way?" asked Celia. "She might have been wearing any of them."

"She might. I also learnt the housekeeper told the police that she had been wearing that particular wig almost all the time for the last few weeks before she died. It appeared to be her favourite one."

"I can't see—"

"There was also a saying that Superintendent Garroway quoted to me —'Same man, different hat.' It gave me furiously to think."

Celia repeated, “I don’t see—”

Poirot said, “There was also the evidence of the dog—”

“The dog—what did the dog do?”

“The dog bit her. The dog was said to be devoted to its mistress—but in the last few weeks of her life, the dog turned on her more than once and bit her quite severely.”

“Do you mean it knew she was going to commit suicide?” Desmond stared.

“No, something much simpler than that—”

“I don’t—”

Poirot went on—“No, it knew what no one else seemed to know. It knew she was not its mistress. She looked like its mistress—the housekeeper who was slightly blind and also deaf saw a woman who wore Molly Ravenscroft’s clothes and the most recognizable of Molly Ravenscroft’s wigs—the one with little curls all over the head. The housekeeper said only that her mistress had been rather different in her manner the last few weeks of her life—‘Same man, different hat,’ had been Garroway’s phrase. And the thought—the conviction—came to me then. Same wig—different woman. The dog knew—he knew by what his nose told him. A different woman, not the woman he loved—a woman whom he disliked and feared. And I thought, suppose that woman was not Molly Ravenscroft—but who could she be? Could she be Dolly—the twin sister?”

“But that’s impossible,” said Celia.

“No—it was not impossible. After all, remember, they were twins. I must come now to the things that were brought to my notice by Mrs. Oliver. The things people told her or suggested to her. The knowledge that Lady Ravenscroft had suggested to her. The knowledge that Lady Ravenscroft had recently been in hospital or in a nursing home and that she perhaps had known that she suffered from cancer, or thought that she did. Medical evidence was against that, however. She still might have thought she did, but it was not the case. Then I learnt little by little the early history of her and her twin sister, who loved each other very devotedly as twins do, did everything alike, wore clothes alike, the same things seemed to happen to them, they had illnesses at the same time, they married about the same time or not very far removed in time. And eventually, as many twins do, instead of wanting to do everything in the same fashion and the same way, they wanted to do the opposite. To be as unlike each other as they could. And even between them grew a certain amount of dislike. More than that. There was a reason in the past for that. Alistair Ravenscroft as a young man fell in love with Dorothea Preston-Grey, the elder twin of the two. But his affection shifted to the other sister, Margaret, whom he married. There was jealousy then, no doubt, which led to an estrangement between the sisters. Margaret continued to be deeply attached to her twin, but Dorothea no longer was devoted in any way to Margaret. That seemed to me to be the explanation of a great many things. Dorothea was a tragic figure. By no fault of her own but by some accident of genes, of birth, of hereditary characteristics, she was always mentally unstable. At quite an early age she had, for some reason which has never been made clear, a dislike of children. There is every reason to believe that a child came to its death through her action. The evidence was not definite, but it was definite enough for a doctor to advise that she should have mental treatment, and she was for some years treated in a mental home. When reported cured by doctors, she resumed normal life, came often to stay with her sister and went out to Malaya at a time when they were stationed out there, to join them there. And there, again, an accident happened. A child of a neighbour. And again, although perhaps there was no very definite proof, it seems again Dorothea might have been responsible for it. General Ravenscroft took her home to England and she was placed once more in medical care. Once again she appeared to be cured, and after psychiatric care it was again said that she could go once more and resume a normal life. Margaret believed this time that all would be well, and thought that she ought to live with them so that they could watch closely for any signs of any further mental disability. I don’t think that General Ravenscroft approved. I think he had a very strong belief that just as someone can be born deformed, spastic or crippled in some way, she had a deformity of the brain which would recur from time to time and that she would have to be constantly watched and saved from herself in case some other tragedy happened.”

“Are you saying,” asked Desmond, “that it was she who shot both the Ravenscrofts?”

“No,” said Poirot, “that is not my solution. I think what happened was that Dorothea killed her sister, Margaret. They walked together on the cliff one day and Dorothea pushed Margaret over. The dormant obsession of hatred and resentment of the sister who, though so like herself, was sane and healthy, was too much for her. Hate, jealousy, the desire to kill all rose to the surface and dominated her. I think that there was one outsider who knew, who was here at the time that this happened. I think you knew, Mademoiselle Zélie.”

“Yes,” said Zélie Meauhourat, “I knew. I was here at the time. The Ravenscrofts had been worried about her. That is when they saw her attempt to injure their small son, Edward. Edward was sent back to school and I and Celia went to my pensionnat. I came back here—after seeing Celia settled in. Once the house was empty except for myself, General Ravenscroft and Dorothea and Margaret, nobody had any anxiety. And then one day it happened. The two sisters went out together. Dolly returned alone. She seemed in a very queer and nervous state. She came in and sat down at the tea table. It was then General Ravenscroft noticed that her right hand was covered with blood. He asked her if she had had a fall. She said, ‘Oh no, it was nothing. Nothing at all. I got scratched by a rosebush.’ But there were no rosebushes on the downs. It was a purely foolish remark and we were worried. If she had said a gorse bush, we might have accepted the remark. General Ravenscroft went out and I went after him. He kept saying as he walked, ‘Something has happened to Margaret. I’m sure something has happened to Molly.’ We found her on a ledge a little way down the cliff. She had been battered with a rock and stones. She was not dead but she had bled heavily. For a moment we hardly knew what we could do. We dared not move her. We must get a doctor, we felt, at once, but before we could do that she clung to her husband. She said, gasping for breath, ‘Yes, it was Dolly. She didn’t know what she was doing. She didn’t know, Alistair. You mustn’t let her suffer for it. She’s never known the things she does or why. She can’t help it. She’s never been able to help it. You must promise me, Alistair. I think I’m dying now. No—no, we won’t have time to get a doctor and a doctor couldn’t do anything. I’ve been lying here bleeding to death—

and I’m very close to death. I know that, but promise me. Promise me you’ll save her. Promise me you won’t let the police arrest her. Promise me that she’ll not be tried for killing me, not shut up for life as a criminal. Hide me somewhere so that my body won’t be found. Please, please, it’s the last thing I ask you. You whom I love more than anything in the world. If I could live for you I would, but I’m not going to live. I can feel that. I crawled a little way but that was all I could do. Promise me. And you, Zélie, you love me too. I know. You’ve loved me and been good to me and looked after me always. And you loved the children, so you must save Dolly. You must save poor Dolly. Please, please. For all the love we have for each other, Dolly must be saved.’ ”

“And then,” said Poirot. “What did you do? It seems to me that you must in some way between you—”

“Yes. She died, you know. She died within about ten minutes of those last words, and I helped him. I helped him to hide her body. It was a place a little further along the cliff. We carried her there and there were rocks and boulders and stones, and we covered her body as best we could. There was no path to it really, or no way. You had to scramble. We put her there. All Alistair said again and again was—‘I promised her. I must keep my word. I don’t know how to do it, I don’t know how anyone can save her. I don’t know. But—’ Well, we did do it. Dolly was in the house. She was frightened, desperate with fright—but at the same time she showed a horrible kind of satisfaction. She said, ‘I always knew, I’ve known for years that Molly was really evil. She took you away from me, Alistair. You belonged to me—but she took you away from me and made you marry her and I always knew. Now I’m frightened. What’ll they do to me—what’ll they say? I can’t be shut up again. I can’t, I can’t. I shall go mad. You won’t let me be shut up. They’ll take me away and they’ll say I’m guilty of murder. It wasn’t murder. I just had to do it. Sometimes I do have to do things. I wanted to see the blood, you know. I couldn’t wait to see Molly die, though. I ran away. But I knew she would die. I just hoped you wouldn’t find her. She just fell over the cliff. People would say it was an accident.’”

“It’s a horrible story,” said Desmond.

"Yes," said Celia, "it's a horrible story, but it's better to know. It's better to know, isn't it? I can't even feel sorry for her. I mean for my mother. I know she was sweet. I know there was never any trace of evil in her—she was good all through—and I know, I can understand, why my father didn't want to marry Dolly. He wanted to marry my mother because he loved her and he had found out by then that there was something wrong with Dolly. Something bad and twisted. But how—how did you do it all?"

"We told a good many lies," said Zélie. "We hoped the body would not be found so that later perhaps it might be removed in the night or something like that to somewhere where it could look as though she'd fallen down into the sea. But then we thought of the sleepwalking story. What we had to do was really quite simple. Alistair said, 'It's frightening, you know. But I promised—I swore to Molly when she was dying. I swore I'd do as she asked—there's a way, a possible way to save Dolly, if only Dolly can do her part. I don't know if she's capable of it.' I said, 'Do what?' And Alistair said, 'Pretend she's Molly and that it's Dorothea who walked in her sleep and fell to her death.'

"We managed it. Took Dolly to an empty cottage we knew of and I stayed with her there for some days. Alistair said Molly had been taken to hospital suffering from shock after the discovery that her sister had fallen over the cliff whilst walking in her sleep at night. Then we brought Dolly back—brought her back as Molly—wearing Molly's clothes and Molly's wig. I got extra wigs—the kind with the curls which really did disguise her. The dear old housekeeper, Janet, couldn't see very well. Dolly and Molly were really very much alike, you know, and their voices were alike. Everyone accepted quite easily that it was Molly, behaving rather peculiarly now and then because of still suffering from shock. It all seemed quite natural. That was the horrible part of it—"

"But how could she keep it up?" asked Celia. "It must have been dreadfully difficult."

"No—she did not find it difficult—she had got, you see, what she wanted—what she had always wanted. She had got Alistair—"

"But Alistair—how could he bear it?"

"He told me why and how—on the day he had arranged for me to go back to Switzerland. He told me what I had to do and then he told me what he was going to do.

"He said: 'There is only one thing for me to do. I promised Margaret that I wouldn't hand Dolly over to the police, that it should never be known that she was a murderess, that the children were never to know that they had a murderess for an aunt. No one need ever know that Dolly committed murder. She walked in her sleep and fell over the cliff—a sad accident and she will be buried here in the church, and under her own name.'

"'How can you let that be done?' I asked—I couldn't bear it.

"He said: 'Because of what I am going to do—you have got to know about it.'

"'You see,' he said, 'Dolly has to be stopped from living. If she's near children she'll take more lives—poor soul; she's not fit to live. But you must understand, Zélie, that because of what I am going to do, I must pay with my own life, too—I shall live here quietly for a few weeks with Dolly playing the part of my wife—and then there will be another tragedy—'

"I didn't understand what he meant—I said, 'Another accident? Sleepwalking again?' And he said, 'No—what will be known to the world is that I and Molly have both committed suicide—I don't suppose the reason will ever be known. They may think it's because she was convinced she had cancer—or that I thought so—all sorts of things may be suggested. But you see—you must help me, Zélie. You are the only person who really loves me and loves Molly and loves the children. If Dolly has got to die, I am the only person who must do it. She won't be unhappy or frightened. I shall shoot her and then myself. Her fingerprints will show on the revolver because she handled it not long ago, and mine will be there too. Justice has to be done and I have to be the executioner. The thing I want you to know is that I did—that I still do—love them both. Molly more than my life. Dolly because I pity her so much for what she was born to be.' He said, 'Always remember that—' "

Zélie rose and came towards Celia. “Now you know the truth,” she said. “I promised your father that you should never know—I have broken my word. I never meant to reveal it to you or to anyone else. Monsieur Poirot made me feel differently. But—it’s such a horrible story—”

“I understand how you felt,” said Celia. “Perhaps you were right from your point of view, but I—I am glad to know because now a great burden seems to have been lifted off me—”

“Because now,” said Desmond, “we both know. And it’s something we’ll never mind about knowing. It was a tragedy. As Monsieur Poirot here has said, it was a real tragedy of two people who loved each other. But they didn’t kill each other, because they loved each other. One was murdered and the other executed a murderer for the sake of humanity so that more children shouldn’t suffer. One can forgive him if he was wrong, but I don’t think it was wrong really.”

“She was a frightening woman always,” said Celia. “Even when I was a child I was frightened of her but I didn’t know why. But I do know why now. I think my father was a brave man to do what he did. He did what my mother asked him to do, begged him to do with her dying breath. He saved her twin sister whom I think she’d always loved very dearly. I like to think—oh, it seems a silly thing for me to say—” she looked doubtfully at Hercule Poirot. “Perhaps you won’t think so. I expect you’re a Catholic, but it’s what’s written on their tombstone. ‘In death they were not divided.’ It doesn’t mean that they died together, but I think they are together. I think they came together afterwards. Two people who loved each other very much, and my poor aunt whom I’ll try to feel more kindly about than I ever did—my poor aunt didn’t have to suffer for what she couldn’t perhaps help herself doing. Mind you,” said Celia, suddenly breaking into her ordinary everyday voice, “she wasn’t a nice person. You can’t help not liking people if they’re not nice people. Perhaps she could have been different if she tried, but perhaps she couldn’t. And if so, one has to think of her as someone who was very ill—like somebody, for instance, who had plague in a village and they wouldn’t let her go out or feed her and she couldn’t go amongst other people because the whole village would have died. Something like that. But I’ll try and be sorry for her. And my mother and father—I don’t worry about them anymore. They loved each other so much, and loved poor, unhappy, hating Dolly."

"I think, Celia," said Desmond, "we'd better get married now as soon as possible. I can tell you one thing. My mother is never going to hear anything about this. She's not my own mother and she's not a person I can trust with this sort of secret."

"Your adopted mother, Desmond," said Poirot, "I have good reason to believe was anxious to come between you and Celia and tried to influence you in the idea that from her mother and father she might have inherited some terrible characteristic. But you know, or you may not know and I see no reason why I should not tell you, you will inherit from the woman who was your real mother and who died not very long ago leaving all her money to you—you will inherit a very large sum when you reach the age of twenty-five."

"If I marry Celia, of course we shall need the money to live on," said Desmond. "I quite understand. I know my present adopted mother is very keen on money and I often lend her money even now. She suggested my seeing a lawyer the other day because she said it was very dangerous now that I was over twenty-one, not leaving a Will behind me. I suppose she thought she'd get the money. I had thought of probably leaving nearly all the money to her. But of course now Celia and I are getting married I shall leave it to Celia—and I didn't like the way my mother tried to put me against Celia."

"I think your suspicions are entirely correct," said Poirot. "I daresay she could tell herself that she meant it all for the best, that Celia's origin is something that you ought to know if there is a risk for you to take, but—"

"All right," said Desmond, "but—I know I'm being unkind. After all, she adopted me and brought me up and all the rest of it and I daresay if there's enough money I can settle some of it on her. Celia and I will have the rest and we're going to be happy together. After all, there are things that'll make us feel sad from time to time but we shan't worry anymore, shall we, Celia?"

"No," said Celia, "we'll never worry again. I think they were rather splendid people, my mother and father. Mother tried to look after her sister all her life, but I suppose it was a bit too hopeless. You can't stop people from being like they are."

"Ah, dear children," said Zélie. "Forgive me for calling you children because you are not. You are a grown man and woman. I know that. I am so pleased to have seen you again and to know I have not done any harm in what I did."

"You haven't done any harm at all and it's lovely seeing you, dear Zélie." Celia went to her and hugged her. "I've always been terribly fond of you," she said.

"And I was very fond of you too when I knew you," said Desmond. "When I lived next door. You had lovely games you played with us."

The two young people turned.

"Thank you, Mrs. Oliver," said Desmond. "You've been very kind and you've put in a lot of work. I can see that. Thank you, Monsieur Poirot."

"Yes, thank you," said Celia. "I'm very grateful."

They walked away and the others looked after them.

"Well," said Zélie, "I must leave now." She said to Poirot, "What about you? Will you have to tell anyone about this?"

"There is one person I might tell in confidence. A retired police force officer. He is no longer actively in the Service now. He is completely retired. I think he would not feel it is his duty to interfere with what time has now wiped out. If he was still in active service it might be different."

"It's a terrible story," said Mrs. Oliver, "terrible. And all those people I talked to—yes, I can see now, they all remembered something. Something that was useful in showing us what the truth was, although it was difficult to put together. Except for Monsieur Poirot, who can always put things together out of the most extraordinary things. Like wigs and twins."

Poirot walked across to where Zélie was standing looking out over the view.

"You do not blame me," he said, "for coming to you, persuading you to do what you have done?"

"No. I am glad. You have been right. They are very charming, those two, and they are well suited, I think. They will be happy. We are standing here where two lovers once lived. Where two lovers died and I don't blame him for what he did. It may have been wrong, I suppose it was wrong, but I can't blame him. I think it was a brave act even if it was a wrong one."

"You loved him too, did you not?" said Hercule Poirot.

"Yes. Always. As soon as I came to the house. I loved him dearly. I don't think he knew it. There was never anything, what you call, between us. He trusted me and was fond of me. I loved them both. Both him and Margaret."

"There is something I would like to ask you. He loved Dolly as well as Molly, didn't he?"

"Right up to the end. He loved them both. And that's why he was willing to save Dolly. Why Molly wanted him to. Which did he love the best of those sisters? I wonder. That is a thing I shall perhaps never know," said Zélie. "I never did—perhaps I never shall."

Poirot looked at her for a moment, then turned away. He rejoined Mrs. Oliver.

"We will drive back to London. We must return to everyday life, forget tragedies and love affairs."

"Elephants can remember," said Mrs. Oliver, "but we are human beings and mercifully human beings can forget."

Poirot's Early Cases (1974)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

Agatha Christie - Poirot's Early Cases

CHAPTER I THE AFFAIR AT THE VICTORY BALL

Pure chance led my friend Hercule Poirot, formerly chief of the Belgian force, to be connected with the Styles Case. His success brought him notoriety, and he decided to devote himself to the solving of problems in crime. Having been wounded on the Somme and invalided out of the Army, I finally took up my quarters with him in London. Since I have a first-hand knowledge of most of his cases, it has been suggested to me that I select some of the most interesting and place them on record. In doing so, I feel that I cannot do better than begin with that strange tangle which aroused such widespread public interest at the time. I refer to the affair at the Victory Ball.

Although perhaps it is not so fully demonstrative of Poirot's peculiar methods as some of the more obscure cases, its sensational features, the well-known people involved, and the tremendous publicity given it by the Press, make it stand out as a cause cdldbre and I have long felt that it is only fitting that Poirot's connection with the solution should be given to the world.

It was a fine morning in spring, and we were sitting in Poirot's rooms. My little friend, neat and dapper as ever, his egg-shaped head tilted slightly on one side, was delicately applying a new pomade to his moustache. A certain harmless vanity was a characteristic of Poirot's and fell into line with his general love of order and method. The Daily Newsmonger, which I had been reading, had slipped to the floor, and I was deep in a brown study when Poirot's voice recalled me.

'Of what are you thinking so deeply, mon ami?'

'To tell you the truth,' I replied, 'I was puzzling over this unaccountable affair at the Victory Ball. The papers are full of it.' I tapped the sheet with my finger as I spoke.

'Yes?' 'The more one reads of it, the more shrouded in mystery the whole thing becomesl' I warmed to my subject. 'Who killed Lord Cronshaw? Was Coco Courtenay's death on the same night a mere coincidence? Was it an accident? Or did she deliberately take an overdose of cocaine?' I stopped, and then added dramatically: 'These are the questions I ask myself.' Poirot, somewhat to my annoyance, did not play up. He was peering into the glass, and merely murmured: 'Decidedly, this new pomade, it is a marvel for the moustaches!' Catching my eye, however, he added hastily: 'Quite so--and how do you reply to your questions?' But before I could answer, the door opened, and our landlady announced Inspector Japp.

The Scotland Yard man was an old friend of ours and we greeted him warmly.

'Ah, my good Japp,' cried Poirot, 'and what brings you to see us?' 'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' said Japp, seating himself and nodding to me, 'I'm on a case that strikes me as being very much in your line, and I came along to know whether you'd care to have a finger in the pie?' Poirot had a good opinion of Japp's abilities, though deploring his lamentable lack of method; but I, for my part, considered that the detective's highest talent lay in the gentle art of seeking favours under the guise of conferring them!

'It's this Victory Ball,' said Japp persuasively. 'Come, now, you'd like to have a hand in that.' Poirot smiled at me.

'My friend Hastings would, at all events. He was just holding forth on the subject, n' est-ce pas, tnon ami?' 'Well, sir,' said Japp condescendingly, 'you shall be in it too.

I can tell you, it's something of a feather in your cap to have inside knowledge of a case like this. Well, here's to business. You know the main facts of the case, I suppose, Monsieur Poirot?' 'From the papers only--and the imagination of the journalist is sometimes misleading. Recount the whole story to' me.'

Japp cross legs comfortably and began.

'As all the and his wife knows, on Tuesday last a grand ¥ictory Ball was, held. Every twopenny-halfpenny hop calls itself that nowadays, but this was the real thing, held at the Colossus tta!l, and all London at it--including young Lord Cronshaw and his party.' 'His dossier?' interrupted Poirot. 'I should say his bioscope no, how do you call it - biograph?' 'Viscount Cronshaw was the fifth viscount, twenty-five years of age, rich, unmarried, and very fond of the theatrical world.

There were rumours of his being engaged to Miss Courtenay of the Albany Theatre, who was known to her friends as "Coco" and xho was, by all accounts, a very fascinating young lady.' 'Good. Continue!' 'Lord Cronshaw.'s party consisted of six people: he himself, his uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, a pretty American widow, Mrs Mallaby, a young actor, Chris Davidson, his wife, and last but not least, Mis Coco Courtenay. It was a fancy-dress ball, as you know, and the Cronshaw party represented the old Italian Comedy - whatever that may be.' 'The Con, media dell'.4rte,' murmured Poirot. 'I know.' 'Anyway, the costumes were copied from a set of china figures forming part of Eustace Beltane's collection. Lord Cronshaw was Harlequin; Beltane was Punchinello; Mrs Mallaby matched him as Pulcinella; the IDavidsons were Pierrot and Pierrette; and Miss Courtenay, of course, was Columbine. Now, quite early in the evening it was apparent that there was something wrong. Lord Cronshaw was moody and strange in his manner. When the party met together for supper in a small private room engaged by the host, everyone noticed that he and Miss Courtenay were no longer on speaking-terms. She had obviously been crying, and seemed on the verge of hysterics. The meal was an uncomfortable one, and as they all left the supper-room, she turned to Chris Davidson and requested him audibly to take her home, as she was "sick of the ball". The young actor hesitated, glancing at Lord Cronshaw, and finally drew them both back to the supper-room.

'But all his efforts to secure a reconciliation were unavailing, and he accordingly got a taxi and escorted the now weeping Miss Courtenay back to her flat. Although obviously very much upset, she did not confide in him, merely reiterating again and again that she would "make old Cronch sorry for this?' That is the only hint we have that her death might not have been accidental, and it's precious little to go upon. By the time Davidson had quieted her down somewhat, it was too late to return to the Colossus Hall, and Davidson accordingly went straight home to his flat in Chelsea, where his wife arrived shortly afterwards, bearing the news of the terrible tragedy that had occurred after his departure.

'Lord Cronshaw, it seems, became more and more moody as the ball went on. He kept away from his party, and they hardly saw him during the rest of the evening. It was about one-thirty a.m., just before the grand cotillion when everyone was to unmask, that Captain Digby, a brother officer who knew his disguise, noticed him standing in a box gazing down on the scene.

'"Hullo, Cronchl" he called. "Come down and be sociablel What are you moping about up there for like a boiled owl? Come along; there's a good old rag coming on now." '"Right?' responded Cronshaw. "Wait for me, or I'll never find you in the crowd." 'He turned and left the box as he spoke. Captain Digby, who had Mrs Davidson with him, waited. The minutes passed, but Lord Cronshaw did not appear. Finally Digby grew impatient.

' "Does the fellow think we're going to wait all night for him?" he exclaimed.

'At that moment Mrs Mallaby joined them, and they explained the situation.

'"Say, now," cried the pretty widow vivaciously, "he's like a bear with a sore head tonight. Let's go right away and rout him out." 'The search commenced, but met with no success until it occurred to Mrs Mallaby that he might possibly be found in the room where they had supped an hour earlier. They made their

way there. What a sight met their eyes! There was Harlequin, sure enough, but stretched on the ground with a table-knife in his heart!'

Japp stopped, and Poirot nodded, and said with the relish of the specialist: 'Une belle affaire! And there was no clue as to the perpetrator of the deed? But how should there be!'

'Well,' continued the inspector, 'you know the rest. The tragedy was a double one. Next day there were headlines in all the papers, and a brief statement to the effect that Miss Courtenay, the popular actress, had been discovered dead in her bed, and that her death was due to an overdose of cocaine. Now, was it accident or suicide? Her maid, who was called upon to give evidence, admitted that Miss Courtenay was a confirmed taker of the drug, and a verdict of accidental death was returned. Nevertheless we can't leave the possibility of suicide out of account. Her death is particularly unfortunate, since it leaves us no clue now to the cause of the quarrel the preceding night. By the way, a small enamel box was found on the dead man. It had Coco written across it in diamonds, and was half full of cocaine. It was identified by Miss Courtenay's maid as belonging to her mis-tress, who nearly always carried it about with her, since it con-tained her supply of the drug to which she was fast becoming a slave.'

'Was Lord Cronshaw himself addicted to the drug?'

'Very far from it. He held unusually strong views on the subject of dope.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'But since the box was in his possession, he knew that Miss

Courtenay took it. Suggestive, that, is it not, my good Japp?' 'Ah!' said Japp rather vaguely.

I smiled.

'Well,' said Japp, 'that's the case. What do you think of it?' 'You found no clue of any kind that has not been reported?' 'Yes, there was this.' Japp took a small object from his pocket and handed it over to Poirot. It was a small pompon of emerald green silk, with some ragged threads hanging from it, as though it had been wrenched violently away.

'We found it in the dead man's hand, which was tightly clenched over it,' explained the inspector.

Poirot handed it back without any comment and asked: 'Had Lord Cronshaw any enemies?'

'None that anyone knows of. He seemed a popular young fellow.'

'Who benefits by his death?'

'His uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, comes into the title and estates. There are one or two suspicious facts against him.

Several people declare that they heard a violent altercation going on in the little supper-room, and that Eustace Beltane was one of the disputants. You see, the table-knife being snatched up off the table would fit in with the murder being done in the heat of a quarrel.'

'What does Mr Beltane say about the matter?'

'Declares one of the waiters was the worse for liquor, and that he was giving him a dressing down. Also that it was nearer to one than half past. You see, Captain Digby's evidence fixes the time pretty accurately. Only about ten minutes elapsed between his speaking to Cronshaw and the finding of the body.'

'And in any case I suppose Mr Beltane, as Punchinello, was wearing a hump and a ruffle?'

'I don't know the exact details of the costumes,' said Jap. p, looking curiously at Poirot. 'And anyway, I don't quite see what that has got to do with it?'

'No?' There was a hint of mockery in Poirot's smile. He con-tinued quietly, his eyes shining with the green light I had learned to recognize so well: 'There was a curtain in this little supper room, was there not?'

'Yes, but - '

'With a space behind it sufficient to conceal a man?'

'Yes - in fact, there's a small recess, but how you knew about it - you haven't been to the place, have you, Monsieur Poirot?'

'No, my good Japp, I supplied the curtain from my brain.

Without it, the drama is not reasonable. And always one must be reasonable. But tell me, did they not send for a doctor?'

'At once, of course. But there was nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous.' Poirot nodded rather impatiently.

'Yes, yes, I understand. This doctor, now, he gave evidence at the inquest?' 'Yes.' 'Did he say nothing of any unusual symptom - was there nothing about the appearance of the body which struck him as being abnormal?' Japp stared hard at the little man.

'Yes, Monsieur Poirot. I don't know what you're getting at, but he did mention that there was a tension and stiffness about the limbs which he was quite at a loss to account for.' 'Aha!' said Poirot. 'Aha[Mon Dieul Japp, that gives one to think, does it not?' I saw that it had certainly not given Japp to think.

'If you're thinking of poison, monsieur, who on earth would poison a man first and then stick a knife into him?' 'In truth that would be ridiculous,' agreed Poirot placidly.

'Now is there anything you want to see, monsieur? If you'd like to examine the room where the body was found - ' Poirot waved his hand.

'Not in the least. You have told me the only thing that interests me - Lord Cronshaw's views on the subject of drug-taking.' 'Then there's nothing you want to see?' 'Just one thing.' 'What is that?' 'The set of china figures from which the costumes were copied.' Japp stared.

'Well, you're a funny one!' 'You can manage that for me?' 'Come round to Berkely Square now if you like. Mr Beltane or His Lordship, as I should say now - won't object.'

We set off at once in a taxi. The new Lord Cronshaw was not at home, but at Japp's request we were shown into the 'china room', where the gems of the collection were kept. Japp looked round him rather helplessly.

'I don't see how you'll ever find the ones you want, monsieur.' But Poirot had already drawn a chair in front of the mantelpiece and was hopping up upon it like a nimble robin. Above the mirror, on a small shelf to themselves, stood six china figures. Poirot examined them minutely, making a few comments to us as he did so.

'Les voildl The old Italian Comedy. Three pairsl Harlequin and Columbine, Pierrot and Pierrette - very dainty in white and green - and Punchinello and Pulcinella in mauve and yellow.

Very elaborate, the costume of Punchinello - ruffles and frills, a hump, a high hat. Yes, as I thought, very elaborate.' He replaced the figures carefully, and jumped down.

Japp looked unsatisfied, but as Poirot had clearly no intention of explaining anything, the detective put the best face he could upon the matter. As we were preparing to leave, the master of the house came in, and Japp performed the necessary introductions.

The sixth Viscount Cronshaw was a man of about fifty, suave in manner, with a handsome, dissolute face. Evidently an elderly roll , with the languid manner of a poseur. I took an instant dislike to him. He greeted us graciously enough, declaring he had heard great accounts of Poirot's skill, and placing himself at our disposal in every way.

'The police are doing all they can, I know,' Poirot said.

'But I much fear the mystery of my nephew's death will never be cleared up. The whole thing seems utterly mysterious.' Poirot was watching him keenly. 'Your nephew had no enemies that you know of?' 'None whatever. I am sure of that.' He paused;and then went on: 'If there are any questions you would like to ask - ' 'Only one.' Poirot's voice was serious. 'The costumes - they were reproduced exactly from your figurines?' 'To the smallest detail.' 'Thank you, milor'. That is all I wanted to be sure of. I wish you good day.'

'And whm next?' inquired Japp as we hurried down the street.

'I've got to report at the Yard, you know.' 'Bienl I will not detain you. I have one other little matter to attend to, and then - ' 'Yes?' 'The case will be complete.' 'What? You don't mean it! You know who killed Lord Cron8haw?' 'Parfaitement.' 'Who was it? Eustace Beltane?' 'Ah, mon ami, you know my little weaknessl Always I have a desire to keep the threads in my own hands up to the last minute.

But have no fear. I will reveal all when the time comes. I want no credit - the affair shall be yours, on the condition that you permit me to play out the dgnouernent my own way.' 'That's fair enough,' said Japp. 'That is, if the dgnouement ever comesl But I say, you are an oyster, aren't you?' Poirot smiled.

'Well, so long. I'm off to the Yard.' He strode off down the street, and Poirot hailed a pasing taxi.

'Where are we going now?' I asked in lively curiosity.

'To Chelsea to see the Davidsons.' He gave the address to the driver.

'What do you think of the new Lord Cronshaw?' I asked.

'What says my good friend Hastings?' 'I distrust him instinctively.' 'You think he is the "wicked uncle" of the story-books, eh?' 'Don't you?' The, I think he was most amiable towards us,' said Poirot noncommittally.

'Because he had his reasonsl' Poirot looked at me, shook his head sadly, and murmured something that sounded like: 'No method.'

The Davidsons lived on the third floor of a block of 'mansion' flats. Mr Davidson was out, we vcere told, but Mrs Davidson was at home. We were ushered into a long, low room with garish Oriental hangings. The air felt close and oppressive, and there

was an overpowering fragrance of joss-sticks. Mrs Davidson came to us almost immediately, a small, fair creature whose fragility would have seemed pathetic and appealing had it not been for the rather shrewd and calculating gleam in her light blue eyes.

Poirot explained our connection with the case, and she shook her head sadly.

'Poor Cronch - and poor Coco too We were both so fond of her, and her death has been a terrible grief to us. What is it you want to ask me? Must I really go over all that dreadful evening again?'

'Oh, madame, believe me, I would not harass your feelings unnecessarily. Indeed, Inspector Japp has told me all that is needful. I only wish to see the costume you wore at the ball that night.'

The lady looked somewhat surprised, and Poirot continued smoothly: 'You comprehend, madame, that I work on the system of my country. There we always "reconstruct" the crime. It is possible that I may have an actual reprdsentatbn, and if so, you understand, the costumes would be important.'

Mrs Davidson still looked a bit doubtful.

'I've heard of reconstructing a crime, of course,' she said. 'But ,I didn't know you were so particular about details. But I'll fetch the dress now.'

She left the room and returned almost immediately with a dainty wisp of white satin and green. Poirot took it from her and examined it, handing it back with a bow.

'Merci, madameI see you have had the misfortune to lose one of your green pompons, the one on the shoulder here.'

'Yes, it got torn off at the ball. I picked it up and gave it to poor

Lord Cronshaw to keep for me.' 'That was after supper?' 'Yes.'

'Not long before the tragedy, perhaps?'

A faint look of alarm came into Mrs Davidson's pale eyes, and she replied quickly: 'Oh no - long before that. Quite soon after supper, in fact.'

'I see. Well, that is all. I will not derange you further. Bonjour, ttladame.' 'Well,' I said, as we emerged from the building, 'that explains the mystery of the green pompon.' 'I wonder.' 'Why, what do you mean?' 'You saw me examine the dress, Hastings?' 'Yes?' 'Eh bien, the pompon that was missing had not been wrenched off, as the lady said. On the contrary, it had been cut off, my friend, cut off with scissors. The threads were all quite even.' 'Dear reel' I exclaimed. 'This becomes more and more involved.' 'On the contrary,' replied Poirot placidly, 'it becomes more and more simple.' 'Poirot,' I cried, 'one day I shall murder you! Your habit of finding everything perfectly simple is aggravating to the last degree!' 'But when I explain, rnon ami, is it not always perfectly simple?' 'Yes; that is the annoying part of it! I feel then that I could have done it myself.' 'And so you could, Hastings, so you could. If you would but take the trouble of arranging your ideas! Without method - ' 'Yes, yes,' I said hastily, for I knew Poirot's eloquence when started on his favourite theme only too well. 'Tell me, what do we do next? Are you really going to reconstruct the crime?' 'Hardly that. Shall we say that the drama is over, but that I propose to add a - harlequinade?'

The following Tuesday was fixed upon by Poirot as the day for this mysterious performance. The preparations greatly intrigued me. A white screen was erected at one side of the room, flanked by heavy curtains at either side. A man with some lighting apparatus arrived next, and finally a group of members of the theatrical profession, who disappeared into Poirot's bedroom, which had been rigged up as a temporary dressing-room.

Shortly before eight, Japp arrived, in no very cheerful mood. I gathered that the official detective hardly approved of Poirot's plan.

'Bit melodramatic, like all his ideas. But there, it can do no harm, and as he says, it might save us a good bit of trouble. He'a been very smart over the case. I was on the same scent myself, of course - ' I felt instinctively that Japp was straining the truth here - 'but there, I promised to let him play the thing out his own way. Ahl Here is the crowd.'

His Lordship arrived first, escorting Mrs Mallaby, whom I had not as yet seen. She was a pretty, dark-haired woman, and appeared perceptibly nervous. The Davidsons followed. Chris Davidson also I saw for the first time. He was handsome enough in a rather obvious style, tall and dark, with the easy grace of the actor.

Poirot had arranged seats for the party facing the screen. This was illuminated by a bright light. Poirot switched out the other lights so that the room was in darkness except for the screen.

Poirot's voice rose out of the gloom.

'Messieurs, mesdames, a word of explanation. Six figures in turn will pass across the screen. They are familiar to you. Pierrot and his Pierrette; Punchinello the buffoon, and elegant Pulcinella; beautiful Columbine, lightly dancing, Harlequin, the sprite, invisible to manl'

With these words of introduction, the show began. In turn each figure that Poirot had mentioned bounded before the screen, stayed there a moment poised, and then vanished. The lights went up, and a sigh of relief went round. Everyone had been nervous, fearing they knew not what. It seemed to me that the proceedings had gone singularly flat. If the criminal was among us, and Poirot expected him to break down at the mere sight of a familiar figure, the device had failed signally - as it was almost bound to do. Poirot, however, appeared not a whit discomposed.

He stepped forward, beaming.

'Now, messieurs and mesdames, will you be so good as to tell me, one at a time what it is that we have just seen? Will you begin, milor'?'

The gentleman looked rather puzzled. 'I'm afraid I don't quite understand.'

'Just tell me what we have been seeing.'

'I - er - well, I should say we have seen six figures passing in front of a screen and dressed to represent the personages in the old Italian Comedy, or - er - ourselves the other night.'

'Never mind the other night, milor',' broke in Poirot. 'The first part of your speech was what I wanted. Madame you agree with Milor' Cronshaw?;

He had turned as he spoke to Mrs Mallaby.

'I - er - yes, of course.'

'You agree that you have seen six figures representing the Italian Comedy?'

'Why, certainly.'

'Monsieur Davidson? You too?' 'Yes.' 'Madame?' 'Yes.'

'Hastings? Japp? Yes? You are all in accord?'

He looked around upon us; his face grew rather pale, and his eyes were green as any cat's.

'And yet - you are all wrong/Your eyes have lied to you - as they lied to you on the night of the Victory Ball. To "see things with your own eyes", as they say, is not always to see the truth.

One must see with eyes of the mind; one must employ the little cells of grey! Know, then, that tonight and on the night of the Victory Ball, you saw not six figures but five! Seel'

The lights went out again. A figure bounded in front of the screen - Pierrotl

'Who is that?' demanded Poirot. 'Is it Pierrot?' 'Yes,' we all cried.

'Look again['

With a swift movement the man divested himself of his loose Pierrot garb. There in the limelight stood glittering Harlequinl At the same moment there was a cry and an overturned chair.

'Curse you,' snarled Davidson's voice. 'Curse youl How did you gue?'

When came the clink of handcuffs and Japp's calm official voice.

'I arrest you, Christopher Davidson - charge of murdering

Viscount Cronshaw - anything you say used in evidence against you.'

It was a quarter of an hour later. A recherch little supper had appeared; and Poirot, beaming all over his face, was dispensing hospitality and answering our eager questions.

'It was all very simple. The circumstances in which the green pompon was found suggested at once that it had been torn from the costume of the murderer. I dismissed Pierrette from my mind (since it takes considerable strength to drive a table-knife home) and fixed upon Pierrot as the criminal. But Pierrot left the ball nearly two hours before the murder was committed. So he must either have returned to the ball later to kill Lord Cronshaw, or eh bien, he must have killed him before he left! Wras that impossible?

Who had seen Lord Cronshaw after supper that evening? Only Mrs Davidson, whose statement, I suspected, was a deliberate fabrication uttered with the object of accounting for the missing pompon, which, of course, she cut from her own dress to replace the one missing on her husband's costume. But then, Harlequin, who was seen in the box at one-thirty, must have been an impersonation.

For a moment, earlier, I had considered the possibility of Mr Beltane being the guilty party. But with his elaborate costume, it was clearly impossible that he could have doubled the roles of Punchinello and Harlequin. On the other hand, to David-son, a young man of about the same height as the murdered man and an actor by profession, the thing was simplicity itself.

'But one thing worried me. Surely a doctor could not fail to perceive the difference between a man who had been dead two hours and one who had been dead ten minutes! Eh &n, the doctor did perceive it! But he was not taken to the body and asked "How long has this man been dead?" On the contrary, he was informed that the man had been seen alive ten minutes ago, and so he merely commented at the inquest on the abnormal stiffening of the limbs for which he was quite unable to accountl 'All was now marching famously for my theory. Davidson had killed Lord Cronshaw immediately after supper, when., as you remember, he was seen to draw him back into the supper-room.

Then he departed with Miss Courtenay, left her at the door of her flat (instead of going in and trying to pacify her as he affirmed) and returned post-haste to the Colossus - but as Harlequin, not Pierrot - a simple transformation effected by removing his outer costume.'

The uncle of the dead man leaned forward, his eyes perplexed.

'But if so, he must have come to the ball prepared to kill his victim. What earthly motive could he have had? The motive, that's what I can't get.'

'Ah! There we come to the second tragedy - that of Miss Courtenay. There was one simple point which everyone over-looked.

Miss Courtenay died of cocaine poisoning - but her supply of the drug was in the enamel box which was found on Lord Cronshaw's body. Where, then, did she obtain the dose which killed her? Only one person could have supplied her with it -Davidson.

And that explains everything. It accounts for her friendship with the Davidsons and her demand that Davidson should escort her home. Lord Cronshaw, who was almost fanatic-ally opposed to drug-taking, discovered that she was addicted to cocaine, and suspected that Davidson supplied her with it.

Davidson doubtless denied this, but Lord Cronshaw determined to get the truth from Miss Courtenay at the ball. He could forgive the wretched girl, but he would certainly have no mercy on the man who made a living by trafficking in drugs. Exposure and ruin confronted Davidson. He went to the ball determined that

Cronshaw's silence must be obtained at any cost.'

'Was Coco's death an accident, then?'

'I suspect that it was an accident cleverly engineered by Davidson. She was furiously angry with Cronshaw, first for his reproaches, and secondly for taking her cocaine from her. Davidson supplied her with more, and probably suggested her augmenting the dose as a defiance to "old Cronch'T

'One other thing,' I said. 'The recess and the curtain? How did you know about them?'

'Why, rnon ami, that was the most simple of all. Waiters had been in and out of that little room, so, obviously, the body could not have been lying where it was found on the floor. There must be some place in the room where it could be hidden. I deduced a curtain and a recess behind it. Davidson dragged the body there, and later, after drawing attention to himself in the box, he dragged it out again before finally leaving the Hall. It was one of his best moves. He is a clever fellow?

But in Poirot's green eyes I read unmistakably the unspoken remark: 'But not quite so clever as Hercule Poirotl'

CHAPTER II THE ADVENTURE OF THE CLAPHAM COOK

At the time that I was sharing rooms with my friend Hercule Poirot, it was my custom to read aloud to him the headlines in the morning newspaper, the Daily Blare.

The Daily Blare was a paper that made the most of any opportunity for sensationalism. Robberies and murders did not lurk obscurely in its back pages. Instead they hit you in the eye in large type on the front page.

ABSCONDING BANK CLERK DISAPPEARS WITH FI17TY THOUSAND POUNDS' WORTH OF NEGOTIABLE SECURITIES, I read.

HUSBAND PUTS HIS HEAD IN GAS-OVEN. UNHAPPY HOME LI17.

MISSING TYPIST. PRETTY OIRL O17 TWENTY-ONE. WHEI IS EDNA FIELD?

'There you are, Poirot, plenty to choose from. An absconding bank clerk, a mysterious suicide, a missing typist - which will you have?' My friend was in a placid mood. He quietly shook his head.

'I am not greatly attracted to any of them, mon ant/. Today I feel inclined for the life of ease. It would have to be a very interesting problem to tempt me from my chair. See you, I have affairs of importance of my own to attend to.' 'Such as?' 'My wardrobe, Hastings. If I mistake not, there is on my new grey suit the spot of grease- only the unique spot, but it is sufficient to trouble me. Then there is my winter overcoat - I must lay him aside in the powder of Keatings. And I think - yes, I think - the moment is ripe for the trimmings of my moustaches - and afterwards I must apply the pomade.' 'Well,' I said, strolling to the window, 'I doubt if you'll be able to carry out this delirious programme. That was a ring at the bell.

You have a client.'

'Unless the affair is one of national importance, I touch it not,' declared Poirot with dignity.

A moment later our privacy was invaded by a stout red-faced lady who panted audibly as a result of her rapid ascent of the stairs.

'You're M. Poirot?' she demanded, as she sank into a chair.

'I am Hercule Poirot, yes, madame.'

'You're not a bit like what I thought you'd be,' said the lady, eyeing him with some disfavour. 'Did you pay for the bit in the paper saying what a clever detective you were, or did they put it in themselves?'

'Madamel' said Poirot, drawing himself up.

'I'm sorry, I'm sure, but you know what these papers are nowadays. You begin reading a nice article "What a bride said to her plain unmarried friend", and it's all about a simple thing you buy at the chemist's and shampoo your hair with. Nothing but puff. But no offence taken, I hope? I'll tell you what I want you to do for me. I want you to find my cook.'

Poirot stared at her; for once his ready tongue failed him. I turned aside to hide the broadening smile I could not control.

'It's all this wicked dole,' continued the lady. 'Putting ideas into servants' heads, wanting to be typists and what nots. Stop the dole, that's what I say. I'd like to know what my servants have to complain of - afternoon and evening off a week, alternate Sundays, washing put out, same food as we have - and never a bit of margarine in the house, nothing but the very best butter.'

She paused for want of breath and Poirot seized his opportunity.

He spoke in his haughtiest manner rising to his feet as he did so.

'I fear you are making a mistake, madame. I am not holding an inquiry into the conditions of domestic service. I am a private detective.'

'I know that,' said our visitor. 'Didn't I tell you I wanted you to find my cook for me? Walked out of the house on Wednesday, without so much as a word to me, and never came back.'

'I am sorry, madame, but I do not touch'this particular kind of business. I wish you good morning.'

Our visitor snorted with indignation.

'That's it, is it, my fine fellow? Too proud, eh? Only deal with Government secrets and countesses' jewels? Let me tell you a servant's every bit as important as a tiara to a woman in my position. We can't all be fine ladies going out in our motors with our diamonds and our pearls. A good cook's a good cook - and when you lose her, it's as much to you as her pearls are to some fine lady.'

For a moment or two it appeared to be a toss up between Poirot's dignity and his sense of humour. Finally he laughed and sat down again.

'Madame, you are in the right, and I am in the wrong. Your remarks are just and intelligent. This case will be a novelty. Never yet have I hunted a missing domestic. Truly here is the problem of national importance that I was demanding of fate just before your arrival. En avant! You say this jewel of a cook went out on

Wednesday and did not return. That is the day before yesterday.' 'Yes, it was her day out.'

'But probably, madame, she has met with some accident. Have you inquired at any of the hospitals?'

'That's exactly what I thought yesterday, but this morning, if you please, she sent for her box. And not so much as a line to mel If I'd been at home, I'd not have let it go - treating me like thatl

But I'd just stepped out to the butcher.'

'Will you describe her to me?'

'She was middle-aged, stout, black hair turning grey - most respectable. She'd been ten years in her last place. Eliza Dunn, her name was.'

'And you had had - no disagreement with her on the Wednes-day?'

'None whatever. That's what makes it all so queer.'

'How many servants do you keep, madame?'

'Two. The house-parlourmaid, Annie, is a very nice girl. A bit forgetful and her head full of young men, but a good servant if you keep her up to her work.'

'Did she and the cook get on well together?'

'They had their ups and downs, of course - but on the whole, very well.'

'And the girl can throw no light on the mystery?'

'She says not - but you know what servants are - they all hang together.'

'Well, well, we must look into this. Where did you say you resided, madame?'

'At Clapham; 88 Prince Albert Road.'

'Bien, madame,, I will wish you good morning, and you may count upon seeing me at your residence during the course of the day.'

Mrs Todd, for such was our new friend's name, then took her departure. Poirot looked at me somewhat ruefully.

'Well, well, Hastings, this is a novel affair that we have here.

The Disappearance of the Clapham Cookl Never, never, must our friend Inspector Japp get to hear of thisl'

He then proceeded to heat an iron and carefully removed the grease spot from his grey suit by means of a piece of blotting-paper.

His moustaches he regretfully postponed to another day, and we set out for Clapham.

Prince Albert Road proved to be a street of small prim houses, all exactly alike, with neat lace curtains veiling the windows, and well polished brass knockers on the doors.

We rang the bell at No. 88, and the door was opened by a neat maid with a pretty face. Mrs Todd came out in the hall to greet us.

'Don't go, Annie,' she cried. 'This gentleman's a detective and he'll want to ask you some questions.'

Annie's face displayed a struggle between alarm and a pleasur-able excitement.

'I thank you, madame,' said Poirot bowing. 'I would like to question your maid now - and to see her alone, if I may.'

We were shown into a small drawing-room, and when Mrs Todd, with obvious reluctance, had left the room, Poirot com-menced his cross-examination.

'Voyons, Mademoiselle Annie, all that you shall tell us will be of the greatest importance. You alone can shed any light on the case. Without your assistance I can do nothing.'

The alarm vanished from the girl's face and the pleasurable excitement became more strongly marked.

'I'm sure, sir,' she said, 'I'll tell you anything I can.'

'That is good.' Poirot beamed approval on her. 'Now, first of all what is your own idea? You are a girl of remarkable intelligence.

That can be seen at oncel What is your own explanation of Eliza's disappearance?'

Thus encouraged, Annie fairly flowed into excited speech.

'White slavers, sir, I've said so all along! Cook was alway warning me against them. "Don't you sniff no scent, or eat any sweets - no matter how gentlemanly the fellowl" Those were her words to me. And now they've got herl I'm sure of it. As likely a not, she's been shipped to Turkey or one of them Eastern place, where I've heard they like them fat?

Poirot preserved an admirable gravity.

'But ia that case - and it is indeed an ideal - would she have ent for her trunk?'

'Well, I don't know, sir. She'd want her things - even in thoe foreign places.'

'Who came for the trunk - a man?' 'It was Carter Paterson, sir.' 'Did you pack it?'

'No, sir, it was already packed and corded.'

'Ahl That's interesting. That shows that when she left the hou on Wednesday, she had already determined not to return. You see that, do you not?'

'Yes, sir.' Annie looked slightly taken aback. 'I hadn't thought of that. But it might still have been white slavers, mightn't it, sir?' she added wistfully.

'Undoubtedlyl' said Poirot gravely. He went on: 'Did you both occupy the same bedroom?'

'No, sir, we had separate rooms.'

'And had Eliza expressed any dissatisfaction with her present post to you at all? Were you both happy here?'

'She'd never mentioned leaving. The place is all right - ' The girl hesitated.

'Speak freely,' said Poirot kindly. 'I shall not tell your mistress.'

'Well, of course, sir, she's a caution, Missus is. But the food's good. Plenty of it, and no stinting. Something hot for supper, good outings, and as much frying-fat as you like. And anyway, if Eliza did want to make a change, she'd never have gone off this way, I'm sure. She'd have stayed her month. Why, Missus could have a month's wages out of her for doing this?

'And the work, it is not too hard?'

'Well, she's particular - always poking round in corners and looking for dust. And then there's the lodger, or paying guest as he's always called. But that's only breakfast and dinner, same as Master. They're out all day in the City.'

'You like your master?'

'He's all right - very quiet and a bit on the stingy side.'

'You can't remember, I suppose, the last thing Eliza said before she went out?'

'Yes, I can. "If there's any stewed peaches over from the dining-room," she says, "we'll have them for supper, and a bit of bacon and some fried potatoes." Mad over stewed peaches, she was. I shouldn't wonder if they didn't get her that way.'

'Was Wednesday her regular day out?'

'Yes, she had Wednesdays and I had Thursdays.'

Poirot asked a few more questions, then declared himself satisfied. Annie departed, and Mrs Todd hurried in, her face alight with curiosity. She had, I felt certain, bitterly resented her exclusion from the room during our conversation with Annie.

Poirot, however, was careful to soothe her feelings tactfully.

'It is difficult,' he explained, 'for a woman of exceptional intelligence such as yourself, madame, to bear patiently the roundabout methods we poor detectives are forced to use. To have patience with stupidity is difficult for the quick-witted.'

Having thus charmed away any little resentment on Mrs Todd's part, he brought the conversation round to her husband and elicited the information that he worked with a firm in the City and would not be home until after six.

'Doubtless he is very disturbed and worried by this unaccount-able business, eh? Is it not so?'

'He's never worried,' declared Mrs Todd. '"Well, well, get another, my dear." That's all he said! He's so calm that it drives me to distraction sometimes. "An ungrateful woman," he said. "We are well rid of her."' 'What about the other inmates of the house, madame?' 'You mean Mr Simpson, our paying guest? Well, as long as he gets his breakfast and his evening meal all right, he doesn't worry. ' 'What is. his profession, madame?' 'He works in a bank.' She mentioned its name, and I started slightly, remembering my perusal of the Daily Blare.

'A young man?' 'Twenty-eight, I believe. Nice quiet young fellow.' 'I should like to have a few words with him, and also with your husband, if I may. I will return for that purpose this evening. I venture to suggest that you should repose yourself a little, madame, you look fatigued.' 'I should just think I am! First the worry about Eliza, and then I was at the sales practically all yesterday, and you know what that is, M. Poirot, and what with one thing and another and a lot to do in the house, because of course

Annie can't do it all - and very likely she'll give notice anyway, being unsettled in this way well, what with it all, I'm tired outl' Poirot murmured sympathetically, and we took our leave.

'It's a curious coincidence,' I said, 'but that absconding clerk, Davis, was from the same bank as Simpson. Can there be any connection, do you think?' Poirot smiled.

'At the one end, a defaulting clerk, at the other a vanishing cook. It is hard to see any relation between the two, unless possibly Davis visited Simpson, fell in love with the cook, and persuaded her to accompany him on his flightl' I laughed. But Poirot remained grave.

'He might have done worse,' he said reprovingly. 'Remember, Hastings, if you are going into exile, a good cook may be of more comfort than a pretty face!' He paused for a moment and then went on. 'It is a curious case, full of contradictory features. I am interested - yes, I am distinctly interested.'

That evening we returned to 88 Prince Albert Road and inter-viewed both Todd and Simpson. The former was a melancholy lantern-jawed man of forty-odd.

'Obi Yes, yes,' he said vaguely. 'Eliza. Yes. A good cook, I believe. And economical. I make a strong point of economy.'

'Can you imagine any reason for her leaving you so suddenly?' 'Oh, well,' said Mr Todd vaguely. 'Servants, you know. My wife worries too much. Worn out from always worrying. The whole problem's quite simple really. "Get another, my dear," I say.

"Get another." That's all there is to it. No good crying over spilt milk.'

Mr Simpson was equally unhelpful. He was a quiet incon-spicuous young man with spectacles.

'I must have seen her, I suppose,' he said. 'Elderly woman, wasn't she? Of course, it's the other one I see always, Annie.

Nice girl. Very obliging.'

'Were those two on good terms with each other?'

Mr Simpson said he couldn't say, he was sure. He supposed so.

'Well, we get nothing of interest there, rnon ami,' said Poirot as we left the house. Our departure had been delayed by a burst of vociferous repetition from Mrs Todd, who repeated everything she had said that morning at rather greater length.

'Are you disappointed?' I asked. 'Did you expect to hear some-thing?'

Poirot shook his head.

'There was a possibility, of course,' he said. 'But I hardly thought it likely.'

The next development was a letter which Poirot received on the following morning. He read it, turned purple with indignation, and handed it to me.

Mrs Todd regrets that after all she will not avail herself of Mr Poirot's services. After talking the matter over with her husband she sees that it is foolish to call in a detective about a purely domestic affair. Mrs Todd encloses a guinea for con-sultation fee.

'Ahal' cried Poirot angrily. 'And they think to get rid of Hercule loirot like thatl As a favour - a great favour - I consent to investigate their miserable little twopenny-halfpenny affair - and they dismiss me comme fal Here, I mistake not, is the hand of Mr Todd. But I say nol - thirty-six times nol I will spend my own guineas, thirty-six hundred of them if need be, but I will get to the bottom of this matter?

'Yes,' I said. 'But how?' Poirot calmed down a little.

'D'abord,' he said, 'we will advertise in the papers. Let me see yes - something like this: "If Eliza Dunn will communicate with thia address, she will hear of something to her advantage." Put it in all the papers you can think of, Hastings. Then I will make some little inquiries of my own. Go, go

- all must be done as quickly as possible!' I did not see him again until the evening, when he condescended to tell me what he had been doing.

'I have made inquiries at the firm of Mr Todd. He was not absent on ,Wednesday, and he bears a good character - so much for him. Then Simpson, on Thursday he was ill and did not come to the bank, but he was there on Wednesday. He was moderately friendly with Davis. Nothing out of the common. There does not eem to be anything there. No. We must place our reliance on the advertisement.' The advertisement duly appeared in all the principal daily papers. By Poirot's orders it was to be continued every day for a week. His eagerness over this uninteresting matter of a defaulting cook was extraordinary, but I realized that he considered it a point of honour to persevere until he finally succeeded. Several extremely interesting cases were brought to him about this time, but he declined them all. Every morning he would rush at his letters, scrutinize them earnestly and then lay them down with a sigh.

But our patience was rewarded at last. On the Wednesday following Mrs Todd's visit, our landlady informed us that a person of the name of Eliza Dunn had called.

'Enfin!' cried Poirot. 'But make her mount thenl At once. Immediately.'

Thts admonished, our landlady hurried out and returned a moment or two later, ushering in Miss Dunn. Our quarry was much as described: tall, stout, and eminently respectable.

'I came in answer to the advertisement,' she eXPlained. 'I thought there must be some muddle or other, and that perhaps you didn't know I'd already got my legacy.'

Poirot was studying her attentively. He drew forward a chair with a flourish.

'The truth of the matter is,' he explained, 'that your late mistress, Mrs Todd, was much concerned about you. She feared some accident might have befallen you.'

Eliza Dunn seemed very much surprised.

'Didn't she get my letter then?'

'She got no word of any kind.' He paused, and then said per-suasively: 'Recount to me the whole story, will you not?'

Eliza Dunn needed no encouragement. She plunged at once into a lengthy narrative.

'I was just coming home on Wednesday night and had nearly got to the house, when a gentleman stopped me. A tall gentleman he was, with a beard and a big hat. "Miss Eliza Dunn?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "I've been inquiring for you at No. 88," he said.

"They told me I might meet you coming along here. Miss Dunn, I have come from Australia specially to find you. Do you happen to know the maiden name of your maternal grandmother?" "Jane Emmott," I said. "Exactly," he said. "Now, Miss Dunn, although you may never have heard of the fact, your grandmother had a great friend, Eliza Leech. This friend went to Australia where she married a very wealthy settler. Her two children died in infancy, and she inherited all her husband's property. She died a few months ago, and by her will you inherit a house in this country and a considerable sum of money."

'You could have knocked me down with a feather,' continued Miss Dunn. 'For a minute, I was suspicious, and he must have seen it, for he smiled. "Quite right to be on your guard, Miss Dunn," he said. "Here are my credentials." He handed me a letter from some lawyers in Melbourne, Hurst and Crotchet, and a card. He was Mr Crotchet. "There are one or two conditions," he said. "Our client was a little eccentric, you know. The bequest is conditional on your taking possession of the house (it is in Cumberland) before twelve o'clock tomorrow. The other condition is of no importance - it is merely a stipulation that you should not be in domestic service." My face fell. "Oh, Mr Crotchet," I said. "I'm a cook. Didn't they tell you at the house?" "Dear, dear," he said. "I had no idea of such a thing. I thought you might possibly be a companion or governess there. This is very unfortunate - very unfortunate indeed." ' "Shall I have to lose all the money?" I said, anxious like. He thought for a minute or two. "There are always ways of getting round the law, Miss Dunn," he said at last. "We lawyers know that. The way out here is for you to have left your employment this afternoon." "But my month?" I said. "My dear Miss Dunn," he said with a smile. "You can leave an employer any minute by forfeiting a month's wages. Your mistress will understand in view of the circumstances. The difficulty is time! It is imperative that you should catch the x.5 from King's Cross to the North. I can advance you ten pounds or so for the fare, and you can write a note at the station to your employer. I will take it to her myself and explain the whole circumstances." I agreed, of course, and an hour later I was in the train, so flustered that I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels. Indeed by the time I got to Carlisle, I was half inclined to think the whole thing was one of those confidence tricks you read about. But I went to the address he had given me - solicitors they were, and it was all right. A nice little house, and an income of three hundred a year. These lawyers knew very little, they'd just got a letter from a gentleman in London instructing them to hand over the house to me and x5o for the first six months. Mr Crotchet sent up my things to me, but there was no word from Missus. I supposed she was angry and grudged me my bit of luck. She kept back my box too, and sent my clothes in paper parcels. But there, of course if she never had my letter, she might think it a bit cool of me.' ?oirot had listened attentively to this long history. Now he nodded his head as though completely satisfied.

'Thank you, mademoiselle. There had been, as you say, a little

muddle. Permit me to recompense you for your trouble.' He handed her an envelope. 'You return to Cumberland immediately? A little word in your ear. Do not forget how to cook. It is always useful to have something to fall back upon in case things go wrong.' 'Credulous,' he murmured, as our visitor departed, 'but perhal not more than most of her class.' His face grew grave. 'Come, Hastings, there is no time to be lost. Get a taxi while I write a note to Japp.' Poirot was waiting on the doorstep when I returned with the taxi.

'Where are we going?' I asked anxiously.

'First, to despatch this note by special messenger.' This was done, and re-entering the taxi Poirot gave the addre to the driver.

'Eighty-eight Prince Albert Road, Clapham.' 'So we are going there?' 'Mai, oui. Though frankly I fear we shall be too late. Our bird will have flown, Hastings.' 'Who is our bird?' Poirot smiled.

'The inconspicuous Mr Simpson.' 'What?' I exclaimed.

'Oh, come now, Hastings, do not tell me that all is not clear to you now?

'The cook was got out of the way, I realize that,' I said, slightly piqued. 'But why? Why should Simpson wish to get her out of the house? Did she know something about him?' 'Nothing whatever.' 'Well, then ' 'But he wanted something that she had.' 'Money? The Australian legacy?' 'No, my friend - something quite different.' He paused a moment and then said gravely: 'q battered tin trunk...' I looked sideways at him. His statement seemed so fantaatic that I suspected him of pulling my leg, but he was perfectly grave and serious.

'Surely he could buy a trunk if he wanted one,' I cried.

'He did not want a new trunk. He wanted a trunk of pedigree.

A trunk of assured respectability.'

'Look here, Poirot,' I cried, 'this really is a bit thick. You're pulling my leg.'

He looked at me.

'You lack the brains and the imagination of Mr Simpson, Hastings. See here: On Wednesday evening, Simpson decoys away the cook. A printed card and a printed sheet of notepaper re simple matters to obtain, and he is willing to pay I5O and a year's house rent to assure the success of his plan. Miss Dunn does not recognize him - the beard and the hat and the slight colonial accent completely deceive her. That is the end of Wed-nesday - except for the trifling fact that Simpson has helped himself to fifty thousand pounds' worth of negotiable securities.' 'Simpson - but it was Davis - '

'If you will kindly permit me to continue, Hastingsl Simpson knows that the theft will be discovered on Thursday afternoon.

He does not go to the bank on Thursday, but he lies in wait for Davis when he comes out to lunch. Perhaps he admits the theft md tells Davis he will return the securities to him - anyhow he succeeds in getting Davis to come to Clapham with him. It is the maid's day out, and Mrs Todd was at the sales, so there is no one in the house. When the theft is discovered and Davis is missing, the implication will be overwhelming. Davis is the thiefl Mr Simpson will be perfectly safe, and can return to work on the morrow like the honest clerk they think him.'

'And Davis?'

Poirot made an expressive gesture, and slowly shook his head.

'It seems too cold-blooded to be believed, and yet what other explanation can there be, rnon ami. The one difficulty for a murderer is the disposal of the body - and Simpson had planned that out beforehand. I was struck at once by the fact that although Eliza Durra obviously meant to return that' night when she went out (witness her remark about the stewed peaches)yet her trunk oas all ready packed when they came for it. It was Simpson who sent word to Carter Paterson to call on Friday and it was Simpson who corded up the box on Thursday afternoon. What suspicion

could possibly arise? A maid leaves and sends for her box, it is labelled and addressed ready in her name, probably to a railway station within easy reach of London. On Saturday afternoon, Simpson, in his Australian disguise, claims it, he affixes a new label and address and redespatches it somewhere else, again "to be left till called for". When the authorities get suspicious, for excellent reasons, and open it, all that can be elicited will be that a bearded colonial despatched it from some junction near London.

There will be nothing to connect it with 88 Prince Albert Road.

Ahl Here we are.'

Poirot's prognostications had been correct. Simpson had left two days previously. But he was not to escape the consequences of his crime. By the aid of wireless, he was discovered on the Olympia, en route to America.

A tin trunk, addressed to Mr Henry Wintergreen, attracted the attention of railway officials at Glasgow. It was opened and found to contain the body of the unfortunate Davis.

Mrs Todd's cheque for a guinea was never cashed. Instead Poirot had it framed and hung on the wall of our sitting-room.

'It is to me a little reminder, Hastings. Never to despise the trivial - the undignified. A disappearing domestic at one end - a cold-blooded murder at the other. To me, one of the most interesting of my cases.'

CHAPTER III THE CORNISH MYSTERY

'Mrs Pengelley,' announced our landlady, and withdrew discreetly.

Many unlikely people came to consult Poirot, but to my mind, the woman who stood nervously just inside the door, fingering her feather neck-piece, was the most unlikely of all. She was so extraordinarily commonplace - a thin, faded woman of about fifty, dressed in a braided coat and skirt, some gold jewellery at her neck, and with her grey hair surmounted by a singularly unbecoming hat. In a country town, you pass a hundred Mrs Pengelleys in the street every day.

Poirot came forward and greeted her pleasantly, perceiving her obvious embarrassment.

'Madamel Take a chair, I beg of you. My colleague, Captain Hastings.' The lady sat down, murmuring uncertainly: 'You are M.

Poirot, the detective?' 'At your service, madame.' But our guest was still tongue-tied. She sighed, twisted her fingers, and grew steadily redder and redder.

'There is something I can do for you, eh, madame?' 'Well, I thought - that is - you see - ' 'Proceed, madame, I beg of you - proceed.' Mrs Pengelley, thus encouraged, took a grip on herself.

'It's this way, M. Poirot - I don't want to have anything to do with the police. No, I wouldn't go to the police for anythingl But all the same, I'm sorely troubled about something. And yet I don't know if I ought - ' She stopped abruptly.

The, I have nothing to do with the police. My investigations are strictly private.'

Mrs Pengelley caught at the word.

'Private - that's what I want. I don't want any talk or fuss, or things in the papers. Wicked it is, the way they write things, until the family could never hold up their heads again. And it isn't as though I was even sure - it's just a dreadful idea that's come to me, and put it out of my head I can't.' She paused for breath. 'And all the time I may be wickedly wronging poor Edward. It's a terrible thought for any wife to have. But you do read of such dreadful things nowadays.'

'Permit me - it is of your husband you speak?'

'Yes.'

'And you suspect him of- what?'

'I don't like even to say it, M. Poirot. But you do read of such things happening - and the poor souls suspecting nothing.'

I was beginning to despair of the lady's ever coming to the point, but Poirot's patience was equal to the demand made upon it.

'Speak without fear, madame. Think what joy will be yours if we are able to prove your suspicions unfounded.'

'That's true - anything's better than this wearing uncertainty.

Oh, M. Poirot, I'm dreadfully afraid I'm being poisoned.'

'What makes you think so?'

Mrs Pengelley, her reticence leaving her, plunged into a full recital more suited to the ears of her medical attendant.

'Pain and sickness after food, eh?' said Poirot thoughtfully.

'You have a doctor attending you, madame? What does he say?'

'He says it's acute gastritis, M. Poirot. But I can see that he's puzzled and uneasy, and he's always altering the medicine, but nothing does any good.'

'You have spoken of your - fears, to him?'

'No, indeed, M. Poirot. It might get about in the town. And perhaps it/s gastritis. All the same, it's very odd that whenever Edward is away for the week-end, I'm quite all right again. Even Freda noticed that - my niece, M. Poirot. And then there's that bottle of weed-killer, never used, the gardener says, and yet it's half-empty.'

She looked appealingly at Poirot. He smiled reassuringly at her, and reached for a pencil and notebook.

'Let us be businesslike, madame. Now, then, you and your husband reside - where?' 'Polgarwith, a small market town in Cornwall.' 'You have lived there long?' 'Fourteen years.' 'And your household consists of you and your husband. Any children?' 'NO,' 'But a niece, I think you said?' 'Yes, Freda Stanton, the child of my husband's only sister. She has lived with us for the iast eight years - that is, until a week go.' 'Oho, and what happened a week ago?' 'Things hadn't been very pleasant for some time; I don't know what had come over Freda. She was so rude and impertinent, and her temper something shocking, and in the end she flared up one day, and out she walked and took rooms of her own in the town. I've not seen her since. Better leave her to come to her senses, so Mr Radnor says.' 'Who is Mr Radnor?' Some of Mrs Pengelley's initial embarrassment returned.

'Oh, he's - he's just a friend. Very pleasant young fellow.' 'Anything between him and your niece?' 'Nothing whatever,' said Mrs Pengelley emphatically.

Poirot shifted his ground.

'You and your husband are, I presume, in comfortable circumstances?' 'Yes, we're very nicely off.' 'The money, is it yours or your husband's?' 'Oh, it's all IF. dward's. I've nothing of my own.' 'You see, madame, to be businesslike, we must be brutal. We must seek for a motive. Your husband, he would not poison you just pour passer]e temps[Do you know of any reason why he should wish you out of the way?' There's the yellow-haired hussy who works for Him,' said

Mrs Pengelley, with a flash of temper. 'My husband's a dentist, M. Poirot, and nothing would do but he must have a smart girl, as he said, with bobbed hair and a white overall, to make his appointments and mix his fillings for him. It's come to my ears that there have been fine goings-on, though of course he swears it's all right.'

'This bottle of weed-killer, madame, who ordered it?'

'My husband - about a year ago.'

'Your niece, now, has she any money of her own?'

'About fifty pounds a year, I should say. She'd be glad enough to come back and keep house for Edward if I left him.'

'You have contemplated leaving him, then?'

'I don't intend to let him have it all his own way. Women aren't the downtrodden slaves they were in old days, M. Poirot.'

'I congratulate you on YOur independent spirit, madame; but let us be practical. You return to Polgarwith today?'

'Yes, I came up by an excursion. Six this morning the train started, and the train goes back at five this afternoon.'

'Bienl I have nothing of great moment on hand. I can devote myself to your little affair. Tomorrow I shall be in Polgarwith.

Shall we say that Hastings, here, is a distant relative of yours, the son of your second cousin? Me, I am his eccentric foreign friend. In the meantime, eat only what is prepared by your own hands, or under your eye. You have a maid whom you trust?'

'Jessie is a very good girl, I am sure.'

'Till tomorrow then, madame, and be of good courage.'

Poirot bowed the lady out, and returned thoughtfully to his chair.

His absorption was not so great, however, that he failed to see two minute strands of feather scarf wrenched off by the lady's agitated fingers. He collected them carefully and consigned them to the wastepaper basket.

'What do you make of the case, Hastings?'

'A nasty business, I should say.'

'Yes, if what the lady suspects be true. But is it? Woe betide any husband who orders a bottle of weed-killer nowadays. If his

wife suffers from gastritis, and is inclined to be of a hysterical temperament, the fat is in the fire.'

'You think that is all there is to it?'

'Ah - vo//d - I do not know, Hastings. But the case interests me - it interests me enormously. For, see you, it has positively no new features. Hence the hysterical theory, and yet Mrs Pengelley did not strike me as being a hysterical woman. Yes, if I mistake not, we have here a very poignant human drama. Tell me, Hastings, what do you consider Mrs Pengelley's feelings towards her husband to be?'

'Loyalty struggling with fear,' I suggested.

'Yet, ordinarily, a woman will accuse anyone in the world - but not her husband. She will stick to her belief in him through thick and thin.'

'The "other woman" complicates the matter.'

'Yes, affection may turn to hate, under the stimulus of jealousy.

But hate would take her to the police - not to me. She would want an outcry - a scandal. No, no, let us exercise our little grey cells.

Why did she come to me? To have her suspicions proved wrong?

Or - to have them proved right? Ah, we have here something I do not understand - an unknown factor. Is she a superb actress, our Mrs Pengelley? No, she was genuine, I would swear that she was genuine, and therefore I am interested. Look up the train to ?olgarwith, I pray you.'

The best train of the day was the one-fifty from Paddington which reached Polgarwith just after seven o'clock. The journey was uneventful, and I had to rouse myself from a pleasant nap to alight upon the platform of the bleak little station. We took our bags to the Duchy Hotel, and after a light meal, Poirot suggested our stepping round to pay an after-dinner call on my so-called cousin.

The Pengelleys' house stood a little way back from the road with an old-fashioned cottage garden in front. The smell of stocks and mignonette came sweetly wafted on the evening breeze. It seemed impossible to associate thoughts of violence with this Old World cham. Poirot rang and knocked. As the summons was not

answered, he rang again. This time, after a little pause, the door was opened by a dishevelled-looking servant. Her eyes were red, and she was sniffing violently.

'We wish to see Mrs Pengelley,' explained Poirot. 'May we enter?'

The maid stared. Then, with unusual directness, she answered: 'Haven't you heard, then? She's dead. Died this evening - about half an hour ago.'

We stood staring at her, stunned.

'What did she die of?' I asked at last.

'There's some as could tell.' She gave a quick glance over her shoulder. 'If it wasn't that somebody ought to be in the house with the missus, I'd pack my box and go tonight. But I'll not leave her dead with no one to watch by her. It's not my place to say anything, and I'm not going to say anything - but everybody knows. It's all over the town. And if Mr Radnor don't write to the 'Omc Secretary, someone else will. The doctor may say what he likes. Didn't I see the master with my own eyes a-lifting down of the weed-killer from the shelf this very evening? And didn't he jump when he turned round and saw me watching of him? And the missus' gruel there on the table, all ready to take to her? Not another bit of food passes my lips while I am in this housel Not if I dies for it.'

'Where does the doctor live who attended your mistress?'

'Dr Adams. Round the corner there in High Street. The second house.'

Poirot turned away abruptly. He was very pale.

'For a girl who was not going to say anything, that girl said a lot,' I remarked dryly.

Poirot struck his clenched hand into his palm.

'An imbecile, a criminal imbecile, that is what I have been, Hastings. I have boasted of my little grey cells, and now I have lost a human life, a life that came to me tQ be saved. Never did I dream that anything would happen so soon. May the good God forgive me, but I never believed anything would happen at all.

Her story seemed to me artificial. Here we are at the doctor's.

Let us see what he can tell us.'

Dr Adams was the typical genial red-faced country doctor of fiction. He received us politely enough, but at a hint of our errand, his red face became purple.

'Damned nonsensel Damned nonsense, every word of it! Wasn't I in attendance on the case? Gastritis - gastritis pure and simple.

This town's a hotbed of gossip - a lot of scandal-mongering old women get together and invent God knows what. They read these scurrilous rags of newspapers, &nd nothing will suit them but that someone in their town shall get poisoned too. They see a bottle of weed-killer on a shelf - and hey prestol - away goes their imagination with the bit between its teeth. I know Edward Pengelley - he wouldn't poison his grandmother's dog. And why should he poison his wife? Tell me that?' 'There is one thing, M. le Docteur, that perhaps you do not know.' And, very briefly, Poirot outlined the main facts of Mrs Pen-gelley's visit to him. No one could have been more astonished than Dr Adams. His eyes almost started out of his head.

'God bless my soull' he ejaculated. 'The poor woman must have been mad. Why didn't she speak to me? That was the proper thing to do.' 'And have her fears ridiculed?' 'Not at all, not at all. I hope I've got an open mind.' Poirot looked at him and smiled. The physician was evidently more perturbed than he cared to admit. As we left the house, ?oirot broke into a laugh.

'He is as obstinate as a pig, that one. He has said it is gastritis; therefore it is gastritis! All the same, he has the mind uneasy.' 'What's our next step?' 'A return to the inn, and a night of horror upon one of your English provincial beds, mon ami. It is a thing to make pity, the cheap English bed!' 'And tomorrow?' 'Rich d faire. We must return to town and await developments.' 'That's very tame,' I said, disappointed. 'Suppose there are none?'

'There will be! I can promise you that. Our old doctor may give as many certificates as he pleases. He cannot stop several hundred tongues from wagging. And they will wag to some purpose, I can tell you thaw

Our train for town left at eleven the following morning. Before we started for the station, Poirot expressed a wish to see Miss Freda 8tanton, the niece mentioned to us by the dead woman. We found the house where she was lodging easily enough. With her was a tall, dark young man whom she introduced in some con-fusion as Mr Jacob Radnor.

Miss Freda Stanton was an extremely pretty girl of the Id Cornish type - dark hair and eyes and rosy cheeks. There was a flash in those same dark eyes which told of a temper that it would not be wise to provoke.

'Poor Auntie,' she said, when Poirot had introduced himself, and explained his business. 'It's terribly sad. I've been wishing all the morning that I'd been kinder and more patient.'

'You stood a great deal, Freda,' interrupted Radnor.

'Yes, Jacob, but I've got a sharp temper, I know. After all, it was only silliness on Auntie's part. I ought to have just laughed and not minded. Of course, it's all nonsense her thinking that Uncle was poisoning her. She was worse after any food he gave her - but I'm sure it was only from thinking about it. She made up her mind she would be, and then she was.'

'What was the actual cause of your disagreement, mademoi-selle?'

Miss Stanton hesitated, looking at Radnor. That young gentle-man was quick to take the hint.

'I must be getting along, Freda. See you this evening. Goodbye, gentlemen; you're on your way to the station, I suppose?' Poirot replied that we were, and Radnor departed.

'You are affianced, is it not so?' demanded Poirot, with a sly smile.

Freda Stanton blushed and admitted that such was the case.

'And that was really the whole trouble with Auntie,' she added.

'She did not approve of the match for you?'

'Oh, it wasn't that so much. But you see, she - ' The girl came to a stop.

'Yes? encouraged Poirot gently.

'It seems rather a horrid thing to say about her - now she's dead.

But you'll never understand unless I tell you. Auntie was absolutely infatuated with Jacob.'

'Indeed?'

'Yes, wasn't it absurd? She was over fifty, and he's not quite thirtyl But there it was. She was silly about himt I had to tell her at last that it was me he was after - and she carried on dreadfully.

She wouldn't believe a word of it, and was so rude and insulting that it's no wonder I lost my temper. I talked it over with Jacob, and we agreed that the best thing to do was for me to clear out for a bit till she came to her senses. Poor Auntie - I suppose she w in a queer state altogether.'

'It would certainly seem so. Thank you, mademoiselle, for making things so clear to me.'

A little to my surprise, Radnor was waiting for us in the street below.

'I can guess pretty well what Freda has been telling you,' he remarked. 'It was a most unfortunate thing to happen, and very awkward for me, as you can imagine. I need hardly say that it w none of my doing. I was pleased at first, because I imagined the old woman was helping on things with Freda. The whole thing was absurd - but extremely unpleasant.'

'When are you and Miss Stanton going to be married?'

'Soon, I hope. Now, M. Poirot, I'm going to be candid with you. I know a bit more than Freda does. She believes her uncle to be innocent. I'm not so sure. But I can tell you one thing: I'm going to keep my mouth shut about what I do know. Let sleeping dogs lie. I don't want my wife's uncle tried and hanged for murder.'

'Why do you tell me all this?'

'Because I've heard of you, and I know you're a clever man. It's quite possible that you might ferret out a case against him. But I put it to you - what good is that? The poor woman is past help, and she'd have been the last person to want a scandal - why, she'd turn in her grave at the mere thought of it.'

'You are probably right there. You want me to - hush it up, then?'

'That's my idea. I'll admit frankly that I'm selfish about it.

I've got my way to make - and I'm building up a good little business as a tailor and outfitter.'

'Most of us are selfish, Mr Radnor. Not all of us admit it so freely. I will do what you ask - but I tell you frankly you will not succeed in hushing it up.'

'Why not?'

Poirot held up a finger. It was market day, and we were passing the market - a busy hum came from within.

'The voice of the people - that is why, Mr Radnor. Ah, we must run, or we shall miss our train.'

'Very interesting, is it not, Hastings?' said Poirot, as the train steamed out of the station.

He had taken out a small comb from his pocket, also a micro-scopic mirror, and was carefully arranging his moustache, the symmetry of which had become slightly impaired during our brisk run.

'You seem to find it so,' I replied. 'To me, it is all rather sordid and unpleasant. There's hardly any mystery about it.'

'I agree with you; there is no mystery whatever.'

'I suppose we can accept the girl's rather extraordinary story of her aunt's infatuation? That seemed the only fishy part to me.

She was such a nice, respectable woman.'

'There is nothing extraordinary about that - it is completely ordinary. If you read the papers carefully, you will find that often a nice respectable woman of that age leaves a husband she has lived with for twenty years, and sometimes a whole family of children as well, in order to link her life with that of a young man considerably her junior. You admire les femmes, Hastings; you prostrate yourself before all of them who are good-looking and have the good taste to smile upon you; but psychologically you know nothing whatever about them. In the autumn of a woman's life, there comes always one mad moment when she longs for romance, for adventure - before it is too late. It comes none the less surely to a woman because she is the wife of a respectable dentist in a country town?

'And you think ' 'That a clever man might take advantage of such a moment.' 'I shouldn't call Pengelley so clever,' I mused. 'He's got the whole town by the ears. And yet I suppose you're right. The only two men who know anything, Radnor and the doctor, both want to hush it up. He's managed that somehow. I wish we'd seen the fellow.' I

'You can indulge your wish. Return by the next train and invent an aching molar.' looked at him keenly.

II wish I knew what you considered so interesting about the case.' i 'My interest is very aptly summed up by a remark of yours,

Hastings. After interviewing the maid, you observed that for i

someone who was not going to say a word, she had said a good d "h!' I said doubtfully; then I harped back to my original criticism: 'I wonder why you made no attempt to see Pen gelley?'

· 'Mon ami, I give him just three months. Then I shall see him

for as long as I please - in the dock.'

For once I thought Poirot's prognostications were going to be proved wrong. The time went by, and nothing transpired as to our Cornish case. Other matters occupied us, and I had nearly forgotten the Pengelley tragedy when it was suddenly recalled to me by a short paragraph in the paper which stated that an order to exhume the body of Mrs Pengelley had been obtained from the Home Secretary.

A few days later, and 'The Cornish Mystery' was the topic of every paper. It seemed that gossip had never entirely died down, and when the engagement of the widower to Miss Marks, his secretary, was announced, the tongues burst out again louder than

ever. Finally a petition was sent to the Home Secretary; the body was exhumed; large quantities of arsenic were discovered; and Mr Pengelley was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife.

Poirot and I attended the preliminary proceedings. The evidence was much as might have been expected. Dr Adams admitted that the symptoms of arsenical poisoning might easily be mistaken for those of gastritis. The Home Office expert gave his evidence; the maid Jessie poured out a flood of voluble information, most of which was rejected, but which certainly strengthened the case against the prisoner. Freda Stanton gave evidence as to her aunt's being worse whenever she ate food prepared by her husband.

Jacob Radnor told how he had dropped in unexpectedly on the day of Mrs Pengelley's death, and found Pengelley replacing the bottle of weed-killer on the pantry sheff, Mrs Pengelley's gruel being on the table close by. Then Miss Marks, the fair-haired secretary, was called, and wept and went into hysterics and admitted that there had been 'passages' between her and her employer, and that he had promised to marry her in the event of anything happening to his wife. Pengelley reserved his defence and was sent for trial.

Jacob Radnor walked back with us to our lodgings.

'You see, M. Radnor,' said Poirot, 'I was right. The voice of the people spoke - and with no uncertain voice. There was to be no hushing up of this case.' 'You were quite right,' sighed Radnor. 'Do you see any chance of his getting off?' 'Well, he has reserved his defence. He may have something up the sleeve, as you English say. Come in with us, will you not?' Radnor accepted the invitation. I ordered two whiskies and sodas and a cup of chocolate. The last order caused consternation, and I much doubted whether it would ever put in an appearance.

'Of course,' continued Poirot, 'I have a good deal of experience in matters of this kind. And I see only one loophole of escape for our friend.'

'What is it?' 'That you should sign this paper.' With the suddenness of a conjuror, he produced a sheet of paper covered with writing.

'What is it?' 'A confession that you murdered Mrs Pengelley.' There was a moment's pause; then Radnor laughed.

'You must be madl' 'No, no, my friend, I am not mad. You came here; you started a little business; you were short of money. Mr Pengelley was a man very well-to-do. You met his niece; she was inclined to smile upon you. But the small allowance that Pengelley might have given her upon her marriage was not enough for you. You must get rid of both the uncle and the aunt; then the money would come to her, since she was the only relative. How cleverly you set about it! You made love to that plain middle-aged woman until she was your slave. You implanted in her doubts of her husband.

She discovered first that he was deceiving her - then, under your guidance, that he was trying to poison her. You were often at the house; you had opportunities to introduce the arsenic into her food. But you were careful never to do so when her husband was away. Being a woman, she did not keep her suspicions to herself.

She talked to her niece; doubtless she talked to other women friends. Your only difficulty was keeping up separate relations with the two women, and even that was not so difficult as it looked.

You explained to the aunt that, to allay the suspicions of her husband, you had to pretend to pay court to the niece. And the younger lady needed little convincing - she would never seriously consider her aunt as a rival.

'But then Mrs Pengelley made up her mind, without saying anything to you, to consult me. If she could be really assured, beyond any possible doubt, that her husband was trying to poison her, she would feel justified in leaving him, and linking her life with yours - which is what she imagined you wanted her to do.

But that did not suit your book at all. You did not want a detective prying around. A favourable minute occurs. You are in the house when Mr Pengelley is getting some gruel for his wife, and you introduce the fatal dose. The rest is easy. Apparently anxious to hush matters up, you secretly foment them. But you reckoned without Hercule Poirot, my intelligent young friend.'

Radnor was deadly pale, but he still endeavoured to carry off matters with a high hand.

'Very interesting and ingenious, but why tell me all this?' 'Because, monsieur, I represent - not the law, but Mrs Pen-gelley.

For her sake, I give you a chance of escape. Sign this paper, and you shall have twenty-four hours' start - twenty-four hours before I place it in the hands of the police.'

Radnor hesitated.

'You can't prove anything.'

'Can't I? I am Hercule Poirot. Look out of the window, monsieur.

There are two men in the street. They have orders not to lose sight of you.'

Radnor strode across to the window and pulled aside the blind, then shrank back with an oath.

'You see, monsieur? Sign - it is your best chance.'

'What guarantee have I - '

'That I shall keep faith? The word of Hercule Poirot. You will sign? Good. Hastings, be so kind as to pull that left-hand blind half-way up. That is the signal that Mr Radnor may leave unmolested.'

White, muttering oaths. Radnor hurried from the room. Poirot nodded gently.

'A cowardl I always knew it.'

'It seems to me, Poirot, that you've acted in a criminal manner,' I cried angrily. 'You always preach against sentiment. And here you are letting a dangerous criminal escape out of sheer senti-mentality.'

'That was not sentiment - that was business,' replied Poirot.

'Do you not see, my friend, that we have no shadow of proof against him? Shall I get up and say to twelve stolid Cornishmen that/, Hercule Poirot, knova? They would laugh at me. The only chance was to frighten him and get a confession that way. Those two loafers that I noticed out:ide came in very useful. Pull down the blind again, will you, Hastings? Not that there was

any reason for raising it. It was part of the raise en scdne.

'Well, well, we must keep our word. Twenty-four hours, did I say? So much longer for poor Mr Pengelley - and it is not more than he deserves; for mark you, he deceived his wife. I am very strong on the family life, as you know. Ah, well, twenty-four houri - and then? I have great faith in Scotland Yard. They will get him, raon ami; they will get him.'

CHAPTER IV THE ADVENTURE OF JOHNNIE WAVERLY

'You can understand the feelings of a mother,' said Mrs Waverly for perhaps the sixth time.

She looked appealingly at Poirot. My little friend, always sympathetic to motherhood in distress, gesticulated reassuringly.

'But yes, but yes, I comprehend perfectly. Have faith in Papa Poirot.'

'The police - ' began Mr Waverly.

His wife waved the interruption aside. 'I won't have anything more to do with the police. We trusted to them and look what happened! But I'd heard so much of M. Poirot and the wonderful things he'd done, that I felt he might possibly be able to help us.

A mother's feelings -'

Poirot hastily stemmed the reiteration with an eloquent gesture.

Mrs Waverly's emotion was obviously genuine, but it assorted strangely with her shrewd, rather hard type of countenance. When I heard later that she was the daughter of a prominent steel manufacturer of Birmingham who had worked his way up in the world from an office boy to his present eminence, I realized that ahe had inherited many of the paternal qualities.

Mr Waverly was a big, florid, jovial-looking man. He stood with his legs straddled wide apart and looked the type of the country squire.

'I suppose you know all about this business, M. Poirot?'

The question was almost superfluous. For some days past the paper had been full of the sensational kidnapping of little Johnnie Waverly, the three-year-old son and heir of Marcus Waverly, Esq., of Waverly Court, Surrey, one of the oldest families in England.

'The main facts I know, of course, but recount to me the whole story, monsieur, I beg of you. And in detail if you please.'

'Well, I suppose the beginning of the whole thing was about ten days ago when I got an anonymous letter - beastly things, anyway - that I couldn't make head or tail of. The writer had the impudence to demand that I should pay him twenty-five thousand pounds - twenty-five thousand pounds, M. Poirotl Failing my agreement, he threatened to kidnap Johnnie. Of course I threw the thing into the wastepaper basket without more ado. Thought it was some silly joke. Five days later I got another letter. "Unless you pay, your son will be kidnapped on the twenty-ninth." That was on the twenty-seventh. Ada was worried, but I couldn't bring myself to treat the matter seriously. Damn it all, we're in England.

Nobody goes about kidnapping children and holding them up to ransom.'

'It is not a common practice, certainly,' said Poirot. 'Proceed, monsieur.'

'Well, Ada gave me no peace, so - feeling a bit of a fool - I laid the matter before Scotland Yard. They didn't seem to take the thing very seriously - inclined to my view that it was some silly joke. On the twenty-eighth I got a third letter. "You have not paid. Your son will be taken from you at twelve o'clock noon tomorrow, the twenty-ninth. It will cost you fifty thousand pounds to recover him." Up I drove to Scotland Yard again. This time they were more impressed. They inclined to the view that the letters were written by a lunatic, and that in all probability an attempt of some kind would be made at the hour stated. They aured me that they would take all due precautions. Inspector McNeil and a sufficient force would come down to Waverly on the morrow and take charge.

'I went home much relieved in my mind. Yet we already had the feeling of being in a state of siege. I gave orders that no stranger was to be admitted, and that no one was to leave the house. The evening passed off without any untoward incident, but on the following morning my wife was seriously unwell. Alarmed by her condition, I sent for Doctor Dakers. Her symptoms appeared to puzzle him. While hesitating to suggest that she had been poisoned, I could see that that was what was in his mind. There was no danger, he assured me, but it would be a day or two before she would be able to get about again. Returning to my own room, I was startled and amazed to find a note pinned to my pillow. It was in the same handwriting as the others and contained just three words: "At twelve o'clock".

'I admit, M. Po[rot, that then I saw redl Someone in the house was in this - one of the servants. I had them all up, blackguarded them right and left. They never split on each other; it was Miss Collins, my wife's companion, who informed me that she had seen Johnnie's nurse slip down the drive early that morning. I taxed her with it, and she broke down. She had left the child with the nursery maid and stolen out to meet a friend of hers - a manl Pretty goings onl She denied having pinned the note to my pillow - she may have been speaking the truth, I don't know. I felt I couldn't take the risk of the child's own nurse being in the plot. One of the servants was implicated - of that I was sure.

Finally I lost my temper and sacked the whole bunch, nurse and all. I gave them an hour to pack their boxes and get out of the house.'

Mr Waverly's red face was quite two shades redder as he remembered his just wrath.

'Was not that a little injudicious, monsieur?' suggested Poirot.

'For all you know, you might have been playing into the enemy's hands.'

Mr Waverly stared at him. 'I don't see that. Send the whole lot packing, that was my idea. I wired to London for a fresh lot to be sent down that evening. In the meantime, there'd be only people I cod trust in the house: my wife's secretary, Miss Collins, and Tredwell, the butler, who has been with me since I was a boy.'

'And this Miss Collins, how long has she been with you?'

'Just a year,' said Mrs Waverly. 'She has been invaluable to me as a secretary-companion, and is also a very efficient housekeeper.' 'The nurse?'

'She has been with me six months. She came to me with excellent references. All the same, I never really liked her, although Johnnie was quite devoted to her.'

'Still, I gather she had already left when the catastrophe occurred.

Perhaps, Monsieur Waverly, you will be so kind as to continue.' Mr Waverly resumed his narrative.

'Inspector McNeil arrived about ten-thirty. The servants had all left by then. He declared himself quite satisfied with the internal arrangements. He had various men posted in the park outside, guarding all the approaches to the house, and he assured me that if the whole thing were not a hoax, we should undoubtedly catch my mysterious correspondent.

'I had Johnnie with me, and he and I and the inspector went together into a room we call the council chamber. The inspector locked the door. There is a big grandfather clock there, and as the hands drew near to twelve I don't mind confessing that I was as nervous as a cat. There was a whirring sound, and the clock began to strike. I clutched lohnnie. I had a feeling a man might drop from the skies. The last stroke sounded, and as it did so, there was a great commotion outside - shouting and running. The inspector flung up the window, and a constable came running up.

' "We've got him, sir," he panted. "He was sneaking up through the bushes. He's got a whole dope outfit on him."

'We hurried out on the terrace where two constables were holding a ruffianly-looking fellow in shabby clothes, who was twisting and turning in a vain endeavour to escape. One of the policemen held out an unrolled parcel which they had wrested from their captive. It contained a pad of cotton wool and a bottle of chloroform. It made my blood boil to see it. There was a note, too, addressed to me. I tore it open. It bore the following words: "You should have paid up. To ransom your son will now cost you fifty thousand. In spite of all your precautions he has been abducted at twelve o'clock on the twenty-ninth as I said."

'I gave a great laugh, the laugh of relief, but as I did so I heard the hum of a motor and a shout. I turned my head. Racing down the drive towards the south lodge at a furious speed was a low, long grey car. It was the man who drove it who had shouted, but that was not what gave me a shock of horror. It was the sight of Johnnie's flaxen curls. The child was in the car beside him.

'The inspector ripped out an oath. "The child was here not a minute ago," he cried. His eyes swept over us. We were all there:

myself, Tredwell, Miss Collins. "When did you see him last, Mr Waverly?"

'I cast my mind back, trying to remember. When the constable had called us, I had run out with the inspector, forgetting all about Johnnie.

'And then there came a sound that startled us, the chiming of a church clock from the village. With an exclamation the inspector pulled out his watch. It was exactly twelve o'clock. With one common accord we ran to the council chamber; the clock there marked the hour as ten minutes past. Someone must have deliber-ately tampered with it, for I have never known it gain or lose before. It is a perfect timekeeper.'

Mr Waverly paused. Poirot smiled to himself and straightened a little mat which the anxious father had pushed askew.

'A pleasing little problem, obscure and charming,' murmured Poirot. 'I will investigate it for you with pleasure. Truly it was planned d merveille.'

Mrs Waverly looked at him reproachfully. 'But my boy,' she wailed.

Poirot hastily composed his face and looked the picture of earnest sympathy again. 'He is safe, madame, he is unharmed.

Rest assured, these miscreants will take the greatest care of him.

I he not to them the turkey - no, the goose - that lays the golden egg?'

'M. Poirot, I'm sure there's only one thing to be done - pay up.

I was all against it at first - but hOWl A mother's feelings - '

'But we have interrupted monsieur in his history,' cried Poirot hastily.

'I expect you know the rest pretty well from the papers,' said Mr Waverly. 'Of course, Inspector McNeil got on to the telephone immediately. A description of the car and the man was circulated all round, and it looked at first as though everything was going to turn out all right. A car, answering to the description, with a man and a small boy, had passed through various villages, apparently making for London. At one place they had stopped, and it wa noticed that the child was crying and obviously afraid of his companion. When Inspector McNeil announced that the car had been stopped and the man and boy detained, I was almost ill with relief. You know the sequel. The boy was not Johnnie, and the man was an ardent motorist, fond of children, who had picked up a small child playing in the streets of Edenswell, a village about fifteen miles from us, and was kindly giving him a ride. Thanks to the cocksure blundering of the police, all traces have disappeared.

Had they not persistently followed the wrong car, they might by now have found the boy.'

'Calm yourself, monsieur. The police are a brave and intelligent force of men. Their mistake was a very natural one. And altogether it was a clever scheme. As to the man they caught in the grounds, I understand that his defence has consisted all along of a persistent denial. He declares that the note and parcel were given to him to deliver at Waverly Court. The man who gave them to him handed him a ten-shilling note and promised him another if it were delivered at exactly ten minutes to twelve. He was to approach the house through the grounds and knock at the side door.'

'I don't believe a word of it,' declared Mrs Waverly hotly. 'It's all a parcel of lies.'

'Eh vritg, it is a thin story,' said Poirot reflectively. 'But so far they have not shaken it. I understand, also, that he made a certain accusation?'

His glance interrogated Mr Waverly. The latter got rather red again.

'The fellow had the impertinence to pretend that he recognized in Tredwell the man who gave him the parcel. "Only the bloke has shaved off his moustache." Tredwell, who was born on the estate!'

Poirot smiled a little at the country gentleman's indignation.

'Yet you yourself suspect an inmate of the house to have been accessory to the abduction.'

'Yes, but not Tredwell.'

'And you, madame?' asked Poirot, suddenly turning to her.

'It could not have been Tredwell who gave this tramp the letter and parcel - if anybody ever did, which I don't believe. It was given him at ten o'clock, he says. At ten o'clock Tredwell was with my husband in the smoking-room.'

'Were you able to see the face of the man in the car, monsieur?

Did it resemble that of Tredwell in any way?' 'It was too far away for me to see his face.' 'Has Tredwell a brother, do you know?'

'He had several, but they are all dead. The last one was killed in the war.'

'I am not yet clear as to the grounds of Waverly Court. The car was heading for the south lodge. Is there another entrance?'

'Yes, what we call the east lodge. It can be seen from the other side of the house.'

'It seems to me strange that nobody saw the car entering the grounds.'

'There is a right of way through, and access to a small chapel.

A good many cars pass through. The man must have stopped the car in a convenient place and run up to the house just as the alarm was given and attention attracted elsewhere.'

'Unless he was already inside the house,' mused Poirot. 'Is there any place where he could have hidden?'

'Well, we certainly didn't make a thorough search of the house beforehand. There seemed no need. I suppose he might have hidden himself somewhere, but who would have let him in?'

'We shall come to that later. One thing at a time - let us be methodical. There is no special hiding-place in the house? Waverly Court is an old place, and there are sometimes "priests' holes", as they call them.'

'By gad, there/s a priest's hole. It opens from one of the panels in the hall.'

'Near the council chamber?' 'Just outside the door.' 'Vo/k/l'

'But nobody knows of its existence except my wife and myself.' 'Tredwell?'

'Well - he might have heard of it.'

'Miss Collins?'

'I have never mentioned it to her.'

Poirot reflected for a minute.

'Well, monsieur, the next thing is for me to come down to

Waverly Court. If I arrive this afternoon, will it suit you?' 'Oh, as soon as possible, please, Monsieur Poirotl' cried Mrs Waverly. 'Read this once more.' She thrust into his hands the last missive from the enemy which had reached the Waverlys that morning and which had sent her post-haste to Poirot. It gave clever and explicit directions for the paying over of the money, and ended with a threat that the boy's life would pay for any treachery. It was clear that a love of money warred with the essential mother love of Mrs Waverley, and that the latter was at last gaining the day.

Poirot detained Mrs Waverly for a minute behind her husband.

'Madame, the truth, if you please. Do you share your husband's faith in the butler, Tredwell?' 'I have nothing against him, Monsieur Poirot, I cannot see how he can have been concerned in this, but - well, I have never liked him - never?

'One other thing, madame, can you give me the address of the child's nurse?' 'x49 Netherall Road, Hammersmith. You don't imagine- ' 'Never do I imagine. Only - I employ the little grey cells. And sometimes, just sometimes, I have a little idea.' Poirot came back to me as the door closed.

'So madame has never liked the butler. It is interesting, that, eh, Hastings?' I refused to be drawn. Poirot has deceived me so often that I now go warily. There is always a catch somewhere.

After completing an elaborate outdoor toilet, we set off for Netherall Road. We were fortunate enough to find Miss Jessie Withers at home. She was a pleasant-faced woman of thirty-five, capable and superior. I could not believe that she could be mixed up in the affair. She was bitterly resentful of the way she had been dismissed, but admitted that she had been in the wrong. She was engaged to be married to a painter and decorator who happened to be in the neighbourhood, and she had run out to meet him.

The thing seemed natural enough. I could not quite understand Poirot. All his questions seemed to me quite irrelevant. They were concerned mainly with the daily routine of her life at Waverly

Court. I was frankly bored and glad when Poirot took his departure.

'Kidnapping is an easy job, rnon ami,' he observed, as he hailed a taxi in the Hammersmith Road and ordered it to drive to Water-1oo.

'That child could have been abducted with the greatest ease any day for the last three years.' 'I don't see that that advances us much,' I remarked coldly. '.4u contraire, it advances us enormously, but enormouslyl If you must wear a tie pin, Hastings, at least let it be in the exact centre of your tie. At present it is at least a sixteenth of an inch too much to the right.' Waverly Court was a fine old place and had recently been restored with taste and care. Mr Waverly showed us the council chamber, the terrace, and all the various spots connected with the case.

Finally, at Poirot's request, he pressed a spring in the wall, a panel slid aside, and a short passage led us into the priest's hole.

'You see,' said Waverly. 'There is nothing here.' The tiny room was bare enough, there was not even the mark of a footstep on the floor. I joined Poirot where he was bending attentively over a mark in the corner.

'What do you make of this, my friend?' There were four imprints close together.

'A dog,' I cried.

'A very small dog, Hastings.' 'A Porn.' 'Smaller than a Porn.' 'A griffon?' I suggested doubtfully.

'Smaller even than a griffon. A species unknown to the Kennel Club.' I looked at him. His face was alight with excitement and satisfaction.

'I was right,' he murmured. 'I knew I was right. Come, Hastings.' As we stepped out into the hall and the panel closed behind us, a young lady came out of a door farther down the passage. Mr Waverl¥ presented her to us.

'Miss Collins.' Miss Collins was about thirty years of age, brisk and alert in manner. She had fair, rather dull hair, and wore pincenez.

At Poirot's request, we passed into a small morning-room, and he questioned her closely as to the servants and particularly as to Tredwell. She admitted that she did not like the butler.

'He gives himself airs,' she explained.

They then went into the question of the food eaten by Mrs Waverly on the night of the 28th. Miss Collins declared that she had partaken of the same dishes upstairs in her sitting-room and had felt no ill effects. As she was departing I nudged Poirot.

'The dog,' I whispered.

'Ah, yes, the dog!' He smiled broadly. 'Is there a dog kept here by any chance, mademoiselle?' 'There are two retrievers in the kennels outside.' 'No, I mean a small dog, a toy dog.' 'No - nothing of the kind.' Poirot permitted her to depart. Then, pressing the bell, he remarked to me, 'She lies, that Mademoiselle Collins. Possibly I should, also, in her place. Now for the butler.' Tredwell was a dignified individual. He told his story with perfect aplomb, and it was essentially the same as that of Mr Waverly. He admitted that he knew the secret of the priest's hole.

When he finally withdrew, pontifical to the last, I met Poirot's quizzical eyes.

'What do you make of it all, Hastings?' 'What do you?' I parried.

'How cautious you become. Never, never will the grey celh function unless you stimulate them. Ah, but I will not tease youl Let us make our deductions together. What points strike us specially as being difficult?' 'There is one thing that strikes me,' I said. 'Why did the man who kidnapped the child go out by the south lodge instead of by the east lodge where no one would see him?' 'That is a very good point, Hastings, an excellent one. I will match it with another. Why warn the Waverlys beforehand? Why not simply kidnap the child and hold him to ransom?' 'BeCause they hoped to get the money without being forced to action.'

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'A very small dog, Hastings.' 'A Porn.' 'Smaller than a Porn.' 'A griffon?' I suggested doubtfully.

'Smaller even than a griffon. A species unknown to the Kennel Club.' I looked at him. His face was alight with excitement and atisfaction.

'I was right,' he murmured. 'I knew I was right. Come, Hastings.' As we stepped out into the hall and the panel closed behind ua, a young lady came out of a door farther down the passage. Mr Waverl¥ presented her to us.

'Miss Collins.' Miss Collins was about thirty years of age, brisk and alert in manner. She had fair, rather dull hair, and wore pincenez.

At Poirot's request, we passed into a small morning-room, and he questioned her closely as to the servants and particularly as to Tredwell. She admitted that she did not like the butler.

'He gives himself air,' she explained.

They then went into the question of the food eaten by Mrs Waverly on the night of the zSth. Miss Collins declared that she had partaken of the same dishes upstairs in her sitting-room and had felt no ill effects. As she was departing I nudged Poirot.

'The dog,' I whispered.

'Ah, yes, the dog? He smiled broadly. 'Is there a dog kept here by any chance, mademoiselle?' 'There are two retriever in the kennels outside.' 'No, I mean a small dog, a toy dog.' 'No - nothing of the kind.' Poirot permitted her to depart. Then, pressing the bell, he remarked to me, 'She lies, that Mademoiselle Collins. Possibly I should, also, in her place. Now for the butler.' Tredwell was a dignified individual. He told his story with perfect aplomb, and it was essentially the same as that of Mr Waverly. He admitted that he knew the secret of the priest's hole.

When he finally withdrew, pontifical to the last, I met Poirot's quizzical eyes.

'What do you make of it all, Hastings?' 'What do you?' I parried.

'How cautious you become. Never, never will the grey cells function unless you stimulate them. Ah, but I will not tease youl Let us make our deductions together. What points strike us specially as being difficult?'

'There is one thing that strikes me,' I said. 'Why did the man who kidnapped the child go out by the south lodge instead of by the east lodge where no one would see him?' 'That is a very good point, Hastings, an excellent one. I will match it with another. Why warn the Waverlys beforehand? Why not simply kidnap the child and hold him to ransom?' 'BeCause they hoped to get the money without being forced to actiol.'

'Surely it was very unlikely that the money would be paid on a mere threat?' 'Also they wanted to focus attention on twelve o'clock, so that when the tramp man' was seized, the other could emerge from his hiding-place and get away with the child unnoticed.' 'That does not alter the fact that they were making a thing difficult that was perfectly easy. If they do not specify a time or date, nothing would be easier than to wait their chance, and carry off the child in a motor one day when he is out with his nurse.' 'Ye - es,' I admitted doubtfully.

'In fact, there is a deliberate playing of the farce! Now let us approach the question from another side. Everything goes to show that there was an accomplice inside the house. Point number one, the mysterious poisoning of Mrs Waverly. Point number two, the letter pinned to the pillow. Point number three, the putting on of the clock ten minutes - all inside jobs. And an additional fact that you may not have noticed. There was no dust in the priest's hole. It had been swept out with a broom.

'Now then, we have four people in the house. We can exclude the nurse, since she could not have swept out the priest's hole, though she could have attended to the other three points. Four people, Mr and Mrs Waverly, Tredwell, the butler, and Miss Collins. We will take Miss Collins first. We have nothing much against her, except that we know very little about her, that she is obviously an intelligent young woman, and that she has only been here a year.' 'She lied about the dog, you said,' I reminded him.

'Ah, yes, the dog.' Poirot gave a peculiar smile. 'Now let us pass to Tredwell. There are several suspicious facts against him.

For one thing, the tramp declares that it was Tredwell who gave him the parcel in the village.' 'But Tredwell can prove an alibi on that point.' 'Even then, he could have poisoned Mrs Waverly, pinned the note to the pillow, put on the clock, and swept out the priest's hole. On the other hand, he has been born and bred in the service of the Waverlys. It seems unlikely in the last degree that he should connive at the abduction of the son of the house. It is not in the picturel'

'Well, then?'

'We must proceed logically - however absurd it may seem. We will briefly consider Mrs Waverly. But she is rich, the money is hers. It is her money which has restored this impoverished estate.

There would be no reason for her to kidnap her son and pay over her money to herself. Her husband, now, is in a different position.

He has a rich wife. It is not the same thing as being rich himself-in fact I have a little idea that the lady is not very fond of parting with her money, except on a very good pretext. But Mr Waverley, you can see at once, he is bon viveur.'

'Impossible,' I spluttered.

'Not at all. Who sends away the servants? Mr Waverly. He can write the notes, drug his wife, put on the hands of the clock, and establish an excellent alibi for his faithful retainer Tredwell.

Tredwell has never liked Mrs Waverley. He is devoted to his master and is willing to obey his orders implicitly. There were three of them in it. Waverly, Tredwell, and some friend of Waverly. That is the mistake the police made, they made no further inquiries about the man who drove the grey car with the wrong child in it. He was the third man. He picks up a child in a village near by, a boy with flaxen curls. He drives in through the east lodge and passes out through the south lodge just at the right moment, waving his hand and shouting. They cannot see his face or the number of the car, so obviously they cannot see the child's face, either. Then he lays a false trail to London. In the meantime, Tredwell has done his part in arranging for the parcel and note to be delivered by a rough-looking gentleman. His master can provide an alibi in the unlikely case of the man recognizing him, in spite of the false moustache he wore. As for Mr

Waverly, as soon as the hullabaloo occurs outside, and the inspector rushes out, he quickly hides the child in the priest's hole, and follows him out. Later in the day, when the inspector is gone and Miss Collins is out of the way, it will be easy enough to drive him off to some safe place in his own car.'

'But what about the dog?' I asked. 'And Miss Collins lying?'

'That was my little joke. I asked her if there were any toy dog in the house, and she said no - but doubtless there are some - in the nurseryl You see, Mr Waverly placed some toys in the priest's hole to keep Johnnie amused and quiet.' 'M. Poirot - ' Mr Waverly entered the room - 'have you discovered anything? Have you any clue to where the boy has been taken?' Poirot handed him a piece of paper. 'Here is the address.' 'But this is a blank sheet.' 'Because I am waiting for you to write it down for me.' 'What the - ' Mr Waverly's face turned purple.

'I know everything, monsieur. I give you twenty-four hours to return the boy. Your ingenuity will be equal to the task of explaining his reappearance. Otherwise, Mrs Waverly will be informed of the exact sequence of events.' Mr Waverly sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. 'He is with my old nurse, ten miles away. He is happy and well cared for.' 'I have no doubt of that. If I did not believe you to be a good father at heart, I should not be willing to give you another chance:' 'The scandal ' 'Exactly. Your name is an old and honoured one. Do not jeopardize it again. Good evening, Mr Waverly. Ah, by the way, one word of advice. Always sweep in the cornersl'

CHAPTER V THE DOUBLE CLUE

'But above everything - no publicity,' said Mr Marcus Hardman for perhaps the fourteenth time.

The word publicity occurred throughout his conversation with the regularity of a leitmotif. Mr Hardman was a small man, delicately plump, with exquisitely manicured hands and a plaintive tenor voice. In his way, he was somewhat of a celebrity and the fashionable life was his profession. He was rich, but not remarkably so, and he spent his money zealously in the pursuit of social pleasure. His hobby was collecting. He had the collector's soul.

Old lace, old fans, antique jewellery - nothing crude or modem for Marcus Hardman.

Poirot and I, obeying an urgent summons, had arrived to find the little man writhing in an agony of indecision. Under the circumstances, to call in the police was abhorrent to him. On the other hand, not to call them in was to acquiesce in the loss of some of the gems of his collection. He hit upon Poirot as a compromise.

'My rubies, Monsieur Poirot, and the emerald necklace - said to have belonged to Catherine de' Medici. Oh, the emerald necklace?

'If you will recount to me the circumstances of their dis-appearance?' suggested Poirot gently.

'I am endeavouring to do so. Yesterday afternoon I had a little tea party - quite an informal affair, some half a dozen people or so. I have given one or two of them during the season, and though perhaps I should not say so, they have been quite a success. Some good music - Nacora, the pianist, and Katherine Bird, the Austral-ian contralto - in the big studio. Well, early in the afternoon, I was showing my guests my collection of medieval jewels. I keep them in the small wall safe over there. It is arranged like a cabinet inside, with coloured velvet background, to display the stone.

Afterwards we inspected the fans - in that case on the wall. Then we all went to the studio for music. It was not until after everyone had gone that I discovered the safe rifledl I must have failed to shut it properly, and someone had seized the opportunity to denude it of its contents. The rubies, Monsieur Poirot, the emerald necklace - the collection of a lifetimel What would I not give to recover them! But there must be no publicity! You fully understand that, do you not, Monsieur Poirot? My own guests, my personal friends! It would be a horrible scandall'

'Who was the last person to leave this room when you went to the studio?'

'Mr Johnston. You may know him? The South African million-aire.

He has just rented the Abbotburys' house in Park Lane. He lingered behind a few moments, I remember. But surely, oh, surely it could not be he!'

'Did any of your guests return to this room during the afternoon on any pretext?'

'I was prepared for that question, Monsieur Poirot. Three of them did so. Countess ¥era Rossakoff, Mr Bernard Parker, and Lady Runcorn.'

'Let us hear about them.'

'The Countess Rossakoff is a very charming Russian lady, a member of the old rgime. She has recently come to this country.

She had bade me goodbye, and I was therefore somewhat surprised to find her in this room apparently gazing in rapture at my cabinet of fans. You know, Monsieur Poirot, the more I think of it, the more suspicious it seems to me. Don't you agree?'

'Extremely suspicious; but let us hear about the others.'

'Well, Parker simply came here to fetch a case of miniatures that

I was anxious to show to Lady Runcorn.'

'And Lady Runcorn herself?'

'As I dare say you know, Lady Runcorn is a middle-aged woman of considerable force of character who devotes most of her time to various charitable committees. She simply returned to fetch a handbag she had laid down somewhere.'

'Bien, monsieur. So we have four possible suspects. The Russian countess, the English grande dame, the South African millionaire, and Mr Bernard Parker. Who is Mr Parker, by the way?' The question appeared to embarrass Mr Hardman considerably.

'He is - er - he is a young fellow. Well, in fact, a young fellow I know.' 'I had already deduced as much,' replied Poirot gravely. 'What does he do, this Mr Parker?' 'He is a young man about town - not, perhaps, quite in the swim, if I may so express myself.' 'How did he come to be a friend of yours, may I ask?' 'Well - er - on one or two occasions he has - performed certain little commissions for me.' 'Continue, monsieur,' said Poirot.

Hardman looked piteously at him. Evidently the last thing he wanted to do was to continue. But as Poirot maintained an inexorable silence, he capitulated.

'You see, Monsieur Poirot - it is well known that I am interested in antique jewels. Sometimes there is a family heirloom to be disposed of- which, mind you, would never be sold in the open market or to a dealer. But a private sale to me is a very different matter. Parker arranges the details of such things, he is in touch with both sides, and thus any little embarrassment is avoided. He brings anything of that kind to my notice. For instance, the Countess Rossakoff has brought some family jewels with her from Russia. She is anxious to sell them. Bernard Parker was to have arranged the transaction.' 'I see,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'And you trust him implicitly?' 'I have had no reason to do otherwise.' 'Mr Hardman, of these four people, which do you yourself suspect?' 'Oh, Monsieur Poirot, what a questionl They are my friends, as I told you. I suspect none of them - or all of them, whichever way you like to put it.' 'I do not agree. You suspect one of those four. It is not Countess Rossakoff. It is not Mr Parker. Is it Lady Runcorn or Mr Johnston?' 'You drive me into a corner, Monsieur Poirot, you do indeed. I am most anxious to have no scandal. Lady Runcorn belongs to one of the oldest families in England; but it is true, it is mot unfortunately true, that her aunt, Lady Caroline, suffered from a most melancholy affliction. It was understood, of course, by all her friends, and her maid returned the teaspoons, or whatever it was, as promptly as possible. You see my predicamentl'

'So Lady Runcorn had an aunt who was a kleptomaniac? Very interesting. You permit that I examine the safe?'

Mr Hardman assenting, Poirot pushed back the door of the safe and examined the interior. The empty velvet-lined shelves gaped at us.

'Even now the door does not shut properly,' murmured Poirot, as he swung it to and fro. 'I wonder why? Ah, what have we here?

A glove, caught in the hinge. A man's glove.'

He held it out to Mr Hardman.

'That's not one of my gloves,' the latter declared.

'Ahal Something morel' Poirot bent deftly and picked up a small object from the floor of the safe. It was a flat cigarette case made of black moire.

'My cigarette casei' cried Mr Hardman.

'Yours? Surely not, monsieur. Those are not your initials.'

He pointed to an entwined monogram of two letters executed in platinum.

Hardman took it in his hand.

'You are right,' he declared. 'It is very like mine, but the initials are different. A 'B' and a 'P'. Good heavens - Parkerl'

'It would seem so,' said Poirot. 'A somewhat careless young man - especially if the glove is his also. That would be a double clue, would it not?'

'Bernard Parker!' murmured Hardman. 'What a reliefl Well, Monsieur Poirot, I leave it to you to recover the jewels. Place the matter in the hands of the police if you think fit - that is, if you are quite sure that it is he who is guilty.'

'See you, my friend,' said Poirot to me, as we left the house together, 'he has one law for the titled, and another law for the plain, this Mr Hardman. Me, I have not yet been ennobled, so I am on the side of the plain. I have sympathy for this young man.

The whole thing was a little curious, was it not? There was Hardman suspecting Lady Runcorn; there was I, suspecting the Countess and Johnston; and all the time, the obscure Mr Parker was our man.'

'Why did you suspect the other two?'

'ParbleuI It is such a simple thing to be a Russian refugee or a South African millionaire. Any woman can call herself a Russian countess; anyone can buy a house in Park Lane and call himself a South African millionaire. Who is going to contradict them? But I observe that we are passing through Bury Street. Our careless young friend lives here. Let us, as you say, strike while the iron is in the fire.'

Mr Bernard Parker was at home. We found him reclining on some cushions, clad in an amazing dressing-gown of purple and orange. I have seldom taken a greater dislike to anyone than I did to this particular young man with his white, effeminate face and affected lisping speech.

'Good morning, monsieur,' said Poirot briskly. 'I come from Mr Hardman. Yesterday, at the party, somebody has stolen all his jewels. Permit me to ask you, monsieur - is this your glove?'

Mr Parker's mental processes did not seem very rapid. He stared at the glove, as though gathering his wits together.

'Where did you find it?' he asked at last.

'Is it your glove, monsieur?'

Mr Parker appeared to make up his mind.

'No, it isn't,' he declared.

'And this cigarette case, is that yours?'

'Certainly not. I always carry a silver one.'

'Very well, monsieur. I go to put matters in the hands of the police.'

'Oh, I say, I wouldn't do that if I were you,' cried Mr Parker in some concern. 'Beastly unsympathetic people, the police. Wait a bit. I'll go round and see old Hardman. Look here - oh, stop a minute.'

But Poirot beat a determined retreat.

'We have given him something to think about, have we not?' he chuckled. 'Tomorrow we will observe what has occurred.'

But we were destined to have a reminder of the Hardmon case that afternoon. Without the least warning the door flew open, and a whirlwind in human form invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables (it was as cold as only an English June day can be) and a hat rampant with slaughtered ospreys. Countess Vera Rossakoff was a somewhat disturbing personality.

'You are Monsieur Poirot? What is this that you have done?

You accuse that poor boyl It is infamous. It is scandalous. I know him. He is a chicken, a lamb - never would he steal. He has done everything for me. Will I stand by and see him martyred and butchered?'

'Tell me, madame, is this his cigarette case?' Poirot held out the black moir case.

The Countess paused for a moment while she inspected it.

'Yes, it is his. I know it well. What of it? Did you find it in the room? We were all there; he dropped it then, I suppose. Ah, you policemen, you are worse than the Red Guards - '

'And is this his glove?'

'How should I know? One glove is like another. Do not try to stop me - he must be set free. His character must be cleared. You shall do it. I will sell my jewels and give you much money.' 'Madame - '

'It is agreed, then? No, no, do not argue. The poor boy! He came to me, the tears in his eyes. "I will save you," I said. "I will go to this man - this ogre, this monsterl Leave it to Vera." Now it is settled, I go.'

With as little ceremony as she had come, she swept from the room, leaving an overpowering perfume of an exotic nature behind her.

'What a woman? I exclaimed. 'And what fursl'

'Ah, yes, they were genuine enoughl Could a spurious countess have real furs? My little joke, Hastings... No, she is truly Russian,

I fancy. Well, well, so Master Bernard went bleating to her.' 'The cigarette case is his. I wonder if the glove is also - '

With a smile Poirot drew from his pocket a second glove and placed it by the fixst. There was no doubt of their being a pair.

'Where did you get the second one. Poirot?'

'It was thrown down with a stick on the table in the hall in Bury Street. Truly, a very careless young man, Monsieur Parker.

Well, well, rnon ami- we must be thorough. Just for the form of the thing, I will make a little visit to Park Lane.' Needless to say, I accompanied my friend. Johnston was out, but we saw his private secretary. It transpired that Johnston had only recently arrived from South Africa. He had never been in England before.

'He is interested in precious stones, is he not?' hazarded Poirot.

'Gold mining is nearer the mark,' laughed the secretary.

Poirot came away from the interview thoughtful. Late that evening, to my utter surprise, I found him earnestly studying a Russian grammar.

'Good heavens, Poirotl' I cried. 'Are you learning Russian in order to converse with the Countess in her own language?' 'She certainly would not listen to my English, my friendl' 'But surely, Poirot, well-born Russians invariably speak French?' 'You are a mine of information, Hastingst I will cease puzzling over the intricacies of the Russian alphabet.' He threw the book from him with a dramatic gesture. I was not entirely satisfied. There was a twinkle in his eye which I knew of old. It was an invariable sign that Hercule Poirot was pleased with himself.

'Perhaps,' I said sapiently, 'you doubt her being really a Russian. You are going to test her?' 'Ah, no, no, she is Russian all right.' 'Well, then ' 'If you really want to distinguish yourself over this case, Hastings, I recommend First Steps in Russian as an invaluable aid.' Then he laughed and would say no more. I picked up the book from the floor and dipped into it curiously, but could make neither head nor tail of Poirot's remarks.

The following morning brought us no news of any kind, but that did not seem to worry my little friend. At breakfast, he announced his intention of calling upon Mr Hardman early in the day. We found the elderly society butterfly at home, and seemingly a little calmer than on the previous day.

'Well, Monsieur Poirot, any news?' he demanded eagerly.

Poirot handed him a slip of paper.

'That is the person who took the jewels, monsieur. Shall I put matters in the hands of the police? Or would you prefer me to recover the jewels without bringing the police into the matter?'

Mr Hardman was staring at the paper. At last he found his voice.

'Most astonishing. I should infinitely prefer to have no scandal in the matter. I give you carte blanche, Monsieur Poirot. I am sure you will be discreet.'

Our next procedure was to hail a taxi, which Poirot ordered to drive to the Carlton. There he inquired for Countess Rossakoff.

In a few minutes we were ushered up into the lady's suite. She came to meet us with outstretched hands, arrayed in a marvellous neglig6e of barbaric design.

'Monsieur Poirot? she cried. 'You have succeeded? You have cleared that poor infant?'

'Madame la Comtesse, your friend Mr Parker is perfectly safe from arrest.'

'Ah, but you are the clever little manl Superbl And so quickly too.'

'On the other hand, I have promised Mr Hardman that the jewels shall be returned to him today.'

'So?'

'Therefore, madame, I should be extremely obliged if you would place them in my hands without delay. I am sorry to hurry you, but I am keeping a taxi - in case it should be necessary for me to go on to Scotland Yard; and we Belgians, madame, we practise the thrift.'

The Countess had lighted a cigarette. For some seconds she sat perfectly still, blowing smoke rings, and gazing steadily at Poirot.

Then she burst into a laugh, and rose. She went across to the bureau, opened a drawer, and took out a black silk handbag. She toesed it lightly to Poirot. Her tone, when she spoke, was perfectly light and unmoved.

'We Russians, on the contrary, practise prodigality,' she said.

'And to do that, unfortunately, one must have money. You need not look inside. They are all there.' Poirot arose.

'I congratulate you, madame, on your quick intelligence and your promptitude.' 'Ah! But since you were keeping your taxi waiting, what else could I do?' 'You are too amiable, madame. You are remaining long in London?' 'I am afraid not - owing to you.' 'Accept my apologies.' 'We shall meet again elsewhere, perhaps.' 'I hope so.' 'And I - do not? exclaimed the Countess with a laugh. 'It is a great compliment that I pay you there - there are very few men in the world whom I fear. Goodbye, Monsieur Poirot.' 'Goodbye, Madame la Comtesse. Ah - pardon me, I forgotl Allow me to return you your cigarette case.' And with a bow he handed to her the little black moir case we had found in the safe. She accepted it without any change of expression - just a lifted eyebrow and a murmured: 'I seel'

'What a woman? cried Poirot enthusiastically as we descended the stairs. 'Mon /]hu, quelle femrnel Not a word of argument - of protestation, of bluff! One quick glance, and she had sized up the position correctly. I tell you, Hastings, a woman who can accept defeat like that - with a careless smile - will go far! She is dangerous, she has the nerves of steel; she - ' He tripped heavily.

'If you can manage to moderate your transports and look where you're going, it might be as well,' I suggested. 'When did you first suspect the Countess?' 'Mon ami, it was the glove and the cigarette case - the double clue, shall we say? - that worried me. Bernard Parker might easily have dropped one or the other - but hardly both. Ah, no, that would have been too carelessl In the same way, if someone else had placed them there to incriminate Parker, one would have been sufficient - the cigarette case or the glove - again not both.

I was forced to the conclusion that one of the two things did not belong to Parker. I imagined at first that the case was his, and that the glove was not. But when I discovered the fellow to the glove, I saw that it was the other way about. Whose, then, was the cigarette case? Clearly, it could not belong to Lady Runcorn.

The initials were wrong. Mr Johnston? Only if he were here under a false name. I interviewed his secretary, and it was apparent at once that everything was clear and aboveboard. There was no reticence about Mr Johnston's past. The Countess, then? She was supposed to have brought jewels with her from Russia; she had only to take the stones from their settings, and it was extremely doubtful if they could ever be identified. What could be easier for her than to pick up one of Parker's gloves from the hall that day and thrust it into the safe? But, bien vfr, she did not intend to drop her own cigarette case.' 'But if the case was hers, why did it have "B.P." on it? The Countess's initials are V.R.' Poirot smiled gently upon me.

'Exactly, tnon ami; but in the Russian alphabet, B is V and Pis R.' 'Well, you couldn't expect me to guess that. I don't know Russian.' 'Neither do I, Hastings. That is why I bought my little book and urged it on your attention.' He sighed.

'A remarkable woman. I have a feeling, my friend - a very decided feeling - I shall meet her again. Where, I wonder?'

CHAPTER VI THE KING OF CLUBS

'Truth,' I observed, laying aside the Daily Nervrraonger, 'is stranger than fiction?

The remark was not, perhaps, an original one. It appeared to incense my friend. Tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, the little man carefully flicked an imaginary fleck of dust from his carefully creased trousers, and observed: 'How profoundt What a thinker is my friend Hastingsl' Without displaying any annoyance at this quite uncalled-for gibe, I tapped the sheet I had laid aside.

'You've read this morning's paper?' 'I have. And after reading it, I folded it anew symmetrically.

I did not cast it on the floor as you have done, with your so lamentable absence of order and method.' (That is the worst of Poirot. Order and Method are his gods.

He goes so far as to attribute all his success to them.) 'Then you saw the account of the murder of Henry Reedburn, the impresario? It was that which prompted my remark. Not only is truth stranger than fiction - it is more dramatic. Think of that solid middle-class English family, the Oglanders. Father and mother, son and daughter, typical of thousands of families all over this country. The men of the family go to the city every day; the women look after the house. Their lives are perfectly peaceful, and utterly monotonous. Last night they were sitting in their neat suburban drawing-room at Daisymead, Streatham, playing bridge.

Suddenly, without any warning, the french window bursts open, and a woman staggers into the room. Her grey satin frock is marked with a crimson stain. She utters one word, "Murder!" before she sinks to the ground insensible. It is possible that they recognize her from her pictures as Valerie Saintclair, the famous dancer who has lately taken London by storm!'

'Is this your eloquence, or that of the Daily Newsmonger?' inquired Poirot.

'The Daily Newsmonger was in a hurry to go to press, and contented itself with bare facts. But the dramatic possibilities of the story struck me at once.' Poirot nodded thoughtfully. 'Wherever there is human nature, there is drama. But - it is not always just where you think it is.

Remember that. Still, I too am interested in the case, since it is likely that I shall be connected with it.' 'Indeed?' 'Yes. A gentleman rang me up this morning, and made an appointment with me on behalf of Prince Paul of Maurania.' 'But what has that to do with it?' 'You do not read your pretty little English scandal-papers. The ones with the funny stories, and % little mouse has heard -" or "a little bird would like to know -" See here.' I followed his short stubby finger along the paragraph: ' - whether the foreign prince and the famous dancer are really affinities! And if the lady likes her new diamond ringl' 'And now to resume your so dramatic narrative,' said Poirot.

'Mademoiselle Saintclair had just fainted on the drawing-room carpet at Daisymead, you remember.' I shrugged. 'As a result of Mademoiselle's first murmured words when she came round, the two male Oglanders stepped out, one to fetch a doctor to attend to the lady, who was evidently suffering terribly from shock, and the other to the police-station whence after telling his story, he accompanied the police to Mort Dsir, Mr Reedburn's magnificent villa, which is situated at no great distance from Daisymead. There they found the great man, who by the way suffers from a somewhat unsavoury reputation, lying in the library with the back of his head cracked open like an eggshell.' 'I have cramped your style,' said Poirot kindly. 'Forgive me, I pray... Ah, here is M. le Prince?

Our distinguished visitor was announced under the title of Count Feodor. He was a strange-looking youth, tall, eager, with a

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weak chin, the famous Mauranberg mouth, and the dark fiery eyes of a fanatic.

'M. Poirot?'

My friend bowed.

'Monsieur, I am in terrible trouble, greater than I can well express - '

Poirot waved his hand. 'I comprehend your anxiety. Mademois-elle Saintclair is a very dear friend, is it not so?'

The Prince replied simply: 'I hope to make her my wife.' Poirot sat up in his chair, and his eyes opened.

The Prince continued: 'I should not be the first of my family to make a morganatic marriage. My brother Alexander has also defied the Emperor. We are living now in more enlightened days, free from the old caste-prejudice. Besides, Mademoiselle Saint-clair, in actual fact, is quite my equal in rank. You have heard hints as to her history?'

'There are many romantic stories of her origin - not an un-common thing with famous dancers. I have heard that she is the daughter of an Irish charwoman, also the story which makes her mother a Russian grand duchess.'

'The first story is, of course, nonsense,' said the young man.

'But the second is true. Valerie, though bound to secrecy, has let me guess as much. Besides, she proves it unconsciously in a thousand ways. I believe in heredity, M. Poirot.'

'I oo believe in heredity,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'I have seen some strange things in connection with it - mol qui oou parle.

But to business, M. le Prince. What do you want of me? What do you fear? I may speak freely, may I not? Is there anything to connect Mademoiselle Saintclair with the crime? She knew Reedburn of course?'

'Yes. He professed to be in love with her.'

'And she?'

'She would have nothing to say to him.'

Poirot looked at him keenly. 'Had she any reason to fear him?'

The young man hesitated. 'There was an incident. You know Zara, the clairvoyant?'

'NO,'

'She is wonderful. You should consult her some time. Valerie and I went to see her last week. She read the cards for us. She spoke to Valerie of trouble - of gathering clouds; then she turned up the last card - the covering card, they call it. It was the king of clubs. She said to Valerie: "Beware. There is a man who holds you in his power. You fear him - you are in great danger through him. You know whom I mean?" Valerie was white to the lips.

She nodded and said: "Yes, yes, I know." Shortly afterwards we left. Zara's last words to Valerie were: "Beware of the king of clubs. Danger threatens you!" I questioned Valerie. She would tell me nothing - assured me that all was well. But now, after last night, I am more sure than ever that in the king of clubs Valerie saw Reedburn, and that he was the man she feared.'

The Prince paused abruptly. 'Now you understand my agitation when I opened the paper this morning. Supposing Valerie, in a fit of madness - oh, it is impossible?

Poirot rose from his seat, and patted the young man kindly on the shoulder. 'Do not distress yourself, I beg of you. Leave it in my hands.'

'You will go to Streatham? I gather she is still there, at Daisy mead - prostrated by the shock.'

'I will go at once.'

'I have arranged matters - through the embassy. You will be allowed access everywhere.'

'Then we will depart - Hastings, you will accompany me? Au revoir, M. le Prince.'

Mon Ddsir was an exceptionally fine villa, thoroughly modern and comfortable. A short carriage-drive led upto it from the road, and beautiful gardens extended behind the house for some acres.

On mentioning Prince Paul's name, the butler who answered the door at once took us to the scene of the tragedy. The library was a magnificent room, running from back to front of the whole building, with a window at either end, one giving on the front carriage-drive, and the other on the garden. It was in the recess of the latter that the body had lain. It had been removed not long before, the police having concluded their examination.

'That is annoying,' I murmured to Poirot. 'Who knows what clues they may have destroyed?'

My little friend smiled. 'Eh - eh! How often must I tell you that dues come from oithin? In the little grey cells of the brain lies the solution of every mystery.'

He turned to the butler. 'I suppose, except for the removal of the body, the room has not been touched?'

'No, sir. It's just as it was when the police came up last night.'

'These curtains, now. I see they pull right across the window-recess.

They are the same in the other window. Were they drawn last night?'

'Yes, sir. I draw them every night.'

'Then Reedburn must have drawn them back himself?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'Did you know your master expected a visitor last night?'

'He did not say so, sir. But he gave orders he was not to be disturbed after dinner. You see, sir, there is a door leading out of the library on to the terrace at the side of the house. He could have admitted anyone that way.'

'Was he in the habit of doing that?'

The butler coughed discreetly. 'I believe so, sir.'

Poirot strode to the door in question. It was unlocked. He stepped through it on to the terrace which joined the drive on the right; on the left it led up to a red brick wall.

'The fruit garden, sir. There is a door leading into it farther along, but it was always locked at six o'clock.'

Poirot nodded, and re-entered the library, the butler following.

'Did you hear nothing of last night's events?'

'Well, sir, we heard voices in the library, a little before nine.

But that wasn't unusual, especially being a lady's voice. But of course, once we were all in the servants' hall, right the other side, we didn't hear anything at all. And then, about eleven o'clock, the police came.'

'How many voices did you hear?'

'I couldn't say, sir. I only noticed the lady's.'

'Ahl'

'I beg pardon, sir, but Dr Ryan is still in the house, if you would care to see him.'

We jumped at the suggestion, and in a few minutes the doctor, a cheery, middle-aged man, joined us, and gave Poirot all the information he required. Reedburn had been lying near the window, his head by the marble window-seat. There were two wounds, one between the eyes, and the other, the fatal one, on the back of the head.

'He was lying on his back?'

'Yes. There is the mark.' He pointed to a small dark stain on the floor.

'Could not the blow on the back of the head have been caused by his striking the floor?'

'Impossible. Whatever the weapon was, it penetrated some distance into the skull.'

Poirot looked thoughtfully in front of him. In the embrasure of each window was a carved marble seat, the arms being fashioned in the form of a lion's head. A light came into Poirot's eyes.

'Supposing he had fallen backward on this projecting lion's head, and slipped from there to the ground. Would not that cause a wound such as you describe?'

'Yes, it would. But the angle at which he was lying makes that theory impossible. And besides, there could not fail to be traces of blood on the marble of the seat.'

'Unless they were washed away?'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'That is hardly likely. It would be to no one's advantage to give an accident the appearance of murder.'

'Quite so,' acquiesced Poirot. 'Could either of the blows have been struck by a woman, do you think?'

'Oh, quite out of the question, I should say. You are thinking of Mademoiselle Saintclair, I suppose?'

'I think of no one in particular until I am sure,' said Poirot gently.

He turned his attention to the open french window, and the doctor continued:

'It is through here that Mademoiselle Saintclair fled. You can just catch a glimpse of Daisymead between the trees. Of course, there are many houses nearer to the front of the house on the road, but as it happens, Daisymead, though some distance away, is the only house visible this side.' 'Thank you for your amiability, Doctor,' said Poirot. 'Come, Hastings, we will follow the footsteps of Mademoiselle.'

Poirot led the way down through the garden, out through an iron gate, across a short stretch of green and in through the garden gate of Daisymead, which was an unpretentious little house in about half an acre of ground. There was a small flight of steps leading up to a french window. Poirot nodded in their direction.

'That is the way Mademoiselle Saintclair went. For us, who have not her urgency to plead, it will be better to go round to the front door.' A maid admitted us and took us into the drawing-room, then went in search of Mrs Oglander. The room had evidently not been touched since the night before. The ashes were still in the grate, and the bridge-table was still in the centre of the room, with a dummy exposed, and the hands thrown down. The place was somewhat overloaded with gimcrack ornaments, and a good many family portraits of surpassing ugliness adorned the walls.

Poirot gazed at them more leniently than I did, and straightened one or two that were hanging a shade askew. 'La famille, it is a strong tie, is it not? Sentiment, it takes the place of beauty.' I agreed, my eyes being fixed on a family group comprising a gentleman with whiskers, a lady with a high 'front' of hair, a stolid, thick-set boy, and two little girls tied up with a good many unnecessary bows of ribbon. I took this to be the Oglander family in earlier days, and studied it with interest.

The door opened, and a young woman came in. Her dark hair was neatly arranged, and she wore a drab-coloured sportscoat and a tweed skirt.

She looked at us inquiringly. Poirot stepped forward. 'Miss Oglander? I regret to derange you - especially after all you have been through. The whole affair must have been most disturbing.' 'It has been rather upsetting,' admitted the young lady cautiously. I began to think that the elements of drama were wasted on Miss Oglander, that her lack of imagination rose superior to any tragedy. I was confirmed in this belief as she continued: 'I must apologize for the state this room is in. Servants get so foolishly excited.'

'It was here that you were sitting last night, n'est-ce pas?' 'Yes, we were playing bridge after supper, when - ' 'Excuse me - how long had you been playing?'

'Well -' Miss Oglander considered. 'I really can't say. I suppose it must have been about ten o'clock. We had had several rubbers, I know.'

'And you yourself were sitting - where?'

'Facing the window. I was playing with my mother and had gone one no trump. Suddenly, without any warning, the window burst open, and Miss Saintclair staggered into the room.'

'You recognized her?'

'I had a vague idea her face was familiar.'

'She is still here, is she not?'

'Yes, but she refuses to see anyone. She is still quite prostrated.'

'I think she will see me. Will you tell her that I am here at the express request of Prince Paul of Maurania?'

I fancied that the mention of a royal prince rather shook Miss Oglander's imperturbable calm. But she left the room on her errand without any further remark, and returned almost im-mediately to say that Mademoiselle Saintclair would see us in her room.

We followed her upstairs, and into a fair-sized light bedroom.

On a couch by the window a woman was lying who turned her head as we entered. The contrast between the two women struck me at once, the more so as in actual features and colouring they were not unalike - but oh, the difference! Not a look, not a gesture of Valerie Saintelair's but expressed drama. She seemed to exhale an atmosphere of romance. A scarlet flannel dressing-gown covered her feet - a homely garment in all conscience; but the charm of her personality invested it with an exotic fiavour, and it seemed an Eastern robe of glowing colour.

Her large dark eyes fastened themselves on Poirot.

'You come from Paul?' Her voice matched her appearance - t was full and languid.

'Yes, mademoiselle. I am here to serve him - and you.' 'What do you want to know?'

'Everything that happened last night. But everythingl'

She smiled rather wearily.

'Do you think I should lie? I am not stupid. I see well enough that there can be no concealment. He held a secret of mine, that man who is dead. He threatened me with it. For Paul's sake, I endeavoured to make terms with him. I could not risk losing Paul ·.. Now that he is dead, I am safe. But for all that, I did not kill him.'

Poirot shook his head with a smile. 'It is not necessary to tell me that, mademoiselle. Now recount to me what happened last night.'

'I offered him money. He appeared to be willing to treat with me. He appointed last night at nine o'clock. I was to go to Mort D6sir. I knew the place; I had been there before. I was to go round to the side door into the library, so that the servants should not see me.'

'Excuse me, mademoiselle, but were you not afraid to trust yourself alone there at night?'

Was it my fancy, or was there a momentary pause before she answered?

'Perhaps I was. But you see, there was no one I could ask to go with me. And I was desperate. Reedburn admitted me to the library. Oh, that manl I am glad he is dead! He played with me, as a cat does with a mouse. He taunted me. I begged and implored him on my knees. I offered him every jewel I have. All in vain!

Then he named his own terms. Perhaps you can guess what they were. I refused. I told him what I thought of him. I raved at him.

He remained calmly smiling. And then, as I fell to silence at last, there was a sound - from behind the curtain in the window.

He heard it too. He strode to the curtains and flung them wide apart. There was a man there, hiding - a dreadful-looking man, a sort of tramp. He struck at Mr Reedburn - then he struck again, and he went down. The tramp clutched at me with his bloodstained

hand. I tore myself free, slipped through the window, and ran for my life. Then I perceived the lights in this house, and made for them. The blinds were up, and I saw some people playing bridge.

I almost fell into the room. I just managed to gasp out "Murder!" and then everything went black - '

'Thank you, mademoiselle. It must have been a great shock to your nervous system. As to this tramp, could you describe him?

Do you remember what he was wearing?'

'No - it was all so quick. But I should know the man anywhere.

His face is burnt in on my brain.'

'Just one more question, mademoiselle. The curtains of the other window, the one giving on the drive, were they drawn?'

For the first time a puzzled expression crept over the dancer's face. She seemed to be trying to remember.

'Eh bien, mademoiselle?'

'I think - I am almost sure - yes, quite sure! They were not drawn.'

'That is curious, since the other ones were. No matter. It is, I dare say, of no great importance. You are remaining here long, mademoiselle?'

'The doctor thinks I shall be fit to return to town tomorrow.' She looked round the room. Miss Oglander had gone out. 'Thee people, they are very kind - but they are not of my world. I 8hock them! And to me - well, I am not fond of the bourgeoisiel'

A faint note of bitterness underlay her words.

Poirot nodded. 'I understand. I hope I have not fatigued you unduly with my questions?'

'Not at all, monsieur. I am only too anxious Paul should know all as soon as possible.'

'Then I will wish you good day, mademoiselle.'

As Poirot was leaving the room, he paused, and pounced on a pair of patent-leather slippers. 'Yours, mademoiselle?'

'Yes, monsieur. They have just been cleaned and brought up.' 'Ah!' said Poirot, as we descended the stairs. 'It seems that the domestics are not too excited to clean shoes, though they forget a grate. Well, rnon ami, at first there appeared to be one or two points of interest, but I fear, I very much fear, that we must regard the case as finished. It all seems straightforward enouth.' 'And the murderer?' 'Hercule Poirot does not hunt down tramps,' replied my fried grandiloquently.

Miss Oglander met us in the hall. 'If you will wait in the drawig-room a minute, Mamma would like to speak to you.' The room was still untouched, and Poirot idly gathered upthe cards, shuffling them with his tiny, fastidiously groomed han& 'Do you know. what I think, my friend?' 'No?' I said eagerly.

'I think that Miss Oglander made a mistake in going one ao trump. She should have gone three spades.' 'Poirott You are the limit.' 'Mon Dieu, I cannot always be talking blood and thunderl' Suddenly he stiffenet: 'Hastings - Hastings. Seel The king of clubs is missing from the pack]' 'garal' I cried.

'Eh?' He did not seem to understand my allusion. Mechanically he stacked the cards and put them away in their cases. His face was very grave.

'Hastings,' he said at last, 'I, Hercule Poirot, have come near to making a big mistake - a very big mistake.' I gazed at him, impressed, but utterly uncomprehending.

'We must begin again, Hastings. Yes, we must begin again.

But this time we shall not err.' He was interrupted by the entrance of a handsome middle-aged lady. She carried some household books in her hand. P0irot bowed to her.

'Do I understand, sir, that you are a friend of - er -8aintdair's?' 'I come from a friend of hers, madame.' 'Oh, I see. I thought perhaps - ' Poirot suddenly waved brusquely at the window.

'Your blinds were not pulled down last night?' 'No - I suppose that is why Miss Saintclair saw the light plainly.'

'There was moonlight last night. I wonder that you did not see Mademoiselle Saintclair from your seat here facing the windows?'

'I suppose we were engrossed with our game. Nothing like this has ever happened before to us.'

'I can quite believe that, madame. And I will put your mind at rest. Mademoiselle Saintclair is leaving tomorrow.'

'Oh!' The good lady's face cleared.

'And I will wish you good morning, madame.'

A servant was cleaning the steps as we went out of the front door. Poirot addressed her.

'Was it you who cleaned the shoes of the young lady upstairs?'

The maid shook her head. 'No, sir. I don't think they've been cleaned.'

'Who cleaned them, then?' I inquired of Poirot, as we walked down the road.

'Nobody. They did not need cleaning.'

'I grant that walking on the road or path on a fine night would not soil them. But surely after going through the long grass of the garden, they would have been soiled and stained.'

'Yes,' said Poirot with a curi(us smile. 'In that case, I agree, they would have been stained.'

'But - '

'Have patience a little half-hour, my friend. We are going back to Mon Dsir.'

The butler looked surprised at our reappearance, but offered no objection to our returning to the library.

'Hi, that's the wrong window, Poirot,' I cried as he made for the one overlooking the carriage-drive.

'I think not, my friend. See here.' He pointed to the marble lion's head. On it was a faint discoloured smear. He shifted his finger and pointed to a similar stain on the polished floor.

'Some one struck Reedburn a blow with his clenched fist between the eyes. He fell backward on this projecting bit of marble, then slipped to the floor. Afterwards, he was dragged across the floor to the other window, and laid there instead, but not quite at the same angle, as the Doctor's evidence told us.'

'But why? It seems utterly unnecessary.' 'On the contrary, it was essential. Also, it is the key to the murderer's identity - though, by the way, he had no intention of killing Reedburn, and so it is hardly permissible to call him a murderer. He must be a very strong manl' 'Because of having dragged the body across the floor?' 'Not altogether. It has been an interesting case. I nearly made an imbecile of myself, though.' 'Do you mean to say it is over, that you know everything?' 'Yes.' A remembrance smote me. 'No,' I cried. 'There is one thing you do not know!' 'And that?' 'You do not know where the missing king of clubs isl' 'Eh? Oh, that is droll! That is very droll, my friend.' 'Why?' 'Because it is in my pocketl' He drew it forth with a flourish.

'Ohl' I said, rather crestfallen. 'Where did you find it?

Here?' 'There was nothing sensational about it. It had simply not been taken out with the other cards. It was in the box.' 'H'm All the same, it gave you an idea, didn't it?' 'Yes, my friend. I present my respects to His Majesty.' 'And to Madame Zaral' 'Ah, yes - to the lady also.' 'Well, what are we going to do now?' 'We are going to return to town. But I must have a few words with a certain lady at Daisymead first.' The same little maid opened the door to us.

'They're all at lunch now, sir - unless it's Miss $aintclair you want to see, and she's resting.' 'It will do if I can see Mrs Oglander for a few minutes. Will you tell her?' We were led into the drawing-room to wait. I had a glimpse of the family in the dining-room as we passed, now reinforced by the presence of two heavy, solid-looking men, one with a moustache, the other with a beard also.

In a few minutes Mrs Oglander came into the room, looking inquiringly at Poirot, who bowed.

'Madame, we, in our country, have a great tenderness, a great respect for the mother. The mi, re defamille, she is everything!' Mrs Oglander looked rather astonished at this opening.

'It is for that reason that I have come - to allay a mother's anxiety. The murderer of Mr Reedburn will not be discovered.

Have no fear. I, Hercule Poirot, tell you so. I am right, am I not?

Or is it a wife that I must reassure?'

There was a moment's pause. Mrs Oglander seemed searching Poirot with her eyes. At last she said quietly: 'I don't know how you know - but yes, you are right.'

Poirot nodded gravely. 'That is all, madame. But do not be uneasy. Your English policemen have not the eyes of Hercule Poirot.' He tapped the family portrait on the wall with his finger-nail.

'You had another daughter once. She is dead, madame?'

Again there was a pause, as she searched him with her eyes.

Then she answered: 'Yes, she is dead.'

'Ahl' said Poirot briskly. 'Well, we must return to town. You permit that I return the king of clubs to the pack? It was your only slip. You understand, to have played bridge for an hour or so, with only fifty-one cards - well, no one who knows anything of the game would credit it for a minute! Bonjourl'

'find now, my friend,' said Poirot as we stepped towards the station, 'you see it all?

'I see nothing! Who killed Reedburn?'

'John Oglander, Junior. I was not quite sure if it was the father or the son, but I fixed on the son as being the stronger and younger of the two. It had to be one of them, because of the win-dow.'

'Why?'

'There were four exits from the library - two doors, two win-dows; but evidently only one would do. Three exits gave on the front, directly or indirectly. The tragedy had to occur in the back window in order to make it appear that Valerie Saintclair came to Daisymead by chance. Really, of course, she fainted, and John

Oglander carried her across over his shoulders. That is why I said he must be a strong man.' 'Did they go there together, then?' 'Yes. You remember Valerie's hesitation when I asked her if she was not afraid to go alone? John Oglander went with her which didn't improve Reedburn's temper, I fancy. They quarrelled, and it was probably some insult levelled at ¥alerie that made Oglander hit him. The rest, you know.' 'But why the bridge?' 'Bridge presupposes four players. A simple thing like that carries a lot of conviction. Who would have supposed that there had been only three people in that room all the evening?' I was still puzzled.

'There's one thing I don't understand. What have the Oglanders to do with the dancer Valerie Saintclair?' 'Ah, that I wonder you did not see. And yet you looked long enough at that picture on the wall - longer than I did. Mrs Oglander's other daughter may be dead to her family, but the world knows her as Valerie Saintclairl' 'What?' 'Did you not see the resemblance the moment you saw the two sisters together?' 'No,' I confessed. 'I only thought how extraordinarily dissimilar they were.' 'That is because your mind is so open to external romantic impressions, my dear Hastings. The features are almost identical.

$o is the colouring. The interesting thing is that ¥alerie is ashamed of her family, and her family is ashamed of her. Nevertheless, in a moment of peril, she turned to her brother for help, and when things went wrong, they all hung together in a remarkable way.

Family strength is a marvellous thing. They can all act, that family. That is where Valerie gets her histrionic talent from. I, like Prince Paul, believe in heredityl They deceived rnel But for a lucky accident, and test question to Mrs Oglander by which I got her to contradict her daughter's account of how they were sitting, the Oglander family would have put a defeat on Hercule Poirot.' 'What shall you tell the Prince?'

'That Valerie could not possibly have committed the crime, and that I doubt if that tramp will ever be found. Also, to convey my compliments to Zara. A curious coincidence, thatl I think I shall call this little affair the Adventure of the King of Clubs.

What do you think, my friend?'

CHAPTER VII THE LEMESURIER INHERITANCE

In company with Poirot, I have investigated many strange eases, but none, I think, to compare with that extraordinary series of events which held our interest over a period of many years, and which culminated in the ultimate problem brought to Poirot to solve. Our attention was first drawn to the family history of the Lemesuriers one evening during the war. Poirot and I had but recently come together again, renewing the old days of our acquaintanceship in Belgium. He had been handling some little matter for the War Office - disposing of it to their entire satisfac-tion; and we had been dining at the Carlton with a Brass Hat who paid Poirot heavy compliments in the intervals of the meal. The Brass Hat had to rush away to keep an appointment with someone, and we finished our coffee in a leisurely fashion before following his example.

As we were leaving the room, I was hailed by a voice which struck a familiar note, and turned to see Captain Vincent Lemesurier, a young fellow whom I had known in France. He was with an older man whose likeness to him proclaimed him to be of the same family. Such proved to be the case, and he was introduced to us as Mr Hugo Lemesurier, uncle of my young friend.

I did not really know Captain Lemesurier at all intimately, but he was a pleasant young fellow, somewhat dreamy in manner, and I remembered hearing that he belonged to an old and exclusive family with a property in Northumberland which dated from before the Reformation. Poirot and I were not in a hurry, and at the younger man's invitation, we sat down at the table with our two new-found friends, and chattered pleasantly enough on various matters. The elder Lemesurier was a man of about forty, with a touch of the scholar in his stooping shoulders; he was engaged at the moment upon some chemical research work for the Government, it appeared.

Our conversation was interrupted by a tall dark young man who strode up to the table, evidently labouring under some agitation Of mind.

'Thank goodness I've found you bothl' he exclaimed.

'What's the matter, Roger?' 'Your guv'nor, Vincent. Bad fall. Young horse.' The rest trailed off, as he drew the other aside.

In a few minutes our two friends had hurriedly taken leave of us. Vincent Lemesurier's father had had a serious accident while trying a young horse, and was not expected to live until morning.

Vincent had gone deadly white, and appeared almost stunned by the news. In a way, I was surprised - for from the few words he had let fall on the subject while in France, I had gathered that he and his father were not on particularly friendly terms, and so his display of filial feeling now rather astonished me.

The dark young man, who had been introduced to us as a cousin, Mr Roger Lemesurier, remained behind, and we three strolled out together.

'Rather a curious business, this,' observed the young man. 'It would interest M. Poirot, perhaps. I've heard of you, you know, M. Poirot - from Higginson.' (Higginson was our Brass Hat friend.) 'He says you're a whale on psychology.' 'I study the psychology, yes,' admitted my friend cautiously.

'Did you see my cousin's face? He was absolutely bowled over, wasn't he? Do you know why? A good old-fashioned family cursel Would you care to hear about it?' 'It would be most kind of you to recount it to me.' Roger Lemesurier looked at his watch.

'Lots of time. I'm meeting them at King's Cross. Well, M.

Poirot, the Lemesuriers are an old family. Way back in medieval times, a Lemesurier became suspicious of his wife. He found the lady in a compromising situation. She swore that she was innocent, but old Baron Hugo didn't listen. She had one child, a son - and he swore that the boy was no child of his and should never inherit.

I forget what he did - some pleasing medieval fancy like walling

up the mother and son alive; anyway, he killed them both, and she died protesting her innocence and solemnly cursing the Lemesuriers forever. No first-born son of a Lemesurier should ever inherit - so the curse ran. Well, time passed, and the lady's innocence was established beyond doubt. I believe that Hugo wore a hair shirt and ended up his days on his knees in a monk's cell. But the curious thing is that from that day to this, no firstborn son ever has succeeded to the estate. It's gone to brothers, to nephews, to second sons - never to the eldest born. Vincent's father was the second of five sons, the eldest of whom died in infancy. Of course, all through the war, Vincent has been convinced that whoever else was doomed, he certainly was. But strangely enough, his two younger brothers have been killed, and he himself has remained unscathed.' 'An interesting family history,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'But now his father is dying, and he, as the eldest son, succeeds?' 'Exactly. A curse has gone rusty - unable to stand the strain of modern life.' Poirot shook his head, as though deprecating the other's jesting tone. Roger Lemesurier looked at his watch again, and declared that he must be off.

The sequel to the story came on the morrow, when we learned of the tragic death of Captain Vincent Lemesurier. He had been travelling north by the Scotch mail-train, and during the night must have opened the door of the compartment and jumped out on the line. The shock of his father's accident coming on top of shell-shock was deemed to have caused temporary mental aberration.

The curious superstition prevalent in the Lemesurier family was mentioned, in connection with the new heir, his father's brother, Ronald Lemesurier, whose only son had died on the Somme.

I suppose our accidental meeting with young Vincent on the last evening of his life quickened our interest in anything that pertained to the Lemesurier family, for we noted with some interest two years later the death of Ronald Lemesurier, who had been a confirmed invalid at the time of his succession to the family estates. His brother John succeeded him, a, a hale, hearty man with a boy at Eton.

Certainly an evil destiny overadowedt,ed the Lemesuriers. On hi very next holiday the boy managed to to shoot himself fatally.

Hia father's death, which occurred quite iite suddenly after being stung by a wasp, gave the estate over to tl 0 the youngest brother of the five - Hugo, whom we remembered me,neeting on the fatal night at the Carlton.

Beyond commenting on the extraordinary, nary series of misfortunes which befell the Lemesuriers, we had takeaken no personal interest in the matter, but the time was now close :se at hand when we were to take a more active part.

One morning 'Mrs Lemesurier' was annos0nounced. She was a tall, active woman, possibly about thirty years qjrs of age, who conveyed by her demeanour a great deal of dete:etermination and strong common sense. She spoke with a faint tranansatlantic accent.

'M. Poirot? I am pleased to meet youvou' My husband, Hugo Lemesurier, met you once many years age, ago, but you will hardly remember the fact.' 'I recollect it perfectly, madame. It was as at the Carlton.' 'That's quite wonderful of you. NI. Poir.,oirot, I'm very worried.' 'What about, madame?' 'My elder boy - I've two boys, you kno-now' Ronald's eight, and Gerald's six.' 'Proceed, madame: why shouId you bd be worried about little Ronald?' 'M. Poirot, within the last six months he he has had three narrow escapes from death: once from drowning - v, - when we were all down at Cornwall this summer; once when he ::he fell from the nursery window; and once from ptomaine poisoninlaing., Perhaps Poirot's face expressed rather to too eloquently what he thought, for Mrs Lemesurier hurried on wi with hardly a moment's pause: 'Of course I know you think I'm just gst a silly fool of a woman, making mountains out of molehills.' 'No, indeed, madame. Any mother mighight be excused for being upset at such occurrences, but I hardly see 'ee where I can be of any

assistance to you. I am not /ebon D/eu to control the waves; for the nursery window I should suggest some iron bars; and for the food - what can equal a mother's care?' 'But why should these things happen to Ronald and not to Gerald?' 'The chance, madame - le hasardl' 'You think so?' 'What do you think, madame - you and your husband?' A shadow crossed Mrs Lemesurier's face.

'It's no good going to Hugo - he won't listen. As perhaps you may have heard, there's supposed to be a curse on the family no eldest son can succeed. Hugo believes in it. He's wrapped up in the family history, and he's superstitious to the last degree.

When I go to him with my fears, he just says it's the curse, and we can't escape it. But I'm from the States, M. Poirot, and over there we don't believe much in curses. We like them as belonging to a real high-toned old family - it gives a sort of cachet, don't you know. I was just a musical comedy actress in a small part when Hugo met me - and I thought his family curse was just too lovely for words. That kind of thing's all right for telling round the fire on a winter's evening, but when it comes to one's own children I just adore my children, M. Poirot. I'd do anything for them.' 'So you decline to believe in the family legend, madame?' 'Can a legend saw through an ivy stem?' 'What is that you are saying, madame?' cried Poirot, an expression of great astonishment on his face.

'I said, can a legend - or a ghost, if you like to call it that - saw through an ivy stem? I'm not saying anything about Cornwall.

Any boy might go out too far and get into difficulties - though Ronald could swim when he was four years old. But the ivy's different. Both the boys were very naughty. They'd discovered they could climb up and down by the ivy. They were always doing it. One day - Gerald was away at the time - Ronald did it once too often, and the ivy gave way and he fell. Fortunately he didn't damage himself seriously. But I went out and examined the ivy: it was cut through, M. Poirot - deliberately cut through.' 'It is very serious what you are telling me there, madame. Yo say your younger boy was away from home at the moment?' 'Yes.'

'And at the time of the ptomaine poisoning, was he still away?' 'No, they were both there.'

'Curious,' murmured Poirot. 'Now, madame, who are the inmates of your establishment?'

'Miss Saunders, the children's governess, and John Gardiner, my husband's secretary - '

Mrs Lemesurier paused, as though slightly embarrassed.

'And who else, madame?'

'Major Roger Lemesurier, whom you also met on that night, I believe, stays with us a good deal.'

'Ah, yes - he is a cousin, is he not?'

'A distant cousin. He does not belong to our branch of the family. Still, I suppose now he is my husband's nearest relative.

He is a dear fellow, and we are all very fond of him. The boys are devoted to him.'

'It was not he who taught them to climb up the ivy?'

'It might have been. He incites them to mischief often enough.' 'Madame, I apologize for what I said to you earlier. The danger is real, and I believe that I can be of assistance. I propose that you should invite us both to stay with you. Your husband will not object?'

'Oh no. But he will believe it to be all of no use. It makes me furious the way he just sits around and expects the boy to die.'

'Calm yourself, madame. Let us make our arrangements methodically.'

Our arrangements were duly made, and the following day saw us flying northward. Poirot was sunk in a reverie. He came out of it, to remark abruptly: 'It was from a train such as this that Vincent Lemesurier fell?'

He put a slight accent on the 'fell'.

'You don't suspect foul play there, surely?' I asked.

'Has it struck you, Hastings, that some of the Lemesurier deaths were, shall we say, capable of being arranged? Take that of Vincent, for instance. Then the Eton boy - an accident with a gun is always ambiguous. Supposing this child had fallen from the nursery window and been dashed to death - what more natural and unsuspicious? But why only the one child, Hastings? Who profits by the death of the elder child? His younger brother, a child of sevenl Absurdl' 'They mean to do away with the other later,' I suggested, though with the vaguest ideas as to who 'they' were.

Poirot shook his head as though dissatisfied.

'Ptomaine poisoning,' he mused. 'Atropine will produce much the same symptoms. Yes, there is need for our presence.' Mrs Lemesurier welcomed us enthusiastically. Then she took us to her husband's study and left us with him. He had changed a good deal since I saw him last. His shoulders stooped more than ever, and his face had a curious pale grey tinge. He listened while Poirot explained our presence in the house.

'How exactly like Sadie's practical common sensei' he said at last. 'Remain by all means, M. Poirot, and I thank you for coming; but - what is written, is written. The way of the transgressor is hard. We Lemesuriers/enow - none of us can escape the doom.' Poirot mentioned the sawn-through ivy, but Hugo seemed very little impressed.

'Doubtless some careless gardener - yes, yes, there may be an instrument, but the purpose behind is plain; and I will tell you this, M. Poirot, it cannot be long delayed.' Poirot looked at him attentively.

'Why do you say that?' 'Because I myself am doomed. I went to a doctor last year. I am suffering from an incurable disease - the end cannot be much longer delayed; but before I die, Ronald will be taken. Gerald ill inherit.' 'And if'anything were to happen to your second son also?' 'Nothing will happen to him; he is not threatened.' 'But if it did?' persisted Poirot.

'My cousin Roger is the next heir.' We were interrupted. A tall man with a good figure and crisply curling auburn hair entered with a sheaf of paper.

'Never mind about those now, Gardiner,' said Hugo Lemesuder; then he added: 'My secretary, Mr Gardiner.' The secretary bowed, uttered a few pleasant words and then went out. In spite of his good looks, there was something repellent about the man. I said so to Poirot shortly afterwards when we were walking round the beautiful old grounds together, and rather to my surprise, he agreed.

'Yes, yes, Hastings, you are right. I do not like him. He is too good-looking. He would be one for the soft job always. Ah, here are the children.' Mrs Lemesurier was advancing towards us, her two children beside her. They were fine-looking boys, the younger dark like his mother, the elder with auburn curls. They shook hands prettily enough, and were soon absolutely devoted to Poirot. We were next introduced to Miss Saunders, a nondescript female, who completed the party.

For some days we had a pleasant, easy existence - ever vigilant, but without result. The boys led a happy normal life and nothing seemed to be amiss. On the fourth day after our arrival Major Roger Lemesurier came down to stay. He was little changed, still care-free and debonair as of old, with the same habit of treating all things lightly. He was evidently a great favourite with the boys, who greeted his arrival with shrieks of delight and immediately dragged him off to play wild Indians in the garden. I noticed that Poirot followed them unobtrusively.

On the following day we were all invited to tea, boys included, with Lady Claygate, whose place adjoined that of the Lemesuriers.

Mrs Lemesurier suggested that we also should come, but seemed rather relieved when Poirot refused and declared he would much prefer to remain at home.

Once everyone had started, Poirot got to work. He reminded me of an intelligent terrier. I believe that there was no corner of the house that he left unsearched; yet it was all done so quietly and methodically that no attention was directed to his movements.

Clearly, at the end, he remained unsatisfied. We had tea on the terrace with Mis Sannders, who had not been included in the party.

'The boys will enjoy it,' she murmured in her faded way, 'though I hope they will behave nicely, and not damage the flower-beds, or go near the bees -' Poirot paused in the very act of drinking. He looked like a man who has seen a ghost.

'Bees?' he demanded in a voice of thunder.

'Yes,]VI. Poirot, bees. Three hives. Lady Claygate is very proud of her bees ' 'Bees?' cried Poirot again. Then he sprang from the table and walked up and down the terrace with his hands to his head. I could not imagine why the little man should be so agitated at the mere mention of bees.

At that moment we heard the car returning. Poirot was on the doorstep a the party alighted.

'Ronaid's been stung,' cried Gerald excitedly.

'It's nothing,' said Mrs Lemesuricr. '!t hasn't even swollen.

We put ammonia on it.' 'Let me see, my little man,' said Poirot. 'Where wa it?' 'Here, on the side of my neck,' said Ronald importantly. 'But it doesn't hurt. Father said: "Keep still - there's a bee on you." And I kept still, and he took it off, but it stung me first, though it didn't really hurt, only like a pin, and I didn't cry, because I'm so big and going to school next year.' Poirot examined the child's neck, then drew away again. He took me by the arm and murmured: 'Tonight, moa ami, tonight we have a little affair onl Say nothing - to anyone.' He refused to be more communicative, and I went through the evening devoured by curiosity. He retired early and I followed his example. As we went upstairs, he caught me by the arm and delivered his instructions: 'Do not undress. Wait a sufficient time, extinguish your light and join me here.' I obeyed, and found him waiting for me when the time came.

He enjoined silence on me with a gesture, and we crept quietly along the nursery wing. Ronald occupied a small room of his own. We entered it and took up our position in the darkest corner. The child's breathing sounded heavy and undisturbed.

'Surely he is sleeping very heavily?' I whispered.

Poirot nodded.

'Drugged,' he murmured.

'Why?' 'So that he should not cry out at - ' 'At what?' I asked, as Poirot paused.

'At the prick of the hypodermic needle, mon ami! Hush, let us speak no more - not that I expect anything to happen for some time.'

But in this Poirot was wrong. Hardly ten minutes had elapsed before the door opened softly, and someone entered the room. I heard a sound of quick hurried breathing. Footsteps moved to the bed, and then there was a sudden click. The light of a little electric lantern fell on the sleeping child - the holder of it was still invisible in the shadow. The figure laid down the lantern. With the right hand it brought forth a syringe; with the left it touched the boy's neck - Poirot and I sprang at the same minute. The lantern rolled to the floor, and we struggled with the intruder in the dark. His strength was extraordinary. At last we overcame him.

'The light, Hastings, I must see his face - though I fear I know only too well whose face it will be.' So did I, I thought as I groped for the lantern. For a moment I had suspected the secretary, egged on by my secret dislike of the man, but I felt assured by now that the man who stood to gain by the death of his two childish cousins was the monster we were tracking.

My foot struck against the lantern. I picked it up and switched on the light. It shone full on the face of- Hugo Lemesurier, the boy's fatherl The lantern almost dropped from my hand.

'Impossible,' I murmured hoarsely. 'Impossiblel'

Lemesurier was unconscious. Poirot nd I between us carried hi to his room and laid him on the Ied. Poirot bent and gentl extricated something from his right Band. He showed it to me. was a hypodermic syringe. I shuddefed.

'What is in it? Poison?' 'Formic acid, I fancy.' 'Formic acid?' 'Yes. Probably obtained by distilling ants. He was a chemis you remember. Death would have been attributed to the bee sting 'My God,' I muttered. 'His own soul And you expected thisi Poirot nodded gravely.

'Yes. He is insane, of course. I iraagine that the family histor has become a mania with him. His itatense longing to succeed the estate led him to commit the loOg series of crimes. Possibl the idea occurred to him first wheo travelling north that nlgl with Vincent. He couldn't bear the prediction to be falsifie Ronald's son was already dead, and Ronald himself was a dyin man - they are a weakly lot. He arrataged the accident to the gut and - which I did not suspect until fow - contrived the death ¢ his brother John by this same meod of injecting formic aci. into the jugular vein. His ambitiota was realized then, and h became the master of the family acreS. But his triumph was short lived - he found that he was sufferifg from an incurable diseas And he had the madman's fixed idea -' the eldest son of a Lemesur ier could not inherit. I suspect that the bathing accident was du to him - he encouraged the child to go out too far. That failing he sawed through the ivy, and afterwards poisoned the child' food.' 'Diabolical!' I murmured with shiver. 'And so cleverl planned!' 'Yes, raon ami, there is nothing m°re amazing than the extrg ordinary sanity of the insane! UnleSS it is the extraordinar eccentricity of the sanel I imagine that it is only lately daat he ha completely gone over the borderline, there was method in hi madness to begin with.'

'And to think that I suspected Roger - that splendid fellow.' 'It was the natural assumption, mon ami. We knew that he also travelled north with Vincent that night. We knew, too, that he was the next heir after Hugo and Hugo's children. But our assumption was not borne out by the facts. The ivy was sawn through when only little Ronald was at home - but it would be to Roger's interest that both children should perish. In the same way, it was only Ronald's food that was poisoned. And today when they came home and I found that there was only his father's word for it that Ronald had been stung, I remembered the other death from a wasp sting - and I knewl'

Hugo Lemesurier died a few months later in the private asylum to which he was removed. His widow was remarried a year later to Mr John Gardiner, the auburn-haired secretary. Ronald inherited the broad acres' of his father, and continues to flourish.

'Well, well,' I remarked to Poirot. 'Another illusion gone. You have disposed very successfully of the curse of the Lemesuriers.' 'I wonder,' said Poirot very thoughtfully. 'I wonder very much indeed.' 'What do you mean?' 'Mon am/, I will answer you with one significant word - redl' 'Blood?' I queried, dropping my voice to an awestricken whisper.

'Always you have the imagination melodramatic, Hastingsl I refer to something much more prosaic - the colour of little Ronald Lemesurier's hair.'

CHAPTER VIII THE LOST MINE

I laid down my bank book with a sigh.

'It is a curious thing,' I observed, 'but my overdraft never seems to grow any less.'

'And it perturbs you not? Me, if I had an overdraft, never should I close my eyes all night,' declared Poirot.

'You deal in comfortable balances, I suppose!' I retorted.

'Four hundred and forty-four pounds, four and fourpence,' said Poirot with some complacency. 'A neat figure, is it not?'

'It must be tact on the part of your bank manager. He is evidently acquainted with your passion for symmetrical details. What about investing, say three hundred of it, in the Porcupine oil-fields?

Their prospectus, which is advertised in the papers today, saya that they will pay one hundred per cent in dividends next year.'

'Not for me,' said Poirot, shaking his head. 'I like not the sensational. For me the safe, the prudent investment - les rentes, the consols, the - how do you call it? - the conversion.'

'Have you never made a speculative investment?'

'No, mon ami,' replied Poirot severely. 'I have not. And the only' shares I own which have not what you call the gilded edge are fourteen thousand shares in the Burma Mines Ltd.'

Poirot paused with an air of waiting to be encouraged to go on.

'Yes?' I prompted.

'And for them I paid no cash - no, they were the reward of the exercise of my little grey cells. You would like to hear the story?

Yes?'

'Of course I would.'

'These mines are situated in the interior, of Burma about two hundred miles inland from Rangoon. They were discovered by the Chinese in the fifteenth century and worked down to the time of the Mohammedan Rebellion, being finally abandoned i the

year x868. The Chinese extracted the rich lead-silver ore from the upper part of the ore body, smelting it for the silver alone, and leaving large quantities of rich lead-bearing slag. This, of course, was soon discovered whdn prospecting work was carried out in Burma, but owing to the fact that the old workings had become full of loose filling and water, all attempts to find the source of the ore proved fruitless. Many parties were sent out by syndicates, and they dug over a large area, but this rich prize still eluded them. But a representative of one of the syndicates got on the track of a Chinese family who were supposed to have still kept a record of the situation of the mine. The present head of the family was one Wu Ling.'

'What a fascinating page of commercial romance? I exclaimed.

'Is it not? Ah, mon ami, one can have romance without golden-haired girls of matchless beauty - no, I am wrong; it is auburn hair that so excites you always. You remember - '

'Go on with the story,' I said hastily.

'Eh bien, my friend, this Wu Ling was approached. He was an estimable merchant, much respected in the province where he lived. He admitted at once that he owned the documents in question, and was perfectly prepared to negotiate for this sale, but he objected to dealing with anyone other than principals.

Finally it was arranged that he should journey to England and meet the directors of an important company.

'Wu Ling made the journey to England in the S.S. Issunta, and the tssunta docked at Southampton on a cold, foggy morning in November. One of the directors, Mr Pearson, went down to Southampton to meet the boat, but owing to the fog, the train down was very much delayed, and by the time he arrived, Wu Ling had disembarked and left by special train for London.

Mr Pearson returned to town somewhat annoyed, as he had no idea where the Chinaman proposed to stay. Later in the day, however, the offices of the company were rung up on the telephone.

Wu Ling was staying at the Russell Square Hotel. He was feeling somewhat unwell after the voyage, but declared himself perfectly able to attend the board meeting on the following day.

'The meeting of the board took place at eleven o'clock. When half past eleven came, and Wu Ling had not put in an appearance, the secretary rang up the Russell Hotel. In answer to his inquiries, he was told that the Chinaman had gone out with a friend about half past ten. It seemed clear that he had started out with the intention of coming to the meeting, but the morning wore away, and he did not appear. It was, of course, possible that he had lost his way, being unacquainted with London, but at a late hour that night he had not returned to the hotel. Thoroughly alarmed now, Mr Pearson put matters in the hands of the police. On the following day, there was still no trace of the missing man, but towards evening of the day after that again, a body was found in the Thames which proved to be that of the ill-fated Chinaman.

Neither on the body, nor in the luggage at the hotel, was there shy trace of the papers relating to the mine.

'At this juncture, mon am/, I was brought into the affair.

Mr Pearson called upon me. While profoundly shocked by the death of Wu Ling, his chief anxiety was to recover the papers which were the object of the Chinaman's visit to England. The main anxiety of the police, of course, would be to track down the murderer - the recovery of the papers would be a secondary consideration. What he wanted me to do was to co-operate with the police while acting min the interests of the company.

'I consented readily enough. It was clear that there were two fields of search open to me. On the one hand, I might look among the employees of the company who knew of the Chinaman's coming; on the other, among the passengers on the boat who might have been acquainted with his mission. I started with the second, as being a narrower field of search. In this I coincided with Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the case - a man altogether different from our friend Japp, conceited, ill-mannered and quite insufferable. Together we interviewed the officers of the ship. They had little to tell us. Wu Ling had kept much to himself on the voyage. He had been intimate with but two of the other passengers - one a broken-down European named Dyer who appeared to bear a somewhat unsavoury reputation, the other a young bank clerk named Charles Lester, who was returning from Hong Kong. We were lucky enough to obtain snapshots of both these men. At the moment there seemed little doubt that if either of the two was implicated, Dyer was the man. He was known to be mixed up with a gang of Chinese crooks, and was altogether a most likely suspect.

'Our next step was to visit the Russell Square Hotel. Shown a snapshot of Wu Ling, they recognized him at once. We then showed them the snapshot of Dyer, but to our disappointment, the hall porter declared positively that that was not the man who had come to the hotel on the fatal morning. Almost as an afterthought, I produced the photograph, of Lester, and to my surprise the man at once recognized it.

' "Yes, sir," he asserted, "that's the gentleman who came in at half past ten and asked for Mr Wu Ling, and afterwards went out with him."

'The affair was progressing. Our next move was to interview Mr Charles Lester. He met us with the utmost frankness, was desolated to hear of the Chinaman's untimely death, and put himself at our disposal in every way. His story was as follows: By arrangement with Wu Ling, he called for him at the hotel at ten-thirty. Wu Ling, however, did not appear. Instead, his servant came, explained that his master had had to go out, and offered to conduct the young man to where his master now was. Suspecting nothing, Lester agreed, and the Chinaman procured a taxi. They drove for some time in the direction of the docks. Suddenly becoming mistrustful, Lester stopped the taxi and got out, dis-regarding the servant's protests. That, he assured us, was all he knew.

'Apparently satisfied, we thanked him and took our leave. His story was soon proved to be a somewhat inaccurate one. To begin with, Wu Ling had had no servant with him, either on the boat or at the hotel. In the second place, the taxi-driver who had driven the two men on that morning came forward. Far from Lester's having left the taxi en route, he and the Chinese gentleman had driven to a certain unsavoury dwelling-place in Limehouse, right in the heart of Chinatown. The place in question was more or less well known as an opium-den of the lowest description. The two gentlemen had gone in - about an hour later the English gentleman, whom he identified from the photograph, came out alone. He looked very pale and ill, and directed the taxi-man to take him to the nearest underground station.

'Inquiries were made about Charles Lester's standing, and it was found that, though bearing an excellent character, he wa heavily in debt, and had a secret passion for gambling. Dyer, of course, was not lost sight of. It seemed just faintly possible that he might have impersonated the other man, but that idea was proved utterly groundless. His alibi for the whole of the day in question was absolutely unimpeachable. Of course, the proprietor of the opium-den denied everything with Oriental stolidity. He had never seen Wu Ling; he had never seen Charles Lester. No two gentlemen had been to the place that morning. In any case, the police were wrong: no opium was ever smoked there.

'His denials, however well meant, did little to help Charle Lester. He was arrested for the murder of Wu Ling. A search of his effects was made, but no papers relating to the mine were discovered. The proprietor of the opium-den was also taken into custody, but a cursory raid of his premises yielded nothing. Not even a stick of opium rewarded the zeal of the police.

'In the meantime my friend Mr Pearson was in a great state of agitation. He strode up and down my room, uttering great lamentations.

' "But you must have some ideas, M. Poirotl" he kept urging.

"Surely you must have some ideas?" ' "Certainly I have ideas," I replied cautiously. "That is the trouble - one has too many; therefore they all lead in different directions." ' "For instance?" he suggested.

' "For instance - the taxi-driver. We have only his word for it that he drove the two men to that house. That is one idea. Then was it really that house they went to? Supposing that they left the taxi there, passed through the house and out by another entrance and went elsewhere?" 'Mr Pearson seemed struck by that.

' "But you do nothing but sit and think? Can't we do something?" 'He was of an impatient temperament, you comprehend.

' "Monsieur," I said with dignity, "it is not for Hercule Poirot to run up and down the evil-smelling streets of Limehouse like a little dog of no breeding. Be calm. My agents are at work." 'On the following day I had news for him. The two men had indeed passed through the house in question, but their real objective waz a small eating-house close to the river. They were seen to pass in there, and Lester came out alone.

'And then, figure to yourself, Hastings, an idea of the most unreasonable seized this Mr Pearsonl Nothing would suit him but that we should go ourselves to this eating-house and make investigations. I argued and prayed, but he would not listen. He talked of disguising himself - he even suggested that I - I should - I hesitate to say it - should shave off my moustachel Yes, rien que fal I pointed out to him that that was an idea ridiculous and absurd. One destroys not a thing of beauty wantonly. Besides, shall not a Belgian gentleman with a moustache desire to see life and smoke the opium just as readily as one without a moustache?

'Eh b/eh, he gave in on that, but he still insisted on his project.

He turned up that evening - Mort Dieu, what a figure! He wore what he called the "pea-jacket", his chin, it was dirty and unshaved; he had a scarf of the vilest that offended the nose. And figure to yourself, he was enjoying himselfl Truly, the English are madl He made some changes in my own appearance. I permitted it. Can one argue with a maniac? We started out -

after all, could I let him go alone, a child dressed up to act the charades?' 'Of course you couldn't,' I replied.

'To continue - we arrived. Mr Pearson talked English of the strangest. He represented himself to be a man of the sea. He talked of "lubbers" and "focselles" and I know not what. It was a low little room with many Chinese in it. We ate of peculiar dishes. /Ih, Dieu, mon estomac!' Poirot clasped that portion of his anatomy tenderly before continuing. 'Then there came to us the proprietor, a Chinaman with a face of evil smiles.

' "You gentlemen no likee food here," he said. "You come for what you likee better. Piecee pipe, eh?" 'Mr Pearson, he gave me the great kick under the table. (He had on the boots of the sea, tool) And he said: "I don't mind if I do, John. Lead ahead."

'The Chinaman smiled, and he took us through a door and to a cellar and through a trapdoor, and down some steps and up again into a room all full of divans and cushions of the most comfortable.

We lay down and a Chinese boy took off our boots. It was the best moment of the evening. Then they brought us the opium-pipes and cooked the opium-pills, and we pretended to smoke and then to sleep and dream. But when we were alone, Mr Pearson called softly to me, and immediately he began crawling along the floor. We went into another room where other people were asleep, and so on, until we heard two men talking. We stayed behind a curtain and listened. They were speaking of Wu Ling.

' "What about the papers?" said one.

' "Mr Lester, he takee those," answered the other, who was a Chinaman. "He say, puttee them alice in saree place - where pleeceman no lookee."

' "Ah, but he's nabbed," said the first one.

' "He gettee free. Pleeceman not sure he done it."

'There was more of the same kind of thing, then apparently the two men were coming our way, and we scuttled back to our beds.

' "We'd better get out of here," said Pearson, after a few minutes had elapsed. "This place isn't healthy."

'"You are right, monsieur," I agreed. "We have played the farce long enough."

'We succeeded in getting away, all right, paying handsomely for our smoke. Once clear of Limehouse, Pearson drew a long breath.

' "I'm glad to get out of that," he said. "But it's something to be sure."

' "It is indeed," I agreed. "And I fancy that we shall not have much difficulty in finding what we want - after this evening', masquerade."

'And there was no difficulty whatsoever,' finished Poirot suddenly.

This abrupt ending seemed so extraordinary that I stared at him.

'But - but where were they?' I asked.

'In his pocket - tout simplement.' 'But in whose pocket?' 'Mr Pearson's, parbleul' Then, observing my look of bewilderment, he continued gently: 'You do not yet see it? Mr Pearson, like Charles Lester, was in debt. Mr Pearson, like Charles Lester, was fond of gambling. And he conceived the idea of stealing the papers from the Chinaman. He met him all right at Southampton, came up to London with him, and took him straight to Limehouse.

It was foggy that day; the Chinaman would not notice where he was going. I fancy Mr Pearson smoked the opium fairly often down there and had some peculiar friends in consequence. I do not think he meant murder. His idea was that one of the Chinamen should impersonate Wu Ling and receive the money for the sale of the document. So far, so goodl But, to the Oriental mind, it was infinitely simpler to kill Wu [,ing and throw his body into the river, and Pearson's Chinese accomplices followed their own methods without consulting him. Imagine, then, what you would call the "funk bleu" of M. Pearson. Someone may have seen him in the train with Wu Ling - murder is a very different thing from simple abduction.

'His salvation lies with the Chinaman who is personating Wu Ling at the Russell Square Hotel. If only the body is not discovered too soon! Probably Wu Ling had told him of the arrangement between him and Charles [,ester whereby the latter was to call for him at the hotel. Pearson sees there an excellent way of diverting suspicion from himself. Charles Lester shall be the last person to be seen in company with Wu Ling. The impersonator has orders to represent himself to Lester as the servant of Wu [,ing, and to bring him as speedily as possible to Limehouse.

There, very likely, he was offered a drink. The drink would be suitably drugged, and when Lester emerged an hour later, he would have a very hazy impression of what had happened. 8o much was this the case, that as soon as Lester learned of Wu [,ing's death, he loses his nerve, and denies that he ever reached [,imehouse.

'By that, of course, he plays right into Pearson's hands. But is Pearson content? No - my manner disquiets him, and he deter104

mines to complete the case against Lester. So he arranges an elaborate masquerade. Me, I am to be gulled completely. Did I not say just now that he was as a child acting the charades? Eh bien, I play my part. He goes home rejoicing. But in the morning, Inspector Miller arrives on his doorstep. The papers are found on him; the game is up. Bitterly he regrets permitting himself to play the farce with Hercule Poirot! There was only one real difficulty in the affair.' 'What was that?' I demanded curiously.

'Convincing Inspector Millerl What an animal, thatl Both obstinate and imbecile. And in the end he took all the credit?

'Too bad,' I cried.

'Ah, well, I had my compensations. The other director of the Burma Mines Ltd awarded me fourteen thousand shares as a small recompense for my services. Not so bad, eh? But when investing money, keep, I beg of you, Hastings, strictly to the conservative. The things you. read in the paper, they may not be true. The directors of the Porcupine - they may be so many Mr Pearsons!'

CHAPTER IX THE PLYMOUTH EXPRESS

Alee Simpson, RN, stepped from the platform at Newton Abbot into a first-class compartment of the Plymouth Express. A porter followed him with a heavy suitcase. He was about to swing it up to the rack, but the young sailor stopped him.

'No - leave it on the seat. I'll put it up later. Here you are.' 'Thank you, sir.' The porter, generously tipped, withdrew.

Doors banged; a stentorian voice shouted: 'Plymouth only.

Change for Torquay. Plymouth next stop.' Then a whistle blew, and the train drew slowly out of the station.

Lieutenant Simpson had the carriage to himself. The December air was chilly, and he pulled up the window. Then he sniffed vaguely, and frowned. What a smell there wasl Reminded him of that time in hospital, and the operation on his leg. Yes, chloroform; that was it!

He let the window down again, changing his seat to one with its back to the engine. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it.

For a little time he sat inactive, looking out into the night and smoking.

At last he roused himself, and opening the suitcase, took out some papers and magazines, then closed the suitcase again and endeavoured to shove it under the opposite seat - without success.

Some hidden obstacle resisted it. He shoved harder with rising impatience, but it still stuck out half-way into the carriage.

'Why the devil won't it go in?' he muttered, and hauling it out completely, he stooped down and peered under the seat o o.

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication cord.

'Mon ami,' said Poirot, 'you have, I know, been deeply inter106 ested in this mystery of the Plymouth Express. Read this.'

I picked up the note he flicked across the table to me. It was brief and to the point.

Dear Sir,

I shall be obliged if you will call upon me at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,

EBENEZER HALLIDAY

The connection was not clear to my mind, and I looked in-quiringly at Poirot.

For answer he took up the newspaper and read aloud: '"A sensational discovery was made last night. A young naval officer returning to Plymouth found under the seat of his compartment the body of a woman, stabbed through the heart. The officer at once pulled the communication cord, and the train was brought to a Standstill. The woman, who was about thirty years of age, and richly dressed, has not yet been identified."

'And later we have this: "The woman found dead in the Plymouth Express has been identified as the Honourable Mrs Rupert Carrington." You see now, my friend? Or if you do not, I will add this - Mrs Rupert Carrington was, before her marriage, Flossie Halliday, daughter of old man Halliday, the steel king of America.'

'And he has sent for you? Splendidl'

'I did him a little service in the past - an affair of bearer bonds.

And once, when I was in Paris for a royal visit, I had Mademoiselle Flossie pointed out to me. Lajolie petite pensionnairel She had the joli dot too! It caused trouble. She nearly made a bad affair.' 'How was that?'

'A certain Count de la Rochefour. Un bien tnauvais sujet! A bad hat, as you would say. An adventurer pure and simple, who knew how to appeal to a romantic young girl. Luckily her father got wind cfi it in time. He took her back to America in haste. I heard of her marriage some years later, but I know nothing of her husband.'

'H'm,' I said. 'The Honourable Rupert Carrington is no beauty, by all accounts. He'd pretty well run through his own money on the turf, and I should imagine old man Halliday's dollars came along in the nick of time. I should say that for a good-looking, well-mannered, utterly unscrupulous young scoundrel, it would be hard to find his match?

'Ah, the poor little lady! Elle n'est pas bien tombde!' 'I fancy he made it pretty obvious at once that it was her money, snd not she, that had attracted him. I believe they drifted apart almost at once. I have heard turnouts lately that there was to be a definite legal separation.' 'Old man Halliday is no fool. He would tie up her money pretty tight.' 'I dare say. Anyway, I know as a fact that the Honourable Rupert is said to be extremely hard-up.' 'Aha! I wonder ' 'You wonder what?' 'My good friend, do not jump down my throat like that. You are interested, I see. Supposing you accompany me to see Mr Halliday. There is a taxi-stand at the corner.'

A few minutes sufficed to whirl us to the superb house in Park Lane rented by the American magnate. We were shown into the library, and almost immediately we were joined by a large, stout man, with piercing eyes and an aggressive chin.

'M. Poirot?' said Mr Halliday. 'I guess I don't need to tell you what I want you for. You've read the papers, and I'm never one to let the grass grow under my feet. I happened to hear you were in London, and I remembered the good work you did over those bonds. Never forget a name. I've got the pick of Scotland Yard, but I'll have my own man as well. Money no object. All the dollars were made for my little girl - and now she's gone, I'll spend my last cent to catch the damned scoundrel that did it! See? So it's up to you to deliver the goods.' Poirot bowed.

'I accept, monsieur, all the more willingly that I saw your daughter in Paris several times. And now I will ask you to tell me the circumstances of her journey to Plymouth and any other detaih that seem to you to bear upon the case.'

'Well, to begin with,' responded Halliday, 'she wasn't going to Plymouth. She was going to join a house-party at Avonmead Court, the Duchess of Swansea's place. She left London by the twelve-fourteen from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at two-fifty. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at all. The twelve-fourteen does a non-stop run to Bristol, afterwards stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter and Newton Abbot. My daughter travelled alone in her carriage, which was reserved as far as Bristol, her maid being in a third-class carriage in the next coach.' Poirot nodded, and Mr Halliday went on: 'The party at Avon-mead Court was to be a very gay one, with several balls, and in consequence my daughter had with her nearly all her jewels amounting in value, perhaps, to about a hundred thousand dollars.' 'Un moment,' interrupted Poirot. 'Who had charge of the jewels?

Your daughter, or the maid?' 'My daughter always took charge of them herself, carrying them in a small blue morocco case.' 'Continue, monsieur.' 'At Bristol the maid, Jane Mason, collected her mistress's dressing-bag and wraps, which were with her, and came to the door of Flossie's compartment. To her intense surprise, my daughter told her that she was not getting out at Bristol, but wa going on farther. She directed Mason to get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom. She could have tea in the refreshment-room, but she was to wait at the station for her mistress, who would return to Bristol by an up-train in the course of the afternoon.

The maid, although very much astonished, did as she wa told. She put the luggage in the cloakroom and had some tea.

But up-train after up-train came in, and her mistress did not appear. After the arrival of the last train, she left the luggage where it was, and went to a hotel near the station for the night. Thi morning she read of the tragedy, and returned to town by the first available train.' 'Is there nothing to account for your daughter's sudden change of plan?' 'Well, there is this: According to Jane Mason, at Bristol, Flosie was no longer alone in her carriage. There was a man in it who stood looking out of the farther window so that she could not see his face.' 'The train was a corridor one, of course?' 'Yes.' 'Which side was the corridor?' 'On the platform side. My daughter was standing in the corridor as she talked to Mason.' 'And there is no doubt in your mind - excuse me!' He got up, and carefully straightened the inkstand which was a little askew. 'e vous demande pardon,' he continued, re-seating himself. 'It affects my nerves to see anything crooked. Strange, is it not? I was saying, monsieur, that there is no doubt in your mind as to this probably unexpected meeting being the cause of your daughter's sudden change of plan?' 'It seems the only reasonable supposition.' 'You have no idea as to who the gentleman in question might be?' The millionaire hesitated for a moment, and then replied: 'No - I do not know at all.' 'Now - as to the discovery of the body?' 'It was discovered by a young naval officer who at once gave the alarm. There was a doctor on the train. He examined the body.

She had been first chloroformed, and then stabbed. He gave it as his opinion that she had been dead about four hours, so it must have been done not long after leaving Bristol - probably between there and Weston, possibly between Weston and Taunton.' 'And the jewel-case?' 'The jewel-case, M. Poirot, was missing.' 'One thing more, monsieur. Your daughter's fortune - to whom does it pass at her death?' 'Flossie made a will soon after her m!lrriage, leaving everything to her husband.' He hesitated for a minute, and then went on: 'I may as well tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that I regard my son-in-law as an unprincipled scoundrel, and that, by my advice, my daughter was on the eve of freeing herself from him by legal means - no difficult matter. I settled her money upon her in such a way that he could not touch it during her lifetime, but although they have lived entirely apart for some years, she had frequently acceded to his demands for money, rather than face an open scandal. However, I was determined to put an end to this. At last Flossie agreed, and my lawyers were instructed to take proceedings.' 'And where is Monsieur Carrington?' 'In town. I believe he was away in the country yesterday, but he returned last night.' Poirot considered a little while. Then he said: 'I think that is all, monsieur.' 'You would like to see the maid, Jane Mason?' 'If you please.' Halliday rang the bell, and gave a short order to the footman.

A few minutes later Jane Mason entered the room, a respectable, hard-featured woman, as emotionless in the face of tragedy as only a good servant can be.

'You will permit me to put a few questions? Your mistress, she was quite as usual before starting yesterday morning? Not excited or flurried?' 'Oh no, sir' 'But at Bristol she was quite different?' 'Yes, sir, regular upset - so nervous she didn't seem to know what she was saying.' 'What did she say exactly?' 'Well, sir, as near as I can remember, she said: "Mason, I've got to alter my plans. Something has happened - I mean, I'm not getting out here after all. I must go on. Get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom; then have some tea, and wait for me in the station." ' "Wait for you here, ma'am?" I asked.

'"Yes, yes. Don't leave the station. I shall return by a later train. I don't know when. It mayn't be until quite late.' ' "Very well, ma'am," I says. It wasn't my place to ask questions, but I thought it very strange.' 'It was unlike your mistrcs, eh?' 'Very unlike her, sir.' 'What did you think?'

'Well, sir, I thought it was to do with the gentleman in the carriage. She didn't speak to him, but she turned round once or twice as though to ask him if she was doing right.'

'But you didn't see the gentleman's face?'

'No, sir; he stood with his back to me all the time.'

'Can you describe him at all?'

'He had on a light fawn overcoat, and a travelling-cap. He was tall and slender, like, and the back of his head was dark.'

You didn't know him?'

'Oh no, I don't think so, sir.'

'It was not your master, Mr Carrington, by any chance?' Mason looked rather startled.

'Oh, I don't think so, sirl' 'But you are not sure?'

'It was about the master's build, sir - but I never thought of it being him. We so seldom saw him... I couldn't say it va.m't himl'

Poirot picked up a pin from the carpet, and frowned at it severely; then he continued: 'Would it be possible for the man to have entered the train at Bristol before you reached the carriage?' Mason considered.

'Yes, sir, I think it would. My compartment was very crowded, and it was some minutes before I could get out - and then there was a very large crowd on the platform, and that delayed me too.

But he'd only have had a minute or two to speak to the mistress, that way. I took it for granted that he'd come along the corridor.' 'That is more probable, certainly?

He paused, still frowning.

'You know how the mistress was dressed, sir?'

'The papers give a few details, but I would like you to confirm them.'

'She was wearing a white fox fur toque, sir, with a white spotted veil, and a blue frieze coat and skirt - the shade of blue they call electric.'

'H'm, rather striking.'

'Yes,' remarked Mr Halliday. 'Inspector Japp is in hopes that that may help us to fix the spot where the crime took place.

Anyone who saw her would remember her.' 'Prdcisd,-nentl - Thank you, mademoiselle.' The maid left the room.

'Wclll' Poirot got up briskly. 'That is all I can do here - except, monsieur, that I would ask you to tell me everything - but everythingl' 'I have done so.' 'You are sure?' 'Absolutely.' 'Then there is nothing more to be aid. I must decline the case.' 'Why?' 'Because you have not been frank with me.' 'I assure you - ' 'No, you are keeping something back.' There was a moment'a pause, and then Halliday drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to my friend.

'I guess that'a what you're after, Monsieur Poirot - though how you know about it fairly gets my goatl' Poirot smiled, and unfolded the paper. It was a letter written in thin sloping handwriting. Poirot read it aloud.

'ChOre Madame, It is with infinite pleasure that I look forward to the felicity of meeting you again. After your so amiable reply to my letter, I can hardly restrain my impatience. I have never forgotten thoe days in Paris. It is most cruel that you should be leaving London tomorrow. However, before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think, I shall have the joy of beholding once more the lady whose image has ever reigned supreme in my heart.

Believe, chore madame, all the assurance of my most devoted and unaltered sentiment - Armand de la Rochefour.'

Poirot handed the letter back to Halliday with a bow.

'I fancy, monsieur, that you did not know that your daughter intended renewing her acquaintance with the Count de la Rochefour?'

'It came as a thunderbolt to me! I found this letter in my daughter's handbag. As you probably know, Monsieur Poirot, this so-called count is an adventurer of the worst type.'

Poirot nodded.

'But I want to know how you knew of the existence of thi letter?'

My friend smiled. 'Monsieur, I did not. But to track footmarlm and recognize cigarette-ash is not sufficient for a detective. He must also be a good psychologist! I knew that you disliked and mistrusted your son-in-law. He benefits by your daughter's death; the maid's description of the mysterious man bears a sufficient resemblance to him. Yet you are not keen on his trackl Why?

Surely because your suspicions lie in another direction. Therefore you were keeping something back.'

'You're right, Monsieur Poirot. I was sure of Rupert's guilt until I found this letter. It unsettled me horribly.'

'Yes. The Count says: "Before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think." Obviously he would not want to wait until you should get wind of his reappearance. Was it he who travelled down from London by the twelve-fourteen, and came along the corridor to your daughter's compartment? The Count de la

Rochefour is also, if I remember rightly, tall and dark?

The millionaire nodded.

'Well, monsieur, I will wish you good day. Scotland Yard has, I presume, a list of the jewels?'

'Yes. I believe Inspector Japp is here now if you would like to see him.'

Japp was an old friend of ours, and greeted Poirot with a sort of affectionate contempt.

'And how are you, monsieur? No bad feeling between us, though we have got our different ways of looking at things. How are the "little grey cells", eh? Going strong?'

Poirot beamed upon him. 'They function, my good Japp; assuredly they do!'

'Then that's all right. Think it was the Honourable Rupert, or a crook? We're keeping an eye on all the regular places, of course.

We shall know if the shiners are disposed of, and of course whoever did it isn't going to keep them to admire their sparkle. Not likelyl I'm trying to find out where Rupert Carrington was yesterday.

Seems a bit of a mystery about it. I've got a man watching him.' 'A great precaution, but perhaps a day late,' suggested Poirot gently.

'You always will have your joke, Monsieur Poirot. Well, I'm off to Paddington. Bristol, Weston, Taunton, that's my beat. So long.' 'You will come round and see me this evening, and tell me the result?' 'Sure thing, if I'm back.' 'That good inspector believes in matter in motion,' murmured Poirot as our friend departed. 'He travels; he measures footprints; he collects mud and cigarette-ashl He is extremely busyl He is zealous beyond words! And if I mentioned psychology to him, do you know what he would do, my friend? He would smilel He would say to himself: "Poor old Poirotl He agesl He grows senile!" Japp is the "younger generation knocking on the door". And ma 'ofI They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is openl' 'And what are you going to do?' 'As we have carte blanche, I shall expend threepence in ringing up the Ritz - where you may have noticed our Count is staying.

After that, as my feet are a little damp, and I have sneezed twice, I shall return to my rooms and make myself a tisane over the spirit lampl'

I did not see Poirot again until the following morning. I found him placidly finishing his breakfast.

'Well?' I inquired eagerly. 'What has happened?' 'Nothing.' 'But Japp?' 'I have not seen him.' 'The Count?' 'He left the Ritz the day before yesterday.' 'The day of the murder?' 'Yes.'

'Then that settles it[Rupert Carrington is cleared.' 'Because the Count de h Rochefour has left the Ritz? You go too fast, my friend.' 'Anyway, he must be followed, a 'restedl But what could be his motive?' 'One hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewellery is a very good motive for anyone. No, the question to my mind is: why kill her? Why not simply steal the jewels? She would not prosecute.' 'Why not?' 'Because she is a woman, mon ami. She once loved this man.

Therefore she would suffer her loss in silence. And the Count, who is an extremely good psychologist where women are concerned - hence his successes - would know that perfectly well!

On the other hand, if Rupert Carrington killed her, why take the jewels, which would incriminate him fatally?' 'As a blind.' 'Perhaps you are right, my friend. Ah, here is lapp[I recognize his knock.' The inspector was beaming good-humouredly.

'Morning, Poirot. Only just got back. I've done some good workl And you?' The, I have arranged my ideas,' replied Poirot placidly.

Japp laughed heartily.

'Old chap's getting on in years,' he observed beneath his breath to me. 'That won't do for us young folk,' he said aloud.

'Quel dommage?' Poirot inquired.

'Well, do you want to hear what I've done?' 'You permit me to make a guess? You have found the knife with which the crime was committed, by the side of the line between Weston and Taunton, and you have interviewed the paperboy who spoke to Mrs Carrington at Weston!' Japp's jaw fell. 'How on earth did you know? Don't tell me it was those almighty "little grey cells" of yoursI' 'I am glad you admit for once that they are all mightyl Tell me, did she give the paper-boy a shilling for himself?' 'No, it was half a crownl' Japp had recovered his temper, and grinned. 'Pretty extravagant, these rich Americans!'

'And in consequence the boy did not forget her?'

'Not he. Half-crowns dgn't come his way every day. She haile him and bought two magazines. One had a picture of a girl it blue on the cover. "That'll match me," she said. Oh, he remem. bered her perfectly. Well, that was enough for me. By the doctor' evidence, the crime must have been committed before Taunton I guessed they'd throw the knife away at once, and I walked dom the line looking for it; and sure enough, there it was. I mad inquiries at Taunton about our man, but of course it's a bi! station, and it wasn't likely they'd notice him. He probably got back to London by a later train.'

Poirot nodded. 'Very likely.'

'But I found another bit of news when I got back. They're passing the jewels, all righfi That large emerald was pawned last night - by one of the regular lot. Who do you think it was?' 'I don't know - except that he was a short man.' lapp stared. 'Well, you're right there. He's short enough. It was Red Narky.'

'Who is Red Narky?' I asked.

'A particularly sharp jewel-thief, sir. And not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman - Gracie Kidd; but she doesn't seem to be in it this time - unless she's got off to Holland with the rest of the swag.'

'You've arrested Narky?'

'Sure thing. But mind you, it's the other man we want - the man who went down with Mrs Carrington in the train. He was the one who planned the job, right enough. But Narky won't squeal on a pal.'

I noticed that Poirot's eyes had become very green.

'I think,' he said gently, 'that I can find Narky's pal for you, all right.'

'One of your little ideas, eh?' lapp eyed Poirot sharply. 'Wonder-ul how you manage to deliver the goods sometimes, at your ae and all. Devil's own luck, of course.'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' murmured my friend. 'Hastings, my hat.

And the brush. Sol My galoshes, if it still rainsl We must not undo the good work of that tisane./lu rm/r, Jappl'

'Good luck to you, Poirot.'

Poirot hailed the first taxi we met, and directed the driver to Park Lane.

When we drew up before Halliday's house, he skipped out nimbly, paid the driver and rang the bell. To the footman who opened the door he made a request in a low voice, and we were immediately taken upstairs. We went up to the top of the house, and were shown into a small neat bedroom.

Poirot's eyes roved round the room and fastened themselves on a small black trunk. He knelt in front of it, scrutinized the labels on it, and took a small twist of wire from his pocket.

'Ask Mr Halliday if he will be so kind as to mount to me here,' he said over his shoulder to the footman.

The man departed, and Poirot gently coaxed the lock of the trunk with a practised hand. In a few minutes the lock gave, and he raised the lid of the trunk. Swiftly he began rummaging among the clothes it contained, flinging them out on the floor.

There was a heavy step on the stairs, and Halliday entered the room.

'What in hell are you doing here?' he demanded, staring.

'I was looking,. monsieur, for this.' Poirot withdrew from the trunk a coat and skirt of bright blue frieze, and a small toque of white fox fur.

'What are you doing with my trunk?' I turned to see that the maid, Jane Mason, had entered the room.

'If you will just shut the door, Hastings. Thank you. Yes, and stand with your back against it. Now, Mr Halliday, let me intro-duce you to Gracie Kidd, otherwise Jane Mason, who will shortly rejoin her accomplice, Red Narky, under the kind escort of Inspector Japp.'

Poirot waved a deprecating hand. 'It was of the most simplel' He helped himself to more caviar.

'It was the maid's insistence on the clothes that her mistre was wearing that first struck me. Why was she so anxious that our attention should be directed to them? I reflected that we had only the maid's word for the mysterious man in the carriage at Bristol.

As far as the doctor's evidence went, Mrs Carrington might easily have been murdered before reaching Bristol. But if so, then the maid must be an accomplice. And if she were an accomplice, she would not vish this point to rest on her evidence alone. The clothes Mrs Carrington was wearing were of a striking nature. A maid usually has a good deal of choice as to what her mistress shall wear. Now if, after Bristol, anyone saw a lady in a bright blue coat and skirt, and a fur toque, he will be quite ready to swear he had seen Mrs Carrington.

'I began to reconstruct. The maid would provide herself with duplicate clothes. She and her accomplice, chloroform and stab Mrs Carrington between London and Bristol, probably taking advantage of a tunnel. Her body is rolled under the seat; and the maid takes her place. At Weston she must make herself noticed.

How? In all probability, a nevspaper-boy will be selected. She will insure his remembering her by giving him a large tip. She also drew his attention to the colour of her dress by a remark about one of the magazines. After leaving Weston, she throws the knife out of the window to mark the place where the crime pre-sumably occurred, and changes her clothes, or buttons a long mackintosh over them. At Taunton she leaves the train and returns to Bristol as soon as possible, where her accomplice has duly left the luggage in the cloakroom. He hands over the ticket and himself returns to London. She waits on the platform, carrying out her role, goes to a hotel for the night and returns to town in the morning, exactly as she said.

'When Japp returned from this expedition, he confirmed all my deductions. He also told me that a well-known crook was passing the jewels. I knew that whoever it was would be the exact opposite of the man Jane Mason described. When I heard that it was Red Narky, who always worked with Graeie Kidd - well, I knew just where to find her.'

'And the Count?'

'The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that he had nothing to do with it. That gentleman is much too careful of his own skin to risk murder. It would be out of keeping with his character.'

'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' said Halliday, 'I owe you a big debt.

And the cheque I write after lunch won't go near to settling it.' Poirot smiled modestly, and murmured to me: 'The good Japp, he shall get the official credit, all right, but though he has got his Gracie Kidd, I think that I, as the Americans say, have got his goat!'

CHAPTER X THE CHOCOI. ATE BOX

It was a wild night. Outside, the wind howled malevolently, and the rain beat against the windows in great gusts.

Poirot and I sat facing the hearth, our legs stretched out to the cheerful blaze. Between us was a small table. On my side of it stood some carefully brewed hot toddy; on Poirot's was a cup of thick, rich chocolate which I would not have drunk for a hundred poundsl Poirot sipped the thick brown mess in the pink china cup, and sighed with contentment.

'Quelle belle v/e!' he murmured.

'Yes, it's a good old world,' I agreed. 'Here am I with a job, and a good job tool And here are you, famous - '

'Oh, mon ami!' protested Poirot.

'But you are. And rightly sol When I think back on your long line of successes, I am positively amazed. I don't believe you know what failure isl'

'He would be a droll kind of original who could say thaw 'No, but seriously, have you ever failed?'

'Innumerable times, my friend. What would you? La bonne chance, it cannot always be on your side. I have been called in too late. Very often another, working towards the same goal, has arrived there first. Twice have I been stricken down with illness just as I was on the point of success. One must take the downs with the ups, my friend.'

'I didn't quite mean that,' I said. 'I meant, had you ever been completely down and out over a case through your own fault?'

'Ah, I comprehend! You ask if I have ever made the complete prize ass of myself, as you say over here? Once, my friend - ' A slow, reflective smile hovered over his face. 'Yes, once I made a fool of myself.'

He sat up suddenly in his chair.

'See here, my friend, you have, I know, kept a record of my little successes. You shall add one more story to the collection, the story of a failure!' He leaned forward and placed a log on the fire. Then, after carefully wiping his hands on a little duster that hung on a nail by the fireplace, he leaned back and commenced his story.

That of which I tell you (said M. Poirot) took place in Belgium many years ago. It was at the time of the terrible struggle in France between church and state. M. Paul Droulard was a French deputy of note. It was an open secret that the portfolio of a Minister awaited him. He was among the bitterest of the anti-Catholic party, and it was certain that on his accession to power, he would have to face violent enmity. He was in many ways a peculiar man.

Though he neither drank nor smoked, he was nevertheless not so scrupulous in other ways. You comprehend, Hastings, cYtait des femrnes - toujours des femmesl He had married some years earlier a young lady from Brussels who had brought him a substantial dot. Undoubtedly the money was useful to him in his career, as his family was not rich, though on the other hand he was entitled to call himself M. le Baron if he chose. There were no children of the marriage, and his wife died after two years - the result of a fall downstairs. Among the property which she bequeathed to him was a house on the Avenue Louise in Brussels.

It was in this house that his sudden death took place, the event coinciding with the resignation of the Minister whose portfolio he was to inherit. All the papers printed long notices of his career.

His death, which had taken place quite suddenly in the evening after dinner, was attributed to heart-failure.

At that time, rnon ami, I was, as you know, a member of the Belgian detective force. The death of M. Paul Droulard was not particularly interesting to me. I am, as you also know, bon catholique, and his demise seemed to me fortunate.

It was some three days afterwards, when my vacation had just begun, that I received a visitor at my own apartments - a lady, heavily veiled, but evidently quite young; and I perceived at once that she was a jeune fille tout d fait cornme il faut.

'You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot?' she asked in a low sweet voice.

I bowed.

'Of the detective service?'

Again I bowed. 'Be seated, I pray of you, mademoiselle,' I said.

She accepted a chair and drew aside her veil. Her face was charming, though marred with tears, and haunted as though with some poignant anxiety.

'Monsieur,' she said, 'I understand that you are now taking a vacation. Therefore you will be free to take up a private case.

You understand that I do not wish to call in the police.'

I shook my head. 'I fear what you ask is impossible, mademois-elle.

Even though on vacation, I am still of the police.'

She leaned forward. 'Ecoutez, monsieur. All that I ask of you is to investigate. The result of your investigations you are at perfect liberty to report to the police. If what I believe to be true/s true, we shall need all the machinery of the law.'

That placed a somewhat different complexion on the matter, and I placed myself at her service without more ado.

A slight colour rose in her cheeks. 'I thank you, monsieur. It is the death of M. Paul Droulard that I ask you to investi-gate.'

'Comment?' I exclaimed, surprised.

'Monsieur, I have nothing to go upon - nothing but my woman's instinct, but I am convinced - convinced, I tell you - that M.

Droulard did not die a natural death!'

'But surely the doctors - '

'Doctors may be mistaken. He was so robust, so strong. Ah, Monsieur Poirot, I beseech of you to help me - '

The poor child was almost beside herself. She would have knelt to me. I soothed her as best I could.

'I will help you, mademoiselle. I feel almost sure that your fears are unfounded, but we will see. First, I will ask you to describe to me the inmates of the house.'

'There are the domestics, of course, Jeanette, Flicie, and Denise the cook. She has been there many years; the others are simple country girls. Also there is Francois, but he too is an old servant.

Then there is Monsieur Droulard's mother who lived with him, and myself. My name is Virginie Mesnard. I am a poor cousin of the late Madame Droulard, M. Paul's wife, and I have been a member of their mnage for over three years. I have now described to you the household. There were also two guests staying in the house.' 'And they were?' 'M. de Saint Alard, a neighbour of M. Droulard's in France.

Also an English friend, Mr John Wilson.' 'Are they still with you?' 'Mr Wilson, yes, but M. de Saint Alard departed yesterday.' 'And what is your plan, Mademoiselle Mesnard?' 'If you will present yourself at the house in half an hour's time, I will have arranged some story to account for your presence. I had better represent you to be connected with journalism in some way. I shall say you have come from Paris, and that you have brought a card of introduction from M. de Saint Alard. Madame Droulard is very feeble in health, and will' pay little attention to details.' On mademoiselle's ingenious pretext I was admitted to the house, and after a brief interview with the dead deputy's mother, who was a wonderfully imposing and aristocratic figure though obviously in failing health, I was made free of the premises.

I wonder, my friend (continued Poirot), whether you can possibly figure to yourself the difficulties of my task? Here was a man whose death had taken place three days previously. If there had been foul play, only one possibility was admittable -poironl And I had had no chance of seeing the body, and there was no possibility of examining, or analysing, any medium in which the poison could have been administered. There were no clues, false or otherwise, to consider. Had the man been poisoned? Had he died a natural death? I, Hercule Poirot, with nothing to help me, had to decide.

First, I interviewed the domestics, and with their aid, I recapitulated the evening. I paid especial notice to the food at

dinner, and the method of serving it. The soup had been served by M. Droulard himself from a tureen. Next a dish of cutlets, then a chicken. Finally a compote of fruits. And all placed on the table, and served by Monsieur himself. The coffee was brought in a big pot to the dinner-table. Nothing there, mon ami - impossible to poison one without poisoning alii After dinner Madame Droulard had retired to her own apartments and Mademoiselle Virginie had accompanied her. The three men had adjourned to M. Droulard's study. Her they had chatted amicably for some time, when suddenly, without any warning, the deputy had fallen heavily to the ground. M. de Saint Alard had rushed out and told Franvois to fetch a doctor immediately.

He said it was without doubt an apoplexy, explained the man. But when the doctor arrived, the patient was past help.

Mr John Wilson, to whom I was presented by Mademoiselle Virginie, was what was known in those days as a regular John Bull Englishman, middle-aged and burly. His account, delivered in very British French, was substantially the same.

'Droulard went very red in the face, and down he fell.' There was nothing further to be found out there. Next I went to the scene of the tragedy, the study, and was left alone there at my own request. So far there was nothing to support Mademoiselle Mesnard's theory. I could not but believe that it was a delusion on her part. Evidently she had entertained a romantic passion for the dead man which had not permitted her to take a normal view of the case. Nevertheless, I searched the study with meticulous care. It was just possible that a.hypodermic needle might have been introduced into the dead man's chair in such a way as to allow of a fatal injection. The minute puncture it would cause was likely to remain unnoticed. But I could discover no sign to support that theory. I flung myself down in the chair with a gesture of despair.

'Enfin, I abandon it!' I said aloud. 'There is not a clue any-wherel Everything is perfectly normal.' As I said the words, my eyes fell on a large box of chocolates standing on a table near by, and my heart gave a leap. It might not

be a clue to M. D6roulard's death, but here at least was something that was not normal. I lifted the lid. The box was full, untouched; not a chocolate was missing - but that only made the peculiarity that had caught my eye more striking. For, see you, Hastings, while the box itself was pink, the lid was blue. Now, one often sees a blue ribbon on a pink box, and vice versa, but a box of one colour, and a lid of another - no; decidedly - fa ne se You jamais!

I did not as yet see that this little incident was of any use to me, yet I determined to investigate it as being out of the ordinary.

I rang the bell for Franvois, and asked him if his late master had been fond of sweets. A faint melancholy smile came to his lips.

'Passionately fond of them, monsieur. He would always have a box of chocolates in the house. He did not drink wine of any kind, you see.' 'Yet this box has not been touched?' I lifted the lid to show him.

'Pardon, monsieur, but that was a new box purchased on the day of his death, the other being nearly finished.' 'Then the other box was finished on the day of his death,' I said slowly.

'Yes, monsieur, I found it empty in the morning and threw it away.' 'Did M. D6roulard eat sweets at all hours of the day?' 'Usually after dinner, monsieur.' I began to see light.

'Franvois,' I said, 'you can be discreet?' 'If there is need, monsieur.' 'Bon! Know, then, that I am of the police. Can you find me that other box?' 'Without doubt, monsieur. It will be in the dustbin.' He departed, and returned in a few minutes with a dust-covered object. It was the duplicate of the box I held, save for the fact that this time the box was blue and the lid was pink. I thanked Francois, recommended him once more to be discreet, and left the house in the Avenue Louise without more ado.

Nt I called upon the doctor who had attended M. D6roulard.

With him I had a difficult task. He entrenched himself prettil, behind a wall of learned phraseology, but I fancied that he was quite as sure about the case as he would like to be.

'There have been many curious occurrences of the kind,' he observed, when I had managed to disarm him somewhat. ', sudden fit of anger, a violent emotion - after a heavy dinner, c'est entendu - then, with an access of rage, the blood flies to th head, and pstl - there you are!' 'But M. Droulard had had no violent emotion.' 'No? I made sure that he had been having a stormy altercatio with M. de Saint Alard.' 'Why should he?' 'C'est dvidentl' The doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'Was not M. de Saint Alard a Catholic of the most fanatical? Their friendship was being ruined by this question of church and state. Not a day passed without discussions. To M. de Saint Alard, Ddroulard appeared almost as Antichrist.' This was unexpected, and gave me food for thought.

'One more question, Doctor: would it be possible to introduce a fatal dose of poison into a chocolate?' 'It would be possible, I suppose,' said the doctor slowly. 'Pure prussic acid would meet the case if there were no chance of evaporation, and a tiny globule of anything might be swallowed unnoticed - but it does not seem a very likely supposition. A chocolate full of morphine or strychnine - ' He made a wry face. 'You comprehend, M. Poirot - one bite would be enoughl The unwary one would not stand upon ceremony.' 'Thank you, M. le Docteur.' I withdrew. Next I made inquiries of the chemists, especially those in the neighbourhood of the Avenue Louise. It is good to be of the police. I got the information I wanted without any trouble. Only in one case could I hear of any poison having been supplied to the house in question. This was some eye drops atropine sulphate for Madame Droulard. Atropine is a potent poison, and for the moment I was elated, but the symptoms of atropine poisoning are closely allied to those of ptomaine, and bear no resemblance to those I was studying. Besides, the prescription was an old one. Madame Droulard had suffered from cataract in both eyes for many years.

I was turning away discouraged when the chemist's voice called me back.

'Un moment, M. Poirot. I remember, the girl who brought that prescription, she said something about having to go on to the English chemist. You might try there.' I did. Once more enforcing my official status, I got the information I wanted. On the day before M. Droulard's death they had made up a prescription for Mr John Wilson. Not that there was any making up about it. They were simplylittle tablets of trinitrine.

I asked if I might see some. He showed me them, and my heart beat faster - for the tiny tablets were of chocolate. 'It is a poison?' I asked.

'No, monsieur.' 'Can you describe to me its effect?' 'It lowers the blood-pressure. It is given for some forms of heart trouble - angina pectoris for instance. It relieves the arterial tem4on. In arteriosclerosis - ' I interrupted him. 'Ma foil This rigmarole says nothing to me.

Does it cause the face to flush?' 'Certainly it does.' 'And supposing I ate ten - twenty of your little tablets, what then?' 'I should not advise you to attempt it,' he replied drily.

'And yet you say it is not poison?' 'There are many things not called poison which can kill a man,' he replied as before.

I left the shop elated. At last, things had begun to marchl I now knew that John Wilson held the means for the crime but what about the motive? He had come to Belgium on business, and had asked M. Droulard, whom he knew slightly, to put him up. There was apparently no way in which Droulard's death could benefit him. Moreover, I discovered by inquiries in England that he had suffered for some years from that painful form of heart disease known as angina. Therefore he had a genuine right to have those tablets in his possession. Nevertheless, I was convinced that

someone had gone to the chocolate box, opening the full one first by mistake, and had abstracted the contents of the last chocolate, cramming in instead as manylittle trinitrin tablets as it would hold.

The chocolates were large ones. Between twenty or thirty tablets, I felt sure, could have been inserted. But who had done this?

There were two guests in the house. John Wilson had the means.

Saint Alard had the motive. Remember, he was a fanatic, and there is no fanatic like a religious fanatic. Could he, by any means, have got hold of John Wilson's trinitrine?

Another little idea came to me. Aht You smile at my little ideas[Why had Wilson run out of trinitrine? Surely he would bring an adequate supply from England. I called once more at the house in the Avenue Louise. Wilson was out, but I saw the girl who did his room, Flicie. I demanded of her immediately whether i was not true that M. Wilson had lost a bottle from his washstand some little time ago. The girl responded eagerly. It was quite true. She, Flicie, had been blamed for it. The English gentleman had evidently thought that she had broken it, and did not like to say so.

Whereas she had never even touched it. Without doubt it was Jeannette - always nosing round where she had no business tobe- I calmed the flow of words, and took my leave. I knew now all that I wanted to know. It remained for me to prove my case. That, I felt, would not be easy. I might be sure that Saint Alard had removed the bottle of trinitrine from John Wilson's washstand, but to convince others, I would have to produce evidence. And I had none to producei Never mind. I kneo - that was the great thing. You remember our difficulty in the Styles case, Hastings? There again, I knew but it took me a long time to find the last link which made my chain of evidence against the murderer complete.

I asked for an interview with Mademoiselle Mesnard. She came at once. I demanded of her the address of M. de Saint Alard. A look of trouble came over her face.

'Why do you want it, monsieur?' 'Mademoiselle, it is necessary.'

She seemed doubtful - troubled.

'He can tell you nothing. He is a man whose thoughts are not in this world. He hardly notices what goes on around him.' 'Possibly, mademoiselle. Nevertheless, he was an old friend of M. D6roulard's. There may be things he can tell me - things of the past - old grudges - old love-affairs.' The girl flushed and bit her lip. 'As you please - but - but - I feel sure now that I have been mistaken. It was good of you to accede to my demand, but I was upset - almost distraught at the time. I see now that there is no mystery to solve. Leave it, I beg of you, monsieur.' I eyed her closely.

'Mademoiselle,' I said, 'it is sometimes difficult for a dog to find a scent, but once he has found it, nothing on earth will make him leave it! That is if he is a good dogl And I, mademoiselle, I, Hercule Poirot, am a very good dog.' Without a word she turned away. A few minutes later she returned with the address written on a sheet of paper. I left the house. Francois was waiting for me outside. He looked at me anxiously.

'There is no news, monsieur?' 'None as yet, my friend.' 'Ahl Pauvre Monsieur D6roulard!' he sighed. 'I too was of his way of thinking. I do not care for priests. Not that I would say so in the house. The women are all devout - a good thing perhaps. Madame est trds pieuse - et Mademoiselle Virginie aussi.' Mademoiselle Virginie? Was she 'trds pieuse?' Thinking of the tear-stained passionate face I had seen that first day, I wondered.

Having obtained the address of M. de Saint Alard, I wasted no time. I arrived in the neighbourhood of his chfiteau in the Ardennes but it was some days before I could find a pretext for gaining admission to the house. In the end I did - how do you think - as a plumber, mon ami! It was the affair of a moment to arrange a neat little gas leak in his bedroom. I departed for my tools, and took care to return with them at an hour when I knew I should have the field pretty well to myself. What I was searching for, I hardly knew. The one thing needful, I could not believe there was any chance of finding. He would never have run the risk of keeping it.

Still when I found a little cupboard above the washstand locked, I could not resist the temptation of seeing what was inside it.

The lock was quite a simple one to pick. The door swung open.

It was full of old bottles. I took them up one by one with a trembling hand. Suddenly, I uttered a cry. Figure to yourself, my friend, I held in my hand a little phial with an English chemist's label. On it were the words: 'Trinitrine Tablets. One to be taken olen required. Mr Jol:n Wilson.'

I controlled my emotion, closed the little cupboard, slipped the bottle into my pocket, and continued to repair the gas leak! One must be methodical. Then I left the chateau, and took train for my own country as soon as possible. I arrived in Brussels late that night. I was writing out a report for the prfet in the morning, when a note was brought to me. It was from old Madame Ddrou-lard, and it summoned me to the house in the Avenue Louise without delay.

Francois opened the door to me.

'Madame la Baronne is awaiting you.'

He conducted me to her apartments. She sat in state in a large armchair. There was no sign of Mademoiselle Virginie.

'M. Poirot,' said the old lady. 'I have just learned that you are not what you pretend to be. You are a police officer.'

'That is so, madame.'

'You came here to inquire into the circumstances of my son's death?'

Again I replied: 'That is so, madame.'

'I should be glad if you would tell me what progress you have made.'

I hesitated.

'First I would like to know how you have learned all this, madame.'

'From one who is no longer of this world.'

Her words, and the brooding way she uttered them, sent a chill to my heart. I was incapable of speech.

'Wherefore, monsieur, I would beg of you most urgently to tell

me exactly what progress you have made in your investigation.' 'Madame, my investigation is finished.' 'My son?'

'Was killed deliberately.' 'You know by whom?' 'Yes, madame.' 'Who, then?'

'M. de Saint Alard.'

The old lady shook her head.

'You are wrong. M. de Saint Alard is incapable of such a crime.' 'The proofs are in my hands.'

'I beg of you once more to tell me all.'

This time I obeyed, going over each step that had led me to the discovery of the truth. She listened attentively. At the end she nodded her head.

'Yes, yes, it is all as you say, all but one thing. It was not M. de Saint Alard who killed my son. It was I, his mother.'

I stared at her. She continued to nod her head gently.

'It is well that I sent for you. It is the providence of the good God that Virginie told me before she departed for the convent, what she had done. Listen, M. Poirofl My son was an evil man.

He persecuted the church. He led a life of mortal sin. He dragged down other souls beside his own. But there was worse than that.

As I came out of my room in this house one morning, I saw my daughter-in-law standing at the head of the stairs. She was reading a letter. I saw my son steal up behind her. One swift push, and she fell, striking her head on the marble steps. When they picked her up she was dead. My son was a murderer, and only I, his mother, knew it.'

She closed her eyes for a moment. 'You cannot conceive, monsieur, of my agony, my despair. What was I to do? Denounce him to the police? I could not bring myself to do it. It was my duty, but my flesh was weak. Besides, would they believe me?

My eyesight had been failing for some time - they would say I was mistaken. I kept silence. But my conscience gave me no peace.

By keeping silence I too was a murderer. My son inherited his wife's money. He flourished as the green bay tree. And now he

was to have a Minister's portfolio. His persecution of the church would be redoubled. And there was Virginie. She, poor child, beautiful, naturally pious, was fascinated by him. He had a strange and terrible power over women. I saw it coming. I was powerless to prevent it. He had no intention of marrying her. The time came when she was ready to yield everything to him.

'Then I saw my path clear. He was my son. I had given him life. I was responsible for him. He had killed one woman's body, now he would kill another's soull I went to Mr Wilson's room, and took the bottle of tablets. He had once said laughingly that there were enough in it to kill a manl I went into the study and opened the big box of chocolates that always stood on the table. I opened a new box by mistake. The other was on the table also. There was just one chocolate left in it. That simplified things, bio one ate chocolates except my son and Virginie. I would keep her with me that night. All went as I had planned - '

She paused, closing her eyes a minute then opened them again.

'M. Poirot, I am in your hands. They tell me I have not many days to live. I am willing to answer for my action before the good God. Must I answer for it on earth also?'

I hesitated. 'But the empty bottle, madame,' I said to gain time.

'How came that into M. de Saint Alard's possession?'

'When he came to say goodbye to me, monsieur, I slipped it into his pocket. I did not know how to get rid of it. I am so infirm that I cannot move about much without help, and finding it empty in my rooms might have caused suspicion. You understand, monsieur - ' she drew herself up to her full height - 'it was with no idea of casting suspicion on M. de Saint Alardl I never dreamed of such a thing. I thought his valet would find an empty bottle and throw it away without question.'

I bowed my head. 'I comprehend, madame,' I said.

'And your decision, monsieur?'

Her voice was firm and unfaltering, her head held as high as ever.

I rose to my feet.

'Madame,' I said, 'I have the honour to wish you good day.

I have made my investigations - and failed! The matter is closed.'

He was silent for a moment, then said quietly: 'She died just a week later. Mademoiselle Virginie passed through her novitiate, and duly took the veil. That, my friend, is the story. I must admit that I do not make a fine figure in it.' 'But that was hardly a failure,' I expostulated. 'What else could you have thought under the circumstances?' 'Ah, sacra, rnon ami,' cried Poirot, becoming suddenly animated.

'Is it that you do not see? But I was thirty-six times an idiotl My grey cells, they functioned not at all. The whole time I had the true clue in my hands.' 'What clue?' 'The chocolate boxl Do you not see? Would anyone in possession of their full eyesight make such a mistake? I knew Madame Droulard had cataract - the atropine drops told me that. There was only one person in the household whose eyesight was such that she could not see which lid to replace. It was the chocolate box that started me on the track, and yet up to the end I failed consistently to perceive its real significancel 'Also my psychology was at fault. Had M. de Saint Alard been the criminal, he would never have kept an incriminating bottle.

Finding it was a proof of his innocence. I had learned already from Mademoiselle Virginie that he was absent-minded. Altogether it was a miserable affair that I have recounted to you there! Only to you have I told the story. You comprehend, I do not figure well in it! An old lady commits a crime in such a simple and clever fashion that I, Hercule Poirot, am completely deceived. $apristi! It does not bear thinking of! Forget it. Or no - remember it, and if you think at any time that I am growing conceited - it is not likely, but it might arise.' I concealed a smile.

'Eh bien, my friend, you shall say to me, "Chocolate box". Is it agreed?' 'It's a bargainl' 'After all,' said Poirot reflectively, 'it was an experience! I, who have undoubtedly the finest brain in Europe at present, can afford to be magnanimousl' 'Chocolate box,' I murmured gently.

'Pardon, mon ami?'

I looked at Poirot's innocent face, as he bent forward inquiringly, and my heart smote me. I had suffered often at his hands, but I, too, though not possessing the finest brain in Europe, could afford to be magnanimous!

'Nothing,' I lied, and lit another pipe, smiling to myself.

CHAPTER XI THE SUBMARINE PLANS

A note had been brought by special messenger. Poirot read it, and a gleam of excitement and interest came into his eyes as he did so.

He dismissed the man with a few curt words and then turned to me.

'Pack a bag with all haste, my friend. We're going down to Sharpies.'

I started at the mention of the famous country place of Lord Alloway. Head of the newly formed Ministry of Defence, Lord Alloway was a prominent member of the Cabinet. As Sir Ralph Curtis, head of a great engineering firm, he had made his mark in the House of Commons, and he was now freely spoken of as the coming man, and the one most likely to be asked to form a ministry should the turnouts as to Mr David MacAdam's health prove well founded.

A big Rolls-Royce car was waiting for us below, and as we glided off into the darkness, I plied Poirot with questions.

'What on earth can they want us for at this time of night?' I demanded. It was past eleven.

Poirot shook his head. 'Something of the most urgent, without doubt.'

'I remember,' I said, 'that some years ago there was some rather ugly scandal about Ralph Curtis, as he then was - some jugglery with shares, I believe. In the end, he was completely exonerated; but perhaps something of the kind has arisen again?'

'It would hardly be necessary for him to send for me in the middle of the night, my friend.'

I was forced to agree, and the remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Once out of London, the powerful car forged rapidly ahead, and we arrived at Sharples in a little under the hour.

A pontifical butler conducted us at once to a small study where Lord Alloway was awaiting us. He sprang up to greet us - a tall,

spare man who seemed actually to radiate power and vitality.

'M. Poirot, I am delighted to see you. It is the second time the Government has demanded your services. I remember only too well what you did for us during the war, when the Prime Mini-ster was kidnapped in that astounding fashion. Your masterly deductions - and may I add, your discretion? - saved the situ-ation.'

Poirot's eyes twinkled a little.

'Do I gather then, milor', that this is another case for - dis-cretion?'

'Most emphatically. Sir Harry and I - oh, let me introduce you - Admiral Sir Harry Weardale, our First Sea Lord - M. Poirot and - let me see, Captain - '

'Hastings,' I supplied.

'I've often heard of you, M. Poirot,' said Sir Harry, shaking hands. 'This is a most unaccountable business, and if you can solve it, we'll be extremely grateful to you.'

I liked the First Sea Lord immediately, a square, bluff sailor of the good old-fashioned type.

Poirot looked inquiringly at them both, and Alloway took up the tale.

'Of course, you understand that all this is in confidence, M.

Poirot. We have had a most serious loss. The plans of the new g type of submarine have been stolen.'

'When was that?'

'Tonight - less than three hours ago. You can appreciate perhaps, M. Poirot,,.the magnitude of the disaster. It is essential that the loss should not be made public. I will give you the facts as briefly as possible. My guests over the week-end were the Admiral, here, his wife and son, and a Mrs Conrad, a lady well known in London society. The ladies retired to bed early - about ten o'clock; so did Mr Leonard Weardale. Sir Harry is down here partly for the purpose of discussing the construction of this new type of submarine with me. Accordingly, I asked Mr Fitzroy, my secretary, to get out the plans from the safe in the corner there, and to arrange them ready for me, as well as various other documents that bore upon the subject in hand. While he was doing this, the

Admiral and I strolled up and down the terrace, smoking cigars and enjoying the warm June air. We finished our smoke and our chat, and decided to get down to business. Just as we turned at the far end of the terrace, I fancied I saw a shadow slip out of the french window here, cross the terrace, and disappear. I paid very little attention, however. I knew Fitzroy to be in this room, and it never entered my head that anything might be amiss. There, of course, I am to blame. Well, we retraced our steps along the terrace and entered this room by the window just as Fitzroy entered it from the hall.

' "Got everything out we are likely to need, Fitzroy?" I asked.

' "I think so, Lord Alloway. The papers are all on your desk," he answered. And then he wished us both goodnight.

' "Just wait a minute," I said, going to the desk. "I may want something I haven't mentioned."

'I looked quickly through the papers that were lying there.

' "You've forgotten the most important of the lot, Fitzroy," I said. "The actual plans of the submarine!"

' "The plans are right on top, Lord Alloway."

' "Oh no, they're not," I said, turning over the papers.

' "But I put them there not a minute ago?' ' "Well, they're not here now," I said.

'Fitzroy advanced with a bewildered expression on his face.

The thing seemed incredible. We turned over the papers on the desk; we hunted through the safe; but at last we had to make up our minds to it'that the papers were gone - and gone within the short space of about three minutes while Fitzroy was absent from the room.'

'Why did he leave the room?' asked Poirot quickly.

'Just what I asked him,' exclaimed Sir Harry.

'It appears,' said Lord Alloway, 'that just when he had finished arranging the papers on my desk, he was startled by hearing a woman scream. He dashed out into the hall. On the stairs he discovered Mrs Conrad's French maid. The girl looked very white and upset, and declared that she had seen a ghost - a tall figure dressed all in white that moved without a sound. Fitzroy laughed at her fears and told her, in more or less polite language, not to be a fool. Then he returned to this room just as we entered from the window.' 'It all seems very clear,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'The only question is, was the maid an accomplice? Did she scream by arrangement with her confederate lurking outside, or was he merely waiting there in the hope of an opportunity presenting itself? It was a man, I suppose - not a woman you saw?' 'I can't tell you, M. Poirot. It was just a - shadow.' The Admiral gave such a peculiar snort that it could not fail to attract attention.

'M. l'Amiral has something to say, I think,' said Poirot quietly, with a slight smile. 'You saw this shadow, Sir Harry?' 'No, I didn't,' returned the other. 'And neither did Alloway.

The branch of a tree flapped, or something, and then afterwards, when we discovered the theft, he leaped to the conclusion that he had seen someone pass across the terrace. His imagination played a trick on him; that's all.' 'I am not usually credited with having much imagination,' said Lord Alloway with a slight smile.

'Nonsense, we've all got imagination. We can all work ourselves up to believe that we've seen more than we have. I've had a lifetime of experience at sea, and I'll back my eyes against those of any landsman. I was looking right down the terrace, and I'd have seen the same if there was anything to see.' He was quite excited over the matter. Poirot rose and stepped quickly to the window.

'You permit?' he asked. 'We must settle this point if possible.' He went out upon the terrace, and we followed him. He had taken an electric torch from his pocket, and was playing the light along the edge of the grass that bordered the terrace.

'Where did he cross the terrace, milor'?' he asked.

'About opposite the window, I should say.' Poirot continued to play the torch for some minutes longer, walking the entire length of the terrace and back. Then he shut it off and straightened himself up.

'Sir Harry is right - and you are wrong, milor',' he said quietly.

'It rained heavily earlier this evening. Anyone who passed over

that grass could not avoid leaving footmarks. But there are none none at all.' His eyes went from one man's face to the other's. Lord Alloway looked bewildered and unconvinced; the Admiral expressed a noisy gratification.

'Knew I couldn't be wrong,' he declared. 'Trust my eyes anywhere.' He was such a picture of an honest old sea-dog that I could not help smiling.

'So that brings us to the people in the house,' said Poirot smoothly. 'Let us come inside again. Now, milor', while Mr Fitzroy was speaking to the maid on the stairs, could anyone have seized the opportunity to enter the study from the hall?' Lord Alloway shook his head.

'Quite impossible - they would have had to pass him in order to do so.' 'And Mr Fitzroy himself - you are sure of him, eh?' Lord Alloway flushed.

'Absolutely, M. Poirot. I will answer confidently for my secretary. It is quite impossible that he should be concerned in the matter in any way.' 'Everything seems to be impossible,' remarked Poirot rather drily. 'Possibly the plans attached to themselves a little pair of wings, and flew away - comme fa!' He blew his lips out like a comical cherub.

'The whole thing is impossible,' declared Lord Alloway impatiently. 'But I beg, M. Poirot, that you will not dream of suspecting Fitzroy. Consider for one moment - had he wished to take the plans, what could have been easier for him than to take a tracing of them without going to the trouble of stealing them?' 'There, milor',' said Poirot with approval, 'you make a remark &n juste - I see that you have a mind orderly and methodical. L'Angleterre is happy in possessing you.' Lord Alloway looked rather embarrassed by this sudden burst of praise. Poirot returned to the matter in hand.

'The room in which you had been sitting all the evening - ' 'The drawing-room? Yes?'

'That also has a window on the terrace, since I remember your saying you went out that way. Would it not be possible for someone to come out by the drawing-room window and in by this one while Mr Fitzroy was out of the room, and return the same way?' 'But we'd have seen them,' objected the Admiral.

'Not if you had your backs turned, walking the other way.'

'Fitzroy was only out of the room a few minutes, the time it would take us to walk to the end and back.'

'No matter - it is a possibility - in fact, the only one as things stand.'

'But there was no one in the drawing-room when we went out,' said the Admiral.

'They may have come there afterwards.'

'You mean,' said Lord Alloway slowly, 'that when Fitzroy heard the maid scream and went out, someone was already con-cealed in the drawing-room, that they darted in and out through the windows, and only left the drawing-room when Fitzroy had returned to this room?'

'The methodical mind again,' said Poirot, bowing.

'You express the matter perfectly.' 'One of the servants, perhaps?'

'Or a guest. It was Mrs Conrad's maid who screamed. What exactly can you tell me of Mrs Conrad?'

Lord Alloway considered for a minute.

'I told you that she is a lady well known in society. That is true in the sense that she gives large parties, and goes everywhere.

But very little is known as to where she really comes from, and what her past life has been. She is a lady who frequents diplomatic and Foreign Office circles as much as possible. The Secret Service is inclined to ask - why?'

'I see,' said Poirot. 'And she was asked here this week-end - ' 'So that - shall we say? - we might observe her at close quarter.'

'Parfaitemenfl It is possible that she has turned the tables on you rather neatly.'

Lord Alloway looked discomfited, and Poirot continued: 'Tell me, milor', was any reference made in her hearing to the subjects you and the Admiral were going to discuss together?' that grass could not avoid leaving footmarks. But there are none none at all.' His eyes went from one man's face to the other's. Lord Alloway looked bewildered and unconvinced; the Admiral expressed a noisy gratification.

'Knew I couldn't be wrong,' he declared. 'Trust my eyes anywhere.' He was such a picture of an honest old sea-dog that I could not help smiling.

'So that brings us to the people in the house,' said Poirot smoothly. 'Let us come inside again. Now, milor', while Mr Fitzroy was speaking to the maid on the stairs, could anyone have seized the opportunity to enter the study from the hall?' Lord Alloway shook his head.

'Quite impossible - they would have had to pass him in order to do so.' 'And Mr Fitzroy himself - you are sure of him, eh?' Lord Alloway flushed.

'Absolutely, M. Poirot. I will answer confidently for my secretary. It is quite impossible that he should be concerned in the matter in any way.' 'Everything seems to be impossible,' remarked Poirot rather drily. 'Possibly the plans attached to themselves a little pair of wings, and flew away - comme la!' He blew his lips out like a comical cherub.

'The whole thing is impossible,' declared Lord Alloway impatiently. 'But I beg, M. Poirot, that you will not dream of suspecting Fitzroy. Consider for one moment - had he wished to take the plans, what could have been easier for him than to take a tracing of them without going to the trouble of stealing them?' 'There, milor',' said Poirot with approval, 'you make a remark bn juste - I see that you have a mind orderly and methodical. L',dngleterre is happy in possessing you.' Lord Alloway looked rather embarrassed by this sudden burst of praise. Poirot returned to the matter in hand.

'The room in which you had been sitting all the evening - ' 'The drawing-room? Yes?'

'That also has a window on the terrace, since I remember your aying you went out that way. Would it not be possible for someone to come out by the drawing-room window and irt by this one while Mr Fitzroy was out of the room, and return the same way?' 'But we'd have seen them,' objected the Admiral.

'Not if you had your backs turned, walking the other way.' 'Fitzroy was only out of the room a few minutes, the time it would take us to walk to the end and back.' 'No matter - it is a possibility - in fact, the only one as thing stand.' 'But there was no one in the drawing-room when we went out,' said the Admiral.

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'Yes,' admitted the other. 'Sir Harry said: "And now for our submarinel To workl" or something of that sort. The others had left the room, but she had come back for a book.'

'I see,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'Milor', it is very late - but this is an urgent affair. I would like to question the members of this house-party at once if it is possible.'

'It can be managed, of course,' said Lord Ailoway. 'The awk-ward thing is, we don't want to let it get about more than can be helped. Of course, Lady Juliet Weardale and young Leonard are all right - but Mrs Conrad, if she is not guilty, is rather a different proposition. Perhaps you could just state that an important paper is missing, without specifying what it is, or going into any of the circumstances of the disappearance?'

'Exactly what I was about to propose myself,' said Poirot, beaming. 'In fact, in all three cases. Monsieur the Admiral will pardon me, but even the best of wives - '

'No offence,' said Sir Harry. 'All women talk, bless 'em! I wish Juliet would talk a little more and play bridge a little less. But women are like that nowadays, never happy unless they're dancing or gambling. I'll get Juliet and Leonard up, shall I, Ailoway?'

'Thank you. I'll call the French maid. M. Poirot will want to see her, and she can rouse her mistress. I'll attend to it now. In the meantime, I'll send Fitzroy along.'

Mr Fitzroy was a pale, thin young man with pince-nez and a frigid expression. His statement was practically word for word what Lord Alloway had already told us.

'What is your own theory, Mr Fitzroy?'

Mr Fitzroy shrugged his shoulders.

'Undoubtedly someone who knew the hang of things was waiting his chance outside. He could see what went on through the window, and he slipped in when I left the room. It's a pity Lord Ailoway didn't give chase then and there when he saw the fellow leave.'

Poirot did not undeceive him. Instead he asked: 'Do you believe the story of the French maid - that she had seen a ghost?'

'Well, hardly, M. Poirotl'

'I mean - that she really thought so?' 'Oh, as to that, I can't say. She certainly seemed rather upset.

She had her hands to her head.' 'Ahal' cried Poirot with the air of one who has made a discovery.

'Is that so indeed - and she was without doubt a pretty girl?' 'I didn't notice particularly,' said Mr Fitzroy in a repressive voice.

'You did not see her mistress, I suppose?' 'As a matter of fact, I did. She was in the gallery at the top o! the steps and was calling her - "Loniel" Then she saw me - and of course retired.' 'Upstairs,' said Poirot, frowning.

'Of course, I realize that all this is very unpleasant for me - or rather would have been, if Lord Alloway had not chanced to see the man actually leaving. In any case, I should be glad if you would make a point of searching my room - and myself.' 'You really wish that?' 'Certainly I do.' What Poirot would have replied I do not know, but at that moment Lord Alloway reappeared and informed us that the two ladies and Mr Leonard Weardale were in the drawing- room.

The women were in becoming negligees. Mrs Conrad wa a beautiful woman of thirty-five, with golden hair and a slight tendency to embonpoint. Lady Juliet Weardale must have been forty, tall and dark, very thin, still beautiful, with exquisitehand and feet, and a resfiess, haggard manner. Her son was rather an effeminate-looking young man, as great a contrast to his bluff, hearty father as could well be imagined.

Poirot gave forth the LITTLE rigmarole we had agreed upon, and then explained that he was anxious to know if anyone had heard or seen anything that night which might assist us.

Turning to Mrs Conrad first, he asked her if she would be o kind as to inform him exactly what her movement had been.

'Let me see... I went upstairs. I rang for my maid. Then, a she did not put in an appearance, I came out and called her. I could hear her talking on the stairs. After she had brushed my hair, I sent her away - she was in a very curious nervous state..

I read awhile and then went to bed.'

'And you, Lady Juliet?'

'I went straight upstairs and to bed. I was very tired.'

'What about your book, dear?' asked Mrs Conrad with a swe smile.

'My book?' Lady Juliet flushed.

'Yes, you know, when I sent Ldonie away, you were coming up the stairs. You had been down to the drawing-room for a books you said.'

'Oh yes, I did go down. I - I forgot.'

Lady Juliet clasped her hands nervously together.

'Did you hear Mrs Conrad's maid scream, milady?' 'No - no, I didn't.'

'How curious - because you must have been in the drawing-room at the time.'

'I heard nothing,' said Lady Juliet in a firmer voice.

Poirot turned to young Leonard.

'Monsieur?'

'Nothing doing. I went straight upstairs and turned in.' Poirot stroked his chin.

'Alas, I fear there is nothing to help me here. Mesdames and monsieur, I regret - I regret infinitely to have deranged you from your slumbers for so little. Accept my apologies, I pray of you.'

Gesticulating and apologizing, he marshalled them out. He returned with the French maid, a pretty, impudent-looking girl Alloway and Weardale had gone out with the ladies.

'Now, mademoiselle,' said Poirot in a brisk tone, 'let us have the truth. Recount to me no histories. Why did you scream on stairs?'

'Ah, monsieur, I saw a tall figure - all in white - '

Poirot arrested her with an energetic shake of his forefinger.

'Did I not say, recount to me no histories? I will make a guess. He kissed you, did he not? M. Leonard Weardale, I mean?'

'Eh b/n, mom'/eur, and after all, what is a kiss?'

'Under the circumstances, it is most natural,' replied Poiro gallantly. 'I myself, or Hastings here - but tell me just what occurred.' 'He came up behind me, and caught me. I was startled, and I screamed. If I had known, I would not have screamed - but he came upon me like a cat. Then came M./e secrtaire. M. Leonard flew up the stairs. And what could I say? Especially to a jeune homme comme fa - tellement comme il faut? Ma foi, I invent a ghost.' 'And all is explained,' cried Poirot genially.'You then mounted to the chamber of Madame your mistress. Which is her room, by the way?' 'It is at the end, monsieur. That way.' 'Directly over the study, then. B/eh, mademoiselle, I will detain you no longer. And la prochainefois, do not scream.' Handing her out, he came back to me with a smile.

'An interesting case, is it not, Hastings? I begin to have a few little ideas. Et vous?' 'What was Leonard Weardale doing on the stairs? I don't like that young man, Poirot. He's a thorough young rake, I should say.' 'I agree with you, mon am£' 'Fitzroy seems an honest fellow.' 'Lord Alloway is certainly insistent on that point.' 'And yet there is something in his manner - ' 'That is almost too good to be true? I felt it myself. On the other hand, our friend Mrs Conrad is certainly not good at all.' 'And her room is over the study,' I said musingly, and keeping a sharp eye on Poirot.

He shook his head with a slight smile.

'No, mort ami, I cannot bring myself seriously to believe that that immaculate lady swarmed down the chimney, or let herself down from the balcony.' As he spoke, the door opened, and to my great surprise, Lady Juliet Weardale flitted in.

'M. Poirot,' she said somewhat breathlessly, 'can I speak to you alone?' 'Milady, Captain Hastings is as my other self. You can speak before him as though he were a thing of no account, not there at all. Be seated, I pray you.'

She sat down, still keeping her eyes fixed on Poirot.

'What I have to say is - rather difficult. You are in charge of this case. If the - papers were to be returned, would that end the matter? I mean, could it be done without questions being asked?' Poirot stared hard at her.

'Let me understand you, madame. They are to be placed in my hands - is that right? And I am to return them to Lord Alloway on the condition that he asks no questions as to where I got them?'

She bowed her head. 'That is what I mean. But I must be sure there will be no - publicity.'

'I do not think Lord Alloway is particularly anxious for publicity,' said Poirot grimly.

'You accept then?' she cried eagerly in response.

'A little moment, milady. It depends on how soon you can place those papers in my hands.'

'Almost immediately.'

Poirot glanced up at the clock.

'How soon, exactly?'

'Say - ten minutes,' she whispered.

'I accept, milady.'

She hurried from the room. I pursed my mouth up for a whistle.

'Can you sum up the situation for me, Hastings?' 'Bridge,' I replied succinctly.

'Ah, you remember the careless words of Monsieur the Admirall What a memoryl I felicitate you, Hastings.'

We said no more, for Lord Alloway came in, and looked inquiringly at Poirot.

'Have you any further ideas, M. Poirot? I am afraid the answer to your questions have been rather disappointing.'

'Not at all, milor'. They have been quite sufficiently illuminat-ing.

It will be unnecessary for me to stay here any longer, and o, with your permission, I will return at once to London.'

Lord Alloway seemed dumbfounded.

'But - but what have you discovered? Do you know who took the plans?'

'Yes, milor', I do. Tell me - in the case of the papers being returned to you anonymously, you would prosecute no further inquiry?' Lord Alloway stared at him.

'Do you mean on payment of a sum of money?' 'No, milor', returned unconditionally.' 'Of course, the recovery of the plans is the great thing,' said Lord Alloway slowly. He still looked puzzled and uncomprehending.

'Then I should seriously recommend you to adopt that course.

Only you, the Admiral and your secretary know of the loss. Only they need know of the restitution. And you may count on me to support you in every way - lay the mystery on my shoulders.

You asked me to restore the papers - I have done so. You know no more.' He rose and held out his hand. 'Milor', I am glad to have met you. I have faith in you - and your devotion to England.

You will guide her destinies with a strong, sure hand.' 'M. Poirot - I swear to you that I will do my best. It may be a fauk, or it may be a virtue - but I believe in myself.' 'So does every great man. Me, I am the same!' said Poirot grandiloquently.

The car came round to the door in a few minutes, and Lord Alloway bade us farewell on the steps with renewed cordiality.

'That is a great man, Hastings,' said Poirot as we drove off.

'He has brains, resource, power. He is the strong man that England needs to guide her through these difficult days of reconstruction.' 'I'm quite ready to agree with all you say, Poirot - but what about Lady Juliet? Ishe to return the papers straight to Alloway?

What will she think when she finds you have gone off without a word?' 'Hastings, I will ask you a little question. Why, when she was talking with me, did she not hand me the plans then and there?' 'She hadn't got them with her.' 'Perfectly. How long would it take her to fetch them from her room? Or from any hiding-place in the house? You need not answer. I will tell you. Probably about two minutes and a haiti

Yet she asks for ten minutes. Why? Clearly she has to obtain them from some other person, and to reason or argue with that person before they give them up. Now, what person could that be? Not Mrs Conrad, clearly, but a member of her own family, her husband or son. Which is it likely to be? Leonard Weardale said he went straight to bed. We know that to be untrue. Supposing his mother went to his room and found it empty; supposing she came down filled with a nameless dread - he is no beauty that son of hers[She does not find him, but later she hears him deny that he ever left his room. She leaps to the conclusion that he is the thief.

Hence her interview with me.

'But, mon ami, we know sometling that Lady Juliet does not.

We know that her son could not have been in the study, because he was on the stairs, making love to the pretty French maid.

Although she does not know it, Leonard Weardale has an alibi.' 'Well, then, who did steal the papers? We seem to have eliminated everybody - Lady Juliet, her son, Mrs Conrad, the French maid ' 'Exactly. Use your little grey cells, my friend. The solution stares you in the face.' I shook my head blankly.

'But yes! If you would only persevere! See, then, Fitzroy goes out of the study; he leaves the papers on the desk. A few minutes later Lord Alloway enters the room, goes to the desk, and the papers are gone. Only two things are possible: either Fitzroy did not leave the papers on the desk, but put them in his pocket - and that is not reasonable, because, as Alloway pointed out, he could have taken a tracing at his own convenience any time - or else the papers were still on the desk when Lord Alloway went to it - in which case they went into his pocket.' 'Lord Alloway the thief,' I said, dumbfounded. 'But why?

Why?' 'Did you not tell me of some scandal in the past? He was exonerated, you said. But suppose, after all, it had been true? In English public life there must be no scandal. If this were raked up and proved against him now - goodbye to his political career.

We will suppose that he was being blackmailed, and the price asked was the submarine plans.'

'But the man's a black traitorl' I cried.

'Oh no, he is not. He is clever and resourceful. Supposing, my friend, that he copied those plans, making - for he is a clever engineer - a slight alteration in each part which will render them quite impracticable. He hands the faked plans to the enemy's agent - Mrs Conrad, I fancy; but in order that no suspicion of their genuineness may arise, the plans must seem to be stolen.

He does his best to throw no suspicion on anyone in the house, by pretending to see a man leaving the window. But there he ran up against the obstinacy of the Admiral. So his next anxiety is that no suspicion shall fall on Fitzroy.'

'This is all guesswork on your part, Poirot,' I objected.

'It is psychology, mon ami. A man who had handed over the real plans would not be overscrupulous as to who was likely to fall under suspicion. And why was he so anxious that no details of the robbery should be given to Mrs Conrad? Because he had handed over the faked plans earlier in the evening, and did not want her to know that the theft could only have taken place later.' 'I wonder if you are right,' I said.

'Of course, I am right. I spoke to Alloway as one great man to another - and he understood perfectly. You will see.'

One thing is quite certain. On the day when Lord Alloway became Prime Minister, a cheque and a signed photograph arrived; on the photograph were the words: ' To my discreet friend, Hercule Poirot-from Alhnoay.'

I believe that the Z type of submarine is causing great exultation in naval circles. They say it will revolutionize modern naval warfare. I have heard that a certain foreign power essayed to construct something of the same kind and the result was a dismal failure. But I still consider that Poirot was guessing. He will do it once too often one of these days.

CHAPTER XII THE THIRD-FLOOR FLAT

'Bother!' said Pat.

With a deepening frown she rummaged wildly in the silken trifle she called an evening bag. Two young men and another girl watched her anxiously. They were all standing outside the closed door of Patricia Garnett's flat.

'It's no good,' said Pat. 'It's not there. And now what shall we do?'

'What is life without a latchkey?' murmured Jimmy Faulkener.

He was a short, broad-shouldered young man, with good-tempered blue eyes.

Pat turned on him angrily. 'Don't make jokes, Jimmy. This is serious.'

'Look again, Pat,' said Donovan Bailey. 'It must be there somewhere.'

He had a lazy, pleasant voice that matched his lean, dark figure.

'If you ever brought it out,' said the other girl, Mildred Hope.

'Of course I brought it out,' said Pat. 'I believe I gave it to one of you two.' She turned on the man accusingly. 'I told Donovan to take it for me.'

But she was not to find a scapegoat so easily. Donovan put in a firm disclaimer, and Jimmy backed him up.

'I saw you put it in your bag, myself,' said Jimmy.

'Well, then, one of you dropped it out when you picked up my bag. I've dropped it once or twice.'

'Once or twice[' said Donovan. 'You've dropped it a dozen times at least, besides leaving it behind on every possible oc-casion.'

'I can't see why everything on earth doesn't drop out of it the whole time,' said Jimmy.

'The point is - how are we going to get in?' said Mildred.

She was a sensible girl, who kept to the point, but she was not nearly so attractive as the impulsive and troublesome Pat.

All four of them regarded the closed door blankly.

'Couldn't the porter help?' suggested Jimmy. 'Hasn't he got a master key or something of that kind?' Pat shook her head. There were only two keys. One was inside the flat hung up in the kitchen and the other was - or should be in the maligned bag.

'If only the flat were on the ground floor,' wailed Pat. 'We could have broken open a window or something. Donovan, you wouldn't like to be a cat burglar, would you?' Donovan declined firmly but politely to be a cat burglar.

'A flat on the fourth floor is a bit of an undertaking,' said Jimmy.

'How about a fire-escape?' suggested Donovan.

'There isn't one.' 'There should be,' said Jimmy. 'A building five storeys high ought to have a fire escape.' 'I dare say,' said Pat. 'But what should be doesn't help us. How am I ever to get into my flat?' 'Isn't there a sort of thingummybob?' said Donovan. 'A thing the tradesmen send up chops and brussels sprouts in?' 'The service lift,' said Pat. 'Oh yes, but it's only a sort of wire- basket thing. Oh wait - I know. What about the coal lift?' 'Now that,' said Donovan, 'is an idea.' Mildred made a discouraging suggestion. 'It'll be bolted,' she said. 'In Pat's kitchen, I mean, on the inside.' But the idea was instantly negatived.

'Don't you believe it,' said Donovan.

'Not in Pat's kitchen,' said Jimmy. 'Pat never locks and bolts things.' 'I don't think it's bolted,' said Pat. 'I took the dustbin off this morning, and I'm sure I never bolted it afterwards, and I don't think I've been near it since.' 'Well,' said Donovan, 'that fact's going to be very useful to us tonight, but, all the same, young Pat, let me point out to you that these slack habits are leaving you at the mercy of burglars -non-feline - every night.'

Pat disregarded these admonitions.

'Come on,' she cried, and began racing down the four flights of stairs. The others followed her. Pat led them through a dark recess, apparently full to overflowing of perambulators, and through another door into the well of the flats, and guided them to the right lift. There was, at the moment, a dustbin on it. Donovan lifted it off and stepped gingerly on to the platform in its place.

He wrinkled up his nose.

'A little noisome,' he remarked. 'But what of that? Do I go alone on this venture or is anyone coming with me?'

'I'll come, too,' said Jimmy.

He stepped on by Donovan's side.

'I suppose the lift will bear me,' he added doubtfully.

'You can't weigh much more than a ton of coal,' said Pat, who had never been particularly strong on her weights-and-measures table.

'And, anyway, we shall soon find out,' said Donovan cheerfully, a he hauled on the rope.

With a grinding noise they disappeared from sight.

'This thing makes an awful noise,' remarked Jimmy, as they passed up through blackness. 'What will the people in the other flats think?'

'Ghosts or burglars, I expect,' said Donovan. 'Hauling this rope is quite heavy work. The porter of Friars Mansions does more work than I ever suspected. I say, Jimmy, old son, are you counting the floors?'

'Oh, Lordl No. I forgot about it.'

'Well, I have, which is just as well. That's the third we're passing now. The next is ours.'

'And now, I suppose,' grumbled Jimmy, 'we shall find that Pat did bolt the door after all.'

But these fears were unfounded. The wooden door swung back at a touch, and Donovan and Jimmy stepped out into the inky blackness of Pat's kitchen.

'We ought to have a torch for this wild night work,' explained

Donovan. 'If I know Pat, everything's on the floor, and we shall smash endless crockery before I can get to the light switch. Don't move about, Jimmy, till I get the light on.' He felt his way cautiously over the floor, uttering one fervent 'Damn? as a corner of the kitchen table took him unawares in the ribs. He reached the switch, and in another moment another 'Damn!' floated out of the darkness.

'What's the matter?' asked Jimmy.

'Light won't come on. Dud bulb, I suppose. Wait a minute. I'll turn the sitting-room light on.' The sitting-room was the door immediately across the passage.

Jimmy heard Donovan go out of the door, and presently fresh muffled curses reached him. He himself edged his way cautiously across the kitchen.

'What's the matter?' 'I don't know. Rooms get bewitched at night, I believe. Everything seems to be in a different place. Chairs and tables where you least expected them. Oh, hell! Here's another?

But at this moment Jimmy fortunately connected with the electric-light switch and pressed it down. In another minute two young men were looking at each other in silent horror.

This room was not Pat's sitting-room. They were in the wrong flat.

To begin with, the room was about ten times more crowded than Pat's, which explained Donovan's pathetic bewilderment at repeatedly cannoning into chairs and tables. There was a large round table in the centre of the room covered with a baize cloth, and there was an aspidistra in the window. It was, in fact, the kind of room whose owner, the young men felt sure, would be difficult to explain to. With silent horror they gazed down at the table, on which lay a little pile of letters.

'Mrs Ernestine Grant,' breathed Donovan, picking them up and reading the name. 'Oh, helpl Do you think she's heard us?' 'It's a miracle she hasn't heard you,' said Jimmy. 'What with your language and the way you've been crashing into the furniture.

Come on, for the Lord's sake, let's get out of here quickly.' They hastily switched off the light and retraced their steps on

tiptoe to the lift. Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief as they regained the fastness of its depths without further incident.

'I do like a woman to be a good, sound sleeper,' he said approvingly. 'Mrs Ernestine Grant has her points.' 'I see if now,' said Donovan; 'why we made the mistake in the floor, I mean. Out in that well we started up from the basement.'

He heaved on the rope, and the lift shot up. 'We're right this time.' 'I devoutly trust we are,' said Jimmy as he stepped out into anotherinky void. 'My nerves won't stand many more shocks of this kind.' But no further nerve strain was imposed. The first click of the light showed them Pat's kitchen, and in another minute they were opening the front door and admitting the two girls who were waiting outside.

'You have been a long time,' grumbled Pat. 'Mildred and I have been waiting here ages.' 'We've had an adventure,' said Donovan. 'We might have been hauled off to the police-station as dangerous malefactors.' Pat had passed on into the sitting-room, where she switched on the light and dropped her wrap on the sofa. She listened with lively interest to Donovan's account of his adventures.

'I'm glad she didn't catch you,' she commented. 'I'm sure she's an old curmudgeon. I got a note from her this morning - wanted to see me some time - something she had to complain about - my piano, I suppose. People who don't like pianos over their heads shouldn't come and live in flats. I say, Donovan, you've hurt your hand. It's all over blood. Go and wash it under the tap.' Donovan looked down at his hand in surprise. He went out of the room obediently and presently his voice called to Jimmy.

'Hullo,' said the other, 'what's up? You haven't hurt yourself badly, have you?' 'I haven't hurt myself at all.' There was something so queer in Donovan's voice that Jimmy stared at him in surprise. Donovan held out his washed hand and Jimmy saw that there was no mark or cut of any kind on it.

'That's odd,' he said, frowning. 'There was quite a lot of blood.

Where did it come/rom?' And then suddenly he realized what his quicker-witted friend had already seen. 'By Jove,' he said. 'It must have come from that flat' He stopped, thinking over the possibilities his words implied. 'You're sure it was - er - blood?' he said. 'Not paint?' Donovan shook his head. 'It was blood, all right,' he said, and shivered.

They looked at each other. The same thought was clearly in each of their minds. It was Jimmy who voiced it first.

'I say,' he said awkwardly. 'Do you think we ought to - well go down again - and have - a - a look around? See it's all right, you know?' 'What about the girls?' 'We won't say anything to them. Pat's going to put on an apron and make us an omelette. We'll be back by the time they wonder where we are.' 'Oh, well, come on,' said Donovan. 'I suppose we've got to go through with it. I dare say there isn't anything really wrong.' But his tone lacked conviction. They got into the lift and descended to the floor below. They found their way across the kitchen without much difficulty and once more switched on the sitting-room light.

'It must have been in here,' said Donovan, 'that - that I got the stuff on me. I never touched anything in the kitchen.' He looked round him. Jimmy did the same, and they both frowned. Everything looked neat and commonplace and miles removed from any suggestion of violence or gore.

Suddenly Jimmy started violently and caught his companion's

'Look!' Donovan followed the pointing finger, and in his turn uttered an exclamation. From beneath the heavy rep curtains there protruded a foot - a woman's foot in a gaping patent-leather shoe.

Jimmy went to the curtains and drew them sharply apart. In the recess of the window a woman's huddled body lay on the floor, a sticky dark pool beside it. She was dead, there was no doubt of

that. Jimmy was attempting to raise her up when Donovan stopped him.

'You'd better not do that. She oughtn't to be touched till the police come.' 'The police. Oh, of course. I say, Donovan, what a ghastly business. Who do you think she is? Mrs Ernestine Grant?' 'Looks like it. At any rate, if there's anyone else in the flat they're keeping jolly quiet.' 'What do we do next?' asked Jimmy. 'Run out and get a policeman or ring up from Pat's flat?' 'I should think ringing up would be best. Come on, we might as well go out the front door. We can't spend the whole night going up and down in that evil-smelling lift.' Jimmy agreed. Just as they were passing through the door he hesitated. 'Look here; do you think one of us ought to stay - just to keep an eye on things - till the police come?' 'Yes, I think you're right. If you'll stay I'll run up and telephone.' He ran quickly up the stairs and rang the bell of the flat above.

Pat came to open it, a very pretty Pat with a flushed face and a cooking apron on. Her eyes widened in surprise.

'You? But how - Donovan, what is it? Is anything the matter?' He took both her hands in his. 'It's all right, Pat - only we've made rather an unpleasant discovery in the flat below. A woman dead.' 'Oh!' She gave a little gasp. 'How horrible. Has she had a fit or something?' 'No. It looks - well - it looks rather as though she had been murdered.' 'Oh, Donovan!' 'I know. It's pretty beastly.' Her hands were still in his. She had left them there - was even clinging to him. Darling Pat - how he loved her. Did she care at all for him? Sometimes he thought shd did. Sometimes he was afraid that Jimmy Faulkener - remembrances of Jimmy waiting patiently below made him start guiltily.

'Pat, dear, we must telephone to the police.' 'Monsieur is right,' said a voice behind him. 'And in the mean156

time, while we are waiting their arrival, perhaps I can be of some slight assistance.' They had been standing in the doorway of the flat, and now they peered out on to the landing. A figure was standing on the stairs a little way above them. It moved down and into their range of vision.

They stood staring at a little man with a very fierce moustache and an egg-shaped head. He wore a resplendent dressing-gown and embroidered slippers. He bowed gallantly to Patricia.

'Mademoisellel' he said. 'I am, as perhaps you know, the tenant of the flat above. I like to be up high - the air - the view over London. I take the flat in the name of Mr O'Connor. But I am not an Irishman. I have another name. That is why I venture to put myself at your service. Permit me.' With a flourish he pulled out a card and handed it to Pat. She read it.

'M. Hercule Poirot. Oh!' She caught her breath. 'The M. Poirofl The great detective? And you will really help?' 'That is my intention, mademoiselle. I nearly offered my help earlier in the evening.' Pat looked puzzled.

'I heard you discussing how to gain admission to your flat Me, I am very clever at picking locks. I could, without doubt, have opened your door for you, but I hesitated to suggest it. You would have had the grave suspicions of me.' Pat laughed.

'Now, monsieur,' said Poirot to Donovan. 'Go in, I pray of you, and telephone to the police. I will descend to the flat below.' Pat came down the stairs with him. They found Jimmy on guard, and Pat explained Poirot's presence. Jimmy, in his turn, explained to Poirot his and Donovan's adventures. The detective listened attentively.

'The lift door was unbolted, you say? You emerged into the kitchen, but the light it would not turn on.' He directed his footsteps to the kitchen as he spoke. His fingem pressed the switch.

'T/ensl Voild ce qui est curieuxl' he said as the light flashed on.

'It functions perfectly now. I wonder - ' He held up a finger to ensure silence and listened. A faint sound broke the stillness-the sound of an unmistakable snore. 'Ah!' said Poirot. 'La chambre de domestique.'

He tiptoed across the kitchen into a little pantry, out of which led a door. He opened the door and switched on the light. The room was the kind of dog kennel designed by the builders of flats to accommodate a human being. The floor space was almost entirely occupied by the bed. In the bed was a rosy-cheeked girl lying on her back with her mouth wide-open, snoring placidly.

Poirot switched off the light and beat a retreat.

'She will not wake,' he said. 'We will let her sleep till the police come.'

He went back to the sitting-room. Donovan had joined them.

'The police will be here almost immediately, they say,' he said breathlessly. 'We are to touch nothing.'

Poirot nodded. 'We will not touch,' he said. 'We will look, that is all.'

He moved into the room. Mildred had come down with Donovan, and all four young people stood in the doorway and watched him with breathless interest.

'What I can't understand, sir, is this,' said Donovan. 'I never went near the window - how did the blood come on my hand?'

'My young friend, the answer to that stares you in the face. Of what colour is the tablecloth? Red, is it not? and doubtless you did put your hand on the table.'

'Yes, I did. Is that -' He stopped.

Poirot nodded. He was bending over the table. He indicated with his hand a dark patch on the red.

'It was here that the crime was committed,' he said solemnly.

'The body was moved afterwards.'

Then he stood upright and looked slowly round the room. He did not move, he handled nothing, but nevertheless the four watching felt as though every object in that rather frowsty place gave up its secret to his observant eye.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head as though satisfied. A little sigh escaped him. 'I see,' he said.

'You see what?' asked Donovan curiously.

'I see,' said Poirot, 'what you doubtless felt - that the room is overfull of furniture.' Donovan smiled ruefully. 'I did go barging about a bit,' he confessed. 'Of course, everything was in a different place to Pat's room, and I couldn't make it out.' 'Not everything,' said Poirot.

Donovan looked at him inquiringly.

'I mean,' said Poirot apologetically, 'that certain things are alway fixed. In a block of flats the door, the window, the fireplace - they are in the same place in the rooms which are below each other.' 'Isn't that rather splitting hairs?' asked Mildred. She was looking at Poirot with faint disapproval.

'One should always speak with absolute accuracy. That is a little - how do you say? - fad of mine.' There was the noise of footsteps on the stairs, and three men came in. They were a police inspector, a constable, and the divisional surgeon. The inspector recognized Poirot and greeted him in an almost reverential manner. Then he turned to the others.

'I shall want statements from everyone,' he began, 'but in the first place - ' Poirot interrupted. 'A little suggestion. We will go back to the flat upstairs and mademoiselle here shall do what she was planning to do - make us an omelette. Me, I have a passion for the omelettes.

Then, M. l'Inspecteur, when you have finished here, you will mount to us and ask questions at your leisure.' It was arranged accordingly, and Poirot went up with them.

'M. Poirot,' said Pat, 'I think you're a perfect dear. And you shall have a lovely omelette. I really make omelettes frightfully well.' 'That is good. Once, mademoiselle, I loved a beautiful young English girl, who resembled you greatly - but alasl - she could not cook. So perhaps everything was for the best.' There was a faint sadness in his voice, and Jimmy Faulkener looked at him curiously.

Once in the flat, however, he exerted himself to please and amuse. The grim tragedy below was almost forgotten.

The omelette had been consumed and duly praised by the time that Inspector Rice's footsteps were heard. He came in accom-panied by the doctor, having left the constable below.

'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' he said. 'It all seems clear and above-board - not much in your line, though we may find it hard to catch the man. I'd just like to hear how the discovery came to be made.'

Donovan and Jimmy between them recounted the happenings of the evening. The inspector turned reproachfully to Pat.

'You shouldn't leave your lift door unbolted, miss. You really shouldn't.'

'I shan't again,' said Pat, with a shiver. 'Somebody might come in and murder me like that poor woman below.'

'Ah, but they didn't come in that way, though,' said the inspector.

'You will recount to us what you have discovered, yes?' said Poirot.

'I don't know as I ought to - but seeing it's you, M. Poirot -'

'Pricisdment,' said Poirot. 'And these young people - they will be discreet.'

'The newspapers will get hold of it, anyway, soon enough,' said the inspector. 'There's no real secret about the matter. Well, the dead woman's Mrs Grant, all right. I had the porter up to identify her. Woman of about thirty-five. She was sitting at the table, and she was shot with an automatic pistol of small calibre, probably by someone sitting opposite her at table. She fell forward, and that's how the bloodstain came on the table.'

'But wouldn't someone have heard the shot?' asked Mildred.

'The pistol was fitted with a silencer. No, you wouldn't hear anything. By the way, did you hear the screech the maid let out when we told her her mistress was dead? No. Well, that just shows how unlikely it was that anyone would hear the other.'

'Has the maid no story to tell?' asked Poirot.

'It was her evening out. She's got her own key. She came in about ten o'clock. Everything was quiet. She thought her mistress had gone to bed.'

'She did not look in the sitting-room, then?'

'Yes, she took the letters in there which had come by the

evening post, but she saw nothing unusual - any more than Mr Faulkener and Mr Bailey did. You see, the murderer had concealed the body rather neatly behind the curtains.'

'But it was a curious thing to do, don't you think?'

Poirot's voice was very gentle, yet it held something that made the inspector look up quickly.

'Didn't want the crime discovered till he'd had time to make his getaway.'

'Perhaps, perhaps - but continue with what you were saying.' 'The maid went out at five o'clock. The doctor here puts the time of death as - roughly - about four to five hours ago. That's right, isn't it?'

The doctor, who was a man of few words, contented himself with jerking his head affirmatively.

'It's a quarter to twelve now. The actual time can, I think, be narrowed down to a fairly definite hour.'

He took out a crumpled sheet of paper.

'We found this in the pocket of the dead woman's dress. You needn't be afraid of handling it. There are no fingerprints on it.'

Poirot smoothed out the sheet. Across it some words were printed in small, prim capitals.

I WILL COME TO SEE YOU THIS EVIING AT HALF PAST SEVEN.

'A compromising document to leave behind,' commented Poirot, as he handed it back.

'Well, he didn't know she'd got it in her pocket,' said the inspector. 'He probably thought she'd destroyed it. We've evidence that he was a careful man, though. The pistol she was shot with we found under the body - and there again no fingerprints.

They'd been wiped off very carefully with a silk handkerchief.'

'How do you know,' said Poirot, 'that it was a silk handker-chief?'

'Because we found it,' said the inspector triumphantly. 'At the last, as he was drawing the curtains, he must have let it fall unnoticed.'

He handed across a big white silk handkerchief - a good-quality handkerchief. It did not need the inspector's finger to draw Poirot's attention to the mark on it in the centre. It was neatly marked and quite legible. Poirot read the name out.

'John Fraser.' 'That's it,' said the inspector. 'John Fraser - J.F. in the note.

We know the name of the man we have to look for, and I dare say when we find out a little about the dead woman, and her relations come forward, we shall soon get a line on him.' 'I wonder,' said Poirot. 'No, mon cher, somehow I do not think he will be easy to find, your John Fraser. He is a strange man-careful, since he marks his handkerchiefs and wipes the pistol with which he has committed the crime - yet careless since he loses his handkerchief and does not search for a letter that might incriminate him.' 'Flurried, that's what he was,' said the inspector.

'It is possible,' said Poirot. 'Yes, it is possible. And he was not seen entering the building?' 'There are all sorts of people going in and out at the time. These are big blocks. I suppose none of you - ' he addressed the four collectively - 'saw anyone coming out of the flat?' Pat shook her head. 'We went out earlier - about seven o'clock.' 'I see.' The inspector rose. Poirot accompanied him to the door.

'As a little favour, may I examine the flat below?' 'Why, certainly, M. Poirot. I know what they think of you at headquarters. I'll leave you a key. I've got two. It will be empty.

The maid cleared out to some relatives, too scared to stay there

'I thank you,' said M. Poirot. He went back into the flat, thoughtful.

'You're not satisfied, M. Poirot?' said Jimmy.

'No,' said Poirot. 'I am not satisfied.' Donovan looked at him curiously. 'What is it that - well, worries you?' Poirot did not answer. He remained silent for a minute or two, frowning, as though in thought, then he made a sudden impatient movement of shoulders.

'I will say good night to you, mademoiselle. You must be tired You have had much cooking to do - eh?' Pat laughed. 'Only the omelette. I didn't do dinner. Donova and Jimmy came and called for us, and we went out to a littl place in Soho.' 'And then without doubt, you went to a theatre?' 'Yes. The Brown Eyes of Caroline.' 'Ahl' said Poirot. 'It should have been blue eyes - the blue eye: of mademoiselle.' He made a sentimental gesture, and then once more wished Pa good night, also Mildred, who was staying the night by special request, as Pat admitted frankly that she would get the horrors, if left alone on this particular night.

The two young men accompanied Poirot. When the door wa., shut, and they were preparing to say goodbye to him on th{ landing, Poirot forestalled them.

'My young friends, you heard me say that I was not satisfiedl Eh bien, it is true - I am not. I go now to make some little investiga. tions of my own. You would like to accompany me - yes?' An eager assent greeted this proposal. Poirot led the way to th flat below and inserted the key the inspector had given him in th4 lock. On entering, he did not, as the others had expected, ente the sitting-room. Instead he went straight to the kitchen. In a litth recess which served as a scullery a big iron bin was standing.

Poirot uncovered this and, doubling himself up, began to rootk in it with the energy of a ferocious terrier.

Both Jimmy and Donovan stared at him in amazement.

Suddenly with a cry of triumph he emerged. In his hand he held aloft a small stoppered bottle.

'Voild!' he said. 'I find what I seek.' He sniffed at it delicately.

'Alas! I am enrhurad - I have the cold in the head.' Donovan took the bottle from him and sniffed in his turn, bm could smell nothing. He took out the stopper and held the bottk to his nose before Poirot's warning cry could stop him.

Immediately he fell like a log. Poirot, by springing forward: partly broke his fall.

'Imbecile!' he cried. 'The idea. To remove the stopper in that foolhardy mannerl Did he not observe how delicately I handled it? Monsieur - Faulkener - is it not? Will you be so good as to get me a little brandy? I observed a decanter in the sitting-room.'

Jimmy hurried off, but by the time he returned, Donovan was sitting up and declaring himself quite all right again. He had to listen to a short lecture from Poirot on the necessity of caution in sniffmg at possibly poisonous substances.

'I think I'll be off home,' said Donovan, rising shakily to his feet. 'That is, if I can't be any more use here. I feel a bit wonky still.'

'Assuredly,' said Poirot. 'That is the best thing you can do.

M. Faulkener, attend me here a little minute. I will return on the instant.'

He accompanied Donovan to the door and beyond. They remained outside on the landing talking for some minutes When Poirot at last re-entered the flat he found Jimmy standing in the sitting-rom gazing round him with puzzled eyes.

'Well, M. Poirot,' he said, 'what next?' 'There is nothing next. The case is finished.' 'What?'

'I know everything - now.'

Jimmy stared at him. 'That little bottle you found?'

'Exactly. That little bottle.'

Jimmy shook his head. 'I can't make head or tail of it. For some reason or other I can see you are dissatisfied with the evidence against this John

Fraser, whoever he may be.'

'Whoever he may be,' repeated Poirot softly. 'If he is anyone at all - well, I shall be surprised.'

'I don't understand.'

'He is a name - that is all - a name carefully marked on a handkerchiefl'

'And the letter?'

'Did you notice that it was printed? Now, why? I will tell you.

Handwriting might be recognized, and a typewritten letter ia more easily traced than you would imagine - but if a real John Fraser wrote that letter those two points would not have appealed to himl No, it was written on purpose, and put in the dead woman's pocket for us to find. There is no such person as John Fraser.' Jimmy looked at him inquiringly.

'And so,' went on Poirot, 'I went back to the point that first struck me. You heard me say that certain things in a room were always in the same place under given circumstances. I gave three instances. I might have mentioned a fourth - the electric-light switch, my friend.' Jinuny still stared uncomprehendingly. Poirot went on.

'Your friend Donovan did not go near the window - it was by resting his hand on this table that he got it covered in bloodl But I asked myself at once - why did he rest it there? What was he doing groping about this room in darkness? For remember, my friend, the electric-light switch is always in the same place - by the door. Why, when he came to this room, did he not at once feel for the light and turn it on? That was the natural, the normal thing to do. According to him, he tried to turn on the light in the kitchen, but failed. Yet when I tried the switch it was in perfect working order. Did he, then, not wish the light to go on just then? If it had gone on you would both have seen at once that you were in the wrong flat. There would have been no reason to come into this room.' 'What are you driving at, M. Poirot? I don't understand. What do you mean?' 'I mean - this.' Poirot held up a Yale door key.

'The key of this flat?' 'N0, mon ami, the key of the flat above. Mademoiselle Patricia's key, which M. Donovan Bailey abstracted from her bag some time during the evening.' 'But why - why?' 'Parbleul So that he could do what he wanted to do - gain admission to this flat in a perfectly unsuspicious manner. He made sure that the lift door was unbolted earlier in the evening.' 'Where did you get the key?' P0irot's smile broadened. 'I found it just now - where I looked for it- in M. Donovan's pocket. See you, that little bottle I pretended to find was a ruse. M. Donovan is taken in. He doe

what I knew he would do - unstoppers it and sniffs. And in that little bottle is ethyl chloride, a very powerful instant anaesthetic.

It gives me just the moment or two of unconsciousness I need. I take from his pocket the two things that I knew would be there.

This key was one of them - the other ' He stopped and then went on.

'I questioned at the time the reason the inspector gave for the body being concealed behind the curtain. To gain time? No, there was more than that. And so I thought of just one thing the post, my friend. The evening post that comes at half past nine or thereabouts. Say the murderer does not find something he expects to find, but that something may be delivered by post later.

Clearly, then, he must come back. But the crime must not be discovered by the maid when she comes in, or the police would take possession of the flat, so he hides the body behind the curtain.

And the maid suspects nothing and lays the letters on the table as usual.' 'The letters?' 'Yes, the letters.' Poirot drew something from his pocket. 'This is the second article I took from M. Donovan when he was unconscious.' He showed the superscription - a typewritten envelope addressed to Mrs Ernestine Grant. 'But I will ask you one thing first, M. Faulkener, before we look at the contents of this letter. Are you or are you not in love with Mademoiselle Patricia?' 'I care for Pat damnably - but I've never thought I had a chance.' 'You thought that she cared for M. Donovan? It may be that she had begun to care for him - but it was only a beginning, my friend. It is for you to make her forget - to stand by her in her trouble.' 'Trouble?' said Jimmy sharply.

'Yes, trouble. We will do all we can to keep her name out of it, but it will be impossible to do so entirely. She was, you see, the motive.' He ripped open the envelope that he held. An enclosure fell out. The covering letter was brief, and was from a firm of solicitors.

Dear Madam, The document you enclose is quite in order, and the fact of the marriage having taken place in a foreign country does not invalidate it in any way.

Yours truly, etc.

Poirot spread out the enclosure. It was a certificate of marriage Ietween Donovan Bailey and Ernestine Grant, dated eight years go.

'Oh, my God!' said Jimmy. 'Pat said she'd had a letter from the Xtoman asking to see her, but she never dreamed it was anything i mp0rtant.' poirot nodded. 'M. Donovan knew - he went to see his wife t:his evening before going to the flat above - a strange irony, by the ray, that led the unfortunate woman to come to this building where her rival lived - he murdered her in cold blood, and then vent on to his evening's amusement. His wife must have told him tzhat she had sent the marriage certificate to her solicitors and was expecting to hear from them. Doubtless he himself had tried to nake her believe that there was a flaw in the marriage.' 'Ie seemed in quite good spirits, too, all the evening. M. oir0t, you haven't let him escape?' Jimmy shuddered.

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CHAPTER XIII DOUBLE SIN

I had called in at my friend Poirot's rooms to find him sadly overworked. So much had he become the rage that every rich woman who had mislaid a bracelet or lost a pet kitten rushed to ecure the services of the great Hercule Poirot. My little friend was a strange mixture of Flemish thrift and artistic fervour. He accepted many cases in which he had little interest owing to the first instinct being predominant.

He also undertook cases in which there was a little or no monet-m'y reward sheerly because the problem involved interested him.

The result was that, as I say, he was overworking himself. He admitted as much himself, and I found little difficulty in persuad-ing him to accompany me for a week's holiday to that well-known South Coast resort, Ebermouth.

We had spent four very agreeable days when Poirot came to me, an open letter in his hand.

'Mort ami, you remember my friend Joseph Aarons, the theatrical agent?'

I assented after a moment's thought. Poirot's friends are so many and so varied, and range from dustmen to dukes.

'Eh bien, Hastings, Joseph Aarons finds himself at Charlock Bay. He is far from well, and there is a little affair that it seems is worrying him. He begs me to go over and see him. I think, mon ami, that I must accede to his request. He is a faithful friend, the good Joseph Aarons, and has done much to assist me in the past.'

'Certainly, if you think so,' I said. 'I believe Charlock Bay is a beautiful spot, and as it happens I've never been there.'

'Then we combine business with pleasure,' said Poirot. 'You will inquire the trains, yes?'

'It will probably mean a change or two,' I said with a grimace.

'You know what these cross-country lines are. To go from the South Devon coast to the North Devon coast is sometimes a day's journey.' However, on inquiry, I found that the journey could be accomplished by only one change at Exeter and that the trains were good. I was hastening back to Poirot with the information when I happened to pass the offices of the Speedy cars and saw written up:

Tomorrow. All-day excursion to Charlock Bay. Starting 8.3o through some of the most beautiful scenery in Devon.

I inquired a few particulars and returned to the hotel full of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, I found it hard to make Poirot share my feelings.

'My friend, why this passion for the motor coach? The train, see you, it is sure? The tyres, they do not burst; the accidents, they do not happen. One is not incommoded by too much air. The windows can be shut and no draughts admitted.' I hinted delicately that the advantage of fresh air was what attracted me most to the motor-coach scheme.

'And if it rains? Your English climate is so uncertain.' 'There's a hood and all that. Besides, if it rains badly, the excursion doesn't take place.' 'Ahl' said Poirot. 'Then let us hope that it rainS.' 'Of course, if you feel like that and...' 'No, no, mon ami. I see that you have set your heart on the trip.

Fortunately, I have my greatcoat with me and two mufflers.' He sighed. 'But shall we have sufficient time at Charlock Bay?' 'Well, I'm afraid it means staying the night there. You see, the tour goes round by Dartmoor. We have lunch at Monkhampton.

We arrive at Charlock Bay about four o'clock, and the coach tarts back at five, arriving here at ten o'clock.' 'Sol' said Po[rot. 'And there are people who do this for pleasure!

We shall, of course, get a reduction of the fare since we do not make the return journey?' 'I hardly think that's likely.' 'You must insist.'

'Come now, Poirot, don't be mean. You know you're coining money.' 'My friend, it is not the meanness. It is the business sense. If I were a millionaire, I would pay only what was just and right.' As I had foreseen, however, Poirot was doomed to fail in this respect. The gentleman who issued tickets at the Speedy office was calm and unimpassioned but adamant. His point was that we ought to return. He even implied that we ought to pay extra for the privilege of leaving the coach at Charlock Bay.

Defeated, Poirot paid over the required sum and left the office.

'The English, they have no sense of money,' he grumbled.

'Did you observe a young man, Hastings, who paid over the full fare and yet mentioned his intention of leaving the coach at Monkhampton?' 'I don't think I did. As a matter of fact...' 'You were observing the pretty young lady who booked No. 5, the next seat to ours. Ah! Yes, my friend, I saw you. And that is why when I was on the point of taking seats No. 13 and 4 which are in the middle and as well sheltered as it is possible to be - you rudely pushed yourself forward and said that 3 and 4 would be better.' 'Really, Poirot,' I said, blushing.

'Auburn hair - always the auburn hair!' 'At any rate, she was more worth looking at than an odd young man.' 'That depends upon the point of view. To me, the young man was interesting.' Something rather significant in Poirot's tone made me look at him quickly. 'Why? What do you mean?' 'Oh, do not excite yourself. Shall I say that he interested me because he was trying to grow a moustache and as yet the result is poor.' Poirot stroked his own magnificent moustache tenderly. 'It i an art,' he murmured, 'the growing of the moustachel I have sympathy for all who attempt it.' It is always difficult with Poirot to know when he is serious and when he is merely amusing hirnseff at one's expense. I judged it safest to say no more.

The following morning dawned bright and sunny. A really glorious dayl Poirot, however, was taking no chances. He wore a woolly waistcoat, a mackintosh, a heavy overcoat, and two mufflers, in addition to wearing his thickest suit. He also swallowed two tablets of 'Anti-grippe' before starting and packed a further supply.

We took a couple of small suitcases with us. The pretty girl we had noticed the day before had a small suitcase, and so did the young man whom I gathered to have been the object of Poirot's sympathy. Otherwise, there was no luggage. The four pieces were stowed away by the driver, and we all took our places.

Poirot, rather maliciously, I thought, assigned me the outside place as 'I had the mania for the fresh air' and himself occupied the seat next to our fair neighbour. Presently, however, he made amends. The man in seat 6 was a noisy fellow, inclined to be facetious and boisterous, and Poirot asked the girl in a low voice if she would like to change seats with him. She agreed gratefully, and, the change having been effected, she entered into conversation with us and we were soon all three chattering together merrily.

She was evidently quite young, not more than nineteen, and as ingenuous as a child. She soon confided to us the reason for her trip. She was going, it seemed, on business for her aunt who kept a most interesting antique shop in Ebermouth.

This aunt had been left in very reduced circumstances on the death of her father and had used her small capital and a houseful of beautiful things which her father had left to start in business.

She had been extremely successful and had made quite a name for herself in the trade. This girl, Mary Durrant, had come to be with her aunt and learn the business and was very excited about it much preferring it to the other alternative - becoming a nursery governess or companion.

Poirot nodded interest and approval to all this.

'Mademoiselle will be successful, I am sure,' he said gallantly.

'But I will give her a little word of advice. Do not be too trusting, mademoiselle. Everywhere in the world there are rogues and vagabonds, even it may be on this very coach of ours. One should lways be on the guard, suspiciousl' She stared at him open-mouthed, and he nodded sapiently.

'But yes, it is as I say. Who knows? Even I who speak to you may be a malefactor of the worst description.' And he twinkled more than ever at her surprised face.

We stopped for lunch at Monkhampton, and, after a few words with the waiter, Poirot managed to secure us a small table for three close by the window. Outside, in a big courtyard, about twenty char--bancs were parked - char--bancs which had come from all over the county. The hotel dining-room was full, and the noise was rather considerable.

'One can have altogether too much of the holiday spirit,' I said with a grimace.

Mary Durrant agreed. 'Ebermouth is quite spoiled in the summers nowadays. My aunt says it used to be quite different.

Now one can hardly get along the pavements for the crowd.' 'But it is good for business, mademoiselle.' 'Not for ours particularly. We sell only rare and valuable things.

We do not go in for cheap bric-h-brac. My aunt has clients all over England. If they want a particular period table or chair, or a certain piece of china, they write to her, and, sooner or later, she gets it for them. That is what has happened in this case.' We looked interested and she went on to explain. A certain American gentleman, Mr J. Baker Wood, was a connoisseur and collector of miniatures. A very valuable set of miniatures had recently come into the market, and Miss Elizabeth Penn - Mary's aunt - had purchased them. She had written to Mr Wood describing the miniatures and naming a price. He had replied at once, saying that he was prepared to purchase if the miniatures were as represented and asking that someone should be sent with them for him to see where he was staying at Charlock Bay. Miss Durrant had accordingly been despatched, acting as representative for the firm.

'They're lovely things, of course,' she said. 'But I can't imagine anyone paying all that money for them. Five hundred poundsl Just think of it! They're by Cosway. Is it Cosway I mean? I get so mixed up in these things.' Poirot smiled. 'You are not yet experienced, eh, mademoiselle?'

'I've had no training,' said Mary ruefully. 'We weren't brought up to know about old things. It's a lot to learn.'

She sighed. Then suddenly, I saw her eyes widen in surprise.

She was sitting facing the window, and her glance now was directed out of that window, into the courtyard. With a hurried word, she rose from her seat and almost ran out of the room. She returned in a few moments, breathless and apologetic.

'I'm so sorry rushing off like that. But I thought I saw a man taking my suitcase out of the coach. I went flying after him, and it turned out to be his own. It's one almost exactly like mine. I felt like such a fool. It looked as though I were accusing him of stealing it.'

She laughed at the idea.

Poirot, however, did not laugh. 'What man was it, mademoiselle?

Describe him to me.'

'He had on a brown suit. A thin weedy young man with a very indeterminate moustache.'

'Aha,' said Poirot. 'Our friend of yesterday, Hastings. You know this young man, mademoiselle. You have seen him before?' 'No, never. Why?'

'Nothing. It is rather curious - that is all.'

He relapsed into silence and took no further part in the con-versation until something Mary Durrant said caught his atten-tion.

'Eh, mademoiselle, what is that you say?'

'I said that on my return journey I should have to be careful of "malefactors", as you call them. I believe Mr Wood always pays for things in cash. If I have five hundred pounds in notes on me, I shall be worth some malefactor's attention.'

She laughed but again Poirot did not respond. Instead, he asked her what hotel she proposed to stay at in Charlock Bay.

'The Anchor Hotel. It is small and not expensive, but quite good.'

'So!' said Poirot. 'The Anchor Hotel. Precisely where Hastings here has made up his mind to stay. How oddl'

He twinkled at me.

'You are staying long in Charlock Bay?' asked Mary.

'One night only. I have business there. You could not guess, I am sure, what my profession is, mademoiselle?' I saw Mary consider several possibilities and reject them probably from a feeling of caution. At last, she hazarded the suggestion that Poirot was a conjurer. He was vastly entertained.

'Ahl But it is an idea thatl You think I take the rabbits out of the hat? No, mademoiselle. Me, I am the opposite of a conjurer.

The conjurer, he makes things disappear. Me, I make things that have disappeared, reappear.' He leaned forward dramatically so aa to give the words full effect. 'It is a secret, mademoiselle, but I will tell you, I am a detectivel' He leaned back in his chair pleased with the effect he had created. Mary Durrant stared at him spellbound. But any further conversation was barred for the braying of various horns outside announced that the road monsters were ready to proceed.

As Poirot and I went out together I commented on the charm of our luncheon companion. Poirot agreed.

'Yes, she is charming. But, also rather silly?' 'Silly?' 'Do not be outraged. A girl may be beautiful and have auburn hair and yet be silly. It is the height of foolishness to take two strangers into her confidence as she has done.' 'Well, she could see we were all right.' 'That is imbecile, what you say, my friend. Anyone who knows his job - naturally he will appear "all right". That little one she talked of being careful when she would have five hundred pounds in money with her. But she has five hundred pounds with her now.' 'In miniatures.' 'Exactly. In miniatures. And between one and the other, there is no great difference, mon ami.' 'But no one knows about them except us.' 'And the waiter and the people at the next table. And, doubtless, everal people in Ebermouthl Mademoiselle Durrant, she is charming, but, if I were Miss Elizabeth Penn, I would first of all instruct my new assistant in the common sense.' He paused and then said in a different voice: 'You know, my friend, it would be the easiest thing in the world to remove a suitcase from one of those char-h-bancs while we were all at luncheon.'

'Oh, come, Poirot, somebody will be sure to see.'

'And what would they see? Somebody removing his luggage.

It would be done in an open and aboveboard manner, and it would be nobody's business to interfere.'

'Do you mean - Poirot, are you hinting - But that fellow in the brown suit - it was his own suitcase?'

Poirot frowned. 'So it seems. All the same, it is curious, Hastings, that he should have not removed his suitcase before, when the car first arrived. He has not lunched here, you notice.'

'If Miss Durrant hadn't been sitting opposite the window, she wouldn't have seen him,' I said slowly.

'And since it was his own suitcase, that would not have mattered,' said Poirot. 'So let us dismiss it from our thoughts, mon ami.'

Nevertheless, when we had resumed our places and were speeding along once more, he took the opportunity of giving Mary Durrant a further lecture on the dangers of indiscretion which she received meekly enough but with the air of thinking it all rather a joke.

We arrived at Charlock Bay at four o'clock and were fortunate enough to be able to get rooms at the Anchor Hotel - a charming old-world inn in one of the side streets.

Poirot had just unpacked a few necessaries and was applying a little cosmetic to his moustache preparatory to going out to call upon Joseph Aarons when there came a frenzied knocking at the door. I called 'Come in,' and, to my utter amazement, Mary I)urrant appeared, her face white and large tears standing in her

'I do beg your pardon - but - but the most awful thing has happened. And you did say you were a detective?' This to Poirot.

'What has happened, mademoiselle?'

'I opened my suitcase. The miniatures were in a crocodile despatch case - locked, of course. Now, lookl'

She held out a small square crocodile-covered case. The lid hung loose. Poirot took it from her. The case had been forced;

great strength must have been used. The marks were plain enough. Poirot examined it and nodded.

'The miniatures?' he asked, though we both knew the answer well enough.

'Gone. They've been stolen. Oh, what shall I do?'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'My friend is Hercule Poirot. You must have heard of him. He'll get them back for you if anyone can.' 'Monsieur Poirot. The great Monsieur Poirot.'

Poirot was vain enough to be pleased at the obvious reverence in her voice. 'Yes, my child,' he said. 'It is I, myself. And you can leave your little affair in my hands. I will do all that can be done.

But I fear - I much fear - that it will be too late. Tell me, was the lock of your suitcase forced also?' She shook her head.

'Let me see it, please.'

We went together to her room, and Poirot examined the suitcase closely. It had obviously been opened with a key.

'Which is simple enough. These suitcase locks are all much of the same pattern. Eh bien, we must ring up the police and we must also get in touch with Mr Baker Wood as soon as possible. I will attend to that myself.'

I went with him and asked what he meant by saying it might be too late. 'Mon chef, I said today that I was the opposite of the conjurer - that I make the disappearing things reappear - but suppose someone has been beforehand with me. You do not understand? You will in a minute.'

He disappeared into the telephone box. He came out five minutes later looking very grave. 'It is as I feared. A lady called upon Mr Wood with the miniatures half an hour ago. She repre-sented herself as coming from Miss

Elizabeth Penn. He was delighted with the miniatures and paid for them forthwith.' 'Half an hour ago - before we arrived here.'

Poirot smiled rather enigmatically. 'The Speedy cars are quite speedy, but a fast motor from, say, Monkhampton would get here a good hour ahead of them at least.'

'And what do we do now?'

'The good Hastings - always practical. We inform the police,

do all we can for Miss Durrant, and - yes, I think decidedly, we have an interview with Mr J. Baker Wood.'

We carried out this programme. Poor Mary Durrant was terribly upset, fearing her aunt would blame her.

'Which she probably will,' observed Poirot, as we set out for the Seaside Hotel where Mr Wood was staying. 'And with perfect justice. The idea of leaving five hundred pounds' worth of valuables in a suitcase and going to lunch! All the same, mort ami, there are one or two curious points about the case. That despatch box, for instance, why was it forced?'

'To get out the miniatures.'

'But was not that a foolishness? Say our thief is tampering with the luggage at lunch-time under the pretext of getting out his own. Surely it is much simpler to open the suitcase, transfer the despatch case unopened to his own suitcase, and get away, than to waste the time forcing the lock?'

'He had to make sure the miniatures were inside.'

Poirot did not look convinced, but, as we were just being shown into Mr Wood's suite, we had no time for more discussion.

I took an immediate dislike to Mr Baker Wood.

He was a large vulgar man, very much overdressed and wearing a diamond solitaire ring. He was blustering and noisy.

Of course, he'd not suspected anything amiss. Why should he?

The woman said she had the miniatures all right. Very fine specimens, too! Had he the numbers of the notes? No, he hadn't.

And who was Mr - er - Poirot, anyway, to come asking him all these questions?

'I will not ask you anything more, monsieur, except for one thing. A description of the woman who called upon you. Was she young and pretty?'

'No, sir, she was not. Most emphatically not. A tall woman, middle-aged, grey hair, blotchy complexion and a budding moustache. A siren? Not on your life.'

'Poirot,' I cried, as we took our departure. 'A moustache. Did you hear?'

'I have the use of my ears, thank you, Hastings.'

'But what a very unpleasant man.'

'He has not the charming manner, no.'

'Well, we ought to get the thief all right,' I remarked. 'We can identify him.'

'You are of such a naive simplicity, Hastings. Do you not know that there is such a thing as an alibi?'

'You think he will have an alibi?'

Poirot replied unexpectedly: 'I sincerely hope so.'

'The trouble with you is,' I said, 'that you like a thing to be difficult.'

'Quite right, mon ami. I do not like - how do you say it - the bird who sits?

Poirot's prophecy was fully justified. Our travelling companion in the brown suit turned out to be a Mr Norton Kane. He had gone straight to the George Hotel at Monkhampton and had been there during the afternoon.

The only evidence against him was that of Miss Durrant who declared that she had seen him getting out his luggage from the car while we were at lunch.

'Which in itself is not a suspicious act,' said Poirot meditat-ively.

After that remark, he lapsed into silence and refused to discuss the matter any further, saying when I pressed him, that he was thinking of moustaches in general, and that I should be well advised to do the same.

I discovered, however, that he had asked Joseph Aarons - with whom he spent the evening - to give him every detail possible about Mr Baker Wood. As both men were staying at the same hotel, there was a chance of gleaning some stray crumbs of information. Whatever Poirot learned, he kept to himself, however.

Mary Durrant, after various interviews with the police, had returned to Ebermouth by an early morning train. We lunched with Joseph Aarons, and, after lunch, Poirot announced to me that he had settled the theatrical agent's problem satisfactorily, and that we could return to Ebermouth as soon as we liked. 'But not by road, mon ami; we go by rail this time.'

'Are you afraid of having your pocket picked, or of meeting another damsel in distress?'

'Both those affairs, Hastings, might happen to me on the train.

No, I am in haste to be back in Ebermouth, because I want to proceed with our case.'

'Our case?'

'But, yes, my friend. Mademoiselle Durrant appealed to me to help her. Because the matter is now in the hands of the police, it does not follow that I am free to wash my hands of it. I came here to oblige an old friend, but it shall never be said of Hercule Poirot that he deserted a stranger in need? And he drew himself up grandiloquently.

'I think you were interested before that,' I said shrewdly. 'In the office of cars, when you first caught sight of that young man, though what drew your attention to him I don't know.'

'Don't you, Hastings? You should. Well, well, that must remain my little secret.'

We had a short conversation with the police inspector in charge of the case before leaving. He had interviewed Mr Norton Kane, and told Poirot in confidence that the young man's manner had not impressed him favourably. He had blustered, denied, and contradicted himself.

'But just how the trick was done, I don't know,' he confessed.

'He could have handed the stuff to a confederate who pushed off at once in a fast car. But that's just theory. We've got to find the car and the confederate and pin the thing down.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'Do you think that was how it was done?' I asked him, as we were seated in the train.

'No, my friend, that was not how it was done. It was cleverer than that.'

'Won't you tell me?'

'Not yet. You know - it is my weakness - I like to keep my little secrets till the end.'

'Is the end going to be soon?' every soon now.'

We arrived in Ebermouth a little after six and Poirot drove at once to the shop which bore the name 'Elizabeth Penn'. The establishment was closed, but Poirot rang the bell, and presently

Mary herself opened the door, and expressed surprise and delight at seeing us.

'Please come in and see my aunt,' she said.

She led us into a back room. An elderly lady came forward to meet us; she had white hair and looked rather like a miniature herself with her pink-and-white skin and her blue eyes. Round her rather bent shoulders she wore a cape of priceless old lace.

'Is this the great Monsieur Poirot?' she asked in a low charming voice. 'Mary has been telling me. I could hardly believe it. And you will really help us in our trouble. You will advise us?' Poirot looked at her for a moment, then bowed.

'Mademoiselle Penn - the effect is charming. But you should really grow a moustache.'

Miss Penn gave a gasp and drew back.

'You were absent from business yesterday, were you not?'

'I was here in the morning. Later I had a bad headache and went directly home.'

'Not home, mademoiselle. For your headache you tried the change of air, did you not? The air of Charlock Bay is very bracing, I believe.'

He took me by the arm and drew me towards the door. He paused there and spoke over his shoulder.

'You comprehend, I know everything. This little - farce - it must cease.'

There was a menace in his tone. Miss Penn, her face ghastly white, nodded mutely. Poirot turned to the girl.

'Mademoiselle,' he said gently, 'you are young and charming.

But participating in these little affairs will lead to that youth and charm being hidden behind prison walls - and I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that that will be a pity.'

Then he stepped out into the street and I followed him, be-wildered.

'From the first, mon ami, I was interested. When that young man booked his place as far as Monkhampton only, I saw the girl's attention suddenly riveted on him. Now why? He was not of the type to make a woman look at him for himself alone. When we started on that coach, I had a feeling that something would happen. Who saw the young man tampering with the luggage Mademoiselle and mademoiselle only, and remember she chos that seat - a seat facing the window - a most unfeminine choice.

'And then she comes to us with the tale of robbery- the despatch box forced which makes not the common sense, as I told you at the time.

'And what is the result of it all? Mr Baker Wood has paid over good money for stolen goods. The miniatures will be returned to Miss Penn. She will sell them and will have made a thousand pounds instead of five hundred. I make the discreet inquiries and learn that her business is in a bad state - touch and go. I say to myself- the aunt and niece are in this together.' 'Then you never suspected Norton Kane?' Then amfl With that moustache? A criminal is either clean shaven or he has a proper moustache that can be removed at will.

But what an opportunity for the clever Miss Penn - a shrinking elderly lady with a pink-and-white complexion as we saw her.

But if she holds herself erect, wears large boots, alters her complexion with a few unseemly blotches and - crowning touch adds a few sparse hairs to her upper lip. What then? A masculine woman, says Mr Wood and - "a man in disguise" say we at once.' 'She really went to Charlock yesterday?' 'Assuredly. The train, as you may remember telling me, left here at eleven and got to Charlock Bay at two o'clock. Then the return train is even quicker - the one we came by. It leaves Charlock at four-five and gets here at six-fifteen. Naturally, the miniatures were never in the despatch case at all. That was artistically forced before being packed. Mademoiselle Mary has only to find a couple of mugs who will be sympathetic to her charm and champion beauty in distress. But one of the mugs was no mug - he was Hercule Poirotl' I hardly liked the inference. I said hurriedly: 'Then, when you ·aid you were helping a stranger, you were wilfully deceiving me.

That's exactly what you were doing.' 'Never do I deceive you, Hastings. I only permit you to deceive yourself. I was referring to Mr Baker Wood - a stranger to these shores.' His face darkened. 'Ahl When I think of that imposition, that iniquitous overcharge, the same fare single to Charlock as return, my blood boils to protect the visitor! Not a pleasant man, Mr Baker Wood, not, as you would say, sympathetic. But a visitor! And we visitors, Hastings, must stand together. Me, I am all for the visitorst'

CHAPTER XIV THE MARKET BASING MYSTERY

'After all, there's nothing like the country, is there?' said Inspector Japp, breathing in heavily through his nose and out through his mouth in the most approved fashion.

Poirot and I applauded the sentiment heartily. It had been the Scotland Yard inspector's idea that we should all go for the week-end to the little country town of Market Basing. When off duty, Japp was an ardent botanist, and discoursed upon minute flowers possessed of unbelievably lengthy Latin names (somewhat strangely pronounced) with an enthusiasm even greater than that he gave to his cases.

'Nobody knows us, and we know nobody,' explained Japp.

'That's the idea.'

This was not to prove quite the case, however, for the local constable happened to have been transferred from a village fifteen miles away where a case of arsenical poisoning had brought him into contact with the Scotland Yard man. However, his delighted recognition of the great man only enhanced Japp's sense of well-being, and as we sat down to breakfast on Sunday morning in the parlour of the village inn, with the sun shining, and tendrils of honeysuckle thrusting themselves in at the window, we were all in the best of spirits. The bacon and eggs were excellent, the coffee not so good, but passable and boiling hot.

'This is the life,' said Japp. 'When I retire, I shall have a little place in the country. Far from crime, like this!'

'Lc crime, il est partout,' remarked Poirot, helping himself to a neat square of bread, and frowning at a sparrow which had balanced itself impertinently on the windowsill.

I quoted lightly:

'That rabbit has a pleasant face, His private life is a disgrace I really could not tell to you The awful things that rabbits do.'

'Lord,' said Japp, stretching himself backward, 'I believe I could manage another egg, and perhaps a rasher or two of bacon.

What do you say, Captain?' 'I'm with you,' I returned heartily. 'What about you, Poirot?' Porot shook his head.

'One must not so replenish the stomach that the brain refuses to function,' he remarked.

'I'll risk replenishing the stomach a bit more,' laughed Jalap.

'I take a large size in stomachs; and by the way, you're getting stout yourself, M. Poirot. Here, miss, eggs and bacon twice.' At that moment, however, an imposing form blocked the doorway.

It was Constable Pollard.

'I hope you'll excuse me troubling the inspector, gentlemen, but I'd be glad of his advice.' 'I'm on my holiday,' said Japp hastily. 'No work for me. What is the case?' 'Gentleman up at Leigh Hall - shot himself - through the head.' 'Well, they will do it,' said Japp prosaically. 'Debt, or a woman, I suppose. Sorry I can't help you, Pollard.' 'The point is,' said the constable, 'that he can't have shot himself. Leastways, that's what Dr Giles says.' Japp put down his cup.

'Can't have shot him-serf? What do you mean?' 'That's what Dr Giles says,' repeated Pollard. 'He says it's plumb impossible. He's puzzled to death, the door being locked on the inside and the window bolted; but he sticks to it that the man couldn't have committed suicide.' That settled it. The further supply of bacon and eggs were waved aside, and a few minutes later we were all walking as fast as we could in the direction of Leigh House, Japp eagerly questioning the constable.

The name of the deceased was Walter Protheroe; he was a man of middle age and something of a recluse. He had come to Market Basing eight years ago and rented Leigh House, a rambling, dilapidated old mansion fast falling into ruin. He lived in a corner of it, his wants attended to by a housekeeper whom he had brought with him. Miss Clegg was her name, and she was a very superior woman and highly thought of in the village. Just lately Mr Protheroe had had visitors staying with him, a Mr and Mrs Parker from London. This morning, unable to get a reply when she went to call her master, and finding the door locked, Miss Clegg became alarmed, and telephoned for the police and the doctor. Constable Pollard and Dr Giles had arrived at the same moment. Their united efforts had succeeded in breaking down the oak door of his bedroom.

Mr Protheroe was lying on the floor, shot through the head, and the pistol was clasped in his right hand. It looked a clear case of suicide.

After examining the body, however, Dr Giles became clearly perplexed, and finally he drew the constable aside, and communicated his perplexities to him; whereupon Pollard had at once thought of Japp. Leaving the doctor in charge, he had hurried down to the inn.

By the time the constable's recital was over, we had arrived at Leigh House, a big, desolate house surrounded by an unkempt, weed-ridden garden. The front door was open, and we passed at once into the hall and from there into a small morning-room whence proceeded the sound of voices. Four people were in the room: a somewhat flashily dressed man with a shifty, unpleasant face to whom I took an immediate dislike; a woman of much the same type, though handsome in a coarse fashion; another woman dressed in neat black who stood apart from the rest, and whom I took to be the housekeeper; and a tall man dressed in sporting tweeds, with a clever, capable face, and who was clearly in command of the situation.

'Dr Giles,' said the constable, 'this is Detective-Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard, and his two friends.' The doctor greeted us and made us known to Mr and Mrs

Parker. Then we accompanied him upstairs. Pollard, in obedience to a sign from Japp, remained below, as it were on guard over the household. The doctor led us upstairs and along a passage. A door was open at the end; splinters hung from the hinges, and the door itself had crashed to the floor inside the room.

We went in. The body was still lying on the floor. Mr Protheroe had been a man of middle age, bearded, with hair grey at the temples. Japp went and knelt by the body.

'Why couldn't you leave it as you found it?' he grumbled.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

'We thought it a clear case of suicide.'

'H'mt' said Japp. 'Bullet entered the head behind the left ear.' 'Exactly,' said the doctor. 'Clearly impossible for him to have fired it himself. He'd have had to twist his hand right round his head. It couldn't have been done.'

'Yet you found the pistol clasped in his hand? Where is it, by the way?'

The doctor nodded to the table.

'But it wasn't clasped in his hand,' he said. 'It was inside the hand, but the fingers weren't closed over it.'

'Put there afterwards,' said Japp; 'that's clear enough.' He was examining the weapon. 'One cartridge fired. We'll test it for fingerprints, but I doubt if we'll find any but yours, Dr Giles.

How long has he been dead?'

'Some time last night. I can't give the time to an hour or so, as thoe wonderful doctors in detective stories do. Roughly, he's been dead about twelve hours.'

So far, Poirot had not made a move of any kind. He had remained by my side, watching Japp at work and listening to his questions.

Only, from time to time he had sniffed the air very delicately, and as if puzzled. I too bad sniffed, but could detect nothing to arouse interest. The air seemed perfectly fresh and devoid of odour. And yet, from time to time, Poirot continued to sniff it dubiously, as though his keener nose detected something I had missed.

Now, as Japp moved away from the body, Poirot knelt down by it. He took no interest in the wound. I thought at first that he was examining the fingers of the hand that had held the pistol, but in a minute I saw that it was a handkerchief carried in the coat-sleeve that interested him. Mr Protheroe was dressed in a dark grey lounge-suit. Finally Poirot got up from his knees, but his eyes still strayed back to the handkerchief as though puzzled.

Japp called to him to come and help to lift the door. Seizing my opportunity, I too knelt down, and taking the handkerchief from the sleeve, scrutinized it minutely. It was a perfectly plain handkerchief of white cambric; there was no mark or stain on it of any kind. I replaced it, shaking my head, and confessing myself baffled.

The others had raised the door. I realized that they were hunting for the key. They looked in vain.

'That settles it,' said Japp. 'The window's shut and bolted.

The murderer left by the door, locking it and taking the key with him. He thought it would be accepted that Protherhoe had locked himself in and shot himself, and that the absence of the key would not be noticed. You agree, M. Poirot?'

'I agree, yes; but it would have been simpler and better to slip the key back inside the room under the door. Then it would look as though it had fallen from the lock.'

'Ah, well, you can't expect everybody to have the bright ideas that you have. You'd have been a holy terror if you'd taken to crime. Any remarks to make, M. Poirot?'

Poirot, it seemed to me, was somewhat at a loss. He looked round the room and remarked mildly and almost apologetically: 'He smoked a lot, this monsieur.'

True enough, the grate was filled with cigarette-stubs, as was an ashtray that stood on a small table near the big armchair.

'He must have got through about twenty cigarettes last night,' remarked Japp. Stooping down, he examined the contents of the grate carefully, then transferred his attention to the ashtray.

'They're all the same kind,' he announced, 'and smoked by the same man. There's nothing there, M. Poirot.'

'I did not suggest that there was,' murmured my friend.

'Ha,' cried Japp, 'what's this?' He pounced on something bright and glittering that lay on the floor near the dead man. 'A broken cuff-link. I wonder who this belongs to. Dr Giles, I'd be obliged if you'd go down and send up the housekeeper.'

'What about the Parkers? He's very anxious to leave the house - says he's got urgent business in London.'

'I dare say. It'll have to get on without him. By the way things are going, it's likely that there'll be some urgent business down here for him to attend to! Send up the housekeeper, and don't let either of the Parkers give you and Pollard the slip. Did any of the household come in here this morning?'

The doctor reflected.

'No, they stood outside in the corridor while Pollard and I came in.'

'Sure of that?'

'Absolutely certain.'

The doctor departed on his mission.

'Good man, that,' said Japp approvingly. 'Some of these sporting doctors are first-class fellows. Well, I wonder who shot this chap. It looks like one of the three in the house. I hardly suspect the housekeeper. She's had eight years to shoot him in if she wanted to. I wonder who these Parkers are? They're not a prepossessing-looking couple.'

Miss Clegg appeared at this juncture. She was a thin, gaunt woman with neat grey hair parted in the middle, very staid and calm in manner. Nevertheless there was an air of efficiency about her which commanded respect. In answer to Japp's questions, she explained that she had been with the dead man for fourteen years. He had been a generous and considerate master. She had never seen Mr and Mrs Parker until three days ago, when they arrived unexpectedly to stay. She was of the opinion that they had asked themselves - the master had certainly not seemed pleased to see them. The cuff-links which Japp showed her had not belonged to Mr Protheroe - she was sure of that. Questioned about the pistol, she said that she believed her master had a weapon of that kind. He kept it locked up. She had seen it once some years ago, but could not say whether this was the same one. She had heard no shot last night, but that was not surprising, as it was a big, rambling house, and her rooms and those prepared for the Parkers were at the other end of the building. She did not know what time Mr Protheroe had gone t°bed - he was still up when she retired at half past nine. It was not his habit to go at once to bed when he went to his room. Usually he would sit up half the night, reading and smoking. He was a great smoker.

Then Poirot interposed a question: 'Did your master sleep with his window open or shut, as a rule?' Miss Clegg considered.

'It was usually open, at any rate at the top.' 'Yet now it is closed. Can you explain that?' 'No, unless he felt a draught and shut it.' Japp asked her a few more questions and then dismissed her.

Next he interviewed the Parkers separately. Mrs Parker was inclined to be hysterical and tearful; Mr Parker was full of bluster and abuse. He denied that the cuff-link was his, but as his wife had previously recognized it, this hardly improved matters for him; and as he had also denied ever having been in Protheroe's room, Japp considered that he had sufficient evidence to apply for a warrant.

Leaving Pollard in charge, Japp bustled back to the village and got into telephonic communication with headquarters. Poirot and I strolled back to the inn.

'You're unusually quiet,' I said. 'Doesn't the case interest you?' 'Au contraire, it interests me enormously. But it puzzles me also.' 'The motive is obscure,' I said thoughtfully, 'but I'm certain that Parker's a bad lot. The case against him seems pretty clear but for the lack of motive, and that may come out later.' 'Nothing struck you as being§ especially significant, although overlooked by Japp?' I looked at him curiously.

'What have you got up your sleeve, Poirot?' 'What did the dead man have up his sleeve?' 'Oh, that handkerchiefl' 'Exactly, the handkerchief.' 'A sailor carries his handkerchief in his sleeve,' I said thoughtfully.

'An excellent point, Hastings, though not the one I had in mind.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes, over and over again I go back to the smell of cigarette-smoke.'

'I didn't smell any,' I cried wonderingly.

'No more did I, chef am pounds

I looked earnestly at him. It is so difficult to know when Poirot is pulling one's leg, but he seemed thoroughly in earnest and was frowning to himself.

The inquest took place two days later. In the meantime other evidence had come to light. A tramp had admitted that he had climbed over the wall into the Leigh House garden, where he often slept in a shed that was left unlocked. He declared that at twelve o'clock he had heard two men quarrelling loudly in a room on the first floor. One was demanding a sum of money; the other was angrily refusing. Concealed behind a bush, he had seen the two men as they passed and repassed the lighted window. One he knew well as being Mr Protheroe, the owner of the house; the other he identified positively as Mr Parker.

It was clear now that the Parkers had come to Leigh House to blackmail Protheroe, and when later it was discovered that the dead man's real name was Wendover, and that he had been a lieutenant in the Navy and had been concerned in the blowing up of the first-class cruiser Merrythought, in 9xo, the case seemed to be rapidly clearing. It was supposed that Parker, cognizant of the part Wendover had played, had tracked him down and dem.anded hush-money which the other refused to pay. In the course of the quarrel, Wendover drew his revolver, and Parker snatched it from him and shot him, subsequently endeavouring to give it the appearance of suicide.

Parker was committed for trial, reserving his defence. We had attended the police-court proceedings. As we left, Poirot nodded his head.

'It must be so,' he murmured to himself. 'Yes, it must be so. I will delay no longer.'

He went into the post office, and wrote off a note which he despatched by special messenger. I did not see to whom it was addressed. Then we returned to the inn where we had stayed on that memorable weekend.

Poirot was restless, going to and from the window.

'I await a visitor,' he explained. 'It cannot be - surely it cannot be that I am mistaken? No, here she is.' To my utter astonishment, in another minute Miss Clegg walked into the room. She was less calm than usual, and was breathing hard as though she had been running. I saw the fear in her eyes as she looked at Poirot.

'Sit down, mademoiselle,' he said kindly. 'I guessed rightly, did I not?' For answer she burst into tears.

'Why did you do it?' asked Poirot gently. 'Why?' 'I loved him so,' she answered. 'I was nursemaid to him when he was a little boy. Oh, be merciful to me!' 'I will do all I can. But you understand that I cannot permit an innocent man to hang - even though he is an unpleasing scoundrel.' She sat up and said in a low voice: 'Perhaps in the end I could not have, either. Do whatever must be done.' Then, rising, she hurried from the room.

'Did she shoot him?' I asked, utterly bewildered.

Poirot smiled and shook his head.

'He shot himself. Do you remember that he carried his handkerchief in his right sleeve? That showed me that he was left-handed.

Fearing exposure, after his stormy interview with Mr Parker, he shot himself. In the morning Miss Clegg came to call him as usual and found him lying dead. As she has just told us, she had known him from a little boy upward, and was filled with fury against the Parkers, who had driven him to this shameful death. She regarded them as murderers, and then suddenly she saw a chance of making them suffer for the deed they had inspired.

She alone knew that he was left-handed. She changed the pistol to his right hand, closed and bolted the window, dropped the bit of cuff-link she had picked up in one of the downstairs rooms, and went out, locking the door and removing the key.'

'Poirot,' I said, in a burst of enthusiasm, 'you are magnificent.

All that from the one little clue of the handkerchiefl'

'And the cigarette-smoke. If the window had been closed, and all those cigarettes smoked, the room ought to have been full of stale tobacco. Instead, it was perfectly fresh, so I deduced at once that the window must have been open all night, and only closed in the morning, and that gave me a very interesting line of specula-tion.

I could conceive of no circumstances under which a murderer could want to shut the window. It would be to his advantage to leave it open, and pretend that the murderer had escaped that way, if the theory of suicide did not go down. Of course, the tramp's evidence, when I heard it, confirmed my suspicions. He could never have overheard that conversation unless the window had been open.'

'Splendid? I said heartily. 'Now, what about some tea?'

'Spoken like a true Englishman,' said Poirot with a sigh. 'I suppose it is not likely that I could obtain here a glass of sirop?'

CHAPTER XV WASPS' NEST

Out of the house came John Harrison and stood a moment on the terrace looking out over the garden. He was a big man with a lean, cadaverous face. His aspect was usually somewhat grim but when, as now, the rugged features softened into a smile, there was something very attractive about him.

John Harrison loved his garden, and it had never looked better than it did on this August evening, summery and languorous.

The rambler roses were still beautiful; sweet peas scented the air.

A well-known creaking sound made Harrison turn his head sharply. Who was coming in through the garden gate? In another minute, an expression of utter astonishment came over his face, for the dandified figure coming up the path was the last he expected to see in this part of the world.

'By all that's wonderful,' cried Harrison. 'Monsieur Poirott'

It was, indeed, the famous Hercule Poirot whose renown as a detective had spread over the whole world.

'Yes,' he said, 'it is I. You said to me once: "If you are ever in this part of the world, come and see me." I take you at your word.

I arrive.'

'And I'm delighted,' said Harrison heartily. 'Sit down and have a drink.'

With a hospitable hand, he indicated a table on the veranda bearing assorted bottles.

'I thank you,' said Poirot, sinking down into a basket chair.

'You have, I suppose, no drop? No, no, I thought not. A little plain soda water then - no whisky.' And he added in a feeling voice as the other placed the glass beside him: 'Alas, my moustache are limp. It is this heatl'

'And what brings you into this quiet spot?' asked Harrison as he dropped into another chair. 'Pleasure?'

'No, mon ami, business.'

'Business? In this out-of-the-way place?'

Poirot nodded gravely. 'But yes, my friend, all crimes are not committed in crowds, you know?'

The other laughed. 'I suppose that was rather an idiotic remark of mine. But what particular crime are you investigating down here, or is that a thing I mustn't ask?'

'You may ask,' said the detective. 'Indeed, I would prefer that you asked.'

Harrison looked at him curiously. He sensed something a little unusual in the other's manner. 'You are investigating a crime, you say?' he advanced rather hesitatingly. 'A serious crime?'

'A crime of the most serious there is.' 'You mean...' 'Murder.'

So gravely did Hercule Poirot say that word that Harrison was quite taken aback. The detective was looking straight at him and again there was something so unusual in his glance that Harrison hardly knew how to proceed. At last, he said: 'But I have heard of no murder.'

'No,' said Poirot, 'you would not have heard of it.'

'Who has been murdered?'

'As yet,' said Hercule Poirot, 'nobody.'

'What?'

'That is why I said you would not have heard of it. I am investigating a crime that has not yet taken place.'

'But look here, that is nonsense.'

'Not at all. If one can investigate a murder before it has hap-pened, surely that is very much better than afterwards. One might even - a little idea - prevent it.'

Harrison stared at him. 'You are not serious, Monsieur Poirot.' 'But yes, I am serious.'

'You really believe that a murder is going to be committed? oh, it's absurd!'

Hercule Poirot finished the first part of the sentence without taking any notice of the exclamation.

'Unless we can manage to prevent it. Yes, mon ami, that is what I mean.' 'We?' 'I said we. I shall need your cooperation.' 'Is that why you came down here?' Again Poirot looked at him, and again an indefinable something made Harrison uneasy.

'I came here, Monsieur ttarrison because I - well - like you.' And then he added in an entirely different voice: 'I see, Monsieur Harrison, that you have a wasps' nest there. You should destroy it.' The change of subject made Harrison frown in a puzzled way.

He followed Poirot's glance and said in rather a bewildered voice: 'As a matter of fact, I'm going to. Or rather, young Langton is.

You remember Claude Langton? He was at that same dinner where I met you. He's coming over this evening to take the nest.

Rather fancies himself at the job.' 'Ah!' said Poirot. 'And how is he going to do it?' 'Petrol and the garden syringe. He's bringing his own syringe over; it's a more convenient size than mine.' 'There is another way, is there not?' asked Poirot. 'With cyanide of potassium?' Harrison looked a little surprised. 'Yes, but that's rather dangerous stuff. Always a risk having it about the place.' Poirot nodded gravely. 'Yes, it is deadly poison.' He waited a minute and then repeated in a grave voice. 'Deadly poison.' 'Useful if you want to do away with your mother-in-law, eh?' aid Harrison with a laugh.

But Hercule Poirot remained grave. 'And you are quite sure, Monsieur Harrison, that it is with petrol that Monsieur Langton ia going to destroy your wasps' nest?' 'Quite sure. Why?' 'I wondered. I was at the chemist's in Barchester this afternoon.

For one of my purchases I had to sign the poison book. I saw the last entry. It was for cyanide of potassium and it was signed for by Claude Langton.'

Harrison stared. 'That's odd,' he said. 'Langton told me the other day that he'd never dream of using the stuff; in fact, he said it oughtn't to be sold for the purpose.'

Poirot looked out over the roses. His voice was very quiet as he asked a question. 'Do you like Langton?'

The other started. The question somehow seemed to find him quite unprepared. 'I - I - well, I mean - of course, I like him.

Why shouldn't I?'

'I only wondered,' said Poirot placidly, 'whether you did.'

And as the other did not answer, he went on. 'I also wondered if he liked you?'

'What are you getting at, Monsieur Poirot? There's something in your mind I can't fathom.'

'I am going to be very frank. You are engaged to be married, Monsieur Harrison. I know Miss Molly Dearie. She is a very charming, a very beautiful girl. Before she was engaged to you, she was engaged to Claude Langton. She threw him over for you.'

Harrison nodded.

'I do not ask what her reasons were; she may have been justified.

But I tell you this, it is not too much to suppose that Langton has not forgotten or forgiven.'

'You're wrong, Monsieur Poirot. I swear you're wrong. Lang-ton's been a sportsman; he's taken things like a man. He's been amazingly decent to me - gone out of his way to be friendly.'

'And that does not strike you as unusual? You use the word

"amazingly", but you do not seem to be amazed.'

'What do you mean, M. Poirot?'

'I mean,' said Poirot, and his voice had a new note in it, 'that a man may conceal his hate till the proper time comes.'

'Hate?' Harrison shook his head and laughed.

'The English are very stupid,' said Poirot. 'They think that they can deceive anyone but that no one can deceive them. The sportsman - the good fellow - never will they believe evil of him.

And because they are brave, but stupid, sometimes they die when they need not die.' /

'You are warning me,' said Harrison in a low voice. 'I see it now - what has puzzled me all along. You are warning me against Claude Langton. You came here today to warn me...'

Poirot nodded. Harrison sprang up suddenly. 'But you are mad, Monsieur Poirot. This is England. Things don't happen like that here. Disappointed suitors don't go about stabbing people in the back and poisoning them. And you're wrong about Langton. That chap wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'The lives of flies are not my concern,' said Poirot placidly.

'And although you say Monsieur Langton would not take the life of one, yet you forget that he is even now preparing to take the lives of several thousand wasps.'

Harrison did not at once reply. The little detective in his turn sprang to his feet. He advanced to his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder. So agitated was he that he almost shook the big man, and, as he did so, he hissed into his ear: 'Rouse yourself, my friend, rouse yourself. And look - look where I am pointing. There on the bank, close by that tree root. See you, the wasps returning home, placid at the end of the day? In a little hour, there will be destruction, and they know it not. There is no one to tell them.

They have not, it seems, a Hercule Poirot. I tell you, Monsieur Harrison, I am down here on business. Murder is my business.

And it is my business before it has happened as well as afterwards.

At what time does Monsieur Langton come to take this wasps' nest?'

'Langton would never...'

'At what time?'

'At nine o'clock. But I tell you, you're all wrong. Langton would never...°

'These Englishl' cried Poirot in a passion. He caught up his hat and stick and moved down the path, pausing to speak over his shoulder. 'I do not stay to argue with you. I should only enrage myself. But you understand, I return at nine o'clock?'

Harrison opened his mouth to speak, but Poirot did not give him the chance. 'I know what you would say: "Langton would never," et cetera. Ah, Langton would never{ But all the same I return at nine o'clock. But, yes, it will amuse me - put it like that - it will amuse me to see the taking of a wasps' nest. Another of your English sports' He waited for no reply but passed rapidly down the path and out through the door that creaked. Once outside on the road, his pace slackened. His vivacity died down, his face became grave and troubled. Once he drew his watch from his pocket and con-suited it. The hands pointed to ten minutes past eight. 'Over three quarters of an hour,' he murmured. 'I wonder if I should have waited.' His footsteps slackened; he almost seemed on the point of returning. Some vague foreboding seemed to assail him. He shook it off resolutely, however, and continued to walk in the direction of the village. But his face was still troubled, and once or twice he shook his head like a man only partly satisfied.

It was still some minutes of nine when he once more approached the garden door. It was a clear, still evening; hardly a breeze stirred the leaves. There was, perhaps, something a little sinister in the stillness, like the lull before a storm.

Poirot's footsteps quickened every so slightly. He was suddenly alarmed - and uncertain. He feared he knew not what.

And at that moment the garden door opened and Claude Langton stepped quickly out into the road. He started when he saw Poirot.

'Oh - er - good evening.' 'Good evening, Monsieur Langton. You are early.' Langton stared at him. 'I don't know what you mean.' 'You have taken the wasps' nest?' 'As a matter of fact, I didn't.' 'Oh!' said Poirot softly. 'So you did not take the wasps' nest.

What did you do then?' 'Oh, just sat and yarned a bit with old Harrison. I really must hurry along now, Monsieur Poirot. I'd no idea you were remaining in this part of the world.' 'I-had business here, you see.'

'Ohl Well, you'll find Harrison on the terrace. Sorry I can't stop.'

He hurried away. Poirot looked after him. A nervous young fellow, good-looking with a weak mouthl

'So I shall find Harrison on the terrace,' murmured Poirot.

'I wonder.' He went in through the garden door and up the path.

Harrison was sitting in a chair by the table. He sat motionless and did not even turn his head as Poirot came up to him.

'Ah! Mon ami,' said Poirot. 'You are all right, eh?'

There was a long pause and, then Harrison said in a queer, dazed voice, 'What did you say?'

'I said - are you all right?'

'All right? Yes, I'm all right. Why not?' 'You feel no ill effects? That is good.' 'Ill effects? From what?' 'Washing soda.'

Harrison roused himself suddenly. 'Washing soda? What do you mean?'

Poirot made an apologetic gesture. 'I infinitely regret the necessity, but I put some in your pocket.'

'You put some in my pocket? What on earth for?'

IIarrison stared at him. Poirot spoke quietly and impersonally like a lecturer coming down to the level of a small child.

'You see, one of the advantages, or disadvantages, of being a detective is that it brings you into contact with the criminal classes. And the criminal classes, they can teach you some very interesting and curious things. There was a pickpocket once - I interested myself in him because for once in a way he has not done what they say he has done - and so I get him off. And because he is grateful he pays me in the only way he can think of - which is to show me the tricks of his trade.

'And so it happens that I can pick a man's pocket if I choose without his ever suspecting the fact. I lay one hand on his shoulder, I excite myself, and he feels nothing. But all the same I have managed to transfer what is in his pocket to my pocket and leave washing soda in its place.

'You see,' continued Poirot dreamily, 'if a man wants to get at some poison quickly to put in a glass, unobserved, he positively must keep it in his right-hand coat pocket; there is nowhere else.

I knew it would be there.' He dropped his hand into his pocket and brought out a few white, lumpy crystals. 'Exceedingly dangerous,' he murmured, 'to carry it like that - loose.' Calmly and without hurrying himself, he took from another pocket a wide-mouthed bottle. He slipped in the crystals, stepped to the table and filled up the bottle with plain water. Then carefully corking it, he shook it until all the crystals were dissolved.

Harrison watched him as though fascinated.

Satisfied with his solution, Poirot stepped across to the nest.

He uncorked the bottle, turned his head aside, and poured the solution into the wasps' nest, then stood back a pace or two watching.

Some wasps that were returning alighted, quivered a little and then lay still. Other wasps crawled out of the hole only to die.

Poirot watched for a minute or two and then nodded his head and came back to the veranda.

'A quick death,' he said. 'A very quick death.' Harrison found his voice. 'How much do you know?' Poirot looked straight ahead. 'As I told you, I saw Claude Langton's name in the book. What I did not tell you was that almost immediately afterwards, I happened to meet him. He told me he had been buying cyanide of potassium at your request - to take a wasps' nest. That struck me as a little odd, my friend, because I remember that at that dinner of which you spoke, you held forth on the superior merits of petrol and denounced the buying of cyanide as dangerous and unnecessary.' 'Go on.' 'I knew something else. I had seen Claude Langton and Molly Deane together when they thought no one saw them. I do not know what lovers' quarrel it was that originally parted them and drove her into your arms, but I realized that misunderstandings were over and that Miss Deane was drifting back to her love.' Go on.' 'I knew something more, my friend. I was in Harley Street the other day, and I saw you come out of a certain doctor's house. I know that doctor and for what disease one consults him, and I read the expression on your face. I have seen it only once or twice in my lifetime, but it is not easily mistaken. It was the face of a man under sentence of death. I am right, am I not?' 'Quite right. He gave me two months.' 'You did not see me, my friend, for you had other things to think about. I saw something else on your face - the thing that I told you this afternoon men try to conceal. I saw hate there, my friend. You did not trouble to conceal it, because you thought there were none to observe.' 'Go on,' said Harrison.

'There is not much more to say. I came down here, saw Lang-ton's name by accident in the poison book as I tell you, met him, and came here to you. I laid traps for you. You denied having asked Langton to get cyanide, or rather you expressed surprise at his having done so. You were taken aback at first at my appearance, but presently you saw how well it would fit in and you encouraged my suspicions. I knew from Langton himself that he was coming at half past eight. You told me nine o'clock, thinking I should come and find everything over. And so I knew everything.' 'Why did you come?' cried Harrison. 'If only you hadn't come!' Poirot drew himself up. 'I told you,' he said, 'murder is my business.' 'Murder? Suicide, you mean.' 'No.' Poirot's voice rang out sharply and clearly. 'I mean murder.

Your death was to be quick and easy, but the death you planned for Langton was the worst death any man can die. He bought the poison; he comes to see you, and he is alone with you. You die suddenly, and the cyznide is found in your glass, and Claude Langton hangs. That was your plan.' Again Harrison moaned.

'Why did you come? Why did you come?' 'I have told you, but there is another reason. I liked you.

Listen, rnon ami, you are a dying man; you have lost the girl you loved, but there is one thing that you are not: you are not a murderer. Tell me now: are you glad or sorry that I came?'

There was a moment's pause and Harrison drew himself up.

There was a new dignity in his face - the look of a man who has conquered his own baser self. He stretched out his hand across the table.

'Thank goodness you came,' he cried. 'Oh, thank goodness you came.'

CHAPTER XVI THE VEILED LADY

I had noticed that for some time Poirot had been growing in-creasingly dissatisfied and restless. We had had no interesting cases of late, nothing on which my little friend could exercise his keen wits and remarkable powers of deduction. This morning he flung down the newspaper with an impatient 'Tchah!' - a favourite exclamation of his which sounded exactly like a cat sneezing.

'They fear me, Hastings; the criminals of your England they fear mci When the cat is there, the little mice, they come no more to the cheesel'

'I don't suppose the greater part of them even know of your existence,' I said, laughing.

Poirot looked at me reproachfully. He always imagines that the whole world is thinking and talking of Hercule Poirot. tie had certainly made a name for himself in London, but I could hardly believe that his existence struck terror into the criminal world.

'What about that daylight robbery of jewels in Bond Street the other day?' I asked.

'A neat coup,' said Poirot approvingly, 'though not in my line.

Pas de finesse, seuelment de l'audace! A man with a loaded cane smashes the plate-glass window of a jeweller's shop and grabs a number of precious stones. Worthy citizens immediately seize him; a policeman arrives. He is caught red-handed with the jewels on him. He is marched off to the police, and then it is discovered that the stones are paste. He has passed the real ones to a confederate - one of the aforementioned worthy citizens. He will go to prison - true; but when he comes out, there will be a nice little fortune awaiting him. Yes, not badly imagined. But I could do better than that. Sometimes, Hastings, I regret that I am of such a moral disposition. To work against the law, it would be pleasing, for a change.'

'Cheer up, Poirot; you know you are unique in your own line.' 'But what is there on hand in my own line?' I picked up the paper.

'Here's an Englishman mysteriously done to death in Holland,' I said.

'They always say that - and later they find that he ate the tinned fish and that his death is perfectly natural.' 'Well, if you're determined to grouse?

'Tiens!' said Poirot, who had strolled across to the window.

'Here in the street is what they call in novels a "heavily veiled lady". She mounts the steps; she rings the bell - she comes to consult us. Here is a possibility of something interesting. When one is as young and pretty as that one, one does not veil the face except for a big affair.' A minute later our visitor was ushered in. As Poirot had said, she was indeed heavily veiled. It was impossible to distinguish her features until she raised her veil of black Spanish lace. Then I saw that Poirot's intuition had been right; the lady was extremely pretty, with fair hair and large blue eyes. From the costly simplicity of her attire, I deduced at once that she belonged to the upper strata of society.

'Monsieur Poirot,' said the lady in a soft, musical voice, 'I am in great trouble. I can hardly believe that you can help me, but I have heard such wonderful things of you that I come literally as a last hope to beg you to do the impossible.' 'The impossible, it pleases me always,' said Poirot. 'Continue, I beg of you, mademoiselle.' Our fair guest hesitated.

'But you must be frank,' added Poirot. 'You must not leave me in the dark on any point.' 'I will trust you,' said the girl suddenly. 'You have heard of Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan?' I looked up with keen interest. The announcement of Lady Millicent's engagement to the young Duke of Southshire had appeared a few days previously. She was, I knew, the fifth daughter of an impecunious Irish peer, and the Duke of Southshire was one of the best matches in England.

'Iarn Lady Millicent,' continued the girl. 'You may have read of nY engagement. I should be one of the happiest girls alive; but oh, M. Poirot, I am in terrible troublel There is a man, a horrible man - his name is Lavington; and he - I hardly know how to tell you. 'Ihere was a letter I wrote - I was only sixteen at the time; and he - he - '

'¢ letter that you wrote to this Mr Lavington?'

'Oh no - not to him! To a young soldier - I was very fond of him- he was killed in the war.'

'I understand,' said Poirot kindly.

'It v/as a foolish letter, an indiscreet letter, but indeed, M.

PoirOt, nothing more. But there are phrases in it which - which might bear a different interpretation.'

'I see,' said Poirot. 'And this letter has come into the possession of lgr Lavington?'

'¥e, and he threatens, unless I pay him an enormous sum of money, a sum that it is quite impossible for me to raise, to send it to the Duke.'

'The dirty swinel' I ejaculated. 'I beg your pardon, Lady Millicent.'

'l/culd it not be wiser to confess all to your future husband?' 'I &are not, M. Poirot. The Duke is a rather peculiar character, jealous and suspicious and prone to believe the worst. I might as well break off my engagement at once.'

'l)ear, dear,' said Poirot with an expressive grimace. 'And what do you want me to do, milady?'

'I thought perhaps that I might ask Mr Lavington to call upon you. I would tell him that you were empowered by me to discuss the matter. Perhaps you could reduce his demands.'

'Btlat sum does he mention?'

've'enty thousand pounds - an impossibility. I doubt if I could xaise a thousand, even.'

''/ora might perhaps borrow the money on the prospect of your aplrOching marriage - but I doubt if you could get hold of half that sram. Besides - eh bien, it is repugnant to me that you should payl 1o, the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot shall defeat your enemiesl

' Cheer up, Poirot; you know you are unique in your own line.' · But what is there on hand in my own line?' I picked up the paper.

' Here's an Englishman mysteriously done to death in Holland,' I staid.

' They always say that - and later they find that he ate the tinned fisl and that his death is perfectly natural.' ' Well, if you're determined to grouse!' ''Tiens!' said Poirot, who had strolled across to the window.

'HEre in the street is what they call in novels a "heavily veiled lacy". She mounts the steps; she rings the bell - she comes to consult us. Here is a possibility of something interesting. When one is as young and pretty as that one, one does not veil the face except for- a big affair.' minute later our visitor was ushered in. As Poirot had said, she was indeed heavily veiled. It was impossible to distinguish her features until she raised her veil of black Spanish lace. Then I sa;v that Poirot's intuition had been right; the lady was extremely pretty, with fair hair and large blue eyes. From the costly simplicity of her attire, I deduced at once that she belonged to the upper tr ara of society.

Monsieur Poirot,' said the lady in a soft, musical voice, 'I am in great trouble. I can hardly believe that you can help me, but I halve heard such wonderful things of you that I come literally as a last hope to beg you to do the impossible.' 'The impossible, it pleases me always,' said Poirot. 'Continue, I leg of you, mademoiselle.' Our fair guest hesitated.

'But you must be frank,' added Poirot. 'You must not leave me in the dark on any point.' 'I will trust you,' said the girl suddenly. 'You have heard of Ldy Millicent Castle Vaughan?' I looked up with keen interest. The announcement of Lady M2illicent's engagement to the young Duke of Southshire had alpeared a few days previously. She was, I knew, the fifth daughter of an impecunious Irish peer, and the Duke of Southshire was one of the best matches in England.

'I am Lady Millicent,' continued the girl. 'You may have read of my engagement. I should be one of the happiest girls alive; but oh, M. Poirot, I am in terrible troublel There is a man, a horrible man - his name is Lavington; and he - I hardly know how to tell you. There was a letter I wrote - I was only sixteen at the time; and he - he ' 'A letter that you wrote to this Mr Lavington?' 'Oh no - not to him! To a young soldier - I was very fond of him - he was killed in the war.' 'I understand,' said Poirot kindly.

'It was a foolish letter, an indiscreet letter, but indeed, M.

Poirot, nothing more. But there are phrases in it which - which might bear a different interpretation.' 'I see,' said Poirot. 'And this letter has come into the possession of Mr Lavington?' 'Yes, and he threatens, unless I pay him an enormous sum of money, a sum that it is quite impossible for me to raise, to send it to the Duke.' 'The dirty swine? I ejaculated. 'I beg your pardon, Lady Millicent.' 'Would it not be wiser to confess all to your future husband?' 'I dare not, M. Poirot. The Duke is a rather peculiar character, jealous and suspicious and prone to believe the worst. I might as well break off my engagement at once.' 'Dear, dear,' said Poirot with an expressive grimace. 'And what do you want me to do, milady?' 'I thought perhaps that I might ask Mr Lavington to call upon you. I would tell him that you were empowered by me to discuss the matter. Perhaps you could reduce his demands.' 'What sum does he mention?' 'Twenty thousand pounds - an impossibility. I doubt if I could raise a thousand, even.' 'You might perhaps borrow the money on the prospect of your approaching marriage - but I doubt if you could get hold of half that sum. Besides - eh bien, it is repugnant to me that you should payl No, the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot shall defeat your enemiesl

Send me this Mr Lavington. Is he likely to bring the letter with him?'

The girl shook her head.

'I do not think so. He is very cautious.'

'I suppose there is no doubt that he really has it?'

'He showed it to me when I went to his house.'

'You went to his house? That was very imprudent, milady.'

'Was it? I was so desperate. I hoped my entreaties might move him.'

'Oh, Id Id! The Lavingtons of this world are not moved by entreatiesl He would welcome them as showing how much im-portance you attached to the document. Where docs he live, this frae gentleman?'

'At Buona Vista, Wimbledon. I went there after dark - ' Poirot groaned. 'I declared that I would inform the police in the end, but he only laughed in a horrid, sneering manner. "By all means, my dear Lady Millicent, do so if you wish," he said.'

'Yes, it is hardly an affair for the police,' murmured Poirot.

' "But I think you will be wiser than that," he continued. "See, here is your letter - in this little Chinese puzzle boxl" He held it o that I could see. I tried to snatch at it, but he was too quick for me. With a horrid smile he folded it up and replaced it in the little wooden box. "It will be quite safe here, I assure you," he said, "and the box itself lives in such a clever place that you would never find it." My eyes turned to the small wall-safe, and he shook his head and laughed. "I have a better safe than that," he said. Oh, he was odiousl M. Poirot, do you think that you can help me?'

'Have faith in Papa Poirot. I will find a way.'

These reassurances were all very well, I thought, as Poirot gallantly ushered his fair client down the stairs, but it seemed to me that we had a tough nut to crack. I said as much to Poirot when he returned. He nodded ruefully.

'Yes - the solution does not leap to the eye. He has the whip hand, this M. Lavington. For the moment I do not see how we · re to circumvent him.'

Mr Lavingdon duly called upon us that afternoon. Lady Millicent had spoken truly when she described him as an odious man. I felt a positive tingling in the end of my boot, so keen was I to kick him down the stairs. He was blustering and overbearing in manner, laughed Poirot's gentle suggestions to scorn, and generally showed himself as master of the situation. I could not help feeling that Poirot was hardly appearing at his best. He looked discouraged and crestfallen.

'Well, gentlemen,' said Lavington, as he took up his hat, 'we don't seem to be getting much further. The case stands like this: I'll let the Lady Millicent off cheap, as she is such a charming young lady.' He leered odiously. 'We'll say eighteen thousand.

I'm off to Paris today - a little Piece of business to attend to over there. I shall be back on Tuesday. Unless the money is paid by Tuesday evening, the letter goes to the Duke. Don't tell me Lady Millicent can't raise the money. Some of her gentlemen friends would be only too willing to oblige such a pretty woman with a loan - if she goes the right way about it.'

My face flushed, and I took a step forward, but Lavington had wheeled out of the room as he finished his sentence.

'My GodI' I cried. 'Something has got to be done. You seem to be taking this lying down, Poirot.'

'You have an excellent heart, my friend - but your grey cells are in a deplorable condition. I have no wish to impress Mr Lavington with my capabilities. The more pusillanimous he thinks me, the better.'

'Why?'

'It is curious,' murmured Poirot reminiscently, 'that I should have uttered a wish to work against the law just before Lady Millicent arrivedl'

'You are going to burgle his house while he is away?' I gasped.

'Sometimes, Hastings, your mental processes are amazingly quick.'

'Suppose he takes the letter with him?'

Poirot shook his head.

'That is very unlikely. He has evidently a hiding-place in his house that he fancies to be pretty impregnable.'

'When do we - er - do the deed?' 'Tomorrow night. We will start from here about eleven o'clock.'

At the time appointed I was ready to set off. I had donned a dark suit, and a soft dark hat. Poirot beamed kindly on me.

'You have dressed the part, I see,' he observed. 'Come let us take the underground to Wimbledon.' 'Aren't we going to take anything with us? Tools to break in with?' 'My dear Hastings, Hercule Poirot does not adopt such crude methods.' I retired, snubbed, but my curiosity was alert.

It was just on midnight that we entered the small suburban garden of Buona Vista. The house was dark and silent. Poirot went straight to a window at the back of the house, raised the sash noiselessly and bade me enter.

'How did you know this window would be open?' I whispered, for really it seemed uncanny.

'Because I sawed through the catch this morning.' 'What?' 'But yes, it was the most simple. I called, presented a fictitious card and one of Inspector Japp's official ones. I said I had been sent, recommended by Scotland Yard, to attend to some burglarproof fastenings that Mr Lavington wanted fixed while he waz away. The housekeeper welcomed me with enthusiasm. It seems they have had two attempted burglaries here lately - evidently our little idea has occurred to other clients of Mr Lavington's - with nothing of value taken. I examined all the windows, made my little arrangement, forbade the servants to touch the windows until tomorrow, as they were electrically connected up, and withdrew gracefully.' 'Really, Poirot, you are wonderful.' 'Mon ami, it was of the simplest. Now, to work! The servants sleep at the top of the house, so we will run little risk of disturbing them.' 'I presume the safe is built into the wall somewhere?' 'Safe? Fiddlesticks! There is no safe. Mr Lavington is an

intelligent man. You will see, he will have devised a hiding-place much more intelligent than a safe. A safe is the first thing everyone looks for.' Whereupon we began a systematic search of the entire place.

But after several hours' ransacking of the house, our search had been unavailing. I saw symptoms of anger gathering on Poirot's face.

'Ah, sapristi, is Hercule Poirot to be beaten? Never! Let us be calm. Let us reflect. Let us reason. Let us - en! - employ our little grey cells!' He paused for some moments, bending his brows in concentration; then the green light I knew so well stole into his eyes.

'I have been an imbecile! The kitchen?

'The kitchen,' I cried. 'But that's impossible. The servantsl' 'Exactly. Just what ninety-nine people out of a hundred would sayl And for that very reason the kitchen is the ideal place to choose. It is full of various homely objects. En avant, to the kitchenl' I followed him, completely sceptical, and watched whilst he dived into bread-bins, tapped saucepans, and put his head into the gas-oven. In the end, tired of watching him, I strolled back to the study. I was convinced that there, and there only, would we find the cache. I made a further minute search, noted that it was now a quarter past four and that therefore it would soon be growing light, and then went back to the kitchen regions.

To my utter amazement, Poirot was now standing right inside the coal-bin, to the utter ruin of his neat light suit. He made a grimace.

'But yes, my friend, it is against all my instincts so to ruin my appearance, but what will you?' 'But Lavington can't have buried it under the coal?' 'If you would use your eyes, you would see that it is not the coal that I examine.' I then saw that on a shelf behind the coal-bunker some logs of wood were piled. Poirot was dexterously taking them down one by one. Suddenly he uttered a low exclamation.

'Your knife, Hastings!'

I handed it to him. He appeared to insert it in the wood, and suddenly the log split in two. It had been neatly sawn in half and a cavity hollowed out in the centre. From this cavity Poirot took a little wooden box of Chinese make.

'Well done!' I cried, carried out of myself.

'Gently, Hastingsl Do not raise your voice too much. Come, let us be off, before the daylight is upon us.' Slipping the box into his pocket, he leaped lightly out of the coal-bunker, brushed himself down as well as he could, and leaving the house by the same way as we had come, we walked rapidly in the direction of London.

'But what an extraordinary place!' I expostulated. 'Anyone might have used the log.' 'In July, Hastings? And it was at the bottom of the pile - a very ingenious hiding-place. Ah, here is a taxil Now for home, a wash, and a refreshing sleep.'

After the excitement of the night, I slept late. When I finally strolled into our sitting-room just before one o'clock, I was surprised to see Poirot, leaning back in an armchair, the Chinese box open beside him, calmly reading the letter he had taken from it.

He smiled at me affectionately, and tapped the sheet he held.

'She was right, the Lady Millicent; never would the Duke have pardoned this letter{ It contains some of the most extravagant terms of affection I have ever come across.' 'Really, Poirot,' I said, rather disgustedly, 'I don't think you should really have read the letter. That's the sort of thing that isn't done.' 'It is done by Hercule Poirot,' replied my friend imperturbably.

'And another thing,' I said. 'I don't think using Japp's official card yesterday was quite playing the game.' 'But I was not playing a game, Hastings. I was conducting a case.' I shrugged my shoulders. One can't argue with a point of view.

'A step on the stairs,' said Poirot. 'That will be Lady Millicent.' Our fair client came in with an anxious expression on her face

which changed to one of delight on seeing the letter and go: which Poirot held up.

'Oh, M. Poirot. How wonderful of you! How did you do it?' 'By rather reprehensible methods, milady. But Mr Lavingto will not prosecute. This is your letter, is it not?' She glanced through it.

'Yes. Oh, how can I ever thank youl You are a wonderfu wonderful man. Where was it hidden?' Poirot told her.

'How very clever of you? She took up the smll box from th table. 'I shall keep this as a souvenir.' 'I had hoped, milady, that you would permit fne to keep it. also as a souvenir.' 'I hope to send you a better souvenir than that - on my wedding day. You shall not find me ungrateful, M. Poirot.' 'The pleasure of doing you a service will be more to me than cheque - so you permit that I retain the box.' 'Oh no, M. Poirot, I simply must have that,' she cried !aug} ingly.

She stretched out her hand, but Poirot was before her./lis hah closed over it.

'I think not.' His voice had changed.

'What do you mean?' Her voice seemed to have grown sharpe 'At any rate, permit me to abstract its further contents. Yo observe that the original cavity has been reduced by hall In th top half, the compromising letter; in the bottom -- ' He made a nimble gesture, then held out his haod. On the pair were four large glittering stones, and two big milky white pearl: 'The jewels stolen in Bond Street the other day, I rather fancy murmured Poirot. 'Japp will tell us.' To my utter amazement, Japp himself stepped out from Poirot bedroom.

'An old friend of yours, I believe,' said Poirot politely to La Milllcent.

'Nabbed, by the Lord!' said Lady Millicent, with a comple change of manner. 'You nippy old devill' She looked at Poirot wit almost affectionate awe.

'Well, Gertie, my dear,' said Japp, 'the game's up this time, I fancy. Fancy seeing you again so sooni We've got your pal, too, the gentleman who called here the other day calling himself Lavington. As for Lavington himself, alias Croker, alias Reed, I wonder which of the gang it was who stuck a knife into him the other day in Holland? Thought he'd got the goods with him, didn't you? And he hadn't. He double-crossed you properly - hid 'em in his own house. You had two fellows looking for them, and then you tackled M. Poirot here, and by a piece of amazing luck he found them.'

'You do like talking, don't you?' said the late Lady Millicent.

'Easy there, now. I'll go quietly. You can't say that I'm not the perfect lady. Ta-ta, all!'

'The shoes were wrong,' said Poirot dreamily, while I was still too stupefied to speak. 'I have made my little observations of your English nation, and a lady, a born lady, is always particular about her shoes. She may have shabby clothes, but she will be well shod.

Now, this Lady Millicent had smart, expensive clothes, and cheap shoes. It was not likely that either you or I should have seen the real Lady Millicent; she has been very little in London, and this girl had a certain superficial resemblance which would pass well enough. As I say, the shoes first awakened my suspicions, and then her story - and her veil - were a little melodramatic, eh?

The Chinese box with a bogus compromising letter in the top must have been known to all the gang, but the log of wood was the late Mr Lavington's own idea. Eh, par exernple, Hastings, I hope you will not again wound my feelings as you did yesterday by aying that I am unknown to the criminal classes. Ma roi, they even employ me when they themselves fail?

CHAPTER XVII PROBLEM AT SEA

'Colonel Clapperton!' said General Forbes.

He said it with an effect midway between a snort and a sniff.

Miss Ellie Henderson leaned forward, a strand of her soft grey hair blowing across her face. Her eyes, dark and snapping, gleamed with a wicked pleasure.

'Such a soldierly-looking man? she said with malicious intent, and smoothed back the lock of hair to await the result.

'Soldierly!' exploded General Forbes. He tugged at his military moustache and his face became bright red.

'In the Guards, wasn't he?' murmured Miss Henderson, completing her work.

'Guards? Guards? Pack of nonsense. Fellow was on the music hall stagel Fact! Joined up and was out in France counting tins of plum and apple. Huns dropped a stray bomb and he went home with a flesh wound in the arm. Somehow or other got into Lady Carrington's hospital.' 'So that's how they met.' 'Fact! Fellow played the wounded hero. Lady Carrington had no sense and oceans of money. Old Carrington had been in munitions. She'd been a widow only six months. This fellow snaps her up in no time. She wangled him a job at the War Office. Colonel Clappertonl Pahl' he snorted.

'And before the war he was on the music hall stage,' mused Miss Henderson, trying to reconcile the distinguished grey-haired Colonel Clapperton with a red-nosed comedian singing mirth-provoking songs.

'Fact!' said General Forbes. 'Heard it from old Basaingtonffrench.

And he heard it from old Badger Cotterill who'd got it from Snooks Parker.' Miss Henderson nodded brightly. 'That does seem to settle it!' she said.

A fleeting smile showed for a minute on the face of a small man sitting near them. Miss Henderson noticed the smile. She was observant. It had shown appreciation of the irony underlying her last remark - irony which the General never for a moment suspected.

The General himself did not notice the smiles. He glanced at his watch, rose and remarked: 'Exercise. Got to keep oneself fit on a boat,' and passed out through the open door on to the deck.

Miss Henderson glanced at the man who had smiled. It was a well-bred glance indicating that she was ready to enter into conversation with a fellow traveller.

'He is energetic - yes?' said the little man.

'He goes round the deck forty-eight times exactly,' said Miss Henderson. 'What an old gossip! And they say we are the scandal-loving sex.' 'What an impoliteness!' 'Frenchmen are always polite,' said Miss Henderson - there was the nuance of a question in her voice.

The little man responded promptly. 'Belgian, mademoiselle.' 'Obi Belgian.' 'Hercule Poirot. At your service.' The name aroused some memory. Surely she had heard it before - ? 'Are you enjoying this trip, M. Poirot?' 'Frankly, no. It was an imbecility to allow myself to be persuaded to come. I detest la mcr. Never does it remain tranquil no, not for a little minute.' 'Well, you admit it's quite calm now.' M. Poirot admitted this grudgingly. '.4 ce moment, yes. That is why I revive. I once more interest myself in what passes around me - your very adept handling of the General Forbes, for instance.' 'You mean -' Miss Henderson paused. ttercule Poirot bowed. 'Your methods of extracting the scandalous matter. Admirable?

Miss Henderson laughed in an unashamed manner. 'That touch about the Guards? I knew that would bring the old boy up spluttering and gasping.' She leaned forward confidentially. 'I admit I life scandal - the more ill-natured, the betterl'

Poirot looked thoughtfully at her - her slim well-preserved figure, her keen dark eyes, her grey hair; a woman of forty-five who was content to look her age.

Ellie said abruptly: 'I have it! Aren't you the great detective?' Poirot bowed. 'You are too amiable, mademoiselle.' But he made no disclaimer.

'How thrilling,' said Miss Henderson. 'Are you "hot on the trail" as they say in books? Have we a criminal secretly in our midst? Or am I being indiscreet?' 'Not at all. Not at all. It pains me to disappoint your expectations, but I am simply here, like everyone else, to amuse myself.' He said it in such a gloomy voice that Miss Henderson laughed.

'Oh! Well, you will be able to get ashore tomorrow at Alexandria.

You have been to Egypt before?' 'Never, mademoiselle.' Miss Henderson rose somewhat abruptly.

'I think I shall join the General on his constitutional,' she announced.

Poirot sprang politely to his feet.

She gave him a little nod and passed out on to the deck.

A faint puzzled look showed for a moment in Poirot's eyes, then, a little smile creasing his lips, he rose, put his head through the door and glanced down the deck. Miss Henderson was leaning against the rail talking to a tall, soldierly-looking man.

Poirot's smile deepened. He drew himself back into the smoking-room with the same exaggerated care with which a tortoise withdraws itself into its shell. For the moment he had the smoking-room to himself, though he rightly conjectured that that would not last long.

It did not. Mrs Clapperton, her cdrefully waved platinum head protected with a net, her massaged and dieted form dressed in a smart sports suit, came through the door from the bar with the purposeful air of a woman who has always been able to pay top price for anything she needed.

She said: 'John - ? Ohl Good morning, M. Poirot - have you seen John?'
'He's on the starboard deck, madame. Shall I - ?'

She arrested him with a gesture. 'I'll sit here a minute.' She at down in a regal fashion in the chair opposite him. From the distance she had looked a possible twenty-eight. Now, in spite of her exquisitely made-up face, her delicately plucked eyebrows, she looked not her actual forty-nine years, but a possible fifty-five.

Her eyes were a hard pale blue with tiny pupils.

'I was sorry not to have seen you at dinner last night,' she said.

'It was just a shade choppy, of course -' 'Prdcisgrnent,' said Poirot with feeling.

'Luckily, I am an excellent sailor,' said Mrs Clapperton. 'I say luckily, because, with my weak heart, seasickness would probably be the death of me.' 'You have the weak heart, madame?' 'Yes, I have to be most careful. I must not overtire myself AR the specialists say so!' Mrs Clapperton had embarked on the - to her - ever-fascinating topic of her health. 'John, poor darting, wears himself out trying to prevent me from doing too much. I live so intensely, if you know what I mean, M. Poirot?' 'Yes, yes.' 'He always says to me: "Try to be more of a vegetable, Adeline." But I can't. Life was meant to be lived, I feel. As a matter of fact I wore myself out as a girl in the war. My hospital - you've heard of my hospital? Of course I had nurses and matrons and all that but I actually ran it.' She sighed.

'Your vitality is marvellous, dear lady,' said Poirot, with the slightly mechanical air of one responding to his cue.

Mrs Clapperton gave a girlish laugh.

'Everyone tells me how young I ami It's absurd. I never try to pretend I'm a day less than forty-three,' she continued with lightly mendacious candour, 'but a lot of people find it hard to believe. "You're so alive, Adeline," they ay to me. But really, M.

Poirot, what would one be if one wasn't alive?' 'Dead,' said Poirot.

Mrs Clapperton frowned. The reply was not to her liking. The man, she decided, was trying to be funny. She got up and said coldly: 'I must find John.' As she stepped through the door she dropped her handbag. It

opened and the contents flew far and wide. Poirot rushed gallantly to the rescue. It was some few minutes before the lipsticks, vanit boxes, cigarette case and lighter and other odds and ends were collected. Mrs Clapperton thanked him politely, then she swep! down the deck and said, 'John ' Colonel Clapperton was still deep in conversation with Mis Henderson. He swung round and came quickly to meet his wife.

He bent over her protectively. Her deck chair - was it in the right place? Wouldn't it be better - ? His manner was courteous - full of gentle consideration. Clearly an adored wife spoilt by ar adoring husband.

Miss Ellie Henderson looked out at the horizon as though. something about it rather disgusted her.

Standing in the smoking-room door, Poirot looked on.

A hoarse quavering voice behind him said: 'I'd take a hatchet to that woman if I were her husband.' The old gentleman known disrespectfully among the younger set on board as the Grandfather of All the Tea Planters, had just shuffled in. 'Boyl' he called. 'Get me a whisky peg.' Poirot stooped to retrieve a torn scrap of notepaper, an over. looked item from the contents of Mrs Clapperton's bag. Part of. prescription, he noted, containing digitalin. He put it in hi.' pocket, meaning to restore it to Mrs Clapperton later.

'Yes,' went on the aged passenger. 'Poisonous woman, l remember a woman like that in Poona. In '87 that was.' 'Did anyone take a hatchet to her?' inquired Poirot.

The old gentleman shook his head sadly.

'Worried her husband into his grave within the year. Clapperton ought to assert himself. Gives his wife her head too much.' 'She holds the purse strings,' said Poirot gravely.

'Ha, ha!' chuckled the old gentleman. 'You've put the matter in a nutshell. Holds the purse strings. Ha, hal' Two girls burst into the smoking-room. One had a round face with freckles and dark hair streaming out in a windswept con. fusion, the other had freckles and curly chestnut hair.

'A rescue - a rescue? cried Kitty Mooney. 'Pam and I are going to rescue Colonel Clapperton.'

'From his wife,' gasped Pamela Cregan.

'We think he's a pet...' 'And she's just awful - she won't let him do anything,' the two girls exclaimed.

'And if he isn't with her, he's usually grabbed by the Henderson woman...' 'Who's quite nice. But terribly old...' They ran out, gasping in between giggles: 'A rescue - a rescue

That the rescue of Colonel Clapperton was no isolated sally, but a fixed project was made clear that same evening when the eighteen-year-old Pam Cregan came up to Hercule Poirot, and murmured: 'Watch us, M. Poirot. He's going to be cut out from under her nose and taken to walk in the moonlight on the boat deck.' It was just at that moment that Colonel Clapperton was saying: 'I grant you the price of a Rolls-Royce. But it's practically good for a lifetime. Now my car - ' 'My car, I think, John.' Mrs Clapperton's voice was shrill and penetrating.

He showed no annoyance at her ungraciousness. Either he was used to it by this time, or else 'Or else?' thought Poirot and let himself speculate.

'Certainly, my dear, your car,' Clapperton bowed to his wife and finished what he had been saying, perfectly unruffled.

'Voild ce qu'on appelle le pukka sahib,' thought Poirot. 'But the General Forbes says that Clapperton is no gentleman at all. I wonder now.' There was a suggestion of bridge. Mrs Clapperton, General Forbes and a hawk-eyed couple sat down to it. Miss Henderson had excused herself and gone out on deck.

'What about your husband?' asked General Forbes, hesitating.

'John won't play,' said Mrs Clapperton. 'Most tiresome of him.' The four bridge players began shuffling the cards.

Pam and Kitty advanced on Colonel Clapperton. Each one took an arm.

'You're coming with us!' said Pam. 'To the boat deck. There's a moon.'

'Don't be foolish, John,' said Mrs Clapperton. 'You'll catch a chill.'

'llot with us, he won't,' said Kitty. 'We're hot stuff!'

He went with them, laughing.

Poirot noticed that Mrs Clapperton said No Bid to her initial bid of Two Clubs.

He strolled out on to the promenade deck. Miss Henderson was standing by the rail. She looked round expectantly as he came to stand beside her and he saw the drop in her expression.

They chatted for a while. Then presently as he fell silent she asked: 'What are you thinking about?'

Poirot replied: 'I am wondering about my knowledge of English.

Mrs Clapperton said: "John won't play bridge." Is not "can't play" the usual term?'

'She takes it as a personal insult that he doesn't, I suppose,' said Ellie drily. 'The man was a fool ever to have married her.'

In the darkness Poirot smiled. 'You don't think it's just possible that the marriage may be a success?' he asked diffidently.

'With a woman like that?'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. 'Many odious women have devoted husbands. An enigma of nature. You will admit that nothing she says or does appears to gall him.' Miss Henderson was considering her reply when Mrs Clapperton's voice floated out through the smoking-room window.

'No - I don't think I will play another rubber. So stuffy. I think I'll go up and get some air on the boat deck.'

'Good night,' said Miss Hendersom 'I'm going to bed.' She disappeared abruptly.

Poirot strolled forward to the lounge - deserted save for Colonel Clapperton and the two girls. He was doing card tricks for them and noting the dexterity of his shuffling and handling of the cards, Poirot remembered the General's story of a career on the music hall stage.

'I see you enjoy the cards even though you do not play bridge,' he remarked.

'I've my reasons for not playing bridge,' said Clapperton, his charming smile breaking out. 'I'll show you. We'll play one hand.' He dealt the cards rapidly. 'Pick up your hands. Well, what about it?' He laughed at the bewildered expression on Kitty's face.

He laid down his hand and the others followed suit. Kitty held the entire club suit, M. Poirot the hearts, Pam the diamonds and Colonel Clapperton the spades.

'You see?' he said. 'A man who can deal his partner and his adversaries any hand he pleases had better stand aloof from a friendly gamet If the luck goes too much his way, ill-natured things might be said.'

'Ohl' gasped Kitty. 'How could you do that? It all looked perfectly ordinary.'

'The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,' said Poirot sententiously - and caught the sudden change in the Colonel's expression.

It was as though he realized that he had been off his guard for a moment or two.

Poirot smiled. The conjuror had shown himself through the mask of the pukka sahib.

The ship reached Alexandria at dawn the following morning.

As Poirot came up from breakfast he found the two girls all ready to go on shore. They were talking to Colonel Clapperton.

'We ought to get off now,' urged Kitty. 'The passport people will be going off the ship presently. You'll come with us, won't you? You wouldn't let us go ashore all by ourselves? Awful things might happen to us.'

'I certainly don't think you ought to go by yourselves, said Clapperton, smiling. 'But I'm not sure my wife feels up to it.'

'That's too bad,' said Pam. 'But she can have a nice long rest.'

Colonel Clapperton looked a little irresolute. Evidently the desire to play truant was strong upon him. He noticed Poirot.

'Hullo, M. Poirot - you going ashore?' 'No, I think not,' M. Poirot replied.

'I'll - I'll -just have a word with Adeline,' decided Colonel Clapperton.

'We'll come with you,' said Pam. She flashed a wink at Poirot.

'Perhaps we can persuade her to come too,' she added gravely.

Colonel Clapperton seemed to welcome this suggestion. He looked decidedly relieved.

'Come along then, the pair of you,' he said lightly. They all three went along the passage of B deck together.

Poirot, whose cabin was just opposite the Clappertons, followed them out of curiosity.

Colonel Clapperton rapped a little nervously at the cabin door.

'Adeline, my dear, are you up?'

The sleepy voice of Mrs Clapperton from within replied: 'Oh, bother - what is it?'

'It's John. What about going ashore?'

'Certainly not.' The voice was shrill and decisive. 'I've had a very bad night. I shall stay in bed most of the day.'

Pam nipped in quickly. 'Oh, Mrs Clapperton, I'm so sorry. We did so want you to come with us. Are you sure you're not up to it?'

'I'm quite certain. Mrs Clapperton's voice sounded even shriller.

The Colonel was turning the door-handle without result.

'What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be dis-turbed by the stewards.'

'Sorry, my dear, sorry. Just wanted my Baedeker.'

'Well, you can't have it,' snapped Mrs Clapperton. 'I'm not going to get out of bed. Do go away, John, and let me have a little peace.'

'Certainly, certainly, my dear.' The Colonel backed away from the door. Pam and Kitty closed in on him.

'Let's start at once. Thank goodness your hat's on your head.

Oh, gracious - your passport isn't in the cabin, is it?'

'As a matter of fact it's in my pocket - ' began the Colonel.

Kitty squeezed his arm. 'Glory be!' she exclaimed. 'Now, come on.'

Leaning over the rail, Poirot watched the three of them leave the ship. He heard a faint intake of breath beside him and turned to see Miss Henderson. Her eyes were fastened on the three retreating figures.

'So they've gone ashore,' she said flatly.

'Yes. Are you going?' She had a shade hat, he noticed, and a smart bag and shoes.

There was a shore-going appearance about her. Nevertheless, after the most infinitesimal of pauses, she shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I think I'll stay on board. I have a lot of letters to write.' She turned and left him.

Puffing after his morning tour of forty-eight rounds of the deck, General Forbes took her place. 'Aha? he exclaimed as his eyes noted the retreating figures of the Colonel and the two girls. 'So that's the game! Where's the Madam?' Poirot explained that Mrs Clapperton was having a quiet day in bed.

'Don't you believe it!' the old warrior closed one knowing eye.

'She'll be up for tiffin - and if the poor devil's found to be absent without leave, there'll be ructions.' But the General's prognostications were not fulfilled. Mrs Clapperton did not appear at lunch and by the time the Colonel and his attendant damsels returned to the ship at four o'clock, she had not shown herself.

Poirot was in his cabin and heard the husband's slightly guilty knock on his cabin door. Heard the knock repeated, the cabin door tried, and finally heard the Colonel's call to a steward.

'Look here, I can't get an answer. Have you a key?' Poirot rose quickly from his bunk and came out into the passage.

The news went like wildfire round the ship. With horrified incredulity people heard that Mrs Clapperton had been found dead in her bunk - a native dagger driven through her heart. A string of amber beads was found on the floor of her cabin.

Rumour succeeded rumour. All bead sellers who had been allowed on board that day were being rounded up and questionedl A large sum in cash had disappeared from a drawer in the cabinl The notes had been tracedl They had not been tracedl Jewellery worth a fortune had been takenl No jewellery had been taken at alll A steward had been arrested and had confessed to the murderl

'What is the truth of it all?' demanded Miss Ellie Henderson waylaying Poirot. Her face was pale and troubled.

'My dear lady, how should I know?'

'Of course you know,' said Miss Henderson.

It was late in the evening. Most people had retired to their cabins. Miss Henderson led Poirot to a couple of deck chairs on the sheltered side of the ship. 'Now tell me,' she commanded.

Poirot surveyed her thoughtfully. 'It's an interesting case,' he said.

'Is it true that she had some very valuabte jewellry stolen?' Poirot shook his head. 'No. No jewellery was taken. A small amount of loose cash that was in a drawer has disappeared, though.'

'I'll never feel safe on a ship again,' said Miss Henderson with a shiver. 'Any clue as to which of those coffee-coloured brutes did it?'

'No,' said Hercule Poirot. 'The whole thing is rather - strange.' 'What do you mean?' asked Ellie sharply.

Poirot spread out his hands. 'Eh bien - take the facts. Mrs Clapperton had been dead at least five hour when she was found.

Some money had disappeared. A string of beads was on the floor by her bed. The door was locked and the key was missing. The window - window, not port-hole - gives on the deck and was open.' 'Well?' asked the woman impatiently.

'Do you not think it is curious for a murder to be committed under those particular circumstances? Remember that the postcard sellers, money changers and bead sellers who are allowed on board are all well known to the police.'

'The stewards usually lock your cabin, all the same,' Ellie pointed out.

'Yes, to prevent any chance of petty pilfering. But this - was murder.'

'What exactly are you thinking of, M. Poirot?' Her voice sounded a little breathless.

'I am thinking of the locked door.'

Miss Henderson considered this. 'I don't see anything in that.

The man left by the door, locked it and took the key with him so as to avoid having the murder discovered too soon. Quite intelligent of him, for it wasn't discovered until four o'clock in the afternoon.'

'No, no, mademoiselle, you don't appreciate the point I'm trying to make. I'm not worried as to how he got out, but as to how he got in.'

'The window of course.'

'C'est possible. But it would be a very narrow fit - and there were people passing up and down the deck all the time, remember.' 'Then through the door,' said Miss Henderson impatiently.

'But you forget, mademoiselle. Mrs Clapperton had locked the door on the inside. She had done so before Colonel Clapperton left the boat this morning. He actually tried it - so we know that is so.'

'Nonsense. It probably stuck - or he didn't turn the handle properly.'

'But it does not rest on his word. We actually heard Mrs

Clapperton herself say so.'

'We?'

'Miss Mooney, Miss Cregan, Colonel Clapperton and myself.' Ellie Henderson tapped a neatly shod foot. She did not speak for a moment or two. Then she said in a slightly irritable tone: 'Well - what exactly do you deduce from that? If Mrs Clapperton could lock the door she could unlock it too, I suppose.'

'Precisely, precisely.' Poirot turned a beaming face upon her.

'And you see where that leads us. Mrs Clapperton unlocked the door and let the murderer in. Now would she be likely to do that for a bead seller?'

Ellie objected: 'She might not have known who it was. He may have knocked - she got up and opened the door - and he forced his way in and killed her.'

Poirot shook his head. '.4u contraire. She was lying peacefully in bed when she was stabbed.'

Miss Henderson stared at him. 'What's your idea?' she asked abruptly.

Poirot smiled. 'Well, it looks, does it not, as though she knew the person she admitted...'

'You mean,' said Miss Henderson and her voice sounded a little harsh, 'that the murderer is a passenger on the ship?' Poirot nodded. 'It seems indicated.' 'And the string of beads left on the floor was a blind?' 'Precisely.' 'The theft of the money also?' 'Exactly.' There was a pause, then Miss Henderson said slowly: 'I thought Mrs Clapperton a very unpleasant woman and I don't think anyone on board really liked her - but there wasn't anyone who had any reason to kill her.' 'Except her husband, perhaps,' said Poirot.

'You don't really think - ' She stopped.

'It is the opinion of every person on this ship that Colonel Clapperton would have been quite justified in "taking a hatchet to her". That was, I think, the expression used.' Ellie Henderson looked at him - waiting.

'But I am bound to say,' went on Poirot, 'that I myself have not noted any signs of exasperation on the good Colonel's part. Also, what is more important, he had an alibi. He was with those two girls all day and did not return to the ship till four o'clock. By then, Mrs Clapperton had been dead many hours.' There was another minute of silence. Ellie Henderson said softly: 'But you still think - a passenger on the ship?' Poirot bowed his head.

Ellie Henderson laughed suddenly - a reckless defiant laugh.

'Your theory may be difficult to prove, M. Poirot. There are a good many passengers on this ship.' Poirot bowed to her. 'I will use a phrase from one of your detective story writers. "I have my methods, Watson." '

The following evening, at dinner, every passenger found a typewritten slip by his plate requesting him to be in the main loung at 8.30. When the company were assembled, the Captain stepped on to the raised platform where the orchestra usually played and addressed them.

'Ladies and gentlemen, you all know of the tragedy which took place yesterday. I am sure you all wish to co-operate in bringing the perpetrator of that foul crime to justice.' He paused and cleared his throat. 'We have on board with us M. Hercule Poirot who is probably known to you all as a man who has had wide experience in - er - such matters. I hope you will listen carefully to what he has to say.'

It was at this minute that Colonel Clapperton, who had not been at dinner, came in and sat down next to General Forbes. He looked like a man bewildered by sorrow - not at all like a man conscious of great relief. Either he was a very good actor or else he had been genuinely fond of his disagreeable wife.

'M. Hercule Poirot,' said the Captain and stepped down. Poirot took his place. He looked comically serf-important as he beamed on his audience.

'Messieurs, mesdames,' he began. 'It is most kind of you to be so indulgent as to listen to me. M. le Cataine has told you that I have had a certain experience in these matters. I have, it is true, a littie idea of my own about how to get to the bottom of this particular case.' He made a sign and a steward pushed forward and passed on to him a bulky, shapeless object wrapped in a sheet.

'What I am about to do may surprise you a little,' Poirot warned them. 'It may occur to you that I am eccentric, perhaps mad.

Nevertheless I assure you that behind my madness there is - as you English say - a method.'

His eyes met those of Miss Henderson for just a minute. He began unwrapping the bulky object.

'I have here, mesdeurs and mesdames, an important witness to the truth of who killed Mrs Clapperton.' With a deft hand he whisked away the last enveloping cloth, and the object it concealed was revealed - an almost life-sized wooden doll, dressed in a velvet suit and lace collar.

'Now, Arthur,' said Poirot and his voice changed subtly - it was no longer foreign - it had instead a confident English, a slightly Cockney inflection. 'Can you tell me - I repeat - can you tell me - anything at all about the death of Mrs Clapperton?'

The doll's neck oscillated a little, its wooden lower jaw dropped and wavered and a shrill high-pitched woman's voice spoke:

'What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be disturbed by the stewards...' There was a cry - an overturned chair - a man stood swaying, his hand to his throat - trying to speak - trying... Then suddenly, his figure seemed to crumple up. He pitched headlong.

It was Colonel Clapperton.

Poirot and the ship's doctor rose from their knees by the prostrate figure.

'All over, I'm afraid. Heart,' said the doctor briefly.

Poirot nodded. 'The shock of having his trick seen through,' he said.

He turned to General Forbes. 'It was you, General, who gave me a valuable hint with your mention of the music hall stage. I puzzle - I think - and then it comes to me. Supposing that before the war Clapperton was a ventriloquist. In that case, it would be perfectly possible for three people to hear Mrs Clapperton speak from inside her cabin when she was already dead...' Ellie Henderson was beside him. Her eyes were dark and full of pain. 'Did you know his heart was weak?' she asked.

'I guessed it... Mrs Clapperton talked of her own heart being affected, but she struck me as the type of woman who likes to be thought ill. Then I picked up a torn prescription with a very strong dose of digitalin in it. Digitalin is a heart medicine but it couldn't be Mrs Clapperton's because digitalin dilates the pupils of the eyes. I had never noticed such a phenomenon with her but when I looked at his eyes I saw the signs at once.' Ellie murmured: 'So you thought - it might end - this way?' 'The best way, don't you think, mademoiselle?' he said gently.

He saw the tears rise in her eys. She said: 'You've known. You've known all along... That I cared... But he didn't do it for me... It was those girls - youth - it made him feel his slavery. He wanted to be free before it was too late... Yes, I'm sure that's how it was ·.. When did you guess - that it was he?' 'His self-control was too perfect,' said Poirot simply. 'No matter how galling his wife's conduct, it never seemed to touch him.

That meant either that he was so used to it that it no longer stung him, or else - eh b/eh - I decided on the latter alternative... And I was right...

'And then there was his insistence on his conjuring ability - the evening before the crime he pretended to give himself away. But a man like Clapperton doesn't give himself away. There must be a reason. So long as people thought he had been a conjuror they weren't likely to think of his having been a ventriloquist.'

'And the voice we heard - Mrs Clapperton's voice?'

'One of the stewardesses had a voice not unlike hers. I induced her to hide behind the stage and taught her the words to say.' 'It was a trick - a cruel trick,' cried out Ellie.

'I do not approve of murder,' said-Hercule Poirot.

CHAPTER XVIII HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

Hercule Poirot arranged his letters in a neat pile in front of him.

He picked up the topmost letter, studied the address for a moment, then neatly slit the back of the envelope with a little paperknife that he kept on the breakfast table for that express purpose and extracted the contents. Inside was yet another envelope, carefully sealed with purple wax and marked 'Private and Confidential'.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose a little on his egg-shaped head.

He murmured, 'Patience! Nous allons arriver!' and once more brought the little paper-knife into play. This time the envelope yielded a letter - written in a rather shaky and spiky handwriting.

Several words were heavily underlined.

Hercule Poirot unfolded it and read. The letter was headed once again 'Private and Confidential'. On the right-hand side was the address - Rosebank, Charman's Green, Bucks - and the date-March twenty-first.

Dear M. Poirot, I have been recommended to you by an old and valued friend of mine who knows the worry and distress I have been in lately. Not that this friend knows the actual circumstances those I have kept entirely to myself- the matter being strictly private. My friend assures me that you are discretion itself and that there will be no fear of my being involved in a police matter which, if my suspicions should prove correct, I should very much dislike. But it is of course possible that I am entirely mistaken. I do not feel myself clear-headed enough nowadays suffering as I do from insomnia and the result of a severe illness last winter - to investigate things for myself. I have neither the means nor the ability. On the other hand, I must reiterate once more that this is a very delicate family matter and that for many reasons I may want the whole thing hushed up. If I am once assured of the facts, I can deal with the matter myself and should prefer to do so. I hope that I have made myself clear on this point. If you will undertake this investigation, perhaps you will let me know to the above address?

Yours very truly,

AMELIA BARROWBY

Poirot read the letter through twice. Again his eyebrows rose slightly. Then he placed it on one side and proceeded to the next envelope in the pile.

At ten o'clock precisely he entered the room where Miss Lemon, his confidential secretary, sat awaiting her instructions for the day.

Miss Lemon was forty-eight and of unprepossessing appearance.

Her general effect was that of a lot of bones flung together at random. She had a passion for order almost equalling that of Poirot himself; and though capable of thinking, she never thought unless told to do so.

Poirot handed her the morning correspondence. 'Have the goodness, mademoiselle, to write refusals couched in correct terms to all of these.'

Miss Lemon ran an eye over the various letters, scribbling in turn a hieroglyphic on each of them. These marks were legible to her alone and were in a code of her own: 'Soft soap'; 'slap in the face'; 'purr purr'; 'curt'; and so on. Having done this, she nodded and looked up for further instructions.

Poirot handed her Amelia Barrowby's letter. She extracted it from its double envelope, read it through and looked up inquiringly.

'Yes, M. Poirot?' Her pencil hovered - ready - over her short-hand pad.

'What is your opinion of that letter, Miss Lemon?'

With a slight frown Miss Lemon put down the pencil and read through the letter again.

The contents of a letter meant nothing to Miss Lemon except from the point of view of composing an adequate reply. Very occasionally her employer appealed to her human, as opposed to her official, capacities. It slightly annoyed Miss Lemon when he did so - she was very nearly the perfect machine, completely and gloriously uninterested in all human affairs. Her real passion in life was the perfection of a filing system beside which all other filing systems should sink into oblivion. She dreamed of such a system at night. Nevertheless, Miss Lemon was perfectly capable of intelligence on purely human matters, as Hercule Poirot well knew.

'Well?' he demanded.

'Old lady,' said Miss Lemon. 'Got the wind up pretty badly.' 'Ah! The wind rises in her, you think?' Miss Lemon, who considered that Poirot had been long enough in Great Britain to understand its slang terms, did not reply. She took a brief look at the double envelope.

'Very hush-hush,' she said. 'And tells you nothing at all.' 'Yes,' said Hercule Poirot. 'I observed that.' Miss Lemon's hand hung once more hopefully over the shorthand pad. This time Hercule Poirot responded.

'Tell her I will do myself the honour to call upon her at any time she suggests, unless she prefers to consult me here. Do not type the letter - write it by hand.' 'Yes, M. Poirot.' Poirot produced more correspondence. 'These are bills.' Miss Lemon's efficient hands sorted them quickly. 'I'll pay all but these two.' 'Why those two? There is no error in them.' 'They are firms you've only just begun to deal with. It looks bad to pay too promptly when you've just opened an account looks as though you were working up to get some credit later on.' 'Ahl' murmured Poirot. 'I bow to your superior knowledge of the British tradesman.' 'There' nothing much I don't know about them,' said Mis: Lemon grimly.

The letter to Miss Amelia Barrowby was duly written and sen but no reply was forthcoming. Perhaps, thought Hercule Poin the old lady had unravelled her mystery herself. Yet he felt a sha of surprise that in that case she should not have written a courteouo word to say that his services were no longer required.

It was five days later when Miss Lemon, after receiving her morning's instructions, said, 'That Miss Barrowby we wrote to no wonder there's been no answer. She's dead.' Hercule Poirot said very softly, 'Ah - dead.' It sounded not so much like a question as an answer.

Opening her handbag, Miss Lemon produced a newspaper cutting. 'I saw it in the tube and tore it out.' Just registering in his mind approval of the fact that, though Miss Lemon used the word 'tore', she had neatly cut the entry out with scissors, Poirot read the announcement taken from the Births, Deaths and Marriages in the Morning Post: 'On March 26th suddenly- at Rosebank, Charman's Green, Amelia Jane Barrowby, in her seventy-third year. No flowers, by request.' Poirot read it over. He murmured under his breath, 'Suddenly'.

Then he said briskly, 'If you will be so obliging as to take a letter, Miss Lemon?' The pencil hovered. Miss Lemon, her mind dwelling on the intricacies of the filing system, took down in rapid and correct shorthand:

Dear Miss Barrowby, I have received no reply from you, but as I shall be in the neighbourhood of Charman's Green on Friday, I will call upon you on that day and discuss more fully the matter mentioned to me in your letter.

Yours, etc.

'Type this letter, please; and if it is posted at once, it should get to Charman's Green tonight.' On the following morning a letter in a black-edged envelope arrived by the second post:

Dear Sir, In reply to your letter my aunt, Miss Barrowby, passed away on the twenty-sixth, so the matter you speak of is no longer of importance.

Yours truly, MARY DELAFONTAINR

Poirot smiled to himself. 'No longer of importance... Ah that is what we shall see. En avant - to Charman's Green.' Rosebank was a house that seemed likely to live up to its name, which is more than can be said for most houses of its class and character.

Hercule Poirot paused as he walked up the path to the front door and looked approvingly at the neatly planned beds on either side of him. Rose trees that promised a good harvest later in the year, and at present daffodils, early tulips, blue hyacinths - the last bed was partly edged with shells.

Poirot murmured to himself, 'How does it go, the English rhyme the children sing?

Mistress Mary, quite contrary, How does your garden grow?

With cockle-shells, and silver bells, And pretty maids all in a row.

'Not a row, perhaps,' he considered, 'but here is at least one pretty maid to make the little rhyme come right.' The front door had opened and a neat little maid in cap and apron was looking somewhat dubiously at the spectacle of a heavily moustached foreign gentleman talking aloud to himself in the front garden. She was, as Poirot had noted, a very pretty little maid, with round blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

Poirot raised his hat with courtesy and addressed her: 'Pardon, but does a Miss Amelia Barrowby live here?' The little maid gasped and her eyes grew rounder. 'Oh, sir, didn't you know? She's dead. Ever so sudden it was. Tuesday night.' She hesitated, divided between two strong instincts: the first, distrust of a foreigner; the second, the pleasurable enjoyment of her class in dwelling on the subject of illness and death.

'You amaze me,' said Hercule Poirot, not very truthfully. 'I had an appointment with the lady for today. However, I can perhaps see the other lady who lives here.' The little maid seemed slightly doubtful. 'The mistress? Well, you could see her, perhaps, but I don't know whether she'll b eeing anyone or not.'

'She will see me,' said Poirot, and handed her a card.

The authority of his tone had its effect. The rosy-cheeked maid fell back and ushered Poirot into a sitting-room on the right of the hall. Then, card in hand, she departed to summon her mistress.

Hercule Poirot looked round him. The room was a perfectly conventional, drawing-room - oatmeal-coloured paper with a frieze round the top, indeterminate cretonnes, rose-coloured cushions and curtains, a good many china knick-knacks and ornaments. There was nothing in the room that stood out, that announced a definite personality.

Suddenly Poirot, who was very sensitive, felt eyes watching him. He wheeled round. A girl was standing in the entrance of the french window - a small, sallow girl, with very black hair and suspicious eyes.

She came in, and as Poirot made a little bow she burst out abruptly, 'Why have you come?'

Poirot did not reply. He merely raised his eyebrows.

'You are not a lawyer - no?' Her English was good, but not for a minute would anyone have taken her to be English.

'Why should I be a lawyer, mademoiselle?'

The girl stared at him sul.nly. 'I thought you might be. I thought you had come perha? ;o say that she did not know what she was doing. I have heard of such things - the not due influence; that is what they call it, no? But that is not right. She wanted me to have the money, and I shall have it. If it is needful I shall have a lawyer of my own. The money is mine. She wrote it down so, and so it shall be.' She looked ugly, her chin thrust out, her eyes gleaming.

The door opened and a tail woman entered and said, 'Katrina'.

The girl shrank, flushed, muttered something and went out through the window.

Poirot turned to face the newcomer who had so effectually dealt with the situation by uttering a single word. There had been authority in her voice, and contempt and a shade of well-bred irony. He realized at once that this was the owner of the house, Mary Delafontaine.

'M. Poirot? I wrote to you. You cannot have received my letter.'

'Alas, I have been away from London.' 'Oh, I see; that explains it. I must introduce myself. My name is Delafontaine. This is my husband. Miss Barrowby was my aunt.' Mr Delafontaine had entered so quietly that his arrival had passed unnoticed. He was a tall man with grizzled hair and an indeterminate manner. He had a nervous way of fingering his chin. He looked often towards his wife, and it was plain that he expected her to take the lead in any conversation.

'I much regret that I intrude in the midst of your bereavement,' said Hercule Poirot.

'I quite realize that it is not your fault,' said Mrs Delafontaine.

'My aunt died or Tuesday evening. It was quite unexpected.' 'Most unexpected,' said Mr Delafontaine. 'Great blow.' His eyes watched the window where the foreign girl had disappeared.

'I apologize,' said Hercule Poirot. 'And I withdraw.' He moved a step towards the door.

'Half a sec,' said Mr Delafontaine. 'You - er - had an appointment with Aunt Amelia, you say?' 'Parfa(tement.' 'Perhaps you will tell us about it,' said his wife. 'If there i. anything we can do - ' 'It was of a private nature,' said Poirot. 'I am a detective,' he added simply.

Mr Delafontaine knocked over a little china figure he was handling. His wife looked puzzled.

'A detective? And you had an appointment with Auntie? But how extraordinary? She stared at him. 'Can't you tell us a little more, M. Poirot?

It - it seems quite fantastic.' Poirot was silent for a moment. He chose his words with care.

'It is difficult for..me, madame, to know what to do.' 'Look here,' said Mr Delafontaine. '8he didn't mention Russians, did she?' 'Russians?' 'Yes, you know - Bolshies, Reds, all that sort of thing.' 'Don't be absurd, Henry,' said his wife.

Mr Delafontaine collapsed. 'Sorry - sorry - I just wondered.' Mary Delafontaine looked frankly at Poirot. Her eyes were very blue - the colour of forget-me-nots. 'If you can tell us anything, M. Poirot, I should be glad if you would do so. I can assure you that I have a - a reason for asking.'

Mr Delafontaine looked alarmed. 'Be careful, old girl - you know there may be nothing in it.'

Again his wife quelled him with a glance. 'Well, M. Poirot?' Slowly, gravely, Hercule Poirot shook his head. He shook it with visible regret, but he shook it. 'At present, madame,' he said, 'I fear I must say nothing.'

He bowed, picked up his hat and moved to the door. Mary Delafontaine came with him into the hall. On the doorstep he paused and looked at her.

'You are fond of your garden, I think, madame?' 'I? Yes, I spend a lot of time gardening.' 'Je ous fait roes compliments.'

He bowed once more and strode down to the gate. As he passed out of it and turned to the right he glanced back and registered two impressions - a sallow face watching him from a first-floor window, and a man of erect and soldierly carriage pacing up and down on the opposite side of the street.

Hercule Poirot nodded to himself. 'Definitivement,' he said.

'There is a mouse in this hole! What move must the cat make now?'

His decision took him to the nearest post office. Here he put through a couple of telephone calls. The result seemed to be satisfactory. He bent his steps to Charman's Green police station, where he inquired for Inspector Sims.

Inspector Sims was a big, burly man with a hearty manner.

'M. Poirot?' he inquired. 'I thought so. I've just this minute had a telephone call through from the chief constable about you. tie aid you'd be dropping in. Come into my office.'

The door shut, the inspector waved Poirot to one chair, settled himself in another, and turned a gaze of acute inquiry upon his visitor.

'You're very quick on to the mark, M. Poirot. Come to see us about this Rosebank case almost before we know it is a case. What put you on to it?'

Poirot drew out the letter he had received and handed it to the inspector. The latter read it with some interest.

'Interesting,' he said. 'The trouble is, it might mean so many things. Pity she couldn't have been a little more explicit. It would have helped us now.' 'Or there might have been no need for help.' 'You mean?' 'She might have been alive.' 'You go as far as that, do you? H'm - I'm not sure you're wrong.' 'I pray of you, Inspector, recount to me the facts. I know nothing at all.' 'That's easily done. Old lady was taken bad after dinner on Tuesday night. Very alarming. Convulsions - spasms - whatnot.

They sent for the doctor. By the time he arrived she was dead.

Idea was she'd died of a fit. Well, he didn't much like the look of things. He hemmed and hawed and put it with a bit of Soft awder, but he made it clear that he couldn't give a death certificate.

And as far as the family go, that's where the matter stands. They're awaiting the result of the post-mortem. We've got a bit further. The doctor gave us the tip right away - he and the police surgeon did the autopsy together - and the result is in no doubt whatever. The old lady died of a large dose of strychnine.' 'Aha?

'That's right. Very nasty bit of work. Point is, who gave it to her? It must have been administered very shortly before death.

First idea was it was given to her in her food at dinner - but, frankly, that seems to be a washout. They had artichoke soup, served from a tureen, fish pie and apple tart.' 'Miss Barrowby, Mr Delafontaine and Mrs Delafontaine. Miss Barrowby had a kind of nurse-attendant - a half-Russian girl but she didn't eat with the family. She had the remains as they came out from the dining-room. There's a maid, but it was her night out. She left the soup on the stove and the fish pie in the oven, and the apple tart was cold. All three of them ate the same thing- and, apart from that, I don't think you could get strychnine down anyone's throat that way. Stuff's as bitter as gall. The doctor

told me you could taste it in a solution of one in a thousand, or something like that.' 'Coffee?' 'Coffee's more like it, but the old lady never took coffee.' 'I see your point. Yes, it seems an insuperable difficulty. What did she drink at the meal?' 'Water.' 'Worse and worse.' 'Bit of a teaser, isn't it?' 'She had money, the old lady?' 'Very well to do, I imagine. Of course, we haven't got exact details yet. The Delafontaines are pretty badly off, from what I can make out. The old lady helped with the upkeep of the house.' Poirot smiled a little. He said, 'So you suspect the Delafontaines.

Which of them?' 'I don't exactly say I suspect either of them in particular. But there it is; they're her only near relations, and her death brings them a tidy sum of money, I've no doubt. We all know what human nature is!' 'Sometimes inhuman - yes, that is very true. And there was nothing else the old lady ate or drank?' 'Well, as a matter of fact - ' 'Ah, voild! I felt that you had something, as you say, up your sleeve - the soup, the fish pie, the apple tart - a bgtise! Now we come to the hub of the affair.' 'I don't know about that. But as a matter of fact, the old girl took a cachet before meals. You know, not a pill or a tablet; one of those rice-paper things with a powder inside. Some perfectly harmless thing for the digestion.' 'Admirable. Nothing is easier than to fill a cachet with strychnine and substitute it for one of the others. It slips down the throat with a drink of water and is not tasted.' 'That's all right. The trouble is, the girl gave it to her.' 'The Russian girl?' 'Yes. Katrina Rieger. She was a kind of lady-help, nurse-companion to

Miss Barrowby. Fairly ordered about by her, too, I gather. Fetch this, fetch that, fetch the other, rub my back, pour out my medicine, run round to the chemist - all that sort of busi-ness.

You know how it is with these old women - they mean to be kind, but what they need is a sort of black slave?

Poirot smiled.

'And there you are, you see,' continued Inspector Sims. 'It doesn't fit in what you might call nicely. Why should the girl poison her? Miss Barrowby dies and now the girl will be out of a job, and jobs aren't so easy to find - she's not trained or anything.'

'Still,' suggested Poirot, 'if the box of cachets was left about, anyone in the house might have the opportunity.'

'Naturally we're on to that, M. Poirot. I don't mind telling you we're making our inquiries - quiet like, if you understand me.

When the prescription was last made up, where it was usually kept; patience and a lot of spade work - that's what will do the trick in the end. And then there's Miss Barrowby's solicitor. I'm having an interview with him tomorrow. And the bank manager.

There's a lot to be done still.'

Poirot rose. 'A little favour, Inspector Sims; you will send me a little word how the affair marches. I would esteem it a great favour. Here is my telephone number.'

'Why, certainly, M. Poirot. Two heads are better than one; and, besides, you ought to be in on this, having had that letter andall.'

'You are too amiable, Inspector.' Politely, Poirot shook hands and took his leave.

He was called to the telephone on the following afternoon. 'Is that M. Poirot? Inspector Sims here. Things are beginning to sit up and look pretty in that little matter you and I know of.'

'In verity? Tell me, I pray of you.'

'Well, here's item No. x - and a pretty big item. Miss B. left a small legacy to her niece and everything else to K. In consideration of her great kindness and attention - that's the way it was put.

That alters the complexion of things.'

A picture rose swiftly in Poirot's mind. A sullen face and a passionate voice saying, 'The money is mine. She wrote it down and so it shall be.' The legacy would not come as a surprise to Katrina - she knew about it beforehand.

'Item No. 2,' continued the voice of Inspector Sims. 'Nobody but K. handled that cachet.' 'You can be sure of that?' 'The girl herself doesn't deny it. What do you think of that?' 'Extremely interesting.' 'We only want one thing more - evidence of how the strychnine came into her possession. That oughtn't to be difficult.' 'But $o far you haven't been successful?' 'I've barely started. The inquest was only this morning.' 'What happened at it?' 'Adjourned for a week.' 'And the young lady - K.?' 'I'm detaining her on suspicion. Don't want to run any risks.

She might have some funny friends in the country who'd try to get her out of it.' 'No,' said Poirot. 'I do not think she has any friends.' 'Really? What makes you say that, M. Poirot?' 'It is just an idea of mine. There were no other "items", as you call them?' 'Nothing that's strictly relevant. Misa B. seems to have been monkeying about a bit with her shares lately - must have dropped quite a tidy sum. It's rather a funny business, one way and another, but I don't see how it affects the main issue - not at present, that is.' 'No, perhaps you are right. Well, my best thanks to you. It wire most amiable of you to ring me up.' 'Not at all. I'm a man of my word. I could see you were interested.

Who knows, you may be able to give me a helping hand before the end.' 'That would give me great pleasure. It might help you, for inatance, if I could lay my hand on a friend of the girl Katrina.' 'I thought you said she hadn't got any friends?' said Inspector Sires, surprised.

'I was wrong,' said Hercule Poirot. 'She has one.' Before the inspector could ask a further question, Poirot had rung off.

With a serious face he wandered into the room where Mi

Lemon sat at her typewriter. She raised her hands from the keys at her employer's approach and looked at him inquiringly.

'I want you,' said Poirot, 'to figure to yourself a little history.' Miss Lemon dropped her hands into her lap in a resigned manner. She enjoyed typing, paying bills, filing papers and enter-ing up engagements. To be asked to imagine herself in hypo-thetical situations bored her very much, but she accepted it as a disagreeable part of a duty.

'You are a Russian girl,' began Poirot.

'Yes,' said Miss Lemon, looking intensely British.

'You are alone and friendless in this country. You have reasons for not wishing to return to Russia. You are employed as a kind of drudge, nurse-attendant and companion to an old lady. You are meek and uncomplaining.'

'Yes,' said Miss Lemon obediently, but entirely failing to see herself being meek to any old lady under the sun.

'The old lady takes a fancy to you. She decides to leave her money to you. She tells you so.' Poirot paused.

Miss Lemon said 'Yes' again.

'And then the old lady finds out something; perhaps it is a matter of money - she may find that you have not been honest with her. Or it might be more grave still - a medicine that tasted different, some food that disagreed. Anyway, she begins to suspect you of something and she writes to a very famous detective - enfin, to the most famous detective - mel I am to call upon her shortly. And then, as you say, the dripping will be in the fire.

The great thing is to act quickly. And so - before the great detec-tive arrives - the old lady is dead. And the money comes to you.

Tell me, does that seem to you reasonable?'

'Quite reasonable,' said Miss Lemon. 'Quite reasonable for a Russian, that is. Personally, I should never take a post as a com-panion.

I like my duties clearly defined. And of course I should not dream of murdering anyone.'

Poirot sighed. 'How I miss my friend Hastings. He had such an imagination. Such a romantic mindl It is true that he always imagined wrong - but that in itself was a guide.'

Miss Lemon was silent. She had heard about Captain Hastings before, and was not interested. She looked longingly at the typewritten sheet in front of her.

'So it seems to you reasonable,' mused Poirot.

'Doesn't it to you?' 'I am almost afraid it does,' sighed Poirot.

The telephone rang and Miss Lemon went out of the room to answer it. She came back to say 'It's Inspector Sims again.' Poirot hurried to the instrument. ' '/kilo, 'allo. What is that you say?' Sims repeated his statement. 'We've found a packet of strychnine in the girl's bedroom - tucked underneath the mattress. The sergeant's just come in with the news. That about clinches it, I think.' 'Yes,' said Poirot, 'I think that clinches it.' His voice had changed. It rang with sudden confidence.

When he had rung off, he sat down at his writing table and arranged the objects on it in a mechanical manner. He murmured to himself, 'There was something wrong. I felt it - no, not felt.

It must have been something I saw. En avant, the little grey cells.

Ponder - reflect. Was everything logical and in order? The girl her anxiety about the money: Mme Delafontaine; her husband his suggestion of

Russians - imbecile, but he is an imbecile; the room; the garden - ahl Yes, the garden.' He sat up very stiff. The green light shone in his eyes. He sprang up and went into the adjoining room.

'Miss Lemon, will you have the kindness to leave what you are doing and make an investigation for me?' 'An investigation, M. Poirot? I'm afraid I'm not very good - ' Poirot interrupted her. 'You said one day that you knew all about tradesmen.' 'Certainly I do,' said Miss Lemon with confidence.

'Then the matter is simple. You are to go to Charman's Green and you are to discover a fishmonger.' 'A fishmonger?' asked Miss Lemon, surprised.

'Precisely. The fishmonger who supplied Rosebank with fish.

When you have found him you will ask him a certain question.' He handed her a slip of paper. Miss Lemon took it, noted its contents without interest, then nodded and slipped the lid on her typewriter.

'We will go to Charman's Green together,' said Poirot. 'You go to the fishmonger and I to the police station. It will take us but half an hour from Baker Street.'

On arrival at his destination, he was greeted by the surprised Inspector Sims. 'Well, this is quick work, M. Poirot. I was talking to you on the phone only an hour ago.'

'I have a request to make to you; that you allow me to see this girl Katrina - what is her name?'

'Katrina Rieger. Well, I don't suppose there's any objection to that.'

The girl Katrina looked even more sallow and sullen than ever.

Poirot spoke to her very gently. 'Mademoiselle, I want you to believe that I am not your enemy. I want you to tell me the truth.'

Her eyes snapped defiantly. 'I have told the truth. To everyone I have told the truth! If the old lady was poisoned, it was not I who poisoned her. It is all a mistake. You wish to prevent me having the money.' Her voice was rasping. She looked, he thought, like a miserable little cornered rat.

'Tell me about this cachet, mademoiselle,' M. Poirot went on.

'Did no one handle it but you?'

'I have said so, have I not? They were made up at the chemist's that afternoon. I brought them back with me in my bag - that was just before supper. I opened the box and gave Miss Barrowby one with a glass of water.'

'No one touched them but you?'

''No.' A cornered rat - with couragel

'And Miss Barrowby had for supper only what we have been told. The soup, the fish pie, the tart?'

'Yes.' A hopeless 'yes' - dark, smouldering eyes that saw no light anywhere.

Poirot patted her shoulder. 'Be of good courage, mademoiselle.

There may yet be freedom - yes, and money - a life of ease.' She looked at him suspiciously.

As he went out Sims said to him, 'I didn't quite get what you aid through the telephone - something about the girl having a friend.' 'She has one. Me!' said Hercule Poirot, and had left the police station before the inspector could pull his wits together.

At the Green Cat tearooms, Miss Lemon did not keep her employer waiting. She went straight to the point.

'The man's name is Rudge, in the High Street, and you were quite right. A dozen and a half exactly. I've made a note of what he said.' She handed it to him.

'Arrr.' It was a deep, rich sound like the purr of a cat.

Hercule ?oirot betook himself to Rosebank. As he stood in the front garden, the sun setting behind him, Mary Delafontaine came out to him.

'M. Poirot?' Her voice sounded surprised. 'You have come back?' 'Yes, I have first came here, my head: come back.' He paused and then said, 'When I madame, the children's nursery rhyme came into

Mistress Mary, quite contrary, How does your garden grow?

With cockle-shells, and silver bells, And pretty maids all in a row.

Only they are not cockle shells, are they, madame? They are oyster shells.' His hand pointed.

He heard her catch her breath and then stay very still. Her eyes asked a question.

He nodded. 'Mais, oui, I know! The maid left the dinner ready - she will swear and Katrina will swear that that is all you had.

Only you and your husband know that you brought back a dozen and a half oysters - a little treat pour la bonne tante. So easy to put the strychnine in an oyster. It is swallowed - cornme fa! But there remain the shells - they must not go in the bucket. The maid would see them. And so you thought of making an edging of them to a bed. But there were not enough - the edging is not complete. The effect is bad - it spoils the symmetry of the other244

wise charming garden. Those few oyster shells struck an alien note - they displeased my eye on my first visit.' Mary Delafontaine said, 'I suppose you guessed from the letter. I knew she had written - but I didn't know how much she'd said.' Poirot answered evasively, 'I knew at least that it was a family matter. If it had been a question of Katrina there would have been no point in hushing things up. I understand that you or your husband handled Miss Barrowby's securities to your own profit, and that she found out - ' Mary Delafontaine nodded. 'We've done it for years - a little here and there. I never realized she was sharp enough to find out.

And then I learned she had sent for a detective; and I found out, too, that she was leaving her money to Katrina - that miserable little creature!' 'And so the strychnine was put in Katrina's bedroom? I comprehend.

You save yourself and your husband from what I may discover, and you saddle an innocent child with murder. Had you no pity, madame?' Mary Delafontaine shrugged her shoulders - her blue forget-me°not eyes looked into Poirot's. He remembered the perfection of her acting the first day he had come and the bungling attempts of her husband. A woman above the average - but inhuman.

She said, 'Pity? For that miserable intriguing little rat?' Her contempt rang out.

Hercule Poirot said slowly, 'I think, madame, that you have cared in your life for two things only. One is your husband.' He saw her lips tremble.

'And the other - is your garden.' He looked round him. His glance seemed to apologize to the flowers for that which he had done and was about to do.

POSTERN OF FATE university and she's gone off now to Africa to do research on how people live - that' sort of thing. A lot of young people are very keen on that. She's a darling - and very happy.'

Mr Robinson cleared his throat and rose to his feet. 'I want to propose a toast. To Mr and Mrs Thomas Beresford in acknowledgement of the service they have rendered to their country.' It was drunk enthusiastically. 'And if I may, I will propose a further toast,' said Mr Robinson. 'To Hannibal.'

'There, Hannibal,' said Tuppence, stroking his head. 'You've had your health drunk. Almost as good as being knighted or having a medal. I was reading Stanley Weyman's Count Hannibal only the other day.'

'Read it as a boy, I remember,' said Mr Robinson. ' "Who touches my brother touches Tavanne," if I've got it right. Pikeaway, don't you think? Hannibal, may I be permitted to tap you on the shoulder?'

Hannibal took a step towards him, received a tap on the shoulder and gently wagged his tail.

'I hereby create you a Count of this Realm.'

'Count Hannibal. Isn't that lovely?' said Tuppence. 'What a proud dog you ought to be!'

The End

Curtain - Poirot's Last Case (1975)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

I

Who is there who has not felt a sudden startled pang at reliving an old experience, or feeling an old emotion?

“I have done this before. . . .”

Why do those words always move one so profoundly?

That was the question I asked myself as I sat in the train watching the flat Essex landscape outside.

How long ago was it that I had taken this selfsame journey? Had felt (ridiculously) that the best of life was over for me! Wounded in that war that for me would always be the war—the war that was wiped out now by a second and a more desperate war.

It had seemed in 1916 to young Arthur Hastings that he was already old and mature. How little had I realized that, for me, life was only then beginning.

I had been journeying, though I did not know it, to meet the man whose influence over me was to shape and mould my life. Actually, I had been going to stay with my old friend, John Cavendish, whose mother, recently remarried, had a country house named Styles. A pleasant renewing of old acquaintanceships, that was all I had thought it, not foreseeing that I was shortly to plunge into all the dark embroilments of a mysterious murder.

It was at Styles that I had met again that strange little man, Hercule Poirot, whom I had first come across in Belgium.

How well I remembered my amazement when I had seen the limping figure with the large moustache coming up the village street.

Hercule Poirot! Since those days he had been my dearest friend, his influence had moulded my life. In company with him, in the hunting down of yet another murderer, I had met my wife, the truest and sweetest companion any man could have had.

She lay now in Argentine soil, having died as she would have wished, with no long drawn out suffering, or feebleness of old age. But she had left a very lonely and unhappy man behind her.

Ah! If I could go back—live life all over again. If this could have been that day in 1916 when I first travelled to Styles . . . What changes had taken place since then! What gaps amongst the familiar faces! Styles itself had been sold by the Cavendishes. John Cavendish was dead, though his wife, Mary (that fascinating enigmatical creature), was still alive, living in Devonshire. Laurence was living with his wife and children in South Africa. Changes—changes everywhere.

But one thing, strangely enough, was the same. I was going to Styles to meet Hercule Poirot.

How stupefied I had been to receive his letter, with its heading Styles Court, Styles, Essex.

I had not seen my old friend for nearly a year. The last time I had seen him I had been shocked and saddened. He was now a very old man, and almost crippled with arthritis. He had gone to Egypt in the hopes of improving his health, but had returned, so his letter told me, rather worse than better. Nevertheless, he wrote cheerfully. . . .

II

And does it not intrigue you, my friend, to see the address from which I write? It recalls old memories, does it not? Yes, I am here, at Styles. Figure to yourself, it is now what they call a guest house. Run by one of your so British old Colonels—very “old school tie” and “Poonar.” It is his wife, bien entendu, who makes it pay. She is a good manage, that one, but the tongue like vinegar, and the poor Colonel, he suffers much from it. If it were me I would take a hatchet to her!

I saw their advertisement in the paper, and the fancy took me to go once again to the place which first was my home in this country. At my age one enjoys reliving the past.

Then figure to yourself, I find here a gentleman, a baronet who is a friend of the employer of your daughter. (That phrase it sounds a little like the French exercise, does it not?)

Immediately I conceive a plan. He wishes to induce the Franklins to come here for the summer. I in my turn will persuade you and we shall be all together, en famille. It will be most agreeable. Therefore, mon cher Hastings, dépêchez-vous, arrive with the utmost celerity. I have commanded for you a room with bath (it is modernized now, you comprehend, the dear old Styles) and disputed the price with Mrs. Colonel Luttrell until I have made an arrangement très bon marché.

The Franklins and your charming Judith have been here for some days. It is all arranged, so make no histories.

A bientôt,

Yours always, Hercule Poirot

The prospect was alluring, and I fell in with my old friend's wishes without demur. I had no ties and no settled home. Of my children, one boy was in the Navy, the other married and running the ranch in the Argentine. My daughter Grace was married to a soldier and was at present in India. My remaining child, Judith, was the one whom secretly I had always loved best, although I had never for one moment understood her. A queer, dark, secretive child, with a passion for keeping her own counsel, which had sometimes affronted and distressed me. My wife had been more understanding. It was, she assured me, no lack of trust or confidence on Judith's part, but a kind of fierce compulsion. But she, like myself, was sometimes worried about the child. Judith's feelings, she said, were too intense, too concentrated, and her instinctive reserve deprived her of any safety valve. She had queer fits of brooding silence and a fierce, almost bitter power of partisanship. Her brains were the best of the family and we gladly fell in with her wish for a university education. She had taken her

B.Sc. about a year ago, and had then taken the post of secretary to a doctor who was engaged in research work connected with tropical disease. His wife was somewhat of an invalid.

I had occasionally had qualms as to whether Judith's absorption in her work, and devotion to her employer, were not signs that she might be losing her heart, but the businesslike footing of their relationship assured me.

Judith was, I believed, fond of me, but she was very undemonstrative by nature, and she was often scornful and impatient of what she called my sentimental and outworn ideas. I was, frankly, a little nervous of my daughter!

At this point my meditations were interrupted by the train drawing up at the station of Styles St. Mary. That at least had not changed. Time had passed it by. It was still perched up in the midst of fields, with apparently no reason for existence.

As my taxi passed through the village, though, I realized the passage of years. Styles St. Mary was altered out of all recognition. Petrol stations, a cinema, two more inns and rows of council houses.

Presently we turned in at the gate of Styles. Here we seemed to recede again from modern times. The park was much as I remembered it, but the drive was badly kept and much overgrown with weeds growing up over the gravel. We turned a corner and came in view of the house. It was unaltered from the outside and badly needed a coat of paint.

As on my arrival all those years ago, there was a woman's figure stooping over one of the garden beds. My heart missed a beat. Then the figure straightened up and came towards me, and I laughed at myself. No greater contrast to the robust Evelyn Howard could have been imagined.

This was a frail elderly lady, with an abundance of curly white hair, pink cheeks, and a pair of cold pale blue eyes that were widely at variance with the easy geniality of her manner, which was frankly a shade too gushing for my taste.

“It’ll be Captain Hastings now, won’t it?” she demanded. “And me with my hands all over dirt and not able to shake hands. We’re delighted to see you here—the amount we’ve heard about you! I must introduce myself. I’m Mrs. Luttrell. My husband and I bought this place in a fit of madness and have been trying to make a paying concern of it. I never thought the day would come when I’d be a hotel keeper! But I’ll warn you, Captain Hastings, I’m a very businesslike woman. I pile up the extras all I know how.”

We both laughed as though at an excellent joke, but it occurred to me that what Mrs. Luttrell had just said was in all probability the literal truth. Behind the veneer of her charming old lady manner, I caught a glimpse of flint-like hardness.

Although Mrs. Luttrell occasionally affected a faint brogue, she had no Irish blood. It was a mere affectation.

I enquired after my friend.

“Ah, poor little M. Poirot. The way he’s been looking forward to your coming. It would melt a heart of stone. Terribly sorry I am for him, suffering the way he does.”

We were walking towards the house and she was peeling off her gardening gloves.

“And your pretty daughter, too,” she went on. “What a lovely girl she is. We all admire her tremendously. But I’m old-fashioned, you know, and it seems to me a shame and a sin that a girl like that, that ought to be going to parties and dancing with young men, should spend her time cutting up rabbits and bending over a microscope all day. Leave that sort of thing to the frumps, I say.”

“Where is Judith?” I asked. “Is she somewhere about?”

Mrs. Luttrell made what children call “a face.”

"Ah, the poor girl. Sheh's cooped up in tat studio place down at the bottom of the garden. Dr. Franklin rents it from me and he's had it all fitted up. Hutches of guinea pigs he's got there, the poor creatures, and mice and rabbits. I'm not sure that I like all this science, Captain Hastings. Ah, here's my husband."

Colonel Luttrell had just come round the corner of the house. He was a very tall, attenuated old man, with a cadaverous face, mild blue eyes and a habit of irresolutely tugging at his little white moustache.

He had a vague, rather nervous manner.

"Ah, George, here's Captain Hastings arrived."

Colonel Luttrell shook hands. "You came by the five—er—forty, eh?"

"What else should he have come by?" said Mrs. Luttrell sharply. "And what does it matter anyway? Take him up and show him his room, George. And then maybe he'd like to go straight to M. Poirot—or would you rather have tea first?"

I assured her that I did not want tea and would prefer to go and greet my friend.

Colonel Luttrell said, "Right. Come along. I expect—er—they'll have taken your things up already—eh, Daisy?"

Mrs. Luttrell said tartly, "That's your business, George. I've been gardening. I can't see to everything."

"No, no, of course not. I—I'll see to it, my dear."

I followed him up the front steps. In the doorway we encountered a grey-haired man, slightly built, who was hurrying out with a pair of field glasses. He limped, and had a boyish eager face. He said, stammering slightly: "There's a pair of n-nesting blackcaps down by the sycamore."

As we went into the hall, Luttrell said, "That's Norton. Nice fellow. Crazy about birds."

In the hall itself, a very big man was standing by the table. He had obviously just finished telephoning. Looking up he said, “I’d like to hang, draw and quarter all contractors and builders. Never get anything done right, curse ’em.”

His wrath was so comical and so rueful, that we both laughed. I felt very attracted at once towards the man. He was very good-looking, though a man well over fifty, with a deeply tanned face. He looked as though he had led an out-of-doors life, and he looked, too, the type of man that is becoming more and more rare, an Englishman of the old school, straightforward, fond of out-of-doors life, and the kind of man who can command.

I was hardly surprised when Colonel Luttrell introduced him as Sir William Boyd Carrington. He had been, I knew, Governor of a province in India, where he had been a signal success. He was also renowned as a first-class shot and big game hunter. The sort of man, I reflected sadly, that we no longer seemed to breed in these degenerate days.

“Aha,” he said. “I’m glad to meet in the flesh that famous personage mon ami Hastings.” He laughed. “The dear old Belgian fellow talks about you a lot, you know. And then, of course, we’ve got your daughter here. She’s a fine girl.”

“I don’t suppose Judith talks about me much,” I said, smiling.

“No, no, far too modern. These girls nowadays always seem embarrassed at having to admit to a father or mother at all.”

“Parents,” I said, “are practically a disgrace.”

He laughed. “Oh, well—I don’t suffer that way. I’ve no children, worse luck. Your Judith is a very good-looking wench, but terribly highbrow. I find it rather alarming.” He picked up the telephone receiver again. “Hope you don’t mind, Luttrell, if I start damning your exchange to hell. I’m not a patient man.”

“Do ’em good,” said Luttrell.

He led the way upstairs and I followed him. He took me along the left wing of the house to a door at the end, and I realized that Poirot had chosen for me the room I had occupied before.

There were changes here. As I walked along the corridor some of the doors were open and I saw that the old-fashioned large bedrooms had been partitioned off so as to make several smaller ones.

My own room, which had not been large, was unaltered save for the installation of hot and cold water, and part of it had been partitioned off to make a small bathroom. It was furnished in a cheap modern style which rather disappointed me. I should have preferred a style more nearly approximating to the architecture of the house itself.

My luggage was in my room and the Colonel explained that Poirot's room was exactly opposite. He was about to take me there when a sharp cry of "George" echoed up from the hall below.

Colonel Luttrell started like a nervous horse. His hand went to his lips.

"I—I—sure you're all right? Ring for what you want—"

"George."

"Coming, my dear, coming."

He hurried off down the corridor. I stood for a moment looking after him. Then, with my heart beating slightly faster, I crossed the corridor and rapped on the door of Poirot's room.

Two

Nothing is so sad, in my opinion, as the devastation wrought by age.

My poor friend. I have described him many times. Now to convey to you the difference. Crippled with arthritis, he propelled himself about in a wheeled chair. His once plump frame had fallen in. He was a thin little man now. His face was lined and wrinkled. His moustache and hair, it is true, were still of a jet black colour, but candidly, though I would not for the world have hurt his feelings by saying so to him, this was a mistake. There comes a moment when hair dye is only too painfully obvious. There had been a time when I had been surprised to learn that the blackness of Poirot's hair came out of a bottle. But now the theatricality was apparent and merely created the impression that he wore a wig and had adorned his upper lip to amuse the children!

Only his eyes were the same as ever, shrewd and twinkling, and now—yes, undoubtedly—softened with emotion.

"Ah, mon ami Hastings—mon ami Hastings. . . ."

I bent my head and, as was his custom, he embraced me warmly.

"Mon ami Hastings!"

He leaned back, surveying me with his head a little to one side.

"Yes, just the same—the straight back, the broad shoulders, the grey of the hair—très distingué. You know, my friend, you have worn well. Les femmes, they still take an interest in you? Yes?"

"Really, Poirot," I protested. "Must you—"

"But I assure you, my friend, it is a test—it is the test. When the very young girls come and talk to you kindly, oh so kindly—it is the end! 'The poor old man,' they say, 'we must be nice to him. It must be so awful to be like that.'

But you, Hastings—vous êtes encore jeune. For you there are still possibilities. That is right, twist your moustache, hunch your shoulders—I see it is as I say—you would not look so self-conscious otherwise."

I burst out laughing. "You really are the limit, Poirot. And how are you yourself?"

"Me," said Poirot with a grimace. "I am a wreck. I am a ruin. I cannot walk. I am crippled and twisted. Mercifully I can still feed myself, but otherwise I have to be attended to like a baby. Put to bed, washed and dressed. Enfin, it is not amusing that. Mercifully, though the outside decays, the core is still sound."

"Yes, indeed. The best heart in the world."

"The heart? Perhaps. I was not referring to the heart. The brain, mon cher, is what I mean by the core. My brain, it still functions magnificently."

I could at least perceive clearly that no deterioration of the brain in the direction of modesty had taken place.

"And you like it here?" I asked.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. "It suffices. It is not, you comprehend, the Ritz. No, indeed. The room I was in when I first came here was both small and inadequately furnished. I moved to this one with no increase of price. Then, the cooking, it is English at its worst. Those Brussels sprouts so enormous, so hard, that the English like so much. The potatoes boiled and either hard or falling to pieces. The vegetables that taste of water, water, and again water. The complete absence of the salt and pepper in any dish—" he paused expressively.

"It sounds terrible," I said.

"I do not complain," said Poirot, and proceeded to do so. "And there is also the modernization, so called. The bathrooms, the taps everywhere and what comes out of them? Lukewarm water, mon ami, at most hours of the day. And the towels, so thin, so meagre!"

“There is something to be said for the old days,” I said thoughtfully. I remembered the clouds of steam which had gushed from the hot tap of the one bathroom Styles had originally possessed, one of those bathrooms in which an immense bath with mahogany sides had reposed proudly in the middle of the bathroom floor. Remembered, too, the immense bath towels, and the frequent shining brass cans of boiling hot water that stood in one’s old-fashioned basin.

“But one must not complain,” said Poirot again. “I am content to suffer—for a good cause.”

A sudden thought struck me.

“I say, Poirot, you’re not—er—hard up, are you? I know the war hit investments very badly—”

Poirot reassured me quickly.

“No, no, my friend. I am in most comfortable circumstances. Indeed, I am rich. It is not the economy that brings me here.”

“Then that’s all right,” I said. I went on: “I think I can understand your feeling. As one gets on, one tends more and more to revert to the old days. One tries to recapture old emotions. I find it painful to be here, in a way, and yet it brings back to me a hundred old thoughts and emotions that I’d quite forgotten I ever felt. I daresay you feel the same.”

“Not in the least. I do not feel like that at all.”

“They were good days,” I said sadly.

“You may speak for yourself, Hastings. For me, my arrival at Styles St. Mary was a sad and painful time. I was a refugee, wounded, exiled from home and country, existing by charity in a foreign land. No, it was not gay. I did not know then that England would come to be my home and that I should find happiness here.”

“I had forgotten that,” I admitted.

"Precisely. You attribute always to others the sentiments that you yourself experience. Hastings was happy—everybody was happy!"

"No, no," I protested, laughing.

"And in any case it is not true," continued Poirot. "You look back, you say, the tears rising in your eyes, 'Oh, the happy days. Then I was young.' But indeed, my friend, you were not so happy as you think. You had recently been severely wounded, you were fretting at being no longer fit for active service, you had just been depressed beyond words by your sojourn in a dreary convalescent home and, as far as I remember, you proceeded to complicate matters by falling in love with two women at the same time."

I laughed and flushed.

"What a memory you have, Poirot."

"Ta ta ta—I remember now the melancholy sigh you heaved as you murmured fatuities about two lovely women."

"Do you remember what you said? You said, 'And neither of them for you! But courage, mon ami. We may hunt together again and then perhaps—' "

I stopped. For Poirot and I had gone hunting again to France and it was there that I had met the one woman. . . .

Gently my friend patted my arm.

"I know, Hastings, I know. The wound is still fresh. But do not dwell on it, do not look back. Instead look forward."

I made a gesture of disgust.

"Look forward? What is there to look forward to?"

"Eh bien, my friend, there is work to be done."

"Work? Where?"

"Here."

I stared at him.

"Just now," said Poirot, "you asked me why I had come here. You may not have observed that I gave you no answer. I will give the answer now. I am here to hunt down a murderer."

I stared at him with even more astonishment. For a moment I thought he was rambling.

"You really mean that?"

"But certainly I mean it. For what other reason did I urge you to join me? My limbs, they are no longer active, but my brain, as I told you, is unimpaired. My rule, remember, has been always the same—sit back and think. That I still can do—in fact it is the only thing possible for me. For the more active side of the campaign I shall have with me my invaluable Hastings."

"You really mean it?" I gasped.

"Of course I mean it. You and I, Hastings, are going hunting once again."

It took some minutes to grasp that Poirot was really in earnest.

Fantastic though his statement sounded, I had no reason to doubt his judgement.

With a slight smile he said, "At last you are convinced. At first you imagined, did you not, that I had the softening of the brain?"

"No, no," I said hastily. "Only this seems such an unlikely place."

"Ah, you think so?"

"Of course I haven't seen all the people yet—"

"Whom have you seen?"

“Just the Luttrells, and a man called Norton, seems an inoffensive chap, and Boyd Carrington—I must say I took the greatest fancy to him.”

Poirot nodded. “Well, Hastings, I will tell you this, when you have seen the rest of the household, my statement will seem to you just as improbable as it is now.”

“Who else is there?”

“The Franklins—Doctor and Mrs., the hospital nurse who attends to Mrs. Franklin, your daughter Judith. Then there is a man called Allerton, something of a lady-killer, and a Miss Cole, a woman in her thirties. They are all, let me tell you, very nice people.”

“And one of them is a murderer?”

“And one of them is a murderer.”

“But why—how—why should you think—?”

I found it hard to frame my questions, they tumbled over each other.

“Calm yourself, Hastings. Let us begin from the beginning. Reach me, I pray you, that small box from the bureau. Bien. And now the key—so—”

Unlocking the despatch case, he took from it a mass of typescript and newspaper clippings.

“You can study these at your leisure, Hastings. For the moment I should not bother with the newspaper cuttings. They are merely the press accounts of various tragedies, occasionally inaccurate, sometimes suggestive. To give you an idea of the cases I suggest that you should read through the précis I have made.”

Deeply interested, I started reading.

CASE A. ETHERINGTON

Leonard Etherington. Unpleasant habits—took drugs and also drank. A peculiar and sadistic character. Wife young and attractive. Desperately unhappy with him. Etherington died, apparently of food poisoning. Doctor not satisfied. As a result of autopsy, death discovered to be due to arsenical poisoning. Supply of weed killer in the house, but ordered a long time previously. Mrs. Etherington arrested and charged with murder. She had recently been friends with a man in Civil Service returning to India. No suggestion of actual infidelity, but evidence of deep sympathy between them. Young man had since become engaged to be married to girl he met on voyage out. Some doubt as to whether letter telling Mrs. Etherington of this fact was received by her after or before her husband's death. She herself says before. Evidence against her mainly circumstantial, absence of another likely suspect and accident highly unlikely. Great sympathy felt with her at trial owing to husband's character and the bad treatment she had received from him. Judge's summing up was in her favour stressing that verdict must be beyond any reasonable doubt.

Mrs. Etherington was acquitted. General opinion, however, was that she was guilty. Her life afterwards very difficult owing to friends, etc., cold-shouldering her. She died as a result of taking an overdose of sleeping draught two years after the trial. Verdict of accidental death returned at inquest.

CASE B. MISS SHARPLES

Elderly spinster. An invalid. Difficult, suffering much pain. She was looked after by her niece, Freda Clay. Miss Sharples died as a result of an overdose of morphia. Freda Clay admitted an error, saying that her aunt's sufferings were so bad that she could not stand it and gave her more morphia to ease the pain. Opinion of police that act was deliberate, not a mistake, but they considered evidence insufficient on which to prosecute.

CASE C. EDWARD RIGGS

Agricultural labourer. Suspected his wife of infidelity with their lodger, Ben Craig. Craig and Mrs. Riggs found shot. Shots proved to be from Riggs's gun. Riggs gave himself up to the police, said he supposed he must have done it, but couldn't remember. His mind went blank, he said. Riggs sentenced to death, sentence afterwards commuted to penal servitude for life.

CASE D. DEREK BRADLEY

Was carrying on an intrigue with a girl. His wife discovered this, she threatened to kill him. Bradley died of potassium cyanide administered in his beer. Mrs. Bradley arrested and tried for murder. Broke down under cross-examination. Convicted and hanged.

CASE E. MATTHEW LITCHFIELD

Elderly tyrant. Four daughters at home, not allowed any pleasures or money to spend. One evening on returning home, he was attacked outside his side door and killed by a blow on the head. Later, after police investigation, his eldest daughter, Margaret, walked into the police station and gave herself up for her father’s murder. She did it, she said, in order that her younger sisters might be able to have a life of their own before it was too late. Litchfield left a large fortune. Margaret Litchfield was adjudged insane and committed to Broadmoor, but died shortly afterwards.

I read carefully, but with a growing bewilderment. Finally I put the paper down and looked enquiringly at Poirot.

“Well, mon ami?”

“I remember the Bradley case,” I said slowly, “I read about it at the time. She was a very good-looking woman.”

Poirot nodded.

“But you must enlighten me. What is all this about?”

“Tell me first what it amounts to in your eyes.”

I was rather puzzled.

“What you gave me was an account of five different murders. They all occurred in different places and amongst different classes of people.

Moreover there seems no superficial resemblance between them. That is to say, one was a case of jealousy, one was an unhappy wife seeking to get rid of her husband, another had money for a motive, another was, you might say, unselfish in aim since the murderer did not try to escape punishment, and the fifth was frankly brutal, probably committed under the influence of drink.” I paused and said doubtfully: “Is there something in common between them all that I have missed?”

“No, no, you have been very accurate in your summing up. The only point that you might have mentioned, but did not, was the fact that in none of those cases did any real doubt exist.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Mrs. Etherington, for instance, was acquitted. But everybody, nevertheless, was quite certain that she did it. Freda Clay was not openly accused, but no one thought of any alternative solution to the crime. Riggs stated that he did not remember killing his wife and her lover, but there was never any question of anybody else having done so. Margaret Litchfield confessed. In each case, you see, Hastings, there was one clear suspect and no other.”

I wrinkled my brow. “Yes, that is true—but I don’t see what particular inferences you draw from that.”

“Ah, but you see, I am coming to a fact that you do not know as yet. Supposing, Hastings, that in each of these cases that I have outlined, there was one alien note common to them all?”

“What do you mean?”

Poirot said slowly: “I intend, Hastings, to be very careful in what I say. Let me put it this way. There is a certain person—X. In none of these cases did X (apparently) have any motive in doing away with the victim. In one case, as far as I have been able to find out, X was actually two hundred miles away when the crime was committed. Nevertheless I will tell you this. X was on intimate terms with Etherington, X lived for a time in the same village as Riggs, X was acquainted with Mrs. Bradley. I have a snap of X and Freda Clay walking together in the street, and X was near the house when old Matthew Litchfield died. What do you say to that?”

I stared at him. I said slowly: “Yes, it’s a bit too much. Coincidence might account for two cases, or even three, but five is a bit too thick. There must, unlikely as it seems, be some connection between these different murders.”

“You assume, then, what I have assumed?”

“That X is the murderer? Yes.”

“In that case, Hastings, you will be willing to go with me one step farther. Let me tell you this. X is in this house.”

“Here? At Styles?”

“At Styles. What is the logical inference to be drawn from that?”

I knew what was coming as I said: “Go on—say it.”

Hercule Poirot said gravely: “A murder will shortly be committed here—here.”

Three

For a moment or two I stared at Poirot in dismay, then I reacted.

“No, it won’t,” I said. “You’ll prevent that.”

Poirot threw me an affectionate glance.

“My loyal friend. How much I appreciate your faith in me. Tout de même, I am not sure if it is justified in this case.”

“Nonsense. Of course you can stop it.”

Poirot’s voice was grave as he said: “Reflect a minute, Hastings. One can catch a murderer, yes. But how does one proceed to stop a murder?”

“Well, you—you—well, I mean—if you know beforehand—”

I paused rather feebly—for suddenly I saw the difficulties.

Poirot said: “You see? It is not so simple. There are, in fact, only three methods. The first is to warn the victim. To put the victim on his or her guard. That does not always succeed, for it is unbelievably difficult to convince some people that they are in grave danger—possibly from someone near and dear to them. They are indignant and refuse to believe. The second course is to warn the murderer. To say, in language that is only slightly veiled, ‘I know your intentions. If so-and-so dies, my friend, you will most surely hang.’ That succeeds more often than the first method, but even there it is likely to fail. For a murderer, my friend, is more conceited than any creature on this earth. A murderer is always more clever than anyone else—no one will ever suspect him or her—the police will be utterly baffled, etc. Therefore he (or she) goes ahead just the same, and all you can have is the satisfaction of hanging them afterwards.” He paused and said thoughtfully: “Twice in my life I have warned a murderer—once in

Egypt, once elsewhere. In each case, the criminal was determined to kill . . . It may be so here."

"You said there was a third method," I reminded him.

"Ah yes. For that one needs the utmost ingenuity. You have to guess exactly how and when the blow is timed to fall and you have to be ready to step in at the exact psychological moment. You have to catch the murderer, if not quite red-handed, then guilty of the intention beyond any possible doubt.

"And that, my friend," went on Poirot, "is, I can assure you, a matter of great difficulty and delicacy, and I would not for a moment guarantee its success! I may be conceited, but I am not so conceited as that."

"Which method do you propose to try here?"

"Possibly all three. The first is the most difficult."

"Why? I should have thought it the easiest."

"Yes, if you know the intended victim. But do you not realize, Hastings, that here I do not know the victim?"

"What?"

I gave vent to the exclamation without reflecting. Then the difficulties of the position began to draw on me. There was, there must be, some link connecting this series of crimes, but we did not know what that link was. The motive, the vitally important motive, was missing. And without knowing that, we could not tell who was threatened.

Poirot nodded as he saw by my face that I was realizing the difficulties of the situation.

"You see, my friend, it is not so easy."

"No," I said. "I see that. You have so far been able to find no connection between these varying cases?"

Poirot shook his head. “Nothing.”

I reflected again. In the ABC crimes, we had to deal with what purported to be an alphabetical series, though in actuality it had turned out to be something very different.

I asked: “There is, you are quite sure, no far-fetched financial motive—nothing, for instance, like you found in the case of Evelyn Carlisle?”

“No. You may be quite sure, my dear Hastings, that financial gain is the first thing for which I look.”

That was true enough. Poirot had always been completely cynical about money.

I thought again. A vendetta of some kind? That was more in accordance with the facts. But even there, there seemed a lack of any connecting link. I recalled a story I had read of a series of purposeless murders—the clue being that the victims had happened to serve as members of a jury, and the crimes had been committed by a man whom they had condemned. It struck me that something of that kind would meet this case. I am ashamed to say that I kept the idea to myself. It would have been such a feather in my cap if I could go to Poirot with the solution.

Instead I asked: “And now tell me, who is X?”

To my intense annoyance Poirot shook his head very decidedly. “That, my friend, I do not tell.”

“Nonsense. Why not?”

Poirot’s eyes twinkled. “Because, mon cher, you are still the same old Hastings. You have still the speaking countenance. I do not wish, you see, that you should sit staring at X with your mouth hanging open, your face saying plainly: ‘This—this that I am looking at—is a murderer.’ ”

“You might give me credit for a little dissimulation at need.”

“When you try to dissimulate, it is worse. No, no, mon ami, we must be very incognito, you and I. Then, when we pounce, we pounce.”

“You obstinate old devil,” I said. “I’ve a good mind to—”

I broke off as there was a tap on the door. Poirot called, “Come in,” and my daughter Judith entered.

I should like to describe Judith, but I’ve always been a poor hand at descriptions.

Judith is tall, she holds her head high, she has level dark brows, and a very lovely line of cheek and jaw, severe in its austerity. She is grave and slightly scornful, and to my mind there has always hung about her a suggestion of tragedy.

Judith didn’t come and kiss me—she is not that kind. She just smiled at me and said, “Hullo, Father.”

Her smile was shy and a little embarrassed, but it made me feel that in spite of her undemonstrativeness she was pleased to see me.

“Well,” I said, feeling foolish as I so often do with the younger generation, “I’ve got here.”

“Very clever of you, darling,” said Judith.

“I describe to him,” said Poirot, “the cooking.”

“Is it very bad?” asked Judith.

“You should not have to ask that, my child. Is it that you think of nothing but the test tubes and the microscopes? Your middle finger it is stained with methylene blue. It is not a good thing for your husband if you take no interest in his stomach.”

“I daresay I shan’t have a husband.”

“Certainly you will have a husband. What did the bon Dieu create you for?”

"Many things, I hope," said Judith.

"Le mariage first of all."

"Very well," said Judith. "You will find me a nice husband and I will look after his stomach very carefully."

"She laughs at me," said Poirot. "Some day she will know how wise old men are."

There was another tap on the door and Dr. Franklin entered. He was a tall, angular young man of thirty-five, with a decided jaw, reddish hair, and bright blue eyes. He was the most ungainly man I had ever known, and was always knocking into things in an absentminded way.

He cannoned into the screen round Poirot's chair, and half turning his head murmured "I beg your pardon" to it automatically.

I wanted to laugh, but Judith, I noted, remained quite grave. I suppose she was quite used to that sort of thing.

"You remember my father," said Judith.

Dr. Franklin started, shied nervously, screwed up his eyes and peered at me, then stuck out a hand, saying awkwardly: "Of course, of course, how are you? I heard you were coming down." He turned to Judith. "I say, do you think we need change? If not we might go on a bit after dinner. If we got a few more of those slides prepared—"

"No," said Judith. "I want to talk to my father."

"Oh, yes. Oh, of course." Suddenly he smiled, an apologetic, boyish smile. "I am sorry—I get so awfully wrapped up in a thing. It's quite unpardonable—makes me so selfish. Do forgive me."

The clock struck and Franklin glanced at it hurriedly.

"Good Lord, is it as late as that? I shall get into trouble. Promised Barbara I'd read to her before dinner."

He grinned at us both and hurried out, colliding with the door post as he went.

“How is Mrs. Franklin?” I asked.

“The same and rather more so,” said Judith.

“It’s very sad her being such an invalid,” I said.

“It’s maddening for a doctor,” said Judith. “Doctors like healthy people.”

“How hard you young people are!” I exclaimed.

Judith said coldly: “I was just stating a fact.”

“Nevertheless,” said Poirot, “the good doctor hurries to read to her.”

“Very stupid,” said Judith. “That nurse of hers can read to her perfectly well if she wants to be read to. Personally I should loathe anyone reading aloud to me.”

“Well, well, tastes differ,” I said.

“She’s a very stupid woman,” said Judith.

“Now there, mon enfant,” said Poirot, “I do not agree with you.”

“She never reads anything but the cheapest kind of novel. She takes no interest in his work. She doesn’t keep abreast of current thought. She just talks about her health to everyone who will listen.”

“I still maintain, said Poirot, “that she uses her grey cells in ways that you, my child, know nothing about.”

“She’s a very feminine sort of woman,” said Judith. “She coos and purrs. I expect you like ’em like that, Uncle Hercule.”

“Not at all,” I said. “He likes them large and flamboyant and Russian for choice.”

“So that is how you give me away, Hastings? Your father, Judith, has always had a penchant for auburn hair. It has landed him in trouble many a time.”

Judith smiled at us both indulgently. She said: “What a funny couple you are.”

She turned away and I rose.

“I must get unpacked, and I might have a bath before dinner.”

Poirot pressed a little bell within reach of his hand and a minute or two later his valet attendant entered. I was surprised to find that the man was a stranger.

“Why! Where’s George?”

Poirot’s valet George had been with him for many years.

“George has returned to his family. His father is ill. I hope he will come back to me some time. In the meantime—” he smiled at the new valet—“Curtiss looks after me.”

Curtiss smiled back respectfully. He was a big man with a bovine, rather stupid, face.

As I went out of the door I noted that Poirot was carefully locking up the despatch case with the papers inside it.

My mind in a whirl I crossed the passage to my own room.

Four

I went down to dinner that night feeling that the whole of life had become suddenly unreal.

Once or twice, while dressing, I had asked myself if possibly Poirot had imagined the whole thing. After all, the dear old chap was an old man now and sadly broken in health. He himself might declare his brain was as sound as ever—but in point of fact, was it? His whole life had been spent in tracking down crime. Would it really be surprising if, in the end, he was to fancy crimes where no crimes were? His enforced inaction must have fretted him sorely. What more likely than that he should invent for himself a new manhunt? Wishful thinking—a perfectly reasonable neurosis. He had selected a number of publicly reported happenings, and had read into them something that was not there—a shadowy figure behind them, a mad mass murderer. In all probability Mrs. Etherington had really killed her husband, the labourer had shot his wife, a young woman had given her old aunt an overdose of morphia, a jealous wife had polished off her husband as she had threatened to do, and a crazy spinster had really committed the murder for which she had subsequently given herself up. In fact these crimes were exactly what they seemed!

Against that view (surely the commonsense one) I could only set my own inherent belief in Poirot's acumen.

Poirot said that a murder had been arranged. For the second time Styles was to house a crime.

Time would prove or disprove that assertion, but if it were true, it behoved us to forestall that happening.

And Poirot knew the identity of the murderer which I did not.

The more I thought about that, the more annoyed I became! Really, frankly, it was damned cheek of Poirot! He wanted my cooperation and yet he refused to take me into his confidence!

Why? There was the reason he gave—surely a most inadequate one! I was tired of this silly joking about my “speaking countenance.” I could keep a secret as well as anyone. Poirot had always persisted in the humiliating belief that I am a transparent character and that anyone can read what is passing in my mind. He tries to soften the blow sometimes by attributing it to my beautiful and honest character which abhors all form of deceit!

Of course, I reflected, if the whole thing was a chimera of Poirot’s imagination, his reticence was easily explained.

I had come to no conclusion by the time the gong sounded, and I went down to dinner with an open mind, but with an alert eye, for the detection of Poirot’s mythical X.

For the moment I would accept everything that Poirot had said as gospel truth. There was a person under this roof who had already killed five times and who was preparing to kill again. Who was it?

In the drawing room before we went in to dinner I was introduced to Miss Cole and Major Allerton. The former was a tall, still handsome woman of thirty-three or four. Major Allerton I instinctively disliked. He was a good-looking man in the early forties, broad-shouldered, bronzed of face, with an easy way of talking, most of what he said holding a double implication. He had the pouches under his eyes that come with a dissipated way of life. I suspected him of racketing around, of gambling, of drinking hard, and of being first and last a womanizer.

Old Colonel Luttrell, I saw, did not much like him either, and Boyd Carrington was also rather stiff in his manner towards him. Allerton’s success was with the women of the party. Mrs. Luttrell twittered to him delightedly, whilst he flattered her lazily and with a hardly concealed impertinence. I was also annoyed to see that Judith, too, seemed to enjoy his company and was exerting herself far more than usual to talk to him. Why the worst type of man can always be relied upon to please and interest the nicest of women has long been a problem beyond me. I knew instinctively that Allerton was a rotter—and nine men out of ten would have agreed with me. Whereas nine women or possibly the whole ten would have fallen for him immediately.

As we sat down at the dinner table and plates of white gluey liquid were set before us, I let my eyes rove round the table whilst I summed up the possibilities.

If Poirot were right, and retained his clearness of brain unimpaired, one of these people was a dangerous murderer—and probably a lunatic as well.

Poirot had not actually said so, but I presumed that X was probably a man. Which of these men was it likely to be?

Surely not old Colonel Luttrell, with his indecision, and his general air of feebleness. Norton, the man I had met rushing out of the house with field glasses? It seemed unlikely. He appeared to be a pleasant fellow, rather ineffective and lacking in vitality. Of course, I told myself, many murderers have been small insignificant men—driven to assert themselves by crime for that very reason. They resented being passed over and ignored. Norton might be a murderer of this type. But there was his fondness for birds. I have always believed that a love of nature was essentially a healthy sign in a man.

Boyd Carrington? Out of the question. A man with a name known all over the world. A fine sportsman, an administrator, a man universally liked and looked up to. Franklin I also dismissed. I knew how Judith respected and admired him.

Major Allerton now. I dwelt on him appraisingly. A nasty fellow if I ever saw one! The sort of fellow who would skin his grandmother. And all glossed over with this superficial charm of manner. He was talking now—telling a story of his own discomfiture and making everybody laugh with his rueful appreciation of a joke at his expense.

If Allerton was X, I decided, his crimes had been committed for profit in some way.

It was true that Poirot had not definitely said that X was a man. I considered Miss Cole as a possibility. Her movements were restless and jerky—obviously a woman of nerves. Handsome in a hag-ridden kind of way. Still, she looked normal enough. She, Mrs. Luttrell and Judith were the only women at the dinner table. Mrs. Franklin was having dinner upstairs in her room, and the nurse who attended to her had her meals after us.

After dinner I was standing by the drawing room window looking out into the garden and thinking back to the time when I had seen Cynthia Murdoch, a young girl with auburn hair, run across that lawn. How charming she had looked in her white overall. . . .

Lost in thoughts of the past, I started when Judith passed her arm through mine and led me with her out of the window on to the terrace.

She said abruptly: “What’s the matter?”

I was startled. “The matter? What do you mean?”

“You’ve been so queer all through the evening. Why were you staring at everyone at dinner?”

I was annoyed. I had had no idea I had allowed my thoughts so much sway over me.

“Was I? I suppose I was thinking of the past. Seeing ghosts perhaps.”

“Oh, yes, of course you stayed here, didn’t you, when you were a young man? An old lady was murdered here, or something?”

“Poisoned with strychnine.”

“What was she like? Nice or nasty?”

I considered the question.

“She was a very kind woman,” I said slowly. “Generous. Gave a lot to charity.”

“Oh, that kind of generosity.”

Judith’s voice sounded faintly scornful. Then she asked a curious question: “Were people—happy here?”

No, they had not been happy. That, at least, I knew. I said slowly: “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because they felt like prisoners. Mrs. Inglethorp, you see, had all the money—and—doled it out. Her stepchildren could have no life of their own.”

I heard Judith take a sharp breath. The hand on my arm tightened.

“That’s wicked—wicked. An abuse of power. It shouldn’t be allowed. Old people, sick people, they shouldn’t have the power to hold up the lives of the young and strong. To keep them tied down, fretting, wasting their power and energy that could be used—that’s needed. It’s just selfishness.”

“The old,” I said drily, “have not got a monopoly of that quality.”

“Oh, I know, Father, you think the young are selfish. So we are, perhaps, but it’s a clean selfishness. At least we only want to do what we want ourselves, we don’t want everybody else to do what we want, we don’t want to make slaves of other people.”

“No, you just trample them down if they happen to be in your way.”

Judith squeezed my arm. She said: “Don’t be so bitter! I don’t really do much trampling—and you’ve never tried to dictate our lives to any of us. We are grateful for that.”

“I’m afraid,” I said honestly, “that I’d have liked to, though. It was your mother who insisted you should be allowed to make your own mistakes.”

Judith gave my arm another quick squeeze. She said: “I know. You’d have liked to fuss over us like a hen! I do hate fuss. I won’t stand it. But you do agree with me, don’t you, about useful lives being sacrificed to useless ones?”

“It does sometimes happen,” I admitted. “But there’s no need for drastic measures . . . It’s up to anybody just to walk out, you know.”

“Yes, but is it? Is it?”

Her tone was so vehement that I looked at her in some astonishment. It was too dark to see her face clearly. She went on, her voice low and troubled: “There’s so much—it’s difficult—financial considerations, a sense of responsibility, reluctance to hurt someone you’ve been fond of—all those things, and some people are so unscrupulous—they know just how to play on all those feelings. Some people—some people are like leeches!”

“My dear Judith,” I exclaimed, taken aback by the positive fury of her tone.

She seemed to realize that she had been overvehement, for she laughed, and withdrew her arm from mine.

“Was I sounding very intense? It’s a matter I feel rather hotly about. You see, I’ve known a case . . . An old brute. And when someone was brave enough to—to cut the knot and set the people she loved free, they called her mad. Mad? It was the sanest thing anyone could do—and the bravest!”

A horrible qualm passed over me. Where, not long ago, had I heard something like that?

“Judith,” I said sharply. “Of what case are you talking?”

“Oh, nobody you know. Some friends of the Franklins. Old man called Litchfield. He was quite rich and practically starved his wretched daughters—never let them see anyone, or go out. He was mad really, but not sufficiently so in the medical sense.”

“And the eldest daughter murdered him,” I said.

“Oh, I expect you read about it? I suppose you would call it murder—but it wasn’t done from personal motives. Margaret Litchfield went straight to the police and gave herself up. I think she was very brave. I wouldn’t have had the courage.”

“The courage to give yourself up or the courage to commit murder?”

“Both.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” I said severely, “and I don’t like to hear you talking of murder as justified in certain cases.” I paused, and added: “What did Dr. Franklin think?”

“Thought it served him right,” said Judith. “You know, Father, some people really ask to be murdered.”

“I won’t have you talking like this, Judith. Who’s been putting these ideas into your head?”

“Nobody.”

“Well, let me tell you that it’s all pernicious nonsense.”

“I see. We’ll leave it at that.” She paused. “I came really to give you a message from Mrs. Franklin. She’d like to see you if you don’t mind coming up to her bedroom.”

“I shall be delighted. I’m so sorry she was feeling too ill to come down to dinner.”

“She’s all right,” said Judith unfeelingly. “She just likes making a fuss.”

The young are very unsympathetic.

Five

I had only met Mrs. Franklin once before. She was a woman about thirty—of what I should describe as the madonna type. Big brown eyes, hair parted in the centre, and a long gentle face. She was very slender and her skin had a transparent fragility.

She was lying on a day bed, propped up with pillows, and wearing a very dainty negligee of white and pale blue.

Franklin and Boyd Carrington were there drinking coffee. Mrs. Franklin welcomed me with an outstretched hand and a smile.

“How glad I am you’ve come, Captain Hastings. It will be so nice for Judith. The child has really been working far too hard.”

“She looks very well on it,” I said as I took the fragile little hand in mine.

Barbara Franklin sighed. “Yes, she’s lucky. How I envy her. I don’t believe really that she knows what ill health is. What do you think, Nurse? Oh! Let me introduce you. This is Nurse Craven who’s so terribly, terribly good to me. I don’t know what I should do without her. She treats me just like a baby.”

Nurse Craven was a tall, good-looking young woman with a fine colour and a handsome head of auburn hair. I noticed her hands which were long and white—very different from the hands of so many hospital nurses. She was in some respects a taciturn girl, and sometimes did not answer. She did not now, merely inclined her head.

“But really,” went on Mrs. Franklin, “John has been working that wretched girl of yours too hard. He’s such a slave driver. You are a slave driver, aren’t you, John?”

Her husband was standing looking out of the window. He was whistling to himself and jingling some loose change in his pocket. He started slightly at his wife's question.

"What's that, Barbara?"

"I was saying that you overwork poor Judith Hastings shamefully. Now Captain Hastings is here, he and I are going to put our heads together and we're not going to allow it."

Persiflage was not Dr. Franklin's strong point. He looked vaguely worried and turned to Judith enquiringly. He mumbled: "You must let me know if I overdo it."

Judith said: "They're just trying to be funny. Talking of work, I wanted to ask you about that stain for the second slide—you know, the one that—"

He turned to her eagerly and broke in. "Yes, yes. I say, if you don't mind, let's go down to the lab. I'd like to be quite sure—"

Still talking, they went out of the room together.

Barbara Franklin lay back on her pillows. She sighed. Nurse Craven said suddenly and rather disagreeably: "It's Miss Hastings who's the slave driver, I think!"

Again Mrs. Franklin sighed. She murmured: "I feel so inadequate. I ought, I know, to take more interest in John's work, but I just can't do it. I daresay it's something wrong in me, but—"

She was interrupted by a snort from Boyd Carrington who was standing by the fireplace.

"Nonsense, Babs," he said. "You're all right. Don't worry yourself."

"Oh but, Bill, dear, I do worry. I get so discouraged about myself. It's all—I can't help feeling it—it's all so nasty. The guinea pigs and the rats and everything. Ugh!" She shuddered. "I know it's stupid, but I'm such a fool. It makes me feel quite sick. I just want to think of all the lovely happy things—birds and flowers and children playing. You know, Bill."

He came over and took the hand she held out to him so pleadingly. His face as he looked down at her was changed, as gentle as any woman's. It was, somehow, impressive—for Boyd Carrington was so essentially a manly man.

"You've not changed much since you were seventeen, Babs," he said. "Do you remember that garden house of yours and the bird bath and the coconuts?"

He turned his head to me. "Barbara and I are old playmates," he said.

"Old playmates!" she protested.

"Oh, I'm not denying that you're over fifteen years younger than I am. But I played with you as a tiny tot when I was a young man. Gave you pick-a-backs, my dear. And then later I came home to find you a beautiful young lady—just on the point of making your début in the world—and I did my share by taking you out on the golf links and teaching you to play golf. Do you remember?"

"Oh, Bill, do you think I'd forget?"

"My people used to live in this part of the world," she explained to me. "And Bill used to come and stay with his old uncle, Sir Everard, at Knatton."

"And what a mausoleum it was—and is," said Boyd Carrington. "Sometimes I despair of getting the place liveable."

"Oh, Bill, it could be made marvellous—quite marvellous!"

"Yes, Babs, but the trouble is I've got no ideas. Baths and some really comfortable chairs—that's all I can think of. It needs a woman."

"I've told you I'll come and help. I mean it. Really."

Sir William looked doubtfully towards Nurse Craven.

"If you're strong enough, I could drive you over. What do you think, Nurse?"

"Oh yes, Sir William. I really think it would do Mrs. Franklin good—if she's careful not to overtire herself, of course."

"That's a date, then," said Boyd Carrington. "And now you have a good night's sleep. Get into good fettle for tomorrow."

We both wished Mrs. Franklin good night and went out together. As we went down the stairs, Boyd Carrington said gruffly: "You've no idea what a lovely creature she was at seventeen. I was home from Burma—my wife died out there, you know. Don't mind telling you I completely lost my heart to her. She married Franklin three or four years afterwards. Don't think it's been a happy marriage. It's my idea that that's what lies at the bottom of her ill health. Fellow doesn't understand her or appreciate her. And she's the sensitive kind. I've an idea that this delicacy of hers is partly nervous. Take her out of herself, amuse her, interest her, and she looks a different creature! But that damned sawbones only takes an interest in test tubes and West African natives and cultures." He snorted angrily.

I thought that there was, perhaps, something in what he said. Yet it surprised me that Boyd Carrington should be attracted by Mrs. Franklin who, when all was said and done, was a sickly creature, though pretty in a frail, chocolate-box way. But Boyd Carrington himself was so full of vitality and life that I should have thought he would merely have been impatient with the neurotic type of invalid. However, Barbara Franklin must have been quite lovely as a girl, and with many men, especially those of the idealistic type such as I judged Boyd Carrington to be, early impressions die hard.

Downstairs, Mrs. Luttrell pounced upon us and suggested bridge. I excused myself on the plea of wanting to join Poirot.

I found my friend in bed. Curtiss was moving around the room tidying up, but he presently went out, shutting the door behind him.

“Confound you, Poirot,” I said. “You and your infernal habit of keeping things up your sleeve. I’ve spent the whole evening trying to spot X.”

“That must have made you somewhat distrait,” observed my friend. “Did nobody comment on your abstraction and ask you what was the matter?”

I reddened slightly, remembering Judith’s questions. Poirot, I think, observed my discomfiture. I noticed a small malicious smile on his lips. He merely said, however: “And what conclusion have you come to on that point?”

“Would you tell me if I was right?”

“Certainly not.”

I watched his face closely.

“I had considered Norton—”

Poirot’s face did not change.

“Not,” I said, “that I’ve anything to go upon. He just struck me as perhaps less unlikely than anyone else. And then he’s—well—inconspicuous. I should imagine the kind of murderer we’re after would have to be inconspicuous.”

“That is true. But there are more ways than you think of being inconspicuous.”

“What do you mean?”

“Supposing, to take a hypothetical case, that if a sinister stranger arrives there some weeks before the murder, for no apparent reason, he will be noticeable. It would be better, would it not, if the stranger were to be a negligible personality, engaged in some harmless sport like fishing.”

“Or watching birds,” I agreed. “Yes, but that’s just what I was saying.”

“On the other hand,” said Poirot, “it might be better still if the murderer were already a prominent personality—that is to say, he might be the butcher. That would have the further advantage that no one notices bloodstains on a butcher!”

“You’re just being ridiculous. Everybody would know if the butcher had quarrelled with the baker.”

“Not if the butcher had become a butcher simply in order to have a chance of murdering the baker. One must always look one step behind, my friend.”

I looked at him closely, trying to decide if a hint lay concealed in those words. If they meant anything definite, they would seem to point to Colonel Luttrell. Had he deliberately opened a guest house in order to have an opportunity of murdering one of the guests?

Poirot very gently shook his head. He said: “It is not from my face that you will get the answer.”

“You really are a maddening fellow, Poirot,” I said with a sigh. “Anyway, Norton isn’t my only suspect. What about this fellow Allerton?”

Poirot, his face still impassive, enquired: “You do not like him?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Ah. What you call the nasty bit of goods. That is right, is it not?”

“Definitely. Don’t you think so?”

“Certainly. He is a man,” said Poirot slowly, “very attractive to women.”

I made an exclamation of contempt. “How women can be so foolish. What do they see in a fellow like that?”

“Who can say? But it is always so. The mauvais sujet—always women are attracted to him.”

“But why?”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. “They see something, perhaps, that we do not.”

“But what?”

“Danger, possibly . . . Everyone, my friend, demands a spice of danger in their lives. Some get it vicariously—as in bullfights. Some read about it. Some find it at the cinema. But I am sure of this—too much safety is abhorrent to the nature of a human being. Men find danger in many ways—women are reduced to finding their danger mostly in affairs of sex. That is why, perhaps, they welcome the hint of the tiger—the sheathed claws, the treacherous spring. The excellent fellow who will make a good and kind husband—they pass him by.”

I considered this gloomily in silence for some minutes. Then I reverted to the previous theme.

“You know, Poirot,” I said. “It will be easy enough really for me to find out who X is. I’ve only got to poke about and find who was acquainted with all the people. I mean the people of your five cases.”

I brought this out triumphantly, but Poirot merely gave me a look of scorn.

“I have not demanded your presence here, Hastings, in order to watch you clumsily and laboriously following the way I have already trodden. And let me tell you it is not quite so simple as you think. Four of those cases took place in this county. The people assembled under this roof are not a collection of strangers who have arrived here independently. This is not a hotel in the usual sense of the word. The Luttrells come from this part of the world; they were badly off and bought this place and started it as a venture. The people who come here are their friends, or friends recommended by their friends. Sir William persuaded the Franklins to come. They in turn suggested it to Norton, and, I believe, to Miss Cole—and so on. Which is to say that there is a very fair chance of a certain person who is known to one of these people being known to all of these people. It is also open to X to lie wherever the facts are best known. Take the case of the labourer Riggs. The village where that tragedy occurred is not far from the house of Boyd Carrington’s uncle. Mrs. Franklin’s people, also, lived near. The inn in the village is much frequented by tourists. Some of Mrs. Franklin’s family friends used to put up there. Franklin himself has stayed there. Norton and Miss Cole may have stayed there and probably have.

“No, no, my friend. I beg that you will not make these clumsy attempts to unravel a secret that I refuse to reveal to you.”

“It’s so damned silly. As though I should be likely to give it away. I tell you, Poirot, I’m tired of these jokes about my speaking countenance. It’s not funny.”

Poirot said quietly: “Are you so sure that is the only reason? Do you not realize, my friend, that such knowledge may be dangerous? Do you not see that I concern myself with your safety?”

I stared at him openmouthed. Up till that minute I had not appreciated that aspect of the matter. But it was, of course, true enough. If a clever and resourceful murderer who had already got away with five crimes—unsuspected as he thought—once awoke to the fact that someone was on his trail, then indeed there was danger for those on his track.

I said sharply: “But then you—you yourself are in danger, Poirot?”

Poirot, as far as he was able to in his crippled state, made a gesture of supreme disdain.

“I am accustomed to that; I can protect myself. And see, have I not here my faithful dog to protect me also? My excellent and loyal Hastings!”

Six

Poirot was supposed to keep early hours. I left him therefore to go to sleep and went downstairs, pausing to have a few words with the attendant Curtiss on the way.

I found him a stolid individual, slow in the uptake, but trustworthy and competent. He had been with Poirot since the latter's return from Egypt. His master's health, he told me, was fairly good, but he occasionally had alarming heart attacks, and his heart was much weakened in the last few months. It was a case of the engine slowly failing.

Oh well, it had been a good life. Nevertheless my heart was wrung for my old friend who was fighting so gallantly every step of the downward way. Even now, crippled and weak, his indomitable spirit was still leading him to ply the craft at which he was so expert.

I went downstairs sad at heart. I could hardly imagine life without Poirot. . . .

A rubber was just finished in the drawing room, and I was invited to cut in. I thought it might serve to distract my mind and I accepted. Boyd Carrington was the one to cut out, and I sat down with Norton and Colonel and Mrs. Luttrell.

"What do you say now, Mr. Norton," said Mrs. Luttrell. "Shall you and I take the other two on? Our late partnership's been very successful."

Norton smiled pleasantly, but murmured that perhaps, really, they ought to cut—what?

Mrs. Luttrell assented, but with rather an ill-grace, I thought.

Norton and I cut together against the Luttrells. I noticed that Mrs. Luttrell was definitely displeased by this. She bit her lip and her charm and Irish brogue disappeared completely for the moment.

I soon found out why. I played on many future occasions with Colonel Luttrell, and he was not really such a bad player. He was what I should describe as a moderate player, but inclined to be forgetful. Every now and then he would make some really bad mistake owing to this. But playing with his wife he made mistake after mistake without ceasing. He was obviously nervous of her, and this caused him to play about three times as badly as was normal. Mrs. Luttrell was a very good player indeed, though a rather unpleasant one to play with. She snatched every conceivable advantage, ignored the rules if her adversary was unaware of them, and enforced them immediately when they served her. She was also extremely adept at a quick sideways glance into her opponent's hands. In other words, she played to win.

And I understood soon enough what Poirot had meant by vinegar. At cards her self-restraint failed, and her tongue lashed every mistake her wretched husband made. It was really most uncomfortable for both Norton and myself, and I was thankful when the rubber came to an end.

We both excused ourselves from playing another on the score of the lateness of the hour.

As we moved away, Norton rather incautiously gave way to his feelings.

"I say, Hastings, that was pretty ghastly. It gets my back up to see that poor old boy bullied like that. And the meek way he takes it! Poor chap. Not much of the peppery-tongued Indian Colonel about him."

"Ssh," I warned him, for Norton's voice had been incautiously raised and I was afraid old Colonel Luttrell would overhear.

"No, but it is too bad."

I said with feeling: "I shall understand it if he ever takes a hatchet to her."

Norton shook his head. "He won't. The iron's entered his soul. He'll go on: 'Yes, m'dear, no, m'dear, sorry, m'dear,' pulling at his moustache and bleating meekly until he’s put in his coffin. He couldn’t assert himself if he tried!”

I shook my head sadly, for I was afraid Norton was right.

We paused in the hall and I noticed that the side door to the garden was open and the wind blowing in.

“Ought we to shut that?” I asked.

Norton hesitated a minute before saying: “Well—er—I don’t think everybody’s in yet.”

A sudden suspicion darted through my mind.

“Who’s out?”

“Your daughter, I think—and—er—Allerton.”

He tried to make his voice extra casual, but the information coming on top of my conversation with Poirot made me feel suddenly uneasy.

Judith—and Allerton. Surely Judith, my clever, cool Judith, would not be taken in by a man of that type? Surely she would see through him?

I told myself that repeatedly as I undressed, but the vague uneasiness persisted. I could not sleep and lay tossing from side to side.

As is the way with night worries, everything gets exaggerated. A fresh sense of despair and loss swept over me. If only my dear wife were alive. She on whose judgement I had relied for so many years. She had always been wise and understanding about the children.

Without her I felt miserably inadequate. The responsibility for their safety and happiness was mine. Would I be equal to that task? I was not, Heaven help me, a clever man. I blundered—made mistakes. If Judith was to ruin her chances of happiness, if she were to suffer—

Desperately I switched the light on and sat up.

It was no good going on like this. I must get some sleep. Getting out of bed I walked over to the washbasin and looked doubtfully at a bottle of aspirin tablets.

No, I needed something stronger than aspirin. I reflected that Poirot, probably, would have some sleeping stuff of some kind. I crossed the passage to his room and stood hesitating a minute outside the door. Rather a shame to wake the old boy up.

As I hesitated I heard a footfall and looked round. Allerton was coming along the corridor towards me. It was dimly lit, and until he came near I could not see his face, and wondered for a minute who it was. Then I saw, and stiffened all over. For the man was smiling to himself, and I disliked that smile very much.

He looked up and raised his eyebrows. “Hullo, Hastings, still about?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said shortly.

“Is that all? I’ll soon fix you up. Come with me.”

I followed him into his room, which was the next one to mine. A strange fascination drove me to study this man as closely as I could.

“You keep late hours yourself,” I remarked.

“I’ve never been an early bed-goer. Not when there’s sport abroad. These fine evenings aren’t made to be wasted.”

He laughed—and I disliked the laugh.

I followed him into the bathroom. He opened a little cupboard and took out a bottle of tablets.

“Here you are. This is the real dope. You’ll sleep like a log—and have pleasant dreams too. Wonderful stuff Slumberyl—that’s the patent name for it.”

The enthusiasm in his voice gave me a slight shock. Was he a drugtaker as well? I said doubtfully: “It isn’t—dangerous?”

“It is if you take too much of it. It’s one of the barbiturates—whose toxic dose is very near the effective one.” He smiled, the corners of his mouth sliding up his face in an unpleasant way.

“I shouldn’t have thought you could get it without a doctor’s prescription,” I said.

“You can’t, old boy. Anyway, quite literally, you can’t. I’ve got a pull in that line.”

I suppose it was foolish of me, but I get these impulses. I said: “You knew Etherington, I think?”

At once I knew that it had struck a note of some kind. His eyes grew hard and wary. He said—and his voice had changed—it was light and artificial: “Oh yes—I knew Etherington. Poor chap.” Then, as I did not speak, he went on: “Etherington took drugs—of course—but he overdid it. One’s got to know when to stop. He didn’t. Bad business. That wife of his was lucky. If the sympathy of the jury hadn’t been with her, she’d have hanged.”

He passed me over a couple of the tablets. Then he said casually: “Did you know Etherington as well?”

I answered with the truth. “No.”

He seemed for a moment at a loss how to proceed. Then he turned it off with a light laugh.

“Funny chap. Not exactly a Sunday school character but he was good company sometimes.”

I thanked him for the tablets and went back to my room.

As I lay down again and turned off the lights I wondered if I had been foolish.

For it came to me very strongly that Allerton was almost certainly X. And I had let him see that I suspected the fact.

Seven

I

My narrative of the days spent at Styles must necessarily be somewhat rambling. In my recollection of it, it presents itself to me as a series of conversations—of suggestive words and phrases that etched themselves into my consciousness.

First of all, and very early on, there came the realization of Hercule Poirot's infirmity and helplessness. I did believe, as he had said, that his brain still functioned with all its old keenness, but the physical envelope had worn so thin that I realized at once that my part was destined to be a far more active one than usual. I had to be, as it were, Poirot's eyes and ears.

True, every fine day Curtiss would pick up his master and carry him carefully downstairs to where his chair had been carried down beforehand and was awaiting him. Then he would wheel Poirot out into the garden and select a spot that was free of draughts. On other days, when the weather was not propitious, he would be carried to the drawing room.

Wherever he might be, someone or other was sure to come and sit with him and talk, but this was not the same thing as if Poirot could have selected for himself his partner in the tête-à-tête. He could no longer single out the person he wanted to talk to.

On the day after my arrival I was taken by Franklin to an old studio in the garden which had been fitted up in a rough and ready fashion for scientific purposes.

Let me make clear here and now that I myself have not got the scientific mind. In my account of Dr. Franklin's work I shall probably use all the wrong terms and arouse the scorn of those properly instructed in such matters.

As far as I, a mere layman, could make out, Franklin was experimenting with various alkaloids derived from the Calabar bean, Physostigma venenosum. I understood more after a conversation which took place one day between Franklin and Poirot. Judith, who tried to instruct me, was, as is customary with the earnest young, almost impossibly technical. She referred learnedly to the alkaloids physostigmine, eserine, physoveine and geneserine, and then proceeded to a most impossible sounding substance, prostigmin or the demethylcarbonic ester of 3 hydroxypheyl trimethyl lammonum, etc. etc., and a good deal more which, it appeared, was the same thing, only differently arrived at! It was all, at any rate, double Dutch to me, and I aroused Judith's contempt by asking what good all this was likely to do mankind? There is no question that annoys your true scientist more. Judith at once threw me a scornful glance and embarked on another lengthy and learned explanation. The upshot of it was, so I gathered, that certain obscure tribes of West African natives had shown a remarkable immunity to an equally obscure, though deadly disease called, as far as I remember, Jordanitis—a certain enthusiastic Dr. Jordan having originally tracked it down. It was an extremely rare tropical ailment, which had been, on one or two occasions, contracted by white people, with fatal results.

I risked inflaming Judith's rage by remarking that it would be more sensible to find some drug that would counteract the after-effects of measles!

With pity and scorn Judith made it clear to me that it was not the benefaction of the human race, but the enlargement of human knowledge, that was the only goal worthy of attainment.

I looked at some slides through the microscope, studied some photographs of West African natives (really quite entertaining!), caught the eye of a soporific rat in a cage and hurried out again into the air.

As I say, any interest I could feel was kindled by Franklin's conversation with Poirot.

He said: "You know, Poirot, the stuff's really more up your street than mine. It's the ordeal bean—supposed to prove innocence or guilt. These West African tribes believe it implicitly—or did do so—they're getting sophisticated nowadays. They’ll solemnly chew it up quite confident that it will kill them if they’re guilty and not harm them if they’re innocent.”

“And so, alas, they die?”

“No, they don’t all die. That’s what has always been overlooked up to now. There’s a lot behind the whole thing—a medicine man ramp, I rather fancy. There are two distinct species of this bean—only they look so much alike that you can hardly spot the difference. But there is a difference. They both contain physostigmine and geneserine and the rest of it, but in the second species you can isolate, or I think I can, yet another alkaloid—and the action of that alkaloid neutralizes the effect of the others. What’s more that second species is regularly eaten by a kind of inner ring in a secret ritual—and the people who eat it never go down with Jordanitis. This third substance has a remarkable effect on the muscular system—without deleterious effects. It’s damned interesting. Unfortunately the pure alkaloid is very unstable. Still, I’m getting results. But what’s wanted is a lot more research out there on the spot. It’s work that ought to be done! Yes, by heck it is . . . I’d sell my soul to—” He broke off abruptly. The grin came again. “Forgive the shop. I get too het up over these things!”

“As you say,” said Poirot placidly, “it would certainly make my profession much easier if I could test guilt and innocence so easily. Ah, if there were a substance that could do what is claimed for the Calabar bean.”

Franklin said: “Ah, but your troubles wouldn’t end there. After all, what is guilt or innocence?”

“I shouldn’t think there could be any doubt about that,” I remarked.

He turned to me. “What is evil? What is good? Ideas on them vary from century to century. What you would be testing would probably be a sense of guilt or a sense of innocence. In fact no value as a test at all.”

“I don’t see how you make that out.”

“My dear fellow, suppose a man thinks he has a divine right to kill a dictator or a moneylender or a pimp or whatever arouses his moral indignation. He commits what you consider a guilty deed—but what he considers is an innocent one. What is your poor ordeal bean to do about it?”

“Surely,” I said, “there must always be a feeling of guilt with murder?”

“Lots of people I’d like to kill,” said Dr. Franklin cheerfully. “Don’t believe my conscience would keep me awake at night afterwards. It’s an idea of mine, you know, that about eighty percent of the human race ought to be eliminated. We’d get on much better without them.”

He got up and strolled away, whistling cheerfully to himself.

I looked after him doubtfully. A low chuckle from Poirot recalled me.

“You look, my friend, like one who has envisaged a nest of serpents. Let us hope that our friend the doctor does not practise what he preaches.”

“Ah,” I said. “But supposing he does?”

II

After some hesitations I decided that I ought to sound Judith on the subject of Allerton. I felt that I must know what her reactions were. She was, I knew, a levelheaded girl, well able to take care of herself, and I did not think that she would really be taken in by the cheap attraction of a man like Allerton. I suppose, actually, that I tackled her on the subject because I wanted to be reassured on that point.

Unfortunately, I did not get what I wanted . . . I went about it clumsily, I daresay. There is nothing that young people resent so much as advice from their elders. I tried to make my words quite careless and debonair. I suppose that I failed.

Judith bristled at once.

“What’s this?” she said. “A paternal warning against the big bad wolf?”

“No, no, Judith, of course not.”

"I gather you don't like Major Allerton?"

"Frankly, I don't. Actually, I don't suppose you do either."

"Why not?"

"Well—er—he isn't your type, is he?"

"What do you consider is my type, Father?"

Judith can always flurry me. I boggled rather badly. She stood looking at me, her mouth curving upwards in a slightly scornful smile.

"Of course you don't like him," she said. "I do. I think he's very amusing."

"Oh, amusing—perhaps." I endeavoured to pass it off.

Judith said deliberately: "He's very attractive. Any woman would think so. Men, of course, wouldn't see it."

"They certainly wouldn't." I went on, rather clumsily: "You were out with him very late the other night—"

I was not allowed to finish. The storm broke.

"Really, Father, you're being too idiotic. Don't you realize that at my age I'm capable of managing my own affairs? You've no earthly right to control what I do or whom I choose to make a friend of. It's this senseless interfering in their children's lives that is so infuriating about fathers and mothers. I'm very fond of you—but I'm an adult woman and my life is my own. Don't start making a Mr. Barrett of yourself."

I was so hurt by this extremely unkind remark that I was quite incapable of replying, and Judith went quickly away.

I was left with the dismayed feeling that I had done more harm than good.

I was standing lost in my thoughts when I was roused by the voice of Mrs. Franklin's nurse exclaiming archly: "A penny for your thoughts, Captain

Hastings!”

I turned gladly to welcome the interruption.

Nurse Craven was really a very good-looking young woman. Her manner was, perhaps, a little on the arch and sprightly side, but she was pleasant and intelligent.

She had just come from establishing her patient in a sunny spot not far from the improvised laboratory.

“Is Mrs. Franklin interested in her husband’s work?” I asked.

Nurse Craven tossed her head contemptuously. “Oh, it’s a good deal too technical for her. She’s not at all a clever woman, you know, Captain Hastings.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Dr. Franklin’s work, of course, can only be appreciated by someone who knows something about medicine. He’s a very clever man indeed, you know. Brilliant. Poor man, I feel so sorry for him.”

“Sorry for him?”

“Yes. I’ve seen it happen so often. Marrying the wrong type of woman, I mean.”

“You think she’s the wrong type for him?”

“Well, don’t you? They’ve nothing at all in common.”

“He seems very fond of her,” I said. “Very attentive to her wishes and all that.”

Nurse Craven laughed rather disagreeably. “She sees to that all right!”

“You think she trades on her—on her ill health?” I asked doubtfully.

Nurse Craven laughed. “There isn’t much you could teach her about getting her own way. Whatever her ladyship wants happens. Some women are like that—clever as a barrelful of monkeys. If anyone opposes them they just lie back and shut their eyes and look ill and pathetic, or else they have a nerve storm—but Mrs. Franklin’s the pathetic type. Doesn’t sleep all night and is all white and exhausted in the morning.”

“But she is really an invalid, isn’t she?” I asked, rather startled.

Nurse Craven gave me a rather peculiar glance. She said drily: “Oh, of course,” and then turned the subject rather abruptly.

She asked me if it was true that I had been here long ago, in the first war.

“Yes, that’s quite true.”

She lowered her voice. “There was a murder here, wasn’t there? So one of the maids was telling me. An old lady?”

“Yes.”

“And you were here at the time?”

“I was.”

She gave a slight shiver. She said: “That explains it, doesn’t it?”

“Explains what?”

She gave me a quick sideways glance. “The—the atmosphere of the place. Don’t you feel it? I do. Something wrong, if you know what I mean?”

I was silent a moment considering. Was it true what she had just said? Did the fact that death by violence—by malice aforethought—had taken place in a certain spot leave its impression on that spot so strongly that it was perceptible after many years? Psychic people said so. Did Styles definitely bear traces of that event that had occurred so long ago? Here, within these walls, in these gardens, thoughts of murder had lingered and grown stronger and had at last come to fruition in the final act. Did they still taint the air?

Nurse Craven broke in on my thoughts by saying abruptly: “I was in a house where there was a murder case once. I’ve never forgotten it. One doesn’t, you know. One of my patients. I had to give evidence and everything. Made me feel quite queer. It’s a nasty experience for a girl.”

“It must be. I know myself—”

I broke off as Boyd Carrington came striding round the corner of the house.

As usual, his big, buoyant personality seemed to sweep away shadows and intangible worries. He was so large, so sane, so out-of-doors—one of those lovable, forceful personalities that radiate cheerfulness and common sense.

“Morning, Hastings, morning, Nurse. Where’s Mrs. Franklin?”

“Good morning, Sir William. Mrs. Franklin’s down at the bottom of the garden under the beech tree near the laboratory.”

“And Franklin, I suppose, is inside the laboratory?”

“Yes, Sir William—with Miss Hastings.”

“Wretched girl. Fancy being cooped up doing stinks on a morning like this! You ought to protest, Hastings.”

Nurse Craven said quickly: “Oh, Miss Hastings is quite happy. She likes it, you know, and the doctor couldn’t do without her, I’m sure.”

“Miserable fellow,” said Boyd Carrington. “If I had a pretty girl like your Judith as a secretary, I’d be looking at her instead of at guinea pigs, eh, what?”

It was the kind of joke that Judith would particularly have disliked but it went down quite well with Nurse Craven who laughed a good deal.

“Oh, Sir William,” she exclaimed. “You really mustn’t say things like that. I’m sure we all know what you’d be like! But poor Dr. Franklin is so serious—quite wrapped up in his work.”

Boyd Carrington said cheerfully: “Well, his wife seems to have taken up her position where she can keep her eye on her husband. I believe she’s jealous.”

“You know far too much, Sir William!”

Nurse Craven seemed delighted with this badinage. She said reluctantly: “Well, I suppose I ought to be going to see about Mrs. Franklin’s malted milk.”

She moved away slowly and Boyd Carrington stood looking after her.

“Good-looking girl,” he remarked. “Lovely hair and teeth. Fine specimen of womanhood. Must be a dull life on the whole always looking after sick people. A girl like that deserves a better fate.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “I suppose she’ll marry one day.”

“I expect so.”

He sighed—and it occurred to me that he was thinking of his dead wife. Then he said: “Like to come over with me to Knatton and see the place?”

“Rather. I’d like to. I’ll just see first if Poirot needs me.”

I found Poirot sitting on the veranda, well muffled up. He encouraged me to go.

“But certainly go, Hastings, go. It is, I believe, a most handsome property. You should certainly see it.”

“I’d like to. But I didn’t want to desert you.”

“My faithful friend! No, no, go with Sir William. A charming man, is he not?”

“First-class,” I said with enthusiasm.

Poirot smiled. “Ah yes. I thought he was your type.”

III

I enjoyed my expedition enormously.

Not only was the weather fine—a really lovely summer’s day—but I enjoyed the companionship of the man.

Boyd Carrington had that personal magnetism, that wide experience of life and of places that made him excellent company. He told me stories of his administrative days in India, some intriguing details of East African tribal lore, and was altogether so interesting that I was quite taken out of myself and forgot my worries about Judith and the deep anxieties that Poirot’s revelations had given me.

I liked, too, the way Boyd Carrington spoke of my friend. He had a deep respect for him—both for his work and his character. Sad though his present condition of ill health was, Boyd Carrington uttered no facile words of pity. He seemed to think that a lifetime spent as Poirot’s had been was in itself a rich reward and that in his memories my friend could find satisfaction and self-respect.

“Moreover,” he said, “I’d wager his brain is as keen as ever it was.”

“It is, indeed it is,” I assented eagerly.

“No greater mistake than to think that because a man’s tied by the leg it affects his brain pan. Not a bit of it. Anno Domini affects head work much less than you’d think. By Jove, I wouldn’t care to undertake to commit a murder under Hercule Poirot’s nose—even at this time of day.”

“He’d get you if you did,” I said grinning.

“I bet he would. Not,” he added ruefully, “that I should be much good at doing a murder anyway. I can’t plan things, you know. Too impatient. If I did a murder it would be done on the spur of the moment.”

“That might be the most difficult crime to spot.”

"I hardly think so. I'd probably leave clues trailing along behind me in every direction. Well, it's lucky I haven't got a criminal mind. Only kind of man I can imagine myself killing is a blackmailer. That is a foul thing if you like. I've always thought a blackmailer ought to be shot. What do you say?"

I confessed to some sympathy with his point of view.

Then we passed on to an examination of the work done on the house as a young architect came forward to meet us.

Knatton was mainly of Tudor date with a wing added later. It had not been modernized or altered since the installation of two primitive bathrooms in the eighteen forties or thereabouts.

Boyd Carrington explained that his uncle had been more or less of a hermit, disliking people and living in a corner of the vast house. Boyd Carrington and his brother had been tolerated, and had spent their holidays there as schoolboys before Sir Everard had become as much of a recluse as he afterwards became.

The old man had never married, and had spent only a tenth of his large income, so that even after death duties had been paid, the present baronet had found himself a very rich man.

"But a very lonely one," he said sighing.

I was silent. My sympathy was too acute to be put into words. For I, too, was a lonely man. Since Cinders had died, I felt myself to be only half a human being.

Presently, a little haltingly, I expressed a little of what I felt.

"Ah yes, Hastings, but you've had something I never had."

He paused a moment and then—rather jerkily—he gave me an outline of his own tragedy.

Of the beautiful young wife, a lovely creature full of charm and accomplishments but with a tainted heritage. Her family had nearly all died of drink, and she herself fell victim to the same curse. Barely a year after their marriage she had succumbed and had died a dipsomaniac’s death. He did not blame her. He realized that heredity had been too strong for her.

After her death he had settled down to lead a lonely life. He had determined, saddened by his experience, not to marry again.

“One feels,” he said simply, “safer alone.”

“Yes, I can understand your feeling like that—at any rate at first.”

“The whole thing was such a tragedy. It left me prematurely aged and embittered.” He paused. “It’s true—I was once very much tempted. But she was so young—I didn’t feel it would be fair to tie her to a disillusioned man. I was too old for her—she was such a child—so pretty—so completely untouched.”

He broke off, shaking his head.

“Wasn’t that for her to judge?”

“I don’t know, Hastings. I thought not. She—she seemed to like me. But then, as I say, she was so young. I shall always remember her as I saw her the last day of that leave. Her head a little on one side—that slightly bewildered look—her little hand—”

He stopped. The words conjured up a picture that seemed vaguely familiar, though I could not think why.

Boyd Carrington’s voice, suddenly harsh, broke into my thoughts.

“I was a fool,” he said. “Any man is a fool who lets opportunity slip by him. Anyway, here I am, with a great mansion of a house far too big for me, and no gracious presence to set at the head of my table.”

To me there was a charm in his slightly old-fashioned way of putting things. It conjured up a picture of old world charm and ease.

“Where is the lady now?” I asked.

“Oh—married.” He turned it off briefly. “Fact is, Hastings, I’m cut out now for a bachelor existence. I’ve got my little ways. Come and look at the gardens. They’ve been badly neglected, but they’re very fine in their way.”

We walked round the place and I was much impressed with all I saw. Knatton was undoubtedly a very fine estate and I did not wonder that Boyd Carrington was proud of it. He knew the neighbourhood well and most of the people round about, though of course there had been newcomers since his time.

He had known Colonel Luttrell in the old days and expressed his earnest hope that the Styles venture was going to pay.

“Poor old Toby Luttrell’s very hard up, you know,” he said. “Nice fellow. Good soldier, too, and a very fine shot. Went on safari with him in Africa once. Ah, those were the days! He was married then, of course, but his missus didn’t come along, thank goodness. Pretty woman she was—but always a bit of a Tartar. Funny the things a man will stand from a woman. Old Toby Luttrell who used to make subalterns shake in their shoes, he was such a stern martinet! And there he is, henpecked and bullied and meek as they make ’em! No doubt about it, that woman’s got a tongue like vinegar. Still, she’s got a head on her. If anyone can make the place pay, she will. Luttrell never had much of a head for business—but Mrs. Toby would skin her grandmother!”

“She’s so gushing with it all,” I complained.

Boyd Carrington looked amused. “I know. All sweetness. But have you played bridge with them?”

I replied feelingly that I had.

“On the whole I steer clear of women bridge players,” said Boyd Carrington. “And if you take my tip you’ll do the same.”

I told him how uncomfortable Norton and myself had felt on the first evening of my arrival.

“Exactly. One doesn’t know where to look!” He added: “Nice fellow, Norton. Very quiet, though. Always looking at birds and things. Doesn’t care for shooting them, he told me. Extraordinary! No feeling for sport. I told him he missed a lot. Can’t see myself what excitement there can be stalking about through cold woods peering at birds through glasses.”

How little we realized that Norton’s hobby might have an important part to play in the events that were to come.

Eight

I

The days passed. It was an unsatisfactory time, with its uneasy feeling of waiting for something.

Nothing, if I may put it in such a way, actually happened. Yet there were incidents, scraps of odd conversations, sidelights upon the various inmates of Styles, elucidating remarks. They all mounted up and, if properly pieced together, could have done a lot towards enlightening me.

It was Poirot who, with a few forceful words, showed me something to which I had been criminally blind.

I was complaining, for the umpteenth time, of his wilful refusal to admit me to his confidence. It was not fair, I told him. Always he and I had had equal knowledge—even if I had been dense and he had been astute in drawing the right conclusions from that knowledge.

He waved an impatient hand. “Quite so, my friend. It is not fair! It is not sporting! It is not playing the game! Admit all that and pass from it. This is not a game—it is not le sport. For you, you occupy yourself in guessing wildly at the identity of X. It is not for that that I asked you to come here. Unnecessary for you to occupy yourself with that. I know the answer to that question. But what I do not know and what I must know is this: ‘Who is going to die—very soon?’ It is a question, mon vieux, not of you playing a guessing game, but of preventing a human being from dying.”

I was startled. “Of course,” I said slowly. “I—well, I did know that you practically said so once, but I haven’t quite realized it.”

“Then realize it now—immediately.”

“Yes, yes, I will—I mean, I do.”

“Bien! Then tell me, Hastings, who is it who is going to die?”

I stared at him blankly. “I have really no idea!”

“Then you should have an idea! What else are you here for?”

“Surely,” I said, going back over my meditations on the subject, “there must be a connection between the victim and X so that if you told me who X was—”

Poirot shook his head with so much vigour that it was quite painful to watch.

“Have I not told you that that is the essence of X’s technique? There will be nothing connecting X with the death. That is certain.”

“The connection will be hidden, you mean?”

“It will be so well hidden that neither you nor I will find it.”

“But surely by studying X’s past—”

“I tell you, no. Certainly not in the time. Murder may happen any moment, you comprehend?”

“To someone in this house?”

“To someone in this house.”

“And you really do not know who, or how?”

“Ah! If I did, I should not be urging you to find out for me.”

“You simply base your assumption on the presence of X?”

I sounded a little doubtful. Poirot, whose self-control had lessened as his limbs were perforce immobile, fairly howled at me.

“Ah, ma foi, how many times am I to go over all this? If a lot of war correspondents arrive suddenly in a certain spot of Europe, it means what? It means war! If doctors come from all over the world to a certain city, it shows what? That there is to be there a medical conference. Where you see a vulture hovering, there will be a carcass. If you see beaters walking up a moor, there will be a shoot. If you see a man stop suddenly, tear off his coat and plunge into the sea, it means that there, there will be a rescue from drowning.

“If you see ladies of middle age and respectable appearance peering through a hedge, you may deduce that there is there an impropriety of some kind! And finally, if you smell a succulent smell and observe several people all walking along a corridor in the same direction you may safely assume that a meal is about to be served!”

I considered these analogies for a minute or two, then I said, taking the first one: “All the same, one war correspondent does not make a war!”

“Certainly not. And one swallow does not make a summer. But one murderer, Hastings, does make a murder.”

That, of course, was undeniable. But it still occurred to me, as it did not seem to have occurred to Poirot, that even a murderer has his off times. X might be at Styles simply for a holiday with no lethal intent. Poirot was so worked up, however, that I dared not propound this suggestion. I merely said that the whole thing seemed to me hopeless. We must wait—

“And see,” finished Poirot. “Like your Mr. Asquith in the last war. That, mon cher, is just what we must not do. I do not say, mark you, that we shall succeed, for as I have told you before, when a killer has determined to kill, it is not easy to circumvent him. But we can at least try. Figure to yourself, Hastings, that you have here the bridge problem in the paper. You can see all the cards. What you are asked to do is ‘Forecast the result of the deal.’ ”

I shook my head. “It’s no good, Poirot, I haven’t the least idea. If I knew who X was—”

Poirot howled at me again. He howled so loud that Curtiss came running in from the next room looking quite frightened. Poirot waved him away and when he had gone out again, my friend spoke in a more controlled manner.

“Come, Hastings, you are not so stupid as you like to pretend. You have studied those cases I gave you to read. You may not know who X is, but you know X’s technique for committing a crime.”

“Oh,” I said. “I see.”

“Of course you see. The trouble with you is that you are mentally lazy. You like to play games and guess. You do not like to work with your head. What is the essential element of X’s technique? Is it not that the crime, when committed, is complete? That is to say, there is a motive for the crime, there is an opportunity, there is means and there is, last and most important, the guilty person all ready for the dock.”

At once I grasped the essential point and realized what a fool I had been not to see it sooner.

“I see,” I said. “I’ve got to look round for somebody who—who answers to those requirements—the potential victim.”

Poirot leaned back with a sigh. “Enfin! I am very tired. Send Curtiss to me. You understand your job now. You are active, you can get about, you can follow people about, talk to them, spy upon them unobserved—” (I nearly uttered an indignant protest, but quelled it. It was too old an argument) —“You can listen to conversations, you have knees that will bend and permit you to kneel and look through keyholes—”

“I will not look through keyholes,” I interrupted hotly.

Poirot closed his eyes. “Very well, then. You will not look through keyholes. You will remain the English gentleman and someone will be killed. It does not matter, that. Honour comes first with an Englishman. Your honour is more important than somebody else’s life. Bien! It is understood.”

"No, but dash it all, Poirot—"

Poirot said coldly: "Send Curtiss to me. Go away. You are obstinate and extremely stupid and I wish that there were someone else whom I could trust, but I suppose I shall have to put up with you and your absurd ideas of fair play. Since you cannot use your grey cells as you do not possess them, at any rate use your eyes, your ears and your nose if need be in so far as the dictates of honour allow."

II

It was on the following day that I ventured to broach an idea which had come into my mind more than once. I did so a little dubiously, for one never knows how Poirot may react!

I said: "I've been thinking, Poirot, I know I'm not much of a fellow. You've said I'm stupid—well, in a way it's true. And I'm only half the man I was. Since Cinders's death—"

I stopped. Poirot made a gruff noise indicative of sympathy.

I went on: "But there is a man here who could help us—just the kind of man we need. Brains, imagination, resource—used to taking decisions and a man of wide experience. I'm talking of Boyd Carrington. He's the man we want, Poirot. Take him into your confidence. Put the whole thing before him."

Poirot opened his eyes and said with immense decision: "Certainly not."

"But why not? You can't deny that he's clever—a good deal cleverer than I am."

"THAT," said Poirot with biting sarcasm, "would be easy. But dismiss the idea from your mind, Hastings. We take no one into our confidence. That is understood—hein? You comprehend, I forbid you to speak of this matter."

"All right, if you say so, but really Boyd Carrington—"

"Ah, ta ta! Boyd Carrington. Why are you so obsessed with Boyd Carrington? What is he, after all? A big man who is pompous and pleased with himself because people have called him 'Your Excellency.' A man with—yes, a certain amount of tact and charm of manner. But he is not so wonderful, your Boyd Carrington. He repeats himself, he tells the same story twice—and what is more, his memory is so bad that he tells back to you the story that you have told to him! A man of outstanding ability? Not at all. An old bore, a windbag—enfin—the stuffed shirt!"

"Oh," I said as enlightenment came to me.

It was quite true that Boyd Carrington's memory was not good. And he had actually been guilty of a gaffe which I now saw had annoyed Poirot a good deal. Poirot had told him a story of his police days in Belgium, and only a couple of days afterwards, when several of us were assembled in the garden, Boyd Carrington had in bland forgetfulness told the same story back again to Poirot, prefacing it with the remark: "I remember the Chef de la Sûreté in Paris telling me. . . ."

I now perceived that this had rankled!

Tactfully, I said no more, and withdrew.

III

I wandered downstairs and out into the garden. There was no one about and I strolled through a grove of trees and up to a grassy knoll which was surmounted by a somewhat earwiggy summerhouse in an advanced stage of decrepitude. Here I sat down, lit my pipe, and settled to think things out.

Who was there at Styles who had a fairly definite motive for murdering somebody else—or who might be made out to have one?

Putting aside the somewhat obvious case of Colonel Luttrell, who, I was afraid, was hardly likely to take a hatchet to his wife in the middle of a rubber, justifiable though that course might be, I could not at first think of anyone.

The trouble was that I did not really know enough about these people. Norton, for instance, and Miss Cole? What were the usual motives for murder? Money? Boyd Carrington was, I fancied, the only rich man of the party. If he died, who would inherit that money? Anyone at present in the house? I hardly thought so, but it was a point that might bear enquiry. He might, for instance, have left his money to research, making Franklin a trustee. That, with the doctor's rather injudicious remarks on the subject of eliminating eighty percent of the human race, might make out a fairly damning case against the red-haired doctor. Or possibly Norton or Miss Cole might be a distant relative and would inherit automatically. Far-fetched but possible. Would Colonel Luttrell, who was an old friend, benefit under Boyd Carrington's will? These possibilities seemed to exhaust the money angle. I turned to more romantic possibilities. The Franklins. Mrs. Franklin was an invalid. Was it possible that she was being slowly poisoned—and would the responsibility for her death be laid at her husband's door? He was a doctor, he had opportunity and means, no doubt. What about motive? An unpleasant qualm shot across my mind as it occurred to me that Judith might be involved. I had good reason to know how businesslike their relations were—but would the general public believe that? Would a cynical police officer believe it? Judith was a very beautiful young woman. An attractive secretary or assistant had been the motive for many crimes. The possibility dismayed me.

I considered Allerton next. Could there be any reason for doing away with Allerton? If we had to have a murder I would prefer to see Allerton the victim! One ought to be able to find motives easily for doing away with him. Miss Cole, though not young, was still a good-looking woman. She might, conceivably, be actuated by jealousy if she and Allerton had ever been on intimate terms, though I had no reason to believe that that was the case. Besides, if Allerton was X—

I shook my head impatiently. All this was getting me nowhere. A footstep on the gravel below attracted my attention. It was Franklin walking rapidly towards the house, his hands in his pockets, his head thrust forward. His whole attitude was one of dejection. Seeing him thus, off guard, I was struck by the fact that he looked a thoroughly unhappy man.

I was so busy staring at him that I did not hear a footfall nearer at hand, and turned with a start when Miss Cole spoke to me.

“I didn’t hear you coming,” I explained apologetically as I sprang up.

She was examining the summerhouse.

“What a Victorian relic!”

“Isn’t it? It’s rather spidery, I’m afraid. Do sit down. I’ll dust the seat for you.”

For it occurred to me that here was a chance to get to know one of my fellow guests a little better. I studied Miss Cole covertly as I brushed away cobwebs.

She was a woman of between thirty and forty, slightly haggard, with a clear-cut profile and really very beautiful eyes. There was about her an air of reserve, more—of suspicion. It came to me suddenly that this was a woman who had suffered and who was, in consequence, deeply distrustful of life. I felt that I would like to know more about Elizabeth Cole.

“There,” I said with a final flick of the handkerchief, “that’s the best I can do.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and sat down. I sat down beside her. The seat creaked ominously but no catastrophe occurred.

Miss Cole said: “Do tell me, what were you thinking about when I came up to you? You seemed quite sunk in thought.”

I said slowly: “I was watching Dr. Franklin.”

“Yes?”

I saw no reason for not repeating what had been in my mind.

“It struck me that he looked a very unhappy man.”

The woman beside me said quietly: “But of course he is. You must have realized that.”

I think I showed my surprise. I said, stammering slightly: “No—no—I haven’t. I’ve always thought of him as absolutely wrapped up in his work.”

“So he is.”

“Do you call that unhappiness? I should have said it was the happiest state imaginable.”

“Oh yes, I’m not disputing it—but not if you’re hampered from doing what you feel it’s in you to do. If you can’t, that is to say, produce your best.”

I looked at her, feeling rather puzzled. She went on to explain: “Last autumn Dr. Franklin was offered the chance of going out to Africa and continuing his research work there. He’s tremendously keen, as you know, and has really done first-class work already in the realm of tropical medicine.”

“And he didn’t go?”

“No. His wife protested. She herself wasn’t well enough to stand the climate and she kicked against the idea of being left behind, especially as it would have meant very economical living for her. The pay offered was not high.”

“Oh,” I said. I went on slowly: “I suppose he felt that in her state of health he couldn’t leave her.”

“Do you know much about her state of health, Captain Hastings?”

“Well, I—no—But she is an invalid, isn’t she?”

“She certainly enjoys bad health,” said Miss Cole drily. I looked at her doubtfully. It was easy to see that her sympathies were entirely with the husband.

"I suppose," I said slowly, "that women who are—delicate are apt to be selfish?"

"Yes, I think invalids—chronic invalids—usually are very selfish. One can't blame them perhaps. It's so easy."

"You don't think that there's really very much the matter with Mrs. Franklin?"

"Oh, I shouldn't like to say that. It's just a suspicion. She always seems able to do anything she wants to do."

I reflected in silence for a minute or two. It struck me that Miss Cole seemed very well acquainted with the ramifications of the Franklin ménage. I asked with some curiosity: "You know Dr. Franklin well, I suppose?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I had only met them once or twice before we met here."

"But he has talked to you about himself, I suppose?"

Again she shook her head. "No, what I have just told you I learnt from your daughter Judith."

Judith, I reflected, with a moment's bitterness, talked to everyone except me.

Miss Cole went on: "Judith is terrifically loyal to her employer and very much up in arms on his behalf. Her condemnation of Mrs. Franklin's selfishness is sweeping."

"You, too, think she is selfish?"

"Yes, but I can see her point of view. I—I understand invalids. I can understand, too, Dr. Franklin's giving way to her. Judith, of course, thinks he should park his wife anywhere and get on with the job. Your daughter's a very enthusiastic scientific worker."

"I know," I said rather disconsolately. "It worries me sometimes. It doesn't seem natural, if you know what I mean. I feel she ought to be—more human—more keen on having a good time. Amuse herself—fall in love with a nice boy or two. After all, youth is the time to have one's fling—not to sit poring over test tubes. It isn't natural. In our young days we were having fun—flirting—enjoying ourselves—you know."

There was a moment's silence. Then Miss Cole said in a queer cold voice: "I don't know."

I was instantly horrified. Unconsciously I had spoken as though she and I were contemporaries—but I realized suddenly that she was well over ten years my junior and that I had been unwittingly extremely tactless.

I apologized as best I could. She cut into my stammering phrases.

"No, no, I didn't mean that. Please don't apologize. I meant just simply what I said. I don't know. I was never what you meant by 'young.' I never had what is called 'a good time.'"

Something in her voice, a bitterness, a deep resentment, left me at a loss. I said, rather lamely, but with sincerity: "I'm sorry."

She smiled. "Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Don't look so upset. Let's talk about something else."

I obeyed. "Tell me something about the other people here," I said. "Unless they're all strangers to you."

"I've known the Luttrells all my life. It's rather sad that they should have to do this—especially for him. He's rather a dear. And she's nicer than you'd think. It's having had to pinch and scrape all her life that has made her rather—well—predatory. If you're always on the make, it does tell in the end. The only thing I do rather dislike about her is that gushing manner."

"Tell me something about Mr. Norton."

"There isn't really much to tell. He's very nice—rather shy—just a little stupid, perhaps. He's always been rather delicate. He's lived with his mother—rather a peevish, stupid woman. She bossed him a good deal, I think. She died a few years ago. He's keen on birds and flowers and things like that. He's a very kind person—and he's the sort of person who sees a lot."

"Through his glasses, you mean?"

Miss Cole smiled. "Well, I wasn't meaning it quite so literally as that. I meant more that he notices a good deal. Those quiet people often do. He's unselfish—and very considerate for a man, but he's rather—ineffectual, if you know what I mean."

I nodded. "Oh, yes, I know."

Elizabeth Cole said suddenly, and once more the deep bitter note was in her voice: "That's the depressing part of places like this. Guest houses run by broken-down gentlepeople. They're full of failures—of people who have never got anywhere and never will get anywhere, of people who—who have been defeated and broken by life, of people who are old and tired and finished."

Her voice died away. A deep and spreading sadness permeated me. How true it was! Here we were, a collection of twilit people. Grey heads, grey hearts, grey dreams. Myself, sad and lonely, the woman beside me also a bitter and disillusioned creature. Dr. Franklin, eager, ambitious, curbed and thwarted, his wife a prey to ill health. Quiet little Norton limping about looking at birds. Even Poirot, the once brilliant Poirot, now a broken, crippled old man.

How different it had been in the old days—the days when I had first come to Styles. The thought was too much for me—a stifled exclamation of pain and regret came to my lips.

My companion said quickly: "What is it?"

“Nothing. I was just struck by the contrast—I was here, you know, many years ago, as a young man. I was thinking of the difference between then and now.”

“I see. It was a happy house then? Everyone was happy here?”

Curious, sometimes, how one’s thoughts seemed to swing in a kaleidoscope. It happened to me now. A bewildering shuffling and reshuffling of memories, of events. Then the mosaic settled into its true pattern.

My regret had been for the past as the past, not for the reality. For even then, in that far-off time, there had been no happiness at Styles. I remembered dispassionately the real facts. My friend John and his wife, both unhappy and chafing at the life they were forced to lead. Laurence Cavendish, sunk in melancholy. Cynthia, her girlish brightness damped by her dependent position. Inglethorp married to a rich woman for her money. No, none of them had been happy. And now, again, no one here was happy. Styles was not a lucky house.

I said to Miss Cole: “I’ve been indulging in false sentiment. This was never a happy house. It isn’t now. Everyone here is unhappy.”

“No, no. Your daughter—”

“Judith’s not happy.”

I said it with the certainty of sudden knowledge. No, Judith wasn’t happy.

“Boyd Carrington,” I said doubtfully. “He was saying the other day that he was lonely—but for all that I think he’s enjoying himself quite a good deal—what with his house and one thing and another.”

Miss Cole said sharply: “Oh yes, but then Sir William is different. He doesn’t belong here like the rest of us do. He’s from the outside world—the world of success and independence. He’s made a success of his life and he knows it. He’s not one of—of the maimed.”

It was a curious word to choose. I turned and stared at her.

“Will you tell me,” I asked, “why you used that particular expression?”

“Because,” she said with a sudden fierce energy, “it’s the truth. The truth about me, at any rate. I am maimed.”

“I can see,” I said gently, “that you have been very unhappy.”

She said quietly: “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“Er—I know your name—”

“Cole isn’t my name—that is to say, it was my mother’s name. I took it—afterwards.”

“After?”

“My real name is Litchfield.”

For a minute or two it didn’t sink in—it was just a name vaguely familiar. Then I remembered.

“Matthew Litchfield.”

She nodded. “I see you know about it. That was what I meant just now. My father was an invalid and a tyrant. He forbade us any kind of normal life. We couldn’t ask friends to the house. He kept us short of money. We were—in prison.”

She paused, her eyes, those beautiful eyes, wide and dark.

“And then my sister—my sister—”

She stopped.

“Please don’t—don’t go on. It is too painful for you. I know about it. There is no need to tell me.”

“But you don’t know. You can’t. Maggie. It’s inconceivable—unbelievable. I know that she went to the police, that she gave herself up, that she confessed. But I still sometimes can’t believe it! I feel somehow that it wasn’t true—that it didn’t—that it couldn’t have happened like she said it did.”

“You mean—” I hesitated—“that the facts were at—at variance—”

She cut me short. “No, no. Not that. No, it’s Maggie herself. It wasn’t like her. It wasn’t—it wasn’t Maggie!”

Words trembled on my lips, but I did not say them. The time had not yet come when I could say to her: “You are right. It wasn’t Maggie. . . .”

Nine

It must have been about six o’clock when Colonel Luttrell came along the path. He had a rook rifle with him and was carrying a couple of dead wood pigeons.

He started when I hailed him and seemed surprised to see us.

“Hullo, what are you two doing here? That tumbledown old place isn’t very safe, you know. It’s falling to pieces. Probably break up about your ears. Afraid you’ll get dirty there, Elizabeth.”

“Oh, that’s all right. Captain Hastings has sacrificed a pocket handkerchief in the good cause of keeping my dress clean.”

The Colonel murmured vaguely: “Oh really? Oh well, that’s all right.”

He stood there pulling at his lip and we got up and joined him.

His mind seemed far away this evening. He roused himself to say: “Been trying to get some of these cursed wood pigeons. Do a lot of damage, you know.”

“You’re a very fine shot, I hear,” I told him.

“Eh? Who told you that? Oh, Boyd Carrington. Used to be—used to be. Bit rusty nowadays. Age will tell.”

“Eyesight,” I suggested.

He negatived the suggestion immediately. “Nonsense. Eyesight’s as good as ever it was. That is—have to wear glasses for reading, of course. But far sight’s all right.”

He repeated a minute or two later: “Yes—all right. Not that it matters . . .” His voice trailed off into an absentminded mutter.

Miss Cole said, looking round: “What a beautiful evening it is.”

She was quite right. The sun was drawing to the west and the light was a rich golden, bringing out the deeper shades of green in the trees in a deep glowing effect. It was an evening, still and calm, and very English, such as one remembers when in far-off tropical countries. I said as much.

Colonel Luttrell agreed eagerly. “Yes, yes, often used to think of evenings like this—out in India, you know. Makes you look forward to retiring and settling down, what?”

I nodded. He went on, his voice changing: “Yes, settling down, coming home—nothing’s ever quite what you picture it—no—no.”

I thought that that was probably particularly true in his case. He had not pictured himself running a guest house, trying to make it pay, with a nagging wife forever snapping at him and complaining.

We walked slowly towards the house. Norton and Boyd Carrington were sitting on the veranda and the Colonel and I joined them whilst Miss Cole went on into the house.

We chatted for a few minutes. Colonel Luttrell seemed to have brightened up. He made a joke or two and seemed far more cheerful and wide awake than usual.

“Been a hot day,” said Norton. “I’m thirsty.”

“Have a drink, you fellows. On the house, what?” The Colonel sounded eager and happy.

We thanked him and accepted. He got up and went in.

The part of the terrace where we were sitting was just outside the dining room window, and that window was open.

We heard the Colonel inside opening a cupboard, then heard the squeak of a corkscrew and the subdued pop as the cork of the bottle came out.

And then, sharp and high, came the unofficial voice of Mrs. Colonel Luttrell!

“What are you doing, George?”

The Colonel’s voice was subdued to a mutter. We only heard a mumbled word here and there—“fellows outside”—“drink”—

The sharp, irritating voice burst out indignantly: “You’ll do no such thing, George. The idea now. How do you think we’ll ever make this place pay if you go round standing everybody drinks? Drinks here will be paid for. I’ve got a business-head if you haven’t. Why, you’d be bankrupt tomorrow if it wasn’t for me! I’ve got to look after you like a child. Yes, just like a child. You’ve got no sense at all. Give me that bottle. Give it to me, I say.”

Again there was an agonized low protesting mumble.

Mrs. Luttrell answered snappishly: “I don’t care whether they do or they don’t. The bottle’s going back in the cupboard, and I’m going to lock the cupboard too.”

There was the sound of a key being turned in the lock.

“There now. That’s the way of it.”

This time the Colonel’s voice came more clearly: “You’re going too far, Daisy. I won’t have it.”

“You won’t have it? And who are you I’d like to know? Who runs this house? I do. And don’t you forget it.”

There was a faint swish of draperies and Mrs. Luttrell evidently flounced out of the room.

It was some few moments before the Colonel reappeared. He looked in those few moments to have grown much older and feebler.

There was not one of us who did not feel deeply sorry for him and who would not willingly have murdered Mrs. Luttrell.

“Awfully sorry, you chaps,” he said, his voice sounding stiff and unnatural. “Seem to have run out of whisky.”

He must have realized that we could not have helped overhearing what had passed. If he had not realized it, our manner would soon have told him. We were all miserably uncomfortable, and Norton quite lost his head, hurriedly saying first that he didn’t really want a drink—too near dinner, wasn’t it—and then elaborately changing the subject and making a series of the most unconnected remarks. It was indeed a bad moment. I myself felt paralysed and Boyd Carrington, who was the only one of us who might conceivably have managed to pass it off, got no opportunity with Norton’s babble.

Out of the tail of my eye I saw Mrs. Luttrell stalking away down one of the paths equipped with gardening gloves and a dandelion weeder. She was certainly an efficient woman, but I felt bitterly towards her just then. No human being has a right to humiliate another human being.

Norton was still talking feverishly. He had picked up a wood pigeon, and from first telling us how he had been laughed at at his prep school for being sick when he saw a rabbit killed, had gone on to the subject of grouse moors, telling a long and rather pointless story of an accident that had occurred in Scotland when a beater had been shot. We talked of various shooting accidents we had known, and then Boyd Carrington cleared his throat and said:

“Rather an amusing thing happened once with a batman of mine. Irish chap. He had a holiday and went off to Ireland for it. When he came back I asked him if he had had a good holiday.

“ ‘Ah shure, your Honour, best holiday I’ve ever had in my life!’

“ ‘I’m glad of that,’ I said, rather surprised at his enthusiasm.

“ ‘Ah yes, shure, it was a grand holiday! I shot my brother.’

“ ‘You shot your brother!’ I exclaimed.

“ ‘Ah yes, indade. It’s years now that I’ve been wanting to do it. And there I was on a roof in Dublin and who should I see coming down the street but my brother and I there with a rifle in my hand. A lovely shot it was, though I say it myself. Picked him off as clean as a bird. Ah, it was a foine moment, that, and I’ll never forget it!’ ”

Boyd Carrington told a story well, with exaggerated dramatic emphasis, and we all laughed and felt easier. When he got up and strolled off, saying he must get a bath before dinner, Norton voiced our feeling by saying with enthusiasm: “What a splendid chap he is!”

I agreed and Luttrell said: “Yes, yes, a good fellow.”

“Always been a success everywhere, so I understand,” said Norton. “Everything he’s turned his hand to has succeeded. Clear-headed, knows his own mind—essentially a man of action. The true successful man.”

Luttrell said slowly: “Some men are like that. Everything they turn their hand to succeeds. They can’t go wrong. Some people—have all the luck.”

Norton gave a quick shake of the head. “No, no, sir. Not luck.” He quoted with meaning: “Not in our stars, dear Brutus—but in ourselves.”

Luttrell said: “Perhaps you’re right.”

I said quickly: “At any rate he’s lucky to have inherited Knatton. What a place! But he certainly ought to marry. He’ll be lonely there by himself.”

Norton laughed. “Marry and settle down? And suppose his wife bullies him—”

It was the purest bad luck. The sort of remark that anyone could make. But it was unfortunate in the circumstances, and Norton realized it just at the moment that the words came out. He tried to catch them back, hesitated, stammered, and stopped awkwardly. It made the whole thing worse.

Both he and I began to speak at once. I made some idiotic remark about the evening light. Norton said something about having some bridge after dinner.

Colonel Luttrell took no notice of either of us. He said in a queer, inexpressive voice: “No, Boyd Carrington won’t get bullied by his wife. He’s not the sort of man who lets himself get bullied. He’s all right. He’s a man!”

It was very awkward. Norton began babbling about bridge again. In the middle of it a large wood pigeon came flapping over our heads and settled on the branch of a tree not far away.

Colonel Luttrell picked up his gun. “There’s one of the blighters,” he said.

Before he could take aim the bird had flown off again through the trees where it was impossible to get a shot at it.

At the same moment, however, the Colonel’s attention was diverted by a movement on the far slope.

“Damn, there’s a rabbit nibbling the bark of those young fruit trees. Thought I’d wired the place.”

He raised the rifle and fired, and as I saw—

There was a scream in a woman’s voice. It died in a kind of horrible gurgle.

The rifle fell from the Colonel’s hand, his body sagged—he caught his lip.

“My God—it’s Daisy.”

I was already running across the lawn. Norton came behind me. I reached the spot and knelt down. It was Mrs. Luttrell. She had been kneeling, tying a stake against one of the small fruit trees. The grass was long there so that I realized how it was that the Colonel had not seen her clearly and had only distinguished movements in the grass. The light too was confusing. She had been shot through the shoulder and the blood was gushing out.

I bent to examine the wound and looked up at Norton. He was leaning against a tree and was looking green and as though he were going to be sick. He said apologetically: “I can’t stand blood.”

I said sharply: “Get hold of Franklin at once. Or the nurse.”

He nodded and ran off.

It was Nurse Craven who appeared first upon the scene. She was there in an incredibly short time and at once set about in a businesslike way to stop the bleeding. Franklin arrived at a run soon afterwards. Between them they got her into the house and to bed: Franklin dressed and bandaged the wound and sent for her own doctor and Nurse Craven stayed with her.

I ran across Franklin just as he left the telephone.

“How is she?”

“Oh, she’ll pull through all right. It missed any vital spot, luckily. How did it happen?”

I told him. He said: “I see. Where’s the old boy? He’ll be feeling knocked out, I shouldn’t wonder. Probably needs attention more than she does. I shouldn’t say his heart is any too good.”

We found Colonel Luttrell in the smoking room. He was a blue colour round the mouth and looked completely dazed. He said brokenly: “Daisy? Is she—how is she?”

Franklin said quickly: “She’ll be all right, sir. You needn’t worry.”

“I—thought—rabbit—nibbling the bark—don’t know how I came to make such a mistake. Light in my eyes.”

“These things happen,” said Franklin drily. “I’ve seen one or two of them in my time. Look here, sir, you’d better let me give you a pick-me-up. You’re not feeling too good.”

“I’m all right. Can I—can I go to her?”

“Not just now. Nurse Craven is with her. But you don’t need to worry. She’s all right. Dr. Oliver will be here presently and he’ll tell you the same.”

I left the two of them together and went out into the evening sunshine. Judith and Allerton were coming along the path towards me. His head was bent to hers and they were both laughing.

Coming on top of the tragedy that had just happened, it made me feel very angry. I called sharply to Judith and she looked up, surprised. In a few words I told them what had occurred.

“What an extraordinary thing to happen,” was my daughter’s comment.

She did not seem nearly as perturbed as she should have been, I thought.

Allerton’s manner was outrageous. He seemed to take the whole thing as a good joke.

“Serve the old harridan damn well right,” he observed. “Think the old boy did it on purpose?”

“Certainly not,” I said sharply. “It was an accident.”

“Yes, but I know these accidents. Damned convenient sometimes. My word, if the old boy shot her deliberately I take off my hat to him.”

“It was nothing of the kind,” I said angrily.

“Don’t be too sure. I’ve known two men who shot their wives. Cleaning his revolver one was. The other fired point-blank at her as a joke, he said. Didn’t know the thing was loaded. Got away with it, both of them. Damned good release, I should say myself.”

“Colonel Luttrell,” I said coldly, “isn’t that type of man.”

“Well you couldn’t say it wouldn’t be a blessed release, could you?” demanded Allerton pertinently. “They hadn’t just had a row or anything, had they?”

I turned away angrily, at the same time trying to hide a certain perturbation. Allerton had come a little too near the mark. For the first time a doubt crept into my mind.

It was not bettered by meeting Boyd Carrington. He had been for a stroll down towards the lake, he explained. When I told him the news he said at once: “You don’t think he meant to shoot her, do you, Hastings?”

“My dear man.”

“Sorry, sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It was only, for the moment, one wondered . . . She—she gave him a bit of provocation, you know.”

We were both silent for a moment as we remembered the scene we had so unwillingly overheard.

I went upstairs feeling unhappy and worried, and rapped on Poirot’s door.

He had already heard through Curtiss of what had occurred, but he was eager for full details. Since my arrival at Styles I had got into the way of reporting most of my daily encounters and conversations in full detail. In this way I felt that the dear old fellow felt less cut off. It gave him the illusion of actually participating in everything that went on. I have always had a good and accurate memory and found it a simple matter to repeat conversations verbatim.

Poirot listened very attentively. I was hoping that he would be able definitely to pooh-pooh the dreadful suggestion that had by now taken easy control of my mind, but before he had a chance of telling me what he thought, there came a light tap on the door.

It was Nurse Craven. She apologized for disturbing us.

“I’m sorry, but I thought Doctor was here. The old lady is conscious now and she’s worrying about her husband. She’d like to see him. Do you know where he is, Captain Hastings? I don’t want to leave my patient.”

I volunteered to go and look for him. Poirot nodded approval and Nurse Craven thanked me warmly.

I found Colonel Luttrell in a little morning room that was seldom used. He was standing by the window looking out.

He turned sharply as I came in. His eyes asked a question. He looked, I thought, afraid.

“Your wife is conscious, Colonel Luttrell, and is asking for you.”

“Oh.” The colour surged up in his cheeks and I realized then how very white he had been before. He said slowly, fumblingly, like an old, old man: “She—she—is asking for me? I’ll—I’ll come—at once.”

He was so unsteady as he began shuffling towards the door that I came and helped him. He leaned on me heavily as we went up the stairs. His breathing was coming with difficulty. The shock, as Franklin had prophesied, was severe.

We came to the door of the sickroom. I tapped and Nurse Craven’s brisk, efficient voice called: “Come in.”

Still supporting the old man, I went with him into the room. There was a screen round the bed. We came round the corner of it.

Mrs. Luttrell was looking very ill—white and frail, her eyes closed. She opened them as we came round the corner of the screen.

She said in a small, breathless voice: “George—George. . . .”

“Daisy—my dear. . . .”

One of her arms was bandaged and supported. The other, the free one, moved unsteadily towards him. He took a step forward and clasped her frail little hand in his. He said again: “Daisy . . .” And then, gruffly . . . “Thank God, you’re all right.”

And looking up at him, seeing his eyes slightly misty and the deep love and anxiety in them, I felt bitterly ashamed of all our ghoulish imaginings.

I crept quietly out of the room. Camouflaged accident indeed! There was no disguising that heartfelt note of thankfulness. I felt immeasurably relieved.

The sound of the gong startled me as I went along the passage. I had completely forgotten the passage of time. The accident had upset everything. Only the cook had gone on as usual and produced dinner at the usual time.

Most of us had not changed and Colonel Luttrell did not appear. But Mrs. Franklin, looking quite attractive in a pale pink evening dress, was downstairs for once and seemed in good health and spirits. Franklin, I thought, was moody and absorbed.

After dinner, to my annoyance, Allerton and Judith disappeared into the garden together. I sat around a while, listening to Franklin and Norton discussing tropical diseases. Norton was a sympathetic and interested listener, even if he knew little of the subject under discussion.

Mrs. Franklin and Boyd Carrington were talking at the other end of the room. He was showing her some patterns of curtains or cretonnes.

Elizabeth Cole had a book and seemed deeply absorbed in it. I fancied that she was slightly embarrassed and ill at ease with me. Perhaps not unnaturally so after the confidences of the afternoon. I was sorry about it, all the same, and hoped she did not regret all she had told me. I should have liked to have made it clear to her that I should respect her confidence and not repeat it. However she gave me no chance.

After a while I went up to Poirot.

I found Colonel Luttrell sitting in the circle of light thrown by the one small electric lamp that was turned on.

He was talking and Poirot was listening. I think the Colonel was speaking to himself rather than to his listener.

"I remember so well—yes, it was at a hunt ball. She wore white stuff, called tulle, I think it was. Floated all round her. Such a pretty girl—bowled me over then and there. I said to myself: 'That's the girl I'm going to marry.' And by Jove I brought it off. Awfully pretty way she had with her—saucy, you know, plenty of backchat. Always gave as good as she got, bless her."

He chuckled.

I saw the scene in my mind's eye. I could imagine Daisy Luttrell with a young saucy face and that smart tongue—so charming then, so apt to turn shrewish with the years.

But it was as that young girl, his first real love, that Colonel Luttrell was thinking of her tonight. His Daisy.

And again I felt ashamed of what we had said such a few hours previously.

Of course, when Colonel Luttrell had at last taken himself off to bed, I blurted out the whole thing to Poirot.

He listened very quietly. I could make nothing of the expression on his face.

"So that is what you thought, Hastings—that the shot was fired on purpose?"

"Yes. I feel ashamed now—"

Poirot waved aside my present feelings.

"Did the thought occur to you of your own accord, or did someone else suggest it to you?"

"Allerton said something of the kind," I said resentfully. "He would, of course."

"Anyone else?"

"Boyd Carrington suggested it."

“Ah! Boyd Carrington.”

“And after all, he’s a man of the world and has experience of these things.”

“Oh, quite so, quite so. He did not see the thing happen, though?”

“No, he’d gone for a walk. Bit of exercise before changing for dinner.”

“I see.”

I said uneasily: “I don’t think I really believed that theory. It was only—”

Poirot interrupted me. “You need not be so remorseful about your suspicions, Hastings. It was an idea quite likely to occur to anyone given the circumstances. Oh, yes, it was all quite natural.”

There was something in Poirot’s manner I did not quite understand. A reserve. His eyes were watching me with a curious expression.

I said slowly: “Perhaps. But seeing now how devoted he really is to her—”

Poirot nodded. “Exactly. That is often the case, remember. Underneath the quarrels, the misunderstandings, the apparent hostility of everyday life, a real and true affection can exist.”

I agreed. I remembered the gentle affectionate look in little Mrs. Luttrell’s eyes as she looked up at her husband stooping over her bed. No more vinegar, no impatience, no ill-temper.

Married life, I mused, as I went to bed, was a curious thing.

That something in Poirot’s manner still worried me. That curious watchful look—as though he were waiting for me to see—what?

I was just getting into bed when it came to me. Hit me bang between the eyes.

If Mrs. Luttrell had been killed, it would have been a case like those other cases. Colonel Luttrell would, apparently, have killed his wife. It would have been accounted an accident, yet at the same time nobody would have been sure that it was an accident, or whether it had been done on purpose. Insufficient evidence to show it as murder, but quite enough evidence for murder to be suspected.

But that meant—that meant—

What did it mean?

It meant—if anything at all was to make sense—that it was not Colonel Luttrell who shot Mrs. Luttrell, but X.

And that was clearly impossible. I had seen the whole thing. It was Colonel Luttrell who had fired the shot. No other shot had been fired.

Unless—But surely that would be impossible. No, perhaps not impossible—merely highly improbable. But possible, yes . . . Supposing that someone else had waited his moment, and at the exact instant when Colonel Luttrell had fired (at a rabbit), this other person had fired at Mrs. Luttrell. Then only the one shot would have been heard. Or, even with a slight discrepancy, it would have been put down as an echo. (Now I come to think of it, there had been an echo, surely.)

But no, that was absurd. There were ways of deciding exactly what weapon a bullet had been fired from. The marks on the bullet must agree with the rifling of the barrel.

But that, I remembered, was only when the police were anxious to establish what weapon had fired the shot. There would have been no enquiry in this business. For Colonel Luttrell would have been quite as certain as everyone else that it was he who had fired the fatal shot. That fact would have been admitted, accepted without question; there would have been no question of tests. The only doubt would have been whether the shot was fired accidentally or with criminal intent—a question that could never be resolved.

And therefore the case fell into line exactly with those other cases—with the case of the labourer Riggs who didn't remember but supposed he must have done it, with Maggie Litchfield who went out of her mind and gave herself up—for a crime she had not committed.

Yes, this case fell into line with the rest and I knew now the meaning of Poirot’s manner. He was waiting for me to appreciate the fact.

Ten

I

I opened the subject with Poirot the following morning. His face lighted up and he wagged his head appreciatively.

“Excellent, Hastings. I wondered if you would see the similarity. I did not want to prompt you, you understand.”

“Then I am right. This is another X case?”

“Undeniably.”

“But why, Poirot? What is the motive?”

Poirot shook his head.

“Don’t you know? Haven’t you any idea?”

Poirot said slowly: “I have an idea, yes.”

“You’ve got the connection between all these different cases?”

“I think so.”

“Well then.”

I could hardly restrain my impatience.

“No, Hastings.”

“But I’ve got to know.”

“It is much better that you should not.”

“Why?”

“You must take it from me that it is so.”

“You are incorrigible,” I said. “Twisted up with arthritis. Sitting here helpless. And still trying to play a lone hand.”

“Do not figure to yourself that I am playing a lone hand. Not at all. You are, on the contrary, very much in the picture, Hastings. You are my eyes and ears. I only refuse to give you information that might be dangerous.”

“To me?”

“To the murderer.”

“You want him,” I said slowly, “not to suspect that you are on his track? That is it, I suppose. Or else you think that I cannot take care of myself.”

“You should at least know one thing, Hastings. A man who has killed once will kill again—and again and again and again.”

“At any rate,” I said grimly, “there hasn’t been another murder this time. One bullet at least has gone wide.”

“Yes, that was very fortunate—very fortunate indeed. As I told you, these things are difficult to foresee.”

He sighed. His face took on a worried expression.

I went away quietly, realizing sadly how unfit Poirot was now for any sustained effort. His brain was still keen, but he was a sick and tired man.

Poirot had warned me not to try and penetrate the personality of X. In my own mind I still clung to my belief that I had penetrated that personality. There was only one person at Styles who struck me as definitely evil. By a simple question, however, I could make sure of one thing. The test would be a negative one, but would nevertheless have a certain value.

I tackled Judith after breakfast.

“Where had you been yesterday evening when I met you, you and Major Allerton?”

The trouble is that when you are intent on one aspect of a thing, you tend to ignore all other aspects. I was quite startled when Judith flared out at me.

“Really, Father, I don’t see what business it is of yours.”

I stared at her, rather taken aback. “I—I only asked.”

“Yes, but why? Why do you have to be continually asking questions? What was I doing? Where did I go? Who was I with? It’s really intolerable!”

The funny part of it was, of course, that this time I was not really asking at all where Judith was. It was Allerton I was interested in.

I tried to pacify her.

“Really, Judith, I don’t see why I can’t ask a simple question.”

“I don’t see why you want to know.”

“I don’t particularly. I mean, I just wondered why neither of you—er—seemed to know what had happened.”

“About the accident, do you mean? I’d been down to the village, if you must know, to get some stamps.”

I pounced on the personal pronoun.

“Allerton wasn’t with you then?”

Judith gave an exasperated gasp.

“No, he was not,” she said in tones of cold fury. “Actually, we’d met just near the house and only about two minutes before we met you. I hope you’re satisfied now. But I’d just like to say that if I’d spent the whole day walking around with Major Allerton, it’s really not your business. I’m twenty-one and earning my own living, and how I spend my time is entirely my own business.”

“Entirely,” I said, quickly trying to stem the tide.

“I’m glad you agree.” Judith looked mollified. She gave a rueful half smile. “Oh, dearest, do try and not come the heavy father quite so much. You don’t know how maddening it is. If you just wouldn’t fuss so.”

“I won’t—I really won’t in future,” I promised her.

Franklin came striding along at this minute.

“Hullo, Judith. Come along. We’re later than usual.”

His manner was curt and really hardly polite. In spite of myself I felt annoyed. I knew that Franklin was Judith’s employer, that he had a call upon her time and that, since he paid for it, he was entitled to give her orders. Nevertheless, I did not see why he could not behave with common courtesy. His manners were not what one would call polished to anyone, but he did at least behave to most people with a certain amount of everyday politeness. But to Judith, especially of late, his manner was always curt and dictatorial in the extreme. He hardly looked at her when he spoke and merely barked out orders. Judith never appeared to resent this, but I did on her behalf. It crossed my mind that it was especially unfortunate since it contrasted in such a very marked way with Allerton’s exaggerated attention. No doubt John Franklin was a ten times better man than Allerton, but he compared very badly with him from the point of view of attraction.

I watched Franklin as he strode along the path towards the laboratory, his ungainly walk, his angular build, the jutting bones of his face and head, his red hair and his freckles. An ugly man and an ungainly man. None of the more obvious qualities. A good brain, yes, but women seldom fall for brains alone. I reflected with dismay that Judith, owing to the circumstances of her job, practically never came into contact with other men. She had no opportunity of sizing up various attractive men. Compared with the gruff and unattractive Franklin, Allerton’s meretricious charms stood out with all the force of contrast. My poor girl had no chance of appraising him at his true worth.

Supposing that she should come seriously to lose her heart to him? The irritability she had shown just now was a disquieting sign. Allerton, I knew, was a real bad lot. He was possibly something more. If Allerton were X—?

He could be. At the time that the shot was fired he had not been with Judith.

But what was the motive of all these seemingly purposeless crimes? There was, I felt sure, nothing of the madman about Allerton. He was sane—altogether sane—and utterly unprincipled.

And Judith—my Judith—was seeing altogether too much of him.

II

Up to this time, though I had been faintly worried about my daughter, my preoccupation over X and the possibility of a crime occurring at any moment had successfully driven more personal problems to the back of my mind.

Now that the blow had fallen, that a crime had been attempted and had mercifully failed, I was free to reflect on these things. And the more I did so, the more anxious I became. A chance word spoken one day revealed to me the fact that Allerton was a married man.

Boyd Carrington, who knew all about everyone, enlightened me further. Allerton’s wife was a devout Roman Catholic. She had left him a short time after their marriage. Owing to her religion there had never been any question of divorce.

“And if you ask me,” said Boyd Carrington frankly, “it suits the blighter down to the ground. His intentions are always dishonourable, and a wife in the background suits the book very well.”

Pleasant hearing for a father!

The days after the shooting accident passed uneventfully enough on the surface, but they accompanied a growing undercurrent of unrest on my part.

Colonel Luttrell spent much time in his wife's bedroom. A nurse had arrived to take charge of the patient and Nurse Craven was able to resume her ministrations to Mrs. Franklin.

Without wishing to be ill-natured, I must admit that I had observed signs on Mrs. Franklin's part of irritation at not being the invalid en chef. The fuss and attention that centred round Mrs. Luttrell was clearly very displeasing to the little lady who was accustomed to her own health being the main topic of the day.

She lay about in a hammock chair, her hand to her side, complaining of palpitation. No food that was served was suitable for her, and all her exactions were masked by a veneer of patient endurance.

"I do so hate making a fuss," she murmured plaintively to Poirot. "I feel so ashamed of my wretched health. It's so—so humiliating always to have to ask people to be doing things for me. I sometimes think ill health is really a crime. If one isn't healthy and insensitive one isn't fit for this world and one should just be put quietly away."

"Ah no, madame." Poirot, as always, was gallant. "The delicate exotic flower has to have the shelter of the greenhouse—it cannot endure the cold winds. It is the common weed that thrives in the wintry air, but it is not to be prized higher on that account. Consider my case—cramped, twisted, unable to move, but I—I do not think of quitting life. I enjoy still what I can—the food, the drink, the pleasures of the intellect."

Mrs. Franklin sighed and murmured: "Ah, but it's different for you. You have no one but yourself to consider. In my case, there is my poor John. I feel acutely what a burden I am to him. A sickly useless wife. A millstone hung round his neck."

"He has never said that you are that, I am sure."

"Oh, not said so. Of course not. But men are so transparent, poor dears. And John isn't any good at concealing his feelings. He doesn't mean, of course, to be unkind, but he's—well, mercifully for himself he's a very insensitive sort of person. He's no feelings and so he doesn't expect anyone else to have them. It's so terribly lucky to be born thick-skinned."

"I should not describe Dr. Franklin as thick-skinned."

"Wouldn't you? Oh, but you don't know him as well as I do. Of course I know that if it wasn't for me, he would be much freer. Sometimes, you know, I get so terribly depressed that I think what a relief it would be to end it all."

"Oh, come, madame."

"After all, what use am I to anybody? To go out of it all into the Great Unknown . . ." she shook her head. "And then John would be free."

"Great fiddlesticks," said Nurse Craven when I repeated this conversation to her. "She won't do anything of the kind. Don't you worry, Captain Hastings. These ones that talk about 'ending it all' in a dying-duck voice haven't the faintest intention of doing anything of the kind."

And I must say that once the excitement aroused by Mrs. Luttrell's injury had died down, and Nurse Craven was once more in attendance, Mrs. Franklin's spirits improved very much.

On a particularly fine morning Curtiss had taken Poirot down to the corner below the beech trees near the laboratory. This was a favourite spot of his. It was sheltered from any east wind and in fact hardly any breeze could ever be felt there. This suited Poirot, who abhorred draughts and was always suspicious of the fresh air. Actually, I think he much preferred to be indoors but had grown to tolerate the outer air when muffled in rugs.

I strolled down to join him and as I got there Mrs. Franklin came out of the laboratory.

She was most becomingly dressed and looked remarkably cheerful. She explained that she was driving over with Boyd Carrington to see the house and give expert advice in choosing cretonnes.

“I left my handbag in the lab yesterday when I was talking to John,” she explained. “Poor John, he and Judith have driven into Tadcaster—they were short of some chemical reagent or other.”

She sank down on a seat near Poirot and shook her head with a comical expression. “Poor dears—I’m so glad I haven’t got the scientific mind. On a lovely day like this it all seems so puerile.”

“You must not let scientists hear you say that, madame.”

“No, of course not.” Her face changed. It grew serious. She said quietly: “You mustn’t think, M. Poirot, that I don’t admire my husband. I do. I think the way he just lives for his work is really—tremendous.”

There was a little tremor in her voice.

A suspicion crossed my mind that Mrs. Franklin rather liked playing different roles. At this moment she was being the loyal and hero-worshipping wife.

She leaned forward, placing an earnest hand on Poirot’s knee. “John,” she said, “is really a—a kind of saint. It makes me quite frightened sometimes.”

To call Franklin a saint was somewhat overstating the case, I thought, but Barbara Franklin went on, her eyes shining.

“He’ll do anything—take any risk—just to advance the sum of human knowledge. That is pretty fine, don’t you think?”

“Assuredly, assuredly,” said Poirot quickly.

“But sometimes, you know,” went on Mrs. Franklin, “I’m really nervous about him. The lengths to which he’ll go, I mean. This horrible bean thing he’s experimenting with now. I’m so afraid he’ll start experimenting on himself.”

"He'd take every precaution, surely," I said.

She shook her head with a slight, rueful smile. "You don't know John. Did you never hear about what he did with that new gas?"

I shook my head.

"It was some new gas they wanted to find out about. John volunteered to test it. He was shut up in a tank for something like thirty-six hours, taking his pulse and temperature and respiration, to see what the aftereffects were and if they were the same for men as for animals. It was a frightful risk, so one of the professors told me afterwards. He might easily have passed out altogether. But that's the sort of person John is—absolutely oblivious of his own safety. I think it's rather wonderful, don't you, to be like that? I should never be brave enough."

"It needs, indeed, high courage," said Poirot, "to do these things in cold blood."

Barbara Franklin said: "Yes, it does. I'm awfully proud of him, you know, but at the same time it makes me rather nervous, too. Because, you see, guinea pigs and frogs are no good after a certain point. You want the human reaction. That's why I feel so terrified that John will go and dose himself with this nasty ordeal bean and that something awful might happen." She sighed and shook her head. "But he only laughs at my fears. He really is a sort of saint, you know."

At this moment Boyd Carrington came towards us.

"Hullo, Babs, ready?"

"Yes, Bill, waiting for you."

"I do hope it won't tire you too much."

"Of course it won't. I feel better today than I have for ages."

She got up, smiled prettily at us both, and walked up the lawn with her tall escort.

“Dr. Franklin, the modern saint—h’m,” said Poirot.

“Rather a change of attitude,” I said. “But I think the lady is like that.”

“Like what?”

“Given to dramatizing herself in various roles. One day the misunderstood, neglected wife, then the self-sacrificing, suffering woman who hates to be a burden on the man she loves. Today it’s the hero-worshipping helpmate. The trouble is that all the roles are slightly overdone.”

Poirot said thoughtfully: “You think Mrs. Franklin, do you not, rather a fool?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that—yes, perhaps not a very brilliant intellect.”

“Ah, she is not your type.”

“Who is my type?” I snapped.

Poirot replied unexpectedly: “Open your mouth and shut your eyes and see what the fairies will send you—”

I was prevented from replying because Nurse Craven came tripping hastily across the grass. She gave us a smile with a brilliant flash of teeth, unlocked the door of the lab, passed inside and reappeared with a pair of gloves.

“First a hanky and now gloves, always something left behind,” she observed as she sped back with them to where Barbara Franklin and Boyd Carrington were waiting.

Mrs. Franklin, I reflected, was that rather feckless type of woman who always did leave things behind, shedding her possessions and expecting everybody to retrieve them as a matter of course and even, I fancied, was rather proud of herself for so doing. I had heard her more than once murmur complacently: “Of course I’ve got a head like a sieve.”

I sat looking after Nurse Craven as she ran across the lawn and out of sight. She ran well, her body was vigorous and well balanced. I said impulsively:

"I should think a girl must get fed up with that sort of life. I mean when there isn't much nursing to be done—when it's just fetch and carry. I don't suppose Mrs. Franklin is particularly considerate or kindly."

Poirot's response was distinctly annoying. For no reason whatever, he closed his eyes and murmured: "Auburn hair."

Undoubtedly Nurse Craven had got auburn hair, but I did not see why Poirot should choose just this minute to comment upon it.

I made no reply.

Eleven

It was, I think, on the following morning before lunch that a conversation took place which left me vaguely disquieted.

There were four of us—Judith, myself, Boyd Carrington and Norton.

Exactly how the subject started, I am not sure, but we were talking of euthanasia—the case for and against it.

Boyd Carrington, as was natural, did most of the talking, Norton putting in a word or two here and there and Judith sitting silent but closely attentive.

I myself had confessed that though there seemed, on the face of it, every reason to support the practice, yet in actuality I felt a sentimental shrinking from it. Besides, I said, I thought it would put too much power in the hands of relatives.

Norton agreed with me. He added that he thought it should only be done by the wish and consent of the patient himself where death after prolonged suffering was certain.

Boyd Carrington said: "Ah, but that's the curious thing. Does the person most concerned ever wish to 'put himself out of his misery,' as we say?"

He then told a story which he said was authentic, of a man in terrible pain from inoperable cancer. This man had begged the doctor in attendance to "give him something that would finish it all." The doctor had replied: "I can't do that, old man." Later, on leaving, he had placed by the patient some morphia tablets, tellinghim carefully how many he could safely take and what dose would be dangerous. Although these were left in the patient's charge and he could easily have taken a fatal quantity, he did not do so. "Thus proving," said Boyd Carrington, "that, in spite of his words, the man preferred his suffering to a swift and merciful release."

It was then that Judith spoke for the first time, spoke with vigour and abruptly. “Of course he would,” she said. “It shouldn’t have been left to him to decide.”

Boyd Carrington asked what she meant.

“I mean that anyone who’s weak—in pain and ill—hasn’t got the strength to make a decision—they can’t. It must be done for them. It’s the duty of someone who loves them to take the decision.”

“Duty?” I queried abruptly.

Judith turned on me. “Yes, duty. Someone whose mind is clear and who will take the responsibility.”

Boyd Carrington shook his head. “And end up in the dock charged with murder?”

“Not necessarily. Anyway, if you love someone, you would take the risk.”

“But look here, Judith,” said Norton, “what you’re suggesting is simply a terrific responsibility to take.”

“I don’t think it is. People are too afraid of responsibility. They’ll take responsibility where a dog is concerned—why not with a human being?”

“Well—it’s rather different, isn’t it?”

Judith said: “Yes, it’s more important.”

Norton murmured: “You take my breath away.”

Boyd Carrington asked curiously: “So you’d take the risk, would you?”

“I think so. I’m not afraid of taking risks.”

Boyd Carrington shook his head. “It wouldn’t do, you know. You can’t have people here, there, and everywhere, taking the law into their own hands, deciding matters of life and death.”

Norton said: “Actually, you know, Boyd Carrington, most people wouldn’t have the nerve to take the responsibility.” He smiled faintly as he looked at Judith. “Don’t believe you would if it came to the point.”

Judith said composedly: “One can’t be sure, of course. I think I should.”

Norton said with a slight twinkle: “Not unless you had an axe of your own to grind.”

Judith flushed hotly. She said sharply: “That just shows you don’t understand at all. If I had a—a personal motive, I couldn’t do anything. Don’t you see?” she appealed to us all. “It’s got to be absolutely impersonal. You could only take the responsibility of—of ending a life if you were quite sure of your motive. It must be absolutely selfless.”

“All the same,” said Norton, “you wouldn’t do it.”

Judith insisted: “I would. To begin with I don’t hold life as sacred as all you people do. Unfit lives, useless lives—they should be got out of the way. There’s so much mess about. Only people who can make a decent contribution to the community ought to be allowed to live. The others ought to be put painlessly away.”

She appealed suddenly to Boyd Carrington.

“You agree with me, don’t you?”

He said slowly: “In principle, yes. Only the worthwhile should survive.”

“Wouldn’t you take the law into your own hands if it was necessary?”

Boyd Carrington said slowly: “Perhaps. I don’t know. . . .”

Norton said quietly: “A lot of people would agree with you in theory. But practice is a different matter.”

“That’s not logical.”

Norton said impatiently: “Of course it’s not. It’s really a question of courage. One just hasn’t got the guts, to put it vulgarly.”

Judith was silent. Norton went on.

“Frankly, you know, Judith, you’d be just the same yourself. You wouldn’t have the courage when it came to it.”

“Don’t you think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“I think you’re wrong, Norton,” said Boyd Carrington. “I think Judith has any amount of courage. Fortunately the issue doesn’t present itself.”

The gong sounded from the house.

Judith got up.

She said very distinctly to Norton: “You’re wrong, you know. I’ve got more —more guts than you think.”

She went swiftly towards the house. Boyd Carrington followed her saying, “Hey, wait for me, Judith.”

I followed, feeling for some reason rather dismayed. Norton, who was always quick to sense a mood, endeavoured to console me.

“She doesn’t mean it, you know,” he said. “It’s the sort of half-baked idea one has when one is young, but fortunately one doesn’t carry it out. It remains just talk.”

I think Judith overheard, for she cast a furious glance over her shoulder.

Norton dropped his voice. “Theories needn’t worry anybody,” he said. “But look here, Hastings—”

“Yes?”

Norton seemed rather embarrassed. He said: “I don’t want to butt in, but what do you know of Allerton?”

“Of Allerton?”

“Yes, sorry if I’m being a Nosy Parker, but frankly if I were you I shouldn’t let that girl of yours see too much of him. He’s—well, his reputation isn’t very good.”

“I can see for myself the sort of rotter he is,” I said bitterly. “But it’s not so easy in these days.”

“Oh, I know. Girls can look after themselves, as the saying goes. Most of them can, too. But—well—Allerton has rather a special technique in that line.” He hesitated, then said: “Look here, I feel I ought to tell you. Don’t let it go farther, of course—but I do happen to know something pretty foul about him.”

He told it me then and there—and I was able to verify it in every detail later. It was a revolting tale. The story of a girl, sure of herself, modern, independent. Allerton had brought all his technique to bear upon her. Later had come the other side of the picture—the story ended with a desperate girl taking her own life with an overdose of Veronal.

And the horrible part was that the girl in question had been much the same type as Judith—the independent, highbrow kind. The kind of girl who when she does lose her heart, loses it with a desperation and an abandonment that the silly little fluffy type can never know.

I went in to lunch with a horrible sense of foreboding.

Twelve

I

“Is anything worrying you, mon ami?” asked Poirot that afternoon.

I did not answer him, merely shook my head. I felt that I had no right to burden Poirot with this, my purely personal problem. It was not as though he could help in any way.

Judith would have treated any remonstrances on his part with the smiling detachment of the young towards the boring counsels of the old.

Judith, my Judith. . . .

It is hard now to describe just what I went through that day. Afterwards, thinking it over, I am inclined to put something down to the atmosphere of Styles itself. Evil imaginings came easily to the mind there. There was, too, not only the past, but a sinister present. The shadow of murder and a murderer haunted the house.

And to the best of my belief the murderer was Allerton and Judith was losing her heart to him! It was unbelievable—monstrous—and I didn’t know what to do.

It was after lunch that Boyd Carrington drew me aside. He hemmed and hawed a bit before coming to the point. At last he said rather jerkily: “Don’t think I’m interfering, but I think you ought to speak to that girl of yours. Give her a word of warning, eh? You know this fellow Allerton—reputation’s pretty bad, and she—well, it looks rather like a case.”

So easy for these men without children to speak like that! Give her a word of warning?

Would it be any use? Would it make things worse?

If only Cinders were here. She would know what to do, what to say.

I was tempted, I admit, to hold my peace and say nothing. But I reflected after a while that this was really only cowardice. I shrank from the unpleasantness of having things out with Judith. I was, you see, afraid of my tall, beautiful daughter.

I paced up and down the gardens in increasing agitation of mind. My footsteps led me at last to the rose garden, and there, as it were, the decision was taken out of my hands, for Judith was sitting on a seat alone, and in all my life I have never seen an expression of greater unhappiness on any woman's face.

The mask was off. Indecision and deep unhappiness showed only too plainly.

I took my courage in my hands. I went to her. She did not hear me until I was beside her.

"Judith," I said. "For God's sake, Judith, don't mind so much."

She turned on me, startled. "Father? I didn't hear you."

I went on, knowing that it would be fatal if she managed to turn me back to normal everyday conversation.

"Oh, my dearest child, don't think I don't know, that I can't see. He isn't worth it—oh, do believe me, he isn't worth it."

Her face, troubled, alarmed, was turned towards me. She said quietly: "Do you think you really know what you are talking about?"

"I do know. You care about this man. But, my dear, it's no good."

She smiled sombrely. A heartbreaking smile.

"Perhaps I know that as well as you do."

“You don’t. You can’t. Oh, Judith, what can come of it all? He’s a married man. There can be no future there for you—only sorrow and shame—and all ending in bitter self-loathing.”

Her smile grew wider—even more sorrowful.

“How fluently you talk, don’t you?”

“Give it up, Judith—give it all up.”

“No!”

“He’s not worth it, my dear.”

She said very quietly and slowly: “He’s worth everything in the world to me.”

“No, no. Judith, I beg of you—”

The smile vanished. She turned on me like an avenging fury.

“How dare you? How dare you interfere? I won’t stand it. You are never to speak to me of this again. I hate you, I hate you. It’s no business of yours. It’s my life—my own secret inside life!”

She got up. With one firm hand she pushed me aside and went past me. Like an avenging fury. I stared after her, dismayed.

II

I was still there, dazed and helpless, unable to think out my next course of action, some quarter of an hour later.

I was there when Elizabeth Cole and Norton found me.

They were, I realized later, very kind to me. They saw, they must have seen, that I was in a state of great mental perturbation. But tactfully enough they made no slightest allusion to my state of mind. Instead they took me with them on a rambling walk. They were both nature lovers. Elizabeth Cole pointed out wild flowers to me, Norton showed me birds through his field glasses.

Their talk was gentle, soothing, concerned only with feathered beings and with woodland flora. Little by little I came back to normal, although underneath I was still in a state of the utmost perturbation.

Moreover I was, as people are, convinced that any happening that occurred was connected with my own particular perplexity.

So, therefore, when Norton, his glasses to his eyes, exclaimed: “Hullo, if that isn’t a speckled woodpecker. I never—” and then broke off suddenly, I immediately leapt to suspicion. I held out my hand for the glasses.

“Let me see.” My voice was peremptory.

Norton fumbled with the glasses. He said, in a curious hesitating voice: “I—I—made a mistake. It’s flown away—at least, as a matter of fact, it was quite a common bird.”

His face was white and troubled, he avoided looking at us. He seemed both bewildered and distressed.

Even now I cannot think I was altogether unreasonable in jumping to the conclusion that he had seen through those glasses of his something that he was determined to prevent my seeing.

Whatever it was that he had seen, he was so thoroughly taken aback by it that it was noticeable to both of us.

His glasses had been trained on a distant belt of woodland. What had he seen there?

I said peremptorily: “Let me look.”

I snatched at the glasses. I remember he tried to defend them from me, but he did it clumsily. I seized them roughly.

Norton said weakly: “It wasn’t really—I mean, the bird’s gone. I wish—”

My hands shaking a little, I adjusted the glasses to my eyes. They were powerful glasses. I trained them as nearly as I could on the spot where I thought Norton had been looking.

But I saw nothing—nothing but a gleam of white (a girl’s white dress?) disappearing into the trees.

I lowered the glasses. Without a word I handed them back to Norton. He did not meet my eyes. He was looking worried and perplexed.

We walked back to the house together and I remember that Norton was very silent all the way.

III

Mrs. Franklin and Boyd Carrington came in shortly after we got back to the house. He had taken her in his car to Tadcaster because she wanted to do some shopping.

She had done it, I gather, pretty thoroughly. Lots of parcels came out of the car and she was looking quite animated, talking and laughing and with quite a colour in her cheeks.

She sent Boyd Carrington up with a particularly fragile purchase and I gallantly received a further consignment.

Her talk was quicker and more nervous than usual.

“Frightfully hot, isn’t it? I think there’s going to be a storm. This weather must break soon. They say, you know, there’s quite a water shortage. The worst drought there’s been for years.”

She went on, turning to Elizabeth Cole: “What have you all been doing with yourselves? Where’s John? He said he’d got a headache and was going to walk it off. Very unlike him to have a headache. I think, you know, he’s worried about his experiments. They aren’t going right or something. I wish he’d talk more about things.”

She paused and then addressed Norton: “You’re very silent, Mr. Norton. Is anything the matter? You look—you look scared. You haven’t seen the ghost of old Mrs. Whoever-it-was?”

Norton started. “No, no. I haven’t seen any ghosts. I—I was just thinking of something.”

It was at that moment that Curtiss came through the doorway wheeling Poirot in his invalid chair.

He stopped with it in the hall, preparatory to taking his master out and carrying him up the stairs.

Poirot, his eyes suddenly alert, looked from one to the other of us.

He said sharply: “What is it? Is anything the matter?”

None of us answered for a minute, then Barbara Franklin said with a little artificial laugh: “No, of course not. What should be the matter? It’s just—perhaps thunder coming? I—oh dear—I’m terribly tired. Bring those things up, will you, Captain Hastings? Thank you so much.”

I followed her up the stairs and along the east wing. Her room was the end one on that side.

Mrs. Franklin opened the door. I was behind her, my arms full of parcels.

She stopped abruptly in the doorway. By the window Boyd Carrington was having his palm examined by Nurse Craven.

He looked up and laughed a little sheepishly. “Hullo, I’m having my fortune told. Nurse is no end of a hand reader.”

“Really? I had no idea of that.” Barbara Franklin’s voice was sharp. I had an idea that she was annoyed with Nurse Craven. “Please take these things, Nurse, will you? And you might mix me an egg flip. I feel very tired. A hot-water bottle, too, please. I’ll get to bed as soon as possible.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Franklin.”

Nurse Craven moved forward. She showed no signs of anything but professional concern.

Mrs. Franklin said: “Please go, Bill, I’m terribly tired.”

Boyd Carrington looked very concerned. “Oh, I say, Babs, has it been too much for you? I am sorry. What a thoughtless fool I am. I shouldn’t have let you overtire yourself.”

Mrs. Franklin gave him her angelic martyr’s smile. “I didn’t want to say anything. I do hate being tiresome.”

We two men went out of the room, somewhat abashed, and left the two women together.

Boyd Carrington said contritely: “What a damned fool I am. Barbara seemed so bright and gay I forgot all about tiring her. Hope she’s not knocked herself up.”

I said mechanically: “Oh, I expect she’ll be all right after a night’s rest.”

He went down the stairs. I hesitated and then went along the other wing towards my own room, and Poirot’s. The little man would be expecting me. For the first time I was reluctant to go to him. I had so much to occupy my thoughts, and I still had that dull sick feeling at the pit of my stomach.

I went slowly along the corridor.

From inside Allerton’s room I heard voices. I don’t think I meant consciously to listen though I stopped for a minute automatically outside his door. Then, suddenly, the door opened and my daughter Judith came out.

She stopped dead when she saw me. I caught her by the arm and hustled her along into my room. I was suddenly intensely angry.

“What do you mean by going to that fellow’s room?”

She looked at me steadily. She showed no anger now, only complete coldness. For some few seconds she did not reply.

I shook her by the arm. “I won’t have it, I tell you. You don’t know what you are doing.”

She said then, in a low biting voice: “I think you have a perfectly filthy mind.”

I said: “I daresay I have. It’s a reproach your generation is fond of levelling at mine. We have, at least, certain standards. Understand this, Judith, I forbid you absolutely to have anything more to do with that man.”

She looked at me steadily. Then she said quietly: “I see. So that’s it.”

“Do you deny that you’re in love with him?”

“No.”

“But you don’t know what he is. You can’t know.”

Deliberately, without mincing my language, I repeated to her the story I had heard about Allerton.

“You see,” I said when I had finished. “That’s the kind of foul brute he is.”

She seemed quite annoyed. Her lips curled upwards scornfully.

“I never thought he was a saint, I can assure you.”

“Doesn’t this make any difference to you? Judith, you can’t be utterly depraved.”

“Call it that if you like.”

“Judith, you haven’t—you aren’t—”

I could not put my meaning into words. She shook her arm free from my detaining hand.

“Now, listen, Father. I do what I choose. You can’t bully me. And it’s no good ranting. I shall do exactly as I please with my life, and you can’t stop me.”

In another instant she was out of the room.

I found my knees trembling.

I sank down on to a chair. It was worse—much worse than I thought. The child was utterly infatuated. There was no one to whom I could appeal. Her mother, the only person she might have listened to, was dead. It all depended on me.

I do not think that either before or since I have ever suffered as I suffered then. . . .

IV

Presently I roused myself. I washed and shaved and changed. I went down to dinner. I behaved, I fancy, in quite a normal manner. Nobody seemed to notice anything amiss.

Once or twice I saw Judith flash a curious glance at me. She must have been puzzled, I think, by the way I was able to appear quite like my usual self.

And all the time, underneath, I was growing more and more determined.

All that I needed was courage—courage and brains.

After dinner we went outside, looked up at the sky, commented on the closeness of the atmosphere, prophesied rain—thunder—a storm.

Out of the tail of my eye I saw Judith disappear round the corner of the house. Presently Allerton strolled in the same direction.

I finished what I was saying to Boyd Carrington and wandered that way myself.

Norton, I think, tried to stop me. He took my arm. He tried, I think, to suggest walking up to the rose garden. I took no notice.

He was still with me as I turned the corner of the house.

They were there. I saw Judith's upturned face, saw Allerton's bent down over it, saw how he took her in his arms and the kiss that followed.

Then they broke away quickly. I took a step forward. Almost by main force, Norton hauled me back and round the corner. He said: "Look here, you can't—"

I interrupted him. I said forcefully: "I can. And I will."

"It's no good, my dear fellow. It's all very distressing but all it comes to is that there's nothing you can do."

I was silent. He might think that that was so, but I knew better.

Norton went on: "I know how ineffectual and maddened one feels, but the only thing to do is to admit defeat. Accept it, man!"

I didn't contradict him. I waited, allowing him to talk. Then I went firmly round the corner of the house again.

The two of them had disappeared now, but I had a shrewd idea of where they might be. There was a summerhouse concealed in a grove of lilac trees not far away.

I went towards it. I think Norton was still with me, but I'm not sure.

As I got nearer I heard voices and stopped. It was Allerton's voice I heard.

"Well, then, my dear girl, that's settled. Don't make anymore objections. You go up to town tomorrow. I'll say I'm running over to Ipswich to stay with a pal for a night or two. You wire from London that you can't get back. And who's to know of that charming little dinner at my flat? You won't regret it, I can promise you."

I felt Norton tugging at me, and suddenly, meekly, I turned. I almost laughed at the sight of his worried anxious face. I let him drag me back to the house. I pretended to give in because I knew, at that moment, exactly what I was going to do. . . .

I said to him clearly and distinctly: “Don’t worry, old chap. It’s all no good—I see that now. You can’t control your children’s lives. I’m through.”

He was ridiculously relieved.

Shortly afterwards, I told him I was going to bed early. I’d got a bit of a headache, I said.

He had no suspicions at all of what I was going to do.

V

I paused for a moment in the corridor. It was quite quiet. There was no one about. The beds had been all turned down ready for the night. Norton, who had a room on this side, I had left downstairs. Elizabeth Cole was playing bridge. Curtiss, I knew, would be downstairs having his supper. I had the place to myself.

I flatter myself that I have not worked with Poirot for so many years in vain. I knew just what precautions to take.

Allerton was not going to meet Judith in London tomorrow.

Allerton was not going anywhere tomorrow. . . .

The whole thing was really so ridiculously simple.

I went to my own room and picked up my bottle of aspirins. Then I went into Allerton’s room and into the bathroom. The tablets of Slumberyl were in the cupboard. Eight, I considered, ought to do the trick. One or two was the stated dose. Eight, therefore, ought to be ample. Allerton himself had said the toxic dose was not high. I read the label. “It is dangerous to exceed the prescribed dose.”

I smiled to myself.

I wrapped a silk handkerchief round my hand and unscrewed the bottle carefully. There must be no fingerprints on it.

I emptied out the tablets. Yes, they were almost exactly the same size as the aspirins. I put eight aspirins in the bottle, then filled up with the Slumberyls, leaving out eight of them. The bottle now looked exactly as it had before. Allerton would notice no difference.

I went back to my room. I had a bottle of whisky there—most of us had at Styles. I got out two glasses and a syphon. I'd never known Allerton refuse a drink yet. When he came up I'd ask him in for a nightcap.

I tried the tablets in a little of the spirit. They dissolved easily enough. I tasted the mixture gingerly. A shade bitter perhaps but hardly noticeable. I had my plan. I should be just pouring myself out a drink when Allerton came up. I would hand that to him and pour myself out another. All quite easy and natural.

He could have no idea of my feelings—unless of course Judith had told him. I considered this for a moment, but decided that I was quite safe here. Judith never told anyone anything.

He would probably believe me to be quite unsuspicious of their plan.

I had nothing to do but to wait. It would be a long time, probably an hour or two, before Allerton came up to bed. He was always a late bird.

I sat there quietly waiting.

A sudden knock on the door made me start. It was only Curtiss, however. Poirot was asking for me.

I came to myself with a shock. Poirot! I had never once thought of him all evening. He must have wondered what had become of me. It worried me a little. First of all because I was ashamed of never having been near him, and secondly I did not want him to suspect that anything out of the way had happened.

I followed Curtiss across the passage.

“Eh bien!” exclaimed Poirot. “So you desert me, hein?”

I forced a yawn and an apologetic smile. “Awfully sorry, old boy,” I said. “But to tell the truth I’ve got such a blinding headache I can hardly see out of my eyes. It’s the thunder in the air, I suppose. I really have been feeling quite muzzy with it—in fact, so much so I entirely forgot I hadn’t been in to say good night to you.”

As I had hoped, Poirot was immediately solicitous. He offered remedies. He fussed. He accused me of having sat about in the open air in a draught. (On the hottest day of the summer!) I refused aspirin on the grounds that I had already taken some, but I was not able to avoid being given a cup of sweet and wholly disgusting chocolate!

“It nourishes the nerves, you comprehend,” Poirot explained.

I drank it to avoid argument and then, with Poirot’s anxious and affectionate exclamations still ringing in my ears, I bade him good night.

I returned to my own room, and shut the door ostentatiously. Later, I opened it a crack with the utmost caution. I could not fail now to hear Allerton when he came. But it would be some time yet.

I sat there waiting. I thought of my dead wife. Once, under my breath, I murmured: “You understand, darling, I’m going to save her.”

She had left Judith in my care, I was not going to fail her.

In the quiet and the stillness I suddenly felt that Cinders was very near to me.

I felt almost as though she were in the room.

And still I sat on grimly, waiting.

Thirteen

I

There is something about writing down an anticlimax in cold blood that is somewhat shattering to one’s self-esteem.

For the truth of the matter is, you see, that I sat there waiting for Allerton and that I fell asleep!

Not so surprising really, I suppose. I had slept very badly the night before. I had been out in the air the whole day. I was worn out with worry and the strain of nerving myself for doing what I had decided to do. On top of all that was the heavy thundery weather. Possibly even the fierce effort of concentration I was making helped.

Anyway, it happened. I fell asleep there in my chair, and when I woke birds were twittering outside, the sun was up and there was I, cramped and uncomfortable, slipped down in my chair in my evening dress, with a foul taste in the mouth and a splitting head.

I was bewildered, incredulous, disgusted, and finally immeasurably and overwhelmingly relieved.

Who was it who wrote, “The darkest day, lived till tomorrow, will have passed away?” And how true it is. I saw now, clearly and sanely, how overwrought and wrongheaded I had been. Melodramatic, lost to all sense of proportion. I had actually made up my mind to kill another human being.

At this moment my eyes fell on the glass of whisky in front of me. With a shudder I got up, drew the curtains and poured it out of the window. I must have been mad last night!

I shaved, had a bath and dressed. Then, feeling very much better, I went across to Poirot. He always woke very early, I knew. I sat down and made a clean breast of the whole thing to him.

I may say it was a great relief.

He shook his head gently at me. “Ah, but what follies it is you contemplate. I am glad you came to confess your sins to me. But why, my dear friend, did you not come to me last night and tell me what was in your mind?”

I said shamefacedly: “I was afraid, I suppose, that you would have tried to stop me.”

“Assuredly I would have stopped you. Ah that, certainly. Do you think I want to see you hanged by the neck, all on account of a very unpleasant scoundrel called Major Allerton?”

“I shouldn’t have been caught,” I said. “I’d taken every precaution.”

“That is what all murderers think. You had the true mentality! But let me tell you, mon ami, you were not as clever as you thought yourself.”

“I took every precaution. I wiped my fingerprints off the bottle.”

“Exactly. You also wiped Allerton’s fingerprints off. And when he is found dead, what happens? They perform the autopsy and it is established that he died of an overdose of Slumberyl. Did he take it by accident or intention? Tiens, his fingerprints are not on the bottle. But why not? Whether accident or suicide he would have no reason to wipe them off. And then they analyse the remaining tablets and find nearly half of them have been replaced by aspirin.”

“Well, practically everyone has aspirin tablets,” I murmured weakly.

“Yes, but it is not everyone who has a daughter whom Allerton is pursuing with dishonourable intentions—to use an old-fashioned dramatic phrase. And you have had a quarrel with your daughter on the subject the day before. Two people, Boyd Carrington and Norton, can swear to your violent feeling against the man. No, Hastings, it would not have looked too good. Attention would immediately have been focused upon you, and by that time you would probably have been in such a state of fear—or even remorse—that some good solid inspector of police would have made up his mind quite definitely that you were the guilty party. It is quite possible, even, that someone may have seen you tampering with the tablets.”

“They couldn’t. There was no one about.”

“There is a balcony outside the window. Somebody might have been there, peeping in. Or, who knows, someone might have been looking through the keyhole.”

“You’ve got keyholes on the brain, Poirot. People don’t really spend their time looking through keyholes as much as you seem to think.”

Poirot half-closed his eyes and remarked that I had always had too trusting a nature.

“And let me tell you, very funny things happen with keys in this house. Me, I like to feel that my door is locked on the inside, even if the good Curtiss is in the adjoining room. Soon after I am here, my key disappears—but entirely! I have to have another one made.”

“Well, anyway,” I said with a deep breath of relief, my mind still laden with my own troubles, “it didn’t come off. It’s awful to think one can get worked up like that.” I lowered my voice. “Poirot, you don’t think that because—because of that murder long ago there’s a sort of infection in the air?”

“A virus of murder, you mean? Well, it is an interesting suggestion.”

“Houses do have an atmosphere,” I said thoughtfully. “This house has a bad history.”

Poirot nodded. “Yes. There have been people here—several of them—who desired deeply that someone else should die. That is true enough.”

“I believe it gets hold of one in some way. But now, Poirot, tell me, what am I to do about all this—Judith and Allerton, I mean. It’s got to be stopped somehow. What do you think I’d better do?”

"Do nothing," said Poirot with emphasis.

"Oh, but—"

"Believe me, you will do least harm by not interfering."

"If I were to tackle Allerton—"

"What can you say or do? Judith is twenty-one and her own mistress."

"But I feel I ought to be able—"

Poirot interrupted me. "No, Hastings. Do not imagine that you are clever enough, forceful enough, or even cunning enough to impose your personality on either of those two people. Allerton is accustomed to dealing with angry and impotent fathers and probably enjoys it as a good joke. Judith is not the sort of creature who can be browbeaten. I would advise you—if I advised you at all—to do something very different. I would trust her if I were you."

I stared at him.

"Judith," said Hercule Poirot, "is made of very fine stuff. I admire her very much."

I said, my voice unsteady: "I admire her, too. But I'm afraid for her."

Poirot nodded his head with sudden energy. "I, too, am afraid for her," he said. "But not in the way you are. I am terribly afraid. And I am powerless—or nearly so. And the days go by. There is danger, Hastings, and it is very close."

II

I knew as well as Poirot that the danger was very close. I had more reason to know it than he had, because of what I had actually overheard the previous night.

Nevertheless I pondered on that phrase of Poirot’s as I went down to breakfast. “I would trust her if I were you.”

It had come unexpectedly, but it had given me an odd sense of comfort. And almost immediately, the truth of it was justified. For Judith had obviously changed her mind about going up to London that day.

Instead she went off with Franklin to the lab as usual directly after breakfast, and it was clear that they were to have an arduous and busy day there.

A feeling of intense thanksgiving rushed over me. How mad, how despairing I had been last night. I had assumed—assumed quite certainly—that Judith had yielded to Allerton’s specious proposals. But it was true, I reflected now, that I had never heard her actually assent. No, she was too fine, too essentially good and true, to give in. She had refused the rendezvous.

Allerton had breakfasted early, I found, and gone off to Ipswich. He, then, had kept to the plan and must assume that Judith was going up to London as arranged.

“Well,” I thought grimly, “he will get a disappointment.”

Boyd Carrington came along and remarked rather grumpily that I looked very cheerful this morning.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve had some good news.”

He said that it was more than he had. He’d had a tiresome telephone call from the architect, some building difficulty—a local surveyor cutting up rough. Also worrying letters. And he was afraid he’d let Mrs. Franklin overdo herself the day before.

Mrs. Franklin was certainly making up for her recent bout of good health and spirits. She was, so I gathered from Nurse Craven, making herself quite impossible.

Nurse Craven had had to give up her day off which had been promised her to go and meet some friends, and she was decidedly sour about it. Since early morning Mrs. Franklin had been calling for sal volatile, hot-water bottles, various patent food and drinks, and was unwilling to let Nurse leave the room. She had neuralgia, a pain round the heart, cramps in her feet and legs, cold shivers and I don’t know what else.

I may say here and now that neither I, nor anyone else, was inclined to be really alarmed. We all put it down as part of Mrs. Franklin’s hypochondriacal tendencies.

This was true of Nurse Craven and Dr. Franklin as well.

The latter was fetched from the laboratory; he listened to his wife’s complaints, asked her if she would like the local doctor called in (violently negatived by Mrs. Franklin); he then mixed her a sedative, soothed her as best he could and went off back to work again.

Nurse Craven said to me: “He knows, of course, she’s just playing up.”

“You don’t really think there’s anything much the matter?”

“Her temperature is normal, and her pulse is perfectly good. Just fuss, if you ask me.”

She was annoyed and spoke out more imprudently than usual.

“She likes to interfere with anyone else enjoying themselves. She’d like her husband all worked up, and me running round after her, and even Sir William has got to be made to feel like a brute because he ‘overtired her yesterday.’ She’s one of that kind.”

Nurse Craven was clearly fiding her patient almost impossible today. I gathered that Mrs. Franklin had been really extremely rude to her. She was the kind of woman whom nurses and servants instinctively disliked, not only because of the trouble she gave, but because of her manner of doing so.

So, as I say, none of us took her indisposition seriously.

The only exception was Boyd Carrington, who wandered round looking rather pathetically like a small boy who has been scolded.

How many times since then have I not gone over and over the events of that day, trying to remember something so far unheeded—some tiny forgotten incident, striving to remember exactly the manner of everybody. How far they were normal, or showed excitement.

Let me, once more, put down exactly what I remember of everybody.

Boyd Carrington, as I have said, looked uncomfortable and rather guilty. He seemed to think that he had been rather over-exuberant the day before and had been selfish in not thinking more of the frail health of his companion. He had been up once or twice to enquire about Barbara Franklin, and Nurse Craven, herself not in the best of tempers, had been tart and snappish with him. He had even been to the village and purchased a box of chocolates. This had been sent down. "Mrs. Franklin couldn't bear chocolates."

Rather disconsolately, he opened the box in the smoking room and Norton and I and he all solemnly helped ourselves.

Norton, I now think, had definitely something on his mind that morning. He was abstracted, once or twice his brows drew together as though he were puzzling over something.

He was fond of chocolates, and ate a good many in an abstracted fashion.

Outside, the weather had broken. Since ten o'clock the rain had been pouring down.

It had not the melancholy that sometimes accompanies a wet day. Actually it was a relief to us all.

Poirot had been brought down by Curtiss about midday and ensconced in the drawing room. Here Elizabeth Cole had joined him and was playing the piano to him. She had a pleasant touch, and played Bach and Mozart, both favourite composers of my friend’s.

Franklin and Judith came up from the garden about a quarter to one. Judith looked white and strained. She was very silent, looked vaguely about her as though lost in a dream and then went away. Franklin sat down with us. He, too, looked tired and absorbed, and he had, too, the air of a man very much on edge.

I said, I remember, something about the rain being a relief, and he said quickly: “Yes. There are times when something’s got to break. . . .”

And somehow I got the impression that it was not merely of the weather that he spoke. Awkward as always in his movements, he jerked against the table and upset half the chocolates. With his usual startled air, he apologized—apparently to the box.

“Oh, sorry.”

It ought to have been funny, but somehow it wasn’t. He bent quickly and picked up the spilt chocolates.

Norton asked him if he had had a tiring morning.

His smile flashed out then—eager, boyish, very much alive.

“No—no—just realized, suddenly, I’ve been on the wrong track. Much simpler process altogether is what’s needed. Can take a shortcut now.”

He stood swaying slightly to and fro on his feet, his eyes absent yet resolved.

“Yes, shortcut. Much the best way.”

III

If we were all nervy and aimless in the morning, the afternoon was unexpectedly pleasant. The sun came out, the temperature was cool and fresh. Mrs. Luttrell was brought down and sat on the veranda. She was in excellent form—exercising her charm and manner with less gush than usual, and with no latent hint of vinegar in reserve. She chaffed her husband, but gently and with a kind of affection, and he beamed at her. It was really delightful to see them on such good terms.

Poirot permitted himself to be wheeled out also, and he was in good spirits too. I think he liked seeing the Luttrells on such a friendly footing with each other. The Colonel was looking years younger. His manner seemed less vacillating, he tugged less at his moustache. He even suggested that there might be some bridge that evening.

“Daisy here misses her bridge.”

“Indeed I do,” said Mrs. Luttrell.

Norton suggested it would be tiring for her.

“I’ll play one rubber,” said Mrs. Luttrell, and added with a twinkle: “And I’ll behave myself and not bite poor George’s head off.”

“My dear,” protested her husband, “I know I’m a shocking player.”

“And what of that?” said Mrs. Luttrell. “Doesn’t it give me grand pleasure badgering and bullying you about it?”

It made us all laugh. Mrs. Luttrell went on: “Oh, I know my faults, but I’m not going to give them up at my time of life. George has just got to put up with me.”

Colonel Luttrell looked at her quite fatuously.

I think it was seeing them both on such good terms that led to a discussion on marriage and divorce that took place later in the day.

Were men and women actually happier by reason of the greater facilities afforded for divorce, or was it often the case that a temporary period of irritation and estrangement—or trouble over a third person—gave way after a while to a resumption of affection and friendliness?

It is odd sometimes to see how much at variance people’s ideas are with their own personal experiences.

My own marriage had been unbelievably happy and successful, and I am essentially an old-fashioned person, yet I was on the side of divorce—of cutting one’s losses and starting afresh. Boyd Carrington, whose marriage had been unhappy, yet held for an indissoluble marriage bond. He had, he said, the utmost reverence for the institution of marriage. It was the foundation of the state.

Norton, with no ties and no personal angle, was of my way of thinking. Franklin, the modern scientific thinker, was, strangely enough, resolutely opposed to divorce. It offended, apparently, his ideal of clear-cut thinking and action. One assumed certain responsibilities. Those must be carried through and not shirked or set aside. A contract, he said, is a contract. One enters upon it of one’s own free will, and must abide by it. Anything else resulted in what he called a mess. Loose ends, half-dissolved ties.

Leaning back in his chair, his long legs kicking vaguely at a table, he said: “A man chooses his wife. She’s his responsibility until she dies—or he does.”

Norton said rather comically: “And sometimes—Oh blessed death, eh?”

We laughed, and Boyd Carrington said: “You needn’t talk, my lad, you’ve never been married.”

Shaking his head, Norton said: “And now I’ve left it too late.”

“Have you?” Boyd Carrington’s glance was quizzical. “Sure of that?”

It was just at that moment that Elizabeth Cole joined us. She had been up with Mrs. Franklin.

I wondered if it was my fancy, or did Boyd Carrington look meaningly from her to Norton, and was it possible that Norton blushed?

It put a new idea into my head and I looked searchingly at Elizabeth Cole. It was true that she was still a comparatively young woman. Moreover she was quite a handsome one. In fact a very charming and sympathetic person who was capable of making any man happy. And she and Norton had spent a good deal of time together of late. In their hunts for wildflowers and birds, they had become friends; I remembered how she had spoken of Norton being such a kind person.

Well, if so, I was glad for her sake. Her starved and barren girlhood would not stand in the way of her ultimate happiness. The tragedy that had shattered her life would not have been enacted in vain. I thought, looking at her, that she certainly looked much happier and—yes, gayer, than when I had first come to Styles.

Elizabeth Cole and Norton—yes, it might be.

And suddenly, from nowhere, a vague feeling of uneasiness and disquiet assailed me. It was not safe—it was not right—to plan happiness here. There was something malignant about the air of Styles. I felt it now—this minute, felt suddenly old and tired—yes, and afraid.

A minute later the feeling passed. Nobody had noticed it, I think, except Boyd Carrington. He said to me in an undertone a few minutes later: "Anything the matter, Hastings?"

"No, why?"

"Well—you looked—I can't quite explain it."

"Just a feeling—apprehension."

"A premonition of evil?"

"Yes, if you like to put it that way. A feeling that—that something was going to happen."

"Funny. I've felt that once or twice. Any idea what?"

He was watching me narrowly.

I shook my head. For indeed I had had no definite apprehension of any particular thing. It had only been a wave of deep depression and fear.

Then Judith had come out of the house. She had come slowly, her head held high, her lips pressed together, her face grave and beautiful.

I thought how unlike she was to either me or Cinders. She looked like some young priestess. Norton felt something of that too. He said to her: “You look like your namesake might have looked before she cut off the head of Holofernes.”

Judith smiled and raised her eyebrows a little. “I can’t remember now why she wanted to.”

“Oh, strictly on the highest moral grounds for the good of the community.”

The light banter in his tone annoyed Judith. She flushed and went past him to sit by Franklin. She said: “Mrs. Franklin is feeling much better. She wants us all to come up and have coffee with her this evening.”

IV

Mrs. Franklin was certainly a creature of moods, I thought, as we trooped upstairs after dinner. Having made everyone’s life unbearable all day, she was now sweetness itself to everybody.

She was dressed in a negligee of pale eau-de-Nil and was lying on her chaise longue. Beside her was a small revolving bookcase-table with the coffee apparatus set out. Her fingers, deft and white, dealt with the ritual of coffee making, with some slight aid from Nurse Craven. We were all there with the exception of Poirot who always retired before dinner, Allerton who had not returned from Ipswich, and Mrs. and Colonel Luttrell who had remained downstairs.

The aroma of coffee came to our noses—a delicious smell. The coffee at Styles was an uninteresting muddy fluid, so we all looked forward to Mrs. Franklin’s brew with freshly ground berries.

Franklin sat on the other side of the table handing the cups as she filled them. Boyd Carrington stood by the foot of the sofa, Elizabeth Cole and Norton were by the window. Nurse Craven had retired to the background by the head of the bed. I was sitting in an armchair wrestling with The Times crossword, and reading out the clues.

“Even love or third party risk?” I read out. “Eight letters.”

“Probably an anagram,” said Franklin.

We thought for a minute. I went on. “The chaps between the hills are unkind.”

“Tormentor,” said Boyd Carrington quickly.

“Quotation: ‘And Echo whate’er is asked her answers’—blank. Tennyson. Five letters.”

“Where,” suggested Mrs. Franklin. “Surely that’s right. ‘And Echo answers where?’ ”

I was doubtful. “It would make a word end in ‘W.’ ”

“Well, lots of words end in ‘W.’ How and now and snow.”

Elizabeth Cole said from the window: “The Tennyson quotation is: ‘And Echo whate’er is asked her answers Death.’”

I heard a quick sharp intake of breath behind me. I looked up. It was Judith. She went past us to the window and out upon the bacony.

I said, as I wrote the last clue in: “Even love can’t be an anagram. The second letter now is ‘A.’ ”

“What’s the clue again?”

“Even love or third party risk? Blank A and six blanks.”

“Paramour,” said Boyd Carrington.

I heard the teaspoon rattle on Barbara Franklin’s saucer. I went on to the next clue.

“ ‘Jealousy is a green-eyed monster,’ this person said.”

“Shakespeare,” said Boyd Carrington.

“Was it Othello or Emilia?” said Mrs. Franklin.

“All too long. The clue is only four letters.”

“Iago.”

“I’m sure it was Othello.”

“It wasn’t in Othello at all. Romeo said it to Juliet.”

We all voiced our opinions. Suddenly from the balcony Judith cried out: “Look, a shooting star. Oh, there’s another.”

Boyd Carrington said: “Where? We must wish.” He went out on the balcony, joining Elizabeth Cole, Norton and Judith. Nurse Craven went out too. Franklin got up and joined them. They stood there, exclaiming, gazing out into the night.

I remained with my head bent over the crossword. Why should I wish to see a falling star? I had nothing to wish for. . . .

Suddenly Boyd Carrington wheeled back into the room.

“Barbara, you must come out.”

Mrs. Franklin said sharply: “No, I can’t. I’m too tired.”

“Nonsense, Babs. You must come and wish!” He laughed. “Now don’t protest. I’ll carry you.”

And suddenly stooping he picked her up in his arms. She laughed and protested: “Bill, put me down—don’t be so silly.”

“Little girls have got to come out and wish.” He carried her through the window and set her down on the balcony.

I bent closer over the paper. For I was remembering . . . A clear tropical night, frogs croaking . . . and a shooting star. I was standing there by the window, and I had turned and picked up Cinders and carried her out in my arms to see the stars and wish. . . .

The lines of my crossword ran and blurred before my eyes.

A figure detached itself from the balcony and came into the room—Judith.

Judith must never catch me with tears in my eyes. It would never do. Hastily I swung round the bookcase and pretended to be looking for a book. I remembered having seen an old edition of Shakespeare there. Yes, here it was. I looked through Othello.

“What are you doing, Father?”

I mumbled something about the clue, my fingers turning over the pages. Yes, it was Iago.

“O beware, my lord, of jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on.”

Judith went on with some other lines:

“Not poppy, nor mandragora, nor all the drowsy syrups of the world

Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep which thouow’dst yesterday.”

Her voice rang out, beautiful and deep.

The others were coming back, laughing and talking. Mrs. Franklin resumed her place on the chaise longue, Franklin came back to his seat and stirred his coffee. Norton and Elizabeth Cole finished drinking theirs and excused themselves as they had promised to play bridge with the Luttrells.

Mrs. Franklin drank her coffee and then demanded her “drops.” Judith got them for her from the bathroom as Nurse Craven had just gone out.

Franklin was wandering aimlessly round the room. He stumbled over a small table. His wife said sharply:

“Don’t be so clumsy, John.”

“Sorry, Barbara. I was thinking of something.”

Mrs. Franklin said rather affectedly: “Such a great bear, aren’t you, darling?”

He looked at her rather abstractedly. Then he said: “Nice night, think I’ll take a stroll.”

He went out.

Mrs. Franklin said: “He is a genius, you know. You can tell it from his manner. I really do admire him terrifically. Such a passion for his work.”

“Yes, yes, clever fellow,” said Boyd Carrington rather perfunctorily.

Judith left the room abruptly, nearly colliding with Nurse Craven in the doorway.

Boyd Carrington said: “What about a game of picquet, Babs?”

“Oh, lovely. Can you get hold of some cards, Nurse?”

Nurse Craven went to get cards, and I wished Mrs. Franklin good night and thanked her for the coffee.

Outside I overtook Franklin and Judith. They were standing looking out of the passage window. They were not speaking, just standing side by side.

Franklin looked over his shoulder as I approached. He moved a step or two, hesitated and said: “Coming out for a stroll, Judith?”

My daughter shook her head. “Not tonight.” She added abruptly: “I’m going to bed. Good night.”

I went downstairs with Franklin. He was whistling softly to himself and smiling.

I remarked rather crossly, for I was feeling depressed myself: “You seem pleased with yourself tonight.”

He admitted it.

“Yes. I’ve done something that I’ve been meaning to do for a long time. Very satisfactory, that.”

I parted from him downstairs, and looked in on the bridge players for a minute. Norton winked at me when Mrs. Luttrell wasn’t looking. The rubber seemed to be progressing with unusual harmony.

Allerton had still not come back. It seemed to me that the house was happier and less oppressive without him.

I went up to Poirot’s room. I found Judith sitting with him. She smiled at me when I came in and did not speak.

“She has forgiven you, mon ami,” said Poirot—an outrageous remark.

“Really,” I spluttered. “I hardly think—”

Judith got up. She put an arm round my neck and kissed me. She said: “Poor Father. Uncle Hercule shall not attack your dignity. I am the one to be forgiven. So forgive me and say good night.”

I don’t quite know why, but I said: “I’m sorry, Judith. I’m very sorry, I didn’t mean—”

She stopped me. “That’s all right. Let’s forget it. Everything’s all right now.” She smiled a slow, faraway smile. She said again: “Everything’s all right now . . .” and quietly left the room.

When she had gone Poirot looked at me.

“Well?” he demanded. “What has been happening this evening?”

I spread out my hands. “Nothing has happened, or is likely to happen,” I told him.

Actually I was very wide of the mark. For something did happen that night. Mrs. Franklin was taken violently ill. Two more doctors were sent for, but in vain. She died the following morning.

It was not until twenty-four hours later that we learned that her death was due to poisoning by physostigmine.

Fourteen

I

The inquest took place two days later. It was the second time I had attended an inquest in this part of the world.

The coroner was an able middle-aged man with a shrewd glance and a dry manner of speech.

The medical evidence was taken first. It established the fact that death was the result of poisoning by physostigmine, and that other alkaloids of the Calabar bean were also present. The poison must have been taken some time on the preceding evening between seven o’clock and midnight. The police surgeon and his colleague refused to be more precise.

The next witness was Dr. Franklin. He created on the whole a good impression. His evidence was clear and simple. After his wife’s death he had checked over his solutions in the laboratory. He had discovered that a certain bottle, which should have contained a strong solution of alkaloids of the Calabar bean with which he had been conducting experiments, had been filled up with ordinary water in which only a trace of the original contents was present. He could not say with certainty when this had been done as he had not used that particular preparation for some days.

The question of access to the laboratory was then gone into. Dr. Franklin agreed that the laboratory was usually kept locked and that he usually had the key in his pocket. His assistant, Miss Hastings, had a duplicate key. Anyone who wished to go into the studio had to get the key from her or from himself. His wife had borrowed it occasionally, when she had left things belonging to her in the laboratory. He himself had never brought a solution of physostigmine into the house or into his wife’s room and he thought that by no possibility could she have taken it accidentally.

Questioned further by the coroner, he said that his wife had for some time been in a low and nervous state of health. There was no organic disease. She suffered from depression and from a rapid alteration of moods.

Of late, he said, she had been cheerful and he had considered her improved in health and spirits. There had been no quarrel between them and they had been on good terms. On the last evening his wife had seemed in good spirits and not melancholy.

He said that his wife had occasionally spoken of ending her life but that he had not taken her remarks seriously. Asked the question definitely, he replied that in his opinion his wife had not been a suicidal type. That was his medical opinion as well as his personal one.

He was followed by Nurse Craven. She looked smart and efficient in her trim uniform and her replies were crisp and professional. She had been in attendance on Mrs. Franklin for over two months. Mrs. Franklin suffered badly from depression. Witness had heard her say at least three times that she “wanted to end it all,” that her life was useless and that she was a millstone round her husband’s neck.

“Why did she say that? Had there been any altercation between them?”

“Oh no, but she was aware that her husband had recently been offered an appointment abroad. He had refused that in order not to leave her.”

“And sometimes she felt morbidly about the fact?”

“Yes. She would blame her miserable health, and get all worked up.”

“Did Dr. Franklin know about this?”

“I do not think she often said so to him.”

“But she was subject to fits of depression.”

“Oh, definitely.”

“Did she ever specifically mention committing suicide?”

“I think ‘I want to end it all’ was the phrase she used.”

“She never suggested any particular method of taking her own life?”

“No. She was quite vague.”

“Had there been anything especially to depress her of late?”

“No. She had been in reasonably good spirits.”

“Do you agree with Dr. Franklin that she was in good spirits on the night of her death?”

Nurse Craven hesitated. “Well—she was excited. She’d had a bad day—complained of pain and giddiness. She had seemed better in the evening, but her good spirits were a bit unnatural. She seemed feverish and rather artificial.”

“Did you see anything of a bottle, or anything that might have contained the poison?”

“No.”

“What did she eat and drink?”

“She had soup, a cutlet, green peas and mashed potatoes, and cherry tart. She had a glass of burgundy with it.”

“Where did the burgundy come from?”

“There was a bottle in her room. There was some left afterwards but I believe it was examined and found to be quite all right.”

“Could she have put the drug in her glass without you seeing?”

“Oh yes, easily. I was to and fro in the room, tidying up and arranging things. I was not watching her. She had a little despatch case beside her and also a handbag. She could have put anything in the burgundy, or later in the coffee, or in the hot milk she had last thing.”

"Have you any idea as to what she could have done with the bottle or container if so?"

Nurse Craven considered. "Well, I suppose she could have thrown it out of the window later. Or put it in the wastepaper basket, or even washed it out in the bathroom and put it back in the medicine cupboard. There are several empty bottles there. I save them because they come in handy."

"When did you last see Mrs. Franklin?"

"At ten-thirty. I settled her for the night. She had hot milk and said she'd like an aspirin."

"How was she then?"

The witness considered a minute.

"Well, really, just as usual . . . No, I'd say she was perhaps just a bit overexcited."

"Not depressed?"

"Well, no, more strung up, so to speak. But if it's suicide you're thinking of, it might take her that way. She might feel noble or exalted about it."

"Do you consider she was a likely person to take her own life?"

There was a pause. Nurse Craven seemed to be struggling to make up her mind.

"Well," she said at last, "I do and I don't. I—yes, on the whole I do. She was very unbalanced."

Sir William Boyd Carrington came next. He seemed genuinely upset, but gave his evidence clearly.

He had played picquet with the deceased on the night of her death. He had not noticed any signs of depression then, but in a conversation some days previously Mrs. Franklin had mentioned the subject of taking her own life.

She was a very unselfish woman, and deeply distressed at feeling that she was hampering her husband’s career. She was devoted to her husband and very ambitious for him. She was sometimes very depressed about her own health.

Judith was called, but she had little to say.

She knew nothing about the removal of the physostigmine from the laboratory. On the night of the tragedy Mrs. Franklin had seemed to her much as usual, though perhaps overexcited. She had never heard Mrs. Franklin mention suicide.

The last witness was Hercule Poirot. His evidence was given with much emphasis and caused a considerable impression. He described a conversation he had had with Mrs. Franklin on the day previous to her decease. She had been very depressed and had expressed several times a wish to be out of it all. She was worried about her health and had confided in him that she had fits of deep melancholy when life did not seem worth living. She said that sometimes she felt it would be wonderful to go to sleep and never wake up.

His next reply caused an even greater sensation.

“On the morning of June 10th you were sitting outside the laboratory door?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see Mrs. Franklin come out of the laboratory?”

“I did.”

“Did she have anything in her hand?”

“She had a small bottle clasped in her right hand.”

“You are quite sure of that?”

“Yes.”

"Did she show any confusion at seeing you?"

"She looked startled, that is all."

The coroner proceeded to his summing up. They must make up their minds, he said, how the deceased came to her death. They would have no difficulty in assigning the cause of death, the medical evidence had told them that. Deceased was poisoned by physostigmine sulphate. All they had to decide was whether she took it accidentally or by intent, or if it was administered to her by some other person. They had heard that deceased had fits of melancholy, that she was in poor health, and that while there was no organic disease, she was in a bad nervous condition. Mr. Hercule Poirot, a witness whose name must carry weight, had asserted positively that he had seen Mrs. Franklin come out of the laboratory with a small bottle in her hand and that she seemed startled to see him. They might come to the conclusion that she had taken the poison from the laboratory with the intention of doing away with herself. She seemed to be suffering from an obsession that she was standing in her husband's light and obstructing his career. It was only fair to Dr. Franklin to say that he seemed to have been a kind and affectionate husband, and that he had never expressed annoyance at her delicacy, or complained that she hindered his career. The idea seemed to be entirely her own. Women in a certain condition of nervous collapse did get these persistent ideas. There was no evidence to show at what time or in what vehicle the poison was taken. It was, perhaps, a little unusual that the bottle which originally contained the poison had not been found, but it was possible that, as Nurse Craven suggested, Mrs. Franklin had washed it and put it away in the bathroom cupboard from where she may have originally taken it. It was for the jury to make their own decision.

The verdict was arrived at after only a short delay.

The jury found that Mrs. Franklin took her own life while temporarily of unsound mind.

II

Half an hour later I was in Poirot's room. He was looking very exhausted. Curtiss had put him to bed and was reviving him with a stimulant.

I was dying to talk but I had to contain myself until the valet had finished and left the room.

Then I burst out. “Was that true, Poirot, what you said? That you saw a bottle in Mrs. Franklin’s hand when she came out of the laboratory?”

A very faint smile crept over Poirot’s bluish-tinged lips. He murmured: “Did not you see it, my friend?”

“No, I did not.”

“But you might not have noticed, hein?”

“No, perhaps not. I certainly can’t swear she didn’t have it.” I looked at him doubtfully. “The question is, are you speaking the truth?”

“Do you think I would lie, my friend?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“Hastings, you shock and surprise me. Where is now your simple faith?”

“Well,” I conceded. “I don’t suppose you would really commit perjury.”

Poirot said mildly: “It would not be perjury. It was not on oath.”

“Then it was a lie?”

Poirot waved his hand automatically. “What I have said, mon ami, is said. It is unnecessary to discuss it.”

“I simply don’t understand you!” I cried.

“What don’t you understand?”

“Your evidence—all that about Mrs. Franklin’s having talked about committing suicide, about her being depressed.”

“Enfin, you heard her say such things yourself.”

"Yes. But it was only one of many moods. You didn't make that clear."

"Perhaps I did not want to."

I stared at him. "You wanted the verdict to be suicide?"

Poirot paused before replying. Then he said: "I think, Hastings, that you do not appreciate the gravity of the situation. Yes, if you like, I wanted the verdict to be suicide. . . ."

I said: "But you didn't think—yourself—that she did commit suicide?"

Slowly Poirot shook his head.

I said: "You think—that she was murdered?"

"Yes, Hastings, she was murdered."

"Then why try to hush it up, to have it labelled and put aside as suicide? That stops all enquiry."

"Precisely."

"You want that?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Is it conceivable that you do not see? Never mind—let us not go into that. You must take my word for it that it was murder—deliberate preconceived murder. I told you, Hastings, that a crime would be committed here, and that it was unlikely we should be able to prevent it—for the killer is both ruthless and determined."

I shivered. I said: "And what happens next?"

Poirot smiled. "The case is solved—labelled and put away as suicide. But you and I, Hastings, go on working underground, like moles. And, sooner or later, we get X.”

I said: “And supposing that, meanwhile, someone else is killed?”

Poirot shook his head. “I do not think so. Unless, that is, somebody saw something or knows something, but if so, surely, they would have come forward to say so . . . ?”

Fifteen

I

My memory is a little vague about the events of the days immediately following the inquest on Mrs. Franklin. There was, of course, the funeral, which I may say was attended by a large number of the curious of Styles St. Mary. It was on that occasion that I was addressed by an old woman with rheumy eyes and an unpleasant ghoulish manner.

She accosted me just as we were filing out of the cemetery.

“Remember you, sir, don’t I?”

“Well—er—possibly. . . .”

She went on, hardly listening to what I said.

“Twenty years ago and over. When the old lady died up at the Court. That was the first murder we had at Styles. Won’t be the last, I say. Old Mrs. Inglethorp, her husband done her in so we all said. Sure of it we was.” She leered at me cunningly. “Maybe it’s the husband this time.”

“What do you mean?” I said sharply. “Didn’t you hear the verdict was suicide?”

“That’s what Coroner said. But he might be wrong, don’t you think?” She nudged me. “Doctors, they know how to do away with their wives. And she wasn’t much good to him seemingly.”

I turned on her angrily and she slunk away murmuring she hadn’t meant anything, only it seemed odd like, didn’t it, happening a second time. “And it’s queer you should be there both times, sir, isn’t it now?”

For one fantastic moment I wondered if she suspected me of having really committed both crimes. It was most disturbing. It certainly made me realize what a queer, haunting thing local suspicion is.

And it was not, after all, so far wrong. For somebody had killed Mrs. Franklin.

As I say I remember very little of those days. Poirot's health, for one thing, was giving me grave concern. Curtiss came to me with his wooden face slightly disturbed and reported that Poirot had had a somewhat alarming heart attack.

"Seems to me, sir, he ought to see a doctor."

I went posthaste to Poirot who negatived the suggestion most vigorously. It was, I thought, a little unlike him. He had always been, in my opinion, extremely fussy about his health. Distrusting draughts, wrapping up his neck in silk and wool, showing a horror of getting his feet damp, and taking his temperature and retiring to bed at the least suspicion of a chill—"For otherwise it may be for me a fluxion de poitrine!" In most little ailments, he had, I knew, always consulted a doctor immediately.

Now, when he was really ill, the position seemed reversed.

Yet perhaps that was the real reason. Those other ailments had been trifling. Now, when he was indeed a sick man, he feared, perhaps, admitting the reality of his illness. He made light of it because he was afraid.

He answered my protests with energy and bitterness.

"Ah, but I have consulted doctors! Not one but many. I have been to Blank and to Dash [he named two specialists] and they do what?—they send me to Egypt where immediately I am rendered much worse. I have been, too, to R. . . ."

R. was, I knew, a heart specialist. I asked quickly: "What did he say?"

Poirot gave me a sudden sidelong glance—and my heart gave an agonized leap.

He said quietly: “He has done for me all that can be done. I have my treatments, my remedies, all close at hand. Beyond that—there is nothing. So you see, Hastings, to call in more doctors would be of no avail. The machine, mon ami, wears out. One cannot, alas, install the new engine and continue to run as before like a motor car.”

“But look here, Poirot, surely there’s something. Curtiss—”

Poirot said sharply: “Curtiss?”

“Yes, he came to me. He was worried—You had an attack—”

Poirot nodded gently. “Yes, yes. They are sometimes, these attacks, painful to witness. Curtiss, I think, is not used to these attacks of the heart.”

“Won’t you really see a doctor?”

“It is of no avail, my friend.”

He spoke very gently but with finality. And again my heart felt a painful constriction. Poirot smiled at me. He said: “This, Hastings, will be my last case. It will be, too, my most interesting case—and my most interesting criminal. For in X we have a technique superb, magnificent, that arouses admiration in spite of oneself. So far, mon cher, this X has operated with so much ability that he has defeated me, Hercule Poirot! He has developed the attack to which I can find no answer.”

“If you had your health—” I began soothingly.

But apparently that was not the right thing to say. Hercule Poirot immediately flew into a rage.

“Ah! Have I got to tell you thirty-six times, and then again thirty-six, that there is no need of physical effort? One needs only—to think.”

“Well—of course—yes, you can do that all right.”

“All right? I can do it superlatively. My limbs they are paralysed, my heart, it plays me the tricks, but my brain, Hastings, my brain it functions without impairment of any kind. It is still of the first excellence my brain."

"That," I said soothingly, "is splendid."

But as I went slowly downstairs, I thought to myself that Poirot's brain was not getting on with things as fast as it might do. First the narrow escape of Mrs. Luttrell and now the death of Mrs. Franklin. And what were we doing about it? Practically nothing.

II

It was the following day that Poirot said to me: "You suggested, Hastings, that I should see a doctor."

"Yes," I said eagerly. "I'd feel much happier if you would."

"Eh bien, I will consent. I will see Franklin."

"Franklin?" I looked doubtful.

"Well, he is a doctor, is he not?"

"Yes, but—his main line is research, is it not?"

"Undoubtedly. He would not succeed, I fancy, as a general practitioner. He has not sufficiently what you call the 'side of the bed manner.' But he has the qualifications. In fact I should say that, as the films say, 'he knows his stuff better than most.' "

I was still not entirely satisfied. Although I did not doubt Franklin's ability, he had always struck me as a man who was impatient of and uninterested in human ailments. Possibly an admirable attitude for research work, but not so good for any sick persons he might attend.

However, for Poirot to go so far was a concession, and as Poirot had no local medical attendant, Franklin readily agreed to take a look at him. But he explained that if regular medical attendance was needed, a local practitioner must be called in. He could not attend the case.

Franklin spent a long time with him.

When he came out finally I was waiting for him. I drew him into my room and shut the door.

“Well?” I demanded anxiously.

Franklin said thoughtfully: “He’s a very remarkable man.”

“Oh, that. Yes—” I brushed aside this self-evident fact. “But his health?”

“Oh! His health?” Franklin seemed quite surprised—as though I had mentioned something of no importance at all. “Oh! His health’s rotten, of course.”

It was not, I felt, at all a professional way of putting it. And yet I had heard—from Judith—that Franklin had been one of the most brilliant students of his time.

“How bad is he?” I demanded anxiously.

He shot me a look. “D’you want to know?”

“Of course.”

What did the fool think?

He almost immediately told me.

“Most people,” he said, “don’t want to know. They want soothing syrup. They want hope. They want reassurance ladled out in driblets. And of course amazing recoveries do occur. But they won’t in Poirot’s case.”

“Do you mean—” Again that cold hand closed round my heart.

Franklin nodded. “Oh yes, he’s for it all right. And pretty soon, I should say. I shouldn’t tell you so if he hadn’t authorized me to do so.”

“Then—he knows.”

Franklin said: “He knows all right. That heart of his may go out—phut—any moment. One can’t say, of course, exactly when.”

He paused, then he said slowly: “From what he says, I gather he’s worrying about getting something finished, something that, as he puts it, he’s undertaken. D’you know about that?”

“Yes,” I said. “I know.”

Franklin shot me an interested glance.

“He wants to be sure of finishing off the job.”

“I see.”

I wondered if John Franklin had any idea of what that job was!

He said slowly: “I hope he’ll manage it. From what he said it means a lot to him.” He paused and added: “He’s got a methodical mind.”

I asked anxiously: “Isn’t there something that can be done—something in the way of treatment—”

He shook his head. “Nothing doing. He’s got ampoules of amyl nitrate to use when he feels an attack is coming on.”

Then he said a rather curious thing.

“Got a very great respect for human life, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, I suppose he has.”

How often had I not heard Poirot say: “I do not approve of murder.” That understatement, made so primly, had always tickled my fancy.

Franklin was going on. “That’s the difference between us. I haven’t . . . !”

I looked at him curiously. He inclined his head with a faint smile.

“Quite true,” he said. “Since death comes anyway, what does it matter if it comes early or late? There’s so little difference.”

“Then what on earth made you become a doctor if you feel like that?” I demanded with some indignation.

“Oh, my dear fellow, doctoring isn’t just a matter of dodging the ultimate end. It’s a lot more—it’s improving living. If a healthy man dies, it doesn’t matter—much. If an imbecile—a cretin—dies, it’s a good thing—but if by the discovery of administering the correct gland you turn your cretin into a healthy normal individual by correcting his thyroid deficiency, that, to my mind, matters a good deal.”

I looked at him with more interest. I still felt that it would not be Dr. Franklin I should call in if I had influenza, but I had to pay tribute to a kind of white-hot sincerity and a very real force in the man. I had noticed a change in him since his wife’s death. He had displayed few of the conventional signs of mourning. On the contrary he seemed more alive, less absentminded, and full of a new energy and fire.

He said abruptly, breaking into my thoughts: “You and Judith aren’t much alike, are you?”

“No, I suppose we’re not.”

“Is she like her mother?”

I reflected, then slowly shook my head. “Not really. My wife was a merry, laughing creature. She wouldn’t take anything seriously—and tried to make me the same, without much success I’m afraid.”

He smiled faintly. “No, you’re rather the heavy father, aren’t you? So Judith says. Judith doesn’t laugh much—serious young woman. Too much work, I expect. My fault.”

He went into a brown study. I said conventionally: “Your work must be very interesting.”

"Eh?"

"I said your work must be interesting."

"Only to about half a dozen people. To everybody else it's darned dull—and they're probably right. Anyway—" he flung his head back, his shoulders squared themselves, he suddenly looked what he was, a powerful and virile man—"I've got my chance now! God, I could shout out loud. The Minister Institute people let me know today. The job's still open and I've got it. I start in ten days' time."

"For Africa?"

"Yes. It's grand."

"So soon." I felt slightly shocked.

He stared at me. "What do you mean—soon? Oh." His brow cleared. "You mean after Barbara's death? Why on earth not? It's no good pretending, is it, that her death wasn't the greatest relief to me."

He seemed amused by the expression on my face.

"I've not time, I'm afraid, for conventional attitudes. I fell in love with Barbara—she was a very pretty girl—married her and fell out of love with her again in about a year. I don't think it lasted even as long as that with her. I was a disappointment to her, of course. She thought she could influence me. She couldn't. I'm a selfish, pigheaded sort of brute, and I do what I want to do."

"But you did refuse this job in Africa on her account," I reminded him.

"Yes. That was purely financial, though. I'd undertaken to support Barbara in the way of life she was accustomed to. If I'd gone it would have meant leaving her very short. But now—" he smiled, a completely frank, boyish smile—"it's turned out amazingly lucky for me."

I was revolted. It is true, I suppose, that many men whose wives die are not precisely heartbroken and everyone more or less knows the fact. But this was so blatant.

He saw my face, but did not seem put out.

“Truth,” he said, “is seldom appreciated. And yet it saves a lot of time and a lot of inaccurate speech.”

I said sharply: “And it doesn’t worry you at all that your wife committed suicide?”

He said thoughtfully: “I don’t really believe she did commit suicide. Most unlikely—”

“But, then, what do you think happened?”

He caught me up: “I don’t know. I don’t think I—want to know. Understand?”

I stared at him. His eyes were hard and cold.

He said again: “I don’t want to know. I’m not—interested. See?”

I did see—but I didn’t like it.

III

I don’t know when it was that I noticed that Stephen Norton had something on his mind. He had been very silent after the inquest, and after that and the funeral were over he still walked about, his eyes on the ground and his forehead puckered. He had a habit of running his hands through his short grey hair until it stuck up on end like Struwwelpeter. It was comical but quite unconscious and denoted some perplexity of his mind. He returned absentminded answers when you spoke to him, and it did at last dawn upon me that he was definitely worried about something. I asked him tentatively if he had had bad news of any kind, which he promptly negatived. That closed the subject for the time being.

But a little later he seemed to be trying to get an opinion from me on some matter in a clumsy, roundabout way.

Stammering a little, as he always did when he was serious about a thing, he embarked on an involved story centring about a point of ethics.

“You know, Hastings, it should be awfully simple to say when a thing’s right or wrong—but really when it comes to it, it isn’t quite such plain sailing. I mean, one may come across something—the kind of thing, you see, that isn’t meant for you—it’s all a kind of accident, and it’s the sort of thing you couldn’t take advantage of, and yet it might be most frightfully important. Do you see what I mean?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid,” I confessed.

Norton’s brow furrowed again. He ran his hands up through his hair again so that it stood upright in its usual comical manner.

“It’s so hard to explain. What I mean is, suppose you just happened to see something in a private letter—one opened by mistake, that sort of thing—a letter meant for someone else and you began reading it because you thought it was written to you and so you actually read something you weren’t meant to before you realized. That could happen, you know.”

“Oh yes, of course it could.”

“Well, I mean, what would one do?”

“Well—” I gave my mind to the problem. “I suppose you’d go to the person and say, ‘I’m awfully sorry but I opened this by mistake.’ ”

Norton sighed. He said it wasn’t quite so simple as that.

“You see, you might have read something rather embarrassing, Hastings.”

“That would embarrass the other person, you mean? I suppose you’d have to pretend you hadn’t actually read anything—that you’d discovered your mistake in time.”

“Yes.” Norton said it after a moment’s pause, and he did not seem to feel that he had yet arrived at a satisfactory solution.

He said rather wistfully: “I wish I did know what I ought to do.”

I said that I couldn’t see that there was anything else he could do.

Norton said, the perplexed frown still on his forehead: “You see, Hastings, there’s rather more to it than that. Supposing that what you read was—well, rather important, to someone else again, I mean.”

I lost patience. “Really, Norton, I don’t see what you do mean. You can’t go about reading other people’s private letters, can you?”

“No, no, of course not. I didn’t mean that. And anyway, it wasn’t a letter at all. I only said that to try and explain the sort of thing. Naturally anything you saw or heard or read—by accident—you’d keep to yourself, unless—”

“Unless what?”

Norton said slowly: “Unless it was something you ought to speak about.”

I looked at him with suddenly awakened interest. He went on: “Look here, think of it this way, supposing you saw something through a—a keyhole—”

Keyholes made me think of Poirot! Norton was stumbling on:

“What I mean is, you’d got a perfectly good reason for looking through the keyhole—the key might have stuck and you just looked to see if it was clear—or—or some quite good reason—and you never for one minute expected to see what you did see. . . .”

For a moment or two I lost thread of his stumbling sentences, for enlightenment had come to me. I remembered a day on a grassy knoll and Norton swinging up his glasses to see a speckled woodpecker. I remembered his immediate distress and embarrassment, his endeavours to prevent me from looking through the glasses in my turn. At the moment I had leaped to the conclusion that what he had seen was something to do with me—in fact that it was Allerton and Judith. But supposing that that was not the case? That he had seen something quite different? I had assumed that it was something to do with Allerton and Judith because I was so obsessed by them at that time that I could think of nothing else.

I said abruptly: “Was it something you saw through those glasses of yours?”

Norton was both startled and relieved.

“I say, Hastings, how did you guess?”

“It was that day when you and I and Elizabeth Cole were up on that knoll, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And you didn’t want me to see?”

“No. It wasn’t—well, I mean it wasn’t meant for any of us to see.”

“What was it?”

Norton frowned again. “That’s just it. Ought I to say? I mean it was—well, it was spying. I saw something I wasn’t meant to see. I wasn’t looking for it—there really was a speckled woodpecker—a lovely fellow, and then I saw the other thing.”

He stopped. I was curious, intensely curious, yet I respected his scruples.

I asked: “Was it—something that mattered?”

He said slowly: “It might matter. That’s just it. I don’t know.”

I asked then: “Has it something to do with Mrs. Franklin’s death?”

He started. “It’s queer you should say that.”

“Then it has?”

“No—no, not directly. But it might have.” He said slowly: “It would throw a different light on certain things. It would mean that—Oh, damn it all, I don’t know what to do!”

I was in a dilemma. I was agog with curiosity, yet I felt that Norton was very reluctant to say what he had seen. I could understand that. I should have felt the same myself. It is always unpleasant to come into possession of a piece of information that has been acquired in what the outside world would consider a dubious manner.

Then an idea struck me.

“Why not consult Poirot?”

“Poirot?” Norton seemed a little doubtful.

“Yes, ask his advice.”

“Well,” said Norton slowly, “it’s an idea. Only, of course, he’s a foreigner—” he stopped, rather embarrassed.

I knew what he meant. Poirot’s scathing remarks on the subject of “playing the game” were only too familiar to me. I only wondered that Poirot had never thought of taking to bird glasses himself! He would have done if he had thought of it.

“He’d respect your confidence,” I urged. “And you needn’t act upon his advice if you don’t like it.”

“That’s true,” said Norton, his brow clearing. “You know, Hastings, I think that’s just what I will do.”

IV

I was astonished at Poirot’s instant reaction to my piece of information.

“What is that you say, Hastings?”

He dropped the piece of thin toast he had been raising to his lips. He poked his head forward.

“Tell me. Tell me quickly.”

I repeated the story.

“He saw something through the glasses that day,” repeated Poirot thoughtfully. “Something that he will not tell you.” His hand shot out and gripped my arm. “He has not told anyone else of this?”

“I don’t think so. No, I’m sure he hasn’t.”

“Be very careful, Hastings. It is urgent that he should not tell anyone—he must not even hint. To do so might be dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“Very dangerous.”

Poirot’s face was grave. “Arrange with him, mon ami, to come up and see me this evening. Just an ordinary friendly little visit, you understand. Do not let anyone else suspect that there is any special reason for his coming. And be careful, Hastings, be very, very careful. Who else did you say was with you at the time?”

“Elizabeth Cole.”

“Did she notice anything odd about his manner?”

I tried to recollect. “I don’t know. She may have. Shall I ask her if—?”

“You will say nothing, Hastings—absolutely nothing.”

Sixteen

I

I gave Norton Poirot’s message.

“I’ll go up and see him, certainly. I’d like to. But you know, Hastings, I’m rather sorry I mentioned the matter even to you.”

“By the way,” I said, “you haven’t said anything to anyone else about it, have you?”

“No—at least—no, of course not.”

“You’re quite sure?”

“No, no, I haven’t said anything.”

“Well, don’t. Not until after you’ve seen Poirot.”

I had noticed the slight hesitation in his tone when he first answered, but his second assurance was quite firm. I was to remember that slight hesitation afterwards, though.

II

I went up again to the grassy knoll where we had been on that day. Someone else was there already. Elizabeth Cole. She turned her head as I came up the slope.

She said: “You look very excited, Captain Hastings. Is anything the matter?”

I tried to calm myself.

"No, no, nothing at all. I'm just out of breath with walking fast." I added in an everyday, commonplace voice: "It's going to rain."

She looked up at the sky. "Yes, I think it is."

We stood there silent for a minute or two. There was something about this woman that I found very sympathetic. Ever since she had told me who she really was, and the tragedy that had ruined her life, I had taken an interest in her. Two people who have suffered unhappiness have a great bond in common. Yet for her there was, or so I suspected, a second spring. I said now impulsively: "Far from being excited, I'm depressed today. I've had bad news about my dear old friend."

"About M. Poirot?"

Her sympathetic interest led me to unburden myself.

When I had finished she said softly: "I see. So—the end might come at any time?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

After a minute or two I said: "When he's gone I shall indeed be alone in the world."

"Oh, no, you've got Judith—and your other children."

"They're scattered over the world, and Judith—well, she's got her work, she doesn't need me."

"I suspect that children don't ever need their parents until they are in trouble of some kind. I should make up your mind to that as to some fundamental law. I'm far more lonely than you are. My two sisters are far away, one in America and one in Italy."

"My dear girl," I said. "You're life's beginning."

"At thirty-five?"

“What’s thirty-five? I wish I were thirty-five.” I added maliciously: “I’m not quite blind, you know.”

She turned an enquiring glance on me, then blushed.

“You don’t think—oh! Stephen Norton and I are only friends. We’ve got a good deal in common—”

“All the better.”

“He’s—he’s just awfully kind.”

“Oh, my dear,” I said. “Don’t believe it’s all kindness. We men aren’t made that way.”

But Elizabeth Cole had turned suddenly white. She said in a low, strained voice: “You’re cruel—blind! How can I ever think of—of marriage? With my history. With my sister a murderess—or if not that, insane. I don’t know which is worse.”

I said strongly: “Don’t let that prey on your mind. Remember, it may not be true.”

“What do you mean? It is true.”

“Don’t you remember saying to me once, ‘That wasn’t Maggie?’ ”

She caught her breath. “One feels like that.”

“What one feels is often—true.”

She stared at me. “What do you mean?”

“Your sister,” I said, “did not kill her father.”

Her hand crept up to her mouth. Her eyes, wide and scared, looked into mine.

“You’re mad,” she said. “You must be mad. Who told you that?”

“Never mind,” I said. “It’s true. Some day I’ll prove it to you.”

III

Near the house I ran into Boyd Carrington.

“This is my last evening,” he told me. “I move out tomorrow.”

“To Knatton?”

“Yes.”

“That’s very exciting for you.”

“Is it? I suppose it is.” He gave a sigh. “Anyway, Hastings, I don’t mind telling you, I shall be glad to leave here.”

“The food is certainly pretty bad and the service isn’t good.”

“I don’t mean that. After all, it’s cheap, and you can’t expect much from these paying-guest places. No, Hastings, I mean more than discomfort. I don’t like this house—there’s some malign influence about it. Things happen here.”

“They certainly do.”

“I don’t know what it is. Perhaps a house that has once had a murder in it is never quite the same afterwards . . . But I don’t like it. First there was that accident to Mrs. Luttrell—a damned unlucky thing to happen. And then there was poor little Barbara.” He paused. “The most unlikely person in the world to have committed suicide I should have said.”

I hesitated. “Well, I don’t know that I’d go as far as that—”

He interrupted me. “Well, I would. Hang it all, I was with her most of the day before. She was in good spirits—enjoyed our outing. The only thing she was worrying about was whether John wasn’t getting too much wrapped up in his experiments and might overdo things, or try some of his messes upon himself. Do you know what I think, Hastings?”

"No."

"That husband of hers is the one who's responsible for her death. Nagged at her, I expect. She was always happy enough when she was with me. He let her see that she handicapped his precious career (I'd give him a career!) and it broke her up. Damned callous, that fellow, hasn't turned a hair. Told me as cool as anything he was off to Africa now. Really, you know, Hastings, I shouldn't be surprised if he'd actually murdered her."

"You don't mean that," I said sharply.

"No—no, I don't really. Though, mind you, mainly because I can see that if he murdered her, he wouldn't do it that way. I mean, he was known to be working on this stuff physostigmine, so it stands to reason if he'd done her in, he wouldn't have used that. But all the same, Hastings, I'm not the only one to think that Franklin's a suspicious character. I had the tip from someone who ought to know."

"Who was that?" I asked sharply.

Boyd Carrington lowered his voice. "Nurse Craven."

"What?" I was intensely surprised.

"Hush. Don't shout. Yes, Nurse Craven put the idea into my head. She's a smart girl, you know, got her wits about her. She doesn't like Franklin—hasn't liked him all along."

I wondered. I should have said that it was her own patient whom Nurse Craven had disliked. It occurred to me suddenly that Nurse Craven must know a good deal about the Franklin ménage.

"She's staying here tonight," said Boyd Carrington.

"What?" I was rather startled. Nurse Craven had left immediately after the funeral.

"Just for a night between cases," explained Boyd Carrington.

"I see."

I was vaguely disquieted by Nurse Craven's return, yet I could hardly have said why. Was there, I wondered, any reason for her coming back? She didn't like Franklin, Boyd Carrington had said. . . .

Reassuring myself I said with sudden vehemence: "She's no right to hint things about Franklin. After all, it was her evidence that helped to establish suicide. That, and Poirot's seeing Mrs. Franklin coming out of the studio with a bottle in her hand."

Boyd Carrington snapped: "What's a bottle? Women are always carrying bottles—scent bottles, hair lotion, nail polish. That wench of yours was running about with a bottle in her hand that evening—it doesn't mean she was thinking of suicide, does it? Nonsense!"

He broke off as Allerton came up to us. Most appropriately, in melodramatic fashion, there was a low rumble of thunder in the distance. I reflected, as I had reflected before, that Allerton was certainly cast for the part of the villain.

But he had been away from the house on the night of Barbara Franklin's death. And besides, what possible motive could he have had?

But then, I reflected, X never had a motive. That was the strength of his position. It was that, and that only, that was holding us up. And yet, at any minute, that tiny flash of illumination might come.

IV

I think that here and now I should like to place on record that I had never, all through, considered for one moment that Poirot might fail. In the conflict between Poirot and X I had never contemplated the possibility that X might come out victor. In spite of Poirot's feebleness and ill health, I had faith in him as potentially the stronger of the two. I was used, you see, to Poirot's succeeding.

It was Poirot himself who first put a doubt into my head.

I went in to see him on my way down to dinner. I forget now exactly what led to it, but he suddenly used the phrase “if anything happens to me.”

I protested immediately and loudly. Nothing would happen—nothing could happen.

“Eh bien, then you have not listened carefully to what Dr. Franklin told you.”

“Franklin doesn’t know. You’re good for many a long year yet, Poirot.”

“It is possible, my friend, though extremely unlikely. But I speak now in the particular and not the general sense. Though I may die very soon, it may still be not soon enough to suit our friend X.”

“What?” My face showed my shocked reaction.

Poirot nodded. “But yes, Hastings. X is, after all, intelligent. In fact, most intelligent. And X cannot fail to perceive that my elimination, even if it were only to precede natural decease by a few days, might be of inestimable advantage.”

“But then—but then—what would happen?” I was bewildered.

“When the Colonel falls, mon ami, the second in command takes over. You will continue.”

“How can I? I’m entirely in the dark.”

“I have arranged for that. If anything happens to me, my friend, you will find here—” he patted the locked despatch case by his side—“all the clues you need. I have arranged, you see, for every eventuality.”

“There is really no need to be clever. Just tell me now everything there is to know.”

“No, my friend. The fact that you do not know what I know is a valuable asset.”

“You have left me a clearly written account of things?”

“Certainly not. X might get hold of it.”

“Then what have you left?”

“Indications in kind. They will mean nothing to X—be assured of that—but they will lead you to the discovery of the truth.”

“I’m not so sure of that. Why must you have such a tortuous mind, Poirot? You always like making everything difficult. You always have!”

“And it is now with me a passion? Is that what you would say? Perhaps. But rest assured, my indications will lead you to the truth.” He paused. Then he said: “And perhaps, then, you would wish that they had not led you so far. You would say instead: ‘Ring down the curtain.’ ”

Something in his voice started again that vague unformulated dread that I had once or twice felt spasms of already. It was as though somewhere, just out of sight, was a fact that I did not want to see—that I could not bear to acknowledge. Something that already, deep down, I knew. . . .

I shook the feeling off and went down to dinner.

Seventeen

I

Dinner was a reasonably cheerful meal. Mrs. Luttrell was down again and in her best vein of artificial Irish gaiety. Franklin was more animated and cheerful than I had yet seen him. Nurse Craven I saw for the first time in mufti instead of her nurse's uniform. She was certainly a very attractive young woman now that she had cast off her professional reserve.

After dinner Mrs. Luttrell suggested bridge, but in the end some round games were started. About half past nine Norton declared his intention of going up to see Poirot.

"Good idea," said Boyd Carrington. "Sorry he's been under the weather lately. I'll come up too."

I had to act quickly.

"Look here," I said, "do you mind—it really tires him too much to talk to more than one person at a time."

Norton took the cue and said quickly: "I promised to lend him a book on birds."

Boyd Carrington said: "All right. You coming back again, Hastings?"

"Yes."

I went up with Norton. Poirot was waiting. After a word or two I came down again. We began playing rummy.

Boyd Carrington, I think, resented the carefree atmosphere of Styles tonight. He thought, perhaps, that it was too soon after the tragedy for everyone to forget. He was absentminded, forgot frequently what he was doing, and at last excused himself from further play.

He went to the window and opened it. The sound of thunder could be heard in the distance. There was a storm about although it had not yet reached us. He closed the window again and came back. He stood for a minute or two watching us play. Then he went out of the room.

I went up to bed at a quarter to eleven. I did not go in to Poirot. He might be asleep. Moreover I felt a reluctance to think anymore about Styles and its problems. I wanted to sleep—to sleep and forget.

I was just dropping off when a sound wakened me. I thought it might have been a tap on my door. I called "Come in," but as there was no response, I switched the light on and, getting up, looked out into the corridor.

I saw Norton just coming from the bathroom and going into his own room. He wore a checked dressing gown of particularly hideous colouring and his hair was sticking up on end as usual. He went into his room and shut the door, and immediately afterwards I heard him turn the key in the lock.

Overhead there was a low rumbling of thunder. The storm was coming nearer.

I went back to bed with a slightly uneasy feeling induced by the sound of that turning key.

It suggested, very faintly, sinister possibilities. Did Norton usually lock his door at night, I wondered? Had Poirot warned him to do so? I remembered with sudden uneasiness how Poirot's door key had mysteriously disappeared.

I lay in bed and my uneasiness grew whilst the storm overhead added to my feeling of nerviness. I got up at last and locked my own door. Then I went back to bed and slept.

II

I went in to Poirot before going down to breakfast.

He was in bed and I was struck again by how ill he looked. Deep lines of weariness and fatigue were on his face.

“How are you, old boy?”

He smiled patiently at me. “I exist, my friend. I still exist.”

“Not in pain?”

“No—just tired—” he sighed—“very tired.”

I nodded. “What about last night? Did Norton tell you what he saw that day?”

“He told me, yes.”

“What was it?”

Poirot looked at me long and thoughtfully before he replied: “I am not sure, Hastings, that I had better tell you. You might misunderstand.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Norton,” said Poirot, “tells me he saw two people—”

“Judith and Allerton,” I cried. “I thought so at the time.”

“Eh bien, non. Not Judith and Allerton. Did I not tell you you would misunderstand? You are a man of one idea!”

“Sorry,” I said, a little abashed. “Tell me.”

“I will tell you tomorrow. I have much on which I wish to reflect.”

“Does it—does it help with the case?”

Poirot nodded. He closed his eyes, leaning back in his pillows.

"The case is ended. Yes, it is ended. There are only some loose ends to be tied. Go down to breakfast, my friend. And as you go, send Curtiss to me."

I did so and went downstairs. I wanted to see Norton. I was deeply curious to know what it was that he had told Poirot.

Subconsciously I was still not happy. The lack of elation in Poirot's manner struck me disagreeably. Why this persistent secrecy? Why that deep inexplicable sadness? What was the truth of all this?

Norton was not at breakfast.

I strolled out into the garden afterwards. The air was fresh and cool after the storm. I noticed that it had rained heavily. Boyd Carrington was on the lawn. I felt pleased to see him and wished that I could take him into my confidence. I had wanted to all along. I was very tempted to do so now. Poirot was really unfit to carry on by himself.

This morning Boyd Carrington looked so vital, so sure of himself, that I felt a wave of warmth and reassurance.

"You're late up this morning," he said.

I nodded. "I slept late."

"Bit of a thunderstorm last night. Hear it?"

I remembered now that I had been conscious of the rolling of thunder through my sleep.

"I felt a bit under the weather last night," said Boyd Carrington. "I feel a lot better today." He stretched his arms out and yawned.

"Where's Norton?" I asked.

"Don't think he's up yet. Lazy devil."

With common accord we raised our eyes. Where we were standing the windows of Norton's room were just above us. I started. For alone in the façade of windows Norton's were still shuttered.

I said: "That's odd. Do you think they've forgotten to call him?"

"Funny. Hope he's not ill. Let's go up and see."

We went up together. The housemaid, a rather stupid-looking girl, was in the passage. In answer to a question she replied that Mr. Norton hadn't answered when she knocked. She'd knocked once or twice but he hadn't seemed to hear. His door was locked.

A nasty foreboding swept over me. I rapped loudly on the door, calling as I did so: "Norton—Norton. Wake up!"

And again with growing uneasiness: "Wake up. . . ."

III

When it was apparent that there was going to be no answer we went and found Colonel Luttrell. He listened to us with a vague alarm showing in his faded blue eyes. He pulled uncertainly at his moustache.

Mrs. Luttrell, always the one for prompt decisions, made no bones about it.

"You'll have to get that door open somehow. There's nothing else for it."

For the second time in my life, I saw a door broken open at Styles. Behind that door was what had been behind a locked door on the first occasion. Death by violence.

Norton was lying on his bed in his dressing gown. The key of the door was in the pocket. In his hand was a small pistol, a mere toy, but capable of doing its work. There was a small hole in the exact centre of his forehead.

For a moment or two I could not think of what I was reminded. Something, surely very old. . . .

I was too tired to remember.

As I came into Poirot's room he saw my face.

He said quickly: "What has happened? Norton?"

"Dead!"

"How? When?"

Briefly I told him.

I ended wearily: "They say it's suicide. What else can they say? The door was locked. The windows were shuttered. The key was in his pocket. Why! I actually saw him go in and heard him lock the door."

"You saw him, Hastings?"

"Yes, last night."

I explained.

"You're sure it was Norton?"

"Of course. I'd know that awful old dressing gown anywhere."

For a moment Poirot became his old self.

"Ah, but it is a man you are identifying, not a dressing gown. Ma foi! Anyone can wear a dressing gown."

"It's true," I said slowly, "that I didn't see his face. But it was his hair all right, and that slight limp—"

"Anyone could limp, mon Dieu!"

I looked at him, startled. "Do you mean to suggest, Poirot, that it wasn't Norton that I saw?"

"I am not suggesting anything of the kind. I am merely annoyed by the unscientific reasons you give for saying it was Norton. No, no, I do not for one minute suggest that it was not Norton. It would be difficult for it to be anyone else, for every man here is tall—very much taller than he was—and enfin you cannot disguise height—that, no. Norton was only five foot five, I should say. Tout de même, it is like a conjuring trick, is it not? He goes into his room, locks the door, puts the key in his pocket, and is found shot with the pistol in his hand and the key still in his pocket."

"Then you don't believe," I said, "that he shot himself?"

Slowly Poirot shook his head. "No," he said. "Norton did not shoot himself. He was deliberately killed."

IV

I went downstairs in a daze. The thing was so inexplicable I may be forgiven, I hope, for not seeing the next inevitable step. I was dazed. My mind was not working properly.

And yet it was so logical. Norton had been killed—why? To prevent, or so I believed, his telling what he had seen.

But he had confided that knowledge to one other person.

So that person, too, was in danger. . . .

And was not only in danger, but was helpless.

I should have known.

I should have foreseen. . . .

"Cher ami!" Poirot had said to me as I left the room.

They were the last words I was ever to hear him say. For when Curtiss came to attend to his master he found that master dead. . . .

Eighteen

I

I don’t want to write about it at all.

I want, you see, to think about it as little as possible. Hercule Poirot was dead—and with him died a good part of Arthur Hastings.

I will give you the bare facts without embroidery. It is all I can bear to do.

He died, they said, of natural causes. That is to say he died of a heart attack. It was the way, so Franklin said, that he had expected him to go. Doubtless the shock of Norton’s death brought one on. By some oversight, it seems, the amyl nitrate ampoules were not by his bed.

Was it an oversight? Did someone deliberately remove them? No, it must have been something more than that. X could not count on Poirot’s having a heart attack.

For, you see, I refuse to believe that Poirot’s death was natural. He was killed, as Norton was killed, as Barbara Franklin was killed. And I don’t know why they were killed—and I don’t know who killed them!

There was an inquest on Norton and a verdict of suicide. The only point of doubt was raised by the surgeon who said it was unusual for a man to shoot himself in the exact centre of his forehead. But that was the only shadow of doubt. The whole thing was so plain. The door locked on the inside, the key in the dead man’s pocket, the windows closely shuttered, the pistol in his hand. Norton had complained of headaches, it seemed, and some of his investments had been doing badly lately. Hardly reasons for suicide, but they had to put forward something.

The pistol was apparently his own. It had been seen lying on his dressing-table twice by the housemaid during his stay at Styles. So that was that.

Another crime beautifully stage-managed and as usual with no alternative solution.

In the duel between Poirot and X, X had won.

It was now up to me.

I went to Poirot’s room and took away the despatch box.

I knew that he had made me his executor, so I had a perfect right to do so. The key was round his neck.

In my own room I opened the box.

And at once I had a shock. The dossiers of X’s cases were gone. I had seen them there only a day or two previously when Poirot unlocked it. That was proof, if I had been needing it, that X had been at work. Either Poirot had destroyed those papers himself (most unlikely) or else X had done so.

X. X. That damned fiend X.

But the case was not empty. I remembered Poirot’s promise that I should find other indications which X would not know about.

Were these the indications?

There was a copy of one of Shakespeare’s plays, Othello, in a small cheap edition. The other book was the play John Fergueson by St. John Ervine. There was a marker in it at the third act.

I stared at the two books blankly.

Here were the clues that Poirot had left for me—and they meant nothing to me at all!

What could they mean?

The only thing I could think of was a code of some kind. A word code based on the plays.

But if so, how was I to get at it?

There were no words, no letters, underlined anywhere. I tried gentle heat with no result.

I read the third act of John Fergueson carefully through. A most admirable and thrilling scene where the “wanting” Clutie John sits and talks, and which ends with the younger Fergueson going out to seek for the man who has wronged his sister. Masterly character drawing—but I could hardly think that Poirot had left them to improve my taste in literature!

And then, as I turned the leaves of the book over, a slip of paper fell out. It bore a phrase in Poirot’s handwriting.

“Talk to my valet George.”

Well, here was something. Possibly the key to the code—if code it was—had been left with George. I must get hold of his address and go to see him.

But first there was the sad business of burying my dear friend.

Here was the spot where he had lived when he first came to this country. He was to lie here at the last.

Judith was very kind to me in these days.

She spent a lot of time with me and helped to make all the arrangements. She was gentle and sympathetic. Elizabeth Cole and Boyd Carrington were very kind too.

Elizabeth Cole was less affected by Norton’s death than I should have thought. If she felt any deep grief she kept it to herself.

And so it was all ended. . . .

II

Yes, I must put it down.

It must be said.

The funeral was over. I was sitting with Judith, trying to make a few sketchy plans for the future.

She said then: “But you see, dear, I shan’t be here.”

“Not here?”

“I shan’t be in England.”

I stared at her.

“I haven’t liked to tell you before, Father. I didn’t want to make things worse for you. But you’ve got to know now. I hope you won’t mind too much. I’m going to Africa, you see, with Dr. Franklin.”

I burst out at that. It was impossible. She couldn’t do a thing like that. Everyone would be bound to talk. To be an assistant to him in England and especially when his wife was alive was one thing, but to go abroad with him to Africa was another. It was impossible and I was going to forbid it absolutely. Judith must not do such a thing!

She didn’t interrupt. She let me finish. She smiled very faintly.

“But, dearest,” she said, “I’m not going as his assistant. I’m going as his wife.”

It hit me between the eyes.

I said—or rather stammered: “Al—Allerton?”

She looked faintly amused. “There was never anything in that. I would have told you so if you hadn’t made me so angry. Besides, I wanted you to think, well—what you did think. I didn’t want you to know it was—John.”

“But I saw him kiss you one night—on the terrace.”

She said impatiently: “Oh, I daresay. I was miserable that night. These things happen. Surely you know that?”

I said: “You can’t marry Franklin yet—so soon.”

“Yes, I can. I want to go out with him, and you’ve just said yourself it’s easier. We’ve nothing to wait for—now.”

Judith and Franklin. Franklin and Judith.

Do you understand the thoughts that came into my mind—the thoughts that had lain under the surface for some time?

Judith with a bottle in her hand, Judith with her young passionate voice declaring that useless lives should go to make way for useful ones—Judith whom I loved and whom Poirot also had loved. Those two people that Norton had seen—had they been Judith and Franklin? But if so—if so—no, that couldn’t be true. Not Judith. Franklin, perhaps—a strange man, a ruthless man, a man who if he made up his mind to murder, might murder again and again.

Poirot had been willing to consult Franklin.

Why? What had he said to him that morning?

But not Judith. Not my lovely grave young Judith.

And yet how strange Poirot had looked. How those words had rung out: “You may prefer to say ‘Ring down the curtain . . .’ ”

And suddenly a fresh idea struck me. Monstrous! Impossible! Was the whole story of X a fabrication? Had Poirot come to Styles because he feared a tragedy in the Franklin ménage? Had he come to watch over Judith? Was that why he had resolutely told me nothing? Because the whole story of X was a fabrication, a smoke screen?

Was the whole heart of the tragedy Judith, my daughter?

Othello! It was Othello I had taken from the bookcase that night when Mrs. Franklin had died. Was that the clue?

Judith that night looking, so someone had said, like her namesake before she cut off the head of Holofernes. Judith—with death in her heart?

Nineteen

I am writing this in Eastbourne.

I came to Eastbourne to see George, formerly Poirot’s valet.

George had been with Poirot many years. He was a competent matter-of-fact man, with absolutely no imagination. He always stated things literally and took them at their face value.

Well, I went to see him. I told him about Poirot’s death and George reacted as George would react. He was distressed and grieved and managed very nearly to conceal the fact.

Then I said: “He left you, did he not, a message for me?”

George said at once: “For you, sir? No, not that I am aware of.”

I was surprised. I pressed him, but he was quite definite.

I said at last: “My mistake, I suppose. Well, that’s that. I wish you had been with him at the end.”

“I wish so, too, sir.”

“Still I suppose if your father was ill you had to come to him.”

George looked at me in a very curious manner. He said: “I beg your pardon, sir, I don’t quite understand you.”

“You had to leave in order to look after your father, isn’t that right?”

“I didn’t wish to leave, sir. M. Poirot sent me away.”

“Sent you away?” I stared.

“I don’t mean, sir, that he discharged me. The understanding was that I was to return to his service later. But I left by his wish, and he arranged for suitable remuneration whilst I was here with my old father.”

“But why, George, why?”

“I really couldn’t say, sir.”

“Didn’t you ask?”

“No, sir. I didn’t think it was my place to do so. M. Poirot always had his ideas, sir. A very clever gentleman, I always understood, sir, and very much respected.”

“Yes, yes,” I murmured abstractedly.

“Very particular about his clothes, he was—though given to having them rather foreign and fancy if you know what I mean. But that, of course, is understandable as he was a foreign gentleman. His hair, too, and his moustache.”

“Ah, those famous moustaches.” I felt a twinge of pain as I remembered his pride in them.

“Very particular about his moustache, he was,” went on George. “Not very fashionable the way he wore it, but it suited him, sir, if you know what I mean.”

I said I did know. Then I murmured delicately: “I suppose he dyed it as well as his hair?”

“He did—er—touch up his moustache a little—but not his hair—not of late years.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “It was as black as a raven—looked quite like a wig it was so unnatural.”

George coughed apologetically. “Excuse me, sir, it was a wig. M. Poirot’s hair came out a good deal lately, so he took to a wig.”

I thought how odd it was that a valet knew more about a man than his closest friend did.

I went back to the question that puzzled me.

“But have you really no idea why M. Poirot sent you away as he did? Think, man, think.”

George endeavoured to do so, but he was clearly not very good at thinking.

“I can only suggest, sir,” he said at last, “that he discharged me because he wanted to engage Curtiss.”

“Curtiss? Why should he want to engage Curtiss?”

George coughed again. “Well, sir, I really cannot say. He did not seem to me, when I saw him, as a—excuse me—particularly bright specimen, sir. He was strong physically, of course, but I should hardly have thought that he was quite the class M. Poirot would have liked. He’d been assistant in a mental home at one time, I believe.”

I stared at George.

Curtiss!

Was that the reason why Poirot had insisted on telling me so little? Curtiss, the one man I had never considered! Yes, and Poirot was content to have it so, to have me combing the guests at Styles for the mysterious X. But X was not a guest.

Curtiss!

One-time assistant in a mental home. And hadn’t I read somewhere that people who have been patients in mental homes and asylums sometimes remain or go back there as assistants?

A queer, dumb, stupid-looking man—a man who might kill for some strange warped reason of his own. . . .

And if so—if so. . . .

Why, then a great cloud would roll away from me!

Curtiss . . . ?

Postscript

Note by Captain Arthur Hastings: The following manuscript came into my possession four months after the death of my friend Hercule Poirot. I received a communication from a firm of lawyers asking me to call at their office. There “in accordance with the instructions of their client, the late M. Hercule Poirot,” they handed me a sealed packet. I reproduce its contents here.

Manuscript written by Hercule Poirot:

“Mon cher ami,

“I shall have been dead four months when you read these words. I have debated long whether or not to write down what is written here, and I have decided that it is necessary for someone to know the truth about the second ‘Affaire Styles.’ Also I hazard a conjecture that by the time you read this you will have evolved the most preposterous theories—and possibly may be giving pain to yourself.

“But let me say this: You should, mon ami, have easily been able to arrive at the truth. I saw to it that you had every indication. If you have not, it is because, as always, you have far too beautiful and trusting a nature. A la fin comme au commencement.

“But you should know, at least, who killed Norton—even if you are still in the dark as to who killed Barbara Franklin. The latter may be a shock to you.

“To begin with, as you know, I sent for you. I told you that I needed you. That was true. I told you that I wanted you to be my ears and my eyes. That again was true, very true—if not in the sense that you understood it! You were to see what I wanted you to see and hear what I wanted you to hear.

“You complained, cher ami, that I was ‘unfair’ in my presentation of this case. I withheld from you knowledge that I had myself. That is to say, I refused to tell you the identity of X. That is quite true. I had to do so—though not for the reasons that I advanced. You will see the reason presently.

“And now let us examine this matter of X. I showed you the résumé of the various cases. I pointed out to you that in each separate case it seemed quite clear that the person accused, or suspected, had actually committed the crimes in question, that there was no alternate solution. And I then proceeded to the second important fact—that in each case X had been either on the scene or closely involved. You then jumped to a deduction that was, paradoxically, both true and false. You said that X had committed all the murders.

“But, my friend, the circumstances were such that in each case (or very nearly) only the accused person could have done the crime. On the other hand, if so, how account for X? Apart from a person connected with the police force or with, say, a firm of criminal lawyers, it is not reasonable for any man or woman to be involved in five murder cases. It does not, you comprehend, happen! Never, never does it occur that someone says confidentially: ‘Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve actually known five murderers!’ No, no, mon ami, it is not possible, that. So we get the curious result that we have here a case of catalysis—a reaction between two substances that takes place only in the presence of a third substance, that third substance apparently taking no part in the reaction and remaining unchanged. That is the position. It means that where X was present, crimes took place—but X did not actively take part in these crimes.

“An extraordinary, an abnormal situation! And I saw that I had come across at last, at the end of my career, the perfect criminal, the criminal who had invented such a technique that he could never be convicted of crime.

“It was amazing. But it was not new. There were parallels. And here comes in the first of the ‘clues’ I left you. The play of Othello. For there, magnificently delineated, we have the original X. Iago is the perfect murderer. The deaths of Desdemona, of Cassio—indeed of Othello himself—are all Iago’s crimes, planned by him, carried out by him. And he remains outside the circle, untouched by suspicion—or could have done so. For your great Shakespeare, my friend, had to deal with the dilemma that his own art had brought about. To unmask Iago he had to resort to the clumsiest of devices—the handkerchief—a piece of work not at all in keeping with Iago's general technique and a blunder of which one feels certain he would not have been guilty.

"Yes, there is there the perfection of the art of murder. Not even a word of direct suggestion. He is always holding back others from violence, refuting with horror suspicions that have not been entertained until he mentions them!

"And the same technique is seen in the brilliant third act of John Fergueson, where the 'half-witted' Clutie John induces others to kill the man that he himself hates. It is a wonderful piece of psychological suggestion.

"Now you must realize this, Hastings. Everyone is a potential murderer. In everyone there arises from time to time the wish to kill—though not the will to kill. How often have you not felt or heard others say: 'She made me so furious I felt I could have killed her!' 'I could have killed B. for saying so and so!' 'I was so angry I could have murdered him!' And all those statements are literally true. Your mind at such moments is quite clear. You would like to kill so and so. But you do not do it. Your will has to assent to your desire. In young children, the brake is as yet acting imperfectly. I have known a child, annoyed by its kitten, say 'Keep still or I'll hit you on the head and kill you' and actually do so—to be stunned and horrified a moment later when it realizes that the kitten's life will not return—because, you see, really the child loves that kitten dearly. So then, we are all potential murderers. And the art of X was this, not to suggest the desire, but to break down the normal decent resistance. It was an art perfected by long practice. X knew the exact word, the exact phrase, the intonation even to suggest and to bring cumulative pressure on a weak spot! It could be done. It was done without the victim ever suspecting. It was not hypnotism—hypnotism would not have been successful. It was something more insidious, more deadly. It was a marshalling of the forces of a human being to widen a breach instead of repairing it. It called on the best in a man and set it in alliance with the worst.

"You should know, Hastings—for it happened to you . . .

"So now, perhaps, you begin to see what some of my remarks, that annoyed and confused you, really meant. When I spoke of a crime to be committed, I was not always referring to the same crime. I told you that I was at Styles for a purpose. I was there, I said, because a crime was going to be committed. You were surprised at my certainty on that point. But I was able to be certain—for the crime, you see, was to be committed by myself. . . .

"Yes, my friend—it is odd—and laughable—and terrible! I, who do not approve of murder—I, who value human life—have ended my career by committing murder. Perhaps it is because I have been too self-righteous, too conscious of rectitude, that this terrible dilemma had to come to me. For you see, Hastings, there are two sides to it. It is my work in life to save the innocent—to prevent murder—and this—this is the only way I can do it! Make no mistake, X could not be touched by the law. He was safe. By no ingenuity that I could think of could he be defeated any other way.

"And yet, my friend, I was reluctant. I saw what had to be done—but I could not bring myself to do it. I was like Hamlet—eternally putting off the evil day . . . And then the next attempt happened—the attempt on Mrs. Luttrell.

"I had been curious, Hastings, to see if your well-known flair for the obvious would work. It did. Your very first reaction was a mild suspicion of Norton. And you were quite right. Norton was the man. You had no reason for your belief—except the perfectly sound if slightly halfhearted suggestion that he was insignificant. There, I think, you came very close to the truth.

"I have considered his life history with some care. He was the only son of a masterful and bossy woman. He seems to have had at no time any gift for asserting himself or for impressing his personality on other people. He has always been slightly lame and was unable to take part in games at school.

"One of the most significant things you told me was a remark about him having been laughed at at school for nearly being sick when seeing a dead rabbit. There, I think, was an incident that may have left a deep impression on him. He disliked blood and violence and his prestige suffered in consequence. Subconsciously, I should say, he has waited to redeem himself by being bold and ruthless.

“I should imagine that he began to discover quite young his own power for influencing people. He was a good listener, he had a quiet sympathetic personality. People liked him without, at the same time, noticing him very much. He resented this—and then made use of it. He discovered how ridiculously easy it was, by using the correct words and supplying the correct stimuli, to influence his fellow creatures. The only thing necessary was to understand them—to penetrate their thoughts, their secret reactions and wishes.

“Can you realize, Hastings, that such a discovery might feed a sense of power? Here was he, Stephen Norton whom everyone liked and despised, and he would make people do things they didn’t want to do—or (mark this) thought they did not want to do.

“I can visualize him, developing this hobby of his . . . And little by little developing a morbid taste for violence at secondhand. The violence for which he lacked physical stamina and for the lack of which he had been derided.

“Yes, his hobby grows and grows until it comes to be a passion, a necessity! It was a drug, Hastings—a drug that induced craving as surely as opium or cocaine might have done.

“Norton, the gentle-hearted, loving man, was a secret sadist. He was an addict of pain, of mental torture. There has been an epidemic of that in the world of late years—L’appétit vient en mangeant.

“It fed two lusts, the lust of the sadist and the lust of power. He, Norton, had the keys of life and of death.

“Like any other drug slave, he had to have his supply of the drug. He found victim after victim. I have no doubt there have been more cases than the five I actually tracked down. In each of those he played the same part. He knew Etherington, he stayed one summer in the village where Riggs lived and drank with Riggs in the local pub. On a cruise he met the girl Freda Clay and encouraged and played upon her half-formed conviction that if her old aunt died it would be really a good thing—a release for Auntie and a life of financial ease and pleasure for herself. He was a friend of the Litchfields, and when talking to him, Margaret Litchfield saw herself in the light of a heroine delivering her sisters from their life sentence of imprisonment. But I do not believe, Hastings, that any of these people would have done what they did—but for Norton's influence.

"And now we come to the events at Styles. I had been on Norton's tracks for some time. He became acquainted with the Franklins and at once I scented danger. You must understand that even Norton has to have a nucleus on which to work. You can only develop a thing of which the seed is already present. In Othello, for instance, I have always been of the belief that already present in Othello's mind was the conviction (possibly correct) that Desdemona's love for him was the passionate unbalanced hero-worship of a young girl for a famous warrior and not the balanced love of a woman for Othello the man. He may have realized that Cassio was her true mate and that in time she would come to realize the fact.

"The Franklins presented a most agreeable prospect to our Norton. All kinds of possibilities! You have doubtless realized by now, Hastings, (what anyone of sense could have seen perfectly plainly all along) that Franklin was in love with Judith and she with him. His brusqueness, his habit of never looking at her, of forsaking any attempt at courtesy, ought to have told you that the man was head over ears in love with her. But Franklin is a man of great strength of character and also of great rectitude. His speech is brutally unsentimental, but he is a man of very definite standards. In his code a man sticks to the wife he has chosen.

"Judith, as I should have thought even you could have seen, was deeply and unhappily in love with him. She thought you had grasped the fact that day you found her in the rose garden. Hence her furious outburst. Characters like hers cannot stand any expression of pity or sympathy. It was like touching a raw wound.

"Then she discovered that you thought it was Allerton she cared for. She let you think so, thereby shielding herself from clumsy sympathy and from a further probing of the wound. She flirted with Allerton as a kind of desperate solace. She knew exactly the type of man he was. He amused her and distracted her, but she never had the least feeling for him.

"Norton, of course, knew exactly how the wind lay. He saw possibilities in the Franklin trio. I may say that he started first on Franklin, but drew a complete blank. Franklin is the one type of man who is quite immune from Norton's type of insidious suggestion. Franklin has a clear-cut, black and white mind, with an exact knowledge of his own feeling—and a complete disregard for outside pressure. Moreover the great passion of his life is his work. His absorption in it makes him far less vulnerable.

"With Judith, Norton was far more successful. He played very cleverly on the theme of useless lives. It was an article of faith with Judith—and the fact that her secret desires were in accordance with it was a fact that she ignored stridently whilst Norton knew it to be an ally. He was very clever about it—taking himself the opposite point of view, gently ridiculing the idea that she would ever have the nerve to do such a decisive action. 'It is the kind of thing that all young people say—but never do!' Such an old cheap jibe—and how often it works, Hastings! So vulnerable they are, these children! So ready, though they do not recognize it that way, to take a dare!

"And with the useless Barbara out of the way, then the road is clear for Franklin and Judith. That was never said—that was never allowed to come into the open. It was stressed that the personal angle had nothing to do with it—nothing at all. For if Judith once recognized that it had, she would have reacted violently. But with a murder addict so far advanced as Norton, one iron in the fire is not enough. He sees opportunities for pleasure everywhere. He found one in the Luttrells.

"Cast your mind back, Hastings. Remember the very first evening you played bridge. Norton's remarks to you afterwards, uttered so loud that you were afraid Colonel Luttrell would hear. Of course! Norton meant him to hear! He never lost an opportunity of underlining it, rubbing it in—And finally his efforts culminated in success. It happened under your nose, Hastings, and you never saw how it was done. The foundations were already laid—the increasing sense of a burden borne, of shame at the figure he cut in front of other men, in a deep growing resentment against his wife.

“Remember exactly what happened. Norton says he is thirsty. (Did he know Mrs. Luttrell is in the house and will come upon the scene?) The Colonel reacts immediately as the openhanded host which he is by nature. He offers drinks. He goes to get them. You are all sitting outside the window. His wife arrives—there is the inevitable scene, which he knows is being overheard. He comes out. It might have been glossed over by a good pretence—Boyd Carrington could have done it well. (He has a certain amount of worldly wisdom and a tactful manner, though otherwise he is one of the most pompous and boring individuals that I have ever come across! Just the sort of man you would admire!) You yourself could have acquitted yourself not too badly. But Norton rushes into speech, heavily, fatuously, underlining tact until it screams to Heaven and makes things much worse. He babbles of bridge (more recalled humiliations), talks aimlessly of shooting incidents. And prompt on his cue, just as Norton intended, that old woolly-headed ass Boyd Carrington comes out with his story of an Irish batman who shot his brother—a story, Hastings, that Norton told to Boyd Carrington, knowing quite well that the old fool would bring it out as his own whenever suitably prompted. You see, the supreme suggestion will not come from Norton. Mon Dieu, non!

“It is all set, then. The cumulative effect. The breaking point. Affronted in his instincts as a host, shamed before his fellow men, writhing under the knowledge that they are quite convinced he has not got the guts to do anything but submit meekly to bullying—and then the key words of escape. The rook rifle, accidents—man who shot his brother—and suddenly, bobbing up, his wife’s head . . . ‘quite safe—an accident . . . I’ll show them . . . I’ll show her . . . damn her! I wish she was dead . . . she shall be dead!’

“He did not kill her, Hastings. Myself, I think that, even as he fired, instinctively he missed because he wanted to miss. And afterwards—afterwards the evil spell was broken. She was his wife, the woman he loved in spite of everything.

“One of Norton’s crimes that did not quite come off.

“Ah, but his next attempt! Do you realize, Hastings, that it was you who came next? Throw your mind back—recall everything. You, my honest, kindly Hastings! He found every weak spot in your mind—yes, and every decent and conscientious one, too.

“Allerton is the type of man you instinctively dislike and fear. He is the type of man that you think ought to be abolished. And everything you heard about him and thought about him was true. Norton tells you a certain story about him—an entirely true story as far as the facts go. (Though actually the girl concerned was a neurotic type and came of poor stock.)

“It appeals to your conventional and somewhat old-fashioned instincts. This man is the villain, the seducer, the man who ruins girls and drives them to suicide! Norton induces Boyd Carrington to tackle you also. You are impelled to ‘speak to Judith.’ Judith, as could be predicted, immediately responds by saying she will do as she chooses with her life. That makes you believe the worst.

“See now the different stops on which Norton plays. Your love for your child. The intense old-fashioned sense of responsibility that a man like you feels for his children. The slight self-importance of your nature: ‘I must do something. It all depends on me.’ Your feeling of helplessness owing to the lack of your wife’s wise judgement. Your loyalty—I must not fail her. And, on the baser side, your vanity—through association with me you have learned all the tricks of the trade! And lastly, that inner feeling which most men have about their daughters—the unreasoning jealousy and dislike for the man who takes her away from him. Norton played, Hastings, like a virtuoso on all these themes. And you responded.

“You accept things too easily at their face value. You always have done. You accepted quite easily the fact that it was Judith to whom Allerton was talking in the summerhouse. Yet you did not see her, you did not even hear her speak. And incredibly, even the next morning, you still thought it was Judith. You rejoiced because she had ‘changed her mind.’

“But if you had taken the trouble to examine the facts you would have discovered at once that there had never been any question of Judith going up to London that day! And you failed to make another most obvious inference. There was someone who was going off for the day—and who was furious at not being able to do so. Nurse Craven. Allerton is not a man who confines himself to the pursuit of one woman! His affair with Nurse Craven had progressed much farther than the mere flirtation he was having with Judith.

“No, stage management again by Norton.

“You saw Allerton and Judith kiss. Then Norton shoves you back round the corner. He doubtless knows quite well that Allerton is going to meet Nurse Craven in the summerhouse. After a little argument he lets you go but still accompanies you. The sentence you overhear Allerton speaking is magnificent for his purpose and he swiftly drags you away before you have a chance to discover that the woman is not Judith!

“Yes, the virtuoso! And your reaction is immediate, complete on all those themes! You responded. You made up your mind to do murder.

“But fortunately, Hastings, you had a friend whose brain still functioned. And not only his brain!

“I said at the beginning of this that if you have not arrived at the truth it is because you have too trusting a nature. You believe what is said to you. You believed what I said to you. . . .

“Yet it was all very easy for you to discover the truth. I had sent George away—why? I had replaced him with a less experienced and clearly much less intelligent man—why? I was not being attended by a doctor—I who have always been careful about my health—I would not hear of seeing one—why?

“Do you see now why you were necessary to me at Styles? I had to have someone who accepted what I said without question. You accepted my statement that I came back from Egypt much worse than when I went. I did not. I came back very much better! You could have found out the fact if you had taken the trouble. But no, you believed. I sent away George because I could not have succeeded in making him think that I had suddenly lost all power in my limbs. George is extremely intelligent about what he sees. He would have known that I was shamming.

“Do you understand, Hastings? All the time that I was pretending to be helpless, and deceiving Curtiss, I was not helpless at all. I could walk—with a limp.

“I heard you come up that evening. I heard you hesitate and then go into Allerton’s room. And at once I was on the alert. I was already much exercised about your state of mind.

“I did not delay. I was alone. Curtiss had gone down to supper. I slipped out of my room and across the passage. I heard you in Allerton’s bathroom. And promptly, my friend, in the manner you so much deplore, I dropped to my knees and looked through the keyhole of the bathroom door. One could see through it, fortunately, as there is a bolt and not a key on the inside.

“I perceived your manipulations with the sleeping tablets. I realized what your idea was.

“And so, my friend, I acted. I went back to my room. I made my preparations. When Curtiss came up I sent him to fetch you. You came, yawning and explaining that you had a headache. I made at once the big fuss—urged remedies on you. For the sake of peace you consented to drink a cup of chocolate. You gulped it down quickly so as to get away quicker. But I, too, my friend, have some sleeping tablets.

“And so, you slept—slept until morning when you awoke your own sane self and were horrified at what you had so nearly done.

“You were safe now—one does not attempt these things twice—not when one has relapsed into sanity.

“But it decided me, Hastings! For whatever I might not know about other people did not apply to you. You are not a murderer, Hastings! But you might have been hanged for one—for a murder committed by another man who in the eyes of the law would be guiltless.

“You, my good, my honest, my oh so honourable Hastings—so kindly, so conscientious—so innocent!

"Yes, I must act. I knew that my time was short—and for that I was glad. For the worst part of murder, Hastings, is its effect on the murderer. I, Hercule Poirot, might come to believe myself divinely appointed to deal out death to all and sundry . . . But mercifully there would not be time for that to happen. The end would come soon. And I was afraid that Norton might succeed with someone who was unutterably dear to both of us. I am talking of your daughter. . . .

"And now we come to the death of Barbara Franklin. Whatever your ideas may be on the subject, Hastings, I do not think you have once suspected the truth.

"For you see, Hastings, you killed Barbara Franklin.

"Mais oui, you did!

"There was, you see, yet another angle to the triangle. One that I did not fully take into account. As it happened, Norton's tactics there were unseen and unheard by either of us. But I have no doubt that he employed them. . . .

"Did it ever enter your mind to wonder, Hastings, why Mrs. Franklin was willing to come to Styles? It is not, when you think of it, at all her line of country. She likes comfort, good food and above all social contacts. Styles is not gay; it is not well-run; it is in the dead country. And yet it was Mrs. Franklin who insisted on spending the summer there.

"Yes, there was a third angle. Boyd Carrington. Mrs. Franklin was a disappointed woman. That was at the root of her neurotic illness. She was ambitious both socially and financially. She married Franklin because she expected him to have a brilliant career.

"He was brilliant but not in her way. His brilliance would never bring him newspaper notoriety, or a Harley Street reputation. He would be known to half a dozen men of his own profession and would publish articles in learned journals. The outside world would not hear of him—and he would certainly not make money.

“And here is Boyd Carrington—home from the East—just come into a baronetcy and money, and Boyd Carrington has always felt tenderly sentimental towards the pretty seventeen-year-old girl he nearly asked to marry him. He is going to Styles, he suggests the Franklins come too—and Barbara comes.

“How maddening it is for her! Obviously she has lost none of her old charm for this rich attractive man, but he is old-fashioned—not the type of man to suggest divorce. And John Franklin, too, has no use for divorce. If John Franklin were to die, then she could be Lady Boyd Carrington—and oh what a wonderful life that would be!

“Norton, I think, found her only too ready a tool.

“It was all too obvious, Hastings, when you come to think of it. Those first few tentative attempts at establishing how fond she was of her husband. She overdid it a little—murmuring about ‘ending it all’ because she was a drag on him.

“And then an entirely new line. Her fears that Franklin might experiment upon himself.

“It ought to have been so obvious to us, Hastings! She was preparing us for John Franklin to die of physostigmine poisoning. No question, you see, of anyone trying to poison him—oh no—just pure scientific research. He takes the harmless alkaloid, and it turns out to be harmful after all.

“The only thing was it was a little too swift. You told me that she was not pleased to find Boyd Carrington having his fortune told by Nurse Craven. Nurse Craven was an attractive young woman with a keen eye for men. She had had a try at Dr. Franklin and had not met with success. (Hence her dislike for Judith.) She is carrying on with Allerton, but she knows quite well he is not serious. Inevitable that she should cast her eye on the rich and still attractive Sir William—and Sir William was, perhaps, only too ready to be attracted. He had already noticed Nurse Craven as a healthy, good-looking girl.

“Barbara Franklin has a fright and decides to act quickly. The sooner she is a pathetic, charming and not inconsolable widow the better.

“And so, after a morning of nerves, she sets the scene.

“Do you know, mon ami, I have some respect for the Calabar bean. This time, you see, it worked. It spared the innocent and slew the guilty.

“Mrs. Franklin asks you all up to her room. She makes coffee with much fuss and display. As you tell me, her own coffee is beside her, her husband’s on the other side of the bookcase-table.

“And then there are the shooting stars and everyone goes out and only you, my friend, are left, you and your crossword puzzle and your memories—and to hide emotion you swing round the bookcase to find a quotation in Shakespeare.

“And so they come back and Mrs. Franklin drinks the coffee full of the Calabar bean alkaloids that were meant for dear scientific John, and John Franklin drinks the nice plain cup of coffee that was meant for clever Mrs. Franklin.

“But you will see, Hastings, if you think a minute, that although I realized what had happened, I saw that there was only one thing to be done. I could not prove what had happened. And if Mrs. Franklin’s death was thought to be anything but suicide suspicion would inevitably fall on either Franklin or Judith. On two people who were utterly and completely innocent. So I did what I had a perfect right to do, laid stress on and put conviction into, my repetition of Mrs. Franklin’s extremely unconvincing remarks on the subject of putting an end to herself.

“I could do it—and I was probably the only person who could. For you see my statement carried weight. I am a man experienced in the matter of committing murder—if I am convinced it is suicide, well, then, it will be accepted as suicide.

“It puzzled you, I could see, and you were not pleased. But mercifully you did not suspect the true danger.

"But will you think of it after I am gone? Will it come into your mind, lying there like some dark serpent that now and then raises its head and says: 'Suppose Judith . . . ?'

"It may do. And therefore I am writing this. You must know the truth.

"There was one person whom the verdict of suicide did not satisfy. Norton. He was balked, you see, of his pound of flesh. As I say, he is a sadist. He wants the whole gamut of emotion, suspicion, fear, the coils of the law. He was deprived of all that. The murder he had arranged had gone awry.

"But presently he saw what one may call a way of recouping himself. He began to throw out hints. Earlier on he had pretended to see something through his glasses. Actually he intended to convey the exact impression that he did convey—namely that he saw Allerton and Judith in some compromising attitude. But not having said anything definite, he could use that incident in a different way.

"Supposing, for instance, that he says he saw Franklin and Judith. That will open up an interesting new angle of the suicide case! It may, perhaps, throw doubts on whether it was suicide. . . .

"So, mon ami, I decided that what had to be done must be done at once. I arranged that you should bring him to my room that night. . . .

"I will tell you exactly what happened. Norton, no doubt, would have been delighted to tell me his arranged story. I gave him no time. I told him, clearly and definitely, all that I knew about him.

"He did not deny it. No, mon ami, he sat back in his chair and smirked. Mais oui, there is no other word for it, he smirked. He asked me what I thought I was going to do about this amusing idea of mine. I told him that I proposed to execute him.

"'Ah,' he said, 'I see. The dagger or the cup of poison?'

"We were about to have chocolate together at the time. He has a sweet tooth, M. Norton.

"'The simplest,' I said, 'would be the cup of poison.'

"And I handed him the cup of chocolate I had just poured out.

"'In that case,' he said, 'would you mind my drinking from your cup instead of from mine?'

"I said, 'Not at all.' In effect, it was quite immaterial. As I have said, I, too, take the sleeping tablets. The only thing is that since I have been taking them every night for a considerable period, I have acquired a certain tolerance, and a dose that would send M. Norton to sleep would have very little effect upon me. The dose was in the chocolate itself. We both had the same. His portion took effect in due course, mine had little effect upon me, especially when counteracted with a dose of my strychnine tonic.

"And so to the last chapter. When Norton was asleep I got him into my wheeled chair—fairly easy, it has many types of mechanism—and wheeled him back in it to its usual place in the window embrasure behind the curtains.

"Curtiss then 'put me to bed.' When everything was quiet I wheeled Norton to his room. It remained, then, to avail myself of the eyes and ears of my excellent friend Hastings.

"You may not have realized it, but I wear a wig, Hastings. You will realize even less that I wear a false moustache. (Even George does not know that!) I pretended to burn it by accident soon after Curtiss came, and at once had my hairdresser make me a replica.

"I put on Norton's dressing gown, ruffled up my grey hair on end, and came down the passage and rapped on your door. Presently you came and looked with sleepy eyes into the passage. You saw Norton leave the bathroom and limp across the passage into his own room. You heard him turn the key in the lock on the inside.

"I then replaced the dressing gown on Norton, laid him on his bed, and shot him with a small pistol that I acquired abroad and which I have kept carefully locked up except for two occasions when (nobody being about) I have put it ostentatiously on Norton's dressing table, he himself being well away somewhere that morning.

"Then I left the room after putting the key in Norton's pocket. I myself locked the door from the outside with the duplicate key which I have possessed for some time. I wheeled the chair back to my room.

"Since then I have been writing this explanation.

"I am very tired—and the exertions I have been through have strained me a good deal. It will not, I think, be long before. . . .

"There are one or two things I would like to stress.

"Norton's were the perfect crimes.

"Mine was not. It was not intended to be.

"The easiest way and the best way for me to have killed him was to have done so quite openly—to have had, shall we say, an accident with my little pistol. I should have professed dismay, regret—a most unfortunate accident. They would have said, 'Old ga ga, didn't realize it was loaded—ce pauvre vieux.'

"I did not choose to do that.

"I will tell you why.

"It is because, Hastings, I chose to be 'sporting.'

"Mais oui, sporting! I am doing all the things that so often you have reproached me with not doing. I am playing fair with you. I am giving you a run for your money. I am playing the game. You have every chance to discover the truth.

"In case you disbelieve me let me enumerate all the clues.

"The keys.

"You know, for I have told you so, that Norton arrived here after I did. You know, for you have been told, that I changed my room after I got here. You know, for again it has been told to you, that since I have been at Styles the key of my room disappeared and I had another made.

"Therefore when you ask yourself who could have killed Norton? Who could have shot and still have left the room (apparently) locked on the inside since the key is in Norton's pocket?—

"The answer is 'Hercule Poirot, who since he has been here has possessed duplicate keys of one of the rooms.'

"The man you saw in the passage.

"I myself asked you if you were sure the man you saw in the passage was Norton. You were startled. You asked me if I intended to suggest it was not Norton. I replied, truthfully, that I did not at all intend to suggest it was not Norton. (Naturally, since I had taken a good deal of trouble to suggest it was Norton.) I then brought up the question of height. All the men, I said, were much taller than Norton. But there was a man who was shorter than Norton—Hercule Poirot. And it is comparatively easy with raised heels or elevators in the shoes to add to one's height.

"You were under the impression that I was a helpless invalid. But why? Only because I said so. And I had sent away George. That was my last indication to you, 'Go and talk to George.'

"Othello and Clutie John show you that X was Norton.

"Then who could have killed Norton?

"Only Hercule Poirot.

"And once you suspected that, everything would have fallen into place, the things I had said and done, my inexplicable reticence. Evidence from the doctors in Egypt, from my own doctor in London, that I was not incapable of walking about. The evidence of George as to my wearing a wig. The fact which I was unable to disguise, and which you ought to have noticed, that I limp much more than Norton does.

“And last of all, the pistol shot. My one weakness. I should, I am aware, have shot him through the temple. I could not bring myself to produce an effect so lopsided, so haphazard. No, I shot him symmetrically, in the exact centre of the forehead. . . .

“Oh, Hastings, Hastings, that should have told you the truth.

“But perhaps, after all, you have suspected the truth? Perhaps when you read this, you already know.

“But somehow I do not think so. . . .

“No, you are too trusting. . . .

“You have too beautiful a nature. . . .

“What shall I say more to you? Both Franklin and Judith, I think you will find, knew the truth although they will not have told it to you. They will be happy together, those two. They will be poor and innumerable tropical insects will bite them and strange fevers will attack them—but we all have our own ideas of the perfect life, have we not?

“And you, my poor lonely Hastings? Ah, my heart bleeds for you, dear friend. Will you, for the last time, take the advice of your old Poirot?

“After you have read this, take a train or a car or a series of buses and go to find Elizabeth Cole who is also Elizabeth Litchfield. Let her read this, or tell her what is in it. Tell her that you, too, might have done what her sister Margaret did—only for Margaret Litchfield there was no watchful Poirot at hand. Take the nightmare away from her, show her that her father was killed, not by his daughter, but by that kind sympathetic family friend, that ‘honest Iago’ Stephen Norton.

“For it is not right, my friend, that a woman like that, still young, still attractive, should refuse life because she believes herself to be tainted. No, it is not right. Tell her so, you, my friend, who are yourself still not unattractive to women. . . .

“Eh bien, I have no more now to say. I do not know, Hastings, if what I have done is justified or not justified. No—I do not know. I do not believe that a man should take the law into his own hands. . . .

“But on the other hand, I am the law! As a young man in the Belgian police force I shot down a desperate criminal who sat on a roof and fired at people below. In a state of emergency martial law is proclaimed.

“By taking Norton’s life, I have saved other lives—innocent lives. But still I do not know . . . It is perhaps right that I should not know. I have always been so sure—too sure. . . .

“But now I am very humble and I say like a little child ‘I do not know . . .’

“Good-bye, cher ami. I have moved the amyl nitrate ampoules away from beside my bed. I prefer to leave myself in the hands of the bon Dieu. May his punishment, or his mercy, be swift!

“We shall not hunt together again, my friend. Our first hunt was here—and our last. . . .

“They were good days.

“Yes, they have been good days. . . .”

(End of Hercule Poirot’s manuscript.)

Final note by Captain Arthur Hastings: I have finished reading . . . cannot believe it all yet . . . But he is right. I should have known. I should have known when I saw the bullet hole so symmetrically in the middle of the forehead.

Queer—it’s just come to me—the thought in the back of my mind that morning.

The mark on Norton’s forehead—it was like the brand of Cain. . . .

Problem At Pollensa Bay And Other Stories (1991)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

"Quite true. I've never known you to make a mistake."

"Take that cup away from him," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Take it back to your surgery or take it to an analytic chemist and find out what's in it. I saw that woman buy that cup. She bought it in the village shop. She knew then that she was going to break a red cup, replace it by a blue and that Timothy would never know that the colours were different."

"I think you're mad, Satterthwaite. But all the same I'm going to do what you say."

He advanced on the table, stretched out a hand to the blue cup.

"Do you mind letting me have a look at that?" said Dr. Horton.

"Of course," said Timothy. He looked slightly surprised.

"I think there's a flaw in the china, here, you know. Rather interesting."

Beryl came across the lawn. She came quickly and sharply.

"What are you doing? What's the matter? What is happening?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Dr. Horton, cheerfully. "I just want to show the boys a little experiment I'm going to make with a cup of tea."

He was looking at her very closely and he saw the expression of fear, of terror. Mr. Satterthwaite saw the entire change of countenance.

"Would you like to come with me, Satterthwaite? Just a little experiment, you know. A matter of testing porcelain and different qualities in it nowadays. A very interesting discovery was made lately."

Chatting, he walked along the grass. Mr. Satterthwaite followed him and the two young men, chatting to each other, followed him.

"What's the Doc up to now, Roly?" said Timothy.

"I don't know," said Roland. "He seems to have got some very extraordinary ideas. Oh well, we shall hear about it later, I expect. Let's go and get our bikes."

Beryl Gilliatt turned abruptly. She retraced her steps rapidly up the lawn towards the house.

Tom Addison called to her: "Anything the matter, Beryl?"

"Something I'd forgotten," said Beryl Gilliatt. "That's all."

Tom Addison looked inquiringly towards Simon Gilliatt.

"Anything wrong with your wife?" he said.

"Beryl? Oh no, not that I know of. I expect it's some little thing or other that she's forgotten. Nothing I can do for you, Beryl?" he called.

"No. No, I'll be back later." She turned her head half sideways, looking at the old man lying back in the chair. She spoke suddenly and vehemently. "You silly old fool. You've got the wrong shoes on again today. They don't match. Do you know you've got one shoe that's red and one shoe that's green?"

"Ah, done it again, have I?" said Tom Addison. "They look exactly the same colour to me, you know. It's odd, isn't it, but there it is."

She went past him, her steps quickening.

Presently Mr. Satterthwaite and Dr. Horton reached the gate that led out into the roadway. They heard a motor bicycle speeding along.

"She's gone," said Dr. Horton. "She's run for it. We ought to have stopped her, I suppose. Do you think she'll come back?"

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I don't think she'll come back. Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "it's best left that way."

"You mean?"

"It's an old house," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "And an old family. A good family. A lot of good people in it. One doesn't want trouble, scandal, everything brought upon it. Best to let her go, I think."

"Tom Addison never liked her," said Dr. Horton. "Never. He was always polite and kind but he didn't like her."

"And there's the boy to think of," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"The boy. You mean?"

"The other boy. Roland. This way he needn't know about what his mother was trying to do."

"Why did she do it? Why on earth did she do it?"

"You've no doubt now that she did," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"No. I've no doubt now. I saw her face, Satterthwaite, when she looked at me. I knew then that what you'd said was truth. But why?"

"Greed, I suppose," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "She hadn't any money of her own, I believe. Her husband, Christopher Eden, was a nice chap by all accounts but he hadn't anything in the way of means. But Tom Addison's grandchild has got big money coming to him. A lot of money. Property all around here has appreciated enormously. I've no doubt that Tom Addison will leave the bulk of what he has to his grandson. She wanted it for her own son and through her own son, of course, for herself. She is a greedy woman."

Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head back suddenly.

"Something's on fire over there," he said.

"Good lord, so it is. Oh, it's the scarecrow down in the field. Some young chap or other's set fire to it, I suppose. But there's nothing to worry about. There are no ricks or anything anywhere near. It'll just burn itself out."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Well, you go on, Doctor. You don't need me to help you in your tests."

"I've no doubt of what I shall find. I don't mean the exact substance, but I have come to your belief that this blue cup holds death."

Mr. Satterthwaite had turned back through the gate. He was going now down in the direction where the scarecrow was burning. Behind it was the sunset. A remarkable sunset that evening. Its colours illuminated the air round it, illuminated the burning scarecrow.

"So that's the way you've chosen to go," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked slightly startled then, for in the neighbourhood of the flames he saw the tall, slight figure of a woman. A woman dressed in some pale mother-of-pearl colouring. She was walking in the direction of Mr. Satterthwaite. He stopped dead, watching.

"Lily," he said. "Lily."

He saw her quite plainly now. It was Lily walking towards him. Too far away for him to see her face but he knew very well who it was. Just for a moment or two he wondered whether anyone else would see her or whether the sight was only for him. He said, not very loud, only in a whisper,

"It's all right, Lily, your son is safe."

She stopped then. She raised one hand to her lips. He didn't see her smile, but he knew she was smiling. She kissed her hand and waved it to him and then she turned. She walked back towards where the scarecrow was disintegrating into a mass of ashes.

"She's going away again," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "She's going away with him. They're walking away together. They belong to the same world, of course. They only come - those sort of people - they only come when it's a case of love or death or both."

He wouldn't see Lily again, he supposed, but he wondered how soon he would meet Mr. Quin again. He turned then and went back across the lawn towards the tea table and the Harlequin tea set, and beyond that, to his old friend Tom Addison. Beryl wouldn't come back. He was sure of it. Doverton Kingsbourne was safe again.

Across the lawn came the small black dog in flying leaps. It came to Mr. Satterthwaite, panting a little and wagging its tail. Through its collar was twisted a scrap of paper. Mr. Satterthwaite stooped and detached it - smoothing it out - on it in coloured letters was written a message:

Congratulations. To Our Next Meeting

H.Q.

"Thank you, Hermes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, and watched the black dog flying across the meadow to rejoin the two figures that he himself knew were here but could no longer see.

THE REGATTA MYSTERY

Mr Isaac Pointz removed a cigar from his lips and said approvingly:

"Pretty little place."

Having thus set the seal of his approval upon Dartmouth harbor, he replaced the cigar and looked about him with the air of a man pleased with himself, his appearance, his surroundings and life generally.

As regards the first of these, Mr Isaac Pointz was a man of fifty-eight, in good health and condition with perhaps a slight tendency to liver. He was not exactly stout, but comfortable-looking, and a yachting costume, which he wore at the moment, is not the most kindly of attires for a middle-aged man with a tendency to embonpoint. Mr Pointz was very well turned out - correct to every crease and button - his dark and slightly Oriental face beaming out under the peak of his yachting cap.

As regards his surroundings, these may have been taken to mean his companions - his partner Mr Leo Stein, Sir George and Lady Marroway, an American business acquaintance Mr Samuel Leathern and his schoolgirl daughter Eve, Mrs Rustington and Evan Llewellyn. The party had just come ashore from Mr Pointz' yacht - the Merrimaid. In the morning they had watched the yacht racing and they had now come ashore to join for a while in the fun of the fair - Coconut shies, Fat Ladies, the Human Spider and the Merry-go-round. It is hardly to be doubted that these delights were relished most by Eve Leathern. When Mr Pointz finally suggested that it was time to adjourn to the Royal George for dinner hers was the only dissentient voice.

"Oh, Mr Pointz - I did so want to have my fortune told by the Real Gypsy in the Caravan."

Mr Pointz had doubts of the essential Realness of the Gypsy in question but he gave indulgent assent.

"Eve's just crazy about the fair," said her father apologetically. "But don't you pay any attention if you want to be getting along."

"Plenty of time," said Mr Pointz benignantly. "Let the little lady enjoy herself. I'll take you on at darts, Leo."

"Twenty-five and over wins a prize," chanted the man in charge of the darts in a high nasal voice.

"Bet you a fiver my total score beats yours," said Pointz.

"Done," said Stein with alacrity.

The two men were soon whole-heartedly engaged in their battle.

Lady Marroway murmured to Evan Llewellyn:

"Eve is not the only child in the party."

Llewellyn smiled assent but somewhat absently. He had been absent-minded all that day. Once or twice his answers had been wide of the point. Pamela Marroway drew away from him and said to her husband:

"That young man has something on his mind."

Sir George murmured:

"Or someone?"

And his glance swept quickly over Janet Rustington. Lady Marroway frowned a little. She was a tall woman exquisitely groomed. The scarlet of her fingernails was matched by the dark red coral studs in her ears. Her eyes were dark and watchful. Sir George affected a careless "hearty English gentleman" manner - but his bright blue eyes held the same watchful look as his wife's.

Isaac Pointz and Leo Stein were Hatton Garden diamond merchants. Sir George and Lady Marroway came from a different world - the world of Antibes and Juan les Pins - of golf at St Jean de Luz - of bathing from the rocks at Madeira in the winter.

In outward seeming they were as the lilies that toiled not, neither did they spin. But perhaps this was not quite true. There are diverse ways of toiling and also of spinning.

"Here's the kid back again," said Evan Llewellyn to Mrs Rustington.

He was a dark young man - there was a faintly hungry wolfish look about him which some women found attractive.

It was difficult to say whether Mrs Rustington found him so. She did not wear her heart on her sleeve. She had married young - and the marriage had ended in disaster in less than a year. Since that time it was difficult to know what Janet Rustington thought of anyone or anything - her manner was always the same - charming but completely aloof.

Eve Leathern came dancing up to them, her lank fair hair bobbing excitedly. She was fifteen - an awkward child - but full of vitality.

"I'm going to be married by the time I'm seventeen," she exclaimed breathlessly. "To a very rich man and we're going to have six children and

Tuesdays and Thursdays are my lucky days and I ought always to wear green or blue and an emerald is my lucky stone and -"

"Why, pet, I think we ought to be getting along," said her father.

Mr Leathern was a tall, fair, dyspeptic-looking man with a somewhat mournful expression.

Mr Pointz and Mr Stein were turning away from the darts. Mr Pointz was chuckling and Mr Stein was looking somewhat rueful.

"It's all a matter of luck," he was saying.

Mr Pointz slapped his pocket cheerfully.

"Took a fiver off you all right. Skill, my boy, skill. My old Dad was a first class dart player. Well, folks, let's be getting along. Had your fortune told, Eve? Did they tell you to beware of a dark man?"

"A dark woman," corrected Eve. "She's got a cast in her eye and she'll be real mean to me if I give her a chance. And I'm to be married by the time I'm seventeen..."

She ran on happily as the party steered its way to the Royal George.

Dinner had been ordered beforehand by the forethought of Mr Pointz and a bowing waiter led them upstairs and into a private room on the first floor. Here a round table was ready laid. The big bulging bow-window opened on the harbor square and was open. The noise of the fair came up to them, and the raucous squeal of three roundabouts each blaring a different tune.

"Best shut that if we're to hear ourselves speak," observed Mr Pointz drily, and suited the action to the word.

They took their seats round the table and Mr Pointz beamed affectionately at his guests. He felt he was doing them well and he liked to do people well. His eye rested on one after another. Lady Marroway - fine woman - not quite the goods, of course, he knew that - he was perfectly well aware that what he had called all his life the crême de la crême would have very little to do with the Marroways - but then the crême de la crême were supremely unaware of his own existence. Anyway, Lady Marroway was a damned smart-looking woman - and he didn't mind if she did rook him a bit at bridge. Didn't enjoy it quite so much from Sir George. Fishy eye the fellow had. Brazenly on the make. But he wouldn't make too much out of Isaac Pointz. He'd see to that all right.

Old Leathern wasn't a bad fellow - longwinded, of course, like most Americans - fond of telling endless long stories. And he had that disconcerting habit of requiring precise information. What was the population of Dartmouth? In what year had the Naval College been built? And so on. Expected his host to be a kind of walking Baedeker. Eve was a nice cheery kid - he enjoyed chaffing her. Voice rather like a corncrake, but she had all her wits about her. A bright kid.

Young Llewellyn - he seemed a bit quiet. Looked as though he had something on his mind. Hard up, probably. These writing fellows usually were. Looked as though he might be keen on Janet Rustington. A nice woman - attractive and clever, too. But she didn't ram her writing down your throat. Highbrow sort of stuff she wrote but you'd never think it to hear her talk. And old Leo! He wasn't getting younger or thinner. And blissfully unaware that his partner was at that moment thinking precisely the same thing about him, Mr Pointz corrected Mr Leathern as to pilchards being connected with Devon and not Cornwall, and prepared to enjoy his dinner.

"Mr Pointz," said Eve when plates of hot mackerel had been set before them and the waiters had left the room.

"Yes, young lady."

"Have you got that big diamond with you right now? The one you showed us last night and said you always took about with you?"

Mr Pointz chuckled.

"That's right. My mascot, I call it. Yes, I've got it with me all right."

"I think that's awfully dangerous. Somebody might get it away from you in the crowd at the fair."

"Not they," said Mr Pointz. "I'll take good care of that."

"But they might," insisted Eve. "You've got gangsters in England as well as we have, haven't you?"

"They won't get the Morning Star," said Mr Pointz. "To begin with it's in a special inner pocket. And anyway - old Pointz knows what he's about. Nobody's going to steal the Morning Star."

Eve laughed.

"Ugh-huh - bet I could steal it!"

"I bet you couldn't," Mr Pointz twinkled back at her.

"Well, I bet I could. I was thinking about it last night in bed - after you'd handed it round the table for us all to look at. I thought of a real cute way to steal it."

"And what's that?"

Eve put her head on one side, her fair hair wagged excitedly. "I'm not telling you - now. What do you bet I couldn't?"

Memories of Mr Pointz' youth rose in his mind.

"Half a dozen pairs of gloves," he said.

"Gloves," cried Eve disgustedly. "Who wears gloves?"

"Well - do you wear silk stockings?"

"Do I not? My best pair laddered this morning."

"Very well, then. Half a dozen pairs of the finest silk stockings -"

"Oo-er," said Eve blissfully. "And what about you?"

"Well, I need a new tobacco pouch."

"Right. That's a deal. Not that you'll get your tobacco pouch. Now I'll tell you what you've got to do. You must hand it round like you did last night -"

She broke off as two waiters entered to remove the plates. When they were starting on the next course of chicken, Mr Pointz said:

"Remember this, young woman, if this is to represent a real theft, I should send for the police and you'd be searched."

"That's quite O.K. by me. You needn't be quite so lifelike as to bring the police into it. But Lady Marroway or Mrs Rustington can do all the searching you like."

"Well, that's that then," said Mr Pointz. "What are you setting up to be? A first class jewel thief?"

"I might take to it as a career - if it really paid."

"If you got away with the Morning Star it would pay you. Even after recutting that stone would be worth over thirty thousand pounds."

"My!" said Eve, impressed. "What's that in dollars?"

Lady Marroway uttered an exclamation.

"And you carry such a stone about with you?" she said reproachfully. "Thirty thousand pounds." Her darkened eyelashes quivered.

Mrs Rustington said softly: "It's a lot of money. And then there's the fascination of the stone itself. It's beautiful."

"Just a piece of carbon," said Evan Llewellyn.

"I've always understood it's the 'fence' that's the difficulty in jewel robberies," said Sir George. "He takes the lion's share - eh, what?"

"Come on," said Eve excitedly. "Let's start. Take the diamond out and say what you said last night."

Mr Leathern said in his deep melancholy voice:

"I do apologize for my offspring. She gets kinder worked up -"

"That'll do, Pops," said Eve. "Now then, Mr Pointz -"

Smiling, Mr Pointz fumbled in an inner pocket. He drew something out. It lay on the palm of his hand, blinking in the light.

A diamond...

Rather stiffly, Mr Pointz repeated as far as he could remember his speech of the previous evening on the Merrimaid.

"Perhaps you ladies and gentlemen would like to have a look at this? It's an unusually beautiful stone. I call it the Morning Star and it's by way of being my mascot - goes about with me anywhere. Like to see it?"

He handed it to Lady Marroway, who took it, exclaimed at its beauty and passed it to Mr Leathern who said, "Pretty good - yes, pretty good," in a somewhat artificial manner and in his turn passed it to Llewellyn.

The waiters coming in at that moment there was a slight hitch in the proceedings. When they had gone again, Evan said, "Very fine stone" and passed it to Leo Stein who did not trouble to make any comment but handed it quickly on to Eve.

"How perfectly lovely," cried Eve in a high affected voice.

"Oh!" She gave a cry of consternation as it slipped from her hand. "I've dropped it."

She pushed back her chair and got down to grope under the table. Sir George at her right, bent also. A glass got swept off the table in the confusion. Stein, Llewellyn and Mrs Rustington all helped in the search. Finally Lady Marroway joined in.

Only Mr Pointz took no part in the proceedings.

He remained in his seat sipping his wine and smiling sardonically.

"Oh, dear," said Eve, still in her artificial manner. "How dreadful! Where can it have rolled to? I can't find it anywhere."

One by one the assistant searchers rose to their feet.

"It's disappeared all right, Pointz," said Sir George, smiling.

"Very nicely done," said Mr Pointz, nodding approval. "You'd make a very good actress, Eve. Now the question is, have you hidden it somewhere or have you got it on you?"

"Search me," said Eve dramatically.

Mr Pointz' eye sought out a large screen in the corner of the room.

He nodded towards it and then looked at Lady Marroway and Mrs Rustington.

"If you ladies will be so good -"

"Why, certainly," said Lady Marroway, smiling.

The two women rose.

Lady Marroway said,

"Don't be afraid, Mr Pointz. We'll vet her properly."

The three went behind the screen.

The room was hot. Evan Llewellyn flung open the window. A news vender was passing. Evan threw down a coin and the man threw up a paper.

Llewellyn unfolded it.

"Hungarian situation none too good," he said.

"That the local rag?" asked Sir George. "There's a horse I'm interested in ought to have run at Haldon today - Natty Boy."

"Leo," said Mr Pointz. "Lock the door. We don't want those damned waiters popping in and out till this business is over."

"Natty Boy won three to one," said Evan.

"Rotten odds," said Sir George.

"Mostly Regatta news," said Evan, glancing over the sheet.

The three young women came out from the screen.

"Not a sign of it," said Janet Rustington.

"You can take it from me she hasn't got it on her," said Lady Marroway.

Mr Pointz thought he would be quite ready to take it from her. There was a grim tone in her voice and he felt no doubt that the search had been thorough.

"Say, Eve, you haven't swallowed it?" asked Mr Leathern anxiously. "Because maybe that wouldn't be too good for you."

"I'd have seen her do that," said Leo Stein quietly. "I was watching her. She didn't put anything in her mouth."

"I couldn't swallow a great thing all points like that," said Eve. She put her hands on her hips and looked at Mr Pointz. "What about it, big boy?" she asked.

"You stand over there where you are and don't move," said that gentleman.

Among them, the men stripped the table and turned it upside down. Mr Pointz examined every inch of it. Then he transferred his attention to the chair on which Eve had been sitting and those on either side of her.

The thoroughness of the search left nothing to be desired. The other four men joined in and the women also. Eve Leathern stood by the wall near the screen and laughed with intense enjoyment.

Five minutes later Mr Pointz rose with a slight groan from his knees and dusted his trousers sadly. His pristine freshness was somewhat impaired.

"Eve," he said. "I take off my hat to you. You're the finest thing in jewel thieves I've ever come across. What you've done with that stone beats me. As far as I can see it must be in the room as it isn't on you. I give you best."

"Are the stockings mine?" demanded Eve.

"They're yours, young lady."

"Eve, my child, where can you have hidden it?" demanded Mrs Rustington curiously.

Eve pranced forward.

"I'll show you. You'll all be just mad with yourselves."

She went across to the side table where the things from the dinner table had been roughly stacked. She picked up her little black evening bag.

"Right under your eyes. Right..."

Her voice, gay and triumphant, trailed off suddenly.

"Oh," she said. "Oh..."

"What's the matter, honey?" said her father.

Eve whispered: "It's gone... it's gone..."

"What's all this?" asked Pointz, coming forward.

Eve turned to him impetuously.

"It was like this. This pochette of mine has a big paste stone in the middle of the clasp. It fell out last night and just when you were showing that diamond round I noticed that it was much the same size. And so I thought in the night what a good idea for a robbery it would be to wedge your diamond into the gap with a bit of plasticine. I felt sure nobody would ever spot it. That's what I did tonight. First I dropped it - then went down after it with the bag in my hand, stuck it into the gap with a bit of plasticine which I had handy, put my bag on the table and went on pretending to look for the diamond. I thought it would be like the Purloined Letter - you know - lying there in full view under all your noses - and just looking like a common bit of rhinestone. And it was a good plan - none of you did notice."

"I wonder," said Mr Stein.

"What did you say?"

Mr Pointz took the bag, looked at the empty hole with a fragment of plasticine still adhering to it and said slowly: "It may have fallen out. We'd better look again."

The search was repeated, but this time it was a curiously silent business. An atmosphere of tension pervaded the room.

Finally everyone in turn gave it up. They stood looking at each other.

"It's not in this room," said Stein.

"And nobody's left the room," said Sir George significantly.

There was a moment's pause. Eve burst into tears.

Her father patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there," he said awkwardly.

Sir George turned to Leo Stein.

"Mr Stein," he said. "Just now you murmured something under your breath. When I asked you to repeat it, you said it was nothing. But as a matter of fact I heard what you said. Miss Eve had just said that none of us noticed the place where she had put the diamond. The words you murmured were: 'I wonder.' What we have to face is the probability that one person did notice - that that person is in this room now. I suggest that the only fair and honorable thing is for every one present to submit to a search. The diamond cannot have left the room."

When Sir George played the part of the old English gentleman, none could play it better. His voice rang with sincerity and indignation.

"Bit unpleasant, all this," said Mr Pointz unhappily.

"It's all my fault," sobbed Eve. "I didn't mean -"

"Buck up, kiddo," said Mr Stein kindly. "Nobody's blaming you."

Mr Leathern said in his slow pedantic manner,

"Why, certainly, I think that Sir George's suggestion will meet with the fullest approval from all of us. It does from me."

"I agree," said Evan Llewellyn.

Mrs Rustington looked at Lady Marroway who nodded a brief assent. The two of them went back behind the screen and the sobbing Eve accompanied them.

A waiter knocked on the door and was told to go away.

Five minutes later eight people looked at each other incredulously.

The Morning Star had vanished into space...

Mr Parker Pyne looked thoughtfully at the dark agitated face of the young man opposite him.

"Of course," he said. "You're Welsh, Mr Llewellyn."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Mr Parker Pyne waved a large, well-cared-for hand.

"Nothing at all, I admit. I am interested in the classification of emotional reactions as exemplified by certain racial types. That is all. Let us return to the consideration of your particular problem."

"I don't really know why I came to you," said Evan Llewellyn. His hands twitched nervously, and his dark face had a haggard look. He did not look at Mr Parker Pyne and that gentleman's scrutiny seemed to make him uncomfortable. "I don't know why I came to you," he repeated. "But where the hell can I go? And what the hell can I do? It's the powerlessness of not being able to do anything at all that gets me... I saw your advertisement and I remembered that a chap had once spoken of you and said that you got results... And - well - I came! I suppose I was a fool. It's the sort of position nobody can do anything about."

"Not at all," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I am the proper person to come to. I am a specialist in unhappiness. This business has obviously caused you a good deal of pain. You are sure the facts are exactly as you have told me?"

"I don't think I've left out anything. Pointz brought out the diamond and passed it around - that wretched American child stuck it on her ridiculous bag and when we came to look at the bag, the diamond was gone. It wasn't on anyone - old Pointz himself even was searched - he suggested it himself - and I'll swear it was nowhere in that room! And nobody left the room."

"No waiters, for instance?" suggested Mr Parker Pyne.

Llewellyn shook his head.

"They went out before the girl began messing about with the diamond, and afterwards Pointz locked the door so as to keep them out. No, it lies between one of us."

"It would certainly seem so," said Mr Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

"That damned evening paper," said Evan Lewellyn bitterly. "I saw it come into their minds - that that was the only way -"

"Just tell me again exactly what occurred."

"It was perfectly simple. I threw open the window, whistled to the man, threw down a copper and he tossed me up the paper. And there it is; you see - the only possible way the diamond could have left the room - thrown by me to an accomplice waiting in the street below."

"Not the only possible way," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"What other way can you suggest?"

"If you didn't throw it out, there must have been some other way."

"Oh, I see. I hoped you meant something more definite than that. Well, I can only say that I didn't throw it out. I can't expect you to believe me - or anyone else."

"Oh, yes, I believe you," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"You do? Why?"

"Not a criminal type," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Not, that is, the particular criminal type that steals jewelry. There are crimes, of course, that you might commit - but we won't enter into that subject. At any rate I do not see you as the purloiner of the Morning Star."

"Everyone else does though," said Llewellyn bitterly.

"I see," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"They looked at me in a queer sort of way at the time. Marroway picked up the paper and just glanced over at the window. He didn't say anything. But Pointz cottoned on to it quick enough! I could see what they thought. There hasn't been any open accusation, that's the devil of it."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded sympathetically.

"It is worse than that," he said.

"Yes. It's just suspicion. I've had a fellow round asking questions - routine inquiries, he called it. One of the new dress-shirted lot of police, I suppose. Very tactful - nothing at all hinted. Just interested in the fact that I'd been hard up and was suddenly cutting a bit of a splash."

"And were you?"

"Yes - some luck with a horse or two. Unluckily my bets were made on the course - there's nothing to show that that's how the money came in. They can't disprove it, of course - but that's just the sort of easy lie a fellow would invent if he didn't want to show where the money came from."

"I agree. Still they will have to have a good deal more than that to go upon."

"Oh! I'm not afraid of actually being arrested and charged with the theft. In a way that would be easier - one would know where one was. It's the ghastly fact that all those people believe I took it."

"One person in particular?"

"What do you mean?"

"A suggestion - nothing more -" Again Mr Parker Pyne waved his comfortable-looking hand. "There was one person in particular, wasn't there? Shall we say Mrs Rustington?"

Llewellyn's dark face flushed.

"Why pitch on her?"

"Oh, my dear sir - there is obviously someone whose opinion matters to you greatly - probably a lady. What ladies were there? An American flapper? Lady Marroway? But you would probably rise not fall in Lady Marroway's estimation if you had brought off such a coup. I know something of the lady. Clearly then, Mrs Rustington."

Llewellyn said with something of an effort, "She - she's had rather an unfortunate experience. Her husband was a down and out rotter. It's made her unwilling to trust anyone. She - if she thinks -"

He found it difficult to go on.

"Quite so," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I see the matter is important. It must be cleared up."

Evan gave a short laugh.

"That's easy to say."

"And quite easy to do," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes - the problem is so clear cut. So many possibilities are ruled out. The answer must really be extremely simple. Indeed already I have a kind of glimmering -"

Llewellyn stared at him incredulously.

Mr Parker Pyne drew a pad of paper towards him and picked up a pen.

"Perhaps you would give me a brief description of the party."

"Haven't I already done so?"

"Their personal appearance - color of hair and so on."

"But, Mr Parker Pyne, what can that have to do with it?"

"A good deal, young man, a good deal. Classification and so on."

Somewhat unbelievingly, Evan described the personal appearance of the members of the yachting party.

Mr Parker Pyne made a note or two, pushed away the pad and said:

"Excellent. By the way, did you say a wineglass was broken?"

Evan stared again.

"Yes, it was knocked off the table and then it got stepped on."

"Nasty thing, splinters of glass," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Whose wine-glass was it?"

"I think it was the child's - Eve."

"Ah! - and who sat next to her on that side?"

"Sir George Marroway."

"You didn't see which of them knocked it off the table?"

"Afraid I didn't. Does it matter?"

"Not really. No. That was a superfluous question. Well -" he stood up - "good morning, Mr Llewellyn. Will you call again in three days' time? I think the whole thing will be quite satisfactorily cleared up by then."

"Are you joking, Mr Parker Pyne?"

"I never joke on professional matters, my dear sir. It would occasion distrust in my clients. Shall we say Friday at 11:30? Thank you."

Evan entered Mr Parker Pyne's office on the Friday morning in a considerable turmoil. Hope and skepticism fought for mastery.

Mr Parker Pyne rose to meet him with a beaming smile.

"Good morning, Mr Llewellyn. Sit down. Have a cigarette?"

Llewellyn waved aside the proffered box.

"Well?" he said.

"Very well indeed," said Mr Parker Pyne. "The police arrested the gang last night."

"The gang? What gang?"

"The Amalfi gang. I thought of them at once when you told me your story. I recognized their methods and once you had described the guests, well, there was no doubt at all in my mind."

"Who are the Amalfi gang?"

"Father, son and daughter-in-law - that is if Pietro and Maria are really married - which some doubt."

"I don't understand."

"It's quite simple. The name is Italian and no doubt the origin is Italian, but old Amalfi was born in America. His methods are usually the same. He impersonates a real business man, introduces himself to some prominent figure in the jewel business in some European country and then plays his little trick. In this case he was deliberately on the track of the Morning Star. Pointz' idiosyncrasy was well known in the trade. Maria Amalfi played the part of his daughter (amazing creature, twenty-seven at least, and nearly always plays a part of sixteen)."

"Not Eve!" gasped Llewellyn.

"Exactly. The third member of the gang got himself taken on as an extra waiter at the Royal George - it was holiday time, remember, and they would need extra staff. He may even have bribed a regular man to stay away. The scene is set. Eve challenges old Pointz and he takes on the bet. He passes round the diamond as he had done the night before. The waiters enter the room and Leathern retains the stone until they have left the room. When they do leave, the diamond leaves also, neatly attached with a morsel of chewing gum to the underside of the plate that Pietro bears away. So simple!"

"But I saw it after that."

"No, no, you saw a paste replica, good enough to deceive a casual glance. Stein, you told me, hardly looked at it. Eve drops it, sweeps off a glass too and steps firmly on stone and glass together. Miraculous disappearance of diamond. Both Eve and Leathern can submit to as much searching as anyone pleases."

"Well - I'm -" Evan shook his head, at a loss for words.

"You say you recognized the gang from my description. Had they worked this trick before?"

"Not exactly - but it was their kind of business. Naturally my attention was at once directed to the girl Eve."

"Why? I didn't suspect her - nobody did. She seemed such a - such a child."

"That is the peculiar genius of Maria Amalfi. She is more like a child than any child could possibly be! And then the plasticine! This bet was supposed to have arisen quite spontaneously - yet the little lady had some plasticine with her all handy. That spoke of premeditation. My suspicions fastened on her at once."

Llewellyn rose to his feet.

"Well, Mr Parker Pyne, I'm no end obliged to you."

"Classification," murmured Mr Parker Pyne. "The classification of criminal types - it interests me."

"You'll let me know how much - er -"

"My fee will be quite moderate," said Mr Parker Pyne. "It will not make too big a hole in the - er - horse racing profits. All the same, young man, I should, I think, leave the horses alone in future. Very uncertain animal, the horse."

"That's all right," said Evan.

He shook Mr Parker Pyne by the hand and strode from the office.

He hailed a taxi and gave the address of Janet Rustington's flat.

He felt in a mood to carry all before him.

THE LOVE DETECTIVES

Little Mr Satterthwaite looked thoughtfully across at his host. The friendship between these two men was an odd one. The colonel was a simple country gentleman whose passion in life was sport. The few weeks that he spent perforce in London, he spent unwillingly. Mr Satterthwaite, on the other hand, was a town bird. He was an authority on French cooking, on ladies' dress, and on all the latest scandals. His passion was observing human nature, and he was an expert in his own special line - that of an onlooker at life.

It would seem, therefore, that he and Colonel Melrose would have little in common, for the colonel had no interest in his neighbours' affairs and a horror of any kind of emotion. The two men were friends mainly because their fathers before them had been friends. Also they knew the same people and had reactionary views about nouveaux riches.

It was about half past seven. The two men were sitting in the colonel's comfortable study, and Melrose was describing a run of the previous winter with a keen hunting man's enthusiasm. Mr Satterthwaite, whose knowledge of horses consisted chiefly of the time-honoured Sunday morning visit to the stables which still obtains in old-fashioned country houses, listened with his invariable politeness.

The sharp ringing of the telephone interrupted Melrose. He crossed to the table and took up the receiver.

"Hello, yes - Colonel Melrose speaking. What's that?" His whole demeanour altered - became stiff and official. It was the magistrate speaking now, not the sportsman.

He listened for some moments, then said laconically, "Right, Curtis. I'll be over at once." He replaced the receiver and turned to his guest. "Sir James Dwighton has been found in his library - murdered."

"What?"

Mr Satterthwaite was startled - thrilled.

"I must go over to Alderway at once. Care to come with me?"

Mr Satterthwaite remembered that the colonel was chief constable of the county.

"If I shan't be in the way - " He hesitated.

"Not at all. That was Inspector Curtis telephoning. Good, honest fellow, but no brains. I'd be glad if you would come with me, Satterthwaite. I've got an idea this is going to turn out a nasty business."

"Have they got the fellow who did it?"

"No," replied Melrose shortly.

Mr Satterthwaite's trained ear detected a nuance of reserve behind the curt negative. He began to go over in his mind all that he knew of the Dwightons.

A pompous old fellow, the late Sir James, brusque in his manner. A man that might easily make enemies. Veering on sixty, with grizzled hair and a florid face. Reputed to be tight-fisted in the extreme.

His mind went on to Lady Dwighton. Her image floated before him, young, auburn-haired, slender. He remembered various rumours, hints, odd bits of gossip. So that was it - that was why Melrose looked so glum. Then he pulled himself up - his imagination was running away with him.

Five minutes later Mr Satterthwaite took his place beside his host in the latter's little two seater, and they drove off together into the night.

The colonel was a taciturn man. They had gone quite a mile and a half before he spoke. Then he jerked out abruptly. "You know 'em, I suppose?"

"The Dwightons? I know all about them, of course." Who was there Mr Satterthwaite didn't know all about? "I've met him once, I think, and her rather oftener."

"Pretty woman," said Melrose.

"Beautiful!" declared Mr Satterthwaite.

"Think so?"

"A pure Renaissance type," declared Mr Satterthwaite, warming up to his theme. "She acted in those theatricals - the charity matinee, you know, last spring. I was very much struck. Nothing modern about her - a pure survival. One can imagine her in the doge's palace, or as Lucrezia Borgia."

The colonel let the car swerve slightly, and Mr Satterthwaite came to an abrupt stop. He wondered what fatality had brought the name of Lucrezia Borgia to his tongue. Under the circumstances -

"Dwighton was not poisoned, was he?" he asked abruptly.

Melrose looked at him sideways, somewhat curiously.

"Why do you ask that, I wonder?" he said.

"Oh, I - I don't know." Mr Satterthwaite was flustered. "I - It just occurred to me."

"Well, he wasn't," said Melrose gloomily. "If you want to know, he was crashed on the head."

"With a blunt instrument," murmured Mr Satterthwaite, nodding his head sagely.

"Don't talk like a damned detective story, Satterthwaite. He was hit on the head with a bronze figure."

"Oh," said Satterthwaite, and relapsed into silence.

"Know anything of a chap called Paul Delangua?" asked Melrose after a minute or two.

"Yes. Good-looking young fellow."

"I daresay women would call him so," growled the colonel.

"You don't like him?"

"No, I don't."

"I should have thought you would have. He rides very well."

"Like a foreigner at the horse show. Full of monkey tricks."

Mr Satterthwaite suppressed a smile. Poor old Melrose was so very British in his outlook. Agreeably conscious himself of a cosmopolitan point of view, Mr Satterthwaite was able to deplore the insular attitude toward life.

"Has he been down in this part of the world?" he asked.

"He's been staying at Alderway with the Dwightons. The rumour goes that Sir James kicked him out a week ago."

"Why?"

"Found him making love to his wife, I suppose. What the hell - "

There was a violent swerve, and a jarring impact.

"Most dangerous crossroads in England," said Melrose. "All the same, the other fellow should have sounded his horn. We're on the main road. I fancy we've damaged him rather more than he has damaged us."

He sprang out. A figure alighted from the other car and joined him. Fragments of speech reached Satterthwaite.

"Entirely my fault, I'm afraid," the stranger was saying. "But I do not know this part of the country very well, and there's absolutely no sign of any kind to show you're coming onto the main road."

The colonel, mollified, rejoined suitably. The two men bent together over the stranger's car, which a chauffeur was already examining.

The conversation became highly technical.

"A matter of half an hour, I'm afraid," said the stranger. "But don't let me detain you. I'm glad your car escaped injury as well as it did."

"As a matter of fact - " the colonel was beginning, but he was interrupted.

Mr Satterthwaite, seething with excitement, hopped out of the car with a birdlike action, and seized the stranger warmly by the hand.

"It is! I thought I recognized the voice," he declared excitedly. "What an extraordinary thing. What a very extraordinary thing."

"Eh?" said Colonel Melrose.

"Mr Harley Quin. Melrose, I'm sure you've heard me speak many times of Mr Quin?"

Colonel Melrose did not seem to remember the fact, but he assisted politely at the scene while Mr Satterthwaite was chirruping gaily on. "I haven't seen you - let me see - "

"Since the night at the Bells and Motley," said the other quietly.

"The Bells and Motley, eh?" said the colonel.

"An inn," explained Mr Satterthwaite.

"What an odd name for an inn."

"Only an old one," said Mr Quin. "There was a time, remember, when bells and motley were more common in England than they are nowadays."

"I suppose so, yes, no doubt you are right," said Melrose vaguely. He blinked. By a curious effect of light - the headlights of one car and the red tail-light of the other - Mr Quin seemed for a moment to be dressed in motley himself. But it was only the light.

"We can't leave you here stranded on the road," continued Mr Satterthwaite. "You must come along with us. There's plenty of room for three, isn't there, Melrose?"

"Oh rather." But the colonel's voice was a little doubtful. "The only thing is," he remarked, "the job we're on. Eh, Satterthwaite?"

Mr Satterthwaite stood stock-still. Ideas leaped and flashed over him. He positively shook with excitement.

"No," he cried. "No, I should have known better! There is no chance where you are concerned, Mr Quin. It was not an accident that we all met tonight at the crossroads."

Colonel Melrose stared at his friend in astonishment. Mr Satterthwaite took him by the arm.

"You remember what I told you - about our friend Derek Capel? The motive for his suicide, which no one could guess? It was Mr Quin who solved that problem - and there have been others since. He shows you things that are there all the time, but which you haven't seen. He's marvellous."

"My dear Satterthwaite, you are making me blush," said Mr Quin, smiling. "As far as I can remember, these discoveries were all made by you, not by me."

"They were made because you were there," said Mr Satterthwaite with intense conviction.

"Well," said Colonel Melrose, clearing his throat uncomfortably. "We mustn't waste any more time. Let's get on."

He climbed into the driver's seat. He was not too well pleased at having the stranger foisted upon him through Mr Satterthwaite's enthusiasm, but he had no valid objection to offer, and he was anxious to get on to Alderway as fast as possible.

Mr Satterthwaite urged Mr Quin in next, and himself took the outside seat. The car was a roomy one and took three without undue squeezing.

"So you are interested in crime, Mr Quin?" said the colonel, doing his best to be genial.

"No, not exactly in crime."

"What, then?"

Mr Quin smiled. "Let us ask Mr Satterthwaite. He is a very shrewd observer."

"I think," said Satterthwaite slowly, "I may be wrong, but I think - that Mr Quin is interested in - lovers."

He blushed as he said the last word, which is one no Englishman can pronounce without self-consciousness. Mr Satterthwaite brought it out apologetically, and with an effect of inverted commas.

"By gad!" said the colonel, startled and silenced.

He reflected inwardly that this seemed to be a very rum friend of Satterthwaite's. He glanced at him sideways. The fellow looked all right - quite a normal young chap. Rather dark, but not at all foreign-looking.

"And now," said Satterthwaite importantly, "I must tell you all about the case."

He talked for some ten minutes. Sitting there in the darkness, rushing through the night, he had an intoxicating feeling of power. What did it matter if he were only a looker-on at life? He had words at his command, he was master of them, he could string them to a pattern - a strange Renaissance pattern composed of the beauty of Laura Dwighton, with her white arms and red hair - and the shadowy dark figure of Paul Delangua, whom women found handsome.

Set that against the background of Alderway - Alderway that had stood since the days of Henry VII and, some said, before that. Alderway that was

English to the core, with its clipped yew and its old beak barn and the fishpond, where monks had kept their carp for Fridays.

In a few deft strokes he had etched in Sir James, a Dwighton who was a true descendant of the old De Wittons, who long ago had wrung money out of the land and locked it fast in coffers, so that whoever else had fallen on evil days, the masters of Alderway had never become impoverished.

At last Mr Satterthwaite ceased. He was sure, had been sure all along, of the sympathy of his audience. He waited now the word of praise which was his due. It came.

"You are an artist, Mr Satterthwaite."

"I - I do my best." The little man was suddenly humble.

They had turned in at the lodge gates some minutes ago. Now the car drew up in front of the doorway, and a police constable came hurriedly down the steps to meet them.

"Good evening, sir. Inspector Curtis is in the library."

"Right."

Melrose ran up the steps followed by the other two. As the three of them passed across the wide hall, an elderly butler peered from a doorway apprehensively. Melrose nodded to him.

"Evening, Miles. This is a sad business."

"It is indeed," the other quavered. "I can hardly believe it, sir; indeed I can't. To think that anyone should strike down the master."

"Yes, yes," said Melrose, cutting him short. "I'll have talk with you presently."

He strode on to the library. There a big, soldierly-looking inspector greeted him with respect.

"Nasty business, sir. I have not disturbed things. No fingerprints on the weapon. Whoever did it knew his business."

Mr Satterthwaite looked at the bowed figure sitting at the big writing table, and looked hurriedly away again. The man had been struck down from behind, a smashing blow that had crashed in the skull. The sight was not a pretty one.

The weapon lay on the floor - a bronze figure about two feet high, the base of it stained and wet. Mr Satterthwaite bent over it curiously.

"A Venus," he said softly. "So he was struck down by Venus."

He found food for poetic meditation in the thought.

"The windows," said the inspector, "were all closed and bolted on the inside."

He paused significantly.

"Making an inside job of it," said the chief constable reluctantly. "Well - well, we'll see."

The murdered man was dressed in golf clothes, and a bag of golf clubs had been flung untidily across a big leather couch.

"Just come in from the links," explained the inspector, following the chief constable's glance. "At five-fifteen, that was. Had tea brought here by the butler. Later he rang for his valet to bring him down a pair of soft slippers. As far as we can tell, the valet was the last person to see him alive."

Melrose nodded, and turned his attention once more to the writing table.

A good many of the ornaments had been overturned and broken. Prominent among these was a big dark enamel clock, which lay on its side in the very centre of the table.

The inspector cleared his throat.

"That's what you might call a piece of luck, sir," he said. "As you see, it's stopped. At half past six. That gives us the time of the crime. Very convenient."

The colonel was staring at the clock.

"As you say," he remarked. "Very convenient." He paused a minute, and then added, "Too damned convenient! I don't like it, Inspector."

He looked around at the other two. His eye sought Mr Quin's with a look of appeal in it.

"Damn it all," he said. "It's too neat. You know what I mean. Things don't happen like that."

"You mean," murmured Mr Quin, "that clocks don't fall like that?"

Melrose stared at him for a moment, then back at the clock, which had that pathetic and innocent look familiar to objects which have been suddenly bereft of their dignity. Very carefully Colonel Melrose replaced it on its legs again. He struck the table a violent blow. The clock rocked, but it did not fall. Melrose repeated the action, and very slowly, with a kind of unwillingness, the clock fell over on its back.

"What time was the crime discovered?" demanded Melrose sharply.

"Just about seven o'clock, sir."

"Who discovered it?"

"The butler."

"Fetch him in," said the chief constable. "I'll see him now. Where is Lady Dwighton, by the way?"

"Lying down, sir. Her maid says that she's prostrated and can't see anyone."

Melrose nodded, and Inspector Curtis went in search of the butler. Mr Quin was looking thoughtfully into the fireplace. Mr Satterthwaite followed his example. He blinked at the smouldering logs for a minute or two, and then something bright lying in the grate caught his eye. He stooped and picked up a little sliver of curved glass.

"You wanted me, sir?"

It was the butler's voice, still quavering and uncertain.

Mr Satterthwaite slipped the fragment of glass into his waistcoat pocket and turned round.

The old man was standing in the doorway.

"Sit down," said the chief constable kindly. "You're shaking all over. It's been a shock to you, I expect."

"It has indeed, sir."

"Well, I shan't keep you long. Your master came in just after five, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. He ordered tea to be brought to him here. Afterward, when I came to take it away, he asked for Jennings to be sent to him - that's his valet, sir."

"What time was that?"

"About ten minutes past six, sir."

"Yes - well?"

"I sent word to Jennings, sir. And it wasn't till I came in here to shut the windows and draw the curtains at seven o'clock that I saw - "

Melrose cut him short. "Yes, yes, you needn't go into all that. You didn't touch the body, or disturb anything, did you?"

"Oh! No indeed, sir! I went as fast as I could go to the telephone to ring up the police."

"And then?"

"I told Jane - her ladyship's maid, sir - to break the news to her ladyship."

"You haven't seen your mistress at all this evening?"

Colonel Melrose put the question casually enough, but Mr Satterthwaite's keen ears caught anxiety behind the words.

"Not to speak to, sir. Her ladyship has remained in her own apartments since the tragedy."

"Did you see her before?"

The question came sharply, and everyone in the room noted the hesitation before the butler replied.

"I - I just caught a glimpse of her, sir, descending the staircase."

"Did she come in here?"

Mr Satterthwaite held his breath.

"I - I think so, sir."

"What time was that?"

You might have heard a pin drop. Did the old man know, Mr Satterthwaite wondered, what hung on his answer?

"It was just upon half past six, sir."

Colonel Melrose drew a deep breath. "That will do, thank you. Just send Jennings, the valet, to me, will you?"

Jennings answered the summons with promptitude. A narrow-faced man with a catlike tread. Something sly and secretive about him.

A man, thought Mr Satterthwaite, who would easily murder his master if he could be sure of not being found out.

He listened eagerly to the man's answers to Colonel Melrose's questions. But his story seemed straightforward enough. He had brought his master down some soft hide slippers and removed the brogues.

"What did you do after that, Jennings?"

"I went back to the stewards' room, sir."

"At what time did you leave your master?"

"It must have been just after a quarter past six, sir."

"Where were you at half past six, Jennings?"

"In the stewards' room, sir."

Colonel Melrose dismissed the man with a nod. He looked across at Curtis inquiringly.

"Quite correct, sir, I checked that up. He was in the stewards' room from about six-twenty until seven o'clock."

"Then that lets him out," said the chief constable a trifle regretfully. "Besides, there's no motive."

They looked at each other.

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," said the colonel.

A scared-looking lady's maid appeared.

"If you please, her ladyship has heard that Colonel Melrose is here and she would like to see him."

"Certainly," said Melrose. "I'll come at once. Will you show me the way?"

But a hand pushed the girl aside. A very different figure now stood in the doorway. Laura Dwighton looked like a visitor from another world.

She was dressed in a clinging medieval tea gown of dull blue brocade. Her auburn hair was parted in the middle and brought down over her ears. Conscious of the fact she had a style of her own, Lady Dwighton had never had her hair cut. It was drawn back into a simple knot on the nape of her neck. Her arms were bare.

One of them was outstretched to steady herself against the frame of the doorway, the other hung down by her side, clasping a book. She looks, Mr Satterthwaite thought, like a Madonna from an early Italian canvas.

She stood there, swaying slightly from side to side. Colonel Melrose sprang toward her.

"I've come to tell you - to tell you - "

Her voice was low and rich. Mr Satterthwaite was so entranced with the dramatic value of the scene that he had forgotten its reality.

"Please, Lady Dwighton - " Melrose had an arm round her, supporting her. He took her across the hall into a small anteroom, its walls hung with faded silk. Quin and Satterthwaite followed. She sank down on the low settee, her head resting back on a rust-coloured cushion, her eyelids closed. The three men watched her. Suddenly she opened her eyes and sat up. She spoke very quietly.

"I killed him," she said. "That's what I came to tell you. I killed him!"

There was a moment's agonized silence. Mr Satterthwaite's heart missed a beat.

"Lady Dwighton," said Melrose. "You've had a great shock - you're unstrung. I don't think you quite know what you're saying."

Would she draw back now - while there was yet time?

"I know perfectly what I'm saying. It was I who shot him."

Two of the men in the room gasped, the other made no sound. Laura Dwighton leaned still farther forward.

"Don't you understand? I came down and shot him. I admit it."

The book she had been holding in her hand clattered to the floor. There was a paper cutter in it, a thing shaped like a dagger with a jewelled hilt. Mr Satterthwaite picked it up mechanically and placed it on the table. As he did so he thought, That's a dangerous toy. You could kill a man with that.

"Well - " Laura Dwighton's voice was impatient. "- what are you going to do about it? Arrest me? Take me away?"

Colonel Melrose found his voice with difficulty.

"What you have told me is very serious, Lady Dwighton. I must ask you to go to your room till I have - er - made arrangements."

She nodded and rose to her feet. She was quite composed now, grave and cold.

As she turned toward the door, Mr Quin spoke. "What did you do with the revolver, Lady Dwighton?"

A flicker of uncertainty passed across her face. "I - I dropped it there on the floor. No, I think I threw it out of the window - oh! I can't remember now. What does it matter? I hardly knew what I was doing. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"No," said Mr Quin. "I hardly think it matters."

She looked at him in perplexity with a shade of something that might have been alarm. Then she flung back her head and went imperiously out of the room. Mr Satterthwaite hastened after her. She might, he felt, collapse at any minute. But she was already halfway up the staircase, displaying no sign of her earlier weakness. The scared-looking maid was standing at the foot of the stairway, and Mr Satterthwaite spoke to her authoritatively.

"Look after your mistress," he said.

"Yes, sir." The girl prepared to ascend after the blue-robed figure. "Oh, please, sir, they don't suspect him, do they?"

"Suspect whom?"

"Jennings, sir. Oh! Indeed, sir, he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Jennings? No, of course not. Go and look after your mistress."

"Yes, sir."

The girl ran quickly up the staircase. Mr Satterthwaite returned to the room he had just vacated.

Colonel Melrose was saying heavily, "Well, I'm jiggered. There's more in this than meets the eye. It - it's like those dashed silly things heroines do in many novels."

"It's unreal," agreed Mr Satterthwaite. "It's like something on the stage."

Mr Quin nodded. "Yes, you admire the drama, do you not? You are a man who appreciates good acting when you see it."

Mr Satterthwaite looked hard at him.

In the silence that followed a far-off sound came to their ears.

"Sounds like a shot," said Colonel Melrose. "One of the keepers, I daresay. That's probably what she heard. Perhaps she went down to see. She wouldn't go close or examine the body. She'd leap at once to the conclusion - "

"Mr Delangua, sir." It was the old butler who spoke, standing apologetically in the doorway.

"Eh?" said Melrose. "What's that?"

"Mr Delangua is here, sir, and would like to speak to you if he may."

Colonel Melrose leaned back in his chair. "Show him in," he said grimly.

A moment later Paul Delangua stood in the doorway. As Colonel Melrose had hinted, there was something un-English about him - the easy grace of his movements, the dark, handsome face, the eyes set a little too near together. There hung about him the air of the Renaissance. He and Laura Dwighton suggested the same atmosphere.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Delangua. He made a little theatrical bow.

"I don't know what your business may be, Mr Delangua," said Colonel Melrose sharply, "but if it is nothing to do with the matter at hand - "

Delangua interrupted him with a laugh. "On the contrary," he said, "it has everything to do with it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Delangua quietly, "that I have come to give myself up for the murder of Sir James Dwighton."

"You know what you are saying?" said Melrose gravely.

"Perfectly." The young man's eyes were riveted to the table.

"I don't understand - "

"Why I give myself up? Call it remorse - call it anything you please. I stabbed him, right enough - you may be quite sure of that." He nodded toward the table. "You've got the weapon there, I see. A very handy little tool. Lady Dwighton unfortunately left it lying around in a book, and I happened to snatch it up."

"One minute," said Colonel Melrose. "Am I to understand that you admit stabbing Sir James with this?" He held the dagger aloft.

"Quite right. I stole in through the window, you know. He had his back to me. It was quite easy. I left the same way."

"Through the window?"

"Through the window, of course."

"And what time was this?"

Delangua hesitated. "Let me see - I was talking to the keeper fellow - that was at a quarter past six. I heard the church tower chime. It must have been - well, say somewhere about half past."

A grim smile came to the colonel's lips.

"Quite right, young man," he said. "Half past six was the time. Perhaps you've heard that already? But this is altogether a most peculiar murder!"

"Why?"

"So many people confess to it," said Colonel Melrose.

They heard the sharp intake of the other's breath.

"Who else has confessed to it?" he asked in a voice that he vainly strove to render steady.

"Lady Dwighton."

Delangua threw back his head and laughed in rather a forced manner. "Lady Dwighton is apt to be hysterical," he said lightly. "I shouldn't pay any attention to what she says if I were you."

"I don't think I shall," said Melrose. "But there's another odd thing about this murder."

"What's that?"

"Well," said Melrose, "Lady Dwighton has confessed to having shot Sir James, and you have confessed to having stabbed him. But luckily for both of you, he wasn't shot or stabbed, you see. His skull was smashed in."

"My God!" cried Delangua. "But a woman couldn't possibly do that - "

He stopped, biting his lip. Melrose nodded with the ghost of a smile.

"Often read of it," he volunteered. "Never seen it happen."

"What?"

"Couple of young idiots each accusing themselves because they thought the other had done it," said Melrose. "Now we've got to begin at the beginning."

"The valet," cried Mr Satterthwaite. "That girl just now - I wasn't paying any attention at the time." He paused, striving for coherence. "She was afraid of our suspecting him. There must be some motive that he had and which we don't know, but she does."

Colonel Melrose frowned, then he rang the bell. When it was answered, he said, "Please ask Lady Dwighton if she will be good enough to come down again."

They waited in silence until she came. At sight of Delangua she started and stretched out a hand to save herself from falling. Colonel Melrose came quickly to the rescue.

"It's quite all right, Lady Dwighton. Please don't be alarmed."

"I don't understand. What is Mr Delangua doing here?"

Delangua came over to her, "Laura - Laura - why did you do it?"

"Do it?"

"I know. It was for me - because you thought that - After all, it was natural, I suppose. But, oh! You angel!"

Colonel Melrose cleared his throat. He was a man who disliked emotion and had a horror of anything approaching a 'scene'.

"If you'll allow me to say so, Lady Dwighton, both you and Mr Delangua have had a lucky escape. He had just arrived in his turn to 'confess' to the murder - oh, it's quite all right, he didn't do it! But what we want to know is the truth. No more shillyshallying. The butler says you went into the library at half past six - is that so?"

Laura looked at Delangua. He nodded.

"The truth, Laura," he said. "That is what we want now."

She breathed a deep sigh. "I will tell you."

She sank down on a chair that Mr Satterthwaite had hurriedly pushed forward.

"I did come down. I opened the library door and I saw - " She stopped and swallowed. Mr Satterthwaite leaned forward and patted her hand encouragingly.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. You saw?"

"My husband was lying across the writing table. I saw his head - the blood - oh!" She put her hands to her face.

The chief constable leaned forward.

"Excuse me, Lady Dwighton. You thought Mr Delangua had shot him?"

She nodded. "Forgive me, Paul," she pleaded. "But you said - you said - "

"That I'd shoot him like a dog," said Delangua grimly. "I remember. That was the day I discovered he'd been ill-treating you."

The chief constable kept sternly to the matter in hand.

"Then I am to understand, Lady Dwighton, that you went upstairs again and - er - said nothing. We needn't go into your reason. You didn't touch the body or go near the writing table?"

She shuddered. "No, no. I ran straight out of the room."

"I see, I see. And what time was this exactly? Do you know?"

"It was just half past six when I got back to my bedroom."

"Then at - say five-and-twenty past six, Sir James was already dead." The chief constable looked at the others. "That clock - it was faked, eh? We suspected that all along. Nothing easier than to move the hands to whatever time you wished, but they made a mistake to lay it down on its side like that. Well, that seems to narrow it down the butler or the valet, and I can't believe it's the butler. Tell me, Lady Dwighton, did this man Jennings have any grudge against your husband?"

Laura lifted her face from her hands. "Not exactly a grudge, but - well, James told me only this morning that he'd dismissed him. He'd found him pilfering."

"Ah! Now we're getting at it. Jennings would have been dismissed without a character. A serious matter for him."

"You said something about a clock," said Laura Dwighton. "There's just a chance - if you want to fix the time - James would have been sure to have his little golf watch on him. Mightn't that have been smashed, too, when he fell forward?"

"It's an idea," said the colonel slowly. "But I'm afraid - Curtis!"

The inspector nodded in quick comprehension and left the room. He returned a minute later. On the palm of his hand was a silver watch marked like a golf ball, the kind that are sold for golfers to carry loose in a pocket with balls.

"Here it is, sir," he said, "but I doubt if it will be any good. They're tough, these watches."

The colonel took it from him and held it to his ear.

"It seems to have stopped, anyway," he observed.

He pressed with his thumb, and the lid of the watch flew open. Inside the glass was cracked across.

"Ah!" he said exultantly.

The hand pointed to exactly a quarter past six.

"A very good glass of port, Colonel Melrose," said Mr Quin.

It was half past nine, and the three men had just finished a belated dinner at Colonel Melrose's house. Mr Satterthwaite was particularly jubilant.

"I was quite right," he chuckled. "You can't deny it, Mr Quin. You turned up tonight to save two absurd young people who were both bent on putting their heads into a noose."

"Did I?" said Mr Quin. "Surely not. I did nothing at all."

"As it turned out, it was not necessary," agreed Mr Satterthwaite. "But it might have been. It was touch and go, you know. I shall never forget the moment when Lady Dwighton said, 'I killed him.' I've never seen anything on the stage half as dramatic."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Mr Quin.

"Wouldn't have believed such a thing could happen outside a novel," declared the colonel, for perhaps the twentieth time that night.

"Does it?" asked Mr Quin.

The colonel stared at him, "Damn it, it happened tonight."

"Mind you," interposed Mr Satterthwaite, leaning back and sipping his port, "Lady Dwighton was magnificent, quite magnificent, but she made one mistake. She shouldn't have leaped to the conclusion that her husband had been shot. In the same way Delangua was a fool to assume that he had been stabbed just because the dagger happened to be lying on the table in front of us. It was a mere coincidence that Lady Dwighton should have brought it I down with her."

"Was it?" asked Mr Quin.

"Now if they'd only confined themselves to saying that they'd killed Sir James, without particularizing how - " went on Mr Satterthwaite - "what would have been the result?"

"They might have been believed," said Mr Quin with an odd smile.

"The whole thing was exactly like a novel," said the colonel.

"That's where they got the idea from, I daresay," said Mr Quin.

"Possibly," agreed Mr Satterthwaite. "Things one has read do come back to one in the oddest way." He looked across at Mr Quin. "Of course," he said, "the clock really looked suspicious from the first. One ought never to forget how easy it is to put the hands of a clock or watch forward or back."

Mr Quin nodded and repeated the words. "Forward," he said, and paused. "Or back."

There was something encouraging in his voice. His bright, dark eyes were fixed on Mr Satterthwaite.

"The hands of the clock were put forward," said Mr Satterthwaite. "We know that."

"Were they?" asked Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him. "Do you mean," he said slowly, "that it was the watch which was put back? But that doesn't make sense. It's impossible."

"Not impossible," murmured Mr Quin.

"Well - absurd. To whose advantage could that be?"

"Only, I suppose, to someone who had an alibi for that time."

"By gad!" cried the colonel. "That's the time young Delangua said he was talking to the keeper."

"He told us that very particularly," said Mr Satterthwaite.

They looked at each other. They had an uneasy feeling as of solid ground failing beneath their feet. Facts went spinning round, turning new and unexpected faces. And in the centre of the kaleidoscope was the dark, smiling face of Mr Quin.

"But in that case - " began Melrose " - in that case - "

Mr Satterthwaite, nimble-witted, finished his sentence for him. "It's all the other way round. A plant just the same - but a plant against the valet. Oh, but it can't be! It's impossible. Why each of them accused themselves of the crime."

"Yes," said Mr Quin. "Up till then you suspected them, didn't you?" His voice went on, placid and dreamy. "Just like something out of a book, you said, colonel. They got the idea there. It's what the innocent hero and heroine do. Of course it made you think them innocent - there was the force of tradition behind them. Mr Satterthwaite has been saying all along it was like something on the stage. You were both right. It wasn't real. You've been saying so all along without knowing what you were saying. They'd have told a much better story than that if they'd wanted to be believed."

The two men looked at him helplessly.

"It would be clever," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. "It would be diabolically clever. And I've thought of something else. The butler said he went in at seven to shut the windows - so he must have expected them to be open."

"That's the way Delangua came in,' said Mr Quin. "He killed Sir James with one blow, and he and she together did what they had to do - "

He looked at Mr Satterthwaite, encouraging him to reconstruct the scene. He did so, hesitatingly.

"They smashed the clock and put it on its side. Yes. They altered the watch and smashed it. Then he went out of the window, and she fastened it after him. But there's one thing I don't see. Why bother with the watch at all? Why not simply put back the hands of the clock?"

"The clock was always a little obvious," said Mr Quin. "Anyone might have seen through a rather transparent device like that."

"But surely the watch was too far-fetched. Why, it was pure chance that we ever thought of the watch."

"Oh, no," said Mr Quin. "It was the lady's suggestion, remember."

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him, fascinated.

"And yet, you know," said Mr Quin dreamily, "the one person who wouldn't be likely to overlook the watch would be the valet. Valets know better than anyone what their masters carry in their pockets. If he altered the clock, the valet would have altered the watch, too. They don't understand human nature, those two. They are not like Mr Satterthwaite."

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head.

"I was all wrong," he murmured humbly. "I thought that you had come to save them."

"So I did," said Mr Quin. "Oh! Not those two - the others. Perhaps you didn't notice the lady's maid? She wasn't wearing blue brocade, or acting a dramatic part. But she's really a very pretty girl, and I think she loves that man Jennings very much. I think that between you you'll be able to save her man from getting hanged."

"We've no proof of any kind," said Colonel Melrose heavily.

Mr Quin smiled. "Mr Satterthwaite has."

"I?" Mr Satterthwaite was astonished.

Mr Quin went on.

"You've got a proof that that watch wasn't smashed in Sir James's pocket. You can't smash a watch like that without opening the case. Just try it and see. Someone took the watch out and opened it, set back the hands, smashed the glass, and then shut it and put it back. They never noticed that a fragment of glass was missing."

"Oh!" cried Mr Satterthwaite. His hand flew to his waist-coat pocket. He drew out a fragment of curved glass.

It was his moment.

"With this," said Mr Satterthwaite importantly, "I shall save a man from death."

NEXT TO A DOG

The ladylike woman behind the Registry Office table cleared her throat and peered across at the girl who sat opposite.

"Then you refuse to consider the post? It only came in this morning. A very nice part of Italy, I believe, a widower with a little boy of three and an elderly lady, his mother or aunt."

Joyce Lambert shook her head.

"I can't go out of England," she said in a tired voice; "there are reasons. If only you could find me a daily post?"

Her voice shook slightly - ever so slightly, for she had it well under control. Her dark blue eyes looked appealingly at the woman opposite her.

"It's very difficult, Mrs. Lambert. The only kind of daily governess required is one who has full qualifications. You have none. I have hundreds on my books - literally hundreds." She paused. "You have someone at home you can't leave?"

Joyce nodded.

"A child?"

"No, not a child." And a faint smile flickered across her face.

"Well, it is very unfortunate. I will do my best, of course, but - "

The interview was clearly at an end. Joyce rose. She was biting her lip to keep the tears from springing to her eyes as she emerged from the frowsy office into the street.

"You mustn't," she admonished herself sternly. "Don't be a snivelling little idiot. You're panicking - that's what you're doing - panicking. No good ever came of giving way to panic. It's quite early in the day still and lots of things may happen. Aunt Mary ought to be good for a fortnight anyway. Come on, girl, step out, and don't keep your well-to-do relations waiting."

She walked down Edgware Road, across the park, and then down to Victoria Street, where she turned into the Army and Navy Stores. She went to the lounge and sat down glancing at her watch. It was just half-past one. Five minutes sped by and then an elderly lady with her arms full of parcels bore down upon her.

"Ah! There you are, Joyce. I'm a few minutes late, I'm afraid. The service is not as good as it used to be in the luncheon room. You've had lunch, of course?"

Joyce hesitated a minute or two, then she said quietly: "Yes, thank you."

"I always have mine at half-past twelve," said Aunt Mary, settling herself comfortably with her parcels. "Less rush and a clearer atmosphere. The curried eggs here are excellent."

"Are they?" said Joyce faintly.

She felt that she could hardly bear to think of curried eggs - the hot steam rising from them - the delicious smell! She wrenched her thoughts resolutely aside.

"You look peaky, child," said Aunt Mary, who was herself of a comfortable figure. "Don't go in for this modern fad of eating no meat. All fal-de-lal. A good slice off the joint never did anyone any harm."

Joyce stopped herself from saying "It wouldn't do me any harm now." If only Aunt Mary would stop talking about food. To raise your hopes by asking you to meet her at half past one and then to talk of curried eggs and slices of roast meat - oh! cruel - cruel.

"Well, my dear," said Aunt Mary. "I got your letter - and it was very nice of you to take me at my word. I said I'd be pleased to see you anytime and so I should have been - but as it happens, I've just had an extremely good offer to let the house. Quite too good to be missed, and bringing their own plate and linen. Five months. They come in on Thursday and I go to Harrogate. My rheumatism's been troubling me lately."

"I see," said Joyce. "I'm so sorry."

"So it'll have to be for another time. Always pleased to see you, my dear."

"Thank you, Aunt Mary."

"You know, you do look peaky," said Aunt Mary, considering her attentively. "You're thin, too; no flesh on your bones, and what's happened to your pretty colour? You always had a nice healthy colour. Mind you take plenty of exercise."

"I'm taking plenty of exercise today," said Joyce grimly. She rose. "Well, Aunt Mary, I must be getting along."

Back again - through St. James's Park this time, and so on through Berkeley Square and across Oxford Street and up Edgware Road, past Praed Street to the point where the Edgware Road begins to think of becoming something else. Then aside, through a series of dirty little streets till one particular dingy house was reached.

Joyce inserted her latchkey and entered a small frowsy hall. She ran up the stairs till she reached the top landing. A door faced her and from the bottom of this door a snuffling noise proceeded succeeded in a second by a series of joyful whines and yelps.

"Yes, Terry darling - it's Missus come home."

As the door opened, a white body precipitated itself upon the girl - an aged wire-haired terrier very shaggy as to coat and suspiciously bleary as to eyes. Joyce gathered him up in her arms and sat down on the floor.

"Terry darling! Darling, darling Terry. Love your Missus, Terry; love your Missus a lot!"

And Terry obeyed, his eager tongue worked busily, he licked her face, her ears, her neck and all the time his stump of a tail wagged furiously.

"Terry darling, what are we going to do? What's going to become of us? Oh! Terry darling, I'm so tired."

"Now then, miss," said a tart voice behind her. "If you'll give over hugging and kissing that dog, here's a cup of nice hot tea for you."

"Oh! Mrs. Barnes, how good of you."

Joyce scrambled to her feet. Mrs. Barnes was a big, formidable-looking woman. Beneath the exterior of a dragon she concealed an unexpectedly warm heart.

"A cup of hot tea never did anyone any harm," enunciated Mrs. Barnes, voicing the universal sentiment of her class.

Joyce sipped gratefully. Her landlady eyed her covertly.

"Any luck, miss - ma'am, I should say?"

Joyce shook her head, her face clouded over.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Barnes with a sigh. "Well, it doesn't seem to be what you might call a lucky day."

Joyce looked up sharply.

"Oh, Mrs. Barnes - you don't mean - "

Mrs. Barnes was nodding gloomily.

"Yes - it's Barnes. Out of work again. What we're going to do, I'm sure I don't know."

"Oh, Mrs. Barnes - I must - I mean you'll want - "

"Now don't you fret, my dear. I'm not denying but that I'd be glad if you'd found something - but if you haven't - you haven't. Have you finished that tea? I'll take the cup."

"Not quite."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Barnes accusingly. "You're going to give what's left to that dratted dog - I know you."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Barnes. Just a little drop. You don't mind really, do you?"

"It wouldn't be any use if I did. You're crazy about that cantankerous brute. Yes, that's what I say - and that's what he is. As near as nothing bit me this morning, he did."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Barnes! Terry wouldn't do such a thing."

"Growled at me - showed his teeth. I was just trying to see if there was anything could be done to those shoes of yours."

"He doesn't like anyone touching my things. He thinks he ought to guard them."

"Well, what does he want to think for? It isn't a dog's business to think. He'd be well enough in his proper place, tied up in the yard to keep off burglars. All this cuddling! He ought to be put away, miss - that's what I say."

"No, no, no. Never. Never!"

"Please yourself," said Mrs. Barnes. She took the cup from the table, retrieved the saucer from the floor where Terry had just finished his share, and stalked from the room.

"Terry," said Joyce. "Come here and talk to me. What are we going to do, my sweet?"

She settled herself in the rickety armchair, with Terry on her knees. She threw off her hat and leaned back. She put one of Terry's paws on each side of her neck and kissed him lovingly on his nose and between his eyes. Then she began talking to him in a soft low voice, twisting his ears gently between her fingers.

"What are we going to do about Mrs. Barnes, Terry? We owe her four weeks - and she's such a lamb, Terry - such a lamb. She'd never turn us out. But we can't take advantage of her being a lamb, Terry. We can't do that. Why does Barnes want to be out of work? I hate Barnes. He's always getting drunk. And if you're always getting drunk, you are usually out of work. But I don't get drunk, Terry, and yet I'm out of work.

"I can't leave you, darling. I can't leave you. There's not even anyone I could leave you with - nobody who'd be good to you. You're getting old, Terry - twelve years old - and nobody wants an old dog who's rather blind and a little deaf and a little - yes, just a little - bad-tempered. You're sweet to me, darling, but you're not sweet to everyone, are you? You growl. It's because you know the world's turning against you. We've just got each other, haven't we, darling?"

Terry licked her cheek delicately.

"Talk to me, darling."

Terry gave a long lingering groan - almost a sigh, then be nuzzled his nose in behind Joyce's ear.

"You trust me, don't you, angel? You know I'd never leave you. But what are we going to do? We're right down to it now, Terry."

She settled back further in the chair, her eyes half closed.

"Do you remember, Terry, all the happy times we used to have? You and I and Michael and Daddy. Oh, Michael - Michael! It was his first leave, and he wanted to give me a present before he went back to France. And I told him not to be extravagant. And then we were down in the country - and it was all a surprise. He told me to look out of the window, and there you were, dancing up the path on a long lead. The funny little man who brought you, a little man who smelt of dogs. How he talked. 'The goods, that's what he is. Look at him, ma'am, ain't he a picture? I said to myself, as soon as the lady and gentleman see him they'll say: "That dog's the goods!"'

"He kept on saying that - and we called you that for quite a long time - the Goods! Oh, Terry, you were such a darling of a puppy, with your little head on one side, wagging your absurd tail! And Michael went away to France and I had you - the darlingest dog in the world. You read all Michael's letters with me, didn't you? You'd sniff them, and I'd say - 'From Master,' and you'd understand. We were so happy - so happy. You and Michael and I. And now Michael's dead, and you're old, and I - I'm so tired of being brave."

Terry licked her.

"You were there when the telegram came. If it hadn't been for you, Terry - if I hadn't had you to hold on to..."

She stayed silent for some minutes.

"And we've been together ever since - been through all the ups and downs together - there have been a lot of downs, haven't there? And now we've come right up against it. There are only Michael's aunts, and they think I'm all right. They don't know he gambled that money away. We must never tell anyone that. I don't care - why shouldn't he? Everyone has to have some fault. He loved us both, Terry, and that's all that matters. His own relations were always inclined to be down on him and to say nasty things. We're not going to give them the chance. But I wish I had some relations of my own. It's very awkward having no relations at all.

"I'm so tired, Terry - and remarkably hungry. I can't believe I'm only twenty-nine - I feel sixty-nine. I'm not really brave - I only pretend to be. And I'm getting awfully mean ideas. I walked all the way to Ealing yesterday to see Cousin Charlotte Green. I thought if I got there at half-past twelve she'd be sure to ask me to stop to lunch. And then when I got to the house, I felt it was too cadging for anything. I just couldn't. So I walked all the way back. And that's foolish. You should be a determined cadger or else not even think of it. I don't think I'm a strong character."

Terry groaned again and put a black nose into Joyce's eye.

"You've got a lovely nose still, Terry - all cold like ice cream. Oh, I do love you so! I can't part from you. I can't have you 'put away.' I can't... I can't... I can't..." she began talking to him in a soft low voice, twisting his ears gently between her fingers. The warm tongue licked eagerly.

"You understand so, my sweet. You'd do anything to help Missus, wouldn't you?"

Terry clambered down and went unsteadily to a corner. He came back holding a battered bowl between his teeth.

Joyce was midway between tears and laughter.

"Was he doing his only trick? The only thing he could think of to help Missus. Oh, Terry - Terry - nobody shall part us! I'd do anything. Would I, though? One says that - and then when you're shown the thing, you say, 'I didn't mean anything like that.' Would I do anything?"

She got down on the floor beside the dog.

"You see, Terry, it seems that Nursery governesses can't have dogs, and companions to elderly ladies can't have dogs. Only married women can have dogs, Terry - little fluggy expensive dogs that they take shopping with them - and if one preferred an old blind terrier - well, why not?"

She stopped frowning and at that minute there was a double knock from below.

"The post. I wonder." She jumped up and hurried down the stairs, returning with a letter.

"It might be, if only..." She tore it open.

Dear Madam,

We have inspected the picture and our opinion is that it is not a genuine Cuyp and that its value is practically nil.

Yours truly,

Sloane & Ryder

Joyce stood holding it. When she spoke, her voice had changed.

"That's that," she said. "The last hope gone. But we won't be parted. There's a way - and it won't be cadging. Terry darling, I'm going out. I'll be back soon."

Joyce hurried down the stairs to where the telephone stood in a dark corner. There she asked for a certain number. A man's voice answered her, its tone changing as he realized her identity.

"Joyce, my dear girl. Come out and have some dinner and dance tonight."

"I can't," said Joyce lightly. "Nothing fit to wear."

And she smiled grimly as she thought of the empty pegs in the flimsy cupboard.

"How would it be if l came along and saw you now? What's the address? Good Lord, where's that? Rather come off your high horse, haven't you?"

"Completely."

"Well, you're frank about it. So long."

Arthur Halliday's car drew up outside the house about three quarters of an hour later. An awestruck Mrs. Barnes conducted him upstairs.

"My dear girl - what an awful hole. What on earth has got you into this mess?"

"Pride and a few other unprofitable emotions."

She spoke lightly enough; her eyes looked at the man opposite her sardonically.

Many people called Halliday handsome. He was a big man with square shoulders, fair, with small, very pale blue eyes and a heavy chin.

He sat down on the rickety chair she indicated.

"Well," he said thoughtfully. "I should say you'd had your lesson. I say - will that brute bite?"

"No, no, he's all right. I've trained him to be rather a - a watchdog."

Halliday was looking her up and down.

"Going to climb down, Joyce," he said softly. "Is that it?"

Joyce nodded.

"I told you before, my dear girl. I always get what I want in the end. I knew you'd come in time to see which way your bread was buttered."

"It's lucky for me you haven't changed your mind," said Joyce.

He looked at her suspiciously. With Joyce you never knew quite what she was driving at.

"You'll marry me?"

She nodded. "As soon as you please."

"The sooner, the better, in fact." He laughed, looking round the room. Joyce flushed.

"By the way, there's a condition." she said.

"A condition?" He looked at her again.

"My dog. He must come with me."

"This old scarecrow? You can choose any kind of a dog; I won't spare the expenses."

"I want Terry."

"Oh! All right, please yourself."

Joyce was staring at him. "You do know - don't you that I don't love you? Not in the least."

"I'm not worrying about that; I'm not thin-skinned. But no hanky-panky, my girl. If you come with me, you play fair."

The colour flashed into Joyce's cheeks. "You will have your money's worth." she said.

"What about a kiss now?"

He advanced upon her. She kept smiling. He took her in his arms, kissing her face, her neck. She neither stiffened nor drew back. He released at last.

"I'll get you a ring," he said. "What would you like, diamonds or pearls?"

"A ruby," said Joyce. "The largest ruby possible - the colour of blood."

"That's an odd idea."

"I should like it to be a fixed in a little half loop of pearls that was all that Michael could afford to give me."

"Better luck this time, eh?" he said.

"You put things wonderfully, Arthur."

Halliday went out chuckling.

"Terry," said Joyce. "Lick me - lick hard - all over my face and my neck - particularly the neck."

And as Terry obeyed, she spoke reflectively:

"Thinking of something else ought do the trick - that's the only way. You'd never guess what I thought of - jam - jam in a grocer's shop. I said it over to myself. Strawberry, blackcurrant, raspberry, damson. And perhaps, Terry, he'll get tired of me fairly soon. I hope so, don't you? They say men do when they're married to you. Only Michael wouldn't have tired of me - never - never! Oh, Michael..."

Joyce rose the next morning with a heart like lead. She gave a deep sigh and immediately Terry, who slept on her bed, had moved up and was kissing her affectionately.

"Oh, darling - darling! We've got to go through with it. But if only something would happen. Terry darling, can't you help Missus? You would if you could, I know."

Mrs. Barnes brought up some tea and bread and butter and was heartily congratulatory.

"There now, ma'am, to think of you going to marry that gentleman. It was a Rolls he came in. It was indeed. It quite sobered Barnes up to think of one of them Rolls standing outside our door. Why, I declare that dog's sitting out on the window sill."

"He likes the sun," said Joyce. "But it's rather dangerous. Terry, come in."

"I'd have the poor dear put out of his misery if I was you," said Mrs. Barnes, "and get your gentleman to buy you one of them plummy dogs as ladies carry in their muffs."

Joyce smiled and called again to Terry. The dog rose awkwardly and just at that moment the noise of a dog fight rose from the street below. Terry craned his neck forward and added some brisk barking. The window sill was old and rotten. It tilted and Terry, too old and stiff to regain his balance, fell.

With a wild cry, Joyce ran down the stairs and out of the front door. In a few seconds she was kneeling by Terry's side. He was whining pitifully and his position showed her that he was badly hurt. She bent over him.

"Terry - Terry darling - darling, darling, darling - "

Very feebly, he tried to wag his tail.

"Terry boy - Missus will make you better - darling boy - "

A crowd, mainly composed of small boys, was pushing round.

"Fell from the window, 'e did." "My, 'e looks bad." "Broke 'is back as likely as not."

Joyce paid no heed.

"Mrs. Barnes, where's the nearest vet?"

"There's Jobling - round in Mere Street - if you could get him there."

"A taxi."

"Allow me."

It was the pleasant voice of an elderly man who had just alighted from a taxi. He knelt down by Terry and lifted the upper lip, then passed his hand down the dog's body.

"I'm afraid he may be bleeding internally," he said. "There don't seem to be any bones broken. We'd better get him along to the vet's."

Between them, he and Joyce lifted the dog. Terry gave a yelp of pain. His teeth met in Joyce's arm.

"Terry - it's all right - all right, old man."

They got him into the taxi and drove off. Joyce wrapped a handkerchief round her arm in an absent-minded way. Terry, distressed, tried to lick it.

"I know, darling; I know. You didn't mean to hurt me. It's all right. It's all right, Terry."

She stroked his head. The man opposite watched her but said nothing.

They arrived at the vet's fairly quickly and found him in. He was a red-faced man with an unsympathetic manner.

He handled Terry none too gently while Joyce stood by agonized. The tears were running down her face. She kept on talking in a low, reassuring voice.

"It's all right, darling. It's all right... "

The vet straightened himself.

"Impossible to say exactly. I must make a proper examination. You must leave him here."

"Oh! I can't."

"I'm afraid you must. I must take him below. I'll telephone you in - say - half an hour."

Sick at heart, Joyce gave in. She kissed Terry on his nose. Blind with tears, she stumbled down the steps. The man who had helped her was still there. She had forgotten him.

"The taxi's still here. I'll take you back." She shook her head.

"I'd rather walk."

"I'll walk with you."

He paid off the taxi. She was hardly conscious of him as he walked quietly by her side without speaking. When they arrived as Mrs Bernes', he spoke.

"Your wrist. You must see to it."

She looked down at it. "Oh! That's all tight."

"It wants properly washing and tying up. I'll come in with you."

He went with her up the stairs. She let him wash the place and bind it up with a clean handkerchief. She only said one thing.

"Terry didn't mean to do it. He would never, never mean to do it. He just didn't realize it was me. He must have been in dreadful pain."

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"And perhaps they're hurting him dreadfully now?"

"I'm sure that everything that can he done for him is being done. When the vet rings up, you can go and get him and nurse him here."

"Yes, of course."

The man paused, then moved towards the door.

"I hope it will be all right," he said awkwardly. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Two or three minutes later it occurred to her that he had been kind and that she had never thanked him.

Mrs. Barnes appeared, cup in hand.

"Now, my poor lamb, a cup of hot tea. You're all to pieces, I can see that."

"Thank you, Mrs. Barnes, but I don't want any tea."

"It would do you good, dearie. Don't take on so now. The doggie will be all tight, and even if he isn't, that gentleman of yours will give you a pretty new dog - "

"Don't, Mrs. Barnes. Don't. Please, if you don't mind, I'd rather he left alone."

"Well, I never - there's the telephone."

Joyce sped down to it like an arrow. She lifted the receiver. Mrs. Barnes panted down after her. She heard Joyce say, "Yes - speaking. What? Oh! Oh! Yes. Yes, thank you."

She put back the receiver. The face she turned to Mrs. Barnes startled that good woman. It seemed devoid of any life or expression.

"Terry's dead, Mrs. Barnes," she said. "He died alone there without me."

She went upstairs and, going into her room, shut the door very decisively.

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Barnes to the hall wallpaper.

Five minutes later she poked her head into the room. Joyce was sitting bolt upright in a chair. She was not crying.

"It's your gentleman, miss. Shall I send him up?"

A sudden light came into Joyce's eyes. "Yes, please. I'd like to see him."

Halliday came in boisterously.

"Well, here we are. I haven't lost much time, have I? I'm prepared to carry you off from this dreadful place here and now. You can't stay here. Come on, get your things on."

"There's no need, Arthur."

"No need? What do you mean?"

"Terry's dead. I don't need to marry you now."

"What are you talking about?"

"My dog - Terry. He's dead. I was only marrying you so that we could be together."

Halliday stared at her, his face growing redder and redder. "You're mad."

"I dare say. People who love dogs are."

"You seriously tell me that you were only marrying me because - Oh, it's absurd!"

"Why did you think I was marrying you? You knew I hated you."

"You were marrying me because I could give you a jolly good time - and so I can."

"To my mind," said Joyce, "that is a much more revolting motive than mine. Anyway, it's off. I'm not marrying you!"

"Do you realize that you are treating me damned badly?"

She looked at him coolly but with such a blaze in her eyes that he drew back before it.

"I don't think so. I've heard you talk about getting a kick out of life. That's what you got out of me - and my dislike of you heightened it. You knew I hated you and you enjoyed it. When I let you kiss me yesterday, you were disappointed because I didn't flinch or wince. There's something brutal in you, Arthur, something cruel - something that likes hurting... Nobody could treat you as badly as you deserve. And now do you mind getting out of my room? I want it to myself."

He spluttered a little.

"Wh - What are you going to do? You've no money."

"That's my business. Please go."

"You little devil. You absolutely maddening little devil. You haven't done with me yet."

Joyce laughed.

The laugh routed him as nothing else had done. It was so unexpected. He went awkwardly down the stairs and drove away.

Joyce heaved a sigh. She pulled on her shabby black felt hat and went out. She walked along the streets mechanically, neither thinking nor feeling. Somewhere at the back of her mind there was pain - pain that she would presently feel, but for the moment everything was mercifully dulled.

She passed the Registry office and hesitated.

"I must do something. There's the river, of course. I've often thought of that. Just finish everything. But it's so cold and wet. I don't think I'm brave enough. I'm not brave really."

She turned into the Registry Office.

"Good morning, Mrs Lambert. I'm afraid we've no daily post."

"It doesn't matter," said Joyce. "I can take any kind of post now. My friend, whom I lived with, has - gone away."

"Then you'd consider going abroad?"

Joyce nodded.

"Yes, as far away as possible."

"Mr Allaby is here now, as it happens, interviewing candidates. I'll send you in to him."

In another minute Joyce was sitting in a cubicle answering questions. Something about her interlocutor seemed vaguely familiar to her, but she could not place him. And then suddenly her mind awoke a little, aware that the last question was faintly out of the ordinary.

"Do you get on with the old ladies ?" Mr Allaby was asking.

Joyce smiled in spite of herself. "I think so."

"You see my aunt, who lives with me, is rather difficult. She is very fond of me and she is a great dear really, but I fancy that a young woman might find her rather difficult sometimes."

"I think I'm patient and good-tempered," said Joyce, "and I have always got on with elderly people very well."

"You would have to do certain things for my aunt and otherwise you would have the charge of my little boy, who is three. His mother died a year ago."

There was a pause.

"Then if you think you would like the post, we will consider that settled. We travel out next week. I will let you know the exact date, and I expect you would like a small advance of salary to fit yourself out."

"Thank you very much. That would be very kind of you."

They had both risen.

Suddenly Mr. Allaby said awkwardly:

"I - I hate to butt in - I mean I wish - I would like to know - I mean, is your dog all right?"

For the first time Joyce looked at him. The colour came into her face, her blue eyes deepened almost to black. She looked straight at him. She had thought him elderly, but he was not so very old. Hair turning grey, a pleasant weatherbeaten face, rather stooping shoulders, eyes that were brown and something of the shy kindliness of a dog's. He looked a little like a dog, Joyce thought.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "I thought afterwards - I never thanked you."

"No need. Didn't expect it. Knew what you were feeling like. What about the poor old chap?"

The tears came into Joyce's eyes. They streamed down her cheeks. Nothing on earth could have kept them back.

"He's dead."

"Oh!"

He said nothing else, but to Joyce that Oh! was one of the most comforting things she had ever heard. There was everything in it that couldn't be put into words.

After a minute or two he said jerkily:

"Matter of fact, I had a dog. Died two years ago. Was with a crowd of people at the time who couldn't understand making heavy weather about it. Pretty rotten to have to carry on as though nothing had happened."

Joyce nodded.

"I know - " said Mr. Allaby.

He took her hand, squeezed it hard and dropped it. He went out of the little cubicle. Joyce followed in a minute or two and fixed up various details with the ladylike person. When she arrived home, Mrs. Barnes met her on the doorstep with that relish in gloom typical of her class.

"They've sent the poor little doggie's body home," she announced. "It's up in your room. I was saying to Barnes, and he's ready to dig a nice little hole in the back garden - "

MAGNOLIA BLOSSOM

Vincent Easton was waiting under the clock at Victoria Station. Now and then he glanced up at it uneasily. He thought to himself: "How many other men have waited here for a woman who didn't come?"

A sharp pang shot through him. Supposing that Theo didn't come, that she had changed her mind? Women did that sort of thing. Was he sure of her - had he ever been sure of her? Did he really know anything at all about her? Hadn't she puzzled him from the first? There had seemed to be two women - the lovely, laughing creature who was Richard Darrell's wife, and the other - silent, mysterious, who had walked by his side in the garden of Haymer's Close. Like a magnolia flower - that was how he thought of her - perhaps because it was under the magnolia tree that they had tasted their first rapturous, incredulous kiss. The air had been sweet with the scent of magnolia bloom, and one or two petals, velvety-soft and fragrant, had floated down, resting on that upturned face that was as creamy and as soft and as silent as they. Magnolia blossom - exotic, fragrant, mysterious.

That had been a fortnight ago - the second day he had met her. And now he was waiting for her to come to him forever. Again incredulity shot through him. She wouldn't come. How could he ever have believed it? It would be giving up so much. The beautiful Mrs. Darrell couldn't do this sort of thing quietly. It was bound to be a nine days' wonder, a far-reaching scandal that would never quite be forgotten. There were better, more expedient ways of doing these things - a discreet divorce, for instance.

But they had never thought of that for a moment - at least he had not. Had she, he wondered? He had never known anything of her thoughts. He had asked her to come away with him almost timorously - for after all, what was he? Nobody in particular - one of a thousand orange-growers in the Transvaal. What a life to take her to - after the brilliance of London! And yet, since he wanted her so desperately, he must needs ask.

She had consented very quietly, with no hesitations or protests, as though it were the simplest thing in the world that he was asking her.

"Tomorrow?" he had said, amazed, almost unbelieving.

And she had promised in that soft, broken voice that was so different from the laughing brilliance of her social manner. He had compared her to a diamond when he first saw her - a thing of flashing fire, reflecting light from a hundred facets. But at that first touch, that first kiss, she had changed miraculously to the clouded softness of a pearl - a pearl like a magnolia blossom, creamy-pink.

She had promised. And now he was waiting for her to fulfil that promise.

He looked again at the clock. If she did not come soon, they would miss the train.

Sharply a wave of reaction set in. She wouldn't come! Of course she wouldn't come. Fool that he had been ever to expect it! What were promises? He would find a letter when he got back to his rooms - explaining, protesting, saying all the things that women do when they are excusing themselves for lack of courage.

He felt anger - anger and the bitterness of frustration.

Then he saw her coming towards him down the platform, a faint smile on her face. She walked slowly, without haste or fluster, as one who had all eternity before her. She was in black - soft black that clung, with a little black hat that framed the wonderful creamy pallor of her face.

He found himself grasping her hand, muttering stupidly: "So you've come - you have come. After all!"

"Of course."

How calm her voice sounded! How calm!

"I thought you wouldn't," he said, releasing her hand and breathing hard.

Her eyes opened - wide, beautiful eyes. There was wonder in them, the simple wonder of a child.

"Why?"

He didn't answer. Instead he turned aside and requisitioned a passing porter. They had not much time. The next few minutes were all bustle and confusion. Then they were sitting in their reserved compartment and the drab houses of southern London were drifting by them.

II

Theodora Darrell was sitting opposite him. At last she was his. And he knew now how incredulous, up to the very last minute, he had been. He had not dared to let himself believe. That magical, elusive quality about her had frightened him. It had seemed impossible that she should ever belong to him.

Now the suspense was over. The irrevocable step was taken. He looked across at her. She lay back in the corner, quite still. The faint smile lingered on her lips, her eyes were cast down, the long, black lashes swept the creamy curve of her cheek.

He thought: "What's in her mind now? What is she thinking of? Me? Her husband? What does she think about him anyway? Did she care for him once? Or did she never care? Does she hate him, or is she indifferent to him?" And with a pang the thought swept through him: "I don't know. I never shall know. I love her, and I don't know anything about her - what she thinks or what she feels."

His mind circled round the thought of Theodora Darrell's husband. He had known plenty of married women who were only too ready to talk about their husbands - of how they were misunderstood by them, of how their finer feelings were ignored. Vincent Easton reflected cynically that it was one of the best-known opening gambits.

But except casually, Theo had never spoken of Richard Darrell. Easton knew of him what everybody knew. He was a popular man, handsome, with an engaging, carefree manner. Everybody liked Darrell. His wife always seemed on excellent terms with him. But that proved nothing, Vincent reflected. Theo was well-bred - she would not air her grievances in public.

And between them, no word had passed. From that second evening of their meeting, when they had walked together in the garden, silent, their shoulders touching, and he had felt the faint tremor that shook her at his touch, there had been no explainings, no defining of the position. She had returned his kisses, a dumb, trembling creature, shorn of all that hard brilliance which, together with her cream-and-rose beauty, had made her famous. Never once had she spoken of her husband. Vincent had been thankful for that at the time. He had been glad to be spared the arguments of a woman who wished to assure herself and her lover that they were justified in yielding to their love.

Yet now the tacit conspiracy of silence worried him. He had again that panic-stricken sense of knowing nothing about this strange creature who was willingly linking her life to his. He was afraid.

In the impulse to reassure himself, he bent forward and laid a hand on the black-clad knee opposite him. He felt once again the faint tremor that shook her, and he reached up for her hand. Bending forward, he kissed the palm, a long, lingering kiss. He felt the response of her fingers on his and, looking up, met her eyes, and was content. He leaned back in his seat. For the moment, he wanted no more. They were together. She was his.

And presently he said in a light, almost bantering tone: "You're very silent?"

"Am I?"

"Yes." He waited a minute, then said in a graver tone: "You're sure you don't - regret?"

Her eyes opened wide at that. "Oh, no!"

He did not doubt the reply. There was an assurance of sincerity behind it.

"What are you thinking about? I want to know."

In a low voice she answered: "I think I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Of happiness."

He moved over beside her then, held her to him and kissed the softness of her face and neck.

"I love you," he said. "I love you - love you."

Her answer was in the clinging of her body, the abandon of her lips.

Then he moved back to his own corner. He picked up a magazine and so did she. Every now and then, over the top of the magazines, their eyes met. Then they smiled.

They arrived at Dover just after five. They were to spend the night there, and cross to the Continent on the following day. Theo entered their sitting room in the hotel with Vincent close behind her. He had a couple of evening papers in his hand which he threw down on the table. Two of the hotel servants brought in the luggage and withdrew.

Theo turned from the window where she had been standing looking out. In another minute they were in each other's arms.

There was a discreet tap on the door and they drew apart again.

"Damn it all," said Vincent, "it doesn't seem as though we were ever going to be alone."

Theo smiled. "It doesn't look like it," she said softly. Sitting down on the sofa, she picked up one of the papers.

The knock proved to be a waiter bearing tea. He laid it on the table, drawing the latter up to the sofa on which Theo was sitting, cast a deft glance round, inquired if there were anything further, and withdrew.

Vincent, who had gone into the adjoining room, came back into the sitting room.

"Now for tea," he said cheerily, but stopped suddenly in the middle of the room. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

Theo was sitting bolt upright on the sofa. She was staring in front of her with dazed eyes, and her face had gone deathly white.

Vincent took a quick step towards her. "What is it, sweetheart?"

For answer she held out the paper to him, her finger pointing to the headline.

Vincent took the paper from her. "FAILURE OF HOBSON, JEKYLL AND LUCAS," he read. The name of the big city firm conveyed nothing to him at the moment, though he had an irritating conviction in the back of his mind that it ought to do so. He looked inquiringly at Theo.

"Richard is Hobson, Jekyll and Lucas," she explained.

"Your husband?"

"Yes."

Vincent returned to the paper and read the bald information it conveyed carefully. Phrases such as "sudden crash," "serious revelations to follow," "other houses affected" struck him disagreeably.

Roused by a movement, he looked up. Theo was adjusting her little black hat in front of the mirror. She turned at the movement he made.

Her eyes looked steadily into his.

"Vincent - I must go to Richard."

He sprang up. "Theo - don't he absurd."

She repeated mechanically:

"I must go to Richard."

"But, my dear - "

She made a gesture towards the paper on the floor.

"That means ruin - bankruptcy. I can't choose this day of all others to leave him."

"You had left him before you heard of this. Be reasonable!"

She shook her head mournfully.

"You don't understand. I must go to Richard."

And from that he could not move her. Strange that a creature so soft, so pliant, could he so unyielding. After the first, she did not argue. She let him say what he had to say unhindered. He held her in his arms, seeking to break her will by enslaving her senses, but though her soft mouth returned his kisses, he felt in her something aloof and invincible that withstood all his pleadings.

He let her go at last, sick and weary of the vain endeavour. From pleading he had turned to bitterness, reproaching her with never having loved him. That, too, she took in silence, without protest, her face, dumb and pitiful, giving the lie to his words. Rage mastered him in the end; he hurled at her every cruel word he could think of, seeking only to bruise and batter her to her knees. At last the words gave out; there was nothing more to say. He sat, his head in his hands, staring down at the red pile carpet. By the door, Theodora stood, a black shadow with a white face.

It was all over.

She said quietly: "Good-bye, Vincent."

He did not answer.

The door opened - and shut again.

III

The Darrells lived in a house in Chelsea - an intriguing, old-world house, standing in a little garden of its own. Up the front of the house grew a magnolia tree, smutty, dirty, begrimed, but still a magnolia.

Theo looked up at it, as she stood on the doorstep some three hours later. A sudden smile twisted her mouth in pain.

She went straight to the study at the back of the house. A man was pacing up and down in the room - a young man, with a handsome face and a haggard expression.

He gave an ejaculation of relief as she came in.

"Thank God you've turned up, Theo. They said you'd taken your luggage with you and gone off out of town somewhere."

"I heard the news and came back."

Richard Darrell put an arm about her and drew her to the couch. They sat down upon it side by side. Theo tore herself free of the encircling arms in what seemed a perfectly natural manner.

"How bad is it, Richard?" she asked quietly.

"Just as bad as it can be - and that's saying a lot."

"Tell me!"

He began to walk up and down again as he talked. Theo sat and watched him. He was not to know that every now and then the room went dim, and his voice faded from her hearing, while another room in a hotel at Dover came clearly before her eyes.

Nevertheless she managed to listen intelligently enough. He came back and sat down on the couch by her.

"Fortunately," he ended, "they can't touch your marriage settlement. The house is yours also."

Theo nodded thoughtfully.

"We shall have that at any rate," she said. "Then everything will not be too bad? It means a fresh start, that is all."

"Oh! Quite so. Yes."

But his voice did not ring true, and Theo thought suddenly: "There's something else. He hasn't told me everything."

"There's nothing more, Richard?" she said gently. "Nothing worse?"

He hesitated for just half a second, then: "Worse? What should there be?"

"I don't know," said Theo.

"It'll be all right," said Richard, speaking more as though to reassure himself than Theo. "Of course, it'll be all right."

He flung an arm about her suddenly.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "It'll be all right now that you're here. Whatever else happens, I've got you, haven't I?"

She said gently: "Yes, you've got me." And this time she left his arm round her.

He kissed her and held her close to him, as though in some strange way he derived comfort from her nearness.

"I've got you, Theo," he said again presently, and she answered as before: "Yes, Richard."

He slipped from the couch to the floor at her feet.

"I'm tired out," he said fretfully. "My God, it's been a day. Awful! I don't know what I should do if you weren't here. After all, one's wife is one's wife, isn't she?"

She did not speak, only bowed her head in assent.

He laid his head on her lap. The sigh he gave was like that of a tired child.

Theo thought again: "There's something he hasn't told me. What is it?"

Mechanically her hand dropped to his smooth, dark head, and she stroked it gently, as a mother might comfort a child.

Richard murmured vaguely:

"It'll be all right now you're here. You won't let me down."

His breathing grew slow and even. He slept. Her hand still smoothed his head.

But her eyes looked steadily into the darkness in front of her, seeing nothing.

"Don't you think, Richard," said Theodora, "that you'd better tell me everything?"

It was three days later. They were in the drawing room before dinner.

Richard started, and flushed. "I don't know what you mean," he parried.

"Don't you?"

He shot a quick glance at her.

"Of course there are - well - details."

"I ought to know everything, don't you think, if I am to help?"

He looked at her strangely. "What makes you think I want you to help?"

She was a little astonished.

"My dear Richard, I'm your wife."

He smiled suddenly, the old, attractive, carefree smile. "So you are, Theo. And a very good-looking wife, too. I never could stand ugly women."

He began walking up and down the room, as was his custom when something was worrying him.

"I won't deny you're right in a way," he said presently. "There is something." He broke off.

"Yes - "

"It's so damned hard to explain things of this kind to women. They get hold of the wrong end of the stick - fancy a thing is - well, what it isn't."

Theo said nothing.

"You see," went on Richard, "the law's one thing, and right and wrong are quite another. I may do a thing that's perfectly right and honest, but the law wouldn't take the same view of it. Nine times out of ten, everything pans out all right, and the tenth time you - well, hit a snag."

Theo began to understand. She thought to herself: "Why am I not surprised? Did I always know, deep down, that he wasn't straight?"

Richard went on talking. He explained himself at unnecessary lengths. Theo was content for him to cloak the actual details of the affair in this mantle of verbosity. The matter concerned a large tract of South African property. Exactly what Richard had done, she was not concerned to know. Morally, he assured her, everything was fair and aboveboard; legally - well, there it was, no getting away from the fact, he had rendered himself liable to criminal prosecution.

He kept shooting quick glances at his wife as he talked. He was nervous and uncomfortable. And still he excused himself and tried to explain away that which a child might have seen in its naked truth. Then finally in a burst of justification, he broke down. Perhaps Theo's eyes, momentarily scornful, had something to do with it. He sank down in a chair by the fireplace, his head in his hands.

"There it is, Theo," he said brokenly. "What are you going to do about it?"

She came over to him with scarcely a moment's pause and, kneeling down by the chair, put her face against his.

"What can he done, Richard? What can we do?"

He caught her to him.

"You mean it? You'll stick to me?"

"Of course. My dear, of course."

He said, moved to sincerity in spite of himself: "I'm a thief, Theo. That's what it means, shorn of fine language - just a thief."

"Then I'm a thief's wife, Richard. We'll sink or swim together."

They were silent for a little while. Presently Richard recovered something of his jaunty manner.

"You know, Theo, I've got a plan, but we'll talk of that later. It's just on dinnertime. We must go and change. Put on that creamy thingummybob of yours, you know - the Caillot model."

Theo raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"For an evening at home?"

"Yes, yes, I know. But I like it. Put it on, there's a good girl. It cheers me up to see you looking your best."

Theo came down to dinner in the Caillot. It was a creation in creamy brocade, with a faint pattern of gold running through it and an undernote of pale pink to give warmth to the cream. It was cut daringly low in the back, and nothing could have been better-designed to show off the dazzling whiteness of Theo's neck and shoulders. She was truly now a magnolia flower.

Richard's eye rested upon her in warm approval. "Good girl. You know, you look simply stunning in that dress."

They went in to dinner. Throughout the evening Richard was nervous and unlike himself, joking and laughing about nothing at all, as if in a vain attempt to shake off his cares. Several times Theo tried to lead him back to the subject they had been discussing before, but he edged away from it.

Then suddenly, as she rose to go to bed, he came to the point.

"No, don't go yet. I've got something to say. You know, about this miserable business."

She sat down again.

He began talking rapidly. With a bit of luck, the whole thing could be hushed up. He had covered his tracks fairly well. So long as certain papers didn't get into the receiver's hands -

He stopped significantly.

"Papers?" asked Theo perplexedly. "You mean you will destroy them?"

Richard made a grimace.

"I'd destroy them fast enough if I could get hold of them. That's the devil of it all!"

"Who has them, then?"

"A man we both know - Vincent Easton."

A very faint exclamation escaped Theo. She forced it back, but Richard had noticed it.

"I've suspected he knew something of the business all along. That's why I've asked him here a good bit. You may remember that I asked you to be nice to him?"

"I remember," said Theo.

"Somehow I never seem to have got on really friendly terms with him. Don't know why. But he likes you. I should say he likes you a good deal."

Theo said in a very clear voice: "He does."

"Ah!" said Richard appreciatively. "That's good. Now you see what I'm driving at. I'm convinced that if you went to Vincent Easton and asked him to give you those papers, he wouldn't refuse. Pretty woman, you know - all that sort of thing."

"I can't do that," said Theo quickly.

"Nonsense."

"It's out of the question."

The red came slowly out in blotches on Richard's face. She saw that he was angry.

"My dear girl, I don't think you quite realize the position. If this comes out, I'm liable to go to prison. It's ruin - disgrace."

"Vincent Easton will not use those papers against you. I am sure of that."

"That's not quite the point. He mayn't realize that they incriminate me. It's only taken in conjunction with - with my affairs - with the figures they're bound to find. Oh! I can't go into details. He'll ruin me without knowing what he's doing unless somebody puts the position before him."

"You can do that yourself, surely. Write to him."

"A fat lot of good that would be! No, Theo, we've only got one hope. You're the trump card. You're my wife. You must help me. Go to Easton tonight - "

A cry broke from Theo.

"Not tonight. Tomorrow perhaps."

"My God, Theo, can't you realize things? Tomorrow may be too late. If you could go now - at once - to Easton's rooms." He saw her flinch, and tried to reassure her. "I know, my dear girl, I know. It's a beastly thing to do. But it's life or death. Theo, you won't fail me? You said you'd do anything to help me - "

Theo heard herself speaking in a hard, dry voice. "Not this thing. There are reasons."

"It's life or death, Theo. I mean it. See here."

He snapped open a drawer of the desk and took out a revolver. If there was something theatrical about that action, it escaped her notice.

"It's that or shooting myself. I can't face the racket. If you won't do as I ask you, I'll be a dead man before morning. I swear to you solemnly that that's the truth."

Theo gave a low cry. "No, Richard, not that!"

"Then help me."

He flung the revolver down on the table and knelt by her side. "Theo, my darling - if you love me - if you've ever loved me - do this for me. You're my wife, Theo. I've no one else to turn to."

On and on his voice went, murmuring, pleading. And at last Theo heard her own voice saying: "Very well - yes."

Richard took her to the door and put her into a taxi.

IV

"Theo!"

Vincent Easton sprang up in incredulous delight. She stood in the doorway. Her wrap of white ermine was hanging from her shoulders. Never, Easton thought, had she looked so beautiful.

"You've come after all."

She put out a hand to stop him as he came towards her.

"No, Vincent, this isn't what you think."

She spoke in a low, hurried voice.

"I'm here from my husband. He thinks there are some papers which may - do him harm. I have come to ask you to give them to me."

Vincent stood very still, looking at her. Then he gave a short laugh.

"So that's it, is it? I thought Hobson, Jekyll and Lucas sounded familiar the other day, but I couldn't place them at the minute. Didn't know your husband was connected with the firm. Things have been going wrong there for some time. I was commissioned to look into the matter. I suspected some underling. Never thought of the man at the top.

Theo said nothing. Vincent looked at her curiously.

"It makes no difference to you, this?" he asked. "That - Oh! well, to put it plainly, that your husband's a swindler?'

She shook her head.

"It beats me," said Vincent. Then he added quietly: "Will you wait a minute or two? I will get the papers."

Theo sat down in a chair. He went into the other room. Presently he returned and delivered a small package into her hand.

"Thank you," said Theo. "Have you a match?"

Taking the matchbox he proffered, she knelt down by the fireplace. When the papers were reduced to a pile of ashes, she stood up.

"Thank you," she said again.

"Not at all," he answered formally. "Let me get you a taxi."

He put her into it, saw her drive away. A strange, formal little interview. After the first, they had not even dared look at each other. Well, that was that, the end. He would go away, abroad, try and forget.

Theo leaned her head out of the window and spoke to the taxi driver. She could not go back at once to the house in Chelsea. She must have a breathing space. Seeing Vincent again had shaken her horribly. If only - if only. But she pulled herself up. Love for her husband she had none - but she owed him loyalty. He was down, she must stick by him. Whatever else he might have done, he loved her; his offence had been committed against society, not against her.

The taxi meandered on through the wide streets of Hampstead. They came out on the heath, and a breath of cool, invigorating air fanned Theo's cheeks. She had herself in hand again now. The taxi sped back towards Chelsea. Richard came out to meet her in the hall.

"Well," he demanded, "you've been a long time."

"Have I?"

"Yes - a very long time. Is it - all right?"

He followed her, a cunning look in his eyes. His hands were shaking.

"It's - it's all right, eh?" he said again.

"I burnt them myself."

"Oh!"

She went on into the study, sinking into a big armchair. Her face was dead white and her whole body drooped with fatigue. She thought to herself: "If only I could go to sleep now and never, never wake up again!"

Richard was watching her. His glance, shy, furtive, kept coming and going. She noticed nothing. She was beyond noticing.

"It went off quite all right, eh?"

"I've told you so."

"You're sure they were the right papers? Did you look?"

"No."

"But then - "

"I'm sure, I tell you. Don't bother me, Richard. I can't bear any more tonight."

Richard shifted nervously.

"No, no. I'm sure."

He fidgeted about the room. Presently he came over to her, laid a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

"Don't touch me." She tried to laugh. "I'm sorry, Richard. My nerves are on edge. I feel I can't bear to be touched."

"I know. I understand."

Again he wandered up and down. "Theo," he burst out suddenly. "I'm damned sorry."

"What?" She looked up, vaguely startled.

"I oughtn't to have let you go there at this time of night. I never dreamed that you'd be subjected to any - unpleasantness."

"Unpleasantness?" She laughed. The word seemed to amuse her. "You don't know! Oh, Richard, you don't know!"

"I don't know what?"

She said very gravely, looking straight in front of her: "What this night has cost me."

"My God! Theo! I never meant - You - you did that, for me? The swine! Theo - Theo - I couldn't have known. I couldn't have guessed. My God!"

He was kneeling by her now stammering, his arms round her, and she turned and looked at him with faint surprise, as though his words had at last really penetrated to her attention.

"I - I never meant - "

"You never meant what, Richard?"

Her voice startled him.

"Tell me. What was it that you never meant?"

"Theo, don't let us speak of it. I don't want to know. I want never to think of it."

She was staring at him, wide awake now, with every faculty alert. Her words came clear and distinct: "You never meant - What do you think happened?"

"It didn't happen, Theo. Let's say it didn't happen."

And still she stared, till the truth began to come to her. "You think that - "

"I don't want - "

She interrupted him: "You think that Vincent Easton asked a price for those letters? You think that I - paid him?"

Richard said weakly and unconvincingly: "I - I never dreamed he was that kind of man."

V

"Didn't you?" She looked at him searchingly. His eyes fell before hers.

"Why did you ask me to put on this dress this evening? Why did you send me there alone at this time of night? You guessed he - cared for me. You wanted to save your skin - save it at any cost - even at the cost of my honour."

She got up. "I see now. You meant that from the beginning - or at least you saw it as a possibility, and it didn't deter you."

"Theo - "

"You can't deny it. Richard, I thought I knew all there was to know about you years ago. I've known almost from the first that you weren't straight as regards the world. But I thought you were straight with me."

"Theo - "

"Can you deny what I've just been saying?"

He was silent, in spite of himself.

"Listen, Richard. There is something I must tell you. Three days ago when this blow fell on you, the servants told you I was away - gone to the country. That was only partly true. I had gone away with Vincent Easton."

Richard made an inarticulate sound. She held out a hand to stop him.

"Wait. We were at Dover. I saw a paper - I realized what had happened. Then, as you know, I came back."

She paused.

Richard caught her by the wrist. His eyes burnt into hers. "You came back - in time?"

Theo gave a short, bitter laugh. "Yes, I came back, as you say, 'in time,' Richard."

Her husband relinquished his hold on her arm. He stood by the mantelpiece, his head thrown back. He looked handsome and rather noble.

"In that case," he said, "I can forgive."

"I cannot."

The two words came crisply. They had the semblance and the effect of a bomb in the quiet room. Richard started forward, staring, his jaw dropped with an almost ludicrous effect.

"You - er - what did you say, Theo?"

"I said I cannot forgive! In leaving you for another man, I sinned - not technically, perhaps, but in intention, which is the same thing. But if I sinned, I sinned through love. You, too, have not been faithful to me since our marriage. Oh, yes, I know. That I forgave, because I really believed in your love for me. But the thing you have done tonight is different. It is an ugly thing, Richard - a thing no woman should forgive. You sold me, your own wife, to purchase safety!"

She picked up her wrap and turned towards the door.

"Theo," he stammered out, "where are you going?"

She looked back over her shoulder at him.

"We all have to pay in this life, Richard. For my sin I must pay in loneliness. For yours - well, you gambled with the thing you love, and you have lost it!"

"You are going?"

She drew a long breath. "To freedom. There is nothing to bind me here."

He heard the door shut. Ages passed, or was it a few minutes? Something fluttered down outside the window - the last of the magnolia petals, soft, fragrant.

The Harlequin Tea Set (1997)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

One

THE EDGE

"The Edge" was first published in Pearson's Magazine, February 1927.

Clare Halliwell walked down the short path that led from her cottage door to the gate. On her arm was a basket, and in the basket was a bottle of soup, some homemade jelly and a few grapes. There were not many poor people in the small village of Daymer's End, but such as there were were assiduously looked after, and Clare was one of the most efficient of the parish workers.

Clare Halliwell was thirty-two. She had an upright carriage, a healthy colour and nice brown eyes. She was not beautiful, but she looked fresh and pleasant and very English. Everybody liked her, and said she was a good sort. Since her mother's death, two years ago, she had lived alone in the cottage with her dog, Rover. She kept poultry and was fond of animals and of a healthy outdoor life.

As she unlatched the gate, a two-seater car swept past, and the driver, a girl in a red hat, waved a greeting. Clare responded, but for a moment her lips tightened. She felt that pang at her heart which always came when she saw Vivien Lee. Gerald's wife!

Medenham Grange, which lay just a mile outside the village, had belonged to the Lees for many generations. Sir Gerald Lee, the present owner of the Grange, was a man old for his years and considered by many stiff in manner. His pomposity really covered a good deal of shyness. He and Clare had played together as children. Later they had been friends, and a closer and dearer tie had been confidently expected by many—including, it may be said, Clare herself. There was no hurry, of course—but some day . . . She left it so in her own mind. Some day.

And then, just a year ago, the village had been startled by the news of Sir Gerald's marriage to a Miss Harper—a girl nobody had ever heard of!

The new Lady Lee had not been popular in the village. She took not the faintest interest in parochial matters, was bored by hunting, and loathed the country and outdoor sports. Many of the wiseacres shook their heads and wondered how it would end. It was easy to see where Sir Gerald's infatuation had come in. Vivien was a beauty. From head to foot she was a complete contrast to Clare Halliwell, small, elfin, dainty, with golden-red hair that curled enchantingly over her pretty ears, and big violet eyes that could shoot a sideways glance of provocation to the manner born.

Gerald Lee, in his simple man's way, had been anxious that his wife and Clare should be great friends. Clare was often asked to dine at the Grange, and Vivien made a pretty pretence of affectionate intimacy whenever they met. Hence that gay salutation of hers this morning.

Clare walked on and did her errand. The Vicar was also visiting the old woman in question and he and Clare walked a few yards together afterwards before their ways parted. They stood still for a minute discussing parish affairs.

"Jones has broken out again, I'm afraid," said the Vicar. "And I had such hopes after he had volunteered, of his own accord, to take the pledge."

"Disgusting," said Clare crisply.

"It seems so to us," said Mr. Wilmot, "but we must remember that it is very hard to put ourselves in his place and realize his temptation. The desire for drink is unaccountable to us, but we all have our own temptations, and thus we can understand."

"I suppose we have," said Clare uncertainly.

The Vicar glanced at her.

"Some of us have the good fortune to be very little tempted," he said gently. "But even to those people their hour comes. Watch and pray, remember, that ye enter not into temptation.”

Then bidding her goodbye, he walked briskly away. Clare went on thoughtfully, and presently she almost bumped into Sir Gerald Lee.

“Hullo, Clare. I was hoping to run across you. You look jolly fit. What a colour you’ve got.”

The colour had not been there a minute before. Lee went on:

“As I say, I was hoping to run across you. Vivien’s got to go off to Bournemouth for the weekend. Her mother’s not well. Can you dine with us Tuesday instead of tonight?”

“Oh, yes! Tuesday will suit me just as well.”

“That’s all right, then. Splendid. I must hurry along.”

Clare went home to find her one faithful domestic standing on the doorstep looking out for her.

“There you are, Miss. Such a to-do. They’ve brought Rover home. He went off on his own this morning, and a car ran clean over him.”

Clare hurried to the dog’s side. She adored animals, and Rover was her especial darling. She felt his legs one by one, and then ran her hands over his body. He groaned once or twice and licked her hand.

“If there’s any serious injury, it’s internal,” she said at last. “No bones seem to be broken.”

“Shall we get the vet to see him, Miss?”

Clare shook her head. She had little faith in the local vet.

“We’ll wait until tomorrow. He doesn’t seem to be in great pain, and his gums are a good colour, so there can’t be much internal bleeding. Tomorrow, if I don’t like the look of him, I’ll take him over to Skippington in the car and let Reeves have a look at him. He’s far and away the best man.”

On the following day, Rover seemed weaker, and Clare duly carried out her project. The small town of Skippington was about forty miles away, a long run, but Reeves, the vet there, was celebrated for many miles round.

He diagnosed certain internal injuries, but held out good hopes of recovery, and Clare went away quite content to leave Rover in his charge.

There was only one hotel of any pretensions in Skippington, the County Arms. It was mainly frequented by commercial travellers, for there was no good hunting country near Skippington, and it was off the track of the main roads for motorists.

Lunch was not served till one o’clock, and as it wanted a few minutes of that hour, Clare amused herself by glancing over the entries in the open visitors’ book.

Suddenly she gave a stifled exclamation. Surely she knew that handwriting, with its loops and whirls and flourishes? She had always considered it unmistakable. Even now she could have sworn—but of course it was clearly impossible. Vivien Lee was at Bournemouth. The entry itself showed it to be impossible: Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Brown. London.

But in spite of herself her eyes strayed back again and again to that curly writing, and on an impulse she could not quite define she asked abruptly of the woman in the office:

“Mrs. Cyril Brown? I wonder if that is the same one I know?”

“A small lady? Reddish hair? Very pretty. She came in a red two-seater car, madam. A Peugeot, I believe.”

Then it was! A coincidence would be too remarkable. As if in a dream, she heard the woman go on:

“They were here just over a month ago for a weekend, and liked it so much that they have come again. Newly married, I should fancy.”

Clare heard herself saying: “Thank you. I don’t think that could be my friend.”

Her voice sounded different, as though it belonged to someone else. Presently she was sitting in the dining room, quietly eating cold roast beef, her mind a maze of conflicting thought and emotions.

She had no doubts whatever. She had summed Vivien up pretty correctly on their first meeting. Vivien was that kind. She wondered vaguely who the man was. Someone Vivien had known before her marriage? Very likely—it didn’t matter—nothing mattered, but Gerald.

What was she—Clare—to do about Gerald? He ought to know—surely he ought to know. It was clearly her duty to tell him. She had discovered Vivien’s secret by accident, but she must lose no time in acquainting Gerald with the facts. She was Gerald’s friend, not Vivien’s.

But somehow or other she felt uncomfortable. Her conscience was not satisfied. On the face of it, her reasoning was good, but duty and inclination jumped suspiciously together. She admitted to herself that she disliked Vivien. Besides, if Gerald Lee were to divorce his wife—and Clare had no doubts at all that that was exactly what he would do, he was a man with an almost fanatical view of his own honour—then—well, the way would lie open for Gerald to come to her. Put like that, she shrank back fastidiously. Her own proposed action seemed naked and ugly.

The personal element entered in too much. She could not be sure of her own motives. Clare was essentially a high-minded, conscientious woman. She strove now very earnestly to see where her duty lay. She wished, as she had always wished, to do right. What was right in this case? What was wrong?

By a pure accident she had come into possession of facts that affected vitally the man she loved and the woman whom she disliked and—yes, one might as well be frank—of whom she was bitterly jealous. She could ruin that woman. Was she justified in doing so?

Clare had always held herself aloof from the backbiting and scandal which is an inevitable part of village life. She hated to feel that she now resembled one of those human ghouls she had always professed to despise.

Suddenly the Vicar’s words that morning flashed across her mind:

“Even to those people their hour comes.”

Was this her hour? Was this her temptation? Had it come insidiously disguised as a duty? She was Clare Halliwell, a Christian, in love and charity with all men—and women. If she were to tell Gerald, she must be quite sure that only impersonal motives guided her. For the present she would say nothing.

She paid her bill for luncheon and drove away, feeling an indescribable lightening of spirit. Indeed, she felt happier than she had done for a long time. She felt glad that she had had the strength to resist temptation, to do nothing mean or unworthy. Just for a second it flashed across her mind that it might be a sense of power that had so lightened her spirits, but she dismissed the idea as fantastic.

By Tuesday night she was strengthened in her resolve. The revelation could not come through her. She must keep silence. Her own secret love for Gerald made speech impossible. Rather a high-minded view to take? Perhaps; but it was the only one possible for her.

She arrived at the Grange in her own little car. Sir Gerald’s chauffeur was at the front door to drive it round to the garage after she had alighted, as the night was a wet one. He had just driven off when Clare remembered some books which she had borrowed and had brought with her to return. She called out, but the man did not hear her. The butler ran out after the car.

So, for a minute or two, Clare was alone in the hall, close to the door of the drawing room which the butler had just unlatched prior to announcing her. Those inside the room, however, knew nothing of her arrival, and so it was that Vivien’s voice, high pitched—not quite the voice of a lady—rang out clearly and distinctly.

"Oh, we're only waiting for Clare Halliwell. You must know her—lives in the village—supposed to be one of the local belles, but frightfully unattractive really. She tried her best to catch Gerald, but he wasn't having any.

"Oh, yes, darling"—this in answer to a murmured protest from her husband. "She did—you mayn't be aware of the fact—but she did her very utmost. Poor old Clare! A good sort, but such a dump!"

Clare's face went dead white, her hands, hanging against her sides, clenched themselves in anger such as she had never known before. At that moment she could have murdered Vivien Lee. It was only by a supreme physical effort that she regained control of herself. That, and the half-formed thought that she held it in her power to punish Vivien for those cruel words.

The butler had returned with the books. He opened the door, announced her, and in another moment she was greeting a roomful of people in her usual pleasant manner.

Vivien, exquisitely dressed in some dark wine colour that showed off her white fragility, was particularly affectionate and gushing. They didn't see half enough of Clare. She, Vivien, was going to learn golf, and Clare must come out with her on the links.

Gerald was very attentive and kind. Though he had no suspicion that she had overheard his wife's words, he had some vague idea of making up for them. He was very fond of Clare, and he wished Vivien wouldn't say the things she did. He and Clare had been friends, nothing more—and if there was an uneasy suspicion at the back of his mind that he was shirking the truth in that last statement, he put it away from him.

After dinner the talk fell on dogs, and Clare recounted Rover's accident. She purposely waited for a lull in the conversation to say:

". . . so, on Saturday, I took him to Skippington."

She heard the sudden rattle of Vivien Lee's coffee cup on the saucer, but she did not look at her—yet.

"To see that man, Reeves?"

"Yes. He'll be all right, I think. I had lunch at the County Arms afterwards. Rather a decent little pub." She turned now to Vivien. "Have you ever stayed there?"

If she had had any doubts, they were swept aside. Vivien's answer came quick—in stammering haste.

"I? Oh! N-no, no."

Fear was in her eyes. They were wide and dark with it, as they met Clare's. Clare's eyes told nothing. They were calm, scrutinizing. No one could have dreamt of the keen pleasure that they veiled. At that moment Clare almost forgave Vivien for the words she had overheard earlier in the evening. She tasted in that moment a fullness of power that almost made her head reel. She held Vivien Lee in the hollow of her hand.

The following day, she received a note from the other woman. Would Clare come up and have tea with her quietly that afternoon? Clare refused.

Then Vivien called on her. Twice she came at hours when Clare was almost certain to be at home. On the first occasion, Clare really was out; on the second, she slipped out by the back way when she saw Vivien coming up the path.

"She's not sure yet whether I know or not," she said to herself. "She wants to find out without committing herself. But she shan't—not until I'm ready."

Clare hardly knew herself what she was waiting for. She had decided to keep silence—that was the only straight and honourable course. She felt an additional glow of virtue when she remembered the extreme provocation she had received. After overhearing the way Vivien talked of her behind her back, a weaker character, she felt, might have abandoned her good resolutions.

She went twice to church on Sunday. First to early Communion, from which she came out strengthened and uplifted. No personal feelings should weigh with her—nothing mean or petty. She went again to morning service. Mr. Wilmot preached on the famous prayer of the Pharisee. He sketched the life of that man, a good man, pillar of the church. And he pictured the slow, creeping blight of spiritual pride that distorted and soiled all that he was.

Clare did not listen very attentively. Vivien was in the big square pew of the Lee family, and Clare knew by instinct that the other intended to get hold of her afterwards.

So it fell out. Vivien attached herself to Clare, walked home with her, and asked if she might come in. Clare, of course, assented. They sat in Clare's little sitting room, bright with flowers and old-fashioned chintzes. Vivien's talk was desultory and jerky.

"I was at Bournemouth, you know, last weekend," she remarked presently.

"Gerald told me so," said Clare.

They looked at each other. Vivien appeared almost plain today. Her face had a sharp, foxy look that robbed it of much of its charm.

"When you were at Skippington—" began Vivien.

"When I was at Skippington?" echoed Clare politely.

"You were speaking about some little hotel there."

"The County Arms. Yes. You didn't know it, you said?"

"I—I have been there once."

"Oh!"

She had only to keep still and wait. Vivien was quite unfitted to bear a strain of any kind. Already she was breaking down under it. Suddenly she leant forward and spoke vehemently.

“You don’t like me. You never have. You’ve always hated me. You’re enjoying yourself now, playing with me like a cat with a mouse. You’re cruel—cruel. That’s why I’m afraid of you, because deep down you’re cruel.”

“Really, Vivien!” said Clare sharply.

“You know, don’t you? Yes, I can see that you know. You knew that night—when you spoke about Skippington. You’ve found out somehow. Well, I want to know what you are going to do about it? What are you going to do?”

Clare did not reply for a minute, and Vivien sprang to her feet.

“What are you going to do? I must know. You’re not going to deny that you know all about it?”

“I do not propose to deny anything,” said Clare coldly.

“You saw me there that day?”

“No. I saw your handwriting in the book—Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Brown.”

Vivien flushed darkly.

“Since then,” continued Clare quietly, “I have made inquiries. I find that you were not at Bournemouth that weekend. Your mother never sent for you. Exactly the same thing happened about six weeks previously.”

Vivien sank down again on the sofa. She burst into furious crying, the crying of a frightened child.

“What are you going to do?” she gasped. “Are you going to tell Gerald?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Clare.

She felt calm, omnipotent.

Vivien sat up, pushing the red curls back from her forehead.

“Would you like to hear all about it?”

“It would be as well, I think.”

Vivien poured out the whole story. There was no reticence in her. Cyril “Brown” was Cyril Haviland, a young engineer to whom she had previously been engaged. His health failed, and he lost his job, whereupon he made no bones about jilting the penniless Vivien and marrying a rich widow many years older than himself. Soon afterwards Vivien married Gerald Lee.

She had met Cyril again by chance. That was the first of many meetings. Cyril, backed by his wife’s money, was prospering in his career, and becoming a well-known figure. It was a sordid story, a story of backstairs meeting, of ceaseless lying and intrigue.

“I love him so,” Vivien repeated again and again, with a sudden moan, and each time the words made Clare feel physically sick.

At last the stammering recital came to an end. Vivien muttered a shamefaced: “Well?”

“What am I going to do?” asked Clare. “I can’t tell you. I must have time to think.”

“You won’t give me away to Gerald?”

“It may be my duty to do so.”

“No, no.” Vivien’s voice rose to a hysterical shriek. “He’ll divorce me. He won’t listen to a word. He’ll find out from that hotel, and Cyril will be dragged into it. And then his wife will divorce him. Everything will go—his career, his health—he’ll be penniless again. He’d never forgive me—never.”

“If you’ll excuse my saying so,” said Clare, “I don’t think much of this Cyril of yours.”

Vivien paid no attention.

“I tell you he’ll hate me—hate me. I can’t bear it. Don’t tell Gerald. I’ll do anything you like, but don’t tell Gerald.”

“I must have time to decide,” said Clare gravely. “I can’t promise anything offhand. In the meantime, you and Cyril mustn’t meet again.”

“No, no, we won’t. I swear it.”

“When I know what’s the right thing to do,” said Clare, “I’ll let you know.”

She got up. Vivien went out of the house in a furtive, slinking way, glancing back over her shoulder.

Clare wrinkled her nose in disgust. A beastly affair. Would Vivien keep her promise not to see Cyril? Probably not. She was weak—rotten all through.

That afternoon Clare went for a long walk. There was a path which led along the downs. On the left the green hills sloped gently down to the sea far below, while the path wound steadily upward. This walk was known locally as the Edge. Though safe enough if you kept to the path, it was dangerous to wander from it. Those insidious gentle slopes were dangerous. Clare had lost a dog there once. The animal had gone racing over the smooth grass, gaining momentum, had been unable to stop and had gone over the edge of the cliff to be dashed to pieces on the sharp rocks below.

The afternoon was clear and beautiful. From far below there came the ripple of the sea, a soothing murmur. Clare sat down on the short green turf and stared out over the blue water. She must face this thing clearly. What did she mean to do?

She thought of Vivien with a kind of disgust. How the girl had crumpled up, how abjectly she had surrendered! Clare felt a rising contempt. She had no pluck—no grit.

Nevertheless, much as she disliked Vivien, Clare decided that she would continue to spare her for the present. When she got home she wrote a note to her, saying that although she could make no definite promise for the future, she had decided to keep silence for the present.

Life went on much the same in Daymer’s End. It was noticed locally that Lady Lee was looking far from well. On the other hand, Clare Halliwell bloomed. Her eyes were brighter, she carried her head higher, and there was a new confidence and assurance in her manner. She and Lady Lee often met, and it was noticed on these occasions that the younger woman watched the older with a flattering attention to her slightest word.

Sometimes Miss Halliwell would make remarks that seemed a little ambiguous—not entirely relevant to the matter in hand. She would suddenly say that she had changed her mind about many things lately—that it was curious how a little thing might alter one’s point of view entirely. One was apt to give way too much to pity—and that was really quite wrong.

When she said things of that kind she usually looked at Lady Lee in a peculiar way, and the latter would suddenly grow quite white, and look almost terrified.

But as the year drew on, these little subtleties became less apparent. Clare continued to make the same remarks, but Lady Lee seemed less affected by them. She began to recover her looks and spirits. Her old gay manner returned.

One morning, when she was taking her dog for a walk, Clare met Gerald in a lane. The latter’s spaniel fraternized with Rover, while his master talked to Clare.

“Heard our news?” he said buoyantly. “I expect Vivien’s told you.”

“What sort of news? Vivien hasn’t mentioned anything in particular.”

“We’re going abroad—for a year—perhaps longer. Vivien’s fed up with this place. She never has cared for it, you know.” He sighed, for a moment or two he looked downcast. Gerald Lee was very proud of his home.

"Anyway, I've promised her a change. I've taken a villa near Algiers. A wonderful place, by all accounts." He laughed a little self-consciously. "Quite a second honeymoon, eh?"

For a minute or two Clare could not speak. Something seemed to be rising up in her throat and suffocating her. She could see the white walls of the villa, the orange trees, smell the soft perfumed breath of the South. A second honeymoon!

They were going to escape. Vivien no longer believed in her threats. She was going away, carefree, gay, happy.

Clare heard her own voice, a little hoarse in timbre, saying the appropriate things. How lovely! She envied them!

Mercifully at that moment Rover and the spaniel decided to disagree. In the scuffle that ensued further conversation was out of the question.

That afternoon Clare sat down and wrote a note to Vivien. She asked her to meet her on the Edge the following day, as she had something very important to say to her.

The next morning dawned bright and cloudless. Clare walked up the steep path of the Edge with a lightened heart. What a perfect day! She was glad that she had decided to say what had to be said out in the open, under the blue sky, instead of in her stuffy little sitting room. She was sorry for Vivien, very sorry indeed, but the thing had got to be done.

She saw a yellow dot, like some yellow flower higher up by the side of the path. As she came nearer it resolved itself into the figure of Vivien, dressed in a yellow knitted frock, sitting on the short turf, her hands clasped round her knees.

"Good morning," said Clare. "Isn't it a perfect morning?"

"Is it?" said Vivien. "I haven't noticed. What was it you wanted to say to me?"

Clare dropped down on the grass beside her.

“I’m quite out of breath,” she said apologetically. “It’s a steep pull up here.”

“Damn you!” cried Vivien shrilly. “Why can’t you say it, you smooth-faced devil, instead of torturing me?”

Clare looked shocked, and Vivien hastily recanted.

“I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry, Clare. I am indeed. Only—my nerves are all to pieces, and your sitting here and talking about the weather—well, it got me all rattled.”

“You’ll have a nervous breakdown if you’re not careful,” said Clare coldly.

Vivien gave a short laugh.

“Go over the edge? No—I’m not that kind. I’ll never be a loony. Now tell me—what’s all this about?”

Clare was silent for a moment, then she spoke, looking not at Vivien, but steadily out over the sea.

“I thought it only fair to warn you that I can no longer keep silence about—about what happened last year.”

“You mean—you’ll go to Gerald with the whole story?”

“Unless you’ll tell him yourself. That would be infinitely the better way.”

Vivien laughed sharply.

“You know well enough I haven’t got the pluck to do that.”

Clare did not contradict the assertion. She had had proof before of Vivien’s utterly craven temper.

“It would be infinitely better,” she repeated.

Again Vivien gave that short, ugly laugh.

“It’s your precious conscience, I suppose, that drives you to do this?” she sneered.

“I dare say it seems very strange to you,” said Clare quietly. “But it honestly is that.”

Vivien’s white, set face stared into hers.

“My God!” she said. “I really believe you mean it, too. You actually think that’s the reason.”

“It is the reason.”

“No, it isn’t. If so, you’d have done it before—long ago. Why didn’t you? No, don’t answer. I’ll tell you. You got more pleasure out of holding it over me—that’s why. You liked to keep me on tenterhooks, and make me wince and squirm. You’d say things—diabolical things—just to torment me and keep me perpetually on the jump. And so they did for a bit—till I got used to them.”

“You got to feel secure,” said Clare.

“You saw that, didn’t you? But even then, you held back, enjoying your sense of power. But now we’re going away, escaping from you, perhaps even going to be happy—you couldn’t stick that at any price. So your convenient conscience wakes up!”

She stopped, panting. Clare said, still very quietly:

“I can’t prevent your saying all these fantastical things; but I can assure you they’re not true.”

Vivien turned suddenly and caught her by the hand.

“Clare—for God’s sake! I’ve been straight—I’ve done what you said. I’ve not seen Cyril again—I swear it.”

"That's nothing to do with it."

"Clare—haven't you any pity—any kindness? I'll go down on my knees to you."

"Tell Gerald yourself. If you tell him, he may forgive you."

Vivien laughed scornfully.

"You know Gerald better than that. He'll be rabid—vindictive. He'll make me suffer—he'll make Cyril suffer. That's what I can't bear. Listen, Clare—he's doing so well. He's invented something—machinery, I don't understand about it, but it may be a wonderful success. He's working it out now—his wife supplies the money for it, of course. But she's suspicious—jealous. If she finds out, and she will find out if Gerald starts proceedings for divorce—she'll chuck Cyril—his work, everything. Cyril will be ruined."

"I'm not thinking of Cyril," said Clare. "I'm thinking of Gerald. Why don't you think a little of him, too?"

"Gerald! I don't care that—" she snapped her fingers "for Gerald. I never have. We might as well have the truth now we're at it. But I do care for Cyril. I'm a rotter, through and through, I admit it. I dare say he's a rotter, too. But my feeling for him—that isn't rotten. I'd die for him, do you hear? I'd die for him!"

"That is easily said," said Clare derisively.

"You think I'm not in earnest? Listen, if you go on with this beastly business, I'll kill myself. Sooner than have Cyril brought into it and ruined, I'd do that."

Clare remained unimpressed.

"You don't believe me?" said Vivien, panting.

"Suicide needs a lot of courage."

Vivien flinched back as though she had been struck.

“You’ve got me there. Yes, I’ve no pluck. If there were an easy way—”

“There’s an easy way in front of you,” said Clare. “You’ve only got to run straight down that green slope. It would be all over in a couple of minutes. Remember that child last year.”

“Yes,” said Vivien thoughtfully. “That would be easy—quite easy—if one really wanted to—”

Clare laughed.

Vivien turned to her.

“Let’s have this out once more. Can’t you see that by keeping silence as long as you have, you’ve—you’ve no right to go back on it now? I’ll not see Cyril again. I’ll be a good wife to Gerald—I swear I will. Or I’ll go away and never see him again? Whichever you like. Clare—”

Clare got up.

“I advise you,” she said, “to tell your husband yourself . . . otherwise—I shall.”

“I see,” said Vivien softly. “Well, I can’t let Cyril suffer. . . .”

She got up, stood still as though considering for a minute or two, then ran lightly down to the path, but instead of stopping, crossed it and went down the slope. Once she half turned her head and waved a hand gaily to Clare, then she ran on gaily, lightly, as a child might run, out of sight. . . .

Clare stood petrified. Suddenly she heard cries, shouts, a clamour of voices. Then—silence.

She picked her way stiffly down to the path. About a hundred yards away a party of people coming up it had stopped. They were staring and pointing. Clare ran down and joined them.

“Yes, Miss, someone’s fallen over the cliff. Two men have gone down—to see.”

She waited. Was it an hour, or eternity, or only a few minutes?

A man came toiling up the ascent. It was the Vicar in his shirt sleeves. His coat had been taken off to cover what lay below.

“Horrible,” he said, his face was very white. “Mercifully death must have been instantaneous.”

He saw Clare, and came over to her.

“This must have been a terrible shock to you. You were taking a walk together, I understand?”

Clare heard herself answering mechanically.

Yes. They had just parted. No, Lady Lee’s manner had been quite normal. One of the group interposed the information that the lady was laughing and waving her hand. A terribly dangerous place—there ought to be a railing along the path.

The Vicar’s voice rose again.

“An accident—yes, clearly an accident.”

And then suddenly Clare laughed—a hoarse, raucous laugh that echoed along the cliff.

“That’s a damned lie,” she said. “I killed her.”

She felt someone patting her shoulder, a voice spoke soothingly.

“There, there. It’s all right. You’ll be all right presently.”

But Clare was not all right presently. She was never all right again. She persisted in the delusion—certainly a delusion, since at least eight persons had witnessed the scene—that she had killed Vivien Lee.

She was very miserable till Nurse Lauriston came to take charge. Nurse Lauriston was very successful with mental cases.

“Humour them, poor things,” she would say comfortably.

So she told Clare that she was a wardress from Pentonville Prison. Clare’s sentence, she said, had been commuted to penal servitude for life. A room was fitted up as a cell.

“And now, I think, we shall be quite happy and comfortable,” said Nurse Lauriston to the doctor. “Round-bladed knives if you like, doctor, but I don’t think there’s the least fear of suicide. She’s not the type. Too self-centred. Funny how those are often the ones who go over the edge most easily.”

Two

THE ACTRESS

"The Actress" was first published as "A Trap for the Unwary" in The Novel Magazine, May 1923.

The shabby man in the fourth row of the pit leant forward and stared incredulously at the stage. His shifty eyes narrowed furtively.

"Nancy Taylor!" he muttered. "By the Lord, little Nancy Taylor!"

His glance dropped to the programme in his hand. One name was printed in slightly larger type than the rest.

"Olga Stormer! So that's what she calls herself. Fancy yourself a star, don't you, my lady? And you must be making a pretty little pot of money, too. Quite forgotten your name was ever Nancy Taylor, I daresay. I wonder now—I wonder now what you'd say if Jake Levitt should remind you of the fact?"

The curtain fell on the close of the first act. Hearty applause filled the auditorium. Olga Stormer, the great emotional actress, whose name in a few short years had become a household word, was adding yet another triumph to her list of successes as "Cora," in The Avenging Angel.

Jake Levitt did not join in the clapping, but a slow, appreciative grin gradually distended his mouth. God! What luck! Just when he was on his beam-ends, too. She'd try to bluff it out, he supposed, but she couldn't put it over on him. Properly worked, the thing was a gold mine!

On the following morning the first workings of Jake Levitt's gold-mine became apparent. In her drawing room, with its red lacquer and black hangings, Olga Stormer read and reread a letter thoughtfully. Her pale face, with its exquisitely mobile features, was a little more set than usual, and every now and then the grey-green eyes under the level brows steadily envisaged the middle distance, as though she contemplated the threat behind rather than the actual words of the letter.

In that wonderful voice of hers which could throb with emotion or be as clear-cut as the click of a typewriter, Olga called: “Miss Jones!”

A near young woman with spectacles, a shorthand pad and a pencil clasped in her hand, hastened from an adjoining room.

“Ring up Mr. Danaham, please, and ask him to come round, immediately.”

Syd Danahan, Olga Stormer’s manager, entered the room with the usual apprehension of the man whose life it is to deal with and overcome the vagaries of the artistic feminine. To coax, to soothe, to bully, one at a time or all together, such was his daily routine. To his relief, Olga appeared calm and composed, and merely flicked a note across the table to him.

“Read that.”

The letter was scrawled in an illiterate hand, on cheap paper.

Dear Madam,

I much appreciated your performance in The Avenging Angel last night. I fancy we have a mutual friend in Miss Nancy Taylor, late of Chicago. An article regarding her is to be published shortly. If you would care to discuss same, I could call upon you at any time convenient to yourself.

Yours respectfully,

Jake Levitt

Danahan looked slightly bewildered.

“I don’t quite get it. Who is this Nancy Taylor?”

“A girl who would be better dead, Danny.” There was bitterness in her voice and a weariness that revealed her 34 years. “A girl who was dead until this carrion crow brought her to life again.”

“Oh! Then. . . .”

“Me, Danny. Just me.”

“This means blackmail, of course?”

She nodded. “Of course, and by a man who knows the art thoroughly.”

Danahan frowned, considering the matter. Olga, her cheek pillowed on a long, slender hand, watched him with unfathomable eyes.

“What about bluff? Deny everything. He can’t be sure that he hasn’t been misled by a chance resemblance.”

Olga shook her head.

“Levitt makes his living by blackmailing women. He’s sure enough.”

“The police?” hinted Danahan doubtfully.

Her faint, derisive smile was answer enough. Beneath her self-control, though he did not guess it, was the impatience of the keen brain watching a slower brain laboriously cover the ground it had already traversed in a flash.

“You don’t—er—think it might be wise for you to—er—say something yourself to Sir Richard? That would partly spike his guns.”

The actress’s engagement to Sir Richard Everard, MP, had been announced a few weeks previously.

“I told Richard everything when he asked me to marry him.”

“My word, that was clever of you!” said Danahan admiringly.

Olga smiled a little.

"It wasn't cleverness, Danny dear. You wouldn't understand. All the same, if this man Levitt does what he threatens, my number is up, and incidentally Richard's Parliamentary career goes smash, too. No, as far as I can see, there are only two things to do."

"Well?"

"To pay—and that of course is endless! Or to disappear, start again."

The weariness was again very apparent in her voice.

"It isn't even as though I'd done anything I regretted. I was a half-starved little gutter waif, Danny, striving to keep straight. I shot a man, a beast of a man who deserved to be shot. The circumstances under which I killed him were such that no jury on earth would have convicted me. I know that now, but at the time I was only a frightened kid—and—I ran."

Danahan nodded.

"I suppose," he said doubtfully, "there's nothing against this man Levitt we could get hold of?"

Olga shook her head.

"Very unlikely. He's too much of a coward to go in for evildoing." The sound of her own words seemed to strike her. "A coward! I wonder if we couldn't work on that in some way."

"If Sir Richard were to see him and frighten him," suggested Danahan.

"Richard is too fine an instrument. You can't handle that sort of man with gloves on."

"Well, let me see him."

"Forgive me, Danny, but I don't think you're subtle enough. Something between gloves and bare fists is needed. Let us say mittens! That means a woman! Yes, I rather fancy a woman might do the trick. A woman with a certain amount of finesse, but who knows the baser side of life from bitter experience. Olga Stormer, for instance! Don't talk to me, I've got a plan coming."

She leant forward, burying her face in her hands. She lifted it suddenly.

"What's the name of that girl who wants to understudy me? Margaret Ryan, isn't it? The girl with the hair like mine?"

"Her hair's all right," admitted Danahan grudgingly, his eyes resting on the bronze-gold coil surrounding Olga's head. "It's just like yours, as you say. But she's no good any other way. I was going to sack her next week."

"If all goes well, you'll probably have to let her understudy 'Cora.' " She smothered his protests with a wave of her hand. "Danny, answer me one question honestly. Do you think I can act? Really act, I mean. Or am I just an attractive woman who trails round in pretty dresses?"

"Act? My God! Olga, there's been nobody like you since Duse!"

"Then if Levitt is really a coward, as I suspect, the thing will come off. No, I'm not going to tell you about it. I want you to get hold of the Ryan girl. Tell her I'm interested in her and want her to dine here tomorrow night. She'll come fast enough."

"I should say she would!"

"The other thing I want is some good strong knockout drops, something that will put anyone out of action for an hour or two, but leave them none the worse the next day."

Danahan grinned.

"I can't guarantee our friend won't have a headache, but there will be no permanent damage done."

"Good! Run away now, Danny, and leave the rest to me." She raised her voice: "Miss Jones!"

The spectacled young woman appeared with her usual alacrity.

“Take down this, please.”

Walking slowly up and down, Olga dictated the day’s correspondence. But one answer she wrote with her own hand.

Jake Levitt, in his dingy room, grinned as he tore open the expected envelope.

Dear Sir,

I cannot recall the lady of whom you speak, but I meet so many people that my memory is necessarily uncertain. I am always pleased to help any fellow actress, and shall be at home if you will call this evening at nine o’clock.

Yours faithfully,

Olga Stormer

Levitt nodded appreciatively. Clever note! She admitted nothing. Nevertheless she was willing to treat. The gold mine was developing.

At nine o’clock precisely Levitt stood outside the door of the actress’s flat and pressed the bell. No one answered the summons, and he was about to press it again when he realized that the door was not latched. He pushed the door open and entered the hall. To his right was an open door leading into a brilliantly lighted room, a room decorated in scarlet and black. Levitt walked in. On the table under the lamp lay a sheet of paper on which were written the words:

Please wait until I return.—O. Stormer.

Levitt sat down and waited. In spite of himself a feeling of uneasiness was stealing over him. The flat was so very quiet. There was something eerie about the silence.

Nothing wrong, of course, how could there be? But the room was so deadly quiet; and yet, quiet as it was, he had the preposterous, uncomfortable notion that he wasn’t alone in it. Absurd! He wiped the perspiration from his brow. And still the impression grew stronger. He wasn’t alone! With a muttered oath he sprang up and began to pace up and down. In a minute the woman would return and then—

He stopped dead with a muffled cry. From beneath the black velvet hangings that draped the window a hand protruded! He stooped and touched it. Cold—horribly cold—a dead hand.

With a cry he flung back the curtains. A woman was lying there, one arm flung wide, the other doubled under her as she lay face downwards, her golden-bronze hair lying in dishevelled masses on her neck.

Olga Stormer! Tremblingly his fingers sought the icy coldness of that wrist and felt for the pulse. As he thought, there was none. She was dead. She had escaped him, then, by taking the simplest way out.

Suddenly his eyes were arrested by two ends of red cord finishing in fantastic tassels, and half hidden by the masses of her hair. He touched them gingerly; the head sagged as he did so, and he caught a glimpse of a horrible purple face. He sprang back with a cry, his head whirling. There was something here he did not understand. His brief glimpse of the face, disfigured as it was, had shown him one thing. This was murder, not suicide. The woman had been strangled and—she was not Olga Stormer!

Ah! What was that? A sound behind him. He wheeled round and looked straight into the terrified eyes of a maidservant crouching against the wall. Her face was as white as the cap and apron she wore, but he did not understand the fascinated horror in her eyes until her half-breathed words enlightened him to the peril in which he stood.

“Oh, my Gord! You’ve killed ’er!”

Even then he did not quite realize. He replied:

“No, no, she was dead when I found her.”

“I saw yer do it! You pulled the cord and strangled her. I ’eard the gurgling cry she give.”

The sweat broke out upon his brow in earnest. His mind went rapidly over his actions of the previous few minutes. She must have come in just as he had the two ends of cord in his hands; she had seen the sagging head and had taken his own cry as coming from the victim. He stared at her helplessly. There was no doubting what he saw in her face—terror and stupidity. She would tell the police she had seen the crime committed, and no cross-examination would shake her, he was sure of that. She would swear away his life with the unshakable conviction that she was speaking the truth.

What a horrible, unforeseen chain of circumstances! Stop, was it unforeseen? Was there some devilry here? On an impulse he said, eyeing her narrowly:

“That’s not your mistress, you know.”

Her answer, given mechanically, threw a light upon the situation.

“No, it’s ’er actress friend—if you can call ’em friends, seeing that they fought like cat and dog. They were at it tonight, ’ammer and tongs.”

A trap! He saw it now.

“Where’s your mistress?”

“Went out ten minutes ago.”

A trap! And he had walked into it like a lamb. A clever devil, this Olga Stormer; she had rid herself of a rival, and he was to suffer for the deed. Murder! My God, they hanged a man for murder! And he was innocent—innocent!

A stealthy rustle recalled him. The little maid was sidling towards the door. Her wits were beginning to work again. Her eyes wavered to the telephone, then back to the door. At all costs he must silence her. It was the only way. As well hang for a real crime as a fictitious one. She had no weapon, neither had he. But he had his hands! Then his heart gave a leap. On the table beside her, almost under her hand, lay a small, jewelled revolver. If he could reach it first—

Instinct or his eyes warned her. She caught it up as he sprang and held it pointed at his breast. Awkwardly as she held it, her finger was on the trigger, and she could hardly miss him at that distance. He stopped dead. A revolver belonging to a woman like Olga Stormer would be pretty sure to be loaded.

But there was one thing, she was no longer directly between him and the door. So long as he did not attack her, she might not have the nerve to shoot. Anyway, he must risk it. Zig-zagging, he ran for the door, through the hall and out through the outer door, banging it behind him. He heard her voice, faint and shaky, calling, "Police, Murder!" She'd have to call louder than that before anyone was likely to hear her. He'd got a start, anyway. Down the stairs he went, running down the open street, then slacking to a walk as a stray pedestrian turned the corner. He had his plan cut and dried. To Gravesend as quickly as possible. A boat was sailing from there that night for the remoter parts of the world. He knew the captain, a man who, for a consideration, would ask no questions. Once on board and out to sea he would be safe.

At eleven o'clock Danahan's telephone rang. Olga's voice spoke.

"Prepare a contract for Miss Ryan, will you? She's to understudy 'Cora.' It's absolutely no use arguing. I owe her something after all the things I did to her tonight! What? Yes, I think I'm out of my troubles. By the way, if she tells you tomorrow that I'm an ardent spiritualist and put her into a trance tonight, don't show open incredulity. How? Knockout drops in the coffee, followed by scientific passes! After that I painted her face with purple grease paint and put a tourniquet on her left arm! Mystified? Well, you must stay mystified until tomorrow. I haven't time to explain now. I must get out of the cap and apron before my faithful Maud returns from the pictures. There was a 'beautiful drama' on tonight, she told me. But she missed the best drama of all. I played my best part tonight, Danny. The mittens won! Jake Levitt is a coward all right, and oh, Danny, Danny—I'm an actress!"

Three

WHILE THE LIGHT LASTS

"While the Light Lasts" was first published in Novel Magazine, April 1924.

The Ford car bumped from rut to rut, and the hot African sun poured down unmercifully. On either side of the so-called road stretched an unbroken line of trees and scrub, rising and falling in gently undulating lines as far as the eye could reach, the colouring a soft, deep yellow-green, the whole effect languorous and strangely quiet. Few birds stirred the slumbering silence. Once a snake wriggled across the road in front of the car, escaping the driver's efforts at destruction with sinuous ease. Once a native stepped out from the bush, dignified and upright, behind him a woman with an infant bound closely to her broad back and a complete household equipment, including a frying pan, balanced magnificently on her head.

All these things George Crozier had not failed to point out to his wife, who had answered him with a monosyllabic lack of attention which irritated him.

"Thinking of that fellow," he deduced wrathfully. It was thus that he was wont to allude in his own mind to Deirdre Crozier's first husband, killed in the first year of the War. Killed, too, in the campaign against German West Africa. Natural she should, perhaps—he stole a glance at her, her fairness, the pink and white smoothness of her cheek, the rounded lines of her figure—rather more rounded perhaps than they had been in those far-off days when she had passively permitted him to become engaged to her, and then, in that first emotional scare of war, had abruptly cast him aside and made a war wedding of it with that lean, sunburnt boy lover of hers, Tim Nugent.

Well, well, the fellow was dead—gallantly dead—and he, George Crozier, had married the girl he had always meant to marry. She was fond of him, too; how could she help it when he was ready to gratify her every wish and had the money to do it, too! He reflected with some complacency on his last gift to her, at Kimberley, where, owing to his friendship with some of the directors of De Beers, he had been able to purchase a diamond which, in the ordinary way, would not have been in the market, a stone not remarkable as to size, but of a very exquisite and rare shade, a peculiar deep amber, almost old gold, a diamond such as you might not find in a hundred years. And the look in her eyes when he gave it to her! Women were all the same about diamonds.

The necessity of holding on with both hands to prevent himself being jerked out brought George Crozier back to the realities. He cried out for perhaps the fourteenth time, with the pardonable irritation of a man who owns two Rolls-Royce cars and who has exercised his stud on the highways of civilization: “Good Lord, what a car! What a road!” He went on angrily: “Where the devil is this tobacco estate, anyway? It’s over an hour since we left Bulawayo.”

“Lost in Rhodesia,” said Deirdre lightly between two involuntary leaps into the air.

But the coffee-coloured driver, appealed to, responded with the cheering news that their destination was just round the next bend of the road.

The manager of the estate, Mr. Walters, was waiting on the stoep to receive them with the touch of deference due to George Crozier’s prominence in Union Tobacco. He introduced his daughter-in-law, who shepherded Deirdre through the cool, dark inner hall to a bedroom beyond, where she could remove the veil with which she was always careful to shield her complexion when motoring. As she unfastened the pins in her usual leisurely, graceful fashion, Deirdre’s eyes swept round the whitewashed ugliness of the bare room. No luxuries here, and Deirdre, who loved comfort as a cat loves cream, shivered a little. On the wall a text confronted her. “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” it demanded of all and sundry, and Deirdre, pleasantly conscious that the question had nothing to do with her, turned to accompany her shy and rather silent guide. She noted, but not in the least maliciously, the spreading hips and the unbecoming cheap cotton gown. And with a glow of quiet appreciation her eyes dropped to the exquisite, costly simplicity of her own

French white linen. Beautiful clothes, especially when worn by herself, roused in her the joy of the artist.

The two men were waiting for her.

“It won’t bore you to come round, too, Mrs. Crozier?”

“Not at all. I’ve never been over a tobacco factory.”

They stepped out into the still Rhodesian afternoon.

“These are the seedlings here; we plant them out as required. You see—”

The manager’s voice droned on, interpolated by her husband’s sharp staccato questions—output, stamp duty, problems of coloured labour. She ceased to listen.

This was Rhodesia, this was the land Tim had loved, where he and she were to have gone together after the War was over. If he had not been killed! As always, the bitterness of revolt surged up in her at that thought. Two short months—that was all they had had. Two months of happiness—if that mingled rapture and pain were happiness. Was love ever happiness? Did not a thousand tortures beset the lover’s heart? She had lived intensely in that short space, but had she ever known the peace, the leisure, the quiet contentment of her present life? And for the first time she admitted, somewhat unwillingly, that perhaps all had been for the best.

“I wouldn’t have liked living out here. I mightn’t have been able to make Tim happy. I might have disappointed him. George loves me, and I’m very fond of him, and he’s very, very good to me. Why, look at that diamond he bought me only the other day.” And, thinking of it, her eyelids dropped a little in pure pleasure.

“This is where we thread the leaves.” Walters led the way into a low, long shed. On the floor were vast heaps of green leaves, and white-clad black “boys” squatted round them, picking and rejecting with deft fingers, sorting them into sizes, and stringing them by means of primitive needles on a long line of string. They worked with a cheerful leisureliness, jesting amongst themselves, and showing their white teeth as they laughed.

“Now, out here—”

They passed through the shed into the daylight again, where the lines of leaves hung drying in the sun. Deirdre sniffed delicately at the faint, almost imperceptible fragrance that filled the air.

Walters led the way into other sheds where the tobacco, kissed by the sun into faint yellow discoloration, underwent its further treatment. Dark here, with the brown swinging masses above, ready to fall to powder at a rough touch. The fragrance was stronger, almost overpowering it seemed to Deirdre, and suddenly a sort of terror came upon her, a fear of she knew not what, that drove her from that menacing, scented obscurity out into the sunlight. Crozier noted her pallor.

“What’s the matter, my dear, don’t you feel well? The sun, perhaps. Better not come with us round the plantations? Eh?”

Walters was solicitous. Mrs. Crozier had better go back to the house and rest. He called to a man a little distance away.

“Mr. Arden—Mrs. Crozier. Mrs. Crozier’s feeling a little done up with the heat, Arden. Just take her back to the house, will you?”

The momentary feeling of dizziness was passing. Deirdre walked by Arden’s side. She had as yet hardly glanced at him.

“Deirdre!”

Her heart gave a leap, and then stood still. Only one person had ever spoken her name like that, with the faint stress on the first syllable that made of it a caress.

She turned and stared at the man by her side. He was burnt almost black by the sun, he walked with a limp, and on the cheek nearer hers was a long scar which altered his expression, but she knew him.

"Tim!"

For an eternity, it seemed to her, they gazed at each other, mute and trembling, and then, without knowing how or why, they were in each other's arms. Time rolled back for them. Then they drew apart again, and Deirdre, conscious as she put it of the idiocy of the question, said:

"Then you're not dead?"

"No, they must have mistaken another chap for me. I was badly knocked on the head, but I came to and managed to crawl into the bush. After that I don't know what happened for months and months, but a friendly tribe looked after me, and at last I got my proper wits again and managed to get back to civilization." He paused. "I found you'd been married six months."

Deirdre cried out:

"Oh, Tim, understand, please understand! It was so awful, the loneliness—and the poverty. I didn't mind being poor with you, but when I was alone I hadn't the nerve to stand up against the sordidness of it all."

"It's all right, Deirdre; I did understand. I know you always have had a hankering after the fleshpots. I took you from them once—but the second time, well—my nerve failed. I was pretty badly broken up, you see, could hardly walk without a crutch, and then there was this scar."

She interrupted him passionately.

"Do you think I would have cared for that?"

"No, I know you wouldn't. I was a fool. Some women did mind, you know. I made up my mind I'd manage to get a glimpse of you. If you looked happy, if I thought you were contented to be with Crozier—why, then I'd remain dead. I did see you. You were just getting into a big car. You had on some lovely sable furs—things I'd never be able to give you if I worked my fingers to the bone—and—well—you seemed happy enough. I hadn't the same strength and courage, the same belief in myself, that I'd had before the War. All I could see was myself, broken and useless, barely able to earn enough to keep you—and you looked so beautiful, Deirdre, such a queen amongst women, so worthy to have furs and jewels and lovely clothes and all the hundred and one luxuries Crozier could give you. That—and—well, the pain—of seeing you together, decided me. Everyone believed me dead. I would stay dead.”

“The pain!” repeated Deirdre in a low voice.

“Well, damn it all, Deirdre, it hurt! It isn’t that I blame you. I don’t. But it hurt.”

They were both silent. Then Tim raised her face to his and kissed it with a new tenderness.

“But that’s all over now, sweetheart. The only thing to decide is how we’re going to break it to Crozier.”

“Oh!” She drew herself away abruptly. “I hadn’t thought—” She broke off as Crozier and the manager appeared round the angle of the path. With a swift turn of the head she whispered:

“Do nothing now. Leave it to me. I must prepare him. Where could I meet you tomorrow?”

Nugent reflected.

“I could come in to Bulawayo. How about the Café near the Standard Bank? At three o’clock it would be pretty empty.”

Deirdre gave a brief nod of assent before turning her back on him and joining the other two men. Tim Nugent looked after her with a faint frown. Something in her manner puzzled him.

Deirdre was very silent during the drive home. Sheltering behind the fiction of a “touch of the sun,” she deliberated on her course of action. How should she tell him? How would he take it? A strange lassitude seemed to possess her, and a growing desire to postpone the revelation as long as might be.

Tomorrow would be soon enough. There would be plenty of time before three o’clock.

The hotel was uncomfortable. Their room was on the ground floor, looking out on to an inner court. Deirdre stood that evening sniffing the stale air and glancing distastefully at the tawdry furniture. Her mind flew to the easy luxury of Monkton Court amidst the Surrey pinewoods. When her maid left her at last, she went slowly to her jewel case. In the palm of her hand the golden diamond returned her stare.

With an almost violent gesture she returned it to the case and slammed down the lid. Tomorrow morning she would tell George.

She slept badly. It was stifling beneath the heavy folds of the mosquito netting. The throbbing darkness was punctuated by the ubiquitous ping she had learnt to dread. She awoke white and listless. Impossible to start a scene so early in the day!

She lay in the small, close room all the morning, resting. Lunchtime came upon her with a sense of shock. As they sat drinking coffee, George Crozier proposed a drive to the Matopos.

“Plenty of time if we start at once.”

Deirdre shook her head, pleading a headache, and she thought to herself: “That settles it. I can’t rush the thing. After all, what does a day more or less matter? I’ll explain to Tim.”

She waved goodbye to Crozier as he rattled off in the battered Ford. Then, glancing at her watch, she walked slowly to the meeting place.

The Café was deserted at this hour. They sat down at a little table and ordered the inevitable tea that South Africa drinks at all hours of the day and night. Neither of them said a word till the waitress brought it and withdrew to her fastness behind some pink curtains. Then Deirdre looked up and started as she met the intense watchfulness in his eyes.

“Deirdre, have you told him?”

She shook her head, moistening her lips, seeking for words that would not come.

“Why not?”

“I haven’t had a chance; there hasn’t been time.”

Even to herself the words sounded halting and unconvincing.

“It’s not that. There’s something else. I suspected it yesterday. I’m sure of it today. Deirdre, what is it?”

She shook her head dumbly.

“There’s some reason why you don’t want to leave George Crozier, why you don’t want to come back to me. What is it?”

It was true. As he said it she knew it, knew it with sudden scorching shame, but knew it beyond any possibility of doubt. And still his eyes searched her.

“It isn’t that you love him! You don’t. But there’s something.”

She thought: “In another moment he’ll see! Oh, God, don’t let him!”

Suddenly his face whitened.

“Deirdre—is it—is it that there’s going to be a—child?”

In a flash she saw the chance he offered her. A wonderful way! Slowly, almost without her own volition, she bowed her head.

She heard his quick breathing, then his voice, rather high and hard.

“That—alters things. I didn’t know. We’ve got to find a different way out.” He leant across the table and caught both her hands in his. “Deirdre, my darling, never think—never dream that you were in any way to blame. Whatever happens, remember that. I should have claimed you when I came back to England. I funked it, so it’s up to me to do what I can to put things straight now. You see? Whatever happens, don’t fret, darling. Nothing has been your fault.”

He lifted first one hand, then the other to his lips. Then she was alone, staring at the untasted tea. And, strangely enough, it was only one thing that she saw—a gaudily illuminated text hanging on a whitewashed wall. The words seemed to spring out from it and hurl themselves at her. “What shall it profit a man—” She got up, paid for her tea and went out.

On his return George Crozier was met by a request that his wife might not be disturbed. Her headache, the maid said, was very bad.

It was nine o’clock the next morning when he entered her bedroom, his face rather grave. Deirdre was sitting up in bed. She looked white and haggard, but her eyes shone.

“George, I’ve got something to tell you, something rather terrible—”

He interrupted her brusquely.

“So you’ve heard. I was afraid it might upset you.”

“Upset me?”

“Yes. You talked to the poor young fellow that day.”

He saw her hand steal to her heart, her eyelids flicker, then she said in a low, quick voice that somehow frightened him:

“I’ve heard nothing. Tell me quickly.”

“I thought—”

“Tell me!”

“Out at that tobacco estate. Chap shot himself. Badly broken up in the War, nerves all to pieces, I suppose. There’s no other reason to account for it.”

“He shot himself—in that dark shed where the tobacco was hanging.” She spoke with certainty, her eyes like a sleepwalker’s as she saw before her in the odorous darkness a figure lying there, revolver in hand.

“Why, to be sure; that’s where you were taken queer yesterday. Odd thing, that!”

Deirdre did not answer. She saw another picture—a table with tea things on it, and a woman bowing her head in acceptance of a lie.

“Well, well, the War has a lot to answer for,” said Crozier, and stretched out his hand for a match, lighting his pipe with careful puffs.

His wife’s cry startled him.

“Ah! don’t, don’t! I can’t bear the smell!”

He stared at her in kindly astonishment.

“My dear girl, you mustn’t be nervy. After all, you can’t escape from the smell of tobacco. You’ll meet it everywhere.”

“Yes, everywhere!” She smiled a slow, twisted smile, and murmured some words that he did not catch, words that she had chosen for the original obituary notice of Tim Nugent’s death. “While the light lasts I shall remember, and in the darkness I shall not forget.”

Her eyes widened as they followed the ascending spiral of smoke, and she repeated in a low, monotonous voice: “Everywhere, everywhere.”

Four

THE HOUSE OF DREAMS

"The House of Dreams" was first published in The Sovereign Magazine, January 1926. According to Agatha Christie's autobiography, it was a revised version of the unpublished "The House of Beauty," written before the First World War and "the first thing I ever wrote that showed any kind of promise."

This is the story of John Segrave—of his life, which was unsatisfactory; of his love, which was unsatisfied; of his dreams, and of his death; and if in the two latter he found what was denied in the two former, then his life may, after all, be taken as a success. Who knows?

John Segrave came of a family which had been slowly going downhill for the last century. They had been landowners since the days of Elizabeth, but their last piece of property was sold. It was thought well that one of the sons at least should acquire the useful art of moneymaking. It was an unconscious irony of Fate that John should be the one chosen.

With his strangely sensitive mouth, and the long dark blue slits of eyes that suggested an elf or a faun, something wild and of the woods, it was incongruous that he should be offered up, a sacrifice on the altar of Finance. The smell of the earth, the taste of the sea salt on one's lips, and the free sky above one's head—these were the things beloved by John Segrave, to which he was to bid farewell.

At the age of eighteen he became a junior clerk in a big business house. Seven years later he was still a clerk, not quite so junior, but with status otherwise unchanged. The faculty for "getting on in the world" had been omitted from his makeup. He was punctual, industrious, plodding—a clerk and nothing but a clerk.

And yet he might have been—what? He could hardly answer that question himself, but he could not rid himself of the conviction that somewhere there was a life in which he could have—counted. There was power in him, swiftness of vision, a something of which his fellow toilers had never had a glimpse. They liked him. He was popular because of his air of careless friendship, and they never appreciated the fact that he barred them but by that same manner from any real intimacy.

The dream came to him suddenly. It was no childish fantasy growing and developing through the years. It came on a midsummer night, or rather early morning, and he woke from it tingling all over, striving to hold it to him as it fled, slipping from his clutch in the elusive way dreams have.

Desperately he clung to it. It must not go—it must not—he must remember the house. It was the House, of course! The House he knew so well. Was it a real house, or did he merely know it in dreams? He didn't remember—but he certainly knew it—knew it very well.

The faint grey light of the early morning was stealing into the room. The stillness was extraordinary. At four-thirty a.m. London, weary London, found her brief instant of peace.

John Segrave lay quiet, wrapped in the joy, the exquisite wonder and beauty of his dream. How clever it had been of him to remember it! A dream flitted so quickly as a rule, ran past you just as with waking consciousness your clumsy fingers sought to stop and hold it. But he had been too quick for this dream! He had seized it as it was slipping swiftly by him.

It was really a most remarkable dream! There was the house and—his thoughts were brought up with a jerk, for when he came to think of it, he couldn't remember anything but the house. And suddenly, with a tinge of disappointment, he recognized that, after all, the house was quite strange to him. He hadn't even dreamed of it before.

It was a white house, standing on high ground. There were trees near it, blue hills in the distance, but its peculiar charm was independent of surroundings for (and this was the point, the climax of the dream) it was a beautiful, a strangely beautiful house. His pulses quickened as he remembered anew the strange beauty of the house.

The outside of it, of course, for he hadn’t been inside. There had been no question of that—no question of it whatsoever.

Then, as the dingy outlines of his bed-sitting room began to take shape in the growing light, he experienced the disillusion of the dreamer. Perhaps, after all, his dream hadn’t been so very wonderful—or had the wonderful, the explanatory part, slipped past him, and laughed at his ineffectual clutching hands? A white house, standing on high ground—there wasn’t much there to get excited about, surely? It was rather a big house, he remembered, with a lot of windows in it, and the blinds were all down, not because the people were away (he was sure of that), but because it was so early that no one was up yet.

Then he laughed at the absurdity of his imaginings, and remembered that he was to dine with Mr. Wetterman that night.

Maisie Wetterman was Rudolf Wetterman’s only daughter, and she had been accustomed all her life to having exactly what she wanted. Paying a visit to her father’s office one day, she had noticed John Segrave. He had brought in some letters that her father had asked for. When he had departed again, she asked her father about him. Wetterman was communicative.

“One of Sir Edward Segrave’s sons. Fine old family, but on its last legs. This boy will never set the Thames on fire. I like him all right, but there’s nothing to him. No punch of any kind.”

Maisie was, perhaps, indifferent to punch. It was a quality valued more by her parent than herself. Anyway, a fortnight later she persuaded her father to ask John Segrave to dinner. It was an intimate dinner, herself and her father, John Segrave, and a girlfriend who was staying with her.

The girlfriend was moved to make a few remarks.

“On approval, I suppose, Maisie? Later, father will do it up in a nice little parcel and bring it home from the city as a present to his dear little daughter, duly bought and paid for.”

“Allegra! You are the limit.”

Allegra Kerr laughed.

“You do take fancies, you know, Maisie. I like that hat—I must have it! If hats, why not husbands?”

“Don’t be absurd. I’ve hardly spoken to him yet.”

“No. But you’ve made up your mind,” said the other girl. “What’s the attraction, Maisie?”

“I don’t know,” said Maisie Wetterman slowly. “He’s—different.”

“Different?”

“Yes. I can’t explain. He’s good looking, you know, in a queer sort of way, but it’s not that. He’s a way of not seeing you’re there. Really, I don’t believe he as much as glanced at me that day in father’s office.”

Allegra laughed.

“That’s an old trick. Rather an astute young man, I should say.”

“Allegra, you’re hateful!”

“Cheer up, darling. Father will buy a woolly lamb for his little Maisiekins.”

“I don’t want it to be like that.”

“Love with a capital L. Is that it?”

“Why shouldn’t he fall in love with me?”

“No reason at all. I expect he will.”

Allegra smiled as she spoke, and let her glance sweep over the other. Maisie Wetterman was short—inclined to be plump—she had dark hair, well shingled and artistically waved. Her naturally good complexion was enhanced by the latest colours in powder and lipstick. She had a good mouth and teeth, dark eyes, rather small and twinkly, and a jaw and chin slightly on the heavy side. She was beautifully dressed.

“Yes,” said Allegra, finishing her scrutiny. “I’ve no doubt he will. The whole effect is really very good, Maisie.”

Her friend looked at her doubtfully.

“I mean it,” said Allegra. “I mean it—honour bright. But just supposing, for the sake of argument, that he shouldn’t. Fall in love, I mean. Suppose his affection was to become sincere, but platonic. What then?”

“I may not like him at all when I know him better.”

“Quite so. On the other hand you may like him very much indeed. And in that latter case—”

Maisie shrugged her shoulders.

“I should hope I’ve too much pride—”

Allegra interrupted.

“Pride comes in handy for masking one’s feelings—it doesn’t stop you from feeling them.”

“Well,” said Maisie, flushed. “I don’t see why I shouldn’t say it. I am a very good match. I mean—from his point of view, father’s daughter and everything.”

“Partnership in the offing, et cetera,” said Allegra. “Yes, Maisie. You’re father’s daughter, all right. I’m awfully pleased. I do like my friends to run true to type.”

The faint mockery of her tone made the other uneasy.

“You are hateful, Allegra.”

“But stimulating, darling. That’s why you have me here. I’m a student of history, you know, and it always intrigued me why the court jester was permitted and encouraged. Now that I’m one myself, I see the point. It’s rather a good rôle, you see, I had to do something. There was I, proud and penniless like the heroine of a novelette, well born and badly educated. ‘What to do, girl? God wot,’ saith she. The poor relation type of girl, all willingness to do without a fire in her room and content to do odd jobs and ‘help dear Cousin So-and-So,’ I observed to be at a premium. Nobody really wants her—except those people who can’t keep their servants, and they treat her like a galley slave.

“So I became the court fool. Insolence, plain speaking, a dash of wit now and again (not too much lest I should have to live up to it), and behind it all, a very shrewd observation of human nature. People rather like being told how horrible they really are. That’s why they flock to popular preachers. It’s been a great success. I’m always overwhelmed with invitations. I can live on my friends with the greatest ease, and I’m careful to make no pretence of gratitude.”

“There’s no one quite like you, Allegra. You don’t mind in the least what you say.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I mind very much—I take care and thought about the matter. My seeming outspokenness is always calculated. I’ve got to be careful. This job has got to carry me on to old age.”

“Why not marry? I know heaps of people have asked you.”

Allegra’s face grew suddenly hard.

“I can never marry.”

“Because—” Maisie left the sentence unfinished, looking at her friend. The latter gave a short nod of assent.

Footsteps were heard on the stairs. The butler threw open the door and announced:

“Mr. Segrave.”

John came in without any particular enthusiasm. He couldn’t imagine why the old boy had asked him. If he could have got out of it he would have done so. The house depressed him, with its solid magnificence and the soft pile of its carpet.

A girl came forward and shook hands with him. He remembered vaguely having seen her one day in her father’s office.

“How do you do, Mr. Segrave? Mr. Segrave—Miss Kerr.”

Then he woke. Who was she? Where did she come from? From the flame-coloured draperies that floated round her, to the tiny Mercury wings on her small Greek head, she was a being transitory and fugitive, standing out against the dull background with an effect of unreality.

Rudolf Wetterman came in, his broad expanse of gleaming shirt-front creaking as he walked. They went down informally to dinner.

Allegra Kerr talked to her host. John Segrave had to devote himself to Maisie. But his whole mind was on the girl on the other side of him. She was marvellously effective. Her effectiveness was, he thought, more studied than natural. But behind all that, there lay something else. Flickering fire, fitful, capricious, like the will-o’-the-wisps that of old lured men into the marshes.

At last he got a chance to speak to her. Maisie was giving her father a message from some friend she had met that day. Now that the moment had come, he was tongue-tied. His glance pleaded with her dumbly.

“Dinner-table topics,” she said lightly. “Shall we start with the theatres, or with one of those innumerable openings beginning, ‘Do you like—?’ ”

John laughed.

“And if we find we both like dogs and dislike sandy cats, it will form what is called a ‘bond’ between us?”

“Assuredly,” said Allegra gravely.

“It is, I think, a pity to begin with a catechism.”

“Yet it puts conversation within the reach of all.”

“True, but with disastrous results.”

“It is useful to know the rules—if only to break them.”

John smiled at her.

“I take it, then, that you and I will indulge our personal vagaries. Even though we display thereby the genius that is akin to madness.”

With a sharp unguarded movement, the girl’s hand swept a wineglass off the table. There was the tinkle of broken glass. Maisie and her father stopped speaking.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Wetterman. I’m throwing glasses on the floor.”

“My dear Allegra, it doesn’t matter at all, not at all.”

Beneath his breath John Segrave said quickly:

“Broken glass. That’s bad luck. I wish—it hadn’t happened.”

“Don’t worry. How does it go? ‘Ill luck thou canst not bring where ill luck has its home.’ ”

She turned once more to Wetterman. John, resuming conversation with Maisie, tried to place the quotation. He got it at last. They were the words used by Sieglinde in the Walküre when Sigmund offers to leave the house.

He thought: “Did she mean—?”

But Maisie was asking his opinion of the latest Revue. Soon he had admitted that he was fond of music.

“After dinner,” said Maisie, “we’ll make Allegra play for us.”

They all went up to the drawing room together. Secretly, Wetterman considered it a barbarous custom. He liked the ponderous gravity of the wine passing round, the handed cigars. But perhaps it was as well tonight. He didn’t know what on earth he could find to say to young Segrave. Maisie was too bad with her whims. It wasn’t as though the fellow were good looking—really good looking—and certainly he wasn’t amusing. He was glad when Maisie asked Allegra Kerr to play. They’d get through the evening sooner. The young idiot didn’t even play Bridge.

Allegra played well, though without the sure touch of a professional. She played modern music, Debussy and Strauss, a little Scriabin. Then she dropped into the first movement of Beethoven’s Pathétique, that expression of a grief that is infinite, a sorrow that is endless and vast as the ages, but in which from end to end breathes the spirit that will not accept defeat. In the solemnity of undying woe, it moves with the rhythm of the conqueror to its final doom.

Towards the end she faltered, her fingers struck a discord, and she broke off abruptly. She looked across at Maisie and laughed mockingly.

“You see,” she said. “They won’t let me.”

Then, without waiting for a reply to her somewhat enigmatical remark, she plunged into a strange haunting melody, a thing of weird harmonies and curious measured rhythm, quite unlike anything Segrave had ever heard before. It was delicate as the flight of a bird, poised, hovering—suddenly, without the least warning, it turned into a mere discordant jangle of notes, and Allegra rose laughing from the piano.

In spite of her laugh, she looked disturbed and almost frightened. She sat down by Maisie, and John heard the latter say in a low tone to her:

“You shouldn’t do it. You really shouldn’t do it.”

“What was the last thing?” John asked eagerly.

“Something of my own.”

She spoke sharply and curtly. Wetterman changed the subject.

That night John Segrave dreamt again of the House.

John was unhappy. His life was irksome to him as never before. Up to now he had accepted it patiently—a disagreeable necessity, but one which left his inner freedom essentially untouched. Now all that was changed. The outer world and the inner intermingled.

He did not disguise to himself the reason for the change. He had fallen in love at first sight with Allegra Kerr. What was he going to do about it?

He had been too bewildered that first night to make any plans. He had not even tried to see her again. A little later, when Maisie Wetterman asked him down to her father’s place in the country for a weekend, he went eagerly, but he was disappointed, for Allegra was not there.

He mentioned her once, tentatively, to Maisie, and she told him that Allegra was up in Scotland paying a visit. He left it at that. He would have liked to go on talking about her, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Maisie was puzzled by him that weekend. He didn’t appear to see—well, to see what was so plainly to be seen. She was a direct young woman in her methods, but directness was lost upon John. He thought her kind, but a little overpowering.

Yet the Fates were stronger than Maisie. They willed that John should see Allegra again.

They met in the park one Sunday afternoon. He had seen her from far off, and his heart thumped against the side of his ribs. Supposing she should have forgotten him—

But she had not forgotten. She stopped and spoke. In a few minutes they were walking side by side, striking out across the grass. He was ridiculously happy.

He said suddenly and unexpectedly:

“Do you believe in dreams?”

“I believe in nightmares.”

The harshness of her voice startled him.

“Nightmares,” he said stupidly. “I didn’t mean nightmares.”

Allegra looked at him.

“No,” she said. “There have been no nightmares in your life. I can see that.”

Her voice was gentle—different.

He told her then of his dream of the white house, stammering a little. He had had it now six—no, seven times. Always the same. It was beautiful—so beautiful!

He went on.

“You see—it’s to do with you—in some way. I had it first the night before I met you.”

“To do with me?” She laughed—a short bitter laugh. “Oh, no, that’s impossible. The house was beautiful.”

“So are you,” said John Segrave.

Allegra flushed a little with annoyance.

“I’m sorry—I was stupid. I seemed to ask for a compliment, didn’t I? But I didn’t really mean that at all. The outside of me is all right, I know.”

“I haven’t seen the inside of the house yet,” said John Segrave. “When I do I know it will be quite as beautiful as the outside.”

He spoke slowly and gravely, giving the words a meaning that she chose to ignore.

“There is something more I want to tell you—if you will listen.”

“I will listen,” said Allegra.

“I am chucking up this job of mine. I ought to have done it long ago—I see that now. I have been content to drift along knowing I was an utter failure, without caring much, just living from day to day. A man shouldn’t do that. It’s a man’s business to find something he can do and make a success of it. I’m chucking this, and taking on something else—quite a different sort of thing. It’s a kind of expedition in West Africa—I can’t tell you the details. They’re not supposed to be known; but if it comes off—well, I shall be a rich man.”

“So you, too, count success in terms of money?”

“Money,” said John Segrave, “means just one thing to me—you! When I come back—” he paused.

She bent her head. Her face had grown very pale.

“I won’t pretend to misunderstand. That’s why I must tell you now, once and for all: I shall never marry.”

He stayed a little while considering, then he said very gently:

“Can’t you tell me why?”

“I could, but more than anything in the world I do not want to tell you.”

Again he was silent, then he looked up suddenly and a singularly attractive smile illumined his faun’s face.

“I see,” he said. “So you won’t let me come inside the House—not even to peep in for a second? The blinds are to stay down.”

Allegra leaned forward and laid her hand on his.

“I will tell you this much. You dream of your House. But I—don’t dream. My dreams are nightmares!”

And on that she left him, abruptly, disconcertingly.

That night, once more, he dreamed. Of late, he had realized that the House was most certainly tenanted. He had seen a hand draw aside the blinds, had caught glimpses of moving figures within.

Tonight the House seemed fairer than it had ever done before. Its white walls shone in the sunlight. The peace and the beauty of it were complete.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of a fuller ripple of the waves of joy. Someone was coming to the window. He knew it. A hand, the same hand that he had seen before, laid hold of the blind, drawing it back. In a minute he would see. . . .

He was awake—still quivering with the horror, the unutterable loathing of the Thing that had looked out at him from the window of the House.

It was a Thing utterly and wholly horrible, a Thing so vile and loathsome that the mere remembrance of it made him feel sick. And he knew that the most unutterably and horribly vile thing about it was its presence in that House—the House of Beauty.

For where that Thing abode was horror—horror that rose up and slew the peace and the serenity which were the birthright of the House. The beauty, the wonderful immortal beauty of the House was destroyed for ever, for within its holy consecrated walls there dwelt the Shadow of an Unclean Thing!

If ever again he should dream of the House, Segrave knew he would awake at once with a start of terror, lest from its white beauty that Thing might suddenly look out at him.

The following evening, when he left the office, he went straight to the Wettermans’ house. He must see Allegra Kerr. Maisie would tell him where she was to be found.

He never noticed the eager light that flashed into Maisie's eyes as he was shown in, and she jumped up to greet him. He stammered out his request at once, with her hand still in his.

"Miss Kerr. I met her yesterday, but I don't know where she's staying."

He did not feel Maisie's hand grow limp in his as she withdrew it. The sudden coldness of her voice told him nothing.

"Allegra is here—staying with us. But I'm afraid you can't see her."

"But—"

"You see, her mother died this morning. We've just had the news."

"Oh!" He was taken aback.

"It is all very sad," said Maisie. She hesitated just a minute, then went on. "You see, she died in—well, practically an asylum. There's insanity in the family. The grandfather shot himself, and one of Allegra's aunts is a hopeless imbecile, and another drowned herself."

John Segrave made an inarticulate sound.

"I thought I ought to tell you," said Maisie virtuously. "We're such friends, aren't we? And of course Allegra is very attractive. Lots of people have asked her to marry them, but naturally she won't marry at all—she couldn't, could she?"

"She's all right," said Segrave. "There's nothing wrong with her."

His voice sounded hoarse and unnatural in his own ears.

"One never knows, her mother was quite all right when she was young. And she wasn't just—peculiar, you know. She was quite raving mad. It's a dreadful thing—insanity."

"Yes," he said, "it's a most awful Thing."

He knew now what it was that had looked at him from the window of the House.

Maisie was still talking on. He interrupted her brusquely.

“I really came to say goodbye—and to thank you for all your kindness.”

“You’re not—going away?”

There was alarm in her voice.

He smiled sideways at her—a crooked smile, pathetic and attractive.

“Yes,” he said. “To Africa.”

“Africa!”

Maisie echoed the word blankly. Before she could pull herself together he had shaken her by the hand and gone. She was left standing there, her hands clenched by her sides, an angry spot of colour in each cheek.

Below, on the doorstep, John Segrave came face to face with Allegra coming in from the street. She was in black, her face white and lifeless. She took one glance at him then drew him into a small morning room.

“Maisie told you,” she said. “You know?”

He nodded.

“But what does it matter? You’re all right. It—it leaves some people out.”

She looked at him sombrely, mournfully.

“You are all right,” he repeated.

“I don’t know,” she almost whispered it. “I don’t know. I told you—about my dreams. And when I play—when I’m at the piano—those others come and take hold of my hands.”

He was staring at her—paralysed. For one instant, as she spoke, something looked out from her eyes. It was gone in a flash—but he knew it. It was the Thing that had looked out from the House.

She caught his momentary recoil.

“You see,” she whispered. “You see—but I wish Maisie hadn’t told you. It takes everything from you.”

“Everything?”

“Yes. There won’t even be the dreams left. For now—you’ll never dare to dream of the House again.”

The West African sun poured down, and the heat was intense.

John Segrave continued to moan.

“I can’t find it. I can’t find it.”

The little English doctor with the red head and the tremendous jaw, scowled down upon his patient in that bullying manner which he had made his own.

“He’s always saying that. What does he mean?”

“He speaks, I think, of a house, monsieur.” The soft-voiced Sister of Charity from the Roman Catholic Mission spoke with her gentle detachment, as she too looked down on the stricken man.

“A house, eh? Well, he’s got to get it out of his head, or we shan’t pull him through. It’s on his mind. Segrave! Segrave!”

The wandering attention was fixed. The eyes rested with recognition on the doctor’s face.

“Look here, you’re going to pull through. I’m going to pull you through. But you’ve got to stop worrying about this house. It can’t run away, you know. So don’t bother about looking for it now.”

“All right.” He seemed obedient. “I suppose it can’t very well run away if it’s never been there at all.”

“Of course not!” The doctor laughed his cheery laugh. “Now you’ll be all right in no time.” And with a boisterous bluntness of manner he took his departure.

Segrave lay thinking. The fever had abated for the moment, and he could think clearly and lucidly. He must find that House.

For ten years he had dreaded finding it—the thought that he might come upon it unawares had been his greatest terror. And then, he remembered, when his fears were quite lulled to rest, one day it had found him. He recalled clearly his first haunting terror, and then his sudden, his exquisite, relief. For, after all, the House was empty!

Quite empty and exquisitely peaceful. It was as he remembered it ten years before. He had not forgotten. There was a huge black furniture van moving slowly away from the House. The last tenant, of course, moving out with his goods. He went up to the men in charge of the van and spoke to them. There was something rather sinister about that van, it was so very black. The horses were black, too, with freely flowing manes and tails, and the men all wore black clothes and gloves. It all reminded him of something else, something that he couldn’t remember.

Yes, he had been quite right. The last tenant was moving out, as his lease was up. The House was to stand empty for the present, until the owner came back from abroad.

And waking, he had been full of the peaceful beauty of the empty House.

A month after that, he had received a letter from Maisie (she wrote to him perseveringly, once a month). In it she told him that Allegra Kerr had died in the same home as her mother, and wasn’t it dreadfully sad? Though of course a merciful release.

It had really been very odd indeed. Coming after his dream like that. He didn’t quite understand it all. But it was odd.

And the worst of it was that he'd never been able to find the House since. Somehow, he'd forgotten the way.

The fever began to take hold of him once more. He tossed restlessly. Of course, he'd forgotten, the House was on high ground! He must climb to get there. But it was hot work climbing cliffs—dreadfully hot. Up, up, up—oh! he had slipped! He must start again from the bottom. Up, up, up—days passed, weeks—he wasn't sure that years didn't go by! And he was still climbing.

Once he heard the doctor's voice. But he couldn't stop climbing to listen. Besides the doctor would tell him to leave off looking for the House. He thought it was an ordinary house. He didn't know.

He remembered suddenly that he must be calm, very calm. You couldn't find the House unless you were very calm. It was no use looking for the House in a hurry, or being excited.

If he could only keep calm! But it was so hot! Hot? It was cold—yes, cold. These weren't cliffs, they were icebergs—jagged cold, icebergs.

He was so tired. He wouldn't go on looking—it was no good. Ah! here was a lane—that was better than icebergs, anyway. How pleasant and shady it was in the cool, green lane. And those trees—they were splendid! They were rather like—what? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter.

Ah! here were flowers. All golden and blue! How lovely it all was—and how strangely familiar. Of course, he had been here before. There, through the trees, was the gleam of the House, standing on the high ground. How beautiful it was. The green lane and the trees and the flowers were as nothing to the paramount, the all-satisfying, beauty of the House.

He hastened his steps. To think that he had never yet been inside! How unbelievably stupid of him—when he had the key in his pocket all the time!

And of course the beauty of the exterior was as nothing to the beauty that lay within—especially now that the owner had come back from abroad. He mounted the steps to the great door.

Cruel strong hands were dragging him back! They fought him, dragging him to and fro, backwards and forwards.

The doctor was shaking him, roaring in his ear. “Hold on, man, you can. Don’t let go. Don’t let go.” His eyes were alight with the fierceness of one who sees an enemy. Segrave wondered who the Enemy was. The black-robed nun was praying. That, too, was strange.

And all he wanted was to be left alone. To go back to the House. For every minute the House was growing fainter.

That, of course, was because the doctor was so strong. He wasn’t strong enough to fight the doctor. If he only could.

But stop! There was another way—the way dreams went in the moment of waking. No strength could stop them—they just flitted past. The doctor’s hands wouldn’t be able to hold him if he slipped—just slipped!

Yes, that was the way! The white walls were visible once more, the doctor’s voice was fainter, his hands were barely felt. He knew now how dreams laugh when they give you the slip!

He was at the door of the House. The exquisite stillness was unbroken. He put the key in the lock and turned it.

Just a moment he waited, to realize to the full the perfect, the ineffable, the all-satisfying completeness of joy.

Then—he passed over the Threshold.

Five

THE LONELY GOD

“The Lonely God” was first published in Royal Magazine, July 1926.

He stood on a shelf in the British Museum, alone and forlorn amongst a company of obviously more important deities. Ranged round the four walls, these greater personages all seemed to display an overwhelming sense of their own superiority. The pedestal of each was duly inscribed with the land and race that had been proud to possess him. There was no doubt of their position; they were divinities of importance and recognized as such.

Only the little god in the corner was aloof and remote from their company. Roughly hewn out of grey stone, his features almost totally obliterated by time and exposure, he sat there in isolation, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands; a lonely little god in a strange country.

There was no inscription to tell the land whence he came. He was indeed lost, without honour or renown, a pathetic little figure very far from home. No one noticed him, no one stopped to look at him. Why should they? He was so insignificant, a block of grey stone in a corner. On either side of him were two Mexican gods worn smooth with age, placid idols with folded hands, and cruel mouths curved in a smile that showed openly their contempt of humanity. There was also a rotund, violently self-assertive little god, with a clenched fist, who evidently suffered from a swollen sense of his own importance, but passers-by stopped to give him a glance sometimes, even if it was only to laugh at the contrast of his absurd pomposity with the smiling indifference of his Mexican companions.

And the little lost god sat on there hopelessly, his head in his hands, as he had sat year in and year out, till one day the impossible happened, and he found—a worshipper.

“Any letters for me?”

The hall porter removed a packet of letters from a pigeon hole, gave a cursory glance through them, and said in a wooden voice:

“Nothing for you, sir.”

Frank Oliver sighed as he walked out of the club again. There was no particular reason why there should have been anything for him. Very few people wrote to him. Ever since he had returned from Burma in the spring, he had become conscious of a growing and increasing loneliness.

Frank Oliver was a man just over forty, and the last eighteen years of his life had been spent in various parts of the globe, with brief furloughs in England. Now that he had retired and come home to live for good, he realized for the first time how very much alone in the world he was.

True, there was his sister Greta, married to a Yorkshire clergyman, very busy with parochial duties and the bringing up of a family of small children. Greta was naturally very fond of her only brother, but equally naturally she had very little time to give him. Then there was his old friend Tom Hurley. Tom was married to a nice, bright, cheerful girl, very energetic and practical, of whom Frank was secretly afraid. She told him brightly that he must not be a crabbed old bachelor, and was always producing “nice girls.” Frank Oliver found that he never had anything to say to these “nice girls;” they persevered with him for a while, then gave him up as hopeless.

And yet he was not really unsociable. He had a great longing for companionship and sympathy, and ever since he had been back in England he had become aware of a growing discouragement. He had been away too long, he was out of tune with the times. He spent long, aimless days wandering about, wondering what on earth he was to do with himself next.

It was on one of these days that he strolled into the British Museum. He was interested in Asiatic curiosities, and so it was that he chanced upon the lonely god. Its charm held him at once. Here was something vaguely akin to himself; here, too, was someone lost and astray in a strange land. He became in the habit of paying frequent visits to the Museum, just to glance in on the little grey stone figure, in its obscure place on the high shelf.

“Rough luck on the little chap,” he thought to himself. “Probably had a lot of fuss made about him once, kowtowing and offerings and all the rest of it.”

He had begun to feel such a proprietary right in his little friend (it really almost amounted to a sense of actual ownership) that he was inclined to be resentful when he found that the little god had made a second conquest. He had discovered the lonely god; nobody else, he felt, had a right to interfere.

But after the first flash of indignation, he was forced to smile at himself. For this second worshipper was such a little bit of a thing, such a ridiculous, pathetic creature, in a shabby black coat and skirt that had seen its best days. She was young, a little over twenty he should judge, with fair hair and blue eyes, and a wistful droop to her mouth.

Her hat especially appealed to his chivalry. She had evidently trimmed it herself, and it made such a brave attempt to be smart that its failure was pathetic. She was obviously a lady, though a poverty-stricken one, and he immediately decided in his own mind that she was a governess and alone in the world.

He soon found out that her days for visiting the god were Tuesdays and Fridays, and she always arrived at ten o’clock, as soon as the Museum was open. At first he disliked her intrusion, but little by little it began to form one of the principal interests of his monotonous life. Indeed, the fellow devotee was fast ousting the object of devotion from his position of preeminence. The days that he did not see the “Little Lonely Lady,” as he called her to himself, were blank.

Perhaps she, too, was equally interested in him, though she endeavoured to conceal the fact with studious unconcern. But little by little a sense of fellowship was slowly growing between them, though as yet they had exchanged no spoken word. The truth of the matter was, the man was too shy! He argued to himself that very likely she had not even noticed him (some inner sense gave the lie to that instantly), that she would consider it a great impertinence, and, finally, that he had not the least idea what to say.

But Fate, or the little god, was kind and sent him an inspiration—or what he regarded as such. With infinite delight in his own cunning, he purchased a woman’s handkerchief, a frail little affair of cambric and lace which he almost feared to touch, and, thus armed, he followed her as she departed and stopped her in the Egyptian room.

“Excuse me, but is this yours?” He tried to speak with airy unconcern, and signally failed.

The Lonely Lady took it, and made a pretence of examining it with minute care.

“No, it is not mine.” She handed it back, and added, with what he felt guiltily was a suspicious glance: “It’s quite a new one. The price is still on it.”

But he was unwilling to admit that he had been found out. He started on an overplausible flow of explanation.

“You see, I picked it up under that big case. It was just by the farthest leg of it.” He derived great relief from this detailed account. “So, as you had been standing there, I thought it must be yours and came after you with it.”

She said again: “No, it isn’t mine,” and added, as if with a sense of ungraciousness, “thank you.”

The conversation came to an awkward standstill. The girl stood there, pink and embarrassed, evidently uncertain how to retreat with dignity.

He made a desperate effort to take advantage of his opportunity.

“I—I didn’t know there was anyone else in London who cared for our little lonely god till you came.”

She answered eagerly, forgetting her reserve:

“Do you call him that too?”

Apparently, if she had noticed his pronoun, she did not resent it. She had been startled into sympathy, and his quiet “Of course!” seemed the most natural rejoinder in the world.

Again there was a silence, but this time it was a silence born of understanding.

It was the Lonely Lady who broke it in a sudden remembrance of the conventionalities.

She drew herself up to her full height, and with an almost ridiculous assumption of dignity for so small a person, she observed in chilling accents:

“I must be going now. Good morning.” And with a slight, stiff inclination of her head, she walked away, holding herself very erect.

By all acknowledged standards Frank Oliver ought to have felt rebuffed, but it is a regrettable sign of his rapid advance in depravity that he merely murmured to himself: “Little darling!”

He was soon to repent of his temerity, however. For ten days his little lady never came near the Museum. He was in despair! He had frightened her away! She would never come back! He was a brute, a villain! He would never see her again!

In his distress he haunted the British Museum all day long. She might merely have changed her time of coming. He soon began to know the adjacent rooms by heart, and he contracted a lasting hatred of mummies. The guardian policeman observed him with suspicion when he spent three hours poring over Assyrian hieroglyphics, and the contemplation of endless vases of all ages nearly drove him mad with boredom.

But one day his patience was rewarded. She came again, rather pinker than usual, and trying hard to appear self-possessed.

He greeted her with cheerful friendliness.

“Good morning. It is ages since you’ve been here.”

“Good morning.”

She let the words slip out with icy frigidity, and coldly ignored the end part of his sentence.

But he was desperate.

“Look here!” He stood confronting her with pleading eyes that reminded her irresistibly of a large, faithful dog. “Won’t you be friends? I’m all alone in London—all alone in the world, and I believe you are, too. We ought to be friends. Besides, our little god has introduced us.”

She looked up half doubtfully, but there was a faint smile quivering at the corners of her mouth.

“Has he?”

“Of course!”

It was the second time he had used this extremely positive form of assurance, and now, as before, it did not fail of its effect, for after a minute or two the girl said, in that slightly royal manner of hers:

“Very well.”

“That’s splendid,” he replied gruffly, but there was something in his voice as he said it that made the girl glance at him swiftly, with a sharp impulse of pity.

And so the queer friendship began. Twice a week they met, at the shrine of a little heathen idol. At first they confined their conversation solely to him. He was, as it were, at once a palliation of, and an excuse for, their friendship. The question of his origin was widely discussed. The man insisted on attributing to him the most bloodthirsty characteristics. He depicted him as the terror and dread of his native land, insatiable for human sacrifice, and bowed down to by his people in fear and trembling. In the contrast between his former greatness and his present insignificance there lay, according to the man, all the pathos of the situation.

The Lonely Lady would have none of this theory. He was essentially a kind little god, she insisted. She doubted whether he had ever been very powerful. If he had been so, she argued, he would not now be lost and friendless, and, anyway, he was a dear little god, and she loved him, and she hated to think of him sitting there day after day with all those other horrid, supercilious things jeering at him, because you could see they did! After this vehement outburst the little lady was quite out of breath.

That topic exhausted, they naturally began to talk of themselves. He found out that his surmise was correct. She was a nursery governess to a family of children who lived at Hampstead. He conceived an instant dislike of these children; of Ted, who was five and really not naughty, only mischievous; of the twins who were rather trying, and of Molly, who wouldn’t do anything she was told, but was such a dear you couldn’t be cross with her!

“Those children bully you,” he said grimly and accusingly to her.

“They do not,” she retorted with spirit. “I am extremely stern with them.”

“Oh! Ye gods!” he laughed. But she made him apologize humbly for his scepticism.

She was an orphan she told him, quite alone in the world.

Gradually he told her something of his own life: of his official life, which had been painstaking and mildly successful; and of his unofficial pastime, which was the spoiling of yards of canvas.

“Of course, I don’t know anything about it,” he explained. “But I have always felt I could paint something some day. I can sketch pretty decently, but I’d like to do a real picture of something. A chap who knew once told me that my technique wasn’t bad.”

She was interested, pressed for details.

“I am sure you paint awfully well.” He shook his head.

“No, I’ve begun several things lately and chucked them up in despair. I always thought that, when I had the time, it would be plain sailing. I have been storing up that idea for years, but now, like everything else, I suppose, I’ve left it too late.”

“Nothing’s too late—ever,” said the little lady, with the vehement earnestness of the very young.

He smiled down on her. “You think not, child? It’s too late for some things for me.”

And the little lady laughed at him and nicknamed him Methuselah.

They were beginning to feel curiously at home in the British Museum. The solid and sympathetic policeman who patrolled the galleries was a man of tact, and on the appearance of the couple he usually found that his onerous duties of guardianship were urgently needed in the adjoining Assyrian room.

One day the man took a bold step. He invited her out to tea!

At first she demurred.

“I have no time. I am not free. I can come some mornings because the children have French lessons.”

“Nonsense,” said the man. “You could manage one day. Kill off an aunt or a second cousin or something, but come. We’ll go to a little ABC shop near here, and have buns for tea! I know you must love buns!”

“Yes, the penny kind with currants!”

“And a lovely glaze on top—”

“They are such plump, dear things—”

“There is something,” Frank Oliver said solemnly, “infinitely comforting about a bun!”

So it was arranged, and the little governess came, wearing quite an expensive hothouse rose in her belt in honour of the occasion.

He had noticed that, of late, she had a strained, worried look, and it was more apparent than ever this afternoon as she poured out the tea at the little marble-topped table.

“Children been bothering you?” he asked solicitously.

She shook her head. She had seemed curiously disinclined to talk about the children lately.

“They’re all right. I never mind them.”

“Don’t you?”

His sympathetic tone seemed to distress her unwarrantably.

“Oh, no. It was never that. But—but, indeed, I was lonely. I was indeed!” Her tone was almost pleading.

He said quickly, touched: “Yes, yes, child, I know—I know.”

After a minute’s pause he remarked in a cheerful tone: “Do you know, you haven’t even asked my name yet?”

She held up a protesting hand.

“Please, I don’t want to know it. And don’t ask mine. Let us be just two lonely people who’ve come together and made friends. It makes it so much more wonderful—and—and different.”

He said slowly and thoughtfully: “Very well. In an otherwise lonely world we’ll be two people who have just each other.”

It was a little different from her way of putting it, and she seemed to find it difficult to go on with the conversation. Instead, she bent lower and lower over her plate, till only the crown of her hat was visible.

“That’s rather a nice hat,” he said by way of restoring her equanimity.

“I trimmed it myself,” she informed him proudly.

“I thought so the moment I saw it,” he answered, saying the wrong thing with cheerful ignorance.

“I’m afraid it is not as fashionable as I meant it to be!”

“I think it’s a perfectly lovely hat,” he said loyally.

Again constraint settled down upon them. Frank Oliver broke the silence bravely.

“Little Lady, I didn’t mean to tell you yet, but I can’t help it. I love you. I want you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you standing there in your little black suit. Dearest, if two lonely people were together—why—there would be no more loneliness. And I’d work, oh! how I’d work! I’d paint you. I could, I know I could. Oh! my little girl, I can’t live without you. I can’t indeed—”

His little lady was looking at him very steadily. But what she said was quite the last thing he expected her to say. Very quietly and distinctly she said: “You bought that handkerchief!”

He was amazed at this proof of feminine perspicacity, and still more amazed at her remembering it against him now. Surely, after this lapse of time, it might have been forgiven him.

“Yes, I did,” he acknowledged humbly. “I wanted an excuse to speak to you. Are you very angry?” He waited meekly for her words of condemnation.

“I think it was sweet of you!” cried the little lady with vehemence. “Just sweet of you!” Her voice ended uncertainly.

Frank Oliver went on in his gruff tone:

“Tell me, child, is it impossible? I know I’m an ugly, rough old fellow. . . .”

The Lonely Lady interrupted him.

“No, you’re not! I wouldn’t have you different, not in any way. I love you just as you are, do you understand? Not because I’m sorry for you, not because I’m alone in the world and want someone to be fond of me and take care of me—but because you’re just—you. Now do you understand?”

“Is it true?” he asked half in a whisper.

And she answered steadily: “Yes, it’s true—” The wonder of it overpowered them.

At last he said whimsically: “So we’ve fallen upon heaven, dearest!”

“In an ABC shop,” she answered in a voice that held tears and laughter.

But terrestrial heavens are short-lived. The little lady started up with an exclamation.

“I’d no idea how late it was! I must go at once.”

“I’ll see you home.”

“No, no, no!”

He was forced to yield to her insistence, and merely accompanied her as far as the Tube station.

“Goodbye, dearest.” She clung to his hand with an intensity that he remembered afterwards.

“Only goodbye till tomorrow,” he answered cheerfully. “Ten o’clock as usual, and we’ll tell each other our names and our histories, and be frightfully practical and prosaic.”

“Goodbye to—heaven, though,” she whispered.

“It will be with us always, sweetheart!”

She smiled back at him, but with that same sad appeal that disquieted him and which he could not fathom. Then the relentless lift dragged her down out of sight.

He was strangely disturbed by those last words of hers, but he put them resolutely out of his mind and substituted radiant anticipations of tomorrow in their stead.

At ten o’clock he was there, in the accustomed place. For the first time he noticed how malevolently the other idols looked down upon him. It almost seemed as if they were possessed of some secret evil knowledge affecting him, over which they were gloating. He was uneasily aware of their dislike.

The little lady was late. Why didn’t she come? The atmosphere of this place was getting on his nerves. Never had his own little friend (their god) seemed so hopelessly impotent as today. A helpless lump of stone, hugging his own despair!

His cogitations were interrupted by a small, sharp-faced boy who had stepped up to him, and was earnestly scrutinizing him from head to foot. Apparently satisfied with the result of his observations, he held out a letter.

“For me?”

It had no superscription. He took it, and the sharp boy decamped with extraordinary rapidity.

Frank Oliver read the letter slowly and unbelievingly. It was quite short.

Dearest,

I can never marry you. Please forget that I ever came into your life at all, and try to forgive me if I have hurt you. Don’t try to find me, because it will be no good. It is really “goodbye.”

The Lonely Lady

There was a postscript which had evidently been scribbled at the last moment:

I do love you. I do indeed.

And that little impulsive postscript was all the comfort he had in the weeks that followed. Needless to say, he disobeyed her injunction “not to try to find her,” but all in vain. She had vanished completely, and he had no clue to trace her by. He advertised despairingly, imploring her in veiled terms at least to explain the mystery, but blank silence rewarded his efforts. She was gone, never to return.

And then it was that for the first time in his life he really began to paint. His technique had always been good. Now craftsmanship and inspiration went hand in hand.

The picture that made his name and brought him renown was accepted and hung in the Academy, and was accounted to be the picture of the year, no less for the exquisite treatment of the subject than for the masterly workmanship and technique. A certain amount of mystery, too, rendered it more interesting to the general outside public.

His inspiration had come quite by chance. A fairy story in a magazine had taken a hold on his imagination.

It was the story of a fortunate Princess who had always had everything she wanted. Did she express a wish? It was instantly gratified. A desire? It was granted. She had a devoted father and mother, great riches, beautiful clothes and jewels, slaves to wait upon her and fulfil her lightest whim, laughing maidens to bear her company, all that the heart of a Princess could desire. The handsomest and richest Princes paid her court and sued in vain for her hand, and were willing to kill any number of dragons to prove their devotion. And yet, the loneliness of the Princess was greater than that of the poorest beggar in the land.

He read no more. The ultimate fate of the Princess interested him not at all. A picture had risen up before him of the pleasure-laden Princess with the sad, solitary soul, surfeited with happiness, suffocated with luxury, starving in the Palace of Plenty.

He began painting with furious energy. The fierce joy of creation possessed him.

He represented the Princess surrounded by her court, reclining on a divan. A riot of Eastern colour pervaded the picture. The Princess wore a marvellous gown of strange-coloured embroideries; her golden hair fell round her, and on her head was a heavy jewelled circlet. Her maidens surrounded her, and Princes knelt at her feet bearing rich gifts. The whole scene was one of luxury and richness.

But the face of the Princess was turned away; she was oblivious of the laughter and mirth around her. Her gaze was fixed on a dark and shadowy corner where stood a seemingly incongruous object: a little grey stone idol with its head buried in its hand in a quaint abandonment of despair.

Was it so incongruous? The eyes of the young Princess rested on it with a strange sympathy, as though a dawning sense of her own isolation drew her glance irresistibly. They were akin, these two. The world was at her feet—yet she was alone: a Lonely Princess looking at a lonely little god.

All London talked of this picture, and Greta wrote a few hurried words of congratulation from Yorkshire, and Tom Hurley's wife besought Frank Oliver to "come for a weekend and meet a really delightful girl, a great admirer of your work." Frank Oliver laughed once sardonically, and threw the letter into the fire. Success had come—but what was the use of it? He only wanted one thing—that little lonely lady who had gone out of his life for ever.

It was Ascot Cup Day, and the policeman on duty in a certain section of the British Museum rubbed his eyes and wondered if he were dreaming, for one does not expect to see there an Ascot vision, in a lace frock and a marvelous hat, a veritable nymph as imagined by a Parisian genius. The policeman stared in rapturous admiration.

The lonely god was not perhaps so surprised. He may have been in his way a powerful little god; at any rate, here was one worshipper brought back to the fold.

The Little Lonely Lady was staring up at him, and her lips moved in a rapid whisper.

“Dear little god, oh! dear little god, please help me! Oh, please do help me!”

Perhaps the little god was flattered. Perhaps, if he was indeed the ferocious, unappeasable deity Frank Oliver had imagined him, the long weary years and the march of civilization had softened his cold, stone heart. Perhaps the Lonely Lady had been right all along and he was really a kind little god. Perhaps it was merely a coincidence. However that may be, it was at that very moment that Frank Oliver walked slowly and sadly through the door of the Assyrian room.

He raised his head and saw the Parisian nymph.

In another moment his arm was round her, and she was stammering out rapid, broken words.

“I was so lonely—you know, you must have read that story I wrote; you couldn’t have painted that picture unless you had, and unless you had understood. The Princess was I; I had everything, and yet I was lonely beyond words. One day I was going to a fortune-teller’s, and I borrowed my maid’s clothes. I came in here on the way and saw you looking at the little god. That’s how it all began. I pretended—oh! it was hateful of me, and I went on pretending, and afterwards I didn’t dare confess that I had told you such dreadful lies. I thought you would be disgusted at the way I had deceived you. I couldn’t bear you to find out, so I went away. Then I wrote that story, and yesterday I saw your picture. It was your picture, wasn’t it?”

Only the gods really know the word “ingratitude”. It is to be presumed that the lonely little god knew the black ingratitude of human nature. As a divinity he had unique opportunities of observing it, yet in the hour of trial he who had had sacrifices innumerable offered to him, made sacrifice in his turn. He sacrificed his only two worshippers in a strange land, and it showed him to be a great little god in his way, since he sacrificed all that he had.

Through the chinks in his fingers he watched them go, hand in hand, without a backward glance, two happy people who had found heaven and had no need of him any longer.

What was he, after all, but a very lonely little god in a strange land?

Six

MANX GOLD

“Manx Gold” was first published in The Daily Dispatch between 23–28 May 1930 as a treasure hunt to promote tourism in the Isle of Man.

Old Mylecharane liv’d up on the broo.

Where Furby slopes down to the wold,

His croft was all golden with cushag and furze,

His daughter was fair to behold.

“O father, they say you’ve plenty of store,

But hidden all out of the way.

No gold can I see, but its glint on the gorse;

Then what have you done with it, pray?”

“My gold is locked up in a coffer of oak,

Which I dropped in the tide and it sank,

And there it lies fixed like an anchor of hope,

All bright and as safe as the bank.”

“I like that song,” I said appreciatively, as Fenella finished.

“You should do,” said Fenella. “It’s about our ancestor, yours and mine. Uncle Myles’s grandfather. He made a fortune out of smuggling and hid it somewhere, and no one ever knew where.”

Ancestry is Fenella’s strong point. She takes an interest in all her forebears. My tendencies are strictly modern. The difficult present and the uncertain future absorb all my energy. But I like hearing Fenella singing old Manx ballads.

Fenella is very charming. She is my first cousin and also, from time to time, my fiancée. In moods of financial optimism we are engaged. When a corresponding wave of pessimism sweeps over us and we realize that we shall not be able to marry for at least ten years, we break it off.

“Didn’t anyone ever try to find the treasure?” I inquired.

“Of course. But they never did.”

“Perhaps they didn’t look scientifically.”

“Uncle Myles had a jolly good try,” said Fenella. “He said anyone with intelligence ought to be able to solve a little problem like that.”

That sounded to me very like our Uncle Myles, a cranky and eccentric old gentleman, who lived in the Isle of Man, and who was much given to didactic pronouncements.

It was at that moment that the post came—and the letter!

“Good Heavens,” cried Fenella. “Talk of the devil—I mean angels—Uncle Myles is dead!”

Both she and I had only seen our eccentric relative on two occasions, so we could neither of us pretend to a very deep grief. The letter was from a firm of lawyers in Douglas, and it informed us that under the will of Mr. Myles Mylecharane, deceased, Fenella and I were joint inheritors of his estate, which consisted of a house near Douglas, and an infinitesimal income. Enclosed was a sealed envelope, which Mr. Mylecharane had directed should be forwarded to Fenella at his death. This letter we opened and read its surprising contents. I reproduce it in full, since it was a truly characteristic document.

“My dear Fenella and Juan (for I take it that where one of you is the other will not be far away! Or so gossip has whispered), You may remember having heard me say that anyone displaying a little intelligence could easily find the treasure concealed by my amiable scoundrel of a grandfather. I displayed that intelligence—and my reward was four chests of solid gold—quite like a fairy story, is it not?

Of living relations I have only four, you two, my nephew Ewan Corjeag, whom I have always heard is a thoroughly bad lot, and a cousin, a Doctor Fayll, of whom I have heard very little, and that little not always good.

My estate proper I am leaving to you and Fenella, but I feel a certain obligation laid upon me with regard to this ‘treasure’ which has fallen to my lot solely through my own ingenuity. My amiable ancestor would not, I feel, be satisfied for me to pass it on tamely by inheritance. So I, in my turn, have devised a little problem.

There are still four ‘chests’ of treasure (though in a more modern form than gold ingots or coins) and there are to be four competitors—my four living relations. It would be fairest to assign one ‘chest’ to each—but the world, my children, is not fair. The race is to the swiftest—and often to the most unscrupulous!

Who am I to go against Nature? You must pit your wits against the other two. There will be, I fear, very little chance for you. Goodness and innocence are seldom rewarded in this world. So strongly do I feel this that I have deliberately cheated (unfairness again, you notice!). This letter goes to you twenty-four hours in advance of the letters to the other two. Thus you will have a very good chance of securing the first ‘treasure’—twenty-four hours’ start, if you have any brains at all, ought to be sufficient.

The clues for finding this treasure are to be found at my house in Douglas. The clues for the second ‘treasure’ will not be released till the first treasure is found. In the second and succeeding cases, therefore, you will all start even. You have my good wishes for success, and nothing would please me better than for you to acquire all four ‘chests,’ but for the reasons which I have already stated I think that most unlikely. Remember that no scruples will stand in dear Ewan’s way. Do not make the mistake of trusting him in any respect. As to Dr. Richard Fayll, I know little about him, but he is, I fancy, a dark horse.

Good luck to you both, but with little hopes of your success,

Your affectionate Uncle,

Myles Mylecharane”

As we reached the signature, Fenella made a leap from my side.

“What is it?” I cried.

Fenella was rapidly turning the pages of an ABC.

“We must get to the Isle of Man as soon as possible,” she cried. “How dare he say we were good and innocent and stupid? I’ll show him! Juan, we’re going to find all four of these ‘chests’ and get married and live happily ever afterwards, with Rolls-Royces and footmen and marble baths. But we must get to the Isle of Man at once.”

It was twenty-four hours later. We had arrived in Douglas, interviewed the lawyers, and were now at Maughold House facing Mrs. Skillicorn, our late Uncle’s housekeeper, a somewhat formidable woman who nevertheless relented a little before Fenella’s eagerness.

“Queer ways he had,” she said. “Liked to set everyone puzzling and contriving.”

“But the clues,” cried Fenella. “The clues?”

Deliberately, as she did everything, Mrs. Skillicorn left the room. She returned after an absence of some minutes and held out a folded piece of paper.

We unfolded it eagerly. It contained a doggerel rhyme in my Uncle’s crabbed handwriting.

Four points of the compass so there be

S., and W., N. and E.

East winds are bad for man and beast.

Go south and west and

North not east.

“Oh!” said Fenella, blankly.

“Oh!” said I, with much the same intonation.

Mrs. Skillicorn smiled on us with gloomy relish.

“Not much sense to it, is there?” she said helpfully.

“It—I don’t see how to begin,” said Fenella, piteously.

“Beginning,” I said, with a cheerfulness I did not feel, “is always the difficulty. Once we get going—”

Mrs. Skillicorn smiled more grimly than ever. She was a depressing woman.

“Can’t you help us?” asked Fenella, coaxingly.

“I know nothing about the silly business. Didn’t confide in me, your uncle didn’t. I have told him to put his money in the bank, and no nonsense. I never knew what he was up to.”

“He never went out with any chests—or anything of that kind?”

“That he didn’t.”

“You don’t know when he hid the stuff—whether it was lately or long ago?”

Mrs. Skillicorn shook her head.

“Well,” I said, trying to rally. “There are two possibilities. Either the treasure is hidden here, in the actual grounds, or else it may be hidden anywhere on the Island. It depends on the bulk, of course.”

A sudden brain wave occurred to Fenella.

“You haven’t noticed anything missing?” she said. “Among my Uncle’s things, I mean?”

“Why, now, it’s odd your saying that—”

“You have, then?”

“As I say, it’s odd your saying that. Snuffboxes—there’s at least four of them I can’t lay my hand on anywhere.”

“Four of them!” cried Fenella, “that must be it! We’re on the track. Let’s go out in the garden and look about.”

“There’s nothing there,” said Mrs. Skillicorn. “I’d know if there were. Your Uncle couldn’t have buried anything in the garden without my knowing about it.”

“Points of the compass are mentioned,” I said. “The first thing we need is a map of the Island.”

“There’s one on that desk,” said Mrs. Skillicorn.

Fenella unfolded it eagerly. Something fluttered out as she did so. I caught it.

“Hullo,” I said. “This looks like a further clue.”

We both went over it eagerly.

It appeared to be a rude kind of map. There was a cross on it and a circle and a pointing arrow, and directions were roughly indicated, but it was hardly illuminating. We studied it in silence.

“It’s not very illuminating, is it?” said Fenella.

“Naturally it wants puzzling over,” I said. “We can’t expect it to leap to the eye.”

Mrs. Skillicorn interrupted with a suggestion of supper, to which we agreed thankfully.

“And could we have some coffee?” said Fenella. “Lots of it—very black.”

Mrs. Skillicorn provided us with an excellent meal, and at its conclusion a large jug of coffee made its appearance.

“And now,” said Fenella, “we must get down to it.”

“The first thing,” I said, “is direction. This seems to point clearly to the northeast of the Island.”

“It seems so. Let’s look at the map.”

We studied the map attentively.

“It all depends on how you take the thing,” said Fenella. “Does the cross represent the treasure? Or is it something like a church? There really ought to be rules!”

“That would make it too easy.”

“I suppose it would. Why are there little lines one side of the circle and not the other.”

“I don’t know.”

“Are there any more maps anywhere?”

We were sitting in the library. There were several excellent maps. There were also various guide books descriptive of the Island. There was a book on folklore. There was a book on the history of the Island. We read them all.

And at last we formed a possible theory.

“It does seem to fit,” said Fenella at last. “I mean the two together is a likely conjunction which doesn’t seem to occur anywhere else.”

“It’s worth trying, anyhow,” I said. “I don’t think we can do anything more tonight. Tomorrow, first thing, we’ll hire a car and go off and try our luck.”

“It’s tomorrow now,” said Fenella. “Half-past two! Just fancy!”

Early morning saw us on the road. We had hired a car for a week, arranging to drive it ourselves. Fenella’s spirits rose as we sped along the excellent road, mile after mile.

“If only it wasn’t for the other two, what fun this would be,” she said. “This is where the Derby was originally run, wasn’t it? Before it was changed to Epsom. How queer that is to think of!”

I drew her attention to a farmhouse.

“That must be where there is said to be a secret passage running under the sea to that island.”

“What fun! I love secret passages, don’t you? Oh! Juan, we’re getting quite near now. I’m terribly excited. If we should be right!”

Five minutes later we abandoned the car.

“Everything’s in the right position,” said Fenella, tremulously.

We walked on.

“Six of them—that’s right. Now between these two. Have you got the compass?”

Five minutes later, we were standing facing each other, an incredulous joy on our faces—and on my outstretched palm lay an antique snuffbox.

We had been successful!

On our return to Maughold House, Mrs. Skillicorn met us with the information that two gentlemen had arrived. One had departed again, but the other was in the library.

A tall, fair man, with a florid face, rose smilingly from an armchair as we entered the room.

“Mr. Faraker and Miss Mylecharane? Delighted to meet you. I am your distant cousin, Dr. Fayll. Amusing game all this, isn’t it?”

His manner was urbane and pleasant, but I took an immediate dislike to him. I felt that in some way the man was dangerous. His pleasant manner was, somehow, too pleasant, and his eyes never met yours fairly.

“I’m afraid we’ve got bad news for you,” I said. “Miss Mylecharane and myself have already discovered the first ‘treasure.’ ”

He took it very well.

“Too bad—too bad. Posts from here must be odd. Barford and I started at once.”

We did not dare to confess the perfidy of Uncle Myles.

“Anyway, we shall all start fair for the second round,” said Fenella.

“Splendid. What about getting down to the clues right away? Your excellent Mrs.—er—Skillicorn holds them, I believe?”

“That wouldn’t be fair to Mr. Corjeag,” said Fenella, quickly. “We must wait for him.”

“True, true—I had forgotten. We must get in touch with him as quickly as possible. I will see to that—you two must be tired out and want to rest.”

Thereupon he took his departure. Ewan Corjeag must have been unexpectedly difficult to find, for it was not till nearly eleven o’clock that night that Dr. Fayll rang up. He suggested that he and Ewan should come over to Maughold House at ten o'clock the following morning, when Mrs. Skillicorn could hand us out the clues.

"That will do splendidly," said Fenella. "Ten o'clock tomorrow."

We retired to bed tired but happy.

The following morning we were aroused by Mrs. Skillicorn, completely shaken out of her usual pessimistic calm.

"Whatever do you think?" she panted. "The house has been broken into."

"Burglars?" I exclaimed, incredulously. "Has anything been taken?"

"Not a thing—and that's the odd part of it! No doubt they were after the silver—but the door being locked on the outside they couldn't get any further."

Fenella and I accompanied her to the scene of the outrage, which happened to be in her own sitting room. The window there had undeniably been forced, yet nothing seemed to have been taken. It was all rather curious.

"I don't see what they can have been looking for?" said Fenella.

"It's not as though there were a 'treasure chest' hidden in the house," I agreed facetiously. Suddenly an idea flashed into my mind. I turned to Mrs. Skillicorn. "The clues—the clues you were to give us this morning?"

"Why to be sure—they're in that top drawer." She went across to it. "Why—I do declare—there's nothing here! They're gone!"

"Not burglars," I said. "Our esteemed relations!" And I remember Uncle Myles's warning on the subject of unscrupulous dealing. Clearly he had known what he was talking about. A dirty trick!

"Hush," said Fenella, suddenly, holding up a finger. "What was that?"

The sound she had caught came plainly to our ears. It was a groan and it came from outside. We went to the window and leaned out. There was a shrubbery growing against this side of the house and we could see nothing; but the groan came again, and we could see that the bushes seemed to have been disturbed and trampled.

We hurried down and out round the house. The first thing we found was a fallen ladder, showing how the thieves had reached the window. A few steps further brought us to where a man was lying.

He was a youngish man, dark, and he was evidently badly injured, for his head was lying in a pool of blood. I knelt down beside him.

“We must get a doctor at once. I’m afraid he’s dying.”

The gardener was sent off hurriedly. I slipped my hand into his breast pocket and brought out a pocket book. On it were the initials EC.

“Ewan Corjeag,” said Fenella.

The man’s eyes opened. He said, faintly: “Fell from ladder . . .” then lost consciousness again.

Close by his head was a large jagged stone stained with blood.

“It’s clear enough,” I said. “The ladder slipped and he fell, striking his head on this stone. I’m afraid it’s done for him, poor fellow.”

“So you think that was it?” said Fenella, in an odd tone of voice.

But at that moment the doctor arrived. He held out little hope of recovery. Ewan Corjeag was moved into the house and a nurse was sent for to take charge of him. Nothing could be done, and he would die a couple of hours later.

We had been sent for and were standing by his bed. His eyes opened and flickered.

“We are your cousins Juan and Fenella,” I said. “Is there anything we can do?”

He made a faint negative motion of the head. A whisper came from his lips. I bent to catch it.

“Do you want the clue? I’m done. Don’t let Fayll do you down.”

“Yes,” said Fenella. “Tell me.”

Something like a grin came over his face.

“D’ye ken—” he began.

Then suddenly his head fell over sideways and he died.

“I don’t like it,” said Fenella, suddenly.

“What don’t you like?”

“Listen, Juan. Ewan stole those clues—he admits falling from the ladder. Then where are they? We’ve seen all the contents of his pockets. There were three sealed envelopes, so Mrs. Skillicorn says. Those sealed envelopes aren’t there.”

“What do you think, then?”

“I think there was someone else there, someone who jerked away the ladder so that he fell. And that stone—he never fell on it—it was brought from some distance away—I’ve found the mark. He was deliberately bashed on the head with it.”

“But Fenella—that’s murder!”

“Yes,” said Fenella, very white. “It’s murder. Remember, Dr. Fayll never turned up at ten o’clock this morning. Where is he?”

“You think he’s the murderer?”

“Yes. You know—this treasure—it’s a lot of money, Juan.”

“And we’ve no idea where to look for him,” I said. “A pity Corjeag couldn’t have finished what he was going to say.”

“There’s one thing might help. This was in his hand.”

She handed me a torn snapshot.

“Suppose it’s a clue. The murderer snatched it away and never noticed he’d left a corner of it behind. If we were to find the other half—”

“To do that,” I said, “we must find the second treasure. Let’s look at this thing.”

“H’m,” I said, “there’s nothing much to go by. That seems a kind of tower in the middle of the circle, but it would be very hard to identify.”

Fenella nodded.

“Dr. Fayll has the important half. He knows where to look. We’ve got to find that man, Juan, and watch him. Of course, we won’t let him see we suspect.”

“I wonder whereabouts in the Island he is this minute. If we only knew—”

My mind went back to the dying man. Suddenly, I sat up excitedly.

“Fenella,” I said, “Corjeag wasn’t Scotch?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, then, don’t you see? What he meant, I mean?”

“No?”

I scribbled something on a piece of paper and tossed it to her.

“What’s this?”

“The name of a firm that might help us.”

"Bellman and True. Who are they? Lawyers?"

"No—they're more in our line—private detectives."

And I proceeded to explain.

"Dr. Fayll to see you," said Mrs. Skillicorn.

We looked at each other. Twenty-four hours had elapsed. We had returned from our quest successful for the second time. Not wishing to draw attention to ourselves, we had journeyed in the Snaefell—a charabanc.

"I wonder if he knows we saw him in the distance?" murmured Fenella.

"It's extraordinary. If it hadn't been for the hint that photograph gave us—"

"Hush—and do be careful, Juan. He must be simply furious at our having outwitted him, in spite of everything."

No trace of it appeared in the doctor's manner, however. He entered the room his urbane and charming self, and I felt my faith in Fenella's theory dwindling.

"What a shocking tragedy!" he said. "Poor Corjeag. I suppose he was—well—trying to steal a march on us. Retribution was swift. Well, well—we scarcely knew him, poor fellow. You must have wondered why I didn't turn up this morning as arranged. I got a fake message—Corjeag's doing, I suppose—it sent me off on a wild-goose chase right across the Island. And now you two have romped home again. How do you do it?"

There was a note of really eager inquiry in his voice which did not escape me.

"Cousin Ewan was fortunately able to speak just before he died," said Fenella.

I was watching the man, and I could swear I saw alarm leap into his eyes at her words.

“Eh—eh? What’s that?” he said.

“He was just able to give us a clue as to the whereabouts of the treasure,” explained Fenella.

“Oh! I see—I see. I’ve been clean out of things—though, curiously enough, I myself was in that part of the Island. You may have seen me strolling round.”

“We were so busy,” said Fenella, apologetically.

“Of course, of course. You must have run across the thing more or less by accident. Lucky young people, aren’t you? Well, what’s the next programme? Will Mrs. Skillicorn oblige us with the new clues?”

But it seemed that this third set of clues had been deposited with the lawyers, and we all three repaired to the lawyer’s office, where the sealed envelopes were handed over to us.

The contents were simple. A map with a certain area marked off on it, and a paper of directions attached.

In ’85, this place made history.

Ten paces from the landmark to

The east, then an equal ten

Paces north. Stand there

Looking east. Two trees are in the

Line of vision. One of them

Was sacred in this island. Draw

A circle five feet from

The Spanish chestnut and,

With head bent, walk round. Look well. You’ll find.

“Looks as though we were going to tread on each other’s toes a bit today,” commented the doctor.

True to my policy of apparent friendliness, I offered him a lift in our car, which he accepted. We had lunch at Port Erin, and then started on our search.

I had debated in my own mind the reason of my uncle’s depositing this particular set of clues with his lawyer. Had he foreseen the possibility of a theft? And had he determined that not more than one set of clues should fall into the thief’s possession?

The treasure hunt this afternoon was not without its humour. The area of search was limited, and we were continually in sight of each other. We eyed each other suspiciously, each trying to determine whether the other was farther on or had had a brain wave.

“This is all part of Uncle Myles’s plan,” said Fenella. “He wanted us to watch each other and go through all the agonies of thinking the other person was getting there.”

“Come,” I said. “Let’s get down to it scientifically. We’ve got one definite clue to start on. ‘In ’85 this place made history.’ Look up the reference books we’ve got with us and see if we can’t hunt that down. Once we get that—”

“He’s looking in that hedge,” interrupted Fenella. “Oh! I can’t bear it. If he’s got it—”

“Attend to me,” I said firmly. “There’s really only one way to go about it—the proper way.”

“There are so few trees on the Island that it would be much simpler just to look for a chestnut tree!” said Fenella.

I pass over the next hour. We grew hot and despondent—and all the time we were tortured with fear that Fayll might be succeeding whilst we failed.

“I remember once reading in a detective story,” I said, “how a fellow stuck a paper of writing in a bath of acid—and all sorts of other words came out.”

“Do you think—but we haven’t got a bath of acid!”

“I don’t think Uncle Myles could expect expert chemical knowledge. But there’s common-or-garden heat—”

We slipped round the corner of a hedge and in a minute or two I had kindled a few twigs. I held the paper as close to the blaze as I dared. Almost at once I was rewarded by seeing characters begin to appear at the foot of the sheet. There were just two words.

“Kirkhill Station,” read out Fenella.

Just at that moment Fayll came round the corner. Whether he had heard or not we had no means of judging. He showed nothing.

“But, Juan,” said Fenella, when he moved away, “there isn’t a Kirkhill Station!” She held out the map as she spoke.

“No,” I said, examining it, “but look here.”

And with a pencil I drew a line on it.

“Of course! And somewhere on that line—”

“Exactly.”

“But I wish we knew the exact spot.”

It was then that my second brain wave came to me.

“We do!” I cried, and, seizing the pencil again, I said: “Look!”

Fenella uttered a cry.

“How idiotic!” she cried. “And how marvellous! What a sell! Really, Uncle Myles was a most ingenious old gentleman!”

The time had come for the last clue. This, the lawyer had informed us, was not in his keeping. It was to be posted to us on receipt of a postcard sent by him. He would impart no further information.

Nothing arrived, however, on the morning it should have done, and Fenella and I went through agonies, believing that Fayll had managed somehow to intercept our letter. The next day, however, our fears were calmed and the mystery explained when we received the following illiterate scrawl:

“Dear Sir or Madam,

Escuse delay but have been all sixes and sevens but i do now as mr. Mylecharane axed me to and send you the piece of riting wot as been in my family many long years the wot he wanted it for i do not know. thanking you i am

Mary Kerruish”

“Postmark—Bride,” I remarked. “Now for the ‘piece of riting handed down in my family’!”

Upon a rock, a sign you’ll see.

O, Tell me what the point of

That may be? Well, firstly, (A). Near

By you’ll find, quite suddenly, the light

You seek. Then (B). A house. A

Cottage with a thatch and wall.

A meandering lane near by. That’s all.

“It’s very unfair to begin with a rock,” said Fenella. “There are rocks everywhere. How can you tell which one has the sign on it?”

“If we could settle on the district,” I said, “it ought to be fairly easy to find the rock. It must have a mark on it pointing in a certain direction, and in that direction there will be something hidden which will throw light on the finding of the treasure.”

“I think you’re right,” said Fenella.

“That’s A. The new clue will give us a hint where B, the cottage, is to be found. The treasure itself is hidden down a lane alongside the cottage. But clearly we’ve got to find A first.”

Owing to the difficulty of the initial step, Uncle Myles’s last problem proved a real teaser. To Fenella falls the distinction of unravelling it—and even then she did not accomplish it for nearly a week. Now and then we had come across Fayll in our search of rocky districts, but the area was a wide one.

When we finally made our discovery it was late in the evening. Too late, I said, to start off to the place indicated. Fenella disagreed.

“Supposing Fayll finds it, too,” she said. “And we wait till tomorrow and he starts off tonight. How we should kick ourselves!”

Suddenly, a marvellous idea occurred to me.

“Fenella,” I said, “do you still believe that Fayll murdered Ewan Corjeag?”

“I do.”

“Then I think that now we’ve got our chance to bring the crime home to him.”

“That man makes me shiver. He’s bad all through. Tell me.”

“Advertise the fact that we’ve found A. Then start off. Ten to one he’ll follow us. It’s a lonely place—just what would suit his book. He’ll come out in the open if we pretend to find the treasure.”

“And then?”

“And then,” I said, “he’ll have a little surprise.”

It was close on midnight. We had left the car some distance away and were creeping along by the side of a wall. Fenella had a powerful flashlight which she was using. I myself carried a revolver. I was taking no chances.

Suddenly, with a low cry, Fenella stopped.

“Look, Juan,” she cried. “We’ve got it. At last.”

For a moment I was off my guard. Led by instinct I whirled round—but too late. Fayll stood six paces away and his revolver covered us both.

“Good evening,” he said. “This trick is mine. You’ll hand over that treasure, if you please.”

“Would you like me also to hand over something else?” I asked. “Half a snapshot torn from a dying man’s hand? You have the other half, I think.”

His hand wavered.

“What are you talking about?” he growled.

“The truth’s known,” I said. “You and Corjeag were there together. You pulled away the ladder and crashed his head with that stone. The police are cleverer than you imagine, Dr. Fayll.”

“They know, do they? Then, by Heaven, I’ll swing for three murders instead of one!”

“Drop, Fenella,” I screamed. And at the same minute his revolver barked loudly.

We had both dropped in the heather, and before he could fire again uniformed men sprang out from behind the wall where they had been hiding. A moment later Fayll had been handcuffed and led away.

I caught Fenella in my arms.

“I knew I was right,” she said tremulously.

“Darling!” I cried, “it was too risky. He might have shot you.”

“But he didn’t,” said Fenella. “And we know where the treasure is.”

“Do we?”

“I do. See—” she scribbled a word. “We’ll look for it tomorrow. There can’t be many hiding places there, I should say.”

It was just noon when:

“Eureka!” said Fenella, softly. “The fourth snuffbox. We’ve got them all. Uncle Myles would be pleased. And now—”

“Now,” I said, “we can be married and live together happily ever afterwards.”

“We’ll live in the Isle of Man,” said Fenella.

“On Manx Gold,” I said, and laughed aloud for sheer happiness.

Seven

WITHIN A WALL

“Within a Wall” was first published in Royal Magazine, October 1925.

It was Mrs. Lemprière who discovered the existence of Jane Haworth. It would be, of course. Somebody once said that Mrs. Lemprière was easily the most hated woman in London, but that, I think, is an exaggeration. She has certainly a knack of tumbling on the one thing you wish to keep quiet about, and she does it with real genius. It is always an accident.

In this case we had been having tea in Alan Everard’s studio. He gave these teas occasionally, and used to stand about in corners, wearing very old clothes, rattling the coppers in his trouser pockets and looking profoundly miserable.

I do not suppose anyone will dispute Everard’s claim to genius at this date. His two most famous pictures, Colour, and The Connoisseur, which belong to his early period, before he became a fashionable portrait painter, were purchased by the nation last year, and for once the choice went unchallenged. But at the date of which I speak, Everard was only beginning to come into his own, and we were free to consider that we had discovered him.

It was his wife who organized these parties. Everard’s attitude to her was a peculiar one. That he adored her was evident, and only to be expected. Adoration was Isobel’s due. But he seemed always to feel himself slightly in her debt. He assented to anything she wished, not so much through tenderness as through an unalterable conviction that she had a right to her own way. I suppose that was natural enough, too, when one comes to think of it.

For Isobel Loring had been really very celebrated. When she came out she had been the débutante of the season. She had everything except money;

beauty, position, breeding, brains. Nobody expected her to marry for love. She wasn't that kind of girl. In her second season she had three strings to her bow, the heir to a dukedom, a rising politician, and a South African millionaire. And then, to everyone's surprise, she married Alan Everard—a struggling young painter whom no one had ever heard of.

It is a tribute to her personality, I think, that everyone went on calling her Isobel Loring. Nobody ever alluded to her as Isobel Everard. It would be: "I saw Isobel Loring this morning. Yes—with her husband, young Everard, the painter fellow."

People said Isobel had "done for herself." It would, I think, have "done" for most men to be known as "Isobel Loring's husband." But Everard was different. Isobel's talent for success hadn't failed her after all. Alan Everard painted Colour.

I suppose everyone knows the picture: a stretch of road with a trench dug down it, the turned earth, reddish in colour, a shining length of brown glazed drainpipe and the huge navvy, resting for a minute on his spade—a Herculean figure in stained corduroys with a scarlet neckerchief. His eyes look out at you from the canvas, without intelligence, without hope, but with a dumb unconscious pleading, the eyes of a magnificent brute beast. It is a flaming thing—a symphony of orange and red. A lot has been written about its symbolism, about what it is meant to express. Alan Everard himself says he didn't mean it to express anything. He was, he said, nauseated by having had to look at a lot of pictures of Venetian sunsets, and a sudden longing for a riot of purely English colour assailed him.

After that, Everard gave the world that epic painting of a public house—Romance; the black street with rain falling—the half-open door, the lights and shining glasses, the little foxy-faced man passing through the doorway, small, mean, insignificant, with lips parted and eyes eager, passing in to forget.

On the strength of these two pictures Everard was acclaimed as a painter of "working men." He had his niche. But he refused to stay in it. His third and most brilliant work, a full-length portrait of Sir Rufus Herschman. The famous scientist is painted against a background of retorts and crucibles and laboratory shelves. The whole has what may be called a Cubist effect, but the lines of perspective run strangely.

And now he had completed his fourth work—a portrait of his wife. We had been invited to see and criticize. Everard himself scowled and looked out of the window; Isobel Loring moved amongst the guests, talking technique with unerring accuracy.

We made comments. We had to. We praised the painting of the pink satin. The treatment of that, we said, was really marvellous. Nobody had painted satin in quite that way before.

Mrs. Lemprière, who is one of the most intelligent art critics I know, took me aside almost at once.

"Georgie," she said, "what has he done to himself? The thing's dead. It's smooth. It's—oh! it's damnable."

"Portrait of a Lady in Pink Satin?" I suggested.

"Exactly. And yet the technique's perfect. And the care! There's enough work there for sixteen pictures."

"Too much work?" I suggested.

"Perhaps that's it. If there ever was anything there, he's killed it. An extremely beautiful woman in a pink satin dress. Why not a coloured photograph?"

"Why not?" I agreed. "Do you suppose he knows?" "Don't you see the man's on edge? It comes, I daresay, of mixing up sentiment and business. He's put his whole soul into painting Isobel, because she is Isobel, and in sparing her, he's lost her. He's been too kind. You've got to—to destroy the flesh before you can get at the soul sometimes."

I nodded reflectively. Sir Rufus Herschman had not been flattered physically, but Everard had succeeded in putting on the canvas a personality that was unforgettable.

“And Isobel’s got such a very forceful personality,” continued Mrs. Lemprière.

“Perhaps Everard can’t paint women,” I said.

“Perhaps not,” said Mrs. Lemprière thoughtfully. “Yes, that may be the explanation.”

And it was then, with her usual genius for accuracy, that she pulled out a canvas that was leaning with its face to the wall. There were about eight of them, stacked carelessly. It was pure chance that Mrs. Lemprière selected the one she did—but as I said before, these things happen with Mrs. Lemprière.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Lemprière as she turned it to the light.

It was unfinished, a mere rough sketch. The woman, or girl—she was not, I thought, more than twenty-five or six—was leaning forward, her chin on her hand. Two things struck me at once: the extraordinary vitality of the picture and the amazing cruelty of it. Everard had painted with a vindictive brush. The attitude even was a cruel one—it had brought out every awkwardness, every sharp angle, every crudity. It was a study in brown—brown dress, brown background, brown eyes—wistful, eager eyes. Eagerness was, indeed, the prevailing note of it.

Mrs. Lemprière looked at it for some minutes in silence. Then she called to Everard.

“Alan,” she said. “Come here. Who’s this?”

Everard came over obediently. I saw the sudden flash of annoyance that he could not quite hide.

“That’s only a daub,” he said. “I don’t suppose I shall ever finish it.”

“Who is she?” said Mrs. Lemprière.

Everard was clearly unwilling to answer, and his unwillingness was as meat and drink to Mrs. Lemprière, who always believes the worst on principle.

“A friend of mine. A Miss Jane Haworth.”

“I’ve never met her here,” said Mrs. Lemprière.

“She doesn’t come to these shows.” He paused a minute, then added: “She’s Winnie’s godmother.”

Winnie was his little daughter, aged five.

“Really?” said Mrs. Lemprière. “Where does she live?”

“Battersea. A flat.”

“Really,” said Mrs. Lemprière again, and then added: “And what has she ever done to you?”

“To me?”

“To you. To make you so—ruthless.”

“Oh, that!” he laughed. “Well, you know, she’s not a beauty. I can’t make her one out of friendship, can I?”

“You’ve done the opposite,” said Mrs. Lemprière. “You’ve caught hold of every defect of hers and exaggerated it and twisted it. You’ve tried to make her ridiculous—but you haven’t succeeded, my child. That portrait, if you finish it, will live.”

Everard looked annoyed.

“It’s not bad,” he said lightly, “for a sketch, that is. But, of course, it’s not a patch on Isobel’s portrait. That’s far and away the best thing I’ve ever done.”

He said the last words defiantly and aggressively. Neither of us answered.

“Far and away the best thing,” he repeated.

Some of the others had drawn near us. They, too, caught sight of the sketch. There were exclamations, comments. The atmosphere began to brighten up.

It was in this way that I first heard of Jane Haworth. Later, I was to meet her—twice. I was to hear details of her life from one of her most intimate friends. I was to learn much from Alan Everard himself. Now that they are both dead, I think it is time to contradict some of the stories Mrs. Lemprière is busily spreading abroad. Call some of my story invention if you will—it is not far from the truth.

When the guests had left, Alan Everard turned the portrait of Jane Haworth with its face to the wall again. Isobel came down the room and stood beside him.

“A success, do you think?” she asked thoughtfully. “Or—not quite a success?”

“The portrait?” he asked quickly.

“No, silly, the party. Of course the portrait’s a success.”

“It’s the best thing I’ve done,” Everard declared aggressively.

“We’re getting on,” said Isobel. “Lady Charmington wants you to paint her.”

“Oh, Lord!” He frowned. “I’m not a fashionable portrait painter, you know.”

“You will be. You’ll get to the top of the tree.”

“That’s not the tree I want to get to the top of.”

“But, Alan dear, that’s the way to make mints of money.”

“Who wants mints of money?”

“Perhaps I do,” she said smiling.

At once he felt apologetic, ashamed. If she had not married him she could have had her mints of money. And she needed it. A certain amount of luxury was her proper setting.

“We’ve not done so badly just lately,” he said wistfully.

“No, indeed; but the bills are coming in rather fast.”

Bills—always bills!

He walked up and down.

“Oh, hang it! I don’t want to paint Lady Charmington,” he burst out, rather like a petulant child.

Isobel smiled a little. She stood by the fire without moving. Alan stopped his restless pacing and came nearer to her. What was there in her, in her stillness, her inertia, that drew him—drew him like a magnet? How beautiful she was—her arms like sculptured white marble, the pure gold of her hair, her lips—red full lips.

He kissed them—felt them fasten on his own. Did anything else matter? What was there in Isobel that soothed you, that took all your cares from you? She drew you into her own beautiful inertia and held you there, quiet and content. Poppy and mandragora; you drifted there, on a dark lake, asleep.

“I’ll do Lady Charmington,” he said presently. “What does it matter? I shall be bored—but after all, painters must eat. There’s Mr. Pots the painter, Mrs. Pots the painter’s wife, and Miss Pots the painter’s daughter—all needing sustenance.”

“Absurd boy!” said Isobel. “Talking of our daughter—you ought to go and see Jane some time. She was here yesterday, and said she hadn’t seen you for months.”

“Jane was here?”

“Yes—to see Winnie.”

Alan brushed Winnie aside.

“Did she see the picture of you?”

“Yes.”

“What did she think of it?”

“She said it was splendid.”

“Oh!”

He frowned, lost in thought.

“Mrs. Lemprière suspects you of a guilty passion for Jane, I think,” remarked Isobel. “Her nose twitched a good deal.”

“That woman!” said Alan, with deep disgust. “That woman! What wouldn’t she think? What doesn’t she think?”

“Well, I don’t think,” said Isobel, smiling. “So go and see Jane soon.”

Alan looked across at her. She was sitting now on a low couch by the fire. Her face was half turned away, the smile still lingered on her lips. And at that moment he felt bewildered, confused, as though a mist had formed round him, and, suddenly parting, had given him a glimpse into a strange country.

Something said to him: “Why does she want you to go and see Jane? There’s a reason.” Because with Isobel, there was bound to be a reason. There was no impulse in Isobel, only calculation.

“Do you like Jane?” he asked suddenly.

“She’s a dear,” said Isobel.

“Yes, but do you really like her?”

"Of course. She's so devoted to Winnie. By the way, she wants to carry Winnie off to the seaside next week. You don't mind, do you? It will leave us free for Scotland."

"It will be extraordinarily convenient."

It would, indeed, be just that. Extraordinarily convenient. He looked across at Isobel with a sudden suspicion. Had she asked Jane? Jane was so easily imposed upon.

Isobel got up and went out of the room, humming to herself. Oh, well, it didn't matter. Anyway, he would go and see Jane.

Jane Haworth lived at the top of a block of mansion flats overlooking Battersea Park. When Everard had climbed four flights of stairs and pressed the bell, he felt annoyed with Jane. Why couldn't she live somewhere more getatable? When, not having obtained an answer, he had pressed the bell three times, his annoyance had grown greater. Why couldn't she keep someone capable of answering the door?

Suddenly it opened, and Jane herself stood in the doorway. She was flushed.

"Where's Alice?" asked Everard, without any attempt at greeting.

"Well, I'm afraid—I mean—she's not well today."

"Drunk, you mean?" said Everard grimly.

What a pity that Jane was such an inveterate liar.

"I suppose that's it," said Jane reluctantly.

"Let me see her."

He strode into the flat. Jane followed him with disarming meekness. He found the delinquent Alice in the kitchen. There was no doubt whatever as to her condition. He followed Jane into the sitting room in grim silence.

"You'll have to get rid of that woman," he said. "I told you so before."

"I know you did, Alan, but I can't do that. You forget, her husband's in prison."

"Where he ought to be," said Everard. "How often has that woman been drunk in the three months you've had her?"

"Not so very many times; three or four perhaps. She gets depressed, you know."

"Three or four! Nine or ten would be nearer the mark. How does she cook? Rottenly. Is she the least assistance or comfort to you in this flat? None whatever. For God's sake, get rid of her tomorrow morning and engage a girl who is of some use."

Jane looked at him unhappily.

"You won't," said Everard gloomily, sinking into a big armchair. "You're such an impossibly sentimental creature. What's this I hear about your taking Winnie to the seaside? Who suggested it, you or Isobel?"

Jane said very quickly: "I did, of course."

"Jane," said Everard, "if you would only learn to speak the truth, I should be quite fond of you. Sit down, and for goodness' sake don't tell any more lies for at least ten minutes."

"Oh, Alan!" said Jane, and sat down.

The painter examined her critically for a minute or two. Mrs. Lemprière—that woman—had been quite right. He had been cruel in his handling of Jane. Jane was almost, if not quite, beautiful. The long lines of her body were pure Greek. It was that eager anxiety of hers to please that made her awkward. He had seized on that—exaggerated it—had sharpened the line of her slightly pointed chin, flung her body into an ugly poise.

Why? Why was it impossible for him to be five minutes in the room with Jane without feeling violent irritation against her rising up in him? Say what you would, Jane was a dear, but irritating. He was never soothed and at peace with her as he was with Isobel. And yet Jane was so anxious to please, so willing to agree with all he said, but alas! so transparently unable to conceal her real feelings.

He looked round the room. Typically Jane. Some lovely things, pure gems, that piece of Battersea enamel, for instance, and there next to it, an atrocity of a vase hand painted with roses.

He picked the latter up.

“Would you be very angry, Jane, if I pitched this out of the window?”

“Oh! Alan, you mustn’t.”

“What do you want with all this trash? You’ve plenty of taste if you care to use it. Mixing things up!”

“I know, Alan. It isn’t that I don’t know. But people give me things. That vase—Miss Bates brought it back from Margate—and she’s so poor, and has to scrape, and it must have cost her quite a lot—for her, you know, and she thought I’d be so pleased. I simply had to put it in a good place.”

Everard said nothing. He went on looking round the room. There were one or two etchings on the walls—there were also a number of photographs of babies. Babies, whatever their mothers may think, do not always photograph well. Any of Jane’s friends who acquired babies hurried to send photographs of them to her, expecting these tokens to be cherished. Jane had duly cherished them.

“Who’s this little horror?” asked Everard, inspecting a pudgy addition with a squint. “I’ve not seen him before.”

“It’s a her,” said Jane. “Mary Carrington’s new baby.”

“Poor Mary Carrington,” said Everard. “I suppose you’ll pretend that you like having that atrocious infant squinting at you all day?”

Jane’s chin shot out.

“She’s a lovely baby. Mary is a very old friend of mine.”

“Loyal Jane,” said Everard smiling at her. “So Isobel landed you with Winnie, did she?”

“Well, she did say you wanted to go to Scotland, and I jumped at it. You will let me have Winnie, won’t you? I’ve been wondering if you would let her come to me for ages, but I haven’t liked to ask.”

“Oh, you can have her—but it’s awfully good of you.”

“Then that’s all right,” said Jane happily.

Everard lit a cigarette.

“Isobel show you the new portrait?” he asked rather indistinctly.

“She did.”

“What did you think of it?”

Jane’s answer came quickly—too quickly:

“It’s perfectly splendid. Absolutely splendid.”

Alan sprang suddenly to his feet. The hand that held the cigarette shook.

“Damn you, Jane, don’t lie to me!”

“But, Alan, I’m sure, it is perfectly splendid.”

“Haven’t you learnt by now, Jane, that I know every tone of your voice? You lie to me like a hatter so as not to hurt my feelings, I suppose. Why can’t you be honest? Do you think I want you to tell me a thing is splendid when I know as well as you do that it’s not? The damned thing’s dead—dead. There’s no life in it—nothing behind, nothing but surface, damned smooth surface. I’ve cheated myself all along—yes, even this afternoon. I came along to you to find out. Isobel doesn’t know. But you know, you always do know. I knew you’d tell me it was good—you’ve no moral sense about that sort of thing. But I can tell by the tone of your voice. When I showed you Romance you didn't say anything at all—you held your breath and gave a sort of gasp."

"Alan . . ."

Everard gave her no chance to speak. Jane was producing the effect upon him he knew so well. Strange that so gentle a creature could stir him to such furious anger.

"You think I've lost the power, perhaps," he said angrily, "but I haven't. I can do work every bit as good as Romance—better, perhaps. I'll show you, Jane Haworth."

He fairly rushed out of the flat. Walking rapidly, he crossed through the Park and over Albert Bridge. He was still tingling all over with irritation and baffled rage. Jane, indeed! What did she know about painting? What was her opinion worth? Why should he care? But he did care. He wanted to paint something that would make Jane gasp. Her mouth would open just a little, and her cheeks would flush red. She would look first at the picture and then at him. She wouldn't say anything at all probably.

In the middle of the bridge he saw the picture he was going to paint. It came to him from nowhere at all, out of the blue. He saw it, there in the air, or was it in his head?

A little, dingy curio shop, rather dark and musty looking. Behind the counter a Jew—a small Jew with cunning eyes. In front of him the customer, a big man, sleek, well fed, opulent, bloated, a great jowl on him. Above them, on a shelf, a bust of white marble. The light there, on the boy's marble face, the deathless beauty of old Greece, scornful, unheeding of sale and barter. The Jew, the rich collector, the Greek boy's head. He saw them all.

"The Connoisseur, that's what I'll call it," muttered Alan Everard, stepping off the kerb and just missing being annihilated by a passing bus. "Yes, The Connoisseur. I'll show Jane."

When he arrived home, he passed straight into the studio. Isobel found him there, sorting out canvases.

“Alan, don’t forget we’re dining with the Marches—”

Everard shook his head impatiently.

“Damn the Marches. I’m going to work. I’ve got hold of something, but I must get it fixed—fixed at once on the canvas before it goes. Ring them up. Tell them I’m dead.”

Isobel looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two, and then went out. She understood the art of living with a genius very thoroughly. She went to the telephone and made some plausible excuse.

She looked round her, yawning a little. Then she sat down at her desk and began to write.

“Dear Jane,

Many thanks for your cheque received today. You are good to your godchild. A hundred pounds will do all sorts of things. Children are a terrible expense. You are so fond of Winnie that I felt I was not doing wrong in coming to you for help. Alan, like all geniuses, can only work at what he wants to work at—and unfortunately that doesn’t always keep the pot boiling. Hope to see you soon.

Yours, Isobel”

When The Connoisseur was finished, some months later, Alan invited Jane to come and see it. The thing was not quite as he had conceived it—that was impossible to hope for—but it was near enough. He felt the glow of the creator. He had made this thing and it was good.

Jane did not this time tell him it was splendid. The colour crept into her cheeks and her lips parted. She looked at Alan, and he saw in her eyes that which he wished to see. Jane knew.

He walked on air. He had shown Jane!

The picture off his mind, he began to notice his immediate surroundings once more.

Winnie had benefited enormously from her fortnight at the seaside, but it struck him that her clothes were very shabby. He said so to Isobel.

“Alan! You who never notice anything! But I like children to be simply dressed—I hate them all fussed up.”

“There’s a difference between simplicity and darns and patches.”

Isobel said nothing, but she got Winnie a new frock.

Two days later Alan was struggling with income tax returns. His own passbook lay in front of him. He was hunting through Isobel’s desk for hers when Winnie danced into the room with a disreputable doll.

“Daddy, I’ve got a riddle. Can you guess it? ‘Within a wall as white as milk, within a curtain soft as silk, bathed in a sea of crystal clear, a golden apple doth appear.’ Guess what that is?”

“Your mother,” said Alan absently. He was still hunting.

“Daddy!” Winnie gave a scream of laughter. “It’s an egg. Why did you think it was mummy?”

Alan smiled too.

“I wasn’t really listening,” he said. “And the words sounded like mummy, somehow.”

A wall as white as milk. A curtain. Crystal. The golden apple. Yes, it did suggest Isobel to him. Curious things, words.

He had found the passbook now. He ordered Winnie peremptorily from the room. Ten minutes later he looked up, startled by a sharp exclamation.

“Alan!”

“Hullo, Isobel. I didn’t hear you come in. Look here, I can’t make out these items in your passbook.”

“What business had you to touch my passbook?”

He stared at her, astonished. She was angry. He had never seen her angry before.

“I had no idea you would mind.”

“I do mind—very much indeed. You have no business to touch my things.”

Alan suddenly became angry too.

“I apologize. But since I have touched your things, perhaps you will explain one or two entries that puzzle me. As far as I can see, nearly five hundred pounds has been paid into your account this year which I cannot check. Where does it come from?”

Isobel had recovered her temper. She sank into a chair.

“You needn’t be so solemn about it, Alan,” she said lightly. “It isn’t the wages of sin, or anything like that.”

“Where did this money come from?”

“From a woman. A friend of yours. It’s not mine at all. It’s for Winnie.”

“Winnie? Do you mean—this money came from Jane?”

Isobel nodded.

“She’s devoted to the child—can’t do enough for her.”

“Yes, but—surely the money ought to have been invested for Winnie.”

“Oh! it isn’t that sort of thing at all. It’s for current expenses, clothes and all that.”

Alan said nothing. He was thinking of Winnie’s frocks—all darns and patches.

“Your account’s overdrawn, too, Isobel?”

“Is it? That’s always happening to me.”

“Yes, but that five hundred—”

“My dear Alan, I’ve spent it on Winnie in the way that seemed best to me. I can assure you Jane is quite satisfied.”

Alan was not satisfied. Yet such was the power of Isobel’s calm that he said nothing more. After all, Isobel was careless in money matters. She hadn’t meant to use for herself money given to her for the child. A receipted bill came that day addressed by a mistake to Mr. Everard. It was from a dressmaker in Hanover Square and was for two hundred odd pounds. He gave it to Isobel without a word. She glanced over it, smiled, and said:

“Poor boy, I suppose it seems an awful lot to you, but one really must be more or less clothed.”

The next day he went to see Jane.

Jane was irritating and elusive as usual. He wasn’t to bother. Winnie was her godchild. Women understood these things, men didn’t. Of course she didn’t want Winnie to have five hundred pounds’ worth of frocks. Would he please leave it to her and Isobel? They understood each other perfectly.

Alan went away in a state of growing dissatisfaction. He knew perfectly well that he had shirked the one question he really wished to ask. He wanted to say: “Has Isobel ever asked you for money for Winnie?” He didn’t say it because he was afraid that Jane might not lie well enough to deceive him.

But he was worried. Jane was poor. He knew she was poor. She mustn’t—mustn’t denude herself. He made up his mind to speak to Isobel. Isobel was calm and reassuring. Of course she wouldn’t let Jane spend more than she could afford.

A month later Jane died.

It was influenza, followed by pneumonia. She made Alan Everard her executor and left all she had to Winnie. But it wasn't very much.

It was Alan's task to go through Jane's papers. She left a record there that was clear to follow—numerous evidences of acts of kindness, begging letters, grateful letters.

And lastly, he found her diary. With it was a scrap of paper:

"To be read after my death by Alan Everard. He has often reproached me with not speaking the truth. The truth is all here."

So he came to know at last, finding the one place where Jane had dared to be honest. It was a record, very simple and unforced, of her love for him.

There was very little sentiment about it—no fine language. But there was no blinking of facts.

"I know you are often irritated by me," she had written. "Everything I do or say seems to make you angry sometimes. I do not know why this should be, for I try so hard to please you; but I do believe, all the same, that I mean something real to you. One isn't angry with the people who don't count."

It was not Jane's fault that Alan found other matters. Jane was loyal—but she was also untidy; she filled her drawers too full. She had, shortly before her death, burnt carefully all Isobel's letters. The one Alan found was wedged behind a drawer. When he had read it, the meaning of certain cabalistic signs on the counterfoils of Jane's chequebook became clear to him. In this particular letter Isobel had hardly troubled to keep up the pretence of the money being required for Winnie.

Alan sat in front of the desk staring with unseeing eyes out of the window for a long time. Finally he slipped the chequebook into his pocket and left the flat. He walked back to Chelsea, conscious of an anger that grew rapidly stronger.

Isobel was out when he got back, and he was sorry. He had so clearly in his mind what he wanted to say. Instead, he went up to the studio and pulled out the unfinished portrait of Jane. He set it on an easel near the portrait of Isobel in pink satin.

The Lemprière woman had been right; there was life in Jane's portrait. He looked at her, the eager eyes, the beauty that he had tried so unsuccessfully to deny her. That was Jane—the aliveness, more than anything else, was Jane. She was, he thought, the most alive person he had ever met, so much so, that even now he could not think of her as dead.

And he thought of his other pictures—Colour, Romance, Sir Rufus Herschman. They had all, in a way, been pictures of Jane. She had kindled the spark for each one of them—had sent him away fuming and fretting—to show her! And now? Jane was dead. Would he ever paint a picture—a real picture—again? He looked again at the eager face on the canvas. Perhaps. Jane wasn't very far away.

A sound made him wheel round. Isobel had come into the studio. She was dressed for dinner in a straight white gown that showed up the pure gold of her hair.

She stopped dead and checked the words on her lips. Eyeing him warily, she went over to the divan and sat down. She had every appearance of calm.

Alan took the chequebook from his pocket.

"I've been going through Jane's papers."

"Yes?"

He tried to imitate her calm, to keep his voice from shaking.

"For the last four years she's been supplying you with money."

"Yes. For Winnie."

"No, not for Winnie," shouted Everard. "You pretended, both of you, that it was for Winnie, but you both knew that that wasn't so. Do you realize that Jane has been selling her securities, living from hand to mouth, to supply you with clothes—clothes that you didn't really need?"

Isobel never took her eyes from his face. She settled her body more comfortably on the cushions as a white Persian cat might do.

"I can't help it if Jane denuded herself more than she should have done," she said. "I supposed she could afford the money. She was always crazy about you—I could see that, of course. Some wives would have kicked up a fuss about the way you were always rushing off to see her, and spending hours there. I didn't."

"No," said Alan, very white in the face. "You made her pay instead."

"You are saying very offensive things, Alan. Be careful."

"Aren't they true? Why did you find it so easy to get money out of Jane?"

"Not for love of me, certainly. It must have been for love of you."

"That's just what it was," said Alan simply. "She paid for my freedom—freedom to work in my own way. So long as you had a sufficiency of money, you'd leave me alone—not badger me to paint a crowd of awful women."

Isobel said nothing.

"Well?" cried Alan angrily.

Her quiescence infuriated him.

Isobel was looking at the floor. Presently she raised her head and said quietly:

“Come here, Alan.”

She touched the divan at her side. Uneasily, unwillingly, he came and sat there, not looking at her. But he knew that he was afraid.

“Alan,” said Isobel presently.

“Well?”

He was irritable, nervous.

“All that you say may be true. It doesn’t matter. I’m like that. I want things—clothes, money, you. Jane’s dead, Alan.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jane’s dead. You belong to me altogether now. You never did before—not quite.”

He looked at her—saw the light in her eyes, acquisitive, possessive—was revolted, yet fascinated.

“Now you shall be all mine.”

He understood Isobel then as he had never understood her before.

“You want me as a slave? I’m to paint what you tell me to paint, live as you tell me to live, be dragged at your chariot wheels.”

“Put it like that if you please. What are words?”

He felt her arms round his neck, white, smooth, firm as a wall. Words danced through his brain. “A wall as white as milk.” Already he was inside the wall. Could he still escape? Did he want to escape?

He heard her voice close against his ear—poppy and mandragora.

“What else is there to live for? Isn’t this enough? Love—happiness—success—love—”

The wall was growing up all round him now—“the curtain soft as silk,” the curtain wrapping him round, stifling him a little, but so soft, so sweet! Now they were drifting together, at peace, out on the crystal sea. The wall was very high now, shutting out all those other things—those dangerous, disturbing things that hurt—that always hurt. Out on the sea of crystal, the golden apple between their hands.

The light faded from Jane’s picture.

Eight

THE MYSTERY OF THE SPANISH CHEST

“The Mystery of the Spanish Chest” is an expanded version of the story “The Mystery of the Baghdad Chest” which was first published in The Strand, January 1932.

Punctual to the moment, as always, Hercule Poirot entered the small room where Miss Lemon, his efficient secretary, awaited her instructions for the day.

At first sight Miss Lemon seemed to be composed entirely of angles—thus satisfying Poirot’s demand for symmetry.

Not that where women were concerned Hercule Poirot carried his passion for geometrical precision so far. He was, on the contrary, old-fashioned. He had a continental prejudice for curves—it might be said for voluptuous curves. He liked women to be women. He liked them lush, highly coloured, exotic. There had been a certain Russian countess—but that was long ago now. A folly of earlier days.

But Miss Lemon he had never considered as a woman. She was a human machine—an instrument of precision. Her efficiency was terrific. She was forty-eight years of age, and was fortunate enough to have no imagination whatever.

“Good morning, Miss Lemon.”

“Good morning, M. Poirot.”

Poirot sat down and Miss Lemon placed before him the morning’s mail, neatly arranged in categories. She resumed her seat and sat with pad and pencil at the ready.

But there was to be this morning a slight change in routine. Poirot had brought in with him the morning newspaper, and his eyes were scanning it with interest. The headlines were big and bold. SPANISH CHEST MYSTERY. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS.

“You have read the morning papers, I presume, Miss Lemon?”

“Yes, M. Poirot. The news from Geneva is not very good.”

Poirot waved away the news from Geneva in a comprehensive sweep of the arm.

“A Spanish chest,” he mused. “Can you tell me, Miss Lemon, what exactly is a Spanish chest?”

“I suppose, M. Poirot, that it is a chest that came originally from Spain.”

“One might reasonably suppose so. You have then, no expert knowledge?”

“They are usually of the Elizabethan period, I believe. Large, and with a good deal of brass decoration on them. They look very nice when well kept and polished. My sister bought one at a sale. She keeps household linen in it. It looks very nice.”

“I am sure that in the house of any sister of yours, all the furniture would be well kept,” said Poirot, bowing gracefully.

Miss Lemon replied sadly that servants did not seem to know what elbow grease was nowadays. Poirot looked a little puzzled, but decided not to inquire into the inward meaning of the mysterious phrase “elbow grease.”

He looked down again at the newspaper, conning over the names: Major Rich, Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, Commander McLaren, Mr. and Mrs. Spence. Names, nothing but names to him; yet all possessed of human personalities, hating, loving, fearing. A drama, this, in which he, Hercule Poirot, had no part. And he would have liked to have a part in it! Six people at an evening party, in a room with a big Spanish chest against the wall, six people, five of them talking, eating a buffet supper, putting records on the gramophone, dancing, and the sixth dead, in the Spanish chest. . . .

Ah, thought Poirot. How my dear friend, Hastings, would have enjoyed this! What romantic flights of imagination he would have had. What ineptitudes he would have uttered! Ah, ce cher Hastings, at this moment, today, I miss him . . . Instead—

He sighed and looked at Miss Lemon. Miss Lemon, intelligently perceiving that Poirot was in no mood to dictate letters, had uncovered her typewriter and was awaiting her moment to get on with certain arrears of work. Nothing could have interested her less than sinister Spanish chests containing dead bodies.

Poirot sighed and looked down at a photographed face. Reproductions in newsprint were never very good, and this was decidedly smudgy—but what a face! Mrs. Clayton, the wife of the murdered man. . . .

On an impulse, he thrust the paper at Miss Lemon.

“Look,” he demanded. “Look at that face.”

Miss Lemon looked at it obediently, without emotion.

“What do you think of her, Miss Lemon? That is Mrs. Clayton.”

Miss Lemon took the paper, glanced casually at the picture and remarked:

“She’s a little like the wife of our bank manager when we lived at Croydon Heath.”

“Interesting,” said Poirot. “Recount to me, if you will be so kind, the history of your bank manager’s wife.”

“Well, it’s not really a very pleasant story, M. Poirot.”

“It was in my mind that it might not be. Continue.”

"There was a good deal of talk—about Mrs. Adams and a young artist. Then Mr. Adams shot himself. But Mrs. Adams wouldn't marry the other man and he took some kind of poison—but they pulled him through all right; and finally Mrs. Adams married a young solicitor. I believe there was more trouble after that, only of course we'd left Croydon Heath by then so I didn't hear very much more about it."

Hercule Poirot nodded gravely.

"She was beautiful?"

"Well—not really what you'd call beautiful—But there seemed to be something about her—"

"Exactly. What is that something that they possess—the sirens of this world! The Helens of Troy, the Cleopatras—?"

Miss Lemon inserted a piece of paper vigorously into her typewriter.

"Really, M. Poirot, I've never thought about it. It seems all very silly to me. If people would just go on with their jobs and didn't think about such things it would be much better."

Having thus disposed of human frailty and passion, Miss Lemon let her fingers hover over the keys of the typewriter, waiting impatiently to be allowed to begin her work.

"That is your view," said Poirot. "And at this moment it is your desire that you should be allowed to get on with your job. But your job, Miss Lemon, is not only to take down my letters, to file my papers, to deal with my telephone calls, to typewrite my letters—All these things you do admirably. But me, I deal not only with documents but with human beings. And there, too, I need assistance."

"Certainly, M. Poirot," said Miss Lemon patiently. "What is it you want me to do?"

"This case interests me. I should be glad if you would make a study of this morning's report of it in all the papers and also of any additional reports in the evening papers—Make me a précis of the facts."

"Very good, M. Poirot."

Poirot withdrew to his sitting room, a rueful smile on his face.

"It is indeed the irony," he said to himself, "that after my dear friend Hastings I should have Miss Lemon. What greater contrast can one imagine? Ce cher Hastings—how he would have enjoyed himself. How he would have walked up and down talking about it, putting the most romantic construction on every incident, believing as gospel truth every word the papers have printed about it. And my poor Miss Lemon, what I have asked her to do, she will not enjoy at all!"

Miss Lemon came to him in due course with a typewritten sheet.

"I've got the information you wanted, M. Poirot. I'm afraid though, it can't be regarded as reliable. The papers vary a good deal in their accounts. I shouldn't like to guarantee that the facts as stated are more than sixty per cent accurate."

"That is probably a conservative estimate," murmured Poirot. "Thank you, Miss Lemon, for the trouble you have taken."

The facts were sensational, but clear enough. Major Charles Rich, a well-to-do-bachelor, had given an evening party to a few of his friends, at his apartment. These friends consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, Mr. and Mrs. Spence, and a Commander McLaren. Commander McLaren was a very old friend of both Rich and the Claytons, Mr. and Mrs. Spence, a younger couple, were fairly recent acquaintances. Arnold Clayton was in the Treasury. Jeremy Spence was a junior Civil Servant. Major Rich was forty-eight, Arnold Clayton was fifty-five, Commander McLaren was forty-six, Jeremy Spence was thirty-seven. Mrs. Clayton was said to be "some years younger than her husband." One person was unable to attend the party. At the last moment, Mr. Clayton was called away to Scotland on urgent business, and was supposed to have left King’s Cross by the 8:15 train.

The party proceeded as such parties do. Everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. It was neither a wild party nor a drunken one. It broke up about 11:45. The four guests left together and shared a taxi. Commander McLaren was dropped first at his club and then the Spences dropped Margharita Clayton at Cardigan Gardens just off Sloane Street and went on themselves to their house in Chelsea.

The gruesome discovery was made on the following morning by Major Rich’s manservant, William Burgess. The latter did not live in. He arrived early so as to clear up the sitting room before calling Major Rich with his early morning tea. It was whilst clearing up that Burgess was startled to find a big stain discolouring the light-coloured rug on which stood the Spanish chest. It seemed to have seeped through from the chest, and the valet immediately lifted up the lid of the chest and looked inside. He was horrified to find there the body of Mr. Clayton, stabbed through the neck.

Obeying his first impulse, Burgess rushed out into the street and fetched the nearest policeman.

Such were the bald facts of the case. But there were further details. The police had immediately broken the news to Mrs. Clayton who had been “completely prostrated.” She had seen her husband for the last time at a little after six o’clock on the evening before. He had come home much annoyed, having been summoned to Scotland on urgent business in connection with some property that he owned. He had urged his wife to go to the party without him. Mr. Clayton had then called in at his and Commander McLaren’s club, had had a drink with his friend, and had explained the position. He had then said, looking at his watch, that he had just time on his way to King’s Cross, to call in on Major Rich and explain. He had already tried to telephone him, but the line had seemed to be out of order.

According to William Burgess, Mr. Clayton arrived at the flat at about 7:55. Major Rich was out but was due to return any moment, so Burgess suggested that Mr. Clayton should come in and wait. Clayton said he had no time, but would come in and write a note. He explained that he was on his way to catch a train at King's Cross. The valet showed him into the sitting room and himself returned to the kitchen where he was engaged in the preparation of canapés for the party. The valet did not hear his master return but about ten minutes later, Major Rich looked into the kitchen and told Burgess to hurry out and get some Turkish cigarettes which were Mrs. Spence's favourite smoking. The valet did so and brought them to his master in the sitting room. Mr. Clayton was not there, but the valet naturally thought he had already left to catch his train.

Major Rich's story was short and simple. Mr. Clayton was not in the flat when he himself came in and he had no idea that he had been there. No note had been left for him and the first he heard of Mr. Clayton's journey to Scotland was when Mrs. Clayton and the others arrived.

There were two additional items in the evening papers. Mrs. Clayton who was "prostrated with shock" had left her flat in Cardigan Gardens and was believed to be staying with friends.

The second item was in the stop press. Major Charles Rich had been charged with the murder of Arnold Clayton and had been taken into custody.

"So that is that," said Poirot, looking up at Miss Lemon. "The arrest of Major Rich was to be expected. But what a remarkable case. What a very remarkable case! Do you not think so?"

"I suppose such things do happen, M. Poirot," said Miss Lemon without interest.

"Oh certainly! They happen every day. Or nearly every day. But usually they are quite understandable—though distressing."

"It is certainly a very unpleasant business."

"To be stabbed to death and stowed away in a Spanish chest is certainly unpleasant for the victim—supremely so. But when I say this is a remarkable case, I refer to the remarkable behaviour of Major Rich."

Miss Lemon said with faint distaste:

“There seems to be a suggestion that Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were very close friends . . . It was a suggestion and not a proved fact, so I did not include it.”

“That was very correct of you. But it is an inference that leaps to the eye. Is that all you have to say?”

Miss Lemon looked blank. Poirot sighed, and missed the rich colourful imagination of his friend Hastings. Discussing a case with Miss Lemon was uphill work.

“Consider for a moment this Major Rich. He is in love with Mrs. Clayton—granted . . . He wants to dispose of her husband—that, too, we grant, though if Mrs. Clayton is in love with him, and they are having the affair together, where is the urgency? It is, perhaps, that Mr. Clayton will not give his wife the divorce? But it is not of all this that I talk. Major Rich, he is a retired soldier, and it is said sometimes that soldiers are not brainy. But, tout de même, this Major Rich, is he, can he be, a complete imbecile?”

Miss Lemon did not reply. She took this to be a purely rhetorical question.

“Well,” demanded Poirot. “What do you think about it all?”

“What do I think?” Miss Lemon was startled.

“Mais oui—you!”

Miss Lemon adjusted her mind to the strain put upon it. She was not given to mental speculation of any kind unless asked for it. In such leisure moments as she had, her mind was filled with the details of a superlatively perfect filing system. It was her only mental recreation.

“Well—” she began, and paused.

“Tell me just what happened—what you think happened, on that evening. Mr. Clayton is in the sitting room writing a note, Major Rich comes back—what then?”

"He finds Mr. Clayton there. They—I suppose they have a quarrel. Major Rich stabs him. Then, when he sees what he has done, he—he puts the body in the chest. After all, the guests, I suppose, might be arriving any minute."

"Yes, yes. The guests arrive! The body is in the chest. The evening passes. The guests depart. And then—"

"Well, then, I suppose Major Rich goes to bed and—Oh!"

"Ah," said Poirot. "You see it now. You have murdered a man. You have concealed his body in a chest. And then—you go peacefully to bed, quite unperturbed by the fact that your valet will discover the crime in the morning."

"I suppose it's possible that the valet might never have looked inside the chest?"

"With an enormous pool of blood on the carpet underneath it?"

"Perhaps Major Rich didn't realize that the blood was there."

"Was it not somewhat careless of him not to look and see?"

"I dare say he was upset," said Miss Lemon.

Poirot threw up his hands in despair.

Miss Lemon seized the opportunity to hurry from the room.

The mystery of the Spanish chest was, strictly speaking, no business of Poirot's. He was engaged at the moment in a delicate mission for one of the large oil companies where one of the high ups was possibly involved in some questionable transaction. It was hush-hush, important and exceedingly lucrative. It was sufficiently involved to command Poirot's attention, and had the great advantage that it required very little physical activity. It was sophisticated and bloodless. Crime at the highest levels.

The mystery of the Spanish chest was dramatic and emotional; two qualities which Poirot had often declared to Hastings could be much overrated—and indeed frequently were so by the latter. He had been severe with ce cher Hastings on this point, and now here he was, behaving much as his friend might have done, obsessed with beautiful women, crimes of passion, jealousy, hatred and all the other romantic causes of murder! He wanted to know about it all. He wanted to know what Major Rich was like, and what his manservant, Burgess, was like, and what Margharita Clayton was like (though that, he thought, he knew) and what the late Arnold Clayton had been like (since he held that the character of the victim was of the first importance in a murder case), and even what Commander McLaren, the faithful friend, and Mr. and Mrs. Spence, the recently acquired acquaintances, were like.

And he did not see exactly how he was going to gratify his curiosity!

He reflected on the matter later in the day.

Why did the whole business intrigue him so much? He decided, after reflection, that it was because—as the facts were related—the whole thing was more or less impossible! Yes, there was a Euclidean flavour.

Starting from what one could accept, there had been a quarrel between two men. Cause, presumably, a woman. One man killed the other in the heat of rage. Yes, that happened—though it would be more acceptable if the husband had killed the lover. Still—the lover had killed the husband, stabbed him with a dagger (?)—somehow a rather unlikely weapon. Perhaps Major Rich had had an Italian mother? Somewhere—surely—there should be something to explain the choice of a dagger as a weapon. Anyway, one must accept the dagger (some papers called it a stiletto!). It was to hand and was used. The body was concealed in the chest. That was common sense and inevitable. The crime had not been premeditated, and as the valet was returning at any moment, and four guests would be arriving before very long, it seemed the only course indicated.

The party is held, the guests depart, the manservant is already gone—and—Major Rich goes to bed!

To understand how that could happen, one must see Major Rich and find out what kind of a man acts in that way.

Could it be that, overcome with horror at what he had done and the long strain of an evening trying to appear his normal self, he had taken a sleeping pill of some kind or a tranquillizer which had put him into a heavy slumber which lasted long beyond his usual hour of waking? Possible. Or was it a case, rewarding to a psychologist, where Major Rich's feeling of subconscious guilt made him want the crime to be discovered? To make up one's mind on that point one would have to see Major Rich. It all came back to—

The telephone rang. Poirot it ring for some moments, until he realized that Miss Lemon after bringing him his letters to sign, had gone home some time ago, and that George had probably gone out.

He picked up the receiver.

"M. Poirot?"

"Speaking!"

"Oh how splendid." Poirot blinked slightly at the fervour of the charming female voice. "It's Abbie Chatterton."

"Ah, Lady Chatterton. How can I serve you?"

"By coming over as quickly as you can right away to a simply frightful cocktail party I am giving. Not just for the cocktail party—it's for something quite different really. I need you. It's absolutely vital. Please, please, please don't let me down! Don't say you can't manage it."

Poirot had not been going to say anything of the kind. Lord Chatterton, apart from being a peer of the realm and occasionally making a very dull speech in the House of Lords, was nobody in particular. But Lady Chatterton was one of the brightest jewels in what Poirot called le haut monde. Everything she did or said was news. She had brains, beauty, originality and enough vitality to activate a rocket to the moon.

She said again:

“I need you. Just give that wonderful moustache of yours a lovely twirl, and come!”

It was not quite so quick as that. Poirot had first to make a meticulous toilet. The twirl to the moustaches was added and he then set off.

The door of Lady Chatterton’s delightful house in Cheriton Street was ajar and a noise as of animals mutinying at the zoo sounded from within. Lady Chatterton who was holding two ambassadors, an international rugger player and an American evangelist in play, neatly jettisoned them with the rapidity of sleight of hand and was at Poirot’s side.

“M. Poirot, how wonderful to see you! No, don’t have that nasty Martini. I’ve got something special for you—a kind of sirop that the sheikhs drink in Morocco. It’s in my own little room upstairs.”

She led the way upstairs and Poirot followed her. She paused to say over her shoulder:

“I didn’t put these people off, because it’s absolutely essential that no one should know there’s anything special going on here, and I’ve promised the servants enormous bonuses if not a word leaks out. After all, one doesn’t want one’s house besieged by reporters. And, poor darling, she’s been through so much already.”

Lady Chatterton did not stop at the first-floor landing, instead she swept on up to the floor above.

Gasping for breath and somewhat bewildered, Hercule Poirot followed.

Lady Chatterton paused, gave a rapid glance downwards over the banisters, and then flung open a door, exclaiming as she did so:

“I’ve got him, Margharita! I’ve got him! Here he is!”

She stood aside in triumph to let Poirot enter, then performed a rapid introduction.

"This is Margharita Clayton. She's a very, very dear friend of mine. You'll help her, won't you? Margharita, this is that wonderful Hercule Poirot. He'll do just everything you want—you will, won't you, dear M. Poirot?"

And without waiting for the answer which she obviously took for granted (Lady Chatterton had not been a spoilt beauty all her life for nothing), she dashed out of the door and down the stairs, calling back rather indiscreetly, "I've got to go back to all these awful people. . . ."

The woman who had been sitting in a chair by the window rose and came towards him. He would have recognized her even if Lady Chatterton had not mentioned her name. Here was that wide, that very wide brow, the dark hair that sprang away from it like wings, the grey eyes set far apart. She wore a close-fitting, high-necked gown of dull black that showed up the beauty of her body and the magnolia whiteness of her skin. It was an unusual face, rather than a beautiful one—one of those oddly proportioned faces that one sometimes sees in an Italian primitive. There was about her a kind of medieval simplicity—a strange innocence that could be, Poirot thought, more devastating than any voluptuous sophistication. When she spoke it was with a kind of childlike candour.

"Abbie says you will help me. . . ."

She looked at him gravely and inquiringly.

For a moment he stood quite still, scrutinizing her closely. There was nothing ill-bred in his manner of doing it. It was more the kind but searching look that a famous consultant gives a new patient.

"Are you sure, Madame," he said at last, "that I can help you?"

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean."

"What is it, Madame, that you want me to do?"

"Oh," she seemed surprised. "I thought—you knew who I was?"

"I know who you are. Your husband was killed—stabbed, and a Major Rich has been arrested and charged with his murder."

The flush heightened.

"Major Rich did not kill my husband."

Quick as a flash Poirot said:

"Why not?"

She stared, puzzled. "I—I beg your pardon?"

"I have confused you—because I have not asked the question that everybody asks—the police—the lawyers . . . 'Why should Major Rich kill Arnold Clayton?' But I ask the opposite. I ask you, Madame, why you are sure that Major Rich did not kill him?"

"Because," she paused a moment—"because I know Major Rich so well."

"You know Major Rich so well," repeated Poirot tonelessly.

He paused and then said sharply:

"How well?"

Whether she understood his meaning, he could not guess. He thought to himself: Here is either a woman of great simplicity or of great subtlety . . . Many people, he thought, must have wondered that about Margharita Clayton. . . .

"How well?" She was looking at him doubtfully. "Five years—no, nearly six."

"That was not precisely what I meant . . . You must understand, Madame, that I shall have to ask you the impertinent questions. Perhaps you will speak the truth, perhaps you will lie. It is very necessary for a woman to lie sometimes. Women must defend themselves, and the lie, it can be a good weapon. But there are three people, Madame, to whom a woman should speak the truth. To her Father confessor, to her hairdresser, and to her private detective—if she trusts him. Do you trust me, Madame?"

Margharita Clayton drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she said. "I do." And added: "I must."

"Very well, then. What is it you want me to do—find out who killed your husband?"

"I suppose so—yes."

"But it is not essential? You want me, then, to clear Major Rich from suspicion?"

She nodded quickly—gratefully.

"That—and that only?"

It was, he saw, an unnecessary question. Margharita Clayton was a woman who saw only one thing at a time.

"And now," he said, "for the impertinence. You and Major Rich, you are lovers, yes?"

"Do you mean, were we having an affair together? No."

"But he was in love with you?"

"Yes."

"And you—were in love with him?"

"I think so."

"You do not seem quite sure?"

"I am sure—now."

“Ah! You did not, then, love your husband?”

“No.”

“You reply with an admirable simplicity. Most women would wish to explain at great length just exactly what their feelings were. How long had you been married?”

“Eleven years.”

“Can you tell me a little about your husband—what kind of a man he was?”

She frowned.

“It’s difficult. I don’t really know what kind of a man Arnold was. He was very quiet—very reserved. One didn’t know what he was thinking. He was clever, of course—everyone said he was brilliant—in his work, I mean . . . He didn’t—how can I put it—he never explained himself at all. . . .”

“Was he in love with you?”

“Oh, yes. He must have been. Or he wouldn’t have minded so much—” she came to a sudden stop.

“About other men? That is what you were going to say? He was jealous?”

Again she said:

“He must have been.” And then, as though feeling that the phrase needed explanation, she went on. “Sometimes, for days, he wouldn’t speak. . . .”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“This violence—that has come into your life. Is it the first that you have known?”

“Violence?” She frowned, then flushed. “Is it—do you mean—that poor boy who shot himself?”

"Yes," said Poirot. "I expect that is what I mean."

"I'd no idea he felt like that . . . I was sorry for him—he seemed so shy—so lonely. He must have been very neurotic, I think. And there were two Italians—a duel—It was ridiculous! Anyway, nobody was killed, thank goodness . . . And honestly, I didn't care about either of them! I never even pretended to care."

"No. You were just—there! And where you are—things happen! I have seen that before in my life. It is because you do not care that men are driven mad. But for Major Rich you do care. So—we must do what we can. . . ."

He was silent for a moment or two.

She sat there gravely, watching him.

"We turn from personalities, which are often the really important things, to plain facts. I know only what has been in the papers. On the facts as given there, only two persons had the opportunity of killing your husband, only two persons could have killed him—Major Rich and Major Rich's manservant."

She said, stubbornly:

"I know Charles didn't kill him."

"So, then, it must have been the valet. You agree?"

She said doubtfully:

"I see what you mean. . . ."

"But you are dubious about it?"

"It just seems—fantastic!"

"Yet the possibility is there. Your husband undoubtedly came to the flat, since his body was found there. If the valet's story is true, Major Rich killed him. But if the valet's story is false? Then, the valet killed him and hid the body in the chest before his master returned. An excellent way of disposing of the body from his point of view. He has only got to ‘notice the bloodstain’ the next morning and ‘discover’ it. Suspicion will immediately fall on Rich.”

“But why should he want to kill Arnold?”

“Ah why? The motive cannot be an obvious one—or the police would have investigated it. It is possible that your husband knew something to the valet’s discredit, and was about to acquaint Major Rich with the facts. Did your husband ever say anything to you about this man Burgess?”

She shook her head.

“Do you think he would have done so—if that had indeed been the case?”

She frowned.

“It’s difficult to say. Possibly not. Arnold never talked much about people. I told you he was reserved. He wasn’t—he was never—a chatty man.”

“He was a man who kept his own counsel . . . Yes, now what is your opinion of Burgess?”

“He’s not the kind of man you notice very much. A fairly good servant. Adequate but not polished.”

“What age?”

“About thirty-seven or eight, I should think. He’d been a batman in the army during the war, but he wasn’t a regular soldier.”

“How long had he been with Major Rich?”

“Not very long. About a year and a half, I think.”

“You never noticed anything odd about his manner towards your husband?”

“We weren’t there so very often. No, I noticed nothing at all.”

"Tell me now about the events of that evening. What time were you invited?"

"Eight-fifteen for half past."

"And just what kind of a party was it to be?"

"Well, there would be drinks, and a kind of buffet supper—usually a very good one. Foie gras and hot toast. Smoked salmon. Sometimes there was a hot rice dish—Charles had a special recipe he'd got in the Near East—but that was more for winter. Then we used to have music—Charles had got a very good stereophonic gramophone. Both my husband and Jock McLaren were very fond of classical records. And we had dance music—the Spences were very keen dancers. It was that sort of thing—a quiet informal evening. Charles was a very good host."

"And this particular evening—it was like other evenings there? You noticed nothing unusual—nothing out of place?"

"Out of place?" she frowned for a moment. "When you said that I—no, it's gone. There was something . . ." She shook her head again. "No. To answer your question, there was nothing unusual at all about that evening. We enjoyed ourselves. Everybody seemed relaxed and happy." She shivered. "And to think that all the time—"

Poirot held up a quick hand.

"Do not think. This business that took your husband to Scotland, how much do you know about that?"

"Not very much. There was some dispute over the restrictions on selling a piece of land which belonged to my husband. The sale had apparently gone through and then some sudden snag turned up."

"What did your husband tell you exactly?"

"He came in with a telegram in his hand. As far as I remember, he said: 'This is most annoying. I shall have to take the night mail to Edinburgh and see Johnston first thing tomorrow morning . . . Too bad when one thought the thing was going through smoothly at last.” Then he said: ‘Shall I ring up Jock and get him to call for you,’ and I said ‘Nonsense, I’ll just take a taxi,’ and he said that Jock or the Spences would see me home. I said did he want anything packed and he said he’d just throw a few things into a bag, and have a quick snack at the club, before catching the train. Then he went off and—and that’s the last time I saw him.”

Her voice broke a little on the last words.

Poirot looked at her very hard.

“Did he show you the telegram?”

“No.”

“A pity.”

“Why do you say that?”

He did not answer that question. Instead he said briskly:

“Now to business. Who are the solicitors acting for Major Rich?”

She told him and he made a note of the address.

“Will you write a few words to them and give it to me? I shall want to make arrangements to see Major Rich.”

“He—it’s been remanded for a week.”

“Naturally. That is the procedure. Will you also write a note to Commander McLaren and to your friends the Spences? I shall want to see all of them, and it is essential that they do not at once show me the door.”

When she rose from the writing desk, he said:

“One thing more. I shall register my own impressions, but I also want yours—of Commander McLaren and of Mr. and Mrs. Spence.”

“Jock is one of our oldest friends. I’ve known him ever since I was a child. He appears to be quite a dour person, but he’s really a dear—always the same—always to be relied upon. He’s not gay and amusing but he’s a tower of strength—both Arnold and I relied on his judgement a lot.”

“And he, also, is doubtless in love with you?” Poirot’s eyes twinkled slightly.

“Oh yes,” said Margharita happily. “He’s always been in love with me—but by now it’s become a kind of habit.”

“And the Spences?”

“They’re amusing—and very good company. Linda Spence is really rather a clever girl. Arnold enjoyed talking with her. She’s attractive, too.”

“You are friends?”

“She and I? In a way. I don’t know that I really like her. She’s too malicious.”

“And her husband?”

“Oh, Jeremy is delightful. Very musical. Knows a good deal about pictures, too. He and I go to picture shows a good deal together. . . .”

“Ah, well, I shall see for myself.” He took her hand in his, “I hope, Madame, you will not regret asking for my help.”

“Why should I regret it?” Her eyes opened wide.

“One never knows,” said Poirot cryptically.

“And I—I do not know,” he said to himself, as he went down the stairs. The cocktail party was still in full spate, but he avoided being captured and reached the street.

“No,” he repeated. “I do not know.”

It was of Margharita Clayton he was thinking.

That apparently childlike candour, that frank innocence—Was it just that? Or did it mask something else? There had been women like that in medieval days—women on whom history had not been able to agree. He thought of Mary Stuart, the Scottish Queen. Had she known, that night in Kirk o' Fields, of the deed that was to be done? Or was she completely innocent? Had the conspirators told her nothing? Was she one of those childlike simple women who can say to themselves "I do not know" and believe it? He felt the spell of Margharita Clayton. But he was not entirely sure about her. . . .

Such women could be, though innocent themselves, the cause of crimes.

Such women could be, in intent and design, criminals themselves, though not in action.

Theirs was never the hand that held the knife—

As to Margharita Clayton—no—he did not know!

Hercule Poirot did not find Major Rich's solicitors very helpful. He had not expected to do so.

They managed to indicate, though without saying so, that it would be in their client's best interest if Mrs. Clayton showed no sign of activity on his behalf.

His visit to them was in the interests of "correctness." He had enough pull with the Home Office and the CID to arrange his interview with the prisoner.

Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the Clayton case, was not one of Poirot's favourites. He was not, however, hostile on this occasion, merely contemptuous.

“Can’t waste much time over the old dodderer,” he had said to his assisting sergeant before Poirot was shown in. “Still, I’ll have to be polite.”

“You’ll really have to pull some rabbits out of a hat if you’re going to do anything with this one, M. Poirot,” he remarked cheerfully. “Nobody else but Rich could have killed the bloke.”

“Except the valet.”

“Oh, I’ll give you the valet! As a possibility, that is. But you won’t find anything there. No motives whatever.”

“You cannot be entirely sure of that. Motives are very curious things.”

“Well, he wasn’t acquainted with Clayton in any way. He’s got a perfectly innocuous past. And he seems to be perfectly right in his head. I don’t know what more you want?”

“I want to find out that Rich did not commit the crime.”

“To please the lady, eh?” Inspector Miller grinned wickedly. “She’s been getting at you, I suppose. Quite something, isn’t she? Cherchez la femme with a vengeance. If she’d had the opportunity, you know, she might have done it herself.”

“That, no!”

“You’d be surprised. I once knew a woman like that. Put a couple of husbands out of the way without a blink of her innocent blue eyes. Brokenhearted each time, too. The jury would have acquitted her if they’d had half a chance—which they hadn’t, the evidence being practically cast iron.”

“Well, my friend, let us not argue. What I make so bold as to ask is a few reliable details on the facts. What a newspaper prints is news—but not always truth!”

“They have to enjoy themselves. What do you want?”

“Time of death as near as can be.”

“Which can’t be very near because the body wasn’t examined until the following morning. Death is estimated to have taken place from thirteen to ten hours previously. That is, between seven and ten o’clock the night before . . . He was stabbed through the jugular vein—Death must have been a matter of moments.”

“And the weapon?”

“A kind of Italian stiletto—quite small—razor sharp. Nobody has ever seen it before, or knows where it comes from. But we shall know—in the end . . . It’s a matter of time and patience.”

“It could not have been picked up in the course of a quarrel.”

“No. The valet says no such thing was in the flat.”

“What interests me is the telegram,” said Poirot. “The telegram that called Arnold Clayton away to Scotland . . . Was that summons genuine?”

“No. There was no hitch or trouble up there. The land transfer, or whatever it was, was proceeding normally.”

“Then who sent that telegram—I am presuming there was a telegram?”

“There must have been . . . Not that we’d necessarily believe Mrs. Clayton. But Clayton told the valet he was called by wire to Scotland. And he also told Commander McLaren.”

“What time did he see Commander McLaren?”

“They had a snack together at their club—Combined Services—that was at about a quarter past seven. Then Clayton took a taxi to Rich’s flat, arriving there just before eight o’clock. After that—” Miller spread his hands out.

“Anybody notice anything at all odd about Rich’s manner that evening?”

“Oh well, you know what people are. Once a thing has happened, people think they noticed a lot of things I bet they never saw at all. Mrs. Spence, now, she says he was distrait all the evening. Didn’t always answer to the point. As though he had ‘something on his mind.’ I bet he had, too, if he had a body in the chest! Wondering how the hell to get rid of it!”

“Why didn’t he get rid of it?”

“Beats me. Lost his nerve, perhaps. But it was madness to leave it until next day. He had the best chance he’d ever have that night. There’s no night porter on. He could have got his car round—packed the body in the boot—it’s a big boot—driven out in the country and parked it somewhere. He might have been seen getting the body into the car, but the flats are in a side street and there’s a courtyard you drive a car through. At, say, three in the morning, he had a reasonable chance. And what does he do? Goes to bed, sleeps late the next morning and wakes up to find the police in the flat!”

“He went to bed and slept well as an innocent man might do.”

“Have it that way if you like. But do you really believe that yourself?”

“I shall have to leave that question until I have seen the man myself.”

“Think you know an innocent man when you see one? It’s not so easy as that.”

“I know it is not easy—and I should not attempt to say I could do it. What I want to make up my mind about is whether the man is as stupid as he seems to be.”

Poirot had no intention of seeing Charles Rich until he had seen everyone else.

He started with Commander McLaren.

McLaren was a tall, swarthy, uncommunicative man. He had a rugged but pleasant face. He was a shy man and not easy to talk to. But Poirot persevered.

Fingering Margharita’s note, McLaren said almost reluctantly:

“Well, if Margharita wants me to tell you all I can, of course I’ll do so. Don’t know what there is to tell, though. You’ve heard it all already. But whatever Margharita wants—I’ve always done what she wanted—ever since she was sixteen. She’s got a way with her, you know.”

“I know,” said Poirot. He went on: “First I should like you to answer a question quite frankly. Do you think Major Rich is guilty?”

“Yes, I do. I wouldn’t say so to Margharita if she wants to think he’s innocent, but I simply can’t see it any other way. Hang it all, the fellow’s got to be guilty.”

“Was there bad feeling between him and Mr. Clayton?”

“Not in the least. Arnold and Charles were the best of friends. That’s what makes the whole thing so extraordinary.”

“Perhaps Major Rich’s friendship with Mrs. Clayton—”

He was interrupted.

“Faugh! All that stuff. All the papers slyly hinting at it . . . Damned innuendoes! Mrs. Clayton and Rich were good friends and that’s all! Margharita’s got lots of friends. I’m her friend. Been one for years. And nothing the whole world mightn’t know about it. Same with Charles and Margharita.”

“You do not then consider that they were having an affair together?”

“Certainly NOT!” McLaren was wrathful. “Don’t go listening to that hell cat Spence woman. She’d say anything.”

“But perhaps Mr. Clayton suspected there might be something between his wife and Major Rich.”

“You can take it from me he did nothing of the sort! I’d have known if so. Arnold and I were very close.”

“What sort of man was he? You, if anyone, should know.”

“Well, Arnold was a quiet sort of chap. But he was clever—quite brilliant, I believe. What they call a first-class financial brain. He was quite high up in the Treasury, you know.”

“So I have heard.”

“He read a good deal. And he collected stamps. And he was extremely fond of music. He didn’t dance, or care much for going out.”

“Was it, do you think, a happy marriage?”

Commander McLaren’s answer did not come quickly. He seemed to be puzzling it out.

“That sort of thing’s very hard to say . . . Yes, I think they were happy. He was devoted to her in his quiet way. I’m sure she was fond of him. They weren’t likely to split up, if that’s what you’re thinking. They hadn’t, perhaps, a lot in common.”

Poirot nodded. It was as much as he was likely to get. He said: “Now tell me about that last evening. Mr. Clayton dined with you at the club. What did he say?”

“Told me he’d got to go to Scotland. Seemed vexed about it. We didn’t have dinner, by the way. No time. Just sandwiches and a drink. For him, that is. I only had the drink. I was going out to a buffet supper, remember.”

“Mr. Clayton mentioned a telegram?”

“Yes.”

“He did not actually show you the telegram?”

“No.”

“Did he say he was going to call on Rich?”

“Not definitely. In fact he said he doubted if he’d have time. He said ‘Margharita can explain or you can.’ And then he said: ‘See she gets home all right, won’t you?’ Then he went off. It was all quite natural and easy.”

“He had no suspicion at all that the telegram wasn’t genuine?”

“Wasn’t it?” Commander McLaren looked startled.

“Apparently not.”

“How very odd . . .” Commander McLaren went into a kind of coma, emerging suddenly to say:

“But that really is odd. I mean, what’s the point? Why should anybody want him to go to Scotland?”

“It is a question that needs answering, certainly.”

Hercule Poirot left, leaving the commander apparently still puzzling on the matter.

The Spences lived in a minute house in Chelsea.

Linda Spence received Poirot with the utmost delight.

“Do tell me,” she said. “Tell me all about Margharita! Where is she?”

“That I am not at liberty to state, Madame.”

“She has hidden herself well! Margharita is very clever at that sort of thing. But she’ll be called to give evidence at the trial, I suppose? She can’t wiggle herself out of that.”

Poirot looked at her appraisingly. He decided grudgingly that she was attractive in the modern style (which at that moment resembled an underfed orphan child). It was not a type he admired. The artistically disordered hair fluffed out round her head, a pair of shrewd eyes watched him from a slightly dirty face devoid of make-up save for a vivid cerise mouth. She wore an enormous pale-yellow sweater hanging almost to her knees, and tight black trousers.

“What’s your part in all this?” demanded Mrs. Spence. “Get the boyfriend out of it somehow? Is that it? What a hope!”

“You think then, that he is guilty?”

“Of course. Who else?”

That, Poirot thought, was very much the question. He parried it by asking another question.

“What did Major Rich seem to you like on that fatal evening? As usual? Or not as usual?”

Linda Spence screwed up her eyes judicially.

“No, he wasn’t himself. He was—different.”

“How, different?”

“Well, surely, if you’ve just stabbed a man in cold blood—”

“But you were not aware at the time that he had just stabbed a man in cold blood, were you?”

“No, of course not.”

“So how did you account for his being ‘different’. In what way?”

“Well—distrait. Oh, I don’t know. But thinking it over afterwards I decided that there had definitely been something.”

Poirot sighed.

“Who arrived first?”

“We did, Jim and I. And then Jock. And finally Margharita.”

“When was Mr. Clayton’s departure for Scotland first mentioned?”

“When Margharita came. She said to Charles: “Arnold’s terribly sorry. He’s had to rush off to Edinburgh by the night train.” And Charles said: ‘Oh, that’s too bad.’ And then Jock said: ‘Sorry. Thought you already knew.” And then we had drinks.”

“Major Rich at no time mentioned seeing Mr. Clayton that evening? He said nothing of his having called in on his way to the station?”

“Not that I heard.”

“It was strange, was it not,” said Poirot, “about that telegram?”

“What was strange?”

“It was a fake. Nobody in Edinburgh knows anything about it.”

“So that’s it. I wondered at the time.”

“You have an idea about the telegram?”

“I should say it rather leaps to the eye.”

“How do you mean exactly?”

“My dear man,” said Linda. “Don’t play the innocent. Unknown hoaxer gets the husband out of the way! For that night, at all events, the coast is clear.”

“You mean that Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton planned to spend the night together.”

“You have heard of such things, haven’t you?” Linda looked amused.

“And the telegram was sent by one or the other of them?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were having an affair together you think?”

“Let’s say I shouldn’t be surprised if they were. I don’t know it for a fact.”

“Did Mr. Clayton suspect?”

“Arnold was an extraordinary person. He was all bottled up, if you know what I mean. I think he did know. But he was the kind of man who would never have let on. Anyone would think he was a dry stick with no feelings at all. But I’m pretty sure he wasn’t like that underneath. The queer thing is that I should have been much less surprised if Arnold had stabbed Charles than the other way about. I’ve an idea Arnold was really an insanely jealous person.”

“That is interesting.”

“Though it’s more likely, really, that he’d have done in Margharita. Othello—that sort of thing. Margharita, you know, had an extraordinary effect on men.”

“She is a good-looking woman,” said Poirot with judicious understatement.

“It was more than that. She had something. She would get men all her up—mad about her—and turn round and look at them with a sort of wide-eyed surprise that drove them barmy.”

“Une femme fatale.”

“That’s probably the foreign name for it.”

“You know her well?”

“My dear, she’s one of my best friends—and I wouldn’t trust her an inch!”

“Ah,” said Poirot and shifted the subject to Commander McLaren.

“Jock? Old faithful? He’s a pet. Born to be the friend of the family. He and Arnold were really close friends. I think Arnold unbent to him more than to anyone else. And of course he was Margharita’s tame cat. He’d been devoted to her for years.”

“And was Mr. Clayton jealous of him, too?”

“Jealous of Jock? What an idea! Margharita’s genuinely fond of Jock, but she’s never given him a thought of that kind. I don’t think, really, that one ever would . . . I don’t know why . . . It seems a shame. He’s so nice.”

Poirot switched to consideration of the valet. But beyond saying vaguely that he mixed a very good side car, Linda Spence seemed to have no ideas about Burgess, and indeed seemed barely to have noticed him.

But she was quite quick in the uptake.

“You’re thinking, I suppose, that he could have killed Arnold just as easily as Charles could? It seems to me madly unlikely.”

“That remark depresses me, Madame. But then, it seems to me (though you will probably not agree) that it is madly unlikely—not that Major Rich should kill Arnold Clayton—but that he should kill him in just the way he did.”

“Stiletto stuff? Yes, definitely not in character. More likely the blunt instrument. Or he might have strangled him, perhaps?”

Poirot sighed.

“We are back at Othello. Yes, Othello . . . you have given me there a little idea. . . .”

“Have I? What—” There was the sound of a latchkey and an opening door. “Oh, here’s Jeremy. Do you want to talk to him, too?”

Jeremy Spence was a pleasant-looking man of thirty odd, well groomed, and almost ostentatiously discreet. Mrs. Spence said that she had better go and have a look at a casserole in the kitchen and went off, leaving the two men together.

Jeremy Spence displayed none of the engaging candour of his wife. He was clearly disliking very much being mixed up in the case at all, and his remarks were carefully noninformative. They had known the Claytons some time, Rich not so well. Had seemed a pleasant fellow. As far as he could remember, Rich had seemed absolutely as usual on the evening in question. Clayton and Rich always seemed on good terms. The whole thing seemed quite unaccountable.

Throughout the conversation Jeremy Spence was making it clear that he expected Poirot to take his departure. He was civil, but only just so.

“I am afraid,” said Poirot, “that you do not like these questions?”

“Well, we’ve had quite a session of this with the police. I rather feel that’s enough. We’ve told all we know or saw. Now—I’d like to forget it.”

“You have my sympathy. It is most unpleasant to be mixed up in this. To be asked not only what you know or what you saw but perhaps even what you think?”

“Best not to think.”

“But can one avoid it? Do you think, for instance, that Mrs. Clayton was in it, too. Did she plan the death of her husband with Rich?”

“Good lord, no.” Spence sounded shocked and dismayed. “I’d no idea that there was any question of such a thing?”

“Has your wife not suggested such a possibility?”

“Oh Linda! You know what women are—always got their knife into each other. Margharita never gets much of a show from her own sex—a darned sight too attractive. But surely this theory about Rich and Margharita planning murder—that’s fantastic!”

“Such things have been known. The weapon, for instance. It is the kind of weapon a woman might possess, rather than a man.”

“Do you mean the police have traced it to her—They can’t have! I mean—”

“I know nothing,” said Poirot truthfully, and escaped hastily.

From the consternation on Spence’s face, he judged that he had left that gentleman something to think about!

“You will forgive my saying, M. Poirot, that I cannot see how you can be of assistance to me in any way.”

Poirot did not answer. He was looking thoughtfully at the man who had been charged with the murder of his friend, Arnold Clayton.

He was looking at the firm jaw, the narrow head. A lean brown man, athletic and sinewy. Something of the greyhound about him. A man whose face gave nothing away, and who was receiving his visitor with a marked lack of cordiality.

“I quite understand that Mrs. Clayton sent you to see me with the best intentions. But quite frankly, I think she was unwise. Unwise both for her own sake and mine.”

“You mean?”

Rich gave a nervous glance over his shoulder. But the attendant warder was the regulation distance away. Rich lowered his voice.

“They’ve got to find a motive for this ridiculous accusation. They’ll try to bring that there was an—association between Mrs. Clayton and myself. That, as I know Mrs. Clayton will have told you, is quite untrue. We are friends, nothing more. But surely it is advisable that she should make no move on my behalf?”

Hercule Poirot ignored the point. Instead he picked out a word.

“You said this ‘ridiculous’ accusation. But it is not that, you know.”

"I did not kill Arnold Clayton."

"Call it then a false accusation. Say the accusation is not true. But it is not ridiculous. On the contrary, it is highly plausible. You must know that very well."

"I can only tell you that to me it seems fantastic."

"Saying that will be of very little use to you. We must think of something more useful than that."

"I am represented by solicitors. They have briefed, I understand, eminent counsel to appear for my defence. I cannot accept your use of the word 'we.' "

Unexpectedly Poirot smiled.

"Ah," he said, in his most foreign manner, "that is the flea in the ear you give me. Very well. I go. I wanted to see you. I have seen you. Already I have looked up your career. You passed high up into Sandhurst. You passed into the Staff College. And so on and so on. I have made my own judgement of you today. You are not a stupid man."

"And what has all that got to do with it?"

"Everything! It is impossible that a man of your ability should commit a murder in the way this one was committed. Very well. You are innocent. Tell me now about your manservant Burgess."

"Burgess?"

"Yes. If you didn't kill Clayton, Burgess must have done so. The conclusion seems inescapable. But why? There must be a 'why'? You are the only person who knows Burgess well enough to make a guess at it. Why, Major Rich, why?"

"I can't imagine. I simply can't see it. Oh, I've followed the same line of reasoning as you have. Yes, Burgess had opportunity—the only person who had except myself. The trouble is, I just can’t believe it. Burgess is not the sort of man you can imagine murdering anybody.”

“What do your legal advisers think?”

Rich’s lips set in a grim line.

“My legal advisers spend their time asking me, in a persuasive way, if it isn’t true that I have suffered all my life from blackouts when I don’t really know what I am doing!”

“As bad as that,” said Poirot. “Well, perhaps we shall find it is Burgess who is subject to blackouts. It is always an idea. The weapon now. They showed it to you and asked you if it was yours?”

“It was not mine. I had never seen it before.”

“It was not yours, no. But are you quite sure you had never seen it before?”

“No.” Was there a faint hesitation. “It’s a kind of ornamental toy—really—One sees things like that lying about in people’s houses.”

“In a woman’s drawing room, perhaps. Perhaps in Mrs. Clayton’s drawing room?”

“Certainly NOT!”

The last word came out loudly and the warder looked up.

“Très bien. Certainly not—and there is no need to shout. But somewhere, at some time, you have seen something very like it. Eh? I am right?”

“I do not think so . . . In some curio shop . . . perhaps.”

“Ah, very likely.” Poirot rose. “I take my leave.”

“And now,” said Hercule Poirot, “for Burgess. Yes, at long last, for Burgess.”

He had learnt something about the people in the case, from themselves and from each other. But nobody had given him any knowledge of Burgess. No clue, no hint, of what kind of a man he was.

When he saw Burgess he realized why.

The valet was waiting for him at Major Rich's flat, apprised of his arrival by a telephone call from Commander McLaren.

"I am M. Hercule Poirot."

"Yes, sir, I was expecting you."

Burgess held back the door with a deferential hand and Poirot entered. A small square entrance hall, a door on the left, open, leading into the sitting room. Burgess relieved Poirot of his hat and coat and followed him into the sitting room.

"Ah," said Poirot looking round. "It was here, then, that it happened?"

"Yes, sir."

A quiet fellow, Burgess, white-faced, a little weedy. Awkward shoulders and elbows. A flat voice with a provincial accent that Poirot did not know. From the east coast, perhaps. Rather a nervous man, perhaps—but otherwise no definite characteristics. It was hard to associate him with positive action of any kind. Could one postulate a negative killer?

He had those pale blue, rather shifty eyes, that unobservant people often equate with dishonesty. Yet a liar can look you in the face with a bold and confident eye.

"What is happening to the flat?" Poirot inquired.

"I'm still looking after it, sir. Major Rich arranged for my pay and to keep it nice until—until—"

The eyes shifted uncomfortably.

“Until—” agreed Poirot.

He added in a matter of fact manner. “I should say that Major Rich will almost certainly be committed for trial. The case will come up probably within three months.”

Burgess shook his head, not in denial, simply in perplexity.

“It really doesn’t seem possible,” he said.

“That Major Rich should be a murderer?”

“The whole thing. That chest—”

His eyes went across the room.

“Ah, so that is the famous chest?”

It was a mammoth piece of furniture of very dark polished wood, studded with brass, with a great brass hasp and antique lock.

“A handsome affair.” Poirot went over to it.

It stood against the wall near the window, next to a modern cabinet for holding records. On the other side of it was a door, half ajar. The door was partly masked by a big painted leather screen.

“That leads into Major Rich’s bedroom,” said Burgess.

Poirot nodded. His eyes travelled to the other side of the room. There were two stereophonic record players, each on a low table, trailing cords of snakelike flex. There were easy chairs—a big table. On the walls were a set of Japanese prints. It was a handsome room, comfortable, but not luxurious.

He looked back at William Burgess.

“The discovery,” he said kindly, “must have been a great shock to you.”

“Oh it was, sir. I’ll never forget it.” The valet rushed into speech. Words poured from him. He felt, perhaps, that by telling the story often enough, he might at last expunge it from his mind.

“I’d gone round the room, sir. Clearing up. Glasses and so on. I’d just stooped to pick up a couple of olives off the floor—and I saw it—on the rug, a rusty dark stain. No, the rug’s gone now. To the cleaners. The police had done with it. Whatever’s that? I thought. Saying to myself, almost in joke like: ‘Really it might be blood! But where does it come from? What got spilt?’ And then I saw it was from the chest—down the side, here, where there’s a crack. And I said, still not thinking anything, ‘Well whatever—?’ And I lifted up the lid like this’ (he suited the action to the word) “and there it was—the body of a man lying on his side doubled up—like he might be asleep. And that nasty foreign knife or dagger thing sticking up out of his neck. I’ll never forget it—never! Not as long as I live! The shock—not expecting it, you understand. . . .”

He breathed deeply.

“I let the lid fall and I ran out of the flat and down to the street. Looking for a policeman—and lucky, I found one—just round the corner.”

Poirot regarded him reflectively. The performance, if it was a performance, was very good. He began to be afraid that it was not a performance—that it was just how things had happened.

“You did not think of awakening first Major Rich?” he asked.

“It never occurred to me, sir. What with the shock. I—I just wanted to get out of here—” he swallowed “and—and get help.”

Poirot nodded.

“Did you realize that it was Mr. Clayton?” he asked.

“I ought to have, sir, but you know, I don’t believe I did. Of course, as soon as I got back with the police officer, I said ‘Why, it’s Mr. Clayton!’ And he says ‘Who’s Mr. Clayton?’ And I says: ‘He was here last night.’ ”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “last night . . . Do you remember exactly when it was Mr. Clayton arrived here.”

“Not to the minute. But as near as not a quarter to eight, I’d say. . . .”

“You knew him well?”

“He and Mrs. Clayton had been here quite frequently during the year and a half I’ve been employed here.”

“Did he seem quite as usual?”

“I think so. A little out of breath—but I took it he’d been hurrying. He was catching a train, or so he said.”

“He had a bag with him, I suppose, as he was going to Scotland?”

“No, sir. I imagine he was keeping a taxi down below.”

“Was he disappointed to find that Major Rich was out?”

“Not to notice. Just said he’d scribble a note. He came in here and went over to the desk and I went back to the kitchen. I was a little behindhand with the anchovy eggs. The kitchen’s at the end of the passage and you don’t hear very well from there. I didn’t hear him go out or the master come in—but then I wouldn’t expect to.”

“And the next thing?”

“Major Rich called me. He was standing in the door here. He said he’d forgotten Mrs. Spence’s Turkish cigarettes. I was to hurry out and get them. So I did. I brought them back and put them on the table in here. Of course I took it that Mr. Clayton had left by then to get his train.”

“And nobody else came to the flat during the time Major Rich was out, and you were in the kitchen?”

“No, sir—no one.”

“Can you be sure of that?”

“How could anyone, sir? They’d have had to ring the bell.”

Poirot shook his head. How could anyone? The Spences and McLaren and also Mrs. Clayton could, he already knew, account for every minute of their time. McLaren had been with acquaintances at the club, the Spences had had a couple of friends in for a drink before starting. Margharita Clayton had talked to a friend on the telephone at just that period. Not that he thought of any of them as possibilities. There would have been better ways of killing Arnold Clayton than following him to a flat with a manservant there and the host returning any moment. No, he had had a last minute hope of a “mysterious stranger!” Someone out of Clayton’s apparently impeccable past, recognizing him in the street, following him here. Attacking him with the stiletto, thrusting the body into the chest, and fleeing. Pure melodrama, unrelated to reason or to probabilities! In tune with romantic historical fictions—matching the Spanish chest.

He went back across the room to the chest. He raised the lid. It came up easily, noiselessly.

In a faint voice, Burgess said: “It’s been scrubbed out, sir, I saw to that.”

Poirot bent over it. With a faint exclamation he bent lower. He explored with his fingers.

“These holes—at the back and one side—they look—they feel, as though they had been made quite recently.”

“Holes, sir?” The valet bent to see. “I really couldn’t say. I’ve never noticed them particularly.”

“They are not very obvious. But they are there. What is their purpose, would you say?”

“I really wouldn’t know, sir. Some animal, perhaps—I mean a beetle, something of that kind. Something that gnaws wood?”

“Some animal?” said Poirot. “I wonder.”

He stepped back across the room.

“When you came in here with the cigarettes, was there anything at all about this room that looked different? Anything at all? Chairs moved, table, something of that kind?”

“It’s odd your saying that, sir . . . Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draught from the bedroom door, it was moved over a bit more to the left.”

“Like this?” Poirot moved swiftly.

“A little more still . . . That’s right.”

The screen had already masked about half of the chest. The way it was now arranged, it almost hid the chest altogether.

“Why did you think it had been moved?”

“I didn’t think, sir.”

(Another Miss Lemon!)

Burgess added doubtfully:

“I suppose it leaves the way into the bedroom clearer—if the ladies wanted to leave their wraps.”

“Perhaps. But there might be another reason.” Burgess looked inquiring. “The screen hides the chest now, and it hides the rug below the chest. If Major Rich stabbed Mr. Clayton, blood would presently start dripping through the cracks at the base of the chest. Someone might notice—as you noticed the next morning. So—the screen was moved.”

“I never thought of that, sir.”

“What are the lights like here, strong or dim?”

"I'll show you, sir."

Quickly, the valet drew the curtains and switched on a couple of lamps. They gave a soft mellow light, hardly strong enough even to read by. Poirot glanced up at a ceiling light.

"That wasn't on, sir. It's very little used."

Poirot looked round in the soft glow.

The valet said:

"I don't believe you'd see any bloodstains, sir, it's too dim."

"I think you are right. So, then, why was the screen moved?"

Burgess shivered.

"It's awful to think of—a nice gentleman like Major Rich doing a thing like that."

"You've no doubt that he did do it? Why did he do it, Burgess?"

"Well, he'd been through the war, of course. He might have had a head wound, mightn't he? They do say as sometimes it all flares up years afterwards. They suddenly go all queer and don't know what they're doing. And they say as often as not, it's their nearest and dearest as they goes for. Do you think it could have been like that?"

Poirot gazed at him. He sighed. He turned away.

"No," he said, "it was not like that."

With the air of a conjuror, a piece of crisp paper was insinuated into Burgess's hand.

"Oh thank you, sir, but really I don't—"

"You have helped me," said Poirot. "By showing me this room. By showing me what is in the room. By showing me what took place that evening. The impossible is never impossible! Remember that. I said that there were only two possibilities—I was wrong. There is a third possibility." He looked round the room again and gave a little shiver. "Pull back the curtains. Let in the light and the air. This room needs it. It needs cleansing. It will be a long time, I think, before it is purified from what afflicts it—the lingering memory of hate."

Burgess, his mouth open, handed Poirot his hat and coat. He seemed bewildered. Poirot, who enjoyed making incomprehensible statements, went down to the street with a brisk step.

When Poirot got home, he made a telephone call to Inspector Miller.

"What happened to Clayton's bag? His wife said he had packed one."

"It was at the club. He left it with the porter. Then he must have forgotten it and gone off without it."

"What was in it?"

"What you'd expect. Pyjamas, extra shirt, washing things."

"Very thorough."

"What did you expect would be in it?"

Poirot ignored that question. He said:

"About the stiletto. I suggest that you get hold of whatever cleaning woman attends Mrs. Spence's house. Find out if she ever saw anything like it lying about there."

"Mrs. Spence?" Miller whistled. "Is that the way your mind is working? The Spences were shown the stiletto. They didn't recognize it."

"Ask them again."

"Do you mean—"

"And then let me know what they say—"

"I can't imagine what you think you have got hold of!"

"Read Othello, Miller. Consider the characters in Othello. We've missed out one of them."

He rang off. Next he dialled Lady Chatterton. The number was engaged.

He tried again a little later. Still no success. He called for George, his valet, and instructed him to continue ringing the number until he got a reply. Lady Chatterton, he knew, was an incorrigible telephoner.

He sat down in a chair, carefully eased off his patent leather shoes, stretched his toes and leaned back.

"I am old," said Hercule Poirot. "I tire easily . . ." He brightened. "But the cells—they still function. Slowly—but they function . . . Othello, yes. Who was it said that to me? Ah yes, Mrs. Spence. The bag . . . The screen . . . The body, lying there like a man asleep. A clever murder. Premeditated, planned . . . I think, enjoyed!. . . ."

George announced to him that Lady Chatterton was on the line.

"Hercule Poirot here, Madame. May I speak to your guest?"

"Why, of course! Oh M. Poirot, have you done something wonderful?"

"Not yet," said Poirot. "But possibly, it marches."

Presently Margharita's voice—quiet, gentle.

"Madame, when I asked you if you noticed anything out of place that evening at the party, you frowned, as though you remembered something—and then it escaped you. Would it have been the position of the screen that night?"

"The screen? Why, of course, yes. It was not quite in its usual place."

"Did you dance that night?"

"Part of the time."

"Who did you dance with mostly?"

"Jeremy Spence. He's a wonderful dancer. Charles is good but not spectacular. He and Linda danced and now and then we changed. Jock McLaren doesn't dance. He got out the records and sorted them and arranged what we'd have."

"You had serious music later?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Then Margharita said:

"M. Poirot, what is—all this? Have you—is there—hope?"

"Do you ever know, Madame, what the people around you are feeling?"

Her voice, faintly surprised said:

"I—suppose so."

"I suppose not. I think you have no idea. I think that is the tragedy of your life. But the tragedy is for other people—not for you.

"Someone today mentioned to me Othello. I asked you if your husband was jealous, and you said you thought he must be. But you said it quite lightly. You said it as Desdemona might have said it not realizing danger. She, too, recognized jealousy, but she did not understand it, because she herself never had, and never could, experience jealousy. She was, I think, quite unaware of the force of acute physical passion. She loved her husband with the romantic fervour of hero worship, she loved her friend Cassio, quite innocently, as a close companion . . . I think that because of her immunity to passion, she herself drove men mad . . . Am I making sense to you, Madame?”

There was a pause—and then Margharita’s voice answered. Cool, sweet, a little bewildered:

“I don’t—I don’t really understand what you are saying. . . .”

Poirot sighed. He spoke in matter of fact tones.

“This evening,” he said, “I pay you a visit.”

Inspector Miller was not an easy man to persuade. But equally Hercule Poirot was not an easy man to shake off until he had got his way. Inspector Miller grumbled, but capitulated.

“—though what Lady Chatterton’s got to do with this—”

“Nothing, really. She has provided asylum for a friend, that is all.”

“About those Spences—how did you know?”

“That stiletto came from there? It was a mere guess. Something Jeremy Spence said gave me the idea. I suggested that the stiletto belonged to Margharita Clayton. He showed that he knew positively that it did not.” He paused. “What did they say?” he asked with some curiosity.

“Admitted that it was very like a toy dagger they’d once had. But it had been mislaid some weeks ago, and they had really forgotten about it. I suppose Rich pinched it from there.”

“A man who likes to play safe, Mr. Jeremy Spence,” said Hercule Poirot. He muttered to himself: “Some weeks ago . . . Oh yes, the planning began a long time ago.”

“Eh, what’s that?”

“We arrive,” said Poirot. The taxi drew up at Lady Chatterton’s house in Cheriton Street: Poirot paid the fare.

Margharita Clayton was waiting for them in the room upstairs. Her face hardened when she saw Miller.

“I didn’t know—”

“You did not know who the friend was I proposed to bring?”

“Inspector Miller is not a friend of mine.”

“That rather depends on whether you want to see justice done or not, Mrs. Clayton. Your husband was murdered—”

“And now we have to talk of who killed him,” said Poirot quickly. “May we sit down, Madame?”

Slowly Margharita sat down in a high-backed chair facing the two men.

“I ask,” said Poirot, addressing both his hearers, “to listen to me patiently. I think I now know what happened on that fatal evening at Major Rich’s flat . . . We started, all of us, by an assumption that was not true—the assumption that there were only two persons who had the opportunity of putting the body in the chest—that is to say, Major Rich, or William Burgess. But we were wrong—there was a third person at the flat that evening who had an equally good opportunity to do so.”

“And who was that?” demanded Miller sceptically. “The lift boy?”

“No. Arnold Clayton.”

“What? Concealed his own dead body? You’re crazy.”

“Naturally not a dead body—a live one. In simple terms, he hid himself in the chest. A thing that has often been done throughout the course of history. The dead bride in the Misletoe Bough, Iachimo with designs on the virtue of Imogen and so on. I thought of it as soon as I saw that there had been holes bored in the chest quite recently. Why? They were made so that there might be a sufficiency of air in the chest. Why was the screen moved from its usual position that evening? So as to hide the chest from the people in the room. So that the hidden man could lift the lid from time to time and relieve his cramp, and hear better what went on.”

“But why,” demanded Margharita wide-eyed with astonishment. “Why should Arnold want to hide in the chest?”

“Is it you who ask that, Madame? Your husband was a jealous man. He was also an inarticulate man. ‘Bottled up,’ as your friend Mrs. Spence put it. His jealousy mounted. It tortured him! Were you or were you not Rich’s mistress? He did not know! He had to know! So—a ‘telegram from Scotland’, the telegram that was never sent and that no one ever saw! The overnight bag is packed and conveniently forgotten at the club. He goes to the flat at a time when he has probably ascertained Rich will be out—He tells the valet he will write a note. As soon as he is left alone, he bores the holes in the chest, moves the screen, and climbs inside the chest. Tonight he will know the truth. Perhaps his wife will stay behind the others, perhaps she will go, but come back again. That night the desperate, jealousy-racked man will know. . . .”

“You’re not saying he stabbed himself?” Miller’s voice was incredulous. “Nonsense!”

“Oh no, someone else stabbed him. Somebody who knew he was there. It was murder all right. Carefully planned, long premeditated, murder. Think of the other characters in Othello. It is Iago we should have remembered. Subtle poisoning of Arnold Clayton’s mind; hints, suspicions. Honest Iago, the faithful friend, the man you always believe! Arnold Clayton believed him. Arnold Clayton let his jealousy be played upon, be roused to fever pitch. Was the plan of hiding in the chest Arnold’s own idea? He may have thought it was—probably he did think so! And so the scene is set. The stiletto, quietly abstracted some weeks earlier, is ready. The evening comes. The lights are low, the gramophone is playing, two couples dance, the odd man out is busy at the record cabinet, close to the Spanish chest and its masking screen. To slip behind the screen, lift the lid and strike—Audacious, but quite easy!”

“Clayton would have cried out!”

"Not if he were drugged," said Poirot. "According to the valet, the body was 'lying like a man asleep.' Clayton was asleep, drugged by the only man who could have drugged him, the man he had had a drink with at the club."

"Jock?" Margharita's voice rose high in childlike surprise. "Jock? Not dear old Jock. Why, I've known Jock all my life! Why on earth should Jock . . . ?"

Poirot turned on her.

"Why did two Italians fight a duel? Why did a young man shoot himself? Jock McLaren is an inarticulate man. He has resigned himself, perhaps, to being the faithful friend to you and your husband, but then comes Major Rich as well. It is too much! In the darkness of hate and desire, he plans what is well nigh the perfect murder—a double murder, for Rich is almost certain to be found guilty of it. And with Rich and your husband both out of the way—he thinks that at last you may turn to him. And perhaps, Madame, you would have done . . . Eh?"

She was staring at him, wide-eyed horror struck. . . .

Almost unconsciously she breathed:

"Perhaps . . . I don't—know. . . ."

Inspector Miller spoke with sudden authority.

"This is all very well, Poirot. It's a theory, nothing more. There's not a shred of evidence. Probably not a word of it is true."

"It is all true."

"But there's no evidence. There's nothing we can act on."

"You are wrong. I think that McLaren, if this is put to him, will admit it. That is, if it is made clear to him that Margharita Clayton knows. . . ."

Poirot paused and added:

“Because, once he knows that, he has lost . . . The perfect murder has been in vain.”

The original version of this story, “The Mystery of the Baghdad Chest,” can be found in the volume While The Light Lasts and Other Stories.

Nine

THE HARLEQUIN TEA SET

“The Harlequin Tea Set” was first published in Winter’s Crimes by Macmillan in 1971. It was the last of Agatha Christie’s short stories to be published, 48 years after “The Affair at the Victory Ball” first appeared in The Sketch in 1923.

Mr. Satterthwaite clucked twice in vexation. Whether right in his assumption or not, he was more and more convinced that cars nowadays broke down far more frequently than they used to do. The only cars he trusted were old friends who had survived the test of time. They had their little idiosyncrasies, but you knew about those, provided for them, fulfilled their wants before the demand became too acute. But new cars! Full of new gadgets, different kinds of windows, an instrument panel newly and differently arranged, handsome in its glistening wood but being unfamiliar, your groping hand hovered uneasily over fog lights, windscreen wipers, the choke, et cetera. All these things with knobs in a place you didn’t expect them. And when your gleaming new purchase failed in performance, your local garage uttered the intensely irritating words: “Teething troubles. Splendid car, sir, these roadsters Super Superbos. All the latest accessories. But bound to have their teething troubles, you know. Ha, ha.” Just as though a car was a baby.

But Mr. Satterthwaite, being now of an advanced age, was strongly of the opinion that a new car ought to be fully adult. Tested, inspected, and its teething troubles already dealt with before it came into its purchaser’s possession.

Mr. Satterthwaite was on his way to pay a weekend visit to friends in the country. His new car had already, on the way from London, given certain symptoms of discomfort, and was now drawn up in a garage waiting for the diagnosis, and how long it would take before he could resume progress towards his destination. His chauffeur was in consultation with a mechanic.

Mr. Satterthwaite sat, striving for patience. He had assured his hosts, on the telephone the night before, that he would be arriving in good time for tea. He would reach Doverton Kingsbourne, he assured them, well before four o'clock.

He clucked again in irritation and tried to turn his thoughts to something pleasant. It was no good sitting here in a state of acute irritation, frequently consulting his wristwatch, clucking once more and giving, he had to realize, a very good imitation of a hen pleased with its prowess in laying an egg.

Yes. Something pleasant. Yes, now hadn't there been something—something he had noticed as they were driving along. Not very long ago. Something that he had seen through the window which had pleased and excited him. But before he had had time to think about it, the car's misbehavior had become more pronounced and a rapid visit to the nearest service station had been inevitable.

What was it that he had seen? On the left—no, on the right. Yes, on the right as they drove slowly through the village street. Next door to a post office. Yes, he was quite sure of that. Next door to a post office because the sight of the post office had given him the idea of telephoning to the Addisons to break the news that he might be slightly late in his arrival. The post office. A village post office. And next to it—yes, definitely, next to it, next door or if not next door the door after. Something that had stirred old memories, and he had wanted—just what was it that he had wanted? Oh dear, it would come to him presently. It was mixed up with a colour. Several colours. Yes, a colour or colours. Or a word. Some definite word that had stirred memories, thoughts, pleasures gone by, excitement, recalling something that had been vivid and alive. Something in which he himself had not only seen but observed. No, he had done more. He had taken part. Taken part in what, and why, and where? All sorts of places. The answer came quickly at the last thought. All sorts of places.

On an island? In Corsica? At Monte Carlo watching the croupier spinning his roulette wheel? A house in the country? All sorts of places. And he had been there, and someone else. Yes, someone else. It all tied up with that. He was getting there at last. If he could just . . . He was interrupted at that moment by the chauffeur coming to the window with the garage mechanic in tow behind him.

“Won’t be long now, sir,” the chauffeur assured Mr. Satterthwaite cheerfully. “Matter of ten minutes or so. Not more.”

“Nothing seriously wrong,” said the mechanic, in a low, hoarse, country voice. “Teething troubles, as you might say.”

Mr. Satterthwaite did not cluck this time. He gnashed his own teeth. A phrase he had often read in books and which in old age he seemed to have got into the habit of doing himself, due, perhaps, to the slight looseness of his upper plate. Really, teething trouble! Toothache. Teeth gnashing. False teeth. One’s whole life centred, he thought, about teeth.

“Doverton Kingsbourne’s only a few miles away,” said the chauffeur, “and they’ve a taxi here. You could go on in that, sir, and I’d bring the car along later as soon as it’s fixed up.”

“No!” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He said the word explosively and both the chauffeur and the mechanic looked startled. Mr. Satterthwaite’s eyes were sparkling. His voice was clear and decisive. Memory had come to him.

“I propose,” he said, “to walk along the road we have just come by. When the car is ready, you will pick me up there. The Harlequin Cafe, I think it is called.”

“It’s not very much of a place, sir,” the mechanic advised.

“That is where I shall be,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, speaking with a kind of regal autocracy.

He walked off briskly. The two men stared after him.

“Don’t know what’s got into him,” said the chauffeur. “Never seen him like that before.”

The village of Kingsbourne Ducis did not live up to the old world grandeur of its name. It was a smallish village consisting of one street. A few houses. Shops that were dotted rather unevenly, sometimes betraying the fact that they were houses which had been turned into shops or that they were shops which now existed as houses without any industrial intentions.

It was not particularly old world or beautiful. It was just simple and rather unobtrusive. Perhaps that was why, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, that a dash of brilliant colour had caught his eye. Ah, here he was at the post office. The post office was a simply functioning post office with a pillar box outside, a display of some newspapers and some postcards, and surely, next to it, yes there was the sign up above. The Harlequin Cafe. A sudden qualm struck Mr. Satterthwaite. Really, he was getting too old. He had fancies. Why should that one word stir his heart? The Harlequin Cafe.

The mechanic at the service station had been quite right. It did not look like a place in which one would really be tempted to have a meal. A snack perhaps. A morning coffee. Then why? But he suddenly realized why. Because the cafe, or perhaps one could better put it as the house that sheltered the cafe, was in two portions. One side of it had small tables with chairs round them arranged ready for patrons who came here to eat. But the other side was a shop. A shop that sold china. It was not an antique shop. It had no little shelves of glass vases or mugs. It was a shop that sold modern goods, and the show window that gave on the street was at the present moment housing every shade of the rainbow. A tea set of largish cups and saucers, each one of a different colour. Blue, red, yellow, green, pink, purple. Really, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, a wonderful show of colour. No wonder it had struck his eye as the car had passed slowly beside the pavement, looking ahead for any sign of a garage or a service station. It was labelled with a large card as “A Harlequin Tea Set.”

It was the word “harlequin” of course which had remained fixed in Mr. Satterthwaite’s mind, although just far enough back in his mind so that it had been difficult to recall it. The gay colours. The harlequin colours. And he had thought, wondered, had the absurd but exciting idea that in some way here was a call to him. To him specially. Here, perhaps, eating a meal or purchasing cups and saucers might be his own old friend, Mr. Harley

Quin. How many years was it since he had last seen Mr. Quin? A large number of years. Was it the day he had seen Mr. Quin walking away from him down a country lane, Lovers' Lane they had called it? He had always expected to see Mr. Quin again, once a year at least. Possibly twice a year. But no. That had not happened.

And so today he had had the wonderful and surprising idea that here, in the village of Kingsbourne Ducis, he might once again find Mr. Harley Quin.

"Absurd of me," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "quite absurd of me. Really, the ideas one has as one gets old!"

He had missed Mr. Quin. Missed something that had been one of the most exciting things in the late years of his life. Someone who might turn up anywhere and who, if he did turn up, was always an announcement that something was going to happen. Something that was going to happen to him. No, that was not quite right. Not to him, but through him. That was the exciting part. Just from the words that Mr. Quin might utter. Words. Things he might show him, ideas would come to Mr. Satterthwaite. He would see things, he would imagine things, he would find out things. He would deal with something that needed to be dealt with. And opposite him would sit Mr. Quin, perhaps smiling approval. Something that Mr. Quin said would start the flow of ideas, the active person would be he himself. He—Mr. Satterthwaite. The man with so many old friends. A man among whose friends had been duchesses, an occasional bishop, people that counted. Especially, he had to admit, people who had counted in the social world. Because, after all, Mr. Satterthwaite had always been a snob. He had liked duchesses, he had liked knowing old families, families who had represented the landed gentry of England for several generations. And he had had, too, an interest in young people not necessarily socially important. Young people who were in trouble, who were in love, who were unhappy, who needed help. Because of Mr. Quin, Mr. Satterthwaite was enabled to give help.

And now, like an idiot, he was looking into an unprepossessing village cafe and a shop for modern china and tea sets and casseroles no doubt.

“All the same,” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself, “I must go in. Now I’ve been foolish enough to walk back here, I must go in just—well, just in case. They’ll be longer, I expect, doing the car than they say. It will be more than ten minutes. Just in case there was anything interesting inside.”

He looked once more at the window full of china. He appreciated suddenly that it was good china. Well made. A good modern product. He looked back into the past, remembering. The Duchess of Leith, he remembered. What a wonderful old lady she had been. How kind she had been to her maid on the occasion of a very rough sea voyage to the island of Corsica. She had ministered to her with the kindliness of a ministering angel and only on the next day had she resumed her autocratic, bullying manner which the domestics of those days had seemed able to stand quite easily without any sign of rebellion.

Maria. Yes, that’s what the Duchess’s name had been. Dear old Maria Leith. Ah well. She had died some years ago. But she had had a harlequin breakfast set, he remembered. Yes. Big round cups in different colours. Black. Yellow, red and a particularly pernicious shade of puce. Puce, he thought, must have been a favourite colour of hers. She had had a Rockingham tea set, he remembered, in which the predominating colour had been puce decorated with gold.

“Ah,” sighed Mr. Satterthwaite, “those were the days. Well, I suppose I’d better go in. Perhaps order a cup of coffee or something. It will be very full of milk, I expect, and possibly already sweetened. But still, one has to pass the time.”

He went in. The cafe side was practically empty. It was early, Mr. Satterthwaite supposed, for people to want cups of tea. And anyway, very few people did want cups of tea nowadays. Except, that is, occasionally, elderly people in their own homes. There was a young couple in the far window and two women gossiping at a table against the back wall.

“I said to her,” one of them was saying, “I said you can’t do that sort of thing. No, it’s not the sort of thing that I’ll put up with, and I said the same to Henry and he agreed with me.”

It shot through Mr. Satterthwaite’s mind that Henry must have rather a hard life and that no doubt he had found it always wise to agree, whatever the proposition put up to him might be. A most unattractive woman with a most unattractive friend. He turned his attention to the other side of the building, murmuring, “May I just look round?”

There was quite a pleasant woman in charge and she said “Oh yes, sir. We’ve got a good stock at present.”

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at the coloured cups, picked up one or two of them, examined the milk jug, picked up a china zebra and considered it, examined some ashtrays of a fairly pleasing pattern. He heard chairs being pushed back and turning his head, noted that the two middle-aged women still discussing former grievances had paid their bill and were now leaving the shop. As they went out of the door, a tall man in a dark suit came in. He sat down at the table which they had just vacated. His back was to Mr. Satterthwaite, who thought that he had an attractive back. Lean, strong, well-muscled but rather dark and sinister looking because there was very little light in the shop. Mr. Satterthwaite looked back again at the ashtrays. “I might buy an ashtray so as not to cause a disappointment to the shop owner,” he thought. As he did so, the sun came out suddenly.

He had not realized that the shop had looked dim because of the lack of sunshine. The sun must have been under a cloud for some time. It had clouded over, he remembered, at about the time they had got to the service station. But now there was this sudden burst of sunlight. It caught up the colours of the china and through a coloured glass window of somewhat ecclesiastical pattern which must, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, have been left over in the original Victorian house. The sun came through the window and lit up the dingy cafe. In some curious way it lit up the back of the man who had just sat down there. Instead of a dark black silhouette, there was now a festoon of colours. Red and blue and yellow. And suddenly Mr. Satterthwaite realized that he was looking at exactly what he had hoped to find. His intuition had not played him false. He knew who it was who had just come in and sat down there. He knew so well that he had no need to wait until he could look at the face. He turned his back on the china, went back into the cafe, round the corner of the round table and sat down opposite the man who had just come in.

“Mr. Quin,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I knew somehow it was going to be you.”

Mr. Quin smiled.

“You always know so many things,” he said.

“It’s a long time since I’ve seen you,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

“Does time matter?” said Mr. Quin.

“Perhaps not. You may be right. Perhaps not.”

“May I offer you some refreshment?”

“Is there any refreshment to be had?” said Mr. Satterthwaite doubtfully. “I suppose you must have come in for that purpose.”

“One is never quite sure of one’s purpose, is one?” said Mr. Quin.

“I am so pleased to see you again,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I’d almost forgotten, you know. I mean forgotten the way you talk, the things you say. The things you make me think of, the things you make me do.”

“I—make you do? You are so wrong. You have always known yourself just what you wanted to do and why you want to do them and why you know so well that they have to be done.”

“I only feel that when you are here.”

“Oh no,” said Mr. Quin lightly. “I have nothing to do with it. I am just—as I’ve often told you—I am just passing by. That is all.”

“Today you are passing by through Kingsbourne Ducis.”

“And you are not passing by. You are going to a definite place. Am I right?”

"I'm going to see a very old friend. A friend I have not seen for a good many years. He's old now. Somewhat crippled. He has had one stroke. He has recovered from it quite well, but one never knows."

"Does he live by himself?"

"Not now, I am glad to say. His family have come back from abroad, what is left of his family that is. They have been living with him now for some months. I am glad to be able to come and see them again all together. Those, that's to say, that I have seen before, and those that I have not seen."

"You mean children?"

"Children and grandchildren." Mr. Satterthwaite sighed. Just for a moment he was sad that he had had no children and no grandchildren and no great-grandchildren himself. He did not usually regret it at all.

"They have some special Turkish coffee here," said Mr. Quin. "Really good of its kind. Everything else is, as you have guessed, rather unpalatable. But one can always have a cup of Turkish coffee, can one not? Let us have one because I suppose you will soon have to get on with your pilgrimage, or whatever it is."

In the doorway came a small black dog. He came and sat down by the table and looked up at Mr. Quin.

"Your dog?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Yes. Let me introduce you to Hermes." He stroked the black dog's head. "Coffee," he said. "Tell Ali."

The black dog walked from the table through a door at the back of the shop. They heard him give a short, incisive bark. Presently he reappeared and with him came a young man with a very dark complexion, wearing an emerald green pullover.

"Coffee, Ali," said Mr. Quin. "Two coffees."

"Turkish coffee. That's right, isn't it, sir?" He smiled and disappeared.

The dog sat down again.

“Tell me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “tell me where you’ve been and what you have been doing and why I have not seen you for so long.”

“I have just told you that time really means nothing. It is clear in my mind and I think it is clear in yours the occasion when we last met.”

“A very tragic occasion,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “I do not really like to think of it.”

“Because of death? But death is not always a tragedy. I have told you that before.”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “perhaps that death—the one we are both thinking of—was not a tragedy. But all the same . . .”

“But all the same it is life that really matters. You are quite right, of course,” said Mr. Quin. “Quite right. It is life that matters. We do not want someone young, someone who is happy, or could be happy, to die. Neither of us want that, do we. That is the reason why we must always save a life when the command comes.”

“Have you got a command for me?”

“Me—command for you?” Harley Quin’s long, sad face brightened into its peculiarly charming smile. “I have no commands for you, Mr. Satterthwaite. I have never had commands. You yourself know things, see things, know what to do, do them. It has nothing to do with me.”

“Oh yes, it has,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “You’re not going to change my mind on that point. But tell me. Where have you been during what it is too short to call time?”

“Well, I have been here and there. In different countries, different climates, different adventures. But mostly, as usual, just passing by. I think it is more for you to tell me not only what you have been doing but what you are going to do now. More about where you are going. Who you are going to meet. Your friends, what they are like."

"Of course I will tell you. I should enjoy telling you because I have been wondering, thinking you know about these friends I am going to. When you have not seen a family for a long time, when you have not been closely connected with them for many years, it is always a nervous moment when you are going to resume old friendships and old ties."

"You are so right," said Mr. Quin.

The Turkish coffee was brought in little cups of oriental pattern. Ali placed them with a smile and departed. Mr. Satterthwaite sipped approvingly.

"As sweet as love, as black as night and as hot as hell. That is the old Arab phrase, isn't it?"

Harley smiled over his shoulder and nodded.

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I must tell you where I am going through what I am doing hardly, matters. I am going to renew old friendships, to make acquaintance with the younger generation. Tom Addison, as I have said, is a very old friend of mine. We did many things together in our young days. Then, as often happens, life parted us. He was in the Diplomatic Service, went abroad for several foreign posts in turn. Sometimes I went and stayed with him, sometimes I saw him when he was home in England. One of his early posts was in Spain. He married a Spanish girl, a very beautiful, dark girl called Pilar. He loved her very much."

"They had children?"

"Two daughters. A fair-haired baby like her father, called Lily, and a second daughter, Maria, who took after her Spanish mother. I was Lily's godfather. Naturally, I did not see either of the children very often. Two or three times a year either I gave a party for Lily or went to see her at her school. She was a sweet and lovely person. Very devoted to her father and he was very devoted to her. But in between these meetings, these revivals of friendship, we went through some difficult times. You will know about it as well as I do. I and my contemporaries had difficulties in meeting through the war years. Lily married a pilot in the Air Force. A fighter pilot. Until the other day I had even forgotten his name. Simon Gilliatt. Squadron Leader Gilliatt."

"He was killed in the war?"

"No, no. No. He came through safely. After the war he resigned from the Air Force and he and Lily went out to Kenya as so many did. They settled there and they lived very happily. They had a son, a little boy called Roland. Later when he was at school in England I saw him once or twice. The last time, I think, was when he was twelve years old. A nice boy. He had red hair like his father. I've not seen him since so I am looking forward to seeing him today. He is twenty-three—twenty-four now. Time goes on so."

"Is he married?"

"No. Well, not yet."

"Ah. Prospects of marriage?"

"Well, I wondered from something Tom Addison said in his letter. There is a girl cousin. The younger daughter Maria married the local doctor. I never knew her very well. It was rather sad. She died in childbirth. Her little girl was called Inez, a family name chosen by her Spanish grandmother. As it happens I have only seen Inez once since she grew up. A dark, Spanish type very much like her grandmother. But I am boring you with all this."

"No. I want to hear it. It is very interesting to me."

"I wonder why," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked at Mr. Quin with that slight air of suspicion which sometimes came to him.

"You want to know all about this family. Why?"

"So that I can picture it, perhaps, in my mind."

“Well, this house I am going to, Doverton Kingsbourne it is called. It is quite a beautiful old house. Not so spectacular as to invite tourists or to be open to visitors on special days. Just a quiet country house to live in by an Englishman who has served his country and comes back to enjoy a mellow life when the age of retirement comes. Tom was always fond of country life. He enjoyed fishing. He was a good shot and we had very happy days together in his family home of his boyhood. I spent many of my own holidays as a boy at Doverton Kingsbourne. And all through my life I have had that image in my mind. No place like Doverton Kingsbourne. No other house to touch it. Every time I drove near it I would make a detour perhaps and just pass to see the view through a gap in the trees of the long lane that runs in front of the house, glimpses of the river where we used to fish, and of the house itself. And I would remember all the things that Tom and I did together. He has been a man of action. A man who has done things. And I—I have just been an old bachelor.”

“You have been more than that,” said Mr. Quin. “You have been a man who made friends, who had many friends and who has served his friends well.”

“Well, if I can think that. Perhaps you are being too kind.”

“Not at all. You are very good company besides. The stories you can tell, the things you’ve seen, the places you have visited. The curious things that have happened in your life. You could write a whole book on them,” said Mr. Quin.

“I should make you the main character in it if I did.”

“No, you would not,” said Mr. Quin. “I am the one who passes by. That is all. But go on. Tell me more.”

“Well, this is just a family chronicle that I’m telling you. As I say, there were long periods, years of time when I did not see any of them. But they have been always my old friends. I saw Tom and Pilar until the time when Pilar died—she died rather young, unfortunately—Lily, my godchild, Inez, the quiet doctor’s daughter who lives in the village with her father. . . .”

“How old is the daughter?”

“Inez is nineteen or twenty, I think. I shall be glad to make friends with her.”

“So it is on the whole a happy chronicle?”

“Not entirely. Lily, my godchild—the one who went to Kenya with her husband—was killed there in an automobile accident. She was killed outright, leaving behind her a baby of barely a year old, little Roland. Simon, her husband, was quite brokenhearted. They were an unusually happy couple. However, the best thing happened to him that could happen, I suppose. He married again, a young widow who was the widow of a Squadron Leader, a friend of his and who also had been left with a baby the same age. Little Timothy and little Roland had only two or three months in age between them. Simon’s marriage, I believe, has been quite happy though I’ve not seen them, of course, because they continued to live in Kenya. The boys were brought up like brothers. They went to the same school in England and spent their holidays usually in Kenya. I have not seen them, of course, for many years. Well, you know what has happened in Kenya. Some people have managed to stay on. Some people, friends of mine, have gone to Western Australia and have settled again happily there with their families. Some have come home to this country.

“Simon Gilliatt and his wife and their two children left Kenya. It was not the same to them and so they came home and accepted the invitation that has always been given them and renewed every year by old Tom Addison. They have come, his son-in-law, his son-in-law’s second wife and the two children, now grown-up boys, or rather, young men. They have come to live as a family there and they are happy. Tom’s other grandchild, Inez Horton, as I told you, lives in the village with her father, the doctor, and she spends a good deal of her time, I gather, at Doverton Kingsbourne with Tom Addison who is very devoted to his granddaughter. They sound all very happy together there. He has urged me several times to come there and see. Meet them all again. And so I accepted the invitation. Just for a weekend. It will be sad in some ways to see dear old Tom again, somewhat crippled, with perhaps not a very long expectation of life but still cheerful and gay, as far as I can make out. And to see also the old house again. Doverton Kingsbourne. Tied up with all my boyish memories. When one has not lived a very eventful life, when nothing has happened to one personally, and that is true of me, the things that remain with you are the friends, the houses and the things you did as a child and a boy and a young man. There is only one thing that worries me."

"You should not be worried. What is it that worries you?"

"That I might be—disappointed. The house one remembers, one has dreams of, when one might come to see it again it would not be as you remembered it or dreamt it. A new wing would have been added, the garden would have been altered, all sorts of things can have happened to it. It is a very long time, really, since I have been there."

"I think your memories will go with you," said Mr. Quin. "I am glad you are going there."

"I have an idea," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Come with me. Come with me on this visit. You need not fear that you'll not be welcome. Dear Tom Addison is the most hospitable fellow in the world. Any friend of mine would immediately be a friend of his. Come with me. You must. I insist."

Making an impulsive gesture, Mr. Satterthwaite nearly knocked his coffee cup off the table. He caught it just in time.

At that moment the shop door was pushed open, ringing its old-fashioned bell as it did so. A middle-aged woman came in. She was slightly out of breath and looked somewhat hot. She was good-looking still with a head of auburn hair only just touched here and there with grey. She had that clear ivory-coloured skin that so often goes with reddish hair and blue eyes, and she had kept her figure well. The newcomer swept a quick glance round the cafe and turned immediately into the china shop.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you've still got some of the Harlequin cups."

"Yes, Mrs. Gilliatt, we had a new stock arrived in yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so pleased. I really have been very worried. I rushed down here. I took one of the boys' motorbikes. They'd gone off somewhere and I couldn’t find either of them. But I really had to do something. There was an unfortunate accident this morning with some of the cups and we’ve got people arriving for tea and a party this afternoon. So if you can give me a blue and a green and perhaps I’d better have another red one as well in case. That’s the worst of these different coloured cups, isn’t it?”

“Well, I know they do say as it’s a disadvantage and you can’t always replace the particular colour you want.”

Mr. Satterthwaite’s head had gone over his shoulder now and he was looking with some interest at what was going on. Mrs. Gilliatt, the shop woman had said. But of course. He realized it now. This must be—he rose from his seat, half hesitating, and then took a step or two into the shop.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but are you—are you Mrs. Gilliatt from Doverton Kingsbourne?”

“Oh yes. I am Beryl Gilliatt. Do you—I mean . . . ?”

She looked at him, wrinkling her brows a little. An attractive woman, Mr. Satterthwaite thought. Rather a hard face, perhaps, but competent. So this was Simon Gilliatt’s second wife. She hadn’t got the beauty of Lily, but she seemed an attractive woman, pleasant and efficient. Suddenly a smile came to Mrs. Gilliatt’s face.

“I do believe . . . yes, of course. My father-in-law, Tom, has got a photograph of you and you must be the guest we are expecting this afternoon. You must be Mr. Satterthwaite.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “That is who I am. But I shall have to apologize very much for being so much later in arriving than I said. But unfortunately my car has had a breakdown. It’s in the garage now being attended to.”

“Oh, how miserable for you. But what a shame. But it’s not tea time yet. Don’t worry. We’ve put it off anyway. As you probably heard, I ran down to replace a few cups which unfortunately got swept off a table this morning.

Whenever one has anyone to lunch or tea or dinner, something like that always happens.”

“There you are, Mrs. Gilliatt,” said the woman in the shop. “I’ll wrap them up in here. Shall I put them in a box for you?”

“No, if you’ll just put some paper around them and put them in this shopping bag of mine, they’ll be quite all right that way.”

“If you are returning to Doverton Kingsbourne,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “I could give you a lift in my car. It will be arriving from the garage any moment now.”

“That’s very kind of you. I wish really I could accept. But I’ve simply got to take the motorbike back. The boys will be miserable without it. They’re going somewhere this evening.”

“Let me introduce you,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. He turned towards Mr. Quin, who had risen to his feet and was now standing quite near. “This is an old friend of mine, Mr. Harley Quin, whom I have just happened to run across here. I’ve been trying to persuade him to come along to Doverton Kingsbourne. Would it be possible, do you think, for Tom to put up yet another guest for tonight?”

“Oh, I’m sure it would be quite all right,” said Beryl Gilliatt. “I’m sure he’d be delighted to see another friend of yours. Perhaps it’s a friend of his as well.”

“No,” said Mr. Quin, “I’ve never met Mr. Addison though I’ve often heard my friend, Mr. Satterthwaite, speak of him.”

“Well then, do let Mr. Satterthwaite bring you. We should be delighted.”

“I am very sorry,” said Mr. Quin. “Unfortunately, I have another engagement. Indeed—” he looked at his watch “—I must start for it immediately. I am late already, which is what comes of meeting old friends.”

"Here you are, Mrs. Gilliatt," said the saleswoman. "It'll be quite all right, I think, in your bag."

Beryl Gilliatt put the parcel carefully into the bag she was carrying, then said to Mr. Satterthwaite:

"Well, see you presently. Tea isn't until quarter past five, so don't worry. I'm so pleased to meet you at last, having heard so much about you always both from Simon and from my father-in-law."

She said a hurried goodbye to Mr. Quin and went out of the shop.

"Bit of a hurry she's in, isn't she?" said the shop woman, "but she's always like that. Gets through a lot in a day, I'd say."

The sound of the bicycle outside was heard as it revved up.

"Quite a character, isn't she?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"It would seem so," said Mr. Quin.

"And I really can't persuade you?"

"I'm only passing by," said Mr. Quin.

"And when shall I see you again? I wonder now."

"Oh, it will not be very long," said Mr. Quin. "I think you will recognize me when you do see me."

"Have you nothing more—nothing more to tell me? Nothing more to explain?"

"To explain what?"

"To explain why I have met you here."

"You are a man of considerable knowledge," said Mr. Quin. "One word might mean something to you. I think it would and it might come in useful.”

“What word?”

“Daltonism,” said Mr. Quin. He smiled.

“I don’t think—” Mr. Satterthwaite frowned for a moment. “Yes. Yes, I do know only just for the moment I can’t remember. . . .”

“Goodbye for the present,” said Mr. Quin. “Here is your car.”

At that moment the car was indeed pulling up by the post office door. Mr. Satterthwaite went out to it. He was anxious not to waste more time and keep his hosts waiting longer than need be. But he was sad all the same at saying goodbye to his friend.

“There is nothing I can do for you?” he said, and his tone was almost wistful.

“Nothing you can do for me.”

“For someone else?”

“I think so. Very likely.”

“I hope I know what you mean.”

“I have the utmost faith in you,” said Mr. Quin. “You always know things. You are very quick to observe and to know the meaning of things. You have not changed, I assure you.”

His hand rested for a moment on Mr. Satterthwaite’s shoulder, then he walked out and proceeded briskly down the village street in the opposite direction to Doverton Kingsbourne. Mr. Satterthwaite got into his car.

“I hope we shan’t have any more trouble,” he said.

His chauffeur reassured him.

"It's no distance from here, sir. Three or four miles at most, and she's running beautifully now."

He ran the car a little way along the street and turned where the road widened so as to return the way he had just come. He said again, "Only three or four miles."

Mr. Satterthwaite said again, "Daltonism." It still didn't mean anything to him, but yet he felt it should. It was a word he'd heard used before.

"Doverton Kingsbourne," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. He said it very softly under his breath. The two words still meant to him what they had always meant. A place of joyous reunion, a place where he couldn't get there too quickly. A place where he was going to enjoy himself, even though so many of those whom he had known would not be there any longer. But Tom would be there. His old friend, Tom, and he thought again of the grass and the lake and the river and the things they had done together as boys.

Tea was set out upon the lawn. Steps led out from the French windows in the drawing room and down to where a big copper beech at one side and a cedar of Lebanon on the other made the setting for the afternoon scene. There were two painted and carved white tables and various garden chairs. Upright ones with coloured cushions and lounging ones where you could lean back and stretch your feet out and sleep, if you wished to do so. Some of them had hoods over them to guard you from the sun.

It was a beautiful early evening and the green of the grass was a soft deep colour. The golden light came through the copper beech and the cedar showed the lines of its beauty against a soft pinkish-golden sky.

Tom Addison was waiting for his guest in a long basket chair, his feet up, Mr. Satterthwaite noted with some amusement what he remembered from many other occasions of meeting his host, he had comfortable bedroom slippers suited to his slightly swollen gouty feet, and the shoes were odd ones. One red and one green. Good old Tom, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, he hasn't changed. Just the same. And he thought, "What an idiot I am. Of course I know what that word meant. Why didn't I think of it at once?"

"Thought you were never going to turn up, you old devil," said Tom Addison.

He was still a handsome old man, a broad face with deep-set twinkling grey eyes, shoulders that were still square and gave him a look of power. Every line in his face seemed a line of good humour and of affectionate welcome. "He never changes," thought Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Can't get up to greet you," said Tom Addison. "Takes two strong men and a stick to get me on my feet. Now, do you know our little crowd, or don't you? You know Simon, of course."

"Of course I do. It's a good few years since I've seen you, but you haven't changed much."

Squadron Leader Simon Gilliatt was a lean, handsome man with a mop of red hair.

"Sorry you never came to see us when we were in Kenya," he said. "You'd have enjoyed yourself. Lots of things we could have shown you. Ah well, one can't see what the future may bring. I thought I'd lay my bones in that country."

"We've got a very nice churchyard here," said Tom Addison. "Nobody's ruined our church yet by restoring it and we haven't very much new building round about so there's plenty of room in the churchyard still. We haven't had one of these terrible additions of a new intake of graves."

"What a gloomy conversation you're having," said Beryl Gilliatt, smiling. "These are our boys," she said, "but you know them already, don't you, Mr. Satterthwaite?"

"I don't think I'd have known them now," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Indeed, the last time he had seen the two boys was on a day when he had taken them out from their prep school. Although there was no relationship between them—they had had different fathers and mothers—yet the boys could have been, and often were, taken for brothers. They were about the same height and they both had red hair. Roland, presumably, having inherited it from his father and Timothy from his auburn-haired mother. There seemed also to be a kind of comradeship between them. Yet really, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, they were very different. The difference was clearer now when they were, he supposed, between twenty-two and twenty-five years old. He could see no resemblance in Roland to his grandfather. Nor apart from his red hair did he look like his father.

Mr. Satterthwaite had wondered sometimes whether the boy would look like Lily, his dead mother. But there again he could see little resemblance. If anything, Timothy looked more as a son of Lily's might have looked. The fair skin and the high forehead and a delicacy of bone structure. At his elbow, a soft deep voice said,

"I'm Inez. I don't expect you remember me. It was quite a long time ago when I saw you."

A beautiful girl, Mr. Satterthwaite thought at once. A dark type. He cast his mind back a long way to the days when he had come to be best man at Tom Addison's wedding to Pilar. She showed her Spanish blood, he thought, the carriage of her head and the dark aristocratic beauty. Her father, Dr. Horton, was standing just behind her. He looked much older than when Mr. Satterthwaite had seen him last. A nice man and kindly. A good general practitioner, unambitious but reliable and devoted, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, to his daughter. He was obviously immensely proud of her.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt an enormous happiness creeping over him. All these people, he thought, although some of them strange to him, it seemed like friends he had already known. The dark beautiful girl, the two red-haired boys, Beryl Gilliatt, fussing over the tea tray, arranging cups and saucers, beckoning to a maid from the house to bring out cakes and plates of sandwiches. A splendid tea. There were chairs that pulled up to the tables so that you could sit comfortably eating all you wanted to eat. The boys settled themselves, inviting Mr. Satterthwaite to sit between them.

He was pleased at that. He had already planned in his own mind that it was the boys he wanted to talk to first, to see how much they recalled to him Tom Addison in the old days, and he thought, "Lily. How I wish Lily could be here now.” Here he was, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, here he was back in his boyhood. Here where he had come and been welcomed by Tom’s father and mother, an aunt or so, too, there had been and a great-uncle and cousins. And now, well, there were not so many in this family, but it was a family. Tom in his bedroom slippers, one red, one green, old but still merry and happy. Happy in those who were spread round him. And here was Doverton just, or almost just, as it had been. Not quite so well kept up, perhaps, but the lawn was in good condition. And down there he could see the gleam of the river through the trees and the trees, too. More trees than there had been. And the house needing, perhaps, another coat of paint but not too badly. After all, Tom Addison was a rich man. Well provided for, owning a large quantity of land. A man with simple tastes who spent enough to keep his place up but was not a spendthrift in other ways. He seldom travelled or went abroad nowadays, but he entertained. Not big parties, just friends. Friends who came to stay, friends who usually had some connection going back into the past. A friendly house.

He turned a little in his chair, drawing it away from the table and turning it sideways so that he could see better the view down to the river. Down there was the mill, of course, and beyond the other side there were fields. And in one of the fields, it amused him to see a kind of scarecrow, a dark figure on which birds were settling on the straw. Just for a moment he thought it looked like Mr. Harley Quin. Perhaps, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, it is my friend Mr. Quin. It was an absurd idea and yet if someone had piled up the scarecrow and tried to make it look like Mr. Quin, it could have had the sort of slender elegance that was foreign to most scarecrows one saw.

“Are you looking at our scarecrow?” said Timothy. “We’ve got a name for him, you know. We call him Mister Harley Barley.”

“Do you indeed” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Dear me, I find that very interesting.”

“Why do you find it interesting?” said Roly, with some curiosity.

“Well, because it rather resembles someone that I know, whose name happens to be Harley. His first name, that is.”

The boys began singing, “Harley Barley, stands on guard, Harley Barley takes things hard. Guards the ricks and guards the hay, Keeps the trespassers away.”

“Cucumber sandwich, Mr. Satterthwaite?” said Beryl Gilliatt, “or do you prefer a homemade pâté one?”

Mr. Satterthwaite accepted the homemade pâté. She deposited by his side a puce cup, the same colour as he had admired in the shop. How gay it looked, all that tea set on the table. Yellow, red, blue, green and all the rest of it. He wondered if each one had their favourite colour. Timothy, he noticed, had a red cup, Roland had a yellow one. Beside Timothy’s cup was an object Mr. Satterthwaite could not at first identify. Then he saw it was a meerschaum pipe. It was years since Mr. Satterthwaite had thought of or seen a meerschaum pipe. Roland, noticing what he was looking at, said, “Tim brought that back from Germany when he went. He’s killing himself with cancer smoking his pipe all the time.”

“Don’t you smoke, Roland?”

“No. I’m not one for smoking. I don’t smoke cigarettes and I don’t smoke pot either.”

Inez came to the table and sat down the other side of him. Both the young men pressed food upon her. They started a laughing conversation together.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt very happy among these young people. Not that they took very much notice of him apart from their natural politeness. But he liked hearing them. He liked, too, making up his judgement about them. He thought, he was almost sure, that both the young men were in love with Inez. Well, it was not surprising. Propinquity brings these things about. They had come to live here with their grandfather. A beautiful girl, Roland’s first cousin, was living almost next door. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. He could just see the house through the trees where it poked up from the road just beyond the front gate. That was the same house that Dr. Horton had lived in last time he came here, seven or eight years ago.

He looked at Inez. He wondered which of the two young men she preferred or whether her affections were already engaged elsewhere. There was no reason why she should fall in love with one of these two attractive young specimens of the male race.

Having eaten as much as he wanted, it was not very much, Mr. Satterthwaite drew his chair back altering its angle a little so that he could look all round him.

Mrs. Gilliatt was still busy. Very much the housewife, he thought, making perhaps rather more of a fuss than she need of domesticity. Continually offering people cakes, taking their cups away and replenishing them, handing things round. Somehow, he thought, it would be more pleasant and more informal if she let people help themselves. He wished she was not so busy a hostess.

He looked up to the place where Tom Addison lay stretched out in his chair. Tom Addison was also watching Beryl Gilliatt. Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: “He doesn’t like her. No. Tom doesn’t like her. Well, perhaps that’s to be expected.” After all, Beryl had taken the place of his own daughter, of Simon Gilliatt’s first wife, Lily. “My beautiful Lily,” thought Mr. Satterthwaite again, and wondered why for some reason he felt that although he could not see anyone like her, yet Lily in some strange way was here. She was here at this tea party.

“I suppose one begins to imagine these things as one gets old,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “After all, why shouldn’t Lily be here to see her son.”

He looked affectionately at Timothy and then suddenly realized that he was not looking at Lily’s son. Roland was Lily’s son. Timothy was Beryl’s son.

“I believe Lily knows I’m here. I believe she’d like to speak to me,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “Oh dear, oh dear, I mustn’t start imagining foolish things.”

For some reason he looked again at the scarecrow. It didn’t look like a scarecrow now. It looked like Mr. Harley Quin. Some tricks of the light, of the sunset, were providing it with colour, and there was a black dog like Hermes chasing the birds.

“Colour,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and looked again at the table and the tea set and the people having tea. “Why am I here?” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. “Why am I here and what ought I to be doing? There’s a reason. . . .”

Now he knew, he felt, there was something, some crisis, something affecting—affecting all these people or only some of them? Beryl Gilliatt, Mrs. Gilliatt. She was nervous about something. On edge. Tom? Nothing wrong with Tom. He wasn’t affected. A lucky man to own this beauty, to own Doverton and to have a grandson so that when he died all this would come to Roland. All this would be Roland’s. Was Tom hoping that Roland would marry Inez? Or would he have a fear of first cousins marrying? Though throughout history, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, brothers had married sisters with no ill result. “Nothing must happen,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “nothing must happen. I must prevent it.”

Really, his thoughts were the thoughts of a madman. A peaceful scene. A tea set. The varying colours of the Harlequin cups. He looked at the white meerschaum pipe lying against the red of the cup. Beryl Gilliatt said something to Timothy. Timothy nodded, got up and went off towards the house. Beryl removed some empty plates from the table, adjusted a chair or two, murmured something to Roland, who went across and offered a frosted cake to Dr. Horton.

Mr. Satterthwaite watched her. He had to watch her. The sweep of her sleeve as she passed the table. He saw a red cup get pushed off the table. It broke on the iron feet of a chair. He heard her little exclamation as she picked up the bits. She went to the tea tray, came back and placed on the table a pale blue cup and saucer. She replaced the meerschaum pipe, putting it close against it. She brought the teapot and poured tea, then she moved away.

The table was untenanted now. Inez also had got up and left it. Gone to speak to her grandfather. “I don’t understand,” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. “Something’s going to happen. What’s going to happen?”

A table with different coloured cups round, and—yes, Timothy, his red hair glowing in the sun. Red hair glowing with that same tint, that attractive sideways wave that Simon Gilliatt's hair had always had. Timothy, coming back, standing a moment, looking at the table with a slightly puzzled eye, then going to where the meerschaum pipe rested against the pale blue cup.

Inez came back then. She laughed suddenly and she said, "Timothy, you're drinking your tea out of the wrong cup. The blue cup's mine. Yours is the red one."

And Timothy said, "Don't be silly, Inez, I know my own cup. It's got sugar in it and you won't like it. Nonsense. This is my cup. The meerschaum's up against it."

It came to Mr. Satterthwaite then. A shock. Was he mad? Was he imagining things? Was any of this real?

He got up. He walked quickly towards the table, and as Timothy raised the blue cup to his lips, he shouted.

"Don't drink that!" he called. "Don't drink it, I say."

Timothy turned a surprised face. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. Dr. Horton, rather startled, got up from his seat and was coming near.

"What's the matter, Satterthwaite?"

"That cup. There's something wrong about it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Don't let the boy drink from it."

Horton stared at it. "My dear fellow—"

"I know what I'm saying. The red cup was his," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "and the red cup's broken. It's been replaced with a blue one. He doesn't know the red from blue, does he?"

Dr. Horton looked puzzled. "D'you mean—d'you mean—like Tom?"

"Tom Addison. He's colour-blind. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh yes, of course. We all know that. That's why he's got odd shoes on today. He never knew red from green."

"This boy is the same."

"But—but surely not. Anyway, there's never been any sign of it in—in Roland."

"There might be, though, mightn't there?" said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I'm right in thinking—Daltonism. That's what they call it, don't they?"

"It was a name they used to call it by, yes."

"It's not inherited by a female, but it passes through the female. Lily wasn't colour blind, but Lily's son might easily be colour-blind."

"But my dear Satterthwaite, Timothy isn't Lily's son. Roly is Lily's son. I know they're rather alike. Same age, same coloured hair and things, but—well, perhaps you don't remember."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I shouldn't have remembered. But I know now. I can see the resemblance too. Roland's Beryl's son. They were both babies, weren't they, when Simon remarried. It is very easy for a woman looking after two babies, especially if both of them were going to have red hair. Timothy's Lily's son and Roland is Beryl's son. Beryl's and Christopher Eden's. There is no reason why he should be colour-blind. I know it, I tell you. I know it!"

He saw Dr. Horton's eyes go from one to the other. Timothy, not catching what they said but standing holding the blue cup and looking puzzled.

"I saw her buy it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Listen to me, man. You must listen to me. You've known me for some years. You know that I don't make mistakes if I say a thing positively."

"Quite true. I've never known you make a mistake."

"Take that cup away from him," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Take it back to your surgery or take it to an analytic chemist and find out what's in it. I saw that woman buy that cup. She bought it in the village shop. She knew then that she was going to break a red cup, replace it by a blue and that Timothy would never know that the colours were different."

"I think you're mad, Satterthwaite. But all the same I'm going to do what you say."

He advanced on the table, stretched out a hand to the blue cup.

"Do you mind letting me have a look at that?" said Dr. Horton.

"Of course," said Timothy. He looked slightly surprised.

"I think there's a flaw in the china, here, you know. Rather interesting."

Beryl came across the lawn. She came quickly and sharply.

"What are you doing? What's the matter? What is happening?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Dr. Horton, cheerfully. "I just want to show the boys a little experiment I'm going to make with a cup of tea."

He was looking at her very closely and he saw the expression of fear, of terror. Mr. Satterthwaite saw the entire change of countenance.

"Would you like to come with me, Satterthwaite? Just a little experiment, you know. A matter of testing porcelain and different qualities in it nowadays. A very interesting discovery was made lately."

Chatting, he walked along the grass. Mr. Satterthwaite followed him and the two young men, chatting to each other, followed him.

"What's the Doc up to now, Roly?" said Timothy.

"I don't know," said Roland. "He seems to have got some very extraordinary ideas. Oh well, we shall hear about it later, I expect. Let's go and get our bikes."

Beryl Gilliatt turned abruptly. She retraced her steps rapidly up the lawn towards the house. Tom Addison called to her:

“Anything the matter, Beryl?”

“Something I’d forgotten,” said Beryl Gilliatt. “That’s all.”

Tom Addison looked inquiringly towards Simon Gilliatt.

“Anything wrong with your wife?” he said.

“Beryl? Oh no, not that I know of. I expect it’s some little thing or other that she’s forgotten. Nothing I can do for you, Beryl?” he called.

“No. No, I’ll be back later.” She turned her head half sideways, looking at the old man lying back in the chair. She spoke suddenly and vehemently. “You silly old fool. You’ve got the wrong shoes on again today. They don’t match. Do you know you’ve got one shoe that’s red and one shoe that’s green?”

“Ah, done it again, have I?” said Tom Addison. “They look exactly the same colour to me, you know. It’s odd, isn’t it, but there it is.”

She went past him, her steps quickening.

Presently Mr. Satterthwaite and Dr. Horton reached the gate that led out into the roadway. They heard a motor bicycle speeding along.

“She’s gone,” said Dr. Horton. “She’s run for it. We ought to have stopped her, I suppose. Do you think she’ll come back?”

“No,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, “I don’t think she’ll come back. Perhaps,” he said thoughtfully, “it’s best left that way.”

“You mean?”

“It’s an old house,” said Mr. Satterthwaite. “And old family. A good family. A lot of good people in it. One doesn’t want trouble, scandal, everything brought upon it. Best to let her go, I think.”

"Tom Addison never liked her," said Dr. Horton. "Never. He was always polite and kind but he didn't like her."

"And there's the boy to think of," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"The boy. You mean?"

"The other boy. Roland. This way he needn't know about what his mother was trying to do."

"Why did she do it? Why on earth did she do it?"

"You've no doubt now that she did," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"No. I've no doubt now. I saw her face, Satterthwaite, when she looked at me. I knew then that what you'd said was truth. But why?"

"Greed, I suppose," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "She hadn't any money of her own, I believe. Her husband, Christopher Eden, was a nice chap by all accounts but he hadn't anything in the way of means. But Tom Addison's grandchild has got big money coming to him. A lot of money. Property all around here has appreciated enormously. I've no doubt that Tom Addison will leave the bulk of what he has to his grandson. She wanted it for her own son and through her own son, of course, for herself. She is a greedy woman."

Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head back suddenly.

"Something's on fire over there," he said.

"Good lord, so it is. Oh, it's the scarecrow down in the field. Some young chap or other's set fire to it, I suppose. But there's nothing to worry about. There are no ricks or anything anywhere near. It'll just burn itself out."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Well, you go on, Doctor. You don't need me to help you in your tests."

"I've no doubt of what I shall find. I don't mean the exact substance, but I have come to your belief that this blue cup holds death."

Mr. Satterthwaite had turned back through the gate. He was going now down in the direction where the scarecrow was burning. Behind it was the sunset. A remarkable sunset that evening. Its colours illuminated the air round it, illuminated the burning scarecrow.

“So that’s the way you’ve chosen to go,” said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked slightly startled then, for in the neighbourhood of the flames he saw the tall, slight figure of a woman. A woman dressed in some pale mother-of-pearl colouring. She was walking in the direction of Mr. Satterthwaite. He stopped dead, watching.

“Lily,” he said. “Lily.”

He saw her quite plainly now. It was Lily walking towards him. Too far away for him to see her face but he knew very well who it was. Just for a moment or two he wondered whether anyone else would see her or whether the sight was only for him. He said, not very loud, only in a whisper,

“It’s all right, Lily, your son is safe.”

She stopped then. She raised one hand to her lips. He didn’t see her smile, but he knew she was smiling. She kissed her hand and waved it to him and then she turned. She walked back towards where the scarecrow was disintegrating into a mass of ashes.

“She’s going away again,” said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. “She’s going away with him. They’re walking away together. They belong to the same world, of course. They only come—those sort of people—they only come when it’s a case of love or death or both.”

He wouldn’t see Lily again, he supposed, but he wondered how soon he would meet Mr. Quin again. He turned then and went back across the lawn towards the tea table and the Harlequin tea set, and beyond that, to his old friend Tom Addison. Beryl wouldn’t come back. He was sure of it. Doverton Kingsbourne was safe again.

Across the lawn came the small black dog in flying leaps. It came to Mr. Satterthwaite, panting a little and wagging its tail. Through its collar was twisted a scrap of paper. Mr. Satterthwaite stooped and detached it—smoothing it out—on it in coloured letters was written a message:

CONGRATULATIONS! TO OUR NEXT MEETING H.Q.

“Thank you, Hermes,” said Mr. Satterthwaite, and watched the black dog flying across the meadow to rejoin the two figures that he himself knew were there but could no longer see.

While The Light Lasts And Other Stories (1997)

By Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

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THE HOUSE OF DREAMS

This is the story of John Segrave - of his life, which was unsatisfactory; of his love, which was unsatisfied; of his dreams, and of his death; and if in the two latter he found what was denied in the two former, then his life may, after all, be taken as a success. Who knows?

John Segrave came of a family which had been slowly going down the hill for the last century. They had been landowners since the days of Elizabeth, but their last piece of property was sold. It was thought well that one of the sons at least should acquire the useful art of money-making. It was an unconscious irony of Fate that John should be the one chosen.

With his strangely sensitive mouth, and the long dark blue slits of eyes that suggested an elf or a faun, something wild and of the woods, it was incongruous that he should be offered up, a sacrifice on the altar of Finance. The smell of the earth, the taste of the sea salt on one's lips, and the free sky above one's head - these were the things beloved by John Segrave, to which he was to bid farewell.

At the age of eighteen he became a junior clerk in a big business house. Seven years later he was still a clerk, not quite so junior, but with status otherwise unchanged. The faculty for "getting on in the world" had been omitted from his makeup. He was punctual, industrious, plodding - a clerk and nothing but a clerk. And yet he might have been - what? He could hardly answer that question himself, but he could not rid himself of the conviction that somewhere there was a life in which he could have - counted. There was power in him, swiftness of vision, a something of which his fellow toilers had never had a glimpse. They liked him. He was popular because of his air of careless friendship, and they never appreciated the fact that he barred them out by that same manner from any real intimacy.

The dream came to him suddenly. It was no childish fantasy growing and developing through the years. It came on a midsummer night, or rather early morning, and he woke from it tingling all over, striving to hold it to him as it fled, slipping from his clutch in the elusive way dreams have.

Desperately he clung to it. It must not go - it must not - He must remember the house. It was the House, of course! The House he knew so well. Was it a real house, or did he merely know it in dreams? He didn't remember - but he certainly knew it - knew it very well.

The faint grey light of the early morning was stealing into the room. The stillness was extraordinary. At 4:50 a.m. London, weary London, found her brief instant of peace.

John Segrave lay quiet, wrapped in the joy, the exquisite wonder and beauty of his dream. How clever it had been of him to remember it! A dream flitted so quickly as a rule, ran past you just as with waking consciousness your clumsy fingers sought to stop and hold it. But he had been too quick for this dream! He had seized it as it was slipping swiftly by him.

It was really a most remarkable dream! There was the house and - His thoughts were brought up with a jerk, for when he came to think of it, he couldn't remember anything but the house. And suddenly, with a tinge of disappointment, he recognized that, after all, the house was quite strange to him. He hadn't even dreamed of it before.

It was a white house, standing on high ground. There were trees near it, blue hills in the distance, but its peculiar charm was independent of surroundings for (and this was the point, the climax of the dream) it was a beautiful, a strangely beautiful house. His pulses quickened as he remembered anew the strange beauty of the house.

The outside of it, of course, for he hadn't been inside. There had been no question of that - no question of it whatsoever.

Then, as the dingy outlines of his bed-sitting-room began to take shape in the growing light, he experienced the disillusion of the dreamer. Perhaps, after all, his dream hadn't been so very wonderful - or had the wonderful, the explanatory part, slipped past him, and laughed at his ineffectual clutching hands? A white house, standing on high ground - there wasn't much there to get excited about, surely. It was rather a big house, he remembered, with a lot of windows in it, and the blinds were all down, not because the people were away (he was sure of that), but because it was so early that no one was up yet.

Then he laughed at the absurdity of his imaginings, and remembered that he was to dine with Mr. Wetterman that night.

Maisie Wetterman was Rudolf Wetterman's only daughter, and she had been accustomed all her life to having exactly what she wanted. Paying a visit to her father's office one day, she had noticed John Segrave. He had brought in some letters that her father had asked for. When he had departed again, she asked her father about him. Wetterman was communicative.

"One of Sir Edward Segrave's sons. Fine old family, but on its last legs. This boy will never set the Thames on fire. I like him all right, but there's nothing to him. No punch of any kind."

Maisie was, perhaps, indifferent to punch. It was a quality valued more by her parent than herself. Anyway, a fortnight later she persuaded her father to ask John Segrave to dinner. It was an intimate dinner, herself and her father, John Segrave, and a girlfriend who was staying with her.

The girlfriend was moved to make a few remarks.

"On approval, I suppose, Maisie? Later, father will do it up in a nice little parcel and bring it home from the city as a present to his dear little daughter, duly bought and paid for."

"Allegra! You are the limit."

Allegra Kerr laughed.

"You do take fancies, you know, Maisie. I like that hat - I must have it! If hats, why not husbands?"

"Don't be absurd. I've hardly spoken to him yet."

"No. But you've made up your mind," said the other girl. "What's the attraction, Maisie?"

"I don't know," said Maisie Wetterman slowly. "He's - different."

"Different?"

"Yes. I can't explain. He's good-looking, you know, in a queer sort of way, but it's not that. He's a way of not seeing you're there. Really, I don't believe he as much as glanced at me that day in father's office."

Allegra laughed.

"That's an old trick. Rather an astute young man, I should say."

"Allegra, you're hateful!"

"Cheer up, darling. Father will buy a wooly lamb for his little Maisiekins."

"I don't want it to be like that."

"Love with a capital L. Is that it?"

"Why shouldn't he fall in love with me?"

"No reason at all. I expect he will."

Allegra smiled as she spoke, and let her glance sweep over the other. Maisie Wetterman was short - inclined to be plump - she had dark hair, well shingled and artistically waved. Her naturally good complexion was enhanced by the latest colors in powder and lipstick. She had a good mouth and teeth, dark eyes, rather small and twinkly, and a jaw and chin slightly on the heavy side. She was beautifully dressed.

"Yes," said Allegra, finishing her scrutiny. "I've no doubt he will. The whole effect is really very good, Maisie."

Her friend looked at her doubtfully.

"I mean it," said Allegra. "I mean it - honor bright. But just supposing, for the sake of argument, that he shouldn't. Fall in love, I mean. Suppose his affection to become sincere, but platonic. What then?"

"I may not like him at all when I know him better."

"Quite so. On the other hand you may like him very much indeed. And in that latter case -"

Maisie shrugged her shoulders.

"I should hope I've too much pride -"

Allegra interrupted.

"Pride comes in handy for masking one's feelings - it doesn't stop you from feeling them."

"Well," said Maisie, flushed. "I don't see why I shouldn't say it. I am a very good match. I mean from his point of view, father's daughter and everything."

"Partnership in the offing, et cetera," said Allegra. "Yes, Maisie. You're father's daughter, all right. I'm awfully pleased. I do like my friends to run true to type."

The faint mockery of her tone made the other uneasy.

"You are hateful, Allegra."

"But stimulating, darling. That's why you have me here. I'm a student of history, you know, and it always intrigued me why the court jester was permitted and encouraged. Now that I'm one myself, I see the point. It's rather a good rôle, you see, I had to do something. There was I, proud and penniless like the heroine of a novelette, well born and badly educated. 'What to do, girl? God wot,' saith she. The poor relation type of girl, all willingness to do without a fire in her room and content to do odd jobs and 'help dear Cousin So-and-So,' I observed to be at a premium. Nobody really wants her - except those people who can't keep their servants, and they treat her like a galley slave.

"So I became the court fool. Insolence, plain speaking, a dash of wit now and again (not too much lest I should have to live up to it), and behind it all, a very shrewd observation of human nature. People rather like being told how horrible they really are. That's why they flock to popular preachers. It's been a great success. I'm always overwhelmed with invitations. I can live on my friends with the greatest ease, and I'm careful to make no pretence of gratitude."

"There's no one quite like you, Allegra. You don't mind in the least what you say."

"That's where you're wrong. I mind very much - I take care and thought about the matter. My seeming outspokenness is always calculated. I've got to be careful. This job has got to carry me on to old age."

"Why not marry? I know heaps of people have asked you."

Allegra's face grew suddenly hard.

"I can never marry."

"Because -" Maisie left the sentence unfinished, looking at her friend. The latter gave a short nod of assent.

Footsteps were heard on the stairs. The butler threw open the door and announced:

"Mr. Segrave."

John came in without any particular enthusiasm. He couldn't imagine why the old boy had asked him. If he could have got out of it he would have done so. The house depressed him, with its solid magnificence and the soft pile of its carpet.

A girl came forward and shook hands with him. He remembered vaguely having seen her one day in her father's office.

"How do you do, Mr. Segrave? Mr. Segrave - Miss Kerr."

Then he woke. Who was she? Where did she come from? From the flame-colored draperies that floated round her, to the tiny Mercury wings on her small Greek head, she was a being transitory and fugitive, standing out against the dull background with an effect of unreality.

Rudolph Wetterman came in, his broad expanse of gleaming shirtfront creaking as he walked. They went down informally to dinner.

Allegra Kerr talked to her host. John Segrave had to devote himself to Maisie. But his whole mind was on the girl on the other side of him. She was marvelously effective. Her effectiveness was, he thought, more studied than natural. But behind all that, there lay something else. Flickering fire, fitful, capricious, like the will-o'-the-wisps that of old lured men into the marshes.

At last he got a chance to speak to her. Maisie was giving her father a message from some friend she had met that day. Now that the moment had come, he was tongue-tied. His glance pleaded with her dumbly.

"Dinner-table topics," she said lightly. "Shall we start with the theatres, or with one of those innumerable openings, beginning, 'Do you like -?'"

John laughed.

"And if we find we both like dogs and dislike sandy cats, it will form what is called a 'bond' between us?"

"Assuredly," said Allegra gravely.

"It is, I think, a pity to begin with a catechism."

"Yet it puts conversation within the reach of all."

"True, but with disastrous results."

"It is useful to know the rules - if only to break them."

John smiled at her.

"I take it, then, that you and I will indulge our personal vagaries. Even though we display thereby the genius that is akin to madness."

With a sharp unguarded movement, the girl's hand swept a wineglass off the table. There was the tinkle of broken glass. Maisie and her father stopped speaking.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Wetterman. I'm throwing glasses on the floor."

"My dear Allegra, it doesn't matter at all, not at all." Beneath his breath John Segrave said quickly: "Broken glass. That's bad luck. I wish - it hadn't happened."

"Don't worry. How does it go? 'Ill luck thou canst not bring where ill luck has its home.'"

She turned once more to Wetterman. John, resuming conversation with Maisie, tried to place the quotation. He got it at last. They were the words used by Sieglinde in the Walküre when Sigmund offers to leave the house.

He thought: "Did she mean -"

But Maisie was asking his opinion of the latest revue. Soon he had admitted that he was fond of music.

"After dinner," said Maisie, "we'll make Allegra play for us."

They all went up to the drawing room together. Secretly, Wetterman considered it a barbarous custom.

He liked the ponderous gravity of the wine passing round, the handed cigars. But perhaps it was as well tonight. He didn't know what on earth he could find to say to young Segrave. Maisie was too bad with her whims. It wasn't as though the fellow were good-looking - really good-looking - and certainly he wasn't amusing. He was glad when Maisie asked Allegra Kerr to play. They'd get through the evening sooner. The young idiot didn't even play bridge.

Allegra played well, though without the sure touch of a professional. She played modern music, Debussy and Strauss, a little Scriabine. Then she dropped into the first movement of Beethoven's Pathétique, that expression of a grief that is infinite, a sorrow that is endless and vast as the ages, but in which from end to end breathes the spirit that will not accept defeat. In the solemnity of undying woe, it moves with the rhythm of the conqueror to its final doom.

Towards the end she faltered, her fingers struck a discord, and she broke off abruptly. She looked across at Maisie and laughed mockingly.

"You see," she said. "They won't let me."

Then, without waiting for a reply to her somewhat enigmatical remark, she plunged into a strange haunting melody, a thing of weird harmonies and curious measured rhythm, quite unlike anything Segrave had ever heard before. It was delicate as the flight of a bird, poised, hovering - Suddenly, without the least warning, it turned into a mere discordant jangle of notes, and Allegra rose laughing from the piano.

In spite of her laugh, she looked disturbed and almost frightened. She sat down by Maisie, and John heard the latter say in a low tone to her:

"You shouldn't do it. You really shouldn't do it."

"What was the last thing?" John asked eagerly.

"Something of my own."

She spoke sharply and curtly. Wetterman changed the subject.

That night John Segrave dreamed again of the House.

John was unhappy. His life was irksome to him as never before. Up to now he had accepted it patiently - a disagreeable necessity, but one which left his inner freedom essentially untouched. Now all that was changed. The outer world and the inner intermingled.

He did not disguise to himself the reason for the change. He had fallen in love at first sight with Allegra Kerr. What was he going to do about it?

He had been too bewildered that first night to make any plans. He had not even tried to see her again. A little later, when Maisie Wetterman asked him down to her father's place in the country for a weekend, he went eagerly, but he was disappointed, for Allegra was not there.

He mentioned her once, tentatively, to Maisie, and she told him that Allegra was up in Scotland paying a visit. He left it at that. He would have liked to go on talking about her, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Maisie was puzzled by him that weekend. He didn't appear to see - well, to see what was so plainly to be seen. She was a direct young woman in her methods, but directness was lost upon John. He thought her kind, but a little overpowering.

Yet the Fates were stronger than Maisie. They willed that John should see Allegra again.

They met in the park one Sunday afternoon. He had seen her from far off, and his heart thumped against the side of his ribs. Supposing she should have forgotten him -

But she had not forgotten. She stopped and spoke. In a few minutes they were walking side by side, striking out across the grass. He was ridiculously happy.

He said suddenly and unexpectedly: "Do you believe in dreams?"

"I believe in nightmares."

The harshness of her voice startled him.

"Nightmares," he said stupidly. "I didn't mean nightmares."

Allegra looked at him.

"No," she said. "There have been no nightmares in your life. I can see that."

Her voice was gentle - different -

He told her then of his dream of the white house, stammering a little. He had had it now six - no, seven times. Always the same. It was beautiful - so beautiful!

He went on.

"You see - it's to do with you - in some way. I had it first the night before I met you -"

"To do with me?" She laughed - a short bitter laugh. "Oh, no, that's impossible. The house was beautiful."

"So are you," said John Segrave.

Allegra flushed a little with annoyance.

"I'm sorry - I was stupid. I seemed to ask for a compliment, didn't I? But I didn't really mean that at all. The outside of me is all right, I know."

"I haven't seen the inside of the house yet," said John Segrave. "When I do I know it will be quite as beautiful as the outside."

He spoke slowly and gravely, giving the words a meaning that she chose to ignore.

"There is something more I want to tell you - if you will listen."

"I will listen," said Allegra.

"I am chucking up this job of mine. I ought to have done it long ago - I see that now. I have been content to drift along knowing I was an utter failure, without caring much, just living from day to day. A man shouldn't do that. It's a man's business to find something he can do and make a success of it. I'm chucking this, and taking on something else - quite a different sort of thing. It's a kind of expedition in West Africa - I can't tell you the details. They're not supposed to be known; but if it comes off well, I shall be a rich man."

"So you, too, count success in terms of money?"

"Money," said John Segrave, "means just one thing to me - you! When I come back -" he paused.

She bent her head. Her face had grown very pale.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand. That's why I must tell you now, once and for all: I shall never marry."

He stayed a little while considering, then he said very gently:

"Can't you tell me why?"

"I could, but more than anything in the world I want not to tell you."

Again he was silent, then he looked up suddenly and a singularly attractive smile illumined his faun's face.

"I see," he said. "So you won't let me come inside the House - not even to peep in for a second? The blinds are to stay down."

Allegra leaned forward and laid her hand on his.

"I will tell you this much. You dream of your House. But I - I don't dream. My dreams are nightmares!"

And on that she left him, abruptly, disconcertingly. That night, once more, he dreamed. Of late, he had realized that the House was most certainly tenanted. He had seen a hand draw aside the blinds, had caught glimpses of moving figures within.

Tonight the House seemed fairer than it had ever done before. Its white walls shone in the sunlight. The peace and the beauty of it were complete.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of a fuller ripple of the waves of joy. Someone was coming to the window. He knew it. A hand, the same hand that he had seen before, laid hold of the blind, drawing it back. In a minute he would see -

He was awake - still quivering with the horror, the unutterable loathing of the Thing that had looked out at him from the window of the House.

It was a Thing utterly and wholly horrible, a Thing so vile and loathsome that the mere remembrance of it made him feel sick. And he knew that the most unutterably and horribly vile thing about it was its presence in that House - the House of Beauty.

For where that Thing abode was horror - horror that rose up and slew the peace and the serenity which were the birthright of the House. The beauty, the wonderful immortal beauty of the House was destroyed for ever, for within its holy consecrated walls there dwelt the Shadow of an Unclean Thing!

If ever again he should dream of the House, Segrave knew he would awake at once with a start of terror, lest from its white beauty that Thing might suddenly look out at him.

The following evening, when he left the office, he went straight to the Wettermans' house. He must see Allegra Kerr. Maisie would tell him where she was to be found.

He never noticed the eager light that flashed into Maisie's eyes as he was shown in, and she jumped up to greet him. He stammered out his request at once, with her hand still in his.

"Miss Kerr. I met her yesterday, but I don't know where she's staying."

He did not feel Maisie's hand grow limp in his as she withdrew it. The sudden coldness of her voice told him nothing.

"Allegra is here - staying with us. But I'm afraid you can't see her."

"But -"

"You see, her mother died this morning. We've just had the news."

"Oh!" He was taken aback.

"It is all very sad," said Maisie. She hesitated just a minute, then went on. "You see, she died in - well, practically an asylum. There's insanity in the family. The grandfather shot himself, and one of Allegra's aunts is a hopeless imbecile, and another drowned herself."

John Segrave made an inarticulate sound.

"I thought I ought to tell you," said Maisie virtuously. "We're such friends, aren't we? And of course Allegra is very attractive. Lots of people have asked her to marry them, but naturally she won't marry at all - she couldn't, could she?"

"She's all right," said Segrave. "There's nothing wrong with her."

His voice sounded hoarse and unnatural in his own ears.

"One never knows; her mother was quite all right when she was young. And she wasn't just - peculiar, you know. She was quite raving mad. It's a dreadful thing - insanity."

"Yes," he said, "it's a most awful Thing -"

He knew now what it was that had looked at him from the window of the House.

Maisie was still talking on. He interrupted her brusquely.

"I really came to say good-bye - and to thank you for all your kindness."

"You're not - going away?"

There was alarm in her voice.

He smiled sideways at her - a crooked smile, pathetic and attractive.

"Yes," he said. "To Africa."

"Africa!"

Maisie echoed the word blankly. Before she could pull herself together he had shaken her by the hand and gone. She was left standing there, her hands clenched by her sides, an angry spot of color in each cheek.

Below, on the doorstep, John Segrave came face to face with Allegra coming in from the street. She was in black, her face white and lifeless. She took one glance at him then drew him into a small morning room.

"Maisie told you," she said. "You know?"

He nodded.

"But what does it matter? You're all right. It - it leaves some people out."

She looked at him somberly, mournfully.

"You are all right," he repeated.

"I don't know," she almost whispered it. "I don't know. I told you - about my dreams. And when I play - when I'm at the piano - those others come and take hold of my hands."

He was staring at her - paralyzed. For one instant, as she spoke, something looked out from her eyes. It was gone in a flash - but he knew it. It was the Thing that had looked out from the House.

She caught his momentary recoil.

"You see," she whispered. "You see - But I wish Maisie hadn't told you. It takes everything from you."

"Everything?"

"Yes. There won't even be the dreams left. For now - you'll never dare to dream of the House again."

The West African sun poured down, and the heat was intense.

John Segrave continued to moan.

"I can't find it. I can't find it."

The little English doctor with the red head and the tremendous jaw scowled down upon his patient in that bullying manner which he had made his own.

"He's always saying that. What does he mean?"

"He speaks, I think, of a house, monsieur." The soft-voiced Sister of Charity from the Roman Catholic Mission spoke with her gentle detachment, as she too looked down on the stricken man.

"A house, eh? Well, he's got to get it out of his head, or we shan't pull him through. It's on his mind. Segrave! Segrave!"

The wandering attention was fixed. The eyes rested with recognition on the doctor's face.

"Look here, you're going to pull through. I'm going to pull you through. But you've got to stop worrying about this house. It can't run away, you know. So don't bother about looking for it now."

"All right." He seemed obedient. "I suppose it can't very well run away if it's never been there at all."

"Of course not!" The doctor laughed his cheery laugh. "Now you'll be all right in no time." And with a boisterous bluntness of manner he took his departure.

Segrave lay thinking. The fever had abated for the moment, and he could think clearly and lucidly. He must find that House.

For ten years he had dreaded finding it - the thought that he might come upon it unawares had been his greatest terror. And then, he remembered, when his fears were quite lulled to rest, one day it had found him. He recalled clearly his first haunting terror, and then his sudden, his exquisite, relief. For, after all, the House was empty!

Quite empty and exquisitely peaceful. It was as he remembered it ten years before. He had not forgotten. There was a huge black furniture van moving slowly away from the House. The last tenant, of course, moving out with his goods. He went up to the men in charge of the van and spoke to them. There was something rather sinister about that van, it was so very black. The horses were black, too, with freely flowing manes and tails, and the men all wore black clothes and gloves. It all reminded him of something else, something that he couldn't remember.

Yes, he had been quite right. The last tenant was moving out, as his lease was up. The House was to stand empty for the present, until the owner came back from abroad.

And waking, he had been full of the peaceful beauty of the empty House.

A month after that, he had received a letter from Maisie (she wrote to him perseveringly, once a month). In it she told him that Allegra Kerr had died in the same home as her mother, and wasn't it dreadfully sad? Though of course a merciful release.

It had really been very odd indeed. Coming after his dream like that. He didn't quite understand it all. But it was odd.

And the worst of it was that he'd never been able to find the House since. Somehow, he'd forgotten the way.

The fever began to take hold of him once more. He tossed restlessly. Of course, he'd forgotten, the House was on high ground! He must climb to get there. But it was hot work climbing cliffs - dreadfully hot. Up, up, up - Oh!

he had slipped! He must start again from the bottom. Up, up, up - days passed, weeks - he wasn't sure that years didn't go by! And he was still climbing.

Once he heard the doctor's voice. But he couldn't stop climbing to listen. Besides the doctor would tell him to leave off looking for the House. He thought it was an ordinary house. He didn't know.

He remembered suddenly that he must be calm, very calm. You couldn't find the House unless you were very calm. It was no use looking for the House in a hurry, or being excited.

If he could only keep calm! But it was so hot! Hot? It was cold - yes, cold. These weren't cliffs, they were icebergs - jagged, cold icebergs.

He was so tired. He wouldn't go on looking - it was no good - Ah! here was a lane - that was better than icebergs, anyway. How pleasant and shady it was in the cool, green lane. And those trees - they were splendid! They were rather like - what? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter.

Ah! here were flowers. All golden and blue! How lovely it all was - and how strangely familiar. Of course, he had been here before. There, through the trees, was the gleam of the House, standing on the high ground. How beautiful it was. The green lane and the trees and the flowers were as nothing to the paramount, the all-satisfying beauty of the House.

He hastened his steps. To think that he had never yet been inside! How unbelievably stupid of him - when he had the key in his pocket all the time!

And of course the beauty of the exterior was as nothing to the beauty that lay within - especially now that the Owner had come back from abroad. He mounted the steps to the great door.

Cruel strong hands were dragging him back! They fought him, dragging him to and fro, backwards and forwards.

The doctor was shaking him, roaring in his ear.

"Hold on, man, you can. Don't let go. Don't let go." His eyes were alight with the fierceness of one who sees an enemy. Segrave wondered who the Enemy was.

The black-robed nun was praying. That, too, was strange.

And all he wanted was to be left alone. To go back to the House. For every minute the House was growing fainter.

That, of course, was because the doctor was so strong. He wasn't strong enough to fight the doctor. If he only could.

But stop! There was another way - the way dreams went in the moment of waking. No strength could stop them - they just flitted past. The doctor's hands wouldn't be able to hold him if he slipped - just slipped!

Yes, that was the way! The white walls were visible once more, the doctor's voice was fainter, his hands were barely felt. He knew now how dreams laugh when they give you the slip!

He was at the door of the House. The exquisite stillness was unbroken. He put the key in the lock and turned it.

Just a moment he waited, to realize to the full the perfect, the ineffable, the all-satisfying completeness of joy.

Then - he passed over the Threshold.

THE ACTRESS

The shabby man in the fourth row of the pit leaned forward and stared incredulously at the stage. His shifty eyes narrowed furtively.

"Nancy Taylor!" he muttered. "By the Lord, little Nancy Taylor!"

His glance dropped to the program in his hand. One name was printed in slightly larger type than the rest.

"Olga Stormer! So that's what she calls herself. Fancy yourself a star, don't you, my lady? And you must be making a pretty little pot of money, too. Quite forgotten your name was ever Nancy Taylor, I daresay. I wonder now - I wonder now what you'd say if Jake Levitt should remind you of the fact?"

The curtain fell on the close of the first act. Hearty applause filled the auditorium. Olga Stormer, the great emotional actress, whose name in a few short years had become a household word, was adding yet another triumph to her list of successes as "Cora", in The Avenging Angel.

Jake Levitt did not join in the clapping, but a slow, appreciative grin gradually distended his mouth. God! What luck! Just when he was on his beam-ends, too. She'd try to bluff it out, he supposed, but she couldn't put it over on him. Properly worked, the thing was a gold mine!

On the following morning the first workings of Jake Levitt's gold mine became apparent. In her drawing room, with its red lacquer and black hangings, Olga Stormer read and reread a letter thoughtfully. Her pale face, with its exquisitely mobile features, was a little more set than usual, and every now and then the grey-green eyes under the level brows steadily envisaged the middle distance, as though she contemplated the threat behind rather than the actual words of the letter.

In that wonderful voice of hers, which could throb with emotion or be as clear-cut as the click of a typewriter, Olga called: "Miss Jones!"

A neat young woman with spectacles, a shorthand pad and a pencil clasped in her hand, hastened from an adjoining room.

"Ring up Mr. Danahan, please, and ask him to come round, immediately."

Syd Danahan, Olga Stormer's manager, entered the room with the usual apprehension of the man whose life it is to deal with and overcome the vagaries of the artistic feminine. To coax, to soothe, to bully, one at a time or all together, such was his daily routine. To his relief, Olga appeared calm and reposed, and merely flicked a note across the table to him.

"Read that."

The letter was scrawled in an illiterate hand, of cheap paper.

Dear Madam,

I much appreciated your performance in The Avenging Angel last night. I fancy we have a mutual friend in Miss Nancy Taylor, late of Chicago. An article regarding her is to be published shortly. If you would care to discuss same, I could call upon you at any time convenient to yourself.

Yours respectfully,

Jake Levitt

Danahan looked lightly bewildered,

"I don't quite get it. Who is this Nancy Taylor?"

"A girl who would be better dead, Danny." There was bitterness in her voice and a weariness that revealed her thirty-four years. "A girl who was dead until this carrion crow brought her to life again."

"Oh! Then..."

"Me, Danny. Just me."

"This means blackmail, of course?"

She nodded. "Of course, and by a man who knows the art thoroughly."

Danahan frowned, considering the matter. Olga, her cheek pillowed on a long, slender hand, watched him with unfathomable eyes.

"What about bluff? Deny everything. He can't be sure that he hasn't been misled by a chance resemblance."

Olga shook her head.

"Levitt makes his living by blackmailing women. He's sure enough."

"The police?" hinted Danahan doubtfully.

Her faint, derisive smile was answer enough. Beneath her self-control, though he did not guess it, was the impatience of the keen brain watching a slower brain laboriously cover the ground it had already traversed in a flash.

"You don't - er - think it might be wise for you to - er - say something yourself to Sir Richard? That would partly spike his guns."

The actress's engagement to Sir Richard Everard, M.P., had been announced a few weeks previously.

"I told Richard everything when he asked me to marry him."

"My word, that was clever of you!" said Danahan admiringly.

Olga smiled a little.

"It wasn't cleverness, Danny dear. You wouldn't understand. All the same, if this man Levitt does what he threatens, my number is up, and incidentally Richard's Parliamentary career goes smash, too. No, as far as I can see, there are only two things to do."

"Well?"

"To pay - and that of course is endless! Or to disappear, start again."

The weariness was again very apparent in her voice.

"It isn't even as though I'd done anything I regretted. I was a half-starved little gutter waif, Danny, striving to keep straight. I shot a man, a beast of a man who deserved to be shot. The circumstances under which I killed him were such that no jury on earth would have convicted me. I know that now, but at the time I was only a frightened kid - and - I ran."

Danahan nodded.

"I suppose," he said doubtfully, "there's nothing against this man Levitt we could get hold of?"

Olga shook her head.

"Very unlikely. He's too much of a coward to go in for evil-doing." The sound of her own words seemed to strike her. "A coward! I wonder if we couldn't work on that in some way."

"If Sir Richard were to see him and frighten him," suggested Danahan.

"Richard is too fine an instrument. You can't handle that sort of man with gloves on."

"Well, let me see him."

"Forgive me, Danny, but I don't think you're subtle enough. Something between gloves and bare fists is needed. Let us say mittens! That means a woman! Yes, I rather fancy a woman might do the trick. A woman with a certain amount of finesse, but who knows the baser side of life from bitter experience. Olga Stormer, for instance! Don't talk to me, I've got a plan coming."

She leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. She lifted it suddenly.

"What's the name of that girl who wants to understudy me? Margaret Ryan, isn't it? The girl with the hair like mine?"

"Her hair's all right," admitted Danahan grudgingly, his eyes resting on the bronze-gold coil surrounding Olga's head. "It's just like yours, as you say. But she's no good any other way. I was going to sack her next week."

"If all goes well, you'll probably have to let her understudy 'Cora'." She smothered his protests with a wave of her hand. "Danny, answer me one question honestly. Do you think I can act? Really act, I mean. Or am I just an attractive woman who trails round in pretty dresses?"

"Act? My God! Olga, there's been nobody like you since Duse!"

"Then if Levitt is really a coward, as I suspect, the thing will come off. No, I'm not going to tell you about it. I want you to get hold of the Ryan girl. Tell her I'm interested in her and want her to dine here tomorrow night. She'll come fast enough."

"I should say she would!"

"The other thing I want is some good strong knockout drops, something that will put anyone out of action for an hour or two, but leave them none the worse the next day."

Danahan grinned.

"I can't guarantee our friend won't have a headache, but there will be no permanent damage done."

"Good! Run away now, Danny, and leave the rest to me." She raised her voice: "Miss Jones!"

The spectacled young woman appeared with her usual alacrity.

"Take down this, please."

Walking slowly up and down, Olga dictated the day's correspondence. But one answer she wrote with her own hand.

Jake Levitt, in his dingy room, grinned as he tore open the expected envelope.

Dear Sir,

I cannot recall the lady of whom you speak, but I meet so many people that my memory is necessarily uncertain. I am always pleased to help any fellow actress, and shall be at home if you will call this evening at nine o'clock.

Yours faithfully,

Olga Stormer

Levitt nodded appreciatively. Clever note! She admitted nothing. Nevertheless she was willing to treat.

The gold mine was developing.

At nine o'clock precisely Levitt stood outside the door of the actress's flat and pressed the bell. No one answered the summons, and he was about to press it again when he realized that the door was not latched.

He pushed the door open and entered the hall. To his right was an open door leading into a brilliantly lighted room, a room decorated in scarlet and black. Levitt walked in. On the table under the lamp lay a sheet of paper on which were written the words:

"Please wait until I return. - O. Stormer."

Levitt sat down and waited. In spite of himself a feeling of uneasiness was stealing over him. The flat was so very quiet. There was something eerie about the silence.

Nothing wrong, of course, how could there be? But the room was so deadly quiet; and yet, quiet as it was, he had the preposterous, uncomfortable notion that he wasn't alone in it. Absurd! He wiped the perspiration from his brow. And still the impression grew stronger. He wasn't alone! With a muttered oath he sprang up and began to pace up and down. In a minute the woman would return and then -

He stopped dead with a muffled cry. From beneath the black velvet hangings that draped the window a hand protruded! He stooped and touched it. Cold - horribly cold - a dead hand.

With a cry he flung back the curtains. A woman was lying there, one arm flung wide, the other doubled under her as she lay face downwards, her golden-bronze hair lying in dishevelled masses on her neck.

Olga Stormer! Tremblingly his fingers sought the icy coldness of that wrist and felt for the pulse. As he thought, there was none. She was dead. She had escaped him, then, by taking the simplest way out.

Suddenly his eyes were arrested by two ends of red cord finishing in fantastic tassels, and half hidden by the masses of her hair. He touched them gingerly; the head sagged as he did so, and he caught a glimpse of a horrible purple face. He sprang back with a cry, his head whirling. There was something here he did not understand. His brief glimpse of the face, disfigured as it was, had shown him one thing. This was murder, not suicide. The woman had been strangled and - she was not Olga Stormer!

Ah! What was that? A sound behind him. He wheeled round and looked straight into the terrified eyes of a maidservant crouching against the wall. Her face was as white as the cap and apron she wore, but he did not understand the fascinated horror in her eyes until her half-breathed words enlightened him to the peril in which he stood.

"Oh, my God! You've killed 'er!"

Even then he did not quite realize. He replied:

"No, no, she was dead when I found her."

"I saw yer do it! You pulled the cord and strangled her. I 'eard the gurgling cry she give."

The sweat broke out upon his brow in earnest. His mind went rapidly over his actions of the previous few minutes. She must have come in just as he had the two ends of cord in his hands; she had seen the sagging head and had taken his own cry as coming from the victim. He stared at her helplessly. There was no doubting what he saw in her face - terror and stupidity. She would tell the police she had seen the crime committed, and no cross-examination would shake her, he was sure of that. She would swear away his life with the unshakable conviction that she was speaking the truth.

What a horrible, unforeseen chain of circumstances! Stop, was it unforeseen? Was there some devilry here? On an impulse he said, eyeing her narrowly:

"That's not your mistress, you know."

Her answer, given mechanically, threw a light upon the situation.

"No, it's 'er actress friend - if you can call 'em friends, seeing that they fought like cat and dog. They were at it tonight, 'ammer and tongs."

A trap! He saw it now.

"Where's your mistress?"

"Went out ten minutes ago."

A trap! And he had walked into it like a lamb. A clever devil, this Olga Stormer; she had rid herself of a rival, and he was to suffer for the deed. Murder! My God, they hung a man for murder! And he was innocent - innocent!

A stealthy rustle recalled him. The little maid was sidling towards the door. Her wits were beginning to work again. Her eyes wavered to the telephone, then back to the door. At all costs he must silence her. It was the only way. As well hang for a real crime as a fictitious one. She had no weapon, neither had he. But he had his hands! Then his heart gave a leap. On the table beside her, almost under her hand, lay a small, jeweled revolver. If he could reach it first -

Instinct or his eyes warned her. She caught it up as he sprang and held it pointed at his breast. Awkwardly as she held it, her finger was on the trigger, and she could hardly miss him at that distance. He stopped dead. A revolver belonging to a woman like Olga Stormer would be pretty sure to be loaded.

But there was one thing, she was no longer directly behind him and the door. So long as he did not attack her, she might not have the nerve to shoot. Anyway, he must risk it. Zigzagging, he ran for the door, through the hall and out through the outer door, banging it behind him. He heard her voice, faint and shaky, calling, "Police, Murder!" She'd have to call louder than that before anyone was likely to hear her. He'd got a start, anyway. Down the stairs he went, running down the open street, then slacking to a walk as a stray pedestrian turned the corner. He had his plan cut and dried.

To Gravesend as quickly as possible. A boat was sailing from there that night for the remoter parts of the world. He knew the captain, a man who, for a consideration, would ask no questions. Once on board and out to sea he would be safe.

At eleven o'clock Danahan's telephone rang. Olga's voice spoke.

"Prepare a contract for Miss Ryan, will you? She's to understudy 'Cora'. It's absolutely no use arguing. I owe her something after all the things I did to her tonight! What? Yes, I think I'm out of my troubles. By the way, if she tells you tomorrow that I'm an ardent spiritualist and put her into a trance tonight, don't show open incredulity. How? Knockout drops in the coffee, followed by scientific passes! After that I painted her face with purple grease paint and put a tourniquet on her left arm! Mystified? Well, you must stay mystified until tomorrow. I haven't time to explain now. I must get out of the cap and apron before my faithful Maud returns from the pictures. There was a 'beautiful drama' on tonight, she told me. But she missed the best drama of all. I played my best part tonight, Danny. The mittens won! Jake Levitt is a coward all right, and oh, Danny, Danny - I'm an actress!"

THE EDGE

Clare Halliwell walked down the short path that led from her cottage door to the gate. On her arm was a basket, and in the basket was a bottle of soup, some home-made jelly, and a few grapes. There were not many poor people in the small village of Daymer's End, but such as there were were assiduously looked after, and Clare was one of the most efficient of the parish workers.

Clare Halliwell was thirty-two. She had an upright carriage, a healthy color, and nice brown eyes. She was not beautiful, but she looked fresh and pleasant and very English. Everybody liked her and said she was a good sort. Since her mother's death, two years ago, she had lived alone in the cottage with her dog, Rover. She kept poultry and was fond of animals and of a healthy outdoor life.

As she unlatched the gate, a two-seater car swept past, and the driver, a girl in a red hat, waved a greeting. Clare responded, but for a moment her lips tightened. She felt that pang at her heart which always came when she saw Vivien Lee, Gerald's wife!

Medenham Grange, which lay just a mile outside the village, had belonged to the Lees for many generations. Sir Gerald Lee, the present owner of the Grange, was a man old for his years and considered by many stiff in manner. His pomposity really covered a good deal of shyness. He and Clare had played together as children. Later they had been friends, and a closer and dearer tie had been confidently expected by many - including, it may be said, Clare herself. There was no hurry, of course - but some day - She left it so in her own mind. Some day.

And then, just a year ago, the village had been startled by the news of Sir Gerald's marriage to a Miss Harper - a girl nobody had ever heard of!

The new Lady Lee had not been popular in the village. She took not the faintest interest in parochial matters, was bored by hunting, and loathed the country and outdoor sports. Many of the wiseacres shook their heads and wondered how it would end. It was easy to see where Sir Gerald's infatuation had come in. Vivien was a beauty. From head to foot she was a complete contrast to Clare Halliwell - small, elfin, dainty, with golden-red hair that curled enchantingly over her pretty ears, and big violet eyes that could shoot a sideways glance of provocation to the manner born.

Gerald Lee, in his simple man's way, had been anxious that his wife and Clare should be great friends. Clare was often asked to dine at the Grange, and Vivien made a pretty pretence of affectionate intimacy whenever they met. Hence that gay salutation of hers this morning.

Clare walked on and did her errand. The vicar was also visiting the old woman in question, and he and Clare walked a few yards together afterwards before their ways parted. They stood still for a minute discussing parish affairs.

"Jones has broken out again, I'm afraid," said the vicar. "And I had such hopes after he had volunteered, of his own accord, to take the pledge."

"Disgusting," said Clare crisply.

"It seems so to us," said Mr. Wilmot, "but we must remember that it is very hard to put ourselves in his place and realize his temptation. The desire for drink is unaccountable to us, but we all have our own temptations, and thus we can understand."

"I suppose we have," said Clare uncertainly.

The vicar glanced at her.

"Some of us have the good fortune to be very little tempted," he said gently. "But even to those people their hour comes. Watch and pray, remember, that ye enter not into temptation."

Then bidding her good-bye, he walked briskly away. Clare went on thoughtfully, and presently she almost bumped into Sir Gerald Lee.

"Hullo, Clare. I was hoping to run across you. You look jolly fit. What a color you've got."

The color had not been there a minute before. Lee went on:

"As I say, I was hoping to run across you. Vivien's got to go off to Bournemouth for the weekend. Her mother's not well. Can you dine with us Tuesday instead of tonight?"

"Oh, yes! Tuesday will suit me just as well."

"That's all right, then. Splendid. I must hurry along."

Clare went home to find her one faithful domestic standing on the doorstep looking out for her.

"There you are, miss. Such a to-do. They've brought Rover home. He went off on his own this morning, and a car ran clean over him."

Clare hurried to the dog's side. She adored animals, and Rover was her especial darling. She felt his legs one by one, and then ran her hands over his body. He groaned once or twice and licked her hand.

"If there's any serious injury, it's internal," she said at last. "No bones seem to be broken."

"Shall we get the vet to see him, Miss?"

Clare shook her head. She had little faith in the local vet.

"We'll wait until tomorrow. He doesn't seem to be in great pain, and his gums are a good color, so there can't be much internal bleeding. Tomorrow, if I don't like the look of him, I'll take him over to Skippington in the car and let Reeves have a look at him. He's far and away the best man."

On the following day, Rover seemed weaker, and Clare duly carried out her project. The small town of Skippington was about forty miles away, a long run, but Reeves, the vet there, was celebrated for many miles around.

He diagnosed certain internal injuries but held out good hopes of recovery, and Clare went away quite content to leave Rover in his charge.

There was only one hotel of any pretensions in Skippington, the County Arms. It was mainly frequented by commercial travelers, for there was no good hunting country near Skippington, and it was off the track of the main roads for motorists.

Lunch was not served till one o'clock, and as it wanted a few minutes of that hour, Clare amused herself by glancing over the entries in the open visitors' book.

Suddenly she gave a stifled exclamation. Surely she knew that handwriting, with its loops and whirls and flourishes? She had always considered it unmistakable. Even now she could have sworn - but of course it was clearly impossible. Vivien Lee was at Bournemouth. The entry itself showed it to be impossible:

Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Brown, London.

But in spite of herself her eyes strayed back again and again to that curly writing, and on an impulse she could not quite define she asked abruptly of the woman in the office:

"Mrs. Cyril Brown? I wonder if that is the same one I know?"

"A small lady? Reddish hair? Very pretty. She came in a red two-seater car, madam. A Peugeot, I believe."

Then it was! A coincidence would be too remarkable. As if in a dream, she heard the woman go on:

"They were here just over a month ago for a weekend, and liked it so much that they have come again. Newly married, I should fancy."

Clare heard herself saying: "Thank you. I don't think that could be my friend."

Her voice sounded different, as though it belonged to someone else. Presently she was sitting in the dining room, quietly eating cold roast beef, her mind a maze of conflicting thought and emotions.

She had no doubts whatever. She had summed Vivien up pretty correctly on their first meeting. Vivien was that kind. She wondered vaguely who the man was. Someone Vivien had known before her marriage? Very likely - it didn't matter - nothing mattered but Gerald.

What was she - Clare - to do about Gerald? He ought to know - surely he ought to know. It was clearly her duty to tell him. She had discovered Vivien's secret by accident, but she must lose no time in acquainting Gerald with the facts. She was Gerald's friend, not Vivien's.

But somehow or other she felt uncomfortable. Her conscience was not satisfied. On the face of it, her reasoning was good, but duty and inclination jumped suspiciously together. She admitted to herself that she disliked Vivien. Besides, if Gerald Lee were to divorce his wife - and Clare had no doubts at all that that was exactly what he would do, he was a man with an almost fanatical view of his own honor - then - well, the way would lie open for Gerald to come to her. Put like that, she shrank back fastidiously. Her own proposed action seemed naked and ugly.

The personal element entered in too much. She could not be sure of her own motives. Clare was essentially a high-minded, conscientious woman. She strove now very earnestly to see where her duty lay. She wished, as she had always wished, to do right. What was right in this case? What was wrong?

By a pure accident she had come into possession of facts that affected vitally the man she loved and the woman whom she disliked and - yes, one might as well be frank - of whom she was bitterly jealous. She could ruin that woman. Was she justified in doing so?

Clare had always held herself aloof from the back-biting and scandal which is an inevitable part of village life. She hated to feel that she now resembled one of those human ghouls she had always professed to despise.

Suddenly the vicar's words that morning flashed across her mind:

"Even to those people their hour comes."

Was this her hour? Was this her temptation? Had it come insidiously disguised as a duty? She was Clare Halliwell, a Christian, in love and charity with all men - and women. If she were to tell Gerald, she must be quite sure that only impersonal motives guided her. For the present she would say nothing.

She paid her bill for luncheon and drove away, feeling an indescribable lightening of spirit. Indeed, she felt happier than she had done for a long time. She felt glad that she had had the strength to resist temptation, to do nothing mean or unworthy. Just for a second it flashed across her mind that it might be a sense of power that had so lightened her spirits, but she dismissed the idea as fantastic.

By Tuesday night she was strengthened in her resolve. The revelation could not come through her. She must keep silence. Her own secret love for Gerald made speech impossible. Rather a high-minded view to take? Perhaps; but it was the only one possible for her.

She arrived at the Grange in her own little car. Sir Gerald's chauffeur was at the front door to drive it round to the garage after she had alighted, as the night was a wet one. He had just driven off when Clare remembered some books which she had borrowed and had brought with her to return. She called out, but the man did not hear her. The butler ran out after the car.

So, for a minute or two, Clare was alone in the hall, close to the door of the drawing room, which the butler had just unlatched prior to announcing her. Those inside the room, however, knew nothing of her arrival, and so it was that Vivien's voice, high-pitched - not quite the voice of a lady - rang out clearly and distinctly.

"Oh, we're only waiting for Clare Halliwell. You must know her - lives in the village - supposed to be one of the local belles, but frightfully unattractive really. She tried her best to catch Gerald, but he wasn't having any."

"Oh, yes, darling -" this in answer to a murmured protest from her husband. "She did - you mayn't be aware of the fact - but she did her very utmost. Poor old Clare! A good sort, but such a dump!"

Clare's face went dead white, her hands, hanging against her sides, clenched themselves in anger such as she had never known before. At that moment she could have murdered Vivien Lee. It was only by a supreme physical effort that she regained control of herself. That, and the half-formed thought that she held it in her power to punish Vivien for those cruel words.

The butler had returned with the books. He opened the door, announced her, and in another moment she was greeting a roomful of people in her usual pleasant manner.

Vivien, exquisitely dressed in some dark wine color that showed off her white fragility, was particularly affectionate and gushing. They didn't see half enough of Clare. She, Vivien, was going to learn golf, and Clare must come out with her on the links.

Gerald was very attentive and kind. Though he had no suspicion that she had overheard his wife's words, he had some vague idea of making up for them. He was very fond of Clare, and he wished Vivien wouldn't say the things she did. He and Clare had been friends, nothing more - and if there was an uneasy suspicion at the back of his mind that he was shirking the truth in that last statement, he put it away from him.

After dinner the talk fell on dogs, and Clare recounted Rover's accident. She purposely waited for a lull in the conversation to say:

"- so, on Saturday, I took him to Skippington."

She heard the sudden rattle of Vivien Lee's coffee cup on the saucer, but she did not look at her - yet.

"To see that man, Reeves?"

"Yes. He'll be all right, I think. I had lunch at the County Arms afterwards. Rather a decent little pub." She turned now to Vivien. "Have you ever stayed there?"

If she had had any doubts, they were swept aside.

Vivien's answer came quick - in stammering haste.

"I? Oh! N-no, no."

Fear was in her eyes. They were wide and dark with it as they met Clare's. Clare's eyes told nothing. They were calm, scrutinizing. No one could have dreamed of the keen pleasure that they veiled. At that moment Clare almost forgave Vivien for the words she had overheard earlier in the evening. She tasted in that moment a fullness of power that almost made her head reel. She held Vivien Lee in the hollow of her hand.

The following day, she received a note from the other woman. Would Clare come up and have tea with her quietly that afternoon? Clare refused.

Then Vivien called on her. Twice she came at hours when Clare was almost certain to be at home. On the first occasion, Clare really was out; on the second, she slipped out by the back way when she saw Vivien coming up the path.

"She's not sure yet whether I know or not," she said to herself. "She wants to find out without committing herself. But she shan't - not until I'm ready."

Clare hardly knew herself what she was waiting for. She had decided to keep silence - that was the only straight and honorable course. She felt an additional glow of virtue when she remembered the extreme provocation she had received. After overhearing the way Vivien talked of her behind her back, a weaker character, she felt, might have abandoned her good resolutions.

She went twice to church on Sunday. First to early communion, from which she came out strengthened and uplifted. No personal feelings should weigh with her - nothing mean or petty. She went again to morning service. Mr. Wilmot preached on the famous prayer of the Pharisee. He sketched the life of that man, a good man, pillar of the church. And he pictured the slow, creeping blight of spiritual pride that distorted and soiled all that he was.

Clare did not listen very attentively. Vivien was in the big square pew of the Lee family, and Clare knew by instinct that the other intended to get hold of her afterwards.

So it fell out. Vivien attached herself to Clare, walked home with her, and asked if she might come in. Clare, of course, assented. They sat in Clare's little sitting room, bright with flowers and old-fashioned chintzes. Vivien's talk was desultory and jerky.

"I was at Bournemouth, you know, last weekend," she remarked presently.

"Gerald told me so," said Clare.

They looked at each other. Vivien appeared almost plain today. Her face had a sharp, foxy look that robbed it of much of its charm.

"When you were at Skippington -" began Vivien.

"When I was at Skippington?" echoed Clare politely.

"You were speaking about some little hotel there."

"The County Arms. Yes. You didn't know it, you said?"

"I - I have been there once."

"Oh!"

She had only to keep still and wait. Vivien was quite unfitted to bear a strain of any kind. Already she was breaking down under it. Suddenly she leaned forward and spoke vehemently.

"You don't like me. You never have. You've always hated me. You're enjoying yourself now, playing with me like a cat with a mouse. You're cruel - cruel. That's why I'm afraid of you, because deep down you're cruel."

"Really, Vivien!" said Clare sharply.

"You know, don't you? Yes, I can see that you know. You knew that night - when you spoke about Skippington. You've found out somehow. Well, I want to know what you are going to do about it. What are you going to do?"

Clare did not reply for a minute, and Vivien sprang to her feet.

"What are you going to do? I must know. You're not going to deny that you know all about it?"

"I do not propose to deny anything," said Clare coldly.

"You saw me there that day?"

"No. I saw your handwriting in the book - Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Brown."

Vivien flushed darkly.

"Since then," continued Clare quietly, "I have made inquiries. I find that you were not at Bournemouth that weekend. Your mother never sent for you. Exactly the same thing happened about six weeks previously."

Vivien sank down again on the sofa. She burst into furious crying, the crying of a frightened child.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped. "Are you going to tell Gerald?"

"I don't know yet," said Clare.

She felt calm, omnipotent.

Vivien sat up, pushing the red curls back from her forehead.

"Would you like to hear all about it?"

"It would be as well, I think."

Vivien poured out the whole story. There was no reticence in her. Cyril 'Brown', was Cyril Haviland, a young engineer to whom she had previously been engaged. His health failed, and he lost his job, whereupon he made no bones about jilting the penniless Vivien and marrying a rich widow many years older than himself. Soon afterwards Vivien married Gerald Lee.

She had met Cyril again by chance. That was the first of many meetings. Cyril, backed by his wife's money, was prospering in his career, and becoming a well known figure.

It was a sordid story, a story of backstairs meeting, of ceaseless lying and intrigue.

"I love him so," Vivien repeated again and again, with a sudden moan, and each time the words made Clare feel physically sick.

At last the stammering recital came to an end.

Vivien muttered a shamefaced: "Well?"

"What am I going to do?" asked Clare. "I can't tell you. I must have time to think."

"You won't give me away to Gerald?"

"It may be my duty to do so."

"No, no." Vivien's voice rose to a hysterical shriek. "He'll divorce me. He won't listen to a word. He'll find out from that hotel, and Cyril will be dragged into it. And then his wife will divorce him. Everything will go - his career, his health - he'll be penniless again. He'd never forgive me - never."

"If you'll excuse my saying so," said Clare, "I don't think much of this Cyril of yours."

Vivien paid no attention.

"I tell you he'll hate me - hate me. I can't bear it. Don't tell Gerald. I'll do anything you like, but don't tell Gerald."

"I must have time to decide," said Clare gravely. "I can't promise anything offhand. In the meantime, you and Cyril mustn't meet again."

"No, no, we won't. I swear it."

"When I know what's the right thing to do," said Clare, "I'll let you know."

She got up. Vivien went out of the house in a furtive, slinking way, glancing back over her shoulder.

Clare wrinkled her nose in disgust. A beastly affair. Would Vivien keep her promise not to see Cyril? Probably not. She was weak - rotten all through.

That afternoon Clare went for a long walk. There was a path which led along the downs. On the left the green hills sloped gently down to the sea far below, while the path wound steadily upward. This walk was known locally as the Edge. Though safe enough if you kept to the path, it was dangerous to wander from it.

Those insidious gentle slopes were dangerous. Clare had lost a dog there once. The animal had gone racing over the smooth grass, gaining momentum, had been unable to stop and had gone over the edge of the cliff to be dashed to pieces on the sharp rocks below.

The afternoon was clear and beautiful. From far below there came the ripple of the sea, a soothing murmur. Clare sat down on the short green turf and stared out over the blue water. She must face this thing clearly. What did she mean to do?

She thought of Vivien with a kind of disgust. How the girl had crumpled up, how abjectly she had surrendered! Clare felt a rising contempt. She had no pluck - no grit.

Nevertheless, much as she disliked Vivien, Clare decided that she would continue to spare her for the present. When she got home she wrote a note to her, saying that although she could make no definite promise for the future, she had decided to keep silence for the present.

Life went on much the same in Daymer's End. It was noticed locally that Lady Lee was looking far from well. On the other hand, Clare Halliwell bloomed. Her eyes were brighter, she carried her head higher, and there was a new confidence and assurance in her manner.

She and Lady Lee often met, and it was noticed on these occasions that the younger woman watched the older with a flattering attention to her slightest word.

Sometimes Miss Halliwell would make remarks that seemed a little ambiguous - not entirely relevant to the matter at hand. She would suddenly say that she had changed her mind about many things lately - that it was curious how a little thing might alter entirely one's point of view. One was apt to give way too much to pity - and that was really quite wrong.

When she said things of that kind she usually looked at Lady Lee in a peculiar way, and the latter would suddenly grow quite white, and look almost terrified.

But as the year drew on, these little subtleties became less apparent. Clare continued to make the same remarks, but Lady Lee seemed less affected by them. She began to recover her looks and spirits. Her old gay manner returned.

One morning, when she was taking her dog for a walk, Clare met Gerald in a lane. The latter's spaniel fraternized with Rover, while his master talked to Clare.

"Heard our news?" he said buoyantly. "I expect Vivien's told you."

"What sort of news? Vivien hasn't mentioned anything in particular."

"We're going abroad - for a year - perhaps longer. Vivien's fed up with this place. She never has cared for it, you know." He sighed; for a moment or two he looked downcast. Gerald Lee was very proud of his home. "Anyway, I've promised her a change. I've taken a villa near Algiers. A wonderful place, by all accounts." He laughed a little self-consciously. "Quite a second honeymoon, eh?"

For a minute or two Clare could not speak. Something seemed to be rising up in her throat and suffocating her. She could see the white walls of the villa, the orange trees, smell the soft perfumed breath of the South. A second honeymoon!

They were going to escape. Vivien no longer believed in her threats. She was going away, carefree, gay, happy.

Clare heard her own voice, a little hoarse in timbre, saying the appropriate things. How lovely! She envied them!

Mercifully at that moment Rover and the spaniel decided to disagree. In the scuffle that ensued, further conversation was out of the question.

That afternoon Clare sat down and wrote a note to Vivien. She asked her to meet her on the Edge the following day, as she had something very important to say to her.

The next morning dawned bright and cloudless. Clare walked up the steep path of the Edge with a lightened heart. What a perfect day! She was glad that she had decided to say what had to be said out in the open, under the blue sky, instead of in her stuffy little sitting room. She was sorry for Vivien, very sorry indeed, but the thing had got to be done.

She saw a yellow dot, like some yellow flower higher up by the side of the path. As she came nearer, it resolved itself into the figure of Vivien, dressed in a yellow knitted frock, sitting on the short turf, her hands clasped round her knees.

"Good morning," said Clare. "Isn't it a perfect morning?"

"Is it?" said Vivien. "I haven't noticed. What was it you wanted to say to me?"

Clare dropped down on the grass beside her.

"I'm quite out of breath," she said apologetically. "It's a steep pull up here."

"Damn you!" cried Vivien shrilly. "Why can't you say it, you smooth-faced devil, instead of torturing me?"

Clare looked shocked, and Vivien hastily recanted.

"I didn't mean that. I'm sorry, Clare. I am indeed. Only - my nerves are all to pieces, and your sitting here and talking about the weather - well, it got me all rattled."

"You'll have a nervous breakdown if you're not careful," said Clare coldly.

Vivien gave a short laugh.

"Go over the edge? No - I'm not that kind. I'll never be a loony. Now tell me - what's all this about?"

Clare was silent for a moment, then she spoke, looking not at Vivien but steadily out over the sea.

"I thought it only fair to warn you that I can no longer keep silence about - about what happened last year."

"You mean - you'll go to Gerald with that story?"

"Unless you'll tell him yourself. That would be infinitely the better way."

Vivien laughed sharply.

"You know well enough I haven't got the pluck to do that."

Clare did not contradict the assertion. She had had proof before of Vivien's utterly craven temper.

"It would be infinitely better," she repeated.

Again Vivien gave that short, ugly laugh.

"It's your precious conscience, I suppose, that drives you to do this?" she sneered.

"I dare say it seems very strange to you," said Clare quietly. "But it honestly is that."

Vivien's white, set face stared into hers.

"My God!" she said. "I really believe you mean it, too. You actually think that's the reason."

"It is the reason."

"No, it isn't. If so, you'd have done it before - long ago. Why didn't you? No, don't answer. I'll tell you. You got more pleasure out of holding it over me - that's why. You liked to keep me on tenterhooks, and make me wince and squirm. You'd say things - diabolical things - just to torment me and keep me perpetually on the jump. And so they did for a bit - till I got used to them."

"You got to feel secure," said Clare.

"You saw that, didn't you? But even then, you held back, enjoying your sense of power. But now we're going away, escaping from you, perhaps even going to be happy - you couldn't stick that at any price. So your convenient conscience wakes up!"

She stopped, panting. Clare said, still very quietly:

"I can't prevent your saying all these fantastical things, but I can assure you they're not true."

Vivien turned suddenly and caught her by the hand.

"Clare - for God's sake! I've been straight - I've done what you said. I've not seen Cyril again - I swear it."

"That's nothing to do with it."

"Clare - haven't you any pity - any kindness? I'll go down on my knees to you."

"Tell Gerald yourself. If you tell him, he may forgive you."

Vivien laughed scornfully.

"You know Gerald better than that. He'll be rabid - vindictive. He'll make me suffer - he'll make Cyril suffer. That's what I can't bear. Listen, Clare - he's doing so well. He's invented something - machinery, I don't understand about it, but it may be a wonderful success. He's working it out now - his wife supplies the money for it, of course. But she's suspicious - jealous. If she finds out, and she will find out if Gerald starts proceedings for divorce - she'll chuck Cyril - his work, everything. Cyril will be ruined."

"I'm not thinking of Cyril," said Clare. "I'm thinking of Gerald. Why don't you think a little of him, too?"

"Gerald? I don't care that -" she snapped her fingers - "for Gerald. I never have. We might as well have the truth now we're at it. But I do care for Cyril. I'm a rotter, through and through, I admit it. I dare say he's a rotter, too. But my feeling for him - that isn't rotten. I'd die for him, do you hear? I'd die for him!"

"That is easily said," said Clare derisively.

"You think I'm not in earnest? Listen, if you go on with this beastly business, I'll kill myself. Sooner than have Cyril brought into it and ruined, I'd do that."

Clare remained unimpressed.

"You don't believe me?" said Vivien, panting.

"Suicide needs a lot of courage."

Vivien flinched back as though she had been struck.

"You've got me there. Yes, I've no pluck. If there were an easy way -"

"There's an easy way in front of you," said Clare. "You've only got to run straight down the green slope. It would be all over in a couple of minutes. Remember that child last year."

"Yes," said Vivien thoughtfully. "That would be easy - quite easy - if one really wanted to -"

Clare laughed.

Vivien turned to her.

"Let's have this out once more. Can't you see that by keeping silence as long as you have, you've - you've no right to go back on it now? I'll not see Cyril again. I'll be a good wife to Gerald - I swear I will. Or I'll go away and never see him again. Whichever you like. Clare -"

Clare got up.

"I advise you," she said, "to tell your husband yourself... Otherwise - I shall."

"I see," said Vivien softly. "Well - I can't let Cyril suffer -"

She got up - stood still as though considering for a minute or two, then ran lightly down to the path, but instead of stopping, crossed it and went down the slope.

Once she half turned her head and waved a hand gaily to Clare, then she ran on gaily, lightly, as a child might run, out of sight...

Clare stood petrified. Suddenly she heard cries, shouts, a clamor of voices. Then - silence.

She picked her way stiffly down to the path. About a hundred yards away a party of people coming up it had stopped. They were staring and pointing. Clare ran down and joined them.

"Yes, Miss, someone's fallen over the cliff. Two men have gone down - to see."

She waited. Was it an hour, or eternity, or only a few minutes?

A man came toiling up the ascent. It was the vicar in his shirtsleeves. His coat had been taken off to cover what lay below.

"Horrible," he said, his face very white. "Mercifully, death must have been instantaneous."

He saw Clare, and came over to her.

"This must have been a terrible shock to you. You were taking a walk together, I understand?"

Clare heard herself answering mechanically.

Yes. They had just parted. No, Lady Lee's manner had been quite normal. One of the group interposed the information that the lady was laughing and waving her hand. A terribly dangerous place - there ought to be a railing along the path.

The vicar's voice rose again.

"An accident - yes, clearly an accident."

And then suddenly Clare laughed - a hoarse, raucous laugh that echoed along the cliff.

"That's a damned lie," she said. "I killed her."

She felt someone patting her shoulder, a voice spoke soothingly.

"There, there. It's all right. You'll be all right presently."

But Clare was not all right presently. She was never all right again. She persisted in the delusion - certainly a delusion, since at least eight persons had witnessed the scene - that she had killed Vivien Lee.

She was very miserable till Nurse Lauriston came to take charge. Nurse Lauriston was very successful with mental cases.

"Humor them, poor things," she would say comfortably.

So she told Clare that she was a wardress from Pentonville Prison. Clare's sentence, she said, had been commuted to penal servitude for life. A room was fitted up as a cell.

"And now, I think, we shall be quite happy and comfortable," said Nurse Lauriston to the doctor. "Round-bladed knives if you like, doctor, but I don't think there's the least fear of suicide. She's not the type. Too self-centered. Funny how those are often the ones who go over the edge most easily."

CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

I

The big logs crackled merrily in the wide, open fireplace, and above their crackling rose the babel of six tongues all wagging industriously together. The house-party of young people were enjoying their Christmas.

Old Miss Endicott, known to most of those present as Aunt Emily, smiled indulgently on the clatter.

'Bet you you can't eat six mince-pies, Jean.'

'Yes, I can.'

'No, you can't.'

'You'll get the pig out of the trifle if you do.'

'Yes, and three helps of trifle, and two helps of plum-pudding.'

'I hope the pudding will be good,' said Miss Endicott apprehensively. 'But they were only made three days ago. Christmas puddings ought to be made a long time before Christmas. Why, I remember when I was a child, I thought the last Collect before Advent - "Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee ..." - referred in some way to stirring up the Christmas puddings!'

There was a polite pause while Miss Endicott was speaking. Not because any of the young people were in the least interested in her reminiscences of bygone days, but because they felt that some show of attention was due by good manners to their hostess. As soon as she stopped, the babel burst out again. Miss Endicott sighed, and glanced towards the only member of the party whose years approached her own, as though in search of sympathy - a little man with a curious egg-shaped head and fierce upstanding moustaches. Young people were not what they were, reflected Miss Endicott. In olden days there would have been a mute, respectful circle, listening to the pearls of wisdom dropped by their elders. Instead of which there was all this nonsensical chatter, most of it utterly incomprehensible. All the same, they were dear children! Her eyes softened as she passed them in review - tall, freckled Jean; little Nancy Cardell, with her dark, gipsy beauty; the two younger boys home from school, Johnnie and Eric, and their friend, Charlie Pease; and fair, beautiful Evelyn Haworth ... At thought of the last, her brow contracted a little, and her eyes wandered to where her eldest nephew, Roger, sat morosely silent, taking no part in the fun, with his eyes fixed on the exquisite Northern fairness of the young girl.

'Isn't the snow ripping?' cried Johnnie, approaching the window. 'Real Christmas weather. I say, let's have a snowball fight. There's lots of time before dinner, isn't there, Aunt Emily?'

'Yes, my dear. We have it at two o'clock. That reminds me, I had better see to the table.'

She hurried out of the room.

'I tell you what. We'll make a snowman!' screamed Jean.

'Yes, what fun! I know; we'll do a snow statue of M. Poirot. Do you hear, M. Poirot? The great detective, Hercule Poirot, modelled in snow, by six celebrated artists!'

The little man in the chair bowed his acknowledgements with a twinkling eye.

'Make him very handsome, my children,' he urged. 'I insist on that.'

'Ra-ther!'

The troop disappeared like a whirlwind, colliding in the doorway with a stately butler who was entering with a note on a salver. The butler, his calm re-established, advanced towards Poirot.

Poirot took the note and tore it open. The butler departed. Twice the little man read the note through, then he folded it up and put it in his pocket. Not a muscle of his face had moved, and yet the contents of the note were sufficiently surprising. Scrawled in an illiterate hand were the words: 'Don't eat any plum-pudding.'

'Very interesting,' murmured M. Poirot to himself. 'And quite unexpected.'

He looked across to the fireplace. Evelyn Haworth had not gone out with the rest. She was sitting staring at the fire, absorbed in thought, nervously twisting a ring on the third finger of her left hand round and round.

'You are lost in a dream, Mademoiselle,' said the little man at last. 'And the dream is not a happy one, eh?'

She started, and looked across at him uncertainly. He nodded reassuringly.

'It is my business to know things. No, you are not happy. Me, too, I am not very happy. Shall we confide in each other? See you, I have the big sorrow because a friend of mine, a friend of many years, has gone away across the sea to the South America. Sometimes, when we were together, this friend made me impatient, his stupidity enraged me; but now that he is gone, I can remember only his good qualities. That is the way of life, is it not? And now, Mademoiselle, what is your trouble? You are not like me, old and alone - you are young and beautiful; and the man you love loves you - oh yes, it is so: I have been watching him for the last half-hour.'

The girl's colour rose.

'You mean Roger Endicott? Oh, but you have made a mistake; it is not Roger I am engaged to.'

'No, you are engaged to Mr Oscar Levering. I know that perfectly. But why are you engaged to him, since you love another man?'

The girl did not seem to resent his words; indeed, there was something in his manner which made that impossible. He spoke with a mixture of kindliness and authority that was irresistible.

'Tell me all about it,' said Poirot gently; and he added the phrase he had used before, the sound of which was oddly comforting to the girl. 'It is my business to know things.'

'I am so miserable, M. Poirot - so very miserable. You see, once we were very well off. I was supposed to be an heiress, and Roger was only a younger son; and - and although I'm sure he cared for me, he never said anything, but went off to Australia.'

'It is droll, the way they arrange the marriages over here,' interpolated M. Poirot. 'No order. No method. Everything left to chance.'

Evelyn continued.

'Then suddenly we lost all our money. My mother and I were left almost penniless. We moved into a tiny house, and we could just manage. But my mother became very ill. The only chance for her was to have a serious operation and go abroad to a warm climate. And we hadn't the money, M. Poirot - we hadn't the money! It meant that she must die. Mr Levering had proposed to me once or twice already. He again asked me to marry him, and promised to do everything that could be done for my mother. I said yes -

what else could I do? He kept his word. The operation was performed by the greatest specialist of the day, and we went to Egypt for the winter. That was a year ago. My mother is well and strong again; and I - I am to marry Mr Levering after Christmas.'

'I see,' said M. Poirot; 'and in the meantime, M. Roger's elder brother has died, and he has come home - to find his dream shattered. All the same, you are not yet married, Mademoiselle.'

'A Haworth does not break her word, M. Poirot,' said the girl proudly.

Almost as she spoke, the door opened, and a big man with a rubicund face, narrow, crafty eyes, and a bald head stood on the threshold.

'What are you moping in here for, Evelyn? Come out for a stroll.'

'Very well, Oscar.'

She rose listlessly. Poirot rose also and demanded politely:

'Mademoiselle Levering, she is still indisposed?'

'Yes, I'm sorry to say my sister is still in bed. Too bad, to be laid up on Christmas Day.'

'It is indeed,' agreed the detective politely.

A few minutes sufficed for Evelyn to put on her snow-boots and some wraps, and she and her fiancé went out into the snow-covered grounds. It was an ideal Christmas Day, crisp and sunny. The rest of the house-party were busy with the erection of the snowman. Levering and Evelyn paused to watch them.

'Love's young dream, yah!' cried Johnnie, and threw a snowball at them.

'What do you think of it, Evelyn?' cried Jean. 'M. Hercule Poirot, the great detective.'

'Wait till the moustache goes on,' said Eric. 'Nancy's going to clip off a bit of her hair for it. Vivent les braves Belges! Pom, pom!'

'Fancy having a real-live detective in the house!' - this from Charlie - 'I wish there could be a murder, too.'

'Oh, oh, oh!' cried Jean, dancing about. 'I've got an idea. Let's get up a murder - a spoof one, I mean. And take him in. Oh, do let's - it would be no end of a rag.'

Five voices began to talk at once.

'How should we do it?'

'Awful groans!'

'No, you stupid, out here.'

'Footprints in the snow, of course.'

'Jean in her nightie.'

'You do it with red paint.'

'In your hand - and clap it to your head.'

'I say, I wish we had a revolver.'

'I tell you, Father and Aunt Em won't hear. Their rooms are the other side of the house.'

'No, he won't mind a bit; he's no end of a sport.'

'Yes, but what kind of red paint? Enamel?'

'We could get some in the village.'

'Fat-head, not on Christmas Day.'

'No, watercolour. Crimson lake.'

'Jean can be it.'

'Never mind if you are cold. It won't be for long.'

'No, Nancy can be it, Nancy's got those posh pyjamas.'

'Let's see if Graves knows where there's any paint.'

A stampede to the house.

'In a brown study, Endicott?' said Levering, laughing disagreeably.

Roger roused himself abruptly. He had heard little of what had passed.

'I was just wondering,' he said quietly.

'Wondering?'

'Wondering what M. Poirot was doing down here at all.'

Levering seemed taken aback; but at that moment the big gong pealed out, and everybody went in to Christmas dinner. The curtains were drawn in the dining-room, and the lights on, illuminating the long table piled high with crackers and other decorations. It was a real old-fashioned Christmas dinner. At one end of the table was the Squire, red-faced and jovial; his sister faced him at the other. M. Poirot, in honour of the occasion, had donned a red waistcoat, and his plumpness, and the way he carried his head on one side, reminded one irresistibly of a robin redbreast.

The Squire carved rapidly, and everyone fell to on turkey. The carcasses of two turkeys were removed, and there fell a breathless hush. Then Graves, the butler, appeared in state, bearing the plum-pudding aloft - a gigantic pudding wreathed in flames. A hullabaloo broke out.

'Quick. Oh! my piece is going out. Buck up, Graves; unless it's still burning, I shan't get my wish.'

Nobody had leisure to notice a curious expression on the face of M. Poirot as he surveyed the portion of pudding on his plate. Nobody observed the lightning glance he sent round the table. With a faint, puzzled frown he began to eat his pudding. Everybody began to eat pudding. The conversation was more subdued. Suddenly the Squire uttered an exclamation. His face became purple and his hand went to his mouth.

'Confound it, Emily!' he roared. 'Why do you let the cook put glass in the puddings?'

'Glass?' cried Miss Endicott, astonished.

The Squire withdrew the offending substance from his mouth.

'Might have broken a tooth,' he grumbled. 'Or swallowed it and had appendicitis.'

In front of each person was a small finger-bowl of water, designed to receive the sixpences and other matters found in the trifle. Mr Endicott dropped the piece of glass into this, rinsed it and held it up.

'God bless my soul!' he ejaculated. 'It's a red stone out of one of the cracker brooches.'

'You permit?' Very deftly, M. Poirot took it from his fingers and examined it attentively. As the Squire had said, it was a big red stone, the colour of a ruby. The light gleamed from its facets as he turned it about.

'Gee!' cried Eric. 'Suppose it's real.'

'Silly boy!' said Jean scornfully. 'A ruby that size would be worth thousands and thousands and thousands - wouldn't it, M. Poirot?'

'Extraordinary how well they get up these cracker things,' murmured Miss Endicott. 'But how did it get into the pudding?"

Undoubtedly that was the question of the hour. Every hypothesis was exhausted. Only M. Poirot said nothing, but carelessly, as though thinking of something else, he dropped the stone into his pocket.

After dinner he paid a visit to the kitchen.

The cook was rather flustered. To be questioned by a member of the house-party, and the foreign gentleman too! But she did her best to answer his questions. The puddings had been made three days ago - 'The day you arrived, Sir.' Everyone had come out into the kitchen to have a stir and wish. An old custom - perhaps they didn't have it abroad? After that the puddings were boiled, and then they were put in a row on the top shelf in the larder. Was there anything special to distinguish this pudding from the others? No, she didn't think so. Except that it was in an aluminium pudding-basin, and the others were in china ones. Was it the pudding originally intended for Christmas Day? It was funny that he should ask that. No, indeed! The Christmas pudding was always boiled in a big white china mould with a pattern of holly-leaves. But this very morning (the cook's red face became wrathful) Gladys, the kitchen-maid, sent to fetch it down for the final boiling, had managed to drop and break it. 'And of course, seeing that there might be splinters in it, I wouldn't send it to table, but took the big aluminium one instead.'

M. Poirot thanked her for her information. He went out of the kitchen, smiling a little to himself, as though satisfied with the information he had obtained. And the fingers of his right hand played with something in his pocket.

II

'M. Poirot! M. Poirot! Do wake up! Something dreadful's happened!'

Thus Johnnie in the early hours of the following morning. M. Poirot sat up in bed. He wore a night-cap. The contrast between the dignity of his countenance and the rakish tilt of the nightcap was certainly droll; but its effect on Johnnie seemed disproportionate. But for his words, one might have fancied that the boy was violently amused about something. Curious sounds came from outside the door, too, suggesting soda-water syphons in difficulty.

'Come down at once, please,' continued Johnnie, his voice shaking slightly. 'Someone's been killed.' He turned away.

'Aha, that is serious!' said M. Poirot.

He arose, and, without unduly hurrying himself, made a partial toilet. Then he followed Johnnie down the stairs. The house-party was clustered round the door into the garden. Their countenances all expressed intense emotion. At sight of him Eric was seized with a violent choking fit.

Jean came forward and laid her hand on M. Poirot's arm.

'Look!' she said, and pointed dramatically through the open door.

'Mon Dieu!' ejaculated M. Poirot. 'It is like a scene on the stage.'

His remark was not inapposite. More snow had fallen during the night, the world looked white and ghostly in the faint light of the early dawn. The expanse of white lay unbroken save for what looked like on splash of vivid scarlet.

Nancy Cardell lay motionless on the snow. She was clad in scarlet silk pyjamas, her small feet were bare, her arms were spread wide. Her head was turned aside and hidden by the mass of her clustering black hair. Deadly still she lay, and from her left side rose up the hilt of a dagger, whilst on the snow there was an ever-widening patch of crimson.

Poirot went out into the snow. He did not go to where the girl's body lay, but kept to the path. Two tracks of foot-marks, a man's and a woman's, led to where the tragedy had occurred. The man's footprints went away in the opposite direction alone. Poirot stood on the path, stroking his chin reflectively.

Suddenly Oscar Levering burst out of the house.

'Good God!' he cried. 'What's this?'

His excitement was a contrast to the other's calm.

'It looks,' said M. Poirot thoughtfully, 'like murder.'

Eric had another violent attack of coughing.

'But we must do something,' cried the other. 'What shall we do?'

'There is only one thing to be done,' said M. Poirot. 'Send for the police.'

'Oh!' said everybody at once.

M. Poirot looked inquiringly at them.

'Certainly,' he said. 'It is the only thing to be done. Who will go?'

There was a pause, then Johnnie came forward.

'Rag's over,' he declared. 'I say, M. Poirot, I hope you won't be too mad with us. It's all a joke, you know - got up between us - just to pull your leg. Nancy's only shamming.'

M. Poirot regarded him without visible emotion, save that his eyes twinkled a moment.

'You mock yourselves at me, is that it?' he inquired placidly.

'I say, I'm awfully sorry really. We shouldn't have done it. Beastly bad taste. I apologize, I really do.'

'You need not apologize,' said the other in a peculiar voice.

Johnnie turned.

'I say, Nancy, get up!' he cried. 'Don't lie there all day.'

But the figure on the ground did not move.

'Get up,' cried Johnnie again.

Still Nancy did not move, and suddenly a feeling of nameless dread came over the boy. He turned to Poirot.

'What - what's the matter? Why doesn't she get up?'

'Come with me,' said Poirot curtly.

He strode over the snow. He had waved the others back, and he was careful not to infringe on the other footmarks. The boy followed him, frightened and unbelieving. Poirot knelt down by the girl, then he signed to Johnnie.

'Feel her hand and pulse.'

Wondering, the boy bent down, then started back with a cry. The hand and arm were stiff and cold, and no vestige of a pulse was to be found.

'She's dead!' he gasped. 'But how? Why?'

M. Poirot passed over the first part of the question.

'Why?' he said musingly. 'I wonder.' Then, suddenly leaning across the dead girl's body, he unclasped her other hand, which was tightly clenched over something. Both he and the boy uttered an exclamation. In the palm of Nancy's hand was a red stone that winked and flashed forth fire.

'Aha!' cried M. Poirot. Swift as a flash his hand flew to his pocket, and came away empty.

'The cracker ruby,' said Johnnie wonderingly. Then, as his companion bent to examine the dagger, and the stained snow, he cried out: 'Surely it can't be blood, M. Poirot. It's paint. It's only paint.'

Poirot straightened himself.

'Yes,' he said quietly. 'You are right. It's only paint.'

'Then how -' The boy broke off. Poirot finished the sentence for him.

'How was she killed? That we must find out. Did she eat or drink anything this morning?'

He was retracing his steps to the path where the others waited as he spoke. Johnnie was close behind him.

'She had a cup of tea,' said the boy. 'Mr Levering made it for her. He's got a spirit-lamp in his room.'

Johnnie's voice was loud and clear. Levering heard the words.

'Always take a spirit-lamp about with me,' he declared. 'Most handy thing in the world. My sister's been glad enough of it this visit - not liking to worry the servants all the time you know.'

M. Poirot's eyes fell, almost apologetically as it seemed, to Mr Levering's feet, which were encased in carpet slippers.

'You have changed your boots, I see,' he murmured gently.

Levering stared at him.

'But, M. Poirot,' cried Jean, 'what are we to do?'

'There is only one thing to be done, as I said just now, Mademoiselle. Send for the police.'

'I'll go,' cried Levering. 'It won't take me a minute to put on my boots. You people had better not stay out here in the cold.'

He disappeared into the house.

'He is so thoughtful, that Mr Levering,' murmured Poirot softly. 'Shall we take his advice?'

'What about waking father and - and everybody?'

'No,' said M. Poirot sharply. 'It is quite unnecessary. Until the police come, nothing must be touched out here; so shall we go inside? To the library? I have a little history to recount to you which may distract your minds from this sad tragedy.'

He led the way, and they followed him.

'The story is about a ruby,' said M. Poirot, ensconcing himself in a comfortable arm-chair. 'A very celebrated ruby which belonged to a very celebrated man. I will not tell you his name - but he is one of the great ones of the earth. Eh bien, this great man, he arrived in London, incognito. And since, though a great man, he was also a young and a foolish man, he became entangled with a pretty young lady. The pretty young lady, she did not care much for the man, but she did care for his possessions - so much so that she disappeared one day with the historic ruby which had belonged to his house for generations. The poor young man, he was in a quandary. He is shortly to be married to a noble Princess, and he does not want the scandal. Impossible to go to the police, he comes to me, Hercule Poirot, instead. "Recover for me my ruby," he says. Eh bien, I know something of this young lady. She has a brother, and between them they have put through many a clever coup. I happen to know where they are staying for Christmas. By the kindness of Mr Endicott, whom I chance to have met, I, too, become a guest. But when this pretty young lady hears that I am arriving, she is greatly alarmed. She is intelligent, and she knows that I am after the ruby. She must hide it immediately in a safe place; and figure to yourself where she hides it - in a plum-pudding! Yes, you may well say, oh! She is stirring with the rest, you see, and she pops it into a pudding-bowl of aluminium that is different from the others. By a strange chance, that pudding came to be used on Christmas Day.'

The tragedy forgotten for the moment, they stared at him open-mouthed.

'After that,' continued the little man, 'she took to her bed.' He drew out his watch and looked at it. 'The household is astir. Mr Levering is a long time fetching the police, is he not? I fancy that his sister went with him.'

Evelyn rose with a cry, her eyes fixed on Poirot.

'And I also fancy that they will not return. Oscar Levering has been sailing close to the wind for a long time, and this is the end. He and his sister will pursue their activities abroad for a time under a different name. I alternately tempted and frightened him this morning. By casting aside all pretence he could gain possession of the ruby whilst we were in the house and he was supposed to be fetching the police. But it meant burning his boats. Still, with a case being built up against him for murder, flight seemed clearly indicated.'

'Did he kill Nancy?' whispered Jean.

Poirot rose.

'Supposing we visit once more the scene of the crime,' he suggested.

He led the way, and they followed him. But a simultaneous gasp broke from their lips as they passed outside the house. No trace of the tragedy remained; the snow was smooth and unbroken.

'Crikey!' said Eric, sinking down on the step. 'It wasn't all a dream, was it?'

'Most extraordinary,' said M. Poirot, 'The Mystery of the Disappearing Body.' His eyes twinkled gently.

Jean came up to him in sudden suspicion.

'M. Poirot, you haven't - you aren't - I say, you haven't been spoofing us all the time, have you? Oh, I do believe you have!'

'It is true, my children. I knew about your little plot, you see, and I arranged a little counterplot of my own. Ah, here is Mlle Nancy - and none the worse, I hope, after her magnificent acting of the comedy.'

It was indeed Nancy Cardell in the flesh, her eyes shining and her whole person exuberant with health and vigour.

'You have not caught cold? You drank the tisane I sent to your room?' demanded Poirot accusingly.

'I took one sip and that was enough. I'm all right. Did I do it well, M. Poirot? Oh, my arm hurts after that tourniquet!'

'You were splendid, petite. But shall we explain to the others? They are still in the fog, I perceive. See you, mes enfants, I went to Mlle Nancy, told her that I knew all about your little complot, and asked her if she would act a part for me. She did it very cleverly. She induced Mr Levering to make her a cup of tea, and also managed that he should be the one chosen to leave footprints on the snow. So when the time came, and he thought that by some fatality she was really dead, I had all the materials to frighten him with. What happened after we went into the house, Mademoiselle?'

'He came down with his sister, snatched the ruby out of my hand, and off they went post-haste.'

'But I say, M. Poirot, what about the ruby?' cried Eric. 'Do you mean to say you've let them have that?'

Poirot's face fell, as he faced a circle of accusing eyes.

'I shall recover it yet,' he said feebly; but he perceived that he had gone down in their estimation.

'Well, I do think!' began Johnnie. 'To let them get away with the ruby -'

But Jean was sharper.

'He's spoofing us again!' she cried. 'You are, aren't you?'

'Feel in my left-hand pocket, Mademoiselle.'

Jean thrust in an eager hand, and drew it out again with a squeal of triumph. She held aloft the great ruby in its crimson splendour.

'You see,' explained Poirot, 'the other was a paste replica I brought with me from London.'

'Isn't he clever?' demanded Jean ecstatically.

'There's one thing you haven't told us,' said Johnnie suddenly. 'How did you know about the rag? Did Nancy tell you?'

Poirot shook his head.

'Then how did you know?'

'It is my business to know things,' said M. Poirot, smiling a little as he watched Evelyn Haworth and Roger Endicott walking down the path together.

'Yes, but do tell us. Oh, do, please! Dear M. Poirot, please tell us!'

He was surrounded by a circle of flushed, eager faces.

'You really wish that I should solve for you this mystery?'

'Yes:

'I do not think I can.'

'Why not?'

'Ma foi, you will be so disappointed.'

'Oh, do tell us! How did you know?'

'Well; you see, I was in the library -'

'Yes?'

'And you were discussing your plans just outside - and the library window was open.'

'Is that all?' said Eric in disgust. 'How simple!'

'Is it not?' said M. Poirot, smiling.

'At all events, we know everything now,' said Jean in a satisfied voice.

'Do we?' muttered M. Poirot to himself, as he went into the house. 'I do not - I, whose business it is to know things.'

And, for perhaps the twentieth time, he drew from his pocket a rather dirty piece of paper.

'Don't eat any plum-pudding -'

M. Poirot shook his head perplexedly. At the same moment he became aware of a peculiar gasping sound very near his feet. He looked down and perceived a small creature in a print dress. In her left hand was a dust-pan, and in the right a brush.

'And who may you be, mon enfant?' inquired M. Poirot.

'Annie 'Icks, please, Sir. Between-maid.'

M. Poirot had an inspiration. He handed her the letter.

'Did you write that, Annie?'

'I didn't mean any 'arm, Sir.'

He smiled at her.

'Of course you didn't. Suppose you tell me all about it?'

'It was them two, Sir - Mr Levering and his sister. None of us can abide 'em; and she wasn't ill a bit - we could all tell that. So I thought something queer was going on, and I'll tell you straight, Sir, I listened at the door, and I heard him say as plain as plain, "This fellow Poirot must be got out of the way as soon as possible." And then he says to 'er, meaning-like, "Where did you put it?" And she answers, "In the pudding." And so I saw they meant to poison you in the Christmas pudding, and I didn't know what to do. Cook wouldn't listen to the likes of me. And then I thought of writing a warning, and I put it in the 'all where Mr Graves would be sure to see it and take it to you.'

Annie paused breathless. Poirot surveyed her gravely for some minutes.

'You read too many novelettes, Annie,' he said at last. 'But you have the good heart, and a certain amount of intelligence. When I return to London I will send you an excellent book upon le ménage, also the Lives of the Saints, and a work upon the economic position of woman.'

Leaving Annie gasping anew, he turned and crossed the hall. He had meant to go into the library, but through the open door he saw a dark head and a fair one, very close together, and he paused where he stood. Suddenly a pair of arms slipped round his neck.

'If you will stand just under the mistletoe!' said Jean.

'Me too,' said Nancy.

M. Poirot enjoyed it all - he enjoyed it very much indeed.

THE LONELY GOD

He stood on a shelf in the British Museum, alone and forlorn amongst a company of obviously more important deities. Ranged round the four walls, these greater personages all seemed to display an overwhelming sense of their own superiority. The pedestal of each was duly inscribed with the land and race that had been proud to possess him. There was no doubt of their position; they were divinities of importance and recognized as such.

Only the little god in the corner was aloof and remote from their company. Roughly hewn out of grey stone, his features almost totally obliterated by time and exposure, he sat there in isolation, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands; a lonely little god in a strange country.

There was no inscription to tell the land whence he came. He was indeed lost, without honor or renown, a pathetic little figure very far from home. No one noticed him, no one stopped to look at him. Why should they? He was so insignificant, a block of grey stone in a corner. On either side of him were two Mexican gods worn smooth with age, placid idols with folded hands, and cruel mouths curved in a smile that showed openly their contempt of humanity. There was also a rotund, violently self-assertive little god, with a clenched fist, who evidently suffered from a swollen sense of his own importance, but passers-by stopped to give him a glance sometimes, even if it was only to laugh at the contrast of his absurd pomposity with the smiling indifference of his Mexican companions.

And the little lost god sat on there hopelessly, his head in his hands, as he had sat year in and year out, till one day the impossible happened, and he found - a worshipper.

"Any letters for me?"

The hall porter removed a packet of letters from a pigeonhole, gave a cursory glance through them, and said in a wooden voice:

"Nothing for you, sir."

Frank Oliver sighed as he walked out of the club again. There was no particular reason why there should have been anything for him. Very few people wrote to him. Ever since he had returned from Burma in the spring, he had become conscious of a growing and increasing loneliness.

Frank Oliver was a man just over forty, and the last eighteen years of his life had been spent in various parts of the globe, with brief furloughs in England.

Now that he had retired and come home to live for good, he realized for the first time how very much alone in the world he was.

True, there was his sister Greta, married to a Yorkshire clergyman, very busy with parochial duties and the bringing up of a family of small children. Greta was naturally very fond of her only brother, but equally naturally she had very little time to give him. Then there was his old friend Tom Hurley. Tom was married to a nice, bright, cheerful girl, very energetic and practical, of whom Frank was secretly afraid. She told him brightly that he must not be a crabbed old bachelor, and was always producing "nice girls." Frank Oliver found that he never had anything to say to these "nice girls"; they persevered with him for a while, then gave him up as hopeless.

And yet he was not really unsociable. He had a great longing for companionship and sympathy, and ever since he had been back in England he had become aware of a growing discouragement. He had been away too long, he was out of tune with the times. He spent long, aimless days wandering about, wondering what on earth he was to do with himself next.

It was on one of these days that he strolled into the British Museum. He was interested in Asiatic curiosities, and so it was that he chanced upon the lonely god. Its charm held him at once. Here was something vaguely akin to himself; here, too, was someone lost and astray in a strange land. He became in the habit of paying frequent visits to the Museum, just to glance in on the little grey stone figure, in its obscure place on the high shelf.

"Rough luck on the little chap," he thought to himself. "Probably had a lot of fuss made about him once, kowtowing and offerings and all the rest of it."

He had begun to feel such a proprietary right in his little friend (it really almost amounted to a sense of actual ownership) that he was inclined to be resentful when he found that the little god had made a second conquest. He had discovered the lonely god; nobody else, he felt, had a right to interfere.

But after the first flash of indignation, he was forced to smile at himself. For this second worshipper was such a little bit of a thing, such a ridiculous, pathetic creature, in a shabby black coat and skirt that had seen their best days. She was young, a little over twenty he should judge, with fair hair and blue eyes, and a wistful droop to her mouth.

Her hat especially appealed to his chivalry. She had evidently trimmed it herself, and it made such a brave attempt to be smart that its failure was pathetic. She was obviously a lady, though a poverty-stricken one, and he immediately decided in his own mind that she was a governess and alone in the world.

He soon found out that her days for visiting the god were Tuesdays and Fridays, and she always arrived at ten o'clock, as soon as the Museum was open. At first he disliked her intrusion, but little by little it began to form one of the principal interests of his monotonous life. Indeed, the fellow devotee was fast ousting the object of devotion from his position of preeminence. The days that he did not see the "Little Lonely Lady," as he called her to himself, were blank.

Perhaps she, too, was equally interested in him, though she endeavored to conceal the fact with studious unconcern. But little by little a sense of fellowship was slowly growing between them, though as yet they had exchanged no spoken word. The truth of the matter was, the man was too shy! He argued to himself that very likely she had not even noticed him (some inner sense gave the lie to that instantly), that she would consider it a great impertinence, and, finally, that he had not the least idea what to say.

But Fate, or the little god, was kind, and sent him an inspiration - or what he regarded as such. With infinite delight in his own cunning, he purchased a woman's handkerchief, a frail little affair of cambric and lace which he almost feared to touch, and, thus armed, he followed her as she departed, and stopped her in the Egyptian room.

"Excuse me, but is this yours?" He tried to speak with airy unconcern, and signally failed.

The Lonely Lady took it, and made a pretence of examining it with minute care.

"No, it is not mine." She handed it back, and added, with what he felt guiltily was a suspicious glance: "It's quite a new one. The price is still on it."

But he was unwilling to admit that he had been found out. He started on an over-plausible flow of explanation.

"You see, I picked it up under that big case. It was just by the farthest leg of it." He derived great relief from this detailed account. "So, as you had been standing there, I thought it must be yours and came after you with it."

She said again: "No, it isn't mine," and added, as if with a sense of ungraciousness, "Thank you."

The conversation came to an awkward standstill. The girl stood there, pink and embarrassed, evidently uncertain how to retreat with dignity.

He made a desperate effort to take advantage of his opportunity.

"I - I didn't know there was anyone else in London who cared for our little lonely god till you came."

She answered eagerly, forgetting her reserve: "Do you call him that too?"

Apparently, if she had noticed his pronoun, she did not resent it. She had been startled into sympathy, and his quiet "Of course!" seemed the most natural rejoinder in the world.

Again there was a silence, but this time it was a silence born of understanding.

It was the Lonely Lady who broke it in a sudden remembrance of the conventionalities.

She drew herself up to her full height, and with an almost ridiculous assumption of dignity for so small a person, she observed in chilling accents: "I must be going now. Good morning." And with a slight, stiff inclination of her head, she walked away, holding herself very erect.

By all acknowledged standards Frank Oliver ought to have felt rebuffed, but it is a regrettable sign of his rapid advance in depravity that he merely murmured to himself: "Little darling!"

He was soon to repent of his temerity, however. For ten days his little lady never came near the Museum. He was in despair! He had frightened her away! She would never come back! He was a brute, a villain! He would never see her again!

In his distress he haunted the British Museum all day long. She might merely have changed her time of coming. He soon began to know the adjacent rooms by heart, and he contracted a lasting hatred of mummies. The guardian policeman observed him with suspicion when he spent three hours poring over Assyrian hieroglyphics, and the contemplation of endless vases of all ages nearly drove him mad with boredom.

But one day his patience was rewarded. She came again, rather pinker than usual, and trying hard to appear self-possessed.

He greeted her with cheerful friendliness.

"Good morning. It is ages since you've been here."

"Good morning."

She let the words slip out with icy frigidity, and coldly ignored the end part of his sentence.

But he was desperate.

"Look here!" He stood confronting her with pleading eyes that reminded her irresistibly of a large, faithful dog. "Won't you be friends? I'm all alone in London - all alone in the world, and I believe you are, too. We ought to be friends. Besides, our little god has introduced us."

She looked up half doubtfully, but there was a faint smile quivering at the corners of her mouth.

"Has he?"

"Of course!"

It was the second time he had used this extremely positive form of assurance, and now, as before, it did not fail of its effect, for after a minute or two the girl said, in that slightly royal manner of hers:

"Very well."

"That's splendid," he replied gruffly, but there was something in his voice as he said it that made the girl glance at him swiftly, with a sharp impulse of pity.

And so the queer friendship began. Twice a week they met, at the shrine of a little heathen idol. At first they confined their conversation solely to him. He was, as it were, at once a palliation of, and an excuse for their friendship. The question of his origin was widely discussed. The man insisted on attributing to him the most bloodthirsty characteristics. He depicted him as the terror and dread of his native land, insatiable for human sacrifice, and bowed down to by his people in fear and trembling. In the contrast between his former greatness and his present insignificance there lay, according to the man, all the pathos of the situation.

The Lonely Lady would have none of this theory. He was essentially a kind little god, she insisted. She doubted whether he had ever been very powerful. If he had been so, she argued, he would not now be lost and friendless, and, anyway, he was a dear little god, and she loved him, and she hated to think of him sitting there day after day with all those other horrid, supercilious things jeering at him, because you could see they did! After this vehement outburst the little lady was quite out of breath.

That topic exhausted, they naturally began to talk of themselves. He found out that his surmise was correct. She was a nursery governess to a family of children who lived at Hampstead. He conceived an instant dislike of these children; of Ted, who was five and really not naughty, only mischievous; of the twins who were rather trying, and of Molly, who wouldn't do anything she was told, but was such a dear you couldn't be cross with her!

"Those children bully you," he said grimly and accusingly to her.

"They do not," she retorted with spirit. "I am extremely stern with them."

"Oh! Ye gods!" he laughed. But she made him apologize humbly for his scepticism.

She was an orphan, she told him, quite alone in the world.

Gradually he told her something of his own life: of his official life, which had been painstaking and mildly successful; and of his unofficial pastime, which was the spoiling of yards of canvas.

"Of course, I don't know anything about it," he explained. "But I have always felt I could paint something someday. I can sketch pretty decently, but I'd like to do a real picture of something. A chap who knew once told me that my technique wasn't bad."

She was interested, pressed for details.

"I am sure you paint awfully well."

He shook his head.

"No, I've begun several things lately and chucked them up in despair. I always thought that, when I had the time, it would be plain sailing. I have been storing up that idea for years, but now, like everything else, I suppose, I've left it too late."

"Nothing's too late - ever," said the little lady, with the vehement earnestness of the very young.

He smiled down on her. "You think not, child? It's too late for some things for me."

And the little lady laughed at him and nicknamed him Methuselah.

They were beginning to feel curiously at home in the British Museum. The solid and sympathetic police man who patrolled the galleries was a man of tact, and on the appearance of the couple he usually found that his onerous duties of guardianship were urgently needed in the adjoining Assyrian room.

One day the man took a bold step. He invited her out to tea!

At first she demurred.

"I have no time. I am not free. I can come some mornings because the children have French lessons."

"Nonsense," said the man. "You could manage one day. Kill off an aunt or a second cousin or something, but come. We'll go to a little ABC shop near here, and have buns for tea! I know you must love buns!"

"Yes, the penny kind with currants!"

"And a lovely glaze on top -"

"They are such plump, dear things!"

"There is something," Frank Oliver said solemnly, "infinitely comforting about a bun!"

So it was arranged, and the little governess came, wearing quite an expensive hothouse rose in her belt in honor of the occasion.

He had noticed that, of late, she had a strained, worried look, and it was more apparent than ever this afternoon as she poured out the tea at the little marble-topped table.

"Children been bothering you?" he asked solicitously.

She shook her head. She had seemed curiously disinclined to talk about the children lately.

"They're all right. I never mind them."

"Don't you?"

His sympathetic tone seemed to distress her unwarrantably.

"Oh, no. It was never that. But - but, indeed, I was lonely. I was indeed!" Her tone was almost pleading.

He said quickly, touched: "Yes, yes, child. I know - I know."

After a minute's pause he remarked in a cheerful tone: "Do you know, you haven't even asked my name yet?"

She held up a protesting hand.

"Please, I don't want to know it. And don't ask mine. Let us be just two lonely people who've come together and made friends. It makes it so much more wonderful - and - and different."

He said slowly and thoughtfully: "Very well. In an otherwise lonely world we'll be two people who have just each other."

It was a little different from her way of putting it, and she seemed to find it difficult to go on with the conversation. Instead, she bent lower and lower over her plate, till only the crown of her hat was visible.

"That's rather a nice hat," he said by way of restoring her equanimity.

"I trimmed it myself," she informed him proudly.

"I thought so the moment I saw it," he answered, saying the wrong thing with cheerful ignorance.

"I'm afraid it is not as fashionable as I meant it to be!"

"I think it's a perfectly lovely hat," he said loyally.

Again constraint settled down upon them. Frank Oliver broke the silence bravely.

"Little Lady, I didn't mean to tell you yet, but I can't help it. I love you. I want you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you standing there in your little black suit. Dearest, if two lonely people were together - why - there would be no more loneliness. And I'd work, oh! how I'd work! I'd paint you. I could, I know I could. Oh! my little girl, I can't live without you. I can't indeed -"

His little lady was looking at him very steadily. But what she said was quite the last thing he expected her to say. Very quietly and distinctly she said: "You bought that handkerchief!"

He was amazed at this proof of feminine perspicacity, and still more amazed at her remembering it against him now. Surely, after this lapse of time, it might have been forgiven him.

"Yes, I did," he acknowledged humbly. "I wanted an excuse to speak to you. Are you very angry?"

He waited meekly for her words of condemnation.

"I think it was sweet of you!" cried the little lady with vehemence. "Just sweet of you!" Her voice ended uncertainly.

Frank Oliver went on in his gruff tone:

"Tell me, child, is it impossible? I know I'm an ugly, rough old fellow -"

The Lonely Lady interrupted him.

"No, you're not! I wouldn't have you different, not in any way. I love you just as you are, do you understand? Not because I'm sorry for you, not because I'm alone in the world and want someone to be fond of me and take care of me - but because you're just - you. Now do you understand?"

"Is it true?" he asked half in a whisper.

And she answered steadily: "Yes, it's true -"

The wonder of it overpowered them.

At last he said whimsically: "So we've fallen upon heaven, dearest!"

"In an ABC shop," she answered in a voice that held tears and laughter.

But terrestrial heavens are short-lived. The little lady started up with an exclamation.

"I'd no idea how late it was! I must go at once."

"I'll see you home."

"No, no, no!"

He was forced to yield to her insistence, and merely accompanied her as far as the Tube station.

"Good-bye, dearest." She clung to his hand with an intensity that he remembered afterwards.

"Only good-bye till tomorrow," he answered cheerfully. "Ten o'clock as usual, and we'll tell each other our names and our histories, and be frightfully practical and prosaic."

"Good-bye to - heaven, though," she whispered.

"It will be with us always, sweetheart!"

She smiled back at him, but with that same sad appeal that disquieted him and which he could not fathom. Then the relentless lift dragged her down out of sight.

He was strangely disturbed by those last words of hers, but he put them resolutely out of his mind and substituted radiant anticipations of tomorrow in their stead.

At ten o'clock he was there, in the accustomed place. For the first time he noticed how malevolently the other idols looked down upon him. It almost seemed as if they were possessed of some secret evil knowledge affecting him, over which they were gloating. He was uneasily aware of their dislike.

The little lady was late. Why didn't she come? The atmosphere of this place was getting on his nerves. Never had his own little friend (their god) seemed so hopelessly impotent as today. A helpless lump of stone, hugging his own despair!

His cogitations were interrupted by a small, sharp-faced boy who had stepped up to him, and was earnestly scrutinizing him from head to foot. Apparently satisfied with the result of his observations, he held out a letter.

"For me?"

It had no superscription. He took it, and the sharp boy decamped with extraordinary rapidity.

Frank Oliver read the letter slowly and unbelievingly. It was quite short.

Dearest,

I can never marry you. Please forget that I ever came into your Life at all, and try to forgive me if I have hurt you. Don't try to find me, because it will be no good. It is really 'goodbye."

The Lonely Lady

There was a postscript which had evidently been scribbled at the last moment:

I do love you. I do indeed.

And that little impulsive postscript was all the comfort he had in the weeks that followed. Needless to say, he disobeyed her injunction "not to try to find her," but all in vain. She had vanished completely, and he had no clue to trace her by. He advertised despairingly, imploring her in veiled terms at least to explain the mystery, but blank silence rewarded his efforts. She was gone, never to return.

And then it was that for the first time in his life he really began to paint. His technique had always been good. Now craftsmanship and inspiration went hand in hand.

The picture that made his name and brought him renown was accepted and hung in the Academy, and was accounted to be the picture of the year, no less for the exquisite treatment of the subject than for the masterly workmanship and technique. A certain amount of mystery, too, rendered it more interesting to the general outside public.

His inspiration had come quite by chance. A fairy story in a magazine had taken a hold on his imagination. It was the story of a fortunate Princess who had always had everything she wanted. Did she express a wish? It was instantly gratified. A desire? It was granted. She had a devoted father and mother, great riches, beautiful clothes and jewels, slaves to wait upon her and fulfil her lightest whim, laughing maidens to bear her company, all that the heart of a Princess could desire. The handsomest and richest Princes paid her court and sued in vain for her hand, and were willing to kill any number of dragons to prove their devotion. And yet, the loneliness of the Princess was greater than that of the poorest beggar in the land.

He read no more. The ultimate fate of the Princess interested him not at all. A picture had risen up before him of the pleasure-laden Princess with the sad, solitary soul, surfeited with happiness, suffocated with luxury, starving in the Palace of Plenty.

He began painting with furious energy. The fierce joy of creation possessed him.

He represented the Princess surrounded by her court, reclining on a divan. A riot of Eastern color pervaded the picture. The Princess wore a marvelous gown of strange-colored embroideries; her golden hair fell round her, and on her head was a heavy jeweled circlet. Her maidens surrounded her, and Princes knelt at her feet bearing rich gifts. The whole scene was one of luxury and richness.

But the face of the Princess was turned away; she was oblivious of the laughter and mirth around her. Her gaze was fixed on a dark and shadowy corner where stood a seemingly incongruous object: a little grey stone idol with its head buried in its hand in a quaint abandonment of despair.

Was it so incongruous? The eyes of the young Princess rested on it with a strange sympathy, as though a dawning sense of her own isolation drew her glance irresistibly. They were akin, these two. The world was at her feet - yet she was alone: a Lonely Princess looking at a lonely little god.

All London talked of this picture, and Greta wrote a few hurried words of congratulation from Yorkshire, and Tom Hurley's wife besought Frank Oliver to "come for a weekend and meet a really delightful girl, a great admirer of your work." Frank Oliver laughed once sardonically, and threw the letter into the fire. Success had come - but what was the use of it? He only wanted one thing - that little lonely lady who had gone out of his life forever.

It was Ascot Cup Day, and the policeman on duty in a certain section of the British Museum rubbed his eyes and wondered if he were dreaming, for one does not expect to see there an Ascot vision, in a lace frock and a marvelous hat, a veritable nymph as imagined by a Parisian genius. The policeman stared in rapturous admiration.

The lonely god was not perhaps so surprised. He may have been in his way a powerful little god; at any rate, here was one worshipper brought back to the fold.

The Little Lonely Lady was staring up at him, and her lips moved in a rapid whisper.

"Dear little god, oh! dear little god, please help me! Oh, please do help me!"

Perhaps the little god was flattered. Perhaps, if he was indeed the ferocious, unappeasable deity Frank Oliver had imagined him, the long weary years and the march of civilization had softened his cold, stone heart. Perhaps the Lonely Lady had been right all along and he was really a kind little god. Perhaps it was merely a coincidence. However that may be, it was at that very moment that Frank Oliver walked slowly and sadly through the door of the Assyrian room.

He raised his head and saw the Parisian nymph.

In another moment his arm was round her, and she was stammering out rapid, broken words.

"I was so lonely - you know, you must have read that story I wrote; you couldn't have painted that picture unless you had, and unless you had understood. The Princess was I; I had everything, and yet I was lonely beyond words. One day I was going to a fortuneteller's, and I borrowed my maid's clothes. I came in here on the way and saw you looking at the little god. That's how it all began. I pretended - oh! it was hateful of me, and I went on pretending, and afterwards I didn't dare confess that I had told you such dreadful lies. I thought you would be disgusted at the way I had deceived you. I couldn't bear for you to find out, so I went away. Then I wrote that story, and yesterday I saw your picture. It was your picture, wasn't it?"

Only the gods really know the word "ingratitude."

It is to be presumed that the lonely little god knew the black ingratitude of human nature. As a divinity he had unique opportunities of observing it, yet in the hour of trial, he who had had sacrifices innumerable offered to him, made sacrifice in his turn. He sacrificed his only two worshippers in a strange land, and it showed him to be a great little god in his way, since he sacrificed all that he had.

Through the chinks in his fingers he watched them go, hand in hand, without a backward glance, two happy people who had found heaven and had no need of him any longer.

What was he, after all, but a very lonely little god in a strange land?

MANX GOLD

"Manx Gold" is no ordinary detective story; indeed, it is probably unique. The detectives are conventional enough, but although they are confronted with a particularly brutal murder, the murderer's identity is not their main concern. They are more interested in unraveling a series of clues to the whereabouts of hidden treasure, a treasure whose existence is not confined to the printed page. Clearly, some explanation is required...

In the winter of 1929, Alderman Arthur B. Crookall had an idea. Crookall was the chairman of the "June Effort," a committee responsible for boosting tourism to the Isle of Man, a small island off the northwest coast of

England. His idea was that there should be a treasure hunt, inspired by the many legends of Manx smugglers and their long-forgotten hoards of booty.

There would be "real" treasure, hidden about the island, and clues to its location concealed in the framework of a detective story. Some reservations were expressed by members of the committee, but eventually planning began for the "Isle of Man Treasure Hunt Scheme," to take place at the start of the holiday season and run at the same time as a number of other annual events, such as the "Crowning of the Rose Queen" and the midnight yacht race.

But Crookall had to find someone to write the story on which the hunt would be based. Who better than Agatha Christie? Perhaps surprisingly, and for a fee of only sixty pounds, Christie accepted this, her most unusual commission. She visited the Isle of Man at the end of April 1930, staying as the guest of the lieutenant governor, before returning to Devon, where her daughter was ill. During her visit, Christie and Crookall spent several days discussing the treasure hunt, and visited various sites in order to decide where the treasure should be hidden and how the clues should be composed.

The resulting story, "Manx Gold," was published in five installments towards the end of May in the Daily Dispatch, a Manchester newspaper. A quarter of a million copies of the story also were distributed in booklet form to guesthouses and hotels across the island. The five clues were published separately, and as the date on which the first was due to appear in the Dispatch drew nearer, the June Effort Committee appealed to everyone to "cooperate in order to obtain as much publicity as possible" for the hunt. More tourists meant more tourist revenue, and the hunt was also drawn to the attention of several hundred "Homecomers" who had emigrated from the island to the United States and were due to return as honored guests in June. In the words of the publicity at the time, it was "an opportunity for all Amateur Detectives to test their skill!"

In the story, Juan Faraker and Fenella Mylecharane set out to find four chests of treasure, which have been hidden on the island by their eccentric Uncle Myles. To compete with Juan and Fenella, the reader was advised - like them - to equip himself with "several excellent maps, various guidebooks descriptive of the island, a book on folklore and a book on the history of the island."

The solutions to the clues are given at the end of the story.

* * *

"Old Mylecharane liv'd up on the broo,

Where Jurby slopes down to the wood,

His croft was all golden with cushag and furze,

His daughter was fair to behold.

"O father, they say you've plenty of store,

But hidden all out of the way.

No gold can I see, but its glint on the gorse;

Then what have you done with it, pray?"

"My gold is locked up in a coffer of oak,

Which I dropped in the tide and it sank,

And there it lies fixed like an anchor of hope,

All right and as safe as the hank."

"I like that song," I said appreciatively as Fenella finished.

"You should do," said Fenella. "It's about our ancestor, yours and mine. Uncle Myles's grandfather. He made a fortune out of smuggling and hid it somewhere, and no one ever knew where."

Ancestry is Fenella's strong point. She takes an interest in all her forbears. My tendencies are strictly modern. The difficult present and the uncertain future absorb all my energy. But I like hearing Fenella singing old Manx ballads.

Fenella is very charming. She is my first cousin and also, from time to time, my fiancée. In moods of financial optimism we are engaged. When a corresponding wave of pessimism sweeps over us and we realize that we shall not be able to marry for at least ten years, we break it off.

"Didn't anyone ever try to find the treasure?" I inquired.

"Of course. But they never did."

"Perhaps they didn't look scientifically."

"Uncle Myles had a jolly good try," said Fenella. "He said anyone with intelligence ought to be able to solve a little problem like that."

That sounded to me very like our Uncle Myles, a cranky and eccentric old gentleman, who lived in the Isle of Man and who was much given to didactic pronouncements.

It was at that moment that the post came - and the letter!

"Good Heavens," cried Fenella. "Talk of the devil - I mean angels - Uncle Myles is dead!"

Both she and I had seen our eccentric relative on only two occasions, so we could neither of us pretend to a very deep grief. The letter was from a firm of lawyers in Douglas, and it informed us that under the will of Mr. Myles Mylecharane, deceased, Fenella and I were joint inheritors of his estate, which consisted of a house near Douglas and an infinitesimal income. Enclosed was a sealed envelope, which Mr. Mylecharane had directed should be forwarded to Fenella at his death. This letter we opened and read its surprising contents. I reproduce it in full, since it was a truly characteristic document.

My dear Fenella and Juan,

for I take it that where one of you is the other will not be far away. Or so gossip has whispered.

You may remember having heard me say that anyone displaying a little intelligence could easily find the treasure concealed by my amiable scoundrel of a grandfather. I displayed that intelligence and my reward was four chests of solid gold - quite like a fairy story, is it not?

Of living relations I have only four: you two, my nephew Ewan Corjeag, whom I have always heard is a thoroughly bad lot, and a cousin, a Doctor Fayll, of whom I have heard very little, and that little not always good. My estate proper I am leaving to you and Fenella, but I feel a certain obligation laid upon me with regard to this "treasure" which has fallen to my lot solely through my own ingenuity. My amiable ancestor would not, I feel, be satisfied for me to pass it on tamely by inheritance. So I, in my turn, have devised a little problem.

There are still four "chests" of treasure (though in a more modern form than gold ingots or coins) and there are to he four competitors - my four living relations. It would be fairest to assign one "chest" to each - but the world, my children, is not fair. The race is to the swiftest - and often to the most unscrupulous.

Who am I to go against Nature? You must pit your wits against the other two. There will be, I fear, very little chance for you. Goodness and innocence are seldom rewarded in this world. So strongly do I feel this that I have deliberately cheated (unfairness again, you notice;). This letter goes to you twenty-four hours in advance of the letters to the other two. Thus you will have a very good chance of securing the first "treasure" - twenty-four hours' start, if you have any brains at all, ought to be sufficient.

The clues for finding this treasure are to be found at my house in Douglas. The clues for the second "treasure" will not be released till the first treasure is found. In the second and succeeding cases, therefore, you will all start even. You have my good wishes for success, and nothing would please me better than for you to acquire all four "chests," but for the reasons which I have already stated I think that most unlikely. Remember that no scruples will stand in dear Ewan's way. Do not make the mistake of trusting him in any respect. As to Dr. Richard Fayll, I know little about him, but he is, I fancy, a dark horse.

Good luck to you both, but with little hopes of your success,

Your affectionate uncle,

Myles Mylecharane

As we reached the signature, Fenella made a leap from my side.

"What is it?" I cried.

Fenella was rapidly turning the pages of an ABC.

"We must get to the Isle of Man as soon as possible," she cried. "How dare he say we were good and innocent and stupid? I'll show him! Juan, we're going to find all four of these 'chests' and get married and live happily ever afterwards, with Rolls-Royces and foot-men and marble baths. But we must get to the Isle of Man at once."

It was twenty-four hours later. We had arrived in Douglas, interviewed the lawyers, and were now at Maughold House facing Mrs. Skillicorn, our late uncle's housekeeper, a somewhat formidable woman who nevertheless relented a little before Fenella's eagerness.

"Queer ways he had," she said. "Liked to set everyone puzzling and contriving."

"But the clues," cried Fenella. "The clues?"

Deliberately, as she did everything, Mrs. Skillicorn left the room. She returned after an absence of some minutes and held out a folded piece of paper.

We unfolded it eagerly. It contained a doggerel rhyme in my uncle's crabbed handwriting.

Four points of the compass so there be

S and W, N and E.

East winds are bad for man and beast.

Go south and west and

North not east.

"Oh!" said Fenella blankly.

"Oh!" said I, with much the same intonation.

Mrs. Skillicorn smiled on us with gloomy relish.

"Not much sense to it, is there?" she said helpfully.

"It - I don't see how to begin," said Fenella, piteously.

"Beginning," I said, with a cheerfulness I did not feel, "is always the difficulty. Once we get going -"

Mrs. Skillicorn smiled more grimly than ever. She was a depressing woman.

"Can't you help us?" asked Fenella coaxingly.

"I know nothing about the silly business. Didn't confide in me, your uncle didn't. I told him to put his money in the bank, and no nonsense. I never knew what he was up to."

"He never went out with any chests - or anything of that kind?"

"That he didn't."

"You don't know when he hid the stuff - whether it was lately or long ago?"

Mrs. Skillicorn shook her head.

"Well," I said, trying to rally. "There are two possibilities. Either the treasure is hidden here, in the actual grounds, or else it may be hidden anywhere on the island. It depends on the bulk, of course."

A sudden brain wave occurred to Fenella.

"You haven't noticed anything missing?" she said. "Among my uncle's things, I mean."

"Why, now, it's odd your saying that -"

"You have, then?"

"As I say, it's odd your saying that. Snuffboxes - there's at least four of them I can't lay my hand on anywhere."

"Four of them!" cried Fenella. "That must be it! We're on the track. Let's go out in the garden and look about."

"There's nothing there," said Mrs. Skillicorn. "I'd know if there were. Your uncle couldn't have buried anything in the garden without my knowing about it."

"Points of the compass are mentioned," I said. "The first thing we need is a map of the island."

"There's one on that desk," said Mrs. Skillicorn.

Fenella unfolded it eagerly. Something fluttered out as she did so. I caught it.

"Hullo," I said. "This looks like a further clue." We both went over it eagerly.

It appeared to be a rude kind of map. There was a cross on it and a circle and a pointing arrow, and directions were roughly indicated, but it was hardly illuminating. We studied it in silence.

"It's not very illuminating, is it?" said Fenella.

"Naturally it wants puzzling over," I said. "We can't expect it to leap to the eye."

Mrs. Skillicorn interrupted with a suggestion of supper, to which we agreed thankfully.

"And could we have some coffee?" said Fenella. "Lots of it - very black."

Mrs. Skillicorn provided us with an excellent meal, and at its conclusion a large jug of coffee made its appearance.

"And now," said Fenella, "we must get down to it."

"The first thing," I said, "is direction. This seems to point clearly to the northeast of the island."

"It seems so. Let's look at the map."

We studied the map attentively.

"It all depends on how you take the thing," said Fenella. "Does the cross represent the treasure? Or is it something like a church? There really ought to be rules!"

"That would make it too easy."

"I suppose it would. Why are there little lines on one side of the circle and not the other?"

"I don't know."

"Are there any more maps anywhere?"

We were sitting in the library. There were several excellent maps. There were also various guidebooks descriptive of the island. There was a book on folklore. There was a book on the history of the island. We read them all.

And at last we formed a possible theory.

"It does seem to fit," said Fenella at last. "I mean the two together is a likely conjunction which doesn't seem to occur anywhere else."

"It's worth trying, anyhow," I said. "I don't think we can do anything more tonight. Tomorrow, first thing, we'll hire a car and go off and try our luck."

"It's tomorrow now," said Fenella. "Half past two! Just fancy!!"

Early morning saw us on the road. We had hired a car for a week, arranging to drive it ourselves. Fenella's spirits rose as we sped along the excellent road, mile after mile.

"If only it wasn't for the other two, what fun this would be," she said. "This is where the Derby was originally run, wasn't it? Before it was changed to Epsom. How queer that is to think off"

I drew her attention to a farmhouse.

"That must be where there is said to be a secret passage running under the sea to that island."

"What fun! I love secret passages, don't you? Oh! Juan, we're getting quite near now. I'm terribly excited. If we should be right!"

Five minutes later we abandoned the car.

"Everything's in the right position," said Fenella tremulously.

We walked on.

"Six of them - that's right. Now between these two. Have you got the compass?"

Five minutes later, we were standing facing each other, an incredulous joy on our faces - and on my outstretched palm lay an antique snuffbox.

We had been successful!

On our return to Maughold House, Mrs. Skillicorn met us with the information that two gentlemen had arrived. One had departed again, but the other was in the library.

A tall, fair man with a florid face rose smilingly from an armchair as we entered the room.

"Mr. Faraker and Miss Mylecharane? Delighted to meet you. I am your distant cousin, Dr. Fayll. Amusing game, all this, isn't it?"

His manner was urbane and pleasant, but I took an immediate dislike to him. I felt that in some way the man was dangerous. His pleasant manner was, somehow, too pleasant, and his eyes never met yours fairly.

"I'm afraid we've got bad news for you," I said. "Miss Mylecharane and myself have already discovered the first 'treasure.'"

He took it very well.

"Too bad - too bad. Posts from here must be odd. Barford and I started at once."

We did not dare to confess the perfidy of Uncle Myles.

"Anyway, we shall all start fair for the second round," said Fenella.

"Splendid. What about getting down to the clues right away? Your excellent Mrs. - er - Skillicorn holds them, I believe?"

"That wouldn't be fair to Mr. Corjeag," said Fenella, quickly. "We must wait for him."

"True, true - I had forgotten. We must get in touch with him as quickly as possible. I will see to that - you two must be tired out and want to rest."

Thereupon he took his departure. Ewan Corjeag must have been unexpectedly difficult to find, for it was not till nearly eleven o'clock that night that Dr. Fayll rang up. He suggested that he and Ewan should come over to Maughold House at ten o'clock the following morning, when Mrs. Skillicorn could hand us out the clues.

"That will do splendidly," said Fenella. "Ten o'clock tomorrow."

We retired to bed tired but happy.

The following morning we were aroused by Mrs. Skillicorn, completely shaken out of her usual pessimistic calm.

"Whatever do you think?" she panted. "The house has been broken into."

"Burglars?" I exclaimed incredulously. "Has anything been taken?"

"Not a thing - and that's the odd part of it! No doubt they were after the silver - but the door being locked on the outside they couldn't get any further."

Fenella and I accompanied her to the scene of the outrage, which happened to be in her own sitting room. The window there had undeniably been forced, yet nothing seemed to have been taken. It was all rather curious.

"I don't see what they can have been looking for," said Fenella.

"It's not as though there were a 'treasure chest' hidden in the house," I agreed facetiously. Suddenly an idea flashed into my mind. I turned to Mrs. Skillicorn.

"The clues - the clues you were to give us this morning?"

"Why to be sure - they're in that top drawer." She went across to it. "Why - I do declare - there's nothing here! They're gone!"

"Not burglars," I said. "Our esteemed relations!"

And I remembered Uncle Myles's warning on the subject of unscrupulous dealing. Clearly he had known what he was talking about. A dirty trick!

"Hush," said Fenella suddenly, holding up a finger. "what was that?"

The sound she had caught came plainly to our ears. It was a groan and it came from outside. We went to the window and leaned out. There was shrubbery growing against this side of the house and we could see nothing; but the groan came again, and we could see that the bushes seemed to have been disturbed and trampled.

We hurried down and out round the house. The first thing we found was a fallen ladder, showing how the thieves had reached the window. A few steps further brought us to where a man was lying.

He was a youngish man, dark, and he was evidently badly injured, for his head was lying in a pool of blood. I knelt down beside him.

"We must get a doctor at once. I'm afraid he's dying."

The gardener was sent off hurriedly. I slipped my hand into his breast pocket and brought out a pocket book. On it were the initials E.C.

"Ewan Corjeag," said Fenella.

The man's eyes opened. He said faintly: "Fell from ladder..." then lost consciousness again.

Close by his head was a large jagged stone stained with blood.

"It's clear enough," I said. "The ladder slipped and he fell, striking his head on this stone. I'm afraid it's done for him, poor fellow."

"So you think that was it?" said Fenella, in an odd tone of voice.

But at that moment the doctor arrived. He held out little hope of recovery. Ewan Corjeag was moved into the house and a nurse was sent for to take charge of him. Nothing could be done, and he would die a couple of hours later.

We had been sent for and were standing by his bed. His eyes opened and flickered.

"We are your cousins Juan and Fenella," I said. "Is there anything we can do?"

He made a faint negative motion of the head. A whisper came from his lips. I bent to catch it.

"Do you want the clue? I'm done. Don't let Fayll do you down."

"Yes," said Fenella. "Tell me."

Something like a grin came over his face.

"D'ye ken -" he began.

Then suddenly his head fell over sideways and he died.

"I don't like it," said Fenella suddenly.

"What don't you like?"

"Listen, Juan. Ewan stole those clues - he admits falling from the ladder. Then where are they? We've seen all the contents of his pockets. There were three sealed envelopes, so Mrs. Skillicorn says. Those sealed envelopes aren't there."

"What do you think, then?"

"I think there was someone else there, someone who jerked away the ladder so that Ewan fell. And that stone - he never fell on it - it was brought from some distance away - I've found the mark. He was deliberately bashed on the head with it."

"But Fenella - that's murder!"

"Yes," said Fenella, very white. "It's murder. Remember, Dr. Fayll never turned up at ten o'clock this morning. Where is he?"

"You think he's the murderer?"

"Yes. You know - this treasure - it's a lot of money, Juan."

"And we've no idea where to look for him," I said.

"A pity Corjeag couldn't have finished what he was going to say."

"There's one thing that might help. This was in his hand."

She handed me a torn snapshot.

"Suppose it's a clue. The murderer snatched it away and never noticed he'd left a corner of it behind. If we were to find the other half -"

"To do that," I said, "we must find the second treasure. Let's look at this thing."

"Hmm," I said, "there's nothing much to go by. That seems a kind of tower in the middle of the circle, but it would be very hard to identify."

Fenella nodded.

"Dr. Fayll has the important half. He knows where to look. We've got to find that man, Juan, and watch him. Of course, we won't let him see we suspect."

"I wonder whereabouts in the island he is this minute. If we only knew -"

My mind went back to the dying man. Suddenly I sat up excitedly.

"Fenella," I said, "Corjeag wasn't Scotch?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, then, don't you see? What he meant, I mean?"

"No?"

I scribbled something on a piece of paper and tossed it to her.

"What's this?"

"The name of a firm that might help us."

"Bellman and True. Who are they? Lawyers?"

"No - they're more in our line - private detectives."

And I proceeded to explain.

"Dr. Fayll to see you," said Mrs. Skillicorn.

We looked at each other. Twenty-four hours had elapsed. We had returned from our quest successful for the second time. Not wishing to draw attention to ourselves, we had journeyed in the Snaefell - a charabanc.

"I wonder if he knows we saw him in the distance?" murmured Fenella.

"It's extraordinary. If it hadn't been for the hint that photograph gave us - "

"Hush - and do be careful, Juan. He must be simply furious at our having outwitted him in spite of everything."

No trace of it appeared in the doctor's manner, however. He entered the room his urbane and charming self, and I felt my faith in Fenella's theory dwindling.

"What a shocking tragedy!" he said. "Poor Corjeag. I suppose he was - well - trying to steal a march on us. Retribution was swirl. Well, well - we scarcely knew him, poor fellow. You must have wondered why I didn't turn up this morning as arranged. I got a fake message - Corjeag's doing, I suppose - it sent me off on a wild-goose chase right across the island. And now you two have romped home again. How do you do it?"

There was a note of really eager inquiry in his voice which did not escape me.

"Cousin Ewan was fortunately able to speak just before he died," said Fenella.

I was watching the man, and I could swear I saw alarm leap into his eyes at her words.

"Eh - eh? What's that?" he said.

"He was just able to give us a clue as to the whereabouts of the treasure," explained Fenella.

"Oh! I see - I see. I've been clean out of things - though, curiously enough, I myself was in that part of the island. You may have seen me strolling round."

"We were so busy," said Fenella apologetically.

"Of course, of course. You must have run across the thing more or less by accident. Lucky young people, aren't you? Well, what's the next program? Will Mrs. Skillicorn oblige us with the new clues?"

But it seemed that this third set of clues had been deposited with the lawyer, and we all three repaired to the lawyer's office, where the sealed envelopes were handed over to us.

The contents were simple. A map with a certain area marked off on it, and a paper of directions attached.

In '85, this place made history.

11 paces from the landmark to

The east, then an equal ten

Places north. Stand there

Looking east. Two trees are in the

Line of vision. One of them

Was sacred in this island. Draw

A circle five feet from

The Spanish chestnut and,

With head bent, walk round. Look well. You'll find.

"Looks as though we are going to tread on each other's toes a bit today," commented the doctor.

True to my policy of apparent friendliness, I offered him a lift in our car, which he accepted. We had lunch at Port Erin, and then started on our search.

I had debated in my own mind the reason of my uncle's depositing this particular set of clues with his lawyer. Had he foreseen the possibility of a theft? And had he determined that not more than one set of clues should fall into the thief's possession?

The treasure hunt this afternoon was not without its humor. The area of search was limited and we were continually in sight of each other. We eyed each other suspiciously, each trying to determine whether the other was further on or had had a brain wave.

"This is all part of Uncle Myles's plan," said Fenella.

"He wanted us to watch each other and go through all the agonies of thinking the other person was getting there."

"Come," I said. "Let's get down to it scientifically. We've got one definite clue to start on. 'In '85 this place made history.' Look up the reference books we've got with us and see if we can't hunt that down. Once we get that -"

"He's looking in that hedge," interrupted Fenella. "Oh! I can't bear it. If he's got it -"

"Attend to me," I said firmly. "There's really only one way to go about it the proper way."

"There are so few trees on the island that it would be much simpler just to look for a chestnut tree!" said Fenella.

I pass over the next hour. We grew hot and despondent - and all the time we were tortured with fear that Fayll might be succeeding whilst we failed.

"I remember once reading in a detective story," I said, "how a fellow stuck a paper of writing in a bath of acid - and all sorts of other words came out."

"Do you think - but we haven't got a bath of acid!"

"I don't think Uncle Myles could expect expert chemical knowledge. But there's common or garden heat -"

We slipped round the corner of a hedge and in a minute or two I had kindled a few twigs. I held the paper as close to the blaze as I dared. Almost at once I was rewarded by seeing characters begin to appear at the foot of the sheet. There were just two words.

"Kirkhill Station," read out Fenella.

Just at that moment Fayll came round the corner. Whether he had heard or not we had no means of judging. He showed nothing.

"But Juan," said Fenella, when he moved away, "there isn't a Kirkhill Station!" She held out the map as she spoke.

"No," I said examining it, "but look here."

And with a pencil I drew a line on it.

"Of course! And somewhere on that line -"

"Exactly."

"But I wish we knew the exact spot."

It was then that my second brain wave came to me.

"We do!" I cried, and seizing the pencil again, I said: "Look!"

Fenella uttered a cry.

"How idiotic!" she cried. "And how marvelous: What a sell! Really. Uncle Myles was a most ingenious old gentleman!"

The time had come for the last clue. This, the lawyer had informed us, was not in his keeping. It was to be posted to us on receipt of a postcard sent by him. He would impart no further information.

Nothing arrived, however, on the morning it should have done, and Fenella and I went through agonies, believing that Fayll had managed somehow to intercept our letter. The next day, however, our fears were calmed and the mystery explained when we received the following illiterate scrawl:

Dear Sir or Madam,

Escuse delay but have been all sixes and sevens but i do now as mr. Mylecharane axed me to and send you the piece of riting wot as been in my family many long years the wot he wanted it for i do not know.

thanking you i am

Mary Kerruish

"Postmark - Bride," I remarked. "Now for the 'piece of riting handed down in my family'!"

Upon a rock, a sign you'll see.

O, tell me what the point of

That may be? Well, firstly, (A). Near

By you'll find, quite suddenly, the light

You seek. Then (B). A house. A

Cottage with a thatch and wall.

A meandering lane near by. That all.

"It's very unfair to begin with a rock," said Fenella. "There are rocks everywhere. How can you tell which one has the sign on it?"

"If we could settle on the district," I said, "it ought to be fairly easy to find the rock. It must have a mark on it pointing in a certain direction, and in that direction there will be something hidden which will throw light on the finding of the treasure."

"I think you're right," said Fenella.

"That's A. The new clue will give us a hint where B, the cottage, is to be found. The treasure itself is hidden down a lane alongside the cottage. But clearly we've got to find A first.

Owing to the difficulty of the initial step, Uncle Myles's last problem proved a real teaser. To Fenella falls the distinction of unraveling it - and even then she did not accomplish it for nearly a week. Now and then we had come across Fayll in our search of rocky districts, but the area was a wide one.

When we finally made our discovery it was late in the evening. Too late, I said, to start off to the place indicated. Fenella disagreed.

"Supposing Fayll finds it, too," she said. "And we wait till tomorrow and he starts off tonight. How we should kick ourselves!"

Suddenly, a marvelous idea occurred to me.

"Fenella," I said, "do you still believe that Fayll murdered Ewan Corjeag?"

"I do."

"Then I think that now we've got our chance to bring the crime home to him."

"That man makes me shiver. He's bad all through. Tell me."

"Advertise the fact that we've found A. Then start off. Ten to one he'll follow us. It's a lonely place - just what would suit his book. He'll come out in the open if we pretend to find the treasure."

"And then?"

"And then," I said, "he'll have a little surprise."

It was close on midnight. We had left the car some distance away and were creeping along by the side of a wall. Fenella had a powerful flashlight which she was using. I myself carried a revolver. I was taking no chances.

Suddenly, with a low cry, Fenella stopped.

"Look, Juan," she cried. "We've got it. At last."

For a moment I was off my guard. Led by instinct I whirled round - but too late. Fayll stood six paces away and his revolver covered us both.

"Good evening," he said. "This trick is mine. You'll hand over that treasure, if you please."

"Would you like me also to hand over something else?" I asked. "Half a snapshot torn from a dying man's hand? You have the other half, I think."

His hand wavered.

"What are you talking about?" he growled.

"The truth's known," I said. "You and Corjeag were there together. You pulled away the ladder and crashed his head with that stone. The police are cleverer than you imagine, Dr. Fayll."

"They know, do they? Then, by Heaven, I'll swing for three murders instead of one!"

"Drop, Fenella," I screamed. And at the same minute his revolver barked loudly.

We had both dropped in the heather, and before he could fire again uniformed men sprang out from behind the wall where they had been hiding. A moment later Fayll had been handcuffed and led away.

I caught Fenella in my arms.

"I knew I was right," she said tremulously.

"Darling!" I cried, "it was too risky. He might have shot you."

"But he didn't," said Fenella. "And we know where the treasure is."

"Do we?"

"I do. See -" she scribbled a word. "We'll look for it tomorrow. There can't be many hiding places there, I should say."

It was just noon when:

"Eureka!" said Fenella softly. "The fourth snuffbox! We've got them all. Uncle Myles would be pleased. And now -"

"Now," I said, "we can be married and live together happily ever afterwards."

"We'll live in the Isle of Man," said Fenella.

"On Manx Gold," I said, and laughed aloud for sheer happiness.

* * *

The treasure is all that is left of the lost fortune of "Old Mylecharane," a legendary Manx smuggler. In reality, the treasure took the form of four snuffboxes, each about the size of a matchbox and containing an eighteenth-century Manx halfpenny with a hole in it, through which was tied a length of colored ribbon, and a neatly folded document, executed with many flourishes in India ink and signed by Alderman Crookall, which directed the finder to report at once to the clerk at the town hall in Douglas, the capital of the Isle of Man. Finders were instructed to take with them the snuffbox and its contents in order to claim a prize of one hundred pounds (equivalent to about three thousand pounds today). They also had to bring with them proof of identity, for only visitors to the island were allowed to search for the treasure; Manx residents were excluded from the hunt.

The sole purpose of the first clue in "Manx Gold," the rhyme which begins "Four points of the compass so there be," published in the Daily Dispatch on Saturday, May 31, was to indicate that the four treasures would be found in the north, south, and west of the island, but not in the east. The clue to the location of the first snuffbox was in fact the second clue, a map published on June 7. However, the treasure had already been found by a tailor from Inverness, William Shaw, because sufficient clues to its location were contained in the story itself.

The most important clue was Fenella's remark that the hiding place was near the place "where Derby was originally run... before it was changed to Epsom." This is a reference to the famous English horse race, which was first run at Derbyhaven in the southeast of the Isle of Man. The "quite near" island to which "a secret passage" was rumored to run from a farmhouse can easily be identified as St. Michael's Isle, on which, in addition to the twelfth-century chapel of St. Michael, is a circular stone tower known as the Derby Fort, from which the island gets its alternative name, Fort Island - "the two together is a likely conjunction which doesn't seem to occur anywhere else." The fort was represented on the map by a circle with six lines projected from it to represent the six historical cannons - "six of them" - in the fort; the chapel was represented by a cross.

The small pewter snuffbox was hidden on a rocky ledge running in a northeasterly direction from between the middle two cannons - "between these two have you got the compass?" - while Juan's initial suggestion that the clue "points to the northeast of the island" was a red herring.

The second snuffbox, apparently constructed from horn, was located on June 9 by Richard Highton, a Lancashire builder. As Fenella made clear to the murderous Dr. Fayll, Ewan Corjeag's dying words, "D'ye ken -" are a clue to the whereabouts of the treasure. In fact, they are the opening words of the traditional English song "John Peel," about a Cumbrian hunts-man, and when Juan suggested that "Bellman and True" was the "name of a firm that might help us," he was not referring to the "firm of lawyers in Douglas" mentioned at the beginning of the story but to two of John Peel's hounds, as named in the song. With these clues, the subject of the "torn snapshot," which was published as the third clue on June 9, would not have been "very hard to identify"; it was the ruins of the fourteenth-century Peel Castle on St. Patrick's Isle, and curved lines along the photograph's left-hand edge were the curlicues on the arm of a bench on Peel Hill, which looks down on the castle and under which the snuffbox was hidden. The charabanc journey to Snaefell, the highest peak on the Isle of Man, was another red herring.

The third "treasure" was found by Mr. Herbert Elliot, a Manx-born ship's engineer living in Liverpool M. Elliot later claimed that he had not read "Manx Gold" nor even studied the clues, but had simply decided on a likely area where, very early on the morning of July 8, he chanced upon the snuffbox, hidden in a gully.

The principal clue to its whereabouts was hidden in the fourth clue, published on June 14 (the vers beginning "In '85, this place made history"), in which the second word of each line spells out the following message:

"85... paces... east... north... east... of... sacred... circle... Spanish... head." The "Sacred circle" is the Meayll circle on Mull Hill, a roegalithic monument a little over a mile from the Spanish Head, the most southerly point of the island. The reference to an important event "in '85" and a Spanish chestnut, which from contemporary accounts proved a diversion for many searchers, were false leads. As for "Kirkhill Station," the clue uncovered by Juan, Fenella rightly said that there was no such place. However, there is a village called Kirkhill and there is also a railway station at Port Erin, where Juan and Fenella had had lunch before starting their search. If a line is drawn from Kirkhill to Port Erin and continued southward, it eventually crosses the Meayll circle, "the exact spot" identified by Juan.

Unfortunately, as was the case with the clues to the location of the third snuffbox, those for the fourth were never solved. The fifth and final clue, the verse beginning "Upon a rock, a sign you'll see," was published on June 21, but on July 10, at the end of the extended period allowed for the hunt, which had originally been intended to finish at the end of June, the final "treasure" was "lifted" by the Mayor of Douglas. Two days later, as a "sequel" to the story, the Daily Dispatch published a photograph of the event and Christie's explanation of the final clue:

That last clue still makes me smile when I remember the time we wasted looking for rocks with a sign on them. The real clue was so simple - the words "sixes and sevens" in the covering letter.

Take the sixth and seventh words of each line of the verse, and you get this: "You'll see. Point of (A). Near the lighthouse a wall." See the point of (A) we identified as the Point of Ayre. We spent some time finding the right wall, and the treasure itself was not there. Instead, there were four figures - 2, 5, 6, and 9 scrawled on a stone.

Apply them to the letters of the first line of the verse, and you get the word "park." There is only one real park in the Isle of Man, at Ramsey. We searched that park, and found at last what we sought.

The thatched building in question was a small refreshment kiosk, and the path leading past it ran up to an ivy-covered wall, which was the hiding place of the elusive snuffbox. The fact that the letter had been posted in Bride was an additional clue, as this village is near the lighthouse at the Point of Ayre, the northern-most tip of the island.

It is impossible to judge whether or not "Manx Gold" was a successful means of promoting tourism on the Isle of Man. Certainly, it appears that there were more visitors in 1930 than in previous years, but how far that increase could be ascribed to the treasure hunt is far from clear. Contemporary press reports show that there were many who doubted that it had been of any real value, and at a civic lunch to mark the end of the hunt, Alderman Crookall responded to a vote of thanks by railing against those who had failed to talk up the hunt - they were "slackers and grousers who never did anything but offer up criticism."

The fact that they were not allowed to take part in the hunt might have been a cause of apathy among the islanders, even though the Daily Dispatch offered the Manx resident with whom each finder was staying a prize of five guineas, equivalent to about one hundred fifty pounds today. This also might have accounted for various acts of gentle "sabotage," such as the laying of false snuffboxes and spoof clues, including a rock on which the word "lift" was painted but under which was nothing more interesting than discarded fruit peel.

While there never has been any other event quite like the Isle of Man treasure hunt, Agatha Christie did go on to write mysteries with a similar theme. Most obvious of these is the challenge laid down to Charmian Stroud and Edward Rossiter by their eccentric Uncle Mathew in "Strange Jest," a Miss Marple story first published in 1941 as "A Case of Buried Treasure" and collected in Three Blind Mice (1948). There is also a similarly structured "murder hunt" in the Poirot novel Dead Man's Folly (1956).

WITHIN A WALL

It was Mrs. Lemprière who discovered the existence of Jane Haworth. It would be, of course. Somebody once said that Mrs. Lemprière was easily the most hated woman in London, but that, I think, is an exaggeration. She has certainly a knack of tumbling on the one thing you wish to keep quiet about, and she does it with real genius. It is always an accident.

In this case we had been having tea in Alan Everard's studio. He gave these teas occasionally, and used to stand about in corners, wearing very old clothes, rattling the coppers in his trouser pockets and looking profoundly miserable.

I do not suppose anyone will dispute Everard's claim to genius at this date. His two most famous pictures, Color and The Connoisseur, which belong to his early period, before he became a fashionable portrait painter, were purchased by the nation last year, and for once the choice went unchallenged. But at the date of which I speak, Everard was only beginning to come into his own, and we were free to consider that we had discovered him.

It was his wife who organized these parties. Everard's attitude to her was a peculiar one. That he adored her was evident, and only to be expected. Adoration was Isobel's due. But he seemed always to feel himself slightly in her debt. He assented to anything she wished, not so much through tenderness as through an unalterable conviction that she had a right to her own way. I suppose that was natural enough, too, when one comes to think of it.

For Isobel Loring had been really very celebrated. When she came out she had been the débutante of the season. She had everything except money; beauty, position, breeding, brains. Nobody expected her to marry for love. She wasn't that kind of girl. In her second season she had three strings to her bow, the heir to a dukedom, a rising politician, and a South African millionaire. And then, to everyone's surprise, she married Alan Everard - a struggling young painter whom no one had ever heard of.

It is a tribute to her personality, I think, that everyone went on calling her Isobel Loring. Nobody ever alluded to her as Isobel Everard. It would be: "I saw Isobel Loring this morning. Yes - with her husband, young Everard, the painter fellow."

People said Isobel had "done for herself." It would, I think, have "done" for most men to be known as "Isobel Loring's husband." But Everard was different. Isobel's talent for success hadn't failed her after all. Alan Everard painted Color.

I suppose everyone knows the picture: a stretch of road with a trench dug down it, and turned earth, reddish in color, a shining length of brown glazed drain-pipe and the huge navvy, resting for a minute on his spade - a Herculean figure in stained corduroys with a scarlet neckerchief. His eyes look out at you from the canvas, without intelligence, without hope, but with a dumb unconscious pleading, the eyes of a magnificent brute beast. It is a flaming thing - a symphony of orange and red. A lot has been written about its symbolism, about what it is meant to express. Alan Everard himself says he didn't mean it to express anything. He was, he said, nauseated by having had to look at a lot of pictures of Venetian sunsets, and a sudden longing for a riot of purely English color assailed him.

After that, Everard gave the world that epic painting of a public house - Romance: the black street with rain falling - the half-open door, the lights and shining glasses, the little foxy-faced man passing through the doorway, small, mean, insignificant, with lips parted and eyes eager, passing in to forget.

On the strength of these two pictures Everard was acclaimed as a painter of "working men." He had his niche. But he refused to stay in it. His third and most brilliant work, a full-length portrait of Sir Rufus Herschman. The famous scientist is painted against a background of retorts and crucibles and laboratory shelves. The whole has what may be called a Cubist effect, but the lines of perspective run strangely.

And now he had completed his fourth work - a portrait of his wife. We had been invited to see and criticize. Everard himself scowled and looked out of the window; Isobel Loring moved amongst the guests, talking technique with unerring accuracy.

We made comments. We had to. We praised the painting of the pink satin. The treatment of that, we said, was really marvelous. Nobody had painted satin in quite that way before.

Mrs. Lemprière, who is one of the most intelligent art critics I know, took me aside almost at once.

"Georgie," she said, "what has he done to himself? The thing's dead. It's smooth. It's - oh! its damnable."

"Portrait of a Lady in Pink Satin?" I suggested.

"Exactly. And yet the technique's perfect. And the care! There's enough work there for sixteen pictures."

"Too much work?" I suggested.

"Perhaps that's it. If there ever was anything there, he's killed it. An extremely beautiful woman in a pink satin dress. Why not a colored photograph?"

"Why not?" I agreed. "Do you suppose he knows?"

"Of course he knows," said Mrs. Lemprière scornfully. "Don't you see the man's on edge? It comes, I daresay, of mixing up sentiment and business. He's put his whole soul into painting Isobel, because she is Isobel, and in sparing her, he's lost her. He's been too kind. You've got to - to destroy the flesh before you can get at the soul sometimes."

I nodded reflectively. Sir Rufus Herschman had not been flattered physically, but Everard had succeeded in putting on the canvas a personality that was unforgettable.

"And Isobel's got such a very forceful personality," continued Mrs. Lemprière.

"Perhaps Everard can't paint women," I said.

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Lemprière thoughtfully. "Yes, that may be the explanation."

And it was then, with her usual genius for accuracy, that she pulled out a canvas that was leaning with its face to the wall. There were about eight of them, stacked carelessly. It was pure chance that Mrs. Lemprière selected the one she did - but as I said before, these things happen with Mrs. Lemprière.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Lemprière as she turned it to the light.

It was unfinished, a mere rough sketch. The woman, or girl - she was not, I thought, more than twenty-five or -six - was leaning forward, her chin on her hand. Two things struck me at once: the extraordinary vitality of the picture and the amazing cruelty of it. Everard had painted with a vindictive brush. The attitude even was a cruel one - it had brought out every awkwardness, every sharp angle, every crudity. It was a study in brown - brown dress, brown background, brown eyes - wistful, eager eyes. Eagerness was, indeed, the prevailing note of it.

Mrs. Lemprière looked at it for some minutes in silence. Then she called to Everard.

"Alan," she said. "Come here. Who's this?"

Everard came over obediently. I saw the sudden flash of annoyance that he could not quite hide.

"That's only a daub," he said. "I don't suppose I shall ever finish it."

"Who is she?" said Mrs. Lemprière.

Everard was clearly unwilling to answer, and his unwillingness was as meat and drink to Mrs. Lemprière, who always believes the worst on principle.

"A friend of mine. A Miss Jane Haworth."

"I've never met her here," said Mrs. Lemprière.

"She doesn't come to these shows." He paused a minute, then added: "She's Winnie's godmother."

Winnie was his little daughter, aged five.

"Really?" said Mrs. Lemprière. "Where does she live?"

"Battersea. A flat."

"Really," said Mrs. Lemprière again, and then added: "And what has she ever done to you?"

"To me?"

"To you. To make you so - ruthless."

"Oh, that!" he laughed. "Well, you know, she's not a beauty. I can't make her one out of friendship, can I?"

"You've done the opposite," said Mrs. Lemprière. "You've caught hold of every defect of hers and exaggerated it and twisted it. You've tried to make her ridiculous - but you haven't succeeded, my child. That portrait, if you finish it, will live."

Everard looked annoyed.

"It's not bad," he said lightly, "for a sketch, that is. But, of course, it's not a patch on Isobel's portrait. That's far and away the best thing I've ever done."

He said the last words defiantly and aggressively. Neither of us answered.

"Far and away the best thing," he repeated.

Some of the others had drawn near us. They, too, caught sight of the sketch. There were exclamations, comments. The atmosphere began to brighten up.

It was in this way that I first heard of Jane Haworth. Later, I was to meet her - twice. I was to hear details of her life from one of her most intimate friends. I was to learn much from Alan Everard himself. Now that they are both dead, I think it is time to contradict some of the stories Mrs. Lemprière is busily spreading abroad. Call some of my story invention if you will - it is not far from the truth.

When the guests had left, Alan Everard turned the portrait of Jane Haworth with its face to the wall again. Isobel came down the room and stood beside him.

"A success, do you think?" she asked thoughtfully. "Or - not quite a success?"

"The portrait?" he asked quickly.

"No, silly, the party. Of course the portrait's a success."

"It's the best thing I've done," Everard declared aggressively.

"We're getting on," said Isobel. "Lady Charmington wants you to paint her."

"Oh, Lord!" He frowned. "I'm not a fashionable portrait painter, you know."

"You will be. You'll get to the top of the tree."

"That's not the tree I want to get to the top of."

"But, Alan dear, that's the way to make mints of money."

"Who wants mints of money?"

"Perhaps I do," she said smiling.

At once he felt apologetic, ashamed. If she had not married him she could have had her mints of money. And she needed it. A certain amount of luxury was her proper setting.

"We've not done so badly just lately," he said wistfully.

"No, indeed; but the bills are coming in rather fast."

Bills - always bills!

He walked up and down.

"Oh, hang it! I don't want to paint Lady Charmington," he burst out, rather like a petulant child.

Isobel smiled a little. She stood by the fire without moving. Alan stopped his restless pacing and came nearer to her. What was there in her, in her stillness, her inertia, that drew him - drew him like a magnet? How beautiful she was - her arms like sculptured white marble, the pure gold of her hair, her lips - red, full lips.

He kissed them - felt them fasten on his own. Did anything else matter? What was there in Isobel that soothed you, that took all your cares from you? She drew you into her own beautiful inertia and held you there, quiet and content. Poppy and mandragora; you drifted there, on a dark lake, asleep.

"I'll do Lady Charmington," he said presently. "What does it matter? I shall be bored - but after all, painters must eat. There's Mr. Pots the painter, Mrs. Pots the painter's wife, and Miss Pots the painter's daughter - all needing sustenance."

"Absurd boy!" said Isobel. "Talking of our daughter - you ought to go and see Jane some time. She was here yesterday, and said she hadn't seen you for months."

"Jane was here?"

"Yes - to see Winnie."

Alan brushed Winnie aside.

"Did she see the picture of you?"

"Yes."

"What did she think of it?"

"She said it was splendid."

"Oh!"

He frowned, lost in thought.

"Mrs. Lemprière suspects you of a guilty passion for Jane, I think," remarked Isobel. "Her nose twitched a good deal."

"That woman!" said Alan, with deep disgust. "That woman! What wouldn't she think? What doesn't she think?"

"Well, I don't think," said Isobel, smiling. "So go on and see Jane soon."

Alan looked across at her. She was sitting now on a low couch by the fire. Her face was half turned away, the smile still lingered on her lips. And at that moment he felt bewildered, confused, as though a mist had formed round him, and suddenly parting, had given him a glimpse into a strange country.

Something said to him: "Why does she want you to go and see Jane? There's a reason." Because with Isobel, there was bound to be a reason. There was no impulse in Isobel, only calculation.

"Do you like Jane?" he asked suddenly.

"She's a dear," said Isobel.

"Yes, but do you really like her?"

"Of course. She's so devoted to Winnie. By the way, she wants to carry Winnie off to the seaside next week. You don't mind, do you? It will leave us free for Scotland."

"It will be extraordinarily convenient."

It would, indeed, be just that. Extraordinarily convenient. He looked across at Isobel with a sudden suspicion. Had she asked Jane? Jane was so easily imposed upon.

Isobel got up and went out of the room, humming to herself. Oh, well, it didn't matter. Anyway, he would go and see Jane.

Jane Haworth lived at the top of a block of mansion flats overlooking Battersea Park. When Everard had climbed four flights of stairs and pressed the bell, he felt annoyed with Jane. Why couldn't she live somewhere more get-at-able? When, not having obtained an answer, he had pressed the bell three times, his annoyance had grown greater. Why couldn't she keep someone capable of answering the door?

Suddenly it opened, and Jane herself stood in the doorway. She was flushed.

"Where's Alice?" asked Everard, without any attempt at greeting.

"Well, I'm afraid - I mean - she's not well today."

"Drink, you mean?" said Everard grimly.

What a pity that Jane was such an inveterate liar.

"I suppose that's it," said Jane reluctantly.

"Let me see her."

He strode into the flat. Jane followed him with disarming meekness. He found the delinquent Alice in the kitchen. There was no doubt whatever as to her condition. He followed Jane into the sitting room in grim silence.

"You'll have to get rid of that woman," he said. "I told you so before."

"I know you did, Alan, but I can't do that. You forget, her husband's in prison."

"Where he ought to be," said Everard. "How often has that woman been drunk in the three months you've had her?"

"Not so very many times; three or four perhaps. She gets depressed, you know."

"Three or four! Nine or ten would be nearer the mark. How does she cook? Rottenly. Is she the least assistance or comfort to you in this flat? None whatever. For God's sake, get rid of her tomorrow morning and engage a girl who is of some use."

Jane looked at him unhappily.

"You won't," said Everard gloomily, sinking into a big armchair. "You're such an impossibly sentimental creature. What's this I hear about your taking Winnie to the seaside? Who suggested it, you or Isobel?"

Jane said very quickly: "I did, of course."

"Jane," said Everard, "if you would only learn to speak the truth, I should be quite fond of you. Sit down, and for goodness sake don't tell any more lies for at least ten minutes."

"Oh, Alan!" said Jane, and sat down.

The painter examined her critically for a minute or two. Mrs. Lemprière - that woman - had been quite right. He had been cruel in his handling of Jane. Jane was almost, if not quite, beautiful. The long lines of her were pure Greek. It was that eager anxiety of hers to please that made her awkward. He had seized on that - exaggerated it - had sharpened the line of her slightly pointed chin, flung her body into an ugly pose.

Why? Why was it impossible for him to be five minutes in the room with Jane without feeling violent irritation against her rising up in him? Say what you would, Jane was a dear but irritating. He was never soothed and at peace with her as he was with Isobel. And yet Jane was so anxious to please, so willing to agree with all he said, but alas! so transparently unable to conceal her real feelings.

He looked round the room. Typically Jane. Some lovely things, pure gems, that piece of Battersea enamel, for instance, and there next to it, an atrocity of a vase hand painted with roses.

He picked the latter up.

"Would you be very angry, Jane, if I pitched this out of the window?"

"Oh! Alan, you mustn't."

"What do you want with all this trash? You've plenty of taste if you care to use it. Mixing things up!"

"I know, Alan. It isn't that I don't know. But people give me things. That vase - Miss Bates brought it back from Margate - and she's so poor, and has to scrape, and it must have cost her quite a lot - for her, you know, and she thought I'd be so pleased. I simply had to put it in a good place."

Everard said nothing. He went on looking around the room. There were one or two etchings on the walls - there were also a number of photographs of babies. Babies, whatever their mothers may think, do not always photograph well. Any of Jane's friends who acquired babies hurried to send photographs of them to her, expecting these tokens to be cherished. Jane had duly cherished them.

"Who's this little horror?" asked Everard, inspecting a pudgy addition with a squint. "I've not seen him before."

"It's a her," said Jane. "Mary Carrington's new baby."

"Poor Mary Carrington," said Everard. "I suppose you'll pretend that you like having that atrocious infant squinting at you all day?"

Jane's chin shot out.

"She's a lovely baby. Mary is a very old friend of mine."

"Loyal Jane," said Everard smiling at her. "So Isobel landed you with Winnie, did she?"

"Well, she did say you wanted to go to Scotland, and I jumped at it. You will let me have Winnie, won't you? I've been wondering if you would let her come to me for ages, but I haven't liked to ask."

"Oh, you can have her - but it's awfully good of you."

"Then that's all right," said Jane happily.

Everard lit a cigarette.

"Isobel show you the new portrait?" he asked rather indistinctly.

"She did."

"What did you think of it?"

Jane's answer came quickly - too quickly:

"It's perfectly splendid. Absolutely splendid."

Alan sprang suddenly to his feet. The hand that held the cigarette shook.

"Damn you, Jane, don't lie to me!"

"But, Alan, I'm sure, it is perfectly splendid."

"Haven't you learned by now, Jane, that I know every tone of your voice? You lie to me like a hatter so as not to hurt my feelings, I suppose. Why can't you be honest? Do you think I want you to tell me a thing is splendid when I know as well as you do that it's not? The damned thing's dead - dead. There's no life in it - nothing behind, nothing but surface, damned smooth surface. I've cheated myself all along - yes, even this afternoon. I came along to you to find out. Isobel doesn't know. But you know, you always do know. I knew you'd tell me it was good - you've no moral sense about that sort of thing. But I can tell by the tone of your voice. When I showed you Romance you didn't say anything at all - you held your breath and gave a sort of gasp."

"Alan -"

Everard gave her no chance to speak. Jane was producing the effect upon him he knew so well. Strange that so gentle a creature could stir him to such furious anger.

"You think I've lost the power, perhaps," he said angrily, "but I haven't. I can do work every bit as good as Romance - better, perhaps. I'll show you, Jane Haworth."

He fairly rushed out of the flat. Walking rapidly, he crossed through the Park and over Albert Bridge. He was still tingling all over with irritation and baffled rage. Jane, indeed! What did she know about painting? What was her opinion worth? Why should he care? But he did care. He wanted to paint something that would make Jane gasp. Her mouth would open just a little, and her cheeks would flush red. She would look first at the picture and then at him. She wouldn't say anything at all probably.

In the middle of the bridge he saw the picture he was going to paint. It came to him from nowhere at all, out of the blue. He saw it, there in the air, or was it in his head?

A little, dingy curio shop, rather dark and musty looking. Behind the counter a Jew - a small Jew with cunning eyes. In front of him the customer, a big man, sleek, well fed, opulent, bloated, a great jowl on him. Above them, on a shelf, a bust of white marble. The light there, on the boy's marble face, the deathless beauty of old Greece, scornful, unheeding of sale and barter. The Jew, the rich collector, the Greek boy's head. He saw them all.

"The Connoisseur, that's what I'll call it," muttered Alan Everard, stepping off the curb and just missing being annihilated by a passing bus. "Yes, The Connoisseur. I'll show Jane."

When he arrived home, he passed straight into the studio. Isobel found him there, sorting out canvases.

"Alan, don't forget we're dining with the Marches -"

Everard shook his head impatiently.

"Damn the Marches. I'm going to work. I've got hold of something, but I must get it fixed - fixed at once on the canvas before it goes. Ring them up. Tell them I'm dead."

Isobel looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two, and then went out. She understood the art of living with a genius very thoroughly. She went to the telephone and made some plausible excuse.

She looked round her, yawning a little. Then she sat down at her desk and began to write.

Many thanks for your cheque received today. You are good to your godchild A hundred pounds will do all sorts of things. Children are a terrible expense. You are so fond of Winnie that I felt I was not doing wrong in coming to you for help. Alan, like all geniuses, can only work at what he wants to work at - and unfortunately that doesn't always keep the pot boiling. Hope to see you soon.

Yours,

Isobel

When The Connoisseur was finished, some months later, Alan invited Jane to come and see it. The thing was not quite as he had conceived it - that was impossible to hope for - but it was near enough. He felt the glow of the creator. He had made this thing and it was good.

Jane did not this time tell him it was splendid. The color crept into her cheeks and her lips parted. She looked at Alan, and he saw in her eyes that which he wished to see. Jane knew.

He walked on air. He had shown Jane!

The picture off his mind, he began to notice his immediate surroundings once more.

Winnie had benefited enormously from her fortnight at the seaside, but it struck him that her clothes were very shabby. He said so to Isobel.

"Alan! You who never notice anything! But I like children to be simply dressed - I hate them all fussed up."

"There's a difference between simplicity and darns and patches."

Isobel said nothing, but she got Winnie a new frock. Two days later Alan was struggling with income-tax returns. His own passbook lay in front of him. He was hunting through Isobel's desk for hers when Winnie danced into the room with a disreputable doll.

"Daddy, I've got a riddle. Can you guess it? 'Within a wall as white as milk, within a curtain soft as silk, bathed in a sea of crystal clear, a golden apple doth appear.' Guess what that is?"

"Your mother," said Alan absently. He was still bunting.

"Daddy!" Winnie gave a scream of laughter. "It's an egg. Why did you think it was Mummy?"

Alan smiled too.

"I wasn't really listening," he said. "And the words sounded like Mummy, somehow."

A wall as white as milk. A curtain. Crystal. The golden apple. Yes, it did suggest Isobel to him. Curious things, words.

He had found the passbook now. He ordered Winnie peremptorily from the room. Ten minutes later he looked up, startled by a sharp ejaculation.

"Alan!"

"Hullo, Isobel. I didn't hear you come in. Look here, I can't make out these items in your passbook."

"What business had you to touch my passbook?"

He stared at her, astonished. She was angry. He had never seen her angry before.

"I had no idea you would mind."

"I do mind - very much indeed. You have no business to touch my things."

Alan suddenly became angry too.

"I apologize. But since I have touched your things, perhaps you will explain one or two entries that puzzle me. As far as I can see, nearly five hundred pounds has been paid into your account this year which I cannot check. Where does it come from?"

Isobel had recovered her temper. She sank into a chair.

"You needn't be so solemn about it, Alan," she said lightly. "It isn't the wages of sin, or anything like that."

"Where did this money come from?"

"From a woman. A friend of yours. It's not mine at all. It's for Winnie."

"Winnie? Do you mean - this money came from Jane?"

Isobel nodded.

"She's devoted to the child - can't do enough for her."

"Yes, but - surely the money ought to have been invested for Winnie."

"Oh! it isn't that sort of thing at all. It's for current expenses, clothes and all that."

Alan said nothing. He was thinking of Winnie's frocks - all darns and patches.

"Your account's overdrawn, too, Isobel?"

"Is it? That's always happening to me."

"Yes, but that five hundred -"

"My dear Alan. I've spent it on Winnie in the way that seemed best to me. I can assure you Jane is quite satisfied."

Alan was not satisfied. Yet such was the power of Isobel's calm that he said nothing more. After all, Isobel was careless in money matters. She hadn't meant to use for herself money given to her for the child. A receipted bill came that day addressed by a mistake to Mr. Everard. It was from a dressmaker in Hanover Square and was for two hundred odd pounds. He gave it to Isobel without a word. She glanced over it, smiled, and said: "Poor boy, I suppose it seems an awful lot to you, but one really must be more or less clothed."

The next day he went to see Jane.

Jane was irritating and elusive as usual. He wasn't to bother. Winnie was her godchild. Women understood these things, men didn't. Of course she didn't want Winnie to have five hundred pounds' worth of frocks. Would he please leave it to her and Isobel? They understood each other perfectly.

Alan went away in a state of growing dissatisfaction. He knew perfectly well that he had shirked the one question he really wished to ask. He wanted to say: "Has Isobel ever asked you for money for Winnie?" He didn't say it because he was afraid that Jane might not lie well enough to deceive him.

But he was worried. Jane was poor. He knew she was poor. She mustn't - mustn't denude herself. He made up his mind to speak to Isobel. Isobel was calm and reassuring. Of course she wouldn't let Jane spend more than she could afford.

A month later Jane died.

It was influenza, followed by pneumonia. She made Alan Everard her executor and left all she had to Winnie. But it wasn't very much.

It was Alan's task to go through Jane's papers. She left a record there that was clear to follow - numerous evidences of acts of kindness, begging letters, grateful letters.

And lastly, he found her diary. With it was a scrap of paper: "To be read after my death by Alan Everard. He has often reproached me with not speaking the truth. The truth is all here."

So he came to know at last, finding the one place where Jane had dared to be honest. It was a record, very simple and unforced, of her love for him.

There was very little sentiment about it - no fine language. But there was no blinking of facts.

"I know you are often irritated by me," she had written. "Everything I do or say seems to make you angry sometimes. I do not know why this should be, for I try so hard to please you; but I do believe, all the same, that I mean something real to you. One isn't angry with the people who don't count."

It was not Jane's fault that Alan found other matters. Jane was loyal - but she was also untidy; she filled her drawers too full. She had, shortly before her death, burned carefully all Isobel's letters. The one Alan found was wedged behind a drawer. When he had read it, the meaning of certain cabalistic signs on the counterfoils of Jane's cheque book became clear to him. In this particular letter Isobel had hardly troubled to keep up the pretence of the money being required for Winnie.

Alan sat in front of the desk staring with unseeing eyes out of the window for a long time. Finally he slipped the cheque book into his pocket and left the flat. He walked back to Chelsea, conscious of an anger that grew rapidly stronger.

Isobel was out when he got back, and he was sorry. He had so clearly in his mind what he wanted to say. Instead, he went up to the studio and pulled out the unfinished portrait of Jane. He set it on an easel near the portrait of Isobel in pink satin.

The Lemprière woman had been right: there was life in Jane's portrait. He looked at her, the eager eyes, the beauty that he had tried so unsuccessfully to deny her. That was Jane - the aliveness, more than anything else, was Jane. She was, he thought, the most alive person he had ever met, so much so, that even now he could not think of her as dead.

And he thought of his other pictures - Color, Romance, Sir Rufus Herschman. They had all, in a way, been pictures of Jane. She had kindled the spark for each one of them - had sent him away fuming and fretting - to show her! And now? Jane was dead. Would he ever paint a picture - a real picture - again? He looked again at the eager face on the canvas. Perhaps. Jane wasn't very far away.

A sound made him wheel round. Isobel had come into the studio. She was dressed for dinner in a straight white gown that showed up the pure gold of her hair.

She stopped dead and checked the words on her lips. Eyeing him warily, she went over to the divan and sat down. She had every appearance of calm.

Alan took the cheque book from his pocket.

"I've been going through Jane's papers."

"Yes?"

He tried to imitate her calm, to keep his voice from shaking.

"For the last four years she's been supplying you with money."

"Yes. For Winnie."

"No, not for Winnie," shouted Everard. "You pretended, both of you, that it was for Winnie, but you both knew that that wasn't so. Do you realize that Jane has been selling her securities, living from hand to mouth, to supply you with clothes - clothes that you didn't really need?"

Isobel never took her eyes from his face. She settled her body more comfortably on the cushions as a white Persian cat might do.

"I can't help it if Jane denuded herself more than she should have done," she said. "I supposed she could afford the money. She was always crazy about you - I could see that, of course. Some wives would have kicked up a fuss about the way you were always rushing off to see her, and spending hours there. I didn't."

"No," said Alan, very white in the face. "You made her pay instead."

"You are saying very offensive things, Alan. Be careful."

"Aren't they true? Why did you find it so easy to get money out of Jane?"

"Not for love of me, certainly. It must have been for love of you."

"That's just what it was," said Alan simply. "She paid for my freedom - freedom to work in my own way. So long as you had a sufficiency of money, you'd leave me alone - not badger me to paint a crowd of awful women."

Isobel said nothing.

"Well?" cried Alan angrily.

Her quiescence infuriated him.

Isobel was looking at the floor. Presently she raised her head and said quietly:

"Come here, Alan."

She touched the divan at her side. Uneasily, unwillingly, he came and sat there, not looking at her. But he knew that he was afraid.

"Alan," said Isobel presently.

"Well?"

He was irritable, nervous.

"All that you say may be true. It doesn't matter. I'm like that. I want things - clothes, money, you. Jane's dead, Alan."

"What do you mean?"

"Jane's dead. You belong to me altogether now. You never did before - not quite."

He looked at her - saw the light in her eyes, acquisitive, possessive - was revolted yet fascinated.

"Now you shall be all mine."

He understood Isobel then as he had never understood her before.

"You want me as a slave? I'm to paint what you tell me to paint, live as you tell me to live, be dragged at your chariot wheels."

"Put it like that if you please. What are words?"

He felt her arms round his neck, white, smooth, firm as a wall. Words danced through his brain. "A wall as white as milk." Already he was inside the wall. Could he still escape? Did he want to escape?

He heard her voice close against his ear - poppy and mandragora.

"What else is there to live for? Isn't this enough? Love - happiness - success - love -"

The wall was growing up all around him now - "the curtain soft as silk," the curtain wrapping him round, stifling him a little, but so soft, so sweet! Now they were drifting together, at peace, out on the crystal sea. The wall was very high now, shutting out all those other things - those dangerous, disturbing things that hurt - that always hurt. Out on the sea of crystal, the golden apple between their hands.

The light faded from Jane's picture.

THE MYSTERY OF THE BAGHDAD CHEST

The words made a catchy headline, and I said as much to my friend, Hercule Poirot. I knew none of the parties. My interest was merely the dispassionate one of the man in the street. Poirot agreed.

"Yes, it has a flavor of the Oriental, of the mysterious. The chest may very well have been a sham Jacobean one from the Tottenham Court Road; none the less the reporter who thought of naming it the Baghdad Chest was happily inspired. The word 'mystery' is also thoughtfully placed in juxtaposition, though I understand there is very little mystery about the case."

"Exactly. It is all rather horrible and macabre, but it is not mysterious."

"Horrible and macabre," repeated Poirot thoughtfully.

"The whole idea is revolting," I said, rising to my feet and pacing up and down the room. "The murderer kills this man - his friend - shoves him into the chest, and half an hour later is dancing in that same room with the wife of his victim. Think! If she had imagined for one moment -"

"True," said Poirot thoughtfully. "That much-vaunted possession, a woman's intuition - it does not seem to have been working."

"The party seems to have gone off very merrily," I said with a slight shiver. "And all that time, as they danced and played poker, there was a dead man in the room with them. One could write a play about such an idea."

"It has been done," said Poirot. "But console yourself, Hastings," he added kindly. "Because a theme has been used once, there is no reason why it should not be used again. Compose your drama."

I had picked up the paper and was studying the rather blurred reproduction of a photograph.

"She must be a beautiful woman," I said slowly. "Even from this, one gets an idea."

Below the picture ran the inscription:

A recent portrait of Mrs. Clayton,

the wife of the murdered man

Poirot took the paper from me.

"Yes," he said. "She is beautiful. Doubtless she is of those born to trouble the souls of men."

He handed the paper back to me with a sigh.

"Dieu merci, I am not of an ardent temperament. It has saved me from many embarrassments. I am duly thankful."

I do not remember that we discussed the case further. Poirot displayed no special interest in it at the time. The facts were so clear, and there was so little ambiguity about them, that discussion seemed merely futile.

Mr. and Mrs. Clayton and Major Rich were friends of fairly long standing. On the day in question, the tenth of March, the Claytons had accepted an invitation to spend the evening with Major Rich. At about seven-thirty, however, Clayton explained to another friend, a Major Curtiss, with whom he was having a drink, that he had been unexpectedly called to Scotland and was leaving by the eight o'clock train.

"I'll just have time to drop in and explain to old Jack," went on Clayton. "Marguerita is going, of course. I'm sorry about it, but Jack will understand how it is."

Mr. Clayton was as good as his word. He arrived at Major Rich's rooms about twenty to eight. The major was out at the time, but his manservant, who knew Mr. Clayton well, suggested that he come in and wait. Mr. Clayton said that he had not time, but that he would come in and write a note. He added that he was on his way to catch a train.

The valet accordingly showed him into the sitting-room.

About five minutes later Major Rich, who must have let himself in without the valet hearing him, opened the door of the sitting-room, called his man and told him to go out and get some cigarettes. On his return the man brought them to his master, who was then alone in the sitting-room. The man naturally concluded that Mr. Clayton had left.

The guests arrived shortly afterwards. They comprised Mrs. Clayton, Major Curtiss and a Mr. and Mrs. Spence. The evening was spent dancing to the phonograph and playing poker. The guests left shortly after midnight.

The following morning, on coming to do the sitting-room, the valet was startled to find a deep stain discoloring the carpet below and in front of a piece of furniture which Major Rich had brought from the East and which was called the Baghdad Chest.

Instinctively the valet lifted the lid of the chest and was horrified to find inside the doubled-up body of a man who had been stabbed to the heart.

Terrified, the man ran out of the flat and fetched the nearest policeman. The dead man proved to be Mr. Clayton. The arrest of Major Rich followed very shortly afterward. The major's defense, it was understood, consisted of a sturdy denial of everything. He had not seen Mr. Clayton the preceding evening and the first he had heard of his going to Scotland had been from Mrs. Clayton.

Such were the bald facts of the case. Innuendoes and suggestions naturally abounded. The close friendship and intimacy of Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were so stressed that only a fool could fail to read between the lines. The motive for the crime was plainly indicated.

Long experience has taught me to make allowance for baseless calumny. The motive suggested might, for all the evidence, be entirely nonexistent. Some quite other reasons might have precipitated the issue. But one thing did stand out clearly - that Rich was the murderer.

As I say, the matter might have rested there, had it not happened that Poirot and I were due at a party given by Lady Chatterton that night.

Poirot, whilst bemoaning social engagements and declaring a passion for solitude, really enjoyed these affairs enormously. To be made a fuss of and treated as a lion suited him down to the ground.

On occasions he positively purred! I have seen him blandly receiving the most outrageous compliments as no more than his due, and uttering the most blatantly conceited remarks, such as I can hardly bear to set down.

Sometimes he would argue with me on the subject.

"But, my friend, I am not an Anglo-Saxon. Why should I play the hypocrite? Si, si, that is what you do, all of you. The airman who has made a difficult flight, the tennis champion – they look down their noses, they mutter inaudibly that 'it is nothing.' But do they really think that themselves? Not for a moment. They would admire the exploit in someone else. So, being reasonable men, they admire it in themselves. But their training prevents them from saying so. Me, I am not like that. The talents that I possess - I would salute them in another. As it happens, in my own particular line, there is no one to touch me. C'est dommage, as it is, I admit freely and without the hypocrisy that I am a great man. I have the order, the method and the psychology in an unusual degree. I am, in fact, Hercule

Poirot! Why should I turn red and stammer and mutter into my chin that really I am very stupid? It would not be true."

"There is certainly only one Hercule Poirot," I agreed - not without a spice of malice, of which, fortunately, Poirot remained quite oblivious.

Lady Chatterton was one of Poirot's most ardent admirers. Starting from the mysterious conduct of a Pekingese, he had unraveled a chain which led to a noted burglar and housebreaker. Lady Chatterton had been loud in his praises ever since.

To see Poirot at a party was a great sight. His faultless evening clothes, the exquisite set of his white tie, the exact symmetry of his hair parting, the sheen of pomade on his hair, and the tortured splendor of his famous mustaches - all combined to paint the perfect picture of an inveterate dandy. It was hard, at these moments, to take the little man seriously.

It was about half-past eleven when Lady Chatterton, bearing down upon us, whisked Poirot neatly out of an admiring group, and carried him off - I need hardly say, with myself in tow.

"I want you to go into my little room upstairs," said Lady Chatterton rather breathlessly as soon as she was out of earshot of her other guests. "You know where it is, M. Poirot. You'll find someone there who needs your help very badly - and you will help her, I know. She's one of my dearest friends - so don't say no."

Energetically leading the way as she talked, Lady Chatterton flung open a door, exclaiming as she did so, "I've got him, Marguerita darling. And he'll do anything you want. You'll help Mrs. Clayton, won't you, M. Poirot?"

And taking the answer for granted, she withdrew with the same energy that characterized all her movements.

Mrs. Clayton had been sitting in a chair by the window. She rose now and come toward us. Dressed in deep mourning, the dull black showed up her fair coloring. She was a singularly lovely woman, and there was about her a simple childlike candor which made her charm quit irresistible.

"Alice Chatterton is so kind," she said. "She arranged this. She said you would help me, M. Poirot. Of course I don't know whether you will or not - but I hope you will."

She had held out her hand and Poirot had taken it. He held it now for a moment or two while he stood scrutinizing her closely. There was nothing ill-bred in his manner of doing it. It was more the kind but searching look that a famous consultant gives a new patient as the latter is ushered into his presence.

"Are you sure, madame," he said at last, "that I can help you?"

"Alice says so."

"Yes, but I am asking you, madame."

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean."

"What is it, madame, that you want me to do?"

"You - you - know who I am?" she asked.

"Assuredly."

"Then you can guess what it is I am asking you to do, M. Poirot - Captain Hastings" - I was gratified that she realized my identity - "Major Rich did not kill my husband."

"Why not?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Poirot smiled at her slight discomfiture.

"I said, 'Why not?'" he repeated.

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"Yet it is very simple. The police - the lawyers - they will all ask the same question: Why did Major Rich kill M. Clayton? I ask the opposite. I ask you, madame, why did Major Rich not kill Major Clayton?"

"You mean - why I'm so sure? Well, but I know. I know Major Rich so well."

"You know Major Rich so well," repeated Poirot tonelessly.

The color flamed into her cheeks.

"Yes, that's what they'll say - what they'll think! Oh, I know!"

"C'est vrai. That is what they will ask you about - how well you knew Major Rich. Perhaps you will speak the truth, perhaps you will lie. It is very necessary for a woman to lie sometimes. Women must defend themselves - and the lie, it is a good weapon. But there are three people, madame, to whom a woman should speak the truth. To her Father Confessor, to her hairdresser and to her private detective - if she trusts him. Do you trust me, madame?"

Marguerita Clayton drew a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "I do. I must," she added rather childishly.

"Then, how well do you know Major Rich?"

She looked at him for a moment in silence, then she raised her chin defiantly.

"I will answer your question. I loved Jack from the first moment I saw him - two years ago. Lately I think - I believe - he has come to love me. But he has never said so."

"Épatant!" said Poirot. "You have saved me a good quarter of an hour by coming to the point without beating the bush. You have the good sense. Now your husband - did he suspect your feelings?"

"I don't know," said Marguerita slowly. "I thought lately - that he might. His manner has been different. But that may have been merely my fancy."

"Nobody else knew?"

"I do not think so."

"And - pardon me, madame - you did not love your husband?"

There were, I think, very few women who would have answered that question as simply as this woman did. They would have tried to explain their feelings.

Maruerita Clayton said quite simply:

"No."

"Bien. Now we know where we are. According to you, madame, Major Rich did not kill your husband, but you realize that all the evidence points to his having done so. Are you aware, privately, of any flaw in that evidence?"

"No. I know nothing."

"When did your husband first inform you of his visit to Scotland?"

"Just after lunch. He said it was a bore, but he'd have to go. Something to do with land values, he said it was."

"And after that?"

"He went out - to his club, I think. I - I didn't see him again."

"Now as to Major Rich - what was his manner that evening? Just as usual?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You are not sure?"

Marguerita wrinkled her brows.

"He was a little constrained. With me – not with the others. But I thought I knew why that was. You understand? I am sure the constraint or - or - absent-mindedness perhaps describes it better - had nothing to do with Edward. He was surprised to hear that Edward had gone to Scotland, but not unduly so."

"And nothing else unusual occurs to you in connection with that evening?"

Marguerita thought.

"No, nothing whatever."

"You - noticed the chest?"

She shook her head with a little shiver.

"I don't even remember it - or what it was like. We played poker most of the evening."

"Who won?"

"Major Rich. I had very bad luck, and so did Major Curtiss. The Spences won a little, but Major Rich was the chief winner."

"The party broke up - when?"

"About half-past twelve, I think. We all left together."

"Ah!"

Poirot remained silent, lost in thought.

"I wish I could be more helpful to you," said Mrs. Clayton. "I seem to be able to tell you so little."

"About the present - yes. What about the past, madame?"

"The past?"

"Yes. Have there not been incidents?"

She flushed.

"You mean that dreadful little man who shot himself. It wasn't my fault, M. Poirot. Indeed it wasn't."

"It was not precisely of that incident that I was thinking."

"That ridiculous duel? But Italians do fight duels. I was so thankful the man wasn't killed."

"It must have been a relief to you," agreed Poirot gravely.

She was looking at him doubtfully. He rose and took her hand in his.

"I shall not fight a duel for you, madame," he said. "But I will do what you have asked me. I will discover the truth. And let us hope that your instincts are correct - that the truth will help and not harm you."

Our first interview was with Major Curtiss. He was a man of about forty, of soldierly build, with very dark hair and a bronzed face. He had known the Claytons for some years and Major Rich also. He confirmed the press reports.

Clayton and he had had a drink together at the club just before half-past seven, and Clayton had then announced his intention of looking in on Major Rich on his way to Euston.

"What was Mr. Clayton's manner? Was he depressed or cheerful?"

The major considered. He was a slow-spoken man.

"Seemed in fairly good spirits," he said at last.

"He said nothing about being on bad terms with Major Rich?"

"Good Lord, no. They were pals."

"He didn't object to his wife's friendship with Major Rich?"

The major became very red in the face.

"You've been reading those damned newspapers, with tall tales and lies. Of course he didn't object. Why, he said to me: 'Marguerita's going, of course.'"

"I see. Now during the evening - the manner of Major Rich - was that much as usual?"

"I didn't notice any difference."

"And madame? She, too, was as usual?"

"Well," he reflected, "now I come to think of it, she was a bit quiet. You know, thoughtful and faraway."

"Who arrived first?"

"The Spences. They were there when I got there. As a matter of fact, I'd called round for Mrs. Clayton, but found she'd already started. So I got there a bit late."

"And how did you amuse yourselves? You danced? You played the cards?"

"A bit of both. Danced first of all."

"There were five of you?"

"Yes, but that's all right, because I don't dance. I put on the records and the others danced."

"Who danced most with whom?"

"Well, as a matter of fact the Spences like dancing together. They've got a sort of craze on fancy steps and all that."

"So that Mrs. Clayton danced mostly with Major Rich?"

"That's about it."

"And then you played poker?"

"Yes."

"And when did you leave?"

"Oh, quite early. A little after midnight."

"Did you all leave together?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, we shared a taxi, dropped Mrs. Clayton first, then me, and the Spences took it on to Kensington."

Our next visit was to Mr. and Mrs. Spence.

Only Mrs. Spence was at home, but her account of the evening tallied with that of Major Curtiss except that she displayed a slight acidity concerning Major Rich's luck at cards.

Earlier in the morning Poirot had had a telephone conversation with Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. As a result we arrived at Major Rich's rooms and found his manservant, Burgoyne, expecting us.

The valet's evidence was very precise and clear.

Mr. Clayton had arrived at twenty minutes to eight. Unluckily Major Rich had just that very minute gone out. Mr. Clayton had said that he couldn't wait, as he had to catch a train, but he would just scrawl a note. He accordingly went into the sitting-room to do so. Burgoyne had not actually heard his master come in, as he was running the bath, and Major Rich, of course, let himself in with his own key. In his opinion it was about ten minutes later that Major Rich called him and sent him out for cigarettes. No, he has not gone into the sitting-room. Major Rich had stood in the doorway. He had returned with the cigarettes five minutes later and on this occasion he has gone into the sitting-room, which was then empty, save for his master, who was standing by the window smoking. His master has inquired if his bath were ready and on being told is was had proceeded to take it. He, Burgoyne, had not mentioned Mr. Clayton, as he assumed that his master had found Mr. Clayton there and let him out himself. His master’s manner had been precisely the same as usual. He had taken his bath, changed, and shortly after, Mr. and Mrs. Spence had arrived, to be followed by Major Curtiss and Mrs. Clayton.

It had not occurred to him, Burgoyne explained, that Mr. Clayton might have left before his master's return. To do so, Mr. Clayton would have had to bang the front door behind him and that the valet was sure he would have heard.

Still in the same impersonal manner, Burgoyne proceeded to his finding of the body. For the first time my attention was directed to the fatal chest. It was a good-sized piece of furniture standing against the wall next to the phonograph cabinet. It was made of some dark wood and plentifully studded with brass nails. The lid opened simply enough. I looked in and shivered. Though well scrubbed, ominous stains remained.

Suddenly Poirot uttered an exclamation. "Those holes there - they are curious. One would say that they had been newly made."

The holes in question were at the back of the chest against the wall. There were three or four of them. They were about a quarter of an inch in diameter - and certainly had the effect of having been freshly made.

Poirot bent down to examine them, looking inquiringly at the valet.

"It's certainly curious, sir. I don't remember ever seeing those holes in the past, though maybe I wouldn't notice them."

"It makes no matter," said Poirot.

Closing the lid of the chest, he stepped back into the room until he was standing with his back against the window. Then he suddenly asked a question.

"Tell me," he said. "When you brought the cigarettes into your master that night, was there not something out of place in the room?"

Burgoyne hesitated for a minute, then with some slight reluctance he replied, "It's odd your saying that, sir. Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draft from the bedroom door - it was moved a bit more to the left."

"Like this?"

Poirot darted nimbly forward and pulled at the screen. It was a handsome affair of painted leather. It already slightly obscured the view of the chest, and as Poirot adjusted it, it hid the chest altogether.

"That's right, sir," said the valet. "It was like that."

"And the next morning?"

"It was still like that. I remember. I moved it away and it was then I saw the stain. The carpet's gone to be cleaned, sir. That's why the boards are bare."

Poirot nodded.

"I see," he said. "I thank you."

He placed a crisp piece of paper in the valet's palm.

"Thank you, sir."

"Poirot," I said when we were out in the street, "that point about the screen - is that a point helpful to Rich?"

"It is a further point against him," said Poirot ruefully. "The screen hid the chest from the room. It also hid the stain on the carpet. Sooner or later the blood was bound to soak through the wood and stain the carpet. The screen would prevent discovery for the moment. Yes - but there is something there that I do not understand. The valet, Hastings, the valet."

"What about the valet? He seemed a most intelligent fellow."

"As you say, most intelligent. Is it credible, then, that Major Rich failed to realize that the valet would certainly discover the body in the morning?

Immediately after the deed he had no time for anything - granted. He shoves the body into the chest, pulls the screen in front of it and goes through the evening hoping for the best. But after the guests are gone? Surely, then is the time to dispose of the body."

"Perhaps he hoped the valet wouldn't notice the stain?"

"That, mon ami, is absurd. A stained carpet is the first thing a good servant would be bound to notice. And Major Rich, he goes to bed and snores there comfortably and does nothing at all about the matter. Very remarkable and interesting, that."

"Curtiss might have seen the stains when he was changing the records the night before?" I suggested.

"That is unlikely. The screen would throw deep shadow just there. No, but I begin to see. Yes, dimly I begin to see."

"See what?" I asked eagerly.

"The possibilities, shall we say, of an alternative explanation. Our next visit may throw light on things."

Our next visit was to the doctor who had examined the body. His evidence was a mere recapitulation of what he had already given at the inquest. Deceased had been stabbed to the heart with long thin knife something like a stiletto. The knife had been left in the wound. Death had been instantaneous. The knife was the property of Major Rich and usually lay on his writing table. There were no fingerprints on it, the doctor understood. It had been either wiped or held in a handkerchief. As regards time, any time between seven and eight seemed indicated.

"He could not, for instance, have been killed after midnight?" asked Poirot.

"No. That I can say. Ten o'clock at the outside - but seven-thirty to eight seems clearly indicated."

"There is a second hypothesis possible," Poirot said when we were back home. "I wonder if you see it, Hastings. To me it is very plain, and I only need one point to clear up the matter for good and all."

"It's no good," I said. "I'm not there."

"But make an effort, Hastings. Make an effort."

"Very well," I said. "At seven-forty Clayton is alive and well. The last person to see him alive is Rich - "

"So we assume."

"Well, isn't it so?"

"You forget, mon ami, that Major Rich denies that. He states explicitly that Clayton had gone when he came in."

"But the valet says that he would have heard Clayton leave because of the bang of the door. And also, if Clayton had left, when did he return? He couldn't have returned after midnight because the doctor says positively that he was dead at least two hours before that. That only leaves one alternative."

"Yes, mon ami?" said Poirot.

"That in the five minutes Clayton was alone in the sitting room, someone else came in and killed him. But there we have the same objection. Only someone with a key could come in without the valet's knowing, and in the same way the murderer on leaving would have had to bang the door, and that again the valet would have heard."

"Exactly," said Poirot. "And therefore - "

"And therefore - nothing," I said. "I can see no other solution."

"It is a pity," murmured Poirot. "And it is really so exceedingly simple - as the clear blue eyes of Madame Clayton."

"You really believe - "

"I believe nothing - until I have got proof. One little proof will convince me."

He took up the telephone and called Japp at Scotland Yard.

Twenty minutes later we were standing before a little heap of assorted objects laid out on a table. They were the contents of the dead man's pockets.

There was a handkerchief, a handful of loose change, a pocketbook containing three pounds ten shillings, a couple of bills and a worn snapshot of Marguerita Clayton. There was also a pocket-knife, a gold pencil and a cumbersome wooden tool.

It was on this latter that Poirot swooped. He unscrewed it and several small blades fell out.

"You see, Hastings, a gimlet and all the rest of it. Ah! it would be a matter of a very few minutes to bore a few holes in the chest with this.'

"Those holes we saw?"

"Precisely."

"You mean it was Clayton who bored them himself?"

"Mais oui, mais oui! What did they suggest to you, those holes? They were not to see through, because they were at the back of the chest. What were they for, then? Clearly for air? But you do not make air holes for a dead body, so clearly they were not made by the murderer. They suggest one thing - and one thing only - that a man was going to hide in that chest. And at once, on that hypothesis, things become intelligible. Mr. Clayton is jealous of his wife and Rich. He plays the old, old trick of pretending to go away. He watches Rich go out, then he gains admission, is left alone to write a note, quickly bores those holes and hides inside the chest. His wife is coming there that night. Possibly Rich will put the others off, possibly she will remain after the others have gone, or pretend to go and return. Whatever it is, Clayton will know. Anything is preferable to the ghastly torment of suspicion he is enduring."

"Then you mean that Rich killed him after the others had gone? But the doctor said that was impossible."

"Exactly. So you see, Hastings, he must have been killed during the evening."

"But everyone was in the room!"

"Precisely," said Poirot gravely. "You see the beauty of that? 'Everyone was in the room.' What an alibi! What sangfroid - what nerve - what audacity!"

"I still don't understand."

"Who went behind that screen to wind up the phonograph and change the records? The phonograph and the chest were side by side, remember. The others are dancing - the phonograph is playing. And the man who does not dance lifts the lid of the chest and thrusts the knife he has just slipped into his sleeve deep into the body of the man who was hiding there."

"Impossible! The man would cry out."

"Not if he were drugged first?"

"Drugged?"

"Yes. Who did Clayton have a drink with at seven-thirty? Ah! Now you see. Curtiss! Curtiss has inflamed Clayton's mind with suspicions against his wife and Rich. Curtiss suggests this plan - the visit to Scotland, the concealment in the chest, the final touch of moving the screen. Not so that Clayton can raise the lid a little and get relief - no, so that he, Curtiss, can raise that lid unobserved. The plan is Curtiss', and observe the beauty of it, Hastings. If Rich had observed the screen was out of place and moved it back - well, no harm is done. He can make another plan. Clayton hides in the chest, the mild narcotic that Curtiss had administered takes effect. He sinks into unconsciousness. Curtiss lifts up the lid and strikes - and the phonograph goes on playing Walking My Baby Back Home."

I found my voice. "Why? But why?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Why did a man shoot himself? Why did two Italians fight a duel? Curtiss is of a dark passionate temperament. He wanted Marguerita Clayton. With her husband and Rich out of the way, she would, or so he thought, turn to him."

He added musingly:

"These simple childlike women... they are very dangerous. But mon Dieu! what an artistic masterpiece! It goes to my heart to hang a man like that. I may be a genius myself, but I am capable of recognizing genius in other people. A perfect murder, mon ami. I, Hercule Poirot, say it to you. A perfect murder. Épatant!"

WHILE THE LIGHT LASTS

The Ford car bumped from rut to rut, and the hot African sun poured down unmercifully. On either side of the so-called road stretched an unbroken line of trees and scrub, rising and falling in gently undulating lines as far as the eye could reach, the coloring a soft, deep yellow-green, the whole effect languorous and strangely quiet. Few birds stirred the slumbering silence. Once a snake wriggled across the road in front of the car, escaping the driver's efforts at destruction with sinuous ease. Once a native stepped out from the bush, dignified and upright, behind him a woman with an infant bound closely to her broad back and a complete household equipment, including a frying pan, balanced magnificently on her head.

All these things George Crozier had not failed to point out to his wife, who had answered him with a monosyllabic lack of attention which irritated him.

"Thinking of that fellow," he deduced wrathfully. It was thus that he was wont to allude in his own mind to Deirdre Crozier's first husband, killed in the first year of the war. Killed, too, in the campaign against German West Africa. Natural she should, perhaps - he stole a glance at her, her fairness, the pink and white smoothness of her cheek, the rounded lines of her figure - rather more rounded perhaps than they had been in those far-off days when she had passively permitted him to become engaged to her, and then, in that first emotional scare of war, had abruptly cast him aside and made a war wedding of it with that lean, sunburned boy lover of hers, Tim Nugent.

Well, well, the fellow was dead - gallantly dead - and he, George Crozier, had married the girl he had always meant to marry. She was fond of him, too; how could she help it when he was ready to gratify her every wish and had the money to do it, too! He reflected with some complacency on his last gift to her, at Kimberley, where, owing to his friendship with some of the directors of De Beers, he had been able to purchase a diamond which, in the ordinary way, would not have been in the market, a stone not remarkable as to size, but of a very exquisite and rare shade, a peculiar deep amber, almost old gold, a diamond such as you might not find in a hundred years. And the look in her eyes when he gave it to her! Women were all the same about diamonds.

The necessity of holding on with both hands to prevent himself being jerked out brought George Crozier back to the realities. He ejaculated for perhaps the fourteenth time, with the pardonable irritation of a man who owns two Rolls-Royce cars and who has exercised his stud on the highways of civilization: "Good Lord, what a car! What a road!" He wet on angrily:

"Where the devil is this tobacco estate, anyway? It's over an hour since we left Bulawayo."

"Lost in Rhodesia," said Deirdre lightly between two involuntary leaps into the air.

But the coffee-colored driver, appealed to, responded with the cheering news that their destination was just round the next bend of the road.

The manager of the estate, Mr. Walter, was waiting on the stoop to receive them with the touch of deference due to George Crozier's prominence in Union Tobacco. He introduced his daughter-in-law, who shepherded Deirdre through the cool, darkening hall to a bedroom beyond, where she could remove the veil with which she was always careful to shield her complexion when motoring. As she unfastened the pits in her usual leisurely, graceful fashion, Deirdre's eyes swept round the whitewashed ugliness of the bare room. No luxuries here, and Deirdre, who loved comfort as a cat loves cream, shivered a little. On the wall a text confronted her. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his s soul?" it demanded of all and sundry, and Deirdre, pleasantly conscious that the question had nothing to do with her, turned to accompany her shy and rather silent guide. She noted, but not in the least maliciously, the spreading hips and the unbecoming cheap cotton gown. And with a glow of quiet appreciation her eyes dropped to the exquisite, costly simplicity of her own French white linen. Beautiful clothes, especially when worn by herself, roused in her the joy of the artist.

The two men were waiting for her.

"It won't bore you to come round, too, Mrs. Crozier?"

"Not at all. I've never been over a tobacco factory."

They stepped out into the still Rhodesian afternoon.

"These are the seedlings here; we plant them out as required. You see -"

The manager's voice droned on, interpolated by her husband's sharp staccato questions - output, stamp duty, problems of colored labor. She ceased to listen.

This was Rhodesia, this was the land Tim had loved, where he and she were to have gone together after the war was over. If he had not been killed! As always, the bitterness of revolt surged up in her at that thought. Two short months - that was all they had had. Two months of happiness - if that mingled rapture and pain were happiness. Was love ever happiness? Did not a thousand tortures beset the lover's heart? She had lived intensely in that short space, but had she ever known the peace, the leisure, the quiet contentment of her present life? And for the first time she admitted, somewhat unwillingly, that perhaps all had been for the best.

"I wouldn't have liked living out here. I mightn't have been able to make Tim happy. I might have disappointed him. George loves me, and I'm very fond of him, and he's very, very good to me. Why, look at that diamond he bought me only the other day." And, thinking of it, her eyelids drooped a little in pure pleasure.

"This is where we thread the leaves." Walters led the way into a low, long shed. On the floor were vast heaps of green leaves, and white-clad black "boys" squatted round them, picking and rejecting with deft fingers, sorting them into sizes, and stringing them by means of primitive needles on a long line of string. They worked with a cheerful leisureliness, jesting amongst themselves, and showing their white teeth as they laughed.

"Now, out here -"

They passed through the shed into the daylight again, where the lines of leaves hung drying in the sun. Deirdre sniffed delicately at the faint, almost imperceptible fragrance that filled the air.

Walters led the way into other sheds where the tobacco, kissed by the sun into faint yellow discoloration, underwent its further treatment. Dark here, with the brown swinging masses above, ready to fall to powder at a rough touch. The fragrance was stronger, almost overpowering it seemed to Deirdre, and suddenly a sort of terror came upon her, a fear of she knew not what, that drove her from that menacing, scented obscurity out into the sunlight. Crozier noted her pallor.

"What's the matter, my dear, don't you feel well? The sun, perhaps. Better not come with us round the plantations? Eh?"

Walters was solicitous. Mrs. Crozier had better go back to the house and rest. He called to a man a little distance away.

"Mr. Arden - Mrs. Crozier. Mrs. Crozier's feeling a little done up with the heat, Arden. Just take her back to the house, will you?"

The momentary feeling of dizziness was passing. Deirdre walked by Arden's side. She had as yet hardly glanced at him.

"Deirdre!"

Her heart gave a leap, and then stood still. Only one person had ever spoken her name like that, with the faint stress on the first syllable that made of it a caress.

She turned and stared at the man by her side. He was burned almost black by the sun, he walked with a limp, and on the cheek nearer her was a long scar which altered his expression, but she knew him.

"Tim!"

For an eternity, it seemed to her, they gazed at each other, mute and trembling, and then, without knowing how or why, they were in each other's arms. Time rolled back for them. Then they drew apart again, and Deirdre, conscious as she put it of the idiocy of the question, said: "Then you're not dead?"

"No, they must have mistaken another chap for me. I was badly knocked on the head, but I came to and managed to crawl into the bush. After that I don't know what happened for months and months, but a friendly tribe looked after me, and at last I got my proper wits again and managed to get back to civilization."

He paused. "I found you'd been married six months."

Deirdre cried out:

"Oh, Tim, understand, please understand! It was so awful, the loneliness - and the poverty. I didn't mind being poor with you, but when I was alone I hadn't the nerve to stand up against the sordidness of it all."

"It's all right, Deirdre; I did understand. I know you always have had a hankering after the fleshpots. I took you from them once - but the second time, well - my nerve failed. I was pretty badly broken up, you see, could hardly walk without a crutch, and then there was this scar."

She interrupted him passionately.

"Do you think I would have cared for that?"

"No, I know you wouldn't. I was a fool. Some women did mind, you know. I made up my mind I'd manage to get a glimpse of you. If you looked happy, if I thought you were contented to be with Crozier - why, then I'd remain dead. I did see you. You were just getting into a big car. You had on some lovely sable furs - things I'd never be able to give you if I worked my fingers to the bone - and - well - you seemed happy enough. I hadn't the same strength and courage, the same belief in myself, that I'd had before the war. All I could see was myself, broken and useless, barely able to earn enough to keep you - and you looked so beautiful, Deirdre, such a queen amongst women, so worthy to have furs and jewels and lovely clothes and all the hundred and one luxuries Crozier could give you. That - and - well, the pain - of seeing you together, decided me. Everyone believed me dead. I would stay dead."

"The pain!" repeated Deirdre in a low voice.

"Well, damn it all, Deirdre, it hurt! It isn't that I blame you. I don't. But it hurt."

They were both silent. Then Tim raised her face to his and kissed it with a new tenderness.

"But that's all over now, sweetheart. The only thing to decide is how we're going to break it to Crozier."

"Oh!" She drew herself away abruptly. "I hadn't thought -" She broke off as Crozier and the manager appeared round the angle of the path. With a swift turn of the head she whispered:

"Do nothing now. Leave it to me. I must prepare him. Where could I meet you tomorrow?"

Nugent reflected.

"I could come in to Bulawayo. How about the café near the Standard Bank? At three o'clock it would be pretty empty."

Deirdre gave a brief nod of assent before turning her back on him and joining the other two men. Tim Nugent looked after her with a faint frown. Something in her manner puzzled him.

Deirdre was very silent during the drive home. Sheltering behind the fiction of a "touch of the sun," she deliberated on her course of action. How should she tell him? How would he take it? A strange lassitude seemed to possess her, and a growing desire to postpone the revelation as long as might be. Tomorrow would be soon enough. There would be plenty of time before three o'clock.

The hotel was uncomfortable. Their room was on the ground floor, looking out onto an inner court. Deirdre stood that evening sniffing the stale air and glancing distastefully at the tawdry furniture. Her mind flew to the easy luxury of Monkton Court amidst the Surrey pinewoods. When her maid left her at last, she went slowly to her jewel case. In the palm of her hand the golden diamond returned her stare.

With an almost violent gesture she returned it to the case and slammed down the lid. Tomorrow morning she would tell George.

She slept badly. It was stifling beneath the heavy folds of the mosquito netting. The throbbing darkness was punctuated by the ubiquitous ping she had learned to dread. She awoke white and listless. Impossible to start a scene so early in the day!

She lay in the small, close room all the morning, resting. Lunchtime came upon her with a sense of shock. As they sat drinking coffee, George Crozier proposed a drive to the Matopos.

"Plenty of time if we start at once."

Deirdre shook her head, pleading a headache, and she thought to herself: "That settles it. I can't rush the thing. After all, what does a day more or less matter? I'll explain to Tim."

She waved good-bye to Crozier as he rattled off in the battered Ford. Then, glancing at her watch, she walked slowly to the meeting place.

The café was deserted at this hour. They sat down at a little table and ordered the inevitable tea that South Africa drinks at all hours of the day and night. Neither of them said a word till the waitress brought it and withdrew to her fastness behind some pink curtains. Then Deirdre looked up and started as she met the intense watchfulness in his eyes.

"Deirdre, have you told him?"

She shook her head, moistening her lips, seeking for words that would not come.

"Why not?"

"I haven't had a chance; there hasn't been time."

Even to herself the words sounded halting and unconvincing.

"It's not that. There's something else. I suspected it yesterday. I'm sure of it today. Deirdre, what is it?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"There's some reason why you don't want to leave George Crozier, why you don't want to come back to me. What is it?"

It was true. As he said it she knew it, knew it with sudden scorching shame, but knew it beyond any possibility of doubt. And still his eyes searched her.

"It isn't that you love him! You don't. But there's something."

She thought: "In another moment he'll see! Oh, God, don't let him!"

Suddenly his face whitened.

"Deirdre - is it - is it that there's going to be a - child?"

In a flash she saw the chance he offered her. A wonderful way! Slowly, almost without her own volition, she bowed her head.

She heard his quick breathing, then his voice, rather high and hard.

"That - alters things. I didn't know. We've got to find a different way out." He leaned across the table and caught both her hands in his. "Deirdre, my darling, never think - never dream that you were in any way to blame. Whatever happens, remember that. I should have claimed you when I came back to England. I funked it, so it's up to me to do what I can to put things straight now. You see? Whatever happens, don't fret, darling. Nothing has been your fault."

He lifted first one hand, then the other to his lips. Then she was alone, staring at the untasted tea. And, strangely enough, it was only one thing that she saw - a gaudily illuminated text hanging on a whitewashed wall. The words seemed to spring out from it and hurl themselves at her. "What shall it profit a man -" She got up, paid for her tea, and went out.

On his return George Crozier was met by a request that his wife might not be disturbed. Her headache, the maid said, was very bad.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when he entered her bedroom, his face rather grave. Deirdre was sitting up in bed. She looked white and haggard, but her eyes shone.

"George, I've got something to tell you, something rather terrible -"

He interrupted her brusquely.

"So you've heard. I was afraid it might upset you."

"Upset me?"

"Yes. You talked to the poor young fellow that day."

He saw her hand steal to her heart, her eyelids flicker, then she said in a low, quick voice that somehow frightened him:

"I've heard nothing. Tell me quickly."

"I thought -"

"Tell me!"

"Out at that tobacco estate. Chap shot himself. Badly broken up in the war, nerves all to pieces, I suppose. There's no other reason to account for it."

"He shot himself in that dark shed where the tobacco was hanging." She spoke with certainty, her eyes like a sleepwalker's as she saw before her in the odorous darkness a figure lying there, revolver in hand.

"Why, to be sure; that's where you were taken queer yesterday. Odd thing, that!"

Deirdre did not answer. She saw another picture - a table with tea things on it, and a woman bowing her head in acceptance of a lie.

"Well, well, the war has a lot to answer for," said Crozier, and stretched out his hand for a match, lighting his pipe with careful puffs.

His wife's cry startled him.

"Ah! don't, don't! I can't bear the smell!"

He stared at her in kindly astonishment.

"My dear girl, you mustn't be nervy. After all, you can't escape from the smell of tobacco. You'll meet it everywhere."

"Yes, everywhere!" She smiled a slow, twisted smile, and murmured some words that he did not catch, words that she had chosen for the original obituary notice of Tim Nugent's death. "While the light lasts I shall remember, and in the darkness I shall not forget."

Her eyes widened as they followed the ascending spiral of smoke, and she repeated in a low, monotonous voice: "Everywhere, everywhere."